



INTERVIEWS

Progressive Roots

Sussan Deyhim in conversation with Sheyma Buali

Sheyma Buali

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Sussan Deyhim is a performance artist, vocalist, and activist whose strong, bold vocals merge the mystical with the radical. With an interest in articulating a sense of self through boundless forms, Deyhim has developed a practice out of combining elements of theatrical, operatic, and choreographed performance with the poetics of film, literature and history. Moving from Tehran to New York in 1980, Deyhim's illustrious career has seen a number of fruitful collaborations, taking her performance work from stage, to screen, gallery; she has featured in Sophie Calle's photography, collaborated with The Blue Man Group, and recorded with Jerry Garcia and Branford Marsalis, among many others, also featuring in various film scores, including *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). But it is her presence as a chador-clad singer in Shirin Neshat's video performance piece *Turbulent* that marked a bewitching meeting point between vocals, moving image and installation – one of the many works she discusses in this interview.

Sheyma Buali: Your background includes music, dance, theatre and performance art. You started out, as a child, as part of the national ballet company of Iran.

Sussan Deyhim: Yes, the Pars National Ballet.

Sh.B: It is interesting to know that there was such a thing – this clearly does not exist anymore.

SD: No, of course not. I went to a progressive high school in Tehran and you had to be quite serious with your studies. I ran into this class with my friends, unknowingly, and was shocked to find that there was a ballet class in my school. I joined just for a laugh, but then I started to really love it and got involved with this dance company. It was affiliated with the Iranian national television, so every two weeks we performed on television on this special programme for Pars National Ballet performances. The expertise of the company was varied including contemporary classical choreography with music by composers such as Edgar Varese, Bela Bartok and so on, as well as incorporating Iranian folkloric dance and music to vitalize the importance of the traditional



Sussan Deyhim, *Wind Up Doll*, 2012-14. Inspired by the poem *Wind up Doll* by Forugh Farrokhzad as part of Sussan Deyhim's installation *Dawn of the Cold Season*.
Courtesy the artist.

roots in the field. That was very unusual. Back then people either listened to classical music or disco, so this was a very worthy effort.

Prior to that I grew up in Tehran and did not know so much about Iranian folklore. It was amazing seeing all these different traditional instruments and dance styles. It seemed a noble effort for us travel and study with different musicians and learn dances from different regions of Iran. There was a camp for us near the Caspian Sea where experts on these folkloric dance forms would be invited and we would learn from them. It was very inspiring. At that time we also had the Shiraz Arts Festival, which was in the centre of Iran. It was probably the most progressive festival of the 1970s. They commissioned very important avant-garde artists of the time, like John Cage, Robert Wilson, Stockhausen, and the Living Theatre – all of that, year after year, right before I left Iran. We were assigned to go to this festival to see this very progressive programme all these incredible artists coming from all over the world. But there was also major emphasis on the traditional indigenous artists and art forms from India, Indonesia, and Africa. Again, the projects were either rooted in Iranian history or were super progressive creative projects. So between the two worlds of the old and the contemporary, my view was shaped.

Sh.B: Did your studies on Iranian folk culture include performance?

SD: Yes, at that time I was really interested in dance. These presentations with dancers and live musicians

created fascinating rituals. We would study with them in the day and at night they would have performances.



Sussan Deyhim, *Sin*, 2013-14. Inspired by the poem *Sin* by Forugh Farrokhzad as part of Sussan Deyhim's installation *Dawn of the Cold Season*.
Courtesy of the artist.

Sh.B: Would you say that your practice combined classical ballet with this localized, folkloric style that you were studying?

SD: Yes, but conceptually it was not just dance – it was like a mixture of ancient traditions, which still exist in cultures like Iran, Morocco, India, and China. There were also the conceptual art forms, which at that point were mostly brought into Iran from the West. Back then we had a prominent experimental theatre company and a contemporary classical musical scene in Iran so there was already an experimental artistic movement happening there. As I mentioned earlier many important performers were invited to work with this company in Tehran for the Shiraz Arts Festival. This all existed during the time of the Shah. Some people criticized the festival strongly whilst, to this days, many others think that it changed the artistic works coming out of Iran - whether in cinema, visual arts, or theatre. A lot of seeds were planted at that time.

Sh.B: I suppose we can say that the change in attitude about performance arts before and after the revolution is obvious.

SD: Well yes, so much has been at a full stop because of the mentality of the new regime. But having said that, there is still a lot of very relevant work in literature, visual arts, cinema and so on still coming out of Iran. So in some ways for artists in Iran it has been a matter of how to balance the brilliant poetic creativity within the

existing socio-political limitations.

Sh.B: And how does this translate in terms of dance and performance specifically?

SD: Dancing in Iran is very tricky, you can forget about that. Whether you are a girl or a boy, it is really not allowed. Music wasn't allowed for women, and they weren't allowed to sing at all in public for about 20 years. But that has changed now although they rather perform as an ensemble and not solo. Playing an instrument is also acceptable for women. There are a lot of sick interpretations of Sharia law, each person has their own idea of what it means. But now there are schools and conservatories that produce very learned singers, musicians, actors, directors and so on. There is a continued problem with women being forbidden to sing solo.

Sh.B: Your collaboration with Shirin Neshat was about these different permissibilities between genders and singing.

SD: Our first collaboration, *Turbulent* (1998), was a two-screen video installation where on one screen Shoja Azari sings for a large all-male audience followed by me singing to an empty auditorium. It was more about the rights a man has to be able to express himself compared to women's platforms to be heard. It was a kind of a revolt or divulgence from the female side, performing in an empty theatre. But this installation has nothing to do with tradition – it's about gender discrimination.

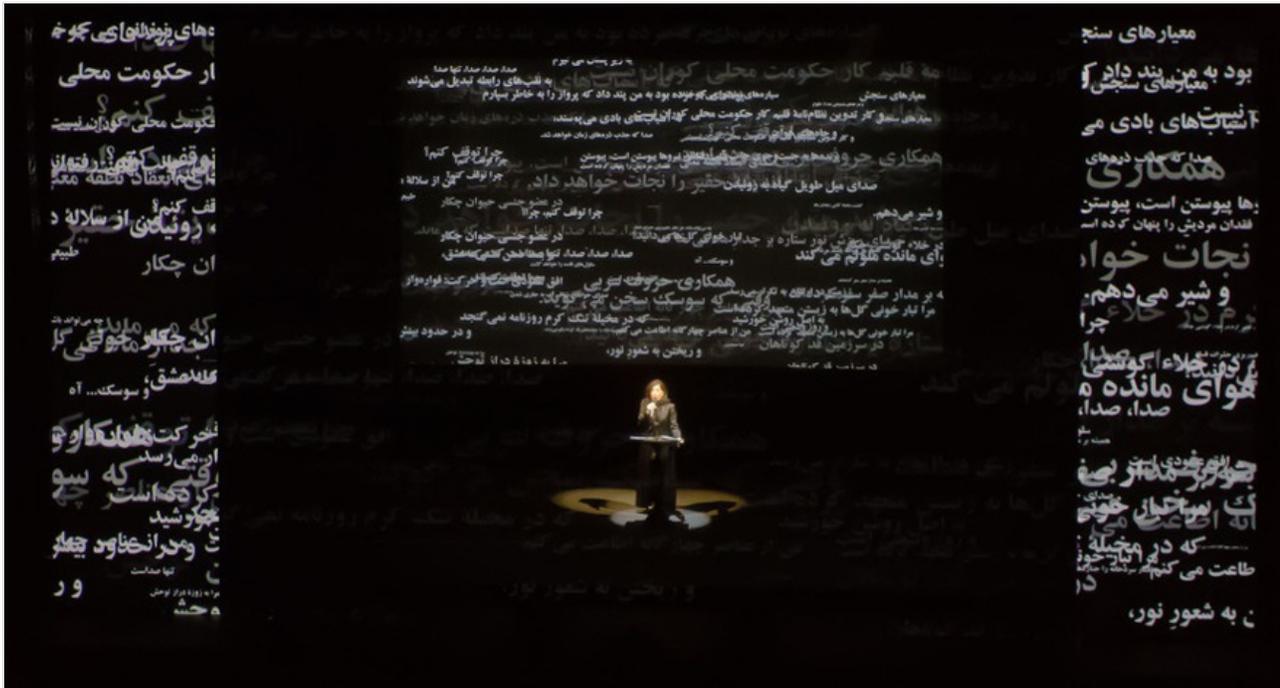
Sh.B: Going back to the traditional and looking at the folkloric education that you had, do you find that this still has a role in the work that you do today?

SD: Absolutely, I felt I had an initiation with old folklore. It influenced me profoundly, even on an alchemical level – I have never felt as I did when I was 15 or 16 years old in that company in the Caspian Sea, listening to Iranian trance music. It is a real shamanistic experience. That made me understand and love indigenous arts in general on a whole different level. The vibration is the power of it and the reason why it has survived for so long, and because it has a certain, and rather sacred, place in the cultures in which it has lived.

Sh.B: I can probably safely say that people may be familiar with folkloric sound or music from Iran, but not quite performance. Would you be able to describe it?

SD: In general, I think that global, indigenous traditions all have similar relationships with their people and heritage. They have been able to have a continuous, deep relationship with their culture. Every time you go to see one of these performances you notice this deep connection in a way that you cannot describe intellectually; it is vibrational. For example, I was in Morocco recently and they have this tradition of trance music called gnawa. And when you go to a gnawa lila, which is an all-night ceremony, you notice its structure – there are complexities but it feels very repetitive. And once you are sitting there living it, you realize that this is a specific sacred place – a ceremonial space. In ceremonial performances or rituals – whether they are native American, Iranian folklore or classical Indian music – people suddenly become one with the vibration of the sound and performance. These traditions have been there for a long time, and they live in people's genes where they probably first felt such vibrations while in their mother's womb. The community comes together

spiritually in a way that makes time stop. And this is on the level of ceremony, not presentational performance. But what is performance? It goes way back in time when there was no language and people created these ceremonies so that they could communicate and have a sense of union and belonging. Humans are a communal species. We can choose to be solitary but this idea of performance, ritual, healing, beautification and so on, bring us together. It has been there since the beginning of time. But there's sacred entertainment and then there's what we know as contemporary, commercial entertainment – 'show biz'.



Sussan Deyhim performs in her media stage production *The House is Black*.
Courtesy of the artist.

Sh.B: Can you tell us about the relationship between that folkloric background and your work today?

SD: My work is much more interested in abstraction at this point, creating sonic vibrations with and through the female voice. I'm working on a new installation at the moment called *Forbidden Echoes*. It has to do with the relationship between the female voice and global mysticism. It is a very difficult relationship and it doesn't matter if it is Islam, Judaism or Christianity. Metaphorically and literally there has always been tension between the female voice and mystical music. You don't hear Qur'anic chants by women. It is a recent development to hear Cantorial pieces performed by women. Women have had their share of difficulty with Christianity as well. For the past 20 years there has been a decree in Iran that women should not sing because the female voice is too erotic, too sexual, which is such a sick concept.

Sh.B: How do you bring these elements of traditional folklore to the progressive in this project?

SD: I want to take the installation in the desert, into abandoned monuments or industrial spaces. *Forbidden Echoes* is a project that includes 120 voices pre-recorded as a virtual choir. The choir's vocals are all mine, but

the soloists will be local – for example, if we go to Pakistan we will invite Pakistani divas, activists, poets and so on, whilst if we do it in New York, I want to install it in a factory in the South Bronx. So at the core of the piece there is the sonic installation all day, and in the evening there will be a performance. The performance will usually be done by the local soloists, wherever we are. There has always been a serious obstacle between the female voice musically and in mystical literature. My project is actually a beautification space in its vibration, quite ethereal and sensual. It denies the idea that the female voice is threatening and brings in the spontaneity of the local artists. If we have an activist she is going to talk about the issues in that specific culture. When inviting a diva, she will then introduce a musical language which can connect us to the great musical heritage of different cultures. If we are in Africa, or the Middle East, there will be an incredible group of vocalists, activists and poets we would like to invite. So we will bring this space to the community, and vice versa – we bring the community to the space.

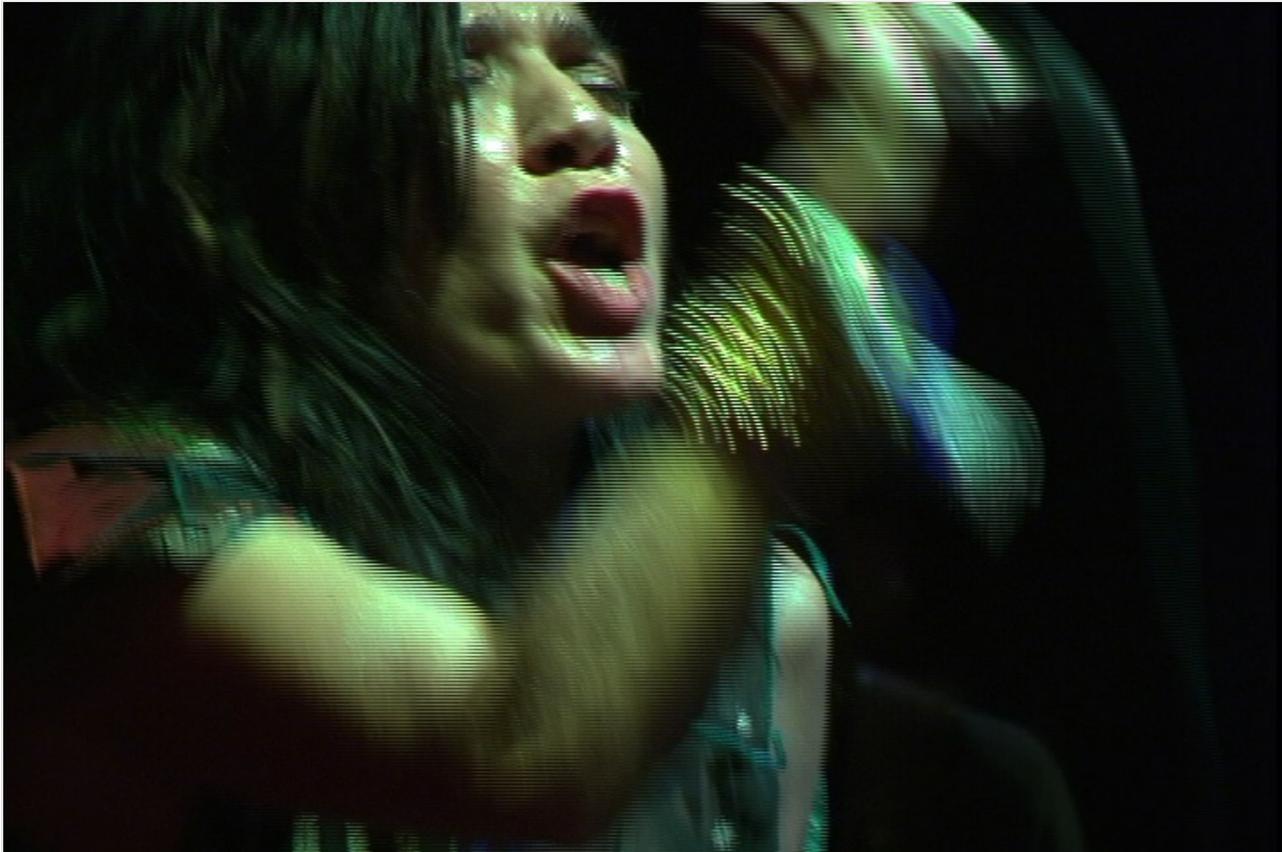
Sh.B: Another piece you are developing now, *The House is Black*, is a performative adaptation of a poet's work and life.

SD: It is a multi-media performance that premiered in Los Angeles, at Royce Hall^[1] and was presented by Kristy Edmunds^[2] at The Center for the Art of Performance at University of California, Los Angeles (CAP UCLA).^[3] The project is based on the life and works of the magnificent Iranian literary icon, Forugh Farrokhzad,^[4] who unfortunately died at the age of 32. I want people to know her and her work. She is a heroine in Iran right now and although she was an eroticist and existentialist, I hear that even some of the clerics quote her poetry, she has become that popular in Iran. But outside Iran only the scholarly people know of her. *The House is Black* is somewhere between an opera, film, theatre and a performative installation that allows for these influences.

Sh.B: It brings together themes of gender, imperial history, biography, poetry, art, and feminism. What was the process of working that into interpretation from one form to the next?

SD: What attracts me to Forugh Farrokhzad is how forward-looking she was. She is one of the few poets who modernized the Farsi language, which is literally a few thousand years old, and she was judged for it. She was also one of the very few women in the history of Iranian literature who wrote about carnal, rather than mystical or Tantric, eroticism. She wrote about the first time she made love and the incredible pleasure and pain and thinking, 'what did I do?' This was in the 1950s, when Iran was ironically more modern than today. The fact that she was an incredible humanist and her work was so socio-politically charged means a lot to me. She had a very hard, but interesting, life. She never compromised as an artist, and was always a provocateur but never an exhibitionist. Her work always stood for something more important that inspired her revolt and satire. And for me, there is a big difference between artists and entertainers. Artists are those who are deeply dedicated to their vision and no matter what happens they have to follow that instinct.

My work has always been about how I experience things. It's about the future and asking how we shape it. I don't often work with Iranian subjects but with Forugh, I feel she spoke the language of contemporary Iran without the notions of mysticism and sacredness. She spoke of the existential realities of women being jailed,



Sussan Deyhim in concert.
Courtesy of the artist.

being deprived of their sexuality, and their lack of ability to voice these things. It was about the here and now. And because she was also a filmmaker, my project could not just be a full evening of compositions around her poetry, there had to be a visual component. She made a haunting documentary about a Leper's colony called *The House is Black* (1963), which won a few international awards.

So through a series of fellowships including a Robert Rauschenberg Residency fellowship from the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation^[5] and a residency at CAP UCLA,^[6] I was able to expand the visual content of the piece. It's important to mention the substantial contribution by the Farhang Foundation,^[7] a prominent Iranian based cultural Foundation, and by Dr Nina Ansary,^[8] an acclaimed activist and writer, through which this major project came together. The installation *Dawn of the Cold Season* (2013–14) was also exhibited at Shulamit Nazarian Gallery^[9] in Los Angeles to a wonderful response. I'm grateful for their support, trust and understanding of the important message these two projects carry. It is about intellectual women artist's freedom of expression, human rights, and allowing progression to take its natural course fed by informed and cultured education systems.

Sh.B: In your work, how do you differentiate between theatre, dance and performance art?

SD: I think we have come a long way in all these mediums in terms of their definition. There has been so much experimentation since surrealism – it was a matter of bypassing what's allowed and what is not. The

boundaries have fortunately evaporated. Having lived and worked in so many mediums I believe it's best to cultivate the senses and let the creation include a synergy of your sensibilities. *The House is Black* is a great example of this very idea. It's embracing as many art forms as the project needed to include, blurring the gaps between theatre, opera, performance art and film. It has more to do with modernism. And modernism has to do with the adoration of abstraction, where you allow tradition to evolve to create your own reality and a newly experienced art form.

Artistry is to me a sort of mediumship. For example when I am composing, I have this technique and I have this list, but something interesting happens that is mostly beyond me – the journey begins and while I am fully aware, I am also fully open to its unknown. This experimentation journey is very special to me. Deconstruction is a positive thing, Dadaism is a blessing and modernism is a sort of duty, especially in the context of cultures holding so firmly into the grace of their past. This is understandable but the reluctance to change is not. How do we move our consciousness to a new and different era? How do we, as artists, give ourselves the courage to be a laboratory of experimentation that includes the past (which we carry in our own genes anyway) and that shapes of the future when there is so much at stake? Artists are not academic historians, some of us are in the arts because we believe history needs new definitions and scientists and artists are the ones to create that. In my current show, people come to me and ask: 'Is this performance art? Contemporary opera? Experimental theatre?' How do you weave a narrative with an abstract point of view and create a relevant soundtrack inspired by the necessary variety of influences, one foot in tradition, one foot in the technological future and its sonics, while remaining faithful to the poetic sensibility of the narrative (in this case Forugh's life)? Nothing is an end in itself; everything is in a permanent state of flux. And it is naïve to think we can control nature and its ambiguities or underestimate the blessing of the unknown.

In May 2016, Deyhim will be presenting a portion of her multi-medium piece, bringing together film, language and feminist history, The House is Black, at the Benaki Museum of Islamic Art in Athens in support of traumatized children of the Syrian conflict. The work is inspired by the late poet Forough Farrokhzad.

Watch Dawn of the Cold Season, Sussan Deyhim's video installation inspired by Forough Farrokhzad's poem Let us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season, published after her death in 1967, on Ibraaz Channel, [here](#).

Sussan Deyhim is an Iranian American composer, vocalist, performance artist and activist. She is internationally known for creating a unique sonic and vocal language with a sense of ritual and the unknown. She was part of the national ballet company in Iran from the age of 13 and in 1976 she joined the Bejart Ballet in Europe after receiving a scholarship to attend Bejarts' performance art school, Mudra. There she trained in many of the great world dance, music and theatre traditions as well as in classical ballet. Her music combines the spirit of her ancient heritage while pointing to the future. In 1980, she moved to New York embarking on a multifaceted career encompassing music, theatre, dance, media and film. She created and starred in ground breaking media operas at La Mama in the 1980s including *Azax Attra* and *The Ghost of Ibn Sabah*.

sussandeyhim.com

[1] See: www.roycehall.org/about/index.asp

[2] See: www.cap.ucla.edu/kristyedmunds/

[3] See: www.cap.ucla.edu

[4] See: www.foroughfarrokhzad.org

[5] See: www.rauschenbergfoundation.org

[6] See: www.cap.ucla.edu/residencies

[7] See: www.farhang.org

[8] See: www.ninaansary.com

[9] See: www.shulamitnazarian.com

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