Art in America

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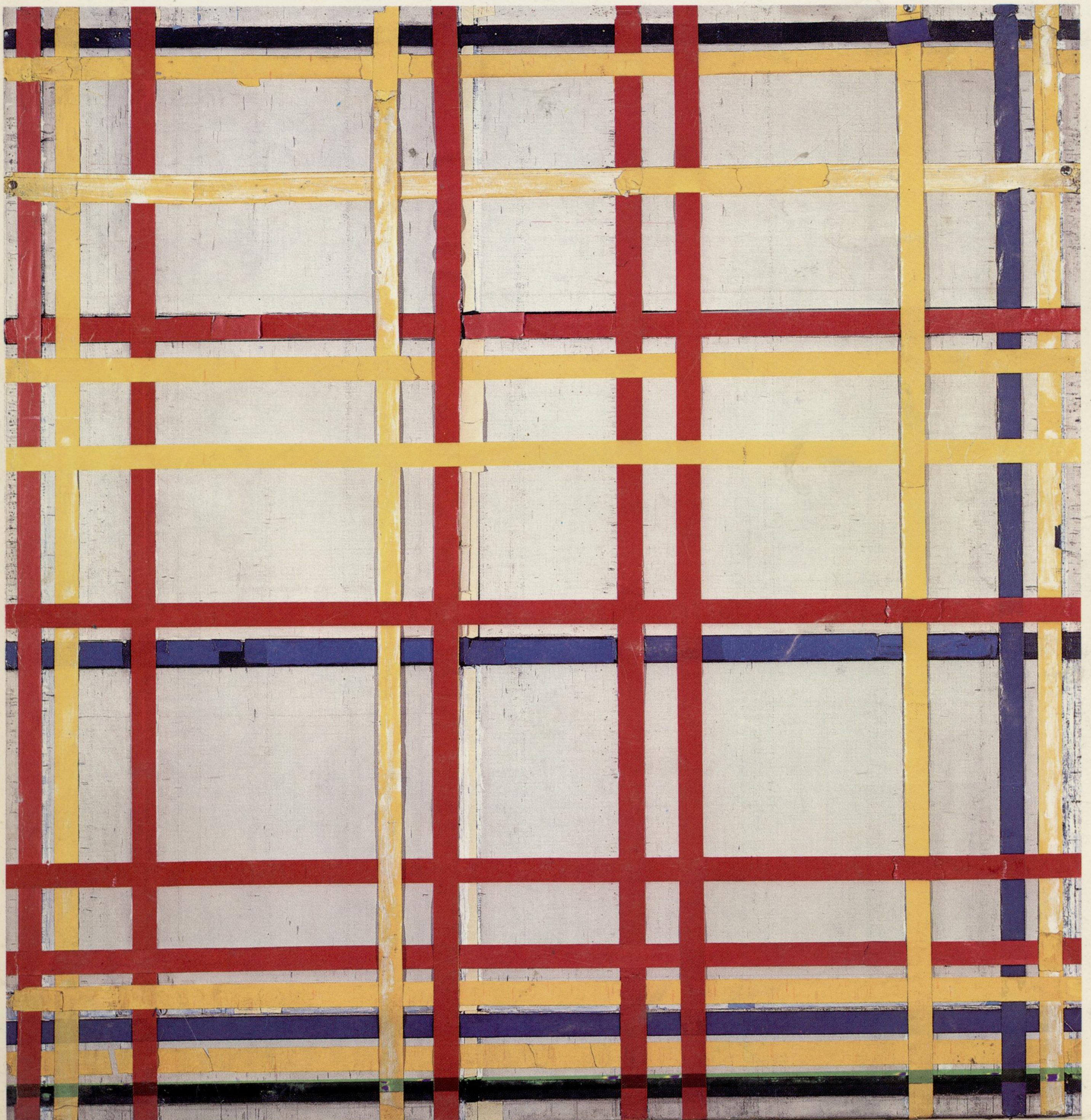
Cover: Mondrian's "New York City II"
Mondrian's Drawings in Baltimore/19th-Century German Masters
Marisol's New Sculpture/Thornton Willis/Steve Keister/Gorky



Museum Under Siege

As chief curator of the Teheran Museum from August to December of 1978, the author was an eyewitness of the early months of the revolution. Below, some excerpts from his Iranian journal.

René Magritte's The Therapeutic, *on a terrace of the Teheran Museum of Contemporary Art.*

BY ROBERT HOBBS

Iranian friends used to joke about the revolution, saying that it started the moment I got off the plane. The only truth to their ribbing is that small rebellions around the country quickly intensified after a fire killed 400 people in an Abadan movie house, and became even more widespread after the Jaleh Square Massacre—known as Black Friday in Iran—when the Shah's troops gunned down nearly 3000 Teheranees who were protesting the unconstitutionality of martial law.

From August to December 1978 I was chief curator of the Teheran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA). The museum had been designed by Nader Ardalan and Kamran Diba, cousin to Empress Farah Diba. Kamran Diba also served as director of the museum, which housed a $30-million collection of international modern art and boasted a staff of over 120. The curatorial division, patterned largely on New York's Museum of Modern Art, contained departments of painting and sculpture, film, photography and architecture. It is perhaps emblematic of the museum's workings that even though it owned a fairly substantial print and drawing collection and almost no films, it had a department of film but no department of prints and drawings.

In 1978 Diba, who had been running the year-old museum, decided to devote most of his time to his architectural firm DAZ. To facilitate this change he hired me to run the museum while he remained titular head. In point of fact, he maintained control of the administrative division and delegated all art affairs to me.

Before coming to Teheran I had been informed that my duties at the museum would be two-fold. I was to establish a series of contemporary international exhibitions that would travel to other Third World nations and perhaps even to Europe and the U.S. And I was to create a year-long museology course for selected personnel from various museums in Teheran: the newly formed cultural center, the soon-to-be-completed glass museum, the carpet museum, the gallery for Qajar art, the archeology museum, and, of course, TMOCA. Taught in conjunction with Farabi University, the program was to include authorities from well-known European and American institutions who would visit Iran for several weeks to give formal classroom presentations and to counsel curators on specific problems.

Undoubtedly the course was needed. When I arrived at TMOCA, few curators had any formal training. (David Galloway, who served as chief curator before me, had tried to introduce professional standards, but he was only at the museum for eight months.) Every two to three weeks during my first month in Teheran a curator would decide a gallery should be reinstalled and would take dozens of paintings from storage without any preconceptions as to arrangement. The resulting installations had no historical and little esthetic basis; they were simply attractive groupings.

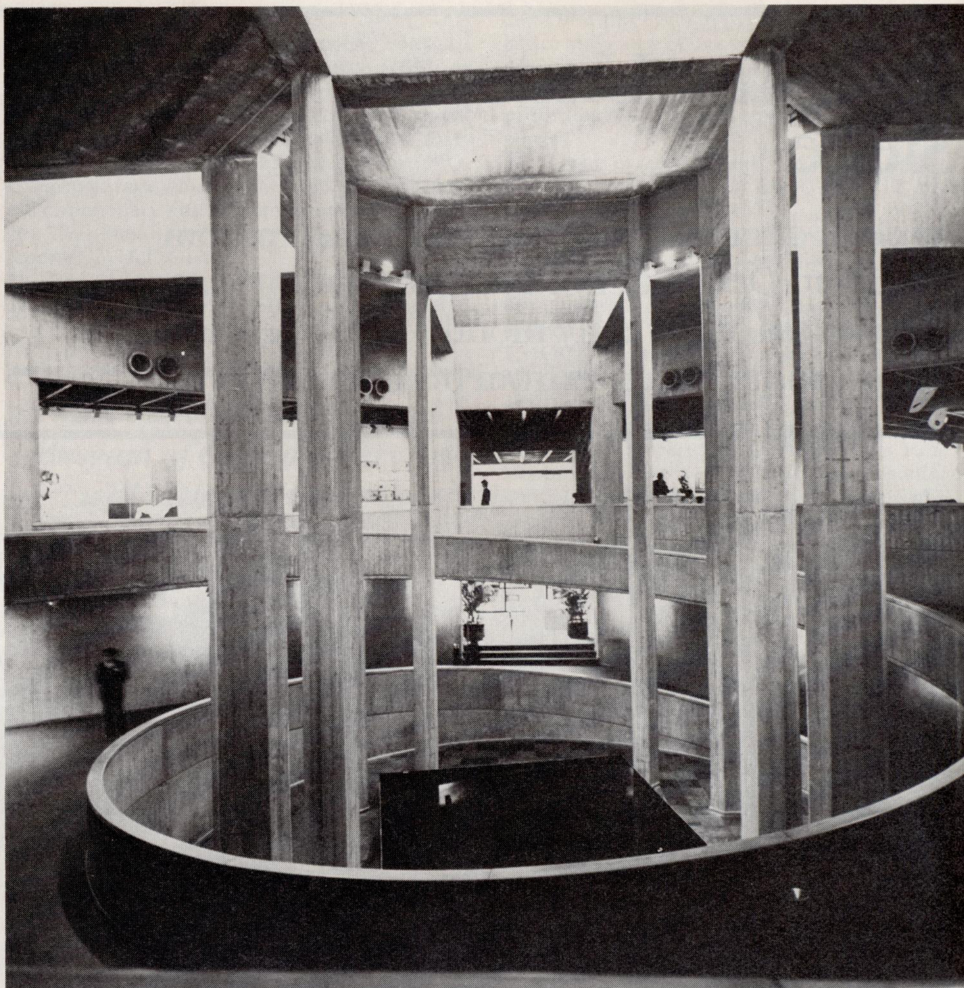
During the approximately four months I was in Teheran my attitudes toward art and politics changed significantly. In the course of my stay I came to realize that art serves the very important practical function of giving people an identity. The so-called esthetic pleasure of art—so much a part of formalist doctrine—is at best a generalized appreciation of surface qualities. Esthetic pleasure considered as a goal of art, and not a means to understanding it, quickly devolves to the level of trivial by-product. It does not compare with art's power to reinforce prevailing social, economic and political structures—its capacity to give people a sense of themselves as distinct entities in the world. Art is less important as an occasion for the exercise of taste than as a communal means of structuring identity, whether the identity be family, tribe, city, or nation.

A cultural revolution was waged in Iran in 1978. The people, having little secure sense of themselves as members of the modern world, took refuge in a timeless Islamic world. They did not wholeheartedly deny the modern world so much as they selectively rejected aspects of it and turned inward—a posture which seemed to many to suggest historical regression. However, this seeming regression was in fact a rejection of the Shah's unfortunate attempts to replace a traditional Persian identity with a Western modernist one. The Shah in the process destroyed the former and made the latter politically infeasible. And Westernized students and political leaders, who had no intention of permanent regression, played on the people's insecurity by adopting the chador and mullah's turban as political emblems. The revolution thus appeared to be a revolt in reverse.

The following are excerpts from a journal that I partially wrote in Iran and completed on my return to the U.S. At the time I was still too dazed and frustrated to be objective. My best notes were the most abbreviated ones—asides which have become the basis for this article.

While I was in Iran, my thinking about the revolution was clouded by a lifetime's exposure to second-rate movies and supermarket literature: riots looked like films, and intense discussions appeared to be sections of novels. The art was a filter, and I became a B-movie stereotype. While this mimetic illusion kept me suspended and saved me from becoming overly afraid, it had the disadvantage of turning me into a cliché. On returning to the U.S. in December 1978—I left Teheran soon after the burning of the British Embassy—I tried to set down my experiences and reflections as honestly and as directly as possible.

Sections included here are arranged chronologically, and dates are often approximate. Without newspapers (which, to protest the Shah's censorship, ceased publishing in October 1978) and lacking accurate television and radio reports, I began to experience dates as unimportant; time in Iran (in spite of the revolution) seemed continuous. My account starts with my first short trip to Teheran in June, when I was interviewed for the position of chief curator.



An interior view of TMOCA, Calder mobile visible at right. Photo Bijan Zohdi.

June: A Museum for the Preservation of Art

The day Kamran Diba and I came to terms about the job, he told me that a small reception would be held on the following day for Her Majesty. Ostensibly the reason for the meeting was a Finnish architecture exhibition at the museum, but I supposed that the Empress was coming to see me and give her approval.

Three hours before the reception began, a bus-load of muscular secret agents wearing
and carrying attaché cases arrived.
staff was then herded out of the
um so that the guards could search the
ng and grounds. Later the staff re-
d to await Her Majesty's arrival.
ce no one had briefed me on the proto-
garding Iranian royalty, I bungled my
hrough the evening, making every pos-
faux pas—shaking hands (rather than
g), putting my hands in my pockets,
to engage Her Majesty in an intellec-
discussion about art.
finished the Empress's tour in the
oom, where Diba wished to show her
to's model of the *Reichstag Wrap-*
-which customs officials had unwrap-
believing that contraband might be hid-
nderneath. Later, racks of paintings
inspected, and I waited to tell the
ess about the art. As the paintings
pulled out, we discovered that three
been damaged that afternoon by Her
Majesty's guards, who had assorted weapons in their briefcases. Even with the damaged works in front of her, Farah Diba showed little concern. Maybe, I naively conjectured, she had schooled herself to be emotionally passive in public. Later I heard the staff talk about how wonderful it was to have such an understanding and enlightened patron as Her Majesty. I figured something was lost in translation.

Kamran Diba had indicated in passing that Their Majesties lacked any real interest in contemporary art. He suggested that when I returned to Teheran we would take works in the collection to the palace and circulate them regularly. Maybe then, he speculated, they would come to appreciate Donald Judd and the rest.

When I returned to the museum in August as an employee, I saw that works of art continued to be damaged by Their Majesties' forces, and no precautions were taken. In retrospect, of course, it is obvious that Her Majesty was more concerned with the political situation than with art. Starting in late August or September, the Shah stopped making public appearances while Empress Farah Diba increased her visibility. Much loved by the Iranian people, she was seen as gently benevolent and nonthreatening.

August: Geography and Art

The standard travel poster of Iran declared the country to be "The Land of Turquoise" or "The Peacock Throne," dazzling the viewer with a glorious desert view or a dramatic sun setting behind a mosque. These images, however, did not seem characteristic of Teheran, which exhibits at best a prosaic exoticism. Teheran is so spread out and has so many partially built and abandoned projects that even before the revolution, it appeared under siege. Compared to European and American cities, Teheran looks austere—signs are not prominent because words in Iran are still holy. In place of the Western architecture of signs, the city exhibits yellow brick buildings, stone veneered edifices, and garishly painted Art Deco and Moderne metal gates.

Like Los Angeles and Tokyo, Teheran is decentralized, rambling, a place of extension where one moves horizontally, not vertically as in New York. Unfocused, ugly and confused, it is analogous to the modern mind, which no longer focuses on the central questions of existence. Teheran, during the Shah's reign, likewise skirted core issues: it kept building and abandoning projects, turning desert into boom town and just as often again into rubble.

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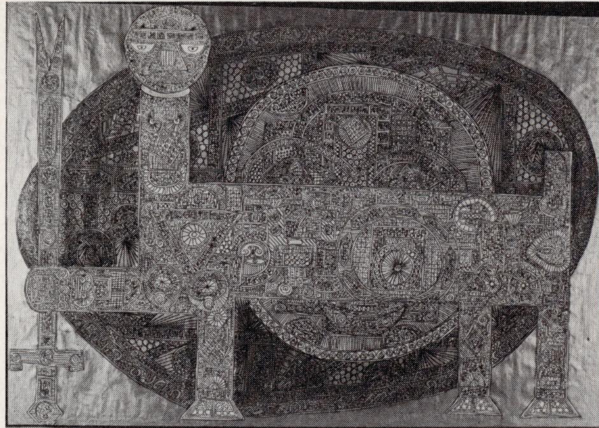
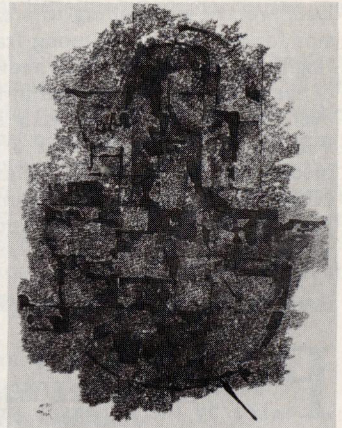
Every act of Iranian city planning was to deny the desert. Along the streets of Teheran, maple trees were planted. Not indigenous to Iran, the trees require great amounts of water to live in the arid climate. Although they seem impractical, the trees have a very real purpose, for they provide people with a sense of scale and diminish the awesomeness of the land so that people and their everyday concerns might appear significant.

Behind TMOCA, in the plot of land adjoining the Hotel Intercontinental, is a huge park that at that time was the glory of Teheran. It was maintained as a Mideastern version of an English garden—with paved walkways, rolled green lawns and enormous shade trees. In this park people might easily forget they were in Iran and imagine themselves in Europe. The park was a refuge where one could be cajoled into forgetting the ultimates that the desert presents.

Although many different artists were active in Iran when I was there, there were essentially two main categories of contemporary artists. One could be allied with the cultivated landscape and the other with the desert. Starting in the 1950s, a group of art-



Hossein Zenderoudi:* Sun and Lion, *1960, ink, watercolor and paint on paper mounted on board, 42 by 58 inches. Collection Grey Art Gallery.



Faramarz Pilaram:* Colt 45, *1968, oil on canvas, 53 by 39 inches. Collection Grey Art Gallery.

Late September: Art in Context

I had a meeting with members of the education department (composed mostly of volunteering American women married

And there was another difficulty: since the museum was an official institution, the works of modern Western art, no matter how "vanguard" and unorthodox their nature for us, were seen as part of Iranian offi-

later we are still hoping to create an occasion for collaboration among Iranian artists, this time an artists-in-exile show. The intent of the exhibition is political in nature: however, it will not be partisan in its effect. Plans are in the works for a multi-media piece with Assurbanipal, Balassanian, and Nickzad Nodjoumi as the main participants. The location has not yet been determined.)

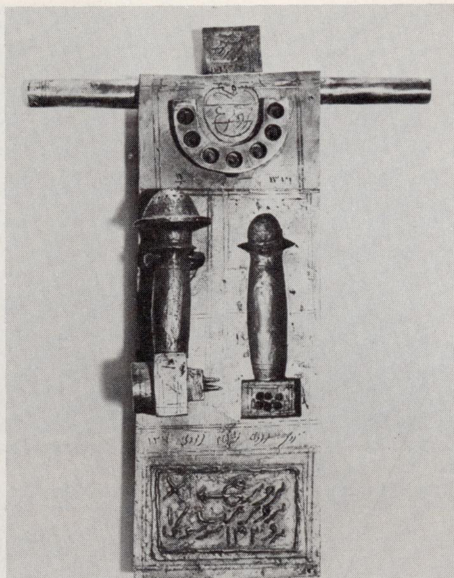
Early October: Cultural Identity

Fereshteh Daftari, an art historian, taught at Farabi University. She was asked by the university president, Dr. Djamshid Behnam, to settle plans for the museum training program that I was organizing. We were driving back from lunch at Xanadu (a French restaurant) and began talking about ways to characterize the Iranian. Whenever I think of the French, the English, or the Japanese an image immediately comes to mind. It may be true or false—most probably it is a cliché of national identity—but it is there all the same. Daftari, who has thought deeply about these questions, had no answers about Iranians. Giving herself as an example, she said that she had no mother tongue. Having lived in Paris and New York for long periods of her life, she was more fluent in English and French than Persian. Her country, she reflected, had no identity. That was part of its problem. Like other Third World nations, its people were unsure of themselves. They denigrated their background and tried to emulate foreign innovations which they didn't understand. No one knew what an Iranian—or, for that matter, a Persian—really was. I conjectured that they were a set of possibilities that currently were in transition. She countered that even the possibilities were denied the Iranians because of their own feelings of inadequacy.

October: Mining the Nonhistoric Past

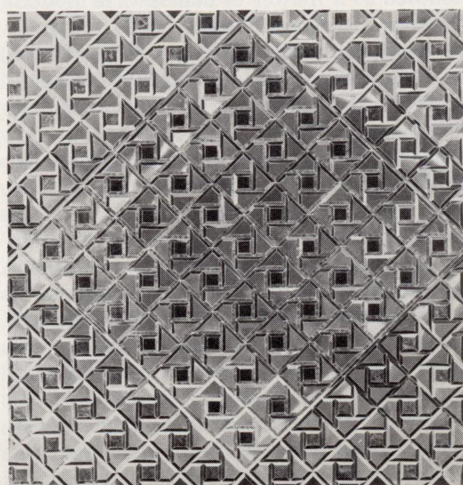
I had an important meeting with Kamran Diba, in which we discussed his forthcoming exhibition of Persian calligraphic painting. The works to be included were sitting right then in the museum basement, but we were nonetheless unsure that the show would take place. It was supposed to open in a week, along with an exhibition of indigenous architecture at Selseneh. Kamran said he could send 11 drivers around the city for the next two days to hand-deliver invitations (mail would take 11 days for delivery within the city limits, and since a telephone directory had not been published for many years, telephoning people was out of the question), and we could open without having the catalogue published. But, of course, any group meeting was dangerous at that point, so we ultimately decided to postpone the exhibition indefinitely.

Then I broached the subject of a new exhibition program. I suggested examining the non-historical past, roughly the last 50



Parviz Tanavoli:* Persian Telephone, *1963, bronze, 19¾ inches high. Collection Grey Art Gallery.

to 100 years, and creating a series of exhibitions presenting Iranian painting, sculpture, film and photography. I suggested another exhibition, "Useful Objects," which would focus on a viable tradition, readily available in bazaars. In such a show we could exhibit, for example, Turkoman tent frames, or a wonderful everyday object left in my office by David Galloway, who also considered such an exhibition. The latter piece looked like a Surrealist *objet trouvê*—an Iranian Rube Goldberg device for smoking bees from their hives. I proposed exhibiting such objects alongside contemporary Western counterparts: a trunk covered with flattened Coca Cola cans juxtaposed to an Andy Warhol, goat-hair ropes next to a Jackie Winsor, and bamboo yarn-winders beside a Sol LeWitt. Even though many of the comparisons might be forced by Western standards, the exhibition would have the distinct advantage of encouraging Iranian artists to



Monir Farmanfarmaian: Untitled, 1975, painted glass, mirrors and stainless steel, 50 inches square.

reevaluate their own tradition.

In addition, Nasrine Faghih's Persian Garden exhibition could be elaborated into a real blockbuster. It consisted only of detailed architectural plans, but it might as easily include garden carpets, ceramics and glass, metalwares, manuscripts, even plants. Such an exhibition would obviously lend itself to packaging and travel. Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the reknowned Islamic scholar, might write a section of the catalogue detailing the history of this art and its relation to Islamic thought. I could tackle certain analogies between walled gardens and chadorees, and also between earthly images of paradise and mathematical proportions signifying perfection.

Diba and I talked about many other ideas. Expressing my belief that most Iranians lacked satisfying images of themselves as 20th-century people and had no historical understanding of their art's evolution during the past century, I suggested that if we had to have Western exhibitions, then they should reinforce the Iranian people's belief in themselves. Such shows as Persian influences on Matisse and Kandinsky, Armenian sources and Arshile Gorky, the black light of Sufi mysticism and Ad Reinhardt's black paintings would be pertinent.

The majority of these proposals were approved. I started planning a broader based Persian Garden exhibition, a retrospective of photography and film, and a useful objects show. However, the impending revolution curtailed all work after the middle of November.

Late October: Museum Politics

Shortly after the Shah decreed that the royal family could not occupy civil positions, I asked Diba if the edict applied to him or to his sister, who was the director of the carpet museum next door. He assured me it pertained only to immediate family.

While Kamran acted confident, his style of dress betrayed a changed attitude. No longer did he wear elegant French and Italian clothes. Instead he appeared in old Iranian suits, frayed at the cuffs. In addition to dressing down, Kamran rode in his Suburban rather than his sports car, and he hired a driver-cum-bodyguard.

I could tell Diba's power was eroding when the museum board, which had formerly been his pawn, called a meeting. Diba was especially anxious that I put his directorship in a favorable light by stressing the international importance of the collection: the Jasper Johns had served as a frontispiece to Max Kozloff's monograph; Claes Oldenburg's *Giant Blue Shirt with Brown Tie* had been exhibited in Maurice Tuchman's "American Sculpture of the Sixties"; Willem de Kooning's *Light in August* and *Woman III* were on loan to the American exhibitions "Abstract Expressionism: the Formative Years" (organized by Gail Levin and me) and "American Art at Mid-Century: Subjects of the Artist" (curated by

E.A. Carmean Jr. and Eliza E. Rathbone).

I was unsuccessful in containing some further, less favorable comments: I stressed the problems of inadequate fire protection and fluctuating temperatures in the galleries. Also I noted that there had been many mistakes in buying. I was compiling a long deaccession list: easily a fifth of the collection consisted of either weak works by well-known artists or fashionable but uninteresting art.

When asked to account for the prices of some works, I said that many documents on file puzzled me. In some cases the price had been literally cut out of the dealers' receipts. I remember in particular that the amount paid for de Kooning's *Woman III* was missing. Someone mentioned that high-ranking officials in the Queen's office who paid for the painting might not want clerical workers to know how much was spent on it, but the explanation seemed implausible, because such documents were always locked up, and not all papers pertaining to expensive works had been tampered with.

Ever since my arrival in Iran, I had heard about paintings by Morris Louis, Frank Stella and Mark Rothko, bought for the museum six years before, which had reportedly found their way into high government officials' private collections. At this meeting with the board, feigning ignorance of the possible whereabouts of these works, I asked if they had been destroyed or sold. My question was not dealt with. Later I learned these works had not been requisitioned for the museum because the Shah preferred to allow them to remain "stolen": As long as he knew who had them, he had control over the "owners."

The same afternoon, I discovered that the museum was broke. According to the head of the public relations department, Diba had spent more than three times the allocated budget. Apparently when the museum opened, Her Majesty told Diba to spend as much money as possible before an official budget was arranged. The spending, I understood from the staff, was frantic and reckless, resulting in poor acquisitions, impractical pieces of expensive gadgetry, and such useless sets of books as the complete *Art Index*—when the museum had nothing but last year's periodicals in the library. In 1978, with the escalation of demonstrations and riots, the royal family began to cut back radically on spending. Budgets, which were usually established by haggling, were almost suspended.

Diba told me about our fiscal crisis in what seemed to me a cavalier manner, adding that we faced a period of some difficulty, but that things would then get better. He suggested speeding up the deaccessioning program—a lengthy, difficult and tedious task—and intimated the necessity of using the resulting money for our annual operating budget. The idea of selling the collection to pay operating expenses was unacceptable to me, and I took care not to accelerate deaccessioning. Indeed, for that reason, no deaccessioning at all took place.

Sonia Balassanian:* Iran After the Shah, *1980, mixed mediums, 39½ by 27½ inches.

Actually the museum's fiscal problems should not have surprised me, because I was receiving only a token salary. Even though my contract was signed by the proper authorities, both Diba and the museum board kept insisting that it was not legal. During my entire time in Iran, I never found out what technical errors were involved, and slowly came to realize that my contract would be indefinitely delayed. The board did not know how to deal with me. Although they wanted professional help, most of them were anti-American. Even though they understood that in the future the museum would feature Iranian art more prominently, they resented having an American in charge.

Early November: The Burning of Teheran

In November, as I was getting over the flu, I witnessed the most terrible siege of burning and looting I ever wish to see. While sick, I stayed in my apartment which was located in the fashionable Saman Building on Boulevard Elizabeth, about three blocks from the museum and next door to the government agricultural building. During my long days in bed, I amused myself by studying military guards who sat in front of the agricultural building in Eames chairs as they manned a machine gun.

One morning I heard a great deal of commotion outside and watched—almost with the passivity of a film viewer—as a group of demonstrators set fire to a Mercedes and rolled it toward my building. At that point, all I could think was that if the building caught fire, I would have to move. It didn't occur to me until later to wonder why the guards across the street chose not to stop the rioters.

Later that morning three staff members of the museum visited me. They went upstairs to the roof of the building to see the fires that had been set throughout the city: hotel lobbies and banks were important targets. From my apartment I could see several small street fires fed by piles of what appeared to be checks (later I heard they were American Express checks), and great clouds of smoke issuing from the Hotel Elizabeth.

Mid-November: Exhibition of Jaleh Square Massacre

I originally underestimated Farshad Farahy, curator of photography at TMOCA, because of his disdain for working schedules. I had written him off as a dandy. But my attitude toward him changed dramatically when he suggested going to a revolutionary exhibition at Teheran University. If I wished to go, he insisted, we should leave immediately, before the exhibition closed. At most, the showing would last a day or two before members of SAVAK or army troops destroyed it, its subject being Black Friday, the Jaleh Square Massacre that had occurred in early September, the morning the Shah declared martial law.

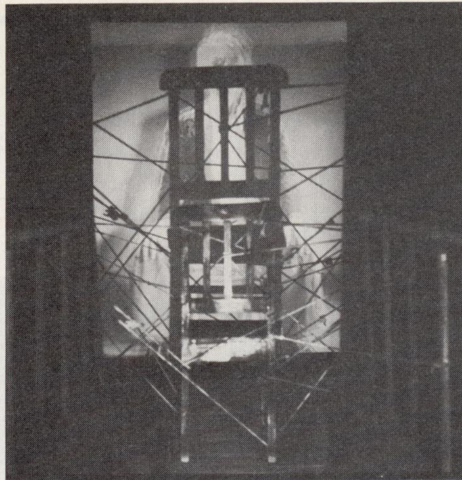
Students, faculty and interested Teheranees were stealthily entering the large courtyard where the exhibition took place. On the center wall a photograph of the Ayatollah had been reverentially placed. Without pushing or shoving, the tightly packed crowd managed to move through the exhibition. Hushed awe suffused the area despite a loudspeaker blaring out a message in Persian—probably a taped message from the Ayatollah.

All my years of training as a museum visitor did me in. I couldn't shake off my tendency to fixate on the esthetic qualities of the exhibition. The photographs attached to white cotton sheets with masking tape reminded me of Nancy Spero's work. To the side of many photographs, captions had been written in red and black ink. The red ink, which was supposed to look like blood, appeared to me decorative and even beautiful. The masking tape seemed an artistic device. I thought of all the contemporary artists from Barnett Newman to Terence LaNoue who used masking tape as a way of indicating casualness. Masking tape connoted the temporary as did no other material. Also it declared the expediency with which the present exhibition had been organized.

I made an effort to put aside my esthetic response, as I wanted to see the photographs as documents of the Jaleh Square Massacre. But certain prints reminded me of Western photographers who exhibit blurred shots containing a portion of their arm, knee, or hand—of photographs that reflect the presence of the photographer as much as the scene taken.

None of the pictures were clear accounts of the massacre. They were accumulations along the periphery, alluding to the melee in before-and-after shots without recording the event itself. In a series of silvery prints I could see the famous phalanx of young girls—300 of them—who formed the front lines. Dressed all in black chadors and holding lilies, they beamed as they were cheered along their route. Then some photographs caught the first shock of the firing, when no one could quite comprehend what was happening and cameras were clicked automatically, almost as a reflex. The only "art" in these pictures—the only moment of decision and shaping—occurred at a later time when random shots were blown up and cropped with an eye toward heightening the drama. Even while looking at these photographs I could not comprehend that nearly 3000 people had been killed in Teheran two months before.

There were also small Polaroids, some in color. These snapshots had a brutal quality to them and affected me more deeply than the other photographs. Because an intimacy is accorded the Polaroid—it is associated with amateurs, family pictures, casual subjects—these snapshots depicting bloody extremities, agonized bodies, and rows of numbered corpses were the most disturbing. That they were made furtively and in a great hurry was readily apparent. Few were focused, and those that were only barely caught the subject within the camera's range. The combination of intimate format and revolutionary subject brought the massacre within the scope of human perception and made it real, enabling me to grasp it as part of my world in a way that the grander and more self-conscious black-and-white photographs never could. The larger prints which had been cropped in the darkroom were not effective instruments of truth; however, the Polaroids, which had few artistic pretensions, were.



Marcos Grigorian: **Condemned Chair,** ***1975, photo projection and wood. Performed at Iran America Society.***

fact sympathized with the revolutionaries.

He was concerned with museums primarily as didactic structures. He intended the gallery space to become an open book with art as illustrations and detailed labels as captions, and he wished all supplemental information to be couched in language plain enough for even semi-illiterate Iranians to understand.

While I was opposed to the museum's tendency to display works of art as decontextualized masterpieces, and wished to suggest possible contemporary social, economic and political situations in which they might be seen to convey specific meanings, I disliked the idea of reducing the work of art through conscious simplification. Simplistic mediation was not a satisfactory form of interpretation. And labels should not aspire to the state of essays, especially in a situation of audience illiteracy.

Our discussion, calm on the surface, made me realize that we were approaching art from radically different points of view. Kossar admitted that he would be willing to exhibit only revolutionary exhibitions such as the show of the Jaleh Square Massacre. While I could certainly see the importance of exhibiting revolutionary art, posters and even banners, I had problems with turning the museum into an outright center for revolutionary propaganda.

(Of course, in retrospect, I can clearly see that the museum under Her Majesty's patronage had been a political tool: it endowed the throne with the look of benevolence, liberality and international—which is to say foreign—culture. And I can also see that a parallel use of the museum by revolutionaries would have been in order, if the museum were to present a balanced picture of the ideological uses to which art may be put.)

Kossar and I discussed several other museum problems including my salary. At this point Kossar alluded to greater political problems than I had imagined possible. (News was frequently prey to rumor and exaggeration. One of the few reliable sources was the BBC radio broadcast in Persian, which the Shah, by broadcasting his own news over the same frequency, attempted to neutralize.) Whenever we talked of the museum's future, Kossar returned with the pessimistic refrain, "If there even is a museum or an Iran." Kossar's statement conveyed the sense of hopelessness felt by many Iranian intellectuals who believed their country to be a pawn of the great world powers.

Postscript: Revolutionary Art

In my opinion only two artists in 1978 appeared to be dealing with the revolution in an interesting manner—Zadik Zadikian and Fred Bull—and both were foreigners. Zadikian's work became political not through his own intention, but accidentally, because of its immediate context, while Bull's art was originally intended as symbolic statements of the upheavals.

In early fall, Zadik Zadikian came to Iran from New York at the invitation of Tony Shafrazi, an Armenian-Iranian and former artist, who had decided to open a gallery in Teheran, which would be followed by another gallery in New York City. Shafrazi wished to inaugurate his gallery with a one-person show of Zadikian's work, and the exhibition opened Oct. 31, 1978, during a time of violent outbreaks between army and revolutionaries. Located in a large apartment in an older residential area, the gallery looked official because it contained, in addition to Zadikian's work, Shafrazi's photographs of Empress Farah Diba.

Intending to create a process piece that relied on Carl Andre's early stacking procedures while still employing his own "signature" medium of gold leaf, Zadikian gilded 1000 Teheran London Bricks (the initials T.L.B. were impressed on each) and arranged them in 32 neatly aligned stacks. The artist (an Armenian refugee from Russia) had come to Iran in the summer and

Marcos Grigorian: Untitled, wood, mud and straw.

...ber: The New ...rector

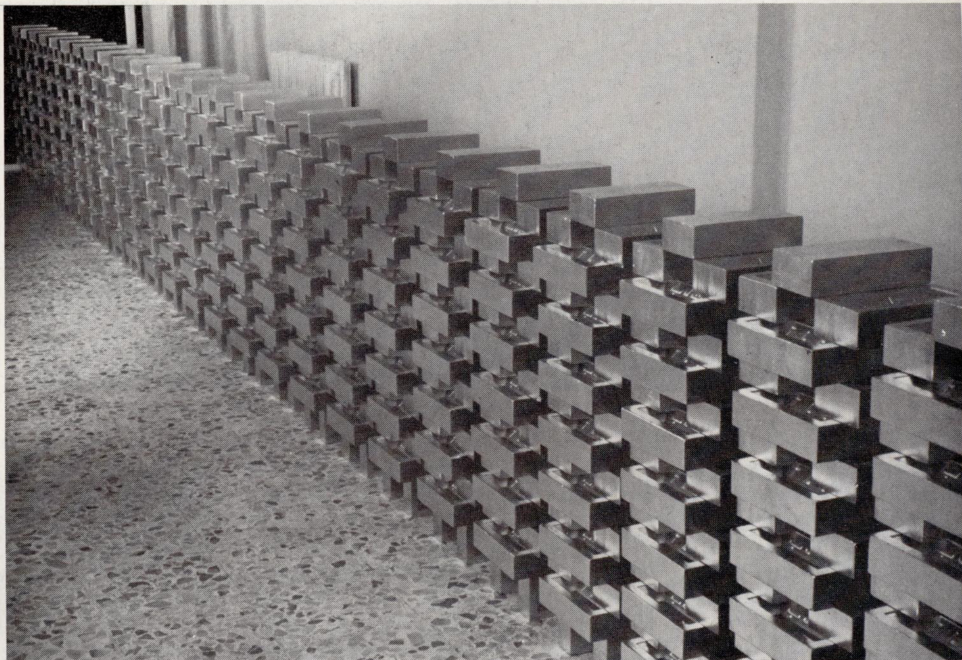
...r's museum board meeting ...d to be very much the straw ...e wind that it had seemed. In ...er, Diba relinquished the mu... ...rship to Dr. Mehdi Kossar, ... farewell speech that reduced ...museum staff to tears, he fled ...sar, former dean of the faculty ... Teheran University and mem... ...useum board, did not seem a ...or director of TMOCA. Al... ...ew little about modern art, he ...ation of being a good adminis... ...uld not guarantee the museum ... royal favors, as could Diba, ...bring together the various fac... ... in the past few months that ...e museum into a microcosm of ... Kossar had the advantage of ... support the Shah when he in

Late Novem... Museum Di...

Octobe... prove... in th... late Novemb... seum directo... and, after a ... much of the ... Teheran. Kos... of fine arts of ... ber of the m... bad choice ... though he kn... had the reput... trator. He co... instantaneous... but he might ... tions formed ... had turned th... the revolution... appearing to ...

worked in the T.L.B. factory for several months. He examined the local procedures for making and stacking bricks and used the factory's method of arranging them for the finished piece, so that T.L.B. workers could, if necessary, reinstall the work at a later date. One wall of the gallery, reflecting the influence of Robert Smithson, contained photo-documentation of the factory.

Even if Zadikian did not intend the pieces to refer to the current political situation, his references to workers and gold, together with the close proximity of his work to photographs of Her Majesty, caused many of us to view *1000 Gold Bricks* as symbolic of the great amounts of money that were then being sent out of the country. (At the time a group of Bank Melli employees published a list of prominent people whom they reported as transferring millions of American dollars, in the past few months, to foreign banks.) Only a few people saw Zadikian's baroque-Minimalist group of gilded bricks, and even fewer recognized the possible parallels with current events. A few, however, did mistake the whole production for deliberate irony.



Zadik Zadikian:* 1000 Gold Bricks, *1978.

Fred Bull had come to Shiraz Festival with Andrew DeGroat's dance company in 1975, but had stayed on to study Sufism, paint, and earn a living by teaching English. When I met him, he was working in the exhibition services department of the museum. Soon after I arrived in Iran, he showed me a series of monochromatic mixed-medium landscape drawings employing traditional Iranian motifs. They were small ironic drawings that used architectural elements and barbed wire as decorative devices. It was only in mid-November that he allowed me to see three large canvases that he was completing. The paintings—symbolic statements of the struggles Iran was having with its past—were abstracted landscapes in paint and graphite with repeated borders derivative of carpet designs. Along the sides of each work three to four dominating shapes looking like hairy swords threatened an abstract secluded garden with a dying tree.

The Iranian artist in the West who has most extensively dealt with the revolution is Sonia Balassanian. Starting to work again about a year after the fall of the Shah's government, Balassanian (who moved to New York in December 1978) began to feel she was a hostage in exile. After weathering enormous personal difficulties including the incarceration of a close family member in Iran, she decided to deal with the revolution in her art. Changing from calligraphic painting to collaged mixed-medium works, she collected information pertaining to the revolution, Xeroxed it and then combined the copies with paint to simulate the look of weathered billboards. In her art all the main characters, themes and symbols of the revolution appear: hostages, helicopters, the Shah, revolutionaries, oil-refining centers, the Koran, mullahs, the Ayatollah, women in chadors. She presents the chaos of dissent but refuses to take sides.

Superficially similar in certain respects to Warhol's and Rauschenberg's work, her art depends on multiple imagery and cheap printing techniques, but she employs these elements for different ends. Even more important an influence on Balassanian is the schema of Near Eastern manuscripts, both Islamic and Armenian, that contain scenes overlaid with calligraphy and decorative patterns. Her works are thus icons of crisis and recapitulations of an antiquated modernism.

My decision to leave TMOCA was made quite suddenly and my departure took place soon thereafter. Early in December, after having weathered what the Shah termed the worst month of outbreaks, I decided the situation was no longer tolerable. Staff morale had eroded seriously, gasoline shortages had begun to curtail activities, and it seemed museum hours were to be drastically cut, once the religious month of Muharram began. Part of the British embassy had been burned, and I discovered from Iranian friends that several American embassy employees had left Teheran secretly in the night. In addition, the museum held up my paychecks on contractual technicalities and failed to secure a work permit for me. During my last few days, armed with a letter from Her Majesty's office and a museum translator, I regularly visited the Teheran police station. I passed through the same offices again and again. At one point a policeman said with great bitterness, "You Americans have gotten everything you wanted for years. Now it's your time to wait." I left Teheran as soon as the arrangements could be made. A staff member had paid off the police and secured an exit permit for me.

Fred Bull:* Persian Garden Walls II, *1978, oil and graphite on canvas.

In the short time I was in Teheran the museum had changed profoundly. From being an institution of international focus, it became a local museum that exhibited mostly Iranian art. Traditional work vied with acceptable vanguard pieces. The important international collection was mostly stored away in the basement; the American staff was gone, and partially trained Iranians were left in charge. □

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