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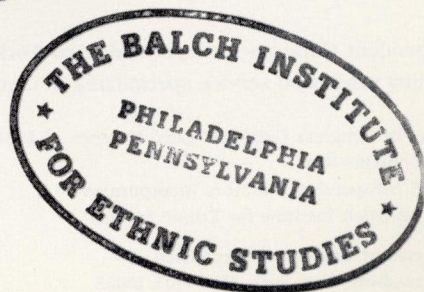


Cynthia Jaffee McCabe, guest curator

Essays by Cynthia Jaffee McCabe, Yi-Fu Tuan,  
and Thomas Kessner

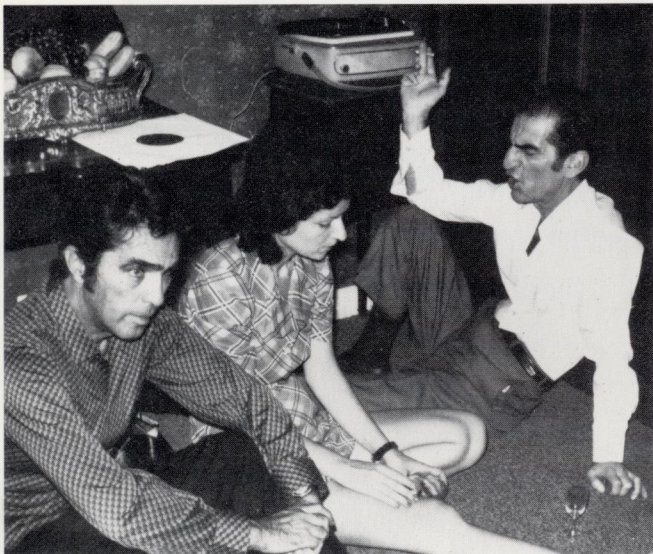


Organized by the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, Philadelphia, and Independent Curators Incorporated, New York; circulated by Independent Curators Incorporated, a non-profit traveling exhibition service specializing in contemporary art. The exhibition, tour, and catalogue are made possible, in part, by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.





# Sonia Balassanian



Sonia Balassanian and other members of "Norej" (New Page) literary group, Teheran, Iran, 1974

I am of Armenian descent and I consider myself an Armenian. . . . I consider myself an American artist . . . I had my education in this country.

Philadelphia was the promised land for Iranian-born artist and poet Sonia Balassanian. Born in 1942 to a traditional Armenian family in Arak, Iran, she experienced the sense of being alien early in life. (Armenian-Iranians, as Christians, are outside the mainstream of Moslem life in Iran.) Balassanian has a deep sense of the ambiguity between her upbringing, her subsequent artistic training in Philadelphia, and her present life in New York. Her 'liberated' husband took her on an extended European honeymoon when she was sixteen; she first saw modern art during the eight months they spent in London. In 1966, when he came to Philadelphia to study city planning, she studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and earned a BFA from the University of Pennsylvania in 1970.

Balassanian returned to Teheran in 1972 where she became successful as an abstract painter, exhibiting her work and obtaining teaching positions. But within four years she missed the artistic challenge she had felt in the United States and returned to earn an MFA from Pratt Institute in 1978. Returning to her homeland in August 1978, she was confronted by the increasing political and social turbulence in Iran. After four months, with a growing sense of disorientation, horror, and fear for her western educated son, the family fled to the United States.

Balassanian expressed her outrage and grief in multi-layered collages which recall accretions of political billboards, Islamic manuscripts, field paintings, and Eastern Orthodox icons. They bear the "look of revolution." In *Self-Portrait* (1980), Balassanian presents herself blindfolded in the guise of a hostage. Her stark, compassionate image evokes *Imago Pietatis*, the devotional device of imagining oneself as the crucified Christ. Her recent figurative work is based on imagery found in ancient Armenian caves.