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ESSAYS

Between Iran and Dubai An Art Collection as an Alternative Archive of Iranian History

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Time can be measured in pictures. An artist bears witness, recollects the past and imagines alternative futures. An art collection becomes an archive, an accumulation of material traces left by artists. 'History,' wrote Paul Ricoeur, 'has always been a critique of social narratives and, in this sense, a rectification of our common memory.'^[1] Our collective memory is mediated by images. Art as an archive, then, helps to give shape to our common memory, which becomes the interglossia for history. But the question of the archive is not just a question of the past, as Jacques Derrida explained, 'It is a question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow.'^[2]

For Michel Foucault, the archive was 'a system of discursivity...It is the general system of the formation and transformation of statements.'^[3] If an archive helps to determine what can be said, in important ways, an art collection helps give shape to what can be seen. If archives determine the sayable, pictorial archives determine the visible. An art collection contains within it not just the images, but the process of the formation and transformation of images. In our archive – the art collection – it is the artist who becomes history's scribe, the artwork our historical document.

In her densely rich essay, *The Allure of the Archives*, Arlette Farge wrote: 'An archive presupposes an archivist, a hand that collects and classifies.'^[4] Our archivist, then, is the art collector. To be taken with archival fever, Derrida said, 'is to burn with a passion...It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the archaic place of absolute commencement.'^[5] Our archivist is the Dubai-based collector, Mohammed Afkhami. The path of return to our archaic past weaves across national borders. Iranian art has become a transnational art form. Iranian artists work from studios in Tehran, London, and Brooklyn. Their art sells in galleries in Tehran and at auction in Dubai. It is collected and exhibited in museums across Europe, the United States, and the Middle East.

Dubai forms a central capital of this new Iranian art world. Dubai provides a central market for Iranian art. It helps sustain the imagination of Iranian artists. Dubai serves as a crucial gathering place for curators, artists, scholars, gallerists, and collectors working on Iranian art. That Mohammed Afkhami's collection is based in Dubai is central to our history.

My historical practice recovers an alternative timeline of Iranian history embedded in the Afkhami collection. And as Farge has noted, the traces of the past that are contained in archives ultimately reveal themselves to the historian in random, sometimes chaotic fashion.

2005

Mohammed Afkhami: 'I started collecting in 2005. It's actually a funny story. You know, as an Iranian, when you go back and you haven't been back for many years, you tend to have difficulties with your passport and your paperwork. So I ended up being stuck there for about two weeks. And of course in Iran, there's not much to do but hang out with your friends, eat kabob, and talk about the good old days. So a friend of mine called me up and said, 'Look, there's a great Iranian art scene flourishing. Come and have a look at some of these galleries.' So I went with him, and he took me to this gallery. And I bought my first pieces. At first I thought, you know, these are so aesthetically pretty and very affordable, I mean these were pieces that were \$300, \$400, or \$500. And in the West, a canvas costs much more than that. And I brought the pieces back, and I started getting a little bit into it. I didn't know why that was.

The family has always been into art. My great grandmother was the founder of the first Iranian art institute for women in the 1930s. My grandfather from my mother's side was an avid Islamic Art collector. So I'd always been surrounded by art, but I'd never found my niche. And I found that being a collector in contemporary Iranian art was the beginning of my lifelong passion. And so I started looking at the space much more actively. It was just beginning to sort of take-off. The gallery scene in Dubai had barely started. I remember there were only curated shows in hotels. Then Third Line, XVA, B21 – all these galleries – they started to flourish. It began to take on a life of its own.'^[6]

1928



Sohrab Sepehri, *Landscape with Houses*, 1970-74.
Copyright Christie's Images Limited [2014].

On 7 October 1928, the artist and poet Sohrab Sepehri was born in Kashan, Iran.

I am from Kashan
My profession is painting
Every now and then I build a cage from paint
Which I sell to you
So that with the song of the poppy imprisoned in it
Your lonely heart may be renewed
What a dream what a dream
I know my canvas is lifeless
I know well that the pond of my painting has no fish
I am from Kashan.[7]

1953



Mitra Tabrizian, *Surveillance*, 1988-89.
Copyright the artist.

In 1953, in the lead up to the first regime change carried out by the CIA, Kermit Roosevelt travelled to Tehran. He hid in the backseat of a black sedan as it drove into the driveway of the Shah's palace, and the Shah joined him in the backseat of the car. This was the third visitor who had gone to the Shah to tell him that it was time to dismiss his Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh. The Shah had refused, believing it would lead to a civil war in Iran. Roosevelt told the Shah that the directive to dismiss Mossadegh was a direct message from Prime Minister Churchill and President Eisenhower. If the Shah were to refuse, the USA and the UK would withdraw support for his government. The CIA backed coup in Iran was the first regime change carried out by the USA.[8] A watershed moment, it is part of the history depicted in the artist Mitra Tabrizian's *Surveillance* (1988-89).

1964



Parviz Tanavoli, *Heech*, 2008
Copyright the artist.

In his studio called *Atelier Kaboud*, the artist Parviz Tanavoli discovered *Heech*. *Heech* was Tanavoli's protest against two trends in Iranian art at the time that were disturbing to him. One was the propensity to mimic the latest international art trends. The other was a fixation on calligraphic painting. Tanavoli decided he was going to limit himself to one word – *heech*, the Persian word for nothingness. The Afkhami collection contains several examples of Tanavoli's *Heech* sculptures.

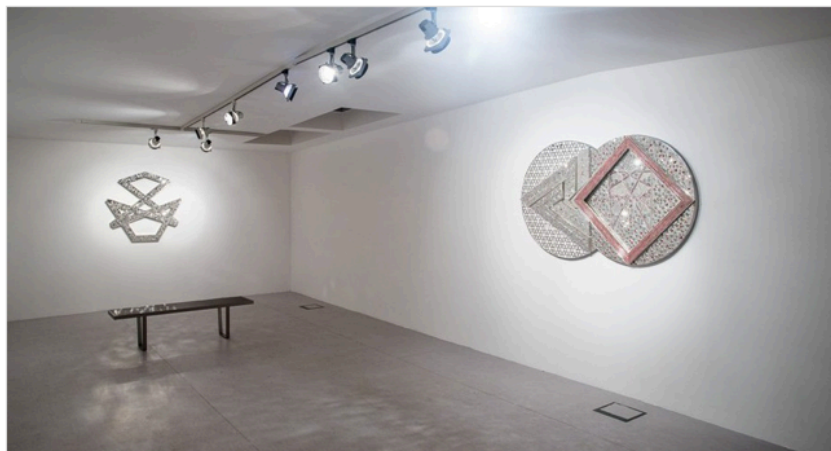
1965



Marcos Grigorian, *Desert*, 1972.
Copyright the artist.

In 1965, New York's Museum of Modern Art acquired a work by Marcos Grigorian, *Untitled* (1963), from his seminal *Earthworks* series. In Spring 1966, Marcos Grigorian and Mohsen Vaziri became the first Iranian artists exhibited at MoMA. Their art was included in an exhibition of recent acquisitions, curated by Dorothy C. Miller. The 70 works by artists from 20 countries that were included in that exhibit dated from 1908 through 1965. A press release issued on 5 April 1966 explained, 'The Museum of Modern Art's annual exhibitions of recently acquired work are presented as a report to the public because, even with the additional gallery space made possible by the completion of the first phase of the Museum's building programme, only a small part of the acquisitions can be hung in the galleries permanently allotted to the Collections.'^[9] Though works of modern Iranian art were collected by MoMA in the 1960s, they weren't hung as part of the museum's permanent collection which helped shape the canon of Modern Art. I call these works a kind of 'closeted modernism'.

1975



Monir Shahrourdy Farmanfarmaian, 2004-2013, installation view. Courtesy the artist and The Third Line.

In 1975, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian took her friends, the artists Robert Morris and Marcia Hafif, to visit the shrine of Shah-e Cheragh in Shiraz, whose walls were adorned in mirror mosaic. She recalls: 'the very space seemed on fire; the lamps blazing in hundreds of thousands of reflections.'^[10] This was the inspiration for her mosaic mirror works, which have become some of the most iconic works of contemporary Iranian art.

1976



Koorosh Shishegaran, *Portrait*, 2005, 160 x 130 cm, acrylic on canvas.
Copyright the artist.

Iranian artist Koorosh Shishegaran made a poster called *Peace for Lebanon* in 1976, for which he won an award from UNICEF. Shishegaran developed the poster into a new form he dubbed 'postal art,' reproducing the image onto hundreds of postcards that he mailed across the country.

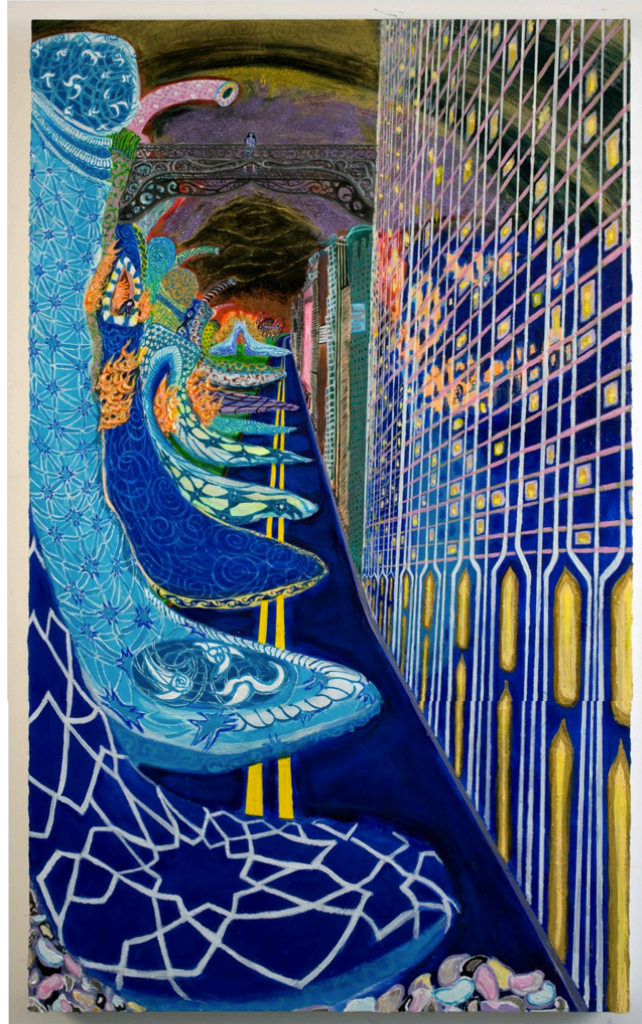
1993

In 1993, Malekeh Nayiny returned home to visit her ailing mother. She recalls, 'By the time I arrived in Iran the funeral had already taken place. Two years later my father also died. All that was left for me were the traces of their lives; their objects, letters, and abandoned pictures from the past. These traces tangibly connect me to my past. Each one tells a different story of a time gone by.'^[11]

1998

Abbas Kiarostami captures photographs during regular walks through the Iranian countryside. He explained: 'A photojournalist covers the news from the scene of war, and I, with nature, cover the news of the scene of peace. I don't think there is a fundamental difference; it is a difference in the selection of a subject. For a photojournalist, a moment is important – the moment for taking a photograph. For a photographer of nature, this particular moment is also important. Without those moments, no image is worth recording. There is only one moment in which a photograph can be taken.'^[12]

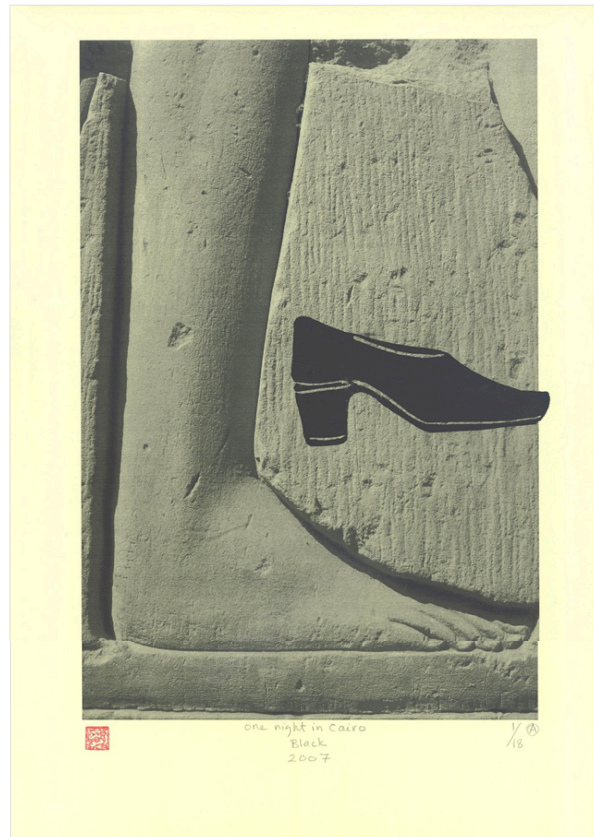
11 September 2001



Negar Ahkami, *Bridge to Nowhere*, 2009
Courtesy the artist.

This work by Negar Ahkami was inspired by the events of 11 September 2001. It's called *Bridge to Nowhere* (2009). On one side, you see a depiction of what used to be the World Trade Centre Buildings. Ahkami remembers as a young child visiting the site; the arches on the bottom on the buildings reminded her of Islamic architecture. On the other side of the artwork, you see her rendition of Arabesque and Persian designs. And in the distance, you see a melting Azadi Tower. The bridge that connects them is topped with a young woman, who represents an Iranian-American immigrant, who has now experienced the terror of violence in both of their home cities.

2006



Afsoon, *One Night in Cairo, Black*, 2007. Dimensions 30 x 43 cm, lino cut on photograph.
Courtesy the artist.

In 2006, the artist Afsoon went to Egypt. She visited the ancient monuments in Luxor and realized there were a thousand feet. No matter how dissolved the ancient sculptures were, the feet remained perfectly shaped. There was a merchant selling some goods to tourists on a cloth he'd spread on the ground. Amongst his wares, Afsoon discovered a plastic doll's shoe. She became obsessed with this object, and though he was resistant, the merchant sold it to her. She keeps it on the desk of her studio in London.

31 October 2007



Farhad Moshiri, *One World*, 2007. Approx. 75,000 crystal diamonds on canvas mounted on board. 138 x 223 cm / 54 1/4 inches x 7.3 feet.

Courtesy Galerie Perrotin.

That night, the hammer went down. Mohammed Afkhami recalls, 'I had been travelling on a business trip, so I hadn't been able to go to the auction preview. When I looked through the catalogue, the work by Farhad Moshiri didn't look like much. It was kind of kitsch. I arrived at the auction at the Jumeirah Emirates Tower Hotel late, and the room was full with about 500 people. So I was standing in the back of the room. When *One World* (2007) came up for auction, I was bamboozled by it. It was just so beautiful. The bidding took off. The auctioneer kept it going. After a while, it was just me bidding against a guy on the phone. And then the hammer went down. That was it. The room erupted. People were clapping. It was like a football stadium.' At the time, the sale set the world auction record for any work by an Iranian artist.

2008

In the summer of 2008, the work of Pouran Jinchi was exhibited at the Vilcek Foundation in Manhattan. The Vilcek Foundation is dedicated to supporting foreign-born scientists and artists who have made outstanding contributions to society in the United States.

2009



Ala Ebtekar, *Kot-e Ahmadi*, 2008.
Copyright the artist.

In August 2009, then President Ahmadinejad made *Time* magazine's list of 'Top 10 Worst Dressed World Leaders,' because of the inexpensive Chinese-made jacket that became his trademark. When the San Francisco-based artist Ala Ebtekar visited the Tehran bazaar, he heard merchants calling the coats they were selling 'kot-e Ahmadi.' Ebtekar then purchased a similar coat in the USA and had tailors in Tehran embellish it with local fabric. Mohammed Afkhami purchased the work at the Third Line Gallery in Dubai. The artist tells me it is a one of a kind work of art.

Nicky Nodjourni, *Masterpiece*, 2012.

Courtesy the artist.

In 2012, Rostam and his horse Rakhsh did battle in the Brooklyn studio of the artist Nicky Nodjourni. The artist explains his artwork called *Masterpiece* (2012), 'So about the work, what I had in mind was the subject of violence, violence in the past and now. The background image is from a nineteenth century lithographic illustration of the *Shahnameh*. It shows the fight between Rostam and Kamus, one of the heroes of Turan Zamin. Rostam and his horse Rakhsh were victorious.' In the triptych, Nodjourni draws from the heroic figures of Ferdowsi's eleventh century poem, the *Shahnameh* to comment on violence in contemporary society. Considered the national epic of Iran, the *Shahnameh* combines a mythical imagined past with the actual history of pre-Islamic Iran. Poetry and art, the past and the present, myth and history mingle powerfully in the painting.

One finds history threaded throughout the Mohammed Afkhami collection – traces of Iran's past as re-imagined by its artists. In this essay – and the original talk at Art Dubai on which it is based – I've explored the idea of writing alternative histories of Iran using an art collection as an archive. Here, the artist became the scribe, the artwork the document, and the collector the archivist. Taking Farge's notion that traces of the past present themselves in an archive in random, sometimes chaotic fashion, I've created an alternative timeline of contemporary Iranian history. But as Anthony Downey reminded us in his essay, 'Archival Dissonance,' 'the physical archive and the process of archiving is as much about determining the future as it is about defining the past.'^[13] Asserting art as an archive, then, is not simply a project to rewrite an episodic timeline of the past, but to help reveal the power of the artist to imagine alternative futures.

This paper was based on a talk presented at Global Art Forum, Art Dubai, March 2014, and revised for publication on Ibraaz.

- [1] Paul Ricoeur, 'Archives/Documents/Traces' in *The Archive*, ed. Charles Merewether (Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2006), p. 69.
- [2] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 36.
- [3] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp.129-130.
- [4] Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 3.
- [5] Derrida, *op cit.*, p. 91.
- [6] Mohammed Afkhami speaking at the Global Art Forum, 'Building and Sustaining Patronage I: From Private to Public Collections (Global Art Forum 2010),' online video clip, YouTube, 22 August 2010 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGy4II7SUhM>.
- [7] From Sohrab Sepehri, 'The Sound of Water Footsteps' in *Iran Online*, trans. Shiva Balaghi <http://www.iranonline.com/literature/sepehri/seday-e-pay-e-ab/>.
- [8] For more on this historic episode see Shiva Balaghi, 'Silenced Histories and Sanitized Autobiographies: The 1953 CIA Coup in Iran,' in *Biography* 36.1 (2013): pp.71-96.
- [9] Cable No. 40n, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 5 April 1966.
- [10] Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian and Zara Houshmand, *A Mirror Garden* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007), p. 186.
- [11] Malekeh Nayiny, artist's statement: www.malekeh.com.
- [12] Abbas Kiarostami as quoted in Shiva Balaghi and Anthony Shadid, 'Nature Has No Culture: The Photographs of Abbas Kiarostami,' *MERIP* (2001): pp.30-33.
- [13] Anthony Downey, 'Archival Dissonance,' *Ibraaz*, 6 November 2013: <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/83>.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dr. Shiva Balaghi is a cultural historian of the Middle East, who has published widely on contemporary Iranian visual culture from the late Qajar era through the contemporary period. She is an International Humanities Fellow at Brown University, where she teaches Art History and History. Her books include *Picturing Iran: Art, Society, and Revolution* (co-edited), *Saddam Hussein: A Biography*, and *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East* (co-edited). Balaghi is a founding board member of the Association of Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey (AMCA). She is an associate editor of *Review of Middle East Studies* and Vice President of the American Institute of Iranian Studies.