

institutions, and from within some employees started a rebellion. There were many difficulties and I had become a political liability so the Queen asked me to resign. Even before the Revolution, I had put valuable work in reserve and put all Western art out of sight. I neutralised the exhibition and went on to create the Niavaran Cultural Centre. The Museum has survived and it and the Niavaran Cultural Centre are the only two institutions whose names were not changed during the Revolution.



Photograph of Kamran Diba  
Taken by Ata Omidvar, 2006

*Kamran Diba left Iran in 1977 and now lives and works in New York and Malaga.*

*Janet Rady has been interested in Middle Eastern Art since the age of fourteen when she first visited Iran. After studying Farsi and Islamic Art and Archaeology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, she lived in Iran for a year during the Iran - Iraq war and subsequently gained a First Class Masters Degree in Islamic Art at the University of Melbourne, Australia.*

*Janet is married to an Egyptian and now lives in London where she is actively involved in promoting Contemporary Middle Eastern Art. She is a regular contributor to specialist Middle Eastern art magazines and journals and has recently curated a number of successful exhibitions of Contemporary Iranian art. She also sits on the Councils of the Iran Society and the Association for the Study of Travel in Egypt and the Near East. [www.janetradyfineart.com](http://www.janetradyfineart.com)*

All images are courtesy of the author and interviewee

## Christine Eberhart *Interview with* **Tony Shafrazi**

July 1st, 2008

After interviewing Kamran Diba at Art Basel with regard to his involvement in the founding of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, I then had the great opportunity to be introduced to Mr Tony Shafrazi here in London to get his recollections of the story as well as news about his current show "Who's afraid of Jasper Johns".

He very kindly agreed for me to interview him while he was in London for the Contemporary Art Sales.

**Christine Eberhart:** *Are there parallels in the art market between pre revolution Iran and Dubai today?*

**Tony Shafrazi:** No you cannot really compare the two in this instance.

The history of the Emirates leads back to the genius that was Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the originator of the Emirates, who in 1971 consulted with the Shah before bringing together and forming a complex entity from what originally were nomadic and tribal states.

Iran is rooted in a huge tradition and its history reaches far back to the 6th century BC. In the late 1960s, the Westernisation of Iran was already in full swing and Kharg Island in the Persian Gulf became the model for Dubai.

By nature Iranian peoples are a vast and varied folk like the terrain itself, and it consists of many types of people which makes for a culture rich in all aspects of the arts and open to outside influences.

**CE:** *How did you get involved with the Art Scene in Tebran at the time of the Shah?*

**TS:** Iran in the mid 70s was host to an international cultural program that had been formulated by the Empress Farah Diba.

Basically the program was composed of five strands. It was modelled on the five fingers of the hand, with the thumb representing the idea for cultural centres of this type throughout Iran.

*CE: What did the Program consist of?*

**TS:** There was the International Film Festival, where we had Pasolini and Carlo Ponti from Italy. Secondly the Shiraz Performance Festival organised to promote Theatre and Dance, attended by the likes of Peter Brooke and Robert Walther and John Cage, came with radical contemporary music and Stockhausen from America. Then there was the Carpet Museum that no one believed in and the Contemporary Art Museum.

*CE: What was your involvement with the Art Museum?*

**TS:** When I got wind of the plans for the Contemporary Art Museum, I saw this as an opportunity to help introduce the very best international artists, and consequently to put Iran on the Western cultural map.

*CE: What was your own background?*

**TS:** I had been culturally active for some time, and after graduating at the Royal College here in London in 1967, I lectured in Manchester and in America. The Leicestershire County Commission had some of my work as well as Ted Power, who had a great collection of Newman's. His father, Alan Power in California, put on an exhibition at the Tate of Pop Art in 1967 showing his collection of Frank Stella's. I also performed at the Iran America Society, and Fereydown gave me my first exhibition at the Zand Gallery

I was going back and forth from New York where I knew a lot of gallerists. I had contributed to exhibitions in Belgium and Italy, and I was involved in artist actions.

*CE: What was your role with the Museum's Collection?*

**TS:** When I got involved it was to help make the Museum Collection as good as possible and to give recognition to other artists' work.

I acquired art works by Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, and I was in a position to introduce Kamran Diba, who was working on the Collection of the gallerists in New York, like Leo Castelli for example.

*CE: There seems to be some controversy over both your and Kamran Diba's roles and involvement with the Collection?*

**TS:** I have no gripes about Kamran, whose knowledge of architecture I admire very much and who was very receptive to my suggestions. At the time we were good friends. This is now forty years ago and I have continued to be culturally active. And when we put the Collection together, it was my influence that helped secure the pieces in the Collection. I will say this until my grave!

*CE: Do you think the Museum was a success?*

**TS:** Kamran had built it and it is architecturally a wonderful building. We amassed a remarkably good collection in four years, and by any museum standards, it was a great success.

I had done enormous work for them but I never received one penny. Even during the Revolution I still had my own gallery in Tehran and I planned to keep it going, hoping that people would come and buy Western contemporary works from me. But I had to abandon this idea because at the opening already there were tanks in the street. I had invested all my resources in the Gallery, so later in New York, I had to start all over again.

*CE: What happened during the Revolution?*

**TS:** Nothing happened to the Collection and thankfully nothing was damaged. Despite the enormous temptations in the art market, nothing was ever sold except for the one De Kooning in return for a page from a very rare manuscript of the Persian Shahnameh. But works are being lent and there is an exchange program facilitating access to the Collection; for example, last year the Francis Bacon was lent to the Tate exhibition here in London. So, yes, the Exchange Program is in existence. Previously work had been lent to an exhibition called "Metamorphoses" in Rome, and works have also been lent to Scotland and the Beyeler Foundation in Basel.

*CE: Tell me more about how the incidence of your defacement of Guernica in 1971 and how it relates to the current show in New York "Who's afraid of Jasper Johns" at your Gallery.*

**TS:** I offered my gallery space to Brown and Fisher since no other was open to their ideas and in my opinion Gavin Brown is a brilliant curator. Although reluctant at first to relate to the old story, I agreed for Brown and Fisher to use my ideas, my history, and my Gallery. And I am glad for them to have done it because now everyone is talking about the Exhibition. They

wanted to use my artist's action of "All Lies All" from forty years ago and interpret it as a springboard for this current exhibition.

*CE: What gave you the idea for "All Lies All" in the first place?*

TS: During the 1960s and during the years of war in Vietnam the image of American culture was gravely damaged and I saw the great works just standing there unnoticed. With my action "All Lies All" I wanted to bring history into context.

*CE: How does it relate?*

TS: I wanted to use another artist's artwork, its history and context to make a new statement because it then becomes a lot more than just a singular artwork by a singular artist.

I believe that a moral rhetorical responsibility is the foundation of ethics in the arts.

At that time and in that context, Guernica was neglected and its patrons were unaware. So I helped its imprisonment and opened up dialogue, which made the cover of every newspaper in the world.

*CE: What do you think of the current show?*

TS: In the 1930s the Guggenheim Museum put on a group exhibition, from which new relationships developed. Then there was Richard Hamilton's show "The Future is Now" in the 1950s, which he designed himself and which contained not only art but also design and architecture, and where experimentation was the foundation. Subsequently it was announced that it was Pop Art and it went on to influence several generations of artists.

I am very happy with the co-operative nature of "Who's afraid of Jasper Jones" and the playful way the wallpaper transforms the space. There are twenty-five different artists involved and together this makes for a really good group show that could be a precedent for the future. Roberta Smith reviewed it very well in the New York Times, stating that the history books of art are never closed. As to my own involvement I would like to say that I am always passionately dedicated to the art world and I'll die in the art world!

*Christina Eberhart* is an artist, writer and curator based in London. She studied Fine Arts at the University of the Arts in London specialising in painting, and installation. In 2003 she pursued an MA in Enterprise and Management for the Creative Arts and has since then promoted multi-cultural projects and events for emergent and established international artists.