

*Janet Rady
in conversation with*

Kamran Diba

Kamran Diba is cousin to Queen Farah and is famous for designing the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. With the support of the Empress, he was able to realise his vision of a contemporary art venue of Western art. The first ever designed and constructed in Iran.

He was head advisor in compiling the collection and was appointed by the Empress to be director of the Museum. The inauguration and opening to the public took place in 1978.

Today, due to political preference and presently alas locked into obscurity, this collection comprises world famous paintings by the likes of Monet, Van Gogh, Pissarro, Renoir, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, Magritte, Miró and Braque. It includes the most valuable Jackson Pollock painting (in the world?), a Pop Art section by Warhol and Lichtenstein and a sculpture park, originally furnished with Giacometti, Moore and the like. It is widely judged as the most important and comprehensive Western art collection in the Middle East.

At our meeting, I took the opportunity to ask Kamran Diba about his then involvement with the Project and the Royal Court and Museum at the time.

Janet Rady: *What were the events leading up to you getting involved with the arts?*

Kamran Diba: I studied architecture in Washington. On my return in 1967, I established the office DAZ Consulting Architects, Planners and Engineers in Tehran. Already in 1966, I had begun to design and build many gardens, parks and mosques in Tehran, Ahwaz and Shiraz. I also advised the Iranian Government on urban design problems - my particular interest was in making local traditions meet the requirements of the modern city.

I am also an artist. My practice at that time was installation and performance art and I was invited to show with prominent galleries like Ave and Seyhoun who were representing

Charles Hossein Zenderoudi and Parviz Tanavoli. We had become good friends and likened ourselves to the Three Musketeers. We also collaborated with other artists, such as Faramarz Pilaram. These works are now with the Grey Foundation in New York. During the Revolution in 1978, my house was confiscated and so I lost the sculptures and what is considered the biggest collection of Zeneroudis.

JR: *When did the idea for a museum come about and what inspired you?*

KD: Through my stay in America, I was in touch with the artistic community and concerns in contemporary art. The globalization of culture and commerce was taking root in the sixties and surpassing national boundaries. I became aware of the need for a venue in my own country. Iranian artists had already petitioned for space and so I propositioned my vision to set up a museum to the Queen, who liked the idea.

JR: *Who financed the idea and how long did you work on this project?*

KD: This was not a government job and I designed the museum in 68/69. The architecture fee was \$5000 and the Queen financed it. I spent nine years working on this project.

JR: *How did you come to be involved with the collection?*

KD: During the building process in the mid 70s, the Queen started to purchase works, but at the beginning there was no unified vision and the Queen had only small-time curators, mostly foreigners, working for her. I presented her with a list of artists to buy, with the idea of making an encyclopaedic collection of contemporary art, starting with Impressionism. I had full authority and was criticised for these purchases by my contemporaries who, it seemed to me, were less knowledgeable about the Western contemporary art scene.

JR: *When did you take your post as director of the museum?*

KD: The Queen wanted to appoint a director, so I advised her to employ someone of international status. I contacted the directors George Kashalek, Walter Hobbs and Harry Zeemann to assume the directorship of the museum, but due to the short notice they were unfortunately all engaged with other commitments. We did not succeed in filling the post, and due to the fact that we had a deadline for the opening, the Queen asked me to inaugurate it as the director of the museum. It was a short while before the opening that I was lucky to meet

David Galloway, a professor of American literature who wrote for the Herald Tribune. He had curated shows of young and fresh art at the American Cultural Center, an arm of the US Embassy, and was duly appointed as Head of Exhibitions, not acquisitions. Unfortunately, Galloway only had a sabbatical year from his university and therefore stayed with us just under a year.

I respected Galloway's opinions and both of us, myself as director and he as curator, without prior museum experience, were able to open the Museum in time with a host of international art dignitaries.

JR: So what was Tony Shafrazi's involvement with the project?

KD: When I took the directorship, I made a point of traveling every month to New York, Paris, Cologne, Dusseldorf and London, and attended the Basel Art Fair and Documenta long before I met Tony Shafrazi. He had come to Iran circa 1976 when our collection was already formed. The Museum opening was in 1977. He proposed a short film for the Shiraz Performing Arts Festival but his project was rejected. Then he decided to make the poster of Tehran's trendy & arty set. So he photographed me among many others. Bijan Safari and Fereydon Ave (artist and gallerist) asked me to help him. Then when Leo Castelli hesitantly asked me if I minded Tony Shafrazi bringing transparencies of the paintings that we had requested and were looking for to Tehran, I welcomed the suggestion. Leo sold us three paintings which I had checked in his gallery. Tony tried to establish the same relationship with a few other galleries. John Webber, from whom I bought some works, called me and said "Who is this man Shafrazi who comes to my gallery and proposes to represent me in Tehran? I kicked him out." Arnold Glimsher avoided him as well. But Tony was neither an art historian nor an employee of any institution. He basically was our courier service. This was before the advent of D.H.L. and Federal Express.

I recently explained all of this in a letter to Michael Stevenson to clarify Tony Shafrazi's role in the Museum, in response to the publication accompanying Michael Stevenson's work "Celebration at Persepolis", which was shown at the 38th Basel Art Fair.

JR: Can you tell me about the inauguration day of the museum?

KD: It was a very prestigious event and attracted the greats of the art world. Amongst others, the Guggenheim came, Mr de Wilde from the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art in Amster-



Portrait of Kamran Diba, in his earlier years

dam, as well as Nelson Rockefeller. It was important to me to start very big and create an Iranian art scene and help artists who had previously been regarded only as talented crafts people gain international status. It was important to expose Iranian artists to Western international art and be part of the universal cultural dialogue, and by building the collection, I achieved this aim, introducing the artists to the Western ideas of modernism more than any other country of this region was able to do. This was despite the fact that Christian artists from neighbouring countries were already in touch with the West.

JR: What were the responses after the opening of the Museum?

KD: Iranian artists responded very positively to Western artists and international greats. One of the positive values of founding this institution was that it contributed to building confidence in Iranian artists and stemmed the inferiority complex that so often translates into fundamentalism. At this time there were only four Contemporary Art Museums in the world, and ours was one of the first to be founded.

Traditionalists like Souren Melikian, impersonating a colonialist attitude, thought it was a waste of time to make Western culture available to Iranians. Some of our own Iranian people also criticised it and felt it was an irrelevant concept. The French Press was also very critical but the German Press was encouragingly positive. Some of the artists had refused to show - amongst them was Claus Oldenburg, who felt that the regime was fascist and did not want to sell his work directly to us.



View of TMOCA

But I was able to obtain a very good work of his on the secondary market.

JR: So was Tony Shafrazi not really involved in compiling the Museum's collection ?

KD: Even though he claims to be a player and he did deal with lots of dealers and did propose works to us, it was I who had the authority to choose and acquire works for the post-Second World War collection. In my student days in the US, I frequently visited MOMA, the Whitney and Guggenheim Museums in New York, and the Pittsburgh International. I visited many Venice Biennales and was there in the year Rauschenberg won the prize. I had also been a painter since the late fifties and had put on exhibitions of my work. I knew all the artists, a point which Tony Shafrazi bypasses, and he tends to exaggerate his role in the Museum.

JR: What were your main concerns for the Museum?

KD: My first concern was education and to break the isolation, because even though there were plenty of consumer goods available, the general public had no access to culture. I wanted to bring Western culture to Iran and make it available.

JR: How did you go about acquiring the works of art for the collection?

KD: We acquired some very good contemporary sculptures by Calder, Giacometti and Moore. We had a photo collection by the curator Donna Stein on the history of photography. Our works on paper included Warhol and Lichtensteins, we

worked with Marion Goodman from the Gallery of Multiples and acquired a number of architectural drawings. I was dealing closely with Waddington's and German dealers promoting American Art, as well as Leo Castelli, Paulo Coope and Ilana Sonnabend.

I had good relations with Werner Schmalenbach, responsible for the then Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, who had founded the Museum in Dusseldorf in 1961. Thomas Messer was Head Director of the Guggenheim and like Leo Castelli and exiles, I bought from auction houses.

JR: What was your budget?

KD: I was grateful to the Queen, who supported the museum, and under my directorship, I spent a careful \$ 4 ½ million for paintings and sculpture. I bought a triptych from Bacon for £350,000 - this was recently shown at the Tate Britain. I was looked upon as courageous when buying a Cy Twombly for \$60,000. At the time Cy was looked upon as an outsider artist and he was not part of the American "boys' network".

JR: How did you organise the running of the Museum?

KD: To staff the Museum from scratch was difficult as the accepted Western values pertaining to curation and conservation did not exist. I had to transplant a Western institution into Iran. I remember having to send off to the West for white gloves and to organise educational trips to other museums for my staff for the purposes of art handling. I arranged for training programmes for my staff with the English restoration expert, John Bull.

JR: Was the Museum a success?

KD: The Museum was embraced by the artistic community and the general public. I remember that even six months before the Revolution, religious Mullahs with their families came to visit the Museum and religious leaders who were totally against the Government came to appreciate the Western art. I believe that one reason for Western art not being shown today is because of curatorial absence. After the Revolution, the Museum had a succession of ineffective directors, but was reborn during Sami Azzar's directorship. But he did not have a chance to go far enough from the point of view of collection and curatorial framing.

JR: What happened to the collection during the Revolution?

KD: The Revolution started with mini revolutions in all

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

All images are courtesy of the author and interviewee

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

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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 Tehran 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.