Paradise Lost
Art, Caviar and Irreconcilable Differences

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A "contested space"[01]—this is how Vali Mahlouji, a London-based curator and art advisor, describes the Shiraz Festival of Arts, which took place in Iran annually from 1967 to 1977. For Mahlouji, proof of the festival's enduringly controversial nature lies in the silence that has shrouded its artistic territory, rendering it an unfairly neglected object of study, an obscure lacuna in pre-revolutionary Iranian history.[02] Mahlouji's project, *The Archeology of the Final Decade,* aims to disrupt this silence by researching, collecting, and recirculating the fragmented, underexposed, and, in many cases, even banned materials related to the festival.

While Mahlouji observes the silence surrounding the festival, the discourse of the Shiraz Festival of Arts can equally be characterized as congested—a cacophony of competing and dispersed voices, narratives, and interpretations that overwhelm its space.[03] The irreconcilability of these narrations has, in part, to do with the ephemeral nature of a performing arts festival, as opposed to a static art object. As Hannah Arendt puts it: while the "arts of making" result in products that persist beyond the creative process, the performing arts, as products of action, are not sustained by a

01 Vali Mahlouji, "Perspectives on the Shiraz Festival: A Radical Third World Re-Writing," in *Iran Modern,* eds. Fereshteh Daftari and Leyla S. Diba (Asia Society, 2013), 87.

02 Vali Mahlouji, "The Shiraz Festival Complexities," interview by Jian Ghomeshi, *Roqe Media,* November 26, 2021, podcast audio, 6:09, https://open.spotify.com/episode/4JaCz5UvZFXa2zevAHyVxl.

03 Mathew Randle-Bent calls Mahlouji the most prominent voice in contemporary discussions of the festival. Mathew Randle-Bent, "'Indigenous Avant-Gardes': The Shiraz Arts Festival and Ritual Performance Theory in 1970s Iran," *Arab Stages* 14 (2023): 2–3.

tangible presence and depend on further acts to ensure their existence and prolong their relevance. Their preservation, Arendt argues, can only occur through the same means that enabled their appearance. They must be re-enacted.[04]

This fragile dependence on further actions seems particularly pronounced in the case of the Shiraz Festival of Arts, which ended abruptly with the 1979 revolution. The festival's material traces were scattered; some were destroyed or removed from public view, some would make it outside the country, while the whereabouts of other fragments remain unclear.[05] To re-stage its space, one must make do with a few low-quality videos of performances and documentaries, pictures, old interviews, festival catalogs, and magazines found in different public and university libraries abroad, written accounts as well as mostly oral histories. However, it is not only the lack of a conclusive archive that complicates the festival's afterlife. Rumors, conspiracies, and speculation have surrounded this iterative space not only as it unfolded but also in its aftermath.

Due to their shared dependence on a publicly organized space and an audience, Arendt identifies a strong kinship between the performing arts and politics.[06] This affinity is driven ad absurdum in the case of the Shiraz Festival of Arts. The troubled nature of this space has much to do with the Shiraz festival's proximity to the 1979 revolution. In her memoirs, Farah Diba, the former queen of Iran who initiated the Festival, recalls how it became associated with the revolution in its afterlife: "Some people later would even claim that the festival paved the way for the Islamic reaction and was, therefore, one of the causes of the overthrow of the monarchy."[07] The historian Houchang Chehabi, who has written extensively on the festival's place in the "revolutionary mythology," claims that it served as a *cause célèbre* in revolutionary discourse.[08] It was even condemned by Khomeini himself,

04 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (The Viking Press, 1961), 153.

05 Mahasti Afshar, "Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis, 1967–1977," *Iran Namag* 4, no. 2 (2019): 12.

06 Arendt, *Between Past and Future,* 154.

07 Farah Diba, *An Enduring Love: My Life with the Shah, A Memoir* (Miramax, 2004), 233.

who at the time was in exile in Najaf (Iraq). In this light, the festival was later often depicted as an aesthetic mistake with massive political consequences that further alienated the people from the monarchy.[09] Alongside such frequent attributions of direct causality, some interpreted the festival's entanglements with the revolution as a case of (aesthetic) intuitions foreshadowing (political) transformations[10]—a safety warning for how revolutions might be closer than they appear. Either way, having not survived the revolution in one piece, the festival was never able to escape its shadow.

Nonetheless, the festival was not seen exclusively through a revolutionary frame. It would come to mean very different things to very different people: a symbol of decadence and promiscuity, *Westoxication,*[11] "an oppressive regime's public relations scheme"[12] but also "one of the leading theatre festivals in the world,"[13] "a third world re-writing,"[14] and a "culturally democratic space, albeit within an autocratic regime."[15]

08 Houchang Chehabi, "The Shiraz Festival and Its Place in Iran's Revolutionary Mythology," in *The Age of Aryamehr: Late Pahlavi Iran and Its Global Entanglements,* ed. Roham Alvandi (Ginko, 2018), 186, 190.

09 Gholam Reza Afkhami, *The Life and the Times of the Shah* (University of California Press, 2009), 404.

10 Arby Ovanessian, interview by Shirin Sami'i, *Iranian Oral History Project Harvard,* Paris 1983, 26–27, https://fis-iran.org/fa/oral-history/ovanesiyan-arbi/ [my translation].

11 For a broad account of the festival's association with Westoxication, see "Occidentosis and the Shiraz Arts Festival," in *Pahlavi Iran and the Politics of Occidentalism: The Shah and the Rastakhiz Party,* Zhand Shakibi (I.B. Taurus, 2020), 283–301.

12 Chehabi, "The Shiraz Festival and Its Place in Iran's Revolutionary Mythology," 182.

13 Micheal Kirby, "An Editorial: The Shiraz Festival: Politics and Theatre," *The Drama Review: TDR* 20, no. 4 (1976): 2.

14 Mahlouji, "Perspectives on the Shiraz Festival: A Radical Third World Re-Writing," 88.

15 Joshua Charney, "The Shiraz Arts Festival: Cultural Democracy, National Identity, and Revolution in Iranian Performance, 1967–1977," (PhD diss., University of California San Diego, 2020), 15.

While these different visions disagree on the implications of the festival—particularly on the extent to which its fleeting and limited space of appearance succeeded in or fell short of embodying "a kind of theater where freedom could appear"[16]—this essay distances itself from normative readings of both the festival and of Arendt's notion of space of appearance. The opaque nature of this specific space of appearance disarms such dichotomies as free versus unfree, aesthetics versus politics, public versus private, and postcolonial versus Orientalist. Rather than imposing binary interpretations, it is more illuminating to shift the focus to the conditions informing its prism-like nature and the spectrum of responses it generates and sustains. How does the example of the Shiraz Festival of Arts invite such contradictory interpretations? What is the secret to its indeterminacy? How can a performing arts festival take on such political significance, to the point of being forced into an explanatory role for a revolution in its reception?[17] And what does its lingering space of appearance reveal about the complex dynamics between art, politics, and power in pre-revolutionary Iran? Does this space ultimately tell a story about underestimating the political relevance of art or about its instrumentalization for the sake of keeping up appearances?

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Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 154.

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Vali Mahlouji, "Meta-Political Aspirations and Praeternatural Investigations: The Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis," *Academia.edu*, 2014, 3.

18
Afkhami, *The Life and the Times of the Shah*, 417.

Back to the Future

The Shiraz Festival of Arts took place over a period of about ten days each summer from 1967 to 1977. It was centered on dance, theater, performance, and music and accompanied by film screenings, exhibitions, symposia, and panel discussions. Instead of the capital, Tehran, the festival was held in and around Shiraz, a location chosen for its greater historical and cultural significance. Shiraz was the city of wine and poetry, famous for being the birthplace of poets such as Hafez and Saadi. Shiraz also provided proximity to monuments such as Persepolis, Pasargadae, Naghsh-e Rostam, Delgosha Garden, and Saraye Moshir, as well as the desert. This unique setting brought art, particularly theatre, out of closed quarters into the open air.[18] During the festival, the whole city would become activated. Monuments like Persepolis hosted larger performances, while smaller performances were staged in cafes,

shops, and Pahlavi University. Expanding the already extensive and unconventional public space of the festival, a good deal of its program was broadcast on national TV.

The international festival was "an unusual hybrid" aimed at reconciling 'apparent opposites,' namely, the avant-garde arts of the West and the marginalized traditions of the East.[19] The festival's mission, formulated in its constitution, reads: "Given Her Majesty Shahbanu Farah's special attention and interest in promoting art and honoring authentic national arts, and to elevate the level of art in Iran—honoring the work of Iranian artists, introducing foreign art and artists to Iran, and acquainting art lovers and enthusiasts with the artistic expressions of the world—a new organization named the 'Shiraz Arts Festival Organization' is being formed."[20] This unlikely combination was meant not only to "shake up people's attitudes"[21] but also to help Iranian artists overcome an inferiority complex.[22] By putting Iranian artists on the same stage as Western giants, the festival proposed a postcolonial alternative to dominant, Eurocentric views of culture in what Mahlouji calls an embodiment of Homi Bhabha's "third world re-writing."[23]

However, the festival was not free of Orientalist tropes. This was evident in the festival's polarized curating tendencies: East versus West, traditional versus avant-garde, irrational versus rational, past versus future, authentic versus progressive. In this dynamic, through the gaze of the Other, the Iranian artists became aware of themselves in a new light. This confrontation sometimes created anxieties concerning the loss of self and local traditions in the face of

19 Catherine Gunther Kodat, *Don't Act, Just Dance: The Metapolitics of Cold War Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 2015), 114.

20 *Shiraz Arts Festival According to SAVAK Documents* (Center for Reviewing Historical Documents, 2002), 4.

21 Diba, *An Enduring Love,* 232.

22 Farah Diba, "For the Love of Her People, an Interview With Farah Diba About the Pahlavi Programs for the Arts in Iran," interview by Donna Stein in *PERFORMING THE IRANIAN STATE: Visual Culture and Representations of Iranian Identity,* ed. Staci Gem Scheiwiller (Anthem Press, 2013), 76.

23 Mahlouji, "Perspectives on the Shiraz Festival: A Radical Third World Re-Writing," 88.

Western art forms. It would, at times, reinforce self-exoticization and lead to an "invention of tradition" further encouraged by the festival's exotic and historic setting.[24]

The Shah used the same setting for the 2,500th anniversary celebrations in October 1971, when the Pahlavis staged a reintroduction of Iran onto the global scene. The notorious "Desert Bash" even made it into the 1980 edition of the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the most extravagant party on record.[25] The celebration aimed to establish a symbolic connection between the Pahlavi regime and the ancient glory of the Achaemenid Empire. During the Persepolis celebrations, the Shah famously held a speech on Cyrus' tomb chamber at Pasargadae, proclaiming in a shaky voice: "Rest in peace, [Cyrus,] for we are awake." The festival would later often be associated and studied in relation to this "self-Orientalizing spectacle," which aimed to assert that Iran had remained true to its cultural heritage while transcending beyond its confinements.[26]

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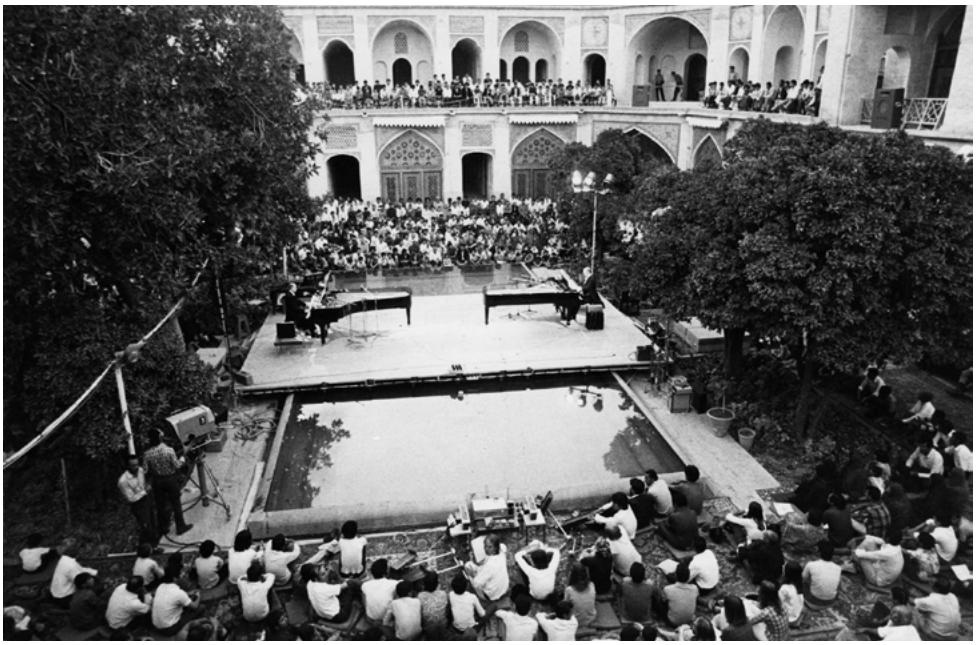
Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition,* eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2.

25
Abbas Milani, *The Shah* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 321, 338.



[29] Performance of Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Mantra* at the 1972 Shiraz Festival at Saraye Moshir, with the composer handling the electronics from the crowd, while Aloys and Alfons Kontarsky perform on piano.

The festival's program would come to be adorned by the names of Western artists and groups such as Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Robert Wilson, Iannis Xenakis, the Maurice Béjart ballet, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Arthur Rubinstein, Abbey Lincoln, and Max Roach. Some would become regulars, returning multiple summers to create large-scale commissioned pieces inspired by the unique setting of Shiraz. The festival also prioritized South-South connections, exposing Iranians to certain art forms for the first time: Indian Raga music, Bharatanatyam and Kathakali, Qawwali from Afghanistan, Balinese Gamelan, Japanese Nō, Kabuki, and many more.[27] They listened to the music of Ravi Shankar and Ram Narayan and were exposed to Shūji Terayama's experimental theater.

[30] Dancers from Maurice Béjart's company appear in a photo taken at the Shiraz Festival of Arts.[28]

26 Talinn Grigor, "Orientalism & Mimicry of Selfness: Archeology of the Neo-Achaemenid Style," in *L'Orientalisme architectural entre imaginaires et savoirs*, eds. Nabila Oulebsir and Mercedes Volait (Publications de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art, 2009), 273, 280.

27 Mahasti Afshar, "Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis, 1967–1977," 5.

The festival also served as a space to preserve and cultivate local and folkloric Persian traditions. Every night at Hafezieh, it featured performances of traditional Persian music by such artists as Faramarz Payvar, Jalil Shahnaz, Mohammad-Reza Lotfi, and Shajarian. Experimental theater was also promoted, with works by Abbas Nalbandian and Bijan Mofid, while reviving traditions such as Naqqāli, Ruhowsi, and Ta'zieh. Ta'zieh, in particular, was endangered at the time since "because of the ritual's religious character and, more importantly, its history of use in the context of political protest, the practice of ta'ziyeh had been outlawed by the Pahlavi regime since the 1930s."[29]

Unique works emerged from this context, using the intercultural setting to reverse the Babelian confusion. In 1972, Robert Wilson staged *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE: a story about a family and some people changing*. Wilson chose seven foothills for the play, which was performed continuously for a week, twenty-four hours a day, lasting a total of 168 hours. He initially worked with 100 participants, but the number eventually grew to 700. In Wilson's own words:

> At the base of the first hill I erected a sort of tower of Babel that had seven levels. Walking up this scaffolding structure, one could sit and converse with a wide range of people: artists, housewives, teachers, scholars, shepherds, etc. People were talking about anything and everything: politics, art, how to make a pizza, and how to build a house. There was an elderly storyteller from the bazaar telling stories from the past and a housewife from New Jersey conversing with local women from the city of Shiraz. It was a real cross-cultural view of the East and West. ...

28 The exact time, place, and specific performance are unknown. It is unclear but possible that the dancer Patrice Touron signed the image. These unknown details reflect the fragmented nature of the festival. The photographer Abbas Hojatpanah notes that all his negatives remain in Iran, and this image is among the few photos he could find from the ballets, but he could not identify further details.

29 Lindsay Goss, "You Are Invited Not to Attend: Answering the Call for a Cultural Boycott of the Shiraz Festival of the Arts," *PERFORMANCE PARADIGM* 14 (2018): 19.

> I cannot imagine anyone today taking such a risk and commissioning a piece like this. There was no censorship, no one telling me I could not do what we did.[30]

Intercultural works and collaborations between Iranian and visiting artists were also encouraged, as seen in *Orghast,* a production between directors Peter Brook, Arby Ovanessian, Geoffrey Reeves, and Andrei Serban with poet Ted Hughes. In *Orghast,* they worked with languages such as Avesta, Greek, and Latin to unearth a "language belonging below the levels where differences appear."[31]

Despite these large-scale and ambitious gestures of reconciliation—reversing the Babelian confusion or digging below the level where differences appear—the Shiraz Festival of Arts is primarily remembered as a site of tension, both during its performances and almost 50 years after its final act. To this day, its unstable space of appearance exhibits its immersive interpretive flexibility and hermeneutical openness. In being able to appear so differently to different people, its example speaks of the unique and complex interplay between aesthetics and politics. If we were to imagine these two abstract categories as bound in a contractual relationship—as if in a marriage between two leading powers of pre-revolutionary Iran—then the festival was a singular product of their irreconcilable differences.

Scenes from a Marriage

To understand the diverse nature of responses given to the Shiraz Festival of Arts, one is forced to look into the broader context of artistic expression and authoritarian rule in the pre-revolutionary period. Abbas Milani describes the period between 1965 and 1975 as "a discordant combination of cultural freedoms and political despotism—of increasing censorship against the opposition but increasing freedoms for everyone else."[32] Inconsistencies in the allocation of freedom across these two spheres were grounded in an assumption of the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere, where "artistic expression co-existed in an ultimately untenable balance with political repression."[33]

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Robert Wilson, "KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE: A Story About a Family and Some People Changing, A 168-Hour Play For The 1972 Festival of Shiraz," in *Iran Modern,* 95.

31
A. C. H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis: An International Experiment in Theatre* (The Viking Press, 1972), 45.

32
Milani, *The Shah,* 348.

33
Robert Gluck, "The Shiraz Festival: Avant-Garde Arts Performance in 1970s Iran," *Leonardo* 40, no. 1 (2007): 20–28, 216.

This discrepancy was rooted in the power distribution in the public sphere between Queen Farah Diba and Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.[34] Mohammad Reza Shah ascended to the throne in 1941 after his father, Reza Shah, was forced to abdicate during the Allied occupation in World War II. Although Iran had claimed neutrality, it was occupied by the Allies due to suspicions of Nazi sympathies. In the early 1950s, Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh nationalized Iranian oil, asserting Iran's right to control its resources and challenging British interests. In response, a 1953 coup organized by the CIA and British intelligence ousted Mosaddegh and consolidated Mohammad Reza Shah's power. His reign, which coincided with a dramatic increase in oil revenues in the 1970s, was marked by the continuation of his father's Westernization policies and his ambition to transform Iran according to his vision of the 'Great Civilization.' In 1975, he established a single-party system with the Resurgence Party, abandoning any pretense of democratic governance.[35]

Farah Diba, the former queen of Iran, was (and is) renowned for her patronage of the arts and culture and for being the driving force behind numerous festivals, museums, and educational institutions. However, it was not only Diba's passion for the arts that characterized her. During this period, Diba emerged as the epitome of good taste. Diba would become famous as a demure and modest fashion icon, wearing the latest hairstyles and haute couture. Yves Saint Laurent designed her wedding dress, and she often wore tiaras designed by Van Cleef & Arpels or Harry Winston.

Diba is frequently depicted in her public persona as "the ideal complementary force to the Shah." For instance, former British ambassador Anthony Parsons described her as "beautiful, artistic, compassionate, and intelligent," emphasizing the different responses evoked by Diba and the Shah: "Where he inspired awe and fear, she inspired love and affection."[36] William Shawcross offered a similar account, portraying Diba as someone who does everything with a pinch of style, "a warm-hearted, rather cultured figure who was much easier with her role than the Shah with his … She retained something that the Shah had never had—an ability to appear spontaneous and in touch."[37]

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Diba was introduced to the Shah in 1959 while studying architecture in Paris, and they were soon married. Although Diba was primarily expected to produce a male heir to the monarchy, she would become a cultural force in her own right and be assigned the role of regent.

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Houchang Chehabi, "Iranian History, 1945–79," in *Iran Modern,* 15.

36
Anthony Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall, Iran 1974–1979* (Jonathan Cape, 1984), 25.

37
William Shawcross, *The Shah's Last Ride* (Simon and Schuster, 1988), 95.

Diba's approachable demeanor, her patronage of the arts, and her soft 'appearance' were often criticized as constituting the glamorous and shiny façade of the Shah's rigorous politics. Perceived as "a symbol of cultural premium placed on appearance and illusion,"[38] Diba was accused of distracting from the social realities of Iran[39] and, in essence, of aestheticizing politics. The Shah and Diba each exerted influence over a different area of the public sphere. In this power dynamic, Diba's activities were often depicted as secondary to those of her husband, and similarly, aesthetics as a mere complement to political power:

> Iranians like to feel they are more European than Oriental, and Farah takes seriously her husband's promise to make Iran the most sophisticated country in Western Asia. She works at it. To match the economic great leap forward of her husband, she has created film and music, and theater festivals, and she has animated this sense of pride and purpose among Iranian artists and musicians.[40]

On the other hand, the Shah, in various accounts, is often characterized by his ignorance of the arts.[41] In a 2014 interview, when asked about her husband's involvement in the Shiraz Festival of Arts, Diba stated: "He didn't see those kinds of things. … I was the one going to the festival. … He didn't have time. He had other things to do."[42]

38 Annie Pfeifer, "'Our White Hands,' Iran and Germany's 1968," in *Iran and the West: Cultural Perceptions from the Sasanian Empire to the Islamic Republic,* eds. David Bagot and Margaux Whiskin (I.B. Tauris, 2018), 113.

39 "Abroad, which clothes Farah Diba wears and the name of her hairdresser are well known. But does the world also know that the Iranian army has been waging a brutal campaign against the population of the southern province of Fars?" Bahman Nirumand, *Persien: Modell eines Entwicklungslandes oder Die Diktatur der Freien Welt* (Rowohlt, 1976), 120.

40 Kourosh Abbassi and Tina Ghazimorad, producers, "Shahbanou," 1:12:12, 2016, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32Uu7SJMUYA.

41 See, for example, Chehabi, "The Shiraz Festival and Its Place in Iran's Revolutionary Mythology," 169.

When Diba, inspired by French festivals such as Nancy and Royan, proposed the idea of the festival to her husband, the Shah was quite content to leave the matter up to her.[43] The irrelevance of the cultural sphere, coupled with the 'feminization' of aesthetics as concerned with appearances (and supposedly unlike politics in that respect), helps explain how it was left to Diba. Some accounts also suggest that it was her reward for tolerating the Shah's extramarital affairs:[44] "One of the things he gave his wife to keep her pacified was a free hand in the fields of her interest. In due time, Farah became a power unto herself."[45] Within the international press, the German daily *Neue Hannoversche Zeitung* similarly employed an infantilizing tone in describing Diba's activities: "The Shiraz Festival is the queen's plaything, and no one is allowed to take it away from her."[46]

Diba's supposedly harmless involvement in her 'fields of interest' and cultural 'hobbies' was seen as aligning with the Shah's reformist 'White Revolution,' which promoted women's rights and education. However, while the desirability of women playing a public role in the Pahlavi era was proclaimed, this opening of the public space to women often remained symbolic and limited.[47] This is evident in an interview conducted by Oriana Fallaci,[48] who had provoked the Shah by alluding to his well-known affairs and womanizing nature:

42 Farah Diba, "Farah Pahlavi," interview by Bob Colacello, *Interview Magazine,* January 8, 2014.

43 Afkhami, *The Life and the Times of the Shah,* 415.

44 Milani, *The Shah,* 362: "The Shah simply smiled, ordered Alam to keep quiet and pay the bill, and said, 'You know I have to live a little too.' Alam clearly understood the Shah's implied message. 'Her Majesty must be allowed to do anything she wants, and her entourage engage in any shitty work so that the Shah hears less grumbling.' Here then was the political price the Shah was paying for his philandering."

45 Afkhami, *The Life and the Times of the Shah,* 54.

46 Reinhard Beuth, *Neue Hannoversche Zeitung,* 1977, cited in *Shiraz Arts Festival According to SAVAK Documents,* 380.

47 Talinn Grigor, *Building Iran* (Periscope, 2009), 176.

48 Oriana Fallaci was an Italian author and journalist who conducted various bold interviews with (controversial) world leaders such as Indira Gandhi, Henry Kissinger, Muammar Gaddafi, and, ironically in the Iranian context, both Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and Khomeini.

> I don't underrate them [women]; they've profited more than anyone else from my White Revolution. … And let's not forget I'm the son of the man who took away women's veils in Iran. But I wouldn't be sincere if I stated I'd been influenced by a single one of them. Nobody can influence me, nobody. Still less a woman. Women are important in a man's life only if they're beautiful and charming and keep their femininity and … This business of feminism, for instance. What do these feminists want? What do you want? You say equality. Oh! I don't want to seem rude, but … You're equal in the eyes of the law but not, excuse my saying so, in ability. No. You've never produced a Michelangelo or a Bach. … You've produced nothing great, nothing![49]

Since the Shah had excluded both aesthetics and women from influential roles, overlooking their potential power, aesthetics during this period underwent a process of 'feminization.' This 'feminization' stemmed from its intertwinement with the figure of Diba and the assumption that aesthetics, like women, was politically inconsequential and irrelevant. Ironically, both turned out not to be harmful for PR purposes, instead helping Iran imagine and present itself as a sophisticated 'Great Civilization.'

This 'feminization of aesthetics' offered Diba a means of exercising indirect political power through culture, by allowing the appearance of things that the politics of the day would typically constrain.[50] Together with their partitioned exercise of power in the public realm, Diba and the Shah personified the tension between two never directly articulated paradigms that coexisted in Iran in the late 1960s and 1970s in response to a rapidly changing geopolitical situation.[51] This tension is often framed as a clash between two modes of modernity. The art historian Talinn Grigor, for instance, distinguishes Diba's "feminized version of modernity" from the Shah's "masculinist paradigm of Western modernism." While the Shah's policy involved bulldozing cultural heritage sites to make way for Western-looking buildings, Diba's version of modernity focused on preservation, and she became known for halting many of these aggressive modernization projects.[52]

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Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, "Interview With Mohammad Reza Pahlavi," in *Interviews with History,* Oriana Fallaci (Liveright, 1976), 271–72.

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Grigor, *Building Iran,* 176.

51
Abbas Milani, *Eminent Persians: The Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran, Volume 1: 1941–1979* (Syracuse University Press, 2008), 167.

52
Grigor, *Building Iran,* 184–86.

[31] Mannequins displaying the attire of the royal couple at the Museum of Royal Clothes in Niavaran Palace, Tehran.

The Shiraz Festival of Arts would become Diba's most provocative legacy. While often discussed as the site where the rift between the Pahlavis and the public became visible, it also marked the space where the contrast between the visions endorsed by each of these two figures became most apparent.[53] A posthumously published private remark by the Shah frames the festival as the object of an ongoing marital conflict:

> I don't understand what use this festival is to us. Its costs are outrageous, and I doubt it has any benefits. They invite low-profile artists who nobody knows, stuff caviar down the throats of a few foreign journalists, and shower them with various gifts. Then, when they return to their countries, they spit on us and criticize us… But, well, the Shahbanou is very insistent.[54]

This division was also reflected in the institutional order of the festival. It fell under the supervision of Reza Ghotbi and the NIRT (National Iranian Radio and Television) rather than the Ministry of Arts and Culture, which was subject to stricter censorship. Joshua Charney describes the festival as embodying multiple paradoxes, as "An artistically liberated zone within an autocracy, and a celebrator of Iranian traditions during an era of Westernization."[55] The festival became known as an enclave, as a paradise[56] garden in the midst of a desert.

In this logic, the festival's singular dynamics and its restrained, feminized space of appearance were perceived as confirming Arendt's verdict that "Freedom, wherever it existed as a tangible reality, has always been spatially limited."[57] The festival's location in Shiraz, once described by Diba as an "oasis of nature and culture,"[58] limited in time to eleven

53 "In the eyes of some ministers and advisors to the king, the Shiraz Festival symbolized too great a desire for openness to the outside world. Thus Minister of Court Asadollah Alam, whose culture and intelligence I much admired, reproached me in his memoirs for my 'misplaced liberal ideas.' Many others like him saw a divergence between my husband's political line and the one I followed." Diba, *An Enduring Love,* 234.

54 Houchang Nahavandi, آن روزها (Sherkat-e-Ketab, 2005), 166 [my translation].

55 Charney, "The Shiraz Arts Festival: Cultural Democracy, National Identity, and Revolution in Iranian Performance, 1967–1977," 3.

56 'Paradise' derives from the Avestan *paridaēza,* an ancient Persian concept of an enclosed garden. Dating back to the first millennium BC, these gardens were an integral part of Persian architecture, as evidenced by sites such as Pasargadae and Persepolis. Mehrdad Fakour, "GARDEN i. ACHAEMENID PERIOD," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica,* 2012, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/garden-i.

57 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Penguin Books, 1965), 275.

58 Diba, *An Enduring Love,* 228.

fleeting interventions each summer, could be seen as aligning with Arendt's metaphor of "oases in a desert"[59]—existing inside an autocratic system while somehow operating outside its rules. As Arendt argues, tyrannies are not necessarily marked by sterility; rather, the "arts may flourish under these conditions if the ruler is 'benevolent' enough to leave his subjects alone in their isolation."[60]

Whether the festival could be perceived in such a subversive light was itself hotly debated, both during and after the event. Some argued that it was not only the 'benevolence' of the rulers that informed the festival's relative openness but also the co-optation of public space with a view to projecting a positive image internationally. Yet it is precisely the presumption of the festival as an autonomous aesthetic sphere—one able to transcend the unstable structures in which it was embedded—that Houchang Chehabi underlines as the source of its vulnerability[61] and, we might add, of its political power. This might indeed help explain the festival's disproportionate provocations, which manifest in a space of appearance that continues to be troubled even today.

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Arendt, *On Revolution,* 275.

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Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 203.

61
Chehabi, "The Shiraz Festival and Its Place in Iran's Revolutionary Mythology," 192.

Trouble in Paradise

Tensions surrounding the festival took various forms, ranging from confrontations and negative press coverage to boycotts and threats. Over time, they intensified, extending beyond domestic debates and taking on a more international character. The festival's ambitious project of curating intercultural works in visible public spaces came up against differing expectations and sensibilities, as well as conflicting views on common sense, taboos, and social dos and don'ts.

One notable controversy was the festival's staging and televising of Ta'zieh. Critics argued that the theatricalization of Ta'zieh, rather than preserving the tradition, was detrimental to its essence, which depended on improvisation and community participation.[62] Another uneasy moment would arise in 1971 when Iannis Xenakis presented the specially commissioned *Polytope of Persepolis* at the festival's opening ceremony. This one-hour open-air spectacle, featuring light, sound, and movement amid the ruins of Persepolis, was accompanied by 150 children, each carrying a torch, who walked through the space and finally stood in formation to spell, in Persian,

the phrase "We bear the light of the earth." Xenakis, who claimed that the piece was "a tribute to Iran's past and her great Zoroastrian and Manichean revolutionaries,"[63] was surprised to find that the work drew different associations from the Iranian audience. One newspaper printed the blunt headline: "Xenakis Attempts to Burn Persepolis."[64] For many Iranians, Xenakis' piece evoked Alexander the Great's conquest of Persepolis, and the imagery fed into the discourse of Westoxication during the Pahlavi era.

Gharbzadegi (غرب‌زدگی), often translated as 'Westoxication' or 'Occidentosis,' was a term coined by Ahmad Fardid and popularized by Jalal Al-e Ahmad in an essay in which he describes it as a disease afflicting Iran. Published in 1962 and written in the aftermath of World War II and the traumatic coup against Mossadegh, the essay reflects growing anti-colonial sentiments. It echoes broader cultural anxieties characteristic of its period, criticizing the East's inferiority complex, uncritical imitation, and acceptance of Western norms.[65]

The Shiraz festival's programming and expenditure on Western artists were criticized as manifestations of Westoxication, misplaced priorities,[66] and "elitist exclusivity."[67] As the Iranian composer Alireza Mashayekhi remarked:

62 For more on the debates surrounding Ta'zieh look at Babak Rahimi, "Staging Ta'ziyeh: Aryanism, Heritage, and the Shiraz Arts Festival, 1967–1977," virtual lecture, September 27, 2023, posted on October 9, 2023 by the Mossavar-Rahmani Center at Princeton University, YouTube, 1:00:20, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leUR-rk8dBs.

63 Iannis Xenakis, *Music and Architecture* (Pendragon Press, 2008), 316, 219, 223.

64 Cited in Charney, "The Shiraz Arts Festival: Cultural Democracy, National Identity, and Revolution in Iranian Performance, 1967–1977," 91.

65 Al-e Ahmad's concept of Westoxication was incorporated into the rhetoric of the Islamic Republic after the revolution. However, Hamid Dabashi and other scholars argue that his ideas should be distinguished from their later use, as he did not witness the revolution or its aftermath. See Hamid Dabashi, *The Last Muslim Intellectual: The Life and Legacy of Jalal Al-e Ahmad* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 128, 165.

66 Chehabi, "The Shiraz Festival and Its Place in Iran's Revolutionary Mythology," 168.

67 Afkhami, *The Life and the Times of the Shah,* 418.

"In a country that has no tradition in Classical music and no acquaintance with contemporary music, the festival had the appearance of an invasion. Sociologically, at a time when we needed a modest electronic studio, we should not have spent a fortune to invite big foreign names."[68] Gholam Hossein Saedi echoed this sentiment:

> In another context, the festival might have been received differently, ... but in that context, it felt like a humiliation. ... During the opening in Persepolis, when, for example, Peter Brook was supposed to come, the poor village people would gather and look from outside and see that some cars and Rolls-Royces and BMWs arrive. People with fancy crazy clothes, guards everywhere ... they would sit in their houses and ask themselves, where did all these people go? It had become a Mount Olympus in its own right and humiliated the people.[69]

The festival's most provocative moment came in 1977 with the play *Pig, Child, Fire!*, performed by the Hungarian *Squat Theatre.* Famous for their controversial works, the *Squat*'s "appearance in a display window of a shop on a busy street in Shiraz felt like their greatest provocation to date."[70] The play was staged in a shop window on Ferdowsi Street, allowing passersby to catch a glimpse of the play. The audience was seated inside the shop, gazing outside towards the street, which became "an extension of the stage or a living background."[71] Gholam Reza Afkhami, in his biography of the Shah, later wrote: "In hindsight, it would have been politically wise not to have shown it."[72] The reaction to the play spiraled

68 Bob Gluck, "Conversations with Alireza Mashayekhi, Iranian Composer: A New East-West Synthesis," based on conversations via email in December 2006 and January 2007, https://econtact.ca/14_4/gluck_mashayekhi.html.

69 Gholam Hossein Saedi, interview by Zia Sedghi, *Iranian Oral History Project Harvard,* Paris 1982, https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:627504, 22 [my translation].

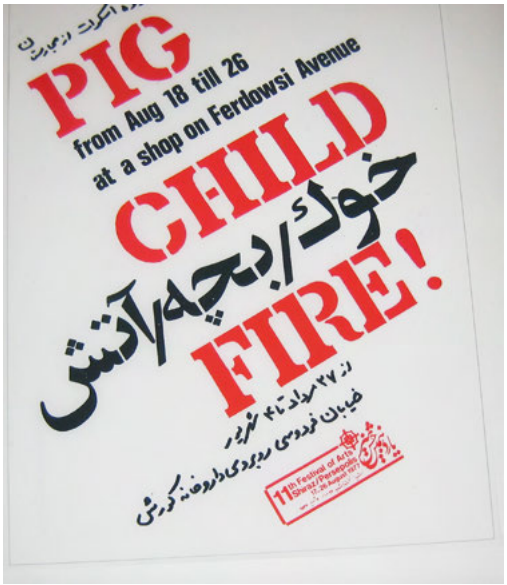
70 Pamela Karimi, *Alternative Iran: Contemporary Art and Critical Spatial Practice* (Stanford University Press, 2020), 215.

71 Anna Koós, "Squat Theatre: Staging Life/Living on Stage," *AJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 35, no. 3 (2013): 24.

72 Afkhami, *The Life and the Times of the Shah,* 420.

out of control, reaching newspaper headlines. A *Keyhan* newspaper headline on the play read: "Avant-garde Art or Showing Sexual Acts on the Street?"[73] William Shawcross's account reflects the spread of rumors about the play:

> It reached a climax in 1977 when another troupe of actors took over a shop in the main street of Shiraz, hard by the mosque, and performed in the shop and on the pavement a play that involved a full frontal rape and lewd acts between naked, consenting actors. Such a performance would have led to scandal and the arrest of the actors in any English or American provincial street. Performed in Shiraz, it aroused enormous anger and offense.[74]



[32] Poster for Squat Theatre's controversial play *Pig, Child, Fire!* performed at the 1977 Shiraz Art Festival.

This account is dismissed by several scholars, including Mahasti Afshar, who personally attended the play and described these claims as exaggerated and untrue.[75] Nevertheless, the alleged rape scene further fueled the narrative of a broader cultural invasion by the festival.[76] The reports enraged the clergy, who were also offended by the festival's overlap with Ramadan, seeing it as another manifestation of its anti-Islamic ethos. Soon, Ayatollahs Mahallati and Dastgheib launched attacks on the festival, threatening to shut down the bazaars and mosques in protest. According to a report issued by the Bureau for Intelligence and Security of the State (SAVAK),

73 "Avant-garde Art or Showing Sexual Acts on the Streets?," *Keyhan,* August 23, 1977.

74 Shawcross, *The Shah's Last Ride,* 28.

75 Mahasti Afshar, جشن هنر شیراز-تخت جمشید، ۱۳۴۶-۱۳۵۶ (Iran Namag, 2023), 150.

76 Bijan Saffari, interview by Shirin Sami'i, *Iranian Oral History Project Harvard,* Paris 1983, https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL: 627504, 25–29 [my translation].

> On 25/09/1977, Mr. Seyyed Abdolhossein Dastgheib, during a speech at the Jameh Mosque of Shiraz, stated, 'I heard something. Pig feast! Pig feast! It has a strange name. Those who go here, male and female together, are inferior to pigs. Damn them. Its founder is a pig. Curse them.'

The news duly reached Khomeini in exile, who condemned the festival from Najaf: "You do not know what kind of immorality has recently begun in Iran... They showed sexual acts in front of all the people! And [the gentlemen] remained silent."[77]

Beyond domestic debates, the Shiraz Festival of Arts also became the subject of international controversy, peaking in 1976 with a boycott led by Iranian poet Reza Baraheni and critic and playwright Eric Bentley. For them, the festival functioned "as a deliberate effort on the part of a repressive government to deflect accusations of human rights abuses while fostering a national image of prestige and sophistication."[78] These sentiments had already provoked confrontations with artists participating in the festival. The "pleasure paradise"[79] was proving to be 'difficult.' During a panel talk with Jerzy Grotowski, a group of students challenged him: "You are a socialist person coming from a socialist country. If you believe in this idea, why are you destroying this belief by coming to an Imperialist country and performing a performance here?" To which Grotowski supposedly answered: "If you think like this, give up theatre and take up a gun."[80]

These confrontations would take on a more public and international character in 1976, when Baraheni, who had been imprisoned himself, highlighted the oppression in Iran under the Shah's secret police and the increasing number of political prisoners: "I would urge all artists who believe in freedom for others as well as for themselves to boycott Iran."[81] Baraheni met with Cunningham and Cage, ultimately convincing them to boycott the festival.[82] Baraheni and Bentley argued that the gains of a cultural boycott as "an attempt at the institutionalization of embarrassment" would be tangible, especially for a regime concerned with keeping up appearances.

77
Shiraz Arts Festival According to SAVAK Documents, 395, 391, 404 [my translation].

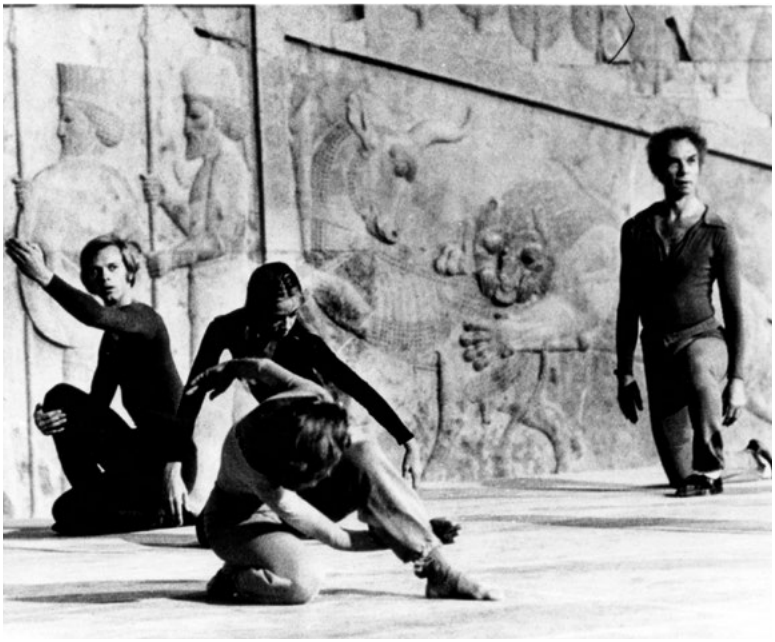
78
Goss "You Are Invited Not to Attend," 11.

79
Negar Azimi, "Good Intentions," in *Frieze* 137, March 2011.

80
Shamohammadloo and Bozorgmehr, interview by Masoud Najafi Ardabilli cited in Masoud Najafi Ardabili, *Grotowski in Iran,* (Peter Lang, 2019).

81
Reza Baraheni, "We Who Have Been In the Shah's Prisons Are Grateful to Marion Javits," interview by Nat Hentoff, *The Village Voice,* February 2, 1976, 15.

82
Reza Baraheni and Gregg E. Gorton, "Iran Boycott; An Exchange," *The New York Review,* November 25, 1976.



[33] Performance by Merce Cunningham Dance Company at Persepolis during the 1972 Shiraz Arts Festival.

The public call for a boycott elicited varied responses from participating artists, revealing broader perceptions concerning the entanglements of aesthetics and politics that extended far beyond Shiraz. Here, the very idea of the arts as "oases in a desert"[84] was directly questioned. While artistic spaces may never be untouched by their political circumstances, must they inevitably be complicit in the same unjust structures they inhabit, be it in Shiraz or elsewhere? Or is it possible to imagine these spaces not as ignorant of their surroundings but as potentially subversive? What is more fatal: the aestheticization of politics or destroying the only sites where subversion might seek refuge?

Many artists rejected the boycott for different reasons. Critic Michael Kirby articulated a recurring argument: "The purpose of the boycott of Shiraz (and the boycott of the Olympics by the African nations) was political. I do not believe in mixing theatre (or sports) and politics."[85] Merce Cunningham echoed this position: "My work is not concerned with politics … and I have always felt it should be

83
Victor S. Navasky, "Boycott. The Moral Question. The Political Question. The Practical Question," *The New York Times*, August 15, 1976, 2–4.

84
Arendt, *On Revolution,* 275.

85
Kirby, "An Editorial: The Shiraz Festival: Politics and Theatre," 2–3.

free to be shown in any place that is made open to it, whether that is a gym in a Detroit high school or an open-air theater in Shiraz."[86]

While some argued by insisting on the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere, Xenakis, who was in talks to establish an art center for fundamental research in audio-visual arts in Shiraz, took a different approach. In an open letter to *Le Monde,* he depicted the boycott as hypocritical:

> Today when it is impossible to name one single country that is truly free and without multifaceted compromises, without any surrender of principles. 'Democracy' is a fallacy, an artificially sweetened mythology in the mouths of all regimes … Must I couple every country with its own cancer?[87]

The third argument against the boycott was that participation in the festival would be more subversive than staying away. This view stressed the "political power in the misuse of what a regime declares an urban space to be."[88] The festival is often credited with fostering critical works that could evade censorship to some extent. Plays such as Bijan Mofid's *City of Tales* (1968), Abbas Nalbandian's *A Modern, Profound, and Important Research into the Fossils of the 25th Geological Era* (1968), and Esmaeel Khalaj's *Killing Friday* (1973) were made possible by the festival's relatively open conditions under NIRT. In her diaries, Diba accordingly emphasizes her view of the festival as a space where the opposition could appear,[89] reinforcing the idea that it was a "liberal space within a dictatorship."[90]

Despite the relative openness, outsiders did not miss the festival's heavily governed nature. Carolyn Brown, a member of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, recalls how the artists would each receive their "'guide,' a euphemism for the male uniformed guard with a lethal-looking gun who guarded our trips to the toilet, to the stage, to wherever we might need to go."[91]

Other artists critically engaged with the political reality of the country they were visiting using the advantages of their "outsider's pass."[92] *Fire* by the *Bread and Puppet Theatre* is often cited in this context. The group, having become more familiar with the situation in Iran, is said to have

86
Cited in Navasky, "Boycott," 2.

87
Xenakis, *Music and Architecture,* 311, 233.

88
Jacques Rancière and Mark Foster Gage, "Politics Equals Aesthetics," in *Aesthetics Equals Politics: New Discourses across Art, Architecture, and Philosophy,* ed. Mark Foster Gage (MIT Press, 2019), 14.

89
Diba, *Enduring Love,* 233.

90
Mahlouji, "Perspectives on the Shiraz Festival: A Radical Third World Re-Writing," 91.

91
Carolyn Brown, *Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 501–02.

92
Goss, "You Are Invited Not to Attend," 18.

read a statement protesting the repression of political opponents in Iran before each performance.[93] In addition to the subversive character of the art itself, the very presence of the outsider's gaze was discussed as a cause of temporary freedom, as noted in this account, where going to Shiraz becomes almost a heroic act: "'Western journalists do a lot of good,' says Gordon, an ex-SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] member. 'It's like an oasis for Iranians who are not free to discuss politics the rest of the year.'"[94] Peter Brook further argued that the presence of foreign artists enabled a negotiation with dominant powers:

> The desert island in which one can work outside a complex, largely repressive social machine does not exist. … Before leaving Tehran, I was able to have an hour and a half alone with the Queen, when I seized the opportunity to say what had to be said on every level of Persian life, starting with the censorship, without frills, without beating around the bush, directly to a person who, within a restricted field of movement, has got more influence than anyone in the country. … We exploited the situation given to us to draw home to them what we consider should be said at least as much as they could exploit the external aspects of our work to fit in with their general world-publicity.[95]

Those in favor of the boycott argued against this compromise, citing the high price for appearing at the festival, including self-censorship, as well as the cannibalistic nature of such a space of appearance, which ultimately might subsume even the most subversive content into its overarching logic. Instead of striving for fleeting moments of political freedom, these critics suggested that the more fitting response would be to disappear completely through "the artistic act … of not making art."[96]

The last planned iteration of the festival, which would have seen Pina Bausch and Yoshi Oida come to Iran, never took place. For months, it was surrounded by clouds of uncertainty. Posters were printed but never distributed to avoid further provocation.[97] Amid growing protests and security concerns, the event was ultimately canceled. In the words of Bijan Saffari: "What was happening in the streets

93
Mahasti Afshar, جشن هنر شیراز-تخت جمشید، ۱۳۵۶-۱۳۴۶, 163.

94
Mel Gordon, theater critic and director, cited in Robert Coe, "Boycott Takes Pizzaz Out of Shiraz Festival," *Soho Weekly,* 1976, cited in Goss, "You Are Invited Not to Attend," 22.

95
Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis,* 259–260.

96
Goss, "You Are Invited Not to Attend," 24.

97
Shiraz Arts Festival According to SAVAK Documents, 434, 441, 443, 453.

was much more compelling, and people would no longer pay for tickets to go watch theater … The main show had spilled into the streets instead of remaining in the theater hall."[98]

Looking back at the festival after its appearance and disappearance confronts us with multiple paradoxes. Its divisive space resists the relief of closure, constantly oscillating between grief and grievance, subject to melancholic sighs of what-ifs but also scapegoating cries. Feminized and confined to harmless aesthetic aspirations, appearances make for the best hideouts. While often famous for concealing 'realities,' their dismissal as superficial and inconsequential can ironically transform them into a domain of subversion. The festival's example provides us with a manual for where to hide things best: on the surface.[99]

98
Saffari, interview, 18.

99
Cf. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Buch der Freunde* (Insel Verlag, 1922), 56.