

# Counter Cultures

NEGAR AZIMI ON “UNEDITED HISTORY: IRAN 1960–2014”

**IN ONE OF THE CORNERS** of “Unedited History: Iran 1960–2014,” a sprawling exhibition that opened this past May at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, an installation of five screens flickered. At its center was a 1973 film called *Mogholha* (The Mongols), directed by Parviz Kimiavi, which recounts the story of a fictional young director who rounds up a band of Turkoman tribesmen to play Mongols in a surreal retelling of the history of cinema. In one of the film’s more unforgettable scenes—and there are a few—the robed Turkomans in Mongol drag march through a harsh desert climate with antennae in hand, reciting a litany of names of technological gadgets en route: microwave, monitor, oscilloscope, and so on. The recitation makes for wonderful, absurd poetry, and as the director draws unsubtle but hilarious parallels between the traumatic thirteenth-century Mongol invasion of his country and the muscular modernization of 1970s-era Iran under the shah, the film can’t help but seem like a harbinger of what is to come in at least one of the twentieth-century histories this exhibition of unusually great ambition sought to address.

In tracing the modern history of Iran from 1960 to the present and its echoes in visual culture, the curators of “Unedited History”—a motley crew led by Catherine David, herself an old hand at putting together heady exhibitions on and around the modern and contempo-

rary Middle East—ventured into a minefield. For one of the accidental legacies of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the toppling of the shah—no doubt one of the last century’s great political passion plays—was to make the project of representing Iran and its histories a feverish battleground littered with rival claims. Was the revolution a great catastrophe or a great victory? Whose Iran? Whose modernity? “Unedited History,” as the curators conveyed in one of their many unusually erudite wall texts, set out to dismantle the view that the revolution—whose primary figurehead was a hectoring holy man by the name of Ayatollah Khomeini—abruptly halted the advance of modernity in that country. Wherever one stands politically, this posture is refreshing: Shows with stakes, and an argument to make—especially in the era of the bland group show—are increasingly rare. Having said that, one can only imagine royalists, who for much of the past three decades have been devoted to mourning the death of the Shah’s “Great Civilization,” getting seriously splenetic.

**THE EXHIBITION OPENED** with a series of oils and collages by Bahman Mohassess, an artist as strange as he was gifted, whose semihuman figures assume the shapes of heroic grotesques. He was joined by his contemporary Behjat Sadr, whose moody teetering between figuration and abstraction seems to capture the atmosphere

of a generation negotiating Western-style modernization in a more or less traditional society. (As it happens, her painterly surfaces look like oil spills—a fine parable for the petrodollar-flush 1970s.) A section titled “Archaeology of the Final Decade,” assembled by curator Vali Mahlouji, presented traces of various Iranian avant-gardes of the ’60s and ’70s and, by extension, their own Peggy Guggenheim in the form of the then empress, Farah Diba, who hovered as a barely acknowledged specter over a vast swath of the show. Here, there was a smattering of documents related to the relatively little-known Shiraz-Persepolis Festival of Arts that she patronized—staged for eleven summers, it was at its peak one of the most adventurous and idiosyncratic festivals in the world. Among these documents were a rare

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film drawn from the first day of Robert Wilson’s unreal seven-day, seven-night production *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE*, 1972; a recording of the late director Bijan Mofid’s beloved animal-human parable *Shahr-e-Ghesse* (City of Tales), 1968; and photographs from 1972 of members of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company doing calisthenics with the sixth-century BC pillars of Persepolis behind them. (For Iranians, the work presented at the festival could occasionally be confounding: “We were only just

From left: Parviz Kimiavi, *Mogholha* (The Mongols), 1973, 35 mm, color, sound, 85 minutes. Installation view, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2014. Bahman Mohassess, *Portrait de la mère* (Portrait of Mother), 1974, oil on canvas, approx. 34 x 30". View of “Unedited History: Iran 1960–2014,” 2014, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2014.





Above: Kaveh Golestan, *untitled*, 1975–77, gelatin silver print. From the series “Prostitutes,” 1975–77.



Top: Narmine Sadeg, *Office of Investigation into Diverted Trajectories (detail)*, 2014, mixed media. Installation view, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Photo: Haupt & Binder.



Bottom: Chohreh Feyzdjou, *Products of Chohreh Feyzdjou (detail)*, 1988–92, mixed media. Installation view, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Photo: Haupt & Binder.

beginning to listen to Bach. Stockhausen was impossible!” was a not-uncommon refrain.)

Iran as captured in the “Final Decade” display was worldly and engaged. Journals such as *Ketab-e Jom'eh* (Friday Book) and *Ketab-e Hafteh* (Weekly Book) carried modern poetry in translation and accounts of the coming third-world revolution. Also assembled here, the works of the caricaturist Ardeshir Mohasses—X-rays of Iranian society that are by turns droll and tragic—were especially worth lingering over, as was the room devoted to Kaveh Golestan’s *Shahr-e No* (New City) 1975–77, a project consisting of the late photographer’s reportage on a shabby red-light district that would eventually burn to the ground in a mysterious fire in the first days of the revolution. Assembled along with research documentation about the neighborhood were portraits of prostitutes in half-lit caves, their gazes alternately plaintive, smoldering, angry, and despairing.

The “Final Decade” section, at odds as it seemed to be with tales of Iran under monarchal rule as categorically unfree, mapped a kind of temporary autonomous zone in which radically unique, even transgressive, culture came to be under state sanction. (*The Mongols*—to

take but one example—was, for all its ribald sins, partially a state production.) The show left unresolved the important question of who exactly had access to such culture, though it did make a convincing case that some members of the small artistic scene in Iran at the time—populated by Mohasses and Sadr, artist and designer Fereydoun Ave, theater director Arby Ovanessian, architect and artist Bijan Saffari, and many others—represented the genesis of a new kind of globalism, one in which Iranian traditional arts were celebrated, and even innovated, alongside experimental and foreign forms. (Hearing the sound of Rwandan percussionists at the Shiraz Festival bleeding into Max Roach’s drumming bleeding into the sound track of *The Mongols* in this exhibition was priceless.)

**THIS IS WHERE** a familiar story about Iranian modernity usually comes to an end. And yet the curators of “Unedited History” moved from royal patronage to revolution and its aftermaths. Kamran Shirdel, Rana Javadi, and the late Bahman Jalali did important work here documenting the uprising in the streets of Tehran. Filmmaker Bahman Giarostami’s *Flowers* (2013), a

seven-minute gem consisting of footage plucked from the vault of the radio and television archives, seems to vividly mark the end of one era and the start of another: The video shows young, fresh-faced members of the state television network as they relay news, in real time, of the revolution in their midst.

Detractors of the exhibition, and there are surely many, might argue that the inclusion of materials produced both by the revolutionaries and by the Islamic Republic that came to supplant the shah’s regime—the show held thrilling bloodred posters calling for the fall of the monarch and his imperial backer, the US, as well as agitprop documentaries about the Iran-Iraq War that ensued—legitimized the theocratic regime that would come. But of course, representation is not endorsement: Rather than impose any discernible moral valence on the politics in their midst, the curators allowed multiple, competing histories to exist side by side in tension. In this way, Catherine David and company made an open-ended case for historical and artistic continuity as opposed to rupture between epochs that might seem as different as night and day. Could the Iranian Revolution have been an articulation of modernity, and not the rejection of it? Could the artistic giants of the 1960s and ’70s and their patrons—such as the former empress or Reza Qotbi, who was the director of the forward-thinking state television—have been the forefathers (and foremothers) of at least some of the expression that would come? One can only speculate. Either way, the exhibition captured moments rarely encapsulated within the bounds of a single show.

“Unedited History” ended with a selection of contemporary work. Much of this art had a sad, poetic pall about it—dead birds, a sculptural tombstone, figures perversely holding their own decapitated heads—as if only to communicate that life in the Islamic Republic is hard. (It is.) In spite of a stirring installation of obscured, soot-covered curios by the late artist Chohreh Feyzdjou, as well as strong photographic work by students of Jalali, this was where the show’s organizers suffered under the weight of their too-large ambitions.

Still, to see modern and contemporary art together with cinema, magazines, and political posters, and not as acontextual magic that emerges like a genie from a lamp, was heartening. In the end, the curators of “Unedited History” managed to offer up one possible rhizomatic reading of Iran’s vexed modern history that, in its own way, encourages the making of long-overdue distinctions between casually overused rubrics such as modernization, modernism, and modernity. Its refusal to take sides or to use art to confirm prefab ideas about Iran was one of the great virtues of this show. In an art world that often peddles Iranian art as ethnic token and has made the humdrum marketing of identity politics a lucrative enterprise, “Unedited History” merits attention. □

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