

INTRODUCTION TO “THE NIGHTINGALE’S BUTCHER MANIFESTO” AND “VOLUME AND ENVIRONMENT II”

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The following two manifestos are among the earliest in modern Iranian art. The first, entitled “The Nightingale’s Butcher Manifesto” (in Persian: *Sallakh-e Bolbol*), boldly opposes all major trends that had come to dominate art practice in Iran by the early 1950s. Its fight takes place on many fronts: against the miniaturists who considered themselves to be continuing Iran’s visual art tradition, against the neo-traditionalist followers of painter Kamal al Molk,¹ and against the leftist orientations emerging in modern Iranian art. Given its deeply ingrained sense of oppositionality, it is no wonder that “The Nightingale’s Butcher Manifesto” met with little success when it was first published in 1951.

The second manifesto, published by the Tehran-based Azad Art Group (also known as the Independent Artists Group) for the 1976 exhibition *Volume and Environment II*, suggests that similar struggles were in play twenty-five years later. Most pressing for the Azad Group, though, was its insistence that Iranian artists could be influenced by contemporary art from other countries, rather than regressing along

1 Kamal al Molk, born Mohammad Ghaffari (1847–1940), was an artist of the Persian royal court inspired by the works of classical European artists, such as Raphael, Rembrandt, and Titian. While serving as the head of the Fine Art School in Tehran, Ghaffari developed and promoted a naturalist style of painting that became the target of the Iranian modernists’ struggle.

a vertical line of history in search of the “essence” of traditional Iranian arts. The two manifestos, translated in the following pages, thus ask key questions about the relationships between local and international histories of the arts and between what is thought a “legitimate” source of inspiration and what is “illegitimate.” They also investigate how best to explore and improve the communicative potentials of a local visual culture.

“THE NIGHTINGALE’S BUTCHER MANIFESTO” (APRIL 1951)

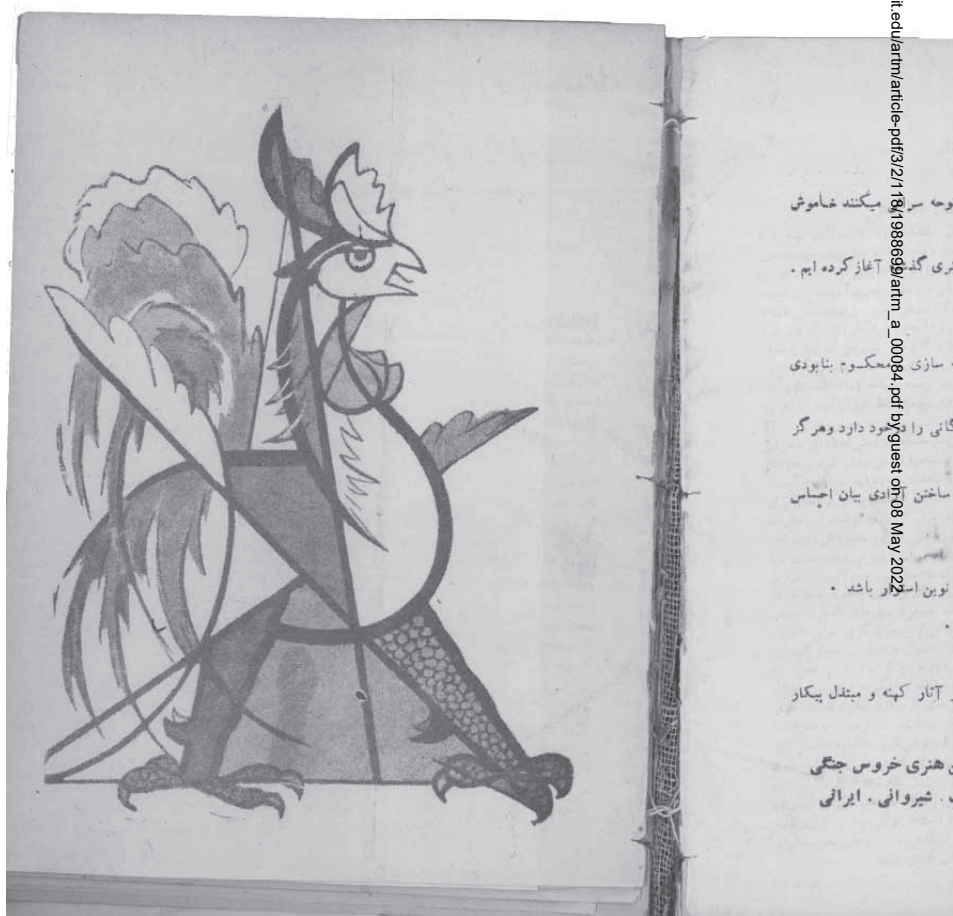
This is perhaps the earliest known manifesto in the history of the Iranian visual arts. It was written at a time when Mohammad Mosaddegh, the leader of the Iranian National Front, was serving his first term in office as the country’s prime minister. Mosaddegh had nationalized the Iranian oil industry one month before the publication of this text; his actions led to a “cold war” with the United Kingdom, whose navy in the Persian Gulf had placed an embargo on Iranian oil. At the same time as Iran’s government struggled to nationalize the country’s oil wealth, the general populace had high hopes of change. The bitter enmity and distrust that had historically existed between the people and the government in Iran was evaporating.² The secular leftists, the Islamists, and the nationalists had gathered forces and were working toward the same cause: economic independence from the West. The devastating cultural effects of the overthrow of Mosaddegh’s democratic government by the American- and British-led coup d’état of 1953 not only affected nationalist and leftist intellectuals, but also modern artists such as Bahman Mohasses (a painter, sculptor, and translator) and Hooshang Irani (an avant-garde poet and painter, and the main author of “The Nightingale’s Butcher Manifesto”). Irani never recovered from the blow. After the coup, he sought consolation in alcohol and mysticism and went into silence for the next decade, until his death.

The manifesto was printed on the back cover of every issue of the second series of a magazine called *Fighting Cock* (four issues printed on a biweekly basis from April until June 6, 1951).³ The manifesto was signed by Gholam Hossein Gharib (a poet, writer, and

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- 2 Under the reign of the Qajar Dynasty (1785–1925), which showed little concern over securing national interests, Iranians had become skeptical of their state. In comparison, the government of Mohammad Mosaddegh enjoyed unprecedented national support.
 - 3 Mohammad Taghi Javaheri Gilani, *Tarikh-e tahlili-ye she’r-e no* [*The Analytical History of Modern Poetry*], vol. 1 (Tehran: Markaz, 1998), 465.

musician), Hassan Shirvani (a journalist and art critic), and Irani. *Fighting Cock* was not just a magazine, though. It was initially an art association founded in 1949 by the modernist painter Jalil Ziapoor, who had long fought for recognition of the visual arts in a country more interested in the literary and verbal than the visual arts.⁴ Ziapoor's art group began with the objective of "fighting any type of historicism and traditionalism which deviates from the realities

- 4 Among Ziapoor's beliefs was his view that "painting has not reached the ultimate level of art and beauty and has been very much mixed with other branches of Fine Arts and even more so with literature and narration. The application of this theory will set the boundaries of painting and distinguish it from other arts. Here, the real destination of painting will be a skill and profession separate from other arts, and as such, painting will represent itself in a broader meaning." ("Ziapoor's Theory of



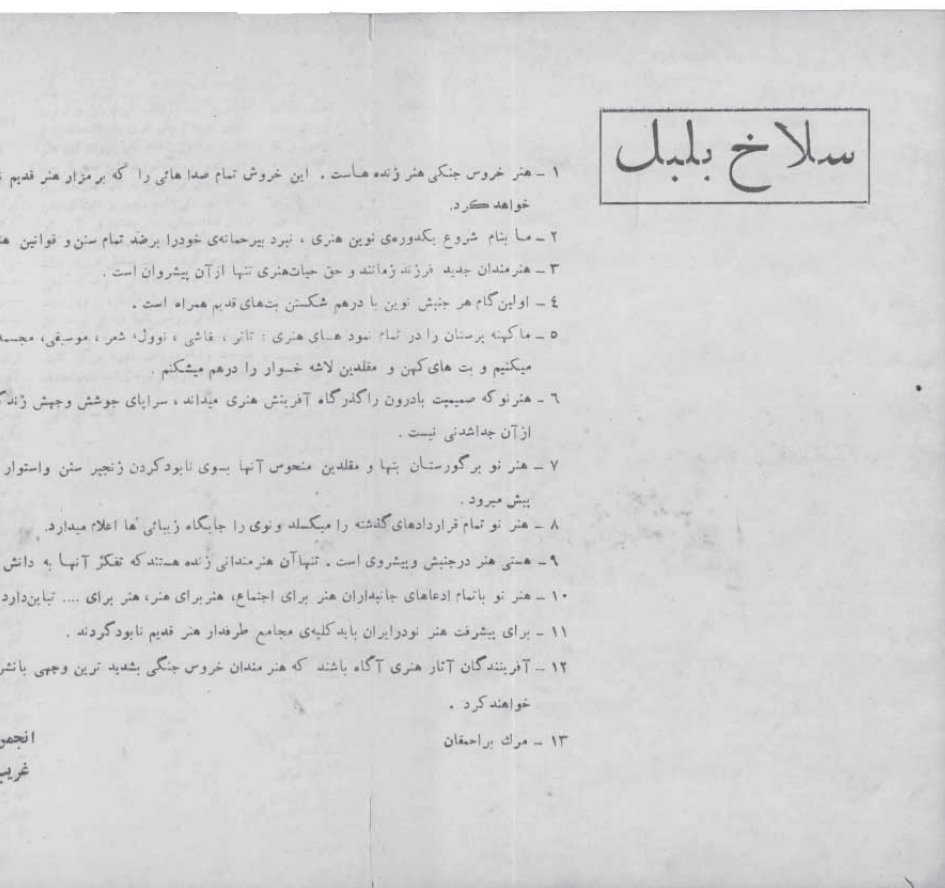
Jalil Ziapoor. *Fighting Cock* magazine logo, 1949. Ink on paper. Tehran. Image courtesy of the author.

of the time.”⁵ The magazine’s purpose was to promote the association’s main ideas, while Ziapoor’s atelier served as the association’s head-quarters and a venue for holding regular lectures on art. The association is sometimes referred to as the first Iranian surrealist group,⁶ but the surrealist tendencies only emerged later, through Irani’s influence. Ziapoor’s ideals in painting were closer to abstraction, and he acknowledged surrealism only as a transitory phase in the development of art.

Painting from the Beginning up to Modern Art (1948),” in *Collected Speeches of Jalil Ziapoor (1948–1999)*, ed. Shahin Saber Tehrani (Tehran: MOCA and Jahad Daneshgahi Honar), 433. I am grateful to my friend, Iman Afsarian, for providing scans of this article.

5 Ziapoor’s official website, accessed October 12, 2013, <http://www.ziapour.com/>.

6 Gilani, *Tarikh-e Tahlili-ye She'r-e No*, 432.



The first series of *Fighting Cock* magazine was published in five issues between 1949 and 1950, with texts by Ziapoor, Shirvani, Gharib, and Manoochehr Sheybani.⁷ The first series emphasized painting and literature over the other branches of art; it also published poems by Nima Yooshij, the father of Iranian modern poetry, whom Irani later criticized for not being sufficiently avant-gardist.⁸ The publication of the magazine was suspended for one year when officials, according to Ziapoor, mistook the word “cubism” for “communism.”

Yet only in the magazine’s second series, after Irani joined the group, did its extreme avant-garde tendencies come to the fore. Considered the *enfant terrible* of modern Persian poetry, Irani was an idiosyncratic figure among his peers. Born in 1925, he started working for the Ministry of Finance in 1945 and graduated from Tehran University in the field of mathematics in 1946. He joined the navy that same year and was sent to the UK for training; he could not stand the military discipline, and flew to France, where he stayed for one year before returning to Iran. While in Iran, he studied Spanish, went to Spain in 1948 to continue his studies, and returned home in 1950 with a PhD in mathematics (his dissertation focused on “Space and Time in Indian Thought”). Ziapoor left the group in 1951 in protest against Irani’s extreme artistic radicalism. Irani had begun publishing poems that others in literary circles were unwilling to consider poetry. The best known of them, “Indigo,” opens with these lines:

Himahooray!

Gil vigooli

Niboon! Niboon!

The indigo cave runs

Hands on ears, pressing its eyelids, hunching

Screams a continuous scream in violet.⁹

To Irani’s neo-Dadaist ears, even the poems of the modernist Nima Yooshij were nothing more than mimicry of a fairly traditional (yet, in

7 I am indebted to Marjan Tajeddini and Shahrooz Mohajer for sending me scans of different issues of the *Fighting Cock* magazine.

8 Gilani, *Tarikh-e Tahlii-ye She’r-e No*, 452.

9 In Hooshang Irani, *Spicy Violet on Grey* (Tehran: self-published, 1951).

Irani's words, "very recent") past. Irani directed his rage at Nima among others, arguing that Nima had compromised his poetry by yielding to the pressure of the "leftists."

The second series of the *Fighting Cock* coincided with the publication of another magazine, *Dove of Peace*. Sympathetic to the USSR, *Dove of Peace* promoted a more conservative approach to literature.¹⁰ It is notable that both the dove and the cock were recurring themes in Picasso's paintings. Across the Middle East, the name Picasso stood for the ultimate artist and an ideal combination of political dedication and formalist excellence. Hence, it seemed only natural that Ziapoor designed the logo for the *Fighting Cock* in a Cubist style, since to the eyes of his contemporaries Cubism was the most significant manifestation of avant-gardism.

Ziapoor had already insisted that painting be independent from realistic or figurative representations, but it was Irani who threw his weight behind formalism and dared to go against both the Iranian Communists, with their social approach to art, and those who, although formally modernist, preferred to preserve some connection with the past. In fact, Irani's views formed the basis for the tenth article of "The Nightingale's Butcher Manifesto": "New art is in contrast with all the claims of the proponents of art for society's sake, art for art's sake, art for whatever's sake."

The name *Fighting Cock* is also meaningful inasmuch as there was a broad culture of cock fighting in Iran at the time the manifesto was published, which imbued the magazine with a nonelitist aura.¹¹ The title that Irani chose for his manifesto pushes this "vernacular" agenda even further. The Persian term for *nightingale* has a double meaning: on the one hand, it refers to *gol-o-bolbol* (the flower-and-nightingale pattern), a term used for the decorative patterns that are typical of Persian ornamentation (the term here also means "cheesy and rosy"); on the other hand, similar to the English term *cock*, its Farsi equivalent refers to a young boy's genitals. The manifesto's title,

10 Shams Langroodi, "Dove of Peace, Fighting Cock and Violet Scream," *Goharan* 7–8 (Summer 2005): 12–17.

11 A similar recourse to popular culture recurs in the case of the naming of the Saqqakhaneh School, which consisted of a number of modern Iranian artists who worked with motifs taken from pop religious culture. The kind of art used in a Saqqakhaneh, a religious drinking fountain, is different from that of a formal religious institution such as a mosque.

“Nightingale’s Butcher,” thus suggests associations with castration, a violence matched by the text’s war against the past and its appropriation of the aggressive and crude tone of Futurist manifestos.

“VOLUME AND ENVIRONMENT II” (OCTOBER 1976)¹²

The second manifesto, apparently drafted by Morteza Momayez (who today is best known as one of the main founders of modern Iranian graphic design), was published as part of the catalog for the Azad Group’s exhibition entitled *Volume and Environment II*. Held at Tehran’s Saman Gallery, from October 17 to 28, 1976, the exhibition occurred just two and a half years before the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In the years after the Saqqakhaneh School had gained major critical acclaim and governmental support in 1963, modern art had become well established in Iran. But the exhibition’s political context was strained: two years before the manifesto’s publication, the shah had dissolved all political parties and established a single party called Rastakhiz (Resurrection), giving every citizen the option to either register with the party or leave the country.

The gallery where the show took place was located in an upper-class neighborhood of Tehran, and was known to have sold some of the most expensive artworks among Iran’s galleries of the time.¹³ Indeed, in a room adjacent to this exhibition, the Saman Gallery staged a show of works by European artists including Hans Hartung and Pierre Soulages. Yet, despite this apolitical context, the artworks presented by the Azad Group were political in tone. In the previous exhibition by the same group, *Volume and Environment*, two works by Momayez and Marcos Grigorian (a pioneering conceptual artist) had been removed by officials.¹⁴ Grigorian had exhibited a broken chair with three legs, while Momayez had made an installation of knives hanging from the ceiling. In *Volume and Environment II*, Momayez planted twenty-five knives in twenty-five pots, with a golden pot placed higher than the others.

¹² I am grateful to Reza Abedini for pointing out the importance of the “Volume and Environment II” manifesto and for his insightful conversations. I also thank Dariush Kiaras for kindly providing the scans of the *Volume and Environment II* exhibition catalogs.

¹³ Dariush Kiaras, “History of Tehran Galleries: 19. Saman Gallery (Part I),” *Tandis* 221 (2012): 8.

¹⁴ Dariush Kiaras, “History of Tehran Galleries: 23. Takht-e Jamshid Gallery (Part II),” *Tandis* 231 (2012): 20.

VOLUME AND ENVIRONMENT 2

گنج و گستره ۳

نگارخانه سامان ۱۵ مهره آبان ۱۳۷۵ بلوار الفیاضیت ساختمان سامان ۲
SAMAN GALLERY OCT. 22-1975 Elizabeth Blvd Saman bldg 2 Tehran IRAN

میهن‌پایان، مهیارالاحص
GUEST ARTISTS
HAKHUS
پوراحسان
MIRAN
محمّد صالح علی
MSALEH ALA
گروه آزاد، INDEPENDENT ARTISTS GROUP



Morteza Momayez. Poster for Volume and Environment II exhibition, 1976.
Saman Gallery, Tehran. Image courtesy of Dariush Kiaras.

According to Gholam Hossein Nami, one of the members of the Azad Group, the installation was a reference to an art event called 25 Years of Iranian Art, organized by order of the shah himself.¹⁵

The Azad Group was founded by Grigorian and included Momayez, Abdorreza Daryabeygi, Masood Arabshahi, Gholam Hossein Nami, Sirak Melkonian, and Faramarz Pilaram (all painters). Artists Hossein Kazemi and Parviz Tanavoli were also members of the group, but they later left. The Azad Group also invited guest artists for their exhibition. These included Siroos Malek, Hanibal Alkhas, Behzad Hatam, Bahman Boroojeni, Monir Shahroodi Farmanfarmaian, Changiz Shahvagh, Asghar Mohammadi, Ghobad Shiva, Mohammad Saleh Ala, and Mohammad Ehsai.¹⁶ The group organized five exhibitions in total, and each exhibition was organized around a theme: for instance, “volume and environment” for the two exhibitions noted here, the color blue for a third exhibition, and so forth.

The *raison d'être* of the group was to fight the emergence of a market-driven version of modern art, which its members no longer identified as being progressive. They instead sought to “open a space for *the new*.”¹⁷ Whereas the authors of “The Nightingale’s Butcher Manifesto” defended modern art, those of “Volume and Environment II” were more concerned with correcting its course. During the twenty-five years between these two manifestos, Iranian modern art had achieved its own character; the time had now come to critique that establishment. The Azad artists’ critique was especially clear in their last three exhibitions—Blue, Volume and Environment, and Volume and Environment II—which became renowned for the introduction of installations and ready-mades and for the generation of conceptual art in Iran.¹⁸

What is particularly curious about this second manifesto is how the authors reply to the accusations typically made against Iranian modern artists: namely, that they merely mimic Western art. The manifesto raises the problem of “the new” to a universal level while

15 “All My Roots Are Here,” interview with Gholam Hossein Nami, *Shargh Newspaper*, June 18, 2011, 8. It is unclear from the interview what this event was exactly.

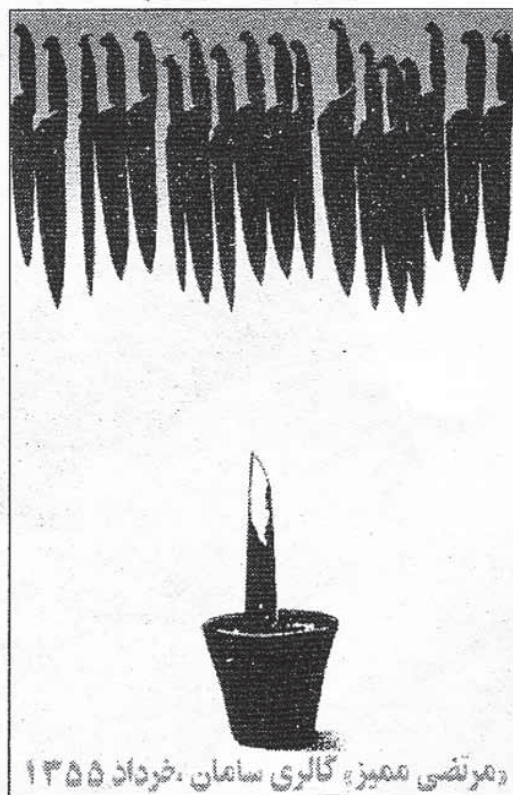
16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 As is the case with many other terms used in Farsi when discussing contemporary Iranian art, the term *conceptual art* does not have the same connotations as in Western art history. It is instead used in a broad sense as a synonym for any art that uses a non-conventional medium.

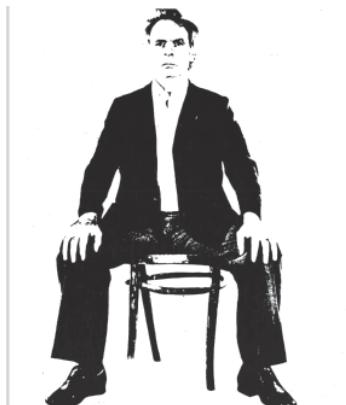
attacking the Eurocentrism of local art circles in order to defend itself: "If we look at much of our cultural activities, or those of other nations, from such a superficial perspective, we will come up with disastrous results: / . . . for instance, many of the American contemporary art movements are imitations of Dadaists' experiences or those of some other European artists. / Or the works of Picasso, the great artist, are imitations of African art."¹⁹ The text acquires the confidence typical of manifestos by turning that accusation on its head: if accepting any sort of "influence" is mimicry, then that mimicry is not restricted to marginal cultures mimicking the West; rather, the art world as a whole cannot be understood without recourse to mimicry.

The type of artworks presented in the Volume and Environment II exhibition, as well as the tone of the manifesto and the exhibition's curatorship, suggest the emergence of a new way of understanding Iranian contemporary art. In that sense, the manifesto is a start, and one that would come to a sudden standstill with the 1979 revolution's radical transformation of Iran's cultural infrastructure (not to mention the devastating effect of the "cleansing" of universities of dissident professors and students during the Cultural Revolution between 1980 and 1983). The manifesto also represents something of a milestone for what



Morteza Momayez. Poster for Morteza Momayez installation, 1976. Saman Gallery, Tehran.
Image courtesy of Dariush Kiaras.

19 "Volume and Environment II" manifesto, in *Volume and Environment II* (Tehran: Saman Gallery, 1976), exhibition catalog.



Marcos Grigorian. Presentation of broken-chair installation in Volume and Environment II exhibition catalog, 1975. Saman Gallery, Tehran. Image courtesy of Dariush Kiaras.

is known today as “Iranian contemporary art.” An interest in mass politics while taking the elite as its audience; the symbolism inherent in Iranian “conceptual art”; an attention to pop culture; and a self-deprecatory approach—all of these elements connect pre- and post-revolution art in Iran. Yet Iranian contemporary art finds itself involved in its own struggles as it seeks to distinguish itself from the official art favored by the Islamic Republic—an art that has rejected the cultural policies of the previous regime, but which, ironically enough, has also combined elements of popular and prerevolution leftist art with that of the Iranian modernists.