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Heech a nothing that is, sculpted in poem by Parviz Tanavoli, Iranian Sculpture

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ABSTRACT

Born in Tehran in 1937, Tanavoli benefited from Reza Shah Pahlavi's quest for modernization/westernization. After Western-style art education had been introduced to Iran, Tanavoli graduated as the first student from the new sculpture programme at the Tehran School of Arts in 1956. Subsequently he went to Italy in order to study under the well-known sculptor Marino Marini (1901–1980). Marini's awareness of the past traditions of his native country, and their incorporation into his contemporary work, led Tanavoli to explore his own cultural heritage and to search for a style suitable to express Persia's past achievements in a modern way. Recurring themes in Tanavoli's sculpture consistently contain references to the human figure, evident both in the upright sculptural forms and their titles. Tanavoli progressively replaces any descriptive figurative features with cultural symbols. This fusion of human and cultural emblems is an enduring characteristic of Tanavoli's powerful sculptural statements. Each work imbues special meaning like Persian poetry, which is more concerned with subjective interpretation of reality than with its external manifestations. It is this quality that is embraced in a wide range of works and revealed in *Lovers*, *Beloved*, *Prophet* and *Poets*. His signature series 'Heech' has found its place in various prestigious museums and galleries worldwide. Red Heech (below) is in the British Museum, London. Tanavoli, at 74, is as productive as ever. The exhibition is drawn entirely from the artist's collection and features a number of works never seen before. He has taken part in several international group exhibitions and is one of the most popular artists at auctions.

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Introduction

Parviz Tanavoli (an Iranian sculptor, painter, art historian and collector) is one of the most influential and pioneering artists of the Middle East and one of Iran's foremost artists; considered as the country's first significant modern sculptor. Additionally, Tanavoli is a prolific writer. He has authored numerous books and articles on the artistic culture of Iran, featuring in publications such as *Hali*, *Tavoos* and *Oriental Rug Review*. An artist-fabricator, teacher and collector, he was born in 1937 where he remained until he graduated from Tehran's School of Fine Arts in 1955. He then travelled to Italy where he continued his studies in Carrere and Milan. He later worked in Milan under Italian artist Marino Marini. Upon graduating from the Berra Academy of Milan in 1959, he returned to Iran and won the Royal Awards in the 2nd Tehran Biennale in 1960. In the same year he founded his first studio, the *Atelier Kaboud*, which acted as both a studio space for him to work in as well as an exhibition space for him and other contemporaries. Tanavoli taught sculpture for three years at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. He then returned to Iran and assumed the directorship of the sculpture department at the University of Tehran, a position he held for 18 years until 1979, when he retired from teaching. Tanavoli is a founder member of the *Saqqakhaneh School* (a school of art that derives inspiration from Iranian folk art and culture), a school that has been described as a 'spiritual Pop Art' and is now considered the inspiration for progressive modern Iranian art. The exhibition at Austin/Desmond Fine Art, his first solo show in Britain since 1960, distinguishes him as one of the finest draughtsman of his

generation. The works on display feature over thirty-five pieces including ceramics, fiberglass and bronze sculptures, paired with contemporary drawings, emphasizing his abiding and joyful love for Persian architecture, culture and poetry.

He exhibited his work widely and received commissions from all over the world. He taught at art colleges and universities in Iran and the U.S.A., retiring from his position of professor of sculpture at Tehran University in 1981. As an art historian, he wrote books and articles on Iranian arts, especially rugs and textiles. His writings, like his sculptures, demonstrate an awareness of the traditions of Iranian life gained from extensive travel to villages and tribal areas. Also he formed collections of Islamic rugs, tools, locks and native stonework. He was also influenced by themes from classical Iranian literature.

He has held solo exhibitions in Iran, Europe, Dubai, United States and Canada and participated in numerous biennales and group exhibitions including, *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World*, Barbican Centre, London, 1989; *Continental Shift*, Museums of Aachen, Maastricht, Heerlen and Liège, 2000; *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution*, Grey Art Gallery, New York, 2002; and *Word into Art*, British Museum, London, 2006. His works are housed in international private and public collections, including The British Museum, London; Grey Art Gallery, New York University Collection; Hamline University, St. Paul, Minnesota; Esfahan City Center; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Nelson Rockefeller Collection, New York; Museum of Modern Art, Vienna; Olympic Park, Seoul; DIFC, Dubai; and Royal Society of Fine Arts, Amman.

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“People moving along Tehran’s Pahlavi Avenue (now renamed Vali-‘Asr Avenue) in 1960,” recalled Parviz Tanavoli, “would have seen a gigantic sculpture on the balcony of one of the apartments that overlooked the street. Constructed from scrap metal, this assemblage depicted a man embracing a deer. The deer’s antlers were made of a bicycle’s form, the man and animal bodies of fenders and other parts of junkyard vehicles. A little below this sculpture, above the entrance, hung a small sign that bore the name ‘Atelier Kaboud’ in both Persian and Latin Letters. This was my first studio.”

The neighborhood surrounding the studio fed Tanavoli’s artistic imagination. He scoured South Tehran’s pottery workshops, blacksmith and welder’s shops, foundries, and street vendors, integrating images, forms, themes, and found objects into his sculptures, ceramics, and paintings. “In our culture,” Tanavoli explained to me, “art is in every aspect of life.” When not making art, he collected talismans, locks, posters with religious inscriptions, and carpets. He also studied the architecture of Shiite devotional spaces—the saqqakhaneh and emamzadeh—fountains and shrines. It was then that Tanavoli began to help formulate the Saqqakhaneh school. Named for the public structures where water is available to passers-by, this school looked inward to local cultural practices. Kamran Diba, former director of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, saw an affinity between Saqqakhaneh art and Pop art:

...if we simplify Pop Art as an art movement which looks at the symbols and tools of a mass consumer society as a relevant and influencing cultural force. Saqqak-khaneh artists looked at the inner beliefs and popular symbols that were part of the religion and culture of Iran, and perhaps, consumed in the same ways as industrial products in the West [1].

At the Atelier Kaboud, a gathering place for poets, painters, architects and filmmakers, Tanavoli organized small exhibitions of his new works and those by other young artists such as Hossein Zenderoudi. These gatherings provided the genesis for an artists’ group known as Contemporary Artists-Marcos Grigorian, Sirak Melkianian, Bijan Saffari, Sohrab Sepehri, Manuchehr Shaybani, and Tanavoli. In June 1961, the collective organized an exhibition of their work in Bank Saderat. “Viewers came in droves,” Tanavoli remembers [2].

Amongst the crowd was Abby Weed Grey, who was in Tehran for an exhibition of Minnesotan artists she had organized at the Iran-America Society. She remarked on the exhibition at Bank Saderat in her diary: “The architectural setting with its polished marble floor and marble walls, its vaulted ceilings and elegant lighting, was the perfect background for the work: bold abstract paintings, collages in wild and exciting colors, modernist metal sculptures and ceramics.” It was here that she was first introduced to Parviz Tanavoli. The next day, Grey made her way to Atelier Kaboud, a space she felt “glowed with the brilliant colors and vitality of his work.” That day, she purchased her first piece by Tanavoli. “I kept returning to a large painting in ink gouache, and gilt whose subject was intriguing,” she wrote in her diary :

The work, which was called *Myth* (Fig.1), depicted three figures, one, the apprentice, holding a mallet, the other a legendary sculptor, Farhad. Protecting both was a gold and blue angel, wings open. For me it went right back to Arabian Nights. But of course it was a Persian tale. I felt I had to have it and purchased it on the spot [3].



Fig.1. Parviz Tanavoli, *Myth*, 1961 gouache, ink and gilt on paper, 39 x 27 1/4 inches (99.1 x 69.2 cm) Grey Art Gallery New York University Art Collection Gift of Abby Weed Grey

Abby Grey would become an avid collector and devoted mentor to Tanavoli, who, in turn, helped Grey become familiar with some of the most notable contemporary artists in Iran in the 1960s and '70s. Her collection, which forms the basis of the Grey Art Gallery’s collection of modern Iranian art, bears the mark of their close relationship. Indeed, it contains one of the most significant extant collections of Tanavoli’s oeuvre nearly 80 works ranging from paintings, drawings, and prints, to jewelry, ceramics, and sculptures.

Returning to Minnesota after her initial meeting with Tanavoli, Grey helped arrange a residency for him at the Minneapolis School of Art. In February 1962, Tanavoli arrived in Minneapolis. “To alleviate my loneliness and ease my transition during a severe, snowy winter,” Tanavoli explained, “Mrs. Grey had arranged for a room for me in [Siah] Armajani’s house.” A close friendship developed between the two artists with Tanavoli helping Armajani keep pace of artistic developments in Iran. The artist Marcos Grigorian, who had been living in New York, also moved to Minneapolis around this time. He opened the Universal Galleries. Grey’s home and Grigorian’s gallery became centers for Iranian art in Minneapolis. In 1963, the Universal Galleries mounted an exhibition that included works by Armajani, Grigorian, Tanavoli, and Zenderoudi.

The bond between Grey and Tanavoli grew. “When I went to Minneapolis,” Tanavoli told me, “I saw Abby nearly every day. She had just begun collecting art and was very eager to learn about Iranian art and culture. During those regular teas, I filled her in as much as I could. She liked me like her son.” After two and a half years of teaching and making art in Minneapolis, Tanavoli returned to Tehran. “After I returned to Iran, she came to see me every year. I took her to artists’ studios and art galleries. She not only bought art, she loved to converse with artists.” In 1964, Grey helped Tanavoli establish a bronze foundry at the University of Tehran. Tanavoli taught at the University of Tehran, set up a workshop, and helped organize a seminar on contemporary Iranian art at the Iran-America society. During these years, Tanavoli’s art reflected a synthesis: “I made use of traditional material such as copper vessels, rugs and calligraphy, along with such Western imports as plastics, fluorescent lights and basic electric equipment,” he explains. The works, which were exhibited at the Borghese Gallery in 1965, caused “considerable hostile clamor” as Grey recalled. The show was closed within a few days, and Tanavoli writes, “Over the years most of those paintings and sculptures have been destroyed, and all that is left to me is a series of vague recollections.” The piece that Grey purchased from the exhibition remains in the Grey Art Gallery’s collection: “I had

chosen Hands of a Poet (Fig.2), a box construction in which from the inside two plaster hands clasped a crisscrossed lattice grille. This is such deeply involved symbolism that it must not be read as representing repression (hands extending through the bars of a prison cell). Rather it represents the hands of a suppliant at a prayer grille.”

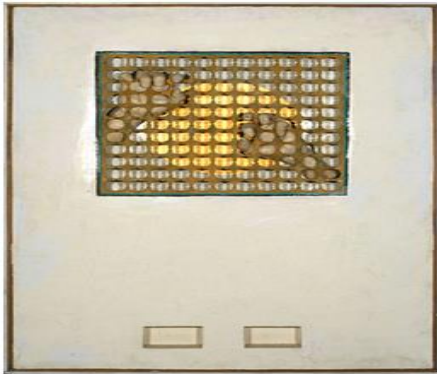


Fig.2. Parviz Tanavoli, Hands of a Poet, 1966 painted wood and plaster construction 47 3/4 x 32 1/2 x 3 1/2 inches (121.3 x 82.6 x 8.9 cm) Grey Art Gallery New York University Art Collection Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.47

Tanavoli is a collector, scholar, and artist. These roles, he explained to me, “are so interwoven, I can hardly separate them from each other.” His intimate knowledge of locks, kohl containers, and rugs has resulted in a series of publications and exhibitions based on his collections. In 1974, the Ben and Abby Grey Foundation helped sponsor a traveling exhibition of Tanavoli’s Lion Rugs from Fars [4]. Tanavoli also created rugs, and the Grey’s collection includes a print, Oh! Nightingale (1974) (Fig.3), that is a design for a carpet. The composition centers on Farhad the poetic sculptor who is Tanavoli’s mythic muse here rendered in a robotic style. His face resembles grillwork from which two locks are hanging. In his hand, Farhad holds a nightingale, the bird whose song Persian poets often wrote of. Reworking tropes from classical Persian literature, tribal rug weaving, calligraphy, and Islamic rituals, Tanavoli produced a work that weds Pop art to traditional Iranian motifs.



Fig.3. Parviz Tanavoli, Oh! Nightingale (design for rug), 1974 silkscreen on paper, sheet: 27 3/4 x 20 1/8 inches Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art Collection Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.61

Ironically, Grey acquired her most substantial work by Tanavoli, Heech Tablet (1973) (Fig.4), during her last trip to Iran in 1973 on the occasion of a special exhibition of his sculptures on the heech theme (Fig.5). Heech is the Persian word for “nothing,” and through the years, Tanavoli has made numerous variations ranging from intricate jewelry, to bronze statues, to large sculptures made of fiberglass. “The sculpture appeared monumental,” Grey wrote of Heech Tablet. The work draws on Tanavoli’s interest in ancient Persian civilization and in the quotidian culture of folk Islam. Standing nearly seven

feet high on its travertine stone base, the bronze is covered with stylus markings mimicking cuneiform script that form an outline of the word heech. The markings also recall the lattice grillwork of shrines from which devotees have hung locks. “Mine was the nothingness of hope and friendship, a nothingness that did not seek to negate. In my mind, it was not life that amounted to nothing, but rather nothing which brimmed with life itself.”



Fig.4. (left), Parviz Tanavoli, Heech Tablet, 1973 bronze on travertine stone base 71 1/2 x 18 1/2 x 11 7/8 inches (181.6 x 47.0 x 30.2 cm) (including integral base) Grey Art Gallery New York University Art Collection Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.570

Fig.5. (Right), Poet turning into Heech 1973-2007 ,Bronze Edition 1/6 ,Signed and dated ,228 x 70 x 58 cm Exhibited: Dubai, Meem Gallery, Parviz Tanavoli and Abbas Kiarostami, 2009-2010, another xample exhibited Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi Festival, Middle Eastern Modern Masters, 2010 , Literature: Parviz Tanavoli, Alireza Sami-Azar, Kamran Diba, Siah Armajani , Shiva Balaghi, Tandis Tanavoli, Gisela Fock, Samar Faruqi Charles Pocock, Parviz Tanavoli Monograph, Dubai, 2010, illus. p.188

Heechestan, Persian Mystical Poet

Everyone is afraid of “Nothingness.” Perhaps the biggest fear of humanity is indeed “Nonbeing.” This fear is due to the fact that not everyone is as keen as Sohrab Sepehri (Persian poet and painter, 1928-1980) or Parviz Tanavoli, who knew that there is a beautiful garden beyond Nothingness. Parviz Tanavoli dared to venture into the wonderland of “Heechestan” and bring as souvenir a marvelous mirror void of forms, in which everyone can see his or her own reflection.

It is the place where, as Rumi (Persian Sufi poet, born in Afghanistan and taught in Konya, Turkey, whose disciples became known in the West as Whirling Dervishes; also known as Mawlana; Jalal ad-Din ar-Rumi ,c.1207.1273) put it:

روز و شب را از میان برداشتند آفتابی با قمر آمیختند
 “Day and night were so intimately fused,
 As if the Sun and the Moon were dancing together.”

Heechestan” is a waterfall whose pearls never touch the face of the earth, It is an amazing city in whose markets they sell “Nothing” and collect all else for barter. ‘Heechestan’ is the famous garden of Sana’i’s (Pen name for Abul-Majd Majdud ibn Adam (1050-1131), Persian mystical poet, greatly admired by Rumi. He was the author of the first great mystical poem in the

Persian language and his verse had a great Influence on Persian and Muslim literature) great mystical poem “The Walled Garden of Truth,” where the freshness of its trees is derived from the absence of leaves. ‘Heechestan’ is the land of nakedness, where face masks do not exist. Heechestan is the realm of eternal union, in which, as Rumi said:

من شدم عریان ز تن او از خیال می خرامم تا نهایدت الوصال
 “I bared my body, she consigned her soul,
 To reach the ultimate union, in such a graceful whole.”

Tanavoli's Nothingness is born out of a rich experience of 'Heechestan.' It looks empty but is rather the miraculous horn of plenty. As Rumi put it:

آینه که ز نقش آیدش جداست پر فرخ روغ از نور اسرار
خداست

"The mirror of the heart is empty of forms,
To be entrusted with God's graceful light."

In the land of Nothingness, Tanavoli presents the essence of Eastern Gnosticism to the world and gives visual form to Sufi allegorical poems. Anyone who comprehends the mystical allegory has taken a trip down the road of humility to the realm of "Heechestan."

Tanavoli's interpretation of Nothingness is not a simple embodiment of hopelessness. His view of Nothingness is rather in conformance with that of Sana'i, Hafez, and Rumi, who fully enjoyed the material world by passing by it gracefully: a passage that is the essential road map of Sufis and Gnostics in their eternal quest for love of the universe and all the truth that it entails.

Heech Sculpture

The Persian word for nothingness was Tanavoli's protest against the two major trends that had taken over the Iranian contemporary art scene works that he felt mimicked new artistic phenomena from the West" and were readily bought up by aristocratic art collectors and the fetishization of the calligraphic notation by a growing number of Saqqakhaneh artists. Heech was the voice of this protest,' Tanavoli recalls [5]. Heech became a marker of the impenetrable inner sanctum of Tanavoli's creative spirit. In part, the inspiration for heech came from his deep knowledge of classical Persian poetry, as Tanavoli explained in 1973, My attachment to the poetry of the East is an old love which I have always cherished, for the East is everything [6]. Heech (Fig.6) referenced Rumi's poetry, steeped in the symbolism of Sufism. God created everything from nothingness, and in order to reach the highest level of spiritual connection, we, in turn, must strive for the purest form of nothingness. In Tanavoli's poetics, nothingness also became a philosophical commentary on art. "My nothingness, however, was not tinged with the cynicism of Western artists," Tanavoli explains, "Mine was the nothingness of hope and friendship, a nothingness that did not seek to negate. In my mind, it was not life that amounted to nothing, but rather nothing which brimmed with life itself" [7]. The materiality of heech also provided Tanavoli with his ultimate sculptural form (Fig.7).



Fig.6. (left), Poet and Bird 2009, Bronze ,Unique, Signed and dated, 115 x 48 x 31.5 cm , Exhibited: Dubai, Meem Gallery, Parviz Tanavoli and Abbas Kiarostami, 2009-2010, another example exhibited Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi Festival, Middle Eastern ,Modern Masters, 2010 ,Literature: Parviz Tanavoli, Alireza Sami-Azar, Kamran Diba, Siah Armajani,

Shiva Balaghi, Tandis Tanavoli, Gisela Fock, Samar Faruqi, Charles Pocock, Parviz Tanavoli ,Monograph, Dubai, 2010, illus. p.242

Fig.7. (Right), Heech 1972, Bronze ,Unique, 56.5 x 30.5 x 20.5 cm , Collection: Grey Art Gallery, New York University, New York, Not long after I completed my academic studies I decided to free my mind from all my acquired knowledge. Agitation and anxiety filled my days. I was in search of something that could not be found At last, one day I found the shape I was searching for. This shape was devoid of all that I had previously known. It had a slender figure, supple and sinuous, the eyes overflowing with meaning; but there were no other features on the face. To this figure, I gave the name "heech" (nothingness) and upon its form I bestowed my heart. Parviz Tanavoli

As Annemarie Schimmel noted, the calligraphic notion for the "two-eyed ha" (Fig.8) traditionally conveyed a sense of melancholy. "The contemporary Persian sculptor Tanavoli has very well expressed this sadness of the "h" in his delightful variations on the word hich" [8]. Certainly, Tanavoli's engaged heech projects a heart-wrenching isolation. But as David Galloway pointed out, Tanavoli's heech was fundamentally "a joyous affirmation of the resources of the creative spirit."6 Ultimately, the caged heech slips through the metal grids that confine it. Heech perches on a chair, hides beneath a table, reclines against a hill, embraces its lover, and blooms like a tulip.

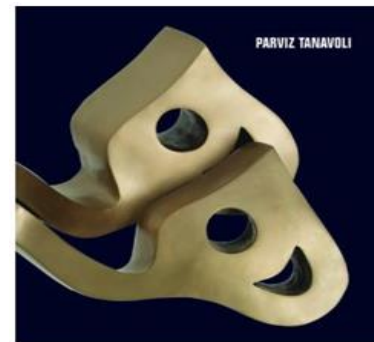


Fig.8. the calligraphic notion for the "two-eyed ha" traditionally conveyed a sense of melancholy

In a sense, Tanavoli's own art is a compilation of Iranian cultural history. "In our culture," Tanavoli explained to me, "art is in every aspect of life. What we learn from a closer look at the heech sculptures, produced in various forms (Fig.9) and media over nearly five decades, is that Tanavoli is also a philosopher. Mark Rothko wrote that "art, like philosophy, is of its own age" [9]. Indeed, Tanavoli's artistic oeuvre stands as a monumental historical record of Iran in this age [10].



Fig.9. Pink Standing Heech, blue Standing Heech , Black Heech Lovers , Standing Heech Lovers

One interpretation of this concept is that our portrait of "Nothingness" has its roots in the abstraction of all negative phenomena in our lives. Our minds are conditioned to conjure up things in absolute; otherwise there is nothing innate in all of the negative aspects in our lives that demand absolute "Nothingness." We combine the small negative events and

aspects of our lives and give them a form called "Nothingness," and then we search for its referents. Death of the one we love is her/his death and not death in itself, even though it seems that our attachment to the one who is dead has a function in how close or distant we perceive Nothingness." There are times when the death of a loved one makes "Nothingness" more tangible. It is perhaps that in her/his death she/he has deprived our minds of fresh memories of her/his existence. In any event, death is never experienced in its totality, just as being is not. Furthermore, Time is an essential aspect in this relative "Nothingness." "Being" is the antecedent to the death of the previous moment. In other words, each moment is fed into the disappearance of the previous one, and it, itself, is immediately somehow devoured by the next moment in time. In this relationship, "Nothingness" is intensely dependent upon "Being," existence - the "thing" that its absence provides an identity (of course dependent) for "Nothingness."

In philosophy, this argument was first addressed by Democritus (c. 460-c. 370 BC), who was a disciple of Parmenides, but his view was diametrically opposed to that of his master on the subject. What he called the "indivisible" part of each particle of matter included the atoms and the spaces between the atom from the point of view of Democritus and his followers, these spaces are nothing but a void. And, from his point of view, this void was "Nothingness." Naturally, if the density of the atoms were such that no empty space ("Nothingness") was allowed in their midst, in the culminated static of universe there would be no room to move [11]. But motion is the essence of the universe. Hence, Democritus's "Nothingness" is the primary factor in motion and, at the same time, a factor of variety in existence [12].

Plato had a similar point of view; he also saw "Nothingness" as the source of variety and motion in the universe, not only in this world, but also in a world he called the "Ideal" world [13]. The real world, according to his convictions, was the world of the "Ideal," and the material world was a shadow of it [14]. In both of his worlds, Plato considered "Nothingness" an inevitable event. He believed that in order to assign any meaning to a thing, one has to establish which meanings are not the meaning of the intended thing.

The relativity of "Nothingness" was among the few subjects on which Aristotle (384-322 BC) followed in the same footsteps as his master, Plato, but, of course, in his own style. He also, in following Plato, argued against the absolute nature of "Nothingness." As an example, he argued that a block of marble that was eventually formed into a sculpture was "potentially" a statue. Aristotle argued that 'not-being' had two separate meanings: one is something that is absolutely nonexistent and the other is something that is potentially nonexistent' [15]. Thus it is evident that in Aristotle's school of thought, as well as in the doctrines of Democritus and Plato, "Nothingness" was perceived as a factor for motion in the universe. Whenever a thing can potentially be something else, motion emerges to attain that perfection. All motion is possible only through what Aristotle called "Formal Cause." His objection about this kind of cause was the same potentiality that was inherent in moving things to perfection. This perfection does not exist initially; it is "Not," and it is its "Not-being" that gives meaning to the existence of things.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) puts forth a bold pretense with regard to "Nothingness." He directs our attention to an eccentric point in his book of Logic: if we focus on the concept of "Absolute Being" in our minds for a minute, we will see that it transforms into the "Nothingness." That is, if we strive to cling to the image of "Absolute Being," after a while

we are left with "Nothing." And this is the very essence of "Nonbeing" and "Nothingness" [16]. He was very familiar with the abstractness of the concept of "Nothingness" and, in the process, of its visualization. For this reason, he was concerned about reaching "concrete" reality. In reaching this reality, Hegel deduced that "visualization of Being" (which, in his words, would lead to "Nonbeing") was the essence of motion. According to this precept, the sole purpose of the visualization of "Being" and "Nothingness" was the consequent visualization of "Becoming."

This reasoning was an introduction for what later became known as Hegelian Dialectics' [17]. In addition to inferring motion from the concepts of "Being" and "Nothingness," Hegel's reflection

On "Nothingness" begins from the relative manifestations of it, somewhat like what is proposed about the negations at the beginning of the present essay. The synopsis of his argument is that our thought proceeds by negating incessantly; when our thought focuses on a specific thing, in order to think about its opposite, it immediately negates it. This negative motion, in his viewpoint, is in the core of the spirit and the mind as well as the core of nature, since it is Hegel's perspective that nature is a form of the spirit, In Hegelian terms, by this motion the spirit moves from thesis to antithesis and then to synthesis' [18].

"Heech" is not a sculpture, per Se. It personifies an organic behavior and structure through which, in various forms and figures, it tries to communicate with us. Its creator was very wise in not providing any explanation for any of these forms, not for the reason of leaving the spectator free to form his/her own opinion, but rather to give the identity of "Heech" the anticipated and expected consideration and independence, in accordance with its nature. In this manner, Tanavoli has opened the way for understanding other "Heeches" in our midst. Moreover, he has presented its function in an epistemological context. To us, the surrounding universe, in its conscious or unconscious states, has an objectively driven purpose. At times, these states are so overwhelming that they may define the whole meaning of our existence. The philosophical concept of the existence of things posits their manner and form as coming from our perception of their purpose. But their priorities vary depending upon their importance, relevance, and utility with respect to our system of existence.

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900), in his book *Die frohliche Wissenschaft (The Joyful Wisdom)* (1882), states that "in the public eye, higher emotions and acts of generosity are practically useless, and, consequently, are unrealistic. When faced with such circumstances, the public eye blinks cynically, as if saying: 'there must be some hidden agenda or a concession behind this, since no one can be certain of what is presented at face value.' The constitution of an ignoble person is hence recognized from the observation that he never dissociates himself from personal gain and advantage; the temptation of personal benefit by far is the greatest among his instincts" [18].

A distinctive feature of Tanavoli's "Heech" sculpture is this epistemological playfulness; in other words, its aesthetic sarcasm about the logic of our today's life, logic based on personal "utility" in interpretation of our environment.

"Heech" teaches us to coexist With it and be liberated from the vacuum in which we, as a "Cartesian subject," are constantly calculating and appraising our environment in the context of benefit-driven objects' [20]. It is this quality that defines the beauty of "Heech" (Fig.10). Heech" as a sculpture loses its mandate as a signifier of its meaning, that is, "Nothingness," and the language for it, become a refuge for the incarnation of that which in its essence and in the core of Its concept is "Not." In

other words, “Nothingness” takes refuge in its own word and, borrowing from Heidegger’s supposition that considers language the “abode of being,” this time language becomes the “abode of Nothing.”



Fig.10. Cartesian subject, is this quality that defines the beauty of “Heech”

Tanavoli, in creating ‘Heech,’ has greatly influenced the viewer’s hermeneutic experience, specifically in the realm of tradition and culture. Its first creation, embodied in the nasta’liq style of calligraphy, is an image of two hands with their fingers grasped around a grille window [21]. In this context, Heech becomes a mixed interpretation of supplication to a deity and/or a yearning for liberation and, in a sense, represents its relative nonexistence. Although the presence of Nothingness” in these concepts suspends humanity on the border of hope and hopelessness, nevertheless, from an astute, philosophical perspective, it is the same “Heech” that creates fluidity and motion in the subject. It establishes them in our minds and provokes our actions for achievement. Irrespective of our fulfilled or unfulfilled desires, Heech” is our singular companion. It is that Nothingness that is buried underneath our awareness and not the Nothingness’ that threatens by negating and/or obliterating our fulfilled desires. There are different ches to ‘Heech” by Its creator. One is a symbol of a Heech’s body that reclines restfully in a reticulated window of a saqqakhaneh (traditional Persian drinking fountain) [22]. Another is a representation of a crumpled Heech in a supplicating hand [23]. At times the yearning of a hand in supplication is nothing N but ‘Nothingness” and this has a definite relevance to Tanavoli’s pure aesthetic approach in his works. In other words, not fulfilled and/or lack of utility as a prerequisite of the aesthetic aspect of an object, a glimpse of wistfulness in itself as an aesthetic object. According to Gadamer, the hermeneutics experience fundamentally implies the experience of custom and tradition (Überlieferung), of course, ‘tradition” not in its usual context, but custom as the interpretation that implies continuing intermediation between the Past and the Present. Although “Heech” is often acquainted with some major Past elements such as the saqqakhaneh (little shrine), traditional instruments, or antique locks, and so forth, it is capable of making a connection with contemporary thought processes and living conditions, and it escapes from the intention of its creator. On this basis, “Heech” has created a capability within itself to engage in “dialogue.” This is a dialogue between Past and Present customs. This is a dialogue in which, according to Gadamer, “the Present will . discover realities about itself from the language of the Past” [24].

The Heech Series

First created during the 1960s, the Heech series is now considered the most well-known work of Tanavoli. He made his first Heech in 1964 and spent ten years demonstrating that the word Heech could actually be a figure and therefore have a shape, body and even emotion. In this way, he created two types of cages for Heech: one, a cage enclosing the word Heech and another one without any Heech. The cages, however, were not

similar, since they suggest different visual and conceptual meanings.

The Heechs, the artist’s reactions against the dominant social atmosphere surrounding him, even turned out to be a reaction against some of the works of the Saqqa-khaneh artists. Tanavoli says that in those days many painters were attracted to the Saqqa-khaneh and most of them had chosen Persian script as the basis of their work. Such an occurrence, suggesting that the Saqqa-khaneh values could be widely disseminated, made him feel dispirited instead of pleased, as he felt that calligraphy had become simply a kitsch element for painters. As a result, he distanced himself from this particular tendency and confined himself just to a single word: Heech. This tendency to be attracted to words and letters has a long history in Iranian culture. There was a group of Sufis, among others, who were well aware of the power and influence of letters and words. They called themselves Hurufiyyeh (those who believe that God’s attribute of speech consists of letters and sounds). A more radical group called Nuqtaviyeh (those who go even further and believe in the power of point). Against such a background, the single word Heech appeared in Tanavoli’s art and he made it in single or combined shapes. The combined Heeches include sculptures such as Heech and Cage, Heech and Chair, Heech and Table, The Sleeping Heech, Cage of Heech, Farhad and Heech and even Wall and Heech, mainly produced during the 1960s and 1970s. Tanavoli’s first eye-catching presence in the international auctions took place with his Heech series (Fig.11).



Fig.11. The combined Heeches include sculptures such as Heech and Cage, Heech and Chair, Heech and Table, The Sleeping Heech, Cage of Heech, Farhad and Heech and even Wall and Heech

Heech and Chair

Heech and Chair (Fig.12) operates as a visual pun. The word heech (nothing) appears here in the shape of a cat sitting huddled on the chair’s surface. The cat’s head consists of the letter ha. Two holes stand for two eyes, and the top part culminates in a little peak that can be seen as an ear. Calligraphers call the initial shape of the letter ha, as it appears here, wajh al-hirr (cat’s face) in Arabic. Also, traditional calligraphic literature often plays with imagery of the ha as a weeping face. Therefore, Tanavoli’s interpretation of the heech as a cat builds upon a traditional metaphor – and even elaborates it by giving the cat a body. The top of the letter djeem is fashioned to evoke a cat’s back and thigh, while its down-stroke literally becomes a tail. The sadness that calligraphic literature

and poetry attribute to the letter ha also finds expression: the entire ensemble appears as a shy little creature, looking out into the world with sad eyes, as it huddles into the chair. Another literary convention exemplified in *Heech and Chair II* is that of the metaphor. If viewed in the most superficial manner, the sculpture is a charming image of a cat sitting on a chair. In the same vein, a poem about the beauty of a beloved can be reduced to the evocation of a charming image, as in Hafiz's ghazal

Radiance:

The radiance of thy body's gleam
The moon doth far exceed;
Before thy face the rose doth seem
Lack-lustre as a weed
The corner of thy arched brow
My spirit doth possess,
And there is not a king, I vow,
Dwells in such loveliness [25]



Fig.12. Parviz Tanavoli, *Heech and Chair II*, 1973

Underneath all this charm, however, we can uncover a deeper meaning. Metaphors centring on the beloved or love are employed particularly in the poetry that grew out of the mystical branch of Islam, Sufism. In Sufi poetry – Tanavoli's favorite poet Rumi is its greatest exponent – the love for a human being stands for the love of God, the beloved is God himself, and the beloved's beauty is a reflection of the beauty of God. The word *heech* (nothing) in Tanavoli's sculpture works similarly, as attested by the sculptor himself: "Nothing" is an aspect of God. God is in all things and therefore in everything. The "nothing" is not God, but is a place where God could be in his purest state' [26]. Thus, both the poem and the sculpture can express the presence of God through the same means, that is, the metaphor. In the case of the poem, it is the beloved that is a metaphor for God: in the case of the sculpture, it is the *heech*.

Heech In A Cage

It has been shown up to this point that the incarnation of "Nothingness" in the form of the *Heech* is a concept based on the "relative Nothingness." The relativity of this philosophical foundation is discussed briefly above, based on the opinions of Democritus, Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel. "Nothingness," in this context, due to its modality, has one foot in the realm of nonexistence, which is the literal meaning of the word "*Heech*" in Persian, and the other foot in the dominion of Being, which is the embodiment of the sculpture that we see. Among Tanavoli's works on the concept of "*Heech*," one stands out from the others. The juxtaposition of the "*Heech in a Cage*" (Fig.13) and *Heech in a Cage* " [27] as a double figure, are two separate sculptures which, in each other's proximity, proclaim a complete meaning. In one cage, the word "*Heech*" is situated in the cage in such a way that both the beginning letter "H" (fo trap a dna (H) the ending letter "Ch" (چ) are outside the cage and the rest of the body of the word is inside the cage. The other cage is empty, and the sculpted word "*Heech*" is altogether missing. The name of

this cage is also "*Heech in a Cage.*" The latter cage is enclosed on all sides, without openings, and should a figure of "*Heech*" exist, there would be no possibility for it to get out. Here "*Heech*" is not present objectively, It is complete "Nothingness," whose sole manifestation in the dominion of our world, the world of "Being," is its location. If the sculpture were not described in such fashion, it would only be an empty cage and nothing else. So, in essence, the "Nothingness" displayed in this work of art is a reflection complete "Nothingness," that is, the absolute "Nothingness." Heidegger posits that it is absolute "Nothingness" that is the source of all negation and relative nonexistence in our lives. In other words, he believes that "Nothingness" is not a by-product of negation; rather, it is negation that is derived from "Nothingness." This proposition creates a multitude of questions, which he himself propounds: where can one find "Nothingness" and nonexistence, and how? He points out that since "Nothingness" is the complete negation of the totality of beings, then our perception of "Nothingness" is correlated with our perception of this totality. We are, of course, incapable of perceiving this totality, but nevertheless we can nevertheless identify our position in the midst of his totality, His proclamation of *Dasein* (Being There) confirms this meaning. We are *Dasein* simply because we find ourselves in the midst of living creatures. *Dasein* is a key term in Heidegger's philosophy to define specifically the being of human. He believed that the human is the only being who thinks about an entity's "being" and this is the main element that distinguishes human from other entities. Questions such as "why am I?" or "why is there a world?" and so forth, arise only in the human mind. Therefore, although he/she, like all other entities, is present in the world, this questioning itself makes him/her *Dasein*. Heidegger referred to this as "boredom" (*Langeweile*) [28] this mood reveals the being in its totality. Revealing of totality from the Heidegger's point of view is the foundation of our *Dasein*'s story. He proclaimed that "Nothingness" confronts us at a specific stage of revealing. This specific revealing is nothing but "anxiety" (*Angst*) [29]. It is a condition under which one cannot comprehend or recognize the dominion of "being" in its totality, since the essence of this totality is so pure that it does not allow us to refer to this totality within a specific region and therefore one slips into the bottleneck of perplexity and astonishment. It is here that "Nothingness" reveals itself. In passing from the stage of anxiety when we inquire about its cause and/or instigator, our response is: "nothing." Heidegger pauses here and proclaims that this "nothing" is the same as 'Nothingness.' If we have rare moments of anxiety, it is because "we usually lose ourselves altogether among beings in a certain way and we turn toward beings in our preoccupations . . . and the more we turn away from the Nothing. Just as surely do we hasten into the public superficialities of existence" [30], Heidegger eventually concluded that the meaning of "Nothingness" is to dissuade and disengage us from it and lead us to the dominion of the being. This is the point of contention of this discussion. The "*Heech*" sculpture, whether in manifested or not manifested figure, reveals itself in its two distinct postures in the passage from "Nothingness" to "Being" and, vice versa, from "Being" to "Nothingness." Regardless of its various postures, either where the context of a word attests to an existence or where it remains humbly in its cage, or where the only visible part of it is the letter "H" (ه, "*Heech*") as if bent, observing us from a window of the world of beings, while, at the same time, its bust remains in its own world [31]. One ponders (as though in this posture it wants us to ask ourselves the fundamental question of metaphysics), "why are there beings rather than nothing?" It is not that it wants to establish its right, but, perhaps, and on the contrary, it strives to

dissuade our focus on this journey from absolute “Nothingness” to the absolute “Being.” In Heidegger’s words, at that stage this is the moment when “Nothingness” posits a metaphysical inquiry, “it will not remain in the context of an indeterminate, anti-existence entity. Instead, It will reveal itself in the context of a “Being” that it so deservingly belongs to” [32]. As Tanavoli has said: “In my mind it was not that life amounted to nothing, but rather nothing which brimmed with life itself” [33]. It seems that this revelation is the underlying mystery of the coexistence of “Being” and “Nothingness” that is ingrained in the “Heech” sculpture: a coexistence under which setting the order of precedence of one over the other is extremely doubtful.



Fig.12. Heech in a Cage, 2005, bronze, 118 x 60 x 50 cm, The British Museum, Parviz Tanavoli

Conclusion

A society with no art is a flat and spiritless one, and we are unfortunately, becoming distant from art. We didn’t live without art until 50 years ago. The daily life of Iranians was mixed with art. Beautiful hand woven carpets were under our feet, in our rooms, nice curtains were hanging over our doors and windows, tablecloths were beautifully woven and decorated with unique patterns. The bowls, dishes and pottery were hand-made, and everything was mixed with art. But today, industrial products are so quickly replacing the handmade ones that sometimes there is no sign of art. Even some of the carpets are no longer hand-woven. This isn’t a good sign and leads the society toward being artless.

Heech seen in Tanavoli recent works and the various shapes in sculptures. It can mean the empty spaces of sculpture in the history of Iran when there was no sculpture. It points to my interest in Iran’s mysticism and poetry. It draws attention to mortality expressing that nothing is immortal and to its shapes in the Persian language which signifies man and his figure. There is nothing in everything and there is everything in nothing. Nothing embraces a wide range of meanings. Artist Nina Cichocki, about Tanavoli’s sculptures of “Nothing”, says: “Tanavoli’s nothingness conveys spirituality and its origin was the theme of subduing, cherished in Persian Sufi poetry. Adherents to Sufism pursue proximity to God through subduing the self. In order to exist and be one with God, one has to subdue oneself, one’s individuality. Thus, nothingness has a very positive connotation, since it leads to the loftiest spiritual achievement possible. This positive aspect is emphasized in Mathnavi of the famous mystic poet Mawlavi.”

His key work is the calligraphic figure of Heech (Nothingness), a recurring theme in his sculptural repertory which contains reference to the human figure, evident both in the upright sculptural forms and their titles. He frequently used the word ‘Heech’ (i.e. nothing) as a sculpture in calligraphic form, using the word on a small scale for a ring and on a large scale for a sculpture in stainless steel (h. 3.35 m) on the campus

of Hamline University, St. Paul, MN, where he was visiting artists in 1971. This dilemma (that is, the inability to categorize “Heech” according to any set of specific artistic paradigms, in line with poignant critics of contemporary art) has caused an eventual compromise formed along two distinctive lines: one, Western avant guardism and the other, Eastern gnosticism. The former, harboring an emotional outlook on nihilisms, saw “Heech” as a kind of nostalgia in harmony with artistic anarchism. The second established “Heech” in connection to mysticism and Gnosticism. Hence, and in this context, “Heech” in the Persian language and calligraphy (nasta’liq), and in the form of a sculpture, carries a heavy conceptual burden, not only in dealing with philosophical intricacies, a synopsis of which was briefly addressed above, but also engaged in reductionistic critiques that are oriented merely from a specific perspective, such as either a psychological assessment of the sculptor, based solely on his personal life, and/or the effects of societal and political factors, or the appearance of his artworks, With the whole process of artistic production being interpreted in the context of one or the other of those perspectives.

References

- [1] Kameran Diba, “Iran,” in *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World*, ed. Widjan Ali (London: Scorpion Press, 1989), p. 153.
- [2] Tanavoli has written eloquently about his early career as an artist in his essay, “Atelier Kaboud,” in *Parviz Tanavoli: Sculptor, Writer, and Collector*, ed. David Galloway (Tehran: Iranian Art Publishing, 2000), pp. 53-113. Quotes by Tanavoli in this essay are from this article and from correspondence with the author.
- [3] Citations from Abby Grey’s diary are taken from her memoir. Abby Weed Grey, *The Picture is the Window, the Window is the Picture* (NY: New York University Press, 1983).
- [4] Between 1974 and 1975, the exhibition traveled as part of the Smithsonian Institution’s Traveling Exhibition Service to the Paine Art Center in Wisconsin, the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Grey Art Gallery at NYU.
- [5] Quotations from Tanavoli are from his autobiographical essay, “Atelier Kaboud,” in *Parviz Tanavoli, Sculptor, Writer, and Collector*, ed. Oaeid Galloway (Tehran: Iranian Art Publishing, 2000), pp. 53.112, and from correspondence and discussions with the author.
- [6] Catalogue of exhibition of P Tanavoli’s Sculptures, Iran-America Society, 1973.
- [7] Ibid.
- [8] Annemarie Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), p. 139.
- [9] Galloway, “Parviz Tanavoli and the Universal Particular,” in *Parviz Tanavoli: Sculptor, Writer, and Collector*, ed. Galloway, p. 16.[10] Mark Rothko, *The Artist’s Reality: Philosophies of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 22.
- [11] Bertrand Russell said: “This idea survived in a refined version as Newton’s theory of ‘absolute space,’ which met the logical requirements of attributing reality to not-being. Einstein’s theory of relativity provided a new answer to Parmenides and Zeno, with the insight that space by itself is relative and cannot be separated from time as part of a generally curved space-time manifold. Consequently, Newtons refinement is now considered superfluous.” Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London, 1972), p. 66.
- [12] WahI, *Traité de métaphysique*, p. 121. See also, Andrew Pyle, *Atomism and Its Critics: From Democritus to Newton* (Chicago, 1995).

[13] Plato, *Parmenides* trans. ML Gill and P. Ryan (Indianapolis, 1996), pp. 73-89.

[14] The forms (Ideas) are the ultimately real entities, not material objects. All material objects are copies or images of some collection of forms; their reality comes only from the forms.

[15] Wahl, *Traité de métaphysique*, p. 121. See also, Plato, *Sophist*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Charleston, S.C., 2008), where Plato discusses this propositional approach to Nothingness, p. 123. See also, David Ross, *Aristotle* (London, 1995).

[16] Wahl, *Traité de métaphysique*, pp. 124-125. See also, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Science of Logic* (*Wissenschaft der Logik* [Nuremberg, 1816]), trans. A.V. Miller, foreword by J.N. Findlay (London, 2004), pp. 531-541.

[17] In Hegel, "Objective Logic" (which is the main part of his *Science of Logic*), Hegel tries to show how it is possible to generate from very simple, so-called "immediate" determinations such as "Being," "Nothing," and "Becoming" other categories of quality and quantity as well as relational and modal determinations, such as "Cause- Effect," "Substance. Accident & "Existence," "Necessity," and the like. As in Hegel's "Subjective Logic," the basic strategy here for the creation of categories or determinations of the concept, assumes that (1) for every category there is an opposing one which upon closer analysis reveals itself to be its true meaning. and that (2) for every two categories opposing each other in this manner there is a third category whose meaning is determined by that which makes the opposing categories compatible.

[18] Hegel considers these two assumptions justified because only they can lead to what in his eyes is a complete and non-contingent system of categories. (From *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [London and New York, 1998], p. 3365.) For a penetrating interpretation of the aim and the structure of Hegelian dialectic, see John McTaggart and Elliott McTaggart, *Studies in the Hegelian Dialectic* (Cambridge, U.K., 2005). 16. Frederick Charles Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 7, *From Nietzsche to Nietzsche* (London, 1971), pp. 125-127.

[19] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom* (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 1882), trans. Thomas Common (New York, 1973), p. 43.

[20] The distinction between subject and Object makes possible the distinction between the knower and what is known. Starting with Descartes, the subject became the center, and the subject, as the first true being, achieved priority over all other beings. This is the Manichean Collection regarded as the philosophical core of modernism and is criticized by many thinkers, including Adorno, who has a comprehensive explanation of it. He

contends that knowing and its objects become deformed or distorted when reason is defined in terms radically independent of the objects to which it applies; whereas by objects" Adorno means not just objects known but, equally, the sensory images of those objects, the articulation of those images in language, the entanglement of natural languages in social practices and the complex histories of those practices. Each of these items could be regarded as a systematic source of error.

[21] Tanavoli, *Atelier Kaboud*, p. 96.

[22] Parviz Tanavoli: Sculptor, Writer & Collector, ed. Galloway, fig. 169 (Heech Tablet) on p. 195; see also, Parviz Tanavoli, *Jewelry* (Tehran, Bon-Gah, 2008), figs. 6-13 (Heech and Cage) on pp. 16, 17; fig. 85 (Heech Ring) on p. 49; fig. 130 (Heech and Cage medal) on p.80; and figs. 32-32a-32b (Heech and Grille medal) on p. 81.

[23] Tanavoli, *Jewelry*, fig. 131 (Heech and Hand) on p. 24.

[24] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 272-273.

[25] Arberry, A.J., *Immortal Rose: An Anthology of Persian Lyrics*, London: Luzac & Co. (1948).

[26] Morrison, Don, 'Iran's "first sculptor" back with unique works', *The Minneapolis Star* (1 April 1971), p.10B.

[27] Parviz Tanavoli: Sculptor, Writer & Collector, ed. Galloway, see fig. 153 on p. 178.

[28] "Profound boredom, drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog, removes all things and men and oneself along with it into a remarkable indifference. This boredom reveals being as a whole." *Ibid.* p. 90.

[29] "Anxiety is basically different from fear. We become afraid in the face of this or that particular being that threatens us in this or that particular respect. Fear in the face of something is also in each case a fear for something in particular. Because fear possesses this trait of being 'fear in the face of' and 'fear for,' he who fears and is afraid is captive to the mood in which he finds himself. Striving to rescue himself from this particular thing, he becomes unsure of everything else and completely 'loses his head.' Anxiety does not let such confusion arise. Anxiety in the face of (something) is always anxiety for [something], but not for this or that. The indeterminateness of that in the face of which and for which we become anxious is not mere lack of determination but rather the essential impossibility of determining it."

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 88.

[31] Parviz Tanavoli: Sculptor, Writer & Collector, ed. Galloway, see figs. 146 and 147 on p. 173.

[32] Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics", p. 82.

[33] Tanavoli, "Atelier Kaboud," p. 97.