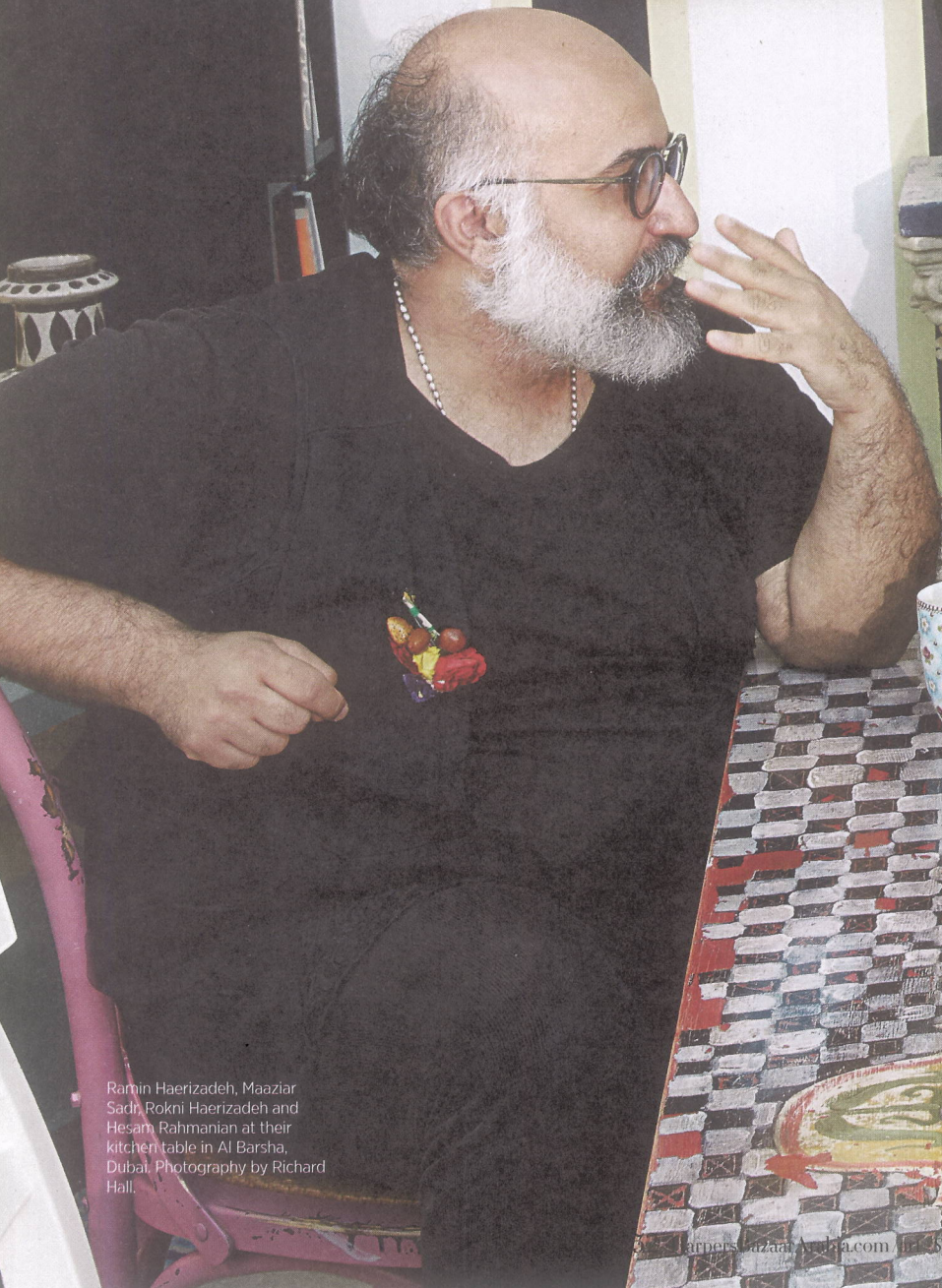


INVITATION TO THE SEA



Ramin Haerizadeh, Maaziar Sadr, Rokni Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmian at their kitchen table in Al Barsha, Dubai. Photography by Richard Hall.

*In the midst of colourful bowls of fruit, tea, coffee and wonderfully fantastical artwork, artists **Hesam Rahmanian, Rokni and Ramin Haerizadeh and Maaziar Sadr and Nazli Ghassemi**, two of their collaborators, gather around the artists' kitchen table at their home-cum-artist's studio in Al Barsha to discuss the collaborations and behind-the-scenes performances that have become a pivotal part of their on-going oeuvre*



ROKNI HAERIZADEH: Before 2009 when we came to Dubai we had an off loft space in Tehran. It was also our family house and we provided several rooms for artists and musicians who needed a temporary place of residence and work. We held film screenings there as well as other activities. It was like a community.

RAMIN HAERIZADEH: We held different discussions there. It was a meeting point for emerging artists and collectors.

HESAM: We held performances there, too. This was a collective space that functioned like an underground creative hub for artists, musicians, and writers that were not getting any support from outside. At some point every individual that was active in the space started to focus more on their own individual practices.

RAMIN: Everyone has the urge for recognition, exhibiting his or her individual work. We started to question what does a solo show mean. And began to question ourselves about what exhibitions meant. Suddenly, you have to bring your works out and display them in a white space. Those huge gallery spaces and you as an artist come and occupy and call it 'my space.' You know, there are so many facts behind what makes some objects happen.

HESAM: The work is created in such an environment that when you remove the piece from that environment it is like a mouth missing some of its teeth!

ROKNI: We started questioning how we as "artists" function in this artist community or the art world. What is the role of the "artist" and what is his or her responsibility?

RAMIN: Everyone works so when does that work become an artwork? We are questioning these things and our practice is about that.

ROKNI: We are not looking for that final result or that specific object. Sometimes we start the day painting the walls and putting objects in a new composition.

HESAM: There's a sense of collaboration in that; there's a sense of reading each other; there's a sense of living in that.

ROKNI: We are questioning the display of our artworks and how we can avoid the conventional types of display. We also question

"THERE'S NEVER BEEN A DULL MOMENT AT THIS AL BARSHA RESIDENCE-THEATRE-GALLERY-CREATIVE-THINK-TANK-SPACE"

Nazli Ghassemi

the art object in general and the artist. That's why we don't have any definition for who is the artist. We do so many collaborations with the pink shirt man outside.

HESAM: Edward (pink shirt man) and Rani, the husband and wife that live with us from Sri Lanka are our studio assistants and our friends. We did a movie with them and about them and we became very close friends. They opened their lives to us. [Edward] started telling us, for example, how when he was younger he was part of an organisation that sought to establish an independent state in Sri Lanka and what he went through.

He and Rani started telling us the history of Sri Lanka through their own viewpoint.

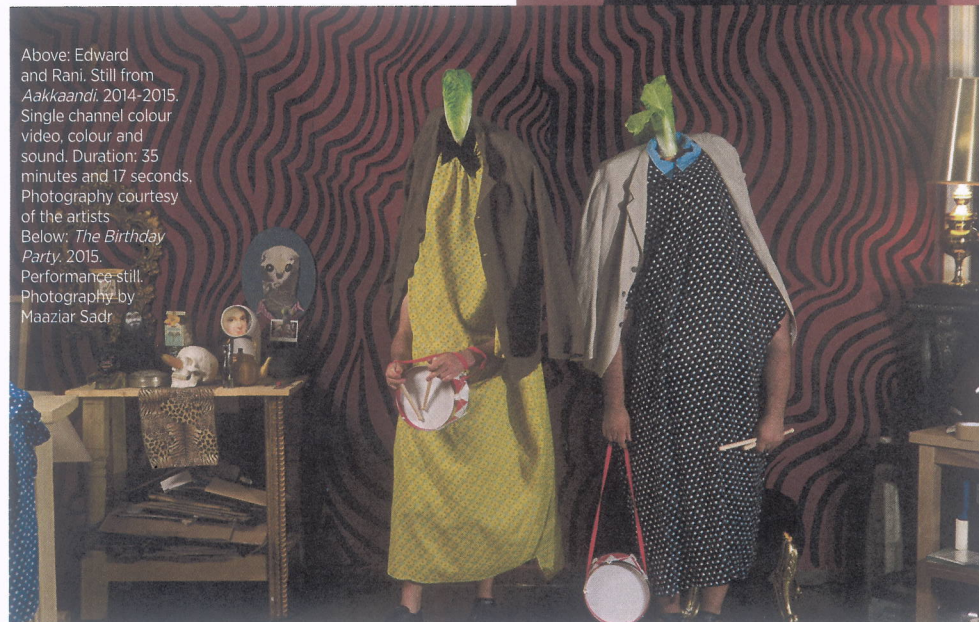
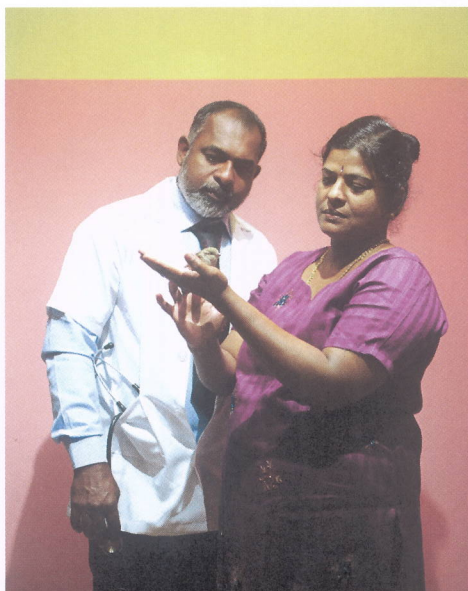
RAMIN: We started with research on Tamil exiled poetry and poets. We then set up the house and made a movie based on two of these poems: *The Aakkaandi Bird* by Shanmugam Sivalinam and *21 May 1986* by R. Cheran.

HESAM: Edward even did some of the filming and we chose the soundtrack together! This created a new understanding and a new friendship.

RAMIN: Whether we are collaborating or working individually we never work to a plan and always keep the path open for chances and possibilities. This has helped our collaborative practice with other people and friends who interrupt our process and channel our attention into unexpected territories.

NAZLI: There's never been a dull moment at this Al Barsha residence-theatre-gallery-creative-think-tank space. There is always a sense of alternative festivity here. Being in this space triggers your creative and colourful side—bringing the artist out in you. The creativity within every one person stepping through the door awakens and before you know it, you become a player and a collaborator in the on-going project, contributing to a fantastical scene. It's like living in a parallel world from the world outside.

MAAZIAR: I am involved by just being here. I see how the artists practice and how they see the world. It helps me to realise the artwork and by being part it—whether it be by being at the dinner table or sometimes as part of the actual artwork. I document the entire artistic process through my photographs. It is like a university. You see how art is continuous. And it is all based on improvisation here. Each piece is regulated to something. Everything is there for a reason. And there is also a lot of humour



Above: Edward and Rani. Still from *Aakkaandi*, 2014-2015. Single channel colour video, colour and sound. Duration: 35 minutes and 17 seconds. Photography courtesy of the artists
Below: *The Birthday Party*, 2015. Performance still. Photography by Maaziar Sadr

Nazli Ghassemi. Still from *Foolad*, 2014-2015. Single channel colour video, colour and sound. Duration: 19 minutes and 21 seconds. Photography courtesy of the artists



injected into how they work. Seeing artists work in this continuous way has really opened my eyes to the art world. In each discussion you learn something.

ROKNI: One thing we (the word WE always contains other people and friends) do in our collaborations is that we never erase the other's idea. We put one idea on top of the other and it accumulates and becomes something whether it works or fails.

RAMIN: We are looking for the moment when everything clicks and it will be something far beyond the differences and interest of each individual in that moment.

HESAM: That moment is the moment when things go together fluidly and organically. Every being has something to add, which makes us look at everything in a wider angle.

ROKNI: Sometimes during a collaboration Maaziar might come up with an idea and that idea will help finish the direction of a project. So it is important to practice that kind of freedom. This is why we don't call ourselves "a group." This is why we don't have a name. Because Maaziar can be part of our group, a guest can be part of our group, Edward and Rani, and so forth. Who is the artist?

NAZLI: Many times, my involvement as a collaborator has crossed over from just writing and translating for the projects, to performing and brainstorming on whatever is 'happening' at hand. The openness to improvisation and becoming part of a creative process has been an elevating, enriching learning experience for me. There is no right or wrong. Every person's idea, presence, and state acts as a welcome seed in this environment driving the affairs of that moment, day and project forward. And there is always humour underlying the participations even when serious subject matters are being addressed.

RAMIN: Warhol once said, "Everyone is going to have fifteen minutes of fame." And Joseph Beuys said, "Everyone is an artist." We are constantly referencing these phrases. It is important to define the role of an artist.

RAMIN: Another angle of our practice is to show the artworks by other artists that we collect and live with.

ROKNI: We become "creatures" that choose these artworks as their organs. We think of them as our self-portraits journey.

HESAM: An example of this was our ICA (Institute of Contemporary Art) show in Boston. It was based on Harold Pinter's 1957 play *The Birthday Party*. For it, we became these lettuce-headed creatures that started improvising to stage the work.

ROKNI: We also looked at the ICA's architecture and thought about the concepts of concealing and revealing. How the architecture of the building speaks the same. You are in an enclosed gallery and then you go out and see the sea. We transformed into these semi-blind lettuce-headed creatures that began to comprehend and live with them. That end result of the show is the relic of these creatures during that process.

HESAM: The creatures took over the gallery space that was dysfunctional during the summer and started contaminating the space, painting the floor and making sculptures with similar objects related to the text from Harold Pinter's *Birthday Party*.

RAMIN: All of our activities that go into creating our various exhibitions are documented mostly by Maaziar through his photographs.

NAZLI: Writing with Rokni about each exhibition throughout these past seven years has let me see how everything in the trios

immediate day-to-day surrounding—from world events and news to their daily rituals, their personal interactions with family, friends and every person, book and artwork that crosses their lives has found its way into their projects. Even the final exhibition on the opening day is part of the process that transforms the viewers into participants as they each take part in the exhibition space.

ROKNI: We do these activities everyday. They are part of our everyday life and living. The audience is arbitrary.

RAMIN: We started to collect based on instability, avoiding familiar narratives: exclusion, rejection, and triumph and that's how the lettuce-headed creatures chose other artists' works that are displayed in our exhibitions.

HESAM: The three of us have been living and working together for the past seven years now so we read each other's movements. We can see shadows of each other. We are beyond language.

MAAZIAR: I have seen it in action.

When the performance is over then they examine what they have done. They don't realise until after they take off their costumes what they have created. It is exhausting. They are full of sweat in the end. It's heavy, hard work.

HESAM: It is a daily activity.

MAAZIAR: Each ritual was 30 to 35 minutes. We would stop it and then do another session. It is a labour of love.

ROKNI: One of our strategies is to make those lines. To blur those boundaries and to define the space as a spectrum from artwork to trash, from man to woman you have that journey. Looking very high and very low. It all depends on our mind and how we comprehend things. A great work of art could go into exile if not comprehended.

MAAZIAR: When the audience sees the final work of these performances or collaborations they always want to come back. They are used to seeing white walls. This is new for them. And then the audience also becomes part of the artwork. There is a story behind all of it. You want to go back to learn more about the story. ■

INVITATION TO THE SEA

*The sea encircles this house
with its traces.
The child's clothes, unwashed,
hang on the line
smelling of the sea.*

*The sea remains with each of us,
like colours which cling
to an artist's unwashed palette:
sand hides away in a corner;
in place of everything we search for
tiny conch shells turn up,
rattling;
every time we reach in our pockets,
sand sticks to our fingers.*

*This house rocks among the waves
like a boat at anchor.*

-Marathi Maitri (Tamil Exiled poet)