

“THE CLARITY OF MEANING”: CONTEMPORARY IRANIAN ART
AND THE COSMOPOLITAN ETHICS OF READING IN ART HISTORY

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2017

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ABSTRACT

“The Clarity of Meaning”: Contemporary Iranian Art and the Cosmopolitan Ethics of Reading in Art History

Foad Torshizi

This dissertation traces the substantial expansion of Western interest in contemporary Iranian art over the past two decades. In reading Iranian artifacts, it argues that Western disciplinary frames, most specifically art history and criticism, circumscribe the heterogeneity of Iranian contemporary art. Submitted to Western frames of legibility, the multivalent aesthetic properties of contemporary Iranian art is reduced to readily consumable social, political, and ethical messages. Burdened by the need to speak for Iranian society as a whole, the diverse aesthetic economies of Iranian artifacts are curtailed and reconfigured so that they align with Euro-American understandings of meaning, value, aspiration, and desire.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Without the patient mentoring and unwavering support of my academic advisor, Hamid Dabashi, writing this dissertation would have not been possible. His generosity, kindness, compassion, and humor brought a delightful lightness to even the most difficult days of graduate school. His steadfast commitment to the idea of a truly cosmopolitan world, untarnished by subjugation, exploitation, and human suffering, is a source of inspiration I will not cease to relish. I am profoundly grateful to him for his constant support and for giving me a great example.

Since the very first days I arrived at Columbia, I was privileged to have my life enriched by the presence and mentorship of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak—I was and continue to be her student. For five consecutive years, I had the rare opportunity to be her teaching assistant. No other experience has had such a formative role in my intellectual life. She taught me that reading is an act of love, an ethical obligation toward the other. This is a lesson I hope I will never stop learning. My debt to her in what follows is obvious. To her I am forever grateful, beyond what I can express with words.

I am endlessly thankful to the members of my doctoral committee: Sudipta Kaviraj, Alexander Alberro, and Joaquín Barriandos. Sudipta Kaviraj shaped my conception of what it means to write history. He spent much time refining my understanding of a host of historians I had the privilege of reading with him. From Vico and Herder to Thompson and Hobsbawm, to

Koselleck and de Certeau, any writing on history, for me, bears a trace of his infinite wisdom. Alex Alberro dedicated many hours to discussing my arguments and critiquing my work. His insightful feedback helped me reimagine my writing in ways I never previously considered. Joaquín Barriendos provided me with challenging and thought-provoking comments that allowed me to understand my own subject within the larger networks of the global circulation of contemporary art.

In writing this dissertation, I have incurred debts to many mentors, colleagues, and friends, who aided me in ways intellectual and material. I am grateful to their generosity, intellectual support, and enduring company. At every stage of writing, my friend Glyn Salton-Cox was my first reader. He has read every line of this dissertation and with an extravagant generosity has discussed every argument with me. All faults that remain, no doubt, are mine. His support was a gift I will never be able to return and I owe him a special debt of gratitude. A special thanks to Navid Naderi for also being involved with some of the major arguments of this dissertation.

Many past and present mentors were central to shaping the ways I think about contemporary non-Western art: I am eternally grateful to Catherine and Frederick Asher, Timothy Brennan, Allison Busch, Jane Blocker, Hamid Severi, and Robert Silberman. I am also grateful to friends at Columbia with whom I had enriching dialogues and from whom I have learned much; to Nasser Abourahme, Sonam Singh, and Matthew Trumbo-Tual, for their challenging wit and valuable feedback on my chapter drafts; to my generous friends whose company and conversation contributed to this project in one way or another: Amir Ahmadi Arian, Anna Chisholm, Matan Cohen, Matthew Goldman, Roni Henig, Farbod Honarpisheh, Selim Karlitekin, Bradley

Coleman Johnson, Yitzhak Lewis, Venugopal Maddipati, Casey Primel, Nazanin Sadr-Azodi, Paymān Samadi, Kenan Tekin, Sahar Ullah, Pieter Vanhove, Vivek Yadav, Emily Yao, Octavio Zaya, Hengameh Ziai, and Uros Zver.

Quite appropriately, much of this dissertation was written in Tehran. I am grateful to all those friends whose guidance and opinions I sought: to Shervin Taheri and Ali Golestaneh, who discussed with me the arguments of the final chapter; to Alireza Ahmadi Saie, Vahid Amini, Helia Darabi, Yasaman Ehsani, Azar Mahmoudian, Mahan Moallemi, Rama Mousavi, Paymān Nabavi, and Jahangir Ramezani Namin, who generously provided me with intellectual, moral, and research support; and a special thanks to Nazanin Izad, for her endless wisdom, infinite personal warmth, and the clam and sanity she presents to everyone who is fortunate enough to be around her, including myself.

In addition, I am indebted to the artists whose works I discuss in this dissertation. To Homayoun Askari Sirizi, Babak Golkar, Shahab Fotouhi, Barbad Golshiri, Ghazaleh Hedayat, Javad Modarresi, and Mehran Mohajer. They generously shared with me their works and ideas, and productively challenged mine. Rosita Sharafjahan and Mohsen Nabizadeh at Azad Art Gallery in Tehran were truly generous with their time and support. I am grateful to them.

I have had the opportunity to discuss my work in different settings at Columbia, including the two consecutive Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies Department Dissertation Colloquia led by Sheldon Pollock and Timothy Mitchell. I received valuable feedback on my chapter drafts in both. A number of individuals and institutions have contributed to this dis-

sertation. I am thankful to all of them: to Dean Carlos Alonso and Associate Dean Andrea Solomon at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences; to Jessica Rechtschaffer and Michael Fishman at the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies; to Catherine LaSota, Sarah Monks, and Kelly Lemons at Columbia's Institute for Comparative Literature and Society; to Kitty Chibnik, the Associate Director of Avery Library, and her staff, especially Abebe Tessema; to Jason Ueda and the staff at the Writing Center; to Mark Phillipson, Director of Graduate Student Programs and Services, and his staff at the Center for Teaching and Learning. During my last year at Columbia I had the privilege of teaching Contemporary Civilization at the Center for the Core Curriculum. This was one of the most memorable and constructive experiences in my entire tenure as a doctoral student. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Roosevelt Montás, the Director of the Center for the Core Curriculum, Patricia Kitcher, the Carnoy Family Program Chair for Contemporary Civilization, from whom I learned immensely, Toni Gunthrope-Hardee, the Associate Director of the Center, and Christine Butcher.

If it wasn't for the intellectual, moral, and material support of my family in the United States and Iran, I would have not been able to complete my research. I am immensely indebted to my uncle, Nader Uskowi, who has been a constant mentor to me. With an inexhaustible patience, he and his wife, Parvaneh Tahmasebi, supported my entire journey throughout graduate school. Mamani, Khaleh Yassi, and my two cousins Omid Uskowi and Mohammad Reza Salimizadeh were the first to run to my rescue when I needed them. Their love and support deeply moves me.

My father's fierce independence of thought and his commitment to social justice remain the greatest lesson I have ever received and an ideal to which I continue to aspire, however inadequately. All I can do is to try to be a bit more like him every day. My mother is the reason I pursued art history. Her love for life, art, and poetry has been the strongest force in shaping my passion for arts and literature. To my family I owe everything: my father, Alireza, my mother, Nasrin, and my sister and brother, Ramona and Sina, for their unlimited support, encouragement, and excellent humor.

This dissertation is dedicated to them.

And to my wife, Golrokh Mohtajolfazl. Every page of this dissertation also tells the story of her patience, sacrifice, and love. That story will invisibly remain on each page, in each line, only for her and I to see. No written sentence can ever faithfully reveal my debt to her.

از همه عالم نهان و بر همه پیدا



با عشق و فروتنی:

برای پدر، نسرين، رامونا، و سينا.
از شما خواندن را آموختم.
با شما هر لحظه شعری خوانده‌ام، از نو.

و

برای گلرخ.
که هر روز شعر و هوایی تازه است،
و «عادی‌ترین موسمی که می‌باید به چار موسم افزود.»



آه، چرا می‌باید
من تو را شگفت بدانم
در این جریان
که از شگفت بودن همه چیزی
عادی می‌نماید؟
وگرنه تو عادی‌ترین موسمی
که می‌باید به چار موسم افزود.
و چشمان تو،
راحت‌ترین روزی که می‌توان برای زیستن تصمیم گرفت.

— بیژن الهی
آزادی و تو، ۱۳۴۵

PREFACE

There is a 47-minute long lecture delivered by Gilles Deleuze, recorded in 1987, in which the philosopher looks at his audience over his glasses and in a clear tone and slow pace asks “Quel est le rapport de l’œuvre d’art avec la communication?” This question, then, is immediately followed by his own, rather emphatic, response: “Aucun. Aucun.”¹ He then continues,

L’œuvre d’art n’est pas un instrument de communication. L’œuvre d’art n’a rien à faire avec la communication. L’œuvre d’art ne contient strictement pas la moindre information. En revanche, en revanche il y a une affinité fondamentale entre l’œuvre d’art et l’acte de résistance. Alors là, oui. Elle a quelque chose à faire avec l’information et la communication, oui, à titre d’acte de résistance.²

For Deleuze—as he has also argued elsewhere with Felix Guattari—the work of art, in its very capacity to “assemble a new type of reality,” detaches itself from “the task of representing a world.”³ This new type of reality or, better yet, the possibility of imagining new worlds is what I have sought in the works of contemporary Iranian artists and chronicled in this dissertation.

¹ “What relationship is there between the work of art and communication? None. None.”

² “A work of art is not an instrument of communication. A work of art has nothing to do with communication. A work of art does not contain the least bit of information. In contrast, there is a fundamental affinity between a work of art and an act of resistance. It has something to do with information and communication as an act of resistance.”

Gilles Deleuze, “What is the Creative Act?” in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975-1995*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 322.

³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 296.

During a decade-long engagement with the scene of contemporary art in Iran, I have witnessed the increasing association of art with information—a move in the direction in which art is evaluated on the basis of its ability to communicate “facts” about the *terrae incognitae* of the exotic geographies at the margins of Europe. During the heyday of postcolonial discourses in the 1980s and 1990s, art history extended its boundaries to include artists from the non-West. Yet today, art and cultural criticism, as Anthony Gardner argues, have not been immune from regression. “Under the guise of the global,” he writes, “we are witnessing a resurgent focus on North Atlantic relations that—in art as in politics or even militarily—appears little changed from forty years ago.” This unchallenged reoccupation of the center by the West has resulted in a “consignment of the postcolonial to ever-increasing inconsequence.” With this shift, the “asymmetries of power between centers and peripheries,” Gardner adds, “have certainly not dissolved, but attained greater reflexivity, become more flexible and more slippery.”⁴

On the other hand, art history’s intellectual allegiance to narratives of art that are based on the concept of representation has made claims to new types of reality almost impossible. This is especially the case for non-Western artists, whose imaginative and aesthetic spaces are colonized by demands of the evidentiary. The exponentially growing attention given to Iranian artists who “represent” the secrets of the inaccessible “interior/inside” to the Western world, especially when translated into a language that indulges art history’s monolingualism, demonstrates that in the world of global art a critical commitment to the alterity of the non-West is no longer

⁴ Anthony Gardner, “Whither the Postcolonial?” in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, eds. Hans Belting, Jakob Birken, and Andrea Buddensieg (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011): 142-143.

considered a priority for the discipline. In this intellectual climate, the non-West becomes an additive element in the predominantly Western narratives of art history only when it “can be explicated with reference to tendencies already valorized within Euro-American practice.”⁵

We are left with interpretive systems predicated on a desire either to assimilate the singularities of foreign artworks into the homogeneous space of exotic alterity, or to transform what is *unknown* into evidentiary documents for “discourses of sobriety,” which presume a “direct, immediate, transparent”⁶ relation to the real. As such, the space of the figural⁷ and the imaginative is colonized by the consolidated claims to reality and the aesthetic becomes, almost ontologically, the *evidentiary*. As Donald Preziosi reminds us not only the artwork is construed as a reflection of its origin, but also the discipline “has been organized, throughout its century and a half of academic professionalization, to respond to the *question* of what it is that works of art might be evidence of and for.”⁸ This innate trait of art history becomes more intensely operative

⁵ In a critical response to the instrumentalization of contemporary Asian art in *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, written by a group of renowned scholars associated with the journal *October*, David Clarke writes that the “ostensibly progressive textbook of twentieth-century art” continues to reinforce “western-centeredness.” Cf. David Clarke, “Contemporary Asian Art and the West,” in *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, ed. Jonathan Harris (Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 249.

⁶ Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 69.

⁷ I have discussed the term *figural* mostly in chapter 4. Following Lyotard’s theorization of the concept, the figural becomes central to my writing in its ability to disrupt and destabilize the clarity and transparency of meaning.

⁸ Donald Preziosi, “The Question of Art History,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (Winter, 1992), 374.

when the birthplace of the object which it sets out to interpret is located outside of the borders of what is “meaningful,” namely Europe.⁹

In reading Iranian artifacts, then, I argue that Western disciplinary frames, whether art history¹⁰ or art criticism,¹¹ the latter deriving its theoretical foundations from the former, circumscribe the heterogeneity of Iranian contemporary art. Submitted to Western frames of intelligibility, the multivalent aesthetic properties of contemporary Iranian art is reduced to readily consumable social, political, and ethical messages. But these reductive readings of contemporary Iranian art as evidentiary *documents* of the realities of modern day Iran have material consequences on the production scene. Burdened by the need to speak for Iranian society as a

⁹ There are two modes of otherness at play here: first, for art history, as a verbal discourse, all that is visual remains *other* insofar as it is not turned to the familiar by way of being placed “under the tyranny of the *visible*,” to borrow Georges Didi-Huberman’s remarkable articulation. The second one is that of ethnic, racial, and even at times, religious (the non-Christian) otherness. It is this second mode of otherness that in the case of contemporary non-Western art augments art history’s inborn proclivity toward reducing the unfamiliar to that which is readily legible. Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ In its orientation toward “aesthetic value,” I am cognizant that art criticism does not follow Art History’s attention to the historical function and value of the art artwork. Yet, what I mean here by espousing the idea that art criticism borrows its theoretical foundations from art history is that Art History as an academic discipline that defined art as an element which finds significance only within an historical frame, establishes “a frame of references and terms within which art’s value, meaning, and legitimacy [is] actively negotiated.” Cf. Anna Brzyski, “Making Art in the Age of Art History, or How to Become a Canonical Artist,” in *Partisan Canons*, ed. Anna Brzyski (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 248. Also, for a discussion of how Art History establishes a frame of reference for art practice and criticism cf. Hans Belting, “The Meaning of Art History in Today’s Culture” in *Art History after Modernism*, trans. Caroline Saltzweid, Mitch Cohen, and Kenneth Northcott (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 7-16.

¹¹ Given the erosion of borders between contemporary art criticism and contemporary art history, I use “art history” to refer to a complex network of academic Art History (the discipline) and its allied fields, including art criticism, philosophy of art, curatorial studies and practice, and institutions of display and circulation.

whole, the diverse aesthetic economies of Iranian artifacts are curtailed and reconfigured so that they align with Euro-American understandings of meaning, value, aspiration, and desire. The global dominance of the West as the authoritative translator, the mediator of the global art scene, and the faraway gatekeeper of meaning has also had significant material effects on the shaping of frames of legibility through which contemporary Iranian critics and art historians view, theorize, and chronicle contemporary Iranian art. As I discuss in this dissertation, the specter of the West as the ultimate spectator has not only reshaped art practice in Iran, in ways that make art objects more and more adapting and accommodating of Western frames of legibility, but has also formed the ways through which these objects are received and valued by their local audience.

This means that the work of contemporary Iranian artists finds its meaning in a context in which the frames of legibility are dictated by the West. Consequently, these artists will be able to garner international attention so long as their work is infused with accessible evidentiary information about their geography of origin. As a result, there is little space for imagination left, little room for what Deleuze calls “a creative act,” without being already bound by the mantra: Inform—and do so with *our* lexicon—or sink into oblivion! This instrumentalization of art as a vehicle for socio-political and ethical statements is what reduces the figural qualities of an artwork into ideology. Here I am not trying to disentangle aesthetics from politics in a regressive gesture toward Western formalism. To assume that politics and aesthetics are separable is an error grounded in the seductive naïveté of *pure* art. Yet, there is certainly a danger in collapsing

aesthetics into politics, mostly by subjugating the former to the latter.¹² In such a collapse, works of art lose their power to “evoke, suggest, and connote rather than transmit meaning.”¹³ The ramification of such clear transference of meaning is at least twofold: On the one hand it fortifies the popular misconception that the visual arts are able to transcend cultural borders and speak a universal language, removing the burden to understand the cultural habitat of an artwork on behalf of the First World audience;¹⁴ on the other hand, it renders art as a repository of valuable information about the other, waiting to be unearthed.

I would like to state, most emphatically, that I do not intend to undermine readings of art that seek meaning, but rather to question the validity of what Adorno has critiqued as “the clarity of meaning.” Despite my efforts to demonstrate the detrimental nature of definitive readings of contemporary Iranian art, more often than not in light of geopolitics, I do not believe that the only way to argue for aesthetics in face of reductive sociopolitical interpretations is bound to a withdrawal “from the duty of representation,”¹⁵ as Rancière argues. More importantly, I do not advocate for any position against meaning or interpretation in a “veering

¹² In a conversation with W.J.T. Mitchell, the late Edward Said responds to the question of how to negotiate the relation between aesthetics and politics while respecting the “formal autonomy of the arts” by saying that “I don’t think there’s any method or secret. There isn’t any clue or pattern to it, except the basic one, which is that a great work of art is not an ideological statement, pure and simple.” Cf. W.J.T. Mitchell, “The Panic of the Visual: A Conversation with Edward W. Said,” in *Edward Said and the Work of the Critic: Speaking Truth to Power*, ed. Paul A. Bové (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 48.

¹³ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 50.

¹⁴ I am borrowing the conception of images as organisms residing in their habitats from W.J.T. Mitchell. Cf. W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

toward an ontology of sensation.”¹⁶ It is not the desire for meaning or an attempt toward interpretation that has consistently contributed to the reduction of art. But it is a desire to “finish once and for all, or to be done with definitively,” itself a “legacy of the Western logos,”¹⁷ that promises to arrive at a clear meaning and leave nothing unilluminated. As Adorno has insightfully put it, the darkness of great artworks needs to be interpreted and not simply brought into the light of clarity: “This darkness must be interpreted, not replaced by the clarity of meaning.”¹⁸

In the current climate of global contemporary art, in which contemporary non-Western art is subject to reductive interpretations so that it fits seamlessly within Western frames of legibility and intelligibility, David Clarke calls for an “emphasis on the local” in order to “counteract the deracination of contemporary [non-Western] art in transnational spaces of exhibition.”¹⁹ In Clarke’s writing, the theoretical purchase of the *local* is in its ability to offer “a relatively distinct context within which the forces of globalization are mediated and even in some respects resisted.”²⁰ I agree with Clarke’s conclusion regarding the significance of the local in pushing back against the cultural onslaught of the global market. I want to add, however, that

¹⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 13.

¹⁶ Timothy Brennan, *Borrowed Light: Vico, Hegel, and the Colonies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 222.

¹⁷ Avital Ronell, *Finitude’s Score: Essays for the End of the Millennium* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), xiv.

¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 1997), 27.

¹⁹ Clarke, “Contemporary Asian Art and the West,” 247.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 248.

for a more effective resistance against the epistemic violence of the hegemonic discourses of readership and in order to de-center Europe, we need a notion of locality that is not limited to the context of the reception of the artwork, but rather one that allows for artists to imagine a worldliness independent of the West. This, I think is only possible by way of a *locatedness* with deep roots in one's literary, artistic, and mythical traditions, both historical and contemporary. It is for this reason that I focus here on the *local*, not as an *alternative* to the global which is already colonized by the West, not as the local identity, feeding into fallacies of multiculturalism and cultural tolerance, but as the *located*—that which is no longer dependent on the West for aesthetic validation. In the chapters that follow, I explore how the imagination of a world deeply located in and informed by a self-conscious sense of worldliness was formed in the critical commitment of contemporary Iranian artists to the vernacular amidst globalizing forces that tend to augment the monolingualism of the West.

In the first chapter of my dissertation, I investigate Iranian contemporary art's precipitous entrance, in the early 2000s, into the global market, focusing both on the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art's complicity with the desires of the market and on the consequences of the exponential privatization of cultural institutions in Iran. This chapter traces the processes of globalization and biennialization of contemporary art and the rising interest of itinerant curators and global institutions in contemporary Iranian artifacts as markers of cultural difference and testaments to the multicultural values of Western societies. I argue that the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art adapted and camouflaged the desires and aspirations of the cultural and financial global art markets as organic Iranian developments.

Investigating the works of five Iranian artists in the second chapter, I discuss rare, yet powerful, moments of resistance against the global art world's unfaltering proclivity for marketing ethnicity and difference. This chapter showcases the ways through which a critical reading attentive to what Mieke Bal and Miguel Hernández-Navarro dub "little acts of resistance" in the works of art is able to bring to the forefront imaginative forces that resist the marginalization and reification of non-Western art. My reading of these artists underscores their systematic efforts to unsettle the status quo of the global art world, where the market's share in determining art's value and meaning is increasingly usurping critical meditations.

The third chapter of my dissertation examines an array of mistranslations vis-à-vis the production and interpretation of contemporary art in Iran. I argue that the translation into Persian of the reductive readings of contemporary Iranian art, put forward by Western institutions, had a considerable effect on the local discourses of art criticism, which tended to draw on their Western counterparts as sources of intellectual legitimacy. This helped sustain the specter of the West as the ultimate interlocutor in the discourses of art history and criticism in Iran. The chapter also investigates the formative role played by the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art in establishing the grammar of "conceptual" art as the primary mode of art production, which in turn prioritized the legibility of the work of art and the clarity of its meaning over its formal properties, aesthetic imagination, and visual creativity.

The final chapter reimagines the possibilities opened up by debates in post-colonialism and cosmopolitan ethics for challenging the identitarian presumptions of metropolitan art criticism. In this chapter I examine the works of two contemporary artists, who in their noncompliance

with the “global” grammar of contemporary art and in their reinvention of the narrative spaces offered in the literary and the visual tradition of their own world, are able to transcend their *located* visual lexicon into a self-reliant worldliness, a “self-conscious universalism,”²¹ liberated from desire for the West’s approval. This *locatedness*, then, I argue is exceptionally valuable in that it reveals possibilities of imagining the world in which these artists are not destined to permanently occupy the position of the *locally other*. By way of conclusion, this chapter reorients the focus of the reception of Iranian art in the West toward accentuating moments of epistemic resistance in those cultural products that do not easily lend themselves to universal narratives. It also argues for the mobilization of postcolonial concepts of South-South Translation and the Global South, as strategies for breaking with the conventional itinerary of global art display according to which Western institutions, biennials, and museums are considered ultimate destinations and the Western public is the ultimate spectator for contemporary Iranian artists.

Despite writing this dissertation in an American institution and for an English-speaking audience, I have tried to write from a self-conscious worldliness which does not borrow its validation from the West. Whereas most of the artists whose works I have studied here have widely exhibited internationally at “world renowned” institutions, I was not motivated by their international success in choosing the works I discuss—a case in point, is Javad Modarresi, who has hardly ever shown outside of Iran. Neither was I dissuaded from critiquing a work due to its popularity with globally celebrated art institutions. At any rate, in my attempts to write from

²¹ Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 324-325.

the position of self-conscious worldliness of contemporary Iranian art, I have tried to steer away from perspectives informed by identitarian politics that ultimately verge on nativism.

The dearth of secondary material in English on contemporary Iranian art is not mitigated by a profusion of primary material: there are only two journals published in Tehran that go beyond exhibition reviews and try to engage critically with the art scene: *حرفه: هنرمند* (*Herfeh: Honarmand*) and *گلستانه* (*Golestaneh*). I have quoted rather extensively from the former. When, to my knowledge, there has been a primary source available I have made sure to include it in my arguments or at least refer to it in footnotes. All translations from Persian and French are mine unless otherwise noted. My argument for challenging the monolingualism of the West would not bear any meaning had I translated all titles of the artworks, articles, and books into English. For the reader who is not familiar with Persian, I have provided an English translation in footnotes. Once the title is repeated I have either kept only the Persian or given a translation of it, when available, in parentheses. I have also not transliterated any Persian name based on the universal standard put in place by the U.S. Library of Congress.

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GLOBAL EXPANSIONS AND LOCAL CLAUSTROPHOBIA
CONTEMPORARY IRANIAN ART
AND THE GLOBALIZED ARTWORLD

Dear editor,

[...] Just like the NY Times article about *Curriculum Mortis* (by Holland Cotter, September 19, 2013), Mr. Vick has reduced nearly a hundred graves to “graves of people opposing the Iranian regime.” Why one would care to see this and this only? The exhibition had numerous works about those killed by Shah’s regime, Nazis in Warsaw and many others who had nothing to do with the Islamic Republic: Jan van Eyck, Georges Wolinski and Samuel Beckett for instance or an anchor cemetery in Portugal, Cimitero Monumentale in Milan, Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. [...] And a whole room was dedicated to a sarcophagus I had made for Chohreh Feyzdjou, an Iranian artist who worked and died in Paris. I could go on with the list of what was there to see, yet I believe many cannot imagine that an Iranian artist can or should work about such people or places. By doing this, Mr. Vick has misinformed your audience, deformed the reality of my work and above all, endangered Aaran Gallery and me. When asking “Is Iran finally ready for change?” will one care to look for a change in one’s view on Iran or should one merely choose to see what one is accustomed to see?¹

¹ Barbad Golshiri, “Rebuttal Letter to Time Magazine,” *Gallery Info* (website), entry posted November 10, 2015, <http://galleryinfo.ir/news.aspx?id=179> (accessed: January 4, 2016).

The above paragraph is an excerpt from a letter written by Barbad Golshiri, addressed to the editor of the *Time* magazine. Golshiri, a young, prolific Iranian artist and critic, denounces the reductive reading of the journal's reporter, Karl Vick, who had written a few lines about his 2015 show in Tehran, *سيرة الموت* (*Curriculum Mortis*), in a November 2015 issue cover-story entitled "Is Iran Finally Ready for Change? What the Country Will Look Like in 2025?"²

Calling for a change in "one's view on Iran," Golshiri orients his objection toward the precritical assumptions that inundate Western discourses on contemporary Iranian Art. Whereas Vick decides to dismiss a number of works in Golshiri's exhibition to only focus on "a collection of photos and actual headstones that includes graves of people killed for opposing the Iranian regime,"³ for Cotter, Golshiri's work on Western figures central to Art History and the artists' past works⁴ only merits a psychologized statement: "The show [...] includes tributes to Western artists and writers (Jan van Eck [sic], Samuel Beckett) Mr. Golshiri holds dear..."⁵ But the inadequate and precritical attention Cotter gives to Golshiri in his review, or the selective approach of Vick to his works, are only important insofar as they point toward a larger problem. The reception of contemporary Iranian art in Western institutions relies heavily on

² Karl Vick, "Is Iran finally ready for change?" *Time* (November 16, 2015), 34-41.

³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴ Golshiri takes Samuel Beckett's *Ohio Impromptu* as a model on which he creates his 5-minute black and white video, *Middle East Impromptu* (2007). It seems that Cotter is alluding to this video here.

⁵ Holland Cotter, "Barbad Golshiri: 'Curriculum Mortis'," *New York Times* (September 20, 2013).

a presumption that along with the ability of the image to travel easily, animated by global circuits of cultural exchange, there exists an itinerant legible culture affixed to the image that does not require much knowledge to decode. As such, more than anything else, the appeal of images from Iran lies in their presumed ability to stand for much more than they want to be and offer a concretized knowledge of the locality they are called upon to represent; a locality that its imposed isolation from the Western world by international sanctions and UN-led ostracization in the past two decades has rendered less and less accessible. This situation results in an extraordinary burden on artworks produced in contemporary Iran to not only make legibility in the West a priority, but also to act as open windows to the Iranian society.

As I discuss in the following chapter, *سيرة الموت* (*Curriculum Mortis*) is a complex account of death, representation, and the politics of memory and forgetting. What is presented in the confines of the white cube is not the entire account; a large number of the tombstones are never shown and only installed on graves where they belong. What is exhibited, however, is not merely a series of monuments to commemorate those died by the hands of the “Iranian regime.” It is an attempt to tease out what spaces of art share with cemeteries as sites of accumulation of historical knowledge. It explores their desire to “enclose all times and epochs in one immobile space”⁶ and by questioning the very possibilities of representation of death, it

⁶ Barbad Golshiri, “Curriculum Mortis,” in *Barbad Golshiri: Curriculum Mortis* (Tehran: Aaran Projects, 2015), 49. Exhibition catalog.

also challenges functions of representation and its capacity for the preservation of the memories of the deceased. A number of Golshiri's works deal with the question of blindness and sight; a question central to art history and repeated in his oeuvre [figure 1-1].

Out of the aesthetically and philosophically intricate *سيرة الموت* (*Curriculum Mortis*), only those objects stand out to the curators of Los Angeles County Museum of Art⁷, Holland Cotter, or Karl Vick that are able to give credence to those imaginary stereotypes of Iran with which they are already acquainted. That the blindness toward Golshiri's multivalent works is shared among these learned writers and curators, is emblematic of a more serious problem. Reductive readings with very little interest in going beyond a clear message about the post-revolutionary Iranian society and politics in the works of artists is a common trend in Western art criticism to which contemporary Iranian artists have been indiscriminately subjected; similarly, the works of those artists with the intention to produce clear messages have rarely been read against the grains or scrutinized as objects of art deserving to be also read in their own rights. Selective and reductive interpretations of Golshiri's work is not an exception. Whereas in the past two decades, propelled by the Euro-American art market's appetite for the traffic in "cultural difference," Iranian contemporary art has dramatically increased production and gained an international profile, it is quite difficult to find among Western art criticism accounts that

⁷ The Los Angeles County Museum of Art's official description on a purchased piece from the *Curriculum Mortis* sculptural grave markers shows no more commitment to a nuanced reading of Golshiri's project than the mainstream media. In a letter to LACMA, Golshiri objects the curator's decision to omit some of his cenotaphs in order to fit his entire series within a reductive narrative that renders his work a protest against the Iranian state. I have discussed this correspondence in more detail in the second chapter. Barbad Golshiri, "Iran Discourses," letter to LACMA's curator of Islamic Art, e-mail message to author, July 23, 2015.

have not continuously suppressed the heterogeneity of Iranian contemporary art in favor of readily consumable social, political, and ethical messages.

This chapter unfolds the effects of the relatively recent curatorial interest of Western art institutions in contemporary Iranian art enabled by the globalization of circuits of cultural exchange. I argue that the deeply entrenched Western, and to certain extents imperial, characteristics and structures of what we have come to know as global art has reinforced the global/local dichotomy and coaxed Iranian artists into representing their locality in their artworks heaved to the international scene. This chapter broadly delineates some of the major issues contemporary Iranian artists have been dealing with in the past twenty-five years and continue to deal with today; marginalization, exoticization, localization, and commodification of their works. It also tracks how the globalized art market has promoted only certain subjects and styles from the Iranian art scene that encourage a particular vision of contemporary Iran. These works include: artworks displaying visual elements of ethnic, religious, and national traditions; those representing the plight of the Iranian women; those offering a critical stance against the current political situation in Iran; and specific decorative abstractions accompanied by either Persian calligraphy or motifs borrowed from Islamic architecture. I contend that the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA) has played a significant role in consolidating these trends by way of first, reinforcing representations of the so-called national identity; and second, by establishing and systematically fostering a conception of contemporary global art practice that was defined by Western markets. This chapter also offers detailed readings of publications on a number of significant exhibitions, primarily outside of Iran, as essential

sources for tracing the formation of the discursive frames of interpretation of contemporary Iranian art.

GLOBAL EXPANSIONS

Iran's very first institutionally supported aspirations for an active participation in the global art scene dates back to the Festival of Arts, Shiraz-Persepolis (جشن هنر شیراز) in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when numerous Iranian artists presented their works in music, dance, poetry, drama, and film alongside internationally renowned figures such as Peter Brook, Joseph Chaikin, Yehudi Menuhin, John Cage, and Karlheinz Stockhausen, to name but a few [figures 1-2 and 1-3].⁸ The Pahlavi dynasty, and in particular Queen Farah Diba, further underscored these aspirations in 1977, when the TMOCA was opened to the public. With more than three-thousand works, from Monet and van Gogh to Hockney and Warhol, the museum is still considered among the most comprehensive collections of Western art outside Western Europe and the United States. A number of major exhibitions with a focus on Western art were held at the museum in the first two years after its inauguration: *Sharp Realistic Vision: The Hyper-realist Movement* (1977); *The Ludwig Collection* (1977); *David Hockney: Voyages through Pen,*

⁸ Robert Gluck, "The Shiraz Arts Festival: Western Avant-Garde Arts in 1970s Iran," *Leonardo* 40, no. 1 (2007), 23.

Pencil, and Ink (1977); *An Experience of Neighborhood: Tehran/Brooklyn* (1977); and *Pop Art* (1978).⁹

The Islamic revolution of the 1978-1979 created a rupture and years of stagnancy in the agenda of the TMOCA to join the so-called global art scene. During almost the entire first decade after the revolution, the museum housed exhibitions on arts of revolution, resistance, and the protracted and imposed war with Iraq (1980-1988). As Helia Darabi observes, the ideologically-driven programs of the TMOCA, as the only institutional support for contemporary art in Iran, led to an “extremely limited” access for Iranian artists to the global art scene. In the early years of the 1990s, however, the museum started playing a more active role in support of contemporary artists and artists’ associations. While as early as September 1991, Düsseldorf housed the “first major international festival of Iranian art and culture since the Islamic Revolution,” with opening speeches by the Iranian minister of culture and the German minister of education, it wasn’t until the late 1990s that the TMOCA assumed its central role in connecting Iranian artists with the metropolitan hubs of the Western world.¹⁰ The presidency of the reformist Mohammad Khatami, with his “Dialogue among Civilizations” doctrine, opened the TMOCA as well as other cultural venues to the more liberally-inclined. Coinciding with the unprecedented telecommunicational achievements of globalization, which enabled flows of

⁹ For a comprehensive study of the TMOCA’s history during the Pahlavi’s and after the revolution see: Helia Darabi, “Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art as a Microcosm of the State’s Cultural Agenda,” in *Contemporary Art from the Middle East: Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses*, ed. Hamid Keshmirshakan (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 221-245.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

international circulation to the extents hardly imaginable before the 1990s, the artistic space in Tehran became a fertile ground for a seismic shift.

A year after the reformist Mohammad Khatami was sworn in as Iran's president in 1998, Alireza Sami'azar was appointed the director of the Visual Art Center of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and *ex officio* became the head of the TMOCA. Sami'azar's plan for the TMOCA was to give a central role to enlightening the public about contemporary art. Interestingly enough, his own understanding of contemporary art was entirely shaped by Western discourses of art and art history.¹¹ Soon after his appointment as the new director, he expanded the curatorial scopes of the museum to include solo exhibitions of Joan Miró (2000), the French-born American Arman (2003), Gerhard Richter (2004), and Heinz Mack (2004). These exhibitions coincided with three consecutive (2001, 2002, and 2004) exhibitions of *New Art*, which ushered artists to express themselves in ways more attuned with the stylistic grammar of new practices of art in the West.¹² While the TMOCA also housed exhibitions of prominent Iranian artists of the Saqqakhaneh school, namely Parviz Tanavoli and Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, the overall tendency of the museum was to educate younger artists to speak the common language of the global art world in order to participate in an international dialogue.

¹¹ I have explained this in more detail in chapter 3.

¹² The three consecutive exhibitions of new art at the museum (The First Conceptual Art Exhibition, 2001; The Second New Art Exhibition, 2002; and The Third New Art Exhibition, 2004) were meant to put this grammar into practice. The TMOCA would issue calls for participation and a number of scholars and artists were members of a jury that would choose the participant from the relatively large pool of applications.

Here, I do not mean to put the entire blame on the TMOCA, for I am cognizant that the museum was responding to the international criteria of the commercial art world that defines “contemporary art,” while determining the amount of commercial and critical attention a work is to receive.¹³ As Charlotte Bydler argues, globalization’s attempt to unite “local nodes in an art world system” was haunted by the ghost of artistic quality;¹⁴

What if there was always already art (special versions, sub-cultures, artistic archives, or whatever we call it) all over the world; is the perceived globalization then confined to a particular sub-culture with a particular sense of quality? In that case, judged by the examples in circulation, the globalization of contemporary art barely made it beyond contemporary art museums. Only slightly caricatured, positions on the globalization of contemporary art are: either the art of the world is subjected to the quality jurisdiction of a few (“western”) institutions in Europe and the USA, or contemporary art is literally a free-for-all.¹⁵

¹³ With the TMOCA’s aspirations to champion Iran’s return to the global art world, it is not difficult to see why the museum did not look beyond the West as the prototype of contemporary art language in order to make the acceptance of Iranian artists by international markets and institutions a more likely scenario. Of the inclusion of Asian artists in international biennials, art historian David Clarke writes: “When Asian contemporary art is included in the now quite ubiquitous biennales (as it so often has been in recent years), that context tends to be missing and the danger of a more simplistic western appropriation of it is thus intensified. The commercial art world (which has recently taken a significant interest in contemporary Chinese art in particular) lurks in the shadows of the biennales, since they are sites where reputations are established. Careerist bids for prominence tend to predominate, and more intimate work (where it finds its way into biennales at all) tends to lose out to showy large-scale installations with an immediate impact. Wilson Shieh’s small-scale ink paintings, made in a meticulous gongbi manner and offering ironic commentaries on contemporary mores, were hidden away in a badly lit corner of the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (1999) at Brisbane’s Queensland Art Gallery, for instance, while Cai Guo-qiang’s rather banal bamboo bridge took up a large part of the main hall.” Cf. Clarke, “Contemporary Asian Art and the West,” 247.

¹⁴ Charlotte Bydler, *The Global Art World Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2004), 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

Interestingly enough, the TMOCA's case reflects the ways through which the "quality jurisdiction" of Western institutions is not directly imposed on non-Western artists, but rather adopted by local institutions that emulate their "global" archetypes.

This becomes more clearly visible once we look at the educational programs of the museum. A case in point is the 2003 exhibition entitled *Twentieth Century British Sculpture*, which showcased sixty artworks by fifteen influential artists who have shaped, and some continue to shape, the contemporary aesthetic language of the medium, including Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Anya Gallaccio, Anthony Caro, and Damien Hirst. In a 2004 review of the show in *Sculpture*, Homa Nasab observes that despite the inclusion of pieces by Asian-born artists, including Anish Kapoor, Mona Hatoum, and Shirazeh Houshiary, "to the majority of Iranian viewers, the works in the exhibition appeared to preach an exotic private language."¹⁶ This is precisely the language with which the TMOCA under Sami'azar aimed to equip Iranian contemporary artists, since its director perceived Iran's ability to participate in the global art world inexorably dependent on its artists' ability to express themselves in a grammar that was, almost without the difficulty of translation and the barriers of language, legible to Western audiences and art critics. Among the artists presented at the show, Richard Deacon and Bill Woodrow travelled to Iran to participate in the educational programs of the exhibition.

¹⁶ Homa Nasab, "Hepworth, Hirst and Hatoum in Tehran," in *Sculpture* 23, no. 10 (Dec. 2004) Washington D.C., A publication of the International Sculpture Center. Web special. <http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmago4/deco4/deco4.shtml> (accessed: September 20, 2015).

For these international exhibitions the museum had to work with cultural councils of embassies in Tehran. Alongside censorship and codes of modesty in Iran, the fact that the TMOCA had to go through diplomatic channels to borrow artworks brought some serious limitations to what the museum was able to collect and put on display. As a result, most of the European artists who showed their works in Iran were among globally recognized figures in modern and contemporary art around the world. Even in exhibitions borrowed from institutions of the European metropolitan hubs, there was a woeful absence of any artist from the margins of the establishment. This of course, aligned perfectly with the museum's agenda to construct and safeguard a Western grammar of art practice in the young and malleable contemporary art scene of Iran. However, it was also aligned with the demands of the global markets of art for maximizing the accessibility of non-Western artifacts for their own audiences.

Besides any alternative to the establishment, what was also absent in the strategic outlook of the museum's director was an effort toward a more comprehensive definition of "global art" beyond the geographic limits of the West. There was an absence of a systematic look toward artists from China, Vietnam, Thailand, India, Anatolia, the so-called Arab world, or the entire African and Latin American continents.¹⁷ It wasn't, in fact, until 2008 that the Bangalore-based Pushpamala N. showed her *Paris Autumn* and *Rashtriya Kheer* (film screening), at a private

¹⁷ In late 2004, the TMOCA held an exhibition of contemporary Japanese artists, entitled آفتاب تابان (*The Shining Sun*), which showcased works in different media, including painting, printmaking, installation, and video art. Complimented with a piano recital of music written by Japanese composers and a Japanese film series at the TMOCA Cinémathèque, the exhibition resembled a Japan Cultural Week project rather than a rigorously curated art exhibition.

gallery, Azad Art Gallery, in Tehran.¹⁸ The TMOCA also administered four gallery spaces at the *Cité internationale des arts* in Paris, which became more active during this period. A large number of Iranian artists were sent for short and long-term residencies to the *Cité* and the museum also sponsored artists traveling to Italy to visit the Venice biennale. No residency or cultural exchange was programmed between Iran and non-Western countries. The erasure of the East and the South, or perhaps what we today call the global south, from the museum's vision of the "global contemporary art" inculcated, in compliance with Euro-American modes of artistic expression and stylistic implementations of various media, a problematically limited grammar for the art in the younger generations of Iranian artists, embellished with tired stereotypes of an Iranian identity. The sense of dependence on the West as the ultimate interlocutor and the authoritative source of validation remains powerful even today.¹⁹

Sami'azar had a teleological vision for contemporary Iranian art: leaving Modernism in order to enter the Postmodern. In this vision, Western art history played an originary role for all other art histories and alternatives to this original history were considered divergent paths

¹⁸ In examining the role of the TMOCA in her *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*, the art historian Talinn Grigor writes: "TMOCA re-established contact with major museums and art institutions around the globe. 'When I arrived,' Sami'azar said, 'my secretary had no phone numbers of museums outside Iran; not even names of [Iranian] diasporic artists.' TMOCA 'took responsibility to promote Iranian artists outside Iran, to collaborate with outside organizations'." What Grigor fails to examine critically, however, is that the TMOCA's collaboration with international organizations remained limited to well-established Western institutions. The absence of relationship between the museum and institutions in the peripheries of the West is worth critical attention in that it was a strategic move to inculcate an understanding of contemporary art practice and discourse that is defined by the West. Cf. Talinn Grigor, *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio* (London: Reaktion, 2014), 196.

¹⁹ I explain this in a detailed reading of new initiatives and the outpouring of privatized galleries and residencies toward the end of this chapter.

not worthy of examination. On the occasion of being granted a *Légion d'honneur* by the French ministry of culture for his efforts in introducing Iranian contemporary art to the world, Sami'azar gave an interview to Soheyla Niakan for *Haft* journal, entitled “در مدرنیسم مانده‌ایم!” (We Have Remained in Modernism).”²⁰ There, he criticized Iran’s educational system that continues to teach and promote styles of painting and sculpture associated with Modernism and explained that his efforts at the TMOCA to introduce new art (new media) was discontinued once he left the museum and the new director took over. He found the lack of a systematic effort to “institutionalize postmodernism” responsible for Iran’s lagging behind “in Modernism.”²¹ This strong belief in the primacy of Western narratives of art was the conceptual maxim behind the TMOCA’s operations during Sami’azar’s tenure.

To understand the significance of the TMOCA in the contemporary art in Iran, one needs to appreciate the institution’s incompatible and almost monopolized control over means and forces of production of art, its display, and its international distribution, as well as the role it played as the initiator of the critical discourses of contemporary Iranian art. The TMOCA reorganized the entire art scene in Iran in such ways as to accommodate the supposed triumph of the global market governed by the West.²² This is not to say that the demand and supply struc-

²⁰ Alireza Sami’azar and Soheyla Niakan, “در مدرنیسم مانده‌ایم!” (We have remained in Modernism”), *Haft*, no. 45 (Tehran: Spring 2009), 23.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

ture of the global art market imposed on art production through auctions in neighboring countries and biennials all around the world had no role in cultivating the tendency to follow the West. Yet, it is crucial to stress on the role played by the TMOCA during formative years in contemporary Iranian art.

During his tenure at the museum, Sami'azar translated two books by the British poet, art critic, and broadcaster, Edward Lucie-Smith; *Movements in Art since 1945: Issues and Concepts* (1996; translated in 2005) and the final chapter of the same book that was separately translated into a new book with the Persian title of *جهانی شدن و هنر جدید: مفاهیم و رویکردها در آخرین جنبش‌های هنری قرن بیستم* (*Globalization and New Art: Concepts and Approaches in the Late Twentieth Century Art Movements*; translated in 2007). Sami'azar's TMOCA championed only Western discourses and frames of interpretation of contemporary art. It also opened up a euphoric space for Iranian artists, especially those of the younger generations, to find themselves practicing art on a global stage, while deeming Western contemporary art, at least stylistically, as the blueprint for local practices. The shadows of the older generations, more specifically the *Saqqakhaneh* movement, members of which endeavored to find a local language for the art, was now gone and a shift, which Abbas Daneshvari deems "seismic," marked the difference between the older

²² By this, I do not mean to undermine individual artists or critics who, in one way or another, questioned and resisted the Eurocentric politics of the TMOCA. In fact, the following chapter aims to study the works of some of these artists, who, in their works, offer deliberate and critical attention to the circuits of the global art world and creatively transgress contemporary Iranian art's approximation to Western expectations of the non-West.

generations of artists, during the Pahlavi period, and those who now, in the era of globalization, freely spoke the universal language of art.²³ Daneshvari writes:

The early generation viewed knowledge as immutable and iconic and, above all, referred to it as truth. The works of the younger generation treat it as a state of emotional unfolding. Moreover, the works of the younger generation are discursive and open ended. They contain because of their opalescence, myriad bits of information and render the complexity of the setting. In all these works there is a constant shift from the particular to the abstract and universal.²⁴

The celebration of the move from the particular to “the abstract and universal” as well as the open-endedness of the works of the younger generation of artists reproduces the well-rehearsed narrative of abandoning the concept of “truth” in the postmodern world,²⁵ where everything seems to be irretrievably global. The new generation, about which Daneshvari writes with such elation, in his *Amazingly Original: Contemporary Iranian Art at [sic] Crossroads*, were now, in the late 1990s, bursting into a global art scene that had left them in isolation for

²³ Abbas Daneshvari, “Seismic Shifts across Political Zones in Contemporary Iranian Art,” in *Performing the State: Visual Culture and Representations of Iranian Identity*, ed. Staci Gem Scheiwiller (New York and London: Anthem, 2013), 113.

²⁴ Abbas Daneshvari, *Amazingly Original: Contemporary Iranian Art at Crossroads* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2014), 65.

²⁵ Of this Fredric Jameson writes: “This is perhaps the moment to say something about contemporary theory, which has, among other things, been committed to the mission of criticizing and discrediting this very hermeneutic model of the inside and the outside and of stigmatizing such models as ideological and metaphysical. But what is today called contemporary theory—or better still, theoretical discourse—is also, I want to argue, itself very precisely a postmodernist phenomenon. It would therefore be inconsistent to defend the truth of its theoretical insights in a situation in which the very concept of ‘truth’ itself is part of the metaphysical baggage which poststructuralism seeks to abandon. What we can at least suggest is that the poststructuralist critique of the hermeneutic, of what I will shortly call the depth model, is useful for us as a very significant symptom of the very postmodernist culture which is our subject here.” Cf. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 12.

decades after the Islamic revolution. Whereas the exposure of the Iranian artists to the global art world allowed for valuable freedom from the paternalistic patronage of the TMOCA and by extension the government, globalization wasn't without its own discontents. Iranian contemporary artists were faced with many significant quandaries of which only one was the question of how to reckon with the problem of creating any piece that is not re-articulated and interpreted as an immobile reductive signifier of their ethnicity and historical background in the Western contexts of the reception of their works.²⁶ The global art world was ready to give Iranian artists a space in which they were only allowed to perform their otherness. It created what Geeta Kapur calls "a utopian realm of the other that is best reclaimed *by* that other."²⁷ In this realm, either the artists complied with the expected performances of alterity, or they would fail in garnering international attention.

That representing otherness, and more specifically an Iranian otherness with its entire ideological and over-politicized baggage, was the major role relegated to Iranian artists, is tantamount to the turning of the subject of art practice and her product both into objects of knowledge and desire. The methodological apparatuses of this transformation are not quite as antiquated as denying Iranian artists a sense of active participation on the global art stage. To this end, their chronological coevalness is not denied, yet it is reinstated in new coordinates not defined by a temporal logic. In fact, as Walter Mignolo aptly suggests, the current stage of

²⁶ In the third chapter I argue that the cultural dominance of the Western contexts of reception also transformed and shaped the frames of legibility inside and for Iranian critics.

²⁷ Geeta Kapur, "Globalisation and Culture," *Third Text* 11, no. 39 (Summer 1997), 30.

globalization, that of transnational corporations and technoglobalism, recasts this denial in terms of space and geography.²⁸ The unequal geographies produced by globalization further complicate problems of marginalization. They disguise this inequality as a form of freedom for the artists to participate on an equal footing in a “truly global” art scene. It is not difficult, however, to attest to the hierarchies of this global stage, where the prerequisite for many non-Western artists is to represent their ethnicity.

Perhaps only the most sanguine of us are able to read the heightened visibility of minority artists in metropolitan museums and private galleries, biennials and triennials, and scholarly and mainstream publications in the West as an augury of a more egalitarian systems of display and meaning production to come—a system in which non-Western artists are not burdened with the “implicit expectation that they ‘represent’ and ‘speak for’ the community from which they come.”²⁹ As Peggy Phelan has poignantly stressed, greater visibility does not always translate into greater agency and power.³⁰ In engaging with the works of Iranian artists, Western media and institutions, as the main producers of international discourses of art criticism, do not invest in critical readings of artworks and foregrounding of the artists’ oeuvre and instead

²⁸ Mignolo sees a great potential in transnational globalization’s contribution to “the restitution of space and location and to the multiplication of local histories” (36), which allows for “theorizing from/of the third world (the expression used metaphorically here) for the (first/third) entire planet” (51). I discuss this potential and its implications for contemporary Iranian art in the final chapter. Walter Mignolo, “Globalization, Civilization Processes, and the Relocation of Languages and Cultures,” in *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 32-53.

²⁹ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 92.

³⁰ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 2.

give priority to her ethnic background. At times, the works are reduced or facts are manipulated—as we saw in the *Time*'s piece on Golshiri—in order to support a pre-critical assumption about Iran.

There is no scarcity of examples; marginalization takes many different shapes, but most commonly it comes in the form of creating an indispensable relationship between the work of art and its creator's ethnicity as the key to ultimate meaning (or even message) proposed by the artwork. The examples here, which I am mostly drawing from International institutions, are to delineate various strategies international institutions adopt in compliance with larger politics of cultural globalization to cement the hierarchies in place between the West and its peripheries. In 1999, Kobena Mercer observed that the “multicultural commodity fetishism” of the global markets have led to the conditions of “hyper-visibility” for non-European artists, wherein invisibility is no longer their central problem; rather, it is the kind of attention they were receiving as markers of ethnic diversity.³¹ What he aptly terms “multicultural normalization” is precisely the outcome of a situation in which political empowerment and cultural visibility are decoupled.³² It is precisely this decoupling that, as Jean Fisher has persuasively argued, relocates cultural marginality in the excess of visibility “in terms of a reading of cultural difference that is too easily marketable.”³³

³¹ Kobena Mercer, “Ethnicity and Internationality: New British Art and Diaspora-based Blackness,” *Third Text* 49, no. 13 (Winter 1999-2000), 57.

³² Ibid.

³³ Jean Fisher, “The Syncretic Turn: Cross-cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism,” in *New Histories*, ed. Milena Kalinovska, Lia Gangitano, and Steven Nelson (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996), 35.

Despite the invaluable endeavors of critics of multicultural commodity fetishism, significantly among them those associated with Rasheed Araeen's *Third Text*, in exposing the political contours of "multicultural normalization," the situation in today's global art world shows little readiness in relinquishing its old habits. The status of contemporary non-Western artists has hardly improved and there is seldom critical interest in their works as objects performing more than cultural difference. Whereas globalization has had significant success in diversification of contemporary art and in inclusion of an ever-increasingly greater number of geographies from all corners around the globe in international exhibitions, biennials, and publications, it did not necessarily give rise to intellectual discourses that were adept to explore and theorize this new cartography. Consequently, the new additions to the global art world were left to be assessed mostly within the old frames of legibility and hierarchical structures that were operative before globalization. I have chosen a number of cases to discuss here, hoping they will demonstrate how the diversification of contemporary art and the inclusion of Iranian artists had little success in decentralizing art historical hierarchies. Where it showed immense success was in changing the dominant narratives of contemporary art inside Iran to comply with the universalized language of Western art.

As one of the early exhibitions of contemporary Iranian art, *Persian Visions* was designed by the TMOCA and sponsored by the DC-based International Arts and Artists organization (IA&A) in 2005. A travelling survey of contemporary Iranian photography, curated by Hamid Severi, of the TMOCA, and Garry Hallman, a photographer and art professor at the Regis Center for Art at the University of Minnesota, *Persian Visions* included the works of twenty Iranian

artists and it has been on display since 2006 in museums, university galleries, public libraries, and cultural centers around the United States, from the Honolulu Academy of Arts in Hawaii all the way to the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University in Ithaca. What distinguishes *Persian Visions* from many other group exhibitions bringing Iranian artists together to show their works somewhere outside of Iran is its curatorial focus on photography as an artistic medium. In his introduction to the catalog, the film and photography historian Robert Silberman emphasizes that the works presented at this exhibition, above all, demonstrate the artistic possibilities of photography as a medium of expression and “how fully those possibilities are being explored in contemporary Iran.”³⁴ The introduction does not refrain from delving into the political landscape of contemporary Iran and it discusses issues ranging from freedom of speech to strategies employed by artists to circumvent censorship.³⁵ What separates Silberman’s writing from a great majority of articles, catalog statements, and media criticism written on an exhibition of Iranian artists, is his conviction that these works are neither to provide a “neat guide” to the public and private realms of the Iranian life, nor is their goal “to document contemporary Iran for the non-Iranian world, dispelling the sense of exoticism and foreignness that permeates Western coverage of Iran and the Middle East.” He also doesn’t situate himself as the authoritative arbiter of meaning in the works of these artists. He writes,

³⁴ Robert Silberman, “Persian Visions,” in *Persian Visions: Contemporary Photography from Iran* (Washington DC: International Arts and Artists, 2005), 11. Exhibition catalog.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

Photography is in a period of change as old methods are giving way to new techniques and the digital revolution takes hold. But *Persian Visions* demonstrates that photography is alive and well—and how!—in Iran. Much remains allusive and elusive in these works, at least for this outsider-viewer. But one thing is clear: the quality of the work.³⁶

Silberman’s introduction, as it continues to delve into each artist and the aesthetic choices made in their works, reveals a rare commitment among metropolitan art critics and historians to read the artworks of non-Western artists as what they are, namely, works of art, instead of inklings to anthropological desires to know more about an exotic geography far away from home! Despite his emphasis that *Persian Visions* is not “an attempt at a systematic portrait of a country,” one needs not to look farther than the same catalog to find the president of the IA&A praising the works for providing “cultural clues about our [Americans and Iranians] sameness and our differences.”³⁷

In 2009, *Persian Visions* traveled to Savannah, Georgia, to be displayed at the Telfair Museum of Art from June 10 to the end of August. On March 16, the museum sent out a press release with a subtitle defying what is quite explicit in the catalog’s essay: “Exhibition offers insight into contemporary Iranian life.” It seems that Silberman’s text is unable to alter the common conviction, even among the organizers of the very same exhibition he is writing on, that all shows comprising of Iranian artists present documents bearing ethnographic clues to “an intriguing word which few Westerners ever experience,” to use the words of the Telfair

³⁶ Ibid., 11.

³⁷ David Furchgott, “Introduction,” in *Persian Visions: Contemporary Photography from Iran* (Washington D.C.: International Arts and Artists, 2005), 9.

Museum's curator, Holly Koons McCullough.³⁸ For her, like many others writing on exhibitions of Iranian contemporary artists, this show is “a study of opposites—traditional vs. modern, private vs. public, authority vs. deference, exposure vs. obscurity.”³⁹

It is easy to trace, in almost every piece written on Iranian artists, the terminology of the “tension between tradition and modernity” and the “plight of women.” These artists, supposedly, always find themselves torn between the “feminine” private and the “masculine” public

³⁸ Telfair Museum of Art, “Persian Visions: Contemporary Photography From Iran,” news release, 2009.

³⁹ Ibid.

Fleming Museum, University of Vermont, which hosted *Persian Visions* in 2012, holds “a complementary photography exhibition” in an adjacent gallery, *Imagining the Islamic World: Early Travel Photography from the J. Brooks Buxton Collection*, of travel photographs taken mostly by Westerners in the Middle East in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Supposedly, this show “provides a visual counterpoint to the contemporary photographs” on view in *Persian Visions*.

Cf. Fleming Museum of Art, “Persian Visions: Contemporary Photography from Iran,” Fleming Museum of Art, University of Vermont, http://www.uvm.edu/~fleming/index.php?category=exhibitions&page=persian_visions (accessed November 24, 2015).

For another example, look at USC's Pacific Asia Museum, where the show was held in 2007. The museum defines *Persian Visions* as “a revealing view of Iranian life,” in which public and intimate lives are on display.

Cf. USC Pacific Asia Museum, “Persian Visions: Contemporary Photography from Iran,” USC Pacific Asia Museum: On View, http://www.pacificasiamuseum.org/_on_view/exhibitions/2007/persianvisions.aspx (accessed November 18, 2015).

Or, look at Cornell University's Johnson Museum of Art's introduction to the exhibition, where, again, depicting private and public realms of life, questioning gender identities, and drawing on Persian traditions to comment on modern life are identified as the major characteristics of the works presented in *Persian Visions*.

Cf. Johnson Museum of Art, “Persian Visions: Contemporary Photography from Iran,” Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, <http://museum.cornell.edu/exhibitions/persian-visions-contemporary-photography-iran> (accessed November 23, 2015).

Limited examples are characterized by a more critically engaged reading of the show. Chicago Tribune's art critic, Alan G. Artner, reviews the show in 2006 at Chicago Cultural Center in Illinois. Surprised by how “strongly formal most of the images are,” he astutely observes that “this is not a show with works that attempt to ‘explain’ Iran through documentary images.” Yet, as it is the case with most reviews written on *Persian Visions*, the Chicago Tribune's review also fails to offer a critical reading of the artworks on display and finds it sufficient to tell the reader what are the messages in some of the photographs.

Cf. Alan G. Artner, “Persian Visions' Shows West Has Influenced Iran: But Content Still Unfamiliar in U.S.” *Chicago Tribune*, November 09, 2006.

space. In his essay on Shirin Neshat, “Transcending the Boundaries of an Imaginative Geography” published in 2005, Hamid Dabashi acerbically points to some examples of reductive interpretations of Neshat’s work in reviews written by Scott McDonald and Francesco Bonami.⁴⁰ Dabashi elaborates further on these politics by using the term “arrested vocabulary,” which refers to a predetermined set of terms that flattens Neshat’s work into a comment on the plight of women in “violent Islamic” countries and fails to account for its semiotic complexity.⁴¹ Valentina Vitali, too, argues that criticism of Neshat reduces her work to narrow understandings based on identitarian interpretations abstracted into preconceived terms such as “Iranian woman.”⁴²

It is not difficult to see how this terminology, what Dabashi has named “arrested verbal vocabulary,” persistently appears in most publications on contemporary Iranian art. The reluctance of Western critics to revisit and rethink this lexicon is a dilemma that does not require much intellectual effort to acknowledge. Marta Weiss, the photography curator of the Victoria

⁴⁰ Hamid Dabashi, “Transcending the Boundaries of an Imaginative Geography,” in *Shirin Neshat: la Última Palabra*, eds. Hamid Dabashi, Shirin Neshat, and Octavio Zaya (Milan, Italy: Charta, 2005), 53-79.

⁴¹ Given Neshat’s immigration to the United States in her teenage years and the formation of her art career in the U.S., one might quite reasonably dispute that she should not be simply categorized as an Iranian artist. However, for better or for worse, not only has she been continuously regarded to as an Iranian artist and included in art shows presenting artists from Iran, but also she has been portrayed as the “voice” of the Iranian women, an attribution that in fact Neshat has always resented. Therefore, it is pertinent to argue that even her association with the voice of the Iranian women is part of a bigger politics of representation and display that resists accepting Neshat as simply an artist rather than an “Iranian artist.” In the third chapter, I discuss the significance of Neshat in the formation of the local critical discourses of contemporary art in Iran.

⁴² Valentina Vitali, “Corporate Art and Critical Theory: On Shirin Neshat,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 10.

and Albert Museum in London, writes in her foreword to *Shadi Ghadirian: Iranian Photographer*, that the contrast between the old-fashioned styles of Ghadirian's *Untitled* (Qajar) Series [figure 1-4] and the incongruous modern consumer props in the photographs, "is indicative of the tension between tradition and modernity and between public personas and private desires that many Iranian women navigate on daily basis."⁴³ What follows the foreword is an article written by the famous curator of Iranian and "Arab art," Rose Issa. Issa played a significant and initiatory role in curating contemporary Iranian art to the Western metropolises, especially London.⁴⁴ Entitled "Like This," it explores all series by Ghadirian that are included in the book. It is worth to closely read and examine a short passage from Issa's writing on Ghadirian:

[...] the Middle East, and in this case Iran, with all its complex and intricate social histories, is simply a rich and aesthetically inspiring place: artists do not need to invent a pure concept in order to work. There is already much to say: the raw material, unexplored aesthetics and life stories are all there. Ghadirian's work is almost exclusively about the personal concerns of Iranian women of her generation."⁴⁵

⁴³ Marta Weiss, "Foreword," in *Shadi Ghadirian: Iranian Photographer*, ed. Rose Issa (London, San Francisco, and Beirut: Saqi, 2008), 5.

⁴⁴ Rose Issa has edited or written introductions for numerous books on Iranian and Arab artists, including *Tehran Studio Words: The Art of Khosrow Hassanzadeh* (Saqi Books, Tropenmuseum, 2007); *Shadi Ghadirian: Iranian Photographer* (Saqi Books, 2008); *Iranian Photography Now* (Hatje Cantz and Beyond Art Productions, 2008); *Parastou Forouhar: Art, Life, and Death in Iran* (Beyond Art Production and Saqi Books, 2010); and *Farhad Ahrarnia: Canary in a Coal Mine* (Beyond Art Production, 2011).

⁴⁵ Rose Issa, "Like This," in *Shadi Ghadirian: Iranian Photographer*, ed. Rose Issa (London, San Francisco, and Beirut: Saqi, 2008), 9.

Apparently, for Issa, there is a direct line between complexity of social histories and aesthetic profusion. Aesthetic is once again reduced into merely an entryway for better access to the intricacies of social situations. As such, artists are expected to produce “raw material” and “life stories,” where there is “no need to invent a pure concept in order to work.” Finally, there is the clear meaning which leaves no doubt in what her work is all about: “almost exclusively about the personal concerns of Iranian women of her generation.”⁴⁶

In the brief section specifically on the *Untitled* (Qajar) Series (1998-1999), Issa forgoes any formal analysis of her works. She remains limited to descriptive accounts and biographical information and criticizes Londoners’ for “misreading her work, failing to see its wit,” and assuming that they represented how “women in today’s Iran actually dressed.”⁴⁷ Ghadirian’s work, however, is far more reflexive than that for which she is given credit by Issa, who ultimately deems her photography as an “illustration” of Iranian women’s quest for liberty.⁴⁸ By way of exposing the backdrop as a part of the apparatus of photograph-taking, Ghadirian addresses the West’s use of the medium to voyeuristically gaze at unexpected signs of modernity in so-called traditional societies. Her provocative use of parody in juxtaposing tradition and modernity in order to stage exotic objects for photography’s curiosity is entirely dismissed.

Issa’s desire to see “raw material” from Iran is echoed in Anna Somers Cocks’s article “Are We Colonializing Middle Eastern Art?” which was published in *The Art Newspaper* in August

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 10.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 9.

2009. Cocks's essay, troubled by hegemonic narratives of Western art, perfectly illustrates how legitimate concerns about domination and reorientation of Middle Eastern art by the West can subtly advocate the exclusion of non-Western contemporary artists from the centrality of contemporary art debates and ultimately feed into the narratives they aspire to dismantle. Cocks, the general editorial director of *The Art Newspaper*, warns us that the "fragile plant" of Middle Eastern art can be trained in one direction or another by Western art institutes, like the Chinese avant-garde of the last few years, since "it is still the western art institutions and western money, both pro bono and commercial, that give validation to contemporary art anywhere in the world."⁴⁹ Criticizing the policies made by some London museums such as the Tate Modern and the British Museum toward the contemporary art of the Middle East, Cocks writes:

The conceptual work, film and photography are being sought by the Tate, while calligraphic work, the art that has the most deep-rooted following in the Middle East, will go into the British Museum. This sounds very reasonable, except that the market follows the lead of the Tate, not the British Museum, because of the key role the Tate has in the international art system. The decisive power of money will come down behind the Tate's choices, inevitably affecting what artists choose to produce. If this happens we will be artistically the poorer, which is why it is good to hear of a museum initiative that seems to be sensitive to the need to nurture an art that does not just mimic our own.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Anna Somers Cocks, "Are We Colonializing Middle Eastern Art? No One Needs Western-style 'Fine Art' with Some Orientalist Flourishes," *The Art Newspaper*, 204 (July-August 2009), <http://www.theart-newspaper.com/articles/Are-we-colonialising-Middle-Eastern-art/?/18604> (accessed February 11, 2011).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

The danger Cocks has astutely delineated here is the eradication of different dialects of the visual arts due to Western institutions' minimal tolerance for artworks that are not easily decodable, where the meaning is not readily on the surface of the work and that require arduous efforts of translation. However, she goes too far on this note to suggest that artists of the Middle East should be put back into their "deep-rooted" traditions. Although she is absolutely right that the last thing we need is "western-style 'fine art' with some orientalist flourishes," she fails to complicate the notion of "western-style" art (read "any form of contemporary global practice, such as video, performance, installation, and so forth") and how these modes of art production are monopolized by "western artists." There is little space in her writing to rethink the institutional demand for art from the non-West to be visually loyal to its geography of origin and not to "mimic" the West, what Cocks calls "our own." In other words, although Cocks's legitimate concern about the hegemony of one language in contemporary art manifests her keen observation of the current predicaments in the global art market, her prescription for artists from the non-West ends in a more dangerous spot that excludes non-Western artists from any dialogue except about their locality, ethnicity, and historical background, that is to only produce "raw material" pertaining to their own country of origin.

Sami'azar's TMOCA aspired to play the main role in reintroducing Iran to the global art scene. This aspiration prevented the TMOCA from taking a critical role in relation to the international curatorial practices that sought to include Iranian artists as evidence of multicultural accomplishments of Western institutions and as exotic markers of cultural difference. In fact, the TMOCA took an active role in reinforcing these problematic positions vis-à-vis Iranian

contemporary art by way of collaborating with as many global institutions and international curators as possible. On the better end of the spectrum of these collaborative projects was *Persian Visions*, with a strong focus on contemporary photography in Iran as a form of art, whereas on the other end one can see a project initiated in 2001 with a rather Orientalist title, *A Breeze from the Gardens of Persia: New Art from Iran*.⁵¹ The exhibition, organized by the DC-based Meridian International Center in collaboration with the TMOCA, received a major grant from Exxon Mobil and support from The Boeing Company, DaimlerChrysler AG, and the Starr Foundation. It should not be surprising that these kind of romanticized corrective tokenisms striving to offer a “stunning view of Persian culture,”⁵² transform the works of participating artists into immobile signs of Iran’s ancient history and put an “array of seldom accessible art on view.”⁵³ *The Breeze from the Gardens of Persia’s* catalog contains a message written by

⁵¹ *A Breeze from the Gardens of Persia: New Art from Iran*. Washington DC: Meridian International Center, 2001.

A Breeze from the Gardens of Persia is among many other exhibitions and publications that aim to correct the erroneous perceptions of the East held by the Western public. Most often, these attempts recourse in a reactionary tokenism that offers yet another flattened image of the peaceful dispositions and exotic appearances of non-Western subjects through art. As such, art plays the role of a correcting pen that marks the clichés produced by mass media, picturing the Middle East as barbaric, violent, and underdeveloped. Some are candid about taking such a position; in the preface to his luxuriously printed *Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran*, Saeb Eigner writes that his ambition is to dispose of stereotypes about the Middle East: “In a world filled with misunderstanding, there can be nothing more fulfilling than to engage—even in a small way—in dispelling some the stereotypes and prejudices that cloud people’s judgement.” Cf. Saeb Eigner, Isabelle Caussé, and Christopher Masters, *Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran* (London and New York: Merrell, 2010).

⁵² Walter L. Cutler, “President of Meridian International Center,” in *A Breeze from the Gardens of Persia: New Art from Iran* (Washington DC: Meridian International Center, 2001), 8.

⁵³ Holland Cotter, “Art in Review: ‘A Breeze From the Gardens of Persia: New Art From Iran,’” in *The New York Times* (November 2, 2001).

no other than the TMOCA's director, Sami'azar; a foreword by the exhibition curator that opens with a poem by Rumi; an introduction by Amir Zekrgoo, a professor at Tehran Art University (دانشگاه هنر), and three other short essays by Iranian artists and scholars. Zekrgoo's introduction, in particular, is interesting as it draws attention to "Persia's major role" in the history of art as a point of visual inspiration for "many Western artists, including the French painter Henri Matisse,"⁵⁴ putting Iran back in its supposed place as an interesting exotic locale for European painters. It then goes on to argue in favor of a "Persian identity" in Iranian contemporary art that its main ingredients are traditional Persian painting and calligraphy. Under a section entitled "What is Contemporary Art?" Zekrgoo writes that despite "the fact that Persian motifs and designs in the works may have been produced in Western and 'modern' styles, there are still many works that can be identified as traditional Persian or Irano-Islamic."⁵⁵

As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the TMOCA, under Sami'azar, played a significant role in reinforcing the cultural hegemony of Western art institutions at home. *A Breeze from the Gardens of Persia* are among those projects the museum carried out that continuously fostered a sense of contemporary art as a predominantly Western practice, the parameters and lexicon of which Iranian artists needed to master in order to take part in the global art market. But this mastering of the Western style, in which, as you can see in Zekrgoo's introduction,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/02/arts/art-in-review-a-breeze-from-the-gardens-of-persia-new-art-from-iran.html>

⁵⁴ Amir H. Zekrgoo, "Introduction," in *A Breeze from the Gardens of Persia*, 16.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

many of the forty-nine Iranian contemporary painters produced their works, was not a guarantor of global display; the twist is to create works in Western style but to still include motifs that are easily legible as signs of belonging to an Iranian culture and its ancient heritage. The TMOCA actively advocated for the production of local identities that, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri aptly observe, “are not autonomous or self-determining but actually feed into and support the development of the capitalist imperial machine.”⁵⁶ As such, The TMOCA became an accomplice in marketing difference.

⁵⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 45.

CURATORIAL INTERVENTIONS

The early years of the 1990s marked the beginning of a renewed desire among Western institutions and curators for untouched geographies and “othered” artists; this time not as sources of Oriental inspirations but as either marginal ornaments to corroborate West’s claims to multiculturalism, or as “authors of a ‘bridge’ between primitive civilizations and the modern world.”⁵⁷ The honorary mention of Nigeria and Zimbabwe in the 44th Venice Biennial, curated by Giovanni Carandente, comes only one year after the controversial 1989 *Magiciens de la terre* at Centre Pompidou in Paris. As Bydler chronicles, in her comprehensive study of the biennialization of the art world, Venice did not exhibit a sustained attention to the non-West in the 1990s and it wasn’t until Okwui Enwezor’s *Documenta XI* in 2002 that postcolonial geographies and perspectives “seemed impossible to bypass within the avant-garde art world.”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Giovanni Carandente, “Dimensione futuro: L’artista e lo spazio,” in *XLIV Esposizione Internazionale d’arte, la Biennale di Venezia. Dimensione futuro: L’artista e lo spazio* (Venezia: Fabbri Editori, 1990), 16. “Gli artisti dell’Africa, gli aborigeni dell’Australia (so no essi i due prescelti nel padiglione di quel paese) costituiscono un aspetto nuovo nell’arte odierna. Non si tratta precisamente di artisti che esaltino il primitivismo o l’ancestrale, ma di artisti che instaurano un dialogo nuovo con il mondo occidentale. Non i *Magiciens de la terre*, dunque, ma gli autori di un rinnovato ponte tra le civiltà primitiva e il mondo moderno, sempre più portato all’esperanto di un linguaggio universale delle forme.”

⁵⁸ Charlotte Bydler, *The Global Art World Inc.*, 106. Of the 48th Venice Biennial in 1991 (*Plateau of Humankind*), Bydler observes that “most of the African representatives were invited to show in a section titled *Plateau of Thought*” (106). She further explains that “The grandiose *Weltanschauung*—and primitivist assumptions in the *Plateau of Humankind/Plateau of Thought*—section became particularly striking in light of the Special exhibition *Authentic/Ex-centric: African art in and out of Africa*, at the Palazzo Fondazione Levi, which was curated by Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe” (107).

The emergent interest in the artists of the postcolonial world during the early years of the 2000s coincided with the TMOCA's restored role in the contemporary art scene of Iran. In its eagerness to become the leading institution of Middle Eastern art on the global art scene, the museum developed a welcoming and cooperative attitude toward European art specialists and curators. Following the major success of the Iranian cinema in international festivals in the 1990s,⁵⁹ the visual arts garnered unprecedented international attention. Sami'azar's cooperation with European curators, and rarely Americans,⁶⁰ resulted in numerous shows of Iranian artists in the West. Rose Issa, who with Sheila Whitaker co-edited *Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema* in 1999, with Sami'azar's support, returned to Tehran to now work on the city's visual art scene. In 2001, Issa curated the first major show of contemporary Iranian art at the Barbican Centre in London. The exhibition, simply entitled *Iranian Contemporary Art*, which showcased more than fifty artworks by twenty Iranian artists, some of whom in diaspora, concentrated "on artists as yet unknown in Britain" and "placed a focus on artists whose work—

⁵⁹ Citing *ماهنامه سینمایی فیلم* (*Film* monthly cinematic periodical) and Jalal Khosrowshahi's *بازتاب سینمای نوین ایران* (1991/1370), Hamid Naficy notes in the fourth volume of his magnum opus, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, that Iranian art-house films' presence in international festival grew exponentially in the 1990s. The figures are staggering: "In 1986, only two postrevolutionary films were shown in foreign festivals, but in 1990, 230 films were screened in 78 international festivals, winning 11 prizes. By 1998 Iranian films had been shown on 5,000 screens abroad, winning nearly 330 international prizes." Cf. Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 242.

⁶⁰ In the exhibition *A Breeze from the Garden of Persia: New Art from Iran* the TMOCA worked with "The Search for Common Ground," a non-governmental public policy institution based in Washington D.C.

both from our own perspective and in individual ways—epitomises most clearly aspects that have been central to the evolution of contemporary art in Iran.”⁶¹

The exhibition catalog, which was published as a book with the same title as the show, included essays by Issa and an Iranian philosopher, Daryush Shaygan. In a wishful rush to a cosmopolitan euphoria, Shaygan’s piece, entitled “At the Cutting Edge of Intersecting Worlds,” suggests that the co-existence, overlap, and crossing of all cultures have rendered their reduction to linear representations impossible.⁶² Borrowing Bhabha’s notions of liminality and hybridity, he argues that this “mosaic-like configuration” of the world has afforded non-Western artists to act as “border-crossers’ who live in the interstices of this world of ‘in-between spaces’.”⁶³ Shaygan writes:

For most of these artists tradition, still rooted in the collective memory, is still very much alive; it reveals an experience where the analogical nature of symbols is still operational, where their vision is dominated by the magic of cultural archetypes and where the soul is still immersed in the empathy of social relations. Translated through the prism of modernity, they unearth whole chapters of repressed visions, consigned by the West to oblivion.⁶⁴

Apparently, for Shaygan, the enabling force behind unearthing epistemological violence enacted by the West is located in the “magic of cultural archetypes.”⁶⁵ While this might appear

⁶¹ Carol Brown and John Hoole, “Foreword,” in *Iranian Contemporary Art* (exhibition catalog) (London: Barbican Centre, 2001), 8.

⁶² Daryush Shaygan, “At the Cutting Edge of Intersecting Worlds,” in *Iranian Contemporary Art*, ed. Rose Issa, trans. Ros Schwartz (London: Barbican Centre, 2001), 9.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 10.

as only strategically essentializing the non-Western artist so that he or she can critically engage with Western modernity, it offers a problematic interpretation of being a non-Western artist as a *mode of being* that is inexorably linked to a specific location. Similar to Carandente, who defined African and ab-original artists present at the 44th Venice Biennial as those who bridge primitive civilizations and modern worlds through the universal language of forms,⁶⁶ Shaygan situates the enchanted liminality of non-Western artists at the core of his interpretive apparatus; a liminality that is to be articulated through the prism of Western modernity. The peripheral visions of the non-Western artists complement Western cultural landscapes and bear witness to its “multi-cultural consciousness.” As he maintains,

[...] we are seeing new literary and artistic creations emerging from the sidelines towards the centre, bringing with them a whole range of new sensibilities. As the product of other milieus, nurtured by other visions and drawing on a memory rooted in other traditions, these creations, which are actualised in modern language—and this is highly important for they can only find expression by modernising themselves—reveal a whole spectrum of original visions with no equivalent in the western cultural arena.⁶⁷

Shaygan’s failure to interrogate the essentialized position at the margins of modernity, which he actively ascribes to non-Western artists, overlooks Bhabha’s critical attention to the relation of domination between the West and its epistemological peripheries.⁶⁸ For Bhabha, the site of

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Carandente, “Dimensione futuro: L’artista e lo spazio,” 16.

⁶⁷ Shaygan, “At the Cutting Edge of Intersecting Worlds,” 9.

cultural difference, especially in critical theory, turns into a “phantom of a dire disciplinary struggle in which it has no space or power.”⁶⁹ “However impeccably the content of an ‘other’ culture may be known, however anti-ethnocentrically it is represented,” he writes, “it is its *location* as the closure of grand theories, the demand that, in analytic terms, it be always the good object of knowledge, the docile body of difference, that reproduces a relation of domination and is the most serious indictment of the institutional powers of critical theory.”⁷⁰ Shaygan’s recourse to Bhabha’s theorization of borders, thresholds, and liminality, lacks a critical reflection on the hierarchies embedded in an East-West or South-North cultural exchange. It is precisely this lack of attention that allows him to claim that the “mosaic-pattern” of our time’s civilization, perhaps already cosmopolitan and multicultural in its makeup, “reflects a simultaneity of all levels of consciousness,” where “all the cultures of the planet seem to have a say in the matter.”⁷¹

Following *Iranian Contemporary Art* at Barbican Centre and the eagerness of Western institutions to celebrate European multiculturalism rather than engage in a critical way with

⁶⁸ Bhabha’s theorization of the liminal space and hybridity, however, has been criticized by a number of Marxist scholars, including Fredric Jameson and Timothy Brennan, for concealing the underlying structures of imperialism. I discuss this in further detail toward the end of this chapter.

⁶⁹ Homi Bhabha, “The Commitment to Theory,” in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 31.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Shaygan, “At the Cutting Edge of Intersecting Worlds,” 9. Shaygan repeats the same argument in his essay on Iranian photography, entitled “Le miroir de l’âme d’un peuple,” which was published a few months later in *Regards persans: Iran, une révolution photographique*, an accompanying publication to an exhibition with the same title held in Paris, organized in collaboration with the TMOCA.

Iranian art, numerous group exhibitions of Iranian modern and contemporary artists were organized in Europe and North America, including *Regards persans: Iran, une révolution photographique* (2001) organized by the Fondation Electricité de France and the cultural section of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in collaboration with the TMOCA; *Between Word and Image: Modern Iranian Visual Culture* (2002) at Grey Art Gallery in New York; *Far Near Distance: Contemporary Positions of Iranian Artists* (2004), a subsequent to the 2003 *Disorientation* project organized by Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt and curated by Rose Issa; *Iran sota la pell: Un encontre amb les cultures iranianes* (2004) at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona; *Immagini dall'Iran* (2005) at the Fondazione Museo Pino Pascali in Polignano a Mare; *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* (2006) at the MoMA; *Iran Inside Out* (2009) at the Chelsea Art Museum in New York (and subsequently in Dubai in 2010); and a much larger number since 2010, most notably at New York's Asia Society (2013), the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (2014); Kunst (Zeug) Haus Rapperswil (2015) near Zurich; and the Grey Art Gallery in New York (2015-2016).⁷²

These exhibitions, alongside numerous others, bestowed an international institutional "validation" to contemporary art practices in Iran. For some scholars and historians, they signaled an auspicious augury of the country's restored position on the global stage; for Shaygan the Western institutional recognition of Iranian art signified equal terrains of dialogue between

⁷² This list is by no means comprehensive. It only includes major exhibitions at internationally recognized institutions, which are exclusively dedicated to Iranian artists. Numerous exhibitions on Middle Eastern art since 2000 have included Iranian artists, such as Saatchi's *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* in 2009 (10 Iranian artists out of a total of 21) and LACMA's *Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East* in 2015 (32 Iranian artists of a total of 56).

the West and the East; for Keshmirshekan, it indicated a short period in which “contemporary Iranian art acquired a new cosmopolitan veneer”⁷³ and it proved “the opening of cultural boundaries” as a direct result of cultural globalization⁷⁴; and for Bhabha it marked the long anticipated moment of the unveiling of the imaginative forces of artists from a country that has completely disappeared “behind a heavy curtain.”⁷⁵ What these scholars share in common, despite the major differences in their methodologies and arguments, is their failure to recognize that while the presence of Iranian artists on global art scenes evinces the desire of Western institutions to draw a map for contemporary art more inclusive than those demarcating geographic territories of modern art, the power to decide what should or should not be displayed remains still in the hands of the West. As the art historian Joaquin Barriendos argues the inclusion of non-Western regions in the Western canons of art and art history has proven incapable of destabilizing the hegemonic positions which Western institutions, as arbitrators of contemporary art, comfortably occupy.⁷⁶ On the contrary, as again Barriendos reminds us in his “Geopolitics of Global Art: The Reinvention of Latin America as a Geoaesthetic Region,” the inclusion of “emerging geoaesthetic regions” into the canon of Western art,

⁷³ Hamid Keshmirshekan, “Contemporary Iranian Art: The Emergence of New Artistic Discourses,” *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 3 (June 2007), 343.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 345.

⁷⁵ Homi Bhabha, “Draw the Curtain: Foreword,” in *Iranian Photography Now*, ed. Rose Issa (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 6.

⁷⁶ Joaquín Barriendos, “Geopolitics of Global Art: The Reinvention of Latin America as a Geoaesthetic Region,” in *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, eds. Hans Belting and Andrea Budensieg (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 99.

seems to lead to nothing other than the reinforcement of a kind of expansionist geographic knowledge derived from the West. What persists in these new museographic global narratives then, is the coloniality of the power of representation of other modernities, other cultures, and other geoaesthetic regions.⁷⁷

The contemporary institutions of art, as Barriendos acknowledges, question the geopolitical cartography of colonial and modern museums, which has led to the construction of a more inclusive and heterogeneous public space at these institutions. That artworks from the peripheries are now included, perhaps more than ever before, in the Western canons of contemporary art does not signify an economy of cultural production and display in which the hierarchies between the center and its peripheries are eradicated. Barriendos situates the failure of this geopolitical revisionism to rewrite the “hegemonic matrix of Western modernity/coloniality” in its incapability to achieve “two geo-epistemological displacements: the de-Westernization of global-led knowledge economy, or the decolonial reinvention of acquisition, representation, and exhibition.”⁷⁸ For him, the institutional revisionism of the 1990s onward in contemporary art has, in fact, sought the opposite of such displacements, namely “a new geopolitical, universal language: global art as a postcolonial *lingua franca* offered-up by the West to the world.”⁷⁹ As such, Barriendos argues that global narratives of art rely heavily on the colo-

⁷⁷ Ibid., 102.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 99.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

niality of the power of representation of “other modernities, other cultures, and other geoaesthetic regions,”⁸⁰ what he, elsewhere, refers to as “the raw material of all international exhibitions.”⁸¹

The contemporary art scene in Iran provided international curators with a profusion of this “raw material.” Iran’s isolation from the global circuits of cultural exchange between the West and African, Asian, and South American countries, its demonization as the international villain in Western mass media, and the welcoming atmosphere in Iran toward the West, especially Europe, after the election of president Khatami, transformed the country into an attractive site for curatorial exploration. Exhibitions curated by Issa were perhaps the earliest among many curatorial projects that entailed compiling a number of Iranian artists into a group exhibition, usually with no significant link connecting them other than being born in Iran, collecting a few essays on contemporary Iranian art, usually with a social science undertone, and publishing them in conjunction with the exhibition. A number of these exhibitions took up the task of educating the Western public about this vilified distant geography; some offered correctives to the mass media, usually by way of tokenism; and some benevolently tried to give voice to the Iranian artists who were repressed by the Iranian government, not surprisingly always addressed as “the regime” by most catalogs on contemporary Iranian art.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 102.

⁸¹ Joaquín Barriendos, “Approximation to the West,” *Atlas of Transformation*, 2011
<http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/a/approximation-to-the-west/approximation-to-the-west-joaquin-barriendos-rodriguez.html> (access date: January 4, 2016).

The exhibition *Iranian Contemporary Art*, curated by Issa at the Barbican Centre, brought together a wide range of artists from a couple of decades before the Islamic revolution in 1979 to the very contemporary of the show in 2001. More than fifty artworks from forty years of Iranian history was put on display, yet, with the exception of a few calligraphic works by Koorosh Shishegaran and Reza Mafi, the exhibition showed very little interest in the works of Iranian painters, sculptors, and photographers of the 1980s—the years of the revolution and consequently the 8-year long war with Iraq—when the dominant formal properties of the visual arts in Iran appeared to be influenced by social realism. In fact, in her brief historical account, Issa deems this decade unworthy of critical attention. She summarily dismisses the works of those who were later labeled revolutionary artists and deems the post-revolutionary 1980s the decade which “produced its losers (sculptors and painters) and winners (photographers and film-makers).”⁸² Interestingly enough, none of the photographers who were “the winners” of the political atmosphere of the 1980s were present at the exhibition. The section on the post-revolutionary art, embellished by a line of Rumi’s poetry which reads “The same wind that uproots trees [painters and sculptors, I assume] makes the grasses [photographers and filmmakers, apparently] shine,” bemoans the “sentimental militant iconography” of the “commissioned artists [who] often used a crude and elementary visual vocabulary that combined social realism, symbolism, and surrealism.” These artists are contrasted in Issa’s account to those who found a safe haven in calligraphy and “decorative art works, such as miniatures [sic]

⁸² Rose Issa, “Borrowed Ware,” in *Iranian Contemporary Art* (London: Barbican Centre, 2001), 24. Exhibition catalog.

watercolours of landscapes and still-lives.”⁸³ It is not a coincidence that the works presented at Barbican, almost invariably, comply with the presuppositions of high art in Western societies and follow the international formal style of contemporary art. Even those that are less easily accessible—calligraphies made by Reza Mafi [figure 1-5]—are supposed to represent Mafi’s “minimalist style” and satiate Issa’s fantasy for *Nasta’liq* calligraphy to be an abstraction of a “word, letter, or a page to its *purest* aspect” [emphasis mine].⁸⁴ It is difficult to find a logical thread that links artists at the *Iranian Contemporary Art* exhibition to one another. At the same time, the selection is not quite arbitrary; the erasure of an entire decade of artistic practice is a sign of a calculated selection that complies with the frames of legibility for the Euro-American spectator while it simultaneously draws the path to international visibility for local artists. The exhibition’s promise to place an emphasis on those artists epitomizing central aspects of the evolution of contemporary Iranian art—a grand historical concept that is at no time defined throughout the catalog—translates to an emphasis on artists of the نقاشی-خط (calligraphic painting) group of the 1950s and 1960s such as Nasrollah Afjé’i, Mohammad Ehsai, and Reza Mafi; established modernist artists, from Sohrab Sepehri (b. 1928) to Parvaneh Etemadi (b. 1948); and a great number of artists from the diaspora, including Siah Armajani, Monir Farmanfarmaian, Shirazeh Houshiary, Bahman Mohasses, and Shirin Neshat.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 19.

Another major exhibition, with a lofty publication of more than 300 pages in color, was *Entfernte Nähe: Neue Positionen Iranischer Künstler (Far Near Distance: Contemporary Positions of Iranian Artists)*, held at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. The program featured Iranian visual arts, film, music, dramatic arts, and literature. It consisted of a plastic arts exhibition, several performances, readings, conferences, concerts, and a series of film screenings. The major emphasis, however, was on contemporary visual arts and film, curated by Rose Issa. The program's publication, with the same title, was comprised of several essays, including those written by Shaheen Merali, Rose Issa, Tirdad Zolghadr, and Daryush Shaygan. The introduction provided by Merali, a London-based curator, entitled "Tehran-centric and Iranian-ity," offers a panoramic, and at times orientaling view, of the Iranian society, particularly its most populated urban site, Tehran. It briefly discusses "the chattering" classes' frustration with the warm reception of Western film festivals of the pastoral images of remote villages in Iranian cinema of the 1990s, ironically dubbed among the locals "poor-nography;"⁸⁵ it explains how Tehran's traffic has forced conversations in Taxis and how as a result Tehrani Taxi drivers "are some of the most philosophical of their mind;"⁸⁶ it examines, in a rather pedestrian manner, the ways through which space is "negotiated according to the temperament of the regime, the confidence of the economy, or, more recently, in consideration of International trade and

⁸⁵ Shaheen Merali, "Tehran-centric and Iranianity," in *Far Near Distance: Contemporary Positions of Iranian Artists* (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2004), 22.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

capital needs;⁸⁷ and reads the statistical data of nose plastic surgeries among “Iranian cosmopolitan woman [sic]” as a sign of “gradual disobedience”⁸⁸ of the young females. There is, surprisingly enough, no discussion of contemporary Iranian art in the introduction of a book published on the occasion of an exhibition of contemporary art in Iran.

Zolghadr’s essay, “Framing Iran: A Coffee-Table Genealogy,” on the other hand, remains critical of “any catalogue of icons endowed with the privilege of epitomising Iran in Western Europe,” and of “any xeno-instrumentarium of metonymies, synecdoches, case studies, gentlemen’s agreements, personal destinies, master discourses, dinner table anecdotes and other quasi-allegorical knick-knacks used for quasi-allegorical hypothesis on Iran...”⁸⁹ Zolghadr locates the tremendous success of Iranian artists on the international stage in the mid-1990s major shift in the “terms of intercultural supply and demand.”⁹⁰ For him, it was the mid-90s during which, “local artists started flaunting international sales figures, and Iranian filmmakers and academics began holding moving talks for understanding audiences in progressive European venues with glossy catalogues.” As such, the sudden burgeoning of Iranian contemporary art is a consequence of the global art world’s call for “testimonies to local realities, packaged in a distinct, cosmopolitan style.”⁹¹

⁸⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁸⁹ Tirdad Zolghadr, “Framing Iran: A Coffee-Table Genealogy,” in *Far Near Distance: Contemporary Positions of Iranian Artists* (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2004), 40-41.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 44.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Zolghadr argues that this binary tension “reflects another unsolved dualism; the art historical dilemma between formal and contextual analysis of art.”⁹² The problem with Zolghadr’s narrative, however, is that he situates the entire dilemma of internationalization of art in a “lose/lose situation,” where historical, social, and cultural contextualization of artists from the non-West is tantamount to essentializing and reducing their works, whereas avoiding references to “conditions of production will prompt accusations of aestheticism, or, even worse, a critical reception that is truly horrific in its arbitrary culturalist presumptions.”⁹³ Despite making perceptive arguments and a self-reflexive insight to his role as a “comprador curator”⁹⁴ of Iranian contemporary art, as Dabashi describes him, Zolghadr constructs a false duality between contextualization and attention to figural and plastic properties of artworks; a duality that one rarely faces in writing on, say, Anselm Kiefer or Gerhard Richter, both historically and socially contextualized with sufficient attention to the plasticity of their œuvre. “From which type of aesthetic tradition of modernity are we to validate the inclusion of non-Western geographies in the Western canon of art?”⁹⁵ is the more pressing question from a wider perspective, raised aptly by Barriendos, to which Zolghadr and his fellow contributors to *Entfernte Nähe*, including Shaygan and Mir-Ahmad Mir-Ehsan, remain woefully oblivious.⁹⁶

⁹² Ibid., 45.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Hamid Dabashi, “Artists without Borders: On Contemporary Iranian Art,” in *Contemporary Iranian Artists: Since the Revolution*, ed. Octavio Zaya (San Sebastian, Spain: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005).

⁹⁵ Barriendos, “Geopolitics of Global Art,” 99.

A more striking example of problematic curatorial approaches to contemporary art in Iran is the Chelsea Art Museum's show, *Iran Inside Out* (June 26 – September 5, 2009), which included fifty-six Iranian artists from “inside” Iran and diasporic artists from the “outside.” The show, as Media Farzin—a reviewer for *Bidoun* magazine on contemporary Middle Eastern art—writes, aspired to “challenge neo-Orientalism and media clichés through a counter-narrative voiced by Iran’s artists, and drew on a talented lineup that ranged from modernist painters to Photoshop aesthetes.”⁹⁷ Farzin’s uncritical celebration of *Iran Inside Out* fails to see the ways through which the exhibition not only falls short of challenging neo-Orientalism, but rather instrumentalizes the works of Iranian artists to provide evidence to the benevolent promises of multicultural sensitivity of Western societies. In the introduction to the catalog *Iran Inside Out*, the managing director of the Chelsea Art Museum, Till Fellrath, criticizes the American mass media’s negative portrayal of Iran. Setting to reveal to the American public that Iran has more to offer culturally than simply being an “axis of evil,” Fellrath writes that the exhibition “aims to promote the common humanity that binds all people together.”⁹⁸ The

⁹⁶ The final text of the book published by the Berlin-based Haus der Kulturen der Welt is written by Issa, entitled “The Fabric of Life and Art,” where after quoting a line by Rumi, she cites a Persian colloquial expression “This too shall pass.” Issa maintains that this attitude, manifest in the expression, comes from a “deeply rooted spiritual belief that everything we have is temporary,” which she locates in the Iranian psyche since medieval times and introduces as an point of departure for interpreting contemporary Iranian art. Cf. Rose Issa, “The Fabric of Life and Art,” in *Far Near Distance: Contemporary Positions of Iranian Artists* (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2004), 139.

⁹⁷ Media Farzin, “Iran Inside Out,” *Bidoun*, no. 19 (Spring 2010) <http://bidoun.org/articles/iran-inside-out> (access date: January 12, 2016).

⁹⁸ Till Fellrath, “Forward,” in *Iran Inside Out: Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists* (New York: Chelsea Art Museum, 2009) (no pagination).

introduction is followed by New York-based gallery owner Leila Taghania-Milani Heller's preface, who having spent more than ten years "working with a considerable amount [sic] of Persian artists from inside and outside Iran," writes that Iranian artists have been making "statements" about the country and the art itself.⁹⁹ This is precisely the rampant kind of treatment of Iranian contemporary art that not only emphasizes on the legibility of artworks in expense of their figural complexities, but also as Kamran Rastegar observes about *Iran Inside Out*, it positions "the exhibition as fundamentally anthropological, introducing Iran to 'the West,' whether to counter stereotypes or to assert the value of what is termed Iranian culture."¹⁰⁰

In his review of the show for the *New York Times*, published on July 2009, Holland Cotter astutely observes that "It is a mistake to reduce new Iranian art to a checklist of social causes, particularly those dear to the hearts of many American viewers." Cotter is more critical and insightful toward the presumptions of the American spectators than Farzin appears to be. Yet, with an uncritical attitude toward the curatorial decisions of the show, he praises the exhibition's organizers, Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, for including works without blunt messages, such as "Ahmad Morshedloo's tender paintings of sleepers, Reza Paydari's portrait of school friends and the mysterious little films of Shoja Azari [...]."¹⁰¹ One example of what he fails to examine is Bardaouil's juxtaposition of Morshedloo's portrait of a young boy lying on a

⁹⁹ Leila Taghania-Milani Heller, "Preface," in *Iran Inside Out: Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists* (New York: Chelsea Art Museum, 2009) (no pagination).

¹⁰⁰ Kamran Rastegar, "Iran Inside Out: Group Show, Chelsea Art Museum (Review)," *Arab Studies Journal* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2010), 345.

¹⁰¹ Holland Cotter, "Iran Inside Out," *New York Times* (New York: July 23, 2009).

wooden box with a photo-installation by Shahram Entekhabi. Bardaouil filled the wall on top of Morshedloo's painting with Entekhabi's prostitutes advertising cards that are censored with a black marker making them appear as if they are wearing the chador. In a video interview, the curator makes a rather strange connection between the two works, implying that the prostitutes in Entekhabi's work are in the dreams of the young sleeping boy in Morshedloo's extraordinarily executed painting. In yet another strange remark, Bardaouil suggests that the sexual fantasies of Iranian male teenagers are confiscated by Iran's theocratic government and argues that this juxtaposition is a critique of this condition¹⁰²—as if a curator may simply collage the works of artists to manufacture a new work that better satisfies the audience, who during the tumultuous summer of 2009 were yearning to know more about Iranian politics than its art.

The Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris' *Iran: Unedited History 1960-2014* is another case in point. I visited the show in summer 2014 and was quite puzzled, to say the least, by the haphazard selection of artworks and historical documents that were put on display to create an holistic image of modern and contemporary Iran for the eager European visitor—perhaps, an “unedited” historical depiction as the title promised. The exhibition was arranged in three chronological order: The years of “modernization” (1960-1978); Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war (1979-1988); and Contemporary matters (1989- 2014). The introductory text at the exhibition claimed that its aim is to “highlight the strong connections that exist between visual

¹⁰² *Iran Inside Out* (documentary video, digital format) (New York, 2009). <http://chelseartmuseum.org/exhibits/2009/iraninsideout/index.html> (access date: February 11, 2011).

culture and the various legacies that visual culture has generated or renewed, and to do this through corpora that are both coherent and heterogeneous.”¹⁰³ It continues by stating that “Each of the artists in their own particular way formulates a reaction to the historical moment to which they belong. These are artists, filmmakers and cultural producers who are attentive to the history of images and to documentary traditions but who are also subject to the power relationships and ideological conflicts of contemporary Iran.”¹⁰⁴

Marking these artworks as reactions formulated to a “historical moment,” which is defined in a relatively conventional chronological sequence (modernization, revolution and war, and the contemporary), is either a reiteration of the necessity of historical contextualization of art, or, it suggests a reductive understanding of artistic practice as a reactionary activity determined only by historical change. The second explanation appears to be more apposite once viewed in light of the arbitrary selection of artists and “cultural producers” chosen for the exhibition. The opening series of oil paintings and collages by Bahman Mohasses and Behjat Sadr, is followed by a section entitled “Archaeology of the Final Decade,” curated by Vali Mahlouji, which presented the avant-garde art scene in Iran of the 1960s and 70s. It also offered audio/visual documents of the Shiraz-Persepolis Festival of Arts, an international summer arts festival patronized by Farah Pahlavi, former queen of Iran, for eleven consecutive years between 1967 to 1977.

¹⁰³ Catherine David, et al, “Iran: Unedited History 1960-2014” (Paris: Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2014) <http://www.mam.paris.fr/fr/expositions/exposition-unedited-history> (access date: December 22, 2015).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

The exhibition's first section featured a series of photographs by the late Kaveh Golestan, entitled *Shahr-e No*, a poignant documentation of marginalized Iranian prostitutes, who lived and worked in a peripheral district of Tehran with the same name [figure 1-6]. This is followed by charting the years of the Iranian revolution and war against Iraq in the second section of the exhibition, including photography, posters, and the cinema of the "sacred defense," the latter solely represented by Morteza Avini's documentaries of the war front entitled *حقيقت* (*Truth*, 1980-81). That Avini, an architect turned photographer and filmmaker, with his state-sponsored didactic, yet lyrical documentary style chronicling the years of war between Iran and Iraq is incongruently present among the elite "fine artists" who consistently dominate the exhibition spaces outside the country, is only a marker of curatorial tokenism, rather than a serious commitment to alternative "cultural productions" coming from Iran. There is an entire article in the exhibition's catalog on Avini, "Morteza Avini et la populisme d'avant-garde," where Hamed Yousefi explains how Avini is influenced by the artistic currents of modernism and Iranian intellectual scene of the 1960s and 1970s ("des divers courants du modernisme artistique et intellectuel iranien durant les années 1960 et 1970").¹⁰⁵ Locating Avini's "modernism" in his awareness of the ideological limits set by the very medium he utilizes, i.e., the moving image, to deliver the message of the Revolution as well as its incongruity with the com-

¹⁰⁵ Hamed Yousefi, "Morteza Avini et la populisme d'avant-garde," in *Unedited History: Séquences du moderne en Iran des années 1960 à nos jours* (Paris: Musée d'Art moderne de la ville de Paris/Arc, 2014), 96.

mandments of the Sharia, Yousefi argues that Avini tried to escape the dominating dispositions of the medium by way of “mastering their [Western] techniques” to undo the humanist tradition and to relocate God at the center of the world again.¹⁰⁶

The incommensurability of Avini’s aesthetics and his “ideological use” of the medium—if we take Yousefi’s argument seriously—with those of other artists present at the exhibition, even those simply deemed as documentary photography, encourages the audience to view his work as a symptomatic example of state-sponsored ideological art. There is nearly no attention to Avini’s *روایتِ فتح* (*Chronicles of Victory*)’s visual parameters, his aesthetic choices in documenting the war, and the technical complexities, or lack thereof, of his work. When there is any, such as a brief mention of his use of over-the-shoulder shot and religious music, it is all to verify the predetermined narrative that reduces his work to a single word, “ideological,” making only one message loudly heard: “La guerre, c’est cool! Et c’est une des portes du paradis.”¹⁰⁷ The entire curatorial attention is centered on his ideological position vis-à-vis the West and the moving image as a predominantly Western medium, while his ability to play the aberrant case on display bears witness to the purportedly egalitarian attitudes of the exhibition’s curators as well as that of the European institution.

The catalog covers a wide range of writers who in one way or another strive to illuminate their readers about the socio-political conditions of contemporary Iranian art: Morad Montazami, in an almost deterministic way, finds the historical narrative of the Iranian oil industry

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 97.

as the underlying cause of major artistic practices in Iran;¹⁰⁸ Bavand Behpour argues, in his “Le double système de production d’images en Iran après la Révolution,” that the globalization of contemporary art has precipitated a relative freedom with which young Iranian artists are able to explore images not already exploited by the official visual regimes put in place by the government and produce their own icons;¹⁰⁹ and, Anoush Ganjipour’s criticism of Iranian artists chastises them for being only revolutionary in their aesthetics while conservative in their politics—as if the former is just there to serve the latter.¹¹⁰ With no exception, they all set forward grand historical narratives or sociological analyses that are supposed to explain the majority of artistic tendencies and formal preferences of Iranian contemporary artists. But, what gives the exhibition’s ethnographic attitude toward its objects away is Catherine David’s “Une passion documentaire,” where she simply ascribes a passion for ethnography to Iranian photographers:

¹⁰⁸ Morad Montazami, “Pétrole surmoi,” in *Unedited History: Séquences du moderne en Iran des années 1960 à nos jours*, ed. Catherine David and Morad Montazami (Paris: Musée d’Art moderne de la ville de Paris/Arc, 2014), 36-40. Also, cf. Morad Montazami, “بهمن محمص در موج خیز سیاه تاریخ” (“Bahman Mohasses in the Black Wave of History”), *Herfeh: Honarmand* 12, no. 54 (Tehran: Spring 2015), 96-99.

¹⁰⁹ Bavand Behpour, “Le double système de production d’images en Iran après la Révolution,” in *Unedited History: Séquences du moderne en Iran des années 1960 à nos jours*, ed. Catherine David and Morad Montazami (Paris: Musée d’Art moderne de la ville de Paris/Arc, 2014), 102-106.

¹¹⁰ Anoush Ganjipour writes, “Le paradoxe que l’on constate dans l’art iranien d’aujourd’hui doit nous amener à réfléchir: en Iran sont légion les artistes dont l’œuvre exprime une politique radicale au sein du discours esthétique; alors que, dans les circonstances politiques concrètes du pays, ils soutiennent sans ambages une position conservatrice qui, sceptique à l’égard de toute radicalisation des revendications, n’aspire souvent qu’à des réformes étatiques du *status quo*.” Cf. Anoush Ganjipour, “Art et politique: les chicanes d’un rapport,” in *Unedited History: Séquences du moderne en Iran des années 1960 à nos jours*, ed. Catherine David and Morad Montazami (Paris: Musée d’Art moderne de la ville de Paris/Arc, 2014), 16-20.

Thus falls a true “documentary passion” for the diversity of landscapes, peoples (Persians, Arabs, Azeris, Baluchis, Kurds, Turkmen and others) and architectures (the great empires of the past, or of Islam) throughout the history of photography in Iran and it is shared by all photographers; Bahman Jalali and Kaveh Golestan as its pioneers, or today Jassem Ghazbanpour and Behzad Jaz (or Tahmineh Monzavi or Mazdak Ayari in more marginal or intimate areas), Iranian photographers exhibit a tenacious and always renewed curiosity for diversity and the complexity of the physical and human geography of the countries they explore, one generation after another, to take note of changes and upheavals.¹¹¹

For David, the photography of the Pahlavi period sheds light on raw social problems “behind the scene of the official images of modernization led by the Shah [Mohammad Reza Pahlavi],”¹¹² while the 1979 revolution and the consequent 8-year war with Iraq opened a “special chapter” in the documentary photography and a massive corpus of images that are yet to be collected and studied. Having inherited the “documentary protocols developed”¹¹³ by Golestan and Jalali among others, the younger generation of Iranian photographers, some of the least known in Iran and internationally, manifest a desire to understand and represent the complex forms of a society that is deeply transformed.¹¹⁴ These artists, whose works are dismissed by

¹¹¹ Catherine David, “Une passion documentaire,” in *Unedited History: Séquences du moderne en Iran des années 1960 à nos jours*, ed. Catherine David and Morad Montazami (Paris: Musée d’Art moderne de la ville de Paris/Arc, 2014), 124.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 125.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹¹⁴ What might at first glance appear to be an intriguing quality of the exhibition, that is to display works of less internationally established artists, turns out to be a curatorial contrivance that helps solidify David’s conviction that Iranian photography is inherently inclined toward documentary style. The works of these artists, such as Monzavi or Jaz, neatly fit within David’s criteria for straightforward documentary photography, lacking enough visual complexity to resist straightforward interpretations.

galleries that favor “self-exoticizing and pseudo-critical subjects,” are praised by David for recording “with accuracy and sensitivity, without pathos or formal gestures, facts and events observed in a society with which they maintain a difficult or complicated relationship.”¹¹⁵

This is an example, *par excellence*, of the benevolent patronizing tone with which David grants visibility to the inheritors of Iran’s documentary photography, who are ignored by galleries. The key component present in their works is “accuracy” and the one which is absent is “formal gestures,” which appears to be a superfluous element of the work of art. Her examples are quite illuminating: Monzavi’s photographs of transvestites in Tehran or Behzad Jaz’s documentation of the everyday life of students of the theological seminaries in Tehran and Qom, which David passionately defends against any accusation of having essentializing traits.¹¹⁶ I agree with David that Jaz’s *Talabeh Studies* (2001-2002) is quite straightforward [figures 1-7 and 1-8]. In fact, they seem to employ the very subject matter which David sees as a guarantor of international visibility. Beyond his often voyeuristic gazes into personal lives of the seminary students, the very choice of documenting the interiors of Tehran and Qom seminaries and the living conditions of their residents suggest a calculated move resulting in seldom seen photographs that are able to garner curatorial attention. *Talabeh Studies* hardly shows a genuine

¹¹⁵ “Sans visibilité dans les galeries—qui privilégient des sujets auto-exotisants et pseudo-critiques—, ces travaux documentaires enregistrent avec précision et sensibilité, sans pathos ni gesticulations formelles, des faits et des événements observés dans une société avec laquelle ils entretiennent des rapports difficiles ou compliqués.” Ibid.

¹¹⁶ David describes Jaz’s photographs as “Portraits singuliers ou de groupe, repas et lectures de textes en commun, examens, mais aussi moments de détente ou de recueillement, ces images restituent la singularité des êtres autant que certaines formes de l’expérience spirituelle, jamais essentialisée.” Ibid.

relation between the photographer and his objects; this is quite obvious in the derisive tone of the very title of the series—apparently its linguistic twist has not clearly registered for David.

More important here, however, is David's and her team's failure to see the ethnographic and thus exoticizing impulses behind the exhibition's obsession with documentation—more specifically, the documentation and commodification of the everyday lives of the ethnic "other." In an intriguing correspondence between Majid Akhgar, an Iranian critic, and Morad Montazami, one of the curators of the *Iran Unedited History*, published in *Herfeh: Honarmand* journal, Akhgar poignantly questions the exhibition's success in breaking with anthropologizing approaches to contemporary art from the peripheries; a trait quite prevalent among modern art museums in global metropolises. At the core of this approach, he situates an emphasis on "visual culture" in an institution of "fine arts"¹¹⁷ and argues that in the past couple of decades a new rule for a division of cultural labor has monopolized the "production of art" on behalf of the global north, whereas the function relegated to the global south is the "production of culture."¹¹⁸ In relation to this general observation, Akhgar's pointed critique aims to expose the profoundly problematic choices made by the curatorial team by questioning the precritical presumptions made by David in situating a "documentary passion" in the works of artists from

¹¹⁷ In his third and last letter and in response to Montazami's claim that the curators had deliberately chosen to undo the museum's role in harboring "fine art," Akhgar points to the discrepancies in *Iran Unedited History* in that on the one hand it places a great deal of emphasis on "visual culture" while simultaneously celebrates the works of Bahman Mohasses, Behjat Sadr, and others who unmistakably belong to a "fine arts" tradition. Cf. Majid Akhgar and Morad Montazami, "Correspondence between Majid Akhgar and Morad Montazami," *Herfeh: Honarmand* 12, no. 56 (Summer 2015), 177.

¹¹⁸ Majid Akhgar and Morad Montazami, "Correspondence between Majid Akhgar and Morad Montazami," 172.

the Middle East. Finding David's postulation, that Iranian artists persistently document their historical events, one that will only cause Iranian critics to chuckle, Akhgar questions the double standards of European curators, who suddenly move from sophisticated readings of artists such as Jeff Wall, Chantal Ackerman, and Eva Hesse toward ethnographic statements about Middle Eastern artists and the entire region. Writing on a famous Iranian filmmaker, Akhgar asks, "Why is Parviz Kimiavi asked to deracinate selections from a number of his movies made in different historical periods with different narrative-subject matter contexts and edit them in parallel and intersecting shapes on five TV screens and present it as a 'video installation'?" For him, it is difficult "to escape the conclusion that this work, whether intentional or not, has no aim but to make the subject 'up to date' and easy-to-digest for the Western spectator for whom everything is reduced to a décor and a familiar 'snapshot'."¹¹⁹

I say with little uncertainty that Akhgar's critical position is not shared among the majority of those involved in the contemporary Iranian art scene, whether writers and critics or artists and curators. The commonly shared belief assumes any visibility on the global scene, especially at prestigious venues such as the MAM, an opportunity for Iranian contemporary art. *Iran:*

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

«چرا خانم داوید - به رغم تأکیدی که بر واسازی کلیشه‌های فرهنگی پسااستعماران دارند - که در جاهای دیگر با جف وال و شانتال آکرمن و اوا هسه سر و کله می‌زنند زمانی که به خاورمیانه می‌آیند از «شور مستندنگارانه» سخن می‌گویند؟ (جدای از اینکه خود این تز، یعنی تأکید بر شور و پیگیری مستمر ایرانی‌ها در امر مستند کردن واقعیت‌ها و تاریخ‌شان، چندان قابل دفاع نیست. فکر می‌کنم شنیدن این حرف لیخندی بر لب بیشتر ناظران فرهنگی داخلی خواهد نشاند). . . چرا باید از پرویز کیمیای خوست که تصاویری از چندین فیلم خود را از زمینه‌های روایی - مضمونی، و تاریخ‌های جداگانه‌ی خود بکند، به اشکالی موازی و متقاطع روی پنج صفحه‌ی تلویزیون همزمان با یکدیگر تدوین کند، و در قالب یک «چیدمان ویدئویی» ارائه دهد؟ این، طبیعتاً می‌تواند انتخاب هنرمند یا کیوریتور یک نمایشگاه باشد. اما اجتناب از این نتیجه‌گیری دشوار است که این کار، خواسته یا ناخواسته، با هدف سهل‌الهمضم کردن موضوع، «روزآمد کردن» آن، و تقلیل همه چیز به دکور و «نمایی» آشنا برای بازشناسی تماشاگر غربی صورت گرفته است - یا به هر حال تأثیر آن در عمل بیشتر به این سمت میل می‌کند.»

«گفت و گوی مجید اخگر و مراد منتظمی»، حرفه: هنرمند، جلد ۱۲، شماره‌ی ۵۶ (تابستان ۱۳۹۳، تهران)، ۱۶۸-۱۷۸.

Unedited History was far more celebrated than any other show in Iranian media within the past ten years and except for Akhgar's position in *Herfeh: Honarmand* it is difficult to find any critical engagement with the exhibition warranting a rereading here.

Instead of finding fault with Bardaouil for his crude "curatorial intervention," or with David for projecting the Western institutional desire for more "veridical" images from Iran onto Iranian contemporary lenswork artists, or with Issa for her want of raw material, what I find more necessary to critically navigate are the conditions under which such curatorial approaches to contemporary Iranian art are made possible and institutionally supported. As John Clark aptly argues, in his "Histories of the Asian 'New': Biennales and Contemporary Asian Art," dominant international exhibitions play a prescriptive role as "consecrators of esteemed practice and work." Clark further coins the term "curatoriate" in order to render the "quasi-ruling function" of a select group of international curators whose "opinions and subsequent selections have canon-making effects" in the scene of global contemporary art.¹²⁰ The relatively unknown contemporary art scene of Iran offered an "unexplored site" for a number of curators to either exercise their power in determining the "qualifying" artworks for international display or to climb the ladder of cultural corporate success by branding themselves as distinct experts of the art of Iran and the Middle East. The west-ward looking politics of the TMOCA, as I discussed earlier, was never able to sustain a solid ground for Iranian artists who did not want to follow the blue-print of a global art world dominated by the West. As such, these

¹²⁰ John Clark, "Histories of the Asian 'New': Biennales and Contemporary Asian Art," in *Asian Art History in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Vishakha N. Desai (Williamstown, M.A.: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2007), 232.

international curators not only did not face an institutionally-backed resistance to their imposing taste, but were instead greeted openly by the TMOCA and local galleries, curators, critics, and artists. Their agenda could be summarized as hunting new unknown talents from less-known geographies to present them in the West, while simultaneously introducing the globally admissible visual vocabulary to Iranian artists.

That the institutional support of contemporary art practice in Iran, championed by and centralized in the TMOCA, was in the nascent stages of its formation led to a scarcity of theoretically established discourses, which ultimately resulted in embracing and rehearsing by the TMOCA the dominant narratives of the non-Western art ushered in by European curators. Thus, the influx of Western curators after the mid 1990s marked an increasingly consequential development in the Iranian contemporary art scene. As I have explained here, the two prevailing *modi operandi* of these curators were promoting easily accessible works of art,¹²¹ with less complex visual vocabularies, and advocating a turn toward either the documentary or the conspicuously “national.” There is an entrenched logic here that legitimizes such functions of the Western curatorial practices as it pertains to the art of the non-West. To ignore the hegemonic status of the global art curatorship, sustained by the grand narratives of Western Art History, seems rather naïve. It is difficult to look past the ways through which Western institutions of

¹²¹ Much has been said on the global market’s inclination toward easily accessible artworks in which the meaning, or the message, of the work seems to be readily available to its Western spectators. For apt discussions of this subject look at Monica Juneja, “Global Art History and the ‘Burden of Representation’,” in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Hans Belting, Jakob Birken, and Andrea Budensieg (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2011) and Chin-Tao Wu, “Worlds Apart: Problems of Interpreting Globalised Art,” *Third Text* 21, no. 6 (November 2007).

art (academia, curatorial spaces, art media) place and support the frames of legibility for non-Western objects, not only determining which artworks are worthy of display, but also demarcating the limits of their signification.

THE PRIVATIZING EFFECT

Much has been postulated on the extent to which hegemonic Western art markets condition art practices around the globe. That the institutions of art, as Walter Mignolo suggests, still belong to “the imperial/colonial paradigm,” dramatically reduces the radical hermeneutic possibilities of works of art that contest institutionalization of meaning production in favor of integration of the object into the familiar epistemic frames of Western knowledge.¹²² Bound to neoliberal globalization and its central imperative of privatized economy, global institutions of art turn into an Orientalized internationalism for new cultural commodities that are readily available to be assimilated into well-rehearsed institutional paradigms. As Chin-Tao Wu observes, in this sort of Western internationalism, Oriental and African artists are present as token figures granting Museums and their multinational sponsors the “global” status. Their

¹²² Walter Mignolo, “Museums in the Colonial Horizon of Modernity: Fred Wilson’s Mining the Museum (1992),” in *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, ed. Jonathan Harris (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 81-82.

inclusion is a “politically correct gesture representing the multinationals who are embracing globalisation not only in economic terms, but in cultural terms too.”¹²³

Contemporary art proves to be an excellent source of supply for neoliberal capitalism’s menacing inclination toward commodification of culture and everyday life. As the sociologist Jeremy Rifkin argues, “the whole of the cultural commons is mined for valuable potential culture meanings that can be transformed by the arts into commodifiable experiences, purchasable in the economy.”¹²⁴ Peter Hitchcock, on the other hand, rightly warns us that the global expansion of neoliberal economy, or what we simply know as economic globalization, should not be conflated with cultural globalization.¹²⁵ Yet it is not difficult to see the ways through which the two are inextricably entwined and any attempt to intellectually disentangle one from the other inevitably results in conceding to neoliberalism the autonomous status of economics. In the art market, the most significant example of this autonomy is visible in the ideological coherence that neoliberalism bestows upon transnational institutions and global markets,

¹²³ Chin-Tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 175.

¹²⁴ Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism, Where all of Life is a Paid-For Experience* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher / Putnam (Penguin), 2001), 171.

¹²⁵ Peter Hitchcock, *Imaginary States: Studies in Cultural Transnationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 196-197.

Hitchcock argues that one form of cultural globalization is primarily concerned with multicultural accretion banking on “multiplicity *sui generis* as cultural capital.” The other form, for Hitchcock resembles the first, but “works on the principle of consumption,” converting quality into quantity. As he aptly observes, in this form, “it is not the addition of culture that is at issue, but its availability to be ingested that strikes the consumer as a very global thing to do” (198).

which allows for a seamless expansion of Western galleries, biennials, auction houses, and curators, as arbiters of the global art scene, all around the world.¹²⁶

Iranian contemporary art, as I have shown through various examples here, has been subject to commodification and assimilation, like other non-Western art from all corners of the globe. Yet, what marks the case of Iran as a rather exceptional one is that despite its significant contribution to and presence in the “art of the region,” due to multiple U.S. and European economic embargos and the internal policies determined by the government it remains isolated and out of reach of many multinational corporations, global art dealers, auction houses, and satellite expansion projects such as those executed in the gulf states. Furthermore, the TMOCA and the Institute for Promotion of Contemporary Visual Arts,¹²⁷ as the two largest funding sources of contemporary art practices in Iran, are public institutions with direct ties to the government. While the exponential growth of privately-owned art galleries in Tehran and some other major cities in Iran has been a relatively consistent tide since the early 2000s, it is only as recent as 2011 that some of these galleries, usually with connection to financial institutions, have commissioned or sponsored works of art.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Also look at Imre Szeman’s essay “Imagining the Future: Globalization, Post-Modernism and Criticism,” where he quite insightfully unfolds the significant role globalization plays in capitalist reification. For Szeman, “globalization hides reality from us even as it proposes to explain it” by way of simultaneously naming both a new reality and a new concept that is required to make sense of that reality (168-9). Cf. Imre Szeman, “Imagining the Future: Globalization, Post-Modernism and Criticism” in *Metaphors of Globalization: Mirrors, Magicians and Mutinies*, eds. Markus Kornprobst et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹²⁷ مؤسسه توسعه‌ی هنرهای تجسمی.

A major step in Sami'azar's plan for contemporary Iranian art on the international scene was to follow the neoliberal capitalist model of free trade and global markets run by transnational corporates and institutions. In a June 2010 note entitled "مصائب برگزاری کریستی در تهران" (The Hassle of Organizing Christie's in Tehran)," Sami'azar claims that the credit for the presence of Christie's in the region and its fortunate growth into the most significant institution representing Middle Eastern art should be given to the TMOCA under his tenure. He writes that in 2000 a number of high-ranking officials from Christie's were invited to Iran, who despite their desire to open up a branch in a country that is a "cradle of civilization and has a large cultural production," took the branch of the auction house to Dubai.¹²⁹ Sami'azar further elaborates that what prevented Tehran to act as the host for Christie's regional branch, was not censorship, a problem shared among most gulf countries, but rather technical banking issues—in fact, US sanctions—preventing Iran from being a part of the international monetary circuits, which makes payments and online transactions impossible. Lamenting this missed opportunity and that the situation has not been rectified after almost ten years, he concludes that if the Iranian government facilitates international trade, "there are many who prefer Iran over the majority of gulf countries."¹³⁰ Clearly, Sami'azar envisioned the path to a successful integration with the global art world being one that requires yielding to the neoliberal capitalist

¹²⁸ The first notable art project sponsored by a private gallery in Iran was Azadeh Akhlaghi's staged photography series, entitled *By an Eyewitness*, which took three years to complete. The exhibition was funded and held in 2013 at Mohsen Art Gallery.

¹²⁹ Alireza Sami'azar, "مصائب برگزاری کریستی در تهران" (The Hassle of Organizing Christie's in Tehran)", *Ayeen*, no. 28-29 (May / June 2010), 83.

economy and its monetary apparatuses. Apparently, what prevented Iran from turning into a hub for Western auction houses and multinational corporates investing in contemporary art, was its “unfortunate” isolation from international trade, rather than a critical stance against the invasive marketization and commodification of contemporary art.

Despite his relative lack of success in securing a complete integration of the Iranian art scene in the global art market, Iran’s share in the sales figures, as well as in sales records, was disproportionately higher than all Middle Eastern countries. Christie’s, Sotheby’s, and Bonhams have been all able to establish themselves firmly in Dubai and Doha since the mid 2000s. It was only a decade past the inaugural auction of Christie’s in Dubai and the amount of its total sale already exceeded \$200m. In October 2007 alone, Christie’s sold Farhad Moshiri’s *یک دنیا* (*One World*) for \$601’000, more than seven-fold the initial estimate. Since 2006, the auction house has sold more than a million US dollars’ worth of Sedaghat Jabbari’s calligraphic-paintings and more than \$4.8m of Mohammad Ehsai’s—with \$1.16m alone for his *He Is the Merciful* in April 2008. In 2008, Parviz Tanavoli’s *The Wall (Oh, Persepolis)* was sold for \$2.84m and Charles Hossein Zenderoudis’ *Tchaar-Bagh* was auctioned for \$1.6m.¹³¹ The Sotheby’s, paired with *Harper’s Bazaar Art*, as its media partner, celebrates ten years of *Art Dubai* and its “traveling exhibition of twentieth-century Arab and Iranian sale.”¹³² Another major role player is

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ The auction’s information and sale figures are open to public on Christie’s official website. <http://www.christies.com/locations/salerooms/dubai> (access date: February 18, 2016).

¹³² The auction’s information and sale figures are open to public on Sotheby’s official website.

the British auction house, Bonhams, establishing itself in the region and holding biannual sales in Dubai since 2008. In its inaugural sale, thirty-three world records were broken and Farhad Moshiri's work, عشق (*Love*), was sold for over a million US dollars—this was the first time, according to Bonhams, that a “Middle Eastern artwork” passed the one million dollars threshold.¹³³

The lucrative markets of the Emirates along with their ambitious urban culturalization projects such as the Saadiyat Island, house to Louvre Abu Dhabi, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, and NYU's Abu Dhabi campus, offered a global outlet to those active on the contemporary Iranian art scene, allowing them to take part in the international market. A number of Tehran-based galleries either entirely migrated to Dubai, such as Ave Gallery, or, like in the case of E'temaad Gallery, opened branches in the UAE. The unprecedented success of some Iranian artists in the European auctions in such close proximity to Tehran not only promised the possibility of open markets in which financial success is to be sought and found, but also created a road map toward that success. The highest records of selling belonged to those artists, such as Moshiri or Ehsai, in whose works either Persian calligraphy played a significant role or constituted the entire visual vocabulary. As such, نقاشی-خط (calligraphic painting, or calligraphy-painting), or

<http://www.sothebys.com/en/news-video/blogs/all-blogs/cultural-crossroads/2016/03/celebrating-ten-years-art-dubai.html>.

¹³³ The auction's information and sale figures are open to public on Bonhams' official website. <http://www.bonhams.com/departments/mea/> (access date: February 20, 2016).

the use of Persian calligraphy as an ornament in the visual arts,¹³⁴ grew popular in spite of its conservative status among contemporary artists. The sudden change in Fereidoon Omid's oeuvre from abstract painting to works that are overcrowded with Persian calligraphy, or Sadegh Tirafkan's use of Persian script in his photo-installations are examples of when calligraphy appears to be more of an element artificially imposed to an artwork instead of a plastic necessity dictated by the aesthetic nature of the genre, the work's content, or the collective visual imagination of an historical period.¹³⁵

Few critics, such as Majid Akhgar and Iman Afsarian, wrote critically on the lamentable hegemony of the global art market, arguing that it has turned into a determining factor in the artistic choices made by Iranian artists, both in form and content.¹³⁶ Akhgar's analysis of the discontents of a globalized contemporary Iranian art, in his "جهانی شدن ایرانی شدن: تأملاتی درباره‌ی" (Globalization of Iranianization: Contemplating Iran's Contemporary Art Scene)," is wonderfully attentive to the socio-economic underpinnings of a global art world and its inseparable ties with global capitalism. The recent vicissitudes in arts, culture, and

¹³⁴ Many Iranian critics, including Barbad Golshiri, accuse Shirin Neshat of transforming Persian script into ornaments hollowed of any meaningful signification. I have written about my position against this accusation in the third chapter of this dissertation.

¹³⁵ Another case in point is the facile overuse of Persian traditional paintings, also known as Persian miniatures in contemporary painting.

¹³⁶ Majid Akhgar, "جهانی شدن ایرانی شدن: تأملاتی درباره‌ی صحنه‌ی هنر اخیر ایران" (Globalization of Iranianization: Contemplating Iran's Contemporary Art Scene)," *Herfeh: Honarmand*, no. 33 (Summer 2010), 10-29. Iman Afsarian, "ترس عقب ماندگی و مکانیسم دفاعی" (The Fear of Lagging Behind and the Defensive Mechanism)," *Herfeh: Honarmand*, no. 33 (Summer 2010), 2-9.

thought at a global level, he argues, are “linked to shifts in ‘hard’ realms of social action, and above all, to [shifts in] global economy.” If we accept this as a departing point,

And if, in fields such as politics and economics, we do not have confidence in panoptic and homogenizing radical solutions, which only afford us to abstractly say “no,” are we—as a producer or as a cultural critic—left with any other way but to validate this receptive and “near-sighted” kind of art that is based on the game of cultural difference? In other words, under such circumstances, other than “suicidal” artistic-political-theoretic options [...] is it possible to have a meaningful critical culture? From where and what topoi, from what point on this pervasive nexus, is such art able to define itself and take a stance against the status quo. Is the [social] force in our country, which finds democracy the best political option, and in the economic domain is disenchanted with governmental economics and “public good,” destined to also accept the cultural layer of the latest form of global capitalism?¹³⁷

Whether we take this passage as a rhetorical gesture refuting any possibility of disentangling global culturalism from global capitalism and its “dubious power relations [...] as a history of dominance,”¹³⁸ as I certainly tend to read it, or we take it at face value for an optimism of cultural autonomy, what remains a significant dimension of his argument is Akhgar’s conviction that any attempt to radically resist and critique the status quo cannot be reconciled with multicultural promises in defense of cultural difference. This is, precisely, what many contemporary Iranian artists and critics failed to see. As such, the artists turned their works into galvanized markers of cultural alterity, easily lending themselves to commodification and reductive interpretations.

¹³⁷ Akhgar, “Globalization of Iranianization,” 16.

¹³⁸ Hitchcock, *Imaginary States*, 196.

Iranian artists, Akhgar maintains, sharply sensed the prevalence of intellectual questions raised by globalization and well-rehearsed binaries of globality/locality and modernity/tradition in Western intellectual canons, and accordingly produced artworks congruent with the discursive frames enabled by such questions.¹³⁹ He continues by offering a content-based categorization of contemporary Iranian art to draw “a broad landscape” of the endemic subjects to which artists have attended. This is where Akhgar falls into the trap of reproducing the very same reductive interpretations of Iranian artists as many Western curators and institutions do, as I have shown previously, rubbing artist off of their semiotic complexities in favor of content-based generalizations. He throws Neshat, Ghadirian, and Shirana Shahbazi into the same melting pot, without acknowledging the tremendous visual and stylistic differences marking off their works. Or, Mehraneh Atashi, Nazgol Ansarinia, Fereydoun Ave, and Khosrow Hassanzadeh, despite their drastic incongruities, are brought together to represent those who juxtapose and link traditional Persian signs with semblances of quotidian life in contemporary Iran.

I am not suggesting that Iranian artists have always engaged with their subjects with sufficient critical obligation to ponder over the hermeneutic implications of their works on the global art scene; nor is it my point to acquit all artists from the accusation of exploiting the gainful global market. I am referring here only to categorizations that lack the same kind of commitment they require of artworks, in their treatment of the singularities of these objects. I am also weary of reducing numerous works to one-line interpretations, where works are only evaluated based on their immediate meanings for a Western audience. I am cognizant of the

¹³⁹ Akhgar, “Globalization of Iranianization,” 18.

methodological and didactic merits of the categories Akhgar has articulated. In fact, I do find myself in agreement with him on a large number of his examples; without delving into much detail, yet with a more substantialized argument, he writes on Shiva Ahmadi's series of works where she paints Arabesque, Paisley pattern, and other ornaments borrowed from Persian rugs, on oil barrels [figure 1-9]. For Akhgar the juxtaposition of these ornaments, connoting an Islamic and Iranian high culture, with the oil barrel suggests an incorporation of signs and images based on their "cultural denotations" and their attractive visual qualities instead of their relevance to the subject, ultimately resulting in a "bad poesies."¹⁴⁰

Ahmadi's regimentation of Persian and Islamic motifs on an oil barrel, or Ala Ebtekar's amalgamation of Zoroastrian figures, Islamic ornaments, and Persian traditional painting against a backdrop of Persian and Arabic book pages (another example Akhgar offers), are problematic insofar as they employ these visual elements as unmediated readymade objects (perhaps, to express cultural alterity), without making an effort to engage with them on their own terms as objects of rich visual traditions.¹⁴¹ This is where the convergence of Akhgar's

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 24-25.

¹⁴¹ From January to April 2016, Grey Art Gallery was the host of Global/Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran exhibition. The show, with a repetitive title and theme, features three artists from the younger generation (born or raised during the Islamic Republic in Iran) in contrast to Faramarz Pilemar (b. 1937), Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937), and Shohreh Feyzjou (b. 1955). Two of the three younger artists, Shahpour Pouyan (b. 1980) and Shiva Ahmadi (b. 1975) have incorporated Persian traditional paintings (miniatures) in their works. In an eclectic way, Ahmadi draws on visual compositions and iconographies of Persian paintings and Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, in order to "to convey messages and to reflect contemporary situations." Here, again, what is at work is an oversimplification of a long-established visual tradition (if not also that of Bosch's), employing a few components of it here and there, ultimately resulting in its commodification as a familiar "message" about war and politics in a dazzling 8-minute video, which "mirrors the unsettling and corrupt political atmosphere of the present day." Cf. Ally Mintz, "Shiva

criticism with the dominant (and reductive) Western interpretations of Iranian contemporary art gains relative pertinence; it is difficult to imagine that the reification of the Persian and Islamic visual vocabulary in the works of Ahmadi and Ebtekar is done without having a clear sense of the market value of such pastiche-like agglomerations of icons [figure 1-10].¹⁴²

Ahmadi,” in *Global/Local 1960-2015: Six Artists from Iran*, ed. Lynn Gumpert (New York: Grey Art Gallery, 2016), 47-51. Exhibition catalog.

The other artist, Shahpour Pouyan, exhibits a seemingly more sophisticated approach to Persian paintings. He removes all human and animal figures from digital reproductions of celebrated Persian paintings, leaving the landscapes (natural or architectural), elaborately reconstructing what would have, hypothetically, been behind omitted figures. For Pouyan, his Miniature Series aims to bring to the forefront the “terror already present in the miniatures concealed by the presence of similar sized figures.” Cf. Shahpour Pouyan, “Miniatures,” <http://shahpourpouyan.com/miniatures> (access date: February 27, 2016).

Khaled Malas, who has written the essay on Pouyan’s works in the exhibition catalog, argues that by foregrounding the landscape and architecture, Pouyan “wrenches place away from its secondary role—the site of an unfolding narrative illustrating an accompanying text—to become the singular stake of the encounter unfolding before us. The spectacle that remains troubles, disturbs, and even evokes terror” (91-92). I find this reading to be in error due to its failure to acknowledge the presence of the text (Persian calligraphic poetics remaining on Pouyan’s reconstructed miniatures) as the most significant instrument of narration. It seems that for the author, Persian texts, in their unintelligibility for the Western audience, lose their function for narrating a story and are transformed into visual ornaments. Moreover, what renders this series as another problematic use of Persian painting is in its disregard for the internal logic of the original paintings. To claim that similar-sized figures conceal the power relations embedded in the image, is to completely miss the point of a tradition that does not subscribe to the rational Renaissance perspective. As Homayoun Sirizi insightfully observes, Pouyan’s move here is tantamount to placing one’s point of view (or one’s camera) behind the figures—a move that is entirely at odds with the internal protocols of the Persian painting tradition—not in order to deconstruct the image, as it fails to express any commitment to the text itself, but in order to force the image into compliance with Western frames of intelligibility.

Cf. Khaled Malas, “Shahpour Pouyan,” in *Global/Local 1960-2015: Six Artists from Iran*, ed. Lynn Gumpert (New York: Grey Art Gallery, 2016), 89-97. Exhibition catalog.

Homayoun Sirizi, personal communication with the author, July 20, 2015.

¹⁴² In his introduction to *Ethnic Marketing*, a pamphlet accompanying an exhibition with the same title in Zurich and Tehran (2004, 2006, respectively), Tirdad Zolghadr asserts that the West’s active role in defining the cultural supply is too plainly visible to be ignored. He writes, “To state the obvious, a number of artists and intellectuals world-wide are quite comfortable with the idea of using mainstream Euro-American expectations to their own advantage, but only a few are in a position to do so” (12). This “few,” I believe, has exponentially grown since 2006, when Zolghadr wrote his introduction to *Ethnic Marketing*. Cf. Tirdad Zolghadr, “Ethnic Marketing: An Introduction,” in *Ethnic Marketing* (Lausanne: JRP|Ringier, 2006).

DOMESTICATING PRIVATIZATION

Whereas a desire for a decreased economic role of the Iranian state and an openness toward private market dates back to 1989 (Rafsanjani's government), it was only during the reformist government of President Khatami that an ambitious plan to privatize large sectors of national industries, "including telecommunications, banking and insurance, power generation, and even the upstream oil and natural gas sector," were set in motion under the Third Five-Year Economic Development Plan.¹⁴³ Seen as a threat to the state's control of the economy and simultaneously as a move toward its liberalization, the plan faced major opposition from the left and the right political factions.¹⁴⁴ Yet, Khatami's period witnessed a more successful liberalization in cultural and social domains. The government supported many commercial and private initiatives in various artistic fields. In visual arts, not only private galleries enjoyed the support of Iranian Center for Plastic Arts, but also the permissive policies of the Center lifted the requirement previously in place for private galleries to obtain approval before each exhi-

¹⁴³ Shirzad Azad, "The Politics of Privatization in Iran," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 14, no. 4 (December 2010), 65.

¹⁴⁴ The privatization policy continues to be a contentious matter in Iran's economy. In 2007, the Iranian supreme leader issued a decree, calling for accelerated implementation of the privatization policies outlined in the revised Article 44 of the constitution. By the end of Ahmadinejad's first term, approximately a third of what was initially planned was transferred to the private sector. By the end of 2010, the Islamic Parliament Research Center's report on the progress of privatization in Iran declared that only 13% of privatized industries have been transferred to the "real" private sector and the remaining 87% is in control of semi-governmental foundations. For more information on privatization in Iran look at annual reports published by the Iranian Privatization Organization as well as reports published by the Islamic Parliament Research Center.

bition. It was during these years that the number of private galleries, government-funded annuals and biennials, and international collaborative projects increased in great numbers. However, it wasn't until the late 2000s and early 2010s when private business owners and affluent sectors of the society, mostly in search of cultural capital, began investing in the visual arts, largely by way of establishing their own galleries.¹⁴⁵ The exponential growth of the international market for contemporary Iranian art and its success on the global stage in the past two decades drew popular attention to the newfound riches of private galleries, both as an investment opportunity and a promise of cultural prestige. In 2015 alone, twenty galleries opened in Tehran, bringing the number of privately owned galleries to more than 120, many of them with several branches and offshoots.¹⁴⁶

A rather extreme example of emulating Western institution is the case of Tehran Auction, which was established in 2012. Tehran Auction, an “endeavor to fulfill the increasing interest in modern and contemporary Iranian art,” claims to support domestic art as a “key basis for the international market.”¹⁴⁷ Not surprisingly, the auction house was founded by the TMOCA's former director, Alireza Sami'azar. The total sales of the auction house, since 2012, exhibits a staggering growth; within four years the number rose from IRR 21.5b (approximately \$615'000) to IRR 210.4b (\$6.5m)—more than a ten-fold growth. The striking success of the

¹⁴⁵ Maah Art Gallery (est. 2004), Shirin Art Gallery (est. 2005), Aaran Art Gallery (est. 2008), and Mohsen Art Gallery (est. 2010) were among the first few private galleries with substantial investments from the private sector.

¹⁴⁶ For a detailed list of galleries active in Tehran visit <http://www.galleryinfo.ir/gallery.aspx>

¹⁴⁷ <http://tehranauction.com/en/aboutus.aspx> (access date: January 23, 2016).

auction house in Tehran, especially seen against the backdrop of the crippling economic sanctions put in place by the U.S. and its European allies, prompted many international news outlets to cover the story.¹⁴⁸ As usual, these reports are complemented with innocuous remarks made by experts, who rarely comment on the larger implications of following Western-model markets for the Iranian contemporary art scene.¹⁴⁹

In the local media, many wrote on the socio-cultural significances of the growing monetary figures of the auction in a country where the Gini coefficient has consistently indicated an income equality far from the promises of social justice made in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution.¹⁵⁰ A number of scholars in different fields, including art history, economy, and anthropology, have made note of the detrimental consequences of the commodification of the visual arts as objects only gauged by their monetary value.¹⁵¹ They have also expressed their

¹⁴⁸ Susan Fenton and William Maclean, "Iran's Domestic Art Scene Thrives Despite Economic Sanctions," *Reuters* (June 1, 2014), <http://www.reuters.com/article/iran-art-idUSL6NoOFoUW20140601> (access date: February 12, 2016); Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Tehran Auction Shifts Millions of Pounds Worth of Art in Spite of Sanctions," *Guardian* (June 1, 2015), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/01/tehran-auction-sells-millions-pounds-art-despite-iran-sanctions> (access date: February 12, 2016); Najmeh Bozorgmehr, "Tehran Auction Shows Signs of a Recovering Contemporary Art Market" *Financial Times* (June 2, 2015), <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/8797d3a0-083c-11e5-95f4-00144feabdco.html> (access date: February 12, 2016).

¹⁴⁹ Shiva Balaghi, a visiting professor of Art History at Brown University, told *The Guardian* that "the auction showed art purchases were increasing in Iran" and that "the recent Tehran auctions have been showing consistently strong prices." Cf. Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Tehran Auction," *Guardian* (June 1, 2015).

¹⁵⁰ The Gini Index information of most countries is available on World Bank's website. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/si.pov.gini>

¹⁵¹ Melika Zandchi, "هنر، سرمایه‌ی مالی، و هنر" (Commodification, Financial Capital, and Art)," in *انسان‌شناسی و فرهنگ* (*Anthropology and Culture*) (October 2013) <http://anthropology.ir/node/20376> (access date: February 15, 2016); Javad Hassanjani, "هنر پس از حراج" ("Art after Auction"), *Tandis*, no. 253 (July 2013); Reza Seifi, "حراج تهران در نسبت با هنر معاصر ایران" (Tehran Auction vis-à-vis Iranian Contemporary Art)," *Tandis*, no. 276 (June 2014).

concerns about the triumph of the aesthetic taste of a few “super-billionaires”¹⁵² (determined by risk/return tradeoff) that situates artists, especially younger and less-established one, in a comply-or-quit situation.

We do not have to look far to find Tehran Auction’s aspirations to shape aesthetic currents in contemporary Iran; the accompanying catalog of the fourth auction in 2015 is a revealing source for tracing the ambitions of a newly found institution that strives to replicate the Western ideals it locates in Christie’s, Sotheby’s, and Bonhams. Since 2015, the auction has also added an educational program, entitled Introduction to the Art Market in Iran, for its affluent buyers, gallery-owners, CEOs of insurance companies, etc., to educate them, through several workshops prior to the auction on the outlines of the art market in Iran and elsewhere as well as on collecting artworks. Interestingly enough, some of these workshops (History of Modern Iranian Art and History of Contemporary Iranian Art) are taught by the art historian Hamid Keshmirshakan, whose *Contemporary Iranian Art* (Saqi, 2013) offers the largest collection of names and artworks of contemporary artists in Iran and the diaspora, conservatively compiled in a historically chronological order and with hardly any significant theoretical reflection.

In a sale of 126 works that put modern Iranian art in focus, only a forty-percent of total works were dedicated to contemporary art. The total number of artists was 190 among which

¹⁵² Amir Kianpour, “خصوصی سازی جشنواره ها: گوهر برتر از هنر آمد پدید” (“Privatization of [Art] Festivals: Jewels are Created Superior to Arts”), *میدان* (August 2015: Tehran) [The title is a play with Ferdowsi’s famous hemistich “Art is created superior to jewels.”] <http://meidaan.com/archive/10417> (access date: February 13, 2016).

sixteen were those below 44-year of age (born 1350 SH. or later). In twenty-two percent of the total works (28 of 126), Persian calligraphy is either the central aesthetic regime of the work or is a crucial visual element in the formation of the work's composition. A number of famous calligraphers of the modern era, such as Ehsai and Reza Mafi, are among the auction's well-established artists. These are mostly those who are trained in a long tradition of calligraphic schools. The use of calligraphy in painting or sculpture, however, has astonishingly risen among the much younger artists; a staggering fifty percent of the works of the younger generation presented at the auction are calligraphic—a good number of these artists have no training in calligraphy at all. A closer look at the remaining half also tells us a lot about the aesthetic choices the auction makes and what it sets forward for younger artists to pick up.

It is not only for its organizational structure that the Tehran Auction looks up to its Western models. That most of the artists presented at the auction are among those who enjoy a share in international markets, including Christie's and Bonhams, is not simply incidental. In the works of those of the younger generation, who are not yet in vogue in gulf area markets, it is not difficult to find the employment of same visual regime used by their established predecessors—this is more obvious in the overuse of calligraphy in painting and sculpture as the figures above reveal. As a consequence, an incentive is fabricated for all younger artists to follow the aesthetic choices promoted by Tehran Auction. Moreover, the auction house's catalog unearths its sense of dependency on the institutional validation sanctioned by the West. In writing on established Iranian artists, including Arabshahi and Zenderoudi, the catalog pro-

vides sales evidence from Christie's, Bonhams, and Sotheby's in order to validate their significance on the contemporary international art stage; a third of all introductory pieces published on forty-eight well-known artists includes a reference to their sales prices in international auctions. The most interesting case is that of Sohrab Sepehri (1928-1980), Iranian painter and poet, whose works has consistently maintained the sales records in Tehran Auction. The introductory text on Sepehri, quite disappointingly, reads: "The sale figure of \$665'000 in 2011 in Christie's Dubai is a sign of the value and uniqueness of the paintings Sepehri has left behind throughout his artistic life."¹⁵³

Yet, such endeavors to simulate Western institutions of privatization, both in their organizational formation and their taste, usually for specific aesthetic currents in Iranian art, is not limited to galleries and auctions. The prevailing conviction that locates the West in the center of all global art orbits is perpetuated by efforts that appear to offer alternatives to the status quo. One such example is Ab-Anbar, a privately-owned art space in central Tehran that was established in 2014. In two consecutive projects in early 2015, Ab-Anbar collaborated with Aria Art Gallery, a gallery with strong ties to Sami'azar (director of Tehran Auction),¹⁵⁴ to revive the legacies of two Iranian modern painters, Sirak Melkonian and Bahman Mohasses.

¹⁵³ Shahrouz Mohajer et al., *Tehran Auction: Iranian Modern and Contemporary Art*, ed. Mitra Hoviyat-Talab (Tehran: Tehran Auction, 2015), 195.

¹⁵⁴ The owner of Aria Art Gallery, Aria Shokouhi Eghbal, is also a founding member of Mah-e Mehr institute, where Alireza Sami'azar has been a board member and a member of the institute's faculty since its inception.

These exhibitions were defined under the larger quasi-educational project entitled “An Overview of Iranian Modern Art.” The first retrospective, *Sirak Melkonian: Seven Decades of Painting* (January 30 to February 19, 2015) was an attempt to resurrect the image of Melkonian, a painter to which “Iranian art critics—similar to Iran’s history of Armenian artists—have always been blind,”¹⁵⁵ right before the fourth auction. Interestingly enough, some of Melkonian’s works were sold during his “retrospective” [figure 1-11]. Following Melkonian, and almost concurrent with the fourth auction, Arya and Ab-Anbar held the second retrospective, *Bahman Mohassess In 60 Pieces of a Lost Body* (May 21 - June 12, 2015). Both Mohassess (second and fourth auctions) and Melkonian (all four auctions) have had a strong presence in Tehran Auction since its formation.

This becomes all more curious when one pays close attention to Ab-Anbar’s claim to be “an independent space for experimentation,” clearly suggesting its position against the market—-independent from the market and experimental rather than commercial. It is also important to point out that Ab-Anbar was co-founded by SAZMANAB Project Space (est. 2008), which fashioned its own image, also, as an alternative non-profit space. In her chapter entitled “The Practice of Art: An Alternative View of Contemporary Art-making in Tehran,” Leili Sreberny-Mohammadi calls SAZMANAB a “different sort of an institute from the other two [state-sponsored and commercial] already present in Tehran,” deeming it “a third space in the

¹⁵⁵ Dariush Kiaras, “Sirak Melkonian: Seven Decades of Painting,” (January 2015: Ab-Anbar Gallery)

<http://www.ab-anbar.com/Exhibitions.aspx?Id=8#> (access date: February 23, 2016).

It is for good reasons, I believe, that Sirak Melkonian has garnered little attention before the resurrection of his oeuvre by the Tehran Auction. Melkonian’s abstract paintings exhibit a more conservative formalism in comparison to the artists of his generation, including Pilaram, Arabshahi, and Zenderoudi.

terms of Homi Bhabha.”¹⁵⁶ I do not want to find blame with SAZMANAB or Ab-Anbar here. My point is rather to reinstate the significance of distinguishing complicity with the privatized market from genuine resistance to it. The camouflaged yet strong connections between what is ostensibly an independent space and the Tehran Auction, as a symptomatic imitation of global capitalism, is revealing of a domesticated privatization guided in accordance to Western blueprints in Iran’s contemporary art scene. Furthermore, that all other Ab-Anbar’s exhibitions are of younger Iranian artists, mostly diasporic, who are represented by European or North American galleries, unfolds a dubious Western-orientated scaffolding for the “alternative” art scene in Iran—a globality guaranteed only by collaboration with Western institutions carried out exclusively in English language—or more precisely yet, in Artspeak.¹⁵⁷ This is precisely where the ostensibly transgressive institutions that, as Nina Möntmann suggests, must “question and break with the current developments of privatization and simultaneously orient themselves towards other disciplines and areas besides the corporative business of globalized capitalism,” lend themselves to furthering global capitalism’s agenda.¹⁵⁸

Thus, my use of the term domestication here means to reflect not only on the mimicking of Western structures of privatization by Iranian art institutions and initiatives, but also on

¹⁵⁶ Leili Sreberny-Mohammadi, “The Practice of Art: An Alternative View of Contemporary Art-making in Tehran,” in *Arts and Aesthetics in a Globalizing World*, ed. Raminder Kaur and Parul Dave-Mukherji (London, New Delhi, and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 65.

¹⁵⁷ Ab-Anbar’s official website is entirely in English. There is not a single post on its website, or on its social media accounts, in Persian.

¹⁵⁸ Nina Möntmann, “The Rise and Fall of New Institutionalism: Perspectives on a Possible Future,” in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, ed. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (London: MayFlyBooks, 2009), 157.

the attempts to naturalize those imported constructs and their discursive apparatuses. Then, domestication is to make homely what is not; it is to make one historical narrative, in which the West is the locus of globality and the sole proprietor of global infrastructures, *the* natural narrative, reducing the global into the Western. What I have been exploring from different angles is that the Iranian institutional networks' preoccupation with being global, as a Western prerogative, has effectively foreclosed any alternative imagination in the collective understanding of global contemporary art in Iran that does not abide by Western prescriptions for globalization. Neoliberal privatization, therefore, is simply viewed as a preliminary step one is required to take in order to graduate into globality rather than a restructuring imperative for the construction of a menacing capitalist global economy.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ Another major privatization project happened during the 56th Venice Art Biennial. The TMOCA, which has historically been in charge of Iran's Pavilion at the biennial, decided to outsource the pavilion to a private foundation. The Faiznia Family Foundation, which was established only a year prior to the biennial, assumed responsibility for curating and financially supporting Iran's pavilion at Venice. Faiznia Family Foundation for Culture and Contemporary Art, one of the recent emerging wave of privately-owned institutions in art, had very little experience in curatorship before the Venice biennial; their résumé consisted of a private show of Hannibal Alkhas in Kermanshah; the repair and polishing of Arnaldo Pomodoro's piece *The Sphere* at TMOCA's sculpture garden in collaboration with the Milan-based Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro; and a talk by the art historian, Marco Meneguzzo, at Tehran Art University entitled "Iran's Place in the Globalization of Art Movement." The foundation's artistic director, Mazdak Faiznia, at the time a student of Meneguzzo at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Milan, invited his tutor to be the chief curator of Iran's pavilion in Venice Biennial. The result of their collaboration as co-curators was an almost arbitrary selection of forty-nine artists from Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, which included many prominent artists such as Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Mitra Tabrizian, Riyas Komu (India), and Wafaa Bilal (Iraq), to name but a few, under the title "The Great Game." According to Meneguzzo, the inclusion of artists from the "region" in Iran's pavilion is due to the impossibility and incoherence of inquiring into a global zone of interest by looking at Iran alone. He maintains that it is only natural to involve "all those who live, think, and work in that region, one which does not coincide with national boundaries" (25). Yet, he continues by arguing that the presence of artists from India to Iraq is reflective of "unresolved social-political and cultural problems that the artists try to highlight, show, and interpret according to their language" (25). While it appears that the effort to bring together the artists of "the region" is a critical tracing of the continuities of aesthetic traditions in their

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The repeated moments of reductive readings of contemporary Iranian art, appearing in exhibition catalogs and journal reviews that are published mostly in western Europe and northern America, gave rise to a new domain of local spectatorship that was heavily informed by the perception of artworks in the West. Making matters worse, primarily those who penned these reductive accounts were also those who governed what Bydler calls “the channels for visibility on the international (global) contemporary art scene.”¹⁶⁰ As such, these itinerant curators had a dramatic effect on the local economies of art production and interpretation in Iran. Apart from those for whom Western institutions’ fixation with cultural difference provided a

works, it falls back into yet another pigeonholing of the artworks presented at the pavilion as manifestations of and reflections on shared socio-political and cultural problems. Another significant error in Meneguzzo’s thought, despite what is perhaps a genuine (and at times even exoticizing) search for authentic visual traditions in Iran and its neighboring countries, is apparent in his reduction of Iran’s art history to the modern and the so-called post-modern era; he writes that the Iranian art, despite “its relative infancy,” being only present on the global scene since the 1950s, has played an increasingly obvious role in responding to the socio-political pressures inflicted on the country by world powers (24). This is an erasure of the historical globality of Iranian artistic traditions, one of the manifestations of which can be seen in the systematic circulations of artworks between the Ottomans, the Safavids, and the Mughals almost half a millennium ago.

For a comprehensive study and criticism of the Iran Pavilion at the 56th Venice International Art Biennial, see Siavash Amirbeigi and Jinoos Taghizadeh, “نردبان‌هایی روی آب: سکانداران قایق ایرانی در ونیز” (Ladders on Water: Iranian Steersmen in Venice),” in شبکه‌ی آفتاب (*Shabake-ye Aftab*), no. 25 (June - July 2015: Tehran), 94-101. All quotes are from: Marco Meneguzzo, “The Great Game,” in *The Great Game: Art, Artists and Culture from the Hearth of the World* (Milan, Italy: Silvana Editoriale, 2015), 24-27.

¹⁶⁰ Charlotte Bydler, “A Local Global Art History,” in *Is Art History Global*, ed. James Elkins (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 317.

shortcut to international visibility, lucrative art markets and auction houses,¹⁶¹ a considerable number of mostly younger, less-established artists faced the anxiety of being seen as mere representations of ethnic and cultural alterity. This created an atmosphere of fault-finding, where any sign referring to Iran, even remotely so, was read as an attempt to self-exoticize and garner the attention of international curators.

But, there are also artists whose works have nothing to do with the visual regimes closely associated with Iran, or, do not address any of the country's socio-political, cultural, or historical issues. These artists, too, have often been read, or put on display, in light of their so-called ethnic origins.¹⁶² They also feel the pressure, from outside and from inside Iran, as I have shown here, to produce art that delivers an easily legible account of this origin. These diverse, and at times contradictory, forces and demands coalesced into a locality claustrophobia,¹⁶³ whereby artists found themselves inextricably bound to their ethnic backgrounds, coaxed to produce localized commodities for the global market.

As a result, some artists chose to abandon the visual vocabulary alluding to an Iranian identity altogether and participate in the so-called global languages of art that were, *prima*

¹⁶¹ I have already discussed a few examples above. But a brief glance at the new popular wave of identifying with Iran among a number of mostly diasporic artists, in whose work a sudden shift toward Persian iconography or socio-political issues of contemporary Iran can be witnessed, is one manifestation of how effective promises of international visibility are in shaping a good portion of contemporary Iranian art production.

¹⁶² Chin-Tao Wu argues that in the venues and events of contemporary global art “the current trend is to focus on a deliberately constructed diversity of artists’ backgrounds. If the artists happen to come from locations where current political correctness can apply, that is all the better.” Cf. Chin-Tao Wu, “Worlds Apart,” 721.

¹⁶³ I am thankful to Azar Mahmoudian, who suggested “locality claustrophobia” for this section.

facie, autonomous from geography. This solution, however, turned out not to be free of complications caused by the identitarian politics of interpretation that were practiced by global institutions. Those artists who remained in Iran and were presented in international exhibitions, were, in many instances, accused of drawing from their Western “prototypes.” Fereydoun Ave, who belongs to the generation of artists active before the 1979 revolution, is described as the “Iranian Warhol”¹⁶⁴ by Sotheby’s and Vahid Sharifian is called the Iranian Jeff Koons in *The New York Times*.¹⁶⁵ Leila Pazooki’s neon-light installation, *Moment of Glory* (2010), in which she makes phrases with neon-light such as “Dali of Bali,” “Christo of China,” and “Iranian Jeff Koons,” is a reactionary, simplistic, and yet amusing response to this situation [figure 1-12]. Those younger artists, including Hannah Darabi (b. 1981, urban landscape photography), Ala Dehghan (b. 1982, installation, painting, printmaking), Melika Shafahi (b. 1984, photography, video), are either included in group shows of Iranian artists not due to their subject matter or aesthetic choices but because of their place of birth, or choose to digress momentarily from their purposeful dissociation with the local art scene and participate in events and exhibitions related to Iran.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Fereydoun Ave (interviewed by Abeer Mishkas), “The ‘Iranian Warhol’ on Collecting and the Changing Art Scene in Iran,” *Sotheby’s at Large* (April 2016), http://www.sothebys.com/en/news-video/blogs/all-blogs/sotheby-s-at-large/2016/04/the-iranian-warhol.html?cmp=social_L16227_facebook_alchemy_41816-41816 (access date: April 20, 2016).

¹⁶⁵ In a review published in *The New York Times* in June 2009, Randy Kennedy quotes Sam Bardaouil, the curator of Chelsea Art Museum’s show *Iran Inside Out*, as he calls Vahid Sharifian “the Jeff Koons of Iran.” See Randy Kennedy, “In Chelsea, Art Intersects with Reality of Iranian Conflict,” *New York Times*, (June 26, 2009).

¹⁶⁶ One pertinent example here is Shirin Sabahi. Despite a deliberate distancing of her practice from stereotypes of Iranian contemporary art, Sabahi (b. 1984) participated in the much criticized competition

To those artists who did not want to break with their marginal positions vis-à-vis the West and yet found themselves caught in the claustrophobia of interpretive systems of the global art world built on identitarian politics, Bhabha's theoretically suspect notions of "hybridity," "liminality," and "in-betweenness" gave an easy way out. As early as 2008, the term "hybridity" was used by Bhabha himself in relation to contemporary Iranian art. Writing on Jalal Sepehr's photographic series, *Water and Persian Rugs*, Bhabha finds the free floating Persian carpets on the surface of the sea reminiscent of a flying carpet, which is juxtaposed with a red speedboat appearing in the middle of the photograph, "as if to part the carpet and the waves" [figure 1-13]. The two main elements present in the picture, for Bhabha, represent two different "affective and aesthetic orders," that of nature (the sea) and artifact (the carpet), "waiting to be related to one another." He further elaborates that the third figure, i.e., the speedboat, "signifies the dynamic temporality of this composition." From here, Bhabha, conveniently, reads the relationship between the "traditional carpet, the eternal sea, and the high-tech leisure craft" as an allegory of "the cultural hybridity of modern life."¹⁶⁷ This reading of Sepehr's work, which I am skeptical of its interpretive fidelity to the object, seems to have dangerous methodological

Magic of Persia in 2011 and accepted the first prize. A year earlier, Golshiri made it to the finalists of the competition, yet not only withdrew his work but publicly denounced the competition for their financial ties and artistic criteria. Cf. Barbad Golshiri, "For They Know What They Do Know," *e-flux Journal* 8 (September 2009).

¹⁶⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, "Draw the Curtain," 6. Bhabha's introduction to *Iranian Photography Now* was translated into Persian by Majid Akhgar (پرده را کنار بزن) and published as a stand-alone article in the Summer 2010 issue of *Herfeh: Honarmand* journal.

ramifications both for art production and its interpretation; that setting contradictory elements of life against one another, perhaps with a dash of ethereality, as represented by the sea in Sepehr's work, creates an allegorical account of the cultural hybridity of our times, and it should be acknowledged by any sophisticated interpretation of such composition.

“Hybridity” or “in-betweenness,” as Monica Juneja has recently observed, are ineffective in theorizing non-Western art practices, not only due to their “inflationary use and overall imprecision,” but also because the extent of their efficacy is restrained to the boundaries of multiculturalism. As such, these terms are incapable of coming to grips “with the quality of unhinging or disintegration that mark agency when used to disrupt the stability of familiar signifiers of tradition.”¹⁶⁸ This is also to say that they are not entirely effective in critiquing figures of tradition that fail to disrupt or transgress cultural stereotypes; what Juneja describes as the fusion of so-called authenticity with a “consumerist commoditization of cultural difference, sustained by the ‘biennial effect’ and the pulls of the art market.”¹⁶⁹ This is where hybridity turns into a “quick ingenuity” for riding the global market demands, “where indigenous form and artisanal life adapts itself to the national-global market in whatsoever manner is most readily available,” as Geeta Kapur aptly puts it.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Monica Juneja, “Global Art History and the ‘Burden of Representation’,” 285.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 284.

¹⁷⁰ Geeta Kapur, “Globalization: Navigating the Void,” in *When was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2001), 349.

Writing on contemporary art in Iran, Zolghadr reduces the complexities of hybridity and in-betweenness to the notion of paradox. He argues that despite apprehensions about global uniformity (whether in form of Westernization of all or a sweeping localization of Iranian artists), the dominant trope is that of the “cultural paradox,” whereby the “juxtapositions of the supposedly medieval and the supposedly modern” will now mark the new and package “cultural change as a contradiction in terms, a schizophrenic oddity, quaint at best, pathological at worst.”¹⁷¹ Zolghadr’s conflation of hybridity and paradox leads him to misconstrue the former as a sheer collaging of the “modern” and the “traditional,” as it is evident in his examples: “calligraphy and digital video, the veiled woman and the Hi-Fi, the veiled woman wearing ‘Christian Dior’ to dance parties, the mullah having a cheeseburger.”¹⁷² His reading fails to grasp the intricacies of the ways through which the term “hybridity” (or in-betweenness) has been mobilized (and indeed instrumentalized) by many artists, critics, and curators.

One such example of a less obvious use of instrumentalization of “hybridity” is Julia Allerstorfer’s curatorial piece for *The State of ‘In-Between’ in Contemporary Iranian Art* exhibition at the Atelierhaus Salzamt in Linz. In her “We Are Standing Outside Time,” written with more sophistication than a juxtaposition of a Dior bag and a women in veil, Allerstorfer asserts that “in-betweenness” is able to transcend “geographic demarcations and arbitrary boundaries and utopian national constructs,” as well as socio-political circumstances and “ideological projections and visual codes between the so-called ‘East’ and ‘West,’” apparently only by virtue of

¹⁷¹ Tirdad Zolghadr, “Framing Iran,” 44.

¹⁷² Ibid.

being in-between the two. Yet, it is as much unclear how this transcendence occurs as it is how “in-betweenness” as a politically effective device is formed. For Allerstorfer, the cooperation between two Iranian artists (one residing in Iran and the other in Germany), “as well as an Austrian curator and researcher” (meaning herself), creates what in Bhabha’s terminology is an “in-between” space. “These in between spaces,” she writes, “include individual semantic levels, empirical values, experiences and perspectives on behalf of the participants.”¹⁷³ Another pertinent example is apparent in Talinn Grigor’s conviction that the hybridized, fragmented subjectivity of artists—mostly of those in “exile” [diaspora is a better term here]—“denote the liberating potentials of liminality.”¹⁷⁴ For her, artists *inhabit* hybrid spaces. Artists such as Nikzad Nojumi, Samira Abbassy, or Laleh Khorramian, are in constant oscillation between “Western hegemony” and “self-Orientalism [sic],” and by way of “inhabiting the liminal, they have paralysed the predicament of identity as well as the structures of aesthetic judgement.”¹⁷⁵

Implicit in such instrumentalized uses of liminality, hybridity, and in-betweenness, is the willingness to jettison a crucial problematic of contemporary non-Western art, that is the marginalization of its artists and the commodification of that marginality. Ironically, the intellec-

¹⁷³ Julia Allerstorfer, “We Are Standing Outside Time,” published on the occasion of the exhibition *The State of ‘In-Between’ in Contemporary Iranian Art*, curated by Julia Allerstorfer, (Linz, Austria: Atelierhaus Salzamt, 2012). Bavand Behpoor’s statement for the exhibition, entitled “Umbilicus of Limbo,” falls into the same trap of fetishizing liminality as a state of being. <http://www.behpoor.com/?p=838#more-838> (accessed: June 20, 2016).

¹⁷⁴ Grigor, *Contemporary Iranian Art*, 221.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 236.

tual fetishization of liminality qua liminality, or hybridity qua hybridity, leads to the commodification of them as values affixed to marginal subjects. As Timothy Brennan points out, various trends, in the university, including hybridity, nomadism, and migrancy among others, continue to make the case that “mobility and mixedness—not as contingent historical experiences but as modes of being—are states of virtue.” For Brennan, what is implied “is that these conditions are *ontologically* superior and that political life should be based today on approximating them.”¹⁷⁶ Elsewhere, in his *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*, Brennan also posits an acerbic critique against “hybridity,” as he maintains that a “system of unargued values” clusters around the term, which “has been marshaled by many critics as an almost atmospheric slogan of multivalent ambiguity.”¹⁷⁷ As Sandra K. Soto has warned us, though in the context of racial studies, celebrating hybridity “threatens to transmute marginality itself into a form of authenticity.”¹⁷⁸ One crucial consequence of such transmutation is the reification of the marginal subject. Hybridity, liminality, or in-betweenness may, as well, in certain contexts, enable transgressive strategies for questioning the identitarian presumptions of global circuits of cultural circulation and exchange.¹⁷⁹ This seems to be far from the ways these terms have

¹⁷⁶ Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 139.

¹⁷⁷ Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 13.

¹⁷⁸ Sandra K. Soto, *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer: The De-Mastery of Desire* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 4.

¹⁷⁹ Charlotte Bydler, insightfully, observes that while constructionist views of cultural identity have rendered “the so-called hybridity and cultural difference of peripheral cultures interesting, and hence less stigmatizing,” they have not been successful in putting forward liberating politics of interpretation. “But

been deployed in the context of contemporary Iranian art. What hybridity, marginality, and in-betweenness have so far spawned in the Iranian art scene is not only the reification of the works of Iranian artists as tokens of marginality, often accompanied with offhand diagnoses of this marginality—appearing as the benevolence of theory bestowing significance to objects—but also the reinforcement of the canon by way of underscoring its marginal territories.

there is a giant leap,” she writes, “from the less harmful to the emancipatory.” Cf. Charlotte Bydler, *The Global Art World Inc.*, 260.

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CHAPTER 2

DISSENTING STRATEGIES OBJECTS THAT DO NOT BEHAVE

The readings I propose in this chapter depend, in many ways, on the outlines that I have drawn in the preceding one. For it is against the backdrop of the dominant currents of art production in contemporary Iran, defined either by the demands of global art institutions or the cultural policies of the local government, that we can appreciate Iranian artists' efforts to transgress the binary logic of Western versus non-Western art governing both the global and the local art scenes. Whether through exposing the epistemic violence embedded in the interpretation of artifacts from the margins of the West—found almost equally in both Western and local discourses—or by way of contesting imperial grand narratives of art history, the artistic and curatorial practices I explore in this chapter deliberately question the status quo of contemporary Iranian art and oppose the shortcuts to international visibility which rely on identitarian exploitations of marginality.

I offer detailed readings of Ghazaleh Hedayat and Barbad Golshiri along with brief discussions of the works of Shahab Fotouhi, Babak Golkar, and Homayoun Sirizi, who have taken up questions of cultural hegemony and marginalization in their practices to devise creative strategies to either respond to or circumvent their positions as marginalized subjects in the

global art scene. In differing ways, all these figures push back against the homogenizing impulses of the global art world and the specific ramifications of current attention given to the contemporary art of Iran by Western museums, galleries, and auction houses. I will also look at the second part of a group exhibition, entitled *Ethnic Marketing*, that was held at the gallery space of Tehran University, Azad Art Gallery, and Art Space 13, all located in Tehran. This show, as I explain here, mounted a critique of the growing obsession of the global art market with non-Western art.¹

It is not my intention, however, to suggest that the strategies formulated by these artists have had necessarily successful results—if such an outcome is even possible. I am cognizant of the perils that a euphoric emphasis on resistance to the market-driven economy of art entails. More often than not, celebrations of resistance lead to readings oblivious of the capitalist market's unusual flexibility vis-à-vis various forms of push-back against flattening taxonomizations and thematizations of the ethnically other. The global market, rather unremittingly, generates new taxonomies to reify and flatten diverse modes of resistance, presenting them along with glossy imagery and spectacular theatrics to its eager consumers.²

It is also important to distinguish the conception of artistic resistance, as it is used here, from the day-to-day struggles against a globally reconfigured imperial dominance and the ever-growing income inequality, what Samir Amin has aptly explained as the “reconstruction

¹ The first part of the exhibition took place at the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva and Tehran University in 2004. Both exhibitions were curated by Tirdad Zolghadr.

² As Jameson observes, most forms of resistance are susceptible to late Capitalism's pervasive reifying power. Cf. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

of the logic of unilateral capital.”³ This is not to say that attempts at resistance through literature and visual arts are less real or less consequential. But it is necessary to remain reflexive about the position of privilege from which artists speak and not to romanticize their work as heroic acts representing the plights of the so-called third world disenfranchised subject—I am convinced this is what the artists I am discussing here surely want to avoid. It is a rampant trope in today’s cultural criticism, with its long history in metropolitan cultural studies, to take the migrant artifact for its documentary verisimilitudes. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has warned us, only an inadequate understanding of international cultural exchange that considers the literary works as expressions of cultural consciousness, “would simply see them as repositories of postcolonial selves, postcolonialism, even postcolonial resistance.”⁴

It is equally imprudent, however, to assume that the privileged position from which most contemporary Iranian artists are able to articulate their ideas, desires, and critical views in their works guarantees them attentive listeners. Not unlike many non-Western artists from all around the world, those discussed in this chapter have in one way or another faced the persistent discursive tropes of Western art criticism that continue to either situate them as lesser copies of their Western archetypes, or puts the burden of representing their “kind” on their shoulders. As such, the objects, practices, and aesthetic strategies I explore in this chapter oppose, in various ways, the prevalent identitarian modes of readership based on either reductive

³ Samir Amin, *Capitalism in the Age of Globalization: The Management of Contemporary Society* (London: Zed Books, 1997), 95.

⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 74.

or entirely fabricated relationships between the artist's geographic origin and her work. Whether this opposition is clearly pronounced in their works, as in the case of Golshiri, or it is not so readily visible, as in Fotouhi or Hedayat, what distinguishes the works of these artists from the popular trends of contemporary Iranian art production and reception is their critical attention to the complexities of relations of power that determine the politics of interpretation, circulation, and representation as well as the inconsistencies involved in the international recognition and institutional support of non-Western artists.⁵

These practices, however inchoate, sporadic, and diverse in their approaches, perform critiques of the limits of cross-cultural exchange in the age of globalization's fictive promises to democratize the art world and decrease the gap between the canonic centers and their peripheries. They also expose the limits of the binary logic (local versus global, culture versus art, etc.) of the contemporary art market, not by way of a premature rush into a cosmopolitan utopia—an anachronistic West-ward escapism I have discussed in the previous chapter—but through devising dissenting strategies against reductive readings and the naïve presumptions of the availability and clarity of meaning abundantly present in hegemonic discourses of art history and criticism. It remains to be seen to what degree the capitalist market is capable of—or shows

⁵ A number of prominent thinkers have studied and theorized the disparities in treatment of Western and non-Western artists on the global art stage. For some of the most important contributions see: Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Néstor García Canclini, "Remaking Passports: Visual Thought in the Debate on Multiculturalism," *Third Text* 8, no. 28-29 (Autumn/Winter 1994), 139-146; Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2003), 57-82; Jonathan Hay, "Double Modernity, Para-Modernity," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Nancy Conde, Okwui Enwezor, and Terry Smith (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 113-132; Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism*, 2001.

any interest in—claiming these uncooperative objects and inserting them into the circuits of private property and commodity exchange. But the fact that the works of these artists, with the exception of Golshiri, are some of the least discussed objects of contemporary Iranian art—locally and internationally—despite their rigorous approaches to the practices of contemporary art, speaks to the futility of attempts at superimposing readily available frames of legibility on these objects in order to arrive at clear-cut interpretations. As such, these objects at once fail to bear witness to Western preconceptions about contemporary Iranian society while simultaneously are bereft of any evidentiary potential which might allow for the exegesis of socio-political truth concealed somewhere “behind” the image.

Photography and painting as artistic practices have long histories in Iran; new forms of art practice, including conceptual art, installation, video art, performance art, happenings, environmental art, and new media art, have a relatively short history. The exposure of Iranian artists to contemporary avant-garde practices in the works of Peter Brook, Joseph Chaikin, and John Cage among many other participants of the Shiraz-Persepolis Art Festival can be traced back to a ten year period between 1967 to 1977. The TMOCA, which was inaugurated by the queen of Iran in 1977 with a significant collection of paintings, prints, and sculpture from European Impressionists to American Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, put a major emphasis on classical definitions of fine art.⁶ Moreover, the sharp disciplinary divides between

⁶ The TMOCA’s collection is still considered the greatest collection of modern masterpieces of art outside North American and Europe. Cf. Peter Waldman and Golnar Motevalli, “Iran Has Been Hiding One of the World’s Great Collections of Modern Art” *Bloomberg* (November 17, 2015). <http://www.bloomberg.com/features/2015-tehran-museum-of-contemporary-art/> (accessed: June 8, 2016).

plastic art and dramatic art in Tehran contributed to the lack of interest of Iranian visual artists in what was taking place in the experimental music and dramatic arts at the Shiraz-Persepolis Art Festival. Evident in *Saqqakhaneh's* (the 1960's modern art movement) recourse in conventional forms of painting and sculpture, and in various other practices of visual arts during the Pahlavi period, it is easy to observe the dominance of distinct divisions between different media in the Iranian contemporary art during this era.

The years of the revolution and the war with Iraq, however, gave prominence to documentary photography and social realism in painting and sculpture. As such, scattered experimental attempts at media heterogeneity, or what Rosalind Krauss terms post-media (Krauss traces it back to the rise of Conceptual Art), in Iran's art scene of the 1970s and 1980s were marginalized and never garnered sufficient critical attention.⁷ Ironically, it was only the institutional support of the TMOCA in early 2000s that led to a systematic practice of post-media forms

⁷ As early as 1974, Marcos Grigorian, Masoud Arabshahi, Gholamhossein Nami, Sirak Melkonian, Morteza Momayez, Faramarz Pilaram, and Abdolreza Daryabeigi, formed the "گروه آزاد نقاشان و مجسمه سازان" ("Independent Artist Group"). Opposing the propagation of commercial values by gallery owners in Tehran, the members decided to turn away from painting and sculpture and work with other media, most prominently installation art. In a catalog printed on the occasion of their November 1976 group exhibition, گنج و گستره ۲ (*Volume and Environment 2*), the group criticized being accused of "imitating contemporary currents in the arts of the US and Europe" and of "creating art that bears no relation to our [Iran's] environment." It is clear from the criticism they received that the art scene in Iran in the 1970s was hardly receptive of transgressing conventional artistic media purity. Cf. Independent Artist Group, گنج و گستره ۲ (*Volume and Environment 2*) (Tehran: Saman Gallery, 1976).

Tracing post-media experiences in the works of modern and contemporary Iranian artist, Tooka Maleki observes in her *Iranian Modern Art* that during the early 1990s a few number of artists, including Bitā Fayyazi and Sasan Nasiri, experimented with new forms of art, but these experiments remained tangential to the major currents of their time and failed to initiate an artistic movement. Cf. Tooka Maleki, هنر نوگرایی ایران (*Iranian Modern Art*) (Tehran: Nazar, 2011), 80-81.

among Iranian artists. The “new art” was from the onset institutionalized and thus it was almost entirely bereft of the subversive capacities that generated defiant movements against art institutions such as the Situationist International, Land Art, or *Fluxus*, to name but a few. This was partly due to an absence of a serious market for new practices in Iran. While the TMOCA did financially support the execution of approved artworks for the three consecutive “New Art” exhibitions, the very small art market in Iran had no interest in what were deemed merely expensive experiments. What the TMOCA offered was a valuable space that lent its institutional credence to the practices long dismissed. But, as I discuss in greater detail in chapter 3, the museum’s support did not come free of consequences. The TMOCA’s policies, evident in the works it supported and in the exhibitions that it held during Sami’azar’s tenure, were quite influential in enshrining the Western vocabulary of art practice as the universal mode in which all artists who aspire to create works that are truly “contemporary” should speak.

Moreover, the relatively short lifespan of post-media art in Iran along with the rise of the interest of itinerant curators in contemporary Iranian art since the early 2000s, made proficiency in the Western language of art practice integral for those artists who sought to be heard. Caroline Jones theorizes this predicament in the irreconcilable demands of non-Western artists to speak of their own difference in the international language of art.⁸ The artists I discuss in this chapter are hardly an exception to this double-binding norm. They all speak in the same language most international artists speak in, the very language in which the native public in

⁸ Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World’s Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

many non-Western countries have no command.⁹ Yet, what differentiates the works I study in this chapter from those I discussed in the first—those subscribing, knowingly or not, to the international language of art—is not only in that the artworks in this chapter reflect on the nature and consequences of consenting to such homogenizing languages, but is also in their very ability to call that language into question. In other words, these artworks manifest their artists' attempts at implementing the lingua franca of contemporary art in order to destabilize its purported naturalization.

These artists also try to resist rampant impositions of simplifying frames of legibility onto non-Western contemporary art. As such it is not surprising if Hedayat, Sirizi, and Fotouhi are not as widely presented on the international art scene as some of their contemporaries whose works satisfy both thematic and formal demands of the global market.¹⁰ In highlighting the strategies deployed by these artists against definitive and reductive interpretations of their works, I discuss the ways in which they are able to effectively transgress the global/local taxonomies, even subverting the inversion of these terms.¹¹

⁹ For a discussion of the failure of the language of global art and itinerant curators to maintain a dialogue with the local population in non-Western countries see Carol Becker, "The Romance of Nomadism: A Series of Reflections," *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (Summer, 1999), 22-29. A few pertinent case studies are Coco Fusco's writing on the Havana Biennial and Jen Budney's on Johannesburg Biennial. Cf. Coco Fusco, "Bridge over Troubled Waters," in *The Bodies That Were Not Ours and Other Writings* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 154-162; Jen Budney, "Who's It For? The 2nd Johannesburg Biennale," *Third Text* 12, no. 42 (Spring 1998), 88-94.

¹⁰ I have discussed this trend among contemporary Iranian artists in detail in chapters 1 and 3.

¹¹ I do not mean to suggest that the global and local dichotomies are not operative today and do not have material consequences. On the contrary, I propose that these artists have been able to transcend the binary rather than simply inverting it.

It is important not to conflate oversimplified interpretations with Western interpretive models that, however rarely, can and do generate careful, attentive, dynamic, and historically situated readings of contemporary art from the non-West.¹² It happens to be, however, that a large share of the actual accounts of Iranian contemporary art, as I have shown in a close examination of catalog texts of numerous international exhibitions of Iranian artists in European and American metropolises in Chapter 1, have yet failed to look beyond predetermined frames of interpreting their works. A marked tendency to relate all works to socio-political conditions and historical narratives of their country of origin, with an obsession for documentation of everyday life, is what characterizes these prevalent acts of reading, but not necessarily the interpretive models employed.

Atreyee Gupta and Sugata Ray offer a cogent critique of the false demand of non-Western “responses” to Art History as authentic modes of knowledge production entirely independent of Western interpretive models. They trace the nostalgic impulses behind such demands in Elkins’s quest for a “genuinely multicultural world art history” through implementation of

¹² Art History’s consistent search for new interpretive models based on linguistics, psychoanalysis, cultural history, or literary criticism has a great role in keeping the discipline reinvigorated. Those interpretive models not concerned with the hierarchies between the Western canons of Art History and the peripheries they sustain, however, are more often than not incapable of engendering interpretations conscious of the hegemonic position from which they are uttered. Deconstruction serves as a good example here for its capacity to understand and destabilize such a position of hegemony. Primarily a model within the European tradition of thought, its attentiveness to the functions of binary oppositions operating at the heart of Western science and philosophy, its commitment to the Other, and its potential for interrogating the politics of reading, as realized through the revisions and interventions made by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, sets a significant example of a Western interpretive model that can both interrupt the primacy of the West and debunk imperialist and orientalist epistemologies.

non-Western methodologies and in David Summers's "obsession with originality, purity, authenticity, and authorship," which leads him to discuss spatiality in "premodern non-Western contexts [...] but not in the 1970s reinvention of narrative space in India (the Baroda School) or in the 1920s reassertion of inkbrush painting in China." For Gupta and Ray, "potent critiques of Euro-American imperialism," posited by Spivak and Geeta Kapur are lost in Elkins's search for authentic non-Western interpretive models as he deems them "fundamentally" dependent on Western models—Derrida and Lyotard, respectively.¹³ They argue that Western interpretive models, informed by rationality and the Enlightenment, "are colonial bequests that have violently shaped the postcolonial." Thus, they posit a pertinent question: "How then can 'world art history' ask the non-West to feign amnesia and return to a past 'untarnished' by the West? For whose benefit?"¹⁴

My reading of the strategies taken up in the artistic and curatorial practices I discuss here is informed by Gupta's and Ray's pertinent critique. Without resorting to a nostalgic longing for "purely" non-Western interpretive models, I situate in these practices the acts of resistance against the status quo of the global art market and the local art scene in Iran. As Mieke Bal and Miguel Hernández-Navarro argue, following Chantal Mouffe, the political impact of art inheres in its ability to not only unveil tension and conflict but to offer platforms on which conflict and resistance is enabled. There are the moments unsettling the status quo, what Bal and

¹³ Atreyee Gupta and Sugata Ray, "Responding from the Margins," in *Is Art History Global?*, ed. James Elkins (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 349-350.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 350-351.

Hernández-Navarro call “little resistances,” that I will trace in the dissenting strategies explored here.¹⁵ As such, it is not my intention to arrive at “better” interpretations, but to outline the ways through which the artistic and curatorial choices I discuss have been able to expose, underline, and perhaps interrupt dominant narratives and discourses of contemporary non-Western art.

ETHNIC MARKETING

The first part of the exhibition *Ethnic Marketing: Art, Globalization and Intercultural Supply and Demand*, curated by Tirdad Zolghadr and Martine Anderfuhren, opened at the Centre d’Art Contemporain, Geneva in 2004. In April 2006, a slightly modified version of the exhibition was held in Tehran at Azad Art Gallery, Tehran University, and No. 13 Art Space with the subtitle “Tracing the Limits of Artworld Internationalism.” It is not unrealistic to consider *Ethnic Marketing* the first curatorial project in Iran to foreground questions of the Euro-American cultural hegemony and the commercialization of ethnic alterity.¹⁶ The show simultaneously addressed the limits of internationalism in the global art world and the demands facing

¹⁵ Mieke Bal and Miguel Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” in *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict, Resistance, and Agency*, eds. Mieke Bal and Miguel Hernández-Navarro (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 9-10.

¹⁶ As I have shown in the previous chapter, the question of reification of ethnic alterity by global capitalism has been, at least as early as 2000, an important, yet sporadically investigated, intellectual query for the Iranian academics, critics, curators, and artists including Zolghadr himself, who in 2004 contributed a critical essay to *Far Near Distance* published in Berlin. In January 2005, Shirana Shahbazi had a solo show at Silk Road Gallery in Tehran. The exhibition was followed by a roundtable between the artist and Tirdad

non-Western artists emerging on the global scene. A Persian translation of the exhibition's booklet, originally published by JRP|Ringier in Zurich, was made available during the exhibition in Tehran. This translation marked a significant introduction of critical approaches and terminologies, dealing with the global art world and its encounter with the non-West, to the local discourse of Iranian contemporary art. It included a number of short essays by Zolghadr, Michaela Kehrer, Charlotte Bydler, and a transcribed discussion between Zolghadr and the Lebanese filmmaker/artist Akram Zaatari and the Egyptian artist Hassan Khan—an informal panel at the Zurich Institute for Theory of Art and Design in 2003.¹⁷

In his introduction to the booklet, Zolghadr offers a terse critique of the then “gradually” globalizing art world for the “naïve” resurrection of the myths of “Authorship, Authenticity, Culture, and other superstitions declared dead and gone since the advent of poststructuralism” in any discussion of art labeled non-Western. He is also equally critical of the curatorial clichés of internationalism on the global art scene in that, as he argues, all examples of this “critical internationalism” prove to be reducing themselves to “postcolonial platitude or self-congratulating adventurism.”¹⁸ For Zolghadr, the West's role in the globalization of art is not that of

Zolghadr, where issues that appeared later in *Ethnic Marketing* were discussed. What marks *Ethnic Marketing* as a significant curatorial project is that it systematically enquired into the cultural hierarchies of the global art world and questioned its enthusiasm for presenting the ethnically Other as well as its success in introducing alternative points of entry to a subject which suffered from an intellectual stagnation in local discourses of Iranian contemporary art. Cf. Tirdad Zolghadr, “Framing Iran,” 40-41.

¹⁷ The exhibition was accompanied by a symposium and a three day seminar at Tehran University. Artists Natasha Sadr-Haghighian, Solmaz Shahbazi, and Farhad Moshiri, and curators Giovanni Carmine and Tirdad Zolghadr were among the speakers at the symposium that was held at Avini Hall of Tehran University's School of Fine Arts.

¹⁸ Tirdad Zolghadr, “Ethnic Marketing,” 11.

a “mere observer of globalized cultural flows.” It is, rather, a “demanding client” defining the supply for which it pays. Underscoring the “demand and supply” makeup of cultural globalization, the pressing question for *Ethnic Marketing* exhibition is rather simple, yet timely and crucial: what aesthetic strategies can artists devise in order to respond to and resist the underlying “hegemonic structures” of such configuration?¹⁹ Thus, Zolghadr defines the crux of his curatorial project as a critical inquiry into practices of marketing ethnicity and an attempt “to flip the objective on its head.” The exhibition itself, as a means of critical inquiry and knowledge production, was concerned with the ways through which “Western xenophilia” functions in global circuits of art. It called for strategies to address, question, destabilize, and even exploit the aesthetic desires and intellectual hopes of the West as an assertive consumer of the artistic portrayals of cultural alterities and authenticities of its Eastern and Southern peripheries.

The booklet also contained an essay by Charlotte Bydler, entitled “Pax Anglo-Americana: A Plea for a Cosmopolitan History of Contemporary Art.” Using Kant’s ideas on cosmopolitanism as a model to understand “how real life art history business-as-usual functions,” Bydler argues that one either identifies with a universal history, rooted in Greek, Roman, and German traditions, and thus becomes a “host,” or alternatively resorts to self-exoticism, thereby obtaining a “guest” status “with full mutual respect for differences, but only temporary access to universal history.”²⁰ For Bydler the cynical kernel of Kant’s cosmopolitan federation is echoed

¹⁹ Ibid., 12.

in today's internationalized art scene, where you either join and emulate or remain a guest. Yet, in this quasi-cosmopolitan contemporary art world, it is still the Euro-American canon that "determines the books and exhibitions (albeit with due self-reflexivity)," and the English language that governs dominant terminologies of contemporary arts historiography.²¹ The contemporary art world, in Bydler's view, faces a gradual replacement of internationalism with an "adventurous form of cosmopolitanization." Itinerant curators and critics commission and comment on art from all around the world in order to present newcomers to global metropolitan centers. Mobility is celebrated and "rhetorically phrased as an ideal placelessness of contemporary art." In spite of what appears to be a universal access to platforms of art and attempts to steer clear of identitarian territorializations, Bydler argues that the "importance of artists' biographies has not disappeared. Artists become portable versions of what a local context silently communicates."²² Bydler's insight might no longer appear as novel today—one can justifiably say that it wasn't quite novel in the early 2000s either.²³

And yet, her model still retains some force. For to better understand the currency and significance of "Pax Anglo-Americana," as part of this curatorial project, we must think of its translation into Persian and its geography of dissemination. In the early 2000s, the euphoria

²⁰ Charlotte Bydler, "Pax Anglo-Americana: A Plea for a Cosmopolitan History of Contemporary Art," in *Ethnic Marketing*, ed. Tirdad Zolghadr (Lausanne: JRP|Ringier, 2006), 27-28.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

²² *Ibid.*, 28-29.

²³ As early as 1987, with the relaunch of *Third Text* as an academic journal, one can find a systematic intellectual attention given to global contemporary art, conditions of coloniality in the arts, and the questions concerning cultural diversity and dominant discourses of meaning production in art history and criticism.

of joining the global art world and receiving West's validation, continuously prioritized and promoted by the agenda of the TMOCA, had already enfolded Tehran's contemporary art scene. It is in this uncritical atmosphere that Bydler's text and the *Ethnic Marketing* project intervene and bring to the forefront questions left unaddressed by the dominant currents of art practice in Tehran and their proponents.

The transcribed conversation between Khan, Zaatari, and Zolghadr, which was held in tandem with the Arab Cinema Week in 2003 at the Zurich Institute for Theory of Art and Design and subsequently included in *Ethnic Marketing*, raised a number of questions that foregrounded the implicit relationships between globalization, emerging markets, and contemporary non-Western art. Most importantly, I believe, Hassan Khan's emphasis on the politics of organization and production of knowledge highlighted some significant topics that were absent in the intellectual discourses of Iranian contemporary art and overlooked in Zolghadr's understanding of ethnic marketing. For Khan, the dependence of power relations on geography, that is to say the asymmetry between the West and the non-West, is linked to the organization of knowledge, theory, and criticism that is produced in the West and claims to speak for the world. As such, he argues that Zolghadr's perception of the market as a medium fails to grasp that the market itself obstructs alternative organizations of knowledge. For him, Zolghadr's "insistence on watching how non-Euro-American cultural production tries to infiltrate the network of knowledge reduces it to a demonstrative function—that of demonstrating how the market works." He further maintains that within the framework of Zolghadr's

project, “which starts out from a critical position, these forms of production actually become mere ways of regenerating the market.”²⁴

The booklet ends with a sardonic piece, entitled “Ethnic Marketing in Eight Easy Steps,” in form of an instruction manual offering practicing artists with a “short guide on how to turn [their] barriers into sales opportunities.” It satirizes the vocabulary of critical theory and art criticism, such as “class erasure,” “the return of the referent,” “hybrid translation,” among others, and says a few words on how this terminology can be implemented by artists, curators, and cultural institutions in order to produce value in the global art market. While Zolghadr’s derisive tone coupled with his undisguised disdain for academism rather prevents the text from instigating a critical dialogue on the issues presented, its overall layout as an instruction manual, including “benefits and risks” sections, alludes to the entanglement of contemporary art with global and corporate capitalism, and interrupts the narrative of a “genuine” global interest in Iranian contemporary art fabricated by the TMOCA and itinerant curators.

Moreover, *Ethnic Marketing* was an attempt to deal with and challenge the ramifications of the increasingly reifying forces of the global economy in relation to the contemporary non-Western art world, not only using erudite essays written by scholars and the exhibition’s curator, but also ways of thinking through the language of plastic arts. Artists participating in the exhibition took different media and aesthetic approaches to address the question at hand. Some artworks tried to respond directly to the problematic of this exhibition and therefore ran

²⁴ Hassan Khan, Akram Zaatari, and Tirdad Zolghadr, “Actually I Don’t Really Think of Myself as the Colin Powell of the Artworld: A discussion with Akram Zaatari, Hassan Khan, and Tirdad Zolghadr,” in *Ethnic Marketing*, ed. Tirdad Zolghadr (Lausanne: JRP|Ringier, 2006), 86-88.

the risk of instrumentalizing art in order to propagate a previously developed and refined concept rather than emanating from a mutually productive encounter between the theoretical question, or the concept of ethnic marketing, and the aesthetics.²⁵ Erkan Özgen's and Sener Özmen's video *The Road to Tate Modern*, for instance, features two men, one on the back of a horse and the other riding an ass, roaming some countryside in west-Asia asking every passerby the path to the Tate Modern [figure 2-1]. Alluding to Don Quixote and Sancho Panza as characters in Western literature who refuse European modernity, and yet who ironically instantiate it, the video tries to tease out the troubled relationship between global institutions of art, such as the Tate, and those marginalized subjects whose failure to keep pace with modernization renders them curious commodities for museums and galleries. Similarly, Natascha Sadr-Haghighian's work in collaboration with the *possest* group, entitled *bioswop.net*, is an online platform with a CV-DIY kit and the possibility of exchanging CVs—criticizing the fact that, in the global contexts of art, the importance of artist's CV “has grown to ridiculous proportions.”²⁶

But there were also artworks at the exhibition that effectively drew the viewers' attention to the aesthetic dimensions of the problem of ethnic marketing. *Arabic Joke* is the title of the

²⁵ Beside the works that communicate their messages rather bluntly, there were also works present at the exhibition that seemed to be at odds with the show's mantra. One such example was Farhad Moshiri's *You Are My White Dream, My Love, My Hope*, a 120 × 150 cm oil and acrylic on canvas of a deformed clay urn with Persian calligraphy written over it. The series of Moshiri's urns and calligraphies had great success in auctions in Dubai, London, and other major cities, turning him to the most in-demand contemporary artist from Iran with sales records well over one million dollars. Moshiri has become the paradigmatic example of artists using a regime of immobile imagery, clearly denoting an “Iranian culture,” in response to the demands of international art auctions in the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf.

²⁶ From the caption of the website's screenshot provided in *Ethnic Marketing* booklet.

Danish artist Jens Haaning's posters that were put in the central neighborhoods of Geneva and subsequently in New York City [figures 2-2 and 2-3]. The posters presented at the gallery are in black, white, green, and red resembling, as Homayoun Sirizi suggests, in his review of the show, the colors of Arab countries' flags.²⁷ On all posters a joke is written in Arabic script, creating confusion for those in Western metropolises who cannot read it:

A Grain of Wheat. When Guha lost his mind, he started to believe that he was a grain of wheat. His biggest fear was that a chicken would eat him. His wife became tired and persuaded him to see a doctor, which he did. The doctor sent him to a mental hospital. After a short while, it seemed as Guha had recovered and regained his sanity. His wife fetched him from the hospital and walked him back home. On the way home, Guha saw some chickens walking on the road. He became very frightened and tried to hide behind his wife. The wife could not understand what had got into him as they had just left the hospital and shouted at him: "What the hell do you think you are doing? Don't you understand that you're not a grain of wheat anymore?" Guha replied in anguish, "It doesn't matter what I think! The important thing is whether these bloody chickens understand that I am not a grain of wheat."²⁸

The joke's poignant resemblance to the conundrum of non-Western artists in a global art market, which continues to assimilate them as tokens of alterity, is lost on most Genevans and New Yorkers who do not read Arabic. Haaning's use of the Arabic script, refusing to offer a translation, is a clever move to criticize the aestheticization of the script in the West. Compared to Farhad Moshiri's work at the exhibition, *You Are My White Dream, My Love, My Hope*, which transforms Persian calligraphy into decorative ornaments, that has long secured his success at

²⁷ Homayoun Askari Sirizi, "بازار مكاره (Flea Market)," *Herfeh: Honarmand*, no. 15 (Spring 2006), 208.

²⁸ English translation is posted on the Good Water Gallery's website: <http://www.goodwatergallery.com/GW01-06/GW/Artists/Haaning/jh-arabic-jokes.htm>

the Christie's and the Bonhams, *Arabic Joke* questions and ridicules the Western market's infatuation with migrant objects that present stereotypic signifiers of otherness [figure 2-4].

Shahab Fotouhi's installation, *عشق، امنیت، و دموکراسی (مخصوص صادرات)* (*Security, Love, and Democracy (for export only)*), 2004) is another example that challenges the international art market's preference for traditional, and more specifically Islamic, forms and motifs [figure 2-5]. The installation is comprised of complex elements: a mosaic pedestal with Islamic patterns on it; two plastic dinosaurs the size of children's toys, one standing over the pedestal and the other, connected to the gallery's ceiling, floating atop; an artificial bouquet attached to the right side of the pedestal; and finally, on top of the pedestal, a chandelier decorated with mirrors in the familiar shape of Islamic architecture's muqarnas with red and green neon lamps that casts light on the installation.

Fotouhi's work points in various directions. It alludes to the commodification of visual and architectural traditions; focuses on the assimilation of local traditions into a culture of consumerism through juxtaposition of elements of kitsch against sophisticated Islamic aesthetics; and, by way of bringing together incongruent objects, teases out the suspect and dubious concept of hybridity, celebrated by identitarian postcolonialism and, ironically, the global market. In his review, entitled "بازار مکاره (Flea Market)," Sirizi reads *Security, Love, and Democracy's* dinosaur as a metaphor of a "glorious ancient power that is now in ruins and only a petty and small icon of it is remained." For him, its secured position above the pedestal is an illusion, now futilely reinforced by the reappraisal of an authoritative, yet long gone, history.

Sirizi argues that the work questions the current conditions of the so-called third world's cultural heritage and art, regarded to as objects for export, preservation, and admiration.²⁹

What I find most provocative in Fotouhi's installation, however, is the ways in which it confuses the viewer as to precisely what the entire assemblage is representing and monumentalizing. The destabilizing juxtaposition of incongruent elements, such as the elegantly designed apparatus of display—the light and the pedestal—and the banality of the supposedly central object of this entire installation—the mass-produced plastic dinosaur—confronts the spectator with a troubling sense of disorientation. Each element on its own bares an array of significations and symbolic connotations. Yet the amalgamation of these dissonant elements pushes the familiar trend of mixing cultural referents to such extremes that it effectively evacuates the installation from meaning. As such, instead of an iconographic reading, such as the one Sirizi undertakes, I believe that shifting our gaze to the totality of the work allows us to see that it repeatedly calls attention to the empty, farcical, and troubling nature of such forced hybridizations of disparate cultural traditions demanded and cherished by the market. Whether we think of Fotouhi's work as emerging from a desire to resist the preconditions for non-Western artists to gain access to the global market, or as an attempt to deride the clichés reproduced by those who instrumentalize local aesthetic traditions in exchange for higher international visibility, his attention to the visual aspects of marketing ethnicity is what differentiates him from most artists present at the exhibition.

²⁹ Homayoun Askari Sirizi, "بازار مکاره (Flea Market)," 209.

Notwithstanding the large number of rather blunt artworks and the show's theoretically undemanding statement, *Ethnic Marketing* introduced a critical vocabulary into discourses of contemporary Iranian art—a vocabulary that was able to expose the euphoric fictions of joining the global stage, marshalled, preserved, and reinforced by Sami'azar's TMOCA.³⁰ This is not to argue that Zolghadr's project effectively dismantled the hegemonic functions of the global market. Contrary to Sirizi's conviction that *Ethnic Marketing* was an ineffectual endeavor due to its refusal to take a pragmatic stance vis-à-vis the imperatives of the Western market and its deliberate failure in recognizing the nostalgia of the Western public for traditional and ethnic artifacts, I see its accomplishment in its illustration of a realistic image of the global art market and its infatuation with ethnic alterity. I also believe that *Ethnic Marketing* was able to offer valid examples of strategies to resist the hegemonic position of the global art market, while,

³⁰ Similar to Sirizi's article in *Herfeh: Honarmand*, where he argues that postmodernism has enabled our membership in the global village, where it shows lenience toward the third world's presumptuous appropriations of Western concepts such as democracy, the artist and critic Behnam Kamrani deems *Ethnic Marketing* an example of the oppositional currents challenging the global art market, which are only enabled by the very same market they oppose. Notes and essays were also published in defense of *Ethnic Marketing*'s project. For example, Iraj Esmailpour Ghouchani wrote a short piece for *Shargh* newspaper, where he praised the exhibition not only for enabling contemporary Iranian artists to analyze the major role-players of the Western art market as an ethnic entity, thus reversing the hierarchy, but also for bringing together, organizing, and challenging complex issues such as “globalization, McDonalidization, art market and economy, third world and the global south, Orientalization, Xenophilia, and ethnography” together under the umbrella of *Ethnic Marketing*. Whereas reactions to the exhibition in Iranian journals and newspapers varied rather dramatically, neither ends of the debate acknowledged *Ethnic Marketing*'s role in offering a platform for such discussions and opening a space in the local discourse for thinking through a critical vocabulary to the global art market's functions and strategies in marketing cultural difference and ethnic authenticity. Cf. Behnam Kamrani, “نمایشگاه بدون مرز هفده راه نگرستن دل بستگی های بی مرز: نگاهی به (Attachments without Borders: A Review of Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking exhibition),” *Tandis* 75 (Tehran: June 6, 2006), 8. Iraj Esmailpour Ghouchani, “بازاریابی قومی (Ethnic Marketing),” *Shargh* 820 (July 29, 2006), 15.

most importantly, it effectively brought significant questions and debates in global contemporary art to the forefront of the collective consciousness and the discursive topography of the Iranian art scene.

BARBAD GOLSHIRI AGAINST GRAND NARRATIVES

Barbad Golshiri (b. 1982) is perhaps the most prolific contemporary Iranian artist of a generation that joined the art scene of Tehran in the early 2000s. He works across different media, including photography, video, performance, and installation, while his works continuously question the validity of such divisions and at times decidedly transgress the boundaries drawn between artistic media, exposing their incapacity to deliver their representational promises. Given the limits of this study, reviewing Golshiri's oeuvre appears to be an impossible task. I trace in his works an evolving, yet relatively consistent, strategy that resists and rejects the discursive tropes of dominant art historical narratives, which enable the marginalization of non-Western artists. In order to do so, I have chosen to focus on a relatively small number of what I see as particularly significant works of Golshiri, works that are emblematic of his artistic strategies.

What distinguishes Golshiri's practice from most contemporary Iranian artists, is the intellectual inquisitiveness of his works, their theoretical sophistication. While sustaining a dialogue with internationally renowned cultural repertoires, mostly within history of art and literature, Golshiri transcends the national boundaries that limit artists from the margins to the

image regimes pertaining to their geography of origin. Figures recurring in his works, such as Samuel Beckett, Jan van Eyck, and Kasimir Malevich, are claimed, celebrated, appropriated, and critiqued by the artist as a way to interrogate historical narratives and their pretense to truth. More importantly, however, Golshiri's appropriation of the artistic and literary preeminent works emerges without losing sight on the hierarchies marking the art world today. For him, Malevich, Beckett, or van Eyck are valuable sites for negotiating his position as an artist *from* the margins; either by hollowing out a play and turning it into the structure of his video-performance, or by turning a Suprematist abstract square on its head.

Golshiri's installation, entitled *غير* (*The Other*), is one of his relatively early works that tackles issues of marginalization and exoticism rather directly [figures 2-6 and 2-7]. The work, shown at Azad Art Gallery in 2007, is a mattress with a slight curve placed on a checkered surface on the floor. The Persian/Arabic word "غير" is written in reverse on the mattress with a mixture of crude oil, saffron, and semen. The clinically immaculate, white, thin gridded plastic surface creates borders around the work, forcing the audience to maintain his/her distance with the "other." The reversal of the word "other" does not alter its readability. Yet, it clearly mimics the effects of a mirror-like reflection, simultaneously marking the object and its viewer as "the other." Intensified by the use of a rumpled mattress, the work allows the viewer to imagine the script as the marks left from an absent body inscribed with the term "other" on its back. The use of semen not only emphasizes that absent body, but also alludes to the racial dimensions of such inscriptions; the marks of otherness carried through lineage. As such, Golshiri's work questions—even menaces—our own subjectivities and subsequently those of the

other. By using semen, a mark of origin in genealogy, غير (*The Other*) poses serious threats to the comfortably resting notions of self and subjectivity in larger trajectories of origin and copy. Saffron and oil, two products closely linked to Iran's national export, connects the work to the geographic logic of center and margin.

Golshiri links this logic to the production of identity and representation. The gridded surface on which the mattress rests divides the space into geometrically aligned squares, with black lines creating multiple intersections. The "other" is placed on a grid that defines its coordinates. This geometrization of the space in which the "other" is re-presented—the mattress itself representing an absent body—highlights a rigid model of understanding the subject in terms of stasis. The inevitable movement of the body that was once lying on the mattress is contrasted with the static positions suggested by the intersections. Golshiri's work, thus, not only critiques the paternal notions of origin and center, where the West's other is a continuously failing copy of it (the semen), but also challenges what Brian Massumi calls the concept of "positionality," which defines the body as linked to immobile subject positions, turning it into "a local embodiment of ideology," foreclosing all potentials for change.³¹

The identitarian politics which Golshiri aims to destabilize in his غير (*The Other*) are the direct corollaries of static understandings of subjectivity. Insofar as we conceive of the subject in moments of stasis it is difficult to transgress the grid and question identities. Golshiri's installation underlines a ghostly presence of the body precisely by way of accentuating its marks

³¹ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 2-3.

and its absence. Here, haptic ingredients (saffron and oil), with their distinct odors, question the faculty of sight as the only means of perception, haunted by the ghost of his work. The invalidation of sight is a trend in Golshiri's oeuvre that matures in his more recent works, and which I will discuss later in further detail. By way of its emphasis on the body, the haptic, and the verbal, *غير* (*The Other*) questions the potentials of the representational to escape identitarian politics and underscores its complicity in cementing marginalization and exoticization of the non-West.³²

Golshiri's strategy in his *غير* (*The Other*) is to haunt and antagonize the spectator. Antagonism, here, threatens the viewer's experience of his/her full presence, by way of emphasizing a "constitutive outside."³³ Informed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, art historians Claire Bishop—in her response to Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics—and Rosalyn Deutsche—in her theorization of art and the politics of space—have underscored social relations of conflict as the *sine qua non* of democratic spheres.³⁴ It is only through sustaining conflict that what Bishop calls "the art world's self-constructed identity" is called into question. Golshiri's installation not

³² An influential critique of representation and its tendency toward fixing the world for the human subject can be found in Heidegger, which later enables thinkers such as Massumi and Derrida to break with the representational logic. Cf. Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Alfred Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt (New York: Garland, 1977).

³³ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics*, trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack (London and New York: Verso, 1985), 125.

³⁴ Cf. Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110, (Fall 2004) and Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1998).

only exposes the relations of power, domination, and hierarchy that are suppressed by a seamlessly operating global art world, it also implicates its viewer in the larger social, cultural, and political narratives enabling fixed identities for the Western and the non-Western subject, narratives that inscribe the guiding grids of mobility in the global contemporary art.

One can also trace this strategy in Golshiri's video, created in the same year, entitled *Middle East Impromptu* [figure 2-8]. The work, which was exhibited at the Barbican Center in London in 2008, is a 5-minute black-and-white video showing a male body lying down on its right side facing the camera. The lower and upper sides of the figure are masked by black surfaces creating an increasingly claustrophobic space for the body enclosed between them. The violence of the space is echoed in the position of the figure's hands that appear to be cuffed behind his back as well as a black knitted mask over his head with a single hole only in front of his mouth, resembling masks used in executions. The body's integrity is interrupted by way of post-production technique; the video image is divided, where only its head and its upper half torso are moving, while the lower body is a still photograph, adding a sense of the uncanny to the violence of the image. The figure, whose voice belongs to the artist, utters articulate sentences, as if reading from a text, recites Samuel Beckett, Golshiri's own writings, and makes numerous references to the contemporary art scene in Iran as well as references to the Middle East. Golshiri's text, interspersed with two sound effects interrupting the monolog, starts with a question that explicitly aims to debunk untouched universal doxai,³⁵ "does geography have a

³⁵ The term *doxa* (δόξα) recurrently appears in Golshiri's writing and works, including *Middle East Impromptu*. The term refers to a popular belief that has its roots in common sense. Taking his lead from Plato's view of doxa as the opposite of knowledge, for Golshiri the term also denotes an understanding of

center?” It continues by asking whether there is any relationship between Alfred Thayer Mahan, a U.S. Navy flag officer who popularized the term “Middle East” in 1902, and Robinson Crusoe, Shirin Neshat, Farhad Moshiri, Lida Abdul, Frank Miller, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, “opening an Iranian *la vie en Rose* painting exhibition.”³⁶ The historical reference to the popularization of the term Middle East by an American historian and admiral calls attention to the association of historical knowledge production with the colonial adventurism of the United States. This is further linked to the ways in which reductive representations of Iran, and by extension the entire region, are complicit in the contemporary imperial politics of the U.S. in the Middle East. Golshiri’s contemptuous rhetorical question portrays Neshat and Moshiri as native informants contributing to the ideological foregrounding of U.S. imperial project engineered by the Bush security administration, including Secretary Rice.³⁷

things and ideas in the absence of critical thinking. Doxa has been used by the anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu to in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, to refer to what is taken for granted, “where the natural and social world appears as self-evident.” Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 164.

³⁶ Here, Golshiri is referring to the *Wishes and Dreams: Iran’s New Generation Emerges* exhibition at the Meridian Center in Washington D.C. The show was curated by Nancy Matthews of the Meridian and Ali-reza Sami’azar of the TMOCA and was on display from May 10 to June 29, 2007. On the opening day, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited the exhibition and met with the artists who were visiting from Iran as part of an exchange program funded primarily by organizations in the United States.

³⁷ In *Brown Skin, White Masks*, Hamid Dabashi writes that the “native informers” provide the “exotic seasonings” for the stories about democracy and liberty on which the empire thrives (128). For him, the native informers reduce “both the historical and the contemporary polyvocality of Muslims to an essentialist conception of Islam,” which is then denounced and rendered inferior to the “superior authority of ‘the West’” (85). In writing of Azar Nafisi, Ibn Warraq, Irshad Manji, Hirsi Ali, and Fouad Ajami among others, Dabashi notes that the central function of the native informer, a term that he suggests exposes more effectively the moral degeneration of the act of betrayal than “native informant,” (12) is to “sustain the mirage of [the] virtual empire,” that is the U.S. and its European shadow (128). Cf. Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks* (London and New York: Pluto Press, 2011).

Golshiri's words drift away from politically charged questions into a parody of Persian mysticism with its non-linear wisdom of the circularity of life, which then leads him to sing the first text of the second act of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*:

A dog came in the kitchen
And stole a crust of bread.
Then cook up with a ladle
And beat him till he was dead.

Then all dogs come running
And dug the dog a tomb—
Then all the dogs come running
And dug the dog a tomb
And wrote upon the tombstone
For the eyes of dogs to come:

A dog came in the kitchen
And stole a crust of bread.
Then cook up with a ladle
And beat him till he was dead.³⁸

And, thus, he frantically repeats the first quatrain over and over until it is abruptly interrupted by the word “off” followed by a chilling sound bite. Here, *Middle East Impromptu*, which borrows its title from another Beckett's play, *Ohio Impromptu*, finds a valuable site for resistance against representation in the crisis of meaning which Beckett locates in form, as the very condition of the possibility of the work itself and its meanings. Beckett's circularity and repetition, which transforms the familiar into nonsense and “the discursive element in language,” as

³⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (New York: Grove, 1954), act 2, scene 1.

Adorno writes, into “an instrument of its own absurdity,” manifest here in the traditional children’s nursery rhyme that Golshiri recites, constitute Beckett’s rebellion against meaning and representation.³⁹

The repetitious rhyme is replaced, once again, by Golshiri’s monologue that now directly challenges the viewer’s sense of completeness and selfhood. Alluding to his prior artwork, the installation غير (*The Other*), he continues:

And one day you will see my innocent semen on your mattress / and you experience me. / This other, / this merchandise from far lands / and you feel that it could have been yours. / You still want to keep this dismem- / dis- / dis- / dismembered *i* / and you’ll try to hang on to this delayed *i* / and then you feel my skin growing on you, / my beard on your face / and my wool on your breasts and / my eyelids around your anus. / Then you shall never forget me.⁴⁰

Golshiri’s provocative language haunts the viewer with an absent, fragmented ghost; a dismembered and delayed subject.⁴¹ Now, however, he returns to the political, with which he started the monologue: “this other, this merchandise from far lands...,” an utterance that directly challenges the reification of his marginality through representation. The rest of the monolog takes a rather blatant tone in its descriptions of how the dominated and reified subject, the “dismembered *i*,” will eventually threaten the integrity and wholeness of the dominant

³⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, “Trying to Understand Endgame,” in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 262.

⁴⁰ Barbad Golshiri, *Middle East Impromptu* (5-minute black and white video), 2007.

⁴¹ This ghost or phantom is also what is present in the figure of the doppelgänger in Beckett’s *Ohio Impromptu*, continuously putting the two works in dialogue.

subject. These explicit sentences disrupt the notion of art as a site of beauty and desire for the viewer, even as Golshiri draws from a vocabulary associated with sexual desire. Golshiri's work resists turning into a desirable object from the "far lands" of the Middle East, typical of Moshiri's and to some extent Neshat's oeuvre. The subject of *Middle East Impromptu* is a recalcitrant antagonizing subject that appears as a menace to the totality of its spectator.

This antagonistic strategy in Golshiri, along with the video's multiple references to the historical fabrication of the Middle East and his critique of representation enables him to expose the mechanisms involved in creating fixed notions of self and its other; a philosophical and political critique one can also locate in his غير (*The Other*). Later in his career, he distanced himself from the rather blatant tone of *Middle East Impromptu* and, gradually, his works turn into increasingly more complex and more difficult objects for interpretation, where multiple references to literature, politics, history, philosophy, and above all history of art are built into the fabric of each piece. Still, in Golshiri's more recent artworks resistance against the status quo, ideology, exoticism, and reification is as present as ever before. Since 2012, Golshiri has concentrated in creating tombstones, or grave-markers to better reflect the impermanence of some of his objects. While he has exhibited these objects at the Thomas Erben Gallery in New York, the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, and the Aaran Projects Gallery in Tehran, among other venues, he vehemently opposes identifying them as artworks. Here, however, I will trace his artistic strategies in relation to three other works that are made prior to this shift in his practice and will only offer a brief review of his grave-markers and the ways in which they fit within his entire corpus.

Golshiri's چارتو (*Quod*, 2010), is a 106.2 × 106.5 cm inkjet print on paper of a rectangular spiral of a Persian text in a bold font that diminishes in size as it moves toward the center, almost ad infinitum [figure 2-9]. چارتو (*Quod*), with the exact size of Malevich's *Black Square* (1913) [figure 2-10], a recurring theme in Golshiri's work, takes the artist's work and transforms it into a black square of text quoting directly from the prison memoirs of a political prisoner of the 1980s, A'zam, as reported by Akbar Sardoozami in his ثبت پیچ و خم‌های چند زندگی (*Chronicling the Ups and Downs of a Few Lives*). Golshiri's appropriation of *The Black Square* complements other works in which he dismantles the plasticity of visual arts. Displacing the grammar of Suprematism and the primacy it bestows upon "pure feeling,"⁴² he reinstates a poetics predominantly dependent on language that questions the vague metaphysics and the political-neutrality of Suprematism. It is only through reading the text that one comes to realize the poetic parallel between the "square," the cell in which A'zam is confined, and her prison memoir:

One day I was checking all angles of my cell to find something, anything. Eventually, under a piece of moquette covering parts of the cell, I found a small rusty pin. [...] I would spend hours drawing with it on the floor. I would say one, two, three, four. When you look at this from outside it seems ridiculous. What does it mean? One, two, three, four, I don't know what it means. But this was so much to me. When I say so much I mean so much! I lived with this one, two, three, four. My mind worked only with this one, two, three, four. After drawing these lines, I would draw a line over it turning it into a square. Then I would draw another square inside it. And then, another one. For a person who has transformed into nothing, drawing a square is very important! [...] I drew so many squares inside each other when I discovered

⁴² Kasimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism*, trans. Howard Dearstyne (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003), 67.

that once the area gets narrower, a square will turn into a point. Then I saw that if I draw a square in another square, once I go deeper, it will turn into a point. The cell wasn't bright enough, but I could see a dot in the center of the square that is helplessly staring back at me. A dot that was saying "you should testify that I am a square." It was saying "you are the only one who knows that I was a square and still am." I would cry for the square that had lost its sides. I knew this dot was a square. I wanted to help it gain back its sides. But it was really wretched. Around it was full of squares in squares. I would talk to the square. I would console it. I would say don't be sorrowful! I will testify on your behalf! To the day I am alive, I will testify that the dot, is exactly the square.⁴³

As Golshiri writes himself for *Tate Etc.* journal, the very physical experience of reading this melancholic text, that is twisted so that it aligns with a rectangular spiral path stimulates nausea.⁴⁴ چارتو (*Quod*) allows us to sense, however minimally, the emotional complexities of solitary confinement and torture without shying away from challenging our inability to grasp its depth—the most inner rectangles of the spiral are ineligible. Golshiri leads the narrative into a dark abyss where letters and words are no longer functional linguistic components, thus, similar to A'zam's squares with no sides, alluding to the very futility of any attempt at "understanding" the pain that does not *belong* to us.

The work's title, which is a play on Beckett's *Quad* (1981), adds to the complex layering of Golshiri's visually unassuming work. Beckett's television play, with the obvious pun in "quad"

⁴³ Akbar Sardoozami, "گوشه‌ای از روایت اعظم" in *ثبت بیچ و خم‌های چند زندگی* (*Chronicling the Ups and Downs of a Few Lives*) (Copenhagen: Kalamat, date unknown), 37-38. [translation mine]

⁴⁴ Barbad Golshiri, "Barbad Golshiri on Malevich," *Tate Etc.*, no. 31 (Summer 2014), 90.

and “quod,”⁴⁵ consists of four actors in different colors moving around and across a square on the stage in various, yet predetermined patterns [figures 2-11 and 2-12]. The relation between Beckett and Malevich seems to be apparent: their attempt to purge the work from representational meaning. And yet, the subtle difference distinguishing Beckett from Malevich’s tendency to empty the work from expression is precisely in the former’s ambivalence toward expression. Tyrus Miller richly elaborates on Beckett’s work as exposing the mechanisms “by which narratives are expressively extracted from mute bodily experience,” through “literal or minimally figured scenes of inquisition, interrogation, and torture.” Miller interprets Beckett’s drive to abstraction as “opening within expression an anti-expressive moment, and within the figuration of suffering a protest against suffering.”⁴⁶ The theme of torture, which is located at the core of Golshiri’s *Quod*—A’zam’s torture in prison and a faint hint to it in the viewer’s nauseating experience of attempting to read her melancholic account—ties Beckett, Malevich, and A’zam in a multifaceted work that touches on the intrinsically limited, if not futile, conditions of plasticity and representation, while retaining its taint of suffering and its expressions.

Being able to read the Persian text in چارتو (*Quod*) is essential to any understanding of the work that is not distracted by the use of a script fraught with signs of exoticism. Here, another

⁴⁵ The renowned Beckett scholar, Rosemary Pountney, links the pun between “quad” and “quod” (prison) in Beckett’s play to his experience of rhythm of life in Santé Prison, which was located in front of one of his apartments in Paris. She further notices that in *Quad*, “the players following their prescribed course of movements around a square could be seen as ‘doing time’ in the most literal sense of the term.” Cf. Rosemary Pountney, *Theatre of Shadows: Samuel Beckett’s Drama, 1956-76* (Gerards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1988), 210.

⁴⁶ Tyrus Miller, *Singular Examples: Artistic Politics and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 196.

trait of Golshiri's resistance against the global market becomes apparent. Golshiri has consistently taken an emphatic position against the use of Arabic/Persian script in the works of artists such as Neshat and Moshiri, where letters and words lose their functions and turn into reified objects as "exotic ornaments" or decorative embellishments of paintings and photographs that are only "answers to the market demand for the Arabesque and Arabic letters without knowing what they are."⁴⁷ چارتو (*Quod*) demands to be read. This demand, apparent in how one must move to read the work, dictates the physical interaction between the viewer and the work, enabling the nauseating feeling the work intends to create in its audience. But Golshiri's resistance to the market takes also another route. The work is made in nine editions, but the artist has a strict criterion for his customers. He refuses to sell the work to those who are not able to read Persian.⁴⁸

Golshiri's defiant position against reductive and identitarian politics of the global market is also visible in his 2010 installation and performance *اشاعه‌ی نظام مقدس* (*Distribution of the Sacred System*) [figures 2-13 and 2-14]. Alternatively entitled [...] *اشاعه‌ی* (*The Distribution of [...]*), the work is comprised of an iron pulley, with a 150 cm diameter and approximately 240 cm length, carrying a massive roll of fabric divided into 180 × 69 cm pieces on each of which a diagram and words in Greek and Persian are silk screened in white color, one after the other covering the entire length of the black canvas strip around the cylinder. The performative act—

⁴⁷ Barbad Golshiri, "For They Know What They Do Know," 2009.

⁴⁸ Barbad Golshiri's official website.
<http://www.barbadgolshiri.com/Quod/Quod.htm> (accessed: July 4, 2016).

or what Golshiri calls an “aktion”—as an integral part of the piece presents the spectators with clues to the diagram and the text. Golshiri stands in front of the diagram that is mounted on the wall, wears the same black head mask he had in *Middle East Impromptu* and holds the microphone of a megaphone in one hand while its speaker is affixed between his thighs to his rear, as if it is an amplification of his anal orifice. He then explains [...] اشاعه‌ی (The Distribution of [...])’s text and the names given to different parts of the diagram, which is in a highly coded and, at times, arcane language of *fiqh* (philosophy of Islamic law) and prison terminology that requires explication even for native speakers. A video documenting the performance accompanies the installation for the entire duration of the exhibition. As such, the work no longer poses a limit of purchase for those who can only read it, as the performance, or its documentation, translates the diagram into plain Persian and English for the spectators.

Golshiri’s decision to produce infinite editions for the diagram, which is cut from the long strip and sold separately for less than \$300 a piece (\$175 for students) only in form of donations to the Reporters Sans Frontières, marks a strategy that undermines the uniqueness of the art object, thereby preventing it from gaining more monetary value in time. The work, which was performed at the *SubRosa: The Language of Resistance* exhibition at the University of Southern Florida Contemporary Art Museum in 2013, takes an outspoken position against the instrumentalization of sacred beliefs and sensibilities for ideological ends. Golshiri’s work questions the mass distribution of ideological values of the dominant, which in turn, determine regimes of truth by establishing the “borders between the visible and the invisible, the audible

and the inaudible, the sayable and the unsayable.”⁴⁹ That purchasing [...] اشاعه‌ی (The Distribution of [...]) is only made possible through donations to a non-profit organization which sets as its goal the promotion of freedom of information, shows Golshiri’s commitment to what “the distribution of the sensible,” in Rancière’s words, has rendered invisible, inaudible, and unsayable. [...] اشاعه‌ی (The Distribution of [...]), however, does not stop at challenging the authority of truth and exposing its suppressed “others,” but appropriates “distribution” as a strategy by creating infinite editions of his work that not only symbolically resist the transformation of art into a lucrative commodity for investment and international flow of finance capital, but also literally distributes, as widely as possible, his counter-narrative to that of the dominant.

In subsequent works, Golshiri extends his critique of representation through examining visibility, diverging from his strategy of antagonism toward a more complex interrogation of plastic arts. His كورا (Cura: The Rise of Aplasticism) is a ten-day performance-installation that took place at the Solyanka State Gallery during the Fourth Moscow Biennial in 2011, where he reconstructs, with painstaking detail, a section from Malevich’s *Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0,10* taken from a widely-circulated installation-shot of the 1915-1916 exhibition in Petrograd [figures 2-15 and 2-16].⁵⁰ The reconstructed room takes a triangular shape that stays

⁴⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004), 89.

⁵⁰ Malevich himself writes in a letter, where he accuses the artist David Diao of copying him, that he believes this black and white photograph of the exhibition has become “so famous and [...] published in hundreds of books.” Golshiri quotes sections about the photograph from Malevich’s letter on his webpage for his work *Cura: The Rise of Aplasticism*. <http://www.barbadgolshiri.com/cura/cura;-the-rise-and-fall-of-aplasticism.htm> (accessed: June 28, 2016).

faithful to the perspective of the photograph [figure 2-17]. All frames are removed, yet there is a simulation of their traces, created with soot, along with their holding nails or their holes on the walls. On the first night, the audience entered the room to find Golshiri on the curator's chair,⁵¹ placed exactly where the chair appears in the installation-shot, wearing black clothes and his recurring black hood. There is a hole in his clothing, on the left side of the artist's abdomen, making visible a sentence in Braille system cauterized on his skin. He invites the spectators to lend him their index fingers, which he places on and ushers through the sentence marked on his body, while he turns the lights off, putting the room in absolute darkness.

On the second night, a surgeon, sitting on the curator's chair, removes the cauterized skin and some layers of flesh beneath it from Golshiri's abdomen. Spectators are allowed into the room in groups of two or three to watch the surgical procedure. From the following day until the end of the exhibition, Golshiri's skin and flesh are placed inside a frame with the exact size of Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) [figure 2-18], where they are to be *cured* in salt during the rest of the performance. Water and blood drip from the frame and the chair is left empty in the reconstructed space. Golshiri's *كورا* (*Cura*) requires an extensive reading that explores all aspects and dimensions of his multivalent performance-installation, with the same careful and thorough attention that his work gives to details. I am, however, more interested in his strategic questioning of visibility and blindness that not only resists the commodification of his art prac-

⁵¹ Before its current semantic shift, the word "curator" was used for the custodian of a museum or a collection.

tice, but also defies reductive interpretations of artworks that continue to seek out a clear message in the works of non-Western artists, while voyeuristically gaze at their works as markers of alterity. This is where Golshiri's strategy of obstructing the clarity of meaning and refusing to take on the position of the othered artist, the object of cultural voyeurisms, comes to fruition.

Through his critical appropriation of Malevich, a central figure in modern art history who in some sense signals the rise of plasticism, Golshiri's work presents a crucial dialectic between sight and blindness, plasticity and aplasticity (also, a kind of *plasticity*), and visibility and invisibility. The title of his work in Persian, كورا, is the plural form for "the blind," not in written language though, but in its spoken form, adding another layer to the complex series of links he establishes between seeing and other senses, such as the somatosensory—when touching the Braille sentence on his skin—or olfaction—when smelling blood and salt. *Cura: The Rise of Aplasticism*, situated between light and darkness—what Golshiri literally brings to his spectators—is much more than an interrogation of formalism or plasticism; it is concerned with the fundamental preconditions of representation. As such, Golshiri's work goes beyond an investigation into the plastic arts as it tries to uncover the cracks and seams concealed by histories of representation. T. J. Clark's has richly elaborated the necessity of considering vision and blindness simultaneously:

What use did the artist make of pictorial tradition; what forms, what schemata, enabled the painter to see and to depict? It is often seen as the only question. It is certainly a crucial one, but when one writes the social history of art one is bound to see it in a different light; one is concerned with what

prevents representations as much as what allows it; one studies blindness as much as vision.⁵²

Through its critique of representation, *كورا* (*Cura*) foregrounds the famous Heideggerian critique of the modern conception of the world as picture. This critique enables Golshiri's work to destabilize what Timothy Mitchell has called "the pictorial certainty of representation," the means of production of "the world-as-exhibition" entirely dependent on displacing the spatial difference between the Orient and Europe into a temporal disjunction.⁵³ Golshiri, replaces a questioning of the symptoms of cultural hegemony, as we see in his *غير* (*The Other*), or *Middle East Impromptu*, by a more complicated inquiry into the very logic of representation and its complicity in imperial grand-narratives of art history.

Since 2012, Golshiri's practice has been primarily focused on making grave-markers. Some of these objects only remain in cemeteries, while some end up in museums and galleries. His solo show, entitled *Curriculum Mortis*, at the Thomas Erben Gallery in 2013 in Chelsea, New York, showcased eleven of his grave-markers; his *The Untitled Tomb*, was purchased by the LACMA in 2015 and was displayed at the *Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East* exhibition [figure 2-19]; in October 2015 a larger selection of his works were exhibited in Tehran's Aaran Projects with the title *سيرة الموت* (*Curriculum Mortis*); and in 2016 his work was

⁵² Timothy J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 15.

⁵³ Timothy Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 501-502.

included in the NYU's Grey Art Gallery's group show *Global/Local*. Golshiri's *Curriculum Mortis* navigates the ways in which graveyards are spaces of sanctioning legitimacy to death and remembrance and thus offers a critique of an authoritarian biopolitics that exercises its jurisdiction not only over life and death but also on the semiotics of remembrance. While taking these objects into museums and galleries might appear to defeat their purpose, highlighting the functional affinity between museums and graveyards in that they both "enclose all times and epochs in one immobile space,"⁵⁴ they maintain a critical position against the spaces of collection and display.

Again, a number of Golshiri's works foreground the tension between sight and blindness. His *Death Sentence* (2011-2013) is comprised of three rectangular marble pieces⁵⁵ that are laid on top of one another on their shorter edges, reminiscent of fallen domino pieces [figure 2-20]. Each marble is engraved in Persian Braille writing system, and thus reversed (indented rather than embossed) with the names of three political activists who died while serving their sentences at the Evin prison in northern Tehran [figure 2-21].⁵⁶ The piece is entitled ه ه ه in Persian; the letter ه (*h*) plays a crucial role in connecting the pieces of this fallen domino; the given names of Golshiri's martyrs are all connected through their last and first letters starting

⁵⁴ Barbad Golshiri, "Curriculum Mortis," 49.

⁵⁵ Marble pieces are in different sizes: 55 × 107 × 5, 56 × 107 × 4, and 55 × 120 × 4 cm.

⁵⁶ On *Death Sentence*'s marbles the names of Ezzatollah Sahabi (d. 31 May 2011), Haleh Sahabi (d. 1 June 2011 at the funeral of his father, Ezzatollah Sahabi), and Hoda Saber (d. 10 June 2011, on a hunger strike in prison protesting the suspicious death of Haleh Sahabi) are engraved.

in عزت‌الله (Ezzatollah), هاله (Haleh), and هدی (Hoda).⁵⁷ Here, Golshiri's protests the ideological politics of remembrance and memorialization, while at the same time, through his use of reversed Braille, draws our attention to the failures of plasticity, as well as the visible, in representing what has been a central theme of the history of representation, namely death—such as in Memento Mori, Vanitas, and other forms of picturing death. The kinship between death and writing, as a representational process, is underscored by way of names that cannot be read. The representation of death therefore foregrounds the idea of representation as death, marking *Death Sentence* with the same aplastic qualities that are located at the core of the artist's earlier practice. In his review of *Curriculum Mortis*, Mehran Mohajer situates this continuity in Golshiri's aplastic tendencies in the ways through which the artist “eliminate[s] seeing from visual experience,” taking his lead from his subject, i.e., death, which mercilessly silences “seeing, reading, [and] feeling.”⁵⁸

One can trace Golshiri's strategy of calling into question the very limits of representation in his *Tombstone of Jan van Eyck* (2013), which consists of an oxidized concave iron in the shape of an italicized *I*, with a repeated Braille sentence that reads “Eyck dead not aye I for aye as far as the I,” creating a linguistic play between “eye,” “I,” “Eyck,” and “for aye” (forever). But a more complex appropriation of the figure and work of van Eyck as a means to inquire

⁵⁷ The three ه letters following each other (hé hé hé) create the onomatopoeic sound for contemptuous laughter in Persian. Golshiri's work makes a poignant note about the apathetic society in which we live that prefers to turn a blind eye to the unjust deaths of these prominent activists.

⁵⁸ Mehran Mohajer, “The Taphographer: Passing over Realms of Death and Form,” in *Barbad Golshiri: Curriculum Mortis* (Tehran: Aaran Projects, 2015), 50. This piece was originally published in Persian in *Herfeh: Honarmand*, no. 51 (Tehran, Summer 2014).

into blindness and sight and their place in histories of art and representation is evident in a crypt lid Golshiri made in place of a performance that was never realized.⁵⁹ *Eyeck*, is a large circular lid (145 × 145 × 18 cm) made of wood, iron, and brass, the top surface of which is covered with an oil on canvas painting that visualizes Golshiri's idea for his performance at the Groeningemuseum in Bruges, where van Eyck's *The Madonna with Canon van der Paele* is on display [figure 2-22]. The painting depicts a figure sitting in front of the masterpiece, shackled to a chair that is reminiscent of Lubbert Das's chair in Hieronymus Bosch's *The Extraction of the Stone of Madness* (ca. 1494) [figure 2-23] and Dr. Benjamin Rush's *Tranquilizing Chair* [figure 2-24], while his eyes facing van Eyck's work are almost blinded by the camera obscura of the sensory-deprivation head enclosure.⁶⁰ Here again, the absence of sight is paralleled with the epitaph in Braille that covers the iron rim of the crypt's lid. Neither embossed nor engraved, the painted English Braille inscription is only a simulation of the writing system, echoing van Eyck's attention to the frames of his paintings, where he at times created illusions of three-dimensionality. Describing the entire scene, the text explains why the crypt is a burial site for Golshiri's own failed performance rather than for the Flemish master of the Northern Renaissance.⁶¹

⁵⁹ The artwork was created in collaboration with Shahryar Hatami.

⁶⁰ From Golshiri's *Curriculum Mortis* catalog (New York: Thomas Erben Gallery, 2013).

⁶¹ The text on the crypt lid describes the image: "Sitting far left on a high chair the artist. Not older than thirty years of age. Sightless and by no means clairvoyant. Hands manacled to the chair arms. Feet shackled to the chair legs. Head in a camera obscura attached to the chair back. Far right levelled with camera obscura's pinhole hangs Jan Van Eyck's *Virgin and Child with Canon van der Paele*. Seeing that the chair is slightly decentred toward his right, upon Van Eyck's reflection in Saint George's shield, the artist's gaze

Golshiri's critical appropriation of central figures of history of art and literature, the multivalence characteristic of his works, and his critique of representational logic, are at the center of his carefully thought-through strategy against the reification of artistic practice. His works either directly question the validity of hegemonic narratives and expose their very epistemological limits in encountering the marginalized "other," or paralyze their operation through a relentless denial of a clear, final meaning. Apart from his artistic practice, Golshiri has written extensively on the politics of display in contemporary Iranian art and on the ways through which the local and global art markets continue to reinforce the "aestheticization of stereotypes."⁶² He has also penned complaints to the LACMA and *Time* magazine, rejecting their oversimplified readings and misrepresentations of his works.⁶³ Golshiri continues to maintain an activist's role in the art scene of Iran, nationally and internationally, intervening in cultural institutions against their ideological presuppositions about contemporary non-Western art.⁶⁴

would fall. The artist failed in his fight for the painting and thus *Eyeck* never came to fruition. Beneath resides *Eyeck*." — from Golshiri's *Curriculum Mortis* catalog. For a discussion of van Eyck's work on his painting's frames cf. Craig Harbison, *Jan Van Eyck: The Play of Realism* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 129-130.

⁶² Barbad Golshiri, "For They Know What They Do Know," 2009.

⁶³ Golshiri has also been a vocal advocate of human rights in Iran and elsewhere, initiating many open petitions and participating in multiple campaigns on behalf of political prisoners, death-row convicts, the Palestinian cause, and rights of other minorities world-wide.

⁶⁴ There have been many instances where Golshiri's activism has coincided with his practice as an artist and critic. In 2009, his *e-flux* article, in which he criticized Saatchi for its homogenizing approach to the Middle East, leads to changes in the Saatchi's *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* catalog. In the same year, he withdrew his work from the Magic of Persia Art Prize, where he was one of the seven finalists and wrote publicly against the organizers' conservative politics and their appraisal of artworks according to their monetary values at art auctions. A more recent example, is his participation in an exhibition in Framer Framed Gallery in Amsterdam, where one of his projects for the program was to prohibit the use

Golshiri's implementation of different means, i.e., writing, art practice, and activism, in resisting reductive interpretations and reifications of the non-West along with his endeavors to dismantle untouched universal doxai, to borrow from his own lexicon, render him a potent force against the status quo of the contemporary Iranian art scene.

GHAZALEH HEDAYAT ABSTRACTION AS AN EXIT STRATEGY

Ghazaleh Hedayat (b. 1979) started her professional practice with photography, a medium that to this day remains central to her work, which also spans video and installation. *My Isfahan* series (2002), one of Hedayat's earliest exhibited works, portrays historical as well as everyday spaces in her hometown, the city of Isfahan, with the artist's body or her scarf appearing in the frame [figure 2-25]. The predominantly masculine architectural characteristics of these spaces, such as mosques' courtyards or traditional coffeehouses, are interrupted by the artist's visibly feminine presence [figure 2-26]. Even in a photograph of a private space, where Hedayat creates a photo-montage of the same horizontally flipped portraits of herself on either sides of the interior of an old private house's door, the upper-middle section of the montage, aligned with Hedayat's sightline, is of nine phallic brass stands for antique oil lamps, suggesting a patriarchal space that is intervened by the artist's body [figure 2-27].

of the term "Middle East" in the title of the exhibition and in the discussions and presentations at the exhibition's conference. Cf. Barbad Golshiri, "آنچه به راستی می‌دانند می‌دانند," هنر آگه, no. 9 (June 2016), 29.

While Hedayat soon replaces her figurative style in *My Isfahan* with a visually minimalist aesthetics, the questions concerning gender, identity, and her own embodiment of these questions, remain central to her practice. These concerns are also incorporated in her meditations on representation, sight, and visibility. A precursor to the links she forms between the act of seeing, representation, and identity are evident in her *Peepholes* (2005), where she takes photographs of details from her passport, her identity card, and old family photographs through a peephole in the door, while she was living in San Francisco completing an MFA program in New Genres [figure 2-28]. This is a period when Hedayat creates various overtly political works reflecting on the socio-political atmosphere in Iran. Upon returning from the United States, her attention to the socio-political gradually drifts toward a critique of institutional politics of art, such as in her 2006 exhibition *بدون عنوان (قباله جات هنرمندان باغدار موزهی هنرهای معاصر)* (*Untitled (The Titles of Garden-owning Artists of the [Tehran] Museum of Contemporary Art)*), then on to a more ontological set of questions concerning subjectivity, gender, marginality, and desire which come to overshadow her brief inclinations toward the socio-political. There isn't a chronological rupture, a dramatic shift at work here as these philosophical issues have always occupied a significant place in her practice.

Hedayat's *Untitled* video (2005) bears witness to the continuity of questions regarding her body and identity, which were already present in her *My Isfahan*, and occupy a key place in her works, especially after 2005. In *Untitled*, we see a close-up shot of the artist's face staring into the camera without blinking until tears begin to fall from her eyes [figure 2-29]. One can trace back to this video how her focus primarily turns toward the female body as a site of pain,

friction, tension, love, maternity, femininity, and more significantly as a site where self and its other encounter. Hedayat's staring into the lens averts the gaze of the camera, denying it its voyeuristic pleasures, while she nearly defunctionalizes her eyelids through a persistent resistance against blinking. Whereas her involuntary tears create a poetics of vulnerability, her staring eyes animate a haunting sensation in the viewer that continuously reminds us of our irreducible difference and alterity. Haunted by this "spectral *someone other* [who] *looks at us*," writes Derrida, "we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony, even before and beyond any look on our part [...]." ⁶⁵ Similarly, Hedayat's work produces an unsettling presence, an inverted gaze, that turns the image of her face into a host of antithetical desires, emotions, and significations as well as the confrontation of self by its other.

In the six and a half minutes video—looped infinitely during the time of exhibition—Hedayat appears wearing a loose scarf. A common visual element associated mostly with middle and the upper-middle class women in Iran, the loose scarf in this video, before any other signification, is a condition for the public display of her work in a country where all exhibitions used to require prior permission from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The scarf gave rise to simultaneous reductive interpretations of her works outside Iran focusing on the plight of women in Islamic countries, and criticism from local artists and critics accusing her of responding to the Western representational expectations of Iranian contemporary artists. That Hedayat's video had no sound allowed for oversimplified readings connecting it to the

⁶⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kaufman (New York: Routledge, 1994), 6.

voicelessness of Iranian women.⁶⁶ But more surprising was how those local criticisms aimed at her work were oblivious to the fact that the veil, especially as it appears in *Untitled*, is not an unfamiliar part of women's everyday outfits in Iran, and is only exotic insofar as viewed from the vantage point of a Western audience.

It was as a result of this situation that Hedayat decided to move away from figurative representations to a figural abstraction that enabled her to evacuate the exoticization of her work without necessarily foreclosing signification. I am interested in the ways through which Hedayat's non-conformity to a readily accessible visual regime signifying "Iranian-ness" complicates not only common reductive readings of her art, but also the wider assumption that the West acts as an authoritative translator of global visual language. Hedayat's use of abstraction is a method of resistance to the translation that occurs when easily recognizable signifiers stand in for "the Orient" in a Western-dominated art market. By moving toward abstraction, and away from easily decodable visual signifiers of cultural alterity, she both aims to resist a localized narrative for her work and also calls for reflection on the inherently tenuous relationship between art objects and an artist's identity.

⁶⁶ Although there is very little written on Hedayat's work in relation to exoticism, being involved with the contemporary art scene in Tehran allowed me to be privy to the influx of criticism flowing in the oral discourses of the art scene, both among artists and critics. In an interview with Iman Afsarian, published in *Honar-e Farda* (2010), Hedayat briefly touches upon the ways through which her ethnic background continues to influence how her works are read outside of Iran. This point was also recently raised by Iman Afsarian in a roundtable with Majid Akhgar, Barbad Golshiri, and myself. Cf. Iman Afsarian et al., "کار سیاسی: گفتگوی مجید اخگر، ایمان افسریان، فواد ترشیزی، و باربد گلشیری درباره‌ی هنر و سیاست (Political Work: A Dialogue between Majid Akhgar, Iman Afsarian, Foad Torshizi, and Barbad Golshiri on Art and Politics)," *Herfeh: Honarmand*, no. 60 (Tehran: Summer 2016), 75-76.

This deliberate move gave rise to her next video, *سَيِّبِ حَوَا* (*Eve's Apple*, 2006), which until today remains one of the least seen and one of the most remarkable video works in the contemporary Iranian art scene, given its semantic and visual complexity and its potential for resisting dominant narratives of marginalization of non-Western artists [figure 2-30]. *سَيِّبِ حَوَا* (*Eve's Apple*) is a seven-minute long video that is repeated continuously during the time of its exhibition. It is an extreme close-up of a female larynx that every once in a while moves slightly up and down, and thus the looping of the video makes it almost impossible to discern where it starts and ends. The experience of encountering the video is somewhat disorienting in that the visual qualities of its low-contrast pale skin color prevent any immediate recognition of what is being shown on the screen. This visually abstract footage of a female throat, which is shown in a small monitor with a comparable scale to the average human being, is installed behind a wall in the gallery at the height of approximately five feet. The video has no sound—a recurring trend in Hedayat's works I will discuss in more detail later. The title of the work, *سَيِّبِ حَوَا* (*Eve's Apple*), denotes the story of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Eden as a result of their rebellious act of eating the fruit of the forbidden tree.

Eve's Apple complicates the problematic manufactured affinity between sin and femininity within the Christian tradition and biblical translations of the story of Adam and Eve. Its title suggests that the protuberance in our throats is a constant reminder of our primordial sin. But at the same time, by changing the famous name of “Adam's apple” given to the human larynx, it alludes to the historical associations of Eve with sin, inscribed in our minds. Hedayat playfully criticizes the phallogocentric biases of history and language. This is one of the instances

where she advances her critique of the politics of translation that have rendered an imaginative story a source of association of women with deception. Emphasizing an arbitrary translation of the Latin word *malum* as *apple* by including it in the title of her work, she draws our attention to the very limits of translation. The Latin word *malum* (evil, mischief) is identical to the word *malum* (apple, fruit); an identity that has influenced the apple's becoming interpreted as the biblical "forbidden fruit." This arbitrariness, as a characteristic of translation, leads us to what Derrida has brought to our attention: that translation enforces homo-hegemony and ultimately always favors one context over the other. This allusion effectively extends Hedayat's criticism of the masculinist biases in reiterations of Adam and Eve's story that held Eve accountable for contracting *malum* or evil.

But Hedayat's attention to translation is not limited to the only lingual element of her work, namely its title. For if we see translation as a form of receiving and internalizing the other, or in other words of bringing home the stranger, the protuberance in her throat moving up and down in front of our eyes takes the shape of an externality that has been internalized without being entirely assimilated. Here, she has surrendered to the external. This is what Spivak has located in the act of translation as "a simple miming of the responsibility to *the trace of the other* in the self."⁶⁷ Hélène Cixous's reading of the fable of Adam and Eve enables an interpretation of Hedayat's *Eve's Apple* that highlights the ways through which the encounter of self and its other have been juxtaposed with translation as an act of intimacy and risk, to

⁶⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Politics of Translation," in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 179.

borrow Spivak again, on the artist's body. In "Reaching the Point of Wheat, or A Portrait of the Artist as a Maturing Woman," in describing what she calls "the primitive meal [cène] in the primitive scene [scène]" of Adam and Eve, Cixous argues that the significance of the biblical story lies in the tension between desire and prohibition. She asserts that the apple, as a paradigmatic object of desire, becomes the site of the struggle between interdiction and desire for the first woman.⁶⁸ What Cixous finds to be the most compelling in the triumph of desire over prohibition in Eve, which ultimately results in her biting of the apple, the visible promise that possesses an inside, is Eve's "non-fear of knowing what is inside." For her, "what Eve will discover in her relationship to the concrete reality is the inside of the apple, and this inside is good. The Fable [of the primordial sin] tells us how the genesis of 'femininity' goes by way of the mouth, through a certain oral pleasure, and through the nonfear of the inside."⁶⁹ Cixous continues: "astonishingly, our oldest book of dreams relates to us, in its cryptic mode, that Eve is not afraid of the inside, neither of her own nor of the other's." Cixous's reading enables us to see another dimension of the complex work of Hedayat, in that it allows us to understand the absence of a bolder protuberance as a higher capacity for the integration of the Other, the outside. Thus, Eve's Apple, in reminding us that Eve, as primordial feminine, exercised her

⁶⁸ Hélène Cixous, "Reaching the Point of Wheat, or A Portrait of the Artist as a Maturing Woman," *New Literary History* 19, no. 1 (Fall 1987), 3.

⁶⁹ Hélène Cixous, "The Author in Truth," in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Jenson, trans. Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddle, and Susan Sellers (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 151.

superior potential to open herself to the otherness of the apple, disturbs the masculine economy that “is characterized by a single-minded concern with increasing the phallic power of the masculine subject.”⁷⁰

Hedayat’s complex and multifaceted video effectively eludes reductive interpretations, in that she deliberately removes any familiar signifier of her ethnic background in order to partake in a broader dialogue concerning femininity and phallogentrism, while not losing sight of marginalization and the relation between self and its other. The gradual evolution in her oeuvre is clearly visible in her departure from *Untitled* (2005) to *Eve’s Apple* (2007), where she breaks with figurative representation by way of replacing it with figural abstraction. Moreover, the continuation of this abstraction in her subsequent works, where she again avoids representation through working with close-ups and fragments of the body, suggests a carefully planned strategy that highlights the transgressive power of the figural through rendering invisible figurative significations. Hedayat offers a valuable and potent series of works that strives to target the limits of visibility, representation, and translation.

In subsequent exhibitions, *تار و پوست* (*The Strand and the Skin*, 2008) and *پوسته* (*Crust*, 2013), figural abstraction remains at the center of her operative methodology. The body, and more specifically its fragments, still comprise the most salient material of Hedayat’s practice. In her photographic series, entitled *Contacts*, shown as part of her 2008 solo-show, the artist takes a needle and scratches the skin of the photographs, which are her self-portraits [figure 2-

⁷⁰ Morny Joy, Kathleen O’Grady, and Judith L. Poxon, “The Author in Truth [abridged]” (editors’ introduction), in *French Feminists on Religion: A Reader*, eds. Morny Joy, Kathleen O’Grady, and Judith L. Poxon (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 221.

31]. The image of her face and torso are either partially or entirely removed from the surface of each photograph through a repetitive act of scratching, exposing the very materiality of photography, constructing a barrier between the viewer and the representation of the object. This removal is a rebellious act against photography's claim to representation and its referential essence, what Roland Barthes sees as the defining unit of photography, its *noeme*: *ça-a-été*: "this has been!"⁷¹ Hedayat's object, her own body, is no longer entirely there, yet the remnants of her presence, which have persistently survived the violence act of removing the skin of the photographic paper, continue to haunt the spectator, whose subjectivity is threatened not only by the incompleteness of the artist's portrait but also by the feeling of betrayal produced by the failure of the image to represent.

In her 2013 solo-show, پوسته (*Crust*), Hedayat returns to fragments of her own body, exploring where it ends and its other begins. In a series of photographs, she covers close-up images of her navel and those of six other women printed on canvas with thin animal skin [figures 2-32 and 2-33]. Once it had dried, the skin shrunk inwards toward the center of the image, gravitating in the direction of her umbilicus, the perpetual scar of selfness, as if the skin is growing out of the navel. The skin, as the external border of the body that separates the self from its other, is also an invitation to touch. Hedayat's effort to *represent* tactility as a different modality of corporeal knowledge suggests an undoing of the hierarchy of senses that privileges

⁷¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 79.

vision over the somatic sense. It is also the skin that covers a hole—the navel—that is reminiscent of the eyelid, which brings the momentary blindness in passage—that which, as Derrida reminds us in his reading of Aristotle, is an inalienable condition of sight.⁷²

The navel appears as a vortex in the center of the canvas pulling everything inside: the artist's body and the viewer's gaze. It allows for the viewer to be subsumed by the work, losing his/her sense of self in the moment of encountering the other's conspicuous mark of separation. Thus, Hedayat's image becomes more than a representation of a detail of her body; it turns into what the media theorist Laura U. Marks has termed "haptic visuality." For Marks, the haptic "is a form of visuality that muddies intersubjective boundaries," while it also draws on "erotic relation that is organized less by sexual difference than by the relationship between mother and infant."⁷³ In this relationship, Marks argues, the subject "comes to being through the dynamic play between the appearance of wholeness with the other (the mother) and the awareness of being distinct." Haptic visuality does not undo representation, but moves in the opposite direction—Hedayat's work too relies heavily on a mimetic relationship between the signifier and the signified, manifest in the indexical nature of the photograph of her own body. *پوسته* (*Crust*), then, in transgressing the static essence of the photographic image, creates a composition of sight and touch that questions the untenable boundaries between the subject and

⁷² Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 32.

⁷³ Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 17.

its other.⁷⁴ Hedayat's photographs are in the middle of a conundrum: how to represent that which relentlessly escapes representation.

It is worth examining the silence of Hedayat's works, as the absence of sounds tends to be a recurring theme in her oeuvre. Her early experiments with the concept of sound dates back to 2005, when she created a very small installation (5 × 10 cm), entitled *The Sound of My Hair* [figure 2-34]. The work is comprised of eight steel nails that create a ten-centimeter column of four nails on each side of the wall, where each couple of horizontally aligned nails is connected with a single strand of the artist's hair, and finally the sound of a hammer in the space. Simultaneously reminiscent of a string instrument and the musical notation staff, the work explores the tension between violence and vulnerability, as well as sound (the sound of the hammer that remains as an absolutely external attachment to the installation) and its total absence. In her later works, including *سبب حوا* (*Eve's Apple*) and the *پوسته* (*Crust*) series the absence of sound is glaringly apparent; the former portrays a human sound box, whereas the animal skin used in the latter, is exactly the same skin used in the making of Iranian musical instruments such as *تار* (Tar) and *کمانچه* (Kamancheh). Hedayat's attention to silence, despite the risks it entails in enabling reductive interpretations of her work that associate this silence to the voicelessness

⁷⁴ Taking her lead from Laura U. Marks, the art historian, Amelia Jones, has written extensively on video art in relation to haptic visuality. Jones, however, does not see the possibility of constituting a haptic relationship the photographic image and the spectating subject. As I have shown here, in the case of Hedayat's *Crust*, Jones's argument is bound to a certain technological determinacy that both fails to see the transgressive possibilities of photography and the almost readily available indexicality of the medium that reinforces a mimetic representation rather than a symbolic one. Cf. Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

of women in Islamic countries,⁷⁵ bestows her work with a critical edge that questions the false privileging of the ear as the organ which listens and *accepts* the other.⁷⁶ In making present the absence of sound, Hedayat's works thus insistently highlight the unheard as an unheard, reminding the viewer of the inherent impediments of listening to the other.

Hedayat's recourse to figural abstraction has not only contributed to the richness and complexity of her work, but also expanded the interpretive possibilities for the viewer in that its aesthetic force, figural rather than figurative, is incessantly changing, shifting, and morphing. Moreover, her works interrupt the semantic field of contemporary non-Western art and destabilize the ideological preconceptions of an art criticism informed by the hegemonic narratives of Western art history. What distinguishes Hedayat's work from that of Golshiri or Sirizi, is her poetic expressions and affective economy that drives what T. J. Demos has termed the "negation of informational content."⁷⁷ The challenge she poses to figurative representation

⁷⁵ Iman Afsarian et al., "کار سیاسی (Political Work)."

⁷⁶ In his reading of Derrida's *Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference*, Martin Jay reminds us on how Derrida distances himself from the privileging of the ear in the philosophical tradition of hermeneutics, while he also finds Heidegger's "reliance on aural metaphors," to be "hostage to logocentrism." As such, while for Jay, Derrida's ambivalent position in choosing between one sense over the other is symptomatic of "the deconstructionist preference for undecidability over closure," his position against "listening" as acceptance, or as "an activity of mutual understanding" enables us to see Hedayat's omission of sound as a critical stance against the pretense of understanding the ethnic and marginalized other. Cf. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, London, and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 513-515.

⁷⁷ Writing on Zarina Bhimji's films, T. J. Demos argues that the artist's "desire for emotional expression and her negation of informational content are no doubt connected, and one explanation for their intertwinement is Bhimji's sensitivity to the fact that strong emotional events often resist linguistic expression." This negation of informational content finds an added edge in Hedayat's practice in that it enables her exit strategy vis-à-vis reductive interpretations of her work that are informed by her ethnic background. Cf. T. J. Demos, *Return to the Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 87.

also questions the validity of positivist iconographic readings of her art, and as such, it strives to semiotically liberate her works from the “arrested vocabulary” that Dabashi has situated at the heart of writings on contemporary non-Western artists.⁷⁸

SHAHAB FOTOUHI
BABAK GOLKAR
HOMAYOUN ASKARI SIRIZI
AND OTHER STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE

I have discussed here in some detail Ghazaleh Hedayat and Barbad Golshiri, whose strategies push back against reductive models of interpretation, the commodification of their artworks by the global market, and the fetishization of liminality. I would like to turn to a number of other artists who have actively pursued creative methods to challenge the marginalization of contemporary Iranian art and the exoticization of their works as non-Western artists. Despite their undeniable efforts in doing so, it is for two reasons that I have not attended to them separately and at length and have found it sufficient to offer a brief consideration of a couple of examples from each artist. First, it is difficult to locate a systematic strategy sustained in the entire oeuvre of Shahab Fotouhi (b. 1980, Yazd) or Babak Golkar (b. 1977, Berkeley) as both

⁷⁸ Dabashi, “Transcending the Boundaries of an Imaginative Geography.”

artists have isolated works in their profiles that deal with the questions and concerns of contemporary Iranian art; second, in the case of Homayoun Sirizi (b. 1981, Kerman), where there is a methodical and consistent strategy, I argue that this strategy was not fully integrated into the aesthetics of his practice and remains as an external inorganic tactic which he applies indiscriminately to all his works. Nevertheless, the examples which I study here, despite their sporadic appearances in the relatively young practice of these artists, important to explore insofar as they outline a variety of strategic approaches to resistance against the geographic hierarchies at the heart of the global art world.

Perhaps the least figurally complex and demanding of the three artists under discussion is Homayoun Sirizi, in whose works, usually, a clear-cut message is delivered to the spectator. Given the consistently political and at times antagonizing content of his work, it is not inaccurate to define this straightforwardness as a deliberate method.⁷⁹ A number of installations that Sirizi took to the No. 13 Art Space in Tehran delineate his tendency to directly confront the spectator with unconcealed messages that target the political inaction of the viewer. His 2006 *جنگ احتمالی* (*A Preconceived War*) is a series of five photography developing trays on a table in one corner of the red-lit space of the gallery that are filled halfway with fixing emulsion and hypo clearing agent, producing the odor of a darkroom [figure 2-35]. Each of the first four trays to the right contains a half-developed low-contrast photograph of generic scenes of war,

⁷⁹ In Chapter 3, I discuss Sirizi's installation *تست مردمسالاری* (*Test of Democracy*, 2005). I argue that the blatant political content of Sirizi's works becomes susceptible to over-politicized reductive interpretations.

appearing as if they are *in* the process of chemical development. The tray to the far left, however, marked with a piece of paper that reads “شهيد گمنام / Anonymous Martyr,” is filled with mercury, allowing the spectator to see his/her own face in it. Sirizi’s socio-political commentary came at the time when the neoconservatives in the government of George W. Bush were preparing the U.S. public for a probable war waged against Iran.

A year later, in 2007, Sirizi exhibited his two-volume solo-show installations, ما اینجا خوشیم (Ain’t We Having Fun Here?).⁸⁰ Entitled جامعه‌ی بوریدان (*Bouridan’s* [sic] *Society*), the first volume of the show took its name from *Buridan’s Ass*, the famous illustration of a paradox in philosophy concerning the concept of free will that satirizes the fourteenth-century French philosopher Jean Buridan’s moral determinism. The illustration depicts an ass that is equally thirsty and hungry, placed on a spot precisely equidistant from a stack of hay and a pail of water, suggesting that the ass will die as it cannot make a rational decision to choose one over the other. Sirizi’s جامعه‌ی بوریدان is a 1 × 2 meters picture of an ass mounted on the wall in front of the spectator and in equal distance from two other photographs on the side walls: one of bread and the other, hanging on the opposite wall, of books. The second part of the exhibition, immediately following the first, with the title دوره‌ی دوربرگردان (*U-Turn to Utopia*), featured seven traffic signs planted in water barrel’s filled with sand⁸¹ that were installed in the shape of a U

⁸⁰ Different English and Persian titles of the exhibition and the artworks are original and not due to mis-translation.

⁸¹ Water barrels were implemented by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, during his time as the mayor of Tehran, in highways and streets of the city in order to temporarily divert traffic into different routes.

around a light-box of a photograph of an ass's hoof to which a horseshoe is attached [figure 2-36]. The traffic signs bearing the proper names of streets in Tehran, instead of being transliterated, are translated literally into English: جنت آباد (*Jannat Abad*) to "Beautiful Town," خوش (*Khosh*) to "happiness," سعادت آباد (*Sa'adat Abad*) to "Utopia," میدان آزادی (*Azadi Square*) to "Freedom Sq.," and نوینپاد (*No'Bonyad*) to "New Fundamentalism Sq."

Sirizi's works, with their overt political messages, offer the artist's critical position against the stagnant society in contemporary Iran. These artworks, as he claims in an interview, are "political manifestos" that are specific to this very particular moment in Iran's history.⁸² As such, Sirizi continuously rejects invitations to exhibit those works that have been created for and shown in Iran in European and American galleries. Site-specificity becomes the overarching strategy that he applies to his entire practice. This strategy has allowed Sirizi to minimize the risks of reductive interpretations of Western cultural institutions and itinerant curators that more often than not have shown a strong appetite for works from Iran with clear political messages that criticize the "regime." And yet, Sirizi's works for international exhibitions, designed specifically for the geography in which they are being displayed, are no less political. He does not fall into the trap of self-censorship in order to show his work in Europe or the U.S. But his commitment to site-specificity dictates the ways in which his works target not only

⁸² "A Preconceived War," *Tehran Projects* website. <http://www.tehranprojects.com/a-preconceived-war> (accessed July 15, 2016).

the contemporary Iranian society but either the host's historical complicity with imperial domination of the so-called third-world countries or their desire to instrumentalize the works of non-Western artists for ideological ends.

A case in point is his installation, *Keep Right* (2013), a piece commissioned for the exhibition *The Fold: Absence, Disappearance, and Loss of Memory in Works of 12 Iranian Artists* at the CAB Art Center in Brussels [figures 2-37 and 2-38]. A white partition wall was raised in the center of the gallery, inside of which a couple of vibration speakers were concealed. [REDACTED]

For an unredacted version of pages 147 and 148 of this dissertation, please see supplement #1.

[REDACTED] In front of the wall, Sirizi placed a wooden stand that contains a number of blank cards, on the back of which the tap code table is printed, and a pencil for the viewers to listen to the sound behind the wall and decode the message on the provided

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

cards. The tapping sound, however, was neither entirely audible, nor decipherable through the table that Sirizi provided. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Contrary to many of the artists of his generation, such as Amir Mo'bed or Gohar Dashti,⁸⁵ Sirizi's site-specific strategy allows his historical mining of the post-revolution political atmosphere in Iran to escape ideological misrepresentations of the country. Owing to his double-edged criticism, *Keep Right* pursues an acerbic critique of the self-righteousness of the ostensible proponents of human rights and democracy, [REDACTED]

A tendency to inquire into history also marks a number of works by Shahab Fotouhi, though his desire to probe into the past, paired with an anticolonial sentiment, is manifested in more subtle and complicated ways than in the works of Sirizi. Earlier, I discussed Fotouhi's installation *Security, Love and Democracy (for export only)* as part of my analysis of *Ethnic Marketing* exhibition. I would now like to look into his video, *بعد از من تکرار کن (Repeat After Me)*, which he filmed during an art residency in Switzerland in 2008 [figure 2-39]. Fotouhi asked ordinary Swiss citizens to memorize and repeat a verse from what they believed to be an

⁸⁵ In chapter 3, I discuss at some length the ways in which the works of Mo'bed and Dashti fuel the rampant misrepresentations of Iran and Islamic countries in the Western mass media and help reinforce the frequent tendency of Western art critics to subject the art of Iran to over-politicizing reductions.

Iranian lullaby in front of his camera. He then reveals to each participant that the verse he or she just sang is from the former anthem of the Islamic Republic of Iran and not from a folkloric cradle song. Given the opportunity to withdraw their contributions, a number of participants have decided not to appear in Fotouhi's video. The artist, however, does not replace their parts with those willing to sing the anthem, but rather leaves silent black interludes in their place, representing his participants' objection.

While the text of the former national anthem, entitled *پاینده بادا ایران* (*Be forever, a lasting Iran*), is not as unambiguously positioned against the superpowers of the world as the popular slogan of the post-revolutionary Iran “نه شرقی، نه غربی، جمهوری اسلامی” (“No to East, No to west, [only] the Islamic Republic”), it undoubtedly conveys the spirit of liberation from Eastern and, more so, Western dominations.⁸⁶ By including moments of absolute silence in his video, Fotouhi allows us to see how some of his participants were willing to repeat after him insofar as the lyrics they are repeating is of an innocuous lullaby; an act of submission to the order “repeat after me!” that portrays the participant as a compassionate citizen of the first-world who is willing to sympathize with the children of the “axis of evil.”⁸⁷ Their decision to withdraw from the video, however, represents their inability to accept the other, once it poses a threat to

⁸⁶ Verses from the lyrics are translated as: “through the Iranian revolution / the palace of oppression has been overturned / the image of our future / is the role of our desire / our enduring power / is our faith and unity.”

⁸⁷ That Fotouhi deceives his participants by letting them think that they are singing a lullaby was partly inspired by the collected traditional cradle songs from Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Syria, Cuba, Libya, Afghanistan, and Palestine, entitled *Lullabies from the Axis of Evil*. The album was released by Kirkelig Kulturverksted (Norway) and Valley Entertainment (U.S.) in 2004.

the integrity of the subject of the dominant world. Fotouhi, thus, asks an unsettling question: how far are you willing to go to listen to the other; how far are you willing to go to let the other speak with your mouth?

On the other hand, those who have decided to keep their footage in the final video, too, have not entirely escaped Fotouhi's criticism. His documentary-style video depicts ordinary citizens in their natural settings—at home, at work, out in the nature, in one's luxurious antique car—singing the anthem with some joy and with a look of uncertainty on their faces as they feel insecure about their success in flawlessly mimicking what is absolutely foreign to them. As Sirizi points out in his “مآمان بازی: یادداشتی برای ویدیوی «بعد از من تکرار کن» اثر شهاب فتوحی” (Playing House: A Note for Shahab Fotouhi's Video *Repeat after Me*),” the echoes of repression are heard equally from those who withdrew and those who remained, made visible in a “boredom” that marks the tone and the singing-style of the participants, symptomatic of their desire to repress the other.⁸⁸ Taking his lead from Jameson's argument that this boredom is transformed into a powerful “hermeneutic instrument,” capable of marking “the spot where something painful is buried,”⁸⁹ Sirizi argues that this instrument allows those who participated to see how they have relentlessly repressed the present's severance from the colonial past. The trauma of a history of colonization and exploitation of the other actively removed from the

⁸⁸ Homayoun Askari Sirizi, “مآمان بازی: یادداشتی برای ویدیوی «بعد از من تکرار کن» اثر شهاب فتوحی” (Playing House: A Note for Shahab Fotouhi's Video *Repeat after Me*),” *Golestaneh*, no. 126 (September 2013), 22.

⁸⁹ Fredric Jameson, “Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism (1975),” in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essay 1971-1986*, vol. 2: The Syntax of History (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 118.

present, refuses to rest in peace and returns in *Repeat after Me* to haunt its viewer. However allegorical and metaphoric, Fotouhi's work investigates the colonial remnants in the collective awareness of the West, simultaneously evoking the erasure of the ethnically other and her trace from the European consciousness. By asking "them" to repeat after him, Fotouhi enacts a post-colonial gesture of reversing the long-established historical dictum according to which all the world has to repeat after Europe.

The interdependent relationship between the West and its others is also explored in a number of Golkar's installations. It might be Golkar's personal experience of immigration to Canada at the age of nineteen that has contributed to the ways in which his practice navigates the distance and tension between the elements of the local and the language of the global—manifest, quite poetically, in his installations as a search for sites of belonging. In 2010, Golkar embarked on a series of works, which were comprised of acrylic paint and Persian carpets. For his *Impositions* series, the artist took Persian handwoven carpets and painstakingly covered them with mostly white, but also gold and blue, acrylic paint. Carpets are either entirely masked under multiple layers of paint (*Imposition No. 1; Imposition No. 7*) [figures 2-40 and 2-41], or are partially painted over, retaining some geometrical shapes that stand out from a faint trace that remains visible under the colored surface (*Imposition No. 2*) [figure 2-42].

Beyond its historical position as an object of global trade that long symbolized Iran's artistic heritage, the Persian carpet is profoundly connected to the land. It is, in a sense, a translation of the natural landscapes of Kashan, Tabriz, Kerman, Shiraz, Turkmen Sahra, and many rural sceneries into mostly geometric and floral patterns, deeply embedded in rootedness and

belonging. Golkar's masking of the carpet works at different levels. By lifting the carpet from the ground to the walls of the gallery and covering it with paint, it calls into question the spectator's predisposition to the so-called global languages of art epitomized in those tropes of Western Modernism which his work teases out: namely, the appropriations and alteration of the crafts of non-Western cultures by numerous modernist painters and architects as well as Malevich's monochromatic paintings as icons of purity and the autonomy of visual arts.⁹⁰ More importantly, though, the very act of masking takes on a double-edge; the carpet, which is at once a site of belonging for Golkar as much as an inkling of his longing for the faraway motherland, is covered by laboriously adding layer after layer, as if protecting the treasured object through a labor of devotion and love. This protection simultaneously mirrors Golkar's longing by way of denying the spectator the gratification of gazing at an exquisite (and perhaps exotic) sight. *Impositions* thus presents us with a series of poetic and multivalent works that bring together defacement, protection, love, rejection, and denial in a language that is as emotionally personal as it is deeply rooted in art historical narratives.

Golkar returns to the Persian carpet in his subsequent series, *Negotiating Space* (2010) [figure 2-43] and installation, *Grounds for Standing and Understanding* (2012) [figure 2-44, 2-45, and 2-46]. Situated in a conversation with the history of art and architecture, these series, as their titles suggest, aim to find a common ground for coexistence and mutual understanding while remaining critical of the fabricated hierarchies that operate at the heart of hegemonic

⁹⁰ There is also a significant link here between Picasso's uses of African *masks*, emblematic of Western Modernism, and Golkar's *masking* of the carpets, in that the latter positions itself as a critique against the former by way of concealing the "exotic" appeal of the object.

structure of subjectivity, meaning, and knowledge. The latter work, *Grounds for Standing and Understanding*, is a monumental installation that bases its white, clinical, architectonic three-dimensional models that are raised vertically at different heights on the geometric patterns of Persian carpets, creating shapes reminiscent of the skyscrapers of a modern metropolis. The installation, which was initially exhibited at the Charles H. Scott Gallery in Vancouver, also included a number of white partition walls that through their placement in the gallery controlled the bodily movements of the viewers—these are large-scale constructions based on the architectural three-dimensional models that are placed on the carpet. The viewer is therefore obliged to move between the large and small scale structures, finding herself inside a work that creates an apprehension of being looked at while trying to look at the installation’s central piece.

As Abbas Daneshvari observes, Golkar’s work questions the purity of the modern by way of grafting it to the traditional and unfolding its derivative nature. *Grounds for Standing and Understanding*, as Daneshvari argues, allows us to see that “all purity is the offspring of far more complexity that it dares to admit” and that it “stands upon the shoulders of the old, hiding its debt to its complex and labyrinthine past.”⁹¹ This grafting is at the center of Golkar’s critique of the fabricated divide between the so-called modern and traditional and its epistemological hierarchies. His strategy in undoing the presuppositions regarding an object of traditional craft, by way of exposing the interdependence of the modern and the traditional, the

⁹¹ Daneshvari, *Amazingly Original*, 259.

pure and the complex, and self and its other, allows Golkar to reconceptualize what is predominantly regarded as an object of “cultural alterity,” or more accurately, Iranian-ness as a ground for disrupting the centrality of the West and the marginality of the non-West. “The carpet,” writes Daneshvari, “as a decorative and dispensable item has now turned essential to the identifying of the ground of meaning and existence.”⁹² Golkar’s poetic labor of protecting the Persian carpet in *Impositions*, is now echoed through an intervention in the bodily engagement of the viewer with the carpet, where the literal ground for standing is now rendered inaccessible by immaculate architectonic structures that shield the carpet from the viewer’s steps and deflect his/her gaze from the culturally foreign object by way of obstructing its colors and patterns. Golkar’s astute strategy of exposing the limits of fabricated hierarchical divides between geographies of knowledge and meaning, along with his profound personal relationship to the objects with which he practices art, allows him to avoid superficial appropriations of signifiers of cultural alterity, a tendency rampant in contemporary Iranian art, and enables his works to escape exoticization and reification.⁹³

⁹² Ibid., 260.

⁹³ In an interview with Alex Quicho, Golkar speaks of the deep connection some of his works have to his childhood: “The building-like structures on the carpet (*Negotiating Space...*), for example, come literally out of a childhood play that I used to do on the carpet.” Cf. Alex Quicho, “The Opening — Babak Golkar,” Vancouver is Awesome Blog, entry posted November 23, 2013. <http://www.vancouverisawesome.com/2013/11/23/the-opening-babak-golkar/> (accessed: July 14, 2016).

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CHAPTER 3

(MIS)TRANSLATIONS AND SOME FORMATIVE MOMENTS IN THE DISCOURSE OF CONTEMPORARY IRANIAN ART

I think all reading is translation, that mistake or errancy is part of the game... Do I believe “in fidelity to the original,” you ask. Yes, yes, not because it’s possible, but because one must try.¹

— Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

In summer 2013, Amir Mo’bed, an Iranian performance and installation artist, raised a two-meter high hill-shaped pile of dried cow dung at the center of Azad Art Gallery in Tehran. He stood still at the center of this pile with his whole body except for his head immersed in the pile [figure 3-1]. At the entrance of the gallery, visitors were handed a one-page note written by Barbad Golshiri, himself a prolific artist and critic. The note, “بگذار برخیزد مردم بی لبخند” (Let People Bereft of Smile Rise),” drew on the similarities between a world in which there is nothing new—everything is a recurrence of the past—and a world in which people “find any change

¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Questioned on Translation: Adrift,” *Public Culture* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2001), 14.

in the heart of totalitarians and reactionaries to be rationally inconceivable.”² The note continued with a lamentation over the despondency that had settled upon people due to their disbelief in any possibility of change and with critique of their persistent quotidian habits that serve to preserve the status quo. Its accusatory tone, which was aimed at all the readers/spectators who were watching Mo’bed suffer inside the pile of cow dung, compelled a gradually increasing number of the audience to intervene by scooping the pile away with their bare hands to let the artist out.

تکرار (Recurrence) was the last of a sequence of works performed by Mo’bed during a period of three years, from 2010 to 2013. In the inaugural performance in September 2010, entitled *بیا نوازشم کن (Come Caress Me)*, he wore a protective metal cube over his head, stood in the middle of the gallery in front of an archery target wearing all white, and invited visitors to shoot at him with a pellet gun [figure 3-2]. The distances from which visitors could shoot at the artist were marked with three horizontal red lines drawn on the floor: the closest to the target was inscribed with “Love you”; the second one, a meter farther marked as “Like you”; and finally the farthest was marked with “Hate you.” After forty-seven bullets were shot, the performance was interrupted by one of the visitors who took it upon himself to end the torment of the artist by breaking the gun into pieces. Mo’bed aspired to appropriate and recontextualize Chris Burden’s *Shoot* (1971) to make a statement about the political atmosphere in

² Barbad Golshiri, “بگذار برخیزد مردم بی لبخند (Let People Bereft of Smile Rise)” (exhibition statement, Azad Art Gallery, Tehran, 2010). The title of Golshiri’s text is borrowed from a poem by Ahmad Shamloo.

Iran in the aftermath of the 2009 mass demonstrations in Tehran [figure 3-3].³ In a conversation with Benjamin Genocchio published in *The New York Times*, he declared the work “a symbolic execution, with a message about freedom of speech and the hopes of artists of his generation being silenced.”⁴

The performance instigated many debates in Iran, most of which defined the work as an ethical and socio-political statement. Subsequent to the performance, a critique session was held at Azad Gallery with Golshiri and Helia Darabi, a university lecturer and art critic. Again, Golshiri offered a reading of the work, later published in هنر فردا (*Art Tomorrow*) journal, which had to do more with the ethical and socio-political concepts animated by the performance rather than the piece itself and its plastic and performative qualities. Informed by Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* and the “Milgram experiment on obedience to authority figures,”⁵ he argued that if we fail to uphold an ethical position we are ourselves exacting the same violence of which we disapprove. “To refuse to take a political

³ I see this as a failed ambition, especially when he decided to perform the piece in Röda Sten Gallery in Sweden. Given the artist’s desire to have his work read in light of Iran’s political climate, the geographic specificity of his performance remains at the center of its significance and it is entirely effaced when performed in any country other than Iran.

⁴ Benjamin Genocchio, “Revolution’s Long Shadow Over the Tehran Art Scene,” *New York Times*, March 30, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/31/world/middleeast/31iht-m31-iran-art.html?_r=0 (accessed December 18, 2014).

⁵ The Milgram Experiment on Obedience to Authority Figures, or simply the Milgram Experiment, was a series of psychological experiments conducted by Stanley Milgram at Yale University. The experiment measured the willingness of participants to obey an authority figure who instructed them to inflict pain on someone else in conflict with their personal ethical principles. Cf. Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

stance and remain passive,” Golshiri writes, “feeds into the reemergence of totalitarianism.”⁶ Another discussion session on Mo’bed’s work was held at Tehran University, where Golshiri, Darabi, and Sara Shariati responded to the performance. The only criticism came from Shariati, a sociologist, who objected the loss of visuality and imagination in Mo’bed’s work in favor of its immediate social message.⁷

Almost a year after *بیانوازشم کن* (*Come Caress Me*), Mo’bed performed *کشتزار* (*The Field*). The title of the work was a play with the two Persian terms *کشتزار* (*Keshtzar*, field) and *کُشتار* (*Koshtar*, massacre)—taking out a single letter from the former makes the latter word. In this performance, Mo’bed put a noose around his neck in Mohsen Gallery’s courtyard and stood on a large cube of ice, which was slowly melting under his feet allowing the rope to gradually throttle his neck tighter [figure 3-4]. The performance ended abruptly when the police received a phone call from a neighbor reporting the “hanging.” Darabi wrote the statement for the performance in which she argued that Mo’bed’s works, seen as a series together, “make comments on violence—both domestic and structured—human pain and sufferance as well as free will and responsibility.”⁸ In a brief critical note published shortly after the performance, she wrote, in similar vein, only about the socio-political messages of the work and concluded that perhaps

⁶ Barbad Golshiri, “دستگاه و تمرد: درباره‌ی *بیانوازشم کن* امیر معبد” (System and Rebellion: On Amir Mo’bed’s *Bia Navazesham Kon*) هنر فردا (*Art Tomorrow*) 28, no. 4 (Spring 2011), 124.

⁷ “گزارش (Spring 2011), 58.” (When Art Surpasses the Society), وقتی هنر از جامعه پیش می‌افتد

⁸ Helia Darabi, “کشتزار (*Keshtzar*)” (November 2011) Mohsen Art Gallery, Tehran. Exhibition statement.

Mo'bed has to examine different strategies in his artistic career, of which “straightforwardness” might not be the best.⁹

There is very little, if not any, discussion of Mo'bed's sequence that attends to the aesthetics, representational, and performative strategies. The artworks and their messages are, as Darabi puts it, so straightforward that they leave very little room for spectators to contemplate their artistic aspects. In fact, it appears that the artist himself is so utterly preoccupied with the ethical and socio-political implications of his performances, that he fails to pay heed to the visual, representational, and aesthetic dimensions of his own work. It requires little effort to detect a repeating underlying theme in his entire sequence: the complicity of the indifferent spectator in systemic violence. The audience is faced with an ethical conundrum: whether they continue to perform their roles as passive spectators and thus function as accomplices to the violence being exacted, or they intervene to interrupt the performance and, as the cliché goes, “do the right thing.”

Mo'bed's works are only symptomatic examples of how the immediacy of moral and socio-political messages found an ever-increasing currency in the so-called “conceptual art” practices of contemporary Iranian artists. The heavy burden of socio-political “concepts” transforms artworks into vehicles whose most significant responsibility was to make those concepts lucidly intelligible, in turn resulting in a marginalization of aesthetic qualities.¹⁰ The

⁹ Helia Darabi, “رُک‌گویی بهترین راه نیست” (Straightforwardness Is Not the Best Way,” *آسمان (Aseman)* 7, no. 7 (Fall 2011), 24.

¹⁰ What I mean by aesthetic quality here is the figural characteristic of the work of art that is not immediately translatable to the verbal. To borrow from Didi-Huberman's *Confronting Images*, I see the aesthetic

uniform characteristic of these works can be best realized once viewed in light of Wendy Brown's valuable distinction between "words and images that evoke, suggest, and connote [and those which] *transmit* meanings."¹¹ Most works like those of Mo'bed are translated with little difficulty into a few sentences; they follow similar scenarios; are more often than not repetitive; and strive to ever-more clearly convey their *messages*. It is precisely this readily available meaning in the works of Mo'bed and a large number of artists of his generation that yields artworks amicable to the curatorial creed of Western art institutions seeking works with straightforward political signification ready for consumption by the Euro-American public. Perhaps, Mo'bed's *بیا نوازشم کن* (*Come Caress Me*), a work specific to the political and moral atmosphere of his home country, owes its appeal for Röda Sten Gallery in Sweden to the transparency of its critical denotation aimed at Iran. It affords the Western gallery to assume the position of a benevolent patron that makes murmurs of dissent and opposition to the Iranian state clearly audible and widely heard.

A few more examples can illuminate how the turn toward "concepts" came at the expense of form and the figural for Iran's contemporary art. In a photographic series titled *Me, She and the Others* (2009), which is comprised of triptych images, Gohar Dashti depicts Iranian women in three different outfits each corresponding to a certain societal setting [figure 3-5]. From left to right, each photograph shows an individual woman in her workplace, private, and outdoors

partly in the visual residues that remain behind in the process of translating *the visual* into *the visible*. Cf. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 2005.

¹¹ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury*, 50. [emphasis mine]

appearances, very obviously attempting to illustrate that women need to appear in public spaces in Iran in different clothes than what they would wear indoors or if they had more freedom in choosing their appearances. In a text on the Kashya Hildebrand Gallery's website, the Zurich-based gallery that continually showcases her works in Europe, Dashti writes that her photographic series meant to show that "when you have no liberty for choosing your clothing, you will transform into a multi-personality person." She continues: "This issue is one of the primary and most important problems that Iranian women have been facing after the Islamic Revolution in Iran."¹² More troubling than her rhetoric, which feeds into the most clichéd renditions of the plight of women in Islam and reductive readings of the veil, is the lack of any imagination in her work. Her photographs, quite literally, translate her problematic statement—as well as her simplistically conceived sense of "self" as a cohesive, unified, and singular entity—into images.

The same can be said of her 2008 photographs entitled *Today's Life and War*. In a series of ten images, Dashti situates a heterosexual couple performing quotidian functions of everyday life, such as watching TV, hanging clothes, and even lying down on a bed, in a war zone embellished by military personnel, tanks, barbed wire, and bunkers [figure 3-6]. The series is supposedly a commentary on the post-war Iran and the trauma-laden living environment of the photographer's generation. Similarly, there is a clear socio-political statement which casts a shadow over the visual qualities of the photographs. That the message put forward by Dashti

¹² Gohar Dashti, "Me, She, and the Others," Kashya Hildebrand Gallery's website, http://kashyahildebrand.org/zurich/dashti/dashtio02_001.html (accessed June 1, 2015).

in these photographs is an overt exaggeration of real life conditions in Iran unfolds the role played by itinerant curators in determining the directions toward which the younger generation of Iranian artists move; creating artworks that satiate European and American cultural institutions' desire for the unknown "truth"—even if entirely fabricated—coming from the "interior," provided by those who have some sort of direct access to this truth only by virtue of living in Iran.

From October 2013 until January 2014, the Milan-based art gallery Officine dell'Immagine hosted a solo exhibition of Dashti's oeuvre. The exhibition, unsurprisingly titled "Inside Out," showed three of her series: *Volcano* (2012), *Slow Decay* (2010), and *Today's Life and War* (2008) and was accompanied by a text written by its curator Silvia Cirelli. The curatorial text, titled "The Moon is Restless and Red," praised Dashti's *Today's Life and War* for transforming life into art:

The transformation of life into art is at the basis of the 2008 series *Today's Life and War*[,] which, through a succession of images, focuses on the impact that war had and still has—she uses the term today and not yesterday—on daily life in Iran. It would appear that the Persian [sic] never really overcame the atrocities of war: the ghosts of those years still linger and can be strongly perceived, hindering a most needed harmony.¹³

¹³ Silvia Cirelli, "The Moon Is Restless and Red," Officine dell'Immagine, http://www.officinedellimmagine.it/insideout_tx.pdf (accessed June 4, 2015). Cirelli further continues by making more sweeping statements about "life" in Iran: "Life and war thus become two intrinsically linked ideas, which look for each other and breathe a parallel life... Every picture is laden with details and nothing is left to chance: the artist is indeed very meticulous, as far as the setting and preparation are concerned. At first sight, we feel like the image we are looking at is welcoming, with a teacup, the Persian rug, and the goldfish; this changes when we notice the cemetery of helmets or the scattered weapons, which bring us back to reality. It is interesting to notice that the couple does not look intimidated by this setting; their gazes are not full of compliance, but convey determination, perseverance, and the will to carry on living their lives. This perseverance is a key feature in Gohar Dashti's narrative style, a tendency also found in the creative symmetries of

The treatment of Dashti's works as evidentiary documents from which the curator then draws sweeping and often benevolent moral conclusions, such as the courage and determination of Iranians in face of forces that compel submission, is not entirely due to the remiss intellectual ethics of the writer. We must also hold responsible the artwork's lack of visual complexity and imagination along with Dashti's exploitation of a traumatic incident in Iran's history to garner international visibility. Cirelli cannot be more confused when she argues that Dashti's messages are "put across via hidden clues" and calls for alternative interpretive methods, while her own text is laden with the most stereotypical ones—at each paragraph some biographical detail of the artist's life comes to support her straightforward readings of Dashti's perspicuous messages.¹⁴ How does this ready-to-consume semiotics produce "hidden clues"?

But the attention given to Dashti in Milan, Boston, Berlin, and other cultural metropolitan hubs is not an exception once situated within the ideological preferences of Western art institutions. Writing about a larger group of artists, but also specifically referring to Dashti's *Me, She and the Others*, Hamid Keshmirshakan, an Iranian art historian, criticizes these institutions for the uncritical attention they bestow upon artworks responding to their "insatiable demand to reveal what might be defined as ethno-cultural identity markers." For him, these markers are often presented through the use of an array of essentializing semiotics conveying clichéd tokens of cultural difference:

many young Iranian artists. Any consoling connotation is foregone in favor of courage over submission and determination over apathy."

¹⁴ Ibid.

References have been made in Iranian art to the issues from traditional imaginary and cultural frameworks to vivid political and controversial subjects (Fig. 7.1 [from Dashti's *Me, She and the Others* series]). Exploring these themes in art would be a strategy whose parameters are at least clear to win recognition internationally, although not necessarily locally. Thus, this strategy often goes unchallenged by practicing artists who wish to be part of this international system.¹⁵

While Keshmirshekan only refers to a couple of examples in passing—that of Dashti and Arman Estepanian—tracing the strategy of using “vivid political and controversial subjects” in many other Iranian artists does not require much effort. In fact, one can observe two major turns within the contemporary art of Iran largely in compliance with the market: one toward a decorative abstraction most often accompanied by either Persian calligraphy or abstract motifs borrowed from Islamic architecture; and the other inclined to a simplified rendition of moral, social, and political subject matters, bereft of imagination or complexity.

Shadi Ghadirian, who had a successful start with her visually engaging *Qajar Series* (1998)—now in the collections of LACMA, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), and the British Museum—completed a photographic series in 2008, entitled *Nil, Nil*, that consists of eighteen indoor scenes and details of a regular household with war paraphernalia placed among other equipment of everyday life [figure 3-7]. A military flask is on a seemingly normal table lit by sunlight with china tea service; the contents of a regular women's purse are interspersed with bullets of Heckler & Koch G3 machine gun; a military personnel identification tag on ball

¹⁵ Hamid Keshmirshekan, “The Crisis of Belonging: On the Politics of Art Practice in Contemporary Iran,” in *Contemporary Art from the Middle East: Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses*, ed. Hamid Keshmirshekan (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 111-112.

chains is in a jewelry box containing necklaces and bracelets; a hand grenade sits on a fruit basket, and so on. Again, in a series that clearly foreshadows Dashti's *Today's Life and War*, war and everyday life are paired to make a social statement on the difficult lives of Iranians in the post-war era.

Another prolific artist working broadly within this trend is Mahmoud Bakhshi Mo'akhar. Most of Bakhshi's works exhibit similar qualities to the artists I have discussed so far. However, Bakhshi himself is aware of the straightforwardness in his works and he has expressed in his statement for the Magic of Persia Award that he has reservations about his own political straightforwardness: "I have often had conflicted feelings about this approach and have always looked at artworks that are disconnected from political issues, that are beautiful and important for art history, with envy."¹⁶ Ultimately, he sees being born and growing up in Iran as a force that propels him to create artworks corresponding with his social environment— suggesting that the work of those artists who create art not entirely consumed by a moral or a political message are unable to reflect on their societies, or even more erroneously, suggesting that art that is politically engaged cannot be simultaneously visually engaging and aesthetically complex.¹⁷

His installation, *Air Pollution of Iran* (2004-2006), which was acquired by Tate Modern in London, consists of eight Iranian flags, faded and stained supposedly by the air pollution of

¹⁶ Mahmoud Bakhshi Mo'akhar, "Artist's Statement," Magic of Persia Award's website, <http://mop-cap.com/artist/2009-mahmoud-bakhshimoakhar/> (accessed June 11, 2015).

¹⁷ Ibid.

Tehran. These flags are stretched over stretchers and mounted vertically onto the wall [figure 3-8]. The number of flags corresponds to the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq and the title of the work enables the delivery of an unambiguous meaning to the whole installation. As Lina Khatib writes in her book, *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle*, Bakhshi's work posits "a symbolic challenge of the sanitization of the image of the state that the regime presents to the world, and a message about the poisoned political atmosphere in Iran."¹⁸ She further continues by saying that the government closed the exhibition in Tehran after two days, in order to better demonstrate the political efficacy of Bakhshi's installation.¹⁹

A shared feature uniting these artworks is the primacy of a straightforward message that employs visualization, or at times performance pieces, in order to get materialized. There is either an arbitrary quality to the visualized or performed artwork—as if the concept or a set of concepts in each piece operate autonomously from form and aesthetics—or the message is so clear and transparent that visual and aesthetic parameters of the work are rendered entirely inconsequential and are thus dismissed. Let us for the moment bracket their ability to engage their audiences imaginatively or even conceptually, and consider how these works travel

¹⁸ Lina Khatib, *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 101.

¹⁹ While Bakhshi's group exhibition with Behnam Kamrani and Shahab Fotouhi at the Niavaran Cultural Center was closed on its second night by Iranian authorities, it was reopened on the third day. Khatib, however, fails to mention the reopening of the exhibition, in order to hold up her optimistic assessment of the political efficacy of Bakhshi's work to pose a staunch socio-political criticism against the Iranian state.

around the world and are exhibited repeatedly. This, in and of itself, undermines the geographic specificity of the messages they strive to convey. Then, how can Amir Mo'bed's *بیا نوازشم کن* (*Come Caress Me*) or Mahmoud Bakhshi's *Air Pollution of Iran* possibly meet their aspirations in Röda Sten Gallery or at Tate Modern? What is quite troubling is that these artists are not even remotely concerned about the ways in which their works are assimilated into ideologically-driven interpretive methods of Western institutions, most often turning them into staunch and myopic criticisms of the state rather than a multifaceted commentary on their social environment.

The unreserved reception these artworks receive from Western cultural centers is primarily a function of their ability to speak in a language that is not only stylistically familiar with these institution's spectators, but also their willingness to forgo semiotic complexity, culturally codified visuality, artistic imagination, and aesthetic rigor, so that their meaning is readily available for consumption. The concepts, or more accurately the subject matters, these artists develop do not emerge from the self-critique of aesthetics.²⁰ They fail to examine the inseparable link between art's political efficacy and aesthetics; moreover, their lack of attention to aes-

²⁰ In *A Hunger for Aesthetics*, Michael Kelly argues that instead of giving credence to the anxiety about the regeneration of aesthetics, we must critically examine its capacity for transforming the relationship between art, ethics, and politics. Through coupling aesthetics with critique, he maintains that aesthetics "takes the form of a self-critique aimed at developing new concepts, principles, and strategies that, if successfully recalibrated, would constitute a regeneration of aesthetics." Cf. Michael Kelly, *A Hunger for Aesthetics: Enacting the Demands of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 2-3.

thetics is not derived from iconoclastic tenets of the avant-garde affording them an anti-aesthetics nature. Rather, the ethico-political message, here, simply subsumes the medium in its entirety.²¹

Whereas Shahab Fotouhi, Ghazaleh Hedayat, Homayoun Askari Sirizi, and Barbad Golshiri, among a few others, do examine the complex and inexorable relationship between aesthetics and political, philosophical, and moral concepts and carefully resist being assimilated as players of the larger cultural games of institutions with ostensibly multicultural aspirations, the dominant trend of conceptualism in Iran derives from a simplified and at times confused understanding of conceptual art. It is difficult to find a work of art that takes up conceptualism in order to question the validity of the art object, or to challenge the conventional definitions of art in terms set by the long-lasting visual traditions of art history. Neither can one find among most Iranian conceptual artists' efforts to dismantle or minimize the authorial role

²¹ I hope it is clear that I am not advocating for a regressive Greenbergian formalism here. Neither do I find myself espousing any kind of defense for what Gardner has aptly called the "neutral neo-formalism" of art historians such as Rosalind Krauss and T. J. Demos, prevailing over their attempts to appeal to "postcolonial politics." What I am concerned with is the effacement of the medium and its specificity in favor of transparent messages that are most often tailored to fit into the curatorial agendas of Western institutions, even though the artworks are ostensibly made for local display. Challenging and questioning aesthetics is scarcely found among the majority of works created under the dominant and simplified understanding of the term conceptual art in Iran. Conceptual works of most Iranian artists have not been able to deliver what Blake Stimson calls the radical and empowering promise of conceptualism, namely intellectualism, which was able to liberate interpretation and evaluation of art from "the privileged domain of scholarly critics and historians," by way of taking up the task of philosophically contemplating art and questions related to it. Neither have these artists been able to critically examine the failures of conceptualism, a self-critical discourse which as Stimson argues, developed early on within conceptualism itself. Cf. Blake Stimson, "The Promise of Conceptual Art," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), xli. Also, Cf. Gardner, "Whither the Post-colonial?" 143.

assigned to the artist or attempts to question the ideological frame of art institutions and their bourgeois audience.

Literal translations of concepts and moral statements into images and performative acts grew unprecedentedly in the past fifteen years after the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art went through what Darabi calls “a curatorial revolution.”²² In 1997, the reformist party won the presidential election and President Mohammad Khatami took office. As Said Amir Arjomand observes, Khatami’s doctrine of development of civil society in Iran based on the rule of law paved the way for neologisms in the political discourse of the country: “Neologisms such as ‘civil society (جامعه‌ی مدنی),’ ‘legality (قانون‌مندی),’ ‘citizens (شهروندان),’ and ‘law-orientedness (قانون‌گرایی),’ many of them coined by Khatami himself, circulated, as did Khatami’s other favorite term, ‘political development.’”²³ This political rhetoric also placed a heavy emphasis on public participation. In fact, President Khatami continuously highlighted the significance of “the recognition of the right of opposition within the framework of law,”²⁴ and the necessity of public participation in the civil and political landscape.

In accordance with this new discourse and shortly after the beginning of the second term of President Khatami, the TMOCA held a major exhibition titled *The First Conceptual Art Exhibition of Iran*. About fifty artists were selected to show their works at the TMOCA. Frenzy

²² Helia Darabi, “Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art as a Microcosm,” 234.

²³ Said Amir Arjomand, “The Reform Movement and the Debate on Modernity and Tradition in Contemporary Iran,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 4 (November 2002), 726.

²⁴ Ibid.

about new practices of art erupted during and in the aftermath of the exhibition. Every artist was “conceptual,” *tout court*, and every work should be “conceptual” before anything else or it was marked as lagging behind. The TMOCA gathered all practices of art that would not be categorized as working within conventional media, such as painting, sculpture, or photography, under the term “conceptual art,” which allowed artists to more flagrantly manifest their social and political points of view in their art and assume their responsibilities as “citizens” to participate in the formation of a civil society.

The mistranslation of “conceptual art” as an all-encompassing term to define all practices of new media persisted in the second and third TMOCA’s exhibitions, even though their titles were changed to the *Second New Art Exhibition (2002)* and the *Third New Art Exhibition (2004)*. Of these exhibitions, Darabi writes:

These events, though highly spontaneous and experimental, played a significant role in opening the doors of the museum to a wider range of the artists, drawing a large public, and establishing more flexible definitions of artistic practice. The alternative artists, however, welcomed the open-call opportunities to create occasional satirical, politically engaged or anti-institutional art, with the state’s financial support, using the strategies of allegory and metaphor.²⁵

While Darabi is correct to observe that these exhibitions allowed for “establishing more flexible definitions of artistic practice,” I am more interested in the effects these definitions had on Iran’s art scene. With this new emphasis on the conceptual aspect of art, each artist had to

²⁵ Helia Darabi, “Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art as a Microcosm,” 236.

write a statement explaining the concept, or even a number of concepts, at the center of his or her work.²⁶

The catachrestic nature of TMOCA's understanding of the term "conceptual" was the start of a chain of consequences, which changed the focus of the majority of artists, especially those who were in the early stages of their careers. From this moment on, and even to this date, it is difficult to attend a show in Tehran and not be greeted by a largely printed statement on the wall or printed on a piece of paper either written by the artist herself or, to add more credibility to it, written by a critic, explaining the concept *in* and thus the ultimate meaning of the work you are about to see. These texts are often convoluted enough to conceal the ferocious clarity of the artworks²⁷—Golshiri's text on Mo'bed's تکرار (*Recurrence*) serves as a good example here.

Photographic artists, also, experienced a yearning to be a part of the expanding scene of new practices of art in Tehran. This was achieved mostly by abandoning photography's conventional visual qualities and shifting its center of gravity toward ethnography, documentation of socio-political concepts, or "photo-art," when more philosophically inclined. A large number of photographers were now practicing conceptual photography through overly simplified ethnographic projects: from opened wallets each paired with its owner's portrait to images of young Iranian females in their bedrooms, peeking into and comparing their private lives, photographs, reminiscent of National Geographic projects, meant to unveil truth and manifest

²⁶ I was among the artists participating in the third exhibition and I can remember that the selection committee showed little concern about the execution and the plastic characteristics of my installation.

²⁷ Boris Groys, "Critical Reflections" in *The State of Art Criticism*, eds. James Elkins and Michael Newman (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 61.

concepts beyond photography. For example, Morteza Khaki writes in the statement of his photographic series *Purse Snatching*—which consisted of nine photographs of unfolded wallets and opened purses exhibited at Mah-e Mehr Gallery in Tehran—that he is interested in revealing the difference between private and public life in Iran:

This is a visual investigation in private and public spaces of people in Iran. Public to private and visa versa [sic], a person appears drastically different in Iran. I observed that wallets are one of the most personal objects that appear in public still unfolding some private aspects of a person. This collection reveals the wallets as merging point of private and public.²⁸

Such approaches in photography often give way to arguments that understand Iranian contemporary photography merely as a reaction to the state. In a preface to Rose Issa's *Iranian Photography Now*, Martin Barnes, the senior curator of photographs at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, argues that the creative impetus behind the works of Iranian artists is "sharpened by oppressive situations of a sense of displacement."²⁹ He further continues by stating that "in an environment of censorship, dissenting voices cut through: certain figures do this with flagrant and defiant opposition, others by using the social methods of reportage to preserve and document, some employ a quiet, meditative approach, while others cleverly re-present images using a sense of nostalgia or wry humor." It is hardly surprising that a sig-

²⁸ Morteza Khaki, "Purse Snatching by Morteza Khaki," (artist's statement, Morteza Khaki's personal website) <http://www.mortezakhaki.com/#!/purse-snatching-by-morteza-kha/cw93> (accessed June 13, 2015).

²⁹ Martin Barnes, "Preface," in *Iranian Photography Now*, ed. Rose Issa (Kassel, Germany: Hatje Cantz and Beyond Art Productions, 2008), iv.

nificant number of introductions, prefaces, and even full-length articles written on contemporary Iranian art simply dismiss visual qualities of the works and go straight to their ethico-political messages.

The failure of the TMOCA to inculcate a sense of contemporary art practice that is not limited to an over-simplified understanding of conceptualism paved the way for artworks wherein visual qualities are marginal to their content.³⁰ In fact, the arbitrarily curated new art exhibitions held at the TMOCA perfectly fit into the social paradigms of Iran's reformist government. The significant outcome of these annuals, however, was an isolation of aesthetics and visuality, a byproduct of which was the dissolving of the nascent art criticism discourse "into the background clutter of ephemeral cultural criticism."³¹ The first two issues of *حرفه: هنرمند* (*Herfeh: Honarmand*) journal, published in summer and fall 2002, were in part dedicated to the conceptual art exhibitions in Iran, with notes and articles mostly unsympathetic to the whole project, interviews with university professors and organizers of the show, and a few pieces of art criticism looking into one or a number of the artworks. Among numerous critical essays, it is hard to locate one that incorporates a formal analysis or makes an effort to read

³⁰ In a newspaper article titled "To see with the eyes of a doll," Mohammad Shamkhani criticizes the TMOCA for their unequivocal insistence on a "conceptual art" that has no relation to Iran's geography and time. He compares the museum's point of view to looking through a doll's eyes, where it appears that the doll is capable of the act of looking, but no image is materialized in its mind. Cf. Mohammad Shamkhani, "حرفه: هنرمند (Seeing with the Eyes of a Doll)," *وقایع اتفاقیه*, May 16, 2004.

³¹ James Elkins, "On the Absence of Judgment in Art Criticism," in *The State of Art Criticism*, eds. James Elkins and Michael Newman (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 71.

works' contents/message in relation to their visual appearances. Newspaper reviews and articles were also predominantly focused on the strange experience those exhibitions were able to offer their audiences.

Contemporary art practice and its discourse fell prey to this mistranslation, having all their horizons closed in favor of expanding only one: practicing conceptual art and locating the “concept” in art. Without paying necessary attention to the effects TMOCA’s exhibitions had on Iranian contemporary art, Hamid Keshmirshekan suggests that this exhibition “proved to be a turning point.” He writes:

An appetite developed for the new, unconventional and, in a word, contemporary. Artists attempted to break down barriers that could have prevented them from tackling subjects, materials, ways of working and modes of exhibiting previously considered out of bounds.³²

What Keshmirshekan uncritically celebrates as “contemporary” had a dark side. The effects of this new atmosphere were primarily, but of course not alone, caused by a mistranslation that was funded by the state and backed by some intellectuals working with the TMOCA. Such intellectuals have continued to this day to transform many of the artworks into political, social, and moral statements with transparent meanings ready for consumption, whether locally or by Western institutions with their appetite for raw material accommodating moral judgments and benevolent positions of their public apropos this “unknown” geography.

³² Hamid Keshmirshekan, *Contemporary Iranian Art* (London: Saqi Books, 2013), 238-240.

With the end of the reformists' era, the TMOCA became increasingly more conservative and artists went back to private galleries. At the same time, the political atmosphere and the worldwide propaganda against President Ahmadinejad allowed stauncher criticism to be voiced and the international market for works with loudly pronounced statements disparaging Iran's government grew exponentially larger. The situation led into a more polarized divide between those who oiled the propaganda machinery of the Western conservative forces by offering exaggerated depictions of the absence of freedom in Iran, mostly visible in depictions of the plight of Muslim women, and those who resisted the global art tempting promises of "international visibility." A few artists, who resisted being dragged into the politically drenched atmosphere of international exhibitions of contemporary Iranian art, did not necessarily relinquish critiquing the political undercurrents of their society, but did so with careful consideration of their audience and without losing site of the over-politicized reductive interpretations to which they would have been subjected outside of Iran. Homayoun Askari Sirizi is among those few.

On June 17, 2005, concurrent with the first round of the presidential election in Iran, Sirizi showed his work, *تستِ مردمسالاری* (*Test of Democracy*) at No. 13, a small art gallery space in northern Tehran—though the space was never officially called a gallery, it was commonly referred to as Ave Gallery (after its owner, the artist Fereydoun Ave). The one-day exhibition displayed an installation comprised of four boxes placed adjacent one another: a post box, a ballot box, a charity donation box, and a garbage can [figure 3-9]. Carefully designed to address the country's political discourse of boycotting the election because of gross disqualifications of

presidential candidates by the Guardian Council (شورای نگهبان), Sirizi's work posed a significant question: whether it is possible to democratically deny democracy. The boxes placed on a row in a barren white cube allowed visitors to rethink what democracy is and how it has been continuously conflated with freedom. Thus, his work, turning the concept on its head, asked whether we are able to exercise the freedom to do away with democracy altogether.

I don't necessarily believe that Sirizi's installation possessed some imaginative and visual qualities that are absent in the works of Bakhshi, Dashti, or Mo'bed. After all, *تست مردمسالاری* (*Test of Democracy*), with its blatant title, is as straightforward as it seems at first glance. And yet, his uncompromising position to not show the work either outside of Iran, or on a date other than June 17, 2005, speaks to the careful attention he has given to the dangers of the assimilating power of ideologically driven interpretations of Iranian artists. Despite all this, in her *Image Politics in the Middle East*, Khatib, by way of distorting factual information about the installation, manages to read the work in light of the political environment during Ahmadinejad's presidency:

Another artist whose work challenges state discourse through appropriation is Homayoun Askari Sirizi [...] In 2005, *shortly after the election of Ahmadinejad*, Askari Sirizi worked on an exhibition titled 'Test of Democracy.' [...] This critique of democratic actions mirrored the wider malaise among liberals in Iran who had felt disappointed by the presidency's regressing towards further conservatism after the opening-up window offered during Khatami's period of rule.³³ [emphasis mine]

³³ Lina Khatib, *Image Politics in the Middle East*, 102.

I am not sure whether mistakes like this, which are not usually the exception but the rule when it comes to reading contemporary Iranian art, are just the results of careless intellectual work or insidious distortions of reality to arrive at more provocative, yet seldom profound interpretations with no attempt at “fidelity to the original.”³⁴

While I find Sirizi’s position as a political gesture that effectively resists assimilating and reductive ethico-political readings of Iranian contemporary art, here I am not necessarily advocating for withdrawal as the ultimate solution to the predicament in which artists from non-hegemonic cultures are entrapped. Readings offered by Khatib, Cirelli, or Barnes are emblematic of a situation in which insufficient attention to visual complexity and aesthetics in the works of contemporary Iranian artists enables flattening interpretations that corroborate the language of international studies departments; either the artwork accommodates such reductive readings (Dashti, Ghadirian, Bakhshi) or the critic dismisses the work’s complexity in favor of an over-politicized interpretation (Khatib’s writing on Sirizi).

The other formative instance I explore in this chapter entails interdiscursive (mis)translations of the Western metropolitan criticism of Iranian contemporary art into the local discourse of art criticism in Iran. From Scott MacDonald’s 2004 reading of Neshat’s works as a reflection of “the repressed status of women in Iran *and* their power, as women and as Muslims,”³⁵ to the 2014 curatorial piece on Golshiri’s tombstones in his *Curriculum Mortis*

³⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Questioned on Translation: Adrift,” 14.

³⁵ Scott MacDonald and Shirin Neshat, “Between Two Worlds: An Interview with Shirin Neshat,” in *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 3 (Fall 2004), 621.

series, written for the LACMA exhibition, which deliberately leaves out some of his pieces in order to interpret Golshiri's work as a direct response "the constraints imposed by the politics and ideology of the Iranian government,"³⁶ Western art criticism of Iran has been continuously curtailing hermeneutic possibilities of contemporary Iranian art in favor of a myopic view that situates them all in a moral and political opposition with the state. Some, however, are quite "benevolent" in doing so—grounding their understanding of third world culture, as Spivak has shown us, in a munificent desire for solidarity.³⁷ Their rhetoric often revolves around giving voice to the voiceless.

Many of these readings have been either directly translated into Persian, published in journals such as *حرفه: هنرمند* (*Herfeh: Honarmand*) and *تندیس* (*Tandis*), or else their terminology has been inserted into the contemporary local discourses with insufficient critical reflection. What

³⁶ Linda Komaroff, "LACMA Curatorial Text for the exhibition Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East," <http://collections.lacma.org/node/1663760> (accessed June 23, 2015). In a letter to LACMA, Golshiri objects the curator's decision to omit some of his cenotaphs in order to fit his entire series within a reductive narrative about his work as a protest against the Iranian state and the series of murders and disappearances from 1988 to 1998 by Iranian government operatives of Iranian dissident intellectuals: "...Let's see what they wrote about the grave markers I just told you about. They wrote that I had made 'a kind of sculptural cemetery memorializing martyrs to Iran's ruling regime.' It is true to say that I've dedicated a great deal of my work to suppression and organized assassination of Iranian intellectuals and in that exhibition there was a cenotaph for Ahmad Miralai, the first translator of Borges into Persian who was brutally murdered in Isfahan. And there were three more cenotaphs and grave markers that dealt with such issues, yet the writer of that text, namely, the curator, deliberately closed her eyes on these tombstones: *Cenotaph for Jan van Eyck; Second Coming, Before Holbein; As Dad as Possible, as Dad as Beckett; Eyeck*, another work based on van Eyck's *The Virgin and Child with Canon van der Paele*. So I am to subject myself to a discourse where utterances (*paroles*) are read through the agency of master signifiers; Arab or Islamic. These, thanks to common sense could be used interchangeably. The official discourse too does the same. Agents of such ideological planes think within it not about it, they are subjects to it." Barbad Golshiri, "Iran Discourses," letter to LACMA's curator of Islamic Art, e-mail message to author, July 23, 2015.

³⁷ Spivak, "The Politics of Translation," 191.

is at stake here is the material effects the Western discourse of art criticism has had on the formation, or transformation to be more accurate, of the local discourse of contemporary art in Iran. By this, I do not mean to suggest that the local discourse should remain local and be posited as a reaction to the international art discourse. Quite the contrary: the local discourse of art criticism can and should entertain international aspirations, but not necessarily by way of borrowing its lexicon from Western cultural institutions whose readings of contemporary Iranian art has been consistently flawed, if not misleading. Moreover, this translated discourse has provided what can be seen as an instruction manual in the art production scene, as it accurately parses out the qualities that effectively guarantee international attention.

In a chapter titled “Trauma, Memory and History,” in Keshmirshakan’s edited volume, *Contemporary Art from The Middle East: Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses*, Dabashi points out the discursive tropes that prevent us from thinking about non-Western art in a more rigorous manner:

Terms such as “Middle East,” “contemporary” or “modern” art, and disciplinary formations such as departments of “art history”—the very tropes that are to guide our reading of this particular constellation of art—are themselves the most basic, the most flagrant traps posed in thinking about these forms of artistic expression. The very designation of this volume as including “the international body of art theorists and historians, together with regional scholars and professionals in the field” already exposes the problems we face. Who is an “international art theorist and historian?” And by what authority, and how, are we to distinguish them from “regional scholars and professionals?”³⁸

³⁸ Hamid Dabashi, “Trauma, Memory, and History,” in *Contemporary Art from the Middle East: Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses*, ed. Hamid Keshmirshakan (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 19.

Whereas I believe that the divide between what is deemed as international art theorists and historians and the regional ones is still viable and is marked most importantly by their access, or lack thereof, to international media and academic institutions, I agree with the direction in which Dabashi's criticism is pointing us. A defeatist position, with which at best we can wish to append our readings to the international art criticism, results in either a total subscription to this insufficient vocabulary or indefensible attempts to simplify Iranian contemporary art in order to arrive at a clear meaning for international consumption—much of what anthologies such as *Contemporary Art from The Middle East* aim to do. The continued dominance of Western cultures has created an unbalanced correspondence between the local discourse of contemporary art and one that is imported to Iran mostly via translation. Within this textual landscape, translations not only undermine the faint possibility of vernacular discourse of art criticism, they consistently reinforce the hegemonic position of the West as the final arbitrator of meaning and the authoritative figure of the Western metropolitan critic as the sole owner of the means of knowledge production.

There are plenty of examples of this adopted terminology, but let us take a look at a specific example which marks an inaugural moment in this process. Neshat's early works offer an effective vantage point to better see how Iran's malleable discourse of art criticism was formed as a reaction to Western criticism. Her photographic series *Women of Allah* (1997), which explores the Iranian female subjectivity in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution of 1979,

paved her way to the international art scene [figure 3-10]. Not surprisingly, her series was subject to reductive interpretations.³⁹

In his essay on Neshat, “Transcending the Boundaries of an Imaginative Geography” published in 2005, Dabashi acerbically points to some examples of reductive interpretations of Neshat’s work such as reviews written by Scott MacDonald or Francesco Bonami.⁴⁰ Dabashi locates a “demented fantasy” at the center of the interpretive politics deployed by Western metropolitan critics. What he aptly terms as an “arrested verbal vocabulary” is a limited lexicon of barren terms, such as “traditional societies,” that instead of corresponding to reality comply with the “deranged delusions” of those in whose conceptions the Middle East is an “entirely imaginative geography in which veil, violence, and eroticism all come together.”⁴¹ Dabashi elaborates, furthermore, on these politics by using the term “arrested vocabulary,” by which he refers to a predetermined vocabulary that flattens Neshat’s work into a comment on the plight of women in “violent Islamic” countries and fails to account for its semiotic complexity.⁴² Dabashi asserts:

³⁹ On one end of the spectrum of reduction of Neshat, Pepe Karmel, a reviewer for the *Times*, reads Neshat’s use of Tahereh Saffarzadeh’s poetry as her political endorsement of revolutionary violence, while on the other end Scott MacDonald applauds her for reflecting the repressed status of Iranian women. Cf. Pepe Karmel, “Art in Review: Shirin Neshat,” *New York Times*, October 20, 1995.

⁴⁰ For a critique of reductive readings of Neshat’s work cf. Dabashi, “Transcending the Boundaries of an Imaginative Geography,” 2005.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴² Given Neshat’s immigration to the United States in her teenage years and the formation of her art career in the U.S., one might quite rightfully dispute that she should not be simply categorized as an Iranian artist. However, for better or for worse, not only she has been continuously regarded to as an Iranian artist and included in art shows presenting artists from Iran, but also she has been portrayed as the “voice” of

There is an imaginative geography at work in the heart of that geopolitics of reception that is impossible to miss and unwise to ignore. It is impossible to read anything on Shirin Neshat these days written by someone having already imagined himself or herself inside a hermetically sealed sort of Andy Warhol's Campbell Soup Can code-named "the West" without reaching for a red pen and marking the number of times that phrases such as "repressed Iranian/ Muslim woman" appear and mar any serious conversation with her work.⁴³

Dabashi's analysis of the geopolitics of reception of Neshat's work most effectively describes the situation of contemporary art's current discourses. Since 2005, when his critique of readings of Neshat was published, a single glance at exhibition catalogs and art reviews suffices to find numerous examples that fall under the same rubric of reductive interpretation.

This mode of meaning production, *authorized* by Western institutions of art historical knowledge, have had serious consequences for the local discourses of contemporary art in Tehran, limiting even further the already adopted lexicon of critics inside and outside of Iran writing on contemporary Iranian art. Whereas Dabashi is able to insightfully transcend this vocabulary by way of situating it within a dialectic between semantic captivity and a semiotic (visual) liberation in Neshat's oeuvre, most Iranian critics mustered their reaction to Western misrepresentations of the Iranian society by pointing the sharp edge of their criticism at Neshat's work, simply deeming it "exotic" or "self-exoticizing." Thus, a new "arrested verbal vocabulary" is formed, not in conformity to the Western discourse, but in reaction to it—a

the Iranian women, an attribution that in fact Neshat has incessantly resented. Therefore, it is pertinent to argue that even her association with the voice of the Iranian women is part of a bigger politics of representation and display that resists accepting Neshat as simply an artist rather than an "Iranian artist."

⁴³ Dabashi, "Transcending the Boundaries of an Imaginative Geography," 59-61.

different form of conformity one might argue, *à la* Foucault.⁴⁴ The term “exoticism” and its other reincarnations were deployed, quite profusely, to address a large number of Iranian contemporary artworks. It evolved into a rampant obstinate barricade against alternative readership, curtailing possibilities of any serious and unbiased critical commitment.

In his essay, “The Question of Identity vis-à-vis Exoticism in Contemporary Iranian Art,” published in a 2010 issue of *Iranian Studies*, Keshmirshekan declares “exoticism” and “identity” the two “primary concerns in the art and artistic practice of contemporary Iran.”⁴⁵ Taking the term at face value, he fails to interrogate its validity, misuses, and effects on the discourse of art criticism in Iran. In fact, he explicitly mentions that the essay will not delve into the “theoretical framework” of the terms it explores. It is precisely this lack of critical reflection on the term and the reactionary politics at its heart that have allowed for the contemporary discourse of art in Iran to be formed in relation (conformity or direct opposition) to the hegemonic discourses of metropolitan art criticism in the West.

While Neshat might appear “exotic” to the Western public, one should seriously consider why, for many Iranian critics, she is considered the self-exoticizing artist *par excellence*. With two of her video-installations, Neshat participated in two group exhibitions at the TMOCA:

⁴⁴ In the first volume of *History of Sexuality*, Foucault theoretically formulated how the counter-discourse is defined in an antagonistic relationship with the dominant discourse and thus its existence is made possible by the very discourse it resists. My understanding of the discourse of Iranian contemporary art as an echo chamber of the dominant Western discourses, slightly diverges from Foucault’s concept in that I believe that the discourse of contemporary art in Iran simultaneously draws its legitimation from the very dominant discourse it is supposed to destabilize. Cf. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 100-102.

⁴⁵ Hamid Keshmirshekan, “The Question of Identity vis-à-vis Exoticism in Contemporary Iranian Art,” *Iranian Studies* 43, no. 4 (August 2010), 489.

“The New Art” in 2002 and “Gardens of Persia: Old Wisdom, New Visions” in 2004. Soon after her initial presence in Iran, Aydin Aghdashloo, the prominent Iranian painter and critic, wrote a short piece in the journal *Herfeh: Honarmand*, entitled “مشکل خانم شیرین نشاط” (The Problem of Madam Shirin Neshat).” In the first few paragraphs, Aghdashloo situates the problem with Neshat’s early works, *Unveiling* (1993-97) and *Women of Allah* (1997), in her fascination with what he calls “the local color,” a term by which he refers to the use of “symbolic motifs that are common between the artist and the foreign audience, creating an implicit and immediate—though usually superficial—contract between them, which enables an instantaneous and convenient spectatorship.”⁴⁶ For Aghdashloo, those artists who fall into the trap of “local color” are obliged, for a long period of time, to accept the consequences of their “local and exotic” works and have to play the role of a reporter for foreigners. Aghdashloo is astute enough to move away from this line of criticism and considers Neshat’s more recent videos worthy of serious critical attention. Thereafter, he quite briefly—in two or three lines—introduces some of her works including *Turbulent* (1998), *Rapture* (1999), *Passage* (2001), and *Tooba* (2002). And yet, what is startlingly absent from his writing is that very critical attention to any of Neshat’s works for which he was calling. Aghdashloo makes one sweeping argument: at the center of these videos lies Neshat’s fear of her homeland rituals. This terror, Aghdashloo believes, has resulted in a fearful and delusional world in her works, which is due to her “distance from her own culture and tradition.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Aydin Aghdashloo, “مشکل خانم شیرین نشاط” (The Problem of Madam Shirin Neshat), *هنرمند: حرفه* 3 (Winter 2003), 137.

Aghdashloo's account is perhaps on the generous end of the spectrum. There are others who write with more hostility and with similarly little theoretical and critical attention to the semiotics of Neshat's works. The same issue of *حرفه: هنرمند* (*Herfeh: Honarmand*) contains an article by Reza Farrokhfal, entitled "اهمیت اگزوتیک بودن" (The Importance of Being Exotic), in which he looks at Neshat's works exhibited at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, and argues that following the logic of Orientalism, Neshat represents Iranians as the very "barren land" in which her works portray us, bereft of an historical relevance in relation to the rest of the world. He continues by stating that "any sign of culture in this exotic primitivism is either minimized or refers to the ancient times (the fort in front of the sea in Neshat's work)."⁴⁸

Another example is Golshiri's criticism. After lengthy chastising remarks about Neshat's superficial use of the veil in her works, in his 2009 "For They Know What They Do Know," Golshiri criticizes Neshat for transforming Persian writing into an "exotic ornament." He writes:

In her recent photographs—like her most famous series, "Women of Allah"—Neshat has used Persian writing. In this piece, language has lost its function and carries the charm of the unfamiliar, and so becomes *mere exotic ornament*. What is there for anyone who can read Persian? Neshat has employed such an excess of superfluous and incorrect diacritics that no one is able to pronounce her words. These are no longer words but ornaments, knick-knacks, and an answer to the market's demand for the "arabesque" and Arabic letters without knowing what they are. [emphasis mine]

⁴⁷ Ibid., 139.

⁴⁸ Reza Farrokhfal, "اهمیت اگزوتیک بودن" (The Importance of Being Exotic), *حرفه: هنرمند* 3 (Winter 2003), 145.

It is quite obvious from this paragraph that for Golshiri the ultimate spectator is the one who cannot possibly read Persian—and perhaps cannot inconvenience himself to learn how to do so. But, what is even more disappointing is how hard it is to find a critical piece written on Neshat that does not follow the same well-rehearsed line of criticism: “that work is exoticizing us!”

Among Neshat’s works exhibited in Iran, as part of the group exhibition Gardens of Persia: Old Wisdom, New Visions, was her work *Mahdokht*. The video-installation is based on a character with the same name in Shahrnush Parsipur’s novella *زنان بدون مردان* (*Women without Men*). It is quite astonishing that none of the Iranian critics looked at Neshat’s rendition of Mahdokht, a character with an intense anxiety about sexuality and love, who not only has deep roots in the revolutionary poetry of Forough Farrokhzad, but also exhibits emancipatory characteristics when she plants herself on the riverbank and eventually transforms into a tree that freely moves around the world as seeds:

Mahdokht planted herself on the riverbank in the fall. She groaned throughout the fall. Her feet were slowly frozen into the ground. The cold autumn rain tore her clothes to shreds. She was left half naked in rags. She shivered until winter came, and then she froze ... In mid-spring the tree in her body exploded ... In an eternal metamorphosis the parts of Mahdokht separated from each other. She was in pain, and felt like she was giving birth ... The tree had turned completely into seeds. A mountain of seeds. A strong wind blew the seeds of Mahdokht into the water. Mahdokht travelled with the water. She travelled all over the world.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Shahrnush Parsipur, *Women without Men: A Novella*, trans. Kamran Talattof and Jocelyn Sharlet (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 120-121.

Neshat's *Mahdokht* takes Parsipur's character and places it in a visually shocking scene with the hallucinatory qualities of a dream. The surreal settings of her video destabilize Parsipur's linear narrative and thus allows for "the body's tentative immersion in an unfamiliar element,"⁵⁰ resisting stereotypical procedures of the unfolding of the plot. Apparently though, it is neither this kind of exotic imagination, nor the kind that brilliantly pairs Magical Realism with anti-colonial politics in her movie *Women without Men*, which finds its way into the contemporary discourse of art criticism in Iran.

Within the boundaries of this discourse, there is no signifier more closely associated with exoticism than the veil. Visual strategies employed by many artists are simply dismissed when a female figure is presented in veil. Take the case of Shadi Ghadirian's *Qajar* photographic series, which has received widespread international attention. In her photographs, Ghadirian staged women in traditional Qajar attire, holding Pepsi cans, newspapers, boom boxes, and vacuum cleaners [figure 3-11]. Whereas Western institutions were, problematically, drawn toward the tensions between the historic nature of the setting of these photographs and the anomalous presence of objects of modern mass-manufacture, Iranian critics failed to challenge these reductive readings of her work and placed her under the category of exoticizing art.

Interpretations of Ghadirian's photographic series could be seen as emblematic of a wider problem, in which many Western art discourses rely on such visual readings to reinforce an impression of Iran as a traditional society. Meanwhile, a lack of theoretical reflection on either her work or the dominant discourses of metropolitan art criticism led into a condescending

⁵⁰ Fredric Jameson, "On Magic Realism in Film," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (Winter 1986), 302.

dismissal of Ghadirian's *Qajar* series by Iranian critics. Contrary to these readings, I contend that by exposing the backdrop as a part of the apparatus of photograph-taking, she addresses the West's use of photography to voyeuristically gaze at unexpected signs of modernity in so-called traditional societies, employing a self-reflexive visual strategy that questions the medium and its relation to the non-West. However, no attention is given to the visual elements of her work. Golshiri simply writes: "Her *Qajar* series embraces 'our anachronistic life' as common wisdom does: Westoxication. Westoxication is not a harmless theory, today, in the Stalinist show trials of the Iranian regime, reformists have to defend themselves against westoxication as a charge."⁵¹

Golshiri goes on to argue that "the veil has become the easiest way for an artist to promote his/her work." I don't necessarily oppose this statement. In fact, I find myself agreeing with him in many cases.⁵² Though, what I am wary of is the transformation of the veil to an easily detectable icon that casts its shadow on the discourse of criticism in Iran, deterring others from trying to engage with artworks from different perspectives, and ultimately defining the outlook of the discourse itself. The veil has already turned into what Lydia Liu theorizes as *super-sign*.

⁵¹ Barbad Golshiri, "For They Know What They Do Know," *e-flux Journal*, no. 8 (2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/80> (accessed June 8, 2015).

In explaining that Al-e Ahmad's theory of Westoxication has been assimilated into the ideological apparatuses of the government in order to maintain the Islamic identity in face of West's cultural hegemony, Golshiri offers this footnote: "Like any other narrative absorbed into common sense, 'westoxication' or 'Occidentosis' was once a theory. For example, see Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West* (*Gharbzadegi*), trans. R. Campbell (Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press, 1983)."

⁵² For example, a number of works by Ghazel Radpay, Mania Akbari, or Sadegh Tirafkan are so blatant in their use of the veil or other clichéd Iranian motifs that it is hard to think of any aesthetic or conceptual necessity dictating their choices, other than what Golshiri argues in his article.

In *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making*, Liu traces cultural dominance and its relation to inter-cultural translation in the interaction between China and Britain. Liu describes the structure of power relations in the context of inter-discursive translation through her theorization of the concept of the *super-sign*. She defines the *super-sign* as “a linguistic monstrosity that thrives on the excess of its presumed meanings by virtue of being exposed to, or thrown together with, foreign etymologies and foreign languages.”⁵³ Liu refers to an historical incident where the Chinese word *yi* 夷 (“foreigners”) was translated as “barbarian” by British people in China during the Sino-British encounter, the use of which in legal documents was officially banned in the Treaty of Tianjin (1858) at the insistence of the British for its derogatory implications. She argues that the translation as “barbarian” for the word *yi* 夷, which was meant to refer to foreigners in China, the prohibition of its use, and its subsequent disappearance from the Chinese language was a result of the encounter between the two divergent contexts (English and Chinese) in which one dominated the other, expropriated this word, and put an end to its life or at least made it invisible for a long time.⁵⁴ As Liu asserts, the imported term finds a new home in the local discourse. Its foreignness is camouflaged and subsumed in “the unchanging face of an indigenous word.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Lydia Liu, *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 13.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 32-34.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

Here, “the veil,” this suddenly exotic motif, becomes “chador art”⁵⁶ and gains prevalence in the scene of contemporary art in Iran. This has not occurred, however, through the insistence of the dominant culture to insert the term into the local lexicon of art criticism. It is formed through a reaction to reductive readings of Western art institutions—galleries, curatorial discourses, and art criticism—by placing the blame on those who offer the visual ingredients for such interpretations, instead of faulting the dominant discourse’s intolerance toward whatever might challenge its comfortable preexisting assumptions about the rest of the world. I call this the *echo effect of the hegemonic discourse*, whereby Iranian critics read contemporary art through a regime of reductive terms either borrowed from or termed in direct reaction to the Western lexicon of art criticism. In fact, they assume, and internalize, a position sufficiently out of touch with reality that allows for anything Iranian, as long as it is not produced in English and for an English-speaking audience, to be considered exotic.

I do not mean to imply that thinking about exoticism should be completely abandoned, as its substantial effects on the contemporary art of Iran and other non-Western geographies must be acknowledged. What I argue, instead, is that laying bare the preoccupation of Iranian critics with terms such as “exoticism” or “chador art,” so prevalent in the past two decades, demonstrates that the specter of the West continues to haunt the local discourses of contemporary Iranian art. This, once again, occludes the possibility of thinking a critical and historical discourse of Iranian contemporary art that does not necessarily situate itself in relation to the

⁵⁶ Lina Khatib, *Image Politics in the Middle East*, 100.

capitalizing discourses that continue to adjudicate globally on the nature of art and its interpretation.

A lack of confidence in the formation of a local discourse of art in Iran that can engage at a serious level with global institutions of art history is obvious in the language of prominent Iranian critics. This has resulted in a woefully inadequate lexicon that either borrows its terms directly from hegemonic languages or poses itself—in a reactionary manner—in opposition to it. Nonetheless, it is the dominant discourses produced by Western institutions, media, critics, and academics that play a formative role in the shaping of contemporary art criticism in Iran. Take the example of Keshmirshekan’s discussion of the tension between cultural specificities and homogenizing international demands, where he attributes “aesthetics,” “functions” of art, and “concepts” to the global, and locates what he calls “value” and “desire” in the local.⁵⁷ Or, the example of Golshiri, who vehemently argues in favor of the heterogeneity of the Middle East—surely an undisputed fact not in need of further validation—while he fails to critically reflect on how his own language plays within the terms set by the discourses responsible for the fabrication of homogenizing stereotypes in the first place.

The relatively nascent discourse of contemporary art in Iran offers the possibility of a non-hegemonic space, an historically privileged juncture in Iran’s art history, which can be claimed by Iranian critics and theorized to its full potential. Provided we agree on the homogenizing effects of Western art criticism’s nomenclature on art practice and criticism in non-Western geographies, one auspicious, but as yet unfulfilled promise of such theorization can be the

⁵⁷ Hamid Keshmirshekan, “The Crisis of Belonging,” 113.

cultivation of a counter-hegemonic discourse that destabilizes homogenizing tendencies of the dominant Euro-American language of art history and criticism, by way of articulating contemporary Iranian art's discourse alongside other non-hegemonic ones.⁵⁸ However, it appears that most critics have thus found it sufficient to draw on the existing dominant discourses that come with their own ideological baggage.

One way to sum up my argument here might be to frame the inter-discursive translations from and into Iranian contemporary art's discourse as defined by what Tejaswini Niranjana aptly describes as "the inequality of languages perpetuated by the colonial encounter."⁵⁹ Either the dominant culture asserts its own terms into the local discourse of the non-hegemonic culture, or, the transposition of its arrested vocabulary onto the local discourse is carried out by intellectuals and critics who having learnt the hegemonic language through art history compendiums and journal articles published in the West, accommodate that language by losing their own in order to be part of the global art scene.

Images of the West as the authoritative translator, mediator of the global art scene, and the distant gatekeeper of meaning are coterminous with what Derrida identifies as the "hegemony of the homogeneous."⁶⁰ In *Monolingualism of the Other, or, The Prosthesis of Origin*,

⁵⁸ In *El milenio huérfano: Ensayos para una nueva cultura política*, Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues that similar to the work of translation of knowledge, translation across non-hegemonic practices provides them with reciprocal intelligibility which is the condition of fruition of anti-systemic and counter-hegemonic potential of any social movement insofar as it is articulated alongside other movements. Cf. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *El milenio huérfano* (Madrid: Trotta, 2005), 177-178.

⁵⁹ Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), 68.

Derrida asserts that the context in which meaning is produced is a political terrain. Context is always non-natural. It enforces homo-hegemony and this means that it always privileges one language over the others. Historically speaking, the dominance of colonial sovereignties brought about the weakening, or in some cases even the utter obliteration, of many languages and consequently the ultimate advantage of one language, i.e., the language of the colonizer, over the others. Thus, we have arrived at “the hegemony of the homogenous. This can be verified everywhere, everywhere this homo-hegemony remains at work in the culture, effacing the folds and flattening the text.”⁶¹ Moreover, this privileging comes hand-in-hand with the exclusion of what disturbs and destabilizes this hegemonic homogeneity.⁶² This flattening of the text, which Derrida warns us against, is produced through the hegemony of the language of art history and criticism that has all too often been limited to a vocabulary that corroborates the politics of Euro-American-centrism. It is my contention, then, that this discourse has been accepted without critical reflection, internalized, and thus perpetuated by native intellectuals and critics who echo the hegemonic language of Western art criticism that is responsible for creating this flattening in the first place.

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 40.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

⁶² Jonathan Roffe, “Translation,” in *Understanding Derrida*, eds. Jack Reynolds and Jonathan Roffe (London; New York: Continuum, 2004), 105.

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CHAPTER 4

THE GLOBAL ART WORLD AND THE COSMOPOLITAN ETHICS OF READING IN ART HISTORY

It is true that contemporary Iranian artists live in the age of the “global art world,”¹ where the geographic distances between metropolitan centers of the planet are collapsed increasingly by the circulation of images, in astronomical numbers, made possible by telecommunicative technologies. Seeing recent exhibitions on display in North American and European renowned cultural centers is no longer an implausible desire for many artists without the same level of unfettered mobility enjoyed by most citizens of the First World. Iran, too, is more widely made accessible through images of its natural and urban landscapes and its people’s everyday lives—an object of recent scholarly obsession—circulated on the web. But these flattened representations of

¹ In his “Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate,” Hans Belting distinguishes “global art” from “world art.” For him, world art is primarily a vestige of modernist universalist aspirations, whereas global art marks a departure from modernist ideals and is incontrovertibly contemporary, “not just in a chronological but also, [...] in a symbolic or even ideological sense.” While Belting is critical also of “global art,” the significance of this definition is that it captures the inexorable links that exist between mechanisms of border-crossing, both cultural and economic, as well as its ability to highlight the lack of “sufficient categories” in dealing with the new directions in which art production is channeled. Cf. Hans Belting, “Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate,” in *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, eds. Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Emanoel Araújo (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 41.

the world are in some measure responsible for creating the illusion that the heightened visibility of the margins of the West has brought about a more equitable world where everyone lives on the *same* planet. They have also given rise to the illusion that access is now fairly shared within metropolitan centers of the global world among all citizens of the internet age.

Among the perils of such misapprehensions is the concealing of the fact that living *in* the age of unprecedented globalization of transnational capitalism and its cultural subsidiaries, does not necessarily offer a dislodging of the entrenched hierarchies in the production of knowledge that have consistently endowed Europe and North America a privileged epistemic position vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Living in the age of the “global art world,” as such, has never granted Iranian artists an equal footing in the production of art and its critical discourses, and ultimately, in the politics of display and reception. In fact, the rapid growth of a globalized art market has quite successfully, and steadily, reduced the works of Iranian contemporary artists into flattened images of ethnic cultural identity, ready for exchange and consumption. It is not far-fetched, then, to think that Iranian artists find themselves not as participants in the “global dialogue” of contemporary art but rather as additive elements transformed into means of diversification of academic debates, curatorial projects, or critical reflections.

Being a non-Western artist neither necessarily translates into a free passing ticket into Euro-American galleries nor does it automatically pull the attention of Western curators toward the artist. This is particularly the case when non-Western artists are not products of European and American art institutions, where they are supposed to be given the artistic tools to speak the same

language as “everyone else.”² Contemporary artists are more successful in garnering attention once they learn how to create their works within the limits determined by this universal grammar. If within these set limits, they are able to convey provincial and identity-based accents with enough legitimacy—granted mostly by ethnic ties to the geographies of cultural alterity—they are on the right path to the mega-exhibitions of Western institutions such as the Musée d’Art Moderne or the MoMA, providing these institutions with certain multicultural bona fides. Gardner observes that the coveted label of “global” is given to art exhibitions at times only “for including artists who, though long based in New York or London, [happen] to be born outside this axis.”³ This appeal of diaspora artists, who are able to be sufficiently authentic as an outsider while they can speak the language of global art, is perhaps due, more than any other thing, to the little

² A case in point is the increasing gravitation of younger Iranian artists, mostly educated in the U.S. and the UK, to a certain aesthetics of low resolution imagery in photography and video-art and disorderly arrangements of trivial objects in installation. Young artists, such as Hadi Fallahpisheh, educated at Bard College, or Ala Dehghan and Shahrzad Changalvae, both educated at the Yale School of Art, are examples of what for many less careful readers of contemporary art is considered the ability to speak the universal language of the global art. Yet, both Dehghan and Changalvae seem to take their cues from the romanticizing accounts of Hito Steyerl’s technologically deterministic concept of the “poor image” (as opposed to the technically seamless images of commercial cinema/video), introduced in her widely disseminated article “In Defense of the Poor Image.” Those artworks at the center of which Steyerl’s mantra is operative, are now called in some circles in Iran as “works with Steyerl-aesthetic,” or at times “Ashford-aesthetic,” after Doug Ashford who is a visiting art professor at Yale.

Cf. Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” *e-flux* 10 (November 2009). <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/> (accessed: December 21, 2016).

I should add here that despite Steyerl’s attempts to champion the “poor image” as a potent force against digital capitalism, her own work is now fully integrated into the global market of art. In reporting on the Second Kiev Biennial in 2015, Henri Neuendorf, the associate editor of Artnet.com, calls both Steyerl and Ashford “international art stars.”

Cf. Henri Neuendorf, “It’s Official: After Much Turmoil, Second Kiev Biennale Opens in September,” *Artnet.com* (July 3, 2015) <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/kiev-biennale-2015-on-313932> (accessed: December 22, 2016).

³ Gardner, “Whither the Postcolonial?” 142.

intellectual work they demand on behalf of exhibition curators' and local audiences' visual monolingualism. The number of contemporary Iranian artists who live in north America and Western Europe and visit Iran during their summer breaks for a solo show, usually accompanied with an artist talk, is increasing by day. These artists, no matter how short their stay in Tehran, know all too well that their appeal for Western institutions depends, to a great measure, on the announcements they make on top of their résumés that they frequent between Berlin and Tehran or New York and Tehran or so forth. It is precisely this continual relationship, no matter how casual and cosmetic, to the geography of alterity that keeps them in vogue.

In 2004, Olu Oguibe wrote that for those with any kind of connection to this geography—those with any affiliation with “elsewhere”—the realm of “mainstream cultural practice in the West [...] is a doubly predictable space.” This is a “game space,” he maintains, in which non-Western artists are required to play by the rules already arbitrated by the Western institutions of cultural practice, knowing all along that their chances for success are significantly minimal, “because it is predetermined they should fail.”⁴ The question emerging from this equation for Oguibe is: “What does it take to break the code of this culture game and the cycle of predetermined obscurity failure to which such artists are otherwise condemned?”⁵ The answer to this inevitable question, for him, can be sought in the success of the British-Nigerian artists Yinka Shonibare, who rose to fame and prominence in the late 1990s British art scene. For Oguibe, the artist's rigorous attention to the critical debates of his own time as well as his devotion to a “thorough

⁴ Oguibe, *The Culture Game*, 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

understanding of the language of the metropolis”⁶ and his own position in it as a “postcolonial outsider,” were what guaranteed his success. What Oguibe believes distinguishes Shonibare from the other success stories of his generation is his deft methods in questioning the West’s exotic fantasies about Africa. His 1994 *Double Dutch*, “a pretend marker of exotic distance that was conceived and manufactured outside Africa,” simultaneously plays the “difference” card as a ticket to British art institutions, yet mocks the fetishizing desire to see Africa as the *terra incognita* where vibrant colors and “loud ‘tropical’ designs” come together.⁷

Oguibe’s analysis of the complex and discriminatory hierarchies shaping the landscape of contemporary art and culture in the West is valuable insofar as our guiding principle is to find a way to “break the code” of the culture game as it is set up and regulated by the West.⁸ Yet, even after breaking into this cultural game space, the non-Western artist is required to play the card of cultural alterity in order to succeed. Oguibe pays heed to the crucial distinction between those who play the “difference card” in order to voice their criticism of the status quo of the Western mainstream cultural space and those who take a step farther “not by only offering difference, but also insisting on the ‘fact’ of such differences”—his example here is Chris Ofili who flies in the elephant dung which he uses in his paintings directly from Africa.⁹ Notwithstanding the signifi-

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 39-42.

⁸ Ibid. 34.

⁹ Ibid., 42.

cance of establishing such a distinction, in either case, non-Western artists are expected to contribute to the projection of Western cultures' inclusiveness by way of exhibiting their alterity. Any attempt at addressing this predicament, however important at the time of a "resurgent focus on North Atlantic relations" in art and politics "under the guise of the global,"¹⁰ is of less interest to me in this chapter than examining the works of those artists who have decidedly refused to enter the *game* of celebrating cultural difference. The question here is no longer over the struggle of Iranian artists for the authorization to make universal statements about politics, gender, conditions of humanity, etc. in their works, but of how to break from the hierarchies that organize their experiences into "asymmetrical, discriminatory, [and] often deeply unjust arrangements,"¹¹ rendering their particularity, and the singularity of their works, less worthy of universalization.

For it is not the privilege of speaking in universal terms that is at stake here, but the sanctioning of some lived experiences, histories, memories, and traumas, and their manifestations in the art as universal. Anselm Kiefer's grappling with the Holocaust and the intersection of German and Jewish identities, for example, is interpreted as the dilemma of ethics of representation by and large, while lived experiences, histories, memories, and traumas of those on the margins

¹⁰ Gardner, "Whither the Postcolonial?" 142.

¹¹ Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 82. In her *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Levine offers an illuminating account of hierarchy as an abstract form that while imposes constraints and arrangements that usually lead to inequality contains the potential to enable critique. Hierarchies within the global world of art have been consistently in favor of privileging one side, epistemologically, over the other. Yet, as Levine argues, hierarchies "exert a far less orderly and systematic kind of domination than we might expect," and are "vulnerable to breakdown" (85). Perhaps, creating other forms of hierarchy that might be able to interfere in the arrangements constructed by those already in place can be seen as a way of resisting the operating inequalities and asymmetries of the global art world.

of Europe are not to be reconciled with any form of universal validity. To me a far more interesting question to explore is why Claude Monet can be sufficiently French and simultaneously universal, or Andy Warhol can epitomize the worldly artist and be the American bad boy par excellence; while contemporary artists from the southern hemisphere are unable to turn their own singular experiences into a space for navigating questions with implications beyond their geo-ethnic particularities.

Still, both questions presume that “worldliness,” “globality,” and “universality” are only validated by the authority vested in the institutions of North American and Western European metropolises. Such presumptions only continue to reinforce the privileged position of the Western subject in assuming a universal status while it simultaneously enables thinking of the margins of the West as an unknown land, “exploited but with rich intact heritages waiting to be recovered, interpreted, and curricularized in English translation,” to borrow Spivak’s words.¹² Her well-known formulation of the worlding of the colonized space, as the inscription of an uninscribed cartography, enables us to see the continued obligation of the marginal subject to experience his/her own epistemological outlook and horizons of imagination as occupied by Euro-American-centrism.¹³ As such, the inevitable question is how to think of “other worlds” in order to move beyond the asymmetries in the production of knowledge and the practice of interpretation rather than producing corrective accounts that interrupt the Western narratives of art.

¹² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives,” *History and Theory* 24, 3 (October 1985), 247.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 253.

The present moment, at least in the global art scene, seems rather peculiarly in favor of those who would leave the position of the West as the only subject of knowledge and history unchallenged. The global art world appears to be overwhelmingly controlled by the market and the rampant desire for readily consumable images of cultural difference. Consequently, the art market rewards those who respond to this need and marginalizes those who push back against it. While exposing the limits of the interpretive models enforced by the West is clearly of utmost importance—and I have shown my intellectual commitment to such attempts in the second chapter—it is more and more crucial to ask what can be done beyond exposing, parodying, or interrupting the Western discourses of knowledge production and the epistemic violence it exacts upon its ethnic other. As Dabashi argues it is possible for “the rest of the world, and the rest of the worlds, to realize that their equally legitimate worlding of the world must reach an identical self-conscious universalism, minus the imperial hubris, and cultivated in the public space evident in between empires.”¹⁴

What drives this chapter, then, is the work of two contemporary Iranian artists, Javad Modarresi, a painter and an art critic, and Mehran Mohajer, a photographer, critic, translator, and educator. The work of these artists opens up a potential to move toward a worlding of contemporary Iranian art in that they neither rely on the grammar of the Westernized global art, nor do they superficially present visual manifestations of otherness and cultural alterity. The works of these artists are deeply grounded on a conversation with Persian literature, Iranian visual tradi-

¹⁴ Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*, 324-325.

tions, the history and memories that form their understanding of the past, and the artists' contemporary, existential experiences. I also examine, briefly, how the postcolonial concept of the "global south" has opened up a space in curatorial practices for breaking with the conventional itinerary of global art display according to which Western institutions, biennials, and museums are considered ultimate interlocutors of non-Western artists. Therefore, this chapter offers a study of the broader itinerary of postcolonialism into practices beyond the well-trod pathways of Western academia. I further argue that to reimagine contemporary art history, in its interactions with the non-West, as a discipline equipped with the apparatuses of comparative critique and analysis it is necessary to push its boundaries by way of confronting it with the debates in comparative literature and postcolonial studies. It is also necessary to maintain an intellectual commitment to the "universalizable singularity" of the non-hegemonic other, possible through a critical commitment to what Spivak has termed *idiomaticity*.¹⁵

To flesh out the major difference—or at least *the* difference with which I am concerned here—between the artists I study in this chapter and those works I examined previously in chapter two, I would like to draw on a different field of contemporary art practice in Iran, namely cinema. The Iranian auteur cinema masters, the late Abbas Kiarostami (1940–2016) and Bahram Beyzaie (b. 1938), are both amongst the foremost figures of Iranian cinema, the former "internationally renowned" and the latter perhaps only "domestically popular."¹⁶ Despite the fact that

¹⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 10.

¹⁶ Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 4.

both directors, as Dabashi accurately argues in his *Masters & Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema*, pass the litmus test of “the globality of Iranian cinema,” by way of being not only rooted “in the best of modern Persian fiction and poetry, but also [through being] conversant with the undisputed masters of the craft,” Beyzaie never enjoyed the same level of international attention as the works of Kiarostami, who was hailed “le secret magnifique” by *Cahiers du Cinéma*.¹⁷ It is perhaps Kiarostami’s more accessible visual grammar that secures him a spot on the front row of international celebrations of “third cinema.” As Dabashi writes elsewhere on the late director’s *باد را خواهد برد* (*The Wind Will Carry Us*), Kiarostami subjects his cinema to “the gaze of the First at the Third World.”¹⁸ Dabashi’s observations that “the *universal* recognition of his cinema is distorting his vision of the *particulars* he has always addressed” sheds much light on the true nucleus of the comparison I want to make here.¹⁹ Whereas Kiarostami’s cinema turns aesthetically toward the West in order to speak to a supposedly universal (European and North American) audience, Beyzaie’s unwavering commitment to his geography’s visual and literary world leads into

¹⁷ Hamid Dabashi, *Masters & Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2007), 19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 255.

¹⁹ The most recent example is the internationally acclaimed Academy Award winner Iranian director, Asghar Farhadi, who with his *درباره‌ی الی* (*About Elly*, 2009) and *جدایی نادر از سیمین* (*A Separation*, 2011) turned into a global sensation. From the onset, since his 2006 *چهارشنبه سوری* (*Wednesday Fireworks*), Farhadi’s cinema was based on a visual grammar very much borrowed from mainstream Hollywood. Aside from the situations of ethical dilemma created repeatedly in his movies, Farhadi’s cinematographic aesthetics, choice of genre (detective film), and his obsession with issues of morality, family values, and loyalty in the urban middle class render him easily accessible to the “global viewer,” who doesn’t want to go any further than the theater around the corner to bring another culture home. It appears only appropriate, then, that Farhadi’s new movie, *فروشنده* (*The Salesman*, 2016), is acquired by Amazon Studios and Cohen Media Group for distribution in the United States.

a mesmerizing oeuvre, from چریکه‌ی تارا (*Ballad of Tara*, 1979) and مرگِ یزدگرد (*Death of Yazdgerd*, 1982) to غریبه‌ی کوچک باشو (*Bashu, the Little Stranger*, 1989) and مسافران (*Travelers*, 1992), that has its roots deep in the vernacular traditions of the literary, the dramatic, and the visual arts.²⁰

This comparison highlights the ways through which I understand the artists in this chapter to be different from those I have hitherto studied. Whereas those I discussed in some detail in the second chapter, most significantly among them Ghazaleh Hedayat and Barbad Golshiri, actively challenge the conditions of the status quo of the global art world, through devising aesthetic and rhetorical strategies that expose, subvert, and critique, the artists I examine in this chapter create a rather self-sufficient language which allows them to visually imagine their world not bound by the limits set by Western frames of legibility, but enriched by a dialogue with their local vernacular. Mohajer and Modarresi create their own idiomatic visual language. By this I have in mind not the romantic idea of the genius artist finding his unique language of artistic expression. Quite the contrary, there is simply nothing *new* as in *untried*, *cutting edge*, or *up to date* in what Modarresi does in his paintings or Mohajer captures with his camera. Yet, in their noncompliance with the “global” grammar of contemporary art and in their reinvention of the narrative

²⁰ In *Displaced Allegories*, Mottahedeh offers a reading of Beyzaie’s works as movements “between the real and the fictional hinges on a turn to the indigenous cultural practice of the *ta’ziyeh*.” For Mottahedeh, this dramatically rich tradition “provides the enunciative landscape and the temporal and spatial tropes shaping Bayza’i’s work—an oeuvre that is popularly considered by Iranians to be genuinely and traditionally Persian in its scope.” Cf. Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 17.

spaces offered in the literary and the visual tradition of their own world, they create something noteworthy and *located*.²¹

Simultaneously, this *locatedness* bestows upon these works the capacity to underscore the monopolization of meaning and knowledge production by Western institutions of art history. This is because it is reinforced by way of sustaining structural inequalities between the canon and what remains outside of its gates. That the works of Modarresi and Mohajer do not rely on the worn-out stereotypical regimes of imagery representing Iranian-ness, bears witness to an understanding of cultural authenticity far removed from caricatures of an immobile culture bereft of fluidity and change as it is present in the readily consumable images made available by the so-called “hybrid” works of artists such as Ghadirian, Dashti, Pouyan, Tirafkan, Bakhshi, Moshiri,

²¹ By *locatedness* I want to highlight those works that in their visual lexicon are not deracinated from their local traditions. Irredeemably mired in identity politics, perhaps after Adorno’s original reading of the term, *authenticity* would have been a valuable concept here. Insofar as the artworks I discuss here do not rely on Western institutions for validation and *authorization* (as an object worthy of attention, interpretation, and international display), they align with at least one significant meaning of *authenticity* derived from the Greek word *authentikos* itself taken from the roots of *authentēs* meaning “one acting on one’s own authority.” What I mean to communicate by *locatedness*, here, is precisely in those forms of cultural practice, which as Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks argues, “define themselves as authentic insofar as they continue indifferent to the West for purposes of validation, perpetuation, and aesthetic evaluation” (11). Cf. Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, “At the Margins of Postcolonial Studies: Part I,” in *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*, eds. Fawzia Afzal-Khan and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 3-23. A compelling resuscitation of the concept of authenticity in Adorno is offered by Keya Ganguly in her “Adorno, Authenticity, Critique,” where she argues that the crux of Adorno’s critique of Heidegger in *The Jargon of Authenticity* (originally published in 1946) is not predicated on the rejection of the idea of authenticity, but to the contrary, on a philosophical concern with the disappearance of “the authentic content of history and experience [...] from view in purely conceptual systems of thought” (247). Cf. Keya Ganguly, “Adorno, Authenticity, Critique,” in *Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonial Studies*, eds. Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 240-256.

Aliabadi, Sepehr, Ebtekar, and so on.²² I do not mean to be provocative here in suggesting either a purist position or a culturally isolationist one. In their noncompliance with the Western metropolitan frames of legibility the works of Mohajer and Modarresi demand intellectual commitment; they demand the reader to acquaint him/herself with the literary, visual, and dramatic traditions in which the works are themselves well-versed. Their works are not images easily lending themselves to readings informed by the vocabulary of liberal think-tanks and international studies jargon. As such, they continue to perform *locatedness* in the most productive and non-purist sense of the term. They are also able to transcend the burden put on the works of non-Western artists by the market to be immediately legible to the Western audience even at the very moment they take up a critical stance against the structural inequalities brought about by the global market.

²² A number of these artists I have already examined in previous chapter. The distinction I want to make here is between the *locatedness* (authenticity, see footnote 21) in Mohajer's and Modarresi's resulted from a genuine yet critical dialogue with the past as well as with literary and visual traditions, versus the so-called *hybridity* and *heterogeneity* in the works of a large group of Iranian artists that offer immobile images deeply reliant on identity politics of the Iranian contemporary society. For example, Sepehr's *Water and Persian Rugs*—a photographic series depicting Persian carpets floating on the surface of the water, lauded as “hybrid” by Homi Bhabha—or Shirin Aliabadi's series *Miss Hybrid*, depicting images of young Iranian women with dyed-blond hair, colored contact lenses and pulled-back scarves that are supposedly a testament to “the subversive potential of Hermès scarves” (*ArtMag* online, 2013), build a more static and purist image of Iran that is now supposedly hybridized by their artworks; the corrective offered by Sepehr's depiction of a speedboat moving across a floating carpet on the sea is the marvelous revelation that modernization and tradition can exist together in Iran—a move that as a premise requires an immobile understanding of the country as the untouched land of one tradition built upon the other, perpetuating the fantasies about the Orient. The same reading holds for Aliabadi. These are some of the names most frequently repeated in group shows of contemporary Iranian artists often with titles promising an exclusive insight to the Iranian society; *Harem Fantasies and the New Scheherazades* (Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, 2003); *Far Near Distance* (Haus der Kulturen der Welt – Berlin, 2004); *Iran Inside Out* (Chelsea Art Museum – New York, 2009); *Unedited History: Iran 1960-2014* (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2014); and most recently, *Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet: Contemporary Persians* (Aga Khan Museum – Toronto, 2017).

A sophisticated understanding of the historical trajectories of various forms of art production in Iran enables Modarresi and Mohajer to share in common a desire to situate themselves in literary and visual worlds to which they belong, without requiring aesthetic validation from the West. Whether through sustaining a dialogue between the long history of photography in Iran that first appeared no later than two decades from its inception,²³ the perspectival logic of Iranian painting and the literary traditions of mysticism, or by way of an excavation in the ancient history of Iran through an architectural monument, both artists have not only been able to construct an idiomatic lexicon that is committed to the vernacular, but also were able to eliminate the specter of the West as the only authoritative spectator. The exceptional achievement of Modarresi and Mohajer, however, is in their ability to transcend dwelling only in the past and remain immune to a nostalgic longing for the bygone Persia. Their works summon the past, question it, and actively expose the cracks concealed in dominant historical narratives. They evoke and confront the past in order to also interrogate the present and by way of doing so their works are more effectively political than innumerable examples in contemporary Iranian art that are saturated with blatant “ethical” and “political” messages.²⁴ Here, I primarily focus on two of

²³ In his 1971 well-researched article, “The Photograph Album of the Italian Diplomatic Mission to Persia (Summer 1862),” the Italian historian, Angelo Michele Piemontese, dates back the history of photography in Iran to the 1950s, practiced mostly by European instructors of the well-known Teheran polytechnic (دارالفنون). As early as 1863, the imperial court of Naser ad-Din Shah Qajar of Iran instituted the office of عكاس باشی or *court photographer*, first held by Agha Reza. Cf. Angelo Michele Piemontese, “The Photograph Album of the Italian Diplomatic Mission to Persia (Summer 1862): Part I,” *East and West* 22, no. 3-4 (September-December 1972), 252, 261.

²⁴ In spring 2015, حرفه: هنرمند (Herfeh: Honarmand) published the results of a poll taken from one-hundred artists, curators, gallery owners, art historians, and critics, asking them to rank their “top ten preferred” modern and contemporary Iranian artists from 1942 to the present. A number of articles were published, after the fact, to accompany the results and perhaps to clarify the *raison d’être* of conducting such a poll in

بین و the most recent series of photographs by Mohajer, *حال گذشته* (*The Present Past*, 2015) and خورنق ۲ (Modarresi's painting exhibition *Between and Non-between*, 2017), as well as *Khavarnagh 2*, 2014).

a journal primarily dedicated to criticism and translation of theoretical and scholarly prose. Among those articles, Majid Akhgar's "مسیرهای هنر ایران" (*Paths of Iranian Art*), published under the section "ارزش، اعتبار، شهرت، و معیارهای آن" (*Value, Reputation, Fame, and their Criteria*), offered a broad categorization of contemporary Iranian artists into four groups. I will not delve into those groups in detail but I think it is important to look at two of the examples he offers as those artists who have been able to "internalize the modern-global consciousness" in their attempts to "understand the internal dynamics or 'visual regime[s]' resulting in the new arts (in contradistinction with old or traditional art) and to probe into the material and resources of their own culture [in order to] either transform these [raw material] from inside or subject them to critical work from outside" (49-50). For Akhgar, Ahmad Amin-Nazar and Ardeshir Mohassess are the two pioneering figures in whose works "strong and complex links are formed between their [visual] properties and ... Iran's history and culture, in ways that the non-Iranian viewer, without curiosity, research, and historical contemplation, and as a matter of course historical experience, will have no access to them" (53). These examples of modern Iranian art are significant insofar as they bear witness to attempts prior to the era of an accelerated globalization among artists to take a critical position vis-à-vis dominant narratives of art practice, criticism, and history. While I am reluctant to condone the nativist undertone of Akhgar's argument, I find myself in agreement with him insofar as he finds access to Iranian art possible only through a systematically trained curiosity and serious research in history as well as literary and visual traditions of Iran. Yet, the danger in such rhetoric is that it assumes that "being Iranian"—or what he terms "تجربه‌ی تاریخی" (historical experience)—already equips one with the knowledge required to interpret works of art. It is not so difficult to claim Hafiz or Molana (Rumi) as Persian poets, but it is highly unimaginable that one can understand their poetry, even at the surface level, without having an extraordinary literary lexicon. As such, the division Akhgar constitutes between the Iranian and the non-Iranian audience, should be in fact placed between those who are committed to study and discover the work and those who prefer to consume what they can take from the work's surface alone. That a woefully large number of contemporary Iranian artists have the West as their presumptive audience and, as Akhgar writes himself tokenize visual traditions of their home country to garner the international market's attention, attests to the absence of any innate capacity to understand Iran's history, literature, and visual arts just by virtue of being an Iranian. Cf. Majid Akhgar, "مسیرهای هنر ایران" (*Paths of Iranian Art*), *حرفه: هنرمند* (*Herfeh: Honarmand*), no. 54 (Spring 2015), 48-59.

«[...] درونی کردن آگاهی مدرن - جهانی (در تمایز از گرتة برداری از - یا تداوم حقیقی - اشکال و جریان‌های هنر جهانی، یعنی گزینة اول)، تلاش برای درک پویایی‌شناسی درونی یا «رژیم بصری» ای که به هنر جدید (در تمایز از هنر قدیم یا سنتی) می‌انجامد، و نفوذ به درون دستمایه‌ها و مواد و مصالح فرهنگ متبوع خویش و استحالته‌ی آن‌ها از درون یا کار نقادانه بر روی آن‌ها از بیرون» (۴۹-۵۰).

«[...] به عنوان نمونه، کوزه‌های فرهاد مشیری از ابتدا با مدنظر قرار دادن امکان بازشناسی و برد جهانی‌شان انتخاب شده‌اند؛ یک «موتیف» قراردادی‌اند که برای مخاطبان فرهنگ مبدأ خود (که ظاهراً ایرانی‌ها هستند) هیچ طنین و معنای خاصی ندارند. در صورتی که برخی از ویژگی‌های کار کسانی مانند اردشیر محمص و [احمد] امین‌نظر پیوندهای عمیق و پیچیده‌ای با برخی ویژگی‌های فرهنگ و تاریخ ایران پیدا می‌کنند که مخاطب غیرایرانی بدون کنجکاوی و تحقیق و تأمل تاریخی و البته در نهایت تجربه‌ی تاریخی، به آن‌ها راهی ندارد» (۵۳).

MEHRAN MOHAJER
THE WORLD
BETWEEN MY FINGERS

Born in 1964 in Tehran, Mehran Mohajer completed his undergraduate education in Photography at the School of Fine Arts, University of Tehran. In 1994, he graduated with an MA degree in General Linguistics from the same university, the same year in which his photographs were accepted to the First Tehran Photography Biennial. His first solo exhibitions date back to the mid and late 1990s, but the early years of the 2000s brought national attention to Mohajer as a consistently important presence in contemporary Iranian photography. His prolific résumé, paired with his numerous translations in critical theory and theory of photography, include more than a dozen solo exhibitions, several group exhibitions, and two book publications, one on theories of photography and the other on linguistics and poetry.

A great number of Mohajer's photographic series, such as *اتاق قرمز* (*Camera Rosea*, 2007) and *خطوط و چیزها* (*Things and Lines*, 2010) are focused on contemplating the camera as a "seeing machine" and the ways in which "it appears to simulate the eye"²⁵ while referring back to culturally conditioned theories of optics.²⁶ In *اتاق قرمز* (*Camera Rosea*) we find Mohajer's preoccupation with the camera obscura and its primary function in projecting what Jean Baudrillard poetically

²⁵ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion, 2000), 23-26.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

terms “the writing of light,”²⁷ as it unfolds in forty photographs that are either taken from within a view camera, lit with red light [figure 4-1], or of rooms with red curtains where some rays of light are penetrating the enclosed space (the camera) through rifts and gaps in the curtain’s fabric [figure 4-2]. A number of these images go further in referencing the medium by capturing upside-down photographic reproductions of prominent works of art placed in the view camera—Qajar paintings and photographs [figure 4-3]; Alfred Stieglitz’s famous close-up of Georgia O’Keeffe’s hands; Nan Goldin’s *Rise and Monty Kissing* (1980); and most intriguing of all, Gerhard Richter’s *Betty* (1988) [figure 4-4], itself an interrogation of the boundaries between photography and painting.²⁸ Mohajer’s introspective move in looking, literally, into the camera enables him to direct our gaze toward the history of representation and the difficulty to “focus on Photography,” caused by what Barthes calls the “stubbornness of the Referent”—that all photographs carry an adherent referent rendering “a photograph [...] always invisible: it is not it that we see.”²⁹ Mohajer’s desire to present to his viewers photography qua photography marks a significant theme in his work directing the aesthetic choices visible in his entire corpus.

²⁷ Jean Baudrillard, “La Photographie ou l’Écriture de la Lumière: Littéralité de l’Image,” in *L’Echange Impossible* (Paris: Galilée, 1999), 175-184.

²⁸ Mohajer’s choices of artworks are not arbitrary in the slightest. On the one hand there are images at the interstices of photography and painting (Richter’s *Betty*) while on the other, some of the photographs capture moments of performative acts (the Qajar painting of a dancing woman standing on her hands or Goldin’s photograph of the intimate act of kissing in her *Rise and Monty Kissing*). Mohajer’s choices simultaneously bring photography to its inner crisis, what Barthes calls the tormenting “ghost of Painting” and liberates photography from this ghost by way of underscoring its relation to performativity or theater, where, for Barthes, Photography “touches art.” Cf. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 30-31.

²⁹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 6.

Mohajer's pinhole camera series *تهران، بی تاریخ* (*Tehran, Undated*, 2010) offers an allegorical portrait of Tehran's cityscapes. Here, the artist brings his seeing apparatus into an intersection with the urban geography of his everyday context. Drawn to the surreal imagery of the Parisian *flâneur* photographer, Eugène Atget, Mohajer takes his pinhole camera into the streets of Tehran, leans it on the walls of the city, and with long-duration exposures creates images of a city cleared of pedestrians. The results are unhomely cityscapes in which the camera's unstable position (leaned on the wall to make long-exposure time possible) is paired with the instability of living in what the artist himself calls the "apocalyptic atmosphere" of the metropolis [figures 4-5 and 4-6].³⁰ Again, what I would like to emphasize here is Mohajer's complex relationship to the photographic apparatus. Eliminating all mediation and stripping the camera to its most rudimentary incarnation—the pinhole—the artist takes a direction in interrogating the photographic device that is quite different from his *اتاق قرمز* (*Camera Rosea*). It is an early step in what later becomes a significant thrust in his works, namely an attempt to fuse the body of the camera with that of his own—to be able not only to capture with the camera but also to turn it into part of his own "seeing machine" as he looks at, and simultaneously shapes, his own world.

Reflecting on the photographic apparatus and invoking the history of photography, Mohajer's works fashion a relationship between art historical erudition and a poetics and politics of his everyday contexts (*بی چیزی* (*Nothingness of*), 2012). While this relationship at times verges on a sentimental attitude toward mundane objects (*خطوط و چیزها* (*Things and Lines*), 2010) [figure 4-

³⁰ Mehran Mohajer, *Tehran, Undated* (Tehran: Azad Art Gallery, 2010). Exhibition statement.

7], in most instances it equips the artist with a language that not only locates him in his immediate world but also situates his works along a worldly history of photography and representation. It draws as much from the dominant narratives of art history as it does from Mohajer's *locatedness* in the visual and literary traditions of the world which he inhabits. Yet, this contemplation of the apparatus, the historical narrative, and his attempts to conjoin the different worlds he navigates—that of staple images of the world history of photography and those particularly of Iranian visual and literary corpora—are gradually replaced with a more mature language of *locatedness*, abounded with idioms of his vernacular, in which celebrated icons of the Euro-American-centered history of photography are assimilated into a figurality irreducible to the discursive, whereby the artist *figures* what cannot be named.³¹ As Ghazaleh Hedayat writes in her review of Mohajer's oeuvre, what begins in his *تاریخ گذشته* (*Expired History*, 2005) reaches a point where the image is no longer producing meaning through metaphors, but is in direct contact with its surrounding world, replacing the semantic with the somatic:

[...] in *Tehran, Undated* [2010] the photographer leans on the walls of his hometown to turn the camera into his eyes and the walls of the city into his body. *Things and Lines* and *Nothingness of*, I suppose, are the ultimate goal which the artist has sought previously in his *Expired History* [2005]. In *Things*

³¹ What renders the figural a potent epistemic structure enabling an understanding of Mohajer's visual world is its ability to act as a disrupting force against ideological meaning. For a philosophical theorization of the figural cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). Also, cf. D. N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

That one cannot situate in Mohajer's conjoining of his different worlds—the Western-centered word of the history of photography and the vernacular visual language in which he is invested—a simplistic fusion of rampant antinomies, such as modernity and tradition, is due to the central role that the figural takes in his works, liberating his art from being bound to such contradictions defined discursively and only translated into images. This is what separates Mohajer from most artists I have discussed in the first and third chapters here, including Jalal Sepehr, Gohar Dashti, and Amir Mo'bed.

and Lines the metaphorical language is still powerfully present but in *Nothingness of* it appears as if all things move to the side so that the camera can touch the world, become *one* with it, and reach the “unnamable.”³²

It is precisely this “unnamable”—the figural that gradually takes over Mohajer’s art—that enables him to move “all things [...] to the side” and not only touch the world with his camera, but rather create that visual world which pushes the discursive frames of legibility to their limits.

I want to focus here on two of Mohajer’s most recent photographic series, exhibited in 2015 and 2017, in both of which the idioms of his language begin to abound and congeal more vividly around his vernacular visual world. In the first series of photographs, I argue, the artist changes his focus from experimenting with the medium, its capacities, and its limits into an exploration of social and historical relations in modern Iran enabled by the camera, and takes further steps in creating a lexicon for his visual language deeply located in and informed by his self-conscious sense of worldliness. It simultaneously questions photography’s disavowed complicity in colonial and neocolonial epistemic violence, a point which I touch upon rather briefly. Mohajer’s *حال گذشته* (*The Present Past*, 2015)³³ is a series of more than forty photographs taken predominantly

³² Ghazaleh Hedayat, “بین و لابین (Sight and Heart Are between Two Fingers)” in *Between and Non-between* (Tehran: Dastan +2 Gallery, 2017). Exhibition catalog. The text in the catalog comes with an English translation, which I find inaccurate and imprecise. Therefore, I have translated Hedayat’s text from the original, which I am bringing here, as I have done consistently in this document for those who read Persian:

«عکاس در تهران بی تاریخ به دیوار شهرش تکیه می زند تا دوربین چشمش شود و دیوار شهر بدنش. خطوط و چیزها و بی چیزی به گمانم حد غایی و متعالی آن چیزی است که عکاس پیش تر در تاریخ گذشته پیاش می کرد. در خطوط و چیزها همچنان زبان استعاره حضوری پررنگ دارد اما در بی چیزی انگار همه چیز کنار می رود تا دوربین جهان را لمس کند، با آن یکی شود و به «بی نام» برسد.»

³³ It is important to note that the term “حال” in Persian has at least two meanings that are pertinent here and cannot be transmitted simultaneously through translation: *present* (as included in the title) and *state/mood* (as in the *state/mood of the past*). The term’s double meaning plays a role in Mohajer’s photographs as they are simultaneously confronting us with the state/mood of the remnants of history.

of historical monuments such as the Pasargadae, Persepolis, the Ja'meh (congregational) Mosque of Isfahan, ruins of the Palace of Artaxerxes I of Persia, domes of mosques in Bastaam, where the great Sufi, Bayazid, also known as the King of the Gnostics, is buried, and more [figures 4-8, 4-9, and 4-10].

None of these edifices, however, become visible in a fully discernible manner in Mohajer's photographs. Details of buildings, partially blocked by enormous protective glasses, convoluted scaffoldings, or other natural and unnatural obstacles, appear in one corner or the other of *حال گذشته* (*Present Past*). In one photograph, a detail of a pallid muqarnas is revealed in the space between two translucent pieces of glass covering the left and right of the image, reflecting on their blurry surfaces geometrically reticulated arches of windows that belong to an undiscernible, yet clearly Islamic in style, architectural monument [figure 4-11]. In another, only a very narrow and blurred strip of the Ja'meh Mosque is visible on the top of the photograph, while the rest of the image is completely occupied by an extreme close-up of a detail of a wall (perhaps of the courtyard's pool) made of rock-face stone. In some, only a reflection [figure 4-10] of a detail from the building appears on a shiny surface, while in others an intricate network of scaffoldings almost completely overshadows interior spaces of the congregational mosque of Isfahan [figure 4-12], or, traces of rain on protective glass is sharply in focus with the Pasargadae completely out of the depth of field in the background [figure 4-13].

Mohajer's *حال گذشته* (*The Present Past*) does not reveal "truths" behind these historical spaces. It certainly does not gloss over them in a nostalgic longing for the glorious past. It does, however, confront the spectator with the mundane realities of a life caught in the interim of a bygone past

and a present pregnant with historical anxieties, accomplished by way of denying the past its supposedly untarnished totality. In doing so, he allows us to see the ways in which the past is only accessible through the very banality of the eventlessness of our everyday lives. As such, he skeptically navigates images created by historical memory and social consciousness and unsettles their triumph in rendering the relationship between the past and the present as a given.

Yet, the great simplicity of Mohajer's visual exploration in time—a past consistently tarnished by the present and a present, and perhaps future, consistently haunted by the past—takes a poetic tone in its oscillation between covering and revealing. The past, covered by the present, playfully finds a rupture, an undone seam on the fabric of the present time's dominion, and reveals itself to the artist's camera. History becomes available to the present only in an abstract vocabulary that transcends the evidentiary. Mohajer's photographs do not tell the story of the Iranian modern society or the "glories" of the bygone empires of Persia. They do not reconstruct an "genuine" image of the past in order to either foreclose critique or augment the dominance of the present over all other temporalities.³⁴ They create a poetics of longing, indeed not for an Iranian or Persian identity, but for an historical past in its unavailability: a homesickness for the motherland/homeland.

³⁴ Cf. Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 103. McPherson argues that a fascination with the past allows for "authenticity to stand in for critique." This, she finds problematic, insofar as popular representations of history under the disguise of factual loyalty to the past, "reinforce strategies of domination in the present."

To the degree that these photographs deliberately negate “informational content,”³⁵ they take on a visual lexicon that resists commodification. The absence of visually perceptible signifiers of Iranian-ness, or the juxtaposition of the rampant authentic traditional past with the globalized modern present, renders Mohajer’s *حال گذشته* (*The Present Past*) a series not so easy to decode and as such impossible to reduce through Western predetermined frames of interpretation. Yet, this diminished accessibility does not come at the expense of meaning. Neither is it produced by way of a deliberate move toward obscurity and away from signification. Mohajer puts in front of us a series of photographs that in their deep rooted connections to historical traditions of the literary, the painterly, and the architectural, do not lose sight of the contemporary. He creates a visual dialectic between the two through a sophisticated language that demands intellectual commitment and work, since his photographs do not lend themselves to the epistemic frames of Western metropolitan readership—a strategy woefully scarce in contemporary Iranian art.

Mohajer’s intellectual preoccupation with the photographic apparatus once again surfaces in his images, disrupting what Hedayat describes as a desire to “touch” the world with the camera. Finding smaller frames within his photographs alluding to the “framing” function of photography [figure 4-14] or depicting an amorphous spot of a bright reflection on glass (either from sunlight or camera’s flash light) [figure 4-15], Mohajer again invites us to stare at the surface of the photograph and reminds us not only of its corporeality but also of the technologies of the image. Situated in the context of an historical dialectic, I contend that Mohajer’s use of a compact

³⁵ I am borrowing the term “negation of informational content” from T. J. Demos. See my discussion of Ghazaleh Hedayat’s works in chapter 2.

camera enables a reading of his work as an articulation of the camera's long history of complicity with colonial epistemologies. Denied access to the past that is caused by the innate limits of the depth of field in a compact camera allows us to question the photographic apparatus as a biased mediation between one's present and past. There is also another level of denial at play here, namely, the negation of alternative—and here of course deeply *located*—modes of representational technologies due to photography's indebtedness to linear “natural” perspective,³⁶ implicitly denying the Persian painting's methodology for organization of the image.³⁷ Despite this critical position, which I am tempted to believe is not essential to his series, I think Mohajer's photographs in *حال گذشته* (*The Present Past*) offer a glimpse of what becomes integral in his *بین و لاین* (*Between and Non-between*), namely an openness to the camera as not necessarily a foreign apparatus with an ignoble history of involvement in colonial and imperial projects, but as an adopted offspring of the artist's visual world and vernacular language.³⁸

³⁶ For analyses of the philosophical implications of what Hubert Damisch calls “natural” perspective” cf. Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994); and Margaret Iversen, “The Discourse of Perspective in the Twentieth Century: Panofsky, Damisch, Lacan,” *Oxford Art Journal* 28, vol. 2 (June 2005), 191-202.

³⁷ I am referring to what is known as «ژرفنمایی مقامی» that can be roughly translated to “perspective based on status.” Spatial simultaneity in Persian painting is another technology of imaging that is not quite present, at least in the same way, in photography.

³⁸ There have been only a handful of articles or talks since 2015 where Mohajer's series *The Present Past* is discussed. Most of these account, including that of Hadi Azari and Parisa Keshtkar, published in *عکسخانه* (*Akskhaneh* online), again reduce Mohajer's photographs to attempts at creating metaphors that would visually refer to some worn binaries such as tradition/modernity and civilization/culture. Alireza Ahmadi Saie's lecture, entitled “تاریخ، در پرده” (History, in Veils),” however, offers a reading of Mohajer's photographs predicated on Dariush Ashuri's theories of an historical rupture that marks modern Iran's disconnect from its past. While I tend to disagree with most of what Ashuri proposes in his «جان پریشان ایران» (“Iran's Wretched Spirit”), what I find significant here is that Saie's attempt to read *The Present Past* through

There are at least two frames that visually connect us to Mohajer's subsequent series. His photographs on the walls of the gallery end with triptychs of a turquoise-colored dome and a humble brick one [figures 4-16 and 4-17]. The latter belongs to a mosque built on the burial site of Bayazid Bastami, whose gnostic beliefs and sensibilities become integral to Mohajer's subsequent exhibition, *بين و لابين* (*Between and Non-between*, 2017): a series of eighty photographs, where Mohajer's quest for the "unnamable," to borrow Hedayat's words, reaches its apex.³⁹ It is rather impossible to describe this series as Mohajer has quite effectively constructed a visual world that hardly lends itself to verbal descriptions [figures 4-18 and 4-19]. The artist creates abstract photographs by way of placing his camera's lens behind his fingers. Seeing from in *between* two fingers, or at times covering almost the entire frame with one, there is an extremely narrow orifice from which either discernible objects, such as a red flag [figure 4-20] or Bayazid's mausoleum's dome [figure 4-21], are made barely visible, or abstract shapes and rays of light are captured.

The title of the exhibition, *بين و لابين* (*Between and Non-between*) opens multiple entrances to the work. Most photographs, with the exception of those in which Mohajer's fingertip occupies almost the entire frame, are taken from between (بين) his two fingers. There is a *thing* between

Ashuri's claim that we, the Iranians, have failed to recognize our historical self-consciousness, only underscores the *locatedness* of Mohajer's works. This acknowledgment of Mohajer's located visual vocabulary, I believe, is what any serious and committed engagement with his photography needs to recognize and try to understand. Cf. Dariush Ashuri, *ما و مدرنتیت* (*We and Modernity*), 4th edition, (Tehran: Seraat Cultural Institute, 2014).

³⁹ I want to especially thank Mehran Mohajer for letting me have access to his most recent series (*Between and Non-between*) in the summer of 2016 during my field research in Tehran. As I am writing these lines, his works are on display at دستان + ۲ (Dastan +2) Gallery in Tehran, opening on January 31, 2017.

the two fingers—sometimes a flag, sometimes a printed letter (like ه)—but there are also numerous instances where there is *nothing* between his fingers. Of course, there is always a *thing* that photography depicts, the indisputable rule of indexicality, to which Barthes calls our attention by reminding what a photograph says: ça-a-été: “this has been!”⁴⁰ But, Mohajer’s *بین و لاین* (*Between and Non-between*) tends to defy this logic by taking away from us the very possibility of decoding. Hedayat’s imaginative reading of this denial is worth repeating here at length:

The term *between* [بین] is one of those paradoxical terms; it is both separation and affinity, but what and where is this *between and non-between* [بین و لاین]? This space in between, is it a partition between two things or two beings? Is it between self and what is outside of it, or is it the limit between what is revealed and what is concealed? What is this place that we are not supposed to see? The body or the finger of photographer has turned into a darkness to reveal what is there, in *between*. That which is between [بین] cannot be fully grasped. The “لا” of fingers [the word’s shape and its meaning as “between” in Persian]⁴¹ takes us to what is *between* this dark veil and it becomes “لا” [both “no” and “non-” in Arabic] and it divests us of seeing. To see *not-seeing*, which has always been Mohajer’s desire, has finally unveiled itself in these works.⁴²

⁴⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 79.

⁴¹ Here Hedayat is referring to the physical shape of the term “لا” as it resembles the gesture made by the two fingers of the artists with a narrow space in between them. The term in Arabic means “no” but it also is a negating prefix meaning “non-.” “لا” in Persian, on the other hand, means “between.”

⁴² Ghazaleh Hedayat, “Sight and Heart Are between Two Fingers.” Translation from Persian to English is mine. All italics are mine.

«کلمه‌ی بین از لغات اضداد است، هم جدایی است و هم پیوستگی، اما این بین و لاین چیست و کجاست؟ این فضای بین، این حد فاصل میان دو چیز است یا میان دو کس؟ میان خودش است و آن چه بیرون از اوست یا حدی است میان آن چه هویدا است و آن چه پنهان؟ آن جا که نباید ببینمش چیست؟ بدن یا انگشت عکاس تاریکی ای شده است تا آن چه آن میان است را آشکار کند. آن بین را نمی‌توان به تمامی دریافت. «لا» ی انگشت، ما را به میان این پرده ی سیاه می برد و «لا» می شود و دیدن را از ما می‌گیرد. دیدن ندیدن که همواره خواست مهاجر بوده است در این کارها بالاخره پرده انداخته است.» ر.ک. غزاله هدایت، «دیده و دل هست بین اصبعین»، *بین و لاین: مهران مهاجر (تهران: گالری دستان ۲+، بهمن ۱۳۹۵)*، کاتالوگ نمایشگاه.

Hedayat's hint in the direction of what is *not to be seen*, the act of *not-seeing*, and the negating prefix ("non-") reminds us of the multiplicity of literary, visual, and theological connections built into the fabric of Mohajer's *بین و لابین* (*Between and Non-between*). Here, I will draw attention to a few of these connections.

There is a visual lead in the tomb of Bayazid. It evokes a plethora of literary and theological traditions, among those, Bayazid's gnostic beliefs captured in what Dabashi calls "*karamat* literature dealing with saintly miracles."⁴³ Anecdotes of Bayazid's conversations with his disciples are most famously chronicled in Attar's magnum opus *تذکرة الأولیاء* (*Biographies of the Saints*), where he is cited to say that God has bestowed upon him the ability to see His entire creatures in between his two fingers. This is also where he is quoted to underscore self-negation (non-, لا) as the only path to truth:

And it is told that he [Bayazid] said, I once supplicated Him [God] and asked: "How can I ever unite with you?" I heard a voice that said: "O, Bayazid! First divorce yourself thrice and then say a word of us."

[...]

And he said, God Almighty was my mirror for thirty years, now I am my own mirror. That is to say what I *was* is no longer, that *I and Truth* is blasphemy. Since I am no longer, God is his own mirror. Now, I say that I am my own mirror. It is Truth that speaks with my tongue and I am invisible in the midst.

[...]

And he said, God Almighty lifted me to a stature where I could see all creatures between my two fingers.⁴⁴

⁴³ Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*, 30.

⁴⁴ Farid ed-Din Attar Neishabouri, "The Zikr of Bayazid Bastami" in *تذکرة الأولیاء* (*Biographies of the Saints*). Translation from Persian and Arabic is mine.

«و گفت: یک بار به درگاه او مناجات کردم. و گفتم: کیف الوصول إلیک؟ ندایی شنیدم که: ای بایزید! طلق نفسک ثلاثا ثم قل الله. نخست خود را سه طلاق ده، و آنکه حدیث ما کن. [...] و گفت: حق تعالی سی سال آینه‌ی من بود، اکنون من آینه‌ی خودم. یعنی آنچه من بودم نماندم که من و حق شرک بود، چون من نماندم حق تعالی آینه خویش است. اینک بگویم که آینه خویشم. حق است که به زبان من سخن گوید و من در میان ناپدید. [...] و گفت: حق مرا به جایی رسانید که خلایق بجملگی در میان دو انگشت خود بدیدم.»

Following Attar, Molana (Rumi), who in multiple instances retells the story of Bayazid, borrows from the Quran (21:25) in his poetry to relate the Gnostic's unity with God: "There is *no* god but I, so worship Me" [لا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنَا فَاعْبُدُونِ] [emphasis mine]. What is dramatically captivating and pertinent to Mohajer's work in Molana's narrative is that Bayazid's claim to be one with God, while faced with the objection of his disciples, cannot be defended through words, but only through sight: it is here that speech (سُخْن) reaches the point of silence; where *qalam* (قلم, pen) is broken.⁴⁵

This is a significant moment in which speech and writing halt. As Dabashi writes in his *Persian Literary Humanism*, Sufism's reality *sui generis* "remains irreducible to a merely literary act." For Dabashi, Sufism "compounds Persian literary humanism by virtue of carving out a potent narrative spot in Persian linguistic and cultural registers, thereby enriching Persian prose and

⁴⁵ Facing with the objection of his disciples, once he has publicly claimed to be one with God, as Molana (Rumi) retells, Bayazid asks them to stab him with their knives should they hear him make the claim once again. In another moment of inebriation, he makes the claim and as soon as his disciples attack him with their knives, every wound they tend to make on his body appears on their own bodies. Cf. "The Story of Bayazid's—may God sanctify his spirit—saying, 'Glory to me! How grand is my estate!' and the objection raised by his disciples, and how he gave them an answer to this, not by the way of speech but by the way of vision (immediate experience)," in *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*, ed. and trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2004), 838-839.

That venerable dervish, Bayazid, came to his disciples
Saying, "Lo, I am God."
That master of the mystic sciences said plainly in drunken
fashion: "Hark, there is no God but I, so worship me!"
[...]
His form has passed away and he has become a mirror;
Naught is there but the form (image) of the face of another.
[...]
When the discourse reached this point, it closed its lips;
When the pen reached this point, it broke to pieces.
(Book IV, Section 79)

با مریدان آن فقیر محتشم
بایزید آمد که نک یزدان منم
گفت مستانه عیان آن ذوفنون
لا اله الا انا ها فاعبدون
[...]
نقش او فانی و او شد آینه
غیر نقش روی غیر آن جای نه
[...]
چون رسید اینجا سخن لب در بیست
چون رسید اینجا قلم هم در شکست
(دفتر چهارم، بخش ۷۹)

poetry beyond anything achieved before.” In this relationship, however, Dabashi situates a mutual interdependence when he writes that “Persian prose and poetry could not do without Sufism, nor could Sufism thrive as it did without Persian prose and poetry.”⁴⁶ Coming to terms with the impossibility of reducing Sufism’s reality to the literary, Mohajer steps onto a path, paved by Rumi, Attar, Sana’i, and other master poets in the Persian literary world, including those of his relative contemporary such as Bijan Elahi (1945–2010), to untiringly contemplate this reality in the domain of the visual.⁴⁷ This knowledge, or more accurately *gnosis*, of an instant in which the *pen* breaks, when discourse reaches its limits, is integral to a meditative search for the truth predicated on unceasing repetition: a repetition not only central to Sufism and *dhikr* (rhythmic repetition of the name of God or his attributes) but also frequently appearing in Persian literature.⁴⁸ It is only through letting one’s *qalam* (pen) to be in between God’s fingers that one is able to surpass the limits of speech and thought. The title given by Hedayat to her essay on *بین و لابین* (*Between and Non-between*), which is taken directly from the *Mathnawi*, bears witness to this mystic notion: “دیده و دل هست بین اصبعین” (Sight and Heart Are Between [His] Two Fingers). The

⁴⁶ Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*, 123.

⁴⁷ Bijan Elahi (July 7, 1945 – December 1, 2010) was a Persian modernist poet, painter, and translator. His translations of Hossein ibn-Mansoor al-Hallaj (منصور حلاج), “Sufism’s most celebrated martyr,” was published by the Philosophy and Hikmat Society in 1975, entitled *حلاج الأسرار* (*Hallaj-ol Asraar*). The second edition of this translation was published by Peykareh Publication in 2014 in Tehran. Cf. Mahdi Ganjavi, “Elahi, Bijan,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2016, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/elahi-bijan> (accessed March 2, 2017).

⁴⁸ Repetition is a rhetorical figure in Persian poetry known as «صنعت تکرار». Examples are abundant but Attar’s “ای نوش کرده نیش را بی خویش کن باخویش را . . . باخویش کن بی خویش را چیزی” or Rumi’s “ای جان جانانم، تو جان جان جانی” are amongst the most famous ones.

term “between [His] two fingers” seems to date back to a *Hadith* attributed to prophet Mohamad that reads: (The believer’s heart is between the two fingers of the fingers of the most merciful [God], if He desires he solidifies it, if he desire he deflects it).⁴⁹ This is, again, where Rumi says that he is nothing but a *Kilk* (a pen made of reed) in God’s hands, repeated both in his lyrics in *Diwan-e Shams* as well as his *Mathnawi*.⁵⁰ It is only through this act of relinquishing one’s self (the negation of self) that Truth is revealed to one.⁵¹

⁴⁹ In numerous instances Molana has directly quoted the term “بين الاصبعين” (between two fingers) from the Hadith:

In God’s palm, for justice and adornment ... The believer’s heart is “between [His] two fingers”

در کف حق بهر داد و بهر زین . . . قلب مؤمن هست بین الاصبعين
(مثنوی معنوی، دفتر سوم، بخش ۲۰۵)

ر.ک. بدیع الزمان فروزانفر، احادیث و قصص مثنوی، ترجمه و تنظیم مجدد: حسین داوودی (تهران: امیرکبیر، ۱۳۸۱)، ۶.

For the source of the Hadith look at:

جلال‌الدین ابوالفضل عبدالرحمن بن ابی بکر بن محمد ابن سابق‌الدین سیوطی، الجامع الصغیر من حدیث البشیر النذیر، جلد ۱، ص. ۸۳.

⁵⁰ For example, look at Book V of the *Mathnawi*, where Molana says he is a *kilk* (pen) between God’s fingers: “من چو کلکم در میان اصبعین” or at *Ghazal 1599* in *Diwan-e Shams*:

من میان اصبعین حکم حکم چون قلم
در کف موسی عصا گاهی و گه افعیستم

I am between the fingers of Truth’s decree like a *qalam* (pen)
At times a cane in Moses’ palm, at other times, a viper.

⁵¹ The visual resemblance of this sign of negation ۷ (non-) and the gestures made by the artist’s fingers connects his works to a particular instance in the Muharram of 61 AH (680 CE), when Imam Hussein and his 72 disciples were killed in Karbala. A popular story commonly related during the month of Muharram in Iran is that the Imam collected all his close disciples and invited them to see from between his two fingers that heaven awaits them after their soon to be expected martyrdom. One of Mohajer’s photographs in this series depicts a red flag in between his two fingers. While the writing on the flag is not entirely visible, it does evoke red flags used in collective commemorations of the death of Hussein ibn Ali in Iran.

In *بين ولا بين* (*Between and Non-between*), no longer is the camera an object of contemplation. Self-referentiality is now less central, constituting a breaking point in Mohajer's oeuvre. The camera, in a literally pulling-inward move—an erotic gesture toward what is the *other*—is placed somewhere between the photographers eyes and his fingers, as if it is integrated into his body. The significance of this integration is that it liberates Mohajer's work from a consistent need to allude to the presence of a “seeing machine” mediating his experience in framing the world. Mechanisms of the camera—depth of field, optic focus, rendition of perspective, etc.—are still interrupted and thus brought to the foreground allowing for interpretations of the photographer's desire to maintain self-reflexivity. Yet, this interruption does not diminish the totality of this newly formed body, in which the camera is united with the artist's flesh—as when one's fingers partially cover one's own eyes.

It is through images made possible by negation, both in the gesture made by the artist's fingers resembling لا and by the negation of the image—a discernible referential photograph of a thing that *is out there*—that Mohajer creates a visual constellation, which turns into an amorphous meeting point of literary, visual, theological, and gnostic traditions of his *located* world. Whereas in few instances there are objects discernible in between Mohajer's fingers [figure 4-20], the figural and abstract properties of his photographs are overpowering to the degree that they render any search for a decoding strategy reliant on iconography entirely futile [figure 4-22]. He creates a photographic series in which, as Hedayat argues, the camera wants to touch the world in a rather unmediated way, instead of capturing it. In doing so, his photo-

graphs undermine iconography. Photography in Mohajer's hand is turned into a way of imagining and constructing his *locatedness* without necessarily turning toward icons—without having to rely on exhausted visual regimes of signifiers of Iranian-ness, easily consumable at the surface level. His photographs no longer hinge on metaphors for meaning. Yet, there are deeply *located* evocations that demand of readings of his work to be informed by the idiomatic world in which his photographs dwell. His body, now made up also of the camera, becomes an epistemological device with which he is able to think *locatedness*, to seek truth in a repetitive meditation, and produce artworks that are not bound to visual grammars of the so-called global art world, where accessibility and the clarity of meaning become of paramount importance.

JAVAD MODARRESI
RUINS OF A SUNDERED PAST

I first came across Javad Modarresi's *خَوَرَنَق ٢ (Khavarnagh 2)*⁵² in Tehran, where his paintings were exhibited at Azad Art Gallery in December 2014. The modest space of the gallery was entirely immersed in a manifold of eerie sensations, predominantly that of death: an incremental triumph of disintegration to a point of no return, originated by different tonalities of black over black on eight large canvases, completely dominating the viewer's attention and sensory inputs [figure 4-23]. Modarresi's paintings, varying in dimension, but mostly either about 150 × 120 cm or 80 × 60 cm, are of ruins of brick walls and monumental arches that were arduously made by laying down thousands of small pieces of charcoal next to one another, fixing them with a combination of mortar and glue—and at times human hair, rust paint, and branches of ivy—on cardboard or burlap and then secured on a wooden stretcher. Situated in a complicated network of historical, literary, and visual allusions, *خَوَرَنَق ٢ (Khavarnagh 2)* has its roots firmly based in a multiplicity of local traditions and manifests a great sophistication irreducible to stereotypical readings of contemporary Iranian art. It is that complex network of variegated traditions that I explore in Modarresi's work.

⁵² This was a sequel to the artist's 2008 exhibition, *خَوَرَنَق (Khavarnagh)*, a project that, both in form and content, is much less pertinent to the arguments I put forward here. In both exhibitions, however, one can trace Modarresi's preoccupation with space. More specifically, the artist tends to carefully study architectural spaces in his paintings/sculptures, examining the ways through which bodily encounters of humans with built environment is depicted through time.

While elements of narrative are not readily visible on these canvases, depictions of ruins along with the title of the exhibition endow his paintings/sculptures with a strong narrative component: the account of the castle of *Khavarnagh* and its ruin. The title, *Khavarnagh*, which is supposedly the popular Arabized version of the Persian word “هوورنه” (*Hoovarnah*), literally meaning “that which has a beautiful roof,” is the name given to what is chronicled as a palace commissioned by No’mān, a Lakhmid king of al-Hira, for the Sasanian emperor, Yazdgerd I. Yazdgerd’s son, Bahram, who is the protagonist of Nezami Ganjavi’s romantic epic, هفت پیکر (*Seven Beauties*, 1197), also known as بهرامنامه (*The Book of Bahram*), is raised and educated by No’mān in the castle of *Khavarnagh*. A recurring theme in Persian literature, “it seems quite impossible to distinguish clearly between historical facts [about the castle] and legendary accounts.”⁵³

The castle of *Khavarnagh* was built by the Roman architect Cenmar (سمنار or سمنار, *Semnar* or *Semmenar* in Nezami), who took twenty years to complete the construction; a story which in its own right turns into the subject of a number of literary and visual masterpieces since Nezami—later, I discuss Behzad’s 1494 painting, *Construction of the Palace of Khavarnagh*, in relation to Modarresi’s visual lexicon. A significant character in هفت پیکر (*Seven Beauties*), Cenmar’s fate remains rather secondary to the main plot of the epic, related so majestically by the poet. In the world of Persian poetry, there are perhaps only a few who rank closely with

⁵³ “Kawarnaq,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2016, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kawarnaq> (accessed March 2, 2017).

Nezami in poetic might. Less can match his uncanny talent for story-telling.⁵⁴ In “صفت خورنق و” (the Description of Khavarnagh and the Missing of No’mān) and in “صفت سمنار” (the Description of Semnar [Cenmar] and the Construction of the Palace of *Khavarnagh*), both in his *هفت پیکر* (*Seven Beauties*), Nezami describes the castle of Khavarnagh as what the sky calls “the *qiblah* of the earth,” what creation calls “the spring of China,” and what changes in its color based on the time of the day.⁵⁵ This description is paired with an admiration of the architectural maestro, who in his dexterity and technique, reshapes “stone like it is wax” in his hands.

⁵⁴ I am fully aware that Nezami does not require an endorsement from a Western figure of authority. Yet, Italo Calvino, has a chapter on him in his *Why Read the Classics?*, where in his magnificent prose he describes Nezami’s style in *Seven Princesses* (also translated as *Seven Beauties*). Reading Calvino’s writing on Nezami is always refreshingly inspiring: “However, it is impossible to separate the various traditions which converge in *The Seven Princesses* because Nezami’s heady figurative language blends them all together in his creative melting pot, and he spreads over every page a gilded patina studded with metaphors which are embedded inside each other like precious gems in a dazzling necklace. The result is that the stylistic unity of the book seems all-pervasive, extending even to the introductory sections on wisdom and mysticism. [...] The decorations of this verbal tapestry are so luxuriant that any parallels we might find in Western literature (beyond the analogies of medieval thematics and the wealth of fantasy in Renaissance works by Shakespeare and Ariosto) would naturally be with works of heaviest baroque; but even Marino’s *Adonis* and Basile’s *Pentameron* are works of laconic sobriety compared to the proliferation of metaphors which encrust Nezami’s tale and germinate a hint of narrative in every single image.” Cf. Italo Calvino, *Why Read the Classics?*, trans. Martin McLaughlin (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 1999), 50-51.

⁵⁵ In section 9 of his *هفت پیکر* (*Seven Beauties*), Nezami describes how the castle would accord in color with the light and color of the day:

صبحدم ز آسمان ازرق پوش . . . چون هوا بستی ازرقی بر دوش
 کافتاب آمدی برون ز نورد . . . چهره چون آفتاب کردی زرد
 چون زدی ابر کله بر خورشید . . . از لطافت شدی چو ابر سفید
 با هوا در نقاب یک رنگی . . . گاه رومی نمود و گه زنگی

At dawn [first] from the blue-robed sky it dressed in robes blue-colored like the atmosphere.
 When from obscurity the sun came forth, its countenance turned yellow like the sun.
 When clouds unveiled the sun, it [then] became in subtle beauty like a silver cloud.
 [Wrapped] in the veil of concord with the air, it showed by turns the Greek’s and Ethiop’s look.

Yet, in a dramatic turn of events, his exquisite and monumental construction, which “its glory surpassed the skies”⁵⁶ becomes the very site of his demise. Furious with Cenmar’s boastful claim that he can build a palace in front of which *Khavarnagh* will pale by comparison, No’mān orders Cenmar to be pushed off of the castle’s highest point. In a brief and magnificent description, Nezami mourns the death of Cenmar:

<p>The worker see—how earth, which blood devours Parted him from the object of his work He raised a castle in some years aloft And fortune threw him from it in a trice.⁵⁷</p>	<p>کارگر بین که خاکِ خونخوارش چون فکند از نشانه‌ی کارش کرد قصری به چند سال بلند به زمانی‌ش ازو زمانه فکند</p>
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This peripheral story thus becomes the locus of Modarresi’s evocation of long forgotten moments of repression and villainy. His bleak, and deliberately colorless (black over black), portrayal of the *Khavarnagh* summons the past, excavates the ruins of the dark side of history, and compels the viewer to look into the glaringly naked face of death and disintegration. No longer is *Khavarnagh* the heavenly castle in which Bahram unites with his seven stunning lovers. It is the portrait of a history in which even love epics relate stories of injustice and cruelty. The work shows the face of death hidden under colorful layers of conscious forgetting—of a romantic epic of Bahram’s courtship with seven beautiful princesses under seven domes each in a distinct color. Modarresi’s grim portrayal of ruinations, though, do not let us be part of

⁵⁶ زآسمان برگذشت رونق او . . . خور به رونق شد از خورنق او (Its [the palace’s] splendor rose above the lofty sky . . . the sun from his Khavarnagh splendor stole).

⁵⁷ *The Haft Paikar (The Seven Beauties)*, translated from the Persian with a commentary by C. E. Wilson (1924). Reproduced by *Persian Literature in Translation* website, the Packard Humanities Institute. <http://persian.packhum.org/persian/main?url=pf%3ffile%3d17601040%26ct%3d14> (accessed: March 4, 2017). All translations of Nezami’s poetry here are by C. E. Wilson.

this historical oblivion. It calls us to look and probe deeper into repressed histories and histories of repression.

A full circle can be drawn here if we go back to Bahram Beyzaie, whom I compared to Kiarostami at the beginning of this chapter. It is not far-fetched to argue that one of the most significant contributions of Beyzaie to contemporary Iranian arts is his dramatizations of works of the old masters of Persian literature, in ways uniquely novel and hardly met in their creative approach and intellectual sophistication by other Iranian dramaturges. In adapting the story of *Khavarnagh* in his *مجلس قربانی سنّمار* (*The Scene of Cenmar's Sacrifice*), Beyzaie takes the supplemental story of Cenmar's death, drastically alters it by taking Bahram entirely out of the story, and transforms it into a potent critique not only of collective forgetfulness, but also of the cultural decay of his own time:

Blessed are those people who did not build, or built only low [short constructions], so that when they fell, neither did they break an arm or lose their life! Blessed is narrow-mindedness! [...] – Humans are worthy of what they build. – True! *Khavarnagh* is Cenmar's face and *death* is No'mān's (9).

[...]

Cenmar: O! That this want of liberation became a tether around my foot. Who do I tell that in Hira, art is rewarded by putting people in chains? (35).⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Bahram Beyzaie, *مجلس قربانی سنّمار* (*The Scene of Cenmar's Sacrifice*) (Tehran: Roshangaran va Motale'at-e Zanan Publishers, 2001), 9 and 35. [translation mine]

«خوشا مردمی که نساختند، یا کوتاه ساختند، که چون فرو افتادند نه دستی شکستند نه جانی باختند! خوشا کوتاه اندیشی! آری، مردمان به آن ارزند که می‌سازند! و آنچه می‌سازند صورت ایشان است! بهتر آن که خود از خاک بر تر نگرفت؛ که چنین واژگون هم نشد! — آن دیگری: حالا تویی که ریشخند می‌کنی! نه! — اگر همه نمی‌ساختند جهان در آغاز آغاز خود بود؛ بیغوله‌ای! — هوم، آری؛ خورنق صورت سنمار است، و مرگ صورت نعمان. [...] سنمار: آه! که این رهایی خواستن بر پای من بندی شد! به که بگویم که در حیره، به پاداش هنر، مردمان را بند بر پای می‌کنند؟» بهرام بیضایی، *مجلس قربانی سنّمار* (تهران: انتشارات روشنگران و مطالعات زنان، ۱۳۸۰)، ۹ و ۳۵.

By focusing on what is a peripheral note in the literary rendition of the construction of *Khavarnagh*, Beyzaie resuscitates a latent taint of tyranny and transforms it into a potent critique of moral and cultural decline, without deracinating Nezami's work from the world to which it belongs by way of turning it into merely a means for flippant socio-political criticism. Beyzaie's able appropriation of canonical works of Persian literature, in turn, contributes to the very corpus which he is deeply rooted and with which he has a constant, mutually enriching, dialogue.

What strikes me as a significant feature in Modarresi's *Khavarnagh*, is precisely this same kind of dialogue that is sustained between his visual cosmos and the Iranian architectural, mythical, and painterly traditions. In his artistic process, he follows a no longer extant architectural tradition known as *آمود* (*Āmud*): embellishment of completed constructions with brickworks, stonework, or plasterwork [figure 4-24].⁵⁹ Modarresi's labor-intensive process of laying down fragments of his walls, piece by piece, reveals *Khavarnagh 2*'s kinship with the local architectural spaces, where the world of both Nezami's *Khavarnagh* and that of Modarresi's painting/sculptures is congealed. Brick over brick, Modarresi's taxing labor embraces the devotion to artistic creation he locates in Iranian architecture. It simultaneously reminds us of the silenced histories of labor that are overshadowed by the grand historical narratives revolving around names of empires and emperors.

⁵⁹ Modarresi's homage to the architectural construction of the *Khavarnagh*, where he painstakingly mimics brickwork by laying down tiny pieces of charcoal on his canvas to create a castle in ruins seems to take to its heart Nezami's declaration that Cenmar is indeed a master to a thousand painters in his architectural prowess.

Yet, the colorful *Khavarnagh* Nezami illustrates, the ever-lively construction that is praised for its ability to reflect the changing colors of the sky, is now transmuted into a black hole, a space that pulls the viewer inside and consumes her while staring at her with a face of ruination, disintegration, and death. Every single brick is laid upon the other not to build a castle but to create images in which untold accounts of ordinary lives lost in the grandiosity of history create charred walls, almost at the verge of crumbling, that threaten to overwhelm their captive viewers with a vortex of deliberate forgetfulness. The procedure of fixing fragments of charcoal next to one another, apart from the exacting labor it demands, hints, in its tediousness, toward the banality of the passing of time, leaving a trace of death on the face of *Khavarnagh*. Modarresi's paintings, in their devotion to the dark side of a repressive history that has sunk into oblivion, follows the footsteps of the visual arts master Kamal ed-Din Behzad in his *The Construction of the Palace Khavarnagh*, painted around 1494, where Behzad chose to visually chronicle the labor invested in rising the castle from the ground [figure 4-25]. Behzad's lively manuscript illustration, laboriously and exquisitely painted as he always did, portrays a representation of the castle's construction in which workers, in a multiplicity of facial features and skin colors, are shown erecting the monumental edifice. While Modarresi's work departs from the masterpiece by drifting away from construction to decay, disintegration, and death, he is able to keep the soul of Behzad's painting intact.

Following the footsteps of one of the most illustrious painters in Iran's history is a demanding labor, one that entails learned insight into the traditions on which Behzad's artistic practice thrived; one that, I believe, Modarresi has been able to accomplish by way of an utmost

regard for the internal logic of Behzad's paintings. This is an exceedingly difficult task as Behzad is no ordinary painter. The visual world that he creates in his paintings is so intricately connected to literary, architectural, and mythical traditions of his geography, time, and history that it is impossible to appreciate him in isolation from his sources of influence and his pictorial legacy. In fact, as Dabashi observes, his prodigious impact goes far beyond the realm of visual arts:

A number of key conceptual and compositional factors come together in Behzad's paintings, and the School of Herat associated with him that will have a lasting influence on Persian literary humanism. Poetry, prose, painting, mysticism, and above all architectural design all come together to define Behzad's works, moving them, formally and narratively, toward a *polyfocal* architectonics of signs that push the boundaries of Persian humanism beyond anything previously achieved.⁶⁰

This firmly rooted dialogue that Modarresi sustains with his own world becomes more palpable once we look at his *Khavarnagh 2* in comparison with Shahpour Pouyan's *Miniatures* (2010), where the latter takes Behzad's *The Construction of Castle Khavarnagh* and removes all the characters (laborers) in his painting, reconstructing what would've possibly been "behind" those figures [figure 4-26]. His "miniatures [sic] are lenses," writes Khaled Malas in a catalog of the show *Global/Local*, "turned toward everything that has been purged from the originals, each of which once represented a spectacle worthy of commemoration." He goes on to assert that by way of removing all the figures, "Pouyan foregrounds the landscape and architecture—the places—as the focus of our silent contemplation."⁶¹ While Pouyan's work has a much more

⁶⁰ Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*, 184.

⁶¹ Malas, "Shahpour Pouyan," 91.

apparent link to Behzad's painting—in that it simply removes elements from Behzad's masterpiece and keeps the background intact—any deep relationship with *The Construction of Castle Khavarnagh* is ultimately impaired by Pouyan's failure to uphold the self-conscious and self-contained world of the fifteenth-century Persian painting. For Pouyan, the only viable mode of engagement with Persian painting, ironically, becomes the denial of its very inner-logic, including its long and lasting tradition of perspective. As such, his playful removal of Behzad's personages, reconstructing the *background* of the painting, reduces the master's work into a meaningless, yet highly marketable, surface.⁶² In stark distinction, Modarresi's work preserves the soul of Behzad's attention to the ordinary people and is able to transcend his appropriation to a critique of history⁶³—hardly reconcilable with what Pouyan's work tends to commemorate only at the level of appearance, namely, spectacular monuments.

These anti-decorative paintings,⁶⁴ exhibit a profound sense of loss produced by the silencing mechanisms of history [figure 4-27]. They navigate the ruin as a site of the failure of historical remembering. A collective self-portrait that in its enabling the act of seeing, as Derrida

⁶² I have written rather at length on the lack of depth in Shahpour Pouyan's engagement with Persian painting in footnote number 141 of the first chapter.

⁶³ Cf. Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

⁶⁴ The uneasy sense of disintegration these paintings engender leaves no room for a decorative function. The presence of human hair in a number of works creates a repulsive sensation that ultimately adds to the minimization of any decorative property. I am borrowing the term "anti-decorative" from Michael Fried's discussion of Kenneth Noland. Cf. Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 186.

writes, refuses “showing you *anything at all*, anything of *the all*.”⁶⁵ But the ruin is also a site of aging and the ineradicable materiality of the body (of human, or art), present in it from the moment of its inception. “The ruin,” writes Derrida, “does not supervene like an accident upon a monument that was intact only yesterday. In the beginning there is ruin. Ruin is that which happens to the image from the moment of the first gaze.” The self-portrait, capturing what one once was, assumes the function and form of a ruin, collapsing past and present, absence and presence:

Ruin is the self-portrait, this face looked at in the face as the memory of itself, what *remains* or *returns* as a specter from the moment one first looks at oneself and a figuration is eclipsed. [...] For one can just as well read the pictures of ruins as the figures of a portrait, indeed, of a self-portrait.⁶⁶

Replacing the mythically exquisite castle of *Khavarnagh* with his portrayals of bleak ruins of the past, Modarresi creates a visual lexicon in which the deliberate forgetfulness of dominant narratives of history, the disintegration of all human constructions, and the ineffability of the passage of time and death are brought together. His charred walls are self-portraits of a nation oblivious to repression, injustice, tyranny, and cruelty [figure 4-28].

Without trying to show us “things” or to communicate with us “messages,” without resorting to iconography, Modarresi’s demanding *Khavarnagh 2*, creates an austere figurality that with its deep roots in a host of artistic traditions, expand the hermeneutic horizons of his art. It is perhaps in their waning reliance on worn-out stereotypical array of icons of “Iranian-

⁶⁵ Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 69.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

ness” that his works are able to establish a sustained affinity with those temporal and spatial junctures which shape their world. In his own writing about *Khavarnagh 2*, Modarresi associates Behzad’s focus on the construction of the castle with a desire to fix a moment in which “work” itself is given prominence over the “meaning” phallically erected with the castle—when three things are unveiled: “hand, work, and material.” For Modarresi, this moment marks a significant point at which a work of art exists in its materiality rather than having been reduced to “meaning.” This is the moment in which “the hand is still the hand, when *discourse* [سخن, also translated as *logos*] has not yet interfered.”⁶⁷ It is not difficult to immediately associate Modarresi’s writing with a nostalgia for a moment of pure matter, unadulterated by discourse. But, what I see here is more in the nature of an objection to categorical subordinations of the materiality of art objects to systems of meaning and knowledge production.⁶⁸ It is the reversal of this subordination, without foreclosing signification and meaning, that Modarresi achieves in his *Khavarnagh 2*.

⁶⁷ Javad Modarresi, “خورنق ۲ (*Khavarnagh 2*)” (Tehran: Azad Art Gallery, 2014). Exhibition statement.

«نزدیک به چهار قرن پس از نظامی، کمال الدین بهزاد، از روی این داستان همین بنا را به تصویر کشیده که اگر به آن نگاه کنیم می‌بینیم از قضا کاخی نیمه‌کاره و بی رونق است. بهزاد سخن نظامی درباره‌ی کاخ ساخته شده را در کاخی که «همواره در حال ساخته شدن» است، متوقف نگه داشته تا به این ترتیب از معنایی که با کاخ بالا آمده، دوری گزینند. او در عوض این دوری گزیدن سه چیز را آشکار کرده است: دست و کار و ماده را. ساختن نیز در همین سه چیز خلاصه می‌شود. از دست و کار و ماده است که ساختن به راه می‌افتد؛ تغییری ایجاد می‌شود در صورت ماده و معنایی به وجود می‌آید. پشم می‌شود پارچه، درخت می‌شود داربست، خاک می‌شود خشت، خشت می‌شود خانه. دست کار نمی‌کند تا چیزی به وجود آورد، یا چیزی به جهان بیفزاید (چون هیچ چیز جز معنا به جهان افزوده نمی‌شود)، می‌سازد، تا بلکه کاری انجام داده باشد. از این جهت هر اصطلاح دیگر جز کار، از جمله «شاهکار» بی‌معنی است. از نظرگاه دست، هر اثر یک «کار» است آنجا که کارش را هنوز وانتهاده است. آنجا که دست هنوز دست است و پای سخن هنوز به میان نیامده است.»

⁶⁸ This is increasingly significant in that the “legitimate perspective” from which contemporary Iranian art has been received (and certainly, reduced) is determined by the Western hegemonic discourses mostly indifferent to real nuances and singularities of artworks produced outside of their comfortably established frames of legibility. For a discussion on how discursive constraints limit our perceptions of objects cf. Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, 199.

THE COSMOPOLITAN IMAGINATION AND THE “ETHICS OF ALTERITY”

The focus of academic and curatorial debates on the nature and politics of marginalization of non-Western art, the processes of commodification of alterity, and what Terry Smith famously called “the provincialism problem,”⁶⁹ has in recent decades given rise to a surge in approaches among contemporary artists that primarily aim to expose the structural shortcomings of Western epistemological frames in confronting the unfamiliar object. Whereas significant spaces have opened up by such debates, both in the university and in the venues of public display, perhaps to a degree unimaginable before cultural globalization, the outcome of these changes remains, to a great extent, a more comprehensive, but still primarily Western, canon of art history with less conspicuous methods of assimilating alterity.

Leaving unquestioned the epistemological underpinnings of European modernism and its aspirations for a comprehensive world history of art, strategies that seek to expand the canon of Western art history, ultimately, fail to reflect upon the ways in which what is “added” is collected, studied, and interpreted. That is to say, the problem with such additive methods is not only that they uproot an object from its context of origin, display it as a token of alterity, and finally reduce its meaning to the familiar frames of legibility operative in the context to

⁶⁹ Terry Smith, “The Provincialism Problem,” *Artforum* 12, no. 1 (September 1974), 54–59. Also, cf. Terry Smith, “The Provincialism Problem: Then and Now,” *ARTMargins* 6, no. 1 (February 2017), 6–32.

which it is imported, they are fundamentally complicit in the reinforcement of the center/periphery logic of Eurocentrism. As such, even when an art object genuinely seeks to expose the epistemological limits of Western cultural and intellectual canons, including that of art history, its integration into the canon, and consequently its assimilation into it, as Brennan reminds us, feeds directly into globalism's "triumphal campaign to extend knowledge outside existing borders." Discussing the entrance of "third world literature" into circuits of Western metropolitan readership, he adds that the "third-world writer who attains a certain fame plays an intermediary role, the role of ushering-in, critiquing the West, usually in acceptable ways, citing strange names, retelling hidden histories, and doing all this pedagogically."⁷⁰

A problem of the same nature arises with the visual. Ostensibly subversive artworks, or those with the genuine design to lay bare the inadequacies of Western metropolitan interpretive systems to adjudicate globally, are either added to the dominant narrative spaces of contemporary art, only insofar as their critique of the West is innocuously permissible, or are simply overlooked. Those ultimately added to the Western mainstream cultural space, as Oguibe reminds us, are able to understand "the language of the metropolis" and break into this "game space."⁷¹ Whereas the ability to speak in the language of the metropolis does not necessarily signify complicity with the imperial roots of Western art history, to borrow Okwui Enwezor's formulation, it is fair to say that most of these artworks are, more or less, assimilated into art history's dominant narratives and do not place a demand for substantial change on

⁷⁰ Brennan, *At Home in the World*, 41.

⁷¹ Oguibe, *The Culture Game*, 34.

the interpretive apparatuses of Western art criticism or the academic curricula of Art History.⁷² As such, the additive response to the hegemonic disciplinary arrangement of art history and criticism has been more pernicious in its effects for it inherently concedes the “locus of enunciation”⁷³ to Western art institutions. This concession has ultimately caused what Donald Preziosi describes as “the recent satisfactions of recanonization and the formulaic assimilation of various ‘new art histories’ that have largely expanded the ground of existing canons and orthodoxies rather than offering substantive alternatives to the status quo.”⁷⁴

Harbored by liberal proponents of transnational capitalism, the metropolitan multiculturalism based on identity-politics plays no small role in fostering a self-congratulatory climate in which accumulation of representations of the charming multiplicity of identities is in and of itself a mission accomplished on behalf of diversification and equality: an invitation to a subjugated assimilation minus a desire for homogenization. In this climate, then, exposing the hierarchies in the world of global contemporary art, as many artworks tend to do today, including those I have studied in the second chapter, is not only insufficient but at the risk of playing into the hands of liberal multiculturalism, corroborating its claims to tolerance and willingness to fundamental change. As Mercer argues, the language of multiculturalism suggests a perspective from which “cultural diversity is seen as a mere ‘novelty’ that belongs to

⁷² Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation,” 59.

⁷³ Joaquín Barriandos, “Geo-aesthetic Hierarchies: Geography, Geopolitics, Global Art, and Coloniality,” in *Art and Globalization*, ed. James Elkins and Zhivka Valiavicharska (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 250.

⁷⁴ Donald Preziosi, “The art of Art History,” in *In the Aftermath of Art: Ethics, Aesthetics, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 70-71.

contemporary art alone” all the while working in “insidious ways to preserve earlier canons of modern art whose monocultural authority thus remains intact.”⁷⁵ Therefore, it seems rather to be a kind of careless misrepresentation of the critiques raised against this “monocultural authority” of Western canons of art history to characterize the demand for a self-reflexive global art history as a call to “include all possible points of view, national, cultural, ethnic, individual, whatever they may be,” or a “confused” quest for a replacing of global art history with non-Western art history, as art historians Thomas Dacosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Beatrice Joyeux-Prunel have recently suggested.⁷⁶

On the other hand, the desire to find exclusively non-Western interpretive models, as I have discussed in the second chapter in response to Elkins, works to the detriment of both Western and non-Western histories of art, reinforcing an already problematic divide. Asserting that the “discipline itself has been exported and has found new homes, and countries such as China and India are producing art histories compatible with Western ones,” Elkins bemoans the “insidious nature” of an “unacknowledged Westernness.” For him, this Westernness forces any scholarship “entirely local and specific” to a non-Western historian’s time and place to comply with the forms and concerns of Western art history. While I sympathize with Elkins’s

⁷⁵ Kobena Mercer, *Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices Since the 1980s* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 249.

⁷⁶ Thomas Dacosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Beatrice Joyeux-Prunel, “Reintroducing Circulations: Historiography and the Project of Global Art History,” in *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, eds. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann et al. (Farnham Surrey, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 18.

insistence on the necessity of acknowledging *local* and *specific* modes of knowledge production, it seems that he is caught in a state of aporia, where production of local art histories are significant and valuable insofar as they are “compatible with Western ones” and are able to offer viable alter-*natives* to the Western canon.⁷⁷ Both ends of the spectrum here—one romanticizing non-Western art with a reactionary undertone and the other blaming it for demanding too much attention from global art history—seem to be sharing a common definition for *local* art history, i.e., that which is not European and thus never fully global.

It is within these already restrained spaces of theorization that the works of artists such as Modarresi and Mohajer pose a radical challenge to any imagination reserving the claim to globality exclusively for Europe. Their ability to transcend their located visual lexicon into a self-reliant worldliness, a “self-conscious universalism,” liberated from a desire for the West’s approval is exceptionally valuable in that it reveals possibilities of *worlding*⁷⁸ a world in which they are not destined to permanently occupy the position of the locally other, placed “outside existing borders.”⁷⁹ By way of adding a modicum of material change to art history’s spaces of global imagination, they allow us to think beyond exposing discursive limits, pointing at inadequacies, or, pushing the boundaries.

⁷⁷ James Elkins, *Stories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 150.

⁷⁸ I am cognizant that my use of the term “worlding” does not necessarily subscribe to the theorization of the term formulated by Spivak in her essay “The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives.” I hope, however, that my reading here allows for an “intended mistake,” to borrow again from her, that, for the sake of clarifying my arguments, allows me to open up new reading possibilities in the stagnant discursive spaces of contemporary art history.

⁷⁹ Brennan, *At Home in the World*, 41.

Achille Mbembe opens his *Critique de la raison nègre* by identifying the present moment as one in which the centrality of Europe has come to its demise. He writes,

Europe is no longer the center of gravity of the world. This is the significant event, the fundamental experience, of our era. And we are only just now beginning the work of measuring its implications and weighing its consequences. Whether such a revelation is an occasion for joy or cause for surprise or worry, one thing remains certain: the demotion of Europe opens up possibilities—and presents dangers—for critical thought.⁸⁰

Writing in the context of “Blackness and race,” a question that remains central to Mbembe’s ambitious project is one with a significant resonance here: can this moment of decentralization of Europe, fraught with possibilities and dangers, lead to a search of autonomy for the racialized subject without necessarily falling back into seeing and knowing oneself “through and within difference.” Can this be a moment, we might ask, for those on the receiving end of West’s colonial desires “to divide and classify, to create hierarchies and produce difference”⁸¹ to forge and sustain a dialogue not mediated by the West?

A similar concern, has been raised by Enrique Dussel, who situates the locus of liberation, or “the negation of negation of liberation,” for the nations, economies, communities, and cultures, long subdued and excluded from modernity’s horizon, in the globalizing world-system’s reaching “a limit with the exteriority of the alterity of the Other.”⁸² If this is a moment of the

⁸⁰ Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 1.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸² Enrique Dussel, “Beyond Eurocentrism: The World-System and the Limits of Modernity,” in *The Cultures of Globalization*, eds. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, trans. Eduardo Mendieta (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 21.

Eurocentric world-system reaching its limits, of the “exhaustion of a ‘civilizing’ system that has come to an end,”⁸³ or of Europe no longer occupying the center of gravity of the world, it is equally a moment in which any counter-position to Eurocentric modernity can no longer assume, as Jameson reminds us, a cultural originality, in the form of traditionalism, capable of resisting “assimilation by Western modernity.”⁸⁴ Brought into being in societies torn by the “penetration of Western modernization,” during the older period of modernity, Jameson argues that now the “anti-modern term of tradition has everywhere vanished from the reality of the former Third World or colonized societies.” As such, for Jameson any emphasis on cultural difference is now perceived as a neotraditionalism defined as “a deliberate political and collective choice, in a situation in which little remains of a past that must be completely reinvented.”⁸⁵

Against what Jameson deems as “reactive” anti-modernity, then, there can be another form of rootedness in and dialogue with tradition that pushes back against the Eurocentric colonization of both the epistemic and the imaginary space. In this imaginary space, the *universal* is not already occupied by the West. Thus, the cultural creation, whether a poem or a painting, inhabits a world in which not only its singularity is immune from reduction to worn-out frames of readership of otherness, but also its right to universality is presumed as a given.

⁸³ Ibid., 19.

⁸⁴ Fredric Jameson, “The Antinomies of Postmodernity,” in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 61.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

This space can only be imagined when the singular, as Spivak writes, “is the always universalizable, never the universal.”⁸⁶ It is only through such conception of universality that past and emerging worlds, once at the peripheries of Europe, can join together in a “self-conscious worlding of the world.”⁸⁷ In this imaginative space, universalism, never-occupied and never-fully-realized, liberates creative forces in art and literature that no longer rely upon the “universal authority” of the West to secure their position on the “world stage,” but are worldly *sui generis*. This is precisely what characterizes the works of Mohajer and Modarresi for me: a located imagination in conversation with their past and emergent worlds, bearing the possibility of an imagination liberated from Eurocentric colonization, its center-periphery *modus operandi*, and a persistent urge to *expose* and *counter* the epistemological limits of Western modernity. It is in their firmly sustained *locatedness* that these artists break from the specter of the West as the ultimate spectator. In their practice, they change the “principle interlocutor”⁸⁸ and are able to see and know themselves neither *entirely* mediated by the West, as the authoritative translator of global visual language, nor defined within the limits set by exhausted concepts of identity and difference.

In order to be located and have roots, there needs to be a material anchor, a ground. This grounding anchor, then, is the *nation*, defined loosely and certainly not in geopolitical terms

⁸⁶ David Damrosch and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Comparative Literature/World Literature: A Discussion with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and David Damrosch,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 48, no. 4 (2011), 466.

⁸⁷ Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*, 304.

⁸⁸ Hamid Dabashi, *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 272.

but with a sense of location:⁸⁹ a nation minus the chauvinist prejudices of nationalism; a nation whose amorphous territories are demarcated by shared languages, common musical, literary, visual, and dramatic traditions.⁹⁰ A case in point, in addition to Persian as the lingua franca of the Muslim empires of the early Modern era, is the shared space of aesthetics and the common visual lexicon in the early global circulations of art between the Ottomans of Turkey (1299–1923), the Mughals of India (1526–1858), and the Safavids of Iran (1501–1722).⁹¹ The sophisticated networks of circulation, convergence, and confluence operative in the region have expanded the common grounds upon which not only creative imaginations of the artists can cut

⁸⁹ In responding to Bhabha’s rhetoric of exile and displacement, Geeta Kapur calls for a more grounded understanding of agency, and a less shifty location of self and culture. She writes, “Let us concede that it is the privilege of those who live their lives within the format of a national culture to resist globalization, as against the privilege of those who live more global lives to seek its emancipatory features. Let us concede that it is pointless setting up a symmetrical hierarchy of belonging and unbelonging that works like a seesaw. Even conceding these, my disagreement with the exile rhetoric of Bhabha, and even Rushdie, is predictably that I want the location of self and culture to be less shifty, less a matter of continual displacement of categories one to another. In Bhabha’s view, ‘The contingent and the liminal become the times and the spaces for the historical representation of the subjects of cultural difference in a postcolonial criticism.’ I would argue for a greater holding power of the historical paradigm where differences are recognized to have real and material consequences, where agency is neither ghost-driven nor collapsed into a series of metonymically disposed identities that are but fragments spinning their way to entropy.” Cf. Kapur, “Globalization: Navigating the Void,” 347.

In response to another formulation on behalf of deterritorialized theoretical model for understanding the world, put forward by Arjun Appadurai in his *Modernity at Large*, Monica Juneja contends that “the notion of permanent flux and unboundedness does not permit us to look more closely at the dialectic between the dissolution of certain boundaries and the reaffirmation of other kinds of difference, of how deterritorialization is invariably followed by reterritorialization.” Cf. Juneja, “Global Art History and the ‘Burden of Representation,’” 275.

⁹⁰ In *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*, Dabashi argues that the site of nation (وطن) is a public space in which “Persian literary humanism reached a fully self-conscious worldly cosmopolitanism outside any royal court” (264). It is this definition of nation which I have in mind here.

⁹¹ It is important to keep abreast of the Persian language’s hegemonic power and position, especially given its formidable canon of prose and poetry as well as its long history in the imperial courts of India, Iran, and modern-day Turkey.

across the limits of the global grammar of art, such as in Modarresi's mutually enriching relationship with Behzad (a painter of the late Timurid and early Safavid period), but also new dialogues can be forged and sustained between postcolonial nodes on the southern hemisphere primarily connected through the West heretofore.⁹²

In a detailed study of cosmopolitanism and art, Marsha Meskimmon argues that a cosmopolitan imagination should not be translated into the eradication of the national. For Meskimmon "cosmopolitanism colludes with the most destructive features of globalization if it occludes the specificity of nation, history and location in an attempt to transcend difference." Instead, the artwork can perform "an aesthetic negotiation between cultural traditions and national borders."⁹³ My main reservation with Meskimmon's *Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination* is her sanguine position regarding the cosmopolitan possibilities

⁹² The "southern hemisphere," here, is not defined by geographical coordinates but rather in a supposed autonomy from the "global north," a term marking what is broadly considered to be the West. Recent years have seen a consistent surge in academic and curatorial interest in the concept. The "global south" on the other hand, as Anthony Gardner writes, "sparks new links between artists and audiences from different regions [and] provokes new ways of thinking about global cultural currents." The task of tracing or "mapping" the south, for Gardner, becomes ever more important not only in that it offers new sites and viewpoints for thinking from, but it also makes possible a recognition of "the profound invisibility of South-South cultural relations—of the many dialogues and cultural connections that have long existed between different parts of the South—for most cultural cartographers." Cf. Anthony Gardner, "Mapping South: Journeys, Arrivals and Gatherings," in *Mapping South: Journeys in South-South Cultural Relations* (Victoria, Australia: The South Project Inc., 2013), 4.

In the curatorial space of contemporary Iranian art, Shaheen Merali organized two exhibitions in 2011: the Indian artists, Leena Kejriwal's photo-installation, *I Saw that which Had Remained Unseen*, was shown at Azad Art Gallery in Tehran from June 24 to July 6 and from April 10–24, The Guild in Mumbai hosted *regarding Iran*, a group exhibition with Barbad Golshiri, Farideh Lashaei, Mitra Tabrizian, and Shirin Neshat among others. These exhibitions could have been precursors of a different approach in curatorial practice, but unfortunately, they never gained momentum in Iran's contemporary art scene.

⁹³ Marsha Meskimmon, *Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 21.

opened up by a “powerful affective viscosity” that enables inter-subjective relations across cultures and generations.⁹⁴ A euphoric vision of this sort fails to grasp that the current conditions of the world in which we live is far from “cosmopolitan.” On the other hand, despite her commitment to remain cognizant of the privileged position of “elite world-travellers,” she seems to consider the entire population of the world, even those in settlements—insofar as “not presented to us as objects to be pitied”—to be already “global citizens.” Failing to address the unapologetic elitism of global contemporary art, Meskimmon also takes for granted the false claims to heightened mobility and equal access professed by globalization.⁹⁵

It can nonetheless be said that Meskimmon’s take on the perils of occluding national specificity in name of globalization and cosmopolitanism represents a valid concern insofar as the response is neither a reactionary, at times even innocent, turn to the nation as a repository of cultural identity, nor a premature rush into a post-national discourse presuming the cosmopolitanization of the world as an inevitable corollary of globalization. Defining cosmopolitanism as the ethics corresponding to “a global cultural outlook that respects autonomy and contestatory values,” Brennan warns us against this premature rush into a cosmopolitan ide-

⁹⁴ Ibid., 27-28.

⁹⁵ In an pointed critique of “corporate strategists and Western politicians,” including Robert Reich and Jeffrey Sachs, Brennan reminds us that not only globalization’s foremost beneficiary of mobility is none other than capitalism, but also that “*the state under globalization ensures that the heightened mobility of capital is not matched by the mobility of labor.*” “Globalization,” he writes, “means heightened border controls.” Cf. Timothy Brennan, “Cosmo-Theory,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 100, no. 3 (summer 2001), 684. [emphasis original]

ology defined in an inexorable correspondence with transnational capitalism and a rearticulation of American cultural hegemony.⁹⁶ A cosmopolitanism “worthy of the name,” Brennan writes, is one that functions as “an ethic of proper intellectual work.”⁹⁷

Whether it is in that mode of intellectual method most closely associated with Edward Said’s “worldliness”—the roaming, hungry intelligence bound neither by discipline nor dogma—or the more conjunctural moments of curricular reform on behalf of studying the world’s many cultures in place of narrow, job-related specializations, the ethics of cosmopolitanism are as desirable as they are embattled.⁹⁸

Then, the question we are faced with is not how to *be*, or how to *remain*, cosmopolitan, but rather how to practice an ethics of cosmopolitanism. In reading the artworks, whose center of gravity is not defined by Euro-American understandings of meaning, value, aspiration, and desire, what can be the guiding principles of a truly cosmopolitan, and indeed comparative, art history? Whereas changing the interlocutor appears to be a generative and liberating force for those consistently denied a place in the canon of art history, it should not be interpreted as a call to abandon the discipline, but to rather reinvigorate the “sleepy confines of academic art history”⁹⁹ in its encounter with its non-European other¹⁰⁰ and to simultaneously make use of

⁹⁶ Brennan, *At Home in the World*, 309.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹⁹ W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 47.

¹⁰⁰ In his “Art History: Making the Visible Legible,” Donald Preziosi convincingly argues that from its inception, art history has consistently functioned side by side its “allied professions” to make visible a particular *past* as the grounds for a present in which European modernity came to flourish. “The principal product of art history,” he contends, “has thus been modernity itself.” This in part, was achieved through the

its pedagogical, intellectual, and archival wealth without necessarily appealing to it for validation. Turning away from the surfeit of thought, scholarship, and archival riches produced, collected, and conserved in the canons of art history in the West is to close one's eyes to a long history of injustice and exploitation that have materially made such an accumulation possible in the first place.

The operative ethics of a cosmopolitan art history, then, is not a universal set of principles rationally deduced through categorical imperatives, but the study and practice of "being positioned by, and taking a position in relation to, others."¹⁰¹ This understanding of ethics, espoused by Rosalyn Diprose, should govern the criteria for intellectual work proper, as it demands self-reflexivity and responsibility toward the other. It engenders an openness toward alterity that is not just defined by speaking *for* the Other but rather by speaking *to* it. In Spivak's words, this is an "ethics of alterity" irreducible to a "politics of identity,"¹⁰² that makes "theory accountable historically and geographically."¹⁰³ And as Gardner reminds us, "Spivak's call to maintain an ethics of alterity rather than a politics of identity remains as crucial now as it was

fabrication not only of a past but of a present that stands in as the constitutive absence of European modernity; its racial, ethnic other. Cf. Donald Preziosi, "Art History: Making the Visible Legible," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (New Edition), ed. Donald Preziosi (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11.

¹⁰¹ Rosalyn Diprose, *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment, and Sexual Difference* (London: Routledge, 1994), 17.

¹⁰² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), x and chapter 2.

¹⁰³ Sangeeta Ray, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In Other Words* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 80.

in decades past” in the face of neocolonial capital’s “disastrous effects on the environment, on subjectivity, and how we negotiate with what we do not or might not know.”¹⁰⁴

Then, in reading the Other, in interpreting the foreign, as necessary as it may be, it is hardly enough to merely acknowledge the limits of one’s hegemonic monolingualism. Insofar as any interpretation of works of art “from unfamiliar cultures” is not only to “reveal the convention of our own metaphoric system”¹⁰⁵ or inflate our sense of multicultural tolerance, there needs to be a de-hegemonizing of one’s own subject position.¹⁰⁶ The first step toward addressing the epistemic violence of the colonial and neo-colonial cartography of the world as well as toward a substantial reorganizing of hegemonic knowledges must be grounded in a critical commitment to what Spivak terms “idiomaticity.”¹⁰⁷ Engagement with the “idiomaticity of nonhegemonic languages,”¹⁰⁸ whether they are literary or visual, has not only the potential to broaden our outlook beyond the Western realms of meaning production and cosmopolitan imagination, it also keeps us from a regression toward identitarian politics, which more often than not verges on nativism. Whether new methods in art history, promising an ethical readership of the foreign object, take the name and properties of *mondialisation* (à la Gruzinski),

¹⁰⁴ Gardner, “Whither the Postcolonial?” 155.

¹⁰⁵ Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 137.

¹⁰⁶ Frances Bartkows and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Intervention Interview,” in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 121.

¹⁰⁷ Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 10.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

transregionality (*à la* Juneja), transmodernity (*à la* Dussel), planetarity (*à la* Spivak), or perhaps a reimagined *cosmopolitanism*, commitment to idiomaticity remains as the ethical and intellectual guiding principle of our acts of reading that averts us from reducing the unfamiliar to our own frames of legibility. It keeps us from turning interpretation into an instrument of augmentation and consolidation of the monolingualism of hegemonic discourses.

Illustrations



Figure 1-1

Barbad Golshiri, *As Dad as Possible, as Dad as Beckett*, 2000-2013.

Iron, ashes. 200.3 × 100.2 × 28.3 cm.

Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York.

The iron grave marker is a replica of Samuel Beckett's tomb in dimensions.

Inside the artist has burnt hundreds of his works.



Figures 1-2 & 1-3

Top: David Tudor (left) and John Cage performing at the 1971 Shiraz-Persepolis Festival of Arts.

Bottom: Merce Cunningham (far right) Dance Company performing at the Shiraz-Persepolis Festival of Arts, 1972.

Cunningham Dance Foundation Archive.



Figure 1-4
Shadi Ghadirian, *Untitled (Qajar series)*, 1998.
Gelatin-silver bromide print, 23.97 × 16.19 cm.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California.

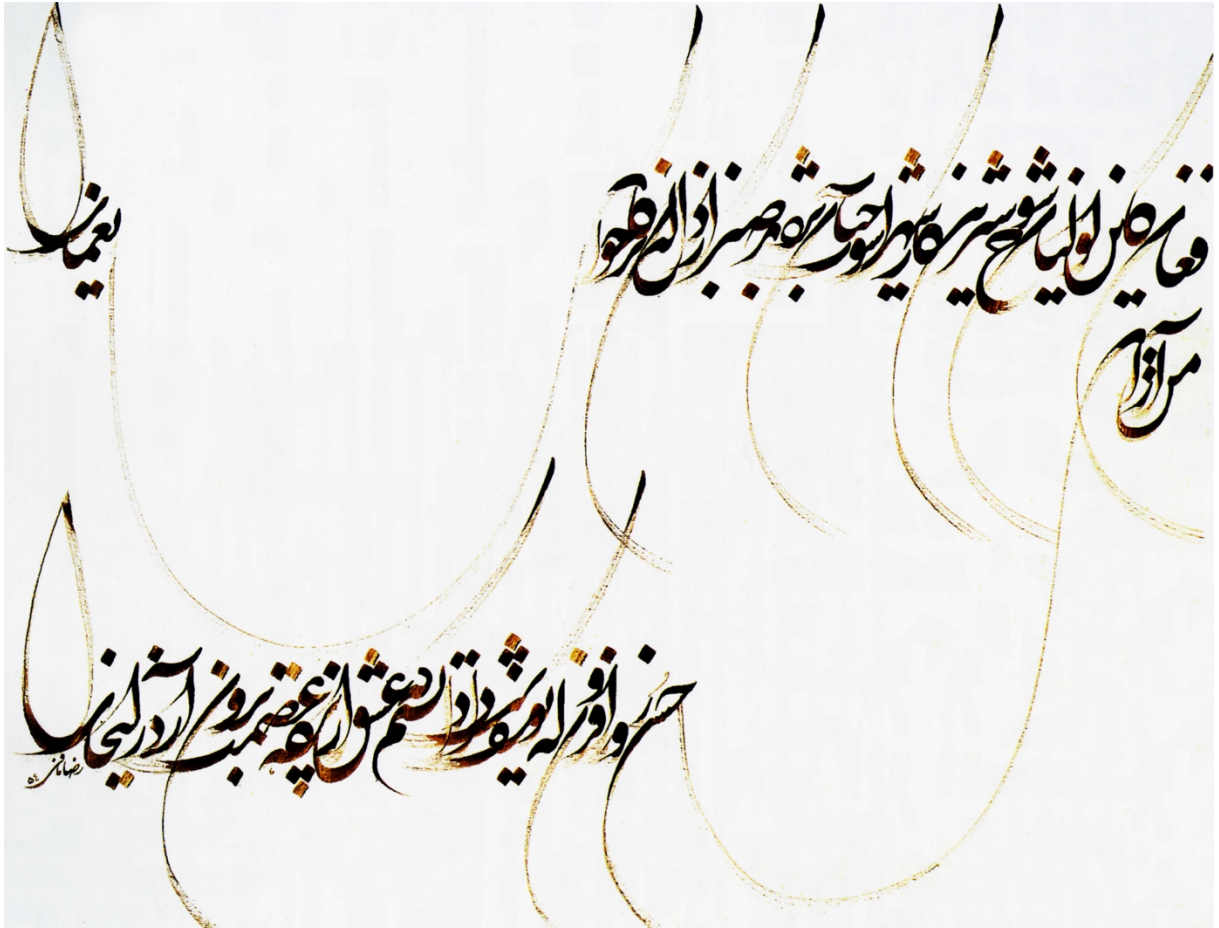


Figure 1-5

Reza Mafi, *Poetry*, 1977.

Oil on canvas, 76 × 100 cm.

Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.



Figure 1-6

Kaveh Golestan, *Portrait of a Woman (Shahr-e No series)*, 1975-1977.

Shahr-e No project included photographs that were published in a report entitled “روسپیگری یک پدیده‌ی غیرقابل اجتناب است (Prostitution is an Inevitable Phenomenon,” *Ayandegan*, September 23, 1977. Report Section.



Figures 1-7 & 1-8
Behzad Jaz, *Talabeh Studies*, 2001-2002.
Gelatin-silver prints. 16 × 24 cm.



Figure 1-9

Shiva Ahmadi, *Oil Barrel #12*, 2010.

Gloss paint on steel oil drum. 87.6 × 59.7 × 59.7 cm.



Figure 1-10

Ala Ebtekar, *Ascension III*, 2009.

Gouache, India ink and pencil on assemblage of book pages laid down on canvas. 127.9 × 205.7 cm.

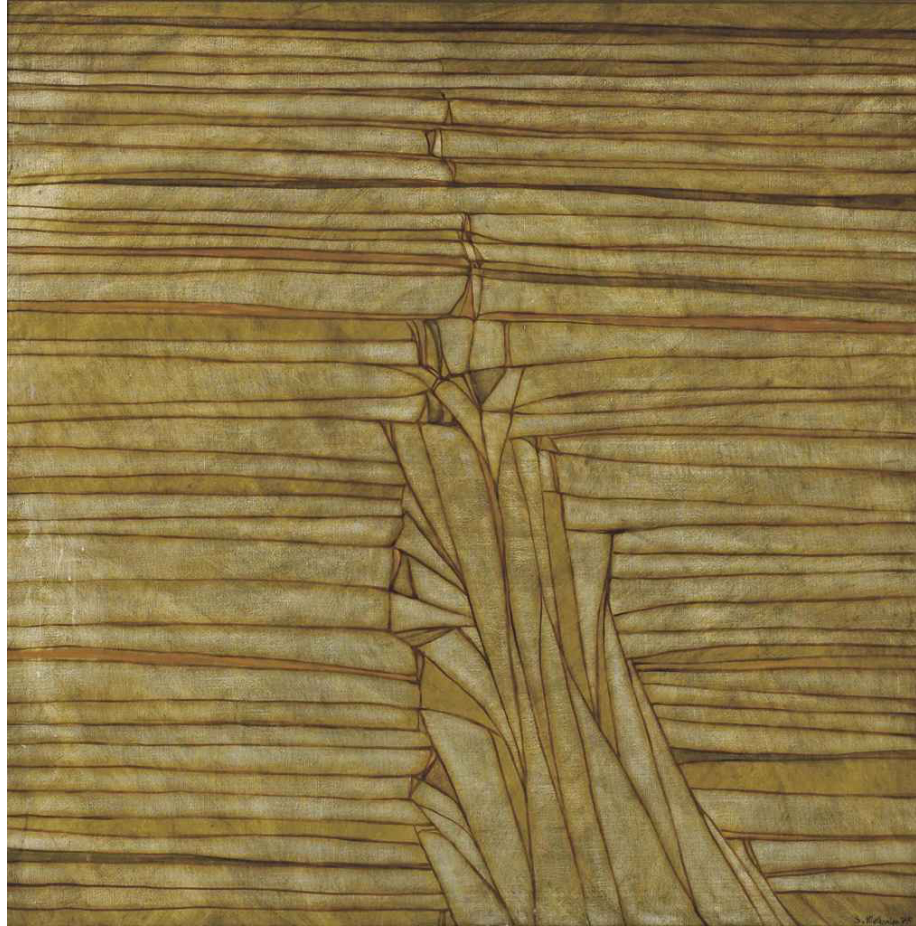


Figure 1-11
Sirak Melkonian, *Untitled*, 1975.
Oil on canvas, 108 × 108 cm.
Private Collection.
Christie's, Dubai.



Figure 1-12

Leila Pazooki, *Moment of Glory*, 2010.

Neon-light installation, dimension variable.

Leila Heller Gallery, New York.



Figure 1-13
Jalal Sepehr, *Untitled* (Water and Persian Rugs series), 2004.
C-print. 70 × 100 cm.



Figure 2-1

Erkan Özgen and Sener Özmen, *The Road to Tate Modern* (Stills from video), 2003.

DVD, 6':30".

Istanbul Modern Art Museum.



Figure 2-2

Jens Haaning, *Arabic Joke*, 1999.

Installation: posters and photographic documentation.

Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Arabic Joke

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In Manhattan, New York, a poster campaign took place for the duration of a month. On the posters the following Arabic joke was written in Arabic:

A Grain of Wheat

When Guha lost his mind, he started to believe that he was a grain of wheat. His biggest fear was that a chicken would eat him. His wife became tired and persuaded him to see a doctor. The doctor sent him to a mental hospital. After a short while, it seemed as if Guha had recovered and regained his sanity. His wife fetched him from the hospital and walked him back home. On the way, Guha saw some chickens walking on the road. He became very frightened and tried to hide behind his wife. She could not understand what had got into him as they had just left the hospital and shouted at him: "What the hell do you think you are doing? Don't you understand that you're not a grain of wheat anymore?" Guha replied in anguish, "It doesn't matter what I think! The important thing is whether these bloody chickens understand that I am not a grain of wheat."

Who Cares, Creative Time, New York USA, 2006.



Figure 2-3

Jens Haaning, *Arabic Joke*, 2006.

Installation: posters and photographic documentation.

Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen, Denmark.



Figure 2-4

Farhad Moshiri, *Jar with Horizontal Calligraphy*, 2004.

Acrylic on canvas, 190 × 150cm.

Christie's website: Modern & Contemporary Arab, Iranian and Turkish Art.

Note that the work presented here is not the same as the one exhibited at Azad Art Gallery in Tehran.

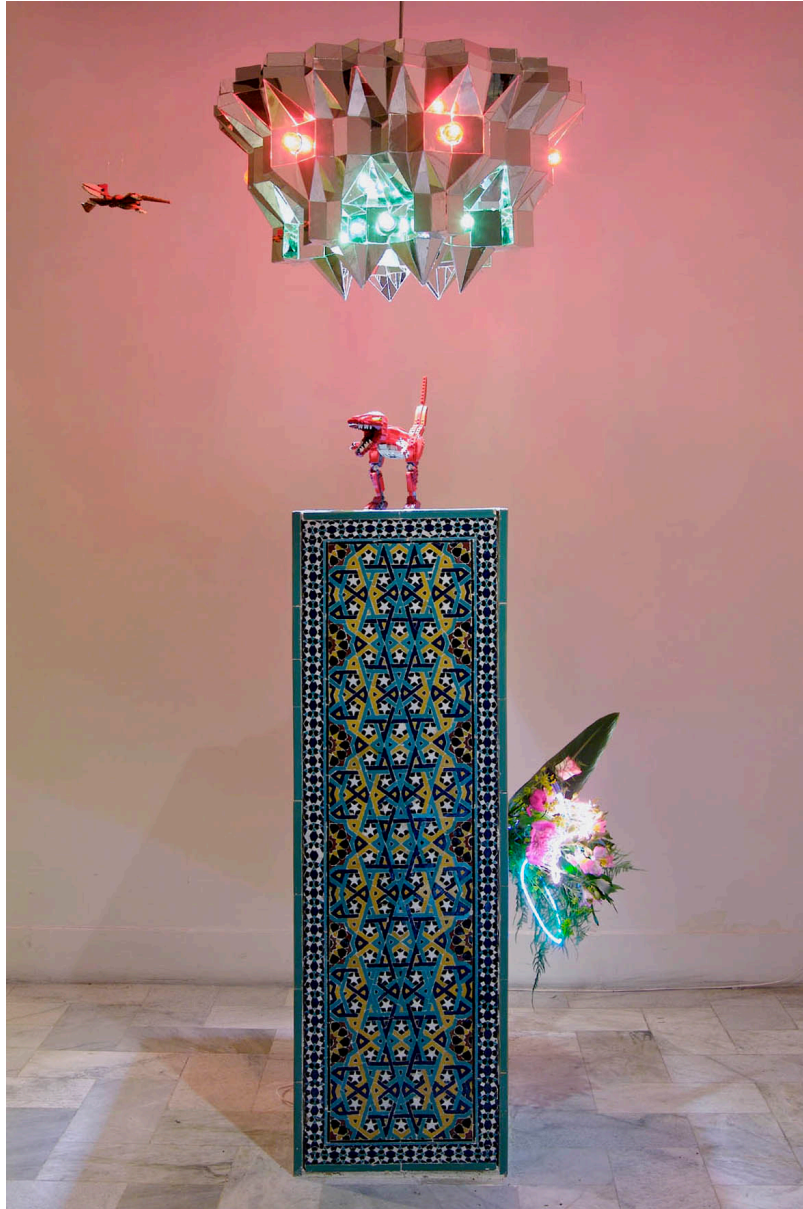


Figure 2-5

Shahab Fotouhi, (مشخص صادرات) و دموکراسی امنیت، عشق، (Security, Love, and Democracy (for export only)), 2006.

Installation (tiles, plastic dinosaurs, artificial flowers, neon lights, decorated chandelier), dimension variable.

Azad Art Gallery, Tehran.

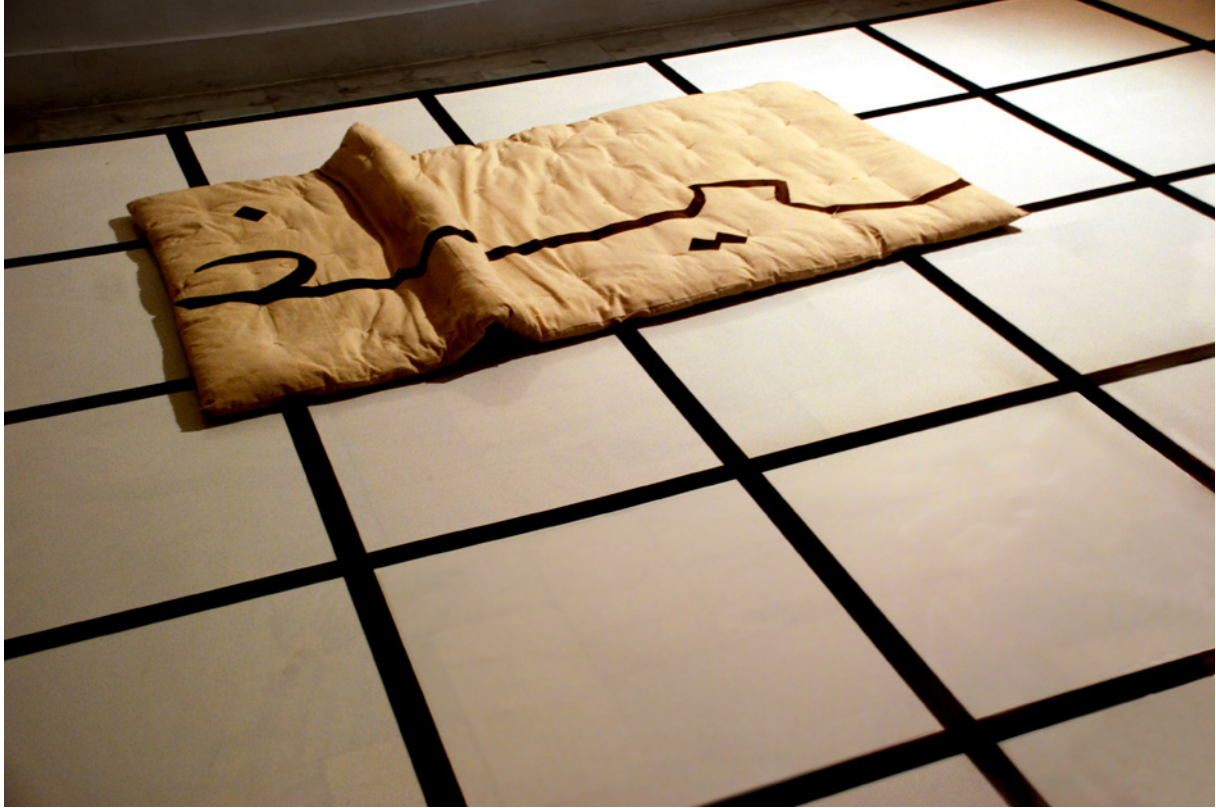


Figure 2-6

Barbad Golshiri, غیر (*The Other*), 2006.

Installation: crude oil, saffron, semen, on mattress, 600 × 380 cm.

Azad Art Gallery, Tehran.

Photograph: Ali Shirkhodaie.

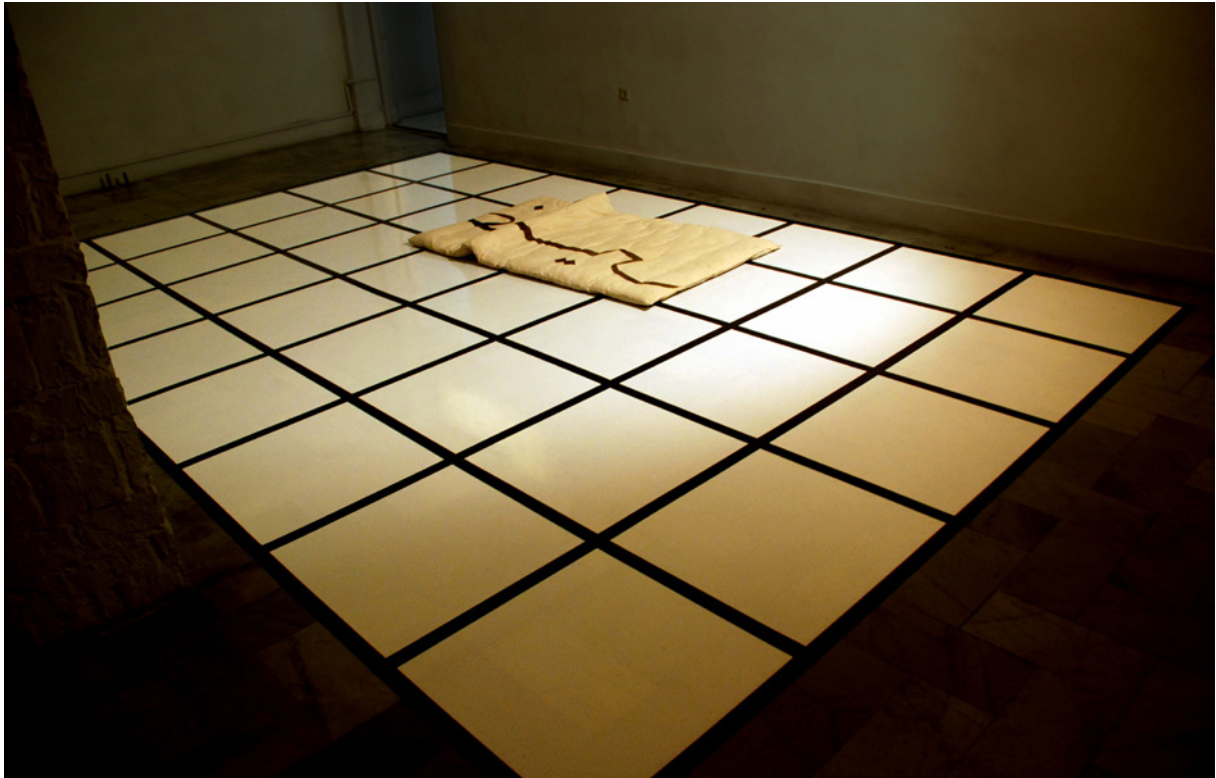


Figure 2-7

Barbad Golshiri, غير (*The Other*), 2006.

Crude oil, saffron, semen, on mattress, 600 × 380 cm.

Azad Art Gallery, Tehran.

Photograph: Ali Shirkhodaie.



Figure 2-8

Barbad Golshiri, *بداهه‌ی خاورمیانه (Middle East Impromptu)*, 2007.

Still from video, 5 minutes, 16:9 black and white, Sound.

Edition of 5 (+1 AP).

Azad Art Gallery, Tehran.

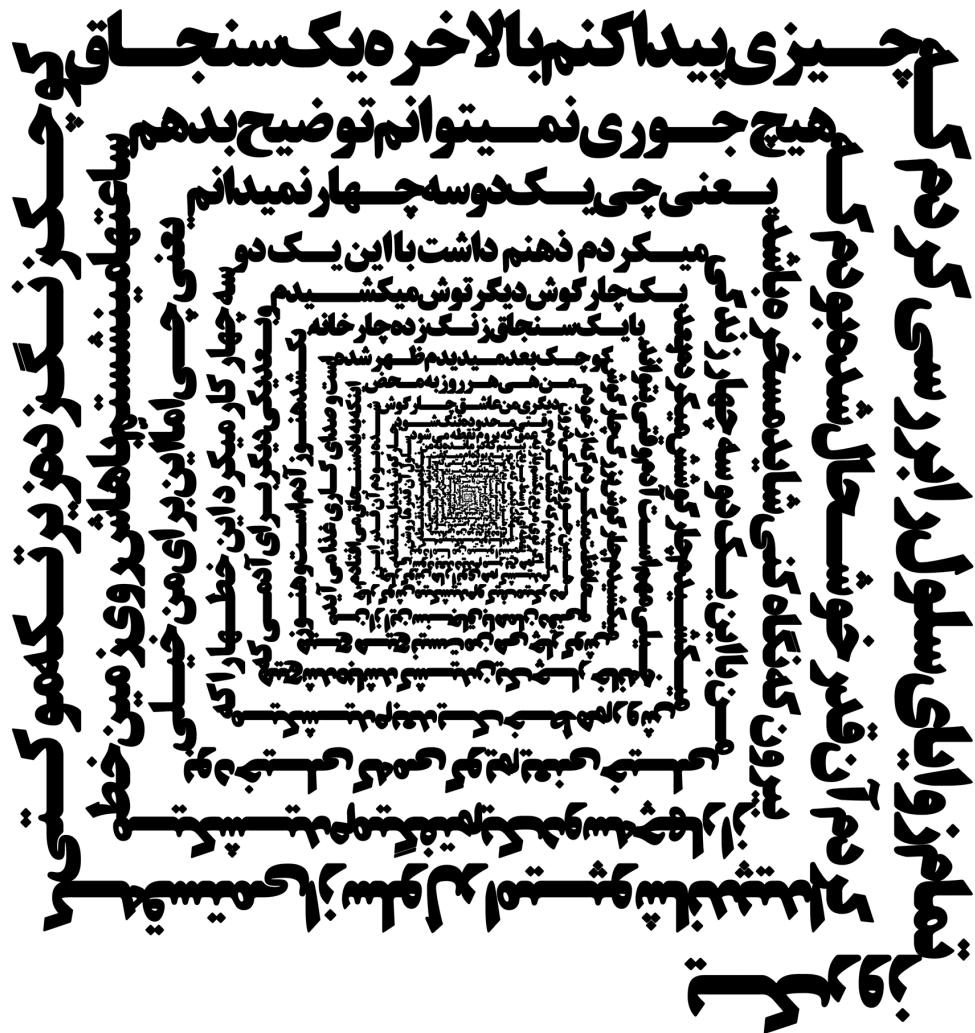


Figure 2-9

Barbad Golshiri, چارتو (Quod), 2010.

C-print on paper, 106.2 × 106.5 cm.

Edition of 9 (+1 AP).

Courtesy of the artist.

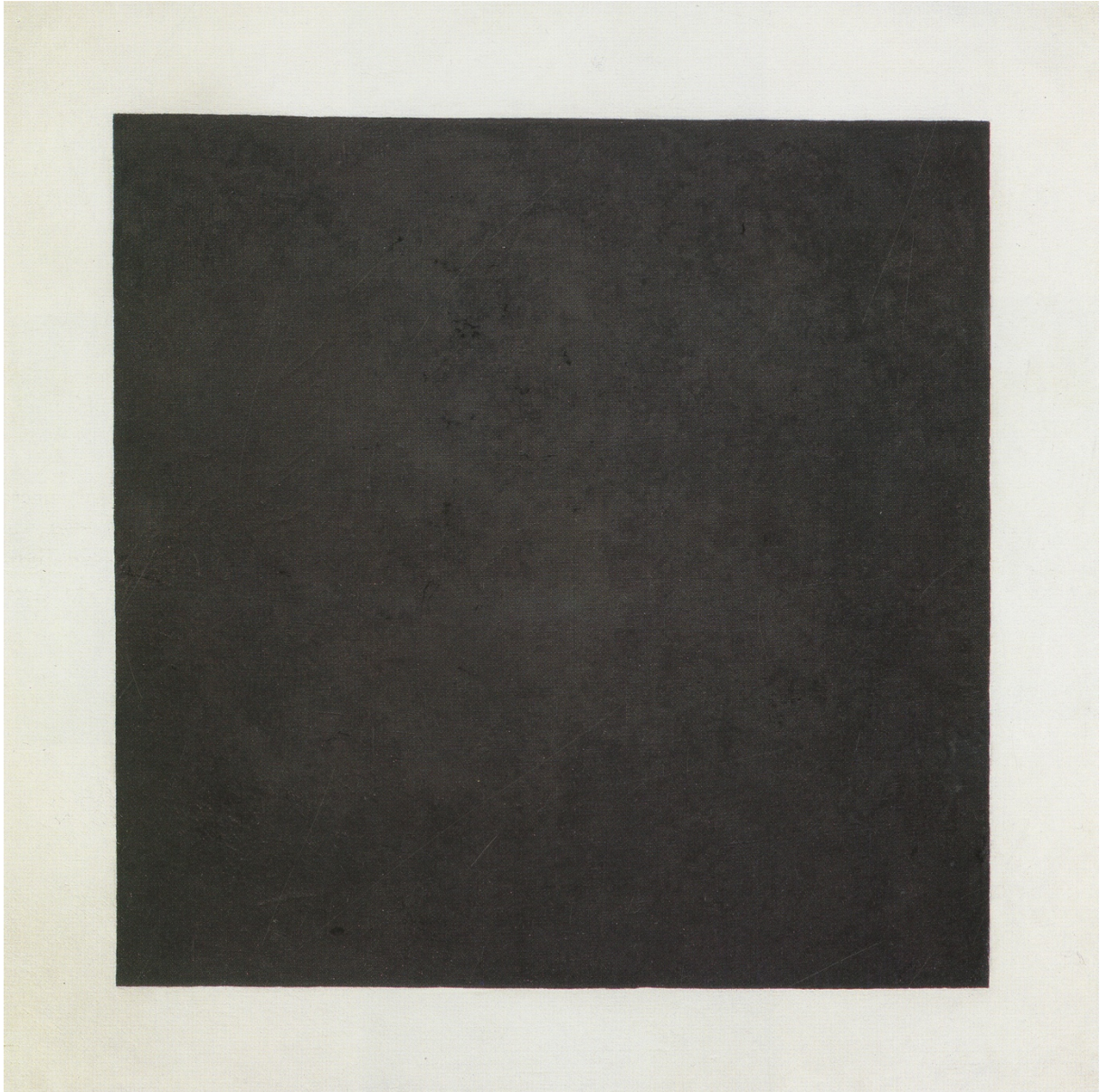


Figure 2-10

Kasimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1913.

Oil on canvas, 106.2 × 106.5 cm.

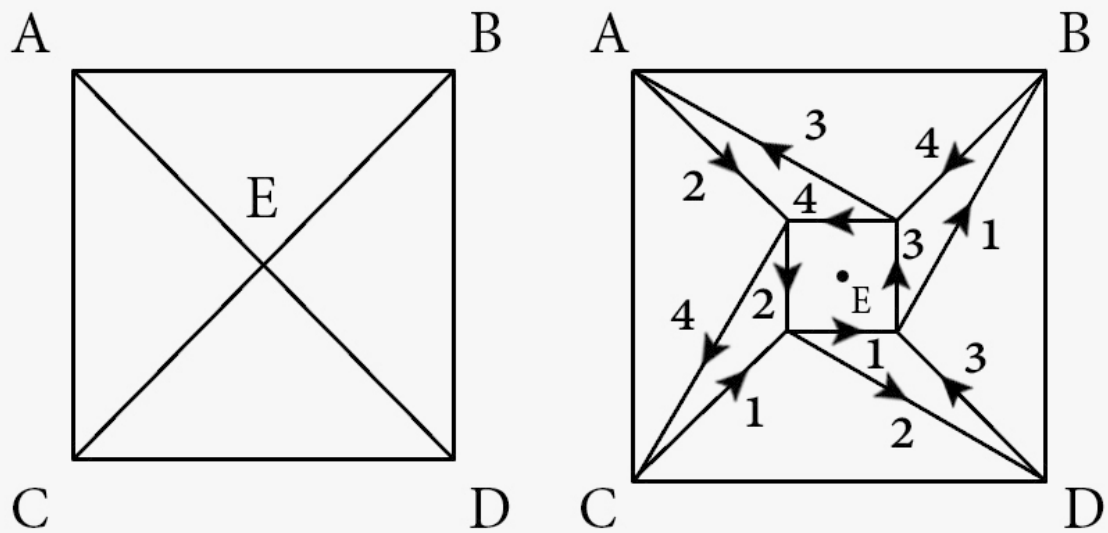
The State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg.



Figure 2-11

Samuel Beckett, *Quad*, 2015 performance of a TV play written in 1981.

The players (1, 2, 3,4) pace the given area, each following his particular course.
 Area: square. Length of side: 6 paces.



Course 1: AC, CB, BA, AD, DB, BC, CD, DA
 Course 2: BA, AD, DB, BC, CD, DA, AC, CB
 Course 3: CD, DA, AC, CB, BA, AD, DB, BC
 Course 2: DB, BC, CD, DA, AC, CB, BA, AD

Figure 2-12

Samuel Beckett, Diagram showing choreography for *Quad*, 1981.



Figure 2-13

Barbad Golshiri, *اشاعهی نظام مقدس (The Distribution of the Sacred System)*, 2010.

Installation and *aktion* (performance).

Silk screen print on canvas, 180 × 69 cm, unlimited editions.

Iron pulley: diameter: 150 cm, length: approximately 240 cm.

Courtesy of the artist and Aaran Art Gallery, Tehran.

Photograph: Olka Hedayat.



Figure 2-14

Barbad Golshiri, *The Distribution of the Sacred System*, 2010.

Installation, *aktion* (performance), and video documentation of performance.

Installation overview at Contemporary Art Museum,

University of Southern Florida.

Courtesy of the artist and Aaran Art Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 2-15

Barbad Golshiri, *Cura: The Rise of Aplasticism*, 2011.

Performance and installation.

Still from a performance at the 4th Moscow Biennial.

Solyanka State Gallery/Moscow Biennial, Moscow

Courtesy of the artist and Aaran Gallery, Tehran.

Photograph: Sergey Morozov.



Figure 2-16

Barbad Golshiri, *Cura: The Rise of Aplasticism*, 2011.

Performance and installation.

Still from video documentation of a performance at the 4th Moscow Biennial.

Solyanka State Gallery/Moscow Biennial, Moscow.

Courtesy of the artist and Aaran Gallery, Tehran.

Photograph: Sergey Morozov.

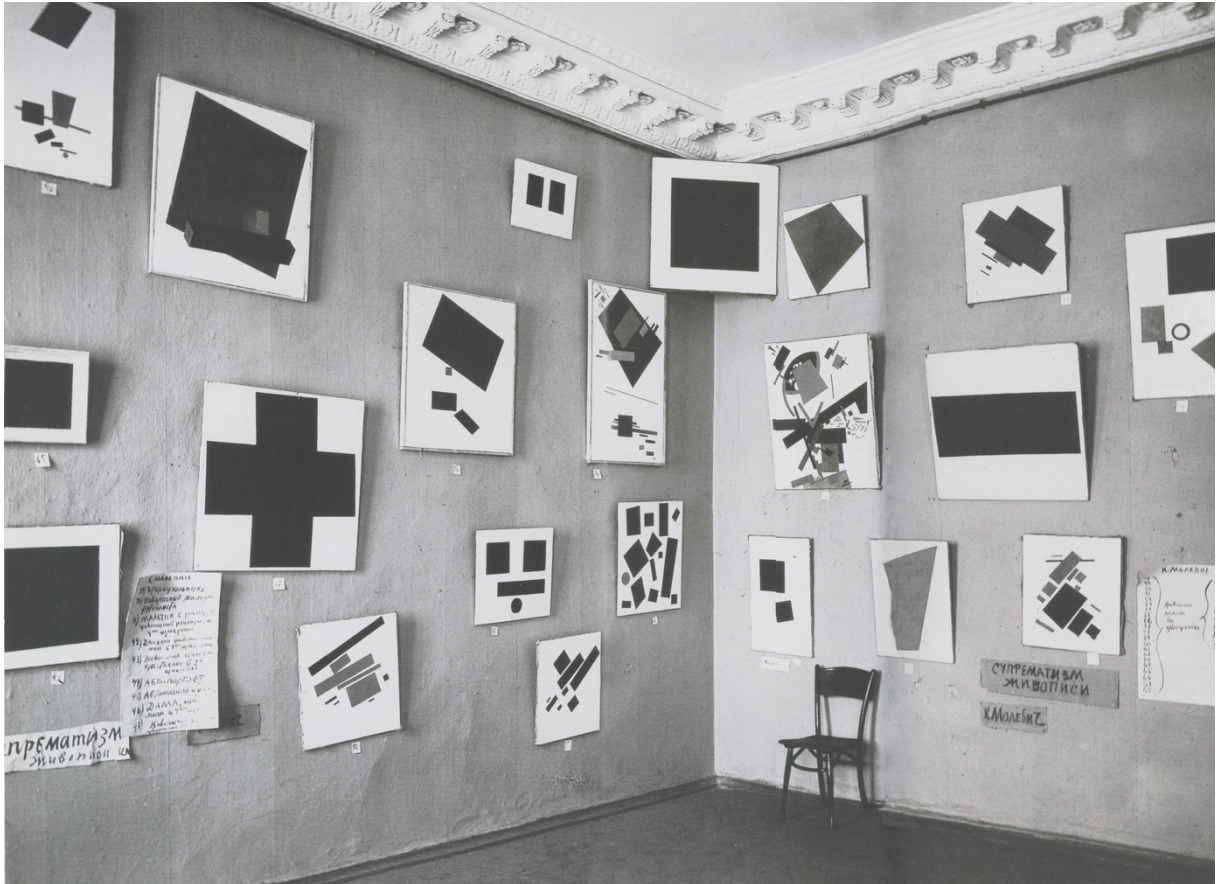


Figure 2-17

Kasimir Malevich, *Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0,10*
19 December 1915 – 17 January 1916, Petrograd.
Installation view.
Fondation Beyeler, Basel, Switzerland.



Figure 2-18

Kasimir Malevich, *Black Suprematic Square*, 1915.

Oil on canvas, 79.5 × 79.5 cm.

Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.



Figure 2-19

Barbad Golshiri, *The Untitled Tomb*, 2012.

Sculpture, iron stencil (and soot), 135 × 60.5 × 6.35 cm.

Edition of 3.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California.



Figure 2-20

Barbad Golshiri, *ه ه ه (Death Sentence)*, 2011-2013.

Memorial. Marble, $55 \times 107 \times 5$ and $56 \times 107 \times 4$ and $55 \times 120 \times 4$ cm.

Epitaph: Reversed Persian Braille.

Private collection.

Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2-21

Barbad Golshiri, ه ه ه (*Death Sentence*), 2011-2013 [detail].

Memorial. Marble, 55 × 107 × 5 and 56 × 107 × 4 and 55 × 120 × 4 cm.

Epitaph: Reversed Persian Braille.

Private collection.

Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2-22

Barbad Golshiri (in collaboration with Shahriar Hatami), *پان فان ع (Eyeck)*, 2008-2013.

A crypt lid for an unrealized performance. Oil on canvas, wood, iron, brass,
145 × 145 × 18 cm.

Epitaph: English imitation Braille.

Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2-23

Hieronymus Bosch, *The Extraction of the Stone of Madness*, ca. 1494.

Oil on board, 48 × 35 cm.

Museo del Prado, Madrid.

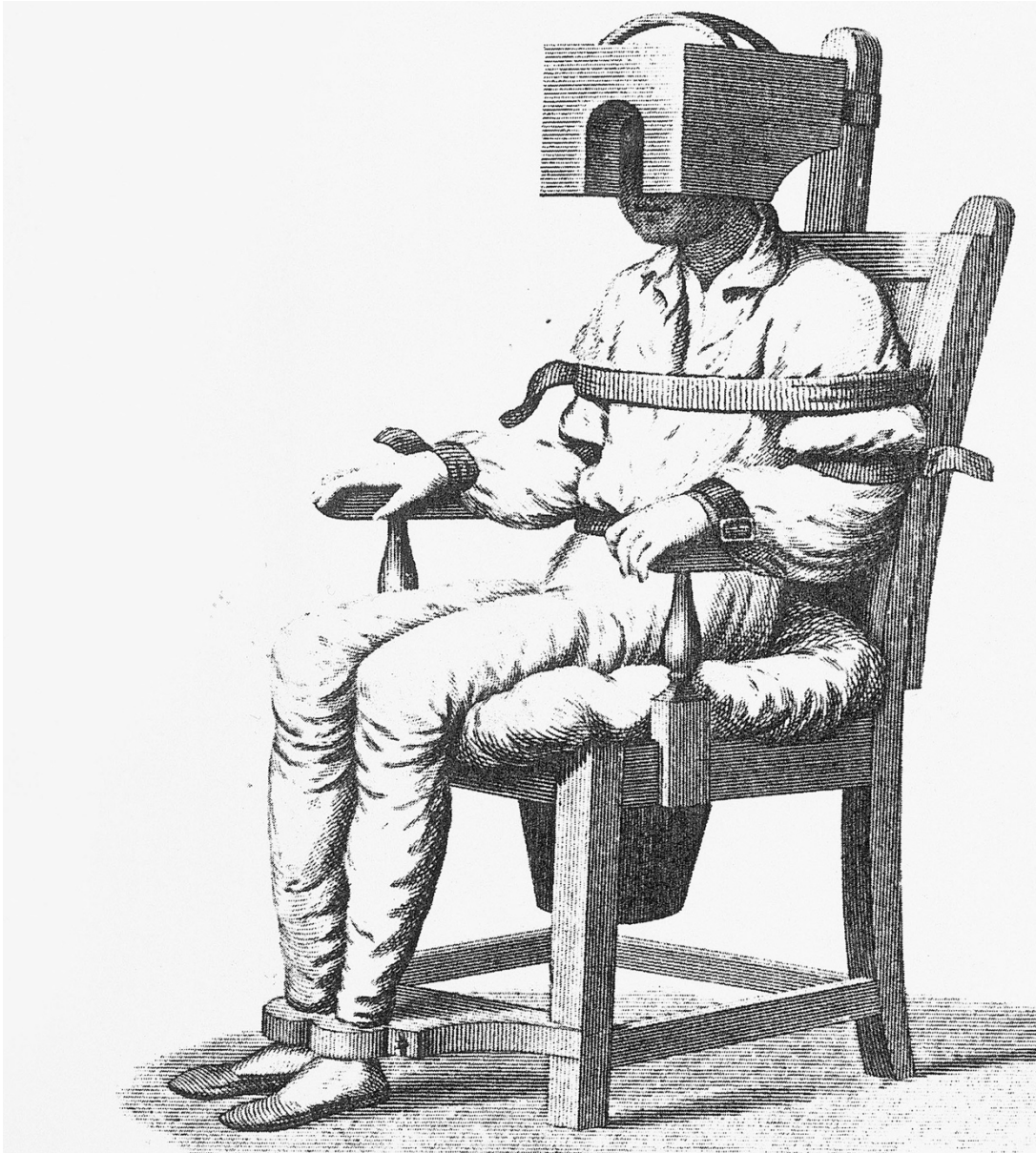


Figure 2-24

Illustration of Dr. Benjamin Rush's Tranquilizing Chair.

Image from Benjamin Rush's *Medical Inquiries on Diseases of the Mind* (1812).



Figure 2-25
Ghazaleh Hedayat, *Untitled* from *My Isfahan* series, 2002.
Analog Photography. C-print on photographic paper.
Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2-26
Ghazaleh Hedayat, *Untitled* from *My Isfahan* series, 2002.
Analog Photography. C-print on photographic paper.
Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2-27
Ghazaleh Hedayat, *Untitled* from *My Isfahan* series, 2002.
Analog Photography. C-print on photographic paper.
Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2-28

Ghazaleh Hedayat, *Untitled* from *Peepholes* series, 2005.

Analog Photography. C-print on photographic paper, 30 × 30 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2-29

Ghazaleh Hedayat, *Untitled*, 2005.
Single channel color video, 6':37". No sound.
Still from video.
Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2-30

Ghazaleh Hedayat, *Eve's Apple*, 2006.

Single channel color video, 7 minutes. No sound.

Still from video.

Courtesy of the artist and Azad Art Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 2-31

Ghazaleh Hedayat, *Untitled* from *Contacts* series, 2008.

C-print on photographic paper.

Private collection.

Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2-32

Ghazaleh Hedayat, *Untitled* from *Crust* series, 2013.

Photograph on canvas covered by animal skin.

Private collection.

Courtesy of the artist and Ag Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 2-33
Ghazaleh Hedayat, *Crust series*, 2013.
Installation view at Ag Gallery.
Courtesy of the artist.

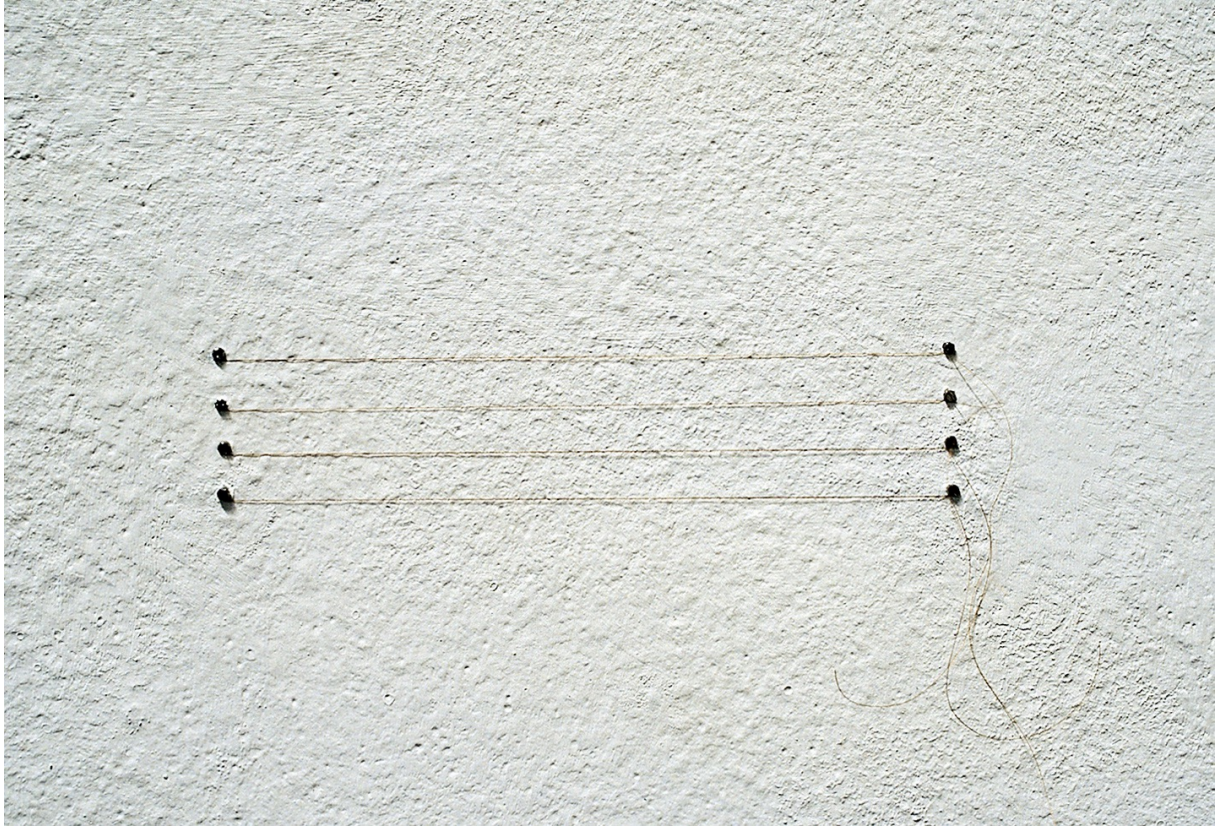


Figure 2-34

Ghazaleh Hedayat, *The Sound of My Hair*, 2005.
Installation. Hair, nail, and the sound of a hammer.
Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2-35

Homayoun Askari Sirizi, *A Preconceived War*, 2006.
Installation. Dimension variable.
Installation view at No. 13 Art Space, Tehran.
Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2-36

Homayoun Askari Sirizi, *U-turn to Utopia*, 2007.
 Installation. Dimension variable.
 Installation view at No. 13 Art Space, Tehran.
 Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2-37

Homayoun Askari Sirizi, *Keep Right*, 2013.
Installation with sound. Dimension variable.
Installation view at CAB Art Center, Brussels.
Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2-38

Homayoun Askari Sirizi, *Keep Right*, 2013.

Installation with sound. Dimension variable.

Installation view at CAB Art Center, Brussels.

Courtesy of the artist.

Photograph: A visitor listens to Homayoun Sirizi's *Keep Right*.

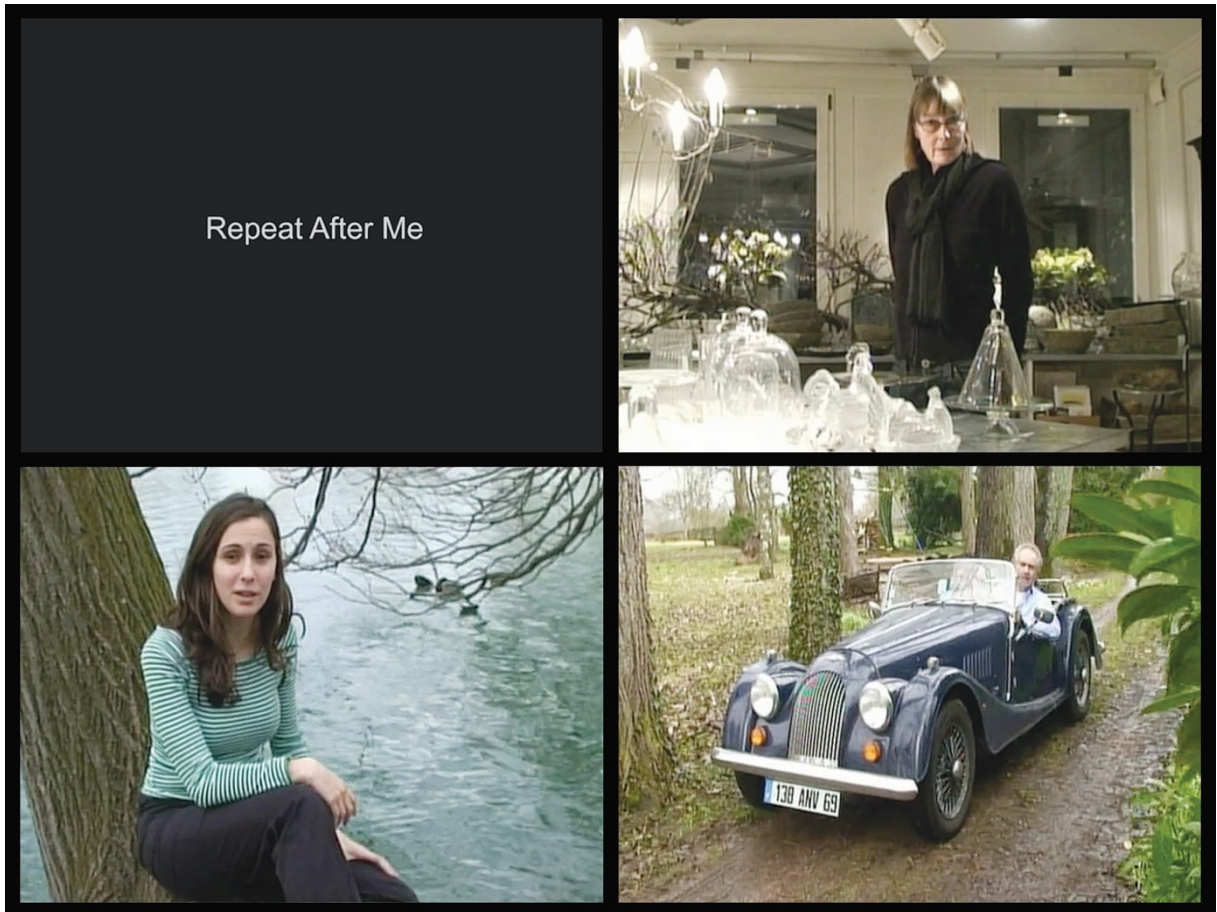


Figure 2-39

Shahab Fotouhi, *Repeat after Me*, 2008.
Stills from single channel color video with sound.
Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2-40

Babak Golkar, *Imposition No. 1*, 2008.

Acrylic on Persian carpet, framed, 92 × 137 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.

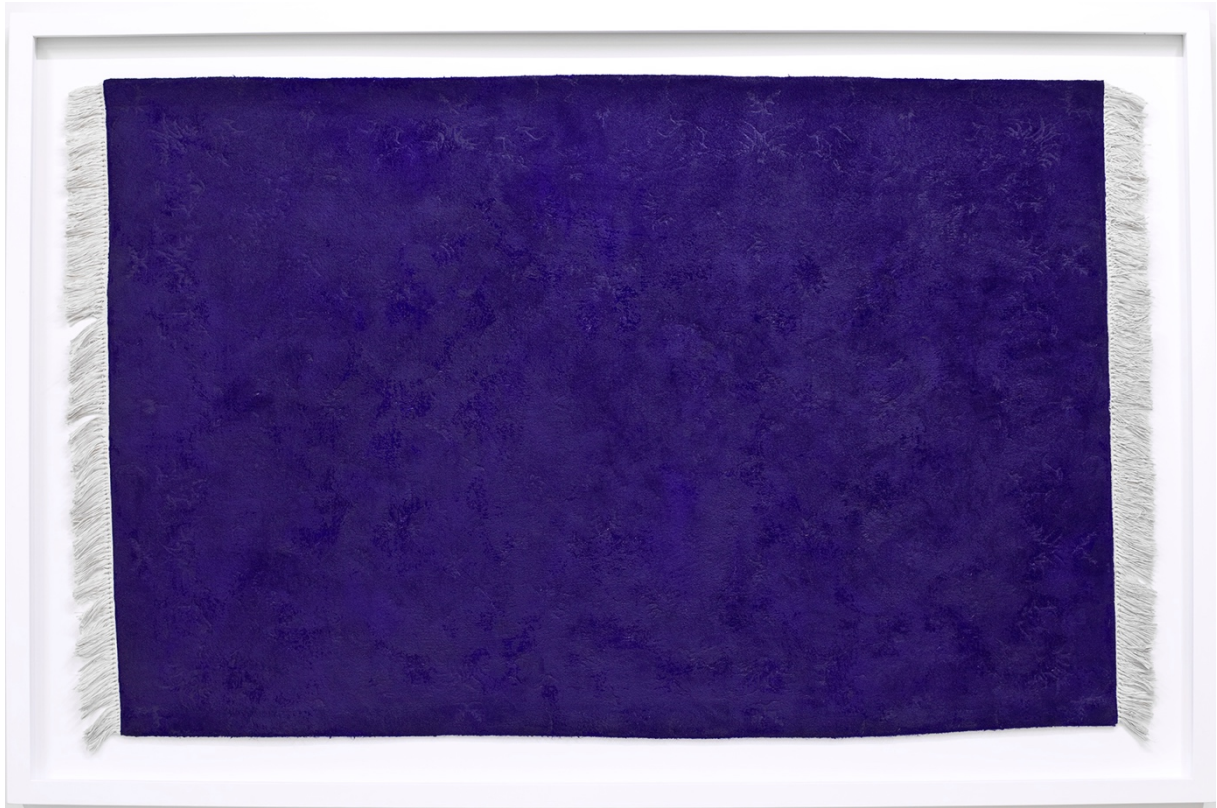


Figure 2-41

Babak Golkar, *Imposition No. 7 (Blue Gold)*, 2011.
Acrylic on Persian carpet, framed, 96.5 × 185.5 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

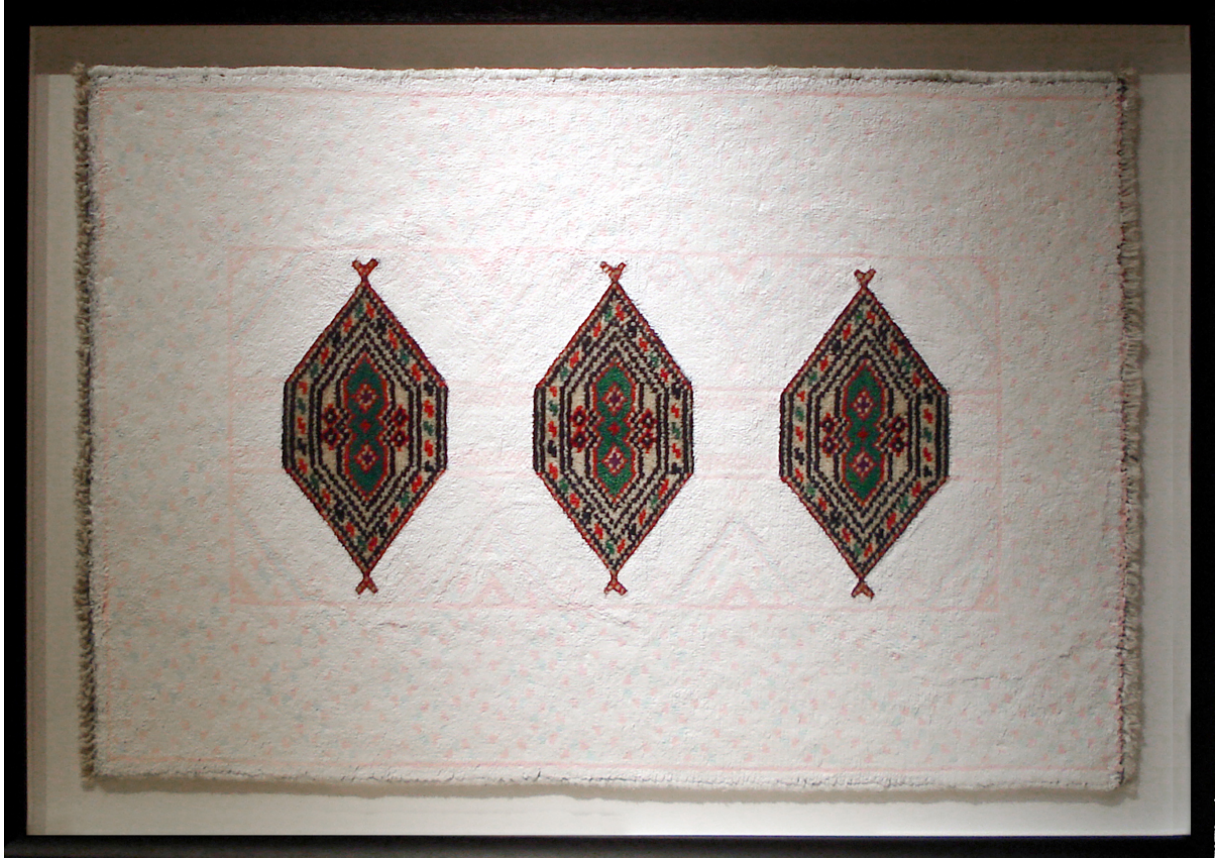


Figure 2-42

Babak Golkar, *Imposition No.2*, 2008.

Acrylic on Persian carpet, framed, 70 × 102 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2-43

Babak Golkar, *Negotiating the Space for Possible Coexistences No. 3*, 2010.

Installation. Persian carpet, wood, Plexiglas, lacquer paint, 100 × 147 × 116 cm.

Sammlung Sanziany and Palais Rasumofsky, Vienna.



Figure 2-44

Babak Golkar, *Grounds For Standing and Understanding*, 2012.

Installation. Persian carpet, wood, lacquer, drywall, interior paint, dimension variable.

Installation view at Charles H. Scott Gallery, Vancouver.

Studio Babak Golkar and The Jameel Collection, London.

Photograph: Scott Massey.



Figure 2-45

Babak Golkar, *Grounds For Standing and Understanding*, 2012.

Installation. Persian carpet, wood, lacquer, drywall, interior paint, dimension variable.

Installation view (detail) at Charles H. Scott Gallery, Vancouver.

Studio Babak Golkar and The Jameel Collection, London.

Photograph: Scott Massey.



Figure 2-46

Babak Golkar, *Grounds For Standing and Understanding*, 2012.

Installation. Persian carpet, wood, lacquer, drywall, interior paint, dimension variable.

Installation view (detail) at Charles H. Scott Gallery, Vancouver.

Studio Babak Golkar and The Jameel Collection, London.

Photograph: Scott Massey.



Figure 3-1

Amir Mo'bed, تکرار (*Recurrence*), 2013.

Performance. Cow dung and soil.

Still from performance at Azad Art Gallery.

Azad Art Gallery, Tehran.

Photograph: Ali Shirkhodaie.



Figure 3-2

Amir Mo'bed, *بیا نوازشم کن (Come Caress Me)*, 2010.

Performance.

Still from performance at Azad Art Gallery.

Azad Art Gallery, Tehran.

Photograph: Zarvan Rouhbakhshan.

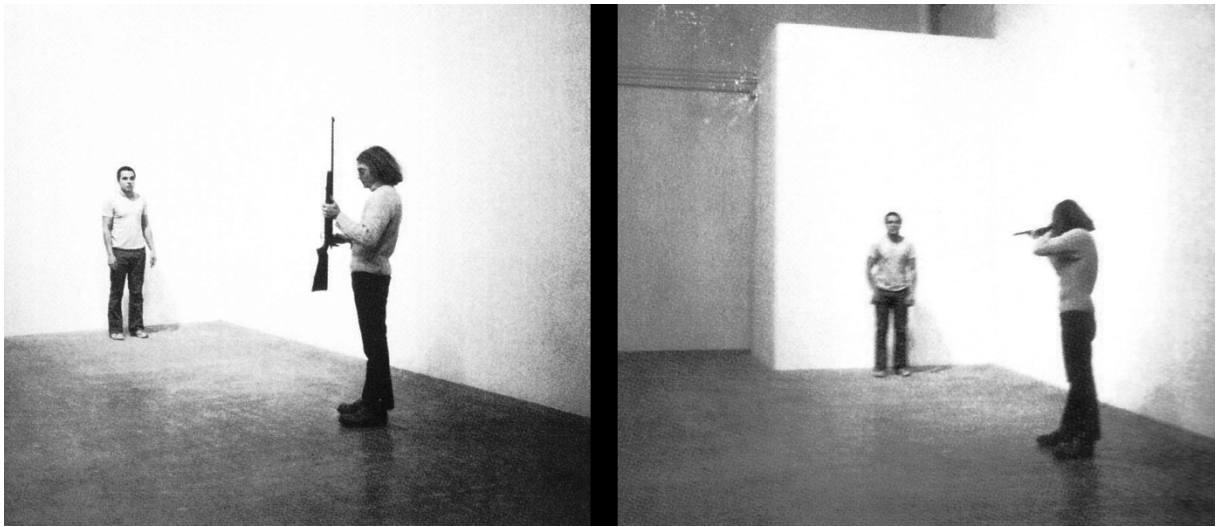


Figure 3-3

Chris Burden, *Shoot*, 1971.

Performance.

Photographic documentation of performance at F-space, Santa Ana, California.

The Chris Burden Estate and Gagosian Gallery, New York.

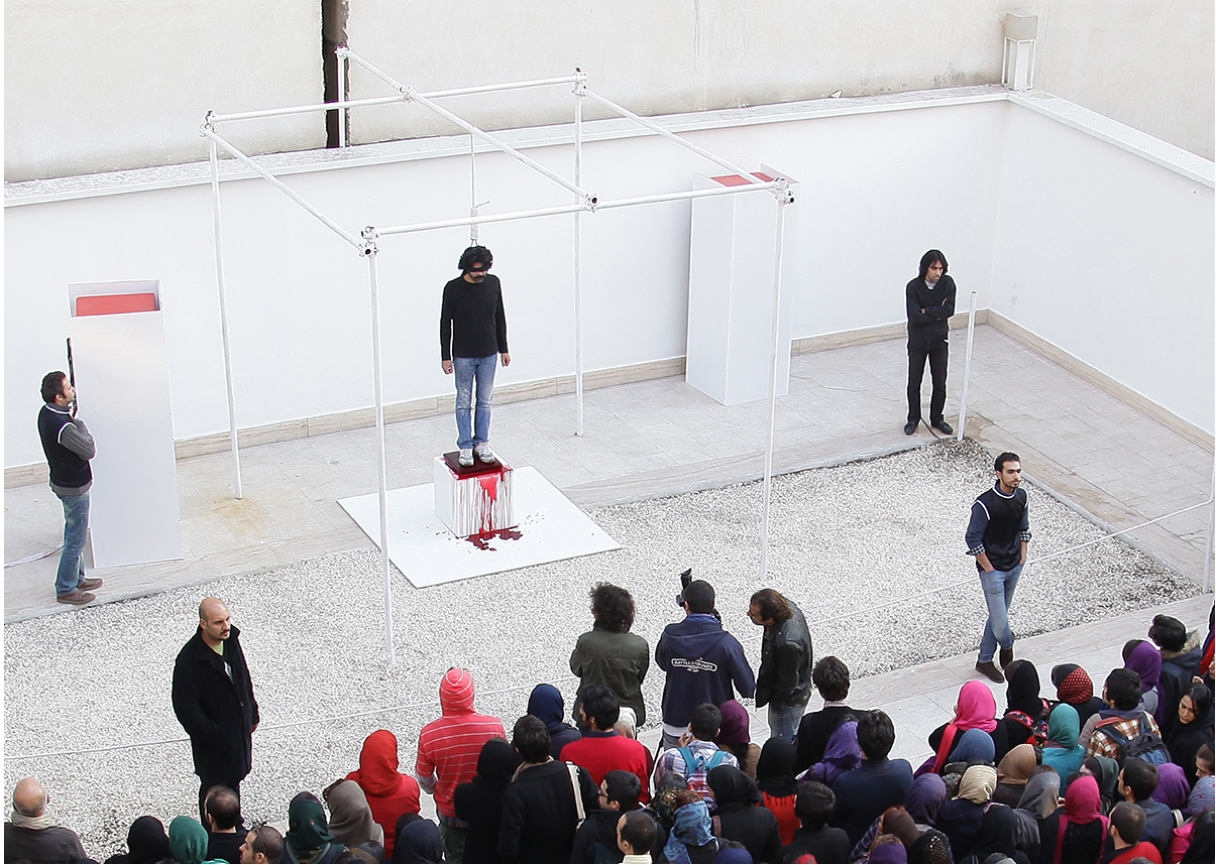


Figure 3-4

Amir Mo'bed, *کشتزار (Field)*, 2011.

Performance.

Photographic documentation of performance at Mohsen Art Gallery, Tehran.

Mohsen Art Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 3-5

Gohar Dashti, *Me, She, and the Others*, 2009.

Photography. Archival digital pigment print, 23 × 42 cm.

Edition of 10.

Kashya Hildebrand Gallery, Zurich.



Figure 3-6

Gohar Dashti, *Today's Life and War #3*, 2008.

Photography. Archival digital pigment print, 77 × 112 cm.

Edition of 7 (+2 AP).

Officine dell'Imagine Contemporary Art, Milan.



Figure 3-7

Shadi Ghadirian, *Nil, Nil #10*, 2008.
Photography. Digital print, 76 × 114 cm.
Edition of 10.
Officine dell'Imagine Contemporary Art, Milan.



Figure 3-8

Mahmoud Bakhshi Mo'akhar, *Air Pollution of Iran*, 2004-2006.

Installation. 8 synthetic fabric flags , each $235 \times 139 \times 5.5$ cm.

Installation view at Tate Modern, London.

Tate Modern, London.



Figure 3-9

Homayoun Askari Sirizi, *تستِ مردمسالاری (Test of Democracy)*, 2005.

Installation. Post box, ballot box, donation box, and trash can, dimension variable.

Installation view at No. 13 Art Space, Tehran.

Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3-10

Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence*, 1994. From series *Women of Allah*.
Photography. Black and White C-print and ink, 142 × 98 cm.
Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.



Figure 3-11

Shadi Ghadirian, *Untitled* (from the *Qajar* series), 1998.
Photography. Gelatin-silver bromide print, 25.56 × 19.37 cm.
Edition of 15.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California.



Figure 4-1

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *Camera Rosea* series), 2007.

Photography. Fuji Crystal Archive print, 25.4 × 25.4 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4-2

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *Camera Rosea* series), 2007.

Photography. Fuji Crystal Archive print, 25.4 × 25.4 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4-3

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *Camera Rosea* series), 2007.

Photography. Fuji Crystal Archive print, 25.4 × 25.4 cm.

Robert Klein Gallery, Boston.



Figure 4-4

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *Camera Rosea* series), 2007.

Photography. Fuji Crystal Archive print, 25.4 × 25.4 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4-5

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *Tehran, Undated* series), 2009.

Photography. C-print, 70 × 70 cm.

Courtesy of the artist and Azad Art Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 4-6

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *Tehran, Undated* series), 2009.

Photography. C-print, 70 × 70 cm.

Courtesy of the artist and Azad Art Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 4-7

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *Things and Lines* series), 2010.

Photography. C-print, 15 × 20 cm.

Courtesy of the artist and Azad Art Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 4-8

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *Present Past* series), 2014.

Digital photography.

Inkjet print on Epson Traditional Photo Paper, 17.7 × 26.7 cm.

Edition of 5 (+1 AP).

Courtesy of the artist and Ag Art Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 4-9

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *Present Past* series), 2014.

Digital photography.

Inkjet print on Epson Traditional Photo Paper, 17.7 × 26.7 cm.

Edition of 5 (+1 AP).

Courtesy of the artist and Ag Art Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 4-10

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *Present Past* series), 2014.

Digital photography.

Inkjet print on Epson Traditional Photo Paper, 37.8 × 52.7 cm.

Edition of 5 (+1 AP).

Courtesy of the artist and Ag Art Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 4-11

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *Present Past* series), 2014.

Digital photography.

Inkjet print on Epson Traditional Photo Paper, 17.7 × 26.7 cm.

Edition of 5 (+1 AP).

Courtesy of the artist and Ag Art Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 4-12

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *Present Past* series), 2014.

Digital photography.

Inkjet print on Epson Traditional Photo Paper, 17.7 × 26.7 cm.

Edition of 5 (+1 AP).

Courtesy of the artist and Ag Art Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 4-13

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *Present Past* series), 2014.

Digital photography.

Inkjet print on Epson Traditional Photo Paper, 60 × 90 cm.

Edition of 5 (+1 AP).

Courtesy of the artist and Ag Art Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 4-14

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *Present Past* series), 2014.

Digital photography.

Inkjet print on Epson Traditional Photo Paper, 17.7 × 26.7 cm.

Edition of 5 (+1 AP).

Courtesy of the artist and Ag Art Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 4-15

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *Present Past* series), 2014.

Digital photography.

Inkjet print on Epson Traditional Photo Paper, 17.7 × 23.7 cm.

Edition of 5 (+1 AP).

Courtesy of the artist and Ag Art Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 4-16 (top) & Figure 4-17 (bottom)

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *Present Past* series), 2014.

Digital photography.

Inkjet print on Epson Traditional Photo Paper, 14 × 43.5 cm.

Edition of 5 (+1 AP).

Courtesy of the artist and Ag Art Gallery, Tehran.

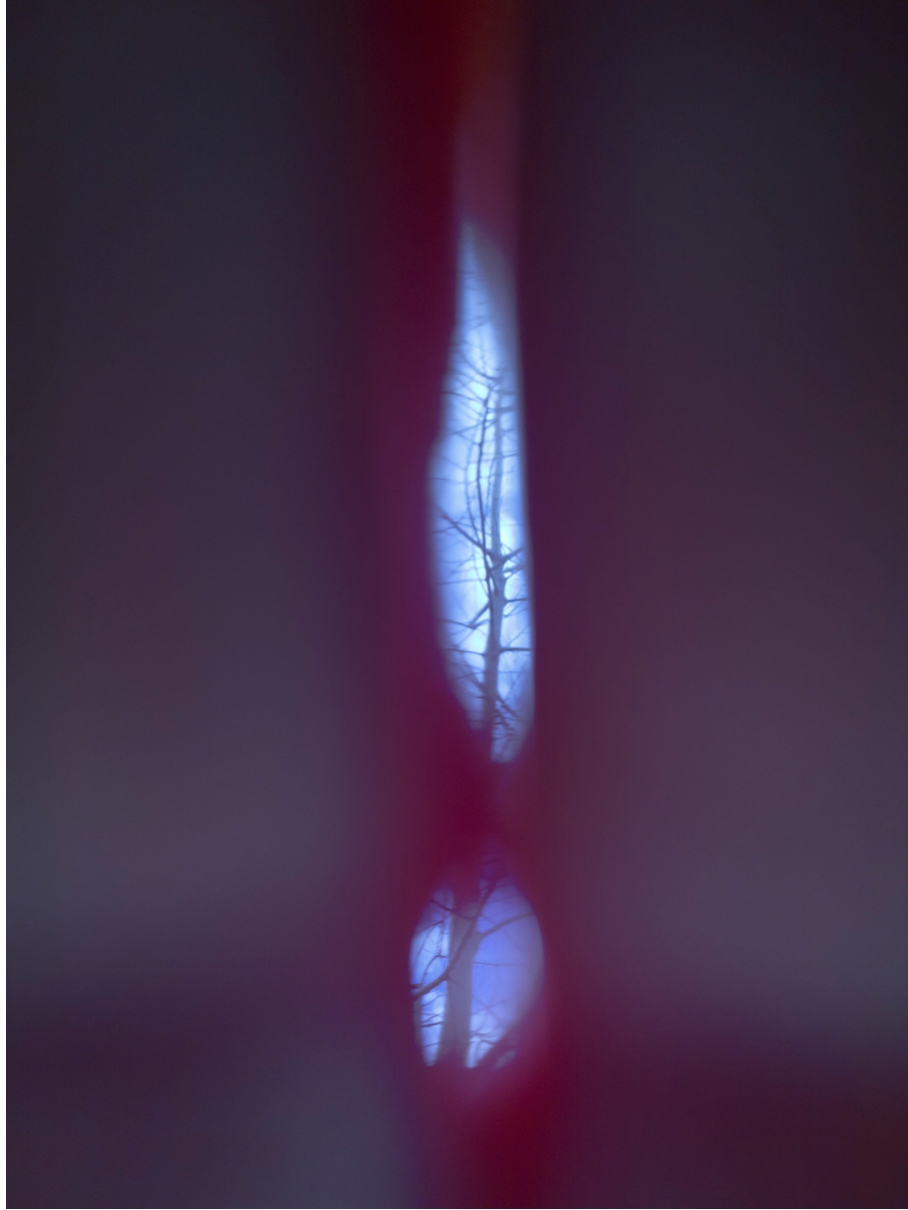


Figure 4-18

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the بین و لاین (Between and Non-between) series), 2017.

Digital photography.

Inkjet print on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag Baryta, 80 × 60 cm.

Edition of 5 (+2 AP).

Courtesy of the artist and Dastan +2 Gallery, Tehran.

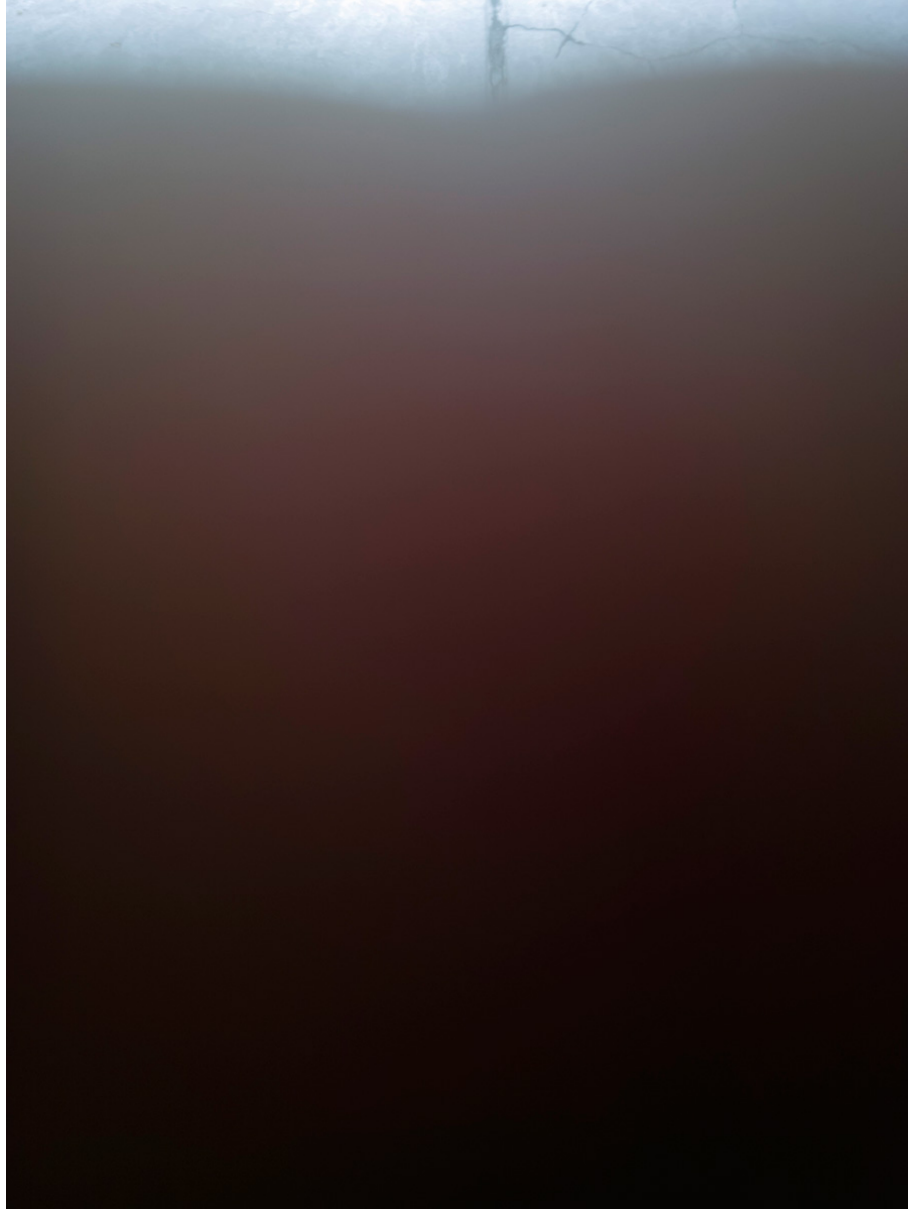


Figure 4-19

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the بین و لاین *(Between and Non-between)* series), 2017.

Digital photography.

Inkjet print on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag Baryta, 19 × 14 cm.

Edition of 5 (+2 AP).

Courtesy of the artist and Dastan +2 Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 4-20

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *بين و لا بين* (*Between and Non-between*) series), 2017.

Digital photography.

Inkjet print on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag Baryta, 80 × 60 cm.

Edition of 5 (+2 AP).

Courtesy of the artist and Dastan +2 Gallery, Tehran.

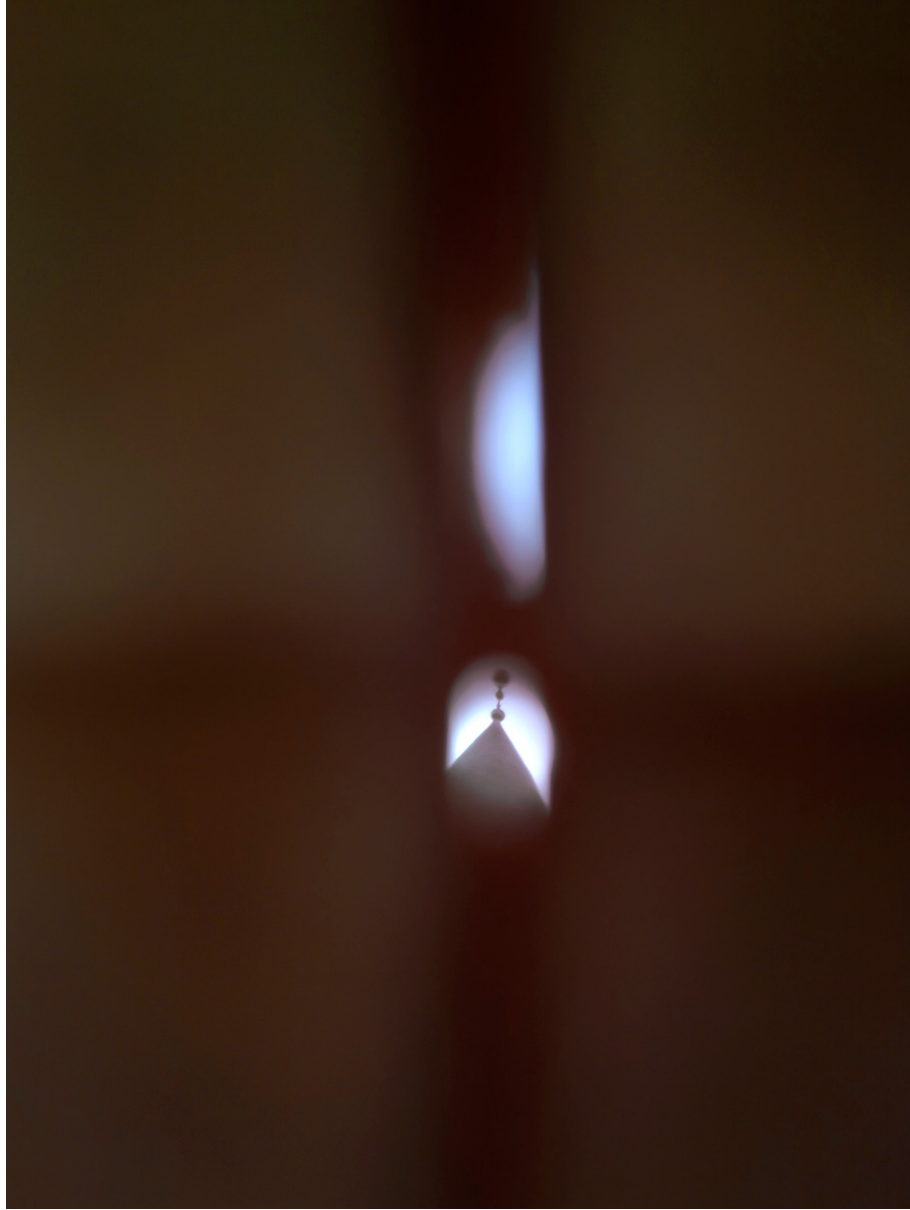


Figure 4-21

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the *بين و لا بين* (*Between and Non-between*) series), 2017.

Digital photography.

Inkjet print on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag Baryta, 19 × 14 cm.

Edition of 5 (+2 AP).

Courtesy of the artist and Dastan +2 Gallery, Tehran.

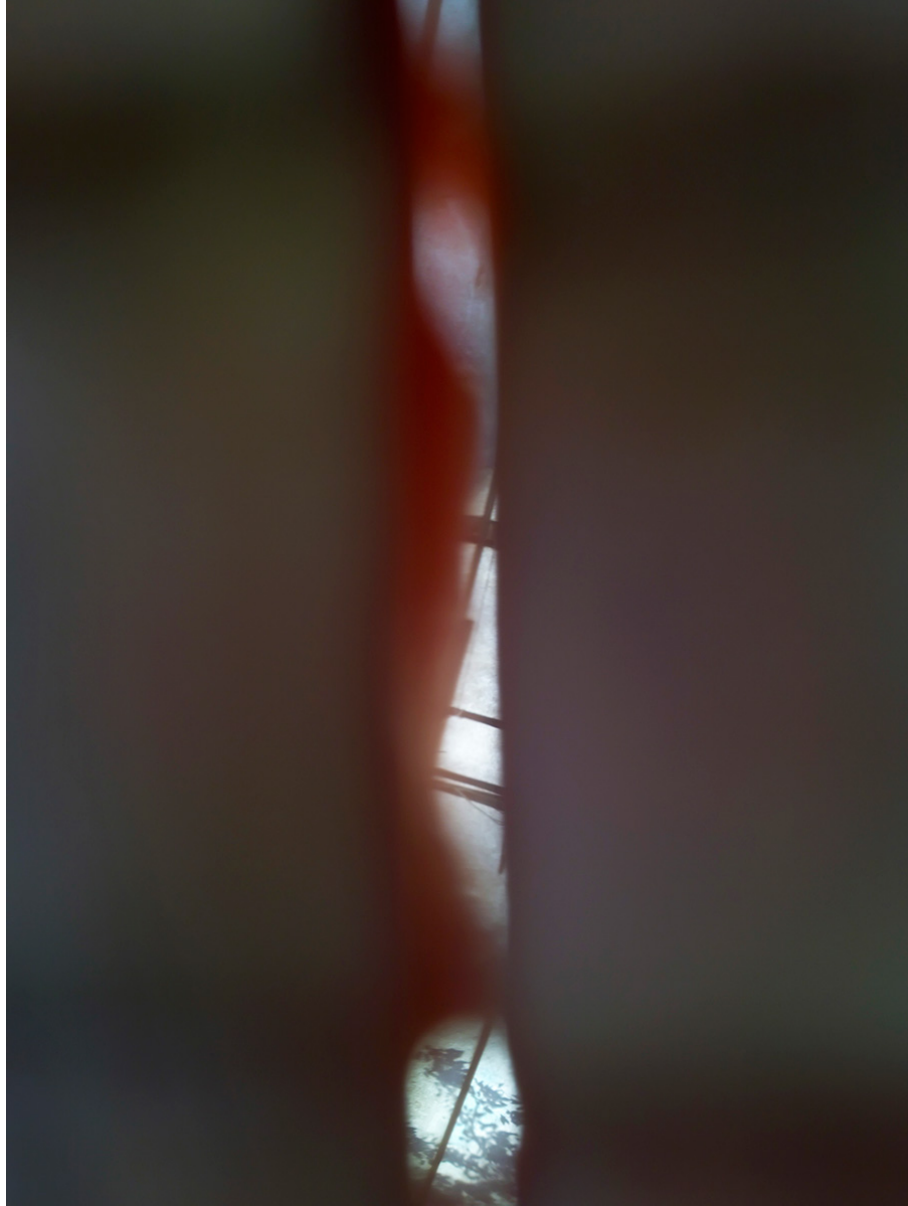


Figure 4-22

Mehran Mohajer, *Untitled* (from the بین و لاین (Between and Non-between) series), 2017.

Digital photography.

Inkjet print on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag Baryta, 19 × 14 cm.

Edition of 5 (+2 AP).

Courtesy of the artist and Dastan +2 Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 4-23

Javad Modarresi, *Untitled* (from the *خورنق ۲ (Khavarnagh 2)* series), 2014.

Charcoal, mortar, and glue on burlap secured of wooden canvas frame, 120 × 155 cm.

Courtesy of the artist and Azad Art Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 4-24

Javad Modarresi, *Untitled* (from the *خورنق ۲ (Khavarnagh 2)* series), 2014. Charcoal, mortar, and glue on cardboard secured on canvas, 60 × 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Azad Art Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 4-25

Kamal ed-Din Behzad, *The Construction of the Palace of Khavarnagh*, ca. 1494-1495.

From *Khamsah* of Nezami, f. 154 v, ca. 20 × 14 cm.

The British Library, London.



Figure 4-26

Shahpour Pouyan, After 'Building of Castle of Khawarnaq, Kamal Al Din Bihzad, 1494 AD,' 2015.

Mixed media, 13 × 18 cm.

Copperfield Gallery, London.



Figure 4-27

Javad Modarresi, *Untitled* (from the *خورنق ۲* (*Khavarnagh 2*) series), 2014.

Charcoal, mortar, glue, and human hair on burlap secured on wooden frame, 120 × 155 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and Azad Art Gallery, Tehran.



Figure 4-28

Javad Modarresi, *Untitled* (from the *خونق ۲ (Khavarnagh 2)* series), 2014.

Charcoal, mortar, glue, and human hair on cardboard secured on wooden frame, 60 × 80 cm.

Courtesy of the artist and Azad Art Gallery, Tehran.

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