



Iran: Art and Discourse

Saturday October 26, 2013, 10:00 am – 6:00 pm
 Asia Society, 725 Park Avenue, New York City



This symposium examines political economies of contemporary art within Iran and abroad—its production and distribution, the mechanisms of circulation in Iran and the United States, and how ideologies and their attendant policies shape transfer of knowledge and praxis from one context to another.

Copresented by Asia Society and Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania

Convened by Sandra Skurvida

In conjunction with the exhibition *Iran Modern*, on view September 6, 2013 through January 5, 2014

Cover image: Barbad Golshiri, *The Distribution of The Sacred System*, 2010

For more information, please visit asiasociety.org

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Schedule

10:00 am–11:00 am

Welcome and Introductory Remarks

Melissa Chiu, Museum Director and Senior Vice President, Global Arts and Cultural Programs, Asia Society; **Monroe Price**, Director of Center for Global Communication, University of Pennsylvania;

Sandra Skurvida, Symposium Convener

Keynote: **Hamid Keshmirshakan** (Tehran), *Art Practice and Dissemination in Contemporary Iran: Discourses and Mechanisms*

11:15 am–1:00 pm

Panel on the Discursive Text. Moderator: Roxanne Varzi

Shiva Balaghi (Brown University), *Exhibiting the West in Iran and Iran in the West*

Babak Elahi (Rochester Institute of Technology), *The Critic as Activist: Cultural Commentary in Iran's Digital Transnational Aesthetic Sphere*

Sohrab Mahdavi (Tehran Avenue), *Artistic Statement: An Instrument to Get Closer or Become Ethereal*

1:00 pm–2:00 pm

Lunch Break

2:00 pm–3:30 pm

Panel on the Curatorial. Moderator: Sandra Skurvida

Fereshteh Daftari (Guest Curator of *Iran Modern*, Asia Society, New York), *Introducing Modern and Contemporary Art by Iranian Artists: A Curatorial Report*

Azar Mahmoudian (Independent Curator, Tehran), *Politics of Display: Reflections on International Exhibitions of Iranian Art*

Anna Vanzan (University of Milan), *Posht-e Pardeh, Behind the Painting: Women Gallerists in Contemporary Iran*

4:00 pm–6:00 pm

Panel on Art Praxis. Moderator: Shiva Balaghi

Roxanne Varzi (University of California, Irvine), *Facing the Future: The Artistic and Diasporic Afterlife of the Iran-Iraq War*

Sohrab Kashani (Artist and Producer, Tehran), *Alternative(s) in Tehran: Art Space and Practices*

Slavs and Tatars, *The Transliterate Tease*

Endnote

Hamid Dabashi (Columbia University). Discussion.

6:00 pm–7:00 pm

Reception at Asia Society

Bios and Abstracts

Shiva Balaghi

Exhibiting the West in Iran and Iran in the West

W. J. T. Mitchell famously asked “What do pictures want?” In this talk, I’ll ask a related question, “What do art exhibitions want?” Put another way, what kind of work do we ask of art exhibitions? Exhibitions can be used as promotional tools for artists, collectors, museums, institutions, corporations, and states. Exhibitions often serve as a stimulus for related scholarly activity such as art criticism, scholarly publications, and university instruction on related topics. Exhibitions can also play a central role in cultural diplomacy, creating opportunities for mutual understanding and dialogue between states. Exhibitions designed within a temporal frame ultimately present a historical narrative; visual culture becomes a template for telling a particular history of a time and place. In his work *Museum Memories*, Didier Maleuvre argued “art makes history.” Museum exhibitions can be read as a pictorial representation of cultural authenticity, the aesthetic essence of a people. After visiting Arthur Upham Pope’s historic 1940 exhibition “Six Thousand Years of Persian Art,” featuring some 2800 Iranian objects in Manhattan’s Union Club, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote: “Here is an art which has survived 6000 years of invasion, war, tyranny, prosperity, and power. Here is the real proof that the spirit as expressed through the arts transcends all material things.” Highlighting some historic exhibitions of Iranian art in the United States and Western art in Iran from the 1940s to the present, I’ll examine the layered meanings and multifarious impacts of art exhibitions in contemporary society.

Shiva Balaghi is a cultural historian of the Middle East, who teaches Art History and History at Brown University as the Laya Khadjavi Visiting Professor of Iranian Studies. Balaghi is a Contributing Editor of *Jadaliyya* and a Trustee of the American Institute of Iranian Studies. Her books include *Saddam Hussein: A Biography* (2005); *Picturing Iran: Art, Society, and Revolution* (coedited, 2002); and *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East* (coedited, 1994). Balaghi has published widely on Iranian visual culture and contemporary Islamic Art. She is currently completing a book on knowledge and power in Iran from 1848–1953. Before coming to Brown, she was Associate Director of the Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at NYU for a decade. She has taught at the University of Vermont and the University of Michigan.

Hamid Dabashi

Endnote

Hamid Dabashi is the Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York. He has taught and delivered lectures in many North and Latin American, European, Arab, and Iranian universities. He is a founding member of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society, as well as a founding member of the Center for Palestine Studies at Columbia University. He has written 25 books, edited four, and contributed chapters to many more. He is also the author of over 100 essays, articles, and book reviews in major scholarly and peer reviewed journals on subjects ranging from Iranian Studies, medieval and modern Islam, comparative literature, world cinema, and the philosophy of art (trans-aesthetics). A selected sample of his writing is coedited by Andrew Davison and Himadeep Muppidi, *The World is my Home: A Hamid Dabashi Reader* (Transaction 2010).

Fereshteh Daftari

Introducing Modern and Contemporary Art by Iranian Artists: A Curatorial Report

New York, in spite of its cosmopolitanism, has not always been receptive to works by Iranian artists. The presentation/paper will map out the inclusion of Iranian artists in thematic exhibitions organized by Fereshteh Daftari not just in New York, but also in Paris and Vancouver. Through this account some of the larger issues, such as funding, sanctions, and museum policies, will be addressed.

Fereshteh Daftari is an independent curator based in New York City and cocurator of the current exhibition at Asia Society, “Iran Modern.” From 1988 to 2009 she worked in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art where she curated numerous exhibitions with international artists, including *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, 2006. Revisiting art by Middle Eastern artists, she curated an exhibition of performance art with Iranian artists for Iranian Arts Now festival in Paris in 2012; and she guest curated *Safar/Voyage: Contemporary Works by Arab, Iranian and Turkish Artists* for MOA in Vancouver in 2013. Her curatorial research on modern Iranian art resulted in a guest-curated exhibition for New York University’s Grey Art Gallery (2002) and an essay, *Another Modernism: An Iranian Perspective*. She obtained a PhD from Columbia University in 1988 and her thesis, *The Influence of Persian Art on Gauguin, Matisse, and*

Kandinsky, was published in 1991. Her many recent publications include essays on contemporary artists such as Ali Banisadr and Raqib Shaw.

Babak Elahi

The Critic as Activist: Cultural Commentary in Iran's Digital Transnational Aesthetic Sphere

Within a year of the summer 2009 protests in Tehran, the culture and arts website *TehranAvenue* closed down. In this presentation, I use qualitative data—interviews with the site's creators and contributors—to show that the closure had as much to do with the limits of the communities its creators had established over the preceding ten years as it did with any political fallout from the protests. Nevertheless, I also argue—through content analysis—that the website participated in a transnational Iranian aesthetic sphere (as defined by Kenneth Tucker, Jr., borrowing from Jürgen Habermas). Through this participation, the team at TA brought to light a complex set of negotiations between the politics of Iranian theocracy and those of North American and European capital and consumer culture.

Attempting to chart a course between flawed and potentially harmful social and political formations at home and abroad, TA writers used cultural commentary as a kind of transnational intellectual activism. TA charted an iconoclastic course between the rock of Iranian limits on free speech and the hard place of hyper consumerist North American, European, and even East Asian societies, whose simulacra dot Iran's cityscapes. The writers and creators at TA saw their role as critics as crucial for public discourse in Iran and its diaspora. It is hoped that this presentation leads to future study of a virtual Iranian aesthetic sphere: a transnational network of socially engaged critical discourse on Iranian art at home and abroad.

Babak Elahi is the Associate Dean in the College of Liberal Arts at Rochester Institute of Technology where he also teaches in the Department of English. His scholarship encompasses American studies and Iranian diasporic studies. His publications include *The Fabric of American Literary Realism* (2009), "Poisons and Remedies in Sadegh Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*" (*Middle Eastern Literatures*, 2012), and "Crossing Tehran Avenue: Digital and Urban Spaces in Tehran" (*Cultural Studies*, 2012). His work in progress includes further exploration of Iran's digital diaspora, particularly by seeking narratives of production from diasporic Iranian website producers; and a book manuscript on illness as metaphor in Iranian fiction and film.

Sohrab Kashani

Alternative(s) in Tehran: Art Space and Practices

Sohrab Kashani will introduce Sazmanab Center for Contemporary Art and discuss some of its projects. He will give a brief overview of Tehran's art scene and will talk about independent and alternative spaces and projects, artists and performers who have worked in the public sphere; as well as his own experience as a socially engaged artist.

Sohrab Kashani is an interdisciplinary artist, curator, and cultural producer based in Tehran. His current art projects include ongoing collaborations with Conflict Kitchen, a project by Jon Rubin and Dawn Weleski in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, featuring Kashani's human avatar in *The Foreigner*; and with OtherIS directed by Sandra Skurvida, featuring his video art and comic books. His curated projects in 2013 include *SubTehran: Subjective Truth from Tehran* at the Center for Contemporary Art–Tbilisi; and *Still Lives*, a video art exhibition on the occasion of the presidential elections in Iran, cocurated with Skurvida at Dastan Gallery, Tehran. Kashani is the founding director of Sazmanab Center for Contemporary Art, a non-profit space in Tehran where he organizes exhibitions, educational events, and lectures, and hosts residencies for emerging and established international artists and curators. This interdisciplinary platform will expand with the new independent art center in downtown Tehran scheduled to open under his direction in spring 2014.

Hamid Keshmirshakan

Art Practice and Dissemination in Contemporary Iran: Discourses and Mechanisms

This paper will examine the current state of contemporary art in Iran and concerning issues and discourses such as identity politics, its association with the formal cultural strategy and institutions, the politics of the market and its impacts on art practice, dissemination, and exchange mechanisms. With reference to selected works, it will further trace the current dilemma of how contemporary Iranian artists have responded to contemporary social and cultural complexities inherent in the context of Iran.

It argues that the formulated interest of the officials clearly promotes particular values as resistance against the secular cultural norms of cultural globalization. This general cultural attitude explains why in official cultural and artistic events it has been perfectly clear that encouragement has been given to taking refuge in cultural authenticity,

historical specificities, artistic identity, and traditional values. It will also examine strategies employed by Iranian artists and art activists concerned with the new dialectics of global culture in contemporary Iran.

Hamid Keshmirshekan is the Barakat Trust Academic Fellow in the History of Art Department, Oxford University, and Editor-in-Chief of the bilingual (English-Persian) quarterly, *Art Tomorrow*. From 2004 to 2012 he was the Associate Fellow at the Khalili Research Centre, Oxford University. He received his PhD in history of art from SOAS, University of London and was awarded post-doctoral fellowships by the Barakat Trust in 2004-5 and the British Academy, AHRC and ESRC in 2008, both at Oxford University. His current research is on twentieth- and twenty-first-century art from the Islamic world, paying particular attention to recent developments in art practice and its relation to the context. Dr. Keshmirshekan has organized international conferences on aspects of modern and contemporary Iranian and Middle Eastern art, most recently *Regional vis-à-vis Global Discourses: Contemporary Art From the Middle East* at SOAS, London. His book *Contemporary Iranian Art: New Perspectives* is forthcoming in October 2013; other recent publications include "Reclaiming Cultural Space: Artist's Performativity versus State's Expectations in Contemporary Iran," *Performing the Iranian State: Cultural Representations of Identity and Nation*; "Contemporary or Specific: the Dichotomous Desires in Art of Early 21st Century Iran," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* (2011); "Seeing Twofold: Locality and Trans-locality in the Art of Contemporary Iran," *Art Tomorrow* (2011); and "The Paradigms for Contemporaneity in Iranian Art," *Art Tomorrow* (2010).

Sohrab Mahdavi

Artistic Statement: An Instrument To Get Closer Or Become Ethereal

What is the relationship between the text of an exhibit and its visual content? This is a question that has preoccupied me for the past several years as artists increasingly feel the pressure to frame and explicate the site of origin of their works. I choose to see this in positive light, as an attempt by artists to reach out to their public. There is still a strong bias in favor of assuming a work of art arising from intuitive and inspirational regions of our psyche. Art is separated from society through its separation from artisanship and immediate concern for being-in-the-world commentary. It could also be that in the absence of a homegrown annotative apparatus (journalistic art criticism, academic point-of view, and retrospective possibilities) Iranian artists see the necessity to bridge the gap between their works and their viewers - they try to make their

works more accessible. Still, the dominant mindset posits "art" as a special, esoteric pasture where the pueblo finds nothing to graze on. In maintaining this mindset, Iranian artists have been complicit much like people the world over. Gospel is the word of white Anglo-European connoisseurs whose pages of magazines and annals of academia will have the final word on the acceptability of an artist in the pantheon of the art world. Part run-of-the-mill Third Worldist effusion, my presentation will try to make sense of an artistic statement within the Iranian art scene.

Sohrab Mahdavi (with Farhad Arianpour) co-founded the bilingual magazine TehranAvenue.com in 2000. They grew up in Tehran. Their last high school years coincided with the Iranian revolution of 1979. They turned into exiles shortly thereafter. Mahdavi lived in the USA for the next 11 years and Arianpour to date lives in France. They launched TehranAvenue together in the optimistic air of globalized connectivity. They realized, however, that the city had become the converging point of dislocation. It was where the "escape to" and the "flight from" coexisted in yin-yang dichotomy. It provided respite from at the same time that it invited a search for identity. It was where collectivism had become individualized and individualism communalized. It had been transformed along virtual lines. A Tehrani in Paris could remain a Tehrani in his virtual space. Conversely, her friend in Tehran could escape from the confines of the city and live in an imaginary landscape. The Internet was the battleground of presence and absence. TehranAvenue, too, became for them the place where lines of presence and absence crisscrossed in tangled rapidity.

Azar Mahmoudian

Politics of Display: Reflections on International Exhibitions of Iranian Art

In 2010, I co-curated (with Amirali Ghasemi and Michel Dewilde) an archival exhibition which focused on circumstances that have affected modes of circulation, accessibility, and distribution of artworks in Iran in the 2000s. This ongoing research project, accompanied by a series of interviews with artists, curators, collectors, art managers, and theorists, investigates the modes of curating group shows of "Iranian art" for international audiences—an array of exhibitions (re)produced under national labels, emphasizing the "the roots and origin" or a "revealing of the unknown." This curatorial research questions national exhibitionism and generally the regionalization of art as a credible producer of content. In this regard, it tries to map the orders of visibility within the current system of art circulation; and argues that "distinct domains" of art production and distribution are in fact constructed in a network of

(transnational) relations. I propose archiving as a strategy to open up the dominant historicist paradigm of art exchange.

Azar Mahmoudian is a freelance curator and researcher based in Tehran and London. She graduated with an M.A. in Contemporary Art Theory from Goldsmiths in 2009 as the recipient of the Chevening scholarship. She has curated exhibitions and screenings for the CC Bruges (2010), CAB Brussels (2013), and SOAS London (2013), and since 2010 has coinitiated an archive and documentary series which engages with international representations of Iranian contemporary art in the last decade. She collaborates with Tehran-based project spaces, and since 2011 has worked as associate editor of essays for the quarterly *Art Tomorrow*, and as a lecturer in Tehran universities.

Slavs and Tatars

The Translitative Tease

Through the lens of phonetic, semantic, and theological slippage, *The Translitative Tease* explores the potential for transliteration—the conversion of scripts—as a strategy equally of resistance and research in notions of identity politics, colonialism, and liturgical reform. Across Slavs and Tatars' three cycles of work, the lecture/performance investigates in particular the urgency of syncretism, as found in the eastern frontier of the Muslim world, Central Asia, a.k.a. Khorasan, a.k.a. Turkestan, the basis of their research for *Not Moscow Not Mecca*. The march of alphabets has always accompanied that of empires—Arabic with Islam, Latin with the rise of Roman Catholicism, and Cyrillic with the Orthodox Church; *The Translitative Tease* attempts not to emancipate peoples or nations but rather the sounds rolling off our tongues.

Slavs and Tatars is a faction of polemics and intimacies devoted to an area east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China, known as Eurasia. The collective's work spans several media, disciplines, and a broad spectrum of cultural registers (high and low) focusing on an oft-forgotten sphere of influence between Slavs, Caucasians, and Central Asians. They have had solo exhibitions at the MoMA, NY; Secession, Vienna; and group exhibitions at Tate Modern, Centre Pompidou, Palais de Tokyo, as well as the Sharjah, Gwangju, and Mercosul Biennials. The collective has published several books—including *Kidnapping Mountains* (Book Works, 2009); *Not Moscow Not Mecca* (Revolver/Secession, 2012); *Khhhhhhh* (Mousse/Moravia Gallery,

2012); *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* (Book Works, 2013); as well as their translation of the legendary Azeri satire *Molla Nasreddin: the magazine that would've, could've, should've* (JRP-Ringier, 2011). Their 2014 engagements include solo exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Zurich; Dallas Museum of Art; and GfZK, Leipzig.

Sandra Skurvida

Symposium Convener

Sandra Skurvida is a New York City–based independent curator, writer, and scholar. She emerged as an art critic and curator in Lithuania in the early 1990s, as that society entered the global context after the dissolution of the USSR. Her early work comprises more than 100 exhibition reviews and essays and numerous curated exhibitions, including the Third Annual Exhibition of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art in Vilnius, Lithuania (1995). For that work, she was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship in 1996, and received a PhD from Stony Brook University in 2006. Since relocating to the United States, she has curated exhibitions in New York and internationally; and taught at Bard Center for Curatorial Studies, New School, MoMA, and elsewhere. Her practice remains focused on regions undergoing radical sociopolitical change, as exemplified in the project OtherIS (www.otheris.com)—a worldwide network of artists, scholars, curators, and others who share the common goal of facilitating art and information exchanges despite restrictions by legislation and embargo. This initiative engages with U.S.-sanctioned countries—including Belarus, Burma, Cote d'Ivoire, Congo, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, North Korea, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Zimbabwe—in the form of exhibitions, screenings, databases, research, lectures, and publications.

Anna Vanzan

Posht-e Pardeh, *Behind the Painting: Women Gallerists in Contemporary Iran*

It is almost a truism to say that women are at the vanguard of present Iranian cultural life. Women act not only as writers, actresses, directors, performers etc., but more often than not they also participate directly in the entrepreneurial process that makes the artistic product possible, available, and marketable. A case in point is the relatively new profession of art gallery manager, recently discovered by Iranian women and rapidly expanding—most of the leading galleries in Tehran are directed or owned by women. This paper maps the current situation of

female-run art galleries in Tehran. It is mainly based on the conversations I have had with female art dealers during spring 2011 and summer 2013. Their experiences show how Iranian women are becoming arbiters in the international field of contemporary visual art, while simultaneously offering the autochthonous artists (among whom we find many young women) the possibility to fulfill their profession. Moreover, the art galleries they run constitute a common space for social interaction while promoting the love for art and beauty.

Anna Vanzan holds a Degree in Oriental Languages and Cultures (University Of Ca' Foscari, Venice) and a PhD in Near Eastern Studies (New York University). Though she is interested in the Middle East in general, her research is focused on Iran, Central Asia, and the subcontinent (Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Muslim India). She has been working in gender studies with particular interest in contemporary Iranian women writers of fiction. Among her numerous publications in Italian and English are *Donna e giardino nel mondo islamico (Women and Garden in the Islamic World)* (Florence, 2013); and *La storia velata: le donne dell'islam nell'immaginario italiano* (Edizioni del Lavoro, Roma), a history of the image of Muslim women in Italian culture from the Middle Ages, which was awarded the International Prize Feudo di Maida 2006. Her book *Figlie di Shahrazàd, scrittrici iraniane dal 19 secolo a oggi* (Bruno Mondadori, Milano, 2009) is a history of Iranian women writers from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Her most recent book, *Le donne di Allah, viaggio nei femminismi islamici* (B. Mondadori, Milano, 2010) offers a collection of conversations and discussions with Muslim women who are engaged in finding their way to feminism. Vanzan is one the founders of the Italian journal *Afriche e Orienti*. She is currently teaching Arabic Culture at the University of Milano; and is visiting lecturer at the European MA M.I.M. Ca' Foscari University, where she teaches Gender and Islamic thought.

Roxanne Varzi

Facing the Future: The Artistic and Diasporic Afterlife of the Iran-Iraq War

From 1991, when I first returned to Iran, to 2006 when my ethnography, *Warring Souls: Media, Martyrdom and Youth in Post-Revolution Iran*, was published, I spent time in Tehran experiencing, observing, and writing about the many ways in which secularly-minded citizens were trying to forget, ignore, and wipe-out the visual memory of years and years of a war that turned Tehran aesthetically into a space of martyrdom and mourning. I wrote of the various visual moves that

happened post the Iran-Iraq War in Iran to produce a martyr culture that maintained an Islamic public sphere and ultimately created an Islamic nation-state. So imagine my surprise in 2007 when I walked into an exhibit in Berlin, Germany by a young Iranian artist, Azin Feizabadi, who was born and raised in Tehran and now making art in Berlin that beautifully and accurately replicated (to use his word) the art and propaganda around the "beauty of sacrifice" (the government's words) during the Iran-Iraq war. My presentation will address how the cultural and emotional remains of the Iran-Iraq War influence artistic production among Iranian artists outside of Iran, and how Iranian diaspora self-portraits act as socio-political memoirs by looking at a few examples of diaspora artists who, through their art, somehow remain political "subjects" of contemporary Iran.

Roxanne Varzi is an Associate Professor of Anthropology, Visual Studies, and Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Irvine. She is the author of *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran* (2006) and director of the documentary film *Plastic Flowers Never Die* (2009). She has published in the *London Review of Books*, the *New York Press*, *Feminist Review*, the *Annals of Social and Political Science*, and the *Journal of Public Culture*. Born in Iran to an American mother and Iranian father, she immigrated with her family to the United States shortly after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Dr. Varzi first returned to Iran in 1991 and again in 1993. She completed her PhD in Anthropology in 2002 from Columbia University and was awarded a Woodrow Wilson fellowship at New York University's International Center for Advanced Studies. In 2005 Dr. Varzi was a senior visiting Fellow to St Antony's College, Oxford University in the United Kingdom and was at the same time a member of the faculty of Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African studies, University of London. During the summer of 2007 she was a visiting Professor of the UC program at the University of Lund in Sweden and for the 2007–2008 academic year, she was a fellow of Berlin's Wissenschaftskolleg's "Near East in Europe" program.