

RETELLING THE GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY  
A CASE STUDY: *SHE WHO TELLS A STORY*  
*WOMEN PHOTOGRAPHERS FROM IRAN AND THE*  
*ARAB WORLD*

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON, AUGUST 27, 2013–JANUARY 12, 2014  
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF WOMEN IN THE ARTS, WASHINGTON, D.C.,  
APRIL 08–JULY 31, 2016.

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Art

University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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By

Maryam Athari

May 2017

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes an exhibition that is a site for discussing the global contemporary in its relation to a specific selection of photographs that aimed to define a geographic area—Iran and the Arab World. This analysis is focused more specifically on Iran. By historicizing the works of a number of Iranian artists in the exhibit *She Who Tells a Story (Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World)*, this thesis examines the overgeneralizing narrative of a US site-specific exhibition, thereby complicating the existing institutional narratives by underlining the contextual particularities. This analysis contends that developing a substantial and reliable body of scholarship about the art world of each of the countries in the region, broadly called the Middle East, demands undertaking an on the ground research to build an archive of multiple histories and a vivid forum of different modes of knowledge.

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## Chapter I

### Other Itineraries: A Little History

The so called “global contemporary” has become a key term for artists, critics, curators and historians to designate, and perhaps even reconcile a range of contradictory dynamics that we witness in the art world today. The temporal and geographical implications of the term call our attention to the dual nature of the processes that generate this concept. The term globalization itself, as David Harvey points out, denotes an “uneven temporal and geographical development” throughout the world, a necessary condition for the flow of capital and the expansion of the neo-liberal market that compromise its operative agent (Harvey 1995). What follows is a rehearsal and analysis of a specific exhibition that is a site for discussing the global contemporary in its relation to a photographic exhibit, whose aim was to define a geographic area, even as I focus more specifically on Iran. To do so however, requires an analysis of the global contemporary as an art historical category.

An inquiry into the nature of this term becomes more complicated, when in addition to the uneven temporal and geographical development inherent in the “global,” we consider an additional temporal factor, namely the “contemporary” aspect of the term. The imposition of one single regulating historical time of the present, as applied to different notions of temporality, in different social and cultural contexts, generates an atemporal condition, or perhaps more specifically, a temporal fixation. Peter Osborne calls this dimension of the contemporary: “an operative fiction,” a notion of presentness that finds its representational form in the “annihilation of temporality” (Osborne 2013, 23-24).

By leveling different spatio-temporal contexts— composed of disparate aesthetic systems, distinct traditions of encrypting and deciphering meaning in an artwork, all under one unifying flag of “global contemporary”— we risk producing a flattened or mutilated understanding of actual cultural contexts and artistic practices within each context.

Despite all these contradictions, the term “global contemporary” art helps us to bring together and organize our thoughts about an existing condition that is in operation; a condition that forms the ways in which we experience the art world today; a condition that is conceived and experienced differently by its many disparate actors and observers. In order to gain a better understanding of the current condition under the global contemporary, I find it necessary to first present a review of ideas, descriptions, contradictions, and different ways of articulating the internal tensions of the term, so as to articulate the context in which concrete examples of the global contemporary take form in exhibitions and artistic practices. By analyzing one recent example— an exhibition that is particularly conceived within the context of global contemporary art, *She Who Tells a Story (Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World)*, a travelling exhibit first curated in 2013 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA) by Kristen Gresh, MFA, and then on display at National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington DC, April-July 2016— I would like to address the global contemporary as an organizing principal governing this occasion of display. I will then focus more specifically on the work of one artist in this exhibit, Shirin Neshat, and her *Book of King* series, to instantiate my critique of the ahistorical and overgeneralizing narrative that conditions the reception of these works. My aim is to demonstrate, why this narrative, despite providing an ostensible set

of socio-political and historical references, lacks historical and art-historical competence, hence unreliable. I believe the only way to avoid a flattened and formulaic interpretation of art in the context of the global contemporary, is to historicize the work. By implementing effective art historical tools to scrutinize the context, we can also better learn about the personal and subjective aspects of the artists' works beyond overgeneralizing statements.

I begin with the writings of Terry Smith, an Australian based in the United States and a leading historian of global contemporary art. My aim here is to sketch some main ideas, in order to map a general frame for my later case study. I start with Smith, whose argument I compare to those of other curators' and critics' arguments, in an attempt to shed light on the practical and unresolved tensions within this field. In "Contemporary Art: World Currents in Transition beyond Globalization," Smith contends that currently the major task of biennials and international exhibitions has changed. Whereas such exhibitions' primary goal used to be the survey of art being made around the world, today the main attempt is to show "contemporary art's contemporaneity— that is, its being-in-the-world, *this* world, as it is now, and as it might be." (Smith 2013, 191) Smith offers a categorizing description of the contemporaneous currents of artistic practices in the present art world: Re-modernist, Retro-sensationalist and Spectacularist, a current that predominates the Euroamerican art centers and other modernizing art worlds and markets. Against this current, in regions outside of central Euroamerica, and especially in the previous colonized cultures, there has emerged another current that developed according to "nationalist, identarian and critical priorities": Transnational Transitionality (Ibid 188). Smith considers three different phases of development for this current—first "a

reactive anti-imperialist search for national and localist imagery; then a rejection of simplistic identarianism and nationalism in favor of a naïve internationalism; followed by a broader search for an integrated cosmopolitanism and or worldliness...” (Ibid). The third current according to Smith can’t be named as a style, inasmuch as it does not have to do with high arts or political, confrontational artistic strategies. The emergence of this third current is due to the great increase in the number of artists and the proliferation of opportunities that informational and communicative technologies make accessible to millions of people all around the world.

According to Smith, the transnational transitionality, along with its affiliated curatorial practices developed within different time periods in different regions (in progress since the 1950s in Africa, the 1960s in Latin America, the 1970s in the Central Desert of Australia, the 1980s in Central Europe, and China, and the 1990s in Southeast Asia, and since 2000 in India and the Middle East). It reoriented art making in the world, made local issues visible, and has been an important way to renegotiate local and global inequalities toward respect for difference. (Ibid, 192).

Gerardo Mosquera, the freelance curator, art historian and critic based in Havana, Cuba and one of the organizers of the first Havana biennial in his essay “Beyond Anthropophagy: Art, Internationalization, and Cultural Dynamics,” shares several main aspects of Smith’s optimism. However, he foregrounds the problems of art and culture in the context of globalized contemporary art circuits. He regards the main characteristic of the current condition, its “tremendous expansion,” the explosion and multiplicity of the regional and global artistic practices and the proliferation of new cultural agents and artistic actors (Mosquera 2013, 233). The processes of globalization, such as the spread

of communication, movement, migration and accelerated urbanization have generated “postnational” agents who physically and culturally embody this constant condition of flow and movement (Ibid 234). Though he believes these processes still retain inequalities— the economic and structural disproportions that control the power to legitimate art— he contends that globalization has by and large energized cultural circulation and provided a “pluralistic consciousness” (Ibid 235). Mosquera draws on the notion of anthropophagy within the context of the global art world and presents the question of “who swallows whom?” as an inherent tension within this concept (Ibid 236). In order to elucidate his argument, I want to briefly review this concept. *Antropofagia* is a term that Brazilian poet, Oswald de Andrade, elaborated in his 1928 manifesto. According to Andrade in order to break with the supremacy of foreign models and dependency on them, it was necessary to devour the enemy in the manner that the Tupinamba Indians (cannibals) did, so as to make the enemy’s strength one’s own. Using the stereotypical cannibalistic depiction of indigenous inhabitants of Brazil as a metaphor for process of cultural assimilation, the cliché was subverted and transformed to an empowering tool. But how about transformations that the periphery cannibals experience when incorporating the dominant culture of the center? While observing such power dynamics, Mosquera is optimistic, maintaining that “the culture of resignification,” the cultures of syncretistic processes and appropriation of “Western metaculture” that was imposed on the peripheries due to their very location on the maps of symbolic power are now substituted in the global contemporary by a new perspective that he calls the “from here paradigm” (Ibid 235). He believes that artists rather than critically appropriating the dominant central culture, are now actively involved in the creation of a meta-culture. He

celebrates the current condition, where artists ever less are inclined to show their passport, and even if they'd be interested in doing so the gallery owners would prohibit them from it, for it jeopardizes their global potentialities.

Cuauhtémoc Medina— the Mexican art critic, curator and art historian— in his essay “Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses” (2010), assumes a less optimistic attitude. He maintains that the contemporary does not imply any utopian hope for change, nor does it indicate any prospect for re-ordering of the world that the term modern promised. The lack of any systematic categorization interestingly performs an inclusive function: For art historians, critics, art institutions, museums etc. the terms contemporary and “contemporariness” suffice to refer to all recent artistic practices. Yet, in this loose logic of categorization, the historical period remains ambiguous; it seems to differ from one institution to the other, from one country to another etc. Medina does not overlook the commercial potential and marketable aspect of the contemporary. He notes that the attendance of contemporary art museums by millions, implies the replacement of fine art by an “intermediary region between elite entertainment and mass culture” (Medina 2010, 3). Medina argues that the contemporary art market that is embedded in the global economy is the actual agent that subverts the hierarchies established by the center/periphery structure of the art world that was inherent in modern art. The “global elites of financial capitalism,” “the disenfranchised wealthy individuals” throughout the globe, who seek an elevated social status through aesthetic philanthropy comprise the actors, who disseminate the contemporary works simultaneously to all corners of the world.

Nevertheless, he does not regard this phenomenon as critically worthless. In fact, he sees in this tumultuous art scene that is still uneven in terms of its power dynamics, an important political and historical achievement; one that cannot be overlooked. In the global circuit of the contemporary art works, the geographical metaphor of the “belatedness” of the South is outdated. Despite all the contradictions inherent in contemporary art, this marks a stage at which different geographies and localities can eventually “claim their right to participate in producing the contemporary.” (Medina 2010, 6)

Tim Griffin, American art critic and curator, in “Worlds Apart: Contemporary Art, Globalization, and the Rise of Biennials,” by drawing on the example of the 1989 exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre* curated by Jean-Hubert Martin at Centre Pompidou Paris, traces back the unresolved and persisting dilemma of center-periphery in the curatorial approaches that claim to be inclusive by incorporating works from the “global margins” (Griffin 2012, 10). He stresses the enduring legacy of *Magiciens de la Terre* in curatorial practices of the global contemporary, namely “re-inscribing neocolonial perspectives” despite the initial inclusive goal. *Magiciens de la Terre* was conceived as a response to the neglect of almost 80% of the countries of the world by the contemporary Western art world (Euro-American art). It presented the work of approximately one hundred artists, half of whom were non-Western or as described by Martin were “marginal” (Buchloh 1989, 152). The group of non-Western works in the exhibit *Magiciens de la Terre* featured objects, which played traditional roles within the specific societies of their origin, e.g. a Tibetan Mandela, or an Ijele mask from Nigeria. Such “cultural objects” as Martin puts it, would encourage the Western audience to not only

view a different object of visual-sensual and spiritual (magical) experience from another region. Also, by contemplating the objects' unique role in their society of origin, the viewer would be encouraged to reassess present Western art practices through an ethnographic prism; that is, to understand its embeddedness in a social context, and to understand its spirituality (magic) (Ibid 153-157). Griffin explains that the exhibit, despite its aim of challenging the conventional notion of art by practicing an anthropological approach— that is, by deploying the terms ritual and cult instead of art, and the magician instead of artist— ultimately fell prey to Western tropes of authorship, [by using the criteria of] “authenticity and originality” [in processes of selection and display of the works from the peripheries]. Griffin contends the problematic historical connotations of “originality” and primitivism and “more specifically, constructions of an Other, would undermine the exhibition’s supposed mission to subvert any privileged Eurocentric vantage on cultural production throughout the world.” (Griffin 10, 2012). In fact, Griffin refers to Buchloh’s words in an interview about this exhibition that he did with Martin in 1989. Buchloh observes the West’s projection of the authentic “otherness” on the selected “original primitive” works of the periphery is but a manifestation of “ethnocentric fallacy” (Buchloh 213, 1989). Buchloh maintains this position and a critical stance throughout the interview, but there is one further aspect of this conversation that merits discussion, since some of these arguments may sound redundant or less urgent today. Yet, I believe the critical points and guiding questions by Buchloh still resonate with the crucial issues pertaining to exhibitions and the selection of artists identified and represented as coming from the peripheries.

Buchloh asks Martin in various ways to articulate the criteria as to the inclusion or exclusion of certain artistic practices in the so-called periphery. One of Martin's responses is that he wants to show the Western audience "the real differences" and the specificity of other cultures. Buchloh wonders what "real differences" denotes, inasmuch as Western hegemonic centers use Third World countries as suppliers for cheap labor, ruin their ecological resources and infrastructure, and use them as dumping grounds for their industrial waste. Buchloh wonders whether by excluding these political and economic aspects, and by focusing solely on the cultural relationships between the Western centers and developing countries, might Martin inevitably foster a "neo-colonialist reading?" (Ibid 211) Martin disagrees, and finds Buchloh's argument weak. He believes a potential Western audience visiting the exhibit is well aware of the West's dominance in relationship to the Third World. Nonetheless, this awareness shouldn't hinder reaching out to and establishing cultural practices with people from these cultures in a period that has passed neo-colonialism. Buchloh continues his query. He tries to make the argument more concrete by considering a possible case. He wonders, whether in a possible contribution from New Zealand, there would be an option to select an artist who works with video to document the activities of the Maori work force in the sheep-shearing industry—the slaughterhouses, and a Maori traditional sculptor who makes artisanal forms of objects that do not deal with everyday working conditions. Martin, responds that he might include both "...as long as both of them produced work that was sufficiently strong ..." (Ibid 211) Buchloh asks what Martin's criteria for the "strength" of a work is. Martin responds, "The intensity of communication of meaning ..." Buchloh is persistent "Meaning for us, or meaning for *them*?"

Martin responds: “For us, obviously. That is important because whatever meaning a practice has for its practitioners is not relevant to us if it cannot be communicated to us.” Buchloh more assertively concludes: “But isn't this approach, once again, precisely the worst ethnocentric fallacy? ... We request that these cultures deliver their cultural products for our inspection and *our consumption*, instead of making an attempt to dismantle the false centrality of our own approach and ... to develop criteria from within the needs and conventions of these cultures.” (Ibid 211)

The expansion of the range of artists, of media and variety of practices, the accompanying exhibition catalogues, curator talks, artist talks, multi-media educational kiosks, and wall texts in exhibitions of the works from the “periphery”, all comprise curatorial and institutional strategies that attempt to improve the conditions and quality of “consumption,” about which Buchloh has been so skeptical. Observing through the lens of a number of curators and theorists of the global contemporary art scene, we have witnessed different stakes, concerns, contradictions and points of tension within this field. We can therefore infer that now, after twenty-five years since Buchloh and Martin’s talk, there have been changes. As a result of booming phenomena of biennials, traveling group exhibitions of non-Western artists in Western art institutions (despite the still extant lumping narrative of such exhibits), and thanks to the phenomena of diaspora artists, along with access gained by a certain social and economic class of artists from the “peripheries” to the art universities and art educational institutions in Europe and North America, there has been a number of different developments in the global art scene. Currently, the power dynamics in relation to the contemporary art world and issues of access to the centers of the art world, are not the same as they were in 1989 and the early



Jananne Al-Ani, *Aerial I*, From *Shadow Sites II*, 2011

1990s. But interestingly, the criteria for inclusion and exclusion of certain works from the “peripheries” and the mechanisms of their reception do manifest symptoms of that peculiar taste for “consumption” and “communication,” which Martin advocated. The packaging of the offer is now subtler and more sophisticated; nonetheless the underlying structure is still persistent.

In order to make my argument more concrete, I now move to examine a specific case study that relies on the myth of an artistic meta-language, the “from-here paradigm,” and the fiction of artists hiding their passports so as not to jeopardize their global potentiality. All these factors falter in the face of the actual dynamics in a quest for global recognition. In fact, “the real differences” that Martin contended proved to be the reliable passport to enter the field.

Within the discourse of “global contemporary art,” when it comes to the art associated with the Middle East, skimming through headlines of daily news in major U.S. news outlets is often a clarifying guideline to navigate through the works that supposedly represent the baffling present of the region: *A Region in Flux*, *War on Streets of Bagdad*,

All the Things Iranian Women Are Not Allowed to Do, Battle of Mosul, Yemen Conflict etc. All these headlines compensate for lacking a knowledge of history. After all, the scene of the daily existence in these regions is apparently devoid of a historical consciousness. Images of wilderness and ruins from a bird's eye view, desert (an imaginative timeless geography suitable for an ahistorical narrative of an eternal war), grenades, men's boots, soldiers, tanks, strict binaries: men and women, black and white, aggressive hairy men, veiled and passively gazing women etc. comprise the commonly accepted visual tropes of the region. Generalizations and blanket narratives from the outsider's vantage point come to make up for the alleged local intellectual lethargy. The interpretation indeed precedes the formation of the art works themselves.

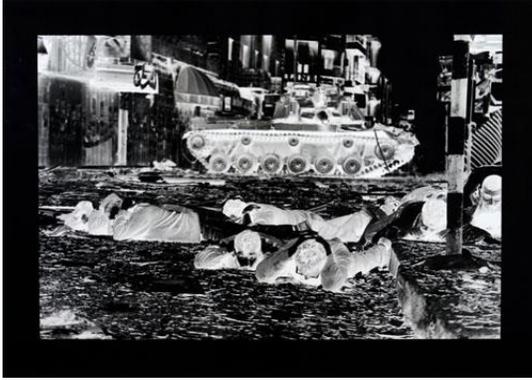
Such is the case when it comes to the exhibit *She Who Tells a Story (Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World)* first curated in 2013 at the Museum of Fine Arts, recently on display at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C. *She Who Tells a Story* welcomes the viewer with a large size photograph by Newsha Tavakolian, an image that sets the tone for the entire exhibition. The photograph depicts a young woman standing on a seashore. The foaming water embraces her lower body while accentuating her black covered torso. Her black scarf waves to the play of restless foam and her black trench coat anchors her into the water. The scarf discloses parts of her black hair, and her oval face meets the viewer with a staring gaze. The Middle Eastern Venus gains life before the eyes of the Western viewer. She is neatly situated before the first hall of the exhibit, facing the territories of her preferred lover, that of Mars, the God of War. The first exhibit hall is devoted to images



Newsha Tavakolian, *Don't Forget This is Not You (For Sahar Lotfi)*, From *Listen Series*, 2010

of the occupied region; piles of rubble, tanks, demolished houses and grieving people in the West Bank comprise Rula Halawani's *Negative Incursion* (2002), large-format photographs printed as negatives, displaying the conditions of military occupation in Palestine. These images are accompanied by Tanya Habjouqa's small size photographs, rendering some aspects of everyday life, mostly of women, in Palestine. Almost half of these images maintain a military undertone. Jananne Al-Ani's large size aerial photograph of the landscapes of the "Middle East," critically revisiting the military surveillance aerial images, underscores the war theme.

*She who tells a Story* presents the works of twelve women photographers with roots in Iran and a number of the Arab countries: Jananne Al-Ani, Boushra Almutawakel, Gohar Dashti, Rana El Nemr, Lalla Essaydi, Shadi Ghadirian, Tanya Habjouqa, Rula Halawani, Nermine Hammam, Rania Matar, Shirin Neshat, and Newsha Tavakolian. The



Rula Halawani, *Untitled VI*, From *Negative Incursions* Series, 2010



Tanya Habjouqa, From *Women of Gaza* Series, 2009

exhibit is indeed one of a kind, as the overgeneralizing term, Middle Eastern, is substituted by the more distinctive terms Arab World (still indicating more than 20 countries) and Iran. The curator claims that the exhibit subverts the “Orientalist narrative” of the West about the region by revealing art made by women artists. Year One of the subversion of the obsolete Orientalist way of seeing the Middle East, is implicitly marked at the beginning of the Arab Spring and Green Movement in Iran (2009-2010). According to this organizing narrative, these political upheavals fueled Middle Eastern women’s artistic and socially critical expression. They formed new ways of looking at their region, themselves and their identity. This narrative could prove problematic, as the creation date of some of the photographs and the cited movements do not correspond. In another blending narrative, such anomalies are introduced as precedents for other works.

The Iranian, Gohar Dashti’s signature image of the exhibit, displays a staged photograph of a bride and groom, sitting in a decorated wrecked car. The couple stares at the viewer, while in the war-torn background a tank is passing. Shadi Ghadirian’s *Nil Nil* (2008) image of the phallic Famas grenade rifle projecting out of the soft linen, or red



Gohar Dashti, *Untitled #5*, From *Today Life and War* series, 2008

high heel shoes next to muddy military boots with splashes of blood on them, indeed sustain the homogenizing war narrative, while adding an erotic level to it. Nermine Hammam's images of Egyptian anti-riot soldiers against photoshopped postcard backgrounds, again affirms the broader narrative of warfare. The exhibition includes a number of portrait series. Ranja Matar's portraits of "Middle-Eastern" teenage girls in their rooms are colorful and diverse. Tavakolian's *Listen* (2010) series- close-ups of Iranian women singers coming to a climax of expressive pleasure with closed eyes and open mouths, against a sparkling background- should be understood according to the accompanying text, as these women's professional limit in Iran. Shirin Neshat's staring portraits, suspended in an ambiguous time and place, homogenized by Neshat's curious blend of Persian and Arabic inscriptions on their bodies, according to the curator are comments on Iran the Green Movement in Iran.



Shadi Ghadirian, *Nil Nil # 8*, 2008



Nermine Hammam, *Armed Innocence II*, 2011

The criteria for selection of this specific cohort of photographers as the representatives of the region is never discussed. Undoubtedly, *She* tells “a” story. Of course, other selections were possible, which would entail other stories. But interestingly in the present context of the global contemporary art, the regional representations found in this exhibit are not referred to as “a” story but as “the” story. “The” story that *She* tells supposedly has an all-encompassing gravitational pull. It devours all concrete geographical, historical and cultural discrepancies of a vast region to state a homogenous tale.

I would like to elucidate my point by closely examining Shirin Neshat’s works in this exhibition. In an interview on the occasion of her solo show at New York City’s Gladstone Gallery (January 2012), Neshat explained to journalist Behnam Nateghi, the Iranian broadcaster at Voice of America Persian, that after several years of working with videos and films she had felt the need to go back to her own style of black and white photography with inscriptions on the body. The resulting series of work was *Book of Kings*. Thrilled at the sight of the exhibit, Nateghi relates how the opening night of her show had evoked both enthusiasm and bitter memories of the Arab Spring into the streets of Chelsea, New York (Nateghi, 2012). Four years later, in the exhibition *She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World* at Washington D.C.’s

National Gallery of Women in the Arts (April 8–July 31, 2016) Neshat was featured prominently with eight portraits from her 2012 *Book of Kings* series and a few photos from her *Women of Allah* series of 1993-1997. The curatorial choice to include a few of Neshat's well-known series of almost three decades earlier together with recent work is consistent with the artist's own attitudes about the *Book of Kings* series.

The photographs selected from the of *Book of Kings* series for *She Who tells a Story* comprise black and white close-ups of three bearded young men, as well as one middle-aged and three younger women. They all wear black T-shirts against a black background with inscriptions of Farsi in Arabic spelling on their face and neck. Although all the figures emerge from the black background and parts of their heads are hidden in the consuming darkness of the backdrop, it is clear that the women are not veiled, with black hair framing each head. Rendered with agonized features, all the portraits stare at the viewer. The women echo a more passive staring gesture, with their mouths half opened. All portraits are titled by the figure's first name. As opposed to the rest of the portraits, which are head-shoulder shots, one of the young women, with her delicate and vulnerable torso, is depicted in three quarter length. She has placed one hand across her chest. While inscriptions adorn all these portraits, the inscriptions on this girl's face are bolder. There is also another photograph, *Divine Rebellion*, an image of hanging legs, shown from below the knee, suspended against a black backdrop. Two sides of a battle are drawn on each leg. The drawing is in the style of "19<sup>th</sup> century Iranian lithographed folios" (Babaie 2013, 34). The upper legs reveal two rows of horsemen facing each other. The lower right leg (left hand side of the viewer) features a kneeling archer in a majestic gesture as he releases an arrow; from his hat -bearing the head of the Div-e-Sepid (White



Shirin Neshat, *Speechless*, From *Women of Allah* Series, 1996



Shirin Neshat, *Roja*, From *Book of Kings* Series (Patriots), 2012

Demon), an Iranian viewer would immediately recognize Rostam, the legendary hero of *Shahnameh* or *Book of Kings*. The left leg reveals the defeated enemy [probably Touranian], in a theatrical moment of falling down with the knees touching the ground and his upper torso bent back. Red blood covering the enemy's chest evokes a contrast in the monochrome composition.

*Shahnameh* or *Book of Kings* is a prodigious poetic oeuvre written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi around 1000AD. It is the national epic of the Persian speaking world. *Shahnameh* recounts the mythical and historical past of Iran from the creation of the world up until the Islamic conquest of Iran in the 7th century. Besides *Shahnameh*'s literary significance, it is of great importance to Iranians and the Farsi/Persian language, as it is written in pure Farsi. In a way, Ferdowsi revived the Persian language and evoked the national identity at the time when the control and rule of Arabs endangered both. *Shahnameh* reflects Iran's history, cultural values and its ancient religions. The



Shirin Neshat, *Kouross*, From *Book of King Series* (Masses), 2012

illustration of Shahnmaeh manuscripts has a long tradition. There are numerous illuminated Shahnameh manuscripts throughout Iran's history.

In her inscriptions on the body, Neshat imitated the column formats of most Shahnameh manuscripts. The Gladstone Gallery's press release text for *Book of Kings* series reads:

“In her upcoming project, Neshat will present a new series of photographs and a video installation, both of which explore the underlying conditions of power within socio-cultural structures. Inspired by the sweeping momentum of recent political uprisings in the Arab world, Neshat turned to both historical and contemporary sources to generate richly provocative metaphors for the network of relations that comprise a society...

Divided into three groups—the Masses, the Patriots, and the Villains—Neshat's portraits of Iranian and Arab youth comprise black and white photographs with meticulously executed calligraphic texts... These texts and illustrations [on figures' portraits] both obscure and illuminate the subjects' facial expressions and emotive intensity, intimately linking the current energy of contemporary Iran with its mythical and historical past.”

Neshat has a more accessible way of describing the portraits. In the same interview with Behnam Nateghi, she introduces the three groups as the condemned [Masses], the protesters [Patriots] and the power [Villains]. She further continues that the masses are dissatisfied with the current status, they are fearful of authority and they are agonized; the protesters are the activist types, agents of change and the powers are the authority figures likened to royalty.

In Neshat's *Book of Kings* series, the masses comprise a grid of forty-five individually framed head and shoulder shots. The patriots are shown in three-quarter length, holding one hand across the chest and over the heart as a gesture of nationalistic dedication and loyalty. The villains are displayed as three full-sized full-body photographs of male figures with a narrative scene of a 19<sup>th</sup> century *Shahnameh* (*Book of Kings*) manuscript, inscribed on their body. While masses and patriots depict both men's and women's portraits, villains are strictly male full-body figures.

In Detroit Institute of Arts' catalogue for Neshat's retrospective in 2013, the catalogue entry for her *Book of Kings* series, frames the way these categories should be understood within the context of Arab Spring (which apparently includes Iran, even as the Green Movement occurred at a different time, a year earlier in Iran). The masses are ordinary people whose faces display feelings of anxiety, fear, resignation etc.; they are most broadly affected by political change but they have little power to effect such change. The patriots are the leaders of the Arab Spring, their sense of agency comes from their belief in goals beyond the individual interests and are ready to make sacrifice for political change. The villains represent the political or religious figures that control the nations (2013, 160-69).



Shirin Neshat, *Divine Rebellion*, From *Book of Kings* Series, 2012

We can therefore infer that the displayed photographs in *She Who Tells a Story* comprise six close-ups of the masses and one of the patriots. The hanging legs, *The Divine Rebellion*, should be perhaps an extra narrative about the confrontation between good and evil, or about martyrdom. Kirsten Gresh, the curator of *She Who tells a Story*, is also convinced that these portraits stand for “the thousands that have taken to the streets in protest across the Middle East” (Gresh 2013, 59).

As someone who actively participated in the Green Movement before and after Iran’s 2009 fraudulent presidential election, from days of non-violent rallies through uneasy days of shootings at non-armed protesters and violent suppressions, I find Neshat’s narrative too remote from realities and the intricate web of events that came to be defined as the Green Movement. My argument here is not about the validity of her interpretation or the legitimacy of her personal contemplation on the moving imagery and

the news of Iran that she experienced via mass media or social networks, in New York City. I imagine creative, symbolic or expressive gestures and activities could have been the ultimate consolation for many, who witnessed from distance what was happening in their country of origin. I also believe that the Green Movement endures in terms of its significant potential to serve as an enriching source of inspiration for diverse groups of Iranian artists. My argument here, is rather directed towards those overgeneralizing narratives that too enthusiastically simplify the complexity of historical moments to an innocuous point of a timeless fantasy, and from there by means of rhetorical tools they attempt to reconstruct their flattened version of it, while omitting virtually all of the intricacies of a social movement. I believe that without rigorously delving into the archival of historical processes, we inevitably perpetuate stereotypes in a context that is already rife with them.

I am actually thankful to Shirin Neshat for her series and for representing her interpretation of the events of the Green Movement, because this series allows me to initiate a dialogue. I hope to present this section as an active dialogue with Neshat's *Book of Kings* series and with its consequent interpretations in American institutions that hosted the work (Hirschsorn 2015, Detroit Institute of Art 2013, MFA Boston 2013, National Museum of Women in the Arts 2016 etc.).

The first thing that struck me when I paid more careful attention to this series was the categories and divisions that Neshat had created. I wondered why some curators or art historians were simply convinced that this series stood for “network of relations that comprise a society in the Arab World” (Gladstone Gallery); that “the villains are representatives of political or religious figures that control nations” (Babaei et al. 2013,

160-61); that “the figures in this series stand for the thousands that have taken to the streets in protest across the Middle East” (Gresh 2013, 59); or that “Shirin Neshat, an artist in exile, is the voice of her people” (Hirschhorn website, Exhibit entry 2015)<sup>1</sup>. I need to emphasize yet again that I respect Neshat’s interpretation, but I firmly believe that by revisiting the history more attentively from a different vantage point, we can enrich our understanding and avoid the vicious circle of stereotypes. To me the Masses, or as Neshat herself puts it, the condemned populace, the Patriots and the Villains do not represent a semblance of what actually happened inside Iran.

To better illustrate my point, I would like to go back to one of Shahnameh’s (Book of Kings) key tragedies, a pivotal twist in the story of the most celebrated legendary hero of Iranian mythology: Rostam. On a hunting visit to Samangan (a region in proximity of Touran, Iran’s prominent enemy), Rostam lost his mythical horse, Rakhsh (=luminous). Rakhsh was a mighty and highly intelligent horse with a rare color of Zafron (orange and crimson) and white. Following the traces of his horse, Rostam entered the Samangan town, threatening and warning the king about consequences of his horse being stolen from him. The king of Samangan, honoring the legendary hero, comforts him and invites him to stay the night at his palace. There he met Tahmineh, the daughter of the king. They fell in love and spent the night together. The king arranged to find Rostam’s horse for him. Before leaving Tahmineh, Rostam gave her a bead. If she had a girl she would fasten it within her hair lock and it would shield her against evil. If she brought forth a son she would fasten the onyx upon his arm, like his father. The son would echo in his grace of speech, strength and stature, all his legendary ancestors.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/shirin-neshat/#detail=/bio/shirin-neshat-art-exile/>

Rostam went back to Iran and kept this union with Tahmineh as a secret. Tahmineh gave birth to a son: Sohrab. She brought him up and taught him all the skills of warfare and speech. Sohrab eventually asked the mother for his father and she revealed the secret to him. Rostam, was a legendary warrior hero but not the king. Kavouss was the king. Proud to learn about his father, Sohrab planned to attack Iran to make his father the king of Iran. He then wanted to go back to Touran and overthrow Afrasiab, Rostam's enemy. Afrasiab learnt about his plan and deceived him. Ultimately Sohrab went with an army to Iran. In a battle, unsure whether the man he was fighting would be his father or not, he engaged in a fight with Rostam. Rostam did not reveal his name to this brilliant unknown warrior. Father and son engaged in a battle, and the young Sohrab was the victor, but Rostam fearing his reputation, stunned and alarmed by this sophisticated and vigorous young warrior, tricked Sohrab. Right when Sohrab was in command of the battle, Rostam told him that the combat tradition required the victor to be determined after a second battle and that Sohrab had to let go of the battle, call the day and meet him again the next day. The next day, when Rostam had the command of the combat, fearing his defeat while wrestling with the vigorous young man, he stabbed Sohrab fatally. Dying Sohrab warned him once his father, Rostam, would learn about this unmerited fight, he'd take revenge. Rostam trembled, he asked Sohrab which sign of the father he carried. Sohrab asked Rostam to take off his armor to see the onyx that mother gave him as a sign of father to protect him against evil. Rostam cried out to the heavens.

In re-telling the Rostam story, I have omitted several subplots and simplified the story. I have not strayed from the central theme of the plot, however. The account of this tragedy itself reveals the complexity of the power structure, power distribution and the

contingent nature of good and evil in all these epic stories. What was more important to me by bringing up the Rostam and Sohrab story, was the similar tragedies that actually happened within the context of the Green Movement. One of our first Green martyrs who died at the Kahrizak Detention Center, Mohsen Rouholamini, a promising computer-engineering graduate student at the prestigious Tehran University, was the son of Abdollah Rouholamini, a prominent conservative, the adviser of Mohsen Rezai. Mohsen Rezai is a senior military officer in the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution and a right-wing conservative politician, affiliated with the Principlist political group: The Resistance Front of Islamic Iran. Mohsen Rezai was a right conservative presidential candidate in 2009 election. The fact that the son of a conservative prime adviser (closely affiliated to the Supreme Leader), had become an enthusiastic reformist, one of the first people to die in the protests against the fraudulent election, reveals but a glimpse of a chasm in the right-wing power structure.

I am intentionally separating here the reformists and moderate political groups from the conservative right wing, as these former political parties were those that advocated in favor of the Green Movement and were initially condemned by different strata of the conservative right as traitors. The news of the above-mentioned tragedy, together with other utterly bitter news- the subsequent scandals of suppression of non-armed and non-violent protesters, and the accounts of the Kahrizak Detention Center- stirred a serious strife within the conservatives, leading the Supreme Leader to intervene and order the closure of Kahrizak.

When looking back at the portraits of the masses and the patriots, something that is noticeable is the lack of diversity. By diversity I mean the lack of representatives of the

devout religious groups of activists, who made considerable sacrifices and paid a significant price to resist the coup that swept the country. While Women of Allah series is comprised of almond eyed sad and vulnerable veiled women targeting us with their innocent rifle and gaze, the Book of King has omitted them all together. I doubt such exotic representations of a veiled woman would serve the purpose of Neshat's recent series. But if the series (according to those narratives that attribute such agency to the portraits), is to stand for merely people of Iran who took part in the Green Movement, I affirm that this series is exclusive. I never forget December 2009, the day of demonstration in Qom after the death of Ayatollah Montazeri, the prominent Islamic theologian, the advocate of Shia Islamic democracy and human rights activist. Qom is Iran's equivalent of the Vatican; the religious fabric of the city is only comparable to the capital of the Catholic Church. Even as someone who did not believe in wearing long black veil, I had to wear the black cover called chador, to be able to pass through the guards and participate in the funeral procession. There, as an Iranian-born citizen, raised and schooled in my country, I was humbled at the sight of all those devout traditional and religious women of all ages who were out to make their voice heard against the injustice that they witnessed. At that moment, I myself had to confront some of my own misperceptions.

Another related claim in my critique of overgeneralizing interpretations, pertains to Neshat's use of texts and inscriptions. She used poems by Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967), Ahmad Shamlou (1925-2000) and Mehdi Akhavan Sales (1929-1990), and excerpts from prisoners' diaries of an unknown period as inscriptions on face, neck, hands and bodies of the figures in her Book of King series. Do the diaries point back to

the 1970s and the revolts in the prison under the Shah, or to the 1980s in Islamic Republic prisons? The prominent Iranian poets whose poems adorn the figures' bodies, are handpicked from a specific historical period. Their well-known political poems refer to the years of the 1970s revolution. In case of the poet Farrokhzad, she had in fact passed away in a car accident ten years before the Islamic Revolution. For Neshat though, these writings resonated with the voices of Iranians of the Green Movement. The peculiar approach of the artist is more accentuated by drawing on the timeless cycle of the epic of Shahnameh (Book of Kings) as a unifying frame for her series. Yet, something perhaps missing for most Iranians who actually participated in the movement: the fact that there were indeed very important reference texts for the activists of Green Movement, namely Mir Hossein Mousavi's eighteen statements. The fact that Mousavi's statements had such a broad appeal among different cultural and political strata of our society, demands due attention. Crucial in understanding these statements is that they were not propaganda texts; that they represented green strategies for a non-violent path to liberation. An excerpt from statement number thirteen still resonates to this day for many of us involved in the movement: "The Green path of Hope, must be 'Lived.' At home, at work and on streets...Let us make our houses a direction to pray to."

Once again, I'd like to emphasize that my aim is neither to criticize Neshat's choice of texts nor to prescribe the right textual reference. My main aim is simply to bring historical precision to a discourse that is largely devoid of it. Neshat's personal interpretation reflects the engagement and contemplation of a concerned diaspora artist of a generation of youths who were geographically removed from Iran before they reached the age of twenty, and whose tangible political memory as represented in her series

echoed events from the 1970s. Hence, the specific frame of her interpretation reflects the artist and “her” lived experience; “her” imagination. Neshat’s representation righteously and strongly stands for a subject known as *her*. It certainly expresses one way of looking at these events. The hasty overgeneralization of this narrative to a whole region only reveals the unawareness of the curator or the catalogue essayist, of the complex history and cultural dynamics of each country in a vast region, throughout the sensitive period of a social upheaval.

By alluding to Mousavi’s statements, I have more to add to my concern with the power structures and the subsequent groupings that Neshat’s *Book of Kings* series represented. Mousavi’s Green Path of Hope, “nurturing the seeds of hope” was perhaps the essential green slogan for most Iranians. But who was Mir Hossein Mousavi? Mir Hossein Mousavi was actually a man who was a part of the establishment. He is an artist and architect, a devout Muslim, a reformist politician born in 1942 in Khameneh, Iran. Mousavi is a blood relative of fellow Khameneh native, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader. He was the seventy ninth and the last prime minister of Iran from 1981-1989. Mousavi's premiership coincided with the Iran-Iraq war 1980-88. He guided the country through its war with Iraq, and became renowned for his economic integrity and his stewardship of the national economy during war years. He was the reformist presidential candidate of 2009 election, house detained over the past six years. Green was used as his sign of presidential campaign. He is known as the leader of the Green Movement.

Mir Hossein Mousavi’s political discourse in his statements marked a pivotal shift in political activism in Iran. He brought the ordinary Iranian citizen to the center of the

political action. A testament to this was the participation of millions of citizens in silent demonstrations before the shootings started. Moreover, his concern was to lower the human costs of the dissent, to the point that even a child or a pregnant woman could participate in the civil dissent (statement 9). Wearing green wristbands, planting flowers to make the urban landscape more pleasing living space, etc. among other actions comprised only a few of these strategies. Another important aspect of this discourse was its recognition of the other side of the power spectrum not as an enemy, but as those who too could be loved. It was not a battle in which one side had to be defeated, ultimately those who resisted the change would benefit from a more just society.

It is utterly simplistic to idolize only one man, Mir Hossein Mousavi, and omit all others who participated in the discourse of reformation. Artists, writers, poets, musicians, activists, economic scholars, left activists and scholars, all contributed to the discourse of the movement. But my main objective, by bringing up Mousavi's statements together with some historical facts is to elucidate the ongoing nature of the discourse of change that he advocated, and the negotiations of power throughout different social/political strata in a society going through a political upheaval.

There is one more aspect to the visual iconography of the inscribed illustrations on the bodies of villains and the hanging legs in Neshat's *Book of Kings* series that I'd like to dwell on. In the Detroit Institute of Arts' catalogue for Neshat's retrospective in 2013, Susan Babaie referred to this style of illustration as Qahveh-khaneh or Coffeehouse painting (Babaie 2013, 35). She goes no further with than the identification of this style. I find it necessary to examine the iconography of Qahveh-Khaneh (Coffeehouse) painting, so as to elucidate how the meaning is encrypted in the specific motifs and visual language

of this style. Peter Chelkowski in “Narrative Painting and Painting Recitation in Qajar Iran,” explains that these large-scale oil canvases, now referred to as naïve, primitive, folk or coffeehouse paintings, were first produced in Qajar period (18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century Iran) as a part of Shi’ite<sup>2</sup> public mourning rituals. These folk paintings were different in execution and style from the high art of the court. Their crude and clumsy execution was remote from the refinement and delicacy of the “Hochkunst” of the time (Chelkowski 1989, 98). Ruyin Pakpaz in his encyclopedia of Iranian art explicates that these painters were not trained as professional artists. They were artisans— tile makers, plasterers, or house painters— who, inspired by the common naturalistic painting of the time, depicted mainly religious narratives. The main goal of these painters was to make a simple, expressive and accessible narrative image. Therefore, in order to distinguish the good and evil in these narrative paintings the main characters (saints, religious and holy figures, and later epic heroes) were depicted usually in the center and relatively larger in size compared to other figures. In addition, the main part of the composition was dedicated to them. The good characters (main characters) were painted as good-looking and handsome, whereas the evil characters were painted as ugly as possible. Even in paint application these simple strategies were the painters’ guidelines (Pakbaz 1999, 587-8).

In order to better explain the iconography of these paintings, which were created initially as a backdrop for religious rituals of mourning for Shi’ite saint martyrs, Peter Chelkowsky underlines the performative rituals that formed these paintings. These theatrical rituals were led by a man, rowza-khan, who recited the story of martyrdom of

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<sup>2</sup> Shi’ism is a branch of Islam that became state religion of Iran since 16<sup>th</sup> century

Shi'it Islamic holy figures. The collective chanting of elegies by the mourners comprised an important part of these religious ceremonies.

The rowza-khan maximized his performative skills by crying, and modulating his voice, among other corporeal gestures, in order to manipulate the mood and emotions of the public. The narrative Qahveh-khaneh paintings were created to aid the dramatic and tragic splendor of the recitation.

Later, when epic stories were also rendered in this style, the same conventions regulated those paintings. The dichotomy of good and evil comprised the fundamental principle of creation in these image environments. Precisely for this reason, I believe Neshat's use of this particular good and evil narrative motif, borrowed from the Qahveh-khaneh painting, aptly supports her very reading of the events of the Green Movement. The simplicity and crudeness of this imagery echoes her interpretation of an event, which might seem far less complicated when witnessed from a distance. Shirin Neshat or any other Iranian or non-Iranian artist could develop their interpretations of the Green Movement, but I insist that each interpretation should be treated as situational, and not as a master narrative or the voice of an entire region.

I started my survey of the term "global contemporary" by examining how the phenomenon has been variously theorized. I then examined and historicized the actual dynamics of the "global contemporary" as governed in the formation of a concrete exhibition. In the reviewed exhibition, the "global contemporary" established itself in practice by secluding regions and ascribing a very specific ethno-political organizing narrative to a particular cohort of imagery. Such narrative fostered a flattening, overgeneralizing and potentially ahistorical account.

Today, in the wake of populist and xenophobic forces in many corners of the world, it is more urgent than ever to nurture a historicizing diversification within contemporary practices of the global art world. Art history, with its diverse methods of investigation, can play a vital role in bringing more insightful responses to the challenges of the “global contemporary” curatorial and artistic practices.

## Chapter II

### Coherence of Singularities

The Tunisian born curator based in Paris, Michket Krifa, in *Women of Images*, in her foreword to the catalog of *She Who Tells a Story* (“Women of Images”), begins the narrative with a wide shot: At the time when the art world seeks artists from all over the globe, she maintains that artists from the Middle East and North Africa are notably in demand. She contends the “emerging art scene in the region” is presented by a whole array of national and international institutions, art fairs, biennials etc. (Krifa 9, 2013). She continues that since 2011 and the rise of the Arab Spring, the interest in the art of the region has specifically increased.

Kristen Gresh, curator of the exhibition, *She Who Tells a Story* frames her argument following the same structure. She starts her catalog essay on the exhibition with a stirring image of a present in flux: a “critical time for the Middle East, as national and personal identities are being dismantled and rebuilt” (Gresh 2013, 21). In this “critical time,” contemporary photography is the tool to reflect this “unprecedented change” (Ibid). She mentions that the interest in the contemporary art from the region has radically increased after 9/11 and exploded again by the beginning of the Arab Spring. Against the overwhelmingly politicized and reductionist image of the region, she maintains photography would reveal the complexities of the society and the culture. Gresh delineates one of “the most significant trends to emerge”: women photographers, among which she has selected the works by twelve leading artists. These photographers’ insights, she believes, would help us to revisit and confront our preconceptions (Ibid 21).

As promising as this synopsis might sound, it inevitably raises two basic questions: First, what are those preconceptions and where do they come from? Second, how do these images work on the existing preconceptions to change them?

By raising these basic questions at the outset, I would like to draw attention to a discursive frame, in relation to which the narrative of the exhibition and its catalog essays are generated. In this chapter my aim is to analyze this narrative and argue how the description, explanation and experience of the exhibited works is still regulated by that very frame. I would like to demonstrate whether the way through which the works by these women photographers were showcased in this exhibition, could surpass the very misperceptions that it sets off to dispel. The preconceptions that the curators and exhibition catalog contributors seemingly take issue with, inevitably comprise a framework for their argumentation. It should be noted that the act of viewing some photographs does not automatically eradicate misperceptions and preconceptions. This viewing or communication with the works is already filtered and channeled by mediating strategies of the curator (including the selection of a specific set of works). These strategies are informed by a representational system, which intervenes and guides the reception of selected works. In other words, the flow of inquiry into these photographs is already modulated and regulated by strategies that are themselves subject to representational codes of a preexisting frame.

Now, I would like to go back to the first question: if preconceptions are, by and large, generated by the mass media, and by their biased stereotyping and inexact representations of the Arab countries and Iran, the concern is whether these curatorial schemes and strategies are liberated from them, and if so, which art historical

methodology aided the curators to achieve this end. As the narrative unfolds I attempt to demonstrate that the flow of reasoning and arguments around these works is constrained by the very premises that generate the exhibit: the dialogue with stereotypes. In other words, my aim here is to dispute the effectiveness of the prism through which this exhibition is articulated. When the lack of necessary historical, cultural and aesthetic sensibilities is not made up for by a rigorous research and art historical coherence, the constructed narrative can barely transcend the stereotypes.

In my analysis, I have mainly focused on Michket Krifa's narrative, while drawing on Gresh's narrative to underline their overlapping scheme. Given the immense range of social, historical, political and aesthetic factors that needed to be examined if I were to discuss the works by Iranian and the artists from Arab countries, I center my argument around works by Iranian artists. I move on with Krifa's account, as she crafts one single narrative for the history of the entire region and its history of photography.

According to Krifa, the Arab revolts sweeping through the region raised consciousness about freedom of expression and gender equality. Krifa underlines the active participation of women in these uprisings and their fight for their rights and their status- to acquire and redefine their rights against the threat of radical Islamist movements. Krifa expands her reading of the stakes of the Arab Spring in the following pages: these women tear down the walls that confine them; they start by refusing to belong to an "unindividuated group, demanding a singularity that is unusual in countries where the 'I' is almost taboo" (Krifa 2013, 10). Though she does not mention in which countries specifically the "I" is a taboo -that is, for whom and why- she further elaborates on these women's claim for a personal history and vision. Krifa contends that these

women through the image that they control, journey in and out of time and place, from the innermost and deepest selves beyond the gender roles, social expectations, conflicted identities, war and battled borderlines. They evade the crude reflections that misrepresented them, by “becoming the ‘women of images themselves’” (Ibid 11).

Krifa’s reading of the stakes of the Arab Spring echoes a tendency to abstraction and generalization that continues in her narrative when she expands her time scheme. She mentions that in the last twenty years, just as women artists from all around the world have been tremendously prolific in their creative practices, so too were women artists from Iran and the Arab World despite the gender-based prejudices against them in these countries as she contends. She then draws on the gradual “evolution” in the region and in its “consciousness” thanks to which the geographical classifications are overshadowed by appreciation of individual artists’ works. The same tendency for generalization occur with the concept of the “emerging art scene,” by which she began her overview. Krifa does not develop the notion of evolution in the region. The nature of this gradually surfacing change and its particulars are ambiguous. Other factors remain unclear: the timeframe of the development; the sociopolitical factors that contributed to it; and the specific countries impacted. The next paragraph ostensibly elucidates this ambiguity. She points out that in the mid-1990s the Middle East and North Africa were shaken by massive upheavals that would put an end to “nationalism-based ideologies” for many artists. While she never mentions any of these events and their specific nature, that supposedly shook more than twenty-four countries, Krifa concludes that “on the ashes of national causes, the nature of the individual arose as a question in these societies” (Ibid 11).

In this way, as Krifa observes, men and women artists made the locus of their artistic investigation their own lives. As maintained by her, women were first to take advantage of the camera to explore issues of identity and representation. She then mentions the example of Mona Hatoum and Shirin Neshat, who were the first to engrave the consequences of these sociopolitical tragedies on “their own flesh.” Krifa notes that these female artists adopted the camera as their medium for artistic exploration of the private realm of personally embodied experiences. In this way, they transformed the use of a medium that was previously reserved for reportage, so as to express the “fractured identity” and “dispossession” of women (Ibid 11).

Krifa in this paragraph seems to offer a concise history of transformation of the medium of photography conducted predominantly by women artists, however there are several chronological and historical ambiguities regarding her account. To point out a few, she does not mention which specific camera pieces from Hatoum’s body of work in the mid-1990s or 1990s in general, is at play here. This account becomes confusing as Hatoum stopped practicing performances and video-art after her work *Measures of Distance* in 1988<sup>3</sup>. In addition, both Hatoum (Lebanese-born Palestinian, London-based)

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<sup>3</sup> *Measures of Distance* is a video piece, a tale of closeness and distance, in which Hatoum used the close-up photographs of her mother under shower, and layered these images with letters that the mother and daughter exchanged while she was away from home in London. Hatoum reads aloud the English translation of these originally Arabic letters.

In an interview with Janine Antoni published in BOMB Magazine (1998), Hatoum discusses her video work *Measures of Distance* (1988) as a threshold, the “culmination and the conclusion of all the early narrative and issue based works.” She mentions after making this work, she felt she had “unloaded a burden off” her back, which allowed her to move forward to do other kinds of work; so, she started making installations.

Hatoum further elaborates on the shift in her practice and artistic interest in relation to the viewer. While in her early works (i.e. performances, videos and stills from performances) she wanted to “demonstrate or deliver” a message to the viewer, with the installation she wanted to engage the viewer in a more direct experience, a more physical, sensual and even emotional experience. She wanted to “implicate the viewer in a phenomenological situation.”

From beginning 1990s Hatoum’s works comprised sculptures, installation and predominantly large scale installations.

and Neshat (Iranian-born, New York-based) have not lived in the region since 1975, when the former moved to London before the outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon and the latter moved to the US before the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Therefore, within Krifa's narrative of the transformation of the photography by these artists, the reference to Hatoum's and Neshat's work demands additional consideration. The fact that these women are diaspora artists is by itself an issue to consider, which forces us to ponder the power dynamics of their medium within the art field of their host(ile) countries during 1980s and 1990s, especially when contemplating the issues of identity that Krifa stresses. In addition, these two women both received their artistic training in Western academic institutions, which also challenges an account of causal relationship between the evolution of the history of photography in the region and massive upheavals in the Middle East in the mid-1990s, and the role of these women as active agents of this transformation.

Furthermore, there is a major historical ambiguity in Krifa's narrative: in reality, no tragic sociopolitical upheaval took place in Iran in the mid-1990s. In fact, the mid-1990s coincides with the later years of the second term presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997), which paved the way for the presidential candidacy of Mohammad Khatami that culminated in the historical victory of Khatami in 1997 and his reform government (1997-2005). There is no responsible way to dismiss the complexity of Iranian politics and culture at this time. Hashemi Rafsanjani himself was a remarkable

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Therefore, it is questionable which specific body of photographic work by Hatoum in mid 1990s, or in 1990s in general Krifa is referring to.  
Antoni, Janine. Interview with Mona Hatoum, *BOMB* 63 (Spring 1998). Accessed February 18, 2017. <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2130/mona-hatoum>.

politician. He was a pragmatist and shrewdly handled the resistance from Islamic hard-liners against his free-market policies and warmer attitudes to Europe and the United States. Rafsanjani became president a year after the end of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). His attempts to renew ties with the West and his strategy to use foreign investment and free enterprise helped revive Iran's war-torn economy. The eight years of the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani is referred to as the Reconstruction Era in the contemporary history of Iran. The detente policies of Rafsanjani opened Iran's doors after a decade of isolation. Thus, it comes as no surprise that many- including artists like Neshat, who had left the country before the 1979 Revolution and never returned during the first years of the Islamic Republic and the following eight years of the Iran-Iraq war- resumed their trips back and forth to Iran from early 1990s onward. It is therefore unclear to which specific political turmoil in Iran in the mid-1990s Krifa alludes. For whom are these historical simplifications meant? If mainly for Westerners, do they play into the West's preconceived notions of the history of this region, subsequently masking changes over time? This in turn may mask deeper problems of this particular narrative and many other narratives around the art and politics of the region.

Krifa continues her essay by discussing the controversy around Neshat's works. She points out that Neshat's photographs brought about a quest among Western art critics to find an "aesthetics of veil," and they sometimes took her work to be merely the critique of the government in Iran or Islam in general (Ibid 11). Following this line of reasoning, some have denounced Neshat's work as using Western pictorial codes to vilify her country of origin and its culture. Krifa strongly disapproves of such "pernicious" suggestions (Ibid 12). She believes such interpretations of Neshat's works have wrongly

merged Neshat's personal artistic expression with superfluous media discourses, misrepresenting her artistic investigation as an anthropological query. Krifa then cites Samuel Herzog (Swiss art critic and journalist), to underline the contradiction in the global art scene that defines Western artists by their individuality, while artists from other regions are defined by their cultural, political and social identities. She concludes this discussion by asserting that despite such controversy, both Hatoum and Neshat are now recognized as international artists and may not be reduced to their cultures of origin.

She then moves on to works of the next generation of artists from the region. Obviously with her narrative, which fails to demonstrate verifiable historical accounts about the recent history of countries lumped together in the exhibition *She Who Tells a Story*, it is far more convenient for the narrator to think about a region as an abstract entity, rather than as countries with specific sociopolitical and cultural histories. Multiple histories, especially for critics and historians who have little on-the-ground knowledge and have not studied closely the recent history of specific areas, prove more challenging than a single history of a region.

Krifa's argument on Neshat contains several holes. She does not bring any evidence to convince the reader that the presented controversy about Neshat is faulty. She does not further elucidate why the specific visual vocabulary of Neshat's work and her use of veil are more personal rather than social, political or cultural. Instead, by citing Herzog she shifts the blame on some erroneous premises that distort the reception of Neshat's works- premises that fail to notice the personal expression in her art. But what is *the personal*? How do we approach it? How do we analyze it? Which art historical tools are more appropriate to appreciate it? Isn't it the case that Krifa herself has thus far



Shadi Ghadirian, *Qajar #9*, 1998



Shadi Ghadirian, *Qajar# 1*, 1998

framed her own broad narrative of the Arab and Iranian art by a set of sweeping political and social events throughout the region? Krisha's project may lack integrity at this point. If the personal is at stake why bother to structure the art of a whole region by some political events? If the personal is the focal point of her inquiry why does she sketch such blanket grouping of artists and countries?

This account gets yet another twist once Krifa reviews the works by other Iranian photographers featured in the exhibit. Krifa observes that in the last fifteen years many young Iranian women artists have enjoyed international success, including Shadi Ghadirian. Here, the methodological navigation between the personal and the sociopolitical gets even more muddled, as Krifa's commentary rests on inexact sociopolitical points. She reviews Ghadirian's *Qajar* series (1998), which according to

Krifa's description, is comprised of "figures posed in a historical studio setting with anachronistic youthful accessories that for years were officially banned: a motorcycle, a helmet, a Pepsi can, a bicycle, a portable radio" (Ibid 16). This is all we would learn about this series from Krifa's narrative. In her description, she has overlooked important art historical references in Ghadirian's *Qajar* series. In addition, her narrative is oblivious to crucial historical facts about Iran at the time Ghadirian developed this series.

Krifa seems to be reluctant to the fact that the women in the images are dressed in a Qajar-style costume, hence the title of series. These sepia-toned photographs consist of a full-length a female model dressed in a Qajar-style costume, posed against a backdrop curtain with an anachronistic object that disrupts the images' temporal association, such as a moderately liberal daily newspaper, boom box, vacuum cleaner, Ray-Ban sunglasses, Pepsi etc. Qajar was a Persian dynasty which ruled Iran from 1785 to 1925. Photography was introduced to the Qajar monarch, Mohammad Shah, "between 1839 and 1842" (Behdad 2001, 144). Queen Victoria of England and Emperor Nicolas I of Russia, each gave Mohammad Shah a photography apparatus as a gift. No one in the palace was interested in these gifts except for the young prince, who learnt photography at the age of thirteen from Richard, a French instructor, in his father's palace. The prince was Naser al-Din Shah Qajar, soon to be the longest reigning Shah of the Qajar Dynasty (ruled 1848-1896). He learnt more advanced methods of photography such as developing his own pictures from negatives, from another instructor: Carllaine. He trained a young boy as a personal assistant for himself and established a "photography institute" in his Golestan Palace in Tehran (Behdad 2001, 145). He was fascinated in taking erotic images of his wives and he developed all his photographs himself for his personal use. Naser al-

Din Shah's interest in photography was not limited to this personal use, and he used the new medium for various governmental purposes. This account of Qajar royal interest in the medium also demands more precision from curators like Krifa who attempt to narrate a blanket history of photography in the region. Ghadirian might be nodding to Qajar king's personal fantasies with a sense of humor.

Another crucial aspect to consider about this series is that Ghadirian's visual iconography did not *emerge* from the void; the concept of "emergence" indeed facilitates idle storytelling. Ghadirian graduated from Azad University, Tehran. Her professor, Bahman Jalali (1944-2010), the renowned Iranian photographer, played a significant role in her interest in Qajar photography. Jalali is well-known for his images of Iran's 1979 revolution, his photographs of the Iran-Iraq war, and his Qajar photomontages. He diligently researched Qajar photo-archives, and he "regularly showed his students" nineteenth-century Qajar portraits (Behdad 2016, 158). Ghadirian herself "traces" her interest in Qajar photographs back to her teacher (Ibid 158). It would be beneficial to point out that the founder of Azad University in Iran, is Hashemi Rafsanjani. Azad University is a private university. Discussion over Azad University and its operation is a contested topic and demands more space than we have here. However, by bringing it up here I would like to stress that the intricate social, political and cultural contexts demand more exacting research and a more profound understanding of the network of relations which constitute the art field, in which creativity matures and in the fullness of time blossoms. Approaching such a network via the facile tool of binaries such as evil government/ good artist, evil men/oppressed women, oppressed women/ emancipated female artist, backward society/ genius artist, forbidden/ permissible, is at best naïve.

The most curious part in Krifa's account is the "banned" status of Pepsi, bicycle, helmet etc. in Iran. It is as if the word "banned" would automatically confer a sacred and elevated meaning upon the photographs. No wonder Krifa does not see it necessary to further elaborate on this series; after all, the meaning should be self-evident when there is a "banned" object in the work. It is ambiguous based on which historical reality Krifa makes this claim. I imagine it should be confusing for the reader or for the potential viewer of the exhibition to communicate with Ghadirian's *Qajar* series based on this cursory information that Krifa provides. The creation of this series, 1998, coincides with the second year of the presidency of Mohammad Khatami in Iran and his reformist policies, especially in the cultural arena. My emphasis on the historical account against perpetuating unfounded assumptions about Iran, is an attempt to enable contemplation of the personal and the subjective in the artworks within the context of actual daily life in Iran. In this way, the artist's creativity, iconography of her/his work and the nuances of her/his critique or cultural and political meanings of the work would better reveal themselves.

The presidency of Khatami is an especially important era for Iranian artistic and cultural scene thanks to his emphasis on the primacy of culture and aesthetics. Before his groundbreaking victory in the presidential election of 1997 with 70% of the vote, Khatami was the Minister of Culture of Iran for ten years: from 1982 to 1992. In 1992 Khatami resigned from his post, in his own words due to "the difference between his views and some of the officials on issues regarding freedom of expression, democracy and civil society"<sup>4</sup>. Khatami then devoted his time to his scholarly research and teaching

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<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from Seyed Mohammad Khatami Official Website.

at universities. The fruit of his scholarship during this period were two books, *From the World of a City to the City of the World*, which is an intellectual inquiry in the history of the political thought in the West from Plato to the current liberal democracies, and the book *Faith and Thought Trapped by Despotism* which is an investigation of the course of intellectual inquiry in relation to the politics in Islam from the Rashedin Kalifs to the new era. In the 1997 presidential election, Khatami enjoyed strong support from Iran's youth, women and intellectuals. The nature of liberal reform in Khatami's viewpoint was more than anything else cultural. Talin Grigor, scholar of modern and contemporary Iranian art, makes a succinct comparison between Khatami's and Rafsanjani's notion of reform:

“Rafsanjani's cultural liberalism was intended to facilitate economic posterity and was therefore conditioned by and curbed by it. Khatami's liberal reforms were first and foremost cultural in nature, in purpose and in end result. While Rafsanjani sought to reform by first restructuring and regulating the market, Khatami believed that economic reintegration with the global market would be possible only after challenging cultural norms and attitudes” (Grigor 2014, 121-22).

For Khatami, the nature of the Islamic Republic was defined by the critical artistic expression, dialogue among people, moderation in censor, freedom to think and expression of new thoughts. Khatami was well aware of the alarming and widening gap between the public and the private spaces in Iranian society. In order to bridge this gap, he aimed to create a cultural environment in which the cynical Iranian intelligentsia and the cultural elite would place confidence in the ruling elite. In this way, the artistic community would actively participate in the life and well-being of the civil society. The aesthetic and the intellectual were two essential pillars of Khatami's notion of reform. He appointed Dr. Ata'ollah Mohajerani, a reformist politician, journalist, author and

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Khatami, Mohammad. Zendeginameh [biography]. *Website-i rasmi Seyed Mohammad Khatami* [Seyed Mohammad Khatami Official Website]. Accessed 18 February 2017. <http://www.khatami.ir/biography.html>

historian (Ph.D. History, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran), as the Minister of Culture of Iran. Mohajerani pursued policies of cultural openness and reform. For his confirmation hearing he delivered an enthusiastic speech before the conservative parliament. *The Los Angeles Times*, in an article by Robin Wright, cited excerpts from Mohajerani hearing a few months after his appointment as minister of culture: "I will oppose almost all the current methods [of censorship] .... This is because I believe we must value our artists, writers and filmmakers, as they deserve our respect. We must create an atmosphere of peace and tranquility in all centers of arts and culture . . . to allow the seeds of creativity to blossom" (Wright 1998). In that same hearing, Mohajerani cited one of the most renowned Shi'a theologians and scholars in Iran, Allameh Tabatabaei. He quoted Tabatabaei's reading of a Quranic verse<sup>5</sup>, according to which creativity dignifies the human being as viceregent of God on Earth. He contended the artistic creativity was an "extension of the God's creativity for mankind" (Mohajerani 1997, 52). Mohajerani survived an impeachment by the 5<sup>th</sup> parliament dominated by conservatives in 1999. He delivered an impassioned defense in favor of the freedom of expression in Islamic terms. Many Iranians attentively listened to his impeachment defense via radio or on television. He was finally confirmed by the parliament.

Mohajerani appointed Alireza Samiazar in 1997 to the post of the director of Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMCA) as well as the Director General of the Visual Arts Office. It was a year after Samiazar had returned to Iran from England with his doctorate degree in Art History from the University of Central England, Birmingham.

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<sup>5</sup> Mohajerani references the Quranic verse "فتبارك الله احسن الخالقين" Mohajerani, Ata'ollah. Jalaseh 121 [session 121] Hearing. *Rooznameh Rasmi Mozakerat-I Jalaseh Alani Majlis Shorayeh Eslami [The Official Newspaper of Plenary Assembly of Parliament]* 15488 (Summer 1997).

Samiazar was in his early forties, young and enthusiastic, always dressed up in fashionable suits, and he spoke perfect French and English. By promoting the policies of cultural openness, diversity of artistic expression, different forms of the avant-garde culture and his predilection for conceptual art, Samiazar played an important role in transformation of the artistic environment in Iran. A meticulous assessment of Samiazar's projects as well as TMCA's operation during this period could be the research topic for a book and is beyond the scope of this chapter, but what is critical to understand here is that the administration and leadership of Khatami, Mohajerani and Samiazar made an unparalleled transformation in cultural and artistic arena in post-revolution Iran.

Of course, this scene was not devoid of tension. The conservative hardliners and the Supreme Leader heavily criticized Mohajerani for his liberal policies. He resigned in 2000. Ahmad Masjed Jame'ei became culture minister after Mohajerani from 2000 to 2005. He had a master degree in Human Geography, with a track record of political engagement in the Tehran City Council. He strongly promoted freedom of the press in the face of conservative hardliners. Especially for the Iranian cinema his office marked an open and prolific period. Samiazar remained the head of TMCA and the Visual Arts Office throughout the presidency of Khatami (including his second term) till 2005, and pursued reform cultural policies. It was in this vibrant cultural environment that Ghadirian and many other artists were working at that time. The creative space in the public debates about the civil society, which Khatami carved out for the artists, enabled a productive chapter for cultural and artistic practices in Iran. Certainly, there were many different stances and artistic viewpoints, and Ghadirian's view is one of many others.



Shadi Ghadirian, *Like Every Day* # 4, 2000



Shadi Ghadirian, *Like Every Day* # 5, 2000

Krifa is interested in another series by Ghadirian from this period: *Like Every Day* (2000-2). This series is not included in the exhibit *She Who Tells a Story*, nonetheless Krifa finds it important to examine. She contends that in *Like Every Day*, Ghadirian uses “humor and panache to denounce the conditions of housewives” who instead of a face identify with a kitchen utensil or household object (Krifa 2013, 16). Krifa understands this series as Ghadirian’s depiction of “daily life in Tehran” while reflecting “her social concerns” (Ibid). According to Krifa, through this imagery Ghadirian “demystifies the reductive and monolithic images that outsiders may harbor” about Iran (Ibid).

This series is comprised of frontal upper torso photographs of women fully covered in floral chador (long cover) whose faces are substituted with pans, knives, brooms, irons, pots and other household objects; the backdrop to these front shots is plainly monochrome, like an ID-card background. It is ambiguous how this series possibly depicts daily life in Tehran in 2001-2002. More curiously is the way this series is supposed to demystify the reductive imagery that outsiders entertain about Iran. I

wonder if Krifa's idea of daily life in Tehran has proved thus far anything beyond reductive in the first place.

There is yet another series by Ghadirian in *She Who Tells a Story* that Krifa reviews: *The Nil, Nil* (2008). According to her, Ghadirian "denounces the intrusion of war into the daily lives of Iranian people" (Ibid). Krifa continues that after eight years of war with Iraq and surrounded by countries at war and threatened daily by impending war, Iranian youth learned to "deal with the culture of war" (Ibid). Krifa is again historically unclear in her narrative. The Iran-Iraq war ended in 1989. Speaking of Iranian youth, it is vague which social definition of the term young people is alluded to. In 2008, twenty years after the end of the Iran-Iraq war when Ghadirian made her *Nil, Nil* series, Iranian youth comprised a generation either born after the war or with vague toddler memories of a war. There are of course concerns and many topics regarding the aftermath of Iran-Iraq war. For instance, landmines in Iran Kurdistan; the damaged infrastructure of the cities which were close to Iran-Iraq borders; disabled veterans and their families, as well as the struggles of those who lost their loved ones during the war, especially those families left destitute. A remarkable number of Iranian painters, photographers (both art photography and social-documentarians) as well as Iranian directors and writers have used their creative projects to address these diverse aspects of the aftermath of the war. But Ghadirian's series, two decades after the end of the war, does not seem to address any of these topics. The imagery is literal in its persistence on an extant notion of war. Through Krifa's interpretation this literal meaning becomes even more rigid and is fixated on a blanket conception of existing regional war.



Shadi Ghadirian, Nil Nil #1, 2008

Reviewing a few of the photographs from this series, which were on view at *She Who Tells a Story*, helps elucidate my point: *Nil Nil #1* juxtaposes a pair of red shiny and sexy high heels facing a slightly opened door, with a pair of muddy army boots stained with fresh blood on the toe. The army boots face the viewer while the red high heels face the light coming from the opened door. Through this image Krifa interprets the penetration of war in the daily life of Iranian youth, some twenty years after the end of Iran-Iraq war. I suspect Iranian youth might communicate with this piece as a still from a Rambo movie, since even the obsolete aesthetics of red high heels and bloodstained army boots are too fictional to be taken seriously by young people in Iran. Another work from this series, *Nil Nil #10* depicts the close-up of a crystal fruit dish on a traditional Persian cashmere embroidered table cloth. A green hand grenade sits among pears, grapes, apples, oranges and apricots. In *Nil Nil # 11* a fancy black-beaded sequin clutch with gold chains sits open on a dark marble counter top next to a pair of silver glasses. A gold nail polish along with a silver watch, silver jewelry, a bottle of perfume and two lipsticks



Shadi Ghadirian Nil Nil # 11, 2008



Shadi Ghadirian Nil Nil # 10, 2008

keep strings of bullets erect in the open clutch. In *Nil Nil # 8* a phallic Famas grenade rifle projects out of the soft linen in a bed for two.

Krifa believes *Nil Nil* renders how “the weapons have completely invaded the household” in Iran (Ibid 16). She understands this series as “mises en scene of daily life in Tehran, intimately linked to her [Ghadirian’s] social concerns” (Ibid 16). In Krifa’s opinion these images “contribute to the demystification of simplistic visions one might have from one side or another” (Ibid). I do agree that these images could contribute to a kind of demystification, however as opposed to Krifa’s emphasis on Ghadirian’s social concerns and the generality of “daily life in Tehran,” I’d like to call for a different mode of interpretation. The erotically charged application of war-associated objects in *Nil Nil* reveal a very specific interpretation of the concept of war. I would like to go back to the notion of “personal.” To do so we might venture an understanding of this series as Ghadirian’s personal interpretation of war instead of treating it as a social manifesto about the looming war in Iran as supposedly perceived by a vaguely defined “Iranian youth”? Why not address the series as the artist’s personal interest to revisit the topic of war to render tensions and power relationships in a couple’s intimacy? Why not assess

the success or shortcomings of this series in respect to the other works of this artist? Why not expand the scope of our scrutiny to assess Ghadirian's personal fascination with war by situating this series in the rich context of the photographic contemplations about Iran-Iraq war and its aftermath by many photographers and artists in Iran. In this way Ghadirian's personal interpretation would indeed demystify the tendency by curators and authors like Krifa to generalize and represent a baffling image of Iran, though in the guise of "demystification."

Thus, the place of the personal, as well as the reduction of the social and historical contexts, seem contingent on the knowledge the critic happens to possess or has easy access to. There is little or no method that would help tease out which approach above may be more valid. The confusion over methodological approach to photographs by Iranian artists manifests itself frequently in Krifa's narrative. Her statements about the personal expression in Neshat and her approach to Ghadirian's work, by employing ostensible sociopolitical data, reveal a contradiction. Another art historical shortcoming of her narrative is the consistently immutable general sociopolitical and cultural premises that she bases her argument upon. It is not only manifest in her flattened image of a vast region with a tremendous geopolitical and cultural variety, but it is also manifest in her reluctance to engage with the changing historical periods within one single territory. In the case of Iran for instance, as we have thus far witnessed, in only 15 years, the country experienced three distinct phases of political and cultural leadership and changes. Krifa's narrative does not possess the required historical and methodological rigor to address any of these crucial phases and their subsequent influence on the broad range of cultural and artistic practices in Iran.

Instead, Krifa mourns for and laments an imminent war, the previous war, the atrocities, the upheaval, the Islamist extremists etc. The notion of “a society in flux” has a uniformly fixed and regionally negative connotation rather than a varying and vibrant meaning in her narration. The positive change is attributed to the artist, who emerges out of a vacuum in time and place, and the meaning of flux, inevitably disapproving, is attributed to the society. The unstable society is paradoxically stagnant in its instability: the public and private cultural institutions remain non-existent and the political conditions remain immutable. Such a narrative is unavoidably rigid and inflexible. There is a uniformity and dogma in such a treatment of art history. It resists a multi-disciplinary historical/art historical approach, for it is based on generalities rather than concrete historical scrutiny; thus, its circuit is closed.

Krifa fails to take note of the larger, layered and vibrant socio-cultural landscape of any single country, where works of art are created. By the omission of the relations of production and reception of the artworks within the distinct geopolitical and cultural spaces of each country (not to mention each city), as well as the mediating institutions which nurtured or hampered the artist and her/his creative projects, Krifa fosters an imaginary construction, a timeless and placeless image of a society; a muddled context in which all external variables remain constant in their hostility towards the artist, especially the female artist.

### Chapter III

## Storytelling in the Plural

Before closing her foreword essay, “Women of Images,” Michket Krifa points out that the works of female photographers in the exhibition *She Who Tells a Story* display a distinct interest in the “new documentary photography” (Krifa 2013, 18). According to Krifa this interest was expressed in the formation of the collective Rawiya, created by “young female photographers” from the Middle East, who “combine the documentary approach to their subject with a self-reflexive attention to aesthetic forms” (Ibid 18). She mentions the name of a few of these contributing female photographers, including the Iranian Newsha Tavakolian. But Krifa does not elaborate on the concept of “the new documentary” which she seems to introduce as a new genre of camera art. Considering the fact that the exhibition’s curator, Kristen Gresh, in her catalog essay on *She Who Tells a Story* also refers to this same term, namely “the new documentary,” and that the word Rawiya رابوية (an Arabic word) means a female narrator or she who tells a story, it can be inferred that the narrative of this exhibition, *She Who Tells a Story*, has been constructed or inspired by this collective’s particular approach to the medium of documentary. Rawiya means raconteur, the ة (ta) at the end of the word in Arabic is a feminization suffix, hence a female raconteur. It is surprising why Krifa does not further elaborate on the meaning of this term “new documentary” and the collective Rawiya. Is the new documentary a new genre of artistic practice? Who coined this term and why? Which art historical urgency authorizes this term?

A quick search in the internet for the collective Rawiya, yields the collective’s own website. In 2017, Newsha Tavakolian is not a member of Rawiya, and the collective

is not limited to female photographers. In fact, there is no Iranian contributor to this collective at this point. The name of the collective has changed to Rawi(ya), (راوى), which denotes both masculine and feminine narrator in Arabic. The collective is currently comprised of Zied Ben Roudhane (male, born and based in Tunisia), Gaith Abdul-Ahad (male, Iraqi, journalist, The Guardian correspondent, working for Getty Images), Myriam Abdelaziz (female, French photographer of Egyptian origin, currently based in New York), Tamara Abdul Hadi (female, born to Iraqi parents in UAE, raised in Montreal Canada, currently based in Dubai), Laura Boushnak (female, Kuwaiti-born Palestinian, based in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina), Tanja Habjouqa (female, half-Jordanian half-Texan, educated in England, currently in East Jerusalem), Tanseem Alsultan (female, born in US, educated in England and US, currently based in Jubail, Saudi Arabia)<sup>6</sup>.

In a November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2011 article, The *TIME* LightBox (the photography and visual journalism section of *TIME*) traces the formation of Rawiya: In 2009 Newsha Tavakolian, Iranian photographers, in a trip to Beirut met with Tamar Abdul Hadi and Dalia Khamissy with the idea of forming the collective. They enthusiastically embraced the idea and later, “in August 2011” Tamara Boushnak and Tanya Habjouqa were asked to join the group. Myriam Abdelaziz, whose work at that time focused on the events around the Egyptian upheavals also joined the collective. The article formulates the focus of the collective as follows:

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<sup>6</sup> All the biographical information is retrieved from the official website of the collective Rawiy(a). Accessed February 19 2017. Last website update 2017. <http://www.rawiya.net/#mi=1&pt=0&pi=2&p=-1&a=0&at=0>

“Rawiya – which means “she who tells a story” in Arabic – is on capturing the region’s social and political issues as well as its stereotypes through photo essays and long-term projects.” (Gibson 2011)

The article does not mention any specific group projects that the collective might have conducted, however it mentions the independent photo stories by each artist which were exhibited together in a group exhibition. Rawiya made its official debut at the Format Festival in Derby, U.K. March 2011. Per *TIME* LightBox, the Rawiya members said they had benefited from exhibiting as a group. The article concludes by underlining the fact that female photographers of Rawiya have strengthened one another’s work by inspiring one another.

In a May 2016 article, James Estrin, editor of LENS *New York Times* (the photography and media journalism section of *New York Times*), titled his article on Rawiya as “The Hidden Stories of Arab Women.” In Estrin’s article, there is already no mention of any Iranian photographer. Estrin maintains that the collective was formed in 2009 to “support female Middle Eastern photographers and to challenge the visual representation of Arab women,” who according to Myriam Abdelaziz had “long been portrayed by Western photographers as weak or oppressed” (Estrin 2016). Estrin continues that these women have access to hidden places and their stories have more substance than those of outsider photographers who stay on assignments in the Middle East for only a month or two. Estrin reviews each photographer’s individual interest, background and a highlight of their individual projects.

Estrin conceptualizes the Middle East as Arab and Rawiya as a group of Arab photographers. At the time he published the article, Rawiya had neither any Iranian, nor any male photographer. It was later in 2016 that the two male photojournalists joined the

group. The website of Rawi(ya) states that the collective was established in 2009 “to provide a supportive platform for female photographers in the Middle East and opened up to male members in late 2016.”<sup>7</sup> The website declares that Rawi(ya) is about “redressing the way the world” (both East and West) “looks at the Middle East.” It asserts that the photographers’ work presents “cheeky challenges” to perceptions of “gender roles, politics, displacement, religion and culture” for an audience in and outside of the region. Per this statement, the Rawi(ya)’s photographers work across different platforms of photography such as “journalism, education and fine art—utilizing long form documentary projects.” Rawi(ya) webpage provides a brief biography for each photographer and a link to their personal website. The homepage of the website in addition to the brief statement that I just mentioned above, provides a list of group activities which consists of exhibitions starting from 2011 through 2016, a workshop in Gaza with World Press Photo Foundation 2016, and a panel discussion in New York 2016, and a recent interview with *Vogue Italia*. There is no information about any group projects, nor any information on the collective’s particular conception of each of the broad topics such as religion, culture, gender, and politics in specific projects or exhibitions.

In the interview conducted by *Vogue Italia* in June 2016, with Tamara Abdul Hadi and Tanya Habouqa, the two photographers give a sensible account of the collective’s achievements and its mission. The collective has enabled the photographers to showcase their work together and benefit from one another’s “honest” critique and support to better proceed with one’s individual projects (Redazione 2016). Tanja

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<sup>7</sup> Retrieved from the website of the collective Rawiy(a). Accessed February 19 2017. Last website update 2017. <http://www.rawiya.net/#mi=1&pt=0&pi=2&p=-1&a=0&at=0>

Habouqa maintained, that “if anything, banding together as female photographers helped us gain attention and platforms” (Ibid). Habjouqa strongly believes that there were no challenges for them as women photographer in the Middle East. Conversely it granted the photographers’ “access to a multitude of stories” (Ibid). Habjouqa maintains Rawiya is comprised of members with broad ethnic and national backgrounds, who are “staunchly secular” with respect for all faiths and communities (Ibid). She maintains that the media perpetuates stereotypes about the Middle East and while she does not deny the serious human rights issues for both men and women, there are “fiercely independent, beautiful and successful women” making great improvements (Ibid). In response to a question regarding the mission of the collective, Tamara Abdul Hadi formulates it in a straightforward way: “We want to say ‘Put aside your pre-conceived notions, come and take a closer look at our region’”(Ibid). Abdul Hadi maintains their aim is to show people they portray in their work as “human” along with the social and political aspects of the region (Ibid). Since the members live in different countries, US, Bosnia, Jordan, Dubai etc. they have managed to communicate via Skype. There have been opportunities for all members of the group to come together, which the members cherished, such as the panel discussion 2016 in New York. The group missed the members that left them, Newsha Tavakolian and Dalia Khamissy. Despite all difficulties that threatened the tangibility of Rawiya as a collective with members scattered all around the world, they managed to tackle issues of distance. The two interviewees were both educators in their cities of residence. Tanya Habjouqa also independently participated as a mentor for three years in a joint educational program organized by Magnum Foundation (New York), Prince Clause Foundation (Amsterdam, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and Arab

Documentary Foundation, in which the focus was on long-term documentary projects. Hobjouqa later invited one of the photographers that she mentored there, Tanseem Alsultan, to join the group.

From the group's history of activities and its account of transformation over time, we can conclude that Rawi(ya), she/he who tells a story, is an initiative without an explicit program, or a specific scheme but with a general orientation, which allowed the collective to change members, regional coverage, topics of interest, and different modes of photography. These facts underscore the arbitrary nature of the term "the new documentary," which Krifa attempted to develop as an art historical term generated in tandem with this collective's practices. "The new documentary" does not provide a solid art historical term; it does not refer to a specific set of practices by a limited group of gendered participants from specific countries. The term does not possess the conceptual and aesthetic consistency to transcend Krifa's vernacular sketch.

The brief (less than a paragraph) description of a "new genre" of practice at the end of an exhibition catalog entry, manifests an intention to include a terminology, and simultaneously a deliberate reluctance to unfold it. The reason for making this cursory mention of the "new documentary," is most likely due to Kristen Gresh's emphasis on this term. Gresh, the curator of *She Who Tells a Story*, titles an entire section of her exhibition essay with this term. She recognizes a distinct category of work assembled in the exhibition, which "brings artistic imagination to the documentation of real-life experiences to form a new kind of documentary" (Gresh 2013, 30). According to Gresh the themes of war, revolt, protest and the preoccupation with the photography as a medium constitute this "new genre" (Ibid). Gresh categorizes *Nil Nil* by Ghadirian and



Gohar Dashti, *Untitled 4*, From *Today's Life and War* Series, 2008

the series *Today's Life and War* (2008) by Gohar Dashti, an Iranian photographer, as belonging to this new genre. According to Gresh, these two artists address “the coexistence of war and daily life in Iran;” while their photographs narrate the “unknown stories of war” (Ibid, 30). Gresh contends that Ghadirian’s *Nil Nil* by juxtaposing masculine and feminine objects, for instance muddy combat boots and a pair of red high heels, sheds light on the experience of women at home during war. Gresh also briefly reviews Gohar Dashti’s series *Today's Life and War*. She perceives this series as Dashti’s own story of growing up in a city near borders of Iran and Iraq during the war.

In her surreally staged photography, Dashti recounts different sequences of a young couple’s life who pose in a fabricated war-torn scene. Gohar Dashti’s signature image of the exhibit, displays a staged photograph of a bride and groom, sitting in the decorated shell of a wrecked car. The couple stares at the viewer, while in the war-torn background a tank is passing. In another photograph from this series, the couple sit at a breakfast table in the middle of a battlefield with a tank rolling right towards the table.

The woman is talking on phone and the man leaning on the table with his elbows, stares at her. Dashti is born 1980 in Ahvaz, in South West of Iran. She moved to Tehran 1999, pursued her higher education in Tehran and stayed there. This series is undoubtedly Dashti's own story- with humor she recounts the story of life which never ceases its rituals even during a war. But the series could recount her experience in a literal sense only with a hint of imagination, for Dashti was eight years old (second grade student) when the war ended. Even if in this series, she had attempted to narrate the story of first-grade school girls who took refuge in a bunker during an air strike against their school, even that story would still be a fabricated and staged scene, an installation to express an idea, a memory or a lived experience in past. It could not hold to the principal characteristics of documentary photography. This fact does not dilute the meaning or conceptual significance of the work, it rather draws a line between fictional narration and an attempted objectivity (as much objectivity that the kaleidoscopic lens permits). Interestingly, in the individual entry for this series in the catalog of *She Who Tells a Story*, these photographs are described as "visual metaphors about the experience of war and collective memories" (Ibid 94). I believe "visual metaphors" or personal artistic metaphors are more relevant to description of Dashti's work. Neither Dashti nor Ghadirian were ever members of Rawiya. They also do not adopt the long-term documentary approach that Rawiya members favored and pointed out in the above-mentioned interview. Moreover, the long-term documentary photography comprises photographic practices, which represent humanity in its natural condition over a long period of time. Thus, it is questionable why Gresh insists on attributing the documentary charge to Dashti's and Ghadirian's work.

The Getty Research Art & Architecture Thesaurus defines metaphor as “a figure of speech or visual work that implies comparison between two unlike entities, in which a word, phrase, or idea is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable in order to suggest a resemblance.” Getty defines the documentary photography as “an approach to photography in which the subject is recorded with an emphasis on factual accuracy and with a high degree of objectivity by the photographer; often of a newsworthy event.”<sup>8</sup> But the objective quality and the authority of documentation is a matter of intense discussions among historians of photography. Abigail Solomon-Godeau in a chapter on documentary photography, “Who is Speaking Thus,” emphatically underlines the contingency and the contextual relativity of the category documentary. The framing context of a documentary photograph starts from the gallery wall or magazine page but extends beyond that to situate the meaning of the photograph within certain institutional and discursive systems. Solomon-Godeau points out that “the meaning of a documentary photograph is produced and secured within those systems of representation that a priori mark its subject and our relations to the subject in preordained ways” (Solomon-Godeau 1991, 182). She warns against a facile reading of a documentary image as a photograph that appears to speak of itself. Such a reading of photography fails to recognize “working of ideology which always functions to naturalize the cultural” (Ibid).

Gresh’s emphasis on the documentary aspect of the *Nil Nil* and *Today’s Life and War* is therefore dubious and puzzling. Is one capable of reversing the meaning of a

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<sup>8</sup> Miriam-Webster defines the word documentary as “having or claiming the objective quality, authority, or force of documentation in the representation of a scene, place, or condition of life or of a social or political problem or cause.”

contested term by adding the word “new” to it? Why is there such obsession with “documentary” when the photographs are readily perceived as staged and fabricated installations to convey an intended meaning by the artist. Which prerogatives are at stake here that call for the emphasis on the “documentary”?

When referring to Dashti and Ghadirian photographs, Gresh cites Rose Issa. She contends that such staged narratives could be called what Rose Issa regards as “‘ real fictions- a subtle mixture of documentary and fiction which blurs the line between reality and creativity’” (Ibid 30). Gresh makes this citation from the book *Iranian Photography Now* (2008), edited by Issa. The book is comprised of an introductory essay of six loosely formatted pages, where Issa reviews the history of photography in Iran from 1840 to 2008, and a selection of works by thirty-six contemporary Iranian photographers, both male and female from different generations, which the editor selected herself. There are no critical or scholarly essays in the book. For each artist, there is a paragraph or two sourced directly from artists’ statement followed by full-page prints of each artist’s selected works. There is also an index of short biographies for artists at the end of the volume.

It is important here to locate Issa and her point of view. Rose Issa is a gallerist in London and an independent curator. She has contributed with an essay similar to the one in the volume *Iranian Photography Now* to another book: *Arab Photography Now* (2011). In that book, together with Michket Krifa, the two authors wrote two short introductory essays and assembled works with similar format. Issa’s short texts in both volumes are similar. In *Iranian Photography Now*, the book that Gresh makes her citation from, Issa points out in the beginning of her essay, that the book is “not a definitive

academic study,” but rather her “personal” selection (Issa 2008, 10). Issa asserts that the book does not include many photographers and many great names, simply because it is impossible to include all artists in one single volume. Issa is candid in her assertion about the lack of academic and scholarly rigor of her essay and the book in general. The book is a compound of many different genres of photography by photographers, many of whom have worked with her gallery. Issa observes that over years she has found herself “drawn to images” that *she* sees as reflecting “recurring themes” (Issa 2008, 13). She improvises the “real fiction” (that Gresh cited) here. It’s not a surprise that immediately after this paragraph, Issa mentions the “legacy of war.”

Gresh clearly structures her New Documentary section after Issa’s essay. Gresh uses war as a central structuring metaphor for her essay. As we have seen above, it is not only Issa who uses war to structure her discourse: like Krifa, Gresh admits the war is over but she makes a vague and general statement about the endurance of wartime stories and possible future conflicts, which preoccupy Iranians.

Structuring metaphors and visions of a particular contemporaneity channel discursive interest and activity. Now the question is this: In the panorama of the contemporary photography in Iran, what segment is favored by Issa and what role does she play in the formulation of discourse on Iranian photography? Issa is known as a curator and gallerist in London, and though she has contributed to catalogs, she neither is nor is she known as a scholar. Moreover, her selection of thirty-six photographers in *Iranian Photography Now* does not indicate any thematic or theoretical cohesion: along with minimalist monochrome landscapes by Abbas Kiarostami, she has picked photojournalistic images, industrial photography, appropriated surrealist images, and

digitalized and photoshopped family albums, just to mention a few of her choices. There is no thematic, conceptual or aesthetic consistency in her selection. There are many names that are not in this volume, but after all this is her personal selection, as she made clear in the beginning. It's in the introduction of this volume that she improvises the term "real fiction."

If we take seriously the role of critical discursive control, it would seem that much of the discourse produced on Iranian photography above may be seen as grounded in an ad hoc, contingent set of interests emanating from a small number of Western interlocutors who may or may not have grounding in scholarship and serious criticism, and may not be attentive to the complex local histories and knowledges that inevitably ground artistic practice. Rose Issa's text, as she herself stated, does not demonstrate the rigor and accuracy of a scholarly and academic study. Gresh's adoption of "real fiction" from Issa, and her own formulation of "new documentary" to explain *her* selection of works in the exhibition *She Who Tells a Story*, manifest a tendency for unexamined generalization. Gresh's terminology along with Krifa's bird'-eye view of a region swept by war and uprising, allows us to recognize a specific prism through which Iran is perceived by these two. I believe, by dwelling on this prism, the emphasis of these authors on the term "new documentary," will inevitably translate into their need for the authority that is embedded in the concept of documentary to justify their understanding and organizing narrative of the exhibit.

As we have thus far seen, all throughout Krifa's narrative historical inaccuracies abounded. Both Krifa and Gresh were unaware of the focal points of Iran's history and Iranian art. For both of them, Iran's contemporary history stretches between two main

points: Iran-Iraq war and 2009 presidential election. They structured their narrative based on this understanding of Iran's history. In Gresh's and Krifa's formulation the war lingers all through the Green Movement. They are for instance, completely unaware of or reluctant to address the 1997-2005 period of reform under Khatami and the significant changes in the cultural arena and artistic practices in Iran during that period. Their story therefore suffers essential holes that disrupt the consistency and the texture of the narrative that they attempt to build up. Moreover, with the kind of prism that they offer, the potential reader of their essay or viewer of their exhibit might miss fundamental details to understand better the exhibited works. To better elucidate this issue, I would like to draw on Ali Behdad's recent book, *Camera Orientalis, Reflections on Photography of the Middle East* (2016). A scholarly publication, the book is the continuation of Behdad's immersive research in photo archives and investigation of the history of the photography in the Middles East.

In the concluding pages of the last chapter of his book- "On Photography and Neo-Orientalism Today-" Behdad points out the predominance of paternalistic and neo-Orientalist reception of Middle Eastern artists' works in the West. He brings up the example of a critic describing Neshat's art as "depicting Islamic women's collective strength and resilience in the face of misogyny and despotism" (Behdad 2016, 167-168)<sup>9</sup>. He then cites the *Artforum International* critic, Jan Avgikos, who admired Neshat's work for representing "'the actual texture of day-to-day life of women in the Middle East' and as such making an important contribution to the area's developing women's movement"

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<sup>9</sup> Bedad's citation from: Denson, G. Roger. "Shirin Neshat: Artist of the Decade." *Huffington Post*, December 30, 2010. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/g-roger-denson/sherin-neshat-artist-of-t\\_b\\_802050.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/g-roger-denson/sherin-neshat-artist-of-t_b_802050.html)

(Ibid 168)<sup>10</sup>. These critics' view of Neshat's work echoes Krifa's interpretation when depicting Neshat's *Women of Allah* series as imprint of the "social and political tragedies" on her "own flesh" (Krifa 2013, 11).

In order to expand his point about the Neo-Orientalism in reception of art works from the Middle East, Behdad draws on the exhibition *Without Boundary: Seven Ways of Looking* at MoMA 2006. Behdad refers to an exhibition curated by Fereshteh Daftari, Iranian scholar (Ph.D. Columbia) and MoMA's curator (1988-2009). The exhibition catalog comprised a solid introductory essay by Daftari in which she tried to dispel stereotypes about conceptions of Islamic and Middle Eastern art<sup>11</sup>. The exhibition featured the works of artists with roots in the Middle East, such as Hatoum, Neshat, and Shahzia Sikander to name a few. Behdad citing Amie Wallach, argues that the exhibition was organized around "formal traditions that stereotypically say 'Middle East' in the West: calligraphy,

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<sup>10</sup> Behdad's citation from: Avgikos, Jan. "Shirin Neshat, Gladstone Gallery." *Artforum*, January 2006, 220-21.

<sup>11</sup> In the introduction to the hardcover catalogue of the group exhibition "Without Boundary" at MoMA (2006), Daftari maps out the stereotypical notion of works loosely categorized and identified as "Islamic Art". She identifies an intense recent attention to Islam from the West. She underscores a reductive homogenizing impulse in the term "Islamic Art." She maintains the region called Islamic World, stretches from Indonesia to the Atlantic coast of Africa; hence to call the art of this whole region "contemporary Islamic art" is utterly reductive. It is like calling the entire art of Western hemisphere "contemporary Christian art". She identifies the study of so called Islamic Art is an occidental invention, dating back to 1860's. She then underlines the paradox embedded into vulgar use of this term in contemporary art scene. She observes, in our present time the term is loaded with political and religious connotations, and yet it has been applied to works of artists who would not use it to describe their works: They mostly don't permanently live in any Islamic areas, they have graduated from Western art schools, their work is specifically produced for European and American art spaces and only a very small fraction of their exhibit audience is comprised of Muslims. Most of these artists have experienced a long-term dislocation across nations. She then identifies those formal elements that have conditioned the Western audience to think as "Islamic" whenever they appear in a work of art, e.g. Calligraphy, Miniature, Elements of Carpet Design etc.

She then surveys the works of artists in the exhibit.

Daftari, Fereshteh. "Islamic or Not" In *Without Boundary: Seventeenth Way of Looking*, Edited by Fereshteh Daftari, 10-28. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2006.

The fact that a sensitive curator like Daftari, who has consciously tried to avoid and dispel stereotypes, falls prey to the same categorizing strategies that she criticizes, underscores the difficulty and complexity of the issue at hand.

miniature painting and carpet”<sup>12</sup>(Behdad 2016, 168). Once again, he quotes from Amie Wallach regarding this exhibition and her critique of the way the “overwhelmingly majority” of art critics and viewers in the West still perceive and receive the artworks from the Middle East:

“...[they] lack the discriminating knowledge of the details of other people’s histories, assumptions, desires, and disappointments necessary to a close reading of work that is embedded in experiences not easily accessible to those born in the United States making them see nothing but that same old familiar face [of a culturally other] staring back.” (Ibid 168)

Though the assessment of MoMA’s *Without Boundaries* demands a research paper in its own right, we should take note of the way, despite some intentions to dispel stereotypes, they were still deeply embedded in the assembling rationale of the exhibition; as a result, the dynamics of reception of the exhibition also signaled failure. If MoMa’s exhibition was organized around the formal traditions that are pigeonholed as Middle Eastern, I argue the organizing narrative of *She Who Tells a Story* is war and discrimination against women, which stereotypically encapsulate an image of the “Middle East” in the West. The lack of a necessary historical, cultural and aesthetic sensibility by the vast majority of Western viewers and critics when communicating with works from the Middle, is particularly pertinent to my discussion. However, I would like to add one more layer to the dynamics through which this shortage of knowledge is covered up by many curators and critics.

After citing Wallach, Behdad further develops his argument. He contends that the interest and enthusiasm for artworks from contemporary Middle Easterners, in the US and Western Europe should be considered in the light of the neo-imperial interventions of

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<sup>12</sup> Shirin Neshat’s work is generally identified by calligraphy, Shahzia Sikander by miniature painting and Mona Hatoum work by carpets

the West in the region. He elaborates on the notion of the veil, or chador art (chador is the long cover worn by some Muslim women), that is by now an obsolete visual trope, and yet there is an insatiable hunger for it in some Western institutions. Behdad refers to his previous discussion in another book, where he argues that Orientalism is not a single and immutable entity “whose totalizing force leaves little room for discursive or ideological transformation” (Ibid 168). He rather conceives Orientalism as an intrinsic network of power relations that in the face of complex political and social changes, “always entails re-articulation of otherness to ensure its cultural hegemony” (Ibid). In this way Behdad argues that the hunger for chador art demonstrates cultural forces that make use of the “circulation of old tropes” such as veil, while seemingly they reject and disparage traditional forms of exoticism (Ibid 168-169).

I would like to expound on Behdad’s condensed argument. Orientalism was coined by Edward Said, Palestinian-born scholar, in his 1978 book of the same title. Despite all the controversy around the term, Orientalism continues to have negative connotations and no Western curator would want his/her exhibition to be associated with this term. In fact, Gresh starts a section of her exhibition catalog essay by giving a brief description of the term and asserting the works that she has selected dispel Orientalism. But she too, inevitably falls in the same trap that Behdad delineated. Gresh concisely defines Orientalism per Said, as a discourse of power, representing the Orient, as culturally inferior to the West. She explains that Orientalism “aligns Western romanticized visions of the region” with the aim of upholding European and American colonial and imperialist goals (Gresh 2013, 24).

I will expand a little more the definition of the term to weave it to Behdad's point. Orientalism manifests itself in practices (literary, visual, scholarly) through which Western cultures describe their rationality, consistency and centrality by opposing themselves to the representations of exotic otherness in the Orient (e.g. backwardness, dominance of sensuality and eroticism over sober rationality, etc.). In this way, the West by constructing this knowledge of the inferior Orient, creates and maintains cultural, political and economic hegemony over the lands and peoples of the East.

Interestingly but not surprisingly, when talking about Neshat, Gresh reinforces what Behdad identifies as neo-Orientalist tendencies. Gresh maintains that Neshat's *Women of Allah* series "breaks down the Orientalist tropes of female submission by showing women's empowerment in face of opposition." She elaborates on one of Neshat's works, an untitled image in which a woman has raised her hand to her mouth, covering her lower lip by her hand. According to Gresh, calligraphy inscription on the woman's hand is her voice despite her closed mouth. She mentions another work by Neshat, *I Am Its Secret*, in which the face of a veiled woman whose gaze directly confronts the viewer, is imprinted with concentric calligraphic circles, which turn her face to target. Gresh contends that in this series Neshat addresses "the paradox of the Islamic female militancy and the precariousness of the women's place in Iranian society" (Gresh 2013, 25). Whatever the "Islamic female militancy" might allude to in the Western imaginary, in Gresh's opinion, Neshat is juxtaposing the aggressive (weapon holding, forward gazing) posture of the veiled woman (she is not submissive) with the fact that she is the target for aggression in Iran's Islamic society. Therefore, Gresh is still

holding onto some stereotypes, while dispelling the trope of Oriental female submissiveness.

Behdad argues such formulation of chador art (veiled women) in the West, manifests the Western audience's understanding of these works as "'authentic' expressions of women's disenfranchisement and their desire for Western-style freedom and democracy," which tacitly supports the paternalistic attitude in the West toward Middle Eastern societies, and validates the discourse of rescue, namely waging war on the region in the name of liberating Muslim women or more broadly Muslim society (Behdad 2016, 169). Thus, although the veil is generally known to be a stereotype, its circulation, or in Behdad's words, its "enthused" reception in the West underscores the neo-Orientalist's stake in sustaining consensus about the sexist and undemocratic nature of Islam (Ibid 168-169).

Behdad then argues that resisting the neo-Orientalist tendencies that circulate the old tropes in new guises, is not merely possible by highlighting the nuances of the formal and conceptual aspects or critical leanings in Middle Eastern artists' practices. The image of the Orient that neo-Orientalism constructs as mediated through practices of Middle Eastern artists cannot be criticized by explaining social or political subtleties of those artists' practice. The required effective response to neo-Orientalism is a way "to challenge the geopolitics of their [the artworks'] circulation and reception in the West" (Ibid). It demands a thorough revision and critical reconsideration of the forces "that enable the 'discovery' and dissemination of seemingly oppositional aesthetic practices by Middle Eastern artists in Euro-American art markets" (Ibid). These forces, as Behdad underlines, while claiming that they highlight the ostensible oppositional artworks by

Middle Easterners, are hard at work to deliver these works as “desirable” for an audience that is completely alien to the aesthetic sensibilities and the context of these practices, concurrently they make them useful to neo-Orientalist politics.

To refresh our discussion, I would like to underline once again Behdad’s notion of the flexibility of Orientalism as a network of relationships that re-invents itself and re-articulates itself in tandem with intrinsic political and cultural changes, in order to sustain its cultural hegemony. It is vitally important to understand the flexibility of this system and the inadequacy of scattered information about the seemingly social/political visuals of artistic works from the Middle East, in the face of the complete deficiency of necessary historical, cultural and aesthetic sensibilities by the overwhelmingly majority of Western viewers and critics. Caught in the dynamics of such context, when a curator like Gresh and Krifa emphatically introduce the exhibition *She Who Tells a Story* as a way to confront the preconceptions of the West about Middle Eastern women, they fail to recognize that they assemble the works around the themes that do not transcend the stereotypes. When the primordial text with which Gresh initiates her so called critical dialogue is Orientalism, the very premises of that master text limit the scope of the thinking and communication in the first place. The effort of curators and critics like Gresh and Krifa is constrained by the forming principles of their discourse. Even though they define their attempt as dismantling of clichés, the epistemic rigor of their prism is unable to transcend the Orientalist text. They are trapped in a closed circuit. They are unable to offer an alternative prism, simply because they are not equipped with sharpened aesthetic, cultural, historical, political and religious knowledge of the region. In this way, the type of knowledge that they construct in their narrative reinforces the cultural

hegemony of the West over the baffled present of the “war-torn” Middle East, “a region in flux”!

The genre of “new documentary” with its fictional component of perpetual war and inexact historical discourse is a neo-Orientalist construct. The claim on the documentary charge of the term “new documentary” is an attempt to sustain the cultural otherness in the image of ceaseless war and never-ending instability. The authority of the word documentary, is the authority by which curators and critics like Gresh claim the superiority of their knowledge of the region despite their blatant unawareness of intricate political and cultural history of a vast and complicated region.

## Chapter IV

### Enunciation: Ground Level

I've argued with the theorizing apparatus of the exhibition *She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Arab Worlds and Iran*, insofar as it is situated outside of the region that it aims to represent. This by itself would not bear a negative influence on the quality of the exhibition narrative, if this *Story* were capable of implementing a thoroughgoing art historical methodology. I claim even then, that the outcome wouldn't be a single art history- *a Story*- of the region, but rather that multiple art histories are required to cover such vast geographical and cultural spaces. Further, I argue that these multiple histories can only be written through an intense engagement with the on-the-ground complexity of the art worlds and art practices in the region. Part of this engagement must wrestle with a deeply felt but largely ignored recent past. I will argue below that discourse around contemporary art needs not a ruling single narrative, but reports from the field— a more anthropological approach that gathers data on the ground and builds up archives that acknowledge complexity.

There is much impetus, however, for a single overarching narrative of the region's art— a narrative produced largely for Western audiences. The debates about the historiography and the group of objects that constitute "Islamic Art," as well as the art of regions that are broadly termed Islamic Worlds, is progressively gaining momentum in academic and scholarly contexts. Photography from the Arab Worlds and Iran covers regions commonly dubbed as Islamic Worlds. The creation and the interpretation of the art historical field Islamic Art within the broader discipline of Western art history is currently being critically re-assessed by scholars. I want to emphasize the seriousness of

the appeal for re-assessment and intervene in the debates. In so doing, I briefly cite parts of an essay by Avinoam Shalem, scholar of the history of arts of Islam, where he insightfully points out the incompatibility of some of the paradigms by which the history of arts of Islam for years has been articulated from an outsider viewpoint. Before elaborating on his essay, I need to clarify that my aim here is not to open a new chapter about Islamic art historiography throughout centuries. That is beyond the scope of this thesis and of my ability. Rather, I would like to draw attention to certain paradigms that do not work for every cultural and artistic context and yet have been perpetually applied to incongruous contexts to homogenously describe *a* history of divergent artistic practices. I want the reader to doubt the efficacy of a methodology that uses one single prism for multiple contexts. More importantly, I want to underline the fact that the generalization about arts of the Middle East has been a habit backed by some hundred years of theoretical practice. This itself accentuates the complexity of the task at hand, namely finding the appropriate art historical methodology.

In this chapter after briefly reviewing highlights of Shalem's critical analysis, I will concisely outline a recent art historical attempt by a scholar in the US, Talinn Grigor, to find an appropriate methodology in order to articulate a history of contemporary art in Iran. By referring to Grigor I would like to point out one more issue: As a scholar of art and architecture of Iran in the Pahlavi (1925-79) and Qajar (1794-1925) eras, Grigor treats the text of the contemporary art in Iran as one, layered with different modes of visual presentations, condensed with different readings of a rich aesthetic tradition, loaded with some two hundred years of debate about ways of interpretation of the past (the immediate or ancient past) in the present and the construction of the cultural identity

in a modern era; she seeks cultural continuity despite the surfacing of political ruptures. In rendering of *her story*, she attempts to situate herself in dialogue with local critics, scholars and artists to position her argument within the existing discourse about art in Iran. Of course, Grigor is not the one sole legitimate historian of Iranian art, but as a scholar based and trained outside of the region that she investigates, her precision and sensitivity to refine an appropriate methodology, as well as the richness of her story supported by archival research and reliable historical facts, distinguishes her narrative from those that we have witnessed in previous chapters. Indeed, her attempt is the start of a way of re-assessing the stories that abound about art in Iran, in hope for more committed art historical research and curatorial practices. What I hope to do here is to underline the necessity of rigorous research to cultivate appropriate art historical methods; the methods that are capable of explaining intricacies, nuances and diversity of cultural practices as well as intellectual projects in different regions.

Avinoam Shalem in his article in the *Journal of Art Historiography*, “What Do We Mean When We Say ‘Islamic Art’? A Plea for a Critical Rewriting of the History of the Arts of Islam,” opens his discussion by mentioning that it would be a pure fiction to talk about Islam “using one sole monolithic and global term” (Shalem 2012, 6). Shalem draws on Arnold Hottinger’s argument, the Swiss scholar of Islamic studies, that a “homogenous sphere called Islam is simply an abstract cognitive notion, which, as with any general concept, has its sole origin in the mind of the person who creates the concept or theory” (Ibid, 6). Shalem’s intention is to underline the critical consciousness echoed in Hottinger’s words when referring to Islam and Islamic art. Shalem contends that this critical standpoint signifies the development of ideas in Post-Edwardian Era, the era after

Edward Said. The critical framework of Orientalism that Said provided is a methodological approach which alters our twisted understanding of the Orient as filtered through a Eurocentric view. Rendering a more accurate picture of an immense area formerly dubbed as the Orient, demands the “reassessment of Eurocentric modes of thought and their repositioning in a more comparative frame of scholarly assessment” (Ibid 7). Shalem observes that academia is still tethered to basic perceptions and prejudices regarding the East. He mentions the example of the tropes of East-West binary paradigm in writing and interpretation of history, and the dominant Western, linear theory of East-West cultural development. Such a theory of evolution of cultures frames progress running from East to West; While East is in an “infantile underdevelopment” and West placed at the peak of the maturity and evolution (Ibid 7).

Shalem contends that in order to write a global art history, historians face serious challenges. I should clarify that here the global does not denote the loaded term of the global in contemporary art world, but rather it indicates a history of art that is not embedded in the Eurocentric view. According to Shalem, the most critical issue for scholars would be the “departure from the idea of center and periphery” (Ibid 8). To unpack Shalem’s argument requires patient close reading. Here he does not refer to the flat presentism of an imaginary egalitarian art world commonly fantasized in the context of the global contemporary. Quite the contrary, he suggests a difficult and minute task for scholars. He proposes the revision of a system that for centuries has been a central paradigm for Eurocentric art historical approach to describe and interpret the changes and modalities in styles. It has been taken for granted that the birth of any mainstream style or innovative moment in history is usually positioned in the center of cultural power and it

reaches the periphery with its “rays of influence” (Ibid 8). Therefore, in this frame the periphery echoes the creativity of the artistic capital. This paradigm explains “the processes of artistic production, transfer and evaluation” in the frame of a creative metropolitan center, with imitating marginal areas (Ibid 9). Shalem brings the examples of the reverse of such dynamics in Islamic arts; that the margin does not echo the creativity of the center, rather it takes “the leading aesthetic role in the artistic production” (Ibid 9). He brings up the example of Norman Sicily, the Fatimid-styled Sicily under Norman dominance, a so called “marginal” area of the Muslim world in twelfth century. Within the cultural map of artistic sites in the twelfth century Mediterranean basin, Norman Sicily played an immense role in the “distribution of Fatimid styles of artistic production” in the Arab world and greatly influenced Arab art in other zones of artistic production all throughout the Mediterranean basin (Ibid). This leading role, has been hardly ever acknowledged since it would disrupt the center-periphery paradigm.

Shalem argues that the notion of the periphery as the source of artistic creativity and cultural production raises more serious challenges to the conventional ways of thinking about the “traditional hierarchies of power” that are essential to the construction of “Us” and “the Other” (Ibid). He further elaborates on the art historical challenge of multiple centers and many peripheries, which necessitates a paradigm shift: instead of a radiating center there will be many centers and many peripheries that are established via a “complex matrix of connections” (Ibid). Thus, this networked-system substitutes the binary of center-periphery. In this networked-system, parallel temporalities replace a static art history.

Shalem insightfully warns against one other harmful myth developed by historians of Islamic art: the myth of unity of Islamic art. According to him, this myth creates a paradigm for understanding Islamic art that “serves to explain similarities between different artistic products” (Ibid 14). It provides an easy solution to shun the intricacies of differences by emphasizing the likenesses. Shalem observes that through the prism of unity, the style and aesthetic language become

“amoeba-like, amorphic, and are no longer necessarily considered to be the product of a culture that occupies a specific span of time and a specific space, i.e. a particular *Zeitgeist*” (Ibid 14).

The myth of unity still offers a handy tool for both the audience and organizers of art exhibitions from regions, categorized as Islamic worlds, Arab lands and Iran etc. I would like to stress the importance of the reasoning cycle of this paradigm for the purpose of my own argument; in so doing I integrate both of the above-mentioned paradigms. The myth of unity does not primarily recognize multiplicity of spatial and temporal frames; it resists the complexity of inter- and intra- relations in and between these frames within a networked-system. It does not take into account the active dynamics of transformation of the frames within each individual context. The myth of unity is indeed an easy solution. Moreover, the power dynamics that are sustained in the paradigm of center-periphery define the locus of narration outside of the locale that it aims to describe. I want to stress the fact that this is a system of narration, which resists the pattern of continual dialectical relationships that is inherent in the paradigm of a networked-system. The paradigms of unity and binary of center-periphery are incompetent of developing relational frames and patterns of cognition.

The myth of unity as well as the system of center-periphery can be easily traced not solely or necessarily in an exhibition of Islamic art from twelfth century, but in the narrative of a contemporary exhibition like *She Who tells a Story*. Gresh has titled her catalog entry essay, “Stories that We Thought We Knew” (Gresh 2013, 21). “We” should refer to her vantage point as standing outside of the region that she describes as Arab Worlds and Iran. I understand her locus of identification as being situated in the West. With the power dynamics that she evokes, Gresh is not giving an impression that she is in Latin America, Africa or South Asia. The dynamics of “Us” versus “the Other” are evoked by the title of her essay. Gresh frames the narrative of the exhibition as an attempt to dispel that what she vaguely calls misperceptions. But even when she deliberately used that title to flag up the subversive mission of her exhibition, did she successfully tackle the dynamics of “Othering” in her narrative and exhibition? In her narrative, I cannot read an understanding of the Arab worlds and Iran, that can surpass a periphery status ascribed to the region. *Her* selection of works is still deeply rooted in the binary of center and periphery. I demonstrated in the previous chapter that the narrative of the exhibition was not equipped with the adequate aesthetic, cultural, historical and political knowledge of the region to transcend the closed circuit of a dialogue with stereotypes. When the narrative of the exhibition is still fixed in one frame of analysis, it does not go beyond the themes of suppression of women, war and regional instability; it cannot detect and handle any other intellectual or artistic projects. To elucidate my point, I propose a simple model of XYZ axes. The narrative of the exhibition could be modelled as: we thought the Other was X, but the Other is not precisely X; and yet it is unable to recognize any Y or Z, or in general a multi-dimensional matrix. Y or Z or any additional features cannot be offered,

as the X-axis is not a multiple variable matrix of relations, it is essentially one dimensional. Its one-dimensional *unity* sustains the dynamics of Othering. In other words, the selection and presentation of the works in the exhibition does not offer a shift in the paradigm: Gresh cannot transcend the dynamics of Othering, since her methodology still does not recognize the existence of multiple temporalities, networked-system of modalities and multiple histories and aesthetics. The fixity of the unity that she offers in the exhibition betrays the mission that she sets off to accomplish.

At the heart of the issue of critical re-assessment of art historical narratives are the questions of what counts as history and which methods are reliable to write that history. Talinn Grigor, a scholar to whom I've already referred in the discussion about the discrepancies between Rafsanjani's and Khatami's cultural politics, determinedly embraced the problematic of historiography. A scholar of modern and contemporary Iranian art and architecture, Iranian-born, but based and educated in the United States, Grigor points out a crucial challenge that she faced while drafting her recent book, *Contemporary Iranian Art* (2014). In the introductory chapter of her book, Grigor offers a transparent account of the difficulties she had as an outsider scholar approaching an intricate art world, which refused to readily reveal itself to her. I believe dwelling on Grigor's account is important, as her approach brings up a marked art historical rigor, a vital element that many of blanket narratives, catalog essays and speculations on the loosely dubbed Art of the Middle East and Iran, essentially lack. Grigor elaborates on the methodological challenge of approaching the contemporary art world in Iran. Although prior to the articulation of the idea of her recent book she had frequently visited Iran for her dissertation on revival of nationalism in Iranian architecture during second Pahlavi

era (1941-1979), she still candidly defines her position as an outsider historian of events. A scholar with ties to the country, an author whose account is dependent on the breadth of the network of friends, or friends of friends and their willingness to participate in her field research. Here it is critical to take note of the fundamental methodological challenges that Grigor's account underscores: the complexity, contingency and ambivalence of the description of the art scene in Iran, and the fact that the institutions and artists represented by the institutions do not speak for the entirety of this artworld, hence the necessity of the underground and interpersonal network of connections. In response to these challenges, Grigor points out that she could not rely on "narrow boundaries of Western art historical narrative" (Grigor 2014, 12). In order to arrange the history of individuals, institutions and ideologies in this art world she developed her narrative using a three-structural framework in which all parts are interdependent and they "cross-pollinate" (Ibid 14). These three structure comprise: The Street, the Studio and the Exile. In her words:

"The Street deals with the official art sponsored by the Islamic Republic within the public domain; The Studio looks at the culture of avant-garde art, artists, galleries and museums with links to the private domain; and the Exile traces diasporic artistic practices outside of Iran, both within the immigrant communities as well as at the core of the Western art scene, which is affected by exilic anxieties and the global art market" (Grigor 2014, 13)

There are three important issues that I would like to highlight concerning Grigor's structural frames. As the reader might have noticed, the galleries and museums are not categorized within the domain of "Street," they are a part of studio or private domain. I will elaborate on this aspect with more details later. Suffice to say that Grigor's assertion of this distinction testifies to the precision and rigor of her methodology. This distinction in the categories has its roots in the Islamic Republic of Iran's Constitution and the status

of the public and private domains. I will discuss it in more length after underlining two other important features of her three-structural framework.

The other distinct aspect of Grigor's proposed system is that the exilic community assumes a distinct category, and even then, it is not introduced as a uniform entity; it too, manifests nuances of reception and perception: whether the artwork mainly addresses the concerns and struggles of immigrant community in host(ile) countries or it is working with the mainstream Western art scene. This very aspect opens her narrative to a broader array of artistic practices that are seldom mentioned in blanket surveys of contemporary Iranian art in the West. There are a number of Iranian artists in exile, who powerfully address the anxieties of immigration, the issue of exilic identity, as well as the dynamics of assimilation and self-censorship in a host(ile) country through their creative practices. This group of exilic artists is commonly eliminated from the discourse on Iranian art in the context of Western institutions. Moreover, there are Iranian artists in exile who do not produce the marketable brands of what could be called Middle Eastern Art, and who are not focused per se on power dynamics and anxieties of immigration, but do play an active and sometimes leading role in the art scene of the countries that they chose as their second home. Grigor tried to include some of these artists in her narrative as well.

The third issue that deserves our attention in the category of exile, is that as opposed to many other accounts, Grigor does not overlook the crucial role of the global art market. The dynamics of market in her narrative is introduced in the chapter on exile; it's certainly not because the global art market only influences exilic artists, but rather it's due to the fact that the locale of the market is essentially outside of the country. Here the cross-pollination feature of her framework plays an enriching role. The dialectical system

of three structures that she proposed illuminates the intense art historical debates around the dynamics of the market and its influence on Iranian art, as disputed by both a large segment of Iranian artists and critics inside the country, and also a remarkable section of the artistic exile community.

Now I would like to briefly dwell on the two other aspects of Grigor's framework. Grigor insightfully identifies "the tensions" between the Islamic and the Republic in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Ibid 23). As she contends these tensions are not solely "reflected in policies towards the arts but remain a major structural debate between the leadership and the people of Iran" (Ibid 23). The Street is the domain, in which the state holds a firm command of its self-representation by creating a public visual environment. But the state sponsored visual culture in Iran is by no means totalitarian. The Islamic Republic of Iran is not a totalitarian regime. This fact might shock those outsider commentators, whose easy refuge in the blanket categories of totalitarianism might be disrupted by this understanding. This fact does not eliminate the dynamics of censorship etc. in Iran, it rather brings more complexity to this context and reveals manifold dimensions of the Iranian art scene that a facile narrative is unable to disclose. The tensions between private and public lies at the core of Iran's constitution. The private property is respected in Islamic Republic of Iran's constitution. Grigor recounts that the 1979 constitution separated the nation's economy into private and public sectors. "With the exception of heavy industries such as oil and steel, all others, including services, were allotted to the private domain" (Ibid 111). Moreover, Imam Khomeini from the very outset of Islamic Republic, had asserted that as opposed to communism (which he heavily criticized), his Islamic state would "respect private property and the privacy of the home

as divine gifts” (Ibid 111). Grigor references Khomeini’s *Kashf al Asrar* (Uncovering the Secrets, 1942), in which he insisted that the sanctity of home was “inviolable” (Ibid 111). The privileged status of private property and the propertied middle class, played a determining role in the formation and intricacies of the art scene inside Iran after the Islamic Revolution.

Almost all galleries in Iran are considered private domains, hence private galleries; there are only a few state-run galleries in the whole country. To the wonder of curators like Gresh, most of the galleries in Iran are run by women. The gallery owners and directors of the top-ten ranking galleries of Iran are women. Grigor observes that in Iran today, younger female gallery directors are “aware and empowered by the feminist history of galleries” in Iran (Ibid 139). Grigor brilliantly points out that “private galleries act as the liminal spaces that negotiate the complexity of the relation between the public and the art world” (Ibid 140). Here, a crucial point needs to be clarified. The tensions between the public and the private domain do affect the art scene in Iran. But its analysis demands sensitive and sharpened tools. A simple example could elucidate the point. The example of erotic artworks would be useful, as erotic arts after the veil comprise one of the main obsessions of the Western art market when it comes to Iran. In Tehran, one can find artworks displayed in galleries that are blatantly categorized as erotic, and yet they have been displayed without any repercussions. The sanctity of private property means that an artist is constitutionally protected to do anything she or he wants in her/his studio. The complexity lies in the dynamics of display. Therefore, the display of those works in gallery does not mean that nothing could potentially happen. Once the gallery owner opens her private property to the public, including the audience, she has opened her

private domain to the state regulations as well. Again, this does not necessarily entail cancellation of the exhibition, but it does indicate that the “display of works is at the discretion of gallery owner and the individual artist” (Ibid 143); the state *might* request the removal of erotic works from the show. Even in the case of the removal from the show, a private collector can go to the gallery and the gallery owner can show the collector and sell the erotic works in her gallery collection (private property). Moreover, an artist can make a private show of her/his erotic works in her/his studio (private property). As Grigor points out, the “actual practice of censorship in Iran remains vague and in constant flux” (Ibid 142).

Here I want to warn against a flat understanding of the notion of state. The rigid and immutable image of a totalitarian state as portrayed in Cold War movies, cannot be extended to Iran. I would like to emphatically underline the crucial aspect of Grigor’s prism, that the three structures “cross-pollinate.” Grigor wisely defines her framework based on cross-pollination of the street, the studio and the exile; and not as street *versus* studio, not as street *versus* exile, etc. In Iran, the state itself has multiple layers and different governments follow different cultural policies, as discussed in previous chapters. These cultural policies manifest in many ways that art is engaged in public and private spaces. As discussed in previous chapter, during his presidency, Khatami effectively attempted to establish a dialogue between public spaces/Street and private domain/Studio. For instance, during his presidency, many of the avant-garde, modern and contemporary artists were invited to participate in transformation of urban public spaces. To mention an example, Arabshahi, one of Iran’s leading modern artists of 1960s and 70s was invited to execute an abstract mural project in Tehran’s Modarres highway.

Moreover, as the example of Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art under Samiazar demonstrated, a state-governed institution followed cultural policies that greatly promoted avant-garde practices.

The above-mentioned facts merely serve to open a discussion. They are meant to draw attention to the complexity of a context, and the incongruity of the blind imposition of uniform and inexact prisms on intricacies of vibrant cultural societies. I haven't even scratched the surface of many other vital aspects of the cultural discourse in Iran. I have mostly compressed the discussion. My aim here has not been to evaluate or review Grigor's book, nor did I want to represent Grigor's account as *the* perfect history of contemporary art in Iran. Nonetheless, I do think that the historical rigor of her account distinguishes it from most of the narratives on contemporary art in Iran. I reiterate that my aim has been to demonstrate how the methodological incompatibility of certain frames not only twist the understanding of cultural and artistic practices in a context, but more importantly their twisted lens hides or eliminates various aspects of artistic practices from art historical narratives. The underlying presuppositions of incompatible methods are innately unable to detect and handle those artistic projects that stand beyond their limited scope. I ask the reader to imagine only for a few seconds, how the constitutional nuances of the 22 countries of Arab Worlds would each influence the artistic and cultural discourse of their individual countries in a distinct way, by carving out or concealing multitude of cultural spaces within the dialectics of private and public domains.

In the end, I would like to close the discussion by borrowing a visual metaphor that the French historian and cultural critic, Michel de Certeau, illustrated. De Certeau

begins the “Walking in the City,” the famous chapter of his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, with a God’s eye view over Manhattan from the 110<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Center. Yet from that isolated and exterior view, from the static map of a frozen grid, he dives into the chaotic and tumultuous waves of everyday life. Instead of developing a hegemonic knowledge system that could ultimately ideologize, manipulate, and discipline its subject of inquiry, he is keener to unravel multiple stories, spatial stories, the hidden operations which resist undifferentiating structures. He proposes a form of archival investigation that turns its subject of inquiry, everyday life, into a vivid and productive forum which can speak for itself. De Certeau’s archiving method resists easy categorizations. His method resists those facile generalizations that due to their regulating and incompatible methods conceal or erase what they promise to show.

Developing a substantial and reliable body of scholarship about the art world of each of the countries in the region, broadly called the Middle East, demands risking the tumultuous waves of intricacies; it demands undertaking an on the ground research to build an *archive* of multiple histories, which contribute to the construction of a *vivid forum* of knowledges instead of a flat monolithic narrative.

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## Epilogue

### Chorus of Modalities

This thesis began with a survey of the term “global contemporary.” As an operative condition across multiple geographies, the global contemporary has been variously theorized in works by different thinkers and agents based in disparate locales in relation to the symbolic, though extant, axes of center-periphery. This survey describes a field of theorization rife with ideas, myths, utopian desires and demonstrable achievements, further entangled by contradictions, critiques, uneven results and internal tensions. One highlight of the survey was an interview that Benjamin Buchloh conducted with Jean-Hubert Martin on the occasion of the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) at the Centre Pompidou Paris. Martin curated the exhibition as a response to the neglect of almost 80% of the countries of the world by the contemporary Western—Euro-American— art world. The exhibition, despite its aim of challenging the conventional notion of art by using an anthropological approach, could not transcend the ethnocentric fallacy concerned with authentic “otherness.” By using the criteria of authenticity and originality in its selection processes and display of works from the so-called peripheries, it fell prey to the tropes of authenticity. In the last instance, the authenticity and originality of the works, or in Martin’s words, their “real differences,” were conceived in response to what other cultures could deliver to the West and its cultural institutions in terms of consumption. Buchloh takes issue with the fact that the criteria for the inclusion and exclusion of works from the peripheries were not developed from within the needs and conventions of those cultures. Another aspect of Buchloh’s critique addressed a crucial point in the relational map of power dynamics between western centers and the

global south. Buchloh wondered whether it was possible to solely focus on cultural relationships by excluding all the political and economic relations between the hegemonic Western centers and the developing countries.

The mere inclusion of works by artists from, or with ties to, so called “global margins” has not proved an effective countercharm to undo the spell cast by an unresolved dilemma: the center-periphery dialectic. Today, almost three decades after Buchloh’s interview with Martin, as we observed in the case study of a concrete exhibition, *She Who Tells a Story* (2013-2016), Buchloh’s questions are still pertinent to curatorial approaches within the exhibition logic that structures global contemporary art. In the reviewed exhibition, the global contemporary establishes itself in practice by secluding regions and ascribing a very specific ethno-political organizing narrative to a particular repertoire of imagery.

By historicizing the works of a number of Iranian artists in the exhibition *She Who Tells a Story*, I have pursued two main objectives. First, I have aimed to demonstrate how this approach would ultimately enable contemplation as to the personal and the subjective stakes involved in artworks made within the actual context of daily life in Iran—an intricate context that can be enacted and addressed in various ways. My aim has been to show that analysis gives way to an ensemble of possibilities, layered with histories and cultural attitudes. Within this constellation emerges an artist’s creativity, her iconographies, strengths and weaknesses, as well as the subtleties of a potential cultural or political critique. I understand this objective as the *raison d’être* of art history. Second, I have sought to examine the overgeneralizing narrative of a US site-specific exhibition. I

complicate the existing institutional narratives by providing historical detail and underlining the contextual particularities.

My argument is not with Kristen Gresh or Mishket Krifa so much as it is with the greater landscape of mediated culture in the global contemporary under the conditions of a neoliberal economy. In other words, I take issue with the flattened and undifferentiated spaces of neo-liberalism, whose aim has been to level the relational dynamics at play in the sites and practices of representation. I call for arguments in lieu of undifferentiated and homogenous accounts. I assert the necessity of heterogeneous histories, and of openness to dialectical tensions between different modalities and various kinds of narratives.

Here, I want to turn to David Harvey as a provisional answer to the hegemonic spaces of neo-liberalism within the global contemporary art world. Harvey's conception of space can offer an effective model to explore the potentials of scholarship in our present condition. His theory of space, I believe, is an effective tool to investigate the complexity and multifarious nature of art works—including production, display, circulation and reception— within the context of our global contemporary. Harvey's theory enables the contemplation of those economic and political forces that Buchloh deemed necessary in assessing cultural relationships between Western centers and developing countries. In addition, Harvey's matrix of space offers a possibility for equitable negotiations among different modalities of knowledge, including the tangible space of nation as per its relative location within the space of global contemporary art.

Harvey develops his theory based on Henri Lefebvre's conception of space. Harvey proposes his own “tripartite” parallel to Lefebvre's trialectics of space (Harvey

2006, 121). Hubbard and Kitchin in a chapter on Lefebvre offer an accessible summary of his axes of spatialization: The “perceived space (*le perçu*)” of the everyday life—common sense and sensory discernment—blends practicality with a popular viewpoint. It is somehow ignored by the theoretical “conceived space (*le conçu*)” of specialists, cartographers and urban planners, among others. Finally, “the lived space (*le vécu*),” constitutes the dwelling of the person, who is fully human—the embodied space of the imagination that has been kept alive by arts and literature. This third space has the capacity to “refigure the balance of the two other spaces.” (Hubbard and Kitchin 2011, 281)

The *perceived space* encompasses the arena of material and physical experience, perceived through senses and sensual interaction with matter; it is experienced in practices of everyday life. The *conceived space* comprises the representations of space; science, maps, and diagrams. are instances of the *conceived space*. And the *lived space* embodies the spaces of representation—as in art, literature, dream, and fantasy. Harvey theorizes his tripartite as “absolute space,” that is, the experienced spaces of concrete a material world, physical and built environments, houses, factories, streets, stadiums, properties; and individual, people, countries, and cities. His next axis is the “relative space,” which encompasses the spaces of exchange, mobility, transportation, and flow of goods. His third axis is the “relational space” that could be illustrated in concepts such as identity, hegemony, and universal rights, or rent and the value of products (Harvey 2006, 121-130). He brings these two schemes together in a matrix. The absolute space and the material perceived space overlap; so do representations of space (conceived space) and relative space, and finally the spaces of representation (lived space) overlap with

relational space. In this matrix, Harvey emphasizes the dialectical tension between every component and the openness of every category within this scheme.

I believe Harvey's model helps to identify the conceptual muddle when it comes to the global art scene. Throughout this thesis, I have been arguing for the importance of a ground-level and anthropological approach to the conception of art-historical narratives. Following Lefebvre's spatialization axes, the anthropological scheme is conceived in an intimate dialectical tension between the perceived or material spaces of everyday life and the conceived spaces of representation, science, or scholarship. Once we consider Harvey's model, namely the *relative* spaces of representation (conceived) and the concrete or absolute spaces of a specific country or culture (perceived), we have already multiplied the dimensions of the axes and turned it into a matrix. Any lived, perceived, or on-the-ground experience will inevitably fall into a form of abstraction once it is conceived as a mode of knowledge. We cannot conceive or explain anything if we do not establish a distance from it. This distance generates abstraction. The familiar metaphor of the skyscraper's aerial view that Michel de Certeau has illustrated can assist in visualizing the *relative* modes of knowledge. Different modes of knowledge are conceived in relative distances to the structures and sensibilities of the perceived spaces within specific cultures. The different modes of knowledge are conceived in dialectical relation to the perceived spaces of particular countries, cities or regions. But these modes of knowledge simultaneously stand in a dialectical relationship with one another. This relationship will inevitably evoke tension. In this field of tension, I side with de Certeau—namely, with the mode of knowledge that is much closer to the everyday tactics of living in a specific culture.

Within the discourse of the global contemporary art, the dialectical tension between the different conceptualizations of space is omitted, hence the flatness of many arguments. The critique of Buchloh to Martin's curatorial approach, after almost three decades, remains pertinent to the current instances of exhibition in the context of global contemporary art. The criteria for the inclusion and exclusion of the works in this context are not developed from within the needs and conventions of the cultures of the global margins. The narratives that underpin such exhibitions do not consider an equitable communicating position able to account for local sensibilities when translated to fit the center's narrative. As a result, most of these exhibitions perpetuate the familiar commonplaces.

The globalization of art can claim its utopian and egalitarian call, only when equitable negotiations between different contexts and cultures are made possible. Here is where the relational scheme of Harvey's spatial theory as coupled with Lefebvre's conception of space can play an effective role. Once the lived space of the imagination or the relational spaces of representation is incorporated into the discourses of global contemporary art, we will be able to refigure the balance between center and periphery. But in so doing, we should first identify the relational conditions of interconnections between center and periphery. Once again, Buchloh's critique comes to fore. Can we omit the political, military and economic *relations* between the center and periphery when we establish cultural relationship between these two symbolic poles? Conclusive answers remain unclear.

I believe that the global contemporary art world can in fact resist the binary impasse of the center-periphery model. To this end, artworks and artists need not serve as

the only mobile entities depicted across different geographies. A transparent spatial discourse would encompass different modes of knowledge beyond those specific to the art world—mobilized, too, in dynamic tension. Only by enacting in discourse the ongoing dialectical relations that emerge between different modes of scholarship can we resist the flattening discourse of neo-liberalism within the practices of global contemporary art.

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