



UNDER CONTEMPORARY ART'S VITRINE

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Last September, a curator from Tel Aviv contacted me about including my work in an exhibition opening in Tel Aviv, and possibly Berlin and Los Angeles “about contemporary art from Iran and Syria”. “There is such a gap between our cultures, even when we are so close and related in many ways,” he wrote in his email. We met in person after exchanging a few more emails, where I expressed my skepticism about my participation in this exhibition. My reluctance was in part because it sounded to me like yet another attempted curation that pigeonholed identity in the name of exhibiting something “provocative.” I also felt that my commitment to the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel¹ could present a problem. In our short meeting he mentioned the names of a few potential participants in the show, a predictable list of self-exotifying, self-orientalizing auction stars, most of them women with photographic practices that I had criticized previously in my writings.²

I knew that this was neither the first nor last time that I would receive such an invitation for my “identity” to be exhibited in the vitrine of cultural tourism by means of “art.” Since the 2009 uprisings in Iran, and later, the so-called Arab Spring, Iranian art has experienced a new tide of interest. This trend consists of an increasing number of scholars, curators, and gallerists researching, curating and showing the works of ‘Iranian artists.’ This new wave is following the great market attention that had thus far been given to Iranian art through the Dubai, Sharjah and London auctions among others, evolving from the tradition of white colonial “art and culture enthusiasts” travelling around the world, “discovering” and buying artifacts from “Persia” and adding them to their growing collections.

Today the new “aware and politically correct” white

subjects traveling to the Middle East are no longer just collecting antiquities, handicrafts or precious exotic objects. They are culling the fragments of a contemporary art from practices of those referred to as ‘professional’ and ‘revolutionary’ artists from the region. These new “connoisseurs” of Iranian contemporary art are interested in exploring the difficulties and challenges of Iranian contemporary artists, including how such artists are striving to create their own language under the systematic censorship, western sanctions and economic depression. These conditions are often presented in contrast to the U.S. practice of extending tolerance and self-reflexivity to the institution.

These “politically correct” contemporary Iranian art savants are often superficially aware of the post-colonial discourse, although, unsurprisingly, treat it as passé or “last-century.” Their gracious inclusion of “insider” voices in the discourse for the sake of authenticity, however, fails to exempt them from the underlying neocolonial tendencies in their approach. Today, Iran has become both a real and virtual destination for art lovers, collectors, scholars, critics, curators and artists. But the outcome of this kind of attention, and the endeavours of scholarly tourism, besides the harm it does to Iranian contemporary art³ is often no more than a repertoire, survey or a PowerPoint presentation of travel to that region.

In *The Problem with Privilege* Andrea Smith writes:

The western subject understands itself as self-determining through its ability to self-reflect, analyze and exercise power over others. The western subject knows that it is self-determining because it compares itself to ‘others’ who are not. In other words, I know who I am because I am not you. These “others” of course are racialized. The western subject is a universal subject who determines itself without being determined by others; the

racialized subject is particular, but is supposed to aspire to be universal and self-determining.

She then refers to Hiram Perez's analysis of "how the white subject positions itself intellectually as a cosmopolitan subject capable of abstract theorizing through the use of the "raw material" provided by fixed, brown bodies. The white subject is capable of being "anti-" or "post-identity," but understands their post-identity only in relationship to brown subjects which are hopelessly fixed within identity. Brown peoples provide the "raw material" that enables the intellectual production of the white subject.⁴"

The exposure that the brown artist, like any other artist today, needs in order to emerge and ultimately establish their career is similar to that of the photographic process. The transparency of the negative after developing and fixing the film depends on the amount of exposure to light that it receives during photography. The more transparent the negative, the more detail is lost until the loss of all of gray scales, all subtleties. Similarly, the exposure that the brown artist receives in order to emerge into and succeed in the art world often denudes layers of subtleties off as the artist gets more fixed in identity under such determining and confining labels as "successful Iranian woman artist."

The western contemporary artist with a "post" practice—ranging from "post-studio" to "post-identity" and "post-human"—can walk into numerous galleries and museums across greater metropolitan areas to look at collections of work from 'the Middle East,' by 'Iranian Women,' 'Syrian Artists,' 'Islamic Art,' 'Leading Arab Artists,' exhibitions with generic titles such as 'Inside Out,' 'Veiling/Unveiling,' etc. These exhibitions function as representatives for arts from an imaginary region such as the "Islamic World," and thereby create a dynamic

where the post-identity artist and art enthusiast is viewing the art by those who are so fixed within identity, "representative" of a region, a culture and a brand of brownness.

A month after that curator's email, I was visiting an exhibition of "Iranian Modern Art" at NYU's Grey Art Gallery. In order to walk to the show I had to pass through another current exhibition at the gallery, "Radical Presence: Black Performance In Contemporary Art." Walking around the gallery a dark and still TV monitor caught my attention. The monitor was permanently switched off and a note posted on it read: "Adrian Piper has requested that Peter Kennedy's film, *Becoming the Mythic Being*, be removed from this exhibition." She articulated her reasoning in correspondence with Valerie Cassel Oliver, the exhibition's curator. It reads in part:

"I appreciate your intentions. Perhaps a more effective way to 'celebrate' [me], [my] work and [my] contributions to not only the art world at large, but also a generation of black artists working in performance' might be to curate multi-ethnic exhibitions that give American audiences the rare opportunity to measure directly groundbreaking achievements of African American artists against those of their peers in 'the art world at large.'"

The Iranian Modern Art exhibition at NYU coincided with the "groundbreaking" exhibition *Iran Modern at Asia Society*. This exhibition includes work from the 50s, 60s and 70s, three decades that led to the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Those thirty years were a period that Melissa Chiu, Museum Director and Senior Vice President at Asia Society, describes in the following way: "It was when Iran as a society was modernizing so the artists were also modernizing their work in many different ways and it became a real kind of cultural flowering of Iranian art during this time."⁵ Through a series of programs and publications organized in conjunction with the exhibition,

along with its curation, Iran Modern posits a glorified “modern” pre-revolutionary Iran against an oppressed Islamic Iran.

Among the publications glorifying this era in Iranian history is an interview with Bob Colacello about Andy Warhol’s visit to Iran. Colacello says Warhol enjoyed the caviar and they enjoyed the warm hospitality shown them by Iranians. He goes on to say, “Everything seemed normal and nice. I never heard the word “Shiites” in the 10 days we were there.” The interview ends with the question, “Did you get the feeling you were there for a unique moment in Iran’s history?” Colacello responds: “Yeah, I think we were there at a time that, kind of looking back, was a golden age for Iran. And seeing the Iran Modern show I realized all the more what kind of creative energy that was there... And I think it was wonderful moment in Iran.”⁶

Not surprisingly, a talk by the once “underground” Iranian musician, Mohsen Namjoo was organized in conjunction with the exhibition as well. For years underground rock music in Iran has been constructing a palatable image for western eyes, depicting the brown Middle Eastern Muslim man rehearsing indie rock in broken English against a backdrop of walls decorated with posters of western icons. In this scene the brown man gets a chance to present himself as “harmless,” as opposed to the western held stereotype of a bearded, hairy savage, a potential suicide bomber speaking a language they do not understand.

*“Legally I’m nobody
When I cross the border I’m somebody mean.
My international rights are in some politician’s thought.
I’m just a dream
As I turn to this microphone and scream”⁷*

Exhibitions such as Iran Modern, which reduce Iran to the binary “glorious pre-Islamic Republic” versus the

“oppressed post-revolutionary,” are part of a larger neocolonial attitude granting Iran legitimacy through modernity. The desire to be legible to the western subject is at the core of this exhibitionism and (over)exposure. Documentary practices of photography and fictional short or feature films where the brown subject is a “representative”—both depicting and delegating⁹—for the eyes of the white Western “art and culture lover,” contribute to this desire. The responsibility of the pedagogical brown is to be willing to educate the western white enthusiast. Hence there is always going to be a documentary about “gays in Iran,” a TedTalk about “Iranian Contemporary Art,” an NPR story about underground rock in Iran and an exhibition “about contemporary art from Iran and Syria”.

Endnotes:

1. PACBI: Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel. PACBI's Call for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel published on July 6, 2004: <http://pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=869/>
2. Khoshgozaran, Gelare, *Nostalgia for a Past I Never Had*, Parkett, No. 91, 2012, (241-242)
3. For a list of some of the ways that this surge of attention is not helping Iranian art read: Salemy, Mohammad, *Six Reasons As To Why The Recent Surge Of Interest In Iranian Contemporary Artists Is Not Productive For Iranian Art* <http://dadabasenyc.com/six-reasons-as-to-why-the-recent-surge-of-interest-in-iranian-contemporary-artists-is-not-productive-for-iranian-art/>
4. Smith, Andrea, *The Problem with Privilege*, published August 14, 2013 on Andrea Smith's website: <http://andrea366.wordpress.com/2013/08/14/the-problem-with-privilege-by-andrea-smith/>
5. In a video clip entitled "Inside Asia Society's 'Iran Modern' Exhibition" published on Asia Society's website, Melissa Chiu offers insights into the exhibition Iran Modern, on view at Asia Society Museum in New York City through January 5, 2014: "What this exhibitions allows us to do and for many Americans is to learn about a time in Iranian history when the U.S. and Iran actually had many relations. Many Iranian artists were engaging with international art. It was a time generally speaking when there was an enormous amount of creativity. Artists were experimenting with new ideas that were on the one hand very localized. They were adapting local or even folks sometimes even spiritual ideas about an issue. But on the other hand it was developing an international language. So on the one hand in the exhibition we have works that are about a movement called Saqqakhane, which is about being grounded in Iranian culture. And then on the other hand, we have a theme in this exhibition, which is all about abstraction, which is very much an international medium. So we're kind of trying to set the stage of understanding how complex Iranian art was at that time." Chiu goes on to say that artists continue to face censorship in Iran. "In the midst of increasing tensions between Iran and the West," she hopes "the exhibit sheds a different light on Iran's history." <http://asiasociety.org/video/arts/inside-asia-societys-iran-modern-exhibition>. On Sep 16, 2013 Charlie Rose also covered Iran Modern Exhibition in the absence of any Iranian individuals, including the curator of the exhibition, Fereshteh Daftari. For more commentaries and insights watch the full interview here: <http://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/watch-charlie-rose-covers-iran-modern>
6. Read the full interview conducted by Dan Washburn and published Oct 22, 2013 on Asia Society's blog here: <http://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/interview-what-it-was-travel-iran-andy-warhol-1976>
7. From *My Sweet Little Terrorist Song* written by Sohrab Mohebbi of 127 band from the album *Magnitizdat* [Songs of Terror & Hope], 2007