Contemporary or Specific: The Dichotomous Desires in the Art of Early Twenty-First Century Iran

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Abstract
This article analyzes the dominant dichotomy in cultural and artistic ideas which Iranian artists—like many non-Euro-American artists—have been forced to confront. These include the idea of ‘contemporaneity’: being imbued with the ‘spirit of the time’, particularly dominant in the minds of the so-called ‘Third Generation’; 1 and ‘specificity’, an underlying precept of compelling force. The first involves the idea that ‘postmodernist’ imagery is one of fragmentation and hybridization—the scattering of traditions and the recombination of their diverse elements (see Campbell 1999: 5). The second refers to the ever-present obsession with cultural and frequently social concerns with which Iranian artists are engaged, both within the country and across the diaspora. Contemporary debate on Iranian art reveals deep-rooted anxieties about national and cultural identity. It raises the important question: Is it possible to open up an art practice and discourse that is both contemporary and global, but also indigenous and specific? While this work reflects my own observations, it also relies heavily on the analysis offered in interviews with artists, philosophers, critics, curators and some former administrators in artistic affairs. It finally focuses on four artists through a study of their works and ideas about the aforementioned issues.

Keywords
contemporaneity, specificity, Iranian art, culture, twenty-first century

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1 This term was perhaps first used in the press and political conversation during the 1997 Iranian general election and in the reformist mottos to emphasize the importance of this generation—born after the 1979 revolution—who actively supported the reformists and their aspirations.
The first question we need to ask is: ‘What do we mean by ‘contemporaneity’?’ We can agree with the art historian and critic Terry Smith’s definition, which says that contemporaneity is basically a concept that captures the frictions of the present while corroborating the inevitability of currently competing universalisms, new ways of conceiving the present, as well as important questions about temporality and change (Smith 2006: 703). Yet it should also be said that the art growing out of the complexities of contemporaneity does not offer easy explanations. An art truly intertwined with contemporaneity is shaped from its deepest impulses; its surfaces are marked by the interplay of such aspects, from the most fashionable and forward-looking to the most paradoxical, from the most trenchant dichotomies to random particularities (Smith 2002: 11).

Contemporary Iranian art, which on the one hand draws heavily on the Euro-American paradigm and, on the other, has selectively adapted existing art forms, is structurally heterogeneous. In the process of this adaptation, like Iranian culture as a whole, it has incorporated elements of Euro-American contemporary art while seeking to create the phenomenon of a localized contemporaneity. This alternative context of contemporaneity is obviously a response to canonical discourses and ideally, in turn, inscribes new discursive formations in the contemporary era. It was most probably by the 1990s that Iranian art witnessed a gradual change, departing from the frame of the newly emerging, post-revolutionary artistic Modernism, and incorporating new viewpoints of existing actualities (see Keshmirshekan 2006). As with contemporaneity, the impetus for this came, in part, from the international arena and also from circumstances within, where the need to register reality in a transitional era in all its shifting forms became compelling.

During the past decade, post-revolutionary Iran has experienced the emergence of a generation of artists whose main preoccupation has been the idea of contemporaneity, a passion for being always and only in the present time (see Keshmirshekan 2007). Like the obsession for social contemporaneity—one of the most significant currents in contemporary Iran—the artists’ works, too, at many times became involved in this very zeitgeist. Here contemporaneity maps the diverse ways in which artists use visual means to record, define, and interrogate their appropriate presence in time. Within this contemporaneity, they seek to identify with, and represent, what it is to live in the contemporary moment. The artists then justify the cross-cultural nature of contemporary art as being relevant to the globalizing era.

During Mohammad Khatami’s presidency (1997–2005), post-revolutionary Iran experienced a period of ‘cultural thaw’; and the relaxation of restrictions
on art led to the emergence of a generation of artists whose main preoccupation was the idea of contemporaneity (see Keshmirshekan 2007). Although no comprehensive study is available, it was clear that the majority of the emergent artists were young, belonged mostly to the Third Generation, were educated and middle-class, and came mostly from central Iranian cities, in particular the capital Tehran. During the reform period, communication with the rest of the world, and in particular the West, developed. Afshin Matin-Asgari believes that there was still continuity with the preoccupation during the 1960s and 1970s with ‘the West’ as a universal model dominating a troubled Iranian ‘self’. The pre-revolutionary ‘Westoxication’ discourse called for a return to, or in fact a forging of, an authentic Iranian identity in resistance to a basically imperialist West. But a significant strand in post-revolutionary intellectual discourse now is inclined to conform to the West for which no clear definition is offered as a positive model. This new trend is a phenomenon of the 1990s. It reflects intellectual disillusionment with the Islamic Republic’s anti-western model. (Matin-Asgari 2004: 87)

Hence, after about two decades of limited relationship with the outside world, during this period the boundaries opened up; there was more access to information through the internet, satellites, periodicals and books, and unprecedented exhibitions of Iranian artists worldwide and of other contemporary artists in Iran. All of this provided Iranian artists new opportunities for exposure to fresh artistic phenomena. There also developed a desire to be in the place of the here and now: to work with others and have the experiences of globalized internationalism in a simultaneous and concrete practice, to see the realization of work and experience connection. The postscript for the contemporary artist was now defined by the desire to be in the ‘contemporary’, rather than produce a belated or elevated response to the everyday. If the artist of the new generation wanted to choose, he would have preferred to move toward what could be called ‘contemporary art’.

By the end of the 1990s a number of young artists had increasingly begun to practice with new and unprecedented means of media. It seemed, however, that there was initially a simplified idea that any art practiced in these media was glibly seen as ‘contemporary’, especially when set in contrast to art that applied the aesthetic formalism as presented in traditional media like painting.

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2 This changed after the 2005 election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.
3 See Boroujerdi, 1996; also for further examination of the theme and the parallels in art, see Keshmirshakan 2005.
The artists’ enthusiasm for experimenting with new idioms that related to the contemporary paved the way for the development of the so-called New Art.\textsuperscript{4} For these artists it was a success to have a chance to experiment with new expressions in innovative languages, which were, fortunately, backed by the official art establishments of this period. The term ‘New Art’, which was used for the first time in Iran for an official exhibition in 2002, was extensive because it included various forms of fine art media such as video, installation, photo art, audio art, environmental art, performance, etc. (see A 2002: 131). However, during subsequent years no media-specificity or preference was seen in the artists’ choices.

Enjoying government patronage, it was now possible for practitioners of the New Art to perform or make their works with the support of the official center, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMoCA) (\textit{Muzeh-i hunar-hay-i mu’asir-i Tihran}) which came to be a supportive, encouraging space, and to exhibit their works—both inside and outside the country—with more flexibility. It is worth noting that there was an obvious and essential dissimilarity between this New Art and what had already been practiced in the West. Ironically, just as art acquired an avant-garde status—precisely at the juncture when it went outside the institution of art and connected with the more radical political movements of its time or, at any rate, with the subversive aspects of the cultures in opposition—in Iran it basically appeared to be an institutionally supported art.

An increasing number of exhibitions testified to the rapidly developing interest in the New Art movement in Iran. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that there were five major exhibitions of art to which the label ‘Conceptual Art’ or ‘New Art’ was attached as a means to single out a specific tendency emerging since the early 2000s.\textsuperscript{5} The designation ‘Conceptual

\textsuperscript{4} It should also be noted that in this period a great number of students entered art institutions and some were taught by New Art instructors.

\textsuperscript{5} Conceptual art exhibitions from 1997 to 2005 include the \textit{First Conceptual Art} exhibition, \textit{New Art 1} exhibition, and \textit{New Art 2} exhibition, in 2001, 2002 and 2003 respectively. In the two later thematic exhibitions, \textit{Spiritual Vision}, and \textit{Gardens of Iran}, both in 2004, the issue of Irano-Islamic identity was considered the theme of the exhibitions and this determined the criteria for the selection of works of artists. The next comprehensive exhibition was supposed to be entitled \textit{A Thousand and One Nights}, but did not take place following the fundamental transformation in cultural and artistic policy of the post-2005 presidential election and above all the administrative alteration in the TMoCA (personal interview with Alireza Sami-Azar, 2006). There were other minor exhibitions in 1997–2005 by new media artists held in various venues both inside and outside the country. These were also supported mainly by the Museum.
One of the apparent examples of this emergence was the exhibitions of Iranian artists in the period just before the revolution in the late 1970s, in particular by the Independent Group of Painters and Sculptors (Guruh-e azad-e naqqashan va mujassameh-sazan). In these exhibitions, works by Morteza Momayyez (1935–2005) and Marcos Grigorian (1925–2007) were exhibited in the form of installations or performances. After about two decades, however, in the post-revolutionary period (1992/3), a conceptual experience took shape in Tehran. In this project, a group of young artists worked with a variety of materials on different floors of an old house which was supposed to be destroyed very soon after the works were completed. The most important event after this was the project entitled Experience of 77 by Contemporary Art Workshop in 1998. This group exhibition was held in a shabby house in Tehran with the co-operation of most of the artists who were involved in the previous show.

Throughout these exhibitions, young people in particular, often from the same generation, decided that they wanted to see new works. An appetite developed for the new, unconventional and, in a word, contemporary. Much of the dynamic, driving, emergent artists in this period sprang from the urge to break down the barriers that could so easily have prevented them from tackling new subjects, materials, and ways of working and exhibiting that had previously been considered out of bounds. Apart from a group of artists who were still influenced by debates such as those on cultural identity which had been discussed mainly since the exhibitions in the early 1990s, a majority of these artists reacted sharply against the idea of cultural specificity and indigenous expression in artwork, which usually reminded one of clichés of tie-dye works using decorative motifs (figures 1, 2). These clichés had been presented repeatedly in the form of references to the pictorial traditions of the Irano-Islamic past. Specificity in this generation is mostly, however, transferred to various forms of self-expression or self-representation. This can be seen in the

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7 Examples of this approach toward the self were the exhibitions Deep Depression (Afsurdigi-i ‘amiq) in 2005 and Deeper Depression (Afsurdigi-i ‘amiq-tar) in 2006, both curated by Amir Ali Gahsemi.
works of artists working with the different media now accessible to them. In many of their works, we see self-portraits of artists in photography, video, etc. Others moved critically toward social issues such as the exploration of highly gendered notions of public space and tradition (figures 3–8). Here, however, it can be seen that the maintenance of the cultural ideals, presented in the works of those previous generations, has now become problematic and this was, perhaps, because these cultural ideals and their presentation hold little sway with those who do not identify with them. This art could, however, enable these artists to shift to the fore alternative visions of Iranian identity in an increasingly globalized world (figures 9, 10). Naturally we are faced with a question: on what grounds?

Alireza Sami-Azar, the former Director of the TMoCA (1998–2005), told me: ‘The obsession with contemporaneity was a major obsession for all of us; perhaps because, for about twenty years, all the windows were closed while a very limited number of art books and magazines were allowed to be used’. He maintained that

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8 Interview with the author, 2006.
the emergence of this new generation with their keenness for the latest artistic materials was not only a result of those restrictions, but also because Modernism in art had reached an impasse. As an action opposing this artistic dogmatism, where the need was obvious, the first exhibition of ‘Conceptual Art’ was an important event in Iran.⁹

Responding to my question—‘Was this movement being promoted by you and the Museum?’—he replied:

Yes; undoubtedly this movement was supported and even promoted by the Museum for three main reasons. First, the necessity of updating Iranian art, which (since the Revolution) was about twenty years ‘behind’ the contemporary art scene. The second reason was that ‘modern art’ was forfeiting its audiences and even many intellectuals were aware of this. Its elitism, which was already experienced in the West, was quite obviously a problem.¹⁰ Consequently, the third reason was that the Museum was losing its spectators.¹¹

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⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ It should be noted, however, that this raises a somewhat problematic comparison between Iranian and western history. Iranian Modernism never attempted to co-opt the discursive system of western Modernism because its discourse was, in fact, an alternative that did not aim for the ‘decidability of utopian meaning’ or to realize itself as a formalist object. It was concerned, rather, with its own method, one that matched the concerns of the artists about living in the rapidly changing environment of post-revolutionary Iran when the alternative Modernism was just being born. See also footnote no. 3

¹¹ Interview with the author, 2006.
Figure 5: Behrang Samadzadegan, *Behesht* (Paradise), 2006, digital image, artist’s private collection.

Figure 6: Rozita Sharafjahan, *Untitled*, 2004, stills from single-screen video installation, approx. 8 mins.

Figure 7: Katayoun Karami, from *Censorship* series, 2005, photograph.

Figure 8: Afshin Pirhashemi, *Untitled*, 2004, mixed media on canvas, artist’s private collection.
Sami-Azar, as director of the museum, was looking for new strategies and plans to respond to this problem, holding ground-breaking exhibitions that would receive a warm welcome from artists and audiences (mainly young people—the majority of the Iranian population). The New Art exhibitions attracted unprecedented numbers who were perhaps visiting the museum or an art exhibition for the first time. Sami-Azar, however, maintains that ‘this need really existed and the Museum provided the opportunity for it to happen and for this generation of artists to be seen!’  

He then traced the atmosphere that provided the possibility of achieving this goal, saying:

The reformist government was itself encouraging us to develop artistic activities and our relationship with the rest of the world—among others, the West. We were advised to be active in the cultural scene, to end Iran’s political isolation. Also, I—as the head of the Visual Art of the Country (Markaz-i hunar-hay-i tajassumi-i kishvar), in charge of all visual art activities in the nation—believed in supporting the innovative approaches to art.

One of his colleagues, a curator of the TMoCA, Hamid Severi, agrees with these observations. However, he addresses other issues about the general content of the exhibitions, saying:

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
It was undoubtedly clear that the new styles and approaches to art attracted many Iranian people. For example, the first exhibition of ‘Conceptual Art’ in 2001 broke attendance records. Perhaps one of the reasons was its title and also the characteristics of the works that, like many other fashionable social phenomena, had become dominant at the time. Some organizers involved in those events, however, believed that New Art should contain religious or spiritual subject matters. So they were, somehow, trying to inject themes to generate specific characteristics of Iranian New Art. Here, even in the Conceptual and New Art exhibitions, issues such as Iranian and Islamic identity had to be used as criteria for the evaluation of a work of art.¹⁴

Severi tells me that, in fact, in the selection of the works of artists for overseas exhibitions, one of the important criteria was the extent to which the artists dealt with the issue of cultural identity in their works. More importantly, it seemed that one of the key purposes of holding exhibitions of Iranian art outside the country was still the representation of this issue in the works of Iranian artists. As can be seen from the quotation, Severi maintains that even in the domestic exhibitions these issues were used for assessment of artworks.¹⁵

He continues,

However, the main aim, the dominant spirit at the official level of artistic administration, was the acceptance, admiration and success garnered from prestigious overseas exhibitions. In this way, even the works such as Mandana Moghaddam’s [who lives and works in Sweden] installation [figure 4], which was conveying a clear political and feminist message, was approved to be exhibited in the Iranian pavilion in the 2005 Venice Biennale.¹⁶

Severi then concludes that sometimes a predilection for the exotic in art overshadowed the process of selection of works for exhibitions of contemporary Iranian art outside Iran. It perhaps confirms that, at the same time that the issue of contemporaneity was imperative to the reformist officials, a cultural and artistic specificity was still a compelling force that was mainly meant to include a variety of specific characteristics. These, as mentioned by Severi, were defined as essentials linked to the Islamic and Iranian identity: historical and social particularities that had to be presented in the works of artists. While it is usually said that the Iranian’s consciousness of cultural heritage has an importance for nationalism that closely parallels that of historical consciousness, both are strong forces that have been used by officials to formulate a specific identity, typically conforming to official policy (Cottam 1979: 29).

¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ Ibid.
¹⁶ Ibid.
Art historian and critic Jonathan Fineberg agrees with this argument when he maintains that the implicit, underlying subject matter of contemporary art is always the personality of the artist in its encounter with the world—the alternately painful and exhilarating intersection of psychological forces, intellect, sociology and events (Fineberg 2000: 14). He continues his argument: ‘This tension between the inner self and world is what, in my view, provides the foundation of that “happening of truth” in art which Martin Heidegger described in 1935. For him a work of art needed to be discussed in terms of the process of its creation, precisely because creating is a form of seeing or knowing’ (2000: 19).

Using various materials and themes from indigenous sources to construct ‘independent’ or ‘authentic’ works has partly been the result of this formulation. If the first and second decades of the post-Revolution era motivated the Islamic revolutionary sensibility and generated anti-nationalist sentiment, in opposition to the Pahlavi (1925–1979) doctrine, it seems that in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the nationalist sentiment has been re-empowered among officials and continued for a variety of reasons. One reason, as John Campbell argues, was perhaps because of the subjective, experiential dimension of identity, effective identity narratives such as those deployed by (ethnic) nationalism are exercises in the mobilisation of emotion through a selective drawing upon affective elements, for example a contextually defined sense of exclusion, fear and anxiety vis-à-vis significant Others. (Campbell 1999: 13)

Hence this definition of nationalist identity was supported and encouraged by the reformists who came to be more understanding and practical than their predecessors when considering the emerging realities of Iranian society.

Quite apart from the censure of cultural formulations made in accordance with the interests of the cultural officials, there were other opposing factions that based their objections to these artistic genres on two main points. The first was the idea that being contemporary had become a fashion rather than something based on a real need, and so these approaches were derivative products that did not have any basis in the artists’ lived experience. The second reproach was made against the issue of ‘exoticism’ or submission to the preference and interests of the ‘market’ (see Keshmirshesan 2010).

The distinguished Iranian philosopher and social scientist, Ramin Jahanbagloo, for example, resents that art has become a ‘fashion’ in Iran; it means that what we can get from it is not ‘meaning’, but just modishness. We always incline toward the new and fresh. It could be art or shoes or clothes. If ‘Conceptual Art’ becomes the subject of the day, suddenly everybody says that he should go and practice this way. We are looking for the new and fresh but have never produced any philosophical thought to support it. (Jahanbagloo 2002: 132)
The prominent artist Nosratollah Moslemian (b. 1951) also maintains that many artists of the new generation are usually affected by the patterns and prototypes of contemporary art, and do not understand the contextual meanings of that art. He says,

[A young Iranian] artist usually reads contemporaneity as being up-to-date or imbued with the spirit of the time. He, however, seems to confuse modishness with this spirit. The cultural policy of government officials has constantly played an instrumental role in the formation of this taste or at least in its development. Here no one can deny the role of globalization and its effects on artists. On the one hand, it encourages local artists to familiarize themselves with the latest idioms practiced mainly on the Euro-American art scene. On the other hand, it causes a kind of reaction against them by seeking refuge in cultural or artistic specificities. He cannot escape from the waves of cultural globalization and at the same time does not usually have enough knowledge of his own cultural past. The keenness for the contemporary or western products is so strong that he is even forced to migrate mentally to the place where he thinks he can get the best products. This itself causes an exotic view that diminishes the sense of living.18

In 2006 Iman Afsarian (b. 1974), an artist and member of the editorial board of *Herfeh hunarmand* (an important Iranian art journal) who is very critical of the New Art movement in Iran, gave an interesting description of it, saying,

The events that have happened somewhere else are the basis of this movement. The main problem is that the questions are already made somewhere else and whoever responds best to these questions is the winner. We are just the responders. We are producing products that on many occasions have no connection with our needs or priorities. They cannot be lasting, because most of them have no connection with the artists’ lived experience. A number of Iranian artists [mainly the younger ones] are living in the world of the internet, not in their own surroundings. Because of this, the ‘Twin Towers’ is more interesting to them than events that are happening in their own country [figure 10]. Our contemporary artist is more affected by September 11th than by road accidents in his own country that cause tens of thousands of casualties each year. We have many other subjects with which we are living, but which cannot be of interest for the artists of the new generation. It sounds as if the only obsession for them is to be seen; otherwise they do not exist. Therefore if they win a prize from a festival somewhere, they exist. This might be a common problem for any artist anywhere. But I think here there is a difference, i.e., our artist needs to be seen by ‘others’ not in his own society. In this scene he has to talk the ‘global’ language which is New Art. He has to apply the latest artistic conventions and mix them with the popular political issues to be approved by them.19

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18 Interview with the author, 2006.
He adds that, in this period, a group of artists were successful outside the country perhaps because they pandered to the West’s exotic view.\textsuperscript{20} Afsarian thinks that the importance of the issue of specificity has now been weakened among the new generation. In other words, it is as if the developmental force has overshadowed the issue of specificity.

The excessive use of ideological mottos during the years after the revolution has caused a kind of repugnance toward those beliefs—among others, the issue of Islamic identity and its various shapes. For example, the ideas of Jalal Al-e Ahmad\textsuperscript{21} and Ali Shariati\textsuperscript{22} do not have any proponents among the young.\textsuperscript{25}

Afsarian believes that, unlike the previous generations [who brought about the revolution and fought the war], in this generation there is no Don Quixote. The works of artists of the new generation do not consist of the same involvements as those of the previous generation who experienced the revolution and its aftermath.\textsuperscript{24}

The strong presence of anti-Orientalism and post-colonial thought can be discerned in his words and are reflected in many similar critical voices in the Iranian art community. For example, Afsarian believes that ‘the common definition of modernity is the one which has already been defined by the “White Western Man”. So there is no common system governing the world, but a bigger system controlling the smaller ones. This is the meaning of globalization!’\textsuperscript{25} In the cases below, artists repeatedly utter the same words and voice similar concerns.

The issue of the market, particularly the western, or so-called ‘global market’, and its effect on Iranian art is another area of apprehension. A curator, Tirdad Zolghadr, in the introduction to the exhibition entitled \textit{Ethnic Marketing}, held in the Azad and Ave Galleries in Tehran in 2006, criticizes the existing hegemonic structures of the Euro-American market. He writes,

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{21} Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969) was a renowned Iranian writer and social and political critic. His ideas of anti-Orientalism and anti-Westernism were widespread mainly during the 1960s and 1970s. His most famous book was a critique of the insatiable desire among the majority to imitate and emulate the West and its products. This was known in Persian as \textit{gharb-zadigi} (Westoxication) in a variety of areas of life, literature and art. See also Keshmirshekan 2005: 627–628.
\textsuperscript{22} Ali Shariati (1933–1977) was a philosopher, lecturer, romantic, and poet and was one of the main thinkers of the 1979 Islamic revolution. Shariati was a hero of Iran’s youth during the 1970s and a ‘patron saint’ of the revolution that he did not live to see.
\textsuperscript{23} Interview with the author, 2006.
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Ibid.}
It is becoming even plainer to see that the West is not a mere observer of globalised cultural flows, but, just as any other demanding client, actively defines the supply. Which aesthetics and intellectual strategies might be used to deal with hegemonic structures of the kind? To state the obvious, a number of artists and intellectuals worldwide are quite comfortable with the idea of using mainstream Euro-American expectations to their own advantage, but only a few are in a position to do so. Western critics and curators, now expected to come to terms with vast quantities of work from geographically remote contexts, are becoming dependent on a small handful of willing players with a foothold in global centers.²⁶

We hear similar questioning of market relations in our examination of the four artists and their ideas. Farshid Azarang (b. 1972), the first artist whose ideas are explored here, is another member of the editorial board of Herfeh hunarmand and works with photography and fine art media. However, he prefers not to be named as a member of the new movement. His words here affirm what we have already heard, i.e., a stance of anti-Orientalism, anti-exoticism and critical ideas about the market. He said,

Many of the works produced by [contemporary] Iranian artists, in particular photographers, refer to the Third World and feminist elements to attract westerners [figures 11–15]. For example, for westerners, the Qajar period might be an interesting period, more interesting than the Pahlavi or even Safavid. We can see the use of shapes which are in different ways reminiscent of this period in the works of photographers [figures 16, 17].²⁷

Azarang believes that the issue of contemporaneity is a real obsession among Iranian artists, including himself. He explains the reason why this obsession exists: ‘because we are a long way from being contemporary, and we want to be’. He also contends,

The new artistic movement in Iran has a mania for mixing media rather than experimenting with them. We are concerned about ‘VDVs’ rather than ‘media’ themselves. We are affected by the Euro-American artistic phenomena. Even my identity is defined by the West, even the meaning of contemporaneity. For example, Postmodernism begins in the West and then is introduced [to other

²⁶ Zolghadr 2006: 12. In the same catalog, Michaela Kehrer also points out the same issue in the broader context of marketing. She argues: ‘It is often assumed that the proximate cause for worldwide cultural assimilation is grounded in the particularities of a global relationship between western centres and non-western peripheries. Mainly, we recognize symbols pertaining to the “triad” (Europe, America, and East Asia) infiltrating other cultures—be it in terms of consumerism or marketing strategies. Here, a cultural superiority seems explicitly located in the uniforming power of the western capitalist system, strongly supported and pushed forward by the activities of western transnational corporations’. (Kehrer 2006: 19)

²⁷ Interview with the author, 2006.
parts of the world], but we cannot eventually play an active role in this discourse. I cannot call myself a postmodern artist since I am not living in the actual context of postmodernity. It is the West and its spirit that makes the decision. I feel being contemporary cannot happen unless the current canonical order changes, meaning that things change both in time and place. But I very much doubt this will happen! I think even specificity means that I need to demonstrate my difference in the minds of others. So I have to be different and specific. The experience of this situation, which is different from active participation, is a feeling of boredom rather than acridity or anger.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
He continues: ‘I think my work should be useful, effective and meaningful in the first place here in Iran and at this particular time’. However, Azarang believes that if it could be meaningful elsewhere too, that would be better, although that is not his immediate aim. He prefers to think about an audience whom he already knows and whom he feels will communicate with his work rather than wonder if he is influenced by one sort of art or another. He likes

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29 Ibid.
to draw the viewer’s attention to the narrative and quality imparted by objects and the media themselves (figure 18). He uses text in his recent works. Although this is not really a new approach, it is consistent with his main artistic principle: ‘no matter if the language has already been practiced elsewhere’. Interestingly, he maintains that the most important reason for this use is that in his society people are usually not interested in reading texts. Stopping for a while and reading his texts is a necessity. He usually uses the texts that he has already read (or experienced) himself and thought have the capacity to affect the reader (figures 19, 20). He is also interested in family relationships, which he himself has experienced as signifying both contemporaneity (his contemporary life) and specificity (his lived experience) (figure 21).  

30 Ibid.
Ghazaleh Hedayat (b. 1979), a young artist and art instructor, expresses similar ideas in response to the same question, i.e., contemporaneity vis-à-vis specificity in art:

We [Iranians] have not had a smooth passage through any period of history and have encountered events suddenly. Our encounter with new media and contemporary art has not been an exception. This has caused a problem which is a lack of recognition of the historical and contextual aspects of this art and their connections with artists. Our artists usually just see a dimness from afar and feel that they need to reach it. To do this they start experimenting in any possible way to shorten the distance. While in the West, the artist, his life and his work are inseparable, meaning that the work of art is his self-expression, this can rarely be seen in the works of contemporary Iranian artists. In other words, the Iranian artists’ obsession is usually how they are seen (by others).31

31 Ibid.
Hedayat, too, addresses the issue of the art market as another serious matter. She continues:

The artist has to continuously think of this and therefore considers this an important agent when he wants to choose his artistic approach. He sometimes deliberately and sometimes unconsciously uses symbols and signs to present cultural codes or iconography which might attract others. This eventually accentuates the exotic quality of his work [figures 22–25]. In this period, a group of artists were successful outside the country perhaps because of the existence of this exoticism.  

She explains her own artistic view: ‘Although I often think of self-expression initially, I have to think of my audience, which could be both

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32 Ibid.
Iranian and western. I admit that I have sometimes had to add another layer to gain acceptance’.  

Unlike Azarang, Hedayat does not personally see the restrictions as a very problematic issue. She thinks that encountering these restrictions and finding solutions to deal with them could be interesting:

I look at it as a part of my life or lived experience. I believe that even the expression of these restrictions is enjoyable [figures 26, 27, 28]. Here again we see that others, too, are fascinated by seeing the presentation and expression of these restrictions in the works of an Iranian artist. It is because they have never experienced these restrictions or pains themselves but enjoy seeing them presented in art.

Barbad Golshiri (b. 1982), a member of the Third Generation (although very critical of some of the works produced in recent years), raises the question of how the ambiguities and elisions of an artwork might be seen to relate to specific codes of visual language which are available ‘universally,’ but then reflect back into those very specific sets of social contradictions in relation to which the aesthetic construct is mechanically posed. To him, then, the contemporaneity of today’s art does not simply pertain to what is here and now, but must be understood as an intentional artistic or theoretical construct that asserts a particular temporality and spatiality for itself. Talking about his own views on the two issues of contemporaneity and specificity, he maintains:

The obsession of contemporaneity is typically recognized as being Euro-American or given the ambiguous term of ‘global’. So much energy and effort has been

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
Figure 26: Ghazaleh Hedayat, Isfahan, 2005, photograph and digital retouch.

Figure 27: Ghazaleh Hedayat, Isfahan, 2005, photograph and digital retouch.

Figure 28: Barbad Golshiri, What Has Befallen Us, Barbad? 2002, stills from single-screen video installation, approx. 20 mins.
spent in being up-to-date. However, I think one should not look for the concept of contemporaneity in time or age. It is, rather, an ontological question. I do not limit myself to choosing the technique or theme. I may choose my theme from Dante or Beckett or anyone else. But I limit myself to thinking of the issues of my own time. I commit myself to talking critically about the actual problems and issues in my society. I try to deal with the issue of contemporaneity by representing our own world. Even if these issues have already been discussed and resolved elsewhere, we still need to adapt them here. Yet I never try to ensure my work depicts a local characteristic; I would rather avoid it. When I use narration from Descartes or the Bible, I write in English, which is to me a kind of self-denial. I am against the unity of the self and a fixed identity. I am talking about hybrid, schizophrenic identity, and one which is lost in intertextuality. I think being aware of the schizophrenic situation or identity is not a negative thing. I think even being other is not bad.  

This idea contrasts sharply with the definition of ‘identity’ and appeal for radical particularism that is suggested by the cultural officials. It also conflicts with descriptions such as that of Epstein, who sees identity as essentially a concept of synthesis, integration and action. According to him, ‘it represents the process by which the person seeks to integrate his various statuses and roles, as well as his diverse experiences, into a coherent image of self’.  

Here Golshiri agrees with the idea that others, such as Severi, put forward regarding the use of local elements as a reference to specificity and unified identity. He says,

... A group of this generation who have been practising in different media including painting, photography, sculpture and all kinds of fine art media have begun to consider local and indigenous issues in their works. To them specificity is believed to be different and unique. So they have aimed at being both contemporary and different from other contemporaries. Some artists whose understanding of Postmodernism has been limited to the mixture of modern and traditional have found a justification for the use of traditional material in their works to achieve postmodern works! [figures 1, 2] They, however, seem to have misunderstood concepts such as pluralism and have confused them with chaos. They have injected atypical indigenous elements into their works, whose language is borrowed from somewhere else. This perhaps originated from the motto

35 Ibid.
36 Epstein 1978: 101. Eriksen also argues that since every individual has several identities to choose from, the identity communicated depends in part on a negotiation which takes place in specific social contexts and which takes place according to recognised cultural conventions (see Eriksen 1991: 127–144). Martin maintains a similar definition by saying that recognition of difference and similarity is based in part on shared understandings of particular cultural expressions of difference in which the very act of narrating one’s own identity may be instrumental in attributing an identity to others (Martin 1995).
promoted by officials saying ‘be yourself’. I believe it is a kind of reactionary reference. How can one consider the co-existence of these atypical elements and concepts together? However, these particularly have attracted curators and audiences to the exhibitions outside Iran. The reason is that these works have better matched the image others have of Iran and therefore this approach has been an answer to their expectation.  

He maintains that this issue is a public/political dimension in the work of many artists, and continues,

A western audience often wants you to be exotic and show them arabesque features, ‘nice’ carpets or, recently, women in chador. A part of the young generation takes advantage of this taste and produces work which deals with issues such as gender, femininity and women in general in society. However, it is often not about their personal experience, but rather about the general issues that women are facing in Iranian society and is, of course, one of the most attractive themes in the West. In other words, Iranian art exports merchandise: marketable items such as collages of mystique, religious texts, chador, ‘poorography’ and, more recently, nuclear-related issues because of their touristic elements and exoticism (figures 16, 17, 25). They usually avoid challenging the paradoxes and variations of contemporary Iranian life.

In Golshiri’s project entitled *Odyssey-I*, he makes pieces about the actual world or the Iranian context as it appears to him (figures 29, 30). Usually the metaphors and allegories of these artworks offering political irony are acknowledged to go beyond recognizable forms of cultural representation. He himself explains the project:

This moment of the world is all those things that designate me as ‘the other’ and what makes Iran not habitable for me. Things that make me ‘the other’ and make Iran less and less habitable are exactly what force me to live here. By means of the parody and distortion of satirical works I am trying to make transcendence possible. This transcendence lies in the direction of ‘what there is’ and proposing and constructing ‘what could be’.

Like Golshiri, Shahab Fotouhi (b. 1980), here the fourth artist under consideration and from the same generation, also believes that what has been

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57 Interview with the author, 2006.
58 *Ibid.* An example of this Orientalist view, Golshiri tells me, was clear when he witnessed an interpretation by a western critic of his video entitled *What has Befallen Us, Barbad?* (figure 28) In that description, the artist’s hair was associated with Arabic calligraphy! However, for the artist himself this work had a sociopolitical and philosophical message. The interpretation, he argues, was the result of the expectation that tends to translate everything according to its own interest.
influential recently in the formation of specific genres in Iranian art and the definition of specificity is partly related to the overseas market and its tastes. Fotouhi maintains:

For Iranian artists to be successful in this market, they are usually advised to use an international language and at the same time benefit from local accents. This has formed clichés in the works of Iranian artists that predominate, and include issues of gender (the veil, women), politics (terrorism and the nuclear issue) and tradition (calligraphy and traditional motifs) [figures 1, 2, 4, 8, 11–17, 23–25]. This is the meaning of specificity for many of these artists.40

On this point, a western writer on Iranian art may well agree with some of the aforementioned critical points by Fotouhi relating to the issue of expectation

40 Ibid.
and exoticism. The art historian and curator Edward Lucie Smith, when he describes the themes of contemporary Iranian artistic production, says: ‘The themes of gender relationship and the position of women have preoccupied a number of artists who continue to live and work in Tehran’.

He notes a second theme of sexuality and gender: ‘Post-revolutionary Iran is commonly seen as a society in which discussion of such topics is discouraged, even where it is actually repressed. Therefore, it is fascinating to see how often these themes recur in current Iranian production’. He continues:

Though the vehicle through which the idea is expressed may often, in a purely technological sense, be very new, there is an increasing fascination with and respect for, the Iranian past. Traditional archetypes—the Qajar odalisque, the legends—are used to express intensely contemporary meanings. (Smith 2010: 42)

Fotouhi believes that an understanding of the concept of contemporaneity is essential. Nevertheless, he says:

I must admit that this rarely happens in our generation. This concept is mainly defined, for example, by the excessive use of contemporary means of media, information and concepts drawn from the latest books and journals of contemporary western art. I think these sources and their support would not alone be helpful for the definition of contemporaneity. The internet, satellite and other technological advancements, although helpful for this, are not enough.41

His installation, entitled Security, Love and Democracy (for Export Only), was exhibited in the exhibition Ethnic Marketing in 2006 (figures 31a & b). In this work, to criticize exoticism, Fotouhi used materials including tiles and mirrors which are, in Iranian culture, valuable and estimable, and also neon lights and toys to represent worthless and makeshift materials. Those fragments in the work, although from various and sometimes opposing origins, are seen together as a whole. Therefore, the work embodies existing contradictions in his society. The work and its title also refer to the issues of ‘export’ and ‘import’. He says: ‘Democracy is believed to be a western product which should be imported to the rest of the world (associated with toys and neon lights). It is also supposed that our traditional products such as craft and oil are the only things that we can export to the West (here associated with the tiles and mirrors)’.42

In conclusion, it can be said that the question of contemporaneity (interpreted variously by artists), or the driving spirit of the contemporary, has

41 Interview with the author, 2006.
42 Ibid.
attracted a great number of artists, even now after the reform period, thanks to the suitable environment for this growing interest provided by reformist custodians and to the artists’ own eagerness to experiment with new idioms. And then, like any culture around the world that conceives of and constructs its present and the concept of presentness visually, the works of Iranian artists which represent the idea of contemporaneity can be affected by various aspects of this situation. From a larger perspective, the recent developments in contemporary Iranian art may signal that it inevitably demands this new condition of contemporaneity. Examples of this art are marked by an acknowledgment of the psychic, philosophical, autobiographical, social, cultural and political settings in which they are made, of the demands that these conditions make upon practice, and the extent to which they provide the content of much of this art. The best works of this kind are, however, contemporary art, not because of their use of new media or marketing, but because they are about one of the most imperative personal, social and political needs of the time: the need to communicate, plainly, constructively and gracefully, yet with an eye turned to the complexities of contemporary culture (see Keshmirshekan 2010). If self-criticism and reflection are a part of the critical idea of contemporary thought and art, this is seen through the more recent works of Iranian artists, works that are consistently blended with political and social aspirations. Addressing contradictions and evincing critical analysis through biographical exposition, everyday life, lived experiences, etc. are among the dominant approaches of art of this period (figures 6, 7, 11, 12, 15). Common discourses in contemporary art, such as appropriation and criticism of originality, are also familiar strategies that are used for dealing with these topics.
This criticism goes even further when criticizing collective memories—sometimes through humorous commentary of those ideals instead of their commemoration, as presented by artists of previous generations (see Keshmirshekan 2005). Sometimes this appears through the presentation of pop culture and by looking at the fashionable currents which are being experienced in Iran (figure 13). While their work often grows dark and intensely skeptical, concerned with isolation, fragmentation and dislocation, the obsession, however, is predominantly explained as ‘being universal’, meaning complying with the spirit of contemporaneity.

The official cultural attitude of recent years seems to be re-endorsing what was experienced in the years before 1997. It promotes traditional Islamic and ideological revolutionary values and at the same time expresses xenophobia toward the West. This, however, has provoked an unenthusiastic response by artists. For many artists of this new generation, debates from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s about authentic identity should stay there. They are not an interesting subject any more. To many of them, contemporary art cannot simply be translated into the particularities of the artist’s nationality, since that status contradicts the artist’s perception of his or her ‘autonomous’ subject-position. It was perhaps such a position, held by many artists, that, as Araeen maintains, helped them ‘appropriate’ the ideas of rebellion and revolt inherent in the avant-garde (Araeen 1989: 12). Although the obsession with being specific is still vigorous, they have come to understand that their response should not repeat that of previous generations.

References

A (2002). guft-u-gu ba Hamid Severi, “agar istifadeh nakunim, aqab mi-manim [if we don’t use it, we shall struggle”]. Herfeh hunrmand 2: 130-133.


43 As Charlotte Bydler asserts: ‘The most internationalised strata of the contemporary arts scene—which inhabit the increasing number of biennial, triennial exhibitions, etc.—travel extensively, and it is difficult to say whether concepts and other contributions to the current contemporary arts agenda bear a recognisable cultural or, even less, national identity’. (Bydler 2006)


