This essay tries to explore two innermost concerns in the art and artistic practice of contemporary Iran; namely "identity" (i.e. local, historical, imagined and collective identity and also self-identity) and "exoticism" (which appears inevitably related to the first), both of which (identity and exoticism) involve challenges relating to the "self" and "other" and the issue of "expectation". It, moreover, suggests that these issues see broader contextual socio-political parallels. Although located differently by generations, the focus, however, will be on artistic productions of recent Iranian history, namely the period from 1997\(^1\) until the present day. The first apprehension

\(^1\) It refers to the 1997 Presidential Election in which the reformist Mohammad Khatami elected president of the Islamic Republic. It marked a major turning point in the social and political arenas towards a more democratic atmosphere. After the election, the new administration promised increased freedom of the press and other cultural reforms. With the new cultural and artistic administrations, Iranian art too witnessed a new period of development which was unprecedented in the post-revolutionary era. With this shift in artistic administration, the new custodians established new policies among which an attempt to support visual art domestically and to communicate with the outside world.
relates to the concept of identity which addresses how artists have interpreted contemporary aesthetics in the light of national and indigenous ideology. The second refers to the ever-present obsession with cultural and frequently social concern with which Iranian artists are engaged within the country. The two concerns are, however, integrated to each other; in the way that the second is criticized to be the outcome of the first concern. Therefore, there are reproaches which have based their criticism on the issues of cultural commodification, anti-canonical West, cultural formulation, and also the stereotypes rooted from the preference and interest of the market.

This essay, however, does not aim at and will not be able to fully look at all the varieties of cultural and artistic ideologies in Iran\textsuperscript{2}, but will just examine the two mentioned critical perspectives from different factions of cultural and artistic thought. It is thus thematic rather than historical or chronological. Throughout the essay several examples of these approaches will be examined in the works of Iranian artists from different generations. However, special attention is given to the younger and emerging artists who are becoming dominant in the contemporary Iranian art scene.

Here this essay is obviously not going to enter on the theoretical framework or discussions of the two terms mentioned (identity and exoticism) since it would need a long discussion which seems not necessary in the current essay, and can perhaps be considered a side-issue. Despite this fact, the question that first of all needs to be

addressed is how identity and exoticism are defined in the current context of Iranian art, which in a sense can have both positive and negative connotations.

It is said that most commentators on global and local social change acknowledge that "identity" is fundamental to their social analysis; however, most also find it a confusing and contradictory concept when trying to capture the force and experience of self-consciousness and collective awareness. As Cottam claims "[t]he Iranian’s consciousness of his cultural heritage has an importance for nationalism closely paralleling that of his historical consciousness."³ Like many Iranians with of varying degrees of intellectual aptitude who encountered with a situational sensitivity of what was foreign, Iranian artists were too preoccupied with the same kind of questions. They nonetheless raised some pertinent questions such as: Can traditional values, beliefs and behaviour be accommodated within the new structures and serve to secure and reinforce it? An answer to these questions would lead the artists to a synthesis in which they could find an appropriate place in the context of contemporary Iranian culture. It was therefore no surprise that during the period before the Revolution many artists who adopted the framework of modernism for their artistic practice were also engaged in the intellectual struggles of their country over the issue of cultural identity. The identity question has still continued to lead individuals to react to it through various approaches: from on the one hand a nostalgic psychological return to the past or an imagined historical identity, ethnic, native, local and even national or societal collective identity to on the other hand a self-identity and embodiment of cultural memory, this latter mainly being practised by the new generations of artists during the recent decades. This first identity, one can argue, is still the compelling

concern of the artists who belong to the first and second generations, while the latter has mainly preoccupied the mind of the third generation which is partly concerned with the outcome of the global forces affecting Iranian society and culture. These approaches and the outcomes which on the one hand have long been concerns of artists and intellectuals since about the mid-twentieth century, and in particular the 1960s inspired by the nativist movements, and on the other hand by cultural officials of the country for different reasons, both in the period before and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, have been targeted for criticism by cultural opponents of these ideologies.

The so-called neo-traditionalist artists, attempted to reconcile cultural heritage of the past and the new language of contemporary art. The 1960s and partly 1970s had already seen artists of the Saqqa-khaneh movement such as Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937), Charles Hossein Zenderoudi (b. 1936), Faramarz Pilaram (1938-1983),

4 For further examination of concepts of different generation of Iranian artists, see Hamid Keshmirshekan, “Globalization and the Question of Identity: Discourses on Contemporary Iranian Art During Past Two Decades,” (forthcoming).

5 See Ibid.


Zhazeh Tabatabaei (b. 1928), Sadeq Tabrizi (b. 1939), Nasser Oveissi (b. 1934), and Massoud Arabshahi (b. 1935), and later many others who were the representatives of this trend. Using ancient, traditional or indigenous materials to be identified especially as "Iranian" is to a certain extent the result of nationalist beliefs which have been variously presented throughout the recent history of Iranian art. The cultural and artistic disapproval of this idea, in particular its products, has been based on the relationship between the demonstration of aesthetically identified works – being the aesthetic potentials of pictorial traditions or more recently social implications, cultural codes, political or social particularities and stereotypes (figs 1-3) – and the strong sense of exoticism which they, meaning particularly the younger generation, strongly oppose.

Exoticism in a strong or radical sense could direct the work's internal rationale and what even governs the aesthetic choices of an artist towards an unrealistic and derivative product which has been shaped purely for the interests of the "others". So the issue of "expectation" here is the main question for criticism. On this base, it is perhaps the anti-canonical ideas that have led the artists and critics to criticize the stereotypes and products whose base are the "others'" expectation and evaluation. Then, they maintain that a work of art should be used, effective and meaningful in the first place at this particular time in artist's own context. It could eventually be meaningful elsewhere, although it would not be a priority.

8 During the 1940s and 1950s, the term "national art" or "school of national art" were repeatedly mentioned by both modernist artists and cultural administrators and some attempts had even been made by artists to produce this kind of art. For further elaboration of this process see Keshmirshekan, "Neotraditionalism and Modern Iranian Painting: the Saqqa-khaneh School in the 1960s," 607-630.

This anti-stereotype view is, moreover, expanded to the formulated interest of officials within the country when particular values are promoted as resistance against the cultural aggression (and storms) of cultural globalisation or so-called Americanism. This latter general cultural attitude explains why in official cultural and artistic events it has been perfectly clear that encouragement has been given to taking refuge in the cultural authenticity, historical specificities and artistic identity and traditional values, particularly of Islam or the so-called "Irano-Islamic" Shiite traditions as an integral part of that authentic culture. It is argued that popularisation of the Iranian identity began to take a different direction with the surfacing of fundamentalist values since the initial post-revolutionary period. As Mostfa Vaziri remarks, "the reinforcement of historical national identity by the Islamic regime was bound to a common code of culture that was centred on Islam as opposed to the secularism of the Pahlavis."\textsuperscript{10} Mehrdad Mashayekhi also believes that the Islamic universalist tendency \textsuperscript{11} in the early post-revolutionary period contributed to the Islamicists’ susceptibility regarding patriotic values. Nevertheless, the experience of running a complex modern state and coming to terms with a wide range of domestic and foreign issues, especially the eight-year war against Iraq, reinforced the regime’s other coexisting political tendency, specifically its nationalism, even though mixed with Shiite enthusiasm; the Islamic Republic increasingly adapted its Islamic


\textsuperscript{11} Pan-Islamism echoed in themes such as export of the Revolution and denunciation of secular nationalism.
universalist ideology to the national context.\textsuperscript{12} It has been then justified by the post-
revolutionary officials that in order to find a place in the global culture and also an
answer to confront western aggression, typically conforming to official policy. Much
of what is, for example, considered local – with reference to tradition or, as having the
nature of a localized culture – is proposed against cultural aggression as being worthy
of preservation is said to be based on cultural essentialism.\textsuperscript{13} However, as the Iranian
philosopher and social scientist Ramin Jahanbagloo in the introduction to his book
\textit{Iran between Tradition and Modernity} argues, "Iran has never been more a country of
paradoxes and contradictions than it is today. Many people in the West continue to
see Iran as a truly radical Islamic country. But the truth is that Iran is a country in a
painful tradition to democracy, and maybe the only Muslim country where people are
rapidly moving away from radical Islam."\textsuperscript{14} Here, it can explain how the implications
for the maintenance of the idea of those cultural ideals, presented in the ideology and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Mashayekhi, 1992, p. 111. Mashayekhi also points out that “among the political leaders and the
intellectual architects of the Islamic Republic one can even identify major pre-revolutionary writings
and speeches that had a strong nationalistic echo. It is no surprise then that the majority of Islamic
thinkers speak of an ‘Islamo-Iranian’ culture and identity; they find a symbiotic relation between Islam
and Iran.” (Ibid)

\item \textsuperscript{13} Explanation in terms of cultural specificities, sliding into cultural essentialism, are well illustrated in
the work of Bertrand Badie (1986), \textit{Les deux etats: pouvoir et societe en Occident et en terre d’Islam},
which presents a detailed argument for the historical and ideational distinction and contrast between the
“two states”, the Western and the Islamic.

\item \textsuperscript{14} Ramin Jahanbagloo, Introduction, in \textit{Iran Between Tradition and Modernity}, ed. Ramin Jahanbagloo
(Oxford, 2004): xvii
\end{itemize}
works of those previous generations, have now become problematic. It was perhaps because these cultural ideals and their presentation carry little weight with those who do not identify with those ideals.

In the early 1990s, a congregation of older questions resurfaced, although they were now posed in a different way. The 1960s and 1970s intellectual preoccupation with "return" to a "true" and glorified Iranian and Islamic "self" was now changed to a more critical attitude towards national culture and character. The movement which already resulted from those preoccupations had been conducted by the cultural elite and the vanguard of the time combining with a revival of tradition. In art, the artists at one hand appropriated Western canons and discourses but on the other looked for inspiration in indigenous popular culture. The result displayed a new form of art inspired by the contemporary trends in the West, but at the same time trying to break the Eurocentric hegemony and incorporate elements from the local cultures to put forward more polycentric and alternative aesthetics. During the early 1990s, however, the idea of reference to the cultural past mixed with the modernism adopted by Iranian artists resulted mainly in a sort of – or sorts of – formalism. Even when artists tried to apply the so-called post-modern visual vocabularies, by creating new cannons of control this formalistic approach – not the contextual meaning of the artwork – could still be discerned. The works of these artists employed motifs taken from "vernacular materials" such as traditional textiles and decorative forms and even Persian classical art. The question of how a contemporary work of art could take on a so-called Irano-Islamic form, on many occasions – as in similar cases elsewhere in the Middle East and Islamic world – led to the solutions of abstraction and calligraphic patterns (figs. 4-6).
Unlike this group who were still influenced by debates such as those on cultural identity discussed in the official exhibitions in this period, another faction gradually began from the late 1990s to react sharply against the idea of indigenous expression in artwork which usually reminded one of clichés of tie-dye works with decorative motifs. The critique of this formalism was an obstacle, for which those previous artists were being criticized. Instead, identity in the new generation is mostly transferred to various forms of self-expression or self-representation. This art could perhaps enable these artists to forefront alternative visions of Iranian identity in an increasingly globalized world. These works essentially become a repository of historical and social commentary often based on the personal experiences and explorations of the artists themselves (figs. 11-15). These works appear in some senses to indicate a preoccupation with post-modern politics even though many of the artists engaged in producing these works have not carefully thought about or engaged with post-modern politics or theory. In this sense, one might loosely call the entire discourse a "para-modern" discourse simply to illustrate the interest of these artists to dismantle certain modernist preconditions and move to another domain of art-making that is not exactly post-modern either.

It was clear by then that the recognition of the role of art as a means to project national and sometimes ideological pride and identity resulted in attempts by officials to hold exhibitions of Iranian art overseas. In the light of the abovementioned interest, it was obvious what sort of art would be chosen for the exhibitions. Additionally, this period witnessed the increase in the market’s interest in all sorts of non-Euro-American art, including contemporary Iranian art, with more exhibitions of this art in
western and non-western cultural venues.\textsuperscript{15} It can perhaps explain why the new audience's expectation has resulted in production of stereotypes in favour of that expectation. These artworks are particularly criticized when the artists are not expressing their own concerns, but rather creating to meet foreign demand. Exoticism is criticized from the point of view that these works may not originate in cultural and artistic real need; but the themes and forms rather are superficially injected into the artist's works. Even when in the recent works of Iranian artists created in various media and presented in the dramatically more numerous auctions or overseas exhibitions, cultural confrontations and contemporary social issue could be based on formulae and even coded typical indigenous elements. These issues and objects have been based on a subjective exotic view of what is expected to be shown as "Iranian" and as "contemporary". They may, however, be based on a part of realities that can be found in contemporary Iran such as themes of gender relations and the situation of Islamic women, Third World and feminist elements, but they have become stereotypes (figs. 16).

This critique is reminiscent of Gerardo Mosquera's essay, "The Marco Polo Syndrome," in which he frames the critique of Eurocentrism within the problematic of intercultural communication. In relation to art, Mosquera argues that the contemporary conception of art is a product of Western culture, always presenting non-Western artists with a dilemma – to have to choose between "derivative" production (never considered as good as the European model) or a display of one's

\textsuperscript{15} For example, the wealthy Persian Gulf states recently started to play an increasing role as a market for artists from other regional countries, including Iranian art; their museum infrastructure has been developed and international events created – like the Sharjah Biennial or Christie's Auctions in Dubai.
otherness. Here the words of Heinz-Norbert Jocks, a German art critic, could possibly well agree with this criticism, when he says:

"Have we Europeans since really made the effort to try to understand an art which originates in a different culture? Or isn't it the case that we always only discover and uncover the parallels to our own culture, our own history and our own art movements, and furthermore forget what alienation the alien elicits, and with it the confusion and revitalisation of one's own seeing and hearing and thinking. As comprehension is inevitably far from certain to follow the exhibition of the alien, and because the seeing which the culture industry has taught us is often only comparing and making comparable, the openness towards other cultures is more illusion than reality. […] Our vision is one which strikes everything with similarity." 17

In suggesting how to break out of this bind, Mosquera states: "the de-
Eurocentralisation in art is not about returning to purity, but about adopting postcolonial 'impurity' through which we might free ourselves and express our own thought." 18 This requires rejection of the West's demands for "authenticity," and

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17 Heinz-Norbert Jocks, "The Vision which Strikes Everything with Similarity", Nukta Art, Vol. 3 Two, 2008, p.54

18 Gerardo Mosquera, The Marco Polo Syndrome, p. 219
"purity" in favour of decentralization, and a move forward adopting artistic strategies of recontextualization, appropriation, and recycling,\textsuperscript{19} he argues.

It is also stated that in this period a group of Iranian artists were successful outside the country perhaps because of this exoticism. It is as if the artist sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously uses symbols and signs to present cultural codes or iconography which might attract others. This eventually empowers the exotic quality of his work. It seems that their identities appear to be built for the needs of the world-culture exhibition industry or as a means to win the sympathy of outsiders. Those approaches are sometimes described as self-exoticism instead of self-expression.\textsuperscript{20}

Self-exoticization usually means when the artist himself makes himself to be exotic or represents his work as an exotic commodity. The critical intellectual objection questions the hegemonic structures of the kind and the aesthetic and intellectual strategies that might be used to deal with it. These arguments are precisely the central themes of post-colonial aesthetics and representational practices.

In this criticism it is argued that the dominant discourse in cultural domain has "deeply affected the relation between art from black or non-European artist and the Western art system – its historiography, market, aesthetic, and critical values – where the greater the work's visibility in terms of radical or ethnic context, the less it is able

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\item \textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid}
\end{itemize}
to speak as an individual utterance." The galleries and museums have responded to
the demand to end cultural marginality basically by exhibiting more non-European
artists, although on a selective and representative basis, provided that they reveal
appropriate signs of cultural difference. In this regard, the art critic Jean Fisher
believes:

"This is to exoticize. Globetrotting has become a popular curatorial pastime,
resulting in 'geo-ethnic entertainment' that maintain the unequal intellectual
hierarchies between the art practices of the European and non-European, whilst
also masking their unequal economic and power relations. Above all, they
evade the complex negotiations that must take place between European aesthetic
language and those of the rest of the world. For the West to frame and evaluate
all cultural productions through its own criteria and stereotypes of otherness is
to reduce them to a spectacle of essentialist radical or ethnic typology and to
ignore their individual insights and human values – a treatment not meted out to
the work of white European artists."  

He continues his argument, which elaborates the reasons why non-Euro-American
artists has had to comply with this system. He maintains that for reasons of artistic
and economic survival, black and non-Euro-American artists have had to agree with

21 Jean Fisher, The Syncretic Turn, Cross-cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism, in Theory
in Contemporary Art since 1985, eds. By Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, Blackwell Publishing,
Oxford, 2005, p 234

22 Ibid, pp 234-235
"promotion through the commodified signs of ethnicity", which renders them complicit with the Western desire for the "exotic other", against which it can measure its own superiority. The "exoticized" artist is marked not as a "thinking subject" and individual innovator in his own right, but as a bearer of prescribed and homogenized cultural signs and meanings. Fisher also maintains that to be "locked into the frame of ethnicity is also to be locked out of a rigorous philosophical and historical debate that risks crippling the work's intellectual development and excluding it from the global circuit of ideas where it is possible to speak and to be heard without compromising one's life experience whatever its source(s)."

On the other hand, however, this anxiety of invisibility might cause a rather perverse turn of thought that reconceptualizes cultural marginality. This thought presumes cultural marginality no longer as a problem of "invisibility" but one of an excessive "visibility" in terms of a reading of cultural difference that is too readily marketable. This also relates to the tendency in colonial thought to associate what is visually verifiable with "truth," where superficial characteristics reflect the inner truth of being. The fact that non-Euro-American artists are still "expected" to produce either "ethnic" or "political" art, whilst other positions are tacitly ignored, suggests that "visibility" alone has not been adequate to provide the conditions for independent speaking subject.

The criticisms partly coincide with the belief that, as Stuart Hall writes, "[e]very identity is placed, positioned, in a culture, a language, a history … But it is not tied to

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23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
fixed, permanent, unalterable conditions. It is not wholly defined by exclusions.”

Hall succinctly writes that "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past." Similarly, the critics reject a fixed unified identity and instead propose a possible hybrid, unfixed and negotiable identity. They are against the idea of particularism in the sense of imposing a fixed and formulated mode of identity or "monolithic" or "one-view" formulas, either imposed by officials or by "others" and presented both domestically or internationally. They instead replace it with multiple or dispersed identity. The recent reproach seems, however, referring to disintegration of the concept of nationalistic boundaries favour an approach that is interdisciplinary, as artists extract images and references from diverse sources.

These artists variously demonstrate these beliefs mainly in their works. Addressing critically the actual problems and issues in society, for instance, is the only commitment for an artist, and not the depiction of local characteristics which they rather avoid. One of the young Iranian artists and art critics, Barbad Golshiri, who is critical of those stereotypes, maintains:

"Western ambience often wants you to be exotic and show them arabesque motives, ‘nice’ carpets or recently, women in chador. In other words, Iranian art exports merchandize; purchasable items such as collages of mystique, religious

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26 Ibid, p.394.
texts, *chador, 'poorography'* and more recently nuclear related issues because of their Tourism and Exoticism. [...] 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 Inter-textuality.”

Then the younger generation, which works with various artistic practices, is indeed concerned – in its imaging mode – with a need for self-presentation. The necessity for constant repositioning has led to a dynamic development in new forms of expression mainly symbolic, metaphorical and poetic traits. They respond to the changing cultural climate of their country by creating works that incorporate with, yet depart from a personal or collective past. Some works represent a commentary of recent social and political change with a focus on political paradoxes its aftermath. Their works are part of the wave of change transforming contemporary Iran: alternately challenging boundaries, documenting contradictions, while sharing a critical interest in the social and political realities and aesthetic history of Iran. In this way, their reference to traditions and cultural values are formed in a rather critical, satirical and ironic language. Artists such as Shahab Forouhi, Behrang Samadzadegan, Bavand Behpur, Jinoos Tghizadeh, Nazgol Ansarinia, Rokni Hayerizadeh, Amir Ali Ghasemi, Hamid Reza Ghiasi, Jamshid Haghighatshenas, and Hamed Sahihi are among several others who are adapting this language in their works, applying different vocabularies (figs. 17-24). This ironic, sometimes humorous, language has become also a common method to criticize exoticism and as a metaphorical reaction against united sacred values defined by officials.

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27 Interview with the author, 2005
Farhad Moshiri (b. 1965), for example, a very successful figure in the market, is well known for his ironic interpretations of hybrids between traditional Iranian forms and those of the consumerist and globalized popular culture widespread in Iran. These include his painted jars in the early 2000s, bursting with popular foods, drinks and desserts with elegant popular scripts written on the body of the large jars. In his latter period, he has experienced different approached such as using gold and other craft-made materials in kitschy ways (figs. 21 & 22).

In the light of the current fashion trends among young Iranian women, "These Days’ Bides" by Amir Hossein Bayani (b. 1977) aims at capturing the aesthetic nuances that shape, reshape and reinvent the identity of the new Iranian culture (fig. 23). Shirin Aliabadi’s (b. 1973) "Miss Hybrid" also suggests the same social commentary, although in a more popular way (fig. 24). Her works propose that a make-believe alternative beauty pageant believing that natural beauty is unfair, elitist and practically irrelevant, while artificial beauty sparked by an insatiable need to transform into someone else, via cosmetic intervention, can be regarded as a healthy exercise in cultural rebellion and global integration.

In conclusion, one may argue that for many artists of this new generation, the 1960s and 1990s debates about authentic unified identity are not an interesting subject any more. While experiencing profound yet contradictory changes in the social and cultural spheres and when religious ideology and revolutionary fervour remain the doctrine of the state, this younger generation – the majority of Iranian population – appear neither very enthusiastic revolutionary nor very ideological in a sense. They
seem to be inventing a new politics of identity for the twentieth first century; new cultural practices that have taken centre stage amongst many Iranians themselves. The international cultural market also welcomes contemporary Iranian artistic expression, although there could also be a concern to see this expression just as interesting "exotic" items from "Iran". It is worth noting, however, that the issue of cultural historical identity and art that is informed by national or collective identity is still an underlying precept of compelling force among a group of artists mainly from the previous generations. This is a sentiment that is still active in the scene of contemporary Iranian culture, although probably not that powerful as previously. The two mentioned very different concerns suggest the same encounters between religious tradition and secular modernity that have had a long history in Iran, although have become more pronounced over the past recent years as the state attempts to reconfigure cultural life at the very moment that globalizing trends in ideas are felt in Iran. All these processes, however, have posed options and challenges for Iranian society and culture and will continue to affect art and artistic activities.