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Platform 007

INTERVIEWS

Two Views, One Country

Azar Mahmoudian and Nazila Noebashari in conversation with Leili Sreberny-Mohammadi

Leili Sreberny-Mohammadi



*America the Beautiful installation view, September 2012.
Courtesy Nazila Noebashari.*

This brief conversation with curators Azar Mahmoudian and Nazila Noebashari centres around the question of infrastructure, or lack thereof, in Iran and more specifically, Tehran. Topics of discussion include the degradation of relationships between Iranian cultural institutions and local artists networks; the question of what can be done to rebuild them or to organize outside of them; and the tension between the relative isolation of Tehran from the global flow of artists, artworks and ideas against sustained interest in multiple forms of Iranian cultural production outside of the country. Firstly, Azar Mahmoudian presents her concerns about the hyper-visibility of Iranian artists outside of Iran, while collaborative efforts to organize from the ground up remain weak. Nazila Noebashari's predictions for the future are more hopeful, as she recognizes the increased interest of young audiences in the visual arts.

Leili Sreberny-Mohammadi: What do you recognize as the most pressing concerns in the visual arts in Iran currently?

Azar Mahmoudian: Well, it is no secret that Iran is an isolated country. However, despite political obstacles, Iranian artists have built diverse and interesting practices in the region and internationally. Nonetheless, we should be careful not to romanticize the Iranian scene. For many outsiders, the mere existence of contemporary art in Iran is fascinating. However, the Iranian art scene is actually suffering from a drastic lack of infrastructure.

LSM: How so? What are the areas that you think are most lacking? What are the infrastructural or institutional gaps and how are they being filled?

AM: Art education is virtually non-existent in contemporary Iran. Universities are disconnected from new developments in international contemporary art and still use syllabi and methods from the 1960s. Cultural institutions are either state-run or limited to small commercial galleries without access to public or external funds. Some of these galleries occasionally exhibit small, non-commercial practices, but none of them can afford to put on international projects. Whereas domestic censorship has been fetishized as the focal point of many debates on Iranian art, its contemporary art scene really craves structural support.

LSM: It seems that what you are identifying is a continued disjuncture between state-sanctioned institutions and artists who wish to operate independently. Yet, you identify current artistic production as dynamic. It's a very particular set of circumstances. How do you connect what is happening now with the availability of support in the past and future infrastructural possibilities?

AM: Since the late 1990s, we have witnessed a surge of global attention towards the art of Iran. There are certain geopolitical and financial reasons behind this. But what is more important is that despite new interests, individual artists and curators in Iran have few opportunities to work beyond the borders of the country. Their opportunities to exhibit outside Iran are limited to 'group survey exhibitions of Iranian artists' in certain Western institutions. These survey exhibitions are very problematic, because they primarily want to introduce Iranian culture to a Western audience. In other words, they reduce artworks to what the work may represent about the society that it comes from. In these exhibitions, 'Iranian art' is predefined by a geopolitical situation. Formal qualities of artworks are presented as being secondary to their representational value. Moreover, these group exhibitions respond to the assumptions of the Westerners who already expect to see Iran as a backward, fundamentalist society in which a younger generation wants to be 'westernized'. Certain images are therefore frequently reproduced in these group shows – Persian and Arabic calligraphy, women wearing hijabs, traditional Islamic patterns, etc.

LSM: These issues you speak of are not exclusive to the Iranian case, but are the forms that exhibitions or art from the non-west or global south often take in traditional art 'centres'.

AM: Indeed, this is not exclusive to Iran. Many southern nations have also been subject to this kind of attention. But Iran has a specific situation, precisely because of the lack of local independent institutions to make up for the effects of international attention. While in other Middle Eastern countries, such as Turkey, Lebanon and Egypt, the new global regard is just one part of their art scene, in Iran the whole scene is on the verge of dissolving into the western gaze. Indeed, survey exhibitions outside the country have long been the only channel for most Iranian artists to exhibit internationally. Furthermore, Iranians barely get the chance to see works by non-Iranian artists inside their country.

LSM: A discussion of infrastructure must also include a discussion of the Internet, the support of which is still, very purposefully, limited in Iran. Of course, I don't wish to overstate the power of the Internet as a tool, as has often been the case. Yet, more recently artists in Iran have been marshalling the virtual spaces and communication protocols of the Internet because of the potential for new forms of interaction and collaboration and for the exhibition possibilities they offer. While the Internet itself is subject to all kinds of restrictions in Iran, do you see the Internet as a place of possibilities for you and artists in Iran?

AM: In the past few years we have heard much about the capacity for new technologies to create 'virtual' alternative platforms for visibility and dialogue. But the Internet's emancipatory power has limits. Today, the romanticization of virtual spaces mostly serves a local regime, which

does not like actual interventions in the physical public sphere. It also serves the bad conscience of the global art scene, which benefits from showing Iranian art but does not invest in its infrastructure.

LSM: Do you view this as a problem to be rectified? And if so, what are the solutions, possibilities, both real and imagined that can you conceive of for this double-edged sword of hyper-interest and infrastructural failure?

AM: What is to be done? In this situation, we need solidarity amongst the artistic community to shake the foundations of the current structure at all levels – universities, museums, galleries and so on. This can happen through experiencing new forms of artistic practice and building sustainable, physical, alternative art spaces.



Aaran Art Gallery, view from the garden.
Courtesy Nazila Noebashari.

LSM: Traditional sorts of art world discourse often drew lines between central and peripheral art worlds, a hierarchical ordering of places. Such discourse has been replaced by a language of multiplicity and the use of the term hub, as a city or area where artistic production is visible, viable and an essential part of the cultural landscape. Does that idea resonate more strongly? Do you conceive of Tehran as an artistic hub, globally or regionally?

Nazila Noebashari: Tehran is a hub, it is a major production centre in this region. There is no other country in this part of the world that has

such a lively and progressive scene. There are infrastructural limitations of course, but what is important and what makes Iran a major player in the region, is the strength of its past and the hope for the future that is consistently upheld and cannot be stopped.

LSM: The disintegration of civil society in Iran poses a major issue in the development of independent institutions and educational platforms for artistic activity. For now, does the gallery space fill that role or at least provide an imaginary space for the production of civic engagement?

NN: There is nothing imaginary about the involvement of the civil society with visual arts in Iran. Visual progressive art is a large component of civil society. The independence that the visual arts has obtained since the hardships of the first two decades of post-revolution Iran, has given it strength and presence. A survey of many exhibitions over the last few years reveals to what extent the visual arts is engaged with contemporary society and politics. The economic independence of the visual arts and the existence of private gallery spaces, despite all the limitations inside Iran, have created a lively scene whilst other branches of the arts are dependent on governmental support and therefore are much more restrained. For example, the lively theatre scene of Iran is completely dependent on governmental permits and funding.

LSM: So, if the visual arts can operate independently and without reliance on government support, limited infrastructure is not necessarily prohibitive. What are the current practical realities of working in Tehran today? What are the limitations in infrastructure and can these be approached pragmatically or viewed as productive for your work?

NN: There is great interest in Iranian art from all over the world and with the election of the new administration we are now receiving more and more foreign visitors. Travelling to Iran has been made easy and more journalists are visiting and finding out more about art. The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art is now in the hands of more knowledgeable people than the last period. Ultimately, if the political negotiations with world powers are concluded to the benefit of Iran, then I believe more doors will be opened, particularly with the facilitation of banking and travel.

LSM: The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art is one of the few institutions that has endured, having been established just two years before the revolution of 1979. Yet the support it provides to artists seems to ebb and flow depending on the priorities of the administration and broader governmental remit. Do you see The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art's role changing under this new administration?

NN: The administration of Dr Rouhani is paying special attention to arts and culture of Iran and although it's all too soon to judge, their whole attitude is more supportive and encouraging than the past administration.

LSM: On the other hand, arts infrastructure cannot be centred on just one large museum. What other institutional gaps are there? How do you respond to these?

NN: We need better lecturers and faculty members and visiting lecturers from other countries. And more private galleries and foundations, but that will be fairly easy to reach once people feel secure in their investments and start new spaces and ventures. Iranians are very versatile and we rapidly react to reforms.

LSM: Iranian social and cultural history is often discussed as a series of ruptures, with institutions of the state consciously separating forms of cultural knowledge in the present from the past, distinguishing their ideological messages. It often falls to individuals to retrace the connections that are still shared in collective memory, yet have been disconnected institutionally. How do you connect what is happening in the present to past narratives and future possibilities?

NN: An important component of Iranian identity and culture is continuity – it can be found in everything we do. There have been major and often violent upheavals but no historical shock, however drastic, has been able to break the chain. While visiting encyclopaedic museums one can witness the chain of art production that has remained strong for millennia. It is important, if not vital, not only for this part of the world but for the whole world to nurture and to support artists of a nation that has endured more than its fair share.

LSM: Since opening your gallery in 2009, has your audience changed? How do you consciously build ways to engage your publics?

NN: Our local audience is young collectors, as well as established collectors both inside and outside the country. Young artists, students and faculty members of universities and generally a good number of enthusiasts who show up for openings on Fridays. The audience has changed for the better over the past decade, with many more young collectors and students eager to see new works of art.

Azar Mahmoudian is an independent curator and researcher based in Tehran. She received her MA in Contemporary Art Theory from Goldsmiths, London, where she was awarded the Chevening Scholarship in 2008. She has curated exhibitions and screenings for Cultuurcentrum Bruges, Belgium; Contemporary Art Brussels; SOAS, University of London; Blackwood Gallery, Toronto; and SAVAC, Toronto. Azar was a 2014 Fellow of Global Art Forum 8, Dubai.

Nazila Noebashari is a curator and the director of Aaran Gallery in Tehran.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leili Sreberny-Mohammadi

Leili Sreberny-Mohammadi received a Bachelors of Social Science in Social Anthropology from The University of Manchester in 2003. She has a background in the arts and broadcasting having worked with British broadcasters Channel 4 and the BBC and as a contemporary arts events producer at London's South Bank Centre. Sreberny-Mohammadi has lived both in Isfahan and Tehran acting as a research consultant on the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded 'Diasporas: Tuning In' project examining the listening and viewing habits of Tehrani residents. She is currently a PhD candidate in Sociocultural Anthropology at NYU.