Curated by art historians Fereshteh Daftari and Layla S. Diba, Iran Modern was the first major international exhibition of Iranian art from the last decades of the Pahlavi regime (1925–79). These decades saw an unprecedented increase in oil revenues, resulting in a major expansion of cultural activities, including the arts. Divided into five categories—Saqqakhaneh, Abstraction and Modernism, Calligraphy and Modernism, Politics and Iranian Modern Artists, and the Time-Line of Iranian Modern History—the 100 works on display at New York’s Asia Society were produced by twenty-six Iranian artists who set the tone for Iranian avant-garde art after World War II (particularly during the 1960s and 1970s). These works were acquired from forty-five public and private collections worldwide. Thus, while tracing major artistic themes of these formative decades, the show also offered a clue to the important collections of Iranian art elsewhere, from places as close as New York, London, Paris, and Los Angeles and as far away as Dubai and Qatar.

It is perhaps ironic that the Iran Modern Exhibition took place a few months after the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art’s exhibition of American art of the same period.
Contemporary Art in the World, the exhibition in Tehran showcased works by renowned American artists such as Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol, which had been buried in the cellar of the museum since 1979. Although temporary, this exhibition was vital in revealing the museum’s abandoned treasures from Iran’s oil-boom era in the last years of the Pahlavi regime, which had long been regarded as taboo.

Another important exhibition, The Fascination of Persia: The Persian-European Dialogue in Seventeenth-Century Art, concurrently on display in Zurich’s Rietberg Museum (September 2013–January 2014), presented the intimate intertwining of Europe and Iran in the Early Modern period. Featuring the work of great European masters, such as Peter Paul Rubens, who drew inspiration from Persian miniatures, and exploring how the early-modern Iranian master painter Muhammad Zaman adapted the work of his European counterparts, the show walked the visitors through the many ways Iran and Europe were culturally and economically linked 400 years ago. These three timely exhibitions—Expressions of Contemporary Art in the World, Iran Modern, and The Fascination of Persia—indicate how art can actively engage us in a direct dialogue between nations that otherwise would remain tacit. At a time when the mainstream media focuses on Iran’s nuclear program, deliberately sensationalizing the country’s ills, we may indeed think of these art exhibits as goodwill gestures of cultural diplomacy.

Such a gesture was even more manifest in Iran Modern. Due to US economic sanctions against Iran, with the exception of one item (described below), Asia Society was barred from borrowing art from within the country itself. What is more, by focusing on an era at the forefront of global avant-garde art, Iran Modern helped combat the stereotypical images that reduce Iranian identity to the familiar visual tropes of the Islamic world: veiled and oppressed women, war and violence, and political revolts that often go awry. In addition to its overall

3 But the vast coverage of the show in the mainstream media—by such renowned journalists as Charlie Rose, Holland Cotter of The New York Times, and Judith H. Dobrzynski of The Wall Street Journal—was an exceptional, if not unprecedented, gesture of cultural diplomacy.
theme, a number of curatorial decisions at Iran Modern helped disengage such stereotypical associations. Commendable, for instance, was the curators’ decision to include the work of leftist and feminist Iranian artists of the late 1970s, demonstrating how the 1979 Revolution—although won by the Islamists—was a collective effort and a result of diverse anti-Shah political groups. Remarkable among these often-marginalized works is an aquatint by Nahid Hagigat, which was showcased at Iran Modern. Titled *Escape* (1975), the work depicts a lone woman running against an empty desert-like landscape, freeing herself from her veil, which connotes—as the label to the piece in Iran Modern aptly suggested—her grappling with the patriarchal society. Hagigat was, indeed, among the very few women artists who dared to express their opinions about their sexual repression in the context of traditional Iranian society and on the eve of the Islamic Revolution. Although unique in the realm of fine art, Hagigat’s work nonetheless captured an idea that was not foreign to the minds of many Iranian women at that time, but that has long fallen into the cracks of the Republic’s Islamicizing agenda. Emphasizing the feminist art of the late 1970s in this way was surely an irrefutable strength of the show.

A few added curatorial choices could have further destabilized such stereotypes and accentuated the significance of Iranian art during the last decades of the Pahlavi era. By suggesting this, I do not mean to diminish the curatorial merit of the show or the quality of the works on display. Nor do I aim to propose that curators and artists always have a say in facilitating larger political repercussions. But I do want to propose that by adopting certain curatorial strategies that further loosen the rigid boundaries between black and white zones, we might better challenge some of the social and cultural commonplaces related to Iran.

To begin with, the title of the show, Iran Modern, did not immediately resonate with the culture of the 1960s and 1970s. As the well-researched catalog that accompanied the show aptly explicates, modern Iranian art was born in the decades that predated this period. Thus, the generic title of the show did justice neither to the uniqueness of the period in question nor to some of the artworks that were in sync

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with—if not more progressive than—concurrent international artistic trends. Take, for instance, Siah Armajani’s *A Number between Zero and One* (1970), which was first showcased at MoMA in July 1970. A vertical stack of paper, printed with 250 million computer-generated digits, in a steel cage, *A Number between Zero and One*, which took a computer twenty-five hours to print, was comparable in every way to the most advanced conceptual works of the West, most notably those of Fluxus’s “anti-art,” anticommercial aesthetic. Armajani’s work plays off the concept of binarity and anticipates such cutting-edge scientific concepts as fuzzy logic, a form of many-valued logic that deals with approximate reasoning rather than fixed rationalities. In this sense, *A Number between Zero and One* also borders on postmodernism—a value-free and pluralistic movement that defied the rigidity of High Modernism.

This postmodern pitch was not restricted to *A Number between Zero and One*. Iran Modern showcased an even punchier version of postmodernism, apparent in the works of Ghasem Hajizadeh, which heralded a form of independence from the dominant artistic styles of that time by capturing snapshots from Iranians’ everyday life in the 1970s. If Mohammad Ghaffari’s (a.k.a. Kamal al-Molk’s) *The Hall of Mirrors* (1896)—a hyperrealist oil painting of an interior of the Golestan

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Palace, a grand complex that housed the Qajar kings and their entourage—represented fledgling Iranian highbrow modernist art in the later 19th century, then Hajizadeh’s works pointed to an instantaneously recognizable lowbrow and anti-elitist culture. Sepideh (1975) depicts an unveiled woman whose broken body appears like pieces cut and pasted from other sources, probably cheap, popular women’s magazines. Next to this work was another oil painting by Hajizadeh, Yesterday-Today (1970), in which a woman is being blamed for her unveiled body and lack of modesty by a macho-looking man. This moment—a macho man pointing at a weak, unveiled woman who appears reprehensible—is a conspicuous theme that often surfaced in the Iranian commercial B-genre movies of the late Shah’s era.

Juxtaposing Sepideh and Yesterday-Today with a display case of Iranian popular magazines and a few monitors featuring B-genre film trailers could have better underlined the postmodern character of Hajizadeh’s oeuvre. Also absent from the show was Hajizadeh’s series portraying Iranian drag queens. Although the drag-queen series dates from after the 1979 Revolution, the works are nonetheless exact imitations of the...
photographs of Iranian drag queens that Hajizadeh had enthusiastically collected in the late 1970s.⁶

Most of the narratives that accompanied the Iran Modern exhibit—including the exhibit placards and a good portion of the exhibition catalog—stressed that Iranian modernism was not a blind imitation of Western modernism, but rather a movement that successfully combined local imagery and ideas with Western trends, such as abstraction and conceptualism. The Iranian Abstract Expressionist style, if one could indeed claim such an attribution, is well captured in the oil painting Untitled (1968) by Faramarz Pilaram (on display at Iran Modern), where patches of black Persian calligraphic areas laid on a bright red backdrop simultaneously affirm the literal flatness of the picture plane and appear to advance and recede spatially, evoking what the American Abstract Expressionist Hans Hofmann famously called the push-and-pull effect.

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This marriage of traditional and Western styles was even more evident in the Saqqakhaneh section of Iran Modern. The pieces in this segment featured elements of traditional Shiite ritual objects, such as the simple raised brass hand carried by the marching community of mourners during Ashura ceremonies. While incorporating traditional motifs and conforming to the antiperspectival horror vacui characteristic of Persian miniature paintings, the Saqqakhaneh School was reminiscent simultaneously of the modernist works of Paul Klee and Johannes Itten.

The aforementioned works are illustrative of a certain blend of tradition and (Westernized) modernity that was characteristic of Iranian art from the 1960s and 1970s. However, this hybridity was not exclusive to Iranian art from the period. Indeed, there is more to the art of this period than its Iranian characteristic. Perhaps, in accentuating this characteristic, Iran Modern—like any other show focused on Iranian art—had to conform to the standards of the global market of non-Western art. In other words, most of the work on display had to be quintessentially Iranian or else the show would not attract sufficient attention. In his book The Culture Game, critic and curator Olu Oguibe asserts that in spite of the fact that many non-Western curators and artists are trained in the West, the “game” of expectations and desires is such that they must be treated as “other” in order to take part in the “culture game.” Moreover, Oguibe contends that this operation is characteristic of most exhibitions of non-Western art in the West. Commenting on the non-Western artists whose works are featured and acquired by mainstream Western institutions, he adds, “rather than be seen in their own right as individual artists worthy of acquisition, these artists are thought of as representative of their backgrounds or regions and acquired accordingly.”

7 The term Saqqakhaneh was first coined by Karim Emami in his article “A New Iranian School,” which appeared in Kyhan International, June 5, 1963, 6.
8 Through these ceremonies, which involve marching and flagellation, Shiite Muslims commemorate a day of mourning for the martyrdom of Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, at the Battle of Karbala in the year 680.
9 It is perhaps ironic that both Klee and Itten embraced the ideal of the geometric form, an undertaking that was itself inspired by the antiperspectival traditional arts of Asia and the Middle East. For more on this exchange of ideas between the West and Persia, see, for example, Fereshteh Daftari, The Influence of Persian Art on Gauguin, Matisse, and Kandinsky (London: Routledge, 1991).
10 Olu Oguibe, “Prologue,” in The Culture Game (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xiii.
11 Ibid., xii.
How can curatorial strategies help us escape such games without necessarily gagging contents and artists that do actually address national or regional tropes? How can we subvert the mechanisms of cultural difference that are often at stake in the global art market?

Of course, there are many ways to answer these questions. In what follows I suggest a few instances in Iran Modern where opportunities presented themselves. For instance, Iranian Pop Art could have been selected and presented differently, thus helping to escape the so-called culture game. Marcos Grigorian’s mixed-media composite of the Iranian sangak bread and a traditional stew dish known as abgusht, which was featured in Iran Modern, was most likely inspired by the work of Claes Oldenburg. Composed at a time when Iranians were increasingly relying on imported fast food chains such as Kentucky Fried Chicken, Grigorian’s Dizy Abgousht (1979) exemplified a timely celebration of the Persian culinary traditions as they were being gradually eliminated from the daily diet. The curators’ selection of this particular piece did not do full justice to Iranian Pop Art of the 1970s. Missing next to this piece—if not in lieu of it—was the work of other important artists, such as Mehdi Hosseini, who illustrated generic household objects such as dish racks. Unlike Grigorian, Hosseini’s works were devoid of cultural references. Instead, they portrayed the artist’s existentialist perspective when confronting the overwhelming presence of mass-produced commodities in daily life, a phenomenon that could have easily happened to any artist—Iranian or otherwise—in the second half of the 20th century. Whereas Oldenburg was and remains canonical, artists like Hosseini were confined to obscurity, because they did not submit to the test of “tolerable difference,” to borrow Oguibe’s term.12

In Iran Modern, the work of several conceptual artists provided an opportunity to further emphasize the immense scope and

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12 According to Oguibe, non-Western artists are often subject to playing the “culture game” by highlighting their difference and by self-exoticizing. These are the kinds of differences that do not challenge the assumptions of Western audiences and are, therefore, “tolerable.” However, Oguibe asserts that a number of artists, such as the installation artist Yinka Shinobare (b. 1962) and renowned jazz musician Duke Ellington (1899–1974), have challenged these rules while maintaining their integrity. These artists captured the essence of their cultural heritage and ethnic background while also questioning their difference with respect to mainstream trends. According to Oguibe, they used the very same “tropes of difference,” but with these tropes “they would consistently and articulately critique the culture of difference,” thus deconstructing the rules of the “culture game.” See further Oguibe, “Double Dutch and the Culture Game,” in The Culture Game, 33–44.
variety of the art-making processes deployed by Iranian artists. Consider, for instance, the dazzling mirror works of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, which followed the Saqqakhaneh section in Iran Modern. Like her American counterpart Frank Stella, Farmanfarmaian created her mirror works from the programmatic organization of a series of straight lines that proceed outward, sometimes even determining the overall shape of the canvas; they are about “movements, connections, relationships, progressions, appropriations, and redistributions,” as art critic Media Farzin asserts. Yet Farmanfarmaian’s works are often positioned within an artisanal lineage of Islamic mirror works, and thus frequently placed in the category of the “subaltern craft.” Similarly, just as the mirror works of Iranian architectural revetments reflected the texture of the adjacent adobe walls, Farmanfarmaian’s “mirror works” in Iran Modern reflected the adjacent “earth paintings” of the Armenian-Iranian painter Marcos Grigorian, whose minimalist work of dried earth resembles the essential material kahgel (a mixture of clay and straw) used in adobe architecture in the deserts of Iran.

Instead of asking the viewer to associate the mirror works with so-called subaltern craft, Iran Modern’s curatorial strategy could have helped to question this common connotation by juxtaposing Farmanfarmaian’s work with the artist’s own diagrammatic drawings, or by linking her techniques to similar conceptual methods employed by artists such as Stella.

Ahmad Aali’s Self-Portrait (1964, reconstructed in 2010), on loan from Tehran’s Aaran Art Gallery, presented another opportunity through which the curators could have privileged questions of technique and form over the purportedly local or traditional content of the works displayed. Self-Portrait experiments with different materials and spatial relationships in its composition, a practice that evolved from Cubist collage and papiers collés and Duchamp’s ready-mades. Instead of further highlighting the work’s mixed-media technique, however,

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14 Farzin, “Mirrors and Diagrams,” 73.

15 These drawings are featured in Obrist and Marta, Cosmic Geometry, 149–57.
the adjacent label emphasized the presumption that Aali’s photographic self-portrait, in which the artist is suffocated by the fumes of an actual stove pipe protruding from his mouth, calls to mind a term used in everyday Iranian dialect—khafekhoon (or suffocation)—which also implies political clampdown, repression, and censorship. This account is apt and applicable; however, there is more to this piece than its political undertone. Together with a few other pieces that were either absent from the show or featured in the Abstraction and Modernism section, Aali’s mixed media could have formed a supplementary section dedicated to experimentation with new materials and techniques. The catalog that accompanied the show highlights these techniques more directly. Noteworthy is an article by Tehran-based art historian Hamid Severi, in which he explores Iranian “art photography.”16 Severi sheds light on handmade, photo-collage, and hand-colored photographs. With the exception of Self-Portrait, none of the other “art photographs” Severi discusses—for example, Bahman Jalali’s cibachrome from his London Series—were included in the exhibition. Indeed, despite such mentions in the catalog, the show itself shied away from abstract works that do not capture some aspect of Iranian culture. In this sense, an important part of Iranian art during the 1960s and 1970s was marginalized—those works that were not immediately bound to culture and identity, but rather to explorations in method, form, and praxis. How these methods differed from those employed by their Western counterparts is a topic that remains to be examined in future exhibitions.

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The show ended with artworks produced on the eve of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Across from Parviz Tanavoli’s celebrated bronze sculpture, *Heech*—a three-dimensional version of the written word *nothing* in Persian—sat another equally iconic piece, a photograph of the Revolution by Bahman Jalali, showcasing a massive demonstrating crowd holding banner portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini, Ali Shariati, and Mohammad Mossadegh. The curious juxtaposition of *Heech* and its existentialist undertones with the emphatically revolutionary photograph appeared like an attempt to pass judgment on Iran’s purportedly tragic fate in the last decades of the 20th century.

Indeed, with the close of the 1970s, the eight-year war with Iraq (starting in September of 1980), and the Cultural Revolution of the early 1980s, the art of the oil-boom era was mostly forgotten. In conformity with the Islamic Republic’s ideals, government censors persecuted many well-known artists from the Shah’s era, accusing them of creating “art for art’s sake” instead of serving the masses, and condemning them for serving the corrupt Shah’s regime. These accusations had a stultifying impact on artistic productions. Many successful artists from the oil-boom era left Iran and formed a diasporic community in Europe.
and the United States. As a result, their work remained marginalized overseas during the 1980s, when Iran and Iranians had a poor reputation in the West. Those who stayed in Iran turned their attention inward. Women artists mostly portrayed interiors, while male artists—if not employed by the regime to create propaganda art—busied themselves with nonpolitical art. Before the Revolution, most art venues in Iran were supported by the government or other publically known organizations. In the years following the Revolution, however, “underground” galleries, rather than the government, sponsored shows of these artists. Although in recent years a new generation of artists (most of whom were born after the Revolution) has reinvented the Iranian art scene, the restrictive atmosphere of the post-Revolutionary period and the lack of state patronage had a regressive effect on the development of art, especially throughout the 1980s. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how the culture and art of a nation could bloom at such a fast pace, 

17 Noteworthy is the sponsorship of Iranian art in the 1970s by the Behshahr Industrial Group, initiated by the Lajevardi family.
yet shortly thereafter become obsolete and remain as such for almost a decade. Given the significance and scope of the art of the last two decades of the Pahlavi era, it is unfortunate that such a productive period was largely ignored before Iran Modern, by both local and international exhibition venues.

A more concerted effort to render the “culture game” null could have made the show an even greater success. Nonetheless, the Iran Modern curators must be applauded for highlighting the significance of an important, yet forgotten, era and for facilitating a vital conduit for cultural diplomacy.