The symposium examines political economies of contemporary art within Iran and abroad—its production and distribution, the mechanisms of circulation in Iran and the United States, and how ideologies and their attendant policies shape transfer of knowledge and praxis from one context to another.

Co-presented by Asia Society and Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania

Convened by Sandra Skurvida

10 am - 11:30 am

Welcome and Introductory Remarks:

Melissa Chiu, Director of Asia Society; Monroe Price, Director of Center for Global Communication, University of Pennsylvania; Sandra Skurvida, Symposium Convener

Keynote: Hamid Keshmirshekan (Tehran), Art Practice and Dissemination in Contemporary Iran: Discourses and Mechanisms

Break

11:30 am - 1:00 pm

Panel on the Discursive Text:

Shiva Balaghi (Brown University), Exhibiting the West in Iran and Iran in the West

Babak Elahi (Rochester Institute of Technology), The Critic as Activist: Cultural Commentary in Iran’s Digital Transnational Aesthetic Sphere

Sohrab Mahdavi (Tehran Avenue), Artistic Statement: An Instrument to Get Closer or Become Ethereal

Lunch break
2:00 - 3:30 pm

Panel on the Curatorial:

**Fereshteh Daftari** (Independent Curator, NYC, co-curator of *Iran Modern*), *Representing Modern and Contemporary Art by Iranian Artists: A Curatorial Perspective*

**Azar Mahmoudian** (Independent Curator, Tehran), *Politics of Display: Reflections on International Exhibitions of Iranian Art*

**Anna Vanzan** (University of Milan), *Posht-e Pardeh, Behind the Painting: Women Gallerists in Contemporary Iran*

Break

4:00 - 6:00 pm

Panel on Art Praxis:

**Roxanne Varzi** (University of California, Irvine), *Facing the Future: The Artistic and Diasporic Afterlife of the Iran-Iraq War*

**Sohrab Kashani** (Artist and Producer, Tehran), *Alternative(s) in Tehran: Art Space and Practices*

**Slavs and Tatars**, *The Transliterative Tease*

Endnote: **Hamid Dabashi** (Columbia University)

6:00 - 7:00 pm

Reception at Asia Society
Shiva Balaghi

*Exhibiting the West in Iran and Iran in the West*

W. J. T. Mitchell famously asked “What do pictures want?” In this talk, I’ll ask a related question, “What do art exhibitions want?” Put another way, what kind of work do we ask of art exhibitions? Exhibitions can be used as promotional tools for artists, collectors, museums, institutions, corporations and states. Exhibitions often serve as a stimulus for related scholarly activity such as art criticism, scholarly publications, and university instruction on related topics. Exhibitions can also play a central role in cultural diplomacy, creating opportunities for mutual understanding and dialogue between states.

Exhibitions designed within a temporal frame ultimately present a historical narrative; visual cultural becomes a template for telling a particular history of a time and place. In his work on *Museum Memories*, Didier Maleuvre argued “art makes history.” Museum exhibitions can be read as a pictoral representation of cultural authenticity, the aesthetic essence of a people. After visiting Arthur Upham Pope’s historic 1940 exhibition “Six Thousand Years of Persian Art,” featuring some 2800 Iranian objects in Manhattan’s Union Club, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote: “Here is an art which has survived 6000 years of invasion, war, tyranny, prosperity and power. Here is the real proof that the spirit as expressed through the arts transcends all material things.” Highlighting some historic exhibitions of Iranian art in the US and Western art in Iran from the 1940s to the present, I’ll examine the layered meanings and multifarious impacts of art exhibitions in contemporary society.

Shiva Balaghi is a cultural historian of the Middle East, who teaches Art History and History at Brown University as the Laya Khadjavi Visiting Professor of Iranian Studies. Balaghi is a Contributing Editor of *Jadaliyya* and a Trustee of the American Institute of Iranian Studies. Her books include *Saddam Hussein: A Biography* (2005); *Picturing Iran: Art, Society, and Revolution* (co-edited, 2002); and *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East* (Co-edited, 1994). Balaghi has published widely on Iranian visual culture and contemporary Islamic Art. She is currently completing a book on knowledge and power in Iran from 1848-1953. Before coming to Brown, she was Associate Director of the Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at NYU for a decade. She has taught at the University of Vermont and the University of Michigan.

Hamid Dabashi

*Endnote*

Hamid Dabashi is the Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York. He has taught and delivered lectures in many North and Latin American, European, Arab, and Iranian universities. He is a founding member of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society, as well as a founding member of the Center for Palestine Studies at Columbia University. He has written 25 books, edited 4, and contributed chapters to many more. He is also the author of over 100 essays, articles and book reviews in major scholarly and peer reviewed journals on subjects ranging from Iranian Studies, medieval and modern Islam, comparative literature, world cinema, and the philosophy of art (trans-aesthetics). A selected sample of his writing is co-edited by Andrew Davison and Himadeep Muppidi, *The World is my Home: A Hamid Dabashi Reader* (Transaction 2010).
Fereshteh Daftari

Representing Modern and Contemporary Art by Iranian Artists: A Curatorial Perspective

New York, in spite of its cosmopolitanism has not always been receptive to works by Iranian artists. The presentation/paper will map out the inclusion of Iranian artists in thematic exhibitions organized by Fereshteh Daftari not just in New York, but also in Paris and Vancouver. Through this account some of the larger issues, such as funding, sanctions, and museum policies will be addressed.

Fereshteh Daftari is an independent curator based in New York City and co-curator of the current exhibition at Asia Society, Iran/Modern. From 1988 to 2009 she worked in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art where she curated numerous exhibitions with international artists, including Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking, 2006. Revisiting art by Middle Eastern artists, she curated an exhibition of performance art with Iranian artists for Iranian Arts Now festival in Paris in 2012; and she guest curated Safar/Voyage: Contemporary Works by Arab, Iranian and Turkish Artists for MOA in Vancouver in 2013. Her curatorial research into modern Iranian art resulted in a guest-curated exhibition for New York University’s Grey Art Gallery (2002) and an essay Another Modernism: An Iranian Perspective. She obtained a PhD from Columbia University in 1988) and her thesis, The Influence of Persian Art on Gauguin, Matisse, and Kandinsky, was published in 1991. Her many recent publications include essays on contemporary artists such as Ali Banisadr and Raqib Shaw.

Babak Elahi

The Critic as Activist: Cultural Commentary in Iran’s Digital Transnational Aesthetic Sphere

Within a year of the summer 2009 protests in Tehran, the culture and arts website, TehranAvenue.com closed down. In this presentation, I use qualitative data—interviews with the sites creators and contributors—to show that the closure had as much to do with the limits of the communities its creators had established over the preceding ten years as it did with any political fallout from the protests. Nevertheless, I also argue—through content analysis—that the website participated in a transnational Iranian aesthetic sphere (as defined by Kenneth Tucker, Jr., borrowing from Jürgen Habermas). Through this participation, the team at TA brought to light a complex set of negotiations between the politics of Iranian theocracy and those of North American and European capital and consumer culture. Attempting to chart a course between flawed and potentially harmful social and political formations at home and abroad, TA writers used cultural commentary as a kind of transnational intellectual activism. TA charted an iconoclastic course between the rock of Iranian limits on free speech and the hard place of hyper consumerist North American, European, and even East Asian societies whose simulacra dot Iran’s cityscapes. The writers and creators at TA saw their role as critics to be crucial for public discourse in Iran and its diaspora. It is hoped that this presentation leads to future study of a virtual Iranian aesthetic sphere: a transnational network of socially engaged critical discourse on Iranian art at home and abroad.

Babak Elahi is the Associate Dean in the College of Liberal Arts at Rochester Institute of Technology where he also teaches in the Department of English. His scholarship encompasses American studies and Iranian diasporic studies. His publications include The Fabric of American Literary Realism (2009), “Poisons and Remedies in Sadegh Hedayat’s The Blind Owl” (Middle Eastern Literatures, 2012), and “Crossing Tehran Avenue: Digital and Urban Spaces in Tehran” (Cultural Studies, 2012). His work in progress includes further exploration of Iran’s digital diaspora, particularly by seeking narratives of production from diasporic Iranian website producers; and a book manuscript on illness as metaphor in Iranian fiction and film.
Sohrab Kashani

*Alternative(s) in Tehran: Art Space and Practices*

Sohrab will introduce Sazmanab Center for Contemporary Art and discuss some of its projects. He will give a brief overview of Tehran’s art scene and will talk about independent and alternative spaces and projects, artists and performers who have worked in the public sphere; as well as his own experience as socially engaged artist.

Sohrab Kashani is an interdisciplinary artist, curator, and cultural producer based in Tehran. His current art projects include ongoing collaborations with Conflict Kitchen, a project by Jon Rubin and Dawn Weleski in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, featuring Kashani’s human avatar in *The Foreigner*; and with OtherIS by Sandra Skurvida, featuring his video art and comic books. His curated projects in 2013 include *SubTehran: Subjective Truth from Tehran* at the Center for Contemporary Art–Tbilisi; and *Still Lives*, a video art exhibition on the occasion of the presidential elections in Iran, co-curated with Skurvida at Dastan Gallery, Tehran. Kashani is the founding director of Sazmanab Center for Contemporary Art, a non-profit space in Tehran where he organizes exhibitions, educational events and lectures, and hosts residencies for emerging and established international artists and curators. This interdisciplinary platform will expand with the opening of the new independent art center in downtown Tehran under his direction, planned for spring 2014.

Hamid Keshmirshekan

*Art Practice and Dissemination in Contemporary Iran: Discourses and Mechanisms*

This paper will examine the current state of contemporary art in Iran and concerning issues and discourses such as identity politics, its association with the formal cultural strategy and institutions, the politics of the market and its impacts on art practice, dissemination and exchange mechanisms. With reference to selected works, it will further trace the current dilemma of how contemporary Iranian artists have responded to contemporary social and cultural complexities inherent in the context of Iran. It argues that the formulated interest of the officials clearly promotes particular values as resistance against the secular cultural norms of cultural globalisation. This 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. It will also examine strategies employed by Iranian artists and art activists concerned with the new dialectics of global culture in contemporary Iran.

Hamid Keshmirshekan is the Barakat Trust Academic Fellow in the History of Art Department, Oxford University, and Editor-in-Chief of the bilingual (English-Persian) quarterly, *Art Tomorrow*. From 2004 to 2012 he was the Associate Fellow at the Khalili Research Centre, Oxford University. He received his PhD in history of art from SOAS, University of London and was awarded post-doctoral fellowships by the Barakat Trust in 2004-5 and the British Academy, AHRC and ESRC in 2008, both at Oxford University. His current research is on twentieth and twenty-first century art from the Islamic world, paying particular attention to recent developments in art practice and its relation to the context. Dr. Keshmirshekan has organized international conferences on aspects of modern and contemporary Iranian and Middle Eastern art, most recently *Regional vis-à-vis Global Discourses: Contemporary Art From the Middle East* at SOAS, London. His book Contemporary Iranian Art: New Perspectives is forthcoming in October 2013; other recent publications include “Reclaiming Cultural Space: Artist's Performativity versus State’s Expectations in Contemporary Iran” in *Performing the Iranian State: Cultural Representations of Identity and Nation*, “Contemporary or Specific: the Dichotomous Desires in Art of Early 21st Century Iran”, *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* (2011), “Seeing Twofold: Locality and Trans-locality in the Art of Contemporary Iran”, and *Art Tomorrow* (2011), “The Paradigms for Contemporaneity in Iranian Art”, *Art Tomorrow* (2010).
Sohrab Mahdavi

Artistic Statement: An Instrument To Get Closer Or Become Ethereal

What is the relationship between the text of an exhibit and its visual content? This is a question that has preoccupied me for the past several years as artists increasingly feel the pressure to frame and explicate the site of origin of their works. I choose to see this in positive light, as an attempt by artists to reach out to their public. There is still a strong bias in favor of assuming a work of art arising from intuitive and inspirational regions of our psyche. Art is separated from society through its separation from artisanship and immediate concern for being-in-the-world commentary. In the case of Iranian artists, it could also be that in the absence of an annotative apparatus (journalistic art criticism, academic point-of-view, and retrospective possibilities) they see the necessity to bridge the gap between their works and their viewers -- they try to make their works more accessible. Still, the dominant mindset posits “art” as a special, esoteric pasture where the pueblo finds nothing to graze on. In maintaining this mindset, Iranian artists have been complicit must like people the world over. Gospel is the word of white Anglo-European connoisseurs whose pages of magazines and annals of academia will have the final word on the acceptability of an artist in the pantheon of the art world. Part run-of-the-mill Third Worldist effusion, my presentation will try to make sense of an artistic statement within the Iranian art scene.

Sohrab Mahdavi is co-founder and editor of the bilingual magazine, TehranAvenue. Mahdavi grew up in Tehran, and his last high school year coincided with the Iranian revolution of 1979. For the next 11 years he lived in the USA, where he grappled with the political realities of exile. When he returned to Tehran, the city was not the one which he had left. The City is the converging point of dislocation. It is where its “escape to” and “flight from” coexist in yin-yang dichotomy. It provides respite from at the same time that it invites a search for identity. It is where collectivism has become individualized and individualism communalized. The City has further been transformed along virtual lines. A Tehrani in Berlin can remain a Tehrani in her virtual space. Conversely, his friend in Tehran can escape from the confines of the City and live in an imaginary landscape. The Internet is the battleground of presence and absence. TehranAvenue is the place where these lines of intensity crisscross. What does it mean to live in a Third World city? Where are the lines that trace a cyber-city?

Azar Mahmoudian

Politics of Display: Reflections on International Exhibitions of Iranian Art

In 2010, I co-curated an archival exhibition which focused on circumstances that have affected modes of circulation, accessibility and distribution of artworks in Iran in the 2000s. This ongoing research project, accompanied by a series of interviews with artists, curators, collectors, art managers, and theorists, is looking to identify the modes of curating group shows of “Iranian art” for the international audience—an array of exhibitions (re)produced under national labels, emphasizing the “origin” and the “unknown.” This curatorial research questions national exhibitionism and regionalization of art as a credible producer of content. In that regard, it tries to map the orders of visibility within the current system of art circulation; and argue that “distinct domains” of art production and distribution are in fact constructed in a network of (transnational?) relations. I propose archiving as a strategy to open up the dominant historicist paradigm of art exchange.

Azar Mahmoudian is a freelance curator and critic based in Tehran and London. She graduated with an MA in Contemporary Art Theory from Goldsmiths in 2009 where she was the recipient of the Chevening scholarship. Her research interests are mainly focused on transcultural circulations and the politics of display. She has curated exhibitions for the CC Bruges and CAB Brussels, Belgium and since 2010 co-initiated the archive and documentary series section of the project “Iran and Co” which engaged with international representations of Iranian contemporary art in the previous
decade. She collaborates with Tehran-based project spaces and works as a researcher, associate editor and lecturer.

Slavs and Tatars

The Transliterative Tease

Through the lens of phonetic, semantic, and theological slippage, The Transliterative Tease explores the potential for transliteration—the conversion of scripts—as a strategy equally of resistance and research in notions of identity politics, colonialism, and liturgical reform. Across Slavs and Tatars’ three cycles of work, the lecture performance investigates in particular the urgency of syncretism, as found in the eastern frontier of the Muslim world, Central Asia, aka Khorasan, aka Turkestan, the basis of their research for Not Moscow Not Mecca. The march of alphabets has always accompanied that of empires—Arabic with Islam, Latin with the rise of Roman Catholicism, and Cyrillic with the Orthodox Church; The Transliterative Tease attempts not to emancipate peoples or nations but rather the sounds rolling off our tongues.

Slavs and Tatars is a faction of polemics and intimacies devoted to an area east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China known as Eurasia. The collective’s work spans several media, disciplines, and a broad spectrum of cultural registers (high and low) focusing on an oft-forgotten sphere of influence between Slavs, Caucasians and Central Asians. They have had solo exhibitions at the MoMA, NY; Secession, Vienna; and group exhibitions at Tate Modern, Centre Pompidou, Palais de Tokyo, as well as the Sharjah, Gwangju, and Mercosul Biennials. The collective has published several books—including Kidnapping Mountains (Book Works, 2009); Not Moscow Not Mecca (Revolver/Secession, 2012); Khhhhhhh (Mousse/Moravia Gallery, 2012); Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi’ite Showbiz (Book Works, 2013); as well as their translation of the legendary Azeri satire Molla Nasreddin: the magazine that would’ve, could’ve, should’ve (JRP-Ringier, 2011). Their 2014 engagements include solo exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Zurich; Dallas Museum of Art; and GfZK, Leipzig.

Sandra Skurvida

Symposium Convener

Sandra Skurvida is a New York City–based independent curator, writer, and scholar. She emerged as an art critic and curator in Lithuania in the early 1990s, as that society entered the global context after the dissolution of the USSR. Her early work comprises more than 100 exhibition reviews and essays and numerous curated exhibitions, including the Third Annual Exhibition of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art in Vilnius, Lithuania (1995). For that work, she was awarded the Fulbright Scholarship in 1996, and received a Ph.D. from Stony Brook University in 2006. Since relocating to the U.S., she has curated exhibitions in New York and internationally; and taught at Bard Center for Curatorial Studies, New School, MoMA, and elsewhere. Her practice remains focused on regions undergoing radical sociopolitical change, as exemplified in the project OtherIS (www.otheris.com)—a worldwide network of artists, scholars, curators, and others who share the common goal of facilitating art and information exchanges despite restrictions by legislation and embargo. This initiative engages with U.S.-sanctioned countries—including Belarus, Burma, Cote d’Ivoire, Congo, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, North Korea, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Zimbabwe—in the form of exhibitions, screenings, databases, research, lectures, and publications.

Anna Vanzan

Posht-e Pardeh, Behind the Painting: Women Gallerists in Contemporary Iran

It is almost a truism to say that women are at the vanguard of present Iran cultural life. Women act not only as writers, actresses, directors, performers etc., but more often
then not they also participate directly in the entrepreneurial process that make the artistic product possible, available, and marketable. A case in point is the relatively new profession of art gallery manager, recently discovered by Iranian women and rapidly expanding—most of the leading galleries in Tehran are directed or owned by women.

This paper maps the current situation of female-run art galleries in Tehran. It is mainly based on the conversations I have had with female art dealers during spring 2011 and summer 2013. Their experience show how Iranian women are becoming arbiters in the international field of contemporary visual art, while simultaneously offering the autochthonous artists (among whom we find many young women) the possibility to fulfill their profession. Moreover, the art galleries they run constitute a common space for social interaction while promoting the love for art and beauty.

Anna Vanzan holds a Degree in Oriental Languages and Cultures (University Of Ca’ Foscari, Venice) and a PhD in Near Eastern Studies (New York University). Though she is interested in the Middle East in general, her research is focused on Iran, Central Asia and the subcontinent (Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Muslim India). She has been working in gender studies with particular interest in contemporary Iranian women writers of fiction. Among her numerous publications in Italian and English are Donna e giardino nel mondo islamico (Women and Garden in the Islamic World (Florence, 2013)); La storia velata: le donne dell’islam nell’immaginario italiano (Edizioni del Lavoro, Roma), a history of the image of Muslim women in Italian culture from the Middle Ages, which has been awarded the International Prize Feudo di Maida 2006. Her book Figlie di Shahrazad, scrittrici iraniane dal 19 secolo a oggi (Bruno Mondadori, Milano, 2009) is a history of Iranian women writers from mid 19th century to nowadays. Her most recent book, Le donne di Allah, viaggio nei femminismi islamici (B. Mondadori, Milano, 2010) offers a collection of conversations and discussions with Muslim women who are engaged in finding their way to feminism. Vanzan is one the founders of the Italian journal Afriche&Orienti. She is currently teaching Arabic Culture at the University of Milano; and is visiting lecturer at the European MA M.I.M. Ca’ Foscari University, where she teaches Gender and Islamic thought.

Roxanne Varzi

Facing the Future: The Artistic and Diasporic Afterlife of the Iran-Iraq War

From 1991 when I first returned to Iran to 2006 when my ethnography, Warring Souls: Media, Martyrdom and Youth in Post-Revolution Iran was published I spent time in Tehran experiencing, observing and writing about the many ways in which secularly-minded citizens were trying to forget, ignore and wipe-out the visual memory of years and years of a war that turned Tehran aesthetically into a space of martyrdom and mourning. I wrote of the various visual moves that happened post Iran-Iraq war in Iran to produce a martyr culture that maintained an Islamic public sphere and ultimately created an Islamic nation-state. So imagine my surprise in 2007 when I walked into an exhibit in Berlin, Germany by a young Iranian artist, Azin Feizabadi, who was born and raised in Tehran and now making art in Berlin that beautifully and accurately replicated (to use his word) the art and propaganda around the “beauty of sacrifice” (the government’s words) during the Iran-Iraq war. My presentation will address how the cultural and emotional remains of the Iran-Iraq War influence artistic production among Iranian artists outside of Iran and how Iranian diaspora self-portraits act as sociopolitical memoirs by looking at a few examples of diaspora artists who through their art somehow remain political “subjects” of contemporary Iran.

completed her PhD in Anthropology in 2002 from Columbia University and was awarded a Woodrow Wilson fellowship at New York University’s International Center for Advanced Studies. In 2005 Dr. Varzi was a senior visiting Fellow to St Antony’s College, Oxford University in the United Kingdom and was at the same time a member of the faculty of Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African studies, University of London. During the summer of 2007 she was a visiting Professor of the UC program at the University of Lund in Sweden and for the 2007-2008 academic year, she was a fellow of Berlin's Wissenschaftskolleg's “Near East in Europe” program.