

***POSHT-E PARDEH, BEHIND THE PAINTING:  
WOMEN AS ART GALLERY MANAGERS IN  
CONTEMPORARY IRAN***

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It is almost a truism to say that women are at the vanguard of present Iran cultural life. Women have become the leaders of various artistic movements, and nowadays literature, cinema, visual and performing arts are inspired by a growing female presence.

Women act not only as writers, actresses, directors, performers etc., but more often than not they also participate directly in the entrepreneurial process that make the artistic product possible, available and marketable.

An interesting case in point is the new profession of art gallery manager, recently discovered by Iranian women and rapidly expanding, so much so that most of the poshest galleries in Tehran are directed or even owned by women. Some of these formidable businesswoman are the engine promoting the global success of Iranian painters (both male and female) whose works are now hosted in the main international galleries, from Dubai to London, from Berlin to New York and whose quotations have dramatically rocketed.

This paper maps the updated situation of female-run art galleries in Tehran and it is mainly based on the conversation I held with some women merchants of art who operate in the capital during spring 2011. Their experience shows how a group of Iranian women are becoming arbiters of taste 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 ambition. Moreover, the art galleries they run constitute a common space for social interaction while promoting the love for art and beauty.

These women's activity is the further proof of Iranian women's tenacity and ability in tailoring new, private enterprises in a strongly nationalized context. Most gallery managers master several languages, attend international auctions and exhibitions and are familiar with the requirements of the global art market. While they are the living proof of the new Iranian cosmopolitanism, at the same time they do care for local (i.e., Iranian) cultural production and for encouraging young artists. As many of the art gallery managers told me, every success they meet on the market turns into more opportunities to launch new artists and create new jobs.

Thus, these women's promotion of a dynamic and dialogic notion of art as a strategic form of empowerment becomes a model for others women to follow while stimulating young Iranians to explore innovative methodologies and tools in order to build their future.<sup>1</sup>

## **It's Friday, where's the Opening?**

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<sup>1</sup> I want to thank all the gallery managers who kindly provided me with information during my research: Mehrva Arvin (Café 78 Gallery), Katayoon Dehchamani (no. 6 Gallery) Aria Eqbal (Aria Gallery), Elaheh Javaheri (Elaheh Gallery), Mansoureh Hosseini (M. H. Gallery), Saideh Lofti (Siin Gallery), Mahtab Mehrabi (Café Mahtab Gallery), Hengameh Moammeri (Homa Gallery), Shahnaz Khonsari (Mah Gallery), Maryam Niazadeh (Atbin Gallery), Nazila No'ebashari (Aaran Gallery), Lila Samari (Haft Gallery), Leila Pakzad (Seyhoun Gallery), Shirin Rostamian (Fravahar Gallery), Maryam Seyhoun (Seyhoun Gallery) Mojdeh Tabatabai (Mojdeh Gallery), Shirin Partovi Tavakolian (Shirin Gallery), Mozghan Vali Pour (Vali Gallery), Afarin Neyssari and her husband Karan Vafadari (Aun Gallery). I keep their names in the transliteration they normally use.

My thanks also to the friends who provided me with hospitality, contacts and information: Parisyma Mayel-Afshar and her husband Paul Sanford, Ziba Na'ini Jalali, Pooneh Shahmir, Nilufar Ahl-e Del, Syamak Filizadeh.

Most of the galleries in Tehran organize the opening of a new exhibition on Friday afternoons: it is holiday, people are free, the city usually chaotic traffic is more quiet and parking is not a problem. However, galleries are spread in a wide area, starting from the posh north and stretching to the congested midtown, therefore for art lovers who plan to attend more than one event Friday has turned into a busy day. Many Iranians, as usual, are quite skeptical about this bustle of activity and ascribe it to the lack of other available amusements. In other words, according to this belief, Iranians would attend gallery openings because they represent one of the scarce possibilities to meet and publicly mix with people of both sexes.

### **Beginning and continuity**

Howbeit, Tehran's artistic scene is very rich and, once again, women are its indisputable protagonists, not only as performing artists but also as patronizers, in view of the fact that most of the galleries are owned and/or run by them.

Though the phenomenon emerged in the last ten years it has an older tradition behind it. It was as early as the beginning of the 1970s when the painter Ma'soumeh Seyhoun decided to open a space to host both her own works and those of the colleagues who strove to enter the artistic scene. During her almost continuous<sup>2</sup> and inexhaustible activity, the gallery has helped hundreds of young artists: about 90% of contemporary Iranian arts stars have exhibited their works for the first time at Seyhoun

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<sup>2</sup> The gallery suffered from periodical closures after the Revolution. On this topic see the interview with Maryam Seyhoun, Ma'soumeh's daughter and director of the homonymous gallery in Los Angeles, on You Tube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvRSOrg425M> (last access 12 June 2011).

gallery.

Unfortunately, Ma'soumeh passed away in March 2010, but the gallery now run by her son is still a point of reference for artists, and in May 2011, 40 among them paid homage to their great patron by offering their works for a commemorative exhibition shown in Seyhoun historical headquarter located in midtown.

For Ma'soumeh the gallery was like her home and indeed she used to pack both locations with pieces of art. She furnished the gallery with personal carpets, ornaments and mementos and turned it into a favorite meeting place for Iranian intellectuals since its beginning. When the young Sohrab Sepehri moved to Tehran from his native Kashan he found a suitable shelter here, and though he had to sleep on the gallery floor he must have been excited at being hosted in such an artistic melting pot.

I inferred this information from Leila Pakzad, the young P.R. manager of Seyhoun gallery who shows both deep love for her job and gratefulness for working here. She had cherished the idea of collaborating with Seyhoun since she was a little girl living in the neighborhood. With this intent she studied Fine Art and now has accomplished her dream.

*“Everyone loved Mrs Seyhoun - affirms Leila - she would always encouraged young artists, especially the ones trained in the Azad University. Not to speak of her customers who trusted her to the point of buying a painting even without knowing its author and price if Mrs Seyhoun would suggest them to do so!”*

Leila underlines the important role of Seyhoun gallery as an open space for artists who wanted to express themselves while remaining independent after the Revolution. Leila also mentions a letter that Ma'soumeh Seyhoun wrote to Mohammad Khatami to compliment him on his election as

President of the Islamic Republic:

*“She was happy because Khatami was a man who appreciated the arts and asked him to help young artists against the mafia who controlled the artistic sphere.”*

Leila Pakzad narrates episodes related to the gallery with much pride as she feels she belongs to a very prestigious institution and more than once she stresses the fact that Seyhoun is the oldest established gallery in Iran:

*“Even Mrs Lili Golestan, who owns the second old gallery in Tehran, started twenty years later, not to speak of all the others who opened very recently. Concerning this, I would like to say that it is important to make a distinction between the professional art dealers who have a vocational principle [kar-e herfei] and the ones who are interested in business only [kar-e bazari]”.*

According to Leila, only 10% of the galleries in Tehran operate on a vocational ground. She insists on the fact that also Ma'soumeh Seyhoun was critical of the fashion which had led many women to become gallery managers, and she quotes Ma'soumeh's witty remark about it:

*“She would say that all the women who once were only busy in preparing the ghormeh sabzi<sup>3</sup> had turned into art dealers!”*

Ma'soumeh Seyhoun/Leila Pakzad's skepticism about some art gallery managers' artistic incompetence is shared by others people, as we will see. Nonetheless, the job keeps on attracting newcomers, and many of them have proved to be

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<sup>3</sup> Famous Iranian “national” dish.

both prepared and successful.

### **The new entrepreneurs**

There are still a few artists who conceive the gallery mainly as the place in which to expose their own works: a case in point is represented by Mansoureh Hosseini (b. 1926) who transformed her home into her personal gallery when she returned from a long stage in Italy, in the 1960s. But she belongs to the past generation and can be considered as an exception.

As one may expect, many female curators have an artistic background as painters, photographers, art historians or collectors: also because they must have it. In fact, the only but indispensable requisite in order to obtain the license (*mojavez*) from the Ministry of Culture (Ershad) in order to open a gallery is to have a diploma in subjects related to the arts, or, as an alternative, to show solid credentials as art collector.

The educational prerequisite is not a problem, since Iranian women's educational level is very high. Rather, it is the initial budget that can be problematic: first, a gallerist needs to rent a good place; second, there is a demand for budgetary intake and disbursements for all transactions, such as hiring, training and management of a number of employees, insurance and guardianship, publicity and promotion etc. And of course success is not guaranteed. To open a gallery requires considerable funds and since no help is offered by public institutions, Iranian art dealers must invest their own money. Therefore, we must affirm that Iranian gallerists come from the affluent class. The difference in the budget at their disposal can be judged at first glance by the chosen location. For instance, while the large majority of the galleries run by women are located in not so large places, often in the basement of some building

and in side streets (though all of them in nice and central neighborhoods), a bunch of them are set up in grandiose positions. It is the case, for instance, of Fravahar Gallery, at a corner of the upper part of boulevard Afriqa; of Shirin Gallery, hosted in a early-20<sup>th</sup> century patrician mansion inside a beautiful garden; of Aun Gallery, placed in a renovated traditional house in the newly fashionable district of Vanak; of Aaran Gallery whose spacious rooms open on a pleasant and modernly shaped *houzeh* (water basin). Anyhow, all the ladies I interviewed, whether situated in impressive structures or in more unpretentious edifices seem to be in full control of their business and quite happy with that. This is an amazing discovery given the planetary economic crises and in particular that suffered by Iran stricken by the international sanctions, a country where art might be considered a superfluous and unreachable commodity for most of its citizens. The flourishing of Iranian art market is even more astonishing in view of the fact that all the gallerists I talked to declared that the overwhelming percentage of their customers are Iranians who live in the Islamic Republic. Naturally, since the majority of the artists hosted in the galleries are young, their quotations are not very high. Cynically speaking, we may insinuate that both the art dealers and their customers hope to “discover” a new star and to get advantage of the low prices when he/she is still a nobody. However, the gallerists' interest in the new generation of artists seems to be genuine. Some of them think that Iranian authorities do not make enough in order to encourage the new talents, therefore private enterprise must take the responsibility for them. All the interviewees confirm they prefer to help young people just because many of them are much talented. Nazila No'ebashari of Aaran Gallery defines the young Iranian artists as a “*golden generation*”.

Though the Iranian educational system lacks of high qualifications in the art fields (one of the reasons why many young artists try to go abroad for completing their education) the basic curriculum is very good both in terms of teachers and of obtainable techniques. Iranian paintings, photography and the decorative arts have a long tradition behind and this heritage never went lost, not even in the more turbulent periods of Iranian history. It is only sculpture that seems to be a little neglected, a scarce presence that the large majority of gallerists I consulted do not impute to the lack of tradition in this field or to religious reasons,<sup>4</sup> but rather, to the complex requirements of this form of art, such as large ateliers, expensive materials, transportation of bulky works from one place to another and so on.

We are also assisting to an increasing popularity of new artistic forms such as video installations, short films and other performances that are finding their place in the galleries and in the customers' appreciation, and women are the main promoters of this new wave as well.

But we still have to answer the basic questions: why are there so many women who take up the career as art managers?

For some of my interviewees (but who attribute this motivation to other colleagues!) to work as curator is a matter of prestige, a way of being in the mainstream of cultural events and to control them. For others, it is a matter of sensitivity:

*“This is a work for women - says Elaheh Javaheri, of Elaheh Gallery - in this respect, we are different from men as we are more concerned with and sensitive to the arts”.*

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<sup>4</sup> Sculpture was discouraged from the very beginning of Islamic civilization, as some Qur'anic verses, especially 5:90, seems to prohibit it.



Her opinion is shared by Mozhgan Vali Pour, of Vali Gallery, who adds:

*“Girls are ten years ahead of boys, even though they have more trouble than men in finding their social space. The last twenty years show how Iranian women have met success in every field. However, men and women need to collaborate, they are two forces that have to join together. It is like at table, one has to eat by using both fork and knife.”*

Also for Shirin Rostamian of Fravahar Gallery the career of art manager is *“feminine and apt to female sensitivity”*; while for Nazila No'ebashari the abundance of female curators has no precise reasons:

*“There are women who come from diverse background, for example Lili Golestan was a translator... there are many galleries run by women, as well as 90% of our NGOs are managed by women...”*

And, in this respect, Mehrva Arvin, of Cafè 78, is even more direct:

*“In Iran women are everywhere. Passion makes them move and undertake every kind of activity.”*

*“Passion and elegance, two typical female qualities”* are the essential ingredients to run a gallery also according to Shirin Partovi Tavakolian of Shirin Gallery.

By the same token, all the interviewees acknowledge that there is no discrimination against women in the artistic domain, either as artists or as managers. All obtained the license in a few months, except for a couple of them who did not have the required titles and had to use a

family member's name in order to start the business. Rather, we may say that they suffer from the broad restrictions which hinder Iranian society in general, such as the pressure of censorship that commonly affects all kind of artistic production. In this respect, my interviewees have different ideas: only one of them declared that censorship is a real problem and that she would often choose her artists also because they are able to get over it. Others galleriests maintain that censorship is not a problem as artists themselves practice auto censorship; for the rest, i.e., the majority of my interviewees, censorship is not an issue at all. Some of them even dare to stage some exhibitions without the Ershad's permission and many are brave enough to expose provocative images. Nazila No'ebashari adds that censorship in Iran is a millenarian practice and her following comment seems even to suggest that, to a certain extent, censorship can be beneficial to Art:

*“If in Hafez's times there had been no censorship, Hafez would not have been Hafez!”*

Shahnaz Khonsari, of Mah Gallery, does not like artists who restraint themselves for fear of a possible censorship; on one occasion she even let one of them display a naked woman:

*“It was a very big and frameless image, but it was a metaphoric body, a mystic representation”,* she explains.

Shahnaz Khonsari herself is a very daring woman who normally walks in her gallery without *hejab*, careless about *namahram* men who come and visit her place. She maintains that the gallery is like her home and at home a woman does not need to wear any veil.

## **The impact abroad/the abroad impact**

Actually most of the galleries I visited give the idea of being cosy and lived ambiances; for example, visitors are complimented with a typical domestic treatment, similar to what you would get in a Persian house, i.e., tea or coffee, fresh drinks, cakes, pistachios etc., and not only during the openings. Of course, some male run galleries provide treatments too, but most of their female counterparts do it more graciously, at least according to my experience. The male presence in this business however, is increasing:

*“Now that art has become a commercial enterprise men also want to enter this arena” - says Aria Eqbal, of Aria Gallery, who adds:*

*“Contemporary Iranian art has become famous thanks to women gallery managers. Twenty years ago, when I started this business, I was the only one to introduce our artists abroad, such as into Canada or the US...”*

As a matter of fact contemporary Iranian art is living a favorable moment abroad: exhibitions of Iranian artists are staged in Dubai, London, Milan and New York and the quotations reached by some of them are very high. No doubt some female art gallery managers have to be credited for this success: many of them have exchanges programs with European countries and young and less young artists are invited to exhibit their work in prestigious international expos. Not to speak of the case of Ma'soumeh Seyhoun who in the year 2004 opened a branch in Los Angeles and put it under the direction of her daughter, Maryam. But relations with foreign countries bring some economic and cultural problems as well. For example, transacting business with a country like Iran that has been in the “black list” for more than 30 years is a mess.

*“It is difficult to bring our artistic works abroad because of visa problems”*, laments Elaheh Javaheri.

The easiest way to do it is via the Gulf, thus Dubai has turned into a hub for Iranian art:

*“There are money and possibilities there,”* confirms Aria Eqbal, who, however, prefers to work in the *“more cosmopolitan”* Istanbul.

Some art managers are particularly interested in the foreign market, though “foreign” is not a proper definition because most customers are expat Iranians. Aaran Gallery, for instance, is rather “foreign oriented” and her manager Nazila told me she mainly works with Iranian collectors living in diaspora.

Naturally, exhibitions, auctions and collectors abroad are crucial in order to disseminate Iranian art: but, which kind of art? During the weeks I spent perusing galleries in Tehran, I noticed that many of them would display artists who often recur to Persian “traditional” imagination. It is especially the Qajar period which seems to offer more inspiration to contemporary artists: for example,<sup>5</sup> Arash Nazari represents dogs masked in (human) royal 19<sup>th</sup> century attires; Syamak Filizadeh sketches body builders wearing *zurkhaneh* pants and holding a Kalashnikov in their arms; Omid Shayan casts silhouettes of Qajar women in new scenarios; not to speak of Shadi Ghadirian and her celebrated photos of women in Qajar costumes while handling modern utensils.

The persistence of portraits of women clad in traditional/

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<sup>5</sup> I am referring to some exhibits I saw in May 2011 in Tehran.

old clothing is a sign of the success met by this “*ciador art*” as it is now commonly known in Iran, not without a dash of negative connotation. It is to say that none of the gallerists I met wish to be quoted by openly criticizing a particular artist, for comprehensible reasons.<sup>6</sup> However, all of them express their dislike for exasperate forms of “*ciador art*”:

*“It is old fashioned - cuts short Mehrva Arvin – ciador art is an old project which sold well, but it is over.”*

*“Ciador art is still successful because it is exotic and therefore it sells well abroad, points out Lila Samari of Haft Samar Gallery.*

According to Mojdeh Tabatabai (Mojdeh Gallery) the style was launched overseas by Shirin Neshat, however:

*“Nobody abroad tried to go beyond Neshat's exotic images and to understand what she meant to say by using them.”*

Hengameh Moammeri of Homa Gallery is very harsh on this topic:

*“Most of the people abroad think we Iranians are only able to produce that kind of art. This is an Orientalist point of view.*

Also Nazila No'ebashari believes that “*ciador art*” is mainly based on neo-Orientalistic motivations, however she minimizes the issue by saying that it occupies a small portion of Iranian artistic life. She proposes not to speak much about it in order not to promote it.

*“Ciador art' can be acceptable when it has a project*

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<sup>6</sup> All the ladies I approached showed to be very happy to talk freely about their work and cultural/ artistic position and all of them accepted to be recorded as soon as they understood my questions were not colored by any political issues. Rather, most of them did not want to criticize other colleagues or the artists.

*behind, otherwise it turns into pure decorative art”.*

Shahnaz Khonsari gives her own interpretation of the concept behind the rather widespread use of “Qajar women in ciador” as follows:

*“I do not like this trend of the day (mod-e ruz) that imposes to have Qajar women everywhere; however, I must recognize that it can be efficacious in order to symbolize Iranian system of power.”*

She also adds that, in a way, “*ciador art*” contains some “Iranianess”, i.e., Iranian flavor, a positive issue that cannot be discarded. Some of her colleagues agree on this concept:

*“For many artists it is important to show they are Iranians”*, specifies Shirin Rostamian.

*“Ciador is part of our everyday life, it's our reality”* - maintains Katayoon Dehchamani of No.6 Gallery - *women here wear ciador, therefore...*

For Mozghan Vali Pour “*An artist needs to show his/her roots*”. Also Hengameh Moammeri, while criticizing the Orientalist approach on which “*ciador art*” is based, considers it a form of artistic production linked with local culture and argues that Art, inevitably, reflects that culture. It follows that “*ciador art*” is a further example of Iranian capacity of elaborating upon suggestions coming from alien cultures. Though “*ciador*” is a symbol belonging to Iran (rather, abroad it has become “the” symbol of Iran par excellence) Iranian artists have rediscovered it through the idea of *ciador* nurtured and fantasized by foreigners.

“*Ciador art*” looks like a further example of “Orientalism in reverse”, a process through which Iranians, this time,

have turned a controversial banner of their country (i.e., the *ciador*) into a representation of the new culture they are forging.<sup>7</sup>

If “*ciador art*” is controversial, the same cannot be said about the use of calligraphy which continues to be the undiscussed queen of contemporary Iranian art, though in several modified versions, also thanks to the various and original materials used to represent it.

“...and think that when I tried to elaborate upon calligraphy as a young painter, in the 1950s Iran, they told me that *khatnevis* (calligraphy) was a virus to kill!” says an aged but still brilliant and witty Mansoureh Hosseini.

It was in Italy that Hosseini's arabesques reminded her teachers of Persian calligraphy and there they encouraged her to focus on abstract painting combined with an extensive use of calligraphy.

Now *khatnevis* is back in business and I believe Nazila No'ebashari's opinion well summarizes the reasons for this new life:

*“I do not show traditional (sonnati) work in my gallery with the exception of calligraphy. Of course I do not like it when it is pure decoration, i.e., exoticism, Orientalism, etc... But calligraphy is a continuation of our nasta'liq tradition. It is a world apart, it is pure beauty and it is a component of our heritage”.*

## **Art and business**

The job of gallery manager is a work around the clock. A curator must equilibrate her/his artistic talent and enthusiasm with the necessity to balance the books. She/

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<sup>7</sup> On “Orientalism in reverse” in Iran see Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: the Tormented Triumph of Nativism*, Syracuse University Press, 1996.

he is responsible for producing exhibitions and ancillary events in an ongoing and timely fashion. As we have seen, women gallerists care for the state of Iranian contemporary arts and artists. They feel responsible for ensuring that the research and focus of exhibitions and events reflect the current discourse of the Iranian art world and hence that they might be viable in terms of contributing to contemporary Iranian culture.

Also, art gallery directors work in an environment which is largely controlled by frequent deadlines that must be met in a timely fashion for the programming of the gallery to take place. The work environment is further complicated by competitiveness. Excellent organizational skills are a must as the curators have to manage several roles simultaneously: staff management professional development, finance, research, programming, advertising, catalogue production, installation etc.

The direction of a gallery involves a lot of economic risks, because investing on an artist can be hazardous:

*“If three consecutive exhibitions fail both you and your reputation are broken. One must have a program, must select a group of artists, must choose a style and follow them”* is Mojdeh Tabatabai's opinion. This is the reason why she has temporarily closed her gallery. She wants to take a pause and reflect:

*“I need a bigger space than the one available to me right now. Every opening gathers at least 150 people and gallery have standards that must be respected: space, light, nice neighbors, parking place in the nearby and so on. I am in a phase of self criticism, I am changing my approach to this job. I need to listen to my society cultural needs, I have to strive for that, to make Iranian talents globally known. Just think that, though Iran can boast a great history of Art, some international encyclopedias of art have no entries on*



*Iranian artists!”*

All the ladies I consulted can count on a specialized staff, an average of 4-5 people for gallery; most of them are young women who have a peculiar interest in the arts, some are artists themselves. In galleries like Aun working hours might be heavy:

*“My gallery opens from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. and each exhibition runs for about one month. Before I launched Aun [a couple of years ago] most of the galleries used to open in the late afternoons only, but I set the fashion of longer hours and now other curators are following my pattern too. Every third Friday is 'meet the artists day': people come because they know they can meet and talk to the artists. This is also a way to attract people to the arts”* says the director Afrin Neyssari.

The responsibility towards the arts and the artists seems to be the common motivation which drives these entrepreneurs. Their activity gives hope to young creative people, encourages would-be-artists and curators to pursue their career by training them in the gallery “back stage” and also originates chances of new work and income opportunities.

### ***Tejarati va honari***

The gallery activity is a combination of business and art, both *tejarati va honari* as my informants would say. Risk and responsibility go hand in hand with commitment. This is also the case of the Mah-e Mehr, a school of art launched and directed by three female curators, i.e., Aria Eqbal, Mozghan Vali Pour and Elaheh Javaheri, in 2006. The three curators and friends decided to inaugurate this ambitious project in order to enhance young artists' chance to get in touch with both local and international maestros of art.

Mah-e Mehr Art Education Institute is determined not only to show the best of art work in Iran in a gallery but also to train and educate the future artists and foster and nourish the students' talents.<sup>8</sup> Students register for ten weeks course throughout the year ranging from paintings to photography and from creative animation to technical languages for art. It is an ambitious project completely based on students' fees, as private sponsorship for this kind of enterprises is not that common in Iran. And, of course, a private school does not attract public funds, as the State has already its own schools/university to subsidize.

*“The project took off thanks to the friendly relationship among the three of us and to our deep love for art”, says Elaheh Javaheri.*

*“I had caressed the idea of a school of art for a while but I did not want to carry out this project by myself alone because I dreamt of a big enterprise. I do not believe in single projects. In Iran there is scarce experience of collective projects, especially among women, but now we made it!”* emphasizes Aria Eqbal.<sup>9</sup>

So, in a few years Mah-e Mehr has become a reference point for arts in Iran, a school of advanced studies that offers a rich syllabus and which continually promotes seminars, conferences, and meetings on artistic topics.

Another formula that is very trendy in Iran now is that of the “coffee shop cum gallery”. We know that coffee shops function mainly as gathering places for young and less young Iranians, but the addition of photos, paintings,

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<sup>8</sup> See the School presentation at: <http://www.mahe-mehr.com/>.

<sup>9</sup> However, while working on this paper in June 2011 I received the invitation to the Second annual Sculpture Expo (running 24 June-19 July 2011) hosted by Shirin gallery with the collaboration of other 18 galleries, 11 of which directed by women: collaboration among women has started to work!

decorative items on show is rendering them even more appealing. One of the last entries in Tehran is represented by Café Mahtab, opened in winter 2010 by the young but resourceful Mahtab Mehrabi. She does not come from the world of art, as she has a diploma in Chemistry and an incredible taste for colors. Colors dominate the Café and its outside terrace where there is a continuous reference to Iranian decorative arts: *suzanis* (traditional embroidered textiles) hang on the wall, multicolored wool socks and gloves typical of the Caspian shores are spread on a side table, drinks are served on little trays decorated with images of Qajar ladies (once more!), ceramic tiles adorned with leaves and flowers pop out here and there. Mahtab Mehrabi herself is dressed in a particular combination of Persian *hejab* and international/hippy folk attire. Almost every Friday, Café Mahtab would inaugurate a new exhibit: photography, painting, decorative arts, even jewelry. Mahtab Mehrabi normally selects young university students and offers them an opportunity. She does not look as a tough business woman, but she certainly is: she openly affirms that her activity is doing very well so much so that she needs six permanent waiters (all men!) to run the place which attracts (chic) intellectuals and foreigners who live in Tehran.<sup>10</sup>

One can breathe an intellectual atmosphere also in the more traditional and older established Café 78 owned by Mehrva Arvin, a sociologist with the passion for photography who has been living here since 1994, after 20 years spent in the US. She started the business by showing her own photos and now the place has become a landmark for photo lovers, though the 8<sup>th</sup> art is mainly subsidized by the refreshments available from the counter (served by male waiters). To be a full time photographer in Iran is a difficult

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<sup>10</sup> See my review on Café Mahtab in: <http://www.payvand.com/news/11/jun/1121.html>, 6/11/2011.

task, says Mehrva, who tries to stage a new exhibition every two weeks. She cares for photos that respect artistic “*international standard*”: it is not the subject the most important issue, she affirms, what is crucial is the photographer's ability in mastering colors and techniques. She is rather polemical in this respect:

*“It happened that people abroad refused the photos I proposed because they were not 'Iranian' enough: they objected me that the snaps could have been taken in the US or somewhere else. Customers on that side [i.e., the West] just care for exotic images; if we passively adhere to the international market wishes we might make some money but for sure we risk to loose our identity!”*

Mehrva Arvin considers herself “*very nationalistic*” and does not like “*those who wash their dirty linen in public*”:

*“People abroad think we die from idleness here, but as you can see there is so much going on, cultural activities flourish everywhere...”*

Anyway, photography does not sell so well as painting: this opinion is also shared by Katayoon Dehchamani who would show exclusively photos in her No.6 gallery. Also Dehchamani believes technique is important, so much so that she periodically organizes exhibitions of old photos to teach young photographers the old masters' skills. When I went to see No.6 Gallery it was hosting an exhibit of Iranian women's portraits taken in studios in the early Pahlavi era after the mandatory removal of the veil, so that the photographed ladies appeared almost “naked” to the Islamic Republic authorities' perception. The exhibit, curated by Parisa Damandan, a researcher in the history of photography in Iran, not only was extremely interesting, but also telling about the bizarre rules Iranian artists and curators have to undergo. The authorities, in fact, had given

the permission for the exhibit, but prohibited male visitors to see it: only a female audience was admitted into the gallery.

### **Financial issues and self confident managers**

As for the practical/financial aspects, we may say that digital era facilitated the photos business, as they became less expensive and are now affordable to virtually every pocket. Katayoon Dehchamani offered me a list of famous artists based in Iran who live by earning out of their photos.

But, generally speaking, it is difficult to quantify a gallery curator's income. All the gallery managers have been (comprehensibly) vague about their financial gain and how they get it. Some ladies told me they use to take a percentage from each work sold through them (around 30%); others prefer to get a sort of general tax partially needed to lease the premises. There are also curators who do not bill students and newcomers but instead prefer to charge more established artists.

Women gallerists in Tehran appear self confident, in control and proud of their activity: a perceptible sign of this situation is the fact that most of the galleries carry their owner's name. Of course there are galleries whose names are indicative of some aspect of Persian art and culture, even with a touch of sophistication: for instance, Aun gallery takes its name from a verse by Hafez, in which “*aun*” expresses “the moment of charisma”:

*“It hints to the charisma we are searching by pursuing our activity,”* specifies her director, Afarin Neysari.<sup>11</sup>

Others names are rooted in more personal/cultural motivations:

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11 بنده طلعت آن باشد که آنی دار

*“My mother was a poetess - explains Lila Samari - she used to say that the seven holiest things in her life were her four children and her three collections of poetry. So we named the gallery Haft Samar”<sup>12</sup>.*

“We” means the Samari brothers and sisters, as actually Haft Samar is a family enterprise. Lila, who owns a Master in tapestry and textiles and teaches at the Faculty of Art (her students' works are often hosted in the gallery) started this business with one of her sisters, who is a decorative artist as well, and with two other brothers who act as art brokers.

Family's help is crucial, as we have seen, though some gallerist instead had to fight with the family in order to become such:

*“My father is an engineer, my mother is a physician, they did not want me to embark upon an artistic profession, they would have liked I became a doctor. But I have dreamed to become a gallery curator since I was a little girl.”* This is Hengameh Moammeri's story who, though coming from a highly educated family, had to strive in order to pursue her artistic career. She studied graphic art, followed an ad hoc course in arts management at Amir Kabir University, began to work in a gallery and rose through the ranks until she finally got the license and opened her own place. Now Homa Gallery employs twelve people and periodically lunches a national competition which attracts thousand of artists from all over the country:

*“Last year we received 3000 proposals. Young artists are particularly eager for sending their works as they know the three best creations will be selected and displayed in our gallery. It is a good promotion.”*

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<sup>12</sup> Samar (نمر) in Persian means “fruit”, “result” and it is also a pun with the family's surname.

Needless to say, the world of Iranian contemporary art is not a perfect one, even if young people seem so inclined to join it. For instance, all the curators mentioned that the good presence of prestigious artists in Iran is not equalled by the existence of valid critics of contemporary art.<sup>13</sup> It is also in order to compensate for this need that Mojdeh Tabatabai would often draw her reluctant 14-year-old daughter to watch exhibitions:

*“Young Iranians' eyes need to be educated to contemporary art!”* she says.

While Saideh Lotfi, of Siin Gallery, who started her career by staging no less than Abbas Kiarostami's videos, laments how New Art still does not sell well, a factor that forces many talented artists to fall back on more conventional forms.

Iranian women curators are thus fighting for several goals: to improve Iranian art and artists' quality in order to make them appreciated both inside and abroad; to establish the profession of gallerist as an activity which might combine both artistic and economic interests; and to affirm their own ambitions as entrepreneurs. In doing so, they show no shyness or fear to compete in the international market, quite the contrary, they are proud of being almost unique in the Middle Eastern panorama:

*“In the Gulf countries all curators are men, the few female exceptions are American and European ladies, but so far Arab women are not in the business”*, affirms Mozhgan Vali Pour.

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<sup>13</sup> Though there are good magazines of contemporary arts (such as *Honar Farda* and *Tavoos*) and some newspapers or general magazines would host comments on artistic events, most of my interviewees insist on the need to establish a school of contemporary art critique in Iran.

Truly, to be a woman gallerist is hard also beyond the Middle East, as shown by the book *Women Gallerists in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century* which lists 30 portraits of female art curators from all over the world, but mainly located in the West.<sup>14</sup> Though art professions are becoming more and more feminine, women are still highly outnumbered by their male counterparts. Women's presence at the top list of the 100 most powerful people in the art world annually published by *Art Review 100* is still very scanty<sup>15</sup>: and, as the last issue shows, women who reached the top are either artists or museum curators, i.e., they are not entrepreneurs.<sup>16</sup>

Rather, Iranian gallerists venture themselves in the meritocratic industry of art, where the only life net is their ability in acquiring various competences. It is women who appear to be instrumental in making the Iranian art world tick. This also explains why these ladies resent being undervalued by their compatriots abroad:

*“When I began showing Iranian art abroad my fellow citizens living there were very skeptical. They thought a woman could not become a gallery director in Iran, they did not even believe that a woman could paint a portrait here!”* adds Aria Eqbal.

“Iran has been changing”, this is almost the slogan all the female curators pronounced: sure enough, all of them are struggling in order to produce the best change.

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<sup>14</sup> Written by Claudia Herstatt, Hatje Cantz, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> It can be viewed at: <http://www.artreview100.com/2011-artreview-power-100/>.

<sup>16</sup> Oddly enough, some female commentators in the West still describe women's success as art managers in patronizing terms: “*Women tend to have that peculiar mix of skills you need to represent artists, a role that combines that of curator, entrepreneur and nanny*” (emphasis mine): s. Alice Rawsthorn, The Guardian, 12 October 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2006/oct/12/art.gender>.



