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# The Making of a Cosmo-Nationalistic Trajectory: Iranian Cultural Entrepreneurs in Tehran and Dubai

AMIN MOGHADAM 

**Abstract:** The art world is commonly seen as being conducive to the emergence of cosmopolitan spaces and sociabilities. However, this cosmopolitanism cannot be understood without observing the specific characteristics of the field of art and the socio-political context in which it emerges. This article examines how the internationalization and diversification of actors involved in the art scene in Tehran, reconfigures power relations and creates new relationships of interdependence, alignment or domination between actors from diverse social and geographical backgrounds. The focus is on the connections between Dubai and Tehran forged through artistic practices, via the analysis of a key actor: the “cultural entrepreneur”. In this sense, cosmopolitanism is considered both through the individual trajectory of the cultural entrepreneur, strongly anchored in the Iranian national context, and as a characteristic of urban spaces and sociabilities generated by artistic dynamics.

**Keywords:** cosmopolitanism, Dubai, Iran, Tehran, cultural entrepreneur, art world

“The bourgeoisie has, through its exploitation of the world market, given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country.”

Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848)

## 1 Introduction

The art world is commonly seen as being conducive to the emergence of cosmopolitan spaces and sociabilities. However, this cosmopolitanism cannot be understood without observing the specific characteristics of the artistic field and socio-political context in which it emerges, as they underpin the physical and social spaces where artistic practice takes place.

The increasing professionalization of contemporary art, the diversification of those involved, the interdependent relationships between them, their increasing mobility, the circulation of art works and all the materials that accompany artistic production and distribution (texts, reviews, images, etc.), and, finally, the spaces in which they meet and exchange are the material conditions

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of the art world.<sup>1</sup> They also set some of the conditions for the emergence of cosmopolitan spaces related to artistic practices.

The art milieu is thus relational: internationalization and diversification, closely linked to professionalization, reconfigure power relations and create new relationships of interdependency, alignment or domination between players from diverse social and geographical backgrounds, all of whom strive to find their place in established art circles.<sup>2</sup> It is also relational insofar as it creates new geographical connections between locations in different cities at regional or global level.

This article examines these relationships and how they contribute to the emergence of cosmopolitan spaces and experiences in Tehran and Dubai, linking the two cities via circuits of artistic practice and the experiences and mobilities of individuals involved. It does not compare the cities, but investigates how artistic spaces there are networked together by the practices of art-world protagonists. The focus is therefore on connections between Dubai and Tehran forged by artistic practices, and how these generate new relationships and urban spaces. The evolving social status of artists and the proliferation of art institutions are, moreover, considered together here, as the latter impact the modalities of artistic production and shape public interest in the arts.

I will look at how local art scenes' moves to internationalize, and the involvement of individuals from different social categories in the arts at local level, contribute to shaping cosmopolitan spaces, and pursue my analysis by focusing on a key player: the 'cultural entrepreneur'.

## 2 Methodology

My approach involves constructing an ideal-typical figure emerging in the Iranian art world: the cultural entrepreneur. My thoughts on this date back to my experience, in 2011, as a public relations officer at a Dubai art gallery. Since then, I have studied transnational art practices between Iran and Dubai under several research programmes, as well as making a study of the Emirati art scene, 2014–16, for the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

During these projects, I conducted over sixty semi-structured interviews of various lengths — some over three hours — with art patrons, curators, artists, gallery-owners, real-estate agents and other urban players in Dubai and Tehran. But what has given me most insight into the characteristics of this emerging figure is my own involvement in arts activities over the past ten years, for example, writing texts for exhibitions in Tehran and Dubai, organising talks with artists, and participating regularly in the Dubai Art Fair.

Finally, as organiser and scientific director of the 2017 *Human Mobilities and Creation* conference in Tehran and Isfahan,<sup>3</sup> I assembled artists, gallerists, curators and some individuals whom I will define as "cultural entrepreneurs" in this paper. This conference was instrumental both in advancing my research and enabling new circuits of exchange between the art scenes in Iranian and abroad, art-world professionals and academia.

The questions I hope to answer are: Who are these cultural entrepreneurs? Under what conditions do they emerge as international players who, intentionally or not, foster the emergence of cosmopolitan spaces in Tehran, in relation with other places like Dubai? How, in turn, do these spaces contribute to internationalizing the trajectory of cultural entrepreneurs, and even prompt them to embrace a cosmopolitan ethos?

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<sup>1</sup> Kaufmann et al., *Circulations in the Global History of Art* (2015).

<sup>2</sup> Heinich, "L'art à l'épreuve de ses médiations", *Médium* 19.2 (2009), pp. 21–35

<sup>3</sup> *Journées d'études Mobilités humaines et Création*, Institut Français de recherche en Iran (IFRI), Esfahan/Tehran, 12–14 November 2017, <https://ifriran.org/mobilites/index.php>.

### 3 Who are cultural entrepreneurs?

In the Iranian TV series *āqazādeh* (son or daughter of a notable or elite), one of Iran's most popular programs between 2020 and 2021, the main character, Nimā Bahrī, is the son of a former revolutionary, now finance minister and involved in various corruption cases. Nimā is passionate about contemporary art, and the Tehran auction-house he attends is the main location of most episodes. Nimā is surrounded by artists, advising him on how to acquire works, organize concerts, or simply produce fakes for sale on the art market. This is a kind of game for him, success in which he enjoys alongside success the other businesses he is involved in. Nimā is temperamental and immersed in the opulent, corrupt legacy his father, once a revolutionary, bequeathed him — one he would sometimes like to shake off.

Despite its exaggerated characters and ideological dimension (it was produced by organizations close to the Revolutionary Guards), the program intelligently explores the mechanisms of corruption in Iran and the personalities involved, especially those from the revolutionary elite now recognized as *āqazādeh*: children of notables, who enjoy the regime's protection and the financial resources they can access through their relations with the circles of power. *āqazādeh* share some features with the cultural entrepreneurs described in this article: emblematic figures in the progress of the Iranian revolution, in the formation of whose *persona* artistic exchanges and mobilities at the level of both Tehran and the region, including Dubai, play a key role.

The cultural entrepreneur is therefore not one actual person, but an ideal type, respecting the anonymity, for deontological reasons, of both the people I have based this character on, and others, including the artists, who have worked with or for them. This emblematic type helps me illustrate how artistic practices have favoured the emergence of cosmopolitan spaces and trajectories between Tehran and Dubai. I developed it by observing the behaviors of influential individuals on the Middle Eastern art scene, who share common traits — particularly in the Iranian context studied below — while not all from the same backgrounds, interviewing some of them in both cities. Interviews were not, however, an ideal solution, as the interviewees were aware of rumors circulating about them, and frequently evaded my questions, or gave no answer at all. However, they often left the door open for me to join in their activities or their events as a panel moderator or speaker. My academic status made access easier.

I also analyzed the relations these individuals maintain with others involved in the art scene, such as artists, or from different spheres of influence such as finance or politics. Cultural entrepreneurs, as we shall see, may hover between being gallery owners, patrons, collectors, or even artists themselves; what distinguishes them from others is their capacity to act in various guises and the resources they deploy to achieve their goals. They are not mere buyers, patrons or gallery-owners: they draw on various spheres of influence (political, artistic and economic), developing considerable power on the local scene and broad visibility regionally and globally. This often leads to monopolistic or dominant positions. But as we shall see, their power is also interdependent on other social players.

The notion of entrepreneur has long been present, directly or indirectly, in classic economics and sociology writings. Economist Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950) in particular describes the entrepreneur in contrast with the Marxian capitalist. Recent writings on cultural entrepreneurship, often in relation to the economics of culture and the creative industries, also refer to Schumpeter's ideal-typical description of the entrepreneur.<sup>4</sup> It is useful to recall a few features

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<sup>4</sup> DiMaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America", *Media, Culture & Society* 4.1 (January 1982), pp. 33–50. DiMaggio, "Classification in Art", *American Sociological Review* 52.4 (1987), pp. 440–455.

of Schumpeter's archetype to help explain how his notion underpins my description of the Iranian cultural entrepreneur.

According to Schumpeter, the entrepreneur takes up challenges and goes beyond routines, against the established order. He innovates in spheres that are new to him and can temporarily create monopolies. His independence is mitigated because, in Schumpeter's description, he is economically dependent on others and their resources, notably to amass the capital needed. His autonomy is also limited by competition, hence his need to mobilize people with varied skills: he is therefore caught up in interdependent relationships. He is out of the ordinary: he is an entrepreneur because he executes novel combinations. He knows how to link new technology and the economy. His intermediary nature, between scientist and producer, is from this perspective explicit.

It is important to recall here that while the search for profit is secondary, it is not neglected. The entrepreneur is a gambler, and the fun of the game prevails over the search for gain; but if profit is made, it expresses the value of the entrepreneur's contribution to production. An entrepreneur's decisions have a rational, objective basis, but also an emotional one. This is quite evident in the central character of the *āqazādeh* series, but also in that of the cultural entrepreneur I describe, often carried away by the excitement of the art world. Charisma, willpower and authority are among his characteristics. He represents a lifestyle, a moral and ethical system, an ethos. Schumpeter goes so far as to identify the emergence of a class of entrepreneurs: a social group.

Building on Schumpeter's ideal type and emphasizing the entrepreneur's ability to combine diverse elements in innovative ways, Richard Swedberg defines the cultural entrepreneur in the artistic sphere:

I would rather argue (in Schumpeter's spirit) that economic entrepreneurship primarily aims at creating something new (and profitable) in the area of the economy, while cultural entrepreneurship aims at creating something new (and appreciated) in the area of culture. While money-making is often a crucial component of cultural entrepreneurship, it does not constitute its primary focus. Cultural entrepreneurship, as I see it, may therefore be defined as the carrying out of a novel combination that results in something new and appreciated in the cultural sphere.<sup>5</sup>

I would add that the entrepreneur's actions can revolutionize a field of practice, allowing it to operate at new geographical levels while creating new issues, tensions and power relationships. As we will see in the Iranian case, the ability to combine ("entrepreneurial combination") leads cultural entrepreneurs to transcend frontiers in the arts by combining multiple activities in the visual arts, architectural projects, the organization of concerts, the financing and production of television series, or even the importation of consumables such as coffee. It is thus important not to consider the cultural entrepreneur from a single perspective, for example that of contemporary art, even if it is the main focus of this article.

These are the reasons why, among the many players in this field, I choose to focus on cultural entrepreneurs. They offer an ideal vantage point to explore how the emerging art market in Dubai and its connections with the Iranian art scene contribute to the development of so-called cosmopolitan spaces. Ethnographic observation of spaces of artistic sociability in Tehran, Dubai and elsewhere sheds light on the forms of alignment, interdependency and unequal power relationships that coexist in the arts sector.

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<sup>5</sup> Swedberg, "The Cultural Entrepreneur and the Creative Industries: Beginning in Vienna", *Journal of Cultural Economics* 30.4 (2006), p. 260.

Capitalist elites enter the cultural field because it offers them opportunities to build symbolic and even financial capital.<sup>6</sup> However, the ways they appropriate cultural practices and position themselves against other social classes vary across geographical contexts. Studying these processes requires understanding economic and social structures at different levels, as well as the protagonists' discursive strategies and practices. As David Harvey observes:

Capitalists, like everyone else, may struggle to make their own historical geography but, also like everyone else, they do not do so under historical and geographical circumstances of their own individual choosing, even when they have played an important and even determinant collective role in shaping those circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

While in the sociology of art, cultural entrepreneurs are often construed as intermediaries, I turn this around to examine how the art milieu and its various spaces mediate the emergence of new urban elites and their interconnection with other groups. In other words, drawing on Nathalie Heinich,<sup>8</sup> I use the art milieu as a lens to scrutinize the trajectories of cultural entrepreneurs. Their entrepreneurial ethos is usually shaped in reference to past and present experiences of elite involvement in the arts. While the characteristics of cultural entrepreneurs emerging in the Middle East vary across national contexts, the activities they pursue nationally, regionally and globally have much in common. Whether they are from the ruling families of the Gulf Arab states, the Turkish bourgeoisie, Iran's post-revolutionary elite or the Iranian diaspora, cultural entrepreneurs are omnipresent on the Middle East's art scene today. Yet in most cases, the capital they initially invest in the arts is not derived from cultural activities.

#### 4 Cosmopolitanism and artistic spaces and practices

Artists, patrons, and other art professionals commonly describe their particular trajectories as stemming from a desire to open up to regional and global art scenes, and often embrace the idea that "art knows no bounds". Yet one of the first boundaries in art, as elsewhere, is the question of resources, i.e. art-world economics, shaped by individual and collective motives.

In the neoliberal context of Dubai and Tehran, the lack of regulatory frameworks (such as state institutions) for the distribution of local and international resources bolsters mechanisms of domination, competition, exclusion, and distinction.<sup>9</sup> Access to resources is *de facto* regulated by the personality cult surrounding certain individuals investing in the field, their fascination for innovation, and, most importantly, the spirit of competition at national and local levels between artists competing for the resources these entrepreneurs can offer, curators, or academics working with artists and entrepreneurs, etc.

This article explores these processes by drawing on literature that links cosmopolitanism to "specific social engagements and lifestyle practices" and "sociability practices rather than to a tolerance for cultural difference or a universalist morality".<sup>10</sup> Cosmopolitanism is thus examined

<sup>6</sup> Codell, *The Victorian Artist: Artists' Lifewritings in Britain, ca. 1870–1910* (2003); Codell, *Political Economy of Art: Making the Nation of Culture* (2008); Velthuis, Olav, and Curioni, "Making Markets Global", in Velthuis and Curioni (eds), *Cosmopolitan Canvases* (2015), pp. 1–28.

<sup>7</sup> Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (2001), p. 345

<sup>8</sup> Heinich, "L'art à l'épreuve de ses médiations".

<sup>9</sup> Calhoun, "Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Social Imaginary", *Daedalus* 137.3 (July 2008), pp. 105–114; Cousin and Chauvin, "Globalizing Forms of Elite Sociability: Varieties of Cosmopolitanism in Paris Social Clubs", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37.12 (October 2014), pp. 2209–2225.

<sup>10</sup> Schiller, Darieva, and Gruner-Domic, "Defining Cosmopolitan Sociability in a Transnational Age: An Introduction", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34.3 (March 2011), pp. 399–418.

here through the interdependency between art professionals, institutions, financial resources, and the materialization of artistic practices in space. As Craig Calhoun argues:

Cosmopolitanism becomes richer and stronger if approached in terms of connections rather than (or in addition to) equivalence. And cosmopolitans who think in terms of connections — and their incompleteness and partiality — are less likely to turn a blind eye to the material inequalities that shape the ways in which different people can belong to specific groups while still inhabiting the world as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to mobilizing economic and human resources, artistic practices take concrete form in the city as novel spatial and architectural configurations. This process unfolds locally in permanent tension with the norms of far-off art milieus, particularly those of leading international art centres such as New York, Berlin, Paris or London.

## 5 The becoming of the cultural entrepreneur in post-revolutionary Iran

The Iranian context provides an interesting vantage point for the study of cultural entrepreneurs, as the configuration of the art world changed after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Before the Revolution, the explicit role played by the state in promoting Iranian and non-Iranian artistic forms reflected the prevailing developmentalist ideology and logic of vertical modernization. Empress Farah Pahlavi, who supervised most leading cultural institutions at the time, played a key role.<sup>12</sup> Although many sought her patronage, this prevented, or masked, their own emergence as visible, recognized players.<sup>13</sup> In addition, a regional market did not yet exist for Iranian art. The internationalization of the art milieu was facilitated by the activities of foreign embassies and cultural centers in Iran, and exhibitions of Iranian artists in Western countries.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the circulation of Iranian artists and art mediators at regional level is a recent phenomenon whose topography reflects the emergence of regional hubs like Dubai and Istanbul in the 2000s.

The Iranian cultural entrepreneurs examined here essentially belong to the elite that emerged after 1979. Of course, some key players of the pre-revolutionary period continue to shape artistic dynamics in Iran today, e.g. by connecting Iranian artists with the regional and global art scenes. But the few at the top of the pyramid — those with the greatest economic, social, and political power and the ability to intervene in various artistic fields — are all members of the post-revolutionary elite. They are between 30 and 50 (note that the Islamic Republic is 43 years old); they are active in several cultural sectors at once; they maintain close relations with Iranian state representatives who offer them protection (I shall return to this at length); and they regularly attend annual art events in Dubai and other major cities, thereby contributing to the internationalization of Iran's art scene.

These young entrepreneurs are from families that amassed wealth during the post-revolutionary period, and consider it important to acquire cultural and symbolic capital beyond the financial capital of their fathers. While often raised in environments valuing management and engineering, many having degrees in these disciplines, their involvement in art opens up new perspectives for them. This process can be viewed as the development of the Revolution into what political scientist Jean-Francois Bayart calls “another Revolution concealed by the first [...] the Revolution of

<sup>11</sup> Calhoun, “Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Social Imaginary”, p. 113.

<sup>12</sup> Grigor, *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio* (2014).

<sup>13</sup> See: Diba, *Bāghī miyān-i dū khiyābān: chahār hazār va yak rūz az zindagī-i Kāmārān Dībā / dar guft va gū bā Rizā Dānishvar* (2010).

<sup>14</sup> Bombardier, *Les pionniers de la Nouvelle peinture en Iran: oeuvres méconnues, activités novatrices et scandales au tournant des années 1940* (2017).



interests.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in Iran, the cultural entrepreneur is an emblematic figure in the republic of technocrats who succeeded in the Revolution’s first decades. The desire to be global underpins their involvement in contemporary art: it affords them access to new spheres of influence and action on new scales. However, “becoming global” is a step-by-step process that involves occupying the local, regional, and then European and global art scenes — a trajectory in which Dubai’s role is central.

After the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88), economic liberalization led to the expansion of trade networks and a surge in imports. Many state and semi-state networks became involved in formal and informal international trade, largely in response to sanctions. Dubai played a crucial role in developing these post-war networks, many of which now represent powerful trading links between Iran and its Emirati neighbor.

Privatization was the watchword of the post-war era. However, given the dearth of foreign investment, this was pseudo-privatization,<sup>16</sup> effectively contributing to the development of semi- and/or para-statal sectors.<sup>17</sup> Under president Rafsanjani (1989–97), experts and educated Iranians, including members of the diaspora, were invited to work with the government on reconstruction projects. This fuelled the emergence of a class of technocrats in banking, logistics (later necessary for the circulation of artworks), food production, and economic planning. Management and engineering became key metiers of the Islamic Republic, reflecting the professionalization of the post-revolutionary elite. As shown by Kevan Harris,<sup>18</sup> under Rafsanjani, accumulating wealth ceased to be an issue as the left-wing ideals of the early years were abandoned. The technocratic oligarchy pursued its rise under presidents Khatami (1997–2005), Ahmadinejad (2005–13) — despite his social-justice sloganeering — and Rohani (2013–21). The involvement of diverse players in reconstruction projects and the expansion of regional business networks led to the formation of powerful blocs and fuelled rivalry as each followed a distinct route to economic, social and even political power.

Under Khatami, art was once more a state concern and became the focus of presidential reforms. The new atmosphere of tolerance prompted some state actors to participate directly in developing Iran’s art market — beginning with the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, who sought to internationalize it by facilitating the exhibition of local artists in neighboring countries, the Emirates in particular.<sup>19</sup> Ahmadinejad’s mandate saw the emergence of several private and public/private corporations. With rising oil prices and international sanctions, these corporations expanded regionally to territories where they could bypass sanctions to conduct their activities, notably in neighboring countries.<sup>20</sup> Banks, private funds and insurance companies proliferated and began investing in a range of activities, including, for the first time in the post-revolutionary period, culture and the arts. Under the banner of social justice, the government reduced support for the fine arts, especially contemporary art, associated with technocrats

<sup>15</sup> Bayart, “Le concept de situation thermidorienne: régimes néo-révolutionnaires et libéralisation économique”, *Questions de Recherche* 24 (March 2008), p. 9, quotation translated from the original French.

<sup>16</sup> Harris, *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran* (2017).

<sup>17</sup> Vahabi and Coville, “L’économie politique de la république islamique d’Iran”, *Revue internationale des études du développement* 229.1 (2017), pp. 11–31.

<sup>18</sup> Harris, *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran* (2017).

<sup>19</sup> Moghadam, “‘L’art est mon métier’: émergence et professionnalisation du marché de l’art à Dubaï”, *Transcontinentales* 12–13 (2012).

<sup>20</sup> Nasr, *The Rise of Islamic Capitalism: Why the New Muslim Middle Class Is the Key to Defeating Extremism* (2010); Moghadam and Weber, “Circulating by Default: Yerevan and Erbil, the Backyards of Iranian Mobility”, in Vignal (eds), *The Transnational Middle East: People, Places, Borders* (2017), pp. 164–180.



and capitalist elites. The field was thus occupied by the private sector, including members of the previous government who had been key players on the art scene.

Paradoxical though it may seem, 265 licenses were issued to galleries during the second mandate of Ahmadinejad's conservative government, a 179% increase over the period. Of the 200 galleries in Tehran, 90% were privately owned, whereas most of the 190 in provincial cities belonged to state organizations, mainly in the provinces of Mazandaran, Fars, Khorassan and Isfahan. When investments in manufacturing fell drastically under sanctions, funds accumulated in the 2000s thanks to rising oil prices mostly served to fuel speculative activities e.g. in real estate, but also the art market.

With the development of opportunities for financial speculation in the work of Iranian artists, art became a focal point for Iranian public and private interests, and the impact is still visible in Iran today in the proliferation of foundations devoted to artistic activities. These are often in the hands of businessmen, who enjoy the prestige associated with their position and derive some profit from their activities, even if financial returns are relative.

## 6 Neoliberalism, social diversity, and cosmopolitanism

The ramified networks in which Iran's young cultural entrepreneurs are involved at national level are essential to the success of their artistic and cultural projects globally. They bolster their power to act locally and internationally by financing projects, maintaining good relations with customs officials for the import and export of artworks, negotiating with the state apparatus to avoid censorship, and controlling urban spaces in Tehran.

The funds deployed sometimes seem limitless. This naturally attracts the attention of those curious to understand the origins of this wealth, and rumors have circulated in art circles and on social networks (Instagram, Facebook, etc.). One young entrepreneur is said to have obtained loans from a bank where his father is a director; another has been accused of embezzling pension funds to produce a TV series by exploiting his father's ties with the President of the Republic.<sup>21</sup> However cultural entrepreneurs may have acquired their wealth, there is no doubt they have access to major resources.

The development of artistic localities reflects the relationships between cultural entrepreneurs and the Iranian state, society and a burgeoning middle class for whom the arts are now important social markers, and the city as a space where cultural entrepreneurs' projects materialize.

In the Iranian context, the State's retreat from the cultural sector, particularly from contemporary art, has fueled cultural entrepreneurship; neoliberal governance thus set the economic conditions for the emergence of new cosmopolitan sociabilities and spaces. Under authoritarian regimes, this may be welcomed by artists who associate the state with censorship and restrictions. Young cultural entrepreneurs benefit from the country's powerful network of oligarchies, enabling them to undertake large-scale cultural projects and bypass the Islamic Republic's moral prohibitions, exhibiting works normally proscribed by fundamentalists.

I was told by one entrepreneur:

I contributed financially, on many occasions, to renovations and to the installation of new technical systems at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. On some occasions, when the director of the museum wanted to travel, I paid for his trip and his stay abroad. I even organized meetings for him.

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<sup>21</sup> Hadi Razavi, son-in-law of the Minister of Labor in Hassan Rohani's government, and Mohammad Emami are investors in the famous television series *Shahzad*. They were recently accused of corruption for borrowing from the teachers' pension fund without guarantee in order to finance the production of this television series. See [www.bbc.com/persian/iran-49248244](http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-49248244)

Now he is an official of the state, but he knows the limits of the system and he helps us find solutions to bypass the usual circuits. Of course, he can't go too far, because he must also protect his position and defend the ideas of his organization. This is what state actors were aiming for: acting merely as "regulators." When they give us permission, we are careful not to cross the red line. There's a relationship of interdependence between us and state actors, but if these become directly involved, things don't work ... In any case we are fighting for a liberal system. The state can invest in distant corners of the country, where there really is nothing. There it can start explaining theater or cinema to people. But the art scene in the capital does not need the state or its money.<sup>22</sup>

The outsourcing of the arts thus chimes with the ambitions and anxieties of individuals who hope to build new symbolic and financial capital through art collecting or strategic rapprochement with the arts community. The legitimacy of private enterprise often rests on access to various spheres of influence at regional and international levels, but also on freedom from the constraints that usually limit public stakeholders. Both are essential for the emergence of cosmopolitan platforms in a context of strong censorship. This outsourcing of cultural activities to private individuals nevertheless closely linked to state players gives rise to a peculiar rhetoric which involves, on the one hand, emphasizing their independent nature and, on the other, their commitment to the nation's development and their role in promoting the local art scene on the world stage. Both public authorities and the transnational elites involved in developing local art scenes and markets adopt a nationalistic, developmentalist argument whereby entrepreneurs are latter-day patriots rehearsing their parents' heroic efforts during the Iran-Iraq war or the reconstruction period. Indeed, the cultural entrepreneur's cosmopolitan ethos is rooted in a national narrative as much as in one of openness to the world outside, leading to a "cosmo-nationalistic" performance.

Like all capitalists, however, to meet their global goals cultural entrepreneurs from the economic elite must engage with other professionals, not necessarily from the same background, and their power is thus established in alignment and interdependence with other social circles. Moreover, this new economic elite must engage with social change and the desires of a young, educated population eager to connect with the rest of the world — to be global in their own way.

Since the 1990s, economic liberalization in Iran has been accompanied by the creation of private universities with arts faculties in many provincial towns, like Sāri in the north or Sanandaj in the west, prompting the development of art circles outside the capital. Increasing student numbers in the arts or related fields (often social sciences) in proportion to other fields, since 1987, testifies to the emergence of a social base that bolsters the legitimacy of investments in certain artistic spaces and practices.<sup>23</sup> The strengthening of local art scenes and the democratization of art education have transformed the status of art-related spaces, and in post-revolutionary Iran artists' social status has improved thanks to the wider availability of art education at national level, but also to the worldwide recognition of Iranian art forms, first in cinema, more recently in fine art.

The growth of the middle class (thanks to the spread of further education, healthcare, etc.) and the reduction of poverty over the last 40 years have not brought less inequality.<sup>24</sup> They have, however, contributed to promoting certain lifestyles reflecting the generalization of a desire to exist in the world, adapting to the structural constraints inherent in Iran's political

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with an Iranian cultural entrepreneur (1), Dubai, March 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Students in the arts represent 2% of the total number of students in 1987 and more than 8% in 2017 whereas the number of students in the medical sciences decreased within the same period from 26% to 6% [Statistical Center for Iran, "Higher Education: Statistical Tables"].

<sup>24</sup> Salehi-Isfahani, "Poverty and Income Inequality in the Islamic Republic of Iran", *Revue internationale des études du développement* 229.1 (2017), p. 113–136.

and economic system. Cultural and artistic practices are vectors of this desire for globalization and individuation among the relatively young: over 60% of the population is aged between 15 and 54 (July 2018 estimate). The term “middle class” does not refer here to a homogeneous, clear-cut group but to a sociology of aspirations emphasizing the widespread distribution of certain values, often associated with specific practices, that transcend social milieus and result in the formation or reinforcement of new economic networks and consumer and cosmopolitan spaces at urban, national and transnational levels.

Thus, the social acceptance of spaces of artistic practice and sociability is reinforced by the autonomization of artistic practices and growing demand for art. Support from major private or semi-private economic actors brings returns in terms of social legitimacy and financial gain. While cultural entrepreneurs gain new social status and cultural capital by exhibiting the work of young Iranian artists, curators, writers, and academics take advantage of this environment for their own upward mobility, in a context where state authorities have relinquished the task of distributing resources equitably in the cultural field.

The professionalization of cultural entrepreneurs is only possible with the support of an entourage facilitating access to a status prized by cosmopolitan individuals and champions of culture. The hierarchy surrounding these entrepreneurs includes PAs and other assistants, contacts in provincial towns, police, politicians, bankers, established and emerging artists, along with the entire corpus of mediators involved in promoting art: curators, social scientists, political scientists, art experts, graphic designers, architects, etc. In other words, social differentiation underwrites entrepreneurs’ power to act and to strengthen their own legitimacy, sometimes creating *de facto* cosmopolitan spaces.

As they collect artworks and exert their economic power and influence, cultural entrepreneurs constantly search for the best academics to write texts for exhibitions, the best graphic designers, the best exhibition spaces. In so doing, they acquire a monopoly on the best intermediaries in the art world and related fields. Artists, too, mediate the visibility of cultural entrepreneurs. Moreover, while expertise is needed when purchasing artworks, the experts must remain in the shadows, so that entrepreneurs may remain the only public figures on the local art scene. Social networks, the media, the financing of exhibitions abroad, the publication in specialist journals of texts narrating their adventures, the organization of talks at academic institutions: all of these shape the trajectory of cosmopolitan entrepreneurs, whose power nevertheless originates and is perpetuated in the national context.

## 7 Neoliberal urban governance and cosmopolitan consumption

The rise of this new urban elite is connected with the emergence of new spheres of influence and cosmopolitan spaces and sociabilities in which art plays a key role. The production of cosmopolitan spaces at local level depends on cultural entrepreneurs’ ability to understand and appropriate global trends. It involves renovating industrial buildings in central Tehran for artistic or cultural purposes, exhibiting works recently displayed in Western institutions, and keeping up with the latest developments in major metropolises such as New York or Paris. In the last ten years, some central districts of Tehran have been turned into artistic and cultural spaces. The success of such projects must be understood against a background of neoliberal urban governance in Tehran,<sup>25</sup> while the role of private individuals, including cultural entrepreneurs, is

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<sup>25</sup> Khatam, *Tehran Urban Reforms between Two Revolutions, Developmentalism, Worlding Urbanism and Neoliberalism*, PhD diss. (2015); Keshavarzian, “Decentralization and Ambiguities of Local Politics in Tehran”, Middle East Institute, *Governing Megacities in MENA and Asia* (2016)

increasingly important at urban level. A powerful rhetoric of urban development through culture and art circulates both in the entourage of Tehran's mayor and at the Ministry of Urban Affairs. The Urban Development and Revitalization Organization (UDRO) Office has organized several meetings between 2016–18 to discuss the Western experience of urban transformation through cultural investment, with a particular focus on East London.

The municipalities of Tehran's two most coveted districts (6 and 12) often pursue their development goals by identifying old houses suitable for artistic uses. Social conditions in these neighborhoods are often evoked to justify the legitimacy of such projects and the influx of new forms of capital. One of the main centers of artistic and cultural production was created in Zone 6, a central district of Tehran where the population has decreased steadily over the past ten years. This district is known for its aging, shrinking population surrounded by official and government buildings. According to a report commissioned by Tehran's city hall, only 30% of the area is residential, and many residential buildings have become commercial or administrative spaces.<sup>26</sup> The report proposes funding the pedestrianization of areas where art and cultural spaces are concentrated. In this particular social and urban context, art-world players, especially those with significant financial clout, have purchased many old houses and transformed them into artistic spaces. Over time, new rituals have emerged, including *Gāleri-gardi*, a Friday tour of galleries and art foundations over a relatively limited area (Friday being the day of rest in Iran), attracting people from upscale northern neighborhoods to the city center.

Historically, these neighborhoods and houses were the focus of modernization projects initiated in Tehran under the first Pahlavi regime (1925–41) and pursued under the second (1941–79).<sup>27</sup> The houses most sought-after by artists, gallery-owners, and cultural entrepreneurs are usually those that have survived amidst recent construction projects, typically row-houses and townhouses of brick or reinforced concrete, often with a garden in front or behind. Their interiors are revamped, usually with cement floors, to reproduce the atmosphere of lofts and white cubes. The combination of bricks — typical of the first Pahlavi era — and cement — the substance of white cubes — reflects both nostalgia for the past and a desire for globalization and openness to the world.

Since the 1990s, Iranian society has also experienced globalization through consumption, which has become a nexus of individual and collective identity formation, as in the West. In a country where travel to foreign, especially Western countries is difficult or even impossible for the many, access to globalized culture becomes especially important, both as a local strategy for social distinction and a symbol of “worldliness”.<sup>28</sup> Most art spaces in Tehran include a café area, with an emphasis on authenticity and traditional Iranian cuisine alongside products found in all major world cities. In some cases, concessions have been granted to well-known coffee shops in wealthy northern districts that reproduce the internationally-recognized fashions of Brooklyn or eastern Paris. The professionalization of the coffee industry (marked by the proliferation of barista training institutes) and its association with a specific type of global sociability reflect the development of consumption patterns typical of certain social milieus, including the arts.

According to real estate agents I interviewed, between 2016 and 2017 the demand for *khānehāy-e honari* (artistic houses) led to a 20% increase in real-estate prices in central Tehran. This *khāneh honari* (artistic house) category was in fact deliberately developed by

<sup>26</sup> Municipality of Tehran, “Tarḥeh motāle ‘e va barresī mas’ leh tose ‘e shahrī mantaqeh shesh Tehran”, vol. 11, *Shahr dāri tehran, mohandesīn moshāver naqshe jahān* (1382) [2003].

<sup>27</sup> Marefat, *Building to Power: Architecture of Tehran 1921–1941*, PhD diss. (1988).

<sup>28</sup> Schein, “Of Cargo and Satellites: Imagined Cosmopolitanism”, *Postcolonial Studies* 2.3 (November 1999), pp. 345–375.

agents as a sales development strategy. Some of the aforementioned cultural entrepreneurs, repeatedly named by the estate agents, are now monopolizing real estate by buying up urban spaces to further their objectives; one individual prominent in the cultural field is claimed to have “bought a whole neighborhood”. These material developments and the ensuing cosmopolitan social environment enable entrepreneurs to gain international visibility and become identified as key figures on the Iranian art scene. Through the work of embassies and articles in Western newspapers and social media, these emblematic spaces become the principal markers of the Iranian cultural scene in the eyes of international institutions seeking cultural cooperation opportunities.

Cultural entrepreneurs maintain close ties with city authorities and often propose financing development projects (such as downtown pedestrianization) near their own artistic spaces — though without an overall vision for urban development at neighborhood or city level. By associating their projects to renovate old buildings or abandoned factories with the names of famous architects from Iran or abroad, they enhance the unique character of artistic spaces in the city. The extravagance of exhibitions and the choice of atypical spaces together contribute to the entrepreneur’s reputation for audacity. Indeed, artworks alone are not enough to confer the status cultural entrepreneurs seek: their meaning may not be obvious to locals, and visitors often feel more comfortable commenting on the space and its originality than on potentially baffling artworks. For the less mobile, the glimpse of the world outside afforded by exhibitions and talks by renowned artists and intellectuals reflects entrepreneurial power at local level. In fact, cultural entrepreneurs do not seek mere financial profit with their activities; they take greater pride in instigating change and promoting new lifestyles, as one cultural entrepreneur in Tehran explained:

We want to create new lifestyles. I often tell my employees: “We are more than a cultural space.” Selling is not my only goal. Besides, most of my exhibitions are not profit-oriented. I want people to seek their identity in this space, to form their own identity. And in any case, buyers do not come to galleries like this one. But I want those who come here to see this as their daily or weekly activity, to think that they can come and spend time here. Today the middle class is willing to spend money to go to the theater, so going to a contemporary art space could also become a habit for large sectors of society, not just for the elite.<sup>29</sup>

Tension is often rife between newcomers and local inhabitants. One cultural entrepreneur recalled how his art-space was initially greeted by the customers of a traditional café opposite his building:

I came to this place with female visitors during Muharram.<sup>30</sup> People in the cafe opposite my building came up to me and tried to hit me in the face. Six months after the opening, perceptions change, and even though they may not like us, they now perceive us as humans. Yes, there is hatred, and I don’t know why there is a line separating us. The people above this line hate those below because those below think that those above have undermined the rights of those below. But thanks to my project the addicts have left. There are families living in this neighborhood who are happy that 60 drug addicts who were living in this area are now gone. The neighbors are happy and they even bring us food to thank us. I wonder whether their culture will change or not in the long run. That’s what I hope. Or maybe a counter-culture will emerge.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with an Iranian cultural entrepreneur (1), Tehran, May 2017.

<sup>30</sup> The first month of the Islamic calendar during which a set of rituals take place associated with mainly Shia Muslims.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with an Iranian cultural entrepreneur (2), Tehran, May 2017.

Coexistence between locals and newcomers may thus foster urban connections characterized by novel uses and rhythms counter to the predominant lifestyle. On Fridays, the backyards of many buildings become host to a kind of self-segregation, whereby visitors from wealthier neighborhoods may avoid the street and its moral and social restrictions. Such spaces remain socially disconnected from their immediate urban environment owing both to *how* they are incorporated into the urban fabric, and their outward-looking nature as participants in regional and global artistic networks.

## **8 Dubai: a cosmopolitan platform for internationalization**

Despite their local power, post-revolutionary cultural entrepreneurs did not enjoy the honorific status that enabled Empress Farah Pahlavi to connect directly with Western art circles and welcome the most renowned artists to her Tehran court, and the Islamic Republic's posture vis-à-vis the West limited their integration into international and global business circles. Moreover, Islamic ideology and moral codes prevented their participation in the globalized sociability characteristic of Western businessmen. Not only did the first generation of revolutionaries lack the resources to engage in cosmopolitan sociabilities internationally; they did not have access to the spaces and intermediaries needed to globalize their social and cultural profile.

However, over the years, Western interest in Middle Eastern art and the internationalization of the market have given rise to a new sphere of influence at regional and, later, global levels, which these young cultural entrepreneurs incorporated into their self-promotion strategies. Thanks to pre-existing commercial networks, Dubai, accessible to this new elite, turned into a platform, even a springboard from which to globalize and grow international social capital.<sup>32</sup>

By the 2000s, Dubai had become a regional center and the main meeting-place of the Middle Eastern art scene — the regional scale corresponding here to the expansion of a regional art market and the increasing professionalization of those involved. The region emerged as a new territory of identification offering a new scale of recognition for art professionals. Yet while anchored in a specific geography (from the Maghreb to India via the countries of the Middle East, Turkey, Iran, and the Arab countries of the Gulf) and cultural space (the Arab, Turkish, Iranian, and Indian worlds), new practices of mobility unfolded well beyond.

Contemporary art in Dubai sprang up in private villas, hotels, and shopping malls serving as the main exhibition venues. With professionalization came a network of cultural infrastructure in the city. Warehouses were transformed into galleries and new art spaces proliferated in neighborhoods previously housing labor camps.<sup>33</sup> Thus, from the early 2000s, the Al-Quoz industrial area gradually became an art district. Originally outside the city, al-Quoz became an integral part of it. As cultural institutions settled in former industrial buildings, they appropriated large, flexible spaces where they now exhibit art, organize screenings, and host public debates.

The financial success and visibility bestowed on regional artists by local galleries led to other forms of non-profit projects, making up for the lack of public initiatives. For instance, in 2011, Iranian-German cultural entrepreneur Ramin Salsali opened a non-profit space in Dubai, the Salsali Private Museum initially planned to open in Berlin.

It was during this period that Dubai began to play a role in the development of Iran's local art scene, partially by fueling the art market. The development of new spheres of exchange in the

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<sup>32</sup> Cousin and Chauvin, "Globalizing Forms of Elite Sociability: Varieties of Cosmopolitanism in Paris Social Clubs".

<sup>33</sup> Moghadam, "L'art est mon métier": émergence et professionnalisation du marché de l'art à Dubaï"; Brones and Moghadam, "Beirut-Dubai. Translocal Dynamics and the Shaping of Urban Art Districts", in Vignal (ed.), *The Transnational Middle East: People, Places, Borders* (2017), pp. 238–254.



arts fostered novel forms of mobility, strengthening ties between the two countries and facilitated the transfer of funds, which had become impossible through standard banking channels. UAE-based businessmen, mostly Iranian, also contributed to transforming Dubai into a platform for marketing and exhibiting art from their home countries.

Many Iranian private collections are now in the UAE, and the works they include reflect the evolution of modern and contemporary Iranian art in Iran and in the diaspora. However, some are now expanding to include art from other parts of the world and today many art experts are helping educate collectors, whether Emiratis or foreign residents, about new forms of artistic expression, thus broadening the market, which might otherwise rapidly be saturated by artworks from national communities.

Also, local institutions for the promotion of the arts explicitly adopt policies of opening up to the world at large. The Dubai Art Fair, called Art Dubai, for instance, has appointed ambassadors to the region's main countries. These individuals, often collectors, contact other local collectors and invite them to the Dubai fair, during which galas, meetings, and private tours are arranged. The aim is to introduce new artists and new forms of artistic expression to UAE-based and foreign collectors.

The calendar of art events in the UAE — including Art Dubai and the Abu Dhabi Art Fair, held annually in March and November, and the Sharjah Biennial — sets the agenda for the Iranian art scene and the circulation of artists, experts, and collectors across the region. Art Dubai is a key moment because of the large volume of sales it generates, but above all because it offers a meeting place for key players in the regional and global art worlds who gather for a week in Dubai. Other cultural institutions in Dubai, Sharjah and sometimes Abu Dhabi, including galleries, art foundations, private museums and collectors' own venues, organize events at the same time, taking advantage of the presence of visitors from a wide range of geographical and professional horizons. Travel between the three Emirates is facilitated during the fair: shuttles enable visitors to attend exhibitions throughout the UAE.

The number of galleries at Art Dubai increased from 10 in 2006 to more than 100 in 2023. Galleries come from 44 countries, presenting 500 artists of 70 nationalities. Iranians participate actively, and the organizers visit Iran to establish ties with the local art scene. In 2017 edition, Iranian galleries were the most present at the fair despite existing political tensions.<sup>34</sup>

While in its early years Art Dubai was primarily a platform for galleries from the Middle East, over time more and more Western galleries and those from other countries of the Global South have participated, even though the majority of sales involve artists from the Middle East or regions not well-represented in other fairs, e.g. South Asian or, more recently, Africa. Moreover, the large volume of sales and concentration of collectors have attracted actors from well-known Western institutions, such as the British Museum, or the Centre Pompidou and the Arab World Institute.

Modalities of access to the fair depend on the category to which actors belong. During the 2016 edition, cards gave visitors access to different areas depending on the card they were given. Opening dates also varied. The first day was reserved for visitors with an "art collector" card, the second day for those with a "VIP" card, and the third for those with a "visitor" card (i.e. the public). Similarly, space was segregated according to areas of consumption. Holders of a visitor card issued by one of the private sponsors could access a space where alcohol

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<sup>34</sup> Iran's economic crisis, which started in January 2018 after the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal, geopolitical tensions between Iran and the UAE and the Covid context seem to have decreased the number of Iranian galleries in Art Dubai editions of 2019 and 2021 (Art Dubai 2020 edition was cancelled due to the Covid circumstances).



consumption was free and legal. Visitors with the “art collector” card could access guided tours and other events held outside — including meetings with local collectors or lunches/dinners at the fair’s private foundations in Al-Quoz.

Thus, the city of Dubai meets the internationalization needs of cultural entrepreneurs from the emerging Iranian elite, and allows them to build new social capital. Iranian cultural entrepreneurs visit Dubai every year, and the experience of cosmopolitanism in the city constitutes an important step, even a necessary rite of passage, for them. To paraphrase Appadurai,<sup>35</sup> such a rite constitutes “social techniques for the production of “natives”” of the art scene. The hierarchical arrangement of an event like Art Dubai offer cultural entrepreneurs a space for learning, professionalization, and internationalization; it also fuels rivalries between them, as each tries to exert influence over other players.

Dubai Art Fair officials travel regularly to neighboring countries to establish ties with local art scenes. This enables them to have a better view of the activities of galleries in Tehran and elsewhere that wish to participate in the fair. These visits directly influence local galleries, as each strives to comply with the standards of the fair.

Officials also hold regular meetings with collectors between fairs. Discussions usually revolve around the quality of artworks exhibited or how they are exhibited. In 2007, Art Dubai created the Global Art Forum, which has since become quite famous thanks to the involvement of intellectuals and artists from the region and from around the world.

In addition, Dubai facilitates encounters between the pre- and post-revolutionary Iranian elites. The question of legitimacy regularly arises regarding their engagement with the arts, as each group has access to different resources. The contempt in which members of the *ancien régime* hold post-revolutionary elites is often tempered by their need to make ties with the Iranian domestic scene, where only the new elites have the ability to act. Meanwhile, these new elites seek to boost their credibility by associating with pre-revolutionary ones and hiding their links with Iran’s current power structures. While international sociabilities bring Iran’s new elites closer to those from other nations, proximity to the revolutionary body hinders their integration into the most globalized circles and undermines their cosmopolitan aspirations — a phenomenon studied in other contexts.<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, institutions such as Art Dubai allow them to amass international capital via the production and dissemination of novel artistic practices and modes of sociability. In Dubai they thus participate in the fair, present Iranian artists and meet counterparts from the Arab Gulf states or the Iranian diaspora, alongside other international art scene personalities. In effect, the considerable amount of transactions they engage in at the fair grants them the status of international artistic entrepreneurs. As one organizer of the fair put it:

Only in Dubai can we have a fair that brings together all the galleries in the region, the Arab world, Iran, and the Arab countries of the Gulf. Because here there is no well-defined identity. Arabs (from outside the Gulf) feel comfortable coming here, as do Indians and Iranians. So the regional scale is very important to us.<sup>37</sup>

Iranian and Emirati patrons (some of whom might be considered “cultural entrepreneurs”) frame the exhibiting of artists from their respective countries as a form of cultural diplomacy, or even an act of heroism in a context of strong political tensions. Abdelmonem bin Eisa Alserkal, founder of the Al-Serkal Contemporary Art Center in Dubai’s Al-Quoz district, attended the

<sup>35</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996).

<sup>36</sup> Wagner, *Les Nouvelles Élités de La Mondialisation: Une Immigration Dorée En France* (1998).

<sup>37</sup> Interview with one of the organizers of Art Dubai, March 2017.

opening of Farideh Lashai's exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran in 2015. Following this visit, the same exhibition was held in one of the Al-Serkal family houses in Sharjah's heritage area.

In April and May 2016, the Mohsen Gallery in Tehran organized a group exhibition called *Spheres of Influence* for Emirati, Iraqi, and Saudi artists. This exhibition was the first of its kind and "made a small but powerful step in breaking the historical barrier that separates Arabs and Iranians".<sup>38</sup> This collaboration gave rise to another exhibition in 2016, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran, in partnership with the Barjeel Foundation of the Emirates, the Mohsen Gallery, and another Dubai gallery that acted as mediator, bringing together 40 Arab and 40 Iranian artists.

Iran's cultural entrepreneurs and their entourage often stress the role of cultural diplomacy in improving the country's image abroad. As one employee of an art Residency in Tehran explained:

Our role is to put artists on the path of actors who can help them develop professionally and can facilitate their success. We assist them in their professional life by finding a market and places where they can exhibit their work. We produce new values, and the cultural products we promote are exhibited abroad thanks to our activities. We help artists mature in their trajectories. Questions of budget are obviously crucial, and we help local artists work with the resources that are available to them.<sup>39</sup>

As the trajectory of cultural entrepreneurs internationalizes, the professionalization of the artistic activities they promote is reinforced. Cultural entrepreneurs are confronted with new standards from Dubai and elsewhere, which they must incorporate into their own cultural enterprises if they wish to acquire an international dimension. Thus, compliance with curatorial standards (ensuring the cohesion of exhibited artworks, drafting texts and contracts, preparing artworks for export, providing for artwork clearance, etc.) is part of a professionalization process impacting artistic practice both in the country of origin and abroad.

Given the importance of knowing international references, mastering languages, and displaying a cosmopolitan *habitus*, cultural entrepreneurs often recruit young Iranian artists or art professionals educated abroad or familiar with international standards. In so doing, they fill the gap between themselves and well-established international elites. As Anne-Catherine Wagner observes, these strategies lead to the constitution of an international capital accumulated "through a kind of alchemy of the professional, social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of knowledge about the foreigner, who is increasingly valued in the globalized field of large corporations and power."<sup>40</sup>

Numerous artists have participated in these power dynamics at some time in their careers, but later distanced themselves, turning to frequently unconstructive criticism, defaming and denouncing other individuals and artists involved, rather than attempting to understand the roots underlying the system of domination. Some now eschew these sources of funding, or seek funding from foreign embassies or art foundations outside Iran with their own political agendas.

Thus, the cosmopolitan trajectory of Iranian cultural entrepreneurs relies on using other players' social and cultural skills, even as tensions around legitimacy and recognition remain

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<sup>38</sup> Mohsen Gallery, *Spheres of Influence* exhibition catalogue (2016).

<sup>39</sup> Interview with the manager of an international art residency in Tehran, November 2017, Tehran

<sup>40</sup> Wagner, "L'émergence d'une classe dominante mondialisée?", *Regards croisés sur l'économie* 21.2 (2017), p. 95, quotation translated from the original French.

strong between sponsors of the arts and those who work for them. In this trajectory, for Iranian entrepreneurs from the post-revolutionary elite, mobilizing national resources goes hand in hand with the constitution of an international trajectory and the internationalization of the local art scene, shaping a cosmo-nationalistic trajectory at the individual level, and cosmopolitan spaces and encounters at the urban level.

## 9 Conclusion

This article has shown, via a study of cultural entrepreneurship in Tehran and Dubai, how under certain circumstances the economic, political, and social conditions of artistic sociability and practice can become key vectors of access to the world stage, and as such, constitute cosmopolitan spaces. The cosmopolitan dimension of artistic practice may seem obvious at first, considering the mobilities it generates and the encounters and exchanges it promotes. Yet the internationalization of the local art scene *de facto* leads to forms of cosmopolitan encounters not limited to elite circles, given the existing interdependencies between the actors involved. As Ulrich Beck observes: “Cosmopolitanism can emerge as the latent or ‘unconscious’ side effect of world trade or transnational interdependencies.”<sup>41</sup> However, openness to the world and inclusiveness at local level are better understood in relation to the political economy of a specific field of practice.

As this article has shown, the converging desire for globalization of the emerging elite and the growing middle classes, the concentration of financial resources in the arts, and neoliberal governance at local level have together shaped the political economy of artistic practice in Iran. The local art scene has consequently become an arena of competition between a wide range of actors, each pursuing their own goals. New networks of artistic practice and skills have been connected to the local art scene, with Dubai emerging in the 2000s as a platform for offshore cosmopolitan encounters and for the development of the international market. This situation has freed Iranian actors from constraints and limitations at national level, while intensifying interdependencies stemming from the growing professionalization of the art scene. Although this new situation has increased social and cultural diversity at local level, it has also fueled inequalities of access to local and international resources.

Some questions nevertheless remain unanswered that could be the object of future research. What does the sacralization of the arts and the figure of the artist, along with the cosmopolitan spaces that result from it, tell us about the axiological system of Iranian society and the profound changes it is undergoing? How could pious men of the early Islamic Republic morph into cultural entrepreneurs whose social status stems not from their religious practice but from sponsoring the arts at home and abroad? Max Weber’s insights<sup>42</sup> can help us answer these questions, as they powerfully remind us that art sometimes replaces the symbolic, economic, ritualistic and even trivial functions of religion, forming new and distinctive communities of value and practice.

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<sup>41</sup> Beck, “Cosmopolitical Realism: On the Distinction between Cosmopolitanism in Philosophy and the Social Sciences”, *Global Networks* 4.2 (April 2004), p. 134

<sup>42</sup> Weber, *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music* (1958).

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