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Indexical Operation of Orientalism in Contemporary Iranian Art*

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Abstract

Problem statement: Iranian's art has been evaluated from different perspectives during the past two decades, and some critics have presented its mainstreams as the reproduction of Orientalism discourses. This study attempts to investigate the specifications of finding common features between the characteristics presented for the production of such works of art and Orientalism functioning. To this end, the concept of index has been applied referring to the debates on the semiotics and art history for the critical reading of the reproduction of Orientalism discourse.

Research objectives: This research aimed at critical studying and at the same time extending the theoretical challenges of contemporary Iranian art focusing on the concept of the index. The main question of the current study was "what components shape the features of contemporary Iranian art and how indexing in the contemporary Iranian art corresponds with Orientalism discourse?".

Research method: This research was descriptive-analytic and qualitative data analysis has been performed. The samples have been selected through purposive sampling method.

Conclusion: The extreme application of some of the elements and traditional motifs in Iranian art has an indexical functioning that creates the capacity for spatial isolation and situationality of works of art. Both spatial isolation and situationality are corresponded with Orientalism discourse.

Keywords: *Contemporary Iranian Art, Index, Orientalism, Calligraphy.*

Introduction

As recognized and introduced in the international

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community, the past two-decade Iranian art has been criticized in many aspects. Many critics considered it as ethnographic, touristic and exotic as the West preferred to see. Generally, it still falls under the umbrella of the Orientalism representations.

According to these critics, these kinds of artwork created by the institutions of Western art are based on the dualism of the West as the subject and the Orient as the object. The emphasis on cultural characteristics and differences in these works has resulted in the production of artworks that are nothing more than the representation of Western stereotypes and assumptions. The present study contributed to highlight this issue by studying the concept of the index. In other words, it tried to find an association between the indexical layout of the artworks and the operation of Orientalism. Therefore, the concept of the index has been used as a critical concept to show the common features of many artworks produced during the last two decades. The main questions are as follows: what are the characteristics formulating the indexical feature of contemporary Iranian art and how is index-making in contemporary Iranian art correspond with Orientalism discourse? In the first step, the concepts related to the index in the field of art history and literary theory were presented, and then literature on Iranian art of the past two decades was briefly reviewed. Theorists' views were used to analyze the indexical features of artistic experience. Besides the description of each of the characteristics, examples of Iranian's art during the past two decades were presented.

Problem statement

In Orientalism discourse, the West as the center and focus, has the ability to identify "the other" and is capable of subjugating it in various dimensions. According to many intellectuals, Orientalism continues in the contemporary cultural context, and "many of the presuppositions and prejudices laid on the foundation of colonial logic are still important issues at play" (Rashidian, 2014, 160). Edward Said defines Orientalism discourse as follows: "a description or expression of a kind of 'desire' or 'intend' to recognize, and in some cases, control, construction, and even to legalize a clearly different world" (Said, 2007, 31-32). Macey describes it as "a designed program to produce hegemony". "The

Western mode of thought is dominated over the Orient". "Orientalism is the system of representations [...] that are introduced with the Western ideological foundations" (cited in Shadmiri, 2010, 53). Although Orientalism is not a coherent discourse, it represents a maintainable nature throughout history. This discourse has been restored from one historical period to another and it has been reproduced from the Middle-Ages to the Age of Exploration, the Enlightenment, Colonization, and Modernity. Conventional imageries of the Orient have been untouched as a presupposition in the European mind (Sardar, 2008, 163). Critics have focused on the representational system and in particular the visual representation as one of the most vital mediums. Critics hold that the West keeps discourse of reproducing the Orientalism representation through control and subjugation. Applying a new approach, this study sought to reveal how the use of index in art serves to reproduce the Orientalism discourse. To this purpose, an attempt has been made to provide the critical analysis of the past two-decade Iranian art through examining the concept of index drawn from semiotics and art history.

Literature review

At the turn of twenty-first, the art of non-western countries and the Middle East received a great deal of attention followed by investigation and speculation in this regard. About a decade ago, the studies turned to be critical and the focus of previous studies have been on the reproduction of Orientalism attitudes. In her paper titled "The World of Iranian Images in the foreigners' Eyes", Mostafavi (2010) analyzed the persistence of cultural stereotypes in these works. In a paper, "A discourse analysis of the Middle-East art: A study of the formation of artistic rules in contemporary Iranian painting", Abolhassan Tanhai, Ravadrad and Moridi (2010) stated that the contemporary art of the Middle East was a new narration of Western visual stereotypes towards the Orient and a particular type of contemporary art recognized as the Middle Eastern art which is

consistent with the discourse of the power institutions of the world of art. In his paper “Contemporaneity of contemporary Iranian art: Contemplation on the concept of time and place in contemporary Iranian art”, Moridi (2015) emphasized spatial experience of contemporary Iranian Art. Winegar (2008, 651-681) investigated the relationship between politics and artistic events in the Middle East after the September 11 attacks and the spread of the stereotypes about Muslims and Middle Eastern people through the selection of certain types of art forms in this regard. In this research, the reproduction of Orientalism stereotypes is examined from a new perspective and through focusing on the index concept.

Theoretical framework

According to Adams (2009, 167) the indexical feature include the components of form, color application techniques, political, social and economic context of the artwork. Hyde Minor (2011, 319-320) believed that the entire issue of context, which reminds the context in the mind of the viewer, was associated with the index, and the artist’s life and the mechanism of financial support of art production rest in this area. Whiteside-St and Lucas (2011, 44) asserted that the “style” in the literary discourse is the index of the socio-cultural background of the author or character of the story. Pooke and Newall (2005, 37) also consider the existence of a direct bond or real relationship between the sign and the signifier, for example, the relationship between the image and what is represented as the index feature. The most important focuses of art history that have been considered in this study included two papers by Krauss (1986) entitled “Notes on index: Seventies art in America’. He described the art of the seventies with indexical characteristics influenced by photography. Krauss raised a question of “Is there any similarity between the artwork of the seventies despite the various forms of art practices and the rejection of the concept of style?”. Accordingly, he finds shared features for artworks in the seventies relied on the concept of index.

Research method

The research data was collected using a library Research method and books, publications and sites were referred to in this process. The research method was descriptive-analytic and it was used to analyze the data collected from various sources. Moreover, quantitative analysis was applied in order to interpret the research objectives. The samples of the research included Iranian works of art during the past two decades. Most of the samples were selected from related significant books published in the last couple of decades. The purposive sampling method was also used to provide a more profound understanding of the subject. In fact, works were been selected in the process of observation and review such that they can be used as the main and general representative of Iranian art during the past two decades. However, the selected works did not include all the artistic approaches of the last two decades.

Findings

The emphasis on texture and socio-political context, the popularity of photography, contiguity –based relationship, and the act of pointing are among the characteristics that have shaped the art formulation of Iranian artistic practices during the last two decades. According to the theorists, the abovementioned characteristics can be considered as indexical characteristics of the arts. On this basis, the motifs and elements of traditional art serve as index devoid of their meaning to present a “situation” as real pieces of evidence. Therefore, they embrace new implications. It is possible to attribute these features to the contemporary Orientalism discourse which has spread to the artistic productions of this epoch.

Index in Peirce’s theory

Art historical practices have experienced developments since the second half of the twentieth century in terms of a critical attitude, and new concepts have developed in this field. Since then, researchers have redefined the views of the founders of semiotics, particularly Peirce, in order

to appreciate the process of producing meaning in visual artworks. By expanding the range of images, Peirce's triadic classification was paid attention and the concept of the index was considered as one of the most challenging concepts in his semiotics apparatus. Peirce stated that the form a sign takes, can be classified as one of three types of icon, index, or symbol. "Peirce's classification is less categorized as distinct types of sign, but more distinguishes the different types of relationships between the sign and the object". (Sojoodi, 2011, 25). An icon correlates with its object because the sign's qualities are similar to the object's characteristics. A portrait of a person is an icon because the photo has many features which the original face has (Liszka, 1996, 37). The symbolic sign, as Saussure points out, only is arbitrarily or conventionally linked with its referent (Eagleton, 2011, 139). Language, for example is a symbolic sign (Sojoodi, 2011, 25). An Index is a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some way (physically or causally) to the signified. This link can be observed or inferred: e.g. natural signs (smoke, thunder, footprint), medical symptoms (pain), measuring instruments (weathercock, clock), signals (a knock on a door, a phone ringing), pointers (a pointing index finger), recordings (a photograph, a film), personal trademarks (handwriting, catchphrase) and deixis (this, that) (Chandler, 2008, 67). Indices, furnish positive assurance of the reality and nearness of their objects (Hooper, 1991, 251). After analyzing the data, we identified the frequent characteristic such as repetitious references to the context of socio-cultural life, the use of photography, the proximity-based representation and act of pointing, and in the following, we will analyze the proliferation of indices in the contemporary Iranian art.

Context as index

Though each work of art is created within a context, sometimes it is difficult to trace clues interwoven to the context and meaning. However, the issue can be identified as how the context is transferred to the

foreground of an artwork. That is, how reference to economic, social and cultural context becomes the subject of the artwork. Hyde Minor (2011, 319), echoing Peirce's emphasis on the dynamic and spatial association of sign with a single subject or object, puts the issue of style and particularly the whole issue of texture, in the framework of the index. Adams (2009, 167) also believes that the indexical aspect of an artwork can be seen in the elements of style, color application techniques, social, political and economic background of the artwork, and the spectator's response, as well as the documents related to the work of art. But it is not easy to trace and pursue the concept of style in contemporary art. Some emphasize that "due to lack of common and shared aesthetic patterns and even the prevailing tastes, the last half-century artworks cannot be classified based on the style" (Abolhassan Tanhai, Ravadrad & Moridi, 2010, 9). However, it seems that the concept of index can be used as a framework to describe the common patterns of art production. Krauss's idea about the transformation of art in the seventies can help to clarify the issue. Various artistic tendencies in the seventies, such as video, performance art, photorealism and etc., represent a kind of pluralism in the seventies, and it seems that the items in this list are not identical and similar. According to Krauss, if we want to search for similarity in these tendencies, we cannot find it in the issue of style (Krauss, 1986, 196). Using the concept of index, Krauss has tried to find the shared and common features of these works, and it seems the concept of the index can help us to reveal common features in contemporary Iranian art. In the following, through providing examples in this regard, context has been focused.

The issues related to the socio-political conditions of Iran and the process of changes in the contemporary era is among the most important concepts in this regard. This issue has been led to recording some of the cultural elements. For instance, portraying Iranian women wearing cover or veil (chādor) is one of the

most important elements of Iranian contemporary art that aims to portray the situation of women in the Islamic countries with a kind of critical orientation. Thus, choosing contexts by which these works have particular emphasis on, focus on the surrounding environment and features of contemporary social life. Identity politics, the challenges of women's lives in contemporary society, gender relations, fashion trends, consumption culture, the communication of disappointment from the status quo, the conflict between tradition and modernism, memory and historical and cultural recollection, the city and civil life of the middle class, the consequences of war, censorship and state supervision, religion and its place in the community, the position of the Middle East and the world of Islam, to name a few, are among the subjects that are reflected in this context. (Amirsadeghi, 2009). The aforementioned items, along with some other subjects, refer to the context of the socio-political life of Iran and the most important topics in contemporary Iranian art. There are many works in this field in which the artist has tried best to set the stage and assemble the elements to take photos. Since these details give a lot of information about the social and cultural context, they can be considered as indices of contemporary social life. On the other hand, a specific and selected narrative of social and cultural life is projected when some of the features are highlighted, and other narratives are removed simultaneously. As before mentioned, the whole subject can be found within the framework of the index (Figs. 1, 4, 6 & 8). Yet, the range of indices in the artworks is all-encompassing, and the study of financial mechanisms and artistic patronage is also included in this framework. One of the most important issues in contemporary Iranian art studies is the impact of the market on the production of artwork. The contemporary art of Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf have received a great deal of attention by Sotheby's and Christie's art gallery auction, especially in 2007 and 2008. The widespread purchase of artwork also has dramatically inspired the trend of artwork production. Accessing global

and international markets and foreign art collectors' interest are the most important factors that have affected the means of art production in recent decades. This had led to the formation of stereotypes in Iranian art, which was followed by creating repetitive and similar works of art.

Indexical potential of photography as a guarantee for the unreal

The range of the application of photography in contemporary Iranian art highlights the necessity of paying attention to the index in these works. Peirce has paid specific attention to the indexicality of photography and his word in this regard has been repeatedly cited: "photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that in certain respects they are exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstance that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the... class of signs... by physical connection [the indexical class] (cited in Chandler, 2008, 67). As the main concern of artists and painters since the Renaissance has been the mimicry and representation of the real world, the advent of photography, which provided such an opportunity, was an important and influential event (Ahmadi, 1992, 47). In this aspect, Peirce's view receives considerable importance. His concentration on photography as an indexical sign has provided a desirable alternative to Saussurian signs in which any real connection between object and signified was rejected. The Saussurian linguistics perpetuated a strong divide between language and the world that was comparable to the mind/body divide in Descartes's philosophy (Schofield, Dorm & Dade-Robertson, 2013, 3). Therefore, because of presenting an indubitable record of the real world through predominance of indexical aspect, which relied on physical and causal connection, photography acquired an ability to overcome the dichotomy between sign and world.

Metz (1985, 82) has pointed out how the indexical quality of cinema has been employed as a “realist guarantee for the unreal”. The sense of familiarity afforded by indexicality in cinema allows filmmakers to introduce elements of fantasy without them being immediately rejected. Manovich (1999, 178) similarly assert that the mere suggestion, perception or even simulation of indexicality in cinema is a powerfully persuasive tool for audience. Images are taken through photography of the existing reality in front of camera. This kind of representation is different from other practices such as animation, because, for instance, cinematic images are photographic and animation images are graphic. “The attraction of indexical as opposed to iconic or symbolic representation is the promise of a truthful relationship to the world, unfiltered by language, culture or artistic intention” (Schofield et al., 2013, 3). Therefore, photography, which is the outcome of physical contiguity, can be used to refer to the real, just as footprint can.

The second is concerned with Krauss’s art historical views on index and new artistic practices in 1970s. To explain her perspective about the index in the world of art by photography, Krauss has referred to Marcel Duchamp’s artworks and considers them innovative in this field (Krauss, 1986, 198-207; Sonesson, 1989, 130). He has pointed to marcel Duchamp’s readymade as index and proposes that they refer to the external reality. Duchamp’s ready-mades point to trace or remainder of something happened in time is done by temporal and spatial isolation or selection of an object in much the same way that others have described the photographic act (Schofield et al., 2013, 2). Krauss considers multiple artistic practices of second half of the twentieth century under the influence of this photographic aspect. Dennis Oppenheim’s Identity Stretch is a well-known example in this regard which artist transferred his thumbprint, greatly magnified, onto a large field and fixed its traces in lines of asphalt (D’Alleva, 2015, 44). Not only photography itself, but also its indexical character

transmitted to art practices and became their main feature since the second half of the twentieth century (Montag, 2000, 65). Therefore, some connections between photography and new art practices are established. In the following section, by presenting some pictures, we will examine the proliferation of photography in the contemporary Iranian art emphasizing the guarantee for unreal, isolation and selection.

The selected image inscribed on the mirror depicts a woman wearing a veil, while the position of the body and script indicates that the real subject of the picture, the woman, is dancing ballet while wearing a chādor (see Fig.1). There is an image of a woman with a veil on the other side of the picture riding a motorcycle. As mentioned above, the indexical capacity of the photo has the potential capacity to represent and show it as if it is real, as well as in connection with something that is happening, as if what can be seen in the image is presented without manipulation and pretention. This image doesn’t specify a sign of manipulation and photo editing techniques. Therefore, the index feature of the photo can support the authenticity and trustworthiness of the photo, as well as the role of journalistic photography at play. Given that the images are photos captured from a video; both of them are considered indices, the quality of which provides an assurance to be real. Numerous examples like this can be found in contemporary Iranian art. The feature of documentary quality and offering reality assurance for an unrealistic case like this can also be found in Figure 6.

Another feature of the index is shown in the next example, which is a toilet bowl with scripts on it (Fig.2). As noted, the isolation, selection, and framing are photographic actions with the indexical nature which makes the association with the external reality available in time and place and the object that the image refers to makes it more believable and tangible. The artist has placed something that relates to everyday life within a frame and a static position. An object, which is directly related to the space (Iran) has been isolated from a continuum of reality by the



Fig. 1. Me, From the video series, Ghazel. Source: Issa; Pakbaz & Shayegan, 2001, 104.



Fig. 2. Mass media, by: Behdad Lahooti. Source: Keshmirshakan, 2013, 256.

artist. At the same time, the object has been selected on purpose to provide implications of new meanings.

Contiguity-based relation and situatedness

Index is based on real contiguity and is connected with the syntagmatic axis of language, and rhetorical figures of metonymy (Sonesson, 1995, 4). As mentioned, Pierce defines three types of signs

(iconic, indexical, and symbolic) in their relation to the object which they represent. In the case of the index, this relationship is based on the metonymy but not the convention (which is true about the symbol) (Whiteside-St & Lucas, 2011, 440). According to Jakobson, metonymy and metaphor are fundamental issues not only are used in language, but also are applied in thinking, everyday speech, and even in unconscious formations such as dreams. Metonymy is drawing contiguity between two things with syntagmatic relation. For example, when we use the word “crow” the meaning of the “king” is implied. The metaphor is based on the resemblance, drawing a similarity between two things, by which the meaning of a word or phrase enters a new field. For instance, when we say, “He is an old fox,” we mean that “he is a swindler” (Chattin, 2011, 33). The significance of this research lied on the conjunction or the connection of one sign with another, which is the fundamental feature of metonymy. As a result, the associate of familiarity to the cultural and contextual situations can be created.

The artist has assembled and put together many religious and national elements with reference to popular culture to show the familiar cultural context that can be found in the next example (Fig. 3). The image of Gholamreza Takhti, Iranian olympic gold-medalist wrestler who is popularly nicknamed Jahān Pahlevān (The world champion), the costumes of the pahlevani and zourkhaneh rituals (an ancient Iranian sport), the ritual bunting, the religious banners (for example banners used widely in Ashura rituals), the religious icons and figures, the religious calligraphy, the decorative patterns and motifs of the background curtain, and the figure of the Achaemenid king on the small iron plate at the left side the image are the “mass” elements that are gathered based on the proximity or contiguity relationships. This kind of re-syntagmatization of the templates and features explicitly and potentially refer to space, and the artist has utilized the contiguity and metonymic capacity of indexes to inspire a familiar sense of space. Considering the syntagmatic aspect of these

elements, the spectator at first glance can feel that this image is reminiscent of Iran and is related to the “real” cultural situation.

Figure 4 is also a stimulated example to represent the indexical aspect based on contiguity relationship. The great names of American and European art history books are attributed to places outside these two regions in this image. In other words, non-western places are attributed to the great names of the history of art, for example, Middle Eastern Louise Bourgeois or Picasso from India. This reference to the place and situation represent a kind frustration and disappointment of non-contiguity, that is, the attempt of the artists of these countries to cite and recognize the Western-style art history books has been failed. Reference to the place indicates the position of artists in the above-mentioned countries and their failure to join the world of art. This shows how the art history has ignored them and how their attempt to enter and join the art world implies their assumptions about the representation of the place.

Deixis as index

Indices like the pointing finger or an arrow serve to point a particular object, to isolate it and bring it out of the typically spatial and context (Sonesson, 1995, 5). This is associated with Peirce’s definition of specificity and singularity of indices and is clearly applicable to deixis (Doane, 2002, 92-93). Linguists consider the following words related to the indexical expressions:

Personal pronouns: I, you, he, she, etc.

Demonstratives, simple and complex: this, that, this man, that woman, etc.

Adverbs: here, now, presently, today, yesterday, actually.

Adjectives: my, your, present, actual.

Verb tenses: present tense, past tense, etc. (Dokic, 2012, 2).

Deixis (for instance “this”) is devoid of any meaning and simply designate a specific and singular object or situation and it is comprehensible only within the given discourse. These pronouns have a directness

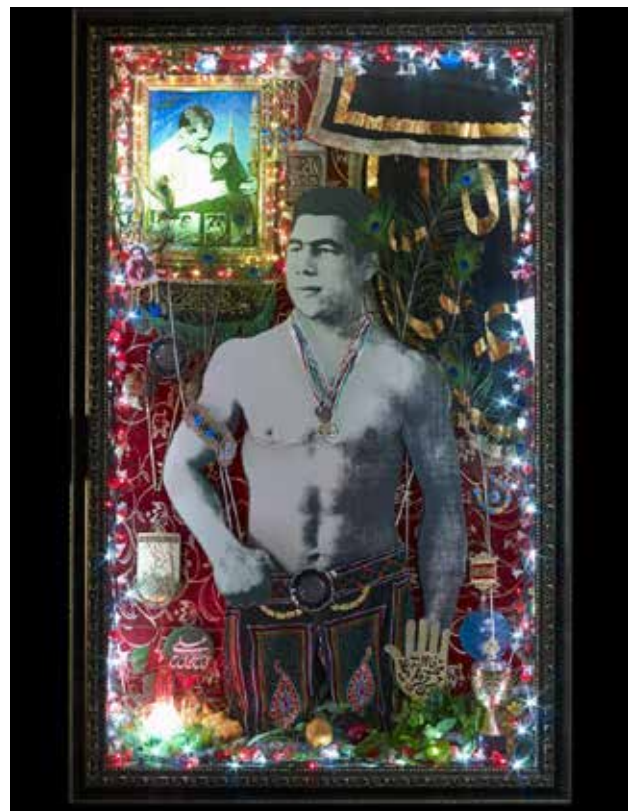


Fig 3. Takhti, Photo by Khosrow Hassanzadeh. Source: Amirsadeghi, 2009, 167.

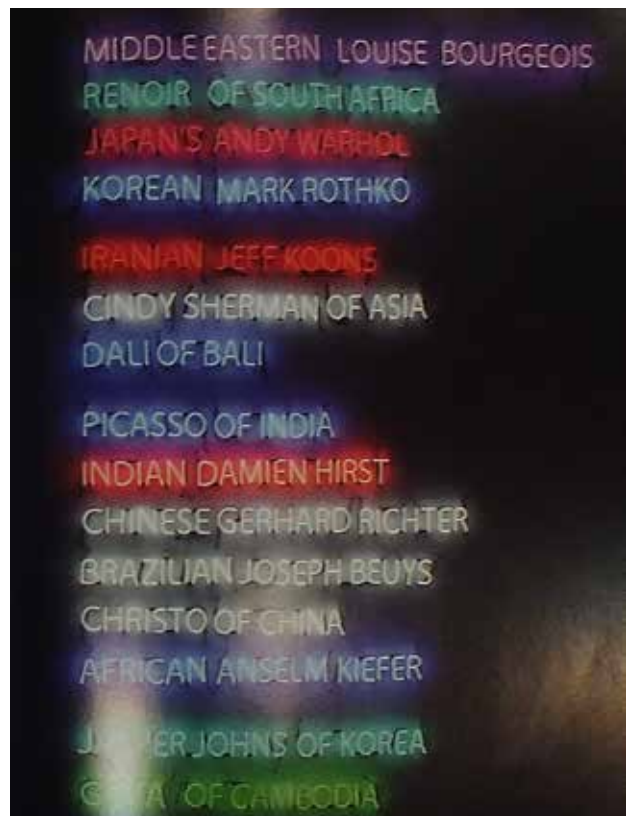


Fig 4. Moment of glory, by: Leila Pazooki. Source: Keshmirshekan, 2013, 329.

and immediacy that all nouns lack. Indices furnish positive assurance of the reality and the nearness of their objects. They simply indicate that something is “there”. It leaves its mark in language in the empty signifier “this”, ready to take on any singular entity (Doane 2002, 92-101). In order to provide information and knowledge, these empty signs need to be embedded in a larger discourse (Huel, 2012, 12). In the works of art, according to Krauss (1986, 218-219), this practice is done in ways such as adding text, sound, speech, or sequence of components. “Mute index” requires “The addition of an articulated text or discourse”.

In this regard, several Iranian works of art can be mentioned with regard to the last two decades. The pointing mode and the necessity of supplemental discourse are explicitly represented in these works of art. This feature provides an opportunity for these works to create and imply the meaning immediately without relying on meaning making conventions. The selected image with the indexical title of “Tehran” is a striking example (Fig. 5). The long shot and wide view of the image covers people doing routines. People are overwhelmed by undecided roads to take and swing around feeling confused and clueless. The selected place is relatively empty and soulless which is a landscape created after the Islamic revolution. Practicing the indexical act of pointing, the artist points to the specific place, and the title of the exhibition catalog in which the collection of works of art are exhibited, is also made up with pronouns: “This is that place”. As mentioned above, these meaningless and empty pronouns need to be positioned within a broader discourse, and this absence or lack is compensated by assigning of a large billboard holding the script and image that can be seen at the left side of the image.

Next two examples have been selected to indicate the calligraphy as a kind of supplemental common discourse in the contemporary Iranian art (Figs. 6 & 7). The first example is a painting of a beautiful vintage cracked paint texture jar inscribed with a line of poetry by the Iranian poet Hafez in Nastaliq

script. These elements remind the spectator of the rich ancient culture that the artist intends to refer to and link it with the present, which may be devoid of that richness. This idea has been completed with the calligraphic text as a supplemental discourse (see Fig. 6). In addition, the presentation of a jar without the Nastaliq calligraphy script could not directly remind the spectator of the association between the historical and present context in this manner. The elimination of the “oppressed” Oriental woman’s eyes is compensated by the addition of a writing that is reminiscent of calligraphy in the next example (see Fig. 7). In fact, the interactive relationship between these elements, the index and the supplementary discourse, has become a formula for the creation of works and a quick reference to a particular place is made possible that Iran is intended here.

The last example includes all indexical features discussed above (see Fig. 8). The artist points to the location of the world map by selecting, isolating, and framing. He refers to “Here” as the essence of all previous artworks. Something that is special, unique and particular. The empty signifier requires the inclusion of “discourse” to which is being referred to. The calligraphic script and even the image of some people created by spraying the color on it can provide this discourse. As if people were present in the previous images (see Fig. 5). But, the text “What if” still refers to the indexical words and deixis. The reference implies a hidden concept something which is a hidden concept. The referral is made to this, here, now, past and future and also to the empty signifiers, as well as the possible supplemental discourses.

Discussion

Based on what has been discussed, some researchers believed that Iranian art during the last two decades not only was unable to challenge the Western stereotypes, but also it reproduced the Orientalism discourse. In other words, it was unable to eliminate the Western stereotypes and represented the Western views. Accordingly, the findings of this study were



Fig. 5. Tehran, Photo by Mitra Tabrizian. Source: Amirsadeghi, 2009, 44.



Fig. 6. Nightingales Song, Photo by Farhad Moshiri. Source: Eigner and Hadid, 2010, 80.



Fig. 7. Untitled, From the Woman of Allah Series. Source: Issa et al., 2001, 116.

consistent with the results of the previous studies in that Iranian art during the last two decades had reproduced the Orientalism discourse. For example, the relationship based on contiguity was consistent with Moridi's results (2015) in terms of reminiscent of spatial experiences. Moreover, the widespread of photography found by Mostafavi (2010, 47) was consistent with the transformations of the Iranian art during the last two decades: "Iranian painting and sculpture received relatively less attention from the beginning. The reason might be that dealing with them is such complicated that is not matched with the impatience of the western art history experts and the changes of painting in Iran?" In other words, the indexical capacity of the photography increases authenticity and reality of the subject, which was not possible in the painting. This justified the reason for the inclination in producing and using the mixed-media artworks with the focus on photography and film. However, there was no similar result for the other characteristics. the index-based interpretation presented in this study presents a new approach to evaluate other representations, including media and news representations which can be an appropriate subject to be investigated in future studies.

Conclusion

This study investigated the indexical signs, reviewed - art theorists, and the main characteristics of - Iranian art -in the last two decades. Accordingly, extreme emphasis on the context and socio-political texture with a critical orientation was considered as one of the most important features of contemporary Iranian art. The widespread interest in photography should also be considered as one of the most important indexical features of contemporary Iranian art. The contiguity-based relationship as another characteristic indicated how traditional arts and motifs obtained indexical implication in this context through losing their meanings. For example, one of the reasons for using calligraphy, and in particular Nastaliq's calligraphy, was that this script implied a contiguity relationship with Iran. Regarding the act of pointing, it should



Fig. 8. Untitled, From the Edge Series, by: Behnam Kamrani. Source: Keshmirshakan, 2013, 262.

be noted that all the images have been referred to a specific place _Iran. In this connection, the cause of the application of calligraphy is manifested from another perspective. That is, calligraphy was used as a supplemental discourse for meaningless deixis. In fact, this was a mere text that could be used as supplemental discourse (see Figs. 1, 2, 4 & 5), but using calligraphy instead of ordinary writing increased the indexical capacity (and the contiguity) of the text (see Figs. 3, 6, 7 & 8). Therefore, the index has a feature to reveal the subject matter instantly and ensures that what is represented is real. However, the issue which has been so far neglected in relation to artwork and turns the concept of the index to critical tool in this research is attributed to the fact that Orientalism is indexical in nature and carries the previously mentioned characteristics. For example, it has a selective emphasis on the context of life in the Orient, and sustains a generalized look on these selected contexts while performing selection and isolation by pointing to a real and tangible place in order to represent the Orientalist discourse as real. In addition, it syngmatizes traits like “the other”, “exotic”, “backward” and etc., which have largely falsified the Orient’s background in terms of contiguity relationship, and in turn these syntagmatic features might include the capacity of referring to another feature and eventually space. Consequently,

it permanently points to a special place in the world where discourse can be imposed on it at any moment. Therefore, the indexical characteristic of contemporary Iranian art is in correspondence with the Orientalism discourse, which itself has an indexical feature. As a result, it directly implies the meaning with the least required encoding. What contributes to the continuity of the Orientalism discourse is its dependence on the indexical features as if it was speaking about something real.

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