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The Emergence of an Auction Category: Iranian Art at Christie's Dubai, 2006–2016

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Abstract: The expansion of the British auction houses Christie's, Sotheby's and Bonhams to markets in the Middle East has played a crucial role in building an international market for art from the region. They have also been essential in providing an international platform for the sale of art from Iran, a country whose economy is otherwise isolated from global markets. In this paper, I address the growth of the market for Iranian art specifically via Christie's auctions in Dubai. Through close analysis of auction catalogs, ethnographic data drawn from live auctions and interviews with key staff members, I document the emergence of Iranian art into the international arena and the solidification of both Iranian and Middle Eastern art as a distinct category of sales. In particular, I explore the notion of "seeing with the other eye", a way that auction specialists nudge local collectors into the arena of "international" taste. Through analysis of the particular tropes used to narrate artist biographies in auction catalogs, I demonstrate how artists are painted as interpreters and translators of "local" and "global" aesthetic registers.

Keywords: art market; auctions; global; local; taste



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1. Introduction

"Sold! Inside the World's Biggest Auction House" is a documentary about Christie's auction house broadcast on the BBC in 2016. Six minutes into the first of the two episodes, aerial footage of an expansive desert is accompanied by the narrator's voiceover:

"From the arid sands of the Middle East came oil, and that meant wealth, lots of it. So ten years ago Christies became the first art auctioneers to open up in Dubai. Now the Dubai sale weeks in March kicks off the main auction season and is seen as a barometer for the year ahead" (Waldman 2016).

We see the sale kick-off with Christie's President Jussi Pyllkkänen at the helm before it cuts to Pyllkkänen and an unnamed "government official" admiring a colossal painting. The narrator explains, "Jussi and his colleagues knew that opening here was risky. The culture of the souk is to haggle down and they were worried that the idea of bidding up would be resisted". The stock footage of the desert accompanied by the narration conjures images of early explorers, Christie's auction house—the institutional version of Lawrence of Arabia—daring to conquer a foreign, uninviting land. Pyllkkänen goes on to explain that we need not worry that the local Arab who was used to bargaining in the bazaar would not understand the logic of the auction. At the Dubai Cup, a horse race without betting, he witnessed the competitive streak of the locals and was convinced the auction floor would provide similar opportunities for one-upmanship. Next, we see another unnamed man, described as a Bahraini jewelry collector, discussing art with one of Christie's advisors. The interaction demonstrates how easily an interest in expensive jewelry could be transposed to another luxury item, modern and contemporary art, and why Christie's is the perfect outfit to help guide the transition.

The BBC documentary paints Christie's auction house as an enterprising and forward-thinking business, ready to strike new territory. The Gulf, with its oil wealth and love of luxury, is the perfect new frontier. Alongside Christie's, the other long-established auction

houses Sotheby's and Bonhams have also held auctions in Dubai and Qatar. Christie's, however, is the only auction house to have a sustained presence through an office in the United Arab Emirates since 2006.

In this article, I explore the role of Christie's auctions in demarcating the category of Middle Eastern art, and Iranian art in particular, as an attractive market category. It is widely acknowledged that the auction house has played a pivotal role in establishing an Iranian art market in an international arena (Keshmirshekan 2013; Grigor 2014), and analysis of Iranian art sales at Christie's shows huge success in economic terms (Jahan Bakhsh 2011) where Iranian paintings often reach the highest prices (Kräussl 2015). The heightened interest in Iranian art via the auctions in the UAE has received a lot of critical attention from scholars (Grigor 2014; Daftari and Diba 2014) who often describe the surge in interest in Iranian art via the auction houses as detrimental to the local art world, distorting the kind of work artists make to meet market demands. On the other hand, a number of artists and dealers feel the market interest is positive, long overdue and only possible because of the increase in quality artistic output in the first place (see discussion in Grigor 2014). Many commentators suggest that the evolution of the art market in the UAE more broadly is yet another way to bolster the local economy, by creating a distinct regional market and making the Emirates a central location within it, despite the fact that most of the artworks sold in this market are not produced there (Horowitz 2011; Robertson 2011; Grigor 2014). Yet that explanation does not tell us nearly enough about how and why Iranian art became so central in the auctions of regional art in Dubai. My aim here is not to dismiss a number of valid critiques of the auction houses and their practices but primarily to consider their evolution. I pay particular attention to the titles of auctions to show how the market categorization of Iranian art emerges and works to constitute a market itself, even though slippages of artistic terms and eras are apparent. Authors have shown that in both the UAE and Iran much critical discourse on the visual arts is still developing (Derderian 2016; Elahi 2015), and thus these market categories may be disproportionately weighted as a signifier of "good" art. By including the opinions of auction house employees, I demonstrate how they view their work beyond simple market validation but rather as a more holistic contribution to the regional art world and its history. At the same time, their accounts of the evolution of the Middle Eastern art market also show how internal business decisions impact broad categories of art altogether. Most histories of auctions are focused exclusively on Western contexts, providing little information on how the local architecture of such institutions is adapted in new market settings (Horowitz 2011). The data presented here go some way in providing new information on how auctions evolve outside of the historic homes of traditional auction houses.

Auctions present an interesting anomaly in the art world and a challenge for ethnographic research. On the one hand, they are often considered a more transparent part of the art market system, as the prices achieved at the sale are public. Yet many aspects of sales are kept well hidden, such as the identities of both buyers and sellers. Auction houses are hard to access, inhibiting more embedded ethnographic research of the processes that lead up to any singular auction event, such as how works are located and consigned into the auction. The difficulty in gaining closer access to the day-to-day running of the auction houses serves as a reminder of the challenge of conducting ethnographic research with institutions that position themselves as gatekeepers, where expertise is formalized and protected (Nader 1972). While I did not conduct long-term fieldwork at the auction house, I conducted two extended interviews with one current and one former auction house employee who both occupied senior positions in the Dubai headquarters of Christie's since it opened. A third interview was conducted with an ex-employee of Bonhams to provide a broader context of auction houses' expansion in the region. Each interview was conducted in person, and one was elongated over three separate meetings. I couple this with analysis of auction catalogs from 2006–2016 and observations of Christie's sales in November 2015 and March and November 2016. I focus on this ten-year period as it provides a decade of data of Christie's activity in the region, which was celebrated at the March 2016 sale.

This decade also witnessed increased activity across the Emirati art world; during the era, the annual fair Art Dubai was established and numerous local galleries opened. Further data are drawn from 72 interviews conducted with artists, dealers and collectors in Dubai, Tehran and London on the role of auctions in establishing Iranian art as a marketable commodity, gathered during fieldwork that began in May 2015 and concluded in December 2016. This period coincided with a landmark deal to remove the decades-long sanctions that Iran had endured over its nuclear program. In July 2015, the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States), the European Union (EU) and Iran reached the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), an accord that ensured that Iran's nuclear program was exclusively peaceful.¹ Implementation day, or the day the sanctions would actually cease, was set for 21 January 2016, allowing Iran six months to implement everything the deal required. Although the deal soon unraveled once Donald Trump came into power in the USA, this context provided an important backdrop to my fieldwork and discussions with my interlocutors. Many of them were poised to see if the deal would have an effect on art business and how the role of Dubai might change if international bank transactions could take place directly with Iran.

Research on auctions frequently draws on price as an economic barometer of the art world. The price of auctioned artworks is published through reserve prices in auction catalogs, and the final price achieved at a single auction is made accessible on searchable databases and often reported on in the press. This focus on price is strikingly different from other parts of the art market, such as the work of a gallery, as it makes clear the primary status of an artwork as a commodity and the ability to achieve the highest price possible (Velthuis 2005). Galleries, in comparison, aim to keep prices commensurate with the artist's current position within the art world and their career, in line with exhibitions they have participated in and the materials they work with. In part because of the availability of data on price, scholarship in a number of fields, including anthropology and sociology, has often focused on how value is agreed upon through the mechanism of pricing (Geismar 2001; Velthuis 2005). This work is also useful in unpicking the relationship between good taste and high economic value (Velthuis 2005). Examples of the sale of tribal art at auctions illuminate how any price achieved at a singular auction event is actually the culmination of other elements—the catalog, the exhibition and already existing relationships that are activated in the space of the auction house (Geismar 2001). Each auction incorporates a multitude of histories of each object in order to set reserve prices before the live auction has even occurred (ibid.). In that sense, prices achieved at an auction have been already reconciled with previous prices achieved in another arena. High prices, as I mentioned above, were certainly recognized as part of the success of Iranian art at the auctions. It was at Bonhams' spectacularly successful March 2008 Dubai sale that the first Iranian artwork, *Eshgh*, by Farhad Moshiri, sold for over one million dollars. At Christie's April sale in 2008, Parviz Tanavoli's sculpture, *The Wall (Oh, Persepolis)*, achieved the highest price for any work auctioned in Dubai and was a world record for any Middle Eastern artist at the time. These watershed moments announced the commercial viability of the category of Iranian art in particular. Since then, the sustained inclusion of Iranian art at auctions has implied that it has a consistent market. Rather than focus on the value-producing mechanism of pricing, however, I follow a more holistic approach, as developed by Geismar (2001), to consider how the category of Iranian art in and of itself has been determined by auctions. My focus is on the ways auctions position Iranian art as a category in an ever-expanding global marketplace, rather than on price or the specific economic success of Iranian art at auctions. To do this, I explore the auction catalogs as artifacts of singular auctions and together as a collection that provides information on the evolution of this category. Through discourse analysis of the auction catalogs, I show how they make artworks attractive in a marketplace that is at once local and global. As with other market spaces, the auctions

¹ A summary of the details of the sanctions agreement can be accessed here <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2016-01-21/pdf/2016-01227.pdf> (accessed on 24 August 2020).

show a complicated network of different kinds of affiliations at the national, regional and international levels.

2. The Titles of Auctions

2006 is considered the year that Middle Eastern art became more fully integrated into the global art market. During that year, many things happened, including the first-ever auction of Middle Eastern art in the Middle East, organized by Christie's, the international Gulf Art Fair (later Art Dubai) was established and the British Museum announced it was building a collection of contemporary Middle Eastern art. Hyperbolic and speculative reporting in the art press focused on the art scene in the UAE and the Gulf, from the ambitious museum projects of Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island to the spending sprees of Qatari emirs (Carver 2007). Each of these ambitious projects connected art from across the region and centered the UAE as a key node in its circulation.

The rather expansive title of Christie's first-ever auction of Middle Eastern art, *International Modern and Contemporary Art, Including Arab, Iranian, Indian and Western Art*, allowed the auctioneers to include artworks from vast geography, stretching from North Africa to India, to Europe and America. This meant "we could pretty much do what we wanted" [Interview, 10 June 2016]. Examining the auction catalog and the lots included in the auction, it seems the name was derived from the country of origin of the majority of the artists whose work was in the sale. The lots are organized geographically, with most artists hailing from the Arab world. The first lot is by the Iraqi artist Shakir Hassan Al-Said followed by the Syrian artist Fateh Moudarres. The following four lots are by Lebanese artists. The lots then circle between Iraqi, Syrian and Lebanese artists until lot 21. Next are a series of works from artists from Arab North African countries: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt. Then works by artists from India and just four works from Pakistan follow. Lots 94–113 are all by Iranian artists.² The last lots in this section are by Shirin Neshat, the only artist whose work is given clear provenance. Followed by her photographs are two lots from the same Turkish artist, Ahmet Ertug. Neshat and Ertug, both famous artists often working with photography and well-established outside of their native countries, act as a bridge that connects the Middle Eastern artists to the last lots in the auction. These make up the "Western" portion of the sale and include a number of famous artists.³ While Pakistani artists are present, they are not included in the auction title, and artists from across the Arab world are subsumed under the title Arab and not distinguished by nation. The title also shows that just as an Iranian market was emerging in Dubai, Christie's was also exploring many others. The first auction was a way for Christie's to test the market for many different national and ethnic affiliations and the possibility of engaging these diaspora communities in Dubai, as explained to me:

One of my superiors mentioned this to me just casually, he said "look I am doing this in Dubai—we are going to have Indian art in there, Western art, Arab contemporary. It's very close to Iran, by the way, they're plenty of Iranians, who are either in Dubai or passing through—Some of them will definitely support. So why not do it?" (edited) Because at that point, the buying was hugely nationalistic, you know Lebanese people will only buy Lebanese, Iranian only Iranian, and all of that. The first auction, we had some Arab buyers—well bidders and buyers—who were basically bidding for the Iranian works and I think that could have been the first time that could have happened in the any auction, which was interesting. Not so many Iranians looking for Arab art. That took a little bit longer still. It's difficult but you know, it has happened . . . (Interview, 15 June 2016)

² The Iranian works was from artistis Sohrab Sepehri, Maliheh Afnan, Mohsen Vaziri, Massoud Arabshahi, Fhrad Moshiri, Sadegh Tabriz, i Nasser Ovissi, Fatemeh Emdadian, Hossein Zenderoudi, Mohammad Ehsai, Faramarz Pilaram, Monir Farmanfarmanian, Fereydoun Ave, Khosrow Hassanzadeh and Shadi Ghadirian.

³ Victor Vasarely (Hungary), Bridget Riley (UK), Alighiero Boetti (Italy), Christo (Bulgaria), Sam Francis, Andrew Vicari (UK), Theodoros Stamos (USA), Tom Wesselman (USA), Andy Warhol (USA) and Richard Prince (USA).

This auction name was adapted to International Modern and Contemporary Art, Featuring Arab, Iranian and Western Art for the second sale at Christie's Dubai held in February 2007. This title stuck until 2010. From 2011–2015, the sales were titled Modern and Contemporary Arab, Iranian & Turkish Art, leaving behind Indian art altogether as specialists were developing their own sales in South Asia, incorporating Turkish art instead. The Western portion of the sale was also abandoned at this juncture, a significant step in concretizing the Middle Eastern and Iranian market category. The sales included both Modern and Contemporary Art yet also distinguished them as separate categories via the auction title. From 2016 until now, Christie's Dubai sales have fallen under the broader umbrella that Christie's uses for modern and contemporary American and European art, Post-War, which has a much less clear connotation for a region almost perpetually ravaged by wars. In 2017, the auction house added to its annual sale roster by launching a London-based one in October called Middle Eastern, Modern and Contemporary Art. Middle Eastern and Iranian art has also been sold in other sale categories in Christie's New York, London, Paris and Milan ([Jahan Bakhsh 2011](#)). The titles of the sales reveal a lot about how the auction houses were testing the market and amalgamating their sales accordingly. As Khaire and Wadhani explained:

Categories thus organize information, generate shared meaning, affect valuation, and facilitate exchange in market settings. Simply put, stable categories are essential to continuity in markets. (2010, p. 1282).

The changing titles of the auctions show how Christie's was effective at distinguishing various autonomous parts of the wider Middle East region in the auctions themselves. At the same time, the inclusion of the category "modern and contemporary" aligns work from the region with these Western art categories and distinguishes work that may have been previously sold in Islamic Art sales.⁴ Across sales at Christie's, Bonhams and Sotheby's, there have been a total of fifteen major auction categories worldwide that demarcate a Middle Eastern art market and feature Middle Eastern artists.

3. Auction Catalogs as Artifacts

The category of "Iranian art" emerges in the auctions and the accompanying catalogs from 2006–2016 through particular object histories, including provenance, exhibition history and the explanation of an artistic oeuvre. In this way, the life story of an object told in an auction catalog attempts to make commensurate its reserve price, its economic value if bought in a fixed marketplace. As reserve prices creep up year on year, the buzz around Iranian art is apparent in the pricing. According to the standards of a catalog, the life of an artwork typically starts at the first moment it was purchased, not produced, inscribing a relationship of property between an art object and an owner ([Geismar 2001](#)). For many of the Iranian artworks in the early auctions, relatively little information is supplied. For example, just a few of the Iranian artworks are enhanced through a list of the exhibitions in which they have been exhibited. These include the work *Rostam in Later Summer* by Fereydoun Ave which the catalog lists as "London, Curve Gallery, Barbican Centre, *Iranian Contemporary Art (emphasis theirs)*, April–June 2001 (illustrated in color on the cover)". For Shadi Ghadirian's work *Untitled, From the Qajar Series* which was exhibited in the same exhibition, the listing simply reads "London, Barbican Centre, 2001". As the auctions become more regular, these inconsistencies are resolved.

The way the category of Iranian art emerges in the auctions bears many similarities with how artistic categories emerged through auctions in both India and China. Rich discourse analysis by [Khaire and Wadhwani \(2010\)](#) showed how the texts of auction catalogs

⁴ Following the first Christie's Middle East sale in 2006, other British auction houses, including Sotheby's and Bonhams, followed suit and created sales dedicated to Middle Eastern Art. Sotheby's London held their first sale of Modern and Contemporary Arab and Iranian Art in 2007, and Bonhams set up a Dubai action house that same year. In 2011, Bonhams closed its Dubai office and continued auctions of Middle Eastern art in London. By 2013, Sotheby's closed its office in Doha, Qatar, which they had set up in 2008. During this period, their annual sale in Doha was simply titled Contemporary Art. In London, Sotheby's auctions have been called Contemporary Art Including Arab and Iranian, Contemporary Art/Arab & Iranian and Modern and Contemporary Arab and Iranian Art and Sotheby's 20th Century Art—A Different Perspective.

highlight individual artistic geniuses and career paths that demonstrate an international trajectory. This enshrines particular tenets of the category of Modern Art and encompasses Indian artists within it. The ultimate function is that the meaning and significance of individual artworks becomes commensurate with the economic value attributed to them in the form of reserve prices in a language understandable to buyers. The writers argued that this had particular salience in a market populated by geographically distributed high-net-worth non-resident Indian collectors, much like the market for Iranian art in Dubai. Similarly, analysis of auctions of Chinese art in Hong Kong revealed how particular demarcations of different categories of Chinese art that circulate outside of or inside of mainland China have been announced through the auctions (Archer 2018). The Hong Kong example also echoes the case of Iranian art auctions; a very close-knit network is responsible for filtering works from mainland China and creating an aesthetic for Chinese contemporary art that is set apart from government-sanctioned art of the same era (ibid.). Both these cases reveal embedded transnationalism in these markets which is echoed in Dubai. The auctions trade on this through multiple mechanisms that highlight particular symbols to show how artists are influenced by their local cultures, while at the same time enshrining notions of the singular artistic genius and an international outlook in the narratives of the success of individual artists.

Close inspection of Christie's auction catalogs of Middle Eastern art reveals similar methods of linguistic and pictorial tropes that are repeated to mark out particularly attractive lots. This also works to demarcate national lineages of artistic practice, demonstrated in the Iranian case. For example, these practices are evident in the October 2011 sale of the artwork *I Give You My Tears* by Farhad Moshiri:

Inspired by ancient Persian ceramics jars, internationally acclaimed Farhad Moshiri reveals his fascination with archaeology and Iranian popular culture through his Jars series, of which the present work is a very fine example. The texture of the painting resembles the crackled surface of the ancient ceramics and the calligraphy, gently superimposed on the surface of the jar, gives the work its title I give you my tears. Undoubtedly, Farhad Moshiri is a leading figure in the contemporary Middle Eastern art scene. Through his works, he refers to the traditional Iranian culture and aesthetics, but also hints to the consumerist and globalized culture of the West. (Christie's Dubai 2011, p. 103)

An explanation of the work of the artist Sohrab Sepehri given in the catalog for the 2016 spring auction Modern and Contemporary Art: Now and Ten also extends this language:

A poet whose heritage is widely celebrated to this day, Sepehri is impartially considered the Father of Modern Art in Iran. Born in Kashan in 1928, avid of discoveries and with a curious mind, he travelled from a young age to explore the world. His journey began in 1957 when he first settled in Paris and enrolled at the Académie des Beaux-Arts. The following year, he stayed in Rome, visited the Venice Biennale, travelled to Africa and then India and ended his journey in Japan in 1960, where he found himself inspired by traditional Japanese art and culture. It is in Tokyo that Sepehri discovered the Far-Eastern techniques in art and turned towards spirituality, an experience that changed his life and career as a multidisciplinary artist. (Christie's Dubai 2016, p. 60)

When a biography of a particular, individual artwork is itself unremarkable, its proximity or similarity to another work can be used to bolster its appeal. For example, in the catalog for the auction Modern and Contemporary Arab, Iranian and Turkish Art Part II held on 30 October 2013, the description for lot 132, *Tomato Plant* by Manoucher Yektai, reads:

The present work *Tomato Plant* is a captivating and delightful example from 1959 that adopts the maturity and skill of the Abstract Expressionist visual lexicon that has established him as an international rather than Iranian artist . . . Yektai's oeuvre has created such an impact that a work of a similar size, also depicting a tomato plant, is currently in the permanent collection of the San Francisco MoMA. (*Christie's Dubai 2013*, p. 57)

In all of the Christie's catalogs from 2006–2016, the nationality of an artist is always provided. Artists with Iranian origins are consistently labeled as Iranian, despite other national affiliations they may have. Numerous art historians have demonstrated the strength of Iranian diaspora artists, many of whom make work related to Iran, but who no longer reside there and hold passports of other countries (*Grigor 2014; Daftari 2019*). The debate over what the category Iranian does for artists, their work and their careers is exhaustive and beyond the scope of this article, but the point here is to note how auctions also categorize artists by nationality and thus contribute to this designation and its commercial possibilities. Ascribing a nationality to each artist helps bolster the category of Iranian Art and keeps the category populated with Iranian artists.

This label is not always met positively as the story of artist Charles Hossein Zenderoudi demonstrates. In the 2016 catalog, the explanation of his origins states "French, born in Iran". In 2006, he was listed as Hossein Zenderoudi and Charles Hossein Zenderoudi by 2007. Origin was provided in a different format in the 2006 catalog using country and date of birth; his read "Iran, B. 1937". Zenderoudi provides a curious case, reported on in 2018 by *The Art Newspaper*. An octogenarian artist born in Iran and a long-term resident of France, he has been known to not authenticate artworks attributed to him that are sold at auction. In the article, the London-based Lebanese-Iranian curator Rose Issa explained that he rarely wants anything to do with anything marketed or discussed as Iranian, perhaps one reason why he may refuse to authenticate artworks sold under auctions of Middle Eastern specific art. While Zenderoudi's actions likely anger many who have purchased his works, they show his attempts to master his own narrative. One wonders if he is frustrated by the ghettoization of his work through its repeated placement in auctions of Middle Eastern works. The example also begs the question of what criteria Iranian nationality is attributed.

In contrast, collections and collectors are referenced in a multitude of different ways. Across various catalogs, artworks are described as Property from a Private European Collector, Private Corporate Collector, Private Collection; Switzerland, Private Collector; Munich, Property from a Distinguished Collection; UAE, Property of a Private Collector; Tehran, Property from a Private French Collection and so on. The many different ways collections are described and the locations they are attached to point to the issue in interpreting these data as many collectors have multiple residencies, and thus it is not clear how the location is decided upon (*Horowitz 2011*). This simple distinction between the labeling of collectors and artists also does a lot of work. The different ways collections are identified by city, by nationality, by region or simply as distinguished, implicates an international clientele. This situates Iranian art broadly in a global network of collectors. At the same time, the national affiliation of all artists in the catalog establishes and constitutes national categories of art. Coupled with the auction titles that distinguish Iranian art from Arab or Western art, this nomenclature works to cement Iranian art as a singular category regardless of any other national or ethnic affiliations of the artists themselves.

For my interlocutors employed at Christie's, the auction catalogs were thought of in two ways. One employee suggested to me that in a region where lots of written sources are still lacking, catalogs themselves become a form of knowledge production around the artistic heritage of the region. In the new market that Christie's was working to expand, this history is being written into the catalogs themselves as more information on provenance and reserve prices began to be included, referencing a history of an object prior to any precise auction. Another employee explained how catalogs were often the only place many artworks on sale were viewed and thus the quality of the reprint, the kind of activity

happening in the foreground and background and the colors, was the essential element that would impact the sale. In a geographically distributed marketplace, the catalog becomes the central way potential bidders can see the works in the form of a two-dimensional reproduction. In this instance, it appears that the image of the artwork and how well it reproduces is more important than the object itself. In contrast, during all of my visits to auction houses in London and Dubai, I have witnessed artworks on display with crooked or hanging mechanisms visible. I saw this repeatedly through the year 2015–2016 at auction houses in London and Dubai, which gave me the impression that the artworks had been hung in haste and that the brief exhibitions of the works prior to the sale were not the most important aspect of the pre-sale activity.

Auction catalogs are “not disposable artefacts, but become pieces themselves, collected, archived, and cross-referenced” (Geismar 2001, p. 38). They are more than just supplemental to the auction: they are central in making the artworks attractive to buyers and providing a record of prices and information, a document of the life story of an artwork. Indeed, the catalog from the 2006 auction and later provided a useful prompt allowing my interlocutors to recollect auctions I have not witnessed and provide an idea of the activity in the auction room that the catalog alone cannot reveal. Pouring over this catalog together, an ex-Christies employee explained both the thinking and tensions behind the scenes of the first auction:

I think (sic) was the first time anyone had taken works out of Tehran for auction. I think it was also the first time anyone had put Arab and Iranian art together in an auction. We received a lot of criticisms about this (edited) . . . We did this press interview where we basically had to justify everything about why we are doing it in Dubai, why are we putting these different categories in, why are you putting Indian in, what are you putting Arab in, Iranian in, what are you doing with Western? [Interview, 15 June 2016]

They go on to explain how these new groupings would encourage collectors:

we sort of saw the possibility of having the kind of collectors who, already looking for a certain thing, could have overlapping interests and by placing them together, then you are more likely to introduce them and put them in the same category; you are more likely to introduce them to each other you know—categories of art or national categories. [Interview, 15 June 2016]

As I have demonstrated above, nationality became a crucial distinguishing factor of artists from the very first auctions and has remained throughout the past decade. Nationality is ascribed to artists and the kinds of work they make, while collections are given multiple assignments. The interests of potential buyers are presumed to be around national affiliation, a point I will return to later on in the paper.

4. Christie’s Dubai, March 2016

On 16 March 2016, the British auction house Christie’s held its tenth-anniversary sale of Modern and Contemporary Middle Eastern art at the Godolphin Ballroom in the Jumeirah Emirates Towers hotel in Dubai’s financial district. The evening auction was in two parts. The first section of just thirty lots was titled Dubai: Modern And Contemporary Art Now And Ten, a nod to the auction house’s ten-year history in the region. The second sale was named Modern & Contemporary Art and featured only Middle Eastern artists. The sale lots were grouped via the national origins of the artist, with ten lots by Iranian artists, followed by ten lots by Egyptian artists, and so on, creating a kind of autonomous national zone within the auction itself. The 2016 catalog reveals a much broader network of dealers than the catalog from the inaugural auction in 2006. Galleries outside of the immediate Dubai and Iran matrix in the UK, France and New York all appear. Crucially, unlike the catalog for the inaugural sale in 2006, provenance is provided for each of the artworks. All of these elements suggest that the market had now been established both in the UAE and more globally. Buyers are aware of the importance of provenance, and the network through

which art is supplied to the auction has widened. Only two artists, Monir Farmanfarmaian and Farhad Moshiri, have works in both the 2006 and 2016 auctions. In 2006, Farhad Moshiri's *Iran Map 1* was for sale with no description provided. Monir Famanfarmaian's Untitled piece, executed just a few months before, in 2005, was accompanied by a very brief explanation:

Farmanfarmaian's glass mosaics combine traditional Islamic designs with a contemporary aesthetic to reinterpret sumptuous the (sic.) Qatar interiors in holy places and rooms such as the Diamond Hall in the Golestan Palace, Tehran. (Christie's Dubai 2016, p. 133)

Monir Farmanfarmaian, a nonagenarian artist at the time, was one of a number of elderly female artists who found international acclaim later in life. Married into the Farmanfarmaian family, an elite, landowning aristocratic family, she had been an art student in New York in the 1940s and 1950s. The description of Famanfarmaian's lot *The Sun Maiden*, available for sale in 2016, describes her glamorous early life:

Monir lived a vibrant life in New York amidst the city's hip and glamorous art circle and befriended artists like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Joan Mitchell, the present work encapsulates every facet of her admirable artistic identity. (Christie's Dubai 2016, p. 106)

On the next page is the piece *Conference* by Farhad Moshiri which is described in very similar terms:

An internationally acclaimed Iranian artist of unparalleled creativity, Farhad Moshiri is notorious for crafting the unexpected, he absorbs the creative formula of the cool and kitsch to orchestrate masterful collaborations between high art and popular culture ... Uniquely harmonising Eastern and Western cultural paradoxes, Moshiri reaps the benefits of having a diverse set of artistic influences. (Christie's Dubai 2016, p. 108)

Both of these artists have the kind of biographies that make them easily marketable, a crucial criterion according to the Christie's employees I interviewed. In these explanations, easy distinctions are made between Western and Eastern cultural motifs, elements that can be drawn out of the works to make them appealing. Both of the artist biographies prop this up while also enhancing an image of a culturally savvy artist, easily able to blend into either American or Iranian artistic worlds and registers.

At the Christie's Dubai auction in 2016, just like their inaugural 2006 auction, the lots were organized nationally. Of course, auctions are commercial enterprises, and it is in the auction houses' interest to hold the interest of their clients. Yet organizing the lots nationally seems to go against the views of many commentators who are hoping the Middle Eastern market matures and buyers venture beyond home turf. One specialist put it like this:

It always starts a bit nationalistically. I think us people of the East, we are very rooted people. We have strong ties to the land, namely when that land is under conflict. But I think that the more people see, the more people buy, they graduate from this stage of you know, "I am Syrian therefore I buy Syrian art." You know they start to see the aesthetics. [Interview, 21 February 2016]

By distinguishing specific countries through the auction titles and then through the organization of lots in the sale, the auction demarcates both a market and a discrete, national category of art. They do not necessarily encourage interest in their buyers beyond national categorizations, despite what the auction house employee above hopes for. The tension between the way the auction house directs interest to "international" taste and the enduring salience of national attachment as a motivation for art collection is apparent. The experts at auction houses mitigate these interests through the ordering of lots in the sale and the explanatory texts in the catalogs, working to both define taste and interest in art, and at the same time making sure national artistic lineages are bolstered.

5. Making Taste “Global”

As I have explained in the preceding section, the organization of lots in the auctions, the language and methods of the catalogs and the names of the auctions themselves reiterate national categories of art, despite the intentions or aspiration of Christie’s expert employees. In the following excerpt from an interview I conducted with a Christie’s employee weeks before the 2016 sale, they explain their view of the role of Christie’s:

Was there no market for Iranian art before Christie’s? No, we are talking a movement that is like 110 years old, we are talking modern and contemporary pioneers, but, it was mainly like through local market in Iran itself, or you know the diaspora of Iranians living in south of France, the diaspora of Iranian living in Paris, in London, in NY, in LA. (edited) . . . they were able to enter the mainstream of the international artists where you see a lot of these hybrid nationalities so they are Iranian but German, Iranian but American, so they were not labeled only as Iranian. But what we did we kind of created; finally, it took a British firm to come and create a platform that is recognized internationally and that allowed a lot of this art to be discovered by a Western audience. [Interview, 21 February 2016]

For this employee, the Christie’s auctions were a conduit between an art world that was not yet globally integrated and a broader Western audience. For them, one of the major roles of the auction house is to translate materials and put the art into “language they understand”. It is curious that this employee argues that Christie’s brought a Western audience to Middle Eastern art, when it is clear that by opening an office and conducting sales in Dubai, they were cultivating local and regional interest. As the BBC documentary I described at the beginning of this article suggests, the UAE offered uncharted territory and a rich clientele. Noted in early reports on the auctions is the fact that over 50% of registered bidders lived locally (Carver 2008). The employee points to other art markets that are based distinctly in diaspora, for artists with hyphenated identities, suggesting that Christie’s works with artists from and in Iran, as if the artists cannot be given any other label but Iranian. As I have shown, in including the label Iranian as part of their auction titles, Christie’s helped to define a distinctive market. Many artists who may well circulate in other contexts and with multiple designations of nationality, i.e., Iranian-American, are subsumed under the ever-expanding label of Iranian art. This is particularly in contrast to artists from the rest of the region who are all contained under the title Arab even when the auction lots are frequently grouped by nation. The broader category Arab means that national markets are undefined and, like with Iranian artists, other national or ethnic affiliations are left opaque.

Though national associations are reiterated in numerous ways through the auctions, auction specialists have actually sought to create interest in buyers in works they deem “international”, implying that artworks must have a meaning and interest beyond a very specific local context. They seek to promote work that is legible in a global context, where particular kinds of styles, such as abstract expressionism, are synonymous with “high” art. This hierarchy of taste means that the auction house specialists are the ultimate arbiters. They are responsible for sourcing and organizing the lots and deciding which things register as “international”. Buyers are framed as “Western” by Christie’s senior staff, but for the most part, they are actually in and of the region and thus likely to understand works that auction house specialists describe as “local”. In this way, the auction houses create markets for particular kinds of artworks and a clientele who are invited to demonstrate their “global” taste through purchasing artworks offered in the Christie’s sale. The auction house employee in Dubai went on to say:

A work of art, you know you need to have the CV of this work of art and the artist too. He caters for a local market, someone that in the popular culture, people love his work. He sits in a known area of his city, people commission him to paint portraits of their kids, but just because he is popular over there doesn't mean he is valuable in the grand scheme of things. We are offering something locally to a global audience, so we have to think with the other eye. [Interview, 21 February 2016]

Attempts to reach a global audience or globalize a local audience are also undergirded by the implementation of infrastructural support as well as education initiatives that teach the audience how to participate in auctions. An ex-employee explains how a number of logistical elements were brought together for the first auction:

we were also dealing with a completely different territory so other people who were working on the legal framework of actually holding an auction. (edited) I was wearing quite a few hats, was trying to find a warehouse to do it and trying to sort of replicate most of the same sort of conditions that you find at the Christie's you know like London or NY, or whatever, in a place which had never had auctions like this, which had no art handlers, trying to train the handlers and trying to find the photographers trying to find all sorts of stuff. [Interview, 15 June 2016]

In this interview extract, my interlocutor points to how vital the auction house was in building other elements of the art world infrastructure in the UAE and how commercial aspects of the art world grew before either pedagogy or practice. This point is central in the discourse of the Emirati art world, one that highlights the history of private institutions in the making of an art world centered on its economy. Christie's also played a role in homogenizing behavior within the auction room itself, creating cues and scripts that are legible to the auctioneer who may be a Christie's employee not necessarily familiar with the region, as explained to me in an interview:

I found at least while I was in Christie's and I don't know if it has changed since, but the people who were in the room, so few of them actually understand what the tricks are, they don't really necessarily understand what the process is . . . when I was working in London you have all these like, old school collectors and dealers, who would all be able to understand the language of what was happening and so you have all these sort of things in the room, like you know, different people bidding, and if you can work out that that person who is on that phone is the same person who has bid for all those things you might try and work out the identity of that person and some of the sort of patterns. No one gets it! [Interview, 15 June 2016]

Rather than being adapted for gestures, reactions or the language of the clientele in the Emirates, regular classes offered by Christie's taught clients the "tricks" of the auction room developed over centuries in the UK. In this way, the auction house is not only responsible for the marketing of artworks but also for the diffusion of comportment, behavior and the language of the auction itself.

6. Auctions as Destabilizing

The early days of auctions of Middle Eastern art from 2006–2009 were described to me as a whirlwind of activity, an energetic frenzy of speculation that resulted in staggering prices for Iranian art achieved in record time. Any single auction can, but does not always, distill artistic genius and national sentiment into a good price. Auctions are usually considered the element of the art world furthest removed from the production of actual artworks as they typically trade in the secondary or resale market. The sales are the potential final stage of the life cycle of an artwork, where it moves out of circulation and into private possession. At the start of the cycle, an artwork moves from the artist's studio to the gallery where it (hopefully) receives critical acclaim and is eventually acquired by

a public or private institution or an individual collector. In this typical cycle, artworks gain value as they circulate in different arenas over time. Both the setting of prices and even the consigning of art into a particular auction is a process based on both concrete information and deep speculation which requires prior knowledge of an artist's market to make predictions for the future. In the course of a single auction, the status of an artwork as a commodity is cemented through the public process of bidding, which moves the relationship with prices beyond the life story of the artwork. Yet this status is not necessarily permanent but rather is contextual and temporal, always in process. A culmination of work put in by auction house experts prior to the sale itself, the auction still has the potential to disrupt the proposed trajectory of an artwork by fetching an incredibly high price or remaining unsold. Either outcome destabilizes what is deemed valuable in the market, and the speculative nature of the market can compromise an artist's future. In theory, this process can stabilize over time as more information is available and the trajectory of an artist's career becomes more apparent. However, within an auction itself, there is only so much that can be mitigated against, either in the form of reserve prices or false bids that raise those prices.

For Iranian artists who may have limited access to non-local collectors, not to mention limitations on how they themselves travel internationally or receive payments due to international sanctions, or obliterated local markets due to volatile political situations, the auctions offer a possibility for them to participate in a global art world and create economic autonomy that does not rely on a relationship with a gallery. Prior to the economic crash of 2009, many Iranian artists sidelined their galleries and consigned their works straight from the studio to the salesroom. When artworks move directly from an artist studio to an auctioneer's block, as is common in new art markets (Horowitz 2011), they are taken out of critical circulation and skip steps of the cycle where they may acquire value beyond the economic. If an artwork goes straight to the auction, it has the potential to create prices that are not repeatable, where an artist may sell for much higher than expected, as opposed to when artworks are sold in galleries for prices agreed upon in advance between the artist and the dealer (Velthuis 2003). Despite the trust and transparency that Christie's hopes to trade on, the proximity of artists to auctions can actually destabilize a system that other participants have invested in (ibid.), although their continued success suggests that fear has not been realized.

Auctions, as the step furthest from artistic production, also allow many opportunities for middlemen and intermediaries to step in and navigate between artists, collectors, sellers, buyers and the auction houses, possibly making a cut of the sale price. Flipping, the practice of buying an artwork privately and then putting it up for auction sale almost immediately, is another practice that used to be common, one alluded to time again by my interlocutors in all sectors of the art world. As Christie's catalogs began to include more information on provenance, this practice became easier to detect when reading between the lines. Work produced in the same year that is sold at a Christie's sale, having been acquired directly from the artist or their gallery in the interim, suggests the speedy placement of the work into the auction in the hope of financial gain. In Iran, participation in Christie's auctions has also become a marker of success; artists reported to me that they are often congratulated by friends and colleagues when one of their works is sold in an auction. Unlike other auctions in 70 countries in the world where artists are paid *droit de suite* or resale royalties, artists are not paid anything when their works are resold at Christie's, another reason to sell work directly into the auction. Yet the reputation enhancement that comes from having a work sold at an auction is not necessarily commensurate with any economic windfall, suggesting participation offers artists more than financial gain.

The newness of seemingly everything in the local art world—the galleries in Dubai, the young generation of artists in Iran—is contrasted by the hundreds and hundreds of years of history of the auction house. Christie's posits itself as a “trustworthy and transparent” brand that does business within a clear structure, a historic auction house that has set its standards through years of work. By setting up their operation in Dubai but including art

from multiple countries across the region, Christie's trade on the assumed stability and business infrastructure that the Emirates offer, as explained here:

Geographically we are located here in the UAE because geographically we think this is an area for us that is very transparent for us to do business, it is a country that allows a company like Christies that thrives for transparency and the correct rules and regulations in the hope of serving our clients based in the region out of Dubai. [Interview, 21 February 2016]

This regional market that operates across many international borders, filtering artworks into sales, across one of the last unregulated kind of markets in the world (Zarobell 2017), provides very little space for legal recourse. Many of my interlocutors, from artists to dealers, expressed the feeling of excitement and possibility of the art market that those early Christie's sales had created as well as cynicism at some of the long-term results.

7. Conclusions

Anthropological studies of art, indebted to the idea of "regimes of value" (Appadurai 1986), have shown how competing scales and kinds of value—moral, aesthetic and economic—crisscross as objects moved across various cultural milieu (Myers 2001; Steiner 1994; Thomas 1991). Rather than focusing on how aesthetic regimes compete, this work makes evident the temporal valences of value and suggests the art market is not a singular, totalizing terrain but rather a space where different hierarchies of values collide (Phillips and Steiner 1999). For example, vibrant Lebanese markets for Orientalist imagery reveal how an outdated representation of the Middle East is re-appropriated through the thoroughly modern action of consumption to reincorporate contested images into a local cultural sphere (Scheid 2006). In the organization of the auction house, however, aesthetic regimes do not collide but rather are transposed on top of one another. In this example of how Iranian art is established as a market category, what is apparent is an ordering of different kinds of associations—between aesthetic registers that are distinguished as local or global—as well as conflicting desires for art to operate within and across them. My interlocutors at Christie's expressed how they aimed for collectors to broaden their interests beyond the art of their home nations, yet the auctions continue to be organized across national categories. High-profile Iranian collectors such as Mohammad Afkhami have articulated their positions as that of "cultural ambassadors" (2017) collecting and promoting Iran through art. In that way, it makes good business sense for the auction houses to continue to promote national links, despite a desire for buyers' interests to diversify. Regardless of local trends, Christie's, as a global brand and institution, also promotes work that fits into their pre-conceived idea of what is appealing, marketable and valuable. It is a curious, circular situation where taste is actually defined by the auction house even though its employees are able to understand what is deemed "local" and buyers are available who may also appreciate that work. Rather than supporting a market where "local" taste is expressed, the auctions work to promote art that is evaluated on terms they develop, where local cultural inflections are easily readable and able to fit into an explanation that suggests artists are navigating the repeated dichotomy of local and global interests and aesthetics. As an organization that works globally, deciding what artworks are most valuable in this hierarchy of taste is ultimately a homogenizing force, where culturally located signs and symbols are used in a formula that registers in the hierarchy they have set up. "Global" becomes a category in and of itself that is applied to art and Christie's provides a blueprint, a pattern of recognizable artistic taste and trends that can be emulated again.

In this paper I explored how the operations of Christie's expanded into the Middle Eastern art market. Christie's, like all of the auction houses, operates across multiple kinds of luxury markets, from real estate to diamonds. The auction houses can certainly claim their role in terms of internationalizing and unifying a regional art market, but at the heart of it, expansion into the UAE and across the Middle East has increased their client base and opened up all of their business areas to wealthy individuals and families seeking all kinds of luxury goods. With a broad, international clientele, Christie's is able to activate a

global marketplace centered in Dubai by reiterating ideas of Modern and Contemporary Art that center singular artistic geniuses as translators—morphing local cultural symbols with Euro-American art histories—and with catalogs promoting Iranian artists in a market that Christie’s and the other major auction houses determine. In the auction houses, there are teams of specialists working on Arab and Iranian Art, distributed in departments called Islamic Art, Contemporary Art of the Middle East or Post-War Art. The categories here are slippery and in process, in part a response to the market, in part making a market through the naming of it, in part due to structural and institutional changes like the meshing of departments and reshuffling of staff, internal business decisions that have real-world consequences. The tensions over nomenclature the auction houses use to demarcate this particular region remind us that even in market contexts, one finds the ever-present question that the amorphous geographical region of the “Middle East” presents: Middle of where? East of what?

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