

# A nation's facelift in three acts : Iran's pledge for a new identity

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*«The strategy of centralized rejuvenation of a nation-identity directly affects and changes a society in their values, their environment and their daily life, while chasing contemporality. Youth here is not seen as a fleeting single period, but as a reoccurring act of renewal.»*

**A NATION'S FACELIFT IN  
THREE ACTS: IRAN'S PLEDGE  
FOR A NEW IDENTITY  
Alexander Poulidakos**



We live in times where the world is entirely connected in a globalized space. Through constantly revolving technologies, geographical distances are being dissolved and time accelerated, creating hybrid spaces directly influencing each other. The dominant force in this mass of connective data is a Western culture, specifically birthed in the United States, which has penetrated the rest of the world. We inevitably need to accept that it directly affects the way we live our daily lives and that societal values are skewed to new realities. But what effect does this have on countries outside the global West? How did other countries react to the most recently emerging nation-identity claiming a global identity? This text aims to look at youth through the lens of social engineering, meaning «the use of centralized planning in an attempt to manage social change and regulate the future development and behavior of a society».<sup>1</sup> The strategy of centralized rejuvenation of a nation-identity directly affects and changes a society in their values, their environment and their daily life, while chasing contemporality. Youth here is not seen as a fleeting single period, but as a reoccurring act of renewal.

The Middle East has historically served as a joint, physically connecting the geographical West and East. Over the past century the region has generated several different positions and reactions to the sociopolitical dominance of the West. While most Gulf countries have created consumer-oriented metropolises, perfectly mirroring the capitalist driving force behind them, a neighboring country, namely Iran, shifted its paradigms several times in pursuit of an awakening into a renewed societal coherence during the course of the last century. Being caught between a Western emulation for economic prosperity and preserving an extremely rich and old cultural identity, the government and the people showed diffracted resistances in the search for a contemporary identity of their nation. The last two monarchs attempted an imported modernization and secularization, leading up to the rise of the Islamic Republic and the suspension of Iran's Westernization, a Westernization that might have leaked through nevertheless.

At the beginning of the 20th century the ruling power in Iran witnessed a shift of dynasties, catalyzing a penetrating process of change to face the country for the rest of the century. In 1905-1911 the Constitutional Revolution saw the fall of the absolutist Qajar dynasty and the rise of its last ruling royals; the Pahlavi monarchy, marking our first act in the attempt to give birth to a new identity. Reza Kahn, a military revolutionary leader, seized power and created a new dynasty naming it after the ancient Persian term «Pahlavi», a word for the middle-Persian writing system that was used up until the Islamic occupation. This illustrates the paradigm shift in constructing a modern society through the Pahlavis by yearning towards the identity of a pre-Islamic, prosperous Persian empire in order to shape their image of a modern monarchy. As the century progressed so did the ruling power's plans towards a modern, secular nation-building project leading Iran into a mass politics society.

Through the rapid economic growth and industrialization initiated by Reza Shah Pahlavi and later his son and successor Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, a modern middle class was created. In most forms of cultural achievements as in language, dress codes, schooling, and architecture a homogenized society was prioritized over an aristocracy from the previous Qajar society. Reza Shah's Uniformity of Dress Code for instance inhibited the traditional dress for men, banned women from wearing the hijab and made western clothing mandatory. This was directly linked to the architectural and urbanist reforms, crafting a new society and creating the modernist «Pahlavi Man». The middle class was the ideal of Reza Shah's utopian Modernity as the ultimate consumer of good taste with architecture being used as a pillar carrying the changed image.

The eclectic Qajar culture of the past centuries was to be replaced and purified by manufacturing a homogeneous nation-identity through reformulating elements in the daily lives of the people, specifically in Tehran. The radical break from recent history and the implementation of the Pahlavi's modernist utopian ideology of a societal *Tabula Rasa* led to a massive urban renewal in the 1930s in which one third of Tehran's dense, low-rise city fabric was demolished.

During the reformation towards a modern nation in the second Pahlavi reign there were two main approaches which created a dichotomy in the royal court. On the one hand, the Shah's court started a so-called White Revolution. The aim of this initiative was to radically modernize Iran through an imported industrialization and economic and cultural globalization combined with an appropriation of a pre-Islamic Persian symbolism in an attempt to save a cultural heritage.

The second, seemingly inferior approach, came about when the Queen was appointed regent by the King in 1967. Consequently, a council was formed in order to advise her on social and political issues. The retrospective modernist vision of the queen's court which possibly planted seeds influencing a whole revolutionary spirit inside the royal house, aimed at developing a new way of preserving an old cultural identity within the modernization process. The group of intellectuals tried to synthesize tradition and technology by means of preserving an ahistorical, timeless essence of Iranian tradition coming from a spiritual base in Eastern culture. The Queen, who had studied architecture in Paris before marrying Mohammed Reza Shah, recognized the potential for societal progression in cultural production, specifically in art and architecture. Consequently, she addressed her agenda by organizing an International Congress of Architecture in Isfahan in 1970. Titled «The Interaction of Tradition and Technology», the congress aimed at finding a strategy together with prominent local and foreign architects to build a new environment in Iran, consciously embodying a philosophical history and culture, but still corresponding to the increasing movement of the world. This approach stands in stark contrast to the Shah's fast and ruthlessly imported modernist resurgence which aimed at displaying power and greatness in combination with an added historicizing formalism.

Both approaches from the royal court were driven by a group of patrons and architects who imagined a nation



unified through outstanding monuments and public buildings, setting a stage for modern life to take place on. The designs of both courts resulted in a hybrid language of imported Western modernism and an appropriation of Persian forms. Through objects like the Borj-e Azadi<sup>2</sup>, one of Iran's most iconic landmarks, new symbols and icons were generated in order to engineer a new identity for the Iranian people. The royal family themselves projected an ideal of what this modern life could promise and what the status quo should aspire to look, live and feel like. The lives of the monarchs became a moving iconography for the people to simulate.



Mohammed Reza Shah and Farah Diba Pahlavi  
Photograph: Unknown, ca 1970

## Act 2

The economic recession in the late 1970s due to the economy's growing dependency on oil-revenues, brought about a critical awareness of the fast-moving modernization and economic democracy of Iran. An instability through social inequality in the increase of a disparity between rural and urban Iran sprouted ideological resistance from the people towards the Shah. Traditionally an agricultural society, Iran was mostly industrialized by the 1970s. Along with an economic openness to foreign imports and investments, the society was pushed towards a capitalist lifestyle. The modernist total planning of the Shah's social engineering and post-war American suburbanization was creating a segregation through new satellite towns, super highways and shopping malls, accommodating an urbanized upper-class. The constant acceleration of the White Revolution was eventually brought to a standstill by a paradox between a socialist utopian approach and realities of a capitalist state under a dictatorial ruler, generating both progressive and archaic forms. The rural migration and urban overflow resulted in pollution and a housing crisis obliterating the intention of social justice and economic prosperity. During this period, an opposition started to form against the Shah's centralized reforms, many of which belonged to the institutions of the Queen's court, promoting a liberal traditionalist critique on the Shah's imported Western modernism. The increasing secularization of the state further boosted the growing opposition with the rise of a pulsing resistance under the clergy.

Naturally, the ambitious and dogmatically enforced progression towards a modern state failed to resonate with the population of the country, an outcome which culminated by the fall of the Pahlavi regime through a mass revolution initiated by student protests in 1978 and the rise of an Islamic Republic in 1979. Iran's identity was reborn in our second act as an Islamic nation under Sharia law, fully rejecting westernization. During the revolution public spaces of Iranian cities served as the stages for the people to act as weapons of resistance towards the government as dictatorial authority. The large scale of the student-led demonstrations created a power shift away from the royal court and onto the streets, with television and news setting a larger international stage for the movement. Joined by secular leftist groups and religious Islamic organizations as main opponents of the Shah, the movement on the streets gained momentum, implementing radical change. The year following the fall of the monarchy, consisted of turbulent involvement of the whole population, young and old, debating on the blooming potential of giving their nation-identity a new face. Communist idealism was finally defeated by the Islamic Republic's rise to power.

After the Islamic revolution, several buildings and public spaces from the Pahlavi era were destroyed or reorganized in order to adapt to the public life of the Islamic Republic. Tehran started to change its face in order to embody Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Shi'ite utopia. This became evident in the built environment during the 1980s and 90s and included gender segregation in public areas as



well as a disappearance of public spaces for entertainment. A new visual language in an array of propaganda murals on facades developed, showing aestheticized depictions of Martyrs and Islamic leaders, reminiscent of mythical idols. The iconography of the supreme leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and later his successor Ali Khamenei to this day are a constant parameter in any public and semi-public space in order to remind the Iranian people of the omnipresent Sharia Law by which it is expected to structure its life by. Specifically, an anti-U.S. culture took center stage. The constant movement towards a new way of life that hit its climax through the fire that fueled the revolution was now blocked by the theocratic government and brought to a standstill in order for a singular and absolute way of life to take command. The enforcement of an Islamic lifestyle resonated with many but a large opposition to the dogmatism of the totalitarian and brutal regime remain. The inside of people's homes became the new space for freedom under the surveillance state.



The Supreme Leaders in front of Department Store in Lavisan, Tehran, Photograph: Alexander Poulidakos, 2016

Most acts of gathering and creativity have disappeared from a public domain and moved behind closed doors, creating an extreme duplicity in the lived environment of Iranians. When leaving the safety of one's home a feeling of being monitored prevails public life, preventing free behavioral change. Am I properly dressed? Am I allowed to be seen in public with this person? Could the police stop me for something else? The plurality of forbidden acts under the Islamic regime never managed to prevent the acts from actually taking place but still inflicts a constant state of paranoia. The restrictive public life is counterbalanced by a widely used and accepted black market which offers alcohol, international newspapers and satellite TV among other things.

Underground cultures emerged over the past decades and became a veiled norm for young people to meet and exchange ideas and shared interests that contradict the ideology that is enforced on their daily lives. Through this, Iranian people, especially adolescents, are able to collectively free themselves from the state of paranoia and express their ambitions independently from the restrictions they encounter in a public environment.

Nevertheless, since the revolution a majority of young people from educated middle- and upper-class backgrounds have tried to leave Iran in order to study and work abroad, preventing a young class of intellectuals to crystallize as a force for a political and effective change. Through the absence of a large body of an educated and reformist youth acting locally, a sufficient renewal of values is decelerated, and a contemporary, homegrown ideology remains void. The absence of a newly developed ideology among young Iranians that are longing for progression, permits a foreign value system to leak through the walls of the theocratic oppression and contaminate the societal purity which the government pretends to have achieved.

Through an increase of accessibility to a global network, the youth of Iran has started to unfold a foreign identity. Electromagnetic radiation through new windows has penetrated the enclosing walls set up around Iran's cultural restrictions, allowing Iranians to interact and attain visibility on an international stage, effectively positioning global technological advances as a Trojan Horse in the battle against Iran's sanctioned environment.

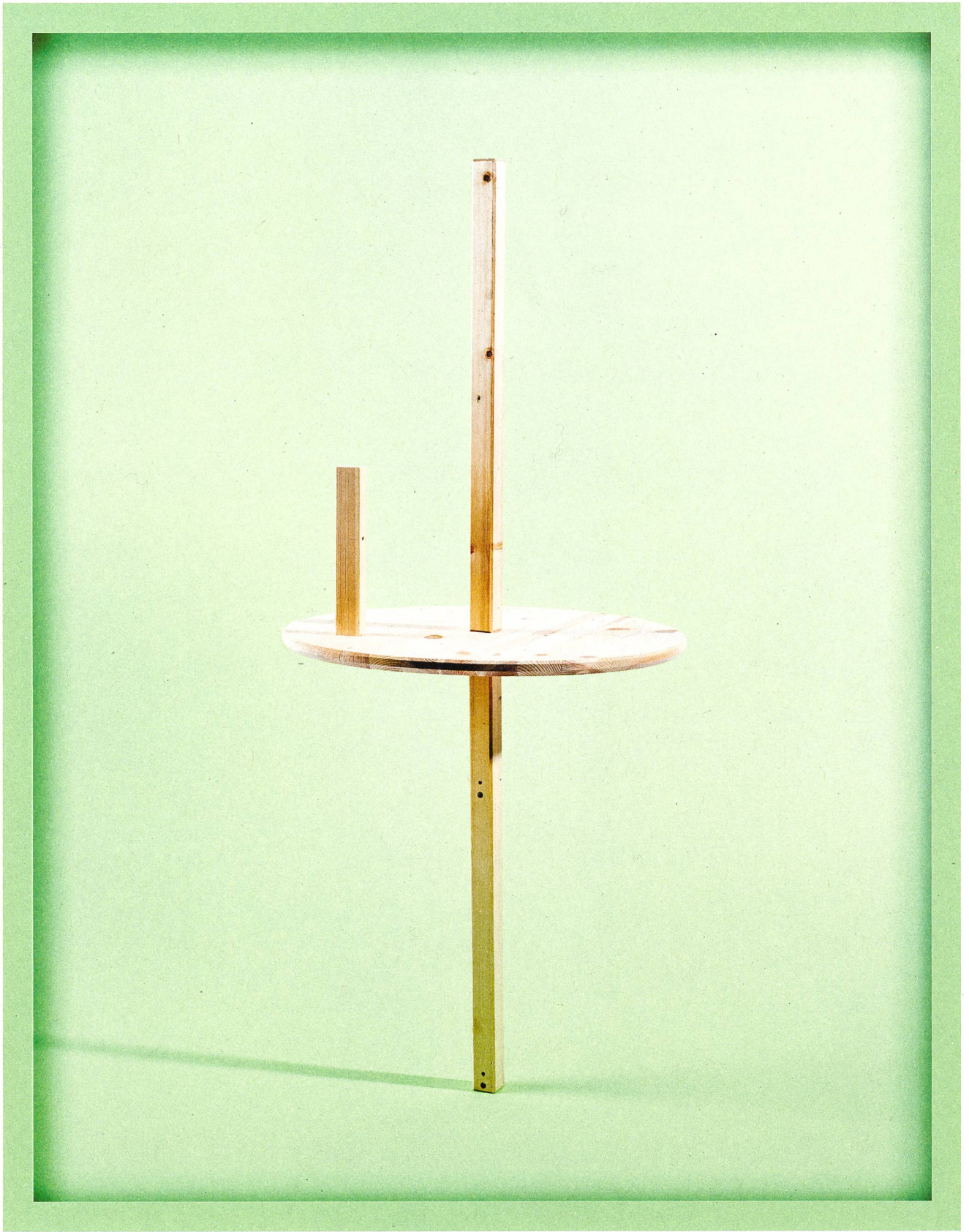
Social media such as Instagram and Telegram have become a common space of connection and communication for Iran's youth, which is deeply influenced by mass culture and urges to participate in its production due to its uncontrollable availability. It becomes evident that a plastic-surgery-fueled ideology modelled after a Kardashian way of life, has taken center stage when going to a party organized by twenty-somethings. Colored blond hair, operated noses and lips (men and women alike), exposed skin, alcohol, dancing, drugs and techno music are customary attractions at Nowruz (Persian New Year) parties. Also customary, visits by the police often resulting in the officers turning the other cheek over bribes. Normally, the indication of any consumed alcohol would lead to an immediate arrest,

(continuing on page 93)





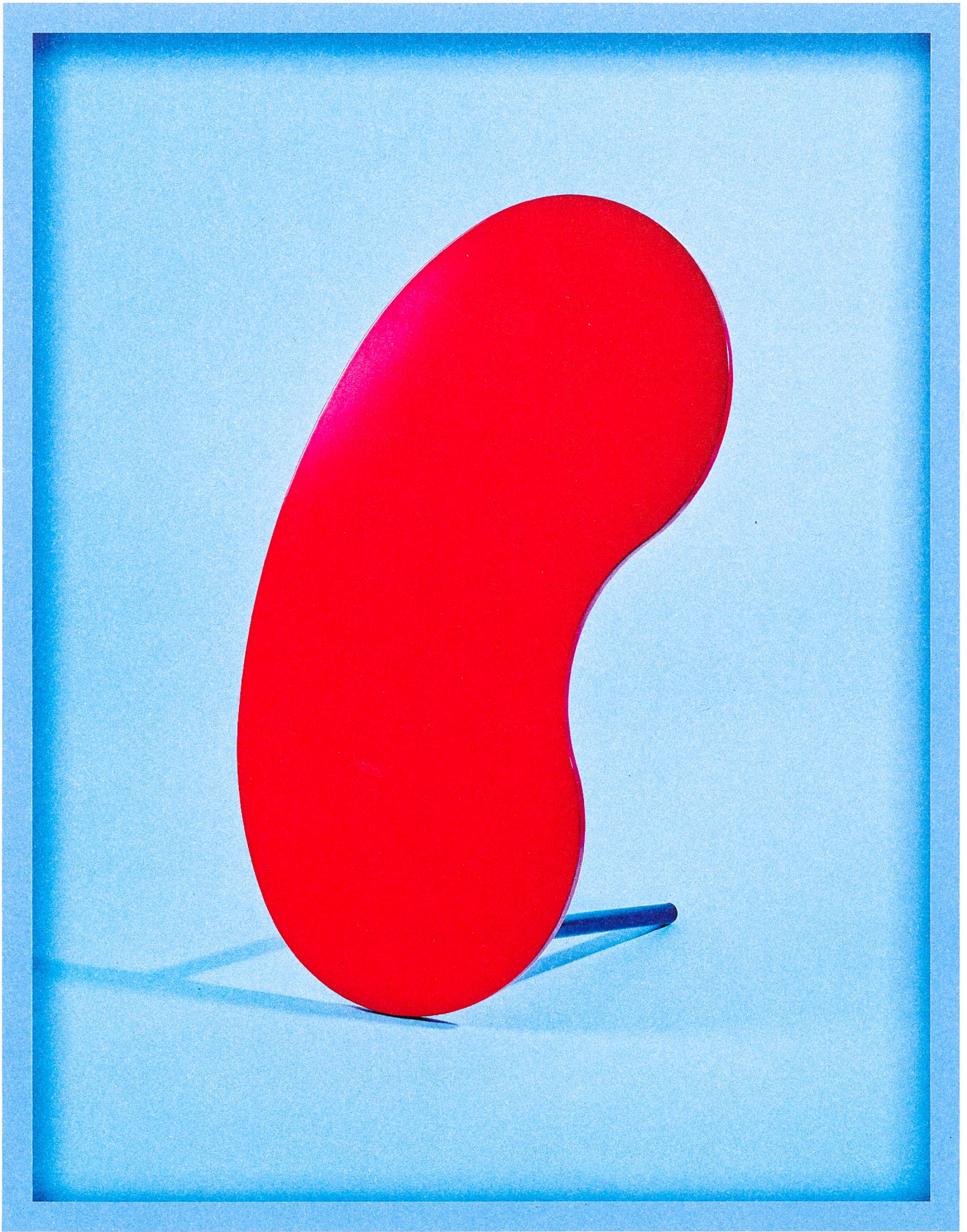




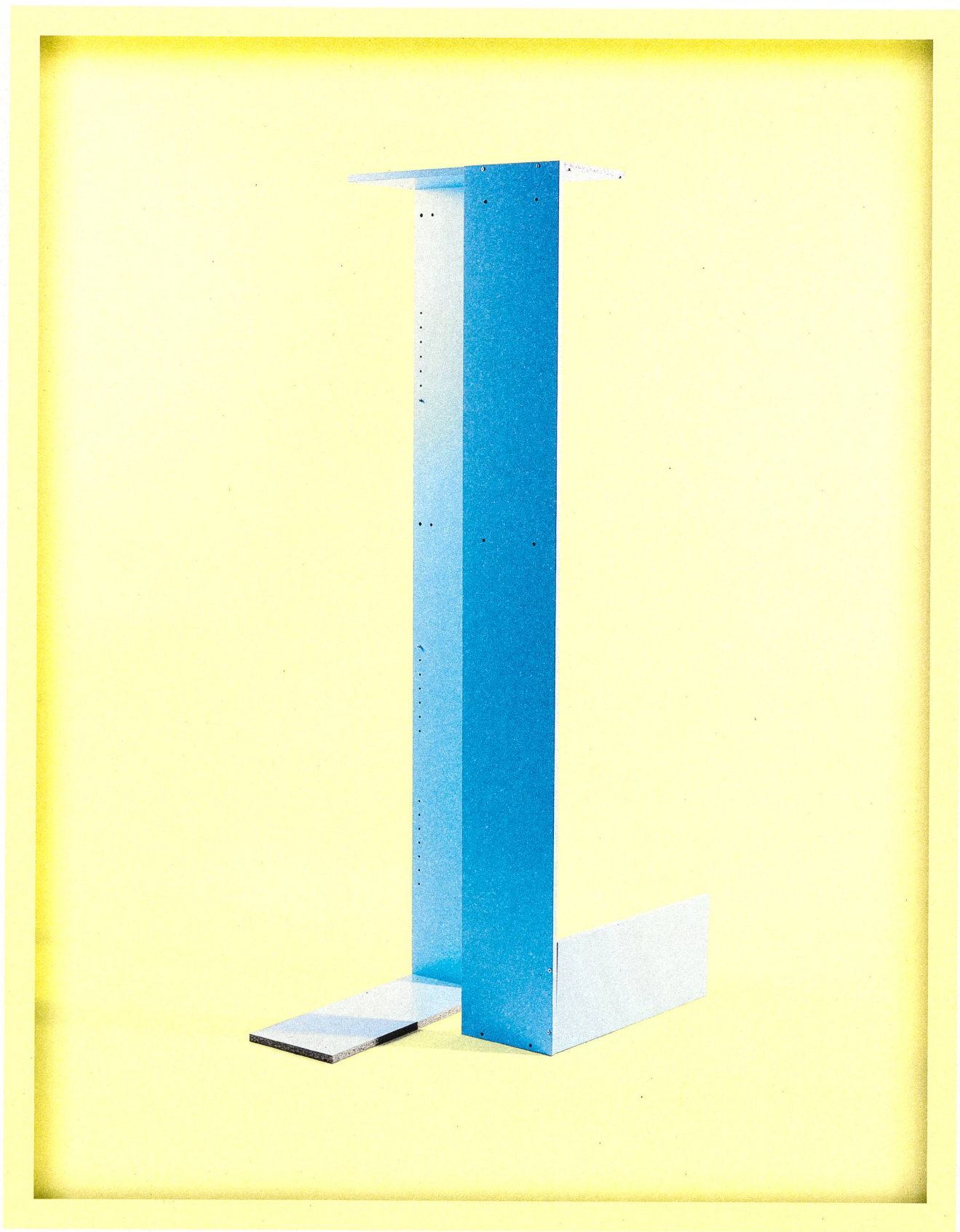




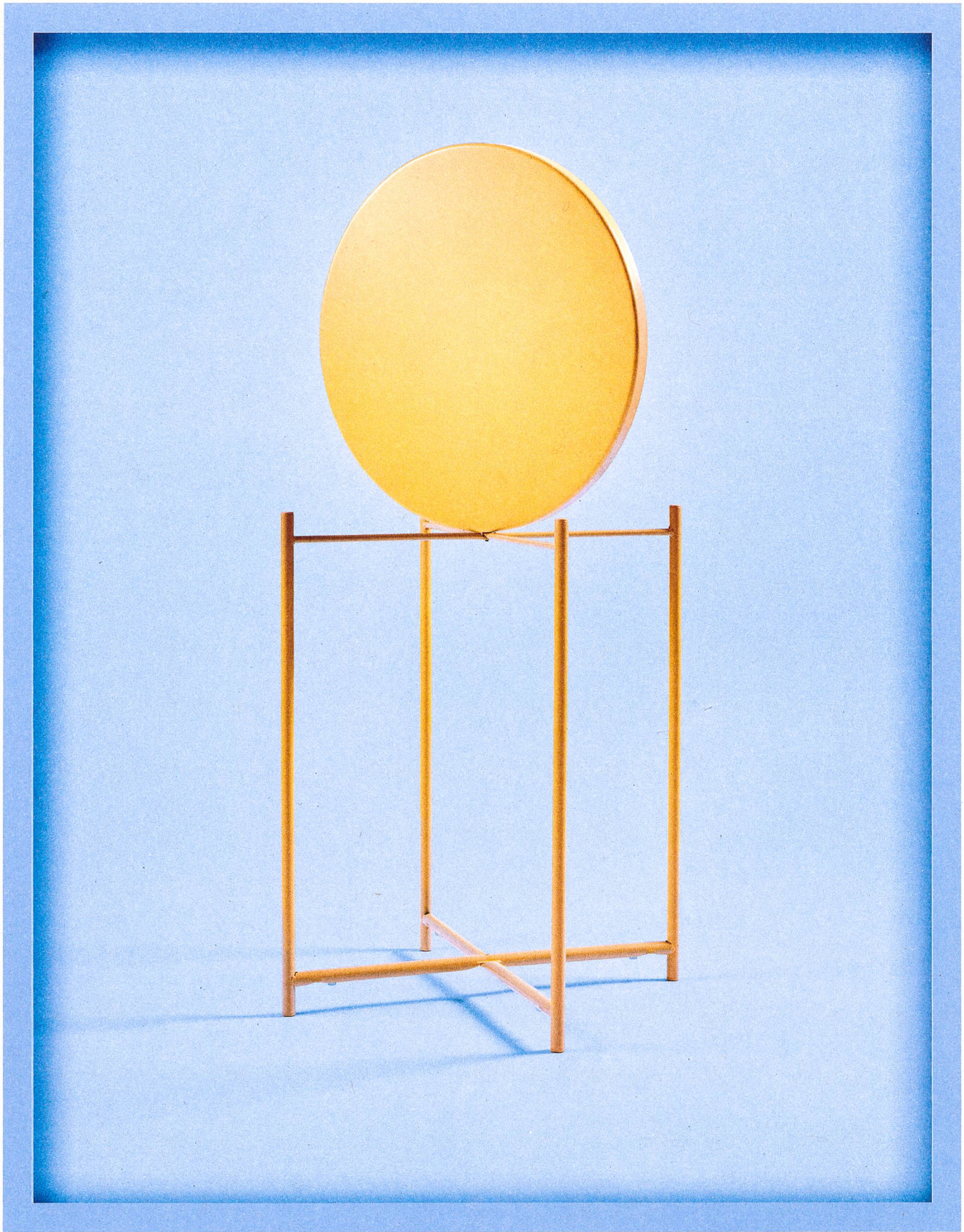




















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which justifies all curtains getting drawn when attending a party serving forbidden goods. Underground art and music scenes burn secretly, fueling a passionate shift towards the birth of subcultures inspired by American culture. Iran's governmental efforts to engineer a contemporary Iranian society and culture before as well as after the 1979 revolution could not accomplish its goal since it always alienated a part of its community or identity. But through an inevitable penetration of a global connectivity, the people themselves are less confined by their government and have individual access to the oversaturating information-power as a unifying force. For instance, during the 2009 protests against the presidential election fraud, social media was a pivotal agent in letting the protestors themselves amplify the unjust police brutality they faced for the world to see. Like during the revolution and several subsequent protests, the young Iranians have the ability to set a germination into motion.

Ultimately this power that promises an illusory freedom, endangers the specificity of a place and its culture and projects a generalization of a lifestyle, a common language which connects through its universality, but disconnects from a physical reality at the same time by means of adding a congesting layer. This layer increasingly overtakes the habitat as a natural and specific living environment. Still, the pervasive digital layer connecting the world acts as a silk road, enabling cultural and social fertilization of contrasting spaces. Through this connecting and merging of different cultural and social singularities, a generic and eclectic culture prevails, defining our values and daily lives in a nonpartisan space containing simultaneously all cultures and values but generating solely an illusion of one.



Woman at Car Wash, Tehran  
Photograph: Alexander Poulikakos, 2017



