Morehshin Allahyari's Art on Iranian Censorship Will Soon Be Out of This World
by Mahsa Alimardani
November 29, 2014

Photo from the #AsYouScrollDown, Printed Records,
used with permission by Morehshin Allahyari

Discovering Morehshin Allahyari's art is a treat to anyone who studies Iranian media or is part of the digital activist community. I spend my time studying censorship and Internet controls inside Iran, which represents a very niche interest group that often does not resonate beyond people who do similar research.

A German friend who knows my overly specific fascination with Iran's Internet sent me a Facebook message this past October saying, "Mahsa, analogue love in digital times: this time with the Internet in Iran." As if to say, your interest has suddenly become more 'sexy' after watching this video.

And indeed, that's what an artist does — make the ordinary and mundane aspects of our world beautiful. Moreshin in effect does this with less than enticing aspects of Iran. She has taken the subject of Iran's slow and interrupted Internet and made something of a new media love story out of it. After watching "In Mere Spaces, All Things Are Side By Side", I chatted with Morehshin through a series of google hangouts and emails, who is now based in San Francisco's Bay area, to understand her art and her many different projects, including one that is being sent to space.

What was the inspiration for the video "In Mere Spaces All Things Are Side by Side I"?

Morehshin Allahyari (MA): For the last one year I've been working on different projects pushing the limits of virtual and physical spaces and my own relationship to them. I moved to the U.S. in 2007 and haven't been back to Iran for four years, so now my only relationship to Iran is virtual: I talk to my family and friends on Skype or chat with them via Facebook or Viber. In the last seven years, I have celebrated Persian New Year with them online; my sister used to send me pictures of everyday life, even images from my father's grave. I saw my grandmother last on Google Hangout. Everyday I wake up and read the news or watch videos online to get a sense of what's happening in Iran (which I think is still far from the experience of living there). I am fascinated about these complex physical and virtual relationships with a place I once called "home". At the same time that I was reading, thinking, doing research about these concepts, I found a CD where I saved all my old Yahoo chat histories from the time I was a teenager in Iran… this is where the idea for my new body of work "In Mere Spaces All Things Are Side by Side" came together.

I think we all relate to the notion of relationships developing through communication technologies, and the story of this particular relationship developing in an environment of filtered and delayed censorship is especially resounding. Can you speak to that?

MA: One reason that I am really interested in this project is that in a country like the U.S. we usually talk and think about our access to technology and internet from the position of privilege… so with this project I wanted to focus on the inaccessibility, failure, and limitation of technology and address the ways that Internet is understood and experienced in a developing country. Raising important questions about the hierarchical and horizontal aspect of the net, its slowness, and broken-ness.
As a teenager in Iran, Internet became a window to the world I otherwise could not have an access to, yet it was limited and censored. My sister thought I was insane for spending so much time every day trying to get online and being so persistent about re-connecting when I would get disconnected every 10-15 minutes… But I learned a lot about the world around me and had a lot of online friends that I talked to, and yeah! this one American guy that I loved and chatted with all the time (for almost five years), and who was my online best friend for years.

So my in progress project "In Mere Spaces All Things Are Side By Side" uses these experiences and a selection of my chat archive as a point of departure to poetically explore the invisible and less discussed aspects of the net in a developing country.

There's a great line in your video where you say, "My slow and interrupted online being cannot resist the oppression of the country I live in." What do you mean by this?

MA: I always think about how you can never escape certain things in life when you are born in a country like Iran….or what's called the geographic determinism. So by this line, I mean to say even though I could exist and interact in the virtual world, the circumstances of my physical environment had an influence on my online presence and life. Although I had access to the Internet, my access was limited and I had to pass through Internet filters and censorship. So for me, it's important to question our assumptions about the virtual and physical binary and how and in what ways they influence one another in certain circumstances. I also think the audio composed by Dan Tramte has an important influence in highlighting these connections and binaries; the gap between the harsh noise (blackness/dis-connection) and the rest of the audio (access/connection/communication).

What happened to your relationship with the guy you were chatting with from Iran in your film (johnny616)?

MA: We lost touch after we met a bunch of times IRL [in real life].

Can you explain the story behind the name "Like Pearls"? And why Iranian spam about underwear?

MA: In the last one year, I've been reading through and gathering the Farsi spam emails that I receive. In my "Like Pearls" project, I was interested to delve into the cultural, religious, and social references of romance, sex, and online shopping from these very strange spam emails that I received about underwear. I think you can learn a lot about the adoption and the use of technology through a phenomenon like email spam. In addition, the text and the kitsch aesthetics of these spam was something that caught my attention. The more research I did, the more I became amazed by these Iranian online stores that sold underwear and roses (all in one package) but also mostly encouraged men to buy them for their wives and lovers. Also, the visual aspect of these censored bodies of the women in these online advertisements was surreal… because of the juxtaposition between what the message and purpose of the images were and how they were eventually censored due to limitations for these websites (many based in Iran) in showing nudity. So "Like Pearls" is a net.art piece, a mash-up of GIFs, text, and images that I've collaged together. As the audience scrolls through the website, there are pop-up messages that will show if you click on hyperlinked images… the messages highlight the misogynistic aspect of these spam and a critique to the objectification of female bodies using these underwear advertisements as an encouragement of relationships.

Where do you find the most inspiration for your art? Can you explain your new media background and how you use this to represent your ideas?

MA: I use my daily life experiences to create work that is meaningful to me and -hopefully- thought provoking to others. As a new media artist, my work primarily uses digital technologies and tools to explore different concepts. I am really interested in political and social issues around me, my personal and political struggles as a Middle-Eastern artist born and raised in Iran; living in the U.S. and in diaspora; and the life of others who live in similar conditions. These digital technologies that I use in my work offer a limitless possibility that in my opinion doesn't exist in a more traditional forms of art practice. In many of my 3D animation projects I use narrative and writing and black and white images/3D environments to create a poetic and dreamlike experience.

#AsYouScrollDown is supposed to serve as a digital and analogue archive of tweets and images from the 2009 protest movement in Iran. Can you explain the idea behind the project?

MA: #AsYouScrollDown is a piece that was commissioned by Theory of Survival project curated by Taraneh Hemami for an exhibition at Southern Exposure gallery in San Francisco. The exhibition took the form of a bazaar and all the artists in the show were invited to create a storefront that reflects back on the revolutions, protests, and in general political history of Iran. My storefront was a record shop and my piece is an archival record of 100 tweets that I gathered from the 2009-2010 Green Movement in Iran (the most shared, favorited tweets), read by a computer voice; suggesting a "scrolling down", looking back at political and historical archives and in this case the twitter archive of the green movement of Iran.
As the audience listens to the record, the sound starts getting more intense and chaotic; harder to understand at certain points; representing our dreams and nightmares and the bitter memories of the protests by reflecting back on the events; once again connecting the two world of physical/analogue and virtual/digital.

Can you break down what is going in the Dark Matter project? How does it feel to be breaking such a big taboo about an Iranian theme?

MA: Dark Matter is a series of combined sculptural objects that are 3D modeled and then 3D printed to form a surreal and humorous juxtapositions. The objects that I chose for the first series were the ones that are forbidden or unwelcome in Iran. I was interested in finding conceptual and poetic ways to use the technology of 3D printing. In Dark Matter the printer becomes a tool for resistance; a tool for documentation of the lives we've lived as Iranians since the 1979 revolution. I think there is something very beautiful about the possibility of 3D printing forbidden objects as an act of resistance. In the case of

my Dark Matter project, none of the objects that I've 3D printed are functional… they only serve as symbolic representations of lives under oppression. The objects vary from dog and satellite dish to barbie and Simpson.

Part two of Dark Matter is going to outer space. Can we pause and just admit that this is very wild. Why? What? How? Please tell me everything.

MA: Six months ago, I was commissioned by Forever Now project to create a new work to be sent to the International Space Station and then into outer space in January 2015. In 1977, NASA did a similar project called "The Voyager Golden Records" which included sounds and images by different musicians and artists and was launched to the space. The Forever Now project is a similar project but with videos and sounds. I think the Voyager Golden Record was more of a utopian message from Earth to the space. I wanted my video (Dark Matter) to represent the dark sides of our lives… a dystopia if you will. In a way this project is a documentation of the monuments of life one can find on Earth, and an attempt to represent some aspects of authoritarianism and dictatorship. I love the idea that these objects will exist beyond human control… there will be free of our obscure laws and bureaucracies and oppression in the space. Symbolical, I am freeing them to the universe.