



111 | Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: Aisha Qandisha*, 2018; installation with pool, 3D printed resin sculpture and HD single-channel video with audio.

3

MONUMENTALITY: SCULPTING MEMORIES BETWEEN MONUMENTS AND ARCHIVES

She who saw all things in the broad-boned earth and beyond,
and knew what was to be known
She who had seen what there was, and had embraced the 'otherness'
She to whom the image clung like a mirror; a display of crisis
and who dwelt together with a devised becoming
She knows and sees the unknown and lays them bare
She is the 'monstrous other', the dark goddess, the possessive jinn,
the dividing persona;
She restores myths and histories; the untold and the forgotten; the misread and uneven;
Those of and from the Near East.¹

The works of Morehshin Allahyari make and mark a space for memories from the SWANA region.² More precisely, Allahyari's practice revolves around the sculptural embodiment of memory and its formation in a dedicated site and form. Unfolding in the hybrid space between sculpture, archive, and monument, this final part examines Allahyari's work as a prime example of a changing understanding of monumentality.

Allahyari was born in Tehran during the Iran–Iraq war in 1985 and left Iran in 2007, choosing 'self-exile' over the '[self]-censorship' she would have had to undertake due to the severe Islamic rule of the reformist president at that time, Mohammad Khatami.³ She pursued her education in social science and media studies at the University of Tehran, then earning a Master of Arts in Digital Media Studies from the University of Denver, and subsequently achieving a Master of Fine Arts in New Media Art from the University of North Texas. Her work with digital technology, including 3D printing, web-based hypertext fictions, sculpture, video, experimental animation, and publishing, is deeply grounded in the interrogation of political, sociocultural, and gender norms.

1 Morehshin Allahyari, 'Aisha Qandisha: Video text', online transcript (date unknown), https://docs.google.com/document/d/1qsUi47lBqGn-m6MW7sdsddmNjmBKmh_kvGq-pBFY40/edit, accessed 10 December 2024.

2 As mentioned in the interim conclusion above, SWANA is a decolonial term for the region of Southwest Asia and North Africa.

3 Nobel Peace prize winner Shirin Ebadi painstakingly describes the political climate in Iran under the rule of Khatami, which saw the introduction of some of the most 'inhumane laws and policies, in response to the activism [Ebadi] and many colleagues in the field of human rights and the women's movement pursued'. Shirin Ebadi, *Until We Are Free: My Fight For Human Rights in Iran* (London: Rider, 2016), 8–9.

Despite Allahyari's intermedial approach, an important centre of her practice is the sculptural object. Allahyari's series *She Who Sees the Unknown* sculpturally revives memories of the partly forgotten but once powerful jinns and goddesses of SWANA origin myths. In both pre-Islamic mythology and Islamic theology, jinns play a central role. They are fearsome and honoured creatures that reveal themselves to humans to resolve or create catastrophic situations.⁴ At the heart of her project, the artist creates sculptural reconstructions of these monstrous, often female or queer figures and their stories through 3D sculpting, printing, and speculative storytelling. The works adopt a variety of visual forms and presentations that mirror the shape-shifting features associated with jinns. *Aisha/Qandisha* (2018; fig. 111), *Huma and Talismans* (2016; fig. 112), *Ya'jooj Ma'jooj* (2017; fig. 113), *Kabous: The Right Witness, and The Left Witness* (2019; fig. 114) consist of 3D sculpted and 3D printed figures juxtaposed with video essays or VR experiences. The fourth iteration in the series, *The Laughing Snake* (2018; fig. 115), manifests as an interactive hypertext narrative available online. In the context of a physical exhibition, it is accompanied by a 3D printed sculpture depicting its protagonist. These visual elements are showcased alongside Allahyari's extensive archival research work for *She Who Sees the Unknown*, accessible in an adjoining reading room. Physical manifestations of the project also include performance–lectures, *Ha'm-Neshini* ('sitting together'), and 'fabulation stations', featuring dialogues with fellow artists, scientists, and activist women from the SWANA region. The project's current state is meticulously documented on an elaborate webpage, further expanding and multiplying its diverse trajectories.⁵

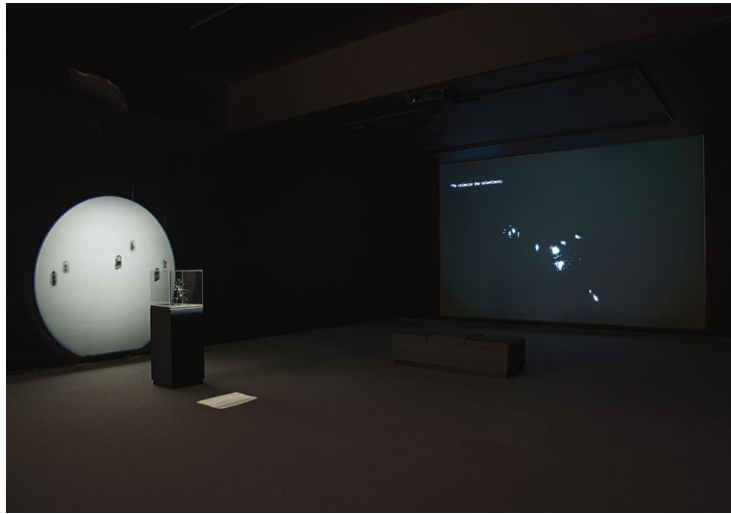
Allahyari thereby reveals herself to be engaged in complex cross-media dialogues in which sculpture, video, VR, the internet, and performance are combined across the works of her series. Grounded in extensive research that draws from pre- and post-Islamic texts, myths, and stories of Persian and Arabic origin, Allahyari reintroduces the forgotten characters of the jinns back into public presence. However, the unifying element of the series is the physical realization of her composite figures in sculptural form. The space-encompassing presentations thus not only preserve, protect, celebrate, and archive their historical influences. They also allow the artist to recode – or in her words 'refigure' – their historical trajectory for critical–creative reflections on the contemporary experiences of SWANA women.

'Monumentality: Sculpting memories between monuments and archives', the third part of this volume, will examine Allahyari's mythological appropriations as a diasporic memory practice with a distinct sculptural embodiment in actual and virtual space. Alongside other Iranian diasporic artists, including Amitis Motevalli, Nooshin Rostami, and Shirin Fahimi. This chapter demonstrates how Allahyari engages with the sculptural features of archives

4 For more detail on the importance of jinns, see G. Hussein Rassool, *Evil Eye, Jinn Possession, and Mental Health Issues: An Islamic Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2018); Robert W. Lebling, *Legends of the Fire Spirits: Jinn and Genies from Arabia to Zanzibar* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010); Amira El-Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2009); and Waḥīd 'Abd al-Salām Bālī, *Man's Protection against Jinn and Satan*, tr. Haytham Kreidly (Beirut: Dar al-Kotob al-Ilmiyah, 2006).

5 Morehshin Allahyari, 'She Who Sees the Unknown', project website (date unknown), <http://shewhosaeestheunknown.com/>, accessed 10 December 2024.

112 | Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: Huma and Talismans*, 2016; installation with 3D printed resin sculpture, three clear resin talismans and HD single-channel video with audio.



113 | Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: Kabous, The Right Witness and The Left Witness*, 2019; installation with 3D printed resin sculpture and VR video.



and monuments to propose innovative ways of making and marking a space for painful, suppressed, or forgotten memories. In all her works, memories assume an aesthetic and sculptural form. Her works enact commemorative structures highlighting the trajectories of those who have been forgotten, erased, or left behind.

Since the nineteenth century, the concept of the monument has undergone a significant change.⁶ From embodying heroic, self-aggrandizing national gestures celebrating ideals and triumphs, the monument has shifted throughout the twentieth century towards ephemer-

⁶ See Horst W. Janson, *The Rise and Fall of the Public Monument*, ed. Andrew W. Mellon (New Orleans, Louisiana: Graduate School, Tulane University, 1976); Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the expanded field', 33.

al conceptual interventions marking national ambivalence and uncertainty.⁷ As artists have developed critical approaches to traditional monumental codes through ephemeral, living, impermanent, or vivid modes of expression, the monument has become a contested site, a place of cultural conflict. For example, since the late 1980s, post-colonial and feminist discourses across the globe have contributed critical reflections on the appropriate national forms for mourning the genocides of indigenous populations, the resuscitation of slavery, and the presence of female voices in the act of commemoration.⁸ These contributions have designated the monument as a site of cultural debate rather than a symbol of shared national values and ideals. With the decline of the monument, the archive has acquired discursive currency as a potential space to restore the memories of those who have been overlooked. As such, the archive seems to have revived some of the functions of the monument while fundamentally impinging on the power of the sculptural monument and sculpture more generally.

This part focuses on a generation of artists who use digital technologies to reveal the problematic power structures inscribed into traditional sculptural and archival forms, while simultaneously using these forms as a means to restore and open alternative sites of commemoration. Despite their proximity to discourses on archives, the works featured in this chapter bring sculptural qualities once again to the fore. Morehshin Allahyari and her colleagues engage with the sculptural functions once assigned to monuments to propose alternative ways of corporealizing remembrance.

Contemporary artists' use of 3D technologies for sculptural purposes requires a fundamental reassessment of the resulting works' specific monumentality. Surprisingly, there has been hardly any work on the theory underlying this transformation. This chapter will address this discursive blind spot by rethinking the function of sculpture as a monument *vis-à-vis* its expansion through the archive on the one hand and 3D technologies, augmented reality, and the internet on the other.

The goal of this final part is thus to investigate the particular monumentality that recent sculptural practices invoke. The notion of monumentality becomes uncoupled from the idea of the colossal, oversized, and imposing, in favour of the etymological origin of the word 'monument' in Persian, یادبود (*yādbūd*). In a literal sense, this can be translated as an 'aid to

7 See James E. Young, 'Twentieth-century countermonuments', in Michael Kelly (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press USA, 1998), 276.

8 See for example Andrew Denson, *Monuments to Absence: Cherokee Removal and the Contest over Southern Memory* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Shiera S. El-Malik and Isaac A. Kamola (eds.), *Politics of African Anticolonial Archive* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Anthony Downey (ed.), *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015); Ana Lucia Araujo, *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2012); Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer (eds.), *Contested Histories in Public Space: Memory, Race, and Nation* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2009); K. S. Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape*, 3rd edn (Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing, 2008); Joanne M. Braxton and Maria Diedrich (eds.), *Monuments of the Black Atlantic: Slavery and Memory* (Münster: Lit, 2004); W. J. T. Mitchell, *Art and the Public Sphere*, 2nd edn (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1993).



114 | Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: Ya'jooj Ma'jooj*, 2017; image of 3D printed sculpture.

memory', something used as a reminder of something or someone.⁹ Allahyari incorporates the spectator in a 'memory site', a setting that imitates a sacred space for commemoration and remembrance. Her works can thus be described as proximate to monumental codes in the sense of memorial structures that aim to transmit a message. Unlike an archive's temporal focus on the past, however, Allahyari's work moves towards the development of future-oriented structures which are intended to commemorate and bring people together – in other words, to memorialize, to remind, to instruct the public, echoing the derivation of the Persian word for 'monument'.

Chapter 3.1 ('Recoding memories between diaspora, gender, and jinns') explores how Allahyari uses digital technologies and networked tools to create structures for memories. Particular attention will be paid to *Aisha/Qandisha*, the third work of her series *She Who Sees the Unknown*, based on a powerful jinn, or she-demon, from Morocco. The visual analysis will emphasize Allahyari's use of digital technology, with artistic strategies such as archiving, storytelling, and refiguring playing a central role in the conception of her works. The chapter then traces Allahyari's different memory assemblages, their gendered and diasporic dynamics, and how these materialize in the artist's work. It thus presents Allahyari as a mnemological artist – an artist who works within and engages with the field of memory.¹⁰

9 My sincere thanks to Dr Zahra Samareh – a translation researcher, authorized translator, and sworn interpreter for Persian – for providing generous support with the spelling, translation, and transliteration of the Farsi words in this chapter.

10 Anna Reading introduces the notion of the 'mnemologist' as a scholar who 'has a particular interest in memory and the ways in which cultural memory is articulated and mobilized, defining herself by working



115 | Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: The Laughing Snake*, 2018; installation with 3D printed sculpture, mirrors and hypertext narrative. Installation view, Hunter College, New York.

In Allahyari's work, memories assume an aesthetic and embodied form.

Chapter 3.2 ('Sculpting the archive') therefore investigates the relationships between the memorial, the sculptural, and the archival in Allahyari's practice as forms of identification and cultural orientation performed in actual space and virtual space. The boundaries between the artist's own memory, the artwork, and its documentation are thereby rendered unstable. By highlighting the dynamics around remembering, archiving, and embodying repressed memories and experiences in Allahyari's online hypertext narrative *The Laughing Snake*, the chapter situates Allahyari's practice in discourses on diasporic, digital, and living archives. Allahyari's work connects to practices by other Iranian diaspora artists, namely Nooshin Rostami, Amitis Motevalli, and Shirin Fahimi. Their sculptural works in turn build and expand on artistic notions of living and generative archives. By comparing their works to those of digital pioneers such as Lynn Hershman Leeson, Claudia Hart, and the Canadian artist Skawennati, the chapter will show that the work of Allahyari and her peers acts as a bridge between the digital and physical realms. Accordingly, their approaches surpass mere diasporic or archival artistic practices, instead pivoting towards a sculptural engagement with the codes of monuments.

within what is now memory studies'. I aim to broaden this concept to encompass artistic practices, such as those seen in Allahyari's work. See Anna Reading, *Gender and Memory in the Global Age* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 15.

Allahyari, Rostami, Motevalli, and Fahimi use digital technologies to enact embodied places and structures for gendered and diasporic memories and histories. Their works are bound together, each employing a commemorative sculptural structure with a clear intention to recall, commemorate, and preserve the stories of SWANA women. It is this fixation on memories in sculptural modes, their embodiment in a designated form and a future-oriented artistic site that not only suggests a discussion of Allahyari's and her peers' work in the context of diasporic, living, and generative archives, but also positions their work close to monumental codes. The final chapter ('Archival monuments: Reflections on monumentality'), locates the work of Allahyari and her peers in current debates on monuments. Highlighting parallels and discontinuities, the chapter demonstrates how this group of artists builds upon and reconfigures previous art-historical discussions. In contrast to the grandeur and pomposity of nineteenth-century public sculpture's monumental representation systems, Allahyari and her peers not only appropriate the functions of monuments but also update their familiar aesthetics with newfound immediacy through digital technologies and distribution systems. By reconsidering the function of sculpture within the intersections of monument and archive, as well as through feminist and diasporic lenses, the chapter explores emerging forms of intermedial and nomadic monumentality.

The chapter concludes that it is through an intermedial, heterogeneous, nomadic – yet still sculptural – approach to monumentality that a new generation of artists has questioned monuments' capacity to both convey and erase memory. The works discussed throughout this chapter not only critically examine the tendency of monuments, archives, and digital information technologies 'to be deployed in ways that reproduce (colonial) power relations' (a tendency that Allahyari has termed 'digital colonialism').¹¹ They also remind us that history and its memory are always subjected to forms of representation and that it is through both conceptual and aesthetic confrontation with representational strategies that such heritage can be critically addressed.

3.1 Recoding memories between diaspora, gender, and jinns

Her name is Aisha Qandisha;
One of the most fearsome and honoured Jinn of the Arab world;
A demon believed to live in the waters of Fez medina.¹²

Allahyari's work *She Who See the Unknown: Aisha/Qandisha* revolves around a she-demon, also called *jinniya*, deeply rooted in the popular belief of North Morocco. This chapter examines this work as an example of Allahyari's mythological appropriations, seen in her series *She Who Sees the Unknown*. A careful visual analysis and discussion of her work's production modes highlight Allahyari's artistic strategies of archiving, visual appropriation, storytelling,

11 Morehshin Allahyari, 'Digital colonialism (2016–2019)', artist's website (date unknown), <http://www.morehshin.com/digital-colonialism-2016-2019/>, accessed 10 December 2024.

12 Allahyari, 'Aisha Qandisha: Video text'.

and refiguring. Each layer of Allahyari's artistic process hinges on memories at a personal and a collective level. Allahyari assembles, reembodies, preserves, and remediates memories linked to the historical trajectory of her jinns. In a second step, this part of the chapter traces Allahyari's different memory assemblages. It interrogates their gendered dynamics, their ties to diasporic and feminist discourses, and, most importantly, how they materialize as embodied, re-coded, and refigured through the artist's mixed-media work with sculpture, video, installation, and digital technologies.

At the centre of the sculptural installation of *She Who Sees the Unknown: Aisha/Qandisha* at the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Canada, stands a small white figure on a red translucent plinth (fig. 116). The creature has two heads, each turned in opposite directions like the heads of Janus. A long mane of hair frames the two faces. At the level of the figure's hips, the hair divides into six distinct strands, with two flowing down the being's back, two down its left side, and two down its right. The strands have pointy ends that curl up slightly. The figure's arms are open and slightly bent. Like its two faces, they point to the left and right of the space. Its posture is welcoming, inviting, conciliatory, and announcing. The figure's breasts, pronounced hips, and vulva identify her as a female. Polarities define the creature's visual presence. As one's gaze descends from her seemingly welcoming demeanor and attractive beauty, a disconcerting transformation takes place in the lower part of her form. Below the knees, her body features resemble those of an animal. Her hair, moving away from the body, begins to look like a serpent or the arms of a kraken-like creature. Her ankles are positioned backward, reminiscent of a bird's, while her feet are closer to those of a hoofed creature – perhaps a donkey, goat, or camel. The thighs are parted, creating a division from the abdomen, giving the impression of a figure composed of two distinct parts: a front and a back, with a noticeable void in the centre. Despite her inviting and confident pose, there is an undertone of intimidation.

The chimera, half human and half animal, is made from white resin and sits on a red translucent plastic plinth that is placed inside an oblong basin of water. Inside the red box, a black cable runs from the centre of the plinth's top surface to a black small cube, like an umbilical cord connecting the white figure to the ground (fig. 117). A closer look reveals that the cable is used to circulate water from the basin to the inside of the plinth. There, it is pumped up to the top, where it cascades down as a small waterfall or fountain. The water basin extends from the plinth to the wall. The highly reflective surface of the water functions like a mirror that factors into the video projection on the wall behind the display.

The projection, shot at a portrait angle, begins with a view of a rippled black surface – resembling water or a dark substance like oil or blood. One hears the sound of flowing water. A queasy tune cuts through the space alongside a discomfiting, mechanical sound reminiscent of a motor. An authorial feminine voice begins to tell a story. Her inflection is reminiscent of the theatrical openings of heroic mythologies. In Allahyari's video essay, the monstrous jinn appears against a red background. She stands thigh-high in water. When positioned in front of the installation at the MacKenzie Art Gallery, the actual 3D printed figure and its projection are overlaid, object and image merging into one another. The figure's physical features are augmented by its digital counterpart. Through the projection, the



116 | Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: Aisha Qandisha*, 2018; installation with pool, 3D printed resin sculpture and HD single-channel video with audio.



117 | Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: Aisha Qandisha*, 2018; installation with pool, 3D printed resin sculpture and HD single-channel video with audio.



118 | Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: Aisha Qandisha*, 2018; installation with pool, 3D printed resin sculpture and HD single-channel video with audio.

physical object is thus magnified and achieves a monumental quality. The narrator's authorial voice and the mesmerizing soundscape further contribute to this impression. The water or liquid surface of the digital projection acts as a translucent boundary between worlds. As a connector and transgressor between those realms, the 3D printed object is strategically placed at their boundary. The figure of Aisha/Qandisha serves as the marker between the underwater and terrestrial world, as well as between the physical realm of the plinth and the virtual digital world of the projection (fig. 118).

In the meantime, Allahyari's video has switched to a new scene: We now see the back of composite figure as a 3D animation standing hip-high in a red underwater world. Her peripherals are bounded by red walls that aesthetically resemble the red plinth in the physical space of the installation. The projection immerses viewers within a watery perspective, as they look up at the figure from below, seeing it on a monumental scale. Through the trans-

parent water surface, the slightly distorted back of the figure is visible, while its animal-like legs remain sharp and clear. The underwater terrain is depicted as hilly, uneven, and earthy, contrasting with the outer world's view, which appears airy, veiled, and obscured. The colour scheme of the scene has also changed; the red tones are darker, as if the figure were standing in an enclosed space such as a cavern or cave. Concurrently, Allahyari's orchestration unfolds in both virtual and physical spaces, referencing sacred Moroccan locations associated with Aisha/Qandisha – such as pits, grottos, springs, fountains, and spots where sightings have occurred.¹³ Allahyari's installation resembles such shrines, honouring both Aisha/Qandisha's destructive and yet intriguing powers.

The viewers' level of engagement, cultural background, and prior knowledge play a significant role in shaping the depth of their understanding of Allahyari's work. A Western, white female spectator, lacking notable knowledge of Arabic mythology and jinnealogy – much like the author of this book – may initially find it challenging to grasp all the facets and nuances of Allahyari's work. Nevertheless, Allahyari's artistic engagement actively encourages dialogue. The radical symmetry of the installation – emphasized by the figure's two faces, her stretched-out arms, and her reflections in the surrounding water – radiates the figure's importance. Even without any previous knowledge of narratives of the jinn, Allahyari's work sensitizes viewers to its significance and influence in the Arabic world. The artwork incorporates the spectator in an intermedia setting that imitates a sacred space. Each of its elements, ranging from the sculptural object of Aisha/Qandisha to its digital projection accompanied by written and spoken text, seems to function as both a repository and a transmitter. It indicates the artist's conscious decision to preserve and transmit knowledge and memories to the work's audience – on both personal and collective, as well as historical and contemporary levels surrounding the jinn Aisha/Qandisha. In this light, Allahyari's work can also be interpreted as a sculptural framework for various intersecting memories.

Allahyari's artistic process unfolds through multiple steps. Beginning with research and exploration of archival sources related to the monstrous figure of Aisha/Qandisha, she visually appropriates and sculpts her subject using 3D technologies, drawing inspiration from ancient representations. Additionally, Allahyari captures and recounts Aisha/Qandisha's stories through feminist storytelling strategies, thereby reshaping gendered memories associated with Aisha/Qandisha for contemporary contemplation. These artistic strategies will be introduced below and situated within discourses on memory.

Archival work

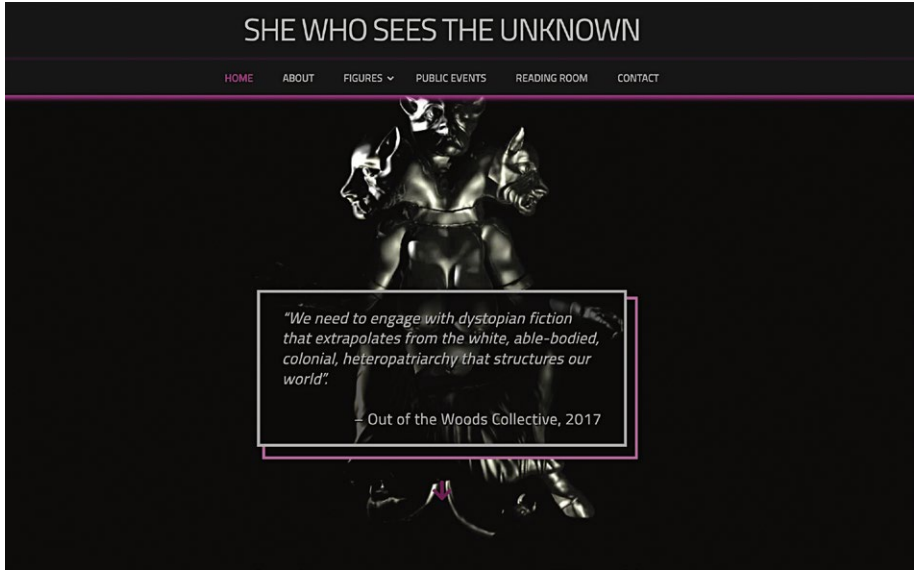
Allahyari considers her series *She Who Sees the Unknown* – one of the five figures of which is *Aisha/Qandisha* – a 'long-term research-based project'.¹⁴ The process begins with the artist's research, involving the gathering of images and texts from Islamic mythical resources, academic journals, lexica, and books that delve into narratives about jinns. At the McKen-

13 See Vincent Crapanzano, *The Hamadsha: A Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1973), 145.

14 Allahyari, 'She Who Sees the Unknown'.



119 | Morehshin Allahyari, *Maktabkhaneh (Reading Room)*, 2019; installation with books, articles, images on iPad, carpet, cushions and archival images on vinyl. Installation view, MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina (Canada).



120 | Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown*, 2016–present; screenshot from website <http://shewhoseestheunknown.com/>.

zie Art Gallery, these research materials are exhibited alongside the installation in a separate reading room area (fig. 119) and can be accessed online on the project's webpage www.shewhoseestheunknown.com (fig. 120). Depending on the viewer's inquisitiveness or their prior knowledge and dedication to Allahyari's project, they will either be able to appreciate these equally significant layers within her work or will miss out on a deeper understanding of Aisha/Qandisha's and the other jinns' intriguing backgrounds.

Research literature describes Aisha/Qandisha as a she-demon or *jinniya*, a jinn who lives in bodies of water.¹⁵ In his book *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (1926), the Finnish sociologist Edvard Westermarck has listed the various stories surrounding the appearance of Aisha/Qandisha, demonstrating how deeply rooted and significant she is in Arabic popular belief, especially in Morocco.¹⁶ According to his sources, Aisha/Qandisha is described as a woman with a face covered by her long black hair.¹⁷ The female jinn 'appears as a grown up woman with a beautiful face, but she also has been seen with legs of a goat or an ass, or with the legs of a woman and the body of a she-goat with long pendant breasts.'¹⁸ Her strong libido makes her distinct from other jinns, except those that appear to be variants of her.¹⁹ She is a shape-shifter like the class of jinns called *la-hraij*, who take on animal or human shapes.²⁰ The verb *hrej*, which translates to 'come out', links to her emergence from a watery abode. The jinn's goal is to seduce handsome (bathing) men, madden them, and then kill them. It has been reported that she also approaches married men, namely in the shape of their wives, then takes their lives.²¹ References to water in actual and virtual form thus dominate Allahyari's installation, alluding to Aisha/Qandisha's strategy of attacking, seizing, and killing. Additionally, these references connect to various religious practices associated with the belief in her. Once again, this aspect of the work becomes truly appreciable only once one is familiar with the existing legends of the jinns.

Almost all figures in Allahyari's series involve detailed reconstructions based on illustrations from *The Book of Felicity* – an illustrated manuscript commissioned by the Ottoman sultan Murad III in 1582 – and *The Book of Wonders* – a fourteenth-century Arabic manuscript compiled and illustrated by Abd al-Hasan al-Isfahani (fig. 121). The illustration forming the visual basis for the reconstruction of Aisha/Qandisha, however, is sourced from the internet without a traceable origin (fig. 122). The image resembles those illustrations from the an-

15 See Manfred Lurker, *The Routledge Dictionary of Gods, Goddesses, Devils and Demons*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2004), 157; Edvard Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1926), 392; Crapanzano, *The Hamadsha*, 44.

16 'A Moorish friend reports, his mother would warn him against the djinn when swimming in the sea. "It is from the sea that she ascends to the cave of Rmelqâla". According to a woman in Tsul, she emerged from a spring. There are other stories that locate her in a river near Tetuan, in the rivers Bou-Regreg and Sebou or in the sewers of Fez, where she appears as an ugly old female with hanging breasts.' Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, 392–393.

17 See Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, 395.

18 Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, 392.

19 See Crapanzano, *The Hamadsha*, 143.

20 See Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, 393.

21 See Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, 393.



121 | Allahyari with source materials outside her office at the School of Poetic Computation.



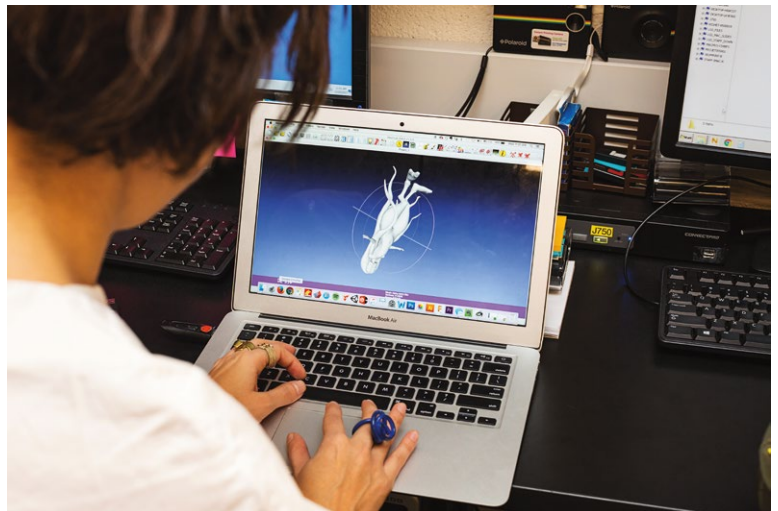
122 | Aisha Qandisha, illustration from unidentified manuscript. Used as one of the references for Allahyari's work; measurements and source unknown.

cient books showing a monstrous figure characterized by the same outstanding features as Allahyari's description. She is naked, and her two faces are poised to the left and right. She has pronounced hips that form an opening between her legs, long hair, and, most importantly, hooves. The six strains of her kraken-like hair have twisted around the necks of six men. Four ethereal, white, ghost-like creatures float just beyond the water's surface, appearing either deceased or half-alive. Two men situated above the water seem poised to be enticed below. The female figure firmly holds them in her hands, while her hair gradually wraps around their necks. The vibrant scene is framed by red sea creatures, including fish, sea stars, a crab, corals, and two octopuses.

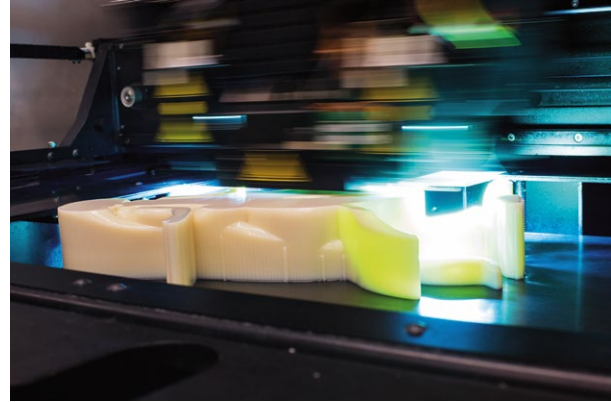
Production

Allahyari translates the two-dimensional illustration into a three-dimensional object using a number of different digital technologies that range from 3D animation programmes to 3D printing. For her installation, the artist initially sculpts *Aisha/Qandisha* digitally, using the programme ZBrush, thus bestowing upon the flat drawing a three-dimensional body in virtual space (fig. 123). Allahyari's reconstruction of *Aisha/Qandisha* then achieves a physical presence through 3D printing (fig. 124). The print is treated further by the artist's hand (fig. 125), which removes any remaining support material or residue.

The physical representation and appropriation of *Aisha/Qandisha* are further augmented by a virtual sculpted version of the jinn, reintroduced in Allahyari's video essay. The dynamic visuals are animated using the software Maya, extending the three-dimensional and sculptural-tactile aspects of her work into a four-dimensional, time-based, and narrative quality. Her elaborate skill of storytelling thus becomes most evident through the video essays accompanying her 3D printed sculpture.



123 | Allahyari builds 3D models in ZBrush and Maya software.



124 | Aisha Qandisha sculpture during the printing process on the Stratasys J750 printer at New York University's LaGuardia Studio. Each figure takes 15–25 hours to print.



125 | Allahyari sands the resin Aisha Qandisha sculpture.

Storytelling

If Allahyari's project begins with strategies of archival research, visual appropriation, and sculptural embodiment, creative writing and storytelling also form an important pillar of her work. Allahyari attended private creative writing and storytelling classes in Tehran from the age of twelve until she was eighteen. According to the artist, these classes were the starting point for her artistic practice and first contact with the art world.²² Storytelling forms an integral part of historical Persian memory culture and identity. In the Sassanid era, for example, storytelling was used as a remedy for patients in the Gondishapur School of Medicine's prehistoric hospital.²³ Moreover, stories were read to royal family members from their early

22 See Daniel Rourke, 'Artist profile: Morehshin Allahyari', *Rhizome* blog (31 January 2014), <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/jan/31/artist-profile-morehshin-allahyari/>, accessed 13 December 2024.

23 See Mohammad-Hossein Azizi, 'Gondishapur School of Medicine: The most important medical center in antiquity', *Archives of Iranian Medicine* 11, no. 1 (January 2008), 116–119, doi: 08111/AIM.0023.

years, subtly imparting lessons on proper manners and discipline.²⁴ Storytelling also formed one of the pillars of traditional Persian theatrical genres such as *ta'ziya*, in which stories are conveyed through music, recitation, and costumed reenactors.²⁵ As Allahyari grew up in a Persian-speaking home, stories featuring jinns and usually male heroes such as Rostam, Siavash, Iskandar, and Amir Arsalan played an essential role in her childhood. These stories continue an oral storytelling tradition that dates back centuries and has deeply influenced the visual arts.²⁶

In his pioneering 1925 book *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* ('The social frames of memory'), Maurice Halbwachs conceptualized the social dimension of individual memory, reminding us that an individual's memories are always situated within their sociocultural context.²⁷ In turn, cultural formations are based on a 'collective memory' of symbols, media, institutions, and social practice that convey versions of a shared past and are significant in shaping an individual's awareness of selfhood and identity.²⁸

It is clear that both Allahyari's memories and the sociocultural context in which her act of remembrance is situated play a significant role, as expressed in the artist's opening statement on her project's webpage:

My upbringing in Iran was full of ancient mythical narratives, all involving extraordinary and supernatural beings. My bedtime stories of childhood, told often by my grandmother, were about her memories of encounters with jinn, usually in the public bathhouse of her village.²⁹

Within Persian storytelling culture, the *Shahnameh* or *Shahnama*, an epic poem that recounts the history of pre-Islamic Persia, is the most significant continuation of the age-old tradition of storytelling in the SWANA regions.³⁰ The *Shahnameh* is an important example of the revered status poetry has enjoyed in Iranian culture from the Middle Ages to today. It is one of the three historical texts that form the basis for Allahyari's storytelling and the writing of her series *She Who Sees the Unknown*. Her incorporation of it forges a significant connection between past and present in her work.

The *Shahnameh* is composed of 50,000 rhyming couplets. It contains 62 stories, told in 990 chapters, and is divided into three distinct ages: the mythical, the heroic, and the historical. In 977, Firdawsī Tūsī (940–1020), also transliterated Ferdowsi, commenced the creation of

24 See Erika Friedl, *Folktales and Storytellers of Iran: Culture, Ethos and Identity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 65.

25 See Linda Komaroff, 'Time and again: The intersection of past and present in Iranian art', in Linda Komaroff (ed.), *In the Fields of Empty Days: The Intersection of Past and Present in Iranian Art* (Los Angeles, California: Prestel, 2018), 12.

26 For more information on the importance of storytelling across Persian cultures and how it intersects with visual arts, see Julia Rubanovich (ed.), *Orality and Textuality in the Iranian World: Patterns of Interaction across the Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

27 See Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* [The social frames of memory] (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1925), IX.

28 See Halbwachs, *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* [The social frames of memory], XI.

29 Allahyari, 'She Who Sees the Unknown'.

30 See Hamid Dabashi, *The Shahnameh: The Persian Epic as World Literature* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

this epic poem. His primary source was a prose translation of an earlier work, the *Xvatynamk* or *Xadāynāmag*, from the later centuries of the pre-Islamic Sassanid era (224–651).³¹

The surviving illuminated versions of the book are sumptuous examples of Persian miniature paintings.³² The *Shahnameh* is more than a mere poetic creation; it is frequently acknowledged as a blend of historiography, folklore, and cultural identity, making it a significant component of cultural memory.³³ The *Shahnameh* has directly affected the epic and poetic works of Persian poets and artists to the present. It is thus not surprising that the legacy of this poetic work forms an integral part of the cultural memory that Allahyari accessed for the conceptualization of her work.

The German scholars Aleida and Jan Assmann coined the term 'cultural memory' to describe a type of memory connected to material manifestations, such as images, texts, or works of art. Cultural memory pertains to memories that are objectified and institutionalized, capable of being stored, transmitted, and reintegrated across successive generations.³⁴ 'The concept of cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society, in each epoch, whose "cultivation" serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image. Upon such collective knowledge, for the most part (but not exclusively) of the past, each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity,' Jan Assmann writes.³⁵ The Assmanns thereby distinguished and refined Halbwachs' notion of 'collective memory' by subdividing it into 'cultural' and 'communicative memory', to examine the distinct forms of transmission of memory.³⁶ While 'cultural memory' is linked to objectified memory, 'communicative' memory designates acts of transmission of memory in everyday oral practices.

The equal significance of cultural and communicative memory in Persian cultural transmission is evident in the ongoing practice that stories from the *Shahnameh* are regularly narrated by professionally trained storytellers, known as *naqqāl* (male) or *naqqāla* (female). *Naqqāli*, the oldest art of storytelling in Persian folklore, traces its origins back to the Parthian Empire (247 BCE–224 CE), reaching its pinnacle during the Safavid era (1501–1736). The

31 See Hiran Dinavari, 'Epics and storytelling in Persianate lands and a Persian language tradition: 4 corners of the world: International Collections and Studies at the Library of Congress,' *Library of Congress* blog (24 July 2017), <https://blogs.loc.gov/international-collections/2017/07/epics-and-storytelling-in-persianate-lands-and-a-persian-language-tradition/>, accessed 12 December 2024.

32 See Robert Hillenbrand (ed.), *Shahnama: The Visual Language of the Persian Book of Kings* (Aldershot: Routledge, 2004), 3.

33 For the relationship between *Shahnameh* and Iranian identity, see A.A.F. Khatibi, 'Iranian identity in the *Shahnameh*,' *Nameh-Ye Farhangestan* 8, no. 432 (1 January 2007), 69–76; Nasrin Naraghi, 'Shahnameh: The layering of Iranian identity and cultural influences,' *Nasrin Naraghi* blog (date unknown), <https://www.nasrinnaraghi.com/articles/shahnameh-the-layering-of-iranian-identity-cultural-influences/>, accessed 13 December 2024; Nematollah Fazeli, *Politics of Culture in Iranian Anthropology, Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2006); Hillenbrand, *Shahnama*.

34 Jan Assmann, 'Communicative and cultural memory,' in Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, and Sara Young (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 110–111.

35 Jan Assmann, 'Collective memory and cultural identity,' tr. John Czaplicka, *New German Critique* 65 (Spring–Summer 1995), 132, doi: 10.2307/488538.

36 Assmann, 'Communicative and cultural memory,' 110.

incorporation of legends from the *Shahnameh* has elevated *naqqāli* to a prominent medium for the dissemination of Iranian myths and cultural values, occurring across bazaars, coffee houses, and communities with limited formal education.³⁷ *Naqqāls* traveled with what are known as *pardeh* – paintings depicting key scenes from the stories they narrated. They revealed these scenes one by one while engaging in storytelling and performing. The combination of narration with visual aids, represented by changing images mounted on screens, also positioned *naqqāli* as a pre-theatrical form, arguably akin to cinema.³⁸ Allahyari's video essays for *Aisha/Qandisha*, *Ya'jooj Ma'jooj*, and *Huma* not only borrow the jinns' stories and figurations from these ancient scripts. They also appear to imitate the visual and narrative history of Persian storytelling by paralleling or superimposing spoken word, text, and images together in the form of a digital animation.

Recognized as UNESCO intangible cultural heritage, *naqqāli* encompasses numerous artistic and performative elements, leading some scholars to posit its significant influence in shaping the development of theatre and contemporary plays.³⁹ The *naqqāl*, as the performer, narrates stories using a combination of verse or prose, incorporating gestures and movements, and occasionally complemented by instrumental music and illustrated scrolls.⁴⁰ *Naqqāls* serve dual roles as both entertainers and custodians of Persian literature and culture. They must be well-versed in local cultural expressions, languages, and dialects, as well as traditional music.

Without explicitly referring to *naqqāli* as a source of influence, Allahyari's performative recounting of ancient myths and the stories of her jinns is informed by the same sources. Moreover, it involves similar techniques in the artist's storytelling that may have subconsciously resonated in her mind with the *naqqāls'* methods. Parallels are most obviously present in Allahyari's performances, such as *Breaching Towards Other Futures* (2018), created with the artist Shirin Fahimi. These extend beyond the confines of time and space to connect and ground the present-day and the Persian past. Yet, one can also observe these parallels in the video essays accompanying *She Who Sees the Unknown*. Each video essay commences with an authorial female-sounding voice, delivering a poetic recounting of the respective jinn's origin from a third-person perspective. These narratives are complemented by moving images depicting the jinns themselves.⁴¹ Interweaving past and present, Allahyari appropriates

37 See Saeed Talajooy, 'Indigenous performing traditions in post-revolutionary Iranian theater', *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2011), 497.

38 See Talajooy, 'Indigenous performing traditions in post-revolutionary Iranian theater', 497.

39 UNESCO, 'Naqqāli, Iranian dramatic story-telling', *UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List* website (date unknown), <https://ich.unesco.org/en/USL/naqqli-iranian-dramatic-story-telling-00535>, accessed 16 December 2024.

40 See Talajooy, 'Indigenous performing traditions in post-revolutionary Iranian theater'.

41 See Morehshin Allahyari, 'She Who Sees the Unknown: Huma (Video Excerpt) – 2016' [video], *Vimeo* (13 June 2019), <https://vimeo.com/342057560>, accessed 10 December 2024; Morehshin Allahyari, 'She Who Sees the Unknown: Ya'Jooj, Ma'Jooj (Video Excerpt) – 2017' [video], *Vimeo* (13 June 2019), <https://vimeo.com/342063763>, accessed 10 December 2024; Morehshin Allahyari, 'She Who Sees the Unknown: Aisha Qandisha (Video Excerpt) – 2019' [video], *Vimeo* (13 June 2019), <https://vimeo.com/342079010>, accessed 10 December 2024; Morehshin Allahyari, 'She Who Sees the Unknown: Kabous, The Right Witness,

and recontextualizes past traditions within the context of the present. In his book *Iran: A People Interrupted*, Hamid Dabashi explains the importance of storytelling and poetic work in Iranian culture today. He thus offers an intriguing framework for the reading of Allahyari's work:

Iranians take poetry quite seriously – a habit that tends to lend a certain poetic diction to our historical recollections, the way we remember ourselves. If jazz is the cadence of American culture, as Robert O'Meally has put it recently in the title of his magnificent volume on the subject, then Persian poetry is the pulse of Iranian culture, the rhyme and rhythm of its collective memory. It is said that what Muslims do is not memorize the Qur'an but Qur'anify their memory. If that is what Muslims do, then that must be what Iranians do too with their poetry, when they remember their past as the poetic resonance of their present – in fact, of their presence in history.⁴²

Astrid Erll, one of the leading figures of memory studies, describes 're-membling' as 'an act of assembling available data that takes place in the present'.⁴³ As such, any active engagement with the past, such as that undertaken by Allahyari, is always already performative rather than reproductive. In Dabashi's words, remembering the past is always already a 'poetic resonance'.⁴⁴

Refiguration

Allahyari's act of remembering, in crucial distinction to the work of a *naqqāl*, goes beyond a merely traditional Persian recounting of myths. In her act of remembering, Allahyari not only assembles, absorbs, and retells cultural memories in the form of mythological stories but also appropriates, refashions, and reworks them using digital media. Allahyari's act of remembering blurs fiction and history, along with individual and collective or cultural and communicative memories. Allahyari not only remembers, she refigures. Doing so allows her to address acts of cultural forgetting, exclusion, and oppression, not only exposing their intricate gendered characteristics but also altering and influencing such patterns for future acts of remembrance.

In an interview, Allahyari says:

For me, re-figuring is going back and re-imagining the past so that we can create and re-imagine alternative futures and worlds; so that we can collapse the political notion of linear space and time as an act of resistance. Re-figuring is a ficto-feminist and activist practice to reflect on the effects of historical and digital colonialism and other forms of oppression and catastrophe.⁴⁵

and The Left Witness (2d Video Excerpt)' [video], *Vimeo* (26 February 2020), <https://vimeo.com/393977901>, accessed 10 December 2024.

42 Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York, New York: New Press, 2007), 13.

43 Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, tr. Sara B. Young (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7.

44 Dabashi, *Iran*, 13.

45 Morehshin Allahyari and Christiane Paul, 'Re-figuring ourselves: A conversation', in Joasia Krysa (ed.), *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* (London: Art Books Publishing, 2018), 2.

The approach of re-figuring can be situated in historical continuity with numerous feminist thinkers who have employed storytelling, fiction, and myth-making as tools to unveil social, physical, or historical disparities. In doing so, these thinkers have emphasized alternative perspectives and models of reality distinct from dominant narratives, a practice known as 'fictioning'.⁴⁶ Allahyari mobilizes such feminist storytelling strategies as a form of world-building that also manifests in the spatial experience of her installation as a whole.

World-building is especially associated with the writing of fantasy and science fiction. It refers to the invention of imaginary places, societies, and worlds, a practice that foregrounds the alternate realm rather than any plot or specific action that occurs there. On a large scale, such practices look beyond the production of scenes and groups and, instead, develop fictions or models of new communities and societies on a planetary scale – referred to as 'worlding'. Feminist worlding can be described as a world-building practice 'that produces more than designs – that, in particular, addresses how relations between entities and things actually become manifest and have continuity'.⁴⁷ For Haraway, worlding has the potential to 'ope[n] up what is yet-to-come in protean entangled times' pasts, presents, and futures'.⁴⁸ Haraway not only considers what worlds are created but also emphasizes how they are made. The questions of ethics, the process of bringing fictions and worlds into existence, and their production permeate Haraway's works, epitomized in her famous mantra:

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.⁴⁹

Allahyari often quotes Haraway's writings, identifying her as an important influence on her practice and, in particular, on her concept of re-figuring. In *Monsters, Simians, Cyborgs*, Haraway speaks of the critical-creative potential of monstrous creatures. By acting as bridges that 'refigure the persons we might be', they act as destabilizing figures, creating alternative worlds or 'multiplicities outside the geometry of part/whole constraints'.⁵⁰ Their 'power-differentiated and highly contested modes of being become in her reading 'signs of possible worlds' that may show how we can 'transform the relations of same and different, self and

46 For some of the most comprehensive overviews of fictioning in contemporary culture, see David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan, *Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); Jon K. Shaw and Theo Reeves-Everson (eds.), *Fiction as Method* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017); Henriette Gunkel, Ayesha Hameed, and Simon O'Sullivan (eds.), *Futures and Fictions* (London: Repeater Books, 2017).

47 Burrows and O'Sullivan, *Fictioning*, 257.

48 Donna J. Haraway, 'SF: Science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, so far', *Ada New Media* 3 (November 2013), <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/items/35104f75-a1b0-4e54-b8f0-1e7976df5fb8>, accessed 12 December 2024.

49 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016), 12.

50 Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, reprint edn (London: Free Assn Books, 1991), 3.

other, inner and outer, recognition and misrecognition into guiding maps for inappropriate/d others.⁵¹

In their book *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs*, present in the reading room of Allahyari's *She Who Sees the Unknown*, Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti develop Haraway's ideas further. In their introduction, they identify the monster, the goddess, and the cyborg as representations of boundary phenomena, as liminal and thus as challenging to established normative orders.⁵² Each puts forward a concept that rejects boundaries, notably those separating the human from the non-human, the animal, the machine, and the vegetal.

Braidotti and Lykke, interpreting Bruno Latour, suggest that modernity involves a process of purification, establishing a distinct separation between the human and non-human realms. This process has resulted in the extensive suppression of the monstrous, which persists beneath the surface of the human world. Any emergence or hybridization poses a threat to this construct, necessitating classification as either human or non-human. Consequently, individuals outside the dominant hegemony of the white Western man are labelled as non-human, relegating them to mere objects and fostering hierarchical and exploitative relationships between human subjects and non-human objects.

The 'promise of the monster' presents Braidotti and Lykke with a way out of this position. Monsters, as well as cyborgs and goddesses, transgress the divisions of worlds, opening up sites for non-suppressive conversations and an opportunity 'for creating embodied and never unambiguous sites for displacing and transforming actions on many levels.'⁵³

Allahyari adopts the feminist interpretation of monstrous creatures as symbols of refiguration in her own work with jinns. In folklore, her jinns, such as Aisha/Qandisha, embody supernatural beings that blend elements of animals and humans, goddesses and monsters. Conceptually, they transcend a Western feminist framework, serving to explore Allahyari's diasporic identity as an Iranian woman residing in the US. She writes:

When jinn[s] possess humans, they guarantee an utter openness. A new kind of entrance, portal, and arrival to the outside. For me, this is what makes them attractive candidates for an act of Re-Figuring.... When thinking about technology, potential futures and new worlds, it is perhaps time to think outside of Donna Haraway's concept of the 'cyborg' in order to stretch our imagination to a new set of figures that do not come from white/western knowledge structures. If Haraway claimed to be 'a cyborg rather than a motherly/earthy goddess', I claim to be a jinn rather than a cyborg.⁵⁴

Her act of remembering and re-figuring jinns becomes Allahyari's way to re-inscribe the stories of women from the SWANA region and, to use Dabashi's words once again, '[their] past

51 Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 3–4.

52 See Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti, *Between Monsters, Goddesses, and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations with Science, Medicine, and Cyberspace* (London: Zed Books, 1996), 4.

53 Lykke and Braidotti, *Between Monsters, Goddesses, and Cyborgs*, 16.

54 Allahyari, 'She Who Sees the Unknown'.

as the poetic resonance of their present – in fact, of their presence in history.⁵⁵ While Haraway's or Braidotti's feminist worlding rejects human exceptionalism to focus on multi-species narratives encompassing the mineral, the vegetal, and the animal, Allahyari's *She Who Sees the Unknown* focuses on the upsetting inequalities, orders, and hierarchies of human communities. Her work is intended 'to remind women, femmes, the people of the Middle East that our figures and our stories, fictional and actual, matter – not just for the present but for claiming an alternative future that is not exclusively white or western.'⁵⁶

Her statement can be situated within a strain of intersectional feminist theory critiquing forms of 'hegemonic feminisms' that universalize and/or essentialize. These hegemonic feminisms erase the differences among women. Through self-reflective critique of second- and third-wave feminist writings, a number of contemporary scholars have highlighted that liberal humanist notions of 'equality' obliterate the 'precise historical, economic, and cultural conditions under which such terms might in fact be viable (by assuming that suffrage or an open-admission policy would be in effect a sufficient condition of equality)'.⁵⁷ Intersectional thinkers, including Audre Lorde, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Marie-Claire Belleau, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Esther Ngan-ling Chow, and Tan Lin, have devoted their research to scrutinizing the intersecting systems of oppression and discrimination that women face based on their race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, and economic background.⁵⁸ Their writings encompass powerful critiques of Western feminist theory's tendency to write about global women of colour in generalizing and homogenizing terms which neglect the specific forms of oppression such women experience informed by their geography, culture, and history.⁵⁹

Furthermore, post-colonial theorists such as Edward Said, Sally Price, Marianna Torgovnick, James Clifford, Nikita Dhawan, and Denise Ferreira da Silva have examined how schol-

55 Dabashi, *Iran*, 13.

56 e-flux, 'Morehshin Allahyari: "She Who Sees the Unknown: The Laughing Snake"', *e-flux Agenda* blog (24 September 2018), <https://www.art-agenda.com/announcements/216308/morehshin-allahyarishe-who-sees-the-unknown-the-laughing-snake>, accessed 10 December 2024.

57 Vicki Callahan, *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 360.

58 Crenshaw, citing nineteenth-century American black feminists Anna Julia Cooper, Maria Stewart, and Sojourner Truth, followed by Angela Davis and Deborah King, argues that the concept of intersectionality predates her work. Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 139, no. 1 (1989) 139–167, available at <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>; see also bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1984); Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York, New York: New Press, 1995); Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th edn (San Francisco, California: Aunt Lute Books, 2012); Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (eds.), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 4th edn (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2015); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd edn (New York, New York: Routledge, 2009); Audre Lorde, *The Audre Lorde Compendium: Essays, Speeches and Journals* (London: Pandora, 1996).

59 See Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses', *Feminist Review* 30 (1988), 61–88, doi: 10.2307/1395054.

ars tend to mistake 'European' and 'North American' for 'universal'. As a result, scholars tend to develop aesthetic criteria that marginalize and exclude the distinctive characteristics of other cultures.⁶⁰ Haraway's approach to worlding centres on crafting narratives that address difficult (or troubling) questions and that embrace kin of all kinds (rather than just human-kind). Allahyari, in contrast, aligns with intersectional inquiries that redirect their focus to women, femmes, and the queer community, shedding light on the oppressive systems each group contends with. Her work's starting point is her experience as an Iranian woman living in the US. The constant blurring and permeating of both personal and collective experiences and memories in her work thus also attests to the artist's own liminal and hybrid identity.

Diasporic memories

Within this contested landscape, the figures of Allahyari's series – liminal as they are – suggest parallels with Allahyari's diasporic identity, an identity that like her jinns' chimerical nature dwells at the point between different worlds. Both Allahyari and her jinns are, in a manner of speaking, neither one thing nor the other. This self-identification of the artist with the protagonist of her works is suggested in an interview with Christiane Paul:

When I first immigrated to the US from Iran in 2007, a lot of my work was about the experience of censorship in Iran and self-exile as a response to oppression that I experienced growing up. But then, after some years, I wanted to figure out how to connect my life as an immigrant in the US to my background of growing up in Iran, to the world around me as I lived/struggled through it. For me, the answer wasn't to make work directly about my identity but rather to find elements and stories that were poetic, personal and collective, then find ways to connect them to issues that were of concern to me. So as much as my work comes from a personal place, it also tries to avoid the simple binary representations of who I am (a woman/woman of colour/woman of colour from Iran, etc.) and how I am in the world. I decided early on that I wanted my work to go beyond identity politics, and I think my love of history and storytelling and my hatred of stereotypical orientalist work really helped me achieve this space in a unique way.⁶¹

Following the Iranian revolution in 1979, which led to an ongoing emigration from Iran and the growth of Iranian communities worldwide, diaspora has become a pivotal concept to describe 'what it is Iranians are and experience as a result of having left Iran'.⁶² Along the nodes of the West and East Coasts of the U.S, as well as in Toronto, Sydney, and many European capitals, a 'new and wider *transnational* frame of reference and identification, and a sense of belonging to a cross-border community outside of Iran – the Iranian diaspora, has emerged'.⁶³

60 See María Fernández, 'Postcolonial media theory', *Art Journal* 58, no. 3 (1 September 1999), 66, doi: 10.1080/00043249.1999.10791954.

61 Hamid Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 17.

62 Babak Elahi and Persis M. Karim, 'Introduction: Iranian diaspora', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31, no. 2 (1 August 2011), 382, doi: 10.1215/1089201X-1264307.

63 Resa Mohabbat-Kar, 'Introduction', in Heinrich Böll Foundation and Transparency for Iran, *Identity and Exile: The Iranian Diaspora Between Solidarity and Difference* (Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2015), 12.

Discourses on diaspora have conceptualized the term in three distinct but interconnected ways. Anthropologist Steven Vertovec suggests three categories for interpreting and theorizing concepts of diaspora: "Diaspora" as a social form, "diaspora" as a type of consciousness, and "diaspora" as a mode of cultural production.⁶⁴ As a social form, the term refers to individuals who voluntarily migrated or were forced to migrate from their homes but maintain a collective identity and solidarity that identifies with the countries or region from which they or their ancestors originated and the society in which they currently reside. Secondly, as a social consciousness, diaspora may describe an awareness of belonging or exclusion, a sense of being simultaneously in a 'home away from home' or 'here and there', that is, in 'a multi-locality'.⁶⁵ Vertovec takes this concept from Paul Gilroy's 'double consciousness' (found in Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*) as a prime example of a consciousness that emphasizes 'a variety of experience, a state of mind, and a sense of identity'.⁶⁶ Finally, diaspora as a mode of production 'involves the *production and reproduction* of transnational social and cultural phenomena'.⁶⁷ This mode revolves around the 'fluidity of constructed styles and identities among diasporic people', highlighting the significance of the high level of creolization, hybridization, and syncretism present in many diasporas.⁶⁸ Of course, all these factors overlap and intersect. Echoing Vertovec, Avtar Brah suggests that we should understand diaspora as a 'conceptual mapping which defies the search for ordinary absolutes, or genuine and authentic manifestations of a stable, pre-given, unchanging identity; for pristine, pure customs and traditions or unsullied glorious pasts'.⁶⁹ The potential for tension and conflict, as much as hope and new beginnings, defines each process of diasporization to varying degrees. Allahyari's *She Who Sees the Unknown*, therefore, can be interpreted as an artistic representation of the processes outlined by Vertovec and Brah. Following Brah's perspective, the series can be seen as 'contesting cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble, and reconfigure'.⁷⁰

Allahyari's journey on both the personal and artistic level – from the experience of exile to a more empowered and autonomous stance – seems to be mirrored in two key concepts – the exilic and the diasporic – developed by Hamid Naficy, one of the earliest scholars to have worked on the Iranian diaspora. In *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (1993), Naficy coined the term 'exilic syncretism' as a way to describe the process following a traumatic cultural experience in which the 'borrowing, sometimes, resurrecting of atavistic forms [occurs], but impregnating them with new meanings appropriate to their new context'.⁷¹ He observed that 'exiles create hybrid identities and syncretic cultures that

64 Steven Vertovec, 'Three meanings of "diaspora" exemplified among South Asian religions', *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 6, no. 3 (1997), 277, doi: 10.1353/dsp.1997.0010.

65 Vertovec, 'Three meanings of "diaspora"', 285.

66 Vertovec, 'Three meanings of "diaspora"', 285.

67 Vertovec, 'Three meanings of "diaspora"', 196.

68 Vertovec, 'Three meanings of "diaspora"', 196.

69 Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 196.

70 Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 193.

71 Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures*, 17–18.

symbolically and materially borrow from both the indigenous and the new one to which they have relocated. Such a hybrid identity and composite culture are characterized by contradictions and instabilities of all sorts.⁷² In 2001, Naficy further refined his understanding of the exilic by contrasting it with the diasporic. In a similar vein as the postmodern diaspora theorists Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, Naficy suggested, to quote cultural theorist Amy Malek, that 'diasporic cultural production is less based on the exilic binaries of here and/or there, and is more rooted in a multiplicity, of here and there and wherever else (what Naficy described as a "lateral relationship to the diaspora communities and experiences" as opposed to a "vertical relationship to the homeland.")'⁷³ The shift in Naficy's theory was produced by a general change in the self-perception of Iranians towards Iranian Americans, from that of a population in exile with a focus on a lost home country to that of an ethnic minority with its political agency.⁷⁴

Malek herself, in her work 'Displaced, re-rooted, transnational: Considerations in theory and practice of being an Iranian outside Iran', traces the constellation of developments behind the shift from exilic to diasporic patterns of identification and behaviour. She argues that 'as the condition of Iranian communities abroad shifted, so too did scholarly classifications of them: while originally considered as *exiles*, Iranians became more frequently described as part of a *diaspora*, reflecting the growth of Iranian communities and institutions, and shifts in their self-identifications in the intervening years.'⁷⁵

Malek concludes that this shift has led to the emergence of networks and affiliations on a lateral community and grassroots level. She compares Salman Rushdie's 'endless paradox of exile', described as 'looking forward by always looking back' with an initial exilic identity.⁷⁶ According to Gorashi, this identity has been replaced 'by a more rhizomatic network-based diasporic approach to Iran as one basis of reference among many others'.⁷⁷ Researchers have described this process as 'diasporic citizenship'.⁷⁸

Within Allahyari's oeuvre, one can best situate the diasporic as a *mode of practice* that allows her to adopt and continue discourses, as well as to assume and play with different cultural identities and to reject, re-evaluate, and redefine them. As Stuart Hall famously argued, cultural identity involves the work of individuals 'constantly producing and reproducing themselves

72 Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures*, 17.

73 Amy Malek, 'Displaced, re-rooted, transnational: Considerations in theory and practice of being an Iranian outside Iran', in Heinrich Böll Foundation and Transparency for Iran, *Identity and Exile: The Iranian Diaspora Between Solidarity and Difference* (Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2015), 25–26.

74 See Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures*, 195 onwards.

75 Malek, 'Displaced, re-rooted, transnational', 26.

76 Malek, 'Displaced, re-rooted, transnational', 13, 26.

77 Lok Siu, *Memories of a Future Home: Diasporic Citizenship of Chinese in Panama* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005); H. Ghorashi and F. K. Boersma, 'Iranian diaspora and the new media: From political action to humanitarian help', *Development and Change* 40, no. 4 (2009), 678, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-7660.2009.01567.x.

78 See Silvia Pedraza, 'Assimilation or diasporic Citizenship?', review of Michel S. Laguerre, *Diasporic Citizenship: Haitian Americans in Transnational America* (New York, New York: St Martin's Press, 1998), in *Contemporary Sociology* 28, no. 4 (1999), 377–381, doi: 10.2307/2655283.

anew in an ongoing process of formation that includes both being and becoming.⁷⁹ Allahyari's strategy of re-figuring could be seen as an expression of such a process central to discussions on diaspora. In her act of re-figuring, Allahyari synthesizes ideas and concepts from different cultural contexts and distils them into her art. Her works amalgamates different individual and collective memories, experiences, influences, and sources from here, there, and elsewhere.

This tension between individual and collective memory becomes evident in the visual essay accompanying *Aisha/Qandisha*. While the first part of the essay tells the story of Aisha/Qandisha from the perspective of a third-person narrator, the second part interweaves the historical knowledge of the narrator with the artist's own experiences. Here, the jinn and the artist merge to allow the artist to revisit one of her failed love stories. This allows Allahyari not only to revisit a forgotten or misrepresented past reality through an act of narrative preservation, but to translate and revive it for contemporary reflection.

As the time passed between then and now
 She and she became one
 Overlapped.
 Their bodies merged.
 Their stories conjoined in a mashup of a fiction and a documentary
 For a mad act of myth-making;
 Giving birth to a re-figure that is neither nor.⁸⁰

Instead of the metallic-sounding voice of the narrator who dominates most of the video, this text emerges on the screen in the concluding section. It constitutes a significant shift in the narrative structure of Allahyari's video, transitioning from the descriptive, third-person account of Aisha/Qandisha to the artist's personal recollection of a painful break-up. By changing the viewpoint of her story from a third- to a first-person narrator, Allahyari's work produces a more direct connection with the spectator, who is sometimes addressed in the second person. Through Allahyari's account of her break-up, a near-universal experience independent of any particular cultural background, the work intensifies its identification of the spectator with the narrator:

I tell you 'I love you'
 I put the palm of my hand on your lips
 So that all the lies stays within you
 Don't ever claim what you can not give
 All your love letters read the same⁸¹

The viewer is again assigned a position just below the water's surface. Words gradually emerge against a background that fluctuates between hues of red liquid. The surroundings

79 Stuart Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora: Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 402.

80 Allahyari, 'Aisha Qandisha: Video text'.

81 Allahyari, 'Aisha Qandisha: Video text'.

begin to shift, while the narration centres on the failed love story. The text alternates in font sizes on the screen, resembling a poetic reflection following the break-up. Simultaneously, it unfolds a continuum between different temporal structures:

You are in the past, and I am heading into the future
It is you who will submit
You will weep like you will change
And this pain will spread like a deadly plague⁸²

In the final scene, the artist describes a bittersweet revenge, claiming back power and control over her feelings:

You have already disappeared
Every crack in your body is an opportunity
To shatter you
To split you
To destroy you
And a world awaits
And is in tune
For an opening
And a closure
You will weep like you can change
Then you disappear infinitely.⁸³

Gendered memories

In the context of Allahyari's failed love story, it is helpful to mention the backstory of Aisha/Qandisha, as one aspect appears to be absent from Allahyari's work and archive. Several researchers have pointed out that Aisha/Qandisha's origin story strongly links back to the ancient goddess of love Astarte, also known as Attart or Ishtar, who reached Morocco via the ancient city of Carthage.⁸⁴ Transmuted into a jinn, Aisha/Qandisha is considered an updated version of the powerful goddess with origins and counterparts in the early Semitic matriarchies.⁸⁵ Accordingly, the different memory assemblages surrounding Allahyari's work reveal deeply gendered dynamics.

Astarte was worshipped across the ancient Levant, including in the colonies of Phoenicians.⁸⁶ The Carthaginians, representing one of the Phoenician city-states, established colonies in Morocco, with the earliest known as the Thymiaterion of Hanni and Scylax, believed to be located in present-day Mehdiya.⁸⁷ Similar to Aisha/Qandisha, Astarte was associated with

82 Allahyari, 'Aisha Qandisha: Video text'.

83 Allahyari, 'Aisha Qandisha: Video text'.

84 See Lurker, *The Routledge Dictionary of Gods, Goddesses, Devils and Demons*, 157; Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, 395.

85 Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, 396.

86 See James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), 115.

87 See Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, 396.

water, being the 'numen of spring' and a catalyst for fertility.⁸⁸ Her names – Astarte, Ashtart, or Athtar – are linked to the Persian root word 'to be watered'. Astarte/Ishtar was a goddess of maternity, fertility, and war. Babylonian culture identified her with the planet Venus. The Phoenicians depicted her with the horns of a cow, resembling the depiction of the Egyptian god Hathor, with whom she was also identified. Referring to writings by Cicero, Homer, and Lucretius, James Hastings identifies strong links between Astarte and the Greek goddess Aphrodite (Venus in the Roman pantheon).⁸⁹ He also insinuates that Rhea, Cybele, and other mother goddesses are derived from the Semitic Astarte or were modified according to her influence. The identification of Astarte with Aphrodite by both Greeks and the Phoenicians is evidence of her sexual character. Astarte is also described as the 'the goddess of untrammelled sexual love'; and 'prostitution as a religious rite in her service is widely attested', for example by the women of the congregation of Astarte.⁹⁰ This links Astarte to Qandisha, whose name originates from 'Kedecha' or 'Qedesa', a name for the temple prostitutes of the Canaanite cults in ancient Palestine. In Ancient Hebrew, *qedēshā* means 'sacred prostitute'.⁹¹

In this aspect, Astarte and, consequently, Aisha/Qandisha are counterparts of the ancient Semitic woman who 'bestowed her love as she pleased upon men of other and often hostile tribes, who was courted at the risk of life'.⁹² Hastings argues:

There is a large body of evidence to show that the Semites before their separation passed through a matriarchal stage of society.... Descent was traced through the mother, and she was the head of the clan in peace and in war. In such a society the chief deity of the tribe must have been conceived as a counterpart of the human matriarch.⁹³

Most interestingly, during the change of society from a matriarchal to a patriarchal state, 'either a male deity was exalted to the chief place and [powerful female goddesses such as] Asthar(t) became his consort, as in Canaan, or her sex was changed, as in South Arabia and Moab'.⁹⁴ Male deities held a less significant role in early Semitic society and consequently did not persist into later religions, thus not requiring reclamation. It is probable that with the emergence of Islam, the attributes associated with Astarte as the goddess of fertility, sexual love, maternity, and war underwent a transformation, manifesting as a monstrous reflection. She reemerged in the form of the malevolent and potent jinn Aisha/Qandisha.

Into the present day, the narrative retellings of Aisha/Qandisha's legends and Allahyari's interpretation of them embody fears of female influence and power that perhaps stem from reactions to Semitic matriarchs and the divine Astarte. As a libidinous, whimsical, dangerous,

88 Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, 395.

89 See Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, 118.

90 Hastings lists a number of ancient sources that confirm his argument. See Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, 116.

91 Jordi Aguadé, 'Ā'isha Qandisha', in Hamilton A.R. Gibb (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1954), 85.

92 Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, 116.

93 Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, 115.

94 Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, 116.

vindictive, and ominous woman, Aisha/Qandisha functions as an outlet for forms of erotic love, sexual pleasure, and passion that, outside of marriage, are prohibited in Islam. Allahyari describes the symptoms of Aisha/Qandisha's possession in an earlier passage of her video essay:

Causing sexual arousal
 Causing physical emasculation
 Causing castration anxiety
 Causing temporary weakening of the muscular portion of the heart
 Causing the appearance of darling isolations
 Causing dry croaking of his throat
 Causing strange times⁹⁵

Her description draws upon a rich documentation of the symptoms of Aisha/Qandisha's possession. A possessed man is said to suffer from blindness, paralysis, muteness, impotence, or a disinterest in women.⁹⁶ Aisha/Qandisha represents a male fantasy, the anti-wife that men seek from women other than their partner – the 'dancer, film star, singer, prostitute, passing tourist, neighbour, etc. The dissociation of the ludic and the serious examined above still continues, then, and acts as a stumbling block to the sexual emancipation not only of women but also of men.'⁹⁷ Referring to research by Vincent Crapanzano, Douglas A. Davis and Susan Schaefer Davis emphasize that the 'language of possession offers the sufferer a collective symbolism for experiences of problems of sexuality, marriage, or family responsibility. Males who are unable to carry out expected roles of suitor, husband, or family provider may undergo an experience of possession by Aisha/Qandisha, whose emotional demands and jealous interference with relations with human women externalize the apparent psychological conflict.'⁹⁸ Most interestingly, Davis and Schaefer Davis indicate that their sources describe a 'possession after a failed love affair, an estrangement from a spouse, or the death of a family member.'⁹⁹ Allahyari's conceptualization of Aisha/Qandisha has been deeply influenced by these studies, with the artist citing Davis's work as one of her critical resources on the work's webpage.¹⁰⁰

Recent research on jinns and jinnealogy, including the work of Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, Fatima Mernissi, and Mohammed Maarouf, significantly locates the gender politics of jinn possession as being profoundly revealing of the political issues that Muslim societies continue to face today.¹⁰¹ In his book *Sexuality in Islam* (1985), Bouhdiba carefully illuminates the relationship

95 Allahyari, 'Aisha Qandisha: Video text'.

96 See Aguadé, 'Á'isha Qandisha', 85.

97 Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, tr. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 243.

98 Douglas A. Davis and Susan Schaefer Davis, 'Possessed by love: Gender and romance in Morocco', in William R. Jankowiak (ed.), *Romantic Passion: A Universal Experience?* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 228.

99 Davis and Schaefer Davis, 'Possessed by love', 228.

100 See Morehshin Allahyari, 'Aisha Qandisha', *She Who Sees the Unknown* project website (date unknown), <http://shewhoseestheunknown.com/aisha-qandisha/>.

101 See Mohammed Maarouf, *Jinn Eviction as a Discourse of Power: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Moroccan Magical Beliefs and Practices* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*.

between the sacred and the sexual within contemporary Muslim societies. These societies are, in the author's view, undergoing a sexual and religious crisis as women seek to emancipate themselves from traditional roles, with men refusing these changes.¹⁰² Bouhdiba argues:

Today's Arab woman is striving to renounce the illusory kingdom of the mothers and is aspiring to an affirmative, positive rule, rather than a mythopoeic one.... And yet there is a curious ambiguity inherent in the concept of female emancipation, as if the partners could be dissociated from the question, as if one could emancipate oneself alone! As if Arab man were not alienated by his own masculinity! Authentic female emancipation requires male emancipation.¹⁰³

Consequently, 'the Arab woman who adopts modern ways all too often merely changes her role and emancipation too frequently consists of exchanging the role of wife for that of the anti-wife [which has] invariably led to the enclosure of women in a double role as objects of pleasure and as producers of children.'¹⁰⁴ Fatima Mernissi's work on gender roles in the SWANA region adds weight to Bouhdiba's argument:

The conservative wave against women in the Muslim world, far from being a regressive trend, is on the contrary a defence mechanism against profound changes in both sex roles and the touchy subject of sexual identity. The most accurate interpretation of this relapse into 'archaic behaviours', such as conservatism on the part of men and resort to magic and superstitious rituals on the part of women, is as anxiety-reducing mechanisms in a world of shifting, volatile sexual identity.¹⁰⁵

According to Mernissi, sexual equality 'violates Islam's ideology on the women's position in the social order: the women should be under the authority of fathers, brothers or husbands'.¹⁰⁶ Unlike in Western societies, however, the 'existing inequality does not rest on an ideological or biological theory of women's inferiority, but is the outcome of specific social institutions designed to restrain her power: namely, segregation and legal subordination of the women to the man in the family structure.'¹⁰⁷

This underscores the fundamental distinction between Western feminist objectives of women's emancipation with concomitant endeavors to liberate themselves from the unfounded notion of biological or ideological inferiority to males, and the distinct struggle for women's equality in the SWANA region:

In Islam, there is no such belief in female inferiority. On the contrary, the whole system assumes that the woman is powerful and dangerous. All sexual institutions (polygamy, repudiation, sexual segregation, etc.) can be perceived as a strategy to contain her power.¹⁰⁸

102 Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, 243.

103 Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, 239.

104 Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, 243.

105 Fatima Mernissi, *Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987), xxvii–xxviii.

106 Mernissi, *Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, 19.

107 Mernissi, *Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, 19.

108 Mernissi, *Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, 19.

The belief that the power of women is exceptionally potent and requires constraint may reflect the distinct nature of the relationship between women and men in Muslim cultures. Since the jinn Aisha/Qandisha can be seen as representing women's dangerous power, moreover, this notion of power serves as a crucial framework for interpreting Allahyari's work.

In Iran, the strategic containment of female power has perhaps been most evident since the 1979 revolution, which replaced the Western-friendly government of the Shah with a clerical government. Around the same time, many revolutionary activists were prosecuted, imprisoned, or killed. As several publications highlight, the fundamentalist interpretation of Sharia in post-revolutionary Iran saw the rights of women, who had helped facilitate and support the revolution, rapidly diminish.¹⁰⁹ While the theocratic government turned the woman veiled with a black hijab or chador into both a nationalist symbol and a religious representation of Iranian womanhood, many discriminatory laws were passed against women during the period, depriving them of almost every right.¹¹⁰ However, Haideh Moghissi's 1994 book, *Populism and Feminism in Iran*, offers a more nuanced account of this change.¹¹¹ While the post-revolutionary period initially saw an upsurge of gender awareness and a proliferation of independent women's professional and political organizations, the increasing criticism of feminists and feminist ideas by *both* Islamic populism and the male-centred left helped enable fundamentalists to enact their Islamization policies based on sexist beliefs and values.¹¹²

The scholar Judith Albrecht writes of this change:

As a consequence, women, who had taken part in the revolution and later rejected it as a failure, became symbols of a movement that had turned against them or their families, and their role became laden with political and religious symbolism – not only in the Islamic Republic of Iran, but also in the West. Ever since then, women have had to deal with this kind of prevalent religious symbolism as something that dominates their own womanhood.¹¹³

From her interviews with Iranian women in Teheran, Berlin, and Los Angeles, Albrecht has highlighted how women have been systematically instrumentalized by Iranian politics and Western media alike as both female Iranian icons and stereotypes. Consequently, women in the diaspora still grapple with their status. Iranian women have thus become icons of Irani-

109 See for example Shirin Ebadi, *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope* (London: Rider, 2007); Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1992); Haideh Moghissi, *Populism and Feminism in Iran: Women's Struggle in a Male-Defined Revolutionary Movement* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan; St. Martin's Press, 1994); Democratic Organization of Iranian Women, *Women In Iran: How They Live under Khomeini's Terror Regime* (London: Democratic Organization of Iranian Women, 1985); Organisation of Hizb-i Tudeh-i Iran in Britain, *The Tudeh Party of Iran and the Women Rights* (London: Organisation of the Tudeh Party of Iran in Britain, 1983).

110 See Ebadi, *Until We Are Free*, 8 onwards.

111 See Moghissi, *Populism and Feminism in Iran*.

112 See Moghissi, *Populism and Feminism in Iran*, 1–3.

113 Judith Albrecht, 'How to be an Iranian Woman in the 21st century? Female identities in the diaspora', in Heinrich Böll Foundation and Transparency for Iran, *Identity and Exile*, 47.

an society in a two-fold sense – as national symbols of the Islamic Republic of Iran and as symbols in the memories of the diaspora and those in exile. They react to such attributions by building their identities through social or artistic practices and by framing their own life-worlds.

Iranian Nobel Peace Prize winner, human rights activist, and lawyer Shirin Ebadi calls the 1979 revolution the ‘revolution of man against women’ and sees its effects reflected in today’s Iranian society, which still legally disadvantages women.¹¹⁴ She has dedicated her life and work to fighting for the rights of women, dissidents, refugees, queer people, and children. In her memoirs, *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope* (2006) and *Until We Are Free* (2016), Ebadi uses her own experience as a human rights lawyer to outline the discrimination against and inequality of women that is enshrined in the laws of Iran’s patriarchal society.¹¹⁵ Numerous other women forced to depart the country have undergone comparable experiences.

Expanding on this argument, Egyptian-American scholar Leila Ahmed contends in *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) that the oppressive treatment faced by women in the SWANA region is a result of the dominance of patriarchal interpretations of Islam, which originated in the misogynistic society of the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258), rather than being inherent to Islam itself.¹¹⁶ During this era, a gendered, male-dominated voice became institutionalized. In the nineteenth century, colonial forces then strategically employed female emancipation to justify what was essentially an economic and geopolitical takeover. This colonial feminism, as a Western discourse of dominance, ‘introduced the notion that an intrinsic connection existed between the issue of culture and the status of women, and... that progress for women could be achieved only through abandoning the native culture.’¹¹⁷ The emancipation of women was instrumentalized as a cudgel to assert Western hegemony not just geopolitically, but culturally as well. This argument continues to this day in Western discourse to legitimize political intervention – namely, to free suppressed Muslim women.¹¹⁸

Countering the imposition of such ideas on Muslim women from the perspective of both the East and West, Allahyari’s *Aisha/Qandisha* can be located in a long historical tradition of forgotten but influential (human) women and goddesses. It is this enduring history of female power that Allahyari’s work remembers and memorializes. Under the influence of patriarchal social structures, women and goddesses were robbed of their influential status precisely because they posed a real danger to their male counterparts. By exhibiting some of the aforementioned literature in the reading room of her installation, Allahyari shows how her work is tied to a larger content of gender politics in both Muslim and also global society.

114 Shirin Ebadi, “Gender and Sexuality in the Islamic Culture”, Lecture at the Digital Islamic Studies Curriculum, see in “Women in Islam – Shirin Ebadi – Digital Islamic Studies Curriculum,” video, 10:51, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/digitalislam/2018/03/16/women-in-islam-shirin-ebadi/>.

115 Ebadi, *Iran Awakening*; Ebadi, *Until We Are Free*.

116 Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1992), 79–83.

117 Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 244.

118 See Ahmed, *Woman and Gender in Islam*, 244.

Memory acts

In interviews and public presentations, Allahyari has declared that a central concern of her artistic practice is to 'repair history and memory' and challenge 'the limitations and possibilities of remembering and forgetting'.¹¹⁹ In contemplating her strategies of archiving, documentation, preservation, reconstruction, and refiguration, a common thread emerges. The layers of each of her works draw from various forms of memory, encompassing cultural and communicative aspects, as well as personal and collective dimensions, and even elements of diasporic and gendered memories. Memory scholar Anna Reading introduces the concept of the 'mnemologist' as a scholar with a specific interest in memory and how cultural memory is articulated and mobilized.¹²⁰ In a similar vein, one could characterize Allahyari as a mnemological artist – an artist who explores and operates within the realm of memory. Allahyari gazes into the past to propel herself forward. Instead of indulging in a static nostalgic endeavour, her active process of remembrance interconnects, assembles, and forges relationships across memorial and temporal frameworks. Her work not only reintegrates Aisha/Qandisha into contemporary memory culture but also traces a lineage of women extending from the Semitic matriarch and her reflection, the goddess Astarte, to contemporary Iranian diasporic women such as the artist herself.

Allahyari's work doesn't merely emerge from memory; it actually embodies memories artistically and shapes them aesthetically within a dedicated site and form. The immersive, participatory nature of her sculptural installation, coupled with the technologies she employs (including 3D sculpture and digital video animation, 3D scanning, and 3D printing), serves as a crucial lens into the multi-layered narratives and memory assemblages that underlie the protagonists of her installations. Bridging the gap between collective and individual, as well as present and past, these technologies animate and sculpt Allahyari's archive. In the following chapter, 'Sculpting the archive', I delve into the archival aspects of Allahyari's work, examining their connection to the material discussed in this section and their relationship to the sculptural.

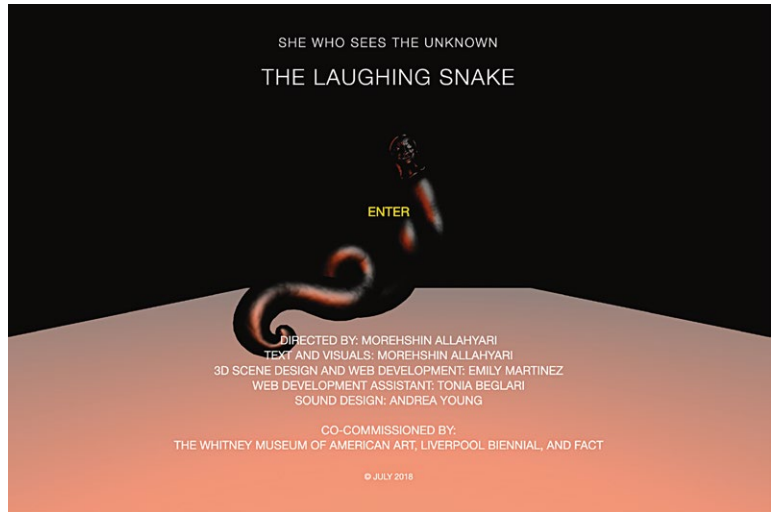
3.2 Sculpting the archive

In Allahyari's work, memories assume an aesthetic, sculpturally embodied form. Like other Iranian diaspora artists, Allahyari engages with the codes of archives to propose ways to make and mark a space for an encounter with painful, suppressed, or forgotten memories. This chapter explores the relationships between the archival, memorial, and sculptural aspects in the artist's practice. These connections facilitate identification and cultural orientation, taking place in both physical and virtual spaces. Allahyari's artistic practice is intertwined with that of her colleagues and collaborators, Amitis Motevalli and Shirin Fahimi, both Iranian diaspora artists working in the US and Canada. By comparing their works to

119 Morehshin Allahyari and Christiane Paul, 'Re-figuring ourselves', 4.

120 See Reading, *Gender and Memory in the Global Age*, 15.

126 | Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: The Laughing Snake*, 2018; interactive hypertextual narrative, screenshot from website <https://artport.whitney.org/commissions/laughing-snake/index.html>.

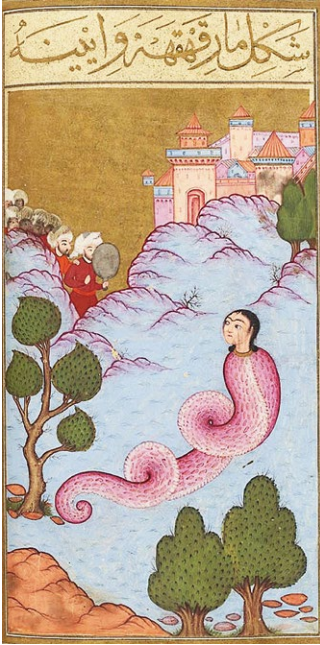


the practices of the digital pioneers Lynn Hershman Leeson, Claudia Hart, and Skawennati, the chapter traces how Allahyari's, Motevalli's, and Fahimi's works expand reflection from diasporic archives to notions of digital, living, and sculptural archives. The section concludes by asserting that the sculptural works of Allahyari and her peers transcend a simple archival approach. In their works, the archive, serving as a site of memory, takes on not only a sculptural form but also assumes a commemorative nature, aligning with functions historically attributed to monuments.

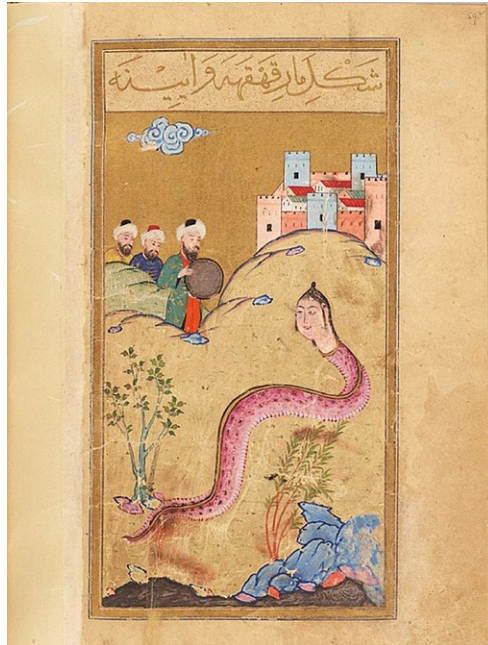
The importance of the archive as a map and tool for orientation, identification, and reclamation is clearest in Allahyari's *The Laughing Snake*, the fourth iteration of the series *She Who Sees the Unknown*. Allahyari's hypertext fiction is an online narrative that can be accessed via *artport* (the online gallery space of the Whitney Museum of Art) or via the artist's webpage (fig. 126).¹²¹ It weaves together the myth of the Laughing Snake with Allahyari's personal experiences of molestation, coercion, and cultural castigation growing up in post-revolutionary Iran. The non-linear, open-ended, 'choose your own adventure'-style story lets the user navigate through various versions of the plot. Depending on the reader's/user's choice, it branches out into various sub-narratives and multiple worlds.

The *Laughing Snake* is a story that appears both in the illustrated manuscripts from *The Book of Felicity* and *The Kitab al-Bulhan* (often translated as the 'Book of Wonders' or the 'Book of Surprises'). *The Book of Felicity* was commissioned by the Ottoman Sultan Murad III in 1582. It features descriptions of the twelve signs of the zodiac and illuminated miniatures by Nakkaş Osman, including astrological and astronomical tables and illustrations representing

121 See Morehshin Allahyari, 'The Laughing Snake | Morehshin Allahyari', project website (July 2018), <https://artport.whitney.org/commissions/laughing-snake/index.html>, accessed 10 December 2024; Morehshin Allahyari, 'The Laughing Snake', *She Who Sees the Unknown* project website (date unknown), <http://shewhoseestheunknown.com/the-laughing-snake/>, accessed 10 December 2024.



127 | *The Laughing Snake and the Mirror*, illustration retrieved from *Kitab Al-Bulhan* (كتاب البهان) possibly illustrated by 'Abd al-Ḥasan ibn Aḥmad ibn 'Alī ibn al-Ḥasan al-Isfahānī



128 | *The Laughing Snake and the Mirror*, illustration retrieved from *The Book of Felicity*, illustrated by Nakkaş Osman.

how the planets influence human lives.¹²² The *Kitab al-Bulhan* is a fourteenth-century Arabic manuscript possibly completed during the reign of Jalayirid Sultan Ahmad, who ruled the area of western Iran and Iraq.¹²³ The codex was compiled and likely illustrated by calligrapher 'Abd al-Ḥasan ibn Aḥmad ibn 'Alī ibn al-Ḥasan al-Isfahānī and includes texts on astrology, astronomy, and geomancy as well as a section of plates dedicated to topics such as folktales, zodiac signs, and the prophet.

The story of the Laughing Snake involves a female jinn with a human face and the body of a snake who conducts a murderous rampage. She conquers cities, murdering humans and animals alike. Numerous attempts to kill her are unsuccessful. She meets her ultimate defeat when someone holds a mirror in front of her. Confronted by her own reflection, she laughs until she dies. Although the exact literary source of the tale remains unknown, its

122 See Miguel Ángel de Bunes Ibarra, Stefano Carboni, Yorgos Dedes, and Evrim Turkcelik, *The Book of Felicity: Matali' al-Saadet: Islamic Art, Astronomy and Astrology* [commentary volume] (Barcelona: M. Moleiro Editor S.A., 2008).

123 See Stefano Carboni, 'The "Book of Surprises" (kitab al-bulhan) of the Bodleian Library', *The La Trobe Journal* 91 (2013), 22.

association with several legends is evident. These include the antique Narcissus, Medusa, the Amazon Gorgon, and the Iranian motif of the horse phoenix that kills people by making them laugh.¹²⁴ One might also think of the basilisk – translated in Persian as ‘laughing snake’ – the reptile from Roman mythology with a terrifying, lethal stare, or of the epic Iranian figure of Dahhak, ‘the man who laughs’, out of whose shoulders grow two hungry snakes.¹²⁵

Allahyari’s online narrative centres on a reconstruction of the snake based on two slightly differing illustrations from the *Book of Wonders* (fig. 127) and the *Book of Felicity* (fig. 128). Once again, the artist playfully interacts with the dynamic between image and text in virtual space. The ancient drawings show a colossal snake with a human head, set against a secluded hilly landscape featuring a handful of trees and a walled city in the distance. The snake’s face is turned towards a group of men at the left corner of the drawings. Emerging from the distance behind the rocks, the leader of the group raises a large disc. In the version from the *Book of Felicity*, his face is partly covered by the mirror, as if he is seeking protection behind the device. His stance suggests that the mirror functions like a shield protecting the group from the deadly gaze of the female jinn. The scene depicts the moment before she sees her reflection and consequently dies.

The cultural history of the mirror has a long relationship to concepts of (self-)perception, knowledge, and human subjectivity.¹²⁶ In the hands of women, it has been positioned as both a powerful tool of cunning and deception. Often associated with the supernatural abilities of witches, sorceresses, and femme fatales, or with snakes, it is frequently linked to humanity’s downfall. Medusa, whose story bears similarities with the Persian myth of the Laughing Snake, is a powerful example of the myths constructed around female power’s deflection by reflection.¹²⁷ Both Medusa and the Laughing Snake threaten society, evoking a fear of womanhood which needs to be contained, subdued, and punished by men.¹²⁸

At the same time, both Medusa and the Laughing Snake are subversive and influential figures. For feminist thinkers, Medusa is, therefore, also an image of female emancipation and influence.¹²⁹ Accordingly, Allahyari’s hyperfiction subverts the ancient, misogynistic pur-

124 See Carboni, ‘The “Book of Surprises”’, 29.

125 See Carboni, ‘The “Book of Surprises”’, 29.

126 See Anderson, *The Book of the Mirror*. For context and comparison, consider also the reflections on masks in chapter 2.1, above.

127 For further reading, see Stephen R. Wilk, *Medusa: Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

128 See Griselda Pollock (ed.), *Visual Politics and Psychoanalysis: Art and the Image in Post-Traumatic Cultures* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013); Ann Giles Stephenson, ‘Endless the Medusa: A feminist reading of Medusan imagery and the myth of the hero in Eudora Welty’s novels’, Master thesis, Angelo State University, San Angelo, Texas, 1997; Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Empowerment in Poetry: Medusa, Aphrodite, Artemis, and Bears: A Gender Comparison* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994); Mary Valentis and Anne Devane, *Female Rage: Unlocking Its Secrets, Claiming Its Power*, 1st edition (New York, New York: Carol Southern Books, 1994).

129 For an overview on feminist readings of the Medusa myth, see Gillian M. E. Alban, *The Medusa Gaze in Contemporary Women’s Fiction: Petrifying, Maternal and Redemptive* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017); Basia Sliwinska, *The Female Body in the Looking-Glass: Contemporary Art, Aes-*

poses of the story, instead being grounded in modern revisionist approaches to the two figures. For Allahyari, the Laughing Snake dies from seeing not her reflection in the mirror but rather the cruelty of the world around her. The mirror becomes a metaphor for the gaze of a patriarchal society and the protagonist's (self-)reflection within this nexus of looking. As a practical and symbolic object, the mirror also plays a central role in Persian culture. From the *Mirror of Fate*, the symbol for light in Persian wedding ceremonies, to its role across Persian architectural history, the mirror is a powerful metaphor, one that is used in mystical as well as non-mystical contexts. However, Allahyari's use of the mirror can best be placed in a trajectory of Iranian artists and writers who have mobilized it as a metaphor for womanhood.¹³⁰ Dick Davis's *The Mirror of My Heart: A Thousand Years of Persian Poetry by Women* collects translated poems exploring the significance of the mirror as a tool for reflecting upon internal and external perceptions of women in Persian culture. The anthology includes works by women writers such as Rabe'eh from the tenth century and Fatemeh Ekhtesari from the twenty-first century. It offers a small window into the vast universe of Persian literature, accessible only in limited translations to a Western audience. Writing on the mirror in Forugh Farrokhzad's poetry, the Iranian scholar Leila Rahimi Bahmany argues:

In Iranian patriarchal culture, women are systematically robbed of their independent identity and their authentic voice. Like any other patriarchal culture, the Iranian manifestation socializes women to be voiceless and self-effacing. Women are forced to present an image dictated to them, to act as obedient daughters and wives, and as self-sacrificial mothers.... By systematically expunging their identity, patriarchal culture has turned women into surfaces for bestowing a delusive, copacetic identity on their male associates.¹³¹

For Iranian artists, the mirror has thus become an important recurring stylistic symbol to describe a 'discrepancy between their self-image and the cultural image of womanhood, as well as their constant adaptations of images and identities.'¹³²

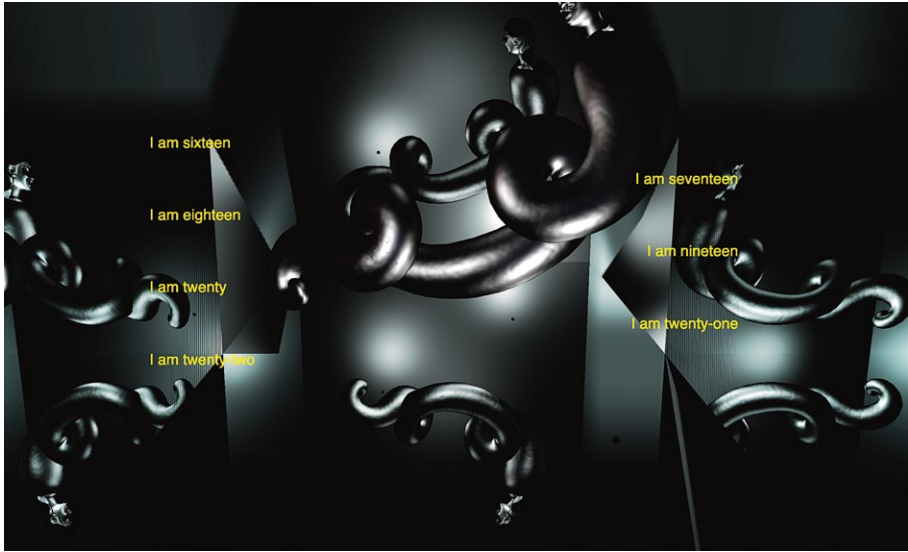
The significance of the mirror in Allahyari's work is underscored by one of the primary settings in her virtual hyperfiction (fig. 129). Within this digitally animated mirror space, a sculptural rendition of the Laughing Snake floats, its image multiplied by reflections from all angles. Accessible via specific pathways, this space opens with an exposition of the mythological tale of the Laughing Snake through a third-person narrator. Initially, the narrative

thetics and Genderland (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016); Robbie Duschinsky and Susan Walker (eds.), *Juliet Mitchell and the Lateral Axis: Twenty-First-Century Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard (eds.), *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Valentis and Devane, *Female Rage*.

130 See Dick Davis, *The Mirror Of My Heart: A Thousand Years of Persian Poetry by Women* (Odenton, Maryland: Mage Publishers, 2019); Leila Rahimi Bahmany, *Mirrors of Entrapment and Emancipation: Forugh Farrokhzad and Sylvia Plath* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2015); Rivanne Sandler, 'Simin Behbahani's Poetic Conversations', *Iranian Studies* 41, no. 1 (2008), 47–60; Mohammad R. Ghanoonparvar, *In a Persian Mirror: Images of the West and Westerners in Iranian Fiction* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1993).

131 See Bahmany, *Mirrors of Entrapment and Emancipation*, 61.

132 See Bahmany, *Mirrors of Entrapment and Emancipation*, 18.

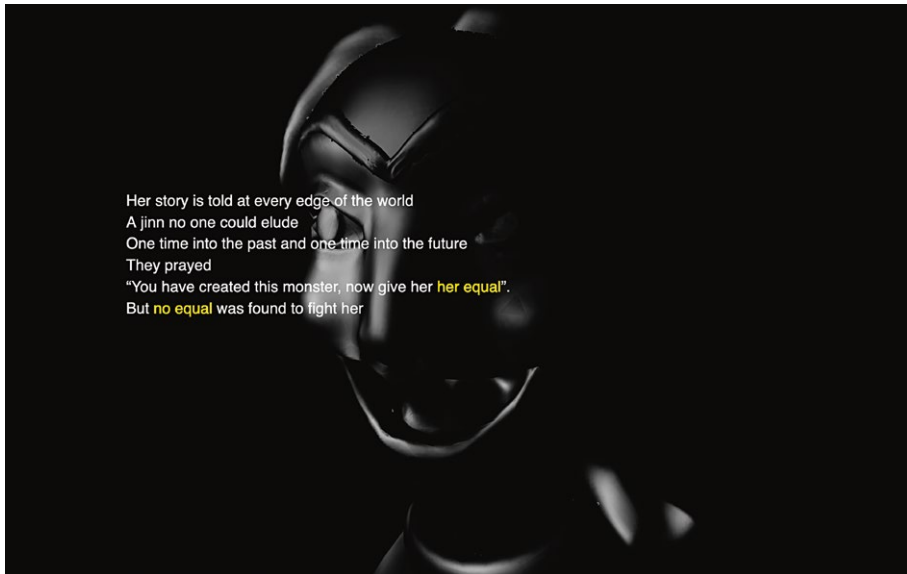


129 | Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: The Laughing Snake*, 2018; interactive hypertextual narrative, screenshot from website <https://artport.whitney.org/commissions/laughing-snake/index.html>.

unfolds linearly against a backdrop of secluded hills, accompanied by a reconstruction of the snake itself. As the story evolves, textual elements increasingly incorporate hyperlinks, enabling users to explore diverse settings and facets of the narrative (fig. 130). Depending on the chosen paths, the structure and complexity of the experience evolve. Multiple routes converge into the virtual mirror space, where the encountered text dynamically adjusts based on the audience's preceding choices.

In one of the scenarios encountered within the mirrored room, users are presented with different ages to choose from, including 'I am sixteen', 'I am seventeen', 'I am eighteen', and so forth. Behind each choice and click unfolds a different experience of sexual harassment narrated from a first-person perspective.

And please know that I am just
Existing:
Walking around the streets of Tehran
(in pants, with a long *Manto*, covering all my body, and a scarf)
Taking the public taxi
Standing in some line
Taking the bus
Sitting down somewhere
And young boys, middle-aged fathers, old old grandpas
CASUALLY
CAUSING EVENTUAL MONSTROSITY...
CAUSING HYSTERICAL PAROXYSM
Touch my lap and my breast and my ass
Rub their penis on me in some crowded place



130 | Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: The Laughing Snake*, 2018; interactive hypertextual narrative, screenshot from website <https://artport.whitney.org/commissions/laughing-snake/index.html>.

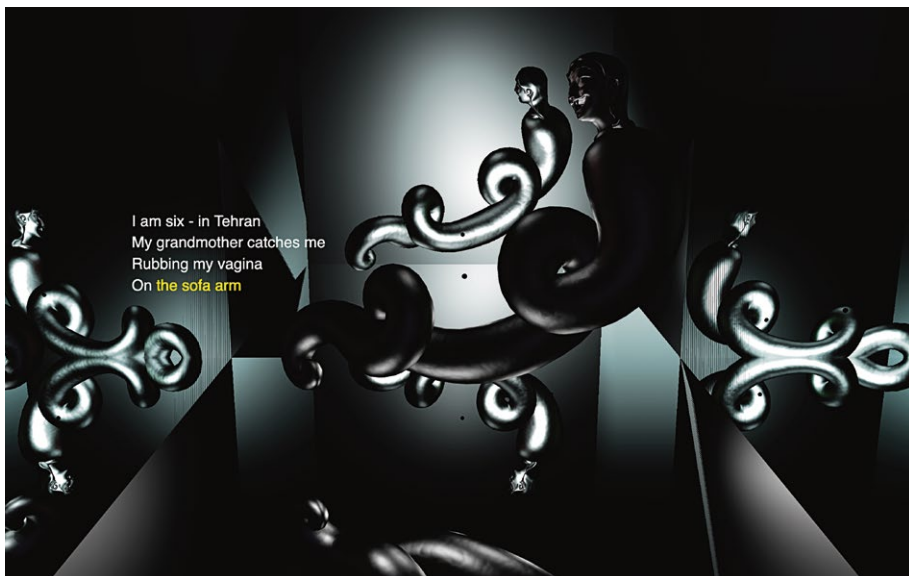
Follow me for blocks at night forcing me to get their number
And young boys, middle-aged fathers, old, old grandpas
CASUALLY
CAUSING LEAVING BEHIND TO GET AHEAD
Ask for directions and show their penis in the car before driving off laughing
Walk to me and whisper:
'If you wait right here at the bus station, I will come back to pick you up after dropping my daughter'
(He points out to his daughter sitting in the car and she is my age)
And young boys, middle-aged fathers, old old grandpas
CAUSING TENDENCY TO CAUSE TROUBLE
Make it to my nightmares
My subconscious
Somewhere deep in my soul
And young boys, middle-aged fathers, old old grandpas
CASUALLY...
Repeat into each other¹³³

Other scenarios encountered in the mirrored space recount situations in which family members, teachers, or random encounters impose on the protagonist a particular cultural image of womanhood that she is expected to internalize. Down other paths of Allahyari's hyperfiction, the first-person narrator speaks of acts of castigation. After being caught wearing nail polish at Tehran airport, she is asked by a state official to painfully remove it with sugar cubes. Another scene describes the narrator's early encounters with her genitalia and her grandmother's subsequent punishment of her (fig. 131).

133 Morehshin Allahyari, 'The Laughing Snake | Morehshin Allahyari'.

However, in the writings of Simin Daneshvar, Forugh Farrokhzad, and Simin Behbahani – important sources for Allahyari – the mirror serves not only as a symbol of the patriarchal gaze and desire that obstructs female agency but also as a medium for self-awareness and empowerment. Therefore, the mirrored room in Allahyari’s hyperfiction assumes a double function. It reflects the judging, salacious gaze of a patriarchal society turned on the protagonist of Allahyari’s story. It also functions as a tool for her self-perception and self-knowledge. The mirrored space signals the protagonist’s entrapment and the possibility of acts of emancipation. It allows for a potential to break free from ideas of female sexuality imposed by having grown up in Iran. In this way, Allahyari’s dark, claustrophobic mirror room reveals itself as a passage and way out. With a combination of clicks, the viewer finds herself in a light-filled grey space (fig. 132). Through an opening reminiscent of a door, light seems to pour in and cast a white shadow. This version of the hyperfiction is also overlaid with text, which again varies depending on the user’s chosen pathways to access the grey space. Despite the textual variations, all scenarios summarize previously described instances of discrimination and abuse, juxtaposing them with the narrator’s calls for collective rebellion and female empowerment. Confronted by the predatory male gaze and cultural coercion from family, teachers, and lovers, the protagonist of Allahyari’s narrative breaks free, embracing her inner serpent, her monstrosity, and her otherness (fig. 133).

Like the mirror, Allahyari mobilizes the image of the monstrous, grotesque-looking snake. It continuously floats through the various spaces of her hypertext to articulate the double-edged role of the narrator. As a monster, her frightening otherness stems from a critical patriarchal gaze. Yet this otherness and monstrosity is the key to freeing herself from

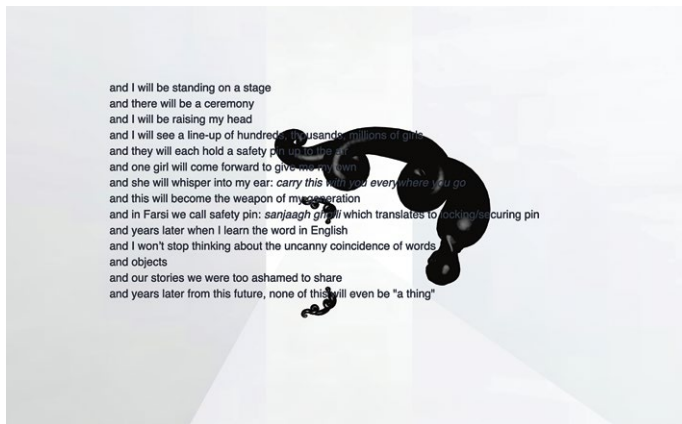


131 | Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: The Laughing Snake*, 2018; interactive hypertextual narrative, screenshot from website <https://artport.whitney.org/commissions/laughing-snake/index.html>.

3 MONUMENTALITY: SCULPTING MEMORIES BETWEEN MONUMENTS AND ARCHIVES



132 | Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: The Laughing Snake*, 2018; interactive hypertextual narrative, screenshot from website <https://artport.whitney.org/commissions/laughing-snake/index.html>.



133 | Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: The Laughing Snake*, 2018; interactive hypertextual narrative, screenshot from website <https://artport.whitney.org/commissions/laughing-snake/index.html>.

those patriarchal ideas of womanhood imposed on the protagonist of the story. Through her laughter and consequent death, the Laughing Snake is, much like Aisha/Qandisha's powerful seduction, capable of disrupting 'phallogocentrism'. In doing so, she can reclaim a position, a reflection in the world. Both jinns become the heroines of their stories and thus become symbols of female empowerment. Allahyari, like many of the Iranian writers and artists before her, refuses the dictates of a patriarchal culture by having a voice and, more significantly, by voicing and archiving her struggles – a collective experience.

In interviews and public presentations, Allahyari has indicated that *She Who Sees the Unknown* is situated within the context of the post-#metoo era. She expresses concern that the voices and experiences of women of colour, especially those from the 'Middle East', have been insufficiently represented:

When the #metoo campaign was at its peak, I felt connected and disconnected from it at the same time. Because I felt like it lacked the voice of women of other cultures and colours. I think the kind of daily trauma and harassment you deal with as a woman in the Middle East is a very specific experience. It does not only come from a patriarchal culture, but also from religious oppression. And it is not just a men towards women kind of oppression/possession, but also

traditional, in a religious sense, with women towards other non-religious women. I wanted this to be contextualized in the space where white, Western feminism still takes a majority of space.¹³⁴

Encoded in her series is not only the fate of Iranian women after the revolution and their subsequent experiences of oppression and harassment that led to migration, exile, and diaspora. Her series may also remind us of the problematic nature of simplifying and objectifying femininity that goes hand in hand with the iconizing and stereotyping of Muslim women in both the East and West. Allahyari's work not only archives and interrogates the mechanisms that influence our understanding of the past – specifically, the dynamics that have historically demonized women and their abilities – but also serves as an archive documenting how these symbolic meanings, ingrained in cultural memory, resurface in contemporary challenges faced by self-identifying women today. Her series guides us from the experiences of the Semitic matriarch through and beyond the #metoo movement.

Digital archives

3D digital technology – encompassing 3D sculpting, animation, scanning, and printing – is Allahyari's essential tool for presenting the multi-layered trajectories and memory assemblages surrounding the protagonists of her installations. Serving as a mediator between the collective and the individual, the present and past memory, these technologies breathe life into and animate Allahyari's archive.

The sculptural essence of her archive is apparent in the exhibition setting of *Aisha/Qandisha*, where the figure is showcased on a plinth, grandiosely extended via the screen, and further amplified through its reflection in the surrounding water (fig. 117). This quality is also evident in the exhibition setting of the *Laughing Snake*, where a room adorned with mirrors on all walls and the ceiling serves as the backdrop for a 3D printed and painted figure of the Laughing Snake suspended from above (fig. 115). The sculptural dimension of Allahyari's work is enhanced by the myriad reflections of the object in the space, which also accommodates the screen for accessing the hyper-narrative. Through these methods, Allahyari sculpts her archive using digital technology.

Digital technology has always been at the core of Allahyari's practice. In an interview with *Studio International* she recalls how the move from Iran to the US introduced her to new digital tools, forming an important turn in her practice that allowed her to tackle questions about misplaced bodies:

So much of my work became about my identity in a place I felt I didn't belong to [the United States] versus a place [where] I felt I didn't fit in [Iran]. Plus, I wanted to be aware of the distance that would grow from not living in Iran and experiencing daily life there. So much of my art projects became about my physical versus my virtual relationship with Iran, but, also, I suddenly had the opportunity of making art without having to censor myself, or being scared of the consequences of what I do. That also came with the decision never to go back to Iran due to the risks that making political or radical work could cause (to censor myself less and exile myself

134 Morehshin Allahyari in Joel Kuennen, 'Refiguring monstrosity', *THE SEEN* 7 (September 2018), 123.

more). All of this changed both the process of art creation and the final products of my work. Not to mention that I was introduced to a lot of new digital tools and software that I knew nothing about prior to moving to the US.¹³⁵

Diasporic archives

In his seminal study *Modernity at Large* (1996), Arjun Appadurai argues that in the era of globalization, the circulation of media images and the movement of migrants have created disconnections between location, imagination, and identity.¹³⁶ For migrants, interactive media – and, one might add, digital media – become ‘the principal resource in which migrants can define the terms of their own identities and identity-building, outside the structures of their new homes.’¹³⁷ Interactive digital media and in particular the internet are vital in building what he calls the ‘diasporic archive’, an archival practice that helps to construct and sustain a migrant identity:

Migrants have a complex relationship to the practices of memory and, thus, to the making of archives, for several reasons. First, because memory becomes hyper-valued for many migrants – the practices through which collective memory is constructed are especially subject to cultural contestations and to simplification. Memory, for migrants, is almost always a memory loss. But since most migrants have been pushed out of the sites of official/national memory in their original homes, there is some anxiety surrounding the status of what is lost, since the memory of the journey to a new place, the memory of one’s own life and family world in the old place, and official memory about the nation one has left have to be recombined in a new location.¹³⁸

The diasporic archive can, therefore, operate as a tool for cultural orientation: ‘For migrants more than for others, the archive is a map. It is a guide to the uncertainties of identity-building under adverse conditions.’¹³⁹ As Niki Akhavan, Annabelle Sreberny, Gholam Khiabany, and Janet Alexanian argue, the emergence of digital media on Iranian websites and blogs since the 1990s has significantly shaped the relationships and identities of Iranian communities within and outside of Iran.¹⁴⁰ From contributing to and engaging with one of the most dynamic blogospheres during the advent of Web 2.0 to documenting and sharing audio-visual materials amid the widespread protests following the June 2009 presidential election, the internet has emerged as a crucial platform for archiving various forms of Iranian

135 A. Will Brown, ‘Morehshin Allahyari: “Suddenly, I had the opportunity of making art without having to censor myself”’, *Studio International* blog (14 February 2015), <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/morehshin-allahyari-interview-digital-media-3d-printing-internet-iran>, accessed 11 December 2024.

136 See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

137 Arjun Appadurai, ‘Archive and aspiration’ in Joke Brouwer, Arjen Mulder, and Susan Charlton (eds.), *Information Is Alive: Art and Theory on Archiving and Retrieving Data* (New York, New York: NAi Publishers, 2003), 23.

138 Appadurai, ‘Archive and aspiration’, 20–21.

139 Appadurai, ‘Archive and aspiration’, 23.

140 See Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany, *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010); Janet Alexanian, ‘Poetry and polemics: Iranian literary expression in the digital age’, *MELUS* 33, no. 2 (2008), 129–152.

self-expression that remain uncensored. This phenomenon has spurred numerous studies dedicated to exploring the Iranian internet landscape.¹⁴¹ Understanding this media specificity of the internet in shaping Iranian identity formation is vital for full comprehension of Allahyari's artistic expressions. It is particularly useful for the hypertext storytelling in the *Laughing Snake*, situated between virtual and actual space. Since the 1990s, the internet has been a significant catalyst for Iranian literary creation, serving as an early platform for a wide array of voices from the Iranian diaspora. Websites and blogs like *Iranian.com* or *Payvand.com* 'have functioned as a 'kind of virtual community that has served the needs of Iranian immigrants dealing with feelings of displacement and longing and, at the same time, allowed for the public expression of feelings that have generally been seen as belonging to the private realm.'¹⁴² The internet, therefore, archives the shared experiences and memories that construct a transnational and heterogeneous Iranian public sphere. If we consider Allahyari's work in dialogue with this public sphere, it is not surprising that she has always emphasized archiving as an integral part of her practice:

I think my fascination with archiving or collecting knowledge comes from a love of making marks and leaving traces behind in the context of history and a 'bigger picture'. For me, it's important to remember what we live and how we live it and that this time and place we get to be in is a tiny chunk of what then becomes a 'past'. This thought is what makes archiving a remarkable practice for me: hoping those who come after us will know and remember this past and our stories.¹⁴³

Archiving as an artistic practice offers artists like Allahyari a form of agency. Put differently, archiving becomes an inevitable necessity for those historically excluded from official archiving practices. In the words of Appadurai, 'the migrant archive cannot afford the illusion that traces are accidents, that documents arrive on their own and that archives are repositories of the luck of materials survival. Rather, the migrant archive is a continuous and conscious work of the imagination, seeking in collective memory an ethical basis for the sustainable reproduction of cultural identities in the new society.'¹⁴⁴ Appadurai's argument builds upon the writings of Foucault and Derrida, who carefully analysed the mechanisms that make up an archive's authority, function, and interpretative power. Foucault carefully traced the clash between the archive as an inert repository of historical artefacts and the idea of the archive as a regulatory discursive system. For the philosopher, the archive inherently embodies a representation of taxonomy, classification, and annotation of knowledge.¹⁴⁵ It is, therefore, understood to be a representative historical form, one whose methodological apparatus does not set 'a condition of validity for judgements, but a condition of reality for

141 See Niki Akhavan, *Electronic Iran: The Cultural Politics of an Online Evolution* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 2.

142 Alexanian, 'Poetry and polemics', 129–130.

143 Allahyari and Paul, 'Re-figuring ourselves', 2.

144 Appadurai, 'Archive and aspiration', 23.

145 See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, tr. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York, New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 22.

statements'.¹⁴⁶ In his book *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995), Derrida also reminds us that 'there is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution. and its interpretation... A science of the archive must include the theory of this institutionalization, that is to say, the theory both of the law which begins by inscribing itself there and of the right which authorizes it.'¹⁴⁷

For a generation of Iranian artists living in a diaspora, archiving underrepresented memories and trajectories through digital and analogue approaches has become the central means to define their place within history. By remembering, collecting, and archiving, they honour the stories of those whose stories will likely never become canonical. 'History is kept by the powerful', the Iranian artist Amitis Motevalli, who moved to the US in 1977 just before the Iranian Revolution, says in a conversation with the author of this book. Employing a wide range of media such as installation, live presentations, sculpting, painting, sketching, printmaking, textiles, embroidery, videography, teaching methods, and collaborative community artwork, Motevalli centres her oeuvre on the experiences of marginalized communities. With a pronounced emphasis on women and femmes, her creations delve into acts of cultural resistance within the context of poverty, conflict, and war. Symbolism drawn from Iranian, Islamic, and Sufi dervish traditions imbues her work. She adeptly modernizes and secularizes these traditions, infusing their rituals and aesthetics with contemporary relevance. 'I am drawn to the aesthetics of Islamic Art as rooted in devotion and love through resistance, rebellion against unjust authoritarianism, and personal sacrifice, and even contemporary mass-media imagery which has derailed the international perception of these messages,' the artist writes.¹⁴⁸

In her work *Golestān Revisited* (2017–present), Motevalli uses an archival artistic form that employs digital and physical strategies. This long-term art and research project examines the colonial histories of roses that have been uprooted since the twelfth century from regions today known as Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan – then parallels them with the erased stories of women, femmes, and girls who have died in the 'war on terror' and other militarized actions since 2010. While her work may be perceived as an intervention in existing archives documenting the war on terror, it can also be viewed as a disruption of the discourse surrounding death, particularly the deaths of women from the SWANA region.

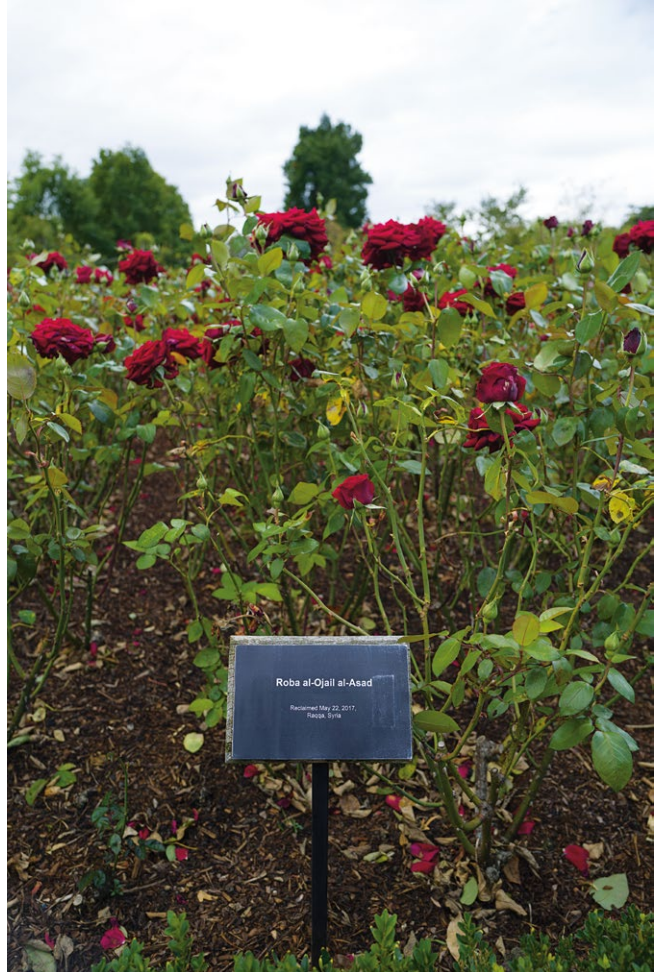
In the project's three iterations at the Huntington Botanical Gardens (2018), the Weingart Gallery at Occidental College Los Angeles (2018), and Regent's Park London (2020), Motevalli reclaims the name of what she calls 'roses in diaspora'.¹⁴⁹ In her unauthorized interventions, Motevalli pasted over the roses' regular descriptions her own labels containing

146 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 127.

147 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, tr. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 4.

148 Amitis Motevalli, 'Amitis' statement', artist's website (date unknown), <https://amitismotevalli.com/statement>, accessed 14 January 2025.

149 Amitis Motevalli quoted in Carrie Paterson, 'Recoupment through roses: A word with artist and activist Amitis Motevalli', *Riot Material* blog (6 July 2018), <https://www.riotmaterial.com/interview-with-amio-tis-motevalli/>, accessed 15 January 2025.



134 | Amitis Motevalli, *Golestān Revisited*, 2017–present; intervention at Regent’s Park, London.

the names of women assassinated since 2010 (fig. 134). In the Weingart Gallery at Occidental College, the installation is enhanced by exhibits featuring genealogical maps and cement block platforms adorned with relocated roses from the lush campus grounds. These exhibits are juxtaposed with indulgent desserts of rosewater-infused ice cream and a fountain featuring five cups filled with what appears to be red tea or blood, flowing from a downward-facing tea spout (fig. 135).

Persia’s ancient roses could be described as successful plant envoys of cultural exchange during a period of trading along the Silk Road. Motevalli, however, questions the way the West has forcefully taken, hybridized, and renamed roses from the SWANA region. Especially during the Crusades, Western culture adopted roses as religious, artistic, and literary/cultural symbols, erasing their non-Western cultural stories and histories. The artist perceives a parallel dynamic associated with the appropriation of land, resources, and authority, which



135 | Amitis Motevalli, *Golestān Revisited*, 2017–present. Installation view, Weingart Gallery, Golestān Revisited, Occidental College, Los Angeles, 2018.

she terms the ‘Neo-Crusades’ of the SWANA region. Nowadays, under the guise of a war on terror, individuals are sacrificed, their faith and narratives obliterated.¹⁵⁰ The work’s title *Golestān Revisited*, which translates from Farsi as the ‘land of the flowers’, is the title of a seminal collection of texts written c. 1258 by the thirteenth-century Iranian poet Sa’di. *Golestān* and his other writings had a great impact on later writers and were, up until the 1940s, standard school texts for reading and learning about Persian literature.¹⁵¹ Sa’di considered his works to be as flowers in a garden that would remain immune to the passage of time: ‘What of a bunch of flowers, if you pardon? Take a leaf instead from my Rose Garden [i.e., the *Golestān*]. Flowers will remain only for a few days; this Rose Garden will be fresh always.’¹⁵²

150 The concept of ‘neo-crusades’ originates from a blog post by Saad Lakhani, who draws parallels between present-day anti-Muslim sentiment and the historical anti-Muslim propaganda of the Crusades. See Saad Lakhani, ‘Neo-crusades?’, *My Bit for Change* blog (13 August 2011), <https://www.mybitforchange.org/2011/neo-crusades/>, accessed 15 January 2025.

151 See Homa Katouzian, *Sa’di: The Poet of Loving and Living* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006), 1.

152 Sa’di translated in Katouzian, *Sa’di: The Poet of Loving and Living*, 32.

Throughout his book, it becomes evident that his poems act as allegories for applying broader ethical and social conduct in line with Sufi ideals.¹⁵³ Motevali emulates this approach in her work: 'After learning about the ways roses had been transplanted and hybridized from the SWANA region, I deepened my research and then started renaming common roses to honour the women whose names I saw and heard in fast disappearing news cycles,' Motevalli explains.¹⁵⁴

In front of a pinkish rose with light yellow undertones and tiny clustered buds, one can read: 'Shayma Faruq Abdullah / Formerly known as Ellen Poulson Polyantha – Bred 1911 Denmark / Reclaimed November 19, 2016, Daquq, Iraq' (fig. 136). Shayma, a small infant, tragically lost her life to a roadside bomb in November 2016 as her family attempted to flee the ISIS-controlled regions near Al Somood, Daquq, southwest of Kirkuk.¹⁵⁵ The rose Motevalli chose to memorialize Shayma was bred and named 'Ellen Poulsen', a Polyantha rose, by the Dutch Dines Poulsen in 1911. As with most roses, 'Ellen Poulsen' is a hybridized rose likely imported to Europe during the Middle Ages. As Motevalli highlights, many roses link back to the Mohammadi rose. European nobility, including Crusader Robert de Brie, who commanded the second Siege of Damascus, is thought to have introduced the plant to Europe from Syria during the twelfth century. This historical connection gives rise to the rose's name, *Rosa × damascena*, commonly known as the Damask rose.¹⁵⁶ The importance of the rose in Persian culture is recorded in ancient Persian folklore stories. Legend tells of a nightingale so enamoured of her white rose that she embraced its thorns, staining them with her blood and giving rise to the rich hue of the red Damask rose, *Rosa × damascena*. The Gallic rose, *Rosa gallica*, a close relative of the Damask rose, was among the earliest roses cultivated in central Europe. The widespread popularity of roses in Europe can be traced back to their origins in ancient Persia, the Indus Valley, and the Levant, where they have been cherished for centuries in perfumery, teas, medicine,



136 | Amitis Motevalli, *Golestān Revisited*, 2017–present. Rose renamed after Shayma Faruq Abdullah, who was killed by a roadside bomb: 'Shayma Faruq Abdullah, formerly known as Ellen

153 See Katouzian, *Sa'di*, 88.

154 Amitis Motevalli 'Golestān revisited: Exhibition and rose renaming (2018–2019)', artist's website (date unknown), <https://amitismotevalli.com/golestanrevisited>, accessed 15 January 2025.

155 See Iraq Body Count. 'a5943: Nov 19: Infant by bomb in Daquq, Southwest of Kirkuk', *Iraq Body Count* website (date unknown), <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/incidents/a5943>, accessed 15 January 2025.

156 See Mark P. Widrechner, 'History and utilization of "Rosa damascena"', *Economic Botany* 35, no. 1 (1981), 42–58, doi: 10.1007/BF02859214.

cuisine, as well as in art and religious ceremonies.¹⁵⁷ Motevalli characterizes roses as both resilient and delicate, possessing thorns that serve as their protection. This duality becomes as a potent symbol in her work, representing the strength and vulnerability of the women she commemorates. Roses hold significant cultural importance across the SWANA region, making them a fitting medium for honouring the women from this region lost in recent years. Among these is the tragic story of ten-year-old Fatin, executed in Mosul by ISIS occupation forces. Another rose one encounters in Motevalli's botanical archive is Abeer Qassim Hamza al-Jabani: 'Abeer Qassim Hamza al-Jabani formerly known as John F. Kennedy / Hybrid Tea / Bred 1965 United States / Reclaimed March 12, 2006, Yusufiyah, Iraq'. Abeer was a fourteen-year-old girl whose family was brutally killed while she was gang-raped, tortured, and then murdered by a group of five United States Army soldiers.

While the majority of Motevalli's project commemorates and memorializes Muslim girls and women whose deaths have barely been covered by Western media, she also includes Europeans and Americans in her rose universe. Kayla Jean Mueller, an American humanitarian aid worker and human rights activist, is named as a flower. In 2013, she was taken captive by ISIS in Aleppo, Syria, after leaving a Doctors Without Borders hospital. According to a *New York Times* article, she was later married off to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who repeatedly raped and tortured her.¹⁵⁸ After holding her captive for eighteen months, the terrorist group claimed that she was killed during an airstrike by either the American or Jordanian military.¹⁵⁹ More recent sources allege that she was executed on the orders of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.¹⁶⁰

Many more tragic deaths like these are documented in online databases such as *Iraq Body Count* – a crucial resource for the artist's research. In a coldly statistical and gruesome manner, these websites catalogue the names of the deceased, along with the date, location, and manner of their deaths. The bureaucratic language and design of these archives evoke unsettling parallels with online databases that categorize roses. Acting as inventories and records of colonial and neo-colonial expansion, both kinds of databases reflect Western practices of territorial mapping and resource nomenclature, which serve to assert control, erase local agency, quantify, and classify both flora and people. This observation inspired the next phase of the project, in which the artist will construct an online archive of women and roses. Leveraging algorithms to enhance search functionalities, she aims for her archive

157 See Roger Phillips and Martyn Rix, *The Ultimate Guide to Roses: A Comprehensive Selection* (London: Pan MacMillan, 2004).

158 See Rukmini Callimachi, 'ISIS held Kayla Mueller, U.S. aid worker, as sex slave before fatal airstrike', *The New York Times* online (14 August 2015), <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/15/world/middleeast/isis-held-us-aid-worker-as-sex-slave-before-death.html>, accessed 15 January 2025.

159 See Rukmini Callimachi and Eric Schmitt, 'With proof from ISIS of her death, family honors Kayla Mueller', *The New York Times* online (10 February 2015), <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/11/world/middleeast/parents-of-kayla-mueller-isis-hostage-confirm-she-is-dead.html>, accessed 15 January 2025.

160 Adam Goldman and Rukmini Callimachi, 'ISIS leader al-Baghdadi may have had U.S. hostage executed, witness says', *The New York Times* online (12 November 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/12/us/politics/kayla-mueller-baghdadi.html>, accessed 15 January 2025.



137 | Shirin Fahimi, *Umm al Raml's Sand Narratives*, 2022; digital rendering of 3D model.

to rank at the top of online searches related to Western roses. If successful, her online archive (more than its physical installations) will illuminate to online visitors the history of rose renaming following its extraction from the 'Middle East'. In doing so, it will shed light on a challenging and often overlooked colonial legacy while drawing parallels to the current sociopolitical climate in the SWANA region. The rose, in the artist's hands, becomes a powerful subject for revising history and its memory mechanisms through a kind of 'archival art'.

Where Motevalli uses roses as avatars to reclaim forgotten narratives, the Iranian-Canadian artist Shirin Fahimi works with forms of atavistic embodiment. Fahimi shares with her colleague and occasional collaborator Allahyari an interest in Islamic mythology, magic, and esoteric and spiritual practices, and their revival through the lens of technology. The act of re-figuring – reworking and reclaiming forgotten memories and knowledge of the past to make it fruitful for our contemporary and future – sits at the heart of her practice.

Umm al-Raml, which translates to 'mother of sand', is a fictional persona that Fahimi has been developing throughout different iterations and in performative collaborations, including with Allahyari (fig. 137). Umm al-Raml represents a female figure of prophetic significance, one among the many powerful women whose stories have been erased throughout history. Using digital means, Fahimi aims to bring this empowering female presence back into the public sphere. She explains the impetus of her project:



138 | Shirin Fahimi, *Umm al-Raml*, 2019; sand, digital print; 111.76 × 167.64 cm. Installation view, Banff Centre, Alberta (Canada), 2019.

Growing up in Iran and being influenced by Islamic culture and literature, as a child I was always fascinated with the prophet's stories who could speak and see the unseen and invisible realm. However, no women in Islamic literature have borne the title of prophecy, they have been excluded from the criteria of being a leader in the spiritual realm and consequently, women get excluded from having political power on earth. While practicing occult sciences have been commonly used in medieval Islamic culture and commonly known to the contemporary fabric of the society in Iran, practicing occult sciences publicly, especially for women, brought negative connotations, in which they are accused of being a charlatan or denounced as irrational. Therefore I call attention to how the exclusion of women from spiritual leadership influences the exclusion of them in political power in society.¹⁶¹

For her residency at the Banff Centre in Alberta, Fahimi used 3D scanning technology to capture her own body, transforming herself into a digital 3D file that can be shared online. From this scan, Fahimi creates an avatar in the form of a 3D model of Umm al-Raml, who then exists in a space that blurs the boundaries between the physical and virtual realms (fig. 138). Fahimi's Umm al-Raml embodies mastery of Ramali, a form of geomancy, an ancient divination practice originating in Iran. 'Raml' translates to 'sand,' the foundational aspect of *ilm*

161 Quote by Shirin Fahimi from the unpublished script for the interview between Mara-Johanna Kölmel and Shirin Fahimi, 'Pattern Recognition: From Tracing Figures in Sand to Devising Other Futures. A conversation between Shirin Fahimi and Mara-Johanna Kölmel,' *Akademie Schloss Solitude* blog, 24 February 2021, <https://www.akademiesolitude.de/de/web-residencies/pattern-recognition-from-tracing-figures-in-sand-to-devising-other-futures/>, accessed 6 February 2025.

al-raml, the science of sand, which involves predicting the future by interpreting patterns traced in sand or earth (fig. 139).

As practiced today, geomantic divination follows several stages. It begins with the creation of sixteen rows of marks and dots, each row representing a specific question guiding the consultation. The even or odd nature of the marks in each row is then determined, with even numbers represented by two dots and odd numbers by a single dot. These sixteen lines form four sets, each comprising four rows, resulting in four figures known as 'the Mothers'. Arranged from right to left, these figures serve as the starting point for the tableau. Each row symbolizes the opening of sixteen metaphorical doors, each corresponding to different shapes, offering insights into past, present, and future possibilities, fostering hope and envisioning oneself in alternative scenarios (fig. 140). Once the initial four figures, known as the Mothers, are established, the remaining figures are derived through transposition, referred to as 'the Daughters', from a 4x4 matrix. Additional rows are generated through a binary operation known as conjugation. This process yields a total of sixteen figures, forming a mathematical structure called a finite commutative group. In Islamic geomancy, each figure is assigned a name, with various significations attributed to them, such as good health, imprisonment, or prosperity. These and various other techniques evolved as this practice spread alongside the expansion of the Islamic empire.¹⁶²



139 | Shirin Fahimi, *Umm al-Raml*, 2019; avatar study, 3D scan, OBJ file, screenshot.

162 See Emilie Savage-Smith, 'Geomancy in the Islamic world', in Helaine Selin (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the*

From the twelfth century until well into the seventeenth, geomancy enjoyed widespread popularity in Europe, as evidenced by the production of manuscripts and the publication of printed books. Figures such as Cornelius Agrippa, Christophe de Cattan, Robert Fludd, Albertus Magnus, Cardan, Dante, Paracelsus, and Chaucer showed a profound interest in geomancy through their writings, further underscoring its prevalence in European thought during this period.¹⁶³ The Latin West gave the name 'geomancy' to the sum of these methods in the twelfth century.¹⁶⁴ Although its study in Europe began to wane by the end of the seventeenth century, geomancy and similar divination methods are still widely practiced in many non-Western regions, spanning from Iran to sub-Saharan Africa and Madagascar.

Since the golden era of Islam, sand has served as a medium for predicting various phenomena such as weather patterns, military outcomes, or personal events. Additionally, a wealth of manuscripts exists on the subject, detailing alignments between geomantic figures and Zodiac signs, parts of the body, the four classical elements, numbers, letters, and more. In the realm of research literature, the greatest thinkers of geomancy were situated not primarily in Europe, but rather in the Islamic world. One notable figure is Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad al-Zanati of the Zanata tribe, often acknowledged as a prominent master and writer of geomancy.¹⁶⁵ Another thinker, Ibn Khaldun, a renowned Muslim scholar and authority on Ramali, suggests that geomancy emerged as a means to circumvent intricate calculations, such as those involved in determining planetary positions as required by astrology.¹⁶⁶ Fahimi also references *On the Calculation with Hindu Numerals* (c. 825 CE), the work of the Persian scholar Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi, whose name gave rise to the term 'algorithm'.¹⁶⁷ Put differently, *ilm al-raml* uses algorithmic procedures, some of the oldest material practices, to try to understand the beyond.¹⁶⁸

History of Science, Technology, and Medicine in Non-Western Cultures (Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media, 1997), 361–362.

163 See Marion B. Smith, 'The nature of Islamic geomancy with a critique of a structuralist's approach', *Studia Islamica* 49 (1979), 7, doi: 10.2307/1595314.

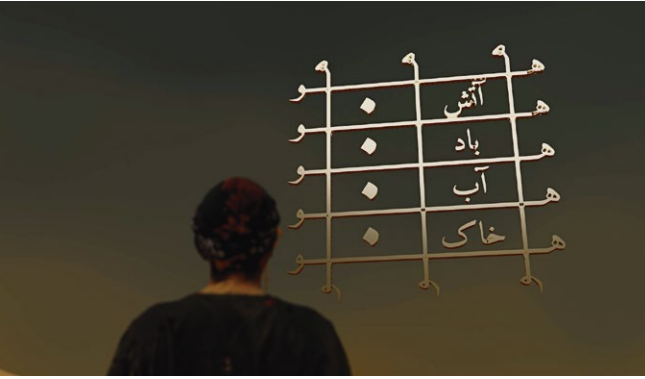
164 See Smith, 'The nature of Islamic geomancy', 6.

165 See Savage-Smith, 'Geomancy in the Islamic world', 362; Bernard Carra de Vaux, 'La géomancie chez les Arabes', in Paul Tannery, *Memoires scientifiques*, ed. Johan Ludvig Heiberg and Hieronymus Georg Zeuthen (Toulouse: E. Privat, 1920), 300–301.

166 See Smith, 'The nature of Islamic geomancy', 31.

167 For further reading on this topic, see Roshdi Rashed, *Classical Mathematics from Al-Khwarizmi to Descartes*, tr. Michael H. Shank (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015); Corona Brezina, *Al-Khwarizmi: The Inventor of Algebra* (New York: Rosen Central, 2005).

168 Algorithms are not confined to mathematics [...] The Babylonians used them for deciding points of law, Latin teachers used them to get the grammar right, and they have been used in all cultures for predicting the future, for deciding medical treatment, or for preparing food [...] We therefore speak of recipes, rules, techniques, processes, procedures, methods, etc., using the same word to apply to different situations.' Jean-Luc Chabert, *A History of Algorithms: From the Pebble to the Microchip* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2012), 1–2.



140 | Shirin Fahimi, *Umm al Raml's Sand Narratives*, 2022; digital rendering of 3D model.

Shirin Fahimi sees this cultural technique as an important precursor of the algorithmic procedures underpinning today's digital space, and as an attempt to counter the lack of reference to female spiritualism and prophecy in the literature on *ilm al-raml*. But it is also important to note how the ancient mathematical structures underpinning ritualistic divination practices are based on binary codes, one and zero configurations. Such practices have been dismissed as irrational or superstitious in the contemporary era, but in fact may help us to understand the algorithm as an 'emergent form' throughout history rather than a 'technological *a priori*'.¹⁶⁹

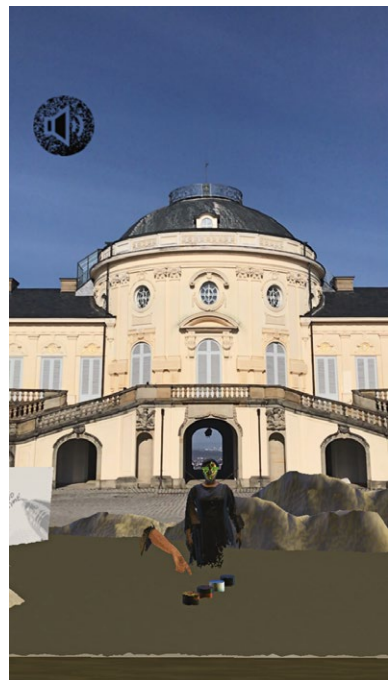
With her work, Fahimi thus revives *ilm al-raml* as a centuries-old form of algorithmic thinking. She, however, reimagines the history of *ilm al-raml* from the perspective of a female *rammal* (geomancer). Her work broaches the ways in which contemporary practice of 'occult' sciences or divination techniques are subject to gender bias, with the women who practice these methods perceived as naive, uneducated, or prone to superstition. She thereby explores how the exclusion of women from spiritual leadership in Islam influences their exclusion from political power in society.

Although 'the European rationalist gaze into Islam has made people shy away from these practices... Geomancy is still considered a noble art by some mainstream Shia scholars,' Fahimi asserts in an interview, adding that 'there are reports every day in the newspapers of people, especially women, who are arrested for practicing *Ramali* – a Farsi term for a geomancer – and labelled as charlatans.'¹⁷⁰

Fahimi's female avatar occupies the virtual realm, employing algorithmic processes not only to reveal the unseen but also to reclaim the (digital) space as one that emerges from contexts beyond the exclusively white or Western. In so doing, she imbues her 3D spatial capture technology with ancient coding techniques for social and ritual spaces.

169 Pasquinelli, 'Three thousand years of algorithmic rituals'.

170 Shirin Fahimi quoted in Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, 'Breaching towards other futures,' *CounterPulse* blog (5 February 2020), <https://counterpulse.org/breaching-towards-futures/>, accessed 16 January 2025.



141 | Shirin Fahimi, *Umm al Raml Sand Narratives: First Story*, 2021; augmented reality, screenshots. The effect may be seen through a preview link when opened on a mobile device: <https://www.instagram.com/ar/827896201094826/>.

For a web residency at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in 2021, Fahimi created an avatar of Umm al-Raml as a 3D model through an Instagram filter. This filter is accessible to viewers through Shirin's Instagram account, enabling them to virtually project Umm al-Raml into their chosen public and private spaces via augmented reality. By aligning the selected space with the filter, one encounters Umm al-Raml inhabiting a hybrid realm between the tangible and virtual (fig. 141). Within Fahimi's 3D spatial capture technology and augmented reality lies a proposition to reconfigure both digital and physical spaces as sites for commemorating alternative histories and erased memories. Like Allahyari, Fahimi establishes an alternative structure of remembrance that also resonates with the artist's diasporic position.

In their collaborative performance *Breaching Towards Other Futures*, Fahimi's avatar Umm al-Raml is entwined with Allahyari's monstrous goddess Aisha/Qandisha to project their avatar bodies towards alternative futures and sociopolitical realities (fig. 142). Incorporating geomantic divination, the work unlocks various portals to the past, future, and present. Within Fahimi's geomantic ritual, she forges pathways to different epochs – where the future morphs into the past, the past merges with the present, and the present exists as both past and future.

'In *ramali* we travel to a lineage of time unfamiliar perhaps by the Western standards, but it is this potential of time travelling that gives Umm al-Raml an eye, control, and possession for a future unknown and unreachable to others,' the artists explain.¹⁷¹ The piece interweaves their ritualistic aspirations with their own experiences – combining the geomantic reading that aspires to an alternative space with – experiences such as Trump's 'Muslim ban' (which affected their ability to travel abroad), the unfolding environmental shutdown, and prejudice and resistance towards immigrants and asylum seekers. The act of 'breaching,' as the work's title suggests, thereby becomes a common theme running through their piece: 'From gazing at fissures in the sand to opening doors and splitting bodies to serve as mediators of possibility. Most importantly, breaching is not a passive act, it is an active moment, a breaking through, pulling down walls of ignorance and forcing open multiple possibilities, past, present, and future,' the artist Zulfikar Ali Bhutto writes on their piece.¹⁷² For Allahyari and Fahimi, the act of opening doors through *ramali* not only describes the search for an unknown but becomes a source for inventing and recording alternatives to the inhumanity found in our present. 'This is about colonial catastrophism and the problem of cozy catastrophism when our dreams and fears and nightmares are picked and chosen and amplified unevenly.'¹⁷³

By appropriating state-of-the-art technologies through the lens of ancient mythologies and ritual systems, including numerology, jinns, and talismans, Fahimi and Allahyari provoke a critical reflection on archiving. Their use of thinkers, theories, and texts outside Western discourse also situates their work in the 'radical outside'.¹⁷⁴ Their work thereby resonates with many other queer and femme-led investigations by artists such as Motevali, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1928–1979, born in Larkana, Sindh, Pakistan), Saba Taj (born 1986 in North Car-



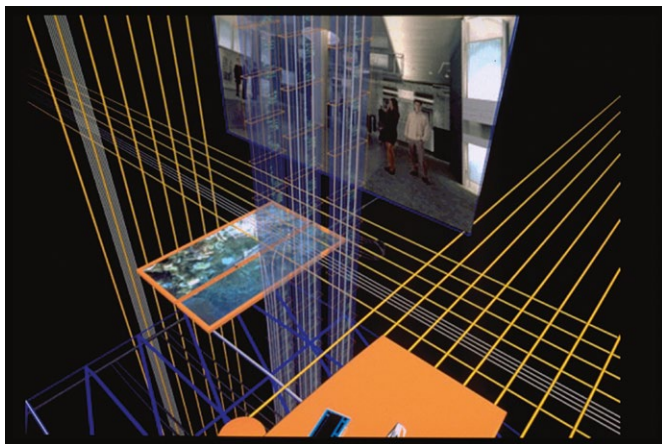
142 | Shirin Fahimi and Morehshin Allahyari, *Breaching Towards Other Futures*, 2018; performance.

171 Shirin Fahimi and Morehshin Allahyari, 'Breaching towards other futures' [video], *Vimeo* (22 June 2019), <https://vimeo.com/343792410>, accessed 16 January 2025. The quotation begins at 10:46.

172 Bhutto, 'Breaching towards other futures'.

173 Fahimi and Allahyari, 'Breaching towards other futures'. The quotation begins at 17:04.

174 See Fahimi and Allahyari, 'Breaching towards other futures'.



143 | Lynn Hershman Leeson, *The Difference Engine #3*, 1995; computer-based installation, laptop (PC), operating system (Windows 95), custom software, motor-operated camera, metal frames, plasma screen.

olina, USA), Meriem Bennani (born 1988 in Rabat, Morocco), Larissa Sansour (born 1973 in East Jerusalem, Palestine), and Baseera Khan (born 1980 in Denton, Texas, USA). Through their poetic rebellion against Eurocentric concepts, they archive, revive, re-own, or re-figure erased narratives and concepts. This, in turn, can contribute to a different reading of our contemporary, a different way of seeing and being in the world. It is this conceptual creativity and visionary impetus, using digital technologies as tools to reclaim the archive, that links the work of Motevalli, Fahimi, and Allahyari with that of previous artistic generations, as elaborated in the following section.

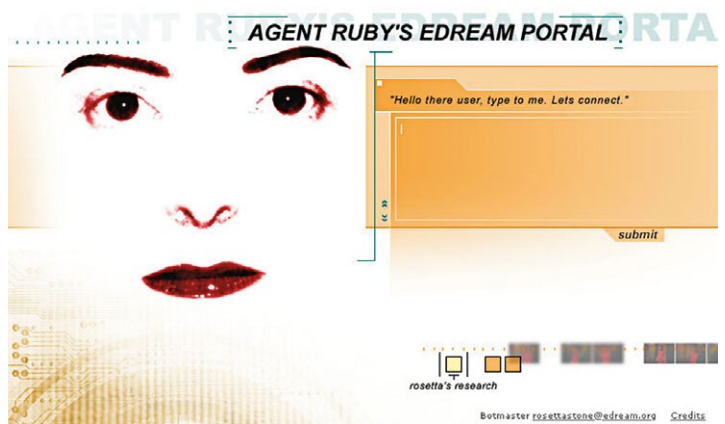
Archives 3.0

From the 1970s onwards, artists, particularly female and queer practitioners, used electronic and digital media to investigate ways of archiving underrepresented, overlooked, and marginalized histories. They did so with limited budgets and frequently without institutional recognition. Digital technology and later the internet emerged as vital platforms for female

artists to scrutinize the archive. They cultivated it as a site for critique, an embodied re-inscription of cultural narratives, and consequently, a platform for the creation of 'future histories'.¹⁷⁵

Most prominently, Lynn Hershman Leeson interrogated the archive as a site for techno-imagination and participatory aesthetics. 'While the artist has long been a New Media pioneer, the archive's link between counternarratives, digital technology, and historical "writing" helps to visualize the larger issues at stake for feminism, film history, and future expanded cinema/writing,' Vicki Callahan observes.¹⁷⁶

Leeson's enduring artistic themes encompass identity construction, the interplay between bodies and machines, and the evolving definitions of reality and virtuality. These themes have significantly influenced a contemporary cohort of media artists, including Allahyari, who studied New Media in an Anglo-American context. Like Allahyari's oeuvre, Lynn Hershman Leeson's projects such as *The Difference Engine #3* (1995, fig. 143) and *Agent Ruby* (1999–2002, fig. 144), along with works like *The Dante Hotel* (1973–1976), create alternative realities, challenge gender biases, and unsettle fixed conceptions of identity and reality. Michael Shanks, therefore, places Leeson's work at the beginning of a new archival era, 'Archive 3.0,' which describes archives that bring together physical and virtual environments. Archive 3.0 involves interactive sites of 'personal affective engagement,' where documentation is not a record but rather 'performative'.¹⁷⁷ As such, Archive 3.0 describes 'new prosthetic architec-

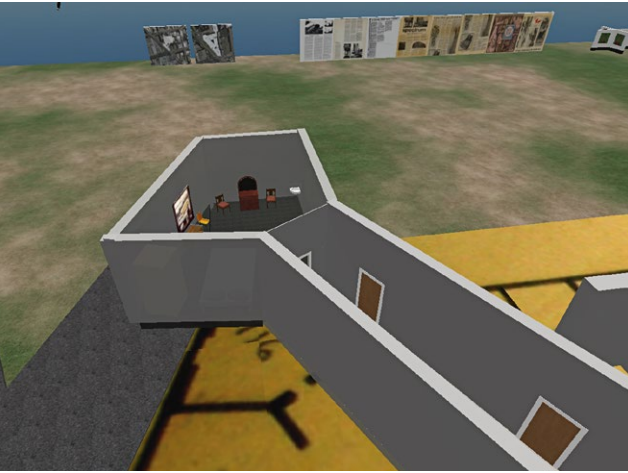


144 | Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Agent Ruby*, 1999–2002; web project, screenshot.

175 The following publications provide a comprehensive overview of the role of female artists shaping digital technologies: Donna Cox, Ellen Sandor, and Janine Fron (eds.), *New Media Futures: The Rise of Women in the Digital Arts* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2018); Judy Malloy (ed.), *Women, Art, and Technology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003).

176 Vicki Callahan, 'The future of the archive: An interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson', in Callahan, *Reclaiming the Archive*, 419.

177 Archive 3.0 succeeds the Archive 2.0, a phase of 'mechanization and digitization of archival databases, with an aim of fast, easy, and open access, based upon efficient dendritic classification and retrieval, associated also with statistical analysis performed upon the data. The earliest stage of archiving, the Ar-



145 | Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Dante Hotel in a Second Life: Life Squared*, 2007; interactive work in *Second Life*, original programming with Stanford Humanities Lab; dimensions variable. Installation view, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, S.F. Museum of Modern Art of Participation.

tures for the production and sharing of archival resources – the animated archive.¹⁷⁸ The performativity of Archive 3.0 refers not only to the viewers' active participation in it, but also the archives' ongoing mutability. 'The aesthetic of fixed order is being replaced by permanent reconfigurability', Wolfgang Ernst observes regarding this progression. In her 2009 book *Performing the Archive: The Transformation of the Archive in Contemporary Art from Repository of Documents to Art Medium*, Simone Osthoff conceptualizes a similar transformation of the archive as a shift from being 'stable and retroactive' to being 'generative' as a result of artists' performative use of archives.¹⁷⁹

Hershman Leeson's projects take on the form of archives in progress. *Life Squared* (2006–present, fig. 145) is a virtual archive of the artist's practice translated into the virtual surroundings of the role-playing game *Second Life*. Produced in collaboration with the Stanford Humanities Lab, its departure point is the artist's existing physical archive housed in the Department of Special Collections at the Stanford University Libraries. The project integrates selected materials from this archive into a virtual environment modelled after Hershman Leeson's very first site-specific installation, *Dante Hotel* in San Francisco in 1972. It serves as both a virtual archive of her broader artistic practice and a focused exploration of one

chive 1.0, was marked by the 'bureaucracy in the early state, temple, and palace archives – inscription as an instrument of management'. See Michael Shanks, 'Synthetic worlds: The history of the archive and the future of memory', [lecture held at MediaX, Stanford University, 4 March 2008], *Academia.edu* repository (2008), https://www.academia.edu/19626690/Synthetic_worlds_the_history_of_the_archive_and_the_future_of_memory, accessed 16 January 2025.

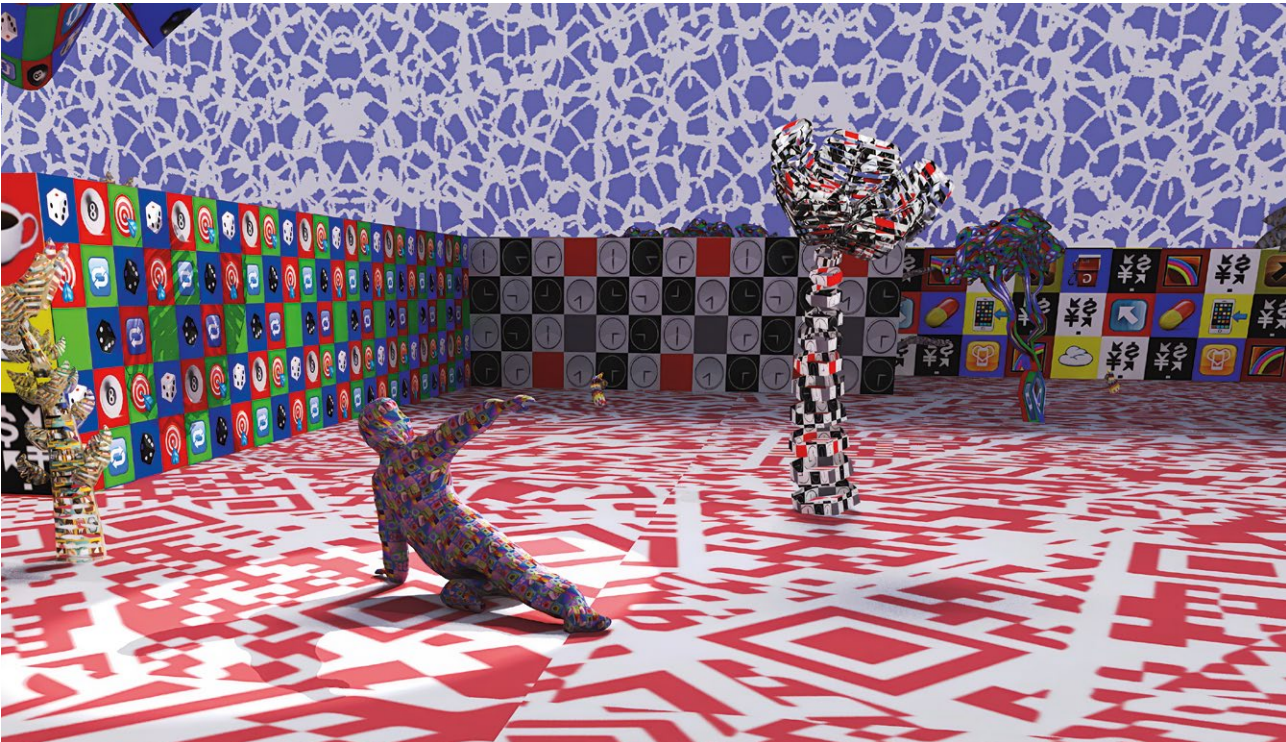
178 Shanks, 'Synthetic worlds'.

179 Simone Osthoff, *Performing the Archive: The Transformation of the Archive in Contemporary Art from Repository of Documents to Art Medium* (New York, New York: Atropos Press, 2009), 12.

particular work. Through the conversion of this archive into a digital format, complete with digitized archival documentation and virtual installations, the creators of the project have brought Hershman Leeson's archive to (digital) life. It encourages 'visitors to the site to revisit the past, while at the same time creating a new audience for this material', the project coordinators Peter Blank and Henry Lowood write.¹⁸⁰

The project enacts, visualizes, and makes experiential a feminist historical project. It takes discarded, received, and found materials and re-examines them with an eye towards what has been previously marginalized. Hershman Leeson's Archive 3.0 delves into the fluid dynamics of identity, body, and perception from a feminist perspective, echoing the approaches of Allahyari, Fahimi, and Motevalli. These artists similarly construct generative, living, and animated archives dedicated to the overlooked and erased, albeit with a pronounced physical and sculptural presence.

Like Hershman Leeson, New York-based artist Claudia Hart disrupts the notion of an essentialist identity in her work, prompting a feminist critique of the male gaze. Since the



146 | Claudia Hart, *Alice Unchained*, 2018; mixed reality installation including monumental three-channel video projection and VR for Vive, music by Edmund Campion.

180 Peter P. Blank and Henry Lowood, 'Life squared', *Stanford Libraries exhibits website* (date unknown), <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/women-art-revolution/about/life-squared>, accessed 11 December 2024.



147 | Claudia Hart, *The Dolls: A Media Ballet for Fashion Runway*, 2015; live performance on 8 May 2015, Fashion Walk 2015, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago; choreography: Kristina Isabelle; projection design: Liviu Pasare; performers: Sarah Gonsiorowski, Katie Graves, Kristina Isabelle, Angela Luem, April Torneby.

1990s, Hart has been working with virtual imaging, using 3D animation and 3D printing to make media installations and projections that question corporality and materiality (fig. 146). Hart's works, much like Allahyari's in the series *She Who Sees the Unknown*, take on a sculptural and almost theatrical quality. They involve digitally enabled sculptures, drawings, paintings, wallpaper, conceptual crafts, and the projections and performances of human bodies wearing sculptural screens. An atavistic embodiment weaves throughout her creations, serving as a unifying thread. Her creative output manifests in various art forms initially shown in gallery settings, subsequently inspiring innovative performances that have increasingly found a platform in experimental theatre and performance venues (fig. 147).

Her teaching becomes a strategy of presenting 'a technical demo as a kind of socially engaged form of performance art at that time. I would confront these boys, and to my surprise they actually loved it. There would be waiting lists of kids trying to get into my classes,' she explains.¹⁸¹ Encoded into her approach is the negotiation of a bureaucratic, technocratic world of the patriarch, the paradigm of the 'natural' white male (for her embodied by Jean-Jacques Rousseau), versus her feminist subversion in the 'romantic anarchistic warrior princess, a character of my own invention.'¹⁸² In countering mathematic calculations with the sensitive eroticism of beautiful organic life forms, she positions her work away from the white male digital art scene of the 1990s.¹⁸³ Bodies – human and otherwise – permeate the intermedia spaces that Hart calls 'post-photography' (fig. 148). This term points to one of the conceptual centres of her work, namely generating organic forms from computer models through programmes such as Maya, which she started using as early as 1998.¹⁸⁴

181 Hart, 'Claudia Hart', 187.

182 Tina Sauerlaender and Claudia Hart, 'In conversation with Claudia Hart: Liminal feedback loops and hybrid dualities', *International Journal for Digital Art History*, no. 5 (20 October 2020), 4.05, doi: 10.11588/dah.2020.5.76172.

183 'Even in an established art school like Pratt – ...there were art places in the late twenty-first century where a hyper-misogynistic culture was still in place,' she explains while describing her aesthetic as a 'counter shooter aesthetic'; see Hart, 'Claudia Hart', 188.

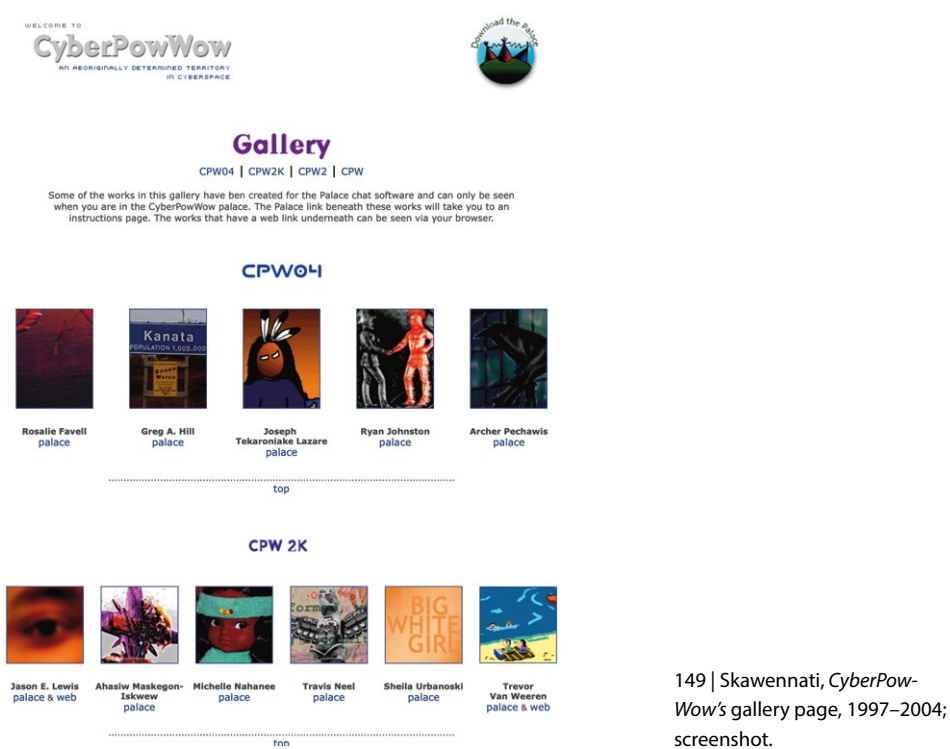
184 See Hart, 'Claudia Hart', 186.

Allahyari and Fahimi employ a similar fictional reorientation and reclamation of the female body alongside its theatrical mise-en-scene, translating these concepts into works deeply rooted in their own cultural contexts. Like Hart, the two artists view digital technology and the virtual realm as tools for constructing worlds from a feminist perspective, distinct from their militaristic origins. For Allahyari and Fahimi, storytelling plays a pivotal role in animating their sculptural archives. In contrast, Hart's practice emphasizes formalism, mathematics, geometry, symbolism, and poetry rather than a narrative focus, as she explains.¹⁸⁵ Instead of engaging in Hart's formal and conceptual inquiries within the realm of digital art, Allahyari and her contemporaries aspire to transcend the boundaries of art toward activist



148 | Claudia Hart, *Hell*, 2008–2011; 3D model integrated into photography, archival inkjet print on photo rag; framed, 108 × 135.9 cm.

185 See Claudia Hart, 'Short bio: Claudia Hart', artist's website (date unknown), <https://claudiahart.com/Short-Bio>, accessed 12 December 2024.



endeavours. They view their tools as imbued with political potential and seek to employ narrative and sculptural structures to re-assess historical and contemporary sociopolitical dynamics. The challenges faced by Allahyari, Fahimi, and other female artists using technology in Iran echo the gendered experiences of their American and European predecessors and mentors. By drawing on both the aesthetic and conceptual lexicons of Western female digital artists, the work of Allahyari, Fahimi and Motevalli not only aligns with marginalized genealogies but also extends them.

Allahyari's, Fahimi's, and Motevalli's artworks navigate the intersections of art, feminism, and decolonial movements. A notable parallel to their practice is found in the work of Skawennati, a Mohawk digital artist born Skawennati Tricia Fragnito in 1969.¹⁸⁶ The three share with Skawennati an interest in exploring the participatory potential of digital art in comprehending colonial histories, territoriality, spatial distribution, and the colonial legacies embedded within digital technology. Their artworks envision potential futures where their narratives are central and no longer relegated to the margins. Through a feminist lens applied to technology, these artists challenge one-sided historical representations by asserting their own significance and presence within these narratives. Despite being a pio-

186 Skawennati is an artist and self-directed curator who obtained her BFA from Concordia University in Montreal. Her involvement in New Media dates back to 1996.

neering figure in VR, Skawennati remained relatively unknown until recently, particularly in Europe. This observation resonates with Maria Fernandez's appraisal from 1999 that there was a lack of intersection between post-colonial theory and media theory, especially within the realm of digital or New Media art.¹⁸⁷ Skawennati's art engages with the (re)presentation of Indigenous pasts and futures through a feminist and decolonial lens. Her work illuminates the impacts of colonialism, highlighting the necessity for reclaiming space due to territorial usurpation. These artworks embody a post-colonial perspective in both a temporal and thematic sense, reflecting on the aftermath of colonialism while also critiquing its ongoing effects. Since the 1990s, Skawennati's pioneering work with immersive virtual environments has employed avatar bodies that 'act as a catalyst in order to break down the contemporary, political episteme of classification and create spaces for fluid *identities-in-politics* (Mignolo, 2011) – virtual bodies that reflect the layering of subjective personal experiences which may be multiple and changing thus provoking a rereading of bodies and identities in order to reimagine and reassert denied and silenced Indigenous voices in virtual reality.'¹⁸⁸

Skawennati's seminal virtual work *CyberPowWow* (1997–2004) stands as the first interactive online gallery showcasing Indigenous art (fig. 149). Its title pays homage to the traditional Powwow, a gathering of Native peoples for socialization and celebration in the

Chat

CyberPowWow used The Palace software as our graphical chatspace because it was easy to use and to customize. It featured cartoon-like text balloons, and a happy-face default avatar. Though we at Nation to Nation no longer have the resources to continue supporting The Palace, it is still possible to download it from www.ThePalace.com.

If you are reading this on a computer that has The Palace installed, you can check out the fabulous artwork, or stop by the library to read the insightful texts, all made just for CyberPowWow. To move around in a room, use your arrow keys. To go to another room, single-click on the hotspots—exactly like in a web page. The best way to learn how to use the palace is to use it.



The Download Palace icon will take you to the easy [instructions](#) page.

This is what a palace window looks like:



150 | Skawennati, *CyberPowWow's* chat page, 1997–2004; screenshot.

187 Fernández, 'Postcolonial media theory', 59.

188 Treva Michelle Pullen, 'Skawennati's TimeTraveller: Deconstructing the colonial matrix in virtual reality', *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 12, no. 3 (2016), 236, doi: 10.20507/AlterNative.2016.12.3.3.

Narragansett language. *CyberPowWow* by Skawennati, in collaboration with Ryan Rice and Eric Robertson, featured a participatory exhibition space, a central meeting area with a reading room featuring works by decolonial writers like Paul Chaat Smith and Audra Simpson and a chat space for instant messaging (fig. 150). The environment was established within the 'Palace', an online communication system that facilitated user interaction through basic graphical representations known as avatars. Skawennati explains that the project emerged as a direct response to the absence of Native artists in Eurocentric galleries and museums, or their problematic portrayal through ethnically themed exhibitions and stereotypes.

I came to realize that it was vital that Native people participate in the shaping of Cyberspace, so that we could determine our own image there. Prior new technologies had shaped the way non-Natives saw us – the camera taught people that we all wore headdresses; movies showed us as mute, or monosyllabic at best. But today, many of us Native types have been able to get our hands on a computer at the same time/rate as the rest of the population. We use it to tell our own stories, create our own images, and to have an effect on how the whole thing looks and works and acts.¹⁸⁹

Since embarking on her New Media journey in 1996, Skawennati has remained dedicated to challenging stereotypes about Indigenous peoples and facilitating their active participation in shaping the World Wide Web through the use and advancement of new media technologies. Viewing the internet as an extension of space that can be colonially dominated, she endeavours to empower Indigenous communities, fostering critical dialogue surrounding their art, technology, and communal identities. As Maureen Trudelle Schwarz aptly reminds us:

The term *postcolonialism* does not apply to the current American situation due to the fact that – at least from a legal standpoint – the 2.4 million Native Americans currently living within the boundaries of the contiguous United States remain a conquered people because the governmental policies and practices used to keep them under control remain in place.¹⁹⁰

It is important to underscore that in the 1990s, internet use and access were still quite limited. Artistic practices on the internet were considered highly experimental and often operated independently from traditional gallery or museum settings.

Skawennati's *CyberPowWow* thus emerged within a tightly-knit online community. Building on the insights from *CyberPowWow*, Skawennati went on to establish *AbTeC* ('Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace'; fig. 151) with Jason Edward Lewis. This website initially focused on biannual exhibitions but swiftly evolved into a dynamic, ongoing online platform – a digitally determined, artist-driven centre – featuring solo exhibitions and thematic group shows.¹⁹¹

189 Skawennati quoted in Sharita Towne, 'Skawennati: Mohawk', *Contemporary North American Indigenous Artists* blog (11 March 2012), <https://contemporarynativeartists.tumblr.com/post/19142160162/skawennati-mohawk>.

190 Maureen Trudelle Schwarz, *Fighting Colonialism with Hegemonic Culture: Native American Appropriation of Indian Stereotypes* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2014), 5.

191 *AbTeC* functions as an online collective with shared interests, with Skawennati serving as its Network Coordinator and Community Liaison. Other key figures include Jason Lewis, who oversees research for



151 | Skawennati, AbTeC's home page, founded in 2005; screenshot.

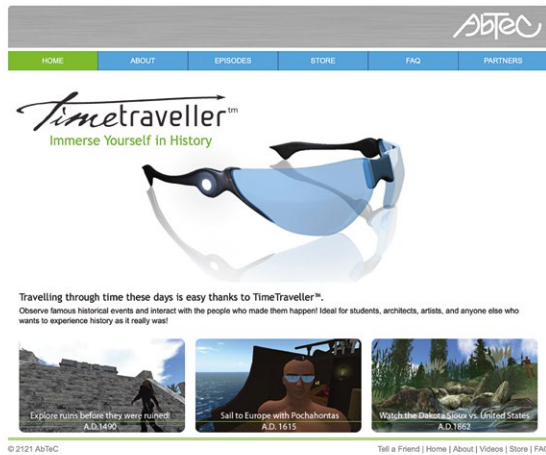
Skawennati's virtual work *TimeTraveller*TM (2007–2014, fig. 152) in *Second Life* emerged out of a collaboration with AbTeC. Continuing Skawennati's thematic trajectory, this project confronts the absence of Indigenous representation in futuristic popular culture and science fiction. Drawing from Skawennati's extensive historical research, the work reinterprets significant events from Indigenous historical narratives traditionally portrayed through colonial lenses. Through a diverse array of characters, the project delves into the artist's own identity narrative, exploring the possibilities of decolonization in reshaping Western-centric histories and empowering marginalized Indigenous voices.

In *TimeTraveller*TM, Skawennati's central characters, Hunter and Karahkwenhawi (fig. 153), embark on a journey through time to reinterpret North American histories from an Indigenous first-person perspective. In the words of the protagonist Hunter: 'When it comes to history, always get a second opinion.'¹⁹² Skawennati's depiction of the female protagonist as a resilient and self-reliant character stands in stark contrast to Hollywood productions' frequent portrayal

new projects, and Celia Pearce, a game designer. AbTeC's team includes project leads, research assistants, and project affiliates, fostering a collaborative environment for their initiatives.

192 Skawennati and Obx Labs, 'TimetravellerTM episode 01' [video], *Vimeo* (25 September 2009), <https://vimeo.com/6757442>, accessed 13 December 2024.

3 MONUMENTALITY: SCULPTING MEMORIES BETWEEN MONUMENTS AND ARCHIVES



152 | Skawennati, *TimeTraveller™*'s home page, 2007–2014; screenshot.



153 | From left to right:

Skawennati, *TimeTraveller™*: Episode 01, A.D. 1875, 2007–2014; screenshot (00:02:15).

Skawennati, *TimeTraveller™*: Episode 04, A.D. 1990, 2007–2014; screenshot (00:03:33).

of indigenous women as helpless victims. Through the immersive experience offered by virtual reality headsets, viewers accompany the protagonists on a journey through time and space across North and South America, uncovering forgotten and erased histories. Skawennati weaves a multifaceted narrative that unfolds over the nine episodes of her *TimeTraveller™* series.

These episodes are created using machinima, a technique involving computer-generated scenarios and short films that punctuate the temporality of games. Machinima has been employed since the mid-1990s to capture action in video games or virtual environments. Skawennati's machinima, blending elements of machine and cinema, is rendered in *Second Life*, the same open-platform online virtual world also used by Hershman Leeson. For Skawennati, '*Second Life* is a platform and a medium. [Our] island in *Second Life* is an Aboriginally determined space. I am not very interested in creating new platforms. I'm much more excited about shaping them, creating content for them, finding the killer app for them.'¹⁹³

193 Skawennati quoted in Treva Michelle Legassie, 'Playing, performing, policing: Navigating avatar ex-



154 | Skawennati, *TimeTraveller™*: Episode 02, A.D. 1862, 2007–2014; screenshot (00:07:24).



155 | Skawennati, *TimeTraveller™*: Episode 03, A.D. 1990, 2007–2014; screenshot (00:07:23).



156 | Skawennati, *TimeTraveller™*: Episode 04, A.D. 2112, 2007–2014; screenshot (00:04:08).

Throughout Skawennati's work, references to pop and consumerist culture, including *Blade Runner* and 1990s gaming culture, merge with painful episodes from American history, including the Dakota Sioux massacre in Acton Township in Minnesota in 1862 (episode 2, fig. 154) or the Oka Crisis land dispute in 1990 between Mohawks and the town of Oka in Quebec (episode 3, fig. 155), which culminated in a brutal military intervention against the original owners of the land. In contrast to dystopian or apocalyptic movies such as *Blade Runner*, however, *TimeTraveller™* does not situate machines or the mixture of humans and technology as a threat. Instead, the work embraces technology as a means of fostering connections among people and cultivating political communities across time and space. While recounting stories of pain and hardship, it also celebrates triumph and love. This sentiment is notably expressed in the series's fourth episode, where the protagonist ventures into the future and encounters a society where Mohawk art and cultural life have become integrated into mainstream culture (fig. 156).

pression in *Second Life*' in Tiffany Funk (ed.), *Video Game Art Reader: Volume 2* (Amherst, Massachusetts: Amherst College Press, 2022).

Skawennati's work delicately balances the portrayal of the problematic effects of post-colonial modernity with considerations of decolonization. She aims to critically analyse the constraints imposed by hegemonic structures of a Eurocentric worldview while envisioning potential futures where Indigenous peoples form strong alliances, achieve prosperity, and maintain their distinct cultural identities.

Sculpted archives

Allahyari, Fahimi, and Motevalli share with Skawennati's visionary approach an interest in re-framing (female) identity, delinking it from 'problematic Westernized histories, and merging post-colonial theory with new media production.'¹⁹⁴ In the context of two very different cultural backgrounds, all four artists use digital technology and storytelling to examine issues of colonialism and as a means to rewrite, rethink, restage, and eventually archive history as a non-linear and non-naturalistic flow of time. Memory is thus manifested through a multitude of selves and perspectives, resituating the viewer within a fictional realm. Encouraged to adopt various viewpoints, the audience can contemplate significant personal and collective cultural moments and experiences that have been disentangled from colonial histories.

The authenticity of the events depicted in these works allows the artists to intertwine fictional elements with historically significant narratives. Through these imaginative interventions, they infuse their works with a critical dimension. Although the characters in the works of Allahyari, Fahimi, and Skawennati are fictional, their interactions with present and historical events allow users to perceive the narrative construction of colonial history. Such narratives are not inherently truthful; rather, they are shaped by contamination, complicating the notion of meaning construction.

Following artworks by feminist pioneers such as Hershman Leeson and Hart, these more recent works assume the function of living, generative, and future-oriented archives. Here, the online world and virtualized body serve as entry points for dismantling colonial modernity and decolonizing historical and contemporary identities and discourses. Skawennati, Allahyari, Fahimi, and Motevalli each re-inscribe the female and indigenous or non-Eurocentric body back into the narrative, thus emancipating history from the patriarchal and colonial matrix. Their artistic and political engagement with archives stems from an understanding of difference that emerges from intersectional feminist critique.

Simultaneously, they underscore the significance of New Media technologies in shaping identities within formerly colonized regions, as these tools offer avenues through which colonized peoples can explore and understand themselves.¹⁹⁵ Hence, Skawennati's, Allahyari's, Motevalli's and Fahimi's narratives serve as decolonial gestures for those identities silenced by the discourse of modernity. These works not only question and re-invent Western archival strategies using digital technology. They also show how diasporic or indigenous cultures are not fixed and how technologies may be crucial in exposing mechanisms of marginalization. By reviving concepts of digital archives to record the underrepresented narratives of women

194 Pullen, 'Skawennati's TimeTraveller', 236.

195 See Fernández, 'Postcolonial media theory', 60.

from the SWANA region, Allahyari, Fahimi, and Motevalli displace white, middle-class heteronormativity as the default reference point for discourses on digital culture and art. Together with artists such as Skawennati, they re-orient the discourse towards protagonists marginalized because of their race, class, sexuality, or gender. Their works thus outline a significant change in the understanding of archives, away from the archive as either merely a physical storage site of a particular set of records and their histories or simply the digital, virtual counterpart of such physical storage. Allahyari and her colleagues craft intricate, physically immersive environments that encapsulate memories of the past, present, and future. Unlike Skawennati, they explore their concerns through sculpture, installation, performance, video, spoken word, and written text. By intricately layering sculptural and textual elements, blending digital and tangible mediums, and intertwining collective myths with personal narratives, they (re-)sculpt the archive and blur the distinctions between past, present, and future.

In his seminal study on French cultural memory, Pierre Nora introduces the notion of '*lieux de mémoire*' as 'any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community'.¹⁹⁶ This is a site 'where memory is crystallized, in which it finds refuge'.¹⁹⁷ He distinguishes those places from '*milieux de mémoire*, settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience', like a family gathering at a church service.¹⁹⁸ Astrid Erll has further specified that the emergence and life of memory sites depend 'on repeated media representations, on a host of remediated versions of the past which "converge and coalesce" into [what Pierre Nora has called] a *lieu de mémoire*; which create, stabilize and consolidate, but then also critically reflect upon and renew these sites'.¹⁹⁹ This dynamic strongly underpins Allahyari's and her peers' memorial work.

In this work, the archive, as a memory site, assumes not only a strong sculptural but also a commemorative form. This is, for example, evident in Allahyari's installation *Aisha/Qandisha*, where the figure's elevation on a plinth, its reflection in the water, its enlargement through the digital projection on the wall, the work's soundscape, and the supporting details of her story all create the experience of entering a commemorative sculptural site. *The Laughing Snake* likewise reformats memory within the memorial, a sculptural structure housing a physical object, by commemorating stories of women from the SWANA region and reminding viewers of these stories and their subjects.

As the following chapter shows further, the works of Allahyari and her peers go beyond the mere act of archiving. Instead, they push towards enacting a future-oriented structure that commemorates, brings people together, and—monumentalizes. Allahyari and her peers engage with the 'codes' of monuments to propose embodied ways to mark and make an

196 Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past, Vol.1: Conflicts and Divisions*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xvii.

197 Nora and Kritzman, *Realms of Memory*, 1.

198 Nora and Kritzman, *Realms of Memory*, 1.

199 Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, 'Introduction: Cultural memory and its dynamics', in Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (eds.), *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 4.

accessible space for painful, suppressed, and forgotten memories. The following chapter will therefore examine Allahyari's and her peers' work in the context of past and current discourses on monuments.

3.3 Archival monuments: Reflections on monumentality

Every period has the impulse to create symbols in the form of monuments which according to the Latin meaning are 'things that remind', things to be transmitted to later generations. This demand for monumentality cannot, in the long run, be suppressed. It will find an outlet at all cost.²⁰⁰

Allahyari, Motevalli, and Fahimi construct embodied places and structures housing gendered and diasporic memories and histories enacted through digital technologies.²⁰¹ Their works are conceived as commemorative structures with a clear intention to commemorate, preserve, and remind audiences of the stories of women from the SWANA region. This deliberate anchoring of memories in sculptural forms, their embodiment in a designated form and site, not only invites discussion of Allahyari's and her peers' work in the context of digital, diasporic, and generative archives, but also situates their work in proximity to monumental codes, akin to memorial structures aimed at transmitting messages for the future.

Unlike an archive, a monument indicates something that is emphasized in a double sense: in the cause for its representation as well as in its form.²⁰² A monument highlights something worthy of glorification or remembrance.²⁰³ Compared to an archive, a monument is thus not only an embodiment of a memory in a textual or physical format, but also an (often sculptural) art object with a particular motivation. From its earliest use until today, the word 'monument' refers to a human artifact erected to preserve the memory of a notable person, action, or event.²⁰⁴ Monuments memorialize and are therefore also called memorials. Monuments also represent a succinct temporal configuration. While archives document the past and its memories in broader, more diffuse formats, monuments are *intentional* memory structures, often taking sculptural form, that not only record the past but also serve

200 Sigfried Giedion, *Architecture, You and Me: The Diary of a Development* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958), 28.

201 An adaption of this chapter has appeared as Mara-Johanna Kölmel, 'Sculpture expanded: In Richtung einer nomadischen Monumentalität' [Sculpture expanded: Towards a nomadic monumentality], in Anne Marlene Meuer, Markus Kersten und Sarah Hegenbart (eds.), *Grenzen der Künste im digitalen Zeitalter* [Boundaries of the arts in the digital age] (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2025), 25–51.

202 See Albrecht Graf von Egloffstein, 'Das Denkmal: Versuch einer Begriffsbestimmung' [The memorial: An attempt to define the concept], in Ekkehard Mai and Gisela Schmirber (eds.), *Denkmal – Zeichen – Monument: Skulptur und öffentlicher Raum heute* [Memorial, sign, monument: Sculpture and public space today] (Munich: Prestel, 1989), 38.

203 See Egloffstein, 'Das Denkmal: Versuch einer Begriffsbestimmung' [The memorial: An attempt to define the concept], 38.

204 See Marita Sturken, 'Monuments', in Michael Kelly (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 274.

to convey a message to the future. They reconstruct the past for communication to future generations while actively engaging in these past realities, capable of shaping them.

Allahyari's artworks serve as a reminder to women, femmes, and individuals from the SWANA regions that their narratives and experiences, whether real or imagined, hold significance not solely for the present moment but also for the assertion of an alternative future that is not dominated solely by white or Western perspectives.²⁰⁵ Similarly, Amitis Motevalli perceives her practice as unfolding between the archive and the monument. Iranian artist Nooshin Rostami also situates her work as a hybrid between archival and monumental structures. These pieces resonate with works of numerous other contemporary artists who are currently revitalizing and redefining the functions of monuments as critical, creative repositories for forgotten diasporic histories and memories. On the one hand, their works acknowledge the necessity, significance, and societal role of collective commemorations. On the other hand, they interrogate monumental codes inherited from colonial, racist, misogynist, imperialist, even fascist contexts. As a result, they offer innovative contributions and perspectives to ongoing debates surrounding monuments and counter-monument movements.

This final chapter, therefore, situates Allahyari and her peers within the debates on monuments of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. By highlighting parallels and discontinuities, this section demonstrates how Allahyari's generation of artists redefines previous art-historical discussions on monumental codes through their use of digital technologies. By reconsidering the function of monuments within digital, feminist, and diasporic contexts, what forms of monumentality emerge from their work?

یادبود

یادبود (*yādbūd*) is the Persian word for 'monument, memorial, or landmark'. In a literal sense, it can be translated as 'aid to memory', something used as a reminder of something or someone. The word is tied to the Persian word بنای یادبود (*banāye yādbūd*), which likewise means 'memorial or monument' but commonly refers to a construct, figure, or building. Other words that are used for memorials are لوح یادبود (*loḥe yādbūd*), which generally means 'memorial plaque, board,' or even a valuable sheet of paper, as well as یادگار (*yādegār*), which is translated as 'relic, souvenir, memorial, memory, evocation, or token'. While memorials mainly focus on paying tribute to the dead by emphasizing loss or sacrifice, monuments in both the West and SWANA regions can honour and be a reminder of the past in more general forms.²⁰⁶ The English and German word 'monument' derives from the Latin word *monumentum*, something that reminds.²⁰⁷ The word 'monument' also links to the Latin word *manere*, something that remains.²⁰⁸ From the same origin derives *monere*, to remind, and *monimenta*, memorials or bur-

205 See Allahyari, 'She Who Sees the Unknown'.

206 See Sturken, 'Monuments', 274.

207 See Robert K. Barnhart (ed.), *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1999), 675.

208 See Hui, 'Texts, monuments and the desire for immortality', 20.

ial places that remind those passing by that they existed and are mortal.²⁰⁹ Following these origins, other things that are written or produced for the sake of memory are called *monimenta*, 'reminders'.²¹⁰ According to the *Chambers Dictionary*, the word 'monument' can either refer to 'a statue, trophy, building or sim., erected to commemorate a person or event', a 'tomb', 'anything which serves as a commemoration, a memorial' but also a 'written memorial, document, record' or 'a literary work, book, writings, literature'.²¹¹ A monument thus embodies a memory in a textual, physical, or sculptural form. Using visual codes, monuments strive to convey and impart a message. The German art historian Alois Riegel defined the monument as an object that preserves an element of the past. He distinguishes between two types of monuments: intentional ones, the lasting significance of which is determined by its makers, and unintentional ones, which achieve their monumental status through later events.²¹²

In interviews and public presentations, Allahyari has suggested that *She Who Sees the Unknown* not only aims to challenge 'the limitations and possibilities of remembering and forgetting' but is actually intended 'to remind women, femmes, the people of the Middle East that our figures and our stories, fictional and actual, matter – not just for the present but for claiming an alternative future that is not exclusively white or western'.²¹³ Consistent with the various definitions of monuments, Allahyari's work thus instructs 'pedagogically on what should be remembered and to what purpose, and...speak[s] with some permanence to the future as a means of guiding the values of the present'.²¹⁴

Allahyari's statement also evokes a Persian lineage inherited from the ancient Mesopotamian kings who not only 'studied history to foresee the future and to make correct decisions' but built monuments to access such knowledge.²¹⁵ As in the Western understanding of monuments, in Assyrian, Akkadian, and Babylonian cultures, monuments were not only erected in commemoration of events but to make political declarations that legitimized the power of the kings and ensured their influence in the future.²¹⁶ By employing traditional visual styles and themes, the past was communicated visually, with the intention of passing on knowledge to future generations. Monuments played a crucial role in conveying memory, often ensuring the legitimacy of the current ruler.²¹⁷ In Persia, too, monuments can therefore be considered as much commemoration of the past as present-day enactment of future commemoration.²¹⁸

209 See Hui, 'Texts, monuments and the desire for immortality', 20.

210 Hui, 'Texts, monuments and the desire for immortality', 20.

211 Editors of Chambers, *The Chambers Dictionary*, 12th edn (Edinburgh: Chambers, 2011), 995.

212 See Alois Riegel, 'The modern cult of monuments: Its character and its origins', tr. Kurt W. Forster and Diane Ghirardo, *Oppositions: A Journal for Ideas and Criticism in Architecture* 25 (Fall 1982), 21–56.

213 Allahyari 'She Who Sees the Unknown'.

214 Sturken, 'Monuments', 274.

215 Mehr Azar Soheil, *The Concept of Monument in Achaemenid Empire* (London: Routledge, 2018), chap. 8, 517.1.

216 See Soheil, *The Concept of Monument in Achaemenid Empire*, chap. 4, 289.0.

217 See Soheil, *The Concept of Monument in Achaemenid Empire*, chap. 8, 515.5.

218 See Soheil, *The Concept of Monument in Achaemenid Empire*, chap. 4, 289.0; Jean-Baptiste Yon, 'Hatra



157 | Morehshin Allahyari, *King Uthal*, from the series *Material Speculation: ISIS*, 2015; 3D printed resin and electronic components.

This Persian concept of the monument found embodiment in landmarks like the ancient city of Persepolis, as well as Hatra and Palmyra. Through their art, architecture, bas-reliefs, and inscriptions, these cities conveyed fundamental principles of kingship, alongside their empire's aspirations for a universal order and the guiding policies behind them.²¹⁹ The structures and artworks commissioned in these locations were designed to convey a message to the entire empire and its future generations, while also commemorating the achievements of the past.²²⁰ Jean-Baptiste Yon writes that the 'monumentalization of the public sphere is among the most striking phenomena' of the SWANA regions.²²¹ As the 'place of memory par excellence', these cities functioned as both archives and monuments that safeguarded the memorials and historical objects of the dynasty's ancestors.²²² A significant aspect of this memory practice involved preserving the memories of their ancestors through illustrated stories of kings, heroes, and religious figures, creating textual monuments.²²³

This understanding of monumentality is inscribed in Allahyari's series, *Material Speculation: ISIS*. Here the artist employs her characteristic approach of research, archiving, and 3D modeling and printing to digitally recreate twelve selected monuments from the Roman-era city of Hatra and Assyrian artifacts from Nineveh, deliberately destroyed by ISIS in 2015. One of the reconstructed monument files, *King Uthal* is available for download on rhizome.org (fig. 157). Allahyari also showcases her reconstructed monuments in museum settings, where she presents them in translucent material, each containing a hard drive with her research and printable files of the pieces themselves. While her work adopts the formal language of commodified cultural heritage available for purchase in museum shops, it

and Palmyra: The monumentalization of public space', in Lucinda Dirven (ed.), *Hatra: Politics, Culture and Religion between Parthia and Rome* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013), 161.

219 See Soheil, *The Concept of Monument in Achaemenid Empire*, chap. 2, 86.3.

220 See Soheil, *The Concept of Monument in Achaemenid Empire*, chap. 4, 287.0.

221 Yon, 'Hatra and Palmyra', 161.

222 Soheil, *The Concept of Monument in Achaemenid Empire*, chap. 8, 517.1.

223 See Hui, 'Texts, monuments and the desire for immortality', 19.



158 | Morehshin Allahyari, *Material Speculation: ISIS*, 2015–2016. Installation view, Trinity Square Video.

simultaneously proposes methods for democratizing heritage accessibility through online distribution and 3D technologies. Allahyari's project does not claim to replicate destroyed artifacts and monuments in their entirety. Instead, the objects maintain their identity as plastic containers, emphasizing that it is the information they carry that the series deems sacred and influential (fig. 158).

In Allahyari's endeavour to remember, commemorate, and preserve the stories from the SWANA region, the commemorative and sculptural nature of her work mirrors the monumental codes familiar to a Persian understanding of monuments. This holds true not just for *Material Speculation (ISIS)*, but also for her series *She Who Sees the Unknown*. Every element of Allahyari's installation of *Aisha/Qandisha* (see fig. 118), for example – including the figure's elevation on a plinth, its reflection in the water, its expansion and augmentation through digital projection on the wall, its soundscape, and the narrative underpinning the story – collectively contribute to a grand, space-encompassing monumental structure reminiscent of what Yon refers to as the 'monumentalization' of space in the 'Middle East'.²²⁴

In *The Laughing Snake*, another of Allahyari's works from the series, memory is once again reimagined and presented within a commemorative, sculptural, and experiential framework, with a distinct intent. The deliberate construction of her work as an embodied and sculptural locus for memory is further emphasized when viewed within an exhibition context. Set within a room lined with mirrors, the hyper-narrative is accessible via a flat screen. A 3D printed and painted figure of the Laughing Snake itself hangs from the ceiling, completing a futuristic, shrine-like presentation in what resembles a devotional space (see fig. 115). Once more, the presentation of the work evokes a sense of sanctity. The spatial encounter enlarges the view-

224 Yon, 'Hatra and Palmyra', 161.

er's presence, extending it along with the sculptural object beyond its physical boundaries. As the spectator gazes into one of the mirrors, their experience mirrors the faith of the Laughing Snake. As one enters Allahyari's installation, physicality and virtuality, as well as reality and hyperreality, converge. Thus, the mirrored room replicates the experiences of navigating the digital space of the hyperfiction and its commemorative structure. The interplay between mirror and screen captivates the spectator visually, enticing them into an affective engagement. The installation immerses the viewer in an overwhelming spatial encounter reminiscent of the space-encompassing and monumental function also seen in *Aisha/Qandisha*.

Amitis Motevalli's work is also deeply influenced by a SWANA concept of the monument, which she approaches through the lens of the shrine. Her surname, Motevalli, translates as 'Keeper of Shrines'.²²⁵ For centuries, her father's family served as caretakers of a Shia shrine in Sari, Iran. However, in recent decades, all shrines were nationalized, and the Sari shrine was taken from her family.²²⁶ The memories of childhood visits to the shrine profoundly permeate her work on conceptual, aesthetic, and structural levels, sparking her keen interest in public monuments and the associated rituals. Motevalli blends symbolism from Islamic art and ritual with the secular experiences of social justice movements and broader struggles for equality and justice. This synthesis is evident not only in *Golestān Revisited*, an archive and memorial for women who perished in 2010 and beyond during the so-called 'war on terror' (see 'Diasporic archives' in the previous chapter), but also in her other works.

One such piece, *Haram eh Massomeen va Shohadha – Threshold of the Innocents and Martyred* (2008; fig. 159), is a hand-carved wooden shrine sculpture and installation inspired by her family's shrine in Sari, Iran. This work serves as a tribute to individuals killed by LAPD police officers in 2008 and is a direct response to the global Black Lives Matter movements (fig. 160). Conducting research into forty-one documented police cases, Motevalli commissioned and carved portraits of fourteen men and women of African-American descent whose images were attached to their files. Throughout her exhibition, she documented additional violent incidents on a second rectangular structure made of plexiglass, which she placed inside the shrine. During weekly performances, she inscribed each new story in reverse on the structure to ensure legibility from the outside. Family members of the victims would sometimes visit the shrine to pay tribute or provide feedback for corrections or additions to her records. Her work culminated in a wall text featuring an Iranian Shia prayer dedicated to those who lost their lives as victims of violence. By appropriating the devotional and spiritual iconography of her family's shrine through local materials, iconographies, and histories, Motevalli creates a collective, collaborative public monument.

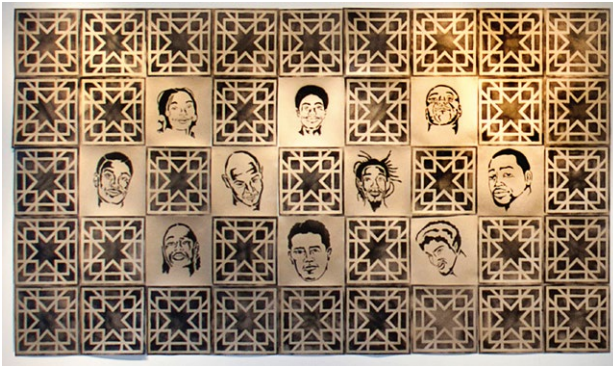
The Iranian and New York-based artist Nooshin Rostami also sees her work imbued with questions related to commemorative structures. Her works *Corner of my Room* (2018) and *And the Alleyway to the Prison's Garden* (2018), serve as embodied and sculptural allegories of family dynamics in diaspora, while simultaneously acting as deeply personal monuments to her

225 Amitis Motevalli, 'Bio', artist's website (date unknown), <https://amitismotevalli.com/bio>, accessed 16 January 2025.

226 Motevalli, 'Bio'.



159 | Amitis Motevalli, *Haram eh Massomeen va Shohadha – Threshold of the Innocents and Martyred*, 2008; hand-carved wooden shrine sculpture and installation; 181.88 × 274.32 cm. Installation view, Los Angeles, 2008.



160 | Amitis Motevalli, *Haram eh Massomeen va Shohadha – Threshold of the Innocents and Martyred*, 2008; collapsible installation made with stencils spray-painted on paper. Installation view, Los Angeles, 2008.

late father. Eliciting a sense of displacement, these complementary projects delve into how physical distance alters familiar relationships. Based on interviews Rostami conducted with her parents residing in Iran, a place she is no longer able to visit, the works explore a series of spatial landscapes characterized by light and shadow – recurring motifs in Rostami's oeuvre.

161 | Nooshin Rostami, *And the Alleyway to the Prison's Garden*, 2018; wood, metal, glue, reflective materials, video light projection. Installation view, Trestle Gallery, New York, 2018.



162 | Nooshin Rostami, *Corner of My Room*, 2018; reflective film, see-through mirrors, light, audio track; 61 × 61 × 91.5 cm. Installation view, corner of a building in West Village, New York, 2018.

The accompanying video, crafted by the artist herself using planes of reflective film where light interacts with folded steel sculptures, forms an integral part of the artistic narrative.

For the first iteration of her project *And the Alleyway to the Prison's Garden* Rostami projects elements from her video onto the walls of a confined space, employing surface, space, light, voids, and shadows (fig. 161). Constructing a disorienting architectural experience and landscape based on her father's recollections, the title derives from the street where her father spent his childhood in Shahroud, Iran. Thus, it becomes a deeply personal, site-specific memorial encapsulating elements and memories of their relationship. A later work, *Corner of my Room*, was shown in a semi-public space at the corner of a building on New York's West 10th Street as part of an exhibition curated by Art in Buildings. Here, Rostami constructs an infinite room based on her mother's reminiscences (fig. 162). Light takes on fluid forms reminiscent of ocean waves, with audio containing fragments of her mother's responses to the videos playing on the street as pedestrians pass by. Out of the interplay of surface, space, light, voids, and shadows, Rostami fashions an intricate architecture, landscape, and ultimately, sculptural structure imbued with a memorial essence, articulating her personal journey as a woman in the diaspora.

Monuments in the twenty-first century

The works of Allahyari, Motevalli, and Rostami can be described as monuments, since they are memorial structures intended to convey a message. Yet the works are also decoupled from the typically colossal aesthetics of a monument. Instead, they function as future-oriented sites for commemoration. By invoking a sculptural memory structure with clear intentionality – one of the monument's primary functions – these Iranian artists create visual metaphors to articulate their personal experiences of diaspora. The works by Allahyari and her peers not only reconstruct the past to present it to future generations but also actively participate in our current realities and aim to shape them. To this end, Allahyari and her peers mobilize the logic of monuments to 'localise' and 'select cultural memory' to the degree that it is capable of 'directly contributing to the maintenance and preservation of the identity of an ethnic, religious, tribal, or familial community'.²²⁷

By highlighting monuments' power to reflect and solidify values, and ultimately reimagine a world, these works offer new perspectives in recent decades' debates over monuments and counter-monuments. In light of the rapidly changing aesthetic and political contexts of the twentieth century – including, among other events, two world wars, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, repeated wars in the SWANA regions, and the collapse of Communist regimes – the concept of the monument and its aesthetics came to face a significant challenge.²²⁸ Arguably, by the end of the nineteenth century, monuments were

227 Marija Kulišić and Miroslav Tuđman, 'Monument as a form of collective memory and public knowledge', *INFUTURE 2009: Digital Resources and Knowledge Sharing* (6 November 2009), 126–127, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268439131_Monument_as_a_Form_of_Collective_Memory_and_Public_Knowledge, accessed 12 December 2024.

228 See James E. Young, 'Twentieth-century countermonuments', in Kelly (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, 278.

no longer important subjects of study in the field of art history.²²⁹ Modernism sealed the fate of monuments, countering their intentional character and one-sided interpretation of the past artificially with unintentional, unmonumental, and ephemeral forms.²³⁰ For modern artists and critics, its heroic stiffness and naive pretentiousness doomed the monument forever as archaic, and it was discarded as an artistic form. 'The notion of a modern monument is virtually a contradiction in terms; if it is a monument, it is not modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument,' Lewis Mumford wrote as early as 1938.²³¹ Krauss famously designated monuments as unable to refer to anything beyond their base, 'functionally placeless and largely self-referential'.²³² In the context of debates on German postwar monument culture, historians suggested that rather than commemorating events, monuments can also bury them beyond ideological layers of national interests.²³³ Others argued that instead of preserving public memory, the monument displaces it altogether, supplanting a community's memory work with its own material form.²³⁴ And yet, by contesting the monument, postmodernism also triggered a new interest in the subject. If monuments historically were fixed to a site, then modern monuments were characterized by 'a kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place'.²³⁵ Krauss discussed these characteristics in relation to modernist sculpture and concluded that a monument's status, meaning, and function were 'essentially nomadic'.²³⁶ In Germany, the extensive historical and social reckoning with the Nazi era has led to an unprecedented level of reflective preoccupation and public debate around the notion of the monument.²³⁷ Hermann Lübke identified the peak of the building

229 See Horst W. Janson, *The Rise and Fall of the Public Monument*, ed. Andrew W. Mellon (New Orleans, Louisiana: Graduate School, Tulane University, 1976); Krauss, 'Sculpture in the expanded field', 33.

230 See, for example, Michael Diers and Andreas Beyer (eds.), *Mo(nu)mente: Formen und Funktionen ephemerer Denkmäler* [Mo(nu)ments: Forms and functions of ephemeral memorials] (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993).

231 Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1938), 438.

232 Krauss, 'Sculpture in the expanded field', 34.

233 See Martin Broszat and Saul Friedlander, 'A controversy about the historicization of national socialism', in Peter Baldwin (ed.), *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians' Debate* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon, 1990), 102–134.

234 See Andreas Huyssen, 'Monument and memory in a postmodern age', *The Yale Journal of Criticism: Interpretation in the Humanities* 6, no. 2 (1993), 249; Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York, New York: Routledge, 1995); Hermann Lübke, 'Zeit-Verhältnisse' [Time relations], in Wolfgang Zacharias (ed.), *Zeitphänomen Musealisierung: Das Verschwinden der Gegenwart und die Konstruktion der Erinnerung* [Temporal phenomenon musealization: The disappearance of the present and the construction of memory] (Essen: Klartext, 1990), 40–50.

235 Krauss, 'Sculpture in the expanded field', 34.

236 Krauss, 'Sculpture in the expanded field', 34.

237 See, for example, Arkadi Zeltser, *Unwelcome Memory: Holocaust Monuments in the Soviet Union*, tr. A. S. Brown (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2018); William John Niven and Chloe E. M. Paver, *Memorialization in Germany since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Peter Carrier, *Holocaust Monuments and National Memory Cultures in France and Germany since 1989: The Origins and Political Function of the Vél'd'Hiv'in Paris and the Holocaust Monument in Berlin* (New York, New York: Berghahn Books, 2005); Brigitte Hausmann, *Duell mit der Verdrängung? Denkmäler für die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*

of monuments and memorials in the 1970s and 1980s.²³⁸ In response, a generation of white and often male conceptual artists countered the problematic history of the monument with proposals for counter- and anti-monuments, such as Hans Haacke's *Und Ihr Habt Doch Gesiegt* (1988), Sol LeWitt's *Black Form – Dedicated to the Missing Jews* (1987/1988), Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz's *Monument Against Fascism* (1989) in Hamburg-Harburg, and the projections of Krzysztof Wodiczko (1983 onward).

In the face of these efforts, the counter-monument was swiftly incorporated into the artistic canon. It now signifies both a site of cultural conflict and a place of potential for reclaiming the memories of those who have been marginalized or victimized. While monuments today are 'born resisting the very premise of their birth', public spaces all over the world are still cramped with the weight of colonial or fascist figures, looted artefacts, and trophies of war.²³⁹ Some of these monuments have been removed from their original contexts, defiling their history and the identity of the people they belonged to.²⁴⁰ While contemporary discussions surrounding monuments may offer critical reflections on their complex and troubled historical trajectories, governments and public agencies persist in preserving, designing, and even commissioning monuments that oversimplify and reduce the significance of multifaceted events and individuals. As Young reminds us, 'only rarely does a nation call on itself to remember the victims of crimes it has perpetrated. Where are the national monuments to the genocide of American Indians, to the millions of Africans enslaved and murdered, to the kulaks and peasants starved to death by the millions?'²⁴¹

Allahyari, Motevalli, and Rostami acknowledge and actualize the need for, importance of, and social function served by collective commemorations when they charge the Persian heritage of monuments with meanings that are pertinent to their own lived experiences. At a time when demonstrations all over the world take down monuments celebrating colonial histories, they activate the ability of the monumental to commemorate complex historical trajectories, as well as gendered and diasporic experiences.²⁴² Their works reveal how

1980 bis 1990 [Duel with repression? Memorials to the victims of national socialism in the Federal Republic of Germany 1980 to 1990] (Münster: Lit, 1997); Günter Morsch and Christine Brade, *Ich dachte, Sie wären tot: NS-Mahnmale und Erinnerungsprozesse in Ostwestfalen-Lippe* [I thought you were dead: NS memorials and remembrance processes in East Westphalia-Lippe] (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 1997); Günter Morsch (ed.), *Von der Erinnerung zum Monument: Die Entstehungsgeschichte der Nationalen Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Sachsenhausen* [From memory to monument: The history of the development of the national warning and memorial site Sachsenhausen] (Berlin: Hentrich, 1996); Mai and Schmirber (eds.), *Denkmal – Zeichen – Monument* [Memorial, sign, monument].

238 See Lübke, 'Zeit-Verhältnisse' [Time relations], 40–50.

239 See Young, 'Twentieth-century countermonuments', 278.

240 See Young, 'Twentieth-century countermonuments', 278.

241 James E. Young, 'Counter-monument: Memory against itself in Germany today', W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *Art and the Public Sphere* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 52.

242 See Tyler Stiem, 'Statue wars: What should we do with troublesome monuments?', *The Guardian* online (26 September 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/sep/26/statue-wars-what-should-we-do-with-troublesome-monuments>, accessed 13 December 2024; Britta Timm Knudsen and Casper Andersen, 'Affective politics and colonial heritage: Rhodes Must Fall at UCT and Oxford', *International Jour-*

monuments in the contemporary era continue to perpetuate a particular, one-sided form of history. The artists address a significant gap that previous efforts by a generation of white (post-)conceptual artists has failed to acknowledge. Yet Allahyari and her peers also share with their predecessors an interest in exploring the relationship between monuments and memories – past, present, and future – highlighting their ‘anthropological function.’²⁴³ They delve into the Persian tradition of remembrance, which envelops the historical trajectory of both textual and physical monuments, posing uncomfortable questions about history and memory. By safeguarding the narratives of individuals historically marginalized from public representation, their works foster engagement and discourse about who is commemorated. In essence, they pose the pivotal question: ‘Who matters?’

To this end, Allahyari, Motevalli and Rostami refashion conceptual codes of monuments through newer media forms. Allahyari, in particular, revises and revisits the concept of monument in the virtual and digital sphere. Put differently, Allahyari remediates the commemorative logic of monuments using the function inherent to digital computer technologies.

Remediated monuments

In their seminal study *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, David Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin introduce the concept of remediation to examine processes like Allahyari’s, in which newer media refashion previous media forms. At least ‘since the Renaissance,’ Bolter and Grusin contend, media ‘are continually commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other, and this process is integral to media. Media need each other in order to function as media at all.’²⁴⁴ The logic of remediation described by the authors thus encapsulates the mediation of mediation. Each mediation depends on other acts of mediation; in other words, ‘all representations of the past draw on available media technologies, on existent media products, on patterns of representation and medial aesthetics.’²⁴⁵ Linked up with this process is the ‘double logic of remediation,’ namely the oscillation ‘between immediacy and hypermediacy, transparency and opacity.’²⁴⁶ This ‘double logic’ describes the paradox of remediation, namely that the appropriation of existing media allows the new medium to strengthen its claim to immediacy. The new medium aims to foster an ‘experience of the real’ that erases its inherent sense of mediation and becomes transparent.²⁴⁷ ‘Our culture wants to multiply

Journal of Heritage Studies 25, no. 3 (4 March 2019), 239–258, doi: 10.1080/13527258.2018.1481134; Wikipedia, ‘Rhodes Must Fall’, *Wikipedia* online encyclopaedia (date unknown), https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Rhodes_Must_Fall&oldid=935851041, accessed 15 January 2020; Steven Morris, ‘Edward Colston statue retrieved from Bristol harbour’, *The Guardian* online (11 June 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jun/11/edward-colston-statue-retrieved-bristol-harbour-black-lives-matter>, accessed 13 December 2024.

243 See Kulišić and Tudman, ‘Monument as a form of collective memory and public knowledge’, 126–127.

244 Jay David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), 55.

245 Erll and Rigney, ‘Introduction: Cultural memory and its dynamics’, 4.

246 Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 17.

247 Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 5.

its media and erase all traces of mediation; ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them,' Bolter and Grusin write.²⁴⁸ On the other hand, this process also generates 'an experience of the medium,' which makes remediation an act of hypermediacy.²⁴⁹ By multiplying media, it reminds the viewer of the presence of a medium. Bolter and Grusin's concept of the double logic of remediation also introduces a helpful framework for thinking about the dynamics of cultural memory and its storage in monuments. In fact, one can argue that cultural memory not only relies on a process of mediation, or what Jan and Aleida Assmann called 'objectification' (see also 'Storytelling' in chapter 3.1). Instead, it needs remediation to travel through time. Thus, remediation is a suitable concept for describing the mechanisms that underpin memory and its links with monuments: 'Just as there is no cultural memory prior to mediation there is no mediation without remediation,' argue Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney.²⁵⁰ 'Most memorial media strive for ever greater "immediacy". The goal is to provide a seemingly transparent window on the past, to make us forget the presence of the medium and instead present us with an "unmediated memory",' Erll and Rigney write.²⁵¹ This process also highlights the process of remembering through a particular media and thus speaks of an act of hypermediacy.

Considering Allahyari's work, one could argue that the logic of immediacy and hypermediacy is achieved by 'the recycling and multiplying' of older memory media. More concretely, Allahyari translates the representations of her jinns in *She Who Sees the Unknown* by sourcing them from illustrations and texts, then transforming them into sculptures, 3D animations, and video essays. Her storytelling and their presence across multiple media imbue the figures with a sense of aliveness, thereby enhancing the immediacy of her work. At the same time, Allahyari's practice magnifies the capacities of an older memory medium, namely that of sculpture and its memorial function. In the installations for *Material Speculation: ISIS* and *She Who Sees the Unknown*, her 3D printed figures are enthroned on plinths, thus imitating traditional sculptural presentations. This sculptural experience relativizes the immediacy of her digital projection and emphasizes the hypermediacy of her memory work. It reminds the viewer of the presence of a medium and thus Allahyari's conscious conception of her work as a memory site. Allahyari thus appropriates different memory media by using digital technologies ranging from 3D sculpting and animation to 3D scanning and 3D printing to bring forth a different kind of monumentality.

Intermedial monumentality

Allahyari remediates cultural memory of the jinns in *She Who Sees the Unknown* or the destroyed artefacts in *Material Speculation: ISIS* across the medium of sculpture, digital files, projections, speech, and text. By expanding her act of remembrance into the public sphere of the museum, as well as online, the artist constructs various types of memory sites. Her

248 Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 5.

249 Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 70.

250 Erll and Rigney, 'Introduction: Cultural memory and its dynamics', 4.

251 Erll and Rigney, 'Introduction: Cultural memory and its dynamics', 4.

work thereby invites a collective form of remembrance that can take root in a community and strongly resembles the functions and structures of monuments while being decentralized, unlike traditional monuments. Allahyari fuses participatory, interactive, and time-based qualities with a three-dimensional experience space encompassing sculptural presentations. More precisely, it is Allahyari's intermediality – her mixing of analogue and digital techniques, including storytelling, moving image, and sculptural vocabularies – that allows her to expand upon the historical codes of monumentality. Allahyari fosters an intermedial monumentality that uses its own heterogeneity to question monuments' ability to bury painful memories under often homogeneous material forms.

Following Klaus Bruhn Jensen's reflections on the twentieth-century avant-gardes and their embrace of heterogeneous media, the term intermedia can once again be employed to speak of the transgression and innovation of a lasting sculptural form – the monument – that is now, however, articulated in the interstices between a number of other media forms.²⁵² Such intermedial monumentality uses numerous media types to diversify its message and thus re-inscribe and transmit memories: Crafted from myth, historical data, and deeply personal experiences, Allahyari's works employ hybrid modes to reframe relationships between the past, present, and future, thereby inscribing the marginalized into this evolving narrative. In its intermedial monumentality, her work serves as evidence of the monument's enduring relevance and its ongoing social function – while simultaneously bearing witness to the dramatic shift in aesthetic codes of monuments and counter-monuments, as well as their expansion into the digital sphere.

In this way, Allahyari subtly subverts and criticizes the institutional implications of monuments (from their erection to their distribution), while also critiquing the iconoclastic acts of destruction they have faced since their inception. Her use of digital technology not only allows her to critically comment on ordinary public monuments but to actively reshape their aesthetic and functions as repositories for the memory of women of the SWANA regions. These works then not only exhibit an intermedial monumentality but equally speak to the idea of a nomadic monument, one that can be easily adaptable and erected within spaces controlled by political interest. In their potential to migrate across sites and various media, her works' nomadic features closely resemble those of the artist's own personal trajectory.

Nomadic monumentality

Allahyari's works respond to a monumental aesthetics of solidity, permanence, fixity, and rigidity with a monumentality that is participatory, generative, and mutable and that unfolds between virtual and physical spaces. A prime example is Allahyari's *King Uthal* from her series *Material Speculation: ISIS*. Remediated as a downloadable STL and OBJ file, the destroyed monument of King Uthal has exchanged its solidity for a nomadic mutability. This transformation is further contextualized by research documents and data on the original statues,

252 See Klaus Bruhn Jensen, 'Intermediality', in Eric W. Rothenbuhler, Klaus Jensen, Jefferson Pooley, Robert T. Craig (eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, Wiley Online Library (2016), doi: 10.1002/9781118766804.wbiect170.

all included in the downloadable folder. Thus, through an act of resurrection, preservation, and, crucially, transformation, the work comes to embody a nomadic monumentality, reaffirming and expanding its presence as a memory site each time the folder is downloaded onto someone's hard drive. The memory sites marked by Allahyari's nomadic monuments can be seen as occupying multiple locations and materialities simultaneously. They possess a digital materiality (see chapter 2.2, in particular 'Im-materiality in materiality'), existing as files on Rhizome's servers, or upon download, on an individual's computer. Additionally, they can assume a tangible materiality and location as 3D printed objects in physical space.

The nomadic monumentality of Allahyari's work thereby not only references the memorial character of monuments but simultaneously transgresses limited conceptions of a fixed monumental form. In essence, her works serve as monuments to the absence of monumentality itself. They stand as proxies and reminders of destroyed memory sites, simultaneously revealing and documenting the information and circumstances leading to their absence. It is within this tension between monument and the absence of monumentality that her work gives rise to a new '*lieu de mémoire*,'²⁵³ a novel form of nomadic monumentality that spans both physical and digital realms while retaining its sculptural essence.

Allahyari's work could then also be seen as part of a wider development, namely the increasing encroachment of monumental structures towards the digital and augmented sphere. An example of this growing presence of nomadic monumentality occurs in the augmented reality game *Pokémon Go*, which superimposes actual and virtual space. The game establishes a hybrid playing field where players capture virtual Pokémon in real-world locations like urban areas or their own homes. *Pokémon Go* is replete with digital monuments, plaques, and statues generated through crowd-sourced information from players, actively shaping how users perceive history and their surroundings.²⁵⁴ The 'Unmarked Slave Graveyard' in Charlottesville is an example of such nomadic monumentality encountered in the app: 'This area contains unmarked graves believed to be those of slaves of the Maury family, owners of Piedmont in the nineteenth century,' the app explains, highlighting the absence of a physical plaque in an act of superimposing virtual information with the actual site.²⁵⁵ In *Pokémon Go*'s digital architecture, almost all sites are marked by light blue squares of the same size and shape. Here, problematic confederate memorials have been shrunk and are 'no grander, no more prominent, than any other sites in town'.²⁵⁶ All of these diverse sites blend together into a multitude of indistinguishable icons, thus challenging the power structures that have historically favoured specific monuments over others.

Another example of such a crowd-sourced monument is the memorial for twelve-year-old African-American Tamir Rice, shot and killed by Cleveland Police Department officers. When players reach the gazebo in Cleveland where Rice was shot, they encounter a pop-

253 Nora and Kritzman, *Realms of Memory*, xvii.

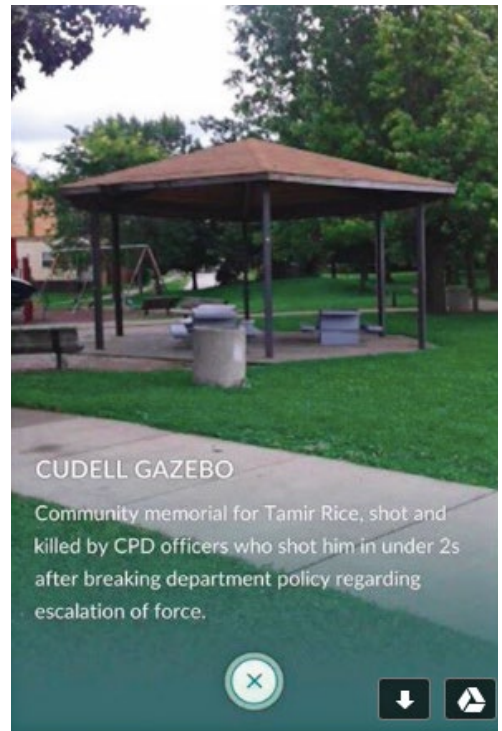
254 See Rebekkah Rubin and Anne Trubek, 'Memorializing Tamir Rice with Pokémon Go', *Belt Magazine* online (20 July 2016), <https://beltmag.com/memorializing-tamir-rice/>, accessed 13 December 2024.

255 Cassius Adair, 'Pokémon Go, before and after August 12', *Nursing Clio* blog (5 September 2018), <https://nursingclio.org/2018/09/05/pokemon-go-before-and-after-august-12/>, accessed 10 December 2024.

256 Adair, 'Pokémon Go, before and after August 12'.

up message: 'Community memorial for Tamir Rice, shot and killed by CPD officers who shot him in under 2s after breaking department policy regarding escalation of force' (fig. 163).²⁵⁷ While the city has not erected a monument to his young citizen, *Pokémon Go* players have addressed this absence by creating a digital monument that becomes part of the actual space when viewed through the screen on site. These in-game monuments are akin to what scholar Dylan Gauthier describes as a 'roadside memorial, and one of a number of such sites of social memory within online worlds, which form a seamless connection between "real world" social memory and virtual world remembrance'.²⁵⁸

In a similar vein, the artist John Craig Freeman (born 1959 in Los Angeles, California, USA) has created several VR monuments and memorials. One notable piece is *Border Memorial: Frontera de los Muertos* (2012, fig. 164), an augmented reality public art project and nomadic monument. It serves as a tribute to migrants who have lost their lives along the U.S./Mexico border while attempting to cross the desert in search of work.²⁵⁹ The project is built for smartphone mobile devices and uses GPS coordinates of each recorded death. When aimed at the landscape, the application uses virtual objects or augmentations in the form of skeletons to reveal the locations where human remains have been recovered. The skeleton, known as a *calaca*, is inspired by traditional wood-carving techniques from Oaxaca, where such figures are used to commemorate deceased souls during the Mexican festivals for *Día de los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead. In the Aztec belief system, death was considered a joyous and not a mournful occasion, despite the grief of loss. This interpretation is reflected in the imagery of the *calaca*. Translated by the artists into the virtual realm, the *calacas* become virtual grave markers integrated in physical locations. Panning the camera of their phones along the locations on the border, viewers experience the *calacas* as existing in the real world (fig. 165). The work thereby reveals the vast numbers of those who have lost their lives in search of better ones (fig. 166). In



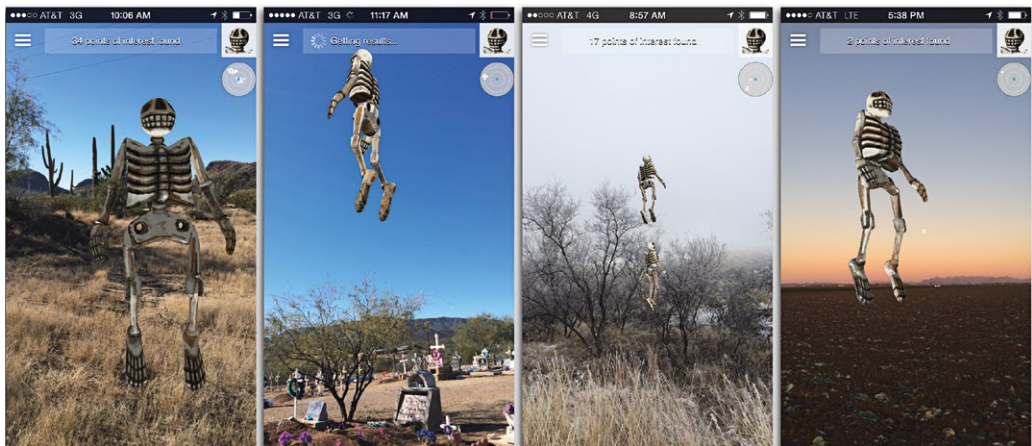
163 | Pokémon Go, screenshot.

257 Rubin and Trubek, 'Memorializing Tamir Rice With Pokémon Go'.

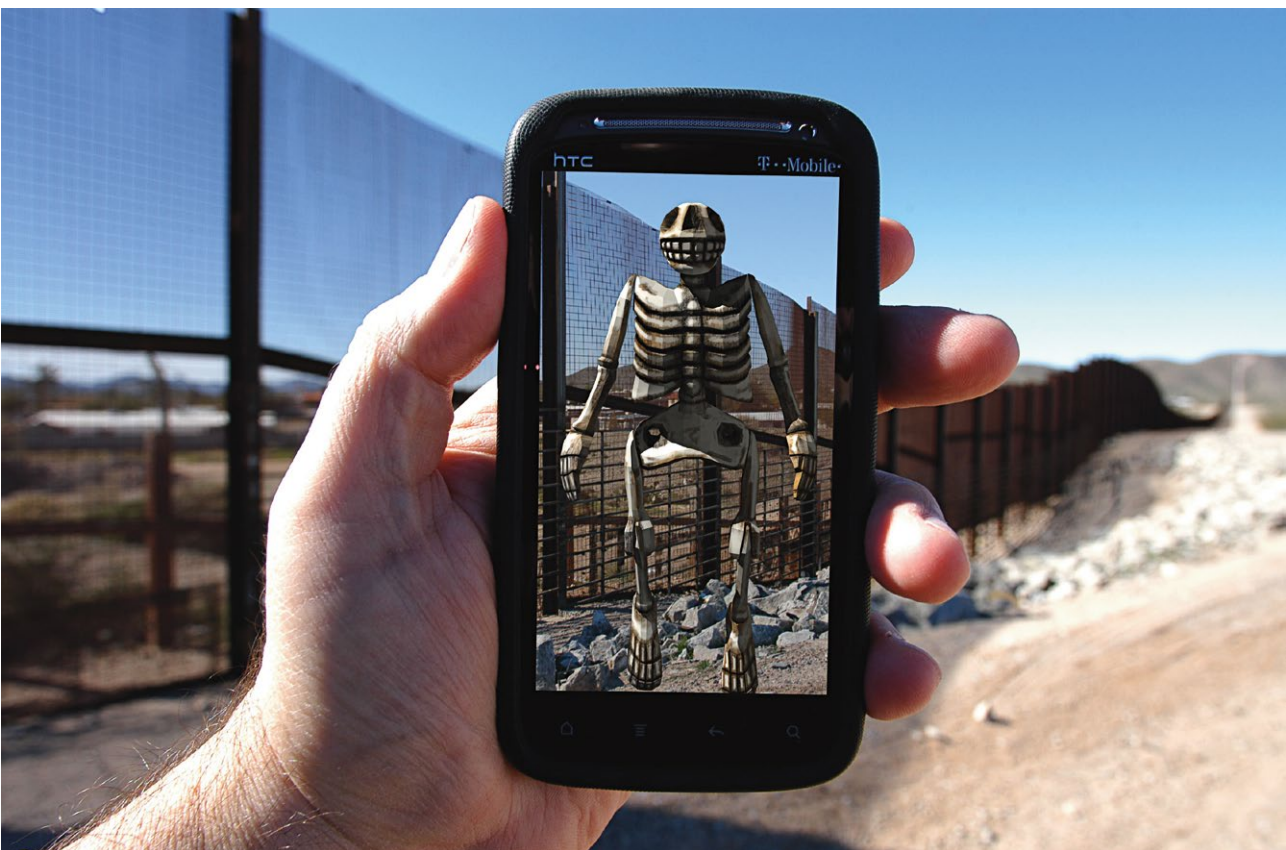
258 Dylan Gauthier, 'Networked monumental: Some conditions of working in public – online and IRL', *Academia.edu* online repository (31 October 2014), https://www.academia.edu/22105974/Networked_Monumental_Some_conditions_of_working_in_public_online_and_IRL, accessed 11 December 2024.

259 See John Craig Freeman, 'Border memorial: Frontera de los muertos', artist's website (30 December 2013), <https://johncraigfreeman.wordpress.com/border-memorial-frontera-de-los-muertos/>, accessed 11 December 2024.

3 MONUMENTALITY: SCULPTING MEMORIES BETWEEN MONUMENTS AND ARCHIVES

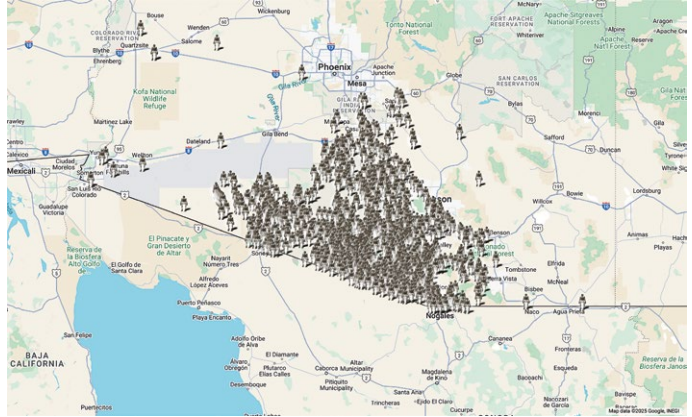


164 | John Craig Freeman, *Border Memorial: Frontera de los Muertos*, 2012; augmented reality public art, Lukeville border crossing, Arizona.

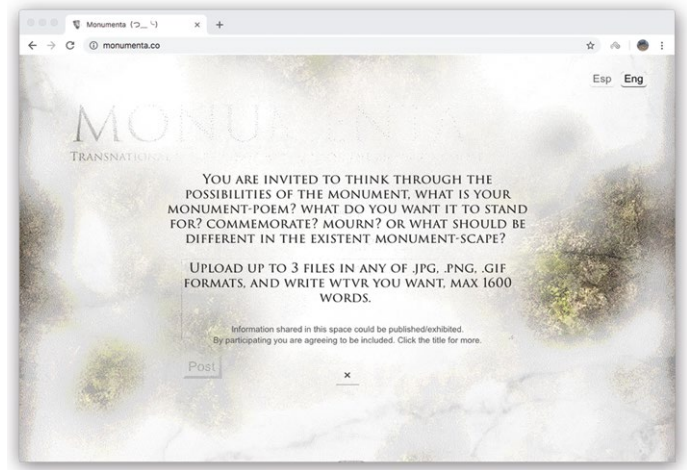


165 | John Craig Freeman, *Border Memorial: Frontera de los Muertos*, 2012; screenshot sequence, augmented reality public art, southern Arizona, 2012.

166 | John Craig Freeman, *Border Memorial: Frontera de los Muertos*, 2012; augmented reality public art. Data provided in partnership between the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner and Humane Borders, Inc. displayed in Google Maps (map: John Craig Freeman).



167 | Gabriella Torres-Ferrer, *Monumenta*, 2018–present; participative website.



the tradition of *Día de los Muertos*, the *Border Memorial* project is designed to honour, celebrate, and memorialize the deceased and to raise public consciousness and political debate surrounding this issue in the US.

Puerto Rican artist Gabriella Torres-Ferrer (born 1987 in Arecibo, Puerto Rico) explores a related form of nomadic and networked monumentality in their crowd-sourced project *Monumenta* (2018–present). Their participatory web space invites the public to use an interface allowing both the archiving of existing monuments and the submission of proposals for future commemorative sites (fig. 167). According to the artist, the concept of *Monumenta* emerged ‘in response to the intent of the government of Puerto Rico to make a monument to the victims of Hurricane Maria, which were due more to their own incompetence and negligence than to climate disaster’.²⁶⁰

260 Gabriella Torres-Ferrer, ‘Monumenta’, project website (date unknown), <http://monumenta.co/#en>, accessed 13 December 2024.

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The project invites viewers to reconsider the purpose and audience of monuments, thereby questioning the process by which history and cultural identity are constructed. Beyond the traditional, male-centric, phallic-monumental forms that have long dominated the public sphere, the artist poses the question: 'What other forms, figures, stories, metaphors, identities, aesthetics, and uses could conform [sic] the monument today?'²⁶¹ Torres-Ferrer agrees with the artist Natalia Skobeeva's (born 1975 in Russia) concept of the 'UnNational Monument' based on the idea that 'a public monument shall be constructed by the public, not for the public.'²⁶² Like Allahyari, Torres-Ferrer probes the potential of networked technologies to offer possibilities for decentralized and non-prescriptive approaches to memorial structures and monuments.



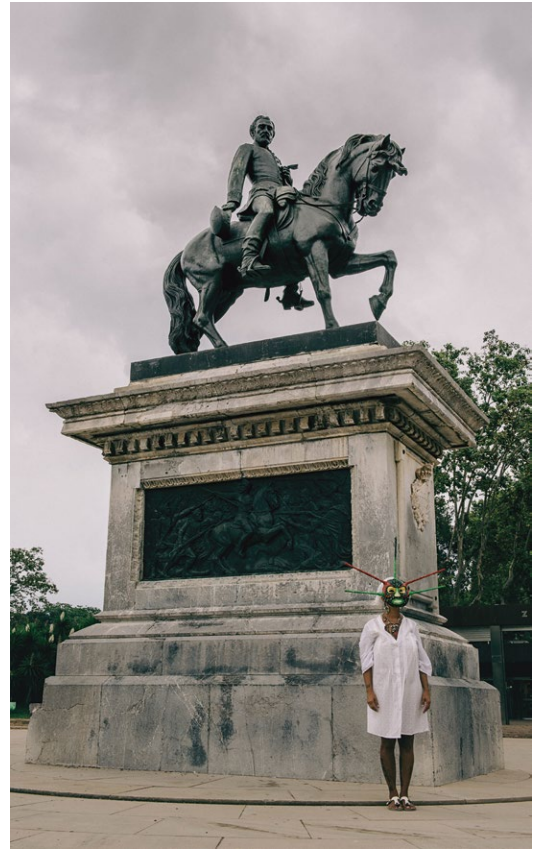
168 | Diana 'Spaghetto' Manfredi, *Monument to the Present*, 2020; Instagram filter @spaghetto.

261 Torres-Ferrer, 'Monumenta'.

262 Natalia Skobeeva, 'UnNational monument', *Is This It?* website (date unknown), <https://www.isthisitis.com/text>, accessed 13 December 2024.

Scrolling through *Monumenta*, one comes across numerous imaginative, subversive projects that expose the highly problematic forces constructing collective memory and history in public space. One such contribution comes from Diana 'Spaghetto' Manfredi (born 1983 in Milan, Italy), who uses Instagram's augmented reality filter to replace the statue of Indro Montanelli in Milan with her own *Monument to the Present* (2020, fig. 168). Indro Montanelli was a celebrated Italian journalist who voluntarily joined the fascist army during Italy's war in Eritrea (1935–1937). During this time he bought and then married a twelve-year-old Eritrean girl called Destà. In an interview with Gianni Bisiach, Italian journalist and activist Elvira Banotti interrupted to ask him whether he had raped the girl.²⁶³ Montanelli defended himself arguing that he was married and therefore rape was out of the question. In a later published collection of essays he referred to his marriage as a leasing contract. In Manfredi's *Monument to the Present*, when the smartphone camera is pointed at the statue of Indro Montanelli in Milan or any reproduction of it on a photo or screen, Manfredi's reclamation appears superimposed over the real work: On the plinth where Montanelli sits, a number of black girls of different ages, areas, and cultural backgrounds manifest. They reclaim his disturbing presence in the public space of Milan, causing him to temporarily disappear through their powerful presence.

Noland Chaliha's (born 1985 in the United States) contribution, *Destroy All the Confederate Statues Left in the US*, proposes an app that allows its users to simulate the destruction of any problematic Confederate monument in the U.S. simply by waving their hand. Artist Marcia X (born 1985 in Chicago, Illinois, USA) shows documentation of her research project into how to confront architectural and colonial monuments through Afro-Indigenous Puerto Rican spiritual markers and performances (fig. 169). Joiir Minaya (born 1990 in New York City, USA) wraps Christopher Columbus in a four-way stretch spandex covered in tropical



169 | Artist Marcia X, *La Sangre Llama, Prim y Prats I*, 2019.

263 Indro Montanelli and Elvira Banotti, 'Il madamato: Indro Montanelli racconta l'atroce vicenda della sua sposa bambina' [The little Mrs: Indro Montanelli recounts the atrocious matter of his child bride] [video], *YouTube* (18 June 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8lJr2STfil>, accessed 13 December 2024.



170 | Joiiri Minaya, *The Cloaking or the Statues of Ponce de Leon at Torch of Friendship and Christopher Columbus behind the Bay-front Park Amphitheatre in Miami, Florida, 2019*; four-way stretch spandex; dimensions variable.



171 | Miguel Luciano, *The Inflatable Head of Columbus & Once Failed, 2006*.

prints designed by the artist (fig. 170). On the basis of Minaya's research into the colonial categorization of Caribbean plants, her fabrics revitalize untold narratives of colonization, calling attention to the flattening of Caribbean histories, as well as identities and the colonial legacy of erasure and violence in the act of erecting statutes to colonial figures. Other projects recorded on Gabriella Torres-Ferrer's webpage include ephemeral interventions in real space that now exist merely in the form of digital images, such as the documentation of Miguel Luciano's (born 1972, in San Juan, Puerto Rico) *The Inflatable Head of Columbus*, a humorous parody on a failed Christopher Columbus monument in Puerto Rico (fig. 171), or *The Wax Monuments* by artist Sandy Williams IV (born 1992 in Belleville, New Jersey, USA) (fig. 172). The entries range in scale from monumental architectural projects to subtle virtual



172 | Sandy Williams IV, *The Wax Monuments*, 2020.

gestures, from expressions of personal memory to collective memories, from proposals for specific monuments at particular sites to online interventions intended to be accessed by people from every part of the world.

This nomadic monumentality unfolding between online and actual worlds creates innovative means for democratic participation and public engagement.²⁶⁴ Like Allahyari's works, the proposed monuments on Gabriella Torres-Ferrer's webpage and the augmented memory sites by John Craig Freeman or the *Pokémon Go* community counteract material destruction and violence by imagining themselves as transient but repeatable, as distributed and migratory, and thus nomadic. Perhaps more precisely, these works acquire site, weight, and presence in a participatory act or a distributed manner.

They consciously resist and reject the fixity and permanence seen with traditional monuments. While they are site-specific, they do not lay sole claim to a site, but superimpose themselves on the site and then depart with the viewer. Using digital technologies, these artists thus remodel and remediate the notion of a monument. As an intermedial, nomadic, and migratory form of commemoration, the monument is no longer a precious object empowered by sacred effect, solidity, grandeur, material vehemence, and weight. Rather, it functions as an (re-)movable nomadic memory site that can be enacted at any time in real life or online. The cultural information and critique that these works convey become more important than the object itself. At their best, the nomadic monuments of Allahyari and

264 Dylan Gauthier speaks instead of a networked monument, discussing a number of other artworks in online spaces, see Gauthier, 'Networked monumental'.

her peers resist institutionalized appropriation and destructive iconoclasm by symbolically critiquing these forces through the very malleability of their forms.

As this chapter has argued, theirs is both an intermedial and nomadic approach to monumentality that inscribes the marginalized back into the developing script of modern monuments. Their cross-media approach uses hybrid modes spanning from physical sculpture to video, virtual and augmented reality experiences, the internet, and at times performance to redefine relationships between the past, present, and future. Their nomadic features allow for monuments that shift forms and can be easily adapted to and erected in several locations and materialities at the same time. Yet they also adhere to the socially acceptable function of the recreated artefact – the aid to memory – as a memory site and as a hinge between an individual and collective form of remembrance. In this sense, the artistic stance of Allahyari and her peers addresses the evocative power of monumental structures. Their works not only critically examine the tendency of monuments and archives to be deployed in ways that reproduce (colonial) power relations, what Allahyari has termed ‘digital colonialism’.²⁶⁵ They also remind us that history and its memory are always subject to forms of representation, and that it is through both a conceptual and an aesthetic confrontation that such heritage can be addressed critically.

Interim conclusion: Refiguring the future-past – Towards a nomadic, intermedial, and diasporic monumentality

As illustrated above, Allahyari and her contemporaries are at the forefront of a redefinition of monumentality in the digital age. Their works serve a dual purpose, functioning as both archives and monuments that exist in online and offline realms, physically and virtually, within and beyond traditional art institutions. Focusing on Allahyari’s practice, this chapter has explored how her sculptural approach to memory is deeply intertwined with diaspora and gender. It has highlighted how Allahyari – alongside fellow artists such as Shirin Fahimi, Amitis Motevalli, and Nooshin Rostami – engages with memories and their materialization in both archival and monumental forms. Through an intermedial, nomadic, and, particularly in Allahyari’s case, still sculptural approach to monumentality, this generation of artists challenges the conventional notion of monuments as vehicles for extinguishing and homogenizing memory.

‘The remarkable thing about monuments is that one does not notice them. There is nothing in the world so invisible as a monument,’ the Austrian novelist Robert Musil once claimed.²⁶⁶ Writing his famous essay in 1927, in the early stages of the so-called mass me-

265 Allahyari, ‘Digital colonialism (2016–2019)’; artist’s website (date unknown), <http://www.morehshin.com/digital-colonialism-2016-2019/>, accessed 10 December 2024.

266 Musil translated by Carrier, *Holocaust Monuments and National Memory Cultures in France and Germany since 1989*, 15. For the original quotation, see Robert Musil, ‘Denkmale’ [Memorials], in *Nachlaß zu Lebzeiten* [Bequest in one’s lifetime] (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1957), 59.

dia age, he worried that public monuments were losing relevance in the face of the rapidly growing and pervasive media landscape. He believed that as the public became more familiar with monuments, the monuments became less noticeable and eventually faded into the background. Of course, writing from the perspective of a well-established European intellectual, little did Musil consider that the 'unnoticed monuments' surrounding him might be deeply disturbing to others – especially to those bearing painful histories and memories. A similar lack of awareness resonates in the presence of many problematic monuments in public spaces today. Contrary to Musil's prognosis, however, mass media, in the form of social media and the contemporary digital media landscape, have served to highlight and thematize the continuous presence of deeply problematic monuments in public spaces. One example is the striking removal of a monument to Edward Colston during the worldwide Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, documented and shared via social media.²⁶⁷ As a participant in the Royal African Company, Colston amassed his wealth through the plundering of individuals from West Africa, whom he then sold into slavery in the Caribbean. So far, he has mainly been remembered as a benefactor and philanthropist in his hometown, Bristol. During one of the myriad protests sparked around the world by the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis policeman, a demonstration took place in Bristol. The frustrations of the crowd were directed at the monument to this certainly not innocent enslaver, which was eventually toppled into the harbour. Around the same time, monuments of other colonial figures were symbolically decapitated, set on fire, tagged with graffiti and/or covered in red paint.

These recent developments, extending from the physical into the digital sphere, have reignited a radical discussion about the aesthetics of monumentality. If monumentality up until the twentieth century implied qualities such as inertness, opacity, permanence, remoteness, distance, preciousness, and grandeur, more recent generations of artists, including those using the digital sculptural technology discussed here, challenge these core values. Notably, many monuments occupying public spaces still uphold these values – despite their problematic nature.

Contemporary digital artists working with monumental sculpture replace an outdated sculptural vocabulary with an artistic language that is not cold, hard, or permanent, but nomadic, flexible, intermedial, accessible, critical, and engaging. Undermining the grandeur and pompousness of traditional monumental representation systems such as nineteenth-century public sculpture, these artists not only appropriate past functions of monuments but also update their familiar aesthetics with a new immediacy using digital production and distribution systems. In re-evaluating the academic study of monuments, they exemplify how monumentality and its relationship to sculpture need to be reconsidered.

The use of digital technologies to construct alternative memory sites prompts renewed theoretical and empirical scrutiny not only of the very idea of the monument and its counterpart, the archive, but also of the sites they operate in. Building on the approaches of female

267 See, for example, BBC News, 'Edward Colston statue pulled from Bristol harbour' [video], *BBC News* online (11 June 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-england-bristol-53004755>, accessed 11 December 2024.

pioneers such as Lynn Hershman Leeson, Claudia Hart, and Skawennati, Allahyari and her colleagues build spaces that enable interactions with monumental and archival structures. These interventions speak of an active reclaiming of public space – one that goes hand in hand with a general expansion of the very idea of the public realm towards virtual and digital spheres. For instance, on some days the number of people that visit popular social media platforms like tumblr or Instagram can exceed the population of a small country. The reality is that large sections of the public engage with these online spaces daily, often spending more time in virtual ‘public’ spaces than they do in physical ones.²⁶⁸

By operating in and claiming the virtual sphere as a space for enacting monumental structures, Allahyari, Fahimi, Skawennati, Torres-Ferrer, Craig Freeman, and their fellow artists are committed to uncovering the mechanisms of absence – which are not accidental, but structured. Their works can then be seen in a lineage of post-colonial and feminist artistic discourses across the globe.

‘History is changed with time and place or, better said, history reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives,’ Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes in his 1995 book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. ‘What matters most are the process and conditions of production of such narratives. Only a focus on that process can uncover how the two sides of historicity intertwine in a particular context. Only through the overlap can we discover the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others.’²⁶⁹ Trouillot urges us to acknowledge such asymmetries of power by carefully dissecting ‘the presences and absences embodied in sources (artefacts and bodies that turn event into fact)’ as well as the way they constitute memory sites themselves, the facts ‘collected, thematized and processed as documents and monuments.’²⁷⁰ These presences and absences of history ‘are neither neutral or natural. They are created. As such they are not mere presences or absences, but mentions and silences of various kinds of degrees.’²⁷¹

Following such reflections, it is, therefore, misleading to think of monuments merely as reminders of important historical events.²⁷² In their durability, monuments inscribe a particular form of memory and history into public life. Monuments at their creation are already subject to and mirrors of dominant, and thus public, interests and knowledge. The powers that control public space also control the outflow of knowledge, thus ensuring the dominance of their messages and personal/political goals.²⁷³ As such, any form of monu-

268 According to recent statistics, 5.34 billion people (66 percent of the world’s population) currently have an internet connection, and 5.04 billion have access to social media. See Ani Petrosyan, ‘Number of internet and social media users worldwide as of January 2024’, *Statista* website (January 2024), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/>, accessed 10 March 2024.

269 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon, 1995), 25.

270 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 48.

271 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 48.

272 See Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 14.

273 See Kulišić and Tudman, ‘Monument as a form of collective memory and public knowledge’, 31.

ment inherently embodies a claim to truth through its assertion of history. Monuments represent not universal history but rather subjective historicity. 'At best, history is a story about power, a story about who won', writes Trouillot.²⁷⁴ The same argument could apply to monuments. How then can we reconsider and redefine the concept of a monument through a decolonial, feminist, and intersectional approach to sculptural memory practice?

The writings of Black and Chicana feminists such as Rasheedah Phillips, Maria Cotera, Maylei Blackwell, and Gloria Anzaldúa offer some clues to solving this problem. In reflections that strongly relate to Trouillot's writings, Cotera calls for active '*encuentro* [encounter] with the past to create new knowledge that engage the present in critical ways.'²⁷⁵ Cotera speaks of a Chicana memory praxis that involves 'collecting and re-collecting,... membering and re-membering.'²⁷⁶ The Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa has referred to such praxis as 'com[ing] to knowledge and *conocimiento*.'²⁷⁷ She describes the process of encounter and exchange between past and present as a synthesis and interpretation that simultaneously recuperates and ruptures the past:

She [i.e., the one engaging in such memory praxis] puts history through a sieve, winnows out the lies, looks at the forces that we as a race, as women, have been part of.... This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths.²⁷⁸

This methodology of *autohistoria-teoría*, of putting history through a sieve, stems from the method by which Chicanas gather historical narratives. Drawing from myth, historical data, and personal experiences, their primary objective is to integrate Chicana narratives into the evolving narrative. Maylei Blackwell proposes retrofitting memory into a social practice of counter-memory that 'uses fragments of older histories that have been disjunctured by colonial practices of organizing historical knowledge.'²⁷⁹ Such counternarratives involve excavating and critiquing both the dominant historical record and counter-hegemonic (yet nevertheless deeply masculinist) articulations of history to illuminate the suppressed knowledge of multiply oppressed subjects. They illuminate aspects obscured by the dominant perspective. Through this process, Chicana feminists craft new visions of political subjectivity in and

274 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 48.

275 María Cotera, 'Unpacking our mothers' libraries: Practices of Chicana memory before and after the digital turn', in Dionne Espinoza, María Eugenia Cotera, and Maylei Blackwell (eds.), *Chicana Movidas: New Narratives of Activism and Feminism in the Movement Era* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018), 302.

276 Cotera, 'Unpacking our mothers' libraries', 302.

277 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015), 4.

278 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th edn (San Francisco, California: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 104.

279 Maylei Blackwell, *¡Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2016), 2.

through narratives about the past or – in Anzaldúa's words – 'myth re-members a history that has been forgotten and erased.'²⁸⁰

Allahyari's act of remembering, or rather re-figuring, in *She Who Sees the Unknown* blurs the lines between fiction and history, as well as individual and collective memories. It can be contextualized within the work of these revisionist feminist thinkers. Much like Chicana writers, Allahyari, Fahimi, Motevalli, and Rostami employ storytelling, fictioning, and myth-making as tools to reveal social, physical, or historical disparities. They aim to foreground alternative perspectives, different models of reality, and new memory structures that challenge dominant narratives.²⁸¹ Within their rethinking of monumental and archival codes, the diasporic – as an identity that dwells between different worlds – and the liminal play a crucial role. It becomes a mode of practice that allows them to adopt and continue pre-existing and acquired discourses, assume and play with different cultural identities, and reject, re-evaluate, and redefine them. Through their works, Allahyari, Fahimi, Motevalli, and Rostami depict the United States, Canada, and Iran as heterogeneous and dynamic societies that have long been intertwined. In doing so, they reveal the inconsistencies inherent in the categories upon which official and diasporic nationalisms rely. Rather than being confined to North America or Iran, their work critically traverses back and forth, establishing connections from one site of contention to another across time and space.

'What memories are forced upon us and what memories are we forced to forget?', Rasheedah Phillips asks in the introduction to her book *Black Quantum Futurism*. Phillips ran *The Afro-Futurist Affair* in Philadelphia (now succeeded by the *Black Quantum Futurism* web-space), and her theory and practice mobilize Black and African cultural traditions, quantum physics, and futurism.²⁸² She aims to develop 'a new approach to living and experiencing reality by way of manipulation of space-time in order to see into possible futures and/or collapse space-time into a desired future in order to bring about that future's reality.'²⁸³ In contrast to the linear model of time dominating Western society in which the 'past is fixed, and the future is inaccessible until it passes through the present', ancient African time consciousness treats modes of time as equivalent. In an African conception of time, the present pervades the future and the future and the past pervade the present.²⁸⁴ 'Your activity is what determines how quickly or slowly time moves, not a mathematically predetermined rate of time where, if you do not fit your activity within the rate, you either end up with a surplus or shortage of time. Time is not its own entity in the African consciousness; it is a component

280 Debbie Blake and Carmen Ábrego, 'An interview with Gloria Anzaldúa', *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (1 January 1995), 16, doi: 10.17077/2168-569X.1190.

281 For some of the most comprehensive overviews on fictioning in contemporary culture, see Burrows and O'Sullivan, *Fictioning*; Shaw and Reeves-Everson (eds.), *Fiction as Method*; Gunkel, Hameed, and O'Sullivan (eds.), *Futures and Fictions*.

282 Rasheedah Phillips, 'Constructing a theory and practice of Black Quantum Futurism', in Rasheedah Phillips (ed.), *Black Quantum Futurism: Theory & Practice: Volume 1* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: AfroFuturist Affair, 2015), 11.

283 Phillips, 'Constructing a theory and practice of Black Quantum Futurism', 11.

284 Phillips, 'Constructing a theory and practice of Black Quantum Futurism', 24.

of events and an experience that can be created, produced, saved, or retrieved.²⁸⁵ Phillips argues that ancient indigenous African practices and their understanding of space-time consciousness prefigure the findings of quantum physics, with both troubling the notion of linear time.²⁸⁶ They delimit the model of linear time developed alongside institutions of imperialism, patriarchal oppression, colonialism, and slavery by treating it as something reversible, layered, and existing on top of other time dimensions. As such, they provide an important methodology for untying monuments from prevailing ideas that they freeze and enforce one particular view of time. Allahyari and her peers share with such anti-Eurocentric memory practices the ways they use the past to theorise the present. In their own commemorative structures, they aim to move through the past towards future scenarios, so that people who have been historically denied access to their histories can regain their own narratives and consequently their own pasts and futures. To this end, the artists mobilize monumental and archival codes to expand the sculptural form and vessel.

As demonstrated in the past three chapters, it is the intermedial nature of the works by this group of artists that significantly contributes to the ongoing debate on monumentality. Enhancing this contribution are the works' nomadic features, the interplay between three-dimensional (sculptural-tactile) and four-dimensional (time-based, performative) qualities, and their proximity to 'diasporic' and 'living archives'. All these characteristics allow the artists to update and advance debates on monuments with a new immediacy:

To address the past (and future), to speak with ghosts, is not to entertain or reconstruct some narrative of the way it was, but to respond, to be responsible, to take responsibility for that which we inherit (from the past and the future), for the entangled relationalities of inheritance that 'we' are, to acknowledge and be responsive to the non-contemporaneity of the present, to put oneself at risk, to risk oneself (which is never one or self), to open oneself up to indeterminacy in moving towards what is to come.²⁸⁷

Every reaction to what Giedion refers to as a period's 'demand for monumentality' entails a responsibility – a call to address such a time with suitable, significant, empathetic, and occasionally revolutionary frameworks for memory.²⁸⁸

Monuments should encompass a collective commitment to collective memory – a capacity to assume responsibility, to reflect upon, to nurture, and to coexist with their contemporary context. It is this responsibility, inherent in the creation of monumental structures, that Allahyari and her contemporaries confront through their critical interaction with archives and monuments. These artists employ sculptural forms to activate forgotten and

285 Phillips, 'Constructing a theory and practice of Black Quantum Futurism', 24–25.

286 Physicists such as Carlo Rovelli have argued that time is an illusion and that our perception of time's linear flow is caused by our inability to see the world in all its details. See Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time* (London: Allen Lane, 2018).

287 Karen Barad, 'Quantum entanglements and hauntological relations of inheritance: Dis/Continuities, spacetime enfoldings, and justice-to-come', *Derrida Today* 3, no. 2 (November 2010), 264, doi: 10.3366/drt.2010.0206.

288 Giedion, *Architecture, You and Me*, 28.

suppressed memories, echoing Audre Lorde's sentiment that, 'it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.'²⁸⁹

289 Audre Lorde, 'The transformation of silence into language and action', in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 1984), 44.