

Morehshin Allahyari on making art that you don't want to sell



August 9, 2017 - Morehshin Allahyari is a new media artist, activist, educator, and occasional curator. She was born and raised in Iran and moved to the United States in 2007. She has a background in social science and media theory. Here she discusses why collaboration is like going on a trip to get to know someone, the complications that arise when you need expensive tools to make your work, and the difficulty of putting a monetary value on political art.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3128 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Politics](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#).

Your work often provides tools for other people to make things. Is one role of the artist to help facilitate other people in their creative projects?

Maybe facilitating other people for creative projects isn't exactly what I'm interested in, but instead creating this platform that will allow collaboration, community-building, and dialogue around different issues and topics. So much of my work has been about collaboration—building the space where people can be creative and come together. But it's not like I'm making software for someone to build something.

It's not just about the technology; it's about how you can critically think about it, how you can bring together the activism work and practices. So much of that is also about community-building. I'm part of a movement called [Additivism](#) with artist and writer [Daniel Rourke](#). Additivism is about the community around us; it's more than just a term that we're using.

I'm more interested in doing a project like we did with [The 3D Additivist Cookbook](#): having a manifesto, the manifesto calls for something, and later it becomes a cookbook where people submit to it and invite other people. The whole idea was gathering these minds and thoughts in a way that didn't already exist.

How do you go about finding collaborators?

For me, collaboration has always happened organically. It was never about, "Oh I really like this person's work; I'm going to email them and see if they want to collaborate with me." It was never like that; it was always standing in some opening talking about something, and then suddenly feeling like something is happening from that conversation. I'll be like, "Oh my god that sounds amazing, maybe we should follow up on this," and then following up. You just feel it. I've always collaborated with people where it's just been about liking their work.

So much of collaboration is also about the person you want to work with. I always say collaboration is like going on a trip with someone to get to know them. You know, "You want to get to know someone, go have a trip with them." Collaboration is the same thing; you get to see so many sides of people that just don't come out otherwise.



Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees The Unknown: Huma* (Gif from video), HD single channel video, 2016, Courtesy the artist

How do you use social media within your work? I was looking at [your Twitter](#) where you have the pinned Tweet about, "Hey could someone give me a grant for this solo show so I can work on this project?" Are you able to find funding for the kind of work you're doing that way? Is it an ongoing struggle, even though you've had a success, to keep finding ways to complete the projects you want to complete?

I was having a conversation with a friend about this last week—maybe two, three years ago I would shy away from putting a post like that out there: "Give me funding; I'm working on this project and I think it's really important." I've been working on this project for one year, and my one-year funding is ending, but I still need funding to print this stuff, I still need funding for production. Of course that's always a challenge, especially if you're not a commercial artist.

I feel like so much of what's happening right now for me personally and practically in relation to my work—and everything in the world—is about visibility. We live in a time that the Middle Eastern body is being banned and rejected and pushed out—not just in the US, but also because of Brexit, etc. So much of what I want is legitimacy and visibility. You want visibility to make work about things that are important in your relationship to all the shit that's happening in this world.

It's much easier for a white cis man to get a show in a museum. The amount of struggle you have to go through to get to that point—the amount of pushing and wanting and requesting and telling people that this is what you're looking for—it's crazy, but it's real. It is real.

The art market is still so male and white. It's so dominated that way, and they're not critically worried about this stuff as much. But, at the same time, I think about six or seven years ago and how we were not having these kind of conversations as much as we are now. Especially with social media and how much that's helped with raising these kinds of questions and problems... I think it is changing, and it's going to be harder and harder for bigger places, like [Ars Electronica](#), to give more awards to men every year, you know? At some point they have to pull back, because of everything that has happened and because of the number of people who publicly try to challenge them. It will become more and more difficult for bigger institutions and commercial art galleries to do that and feel comfortable with it. That's exciting and important.

Your work is both political and personal. It seems complicated to put a financial worth on it.

Yes, of course. For example, my [Material Speculation: ISIS](#) series. I have 12 objects, and I don't sell those. I can't bring myself to think that a person, a collector, will have this piece in their house, because it's not about that. That body of work is probably my most well-known and circulated, but I don't want to enter this space. So much of it is about more than just having these objects that are 3D printed. It's about this history, it's about recreating this thing.

I've been showing those pieces everywhere, at so many exhibitions, but at the same time I'm just not interested in selling them. The only place that I want them to end up is a museum in the Middle East that would commission them and keep them. Other than that, I'm not interested. That's the challenge. If I was going to sell them, it's probably the piece that I could have made the most money from. But you've got to make those decisions, especially if I'm standing on a stage and talking about digital colonialism and colonized histories.

How do you manage to create a path for yourself outside of the more centrist gallery system?

The kind of work I was doing, before making objects that I could even sell, was all video or experimental animation. It's not easy to be in the commercial world with that kind of work. You maybe go to an art fair, and there are three booths maybe that are new media booths, and they don't really sell.

As soon as I started to have objects, like doing 3D printing, it changed a little bit. I was only interested in working with a gallery where I could develop a relationship with the gallery's Director. Right now I'm working with Upfor Gallery in Portland. Theo Downes-Le Guin is the Director. He's my mentor; we have conversations about things and I trust him. He's an intellectual and a smart person; he's not only interested in the monetary aspect of my work. He's interested in helping me develop as an artist, so we have a lot of conversations around that. I was just waiting and waiting for a time where I could work with a gallery that would be something like this. He helps me sell work or find collectors, but much more important than that is this mentorship relationship that we have. I also work with this gallery here called Transfer Gallery. It's the same thing with Kelani Nichole; she's been an amazing mentor in my life. I try to keep that balance.



Morehshin Allahyari, She Who Sees The Unknown: Huma, 3D Printed Sculpture, 2016, Courtesy the artist and Transfer Gallery.

What are some resources that you find useful? Things that you find yourself going back to when you're thinking of a project, or coming up with new work?

My work is very research-based, and I feel like especially over the last three or four years, I've developed a relationship to history and narrative and older storytelling. It's something that I keep on going back to.

The work that I'm doing right now is about re-figuring and going back and looking at older narratives and lists and stories, pulling all these female genies or jinns or dark goddesses from these stories, and then re-appropriating them. Like writing a narrative about each figure and then 3D printing them. I keep on going back to this idea of history as a way to then connect it to something in relation to technology, right now and also the future.

So much of this relates to what has been happening in the last year. I think that interest in the past is from this idea of how I can reimagine the past as a way to reimagine the future, and the importance of that to me and my research. All this stuff is in the Middle East. Stories that are all based in the Middle East, like the Arab world or Persian culture.

Technology-wise, I've been interested in 3D printing and 3D scanning. Much of my work in the last four or five years has been based around this technology, because I felt like there's so much potential there. I was interested in thinking about technology more as a metaphor, a point of departure, but then taking and using it for other things.

I don't want to continue necessarily working on 3D printers. For some reason, it's something I've come back because of the the potential it has for taking something from the digital world to the physical world.

In order to do what you need to do with your current work, you need to have access to these 3D printers. What's an ideal studio situation for you?

Right now I'm at Eyebeam, where I have access to a studio. Mostly my computer, the desktop computer, and then books and a wall that I put stuff on. At Eyebeam I don't necessarily have access to 3D printers that are the kind that I want to use, though. I'm always searching for fabrication labs that want to give me grants; right now I'm a visiting scholar at NYU's fab lab, which is like an architectural lab, and they have amazing printers. They give me some funding and access to their printers. It seems like this is the only way, trying to get labs to give me some funding, and then going from one place to another. I was in the UK two months ago at this place called FACT in Liverpool, and they have a really nice fab lab. I was working on my project and 3D printing some stuff there.

I don't think that there's any way that I can at any point have a \$100,000 machine in my studio. I mean, do I want a \$100,000 printer in my studio? I don't think I do. It's very important for me to have a separate studio space because of that mental thing that happens. I don't want to roll out of my bed and sit in a room of my house. I'd much rather go out and be in a different space to make work.

I guess, for now, just finding places that will give me access to a studio where I can sit and make work and think about this stuff. That's the challenge of living in New York; if you want a separate space, it's expensive. It's not easy to have that.

You said you don't want to do 3D printing forever. Is that because it's more complicated to find access to the printers you want? Sometimes, when an artist is using materials or tools that are expensive, it can become limiting or complicated for them to make the work they want to create.

That's part of it. It's so difficult to constantly search for places, go to places and do this 3D printing stuff, but the more important reason is that I feel, by the end of this current project, I'll have done what I wanted to do and I'll be done for a while with this technology. I don't want to be a 3D printing artist. That's the last thing I want. It's important for me that I don't get stuck in one thing. If there's a topic or a technology... I feel like once I am done with this project I actually want to completely move and do something very different.

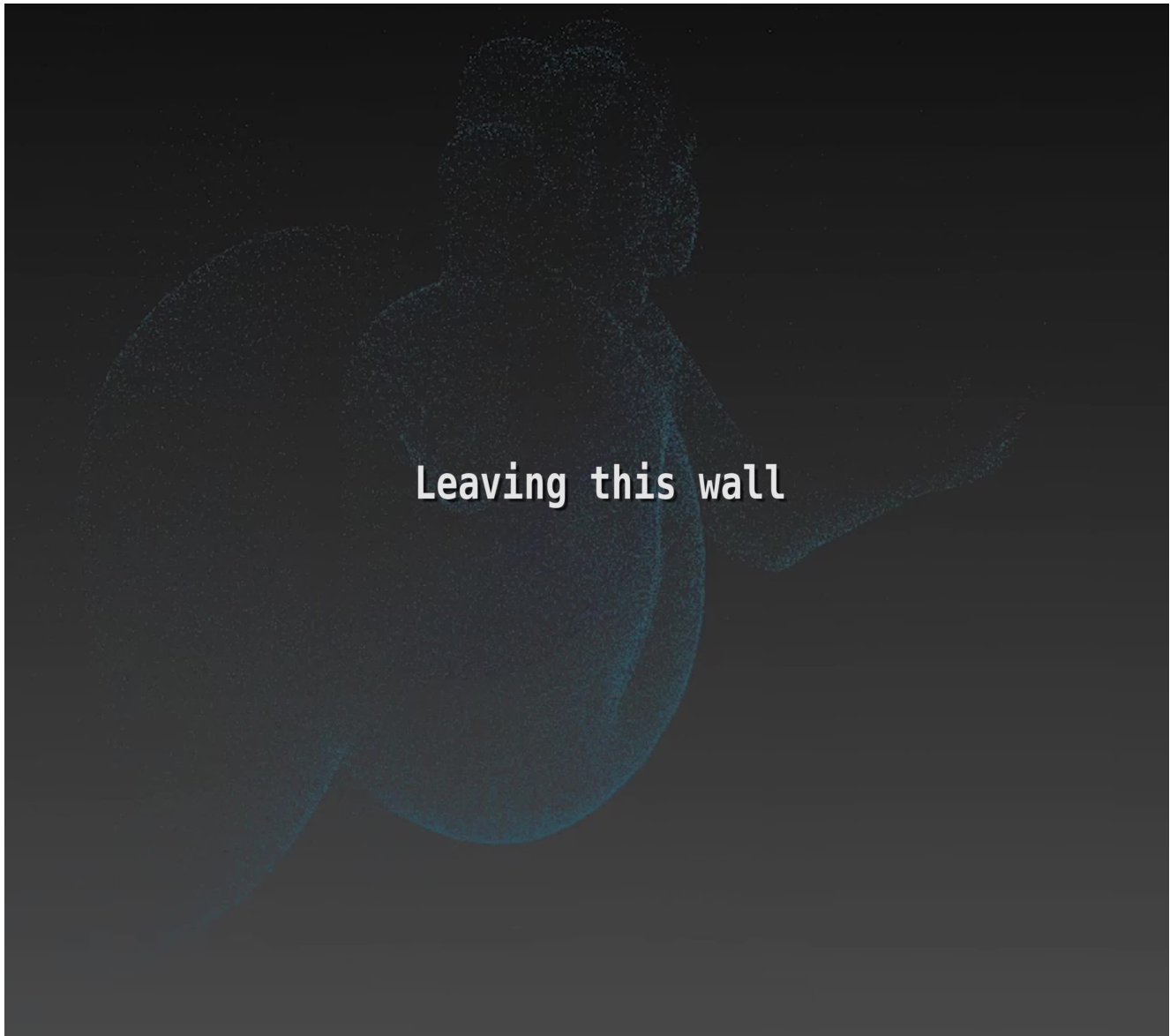


Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: Ya'jooj Ma'jooj* (video still), 2017, Courtesy the artist and The Photographers' gallery

How do you define success for your work? Are the *Material Speculation* pieces successful because they've been circulated and people have seen them?

For me, so much of it is that. The most satisfied I feel, actually, is literally when I go to a university in a small town and I give a talk about xenophobia and digital colonialism and the complexity of a thing like Middle Eastern artists and how my work has been perceived and exoticized or capitalized blah blah blah, and so many of the students respond to that with all these questions. Something is happening in their minds, you know? Something gets shaken up. Every time that happens, I see that I'm doing what I always wanted to do, and that's how I define so much of my work.

I've been talking about how much I want access to a bigger special museum for a new body of work is that because I think if it's in some small random gallery, the number of people that will see it is very different, and the way people experience it. If it's in a bigger museum that is more accessible, more random people will go see it. That's what I want.



Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: Ya'jooj Ma'jooj* (video still), 2017, Courtesy the artist and The Photographers' gallery

In the signature of your email, you have Artist/Activist/Educator. Those things are very tied together for you. Do you ever do a project that exists outside of activism?

For me stuff is always tied together. I don't see the one without the other. I grew up in Iran until I was 23, then moved to the US. So much of my work is either about something in relationship to growing up in Iran and things I was interested in in relationship to that, like censorship, or to me moving here and being an immigrant here. I never had the privilege of *not* thinking about art that way.

It's all I think about, and all that matters to me, because a big part of it was about surviving, a big part of it was about not having a choice. That's the life you have to live. When you grow up in a country like Iran, you think about the world, and everything is about resistance—every single activity. From learning how to drive when you're 18, then wanting to become a really good driver as a woman. These are very little things, but every little thing that many people take for granted, just a simple activity, becomes about this daily social, cultural, and political resistance. So much of that effects my work. When I don't see the truth, I create it. For me it's also so important to go beyond the art world and problems of the art world. That's how I think about everything around me.

There's a lot more political art in the United States right now. Is it hard to not be cynical about something like that?

That's complicated, because I think so much of it is about the person and the kind of work and the context. Like, who is this person? One thing that I've been talking a lot about in my talks is this quote by [Donna Haraway](#). In part of it she says, "It matters, which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts. It matters, which figures figure figures, which systems systemize systems." I think about that a lot. Who is making what kind of work? Who is making? Who is figuring these figures?

It's important. A lot of good and important art has come out of fascist movements and situations, you know? I hope it's something that can stand, that people can focus on it, that normalization doesn't happen, where we just feel numb to things. I feel like some people started to do some important things and interesting stuff and it's faded. It's changed. There's not as much of a loud voice about things. For people like me, or all these other artists that I know, our art has always been politically related. I don't think there's ever a point where it's going to end. It's always going to be about that.

When the Muslim ban happened I was in Berlin. I was stuck there for 10 days. It was such a weird experience to go through that, because I had a U.S. green card and an Iranian passport. It took a while for them to clear that and say, "You can go back." When you actually experience that, or when you have friends who have to now go back after living in this country for six, seven years because there's nothing else they can do to stay... you just feel that. It's real. It exists in your life.

That said, I always say that I wish people wouldn't put all this burden on us all the time, to speak out, to be the ones in conferences, to raise our hands and be like, "How do you feel about everyone here being white and male?" That burden is always on us, and I think if it was shared, that would be amazing. We would be living in a different world.

Morehshin Allahyari recommends:

[On Making Kin beyond babies and humans](#)

[On Being Worldless without one another](#)

[On Uneven and combined apocalypse](#)

[On life and love by one of my favorite Iranian Poets](#)

[On Knowing The Beast intimately](#)

Name

Morehshin Allahyari

Vocation

Visual Artist

Fact

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