

Romantic Self-Exiles

In this essay, new-media artist Morehshin Allahyari and art historian Jennifer Way, respectively and collaboratively, explore how Allahyari's unpublished notes and recent installation, *Romantic Self-Exiles*, consisting of postcards, a film, a 3D animation and video projecting around and through a Plexiglas maquette of Tehran, engage with place and memory from the perspective of leaving yet remaining connected to Iran.¹ First, Allahyari contextualizes excerpts from her unpublished notes on self-exile and diaspora. Next, Way frames major themes in Allahyari's work, such as nation and homeland, in relation to place, collective memory and emotional geography. Together, Allahyari and Way review some of the ways in which Allahyari refracts self-exile and the collective memories she associates with her generation largely by referencing place. They conclude by reflecting on the activism of *Romantic Self-Exiles*.

Self-Exile and Diaspora

I asked you to show me the view of Tehran from your Balcony. You looked back into the monitor: "But remember? It's hard to breath here. Darkness hides it all." You still showed me the lights, the beautiful lights of Tebran, which I only started to dream of after I left.

And so, haven't we said enough? Our story... The story of one exiled nation; self-exiled; in diaspora; lost, nostalgic, displaced, split, broken, torn apart; in between. Places overlapped. Memories fading in and out. Bodies connecting or/and disconnecting. Emotions bitter yet romantic. Collective yet personal. Lives composed of units or dimensions... "[a] shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or resistance..."²

There are many different reasons to go into exile. Religious, political and economic are some of the most important. Exile is the way (sometimes the only way) to escape the pressure, the danger, the life one cannot tolerate anymore or a homeland where one is not accepted for having certain beliefs or ideologies.

Exiles live in diaspora. William Safran defines diaspora as "expatriate minority communities" (1) "dispersed from an original center to at least two peripheral places" (2) who share and maintain "a memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland" and (3) "are not – and perhaps cannot – be fully accepted by their host country". They (4) "see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return, when the time is right" and (5) "are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland".³ Of course, Safran's definition only serves as a general account that includes many yet also excludes the situation of some in diaspora. In Naficy's view, home and return take on a different cast: "diasporic relationship to homeland signifies not a place of return but a source of shifting

¹ See Morehshin Allahyari, unpublished notes for *Romantic Self-Exiles*, as exhibited at the Oliver Francis Gallery, Dallas, Texas, in collaboration with Dallas Contemporary and the Dallas Biennale, 13 April – 5 May 2012. Allahyari subsequently exhibited *Romantic Self-Exiles* at the Chicago Cultural Center in Industry of the Ordinary, curated by Industry of the Ordinary and Greg Lunceford, 27 September – 31 October 2012. Allahyari's unpublished notes are the source for the material used in this section and all quotes in this article, if not otherwise signalled, are from these notes. Publications quoted in or referenced by Allahyari are cited in separate footnotes.

² James Clifford, "Diasporas", *Cultural Anthropology*, 9.3 (1994), 306.

³ William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return", *Diaspora*, 1 (1991), 83-84.

and ambivalent attachment.”⁴ There is also an important relationship between diaspora and borders: “as the borders create a tension of a line drawn and policed, diaspora contains the pain of exile and longing.”⁵

No matter which nation they belong to, exiles experience many common struggles, emotions and discourses. As there are many shared definitions, concepts and examples, we must seek to express the unique experience of diaspora, beyond its general sense. It is important to understand, for example, that Palestinian exile differs from Iranian exile. Moreover, self-exile from Iran following the 1979 revolution was experienced in a situation very different from that of the self-exile driving the new generation (my generation).

It is also important to realize that self-exile for a student from Iran on an F1 single-entry visa with a background of political activism adds complications as does having been suspended or expelled from studies at a university in Iran for political and union activities. Self-exile in the age of Internet, which provides a third space (a virtual space), along with social networking, introduces new questions in terms of the self-exiles’ personal and collective or universal experience. Furthermore, differences in the class divisions of Iranian society also make it necessary for us to inquire what experiences we (as this new self-exiled generation) “reject, replace or marginalize” in comparison to the self-exiled Iranian generation before us. Also, how do old and new discourses of contemporary Iranian self-exile “attain comparative scope while remaining rooted/routed in specific, discrepant histories”?⁶

For my generation, university admission (student visa) and political asylum seem to be the most frequent and recent methods of migration and self-exile (an estimated 70% of Iran’s self-exiled population is under 30 years of age). In practice, these events influence the lives of those who leave as much as those who stay. Something always breaks apart. A balance gets lost, such as the balance of a family when one is gone, or the balance of any relationship formed and grown through two physical bodies. When one body has left, a balance is lost, and so on. We may not ignore the relationship, the influence, the push and pull.

We sit in front of each other. 3 a.m. your time. 5:30 p.m. mine. The lights of the city in your background go off one by one. I tell you that after five years of living here, I still wake up in the morning thinking I was in my room in Tebran. The light is coming through the blue curtain of the windows, from our backyard, gentle, traveling through the space toward my face. Like the lights of your background traveling through the camera of your laptop to the monitor of my computer. In both cases, there is a sense of embodiment. Time, memory, space, and bodies collapsing, losing composition. I tell you that it’s been a while, a long, long time since the last time my memory confused the geographical position – the x, y and z – of my body; that I have started to forget the details of my room. That I postponed the act of thinking and recalling. You laugh and say: “Like Scarlet in ‘Gone with the Wind’. You can always say I will think about it tomorrow. That way you will never think about it.” Then you carry your laptop with you to the kitchen to make Persian tea. “I wish I could have you back only for one hour. So many things I want to share with you,” you say. I resist not telling you once again how much I miss the tea made with the water of Tebran. Those long nights of poetry reading, and drinking in the kitchen, or on the porch of your house... I have come to terms with the realization that ordinary things, inconsequential memories, are romanticized when the return is forbidden by one’s self or the government...

⁴ Hamid Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 17.

⁵ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 247.

⁶ Clifford, “Diasporas”, 302.

Homeland as Place, Collective Memory and Emotional Geography

In explaining the meaning of 'Romantic' in the title of her exhibition, Allahyari counts herself as an exiled subject who belongs to a nation: "I am one of the many of Iranian self-exiled citizens." Of interest is the use she makes of location to express her nation as a place to which she belongs and from which she is exiled:

The *Romantic Self-Exiles* is a new body of work and the story of my self-exiled generation. It explores relationships between self and home and presents the life of those who live in-between. Those who choose self-exile over a homeland in which they are not tolerated or welcome. The word 'romantic' in this context is not used as a confirmation, rather, to question and address the romanticized aspect of exile by the self-exiled citizens.

However, rather than dwelling on aspects of its domestic or international politics, in her writing and art, Allahyari presents details of natural and cultural topography that identify the nation as Iran. She also emphasizes her and her generation's lived and imagined experiences there. In mingling these themes she conveys a longing to return that she and her peers may never fulfil: "For some, the new 'home' finally 'replaces' the homeland. For some, the replacement never occurs; they will always live in the state of between-ness." Implicit in statements such as this and in Allahyari's visual art is not simply vexation about returning to Iran but also conflict about where and what counts as the geographic, social and cultural dimensions of a homeland that, for Allahyari and her peers, in the present day is freighted with on-going memory work and burgeoning, alternative forms of community. Before reviewing some examples of how she engages with this situation, it is important to become aware of related themes in Allahyari's writing and art.

While she conceives of her nation as having a specific geographic territory, Allahyari also implies that its activity compelled her and her peers to leave and consequently troubled their ability and even diminished their desire to return:

I am one of the many of Iranian self-exiled citizens. I come from a generation of an unsuccessful revolution, an ugly war, childhoods filled with bombs, taped windows, and happiness that was short lived and rare. My generation (and I) grew up surrounded by doubt, humiliation, and unknown futures. Today, I have friends in almost every country in the world and I have a 'country' with no friends, no house, and no hope to go back to.

Usually in Iranian culture you don't leave your house until you get married. Now, you have to go study in another country, so you leave. Female friends do this. They convince their traditional families that they want to do this. Some never return.

⁷ Brian Graham, G. J. Ashworth and J. E. Tunbridge, *Geography of Heritage: Power, Culture and Economy* (London: Arnold Publishers, 2000), 2.

At the same time, Allahyari is alert to the significance that self-exiles place on Iranian heritage or "the contemporary use of the past":⁷ "the romanticized memories, places, objects when one is forced – by self or the other – to exile. This strangely includes things, places, and objects we had detested in the past and miss

now.” Importantly, Allahyari associates heritage with the locations she values as places. Tim Cresswell contends that places are “spaces which people have made meaningful. They are all spaces people are attached to in one way or another. This is the most straightforward and common definition of place – a meaningful location.”⁸ Allahyari references meaningful places from her past and present. By treating them as “a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world”,⁹ she is able to shade the “in-betweenness” she associates with self-exile, with qualities ranging from loss, lack and isolation to access, simultaneity, mobility, community and mutability.

What fosters these qualities is the importance that she also places on remembrance. For Allahyari, in some respects her homeland has become so unsettled that it no longer exists other than in memory: “Today, I have friends in almost every country in the world and I have a ‘country’ with no friends, no house, and no hope to go back to.” The notion that a place exists and remains accessible only through remembrance dovetails with contemporary ideas about collective memory. During the early twentieth century, sociologist Maurice Halbwachs distinguished collective memory from history: “History is the remembered past to which we no longer have an ‘organic’ relation – the past that is no longer an important part of our lives – while collective memory is the active past that forms our identities.”¹⁰ Scattered through Allahyari’s writing and informing her art are references to memory not as something discrete and stable; rather, memory is a practice through which she constructs a sense of self and community, sometimes in exchanges that reveal pain and longing to catalyze a recursive narration of place: “It’s like the death of a loved one. You intend to forget about bad memories or those habits and behaviors you were once annoyed by. Only the good memories remain or are worthy thinking about. ... You say to convince me I would not miss what I miss now if I still lived back in Iran.”

At the heart of the practice is a mutually constitutive relationship of people and place to which Allahyari’s remembering testifies. It is fundamental to Halbwach’s theories regarding what is remembered and what is collective:

But place and group have each received the imprint of the other. Therefore every phase of the group can be translated into spatial terms, and its residence is but the juncture of all these terms. Each aspect, each detail, of this place has a meaning intelligent only to members of the group, for each portion of its space corresponds to various and different aspects of the structure and life of their society, at least of what is most stable in it.¹¹

Insofar as “heritage is inherently a spatial phenomenon. All heritage occurs somewhere.”¹² Similar to Halbwachs, Allahyari depends on place to concretize the memory work that is so critical to her generation’s past experience and present-day orientation to Iran:

Now let us close our eyes and, turning within ourselves, go back along the course of time to the furthest point at which our thought still holds clear remembrances of scenes and people. Never do we go outside space. We find ourselves not within an indeterminate space but rather in areas we know or might very easily localize, since they still belong to our present material milieu.

⁸ Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ Jeffrey K. Olick, “Collective Memory,” *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 7.

¹¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. and ed. by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2.

¹² Graham, Ashworth and Tunbridge, *A Geography of Heritage*, 4.

Moreover, as her visual art bears out, and as Halbwachs explains, when “represent[ing] places to ourselves, even in a confused manner” becomes difficult, not simply space but specifically “the spatial image” offers a resolution:

Let us endeavor to go back further. When we reach that period when we are unable to represent places to ourselves, even in a confused manner, we have arrived at the regions of our past inaccessible to memory. That we remember only by transporting ourselves outside space is therefore incorrect. Indeed, quite the contrary, it is the spatial image alone that, by reason of its stability, gives us an illusion of not having changed through time and of retrieving the past in the present. But that’s how memory is defined. Space alone is stable enough to endure without growing old or losing any of its parts.¹³

¹³ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 15.

¹⁴ Elia Petridou, “The Taste of Home,” in Daniel Miller, ed., *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors* (Berg: Oxford, 2001), 88.

¹⁵ Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures*, 17.

¹⁶ Clifford, “Diasporas,” 306.

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

Romantic Self-Exiles does not dwell on a perceived “right to return” to a homeland.¹⁴ Rather, it foregrounds the space of places to provide, if not “an illusion of [the homeland] not having changed through time and of retrieving the past in the present”, then a means to reify “a source of shifting and ambivalent attachment”,¹⁵ or maintain mobility, moving in, in-between and through place as a strategy to maintain “[a] shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or resistance...”.¹⁶

Allahyari reiterates Halbwachs’ account of collective memory by using space to construct a place – a virtual café – having some measure of linking the past to the present: “We come together on a Google hangout. Our new favorite virtual cafe. One in Los Angeles, one in New York, one in Tehran, and one in Denton.” At the same time, the participants cogitate over whether Iran has become unstable and what its instability means for their sense of displacement and dislocation. The themes compel Allahyari to perceive her own art as an extension of her and her friends’ “shifting and ambivalent attachment” to belonging to one another to and through Tehran:¹⁷

We dance virtually, drink, celebrate without being together, and then depressingly end our conversation talking about how we all wish we could be closer, all in Tehran, like those old days. There are so many questions we don’t have an answer for. So many things we are getting tired of talking and complaining about, and suffering for. We get so sick of suffering, so sick of caring, so sick of missing. We have agreed numerous times that we should just let go of all this. But it is as if these have become extensions of our existence. Extensions of our bodies. Physical and virtual. Endlessly. The *Romantic Self-Exiles* is a new extension. A documentation to carry with. A diary to remember. A tragic history not to be forgiven.

¹⁸ See Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 13 and 36.

¹⁹ Halleh Ghorashi and Kees Boersma, “Berlin, Bam, New Media, and Transnational Networks”, *Civil Society* (April 2011), <http://www.arsehsevom.net/zine/?p=76>.

If the social habits they perform electronically ring hollow for the women as a way to retrieve what they lack, still, they are able to iterate traces of the past that maintain the collectivity.¹⁸ Google and its social networking capabilities provide Allahyari’s peers, whom Allahyari perceives as Iran’s second generation diaspora, with “alternative spaces for interaction among Iranians worldwide by stretching the limiting boundaries of the Iranian nation state”.¹⁹ Allahyari associates the interactivity specifically with space – “Internet adds another layer to this complication as a space

we share now” – that corresponds to the hybridized cultural third space that Homi K. Bhabha wrote about in *The Location of Culture*.²⁰ As Andrea Duffie notes,

Bhabha characterizes third space by its ambivalence, its ability to simultaneously contain and negotiate tensions between binary oppositions of space – near and far, home and away. In *Routes*, Clifford contends that the third space incorporates roots of origin and the root-less quality of the present, in order to create an alternative community consciousness that is not based within a population’s geographic location or its surrounding cultural environment. The ambivalence Bhabha attributes to third space allows for opposing viewpoints about space – its permanence and its volatility – to be addressed in such a way that neither viewpoint is completely negated nor completely endorsed or privileged.²¹

Additionally, Allahyari contends that Internet connections reify space because they facilitate embodiment. On this point she is supported by research on the reciprocal constitution of space and self through online interaction. For instance, Hardey argues,

... virtual interactions may be shaped by and grounded in the social, bodily and cultural experiences of users. It is that disembodied anonymity that characterizes the Internet and acts as a foundation for the building of trust and establishing real world relationships rather than the construction of fantasy selves.²²

Interestingly, in “Mapping Homelands through Virtual Spaces: Transnational Embodiment and Iranian Diaspora Bloggers”, Donya Alinejad contends that embodied selves both cause and result from exiled transnationals active on the Internet:

By stressing how sensations of feeling ‘at home’ under certain material and emotional circumstances are found, aspired to and remembered, this notion of transnational embodiment goes against ideas of the disembodied self, with which internet communications have been associated.²³

Thus, according to Alinejad with his research on bodily experience, Hardey challenges existing discussions about new media and embodiment that emphasize the loss of self if not also reality as a consequence of the ostensible integration of bodies with the machines they use.²⁴ In contrast to a loss of embodied self, Alinejad observes that Hardey “focuses on the assumption that although homelands are imagined, the way their attendant collective imaginations are shaped is significantly informed by embodied experiences such as physical return, or strong emotions invoked by sense memories”.²⁵

Ultimately, the reciprocal construction of not simply space but especially places, meaningful locations, and selves, leads us to links between Allahyari’s work and emotional geography. Geographer Steve Pile explains:

For emotional geography, the body is a site of feeling and experience. These experiences and feelings are socially embedded, but they are localizable in the body, and relationships between bodies. The body, though embedded in social relations, is ultimately personal: it is the location of the psychological subject. Emotions may take on social forms of expression, but behind these forms of expression lie genuine personal experiences – that are seeking representation.²⁶

²⁰ See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 311-312.

²¹ Andrea Duffie, *There’s No Space Like Home: Do-Ho Sub’s Fallen Star Series and the Dichotomy of Home* (Ph.D. Thesis at the University of North Texas, 2010), 12.

²² Michael Hardey, “Life Beyond the Screen: Embodiment and Identity Through the Internet,” *The Sociological Review*, 50 (2002), 570.

²³ Donya Alinejad, “Mapping Homelands Through Virtual Spaces: Transnational Embodiment and Iranian Diaspora Bloggers”, *Global Networks: A Journal of Transnational Affairs*, 11.1 (January 2011), 46. See also Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1994).

²⁴ For example, Donna Haraway, “Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century”, in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181.

²⁵ Alinejad, “Mapping Homelands through Virtual Spaces”, 46. See also Hardey, “Life beyond the Screen”, 570.

²⁶ Steve Pile, “Emotion and Affect in Recent Human Geography”, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 35.1 (2009), 11.

Places that Allahyari associates with Iran cast it as a shared emotional geography – “emotions that people feel for one another and, more extensively, for places, for landscapes, for objects in landscapes and in specific situations. In such studies, people express emotions about something.”²⁷ What is more, Allahyari treats a conflation of herself, her peers and Iran as place, that is, as an emotional geographic “site of agency and a site of mobility”.²⁸

²⁷ Pile, “Emotion and Affect”, 15.

²⁸ Daniel Miller, “Behind Closed Doors”, in Miller, ed., *Home Possessions*, 12.

Romantic Self-Exiles

One portion of *Romantic Self-Exiles* consists of a black wall on which Allahyari pinned fifty-five postcards from Facebook friends along with strangers’ statements and comments on her Facebook page about Tehran, Iran and being in exile, and comments from people about missing Tehran, that she printed on postcards.

²⁹ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 36.

On one hand, she localized her peers’ memories “by a kind of mapping”²⁹ that “by reason of its stability, gives ... an illusion of not having changed through time and of retrieving the past in the present. But that’s how memory is defined. Space alone is stable enough to endure without growing old or losing any of its parts.”³⁰ For example, she

³⁰ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 15.

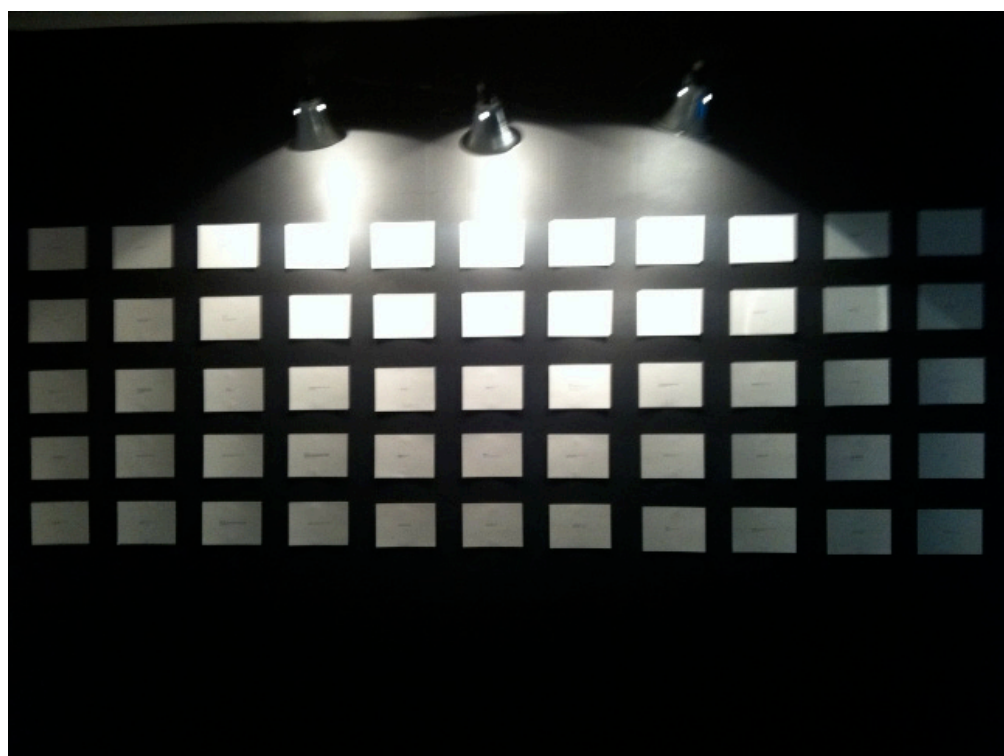


Fig. 1: Morehshin Allahyari, *Romantic Self-Exiles*, 2012, postcards. Courtesy of the artist.

arranged the postcards in rows of five high by eleven wide, thus creating a geometric grid that associates Iran and discourse about it with the steady certainty of precision and logic.

On the other hand, notwithstanding their notations of specific date, hour and minute signaling exactitude in the measurement of time, the authors of the messages, their names truncated as abbreviations, express longings that convey their homeland

through an emotional geography that would vex most cartographers charged with charting the location and boundaries of the nation. Allahyari explains, “The postcards are documentation of lives we live. Bodies coming together through machines to share the embodiment experience of diaspora. The irony of coming together for being apart.”

Correspondingly, she emancipated ‘mapping’ from popular types of information insofar as she printed the communications on postcards from which she removed any images.

At the same time, by withholding interpretation, she permits readers to reflect on whether the writers’ longing for place and desire to return is potentially impossible. Allahyari ruminated on this theme, “you start forgetting about what annoyed you. This happens in exile. You know you can’t go back. You start having memories and imagination of only beautiful things”; “When I went back to Tehran, I totally forgot about all the reasons why I left. They just hit you”; “People in Tehran remind others about the details that are problematic.”

The 16mm film, “The Recitation of a Soliloquy”, refers to a paragraph from a diary that Allahyari’s mother wrote in Farsi in 1984, during the Iran-Iraq war, when she was pregnant with Allahyari. On each frame Allahyari wrote one word in Farsi twenty-seven times and provided its English equivalent once. For example, in Farsi, “a rustling” echoes across one frame; the phrase in English appears at the bottom, where one might expect to read a translation.

In another frame, onto a map of Tehran and a half-figure image of herself facing the camera, Allahyari overlapped a map of Dallas/Denton, Texas, where she currently lives, along with an image of herself from behind. She considers this representation of herself facing outwards from Tehran and simultaneously

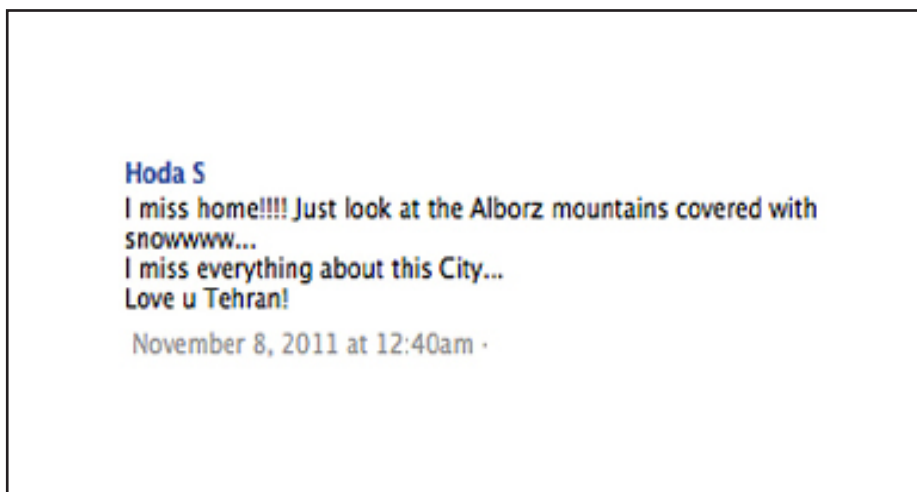


Fig. 2: Morehshin Allahyari, *Romantic Self-Exiles*, 2012, postcards. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 3: Morehshin Allahyari, *Romantic Self-Exiles*, 2012, still from film. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 4: Morehshin Allahyari, *Romantic Self-Exiles*, 2012, still from film. Courtesy of the artist.

looking back towards it as an efficient strategy to convey her in-between life as simply as possible.

Insofar as Allahyari's intervention into her mother's diary makes of its soliloquy a dialogue, it points to a series of relationships that the film manoeuvres into loops integrating sound, word and image, there and here, past and present, remembrance and revision, public and private, pre-existence and existence, and a shift in agency from mother to daughter. Allahyari observes:

Every time we remember a certain memory we intend to forget something about it at the very same time. Every time there is a new narration. We locate the recalled story in a very specific way. Like the telephone game. But in this case, we play it only with ourselves, in an ongoing loop.

In her film, Allahyari's relationship with her mother expresses an emotional geography linking the artist's origins and their consequences. To wit, "a rustling" signifies the first sound Allahyari's mother heard of Allahyari's heartbeat in utero. The paragraph from her mother's diary that Allahyari transcribed explains:

Sunday – 27 ordibehesht – 1984. I heard your heart. Actually on the 15th of Sharivar when I went to the doctor. It made a rustling sound and I asked the doctor what the sound is. He said your baby is laughing! and then said that this is the sound of your heart. It beats 120 times in a minute. There is a strong possibility that you will be starting to move from this month. I don't know if it's right that a person creates a child and gives birth to her without asking the child's opinion? I am always concerned that you might not feel satisfied in life and condemn me to cruelty for giving birth to you. Please don't say this... Never Ever. I will try to provide a good life for you. There is a big chance that I give birth to you in America...

Here, Allahyari represents herself as a sound her mother heard through medical technology and then noted in her diary. Much later, Allahyari translated the passage from her mother's diary into English and transposed it as film for her installation exploring autobiographical and generational Iranian self-exile. The activities Allahyari undertook to engage with her mother's past as part of her own past plus representations of herself render Allahyari a "transnational embodiment", a self-exile rooted in "personal experiences – that are seeking representation"³¹ as are their consequences. Some of these, Allahyari set forth in her notes:

³¹ Pile, "Emotion and Affect," 11.

My parents did provide a good life for me, but my mom never gave birth to me in the United States. Her broken promise has made my life completely different than what it could be (not to put value on which one is or would be better). In my 16mm film, I wrote every word of this paragraph 27 times on each frame as a way to present her diary. I then overlapped the map of Dallas/Denton (where I currently live) with the map of Tehran as a symbolic way of my recitation of her diary. To show my in-between life as simply as possible. The “Recitation of a Soliloquy” is just another way of looking at my life in exile without putting any judgmental value on my mom’s decision.³²

³² Ibid.

“The Romantic Self-Exiles I” is a 3D animation that Allahyari created “[t]o build a land; an imaginary home. To push the limits of real and unreal, memory and imagination, locality and universality, self-censorship and self-exile, time and space.”³³ The imagery, she grounded in autobiographical heritage, or “personal-emotional attachments (tables, bed, stairs)”, as well as

³³ Allahyari, “The Romantic Self-Exiles I (2012)” is available online at <https://vimeo.com/38340522>,¹² March 2013.

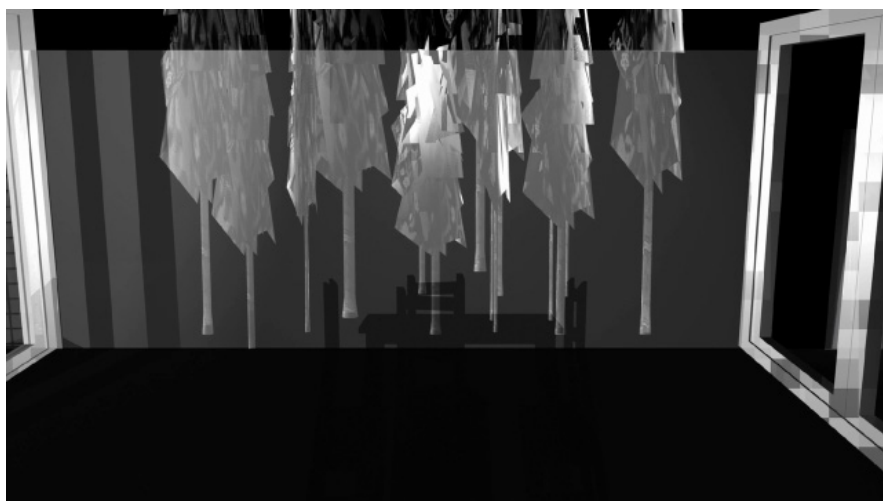


Fig. 5: Morehshin Allahyari, *Romantic Self-Exiles*, 2012, still from 3D animation. Courtesy of the artist.

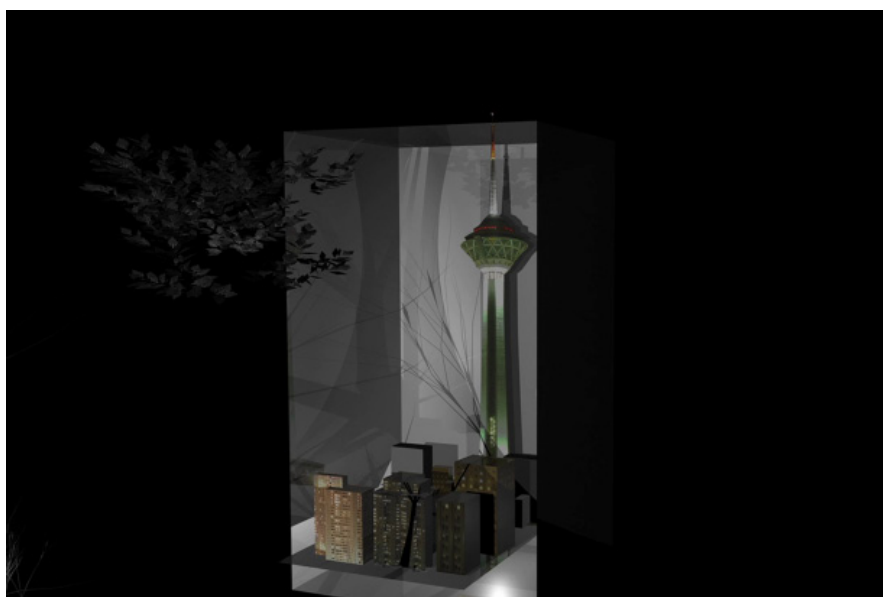


Fig. 6: Morehshin Allahyari, *Romantic Self-Exiles*, 2012, still from 3D animation. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 7: Morehshin Allahyari, *Romantic Self-Exiles*, 2012, still from 3D animation.
Courtesy of the artist.

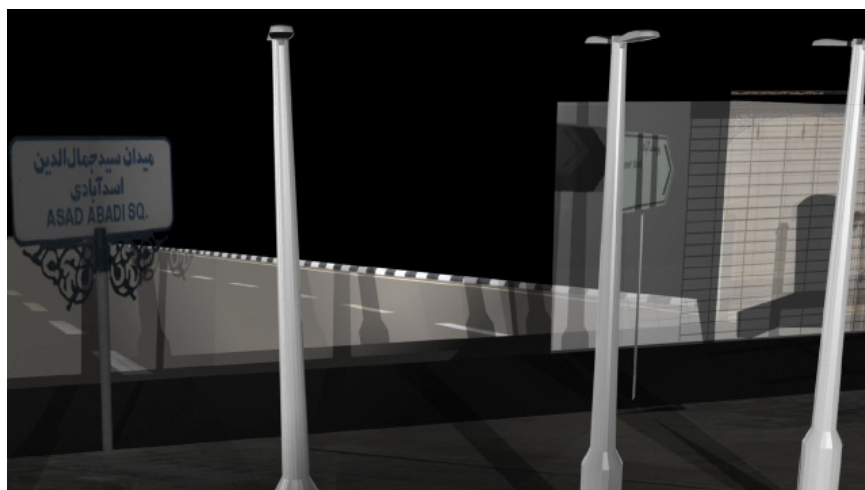
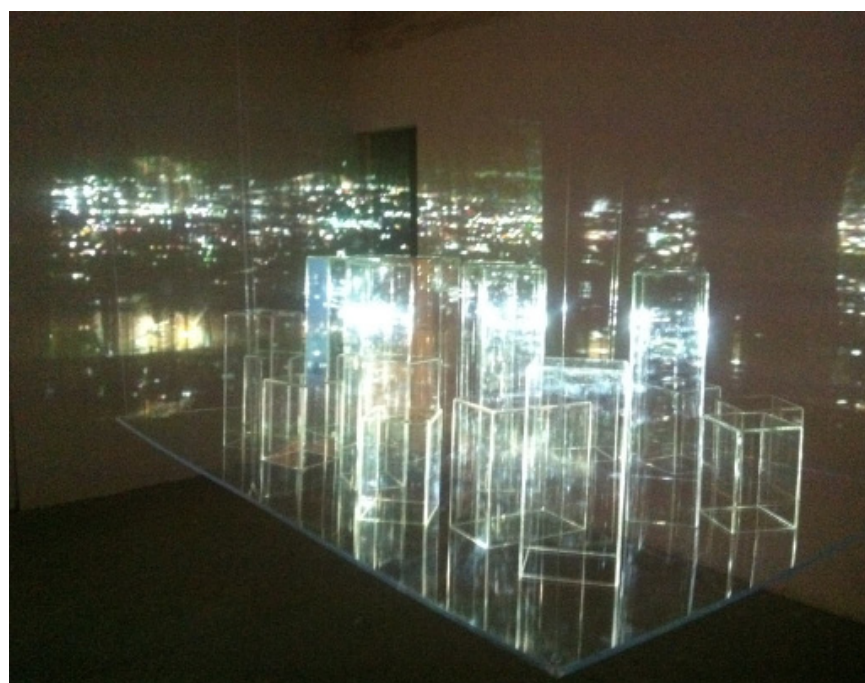


Fig. 8: Morehshin Allahyari, *Romantic Self-Exiles*, 2012, still from 3D animation.
Courtesy of the artist.



... collective-emotional attachments (Alborz mountains, street signs, the house of Tabatabaee, Vakil mosque of Isfahan). There is no place, texture, or object that is made without a personal connection to. Either way, both of the above private and public objects and places are made because I have certain memories from being at them or with them... In a poetic way, this is my romanticized homeland. What I think of when I miss it.

One scene features an interior room with large windows on either side and a table and chairs in the center.

It outlines the kitchen in Allahyari's home in Tehran, where she says "we always sat and had lunch/dinner. One of the things I miss the most about our house."

Along the back wall are broken trees “with light reflections on them that makes them glitch like that. That specific scene for me is the most central. It’s where many concepts connect. It’s my most vivid memory and imagination.”³⁴

³⁴ E-mail correspondence between Allahyari and Way, May 1, 2012.

Another scene depicts Tehran by combining real images of buildings there with imaginary textures on cubes along with a representation of the Milad, the tallest tower in Iran and symbol of Tehran.

Allahyari explains, “The trees are again between memory and imagination. For me looking like Valiasr street (the longest street in Tehran) very well known for having beautiful trees on the both sides.”³⁵ Yet another view of the city focuses on Asadabadi Square: “It’s the square of our neighborhood in Tehran. I went to school close to that square and also spent a lot of time around there when I was a teenager.” To the right, the sign points towards “Yousefabad. The street that I grew up in my whole life.”³⁶

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

In the animation, Allahyari gives the impression that the camera has the agency and mobility to engage with these places. It moves continuously at a constant pace through one scene to another, passing through walls, textures, light and shadows. As an avatar for her, it becomes a site of emotional geography while serving as a means to access places from the past, from another time and location.

Allahyari’s installation, “The Romantic Self-Exiles-II”, is an extension of her 3D animation, “The Romantic Self-Exiles I”, and a physical representation of romanticized and beautiful Tehran (unlike what in reality Tehran looks like – polluted, crowded, full of traffic and people). It iterates the city through the experience of Allahyari’s embodied self and peers, and it attests to their mobility within the city along with their ability to return after having left.

The installation consists of urbanscape made of twenty transparent Plexiglas cubes arranged on a sheet suspended from the ceiling. Allahyari considers it a maquette of Tehran. To make it appear as if it were floating in space, she overlapped it with three videos of the city streets. She made two with her iPhone during her visit in 2010; the third, showing the city lights at night, was made by Mona Allahyari and Amir Shahryar Tavallali in 2012. The videos project from one projector, covering the four walls of the room: “They pass through and reflect on the maquette, creating a sense of dream and blurry memories. With all the over-layered videos, It’s hard to tell what is exactly going on, but one can see the buildings, trees, and lights of the city expanded to four walls in the gallery... Like a city with citizens floating in between. The videos overlap on each other to bring together night and day of Tehran. Like a timeless dream.”

Conclusion

The whole work will be artistic activism.

Throughout *Romantic Self-Exiles* Allahyari’s references to her autobiography and her mother, along with her use of Internet communications, a handwritten diary,

maps, photographs of herself, visual representations of her home in Iran and places familiar to her there, Tehran's urban silhouette and videos of the city that she and her friends made, located in "social, bodily and cultural" experiences, constitute the virtual interactions that make up her current engagement with Iran.³⁷ They amount to an expression of loss. As part of her 3D animation, there is a voice over that can be heard reading the following text:

*Our bodies have lost their dimensions... We float between the depth and the surface, reminiscence and presence, light and dark... We come from a transparent generation and a history refracted and bent. Our souls are broken and shattered by each departure stamp, dispersed and uncertain by self-exile... I have lost logic. My nights cross my days, as if the sun has overcome the sun. My watch stays on Iran's time... Its hands move without its body, like time without its country... and there is a guilt... a continuous guilt in correcting it. My voice stays in Tehran on our answering machine, and I am reminded with every call I make that my physical presence has been misplaced; that it will continue to fall behind... And I have doubted myself a thousand times with every single building I've built. Every wall, every texture, every light, every scene in this animation... They all have put one more block between home and place... Every single object exists twice... once by itself and once through its shadow... each time separated, broken into a different space. Like my voice, like the time, like our identities... Their mnemonic existence collapse every time I remember, every time I forget... with every new day in exile, every new creation in this animation, an old memory from home is superseded... like our bodies and the constant threat of their replacement... I am now a few light years closer to distance... upside down, I feel faded in my memory... How much longer shall we escape from our "cat's" shadow? I have learnt neither pride, nor directionality from drawing its shape. We can no longer be brothers and sisters by geometry. We each speak a new language... Words themselves have become allusions of our tragic yet romantic separations. We no longer mean where we are from.*³⁸

³⁷ Hardey, "Life beyond the Screen", 570.

³⁸ Allahyari, "The Romantic Self-Exiles I" (2012).

In her voice-over, Allahyari mentions bodies that lost their dimension, broken souls, lost logic and the collapse of time. However, in addition to referencing loss, the emotional geography of her work also serves as a "site of agency and a site of mobility",³⁹ and it bears activism. For one thing, *Romantic Self-Exiles* fosters respite from loss if not through the reclamation of a specific place then surely through reflection, recognition and taking stock of the present. It is willing to express if not understand what we now mean if "we no longer mean where we are from". Allahyari clarifies:

The voiceover reads the text that was developed simultaneously with the animation, going back and forth between describing the emotions, thoughts, lives, and scenes, and weaving the self-awareness into the falseness of the animation. The text specifically addresses and describes the position of self-exiled citizens and at the same time takes a personal perspective to explain the animation and emotions involved.

³⁹ Miller, "Behind Closed Doors," 12.

⁴⁰ Charlotte Nekola, "Activism", in Cathy Davidson and Linda Wagner-Martin, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995); Oxford Reference Online at <http://www.oxfordreference.com/>.

Allahyari's work merits consideration with the work of other women creators "[f]orging relationships between self, the local community, and the global".⁴⁰ Shaped by the trajectory of politics in Iran and international relations, her writing and art allude to some of the conflicts experienced by women born in Iran during the mid-1980s who strive to be intellectually and creatively active at home and who, following self-exile, pursue strategies of belonging thereafter.

She writes: “[t]he topic of self-exile is being explored while in the process of making the animation. I as an artist of exile feel more and more exiled everyday with new works, interviews, and political activities that I do that make it more risky to return to Iran.” To this context Allahyari brings an awareness of the contribution her work makes to illuminating the lived experience of self-exile. She represents herself reflexively and with a generation through and constitutive of diverse modes of space nuanced by their respective and collective memory work. At the same time, she remains alert to the ironic prospects for fostering change that various types of distance from Iran both afford and preclude:

I agree that women in most of the cultures censor themselves in many similar ways. But the issue of censorship – the Iranian version – was something that did not end or change when I first moved to the United States. I always think about it this way: as Iranian women, artists, and specifically activists, we carry those cultural taboos, those political rules, those must and must-nots with us everywhere we go. Dictators travel with us. In our pockets. In the back of our heads. We travel with those conscious and/or unconscious self-warnings. We cannot simply get rid of them, because they very much influence our lives, unless we never go back to Iran. And so for me, the issue of censorship was there until I decided not to go back to Iran for a while and stay in the U.S. and make what I should make without being worried about the ‘side effects’. So at that point, I started to feel less pressured, and more comfortable to create the art I wanted to make. So basically, my works are both allowed and forbidden works of art. It’s just the matter of the geographical location and determinism.⁴¹

⁴¹ Brentney Hamilton, “Wandered Lonely As A Cloud: Morehshin Allahyari’s The Romantic Self-Exiles at Oliver Francis Gallery”, *Dallas Observer* (April 13, 2012), <http://blogs.dallasobserver.com/mixmaster/2012/04/morehshin-allahyari.php>, 12 March 2013.