Bridge Obscura:

Connecting Cultures through Sculpture Installation

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Bridge Obscura: Connecting Cultures through Sculpture Installation

ABSTRACT:

21st century Iran is often said to be a country in the grips of isolationism: imposed by both internal and external factors. On one hand, the sanctions applied by the US government isolate the country and restrict the living conditions and mobility of Iranian people, merchants, artists, and designers. On the other, international sanctions lead to political and cultural isolationism at the national level, making the country turn inward as a reactionary response and reinforcing the alienating cycle. Through the lenses of art practice, sensory ethnographic filmmaking, and architectural design, this paper examines the power and effectiveness of an art exhibition that features interdisciplinary sculpture installation, to express ideas about connectivity in such a climate of isolationism. The sculpture installation works in the exhibition highlight a social openness and necessity for global international connectivity, by applying the figure of the arch bridge (symbolic for Iran's once important status as a connector between civilizations along the path of trade routes) as a metaphor for overcoming cultural distances. In the influential collected volume, *The Social Life of Things*, cultural anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff argue that objects (including architectural ones) in a given culture can reveal biographical information about the society at large, when one focuses on how they have been put to use and culturally redefined over time. The cultural responses to the biographical details of objects cast light on the aesthetic, historical, and political judgments and values that shape our attitudes. My thesis and exhibition take the arch bridge as an architectural object and formal representation of cultural referents along these lines, approaching the figure of the arch bridge biographically in order to generate an alternative space that connects contemporary Iranian culture to the rest of the world despite/against boundaries.

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INTRODUCTION:

1.1 Bridge Obscura: The Exhibition

My exhibition for the Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design, "Bridge Obscura: Connecting Cultures through Sculpture Installation," features a sculpture installation, which uses sensory ethnographic filming techniques and projection mapping, installed at two locations: the media room at OCAD University and Toronto Media Arts Centre in Toronto. It engages with ideas about connectivity to underscore the importance of culture, place, and memory in a political climate of isolationism against Iran, using Isfahan's bridges as an inspiration and exploiting their symbolic power.

I was born and raised in Isfahan, a city of two million people located in the center of Iran. Isfahan is famous for its Perso–Islamic architecture, grand boulevards, arch bridges, palaces, tiled mosques, paintings, handicrafts, and minarets. This city reached its cultural peak in the 16th and 17th centuries under the Safavid dynasty. The city's bridges, including historical ones such as Khaju and Allah Verdikhan bridges, have always had a special place in my memory. While growing up, I had to pass these bridges countless times to go to school or to visit my beloved grandparents. Around the age of five, my mother and I would walk almost an hour from our home located on the southern side of the city to my grandparents' house on the north side to visit them at least once a week. To reach to their place, one had to cross the Allah Verdikhan bridge. I remember holding onto my mother's hand and walking on the bridge as the best part of our long trip. In the years that followed, I witnessed people using the city's bridges as cultural spaces for all sorts of purposes that are in excess of their pedestrian functions: celebrating important personal or cultural events, mourning and commemorating religious figures, and/or holding political demonstrations (against as well as in support of government policies) on different occasions.

My exploration here focuses on two bridges in Isfahan, the Khaju and the Allah Verdikhan. In the Safavid era, they were initially used in support of imperial aspirations, for staking out and controlling territory. Later, they became integral to improving communication and facilitating trade. Along the way, their significant and majestic architectural details turned them into desirable places for recreation and leisure, giving them a function that was unforeseen by the builders. Today, bridges like Khaju Bridge and Allah Verdikhan (Bridge of 33 [arches]) enchant and captivate passersby as daily meeting/social gathering points as well as historical artefacts. Depending on the time of the day, women and men of all ages, and all classes, particularly middle-class, populate the bridges not only to go from one point to another but also to spend leisurely time in these popular hangouts. They sing; dance; picnic; idle and chat; make fire (often used to roast tomatoes in the charcoal); watch young people break into spontaneous performances or play traditional as well as modern instruments; buy local snacks like Persian roasted corn, fava beans, or cooked beets in syrup from vendors, and enjoy the view. These are spaces where opposites meet, connect, and collide at times: young and old, traditional and modern, conservative and progressive are all spotted together, sharing common ground under the arches.

Khaju bridge is an arch bridge made of stone and brick, functioning as a weir, as well. The bridge links the Khaju district with the Zoroastrian district across the Zayande river (see figure 1 and 2). Tilework and paintings are used for its decoration, and there is a teahouse located at the lower level of the bridge (southern side). The second bridge, Allah Verdikhan, is also an arch bridge made of stone and brick (see figure 3). This bridge links the mansions of the elite, to the New Julfa, which is the Armenian quarter of Isfahan. There was a teahouse at the edge of the bridge in the past, which has disappeared. I walked on these arch bridges often when I was in Isfahan. Since then they have fascinated me for their social functions, beauty of forms and patterns,

historical significance, and power in highlighting the cultural and artistic strengths of a place. My

relationship to the bridges changed and got intensified in absence, or with distance, as they have

become emblematic of the cultural connections that I have lost in moving to a new country across

the ocean. When preparing the exhibition, I tried to tap into my memories and biographical details,

to invoke the vibrancy of these bridges and provide insights into the range of elements (spatial,

aesthetic, architectural, cultural and affective) that they connect. Here, I use the word connect

intentionally to make a reference to the way bridges function as connectors not only in a physical

sense but also in the sense that they link individuals to place, history, and culture. My exhibition

suggests that they have the potential to do this in memory or in a nostalgic, diasporic context too.
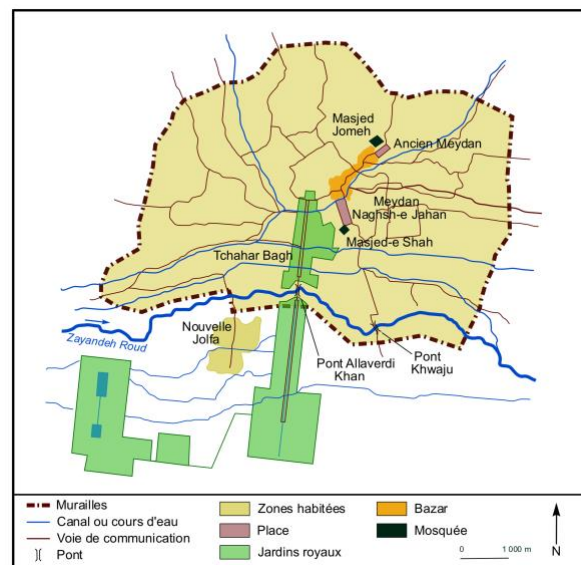
Fig. 1. "City plan of Isfahan during the Persian Safavid Empire era (XVI-XVIIth century)". Wikimedia commons contributors

Architectural structures such as Allah Verdikhan and Khaju bridges not only make us

contemplate the beauty of forms and patterns but can also present a source of inspiration for

scholars and artists, who use them as metaphors for connectivity. For example, Sandra Faustino

states: "Metaphorical language, while re-describing worlds, expresses socio-technical

assemblages of human and non-human components and weaves them together in order to bridge [emphasis mine] different worlds" (Faustino 478). What's striking here is that Faustino uses the bridge as a metaphor for metaphor itself. That creates a tension between bridge as metaphor and bridge as a real site of lived experience. In working with the bridge figure for my exhibition, I was aware of this tension and tried to make the work mediate between the two, through a conjunction of specific documentary images/sounds from the two specific bridges and the schematic/typological figure of the arch (non-specific, but still recognizably Perso-Iranian). What the images, sounds, and the sculpture convey are impressions from the lived experience on the bridges in a specific location, for example. Yet the work asks the viewer to consider these impressions as elements that make us consider broader questions regarding the simultaneity of openness and containment between cultures.

Faustino's definition is also in line with philosopher Graham Harman's object-oriented ontologist take on metaphor, which formulates it as a non-anthropocentric tool that illuminates the relations between humans, matter, culture, and technology through a reference to the inner world of objects (Harman). In other words, "in the metaphor, we step into the place of the object-in-itself (that withdraws) and experience a taste of its reality" (Megan 347). This is the sense in which I use the bridge as a metaphor for connectivity in my installation. By inviting the visitors of the exhibition to step into the everyday world of Isfahan's bridges, my aspiration is that they see a different side of Iran, one that is dissimilar with the stereotypes that frame the country as mainly representing threat, antagonism, terror, and extremism (Azam Zanganeh). I believe that metaphors in art can help artists to express ideas through not only the symbolic meaning but also (as Igor Kopytoff and Arjun Appadurai would argue) the social lives of physical objects.

Fig. 2. "Khaju Bridge". Isfahan, Iran　　　*Fig. 3. "Allah Verdikhan Bridge". Isfahan, Iran*

Upon entering the gallery space, the viewer sees three large-scale plywood arches that are installed from the wall-out, one in front of the other. The repetition of arches toward the wall is expected to give the impression of space extending beyond the given limits of the room and direct the visitor's attention to a video projection on the wall of the gallery space. The plywood structures are modeled after the four-centred arches of bridges in my hometown, Isfahan. The projection compiles images and sounds that depict significant aspects of the vernacular life that animates such historical and cultural places as Allah Verdikhan and Khaju bridges. Here, the video, providing the viewer with a glimpse into everyday life in a distant location, suggests a connection to the installation's title "Bridge Obscura" (see figure 4 and 5). This title is a reference to camera obscura, the proto-cinematic device from the 17th century, which was used "to transform the three-dimensional space of vision to the two-dimensional virtual plane of representation" through the principles of pinhole projection (Friedberg 60). As Anne Friedberg explains, "the camera obscura projected its images - inverted and laterally reversed - onto a planar surface," functioning "like an architectural window: its pinhole aperture brought light from the outside into a darkened interior" (Friedberg 61). The image produced looked almost like a real-time video of the outside world, allowing the viewers to briefly step into a distant reality and experience a connectivity between

two locations. In my installation, the projection on the wall invokes the sense of wonder and mystery that was once a key part of the camera obscura shows' intended effect, this time facilitated through the architectural window of the arch bridge and the virtual window of contemporary technologies.
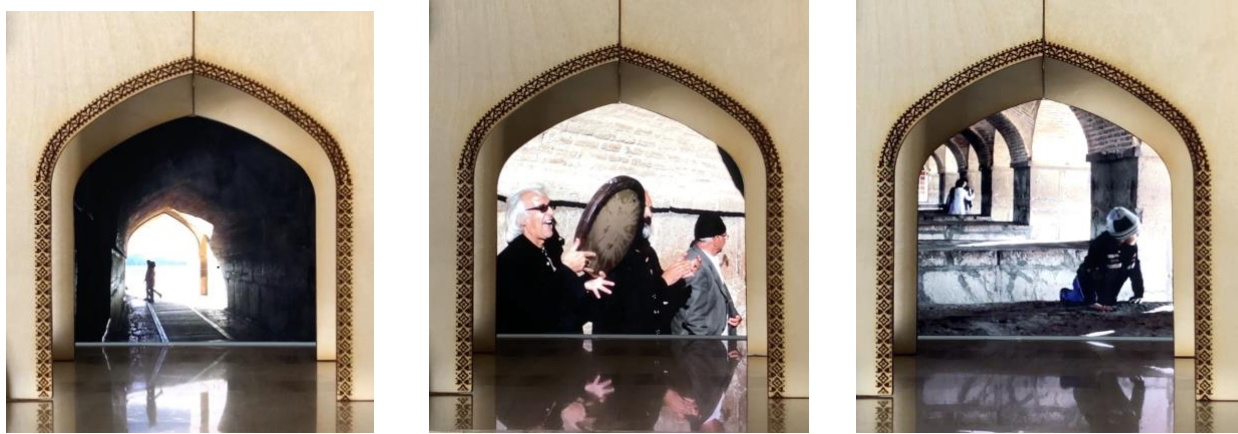
Fig. 4. "Bridge Obscura" (prototype). Canada, Toronto, Shahrzad Amin, 2020

Standing in front of the arches, the visitors, using visual and auditory senses, might first hear the sound or view the image. Although sounds and images are not synchronized, they complement each other to boost the viewer's imagination. Sounds coming out of five speakers located at front-center, left-front, right-front, left-rear, and right-rear create the stereo effect. Voices include all sort of sounds we can hear on, under and around the Khaju and Allah Verdikhan bridges, such as the sounds of people of different ages and genders, vendors, singers, traditional and modern musical instruments, water, birds, means of transportation such as motorcycles or bicycles, and fire at different times of the day. The dreamlike and contemplative atmosphere produced by the slow-motion projection encourages the viewer to activate his/her imagination and multiple senses to make out what they are seeing. The vibrant soundtrack, assembled from carefully curated sounds that I recorded on the two mentioned bridges, in conjunction with the

sculptural installation, heighten audition and embodied modes of perception, creating a multi-sensory environment.

Fig. 5. "Bridge Obscura". Canada, Toronto, Shahrzad Amin, 2020

At this point, I am aware that my audience will be composed of people from different nationalities and other cultures. While Iranian visitors might approach the exhibition with a feeling of nostalgia, others might not be acquainted with Iranian vernacular life and culture, entering the exhibition space without knowing what to expect. Therefore, by using Sensory Ethnographic methods of filmmaking and by being conscious about the role of different senses such as audition (sound) and their relationship to vision (imagery), I try to provoke non-Iranian viewers' curiosity and activate the Iranian viewers' memories. More specifically, I invite them to pass through the arches, experience the transition into a different cultural space, and explore (in a mediated fashion) various aspects of Iranian people's lives such as aesthetics, history, and vernacular life, which are often excluded from politically charged audiovisual representations of Iran. Of course, bridges not only connect but also separate. Perhaps the same could be said of art itself. What is noteworthy

in the design of Allah Verdikhan and Khaju bridges is that the walls on both sides tend to obstruct the visibility of the river and allow only particular framed views. My installation, with its framed video projection, recalls this simultaneous sense of openness and containment. While it invites the visitors to connect with another place and culture through engagement with the mediated bridge, they become aware that such a connection is not possible literally, only metaphorically. Any mediation, reconstructing a located reality in a gallery space, practically dis-locates its situated cultural site (with all its rich life). My exhibition, too, translates the everyday life in Isfahan into a context, in which we are *not* on a bridge; the bridge is no longer functional, and its vernacular uses and experiences are represented via video and recorded sound. One can interpret such translation or dislocation as a failure or limitation. Sound and installation artist Yolanda Harris addresses this problem in her scholarly writing; she states that recording sounds from a location and replaying them in another location is a paradoxical thing. On one hand, practices like this, labeled as "field recordings," are interpreted as giving the viewers a heightened sense of presentness in a location. Yet on the other hand, this presentness is only allowed through dislocation or through severing the sounds from their sited realities/otherness. The presentness, then, comes from not the illusion of being in the sounds' site of origin, but from the fact that the recording enables an "acute awareness of embodied location" (Harris 13). This is the sense, in which I view the dislocation in my exhibition not as a failure or limitation, but as a kind of recontextualization that encourages embodied engagements with another culture.

Humans are social creatures; connectivity plays a crucial role in our lives. To understand different people and cultures, we can look at their social connections. Isolationism and loneliness, on the other hand, are among the biggest fears for individuals as well as societies. This is why they get used as punishments and methods of deterrence. For example, for punishing

criminals, the justice system excludes them from the rest of society and keeps them in jails. While most criminals are allowed limited connections with others in that setting, those who are deemed the most threatening to society (sometimes based on their ideas), are given solitary confinement, taking the measures of isolation to the extreme. Yet, extreme kinds of isolationism are not just for individuals; as in the case of countries like Iran, entire populations or groups can be isolated in this way. Sanctions on developing countries by developed nations make them socially and politically immobilized and disconnected from the rest of the world. Political and economic isolationism can impose fear and constant struggle on the people of those countries and have a wide range of negative consequences. Misperceptions, oppression from local regimes and negative representations from the rest of the world, being forced into exile from one's homeland, and othering and alienation in other countries are some of the consequences of the sanctions.

I believe that isolationism puts cultural burdens on innocent people. It hinders people from traveling and forming connections with the rest of the world, for example. Limitations on travel are a common strategy in foreign policy-making yet their effectiveness as a political deterrent is questionable. Encouraging interactions between different nations is a better tool against political divides in my opinion. For me the desire for connectivity became more urgent after my displacement from Iran to Canada. I realized after the immigration from the land of arches and arch bridges my craving of connecting my country to my new home and even to the world increased significantly. I started to look for pieces of my hometown and value every single object that reminded me of it, trying to convince myself that I can ultimately find something to connect me to my culture. Out of this came the identification of the arched bridges, which became the starting point of this installation's journey.

1.2 The Process and Artistic Influences

Sculpture:

In recent years a number of contemporary and internationally acclaimed artists have engaged with the figure of the bridge; these include Lorenzo Quinn, Krzysztof Wodiczko, and Sia Armajani. My approach to the sculptural part of this installation is informed by their artworks. Some of their works speak to how the arch bridge, and alternatively the arch, has created a powerful symbol and material vessel for conveying diverse metaphorical meanings. For example, Lorenzo Quinn's monumental sculpture created for the 2019 Venice Biennale, "Building Bridges," includes six pairs of hands joining to form arches, in order to represent universal values such as friendship, hope, and love (Quinn). By doing this project, Quinn tries to symbolize that people can bridge cultures if they conquer their differences. The bridge acts as a cultural referent, due to the significance of Venice's bridges in history, bringing to mind Italy's once [and continued] important status as a center for trade, arts, and architecture. In my exhibition, I draw upon the historical and cultural significance of Isfahan's bridges, using them as cultural referents in a similar manner. The laser-engraved stamp motif ornamenting the first arch in my installation is inspired by the tilework of Grate Mosque or Jameh Mosque of Isfahan (see figure 6). Jameh Mosque is one of the oldest historical religious monuments in Iran. It presents a collection of decorative architectural patterns and is a product of the evolution of mosque architecture from the 8th (the pre-Islamic period) through the 20th centuries (UNESCO). The glazed tilework decoration of this significant structure was created more than five hundred years ago (in the Safavid era). Nowadays, lots of artisans in Iran benefit from the patterns found in Jameh Mosque to decorate handicrafts such as handmade fabrics, cloths, carpets, rugs, utensils, reliefs, tiles, etc. In my work, I have utilized two of these patterns to draw the viewers'

attention to the interaction between the artworks, architecture, and society. The patterns serve as cultural referents, much like the bridges of Isfahan. In order to create the motif, I created a composite image, joining two different ancient Iranian patterns (geometric and branching plant forms) to symbolize the connectivity between different visual representations as well as between the past and the present. I designed the block-printed geometric and non-geometric shapes first on paper, and then transferred the designs to a computer to make them ready for laser cutting (see figure 6). The choice of woodblock printing reflects my desire to highlight its respected status as one of the oldest crafts of ancient Iran. This type of print is commonly used to design fabrics and cloths today, in continuation of a long tradition in the country.
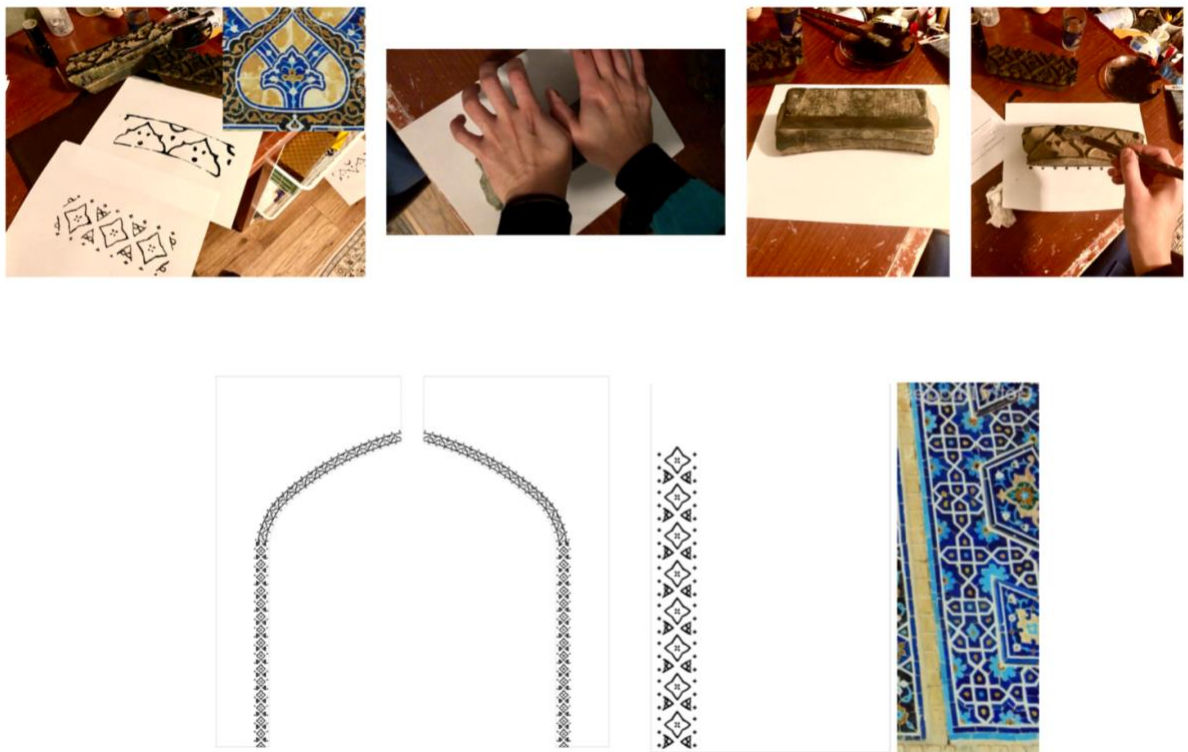

Fig. 6. "Block-Printed patterns". Canada, Toronto, Shahrzad Amin, 2020

Like Lorenzo, I believe in the power of cultural referents in connecting people, since history and culture remind us of the links that were once there and have been severed due to various factors. Yet, it is worth noting that Lorenzo's public sculpture in Venice biennale presents the connectivity through a universal message, of unity and oneness. While I have my own reservations about the whiteness of the hands and its implications for the people of colour, the installation has still informed my exhibition by allowing me to think about the physical and metaphorical force of the bridge figure (see figure 7).

Fig. 7. "Building Bridges". Venice, Italy, Lorenzo Quinn, 2019

Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko's exhibition "Guests," initially installed in the Polish Pavilion of the 53rd Venice Biennale, does not feature sculpture, yet it projects shadowy images of immigrants and refugees onto the walls, creating the illusion of people going about their daily activities in imaginary arch-shaped windows. The work draws attention to the ways in which immigrants and refugees are isolated from society, critiquing their exclusion from the sights and minds of the developed world. Wodiczko's "Guests" forms a parallel and inspiration for my own installation in that it highlights how public spaces often become spaces of suspicion for host nations' hypocritical fears against immigrants and refugees as an imaginary Other (see figure 8).

The multisensory space that "Bridge Obscura" creates, works against this kind of atmosphere however, drawing attention away from suspicion and fear toward curiosity and connection. My exhibition is also inspired by the incorporation of video projection in Wodiczko's work; the monochrome and ghostly projection creates a cinema obscura kind of look, raising curiosity. In giving my exhibition the title of "bridge obscura," I had a similar effect in mind, with the video and sound components adding an air of liveness/presentness to the sculpture that makes the visitor aware (and excited about the mystery) of everyday life in another location. Unlike in Wodiczko's projection, however, the subjects in my slow-motion footage are clearly identifiable, colourful, and vividly portrayed to reduce the sense of otherness, often ascribed to the Iranian people in media representations. The footage presents vignettes and snippets from Iranian vernacular life, fashion (especially in terms of the style of dresses that are displayed), and language.

One of the most significant differences between my installation and Wodiczko's work is in its affective address to the visitors. In Wodiczko's work, the sounds and silhouettes of immigrants, who do not usually have a voice and proper visibility in host nations, are presented in a way that creates an uncomfortable or critical space for the visitors. In contrast, my show evokes comfort, in order to establish an intimate relationship to place through listening and watching.

Fig. 8. "Guests". Liverpool, England, Krzysztof Wodiczko, 2009, Photo: Jon Barraclough

The strongest parallel with my own work is that of Sia Armajani, who is an internationally known sculptor, born in Iran and based in Minneapolis. He engages with common architectural forms, such as house and bridge, in a poetic way that lets us view them in a different light. By creating installations that feature bridges (one of his sources of inspiration has notably been Khaju bridge), Armajani aims to open up a conversation about what is in front of us and what is behind, spatially, temporally, and metaphorically. For example, in his work "Bridge Over Tree," the bridge does not connect two points; rather, Armajani uses it to transfer a poetic and political message to the viewer. In the context of this particular work, the message relates to the Vietnam war and the xenophobic fears developed among Americans against the Vietnamese (seen as Other due to racial differences and the specter of communism) during that epoch. The installation was created initially in 1970, and has been restaged in 2019, to urge visitors to start a conversation about political divides as they pass over the bridge (see figure 9). Armajani creates his artworks based on his

experiences as an immigrant artist in exile, reflecting on the role of art in American society. My desire for creating "Bridge Obscura" originated from a similar experience, that of an artist who left her country and is questioning her place in Canada. However, by recreating the figure of the bridge as a form that raises questions about connections and divides between cultures, my exhibition reflects an exilic sensibility in its affective tone rather than through a direct political commentary.

Fig. 9. "Bridge Over Tree". New York, USA, Sia Armajani, 2019, Photo: Timothy Schenck

In another work, "Limit Bridge III," Armajani places a wall in the middle of a bridge, which makes it impassable (see figure 10). I believe Armajani's intention in creating this sculpture was to question the meaning of the bridge when it is stripped off its functional purpose. The wall in the middle of the bridge might be interpreted as making a reference to the artist's experiences of being in exile or in a new country that he does not immediately fit in. It can also be taken as visualizing the obsession of the contemporary world with creating borders between people. In these two works, Armajani challenges our assumptions about what a bridge does. The arch bridge

that leads to a wall in my installation invokes a similar space: marked with physical impassibility yet calling for an imaginary passage between memories, sensations, and cultures.
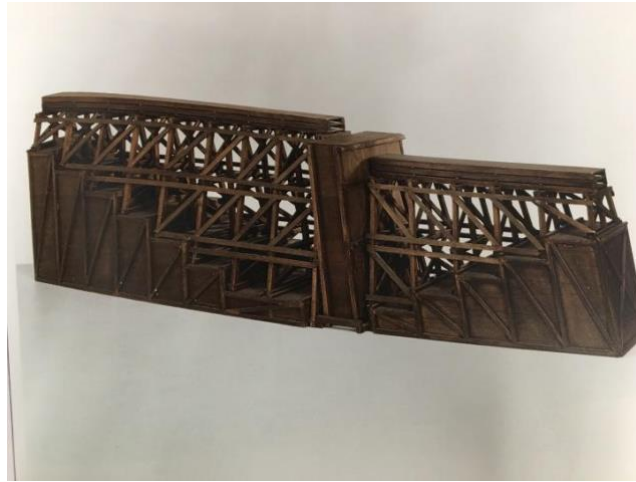

Fig. 10. "Limit Bridge III", USA, Sia Armajani, 1972-1978

While Isfahan bridges are predominantly made of bricks and stones, the three arches of "Bridge Obscura" are built from local plywood. I have opted for working with local plywood for three reasons: 1) to invoke in the visitors' minds a sense of physical transition between Canada and Iran by presenting a material that is common to Ontario and Canada in a whole new context 2) to give the vernacular life in Iran a familiar texture and touch, by including in the installation something familiar to the visitors, and 3) to remind the visitor that connectivity between cultures can only be possible through a blending of memories, senses, social histories, and materials.

Video:

The video projected on the wall features footage that I shot in Iran (on Khaju and Allahverdi Khan bridges between December 20-21, 2019), with the aid of a videographer friend, Ali Reza Abab. We used a Canon 5D Mark IV camera, with 24-70 and 70-200 Canon lenses and a tripod. Since I hadn't used video and audio in sculptural installations before, I experimented with multiple styles of filming (including the capture of slow motion, time lapse, and real time imagery) and lenses. To inform my choices, I had researched sensory ethnographic methods of filmmaking (in

the style of the works of Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab), with the intention of generating multisensory material. Acclaimed for documentaries such as *Leviathan* (2012) and *Sweetgrass* (2009), SEL's films often use experimental camera equipment (including go pros and mobile devices) and techniques. Inspired by *Leviathan*'s use of placing viewfinder-less go pro cameras on the bodies of fishermen, the documentary's subjects, to capture their everyday activities in an embodied fashion, I also experimented with capturing embodied footage. For this, I asked a sixteen-year-old girl I spotted skating on the Naqsh-e Jahan Square prior to filming to accompany me on the two bridges. There, she accepted to take my cell phone with her and skate with the camera of the phone turned on for video capture. She was quite excited to be a part of the process and ended up diversifying her bodily movements, to see what kind of imagery would emerge from a skater's embodied point of view. The final video in the installation includes shots from her footage (with her permission) to give agency to the everyday inhabitants of Isfahan's bridges (and the vehicles/technologies they use) and to make the imagery multi-perspectival. I made the decision to go with the slow-motion footage in the end, to invoke an aesthetic reminiscent of British artist James Nares, who uses high-speed cameras (at times attached to sport-utility vehicles to invoke the travelling actuality film tradition, as exemplified in pre-classical films such as the Miles Brothers' *Trip Down Market Street Before the Fire*) to capture slow motion (cruising) videos of street life in New York (Polednik 122). His 2009 film *Street* is especially poignant, since its slow-motion imagery is coupled with occasional travelling shots to evoke (in his own words) "the dreamlike impression of floating through a city full of people frozen in time, caught 'Pompeii' like, at a particular moment of thought, expression, or activity"; it also searches "for nuance, rather than for particular events of extreme dramatic interest" by "focusing on the ordinary and the

everyday" (Polednik 117). The footage shot from a skater's point-of-view in my video also reflects a similar interest in travelling actuality films that Nares' documentary draws from.

Sound recording:

I made separate visits to the two bridges and used Zoom Recorder H4n Pro to record sounds of targeted subjects and objects, as well as the general ambiance. The soundtrack that is laid under the video does not contain sync sound; instead, what the visitor hears is an acoustic ecology that I created, mixing ambient sounds such as those of birds; water; people walking, clapping, dancing, and singing; corn roasted on the fire by vendors; bicycles and motorcycles, various instruments played by street performers, etc. My decision to give sound special attention and its own space is influenced by Harvard Sensory Ethnography (SEL) Lab affiliate Ernst Karel's rich soundtracks (heard in documentaries like *Leviathan*, which are often celebrated for making sound prominent in ethnographic and observational filmmaking (Karel). Joshua Bonnetta and SEL graduate J. P. Sniadecki's *El Mar La Mar* also has a powerful editorial approach that gives sound and image equal weight in giving the viewer an immersive access to the realities the film depicts, on the Mexico-US migrant trail across the Sonoran Desert. Both of these films have given me ideas about how to pay attention to the "sonic ecology" of the bridges (Kara and Thain 186).

Projection mapping:

In order to incorporate the video footage into the installation, I investigated into the use of PMC (projection Mapping central), a website that provides a community resource for projection and video mapping, to learn about different mapping strategies. I also drew from the experiences gained while assisting OCAD's Artist-in-Residence Vanessa Dion Fletcher, a Lenape and Potawatomi artist, with installing her collaboratory multimedia exhibition for Nuit Blanche and a solo exhibition *Curiosity and Quillwork* at Ada Sleight Gallery, as part of my placement

requirement in the Experiential Learning Placement Program at OCAD. Her collaborative exhibition, with other Indigenous artists Aylan Couchie, Jason Baerg, and Logan MacDonald, especially presented a great learning opportunity for me, for experimenting with projection mapping. Titled *Listen to the Land*, the Nuit Blanche installation featured a projection cast upon a heritage structure at Fort York, using performance, projection, sound, and Max/MSP/jitter. For this project, each artist contributed a different approach. Dion Fletcher's contributions engaged with her relationship to the land, symbolism, and pattern making.

In my work, inspired by traditional Islamic art, I use a combination of historical architectural elements such as arches and combine them with videos and sounds to create an influential space for the viewers. There are some connections between my work and Dion Fletcher's creations, which utilize new media and incorporate them into historical architectural forms or heritage structures in order to visualize the importance of cultures, places, and memories in a contemporary manner. I feel fortunate for having had the opportunity to learn from Dion Fletcher in this regard and am most grateful for her generous guidance.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

2.1 Cultural Anthropology

"The human being is the bordering creature who has no border."

George Simmel, "Bridge and Door"

In his 1909 article "Bridge and Door," sociologist George Simmel states: "Path-building, one could say, is a specifically human achievement [...]. This achievement reaches its zenith in the construction of a bridge" (Simmel 6). What draws Simmel to the figure of the bridge is the way it speaks to humanity's tendencies of building connections and separations between distinct realities

such as individuals, nature, landscape, and culture. These two tendencies go hand-in-hand, presupposing one another:

> Only to humanity, in contrast to nature, has the right to connect and separate been granted, and in the distinctive manner that one of these activities is always the presupposition of the other. By choosing two items from the undisturbed store of natural things in order to designate them as 'separate', we have already related them to one another in our consciousness, we have emphasized these two together against whatever lies between them (Simmel 5).

When a bridge connects two banks of a river, for example, it makes us notice the simultaneity of connectedness and separation: first, we become aware of the spatial separation between the two sides (as Simmel argues, they don't just appear apart but also separated), and second, we imagine the separation as something that can be overcome by both our imagination and the materiality that stands before us. In this manner, the bridge becomes a visual symbol of "the correlation of separateness and unity" (Simmel 7). While the purpose of the bridge seems to be facilitating motion, it does much more than that. The bridge also has an aesthetic value, as an image or visualization; its form is visible and lasting: "The bridge gives to the eye the same support for connecting the sides of the landscape as it does to the body for practical reality" (Simmel 6). In this aesthetic sense, its function is comparable to that of the work of art: visualizing metaphysical experience. Simmel explicitly compares bridges to artworks yet notes a difference in the following sentence: "Yet the bridge reveals its difference from the work of art, in the fact that despite its synthesis transcending nature, in the end it fits into the image of nature" (Simmel 9). Here, the difference lies in the bridge's appeal to the senses beyond the visual. While it tethers together finite matter, humans find themselves removed from the limitations of landscape or physical borders in the act of walking across the bridge. Walking connects one to the bridge through habit, which means that they are aided by sensory memory in the process. The experience makes one feel like not only moving forward but also weightless, infinite amongst the finite: "floating for a moment

between heaven and earth" (Simmel 8).1 In my exhibition, the bridge materializes both in its physical, sited reality (through the video, the soundtrack, and sculptural elements' invocation of the lived experiences of Isfahan's residents) and points to a "visualization of something metaphysical", since the artwork/exhibition itself uses it to build a connection between the artist, visitors, and cultures (Simmel 9).

Simmel's ideas regarding the bridge as an object that points to humanity's key social tendencies resonate with the field of cultural anthropology and recent scholars' call for a biographical approach to objects in order to explore their social lives. In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* - one of the most influential collected volumes on the topic - anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff focus on the ways in which meanings attributed to objects get filtered through human cultural exchanges within the process of use and circulation in the past and present. Kopytoff's own chapter contribution for the book proposes asking similar questions about things and objects as one asks about people and societies, because the "life history" or "biography" of objects can give us information about people that use them, society or culture that might otherwise remain obscure (Kopytoff 67). For example, one can ask:

> Where does the things come from, and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized "ages" or periods in the thing's "life", and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness? (Kopytoff 66-67)

Searching for answers to these questions brings one to look into aesthetic, historical, and political relations in a given society or community, which are revealed in the use of the object. In proposing to approach objects biographically Kopytoff's main concern is in commodities rather than things

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1 It might also be worthwhile to mention Martin Heidegger's conception of the bridge in "Building Dwelling Thinking" here. Heidegger describes the bridge as an object that gathers earth and sky and landscape together into relation; bringing the banks of the river, the river itself, us and the sky above into being as elements in a relation (Heidegger).

like bridges that belong to the public sphere and fall outside of "the exchange sphere". However, he also engages with objects, which are "singularized." What he refers to by the category is objects that are "publicly precluded from being commoditized" and that are marked by culture as singular and sacred. This is the case for public parks, monuments, national landmarks, and art collections, etc. (Kopytoff 73-77). One can imagine the bridge figure as a singularized object in a similar sense: it resists commodification and its value stays attached to the sphere of culture rather than economy. As such, the social life of a bridge can helps us notice things about a society (life stories of different categories of people, for example) that are not easily visible at the level of economic or commoditized exchange relations.

To claim that an object has a social life, is also to suggest that it has agency. In "Agency, biography and objects," visual anthropologist Janet Hoskins argues that objects, like humans, have biographies since their meanings and functions go through a series of transformations through time and are rendered flexible through human use (Hoskins 2006). In that process of transformation, she argues, they have an impact on human relations as active agents; persons that use them are not always fully aware of the meanings and uses of the objects. Especially, when the objects in question are objects of art, people are enchanted or captivated by them, which means that their impact comes from what they *do* to the human imagination rather than their function or what they simply *are*. There's also the perspective of speculative realism / object-oriented ontology, which rejects the view that objects only have meaning in relation to our use of them and claims a mode of existence, in which objects retreat from us and withhold their full meaning, agencies, potencies, etc. (Harman, Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things). In other words, the perspective suggests that the world of things have relations (actual or potential) outside of us. The bridges of Isfahan are good case studies in this context. They are spaces where opposites

meet, connect, and collide, as I mentioned earlier: young and old, traditional and modern, conservative and progressive interact with one another, sharing common ground under the arches. It is in these moments that the bridge asserts its agency and invites them to look beyond differences based on appearance, religion, political affiliation, gender, age, and economic status, by means of spatial proximity.

As a physical connector between spaces, people, and differences, then, the bridge holds the potential to serve as a strong metaphor for social links. In *Sociocultural Anthropology,* Richard Robbins, Maggie Cummings, and Karen McGarry underscore the importance of metaphor for anthropological research and understanding cultures. They state:

> Metaphors are valuable tools for constructing worldviews. By directing attention to certain aspects of experience, while downplaying or ignoring others, metaphors can reinforce people's beliefs, as well as their understandings of reality, which ultimately come to be taken for granted as correct and true (Robbins, Cummings and McGarry 96).

This description of metaphor as a cultural tool notably draws from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's seminal 1980 study *Metaphors We Live By*, which was fundamental to the establishment of metaphor theory with its attention to "the cross-cultural productivity of conceptual metaphors" (Monti 207). Lakoff and Johnson's main intervention was that metaphors help us understand the "meanings people assign to experience" and see their worldviews through a new lens (since metaphors make worldviews - what people experience in their social, economic, and/or political lives - concrete) (Robbins, Cummings and McGarry 95). When understood as such, it becomes easy to imagine why the bridge figure might act as a strong metaphor for connectivity. It can give a concrete face to abstract experiences of building connections and separations between distinct realities such as individuals, nature, landscape, and culture, which I mentioned at the beginning of

this section as constituting the social lives of bridges. In my installation, I use the bridge as a metaphor in this sense, trying to materialize the everyday experiences of Iranian people through my own experience as a diasporic Iranian artist who wants to connect to both her homeland and Canada as a host nation.[2] My hope is to reduce the distance between me and my homeland, as well as Iran and the rest of the world.

METHODOLOGY:

3.1 Art Practice

Art practice constitutes the primary research method in my exhibition and supporting thesis. This form of methodology helps increase my capacity to "intervene, interpret, and act" upon issues and ideas that reveal new understandings about cultural connectivity (Sullivan 101). In his book *Art Practice as Research*, Graeme Sullivan argues that Art Practice – grounded in studio practice – is a powerful research method allowing: 1) knowledge to be applied to help solve the problem, and 2) knowledge to be generated through experience, which helps us understand complex realities (Sullivan 96). Furthermore, he mentions that studio practice is a central site, where visual arts research takes place. A studio is a place of inquiry that is not bounded by walls or removed from the daily grind of everyday life; studio art experiences can include a full range of ideas and images that inform individual, social, and cultural actions (Sullivan 72). It is with regard to these aspects that Art Practice speaks to my interests, research, and artwork.

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[2] The arch figure itself has metaphorical implications in that it is associated with ideas of renewal and moving into new phases of life in various cultures. In my exhibition the arch figure is prominent since arches are structural components of Iranian bridge architecture. In other words, the arch is not exploited for its metaphorical potential fully; however, one can think of the sculptural arches in the exhibition as encouraging the viewer to pass through a cultural threshold and enter into a phase of life, in which they gain a new understanding of a culture they are not familiar with.

3.2 Sensory Ethnography

In addition to art practice, my exhibition and supporting thesis draw from sensory ethnography. Sensory ethnography is a critical methodology, which departs from traditional ethnography's classic observational approach to pay attention to the role of sensory perception and experience in producing knowledge, within the field of anthropology. It has become quite popular among media anthropologists and ethnographic documentary filmmakers in especially the last two decades, following what David Howes refers to as the "sensorial turn" in social sciences and humanities (Howes). In her book *Doing Sensory Ethnography,* social anthropologist Sarah Pink locates the methodology's biggest intervention in its acknowledgment that "sensoriality is fundamental to how we learn about, understand, and represent other people's lives" (Pink 7). As she outlines,

> Doing sensory ethnography entails taking a series of conceptual and practical steps that allow the researcher to rethink both established and new participatory and collaborative ethnographic research techniques in terms of sensory perception, categories, meanings and values, ways of knowing and practices. It involves the researcher self-consciously and reflexively attending to the senses throughout the research process, that is during the planning, reviewing, fieldwork, analysis and representational processes of a project (Pink 10).

In my exhibition, the methodology helps foreground a non-verbal and non-judgmental kind of orientation toward everyday life in Iran. Especially when capturing the vignettes from Isfahan's arch bridges, I took up sensory ethnographic filmmaking methods, to encourage the visitors of my exhibition to imagine and learn about the social lives of these bridges through not only the lens of historical records but also through the senses (the way Iranians engage with them). What I mean by Iranians' sensory engagement is things includes 1) proprioceptive engagement such as walking, biking, or even protesting on the bridge. 2) visual engagement: paying attention to the beauty of styles and patterns, looking at passersby or other bridges spanning across the river through the

arches 3) touch: feeling the materiality of the bridges and the texture of stone and brick 4) audition: listening to various sounds, such as sounds of water, birds, crowds, music, songs, poetry, and vendors 5) and lastly, smell: the smell of river and flowers. These kinds of engagements teach us to experience the world, and the passage between one place to another, in different ways. The resulting information can give us a certain vision about the specific location and culture.

CONCLUSION:

4.1 Summary

Bridges are inspiring for me since, as an immigrant, I always look for a metaphorical bridge between my Iranian roots and culture, and my new nationality as a Canadian citizen. Lack of connection makes me afraid, specifically because the opportunities for Iranian people to connect with the rest of the world are becoming increasingly scarce due to political and religious differences. The bridges of Isfahan are sites of memory/experience in themselves, as well as being locations of culture; therefore, I see in them the potential to act as potent metaphors for the cultural connections that are missing.

My research combines a sculpture installation that engages with Isfahan's arch bridges (physically and metaphorically), with projections of sensory ethnographic footage and sounds, depicting vignettes of everyday life. My work reanimates architectural figures to draw attention to their social lives as objects facilitating cultural exchange. Furthermore, through art practice and sensory ethnography methodology, I experiment with my installation to create a space of cultural and experiential exchange in a climate of isolationism, and to alleviate cultural misperceptions about Iran as a country that represents alterity, threat, violence, and terror.

The exhibition invites visitors to think about the physicality of the bridge figure as well as the metaphorical power of it. In addition, I encourage viewers to walk through the arches, located

inside the gallery space, think through the metaphors, and activate a bridge space between cultures. This experience activates visual and auditory senses in order to make the viewer experience a passage between one place to another or the transition into a new state of perception/vantage point vis-a-vis contemporary Iran.

4.2 Challenges:

The biggest challenge that I have encountered regarding this exhibition relates to the challenge of expressing cultural connectivity and changing misperceptions through art works. While art works can encourage the viewers to think through metaphors and engage with different cultures through affective experiences/sensory perception, there is no guarantee that cultural conceptions can be easily forged or altered. In her article about the potential of public screen-based installations, media scholar Nanna Verhoeff looks at "The Bridge", a 2014 project of the Dutch-based mobile media platform Dropstuff, and discusses the challenges that the project faced, which resonate with my own questions about the potential of using bridge as a metaphor (Verhoeff). To give a little bit of context, Dropstuff's travelling exhibition "The Bridge" features two screens installed in two different European cities and established a video link between them. In one of its iterations, an installation "was set up between Stockholm and Amsterdam for the occasion of the 400th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Sweden and the Netherlands" and performers in two locations were enabled to see and interact with each other through engagement with the screens (Verhoeff 131). While the idea behind the installation was an exploration of what connectivity can be (between people looking at each other from a distance), Verhoeff notes that such an exploration is never easy, because connection necessitates commitment (a desire on the part of the parties on each side of the screens to learn about the other culture):

 But connection is never non-committal. To what purpose, or with what result do we connect? With so many projects, technologies, and forms of design being created to engage with the affordances of connection, a critical question we may ask at this point is: this is all great, but to what end? Who benefits, what is being exchanged, what is the transformative power, what is the surplus value of what is created in this process of connecting? (Verhoeff 136)

Although I have tried to focus on the subject of cultural connectivity and create a bridge between Iranian culture and other nationalities, the commitment to learning about another culture rests upon the viewer and I am aware that my art works cannot pre-empt them. It is only the evocative and conceptual power of the work that might be effective in influencing the viewer's mindset (encouraging them to open themselves up to dialogue).

Accounting for the discordant roles of politics and art in generating solutions that might help Iranian people overcome isolation was another part of the challenge that I have faced. As an artist, I do not want the exhibition to be guided by political discourses; rather, I am interested in the role that art and artists can play in helping Iran to communicate and connect with the world at personal, cultural and affective levels. It might be worth noting here that my exhibition coincided with the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, and I wasn't able to install the sculpture installation in the gallery space that was originally intended. In the weeks that followed the completion of the work, the world found itself in a state of global isolation, suddenly giving my project a new significance. More specifically, people and institutions around the world felt the need to transcend physical and political boundaries to create alternative/virtual spaces for communication. In that climate, art and artists stepped in, and generated alternative channels to give people a sense of togetherness and awareness of common interests/needs. Overcoming isolation highlighted the need for and potential of creativity. I was quite touched by the ways artists and art institutions (such as museums, galleries, artist centers, cinemas, etc) immediately took the responsibility upon themselves to provide relief to the difficult circumstances and

emotional stresses caused by the demands of social distancing. That made me think about the potential of my own exhibition in a new light, in terms of generating a space for highlighting isolation as an affect that can be shared and, perhaps, overcome through compassionate and collective engagements.

Lastly, I encountered a few technical challenges during the preparation of the exhibition in terms of filming, sound recording, and editing the footage and the sounds. More specifically, my decision to include multi-sensory ethnographic film footage into the exhibition required me to gain new technical skills very quickly in a short amount of time. For example, I used software such as Adobe Audition and Adobe Primer Pro for editing. Working with these softwares were a completely new experience and my learning curve was consequently steep. I also learned by experience that shooting ratio matters; looking in to 369 video files and 60 audio files to come up with a short video was highly time-consuming and in retrospect, I should have been more economic in selecting what to film. Perhaps, the most interesting challenge I faced was the one related to the design of the plywood arches for the exhibition. My initial considerations were that the arches needed to be light, relevant to the conceptual framework behind the project, safe for the visitors to pass under, and aesthetically pleasing. However, while preparing the illustrator files for laser cutting, I had to make the decision to design the arches in fragments to facilitate their transportation and installation. As a result, the arches themselves ended up necessitating connectivity, appearing hinged. While it was somewhat accidental, that formal structure complements the ideas that I explore in the thesis and exhibition. The joint arches can make the viewer notice the labour and commitment needed in making connections.

Creating "Bridge Obscura" was genuinely challenging, both technically and conceptually, yet invigorating for me. My hope is that it encourages contemplation on socio-cultural

connectivity and allows people from different cultural backgrounds to experience a part of Iranian vernacular life in a way that they weren't familiar with before.

4.3 Findings and future research

During the process of working on this exhibition, I began to think about isolationism's consequences, such as social, economic, and political insecurity, and how some countries like Iran experience isolationism in multiple ways because of internal and external factors related to the political, religious, cultural, ethnic, and geopolitical differences. I have also become more mindful of how this kind of isolation creates misperceptions against Iranian people and culture, and of how it erases the receptiveness and outward-looking face of Iranian's vernacular life. Therefore, in my ongoing art practice, I continue to think about the potential of sculpture installation in forging cultural connections. I seek to invite Canadians to experience Iranian vernacular life and culture through multi-sensory and multi-media spaces that I create within my installations.

To create this art exhibition, I recorded images and sounds (independently) from the arch bridges of my hometown, Isfahan, and combined them with three large size plywood arches inspired by Khaju and Allah Verdikhan bridges. The experience of recording a diverse array of sounds made me perceive the everyday rhythms on the bridge differently and think about the relations among the senses more carefully. Notably, I hadn't incorporated sound to my sculpture works, prior to embarking on this project, so working with and thinking through auditory perception was a new experience to me. When, for the first time, I began to record the sound on the bridge, I found out that my sense of audition functions in utterly different ways than my other senses and by focusing on it, I started noticing that sound has its own sculptural qualities. All of a sudden, all the voices I heard in everyday life, the sound of people's steps when they were

walking, the sounds of bicycles' wheels as they moved, people's chatters, the thump of a ball falling from a kid's hand, cellphone ringtones, and even the birds' and water's sounds, became amplified and made sense to me. This extraordinary experience made me think of perceiving different spaces through auditory sense and sounds. I continue to think about all the aspects and sounds that make the people's daily experiences on Isfahan's bridges distinctive and significant from those in other places. Moreover, I am trying to figure out what other techniques and methods could have helped convey details such as the way people talked to each other, interacted with each other, or interacted with the bridge and with non-humans around the bridge, as well as the way they used the bridge. With specific attention to auditory sense, meanwhile, I used other senses such as vision and touch, which helped me view Iranian people's everyday lives in a new, sensorially connected way. Further, I have thought of specific sounds that could create a connection between people and get their attention in specific situations. For instance, based on my experience on the designated bridges, the sound of musical instruments played casually by amateur performers; people laughing, singing a song or clapping together; or even the voice of a person during a singing performance are highlighted as having the potential to grab attention and activate a connection between the viewers in the exhibition and socio-cultural space that the sounds belong to. No matter where they come from or what language they speak, the viewers can relate to the affective atmosphere presented by the sounds and images. For my next research project, I want to explore multi-sensory installation methods, considering other senses such as the olfactory and the gustatory, in addition to the visionary and auditory senses to underscore the importance of culture, place, and memory and create different spaces for viewers to interact with.

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