



Peepshow 2.0

Interactive Reflections

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A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Digital Futures

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

Peepshow 2.0: Interactive Reflections is an interactive installation that investigates the relationship between spectators and performers within a digital media context.

This research focuses on the use of social media as a tool for women in Iran to express themselves, through digital performance, in ways that are not physically possible in public. The paper analyzes and contextualizes the current intersection of gender and technology in Iran through a contemporary analysis of cyberfeminism and gender-based segregation. As an artwork, the project examines the ways in which social media reflects a viewer's actions back at them. Through the development of an interactive and responsive installation, *Peepshow 2.0* invites viewers to engage in the creation of a feedback loop that reflects and mirrors their participation.

The development of this paper and interactive artwork serves as a means for me, an Iranian in diaspora, to explore and communicate the complex situation of social freedom for women in Iran.

Keywords: interactive reflections, digital media, social media, digital performance, cyberfeminism, interactive, responsive installation, diaspora, social freedom.

Acknowledgements and Gratitude

I would like to begin by acknowledging that the land on which I have the privilege to live and learn is the traditional territory of the Wendat, the Anishnaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Métis, and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

My deepest gratitude to my advisors Simone Jones and Maria-Belén Ordóñez, for their guidance, support, and valuable feedback throughout my research process. And for pushing me beyond my limits and challenging me to do better. You both truly inspire me, and I am grateful for the opportunity to learn from your knowledge and experience.

I would not have been able to complete this journey without the support and encouragement of the faculty members of Digital Futures Graduate program, Cindy Poremba, Emma Westecott, and Hanna Dickson of Graduate Studies Office, along with my peers who have provided critical feedback and encouragement along the way.

I am filled with gratitude towards my amazing son who not only provided unwavering support and grounded wisdom but also helped me brainstorm creative ways to survive school. And to my incredible family and friends who had my back throughout this epic odyssey, thank you! I could not have done it without all of you!

For Keon

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Introduction – Art and Research Creation in Diaspora

I was born in Iran and lived there for six years after the Islamic revolution in 1979.

During this time, I experienced the devastating impact of living under the Islamic regime as it oppressed and terrorized its citizens, including my family. I witnessed firsthand a diminishment of social freedoms for women which existed prior to the Islamic revolution. While Iran's social structures were formed by patriarchal traditions during the constitutional monarchy that ruled for 28 years, women nonetheless had many social freedoms and rights, including the right to vote, hold public office, wear what they desired in public, and receive an education based on their interests and abilities. However, these rights were taken away in both private and public spaces after the establishment of the Islamic regime.¹

The regime implemented strict and oppressive laws that limited the rights and freedoms of women.² Among other restrictions, mandatory dress codes, including the wearing of the hijab was imposed on all women and girls aged nine and up when entering public spaces regardless of faith; and singing and dancing in public was prohibited for women.³ During the 43 years that followed, an ongoing struggle took shape between women (alongside male allies) and the Islamic regime. Despite efforts of the authorities to control women's rights in both public and private spaces, women continued to resist and push back for the freedom to choose

¹ Women in Iran were restricted from various fields of study and professions; the Family Protection Act which provided guarantees and rights to women in marriage was declared void, contraception was made illegal and the age of marriage for girls was set to 9 (Esfandiari 46-47).

² The first woman to hold cabinet office under the old regime was executed by the Islamic revolutionaries (Esfandiari 8).

³ Wearing hijab in Iran is mandatory for all women and girls over the age of 9 in public spaces of Iran. This is the case even for non-Muslim and foreign women visiting Iran. Morality police patrol the streets enforcing mandatory hijab and social behaviour for women in public. Women who do not wear their hijab or wear it improperly may be imprisoned, beaten, or fined (Esfandiari 4).

how to dress and move freely. In her book *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint* (2021), Maggie Nelson, an American writer, poet, and critic, explores the idea of freedom as a practice of liberation and a process of becoming, rather than a fixed state or a “final ‘big night’ of liberation” (7). According to Nelson, our individual freedom is always connected to and influenced by the freedom of others and that freedom is not just a matter of individual autonomy but requires a relationship with others to create an equitable society (11). I agree with Nelson’s perspective that freedom is not a destination but a process that requires constant questioning and challenging of the limitations placed on each of us by society. Individual freedom is interdependent. This concept of freedom connects my autonomy to the freedom of all women worldwide and it is one of the reasons why I am passionate about social freedom for women. ⁴

In September 2022, the struggles in Iran turned into a nationwide feminist revolution for social freedom. The current wave was instigated and led by both young women and schoolgirls. It started after the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, on September 16, 2022, and the subsequent spread of the Islamic regime’s ideology on social media regarding her death. The morality police of Iran arrested Mahsa Amini because her hair was showing through her hijab. A few days after her arrest, she was pronounced dead in the custody of Islamic authorities. ⁵ Soon after, pictures of her injured and beaten body on a hospital bed were posted on Social Media Sites (SMS), such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, which triggered widespread protests by

⁴ When it comes to gender equality and freedom, I do not identify as an Iranian woman, but rather as a woman living in this world today, and my freedom is contingent on the freedom of all female identifying individuals.

⁵ The morality Police, also known as the “Guidance Patrol”, is a government organization responsible for enforcing Islamic code of conduct in public spaces. They have the authority to arrest and detain individuals who are found to be in violation of these codes, including the dress code for women and segregation of men and women in public spaces.

young Iranian women and schoolgirls who removed their hijab in public, and in some cases burned it in support of Mahsa's memory. The news reporter who posted pictures of Mahsa's injured body in the hospital and interviewed her father after her death, was detained and subsequently jailed.⁶ Access to the internet and SMS was promptly restricted by the Islamic regime, yet local citizens continued to find ways to share images and videos of what was occurring on the streets of Iran by posting reels on SMS as well as mobile apps such as Telegram and Clubhouse. Protests against the mandatory hijab for women quickly grew into widespread uprisings across the country, as well as sparking solidarity demonstrations around the world.

As an Iranian woman living in diaspora for the last 38 years, I was deeply moved by the videos on social media of young women and schoolgirls bravely protesting the regime. These images brought back many difficult memories, but they also brought back the memory of when I was a teenager in Iran after the 1979 revolution. Specifically, during summer holidays when my friends and I went for bike rides in our neighbourhood. At the time, the Islamic regime imposed restrictions on girls biking outdoors which became an invitation for us teenagers to go on secret bike rides. These were significant moments of local and collective resistance because we were able to choose to go out and bike without needing to coordinate with a larger group or align our actions with any specific ideology or belief system. We just wanted to go for a bike ride and defy what seemed to us to be arbitrary and irrational rules by the new regime. My friends and I called each other daily to assess the safety of our neighbourhood and whether a morality police van was spotted driving around. When we felt safe enough, we would swiftly

⁶ *Iranian Reporter Who Interviewed Mahsa Amini's Father Is Convicted without Trial | RSF*. 31 Jan. 2023, [Hyperlink to Reporters Without Borders page about Iranian reporter who interviewed Mahsa Amini's father](#).

cycle around the neighbourhood and rush back home, full of excitement and exhilarated from our small but meaningful transgression. At times, while riding my bike, my hijab slipped off my head and rested on my shoulders. This reminded me of the carefree times before the 1979 revolution, or when we lived abroad one summer. We didn't have access to tools that could capture these sweet moments, but the strong sensations are, nonetheless, marked in my memory. These were the feelings that were sparked when I first encountered the short videos of teenage girls dancing on the streets of Iran, individually and collectively defiant of the regime.

I was unable to look away from watching the growing agitation and violence unfold on the streets of Iran. I felt a sense of solidarity with the women who were fighting for social freedom. It became inexorable to follow social media accounts that shared videos and news related to the revolt against the forces that told women like me to stay put, to stay still, and become small and invisible in public. Following this movement online became an important step in my journey towards my own awareness and activism. Seeing these women challenge their oppressors gave me hope for a free Iran and inspired me to create art as a means to raise awareness in my non-Iranian community.⁷

My fascination with events unfolding in Iran led me to discover women in the country using public art, namely street dance, as a form of resistance against the state's restrictions. This prompted me to search for specific keywords and hashtags related to street dance (for

⁷ Although mainstream media outside of Iran covers the news of the unrest and revolution in Iran, the coverage is limited in time and content and edited to include an overview of all the events, broadcast and updated a few times per day. By only following mainstream media, it is impossible to piece together a picture of what is happening at the street level in Iran.

example: iran_dance, “public dance iran”, raghs (Persian word for dance), “Dancing is not illegal Iran”), in order to learn more about how women were using dance as a means of resistance. My research focuses on short videos of women dancing in the streets of Iran with the purpose of using their bodies as a form of resistance against the regime’s ban on public dancing.⁸

I am aware that my online experience is curated by a combination of my online choices— the types of accounts and keywords I follow and interact with — and algorithms run by social media websites trying to maximize the amount of time and attention they get from me. I am also aware that the sources of the footage I view are not fully disclosed (for privacy and protection of those who capture the footage), yet I recognize that all parties involved in this process, including myself, play a role in this feminist revolution because our interactions and perspectives are actively shaping the course of events.⁹ As consumers of these images, we can take a step further and not simply be passive observers surveilling or gazing from afar. We can actively participate and contribute to the process of liberation and freedom for women in Iran. This can be pursued through sharing their stories, raising public awareness, and demanding action from our local and political representatives to take action by way of sanctions and human rights intervention against Iran’s regime.

⁸ Under Iranian sharia law, it is illegal for a woman to dance in public.

⁹ In recent years, social media has played a significant role in many countries to mobilize protests and spread awareness about issues of concern in countries with totalitarian regime like the Islamic Republic. One example of the role of social media in revolution is the Arab Spring, a series of protests and revolutions that took place in MENA in the late 2010s. Online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were used by activists and citizens to organize and communicate with each other and with the wider audiences around the world. Another example is the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, that has used social media to raise awareness about racial inequality and police brutality.

My experience living under the Islamic regime, and my observations of social media in diaspora, have played a significant role in shaping my understanding of the feminist movements in Iran since 2014. In my research, I compare the interaction of spectators with responsive and interactive artworks to that of viewers of social media posts. I explore how technology might enhance and amplify the significance of the spectator's physical presence in the art installation, just as the presence of social media viewers is crucial to the impact of the social media posts. By combining these elements, my installation explores how technology creates an interactive encounter that blurs the lines between physical and digital worlds. I am specifically interested in how my interactive installation might simulate the interaction between a viewer and a performer and shift the role of the viewer from spectator to digital participant.

My research explores two interrelated dimensions of technology: through a literature review, I examine the role of technology, specifically social media, in providing a platform for Iranian women to share stories and interact with others. The examined literature on the impact of technology on women has led me to the concept of cyberfeminism, first as defined in Donna Haraway's 1991 *A Cyborg Manifesto* followed by its application in Iran. Technology plays a crucial role for Iranian women to create possibilities for expressing new forms of agency and empowerment. Here, cyberfeminism is primarily concerned with achieving public visibility rather than gender equality (Batmanghelichi and Mouri 2017). Women in Iran are expected to be "invisible" in public spaces (the concept of private and public spaces in Iran is discussed in Chapter One). Technology is further explored through an interactive environment where the viewer of the art installation becomes an active participant and essential component of the work. To contextualize my research, I reference the power of art to evoke sensory experiences

(Nelson 2021) and the utilization of interactive installations (Rokeby 1995) as examined in works described in *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art* (Mondloch 2010).

In Chapter One, I provide a brief analysis of the cultural and social significance of private and public spaces in Iran, with a particular emphasis on the degree of freedom afforded to women in each of these spaces (Esfandiari 1997). The emergence and significance of public dance as an alternative form of resistance by women in Iran is also explored in this chapter (Zavarei 2022).

Chapter Two delves into the contrast between social freedom afforded to women in private versus public spaces in Iran and the shift from traditional private spaces to digital ones and how this transformation has given rise to cyberfeminism. Cyberfeminism in Iran centers around the use of technology as a means of increasing the visibility of women in public spaces. The role of social media as a new public space for women in Iran is examined through an analysis of how women in Iran use social media, along with its importance in providing a platform for engagement and interaction (Faris and Rahimi 2015). Importantly, in this chapter, social media is introduced as a modern digital “peep show”. This comparison highlights the intricate nature of social media as a public space mediator and examines a digital dynamic between performer and viewer.

Chapter Three explores the role of technology in engaging the viewer and creating a dialogue between the viewer, the screen, and artwork (Mondloch 2010). Responsive and interactive works by artists such as Hans Haacke and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer are examined, along with an exploration of the role of screens as reflective surfaces enabling the viewer to self-situate and reflect (Rokeby 1995). The chapter concludes by analyzing the role of

technology and interactive installations in transforming the role of spectator to that of participant and performer, alongside the design and creation of *Peepshow 2.0*.

Research Methodologies

The research creation framework used for my exploration is based on the modes proposed by Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk in their 2012 journal article *Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and Family Resemblances*, which combines the creation of artistic and creative works with academic research. Chapman and Sawchuk introduce research creation projects as projects that “typically integrate a creative process, experimental aesthetic component, or an artistic work as an integral part of the study” (5). My project was primarily driven by a creative process that involves critical analysis, reflection and art-based techniques. Chapman and Sawchuk argue that using arts-based techniques, such as dance or visual arts, can foster critical consciousness or increase self-awareness, which means developing a deeper understanding and awareness of social, cultural, and political issues. Through examining my own experiences and analyzing how social and cultural factors have influenced my identity formation, I have come to understand how art can be used as a form of resistance in various contexts, including in Iran. Through self-awareness and an iterative process, I was able to transform my artwork from its initial iteration in the shape of a box to a more organic form resembling that of the human body (*Figure 1*). This art-based research creation has also enabled me to express the viewpoint of a “marginalized” group (Chapman and Sawchuk 12). The viewpoint of a small group of women who are not a homogenous group, do not belong to a specific organization, and do not speak on behalf of any Iranian, except themselves. Yet, the

ability to showcase their art-based resistance has been instrumental in shaping my research and artistic practice.

Chapman and Sawchuk also elaborate on the idea of “family resemblances”, which refers to identifying characteristics that are similar in activities and can group them together, while also acknowledging their differences (Chapman & Sawchuk 14).¹⁰ In my research I explore the family resemblances of the technologies that I am using to create my artwork. For instance, while watching shows on the classic peep show machine and scrolling through social media reels on a mobile phone may appear like two vastly different activities at first glance, a closer examination of the dynamics and relationship between the performer and spectator, as well as the commodified relationship between each of these entities and their respective technology provider, reveals that these technologies share remarkable similarities.

The type of research creation used in my project is known as “Research for Creation.” (Chapman & Sawchuk 15) I collected social media reels, conducted literature reviews, and sought out artwork and social movements in Iran that predated the feminist revolution and experimented with various prototypes as a method to conduct the research.

The studio practice component of this thesis developed over the course of nine months, from June 2022 to March 2023.¹¹ I was four months into the research creation process when public uprising by women began in Iran. The key findings from my studio practice were centered around the design of the peep show structure, its placement within the installation

¹⁰ "Family resemblance" is a term used to describe how concepts can have overlapping, but not necessarily identical, characteristics. For example, many concepts, such as "game" or "language," are better understood as having a complex set of overlapping features that resemble one another in various ways, much like the members of a family share certain traits but may not all look or act alike.

¹¹ A comprehensive account of my iterative process is available in Appendix A.

space, and the creation of an interactive installation using visual, physical, and audio triggers, and cues to encourage interactivity.

Building on valuable insights from these iterations, the final artwork includes the sculpture of a young woman's body in full hijab, or chador.¹² This final iteration of a Peepshow sculpture is the centerpiece of the installation. It holds significance because it relates to the embodiment of the young women featured in the montaged videos gathered from social media, as well as the young women and schoolgirls in Iran who instigated and led the feminist revolution.



Figure 1. Peepshow structure iterated over the course of nine months, from box to body.

¹² A chador is an outer garment that is typically a large piece of cloth, often black, that covers the head and body and drapes down to the feet. The chador is usually held closed at the front with the hands or pinned at the top of the head and is worn in public spaces.

Chapter 1 – Traditional Public and Private Spaces

Private vs. Public Spaces

The 1979 revolution had a significant impact on the social freedom of women in Iran. Since then, the Islamic regime continues to police women's bodies and presence in both public and private spaces. In public, women are required to wear a hijab or chador, which includes a headscarf that covers their neck and head, in addition to long, loose-fitting, modest clothing that covers their arms, legs, and body. This mandatory law was introduced early in 1980 and continues to be a way to control and marginalize the role and movement of women in Iranian society. While women are legally allowed to work in government offices, exercise their right to vote, and hold positions in parliament, their public existence remains violently repressed, restrained, and controlled by the state.¹³

Private spaces, on the other hand, are traditionally safer for women as it relates to their physical presence, where they do not have to follow the strict hijab rules in their own home or in the home of a friend or family member. They can remove their hijab if in the presence of other women, or men who are directly related to them (father, brother, husband, children) (Esfandiari 4). Consideration should be given to the distinction between private and public spaces for Iranian women. In *Conquering Enclosed Public Spaces*, Amir-Ebrahimi, urban sociologist and human geographer, distinguishes between public and private spaces in Iran. The “distinction between the “interior” and the “exterior” is explained by some hierarchy of

¹³ Women can be arrested and punished (by way of being flogged, fined, or jailed) for improper dress code imposed and judged by men.

judgment of values, which allows in the exterior what has less value (symbolic and material) and maintains in the interior what is more valuable.” (455). This judgment of interior/exterior is based on religious and Islamic rules made by men who decide what is morally right or wrong values and standards for women to adhere to. Amir-Ebrahimi describes “Public or exterior places: *biruni*: streets, squares, the bazaar, are considered masculine spaces. While private spaces: *andaruni*: the interior of the home, the neighbourhood and other spaces that could be closed and controlled are considered to be [in]the feminine domain, the spaces where women should socially and physically stay to avoid the gaze of strangers” (455). This segregation has created an environment where women are always vigilant of their physical appearance and constantly under the surveillance of religious government agencies when in public, making their existence in public spaces at odds with their existence in private spheres. This lived disconnection between private and public creates dissonance, where women must hide or suppress themselves in accordance with state segregated designations and social situations.

In *Reconstructed Lives*, Haleh Esfandiari, an Iranian-American Public Policy Fellow, writes about the lives of over 30 professional and working women in Iran who she interviewed to better understand the social and private lives of women in Iran. She discusses how, following the 1979 revolution, the state began to dictate the types of occupations that women could hold, the subjects they were allowed to study, and how they were expected to behave and present themselves in public. The Islamic regime also dictated and continues to dictate how women interact with men in public. This was done by implementing gendered segregation in some public spaces, like separate entrances for men and women in buses, ski hills, universities, and government offices (48). According to these interviews, the changes were not well received

and difficult to accept by Iranian middle-class women. Esfandiari writes “Professional women of the pre-revolutionary period I interviewed displayed a high level of self-worth and ambitious professional goals” (77). They describe the Islamic revolution, as an “earthquake or hurricane which created devastation around them and wreaked havoc with their lives” (105).

Despite the introduction of the restrictive constraints, women refused to retreat from public spaces and give up the social rights they already had during the former regime.

Middleclass women were accustomed to working in government agencies, the education sector, and the legal system. Furthermore, after the Islamic revolution, many conservative mothers who were comfortable with the required hijab rules and observance of religious rituals for themselves even before the Islamic revolution, no longer wanted to see their daughters be denied opportunities for higher education or be excluded from certain employment or career paths. In one way, the Islamic regime’s agenda to oppress women brought Iranian women of all social classes closer together in fighting for their rights. For example, during the Iran-Iraq war of the 80s, when food distribution was rationed, families of all classes had to line up at the grocery and food markets to obtain necessities. Women often took on this responsibility, and this provided an opportunity for them to connect with each other at the neighbourhood level. As they waited in line and talked to each other, they formed bonds of support and solidarity and shared information about local and online forms of resistance against gender segregation (Esfandiari 157). When Esfandiari asked how the women understand “women’s resistance against the impositions of the state,” most women answered with one word: hijab. Iranian women took pride in their creative ways of resisting the Islamic dress code that became a principal battleground between the state and middle-class women and this battle took political

significance (133). While wearing the mandatory neck-to-ankle covered dress code in public, they also find subtle ways of circumventing it. Esfandiari explains, the robes are shorter and come in a variety of colors, or in wealthier neighbourhoods of Tehran, a raincoat or overcoat replaces the robe. Women wear loose, flowing, and vibrant scarves, revealing the tip of their ponytails or the fringe of hair beneath the scarf (133). My friends and I used similar techniques in Iran 38 years ago, and Figure 2, the most iconic picture of Mahsa Amini on social media also shows her wearing a hijab with her hair showing in defiance of the rules.



Figure 2. An undated picture of Mahsa Amini obtained from social media (photo credit: Reuters) ¹⁴

Resistance in Public Spaces

This level of resistance at the local level against the imposed restrictions by the regime has been ongoing since the 1979 revolution and there has been persistent activism towards greater social freedoms in public spaces. Iranian women and their male allies have pushed back

¹⁴ *Iran's Raisi Warns against "acts of Chaos" over Mahsa Amini's Death* | Reuters. [Hyperlink to Reuters Website about Iran's Raisi warns against 'acts of chaos' over Mahsa Amini's death](#). Accessed 5 Mar. 2023.

against the government restrictions by speaking out against the segregation of public spaces and calling for gender equality and freedom. Some of these efforts have been recognized internationally, even before the widespread use of social media.¹⁵

While human rights activists focus on making systematic change through long-term strategies and methods to address injustices in the system, other women find unique ways to express themselves and resist the state through public display and social media posts. Some women challenge the state by wearing their hijab in a defiant way, others engage in public dancing as a form of resistance, using their bodies and movement to assert their right to self-expression and autonomy. Iranian artist, researcher, and writer Saba Zavarei explores the intersection of gender and dance in public spaces in Iran and the way dance has become a form of protest and a means of expression for women to find their own place in public spaces, despite cultural and legal restriction of movement and behaviour in these spaces. Zavarei describes a woman's dance on the roof of a car in Iran:

“In a city under the constant pressure of economic crisis, widespread corruption, and heavy socio-political oppression, this woman's dancing body ruptures the darkness and radiates hope by embodying a different world and dancing another possibility. She occupies a fleeting moment of change, and cuts through the patriarchal norms of a geography that excludes her very body from being the “somatic norm”. Like an embodied collage, her performance creates a surreal contrapuntal juxtaposition between what has been lost, and what has not yet been realized. No one knows her name. No one knows what happens after those twenty odd seconds of video recorded on people's phones. All that is known is that this is Shahr-e Rey Square, South Tehran, April 2021.”

¹⁵ As an example, Shirin Ebadi, the first woman to become a presiding judge in Iran, was dismissed from her positions after the Islamic revolution and became a human rights activist, author, and outspoken critic of the Iranian government. She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003 for her efforts to promote democracy and human rights in Iran.

Zavarei explores the movies and reels of dancing bodies of four anonymous women in Iran found on the internet and focuses on how these dancing bodies create “resistance through evasive occupation of public spaces” and “reveal[s] cracks in the concrete of hegemonic order”. These everyday acts of resistance are of interest to me. Rather than waiting for Human Rights activists to change the oppressive regime, these women claim public spaces that are denied to them, one day and one move at a time, creating enough cracks in the system to eventually break it. The fact that these dances are captured and shared on social media is crucial in making their presence and narrative visible to a (digital) public, and as a result further challenges the dominant narratives of an oppressive regime. Technology can amplify and reveal these acts and potentially encourage others to do the same and create more cracks in the system.

Dance is an art form that requires both skill and artistic expression. The dancer, therefore, is an artist who creates a work of art through movement and performance. In Iran, where public art is censored or illegal, women dancing in the streets becomes not only a public art performance, but also an expression of resistance, a way for women who dance to take back ownership of their bodies in public spaces. The spectator who posts these dances on social media to a wider audience acknowledges the public performance and by sharing them amplifies their impact. These social media posts serve a dual purpose: they showcase the spectatorship of an art form while also highlighting women’s acts of resistance and their right to be seen in public spaces. These secret acts of resistance performed in hiding and published on SMS where anyone, including the authorities, could see them created a new space for women to explore.

Chapter 2 – From Private to Digital Spaces

Women in Iran use digital spaces to exchange ideas and engage in conversations about women's political and social freedom both within Iran and outside the country. Online platforms allow women to express themselves freely without the constraint of strict local laws. Women can explore these spaces from the privacy of their homes. Several women's rights-based platforms such as Bidarzani, Women's Watch, Feminism Every day, Zanan TV, and My Stealthy Freedom have emerged, and use social media to amplify women's voices and advocate for their rights (Batmanghelichi and Mouri 50).

Women of Iran used social media to create an online presence and participate in national and transnational conversations on political gender issues. They shared their views and perspectives on various "subjects such as sexuality, divorce, and hijab" (Sreberny 357). This online social activity is a political act of defiance against the strict rules that govern women's public life. As these digital conversations are accessible to anyone who can access the Internet, (including the morality police and government agencies that monitor the population's political and social life), thereby breaking down barriers between public and private space (Faris and Rahimi 126-129).

Exploration of Digital Space

The increased visibility of Iranian women in digital spaces has created greater awareness and sparked conversations about gender equality and social freedom for women on social media sites. One notable event was the launch of My Stealthy Freedom (MySF) social media

page in 2014. MySF was created by Masih Alinejad, an Iranian American journalist and activist for women’s rights in Iran. The page was initially launched on Facebook as a platform for Iranian women to share their experiences and struggles of the mandatory hijab laws. To kick off the page’s activities, Alinejad posted a photo of herself without her hijab alongside a caption in which she describes the joy of not wearing it (Figure 3). She encouraged other Iranian women to take off their hijab “stealthily” to avoid attracting the attention of the authorities, and to then post photos of themselves. The page quickly gained popularity and became a source of support and empowerment for women in Iran. After Alinejad’s first post on MySF, Iranian women began posting photos of themselves removing their hijab secretly in public, defying the rules imposed by the Islamic regime. MySF soon evolved into a platform for women to connect with each other, share their stories, and raise awareness about the lack of social freedom and gender inequality in the country. MySF became a powerful tool for women to assert their rights and advocate for change in the country.

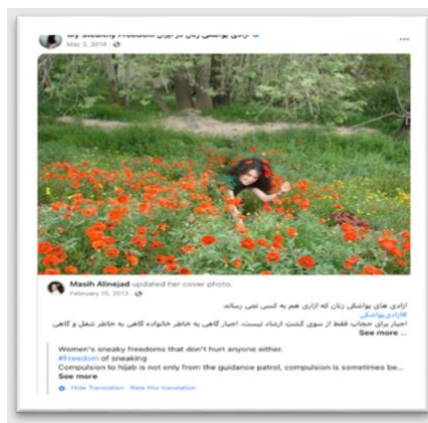


Figure 3. Screen Capture by Author: First post of the My Stealthy Freedom Facebook page. ¹⁶

¹⁶ Screen capture from [Hyperlink to Stealthy Freedom Facebook page](#).

In her first post on MySF, Alinejad writes the following message in Persian translated by Facebook translator:

Women's sneaky freedoms that don't hurt anyone either. [sic]

[#Freedom](#) of sneaking

Compulsion to hijab is not only from the guidance patrol, compulsion is sometimes because of family, sometimes because of job, and sometimes because of concern about judgement of others, I myself [sic] experienced all of these, but I bet majority of Iranian women who don't believe in compulsion, enjoy the sneakiness of freedom They have tasted the.

I bet a lot of women have pictures of these sneaky freedoms that don't hurt anyone.

Shall we publish photos of driving without a scarf, walking without a scarf, going to toilet, and going without a scarf, in the forest, on the beach, on top of trees and breathing in the plain?

This is a sneak photo of my freedom on the North Haraz Road:

Poppies on the side of the road sometimes.

They are more powerful than the patrol officers.

The crumpled robe and the scarf that has fallen on the floor is a witness.

...

From the collection of women's sneaky liberties

In a June 2016 post on the MySF page, Alinejad wrote:

“By sending their unveiled photos to the entire world, these Iranian women have been striving to change this oft-circulated misconception that the compulsory veil is part of Iranian culture. In fact, the compulsory veil has never been part of Iranian culture. This is merely a backward law imposed by the Islamic Republic, which has been trying to convince the entire world that the compulsory veil is part of Iranian culture. This distinction is very important.”¹⁷

It is important to acknowledge that some women choose to wear the hijab for religious or personal reasons and MySF does not undermine women's choice to wear the hijab.

However, mandatory dress codes that target women's appearance and movement, denies women's freedom to choose. Public presentation of self is a personal expression, not something to be regulated by the state. When I was in Iran and the mandatory hijab was

¹⁷ Masih Alinejad, “My Stealthy Freedom Facebook Page,” June 9, 2016, accessed February 13, 2023, [Hyperlink to Stealthy Freedom timeline on Facebook](#).

enforced, I observed the violent way women were treated in public spaces, by morality police and by random men acting on behalf of the state. They acted as if they had ownership of my body and behavior, which made me feel as if I was under constant threat of being punished for transgressing. While in Iran, I have personally experienced verbal and physical abuse from strangers and morality police who were legally supported in their sanctioned belief that they had the right to morally dictate how I should present myself in public. This mandatory wearing of the hijab is the foundation of other restrictions and bans, such as the ban of public art and dancing. The focus of MySF is to reject the compulsory imposition of a specific gender-based dress code, not to reject religion or anyone's choice to present themselves as they wish.

In her 2016 article *To be Myself and have My Stealthy Freedom*, Gi Yeon Koo, a cultural anthropologist, explores the development of social media and Iranian women's engagement with MySF in creating "new spaces for public discourse" (141). Koo conducted a qualitative analysis of the MySF Facebook page and interviewed Iranian women to explore how digital spaces provide a unique environment for resistance. Through this research, Koo found that these online platforms allowed local Iranian women to connect not only with other women in Iran, but also with international communities, to share their stories and voice their political concerns and perspectives. Digital spaces allowed women to challenge and dismantle gender binaries, enabling them to resist the limitations and restrictions imposed on them by the Islamic regime. Koo also brings attention to the fact that most women-related issues of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are discussed online not only in the native language of the women participating but also in English and French, indicating the importance of a Middle Eastern diaspora around the world (144). Social media and digital platforms are powerful tools

that have created online spaces for discourse, subverting traditional public spaces, and allowing women in Iran to challenge traditional norms and power dynamics.

The Intersection of Digital and Physical Spaces

As more and more women joined the MySF Facebook page by liking or following posts, they also shared their experiences and perspectives. This page became an important platform for fostering connections and discussing issues relating to daily lives of Iranian women and their social freedom.¹⁸ Vida Movahed was allegedly inspired by the MySF “White Wednesday” project wherein Alinejad asked women (and men) to wear something white on Wednesdays to protest the mandatory hijab (Hashemi 8). On Wednesday, December 27, 2017, Movahed stood on top of a utility box at the corner of a busy Engelab Street in Tehran waving her white hijab in one hand with her hair uncovered while people walked and drove by her (Figure 4). A few spectators recorded her silent protest and posted it on SMS. The video quickly went viral with the hashtags #GirlOfRevolutionStreet and #WhiteWednesday. This was one of the first instream published acts of defiance in public space. Movahed was arrested and sentenced to one year in prison for improper public appearance. Within the following month, over 30 other women followed Movahed’s act and were arrested for doing the same.¹⁹

¹⁸ Within a few days of the launch of MySF, the page received over 100,000 likes, and by the end of 2016, it reached over 968,000 likes (Tahmasebi-Birgani, Victoria. “*Social Media as a Site of Transformative Politics: Iranian Women’s Online Contestations*”, 2017).

¹⁹ Radio , C. B. C. “*Iranian Women Risk Arrest as They Remove Their Veils for #WhiteWednesdays | CBC Radio.*” CBC, 31 Jan. 2018, [Hyperlink to CBC radio The Current web page about Iranian women risk arrest as they remove their veils for white Wednesday.](#)



Figure 4. Vida Movahed at the corner of Engelab Street in Tehran. ²⁰

Arrests were usually carried out as part of a wider effort to enforce strict gender roles. These crackdowns on women’s online activity highlights the power of digital spaces and how they can be used to challenge and subvert traditional public spaces. Another example is the case of Maedeh Hojabri. In 2018, the Islamic regime arrested Hojabri, a 17-year-old girl, who had posted videos of herself dancing in her room on Instagram. ²¹ Her arrest created significant media coverage and sparked a movement where many Iranian women posted their own videos dancing using the hashtag #dancing_isnt_a_crime to show solidarity with Hojabri and oppose the regime’s oppressive actions.

In her paper *To be myself and have my Stealthy Freedom*, Koo cautioned readers not to overestimate the power of social media and its role in “liberating women from oppressive offline realities,” as Iranian women were still “tightly bound” to these realities at the time (146). Making a connection between offline events as a direct consequence of online activities is not a

²⁰ Screen Capture by Author, source: [Hyperlink to Radio Free Europe page on iconic Iranian anti hijab protestor jailed.](#)

²¹ Dehghan, Saeed Kamali, Iran correspondent. “Woman Arrested in Iran over Instagram Video of Her Dancing.” *The Guardian*, 9 July 2018. *The Guardian*, [Hyperlink to the Guardian website about Iranian woman arrested for Instagram video dancing.](#)

straightforward task, yet it is important to note that by 2022, the Iranian women who did not agree with the rules of the Islamic regime and had access to technology and social media sites, took concrete steps in line with their expressed and documented desires on SMS for social freedom and removal of the mandatory hijab. And today, six months after the onset of the feminist revolution, despite the mandatory hijab law still being in effect, many Iranian women across Iran walk in public without a hijab (and not stealthily either).²²

Feminism and Technology

The term Cyberfeminism emerged in the early 1990s to describe an international group of feminist thinkers, coders, and media artists who began connecting online.²³ Some early ideas in Cyberfeminist movements included the recognition of the Internet as a space that can be claimed and used by women to address gender inequalities by challenging patriarchal norms and asserting digital agency. Moreover, cyberfeminism encourages critical thinking about technology and its potential as a feminist and queer site of knowledge. In her ground-breaking essay, *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway explores how information technology has become a tool for domination and control of populations, especially women and marginalized communities. Haraway continues that in order to confront these power structures, feminists must actively use technology in ways that resist the dominant narrative that technology is the

²² Tanis, Fatma. *Women across Iran Are Refusing to Wear Headscarves, in Open Defiance of the Regime*. NPR, 13 Mar. 2023, [Hyperlink to NPR website about protests against the regime's politics](#).

²³ “The Australian-based media art collective known as VNS Matrix is credited as one of the first to use the term, around the same time as the British cultural theorist Sadie Plant was coining it in England in her writings on the feminizing influence of technology” (Batmanghelichi and Mouri 54).

domain of patriarchy (164). The case of Iranian women who used social media to reclaim their visibility in the digital sphere is an example of technology in our daily lives. It is this active use that subverts state power, even when technology is also controlled by the state to surveil the same population.

In the context of Iranian women, the term cyberfeminism takes on a particular meaning. Scholars in *Study of Modern Iran*, Soraya Batmanghelichi and Leila Mouri, explore Iranian women's presence in cyberspace in their 2017 essay, *Cyberfeminism, Iranian Style*, by examining five Iranian rights-based platforms including My Stealthy Freedom. According to the authors, "Cyberfeminist space is a space of not just diversification, but visibility" (53). This is an important observation particularly for Iranian women who have felt restricted in public spaces and have not presented themselves in ways that they have wanted. Batmanghelichi and Mouri argue that for Iranian women who do not find social freedom in physical public spheres, "the Internet is viewed as a gender-neutral space and platform upon which feminist messages can be broadcast with less government surveillance and interference than in "real" (not digital) spaces." (52). The term "less" in the context of government surveillance of women and their behaviour is worth noting, given strict rules and regulations with the presence of the morality police on the streets. For instance, in a street surveillance video available on social media, a man who seems to be a stranger and not an official morality police officer, physically attacks a woman walking on the street for what seems to be related to not wearing her hijab properly.²⁴ The existence of "less" surveillance in online spaces provides Iranian women with a unique

²⁴ Iskandarani, Aya. "Iranian Woman Beaten for Wearing Loose Hijab, Fights Back and Goes Viral." The National, 12 Mar. 2020, [Hyperlink to The National News website about Iranian woman beaten for wearing loose hijab](#) .

opportunity to explore their autonomy in a way that isn't possible in public spaces. As an example, Sarina Esmailzadeh, 16-year-old teenager in Iran, created a personal Vlog on YouTube to share her daily life on social media. Her videos showcased a range of activities, from cooking and going to the mall, to doing yoga and getting ready for a birthday party. However, in one post titled "*I always think, why did I have to be born in Iran?*" she shares her critical views on Iran's corrupt economy and culture, and the specific restrictions imposed on women, such as the mandatory hijab.²⁵ According to Amnesty International, Sarina was beaten to death with a baton by Iranian security forces during the early days of the ongoing feminist revolution.²⁶ It is worth noting that citizen and government surveillance still exists online, although it is comparatively less pervasive, providing women a platform to express themselves online, therefore, using the technology to their ends.

As of 2021, 78% of Iran's population used the Internet. It was ranked as the fourteenth highest country in the world in terms of mobile subscribers.²⁷ The widespread access to mobile technology played a strong role in the adoption of messaging apps and social media sites among the population. Despite the ongoing censorship, restrictions, and governing agencies, social media became an important part of Iranian women's daily life, and they continue to use the Internet not only for personal activities (surfing, chatting, and shopping) but also to communicate with others and partake in dissident politics (Faris and Rahimi 20). Mobile

²⁵ *I Always Think, Why Did I Have to Be Born in Iran?* Directed by Sarina Esmailzadeh, 2022. YouTube, [Hyperlink to YouTube video of Sarina Esmailzadeh](#).

²⁶ Kelly, Annie, and Deepa Parent. "Another Teenage Girl Dead at Hands of Iran's Security Forces, Reports Claim." *The Guardian*, 7 Oct. 2022. *The Guardian*, [Hyperlink to The Guardian website about another teenage girl dead at hands of Iran's security forces](#).

²⁷ "Iran Internet Users - Data, Chart." TheGlobalEconomy.Com, [Hyperlink to the Global Economy website about use of Internet in Iran](#). Accessed 13 Feb. 2023.

phones and social media therefore, have the ability to function both as a device for political resistance, as well as a source of entertainment, providing a constant stream of content.

Social Media as Contemporary Peep Show Machine

Since the 19th century, accounts of mobile storytelling and entertainment machines, known as peep show machines, are found in various regions worldwide, including Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. These boxes were used to display a range of content, from images of foreign cities to exotic spectacles. The peep show machines were a form of entertainment that involved viewing miniature scenes, painted or photographic images through a small aperture (Scheiwiller, 2013, 33). In Iran, the peep show machine was referred to as the “Shahr-e Farang” (Figure 5) which translates literally to “foreign city” or “Western city”. Images of Shahr-e Farang depict it as a structure with towers that resemble a traditional Persian building.²⁸ It has cylindrical openings where the viewer can place their eyes to observe the images displayed in the back of the structure. The vendor, who collects money to allow access to the images and stories, stands behind the box and spins narratives that accompany the images.

²⁸ “*Shar-e Farang*.” SiraraEpis, SiraraEpis, [Hyperlink to Tumblr website about antique peep show in Golestan](#). Accessed 12 Mar. 2023.



Figure 5. Shahr-e Farang: antique peep show in Golestan Palace, Iran.

In some images of Shahr-e Farang, a curtain was used to create a barrier between the non-paying and paying customers, providing a level of privacy for the patrons (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Antoin Sevruguin's Historical photograph of Shahr-e Farang in Iran. ²⁹

When designing the Peepshow sculpture for *Peepshow 2.0*, I analyzed the shape of traditional Shahr-e Farang and noticed that it was typically designed to resemble a conventional Persian structure, despite its name (which translates to “foreign city”). This observation of the

²⁹ Antoin Sevruguin. *Antoin Sevruguin's Historical Photographs*. <http://www.geocities.com/sevruguin/index.html>, *Wikimedia Commons*, [Hyperlink to Wikimedia website of Antoin Sevruguin Shahrefarang](#).

disjuncture between the form and content led me to question whether the design of Shahr-e Farang was a deliberate attempt to blend it in with its surroundings and convey conformity to social norms, while simultaneously providing a means for the paying viewers to escape to a distant and exotic place through the experience.

Peep show machines are a key element of the origin story of motion picture cinema. In the 19th century, peep shows were boxes that displayed static images of distant and exotic cultures, “mysterious apertures into which the spectator peered, to be rewarded with curious pictures” (Robinson 19). The Kinetoscope machine was created by Thomas Edison, combining moving images with the peep show viewing format. The movies and films shown at first were educational and informational – the first movie is known to be of that of a sneeze (Robinson 42). Whether the audience became increasingly male-dominated, or this was anticipated by those promoting Kinetoscopes, the shows began to revolve around the activities that catered to male interests, such as dancing girls, cockfights, and boxing matches, changing the significance of peep show to a male-centric entertainment machine.

Media historian Amy Herzog describes the peep show as a unique motion-picture viewing experience. “In the peep loops, the filmed body is highly aware that it is being watched. The body of the viewer, too, is explicitly acknowledged by the apparatus of the booth, machines in public foyers that seduce passersby with the promise of the curious and the new.” (Herzog 34). The relationship between the “filmed body” representing the performer, and the body of the viewer, the spectator, is of importance. In a traditional peep show arcade, the performer is aware of being filmed but is sheltered from direct interaction with the spectator. The spectator only views the representation of the performer because the performance is pre-recorded and

must position one eye on the peep hole and only gets a limited view of the performance.

Herzog writes, “The act of peeping necessitates a degree of visual disengagement with one’s immediate surroundings, assuming a pose that allows for an ocular encounter with a space (either real or representational) accessible through some threshold” (34). This design creates a unique experience for the spectator as they need to be fully engaged with the viewing experience while also recognizing the separation between their body and the screen playing the performance.

Herzog concludes that the peep show machine brings to the forefront the inherent contradictions between various aspects of perception such as here and there, then and now, seeing and knowing, perceiving and acting, as well as exposing. She continues with:

“The impact of the peep machine is often one of disruption and failure, yet that failure is actively registered within the body of the viewer. Moreover, the viewer’s body, in return, engages a multisensorial, multi-spatial cohabitation that extends beyond an involuntary response and that is irreducible to a mere voyeuristic fascination within the image. The peep show’s illusion may be hollow, yet its experience is deeply embodied, with far-reaching social and political implication” (42).

Engaging the viewer’s body in multisensorial and multi-spatial experience suggests that the viewer’s engagement with the peep machine is not limited to passive observation but an active and immersive participation through their body by first disengaging from one’s immediate surrounding: the “here and now” and being immersed in the visual story that is unfolding through the peep hole, embodying the “there and then”. The notion of engaging the body in the act of peep show viewing resonates with the concepts discussed in the 2013 paper by art historian Staci Gem Sheiwiller. In *Cartographic Desires: Some Reflections on the Shahr-e Farang (Peepshow) and Modern Iran*, Sheiwiller explores the role and significance of the gaze in

peep show machines in Iran during the 19th century. Sheiwiller notes that the act of gazing can transform the viewer from one physical location to another, “connecting the two separate geographical entities into one through the body of the viewer” (38).³⁰

In contemporary society, a great proportion of the population’s main source of news and entertainment is through personal digital devices, such as mobile phones or tablets which connect to the internet and social media. Our interaction with social media resembles the experience Herzog and Sheiwiller describe in engaging with a peep show machine, featuring a visual immersion with the screen and a disconnection from one’s physical surroundings, being transported from the here and now to the visual representations of there and then. Our mobile phones offer entertainment in exchange for attention and participation which creates a commodified relationship between us, the spectators, and the providers of social media platforms, effectively making social media our digital and personal peep show machine, providing an instant source of curious and exotic entertainment. The commodification of our attention and participation has significant implications on our engagement with social media and raises questions about the nature of our participation. On the one hand the platforms are often offered for free to use and provide access to a wide range of people and content. However, the ultimate purpose of these platforms is to generate profits for the companies that run them. They achieve this by using algorithms that optimize the content that would grab the most attention from users. Our relationship with social media extends beyond mere entertainment though, and we interact and engage with the content in a way that creates

³⁰ Sheiwiller paper is captivating read, as it examines the historical fascination of Iranians with observing Europe. Sheiwiller delves into the writing of some Iranian scholars and politicians, who consider Iran to be part of the Aryan race and have mapped parts of Europe as part of Iran based on the pre-Islamic Persian Empire literature.

tangible changes in our immediate environment as well as those viewing our actions. As an example of the role of social media in creating tangible changes, and relating to the feminist revolution in Iran, Sherwin Hajiport, an Iranian singer songwriter posted a song titled *Baraye* on his Instagram account shortly after Mahsa Amini's death.³¹ The song drew from tweets made by Iranians who explained their reasons for joining the street protests in Iran after Mahsa's death. The song lyrics start with:

For dancing in the street alleys
For the fear when kissing
For my sister, your sister, our sisters...³²

The song quickly gained traction and went viral, receiving more than 40 million views within two days.³³ Within a few days of its release, Hajipour was arrested and jailed for several days by Iran's regime and the song was removed from Hajipour's Instagram account.³⁴ However, others who had access to the song before it was removed from Hajipour's Instagram account were able to continue circulating it on the Internet by posting it on SMS. The song has since become the anthem of the feminist revolution in Iran.

However, it is important to note that our interaction with social media differs from that with a traditional peep show. The feedback loop of interaction that exists between physical actions and virtual engagement of the viewer as a result of social media posts is not present in

³¹ *Baraye* in Persian translates to English as "for the sake of" or "because of".

³² *Baraye* - Shervin Hajipour - Official Music + Video | شروین حاجی‌پور - برای. Directed by Sadra, 2022. YouTube, [Hyperlink to YouTube video of Shervin Hajipour official music video.](#)

(With subtitles: YouTube, [Hyperlink to YouTube video of Shervin Hajipour's video with subtitles.](#))

³³ "Why Iran's Unofficial Protest Anthem 'Baraye' Won a Grammy." Time, 6 Feb. 2023, [Hyperlink to Time website about Shervin Hajipour winning the Grammy's.](#)

³⁴ "Iranian Singer Shervin Hajipour Arrested during Amini Protests Released." Kuwait Times, 4 Oct. 2022, [Hyperlink to Kuwait Times about Hajipour arrested during Amini protests.](#)

traditional peep shows. In a peep show machine, the stories, and the order in which they are shown to all viewers, remain static and the interaction between the viewer and the performance is limited to the physical space of the peep show machine. There is no engagement or feedback loop beyond the immediate interaction. Social media posts are different as their algorithms are designed to be responsive to the user's actions meaning that the content that appears on one user's feed is influenced by the user's previous engagement with similar content. Social media users with the same interest, might see the same posts but not necessarily in the same order.

Chapter 3 – Peepshow 2.0: An Experiment in Creating

Interactive Art

Engaging the Viewer

I use the term responsive art as art that adapts and transforms its form based on the changes in its environment, from its audience interaction to weather changes and other external factors. In his sculpture *Condensation Cube*, (1963 – 1968) artist Hans Haacke uses clear acrylic plastic to build a rectangular container which is then filled with distilled water. The temperature of the distilled water inside the cube fluctuates based on the room temperature and air flow which changes depending on the number of visitors in the room as well as the gallery lighting conditions surrounding the sculpture. These environmental fluctuations create condensation on the surface of the cube and produce a dynamic and evolving formation that is dependent on the physical characteristics of the surrounding environment. In his 1971 statement titled *Provisional Remarks* Haacke wrote: “This was an open system, a system responsive to changes in its environment. Ambient climatic changes were answered by a transfer of energy and material inside the boxes in a self-regulatory way, with the goal of maintaining equilibrium” (48).

The responsiveness of Haacke’s artwork to its immediate physical conditions and environment is relevant to my research because the sculpture’s condensation appearance and formation, despite being ephemeral, is the result of the immediate presence, movement, and interaction of the gallery goer. The status of the art object is a direct result of the accumulation

of past and present conditions. This creates a dynamic interplay between the artwork, the viewer, and its environment.

I would argue that the responsive behaviour of social media plays an equally important role for its users. What the viewer sees on SMS and how a post is interpreted, is not just the content shared by way of images, reels, or stories, but also the subsequent likes and comments from previous viewers. A coalescence of thoughts and emotions that are laid on top of the original posts, creating a medium where users are exposed to many and potentially conflicting ideas and can learn from the experiences of others. The viewer can potentially use the SMS platforms and the posts as a means to express themselves or find allies. The emotional response of viewers to online content is often influenced by whether they agree or disagree with the message conveyed in the post. Viewers may feel a sense of connection with those who created the post or engaged with it, leading to emotions such as joy, excitement, or empathy. On the other hand, viewers may feel irritated or disconnected with those they do not identify with, leading to emotions such as anger, frustration, or sadness. In this case, a viewer's fluctuating emotional energy can be likened to the *Condensation Cube*. This emotional fluctuation is then transferred back to social media by way of comments, likes and shares. The SMS algorithms use this response to display similar posts for the viewer to engage with, reflecting back the same emotions that were put into the system. This emotional energy is also transferred to the physical world around the viewer if the viewer talks about the post and their own reactions with others or uses this information to make social or political decisions. A dialogue is created between the viewer and their immediate and virtual environment creating a "feedback loop between our emotional and somatic state and social media." (Nelson 14)

Contextualizing the Viewer

Contextualizing the viewer within a responsive artwork can take shape when the viewer engages with the art and sees themselves within the artwork. In his 2006 interactive piece, *Close-up*, media artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, investigates the concept of surveillance, identity and the relationship between the body and technology in a large-scale interactive installation by using silhouettes of the participants to reveal the video recording of hundreds of other people who have previously stood in the same place and looked at the work. Participants stand in front of the wall while their face is captured by cameras and then projected in real-time onto the wall as a high-resolution close-up. The participants interact with their own silhouette while watching the videos of others who have stood in front of the same wall, creating a collective, interactive, and immersive experience that places the current viewer in the artwork as well as the recent history of the work. The viewer recognizes that by viewing the installation, they become part of it and their presence is creating the art along with the artist and all previous viewers.

Peepshow 2.0 aims to contextualize the viewer and encourage self-awareness by using projection mapping technology to reflect the viewer's silhouette onto the walls surrounding the Peepshow sculpture. With this technique, the viewer is invited to interact with the artwork and become conscious of how their movements and actions affect it. The walls become the screen where the viewer's reflection is projected, blurring the boundaries between the spectator and the performers in the projected reels (Mondloch 75).

Beyond the Screen

In his 1995 essay *Transforming Mirrors: Subjectivity and Control in Interactive Media*, Canadian installation artist David Rokeby writes, “technology is interactive to the degree that it reflects the consequences of our actions or decisions back to us. It follows that an interactive technology is a medium through which we communicate with ourselves - a mirror” (133). Rokeby argues that interactive technology functions as a mirror and a medium through which we communicate with ourselves and introspect. This act of reflection can have a transformative effect and provides a sense of the relation between us and the world around us. Later in the section on mirrors, Rokeby notes that in certain interactive installations the spectator sees a representation of themselves on a video projection screen, which follows their movements like a mirror-image or shadow that is transformed by the possibilities that the artist has placed within the space (145). The idea of interactive technology functioning as a mirror is an interesting concept to explore in social media. Social media allows us to present a particular version of ourselves to others, and when we view our own posts or profiles, we can see how we appear in the online world, much like looking into a (digital) mirror. Furthermore, social media algorithms are specifically designed to capture and maintain our attention by showing us content that is most likely to keep us engaged, typically by displaying information that we say is relevant to us by engaging with the posts that interest us. This can have the consequence of creating a feedback loop where we primarily interact with people and content that reinforces our existing values and beliefs, leading to an “echo chamber” effect, where our own values are reflected back to us like a mirror.

When creating the interactive artwork, I incorporated reflective surfaces, mirrors, webcams, and other methods of reflecting the presence of the spectator in my installation. This encourages the viewer to stay present with the “here and now” while connecting with the projected images of “there and then”. When the viewer recognizes their movement shapes and changes the projected images, their active participation becomes an integral part of the art. The silhouette of the viewer becomes visible on the screen and the space between the viewer and the screen, as well as the size and shape of the projection becomes an essential component of the installation.

In her 2010 book *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, Kate Mondloch, compares the role of screen-reliant art installations to that of mainstream narrative cinema, where the viewer’s experience and interaction with the screen is not only focused on the space between the viewer and the screen but also the space the screen itself takes. The screen becomes a “conceptual and literal point of emphasis that the viewer moves around,” making the screen a sculptural part of the artwork and not just a surface for projecting the art (64).

Mondloch examines Peter Campus’ 1972 interactive installation *Interface* and describes how once the viewer steps in front of the sheet of glass (the screen), they can see two simultaneous, full-length images of themselves appear on it, a reflected mirror image beside their live video image (captured by a camera from behind the glass). Campus uses the screen as an interface to create awareness in “conceptually and physically mediating (manipulating) relations between itself, the projection, and the viewer” (70). Mondloch compares the traditional use of screens and how they could play the role of a window or a barrier creating a boundary line between “the ‘here’ (embodied subjects in the material exhibition space) and

'there' (observers looking onto screen spaces)" (62). Creating a double spatial dynamic that involves physical interaction in real-time, reimagining the ways in which individuals engage with technological screen interfaces. This window or glass as an interface between the real and the virtual operates as a literal and conceptual barrier for the viewer, giving them "a façade of autonomous disengagement from the "other side" (72). Artists such as Campus use the screen to remain fully present in both "temporal and spatial realms" by creating a dual spectatorship framework where the viewer can shift between self-awareness (here) and the illusion (there). These two types of spectatorships are not mutually exclusive. By using video feedback, the viewer's perception is challenged, and the viewer is invited to slowly transform their perception of "temporal and spatial realms" to a new reality of being present with both realms, blurring the lines between the real and the virtual. Mondloch writes, "interface generates an embodied spectatorship by asking the spectators to engage with virtual screen space" while being aware and present of the physical space they reside in (75).

In *Peepshow 2.0*, the Peepshow sculpture is placed as the centerpiece in the exhibition space. This physical manifestation or embodiment beckons the viewer to engage with its presence, creating a moment of encounter between the spectator and the sculpture. To create the screen to project on, I place a light source behind the Peepshow sculpture to cast a shadow on the wall facing it, making the screen an extension of the Peepshow sculpture. This initiates a relationship between the sculpture's body, the screen, and the body of the viewer once they enter the space. The shadow is deliberately set to be larger than the average height of a person with the intention to create an exaggerated spatial experience, thus symbolizing the far-reaching impact of digital life, highlighting how our digital social interactions can have

significant and transformative consequences on people across the globe. Images and reels of Iranian women dancing were selected from social media posts and projected on this shadow (the screen). The physical and present realm is felt by the viewer as they move around the installation space and approach the sculpture, becoming aware that their movement gives them a different vantage point of the installation. The viewer's movement around the Peepshow sculpture changes the images on the virtual realm's display screen. When the viewer activates the sensors around the sculpture, the projected artwork becomes dynamic and changes in response to the movement of the viewer. This is when the lines between physical and virtual presence become blurry. The viewer is aware of being physically separate from the virtual world while recognizing that their movements in the physical space has impact on what is displayed in the virtual space.

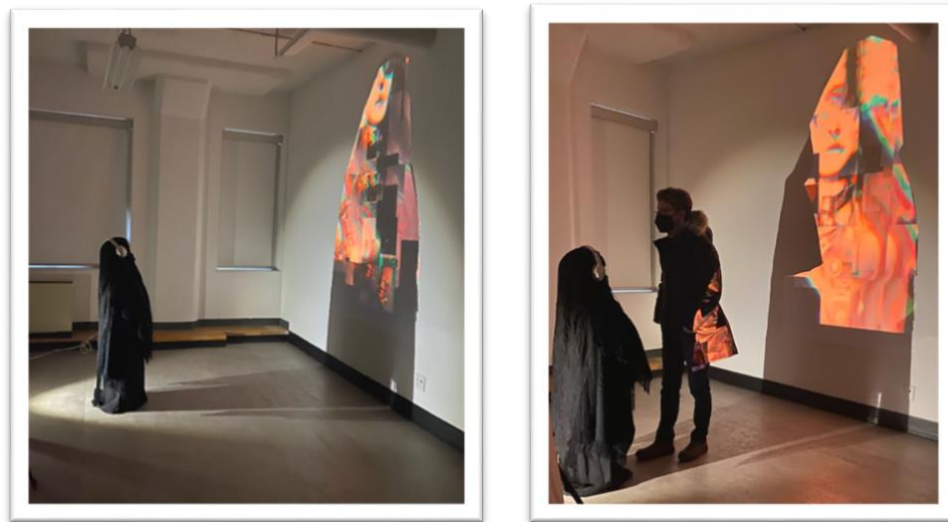


Figure 7. Studio Visit January 2023.

Conclusion

The strict social control in Iran, including media control, has made the Internet and social media powerful tools for accessing information, communication between citizens, and documenting events. Ordinary citizens who capture local events, such as dance performances, or public protests, share them on the Internet and social media becoming participants in these performances. Using technology to share observations on social media makes them an integral part of the performance, and not just passive viewers. Similarly, in contemporary art installations, technology can add a new level of engagement between the spectator and the artwork. Sensors and cameras can be used to capture the presence and actions of the spectators, incorporating them into the artwork.

Peepshow 2.0 uses projection technology and reflective surfaces to create an immersive experience for the spectator. By projecting the spectator's silhouette onto the surrounding walls of the Peepshow sculpture and combining it with pre-recorded and montaged performances, the artwork invites the spectator to interact and become conscious of their presence within the installation. This interaction transforms the spectator from a passive observer to an active participant in the creation of the work. Through the spectator's performance, the lines between the spectator and performer become blurred. The reflective nature of the installation can challenge the spectator's perception to sense dual spectatorship and shift between "here and now" to "there and then", blurring the lines between physical and virtual realms. This blurry space between here and there is where I feel I have been living since the beginning of this feminist revolution. While I enjoy personal freedom in my present

surroundings, I am also experiencing the struggles of Iranian women vicariously through the virtual world of social media.

As I write this, the feminist revolution in Iran has surpassed 180 days. While the outcome of this movement remains uncertain, undertaking this research has been an engaging and enlightening experience, providing an opportunity to reflect on my life and my art practice. Through my research I have come across many reels and videos of ordinary women in Iran resisting the country's oppressive regime by reclaiming agency and using it as an instrument to create art by dancing in public. Although each of these women perform individually, the use of technology to share their dance with a wider audience creates a significant impact that extends beyond a single performance. While the physical repercussions of their performance exist in the physical world, these acts of resistance continue to live in the virtual world. The incorporation of technology in this loop of resistance brings to mind the classic philosophical question of whether a tree falling in the forest makes a sound in the absence of any listeners. This speaks to the importance of acknowledging and giving voice to experiences that may otherwise go unnoticed or unacknowledged and this is where social media and technology can play a significant role. In my installation, the narrative is contingent on the viewer's physical position and movement. If the viewer does not move to a certain location, the installation's story will remain hidden to the viewer and they only get a partial view of the artwork. However, as technology has it, the images in my installation continue to live and will be ready to be uncovered by another spectator. In the "sound of the tree" conundrum, this can be rephrased as because of technology the sound of the falling tree awaits in the digital world until there is a listener who is ready to hear it.

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Appendix A – Studio Practice

Understanding Through Iteration

In the early stages of my research, I planned to use the traditional form of the peep show machine shaped as a box and I experimented with various shapes and evaluated their effectiveness through studio visits with my peers and academic advisors. The process involved iterative experimentation to determine the optimal size and fit of the box within the framework of the interactive installation. The aim was to use the peep show box as a tool to achieve two objectives. First, I intended to use the peep show box as a tool to facilitate two distinct experiences for the viewer: a private, introspective engagement that would take place when viewing the videos within the peep show box, and a public, immersive experience that would involve projected images on the screens and walls surrounding the peep show box. By combining these two elements, I hoped to create an exhibition that would encourage viewers to actively participate and engage with the installation.

Second, I aimed to create a narrative that would draw the spectator's attention and encourage them to explore the installation further. By approaching the box, moving around the space, and eventually noticing how their movement and presence changed the installation, the spectator would recognize that they are an integral part of the experience. This engagement would further be enhanced by the use of projected images and other visual elements that would create an immersive, multi-sensory experience. My goal was to create an installation

that would not only convey a message, but also invite viewers to actively participate in the storytelling process.

The criteria used to evaluate the different shapes and configurations of the peep machine was twofold. First, its purpose and operability by the spectator: would the spectator instinctively understand the purpose and function of the peep machine and be able to interact with it without instructions? The box's design was analyzed on whether it was compelling and intriguing enough for the viewer to approach and explore it. Once the viewer approached the box, visual cues such as labels and lighting were put in place and evaluated to help the viewer operate and interact with the box. The box's design and function were also evaluated on whether it was easy to use and manipulate or were the instructions to operate it were unclear or complex.

Second, its relevance to the interactive and overall installation: that the existence of the peepshow box was perceived as integral to the overall interactive installation, and whether it effectively directed the audience's attention to the need for active engagement. The box's placement within the installation was analyzed to make sure it would fit thematically, aesthetically, and functionally to make sure it contributes to the overall narrative and concept of the installation and is not an extraneous element. Different approaches were evaluated to make sure the peep machine directed the viewer's attention towards the need for active engagement.

Prototypes and challenges: I started with the idea of modernizing the classic design of a coin-operated peep show box, incorporating updated stories and videos that aligned with the

overall theme of the installation, centering around women’s freedom in Iran. However, this approach raised questions about the purpose of utilizing a peep machine within the context of the installation. The closed box format felt disconnected from the installation, and it was a challenge to integrate the peep show concept within the context of freedom for women in Iran. Once I abandoned the idea of using the shape of a cube or box as the peep show device, the primary challenge shifted to ensuring the new design was relevant and aligned with the overarching theme of the installation. Different ideas for the shape of the peep show were considered and examined, including the idea of creating a tiny room within the installation’s area where viewers could peek through holes to watch the show played inside of the small space. A prototype was created for this idea, but it still felt disconnected and out of place within the installation.

First Prototype June 2022



Figure 8. First prototype of peep show box, June 2022.

The first prototype for the coin-operated peep machine was inspired by the classic setup of such a device, usually found in the erotic and intimate peep show arcades. I used a microcontroller (Raspberry Pi) and connected it to a small LCD monitor mounted in the back of

the box. A Python script running on the microcontroller monitoring two input pins was activated once a coin was inserted into the coin acceptor, causing the script to initiate the playback of the pre-edited montages that I created and uploaded on the microcontroller. This design offered a simple yet functional solution for a coin-operated peep show box, using a low-cost and readily accessible computing platform in the Raspberry Pi and a flexible, easily modifiable scripting language in Python. Several issues emerged when evaluating the design that required careful consideration and attention. One of the many challenges was the size of the housing, which proved to be too large for the size of the screen. This presented difficulties for viewers who found it challenging to clearly see the videos displayed on the screen way too far from the viewing holes. Another significant challenge was the use of two peep holes, that were not consistently aligned with every viewer's eye, leading to difficulties in achieving optimal viewing conditions with both eyes.

After experimenting with the initial prototype, a smaller and more compact box was constructed. This second prototype (Figure 9) maintained the same technical capabilities as the first one (coin-operated, Raspberry Pi based microcomputer attached to a small screen at the back of the box) with a smaller form factor with a door viewer as the mechanism to watch the movies through a single peep hole. This created a slightly enhanced interaction, and the functionality was not compromised. The use of a door viewer improved the aesthetic of the installation, but it presented a challenge for some viewers to see the videos clearly. This unclear viewing experience made it difficult for viewers to make a connection between the video and the projection surrounding it, which lessened the overall impact of the installation.

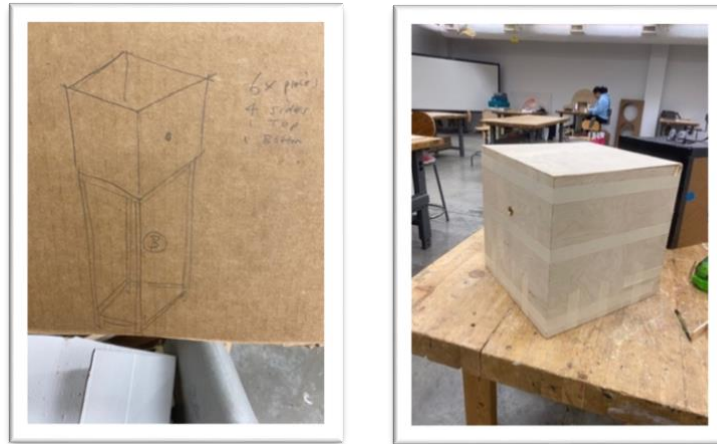


Figure 9. Second Prototype of Peep show box, November 2022.

Studio visit 1: Interactive Installation



Figure 10. Studio Visit October 2022.

At the time of this first studio visit (October 2022), my interest was focused on the topic of women’s bodies used for paid and unpaid work. During the first studio visit, the peep machine was placed in the middle of the studio, a video montage of a woman dancing with feathers played inside the peep machine to set the tone and story of the installation. When the viewer placed a coin in the peep machine it triggers the start of a one-minute video with subtitles to set the context of the video in the installation. The video was edited from a dance by Sally Rand, the American burlesque dancer famous for her ostrich feather fan dance. The same video of Sally Rand was projected on the walls of the studio surrounding the peep

machine, with a slightly different subtitle. A pair of large feather fans similar to the ones Sally Rand placed on a table in the studio close to the projected screen. When the spectator is close to the table to pick up the feather fans, the sensors connected to the projection mapping software trigger and activate the music and change the color and hues of the projected movie on the wall (adding rays of red and green following the feathers). Due to the location of the viewer and the lighting placed behind the viewer, the viewer's shadow was added to the projected movie. The goal of the installation was to create an environment that would be inviting for the viewer to dance with the feather fans along with the performer. However, this did not happen.

Discoveries and Reflections:

The projected body of the dancer on the wall was disorienting to some of the viewers and made it harder to participate in the artwork. It felt like they were asked to watch a movie rather than interact with it. Once I explicitly invited the viewers to take the feather fans, they then engaged with the installation and when they saw their shadow cast on the walls with the feather fans, their engagement became livelier and more active. Questions around removing the body of the dancer from the projection and only including the shadow of the spectator and placement of the feather fans in a location that invites the viewers to pick them up and interact and participate with the installation were raised. Most importantly, the viewers indicated that the peep machine felt separate from the installation and its role within the installation was not clear.

Iterating on the context and interactivity

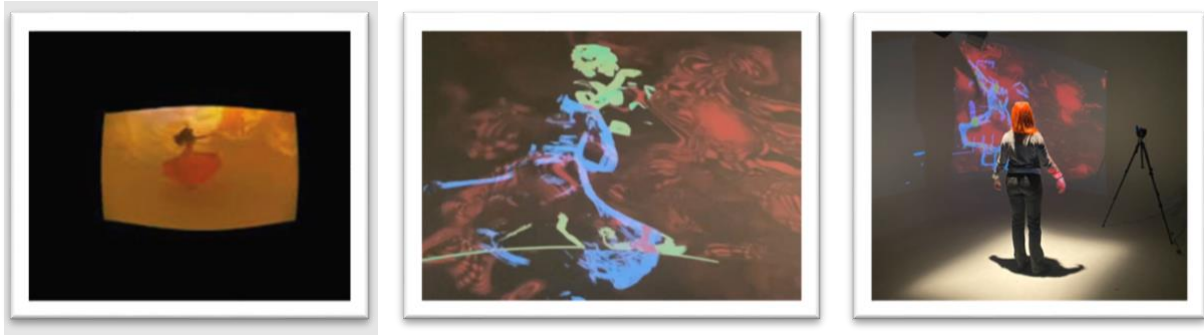


Figure 11. Studio Visit November 2022.

By the second studio visit (November 11, 2022), the installation focused on Iranian women's dance as a form of resistance. The peep show video montage showcased a professional Sufi dancer dancing to enchanting and rhythmic music. Halfway through the video, the video of the Sufi dancer morphed into another video that I collected from social media of a young woman in a street in Iran dancing in the same Sufi way (whirling) close to a fire where hundreds of people gathered around her. She is whirling while holding her hijab in one hand and after a few spins, she throws off her hijab in the fire and the crowd cheers. Another girl walks to the fire and throws her hijab in the fire. Then another. This powerful display of liberation and self-expression of the first girl who is whirling like a Sufi dancer inspired me to use the two forms together. The juxtaposition of these two forms of dance, traditional Sufi dance which is often used for introspection and contemplation, and contemporary street-level dance, which is used as a form of public display of resistance, inspired me to highlight dance as a tool for both individual and collective resistance against social constraints. The projection on the walls surrounding the peep machine were a colourful and abstract version of the Sufi

dancer, adding a dynamic dimension to the installation. As spectators of the installation moved to certain areas of the studio, sensors captured their presence and triggered music, with the projection of the spectator's silhouette alongside the abstract shape of the Sufi dancer. The spectator's silhouette would move in response to the spectator's own movements, creating an interplay between the spectator's and the dancer (the performer). This version of the installation increased viewer engagement and interaction and allowed for a fusion of traditional and contemporary dance and movement forms. However, while some viewers still questioned the purpose of the peep machine within the installation, a few even overlooked its presence within the work and were only engaged with the interactive part of the installation.³⁵

Third Prototype - The making of the Peepshow sculpture.



Figure 12. The making of the Peep Body Sculpture.

³⁵ A short video of the studio visit documentation of November 2022 is available on this site: <https://youtu.be/Rz8D9chQ0rE>

In this prototype, the Peepshow sculpture is placed as the centerpiece in the exhibition space. To create the screen to project on, I place a light source behind the Peepshow sculpture to cast a shadow on the wall facing it, making the screen an extension of the Peepshow sculpture. This initiates a relationship between the sculpture's body, the screen, and the body of the viewer once they enter the space. The shadow is deliberately set to be larger than the average height of a person with the intention to create an exaggerated spatial experience, thus symbolizing the far-reaching impact of digital life. The viewer's movement around the Peepshow sculpture changes the images on the virtual realm's display screen.

When designing the Peepshow sculpture for *Peepshow 2.0*, I analyzed the shape of traditional Shahr-e Farang and noticed that it was typically designed to resemble a conventional Persian structure while providing images and experiences of foreign lands. This observation of the disjuncture between the form and content led me to question whether the design of Shahr-e Farang was a deliberate attempt to blend it in with its surroundings and convey conformity to social norms, while simultaneously providing a means for the paying viewers to escape to a distant and exotic place through the experience.

The centerpiece of Peepshow 2.0 being in the shape of the body of a young woman fully covered with hijab does not conform with what viewers of an art exhibit expect when they enter an art studio in Toronto, and I noticed during critiques that the Peepshow sculpture evoked emotional reaction for the viewers who entered the space. This could be because the sight reminded them of the ongoing and conflicting events in Iran involving young women and schoolgirls covered in the news, or because they were confronted with an unusual life-like

sculpture that they did not know how to interact with. In either case, the encounter left the viewers with an uncanny first impression.

Afterward

The exhibition spanned over three days, and it was a captivating experience for me to observe how spectators interacted and engaged with the art piece. I was fascinated by the varying levels of engagement and how some individuals seemed deeply immersed while others simply observed from a distance. As I documented their presence within the installation, I found myself becoming a spectator of the viewers' engagement with the artwork, as if they were the centerpiece performers of the installation.

The Peepshow Sculpture

The Peepshow sculpture, positioned in the middle of the exhibition room, served as a thought-provoking centerpiece, and set the tone for the entire installation (Figure 13). The sculpture's deliberate design choices, such as the use of a young schoolgirl's body shape and full hijab, was intended to highlight the presence of Iranian schoolgirls and more broadly, the dress restrictions imposed on women in Iran. The inclusion of headphones on the sculpture created the impression of detachment and disengagement from the surrounding environment, highlighting the societal pressures that often lead women to suppress their true selves. The presence of a sculpture of a young girl wearing a hijab created a tension for many of the visitors to the exhibition because the encounter with the sculpture was jarring and unexpected. Upon entering the space viewers could only view the sculpture from behind and the figure was dressed entirely in black denying the viewer any immediate identification. Recent events of schoolgirl demonstrations in Iran are commonplace images on the news and in social media, so

the presence of the figure had an immediate relevance for viewers when they entered the exhibition space. The position of the sculpture facing and “gazing” at the wall where cyborg-type images were projected created a possible sense of speculation whether the sculpture was itself a cyborg looking at its own shadow. This might have been the reason for viewers' initial surprise and provoked conversation on sensitive issues such as Islamophobia, religion, and personal freedom.



Figure 13 The Peepshow sculpture in the exhibition room.

Spectator Interaction

I observed that viewers made what looked like a conscious decision about how they would interact with the space and the sculpture. Some spectators stood behind the sculpture and watched from a distance. After a few minutes, they would leave, sometimes offering comments on the power of the piece. Others stood beside the sculpture and watched the images on the screen without moving. In contrast to this, some viewers moved within the space and explored by walking slowly and carefully around the sculpture. I overheard several comments from viewers suggesting that their first impressions were “unsettling”, and that seeing the sculpture gave them “goosebumps”, and that “[the sculpture] sets a solemn tone”. These observations confirmed for me the varied and powerful impacts that the sculpture could have on individuals and how their engagement with it, shaped their experience.

As the viewers approached the Peepshow sculpture, they often noticed the phone screen inside its head, and some let out a sigh of relief. It appears that these sighs were like signs of being more relaxed about what they had encountered, perhaps due to the familiarity of seeing social media reels with subtitles that set the context of the exhibition. One person commented “Oh that’s why it’s called Peepshow 2.0”. However, despite this familiarity, there was a palpable tension between the spectator and the sculpture. Viewers wanted to see what was on the phone screen, but there was a barrier they had to cross – they had to physically move from the public studio space and enter the proximity or what came to be defined as the “private” and immediate space of the sculpture. Some viewers admitted feeling shy about getting too close to the face to read the text, while others felt uncomfortable being so close to the sculpture. The feedback I received reinforced my choice of placing the mobile phone inside the sculpture’s head as it added a layer of complexity to the viewer’s experience. It required the

viewer to detach from their present moment (“here and now”) and enter the “private” sphere of the sculpture’s story (“there and then”) to experience the piece.

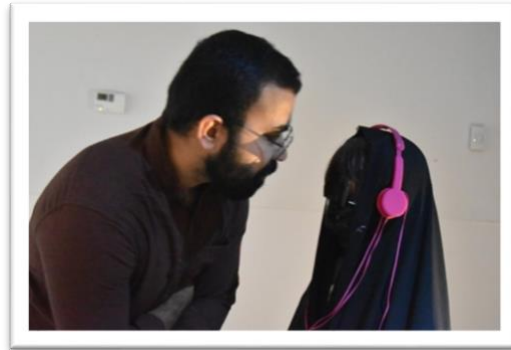


Figure 14 Viewing the videos inside the Peepshow sculpture's head.

Participation

During the exhibition, everyone who moved around the room activated the sensor that started the music and changed the projection on the screen, turning the initial cyborg-style images into the artistic representation of videos of women dancing on the streets of Iran. At this time, the viewers could see their own shadow cast on the screen beside the dancing images. I sensed that this was when the viewer felt contextualized within the work and some started dancing alongside the projected videos (Figure 15). This experience was in line with David Rokeby's statement in *Transforming Mirrors: Subjectivity and Control in Interactive Media*, that when the viewer sees a representation of themselves reflected back to them, they become more conscious and self-aware of their movements, and might even act in response to the feedback from the installation (145). However, regardless of whether the spectators danced or not, this was when they took out their mobile phones and started taking pictures and videos of the installation and themselves interacting with it. To me this moment was when the viewer

captured their spectatorship and created a record of their physical presence in the exhibition, possibly even posting it on social media as evidence of their participation.



Figure 15 Some spectators participated by dancing when the sensors were activated.

Feedback Loop

The experience of seeing viewers record their interactions with the installation on their phones was delightful. It allowed them to experience the installation at least twice, once through their naked eye and again through the screen of their mobile phones. I noticed that some of these recordings later appeared on my social media feed along with the spectator's own comments. This behaviour exemplifies the feedback loop that is created between physical actions and social media content, as described by Maggie Nelson in her book *On Freedom*. As viewers record their physical experiences and post them on social media, algorithms use them to show us similar activities from our social networks, feeding us more of our own behavior and value systems (Nelson 14).



Figure 16 Spectators videotaping their experience.

Beyond the screen

The interactions between the viewer, the artwork, and the screen created an interesting dynamic during the exhibition. The shadows of the viewers cast on the screen, alongside the projected videos, became a unique performative element of the overall work. The interaction between the viewers and the projected images created distinct moments and shapes, as viewers' shadows blurred the boundaries between the physical and digital worlds. Kate Mondloch, in her book *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, has observed that this interaction (where the boundaries between the physical and the digital are blurred) allows viewers to disconnect from their immediate surroundings and engage with the performance on the screen. In other words, viewers disengage from the "here and now" and participate with the "there and then" (Mondloch 72).



Figure 17 Shadow of spectators cast on the screen of the exhibition.

Future Work

The positive feedback I received from the exhibition has caused me to consider possible next versions for the installation. There are several strategies that could be implemented in future versions to increase audience engagement with the work. One such approach is to place the Peepshow sculpture in a public space with a mobile phone inside her skull and observe how passersby might react and interact with it. Moving the sculpture outside of the confines of the gallery space offers a unique opportunity to attract a broader audience to the work.

Another way for expanding visibility of the work is to make existing hashtags related to dancing in public in Iran more prominent within the exhibition space. This would encourage spectators to use those hashtags when posting reels of the exhibition on social media, potentially expanding the reach of the Iranian women's message around social freedom in Iran to a broader public.

Finally, recording spectators dancing within the exhibition space, and digitally adding these captured images to the projected videos on the screen, could create a more dynamic and interactive experience, further blurring the lines between the physical and digital worlds and engaging the spectators on a deeper level.

Overall, this exhibition was a memorable experience that provided me with a unique perspective on the power of art to bring people together and create shared experiences to engage in complicated conversations relating to social freedom for women in Iran. It also allowed me to process my personal experiences with the Islamic regime in Iran and articulate the complex situation to others through art. I am both happy and proud of its outcome as it brought a complex situation to life. The installation presented thought-provoking interactions between viewers and the artwork, inviting them to contemplate their own relationship with social media and its impact on their lives. Overall, I believe the installation achieved its intended purpose of creating an immersive and engaging experience, while also provoking viewers to think critically about their role as participants in social media feedback loops.

Peepshow 2.0 created a means for social commentary and conversation on topics that people might find uncomfortable discussing, such as Islamophobia and religious beliefs vs. personal freedom. By examining the current situation in Iran through different cultural and social lenses and analyzing cyberfeminism, this thesis paper and exhibition shed light on the use of technology in relation to social freedom for women in Iran and how social media is used by women in Iran for self-expression and creating digital space to be visible.