

# Intervista a Morehshin Allahyari

## a cura di Sofia Pirandello

Morehshin Allahyari (Teheran, 1985) è un'artista, attivista, scrittrice ed educatrice. Nata e cresciuta in Iran, si è trasferita negli Stati Uniti nel 2007. Dal 2016 al 2021 ha lavorato al progetto *She Who sees the Unkown*, che include le opere *Ya'jooj Ma'jooj* e *Kabous*, realizzate in VR.

**SP I know you are very interested in technology in general: why at a certain point you became interested in VR in particular? Do you use it as a designing tool or just for experiencing the final work?**

**MA** The first VR piece I did, which was in 2018, I did it as a collaboration with this group called Demora. They provide you with a team of coders and all you need if you don't know how to code. They give you the opportunity to work with a team and then create a VR piece for an exhibition. I already had made this piece called *Ya'jooj Ma'jooj*, in a video version of it, and then I made a VR version of that. That was the first VR project I did but that felt more like bringing something that I already had made in a 2D environment into a 3D space. With that work, I wanted an experience that would be different from the usual experience of what and how VR feels. Because I think VR, at least a big portion of it, comes from the video game culture. Gaming is very like male-aesthetic and action-based, you have to do a lot of things, move around, pick up something, point at something, you're always moving, running through the space. So, with that piece I wanted an opposite experience, which was for the audience member to stand still, to really experience stillness. When you enter the VR space some figures are there, a story is being told to you, so you have to stand there, the amount that you can move is so small. You can move around, look around, but you have to stand in front of these figures and listen to the story that is being told to you. It was important for me because it's

about taking time and appreciating a space you're in, with slowness. For example, Claudia Hart, one of the pioneers of New Media Art, she wrote this essay that talks about the animation culture, about her generation especially (I think with my generation it's changed a little bit for women artists). She was talking about how, when she was teaching at the Art Institute of Chicago, and she was of course a female artist, she was dealing with a lot of 3D animations, 3D simulation spaces. She was constantly encouraged to make work that was fast paced, where things happen constantly, and, again, that comes from this very masculine, manly action-based gaming culture. She has made all these works and animations where everything is so slow. One of my favorite pieces is this piece in which you stand in front of a figure projected, and you don't see any movement because it is moving so slow that your brain can't even process movement. But it *is* moving: if you came back like an hour later you would see that the figure has moved. I think she does an amazing job of really thinking through these ideas of our relationship to technology, of slowness, and of taking time with the work. With my piece, I did it because it also conceptually made sense because in the storyline the Ya'jooj Ma'jooj are these figures originally talked about in Qur'an, and they are said to be a community that represents chaos. The story in the Qur'an is that people of this city ask a person to build a wall to not let the Ya'jooj Ma'jooj into the city. The Islamic interpretation of it is that once Ya'jooj Ma'jooj eventually will break through this world we are going to experience some kind of the end of time. I came across this story during the Muslim ban and I was stuck in Berlin myself because of that for a while. I was obviously privileged enough to come back because I had my Iranian passport, but I also had a Green Card and at the beginning Green Card holders were included in the ban. After a while I could come back, but that moment was so intense because at that point I've lived in the US for twelve or thirteen years, my whole life is here, and I was thinking that everything could just go back to nothing. Obviously, the wall banning a group that is known as the chaos, this notion of the otherness of someone else, all these things became part of what I also put into consideration into the VR experience. The idea was the audience member can't pass through, the stillness is about you feeling a little bit stuck in this space. You participate in the story progressing by hand gestures that come on the screen and ask you

to follow them. Once you do that, you go to the next part of the story. But again, it requires a lot of listening and participation to the story of these figures and the poetic thing that I've written about being others, being rejected, being bad bodies, bodies that are bad.

**SP It is like you build a space in which you ask the audience to assume a performative role. In this way it seems to me you use fiction as a way of reinventing the future, telling us a story that can help us to see in a different way the future. In particular, I noticed that you talk about Donna Haraway, who is actually a reference for everyone in this field, but in a different manner. Can you tell me more about your idea of using fiction as a political tool, especially from a female artist perspective?**

**MA** I guess not only refiguring these figures and the concepts, but also refiguring technology has always been part of the process of making the work. Like with *Kabous*, which is the other VR work where you come as an audience member and lie down on a bed: again, there is this experience of stillness. The whole story is about basically a *jinn* that sits on your chest and you experiencing nightmare and sleep paralysis. When in real life this happens you feel in a dream, but you can't move your body. In a lot of different cultures in Africa and the Middle East people believe that you experience that because this *jinn* comes and sits on your chest and you can't move. I connected this experience with that of an audience member entering this bedroom and lying down on the bed I've designed close to the one I had during my childhood in Iran, and listening to the stories of four generations of women, my grandma, my mother, me and an imagined monstrous daughter. We talk mainly about war and trauma. With both these two works I thought about this process of reconfiguration of technology, asking the audience to put the VR headset on and not move around, not to get up, not to leave the bed and just try to lie down and stay. And that's how the whole piece is designed, when you wear it, there are things that I want you to see, chosen very specifically. For me it has always been about going back and forth between these processes of actual real-life experiences, the concept related to the work that I'm making, and then the VR experience. With Haraway, you know, obviously, as you said, she's



Fig. 1 – Morehshin Allahyari, *Ya'jooj Ma'jooj*, VR Installation, 2019, Courtesy of the artist

everywhere, you go to any conference, you go to any place, every single person is talking about her. And that's amazing. I think the way that she has been influential and the movement she created and her work are so important. She inspires so many people. But at the same time, we can't forget that Haraway is another Western white female person who is going through the same theories and things that she is talking about. When I was thinking about the figure of the cyborg I also thought about the limitation of the figure of the cyborg and how we need so many other figures, other ways of telling stories around these figurations. I think the more we create this kind of figures the more they will allow us to imagine other ways of existing, now and in relationship to the past. The *jinn* became that for me, I saw so much potential and possibilities in the hybrid, and I think it's a figure that hasn't really been talked about in that sense. So, I've tried with this body of work, entitled *She Who Sees the Unknown*, to really think about the possibilities of other ways of reading through figuration, refiguration, fabulation, and storytelling.

**SP About this last thing you said, do you think VR is more a tool for activism or a tool for storytelling?**

**MA** I think it can be both, tools are just tools. You can do whatever you want with a tool, it is what I always talked about. I'm not interested in technology for technology's sake, medium for medium's sake. I'm really interested in the potential of tools beyond what we've been told. I like going to a lot of VR shows and there's always people that are just so obsessed, they tell you "this is what you can do and this is how you can do it". And okay, I get it, that's fun, and cool, but I've forgotten a lot of those VR experiences, and I think that's always the same problem with this kind of technologies: people just fetishize them, exotize them. People get so held up into the technology that the content, the story, what it is doing, everything gets lost. And also to challenge the technology. For example, what I'm saying is these tools come from a history, there's a lot of military training, there is a lot of very male game culture involved, there is porn culture involved. For me it's always about not accepting that this is how it should be used. For instance, we are told interactivity is what we should do with VR. In either the two pieces that I made, you don't

even use the controllers. I like any kind of work that really challenges that kind of functionality of technology. Whatever if it's political or activism or just storytelling in a way that at the same time is challenging.

**SP I have a question regarding the design of a multimedia work, because *She Who Sees the Unknown* is not just a VR piece and involve different kind of media, and maybe this help you to have a critical perspective. You ask people to follow a theoretical schema, you do live performances. What do you think about using different kinds of tools altogether?**

**MA** To me that's the power of an artwork, where you can exist in all these multi-spaces. *She Who Sees the Unknown* was a four-year-long project. There are so many components: there are sculptures; there is installation; there are storytelling and video, which take the form of a VR, or web art; I do performances; I've built a reading room; I just released an archive, which ended the project two weeks ago. To me, the works that are always the most powerful are those that are multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional, that have multiple possibilities and that's what I've tried to do with this body of work, also based on what makes sense. I made *Kabous* as a VR piece because it makes sense, because I wanted a dreamlike experience, I don't think a video would do that. If you sat in front of a video, a regular video, and watch that piece, it wouldn't give you the feeling that I wanted. Nor a web art experience would give you that feeling. It's so specific the way that I wanted it to feel. There were people, especially women from the Middle East, coming out of it and crying. I didn't expect that. I think it is a very intense piece in terms of your experience, because you hear all these stories and voices. I do think I've always chosen different medium because of what is necessary, what makes sense. It's a vehicle that takes you from point A to B to the next thing. In *Ya'jooj Ma'jooj*, there are patterns repeating both in the physical space of the installation and in the digital space. For example, your standing in real life is the same as your standing in the VR space. I like this overlap and transformation and ways of also going back and forth between physical and digital. And I think that's very apparent in a lot of my work, from VR to 3D scanning, to printing something and then again 3D scanning it, back and forth between these processes.

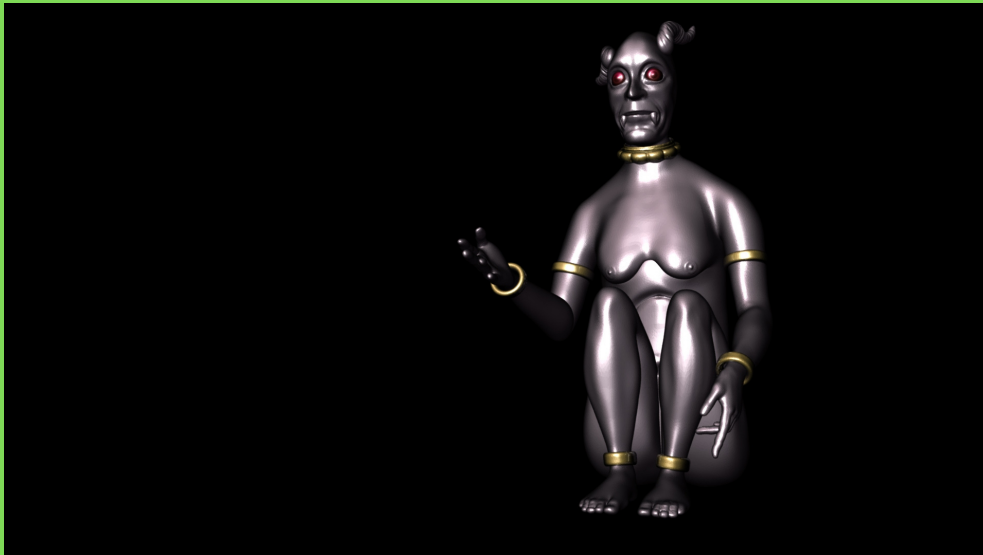


Fig. 2 – Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees The Unknown: The Right Witness*, 3D render, 2019, Courtesy of the artist

**SP** Do you think you're going to use again VR in your next projects?

**MA** For my next project, I want to make a film, which is something I have never done. I'm very excited about that. I was originally going to use VR for that because I did a fellowship at Sundance, but then I decided that I don't want it to be in VR. It is about accessibility. The work I am making right now is about Middle East, it's about ideas of futurity and I asked myself: who gets to see this? For example, the pieces I made in VR: my mum is a big part of that world, she reads in it, it is from her journal. She hasn't seen it in VR. She doesn't have a VR headset, I can't send her a file. I have to take this piece to her next time I see her and then she can maybe experience it like that. Then you extend this problem of accessibility with VR to other countries, other cultures, the digital gap between cultures, all that comes with it. For me making this piece in VR will always be about people having to come to see it, in a physical space where they come and visit and put the VR headset on. Or maybe you have a VR headset, but that requires a certain kind of technological knowledge that you have to know: you should know how to do it, how to click on a file, how to download it. It is not an accessible technology. I want to do it with the medium that allows me to just send a link to my mom so she can click on it. It's very complex. People ask me "who's your audience?" and I think sometimes your audience needs to be your mom or your grandma. It does not always have to be the bigger audience that knows technology or whatever. I do think it's



Fig. 3 – Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees The Unknown: Kabous Installation*, Manual Override Exhibition, The Shed, 2019, Courtesy of the artist

important to consider other countries and other cultures and their access to technology. If I'm making a work that is about Middle East who I want to see it? Who I care to have access to it? Those are the questions I think you should ask when you're making the work.

**SP It is a problem also for museums because not every museum is able today to have access to VR and to organize VR exhibitions. There is a problem of accessibility from an economical point of view but also a practical one, because you can admit one or two visitors in half an hour.**

**MA** Yeah, especially with installation like mine, we couldn't just put like two beds, it would be weird. It was about like one person at a time, and it's like a ten-minute piece. It took time. People had to register, wait in line. It was challenging also in that sense. It really is about what kind of artist you are, what kind of accessibility you want to provide with your work. Do you care how easily or not easily people can have access to it? Some people don't care, I know artists who don't care. That can be an attitude toward your work, but it's not for me. I like accessibility. I like generosity in a way that you can share your work and VR makes it hard.