MOREHSHIN ALLAHYARI
MATERIAL SPECULATION

—

February 11 – March 19, 2016

—

Essay by Alexis Anais and Anna Khachiyan

—

Presented by Trinity Square Video

On Material Speculation

- Essay by Alexis Anais Avedisian and Anna Khachiyan

In July 2014, as ISIS, the self-appointed worldwide caliphate, consolidated its hold on Mosul, reports began to surface of the group's demolition of surrounding Shiite mosques and shrines. These reports were swiftly corroborated by its release of videos showing the extent of the damage. Since then, ISIS has targeted more than two dozen cultural heritage sites in Iraq, Syria and Libya, including Christian churches, ancient and medieval temples and complexes, and contemporary cultural institutions. The spree culminated with the demolition of parts of the ancient city of Palmyra in May 2015. In what has become the group's calling card, these events and others were heavily documented with footage designed to be streamed and shared on the internet, going viral as it was picked up by citizen journalists and international news outlets.

ISIS' unprecedented if bewildering use of social media to disseminate its message and recruit new followers has earned it the nickname the "digital caliphate." But if the mission of propagandizing has traditionally been to paint a rosy picture of a less-than-perfect regime, ISIS differs from other state propaganda organs in that it does not seek to hide or excuse the brutality of its actions, which include a spate of well-publicized beheadings of foreign journalists and aid workers and mass executions of "enemy combatants." Indeed, this nihilism is part of the appeal for a dispersed and alienated contingent of youth. To justify its violent acts, ISIS appeals to Salafism, an ultraconservative reformist doctrine that promotes a literal and rigid interpretation of Islam's holy texts. Where visual culture is concerned, this means the elimination of all historic examples of polytheism across the realm, including but not limited to depictions of people and animals.

Although ISIS sees itself as operating in accordance with the Muslim faith, it has taken advantage of its media portrayal as a band of lawless thugs that flouts international conventions of statecraft and warfare. In fact, this surface-level moral arbitrage provides a tactical upper hand: rather than being defaced or demolished outright, certain items are looted, smuggled, and eventually sold to finance the group's activities, presumably ending up in private collections and perhaps even cultural institutions. Contrary to the popular perception of ISIS as a rogue entity operating in a geopolitical vacuum, these circumstances point to a complex network of complicity that spans national borders and timezones (the Salafi movement, which also encompasses other Sunni jihadist organizations like Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram, is globally sponsored by Saudi Arabia, America's chief ally in the region).

This is the reality confronted by Morehshin Allahyari in *Material Speculation: ISIS*, an ongoing project that uses 3D modeling and printing to reconstruct selected antiquities destroyed by ISIS in Iraq, namely a suite of statues from the Roman-pe-

riod city of Hatra and a series of objects from the Assyrian city of Nineveh. Going beyond metaphoric gestures, *Material Speculation* offers a practical and political archival methodology for endangered or destroyed artifacts. In line with Allahyari's previous work, it also proposes 3D technologies as a tool of resistance. For this project, a flash drive and memory card containing data such as images, videos, maps, and

Morehshin Allahyari, *Material Speculation: ISIS, Lamassu,* 2015

pdf files (with information on specifications and provenance), were embedded within each of the objects—creating a kind of time capsule, sealed for future generations to discover. The materials themselves were sourced through an intensive research process involving archaeologists, historians and museum specialists from Iraq and Iran. In the project's final stages, the 3D printable files will be made available online for download and use by the public. At the center of this initiative is the figure of the Lamassu, an Assyrian protective deity depicted as having the head of a human male and the winged body of a bull or lion that typically adorned the entry gates of cities and palaces. As an avatar of ISIS' crimes against culture, it is also symbolic of Allahyari's rehabilitative practice.

As ISIS has shown, the potential futures that digital technology promises to provoke almost always teeter on the ethically ambiguous—trapped in a crossfire of discourses that vary depending on who's doing the talking. In January 2016, responding to President Barack Obama's public statements that technology is allowing extremists to "poison the minds of people," tech journalist Kashmir Hill wrote on the popular news blog, *Fusion*, "Technology and the internet are being invoked in fearful terms because it is easier to point the finger there than unpack the multifold and complicated reasons behind these acts—the growth of hateful ideologies, racial and ethnic tensions, the ease of buying semi-automatic weapons, the long-term effects of an ongoing war waged by drones, and twisted minds that embrace violence."

Allahyari's work refuses to accept this hypocrisy, which seem to ignore the many number of intimidations put forth by the West. She recognizes that what has traditionally been considered public history is often made vulnerable, subject to possession by organized violence and radical politicking, in which both sides are equally implicated. ISIS' campaign of destruction at the Nineveh Museum, for example, can be seen as a means of using chaos and disorder to enforce social control, fabricate the historical record, and "create a new reality for the present and future," as Allahyari recently told Vice Magazine's *Motherboard*. Cultural institutions, particularly museums, are seen as sanctuaries for knowledge and gateways to narratives that are continually being refined by scholarship and refreshed by the societal urges of each new generation. This, in and of itself, is a process of authority-building, and therefore not immune to bias. In December 2015, when Hillary Clinton, acting as Secretary of State, urged the UN to work with Silicon Valley to restrict suspected terrorists from gaining online access, she was effectively enforcing a similar form of control, chipping away at internet freedoms like ISIS did to the artifacts of Assyrian and Greco-Roman civilization.

Over the past few decades, digitality has proffered a new form of history, one that is as much about self-documentation as it is about collectives, movements and other solidarities; increasing our investment in digital culture makes us more exposed, more self-aware, and putatively more accountable. In this shift Allahyari sees a potential for cultural archives to become accelerated: distributed, democratized, and, paradoxically, more like data centers, which in themselves challenge the myth of the internet's immateriality with their necessarily physical existence. Contrary to techno-utopian narratives that capitalize on technical ignorance of the physical infrastructures that enable digital spaces, Allahyari's work suggests that emancipation comes from an acceptance of materiality not the fetishization of dematerialization. In the *3D Additivist Manifesto*, coauthored with artist and academic Daniel Rourke, she writes of 3D manufacturing technology in similar fashion: "Its potential belies the complications of its history: that matter is the sum and prolongation of our ancestry; that creativity is brutal, sensual, rude, coarse, and cruel."
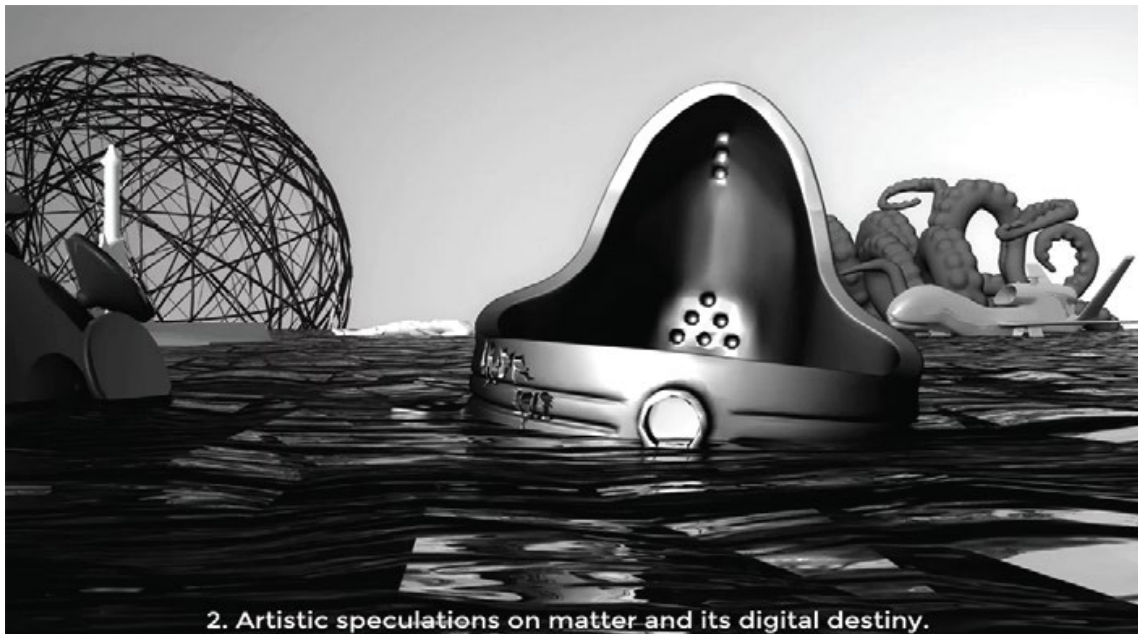
To concretize the metaphor, Allahyari and Rourke have spoken of crude oil being deepwater drilled out of the ocean floor and, later, converted from "bacterioles" into the "petrochemicals" that are used to make 3D plastic filament. The 3D-printed object thus retains the aura of a biomorphic prehistory, as if it has a memory of its own. In such a way, the *3D Additivist Manifesto* goes beyond revealing the electronic processes that make tangible products out of digitally rendered models, it fundamentally attempts to expose histories that have been concealed in service of upholding the hyperfiction that technology is a cure-all for the world's social and economic ills. Additivism does not re-inscribe structural power dynamics that are responsible for countless human and environmental tragedies. Instead, it considers material reproduction as a humanist endeavor, one that merits the same safeguarding as flesh and blood.

The concept of 3D printing as symbolic of corporeality and mortality is defined in the *Manifesto* as "infatuation," following the idea that the human body desires a cyborgian evolution. We want to become physically and cognitively immersed by matter, we want our data to be immortal. In Rourke's words, the Additivist practice exists in "the space between the material and the digital; the human and the nonhuman."

Blind faith in digital technology is contingent on the belief that such advances are always made for human progress, when contrarily, they are often more indicative of aggressive intrusions designed to extract user data and pad corporate bottom lines. As an example of Rourke's in-between space, data analysts began employing ad algorithms to search for emotional clues from Facebook users, a tactic which may allow social media networks to preemptively dissuade someone deemed at risk of being radicalized by ISIS.

Consequently, the hypothesis that 3D printing could launch an imaginative form of archiving is subversive in that it challenges conventional Western methods of recording history. This also echoes recent calls for cultural institutions to "professionalize" by adopting the business ethos of technology startups rather than relying on state funding and charitable donors. Critics raise the question of whether or not Silicon Valley (and all that its continued influence implies), should be relied upon to benefit cultural institutions, which are typically non-profit and increasingly non-Western.

Allahyari and Rourke's conceptualization of additivitism embraces its own contradictions: that 3D printing employs plastic, a cheap, Fordist material that wreaks havoc on our environment; that it threatens to glorify industrial reproduction as yet another kind of "sex organ," upgrading the body's inevitable mortality into a form of fetishistic anthropomorphism; that its materiality is, to some extent, economically dematerializing. It is these kinds of covert, contradictory impulses that can be used as radical practice, perhaps the thing that is needed to recognize the reasons for violence and, alternately, supply security against it. Allahyari is attempting to redefine the radical, not as a byproduct of violence—be it precipitated by Islamic fundamentalism or Western capitalism—but as a way to implore ideological multiplicity as a strategy for changing the world around us. The subjects of history are often defenseless from those who record or revise it, but objects embedded with an Additivitist determination retain some material agency even as their status and meaning shifts with ever evolving contexts. As Allahyari continues to develop Material Speculation: ISIS—in part as an emotional response to terror—she also continues to develop her own experimental theory of preservation, simultaneously protecting objects from objecthood while navigating the materiality of digital information.

Morehshin Allahyari and Daniel Rourke, *The 3D Additivist Manifesto* (video still), 2015

List of Works

Material Speculation: ISIS, 2015-16

(Complete series: *Lamassu; King Uthal; Unknown King of Hatra; Ebu; The Romanian Goddess of Beauty Venus; Barmaren; Maren; Marten; Nergal; The Eagle King; Gorgon; Nike, Greek Goddess of Victory*)

Material Speculation: ISIS is a digital fabrication and 3D printing project focused on the reconstruction of selected (original) artifacts (statues from the Roman period city of Hatra and Assyrian artifacts from Nineveh) that were destroyed by ISIS in 2015. A memory card is included inside the body of each 3D printed objects, containing information, maps, and images gathered about the artifacts.

The 3D Additivist Manifesto, 2015

By Morehshin Allahyari and Daniel Rourke
with sound design by Andrea Young

The 3D Additivist Manifesto is a video, text, website, and movement that blurs the boundaries between art, engineering, science fiction, and digital aesthetics. It calls on artists, activists, designers, and critical engineers to accelerate the 3D printer and other Additivist technologies to their absolute limits and beyond into the realm of the speculative, the provocative, and the weird.

The full text and bibliography can be read and downloaded from: additivism.org/manifesto.

Public Events

Opening Reception: Thursday, February 11, 6:00 – 9:00pm

Panel Discussion: *Material Speculation, Between ISIS and Islamophobia*
Saturday, February 13, 2:00 – 5:00pm
A conversation between Morehshin Allahyari, Pamela Karimi, and Dina Georgis
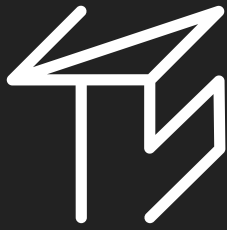
Bios

Morehshin Allahyari uses artistic production to investigate the complicated intersection between technology and politics. Born and raised in Iran, she has been living in the United States since 2007. Her practice examines the gendered, cultural, ethical, and political dimensions of digital spaces and materiality, using technology as both a philosophical and poetic toolset to think through objecthood, and to document the personal and collective struggles of contemporary human experiences. Allahyari has been widely exhibited internationally and has been an artist in residence at CMU STUDIO for Creative Inquiry (2015), Autodesk Pier9 Workshop in San Francisco (2015), and The Banff Centre (2013), among others. Her work has been featured in Rhizome, Hyperallergic, Animal New York, Art F City, Creators Project, Dazed Digital, Huffington Post, NPR, VICE, Parkett Art Magazine, Neural Magazine, Global Voices Online, Al Jazeera, and BBC among others.

Alexis Anais Avedisian is a current graduate student at NYU Steinhardt, writing a thesis on activist internet art. She has worked in communications for MIT's School of Architecture and Planning and at Rhizome at the New Museum as an Editorial Fellow.
She tweets @holyurl.

Anna Khachiyan is a writer living in New York. Her work has appeared in Artwrit, Art in America and Metropolis.
She tweets @annakhachiyan.

Morehshin Allahyari, *Material Speculation: ISIS, King Uthal*, 2015

TRINITY SQUARE VIDEO

Morehshin Allahyari - *Material Speculation*

Trinity Square Video is pleased to present *Material Speculation*, Morehshin Allahyari's first solo exhibition in Canada. The exhibition is titled after her ambitious and widely anticipated series *Material Speculation: ISIS*, which is being shown here for the first time in its completed form. Also on view is Allahyari's collaborative video with Daniel Rourke, *The 3D Additivist Manifesto*.

nts radical propositions for 3D Printing that inspect
relationships between 3D Printing, Plastic, Oil,
italism. Allahyari addresses complex contemporary
nics with the sophistication and nuance it deserves,
s together for a holistic image of contemporary
and ideology. The exhibition addresses the precarity
acts, the location of authenticity, the transformative
duction, the malleability of cultural icons, the
g nations and religious statehoods, collective trauma
nan bodies, emotional investment in abstract and
l and political dimensions of new technologies, and
istorical and contemporary contexts.

thank Pamela Karimi, Christopher Jones, Negin
i, Lamia Al Gailani Werr for their help with research;
Dorschutz, Patrick Delory, Christian Pramuk, and
with 3D modeling.

nn G. Hampton
Tanaka
w Cromey, Jason Ebanks, Aliya Karmali,
Phillips-Carr, and David Plant

m
V. Toronto

1 - March 19, 2016
urday, 12 – 6 pm

Cover image: Morehshin Allahyari, *Material Speculation: ISIS, Gorgon*, 2015