

## Sumac Space

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### Anahita Razmi–Speaking Nearby Iran

By Laura Vetter

[https://sumac.space/dialogues/six-questions-with-anahita-razmi/?fbclid=IwAR3uOJIT6ZAIMp-ZnXaL\\_AFTIpb2eLv62XhRTmCuWh3I77\\_M62RLOhxPczw](https://sumac.space/dialogues/six-questions-with-anahita-razmi/?fbclid=IwAR3uOJIT6ZAIMp-ZnXaL_AFTIpb2eLv62XhRTmCuWh3I77_M62RLOhxPczw)



An email Dialogue between Artist Anahita Razmi and Laura Vetter

#### **What does being an artist mean for you? Is it a way to reflect the world, to distance yourself from it or to point to certain topics?**

I recently saw a list of the “top five non-essential jobs”, published by the Sunday Times. The job “artist” scored highest in the survey, which caused some controversy and debate on social media. I found this weird, as being non-essential within a running neo-liberal system is precisely the whole point of working as an artist. It is the position an artist immanently needs – it enables distance, criticality, alternative thought.

I still like and believe in the idea of an artistic avant-garde and in the possibilities of subversion, even though strategies might look very different in 2020 than in the last century. Outsiders that possibly do not look like outsiders. Intruders. Invaders. For my own practice, this has always meant searching for a position that is as independent as possible from the forced necessities of a global capitalist system – while simultaneously making artistic work that has a relevance in relation to that system. This position is really not easy to find and maintain, especially when your own background is defined by precarity and economic hardship.

#### **Are there visual things that inspire or influence you?**

My work very often makes direct connections to other artistic works and different art histories.

I am interested in reusing artists’ works, concepts and artefacts that are embedded in a “Western art historical canon” – testing them out in newly revised versions and in relation to Middle Eastern contemporary conditions.

#### **You are a German/Iranian artist, living and working in Germany. Your art often shows a certain familiarity with and, at the same time, a critical, ironic distance towards Iran. How would you describe your relationship with the country in which you didn’t grow up but which owns a part of your identity?**

It is a complicated relationship that has been changing during the years. I have been travelling to Iran a lot in the last ten years, realising different projects, but I have never lived in the country.

Iran currently is in an incredibly difficult political and economic situation, and the temporality and the privilege of coming and going, collaborating, and making work within the country becomes a challenging and problematic endeavour. As an artist, I find it necessary to ask myself: For whom is my work “working”? What power relations come into play? What position do I speak from – or is it perceived that I speak from? In my case, this position is the position of an outsider that doesn’t look like one. Maybe we can call it part of a diaspora, but the idea of a diaspora is incredibly complex, and there

are so many different diasporic experiences. When a country is in such a difficult and often sad situation, the question "what can we do to make it better" often seems dominant and central here.

But, as an artist, I do not see any relevance in me trying to answer that question or in making big opinionated statements. Instead, I am trying to produce my work under fair conditions, stay resilient – while making societal and relational complexities visible, asking questions concerning histories and media narratives, using humour as a means to enable states of ambiguity and contradiction, reconsidering set "meanings".

I like it when the Vietnamese filmmaker Trinh T Minh-Ha stated to "not wish to speak about, only to speak nearby", challenging the rules of anthropological filmmaking. When it comes to challenging new modes of cultural imperialism, this is what I can try to do as an artist: speaking *nearby* Iran.

### **Which relation do you want to create with your audience?**

A radically open, challenging relation beyond easy signification, with room for speculation, disagreement, misunderstanding, reconsideration. Ha, that's impossible maybe. I think it is essential to take seriously all the different knowledge and subjective perceptions that the audience brings into an exhibition. Having the possibility of working and exhibiting in a variety of different international contexts has been such a blessing when it comes to these different interactions – I have been learning a lot through them – especially through the difficulties.

A work of art only exists in a connection, in a relation to others, and it changes with the context it is placed in. This thought isn't new, but I find it worthwhile to test out what it can practically mean and facilitate in the now – considering the pandemic, the travel restrictions and the heightened focus on the online space as a context.

### **You mentioned the heightened focus on the online space as a context – where do you see potential and limitations in comparison to a physical art space? How can online spaces enable transcultural exchange these days?**

In theory, they are ideal: no need to travel, no visas, no borders. Yet, in practice, we don't see this being made use of too much – often the people who would have flown in for an event now come together for public talks on Zoom. Then look at Iran, where the internet itself is restricted and a proper bandwidth is very expensive. The seclusion through travel bans extends into the global online space through this.

I recently got thrown back to the first time I used the internet (I think I was 13). I entered some random chat room and talked to someone from Australia. We spent five hours together reciprocally typing all names of the characters that appear in *The Simpsons* into the chat box. We had to remember all names by heart; proper search engines didn't exist at that time – and we were not aware of that possibility anyhow. It was a fucking exciting historical moment in international cross-cultural discourse.

Maybe if we found better ways to connect to people beyond our established internet bubbles and their algorithms, some of this excitement could return – even in 2020.

### **Your work often deals with cultural transfers and translocation and the role of media and propaganda in relation to Eastern cultures and politics. Can you tell us what your new work is about?**

*scroll stock, pluck stock, click stock, drum stock, tap stock, rattle stock* is a work in progress. I was interested in working with video stock footage of scrolling hands and fingers – there are quite a plethora of these on platforms like Shutterstock. These stock footage videos are usually deployed by companies that want to show the navigation of their online content by inserting this content into a green-screen background.

I wanted to test what happens when I don't follow this purpose and instead focus on the actual gestures in the videos – applying a new "non-fitting", "exotic", sonic connection to them. A relation to musical instruments – tapping, plucking, scrolling... How are we touching a touch screen? How are we touching a drum or a string instrument? Are there similar ways of navigation? Are there ways to "exoticise" and "orientalise" a finger scroll, a gesture that seems completely common, intuitive, internalised by now?