AGENCY

WORKS BY
MOREHSHIN ALLAHYARI
SOPHIA AL MARIA
INGRID BURRINGTON
CONSTANT DULLAART
NAVINE G. KHAN-DOS SOS
ANNA RIDLER
SUZANNE TREISTER

CURATED BY
JAMES BRIDLE
AGENCY
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NOMEGALLERY.COM
CURATOR’S STATEMENT

Mass surveillance and transnational terrorism, climate change and conspiracy theories, anti-social media and rapacious capitalism. As the scale and complexity of our societies grows ever vaster, individuals feel ever more disempowered and hopeless. Our vision is increasingly universal, but our agency continues to be reduced. We know more and more about the world, while being less and less able to do anything about it. In an age of planetary-scale networks and opaque, remote systems of governance, how do individuals retain the capability for creative thought, meaningful action — and a sense of humour?

The artists gathered together for “AGENCY” all concern themselves with the present state of the world while refusing, reassessing, and rewriting the narratives of despair and powerlessness that are thrust upon us. They critically engage with the most technologically complex and politically pressing issues of our times while asserting the ongoing importance of storytelling and myth-making, and the value of artistic expression, imagination, and intervention.

The practices of the artists in “AGENCY” work with a range of techniques and materials to interrogate and enchant present conditions. Morehshin Allahyari uses 3D scanning and printing to reappropriate ancient mythologies for new objectives, while Anna Ridler unearths hidden stories buried within leaked archives. Suzanne Treister and Navine G. Khan-Dossos reconfigure contentious technological and political icons in search of alternative, competing realities. Ingrid Burrington literally deconstructs technological apparatuses, while Constant Dullaart builds spirit armies from mass-produced identities, and Sophia Al Maria conducts a call and response across deep time. In these artists’ work, magic, poetic, and material speculations form new narratives and calls to action, and fashion powerful expressions of agency from the tools we all have to hand.
DISTURBING SYMPATHIES

In this exhibition cosmic powers are harnessed in small objects: talismans that operate on the universe. It feels volatile and dangerous yet somehow also festive. These artworks destroy entities we have no more use for, things that have tried to control us, and in some cases fashion new, more appealing tools from what remains. I say “we,” but I tremble.

What makes “AGENCY” so provocative is that the artworks do not operate on the level of representation. Many artworks do the righteous work of making invisible powers perceptible, but the works in this show endeavor to really do things, to work at the level of those invisible powers. The most representational of these works, Suzanne Treister’s large drawing The US National Security Agency on Fire (2010), embodies a performative will. Treister’s marks seem to be coaxing the flames to lick, the melting heat to surge through the building, an impassive black box of glass and steel, from which the agency developed tools to spy on US citizens. These works make contact with the entity they wish to affect. Indexical in C.S. Peirce’s sense of being existentially related to their object, these artworks seek to make that relationship two-way, by in turn causing things to happen to their object.

To fight at this level you need a physical opponent. Some of the entities to be destroyed in “AGENCY” belong to corporations that seek to control the masses, like the Islamic State and Apple—remarkably paired in the exhibition. These powers pretend to ubiquity by hiding behind inscrutable surfaces. The artists draw on ancient methods to seize the sources of these corporations’ power, materialize it, and divert it to different ends. I’m talking about talismans, of course, as well as other means to grasp and realign cosmic energies, like ritual: world-changing actions contained in space and time, small enough to hold in your hand.

Talismans carry out operations by drawing together the universe’s inner resonances into a precisely functioning instrument. They function only in a universe understood to be interconnected and alive with hidden sympathies. Many such cosmologies exist historically, some related, some not. The one that interests me here is Islamic Neoplatonism, in which all entities emanate from God in a hierarchy from angels to celestial bodies to earthly creatures, plants, and stones. In this cascading hierarchy, one could read the macrocosm from the microcosm, as the İkhwān al-Saḥā’ or Brotherhood of Purity, a secret society in tenth-century Basra, wrote:

The course of the body of the universe and the running of the affairs of all the bodies present within it, with all the differences of their forms and fascination of their shapes and the variance of their accidents, is analogous to an individual human body or individual animal body including all of its different shaped members and the fascinating forms of its articulations and the differing accidents of its appearance. ¹

As above, so below, the İkhwān argued: we can understand the operations of the cosmos by referring to our own bodies.

Talismans, emblems, and magic squares contain the cosmos from their particular point of view, like Leibniz’s monad. However, they are a special kind of monad that intercedes in cosmic relationships. For example, the Ghayat al-Ma‘ālim or Aim of the Sage ascribed to the Andalusian al-Majriti (d. c. 1005 - 1008) describes how a magician may draw celestial powers down to earth by employing the incenses, inks, and other earthly substances associated with them, do so at the astrologically favorable time for that planet, and inscribe their powers on stones associated with the planet to produce a talisman.

A jinn is a figure that, by being hidden, is able to take control from within. The word comes from the Arabic root j-n-n, to conceal, also to possess: a majnūn is a crazy person, a janīn is a fetus. Morehshin Allahyari appropriates the jinn Huma, a human-bodied, three-headed demon with tusks or fangs. The central demon is also behorned and its tail terminates in another horned beast.

head. Huma, bringer of [ever], is depicted on talismans to ward off [ever]. Feminizing Huma, Allahyari invokes her as the cause and potential cure of contemporary heat in the form of global warming, much of which results from the climate imperialism of global capitalism. As she produces the figure in three dimensions, the digital process of patiently printing layer by layer resembles the rituals for calling up deities and powers. Allahyari invites us to think in the longer term by drawing out the demon’s enfolded temporality.

Islamic Neoplatonism and the popular magic associated with it profoundly influenced European thought. In thirteenth-century Europe, the single most popular recipe book for magic and talismans was the Picatrix, a Latin mash-up of writings from the aforementioned Chiyat al-Hakīm and the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity, and by the eighth-century alchemist Jabīr ibn Hayyān. The Picatrix’s recipes rely on the bonds of sympathy among all things in the universe: planets and stars, stones and metals, plants and animals, and human tendencies, all of which align at astrologically auspicious times. The book explains that “images that operate by efficacy and similitude are nothing other than the force of celestial bodies that influence the body. If the body is disposed to receive the celestial influence — and the latter is disposed to influence it — the image will be more powerful.”

The images do not simply represent their target but operate on it. This understanding of a constellated universe allowed adepts to intervene in the cosmos to rejoin it. For example, Nostradamus fashioned for Catherine de Medici a complex talisman of metals and goat and human blood that drew the powers of Venus and Jupiter to the queen’s body in order to inspire an honneste est divin love in her spouse, Henry II.

A talisman that manages the cosmos in microcosm features in Sophia Al Maria’s The Limerent Object (2016), a simple drawing of a round female figure with a [at vulva and one enormous eye. This vibrating figure presides over the coming-into-being of the cosmos and its demise. At the end, we are given a glimpse through the vulva to the stars.

Talismanic knowledge was long considered to be so potent that it must be confined to a select few. Secrecy and dissimulation, taqiyya in Arabic, were key to protecting this knowledge from the masses. The literature of magic devotes as much space to embellishing the value of its secrets and threatening those who would divulge them as it does explaining them in highly encrypted terms. Anna Ridler comes up with an ingenious decryption device to interpret the mass of Wikileaks documents: tablets programmed with augmented reality that is sensitive to signs of love. The project treats human affection as a clandestine currency that survives intact by staying under the radar of newsworthiness.

For a few centuries, modernity dispelled the beliefs in an interrelated cosmos and set all things on the same, disenchanted plane. In our time, however, those beliefs are stirring again in many corners, from ecology to new materialism to the ideology of digital interconnectedness. The works in “AGENCY” stir these new notions together with ancient talismanic practices.

The universe to which digital media give us access is a “lame infinity”, because it manages singular differences by reducing them to iterations of the same. Like the magicians of old network-media corporations replicate the cosmos in infinite detail, the better to control it. Many people deploy their mobile devices as contemporary talismans, managing their careers, health, friendships, and love affairs through the proffered interfaces. I don’t blame them: in the old days people managed their future and manipulated distant powers with magic squares, astrological globes, and apotropaic inscriptions. Digital apps, our contemporary talismans, appear to grasp and manipulate the

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3 Laura U. Marks, Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 19—20.
world more directly and easily. That’s why Ingrid Burrington calls smartphones “scrying mirrors.” However, to use them you must surrender to their control and submit to their lame idea of the cosmos. The artists in “AGENCY” smack it down with alacrity and invite more compelling ideas about the cosmos to flood in.

Burrington grinds iPhones to dust and reassembles the dust into an alternative device that can see into the future in a more interesting way. Constant Dullaart uses scores of phones to rally a bot army, employing real people in poor countries to disseminate fake news that would distort the art market. Dullaart’s composition of the SIM cards he used in the project looks to me like a gilded page of an early Qur’an, in which each letter was separate. Mischievous microcosms of the lame universe, the SIM cards, now at rest, suggest the capacity to act differently, in the way the Qur’an hints that individual letters embody divine meanings.

Navine G. Khan-Dossos’s Black Standard series decrypts the Islamic State’s black flag with the word Allah on it in white — itself appropriated from the eighth-century flag of the Abbasids. Khan-Dossos neutralizes the components of the faux caliphate’s visual rhetoric, re-encrypting them into works that draw on its composition, use of black and white, and historical associations. Wittily, Khan-Dossos redeployed the flag as a calibration target for each painting, reducing its iconography of brutality and fear to a tool for establishing the standard of black-and-white values.

“AGENCY” exposes us to artworks that unfold powers that have operated, most often destructively, by being hidden or enfolded. They recompose those powers into new cosmic vibrations — a thought that is not exactly comforting but is certainly energizing.

Laura U. Marks
HUMA AND TALISMANS, 2016

Morehshin Allahyari
3D Printed black resin sculpture, clear resin talismans
Sculpture: 30,5 x 15,2 x 12,7 cm
Talismans: 17,2 x 10,6 x 12,7 cm
Edition of 3 plus 2 artist’s proofs (AP 2/2)
(MALLO40)
Courtesy: the artist and Upfor Gallery
THE LIMERENT OBJECT, 2016

Sophia Al Maria
Digital video projected vertically, color, sound
5 min 11 sec
Courtesy: the artist and The Third Line
ALCHEMY STUDIES, 2018

Ingrid Burrington
iPhone dust, crystals, resin
26 x 20 x 20 cm
PVA COMPOSITION (TILT), 2016

Constant Dullaart
Forex, aluminium, sim cards
117 x 182 cm
Courtesy: the artist
CASCADES I - IV, 2015

Navine G. Khan-Dossos
Gouache on board
50 x 40 cm
CASCADES V - VIII, 2015

Navine G. Khan-Dossos
Gouache on board
50 x 40 cm
WIKILEAKS: A LOVE STORY, 2016

Anna Ridler
Paper, augmented reality app
460 x 80 x 75 cm
Courtesy: the artist
THE U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY ON FIRE, 2010

Suzanne Treister
Venus pencil on watercolour paper
63 x 122 cm
Courtesy: Annely Juda Fine Art, London and PPOW Gallery, New York
Morehshin Allahyari  
(b. 1985, Tehran, Iran; lives and works in New York)

Morehshin Allahyari is a media artist, activist, educator and curator. Her work explores political and cultural contradictions through the lens of Middle Eastern and colonial history and modern techno-utopianism. Her Material Speculation: ISIS series uses digital fabrication technology to reconstruct artifacts destroyed by ISIS in 2015. The project has achieved wide acclaim for proposing 3D-printing as a tool both for resistance and documentation. Dark Matter is a series of 3D-printed sculptures of objects (dog, dildo, gun, neck-tie, satellite dish) censored by the Iranian government, merged in humorous juxtapositions that equally expose the harsh reality of authoritarianism. Allahyari is co-creator of the 3D Additivist Manifesto and subsequent 3D Additivist Cookbook. Allahyari’s work has been part of numerous exhibitions, festivals and workshops including at Centre Pompidou, Paris; MAC, Montreal; Pori Art Museum, Finland; Dallas Museum of Art; Museo Ex Teresa Arte Actual and Material Art Fair, Mexico City, and Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Frankfurt am Main. She has been an artist-in-residence at BANFF Centre in Canada and a research resident at Eyebeam Art + Technology Center, New York. Her work has been featured in many publications including New York Times, Huffington Post, Wired, NPR, Rhizome, Hyperallergic, Dazed Digital, and Al Jazeera. She was recently named a “must-see” artist at the 2018 Armory Show by the New York Times and a Leading Global Thinker by Foreign Policy in 2016. Allahyari is currently an artist-in-residence at Pioneer Works, New York, and recently debuted The Laughing Snake, a hypertext narrative co-commissioned by the Whitney Museum, the Liverpool Biennial and FACT Liverpool, on view through October 28, 2018.

Sophia Al Maria  
(b. 1983, Tacoma, Washington, USA; lives and works in London)

Sophia Al Maria is a Qatari-American artist, writer and filmmaker. Traversing video, text and installation, Al-Maria’s work engages with an imminent urgency of destructive forces. Ranging from large-scale ecological concerns to cross-cultural identities, Al-Maria’s work is underpinned by an intensely personal sentiment. Al-Maria’s most recent solo exhibition was presented at Project Native Informant, London (2018). Her work has also been shown at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2017), Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2017), Whitney Museum, New York (2016), New Museum, New York (2015), The Serpentine Gallery, London (2014), and the Gwangju Biennale, South Korea (2013). Al-Maria participated in the 2016 Biennale of Moving Images (BMI) at the Centre d’Art Contemporain in Geneva. Her memoir, The Girl Who Fell to Earth, was published by Harper Perennial in 2012.
Ingrid Burrington
(b. 1987, USA)

Ingrid Burrington’s artistic practice focuses on mapping, documenting and identifying elements of network infrastructure, drawing attention to the often overlooked or occluded landscapes of the internet. By examining the geographic contexts and material realities of the network, she seeks to both demystify these technologies and to articulate the underlying politics and power dynamics of networked systems and life within an increasingly networked society. In 2015, she created Networks of New York, a field guide to identifying street ephemera and landmarks associated with internet and network infrastructure in New York City, where she lives. Taking a DIY, bottom-up approach, the guide focuses primarily on the quotidian aspects of the network, deciphering spray-painted excavation markings, identifying antennae, and highlighting some major city landmarks of connectivity.

Ingrid Burrington was artist-in-residence at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Eyebeam Art + Technology Center, New York, and the Center for Land Use Interpretation, L.A. She is a fellow at Data & Society and writes for San Francisco Art Quarterly, Creative Time Reports, The Nation, and The Atlantic. She is a frequent public speaker, and has given talks at FutureEverything, Eyeo, dConstruct, Theorizing the Web, and the Copenhagen Documentary Festival. Burrington is a member of Deep Lab, a collective of researchers, artists, writers, engineers and cultural producers that explores topics of control, power and politics as they pertain to technology and society.

Constant Dullaart
(b. 1979, Leiderdorp, Netherlands; lives and works in Berlin and Amsterdam)

Constant Dullaart’s practice reflects on the broad cultural and social effects of communication and image processing technologies. From distributing artificial social capital on social media to completing a “Staff Pick” Kickstarter campaign for a hardware start-up called Dulltech™, his work includes performances, websites, routers, installations, start-ups, armies, and manipulated found images.

Navine G. Khan-Dossos
(b. 1982, UK)

Navine G. Khan-Dossos is a visual artist based in Athens. She focuses on the complex relationship between Islam and the West in both historical and contemporary contexts. Her approach to this research is rooted in traditional Western art history, whereas her painting is based on training in the philosophy and craft of Islamic art. Her interests include Orientalism in the digital realm, geometry as information and decoration, image calibration, and aniconism in contemporary culture.

*My TV Ain’t HD, That’s Too Real (2015)* presented as part of the “Art In The Age Of…” series at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam was a series of in-process wall paintings that evolved throughout the exhibition with a new layer added at set times each month in response to media reports on the ongoing war with the Islamic State.

Khan-Dossos studied art history at Cambridge University, Arabic at Kuwait University, Islamic Art at the Prince’s School of Traditional Art in London, and holds an MA in Fine Art from Chelsea College of Art & Design. During 2014—15, she was a participant at the Van Eyck Academie in Maastricht.


Anna Ridler

Anna Ridler is an artist and researcher who lives and works in London. She has degrees from the Royal College of Art, Oxford University and the University of the Arts London. Ridler has exhibited at a variety of cultural institutions, galleries and festivals including Ars Electronica, Sheffield Documentary Festival, Leverhulme Centre for Future Intelligence, Tate Modern and the V&A. She is a resident with the 2018 European Media Art Program and the winner of the 2018—19 Dare Art Prize. Her works have been commissioned by Opera North, Live Cinema UK, and Impakt Festival in Utrecht. She is interested in working with collections of information or data, particularly self-generated data sets, to create new and unusual narratives in a variety of mediums, and how new technologies can be used to translate these narratives to an audience. She is currently researching the creative potential of machine learning and how it relates to drawing and painting.
Suzanne Treister is a British artist. Initially recognized in the 1980s as a painter, she became a pioneer in the digital, new media, web-based field from the beginning of the 1990s, making work about emerging technologies. Utilizing various media, including video, the internet, interactive technologies, photography, drawing and watercolor, Treister has evolved a large body of work which engages with eccentric narratives and unconventional bodies of research to reveal structures that bind power, identity and knowledge.

James Bridle
(b. 1980, UK)

James Bridle is an artist, writer and theorist based in Athens and London. With a long-standing investigative interest in modern network infrastructure, government transparency and technological surveillance, his artistic practice positions itself at the intersection of art, science and political activism. In particular, he explores how the acceleration of technological advancement creates new ways to represent our physical world and affects our perception of the future by increasingly blurring the lines between the virtual and the real. His work incorporates software programming, social media, photography, installations, architectural rendering and maps. Bridle’s *New Aesthetic* (2011) research project has spurred lively debate and continues to inspire critical and artistic response across many disciplines. Most recently, he has focused his inquiry on addressing the now ubiquitous, yet invisible technologies and operations of drone warfare in projects such as The Drone Shadow series (2012), in collaboration with designer Einar Sneve Martinussen, and Dronestagram (2012), an Instagram account displaying aerial views of the approximate locations of drone strikes. Awarded with an Honorary Mention from Ars Electronica 2013, this project continues to draw wide attention and has stimulated a more vigorous discourse on the moral and political implications, as well as the experiential knowability, of anonymous warfare.

Bridle’s installations and works have been commissioned by The Photographers’ Gallery, London; the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; FACT, Liverpool; and MjEindhoven. Bridle’s artworks have been shown at major international institutions including the Barbican and the V&A, London; LABoral, Gijon; ZKM Karlsruhe, Germany; National Arts Center, Tokyo; Milan Design Fair; Bienal de Curitiba, and the Istanbul Design Biennial. Bridle’s work has been featured in publications including Wired, ICON and The Observer, where he contributes a regular column on publishing and technology. He is a member of the Really Interesting Group and gives regular lectures at conferences worldwide, including SXSW, Austin; dConstruct, Brighton; and Lift, Geneva. James Bridle was creative technologist-in-residence at the Lighthouse, Brighton and Eyebeam, New York. His book *New Dark Age* about technology, knowledge and the end of the future was recently published by Verso (2018).

Laura U. Marks

Laura U. Marks works on media art and philosophy with an intercultural focus. Her recent books are *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (MIT, 2015) and *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (MIT, 2010). Marks programs experimental media art for venues around the world. With Dr. Azadeh Emadi she is a founding member of the Substantial Motion Research network, substantialmotion.org. Dr. Marks is Grant Strate Professor in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver.
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