IRUS: An Intercultural Collaborative Art Show Between Artists in Iran and the United States

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IRUS: An intercultural Collaborative Art Show between Artists in Iran and the United States

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Presented to
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of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
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Advisor: Adrienne Russell
Abstract

IRUS is both a research project and art exhibition that form and analyze cultural exchange. Using art that is developed dialogically and collaboratively between Iranian and American artists, the project employs digital media and the traditional mailing system to create an intercultural exhibition.

The exhibition (March 21st, 2009) brings together two teams of artists, one in Tehran and another in Denver, that have assembled under one name: IRUS (Iran - United States), and collaborate under a common theme: dialogue. Both teams consist of artists proficient in various media.

The research will document, and analyze the dialogue process through the lens of concepts involved in the exhibition and will provide insight into how a dialogue between individuals of these two teams formed. It will also address and question to what extent collaborative art projects between cultures help participant gain a better understanding of each other? To what extent can digital media and telepresence art be used as a bridge in bringing together such collaborations considering the limitations of the Internet in Iran, the differences in access, speed, and language proficiency that shape mediated interactions, and the limiting system of the post office in both countries?
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# Table of Contents

## Chapter One: Introduction to IRUS Art
- Introduction to IRUS Art ................................................................. 1
- IRUS Art Establishment ................................................................. 3
- Art vs. Politics .............................................................................. 7
- IRUS Art and the Similar Projects ............................................. 9
- Layout ......................................................................................... 13

## Chapter Two: Conceptual Foundation
- Conceptual Foundation ................................................................. 15
- Dialogue ..................................................................................... 17
- Dialogue and Consciousness ..................................................... 18
- Dialogue and Decision Making ................................................. 20
- Dialogue in Iranian Culture ....................................................... 20
- Dialogue and Storytelling .......................................................... 23
- One Thousand and One Nights .................................................. 26
- Mark Twain ................................................................................ 28
- Collaborative Art ........................................................................ 29
- Dialogue and Collaboration ....................................................... 31
- Intercultural Collaboration ......................................................... 32
- Individualist and Collectivist Cultures ....................................... 35
- Telematic and Telepresence Art ................................................. 38
- A Space of movement ............................................................... 42

## Chapter Three: An Analysis of IRUS Art
- An Analysis of IRUS Art ............................................................... 44
- A Dialogue about Dialogue ....................................................... 45
- IRUS art, Trust, and Respect ..................................................... 47
- IRUS Art, Differences, and Cultural Creation ............................... 52
- IRUS Art Collaboration: Art Statements ..................................... 53
- IRUS' Collaborative Art .............................................................. 59
- Choosing the Works ................................................................. 59
- Limitations in Collaboration ...................................................... 60
- An Analysis of IRUS Art Collaboration ...................................... 62
- Shahrzad and Mark Twain's: Individual and Collaborative art works .............................................. 70
IRUS art, Telematic and the Issue of Access ................................................................. 75
IRUS Art and Resistance .............................................................................................. 76
IRUS Art, Documentation, and Audience ................................................................... 79

CHAPTER FOUR: ........................................................................................................... 89
Conclusion and Further Directions ............................................................................. 89

Bibliography ............................................................................................................. 91

Appendix: ................................................................................................................... 97
Documentation of IRUS art ......................................................................................... 97
IRUS Art Logo ............................................................................................................ 97
IRUS Art Team Members ............................................................................................. 98
IRUS Art Card (front and back) ................................................................................... 99
IRUS Art Poster .......................................................................................................... 100
IRUS Art’s Press Release ............................................................................................. 101
IRUS Art Article in Denver Post .................................................................................. 103
Comments by Denver Post’s Audience on IRUS Art Article ...................................... 104
IRUS Art’s Flow Map ................................................................................................. 105
Chapter One:
Introduction to IRUS Art

The image of Iran is presently worsening in the west, in conjunction with 9/11 and complicated by the issue of nuclear energy development in Iran, the cultural divide is the largest it has ever been.

A survey by the BBC's World Service in March of 2007 asked 28,000 people to rate 12 countries as having a positive or negative influence in the world which included Britain, Canada, China, France, India, Iran, Israel, Japan, North Korea, Russia, the United States and Venezuela. After Israel, Iran placed as the second most negatively viewed country with a 54 percent negative viewpoint, with a positive viewpoint of only 18 percent of those surveyed (BBC's official website, 2007).

On January 29, 2002, George W. Bush named Iran, North Korea, and Iraq the “Axis of Evil” countries; the countries that he believed were helping terrorism and seeking weapons of mass destruction (From CNN’s official website, 2002).

Although by the year of 2007 there were many people in the United States who were against the policies and points of view of George W. Bush, and would not necessarily look at Iran’s nuclear program as a threat, the image of the Iran has been more or less negative after the 1979
Islamic revolution of Iran and the U.S embassy hostage crisis. These two events, for many American people, are some of the most important historical memories related to the conflict between Iran and United States’ relationship.

When I moved from Iran to the United States in August 2007, Iran’s nuclear issue was one of the hottest news stories and discussions in the media.

Introducing myself as an Iranian in Denver revealed the ignorance and stereotypes people have about Iran. For example people often confuse Iran and Iraq. They ask if my family is safe with war in Iraq or hamas and Israel. Or when wonder how I deal with the cold weather in Colorado (assuming Iran is a dessert).

Stereotypes about Iran and other Muslim countries are very similar to the repetitive images of the media about these countries. The news, reports, and the general image of all of the Middle-Eastern countries (except Israel) are the same for many Americans. As Edward Said talks about the similar issue in his book, Covering Islam, these stereotypes are formed by media all together and the media determine how we see the world (1997). In the Western media, the Middle-East is shown as a region of violence, poverty, tradition, people who are uneducated, people who are terrorists, people who live in the desert. These stereotypes have been developed in the last few decades through different medium in the American culture.
Cultural activities can be used as one of the most influential ways to break down these assumption barriers. We formed IRUS art project and the idea of cultural exchange between the artists located in two cities of Tehran and Denver as a cultural solution to these stereotypes. Through making art together under the theme of “Dialogue” and collaborating on one another’s art works as individuals and artists we hoped that we could start to listen to each other as human beings without paying attention to the biased narratives of political worlds about one another’s countries or the stereotypes around us. To understand the concept of dialogue in IRUS art project and how this project tries to break down these barriers by pushing limits, in the next chapter I will start explaining dialogue and concepts related to it, answering the question of how this project can also lead to a better understanding of each other while respecting and appreciating the differences that we had as artists from different cultures.

**IRUS Art Establishment**

IRUS art project started as an exhibition which was formed and developed by eleven artists in Tehran and nine artists in Denver with focus on having dialogue with each other as Iranian and American artists through making art while trying to stay a way from the regular stereotypes (popularize by media) about our countries. We worked under the same name, *IRUS* (Iran-United States) and a common theme, *dialogue*, and created art together collaboratively, while we used digital media and
mailing system as our telematic tools of sending art works back and forth between Tehran and Denver in order to be able to collaborate.

In February 2007 I gave a talk about underground art in Iran in Estlow Event Conference at the University of Denver. My lecture was about art movements in Iran and the narratives of young Iranian artists. After the session, an art student, Richard Burgess, started talking to me and asked if I was interested in cooperating with their art community called Kinda Collective.

After that short conversation, I started having meetings with the Kinda Collective team, which was comprised of only three art students at that time. We spent a majority of the summer and fall of 2008 finding more members for our team, putting together a proposal, thinking about the theme of the show, making a weblog, planning out the show, and finally starting a team in Tehran through the help of Negin Ehtesabian, an artist in Tehran and a friend of mine.

Later, Iran’s team suggested Shahrzad as one of the sections of our exhibition. In the Iranian team blog Negin wrote: “Shahrzad is the symbol of conquest of bad on good and is a symbol of a dialogical and non-violent battle against killing and war. I think Shahrzad can be the beautiful symbol of the power of dialogue ...” Negin asked me to present this suggestion to the U.S team in the Tehran’s team blog, and also to see if they want to choose a cultural symbol like Shahrzad from their culture, someone who was a storyteller, a peace fighter, or a dialogical person. This
is where the idea of Mark Twain formed from the U.S side; Samuel Clemens also known as Mark Twain who wrote socially proactive stories. We all recognized story-telling and fiction as both a cultural element and a concept related to dialogue. Both Shahrzad and Mark Twain are storytellers. Mark Twain is *Samuel Langhorne Clemens’* pen name, and Shahrzad is the wise storyteller character of *Abdol-latif Saboohi* who is telling stories for one thousand and one nights to Shahryar King (a King in Persia). Mark Twain and Shahrzad have their own seductive ways of telling stories. In this chapter, I will specifically talk about the qualities of these two characters, as well as the similarities and differences between Mark Twain and Shahrzad in order to explain the role of these characters in our IRUS art works and the reason we chose them as our cultural representatives.

After adding these two sections as a two of the sections of our exhibition, every artist was supposed to make an art work for Shahrzad, and/or Mark Twain. We left it open to the artists to either create real or surreal portrait of these two characters or use stories told by them in their art works. There was also no limitation for the media or the artistic style that we could use to create these pieces.

In the next stage, every artist in Iran and the United States started to work on their projects, individually or with some of the members of their teams. For example in Iran, Negin, Shabnam, Mahni, Paris, and Neda worked on a project called “Life & Lines”.
We also started creating committees for the American teams to assign specific roles of the artists, including the artist committee\(^1\), the exhibition committee\(^2\), the coordination committee\(^3\), the budget committee\(^4\), the promotion committee\(^5\), and the communication/deadlines/documentation committee\(^6\).

We received Iran’s collaborative art works in Digital format (DVDs) from New Jersey through one of my relatives who traveled from Iran to the U.S.

We also mailed all the American artists’ art works to Istanbul, Turkey (both in digital and physical format) to a relative who was traveling from Iran to Turkey for two weeks and took our works back to Tehran for the Iranian team.

---

1 **Artist Committee**: Must submit project description with budget. Maintain a page for our wordpress (Ask Richard if you need help). Attend all meetings (if you can't make it let us know). Meet all deadlines for Art work. Keep up with google docs/calendar/groups. Have an art statement with finished work for exhibition.

2 **Exhibition Committee**: Find gallery/location for show. Curate show.

3 **Coordination Committee**: Coordinate with all the committees to stay on track so we are successful.

4 **Budget/funding Committee**: Research and apply for grants. Organize financial information. Develop and prepare financial spreadsheet. Organize sales and distribution of money. Keep up with google docs/calendar/groups.

5 **Promotion Committee**: Develop logo, and promote the IRUS project. Keep up with google Attend all meetings docs/calendar/groups. Finish and maintain proposal. Keep up with google docs/calendar/groups. Attend all meetings.

6 **Communication/Deadlines/Documentation committee**: Maintain communication through Google calendar/groups/discussion. Send reminders about meetings, deadlines, and events to each member. Keep up with documentation of notes, photos and our general progress.
In January and February 2009, the promotion team designed our official press release, an official website for IRUS (www.irusart.org), brochures, and printed out cards, flyers, and posters Designed by Saeed Ensafi.

Later, we received all the complete art works from Turkey (to get the art works in a cheaper and safer way to Denver, my sister flew from Tehran to Istanbul and mailed the art works from there to Denver). The exhibition of IRUS art works will be held at the Andenken gallery in March of 2009 and in Tehran August of 2009.

Art vs. Politics

The complexity of IRUS art’s relationship to politics and the blur line of trying to stay away from politics while we had to resist mailing system limitations in order to be able to collaborate with each other, is an issue that brings up the relationship between politics, culture, and art, in addition to the historical tension between Iran and United States.

It is true that in IRUS art we all tried to make art as non-political as possible. But it is undeniable that our countries of citizenship and the history of their relation had an important and unavoidable role in our project, bringing into attention the role of politics in the processes of our collaboration and the concept of resistance as a political concept.

A brief overview to this history might help to explain why we had to deal with all of these problems to mail our art works; there were three influential
events which played the most dominant role in collapsing the relation of Iran and United States:

I. Hostage crisis that happened in Iran in 1979 (some months after the Islamic revolution of Iran) where Iranian hard-liners attacked the American embassy and kept its employees for 444 days as hostages. This event was the start of this long term collapse in this relation (From Jimmy Carter Library and Museum’s official website, 2006).

II. The Iran-Iraq war which lasted for eight years (1980-1988) and was supported by American government in the Iraq side. (from NPR’S official website, 2005).

III. In 1988 USS Vincennes shot down an Iranian commercial flight in Persian golf which killed 290 people (from U.S Foreign Policy’s official website, 2003). This event made the relationship even darker than before and made the anti-Americanism deeper for many of the Iranians.

For the last thirty years, United States and Iran do not have an official diplomatic relationship. This affects postal service and import and export laws between the two countries. Since 1979 no good can be mailed directly from Iran to United States or vice versa and only documents can be delivered between the two countries.

Therefore, the question that needs to be raised (which I will explain in chapter three) is that could we completely stay out of politics with
this strong political background of our countries, considering the tight relationship of culture, art, and politics.

**IRUS Art and the Similar Projects**

IRUS art project, certainly, is not the only intercultural, collaborative art show between two different cultures. Although, the specific official diplomatic relation between Iran and United States played a key role in our project (making the collaboration process complicated and unique. Transporting the art works directly from Tehran to Denver became one of the great challenges. However, when other concepts such as breaking down the assumptions or cultural barriers, collaboration between artists, intercultural, and telepresence art are involved, there are similarities between IRUS art and some other projects.

One of the similar projects that try to break down the cultural barriers using telepresence art as a way to communicate and form a critical concept is *Satellite Arts Project* from a series of projects called: *Aesthetic from Research* in Telecommunications, developed by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz 1975 through 1977. In this project, demonstrated performing artists, in different geographical locations, could perform together in the same live broadcast. All participants see themselves together, next to one another, able to interact with each other, and ultimately, performing together.
Another project that is similar to IRUS art in some ways is called *Electronic Café*. In this project Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz build the concept of “telecollaborative network connecting informal public multimedia communications venues” in 1983. What Became the Electronic Cafe network was artists delivering “a replicable social model and proposed antidote to the approaching Orwellian year of 1984.” They thought that integrating telecollaborative technologies with creative communities in the Los Angeles area that a new medium for cultural sharing and communication would come forward, a new assembly establishing a dialogue with regard to the role technology plays in the development of new cultural interaction, as well as artistic collaboration and investigation. And ultimately, we would not realize the Orwellian prophecy” (from electronic Café Website: http://www.ecafe.com/, 2009).

*Connect* is an interactive fax project that was created by Gilbertto Prado, which involves two sites and two fax machines at each site. Artists at each site are asked to feed a roll of paper from one fax machine to another and interface with the images process without cutting the paper roll. The important concept behind the project is about connecting not only the artists but the machines themselves’ (Kac,E. 2005:P47).”

It is notable how the above projects intend to connect people and specifically the artists through the latest technology that they had access to (Satellites, networking, telephone, fax machine, etc).
Intercultural and telepresence projects bring people of different cultures, who are very closely linked to the technology together. Without the use of telecomm and digital media, connecting people from long distances seems impossible, especially when it comes to a case such as IRUS art which is connecting the artists from two countries who are separated by thousands of miles, not to mention all of the strict rules both governments have with tourist visa, particularly the U.S which has made it extremely hard for Iranian citizens to travel to the U.S.

One of technological challenges of the IRUS project has been the speed and accessibility of the internet in Iran. For Iranian artists, sending high quality art works through email was impossible. That’s one of the reasons we were forced to rely on the postal service.

Exquisite Corps is the other similar project “Based on an old parlor game, it was played by several people, each of whom would write a phrase on a sheet of paper, fold the paper to conceal part of it, and pass it on to the next player for his contribution (From the website www.exquisитecorpsе.com).” This project later became popular as one of the dominant methods of collaborative art. For example, in painting artists would sit together around the table, one artist would start painting and would pass the incomplete painting to the next artist without sharing his or her thoughts behind the work, the next artist would continue painting according to his or her own perception of the work. This cycle would
continue between the artists around the table as a way to collaborate in creating an art piece.

Exquisite Corps’s method and concepts are one of the closest to the IRUS project in a way that it brings the artists together to create collaborative on art works. One of the differences between Exquisite Corps and the IRUS project is however, the way artists collaborate on the project. In IRUS, artists read each other’s art statement before they collaborate on the art piece. Also, IRUS is about intercultural exchange and telepresence art; two IRUS concept that did not inform in practices of exquisite corpse. Artists are free to use any medium to collaborate on the other artists work and are not limited to finish their work in one session of collaboration. On the contrary Exquisite Corps artists did not discuss the artistic statement behind the art work.

Finally a show called *The Seattle-Tehran Poster Show*; an intercultural art show between graphic designers in Tehran and Seattle, where artists displayed 50 posters from each city related to social and cultural themes such as cinema, music, contemporary arts, and theater. The show was held in Seattle in 2008 and is planning on traveling to Iran in 2009. This cultural exchange, from Daniel Smith’s point of view –The curator of the show and one of the artists- “humanizes our view of the other side and demonstrates not simply a willingness to reach out to one another, but a concrete example of how to do so” (Official Website, 2008).
The focus of both this show and IRUS art show is on breaking the assumptions and cultural barriers between two countries of Iran and United States, using art as the solution of this activity. In IRUS art show, artists not only focus on this aspect of the collaboration, but also try to understand one another’s cultures through making art together. The process of this collaboration and the limitations of sending the arts works back and forth in order to collaborate is also one of the important conceptual aspects of IRUS art which does not exist in the Seattle and Tehran collaboration, while artists in this show did not collaborate on one another’s art works but just displayed their works together in a joint art show.

Layout

In the IRUS art project, even though language plays a less significant role, a similar or more accurate understanding of the dialogue and collaboration between artists is necessary and helpful. However, from my observation of the IRUS project for the last one year, I have learned that it is very hard, and sometimes impossible to consciously and unconsciously agree on a similar understanding of collaboration and dialogue between twenty artists from two different cultures, with different backgrounds, beliefs, and perspectives.

In next chapter, Conceptual Foundation, I will focus on the concepts of dialogue, collaboration, and telematic and telepresence art as the most focal concepts of our IRUS art show. These three concepts, their histories, the artistic
practices based on these concepts, and some of the other elements involved in
those practices, sensibly overlap. Many of the artistic and collaborative projects
that I have used in this chapter as historical backup of my project, point out some
of the above concepts, with a more or less emphasis on dialogue, collaboration,
and telecommunication. In the IRUS art project, dialogue is the central concept
as it is the theme of our show and it includes two categories, verbal and non-
verbal. Collaboration is important because it is the method of our practice and it
is our approach to have non-verbal dialogue through art and collaboration.
Telecommunication is our technological tool used for communication, mailing
the art works, and having a dialogue as individuals and artists which brings into
attention, resistance art, the documentation process of our work and the
importance of it.

In chapter three, *An Analysis of IRUS art*, I will analyze the
process of our verbal dialogue and our collaboration, using details of our
documented dialogue with each other, as well as a brief overview and
analysis of some of the collaborative art works in our project. Moreover, in
this chapter I will point out some of challenges that we faced using digital
media and mailing systems to be able to send the works to Iran and the
United States. Through using these examples and my observation, I wish
to posit and analyze the way dialogue between artists have formed and
through interviewing some of the artists I wish to provide respond to the
questions that I had in my mind while participating and observing
different processes of our project.
CHAPTER TWO: Conceptual Foundation

Participant observation is the dominant method of this study. I have been part of the IRUS art project since the launch of it and have served as the coordinator and organizer of the project. I participated in almost all of the committee meetings including artist, promotion, exhibition, communication, budget, and coordination committee (even though I was not part of the promotion and budget committee). As the coordinator of the project and the only Iranian artists in IRUS art who is living in the United States, I have also been playing the role of the translator. The process of translating the dialogue between the artists in Iran and United States worked as below:

When Negin started a team in Iran, they had their meetings weekly on Thursdays. In the United States, we had most of our meetings weekly on Saturdays. Negin would update their blog each week after their meeting, writing the detail of their meeting, everyone’s opinion on different issues, and usually, including some photos. Sometimes she would also email me to ask some other questions or to express her thoughts or concerns. I would read the blog and emails (both were written in Farsi) before our Saturday meetings and then in our meeting I would start
talking about what the Iran team has said or suggested, or where they are with their art works. The American team would discuss the Iranian team’s thoughts, ideas, or suggestions. Then, we would talk about other things that we had in our agenda. After our meeting I would email Negin in Farsi to transfer our thoughts, suggestions, and ideas. Less frequently than the Iranian team, either I or someone else in our team would also put some photos or our meeting report on our blog. Sometimes Negin and I would also talk on the phone instead of emailing. This process continued back and forth for the entirety of our project.

Bernard, a cultural anthropologist, states in his book *Research Methods in Anthropology*, participant observation should not be mistaken with the pure observation or pure participant (Bernard, 1995). Jorgenson describes pure observation as “going native” or “becoming the phenomena” (Jorgensen, 1989, P.18). When a researcher becomes part of the culture and adjusts the identity, there is always the problem of losing the analytic perspective and interest (Dewalt,k & Dewalt,B, 2002).

With regard to my organization and coordination responsibilities, it was difficult to maintain my role as observer and to avoid becoming a pure participant. As Behar outlines:

“Participant observer is a paradox because the ethnographer seeks to understand the native’s viewpoint, but *not* go native.”

(1991, P.70)
I have used “complete participant” and “reflective observer” methods as my dominant categories of participant observation. In complete participation, the ethnographer becomes the member of the group that he is studying, while still observing, recording, and taking notes. In “reflective observer” the observation and analysis will get more completed after the researcher is done with participation, as he or she reviews and rethinks about the details and actual concepts of the project in order to be able to have a deeper analysis and understanding of the project (Dewalt.K. & Dewalt.B, 2002).

**Dialogue**

Dialogue is the theme of the IRUS art show. All of the art works including the works that were done collaboratively between artists, and also Shahrzad and Mark Twain arts are related to the concept of dialogue. As the members of IRUS congregated, we needed to find a subject as the main theme of the show to focus on. It is notable that the more we got involved in making these art works the more we realized that in our collaboration with each other, we were having a dialogue through art..

Before explaining the way dialogue will occur in this project, it is helpful to first define the details of and develop a definition of dialogue:

"Dialogue" comes from the Greek word *dialogos*. Dia means “through” and *Logos* means "the word," or in our case we would think of the "meaning of the word" (Bohm,D. 1996: P6).
The modern roots of the concept of dialogue have been largely influenced by David Bohm, a physicist and philosopher, as well as Martin Buber, a religious and social philosopher.

Martin Buber divides the relation of the human to the universe and more specifically to dialogue into two different groups: First I-Thou (man-man) and second I-It (man-object). In this Buberian perspective, the human can neither be solely Thou (a pure I or subject) nor can it be an It. “Hence methodologically Thou-orientation, i.e., dialogue, is the only alternative left for us.” (Biswas, 1995, p.47).

**Dialogue and Consciousness**

In the book *Dialogue as a means of collective communication*, Banathy and Jenlink talk about “dialogue as culture creating” and explain that dialogue has the potential to act as a bridge to understand other cultures and other people (2005, p. 7). In this chapter, they also highlight Buber’s thoughts about dialogue and cultural creativity, stating that when two persons relate directly through dialogue, they become able to foster social creativity (2005, p. 7). This relation can “generate frameworks of common discourse between different, often disparate, sectors of society” (Buber, 1992, p. 16).

When it comes down to a dialogue between different cultures, and generally differences between people who are engaged in a dialogue, differences can actually act as a positive point of creativity. “It is in the
differences that Buber (1992) believed that the creative tension is
necessary to cultural creativity resided” (Banathy & Jenlink, 2005, p. 11).

This consciousness could help us to respect and understand
other people and appreciate the differences. “Genuine dialogue enables
the evolution from individual consciousness, to a level of consciousness
awareness of differences, to a level of dialogic consciousness” (Banathy &

Consciousness, respect, and understanding are therefore some
of the imperative elements of a dialogue. Burbules and Rice illustrate that
dialogue might not lead to an agreement, but it can create partial

Putting all of the above elements in a more meaningful order,
and starting with willingness for dialogue, it is important to be conscious
about the differences to be bridged. This level of consciousness can be
influential in a better understanding. Without understanding as well as
trust, a mutual respect cannot occur between the participants of a
dialogue.

Scholars such as Bohm, Gadamer, and Martin Rosenberg who place
emphasis on peaceful dialogue, believe in a dialogue where winning is not the
goal. In this dialogue, we get together to understand the other person’s view to
the world. Therefore, it is not the battle of making the other person understand
what you believe; but rather, to understand that person’s world more peacefully
and respectfully or as Godamer believes:
“[It] is a process of two people understanding each other. Thus it is a characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other to such an extent that he understands not a particular individual, but what he says. The thing that has to be grasped is the objective rightness or otherwise of his opinion, so that they can agree with each other on a subject” (Gadamer 1979: 347).

**Dialogue and Decision Making**

Depending on the amount of engagement in a dialogue, what the goal of having the dialogue is, and for what reasons people are involved in it, decision making through dialogue can become one of the important stages of a dialogue. Giving everyone the chance to express their perspectives, being able to listen to other people’s comments and thoughts, and respect them equally can be helpful in making more democratic decisions. Collectively, a dialogical conversation is not possible without a democratic process and an equal value for everyone’s perspective.

**Dialogue in Iranian Culture**

The word dialogue in Farsi is *goft o goo*. Goft means word, statement, *said* and goo is the order verb which means *say* (Dehkhoda Dictionary).

In his article *The talk of Dialogue in a monologue society*, Kalantari states that Persian literary dialogue has been used as if there are two or more people discussing a subject and there is a judge which is
controlling the discussion and tells them goft “said” and now you “goo” (now you say) (Kalantari, K. 2007: P1).

Also, in some Persian literature, the dialogue has the ideas of discussion and struggle. In such situations, dialogue happens in the battles where both fighters are at the same levels of power. They are forced to listen to each other although they are not interested in the discussion, they each know they will not win the battle, or it will be a tough battle, they suggest to have a conversation instead of a fight (Kalantari, K. 2007).

Kalantari further claims that in most traditional societies, the dominant culture is monologue. The patriotic cultures of these societies teach people to accept the top-down view and listen. Growing up in such societies teaches you to always listen to your parents and older people (with little regard to how right or logical they are being), always listen to your teacher, always listen to your government and so on. There is also slang in Farsi, which says God has given you two ears and one tongue. Which means you should listen two times more than you may speak (Kalantari, L. 2007).

Kalantari also discusses the different role of theater in Persian culture in which monologue is very popular (Compared to the theater in the west where dialogue is the dominant form), he also discusses the importance of the solo voice in traditional music in Iran. He uses these examples as evidences of his claim that Iranian culture and society is more monological than dialogical.
From what Kalantari states in his article, we can conclude that he believes it is almost impossible to have a dialogue between East and West, because as Kalantari outlines, most of the Eastern countries’ governments and cultures are monologue, therefore a dialogue is hardy possible in between monological and dialogical societies. However, what Kalantari forgets to consider is that, first of all dialogue could have many different layers in a culture and considering only one aspect of it should not be used as a general judgment or conclusion. This kind of generalizing is fault in academic area (especially with post-modern perspective which is against any generalizing). Also, dialogue and concepts related to it are relative, but their relativistic characteristic does not necessary mean failure to communicate or failure to have a dialogue with a different culture or with different perceptions of dialogue.

Bohm not only challenges the relative concept of meanings in dialogue, where the sender and the receiver of the message will not share the same meanings on the same concepts, but also clearly places emphasis upon the relativistic characteristic of the concepts being used in a dialogue (Bohm,D. 1996).

We cannot claim that because music, theater, and some cultural aspects of the Persian culture lean more toward monologue than dialogue, that the Iranian society is not able to get engaged in a dialogue with other countries. IRUS art project and my experience with it can surely stand out as one of the many other examples of the possible dialogue between East
and West, between more traditional and more modern cultures. In addition, understanding why and how to value dialogue is a learnable process, even if a person or a society is not completely aware of its facts.

Kalantari’s focus in his article has been mostly on top-down dialogue, not realizing that generalizing this conclusion for every other category of dialogue is not applicable. When he talks about dialogue he uses the examples of political dialogue (for example president Khatami’s Dialogue between civilizations plan) and cultural facts (monologue theater and music), ignoring the potential of bottom-up dialogue. In IRUS art project which is based on bottom-top dialogue, we aim to start from grassroots and form a pattern through having dialogue as artists; hoping that our mission will spread between other groups and even in a more national level. There are many other similar artistic and cultural activities in Iran which is based on bottom-up dialogue, which Kalantari does not mention at all.

**Dialogue and Storytelling**

According to Kuhns, storytelling is probably the greatest constancy of every culture. It is not only entertainment but also a way to express and think about human conflicts and problems (2005).

Storytelling was a significant method used in the IRUS art project as depicted by art. Storytelling is a form of art itself, it has grown along with drawing and cave carving as some of the first and common methods of creation and expression in all cultures (Kungs, 2005). Therefore, using stories of Sharzad and Mark Twain provide both representation of our cultures and a re-creation of
these stories in our own ways as artists. Through the re-creation of these stories in any medium that we were interested in, we could have a dialogue with each other. Therefore, both re-creation and sharing were the important elements of this dialogue.

According to Grobstein:

“Story sharing as the foundation of human cultures would discourage both demonization and disabling and has the potential to engage all humans as equally valued participants in an ongoing process of creating and revising both individual stories and broader human stories in which everyone is involved and can take pride. (2007, P1).

There is a bilinear relationship between dialogue and storytelling. According to Martin : “Dialogue is a form of storytelling that allows a collective story (the New Story?) to emerge”. It is also not limited to linguistic form but can contain all the other non-verbal or silent forms (2005, p.88). Storytelling (if it’s interactive and engaging) can be a form of dialogue as well. On a more general level, from Buber’s perspective “... all art is from its origin essentially of the nature of dialogue (Biswas, 1995, p. 51).”

It was the same point of view that became interesting for all of the IRUS art members to choose a cultural story which would be an example of dialogue or peaceful language; a dialogue between good and bad which could also represent our cultures and would also give us the chance to exchange art works through visualizing these stories.
Through this visualization and re-creation, we not only had a dialogue with each other; but also, became storytellers of our cultures while mixing our own perspectives and interests with the portraits and stories of Shahrzad and Mark Twain. For example, Paris Mahtosh made a poster for Sharzad, called *iSchahrzade* which was a mixture of technology, using the popular “i” of iphones to create a new story about Sharzad which was intimately linked with the technological world (See Figure 1). In the next two sections I will specifically talk about Shahrzad and Mark Twain to give a clearer idea of the reasons we, specifically, chose these two stories as the symbols of our cultures.

![iSchahrzade poster by Paris Mahtosh](image)

Figure 1

*iScheherazade*

by Paris Mahtosh
One Thousand and One Nights

The collection of one thousand and one nights’ stories originated under the name of *Hezar Afsan* in some unknown period of Sasanian Iran. Later, it was translated into Arabic as *Alf Layla* (A thousand nights). The first Western rendition of the one thousand and one nights was by a French orientalist, Antoine Galland, translated as *One Thousand and One Nights, Arabian Tales*. In English the translation, one thousand and one nights was *the Arabian Nights* or the *Arabian Nights’ Entertainment* (Marzoph, 2007). The English translation changes the Arabian stories to Arabian nights.

Shahrzad is the storyteller of these stories. She specifically, is using these stories in a very special way. In the Persian culture, Shahrzad has been the wise and a pro-peace character.

In the story of One Thousand and One nights, she becomes the volunteer of the city who finds a solution to stop Shahryar king from killing virgin girls every night, as he has gone mad after his wife had cheated on him.

Shahryar marries a virgin girl each night and kills her before the sun set. After Shahrzad volunteers to marry the king, she stays alive by preoccupying him with stories and keeps the end of each story past the sunset. Shahrzad continues this for one thousand and one nights weaving stories of morality and virtuous women till the mad king heals. Shahrzad’s legend shows that stories, metaphor, and dialogue are the best way to fight against a conflict; to bring peace and love into someone’s life as well as the world.
It is notable to mention that the replacement of the original titles from *One Thousand and One nights* to *Arabian Nights*, in the first English edition of *One Thousand and One nights*, has an affect on Shahzad’s role. “The temporal aspect of the book (which is the number of the nights) gets replaced with the narrative aspect (which is the number of the stories)” (Yamanaka & Nishio, 2006, p.225). This replacement, in addition to the title of the English edition, takes the Western audience of the book away from Shahrzad’s role and her drama. As Yamanaka and Nishio continue about Shahrzsd in their book *The Arabian Nights and Orientalism*:

“She is no longer perceived as being threatened by the end of the night nor does she need to interrupt her story at the right moment. The suspense, linked to the time on which her life depends, is thus suppressed and so her narration is no longer associated with the idea of sequel on the following day” (2006, p.226).

This issue was one of the concerns of the Iranian team. When Negin suggested Shahrzad as cultural symbol of Iranian culture for dialogue, some of the Iranian team members brought up the fact that One Thousand and One Nights in known as the Arabian Nights in the West, which could get confusing where the story belongs. Negin however mentioned that even though this mistake has been made in the translation, using Shahrzad which is a Persian name as well, not only could help changing this point of view among the artists in Denver and the audience, but it is necessary for us to understand that Arabic and Persian culture have been grown as the same culture in a specific period of
history (since the attack of Arabs to Iran during 8th to 10th century). Negin continues “Even if the titles of these stories are named after Arabs, what is important is that Shahrzad is part of our culture too (From IRUS art Iranian blog, 2009).

**Mark Twain**

The American team decided on Mark Twain as the same cultural symbol as Shahrzad. Mark Twain is the pen name or alter ego of Samuel Clemens. Samuel Clemens used the Mark Twain character as a voice to show social and political absurdities. According to Andrew Blanton (One of the American artists involved in IRUS art), American team chose Mark Twain because: “He is a well known American author who represents some of the best parts of America while his pen illustrated some of the worst. Twain had a sharp wit and was unaccepting of the status quo which ultimately provided for a poetic and great choice in comparison for Shahrzad.”

Josh Fishburn, another American artist in IRUS art expresses his point of view about Mark Twain as below:

“I'm interested in Mark Twain because he represents in himself a transformation in political ideals, from those of American imperialism to a hands-off, anti-nationalist ideal in his later life. Through dialogue, travels, writing, etc. this transformation took place. He is seen as such a mythical figure that I don't think that most people (including myself) know what he was really like, so we only have his stories to live by. Because the US has such an individualist ideal, it seemed appropriate to choose someone who not only represented a
transformation of ideals (like the king in the story of Shahrzad), but also someone who had a life that represented an American mythos.”

One thing that I tried to point out in our meeting was the influence of Mark Twain in Iran, and specifically of my generation in Iran. Mark Twain stories were part of our literature school books, and what made it to stand out for us even more was Huckleberry Finn’s cartoon’s collection which was shown by Iran’s television in Farsi. In addition, the Iranian government has always been showing a positive attitude toward Mark Twain’s character, introducing him as an anti-capitalism, who is trying to stand up against the cruel America. Although Shahrzad did not have the same role in American’s lives and most of the American artists involved in IRUS did not know much about it, the popularity of Mark Twain in Iran could become a positive point for Iranian artists to have a less difficulty dealing with the visual creation of the work.

**Collaborative Art**

Collaborative art inherited its popularity from the Dadaists and Surrealists movements, which promoted joint artistic projects. Performance, collage, and photomontage, were particularly adoptable from the collaborative activities of Dadaists. For Surrealists, “exquisite Corpse” was the joint activity, where artists would create a drawing together. These avant-garde groups focused on ignoring the traditional distinction between visual arts, theater, and literature, or more generally the distinction between different media (Sollins and Sundell, 1990, P.2).
In his article *Collaboration as Symptom*, Charles Green sees collaboration as an essential element in the modernist to postmodernist art transition. His emphasis is on a changing culture, the special characteristics of art in the late 1960s and 1970s are happening as: “Redefinitions of art and of artistic collaboration (which) intersected at this time” (1969). However, in Nancy Roth’s perspective, until the 1970s modernist collaborative art practices, collaboration was not perceived as a choice or opportunity.

Sollins and Sundell believe that although the dialogical collaboration existed in the early modernist art movements, the artists who came together to work on the collaborative art making as a new way of making art, were highly individualistic. Rogoff, as well, critiques these earlier avant-guard movements mentioning that the modern artists’ collaboration has a very limited concept, which “… assumes a coming together of talents and skills which cross-fertilize one another through simple processes, neither challenged by issues of difference nor by issue of resistance” (1990, P.33). Therefore, collaborative art in its earlier formation had a more individualistic essence than the collaborative art in the late 1990s. This is what Craig Bromberg calls “that collaborating itch; “The modernist approach to collaboration without the desire for an integration of elements.” (1988, P.161).

Postmodern collaborations (which were under the influence of conceptual arts), especially the ones that happened during 1980s and 1990s were based on collectivism, conceptualism, and sustainable collaborations (Green, 1969). Collaborative art and its raising popularity between artists, especially for
the last decade, bring up some important concepts such as authorship, authenticity and the artists’ relationships to their works & audiences. My focus here is more on the relation between dialogue and collaboration and the nature of collaboration itself and concepts related to it.

**Dialogue and Collaboration**

In the distinct different layers of dialogue highlighted in the last chapter, dialogue between the artists and their works and the dialogue between artists through collaboration on one and other’s art works, are the dialogical activities that are directly related to collaboration. Collaboration is a process that is impossible without communication and dialogue, the process of individuals coming together to follow the same goal under some specific conditions that they might or might not decide on together. All the other aspects of dialogue that I explained in the last chapter including understanding, trust, respect, and decision-making could also be part of the collaboration depending on the form.

Nancy Roth (2005) believes through collaboration with each other, people potentially join a dialogue. They feel isolated without dialogue because dialogue attaches them to history. More specifically, Roth outlines the artists -those who see themselves as real artists- are among people who know dialogue well; therefore, they are open to collaboration in art which is a more practical form of dialogue. Roth also emphasizes the art being about relationships. In particular, artists have a better potential for understanding dialogue and collaboration because the act of making art and the relationship between artist with their
artwork or the medium that he or she uses is a stable practice of dialogue, even if it is unconscious. This takes us back to Buber’s I-It (man-object) relationship. This perspective to dialogue is helpful in understanding that in collaboration between artists, the I-It relationship can become very complicated. If there are artists working on the same artwork together dialogue is simultaneously happening between them (as artists) and between them and the artwork. The form of dialogue between the artwork and the artists in such collaborations can also be much related to the perception of artists about collaboration and whether their dialogue to the artwork and with each other is more based on individualistic dialogue or collectivistic dialogue.

**Intercultural Collaboration**

Collaboration between people from different cultures brings up concepts that might not be important in collaboration between people involved in a dialogue from the same cultures. Collectivism and individualism are two of these concepts that should be addressed and recognized in some of the intercultural collaborations. However, before exploring these concepts and the complex relationships that might occur in intercultural collaboration because of the differences of cultures - including collectivism and individualism- I will take a brief look at intercultural communication and some aspects of it.

If culture and communication are seen as a recursive loop which makes them inseparable, then intercultural communication can be defined as “a process of interaction between groups of people with different systems of symbolic resources” (Klyukanov, 2005, P.10). By symbolic resources, Klyukanov means
“shared system of symbolic verbal and nonverbal behavior that are meaningful to 
group members” (2005, P.10). There is a problem of language barriers in 
communication and exchanges with cultures of different languages, however non 
verbal communication— as a more common and metaphoric language of the globe, 
presents the participants a less complicated and more understandable way to 
collaborate and communicate.

Collaboration through art as one of the examples of nonverbal 
communication, not only conceal some of the differences between artists, but also 
because art is the same language everywhere in the world, gives the participant 
the feeling of similarity. Following the feeling of similarities, there are feelings of 
understanding which can appear in intercultural collaborations through a 
nonverbal medium which makes the participant—in this case artists—to think: 
“We are all artists, so we understand each other. Doesn’t matter what culture we 
belong to.” With regard to understanding and other issues such as respect, trust, 
and decision-making, in his book “Intercultural Communication” Klyukanov uses 
the example of the Prison’s Dilemma game. He initially states that there are 
some common facts in the study of intercultural communication and game 
theories, and his first point of view is the action of people in intercultural 
communication and games; that the actions of people in one culture depend on 
the actions of the other person from another culture. He uses Prison’s Dilemma 
game and its rules to clarify how this relationship works.
In this game two people are arrested under the suspicion of being partners in a crime. They are put in different cells so they can not communicate but there are some rules which manipulate their destiny in prison; which are:

- If one person confesses sooner than the other one, he or she will go free and the other person gets 10 years in jail.
- If they both confess, they each get 5 years in jail.
- If they both remain silent, they only get one year in jail and less charge.


According to these rules, trust and decision-making are the main lessons of the game. If the both prisoner trust each other and do not confess, they are going to get less years in jail. However, what makes this process complicated is how much and how long these two can trust each other and stay silent, confiding that the other person will not confess. The other lesson is that one person’s decision will affect the other person. The similarity between this game and intercultural communication is not only based on these two lessons but it also based on the fact that in a successful intercultural communication, people should learn to work with each other, not against. Differences between people who are going to collaborate in an intercultural collaboration might make them think that the other person is wrong or their positions and perspectives are better than the other people from another culture. However, having an understanding that differences can be positive in achieving specific goals in producing cultural
creation, the key for the participants is to be able to work together while respecting these differences. Without this kind of perspective and awareness, starting a dialogue with another culture might become very complicated and sometimes impossible.

**Individualist and Collectivist Cultures**

Intercultural collaborations or communications might occur between people with different attitudes toward teamwork and collaboration. Klyunkanov claims that Individualism and Collectivism are conceptually defined as the degree of people’s integration in groups (2005, P.138).

Triandis states that in individual cultures “the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and the immediate family” (Klyunkanov, 2005, P.138; Triandis, 1995). Self-realization is also one of the important elements of these cultures. On the other hand, in collectivistic cultures “people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in groups” (Hoftstede & Bond, 2001: 37). In Collective cultures people have an emotional dependence on the groups and organizations that they belong to. Their self-realization behavior might also be seen as selfishness (Klyunkanov, 2005, P.138). Moreover, Hofstede believe that the members of collectivistic cultures have a “we” consciousness that is rarely visible in individualistic cultures. Triandis statement about the differences between goals in these cultures which highlights that in collectivist cultures, personal and group goals are compatibly aligned, but in individualistic cultures, there is an emphasis in putting
personal goals as prior goals (2003, P.28) is another characteristic of individualistic and collectivistic cultures that is important.

The problem in using the above statements in this study are in the black and white attitude toward the duality of cultures as individualism and collectivism, which does not seem very accurate. This kind of view to societies and cultures are positivistic and traditional. Gudykunst and Nishida critique Hofstede’s theory, calling it “cross-culturally generalizable” (1989, P.28).

Xi as well, critiques Hofstede in her book Individualism and Collectivism in American and Chinese societies, indicating that collectivism and individualism are not dual concepts that can be separated from each other. In short, the fundamental elements of these two cultures are “instinctively linked” (1994, P.158). Also, Hofstede’s theory was developed in organizational communication, therefore, the results of his theory are not applicable to personal communication in different cultures (2003, P.32). From this point of view, American culture, which is famous as a very individualistic culture, actually has some aspect of collectivism which makes it impossible to call the culture solely individualistic. One example Xi uses, is that the American people try to solve social problems together in talk shows. For example, the Oprah show. Xi emphasize that “American individualism can not be separated from their collectivism” (1994, P.32).

It is also the same story about Iranian culture. Although the culture is known as a collectivist culture, there is no doubt that there are aspects of individualism inside of the culture. Iranian’s driving is one of the clearest
examples of their individualism. Doesn’t matter how collectivist Iranians are in other aspects of their lives, they become extremely self-centered in driving. Traffic and the crowd of Tehran (and other major cities), and the pressure of spending hours and hours in traffic makes the whole driving system so complicated. Drivers do not follow the rules of right of way, neither for the other drivers, nor for the pedestrians. People always want to be “the first” passing and crossing streets and intersections. Thus, Driving in Iran is one of the popular examples of sociologists for Iranian’s extreme collectivism which also helps to advocate a more balanced view toward the positivistic perspective of collectivistic and individualistic cultures.

In collaborating with artists from both Iran and United States –Iran known as a collectivism culture and United States as an individualism culture- my observation of artists in collaboration with each other (including myself) is that the majority of the American artists leaned more toward individualism in their collaboration with the artists in Iran, while Iranian artist mostly behaved collectivistic in their collaboration. However, it is hard to generalize these items because some of the artists in the U.S were actually as collective as the artists in Iran and some of the artists in Iran were as individualist as artists in the U.S team. Therefore, given this complexity, I will use my observations and analysis showing some of these differences and similarities, focusing on what Xi calls: the inseparability of the individualism and collectivism in cultures (1994, P.32).
Telematic and Telepresence Art

One of the first issues that the concept of telepresence and telematic arts bring into mind is the break down of space and time. Globalization and the popular “Global Village” slang which McLuhan (1962) talks about, explains a world with no boundaries. In his article *Wealth and Poverty of Networks*, Friedman defines globalism as “an expression of the idea that national boundaries are problematic in some senses, meaningless in others” (2006, P.6). Further he defines this globalism as a world where individuals are equally valuable and a framework is required for each individual to fulfill his or her potential. In the world of art, movements such as telepresence and telematic arts attempt to make this idealistic wish possible through practicing long distance and collaborative art.

Distance is –more or less- a common concept between many of the artists involved in art projects which deal with telecommunication and network art. In fact, one approach to have a different understanding of the concept of distance and what it means when it comes to such art projects, distance can be seen “as a space of movement, circulation, connection, collaboration, and network” (Chandler & Neumark, 2005, p. 27). Therefore, what are important in such practices are not the objects that have been created or gone back and forth between the artists but rather the cultural and social relationships that change the meaning of distance which might be seen as a problem or a block. It is true that projects in distance makes it more complex for communication with other artists and as Douglas David said: “I don’t believe in communication, I believe in
the great adventure of attempting communication, especially over great distances” (Neumark, 2005, p. 14). Part of this adventure is technology and its capability of connecting people.

The concept of distance also brings up the meanings of collaboration as some of the crucial elements of these projects. Before presenting a brief overview of the joint history of telepresence art with collaboration, it is notable to point out that collaboration is the method of many of the art distance projects; Projects which Saper defines their characteristic as speaking themselves without needing any extra explanation (Saper, 2001).

Telematic and telepresence arts have a tight historical background with collaborative art. Just as Dada, Surrealism, Futurism, and in general, conceptual arts were the founders and the most influential movements of collaborative art, they had the same influence in telematic and telepresence arts. Dada telegraphy, Futurist Correspondence, and Duchamp’s *Rendez-vous du dimanche* are some of the historical examples of telepresence art.

According to Kac, telecommunication art is a result of the decrease of the role of the art object which became popular by Duchamp and pursued by other artists associated with conceptual art movement (Kac, 2005). “This new immaterial art is collaborative and interactive and abolishes the state of unidirectionality traditionally characteristic of literature and art” (2005, P.4).

The above explanation might clarify the reason behind the historical joint of collaborative and telematic and telepresence arts, while pointing out the
nature of telecommunication art being linked with collaboration and interaction of both the artists with each other and also the artists with the audience. Based on these relations, the traditional model of sender/receiver is not applicable in these forms of art. In telepresence art, artists usually use the telecommunication system such as telephone, fax, mail, radio, and internet to connect to each other and use the potential of telecommunication tools or media to create art collaboratively. One of the examples of early artistic practices that engages telecommunication and collaborative concepts is *Terminal Art* by Roy Ascott (1980). In this project Ascott mailed portable terminals to a group of artists in California, Washington, and New York. These artists used these terminals to collaboratively share and create ideas with one another (Ascott, 2007).

In his book *Telepresence and Bio Art* Eduardo Kac links some of the conceptual theories of dialogical, collaborative, and telepresence arts, stating that these three concepts are inseparable when it comes to the idea of telepresence and telematic arts. In order to explain this relation, Kac claims:

“Dialogical telepresence events combine self and other in an ongoing interchange, dissolving the rigidity of these positions as projected remote subjects. Art both shares concerns with other disciplines and offers us cognitive models with which to reflect on social, political, emotional, and philosophical aspects of life. The more electronic art learns from the fascinating and unpredictable qualities of
conversational interaction [...] , the closer it will get to engaging us in a process of negotiation of meaning. This is the true dialogic calling of art” (2005, P.120).

Therefore, from this point of view, through using telepresence art (which itself has a dialogical potential), artists are able to connect to each other and collaborate. This is what Kac calls “telecommunications-based dialogically, as it overcomes local boundaries and enables intersubjective experiences through the network on a global scale.” (2005, P.104).

Based on this perspective, Ascott states: “Telematic implies interaction, negotiation, and cooperation amongst human beings and intelligent machines. Telematic process involves ambiguity, uncertainty and incompleteness; meaning is not given but negotiated, endlessly reconstituted and redefined; truth, always relative, does not lie in an absolute location but is embedded in process, is tellematically inscribed in the networking that is human behavior at its most librated (2007, P. 202). “

In fact, this is the place where dialogue stands out and different stages of it (consciousness, understanding, trust, respect, and decision making) and the reasons behind their importance become visible. In this scenario, there is no absolute truth to make art based on and relativism is the theory which helps the artists to appreciate the differences and respect and trust each other while collaborating to have a dialogue. Therefore, through using telematic and telepresence media and tools, and using art as the non-verbal and global
language of this dialogue, artists are able to break down both cultural and geographical boundaries. Going back to the concept of distance as one of the important elements of telematic and telepresence arts and their relation to diversity and understanding; “Distance provides a common reference without undermining the richness of diverse understanding and approaches to it ... Distance opens the way to engage with projects in their own terms, in their diversity, and in their complexity” (Chandler & Neumark, 2005, P.443).

A Space of movement

Digging through the history and examples of telematic and telepresence art projects, it seems the inspiration behind most of these projects is collaboration and using the potential of telecommunication medium to make art together without being worried about distance (place) and time.

However, the goals of some of the projects that have been occurred through the use of telecommunication medium are not only telepresence, but also for resistance reasons. In such projects, artists use mailing system, telephone, internet, etc to overcome the limitations that their governments and the law have built for them.

Between the late 1960s and early 1980s, telepresence art and particularly, mail art became very popular in countries with dictator regimes which tried to silence their citizens and prevent any voice from being heard through torturing and killing the activists. Among some of these countries, Uruguay and Chile and the resistance mail art movements were some of the leading movements of mail art (Kac, 2007). In Uruguay, Clemente Padin
organized the first Latinoamerican mail Art in 1974 in exposition during the military dictatorship (Welch, 1995, 205).

Chilean artist Eugenio Dittborn is well-known for his series of art works which he calls *Airmail Paintings*. Dittborn folded and mailed these paintings internationally which he made from silkscreen, photocopied images and text, and other cheap materials. Dittborn describes his Airmail paintings as being visual messagers. “Like 'Chinese Whispers' they are sent out with one meaning and eventually return with that meaning added to or changed completely ... Travel is the politics of my paintings; and the folds, the unfolding of that politics” (Dittborn, 1993, 20).

Therefore, artists in such countries used the power of telepresence and telematic technologies to be able to have voice. Comparing these movements and the alternative methods of these artists with the telepresence movements of today, mail art did what the network art does today. Networking “has been important as a *collaborative medium* for many distances projects” (Chandler & Neumark, 2005, P.340). Networking, therefore, is not simply about communication between people and machines, but it is significant as a medium with the most capacity for distance artistic projects. In addition, Internet is not just a network for artists, but “it is a social space, a conflation of medium and exhibition venue” (2005, 60).
Chapter Three:

An Analysis of IRUS Art

Paying attention to the details of the processes of our project, there are in fact more layers of dialogue involved that just dialogue between artists through their art works. These layers include dialogue between the artist with his/her work, dialogue between the artists through meetings, blogs, emails, phone calls, and the art statements, dialogue between the art works displaying next to each other in the exhibition, dialogue with the audience through the art works.

When we started the IRUS art project, the dominant concept of our work was “intercultural art”. We (the American team) suggested the theme of the project and giving everyone the opportunity to do whatever they wanted with their art work. Then after some of our meetings, we thought about the collaborative art as the other concept of our show. After Iran’s team joined us they suggested that we think of a specific subject as the theme of the exhibition. They believed working under the same theme could not only help us to be more focused on our projects, but also could give our show a deeper meaning.
A Dialogue about Dialogue

As Negin recorded in their second meeting report, the Iran team chose “dialogue” with 11 votes from other subjects such as: Graphity, Metro, Mask, Money, Extremism, Peace or War, Common Ceremonies, Bus, Future (33 years later, or after World War III), Similar Celebrations (Yalda night, and Christmas), Wedding Party, and Street.

Moin Samadi (one of the artists in Iran’s team) suggested “Dialogue” as the theme of the exhibition. In Iranian’s blog’s meeting report he says: “I think the theme of dialogue is very close to the goal of the exhibition, while it gives us many visual and conceptual opportunities”. Moin also stated that we could call the first part of the collaboration goft (said) and then in the second part artists can add their goo (say) side to the conversation.

Majid Kashani (another artist in Iran’s team) stated: “We should clarify what form this dialogue is. For example it should be between two people not anything. Majid’s critique to the two parts of dialogue based on the word “Goft-o-goo” was that if we use this then we are also mentioning that dialogue is a result that occurs because of the bilinear dialogue between two people. In this process neither goft is important nor goo, but a collection between them is important. This also helps us in the way we want to represent our works in the exhibition.

Pejman Rahimizadeh, however, was concerned about the other side of this dialogue (the American artists), and outlined that as we do not know each other we would also not know what will be the result of this dialogue.
Moin said that what is important is that we have a common theme that we would like to work on with the other artists, and this should be enough for us to work together. It doesn’t matter with who and how we are going to talk. When you start a dialogue with someone, we should accept that the audience says whatever he/she wishes and not to be concerned that what he/she would say after me.

Neda Azimi added that we (the Iranian team) have our own ideas and they (the American team) will have their own. The incorporation of these two is our common dialogue.

Pejman still insisted “but when you meet someone that you don’t know at all, what you are supposed to talk about? See it this way!”.

Saeed said: “We try to find a common point.”

Negin Ehtesabian also stated that more important than the subject of dialogue, it is important that how we have a dialogue and how this dialogue has formed and continued.

This conversation is a detailed example of dialogue between artists in Iran. According to the division that I made in the first section of this chapter, the second category (Dialogue between the artists through meetings, blogs, emails, phone calls, and the art statements) contains this form of dialogue. Between Artists in Iran and United states, blogs and emails are the main medium to connect the artists and make it possible to communicate. Although my translation played an important role, without the emails between Negin and I and
keeping the meetings reports updates between two of us, this dialogue could never happen between two teams of artists.

In the American team’s meeting, I translated most of these conversations from Farsi to English for the artists. We all thought dialogue would be a good fit for our project, and agreed that having a theme would help us in being more focused. There was not much discussion about this issue, as we were interested to see what would be the subject that Iranian team would choose. Although we did not directly engage in conversation with the Iran team, reading the details of Iran’s dialogue, listening to their conversation more than commenting about the discussions.

IRUS art, Trust, and Respect

When I translated the second part of Iran’s team discussion in that same meeting, which was about trusting and respecting the other artists, we actually started to think and talk about this issue to be able to answer Iran’s team questions. This conversation first started between the Iranian’s artists.

In their blog, Negin wrote:

“In this part there was an intense discussion between sympathizers and opponents of this question that if the original work can be used in any form or it should be some limitation for the second artist.”

Negin explained in the meeting that according to the first agreements between American team it should not be any limitations and the second team should have the permission to do anything to the original work, if it conceptually
needed to (even if it is tearing apart or burning the first work, to make something from it).

Moin, Saeed, and Majid Kashani were the advocators of this point of view that when we send our works, or they send theirs, then we should not have any ownership to it or be concerned that what will happen to it. Just like a sentence of a dialogue, which does not belong to anyone but it goes to make a collection of sentences.

Moin continued the discussion mentioning that not trusting each other is not a right attitude, because it is in discord with the main idea of the project. If there are people who’s their art works are that valuable for them they just should not send them or do not send the original works. “If they are artists who are too worried about their art works, they should not participate in this project at all, so they are not ruining the whole idea of the show.” Moin said.

However, Pejman, Peyman, and Moin still believed that the original work should not get destroyed. And if there is a reason for the second artists to destroy the work, he/she should use the copy of the work. Not the work itself.

Pejman gave the example of the famous Dadaist’s Mona Lisa; that Marcel Douchan didn’t just paint on the original Mona Lisa but he copied it himself and then added the mustache.

Negin and Neda were in the middle of the road. They believed that no one should be limited in this project. If there are artists who are worried about their art works, they can give the work to the second artist under some conditions, for example not tearing apart or burning the art work could be part of
it. If there are artists who want to be open about what will happen to their art
works, they can send the work without any condition.

Neda stated that this is itself part of a dialogue. Maybe someone wants
to talk as a dictator, or maybe someone wants to say you can do whatever you
want with my art work.

Majid Kashani pointed out that however we are all artists and none of
us are going to be inconsiderate about one and other’s works. We need to trust
each other more.

At the end, Iranian team decided to leave it to the artists to whether
send their works under some conditions or not.

After I translated some parts of this discussion for the American artists,
we had the same discussion between us. Bailey and Natalie were the artists,
saying that they are concerned about the art works as well. Most of other artists
(including myself) were more interested in an open dialogue. But the more we
talked, the more we came to the same conclusion that we all need to trust each
other first, and then we should as well leave it to the artists to decide about their
own works. Especially when we talked about one of the other Iranian artists’
concerns (Ali), which were part of my concerns as well.

Ali.B was the artist who expressed his concern about Iranian artists
participating in this project and not being able to anticipate what might happen
to their art works in the second part. This could have some risks for them and it
could create some serious political problem if the second artists would make
something political or immoral for the collaboration with them. For example if an
artist in America would draw a nude woman on a religious symbol that an Iranian artist had drawn. Negin added at the end of the meeting report that I need to ask Morehshin that if the American team would give us the chance to see all of the art works before they put it in the show.

In our meeting I talked about all the issues that the American team needed to consider in order to avoid getting Iranian artists in any trouble. We all agreed that this seemed logical, so we should put some guidelines for the both teams, as the main guidelines of this collaboration which would include both the issue of trust, respect, and ownership. These guidelines were:

- Trust members of the other team in the handling of work.
- Respect the cultural and religious perspectives of each artist.
- Specifically communicate how the work (or elements of the work) may not be altered.
- The members of IRUS, who collaborated on a particular piece, are the owners of that piece, whether it sells or not.

Then we sent these guidelines to the Iranian team and for the whole process of the collaborations, we all remained committed to the guidelines.

What stands out in this part for me is that both Peyman and Pejman left the Iranian team later. They both apparently had a different point of view to dialogue and collaboration or lack of trust. For most of the other artists, things became easier and more trusting after a while. Especially because we made
guidelines and also as I promised that I would keep an eye to the art works in the United States to make sure they are not going to be troublesome. For the whole 11 months of this project, this method was one of our central methods to talk and decide on things. Negin and I kept sending emails back and forth, and also talked on the phone every once in a while to discuss things. American and Iranian artists never used telephone as their communication tool. They sent each other emails when they were collaborating on one and other’s art works but this kind of communication was only limited to some of the artists. For example Natalie sent an email to Vana to ask about the size of her painting before Vana sends it over (She only sent a picture of her work for the collaboration and send the painting later). The rest of the linguistic communication between artists was through Negin and I. The problem of some of the Iranian people not knowing enough English and none of the American artists knowing Farsi, made it impossible for some of them to communicate directly.

The only English text that appeared on the Iranian blog in English during our collaboration was a text to congratulate Obama’s presidency which was as below:

“We are thrilled and delighted by the news of American people voting in their new 44th President, Barack Obama into White House. Obama with his youthful energy and enthusiasm will give USA and the rest of the world hope. Congratulations to Our American friends! We are happy too! With best wishes! Iranian team.”
This text does not only show the respect between us but also shows the excitement we shared not only in the art works we were making together, but also in the events of our collaborative country. In short, the above example might be useful to represent that this collaboration made some of the aspects of our lives important for each other as regular individuals and did not remain on surface as Iranian and American artists.

**IRUS Art, Differences, and Cultural Creation**

It should be clear by now that in IRUS art, trying to understand one another’s culture was one of the main goals of the project. Having different backgrounds as artists from different cultures made differences important concept in our project. We were all interested to explore how these differences that our governments and media display as problematic would play out our project; whether they would hinder or help our project.

Two points of view to differences started to shape in our collaboration. One was seeing these differences as a positive point which could increase diversity and creativity of our works. For example one thing we experienced in the collaboration part was that many of the art works were mixes of Oriental and Western culture and designs. Therefore, different cultural backgrounds of the artists who were working together made some of our art works to have both the diverse designs of the both cultures.

The second point of view was the point of view that Majid Kashani described as: “the more we worked together as artists; the more we realized that we are not actually as different as we thought. This especially was applicable to the art works
which were using global elements and concepts as the central points of their work. For example, one of Majid Kashani’s project was on designing a chat program for IRUS art in order to connect the artists in Iran and United States to each other; A concept that is global and does not belong to a specific culture.

**IRUS Art Collaboration: Art Statements**

Collaboration, although seems like a clear idea, gets very complicated in practice. For some art teams that work collaboratively, depending on their perspectives and goals, collaboration might not mean half and half (everyone getting the same amount of authorship or space) or language might not be involved at all. For example, in a team situation based on exquisite corpse theory, words and language could be replaced by a silence between artists. Everyone would draw something without giving any information about what is in his/her mind. In the IRUS project, although we planned on not giving guidelines to the next artist, we finally decided on sending art statements. Particularly because this project was happening between artists from two different cultures and some of the artists were worried that they might not understand what the meaning of some of the symbols and concepts are in another culture; therefore, having an art statement was a safe way for the artists to collaborate on the art works. Nevertheless, I was more interested in a method that would be without any word. There are two specific situations that had important influences on my emphasis of keeping the language out of our collaboration. First of all, my role as the translator of this project made me realize that language barriers and my mistranslations or neglecting to mention some ideas of the opposite team could
become problematic and at the same time because we had the benefit of using art as a non-verbal and global language, then we could make this a focal point in our collaboration and stay a way from the complexity of language barriers. Secondly, I was the only artist who happened to experience both the Iranian and American cultures by living in both countries. There were lots of meanings and concepts in both cultures that I could understand, while other artists, who had never visited the opposite culture, were not familiar enough to be able to communicate in the same way. For example, for me the Finger Quote project that I did with Bailey had a meaning that could be non sense for some of the Iranian artists without an art statement. Finger Quotes as a body language do not exist in Iranian culture, the act of moving the fingers like a Quote would not have any meaning to an Iranian. Therefore, we had to explain the concepts in our art statements for the artist in Iran before sending the art works to them. Without the explanation of what finger quotes are it would make it difficult or impossible for some of the Iranian’s artists to understand the concepts of our work.

In order to understand the above statements, it might be useful to explain the processes of our collaborations: The collaboration between artists would start from the first artist sending his or her art work to the second artist, along with his or her art statement. The second artist would collaborate either on the same piece or through making another piece related to the concepts of the first artists and even making a new concept using the first artist’s concepts. In many of our meetings, both in Tehran and Denver, we all agreed and emphasized on avoiding any kind of guideline or suggestion from the first artist to the second
artist about how the second artist should continue the collaboration. We all talked about the importance of a right understanding of collaboration which means half and half for each artist, especially if they decide to collaborate on the same piece and also the importance of letting an open dialogue happening through our collaboration on one and other’s pieces. This idea was actually one of the excitements of sharing a dialogue, as we all thought it would be interesting to see what will happen to our works after the second artist is done with his or her collaboration.

Just as some of the artists like Pejman, Peyman, and Vana were insisting on having control on their pieces when they would send it to the second artist, some of the artists in the American team were also more interested in having a dialogue under the specific conditions. By using some of the art statements written by Iranian and American artists I will explain the role of individualistic and collectivistic attitude which at the end was visible in the art works of the artists as well. Below are two of these art statements from the American artists with a more individualistic attitude toward their artwork that they were sending to Iran.

At the end of her art statement Bailey mentioned:

“Add text or make any changes to the poster that you deem necessary in order to communicate something about the two cultural figures.”

Bailey really was interested in having the Iranian artists to write something in Farsi in the empty spot that she had in her poster.
Richard even though made his guideline more indirect, still added:

“\[quote\]
I leave it up to the artists in Iran to create compatible work. This work doesn’t have to be in the form of a pop up book, or even a book at all. It would be nice if the work tells the stories of several Iranian people. A dialogue will take place between the seniors and the artists in the telling and recording of the stories. An intercultural dialogue will take place as the work is viewed at the exhibitions in Tehran and Denver, as viewers will have the opportunity to hear and see the stories of ordinary people.\[/quote\]

These two examples show the artists putting their personal goals above the group goals; artists feeling that they have a better understanding or knowledge about how their work should be handled so they should let their collaborator know what would be nice or better to do with their art work. Moreover, this kind of attitude brings up the issue of trust between artists. In this scenario, artists have not considered the principles of our collaboration and open dialogue with the promise of leaving the work to the next artist without telling them how this dialogue should be formed. Just as if we engage in a verbal dialogue with someone and we ask the person to answer our question or see our message the way we tell them or want them to.

However, Bailey and Richard’s efforts were some of the most collaborative with regard to meetings, installing the art works, and decision-making. While other artists in the U.S who were very open to their collaboration with the Iranian artists, were in contrast individualist in installing the works and
being part of the decision making, meetings, etc. For example, when it came to
the installation day, some artists showed up only to put their own work and their
Iranian collaborator’s work on the walls and left the gallery, and did the same on
the closing day. Most of us (including Bailey and Richard) helped installing the
Shahrzad and Mark Twain individual works (which mostly belonged to Iranian
artists but because none of them could come to United States for the show, the
American artists had to help to put them up), covering the walls for the group
video and the information wall, cleaning up the gallery after the closing party, etc,
those artists were absent in these team works. Apparently the “selves” of these
artists were the center of their attention toward a team and collaborative art show
and they did not see the installation as an activity that was occurring as
teamwork, but rather, individually. Going back to what Roth believes about
artists as people who have a better potential in understanding dialogue, none of
the above statements about artists in IRUS are being used as a pattern to claim
that those artists did not have a correct understanding of dialogue or
collaboration, but it is used as the examples of individualism and collectivism
personalities of people which are dynamic in different activities, and also as a way
to state that these artists had a different perspective toward group work and
collaboration.

In Iran’s team, there were no art statements with guidelines or
suggestions. All the artists with different perspectives toward dialogue and
collaboration already had left the team. Negin started the team with twenty one
artists and ended up with eleven. She said that she knew there would be problems
with people who wanted to push the project their own way, and according to her previous experiences in group work in Iran, she thought it would be better for both the group and those people with more individualistic attitudes not to participate in the IRUS project from the beginning. However, the extreme collectivism of most of the Iranian artists in some parts of the project, made the process of our installation very difficult. None of the Iranian artists who sent their work digitally sent any instruction about how they wanted their digital work to be printed and installed. I emailed all of the artists who had sent their art work in digital format but none gave me any strict direction. They all said what they would prefer but all of them, at the end of their emails added: “However, whatever you guys decide or think is the best is fine with us, because we do not know what the size of the exhibition is or how you guys are going to present things in the gallery.” This attitude demonstrates how the Persian culture is known as one of the most collectivist. People showing respect and trust to the other person, in so much that they leave the decision making to other person, saying “whatever you think is right.” While working with the American team, I mostly had the impression of everyone knowing what is right, better than the other person.

The more I thought about it, when the show was finished, the more I understood that these could be part of the individualistic and collectivist personalities of people, as well as the artists’ level of motivation for the project.

On the other hand, being in touch with Negin through the processes of our project and hearing the same issues from her about some of the Iranian
artists and the level of their engagement in the project made me have a more confidence that the individualistic and collectivistic attitude is not necessary something that would belong to specific cultures. But it is more about personal perspectives toward a group work; while it is hard to divide people as solely individualist or solely collectivist, because usually there is a mix of both of these in people’s personalities.

**IRUS’ Collaborative Art**

Through collaboration between IRUS art members, all the artists who were part of the project had a hope of a better understanding of one another’s culture. The focus of this section is on the responses of the artists to each other, using some of the art works of IRUS art as the examples of different aspects of collaboration and different results in each artwork.

**Choosing the Works**

The first step of the collaboration in both Tehran and Denver was choosing the art works that we were interested to working on. When I received the Iranian’s art works, we had a meeting to choose which works we were interested in for collaboration. In our meeting, I orally translated the art statements of the Iranian artists for the American artists, because they all wanted to know what the concept behind the work was. It was the same flow in Iran when they received our art works.

There were two elements that had the most influences in artists’ choices. Firstly, the similar or close conceptual interests and secondly, the similar
or close area of artistic skills and talents. For example, Josh Fishburn chose Majid Kashani’s IRUS CHAT program because his area of interest and his skills were in programming and game designing. To collaborate and complete Majid’s ideas, Josh made interactive software, developing Majid’s idea of artists being able to use the software to chat with each other and have a dialogue. Josh added the audience dialogue with artists as another concept of this dialogue while keeping some of the principle concepts of Majid. On the Iranian side, Sahar Bardaie, chose to work on Bailey’s Finger Quotes Project, adding digital design on top of her photos, using the same metaphoric and injunctive concept of finger quotes that Bailey used in her photos. To complete this dialogue as Western and Eastern dialogue between artists, Sahar used designs and characters, emphasizing Persian and Islamic (Islimi) designs.

Limitations in Collaboration

One of the notable issues in choosing the art works for Iranian artist was around Mathew and Marie’s Street Speak work. This series of works were based on graphiti and the documentation of it and the audiences’ response to it. When the work was sent to Iran, none of the artists wanted to collaborate on it because they had the concern of being arrested in the streets of Tehran by police while putting graffiti up. Negin emailed me and said she was not sure what would happen with those works, because no one had chosen them. She said that she would try to collaborate on them herself, but needed to look for a solution. Although at the end Negin and Paris decided to collaborate on these graffities, choosing Islamic and religious symbols for their graffiti as a solution, this issue
represents the political differences and practical differences between the artists’ situation in the IRUS project. The artists in Iran had to self-censor their art works, both on the first side and also the collaborative side of the project. They either had to use a very symbolic and metaphoric language to be able to say what they wanted to say or they had to work on the subjects that were not political or offensive to Islamic rules and beliefs. This issue, had a big influence in the collaboration with each other, as American artists had the freedom to critique or express their thoughts more than the Iranian artists, and they did not have to create things metaphoric for the same reason as the Iranian artists did. Although the American artists had promised that they would consider the limitations of Iran and the situation of artists, they were still free to critique their own government or the religious and social issues in the United States if they were interested. Therefore, these limitations in this collaborative project made the Iranian’s artists’ art works much more symbolic than the American’s art works.

Limitations in our collaboration were not only conceptual but also physical. Mailing art works back and forth between Iran and United States (Especially because it could not be sent directly) would make it hard to send any physical art work. Therefore, we had to mail or email the digital formats of our art works to make the process easier and the costs lower. With the exception of 5 or 6 art works, including paintings, microphones and cables for a sound sculpture project, and two posters, the rest of the art works were sent digitally.
An Analysis of IRUS Art Collaboration

Excluding choice and limitation as two of the important elements of the IRUS art collaboration, responses of artists to each other and process of their collaborations are some of the other notable issues that need to be analyzed. This analysis is based on the concept of dialogue and collaboration that have been used as some of the guidelines and principles of the IRUS art project; the open dialogue between the artists and also a fair or half and half collaboration which were the promises of artists in Iran and the U.S to each other in order to collaborate. As I stated before, elements such as trust, respect, consciousness about differences, and individualistic and collectivistic personalities are also the related concepts of dialogue and collaboration which I will discuss further in this section.

To clarify the direction of this process, the analyses of these collaborations are not about the dialogue or collaboration success or failing in general but are particularly about which of the collaborations did or did not meet the guidelines and goals of our IRUS art project. To achieve these goals I will focus on some of the art works’ collaboration including a sound sculpture and vide art project by Andrew Blanton and Moin Samadi, a pop-up book, audio and video and a digital design by Richard Burguss, Shabnam Khoshdel, Vana Nabipour, and Sahar Bardaei, coding books by Josh Fishburn, Natalie Nguyen, and Negin Ehtesabian, and poster designs by Bailey Ferguson and Saeed Ensafi.
Andrew and Moin’s collaboration was unique in that they collaborated with one another on both projects. Each took a turn as the first creators and collaborators of the both sides of the project. Moin’s project was a video art without any audio, which Andrew designed an audio for. Andrew’s project which he sent to Iran was bunch of cables with microphones that could be used on any surface to start a video. Moin made a sculpture for it and then they put this whole set up in the show as an interactive video piece which would start to play when the audience would tap on the sculpture. In an interview with Moin, he mentioned that what he found very interesting between his video art and Andrew’s idea of an interactive sculpture was the involvement of touch sense. In his video art, the role of hands and touch were the symbols of non-verbal dialogue and hands touching each other to start a dialogue have the same concept of the audience touching the sculpture to start a dialogue with the artists (See Figure 2 & 3). In addition, in this collaboration they both participated equally and there were also no guidelines or top-down view from one side to the other.
Figure 2

Collaborative art work by Andrew Blanton & Moin Samadi

Photo by Natalie Nguyen
This could be analyzed as the mutual respect and trust between the artists. However, the question to be raised here is if collaborating with only one of the artists in Tehran for Andrew and only one of the artists in the Denver for Moin would limit their chances of experiencing collaboration with more artists, and also could affect their understanding of one another’s culture. For example, if collaborating with more than one artist could add variety to their understanding because it would add more art works with different perspectives which they had to try to understand in order to collaborate on.
To answer this question, Andrew stated that this actually helped him to have a deeper relation and therefore understanding about Moin, his work, and his perspective to concepts that he was interested in globally or more locally in Persian culture. He said that although there is a language barrier between he and Moin, he felt like he had a good relationship with Moin, and that was why he also added him to his facebook page.

I also emailed Moin and asked him the same question. Moin said that he did not think working only with Andrew limited his understanding of the other culture. He said that he and Andrew worked on global symbols and techniques which are the same everywhere else in the world. Moin pointed out that the elements of his video (fire, water, earth, and wind), are the elements of creation in many cultures of the world. He believed the fact that things were more global than cultural in his collaboration with Andrew, made him feel that there is no difference or barriers between them. At the end he stated that maybe if our subject was based on something more cultural, for example the meaning of fire in Persian culture, then it could make a remarkable difference about which artists with what kind of perspective he would collaborate with.

In collaboration with Richard’s pop-up book project which was about memories of older people in Denver, Vana and Shabnam made two slide shows with audio and photos of their family members talking about their lives in Iran. In the first side of this collaboration, Richard did not have his pop-up book ready to send. Therefore the art work that Vana and Shabnam had created for Richard’s work were only from his art statement and a brief description of his concepts
without receiving any visual work from him then or later. The question that comes to my mind here is that whether Vana and Shabnam’s response to Richard’s project would be different if he had his pop-up book ready to send or if he would later would send some examples of his work through an email. Richard did not complete the pop-up book ready for the show. In our IRUS exhibition, Vana and Shabnam had their slide show and their audio work, while there was no art work next to them that would show the process of the collaboration (starting from Richard and completing by the collaborators).

In his collaboration on Sahar’s hodhod project, Richard did not present any work, as well. In his art statement he said that in response to Sahar’s work he was going to use the same concept of her work, applying it to human beings instead of birds which were the symbolic visual elements of Sahar’s work. In this dialogical activity, the dialogue between Richard and his collaborators had only one side and in a more symbolic way, it looked like a monologue or one sided dialogue with no response.

This also can be related to the Prison Dilemma example, which one person’s decision or reaction could influence the other person’s destiny. In this case, the unfinished work of Richard for both sides (collaboration with Shabnam and Vana, and collaboration with Sahar), put Vana, Shabnam, and Sahar’s work in a different situation than the other art works, both for the audience to perceive the process of their collaboration, and also the way we displayed these artist’s works in the exhibition.
In the exhibition, as I mentioned earlier in the first chapter, one of the layers of dialogue was a dialogue between the art works which were displayed next to each other. We had one wall for Shahrzad and Mark Twain which included the individual and collaborative art works, and the arrangement of the rest of the art works was putting the works that were created in collaboration with each other, next to each other. So the audience could look at the art works displaying together, and then read the art statements to understand the processes of the collaboration and the concepts and reasons behind it. However, because Richard did not complete his collaboration, there was no work from him or explanation next to Shabnam, Vana, and Sahar’s art works. Therefore, there was confusion for the audience of how these works were collaborative or why they were being displayed differently (alone, with no other work). Richard’s role and decision in this collaboration had a direct influence in the audience perception about the above Iranian artists’ works, which could be perceived differently if there was a response or original work (Pop-Up book) next to their works.

Moreover, in this case, I particularly wish to bring into attention the goal of this project which was: “understanding one and other’s cultures through creating collaborative and dialogical art”. In relation to this goal, I wonder if, from the Iranian’s artist’s perspective, working with Richard and the result of the collaboration have formed any specific attitude about American culture or artists or if they possibly have attributed it to an artist’s personality which is not generalized to the whole culture?
I emailed Shabnam, Vana, and Sahar and told them that Richard’s work was not finished to be next to their art work in the exhibition. I asked how they would interpret it or what their expression is about this issue.

Vana said that she does not want to see this as Richard not caring about her project. She stated that she was very busy while she was trying to finish her project as a response to Richard’s pop-up book, but she finally got it done and stayed committed to her project. She added: “but maybe Richard did not have enough time to finish his project or maybe we have gone in a wrong direction in response to his work and maybe that made him less motivated in finishing his project.”

Shabnam stated that she thinks artists who get involved in such intercultural projects should be type of people who respect other cultures and are interested in collaborating in such projects; otherwise they probably will not finish their projects. She said that she had cooperated with artists from Germany before, and she thought because those people were chosen right for such projects; the result of the project was very successful. Shabnam also said that during her collaboration with Richard’s pop-up book, she had emailed him to ask him some questions but never received a reply, which made her guess that Richard was not done with his project. But she said she did not think he would not finish his project for the exhibition. At the end, she mentioned that she did not want to generalize this as a negative experience in collaborating with the American artist, but prefers to attribute it to Richard’s attitude toward this project.
Sahar was worried if her work which had so many Persian and Oriental elements and was specifically about a story in Persian culture made Richard less motivated or was not a right project for our project because it was too many cultural and local elements. But at the end said: “I would like to ask Richard what was the reason for not completing the collaboration?”

**Shahrzad and Mark Twain’s: Individual and Collaborative art works**

Shahrzad and Mark Twain’s art works were the only art works which were done both individually and collectively. There were only five artists who made their Shahrzad and Mark Twain works collaboratively.

In these collaborations, Bailey’s posters, which she made to send to the Iranian artists, bring into attention the concept of collaboration from her perspective and the analysis of Saeed’s response to it. In her posters which she sent physically to Iran, Bailey left an empty space in the middle of her posters, where she hoped the Iranian artists write or do something inside of it (See Figure 4 & 5).
Figure 4

Shahrzad, by Bailey Ferguson
Looking at both her Shahrzad and Mark Twain’s posters, less than one third of it was the space that she expected the Iranian artists to draw or write on. I was eager to see what would be the Iranian artist’s response to her work. I
wondered if the artists would work on something inside the box or they would create another piece. When Saeed who was collaborating on Bailey’s work, sent the poster back, the box was empty and nothing was added to the poster. Later, he sent a digital format of the poster, which he had used some of Bailey’s design, while making a new concept in his poster which included a description of Shahrzad’s name written in Farsi.

In an email, I asked Saeed what he thought when he saw the poster and why he did not actually add the text or something else in the white box but decided to make a new poster, and why only Shahrzad and not Mark Twain?

Saeed explained that when he saw Bailey’s posters which were sent to Iran physically, he thought about the ways he could re-create something rather than only adding some text in the box. Saeed said that in collaboration with other people, he is always interested to keep his own artistic style while keeping some elements of the first person in his work, as well. He continued: “That is why I made a copy of Bailey’s poster and then added my own artistic elements to it in my own style and then added a text in Farsi in the empty box of the poster that I created myself.”

At the end, Saeed did add text in the empty box, but not in the box that Bailey had left for him, but in the box that he had been created himself (See Figure 5).

About collaborating only on Shahrzad’s project, Saeed Pointed out that he thought that with the poster that he made for Shahrzad, in a symbolic way, Mark Twain was being the creator of Shahrzad and while there was no image of
Mark Twain in his poster, he saw Mark Twain as the creator of Shahrzad, jointing the starts in the dark sky to each other to create her character which could as well tell stories. In short, the Shahrzad that Saeed re-created was being re-created again by a storyteller (Mark Twain) who wished Shahrzad could tell her stories to seduce the emotions and soul of the people.

Another factor in the Shahrzad and Mark Twain art works were the amount of Shahrzad’s works in comparison to Mark Twain’s works. All together, beside Bailey’s poster, there were only four works that represented Mark Twain which all were done by Iranian artists. Most of the works were the re-creation of Shahrzad (and again mostly by the Iranian artists), which could be analyzed as the intensity of Shahrzad’s story for the most of the artists. One of the reasons that Iranian artists mostly worked only on Shahrzad, and even if they had Mark Twain in their works it was a mix of the both characters, I imagine was because of two reasons: First, the important role of Shahrzad in Persian culture and the intimacy of her character to Iranian people and second, the desire of the part of the artists to represent Shahrzad as a Persian story and not an Arabic story.

Negin describes her collaborative Shahrzad works, called Shahrzad on Rocks:

“I believe Shahrzad is the beautiful symbol of the power of dialogue and therefore, repeating its image is similar as repeating a magic formula; some kind of peace praying ceremony. Shahrzad Repetition by artists can be regarded as a repetition of peace ambition and Peace desire. As a result we made a decision to draw Shahrzad in a way we want by considering being simple and quick performance.”
In her collaborative project, which was completed by Mathew and Marie, she drew Shahrzad on different rocks and then took photos of this process. Mathew and Marie followed the same path, and continued drawing Shahrzad on different surfaces.

The desire and hope that Negin was looking for in her collaborative project, was also followed by other artists in our team. Looking at the Shahrzad and Mark Twain walls and paying attention to the quantity of the Shahrzad works in comparison to Mark Twains’ works, made me think about Negin’s dream and the magic formula and peace praying ceremony that she wished for in her art statement.

**IRUS art, Telematic and the Issue of Access**

Although telematic technologies provide a communication with no geographic border and information accessible to everyone, at the same time it is still not accessible for many groups of people. Solely seeing and appreciating the positive potentials of the internet means ignoring many countries which because of their economical and political situations are unable to have access or compatible access to the internet. As a result, this could become one of the challenges of art projects which deal with the internet as their dominant dialogical tool. This might briefly explain why in IRUS art project we decided to use the mailing system as our dominant non-verbal tool of our collaboration and the internet as our verbal and linguistic tool of communication.
Because of the limitations of Iranian artists in access to high speed internet, sending high quality art works back and forth between the two countries has been one of the challenges of our collaboration. Most of the artists in Iran did not have access to high speed internet. As a result, it was impossible to email the art works to each other with high quality. However, all of us still used the internet to send a low quality version of our works (or a photo from some of our works) to each other, which actually saved a lot of time for us to see some examples of the other artists’ works before we receive a high digital or a physical format of the works. Although we had the problem of sending the art works to be able to collaborate on one another’s art works, the use of the internet (emails, chats, and weblogs) as the linguistic part of our dialogue was the most important media of our project.

Blogging as one of the most usable technologies of this project played the main role of providing an easy way for verbal dialogue between the artists. It is notable to realize that the act of blogging in this project (mostly for the Iranian team) was remarkably different that the regular use of blogging in Iran. In the next section I will explain this difference with a deeper focus on resistance in IRUS art project.

**IRUS Art and Resistance**

In Iran blogging is one of the most significant examples of network resistance and alternative voice. Safsari, one of the active bloggers in Iran notes: At a time when our society is deprived of its rightful free means of communication, and our newspapers are being closed down one by one -- with
writers and journalists crowding the corners of our jails, the only realm that can safeguard and shoulder the responsibility of free speech is the blogosphere (Alavi, 2005).

According to the 2004 NITLE Blog Census, there are more than 64,000 blogs written in Farsi and Farsi is the forth most common language of blogging (Alavi, 2005).

Although the phenomena of blogging in Iran might be mostly focused on journalists, political and women rights activists, artists as well, use blogging as an alternative way to exhibit their art works in online blogs and galleries without needing to get permission and certification from the government. Therefore, blogging for artists has more or less, the same role as for political activists. In this battle, many artists see themselves as artists/activists who can push the limits with their art works themselves, as well as putting them online in their personal blogs.

In contrast with the common use of blogging in Iran as an alternative medium to have voice or the popular virtual space of resistance against the government, blogging in IRUS art project became our evidence of proving that IRUS art was an intercultural project without and political goals. Negin recorded everything with details in their website including the meeting reports and conversations, decision making, our concerns and thoughts, and the news about budgets, exhibition space, etc.

Keeping a blog not only can be used as a documentation of the processes of our project as an example of such practices, but also can save us
from lots of troubles with the Iranian governments. Negin believed detailed recording everything can work as the documentation and the evidence that we have not done anything political or against the Islamic laws and that this collaboration has been created in order to exchange art works between the American and Iranian artists. In one of the emails that she sent, she mentioned: “We should put everything up, so the government does not think we are hiding something” (2009).

Therefore, bogging in IRUS art show had a different resistance role form of resistance which is transparency as a form of resistance against potential harm by government; a solution to be able to continue our project without being banned by our governments.

In addition, dealing with the limitations and rules of postal services of Iran and United States felt like a resistance that would challenge and push forward the reasons behind 30 years of tension between the two countries.

IRUS art, therefore, acts as a double-edges sword. Being non-political was our promise and mission, but when it came to action, we realized that politics is part of our collaboration and challenge, and in a more general level, we are here to resist political tensions while creating cultural solutions.

To be able to mail the art works for collaboration, I asked one of our relatives who was coming from Iran to United States to bring the Iranian’s art work with herself, then I had to mail the American art works to Turkey to have another relative to take them back with herself to Iran, and at the end, we received all of the complete art works through my sister who decided to fly from
Tehran to Istanbul to take the art works with herself and mail them to United States from Turkey. Seeing my whole family and friends, helping us to overcome these limitations was in fact where I started thinking about this concept of our show. The more we talked about these limitations with people around us, the more I realized that this process of our work were some of the most conceptually important elements which we probably tried to ignore (because of the safety issues of the Iranian artists and troubles with the government) more than paying attention.

Moreover, in contrast with some of the telecommunication and network projects which used the potential of technology in order to have voice, in IRUS art project we used the potential of mailing system while criticizing it. This is what Chandler and Neumark call “a nodal point of connection between artists and activists”, where artists are not just using the medium but also challenging it (2005, P.12).

**IRUS Art, Documentation, and Audience**

Just like many other telematic and collaborative projects, in IRUS art project as well, the process of the collaboration has been very more important than the art works themselves. The concepts behind these projects, is what make them noticeable and different. In IRUS art project, as I have discussed in the last three chapters of my thesis, central concepts such as dialogue, collaboration, and telematic art are the concepts which make our project significant.

Documentation, therefore, was the method which enabled us to record and display different processes of our work in our exhibition. Through allocating
a wall in our exhibition to the documentations of our project we attempted to put an emphasis on the importance of these processes. On this wall, we displayed the maps of our collaborations which would clarify our collaboration in a more visual way (See Figure 6 & 7).
Figure 6
IRUS art collaboration
Designed by Negin Ehtesabian

Figure 7
IRUS art collaboration
In these maps, the audience could follow the path of our collaborative projects (who started which art work, who were the people who continued it and what were the art works that have been exchanged between the artists). In addition, through Josh’s *A Story of IRUS* project which was made in collaboration with Majid Kashani’s *IRUS Chat* for our documentation wall, the audience could read the emails, and some parts of our weblogs. This interactive process which would need the audience to put our IRUS art booklet under a camera to be able to read our emails was not only made to display some parts of our dialogue with each other, but also was made in order to start a dialogue with the audience.

In addition, to describe the reason behind our collaborations and how we decided on specific issues we provided an accurate art statement of the artists (In Farsi and English) which could help clarifying why each artists chose another artist’s work/s and what was in his or her mind when he or she was creating an art work to have a dialogue with the first artist.

*A Story of IRUS* project was one of our interactive art works which was created to form a more direct dialogue with the audience while engaging her or him to be able to read, view, and understand some parts of the processes of our collaboration.

Scavenger hunt was another project which was created by Elizabeth Henrichs as a way to engage the audience with dialogue in our show. We left a
piece of paper in our booklets which we had (for free) in our opening. People, who would pick up the booklet, could see a sign with this description:

“A story begins; an adventure ensues, look for the girl with the festive green shoes. She’s a white flower in her hair, if you wish to play, she’ll give you your next clue so that you may.”

If the audience would start this game, then the girl with the festive green shoes, who was Marie (one of the artists in our team) would direct him or her to the next stages of the game. However, before Marie giving the player the clue, she would try to talk to the person about our show, and somehow engage him or her in a dialogue. In the next processes of playing this game, the player would continue this dialogue with the next people. As we anticipated, some of the audience played the game and they were excited to know were the end of the game is going to be. Therefore, both A Story of IRUS and scavenger and hunt were the most direct engagement of our audience with the theme of our show; Dialogue.

In a deeper level of looking at the audience of IRUS art show, there was a remarkable difference between Iranian and American audience, as well as the younger and the older generation.

Talking to many different people who came to visit our show, I have learnt that most of the American older generation (by older I mean those who were young enough in 1979 to understand and remember Islamic revolution of Iran and other events following this event) was more interested to talk about politics, and the historical background of Iran and United States.
In a related theory, social scientists such as Mannheim, Cain, and Ryder explain that age/generation is one of the influences factor of political behavior. These scholars suggest that “Particular generations experience different historical events and use the dominant political views of that particular time period as sources of reference” (Kourvetaris & Dobratz, P.25).

In my personal experience with most of the older audience of our show, it was hard and sometimes impossible to push this older group to understand the cultural exchanges of this show, and the importance of having dialogue as individuals, as artists, and not necessary Iranians and Americans (which we kept emphasizing). It is true that politics had something to do with our art show and although we tried to stay a way from it and not to get involved in direct political dialogues and ideas, we still had to resist toward mailing system, our important point in our show was that we wanted to be artists /activists, but still looking at each other as human beings, without any political bias. This was the point which was hard to highlight in my conversation with our older audience. Many of the people in this category, talked about hostage crisis in Iran and the revolution of Iran and how things started to change between Iran and U.S. after the revolution and how things were much better before that.

On the article that was published by Denver Post as well, there was the same issue. Although we tried to be clear about the importance of this cultural exchange, the journalist who interviewed us and wrote the article, still brought up the issue of hostage crisis as the first paragraph of the article stating that: “The Iranian hostage crisis 30 years ago opened a rupture between the United States
and Iran that has festered ever since, with bursts of bellicosity replacing any official dialogue (Denver Post, 2009, P.1). The historical memory of the readers of the newspaper also worked as political as the historical memory of the Denver Post’s journalists. One of the readers commented under our article: “Iran was one of Jemmy Carter's BIGGEST foreign policy disasters, long before he begged us to pay NK to build nuclear weapons. Jemmy ordered the military commanders in Iran to not resist the Ayatollah Khomeini in the interest of "human rights" “ (DenverPost Official Website, 2009); which again highlights the hostage crisis issue at Jimmy Carter's presidency.

Another reader commented: “America used to get along fine with Iran... until we let too many AIPAC insurgents weasel their way into politics in Washinton D.C.” (DenverPost Official Website, 2009).

These are some of the historical memories that the younger generation of our American audience either did not completely know about or did not find important to bring up. In my conversation with the younger generation, although there were some political discussions about the issue of nuclear energy of Iran, politics did not seem an important subject to bring up or try to discuss about. It seemed like the younger generation which did not have the same historical memory about Iran, could understand the cultural and non-political goals of our project better than the older generation of Americans.

On the other hand, many of the Iranian younger and older generations were mostly impressed by the idea of the actual cultural exchanges of our project. Many of them asked how we managed to send things back and forth or if the
Iranian artists are going to be here as well. Yet, if there was any political discussion or memory about the relationship between Iran and United States, it seemed to be the memories of different events rather than “only” the hostage crisis.

In my conversations with some of the Iranian audience and the Iranian artists and friends about this project, many of this people mentioned Iran and Iraq war, hostage crisis, and the collapse of the IranAir airline by the U.S. governments. The historical memory of many of the Iranian people, whom talked about the political side of Iran and U.S. relationship, seemed to focus on events that were not mentioned by the American audience at all. Paris Mahtosh chose to write about some of these events as his involvement statement of IRUS art project, stepping out from his artistic role in the project, writing as an Iranian citizen. He noted:

"If I had a political mind, I would criticize the US government foreign policies which with no doubt, not only have badly affected my life, but also have even taken the lives of many of my people; Innocent ones. I won't be surprised if my fellow American colleagues complain about any action of Iranian government, in any period of time, in return. We think political sometimes, but at the end of the day, we are artists, not politicians."

In an email Paris explained the guilt he felt about what he sent for the booklet:

“As I sat behind the computer to write the statement, I remembered my teacher in school: A kind, handsome and highly intelligent person, who
one day gave me a Quran as a farewell gift, went to the war with Iraq, heavily supported by US & western countries at the time, and never returned. I also remembered, once I was walking in a street covered with pieces of broken glass, blood and parts of human bodies, caused by bombs thrown by an Iraqi jet, again highly supported by US & Western countries at the time. It sounds like a nightmare, but it's true and extremely harsh thing to be seen by a 12 years old. I remembered how the US government destroyed the hope of a few generations of Iranians, who have been trying peacefully to reach the democracy, by operating a "KOODETA" against Mossadeq government, for the sake of their "National Interests" and surprisingly enough, I had close relatives in the commercial flight which was shot down by US navy in Persian gulf. I thought they were all watching me typing the statement. Dear Moreshin! I thought you should know, I had tears in my eyes when I was typing the statement.

Regards
paris” (2009)

While I was going back to Paris’s email and his statement for our booklet in order to document them in my thesis, remembering my own historical memories of the tragic events that Paris talked about, I could see why it was hard for some of our audience to stop talking about politics or their memories. The goals that we had chosen to achieve in our IRUS art project could be extremely contestable or impossible to achieve for some of these people. However, my perception about IRUS art project is that as twenty young artists of these two countries, we had succeed working as individuals and artists without putting these memories in the center of our collaborations, judgments, and feelings. We
tried to develop the hope of spreading such practices and normalizing such views, starting with our audiences and then a bigger public by repeating the exhibition and the similar artistic and intercultural projects between our countries.
CHAPTER FOUR:

Conclusion and Further Directions

I have written this thesis based on our first exhibition in Denver. IRUS art is in its first steps of practice and experiment, and it is its aim to continue the exhibition in Tehran and other states in the U.S. Therefore, it is remarkable to point out that the analysis of the artist’s and audience actions, as well as many other factors such as the path of collaboration between artists, the projects which did or did not meet the guidelines, and the trend of dialogue and its different stages, could be different in another exhibition and in the similar practices with other art works or other artists. At the same time I would like to continue this research by following the future exhibitions and collaborations to be able to have a deeper understanding of the concepts of projects and a better analysis of this dialogical collaboration.

As a curator and artists it is my goal to continue the IRUS art show in different cultures and countries, as well as expanding our teams in United States and Iran to be able to experience new ways of collaboration, while having a better understanding about the strengths and weaknesses of these kinds of practices. This study suggests that such intercultural practices, especially between countries with tensions and political conflict (and therefore cultural disconnections) should
be continued. I insist to remind the audience and people interested in these kinds of projects that it does not matter how different and disconnected we think we are, it is possible to have dialogue as human beings and individuals. As soon as we decide to take a new approach to the world around us and as Habermas says, put a way our knowledge and assumptions before we step into a dialogue, we are able to see and perceive things differently and with a more open mind.

As an intercultural facilitator, however, I would like to point out that intercultural practices have their own complexities and therefore, not every artist is ready for challenges of such practices. Intercultural practices require deep engagement, patience, passion, and time dedication. Especially in a practice such as IRUS art with specific political issues and also digital gap between Iran and the United States there are more issues such as the challenges of online communication, mailing system, time differences, and distance. Therefore, it is helpful to be aware of these issues, especially as a curator and organizer of intercultural art shows.

In the end, the questions that still remain unanswered both in our practice for us and for me in this research, are what could be a more engaging artistic way to have a deeper understanding of one another? What are the possibilities in engaging artists in long distances project and with language more directly than in the IRUS art project (For example by omitting Negin and my role as the translators and connectors of our projects). And in the end what is the potential of artistic projects with focus on cultural disconnections and political tensions to change or be influential in the relationship of their countries?
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Appendix:

Documentation of IRUS art

IRUS Art Logo
Designed by Saeed Ensafi
IRUS Art Team Members
Designed by Negin Ehtesabian

Dialogue
IRUS Art is an Intercultural Collaborative Art Show between Artists in IRAN and the USA
"Opening on March 21st from 6 to 10 pm"
"Continuing from March 22-29, 5 to 9 pm"
Andenken Gallery
2990 Larimer Street
Denver, Colorado 80205
www.andenken.com
mohrehshin@gmail.com

Closing Party on March 28th from 5 to 9 PM
IRUS Art Card (front and back)
Designed by Saeed Ensaﬁ and Josh Fishburn
IRUS Art Poster
Designed by Saeed Ensafi
IRUS Intercultural Collaborative Art Show

March 21st to March 29th
Opening Reception: 6:00 PM, Saturday, March 21st
Andenken Gallery, 2900 Larimer Street (Denver Colfax) 80205
Tickets: Free admission, No tickets necessary.

Two teams of artists, one in Tehran and another in Denver have assembled under one name: IRUS (Iran - United States). Starting with our mutual respect for art, we have established collaborative projects between our groups. By mailing incomplete artworks from Tehran to Denver and from Denver to Tehran, completing them in our respective cities and sending them back, we are building a collection of completed pieces. Using the theme of “Dialogue,” it is our goal to present the perspectives of each group in a respectful, trusting and encouraging manner. In this process, we are not only developing art, but also participating in a functional dialogue with each other as artists and individuals. One component of the show is the Persian story of Scheherazade alongside the stories of Mark Twain as a conceptual framework for the art, further promoting the exploration of, and interaction between the two cultures.

This functional dialogue is manifesting itself locally in conversations among individuals and globally through the modification of artwork by all the members of IRUS. Through the exhibition of our work and the documentation of the process, we will be displaying our dialogue to the public beginning March 21st. We will also have conversation at the exhibition with the presence of the Persian artists.

Both teams consist of artists proficient in a range of media. Through collaborative interaction we are interested in participating in dialogue. The project began when the artist community, the Kinda Collective approached Morahesh Allahyari about working with the concept of intercultural art in Iran to confront the misconceptions between our cultures. After developing and refining a basic concept, developing a proposal, and gathering a team, Allahyari invited Negin Ehtesabian, a Persian artist in Tehran, to form a team of artists. This Iranian team co-developed a proposal with the Kinda Collective to present the works of this collaboration—a unique combination of painting, video art, drawings, photographs, software, street art, and design— in Denver in the spring of 2009, followed by a show in Tehran in the summer of 2009.

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IRUS Art’s Press Release
by Andrew Blanton
Artists draw on U.S.-Iran rift

By Kyle MacMillan
Denver Post Fine Arts Editor
Published: 03/23/2009 12:56:00 AM MDT
Updated: 03/23/2009 1:55:14 AM MDT

The Iranian hostage crisis 30 years ago opened a rupture between the United States and Iran that has persisted ever since, with bursts of bellicosity replacing any official dialogue. Not willing to wait around for politicians and diplomats to heal the rift, a group of 20 young artists and students in the two countries are doing a little cross-cultural outreach of their own.

Since June, they have worked together on art drawings, videos, designs, animation and sound sculpture, trying to be as nonpolitical as possible.

A portion of the pieces are collaborative — some created via Internet exchanges, others shipped back and forth via Turkey, because no mail service exists between Iran and the U.S.

"Dialogue," the resulting exhibition of more than 200 works, opens today at the Andernach Gallery, 29601 Armer St., with a public reception from 6 to 9 p.m. Friday through
"Things are much easier for us, as we have had the benefit of using an international language which cannot get lost in translation and comes directly out of the heart in the shape of art."  

Parv Aftabzadah, an Iranian architect and photographer, said via e-mail.

That doesn’t mean there haven’t been challenges. Besides having to send people from Iran to Turkey to pick up packages and contend with customs scrutiny, the artists have had to be careful not to attract undue attention from Iranian authorities.

Mohsen Ali Ahyari, an Iranian digital media student at the University of Denver, has shepherded the project. Since arriving in Denver in 2007, she has sought to educate people about her country and to challenge negative perceptions that have focused on terrorism and Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

"Whenever you hear about Iran in the media," she said, "it’s all about: Everyone hates Americans there. It’s a poor country. It’s a desert."

After she gave a talk last year at DU about Iran’s underground art scene, students from the arts coop, Kinda Collective, approached her about working together. The collaborative effort, dubbed IRUS Art, emerged.


Josh Frittsen, 26, a graduate student at DU, became involved because he wanted to improve relations between the countries.

"I’m a little ashamed to admit that I didn’t know a lot about Iran," he said.

Frittsen has been able to put a human face on the country and to learn basic facts, such as Iranians speak Farsi, not Arabic.

"My hope is that by seeing the works that are in this show that people can create a personal connection to the artists and have a similar experience."

Two of the show’s sections center on literary icons that speak to the spirit of each country — American humorist Mark Twain and Scholastic’s the storyteller in "The Arabian Nights: Tales from a Thousand and One Nights."

The rest of the exhibition is devoted to the collaborations.

Mahesh believes the show, which IRUS hopes to present in Iran this summer, can have a small impact on U.S.-Iran relations.

"As long as this little step is followed by more steps in the future," she said, "we can be hopeful about further improvements."
Comments by Denver Post’s Audience on IRUS Art Article

Iran was one of Jimmy Carter’s BIGGEST foreign policy disasters, long before he begged us to pay NK to build nuclear weapons. Jimmy ordered the military commanders in Iran to not resist the Ayatollah Khomeini in the interest of “human rights”. They did what Jimmy asked. Within weeks they were all killed by Khomeini. Jimmy created the modern day Iran. Why the media of this country is always afraid to report this little piece of history is beyond me, no enemies on the left I guess?

Freda Borden | 9:44 AM on Saturday Mar 21
Report Abuse

Israel - American Special Interests The Problem

America used to get along fine with Iran... until we let too many AIPAC insurgents weasel their way into politics in Washinton D.C.

We brought this problem upon ourselves, by not recognizing the aims of a particular special interest group, AIPAC, and we allowed them to ultimately harm our security and reputation in the world.

America’s ultra-one-sided rhetoric, funding and alliances, despite UN and World criticism have been disgustingly non-American. I resent AIPAC’s presence in this country.

ISHMAEL 1 | 9:13 AM on Saturday Mar 21
Report Abuse
IRUS: Sustainable Art

IRUS Art’s Flow Map
by Morehshin Allahyari