Ferdows = Well No. 1
Thesis I Final Design Process Document

Abstract

Based on my research on the discovery of oil and the first oil well in Iran (and in the Middle East), I am developing a new mythology that uses personal narrative and the data of its history, geology, geography, politics, infrastructures, and cultural practices. Through installation and performance, the piece will aim to put the oil back into the ground while revealing hidden stories and layers. Using the Persian poem *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) by Ferdowsi as a foundation for storytelling and a celebration of Persian heritage and identity, this new mythology will be part historiography, part genesis, and part love story.

Erica Kermani
MFADT Thesis I
Gaulon/Sugrue/Richard
December 14, 2017

Concept

Using data from the discovery of oil and the first oil well in Iran, I am developing a new mythological narrative. My central question is, how can I reverse the process and the epic of this oil extractionism that has also redefined the Iranian culture and land (through a Western lens) to then reclaim culture and place by embodying extractivism in terms of research, data, acquiring oil, and creating a new narrative. I also examine monuments, oil wells, data centers, and tombs as synonymous objects of culture, historical memory, preservation, and place, ritual, and legacy. Through installation and performance, the piece will aim to put the oil back into the ground while revealing hidden stories and layers as a form of political resistance. Using the Persian poem *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) by Ferdowsi as a foundation for storytelling and a celebration of Persian heritage and identity, this new mythology will be part historiography, part genesis, and part love story.

Research

I am researching the discovery of oil and the first oil well in Iran, also the first oil well ever in the Middle East. Known as Well No. 1, this oil well's establishment in Masjed Soleyman has changed the Middle East and the world as we know it, including the beginning of the petroleum industry and the expansion of industrialization. My domains of interest and of research are mythology, storytelling, artistic documentary, political science, history, data science, mysticism, culture, heritage, library sciences/archiving, geology, archaeology, geography, architecture, and activism. In my research around the oil well, I am interested in pursuing how these domains overlap, intersect and connect and how my research findings become oil data. Currently, I am exploring methods around how artists and creative practitioners tell layered stories through data and about data.

Mythology and poetry are central substrates for Iranian culture and hold as cultural record. *Shahnameh* provides a poetic account of the prehistory and history of Iran, beginning with the creation of the world and the introduction of the arts of civilization, such as fire and law, the beginnings of Zoroastrianism and the death of the last Sassanid ruler, and ending with the Islamic Conquest of Persia. In a parallel manner, I am specifically collecting data on the stories of kings, heroes, villains, and politics (of Iran and the West); the locations of these stories; the oil well's infrastructure, architecture, and processes; the prehistory, history, geography, and geology of the land and the layers of time; and the ancient rituals and spiritual practices and places around the oil.

Other projects that have pursued storytelling using extensive intertwining of data include Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia de la Luz* (2010); and Camille Henrot's *The The Pale Fox* (2014) and *Grosse Fatigue* (2013). *Nostalgia de la Luz* is a documentary told through Guzmán's narration that addresses that humanity's past within Chile's Atacama Desert, from the remains of those executed during the Pinochet dictatorship to the pre-historical archaeological findings and astronomical research. From this, I have pushed to include my own perspective and

writing into the mythological narrative, taking on the role of the extractivist. Additionally, I plan to produce story elements from the perspectives of the characters in the data itself, from the oil to the tombs, from the dust and the ground, to the "kings" of this oil history. Camille Henrot's *The Pale Fox* and *Grosse Fatigue* serve as precedents as ways to tell a story through the archive and the archival process. *The Pale Fox* is an immersive environment made up of more than 400 photographs, sculptures, books and drawings that "meditates on our shared desire to understand the world intimately through the objects that surround us."[1] As a video piece, *Grosse Fatigue* attempts to tell the story of the universe in thirteen minutes, using various elements including footage of archives from the Smithsonian Institute, a spoken word poem, and the mix of scientific, religious, and traditional imagery and storytelling.[2] Specific precedents around oil data, mythology, and histories include Reza Negarestani's science-fiction novel *Cyclonopedia: complicity with anonymous materials*, a story of oil told through the religious and academic research; and the board game *Petropolis* that allows one to interact through relationships between nations and political actors. Here, locations play key roles in telling the story. In my research of the Iranian oil discovery, I have tracked the locations of the political and social actors.

Impetus and Goal

One of my Ferdowsi's main work objectives was to share Persian heritage and identity with the world, a Persian heritage that also preserves ancient and contemporary history and culture through monuments, archives, and rituals. Through my art practice and accompanying research, I focus on my own cultural exploration, reclamation, and celebration of my Iranian roots, while also in reference to my Western-ness. I believe that resilient ritual and cultural practices can be frameworks for collective action and resistance. Zoroastrians considered oil seeps in Masjed Soleyman to be of spiritual significance. By way of the West, Orientalism, industrialization, globalization, and capitalism, the Western-led oil discovery has extracted the resources, transformed the land, erased the culture and origin stories and has created a new history and mythology for Iran. It has established policies between the West and the Middle East of what lands and peoples are (and are not) preserved or protected, of extraction, of climate change, immigration, interventionism, and war. At the recent COP23, the Conference of Parties around climate change, in Bonne Germany, environmental activists demanded to "keep [fossil fuels] in the ground." I first uncover, explore and collect the oil and oil data. And then I ask, what if I can reverse the erasure and invisibility and then reclaim the rich culture and history by burying this oil data?

Audience and Experience

This project is for various audiences and participants. For the final installation and ritual performances, this project will display in a formal gallery setting, intended to draw Westerners to experience a new mythology about the discovery of oil in Iran. I anticipate that these

---

[1] Henrot, Camille, http://www.camillehenrot.fr/en/work/74/the-pale-fox
[2] Henrot, Camille, http://www.camillehenrot.fr/en/work/68/grosse-fatigue

audience members will interact with the stories and to participate in a ritual. In addition, I would like to engage Iranians and other Middle Eastern people, both living in those countries and from diasporic communities, who could potentially collaborate in developing the visual and written narrative and rituals for the work. Though the final piece would be built and installed for a gallery space, I hope to use pieces of the project in different platforms, from web to printed matter.

Prototyping, testing, exploration through making

My initial prototypes were inspired by artists working in 3D animation, photogrammetry and experimental video. I began by developing 3D collages in Unity3D, utilizing 3D models and simple animations to sketch ideas and connections made while researching the history and politics around Iran's oil industry. I found an oil well in the Persian Gulf named after Ferdowsi, an interesting way that this famous poet was memorialized and honored. Thus the first sketch I created was Ferdowsi's tomb memorial (monument) as an oil well, spewing oil. Ferdowsi metaphorically rolled around in his grave (tomb). Along with these animations and sketches, I also experimented with audio, as I was making connections with the oil industry and the US's recent intervention policies and conflicts in the Middle East. I layered news recordings and Iranian music; in addition, I recorded my mother quoting Ferdowsi's statement on sharing Persian culture with the world. I later recorded the readings of formal documents from the oil's history that I will later use in the videos I produce in developing the mythology.

Another sketch in this series inspired the second phase of making: the Golestan Palace tomb as data center. Golestan Palace in Iran is where the Qajar Dynasty--the Kings in this era of oil discovery--held court and also where one was laid to rest in a tomb. In addition, the Qajar rulers maintained archives of Iranian heritage within the palace. This led to the prospect of producing an art installation that embodied a data center tomb, featuring these previous animations, run on oil, and cold like a data center and tomb. I began to 3D model this space in Blender.

In the next phase I began focusing on how a large of data of is processed and interpreted--using machine learning algorithms. I focused on specific natural language and image style transfer processes in order to begin to develop the written narrative portion of the mythology and propose another aesthetic. I used *Shahnameh* as a training text and visual language (classic miniature paintings) and incorporated a consolidation of the research collection including the history of the oil well, its current status, the geology of the area, and the history of the Bakhtiari Tribe who occupied the land at the time of the British investment into establishing the oil well. The results have yet to successful for this process and I need to begin again to ensure results. However, I did utilize an easy image transfer application for images that combine *Shahnameh* visuals with early photographs of the oil well.

I was urged to maintain an extensive research practice and find ways to document it in pursuit of a more cohesive or simple gesture to express this exploration. These previous prototypes

lacked clarity and purpose, and most importantly my voice and point of view. The most recent prototype intends to capture my research journey--my search for oil data and for the mythical and historical stories buried within. It also incorporates my interest in rituals as resistance. My current proof of concept is a video that illustrates the searching by digging and the burial of the oil data. Based on the locations of major historical moments in the oil well story, I chose one in Paris: Trocadero Gardens where the Paris Exposition of 1900 took place. At this location, the Iran's ambassador first met British William D'Arcy to discuss the prospects of an oil industry in Iran. I propose that this is where a love story begins, yet only one chapter of the entire mythology. And here at this location is where I buried the 3D-printed plastic tomb/oil well/data center that enclosed the mini-SD card storying the data. For my next steps, I will produce additional videos as I expand on the story.

Still from Ferdows = Well No. 1 video
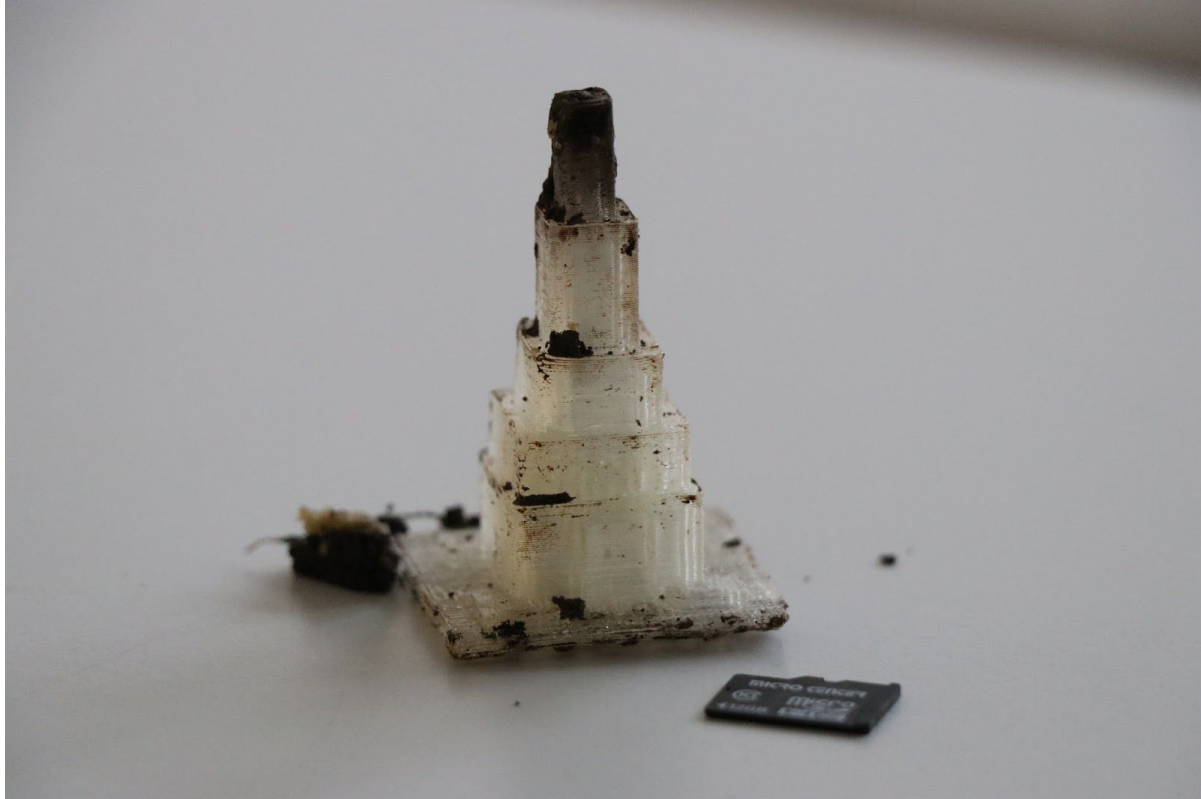
3D printed tomb-oil-well-data center-monument with MicroSD card

Technical Production Plan

Aside from producing these videos as I continue developing the narrative that includes history, my place in the story, and fiction, I would also like to continue researching to find the hidden, untold, or invisible stories of the oil well and the discovery of oil in Iran. I also intend to focus on infrastructure and architecture that will then influence the design of the installation space. Ferdowsi also used architecture to capture the Persian heritage, and architecture is crucial to dialogue around legacies and preservation, how monuments, data centers, tombs, and oil wells share these elements. I incorporated this notion in the proof of concept video, yet I would like to continue this process of development. Additionally, crucial parts of my development of the mythology will be personal writing, working on machine learning again, collaborating with other artists, writers, and activists, and continuing to hone in on special aspects of the data I have collected and will continue to collect. I will interview and document specialists and experts who do work around the oil well story, and expect to open up other stories in my discovery. Research will also include a deeper understanding of the Zoroastrian rituals and fire temples that surrounded the oil and engaging spiritual practitioners in my process and perhaps final work. Lastly, I would like to acquire crude oil. I am working to connect with those involved with the oil industry to accomplish this goal.

Weeks 01 / 02 January 1 - January 13	1. Produce video and writing around location/story 2. Read *Iran without Borders* 3. Correspond with Rasoul Sorkhabi (Utah, Petroleum Institute)
Weeks 03 / 04 January 14 - January 27	1. Participate in Tech and Performance Collab (improve work around performance/ritual) 2. Read *Cyclonopedia* 3. Correspond with oil industry 4. Play *Petropolis* and document
Weeks 05 / 06 January 28 - February 3	1. Produce video based on *Petropolis*/game outcomes 2. Read *Cyclonopedia* 3. Design/prototype installation space 4. Continue oil acquisition process
Weeks 07 / 08 February 4 - February 17	1. Connect with Iranian artists/writers/activists 2. Write about Bakhtiaris and Zoroastrians 3. Correspond with Zoroastrian clergy
Weeks 09 / 10 February 18 - March 3	1. Connect with Iranian artists/writers/activists 2. Write about Bakhtiaris and Zoroastrians 3. Correspond with Zoroastrian clergy
Weeks 11 / 12 March 4 - March 17	1. Produce video on another chapter 2. Document NowRuz rituals, incorporate ritual and document 3. Start building installation space
Weeks 13 / 14 March 18 - March 31	1. Plan how to incorporate oil (if acquired) 2. Finalize writings and videos 3. Work with Iranian artists
Weeks 15 / 16 April 1 - April 15	Prepare for Final Gallery Exhibition