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VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Watching Nasim's world: aesthetics, technology and subjectivity of digital labor

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Abstract

This article discusses the relationship between subjectivity, technology and aesthetics drawing on the case of Nasim, a youtuber of Iranian origin based in California who attacked employees and died at Google's headquarters in 2018. Nasim's self-produced videos provide an entry point to reflect on the encounters between the making of self and audiovisual technologies under current capitalist conditions. Analyzing the formal features of Nasim's videos and the labor they entail, the article reflects on the mutual imbrication of self-determination (autopoiesis) and techno-social articulations, to sketch the hypothesis that freedom and control far from being opposites are inextricably linked and define the conditions of a current mode of existence in which the expression of life results in death.

Keywords

Technology, subjectivity, aesthetics, labor, media, Iranian diaspora

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1. The circulation of images



Figure 1 Screen shot of Nasim's video titled "کوسه+گرسنه+و+دختر"

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/%DA%A9%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%87+%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%87+%D9%88+%D8%AF%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%B1.wmv

A young woman swims in an ocean of pixelated waves only delimited by the sky at the horizon, her slim figure at the center of the screen, almost three quarters out of the water. Speaking Persian, she says she enjoys swimming in such peaceful and transparent waters. It's an abstract world, not much more than colors and shapes, not unlike a basic animation or videogame. A shark appears, first the fins, not much more than blue triangles moving on the surface of the sea, then a cartoonlike enormous open mouth about to eat the woman. A conversation follows. The shark asks the woman to provide a logical reason not to eat her. "I am vegan" she says. "Why you did not say it from the start!" the shark replies swimming away. The video ends as it started, with the woman swimming across the saturated blue screen in a limitless ocean.

It was the contemporary relentless circulation of images in which we are all immersed that made me watch this video and learn about Nasim Aghdam. On April 3rd, 2018, the New York Times carried this news item on its front page:

A woman opened fire with a handgun at YouTube's headquarters in California on Tuesday afternoon, shooting three people – one of whom was critically injured – before killing herself, the authorities said. The San Bruno Police Department identified the attacker late Tuesday as Nasim Najafi Aghdam, who was in her late 30s. The motivation for the shootings was under investigation, the police said, although her social media postings included criticisms of YouTube¹.

Immediately after Nasim's death, her social media accounts were taken down, but some of her videos and screen shots circulated accompanying accounts of the events at YouTube headquarters, along with information on her life and analyses of the "anxiety of demonetization" (Chen 2018). Anxious as many other digital producers about her decline in revenue due to changes in YouTube policies on advertising and retribution per number of views, Nasim harmed others and herself. I learned about Nasim and her media production reading these news items, and started watching her 300 or so videos, many

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/03/us/youtube-shooting.html>

of them reposted on YouTube in subsequent years, many others hosted at archive.org along with chronological captures of her websites with her photos and writings ².

Watching Nasim's videos, I felt summoned into a strangely familiar yet unknown world in which habitual references were reconfigured on an unsettling terrain³. In Nasim's videos everyday settings and objects are reassembled into a circumscribed world made of saturated colors and fixed frames. In most videos Nasim stands at the center of the frame looking outward, straight towards the camera, swimming, working out, cooking, sewing, performing comedy acts, arguing for animal rights, engaging in social and political critique. At once serious and impossible to take seriously, Nasim's images produce estrangement and generate thinking, inviting one to reflect on the relationship between technology, aesthetics and subjectivity in times of digital labor.

Made mostly between 2010 and 2018 –before Covid, Tik-Tok and AI– Nasim's videos are a product of their time, already superseded by the innumerable images and events that followed, which have transformed the specific assemblage of technology, aesthetics and subjectivity that these videos actualized. And yet, because of their peculiarity, Nasim's videos are an original vantagepoint to reflect on the production of images in our epoch and analyze the relationship between the forms of expression made available by digital technologies and the processes of subject formation they enable. My analysis aims at bringing to the fore the contrast between on the one hand the image of self making and freedom the videos enact, what I term Nasim's world, and on the other hand the conditions of their production, determined by capital flows and labor conditions, which determine the very existence of Nasim's world, as well as the circulation of these images and my own practice of watching and researching the videos. However, rather than positing this contradiction as one between individual autonomy and techno-capitalist determination, between humans on one side and apparatus on the other, my discussion aims at showing how today the making of a self is instead indissociable from its technological forms in ways that trouble any neat partition between the two.

The circulation of Nasim's videos cannot be disjoined from her tragic death. However, I am not interested in using it to make sense of her videos retrospectively. The following pages do not draw on Nasim's life to explain her videos, nor do they draw on her videos to explain her actions. Avoiding search for causes, I discuss Nasim's videos as aesthetic products made out of the experiences and the labor of their author but not

² In all her video production Nasim does not use her last name, the one that was reported in the news and used in archive.org to attribute authorship but identifies herself either as Nasim or Nasim-e Sabz (see footnote 12). I refer to her as Nasim to underline both that my focus is on her videos (not her life) and that what I am analyzing is her own production as presented in her video world. I thank Samar Omid-Noubijari and Maryam Roosta for their invaluable research, and Chiara Pilotto and Bruno Riccio for their invitation to present this research at the University of Bologna workshop and their engaging conversations. Alessandra Gribaldo gave me immensely insightful comments. I also thank Lynda Dematteo, Rossen Djagalov, Philippe Messier and especially Mariella Pandolfo and Arvind Rajagopal for inviting me to present the research in their seminars and their precious feedback. The research of Samuele Collu and conversations with him have shaped my thinking. I thank the two generous anonymous reviewers for their incredibly insightful and concrete suggestions. The research was funded by an Insight Development Grant from Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, I thank them for their support. I invite readers to watch Nasim's videos.

³ Many YouTube comments to Nasim's videos (written after her death) express similar reactions see for example user @Kloutkulture "Wow her videos were instantly classified as the weird side of youtube" or @yovanasalgado319 "She looks kinda creepy tho." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1Vi4YGMGkk>.

identical with or indexical of her life. My approach is twofold. On the one hand, I watch and analyze Nasim's videos on their own terms. Nasim aspired to be taken seriously as an artist and cultural critic. My analysis is an effort to understand her video production and examine their forms as artifacts. On the other hand, I describe the videos to reconstruct how their aesthetics, their assemblage of sensations and forms, produces a specific image of Nasim and her actions, what I call Nasim's world, which I argue can tell us something about the specific intersection of technology and subjectivity they express. In this regard, my own act of watching the videos (as that of other viewers) is also caught up in the relationship between technology and subjectivity that these images both elicit and express.

My choice to name her video production "Nasim's world" aims at drawing attention towards the existential dimension of her videos while also underlying both the artistic labor of their production and their distinctive self-contained character. Loosely phenomenological, the term "world" is also meant to underlie the set of intersecting and conflicting expressive trajectories that compose these images and come to constitute a specific form of relationality. Nasim's world is self-contained but not isolated from its surroundings. On the contrary, its composition draws on the milieu of the internet and other media and suburban American and Iranian lifestyles. All these elements however are displaced and reconfigured to delineate a world shaped by Nasim's technologically inflected creativity. This movement from the outside to the inside highlights both the severance of Nasim's world from and the closeness to its surroundings, and sets the stage for their defining underlying tension.

Nasim's videos constitute a world in which the tension between the will towards defining one's own life in one's own terms, what I refer to as the process of "making oneself," becomes inseparable from the set of economic and technological circumstances that both enable and constrain this process. While Nasim asserts over and over that she made everything herself, this tension is not (as it usually posited) a clash between the "internal" will of an "I" and the external circumstances that oppose its development because, as I will try to show, it is these very circumstances which enable the process of making oneself. In Nasim's world self-determination (autopoiesis) and other-determination (allopoiesis) converge⁴. Nasim's world is a technological world. Technology provides not just the tools but the architecture and the building blocks of this self-contained world which could not exist without it. The convergence of self-determination and other determination is also, inextricably, a question of labor. The quantity and diversity of activities one engages in to make a world such as Nasim's is directly proportional to the exchange value through which one expresses oneself. The degree of freedom one has and that allows them to be what they want corresponds (counterintuitively) to the degree to which one is subjected to the economic and technological dispositifs that enable such freedom. Nasim's world suggests that freedom and constraint, rather than opposite have become indistinguishable from each other. This is what makes Nasim's videos unsettling. Ultimately this indistinguishable kernel is related

⁴ My use of the term autopoiesis owes more to Guattari (1995) than the original formulation by Maturana and Varela (1980).

to the pulsional field of repressed tensions that animates singular existences in the contemporary world. It is here that one can find certainly not an answer but perhaps a better formulated question, a riddle, about the way in which such mode of existence turns the expression of life into annihilation.

Though this article does not do justice to the complexity of the Iranian diaspora nor to the scholarship on it, readers should keep in mind that Nasim's world is deeply intertwined with this culture, and more specifically with the politics of the Iranian diaspora's online activities, which bring together and set apart the place of residence and the distant but no less present Iranian homeland (e.g. Khosravi 2000, Zare 2018)⁵. In her study of *weblogestan*, the Persian language media sphere of blogs and other internet exchanges, Sima Shakhsari discusses Nasim's web persona in relation to the politics of sexuality and free speech that dominated this discursive field in United States during the 2010's (Shakhsari 2020: 135-144)⁶. For Shakhsari, Nasim is a "risky subject, an unruly Iranian immigrant that cannot be placed within categories. Neither queer nor heteronormative, neither perfect victim nor villain, Nasim's "para-humanity" is for Shakhsari a sign of her failed exceptionalism and affective queerness that challenges "the promise of freedom of speech and individualism." (Shakhsari 2020: 144).

Shakhsari's analysis is crucial to understand the dynamics of *weblogestan* and to delineate some of the context from which Nasim's world emerged. As I will elaborate further below, Shakhsari also draws a crucial connection between the activities of *weblogestan* and the necessary conditions of self-entrepreneurship upon which this media production is based. These pages however develop a different premise. Rather than analyzing how Nasim might be positioned in relation to the Persian language internet discursive field, or comment on her failures to do so, I aim at delineating Nasim videos' specific process of individuation that outlines a way of doing, "intrinsic" to the phenomenon itself⁷. While not denying that Nasim's world might very well be read as a performance of "humanity," especially considering Nasim's social critique that I will discuss below, what is at stake for me is less Nasim's message than what, referencing Foucault, Deleuze called an "intrinsic aesthetic" (Deleuze 2003: 321), a combinatory art of life that retools whatever it encounters into a thing of its own. Considering the combination of forms, techniques and forces assembled in the videos as expressive of a specific way of being, I reflect on what they can tell us about the conditions of possibility for one to become "someone" (Nasim in this case) in times of migration and digital economy. These conditions are themselves imbricated into the intrinsic aesthetic of Nasim's world, to the extent that the "mode of existence" I delineate is also at the same

⁵ I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting this point and the relevant bibliography.

⁶ On *weblogestan* see also Sreberny and Khiabany (2010) dated but still useful.

⁷ "A process of subjectification, that is, the production of a mode of existence, can't be equated with a subject, unless we divest the subject of any interiority and even any identity. Subjectification doesn't even have anything to do with a 'person': it's a specific or collective individuation relating to an event (a time of day, a river, a wind, a life. . .). It's a mode of intensity, not a personal subject." (Deleuze 1995: 98-99 Translation modified, see also Ibid: 113-116). Deleuze's use of the term "mode of existence" is related at least in part to Simondon's work on the mode of existence of technical objects and linked to the question of technology (Simondon 2017).

time “a mode of production” as Marx and Engels had already noted⁸. The production of images, value and subjectivity are part and parcel of the same process. Furthering Deleuze's perspective, already in 1992 Felix Guattari had charted the intersection of these trajectories reflecting on the increasing relevance of the combination of technology, aesthetics and subjectivity, especially in relation to the then emerging “reappropriation and singularisation of the use of media” (Guattari 1995: 5) which constitutes one of the premises of contemporary platform capitalism. These mediated singular expressions, enabled by digital technologies, constitute the axis of what Guattari called an emergent form of autopoiesis characterized by the possibility to invent or create new universes of reference (in our case Nasim's own world) while at the same time completely subsumed to the logic of capital's accumulation. This singularization of the media has reached nowadays such a level that it is hardly distinguishable from the making of subjectivity itself, having become its hallmark.

2. Nasim's media ecology



Figure 2 Screenshot from Nasim's website for August 26, 2016.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160829054016/http://nasimesabz.com/index.html>

According to what she posted on one of her websites in 2016 (see Figure 2), and stated in her videos, Nasim was born in Iran in 1979 (the year of the Iranian revolution) in the city of Urmia in the northwest of the country, in the province of Azerbaijan⁹. She spent several years in Karaj, her “favorite” city, a urban sprawl about a hundred km from Tehran that

⁸ “This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce.” (Marx and Engels 1976: 31-32) Philological research has shown how the phrasing of this passage of the *German Ideology* is the outcome of editing by generations of editors rather than Marx and Engels' own formulation (see Carver, Blank and Marx 2014).

⁹ “About Nasim”, https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/About+Nasim.mp4.

developed in the 1980s and 90s at a time of rapid urbanization. She arrived in Southern California in the late nineties¹⁰.

On her websites and videos Nasim presented herself as a “vegan” and an activist for animals’ rights, condemning meat eaters while often also addressing the health benefits of a vegan diet. As evidenced by the screenshot in Figure 2, her veganism is also related to her interest in the body, in sports and dance. On her website, Nasim announces that in 2010 she produced the “first Persian Vegan TV commercial” and first “Persian Animal Rights Music Video” for a Persian language satellite channel in Los Angeles¹¹. She later became a YouTube creator also active on other social media (according to her archived website, besides several YouTube channels, Nasim had several Instagram profiles, Facebook, and a Telegram channel, which are now inaccessible). She spoke Turkish, in addition to Persian and English and she produced videos in all three languages. Her posts are often multilingual and she used several variations of her name on the internet¹². Nasim had a certain recognition on social media, mostly among Persian speakers, probably outside Iran¹³. As she explains in a video, she seems to also have attracted the attention of a Turkish speaking internet public: a Turkish youtuber who had posted and ridiculed some of her videos, made an apology after her death¹⁴.

In United States, in Southern California in particular, there is a large and ever-growing population of Iranians who have been migrating there since the 1979 revolution. In the 1980s a diverse Persian language media production developed in the Los Angeles area.

¹⁰ At the time of her death, some news outlets, including the New York Times, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/us/youtube-shooting-nasim-najafi-aghdam.html> reported that Nasim was a Bahai, a religion not recognized by the Islamic Republic of Iran whose followers are persecuted in Iran, indicating this as the reason for her migration (Shakhsari describes her as a “refugee”). In Nasim’s materials that I researched so far I found only one, but significant reference to the Bahai faith. A passage in Persian from one of the works of Bahahullah, the religion’s founder, superimposed on a photograph of Nasim was for at least one year (2017-18) at the top of Nasim’s webpage until early 2018 when it was moved at the bottom of the website, see here <https://web.archive.org/web/20160829054016/http://nasimesabz.com/index.html>.

¹¹ “Nasim First Persian Vegan TV Ads”

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/Nasim+First+Persian+Vegan+TV+Ads.mp4 The music video was produced for Andisheh TV. “Nasim First Iranian Vegan Music Video Do you Dare”

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/Nasim+First+Iranian+Vegan+Music+Video+Do+You+Dare.mp4.

¹² One of them, Nasim-e Sabz (Green Nasim), along with her use of the color green (which is also related to the green screen) likely refers to the 2009 “green” movement of mass political protests in Iran which were repressed by the state. However, (so far) I found no video or other material by Nasim referencing the green movement.

¹³ According to screenshots of her cancelled YouTube accounts posted on her website captures on archive.org, Nasim had between 366,000 and 94,000 views for some of her videos, and 2/3M views of her channels. Also see the reactions to her death by other social media users quoted in Dagres (2018) who also argues she was well known. The extent to which Nasim was known in Iran is uncertain. The NYT states that some of her videos had gone “viral” in Iran, however, anecdotal evidence I was able to collect seems to indicate that she wasn’t known at all in Iran, or she received only some attention because of her death. As Dagres also implies part of her fame was due to the ways in which other social media users and personalities pointed out or ridiculed her videos and postures. The question of recognition and therefore of likes and views was Nasim’s own great concern: she accused YouTube of censoring or obscuring her videos so they would receive less views. Shakhsari (2020: 136) also argues that Nasim was well known in *weblogestan* and her views increased after she moved from producing parodies and sport training videos to recording responses to the people who were attacking her on social media.

¹⁴ “About Nasim,” https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/About+Nasim.mp4 referring to this video “ENTERESAN !!!! (Yeşil Nasim)”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZ7hOjwZWBc&list=PLtV5Nng_bGXpx8HuED313V9lcFbEaTO1a&index=16.

This happened in conjunction with the diffusion of satellite technologies that made long distance broadcasting and reception possible. Since the late 1980s, local TV channels broadcasting in Persian to the LA-Iranian community were also widely watched in Iran despite being prohibited by the Islamic Republic. Populated by many Iranian media personalities, actors and singers who had migrated to Southern California, the satellite TV channels also participated in producing what would eventually become a specific Iranian-American imaginary in which nostalgic views of Iranian modernism intertwined with American consumerism and voyeuristic excess (Nafisi 1993). Reality shows such as “Shahs of Sunset” can be seen as one of the outcomes of this process¹⁵. Music videos have been an important part of this media landscape (Hemmasi 2020). Nasim’s video production is part of this specific media ecology. The settings, content, editing, and overall aesthetics of many of her videos recall Iranian satellite TV channels shows, and her “debut” in 2010 also marks her connection to that world. However, it seems she also took distance from the world of Iranian TVs, or perhaps she never really became a part of it. If Persian language satellite TVs and its attendant mediascape provided her with some of the formal elements of her videos, Nasim appropriated these forms towards a different use.

Equally uncertain is the extent to which Nasim’s video production can be related to the transnational network of Iranian bloggers and social media users that developed in the 2010s. Shahkhsari sees Nasim as an integral part of this *weblogestan*, and certainly there are elements in her videos, speeches and websites that relate to this environment to which Nasim seems at times to respond, especially regarding “freedom”, but the workings of *weblogestan*, as outlined by Shahkhsari, and its focus on political commentary do not fully account for Nasim’s video production, even though Shahkhsari offers a crucial contextualization of the entrepreneurial character of these bloggers to which I return below.

Nasim’s videos are also connected to the YouTube aesthetics of the 2010’s. At the time, with the spread of smartphones and the development of platforms, there were trends – for example vaporwave (i.e. James Ferraro)’s music and videos, or “post-internet art” – whose aesthetics resembles Nasim’s style: use of cheap design software, low fi production, background with solid colors. These are artists took images and videos from the internet and repurposed them in their own work assembling them to create art objects that provided a playful critique of the internet world while at the same time acquiring value in the art market. However, because of its popularity, post-internet art lost its quality of avantgarde and experimentation and became very repetitive. The influence was reciprocal. Post-internet art was based on internet pop culture, while at the same time pop artists copied or stole ideas from post-internet artists. Pop artists like Maryanna or Azelia Banks sold millions of copies taking some of the techniques and ideas for their videos from post-internet art (see Quaranta 2020). Nasim can be seen as part of this media environment. There are similarities between some of Nasim’s videos and these pop/post-internet art productions. One can compare the video in Figure 1, with a 2012 Azelia Banks video in the “sea punk” genre of saturated colors¹⁶. In addition, several of Nasim’s videos

¹⁵ “Shahs of Sunset: Season 2 Official Trailer | Bravo,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LE22Dn27sVw>.

¹⁶ “ATLANTIS - AZELIA BANKS (**OFFICIAL VIDEO**),” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yj-xBpQ0Cl0>.

are “parodies” of well-known pop singers as Taylor Swift. These similarities suggest that Nasim videos are very much part of a specific internet moment. And yet they are also quite estranged from it. They incorporate many elements of “post-internet art,” but their overall modality is far from this genre. Even when they are parodies, Nasim’s videos display a seriousness of intent that is far from the light playfulness of the post internet artists, while Nasim’s artisanal production is far from the professional videos of pop stars.

All these media products and their attendant trajectories come together to constitute the context out of which Nasim’s videos emerged. However, while Nasim videos are very much of their times, they are also outside of them. More than anything, Nasim’s videos stand out as something of their own.

3. Platform Capitalism

Today digital platforms are ubiquitous features of everyday life around the world, contributing to the making of contemporary capitalism and social relations more generally. Snircek draws attention to this phenomenon coining the term “platform capitalism” to identify the specificity of 2010s¹⁷. For him, after the crisis of 2008, a new business and technological model emerged. Developing trends already present that foregrounded knowledge as a key element of value production and therefore of labor, Snircek sees this new phase as characterized by data extraction (see also Mezzadra and Neilson 2019) as the new source of value. Data need an infrastructure to “sense, record, and analyze” (Snircek 2017: 54). The increase of digital communication met these demands and made digital platforms the key infrastructure of this new capitalist mode of production:

Often arising out of internal needs to handle data, platforms became an efficient way to monopolize, extract, analyze, and use the increasingly large amounts of data that were being recorded. Now [in 2017] this model has come to expand across the economy, as numerous companies incorporate platforms: powerful technology companies (Google, Facebook, and Amazon), dynamic start-ups (Uber, Airbnb), industrial leaders (GE, Siemens), and agricultural powerhouses (John Deere, Monsanto), to name just a few (Ibid: 57).

Platforms produce and accumulate exchange value through a complex set of operations of data extraction, via emotive reactions and behaviors like scrolling, surfing and retweeting. One can debate whether this value accumulation is the result of “free labor” as Tiziana Terranova (2000) had argued twenty-five years ago, or instead, as Snircek and others believe, if it primarily involves the extraction and appropriation of data (Snircek 2017: 70-1).

¹⁷ Snircek (2017) is a good overview of debates about internet and capitalism, but his distinction between data (information about what happened) and knowledge (information about why it happened) (Snircek 2017: 53) seems to introduce an unwarranted bifurcation between the what and the how of information, somehow taking the valorization of information as separate from the mode of production, a line of argumentation I disagree with.

Snircek defines platforms as “digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact” (Ibid: 57)¹⁸. Perhaps broad, Snircek’s definition has the merit of describing how production and communication are inextricably linked in contemporary capitalism. The very act of communication becomes an integral part of the value production process. Value in Marxian terms has always been connected to interaction (Rossi-Landi 2017), but platform capitalism valorizes communication itself to an unprecedented extent: there is no communication without valorization, communication coincides with exchange value¹⁹. Concurrently, in platform capitalism the difference between subjectivation and technology appears blurred. Humans are losing monopoly over language, while their affects and cognition have become integral component of technological devices. These developments also invite rethinking the division of labor in relation to technology. There are convergences and divergencies between the work accomplished by an algorithm and that accomplished by a digital worker, between machine labor and human labor²⁰. Research in black studies underlined how capitalism’s extraction is predicated on race (e.g. Robinson 2019) and questioned the humanist critique of technology as reproducing the racial divide (Wynter 2015). Others acknowledging these contributions, see “machine thinking” as potentially undermining the logic of capitalism (Parisi 2019). However, the question that Nasim’s videos pose is not to determine the extent to which the subsumption of communication to capital subjugates or liberates “humans,” nor even what does “human” mean, but to reflect on the mode of existence that such mechanization brings about. In other words, the effort is to move from a diagnostic about the process of valorization and its capture of language and affects, towards the description of an “intrinsic aesthetics” which cannot be explained solely by the dialectic between subsumption and liberation. What is the mode of existence of such assemblages born at the intersection of images and platform capitalism, what does Nasim’s world stand for? To begin to understand Nasim’s videos one still needs to take a closer look at the labor that made them possible.

4. Creative labor

In the 1970s, Joseph Beuys declared every person an artist (Antliff 2014: 5). With his statement, Beuys was contesting art’s institutions, art criticism and the art market by expanding a romantic notion of the artist to encompass humanity as a whole. Everyone can create art. There should not be any distinction between artist and spectator. The value of art is a conceit of the market. Beuys’ position was not without its contradictions at the time –if nothing else given the value of his own art works– but still retained a critical, liberatory potential.

However, by 2018, at the time of Nasim’s death, Beuys’ call for universal artistry had morphed into a description of a specific labor relation, and not necessarily a liberatory one. Rather than the expression of a shared humanity, creativity had become a necessary

¹⁸ Platforms “therefore position themselves as intermediaries that bring together different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers, and even physical objects.” (Ibid)

¹⁹ I thank Aurora Donzelli for discussing this issue with me and pointing me to the seminal work of Rossi Landi.

²⁰ See for example the case of Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (Kassem 2023).

component of one's labor and therefore become integral to exchange value. Shahkhsari (2020: 169-194) discusses these precarious entrepreneurial conditions in relation to Persian language bloggers caught up in the economic gains of political expression wittingly or unwittingly complicit in the war on terror as knowledge producers who can only survive by monetizing their experience. In order to survive, creative workers have to put their cognitive capacities at the service of the platforms out of which they operate, making their selves integrally available to the process of valorization: to survive they have to become entrepreneurs of themselves (i.e. !Mediengruppe Bitnik et al... 2020). These laborers are not the creative class Florida (2002) wrote about, the reservoir of individuals in innovative sectors that ensures the expansion of capitalist relations. Instead, these workers signal the absorption of creativity into self-entrepreneurship: self-making as auto-production (see also for example Wilf 2014). Self-formation, creative expression, and valorization go hand in hand to the extent that they have become indistinguishable. Self-entrepreneurs are by default living precariously. Creativity generates value, which is alienated from its producers. Deleuze noted that the self, the process of individuation, was a "kind of surplus value: not every dispositif necessarily has it" (Deleuze 2006: 341). But nowadays the self is the only surplus value that's left to the artist.

At least since 2016, Nasim had been criticizing YouTube for "demonetizing" and "filtering" her videos. In 2018 the company revised the policies regulating the number of views needed to receive compensation via advertising²¹. According to Chen (2018) the crisis became known as "Adpocalypse." But Nasim also argued that YouTube was flagging her videos, labelling them in a way that made them less visible and therefore censoring her (more on this below). At the time, other animal activists were raising similar arguments: their videos denouncing the violence against animals were flagged for cruelty while hunting videos were not (the fact that these denunciatory videos are now on YouTube speaks to the complexity of the matter)²². Shahkhsari sees these dynamics as evidence that YouTube is an "arbiter of speech" (Shahkhsari 2020, 139). But the question at stake is also the inextricable intertwining of knowledge labor, politics and technology. Labeling and free speech are intertwined with machine labor. The norms of communication are already technical and enmeshed with value production marking the "merging of life and labor in the age of automation" as Domenico Quaranta describes it. (i.e. !Mediengruppe Bitnik et al... 2020).

The merger of life, labor and technology evidenced in the demonetizing and flagging of Nasim's videos points to the current conditions needed for aesthetic creations to come into existence, for creative labor to run its course. The term "conditions" might be misleading insofar as technology, labor and exchange value are not so much the external constraints that delimit the work of the artist as elements that are themselves part of the aesthetic that propels the making of videos, the modality that gives shape to acts of making we might call aesthetic. The available vocabulary to describe this modality of existence is still tentative, caught in between the tendency on one hand to recur to biology to describe the forces at play and on the other hand to resort to moralizing

²¹ <https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/additional-changes-to-youtube-partner/>.

²² For example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQYHqqu1ln0>.

condemnations (“structures of power”) that explain little and generate only a sense of indignation. The vocabulary of subjectivity does not help much either, because, at least in contemporary usage, is inevitably bound to distinguish what pertains to the human and what pertains to the dispositif that models and orients the human (e.g. Agamben 2009, see Pasquinelli 2015 for a critique).

Tentatively, to describe current conditions of creative labor one could resort instead to the term “autopoiesis,” which biologists Maturana and Varela used to describe the self-constitutive reproductive evolution of organisms and Felix Guattari appropriated to elaborate on the relationship between aesthetics technology and subjectivity²³. Guattari (1995) does not focus so much on the “auto” dimension of poeisis, which by default is defined in opposition to allopoesis, but on the impossibility to separate out what pertains to individuals and what pertain to society, what pertains to aesthetics and what to technology. What matters is how the trajectories of aesthetics, technology and subjectivity assemble and what effect their associations generate. To understand how these trajectories intertwine in Nasim’s videos I now turn to discussing some of their constitutive elements.

5. Nasim’s world

Nasim’s videos are “artisanal”: made with care and effort, they are experiments with materials and forms. Everything is carefully thought. The quantity and variety of videos is a testimony to Nasim’s systematic and sustained labor. In Nasim’s craft, aesthetics, the combination of sensations and forms, intertwines with lines of subjectification, trajectories through which a certain self and its relations take shape. The videos instantiate the creative act of assembling a set of elements to express the ways in which a certain existential power to persevere folds into an assemblage of lights, objects, and sounds. These relations are technological, made possible by the affordances of the platform (in this case YouTube) but they also operate at an existential level: they delineate a way of being.

Nasim’s style

In Nasim’s videos, the camera is fixed most of the times, and always when Nasim is in the frame. When the camera is not fixed, it zooms in and out, often unsteady. Most videos seem to be shot in one take, but often there are abrupt cuts and rudimentary editing. In this regard, Nasim’s videos are no different from millions of other videos produced and uploaded every day on YouTube and other platforms. Nevertheless, they are not random or haphazard. The videos bear the mark of careful craft, instantiating an investment that comes with sustained and repeated effort. This investment turns the fixed camera, the rough zooms and the abrupt cuts into elements of a style, a specific aesthetic, a signature. Nasim’s style is the opposite of a purposeful Do It Yourself approach, the inverse of a studied carelessness. The cipher of Nasim’s videos style is the tension between on one hand the assertion of the hard work that went into their production, and on the other hand

²³ See also Slater (2020) who offers a summary of the debates around autopoiesis, gesturing towards the tension between auto-production and “allo” production, between “closed” machines and “open” ones. Povinelli (2006)’s “autological” subject is a token of this configuration –I thank Jennifer Campbell for the discussion.

the limited (if considered by professional standards) results achieved. The staging of this tension between effort and results doubles its respective poles: it puts into relief the homemade and rough character of the videos while doubling the sense of the amount of labor, care and determination they required. Nasim’s investment is diagrammed into the forms and colors of the videos.

The signature style of Nasim’s videos repeats itself throughout a great variety of genres, which Nasim calls “programs” (*barnameh*) –a term used commonly in Persian to refer to a TV show– of which she is the host and sole protagonist. There are sports instructional videos, music and dance videos, news reels, commentaries on political and social issues, often around veganism and animal rights, sex and health education videos, cooking and sewing lessons, comedy, parody, satire, and videos in which Nasim talks about herself and her video production. All these “shows” make up a world onto itself, covering every aspect of modern suburban life. Often the same video exhibits several of these genres combined, see the parody of Taylor Swift video in Figure 3. Many of the videos’ genres fall under the rubric of instructional videos and could be seen as variations of a will to teach, changing in settings and skills but not in overall format. While this is the case, the multiplication of activities –which might also be aimed at reaching different publics– also points to the division of labor: each genre/show a profession, each genre a different set of skills. At the same time, across the different genres, Nasim is endowed with the power to do everything, she is a master all trades, while being always herself, she becomes someone else in each video.



Figure 3 Screenshot from “Music Videoparody Ingilisi Taylor”.

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B2%DB%8C%DA%A9_%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%88_%D9%BE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AF%DB%8C_%D8%A7%D9%86%DA%AF%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%B3%DB%8C_taylor.wmv

A Self-contained Space/time

Nasim’s videos are located in and produce a space/time of their own. They are often set in an enclosed space that corresponds to the video frame. The space of many videos is partitioned in a background and a foreground by using chroma key compositing. The background is composed of fixed images, either photographs (forests, gardens, sunsets, animals) electronic images (geometrical figures and frames or designed landscapes), or solid colors (blue and green screens) –more rarely of moving images (videos of Nasim,

animal slaughtering, newsreels). At times, architectural elements (a door frame for example) appear on one side or the other of the screen. In the foreground there is Nasim, most often at the center of the screen, facing the camera. Videos without chroma key compositing, are set inside houses: in a kitchen, a bedroom, a basement with a pool table, or a courtyard with high walls. The videos follow the temporal arc of the food recipe, the comedy sketch, the song, the political pronouncement, or the body exercise. They rarely last more than two minutes, often less. The temporality of the videos is linear, but also indefinite because severed from any points of reference outside the frame. The videos could last a few moments or continue endlessly.

These spatial and temporal coordinates enclose a world of its own, constituted by the elements that compose it. The outside world is itemized, abstracted and relocated within the frame of the videos. This dislocation is not a complete resignification of the outside, but a movement that re-sizes elements of the outside world to compose them in a different assemblage: the videos' space/time reconfigures the visible in its own terms. Rooms, architectural elements, and furniture as well as electronic landscapes and props appear as décor of the self-contained time/space into which they have been folded. This effect is amplified by the familiarity of the transposed elements. When Nasim is not in the frame, often "found objects" like food or drinks occupy the scene: zooming in and out, the camera places them in a suspended temporality of their own. It's Nasim's world.



Figure 4 Screen shot from "Fruit Icecream Nasim"

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/Fruit+Icecream+Nasim.mp4

The pulsional ground

Sexuality is the ground of this world. Nasim addresses sexuality in many of her videos, often playing with different gender identifications. Sexuality is at once celebrated, mocked, and warned against, it is both alluring and threatening. In one video Nasim lashes against Mariam Mohebbi a sexual therapist who had a program on one of the Iranian Satellite TVs airing out of United States, in another she discusses at length how to enlarge breasts in a natural way via exercise and food²⁴. In another she talks about sex

²⁴ فحشا فساد جنسی و مریم محبی ،

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/%D9%81%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%A7+%D9%81%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%

and contraception²⁵. Some videos verge on eroticism, in others she critiques “naked women.” Nasim is particularly vehement against anal sex and its dangers. In one video she responds and ridicules viewers (either real or imagined) who had implied that she was “a trans,” and states that she is a heterosexual woman²⁶. In other videos she cross-dresses and impersonates sexualized characters. Some videos suggest a critique of patriarchy or at least family expectations about gender roles²⁷.

Neither simply a question of identity nor one of practices, sexuality in Nasim’s world is more connected to fantasy than to genitals. Though Nasim discusses sexual practices in several videos and uses the term “sex” both in English and Persian (*jens*), naming “sexuality” the sensuality permeating these videos is reductive, not fully acknowledging something both more encompassing and less literally defined. It might be far-fetched but interesting to note that Nasim’s investment against violence towards animals in numerous videos also exhibits a similar intensity to her discussion of sexuality, signaling a broader field of tensions that triggers Nasim’s reactions and points towards an unresolved tension, an enlarged and yet undisclosed field which is central to Nasim’s world, in a speculative mode one could call it the unconscious of the videos, the site of pulsional conflicts.

Laplanche calls this pulsional ground *le sexual*, to distinguish it from sexual activity and from what is constituted as “sexual” by adults²⁸. *Le sexual* for Laplanche is the site of repression, but also of the articulation of pleasure in relation to an unknown. While this field is related to sexual pulsion, it is not to be identified literally with sex, but instead refers in a much broader sense to the unknown but constitutive bundling of forces that inscribe external demands into the psyche. It is the field where autopoiesis encounters allopoiesis,

[AF+%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%B3%DB%8C+%D9%88+%D9%85%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%85+%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A8%DB%8C.wmv](https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/video5080147777963425814/t_video5080147777963425814.mp4)

روشهای طبیعی بزرگ کردن سینه

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/video5080147777963425814/t_video5080147777963425814.mp4

خطرات سکس باسن²⁵

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/video5080147777963425814/t_video5080147777963425814.mp4

²⁶ After Nasim’s death some alt right bloggers continued to argue that she was a trans (Shahkhsari 2020: 141).

“t_video5080147777963425814”, https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/t_video5080147777963425814.mp4.

²⁷ “funny fathers” https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/funny+fathers.mp4.

²⁸ “I believe that even these days infantile sexuality, strictly speaking, is what is most repugnant in the eyes of the adult. Even today ‘bad habits’ remain the most difficult thing for adults to accept. So it is a curious definition by opposition. By a sort of circular reasoning the sexual is condemned because it is sexual, or *sexual* because it is condemned. The *sexual* is the repressed, it is repressed because it is the *sexual*.” (Laplanche 2011 162-163). Laplanche’s words describe with precision Nasim’s videos’ circular attraction and revulsion towards sexuality. Bad (sexual) habits for Nasim are often “unhealthy” habits i.e. habits that damage one’s health. At the same time, the playfulness of some of these videos seem to also signal traces of curiosity and explorations which could be associated with a child’s attitude. The terrain is slippery because often the video’s “genre” (i.e. normative viewer’s perspective) is undetermined, and what’s being said becomes undecidable. See a video where Nasim chastises kissing as a practice that spreads microbes in someone’s mouth to others, and advices to keep a Ziplock bag in one’s pocket and put it on either one own’s face or lips as a protection when someone wants to kiss you instead of shaking hands. The video is unsettling because it is impossible to decide if the video is a set of serious instructions or a parody. The fact that it precedes the covid pandemic is itself worth reflecting on. “Healthy Kissing Tip Nasimesabz”

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/Healthy+Kissing+Tip+Nasimesabz.mp4.

where one trajectory is intrinsically related to the other. The self-enclosed space-time of Nasim's videos is delineated by and as *le sexual*. Outside unknown (and repressed) elements are reworked into a field of tension and unstable signification, both inviting and threatening. Not a once and for all delineated territory, but the processual acting out of elements that are repressed but nevertheless reinscribed in relation to an outside world from which Nasim's word is separated. The delineation of an intrinsic space/time enables *le sexual* to come forth, to be referred to. As a psychoanalyst, Laplanche sees *le sexual* as shaped mainly by the adult-parent/child relationship, but in the case of Nasim's videos one would be hard pressed not to also reflect on the social (migration), political (freedom of expression) and economic entailments of the pulsional tensions animating the repressed ground.

The body and its dresses

Nasim's body is often the site where *le sexual* is played out. Though Nasim's words are a relevant dimension of her videos, it is her body that expresses. The body is endowed with the power to delineate Nasim's world, the body stands, moves, declares. Body building and aerobics workouts, dances, postures either still or in motion (standing, sitting, or dancing) and many other movements define the space/time of the videos. Nasim's body is everywhere. Numerous videos focus on care of the body from makeup to abdominals to cooking/diet instructions to advice on the dangers of anal sex. But even in those videos where the body is not the main protagonist it is nevertheless foregrounded, the very pole of the entire composition. In a video where she explains how to turn a pair of woman's underwear into a sports bra, Nasim is shown wearing the bra and flexing her muscles²⁹. Her body occupies the self-enclosed space time of the videos as the sole and overwhelming presence that animates them. Either in movement or rest, Nasim's body traces the lines that mark this territory: the dialogue is between her body and the frame. The videos are her body's environment.

In the videos, Nasim impersonates different characters by wearing clothes and wigs appropriate to the character. Even when Nasim is not embodying a specific character, clothes and hairs are crucial elements of the set up: transformational elements that dress her body. Nasim appears in a variety of outfits and hair styles. She wears plastic breasts, wigs, long sleeves dresses with paillettes, sportwear. She cross dresses.

The different outfits are conduits for character impersonation. In some videos she appears as a young man, in others as a hypersexualized female. In many videos Nasim plays the same character from beginning to end, while in others she plays different characters who dialogue with each other across a split screen or in a temporal sequence. Some of these characters are plotted into comedy acts, for example in one of the videos Nasim portrays an Iranian "lady" with voluminous hairs, a see-through scarf and heavy make-up and an "American" with cowboy hat and mustaches (see also Shakhari 2020: 141) or in others she plays "fathers" or "grandmothers"³⁰. In these instances, dressed in

²⁹"t_video5186284112134013065"https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/t_video5186284112134013065.mp4.

³⁰"iranian [sic] vs americans" https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/iranian+vs+americans.mp4.

character, speaking and moving in accordance with the projected habits of these impersonations, Nasim's body acts out the visible but refracted traces of *le sexual*, the unknowable field of tension that structures this self-contained world, the characters impersonating different, often conflicting trajectories of making oneself into someone.

The gaze

Nasim's gaze seals her world. In most videos Nasim looks directly into the camera, looking at her viewers looking at her, looking at herself looking at the viewers. If *le sexual* is the ground territory of the videos, Nasim's gaze is the perspective that delineates the force field that constitutes this ground. Viewers watch Nasim watching the video watching Nasim. Nasim's figure at the center of the videos, and her gaze at the center of her face, multiply the sense of self-containment of these productions. Nasim's gaze organizes the way in which the different elements of the videos are placed in relation to each other. However, there is no recognition, if one understands by this term the mutual constitution of self and other. Nasim's gaze is not addressed to anyone in particular. Though she often speaks to viewers directly ("you") there is no sense that the addressee is a viewing public from which recognition is sought (despite her fight for increased views), no more than a sense that the gaze defines by refraction a "self" and its intentionality. Rather, the gaze delimits a world, a force field occupied by different, at times conflicting trajectories. In this sense the gaze is also a point of fugue, a point of no return that continues to multiply. It is an autopoietic process that is predicated not on "self-reproduction" per se but on the black hole into which the energy produced and emitted is made to escape ad libitum. Having outlined the technological and the economic conditions of the videos, and examined some of their formal features, I turn now to discuss their process of making oneself.

6. Making oneself

Across videos and in some of Nasim's writings and images on her website, self-making is often highlighted. In one of her videos Nasim states that she makes everything in the videos herself, except the music (she sings atop preset melodies)³¹. Besides the biographical info in Figure 2, and a few videos about herself (notably the one about her sexuality), she does not discuss her life, but when she does, she emphasizes self-making in relation to a somewhat hostile environment. The Bahai prayer on her website is an invocation to the prophet of this religion to resist blame and isolation³². The theme of endurance in a hostile environment looms large.

Shahkhsari (2020: 136) argues that Nasim made videos about herself in response to viewers' comments about her, which either made fun of her or questioned her appearance and sexual orientation. This is certainly the case, and these responses constitute part of the looping process whereby the world I am trying to describe takes shape via the "communication" that digital platforms afford. But the emphasis on self-making goes beyond these responses. Nasim's descriptions of herself stress that she had

³¹ "About Nasim" https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/About+Nasim.mp4.

³²In the prayer the prophet is named "gentle breeze" (*nasim-e sabah*) -possibly a reference to Nasim's own name.

been self-determined and independent since an early age. For example, she discusses her choice of becoming a vegetarian when she was five years old stating that she did it "out of my own desire. I had no guide and everyone was against it" she states underlying the sentence with her moving hands for emphasis³³. The self-contained space time of the videos reinforces the emphasis on her self-making as do the many videos in which something Nasim has made –a dress, a necklace, a plate of food– is placed at the center of the frame. The video themselves are both her products and evidence of her production³⁴.

Autarchy is a widespread characteristic of YouTube producers and creative laborers of the internet economy and aesthetics. These are self-made worlds. Nasim's self-making and entrepreneurship focus on the making itself rather than on the production of *herself*. The videos highlight how she did everything on her own, but the attention is directed towards the objects of production, not towards the self-constitution of her distinctive subjectivity. There is no self-fashioning. Instead, the emphasis is on *making* oneself. With words and actions, but also with the forms, settings and space/time configurations I outlined above, Nasim's videos point towards a process of autopoiesis, a production of oneself with one's own means, an intrinsic aesthetic. The outward is included as trace of a repressed force field which remains unknown and unknowable. In Nasim's world the distinction between use value and exchange value becomes uncertain. Not so much because of a presumed utilitarian imperative –Nasim makes videos to support herself economically– but because in the videos' mode of existence the production of oneself is indistinguishable from its valorization.

7. Critique



Figure 5 Screen shot from "The Star People"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z36TW-lt-R0&list=PLtV5Nng_bGXpx8HuED313V9lcFbEaTO1a&index=12.

³³ "About Nasim" https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/About+Nasim.mp4.

³⁴ Shahksari (2020: 138) without endorsing the comment, notes Nasim's "narcissism" and "her exaggerated sense of self-importance."

In a video titled “The Star People” (Figure 5) Nasim explains that she has finally understood that she comes from the stars and lists the characteristics of people like her:

They have strong magnetism, are sensitive to sound and light, are very creative; they feel different from other people, they have piercing eyes, they have a hard time expressing emotions [...] they have a problem with the system and try to change it. They are lonely and social life is difficult for them. Others have a hard time understanding their opinion and for this reason they are often ridiculed. Honesty is very important for them [...] They have depressing or suicidal thoughts...they communicate with a superior world [...]

The video ends with Nasim asking: “Do you also come from the stars?” The anthropological view from afar is here deployed to elaborate a social typology, describe nonconformity and search for kindred spirits. As Shahksari (2020: 139) argues, Nasim’s videos are a form of critique. Across the different genres of videos that Nasim produced critical themes recur. First, the vegan question. Some videos denounce animal killings, others warn against eating meat, some offer advice on vegan lifestyles and give vegan recipes, others are comedy acts with animals speaking and denouncing the way humans treat them (Figure 1). Videos also criticize advertising, “big business,” and conspicuous consumption. Some videos engage in political commentary. In one video Nasim compares freedom in Iran and freedom in US. In Iran there is no freedom, Nasim says, while in U.S.A. they make us believe that there is total freedom, freedom of expression however: “they make us say what we want, but there is censorship through algorithm.” (see also Shahksari 2020: 139). In another video titled “Islamic Republic,” (Ibid.) Nasim offers a critique of hypocrisy, drawing parallels between Iran and the US. As Shakhari discusses, these sarcastic remarks destabilize easy assumptions.

Many of Nasim’s videos and posts criticize YouTube and explain how she was censored: the company put descriptors and hashtags on her videos filtering them as not to be included among recommended videos. The real meaning of “freedom of speech” in Western countries Nasim argues is that one can voice their critique of the system in videos, but then videos are filtered, negatively tagged or taken down³⁵. This kind of filtering, Nasim argues, led to a substantial decrease in views and therefore in the money she received from advertising. As Nasim’s relatives told media outlets, these actions by YouTube caused her rage, and made her drive 800km, go to YouTube headquarters, wound three employees, and kill herself.

³⁵“Real Meaning of Freedom of Speech”

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/Real+Meaning+Of+Free+Speech.mp4



Figure 6 Screenshot from Nasim's website.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160829054016/http://nasimesabz.com/index.htm>

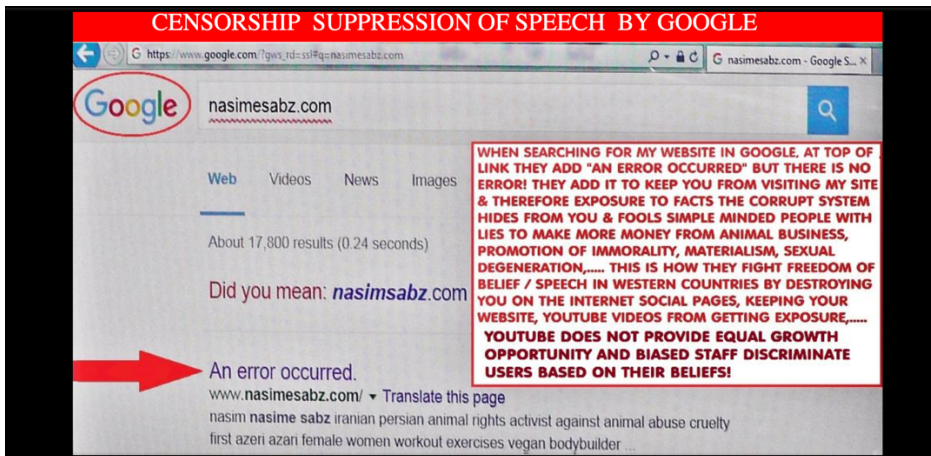


Figure 7 Screenshot from Nasim's website.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160916011632/http://www.nasimesabz.com/Censored.html>

8. Nasim's riddle

Nasim swims in a desolate, endless and self contained ocean. I have shown how Nasim's world encapsulates a contradiction between its self-made character and the technological and economic forms that make it possible. While Nasim shows over and over again that she is the maker of her world as both producer and sole protagonist of her videos, and exercises her critique on a variety of topics, going as far as questioning their valorization, the mode of existence of her world is determined by current economic and technological forms to the extent that her freedom is enabled by their constraints.

The aesthetics of Nasim's world are predicated on data extraction and self-entrepreneurship. This neoliberal model of creative labor along with the different technological affordances that delineate it (from the camera to the production software and the platform) is the skein that envelops the intrinsic aesthetic of the mode of the existence I delineated. This intrinsic aesthetic however is not, as immanent oriented perspectives sometime tend to argue, an endless fountain of life affirming enunciations.

If Nasim's videos celebrate her "self making," their production is imbricated in the forces that control her expression. Autopoiesis should not be confused with celebration. As I have tried to show, at the center of Nasim's world is a zone of indistinction where existential and economic conditions intertwine to the extent that it is impossible to set them apart. This pulsional ground constituted as that which is repressed, and therefore unknowable, impinges on the resulting aesthetic, animating the unsettling familiarity that attracts viewers to these videos.

A passage on the division of labor in *The German Ideology* haunts Nasim's world:

Therefore as soon as the division of labor starts to develop, each man has a particular, exclusive area of activity that constrains him, that he cannot get out of; he is a hunter, fisherman or herdsman or critic & must remain as such unless he wants to lose the means to live -whereas in communist society, where each man does not have an exclusive area of activity, but can rather develop himself in any branch he likes, society regulates the general production & thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, in the morning to hunt, in the afternoon to fish, in the evening to herd livestock and to criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter{,} fisherman, herdsman or critic. (Marx in Carver and Blank and Marx 2014: 89-91)

The intrinsic aesthetic of Nasim's world expresses a mode of existence where she can be a bodybuilder in the morning and a cook in the afternoon, a sex psychologist in the evening and a critic after dinner, without ever becoming one. But the autarchy of this world, its freedom, coincides with the conditions of its control. The more the videos work to expand their self-contained universe the more they get caught up in the existentially exploitative circle of value and communication. More freedom, more control. The more Nasim's world expresses life in all its mutating forms and activities, the more it might result in death. This is its riddle.

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