

Shaghayegh Yassemi

Welcome to my portfolio



The following is a selection of my recent art projects, exploring intersections of film, poetry, and improvisation. Each medium contributes uniquely to my approach, activating art as a participatory force in everyday life and inviting audiences to engage with it from various perspectives. The first two pieces in this list are part of my filmic poetry trilogy, a central element of my PhD research that brings improvisatory art into public spaces through film. (The third piece of the trilogy is not yet included in this portfolio, as it is an ongoing project.) This innovative form has evolved as both a creative practice and a research methodology throughout my doctoral journey. The collection continues with other multidisciplinary projects that similarly create immersive, thought-provoking experiences. Together, these projects reflect my commitment to pushing the boundaries of interdisciplinary art within daily life.

Contents

<i>Duet of the Improvising Streets</i> (2021 to 2023) – Short Film, Performance	2
<i>Hands, Poetry, and Gloves</i> (2020) – Short Film, Performance.....	5
<i>Following Birds’ Footprints</i> (2021-2023) – Walking Performances, Video.....	6
<i>In Virtual Rectangles</i> (2021) – Short Film, Performance.....	9
<i>Phiale</i> (2021) – Short Film	10
<i>The Walnut Yarn</i> (2018) – Short Film	11
<i>Pinwheel</i> (2017) – Short Film	12

Duet of the Improvising Streets (2021 to 2023) – Short Film, Performance



Screenshots from *Duet of the Improvising Streets*

Duet of The Improvising Streets is a short film that has been selected for 11 international film festivals, including Fotogenia in Mexico, the Second Poetic Cinema Festival in Argentina, and Cinestesya in Portugal. It was also showcased at the New York Arthouse Film Festival, where it was selected as a semi-finalist, and at the So Limitless and Free International Film Festival in Canada, where it was a finalist. At the Toronto International Nollywood Film Festival, the film was a finalist in three categories: Best Student Film, Best Female Filmmaker, and Best Poetry Film.

Apart from a short film, *Duet of The Improvising Streets* is a multidisciplinary project that blends film, poetry, and improvisation. It consists of seven walking performances and a short film—a piece of filmic poetry crafted through experimental editing of performance recordings, interwoven with a series of poems. For this project, I walked approximately 124.4 kilometers across Toronto and Tehran. Each city carrying deep historical significance and reflecting remarkable cultural diversity.

During these performances, I delivered parcels containing a letter, along with carefully crafted linocut verses and multicolored, hand-pressed leaves. Walking these extended streetscapes serves as a metaphor for ambient engagement with diverse communities, while delivering poetry emphasizes the close relationship among urban spaces, people, poetry, and language.

The performances took place over seven days between September 2021 and October 2022, with pre-production and production spanning over two years due to COVID-related restrictions on travel and social interactions. These restrictions also served as the motivation behind the project's form: during the pandemic, even the smallest delivery—a toothbrush, for instance—offered a rare

form of connection in a time of isolation. To facilitate a space for distant communication, each parcel included a prepaid envelope, inviting recipients to respond if they wished to participate.

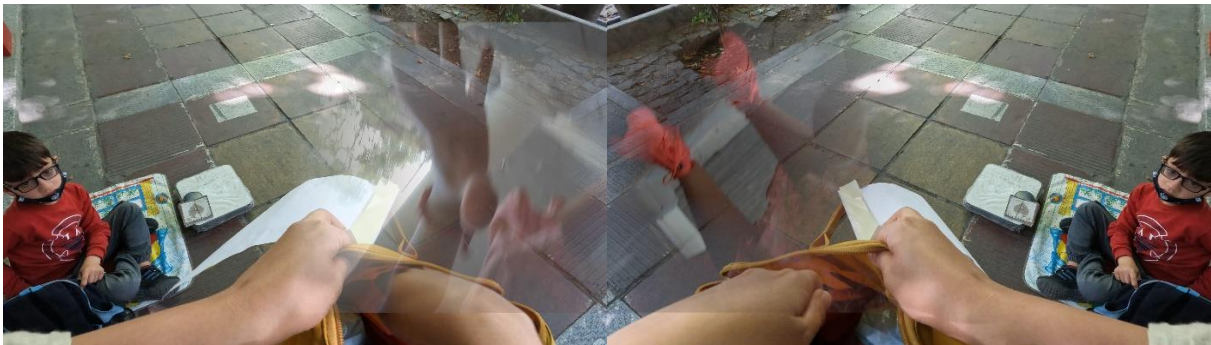
The project received a range of responses from both streets, including poems, leaves, drawings, and more. The responses are reminders that reciprocal relations and hospitality are key to how communities self-sustain. The following images showcase four of these responses.



Images of four responses from the communities

In *Duet of the Improvising Streets*, two streets take on central roles. Although separated by 10,000 kilometers, the streets meet through film fragments, entering a poetic dialogue with one another. The film has a fragmented composition—every frame of the film uses edited fragments of the footage of my performances along with each other to create a multilayered piece that is visually and semiotically rich with signification.

The film captures improvised and live notions. In one scene, for instance, I encountered a child laborer sitting on the pavement. He was very shy, and at first, I felt unsure of how to connect with him. In parallel, during one of my Toronto performances, my chest-mounted camera rig broke. Given the difficulty of traveling to Toronto during the pandemic, I decided to tape the camera to my chest and continue. The camera fell several times, capturing a chaotic, tumbling image. I edited the falling footage from Toronto alongside my encounter with the child in Tehran to integrate the liveness of these two shots, capturing a shared sense of uneasiness.



Screenshots from the *Duet of The Improvising Streets*

Hands, Poetry, and Gloves (2020) – Short Film, Performance



Screenshots from *Hands, Poetry, and Gloves*

Hands, Poetry, and Gloves is a short film crafted from footage of an improvisatory poetry performance I conducted in Tehran during the initial wave of COVID-19. It marks my first exploration of combining poetry, film, and improvisation, aiming to foster dialogue and connection through poetry within a community burdened by pandemic-related restrictions and fear.

For the performance, I placed a bucket filled with slips of paper with poems about spring near an outdoor public elevator. With the pandemic making spring feel faded, I wanted to offer a reminder of spring and hope. Although I had an initial plan, all interactions that followed were improvised. Nearby, I wore a GoPro to record people’s interactions. The visible camera respected their privacy while its small size allowed for an authentic, non-disruptive capture of engagements.

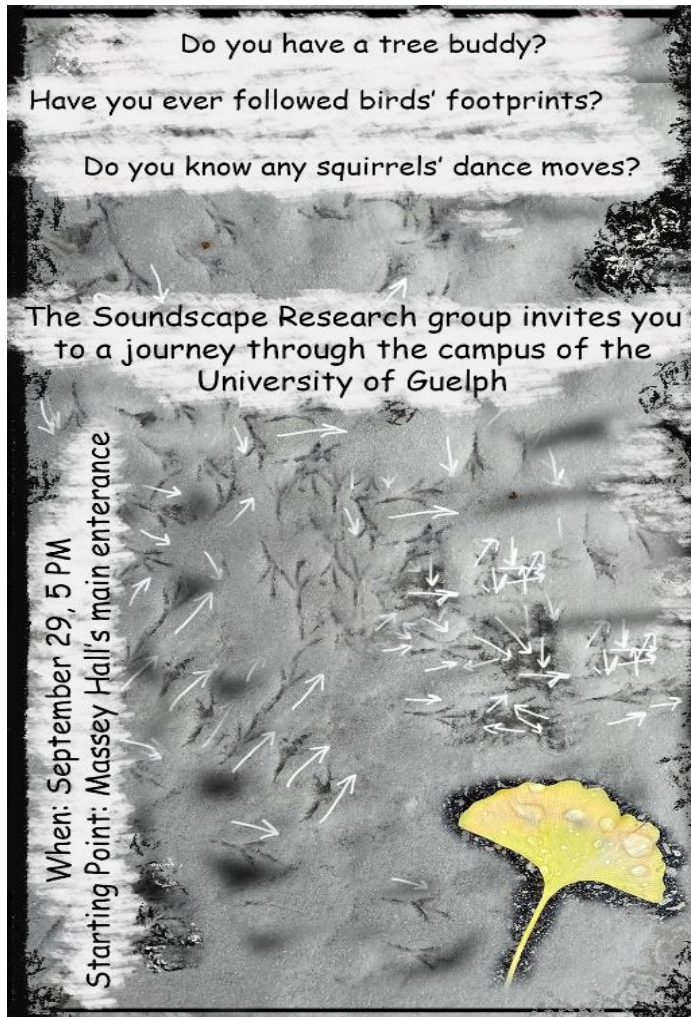
Some people stopped to speak with me about the poems. For instance, two individuals passed by, each holding a slip of poetry. After a few steps, they turned back and asked if I had installed the bucket. When I confirmed, one, who was walking with a stick, said, “I haven’t been able to smile in about a month with this horrible sickness spreading everywhere. You made my day.” This brief exchange illustrates how art can ignite connection in public spaces, even amidst isolation and fear.

Throughout the film, prompts invite viewers to consider how poetry functions in our lives, such as, 'How do we carry and hold onto poetry?' It explores what it means to hold something as intangible as poetry with something as physical as our hands. During the pandemic, hands shifted from symbols of connection to caution. This shift invites viewers to reflect on how poetry—and holding it—can reshape our relationship with touch and closeness, even in trying times.

The film was selected for inclusion in the IF (Improvisation Festival) in 2020, where viewers appreciated its unique intersection of community, art, and shared pandemic experience.

Watch the film here: <https://vimeo.com/872585889>

Following Birds' Footprints (2021-2023) – Walking Performances, Video



Following Birds' Footprints is a multidisciplinary project combining improvisational performances and video as both research methods and artistic expression. The project's name was inspired by a photograph I took of birds' footprints in the snow, which later sparked a series of performances based on this image. Developed as part of collaborative research at the University of Guelph, the project explores how people interact with their surroundings in a campus setting. Through dynamic, sensory engagement with space, it seeks to reveal new perspectives on familiar environments. Below, I outline the project's three key phases: Research, Performance, and Video.

Image of the invitation to the *Following Birds' Footprints* performance, taken and edited by Shaghayegh Yassemi

Research

Over two years, I collaborated with a fellow researcher on a series of walking journeys, each serving as a research process with several objectives: studying the campus environment, observing the social and spatial relationships between people and places, and exploring how seasonal changes influence these interactions in a region known for its dramatic seasonal shifts. Ultimately, our goal was to create a public, improvisational walking performance that would enable us to connect authentically with the space, fostering spontaneous interactions and discoveries.

Performance

By inviting participants into an improvisational, interactive performance, the project fostered a shared, community-centered experience. We aimed to encourage participants to form unique, immersive connections with their surroundings, engaging with people, spaces, and natural elements such as plants, animals, and varying weather conditions. Through the performance, we sought to deepen awareness of the environment and inspire new ways of experiencing familiar spaces, sparking unexpected encounters and fresh perspectives.

In one part of the performance, I asked participants, “How many different types of trees do you think surround us in this small corner of the campus yard?” While there were 24 varieties, people typically guessed far fewer. I then introduced some of the trees, pointing out their intriguing names—such as *Empress*, *Basswood*, *Bladdernut*, *Wingednut*, and *Weeping Beech*. I suggested that while these names might spark our own stories and associations, they may also reflect stories tied to each tree’s appearance or unique qualities. I invited participants to approach a tree of their choice—to sit, stand, climb, or hug it—and listen to a multilingual audio installation I had created, inspired by a tale from *One Thousand and One Nights* about the mythical *Wak Wak* tree.

As they listened, participants became deeply engaged with the trees, sharing moments of perceptive connection with the space. Below, on the left side, is an image of a young participant's drawing, capturing her interpretation of the experience and her relationship to the performance. On the right side, there's a photo of Dr. Jim Harley, one of the participants, leaning against a tree while listening to the audio installation. In the background, I can be seen alongside a child, both of us running toward a tree to climb it.

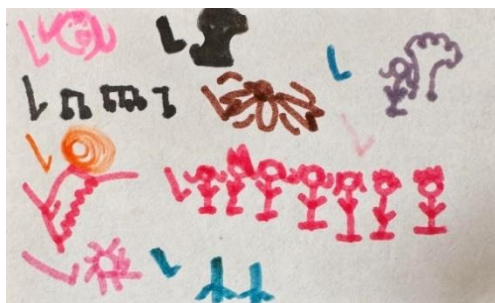


Image of a drawing by Helena Amiri, age 6



Photo from
the
*Following
Birds’
Footprints*
performance

Video

To add another layer of exploration, we used my photo of birds' footprints in the snow as a directional guide. With voice instructions, we followed the paths traced by these footprints across various locations on campus. The following screenshots are from an edited video I created, capturing one of our journeys as we traced the birds' footprints through Massey Hall at the University of Guelph, highlighting moments of spontaneity and discovery.



Screenshots from *Following Birds' Footprints*, edited by Shaghayegh Yassemi

Below is a link to the same video, inspired by our performances *following the birds' footprints*.

Watch the video here: <https://vimeo.com/869567131>

In Virtual Rectangles (2021) – Short Film, Performance



A screenshot from *In Virtual Rectangles*

In Virtual Rectangles is a short film crafted from footage of an improvisatory poetry performance I designed. Four improvisers, including myself, gathered on Zoom from locations as distant as Tehran (Iran), Nantes (France), and Vancouver and Montreal (Canada)—each in different time zones across the globe. Amidst the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic, this project explores themes of connection and freedom in the face of isolation and confinement.

In this performance, the grid of the Zoom interface became a symbolic border, representing both distance and confinement, while also facilitating a space for meeting and connection. Despite the geographical, time-based, and linguistic divides, the performers engaged in a poetic dialogue, each expressing their improvisations in various languages and distinct styles, drawing inspiration from Ahmad Shamlou’s poetry in praise of freedom. His verses resonate deeply with the themes of the performance, illustrating the nuanced longing for freedom:

“Ah if freedom sang a song

Minuscule

As the larynx of a bird...” By Ahmad Shamlou

I edited the raw Zoom footage into a cohesive short film that was showcased at the Hillside Festival in 2021. The film highlights how art forges connections among people, uniting them even in difficult times.

Watch the film here: <https://vimeo.com/890012409>

Phiale (2021) – Short Film



Screenshots from *Phiale*

Phiale is a short film I created as an exploration of balance and its delicate, unseen presence in everyday life—a quality that often goes unnoticed until it’s no longer there. The film captures a dynamic, performative exchange between myself and my surroundings, highlighting the oscillation between balance and off-balance. This navigation between these states reflects the broader experience of living within yet beyond limits, namely those imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic—a time when boundaries felt more constrained.

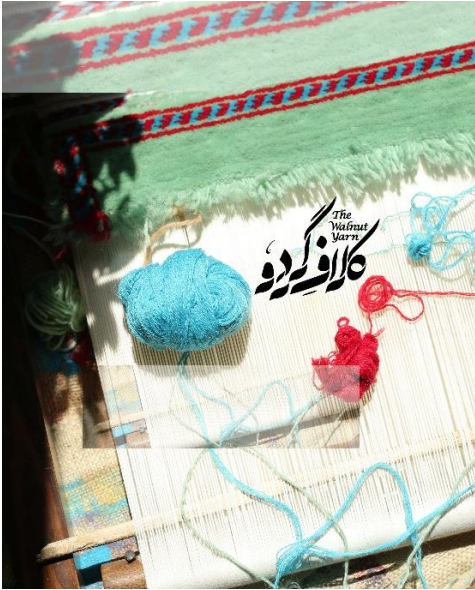
To depict the push and pull between these states, I incorporated bridge poses, a physical expression of the tension between balance and off-balance. Audiovisual cross-cutting between my enclosed room and the open outdoors reinforces this interplay, showcasing an additional layer of challenge.

The title *Phiale* draws inspiration from a verse by Hafez. *Phiale* (or *Piale*) refers to a container, such as a wine glass, that carries layers of metaphorical meaning in Hafez’s literature. I interpret the verse as an expression of love’s paradoxical power to create both balance and off-balance within us.

Featured at the 2021 Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA), This piece resonates as an artistic reflection of the resilience and adaptability required during uncertain times.

Watch the film here: <https://vimeo.com/889940568>

The Walnut Yarn (2018) – Short Film



poster of *The Walnut Yarn*

The Walnut Yarn is an experimental short film created as part of my second master's thesis. This project serves as a creative exploration of a multi-layered verse by Rumi: "You dropped a string, pulled me up to the top I am floating in the sky, the string is cut."

Like the verse, the film reflects on themes such as creation, connection, separation, memory, and more, exploring the journey of a hand-dyed thread as it becomes a knot in a carpet.

To bring this vision to life, I traveled to Kashan, a city in Iran with deep historical, artistic, and cultural roots. I navigated the city in search of locations that would resonate with the visual and performative aspects of the verse as I have perceived and studied it. I explored various traditional hand-dye and weaving workshops and engaged with master dyers and carpet weavers to gain a deeper understanding of the transformation of a thread into a carpet. I filmed two of the masters as they hand-dyed and wove, capturing their artistry in the process. Additionally, I learned basic weaving techniques to prepare for my role as an actress in the film.

Juxtaposing the thread's transformation is the story of a young woman, a character I portrayed, who explores her own love story, weaving her memories through a metaphorical lens. Her recollections are intricately linked to the journey of the thread, reflecting the complexities of connection and separation.

Through a blend of visual storytelling and poetic reflection, *The Walnut Yarn* invites viewers to contemplate the threads that bind us to our past, present, and future, revealing the nuances found in both connection and separation.

Pinwheel (2017) – Short Film



A screenshot from *Pinwheel*

The film explores the intersection of inner and outer worlds, metaphysical realms, and the everyday through a blend of film, improvisation, and performance art. Half of the film was shot in Montreal (Canada), with the other half recorded in Kashan (Iran).

Pinwheel is an experimental short film and part of my second master's thesis. It was my first experience with crosscutting and juxtaposing multiple locations and actions to create parallel, multi-layered worlds—an approach that became a key methodology in my subsequent filmmaking projects.



A screenshot from *Pinwheel*

In this work, I examine improvised movements in public spaces to contrast the experience of freely navigating environments—whether in the tangible world or within the mind's inner realms. The goal is to explore how, while we engage with the physical world around us, we are simultaneously navigating our thoughts, memories, and dreams.

For instance, there is a quiet scene of a pigeon cuddled up in the transom window on a winter morning in Montreal. I crosscut this with another scene where I tap on multicolored stained-glass panes, each of which, through sound design, appears to play a distinct musical note, creating the illusion of playing a musical instrument. While the pigeon, snug in the window frame, evokes a peaceful, everyday moment, the stained-glass doors—set within the vibrant, historical architecture of Kashan—take on a rich, dreamlike quality. This contrast reflects how our minds can transform everyday experiences into something more vivid, much like the way dreams unfold.

Pinwheel explores how our experience of the world is shaped not only by tangible realities but also by the thoughts, memories, and perceptions we carry within.