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Fereshteh Toosi

[Fereshteh Toosi](#), [GARLIC & GREENS](#), [installation](#), [performance](#), [sculpture](#), [sound](#), [tactile](#)

<http://fereshteh.net> /// <http://garlicandgreens.info>



Ragweed & artemisia, wild plant doppelgangers, found on a foraging walk with Nance Klehm

Fereshteh Toosi is a Chicago-based artist working in video, sound, performance, and public intervention. She received a BA from Oberlin College and her MFA from Carnegie Mellon University's School of Art. Currently, she teaches at Columbia College Chicago and is a Fellow at Archeworks, an alternative design school in Chicago. Fereshteh gives us more information on the development of her latest project, GARLIC & GREENS, and discusses her practice as an artist and educator.

“I am an artist who plays with documentary and non-fiction. My projects may not fit the traditional formats that people are familiar with, but specifically with [GARLIC & GREENS](#), I am documenting and re-presenting voices via a sound recording. There is some element of deception in all documentary. Playing on the fringes of this genre gives me permission to work through my discomfort with documentary.



Fereshteh Toosi's Studio

MORE AFTER THE BREAK

The time I spend in my studio is mostly on the computer. That's something I wish was different but for now that's what it is. Maybe spending so much time in this internal, screen-based environment is one of the reasons why I started growing plants. I was in a really rough spot in my life and gardening saved me. It's a lot like art: you take some basic materials, then with your time and care, these develop into something new and marvelous. I was starting seeds for the first time and the progress from day to day was so impressive. These little babies needed me! They depended on me to help them grow strong. I couldn't let them down. They were doing so much with so little. It's a good lesson for when you are down in the dumps.

I've never thought about it this way before, but working with my hands in the soil occupies a place that used to be the core of my

studio practice. There is a positive energy that emerges from making things and growing things. It seems like gardening, urban homesteading, and artisanal food production are really trendy right now, but it should come as no surprise that people are looking for outlets to do hands-on and object-based activities. I'm spending a lot of time thinking about multisensory experiences, so the intersections are quite present for me. The internet provides the illusion that you are collaborating and communicating with the world, but the sensations it is capable of creating are quite dull, or at least, not very diverse.



the last solar eclipse of the 20th century, installation, 2009



Project Safety Orange II, public performance, 2011. Photo by Cesario Moza

In my installation and sculptural work, the environments have included sounds, smells, and altered lighting or temperature. So making art that addresses multiple senses is not something that is new to me, but thinking about it in terms of accessibility for GARLIC & GREENS is something altogether different. Audience participation has been a part of a lot of my projects, but thinking more practically about accessibility forces a heightened awareness about the individual needs of the participant.



Tactile art focus group, workshop, 2012. Photo by Ryan Wilson

GARLIC & GREENS developed from a collaborative design process at Archeworks, which was founded by architects. When it first began, I proposed making a book in Braille with raised line drawings. The project has evolved so much since then! In December I got to go to the Sensory Worlds conference in Edinburgh, UK, and there were a lot of inspiring projects and scholars discussing sensory studies. In the art exhibit accompanying the conference, someone had created an embossed book that was a lot like the book I was imagining I would make, and I think it would have been a fine way to go. But this book didn't have a lot of text, and since I am relying on stories, it's important to have a simple way to include textual material. As I did my research, I quickly learned that Braille text is large and that makes it impractical for many purposes. We did a focus group with people who are low and no vision to test out some prototypes. A participant who is blind told us that one of his college textbooks in Braille can take up several bookshelves. A book that would be one volume in a 12-point font turns into an unwieldy collection of multiple volumes when it's transcribed to Braille.

Last fall I taught a class at Archeworks about tactile graphics. Traditionally tactile graphics have been created for math texts or maps, things that are difficult to digest without an illustration. Also there is a larger market of tactile experiences for kids, and this is analogous to the fact that we tend to have more illustrated books for children and less for adults.

By the end of the workshop, I had stopped using the word "graphics" and started using the phrase tactile design or tactile art. Though I am not an illustrator, I was thinking a lot of about the purpose of illustration. A lot of times we don't *need* a graphical representation, but we have it anyway. How does the illustrator choose what to depict? A lot of the time it's about being interesting, not about being useful. This is another one of those fine lines between art and design.



Tactile Dome at the Exploratorium in San Francisco. Research for GARLIC & GREENS

There are standards for how to create tactile information graphics and there are facile tactile illustrations for children's books. There are museums that will attempt to translate the paintings of great masters into a 3D relief in bronze for people to touch, as if will be a reasonable facsimile of seeing. This seems backwards to me. The piece is created because the painting has been deemed important, not because the experience of feeling the relief is meant to be artistically worthwhile in and of itself. There aren't a lot of accessible works that aspire to that pleasurable experience you get from looking at an interesting thing. It's like they need some other use-value to exist. Because there isn't an abundance of art created for people with low or no vision, I was looking at a very limited set of models for how to create the project. I was so concerned about doing the right thing to achieve accessibility that I wasn't trusting my own experience. I was so attached to creating a tactile 2D experience that I was ignoring my own affinity to work with textures and sculptural objects. I was ignoring my expertise in working with multiple senses in multiple dimensions through time, performance, and interactivity. Once I decided to let go of thinking of the project as an audio book with illustrations, it opened up a lot of possibilities that will be a part of

the finished product.

My art work is probably not going to change anything directly, but it has aspirations. I have a job as an educator so I think there are aspects of my art work that attempt to share different perspectives and information. But I'm asking questions rather than giving answers or making recommendations. In that respect I find that it's very different from activist and social justice work that has a very clear goal. My work is a series of symbolic gestures that are part of a larger tide. It's more about shifting the way we think about things, so it's a bit slow and less direct."

If you'd like to support Fereshteh Toosi's project, check out her kickstarter: <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/fereshteh/garlic-and-greens>

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This is a screenshot of a Facebook social plugin. At the top, it says 'Make Space on Facebook' with a 'Like' button and the text 'You like this.'. Below this, it states '419 people like Make Space.' and shows a grid of 20 small profile pictures of users who have liked the page. The names of the users are listed below their respective photos: Clarisa, April, George, Amanda, Jessica, Robert, Anthony, Whitney, Tanya, Emily, JI, Kate, Anna, Keelan, Hannah, and John. At the bottom of the plugin, it says 'Facebook social plugin'.

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