

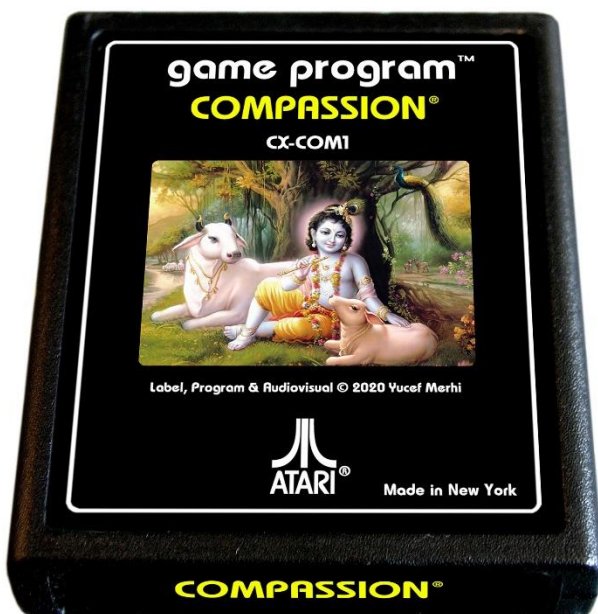
## Pioneer Digital Artist Yucef Merhi has Opened Portals to the Leading Edge of Art and Technology for 30 years – Is the World Finally Catching Up?

### The Bonnier Gallery Presents Yucef Merhi: Open

(On view Sept. 2 – Nov. 20 in Miami) — In 1985, when pioneer digital artist [Yucef Merhi](#) was only eight years old and growing up in Caracas, he reverse-engineered his ATARI 2600 and turned it into a programmable computer. He used the Atari Video Computer System to produce generative videos based in language instructions. A leading art critic at the time saw this and proclaimed: *“What you have created here, Yucef, will be considered a work of art in years to come.”* Decades later, Merhi’s creations would be exhibited at the New Museum in New York and would travel all over the world in international exhibitions, celebrated as **the first works of art crafted from a videogame console**. Watch a video that demonstrates one of these original 1985 works at [youtu.be/zvcDaDeYo6g](https://youtu.be/zvcDaDeYo6g). One year later, at the age of nine, Merhi figured out how to calibrate the atomic clock of Venezuela, and the National Ministry of Defense commended him for achieving this breakthrough.



Throughout his 30+ year journey, the artist’s work has **remained front and center in the current thinking about art**, and especially digital art. Opening up a panoramic view of Merhi’s inner worlds, the new show [Yucef Merhi: Open](#) at [The Bonnier Gallery](#) captures the far-reaching consequence of his orbit around contemporary culture. From data hacking as protest art against totalitarianism and police brutality, to his vision called Retrocycling that rescues obsolete tech devices from landfills . . . from perfecting a universal language as new source code for planetary awakening, to digital interventions that make poems come alive. For the viewer experiencing Merhi’s art, this often results in **mind-expanding encounters with language**.



The gallery show presents 15 works, from five different series that map out his creative diaspora. The show ushers in the eagerly anticipated return of Miami’s Art Basel season, and **opens on September 2 at the Bonnier Gallery** in Allapattah, Miami’s burgeoning art district. “This new show will allow people to experience **digital art that is of substance, as opposed to the speculative NFTs that seem to dominate that conversation**,” says Grant Bonnier, the curator of this show and owner of the Gallery. “Yucef Merhi has packed the equivalent of several lifetimes leading up to this critical mid-career point of his trajectory,” adds Bonnier. “Merhi is poised at the leading edge of the technology and art.”

Yucef Merhi has produced bodies of work that engage a wide spectrum including poetry, facial recognition, artificial intelligence, sound, virtual reality, hacking, and retro video games. By ensuring that his works always connect with the warmth of human engagement through language, **Merhi's momentum continues ahead of the curve.**

### ***Selected by MIT Among the Leading Definers in Their Fields***

In addition to announcing the opening of this new show, the Gallery is also sharing the news from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology that Yucef Merhi was chosen for the MIT Open Documentary Lab – [opendoclab.mit.edu](https://opendoclab.mit.edu).

After a rigorous selection process, Merhi is **the only artist from Miami** (and **from all of Florida**) to be selected among Fellows from around the world invited by MIT. They were chosen by MIT because they are **considered to be definers in their fields** – leaders who deepen the impact and reach of innovative reality-based storytelling. Many of the winners combine **influential, multiple roles** as award-winning technologists, artists, academics, and activists. The international group includes Fellows from the U.S., Brazil, Colombia, the UK, and a number of expats too, from places like Iran and Algeria. **MIT is a leading center for thinking about and developing technology**, and this fellowship brings a humanistic, artistic, and critical dimension to that work, taking it on through new forms of documentary and creativity.



ATARI Mindlink 1984. Image from MIT article by Yucef Merhi about his vision for Retrocycling: [immerse.news/field-notes-why-its-time-for-retrocycling-c5381f922d81](https://immerse.news/field-notes-why-its-time-for-retrocycling-c5381f922d81).

**“Yucef Merhi has an impressive record as a border-crosser, a path-breaker, and hacker-extraordinaire,”** says William Uricchio, the Founder and Principal Investigator of MIT Open Documentary Lab, and a Professor of Comparative Media Studies at MIT. “Merhi’s commitment to the environmental – as context, site of interrogation, and canvas (as his building-scale works demonstrate) – casts **his work in a light that is defining the frontiers** of the new documentary,” adds Uricchio.

For this MIT fellowship, Merhi will be investigating how to reduce the massive amounts of electronic waste on our planet that comes from obsolete technologies, by re-purposing outdated devices and transforming them into new artistic enterprises. This includes tons of discarded devices that have been filling up landfills for decades: video game consoles from the 1970s, TVs and slide projectors from the 1980s, cassette players, CD players, computer supplies, and VR equipment from the 1990s. Many of these discarded devices were designed and engineered to last longer than we expect from today’s appliances. Merhi is calling his new vision *Retrocycling* – [yucef.mit.edu/home](https://yucef.mit.edu/home). **“I propose it is now time to ‘re-plan’ obsolescence moving forward,”** says Yucef Merhi. “To start thinking about what we can do with the countless consumer electronics produced. Historic technologies have **the power to align our actions and spark the curiosity of younger generations** about new uses of old hardware.”

## *The Tech Savant that Pioneered Digital Art*

“As a child, I felt I could actually communicate with these early ATARI machines back in the 1980s. Electronic toys were so important to me because I was able to build my reality with them,” says Merhi. When he was 15, in 1992, Merhi was already consulting for AT&T, and **created one of Venezuela’s first electronic communities** by programming a Bulletin Board System (BBS). The child prodigy even built his country’s first-ever website (for a local Mayor who was also a Miss Universe). As time progressed, however, these whimsical connections between his home country and **his art would take a more somber turn**: reflecting the years ahead filled with **turmoil and painful obstacles to restoring democracy**.



By 1998, he had developed his first *Datagram*, a concept Merhi coined to visualize the movement of hacked information (he prefers the term “intercepted data” instead of hacking).

Throughout the years, in protest of the dictatorship, **Merhi intercepted Venezuelan government email accounts and databases**, turning these revealed secrets into art that raises awareness.

The Chavez regime in Venezuela feared Merhi because they realized he was able to access any server and any email platform in the country – he even **intercepted the emails of Hugo Chavez**.

The government in Venezuela stopped inviting Merhi to exhibit at museums and even blocked him from representing Venezuela at the Venice Biennale in 2013. **Merhi was put on a cultural blacklist**.

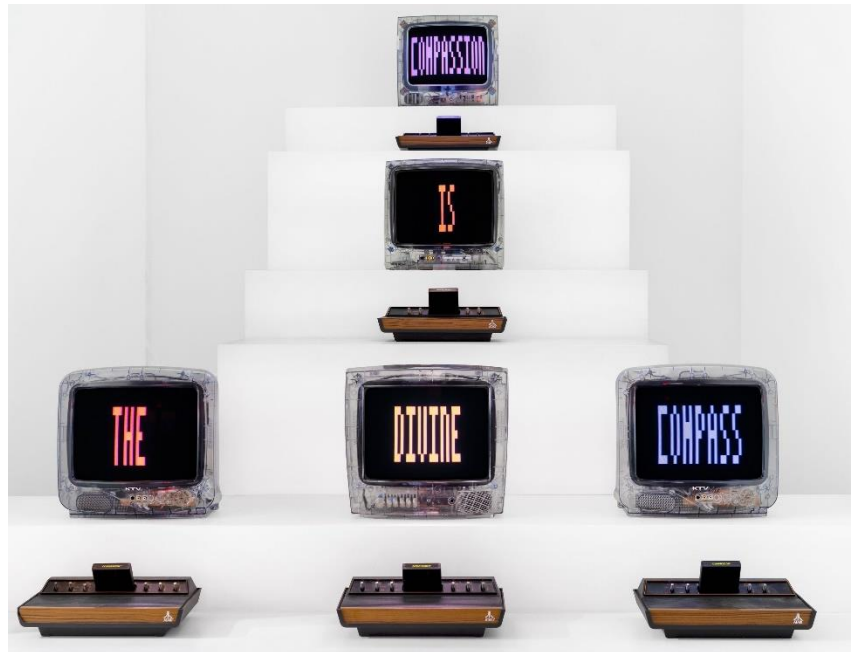
*No Fly Security*, by Yucef Merhi (2018-2019). Intercepted data on laser paper.

Fast-forward to now, and **Merhi has reached international acclaim with major museum exhibitions, biennials, and gallery shows** across the U.S., Latin America, Europe and Asia. He is the recipient of several awards, and his work is represented in the permanent collections of numerous museums and private collections. “**Yucef Merhi is precisely the type of artist we should be focusing on coming out of the pandemic**. He is like an antenna, with an uncanny ability to internalize the energy of others around him and reflect it in his work. **He’s a beacon of hope – what we all need right now**,” says Grant Bonnier.

The Gallery show's largest installation, [\*Compassion\*](#) (2020), was created in 2020 during the pandemic and **responds to the turbulent times we are living through**. The artist repurposed television sets that were manufactured for use in jails by incarcerated Americans – reclaiming them with new, positive meaning.

The viewer is drawn into the experience by their unusual transparent cases, originally meant to prevent prison-related smuggling.

The installation features ATARIs that he programmed and connected to each of the television monitors. The ATARI cartridges interface to spell out one of Merhi's epiphanies: ***Compassion is the Divine Compass***, integrating language, video games, the sound of a Tibetan bell, and consciousness. Watch a video demonstrating this installation at [vimeo.com/417787505](https://vimeo.com/417787505).



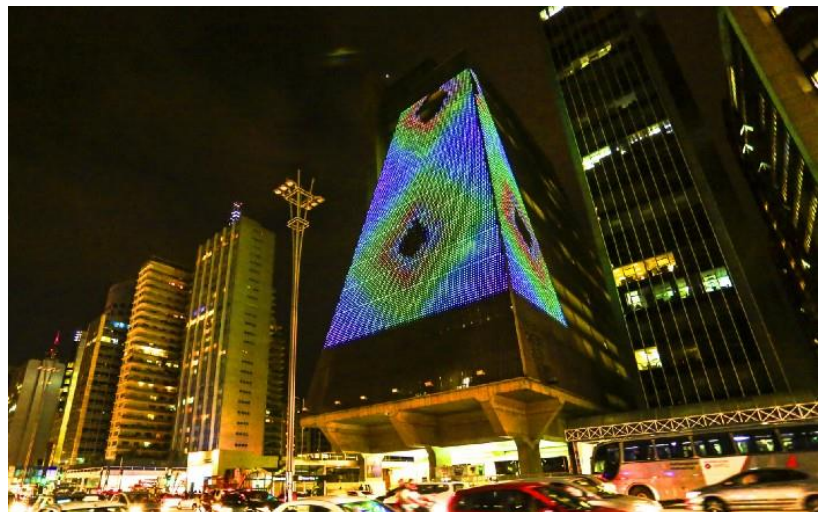
*Compassion*, by Yucef Merhi (2020). 5 CRT TVs, 5 Atari 2600 game consoles, custom Atari cartridges, directional sound system. Photo by Zachary Balber.



*Artificial Stupidity*, Yucef Merhi (2019). Metal stand, iPad, custom software.

Merhi has earned international acclaim throughout his career with **major urban digital art installations**, often because of his keen abilities to embed a feeling of human connection and the spirit of curiosity into the experiences. This includes a **skyscraper's 40,000 square foot building façade** in downtown Sao Paulo wrapped with LEDs. It featured a **vintage ATARI device from 1976** that translated spoken words and music from people on the street into **gigantic, colorful geometric light patterns**. Watch a video about this massive work: [youtu.be/tW5voFrEWaI](https://youtu.be/tW5voFrEWaI).

Another work featured in this show, entitled [\*Artificial Stupidity\*](#), tackles the decline in Venezuela through a rare use of humor. Merhi **dissects politics with primitive notions of artificial intelligence**. What appears to be a harmless throwback to vintage video arcade games turns out to be the **cartoon-like head** of Venezuelan dictator Nicolas Maduro **chasing Venezuelan flags**. Every time Maduro's head eats a flag, it becomes a poop emoji – [vimeo.com/582241974](https://vimeo.com/582241974). “These patriotic symbols that have been hijacked by the dictatorship in Venezuela end up being **transformed into digital excrement**, alluding to the systematic destruction of the country,” says Merhi.



*C-240*, by Yucef Merhi (2001-2014). LED building facade, modified Atari device, analogue-digital adapter w/software, 40,000 square feet.



*Soulless Security*, by Yucef Merhi (2001-2014). Intercepted data on paper.

*Soulless Security* highlights **the act of hacking as an instrument to create protest art**. Merhi uses intercepted data to expose the full names and identity numbers of 50,000 officials from Venezuela’s notorious secret police (who wear hoods and use other means to hide their identities while committing atrocities on their fellow citizens). The data is presented using the spatial ordering system initiated by the artist in 1998 (*Datagram*), which he created from the basic protocol of data transfer on the Internet. Once the data is intercepted, the information is laser printed and organized using a geometric pattern that fills the space with a dense textual mass. The Bonnier Gallery will exhibit detail sections of this work, which **was bravely shown in its entirety in Caracas** as a form of protest in 2017. The files were digitally “smuggled” into Venezuela and the large-scale installation mounted onto a wall.

The five series of works in this show are: *Datagrams*, *ATARI*, *Digital Artworks*, *Perfect Language*, and *Poliverso*. The exhibition’s 15 works and installations span the entire gallery space. Merhi is also creating a new work entitled *Open*, named after the title of this show, which will be exhibited for the first time. **“The unifying element is language, in all of these bodies of work,”** says Yucef Merhi. “Language carries energy. We are made out of language. We breathe language. And ultimately, we end up spending most of our time inside either the prism – or the prison – of language, depending on our intention.” adds Merhi. About his *Perfect Language* series, Merhi states: “While many of the world’s great thinkers have argued through the ages about the possible existence of a perfect language, only a few have tried to find it.” He created a sensorial metalanguage that can be applied to any language, making it automatically understandable to anyone. An example is the artist’s use of a thousand nails [to depict the word nail in Korean](#). In another work from this series, Merhi used [eight letters made out of aluminum](#) to depict the word aluminum in English. “I want people to go back to the primordial act of seeing the word itself,” says Merhi.



*Perfect Language (Aluminum)*, by Yucef Merhi (2014). Eight letters made out of aluminum, aluminum shelf.

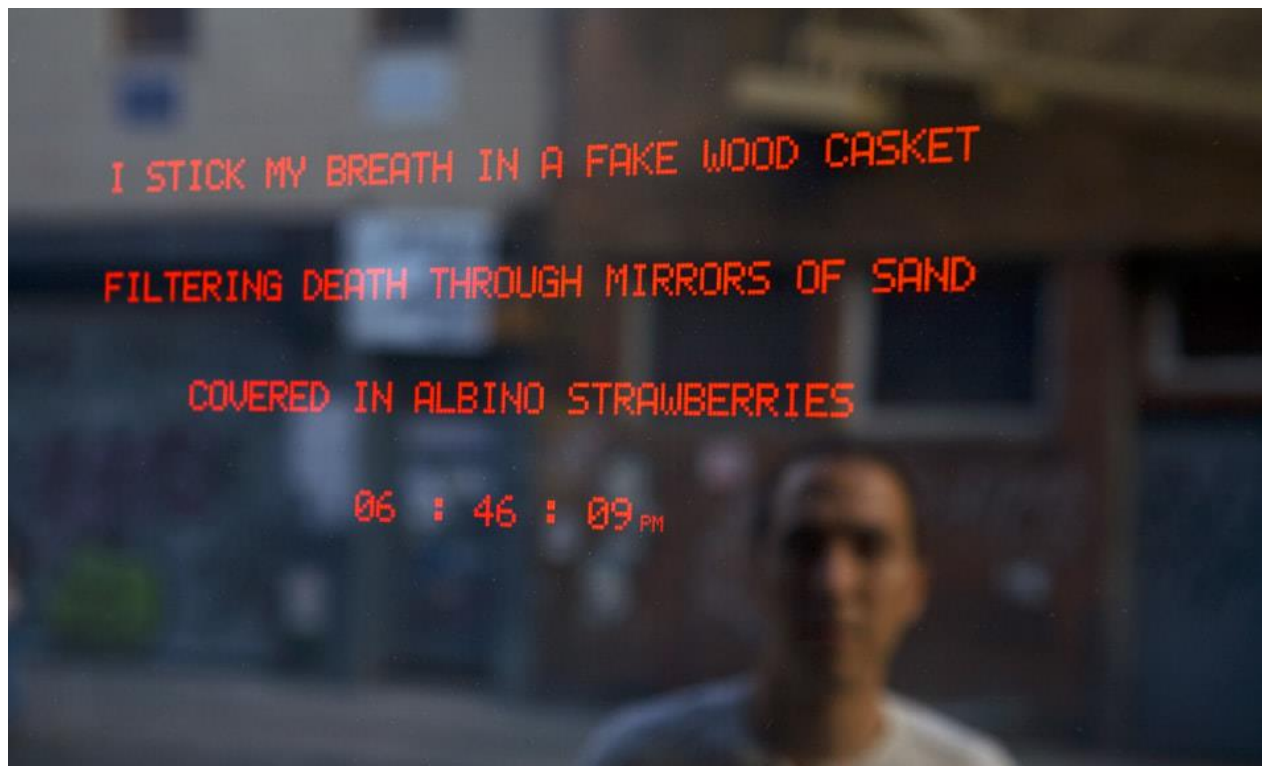


A master woodwork craftsman that Yucef Merhi worked with in Guatemala.

*Perfect Language (Wood: Te #1)*, Yucef Merhi (2014). Guatemalan cedar wood.

Merhi lived and worked for an entire year in the ancient town of Antigua, Guatemala, researching Proto-Mayan language alongside archaeologists, historians, philologists, and epigraphists. There, he created **works that tackle the atrocities of colonialism**, called *Perfect Language: Maya*. When the Spaniards subjugated the Maya peoples they were intent on **destroying their culture by erasing the Mayan visual language** and making them dependent on the Latin alphabet instead. Some of the works by Merhi were [carved in wood](#) with the aid of master woodwork craftsmen. They symbolize the word “wood” in Mayan. “**If we could disconnect from the occidental-colonizing view of art, we might be able to see and experience languages that are connected to the Divine,**” says Merhi.

Merhi’s *Digital Art* series is represented on large-screen televisions facing each other. One of these works, entitled [The Poetic Clock 2.0](#), is a **digital time machine that transforms time into poetry** and generates **86,400 different poems every 24 hours**, displaying through language the movement of time. Every time an hour changes, a new verse is digitally imprinted on screen, as the new first line of the poem. When a minute changes, a new verse pops up on the second line. The change of seconds is represented by the change of verses on the third line. The results are poems that mutate each second, minute and hour, continuously becoming another poem.



The artist’s reflection is captured in *The Poetic Clock 2.0*, by Yucef Merhi (2000). Computer, and custom software.

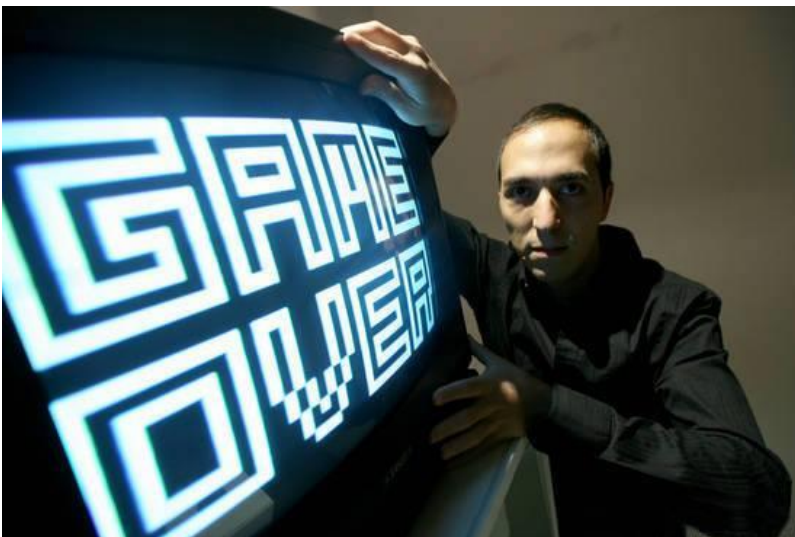
Another work from his *Datagram* series in this show is a study for [No Fly Security](#). This study was the starting point for what would later become a large-scale, immersive installation comprised of official reports, testimonies, and leaked data from the *No Fly List*, a list created and maintained by the U.S. federal government's Terrorist Screening Center (TSC). The list identifies people who are prohibited from boarding commercial aircraft for travel within, into, or out of the United States. **All the content has been kept secret until now**. The work demonstrates evidence of the initial errors of the agency, as well as the struggle of many citizens from the U.S. and abroad whose identities have been mistaken.

Merhi has even discovered an astonishing new literary form that he unlocked using the [Fibonacci sequence](#), amplifying the meaning of words in a creative way that has **never before been accomplished**. While the Fibonacci sequence has been applied to music and artistic composition, no one has ever applied it to language in this manner – [Poliverso](#). The photo on the right shows how Merhi uses three-dimensional layering to illustrate his discovery: words that become two words, then become a sentence, the same way the golden ratio of the Fibonacci sequence causes similar patterns in nature. View all of the works in this show at [bit.ly/Bonnier-Gallery-Presents-Yucef-Merhi](http://bit.ly/Bonnier-Gallery-Presents-Yucef-Merhi)



*Poliverso (detail)* by Yucef Merhi (2012-2014). Wood boxes, glass and vinyl.

## *More About the Artist*



Yucef Merhi is an artist, coder, and academic researcher based in Miami. He explores the interconnections between language, technology, politics, and history primarily through computer-generated experiences. Merhi has a Master's from NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program. Museums and galleries that have shown his work include: The New Museum (New York); LACMA (Los Angeles); The Bronx Museum of the Arts (NY); El Museo del Barrio (NY); Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin); De Appel (Amsterdam); La Colonie (Paris); Seoul Museum of Art (Seoul); The Bass (Miami Beach); Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de

Caracas; the Coral Gables Museum (Miami), and Locust Projects (Miami); as well as the 30<sup>th</sup> Ljubljana Biennial; the 13<sup>th</sup> Cuenca Biennial; and the Bienal de São Paulo-Valencia. Merhi's work is represented in numerous collections, including: the Orange County Museum of Art (Newport Beach); Library of Congress (Washington DC); Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporaneo (Bajadoz); Galeria de Arte Nacional (Caracas); and the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation (Miami). He is the recipient of several awards, including: a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in Digital/Electronic Art; a CIFO Grant & Commissions Program Award; AIM Fellowship at The Bronx Museum of the Arts; and an Ellies Creator Award/Oolite Arts. [View the artist's complete bio here](#).

[The Bonnier Gallery](#) is located at 3408 N.W. 7<sup>th</sup> Ave. in Miami. Open Tuesday–Saturday, 11:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m. Media Contacts: Jose Lima & Bill Spring (News Travels Fast): 305-910-7762 [editorial@newstravelstfast.com](mailto:editorial@newstravelstfast.com)