

# In the Digital Age, is shopping America's new religion?

🕒 Updated 1136 GMT (1936 HKT) July 4, 2016



Photos: Gulf Futurism: Inside the world of Sophia Al-Maria

Sophia Al-Maria's upcoming exhibition at the Whitney Museum in New York, "Black Friday," is a nod to Fridays in Islam.

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## Story highlights

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Sophia Al-Maria is a Qatari-American artist, writer, and director

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Her show "Black Friday" at the Whitney Museum will be her first solo US show

*Spiegler joins CNN Style as [guest editor](#). He's commissioning a series of features on the topic of art and technology.*

**(CNN)** — American-Qatari artist Sophia Al-Maria is preparing for the biggest exhibition of her career.

Her solo show "[Black Friday](#)," which opens at New York's [Whitney Museum of American Art](#) on July 26, will comprise over 100 new videos, screened on a series of broken or rejected consumer electronics.

The title, Al-Maria says, is in part a reference to the American "national holiday of shopping," but also a nod to the holy nature of Fridays in Islam.

The exhibition "posits the thought that shopping malls have become a kind of replacement for religious structures in our contemporary consumer society," she says.

### Editor's

#### Note:

*This month,*

*Art*

*Basel*

*Global*

*Director*

*Marc*

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## Gulf Futurism



"Black Friday" sits

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comfortably in Al-Maria's roster of projects. Exemplifying of a new generation of creative polymaths, the writer-filmmaker-artist has produced photos, directed films, written articles and screenplays, and published a critically acclaimed memoir, ["The Girl Who Fell to Earth."](#)

In her memoir Al-Maria talks about being brought up between two vastly different cultures. Born to an American mother and a Qatari Bedouin father, she spent her childhood in the US before moving to Qatar. There, she experienced the intense and rapid technological and cultural development of the Gulf.



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Still from "The Future was Desert Part II" (2016)  
by Sophia Al-Maria

Witnessing this evolution inspired her to coin the term "Gulf Futurism," inspired by "the idea that time travel had literally occurred in one generation [in Qatar], from a sort of pre-agrarian society -- at least in terms of Bedouin culture -- deep into hyper capitalism and consumerism," as Al-Maria describes it.

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## Techno-pessimism

More than anything, Gulf Futurism is perhaps an investigation into some of the more negative aspects of a hyper-connected digital society that can sometimes be a lonely place -- a perspective Al-Maria describes as "techno-pessimistic."

Born in 1983, she describes herself as an early digital native, part of the first crop of millennials. While the rise of the Internet was a key aspect of her formative years, her work often deals with the isolating nature of the digital space.



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Still from "Between Distant Bodies" (2013) by Sophia Al-Maria

"A few years ago I had a real feeling of heaviness through things like Facebook, like I was dragging the ghost of every person I had ever met. Maybe it doesn't create community in the way that people think because with the ability to post whatever you want at any time, you also get the ugly side," Al-Maria says.

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## Planned obsolescence



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Growing up in Qatar provided a unique vantage point from which to witness the rapid evolution of history, in a commercial and technological sense.

In "Black Friday" AI-Maria will show the tangible results of such development; the physical waste produced by a society obsessed with the latest electronic gadget. This phenomenon of fervent consumerism also feeds into our perception of what constitutes a piece of art.

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"The thing is that people's concept of art is still very much object based," she explains, "So even with a video piece, people will expect there to be something to play it on."

While much time is spent thinking of digital art as forward thinking and innovative, the cost of this innovation may be a reduced life span for the artworks, which have used the technological tools available to them in their time.

As AI-Maria puts it: "There's planned obsolescence in the devices, so there's planned obsolescence in the art.

"There's so much work lost. It's kind of tragic really."

*[Black Friday is on at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York from July 26 to October 31, 2016.](#)*