

RETURN TO EXILE SIAH ARMAJANI



SIAH ARMAJANI, *Emerson's Parlor*, 2005, glass, laminated maple, mattress, plywood, mirror, coat, hat, cane, 310 × 700 × 660 cm. All images in this article are courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York.

FEATURES BY MURTAZA VALI FROM JUL/AUG 2010

Siah Armajani's most recent work, *Murder in Tehran* (2009), shown at New York's Max Protetch Gallery late last year, is a memorial to the victims of the violent crackdowns on the popular mass protests against the reelection of Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad last June. Looming large within the gallery's small project space, the 11-foot-tall rectangular structure consists of a black wooden frame and walls of alternating horizontal bands of black and clear glass. A heavy curtain inside the frame conceals most of the interior space; visible in the exposed base is a bloody cleaver and white casts of human limbs, partially buried in gravel. And leaning over a balcony at the top is a headless effigy with its arms raised. Dressed in black and smeared with red paint, it recalls Neda Agha-Soltan, the young woman shot by a plainclothes Basij security officer one week after the election; with her death caught on video, she emerged as the face of the protests. Finally, emblazoned on the structure's walls, in green, the opposition movement's color, is a foreboding verse by the dissident Iranian poet Ahmad Shamlou (1925–2000)—imprisoned both under the Shah and in the years after the 1979 Islamic Revolution—that warns of state violence.



SIAH ARMAJANI, *Dictionary For Building: Loading Dock*, 1974–75, mixed media, 29 x 30 x 30 cm.

Murder in Tehran is not Armajani's first response to state-sanctioned brutality. *Fallujah* (2004–05) is named after the city that, in November 2004 was decimated by the bloodiest fighting of the Iraq war, as an ill-advised American-led offensive against insurgents holed up in residential areas resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths and thousands made homeless. Armajani distills this inexcusable loss of life and home into *Fallujah's* precarious, interpenetrating architectonic volumes—a two-story vertical rectangular structure, perched on a single edge, with chairs and a mattress underneath, wedged inside a squatter horizontal structure—which are based on a *New York Times* photograph of a Palestinian family salvaging belongings after Israeli police destroyed their Ramallah home. Scattered throughout are abandoned possessions, upturned furniture and visual cues drawn from Picasso's famous antiwar painting *Guernica* (1937): the stylized flames near the top, the hanging naked light bulb fringed with a similarly stylized corona and a white rocking horse that playfully recalls the twisted, rearing animal that dominates Picasso's painting but conveys none of its torment. Though the title of this work is specific, like *Guernica*, Armajani's carefully composed synthesis of these diverse sources produces a universal indictment against the horrors of war.

Created soon after the events to which they respond, both *Murder in Tehran* and *Fallujah* are protests against contemporary atrocities that clearly convey Armajani's immediate outrage. But they are strangely static, restrained and somewhat unyielding, given the tumultuous events they describe. Instead of literal representations, injustice and suffering are merely intimated, through the imposing or precarious structures, and a carefully orchestrated (dis)array of objects, which serve as stand-ins for people. While their politically charged subject matter is somewhat anomalous for Armajani, their thoughtful modulation of space and things, and how viewers respond to them, are emblematic of a distinctive and extensive oeuvre that has primarily engaged with politics and philosophy at a formal level. And like much of his work of the past decade, they mark a significant departure for an artist best known for public structures—reading rooms, gardens, lounges and gazebos—which he envisions as “open, available, useful and common.” Designed to be entered and used, these structures, built at sites across the United States and Europe—though never in Armajani's native Iran—encourage civic assembly, dialogue, reflection and contemplation.

The sources of influence in Armajani's work are rooted in the artist's early life experiences. He was born in Tehran in 1939. His father was a successful dealer of fine European textiles and the patriarch of a family that was part of the small but thriving Christian minority in Iran at the time. He educated his children at a Presbyterian missionary school that taught Persian and Western culture, history and thought. Armajani developed a strong interest in Western philosophy and read Georg WF Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger at Tehran University after school. Armajani's home was filled with books, and his father regularly read Persian poetry to his children. Philosophy and poetry have remained constant interests through Armajani's long career, and many of his works bristle with the disjunction between their distinctive and often oppositional modes, logics and languages. In 1960, with Armajani's growing participation in prodemocracy protests against the Shah putting him at risk, his father shipped him off to Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, where his uncle Yahya taught history. Armajani has lived and worked there since, at a distance from his homeland and the vagaries of the American art world.

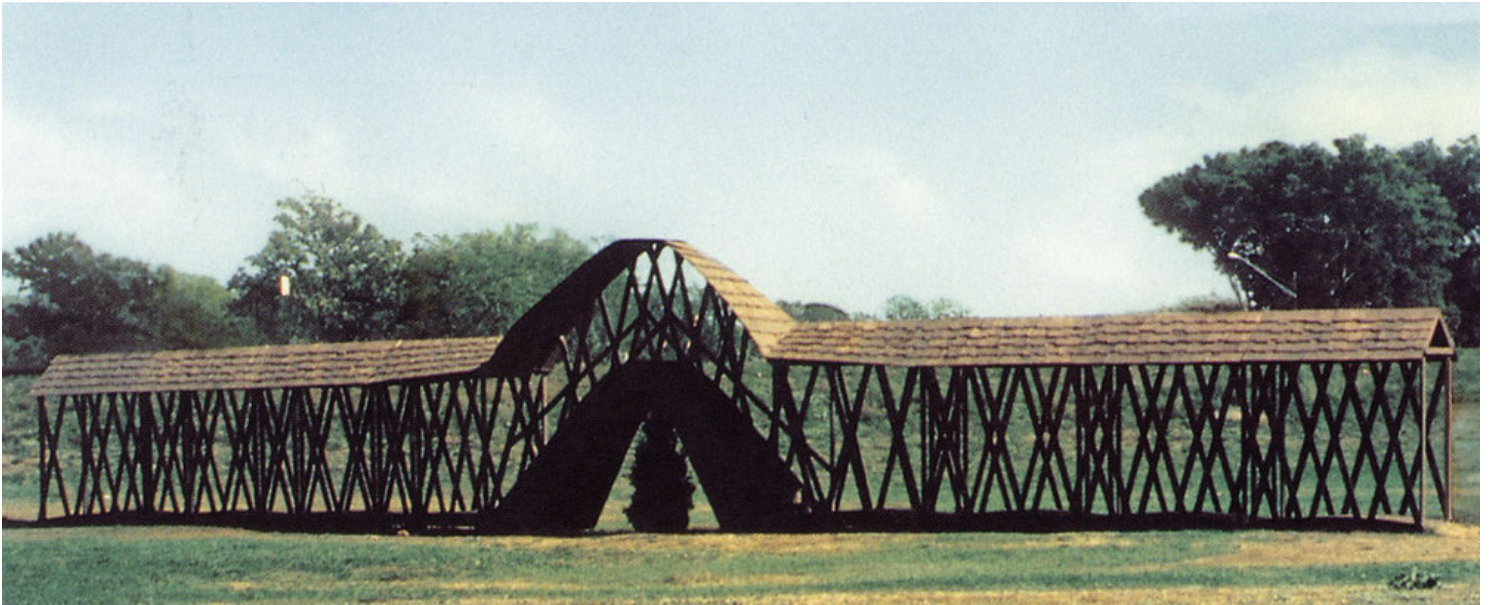
Though he studied philosophy and mathematics at Macalester, Armajani painted throughout his education, at his studio in Minneapolis' warehouse district, fulfilling his childhood ambition to be an artist. His father had been supportive and arranged for private lessons with a master painter and calligrapher in Tehran. Though the curmudgeonly teacher summarily dismissed Armajani as lacking talent after six months, this encounter with the Persian traditions of calligraphy and manuscript illustration influenced his earliest works, which were playful deconstructions of their many conventions. The vast, pale gray expanse of *Prayer* (1962), a four-by-six-foot canvas from this period, is covered with lines of Persian script in oil and ink, haphazardly written in different directions and mostly indecipherable. Words and sentences, rather than conveying meaning, are atomized into series of of-repeated letters, each functioning like an individual brushstroke in the monochrome composition. However, by mid-decade, Armajani had shifted gears, utilizing his longstanding interest in philosophy and recent studies in mathematics for projects that participated in then-emerging currents of conceptual art.



SIAH ARMAJANI, *Meeting Garden*, 1980, public installation at Artpark in Lewiston, New York.

At the beginning of his 1969 manifesto *Sentences on Conceptual Art*, Sol Lewitt famously declared: "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach." These leaps were often disguised in forms that suggested rationality and objectivity, such as photography, language and mathematical systems. Armajani's conceptual projects are emblematic of this approach, deploying the precise computational logic of mathematics and computer science to describe utopian but absurd plans. An almost arbitrary proposition is defined and followed by a carefully worked-out solution, supplemented with formulas, diagrams and models. For *North Dakota Tower* (1968), Armajani calculated the dimensions necessary for a tower sited at the state's eastern edge that would cast a shadow across its entire breadth. Accounting for the degree to which the earth's curvature would affect his calculations, Armajani's answer was a structure 18 miles tall and 2 miles wide at the top. Similarly, *Sound Chamber for Vesuvius* (1972) worked out the specifications for a set of seven brass tubes of varying height to be embedded into the side of the Italian volcano's crater, transforming it into a giant wind instrument that would, somewhat redundantly, produce an acoustic simulation of an actual seismic event. Armajani's conceptual works were critically lauded and he was included in "Information," the seminal 1970 survey of conceptual art at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Simultaneously, Armajani, embracing the cultural peculiarities of his new home, began to apply the deconstructive approach he first used on Persian art forms. As he recounted in an interview with *ArtAsiaPacific* last October: "My immediate architectural environment was farmhouses, barns, grain elevators, silos and so on. The peculiar quality of these structures is that once you walk inside and around them you know exactly how and why they were put together. Everything is self-evident. Erich Mendelsohn and Le Corbusier were also fascinated by rural American architecture; these structures were precursors to the Modern movement. So I started taking pieces from these buildings and putting them together. It was a nonfunctional architecture that retained the appearance and statement of architecture."



SIAH ARMAJANI, *Bridge Over a Tree*, 1970, an 85-foot-long roofed walkway that arches over a small tree, located in a field in Minneapolis.



SIAH ARMAJANI, *Murder In Tehran*, 2009, laminated maple, glass, felt, cloth, cast body parts, meat cleaver, paint, 335.3 × 182.9 × 182.9 cm.

Re-creating the simple construction techniques, the parallel wooden planks used to build farmhouses and barns and the repeated trusses that support the roofs of covered bridges, Armajani began to make his own bridges and houses. However, these structures, some only built as models, others realized at full-scale, undermine our assumptions that a bridge should span something and a house must provide shelter. Instead, the bridge serves as a metaphor for passage, both physical and psychological. *First Bridge* (1968), built in a field in White Bear Lake, Minnesota, is a steadily narrowing passageway; decreasing in height from ten feet to four feet, it mimics and exaggerates the gradually diminishing scale of perspective. *Bridge Over a Tree* (1970), built in an open field in Minneapolis, is exactly that, an 85-foot-long roofed walkway with open, trussed sides, absurdly interrupted at its midpoint by a set of stairs that climb and descend over a small tree. Similarly, Armajani's houses from this period flaunt the convention of the house as a closed rectilinear structure, itself subdivided into smaller right-angled rooms. In his works, walls, ceilings and floors meet at irregular angles and their planes are often interrupted with gaps that allow shafts of light to enter, serving as immaterial partitions of sorts.

In 1974, Armajani initiated a series of sculptures titled "Dictionary for Building." Deconstructing vernacular American architecture and interiors into their constituent structural units—walls, floors, ceilings, doors, windows, stairs, porches, mantels and sideboards—he then recombined two or more of these elements in ways that emphasized intuitive formal concerns over purely functional ones, opening up their connotative potential without losing specific references to style, function and material. Each element functions like a word in an architectural lexicon, and the self-evident, commonsense logic of the vernacular is reconfigured into a form of nonsense poetry, as doors open onto other doors and windows become abstract grids and frames. Originally constructed as cardboard maquettes, Armajani began building these sculptures to scale in 1979, exhibiting them in galleries and museums in the US and Europe throughout the 1980s.

Armajani's immersion in this modest, homegrown architectural idiom was complemented by a growing engagement with the

intellectual bases of the American Revolution and the specific model of democracy it inaugurated. Of particular interest to him was identifying what role, if any, the founding fathers and subsequent American intellectuals thought art and aesthetics might play in this unfolding political vision. Armajani dedicated the structures he began to build in the mid-1970s—buildings disintegrated into open plans of enclosures, walls, screens and fences—to Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, and he often returned to Jefferson's architectural plans for Monticello, his residence in Virginia, and for the campus of the University of Virginia. Beginning with *Meeting Garden* (1980), at Artpark, a public park and venue for cultural festivals in Lewiston, New York, Armajani inscribed these structures with quotations from American writers and philosophers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville and John Dewey as words and ideas to meditate on, much like the Quranic texts that adorn mosques. An Emerson text that Armajani has used often begins: "Beauty must come back to the useful arts, and the distinction between the fine and useful arts be forgotten." Armajani embraced populism, demonstrated by the accessible architectural idiom, material and techniques he used, as an expression of the democratic ideals of freedom and equality for all, and as a virtue, a way to rescue art from elite realms and reinvigorate it with utility and civic function. By reuniting art with life and using it as a pedagogic tool for societal advancement, Armajani's approach sought to extend the utopian aspirations of historical avant-garde movements such as the Russian Constructivists and the Bauhaus in Weimar Germany, as articulated in the specific context of America.

During this period, Armajani began constructing rooms and gardens for reading. Following Dewey's pragmatic philosophy, Armajani embraced education, exemplified in the everyday act of reading, as the key to achieving the equality necessary for a successful democracy. But the resulting structures—some permanent public installations, others constructed for and displayed in temporary exhibitions at museums and galleries—are neither simple nor comfortable. *First Reading Room* (1977–79), has a reading carrel at its center, enclosed by three walls of varying heights, two of which have wooden benches against them, facing outward and providing additional unenclosed seating. There is no roof, only a pair of thin beams that intersect perpendicularly. The furniture, which resembles the roughly finished benches and tables commonly found in parks across America, is familiar but spare, severe and hardly comfortable. In this structure, reading is not easy, not just a right, but also a responsibility that demands action and commitment.

Expanding the scale, Armajani subsequently created larger communal structures, gathering places that he hoped were "neighborly." Some, such as *Reading Garden 1* (1980) at Roanoke College in Virginia, were outdoors, with its shed-like enclosure accompanied by a seemingly random scattering of tables, benches and waist-high fences across the site. Others, such as the *Louis Kahn Lecture Room* (1982), at the Fleisher Art Memorial, a small art school and public gallery in Philadelphia where the famous architect studied, were built indoors, taking design cues from single-room rural meeting halls, schools and churches. With a changing display of Kahn's drawings on one wall, a series of pew-like benches attached to the other and placed at an unexpected angle, a raised stage with a lectern and a quote from Whitman inlaid in a rectangular band around the open floor, the room doubles as a gallery and a meditative space for secular congregations, recalling the original function of the adjacent sanctuary.

As structures that engender social relations and foster interaction and dialogue, albeit colored by American notions of civic

participation and responsibility, these works are important but rarely acknowledged antecedents for exactly the types of 1990s art practices that French curator Nicholas Bourriaud classified as relational aesthetics. And Armajani's focus on reading, specifically, and education, in general, might have presaged the recent pedagogical turn in contemporary art, marked by an explosion of informal artist-initiated educational initiatives and the increasing adoption of didactic formats such as lectures as artistic tools.

By the 1980s, Armajani had become a key figure in the emerging new practice of, what he termed, "art in public places," which sought to challenge the prevalent strategy of simply placing large-scale sculpture, very often Modernist and abstract, into a plaza or square without heeding either the particular conditions of the site or the opinions, needs and desires of the surrounding community. Rejecting the autonomy of the Modernist object, Armajani (and like-minded colleagues including Scott Burton, Mary Miss, Nancy Holt and Robert Irwin) instead embraced utilitarianism, collaborating with architects and urban planners. Several high-profile commissions followed, including: the Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge (1988) in Minneapolis, a half-suspension, half-arch structure spanning 16 lanes of traffic and which connects the Walker Art Center's sculpture garden to nearby Loring Park; the tower and cauldron that housed the torch at the 1996 Olympic Summer Games in Atlanta; and a lighthouse and pedestrian bridge (also built in 1996) at the St. George Ferry Terminal on Staten Island, New York.

Throughout this period, Armajani continued to design reading rooms and, beginning in 1991, gazebos. Structurally complicated but airy pavilions with latticed columns, these latter structures, contrary to their traditional purpose, often seclude one from a view of the surrounding landscape, encouraging individual reflection. Works from this period are often dedicated to American anarchists, such as Ferdinando Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Italian immigrants executed in 1927 for murdering two men during a 1920 armed robbery, their guilt and the fairness of their trial in question, and Emma Goldman, a Russian émigré and champion of free thought. Their revolutionary commitment to the ideals of individual freedom and self-determination over any form of governance, often expressed through acts of political violence, arguably both represent and test the limits of democracy. An extended reflection on whether political ends justify violent means, Armajani's works and his interest in such figures might hold personal resonance given his own early involvement in anti-Shah agitation, a movement that eventually culminated in the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which he witnessed from afar. And the final work in this series, *Room for Noam Chomsky: The Last Anarchist* (1998), dedicated to the dissident American linguist and philosopher, suggests that while radical critique and protest are necessary in a democracy, there are alternatives to violent action.

While Armajani has continued to draw from poetry and philosophy over the past decade, the tenor of his chosen guides has darkened. The transcendental humanism and embrace of nature of Emerson and Whitman has been replaced by the urban Gothic of Edgar Allan Poe, and the optimistic pragmatism of Dewey has given way to the resolute critical pessimism of German-born philosopher and musicologist Theodor Adorno, whose famous maxim, "it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home," pithily encapsulates the idea that alienation is a moral imperative.

During this period, Armajani's constructions have become decidedly less "open, available, useful and common," and less public. The works exhibited in a solo show at Max Protetch Gallery in March

2009, which the artist referred to as “Pieces,” were conceived specifically for a museum or gallery context. Planks of clear, cold glass have replaced his trademark warm, painted wood; the wood, used primarily for the structures’ frames, has sharper edges and a shinier finish, often resembling steel. While these transparent walls guarantee that one can see inside, the spaces they contain are physically inaccessible, the structures resembling human-scale vitrines or glass cages. The entryways that do appear are obstructed; viewers are, in Armajani’s own words, “banished, estranged, expelled,” becoming “habitual outsiders looking in.” Perversely, however, these interiors are filled with objects that are used in daily activities, such as tables, chairs, beds and mattresses, suggesting human presence. Also included in these “Pieces” are enigmatic but symbolic objects which beg interpretation and demand a closer look that is not always possible. Their meaning, like access to the spaces that contain them, is deferred.

Unlike other immigrants or exiles, Armajani, in his recent turn to the poetics of displacement, is not sudden nostalgic for the Iran of his childhood or of feeling at odds with his American Midwest milieu. Nor does it reflect uneasiness about the devaluation of American democratic ideals internationally following the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The uncanny sense of melancholy, detachment and disenchantment that these works convey is more profoundly existential, the result of an endgame initiated by confronting mortality and taking stock of one’s life, retrospectively reevaluating prior successes and failures. Armajani’s apparent rejection of the formal strategies and aesthetic philosophies he long championed might point to his “late style,” a phrase Adorno coined for Beethoven’s difficult last works, filled with contradictions and unresolved tensions, both alienated and alienating. By rendering the basic elements of a domicile unfamiliar, turning them into a spectacle from which viewers remain hopelessly distanced and disconnected, Armajani’s “Pieces” enact alienation at the level of perception, making it palpable to viewers, who become voyeurs surveilling withheld spaces, always unsettled and outside. Estrangement is experienced both phenomenologically and psychologically as an inevitable human condition. Armajani once asserted that, “Space is not an inner experience.” His recent work, more personal and introspective, would suggest that, as he enters his eighth decade, for him it might increasingly be exactly that.