Siah Armajani: Monument Valley

Xin Wang

1

A bridge by Siah Armajani (b.1939) is always a moving target, an ontological riddle. It must be quite odd for a visitor new to his practice to encounter such a structure – either as a sculptural installation or paper-based model – within the confines of gallery walls. Neither sculptures that foreground form nor ready- mades that highlight new aesthetic paradigms, his bridges couldn't even serve the function that their structurally robust forms suggest – as junctures connecting divided space. But it is this oddity, or cognitive dissonance, that precisely activates the bridge maker's true itinerary, in which the work functions as a threshold. It not only evokes the familiar metaphorical tropes that bridges typically bring to mind – the articulation of difference and 'overcoming separation', as the artist himself puts it – but also constellates the artist's personal symbolisms; homage to poets, philosophers and activists; and references to the utopian, civic structures Armajani has designed for specific public sites and imaginaries over the past several decades.[1] One foot in this world, as an inanimate thing rooted in concrete space, and the other steeped in the realms of history, memory and ideology, his works never seem to settle for one identity, one function or even one metaphorical gesture, but rather explode with multiple commitments to meaning and mobilisation. Only when arriving at this understanding have we truly traversed the passage Armajani has paved for us.

For the Tehran-born, Minnesota-based artist, the bridge is a kind of dream infrastructure that embodies multiplicity, sometimes contradictions and layers linked to registers of aesthetic, cultural and critical experiences. The *Fibonacci House Bridge* (1968), created eight years after the artist relocated from Tehran to Minneapolis in light of possible political persecution due to his involvement in pro-democracy protests in Iran, is an early and telling example of Armajani's intellectual ambition for his built structures. It was in equal parts informed by the conceptual potency of mathematics and the utilitarian charm of the vernacular American architecture of his new home.[2] The Fibonacci sequence, built upon a single rule dictating that every number after the first two be the sum of the two preceding ones, has wide resonance in computational visualisation, including with the 'golden spiral', often associated with ideal expressions of aesthetic form, and natural phenomena, ranging from seashells to nebulae. Likewise, Armajani saw something sublime in the understated, 'self-evident' structures of the farmhouses and barns in his new architectural environment, citing Erich Mendelsohn and Le Corbusier in praising these structures as 'precursors of the Modern movement'.[3]

Armajani's engagements with the bridge – as well as with other architectural structures that characterise his oeuvre: gardens, reading rooms, cenotaphs – are inherently and profoundly interdisciplinary. But rather than an alignment with the largely Euro-American-centric discourse of modernism, in which artists began to renegotiate the distance between life and art by expanding the conceptual scope of what is considered art, what is evident here, perhaps, is the fact that the myriad disciplines explored in Armajani's project were never considered alien or external to the notion of art and

Fibonacci House Bridge (1968)
Stained balsa wood on artist's wood base
16 × 90 1/8 × 8 1/8 in (40.7 × 228.9 × 20.5 cm)
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC,
Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund, 1991
Accession Number: 91.2

Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge (1988)
Steel, wood, paint, bronze
375-ft steel-truss construction

Detail view

Model for Lissitzky's Neighborhood, Center House (1978)
Plastic, balsa wood, enamel, corrugated cardboard
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY
Acquired in 1989

visuality by the artist. Growing up in a small but vibrant Christian community in Iran, Armajani was also immersed in Islamic visual cultural traditions. Resonances of this immersion seem to have manifested in the isometric representation of architectural elements and urban landscapes in his paintings; in the intimate, sometimes compartmentalised interplay between text and image in both two-dimensional and three-dimensional works; and in the conceptual approach to architectural language that defies a unified narrative, spatial or otherwise.

Particularly relatable to the Chinese audience of Armajani's oeuvre is how poetry and writing figure prominently into the visual program, and how text and image have fundamentally different semiotic relationships through which meaning is generated, digressed, deferred and, ultimately, expanded. This is curiously aligned with – yet distinctly different from – the eruption of language into the aesthetic field in the 1960s in conceptual art. Works on paper from his Tehran period, such as Father *Has an Apple* (1958) and *Father Has a Pear* (1958), distill the quotidian practice of filling school writing books in the kitchen into a mesmerising narrative through schematised signs and forms. Many of Armajani's public commissions feature texts – usually of poetic and commemorative nature – that mediate and enrich the architectonic experience. The *Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge* (1988), a dynamic hybrid of suspension and arch structures commissioned for the city of Minneapolis, features on its upper lintel a poem by John Ashbery (American, b. 1927): 'It is so much like a beach after all, where you stand and think of going no further…and then it got very cool'. Affixed to the beam, these words nevertheless float in the same way as the Koranic and poetic verses that 'intersect' with the walls, gazebos and bridges in miniature paintings of Persian gardens, as if the painterly arrangement has been transposed in three-dimensional space. Conversely, perhaps, the inscribed text has the power of incorporating those who cross paths – *in situ* or not – into the artist's design of an ideal space, folding its beholder to the realm of fiction and aspiration, just as the Persian gardens were designed with the express purpose of materialising paradise on earth.

2

In *Manifesto: Public Sculpture in the Context of American Democracy*, compiled by the artist from 1968 to 1978 and revised in 1993, Armajani exhibits a strong ownership of the avant-garde agenda – to 'demystify' art, restore its political agency and obliterate the distinction between art and social life: 'public sculpture attempts to fill the gap that comes about between art and public to make art public and artists citizens again'.[4] The fact that a manifesto was penned and the pensive yet declarative style in which it was written are equally telling.In both his writings and public commissions, Armajani champions the utilitarianism and democratic impulse of public art, considering it a 'tool for activity', a statement that certainly calls to mind the constructivist mantra 'not the old, not the new, but the necessary', coined by the Russian avant-garde's key proponent Vladimir Tatlin. The sense of utilitarianism isn't limited, however, to calibrating art for social progress and public service; there's also the utilitarianism in which artists discover new aesthetic paradigms through engaging with new visual languages of industrial structures, machinery and technology. The industrially calibrated aspect of American modernity, in particular, has captured the imagination of non-American artists from Francis Picabia to Jean Tinguely, with the former claiming to have found a new 'material' for art in 1915: 'Almost immediately upon coming to America it flashed on me that the genius of the modern world is in machinery and that through machinery art ought to find a most vivid expression… I don't know what possibilities may be in store'.[5]

Technology and machinery have been, in large part, perceived as useful allies by the avant-garde – as powerful metaphorical tools deployed to broaden the scope of experimental techniques, to critique art as a professionalised institution and even to save the avant-garde from the specialisation of itself. In a way, we may see the bridge – almost always modernist in appearance in Armajani's case – through a curious lineage of structures encompassing: Marcel Duchamp's bicycle wheel and coffee mill; Francis Picabia's mechanic portraits of fellow artists; the Italian Futurists' obsession with fantastical aerodynamics; Tatlin's 'flying bicycle' (*Letatlin*, 1928–32) and *Monument to the Third International* (1919–20), which was, in fact, designed to host the new headquarters for the Third International to carry the revolutionary momentum forward; and El Lissitzky's *Lenin Tribune* (1920) – a moving speaker's podium. It is not surprising, then, that Armajani's civic structures, regardless of their status of materialisation – model, installation, sculpture, markers and mediators of public space – comfortably serve as ideological, democratic, even ethical devices. Armajani claimed in his *Manifesto* that 'the ethical dimensions of the arts are mostly gone and only in a newly formed relationship with a non-art audience may the ethical dimensions come back to the arts'.[6] It would appear that the same can be said about 'non-art' materials.

In *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde: Technology and the Arts in Russia of the 1920s*, historian Julia Vaingurt evokes Heidegger's analysis of the original inseparability of technology, in its Greek conception, from art: '*Techne* is the name

Dictionary for Building (1974–75)
Partial installation view
Siah Armajani: L'art n'est pas le salon de beauté de la civilisation,
MAMCO Musée d'art moderne et contemporain, Geneva
February 21–May 6, 2007
Collection MAMCO Musée d'art modern et contemporain, Geneva,
Switzerland

North Dakota Tower (1968)
Ink on paper
Collection of the artist

not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts. *Techne* belongs to the bringing forth, to poiesis: it is something poietic'.[7] In this light, Armajani's fascination with modernist built structures lies not only in their utilitarian and public dimensions, but also in their revealing nature, and how they mobilise – from the artist and his intended public alike – confrontation with form, functionality and meaning in something familiar yet largely unexamined in shared quotidian experiences that constitute the public domain in a fundamental way.

Between 1974 and 1975, Armajani created a series of small sculptures collectively titled *Dictionary for Building*. Taking note of the modest yet striking forms of vernacular structures – from stairs down the basement to loading docks – on a trip across the United States, Armajani composed a 'travelogue' that explored both a culturally codified architectural language and the social, even fictional spheres it mobilises. Incisive yet playful, specific yet highly abstract, Armajani's reinterpretations of these structures are created through the ingenious use of equally modest materials, such as cardboard and woodchips. The artist presents us with not only humble yet potent monuments, but his processing of their significance and dignity; guided by that process, we become mindful of not only what we see, but also what becomes revealed in our newly found ways of seeing.
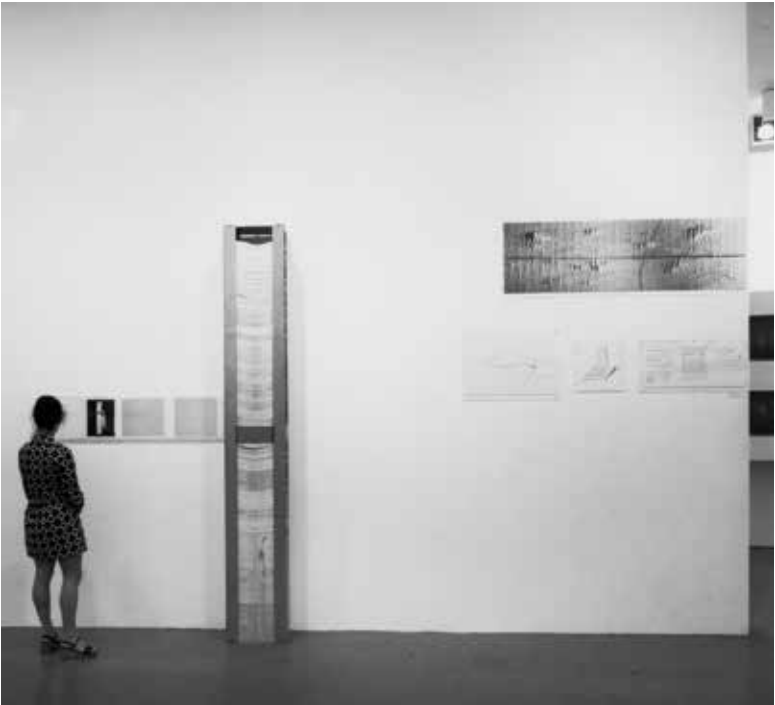
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True to the conceptual intrigue of Armajani's work, in which monumentalisation can be found and represented in the mundane as well as in poetry often unfold architecturally, the artist's grandest landmark is one that can never be erected. *North Dakota Tower* (1968), conceived at a moment when the artist began thinking about architecture as a material for art, follows a simple design: that it shall cast a shadow that covers the entire width of the state from the eastern edge, where it will be sited. According to the artist's calculation, the structure would be at least 18 miles tall. Two years later, Robert Smithson would create his groundbreaking earthwork *Spiral Jetty*, a gigantic spiral constructed on the northeastern shore of the Great Salt Lake, and land art would begin to violently shake up the art institution by challenging its few remaining boundaries, including those of institutional walls, commoditisation, ownership, even spectatorship itself, by demanding that we travel up to the art. But *North Dakota Tower*, a work that only exists as a conceptual design, was the quintessential 'non-site', to borrow Smithson's famous notion, because it didn't even have a 'site' on earth.

I keep thinking about the shadow, a metaphor too poignant as we relate our puny existence to the sun and live in the long shadow of troubled histories – eerily so in light of today's highly controversial and ethically problematic pipeline access drawn across the state's map, and the 'American democracy' that's not quite as it was in Armajani's *Manifesto* decades ago. I keep thinking about Tatlin's tower: the iron and glass structure that would straddle the river Neva and reach some 1,300 feet (nearly 400 metres), with internal glass columns hosting various agency offices that would rotate at different speeds. It was intended as a functional monument-machine that catapults and delivers its public towards an idealised future. However, in its unrealised form – as a design model paraded through Russia's streets in the '20s and exhibition models recreated over and over in worldwide exhibitions in the following decades – it seems that it best captured the revolutionary momentum and the imagination of its audience, the same way Armajani's shadow-casting mega tower haunts mine.

I am reminded of Monument Valley, not the red-sand natural spectacle in Arizona, but the popular video game played out on the smartphone screen. In it, the player helps Princess Ida navigate through a series of architectural spaces characterised by disorienting geometric realities and optical illusions. She solves the puzzle in each space to unlock the next one, which could be a castle, a bell tower, a watermill or a graveyard. Her ultimate goal is to recover her memory and, in that process, restore her land. There's a sense of reality and gravitas to the game, which also provides a comparable structure to understand Armajani's wide-ranging and widely dispersed works. Here, the 'monument valley' is an allegorical bridge that functions more than a conduit for exchange – it also maps an itinerary of self-knowledge. It is in this deeply personal and introspective manner that Armajani's works become so publicly resonant.

Installation view
Information
July 2–September 20, 1970
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY

1   *Siah Armajani: Bridge Builder* (Kansas City, MO:
    Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2016), 25.

2   Murtaza Vali, 'Siah Armajani: Return to Exile', *ArtAsiaPacific*,
    July/August 2010. Accessed 10 January 2017
    (http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/69/ReturnToExileSiahArmajani).

3   Ibid.

4   As reprinted in *Siah Armajani: Contributions Anarchistes*
    (Nice: Villa Arson, Centre National d'art Contemporain, 1994), 62.

5   Francis Picabia as quoted in Pontus Hultén, *The Machine as Seen at the
    End of the Mechanical Age* (New York: Museum of Modern Art;
    distributed by New York Graphic Society, Greenwich, Conn., 1968), 93.

6   As reprinted in *Siah Armajani: Contributions Anarchistes*
    (Nice: Villa Arson, Centre national d'art contemporain, 1994), 61.

7   Julia Vaingurt, *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde:
    Technology and the Arts in Russia of the 1920s*
    (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 12.

Xin Wang is a curator and art historian based in New York. She has worked as special exhibition researcher at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on projects such as *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* (2013). She was the associate curator for Asian Contemporary Art Week 2014 and the inaugural edition of its signature program, FIELD MEETING. As an independent curator, she has co-organised the panel 'Magiciens de la Terre and China: Looking Back 25 Years' with Asia Art Archive at Columbia University, curated the New York solo debut of artist Lu Yang (2014) and presented a critically acclaimed series of exhibitions titled *The BANK Show: Vive le Capital* and *The BANK Show: Hito Steyerl* (2015) in Shanghai. Her writing has appeared frequently in exhibition catalogues (including the 2015 Venice Biennale) and publications such as *Artforum, e-flux, Kaleidoscope, Art in America, Flash Art*, the Metropolitan Museum's blog, *Hyperallergic* and *Leap*. She is currently building a discursive archive of Asian futurisms in contemporary art practice at http://afuturism.tumblr.com, and is a PhD candidate in modern and contemporary art at NYU's Institute of Fine Arts.