



Installationsansicht (nach Sonnenuntergang) | Installation View (After Sunset)

In 2016, I was sitting in a hotel room on the Lower Eastside in New York with Abbas Akhavan, following the opening of the group exhibition *But a Storm is Blowing from Paradise* at the Guggenheim Museum. The exhibition included works from the museum's collection, focusing on artists associated with the Middle East and North Africa; it included Abbas Akhavan's sculptural installation, *Study for a Monument* (2013–ongoing, ill. p. 102). This is one of Abbas's best-known works, composed of bronze casts of various plants native to the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, enlarged in size and laid out on stark white sheets on the floor. Several friends had flown in from Toronto, where Abbas has lived since 2009, to celebrate the occasion. While everyone else went out to celebrate, Abbas crawled into his bed early and we chatted until he fell asleep, as it had been a relatively eventful few days leading up to the opening.

When he and other artists arrived at the museum to install their works, the director announced publicly that the museum was cutting discussions with activist group *Gulf Labor* concerning working conditions for the construction of their proposed Guggenheim Abu Dhabi museum.¹ This issue had concerned Abbas, and when the museum asked to acquire his work, he sold the piece with the stipulation that it was not to be sold to or even exhibited at the Abu Dhabi location. The artists in the exhibition, not all present in New York, quickly began corresponding about the issue by email. They had differing opinions on the matter: some had their own issues with *Gulf Labor* and were not disturbed by the decision, others wanted to protest, although withdrawing was not possible, as the exhibition featured new acquisitions in the museum's collection. Eventually, a group including Abbas and nine others, penned and circulated an open letter to the museum to express their disappointment about the decision to end the talks as well as their belief in cultural institutions to bring about change in the region.²

This question about how to locate oneself politically as an artist is something Abbas has grappled with since I've known him. That night, I reflected on our friendship and realized we had known each other for ten years, which is roughly the same length of time as the age gap between us. I had just entered art school in Vancouver when I recall first seeing Abbas. He had just completed his MFA and was often on campus to lead seminars in critical theory. One of my first conversations with him concerned the role of politics in art and his art in particular. "I teach politically, I don't make political art," was something he was trying out at the time.

Yet around the same time, there used to be a work on Abbas's website dating back to his student days, since removed. In 2006, I remember finding documentation of a cake he made for a year-end critique at UBC. He had sculpted the head of the MFA program, artist Ken Lum, in fondant and presented it to the class.

A Subjective Minor History of the Work of Abbas Akhavan

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Then he cut it into precise slices and piled them one on top of the other before passing portions to his classmates and to Lum. There is one photo in which Lum is pictured, eating a piece of his own likeness in good humor. At the time, I was taking introductory seminars in modern and contemporary art. I was learning about Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning* (1953) drawing, which exists only as traces of ink on paper. Abbas's early work has a similar drive to "kill the father" through an act of reverence and destruction. It is a work that records an event, the end of the school year's final evaluation and is consumed and dispersed into the bodies that made up the class, recorded by photos that now must sit in a hard drive somewhere. It marks the generation between Lum and his students and in consuming Lum's effigy, they absorbed him through a sort of collective sacrifice.

Discussions about the relationship between art and politics at that time had much to do with the US invasion in Iraq and the Bush Jr. administration as well as cross-pollination between art and political theory, especially that of Jacques Rancière, Chantal Mouffe, and Ernesto Laclau. At the end of 2006, the infamous cell phone videos of Saddam Hussein's execution spread through the Internet and in March 2007, David Joselit penned an article in *Artforum* on the relationship between the video and Édouard Manet's painting *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian* (1867–68).

After graduation, Abbas produced *Makeshift Objects* (2008–ongoing), for which he followed instructions by prison inmates to modify household items into weapons that embody the vibrating ambivalence of something potentially useful and harmful. The objects point to the role of trauma in coloring how one sees a seemingly innocent thing in the world. It can mean that a quotidian object, like a kitchen utensil is a tool to one person and a threat to another—and that it can also be both. Elaine Scarry writes about this in her book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of Worlds* (1987), which is a well-known early reference text for Abbas, and this work, made in response, calls into question associations of home and security, likening the domestic sphere to a prison from which to escape. This early work, which continues to be shown regularly, is evidence of a slightly tautological impulse that sits below a practice which has become more and more abstract over time.

I understand Abbas's struggle with the relationship between art and politics, then and now, as having to do with art that incorporates political ideas in ways that only repeat and calcify old thought patterns and inhibit empathy or new ways of understanding something, which is art can short circuit. We would talk about artists who indulged in stereotypes about themselves by incorporating well-known signifiers of their culture or identity into their work in a way that reinforced ideas of difference and

branded them as exotic "other" to the Western contemporary artist, rather than providing new insights or complicated subject positions. Something common and rewarded, at least in the short term.

Yet below the desire to open up a new space of understanding, there is also a real sense of urgency, driven by the need to make people understand something specific or reconsider something in a particular way: that the sound of fireworks recall celebration for some and war for others (see: *August 2006*, 2006, ill. p. 95) or that a home can be as claustrophobic as it is comforting. But I read a constant tension in Abbas's work between a feeling of responsibility to change people's understanding in that almost tautological fashion and an understanding that art's role is to resist easy or one-to-one interpretation in search of possibilities that surprise even its maker. As his work has developed over the past decade, he has moved deeper into a poetic approach to materials that has always existed in his practice—for instance, by incorporating organic material into classically hermetic spaces such as vitrines filled with archival material (see: *Study for a Glasshouse*, 2013), and subject matter that references collective histories through formal experimentation with existing sculptural monuments (see: *Mortar*, in the installation *Beacon*, 2012).

In 2009, when Abbas moved to Toronto, he left me his rent-controlled studio apartment downtown, complete with the furnishings. This included a simple wooden kitchen table, which he used to produce the original version of *Dirt/Table*. The artist placed about a foot of soil atop the construction, weighting it down with about a ton of material, slowly weakening the wood through moisture and mass. In 2012, he recreated the work for the exhibition *Study for a Garden* at Delfina Foundation in London, sited in a home slated for demolition. The exhibition also included a sprinkler installed and functioning like a fountain in an empty room, spraying water inside in a slow, calculated panning motion—as well as other works that broke down the border between the inside and outside of a house through lyrical, slow, destructive methods.

But prior to Delfina, Abbas was invited to do an experimental artist talk as part of a program for *Performa* in New York City in 2011. I was studying upstate and came into the city for the event, which took place in an old classroom. I found a seat facing a teacher's desk, in front of an old chalkboard, with a projector pointed at it. Abbas sat at the desk and read a text he had written, which was the first time I had ever heard him read something so formally. He recited a beautiful and meandering stream of thought that seemed to have been written in 2006, following Hussein's execution.

He recounted his own reaction to the news, what his mother might be doing and thinking when it reached her, and then charts through thoughts strung on oblique segues. He spoke about the garden Hussein was allowed to tend outside his cell,

repulsion about how Hussein resembled his mother's ex-boyfriend, that his death was carried out on a day of sacrifice, sacrifice as a twisting of death into offering, and that Hussein ate mostly hamburgers and fries in his last days. Abbas finished with a reflection on how this person's actions had had a direct effect on his own life, twenty years ago, and that a drone is both a missile, and a male bee who fertilizes the queen.

He then got up and used his breath to adhere patches of gold leaf to the chalkboard. At the end, André Masson's illustration of a headless figure, from Georges Bataille's journal *Acéphale* (1937), was visible on top of it, which could not be seen on the dark surface during the talk. The artist concluded, with a shy smile, downcast eyes, and flecks of gold stuck to his beard.

While in London for the exhibition at Delfina, Abbas conducted research at Kew Gardens into plant species native to modern day Iraq. He sculpted replicas of the photographed specimens in wax, and enlarged them in such a way that the plants had a relationship to human anatomy, and the largest flowers resembled human heads. After London, he spent time in Istanbul, and worked with local craftsmen to cast the sculptures in bronze, letting them ooze and char in the process. When it was first shown for an exhibition of Abraaj Prize nominees, which Abbas won in 2014, he titled the work *Study for a Hanging Garden*, after the mythical gardens of Babylon.

The following iterations, including the one in the Guggenheim's collection, each differ in terms of which plant species they depict, as well as their casting and presentation; they are titled simply, *Study for a Monument*. At the Guggenheim, the work was laid out on the floor directly in front of a large and empty white wall. Visitors stood over the work and walked around the white sheets, examining the different plant specimens which were laid out neatly in groups, suggesting their own internal yet impenetrable logic. It's a poetic and mournful work commemorating representations of flora destroyed by Hussein's regime, others devastated by the ongoing war which unseated Hussein and then destabilized the entire region. The plants laid out together look like fossils from an archaeological dig, recovering an idyllic, perhaps mythical time when they all grew in abundance, before human intervention. Looking down at the arrangement, they become also an abstract topographical representation of a region so often represented in the news, but here, presented anew, without stereotypes or headlines. The sheets also look like they belong to a migrant selling wares, spread out and ready to be picked up, tossed over one shoulder, and carried to a new location.

In a sense, they are a metaphor for the artist and his life of traveling and exhibiting; they are a makeshift sack of historical

burdens and questions about politics, riddled with contradictions, traps, and no clear answers, only experiments and approaches. To carry so much around must be tiring, and it is by no means equal for every artist. Thinking about the dilemma of art and politics, I'm reminded of a quotation by a famous modernist who said something to the effect of: art is what we do and culture is what is done to us.³ For even in pointing to the artist's identity, I have fallen into one such trap of pigeon-holing him once again, and his work by extension. But the alternative, at least to me at the moment, is a fantasy: that one can exist as an artist without a politicized identity. Some live in that fantasy, while others have to make work in spite of the uneven treatment that lies just below contemporary art's smooth, all-encompassing, and uncomplicated global surface. But what continues to pull me into his practice is how he maneuvers, formally, through this "minefield," not compromising his position to address certain subject matter, yet doing it in such a way that creates distance between the subject and how we are accustomed to understanding it; he produces intimate situations where we have the opportunity to see something anew, should we take the leap of faith that contemporary art offers, along with all its complications, biases, and codes.

1 For more on this matter see: Negar Azimi, "The Gulf Art War." *The New Yorker Magazine*, December 19, 2016, pp. 74–79.

2 This letter was circulated online on various art-related websites, published first by: Mostafâ Heddaya, "Artists in Guggenheim Show Denounce Museum's Split With Gulf Labor," *Blouin Art Info Blog*, April 29, 2016, <http://blogs.artinfo.com/artinfotheair/2016/04/29/artists-in-guggenheim-show-denounce-museums-split-with-gulf-labor/> (accessed July 18, 2017).

3 Carl Andre stated: "I think there is a difference between art and culture. Or as the sage once said, 'Art is what we do; culture is what is done to us.'" Carl Andre, "Carl Andre's statement and ideas on Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art—the relation between art and culture," *Artists talks 1969–1977*, ed. Peggy Gale (The Press N.S.C.A.D, Nova Scotia, Canada 2004), pp. 22–23.