

Architecture and De-measurement in Abbas Akhavan's Work

By Mohammad Salemy



It is innocuous to assume that Abbas Akhavan's process of art making directly implicates the space of the exhibition. However, as much as it is redolent that the architectural materials, including the gallery wall or the room's physical interior, often constitute the very medium of his work, it is somewhat misleading to explain Akhavan's use of architecture simply as an aesthetic manipulation of the space. A closer engagement with his work shows that his architectural concerns are not exclusively spatial but also means to probe questions of temporality. In this context, temporality isn't synonymous with the clockwork's measured time and instead resembles the indivisible stream of human experience. Rather than operating as a system for measuring and relating physical space to movement through the passage of time, temporality underlines the immeasurable process of seeing, thinking and experiencing by the subject. It defies the chronological progression of time and symbolizes the networked operation of consciousness in producing the present moment in relation to memory. A de-measured space is where confinement betrays its essence and turns out to be the point of departure for the inclusion of the past in the subject's experience of now.

Similarly, The temporal qualities of Akhavan's works are articulated via the realm of the aesthetic and trigger the audiences' memories against systems of division, measurement and objectification engendered by architecture. Normally, these systems separate the subjects from the past by coercing them into the materiality of space. In order to liberate architecture, Akhavan "de-measures" the space of the exhibit, making the work's structural and formal characteristics indistinguishable from its perceived temporal experience through connections with memory. This strategy runs contrary to the

aesthetic logic of most architectural artworks that depend on the beauty of mathematics or, more precisely, on the proportionality of beauty and its calculable perfection. A quick comparison of Akhavan with other artists may help us better illustrate his subversive attitude towards architecture. Consider artists like Olafur Eliasson or Carsten Höller who, like Akhavan, use the exhibition space as their medium and produce works noted to embody the aesthetics of space. You might also consider artists like Urs Fischer whose architectural concerns are altogether anti aesthetic or Gordon Meta Clark who produced architectural works outside of the gallery space. In the practice of these artists, the use of architecture is integral to the work's conceptual frame, and is both abstracted and distilled in order to refer back to itself, to the space of art or to the history of Avant-garde.

Deviating from these formulas, Akhavan orients his attention towards a careful de-measuring of architecture's numerical logic and a perceptive reformulation of the space of the exhibition in order to look outwards. Akhavan's de-measuring produces a formalism that is characterized by an intuitive shift away from form towards context. This de-measuring unnoticeably amalgamates his aesthetics with his research, enabling the work to embody multiple kinds of memory in addition to its physicality. Consequently, Akhavan's work steps outside of its physical frame by attempting to belong to histories other than just the history of art.

In *Variations on Guests & Ghosts* (2011), Akhavan, in two steps, de-measured the territory of House 44, a heritage building where he was undergoing a residency. In the first step, he loosened up the architecture by inserting unusual composite objects in the space that were too domestic to be instantaneously recognized as art and too unusual to be casually accepted as everyday objects. These objects included a functioning water fountain made of a stack of white dishes installed where the building's original well used to be. The exhibition included a textile installation above the fountain resembling bed sheets drying on a series of laundry lines. In addition to stressing the present moment, these elements allowed the viewers to remember the space in a different time. These objects had a particular function and were supposed to unpack memories upon being noticed by the viewers. If this wasn't enough, to expand the building's territory outwards, Akhavan also installed several colorful bolts of textile on the trees outside of the building. Visible from the window of his residency room, the outdoor installation brought to mind the labour involved in fabric dyeing or washing clothes. In the second step, he commissioned two young European tourists to reside in his room for 48 hours, putting them in a building that had functioned in the past as a housing unit for immigrants from Iran. The inclusion of these individuals in the installation expanded the space by connecting their contemplative experience as European tourists in Dubai to House 44. These living and thinking components of the piece were solicited to enter the space as its compulsory audience. They were brought in to bear witness to changes that had taken place within the space as a result of Akhavan's interventions. By subjecting them to a particular environment that had become both a place to dwell and a sight to see, Akhavan allowed the House to mirror Dubai's uneasy handling of its historical relationship with both its European "protectors" and immigrants in its current global status as an emerging metropolitan center and a tourist attraction.

Akhavan's strategy of de-measurement using aesthetics and space as the place of departure, rather than as focal point, was also evident in the work he produced for his residency at Foundation Botin in Spain in the summer of 2010. For this venue, he created an installation visible from the outside using a line of laundry hanging from the villa's terrace. If measurement involves fitting an entity into preconceived units, Akhavan's installation defied and de-measured its own architectural frame by spilling out onto the street. While attracting attention based on its form, the unusual installation immediately conjured up ideas and issues in the viewers' minds. The assemblage could be seen as a humble monument about domestic labor whose visibility in an upscale neighborhood in Santander undermined the political economy of the surrounding urban landscape and disturbed the violent quietude of its class hierarchy. Considering the mass appeal of soccer among the African immigrants,

the working class and the ordinary Spaniards, the effects of Akhavan's work was doubled by choosing particular sets of clothing for this piece whose colors corresponded to the uniform of the national teams that were playing against Spain in the FIFA World Cup finals.

Similarly, in *Study for a Blue Shield* (2011), produced for the Berlin Contemporary Art Fair, Akhavan utilized the opportunity of exhibiting at a notable contemporary art venue to de-measure not only the discussion of art but the work's very object. For this piece, Akhavan cut out and painted a large section of the gallery's wall in the shape and the colors of the International Committee of the Blue Shield's logo. The visibility of this recognizable sign on the roof of cultural heritage sites like museums and libraries is meant to prevent their areal bombing in armed conflicts. The cut out piece of the wall was then installed horizontally on the building's rooftop, leaving a hole in the exhibition space. Here, once again, the architectural engagement of Akhavan's work with the space went beyond the physical space of the gallery. Acting as a structural lack, it linked the visibility of the hole in the wall to the memory of the destruction of cultural sites. Akhavan's formalism in *Study for a Blue Shield* went beyond the contemporary art's usual interest in the deconstruction of the exhibition space, and used this undertaking to memorialize those institutions of culture like the National Museum of Iraq whose collections or buildings have been damaged as a result of military conflicts. By expanding its own spatial boundaries, *Study for a Blue Shield* exposed the limits of the 20th century's measures to protect global culture and reminded the viewers of the inevitability of cultural loss in the process of war.

Akhavan's practice of de-measuring functions through opening up a void and shifting the viewers' attention from what is present to what is absent and from what is visible to what is invisible. Starting with a consideration of the architecture, he is able to reconfigure the fixed space of the exhibition and make room for multiple temporalities. This de-measuring begins in his aesthetics but quickly moves beyond formal and spatial concerns to external elements that are entered into the piece through memory. Akhavan's installations persuasively invite the viewers to remember what they already know and to consider the artist's research not as the work's carefully-added content but as ideas and concerns that are inherent to the space of the exhibition and the process of contemplation.

Biography:

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