

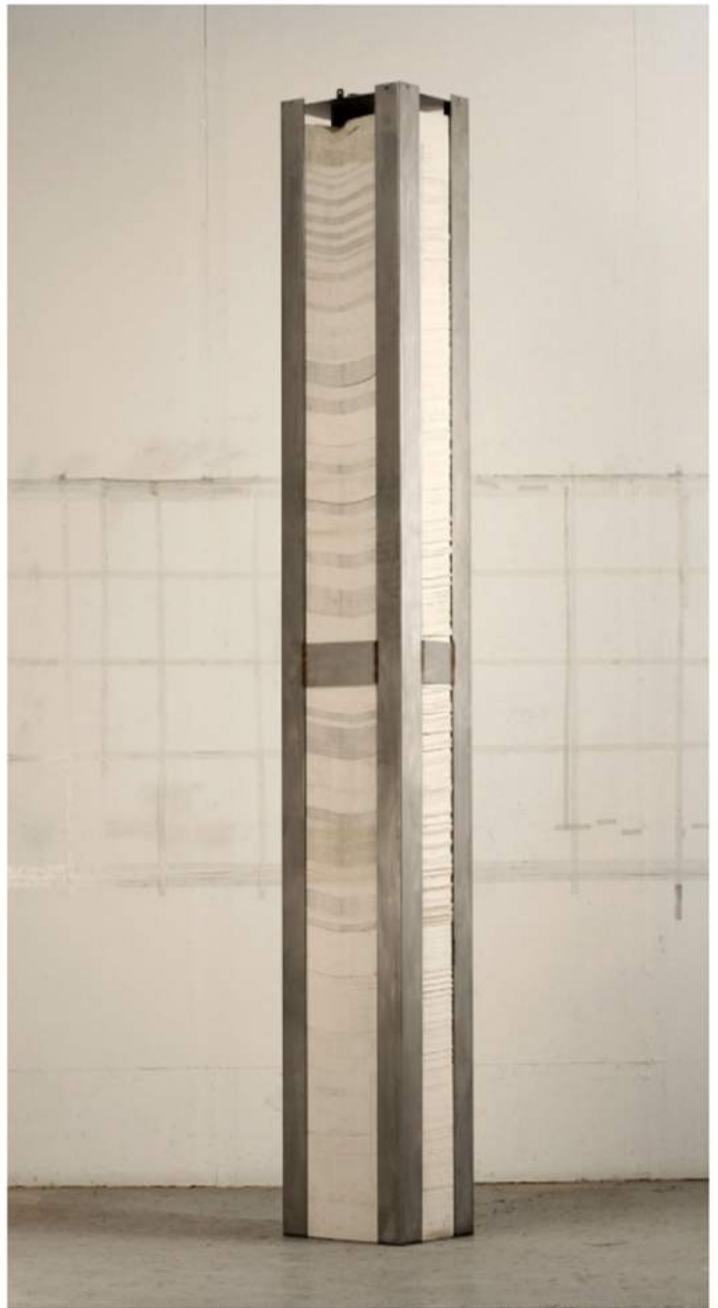
March 4, 2019

JASPER JOHNS AND THE QUESTION OF MEANING

The painter is a riddler, even—or especially—when his themes are blatant.



"Dictionary for Building: Street to Roof," by Siab Armajani. © Siab Armajani, courtesy MAMCO, Geneva



"A Number Between Zero and One," by Siab Armajani, from 1969.

Both more abstruse than Johns and far more lovable is the Iranian-American sculptor, conceptualist, and political philosopher Siah Armajani, the subject of a fascinating retrospective of paintings, drawings, sculptures, architectural models, charts, computer printouts, a video, a slide show, and whatnot at the Met Breuer, and also represented by a terrific temporary installation in Brooklyn Bridge Park. Armajani, seventy-nine years old, is preposterously under-recognized, even in the art world, considering the local successes of the seventy-odd site-specific works he has made since 1968, in eighteen states, plus the District of Columbia, and five European nations. These tend to put colorful structures of abstracted architectural elements in service to civic functions: bridges, gardens, gazebos, open-air reading rooms. Some were temporary, but many are permanent. There's one on Staten Island, "Lighthouse and Bridge" (1996)—an elevated walkway to the ferry, featuring a skeletal tower topped with a stained-glass lamp and, elsewhere, the inscription of a poem by Wallace Stevens—and a collaborative contribution to the adornment, in 1989, of the riverside plaza of Battery Park City, also with snippets of poetry, celebrating Manhattan, by Walt Whitman and Frank O'Hara. Armajani's stated theory of such work is radiantly sensible: "Public sculpture attempts to fill the gap between art and public to make art public and artists citizens again."



"Dictionary for Building: Chair in Between Doors," by Siah Armajani.

There are any number of reasons for Armajani's relative obscurity. He has lived in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul since 1960, when he emigrated from Tehran—none too soon, in the light of official attention to his doings as an activist against the Shah—to attend Macalester College. Uncomfortable with commerce, he's less pleased to sell works than to give them away to people he likes. A penchant for befuddling mathematical, scientific, and literary arcana can rather daunt a viewer, with installations that invite the perusal of books ranging from the hard and social sciences to poetry. Politically, he identifies with historical anarchism, having dedicated pieces to the memories of Emma Goldman and Sacco and Vanzetti. (Though Armajani is from a Christian family, he values Islamic traditions—in early works, he incorporated calligraphed Quranic texts and even a militant speech, from 1963, by the Ayatollah Khomeini—but not the theocracy that took hold with the Iranian Revolution of 1979.) Then, there's the uncategorizable salad of his sculptural styles, harvested from Russian Constructivism, the Bauhaus, American vernacular architecture, and sheer fantasy. All in all, he recalls no predecessor except, perhaps, Buckminster Fuller, minus Fuller's grandiose self-promotion. In person, Armajani is buoyant and kind.

The Met Breuer show includes works from the late sixties that take to extremes an infatuation with technology which marked some conceptual art of the time. Already employing computers in 1969, Armajani programmed one to churn out numerical values between zero and one. (Don't look at me for what sense that makes!) The resulting stack of dot-matrix printouts is nearly nine feet high. He planned a tower that, were it ever built, would cast a morning shadow across the full length of North Dakota ("I want the calculations accepted as art," he stated) and one that would extend forty-eight thousand miles from Earth into space (the right height, he figured, for countering gravity with centrifugal force). More grounded engineering then came to preoccupy him. "Dictionary for Building" is the collective title of scores of delightful little handmade models, mostly in raw cardboard, that explore such possible variations of architectural and design elements as a double Murphy bed, folding out into two bunks, and several configurations of porch steps. Never meant to be executed, "Dictionary" propagates flurries of ideas at the margins of professional practice.



"Bridge Over Tree," by Siah Armajani, from 1970. © Siah Armajani, courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

In Brooklyn Bridge Park, "Bridge Over Tree," which re-creates one of Armajani's first site-specific sculptures, from 1970, in Minneapolis, is what its title denotes: a ninety-one-foot-long, shingle-roofed span made of gray-painted wood and metal, with open-worked trusses for sides. (The 2019 iteration was commissioned by the Public Art Fund.) You can enter from either end and walk along a slope that rises gently to steep stairs in the middle, leading up to a narrow landing and then down toward the opposite end. The stairs are required for the bridge to clear a single thriving arborvitae evergreen, planted beneath it; the roof spikes seventeen feet for the purpose. The effect is a darling symbol of culture deferring to nature. Sculpturally, the piece's orientation to the converging V of the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges and its angular rhymes with buildings on the far side of the ever-seething river make for a mix of visual and physical, spectacular and visceral splendors. "Bridge Over Tree" will better the world a trifle until it is taken down (must it be?), in September. ♦

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