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INTERVIEW WITH ZAROUHIE ABDALIAN
BY LORA BAYDAR

Lora Baydar: Your solo presentation is physically very close to the group exhibition *Untitled (Abstraction)*. How do you approach abstraction in your works? Or how does abstraction work for you, in *Having Been Held Under the Sway*?

Zarouhie Abdalian: Much of the work in *Untitled (Abstraction)* has a strong relationship to geometric abstraction and to the grid. In *Having Been Held Under the Sway*, I do not describe a relationship to the grid in general; instead, by activating the materials of one room, I propose a relationship to the specific grid that constitutes the network of rooms in which the Biennial is presented. While the geometry of the room ostensibly delimits the installation, the work focuses on the material instantiation of that geometry. Ultimately, the sound is not so tidily contained, as it spills beyond the room. Sound-waves propagate in inherently complex and, at times, non-linear ways. Moreover, their quality and effects are modulated by the presence and obstruction of bodies in space. The complex propagation of sound-waves undermines the simple delineation of the work by the structure of the room.

LB: What do you think of site-specificity? Do you think the exhibition design of the 12th Istanbul Biennial works for the whole of the exhibition?

ZA: There are certainly myriad ways of approaching the issue of site specificity, but I usually start with the materiality of the site as way to read or describe something about a site's history or otherwise symbolic status. The space I worked with for the Biennial was a particular challenge for me because it was built solely for this exhibition, and it is not much different from

any other white cube for art. This inevitably became part of the way I define the site of the work: I imagine the physical site of my piece as the whole complex of rooms. Thus, my particular room is one cell that is a representative component of the site as a whole, which is, needless to say, located in Istanbul in 2011.

Overall, the Biennial design provides a space for a considered and generative viewing of the artworks included. There is a conflict for me, however, in the curators' invocation of Gonzalez-Torres to create a decidedly physically contained biennial: Gonzalez-Torres's exploration of the intersection of the political and the personal led him to diverse forms and locations for his pieces ranging from intimate drawings hung in galleries to billboards on public avenues. In my reading, Gonzalez-Torres argues for a physical territory for artwork that is much broader and more varied than the curators allow with this exhibition.

LB: I felt that you have created a very domestic space in the exhibition venue, therefore it was a very intimate experience for me. Does your work aim to ask questions on this? Maybe homesickness?

ZA: I wanted the quality of the air to change as the viewer enters the space—for it actually to feel different from the space outside. Your question on homesickness is one I have not thought of before. Perhaps the work evokes a presence that, even as it is felt in the body, is somehow out of reach.

LB: Does your work share a secret with the audience? Or does it highlight a truth which is in front of our eyes, that we are not aware of? Can it be read as a metaphor for socio-historical events? Is collective memory in the game?

ZA: There is a literal covering-up of the objects that act upon the structure of the room—they are hidden between the layers of the space, but their effects are felt and heard throughout. The plumb bob registers the structural perturbation of the room; its function as a tool to measure vertical true is compromised. It is all meant metaphorically, and the title, *Having Been Held Under the Sway*, is intended to further remove the work from a strictly formal reading. Knowing that I was making a site-specific piece for Istanbul, I set out to create a work that embodied the ruptures and veneers of its history—that is, I meant to make a work that would be at once

undeniably present and yet obscured. There is no single truth I highlight, but there is a strong relationship to history, which in my experience, is lived in and complicated by the present.

LB: In one of your interviews you say, that you work on the geography as a material. What does landscape mean to you in terms of approaching a city, that you know from literature /(Istanbul)? Does this notion have a lot to offer?

ZA: I use the term “landscape” to describe my relationship to and privileging of the physicality of a site. I learned Istanbul first through descriptions that I found mostly in memoirs and novels. As a reader who had never been to Istanbul, I remembered experiences of other streets and seas, smells and sounds to give substance to the words and experiences described in texts. My relationship to Istanbul was both personal and mediated by the narratives and descriptions of others: I imagined Istanbul from elements of other places that gave shape to new places described by Istanbulite writers. Being introduced to the city through these texts oriented me in a way that extended the time and space of my experience of ‘Istanbul’.

LB: In relation to Felix Gonzalez-Torres your work of art reminded me of his Untitled (Ross) installations with candies. Your audio sculpture - if I may call it that way- offers an interactive play with its audience, it is very generous, however it is very minimal in terms of its materiality. Do you see any connection to Felix Gonzalez-Torres?

ZA: There is a definite connection to those works of Gonzalez-Torres that relate to the viewer’s body. Someone may experience my sculpture similarly: when the viewer is within the space, the sound of the space is felt within the body. In terms of materiality, I am very interested in Gonzalez-Torres’s use of mundane or readymade materials as metaphor, such as the candies in *Untitled (Ross)*. In my sculpture, I use the hanging plumb bob similarly.

LB: In the interview that Jens Hoffmann made with you, you said that Art strikes you as a weak tool for effecting political change. On the other hand, you often want your work to initiate a kind of epistemological rift. You say 'A successful work might act a bit like a speed

bump.' Could you see the other works in the Biennial, did you discover any speed bumps for you?

In the Biennial, some of the most effective works for me are those that deal explicitly, though poetically, with contemporary politics. I am thinking particularly of Bisan Abu-Eisheh’s solo installation. His cataloguing of the domestic remnants of demolished Palestinian homes was a provocative mapping of a program of injustice. Martha Rosler’s series *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* (1967-72) was also great to see. Though inspired by the Vietnam War, the acerbic directness of these photomontages makes them enduringly relevant.