

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

ARTFORUM

NAIRY BAGHRAMIAN

Nairy Baghramian on Janette Laverrière and the politics of space

By Amelia Stein (November 26, 2019)



“Work Desk for an Ambassador’s Wife,” Nairy Baghramian’s exhibition with the late Swiss designer Janette Laverrière (1909–2011), contains sculpture, speculative drawings, seating platforms, bookshelves, “useless objects” (Laverrière’s exuberant mirror works), and more. On view at New York’s Marian Goodman gallery through December 20, 2019, it is a meticulous, expansive celebration of an enduring creative friendship. Below, Baghramian discusses her “coexistence” with Laverrière, as well as a work coproduced by Performa 19 and The Kitchen titled *Entre Deux Actes (Ménage à Quatre)*, a collaborative performance and installation with choreographer Maria Hassabi, Laverrière, and the late Italian architect Carlo Mollino that took place earlier this month.

I FIRST LEARNED ABOUT JANETTE in 2007, when it was popular to interweave histories and formal borrowings by unknown or unrepresented artists with your own practice. I understood the significance of these gestures to art-historical debates, but I was suspicious of people who referred to such artists while their actual works remained absent. I don’t even believe it was a conscious misuse, but the cited artists didn’t have the chance to defend or contextualize their works, ideas, and thoughts.

When Adam Szymczyk and Elena Filipovic invited me to open the 2008 Berlin Biennale by referencing an artist of my choice, I suggested that they should curate an exhibition with

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Janette's work—posthumously, I had thought at the time—and that I would only mount this exhibition if I could include her. I was so relieved when I discovered that Janette was, at ninety-eight years old, still living and creating in Paris, and was willing to work with me on this project. I would never have done this exhibition, or the one in New York now, if I didn't have the chance to work closely with Janette to be sure about her ideas for our collaboration. Janette always said to me, "I don't want to become a footnote, I don't want to become a reference. People should have the chance to look at my work first, then they have the right to like or reject it."

Back then, I invited some popular gallerists to her house to discuss the potential of producing her designs. Janette's desire was not to become known; her concern was to have her work produced. She had hundreds of drawings of ideas that should become objects. But the gallerists' response was: "Marvelous works, but, oh no, we would only like to purchase these prototypes," meaning the objects she was living with, her own furniture, her bedroom, her desk. "They're emptying out my house," she said. I fully understood then that for her, it was not about fetishizing objects, that it was about sharing them, and sharing ideas, with a wider audience. The exhibition at Marian Goodman is the pitch point of Janette's and my complementary but divergent understanding of drawings, maquettes, and objects. As an interior architect, Janette would look at her many drawings and imagine them becoming objects, while as a sculptor, my exhibited drawings dwell in ideation. They ask me to leave them alone, to release them from their usual servile purpose by not letting them become objects. We need objects that only fit in our head.

After I escaped Iran with my family in the early '80s, the American dance and theater scene, and also the theater scene in East and West Berlin, made a deep impact on me. I had the chance to see outstanding pieces by Yvonne Rainer, Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham, Robert Ashley, and so on. Theater directors like Ruth Berghaus, Einar Schleeff, Heiner Müller, Frank Castorf and, as a consequence, René Pollesch, also shaped my thinking. Before I dealt with the idea of sculpture, ongoing questions and debates—over representation in space, sociopolitical contexts, temporality, gender studies—were planted in this environment.

Now, performance is often instrumentalized as an event to open an exhibition or as entertainment between dinner courses. My desire is to liberate performance from that function. This was one reason I invited Maria Hassabi to work with me on the Performa project: to have her perform alongside the installation, not over or under it. I was also trying to flatten the hierarchy of different mediums. By limiting the venue's opening hours, I wanted to allow sculpture, drawing, painting, and performance the same durational visibility.

Some people said this approach was almost coy, as if each element was too embarrassed to go beyond its own space. It divided opinions, which, again, I liked. I enjoy searching for the unknown, things and situations I have a problem with or don't immediately agree with. Problems create questions, and I'm not afraid of those. Part of the idea of coexistence or collaboration is to reckon with the politics of space: what space is available, who gets the space, and what's the potential headspace. The labor of coexistence is creating that space for someone else, and it's a commitment that partly happens unseen.

— As told to Amelia Stein