

EDITH-RUSS-HAUS

Shirin Sabahi
BORROWED
SCENERY

05.07.
- 30.09.
2018

Visitor Guide

The artworks in Shirin Sabahi's solo exhibition, *Borrowed Scenery*, derive from broad research into the minimalist dictum of laying bonds to self-expression, and the various contradictions of that stance. Confronting head on the problems of removing the "artist's hand," Sabahi demonstrates how a dialectic emerges from works of art, willingly or not, and at the same time traces poignant pieces of history that converge on the works and stories she presents.

Muted Fanfare for the Shy (2013) and *Muted Fanfare for the Shy (Prop)* (2013) offer a starting point for understanding Sabahi's method. Both in the film and the object, we see a greenhouse and its automated blinds, seemingly disavowed of any human labor. The folding blinds along with the plants take center stage; their function and ghostly presence offer the only action, while a human shape lingers in the background. What remains appears attractive and at the same time somewhat unsettling. Witnessing the dry mechanical language of the machinery over time gives the machine a certain agency; it begins to form a language of its own, a language we cannot completely tune in to.

The muted presence of these works demonstrates the suspension of disbelief required of audiences in order to "buy into" the idea of a truly autonomous art object. Such objects further seem to pose a question to themselves: *Why are they here?* Becoming self-aware is taken to be a sign of maturity and of interaction with the surrounding world, signaling an ability to engage in complex reflection. However, without the human component, the mathematical purity of the gesture becomes simply self-referential and tautological, revealing nothing of its potential content.

In her more recent works, Sabahi focuses on pools as a metaphor for what artworks or artistic processes might contain below their transparent or opaque surfaces. The two films *Mouthful* (2018) and *Borrowed Scenery* (2017) derive from the same project, which ultimately led to bringing the Japanese artist Noriyuki Haraguchi back to Tehran to oversee the restoration of his sculpture *Matter and Mind* (1977), a steel basin filled with used engine oil that has been permanently installed at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art since 1977. Over the past four decades, the oil pool has transformed into the object of a vernacular ritual: an accidental wishing well that triggered museum visitors to throw coins and other objects into it. The film *Mouthful* is in a sense both the means and the end to the project of restoration.

The story of *Matter and Mind* directly shows the kind of unintended consequences that can arise from attempting an aesthetic program—leading with a certain intention, while achieving a completely different outcome. Looking at the various objects fished from the pool, in the work *Pocket Folklore* (2018), we can only ponder what kind of feeling drew the museum visitors to this action. Was it an act of defiance, rejection, protest, resistance, or simple childishness? One particular story in *Borrowed Scenery* is especially telling of the hypnotic effects of the pool: upon seeing it in the museum’s inaugural exhibition, the former Shah was so perplexed by it that he reached into the pool and got the dirty oil all over his hand. He in fact did not even recognize the material he had sold out to all along.

In addition to scrutinizing the possibilities and limits of art production as such, Sabahi also looks to discover or define the sui generis of such stoic objects as *Matter and Mind*, what in the Western art canon is usually referred to as minimalism. Arising in the 1960s as a reaction to the then-dominating abstract expressionism, minimalism quickly led to artists developing practices defined by a programmatic thinking and seriality that enclosed itself in its own logical endpoint. Beyond the confines of New York, however, a similar aesthetic also became emblematic of the international protests of 1968 and materialized for instance in Europe as *arte povera* and in Japan as *Mono-ha* (School of Things), which Haraguchi was a part of.

From these developments, we can see a pattern emerging where certain styles or methods prevail, yet their content and meanings are wholly changed. The title of Sabahi’s exhibition is taken from *shakkei* (borrowed scenery), a principle of East Asian garden design whereby a background landscape is incorporated into the composition of a garden. The various methods of the principle always include a guiding hand of some kind to frame an outside autonomous element within the given context. As with botanical gardens and Haraguchi’s work, Sabahi frames these within her own garden: the exhibition. Her borrowing of locations—or using a location as “a button to then make a coat for,” as she has described it—is likewise apparent in the exhibition design, which is, quite literally, relentlessly reflexive.

With the works *We Came Here to Swim* (2012) and *We Fell into the Water Staying Dry* (2013), we get a glimpse into Sabahi’s inaugural work with the pool as a metaphor for aesthetic determinism and interpretation. Facing two contradicting accounts of a film shoot, and even more confusing imagery to

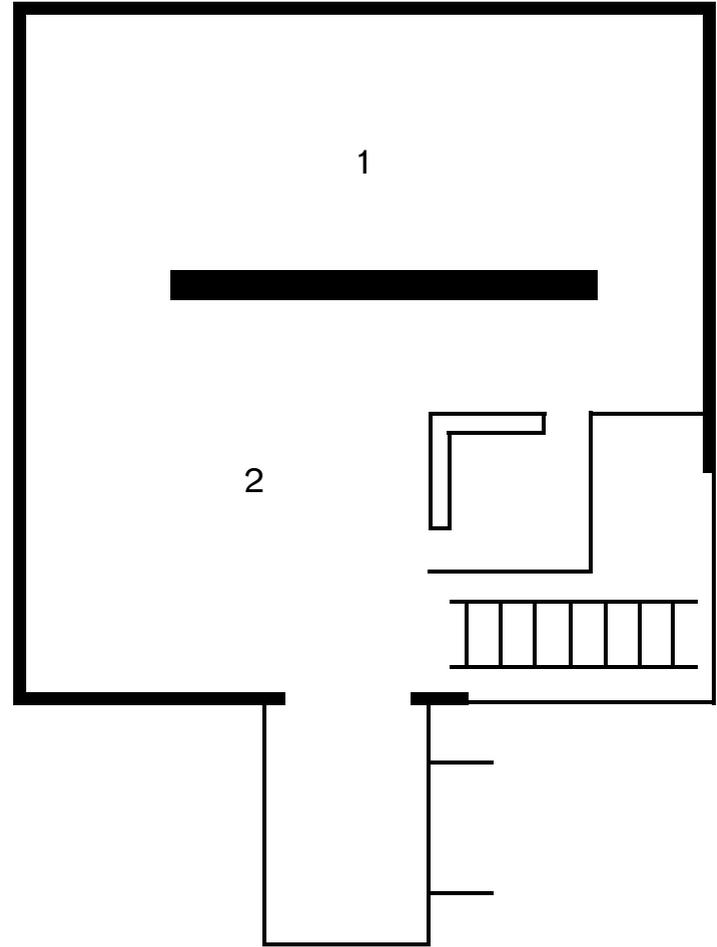
go along with the narratives, it becomes clear that speaking up and speaking out loud does not necessarily always help with being heard. As a consequence, Sabahi’s films implicitly suggest that staying momentarily silent and reflecting have communicative qualities that are also worthy of our time.

Text by Mikael Brkic

Shirin Sabahi is a Berlin-based artist working with and around moving images. In the last year, her works have been shown at Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago; The Living Art Museum, Reykjavik and Tokyo Wonder Site, Shibuya among others.

Shirin Sabahi is a 2017 recipient of the Media Art Grant from the Foundation of Lower Saxony at the Edith-Russ-Haus.

Exhibition design: Jan Parth



1

MOUTHFUL

2018

4K video, colour, stereo sound, Farsi, Japanese, English with English subtitles,
37'15

The film's main character is a historical artwork titled *Matter & Mind (Oil Pool)*, a steel basin filled with used engine oil by Noriyuki Haraguchi (b. 1946, Japan), permanently installed in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art since 1977. In time, this oil pool became an object of ritual and a reverse object-trouv  : an accidental wishing well continuously vandalized by the curious museum visitors throwing coins and other things at it.

In October 2017 and as part of a film production, Sabahi organized Haraguchi's trip to Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art to oversee the restoration of his artwork. The restoration was made possible by Sabahi's previous film, *Borrowed Scenery*, on the oil pool, its placement and its use of abstraction, which then led to reconnecting the museum to Haraguchi and arranging for the restoration. The production of this film became both the means and the end for bringing Haraguchi back to the museum.

The film observes the practice of restoration and through this event, the time that has passed differently for the three characters of the film, the building and the world outside of it. This is told through the poolside conversations, rumors about the causes of the artwork's deterioration, the sought debris from the pool, the care for the art object that at times resembles a religious ceremony and the artist and the restorer, the two other characters of the film, reconnecting after their initial contact during the installation of the artwork.

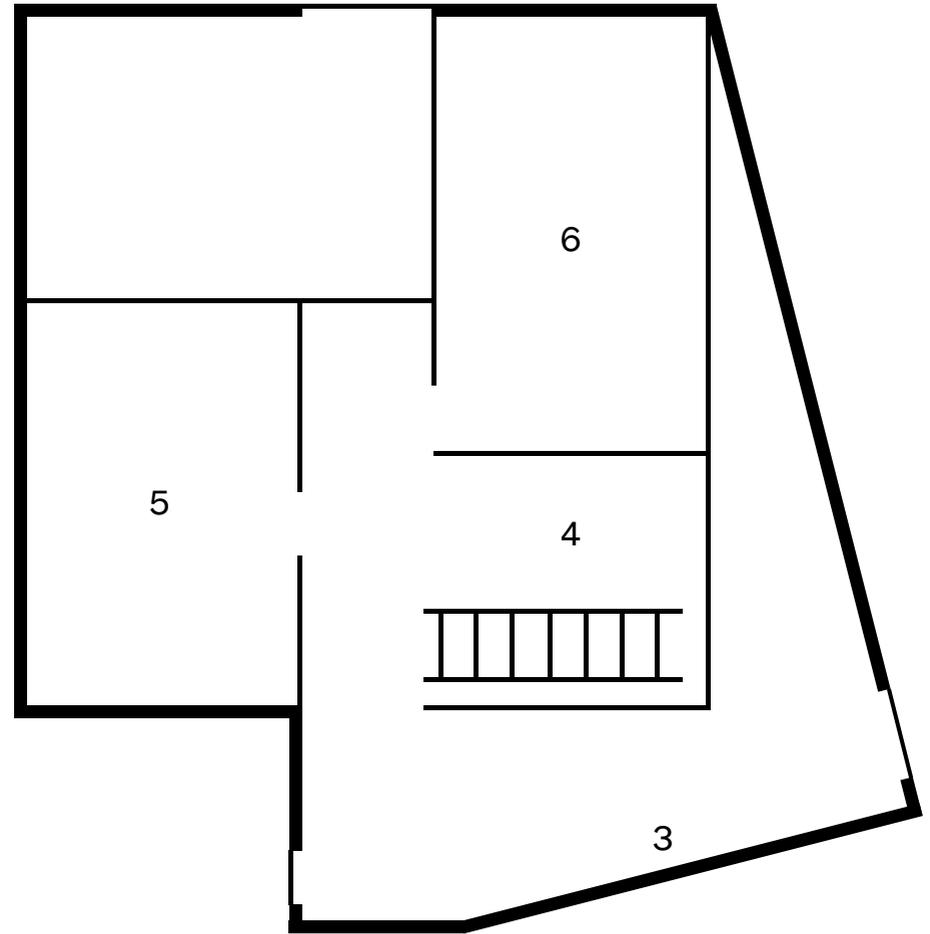
2

POCKET FOLKLORE

2018

various found objects, dimensions variable

The vitrine displays contain various objects that were fished out of the pool, during the restoration that is the subject of the film *Mouthful*. The objects were thrown by visitors and perhaps the museum staff at the pool. Used oil acts as a pickle agent, resulting in consumable objects to last beyond what's expected of them. The repeated objects and edibles sample the contents of Tehranis' pockets during the oil pool's lifetime.



3

MUTED FANFARE FOR THE SHY

2013

2013, 16mm film transferred to video, colour, no sound

5'47

The film looks at the exhibitory function of a greenhouse; the collection of perishable living objects in hope of simulating the natural habitat. Filmed entirely from the outside, the building and its occupants are animated for the camera. The plants brush against the translucent surfaces of their house as if attempting to reach out or to expand the tight skin of the structure, raising questions of accessibility and outreach of the artefacts outside of the assigned viewing space.

4

MUTED FANFARE FOR THE SHY (PROP)

2013

kinetic sculpture made of recycled greenhouse canvas mounted on metal structure, motor, computer kit, cables, 34 x 210 x 110 cm

The sculpture is a replica of a greenhouse blind made of a piece of a used blind, installed in one of the greenhouses in Wilhelma botanical garden in Stuttgart, where the eponymous film was shot. Unlike a greenhouse blind that adjusts the light both nurturing and presenting the plants, the curtain opens and closes at 90-minute intervals, regardless of the light changes in the room. In the new setting, the blind itself is an object on view.

5

BORROWED SCENERY

2017

HD video, colour, stereo sound

15'

Borrowed Scenery is an East Asian principle of integrating the surrounding landscape into the composition of a garden. The film is about the oil pool sculpture by the artist Noriyuki Haraguchi installed at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art since 1977. The film features Haraguchi's voice retelling his memories and his thoughts on and around the pool while the images visit the locations of other of his pools in this series of sculptures and places that have been of importance to his artistic development. The film ends with Haraguchi reflected in another liquid surface, as a way of replicating the principle of his pools; expressing little of their own and instead reflecting the immediate world back at it.

6

WE CAME HERE TO SWIM

2012

continuous super 16mm film projection installation, B&W, no sound,
asynchronous teleprompting text

3'45

WE FELL INTO THE WATER STAYING DRY

2013

continuous super 16mm film projection installation, B&W, no sound

3'16

The two independent films are entangled by the characters of each film, re-counting on the time that they spent together on a film set; a now abandoned swimming pool.

In the first film, the director reflects on her endeavors at finishing her film against all odds. Immersed in her vision, she gradually lost the ability to speak. Nonetheless she bonded with her cameraman, the only person she could still communicate with without need for words. Although vision and passion come together in this process of extra sensory communication, it is not revealed whether the film itself, if ever completed, was legible to others.

In the latter film, the cameraman speaks of craftsmanship and recalls the events that led him to work in the film industry as an underwater cameraman.

Separate and together, the two films raise questions of communicability in relation to imagination invested in the work of art as well as inherent uncertainties of creative labor.

Borrowed Scenery

IMPRESSUM

Production:

Edith-Russ-Haus für Medienkunst

Katharinenstraße 23 | D-26121 Oldenburg | Tel.: 0441 235-3208 | info@edith-russ-haus.de | www.edith-russ-haus.de

Curated by: Edit Molnár and Marcel Schwierin

Project Coordination: Ulrich Kreienbrink

Graphic design: Katarina Šević

Educational programme: Jan Blum, Sandrine Teuber

Technical Realisation: Carlo Bas Sancho, Mathis Oesterlen

Press: Juliane Goldbeck



www.facebook.com/edithrusshaus



www.instagram.com/edith_russ_haus



www.twitter.com/edithrusshaus



Niedersächsisches Ministerium
für Wissenschaft und Kultur



Stiftung
Niedersachsen



FUNDACIÓN
BOTÍN

EDITH
RUSS
HAUS für Medienkunst



STADT OLDENBURG ^{1.0}