













Detail of Scruff of the Neck
(Supplements), 2016



Nairy Baghramian: The Matrix of Sculpture

André Rottmann

Perhaps one must
eliminate repetition.
Eliminate it in favor
not of a discontinuous
now, but of an
utterly open future.

Friedrich A. Kittler¹

I. Supplement as Method

Over the past two decades, Nairy Baghramian has devised an artistic practice comprising photographs, drawings, critical writings, exhibition ephemera, and curatorial collaborations. Yet her primary medium is sculpture, which in her art is in constant communication with other contemporary domains of objects and experiences: theater, dance, design, fashion, cosmetics, culinary art, and craftsmanship. The formal and material as well as social and ideological aspects of furniture and other (infrastructural or decorative) elements of interiors, stage décors, apparel, prostheses, kitchen implements, and tools, have frequently served as points of departure and fields of association for the artist's abstract—yet eminently allusive—works. However, unlike most positions in the field of contemporary sculpture—whose bounds have by now not merely expanded but positively exploded—these works, instead of relying on procedures of assemblage or the accumulation of readymades, operate with references to morphologies of everyday life,² which figure in them as partial motivation but never as defining motifs. Familiar consumer items and articles of daily use are consistently recognizable in her non-figurative art only in derivative, de-familiarized, schematized, or fragmented modes of representation. Rather than appropriating prefabricated objects and arranging them in sprawling installations, Baghramian's sculptural syntax is engendered by an extensive procedural repertoire that includes classic techniques of taking casts and impressions as well as modeling and mounting. The sculptural facets of mass, weight, texture, and material, far from being leveled, are fundamental to a practice that renders tangible in a work's concrete manifestation, the circumstances in which it came into being and those in which it is perceived.

On the one hand, Baghramian's sculptures are characterized by a combination of contrarian plastic registers: amorphous proliferations or seemingly organic structures made of epoxy resin (usually with matte surfaces), silicone, plaster, leather, or fabric that find purchase, position, and orientation (sometimes solely) in (almost always gleaming) constructions of metal or related materials, which support, underlie, brace, or frame them, and have so far formed a virtual

Maitre faux_b, 2011
Museum Abteiberg, 2014



constant of her œuvre. On the other hand, the aesthetic effect of her works derives from the specific way in which they relate to the space in which they are installed. Instead of aggressively taking possession of a site, let alone physically intervening into its substance, the artist preferably positions her often delicate and invariably understated pieces—which tend to lean, pull, or sink back, rather than confront the beholder as self-contained and upright volumes—on the margins, in transitional areas or subsidiary settings of museums, galleries, and public spaces. Emptiness, absence, and withdrawal must thus be regarded as parameters no less constitutive of Baghramian's conception of the sculptural than the synthesis of amorphous matter, industrial forms, and gestural techniques. With this complex configuration, her œuvre evidently ties in with a significant strand among the historical developments of sculpture since the 1960s. It updates the examination, increasingly probing since (post-)minimalism, of the factors which determine the (increasingly segmented) process of the production and contextual situation of the art object (increasingly subject to semiologic definition rather than stringent self-reflection).³ Moreover, Baghramian's practice continues that strand's analysis, influenced by phenomenology, of the temporal, spatial, and bodily relation between object and beholding subject, which had deeply informed post-modern sculpture.⁴ In this regard, it is hardly a coincidence that the objects, appliances, and commodities evoked in the artist's sculptures consistently gesture toward the postures, activities, and endowments of the human body. Even seemingly technical structures

appear to evince anthropomorphic traits.⁵ Yet, instead of integrating this corporeal dimension in the pursuit of an aesthetic of causation as an element that is ostensibly and immediately real,⁶ Baghramian's sculptures operate by way of metonymy. In view of the fact that the cultural industry's apparatus—along with its related control regimes of lifestyle, fashion, and design—affects the contemporary subject's somatic dimension, both more comprehensively and more effectively, these works eschew any kind of mimetic rivalry. The beholder is instead faced with carcasses, surrogates, segments, and rudiments that, precisely in their reduced physicality, both evoke and withhold bodily presence and phenomenological abundance; yet by virtue of (and not, as one might think, despite) the principled negation of figuration, gestalt, and volume, Baghramian's works, which might be described as disfigured sculptures, possess a precarious bodily presence that reflects the prevailing conditions of artistic practice and

Formage de tête, 2011
54th Venice Biennale,
ILLUMInazioni—
ILLUMInations,
Italian Pavilion



1 Friedrich Kittler, "Wiederholung / Überraschung," in *Baggersee: Frühe Schriften aus dem Nachlass*, ed. Tania Hron and Sandrina Khaled (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2015), 200.

2 On the dominance of industrially prefabricated objects in contemporary sculptural production, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "New Sculpture," in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, and David Joselit, *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 724–31. Similarly, Baghramian's art does not belong to the second dominant strand in current sculpture that presents arrangements, modest in scale and mass, of natural materials (such as wood, stone, wax, or clay) bearing visible marks of manual workmanship. On the vogue for natural or "poor" materials in contemporary artistic production, see my response to the "Questionnaire: On Matter and Materialisms," *October*, no. 155 (Winter 2016), 89–93. In a lecture Baghramian gave at the New School, New York, in March 2012, she explicitly disassociated her practice from the recent renaissance of "mystical art objects" and works that evince "a dubious formal resemblance to process-based art such as Arte Povera." See Nairy Baghramian, "Le Mépris," *Texte zur Kunst* 22, no. 87 (September 2012), 114.

3 See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Michael Asher and the Conclusion of Modernist Sculpture" [1983], in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2000), 10, 14–20.

4 *Ibid.*, 10.

5 On the (latent) anthropomorphism of minimalist sculpture, see Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" [1967], in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago, Ill., and London: Chicago University Press, 1998), 155–57; and Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris: Minuit, 1992), 85–102.

The Iron Table
(Homage to Jane Bowles), 2002
documenta 14,
Hessisches Landesmuseum Kassel, 2017

Drawing Table
(Homage to Jane Bowles), 2017
documenta 14,
National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens



















