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In the first decade of his artistic career, Sirous Namazi has created an impressive body of work that brings to the fore a number of issues, both as individual pieces and as part of groups of works. His main concern has been to initiate and maintain a discussion, to test and evaluate, to use art as a stage where different ideas are allowed to collide and influence one another. This has often meant removing objects from their original contexts and incorporating them as parts of sculptures or structures. Sometimes the experiences he has gained from his works have developed into new hybrids. The work of Sirous Namazi could be said to rest on stagings of situations in order to uncover the ways and levels in which an object can communicate. To better understand this process and to be able to say something meaningful about his work, it may be helpful to begin at the beginning. However, I will not attempt a chronological presentation of Namazi's art, seeing that it is far from linear. I have opted for three main subject areas: an introduction that establishes a fundamental duality in his work, a discourse on the artist's manner of relating to society, and finally I attempt to bring Namazi's art onto an immediate, human and existential level.

1.

Many of Sirous Namazi's earlier works were conceived in his student days in collaboration with Per Mårtensson. I think it would be fair to describe the works as the result of equal measures of playing around, discussions and learning. Namazi and Mårtensson were engaged in discussions on art already before they embarked on their artistic training, and when they graduated they ended up in adjacent studios. They had numerous conversations over numerous cups of coffee at a table that was

eventually transformed into an art work, with its coffee stains, smudges and other traces of activity. *Let's Kick Some Ass*, *Wallpainting – Video Projection*, and *Wallpainting – Watercolour on Wall* are some other examples of works from this period that display a conceptual and playful attitude to the creative process and to painting. In *Let's Kick Some Ass*, the marks of the artists' aggressive kicks turned into brush strokes on pieces of MDF which were hung as paintings on the gallery walls. In *Wallpainting – Watercolour on Wall*, the aesthetic end product was based on the artists' urination on a wall. After having meticulously documented the traces on the wall, they made a full-scale watercolour reproduction in the studio. In *Video*, brush strokes in a colour bath were transformed into infinitely mutable compositions with several points of contact with the history of painting: light studies, concretism, abstract expressionism, trompe l'oeil and the history of the monochrome are reflected in the shiny surface.

Namazi gained many valuable experiences from these early works. He learnt about the importance of chance, took an interest in the relation between chaos and control, and discovered how art can function as a zone for everyday concerns. Thus his artistic practice became a way of contemplating. A remarkably powerful aspect of these works is the relationship between the conception of a work and the visible end result. When we look at the individual paintings of *Let's Kick Some Ass* we discover that they are completely devoid of the aggressiveness that spawned them. We are equally far removed from the anarchic antics of the two students who urinated on the façade of the university building when we look at *Wallpainting – Watercolour on Wall*. These two works have been transformed into beautiful, gracious works of art – into something sensuous and delicate. Looking at it from another angle, the inverted

lesson is that a visual, seemingly innocent object may harbour concealed and dark facets. This is something that Namazi later came to explore with “found” objects such as a balcony, a street sign, a fruit cart and a container. But more than anything, these early works can be viewed as a search for an expression – a way of establishing a formal grammar in relation to previous achievements in the history of western art. There is no mistaking his desire to refer to and assume a position in a system of established values and references.

While working on these experiments, Namazi created his video *Sirous Telling Jokes*. If the above mentioned works are concerned primarily with searching for a relation to art and the history of art, *Sirous Telling Jokes* seems to originate in an entirely different place – that is, in the life of the artist. The five-minute video shows Namazi cracking jokes in his mother tongue, Persian, without subtitles. I understand the structure, the gestures and when I am supposed to laugh, but nothing else. Sirous Namazi came to Sweden as a refugee at the age of 15. Here he had to grapple with a new language, a new culture and establish himself in a foreign social context. I believe a comparison between this process of integration and Namazi’s entry into the art world would yield some fundamental and interesting insights. It is not until you have full command over your language that you are able to communicate what you wish to say, it is not until you know the conventions and codes that you can feel confident. At the same time it is risky to feel too safe, seeing that the rough and ready can be an asset. It is in this particular place, where the safe meets the vulnerable, where the integrated meets the unique, that one finds the impetus of Namazi’s art. Exercises and achievements on a formal level – in painting as well as in sculpture –

have given him the confidence to embrace the unrefined, and to venture into territories that border on the banal, the over-explicit, the romantic and the pathetic.

2.

In the Nordic Pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale, Sirous Namazi exhibited two sculptures: *Container*, a blue waste container that the artist had disassembled and placed flat on the floor, and *Untitled*, which stood erect and whose centre consisted of hollow aluminium cubes onto which five glassed doors were attached. Together they formed an organic-looking structure that gave the impression of being able to grow and mutate. In addition, *Untitled* appeared to be frozen in a tumbling movement in space, as a magnified piece of tumbleweed waiting for a gust of wind to propel it forward. Both works were remarkably sophisticated and gracious despite the ponderous, hard and awkward materials such as doors, aluminium cubes and large metal sheets. One immediately thinks of works by artists such as Sol LeWitt, John Chamberlain and Rosemarie Trockel. LeWitt in regard to the spatiality of the works as well as the precise relationship between thought and formal execution, Chamberlain in regard to the heaviness of the materials, transformed into something sculptural and gracious, and Trockel in regard to the precision in the selection of objects and the ability to translate it into an expression. However, it is impossible to mistake *Container* and *Untitled* for works by anyone but Sirous Namazi.

The very fact that Namazi's work compels our thoughts to move in different directions lays the groundwork for explorations of their many dimensions. One may fruitfully read the two sculptures exhibited at Venice as pure form in relation to the western canon. However, they can also be viewed as metaphors of a social systemic

circulation. The point of departure for these two works is the urban landscape. One has the potential to grow, the other is sadly collapsed and no longer capable of housing waste. Or, should one perhaps read *Container* as a bizarre hunting trophy, laid out on the floor like an animal's skin? No matter how we choose to interpret it, it is still a container that has been opened up to the world. The fact that it is no longer able to contain creates the impression that it is capable of embracing everything. Just as Hreinn Fridfinnsson's *House Project*, a house turned inside-out in the Icelandic countryside, Namazi reverses the perspective and dissolves the defined volume of the container in its natural state. Thus something larger, that is: everything outside of the container, becomes the topic of the work.

Our world is changing at an incredible pace, the turnover of things is faster than ever and we seldom have time to stop and think. We always seem to be one step behind, trapped in "the myth of progress", to borrow Georg Henrik von Wright's phrase from his critique of science in 1993. My claim that Namazi is interested in commenting on contemporary consumer society is not just based on his Venice exhibition - which was somewhat abstract in relation to this subject matter. It becomes especially apparent in his series of untitled paintings of waste mountains, begun in 2003. These works are composed of tiny, monochrome squares – paintings per se – and show grotesquely enlarged digital photographs of refuse. In contrast to the motif, the pixels form a strict order, giving the entire work a sense of wishing to structure, deal with, understand and control the chaos we are in the midst of. However, when one inspects the images at close range, the craftsmanship and the relation of the hand to the digital grammar come into focus. The leakage of colour between the monochrome squares marks a human imperfection that makes me think of our

implicit, and naïve, faith in the infallibility of science and technology. Close up to the image, one cannot decipher the whole. Isn't that a crucial dilemma of our time: how to make people see the big picture when they are in the midst of things (or despite of that fact)? How to promote long-term thinking before short-term profit, empathy with the collective before short-sighted egotism?

Patterns of Failure is probably the most encouraging work in this respect and is based on the same interest in the rejected. Since 2000, it has grown into a series of over 60 sculptures. Each work consists of pieces of china that the artist has smashed into pieces and meticulously glued together into new formations. The resulting structures put into play concepts such as stability, balance, fragment and totality. In contrast to a collapsed work such as *Container*, Namazi erects these tottering towers of broken china, demonstrating how left-over products can constitute the foundation for new composite aggregates. He claims that, "my ambition is not only to make beautiful sculptures but to describe a process in which the original functions of the objects are confronted with what they have been transformed into after an imaginary 'catastrophe'."

Thus, these monuments of "failure" point to a new order in which previously dissociate objects may be united into a single form. The smallest common denominator is dislocated from the smaller unit to something larger; in this case from the original shape of the object (a teapot or a cup) into its material (china). The reflections on the formal sculptural language in combination with the unwanted objects in the sculpture may once again be translated into reflections on the world: social structures, individual identity and issues of integration. The common ground of

affiliation has shifted from the family to the city, to the region, to the nation state, to the continent and towards the global. In this respect, the work relates to the issues that were established in *Sirous Telling Jokes*. The tower stands before us like an exclamation mark urging us to scrutinise the meaning of a word such as “integration”: to gradually adapt the unfamiliar into an established form, or to use the various parts to construct a hybrid with an entirely new identity? Differences and diversifications may unbalance the tower, but is it not a more beautiful and interesting expression than a sturdy colossus?

3.

In 2002 Sirous Namazi produced the piece for which he has received most attention, *Periphery*. The work has been interpreted as an unflattering take on the multicultural society: one of isolation and alienation. Placed next to *Patterns of Failure* and seen in the light of this group of themes, one could claim that he reflects on the distance between utopia and reality.

As already mentioned, the balcony with its satellite dish is the first sculpture in a series of reconstructed objects from the urban landscape called *1:1*. The pragmatic title indicates that the reproduced object is of the same size as its original. A characteristic feature of the objects that Namazi has chosen to work with is their ordinariness. Functional rather than aesthetic, they are of low social status. For most of us these objects hide behind a veil of ordinariness so opaque that they are almost devoid of identity. Namazi’s manner of reproducing them, his sculptural aesthetics, is matter-of-fact, not to say detached and dissociated. It may sound like a paradox but I am convinced that the key to the success of these works is these particular features.

This is what gives them such a powerful and persistent identity. The formal exactitude employed as an artistic method neutralises the objects in a way that is absolutely necessary in order to avoid what could potentially turn into cliché. Instead, he uses the surface to penetrate the superficial. It is quite marvellous.

In this light, one could interpret the title *1:1* as referring to a relation between two units. It may point towards the immediate psychological confrontation that occurs in most of Sirous Namazi's works. The delicacy of *Patterns of Failure* may refer to human frailty and identity, which turns the artist's gesture to construct these towers into an act of tenderness and care. The performative act of *Container* may raise questions of power and violence. The desolate emptiness of *Periphery* could, on the other hand, reflect a passive and melancholic state of mind. Traces of existential reflections are always present in Namazi's work. Look at *Sign*, an advertising sign, the large, empty surface of which comments on the lack of a sender as well as makes room for our own thoughts, memories and states of mind, considering the size of the sign, perhaps to a degree that it borders on narcissism? Or look at *Untitled*, a photograph of a window shot from the outside of a darkened building – also in the scale of 1:1. The first thing you see is your own reflection in the glass. The black surface – which is the actual depth of the image – makes everything bounce back on the viewer.

This takes place before one has begun to think about what kind of image one is looking at. Admittedly, the window marks a retreat in relation to the balcony, a step from the public towards the private sphere, but still, these spheres are only separated by a thin sheet of transparent material. From a position on the inside of the window

one can control the environment with one's gaze, but seeing entails the possibility of being seen, and when we stand in front of the work and look for its content, we see ourselves, we are penetrated by our own gaze. A large number of Namazi's works allude to this thin line between one and the other. I have already mentioned the balcony; the glassed doors of *Untitled* is another example and in the introduction to the video *Sirous Telling Jokes*, Namazi walks across the cables on the film set and into camera – from a clearly defined place to another, from one role into another. But what areas are demarcated by these borders? The obvious interpretation is that it is about identity. But there are similar borders in all parts of our lives, leading to all sorts of collisions. In the 21st century we cross invisible borders everyday on a scale of spatial regulations from the intimate (body), the private (home), the interpersonal (social) to the material / institutional (economic, political, cultural). In between these fields, flexible spaces arise, potential places that allow for shared experiences that do not belong to one place or another.

These flexible spaces are often demarcated by walls on both sides; we put up our protective shields against the unknown. In the recently finished photographic series *Interior*, we are allowed to penetrate deeper into the intimate sphere than we have done before in Namazi's work. The six images depict the rooms of an apartment, photographed almost entirely without light. At first, the images appear to be jet-black surfaces. Eventually, and slowly, the spatialities appear and we are allowed to muse on a growing set of details. It is the same experience as when your eyes become accustomed to a pitch-black room, reminiscent of how the relationship between two people slowly grows as we lower our protective shields.

Interior also takes us back to the beginning – to painting. In the slowly emerging images we see traces of the delicate, shadowy paintings of Ola Billgren and Gerhard Richter. In fact, one could write a whole chapter about the role of painting in Namazi's art, about the monochrome surfaces of *Interior*, *Periphery*, *Sign*, *Structure*, *Untitled* and about the lines and the optic, painterly effects of colour in his module works, which could be the point of departure for a chapter about the home. Alas, it has to wait for another text.

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