



JERRY L. THOMPSON

# SIAH ARMAJANI RECENT WORK

STORM KING ART CENTER · MOUNTAINVILLE · NEW YORK · MAY 15 – OCTOBER 31, 1993



In 1992 the Storm King Art Center acquired a major outdoor sculpture by Siah Armajani, *Gazebo For Two Anarchists: Gabriella Antolini and Alberto Antolini*. The present exhibition was developed in tribute to the piece and to the artist's vision. *Gazebo For Two Anarchists* consists of two gazebos joined by a bridge, in which visitors are invited to sit and to stroll. Its site in the sculpture park was specially prepared to accommodate its open form, which affords dramatic views of the park and the surrounding countryside.

Armajani is well-known for his public art projects created for locations throughout the United States and the world. Strongly influenced by philosopher Martin Heidegger's conception of the built environment, he has made works that unite building, site, and purpose.<sup>1</sup> The Storm King Art Center is an outdoor museum that integrates spaces both open and enclosed, public and private, natural and cultural. In its exploration of the relationship of site and meaning, Armajani's work is particularly well suited to this setting.

Armajani borrows formal elements of vernacular American architecture to fashion works that recall traditional useful structures such as covered bridges, reading rooms, and schoolhouses. These structures are designed to be places for people to gather that simultaneously accommodate and symbolize the community and its members. In the artist's words, "The place is the necessary implication of being in the community."<sup>2</sup>

Born in Iran in 1939, Armajani immigrated to the United States in 1960. He graduated in 1963 from Macalester College, St. Paul, Minnesota, and since then has lived and worked in the "Twin Cities" of Minneapolis/St. Paul. Minnesota's long tradition of progressive democratic politics accords well with Armajani's engagement with public art as a way to embody his social ideas, which he has described as "modernist-populist."<sup>3</sup>

Armajani has a wide-ranging knowledge of American political and cultural history and he is deeply interested in the American democratic process. He is an admirer of figures such as Thomas Jefferson, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Dewey, and has included quotations from their writings in many of his works. Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism, which posits that theoretical concepts should be judged by their practical usefulness, serves as a particular guiding force in Armajani's work. The

artist also looks to the model of the Russian constructivists, who believed in a close connection between art and society.

As with all of Armajani's work, the objects in this exhibition probe the relationship between structures and ideas. *Gazebo For Two Anarchists* is one of a series of works named for figures involved with anarchism, the early twentieth century radical political movement in the United States that was especially active among Italian and Irish immigrant workers. Armajani has a long-standing interest in anarchism, which holds that people are naturally good, that repressive government is harmful and evil, and that individuals can live harmoniously when they are linked by voluntary associations.<sup>4</sup> A number of his works are dedicated to Sacco and Vanzetti, two anarchists whose trial and execution in 1927 became an international cause célèbre.

Gabriella Antolini and her brother Alberto were anarchists who lived in New Britain, Connecticut. Gabriella, the more notorious of the two, was arrested and imprisoned for transporting explosives in a 1918 conspiracy known as the Youngstown Affair. Dubbed by the press "the dynamite girl," she was described by an investigating officer as "the cleverest girl I have met in all my experience. . . . She is saturated with anarchy."<sup>5</sup> She was the lover of one of the leading anarchists, the dandyish Carlo Valdinoci, who in 1919 was literally obliterated by a bomb that exploded prematurely as he planted it on the doorstep of the attorney general in Washington D.C. While in prison Gabriella became friends with the socialists Emma Goldman and Kate Richards O'Hare. (Armajani has dedicated gazebos to each of Valdinoci, Goldman, and O'Hare.) Fiercely devoted to her cause, Gabriella risked her life and freedom in pursuit of her idealistic vision of a perfect society.

The gazebos and the walking bridge that connects them in *Gazebo For Two Anarchists* are familiar, inviting elements in Armajani's oeuvre. The bridge symbolizes the joining of disparate spots to make a unified place, while the gazebos are somewhat fanciful, sheltering structures opening out to panoramic views of the natural surroundings. But the piece has a sober edge, appropriate to its title: the wood seats are almost harshly straight-backed, and the columnar latticework and barred windows have a cell-like quality. Even the birdcages behind the seats speak of confinement. With its seating and open structure, the piece is related to Armajani's series of reading rooms, which are places for

reflection and contemplation that symbolize an informed democratic citizenry. But by dedicating the piece to two anarchists—its restrictive design elements calling to mind the movement's fate—Armajani symbolically links the ideals of democracy and anarchy.

The gazebo series commemorates the anarchist movement—not its often violent actions, but its political idealism and reformist zeal. It also expresses the idea of community discourse and the capacity of the American political system to absorb and be enriched by dissent. For these reasons, *Gazebo For Two Anarchists* is dedicated to the Antolinis in the same way that schools and similar public gathering places are named for presidents and other prominent citizens.

Armajani's latest series of works, entitled *Streets*, presents both a continuation of his interests and a new treatment of them. For many years his work has been divided between large-scale public projects and studio-scaled objects. Two earlier series, *Dictionary For Building* and *Elements*, explored configurations of domestic architectural components such as windows and doors, and abstractions of functional objects such as tables and crates. In *Streets*, Armajani brings together these two parts of his oeuvre by mixing objects and imagery that are both private and public, domestic and urban.

*Streets #49*, 1992, is an elaborate combination of elements abstracted from their actual forms—a railroad bridge above a house beside a functional, brightly colored table and chairs, and a bakery stand stocked with miniature wooden models of furniture and buildings. Overhead hangs a string of thin metallic forms resembling clothes on a clothesline. This combination of elements suggests the permeation of interior and exterior in the contemporary urban milieu. The shift in scale between these objects emphasizes this theme: while the furniture is actual size, and thus possesses physical immediacy, the toy-like models are abstract distillations, and the house and bridge are at a scale of  $1/8''=1'$  and  $1/32''=1'$ , respectively, all serving as symbolic—or what the artist would call pictographic—suggestions of buildings and infrastructure. This shift in scales mimics our perception of objects in the urban environment, which is based not on their actual size but on their relative size as we perceive them amidst the city's density. It also gives objects different emotional

thrusts based upon their physical accessibility and refutes the idea of a larger whole.

*Streets #60*, 1993, is another group of elements in differing scales, including a bridge with a barn inside, a showroom, a house, a water tower, and actual size table and chairs, ladders, and a workbench. Once again these objects, and their cheek-by-jowl arrangement, depict the convergence of disparate realms. In this case the miniaturized rural barn contrasts with the elements of urban sprawl and the homey furniture and work bench, while the ladders make literal and metaphorical connections.

*Notations on Streets*, 1992, is a series of collages that explores in two dimensions elements of the *Streets* sculptures. These relief collages are no less visually rich than the sculptures, their vibrant colors and intricate all-over patterning calling to mind Persian miniatures. The *Notations* display myriad doll house miniatures attached to lively colorful backgrounds that suggest settings such as houses, parks, rivers, and railroad tracks in a sort of map-like overview. These scenes are overlaid with hand written excerpts of poetry by Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams that speak of community and a sense of place. A number of the excerpts are from *Paterson*, Williams' long poem in which he correlates the history and geography of the industrial town of Paterson, New Jersey, with the lives of its inhabitants. Quotations from this poem also appear on two outdoor benches included in the exhibition. Williams was a practicing doctor as well as a poet, and he struggled to reconcile his daily experiences, especially his involvement in the lives of other people, with his much more private concerns as a poet—an opposition addressed in *Paterson*.

Armajani's work also explores the tension between the reality of lived experience and the thoughtful detachment of art—explicitly through the use of quotations and texts, as in *Notations on Streets*, but also in his large structures such as *Gazebo For Two Anarchists*, which are simultaneously places that accommodate us and symbolic places that prompt us to contemplate certain ideas. *Streets*, with its combination of differently scaled objects, conjoins the roles of symbol and place in especially pointed terms. Armajani creates and depicts places that foster the coming together of everyday moments and the thoughtful consideration of ideas.

**Maureen Megerian**  
Associate Curator



- 1 See Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," in *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).
- 2 Siah Armajani, *Design Quarterly*, 122, 1984, p. 6, quoted in Margo Shermeta, "An American Dictionary in the Vernacular: Utilitarian Ideas and Structures in the Sculpture of Siah Armajani," *Arts* (January 1987): 40.
- 3 Kathy Halbreich, "Siah Armajani," in *Culture and Commentary: An Eighties Perspective*. Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 1990, p. 32.
- 4 For an introduction to the anarchist movement in America, see Paul Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- 5 See Avrich, op. cit., p. 112.

## Acknowledgements

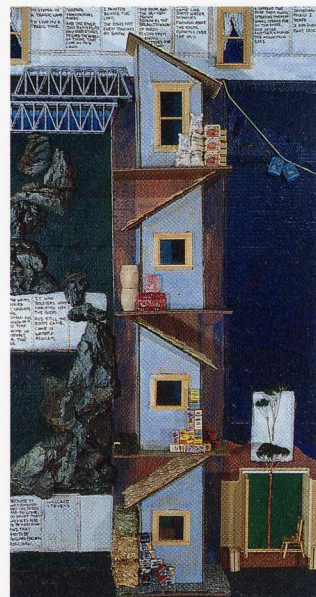
In 1992 the Storm King Art Center commissioned a major large-scale sculpture by Siah Armajani, *Gazebo For Two Anarchists: Gabriella Antolini and Alberto Antolini*. Support for this acquisition was provided by The Brown Foundation, Inc., the Ralph E. Ogden Foundation, Cynthia Hazen Polsky, an anonymous foundation, gifts in memory of Elizabeth Collens, and the Joseph H. Hazen Foundation Purchase Fund. The 32-foot-long work is sited on a plateau with dramatic views of the sculpture park. This piece provided the inspiration for our 1993 exhibition *Siah Armajani: Recent Work*.

We are deeply grateful for the cooperation and assistance of the artist and his dealer, Max Protetch, in the planning and implementation of the show, and for their willingness to lend the pieces on view. Cynthia Hazen Polsky, Trustee and Vice-Chairman, enthusiastically advocated the commissioning of the Armajani sculpture, and her support and counsel on this project is greatly appreciated. William Rutherford, landscape architect, played a major role in siting the *Gazebo*. David R. Collens, director, and Maureen Megerian, associate curator, installed the works with skill and sensitivity. They extend their own thanks to the artist, his wife Barbara, and Max Protetch and his gallery.

*Siah Armajani: Recent Work* is made possible by generous grants from James H. Ottaway, Jr., the Lannan Foundation, and the Ralph E. Ogden Foundation. Education programs held in conjunction with the exhibition are supported by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund and public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts.

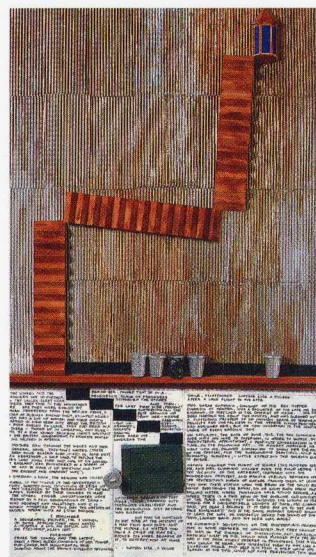
**H. Peter Stern**  
Chairman

Notations on Streets #1  
1992



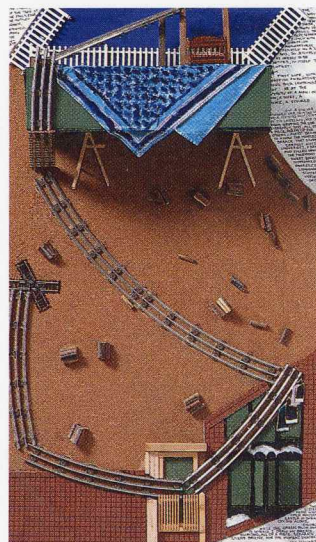
RIK SERRA

Notations on Streets #12  
1992



RIK SERRA

Notations on Streets #18  
1992



RIK SERRA





RIK SPERRA

Above: Streets #49, 1992

Front: Gazebo For Two Anarchists:  
Gabriella Antolini and Alberto Antolini, 1992



## Siah Armajani Biography

American, born in Teheran, Iran, 1939  
B.A., Macalester College,  
St. Paul, Minnesota, 1963  
Lives and works in Minneapolis/  
St. Paul, Minnesota

## Checklist

### *Gazebo For Two Anarchists:*

*Gabriella Antolini and Alberto Antolini*, 1992

Steel painted blue-green, white,  
and black, and wood  
126 x 390 x 101 in.

Storm King Art Center. Gift of The Brown  
Foundation, Inc., the Ralph E. Ogden Foundation,  
Cynthia Hazen Polsky, an anonymous foundation,  
gifts in memory of Elizabeth Collens, and the  
Joseph H. Hazen Foundation Purchase Fund.

### *Streets #49*, 1992

Anodized aluminum, brass, stainless steel  
114 x 240 x 144 in.

Lent by the artist courtesy Max Protetch Gallery

### *Streets #60*, 1993

Anodized aluminum, formed plastic, cedar  
96 x 114 x 198 in.

Lent by the artist courtesy Max Protetch Gallery

### *Notations on Streets #1*, 1992

Mixed media  
48 x 28 in.

Lent by the artist courtesy Max Protetch Gallery

### *Notations on Streets #4*, 1992

Mixed media  
48 x 28 in.

Lent by the artist courtesy Max Protetch Gallery

### *Notations on Streets #12*, 1992

Mixed media  
48 x 28 in.

Lent by the artist courtesy Max Protetch Gallery

### *Notations on Streets #15*, 1992

Mixed media  
48 x 28 in.

Lent by the artist courtesy Max Protetch Gallery

### *Notations on Streets #18*, 1992

Mixed media  
48 x 28 in.

Lent by the artist courtesy Max Protetch Gallery

### *Notations on Streets #22*, 1992

Mixed media  
48 x 28 in.

Lent by the artist courtesy Max Protetch Gallery

### *Notations on Streets #25*, 1992

Mixed media  
48 x 28 in.

Lent by the artist courtesy Max Protetch Gallery

### *Bench With Jars*, 1993

Steel, yellow cedar, ceramic  
36 x 108 x 28 in.

Lent by the artist courtesy Max Protetch Gallery

### *Bench With Jars*, 1993

Steel, yellow cedar, ceramic  
36 x 108 x 28 in.

Lent by the artist courtesy Max Protetch Gallery

## Permanent Public Works

1992

*Gazebo For Two Anarchists: Gabriella Antolini and  
Alberto Antolini*, Storm King Art Center,  
Mountainville, New York

1991

*Sacco and Vanzetti Reading Room #3*, Museum for  
Modern Art, Frankfurt, Federal Republic of  
Germany

*Poetry Garden*, Lannan Foundation,  
Los Angeles, California

1990

*Covered Walkway*,  
General Mills Inc., Minneapolis, Minnesota

1989

*Battery Park City*, New York,  
collaboration with Scott Burton, Cesar Pelli, and  
M. Paul Friedberg

1988

*The Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge*,  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

1983

*NOAA Bridges*, National Oceanic and Atmospheric  
Administration, Seattle, Washington

## Selected Solo Exhibitions

1991 & 1989

*Elements*, Max Protetch Gallery, New York

1988

List Visual Arts Center, Massachusetts Institute of  
Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts

1987

Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

1985

*Siah Armajani: Bridges, Houses, Communal Spaces,  
Dictionary for Building*, Institute of Contemporary  
Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

## Selected Group Exhibitions

1991

*Enclosures and Encounters: Architectural Aspects of  
Recent Sculpture*, Storm King Art Center,  
Mountainville, New York

1990

*Culture and Commentary: An Eighties Perspective*,  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,  
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

1988

*Carnegie International*, Carnegie Museum of Art,  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

1987

*Skuptur Projekte Münster '87*, Westfälische  
Landesmuseum, Münster, Federal Republic of  
Germany

*Documenta 8*, Kassel, Federal Republic of  
Germany

## Selected Bibliography

Ammann, Jean-Christophe. *Siah Armajani*. Basel,  
Switzerland: Kunsthalle, 1987.

Kardon, Janet and Hal Foster. *Connections:  
Bridges/Ladders/Ramps/Staircases/Tunnels*.  
Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art,  
University of Pennsylvania, 1983.

Kardon, Janet and Kate Linker. *Siah Armajani:  
Bridges/Houses/Communal Spaces/Dictionary for  
Building*. Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary  
Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1985.

Phillips, Patricia C. "Siah Armajani's Constitution,"  
*Artforum* (December 1985): 70-75.

Princenthal, Nancy. "Master Builder," *Art in  
America* (March 1986): 126-133

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