

Sahra Motalebi on working without a map



February 26, 2018 -

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3047 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Culture](#), [Design](#), [Theater](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Independence](#), [Production](#), [Promotion](#).

Your work incorporates different disciplines—visual art, music, architecture, writing. When you're approaching institutions, how do you boil it all down so they can understand what you're doing?

I would underscore the idea that I *do* approach institutions. Most people pretend that they don't—but that does happen. I think many people, particularly people doing interdisciplinary work, are put in a position to ask, and to take a position about advocating for their work, and to tell people about it.

That said, many of the projects I've been able to do in the last five to 10 years were things that people asked me to do knowing my work from the outset. They fit it into a program because this kind of work has become a more popular thing to do.

The way performance seems to happen in museums now is that there are various strategies to use performance with a capital "P" to bring people in the door, literally. I had a meeting with a dance presenter yesterday. They approached me because they knew I was thinking about opera from an interdisciplinary point of view and they've expanded their definition of what that means and have a wide spectrum of projects that include visual and sound elements.



Sahra Motalebi, *Intangible Heritages, Belief's Demise*, at SculptureCenter, Long Island City, NY Feb 17, 2014. Photograph, Zach Gross. Courtesy of the Artist

There are things happening culturally and socially that contribute to this and that make my work more of interest. I think it has to do with digitality and the breakdown around notions of artistic identity. It used to be that this was a real caveat and hazard, if you were like, "I'm a painter, but I also make records." Kai [Althoff] was a person that I met and worked with who did that unapologetically, and I was like, "Oh, of course, this has always happened throughout the history of even 20th century art." For whatever reason, within conventional notions of creativity, success seems to be measured by degree of specialization. There's this skepticism around the idea of "Can this dancer also be a sculptor?," or whatever.

I think digitality has not only blown up means of production, the things people are saying and wanting to get across are also more expansive. Some people, whose work didn't otherwise include it, started making their own performances and music, or making their own films. Not everyone is inspired to pursue multiple disciplines, no, but I think some do, in part because notions of skill are up for debate.

That being said, there's still some defensiveness around the assumption that curators or presenters don't understand the interdisciplinary project, or won't take the project on its own terms. For my operas, other artists and practitioners are still like, "Don't you think you need a director?" I'm like, "No." I am playing these roles within this project, and that's the point. But it is true that a set of fresh eyes are super critical, especially if you have 5,000 moving parts. And I also understand and respect that expertise is still a thing. I didn't

train as a director, for instance.

What's the ideal space to see the work you do?

I would say the ideal venue is the Park Avenue Armory, or something where you can have simultaneous scenes happening and an audience member has agency to walk around that space and interact with whatever it is—music or objects or film.

That has all been sped up by technology. Our storytelling capacities are shifting rapidly, and architecture's always going to be an aspect of that. People still like people on a stage and an audience on the floor. They're still interested in this, obviously, but we have a much more intimate relationship with the artists that we want to see.

For the piece I just did at The Kitchen, I put everybody on the floor, and it was in the round. I felt it was a more generous and vulnerable position to be in, because there was no separation, and you could turn and talk to somebody or sing at them in a less presentational way. They are staring right back in close proximity and seeing you from behind, etc. They were invited to move around. I think, in a space like that, people feel more entitled to the creative practice and participating in an artist's project. Someone's process and their performativity can be a shared endeavor.



Sahra Motalebi, Directory of Portrayals (from Rendering What Remains), at The Kitchen, New York, NY Dec 14, 2017. Photograph © Paula Court

You went to graduate school at Columbia for architecture. When you were studying architecture, did you have a plan to do what you're doing now?

It would be disingenuous to say there was a plan, but I do think my interest in architecture had to do with the specific program at Columbia and what that meant for me as an artist. There was an emphasis on postmodern ideas about the event, and it would pop up as a bizarre shorthand for that. You know, this idea of the everyday happening and how this could influence form and, inversely, how you could direct spaces and choreograph people within that space. It was the only school I wanted to go to.

But I also studied classical music, so I had an interest in staging and what that meant both scenographically, like stage-set skill, and also the architectural skill. These ideas were all coming together, and I always thought that anything I designed would have a public program related to it that had to do with visual art or music or performance. I didn't think I was ever going to be in a firm, as an architect, but the architectural education was really interdisciplinary.



Details: scenographic installation for opera from "Ibex [Diagrams for an Empty Stage]", 2015-2012. Variable Dimensions, oil paint, museum board, wood. Credit: © Sahra Motalebi, Courtesy of the

Artist

When you start thinking about a project, how do you know what it's going to involve? Is it an art piece? An opera? A series of songs?

The opera I've been working on for a couple of years became a storehouse for various media, but also of dramaturgical imperatives, texts, and all these things that would normally feel very disparate: a book, paintings, drawings, schema, models. But, while the architecture of it was constantly shifting, the basic premise has stayed the same—which was that I was having this online relationship with a family member I've never met who lives in a decidedly different place.

My sister, who I've never met in person, lives in Iran. The story, however nebulous or free-form, became a place where all these media could play out; this is the way a lot of my work happens. That's been fun, because I wasn't confined. It was just like, "Oh, there's also this book. Then there's an album and there are these drawings." The opera is a good way for me to stuff a bunch of experiments inside of one project, but I'd also hoped there would be a specificity of artistic opportunities around each of those things, and to some degree that has happened.

But you know, we know plenty of artists who've had these multi-year projects that they've actually had the freedom to explore. When you call something a film, it could be a bazillion things within that. And so, in that context, what does it mean to make a film? It actually changes the idea of what a film is. I feel like that about opera.

Normally, I try to fit a visual element, a textural element, and a sound and performance element into everything. Some are more successful than others. Some are better suited to one or the other of those.



Details: production collage, Directory of Portrayals (from Rendering What Remains) 01, 2017. 25x39" Credit: © Sahra Motalebi, Courtesy of the Artist

When you're working on these multifaceted projects, if something's not working, are you willing to just let it go or do you try to keep it going?

There's a part of me that's fastidious and myopic and that can be really bad. Meaning, if I commit to something, it's just going to happen. There would be these albums where I wouldn't throw a song away. I would work each song or each movement to death. Same with my scenographic paintings. Also, I am notoriously in need of an editor, which is fine. What ends up happening now, is there's this investment in one particular aspect of a project that I feel like, wherever it fails, it becomes a point of departure for other things to help and clarify.

When there's a problem, that's what you go into and work out. If something goes wrong, it's a beautiful thing, and you go in there and you see that and work it out. So, with regard to being interdisciplinary, I think something's always going to be lacking, so to speak, and then that becomes a place to pick up for the next project or the next part of the same project.



Sahra Motallebi, Directory of Portrayals (from Rendering What Remains), at The Kitchen, New York, NY Dec 14, 2017. Photograph © Paula Court

Do you find that if you have a momentum, and don't second-guess each moment, it helps you keep going?

Most of the time I don't have the choice. You meet these people that are working all the time, and they're literally turned on; I'm one of those people. In truth, I think it's hard to do multiple things at once, though I do think it's critical when you're working across disciplines to have these things develop in tandem as much as you can. It's maybe a blind spot, because I don't work any other way, but, especially as a woman, something snapped where I was like, "Oh yeah, I'm going to lead the conversation about my work, which is quite literally, all over the place, because no one will do my bidding and there will be pigeon holes, which are things that I cannot surmount anyway."

To the idea of second guessing, in the sense of being afraid of failing: It doesn't mean that one doesn't get spooked and there aren't flaws, but I think especially with regard to performance, you're relying on a kind of alchemy where it sort of doesn't matter what happens up there. I try to remember this and just let that guide the processes at play, especially when there is a lot going on and a lot of momentum.

How do you avoid burning out?

There are weeks between projects that I don't do anything. People are like, "Are you singing a lot these days?" "No." But in general, I'd say I do very well under duress. My voice sounds better when I'm dehydrated and tired. So, burn out is actually ok when it happens. That's why I live upstate; it's a tank and a vacuum where I could go in for several weeks—get up at six, lunchtime, dinnertime, same time every day. It's a little bit like a convent. Go to sleep at nine. An amazing amount can happen in three weeks, maybe a year's worth of work. Especially when you're crunching numbers on things in the background of your mind, and you also have the chance to rest between projects—stack wood, walk outside—and you're sort of out there alone.



still from scenographic video, scene 4, "Sounds from Untitled Skies" 2015. Opera, 1 hour. Credit: © Sahra Motalebi, Courtesy of the Artist

When you're not actively working, are you still thinking about the projects?

Yeah, but honestly, I'm super type A and so there's nothing that's not organized and in a folder. Keeping on top of your documentation and what you're putting out in the world, whether it be web things or social media, all of that is its own job. All that takes days, too-as much time as creative work. I'd say it never really stops, but sometimes I'm thinking about just straightening inboxes. If you work for yourself, with or without assistants, and you're managing things, all the things that are supposed to make things easier require passwords and customer service and they actually don't make things easier. Sometimes you feel like you're on hold with Muzak, and that's your whole life. But I don't have any email in my inbox. I mean, maybe some, self-help books that I haven't read and spam.

Is it freeing or more complicated not to have a model to look towards, like, "Alright this is this person doing a similar thing"?

I think there must be also something about gender that plays into this. For a long time, as a young woman, you had to accept that throughout history, in any given discipline, there have been five people that you could look up to, across the board-if you're lucky.

I don't know any women, even very successful friends of mine speaking from their hearts about their careers, who sit around and are like, "I'm worried about my legacy," in the sense of posterity and falling in line with history. But I know a lot of men that do. They say that out loud. Because these men are contending with history to feel relevant. That's the basis for their value and even their talent, in many cases, and there's an increasing a-historicity that's putting that kind of hegemony in relief and calling into question these narratives, particularly that of the male artist.



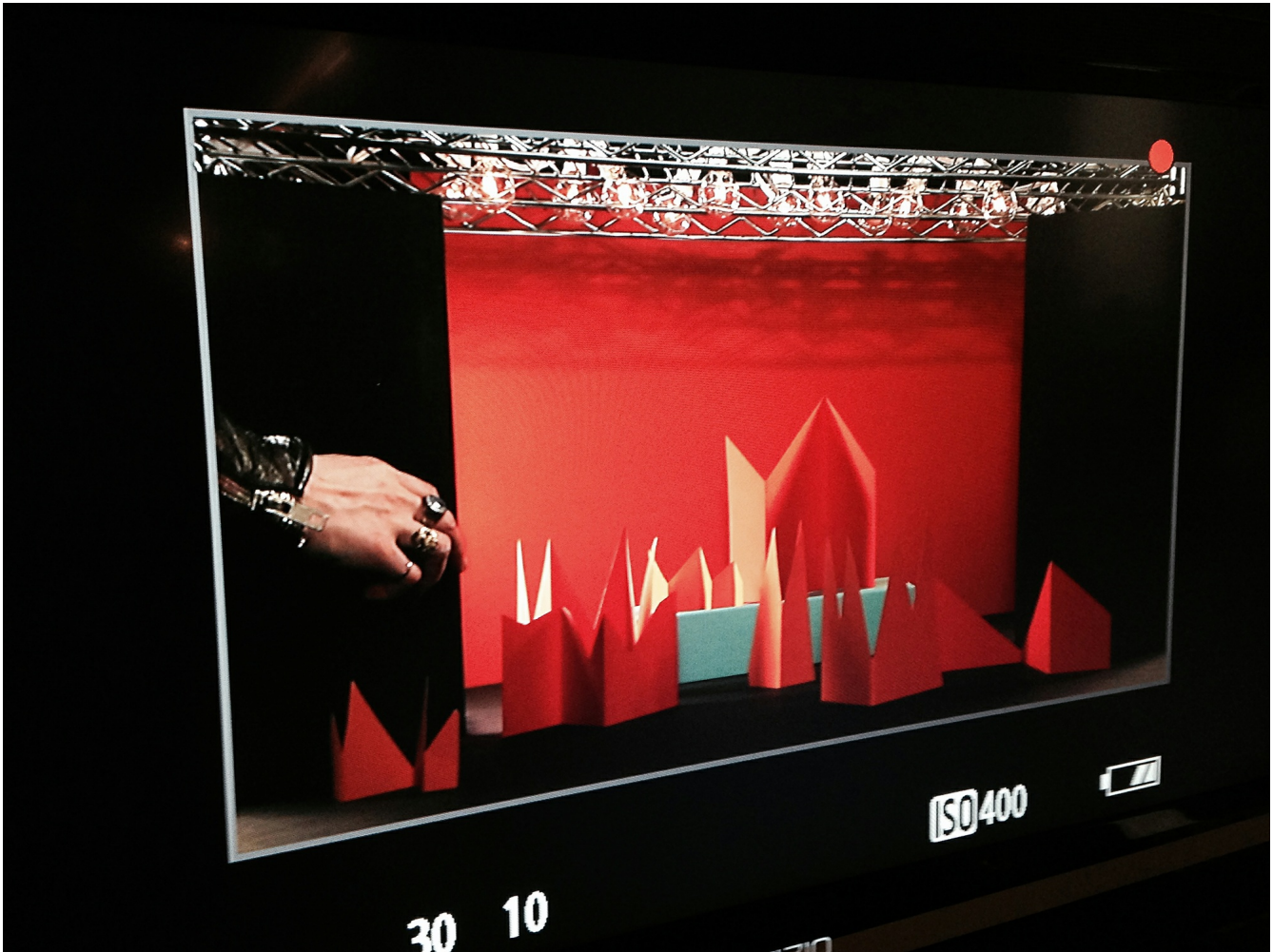
scenographic painting, *Flesh, Format (from Rendering What Remains) 01*, 2017. 18x20", Oil paint on board. From *Directory of Portrayals (from Rendering What Remains)*, opera. Credit: © Sahra Motalebi, Courtesy of the Artist

You just can't give a fuck. That's a very helpful attitude to have had, I think. And to nurture that from the beginning, because as a woman or genderqueer person, you're going to be against a lot of odds, unless of course what you're doing is a trend, and then you can get metabolized really quickly and you become a trend; that it's own set of complications.

Not being the real beneficiaries of the age-old patriarchal lineages is complicated, but also important to innovation. The winding path I took, between modalities, was, in part, a result of this. I was always like, "I'm going to explore everything, even different disciplines and cultivate multiple proficiencies in an extreme way because I don't need to follow anyone's idea of what makes great artist, and because I can."

I think it's that relationship to posterity that means, in a deep way, you just can't give a fuck. I mean this in the sense of shaking self-consciousness, the way that oppression works inside our brains, by getting on with it, and living your life as an artist. I don't want to say, that from this view, one must feel like one's work is going to be insignificant—so why bother worrying about the future?—because I don't think that what I do is insignificant, and I don't think a lot of the female artists' work that I see now is insignificant at all. Plus, I certainly align myself with many people in history. I think I'm saying that with regard to making one's way it is quite the opposite—you can't care too much about outdated historical models. And yet you should take your work seriously and become married to it, against all social expectation. This is hard. Anyone who lives this way knows what I'm saying.

That said, with more women, especially women of color, in positions of power and curation, there is a sense that we're re-seeding the notions and mechanisms of "legacy." So, younger artists may feel freer and also a part of a newer, larger framework—which is pretty beautiful.



Details: production image, scene 6 from "Sounds from Untitled Skies" 2015. Opera, 1 hour Credit: Minsun Sohn, Courtesy of the Artist.

Impossible parameters but here are a few great performances that I like in no particular order, available to all online!

[Moon Ju Ran](#)

월주란 (1968)

A rare, true contralto! This early KPop bit looks like it is set in something like a teen beauty pageant within a night club; high contrast with her later well-produced psych records.

Melina Mercouri

Μελίνα Μερκούρι (1976)

Rehearsals and reel of Mercouri playing Medea the original play by Euripides (431 BC) at Epidauros (open air colosseum still in action and where I saw a production of Oedipus Rex in 2001).

Details of video post are a riveting read.

Cathy Berberian

Stripsody (1966)

Her first known composition, is oddly feminist. Berberian was an incredible performer and game changer for experimental vocalists, jumping off from her performance of Aria by John Cage. She was most known for her capacity to switch characters, offering nonlinear character studies.

Jessye Norman

Beim Schlafengehen (from Four Last Songs) by Richard Strauss (2008)

From a documentary called, A Portrait, by Andre Heller, Norman is lip syncing her famed 1982 performance amidst sets by, you guessed it, Brian Eno. She is the queen of Strauss and one of the great living masters.

[Improv vocal embodiment exercises at Odin Teatret](#) in Norway, with director Eugenio Barba.

Late 1960s.

I look at all kinds of artifacts from performances-theater, opera and dance-and am most drawn to those in which the process is evident. Sadly, though the artist is unknown and unlisted, she is excellent. One can really feel her here and can learn a lot about expressivity from the inside.

[Name](#)

Sahra Motalebi

[Vocation](#)

Artist, Composer, Vocalist



Photo by Ebru Yildiz