

## KEEPING IMPOSSIBILITY IN YOUR POCKET

### The Spaces of Zehra Arslan

Ana Carolina Minozzo  
May 2017

The first time I saw a finished piece by Zehra Arslan at an exhibition, we had that annoying commonplace dialogue: 'So what is this about?', I asked. Only to be given in return, to my fatigue, the answer I wanted the least. 'What do you make of it?'

Despite the inevitable irritation of not being given what I wanted (comfort and explanation), something of Zehra's interpellation pointed elsewhere, away from the separating and excluding preambles many artists – and curators, collectors, critics – offer to the world on a plate. Zehra was letting the work mobilise me – any viewer – genuinely. All her pieces ask – what do you make of it, what do you?

The use of space in her pieces is poignantly twofold. One can speak of what she does to space when her pieces, that in general terms are always somewhat site specific, are conceptualised against the emptiness of walls, rooms and even squares. She takes that space in and metabolises possibilities with either paintings, sculptures, installations or none/all at once. The other space, and that which reveals the radical soul of her practice, is the very emptiness of the piece. Her canvas is never full, it never shouts. It always whispers. By whispering, it resists. They are never full but that does not mean they are empty. Rather, they are filled with void.

Whilst the pieces are not mirrors, not for any viewer or participant to be taken in nor reflected, they do touch on the politics of facing nothingness. What do you do to the possibility of creating an image? She asks herself. To the viewer, it is also not an abyss, not a paralysing congealing abyss so frequently seen in contemporary art; the works are not there to be decoded with any special golden key.

So, what is this special mobilisation?

The use of space in Zehra Arslan's works allows for air to be breathed in, and by not offering a territory neither a framed program of reterritorialization - as some pieces of post-digital art by young artists may do, however critical they attempt to be - these spaces invoke the possibility of something new to be formed, something we have never seen, have never felt. The pieces, through their 'spaces', their gaps, their voids, their breaks, act as facilitators to a project that only the viewer can embark on, a singular journey that is instigated by the offering of this crack to the viewer that could be anyone, preferably one not too invested in reading what the art market expects one to read in a piece of art. Anyone up for leaving these pre-arranged territories... These pieces are just like love: they give you what they do not have, you give them what you do not have. In this exchange of 'not haves' we together touch on impossibility. It is our excess, also our lack. The Man That Walked Out of the Picture, taking us with him, for the picture could not frame him. No picture can frame the un-frameable.

It is what is missing that moves it, that allows for this movement to rhythmically take place. Zehra follows the rhythm of silence - just like music and poetry are made of their silences, her pieces are made of their spaces, rhythmically conferring to it the vivacity it gives us.

The artist is not over inscribed in the work – again, something particularly interesting in the present time – and what this missing identification permits is precisely to liberate the artwork to the world, to the others... together piece, viewer, world can become something else. They can 'play something else', like the record in 'Die Krebse schlugen mit den Schwänzen und Du?'

Anyone with encyclopedic knowledge of art (names, facts, movements) could perhaps point to a number of other works or other artists, especially concrete, minimalist productions, that may touch on this 'full/empty' game so strongly marked in Zehra Arslan's practice. I dare you to consider whether they work as mirrors... do not forget mirrors always have a frame, even the broken ones. The particularity of her work in her very own time - the now - is how it does not accompany any vertical linearity, how there is no sense of pro-di-gress. Her oeuvre is horizontal, moving sideways, telling another story, rejecting any ghosts of modernity and facing – face-to-face – the form of capitalism that colonises desire and so aggressively stuffs our superficial voids with rubbish. The elegance of Zehra Arslan – person and pieces – is conveyed in the way she deals with the notion of what is radical – it is not just about being critical of the art world, of society, of capitalism, of evil and humankind. It is not about eschewing the art market either. Her radicalism lays in the moment where the market or evil become irrelevant to the power of the work. We are having a totally different conversation.

By keeping impossibility in our pockets, we can open up possibilities for an affect we could share differently, creating this space we have not even imagined before.

Ana Carolina Minozzo is a PhD candidate at the Department of Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. She has been lecturing on theory and contextual studies at the University of the Arts London since 2013, as well as acting as the culture correspondent of Vogue Brasil and a number of other publications. She is a graduate of Birkbeck MA in Psychosocial Studies, following from reading Psychoanalytic Psychology and Fashion Media at the University of London and the University of the Arts London respectively.



*Tower of Hamlet, 2017*  
Programa de Arte Publico Independiente presents: Zehra Arslan, Mexico City  
Collection of objects, wood, metal, plastic, plant

*Installation view of Hypothetical Play and Tower of Hamlet - on cities and monuments, 2017*  
Collection of objects, wood, metal, plastic, linen, stone  
Programa de Arte Publico Independiente presents: Zehra Arslan, Mexico City





*Hypothetical Play - on cities and monuments, 2017*  
Collection of objects, wood, metal, plastic, linen, stone  
Programa de Arte Publico Independiente presents: Zehra Arslan, Mexico City



*Making ends meet I, 2017*

Wood, brass. Dimensions variable

Programa de Arte Publico Independiente presents: Zehra Arslan, Mexico City

*Making ends meet I*, 2017  
Wood, brass. Dimensions variable  
Programa de Arte Publico Independiente presents: Zehra Arslan, Mexico City

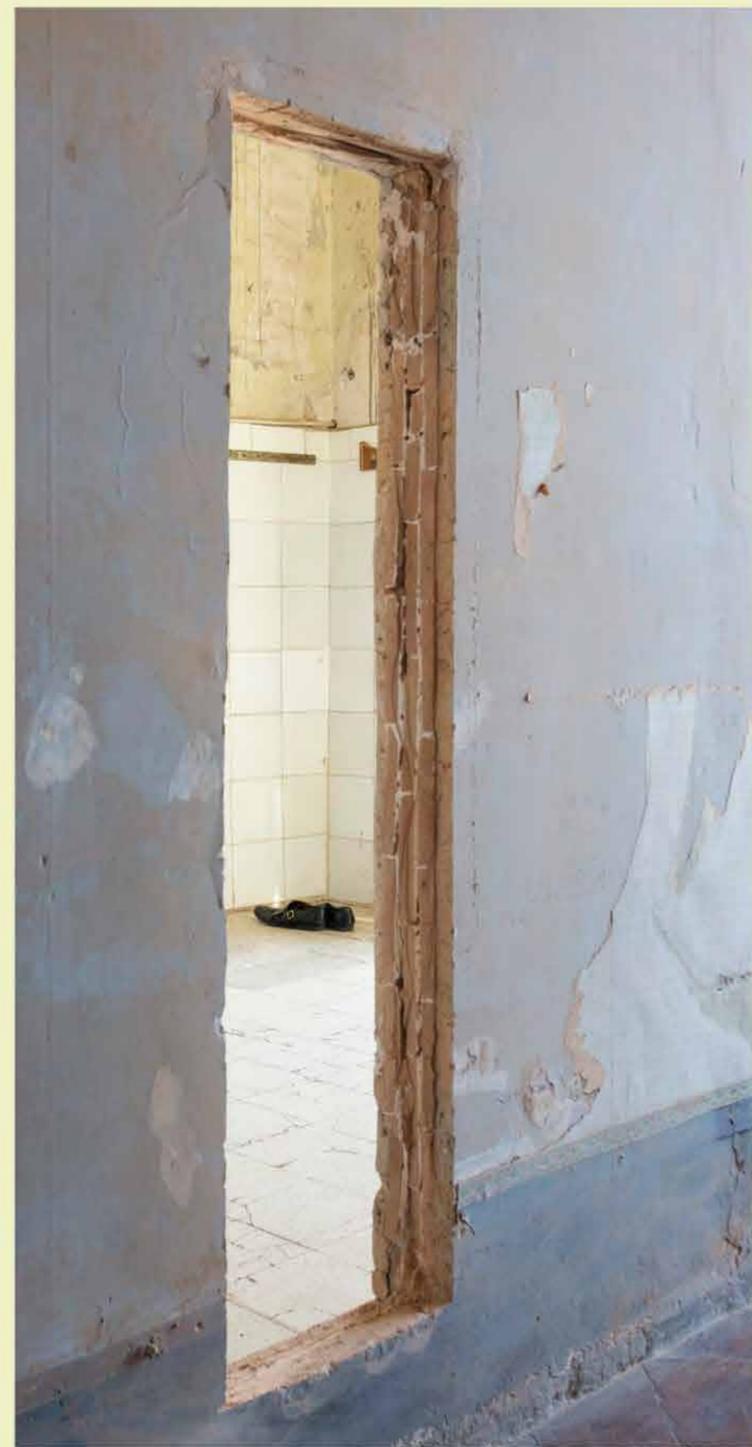




*Making ends meet II, 2017*  
Wood, brass. Dimensions variable  
Programa de Arte Publico Independiente presents: Zehra Arslan, Mexico Ciy



*Untitled, 2018*  
Sulle Forme dell'Abitare, Residency 80121, Naples  
Wall cut out, carpet, socks, grapes and shoes. Dimensions variable



*The Messenger*, 2018  
Plexiglass and engraving on wall  
Sulle Forme dell'Abitare, Residency 80121, Naples





*The Messenger* (detail view), 2018  
Plexiglass and engraving on wall  
Sulle Forme dell'Abitare, Residency 80121, Naples



*An offering of some sorts, 2018*  
Glass, water, wood carving, bread, marble on steel structure, 6mx1.40  
OTIUM - CORRUPTION AND THE DASH  
Palazzo Marigliano, Naples

*An offering of some sorts, 2018*

Glass bottle, water, wood carving, bread, marble on steel structure, 6mx1.40  
OTIUM – CORRUPTION AND THE DASH, Palazzo Marigliano, Naples









## Foreign Play

A group of people were asked to run along several pathways leading from different points of the theatre, on and off stage, through and around the seating area, to a point of individual exhaustion, when the participant sits down, until eventually only one person remains in movement.

There is silence at first. The performers are sat within the audience, facing an empty stage, until one of them rises and silently walks up onto the stage and then appears to exit through the stage door. After a short while she reappears on stage, descends back towards the seating area and starts walking around the theatre. A second performer seated at the back of the theatre, gets up and starts walking between the two seating areas. One after the other the performers get up and start walking around. Gradually they start moving faster, keeping pace with each other at first, then trying to outdo each other, pushing against their individual boundaries, to see who will prevail. It quickly becomes apparent that this is a game, in which every individual is competing against themselves, and each other.

The first thing we pick up on is the movement in space, footsteps, sound moving through space, from one step fading in and out of the space to gradually reaching a crescendo, a point of chaos where exhausted participants start falling over, resting on the floor with the remaining few, moving, running, now jumping over the not so resilient ones to reach a point; as a viewer you are not quite sure what this point is. If they are running towards or away from something until we notice, they all happen to run in circles to a point of exhaustion. The piece is over after about 36 minutes with the last performer leaving the theatre through the front entrance.

As a viewer you assume something is about to happen, but in some ways the only thing that really happens is a group of people running in designated circles until they can't carry on, until their physical and mental stamina fails them, until they get tired of themselves. It seems all a little too real, too literal to remove oneself from the act itself, even though there is a very immediate removal of what it means to stage oneself, act and from the theatre stage itself.

There is something empowering, politically and socially about being in a group, moving in a group, in a herd. You realise the moment all but one performer give up, and only one voice remains in the room, that this single voice struggles to sustain itself, to exist on its own. It stands out, and this standing out becomes a thing, something potentially problematic. The piece highlights various socio-political mechanisms at play; how we relate to one another, or not, it becomes a display of a collective psychology and group mentality.

The piece underlines the vulnerability that comes with being 'the only voice', standing out, it says a lot about human interaction, doesn't it? Are you running from something? Running towards something? The piece on one hand conveys and discusses an ethics of abandonment, but on the other, a display of situational techniques, where group dynamics and individual failure are amplified.

*Foreign Play*, 2019

36min

Teatro Comunale, Teramo





Installation view of *Eros*, 2014  
Bamboo canes and varnish



*Idem Per Idem*, 2014  
Safety glass, concrete slabs, cloth  
Rushgrove House II, London

## SLICE AND SLUMBER

Something washes over, over and under,  
pressed against as well.  
That something that never rests.  
Something washes over, presses, relentless in it's  
pressing: that something.  
Something never still.  
I wish that I had been told about that some-  
thing  
Perhaps I might have sliced it in sleep  
Better to slice in slumber  
Slumber and slice in dream together  
Washed over with nothing left  
That is how dream and slice does its washing  
Infernal machine, washing machine, slicing  
machine

That is how I came to me. I was thinking about such things: but how to write? How to go from one passage to yet another? They both have histories: that is for sure! Should we talk together? How to go on and what follows what? Histories, descriptions and claims or the striation of these? Lines are being drawn; a slicing machine is being constructed, a slicing of slumber or habit. Form and thought are meshed together, woven into the fabric of space. This is how it is, all meshed together. There are different velocities at play manifesting as visibilities, points and blurs that stutter in and out of recognition. Something is thrown: but what? What are the lines that pertain to the subject and what lines to the object: is it this what is blurred?

Painting appears to be that thin tissue of visibility that exists between light and discourse, but in ways that can only be described as chaotic. This is why painting can never be a form of knowledge because it knows nothing of the lines that appear only to draw self-effacing consistency. But is this only what you might say?

Everything is in the edit, in turn the play of forces, the conversations switched on and off, the freedom and constraint of forces. Everything is in play, yet sober at the same time; thus exact, measured. The points at which the in focus might tip over into the out of focus, the tissue of slippage transmuted into the flesh of space. Nothing out of place, nothing in place but on the edge of the in-between of the two conditions. The slice of the two conditions, conditions sliced.

An exhibition of a passage, as opposed to a process, maybe even a procession of becoming. Measure sliced between ethics and aesthetics. The 'fathers' said it should be a case of both together but then a delicate slice might renew the desire for a new accord.

Not empty, not full, but sufficient. To start in the middle of things and then to push out to the edges and limits without fear of exhaustion. Not fixed, not mobile, but resistant. A way of being together, a spacing of being alongside a spacing of work, space not as given but arising; a realignment of space that no longer affords a setting for dualisms. Rather than creating questions, the work is postulated as an action upon the ground that formerly housed contraries.

What we see in both cases, are artists interrogating the nature of passage; one the one side of the subject becoming-other but on the other enacting a restlessness in which the event of manifestation creates a ground of interrogation. This results in an art of exposure of the gaps that exist between nothing and something. In one moment this gap is an unfathomable abyss, in the next it is the fecund site of potentiality, movement and opening. Jean-Luc Nancy that 'subject is what it does, it is its act, and its doing is the experience of the consciousness of the negativity of substance.' What is at stake in our grasp of late modernity is the nature of transformation itself and it is the sense of passage.

That the subject is what it does: everything follows from this. If the subject is what it does then it is open to things as they occur but the way they occur does not imply a symmetrical set of relationships. Elements are assembled within the frame of indeterminacy and without the anticipation of unity. Within this something else enters: but what? Not surely another type of art-work but the possibility of being-with the thing in question in ways that admit to a new process of staging that amounts to encounter within that which opens.

How can something be in a state of drifting and yet be anchored (surely not the play of both, but also the absurdity of one without the other as a condition). So this is where the slicing machine starts its function, dividing things into new conjunctions. Naming marks something in space and through this we proceed. The desire to mark is the desire to name and with this anchoring occurs especially on the level of identity. Thus identity and place are also secured. But what are the forces which rupture this process of securing reality? What if temporality does not seal these conjunctions but opens them anew?

Anchored conjunctions, indeterminate slicing, together and apart, open and closed, absurd and rational, a machinery of excess and sober calculation scrambled into new arrangements that announce new modes of abstraction (abstract intensification). This is what might follow but follow on the condition of a limit endured with schema freed from pre-ordered predications. All these contraries serve as a fulcrum of potential rhythm within the work; the spacing empty and full time, the sudden eruptions discovered in the in-between, the different intensities, the shifts, accumulation within process, reversals and concluding rest. In all the distinct type of rhythm that is organised around spacing and in turn the insistence upon spacing, which in part reveals the gestures contained within the work.

One of the main questions within this presentation of work relates to the nature of the ground and the relationship of the ground to being. The ground itself can appear as solid (a ground to be stood upon) or equally it might appear as an abyss (something that gives way...a space into which a fall might be anticipated). To pose a question, is in turn, to express a desire for a foundation or ground. What is the foundation of your question? A thing requires a ground but how does nothing become something? Art can be said to represent an externalisation and thus alienation of a thing that is making its passage into a form of representation and thus also as value. Behind the state of something (the entry into linear time), is the drive conceived as a rotary motion (this derives from Schelling). This rotation is a pulsation of contractions and expansions that are prior to the word. The subject suffers intense anxiety because this realm can neither be completely opened nor closed. Either the subject falls back into a state of madness beneath time or pushes into the open by repressing the rotary notion of the past thus entering into the symbolic order or the universe of logos. Thus an impossible relationship is played out between the drive and the object state. Art is wrought with this tension between drive (the impulse of the subject) and the object (the work of art) thus exhibiting a place of oscillation between the ground and the figure or between substance and subject.

The presentation (installation?) is not based upon speculation in conjunction with an act of designation. The work simply sides steps such a gesture. The question of 'what is' a work of art is supplanted by the sense of 'that it is' a work of art. This is a question of orientation but manifests as the steps that can be taken. The first step would be to seek a ground for the work that is external to its occurrence, the latter would be the entry into the immanent space or fabric of becoming of the work.

(The word ontology originates from Parmenides positing "on" (being) as the arche (the origin of nature or first cause of things). "On" is also translated as "what is" which also leads to the word "einai" that is translated as "that it is." Both the Chinese word for being, "sonzai" and the Japanese word "aru," carry both meanings.) To be a painter and to lose painting, to be a sculptor and lose sculpture, to have lost all the fixed signs along the way, to proceed beside yourself, without full possession of how things might be named are the clearing gestures which have established this conjunction. Hélène Cixous writes in 'Coming to Writing and Other Essays': "And so when you have lost everything, no more roads, no direction, no fixed signs, no ground, no thoughts able to resist other thoughts, when you are lost, beside yourself, and you continue getting lost..." This is the rehearsal that proceeds the transmutations that occasions the work. Yet to say this at the end is surely out of place but then this is how it is with this work. We have come to expect an unruly order of time. The 'yet to come' is the disordering of the anticipation of certainties we might hope for.

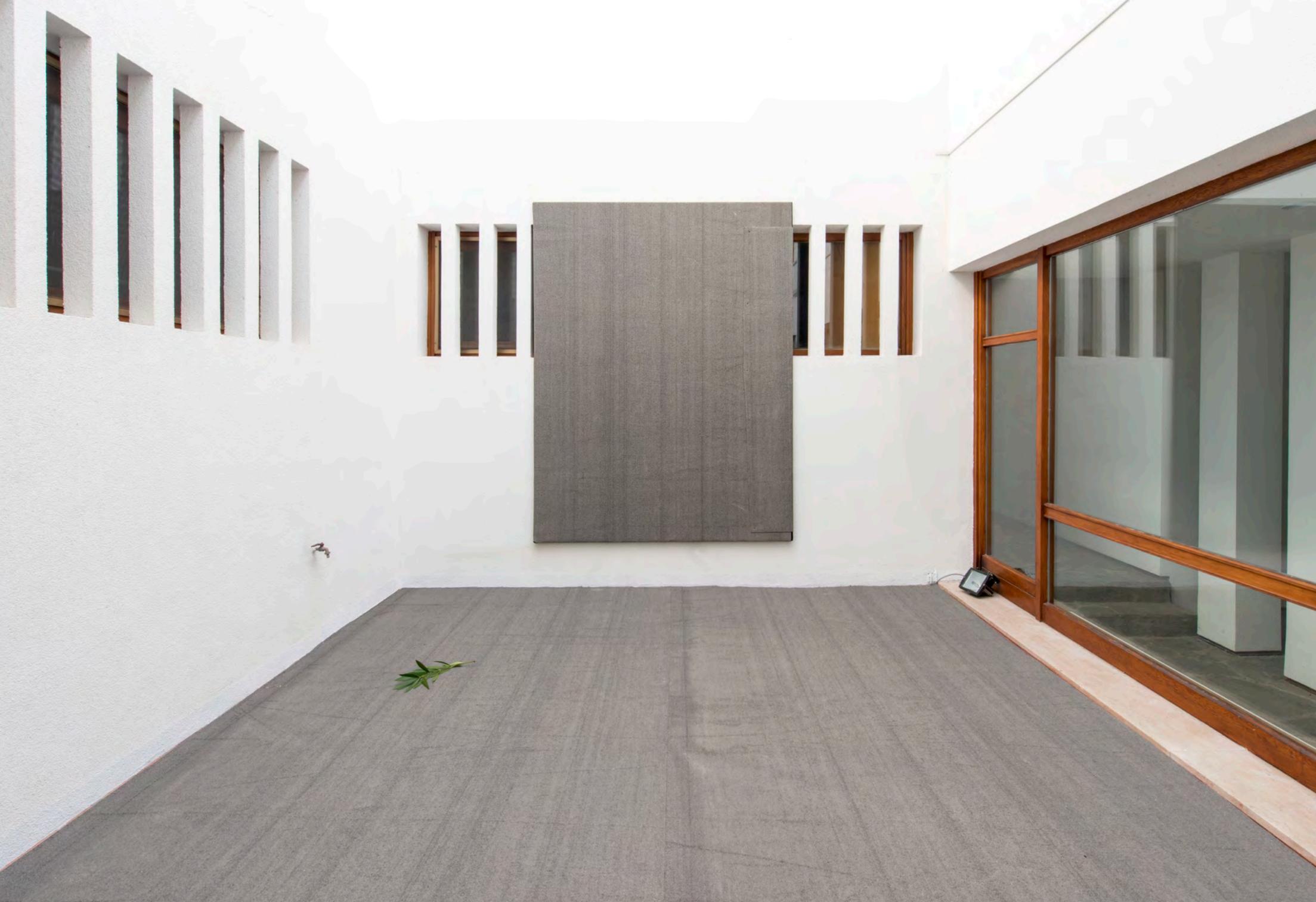
Words by J. Miles

*Not that I ever cared; je m'en fous complètement*, 2017  
Photographic print, varnish, emulsion and wood on board  
Yamakiwa Gallery, Niigata





*Try to say something, 2017*  
Photographic print, varnish, emulsion and wood on board  
Yamakiwa Gallery, Niigata



*Pain is Bread in French*, 2016  
Varnish, nails, tape and atropa  
belladonna on crushed polypropylene,  
Fondazione Zimei, Pescara



To Lose the Ground Beneath  
One's Feet

Words by Jasmine Popper

In her often ambitious architectural works Zehra Arslan creates exploratory, at times unsettling encounters through her re/arrangement of physical surroundings. Having studied painting yet primarily exhibiting 3-dimensional installations, Arslan's practice could be read in itself as a challenge to these arguably strained artistic categories. It is a topical argument at a point where increasing digitisation of art, regardless of its original form, flattens and re-contextualises our first hand experiences of it. Despite her materials focus Arslan's works contain a conceptual flexibility, and *To Lose the Ground Beneath One's Feet* is characteristic of her interventions' subtle yet strangely powerful affects. The 12x12 metres of grass lying flat in the centre of Chelsea College of Arts and adjacent to Tate Britain is positioned within a setting of legendary art making and its display. Shifting it by 15 degrees Arslan provoked both physical and conceptual reactions and perhaps inadvertently nudged towards the institutional traditions set out in this location. The works embodying role emerged when viewers physically interacted with this altered landscape. What at first appears a light-weight comical scenario, perhaps an architectural fault, soon comes into being as a sensitive alteration playing on notions of groundedness, and the too often disregarded relationship between physical environment and human experience.

"We know not through our intellect but through our experience" Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty (1945) urges the recognition of our physical interaction with the equally physical world around us as the origin of all our knowledge-making, as we form intersubjective relationships in which we touch the world and it touches back.

Arslan's piece translates his theory into its lived reality, showing the changing landscape as tellingly influencing our navigations of space and structural boundaries. The new function of this once symmetrical space is however left open-ended, its lack of explicit references or direction necessitating our own interpretive journey.

The artist's incentives to curate physical experiences and catalyse some greater awareness of environment successfully emerge through her material intervention and our resulting interactions. But the piece changes again in its recontextualisation through photography, now its only existing remnant. The documentary photograph flattens this work into formal geometrical shapes, leaving a purely visual distortion of space, and suggested references to art historical painterly trends of abstraction.

We come full circle as this painter-cum-sculptor-cum-painter proves that a focus on artistic categorisation too often belies art's value, or its potential to function in multiple ways. A painting is not just a 2D image, but a crafted 3D material, maybe sitting within a frame, hanging within a particular space, a specific building, and so on. All is not as we tend to first describe it taking into account something's extended physical and conceptual framework, and Arslan's material language continually encourages this widened perspective. Perhaps this piece is jeopardised by its documentation. But then again, if like Marshall McLuhan we understand the medium to be the message, then the photograph facilitates further interpretive transformations of the piece, and rather than being a loss we can now take new meaning from its longevity in image and memory.



*To lose the ground beneath one's feet*, 2013  
Rootstein Hopkins Parade Ground, London  
144sqm