

ground floor

(A glass of wine/ water in hand. I speak softly, as if thinking aloud. I can pause wherever I like.)

2.

Can we all fit into the elevator together?

Mmm... yes.

So— I thought we might start on the second floor.

It feels logical to me. Almost... mathematical, in a way— 2, 3
since you usually move *up* through a building.

Somehow.

Though officially they recommend beginning on the third floor. To later take the steps to the second floor.

But you can always do that later, at your own rhythm.

(pause — doors open, people arrive)



—

Before we continue, I want to say this:
what I'm sharing with you now is a mixture of personal thoughts,
notes from my diary,
things I've read, things I feel,
and even fragments from letters I once wrote—
to lovers, to friends, to people I no longer speak to.
Little scraps of intimacy that have found their way into this moment,
woven through what I believe I understand about Nairy's work.
But you don't have to follow me closely.

You can walk at your own rhythm.

You can drift.

You can look, or not look.

It's completely fine to let my voice become a kind of background noise—
something that accompanies you without directing you.

Think of it as moving through the work together,
but not necessarily in the same way.

—

So.

Here we are.

For now, I think I just need a moment.

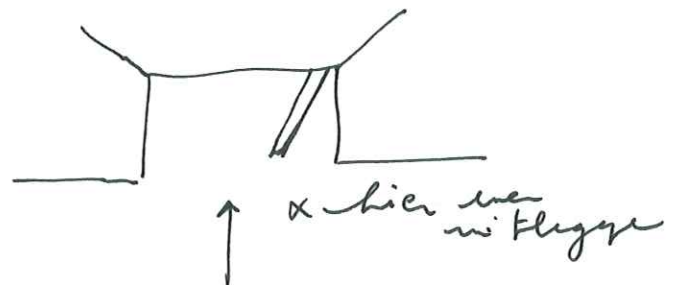
And maybe you do too.

I don't think it's uninteresting to first just stay within this frame—
to feel the room a little.

To take it in.

A bit of air...

(small breath)



Let the space move through you,
before we decide how we're supposed to move through it.

—

Before I enter a space like this,
I fall into my usual pattern—
this talent I have for hesitation.
I walk in and immediately start negotiating with myself:
Where do I stand?
Where do I begin?
What does the space want from me, what do the people want from me
and what do I want from it?

Why did they choose me? And what do I and Nairy Baghramian have in common, except for the
fact that we are both having an Iranian background.

It's like a small private ritual of uncertainty.

(stay confident)

—

(Lean against a wall)

I liked it last week, when I was here and Jef came to visit me during my visit,
he told me that *this*—
this drifting, this being somewhere together and just talking loosely—
is his *favorite way of spending time* with me.
Nothing has to happen, nothing has to be profound.
We can just exist side by side,
letting thoughts spill out without direction,
letting silence be part of the conversation.

Everything is allowed, nothing is required.

Maybe that is the peak of friendship—
a kind of complete nakedness.
Being yourself without performing.

Moving through art together,
like strolling through the streets,
without needing to announce knowledge,
or pretend to be sharper, deeper,
or more certain than we actually are.



And the scenography, here, at the second floor...
strangely, it offers that same condition.

It lets you be.

It doesn't suffocate, it doesn't demand clarity.

It feels transparent, but never overexposed—
as if the space is saying:

you don't need to explain yourself to be here.

When I can access that state inside an exhibition,
I feel held. I feel embraced.
And here, something does hold me.
Transparent. Honest.
Room to breathe.

There's also this sense of leaning—
of being able to rest against the walls for a moment,
to not have it all figured out,
to briefly not manage.

The space allows that.

|| try to take enough
time to breathe

—

So, Dirk told me that nothing touches the ground here. Everything is suspended, *nameless*.

Light in material terms, but—heavy in cognitive weight.

Like a body, the room pulls me inward, as if I'm allowed to walk through someone's most intimate cavities/ hidden interiors.

I find it...

not erotic, exactly—but close, close to the skin.

—

I tried preparing for today.
I tried imagining how the light would fall,
how the scenography might hold me.

(Hopefully there's sun)

I hoped to come back several times.
I planned it, more than once.
But each morning I meant to return,
my body stopped me—
pain holding me in place,
binding me to the bed.

I did come three times in the end,
but each time the lights were already on.

Or it got too misty, grey outside.

So for me, too, this is the first time
I can experience the work fully in daylight.

|| And I woke up today, this morning,
and I am still in pain.

/ always in pain

—

There is a quiet kind of intimacy present.
Though maybe I'm too early for it.

Maybe we *should* begin upstairs after all...
I don't know. I'm doubting. I'm always doubting.

—

Can we all get back into the elevator, please?

3.

Third floor.

I got to know her work a few years ago,
when I asked my friend Bart Cassiman for a list of female artists
he thought might overlap with my interests or my practice.
He wrote me back with a whole list of names. I will read you the letter he wrote me back then,
december, 2019:

"Beste Shervin, Hierbij nog een aantal namen van niet westerse kunstenaars *, die nu wel vaak (al dan niet deels) wonen en werken in het Westen.

Ik vind hen allemaal interessant. Ik weet wel niet of ze zelf teksten hebben geschreven. Al moeten er wel interviews van hen bestaan, waaruit je mogelijks kan putten. Verschillende van hen leven ook in twee werelden, wat vaak weergalmt in hun werk. Iets dat een aantal van hen delen met jou verhaal.

Mona Hatoum (Palestijnse origine), Doris Salcedo (Colombiaans), Nairy Baghramian (Iraans, Armeens, leeft in Berlijn), Emily Jacir (Palestijns, Amerikaans), Fiona Tan, Ayse Erkman, Runa Islam ...

****Ik gebruik, dat merk je, consequent het woord 'kunstenaar' voor zowel vrouwen als mannen. Ik hou niet van het woord kunstenaars."***

Her name immediately stayed with me.

A Persian artist.

At that point she was basically the second Iranian woman artist, ~~after Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, who by the way also had a show here at Wiels in dialogue with Jef Geys,~~
whose background connected to mine.

So of course I paid attention.

At the time, I had just finished my architecture studies
and was still working in an architecture office. (*ajdvin?*)

I was also working on a book called *Ensemble: An Architecture of the Inbetween*,
developing a design for a heterotopia—
an imagined model of transcultural architecture.

And honestly, that's also how I first approached her work:
through spatial logic.

That part made sense to me immediately—
her strong sense of composition,
the way she activates a room,
how carefully the scenography is thought through.

I read in an article that she rejects the term *site-specific*,
and instead describes her approach as ***site-responsive***.
Rather than fixing a work to a place,

→ *zelf direction elevator.*

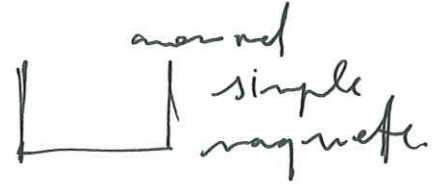
*grid.
inst.*



she reacts to the given conditions of a situation.
She is drawn to friction, to limitation,
to discomfort and disadvantage as productive forces.

—

I'm always drawn to moments where you can feel
that the artist has physically moved through the work—
leaning into it, sitting on it,
testing its limits with her own body. That's what she does.
You sense a negotiation between structure, presence, and tension,
as if the work remembers having been touched.



But I didn't immediately connect to everything.
The organic forms, the colours...
that was harder for me.
I didn't know how to read that at the time,
and I wasn't working with anything like that in my own practice yet either.
So it took a while before I could appreciate that side of her work.

Back then, when I got to know her work, I carried this strange anxiety with me,
the idea that everything needed to express logic.
A kind of proof-driven mindset that came straight out of my architecture studies.
Which is why the works on this floor also bring me back to that period:
everything felt serious, neatly outlined, framed,
almost placed according to the correct coordinates.

She plays with that too,
the grid, the placement, the structural discipline,
the way materials behave when they're asked to perform within a system.
But then she confronts that discipline with something looser,
more bodily: the organic shapes, the soft elements,
these forms that interrupt the rigidity while also depending on it.
As if the work is saying:
they can't quite exist without each other.

—

→ Look.

And maybe this is where my relationship to her work slowly shifted.

There is this moment in her practice where structure stops being purely corrective.
The grid is still there, the placement is still precise,
but it no longer exists to control everything around it.
Instead, it has to coexist with something that resists it—
organic forms, awkward volumes, colours that don't behave.
They interrupt the system, but they also depend on it.
As if neither could fully exist without the other.

That tension—between discipline and something bodily,
between control and instability—
is what I respond to most now.

Not because it resolves anything,
but because it refuses clarity as a final state.

Her sculptures don't collapse into softness,
and they don't remain purely architectural either.
They hover somewhere in between.
They allow for decay, for imbalance, for chance,
without ever fully letting go of structure.
And that makes them feel strangely alive—
closer to how bodies actually function than how systems are designed.

Shervin

There is also something important in how she speaks about precariousness—
about the need for works to exist outside rigid language,
outside fixed names or stable definitions.
As if survival, rather than permanence,
is the real condition of sculpture here.

And I realise that this way of thinking—
this negotiation between holding and letting go,
between stability and vulnerability—
has been shaping how I look at space more broadly.
Not as something that needs to be resolved,
but as something that needs to remain sensitive.
Responsive.
Open to being affected.

So when I stand here now,
it's sometimes hard to tell where her questions end
and where mine begin.

Not because they are the same,
but because they meet in that unstable zone
where structure allows the body to speak—
and where fragility becomes not a weakness,
but a condition for staying present.

—

Here, on this level, the work becomes very curated. Very shaped. Everything is lifted and framed,
placed carefully on aluminium pedestals, or hanged on those transparent walls. It feels stable,
rigid. And I notice that I find it difficult.

(not 100% my thing)

I struggle with the colours here and there. They feel too soft to me, and that immediately confronts
me with my own choices. I don't like using colour in my own work; I tend to avoid it. It feels too
decisive, too defining, as if it fixes meaning too quickly. And then I start doubting myself. As if not
using colour somehow gives me more strength. As if working only with essence, with reduction,
with restraint, makes you more serious, more legitimate, more mysterious even.

!! And maybe that's where I realise that I'm simply romantic—still operating from ideas of
seriousness shaped in another time, while the present keeps moving and I remain, partly,
elsewhere.

(pause)

I recognise in myself this strong urge to prove something — a need for seriousness that probably comes from my architectural background, from a world where precision, grids, and correctness are constantly valued. And I realise how much of that logic I've carried with me, sometimes without questioning it.

(horrible feeling, wrong, architect, "foreign")

On this floor, the grid is very present. The organic elements are there, but they are also tightly controlled, carefully curated. And that tension is exactly where I start to feel uncomfortable.

Sometimes I don't know whether this discomfort comes from a kind of fatigue with the architectural mindset, or whether it's something more physical. Some of these forms remind me of the body when it becomes painful, when it doesn't quite function, when it resists being organised. So yes, this space feels difficult for me.

Painful, even.

—

She keeps asking what a body of work becomes when it loses access to its tools— when there is no proper studio, when materials break, when references disappear. "You don't have access almost to your own self," she said.

"Artworks are shaped by their conditions: where they're made, when they're made, what is available."
Her sculptures tug at the illusion of artistic mastery, showing instead the labor of modification, survival, patching, carrying on.

And I respond to that—personally, to a work in pain.

(Fragment *Leakage*, written in Masereel, 12/2025)

How is pain? — Levi L.

To invite someone into a body in pain is never just an act of intimacy; it is an invitation into a different dimension of being. In pain, the body stops behaving like space and becomes time — a duration, a waiting, a point that exists only through the desperate desire for its ending.

In chronic pain, the wound stops being a place and becomes a passage, sensation becomes a corridor the body must repeatedly cross. Blood becomes substance, leakage a message, self-poisoning a kind of maintenance — an alchemy where the body both harms and sustains itself in order to continue.

There is no collapse, only a continuous stretching-through. The body folds the world around its ache. It learns to navigate through vulnerability, to inhabit the corridor between intensity and numbness.

A body reorganized by pain is still radically present. Not as a symbol of suffering, but as a being that turns dimensional rupture into structure — a self-poisoning that becomes, paradoxically, a way to stay alive.

(glass of wine/ water)

—
And here, too—everything feels stacked, held together by a strong armature.
Broken pieces forming a single organism.
Even the exhibition title goes back years, to her notes on sculptural histories around WWII:

WORKS BURNED FOR HEAT DURING WINTER,
WORKS REMADE,
DISPLACED,
LOST.

She speaks about Katarzyna Kobro burning her wooden constructions to warm her home, while Strzemiński refused to sacrifice his canvases.
“Sculptures were just sculptures,” he said.
As if pain is always someone else’s to bear.

I feel that history vibrating in these structures.

(Walk)

Then there are the small attachments—
limbs, organs, fragments—dangling with no obvious function,
like something half-removed from the body but still connected by a nerve.

I could intellectualize this,
but that isn’t how I experience it.

I’m drawn to *how* everything hangs together.
How intimacy emerges through material tension.
How transparency becomes an invitation rather than an exposure.

There’s even a sculpture hiding a lemon or a banana underneath,
and a few aubergines resting above the aluminium pedestal.
I like *not knowing why*. Like, *why is this piece of légumes placed there?*
I don’t need to understand the entire process.

—
Anyway— (*fluister*)

the first time I came here, I found myself standing next to the security guard.
The one with the transparent pink nineties glasses.
I’m always distracted by him.

There’s this strange urge I have to walk very slowly past him,
to observe him,
to drift a bit longer than necessary.
To stroll through someone else’s work like a soft occupation.

And I realise,
on some level, I want his attention.
Or maybe not his attention exactly,

go to the limbs.

Aah! I like him.

but to belong to the atmosphere he inhabits.
To be part of that rhythm.

Maybe that's something we all recognise:
this desire to belong to something we're drawn to,
especially when we feel slightly out of place.

When you've been pulled out of your original context—
uprooted, displaced—
like Nairy and I both are, in different ways,
you start negotiating your position constantly.
You do your best, through work,
to earn a place,
to stabilise yourself inside a system
that never fully feels like home.

But maybe what we want most
is something simpler:
to exist without having to justify our presence.

Kirsty Bell wrote, in her article for *e-flux*,
that ***exile/ displacement demands adaptation and flexibility,
but that it also creates a perceptual shift—
that when you come from elsewhere,
place and culture and language
never appear quite as they do to others.***

(Explanation in Dutch: Ze schrijft dat ballingschap of ontheemding niet alleen vraagt om
aanpassing en flexibiliteit, maar ook je manier van waarnemen verandert. Wanneer je van "elders"
komt, ervaar je plaats, cultuur en taal nooit op dezelfde manier als iemand die er vanzelfsprekend
bij hoort. Alles wordt net iets verschoven: je kijkt niet vanuit het centrum, maar vanaf de rand.
Daardoor lijken dingen minder vast, minder vanzelfsprekend — ze zijn nooit volledig eigen, maar
ook nooit helemaal vreemd.)

Met andere woorden: ontheemding is niet alleen een sociale of geografische toestand, maar ook
een perceptuele. Je ziet de wereld anders omdat je er anders in staat.)

They tilt.
They shimmer.
They stay a little out of reach.

I recognise that.
This feeling of arriving everywhere a fraction too late,
as if the world has already decided what it is
before you step into it.

And so the question returns,
again and again:
***Was I born as a displaced person,
or did this disordered world teach me to feel that way?***

} ref. to movie.
Jonas Mekas?

—

(Now a shift, a slight gesture to the audience.)

I want you to see something with me.

(I walk with them to the staircase, but I remain on this level.)

2.5

Here you see the only one neon that is lit.
nameless.

Hung like a sign,
almost like the glowing badge of a night shop,
announcing that something inside is happening.

It made me think of all the kitschy streetlights in Tehran.

She told me that this made her wonder about neon today—
which signs still glow and which have gone dark.
How presence and absence in light become a language of value.
What is switched on, what is switched off—
this question runs quietly through *Nameless*,
and through the broader sculptural thinking in the show.

And of course—*nameless*.
What meaning does the word still have
when it floats in a place where names dissolve?

—

It's here, by the neon, that I also find myself thinking about origins.
About displacement.

Her background feels close to mine, even if we've never met.

2.

So.

Here we are again.

For now, I think I just need a moment.
And maybe you do too.

I don't think it's uninteresting to first just stay within this frame—
to feel the room a little.

To take it in.
A bit of air...

(small breath)

Let the space move through you,
before we decide how we're supposed to move through it.

—

Ik blijf op de trappe
staan. Zij is knalke
lange de neon lichte.

herhalings dal 1.
2nd floor.

Before I enter a space like this,
I fall into my usual pattern—
this talent I have for hesitation.
I walk in and immediately start negotiating with myself:
Where do I stand?
Where do I begin?
What does the space want from me, what do the people want from me
and what do I want from it?

It's like a small private ritual of uncertainty.

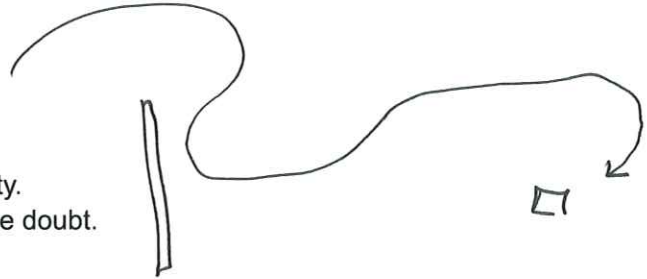
/ always.

—

This is where I like it most.
Here I feel the safest.
Things slow down, but they don't dissolve.

(I walk through the works)

It feels like entering a body,
not in a metaphorical way,
but in the sense that the space allows proximity.
The walls lean slightly, just enough to introduce doubt.



Not collapse, not drama.
More a refusal to stand perfectly straight.

We're left with fragments—
thoughts that don't need to be completed.
Breath.
Sentences without conclusions.

The glass works behind the walls feel composed,
but also withheld.
Like structures that allow sound to pass through
without fixing it.

You're not asked to understand them fully.
You're asked to stay with them.

I start to travel thru the boredom. There are minor glimpses of mathematic scores, organic forms, circles, dots, so I have some idea where I am going. But there is still too much clarity and straight order. Things, not enough shuffling. I am getting always the same compositions, numbers, lines, grids, somehow. And I have had enough of it.

The space feels clinical, bodily,
as if I'm not looking *at* a body,
but standing *inside* one.
Organs exposed,
not violently,
but methodically.

(Boredom)

I am bored. They get bored.

The glass works, the neons that remain off,
register like notes that were never meant to be activated.
Not messages.
More like signals that stay dormant.

Nothing touches the ground here.
Everything hovers.
Suspended just enough to keep you alert.

The transparency invites projection,
but it doesn't reward certainty.

Everything is finished with discipline.
Loops, connections, supports—
all precise, all vulnerable.
Controlled, but never comfortable.

Even the neon works are structured by disappearance.

She once spoke about observing neon signs during the day—
mounted on buildings, switched off.
Present, but inactive.
That logic stays here.

Emptiness operates as a decision.
Not as lack,
but as refusal.
A refusal to produce more than necessary.

What she offers in *Nameless*
is not monumentality,
but endurance.
A sculptural politics rooted in necessity.

She once said that **when you see your family lose everything
and start living in the past,
you have to invent a future—
not just for yourself,
but for others.**

us, the diaspora.
1 thing we have in common.

And maybe that's where architecture enters again.
Not as form,
but as an understanding of space—
how it's defined,
how it's shared,
how it holds and excludes bodies at the same time.

Space here doesn't resolve itself.
It stays slightly open,
slightly unclear.

That ambiguity is not weakness.
It's a position.

*I seem to enjoy only brief glimpses of intimacy. Short concentrated glimpses.
I do not believe that they could be extended, prolonged. So I keep moving ahead, again and again,
looking ahead for other moments.
The question is: was I born a displaced person, or did this disordered world make me one?*



13.12.2025