



# Shuli Sadé Thinking in Time

BY JONATHAN GOODMAN

Shuli Sadé, an Israeli-born, New York-based artist, specializes in working across the interstices of art categories. Most often, her work has to do with photography and video, but her images also explore the boundaries of two-dimensional and three-dimensional form. Sadé's installations may look like orderly constructions, yet the experience that informs them is intuitive and often personal—despite the fact that their arrangements on wall and floor are right-angled and rational. Thus, there is a contrast or tension between the feelings prompted by Sadé's work and the upright system through which her emotions are communicated. The demands of her constructions are essentially architectural—Sadé has often worked as an architectural photographer—and this gives her sensibility a formal edge, even a distance, intended to mediate between her distinctive sensibility and its rigorous conditions of being. A lover of cities—one of her most interesting projects has been to photograph courtyards in Budapest, where her parents originated—she has been inspired by the experience of New York, where she has lived for 25 years.

Urban movement—the forward motion of cars, trains, and subways—remains a central theme in Sadé’s practice. Her videos stand out for the freedom of movement that informs both artist and audience. Shooting videos from a train window, she is literally a bit ahead of herself. Her icons of perception address the future in the sense that they project optimism and continuity balanced by reciprocity with what comes next—as one might imagine, it is a naturally mysterious stance because no one knows what will happen in times to come. For this reason, Sadé’s strengths in photography and video are increased by how she arranges her installations on the ground or in sequence across the wall; they possess, not only in their imagery but also in the conditions of their construction, the attraction of architecture—they require duration, an attribute indicative of time passing, as a prerequisite for the viewer’s experience.

The forward pitch of Sadé’s work demands a visionary stance not only on her part, but also on that of viewers. As she puts it, “I am interested in construction and demolition as stages of documenting time.”\* In her attempts to negotiate the future, Sadé takes architecture as a major field of interest: “I was drawn to work with space and structure early on. Architecture is significantly inspirational to my work. New York made it a signature of my work, as I am constantly surrounded by architecture, old and new.” She sees architecture as “functional monumental sculpture,” a view in which architecture, a highly public art, melds with sculpture, a plastic art as much at home in private as public space. This merger can also be found in the arrangement of her imagery: “I am interested in a stretch beyond the boundaries of a single medium. Installation is a tool I chose to use from early on because it has the space for experimentation of interdisciplinary collaborations between media and ideas.” Such an approach is highly contemporary; much of what is interesting in art today crosses boundaries defining and supposedly separating one medium from the next.

By its very nature, the experience of sculpture requires duration—the three-dimensional object is always an experiment in time. Sadé, who came of age as an artist in the ’70s, looks to Minimalism’s expectation of viewer reaction as key to the experience. She comments, “The viewer is a part of the creative process using her body, walking through or around the installation. By shifting angles with the piece, [viewers] create personal relations with it.” This is the same process used by the Minimalists: the viewer’s experience over time completes the work’s aesthetic effect. Space, too, remains central to Sadé’s sensibility. In an early work, *Touching Space* (1979), she stands in a warrior pose in the center of a gallery, the shadow of her body reflected on three walls, so that her form possesses solidity, shaping space into form. While the work clearly relates to performance art, it is also a meditation on the body’s three-dimensional presence—that is, its ability to project a sense of solidity beyond physical boundaries.

Sadé works not only in minimal terms, but also with minimal materials. In addition to her bodywork, which can be called living sculpture, she works with ethereal elements in space: light, sound, movement, and arrested images. By merging these components of her work, Sadé comes close to totalizing the viewer’s involvement.

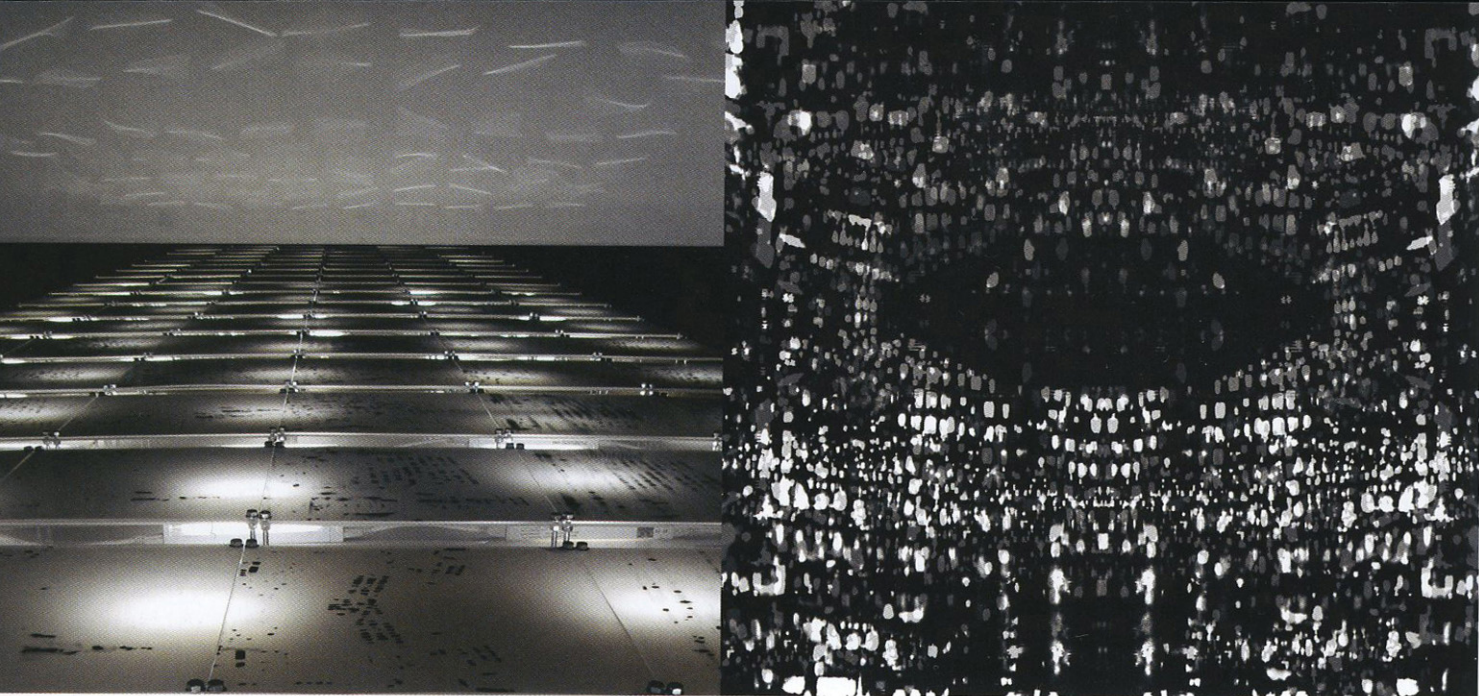


Opposite: *Durée*, 2008–09. 120 illuminated video stills, digital photographs on Duraclear, fused acrylic, and fluorescent lights, 78 x 260 in. Above: *Industrial Temple*, 1992–94. Cedar, 15 x 25 x 16 in. Below: *Industrial Temple*, 1993. Railroad timber and steel, 12 x 11 x 14 ft.



Indeed, the physical activity of the viewer becomes as important as the sculpture itself. In what Sadé calls “a post-material environment,” much work is highly situation-specific, referring both to the site of the installation and its conversation with the viewer.

Now in mid-career, Sadé has a long history of engagement with art, starting at the age of eight, when she saw an artist drawing with charcoal: “It was a life-changing experience.” In 1976, she received her BFA from the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, where she first focused on painting, printmaking, and sculpture. Soon she began producing work in photography and video, and by her last year, she was using her body for documented



*Durée*, 2008–09 (details), 120 illuminated video stills, digital photographs on Duraclear, fused acrylic, and fluorescent lights, 78 x 260 in.

performances that included installations combining sculptural objects, photography, and video (most often without an audience present). At that time, she says, “I was inspired by conceptual art and Minimalism. The goal was to contemplate making dimensional pieces using as little matter as possible.” Joseph Beuys was another big influence in terms of his ability to move across mediums, as well as his determination to be true to the spirit of the time.

Sadé came to New York City in 1984, “seeking a more receptive ground for my process.” Taken with the endless energy of the city, she found a diversity of choice and an emphasis on living in the moment. She created paintings on canvas and wood, in addition to making objects composed of wood, concrete, steel, and rust. In 1991, she received a National Endowment for the Arts grant for painting, and with that encouragement, she increased her emphasis on photography. She documented industrial ruins throughout America and internationally, looking to correlate space, light, and signs of time. In the ’90s, Sadé began creating installations. These included the *Industrial Temple* works (1991–94), a group of 26 sculptures constructed with cedar shingles; *Industrial Temple* (1993), made of railway timbers and steel, temporarily built at Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City; and *Power Echo* (1994), a sculptural proposal for the “Monumental Propaganda” exhibition at the New York Financial Center.

Commenting on *Durée* (2008–09), one of her most interesting recent works, Sadé says that “videos introduce an element of time by generating narrative structures.” For this piece, she fused 120 video stills onto open light boxes, each one showing a view of the cityscape at night, shot while she took a taxi across the Brooklyn Bridge. The light remains unrestricted, flowing out from beneath the images. While Sadé acknowledges that matter inherently possesses mass and volume, and sculpture by definition produces a three-dimensional object, she remains adamant about bringing an ethereal presentation to viewers. Her sensibility emphasizes the spiritual. She maintains a strong interest in Asian philosophy

for its treatment of the transcendent and considers Buddhism and Hinduism inspirational. But in her use of what she calls “matter fields of energy and light,” she brings to *Durée* a visionary quality that also involves Western philosophy, particularly the writings of Henri Bergson. Time becomes its own subject, and to Sadé’s credit, she finds a way of introducing her themes without merely skating on the surface of the philosophical.

Words often become inadequate to the exposition of Sadé’s conception. In a sense, *Durée* remains purely experiential, as if interpretation would irreparably damage its fragile expressiveness. It is built with light waves and their particles: installed on the floor, 60 bright-white units reflect the sequence of a particular memory, which is understood as Sadé’s own or perhaps someone else’s. Another 60 black units, negatives compared to the white units, suggest the creation of another memory. Everything is set in a parallel grid, an essential part of Sadé’s work—she believes that “a basic infrastructure is needed to create order.” The grid arrangement frames the memories of Sadé’s short trip across the bridge; through it, she asks, “Which is the real memory of the scene, and which is a later reflection?” Art based on memory inevitably differs from the original experience; a series of images, persistently pursuing a narrative, may be construed as separate from the events they record. Documentation, no matter how faithful it may be to events, can truly—and only—be read as interpretation.

Readings of an event require language; we must talk or write about our experiences to order and make sense of them. Yet in Sadé’s installations, viewers, drawn to the silence of the object, may well find words disappointing. An Asian perspective regarding silence, which emphasizes the viewer’s subjectivity, seems appropriate to her approach. The viewer’s truth—indeed, *anyone’s*—is always partial; absolute objectivity is a desired, but finally unattainable state. In *Durée*, the viewer chooses a vantage point from which to read meaning, and a new memory is built according to the choice of ordered images. Memory is imposed on memory,

with the consequence that, over time, the reading moves further and further away from the original. New combinations of images represent a new vision of the journey toward Manhattan, with the result that the installation orients each viewer to an interpretation completely different from the one that Sadé presents.

If partial truth is the best we can perceive, if subjectivity is a state we cannot escape no matter how hard we try, then Sadé's idea of a reading *chosen* by the viewer makes sense. Her works generate an interaction dictated by chance, whereby movement among the components of an installation uniquely qualifies each individual for a particular point of view. Although the experience is specific, it is also deeply random and dependent on interaction. In *Waterfall* (2009), a piece first shown at the Brattleboro Museum in Vermont, Sadé combines 15 single-channel video pieces. The components include the video's moving images, sound, and the space. Fifteen soundtracks, released directly into space without headphones, constitute a sound sculpture accompanying the video shots.

On each of the three walls facing the viewer, who becomes the fourth wall, five DVDs show a river; the videos excerpt footage recording different train rides along the Hudson River. These destination-free trips render time as a fluid event, literally and figuratively, since Sadé flips the horizontal river so that it becomes a waterfall, indicative of time passing. The videos are grouped by color: sepia, representing the past; green, the present; and blue, the future. (Sadé retains this color scheme throughout her work.)

Sadé writes, "If Modernism is the ability to redefine the art of the present again and again, I am a Modernist...Modernism is an old term that means constant change. The term 'temporary-contemporary' might define it better." As an artist who "travels" among several projects at one time, she feels that her practice is indicative of the times. *Durée* exemplifies her concept of what art should be—an ongoing collaboration mixing media, artist, and viewer in a current version of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Hence the inclusion of sound and the emphasis on total interaction between work and viewer. Modernism has both its supporters and detractors today, yet it seems fair to say that our age remains dependent on issues and origins that can and should be ascribed to the Modernist movement. Sadé participates in an awareness of 20th-century advances, but like many artists, she feels the need to push things forward. Incorporating the advantages of relatively new categories, such as conceptual and performance art, she offers works whose eclecticism and fluidity across media boundaries echo and foretell what art has been and might be.

Sadé is currently working on a piece called *Reconfiguring Memory* (2011)—a permanent installation of *ArTable* and *Traces*, which visualize memory gaps of the degraded image. *ArTable* is a new conference table designed as an intellectual support for the

laboratory run by André Fenton, a professor at New York University's Center for Neural Science in downtown Manhattan. The 5-by-15-foot table represents state-of-the-art understanding of memory and its expression. Its surface consists of 32 panels, each one a photographic fragment of a single image—a New York cityscape at night incorporating both manmade and natural textures. Images of trees are layered on images of skyscrapers. Because the images are enlarged and pixelated, the table's elements become abstracted, making visual reference to an original image that has been deliberately degraded to a linear reading. *ArTable* serves as the central meeting point for Fenton and his colleagues, a place for exchanging, creating, and refining ideas. Sadé and Fenton believe that the table will strengthen laboratory culture by establishing a site that promotes intellectual debate and discovery. This is Sadé's third project with neural scientists and her work here points in a new direction. Although we don't know what will follow in Sadé's art, her cross-disciplinary methods and objects make it clear that collaboration can illuminate art.

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Note

\* All quotations are taken from an interview with the artist, completed in early 2010.

*Jonathan Goodman is a writer living in New York.*

*Waterfall*, 2009. 15-channel video installation and sound, dimensions variable.

