

BOTH, LIFE AND DEATH
A WALK THROUGH VAJIKO CHACHKHIANI'S
EXHIBITION *BOTH*

Rein Wolfs

Prologue

The work *Father* is situated in the first room of the exhibition *Both* by Vajiko Chachkhiani: at the start of the opening event, a man sits on a concrete chair here, his feet encased in concrete.

Human

Vajiko Chachkhiani's works operate somewhere at the interface of life and death, in the almost incomprehensible border area between existence and absence. His markedly statuary installations and sculptures are often based on performative actions, the traces of which always remain visible, pointing towards the essential process. The actions whose material expressions appear self-contained after they have played their part as the objects of existential, sometimes radical operations can be recognised as human – indeed, as all too human on occasion.

A shock of brown hair sprouts from a heavy concrete cube. Cast into the massive block placed on the wall at about head height despite its obvious separation from the human body, this fragment appears very fresh, almost still alive. In a rather cryptic way, the locks tell us of the young, long-haired woman who stood in front of the wall, her head bent down, with her hair cast into the concrete block throughout a two-hour performance. Driven to the limits of endurance, she remained in this position until the artist delivered her from the situation marked by impotence with the help of a pair of scissors. As if frozen and conserved for eternity, thus an object has evolved from an action, and an artistic act has been transformed into an artistic work. In this context the question is immediately posed: what now constitutes the complete work and what will it comprise of in the longer term – a *physically accentuated*

performance or a minimalist mural sculpture? The artist himself deliberately divides the work *Settle Intimacy* (2012) into two parts, of which the second – following the chronology of the process – represents the concrete sculpture as the outcome of the action. But the first part is the video documenting the performance and clearly verbalising the process once more in its subtitle: *A woman stands still for two hours while her hair is stuck in a concrete block. Another person then cuts off her hair.*

It is possible to note obvious references to the Conceptual Art of the 1960s, not only in methodic and formal terms, but also in the work's prosaic title. But there are also reminiscences of the Performance Art, Minimal Art and Italian Arte Povera of those same years. Here, the sober cubic form and the use of human material (hair) and an industrial construction material (concrete) speak a clear language. Living creatures or fragments of them, traces highly charged with history, and simple, "poor" materials as well as natural phenomena are transposed into the exhibition context; they aim towards a more empathic rather than a purely classical-aesthetic reception. Here, a key part is played by a visualisation of human individuality on the one hand and of collective history and memory on the other.

Georgia

Indeed, Vajiko Chachkhiani's art is always characterised by a set of existential themes, the foremost being basic human qualities and values. In addition, the museum space becomes a bearer of living – or no longer living, but only just – materials and natural processes. But historical events or conditions captured in the collective memory are also themes expressed in the artist's works. In fact, his latest work is one characteristic example of this; a section of Georgian woodland that was burnt during the Caucasian War in 2008 offers the starting point. Chachkhiani, who was born in Georgia, had the charred, dead trees transported from his home country to Germany in order to implement them as monumental witnesses to contemporary history. In a cryptically poetic way that is simultaneously compelling, they relate the ethnic conflicts that make such an impact in the region, even up to the present day. In the exhibition context the trees become a work of art: their deep, striking content means that they evoke memories of the geopolitical strife between Russians, Georgians, Abkhaz and South Ossetians that characterised the post-Soviet era in a globalised world. The trees occupy the museum's rooms and mark

out the interface between autonomous sculpture and artistic memorial within the current culture of remembrance.

As witnesses to a war that is likely to go down in world history as a short episode rather than a decisive caesura, they take their place in a wider context against forgetfulness. Here, the geopolitical reference plays a part, but relating less to political conflicts and warlike disputes than to general historical continuities. It is true that Georgia and the Caucasus region are frequently present in Chachkhiani's work; however, this should not be interpreted as nostalgia deeply attached to home. The charred piece of forest is representative – it stands for the reality of war, independent of any concrete geographical reference. For that reason in particular, the work touches us directly because these trees represent life – albeit plant life – that has been destroyed: they are impartial "civilians" that became victims of the war. The charred plant material becomes an artistic metaphor of the killed and wounded people who constitute the true momentousness of war with all its tragedy and irrevocability. It is only through transfer into a different context, through transformation into a work of art that the object as such can unfold the symbolic significance it is unable to adopt at the site of the actual action. Here, in a western museum, the charred section of forest becomes a memorial to a bloody conflict that has already been forgotten, banished to the periphery of world politics.

The close relationship that Chachkhiani cultivates with his home country, Georgia, makes it possible for him to gain access to objects and materials that would surely be denied to him otherwise. His large-scale installation *Trade* would also be almost inconceivable without trusted connections to Georgia. He employed the principle of barter for this work and so gathered together a huge range of very different objects, which he received in exchange for objects of his own. These include a pair of burnt work shoes that he received in exchange for a video camera, an iron crucifix, from which the cross beam has been removed, or a small cupboard exchanged for beeswax, which contains 2.8 mg of bee venom. The massive prison door weighing 300 kg that he was able to obtain in a similar way for *Trade* is particularly impressive. The door came from an isolation cell for serious offenders in Tbilisi and would scarcely have come into his hands without his knowledge of the Georgian legal system and its structures. This source of artistic materials for processing into works by means of reinterpretation, contextualisation and staging is essential to Chachkhiani's work. Here, his strategy often touches on the

art-historical concept of the readymade, whereby a meaningful charging of the objects via their original context is one key factor. This becomes clear with the prison door, which references the prison inmates, but also in the case of the charred forest. What interests Chachkhiani, and what he realises in his art is a basic reference to the question of human actions and the consequences that emerge from them.

Rooms

The performative component plays a fundamental role in Vajiko Chachkhiani's works. On the one hand, often performances form the basis for the production of sculptural works; on the other hand, entire rooms in museums are charged to turn them into performative installations. In the work *Rite (Dog Days)* the climatic conditions of an exhibition room are modified considerably. A room temperature of 34°C and humidity of 90% create a kind of heat corridor, where it is extremely unpleasant to linger. On the one hand, the title points to the so-called dog days said to be the hottest days of the summer, while the use of the concept of a *Rite* links the corridor in the mind with the *rite de passage*. The principle of the *rite de passage* goes back to a theory of French ethnologist Arnold van Gennep, who assumed that in the course of his or her life a person would be obliged to endure several existential transitions. Entry into a new stage of life is realised in a ritual way, fundamentally and quite independent of the societal form to which one belongs, although the form and character of the rituals diverge considerably according to culture. The high temperature and extreme humidity of *Rite (Dog Days)* also create a reference to the *forced feeding* of hunger strikers, who are locked into rooms with high humidity levels as a protection against dehydration. At the same time, these conditions offer the optimal habitat for certain living creatures like tortoises and other reptiles. Once again, here Chachkhiani is operating at the interface between life and death.

Not only the visitors to the exhibition *Both* face inhospitable conditions; the museum rooms themselves are taxed to the extreme. The golden rules of the exhibition business with regard to climatic conditions are undermined, and the rooms are transformed into danger areas. In recent art history one can find examples in the work of artists such as Chris Burden, Teresa Margolles or Santiago Sierra, who assault the construction and infrastructure of museums in an almost existential manner with some of their performative

installations. Here, Vajiko Chachkhiani does the same in an installation focusing on the poetry of a prison inmate. In this complex work poems about loneliness and isolation are etched into concrete using acid. At the same time, however, rainwater is directed through a hole in the window and an aluminium pipe into the museum space, where it flows into the concrete pool. In this way the texts will fade slowly over the course of the exhibition, and possibly they will disappear altogether. The moving, narrative poems that almost resemble short stories slowly lose their presence, while the museum space is exposed to advancing destruction by the natural elements. The human existence of the prison inmate writing poetry dissolves under the influence of the outside world.

Epilogue

At the end of a tour of the exhibition *Both*, the work *Father* can be found again: a concrete chair, two holes in the concrete pointing to the one-time presence of a person's feet. Two holes representing two leftovers of a performance. The human presence has become a human absence. Present and absent, the father indicates precisely the bipolar interface between life and death.