

CONVERSATION

Vajiko Chachkhiani and Ines Rüttinger

Ines Rüttinger: Before studying art, you studied mathematics and computer sciences. How did this change in direction, which most people would describe as a turn of 180 degrees, come about?

Vajiko Chachkhiani: My grandmother is a chemist and she was the one who was pushing me into sciences. I studied mathematics and computer sciences for two years and then I gave up. I wasn't comfortable with those disciplines. I don't include sciences in my artistic practice, but to a certain degree they have affected my ways of thinking. What I liked about mathematics is its logic – that it is possible to practice the structure of the logic – the logic of sense. So, I think it comes from my past studies that in my artistic practice I try to follow the logical sense of each subject, which follows instinct and feelings rather than intellect.

I was always interested in art from my childhood on, though. For example, I was in a sculpture class as a child. When I was a teenager, I was involved in an artistic collective. We did some interventions in public space. This influence came through my mother, who is an art historian. Later, I moved to Amsterdam to study art and then came to Berlin to continue my studies.

IR: For Siegen, you designed the show to follow the circular course of the rooms. Are the rooms still independent from each other or do they follow a strict overlying narration?

VC: The structure of the ten rooms and the building is fascinating and has great potential. The show consists of ten chapters plus one, because chapter I is both the beginning and the end of the show. Each room has its own approach and position in terms of aesthetics and content. But of course they are connected to each other through recurring concepts and subjects, which are of an existential nature. The first room with the performance piece *Father* is essential for this. *Father* incorporates the contents which are communicated through single positions in every room. The show's title *Both* refers to the point where it all starts and ends in the first room, and the positioning of the piece *Father* is therefore a conceptual decision.

IR: You use very different materials as forms of expression in this show – for example, media like projected film alongside performance and alongside very physical, very heavy sculptures. Are you still experimenting to find ‘your’ material and ‘your’ form of expression, or do you appreciate the different qualities of each?

VC: In general each media has its own nature and potential and each one can communicate a specific content. What you can achieve with film, you can’t achieve with sculpture and the other way around. For me, it is important to let works happen – I don’t approach a work by thinking “Now I’m going to make a sculpture.” I have the same feelings about all these different media and whatever idea or content I want to communicate, it evolves in its own medium, its own form of expression. The intellectual process during the course of the work reshapes it, of course. But I want to keep it raw and not impose intellectual logic on it; I prefer the logic which follows the sense of each subject.

For me, the basic properties of human and other beings are important – that’s what I’m interested in. To use different materials and different approaches is like a different range I can navigate. It is interesting for me and I hope for the public, too. It’s important to maximize the potential of the medium – because all things have their limits. Sculpture is a very immediate thing – it stands there, it has no inner time. Film has a beginning and an end, it consists of time. To use the given nature of each medium is a difficult business. The films of Robert Bresson are a good example revealing the power of cinema. The texture of cinema can communicate about the hidden essence in actions, about the layer of life which is not verbally expressible. This can only be recorded on film and can’t be said or sculpted, as it needs to have a visual narration. I think the sculpture by Carl Andre has references to Bresson’s cinema but from a different angle. Andre’s sculptures have a settled physical form, which contains invisible layers of neurotic feelings. Through this contradiction, the essential drama of life is communicated. These are two good examples, to my mind, of how the potential of different media can be maximized. In my case it can happen that I am working in different media. In general I don’t like to test things – I like to work and do things and let things happen naturally. I don’t force it.

IR: Materials like wood or trees, wax and concrete occur quite often in your sculptures – what fascinates you about these materials?

VC: I like the fact that concrete is sort of basic, both as a material but also in its purpose. Foundations are made of concrete to support buildings. Here, the concrete as a material supports the content I try to communicate. It has a metaphorical potential to represent systems and structures created by humans that has cracks, and those cracks are spaces that interest me. Concrete and wax are also classical materials in sculptural practice, and what interests me is using a classical medium and creating its own time and value. Objects, furniture and trees I use due to their iconographic qualities. They come from certain activities and contain history. The trees in the show, for example, were burned in the war. Both groups provide a view of human nature. One is more about construction and inner structure. The other consists of objects that are produced and contain history.

For me, a work of art starts to exist when two opposing elements encounter each other and form a position. I think it is important to have an inner conflict inside a work, coming from two opposing elements. They merge and form a new thing.

IR: You also seem interested in poetry – is there a competition between you as a visual artist and you as a poet? Do you think you will have to choose one side in the future?

VC: I work mostly in sculpture, performance and film, but it also happens that I write a poetry piece, and it happens on its own – again, I don’t sit down and try to write a poem. Like sketching, it just happens. If I have a need to communicate something and it can’t be done through any other form, or if I’m in the situation that I can’t work, I write. I may quote Rainer Werner Fassbinder: “I shoot in all directions.”

But in general, I think, I don’t choose things. I make decisions. There are some existential subject matters that need to be communicated through art, because art has the power to communicate through the structure of feelings. And that’s where you can contact the person who looks at art. Art can form an articulation of thoughts in the person, which may already have been existing inside them, but the person had not yet articulated them. So art can have the function of a passage to articulation, some kind of rite of passage.

In general, I think poetry is a strong drive to live – and I hope it can also be found in my works. By connecting the formal aspects you can communicate

the content, that's poetry for me. I don't like the term 'poetic', though. It could mean nothing; it can be a romantic relation of formal details or elements that look or sound beautiful, but does not contain any essence, and therefore remains without content. I believe there is no poetry without content.

IR: Some objects you have used for works were traded with other people. After receiving them, you transformed them into works of art. What fascinates you about this rather archaic form of exchange?

VC: Yes, it is because it is basic, an archaic form of exchange between human beings. This form existed before capitalism. As one of the basic properties of human existence, it is in the same spectrum as instinct. For example, a spider makes poetry through its instinct of spinning webs in one of my sculptures. Trade is sort of next to instinct – it is also very basic. Humans tend to exchange, trade and give gifts. For the work that evolves through the traded object, the counterpart – the object I gave for the one I received – is sometimes important, and sometimes not. The object I receive will be transformed into a sculpture, but for this object it is always important that it was traded with a specific individual or a group of individuals. That's what defines the significance of the history contained in the object.

IR: There are many basic concepts in your work that could be described as rather dark or negative, such as death, loss, war, destruction, imprisonment or torture. Do you see that pessimistic overtone as well, or do people just keep looking at the external appearance of things?

VC: What I tend to do is understand the structures of inner conflicts. Through death I tend to communicate about life and its preciousness. Through violence about intimacy, through dysfunctional matters about the poetry in things, and so on.

IR: The risk is that people don't take the step beyond the external appearance towards the inner conflict, i. e. seeing life and its value by looking at death. Are you worried about that?

VC: I hope people will take that step while looking at my work; that they will find a thought within themselves they had not noticed before. If the works I make do not trigger that process, it means that they don't function and therefore don't make sense.

Life Track is an important piece for me here in the show – a film I shot in the house where terminally ill people live, they spend their final phase of life there, and die. Of course the circumstances in the film are dramatic, but I would call it a positive rather than a negative piece. It is the character of life to end. I think it is an optimistic film, because it shows that the person called Grossi has a strong vital force despite the condition and situation he's in. One can see it in the person's eyes, that there is a strong will to live and that he continues to live with no compromise, he does not surrender to the existing conditions. I think it needs guts and a love of life not to give up and to find the strength inside to continue. I am not interested in death as such. In *Life Track*, death is the way to communicate the vitality. Again, the film contains inner conflict and therefore comes to life for me.

Of course, external parameters like political and social dimensions can somehow affect the basic properties of being human. They prevent life from attaining its own value. Imprisonment, for example, which is about solitude, is important to understand the inner dynamics of human nature. A poetry piece I traded was written by an inmate, who was in prison for nine years. This poem is instinctive, raw and resulted from an urge to express emotions. My part was to relocate it in a more physical world – a sort of translation. Although I think translating poetry is rather impossible.

The way I'm approaching subjects, I don't define them as positive or negative – of course other people are free to see them one way or the other – I do work to understand how things function. How far one can go by investigating the basic human properties as well as influences through politics or social parameters.

I tend to communicate about human activities and to extract poetry from nothing or where you wouldn't expect it. Because although war, torture, death affect the value of life, they also emphasize it to some degree – and I believe those are parameters where poetry can be found.

IR: So poetry as you understand it is synonymous with beauty? A sort of inner beauty, or a value? You try to find a new or hidden value in these objects, and also in life itself?

VC: Yes, you are right. I think poetry can contain the quality of beauty in the material sense as well in the immaterial. Poetry has the power to include questions that suggest the hidden values in life, a situation or an object.