

## CHAPTER I

*Father* (2014) is a one-day performance taking place during the exhibition's opening, in the exhibition's initial room, the first in a circulating sequence of ten rooms. The performance shows a man sitting on a chair with his feet trapped inside a concrete slab. The man cannot move, he is forced to be an image, a living sculpture. The title of the performance, *Father*, is a literal description, telling us that the man is actually a father, a real father who has children. This single piece of information enables us to define the performance as an effect of a generation gap, as an oedipal torture, an exercise of filial power over the figure of a degraded father. The violent gesture of the performance stages a father/son relationship between the seated man and the artist. In this symbolic role-play, the artist/son situates the seated fatherly figure as an object of subjection, but at the same time this father can also be perceived as unbeatable insistence, as an unavoidable and irremovable, semiroyal entity who keeps sitting on his throne while surrounded by standing subjects (the viewers during the opening).

After the opening the performer of *Father* goes away and the performance becomes a sculpture: a concrete slab with footprints in it. It becomes an absent presence, or rather, a present absence. As a conventional sign, the footprints represent disappearance, but as time goes by they gain a life of their own. They accumulate distance and lose their status as a substitute or replacement of an original presence. Their structural lack addresses imperceptible time and place, a transcendent, incomprehensible reality. The sculpture's fundamental negative lack signifies an impossible appearance and encounter. It turns the space into the site of a negative revelation, a spatialized representation of non-representability.

When present, the father's body is passive, paralyzed, neutralized. When absent, it is assumed as something mythic, epic, archetypical. The ambiguous status of the fatherly figure inside the work is parallel to the ambiguous status of the work itself, which starts as a performance, is then transformed into a sculpture, and finally into a performative site.

## CHAPTER II

*Rite (Dog days)* (2014) is an empty architectural space filled by hot air from an invisible source. Described by the artist as a 'heat sculpture', it is a climatic installation of artificial heat and humidity, distributed by a concealed array of electronic heaters and mechanical humidity controllers. The regulated room temperature of the space is programmed to 34°C with 90% humidity, causing the air to feel much warmer than it really is.

In *Dog Days* Vajiko Chachkhiani takes immaterial heat and treats it as a material, but from then on, his motivation goes beyond the abstracted sensuality, or the physical tactility of hot air. He materializes the immaterial in order to achieve a new form of historical representation and commemoration. The sculpture's controlled climate is based on historical meteorological data, which it replays. 34°C was the temperature recorded in Israel on July 24, 1980, the day when Ali Shehadeh Mohammad Al-Ja'afari, a Palestinian prisoner from Gaza, died in the Israeli Nafha Prison during an attempt by the Israeli forces to break the prisoners' hunger strike. 90% humidity replays the humidity percentage recorded in Guantanamo bay on August 8, 1980, when prisoners kept in Guantanamo Bay detention camps were force fed during a hunger strike.

*Dog Days'* climatic arrangement takes us back to specific places and times. The space actualizes concrete histories through extreme heat, but the particular historical references evoked by the heat are those it erases and melts when the space is revealed as a limbo, a transitory experience. Crossing the heated space forces each viewer to participate in a rite of passage, temporarily to lose all former identities, pastimes and histories.\* The space is in fact a ritualistic event free of historical awareness. It seeks abstraction, but while simulating the thin line between being free and being detained, being bodily inviolable and bodily violable, it also suggests a political-critical standpoint. It exposes the invisible violence that lies at the root of the authoritarian structure of any juristic, democratic system. The hot air it restores is more than an intensified, purifying sensuality, or a new immaterial, invisible sculptural tactility. It produces pain and anxiety, both universal and historically-conditioned.

\* Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Cornell University Press (New York, 1969).

## CHAPTER III

Behind the sealed glass of a monitor is a moving image of a sealed glass window. Behind the sealed glass window is a municipal retirement house. The window faces the house's backyard. At a certain point the figure of a middle-aged man appears behind the glass, as if from oblivion. His name is Grossi, one of the younger patients in the house. Like the other patients, Grossi is terminally ill. He stares at the camera outside the window. With his vital gaze he keeps holding on to life. After a while he withdraws and disappears inside, only to appear again later. The repetitive loop of the footage, titled *Life Track* (2014), turns Grossi's appearance/disappearance into a memento mori: a ghostly, inexhaustible movement between life and death.

In the same room as *Life Track* there are two more video footages: *Corridor to Solitude* (2014) and *Dust Track* (2014). Contrary to *Life Track*, the viewpoint of both footages is from the inside out. Both were shot in high security prisons. *Corridor to Solitude* is a static frame of a dark underground space superimposed by a white neon illumination coming from a high rectangular window. Taken in the passageway that leads to the confinement chamber, it superimposes light and darkness as interplay between freedom and imprisonment. *Dust Track* is an agitated surface of dust, wind and sunlight. It was taken in a narrow space that has no ceiling and is the only place inside the prison where dangerous prisoners can enjoy the open air.

## CHAPTER IV

*Settle Intimacy 2* (2012) is a performative sculpture: a concrete cubic slab is hanging on the wall at eye level with a lock of hair sticking out of its edges. The sculpture is the result of a two-hour performance (*Settle Intimacy 1*, 2012), during which a woman stood still and faced the cubic slab while her hair was caught in it. After two hours her hair was cut and she was released and could move freely again. Like many other sculptures by Chachkhiani, this sculpture can be described as a trap, designed in order to catch and immobilize human or other animal body parts. Like this sculpture, Chachkhiani's sculptures establish a physical intimacy, as they absorb an individual's bodily feature (in this case, hair) over the course of a predetermined duration (in this case, two hours). Chachkhiani's sculptures usually have two phases: the first is functional and operative, the second is evidential. Nevertheless, the connection between the two phases is not a simple one and the second phase is more than a retroactive aftermath of the first. The sculptures' actual engagement with individual body parts accumulates physical intimacy, but the evidence it leaves behind is disturbing and threatening. It imposes an awareness of one's own bodily integrity, continuously establishing a physical intimacy with each and every viewer.

## CHAPTER V

*The Missing Landscape* (2014) is an installation consisting of burned pine trees found in the Georgian landscape. The forest from which the pine trees were relocated was burned during the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia. The crowded arrangement of the burned trees in space is an indoor earthwork, an elusive and abstracted representation of the dislocated landscape.\* The indoor trees installation integrates the actual landscape and fuses it with the site to which the trees were relocated. The physical synthesis of the two sites juxtaposes history and imagination, facts and metaphors, materiality and illusion.

Chachkhiani's landscape's dislocation is not a memorial dedicated to the war between Georgia and Russia. Chachkhiani marks the historical disaster of this war as a natural disaster in order to say something about human nature. Rather than historical, his statement is universal. For Chachkhiani, human nature is inherently violent and human violence is not the effect, but the cause of war.

Contrary to conventional war memorials, Chachkhiani's *Missing Landscape* is temporary, ephemeral and entropic. It provides no comprehensible overview. The space is filled by a massive amount of trees up to the point when it loses its shape, its definition, its entirety. The space becomes an experience of disorientation and fragmentation, of trial and error, of inconsistency and unpredictability.

\* Robert Smithson, *Collected Writings*, University of California Press (Berkeley, 1996)

## CHAPTER VI

*The Sky is Slightly Dangerous* (2014) is the title of a Georgian poem written by a Georgian prisoner, sentenced to nine years in confinement. Chachkhiani traded this poem with him in exchange for two kisses on the prisoner's neck. Now, *The Sky is Slightly Dangerous* is the title of a group of sculptures that are all attempts to translate the poem, or more accurately, a group of sculptures which are all foreseen failures to translate the poem, whose content remains known only to Chachkhiani and its poet, and whose essential parts, as is the case with all poems, are untranslatable.

Among the unsuccessful translation attempts are:

A mattress from a prison cell with two aluminum plates on top, both touched by water drops.

A concrete pedestal with an unmoving, analog wall clock stuck in it.

A process-based sculpture, containing a shallow concrete pool with poetry verses written in acid on its bottom; a channel of rainwater going through a hole in the museum's window into the pool in the course of the exhibition; a process of erasing the oxidized poetry verses at the bottom of the pool by the rainwater which slowly fills it.

Like many other works by Chachkhiani, this current group of sculptures is the result of an historical 'primal scene', an actual intimate interaction with a person or a thing. The untranslatability of the poem turns it into a possible traumatic event, a story that cannot be told. It locates it outside the chain of signification, as an inaccessible hole.

## CHAPTER VII

*A Chapter with no End* (2014) is the title of raw footage of a man sleeping in a cemetery, lying on top of a tombstone with his back to the camera. The scene takes place during the daytime. When night falls and dots of artificial light appear from the houses on the other side of the cemetery's wall, the camera is switched off and the footage stops.

*A Chapter with no End* relies on dichotomous differentiations that are quickly canceled. It creates confusion between inside and outside, day and night, private and public, profanity and sacredness; it treats sleeping as both a synonym and antonym of death, and therefore of life, abolishing the dividing line between them.

The reference to Andy Warhol's 1963 film *Sleep* is inevitable. Similarly to the experience of time in early Warhol films, Chachkhiani's *A Chapter with no End* generates a state of anticipation and expectation, a basis for a potential narrative. But while Warhol's films are voyeuristic and theoretical, i.e. they eliminate authorship and focus on the analysis of the spectator, *A Chapter with no End* develops a personal-allegorical poetry; it inhabits an author capable of encrypting idiosyncratic meaning. Like other video works by Chachkhiani, *A Chapter with no End* is both incidental and staged, but at the same time it suggests a sort of a refined rawness, and in this sense, is more staged than incidental.

See also: Annette Michelson, "Where is your Rupture?" Mass Culture and the Gesamtkunstwerk. In: *October*, no. 56 (Spring 1991)

## CHAPTER VIII

Chachkhiani characterizes room no. 8 as the *Trade Room*. The *Trade Room* is a sculptural installation composed from different kinds of objects and materials. It displays objects that Chachkhiani acquired through direct barter with their owners, and objects he found and collected along the way; objects he displaced and removed from their original context, and others, already uprooted, which he simply picked up; objects he radically transformed and others he altered through subtle intervention.

The *Trade Room* echoes pre-capitalist economies and systems of evaluation. It speaks on behalf of pre-modernity and contemporaneity. Its concept of signification is based on personal, direct interaction and communal ownership. Its participative objecthood is attributable to rural, non-western culture, to irrational superstitions and to the acceptance of death and tragedy as integral aspects of life.

*Each Touch of the Fallen Ash* (2014) is a pair of burned shoes that Chachkhiani traded from a downtrodden worker in exchange for a video camera, and took them off his feet. Then he burned them on the floor, turning them into an ash silhouette of shoes, an image of loss and death. The crumbled ashes are terminal, yet transformative. They allude to cremation, but they also enact the traces of an after-ascension event.

*Neighbor* (2014) is a bedroom chest with a missing leg that Chachkhiani traded from a neighbor in exchange for a vintage chair. The missing leg was replaced by a cast of beeswax, into which he inserted a lethal dose of toxic venom. The inserted toxin resuscitates this piece of furniture as infected and infectious. By contaminating it, he provides it with life.

*Hunters* (2014) is a reassembled tree branch. Chachkhiani removed part of a tree branch he found in a Georgian forest burned during the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia. He then cast the removed part in lead and reassembled the branch with the lead cast instead of the removed part that it had been made from. The cast was made with the molten lead of several gun bullets Chachkhiani traded with hunters. Rather than an act of continuation and redemption, Chachkhiani's form of recycling can be associated with deadly practices and objects, such as wars, hunting games and gun bullets.

Chachkhiani's paradoxical reconnection of objects and materials is demonstrated fully in the door he collected from a prison's basement. It is the actual door of a confinement chamber. Chachkhiani tore it off, displacing it from its original context. In addition, before leaning it against the wall of the exhibition space, he filled the door's peephole with the molten wax of candles he found inside the confinement chamber. Filling the door's peephole with recycled materials found in its original surroundings reconnects the door to itself, to the place where it came from. But eventually, this reconnection only highlights the violent displacement of the confinement chamber's door – the ultimate symbol of a violent displacement, through which individuals are taken out of their surroundings and kept in isolation.

## CHAPTER IX

The video *Ice Cream Man* (2014) is raw footage, a single unedited shot of an Ice Cream Truck slowly entering a small village in the middle of nowhere, on one sunny day. The streets of the village are empty and no people are seen except two excited kids running after the truck. The ice cream man spots them and stops the truck for a second, but takes off again before they manage to catch him. Frozen, they follow him with their eyes as he drives towards the horizon, leaving them nothing to sweeten their daily routine in the remote, neglected wasteland that they live in.

The arrival of the ice cream truck is not followed by a pop tune and it does not stage a poetical neo-realist scenario of a suburban daily break, a temporal meeting place in the main street of a generic small town. The small village where the footage was taken is in fact a Georgian refugee settlement, founded in 2008 after the war between Georgia and Russia. The kids we see are Georgian war refugees, victims of history. They are placeless, their place is unmapped. They are human sawdust, living outside the global circulation of commodities and consumption. The possibility of consuming ice cream creates a potential distraction, but the immediate departure of the ice cream truck exemplifies a constant, non-emancipatory anti-climax and an improbable social change.

## CHAPTER X

The last room in the sequence of Chachkhiani's *Both* exhibition consists of a group of black pastel drawings on sheets of black paper. The drawings can be referred to literally as 'blind drawings': Chachkhiani gathered a number of blind people and asked them to draw their most precious thing, to translate their emotional state into a drawing. The blind drawings do not take invisibility towards visibility. The decision to execute them with black pastel on black surfaces restores their fundamental invisibility and keeps them as a resonance of a purely instinctive action.

One can mistakenly think that Chachkhiani's interest in this group of works lies in formal questions, examining painting and drawing outside the optical field, as marks of an uninterrupted physical energy, but the emotional impact carried by these drawings transcends any artistic issue. From an art-historical perspective, Chachkhiani's blind drawings can be linked to Jackson Pollock's painterly gesture, described by Allan Kaprow as a 'sort of ecstatic blindness', but while their blindness is real, Pollock's blindness is metaphorical; additional examples worth mentioning in this context are Marcel Duchamp's rejection of retinal art, or the automatist practices of surrealist artists such as André Masson, but while their blindness is conceptual and methodological, the blindness Chachkhiani hangs onto is involuntary. Indicating the twenty-four untitled drawings Willem de Kooning produced in 1966 with his eyes closed makes more sense in this context, and though both groups embrace the introspective nature of drawing, de Kooning's approach is experimental and artistic, while Chachkhiani's is existential.

By commissioning others to draw for him, Chachkhiani remains disengaged, external, but his politics of authorship is not about avoidance and concealment. Rather than eliminating the notion of the autonomous, omnipotent author, the blind drawings reintroduce authorship as an expression of disability, impairment and handicap. They do not alienate authorship, they re-arrange it as an intimate human interaction.

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