

Humancon Undercon

Sophia Tabatadze's installation *Humancon Undercon* concludes a series of works by the artist dealing with the relationship between the body, the home and personal identity that began with her 2002 piece *Wallpaper*.

The latter, her graduation piece from the Academy of Arts in Amsterdam, consisted of several dozen rolls of wallpaper which the artist had had printed with a pattern of her own design. It showed two sinuous and stylised verticals running in alternation, one a series of hearts and aortas, connected by an undulating rivulet of blood, the other a complete urinary system, composed of kidneys, bladder and their interconnecting tubes. The wallpaper was pasted on the exposed interior wall of a half-demolished house, and left slowly to decay beneath the action of the elements.

The artist says that the origins of this work lay in the wallpapered houses she had visited as a child in her native Georgia, and the impression she had got in them of something being hidden behind the façade of domestic propriety they presented. She used her wallpaper to expose what she felt was concealed: the work was, in her words, a way of looking inside herself. For Tabatadze, introspection meant a literal examination of the physical interior of the body, the bloody mess of organs that we all carry around inside us and which is the guarantor of our mortality.

Two themes emerge in this piece which will recur throughout her subsequent work. One is the equation of the domestic space with the space of the body, and the conception of the home itself as a kind of body; the other is the urge to expose what is hidden. For Tabatadze the two are closely interrelated. Her work looks for truths in the built spaces of her environment, and the truths it finds there are always visceral.

That truth, for her, should always somehow be hidden within the material fabric of the lived space is perhaps not so surprising in former citizen of the Soviet republic of Georgia. The art of the late Soviet period is often permeated by a sense of concealed immanence, of something unimaginable about to break through the fabric of everyday reality. To characterise this 'something' as specifically visceral, however, is perhaps an insight peculiar to Tabatadze's generation, whose formative years witnessed the process of its becoming manifest – that is, the rise to power of formerly 'underground' movements of national independence. They had also learnt what this process meant: not the arrival of a utopian modernity but the return of a familiar repressed - the outbreak of bloody ethnic conflicts, and the precipitous immiseration of the vast majority of the population.

Yet there is another moment to the visceral besides the violent and unreasoned, and that is as a seat of identity and creativity, it is as such that it manifests itself in her next piece. If to expose the hidden was a more or less straightforward business when dealing with her memories of Georgia, it was less so when confronting her immediate environment. In the Netherlands, where the liberal democratic ideal of 'transparency' exercised a strong influence over the built environment, the society's repressed was mad that much more difficult to characterise. This became the subject of her next project, *De Doorzonwoning* (2003, literally the 'through-lit apartment', the result of a nine month residency in Vlaardingen. The artist was given an empty apartment to move into, and over the following months converted it, as she says, "to her liking".

Tabatadze noticed that the apartment both embodied not only the ideal of transparency, but also its attendant inconsistencies and hypocrisies as she found them in Dutch society. While its layout appeared to make everything open to view, in reality, she found, it subtly controlled and directed the viewer's gaze. Nothing ultimately was allowed to appear as itself; everything inside it became in a sense an exhibit for the benefit of visitors.

She responded by building an installation that would 'expose' the apartment's 'mechanism'. This involved making architectural additions that overtly manipulated the viewer's gaze. Using a system of reflecting mirrors, she constructed a periscope running from one end of the living space to the other: it ensured that one could literally look through the apartment without seeing anything of its interior. Elsewhere she constructed out of wood and fabric a room within a room, a confined, cosy space which she decided to make her bedroom. She thereby revived, within the archetypal "machine for living in", the Soviet tradition of ad hoc and idiosyncratic home improvement.

These additions also recalled the organs of the body. The room within a room was evidently a kind of womb; the periscope a sort of giant artificial gut, which swallowed the viewer's gaze at one end and effectively excreted it through a window at the other. Both insisted upon the truth of the home as an organic space, a truth suppressed by its reconfiguration as a machine.

Later the same year, Tabatadze visited Georgia after six years living abroad and found herself confronted by a country that had changed almost beyond recognition. *House on Wheels* (2003) was her reaction to this. While in Holland a sense of social alienation had produced the need to adapt her material environment to her requirements, here she felt the opposite: the need to adapt herself to the society in which she found herself. The house on wheels was conceived as a structure that could function both as a dwelling and a market stall. Inhabiting it meant making oneself vulnerable and exposed; this was Tabatadze's way of trying to identify with her native country, where life was precarious and people lived from day to day. At the end of the project she abandoned her work in the market place, where it was slowly dismantled by traders using the parts to construct stalls of their own.

Her next work, *What We Thought was a Wall Turned Out to be a Curtain* (2004), followed a visit to Eastern Europe with a group of Dutch architects. Shocked by the prejudices that she encountered among her companions, she set out to make a piece dealing with perceived differences between east and west. Her aim was to represent the political and ideological divisions that had, at least partly, disappeared in fact but continued to exist in people's minds. It is this, perhaps, that lies behind the peculiarity of the title, which makes one want to object that the 'wall' in question only became a 'curtain' later, and was real enough while it existed. Tabatadze is concerned here not with its historical existence but its persistence within the subconscious - a region that, notoriously, lies outside time.

What We Thought was a Wall takes as its starting point the Soviet institutional space. The artist painted her installation with the two-colour scheme characteristic of such buildings. The public institution is, of course a familiar subject in post-Soviet art; one need only think of installations made between the seventies and nineties by the likes of Kabakov or Sokov. But instead of expressing, as they do, a sort of bathetic nostalgia for a failed utopia, Tabatadze's space - constructed out of curtained-off areas and hidden 'rooms' - radiated an aura of ghostly irreality, in which

one's perception of solidity and insubstantiality, depth and depthlessness were consistently confused. The piece seemed to aim at asking of how we can grasp the disappearance of the divisions of the Cold War with minds that have themselves been formed by those divisions, and as such was drawn inevitably towards paradox - towards investigating of how the non-existent can become tangible, and how objects, and even space itself, can both exist and not exist at the same time. The stark binary of the colour scheme served to underline this: the white and green walls extended into white and green curtains, then half-curtains, then a blank space in which only the dividing line between the two colours, represented by a rope cordon, lived on in a kind of spectral redundancy. The wall having disappeared, its absence survived, radiating a peculiar mystery and impenetrability.

In *Humancon Undercon* (2007), Tabatadze returns to installation after a year spent working mainly in video and performance. The work shows the influence of the latter in that it introduces, for the first time, an element of fictional narrative. The artist imagines the construction of an apartment block in her native Tbilisi, whose story embodies the corrupt and chaotic nature of Georgia's slow economic recovery: its steel skeleton, divided into units and corruptly sold off while still under construction, is built up piecemeal by its new owners. This metaphor for the privatisation of the country's centralised economy is personalised by the introduction of fictional characters. Tabatadze has imagined how the new inhabitants will procure their own building materials and arrange their own apartments: one has even, in an act of absurd foresight, installed his own coffin. The gesture suggests a link between death and the acquisition of the trappings of social respectability. But it also acknowledges that to prepare to die in particular place is also to prepare to live there, to make it one's home.

In so far as Tabatadze's imagined characters often turn out to be parodic self-portraits, we may take this to suggest a degree of reconciliation with her native country and a determination to make her life there. It is for this reason, perhaps, that she sees this work as concluding a cycle that began with *Wallpaper*. For while the first work was concerned with bringing the inside out, with exposing the hidden, this latest one deals with bringing the outside in, with coming to terms what she finds around her - as well as recognising that it had always been part of her.

Tabatadze has described her method of working as drawing on her environment and processing it through her body - a method of digestion and assimilation. By the same token, the ideal fate she envisages for her work is that it be assimilated back into the environment that gave rise to it, in satisfyingly circular processes of decay and dissolution. Such processes ground their maker's place within that environment, by making her a component of its cycles of creation and destruction. In this latest work, the artist recognises that she herself is subject to these processes. In so doing, it proposes for her both an identity and a home.

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