

Profile

Tolia Astakhishvili

The Berlin-based Georgian artist remakes the language of architectural construction and maintenance in her work to explore the edges of survival, the tensions between political and domestic worlds, and why we should pay attention to the ‘first finger’.

Before settling into conversation on an early morning video call in Tbilisi, Tolia Astakhishvili turned her phone towards the window of her family home to show the blue sky and view of Mount Mtatsminda. From this brief glimpse, suggestively bringing to mind the way one continually learns or adaptively orientates oneself through place, architecture and memory, the conversation turned to the cultural differences between architectural developments in London and Tbilisi as experienced when walking past building works and surveying the rubble of construction material or uncovered signage of a now defunct business. For Astakhishvili, this undoing of a given order of appearances is not only ‘more interesting than when everything is completed and covered up’ but also indicative of the oft-concealed infrastructures that hold together a nation’s interests of power and, conversely, what is left to rot. From pipeline to air vent, how use not only defines an object but also makes it one, brings to mind Franz Kafka’s aphorism that ‘a stair not deeply hollowed out by footsteps is, from its own point of view, merely a lacklustre assemblage of wood’.

A similar set of uncertainties is found in Astakhishvili’s densely fabricated and layered ‘habitations’: constructions that often cut and splice at oblique angles through gallery spaces, attuning visitors to the material contingencies – often unsettlingly, dizzyingly mediated by a proliferation of objects and ephemera – that both construct a view as well as, perhaps, haunt it. This method of making has been extended through several collaborative relationships that Astakhishvili maintains with other artists, as well as with her own family members.

Astakhishvili’s *Our garden is in Bonn*, 2023, for example, comprises a series of exposed plasterboard walls, the porous surfaces of which have been skimmed in paint, stained and mottled to appear worn by an inhabitant’s use. Onto these overlapping screens, and rooms that divide and subdivide into ever narrower spaces, Astakhishvili pins numerous sun-bleached sheets of A4 paper featuring spindly, ballpoint-pen drawings of half-realised figures who appear locked in libidinally charged domestic scenes. Dating from the late 1990s to the present, the works both arrest attention but also dissolve into the unstoppable bricolage that surrounds them: miniature cups, a fridge with a detailed maquette of a church organ inside, numerous models of houses piled behind walls, an ironing board with a drawing of a horse on it, piles of shopping bags, a crash mat with a sticker depicting a child’s toy on it. These are objects that are reminiscent of domestic life, yet also not wholly derived from it. The context of Bonn itself – the former capital of West Germany known for its numerous bureaucratic state departments during the Cold War – slides into view through a scrawled photograph of the German president Theodor Heuss; his eyes and mouth are given devilish features with a blue pen, while his hand rests on a notebook with the added gnomonic admission of ‘I love you’.

The fluid spectatorship of moving through space – a look gleaned behind a wall or corner – reaffirms an uncanny sense of something burbling behind, an



Tolia Astakhishvili and James Richards, *I Remember (Depth of Flattened Cruelty)*, 2023, video

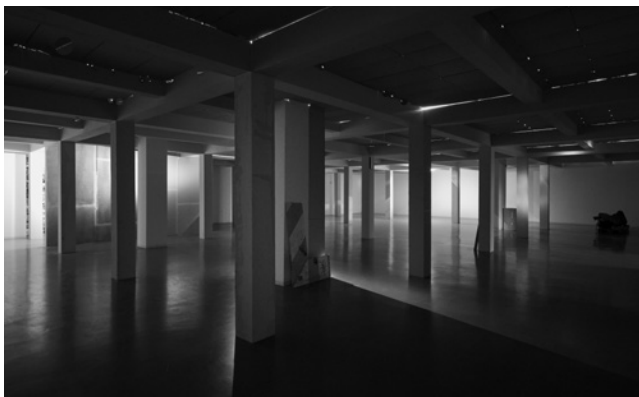


Tolia Astakhishvili, *Once Upon the Time (Diagnoses and Treatments)*, 2023, installation view, Bonner Kunstverein

intensity beyond or out of reach. For Astakhishvili, habitations are not solely the places we reside in, nor are they defined by the routines that we enact as we circle from room to room; instead, habitations are the places in which we fasten aspects of our former and even, perhaps, future selves onto the exterior world, places in which daily thoughts collect and occasionally overwhelm.

This work is part of Astakhishvili's exhibition 'The First Finger', currently at the Bonner Kunstverein, with a further 'chapter' of the exhibition opening this month and running concurrently at the Haus am Waldsee in Berlin. The sprawling environment unfolds through numerous other artworks contained inside: pieces by Vera Palme, Ser Serpas and Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili, and collaborative works with James Richards and the artist's father, Zurab Astakhishvili. As if populating her own town, the exhibition acts as Astakhishvili's own genealogy and personal cosmology, one that seamlessly blends through her makeshift structures. The 'first finger' of the title references the physical response a body has to hostile environments, specifically when blood vessels constrict in extremely cold weather and the body withdraws support away from extremities, sacrificing fingers or toes in an effort to preserve major organs. The way our limbic systems defensively respond to certain environments, and the way certain lives endure such conditions as a norm, is compellingly exacted in Astakhishvili's installations. Palme's (*The Painting of*) *Stephen King's Survivor Type*, 2019, takes up these pressures of an unrelenting, external condition by presenting a text that reimagines Stephen King's short story of a character driven to self-cannibalism in order to survive. Palme's abstract, staccato reimagining of King's lurid story reads more as the draining of consciousness, and amid the flickering sentences one line reads: 'What could have been done to prevent it?'

It is this uneasy familiarity of the everyday, measured in the multiplicities that make survival possible, that is threaded through 'The First Finger'. An unstated aspect of Astakhishvili's work seems to be Russia's invasion of Georgia more than 15 years ago. When writer Robert Kagan observed in the *Washington Post* that 'historians will come to view 8 August 2008 as a turning point' because it 'marked the official return of history' (a nod to Francis Fukuyama's assessment of the end of history around the fall of communism in late 1980s), he noted the way in which the invasion was largely overlooked by the West at that time – it was, perhaps, the first finger to have been lost.



Tolia Astakhishvili, *Entire*, 2023, installation view, Bonner Kunstverein

Looking back at Kagan's writing now, we see how it foreshadowed Russia's current war in Ukraine. Refugees displaced from Georgia's Abkhazia region in the north-west of the country still live in schools and hotels in Tbilisi. 'It looks like a disaster. You can see so much pain, the hope to return home, but their homes don't exist any longer,' Astakhishvili observes, adding, 'I go and photograph these old areas to help show them what's happened. I'm not interested in nostalgia, but it is the need to have a home, across all classes of society, that I return to.'

There is a sense of encountering a fragile, post-pandemic environment in Astakhishvili's installations, an absence further evoked in the artificiality of the gallery being lit in shadowy half-light, such as with *Entire*, 2023, in which the artist has lowered the ceiling of Bonner's largest gallery space with cardboard sheets, populating the gloom with artificial column supports. Towards one corner of the darkened space are mats and chained-up sports equipment that rest on wooden pallets. The work resembles a car park untouched by sunlight, or perhaps a place of dank subterranean life, the cardboard canopy a bleak attempt at heat preservation. A small, caged skylight offers an illuminated view of the empty expanse above: a portal to another life, out of reach.

Around a small nook is the longstanding collaboration between Astakhishvili and her father, Zurab. Forming the exhibition's chilly hearth, *I can't imagine how can I die if I am so alive*, 1986-, covers a wall with photographs of friends and family cut and pasted over images culled from magazines and books, as if driven by the obsessive hand of a worker idling time. The room comes across as being the only corner of the house that is affordable to heat; the existential ruminations linked to the gallery void have been replaced with paucity and scarcity, the multitude of faces offering some brief comfort.

A further constriction of space is found in *I Remember (Depth of Flattened Cruelty)*, 2023, made in collaboration with James Richards. This video digitally folds together found subterranean spaces as well as Astakhishvili's previous installations and drawings: close-ups of empty hallways, scrawled marks left on walls, intercut with images of animals and an anomalous scene of a crowded beach, a verse from 'I Remember' scratchily recorded in Molly Drake's home in the 1950s briefly plays. The spectral drag and pull of the digital effect upon these largely unpopulated dwellings into flattened, pictorial space ultimately reaches a kind of airless vertigo, one which leaves only the anti-human sliver of the digital frame to reside in.

James Baldwin observed that 'perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition'. If the idea of home itself is continually displaced by an imaginary, less tangible set of references, then Astakhishvili's numerous recesses, gaps, pauses, transitions and voids invite viewers to speculate over the fictions that rebuild them, from daily necessity and grind to state-craft narration. Astakhishvili is working from the seemingly unshifting class-defined states of the homeless, the renter and the politicised refugee to a state of momentary sanctity.

'The First Finger' continues at the Bonner Kunstverein till 30 July, the second chapter is at Haus Am Waldsee, Berlin 23 June to 24 September.

Chris McCormack is associate editor of *Art Monthly*.