

The Missing Link Between Art and Life: A True Fish Story

The more frequent the ecological threats become around the Caspian Sea, the more the appearances of strange marine amphibians intensifies. Believed to roam the waters as well as the shores of those regions, the humanoid creatures are also rumoured to be accompanied by a flock of small fish when spotted at sea, and of being able to turn the water they swim in crystal clear. There are other stories specific to that region too: tales of UFOs and ruins of enigmatic ancient cities laying submerged in water. But the deep Caspian Sea holds other less fictional fables, disclosing a loony reality of equally bewitching magnitude.

Indeed, in the stories that Taus Makhacheva recorded with local fishermen Tikhonya, Abubakar, Shamil or Khaibula, to name a few, there is no mention of sea monsters or flying saucers in the sky. The poachers recount terrific stories of a different kind: waves and icebergs the size of nine-storey buildings, dead sailors found tied to their boats, deserted baidas floating amok, crashing. They also recount going through days of hunger, thirst, frost and piercing rain, then succumbing to madness; incredulous ways of survival followed by an enduring trauma from the memory of a failed attempt to save a brother. Upon return, some of the youngest survivors get married and never set out on a boat again, but most of the poachers sail out again and again, overcoming the physical and emotional dread from nearly dying each time in order to make a living. For Shamil Fiksa, for example, who got stranded in a storm on top of an overturned boat for nine days without water nor food, losing twenty-eight kilograms at the moment when he was saved, it took only a week to ship out again. He told the story with dignity when interviewed, occasionally sharing insight about one's state of mind when one is ready to die and fear disappears.

Drawing a painful parallel between the precarious way of earning a life as a poacher and that of working as an artist today, Makhacheva staged the performance *Baida* (2017) for the Venice Biennial, taking art and its believers rightfully far off into the sea. No other help, however, was provided to see the work other than a set of coordinates and a short, dry text on a label about a capsized boat and a performance. Preempting the lack of art enthusiasts taking up such an unhandy invitation, the artist placed a video documentation on the biennial site. But what it documents is fittingly confusing: half of the video is a monotonous journey through the sea, shot from a boat that never appears in the film frame. The boat gets to the location, circles around the promised capsized baida, then nothing really happens, and it goes back. There are no performers emerging under the boat or doing anything else for that matter; just a bird flies over above the sunken boat. Everything could be a performance and nothing seems to be it. All the way to the spot, the three passengers talk - a man and two women, all relatively young judging by their voices. The man seems to know more than the other two. He explains who and where the artists is from, what is the work about, he even seems to have read Fiksa's story. Gradually, their manners get worse with hunger, nausea, boredom and confusion before they become utterly disappointed. The viewer gets annoyed too: dull art talks, irritating human characters, presumptuous comments. Shamil would have not understood them.

At this point, questions such as what constitutes the performance and when did it take place, if it ever did, make little sense. The above mentioned parallel the artist draws in the work, between the precariousness and invisibility of the artist's labour and body and that of the poachers, is complemented by another, more subtle undercurrent present in many of Makhacheva's work: the confrontation of art's power with that of real life. Thus, often tools such as the act of feeding, listening, preserving and storytelling, among others, become her

private and intuitive way of approaching real life. At the same time, these tools are also ways of surviving, communicating and entertaining as a species.

Food (and its politics) is an especially important visceral opportunity for reality, as food can be swallowed, sipped, chewed or spitted, becoming a tiny bit more of the organic mass of “us”. By offering to exhibition visitors, for example, a piece of fish swim bladder to eat – a part of the fish that is also used in making glue which is in turn used in artworks restoration – Makhacheva links the need of preserving culture with mundane practices of rejuvenating procedures for face or body. This in turn becomes part of the visitors’ bodies too, turning one of the galleries into a sort of a shop and a delicatessen (the fish swim bladders can be bought as well as silicone baking molds in the shape of the Caspian Sea). Doing so, she continues the work that began with the Dagistani fishermen community, whilst pushing further the issues raised in her recent sculptural installation *ASMR Spa* (2018) commissioned for the Liverpool Biennial. There, the feeling of satisfaction from something like food is upgraded to a new, multi sensory experience which Makhacheva relates to the heightened experience one might have at the encounter of “good” works of art. The progress in acoustic technology now allows us to feel even the most gentle sounds of whispering or brushing directly onto one’s body, even through the screen of a monitor. It is an incredible experience – the sound is literally felt coming from the back of one’s ear, turning little known sounds such as scratching a comb wrapped in plastic into a sensorial feast. Through an artistic act *ASMR Spa*, thus, worked on the real life senses highlighting the power synesthesia already has in one’s life. Developing it further, perhaps even away from organic matter, is probably a realistic but futuristic, dream. Yet tracing down a common component to her recent works to a tiny fish swim bladder, the artist seems to suggest that the hold the material presence has is still very much part of everything one thinks and feels in the constant game of visibility and non-visibility we all play.

Listening, as Simon Weil once wrote, perhaps remains the best gift one can give. Whether is it listening to empty, hungry stomachs, to the stories of friends and strangers, to one’s preoccupations as a female, an artist or the strangely reassuring sounds of tapping and scratching, Makhacheva elevates it to an almost separate form of art. And whilst her alter ego Super Taus is a woman with abnormal physical strength constantly busy solving, helping and outdoing, the artist’s approach involves an endurance of a different kind, one that combines an infinite curiosity towards reality, private and shared, with an awareness of its bespoke finitude. Perhaps this is why Super Taus never wears a watch. This “tiny, furious bit of something hanging onto your wrist” is more of a working metaphor for Makhacheva’s investigations into the spiral of obligations, inflictions, fears and obsessions we are facing in a complex identity formation process.

Snejana Krasteva

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