

If the Body is the House by A.Serino

“He inverts the concept of house and body. Now the body is the house. It is a community experience. (...) He is connected to the others in a common body. Corporal expression here has an essential importance. It is through it that the cells are built, for example by opening one’s arms, creating tunnels with one’s legs spread out through which people may pass through.”¹ These words by Lygia Clark describe the experience of her ‘propositions’, developed together with the students in Paris at the beginning of the ‘70s, where a series of found objects became catalysts for the experience of a collective body².

This image of a reversed relationship between the house and the body has struck me for a long time. Being far from home myself, I found it empowering to think that via certain postures and gestures, the body – any body – can open up to, support and protect others. Such a body does not necessarily need a home (as a material construct made of roof and walls) because it can become one at any time.

‘The body is the house’ has circled around in my thoughts again – first quietly and then with increasing persistence, when I looked at Tamuna Chabashvili's work during a studio visit in Amsterdam.

Going through her projects, I saw the body and the idea of a house mingling and echoing each other in several ways and for different reasons, yet all centered around a common point of origin: growing up as a teenager during the collapse of the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet years, and the consequent disillusionment and depression caused by the political instability for a whole generation.

In “A Bundle” (2015), for instance, one of the first works developed in Tbilisi, the body is literally the tool that allowed the artist to measure and recreate the neighbourhood where she was born and grew up, and now radically changed due to the urban redevelopment³. In “A Mantle” (2018), the ongoing research project started in residency in Berlin, the body is the measure as well as the carrier of a personal archive in progress in the shape of a mantel.

¹ Lygia Clark, ‘The Body is the House: sexuality, invasion of individual *territory*’, in: Cornelia H. Butler, Luis Perez-Oramas (eds.), *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art 1948-1988*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2014, pp. 247-249.

² Brazilian artist Lygia Clark taught at Sorbonne in Paris from 1972 to 1976, before returning to Brazil. In her classes gestural communication and sensory perception were the key to create a participatory experience that blurred the boundaries between artist, students and spectators.

³ “A Bundle” consists of a map embroidered on textile and a series of drawings. “The square piece of map is thought as a bundle, a piece of cloth used to wrap one’s belongings in the course of a journey. The numbers and the words embroidered on the textile map are based on V. Dolidze street and its surrounding area in the Saburtalo District in Tbilisi. Each drawing locates a story through retracing and linking the numbers to each other. Through the depiction of my body-mindscape I recreate the city, thus retracing my emotions, memories, and questions”. (From the artist’s portfolio).

In the first case, we see a body that carries material from a home, and a hometown, that is invisible to an external eye, yet that is still there and palpable under the skin, in the form of memories. In the second, the body becomes the place where to make visible anew – sewn together in an adult gesture – the memories and the culture that the artist has collected over the years also while far from home. Wearing this mantel-archive-disposable home⁴ allows her to both show and shelter the intimate self, and to speak as a woman artist from a place of protection (like a house is).

It would not be right to highlight only the personal, autobiographical dimension of her body in the work though. In the conscious process to continuously mold the space for her own voice ‘in-betweens’ (facts and memories, East and West, personal and collective history of trauma), Tamuna’s works call in action also other people’s bodies and with them stories of ‘broken’ homes and attempts to rebuild new ones often rearranging and recontextualizing objects, fragments taken from houses left to escape war or violence (“The Corridors of Conflict. Abkhazia 1989-1995”, “Supra of Her Own” are the ones that come to my mind here, as they show different ways to do that).

The new works presented on the occasion of this solo show continue this fertile intertwining between the body and a sense of home, as a place of grounding and protection especially when one is on the move. This time, the numerous layers of a personal and collective history of trauma and (forced) displacement take the form of minimal and deliberately simple signs, dense in their dryness. The works result from a process of removal and distillation, rather than accumulation of traces and documents: **there is a search for essentiality.**

Each blanket with its bright colors and geometric motifs hosts specific prints, intentionally abstract at first sight. The titles of the pieces help us to identify what we are looking at, while the signs of use on the blankets are clues to the existence of a layered history.

Layed on the gray and blue checkered fabric, we have an organic entangled set of lines and points: **a map**. We do not know the identity of this territory. Is it an existing landscape? What is its current name and was it the same before the war? Is it an earthly territory at all? On the yellow and red blanket, it stands out a beautiful, sophisticated image made of lines and numbers. It is a **set of instructions** to make a portable home, **a tent**, and it comes from a manual, part of the ongoing research for ‘the Mantel’. This key-element of the artist’s archive is also present on a different multi-color blanket, as a clear cut, almost abstract design of an **open mantel**. Finally, the pink and green blanket hosts a series of very intriguing elements. This time it is the verse of **a lullaby**, whose words are, however, hard to grasp. The artist, indeed, has decided to highlight the space in between the letters in order to make visible “what is behind

⁴ “The Mantle embodies a process of patterning my own mantle as a possible wrap, a straightjacket, a portable home, a tent, a diary.” – the artist states about this work in her portfolio.

those words”⁵. Differently than in “Supra of Her Own”⁶, the intention is to move away from the words as carriers of meaning, and leave space to a (childhood) memory of a singing voice. The attention here is for a more intimate, visceral sense of being home, that calls for the presence of, and a bond with another person, another body.

A map, a voice, (instructions for) a tent, a mantel. In this installation, I see a body who is fiercely committed to mimic a house, to recreate a sense of home. All the elements in the room are, indeed, somehow tools to position, ground, protect temporarily oneself: ways to create a home away from home, especially if in a new, unknown territory. Together they make **a survival kit**, which the artist confidently offers to everyone as a conceptual tool to ground or reground oneself wherever one is.

Taking the vulnerable position of the displaced person as the starting point, the artist’s work revolves more and more around the idea of a ‘safe space’ in the form of an emergency dwelling (like a portable home) that shelters her creative processes allowing her to gather experiences, process them and pass them on.

What we see in the room is the tangible effect of such artistic development.

(4 September 2021)

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⁵ the artist in conversation with the writer.

⁶ The artist had used embroidered language for the first time in “Supra of Her Own”, where excerpts from a series of interviews with Georgian women survivors of domestic violence were embroidered on tablecloths, known locally as ‘supra’.