

# Tolia Astakhishvili

with

Zurab Astakhishvili

James Richards

Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili

Kirsty Bell

Vera Palme

Ser Serpas

# THE FIRST FINGER

Tolia Astakhishvili's *The First Finger* profoundly transforms the space of the Bonner Kunstverein. Realised across architectural interventions, installation, paintings, drawings and moving images, the exhibition comprises a large body of newly conceived work, alongside collaborations with Zurab Astakhishvili and James Richards, and contributions by Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili, Kirsty Bell, Vera Palme and Ser Serpas.

Tolia Astakhishvili's materially charged practice keeps returning to the lived environment: to the composition and logic it acquires over time, to how it shapes and is shaped by its dwellers. There is a constant slippage between the need to create spaces of protection and continuity, and the compulsion towards more destructive and destabilising impulses. In some ways, this is a reflection on survival, or more specifically on *surviving*, and the ways in which the spirit of life and liveness rubs off on material environments. For Astakhishvili, it is a practice of attending to the discarded, to objects that have been used over time, employing and re-conceiving them beyond the functions they were once assigned.

The title of the show, *The First Finger*, testifies to a certain grappling with the idea of an embodied container, one where the integrity of inside and outside is stubbornly volatile. A body exposed to critically low temperatures sacrifices extremities to focus circulation in the core. It is an ambivalent, at times violent image that speaks of care and the labour of keeping things alive, even though they may be painful and compromised. This tension haunts the work in ways that start small and radiate outwards—rooted, specific, then traveling. Moving through the exhibition, there is an intimate, dreamlike quality perforated by piercing encounters with the 'world out there'. In shifting between these registers, Tolia Astakhishvili conjures a sense of instability that starts from the human body but also evokes broader social and political dimensions. This porousness is further reflected in the formulation of *The First Finger* across two chapters, at Bonner Kunstverein and Haus am Waldsee. In a process of layering and accumulation, Astakhishvili treats space and time as something permeable, opening up worm holes and resonances between the two venues – a process traced and expanded on in newly commissioned writings by Kirsty Bell.

Tolia Astakhishvili's logic of zooming in and out, of slipping between realism and abstraction, unfolds ways of seeing that encompass large-scale spatial constructions as well as more intimate forms. A recurring element in *The First Finger* is the miniature and the model. The model house as proxy for the real thing, as plan or projection, an intersection of reality and play. The process of channeling the conditions and spirit of a material opens up to the possibility of a third mind, of a collaborative space between intention and matter. This logic also carries over into the collaborative works in *The First Finger*. In her work with James Richards, collaged and fractured stills become animated, perambulating videos that keep blurring the experience of inside and out. The scenes have a painterly quality, layering and smudging

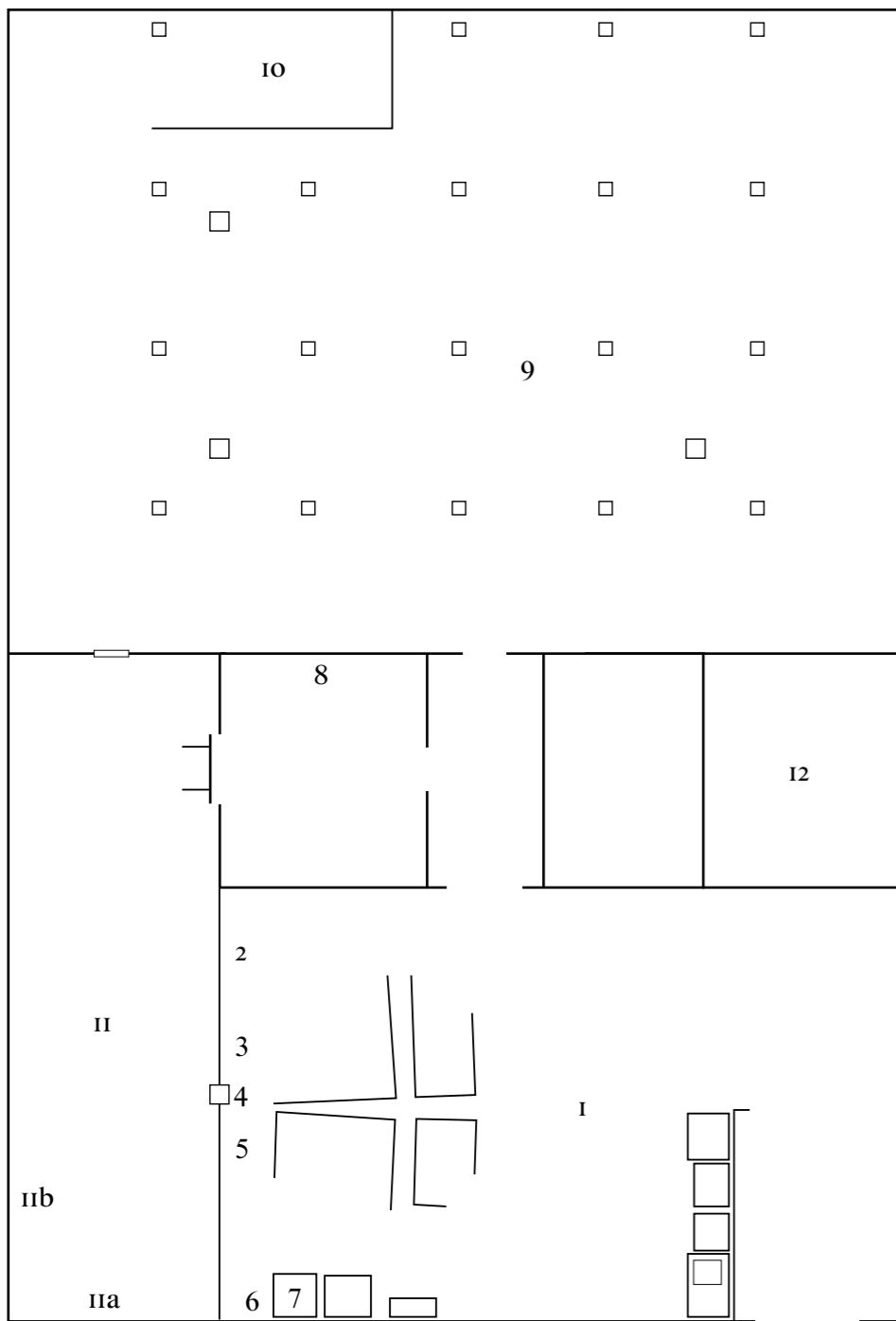
what we might think of as the real and the imaginary. Space is approached as something experiential, as a kind of metaphorical body with circulations, openings, limbs, and pragmatic material forms – plasterboard, filler, vents and other infrastructures unraveled.

In the context of Tolia Astakhishvili's practice, survival is an ambivalent grappling with the difficulty of inhabiting the world, of existing within a counterpoint of assertion and doubt. To consider protection beyond the sphere of self-care and safeguarding of the tangible involves risk, one which Astakhishvili is acutely aware of, one she can't quite leave alone.

*The First Finger* at Bonner Kunstverein is curated by Fatima Hellberg.

The show is developed alongside an associated programme of events, including a performance by Michael Kleine and Roman Lemberg on 20 May, and an evening of music, film and poetry, curated in collaboration with James Richards on 7 July.

*The First Finger* is realised in two chapters: chapter I at Bonner Kunstverein (25 March – 30 July 2023), and chapter II at Haus am Waldsee in Berlin, curated by Beatrice Hilke (23 June – 24 September 2023).



- 1 Tolia Astakhishvili, *Our garden is in Bonn*, 2023, mixed media, dimensions variable
- 2 Tolia Astakhishvili, *Decoy*, 2023, oil on canvas, 100 × 70 × 2 cm
- 3 Tolia Astakhishvili, *digging, planting and fiddling*, 2020, oil on canvas, 30 × 40 × 2 cm
- 4 Vera Palme, (*The Painting of*) *Stephen King's Survivor Type*, 2019, laminated text
- 5 Tolia Astakhishvili, *Dissolving Patient*, 2020, oil, acrylic and India ink on canvas, 30 × 40 × 2 cm
- 6 Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili, *Tolia*, 2023, analogue C-prints, 43 × 51 cm

- 7 Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili, *Natural is Supernatural*, 2023, analogue C-print, 32 × 41 cm
- 8 Tolia Astakhishvili and James Richards, *I Remember (Depth of Flattened Cruelty)*, 2023, digital animation, 10 min
- 9 Tolia Astakhishvili, *Entire*, 2023, mixed media, dimensions variable
- 10 Tolia Astakhishvili and Zurab Astakhishvili, *I can't imagine how can I die if I am so alive*, 1986–, collages and cardboard models, dimensions variable
- 11 *Lust Room* with:
  - a) Ser Serpas, *Untitled*, 2022, oil on canvas, 215 × 227 cm

- b) Ser Serpas, *Untitled*, 2022, oil on canvas, 252 × 227 cm
- 12 Tolia Astakhishvili and James Richards, *Half-Life*, 2023, print on jesmonite panels, wall-mounted vitrines, video loops, ephemera and printed materials, dimensions variable

All works courtesy the artists and:  
 Tolia Astakhishvili: LC Queisser, Tbilisi  
 James Richards: Cabinet, London;  
 Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin;  
 Rodeo, London, and Piraeus  
 Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili: Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris; Galerie Molitor, Berlin;  
 Micky Schubert, Berlin  
 Ser Serpas: Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin;  
 Karma International, Zürich;  
 LC Queisser, Tbilisi; Maxwell Graham/  
 Essex Street, New York City

1 Tolia Astakhishvili, *Our garden is in Bonn*, 2023  
 Tolia Astakhishvili, *Our garden is in Bonn*, is a newly conceived work across architectural interventions, sculpture, painting, drawing and found material. The installation dialogues with the space, introducing a painterly logic of composition and abstraction, whilst also decidedly bringing in elements from the “world out there,” found, gathered and accumulated. Many of the structures and the matter within them evoke a lived environment and the efforts, limping at times, to structure and organise a life, moments of shelter and domesticity are implied but also recurrently incomplete, unstable or overbrimming with a barely contained unrest.

4 Vera Palme, (*The Painting of*) *Stephen King's Survivor Type*, 2019  
 Reflecting on her text in the context of *The First Finger*, artist and writer Vera Palme has shared the following lines: “The character in the Stephen King story is motivated to survive because he wants to tell his story in order to make things right and have his old life back – redemption – for all the wrong reasons, I guess. So I chose not to give him any motivation in my text, but the basic need to survive and to negotiate the economy of ‘what can I live without in order to live’. Eating and speaking – both done with the mouth.”

6 Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili, *Tolia*, 2023  
 7 Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili, *Natural is Supernatural*, 2023  
 Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili’s work *Natural is Supernatural* is an analogue photograph of a domestic piece of fabric with red flowers. The motif and its unsharp quality conjures up a sense of material memory – the indistinct outlines and smell, texture and feel of material from a vaguely remembered interior. Here the mundane is also given an undertone of awe, of the shimmer around the edges when everyday things are perceived in a certain light. The framed print is flanked by three C-prints entitled *Tolia*, semi-transparent representations of wounds.

8 Tolia Astakhishvili and James Richards, *I Remember (Depth of Flattened Cruelty)*  
 Building on their long-running joint practice, *I Remember (Depth of Flattened Cruelty)*, is a newly conceived digital animation. The work has grown out of a cannibalistic process whereby past collaborative work by the artists are folded into new iterations. It is an approach that smudges the edges between documentation of past work and a generative process of shared making.

The video introduces volume and perspective into two-dimensional collages: a continuous folding of “worlds within worlds” and a woozy movement in and out of dream-like states and stark imagery. The soundtrack, developed with composer Max Bloching, draws on field recordings and musical fragments to both channel the imagery, and work against it.

9 Tolia Astakhishvili, *Entire*, 2023  
 The installation *Entire* halves the large hall of Bonner Kunstverein. By lowering the 7m ceiling, an inaccessible vertical expanse and absent presence is introduced. To determine the edges of where this work begins and ends is difficult, instead it envelopes and includes details in its totality. Through a multiplication of pillars, and elements of revealed and concealed infrastructure, Tolia Astakhishvili produces a space teetering on the edge between anonymous functionality – a car park, a cellar with rumbling vents, and a form of subconscious space with a dreamlike and unsharp quality.

10 Tolia Astakhishvili and Zurab Astakhishvili, *I can't imagine how can I die if I am so alive*, 1986–  
*I can't imagine how can I die if I am so alive* is a collaboration between Tolia and her father, Zurab Astakhishvili. The hundreds of collages have been developed through a call and response logic, magazine clippings combined with the faces of an extended network of friends, family and vague acquaintances gathered from the internet. This is a practice which Zurab arrives at with a logic from not being an artist *per se*: there is a functional practicality: image as communication, and as a game, one collage following another as part of a conversation between father and daughter but also a wider semiotics of images, intimacy and projection.

11a) Ser Serpas, *Untitled*, 2022  
 11b) Ser Serpas, *Untitled*, 2022  
 Ser Serpas work returns to the body – explored both in its remarkable resilience and with a frontal robustness as well as a fragile and wounded state. Although these bodies are often naked they are not nudes, perhaps more closely understood as the unclothed human animal. As such they are also connected with a long tradition and experience of suffering, a fate which in the work of Serpas is not fully devoid of pleasure.

12 Tolia Astakhishvili and James Richards, *Half-Life*, 2023  
 Tolia Astakhishvili’s and James Richards’ installation *Half-Life* is set in a room conceived as the appendix of the show – an integrated part, yet detachable. The

space has been articulated in dialogue with its outside, its proximity to the Artothek storage shelves, glass pavilion, the organism of adjoining technical area and office spaces. The wall mural draws on Robert Colquhoun's *Woman with a birdcage* from 1948, an angular modernist portrait of a woman contemplating a bird taken out of its cage, another instance of containers within containers. In the wall mounted glass vitrines (another container), views from a ship passing through bad weather joins an assemblage of fake snow and towels, a form of limping logic, leaning into the strangeness of juxtaposition and simultaneity that are part of dream states and the everyday alike.

## I. PLANS AND DRAWINGS

We are all dwellers. Inhabitation is our thing. And there is no way around the fact that dwelling necessitates building. But all rooms and buildings belong as much to mind-space as to the material world. Think of all the dreams that go into a blueprint, the visions of a perfect home; visions that expand through desire, becoming so embellished and unwieldy that they remain forever on the drawing board, never quite managing the leap from idea to reality. Think also of those hazy childhood memories, that bedroom in your grandmother's house that slips in and out of focus. Or those photographed interiors, with elegant furnishings and sun-drenched windows, that we can so easily imagine ourselves in.

When it comes to actual bricks and mortar, however, our relations to buildings are of mutual obligation. For buildings are not only lived in, but they are also living. Construction is only the first step of what evolves into a ceaseless task of preservation. A certain kind of attention is required to tend to a living building. We must monitor its weak points and look out for symptoms that point to damage. Keep an eye on the weather, let in air, and protect it from the sun. When attention ceases and maintenance halts, a shadow existence emerges; one of thickening cobwebs, tidelines of dust, and abandoned objects that serve no purpose. Porous surfaces allow in moisture, drawing damp landscapes on interior walls. Floorboards buckle, mould spreads, squalor slowly encroaches.

A living building suffers if neglected and displays evidence of its abuse. But nurturing should not be confused with maintaining a state of perfection, a hermetic spotlessness, or hygiene bordering on hypochondria. No, the edges of a lively interior are inevitably tarnished and dented through the rub of small-scale daily encounters, comings and goings, decisions, mistakes. An interior can register its dweller's despair, just as much as the brightness of optimism. Or the helplessness of being stuck, paralyzed, perhaps, within the confines of a superstructure – political, geographic, familial or economic – that strips away the possibility of acting freely, following a chosen path, or simply finding a place in which to dwell.

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Tolia Astakhishvili possesses a spatial kind of imagination. She can look at a plan and envisage a space, as if flying over and around it like a disembodied camera eye. A linear, language-based mind like mine is constantly searching for concrete evidence with which to pin things down. For Tolia, simultaneity – whereby a space exists as a plan, a model, a projected vision, a memory and a real place – is at the root of her enterprise. Hers is a multi-channel undertaking. Even better than a single space is two exhibitions at once: and two massive spaces at that, the Bonner Kunstverein and Berlin's Haus am Waldsee.

Hers is an athletic approach: the drawings, plans, models, conversations are all part of the training, the limbering up before the marathon task of install, when the imagined realm is translated into a physical interior. From mental space to here and now.

In Tolia's Berlin studio, as well as architectural models and 3D plans on computer screens, are delicate paintings with pale chalky surfaces. There are boxes full of drawings of intertwined bodies, involutions of landscapes and limbs infused with sex and hints of violence. Her exhibition projects, she has told me, often begin with the desire to simply hang a picture on the wall. But this action is immediately insufficient once the walls themselves are considered. The walls! When attended to, they fill the space with possibility. Patches of damage and repair begin to speak, plasterboard alternatives and spatial realignments suggest themselves. A passageway is truncated and a new threshold proposed. Why not move that wall and put the kitchen there? Bring the lofty ceiling down to scale. And what is down that staircase? Imagination trumps architectural authority. The exhibition space assumes a new dream logic that overrides the coordinates of here and now. An alternative spatial arena appears that nudges the present aside. Both built realities are held in suspension, oscillating, temporary. Like a landscape in a painting, we can enter it in our mind – this room in which we find ourselves – and observe it from a mental remove. We can zoom in and out, between immersion and analysis, understand it as construction while still giving in to its fantasy.

What is this space? Whose is it? Our access to this exhibition hall is thrown into question by other functions suggested, that have to do with other people, unknown people that are no longer here. Are we allowed to look at all these things that clearly belong to someone else? Should we even be here? A hint of trespass creeps in. Where is that drawing that should simply hang on the wall? There it is, engulfed in overlapping registers, absorbed by surrogate architecture, or perhaps, in fact, it emerges from it, having now found its frame.

*Kirsty Bell*

#### TOLIA ASTAKHISHVILI

lives and works in Berlin and Tbilisi. Recent exhibitions include: *I think it's closed*, Kunstverein Bielefeld (2023); *The Main Entrance*, Shahin Zarinbal, Berlin (2022); *I am the Secret Meat*, Felix Gaudlitz, Vienna (2022); *In Heat Wind Wounds Holes* at LC Queisser, Tbilisi (2022); *When we were monsters*, Haus Mödrath, Kerpen (2021). Her ongoing Installation *Tenant* (2021–), a collaboration with James Richards, has been included in several exhibitions, such as *The Displacement Effect* curated by Kirsty Bell with Jochum Rodgers at Capitain Petzel, Berlin (2021); *The Holding Environment*, Bonner Kunstverein (2021); *Ache* at Cabinet Gallery, London (2018) and *SPEED 2* at Malmö Konsthall (2019).

#### ZURAB ASTAKHISHVILI

lives and works in Tbilisi, Georgia. He is a retired medical doctor with a focus on respiratory medicine and an alpinist. In his spare time, and more recently full time, he has developed an artistic practice and collaboration with his daughter, Tolia Astakhishvili.

#### KETUTA ALEXI-MESKHISHVILI

lives and works in Berlin. Recent exhibitions include: *Back wall project*, Kunsthalle Basel (2022); *Boiled Language*, LC Queisser, Tbilisi (2020); *Mother, Feelings, Cognac*, Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris (2019) and *Hallow Body*, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York (2016). Selected group exhibitions include: *An Ocean Standing*, LC Queisser, Tbilisi (2022); *The Displacement Effect*, Capitain Petzel, Berlin (2021); *Cherries*, Galeria Arsenal, Bialystok (2020) and *Still Life in Contemporary Photography*, Kunst Haus Wien (2018).

#### KIRSTY BELL

is a writer and critic based in Berlin. Recent books include: *The Undercurrents: A Story of Berlin* (2022); Kirsty Bell and Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili, *Boiled Language* (2020) and *The Artist's House: From Workplace to Artwork* (2012). Bell is a regular contributor to exhibition catalogues and art journals, and has curated exhibitions, including *The Displacement Effect*, Capitain Petzel, Berlin (2021) and *Ian White. Any frame is a thrown voice*, with Mike Sperlinger, Camden Arts Centre, London (2018).

#### JAMES RICHARDS

lives and works in Berlin. Recent exhibitions include: *Internal Litter* at Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin (2022); *When We Were Monsters* at Haus Mödrath, Kerpen (2021); *Alms for the Birds* at Castello di Rivoli, Turin (2020), *SPEED 2* at Malmö Konsthall (2019) and *SPEED* at Künstlerhaus Stuttgart (2018), both with Leslie Thornton. Select group exhibitions include: *Penumbra* at Fondazione In Between Art Film, Venice (2022); *The Displacement Effect* at Capitain Petzel, Berlin (2021) and *The Botanical Mind* at Camden Arts Centre, London (2020). Since 2018 he recurrently works with Tolia Astakhishvili, including as part of *The Holding Environment*, Bonner Kunstverein (2021); *Ache*, Cabinet Gallery, London (2019) and *Slight Ache*, Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff (2018). In 2017 Richards represented Wales at the 57th Venice Biennale.

#### SER SERPAS

lives and works in Geneva. Recent exhibitions include: *Hall*, Swiss Institute, New York (2023); *Monakhos*, LC Queisser, Tbilisi (2022); *Head Banger Boogie*, Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin (2022) and *Models*, Karma International, Zürich (2020). Selected group exhibitions include: *It's Personal*, ODC Chinatown, New York (2023); *Larcobaleno riposa sulla strada*, Istituto Svizzero, Rom (2022); *And Your Flash Is My Greatest Poem*, Antenna Space, Sjanghai (2022) and *Benefit of the Doubt*, Deborah Schamoni, München (2021).

Tolia Astakhishvili  
*The First Finger*

Tolia Astakhishvili  
with  
Zurab Astakhishvili  
James Richards  
Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili  
Kirsty Bell  
Vera Palme  
Ser Serpas

Curated by Fatima Hellberg

Bonner Kunstverein  
25 March – 30 July 2023

*The First Finger* is realised  
in two chapters, with the forth-  
coming part taking place at  
Haus am Waldsee in Berlin,  
curated by Beatrice Hilke  
(23 June–September 24, 2023).

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*Opening hours*  
Tuesday–Sunday, 12–6pm

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