

# e-flux Criticism

## Tolia Astakhishvili's "between father and mother"

Chris Murtha



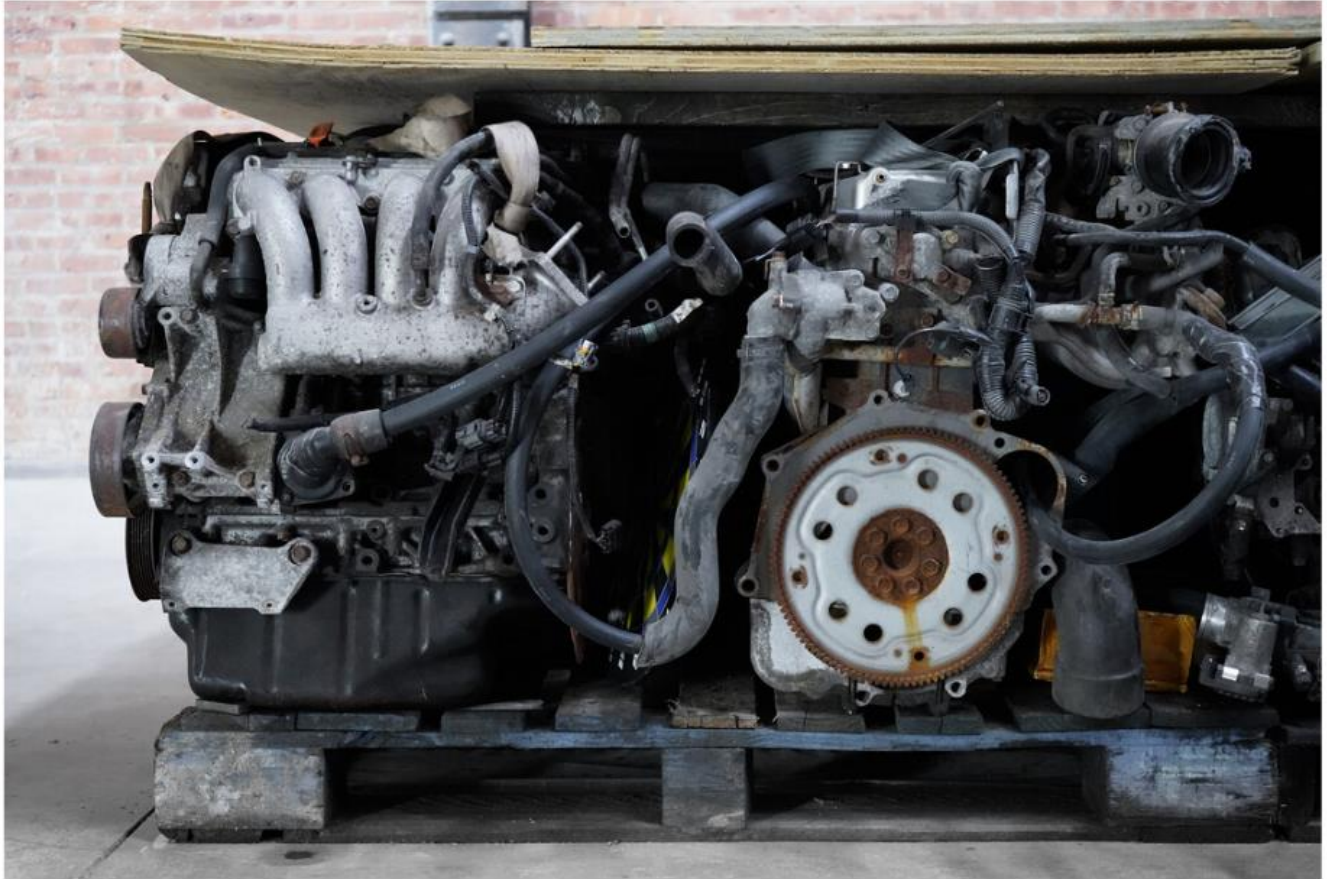
View of Tolia Astakhishvili's "between father and mother" at SculptureCenter, New York, 2024.  
Photo by Charles Benton.



View of Tolia Astakhishvili's "between father and mother" at SculptureCenter, New York, 2024. (Center on floor) Tolia Astakhishvili and Dylan Peirce, *I am different when I am alone*, 2024. Sound, fan, plasterboard, vent covers, 180 x 140 x 40 cm). Commissioned by SculptureCenter, New York. Courtesy the artists. (Center on wall) Tolia Astakhishvili, *People like us in war*, 2024. Ink, board, 37 x 91 cm. (Right) Tolia Astakhishvili, *Boy 4*, 2023. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 46 x 41 cm. Both works courtesy the artist and LC Queisser, Tbilisi. Photo by Charles Benton.



View of Tolia Astakhishvili's "between father and mother" at SculptureCenter, New York, 2024. (Center) Tolia Astakhishvili, *The endless House*, 2024. Cement board, particle board, plaster, sound by Dylan Peirce, 365.8 x 589.5 x 69.2 cm. Commissioned by SculptureCenter, New York. Courtesy the artist and LC Queisser, Tbilisi. (Centre right) Katinka Bock, *Some and any fleeting*, 3, 2022. Gelatin silver print on baryta paper, image: 24.1 x 36.5 cm; paper: 27.4 x 39.4 cm. Courtesy the artist and 303 Gallery, New York. Photo by Charles Benton.



Tolia Astakhishvili, *The art of sleeping* (detail), 2024. Car engines, pallets, plywood, cardboard, found objects, four-channel sound by Dylan Peirce, 87.6 x 386.1 x 231.1 cm. Co-commissioned by SculptureCenter, New York and Hartwig Art Foundation, Amsterdam Collection. Hartwig Art Foundation. Photo by Dylan Peirce.



Tolia Astakhishvili, *When the others are within us* (detail), 2024. Plasterboard, wood, oil, coffee, pigment, cement, hooks, found objects, paper, pencil, ink, light, 920.4 x 129.9 x 135.9 cm. Commissioned by SculptureCenter, New York. Made possible by Valeria Napoleone XX SculptureCenter. Courtesy the artist and LC Queisser, Tbilisi. Photo by Charles Benton.



Tolia Astakhishvili and James Richards, *Our Friends In The Audience* (detail), 2024. Eight digital prints; seven prints at 217.8 x 118.1 cm); one print at 160 x 114.3 cm. Commissioned by SculptureCenter, New York. Courtesy the artists. Photo by Charles Benton.

## **SculptureCenter, New York**

### **May 9–August 12, 2024**

Built from conventional architectural materials including drywall and cement, and later stained with coffee, dirt, and pigment to mimic the wear and tear of time, Tolia Astakhishvili's installations hover between construction and destruction. SculptureCenter's brick and cast-iron building, initially designed for repairing trolleys and later used to manufacture derricks, hoists, and cranes, proves a fitting host for the Georgian artist's first exhibition in the United States. Having previously explored the mutability of domestic spaces, and how they accumulate the marks and alterations of their inhabitants, Astakhishvili here contends with a formerly industrial site, while still remaining focused on what spaces tell us about humans come and gone.

As she did with two recent exhibitions in Germany, Astakhishvili incorporates collaborative projects and works by peers into her installation—an extension of, rather than challenge to, authorship. A microcosm of the exhibiting institution, her fabricated environments become fleeting hosts for her own and others' artworks.<sup>1</sup> The first sculpture visitors encounter is Astakhishvili's *The endless House* (all works 2024 unless otherwise stated), a freestanding cement and particleboard wall modeled on those found in the building's basement. The structure's narrow cavities harbor a sculpture and photograph by Katinka Bock and reverberate with the sound of approaching horns. Similarly evoking locomotion, the car engines sandwiched between warped plywood and pallets in *The art of sleeping* purr with the audio of rumbling motors. Composed from field recordings with frequent collaborator Dylan Peirce, these and other soundtracks permeate the gallery and confuse our perception of interior and exterior, actual and represented.

Astakhishvili's installations foreground the typically hidden channels, like piping and air ducts, that course through our buildings. But the artist's fragmented conduits perform no function, leading nowhere and making only imagined connections. Music and voices carry over from one end of the exhibition to another, as if through the vents in her sculptures. A corroded faucet and an inoperative system of water pipes turns one of the four cell-like compartments of *Can't stop living*—a cross-section seemingly extracted from a housing block or a Brutalist prison—into a haunting washroom. In each room, the same video plays on identical screens, like a program broadcast to separate apartments. Produced with James Richards, *I Remember (Depth of Flattened Cruelty)* (2023–ongoing) navigates viewers through a glitchy, digitally animated and collaged walkthrough of the collaborators' past installations. Discretely scrawled onto the unpainted walls are wispy drawings of spectral figures and phrases (“Yesterday feels very distant to me,” “Our macho cruelties are amplified,” and so on) that suggest that even these claustrophobic hollows can provide meaningful refuge.

With two large debris chutes that descend from above and open onto the floor, Astakhishvili has transformed the cavernous main gallery into a decommissioned facility. At the base of each sheetrock structure is a scattered array of secondhand objects: necklaces and bicycle chains; scraps of cloth; silverware and cake molds; trinkets and plastic toys; machine parts, tools, and hardware; and numerous model houses and boats. Found throughout the exhibition, miniature houses, scale models, and 3D-printed plans are a recurring motif in Astakhishvili's practice, representing an ideal form, a future desired or a past remembered. One prominently situated found model, a student project wrapped in a clear trash bag and ready for disposal, is a humbling reminder of how quickly dreams can be dashed.

Capped with grates and lined on the inside with coat hooks and wire shelves that catch tumbling objects, the shafts double as filters. What passes through and what gets sifted out becomes a bleak metaphor for the movement of people. With so much apparently left behind—abandoned in haste but not necessarily discarded—it's hard not to think of buildings hurriedly evacuated during a war or natural disaster. *People like us in war*, an ink drawing on a torn piece of board that depicts silhouetted figures trudging across a barren landscape, makes the issue of forced emigration more explicit.<sup>2</sup> With its desolate spaces, fabricated deterioration, and castoff belongings all alluding, if obliquely, to involuntary displacement, Astakhishvili's exhibition is especially impactful in this historical moment.

Outside, in the gravel courtyard, near a circular arrangement of folding chairs that indicate a recent gathering, Astakhishvili has sutured together two separate sections of chain-link fencing with heavy duty chain to form the sculpture *One to one*. The care inherent in her crude but reparative act is undermined by the realization that she has only strengthened the fence's capacity to divide. It's the simplest sculpture in the show, barely more than a gesture, but it successfully encapsulates the ever-shifting tension between the desire to connect with others and the need to feel safe at home.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> All of the artists featured here were also included, among others, in Astakhishvili's two-part exhibition, “The First Finger” at Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn (March 25–July 30, 2023), and “The First Finger (chapter II)” at Haus am Waldsee, Berlin (June 23–September 24, 2023).
- <sup>2</sup> Russia's invasions of Ukraine, which followed a similar attack on Georgia in 2008, are especially resonant for Astakhishvili. Speaking of the Georgian refugees from that earlier conflict, she recently said: “You can see so much pain, the hope to return home, but their homes don't exist any longer. ... I'm not interested in nostalgia, but it is the need to have a home, across all classes of society, that I return to.” Chris McCormack, “Profile: Tolia Astakhishvili,” *Art Monthly*, no. 467 (June 2023): 15.