

# *Althuis Hofland Fine Arts*

## **The Gemma**

“The Gemma” is a space for collateral and alternating exhibitions, screenings, performances, miniature art fairs, talks, shops, bars and disco’s; A hybrid space or whatever is possible within a narrow space of 10m<sup>2</sup> underneath the gallery.

**Taus Makhacheva (1983, RU)**

**Baida**

**Video**

**Performance scripted by Tim Etchells. Performed by Zubair Dzhavatkhanov and Artem Krupin.**

**Voices: Deborah Pearson, Madeleine Botet de Lacaze and Andy Field.**

**Production supported by Gazprombank and Art Finance, Moscow**

**8 September - 6 October 2018**

Baida is a video of a performance that was to take place daily during the 57th Venice Biennale (2017) in the open waters of the Adriatic Sea, where several performers were supposed to appear and disappear on a capsized boat transported from the Caspian Sea of Dagestan to the open sea in front of the Venice lagoon. The performance was solely addressed to the biennial visitors via the coördinates of the event, and never actually took place. The work evolved from multiple conversations that the artist had with various fishermen living in the village of Starii Terek of Dagestan and working on the Caspian Sea. A recurrent motif in their stories is the risk of being lost at sea and never being found. In the event that a boat capsizes, the fishermen tie themselves the prow so that their families will be able to find their bodies and mourn. The work reflects on the precarity of human lives struggling for survival, against overwhelming economic and natural forces. At the same it is a comment on the expectations and behaviour of art biennial visitors. The video is a fictionalized visit of the performance location by Biennial visitors during the opening days, scripted by Tim Etchells.

Makhacheva grew up in Dagestan, in the Caucasian part of Russia in which most of her works are rooted. The complex relationship between history, politics of memory and contemporary life, serve as starting point for most of the works.

*Taus Makhacheva was born in Moscow in 1983. Her work has been included in Manifesta 12 Palermo (2018), the 57th Venice Biennale (2017) curated by Christine Macel, the 4th Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art curated by Peter Weibel, and The Liverpool Biennial (2012) amongst many other exhibitions.*

*In 2014 she won the Future of Europe prize at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Leipzig. Her works are in the collections of Tate Modern (London), MuHKA (Antwerp), Moscow Museum of Modern Art, National Centre for Contemporary Arts (Moscow), Sharjah Art Foundation (Sharjah), P.S. Gamzatova Dagestan Museum of Fine Art; Gazprombank Collection, Vehbi Koç Foundation (Istanbul), Yarat Foundation (Baku), Kadist Art Foundation (Paris, San Francisco); the collections of Uppsala Konstmuseum and Videosight Foundation (Turin) Makhacheva studied at London College of Communication, University of the Arts London. In 2007, she completed a BA program in Contemporary Art at Goldsmiths, University of London. In 2006, she graduated in World Economics from the Russian State University for the Humanities. From 2008 to 2009, she studied New Artistic Strategies at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Moscow. In 2013 she received a Master’s degree in Contemporary Art from Royal College of Art in London.*

# *Althuis Hofland Fine Arts*

## **“Conversation in a boat”**

The artist Taus Makhacheva talks with Malika Aliyeva, the manager of Taus Makhacheva’s studio and producer of the work *Baida*.

**Taus:** Let’s remember how we filmed, why we filmed and what we filmed. Tell me what the work began with as you see it.

**Malika:** I think that for me the work began with the meeting with Shamil Fiksa, when I was brought face to face with the theme of survival. When you are told what it’s like for someone without food or drink, to be in the water for 9 days in a storm, you really do start to think how you would behave and I am not at all sure that I would have fought. Perhaps I would have just let myself go and that would be that.

What do you think?

**T:** Yes. I think that that was specifically what struck me in the whole business. You and me, we live in a completely different reality, where tenacity manifests itself, if indeed it does, in a whole other way. And when you come across people who spend 30 days in a small boat that was simply squeezed between the ice floes as they formed like Abakar, or when you talk one to one with a person who spent those nine days without hope in the water, you get a different perspective on your own life. You simply begin to think about what motivates you in everyday existence. Probably it’s that conscious attitude to risk, the awareness of the risk, awareness of the danger that you face every day because of the way of life that you have chosen. That is probably what struck me from the outset on that trip when we travelled with Makhad to the island of Chechen. When you are working on some product, flashes like that appear that you then come back to time and again, and you realize that you need to work with that because you can’t forget it. You try to think up a work because you can’t forget a phrase, can’t forget a gesture, can’t forget a story you’ve been told. In this case it was the story that Makhad told about the fishermen tying themselves to the bow of the capsized boat that kept afloat because of the empty barrels. If the boat overturned in a storm, the motor would drag it down, but the bow would remain on the surface and the fishermen clutched onto that. And when they had no strength to hold on, they tied themselves on, either so as not to drown if they went crazy or else so their relatives could find their bodies and give them a funeral. That’s a story you simply can’t forget.

**M:** Yes. That was the most striking thing on that trip. I also remember about Maga – Maga Kamysh, I think his name was – who was taken prisoner in Kazakhstan and held captive there, but he escaped.

**T:** It was that Maga Kamysh who we went to Novy Chechen to look for. That, by the way, is the start of another amazing story. He was captured by the Kazahstan shore, where the sturgeon are more abundant, by the local poachers, who made him work for them. Each time when he went out to work on their nets, he poured off a small amount of petrol into a bottle and tied it to the nets. And when he had stocked up enough fuel, he used the boat to get away from them. I don’t remember exactly, but I think he was a captive for a few years. And you and I went to look for him and people told us: “That’s right. He’s the very Maga who was kept prisoner.” They say things like that all the time there.

## *Althuis Hofland Fine Arts*

My student Olya Sizoi from GITIS (the Russian Institute of Theatre Arts) did a project for which she was looking for a Magomed whose wife had recently given birth to a son and who drives a black Lada Priora (popular Russian car brand). But that applies to every second man in Daghestan. And so she compiled a portrait of one and at the same time several Magas.

But it seems to me that it was a different story about Kamysh: about some fisherman getting marooned and surviving because he ate reeds (kamysh). But I can't remember exactly.

**M:** It's interesting that during our first trip no-one would tell us real-life stories, they wouldn't open up to us, except they happened to let it slip about Fiksa. Because some young girl artists had turned up and for them everything should be straightforward and nice.

**T:** I think it's a question of the way they're used to seeing things. What seems amazing to us is a commonplace story to them.

I was very upset by the existence of one and the same attitude to those places. Nowhere did anyone write about the risk, about the fact that people put out to sea each time, knowing that they might not come back. And perhaps it would be important not only to tell about them being "bio-terrorists", as the mass media put it.

Listen, thinking back to the filming, what do you think was the most difficult thing about the shooting process?

**M:** I remembered how we looked for the first boat. We decided to do some more takes, went out to look for it and couldn't find it. It was then that I clearly grasped that if we can't find a nine-metre boat in a small patch of sea, what hope is there of finding a little human being. It seems simply unrealistic.

**T:** On the other hand, perhaps now we'll have faith and not give up if such a situation occurs.

**M:** You know, what I took away is that people are brought together by responsibility for someone else. Shamil was kept going by the fact that he had a young lad in his care, Abakar had his son and another youngster with him. And I realize that often that's what keeps me going too. The fact that there's someone else as well.

**T:** Perhaps you're right, because I remember Abakar's words: "How could I not bring a son back to his mother?"

In point of fact, everything somehow came together. That story about the fisherman that prompted the filming, then the water itself around Venice, the works of Forensic Oceanography that I watched. For example, The Left-to-Die Boat from 2014 (<http://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/left-die-boat/>), where a boat carrying 63 migrants was not saved because countries argued over whose jurisdiction it was in. And also the poetry of Warsan Shire, which includes the line "I thought the sea was safer than the land". Thoughts in which you connect our everyday reality with that of other people. I again remember a passage from her poetry where she asks how people can be so haughty and think that does not concern them.

This is all cyclical: in the Second World War refugees from Europe arrived in Africa, while today refugees from Arab countries are arriving in Europe. Such a profane matter as the perception of art is also of significance: you see so many works about death, about the sea, about people drowning, and you think how can I make my work significant, avoid it being simply speculation. I pondered that for the whole year while you and I were travelling around.

## *Althuis Hofland Fine Arts*

That is why it seems to me that we travelled through those doubts. We met with people so as to resolve our doubts, and as a result a work like that appeared. And it is a very strange work, because I grasped that it was impossible to do a real-life performance, impossible to bring those fishermen there. You can make an announcement-label that says a performance is taking place every day in the waters of the Adriatic. In those same waters where the government of European countries is refusing to rescue boats carrying people.

Something is happening that does not concern us at all, that is too far off for us, the visitors of the Venice Biennale, to sail to.

Although the boat sank in the Caspian, in actual fact it's all one and the same expanse of water, where there are many invisible boats – and many invisible people.

When I was at Chioggia, not far from Venice, at the fish market, I spoke with one of the stallholders. He showed me his boat – the Vittoria Manuela II – on the GPS in his phone, the pinpointed location where it was just then. The visibility of some boats and the invisibility of others puts you in some kind of shock and stupor. You realize that there are several seas around us. Several seas, several oceans, several expanses of water, where some boats are totally visible, and others are an illusion. They are completely invisible.

And it seems to me that the form of this work – the text written by Tim Etchells in London on the basis of 70 pages of interviews that we took with various fishermen; the voices of the actors who recorded the text in London; my work with Sasha Khokhlov, when we put the sound onto the video that we shot in Daghestan in the Caspian, and all of that pretends to be a fictitious film shoot of arty people trying to find a performance in Venice. That is the only possible form of work about these invisible boats, invisible people. It is the only form that could combine within it those doubts, that uncertainty, visibility-invisibility, everything on which we spent almost a year of thinking and research.

**M:** I look back on the filming process and it's amazing the way people from a different reality believed in us, although they might not have fully understood us.

**T:** Yes, they believed that we were trying to do something outside of the bounds of the representation that they are used to. That's probably why they worked with us, not without some persuasion, admittedly. There were some lone fishermen, some from a base, from here and there. And they all came together.

Yet there was a lot of resistance in the work. I often think of the resistance that accompanied the filming. What does it mean? Do we need to overcome it or change direction? In the end we sank two boats. One was lost, because they didn't anchor it and it floated away. We sank the second after the first got found.

**M:** There was that dreadful fog as well, in which we lost Artyom in the boat because he had dropped his phone in the water during the first shoot. I remember the morning of the second shoot, when you had to either accept that you hadn't managed it or else see everything through to the end. Either untie yourself from the boat and drown or keep on going.

**T:** Maybe. I was very scared. Everyone was saying, "No, come back in a week's time... No, we won't manage to pull a second boat today." I had already brought all my secret weapons into play. Everyone was already worked up. I don't know, maybe that is what it means to see something through. Oh well, history will tell.