

THE PAST WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE PRESENT

(Attempted Interpretation of the Exposition
of Lia Bagrationi's A Mad Tea Party)

Ana Kldiashvili

Key words: contemporary art, exposition, associative fields, intertextuality, double coding
Illustrations: pp.248-251

A Mad Tea Party, Lia Bagrationi's latest landmark exposition, opened in Tbilisi in the spring of 2018 to bring together her works created in recent years and brand-new installations and objects. The exposition, based on a single concept displayed in three halls, contained several semantic lines. Here I will touch upon only one layer, i.e. line: the past which, in the postmodernist philosophy or art, is known to be based on the break of epistemological link with historical tradition. However, Ms. Lia Bagrationi's approach to the past is somewhat different—she makes it speak within the context of our times.

In the first of the three halls, art connoisseurs found themselves in a pretty extraordinary environment, total plainness and two rows of some kind of "colossi" of white draped bag cloth dresses hanging in equal distances to create a regular slow rhythm in the monumental space (ill. 1)—as though watching live headless female "creations." The columns in the hall were hidden in the "bodies," "dresses" of those creations making an impression of a single grandiose space. On entering the hall, a viewer plunged into a magnificent, monumental, mysterious atmosphere. The slow, vertical, even archaic rhythm totally transformed the space into a somewhat sacred, enigmatic setting. Here the text of the author's concept put up right in front of the entrance came to mind: "How many labels were tat-

toed on goddesses? How many types of bodies they were harnessed to? How many uniforms they had to fit in? How many archetypes they had to embody and what kind of paths they took before having this cup of tea: Emigration? Epos? Cradles? Cigarette kiosks? Faux tale castles? Church icons? Tight corsets? Burkas? In huts with chicken legs? On magazine covers? In cabarets? Salem? Porn websites? Next to the heroes? And I would ask out loud, where did they come? From sea foam? Or Earth? Maybe clay? Yes, women have been labeled in all possible ways, but it is they who carry the universe as a burden on the shoulders of the Atlantes. The sight evokes certain associations: The dressed creations also bring to mind the ancient caryatides yet, at the same time, the whole space may remind us of Egyptian hypostyle halls (associations may differ based on experience and knowledge). All in all, this space and the cloth of "colossi" in it create various "associative fields" (as Roland Barthes would have said) of the past for the viewer to enter and realize that the shapes reveal themselves in cultural codes containing symbols. Here the questions arise: What do the coded shapes refer to? What thought is encoded in them? What does the author want to say? What is there behind the intertextuality of the installation?

"The codes are fragments of that has always been already read, seen, done, experienced; the code is the

wake of that *already*,”¹ into which the viewer delves. Although the installation throws us back into the distant past, what we see is much like and, at the same time, very different from something that has “already been.” How does it differ? This question motivates to switch from the sensual level to that of thinking, to search out for and fathom the difference.

The biggest, most striking difference is the interpretation of an image. With the ancient caryatides, the woman is fully presented, while “the women” of the installation have no heads, i.e. consciousness.

The texture and body of the women also differ. The ancient marble goddesses are three dimensional, solid, and tangible. We clearly discern their shapes beneath the clothes, which rouses a sense of solidness, steadiness and, in a way, their permanent physical presence in this world. The “rag dolls” of the installation, on the contrary, are hollow and have no veins; regardless of their size, they do not create a sense of stability but that of transience, temporariness and changeability (ill. 2).

Upon thinking it over, the viewer realizes that in front of him there is a seemingly orderly world of distinct structure, equal intervals between its elements and a regular rhythm, which actually tends to be totally unstable, changeable, fragile, hollow, and transient. Moreover, it is the “headless” world without common sense and consciousness. It is then that the next associative field emerges, the one that relocates us from the past into the present. Indeed, there is a kind of order in our world, which relies upon the “colossi” of constitutions, laws, institutions, democracies, international legal standards, and the like. It is they that prop up modern society but by a slight touch they change/lose their shapes, become hollow, fragile, unstable, and friable. The giant rag creatures seem to symbolize the ephemerality and fragility of the “colossi.” As we realize it all, by and by the impression of the first associative field weakens, the epistemological link breaks, the actuality of the so-called historical code vanishes, and all we have are the gigantic, ostentatious “rag dolls,” an image of our contemporary world with all its illusiveness.

The installation is the first powerful chord of the

display, its tuning fork. Next to the hall of the “colossi” there is another space, which we may call *The Hall of Paradoxes* housing several objects. The name of the video footage encapsulating the exposition as its finale *A Mad Tea Party*, one justly used by the artist for the entire exhibition.

What we see first in *The Hall of Paradoxes* is a basketball hoop too small for a ball, a kind of poster, a direct image symbolizing the main concept of the hall and preparing visitors for the next works. The deeper we move into the hall, the more paradoxes we see: An object, a faceless human head with curls all around it, is a sort of thematic continuation of the first hall (ill. 3).

The century-long belief is that the face and eyes reflect the inner nature of man. Throughout history, with the differences created by the prevailing worldview, the face and eyes are regarded as a kind of mirror reflecting the person’s mood, state of mind, inner self. It is this tradition that the artist turns her back to. Her creations, headless figures, may seem impersonal, i.e. persons without consciousness. However, this interpretation is too simple. What we see are people immersed in their own selves, humans shielding themselves from endless paradoxes, gaining freedom from outside evaluation by disowning themselves. Individual that deliberately give up their status of a subject become a kind of “non-existent targets,” slipping out of control of those in power and gaining freedom. Both in terms of its shape and essence, the work is a true paradox: A person regaining oneself by giving up its own personality.²

Further in the hall, the series of paradoxes continue with the statue of three ancient Venuses. The topic is the same, women in the perspective of paradoxes: a goddess with traces of violence on her face, a female victim like so many others at various times and places (ill. 4); a goddess bearing signs of the menstrual period, which make her look like an ordinary woman and, finally, a goddess with ironic inscriptions scribbled on her beautiful body: “wisdom is very sexual,” “let’s see what you will look like in 25 years,” “beauty is power,” and the like (ill. 5). The inscriptions demonstrate devaluation of the woman, the goddess; how far we are from

1 R. Barthes. 1989, pp., 456.

2 On „Nonexistent Target” see: Deleuze G. *Empirisme et subjectivité*, 1993.

the ideal, the image of the ideal; how we deceive ourselves by believing in “goddesses.” In all three figures, the faces/images of the goddesses are placed in the context paradoxically different from that of their own, they are presented in the contemporary environment. Not only does their original essence change but it is virtually rejected along with the traditional aesthetics of the artistic shape. In the same hall, the domain of the *Goddesses*, there is a single, fairly large photo of the artist smiling ironically and arrogantly at the images of ancient goddesses bearing the socio-cultural characteristics of our times. She brushes aside the values of the past that the artworks used to represent—the values, which are mere trifles today (ill. 6).

The final work in the hall is a video diptych that, similar to the whole exhibition, is titled *A Mad Tea Party*.³ The video shows three young women at the table, having tea and chatting incessantly (ill. 7). Meanwhile, the pottery on the table gets saturated with water, loses shape, drips and finally breaks. What we see on the table is chaos, which the girls carried away by the conversation do not notice (ill. 8).

Ms. Lia Bagrationi, formerly a ceramic artist, regularly employs clay in her installations, artworks, performances, or videos. Here, clay is once again the key to the video footage. To the artist, it is the primeval material, the earth, permanent substance we join after death. The clay is an existential material, which sets limits to the void, grants content or form to it, and contains the whole universe. It was from clay that God created man; it was from clay that man built its very first dwelling according to the model of the universe and created the microcosm of pottery. The clay man gave shape to, put the shapeless substance into some kind of artistic order is the metaphor of the Genesis; the metaphor which, like a matrix, contains the codes and the values of the past. We see the breakdown of the codes and matrixes, a precise and eloquent image of the crisis in our world. The world is breaking down but men sit back looking calmly at what is going on. Shut in their own microcosm, they are indifferent to the developments around

them. As the artist says in the concept of the exhibition, that is what turned the eternal values into clichés, “stigmata and dogmas” and, finally, the absurd *Mad Tea Part*. “This is exactly the nonsense and absurd I consider to be a tool for freedom. Beyond stigmas and dogmas, there is gibberish, and gibberish can be a savior.” It means that the severe crisis characteristic to the postmodernism times holds a promise of a way out. To the artist “breakdown of the dogmas” is the prerequisite of creation of the new world and values. In the first hall, we see two fairly large pieces of cloths, the same as the dresses of the colossi, were made from hanging on the opposite walls but covered with clay. They are rigid and stiff. Against the background of the monumental Colossi, a viewer may disregard them but we believe that essentially those two plain objects, a kind of “a stiff curtain,” gain special importance. The cloth the women’s clothes were made from is hollow and soft but here, covered with clay, it forms a firm, textured surface. What do the “stiff curtains” stand for? On one hand, clay materializing tradition makes soft substance solid and becomes a metaphor of rigid tradition. On the other, all that loses solidness in our times, breaks down and gains materiality by means of clay, the matrix of human values, and presents itself as a sign of transition of those values from one age to another. Thus, the “stiff curtains” rely on the principle of double coding.

From this perspective, Lia Bagrationi’s exposition makes it evident that postmodernist intertextuality is its active component; not only does the artist evoke the omnipresent past, but she places it within the context of our times, inspires us to think over the problems in place. Sometimes, ironically, with moderate aggression and at other times metaphorically, she identifies the present from the perspective of the past. By employing contemporary artistic strategies, shapes and materials, she makes the past speak within the context of our problems and that is what makes her display so special and significant to the public.

By its concept, new form and originality, outspoken manner, apt use of various media and their amazing

3 In 2015, Lia Bagrationi presented *A Mad Yea Party* installation at the 8th Artisterium. However, the two videos on the same topic were made for this exposition. In the concept the author says: “Ideally, a ritual of “tea-drinking” is associated with tranquil, organized atmosphere, with etiquette, peace, and self-control—it does not have anything in common with madness”.

synthesis, Lia Bagrationi's exhibition towers over the recently created Georgian artistic landscape. The problems of our times overwhelmed with the crisis in-

tuitively or maybe deliberately erupt in the artist, "the product" of her age and find a deeply philosophical, broad interpretation in her multifaceted works.

REFERENCES:

1. Барт Р. Избранные работы: Семиотика: Поэтика. М., 1989.
2. Deleuze G. Empirisme et subjectivité – Eessai sur la nature humanite selon Hume. Epiméthée – P.U.F. – 5 éme edition mai 1993.