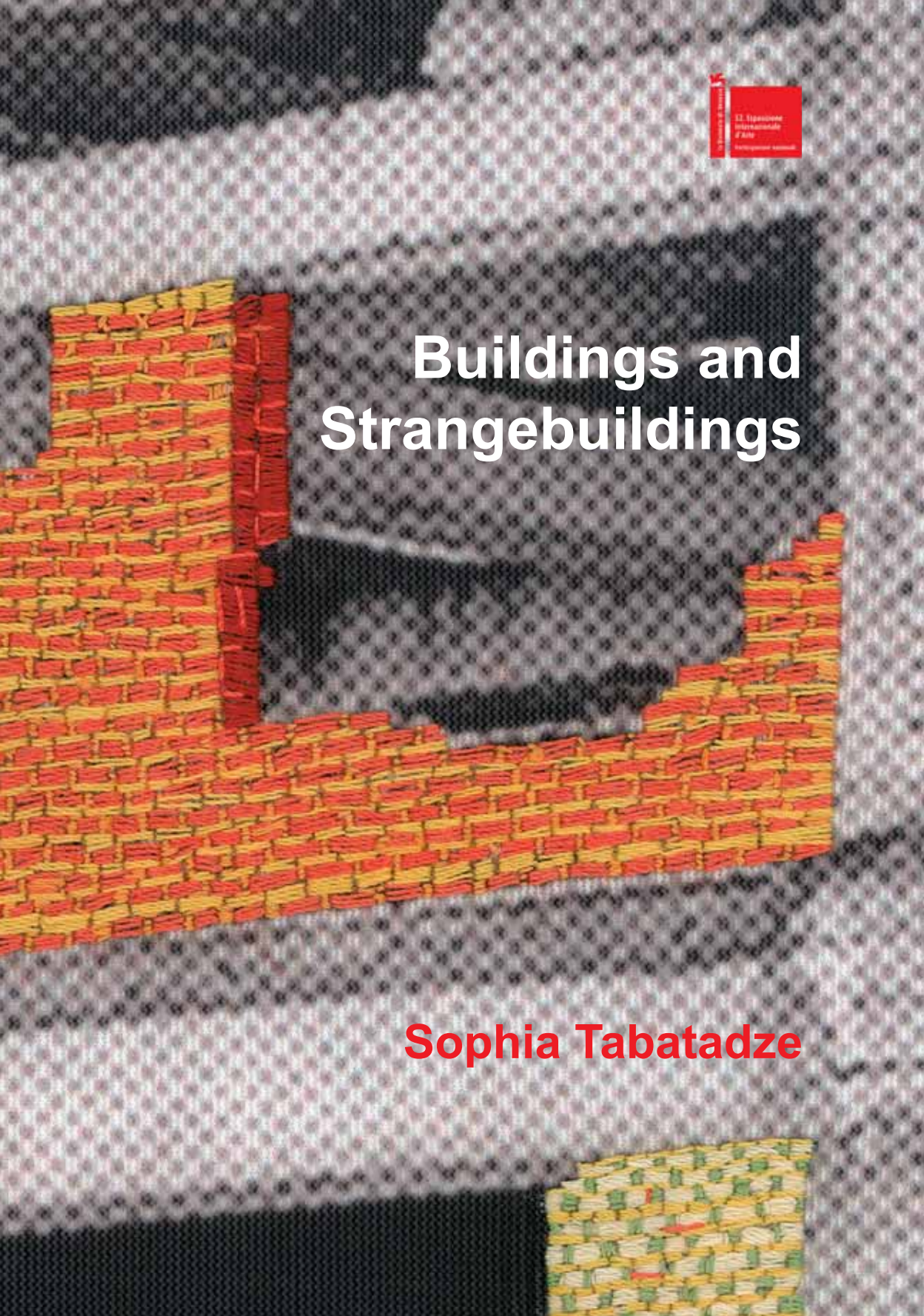


# Buildings and Strangebuildings

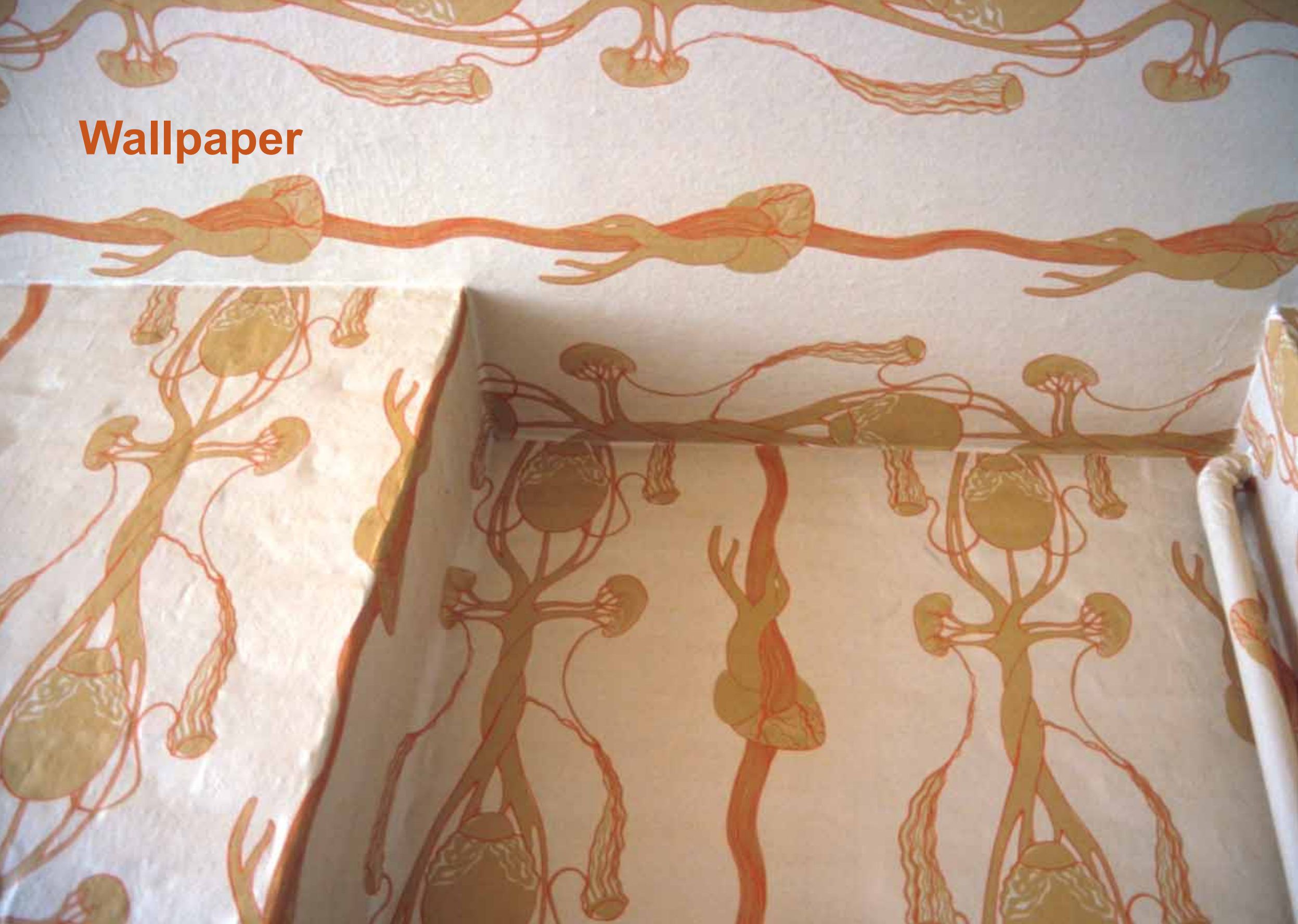
**Sophia Tabatadze**



# **Buildings and Strangebuildings**

Sophia Tabatadze  
Works 2002-2007

**Wallpaper**



## Wallpaper

Place: Amsterdam and Rotterdam, the Netherlands

Year: 2002-03

Material: Factory printed wallpaper

The theme of this factory-printed wallpaper, that of turning the inside out, involved comparing what was inside with what was outside of me. At that point in my life I was living in the Netherlands, finishing my studies, and checking myself against my surroundings in order to 'fit in' with them. When I tried to explain my work back then, I said that I was looking inside myself to see what was going on in there. What I found was in fact the same as what was going on around me.

This work reminded me of the houses I had known as child in which everything was wallpapered - including the doors and water pipes - and the feeling I had that there was something hidden behind this "respectable" façade. It seemed then that a slight change could turn everything upside down – which indeed is what happened, both to the Soviet Union and the wallpapered houses in it.

I covered a half demolished building with this wallpaper. These buildings, with their exposed interior walls showing old wallpaper patterns and tiles from the kitchen of somebody's home, always gave me the feeling of peeping into somebody else's private life. By putting wallpaper patterned with internal organs on this kind of building, I question the border between inside and outside, private and public.





# De Doorzonwoning



## De Doorzonwoning

Project: De Strip

Place: Vlaardingen, the Netherlands

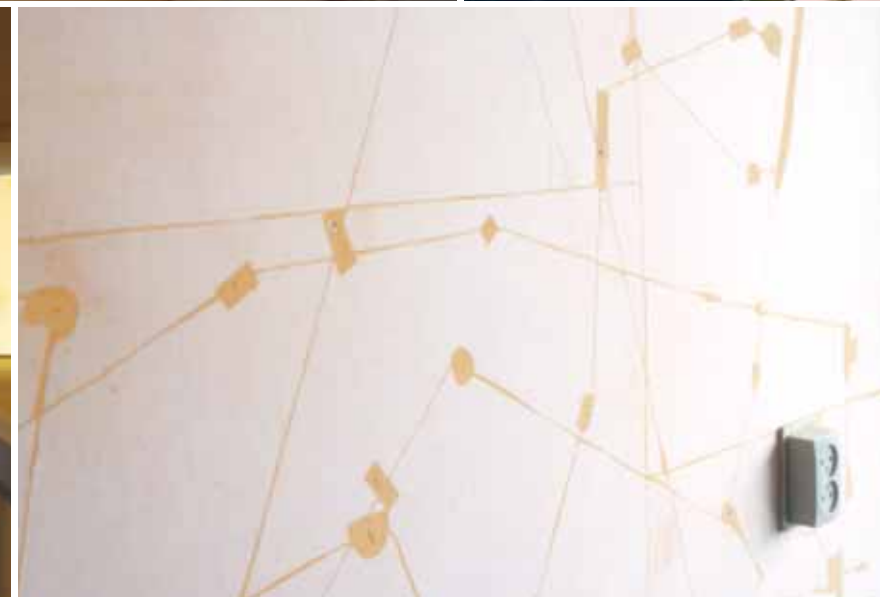
Year: 2003-04

Material: Wood, fabric, mirrors, paint, paper.

De Doorzonwoning, the 'look through' or the 'light through' house, is about Dutch architecture and a Calvinist ideal the home in which the inhabitants keep everything open as they have nothing to hide. By this time I had been living for quite a while in the Netherlands and no longer wanted simply to 'fit in', but had started looking more critically at my surroundings. Though it seems as if everything is transparent in these houses at first, you find your look is always being directed to what the tenant wants you to see – what you get to see is thus always in a sense staged. It is never simply transparent, never simply open; or rather, it is not as open and transparent as it claims or wants to be. That's why I built a tunnel running through the house which, by means of periscopic mirrors, allows one to see one end of it from the other. This project was also a reaction to regulations, for everything about the layout of the Doorzonwoning was predetermined. When you move into one of these apartments you already know where the living room and the bedroom are going to be, and where to put the sofa and the TV.

This work was about searching for home, and among the questions I asked myself were, what is a home, and how much of it is physical and how much mental? Can I make my home in a place I don't belong to? At the time I had the project's location in mind, a suburb of Rotterdam; but now, looking back, I think this question can be applied to the whole country and to my experience of being foreigner there. Instead of bringing my own furniture and painting the walls to my liking, my work was a reaction to the house itself, its empty walls, the traces of the former tenants, the color, the smell, the neighborhood. I brought only what I absolutely needed with me when I moved to this apartment; the rest I started to create. I decided to build my own 'home' by reacting to the place and working in it. Lifestyle and work were therefore interconnected.







# House on Wheels



## House on Wheels

Project: უცხოელი/Foreigner

Place: Tbilisi, Georgia

Year: 2003

Material: Wood, found material

The house on wheels was a multi-functional house, which could be slept in at night and used as a market stall during the day. The house was mobile and its shelves could open and close. I lived there for the two months of the project, building and adding parts to it every day.

This work was a reaction to the situation in Georgia in 2003. The theme of searching for home continues, only here I am back home, in Georgia, where I find my country has become impoverished almost beyond recognition. Everyone seems to have become a small trader, offering little of this and little of that for sale. I have to face the fact, that if my life had not gone the way it did, I could easily have ended up this way, and my home would have been a stall in the market. In a sense, this involved destroying my rather romanticised image of home: what looked like a castle from a distance turned out in fact to be ruins – an illusion. This sense of general illusoriness grew stronger as I noticed how fast things were changing in Georgia and how there was absolutely no feeling of continuity to anything happening here. Everything was on wheels, everything could be folded down and packed away.

After the exhibition was over, I took my work to the market place and left it there, watching and filming it gradually being taken to pieces as people removed the parts they needed for improving their own houses on wheels. My house therefore lived on, dissolved into the market itself.





**What We  
Thought  
was a Wall  
Turned out  
to Be a Curtain**

WHAT WE THOUGHT WAS A WALL, TURNED OUT TO BE A CURTAIN



## What We Thought was a Wall Turned out to Be a Curtain

Place: Het Wilde Weten, Rotterdam, the Netherlands

Year: 2004

Material: Wood, fabric, paint.

What we thought was a wall turned out to be a curtain. And the converse was also true: the wall disappeared but a stronger wall remained, the one that exists in our minds – a transparent veil you can't see through, the wall that turns into a curtain, the curtain that is sewn shut on both sides. Among the questions I asked myself in this piece were, how much can one really see of the other side, and how much of this is what one wants to see? Can I face my image of the other side being destroyed, or do I still think I can build my own home anywhere I start working and creating things around me? Will creating things this way help? Or is it just a form of escape - of creating my own miniature world and seeing everything in its terms? This work deals with the human body placed in new surroundings, and the relation of human beings to their lived space. It is concerned with how human beings change their surroundings to suit themselves, with what happens to them during this process, and how the body itself changes and becomes influenced by its surroundings.

To approach this theme, I put it in the context of Eastern and Western Europe, and of what happened when the old borders disappeared and the new ones emerged. To me, the east – west metaphor stands for how we tend to perceive the world only from our own viewpoint, and try to fit everything we see and experience into our pattern of thinking. Meanwhile, each side changes constantly and dramatically over very short periods of time, be it in respect of people, architecture or their respective social and political situations.

The form of this installation showed coexistence of order and chaos, the façade and what is hidden behind it, the orderliness and the mess. The wooden constructions demonstrated these energies together and the tension between them.





# Humancon Undercon



Humancon Undercon

Project: Georgian Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale

Place: Venice, Italy

Year: 2007

Material: Print on fabric, wood

Human condition under construction. I now live in Georgia, where things aren't as unstable as they were before, but the country is undoubtedly under constant construction. We are going somewhere, but it is unclear where.

In this work I use architectural forms to show the human condition, as architecture lives longer than human beings, while perfectly reflecting their condition and circumstances. When social orders collapse, the first thing people react to, or destroy, is their architecture. It is the perfect object of revenge.

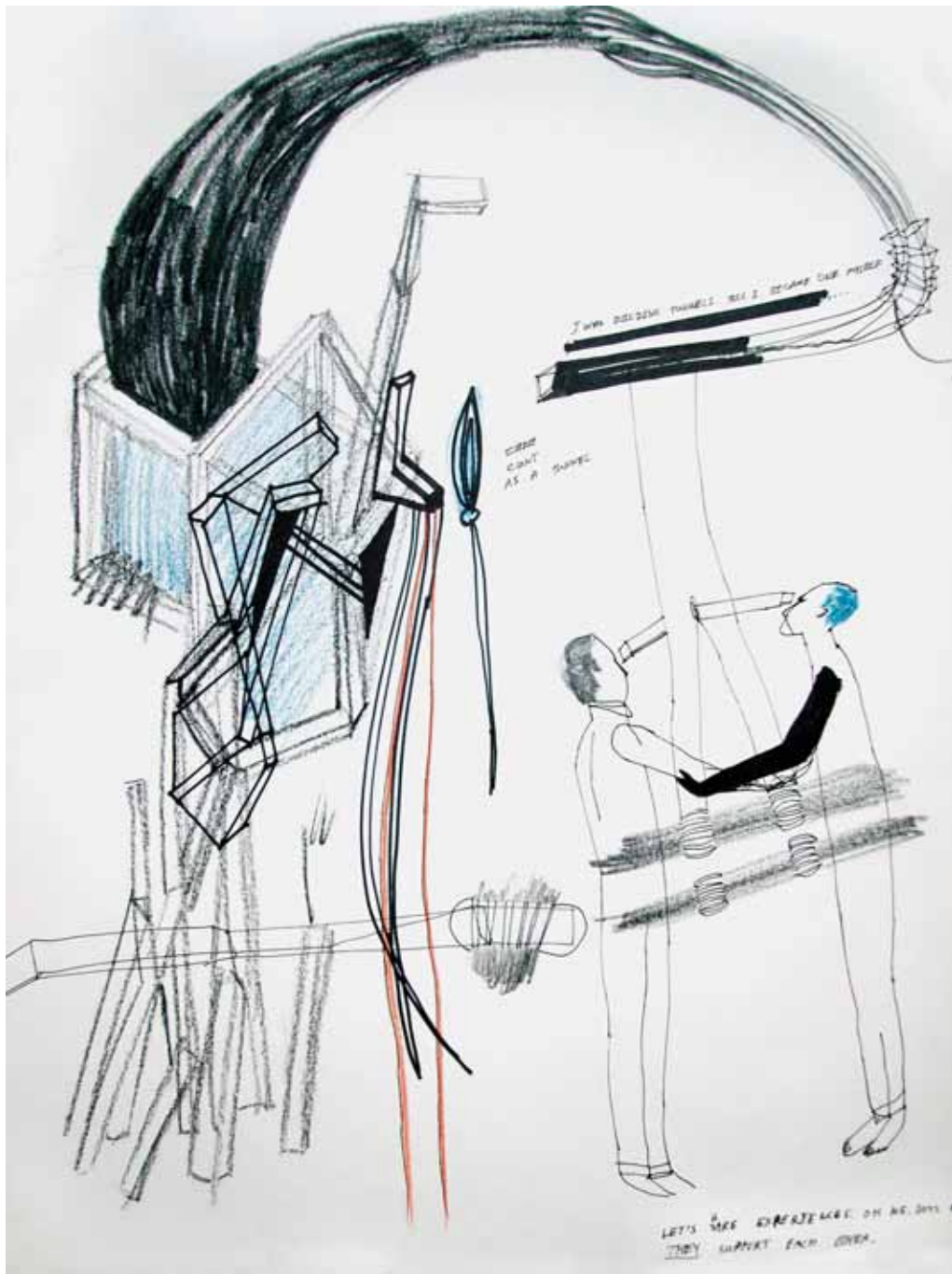
This work consists of the series of the black and white photographs, printed on the fabric. These images show human traces in an urban environment that has become thoroughly inhuman - large and rough manmade landscapes, half destroyed or not yet fully built buildings (a friend exclaimed –oh, yes, just like the society). I work on the details of these images and hand embroider some parts of it. For embroidery I choose the details that show the human touch within this no-man's-land landscapes. This can be a small palm tree garden in front of the so-called 'Khrushchev building' (a very non-tropical setting), or a finished and furnished apartment as part of, or in the middle of, a concrete carcass. I choose these details in order to underline the imbalance or the hybrid situation within this reality.

What I'm concerned about is our inability to perceive things in their totality - a totality that includes space and time. It is this inability that lies behind our present condition of constant amnesia, in which we choose to overlook certain aspects of our collective past. This time, though, my position has changed; I can no longer observe and criticize from a distance – like it or not, I am part of all this myself, and if there are some things I don't agree with I have to try to change them, or at least oppose them, even if I know I cannot change them.









*'I was building tunnels till I became one myself'*  
42x 30 cm, pencil and ink on paper, 2004

Sophia Tabatadze's installation *Humancon Undercon* concludes a series of works by the artist dealing with the relationship between the body, the home and personal identity that began with her 2002 piece *Wallpaper*.

The latter, her graduation piece from the Academy of Arts in Amsterdam, consisted of several dozen rolls of wallpaper which the artist had had printed with a pattern of her own design. It showed two sinuous and stylised verticals running in alternation, one a series of hearts and aortas, connected by an undulating rivulet of blood, the other a complete urinary system, composed of kidneys, bladder and their interconnecting tubes. The wallpaper was pasted on the exposed interior wall of a half-demolished house, and left slowly to decay beneath the action of the elements.

The artist says that the origins of this work lay in the wallpapered houses she had visited as a child in her native Georgia, and the impression she had got in them of something being hidden behind the façade of domestic propriety they presented. She used her wallpaper to expose what she felt was concealed: the work was, in her words, a way of looking inside herself. For Tabatadze, introspection meant a literal examination of the physical interior of the body, the bloody mess of organs that we all carry around inside us and which is the guarantor of our mortality.

Two themes emerge in this piece which will recur throughout her subsequent work. One is the equation of the domestic space with the space of the body, and the conception of the home itself as a kind of body; the other is the urge to expose what is hidden. For Tabatadze the two are closely interrelated. Her work looks for truths in the built spaces of her environment, and the truths it finds there are always visceral.

That truth, for her, should always somehow be hidden within the material fabric of the lived space is perhaps not so surprising in former citizen of the Soviet republic of Georgia. The art of the late Soviet period is often permeated by a sense of concealed immanence, of something unimaginable about to break through the fabric of everyday reality. To characterise this 'something' as specifically visceral, however, is perhaps an insight peculiar to Tabatadze's generation, whose formative years witnessed the process of its becoming manifest – that is, the rise to power of formerly 'underground' movements of national independence. They had also learnt what this process meant: not the arrival of a utopian modernity but the return of a familiar repressed - the outbreak of bloody ethnic conflicts, and the precipitous immiseration of the vast majority of the population.

Yet there is another moment to the visceral besides the violent and unreasoned, and that is as a seat of identity and creativity, it is as such that it manifests itself in her next piece. If to expose the hidden was a more or less straightforward business when dealing with her memories of Georgia, it was less so when confronting her immediate environment. In the Netherlands, where the liberal democratic ideal of 'transparency' exercised a strong influence over the built environment, the society's repressed was made that much more difficult to characterise. This became the subject of her next project, *De Doorzonwoning* (2003, literally the 'through-lit apartment', the result of a nine month residency in Vlaardingen. The artist was given an empty apartment to move into, and over the following months converted it, as she says, "to her liking".



40x40 cm, pencil on paper, 2004

Tabatadze noticed that the apartment embodied not only the ideal of transparency, but also its attendant inconsistencies and hypocrisies as she found them in Dutch society. While its layout appeared to make everything open to view, in reality, she found, it subtly controlled and directed the viewer's gaze. Nothing ultimately was allowed to appear as itself; everything inside it became in a sense an exhibit for the benefit of visitors.

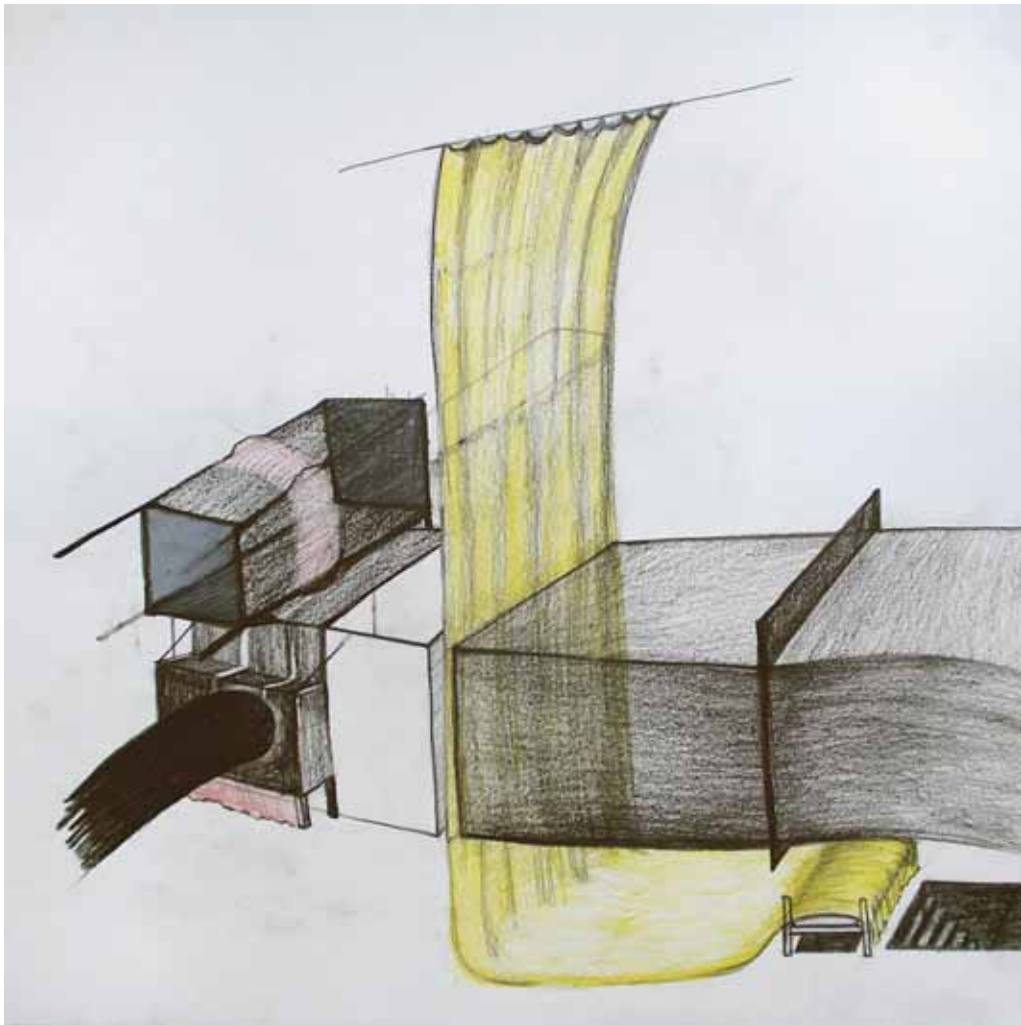
She responded by building an installation that would 'expose' the apartment's 'mechanism'. This involved making architectural additions that overtly manipulated the viewer's gaze. Using a system of reflecting mirrors, she constructed a periscope running from one end of the living space to the other: it ensured that one could literally look through the apartment without seeing anything of its interior. Elsewhere she constructed out of wood and fabric a room within a room, a confined, cosy space which she decided to make her bedroom. She thereby revived, within the archetypal "machine for living in", the Soviet tradition of ad hoc and idiosyncratic home improvement.

These additions also recalled the organs of the body. The room within a room was evidently a kind of womb; the periscope a sort of giant artificial gut, which swallowed the viewer's gaze at one end and effectively excreted it through a window at the other. Both insisted upon the truth of the home as an organic space, a truth suppressed by its reconfiguration as a machine.

Later the same year, Tabatadze visited Georgia after six years living abroad and found herself confronted by a country that had changed almost beyond recognition. *House on Wheels* (2003) was her reaction to this. While in Holland a sense of social alienation had produced the need to adapt her material environment to her requirements, here she felt the opposite: the need to adapt herself to the society in which she found herself. The house on wheels was conceived as a structure that could function both as a dwelling and a market stall. Inhabiting it meant making oneself vulnerable and exposed; this was Tabatadze's way of trying to identify with her native country, where life was precarious and people lived from day to day. At the end of the project she abandoned her work in the market place, where it was slowly dismantled by traders using the parts to construct stalls of their own.

Her next work, *What We Thought was a Wall Turned Out to be a Curtain* (2004), followed a visit to Eastern Europe with a group of Dutch architects. Shocked by the prejudices that she encountered among her companions, she set out to make a piece dealing with perceived differences between east and west. Her aim was to represent the political and ideological divisions that had, at least partly, disappeared in fact but continued to exist in people's minds. It is this, perhaps, that lies behind the peculiarity of the title, which makes one want to object that the 'wall' in question only became a 'curtain' later, and was real enough while it existed. Tabatadze is concerned here not with its historical existence but its persistence within the subconscious - a region that, notoriously, lies outside time.

*What We Thought was a Wall* takes as its starting point the Soviet institutional space. The artist painted her installation with the two-colour scheme characteristic of such buildings. The public institution is, of course a familiar subject in post-Soviet art;



40x40 cm, pencil on paper, 2004

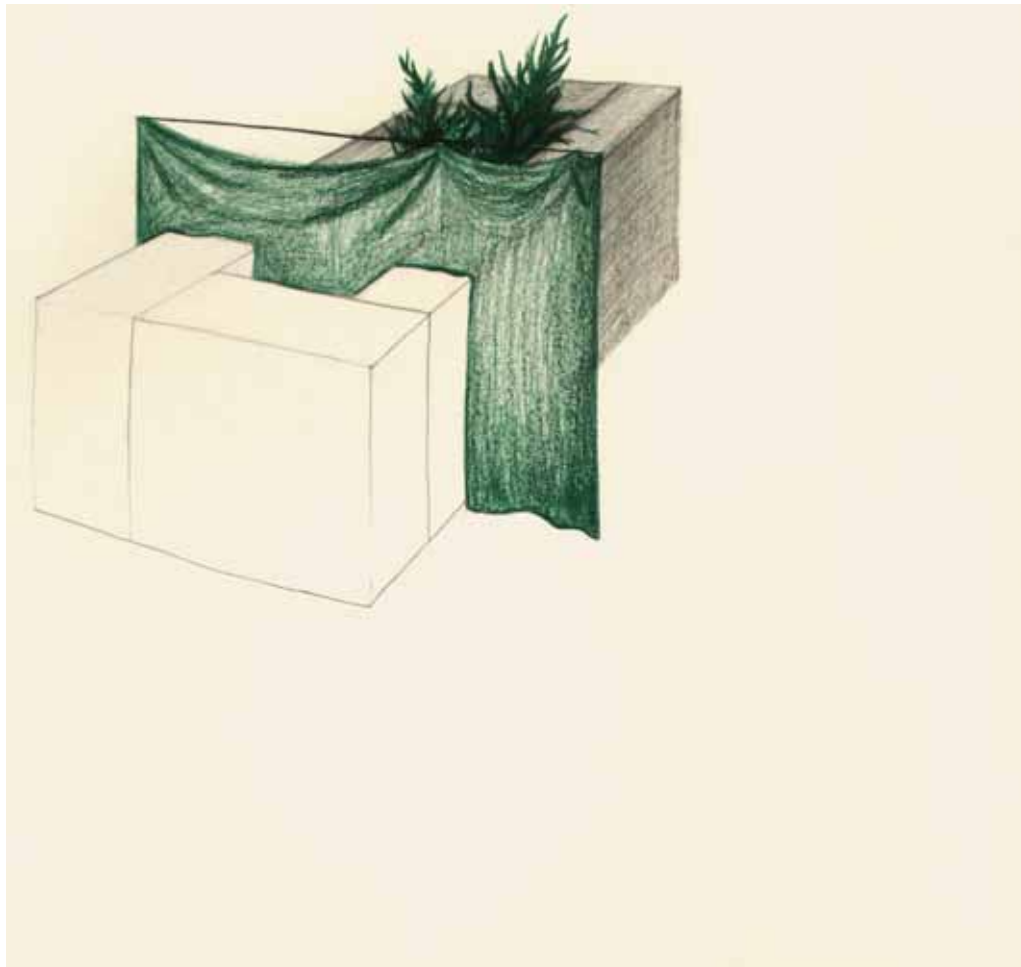
one need only think of installations made between the seventies and nineties by the likes of Kabakov or Sokov. But instead of expressing, as they do, a sort of bathetic nostalgia for a failed utopia, Tabatadze's space - constructed out of curtained-off areas and hidden 'rooms' - radiated an aura of ghostly irreality, in which one's perception of solidity and insubstantiality, depth and depthlessness were consistently confused. The piece seemed to aim at asking of how we can grasp the disappearance of the divisions of the Cold War with minds that have themselves been formed by those divisions, and as such was drawn inevitably towards paradox - towards investigating of how the non-existent can become tangible, and how objects, and even space itself, can both exist and not exist at the same time. The stark binary of the colour scheme served to underline this: the white and green walls extended into white and green curtains, then half-curtains, then a blank space in which only the dividing line between the two colours, represented by a rope cordon, lived on in a kind of spectral redundancy. The wall having disappeared, its absence survived, radiating a peculiar mystery and impenetrability.

In *Humancon Undercon* (2007), Tabatadze returns to installation after a year spent working mainly in video and performance. The work shows the influence of the latter in that it introduces, for the first time, an element of fictional narrative. The artist imagines the construction of an apartment block in her native Tbilisi, whose story embodies the corrupt and chaotic nature of Georgia's slow economic recovery: its steel skeleton, divided into units and corruptly sold off while still under construction, is built up piecemeal by its new owners. This metaphor for the privatisation of the country's centralised economy is personalised by the introduction of fictional characters. Tabatadze has imagined how the new inhabitants will procure their own building materials and arrange their own apartments: one has even, in an act of absurd foresight, installed his own coffin. The gesture suggests a link between death and the acquisition of the trappings of social respectability. But it also acknowledges that to prepare to die in particular place is also to prepare to live there, to make it one's home.

In so far as Tabatadze's imagined characters often turn out to be parodic self-portraits, we may take this to suggest a degree of reconciliation with her native country and a determination to make her life there. It is for this reason, perhaps, that she sees this work as concluding a cycle that began with *Wallpaper*. For while the first work was concerned with bringing the inside out, with exposing the hidden, this latest one deals with bringing the outside in, with coming to terms with what she finds around her - as well as recognising that it had always been part of her.

Tabatadze has described her method of working as drawing on her environment and processing it through her body - a method of digestion and assimilation. By the same token, the ideal fate she envisages for her work is that it be assimilated back into the environment that gave rise to it, in satisfyingly circular processes of decay and dissolution. Such processes ground their maker's place within that environment, by making her a component of its cycles of creation and destruction. In this latest work, the artist recognises that she herself is subject to these processes. In so doing, it proposes for her both an identity and a home.

*Nathaniel McBride*



75x58 cm, pencil on paper, 2004

## Sophia Tabatadze

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Place and date of birth: 19 March 1977, Tbilisi, Georgia

### • Personal exhibitions

- 2004 "What We Thought was a Wall Turned out to Be a Curtain", *Het Wilde Weten*, an artist's initiative, Rotterdam, the Netherlands
- 2003 "Self Portrait as Architecture", *Lambert Tegenbosch* gallery, Heusden, the Netherlands
- 2001 "I Have To Prove Myself!", *Josine Bokhoven* gallery, Amsterdam, the Netherlands
- 1998 "After a Year", *Old Gallery*, Tbilisi, Georgia
- 1997 "But This is Not For Sale", *Old Gallery*, Tbilisi, Georgia

### • Selected group projects, exhibitions and art fairs

- 2007 "Humancon Undercon", Georgian Pavilion at the 52<sup>nd</sup> *Venice Biennale*, Italy
- 2005 "Project Rotterdam" *Boijmans van Beuningen Museum*, Rotterdam, the Netherlands
- 2005 "EcoTopia", *National Museum*, Tbilisi, Georgia
- 2005 "Heroes of Stagnation" in collaboration with Nino Purtskhvanidze, *National Gallery*, Tbilisi, Georgia
- 2003 "De Doorzonwoning", in collaboration with project "De Strip", Vlaardingen, -04 the Netherlands
- 2003 "უცხოელი/Foreigner", old wine factory *Savane*, Tbilisi, Georgia and *Felix Meritis*, Amsterdam, the Netherlands
- 2002 "Papercity", project in public space, by *KunstXpress* and *TENT*, Rotterdam, the Netherlands
- 2002 "Wallpaper", project in public space, Rotterdam, the Netherlands
- 2002 "Works on Paper" *Josine Bokhoven* gallery, Amsterdam, the Netherlands
- 2001 "Kunst Rai", art fair, with *Josine Bokhoven* gallery, Amsterdam, the Netherlands
- 2000 "Kunst Rai", art fair, with *Lambert Tegenbosch* gallery, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

### • Selected performance works in collaboration with Nadia Tsulukidze

- 2007 "Progressive Nostalgia", *Luigi Pecci Centre for Contemporary Art*, Prato, Italy
- 2006 "Alterative Travel Guide Through Georgia", *Caucasus Biennale*, Tbilisi, Georgia
- 2006 "Caucasus Game", *Est-Ouest* festival, Die, France
- 2006 "Art Without Borders", *Armenian Centre for Contemporary Experimental Art*, Yerevan, Armenia
- 2006 "What Georgian Women Do in Istanbul", *Apartment Project*, an artists initiative, Istanbul, Turkey
- 2006 "Kilebi da Kalebi", *National Art Centre*, Tbilisi, Georgia



**Catalogue was made for the Georgian pavilion at the 52<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennale**

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