

Rasul Abakarov^{RA}
Taus MakhachevaTM
PLAYING MYSELF

51 ^{RA} I think everyone can understand this project in their own way. Some might see in it a story of paintings found on the edge of destruction, only preserved thanks to the efforts of individuals. Or its meaning might be taken another way, as related to the preservation of the arts, so little valued in Dagestan. The project was about paintings, but creativity is more than just pictures, art, or choreography. If you were to ask why I did this, why I took this risk, I'd answer that people have to take risks for art because this is our patrimony. And, of course, also important to me was the fact that I, along with my dynasty, my clan, and my village, are now going through exactly what those pictures did. Apart from my father, I have no other relatives left who can walk the tightrope. This is an art that has virtually died out.

I've worked a lot with other people, but there was something in this project that grabbed me. We could have filmed it with a safety wire, but it wouldn't have been the same. I first wanted to feel the satisfaction of it, I wanted to do it. And I did get a sense of gratification, enough to last me a year.

TM As for the safety wire, this was an ethical issue. I couldn't ask you to do it without one. That wouldn't have been right, it couldn't come from me.

^{RA} If you look at it from a professional angle, yes. All in all, there were around two hundred crossings, and we could have done thirty without the safety wire and the rest with. But when I got going I was already feeling the thrill of it. It's a matter of habit. When you get used to heights, you look at everything differently. It was out in nature, all peaceful. I liked the idea of the project, I liked that cube, and it was a really interesting team.

Afterward, I spent a whole year considering retiring because I understood that I needed to carry on with

52 my art. I don't get the same pleasure out of earning money. And I realized how time flies. I'm already thirty, and I won't be able to do this anymore when I'm forty or fifty. And what will I have to show my children? Everything I've bought means nothing, but this project is something I can take pride in, something I can show my children.

TM I remember how calm I was when I got on the plane to leave, though lately I've begun to fear flying. It was because the hard disk with this film on it was safely there on the ground. And I likewise thought I'd done something important, something that would survive me.

RA Of course, because this will stay with us a long time. Writers or artists usually live a poor life, on the edge of existence, but they make pictures that live forever. And here we have the same thing. I'm not saying that money isn't important—it is important, of course—but if you create some kind of foundation with which you can find yourself in a state, so to speak, of non-poverty, then your creative work can bring you a certain dividend. As you said: the hard disk is safe on the ground, and I know that if the plane were to go down, everything would be all right. I did my bit.

TM How did your notion of the project change once we got to the filming location?

RA Having been working in Moscow, in an office, I was a little out of shape. There was a rarefied air in the mountains, it was hot and the sun baked the land. By the time we'd got all the props there, I thought to myself, "That's enough, I'm already tired!" And I still had to sort everything out and check things. Of course, I felt a little wobbly but it was the tightrope I concentrated on, knowing that it was now too late to go back; I had to do it. I tried to brace



54 myself and concentrate. When we first arrived, I was of course astonished at the scale, at the idea itself. I really liked the cube.

TM Why did you like it so much?

RA I don't know. All these paintings in a black cube on a high pinnacle—it all looked great. Every district there has its mountains. Our village is right up in the high peaks, and there are lots of precipices and cliffs. But here there was such an oasis around the mountains with a platform in the middle, and a beautiful backdrop.

TM What, for you, was the main idea behind this work?

RA Not just that our people should understand that art is something to treasure and guard with your life, but that everyone should realize this. You remember that time when a picture fell? I was thinking, “It's falling, and you're only going to catch it right by the edge.” Of course, the main idea was the preservation of art, and you don't even need to be an artistic person to get that.

TM How has your life changed since the filming?

RA I started work when I was thirteen. And now, seventeen years later, I see that I haven't achieved what I could have. I didn't put enough time into it, I barely rehearsed at all. I'd just been given talent and balance by my ancestors. I can balance a *kinzhal* [a dagger from the Caucasus] on my forehead, I can walk the tightrope—this has always been easy for me. And I understand that I can achieve so much. I used to believe that I'd done everything, that I could finish my career and retire. But after this project I'm persuaded that this is not so. It's all only just beginning, you can't give in, you have to go on. My son is growing up, and if I don't pass

55 this talent on to him as the sixth generation, my life will have been senseless. Then he can pass it on to his son, and it won't be lost, because I am, after all, the last from my village. Not that my life changed so much after the filming—I'd been thinking about this for a while—but after it I was even more strongly convinced that I shouldn't pack it in, that I had to continue.

TM You said “given talent and balance by my ancestors.” It sounds as though you're excluding yourself from this story.

RA My father is from the Abakarov dynasty, a famous dynasty. I have tightrope walkers on my mother's side, too. I'd wanted to walk the tightrope since childhood, and my father saw this, but he didn't permit it. It was only when I was eleven that he came to the dacha, set up a rope, and said, “Get up.” Once I'd got up there, I asked what I had to do, how to train. Father said, “Just stand. Learn to stand on the tightrope as if you're standing on the ground, and you'll be able to do whatever you like on it.” And so I did, for two years. Of course, it's boring. But on the other hand, my father could've given me lessons, but that would have been senseless. The logic was simple: you have to find your balance. Just stand there on the rope, for hours. Father said, “If you're tired of standing, go and dig the garden. If you're tired of digging, go and stand.” My aim then was to perform. And after a year and a half I'd got it, and was able to just stand still on the line, after which I learned a few tricks over several months and immediately set off abroad with my father.

But the strangest thing was that—and perhaps this will surprise you—I'm scared of heights. Yes! Only sick people aren't scared of heights. Here, it's all about mastering yourself. I sometimes now see that some children aren't scared of heights, but my son is. I used to worry, and then I decided, “Oh well, he'll get used to it.”



58 The first time I went abroad with my father was to Turkey, and I was thirteen. I get there, and here's the first venue. Father set up the line and said, "Get up." But he'd barely sent me up high at all in the two or three years beforehand, and had decided to do so right there on tour. There was no turning back. I climbed up and realized at once that my adult life had begun. No longer could I tell Papa that I didn't want to do something, that I was scared or wanted to go back. You wanted to come on tour, so you came, and now you have to work. If you don't work, we'll have to pay the cancellation penalty, and you'll get the whole troupe in trouble. And I understood then that my adult life had begun. I soon got used to it, and everything went smoothly. I said I'd been given something by my ancestors, but sometimes I chide myself for not using it as fully as I could. I always understood that in sport or in art there are people with talent and people without it. And as a rule, those who work at something meet with success. I realize that I can do more, but I don't make use of it. Time is ticking away, and I don't want to have any regrets.

TM What do you see your role in this project to have been?

RA To carry pictures? A porter's role? No, of course not. The role was to transfer paintings and preserve them, to pass them on. There was one moment I liked right at the beginning, when you said to me, "This is not a performance, not a film, relax. Carry them however you need to, there's no need to put on a show." It was then that I understood the seriousness of it all. I just needed to convey my feelings as they were. In principle, there was no need to pretend anything, as in my eyes there was both fear, and intensity, and seriousness. I'm not like that in performances: there I'm all cheerful and merry, while here I was something quite different. I was like in real life, it seemed to me.



^{RA} Sometimes fear protects and helps, and sometimes it hinders, but you can't do without it. As I already said, people without fear are generally sick people. And those who do completely fearless things just *seem* fearless; they're afraid, too. The most difficult thing is to overcome your fear, to struggle with yourself, to convince yourself that you can do it. I climbed up onto the tightrope, took one step, then another. I stood there. I did one crossing, then another, three, four. Then I'd done hundreds of thousands, and I was sure then that I could do it. It's hard to fight fear, but the main thing is commitment. It seems to me that the older I get, the more I begin to understand this. When you come into the arena after a long break, and you put the line at three meters high, say, and you climb up there, you're out of the habit, and the fear is there. That was what it was like here too. The first crossing, the second—you overcome yourself. And once you see that you've done it, you can do it again and again. You always have to fight with fear and anxiety. Any artist, any professional, worries before a performance.

TM What does the tightrope mean for you in general?

^{RA} The tightrope is my life, definitely. My life and my hobby, I'd say. Why a hobby? Because you can't call it work. Work usually means something you're obliged to do. You have to go to work to earn a living. But a hobby is something you enjoy, it's your meaning. I understand that, without the tightrope, I wouldn't experience myself. When this is passed on to you, when all this is from your village, when your granddad and great-granddad did it, of course you don't abandon it. I now want to pass it on to my son as a matter of course. I'll put him on the line before his eighteenth birthday, and I'll pass this art on to him. Whether he continues with it or not is then his business.

^{RA} He has the freedom, just as I had complete freedom to choose as well. My father told me all my life, "Go into business, do other things, but the tightrope is your slice of bread, and with it you'll never be short of money." You see the same thing among Lak [indigenous peoples of the North Caucasus] shoemakers, who pass on their craft in dynasties. They pass their skills on to their children, but whether they take it up or not is their affair. They will be able to live off this at any time.

When I was studying in the management faculty at the Institute of Culture, it was, of course, interesting, but I sometimes thought to myself, "Why didn't I opt for another profession?" The profession, say, of a lawyer or an economist—general professions. At the same time, for instance, being a jeweler or a carpenter is the sort of profession where you can make something with your own hands, do something by yourself. It's these professions that impress me the most. And the tightrope is the same sort of thing. Grandfather lived in another age; he was officially recognized, a People's artist, with a calling, a pension. And he worked until he was fifty-five! Father worked in the 1990s, when the arts weren't appreciated anymore, and he combined performance with business. And he convinced me that this should be my hobby. "This is not your main source of income, don't lay any emphasis on it. And God forbid, if you should get injured—what will you do then? You don't live in the sort of country where you can get hurt and have the state take care of you."

TM What you are saying is that they had to pass it on to you, but then you were free. This is amazing. It seems to me that, in the formation of a human being, you need the sense that you can make a choice without the pressure of five generations behind you.



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Tightrope walker company of Rabadan Abakarov and Yaragi Gadzhikurbanov

64 ^{RA} I have a friend who's a hatter. The Dargwa people [indigenous peoples of the North Caucasus] are all hatters. And, definitely, his parents passed their craft on to him in the wrong way—he's hated hats since childhood. "I don't want to do it, and that's it!" I told him, "Do what you like, but this could be your hobby." The most galling thing about it is that he did try other work, business, but nothing came of it. And at the same time he can identify a fur at a glance, because it's in his blood, they passed it to him, and he grew up among hats. I asked him, "Why don't you carry on with what your parents did?" But there has to be freedom to choose, in any situation.

You remember when I told you about the boots? I still laugh about it. I'm curious how my son will react to it. On our first trip, when father put on the boots, he rolled down the upper part, literally by a centimeter. And the next time we were sewing new boots, and he rolled them down again. I asked him if it wouldn't be easier to make them a centimeter shorter: "There's no logic to it, what do you turn them down for?" Father said, "Granddad turned them down. I turned them down. And you'll turn them down, too, and don't ask any more questions."

TM What does it mean to be a tightrope walker of the fifth generation, part of such a family and dynasty? When you speak of tightrope walking, I imagine five generations walking the line with you. Do you think of it like that sometimes, too?

^{RA} No, but I do of course feel the burden, the responsibility. I see that I haven't achieved what I could, and realize that more was given to me than this. I can blame the current times, because when my forefathers were working—in the prewar and postwar periods—everything was quite different, and there was good reason to do this back then. They trained for eight hours a day, performing legendary stunts,

65 they worked their arses off. Now I realize that it wouldn't be any use to me to bust a gut working at this. Of course I'd like to perform wonders, but, frankly speaking, to achieve something you really have to go at it. The tightrope is something where you have to take risks.

TM What do you have in mind when you talk of "busting a gut"?

^{RA} I saw once that I had good balance, that I could put up with wind and heat, and could in principle cope with heights. But if you do some serious stunts, then you will definitely fall at some point, and there will be injuries—that's what I'm talking about. In all my life I've only had two fractures. The first time I broke my leg playing football, and the second time I broke a bone in my face playing volleyball. That's it. The most galling thing is that it wasn't even on the tightrope.

TM Why galling?

^{RA} All my luck is left on the tightrope.

TM And what do you think about the paintings you carried?

^{RA} I recall one picture very well, one that I didn't want to carry. It was of a cemetery. But I liked them all in general. One of a wrestler comes to mind, for instance, the portrait of Ali Aliyev. I liked the one of the crane operator, too, a very interesting picture. I liked the one of Imam Shamil, of course. And those three paintings in shades of red.

TM *Tree*. Red, yes, and very large. A triptych.

^{RA} Yes. And those remarkable girls, the very big picture.

TM Galina Konopatskaya's *Dance*!



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Tsovkra performance
by Lezghinka company, 1965

68 RA And the monkey too!

TM Looking at this selection of pictures, do you think it forms some kind of whole?

RA Of course. It would be Dagestan. Everything was connected there, and you'd picked paintings from different eras. There were battles, sports, the Soviet Union (that girl crane operator). There was humor, and a funeral. Everything was there, as it turned out. Essentially, you'd gathered up all of Dagestan for all of its history, and even included some contemporary art.

TM What was your reaction when you first saw the video?

RA I froze. It petrified me. I'd returned to Moscow after filming, back to my previous life, but the emotions remained with me. And when I came to the exhibition and watched this work, I froze. I was sitting there alone. People were walking all around, but I was sitting there alone, with the shutters pulled down, and I sat and remembered. Of course, this was a flashback. And it wasn't even a film, it was like something real.

TM What you just said about reality is very important. You already mentioned that this was no game, and now you're also saying that it was some kind of reality.

RA I am in any case an artist, I play a role. But here I was playing myself, and it was easier for me. I tried to perform at first, but once you told me "don't perform," I understood that I simply had to take a painting and place it there like that. I liked more than anything else that final moment, when I took up the last two pictures, carried them across, put them in their place and, without any emotion whatsoever, went back and climbed down the mountain.

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69 TM Did you discuss the project with your wife or relatives? What did they say? Were they worried?

RA Of course we talked about it. But, frankly, nobody knew that I would do it without a safety wire, so nobody worried.

TM And when did you understand that you'd be working without a safety wire?

RA Right at the start. Otherwise there would have been no sense to it.

TM You mean, when you came to the film site?

RA I knew before then, but I didn't know whether I'd do without the safety wire for the whole duration. I thought that there might be something too fragile or heavy, but then I realized that I could do without it.

TM You said it gave you satisfaction. For me, everything froze each time you went across, and I was absolutely terrified.

RA Actually, that's how it should be. I struggle with my own fear, so I don't want to struggle the fears of others, too. If you'd constantly been talking about how scared you were, it would have been much worse. That is not support, but the opposite. I liked your stance a lot: don't show your agitation, say everything's fine. That's how it should be, that's how you have to work in this sphere.

Did you enjoy working with us? When you started this project, when you found me in the social networks, did you think it would all turn out the way it did?

TM Of course I imagined things, and there were a great many thoughts connected with the instability of art, with

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Abakarov tightrope
walker company, 1950

71 the fears of any artist. But I couldn't imagine it going so wonderfully as it did. I couldn't imagine how you would be able to work like that. I didn't think one person would be able to carry all the paintings, so we initially planned for two people to work on it. This was a discovery: from the point of view of both art and human relations.

RA It seems to me that the project is much more successful with just one person being filmed. And I also like how, in the video, my tiredness at the end is visible. A kind of living system. It is clear that this is the final crossing, the end of the filming process, a relief—all of this is conveyed, I think.

TM Yes, because it is a story of a man: a man as a supporting structure, as the crutch of everything—of art, of whatever you want. Individual efforts, the individual striving to change the world, and not from the top down, but from the bottom up. You only launch a given process, and the people you meet—you and your father Mukhtar Abakarov, and Malika Alieva who actually came up with this metal structure—they transform it into collective work. For all that, this is a shared story for me, a collective work, into which all participants put a great deal. This is exactly why I love art.

RA You said that this has been one of your most interesting projects. Why does it seem so to you?

TM Because it ended up creating a wonderful metaphor, one that's clear to all. Not long ago, I was talking with my mother and asked her with a certain regret, "Why is it that they don't understand what I do in Dagestan? There's a certain level of popularity to it, a kind of career, in the West, and yet almost nothing in Dagestan. And yet they understood Granddad [the poet and writer Rasul Gamzatov (1923–2003)] so well." She replied, "The word is

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72 a simple code, which is easy to understand. But you work with more complex codes—the visual, the metaphorical—requiring that people should have a degree of erudition, some visual culture. And yet this particular work is very simple when it comes to deciphering the code. You’ve found a very high-capacity metaphor. If you watch the complete video you can start thinking about museum collections, about the histories of the arts that are invisible to the wider world, but if you watch just two seconds that’s enough to get that it’s about the fear connected with the loss of culture, about the destruction of history.”

RA I just recalled one thought that came to me back there in the mountains—about the perception of a painting. It’s one thing when you look at a picture hanging on a wall. But when you’re holding that same painting while standing on a tightrope, you’re scared and in this state of fear you perceive it in a much deeper way.

TM Yes, that’s exactly it!

RA Tell me about your next project.

TM I’ve got a project connected with my grandfather, but it’s still in need of serious elaboration. The essence of it is that I wear prosthetic makeup in my granddad’s likeness while looking at the monument put up to him after his death. It’s about the way he’s remembered now, in 2017. Imagine Rasul Gamzatov walking down a street bearing his name, looking at his own monument. This project is also about how we creative people, for the sake of argument, are commemorated. And the second work is about Caspian poachers, where I’ll be filming at sea.

RA If you film them, they’ll put them all in prison.



74 TM No, of course I won't film them, it's something based on their stories. They told me about how fishermen who are caught in storms sometimes get shipwrecked and what they do in that situation. One time, the fisherman Shamil "Fiksa" spent eight days in the water with his partner, tied to the prow of their boat. And they survived, they were found. The point of departure is that of survival. After a storm, fishermen often tie themselves to the prow of the boat. When a boat capsizes in a storm, the fore part is the only part sticking up out of the water. At such an instant you can lose your senses and drown. So they do this so that, first of all, they hopefully don't kill themselves, and secondly so that if they do, their families will be able to find their bodies and mourn properly: They tie themselves to the prow, or sometimes to empty benzene canisters. And this attitude to death immediately blew my mind.

^{RA} Cool-headed.

TM Yes, cool-headed.

^{RA} So, have we got an interview out of this?

TM I think so, yes, that's it.