

Elena Akaeva Interview – Art as Psychotherapy

Elena Akaeva is a performance artist, photographer and poet. Akaeva works mainly with topics of displacement, homelessness, borders, existential topics of life/death and human loneliness and of the fragility of women – topics deeply felt and very personal for her. Performance art for Akaeva is akin to psychotherapy (for both the artist and for her audience).

Akaeva tries to understand and even cure herself and society through her performances. She grew up with the idea that 'promoting yourself' is somewhat shameful and all art should be done for a good cause. Akaeva is trying to overcome this as we live in a time of self-representation, and it's a time when you should be visible especially as an artist who wants to change the world for the better.

For more information, visit: elena.akaeva.art.tilda.ws

Seed Performance © Elena Akaeva



Can you tell us a little bit about your background and your journey to art?

There was no journey into art. As long as I can remember art was a big part of my life. Art was my way of processing, understanding life events and a way of communication. I tried my hand at many different mediums. I played cello, wrote poetry, played in theatre, dance. I took everything very seriously. I discovered that the combination of body and language is my perfect medium. I'm kinaesthetic. When I'm baffled and want to understand motives or emotions of another person, I'll try to live through his movements.

At school, my friend and I were those strange art girls. We wanted to make art of our lives, so we would call random phone number to read a random poem from a book of verses; or would write a play to stage it under people's balconies.

I was a big fan of the Surrealism, Dada and Fluxus movements since childhood. I don't know where I found out about it first. Music and subcultures were my religion too. I even had a band when I was a teen. I studied journalism that's why my interest in social and political matters. It all added up and the turning point was one lecture at a contemporary art museum where they showed a performance piece of Valie Export Remote Remote, where she was cutting her fingers with a knife until they bled. And after she soaked her fingers in a bowl of milk. It was a performance condemning violence towards children. It was so powerful, beautiful, simple and painful to watch. It left a big impact on me. At the time I mainly wrote poetry. And it made me step out of paper and try to write poetry with my body and surroundings.

Seed Performance © Elena Akaeva



Last year you performed *Nettle* at the Koppel Project. Can you tell us about this and your inspiration for the performance?

Last February, Russia launched a war against Ukraine. This event abruptly changed the lives of many people. We all seem to live in an alternative, bitter reality now, and it is seeming impossible to heal from that number of traumatic experiences. Seven people whom I knew and loved died in Mariupol in the first months of war. Another friend of mine is still missing in Kharkov. My friends in Ukraine have been living in relentless fear all this time.

My Russian friends are being persecuted or forced to leave because of their anti-war position. Some got fines, some got prison terms. I cannot return to Russia to see my mum after anti-war statements and after organising and taking part in charity events and exhibitions where money was collected in support of Ukraine. It's considered treason in Russia (and punished by a prison term).

So, this performance was very personal to me. It was created for an exhibition of Ukrainian artists, who created art in bomb shelters, during air raids, under shelling. The performance took part in a Hampstead Heath police station. I was sitting in a cell in a dress made of nettles and was weaving a net of stinging nettles. The audience could see me through a little cell door window.

All images: *Nettle Performance* © Elena Akaeva



The stinging nettle dress symbolises the constant pain through which art is created in difficult times, the pain that people go through and which they transform into art. By interweaving nettles, suffering with hope, I was trying to transform the frightening reality.

During the performance, I thought about those people who didn't lose hope and life energy in the inhuman conditions of war and about those who did not stop expressing their anti-war position in a totalitarian state, risking a prison sentence. Though this all should leave you emotionally torn, my friends find strength to process their life into something meaningful and redeeming for people.

I lost my fingerprints after this performance and didn't have them for months. And I think it's very symbolic in a way, the war and suffering of my friends, my own grief and losses numbed me and it feels like some happy and childish part of my identity is lost too. I hope this is only temporary.





A Year Performance © Elena Akaeva

Are there any recurring themes within your work?

Each performance I create is very personal. The sources of my performances are events from my life. Performance, in some way, is a form of psychotherapy for me – a way to play out and revisit meaningful or hard experiences, freeing myself from their weight. I create a symbolic environment in which to live and relive those events. My audience live and heal alongside me, achieving their personal catharsis.

Also, the materials for my works are taken from nature: they are both archetypal and mythological. All human cultural history is concentrated in those substances (clay, water, seeds). It adds a deep and long echo of the whole human history to my current story, creating a louder and more profound impact and meaning.

You grew up believing self-promotion was in some way shameful and that all art should be for good causes. Can you tell us why you felt like this, and do you still feel like this?

I find it crucial to be visible only when I have something authentic and important to share. Our world now resembles a market of narcissistic self-presentation, an era of echo chambers. So often now people use their voice in order to be noticed and not to be heard, because often there is only sound and so little meaning in it.

Growing up, I was part of various subcultures and countercultural movements, which valued honesty and authenticity, anti-capitalistic attitudes towards people. And my parents were very idealistic, sometimes it felt they were born two centuries ago. They believed in high noble ideals, and they conveyed those ideals to me. And I'm very grateful to them for it, it saved me from many ailments of growing up in post-Soviet, 90s Russia.

I think if I have something important and timely to say and put it out in the world, it will naturally create a gravitational pull, attracting attention and resonating deeply with audiences. Also, people value what they discover more than what is forcefully imposed upon them. A treasure found through personal exploration holds far greater meaning and significance than something that is simply handed to them. And the main thing - art possesses an immense power. It's created by the subconscious, and it reaches the subconscious of the viewer, breaks down all logical defences and touches the very core of their being. Artists have the capacity to change and transform the world. This realisation has instilled in me a sense of awe and reverence for the potential of art. With such great power comes an equally great responsibility.

I love the concept of your performance, Clay. Can you tell our readers the meaning and inspiration behind it?

I believe that we carry a profound responsibility for our own lives. Life itself is a work of art, and ideally, we should strive to become our authentic selves as we navigate through it. But how much of mine is in me? To what extent am I shaped by external influences?

In the performance, Clay, I wanted to research mechanisms of psychological projection and projective interjection. During the performance, I stood still with a thin layer of clay covering my naked body, the audience was encouraged to shape and mould the clay as they desired. As the performance progressed, the clay gradually dried and, in the end, I was unable to move.

Others constantly shape our image, often projecting on to us their own perceptions and meanings that may have nothing to do with who we truly are. They mould us into certain patterns, altering our essence and creating an external image that is projected into the social realm. Consequently, we become the person shaped by others, sometimes even perceiving ourselves through their projections. This process can be so overpowering that it restricts our ability to move and reconnect with our authentic selves.

In performances, the most interesting thing is the audience reaction. I remember a performance in 2017. Next to the mountain of clay, there was a bowl with water, so that the audience could wash their hands afterwards. After reading the explanation, one very young girl, instead of sticking clay on me, began to wash me. She washed each of my fingers, each toe, and my face, and was saying: 'I will free you from the people's prejudices'. But the young man next to her, on the contrary, began to stick huge pieces of clay right on to my face. He was sticking more clay and she was washing it away. They nearly got into a fight. When you feel that art has touched something personal in people you understand that the performance was a success. They no longer interact with you, they discover something in themselves.

Clay Performance © Elena Akaeva





As for an outspoken Russian, the war must have had a profound effect on you. Can you tell us if the war impacted your art and about any specific performances or images?

As I mentioned the war has had a profound impact on my life, my personality and my art. And all my recent performances have focused on war-related themes. Last year, during the anniversary of the Nuremberg Trials, I performed Seed at an exhibition curated by Anna Nesterenko in Nuremberg.

Mustard seed represents hope and faith and is a reference to the Gospel of St Matthew ("...if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you." Matthew 17:20)

It was a moment of darkness. The horrors of war took away our faith in humanity, in higher powers, we were sinking into despair. Part of the gallery was filled with mounds of earth, somewhere underneath a tiny mustard seed was hidden. I was sifting through the earth, trying to find a mustard seed, trying to find faith in people and hope that this war will end soon.

In February, I made the performance A Year, a year after the war began. I was hammering coffin nails in a three-metre mourning dress that covered the entire gallery floor, each nail symbolised a life lost in the war.

Last year, my visa ran out. I had to wait seven months to get it renewed, and, during this time, I couldn't return to Russia and wasn't able to stay in Europe for a long time - I was stuck without a home. During that time, I volunteered in refugee centres, was producing exhibitions and I created Roads as a video documentation of my journey throughout the whole of Europe with a suitcase full of my belongings. I travelled from London to Turkey, I recorded myself dragging my suitcase in every country along the way. Travelling with my suitcase became a metaphor for the displaced and their struggles. I recorded conversations with refugees from Ukraine, Afghanistan, Russia and Syria. Part of those conversations I included in the Roads documentation. Part of them I'm keeping for another project about home and belonging.

Images: The Roads Performance © Elena Akaeva.



Which artists do you admire and why?

I won't be original here. Tehching Hsieh is the performance artist I admire the most. His work is a true sacrifice of his life to his art. He is akin to early Christian mystics and hermits. He goes to extraordinary lengths to create his works. He immerses himself in performances for a year, isolating himself within a small cage, or forbidding himself to enter inside any space, remaining on the street for the whole year.

Marina Abramovic and Ulay made the most beautiful and powerful performances. Rest Energy is one of the greatest works ever done. It moves me to tears. Chris Burden for underlining how vulnerable the human body is. John Cage for taming the randomness and stopping us being afraid of a silence which doesn't exist.)

And, if I may add a film director, then Kim Ki-Duk, whose films are made as visual poetry and are so close to performance art.

What does the next year hold for you, and do you have any performances coming up?

Currently I'm making a project as previously discussed, about displacement, home and homelessness, recording the stories of political refugees - this will be paired with an art installation.

The past two years were very hard - my father died, I lost many friends, my home country started a war, I experienced how it is to be without a home, being unable to return to Russia, or stay in any country for long. I volunteered to help people evade military conscription. My acquaintances reported on me, the police frequented my Moscow address. I started receiving threats. Needless to say, that it all left deep marks on me.

And it inspired me to perform Repair, where I will cut my hair and mend my ripped dress with a needle threaded with my hair.