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Peer reviewed

For Play and Pleasure

exhibition review by Leander Gussmann

Chará by Kris Lemsalu

Date: 16. AUGUST – 8. NOVEMBER 2023

Location: Kunstplatz Graben, Höhe Graben 21, 1010 Vienna, Austria

Situated in Vienna's Graben—a central point in the city's first district known for its historical gravitas, and a prime location for contemporary luxury shopping—Kris Lemsalu's public sculpture *Chará* emerges as a compelling intervention to address feminine pleasure and joy (fig. 1). Commissioned by KÖR, the sculpture is a steel structure coated in pigmented synthetic resin and mounted on a concrete plinth. Doubling as an accessible seating area, it serves tourists and the local populace, in line with KÖR's mission to support artists and enhance public spaces.¹

KÖR, short for *Kunst im öffentlichen Raum* (Art in Public Space), was established in 2004 as a public/private institution dedicated to enhancing Vienna's public spaces through art. Each year, the organization commissions a new work for the Graben. These temporary projects allow selected artists to conceptualize and realize site-specific works. The selections, overseen by the KÖR jury and financed by their annual budget, are based on the artists' ability to engage with the location's existing conditions. Such projects, widely accessible in Vienna, support emerging artists and

¹ Thomas Brandstätter, "Chará / Public Art Vienna," *KÖR: Kunst im öffentlichen Raum Wien*, accessed December 29, 2023, <https://www.koer.or.at/en/projects/kunstplatz-graben-2023/>.



Figure 1: Kris Lemsalu, *Chará*, Kunstplatz Graben, near Graben 21, 1010, 2023, steel, pigmented synthetic resin, concrete, 5 m, Vienna, Austria. Iris Ranzinger © 2023. Courtesy of KÖR.

improve Vienna's cultural standing internationally, with artworks often becoming focal points for community interaction.

Chará, standing five meters tall, consists of two abstracted, oversized reindeer jawbones. Its form asserts a free sculptural approach, contrasting the city's organization and rigidity. The sculpture's surface is coated using a technique reminiscent of the glazing found in Lemsalu's ceramic pieces. Unlike Lemsalu's ceramic work, which evokes a sense of fragility, *Chará* gives the impression of sturdiness through the use of an inner steel framework and flame-retardant cladding. In contrast to the solidity of the steel form, the coating takes on a soft and organic quality due to its flesh-toned pink hue and a series of white and reflective silver teeth. The form itself is a twisted and curved line that morphs depending on one's perspective, resembling an emoticon heart, mouth, portal, or vulva. Its portal form is more than a mere architectural element in the cityscape, becoming symbolic—of the functional, sexual, social, and political.

Chará blurs the line between the familiar and the uncanny. As a gate or portal, it invites comparisons with Anish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate*, Dani Karavan's *Passages*, and Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Gates* in Central Park. Like these works, *Chará* is a

transitional threshold that destabilizes and redefines spatial, political, and sociocultural identities. Kapoor's *Cloud Gate* reflects and distorts its surroundings, while Karavan's *Passagen* is a monument to the thresholds between life and death, freedom, and oppression (fig. 2). Similarly, the portal of *Chará* is a metaphorical entry to other realms, be they spiritual, psychological, or social. In its ambiguity, *Chará* has a multilayered signification, echoing historical and contemporary analogies between openings in the human body, dichotomies, and the built and natural environment.

Lemsalu's work also relates to ancient myths and rituals, such as the *vagina dentata* and Baubo, which are both explicitly mentioned in the on-site textual information that accompanies the sculpture. Baubo, the female jester in Greek mythology who exposed her vulva to cheer up the grieving goddess Demeter, is often depicted in clay as an obscene or absurd figure (fig. 3).

The use of the *vagina dentata* motif in *Chará* marks a shift from fear to desire, evoking a reimagined engagement with feminine powers. The motif typically represents a male fear of feminine sexuality, but in *Chará*, it takes on multiple tones with the white and sparkling teeth. The sculpture invokes ancient fears, yet subverts them through playful engagement, as reflected by other feminist and queer



Figure 2: Dani Karavan, *Passagen*, 1994, steel and iron, Portbou, Spain. This monument is a tribute to Walter Benjamin, encapsulating the tragic history of his failed escape. A passage constructed of steel presents a gate-like formation with a corridor of 87 steps descending from the cemetery to the sea, flanked by rusted iron.

interpretations of the motif. Minnie Bruce Pratt writes in her poem "TEETH":

[...] I thought men foolish,
Then I saw Cris smile
her teeth set sharp
in her hungry mouth,
and I wanted to turn
into quince or apricot,
I wanted her to eat me up
bite me, entice me,
let me nibble
her tender hand...²

In Lemsalu's work, the motif, which Pratt calls the dentata of greed, destabilizes conventional understandings of sexuality and gender dynamics and directs towards smiles and other forms of love and laughter, which feature prominently in her work. Jo Anna Isaak wrote extensively on the revolutionary power of women's laughter, describing it as pleasure, a dense "transfer point of power relations" with particular significance for those on the margins and without power. In Pratt's poem, the smile and the laughter bring about this transition.³

Thus, in *Chará*, thresholds are not merely structural. The sculpture is a metaphorical gateway to happiness and unashamed pleasure, embodying joy and passage—akin to Baubo's transformative laughter, which alleviated Demeter's sorrow in the wake of her daughter Persephone's rape and abduction. This thematic resonance underscores the power of women's laughter, as discussed by Isaak, as a site of social revolt and relief. Lemsalu has described herself as an ambassador of joy; she invites communal laughter, a shared pleasure that contests the status quo and fosters liberating engagement. In turn, her work becomes part of a larger narrative about behavior in public spaces, where laughter and joy may disrupt the status quo and hold the potential to catalyze social and individual transformation.

Although temporary, Lemsalu's *Chará* was a provocative addition to Vienna's public space in its engagement with the complexities of form, function, and symbolism. Lemsalu's employment of subversive and provocative motifs disrupts conventional perceptions, sparking discussion for some and evoking joy for others. Public comments

² Minnie Bruce Pratt, "Teeth," *Sinister Wisdom* 7 (Fall 1978): 60.

³ Jo Anna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (London: Routledge, 1996): 3.



Figure 3: Baubo, 3rd-2nd century BCE, Egypt, clay, 9.5 x 10.3 x 5 cm, terracotta, Antike Collection, MKG Hamburg, inventory no. 1989.584. Courtesy of MKG Hamburg.

about the work have been polarized, with accolades from the local press counterbalanced by critiques in the boulevard media. One article quotes Vienna's city councilor for culture, Veronica Kaup-Hasler stating, "A beautiful sculptural gesture by a female artist who critically looks at being a woman in a world that men still dominate," thus suggesting the sculpture has not been without its (patriarchal) detractors.⁴ As one far-right politician, Vienna's FPÖ Chief Dominik Nepp stated, "this kind of art is completely tasteless."⁵ Similarly, one pensioner, Ingeborg, was quoted as calling the

⁴ "Kultur-Stadträtin erklärt jetzt Riesen-Vagina am Graben," August 19, 2023, <https://www.oe24.at/oesterreich/chronik/kultur-stadtraetin-erklaert-jetzt-riesen-vagina-am-graben/566335032>. Translated by the author.

⁵ "Riesen-Vagina sorgt für Erregung am Graben" (Giant Vagina Causes a Stir on the Graben), oe24.at, August 17, 2023, updated August 17, 2023, <https://www.oe24.at/oesterreich/chronik/riesen-vagina-sorgt-fuer-erregung-am-graben/566167945>. Translated by the author.

work, “terrible, an imposition [...] I have goosebumps.”⁶ Finally, on the online forum for a national newspaper article about the sculpture, there are approximately 700 comments and reactions.⁷ Upon analyzing the postings, it is evident that the sentiment expressed is divided and lacks a consensus. In quantity, a minority of people have expressed explicit positive opinions, a significant portion has conveyed negativity, and many individuals have remained neutral or expressed mixed feelings. The comments reflect a broad spectrum of general perspectives on the nature and purpose of art, which are often polarized and diverse, and only seldom do they pick up on the themes of female pleasure and joy.

Nothing disappears completely. When certainties give way to new possibilities, we should embrace liminality and reshape our public life not only by political action and deliberation but also by acknowledging our desires. *Chará* was demounted on November 8th, 2023, and moved to the Belvedere21, a contemporary art museum in Vienna. It remains a testament to the transformative power of public art, challenging our understanding of pleasure in urban space.

6“‘Zumutung’: Wirbel Um Riesen-Vagina in Wien.” 2023. www.oe24.at. August 18, 2023. <https://www.oe24.at/oesterreich/chronik/wien/zumutung-wirbel-um-riesen-vagina-in-wien/566296287>.

Translated by the author.

7 Katharina Rustler, “Herz, Portal Oder Bezahnte Vagina? Neue Skulptur Am Wiener Graben,” DER STANDARD, August 24, 2023, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000184049/herz-portal-oder-bezahnte-vagina-neue-skulptur-am-wiener-graben>.

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