

Arts in Society

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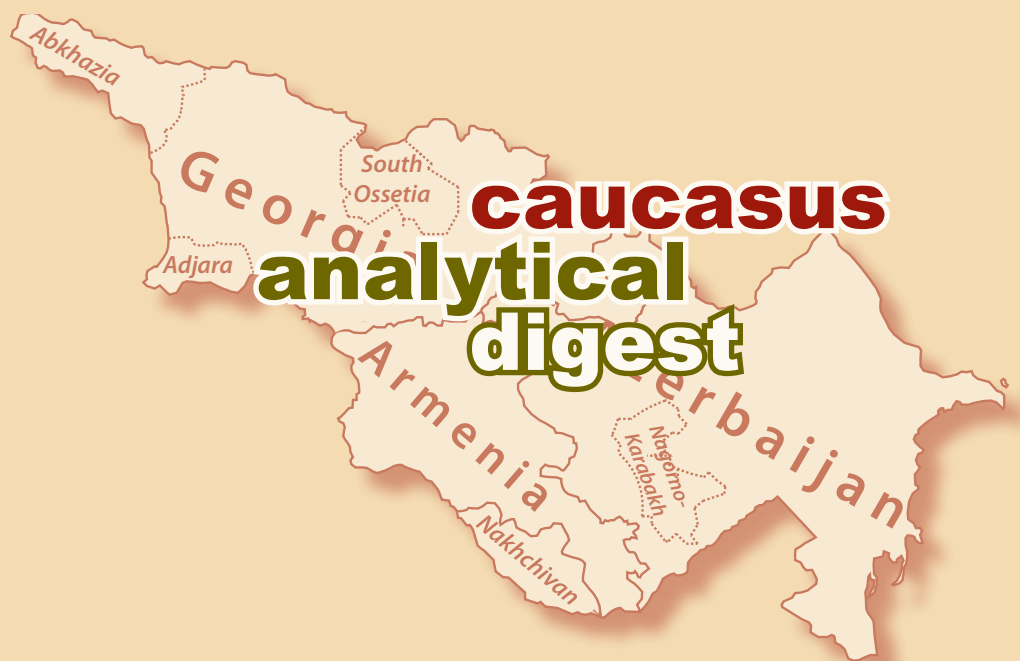
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ARTS IN SOCIETY

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Arts in Society: Asking Questions or Giving Answers?

Introduction by the Special Editor Sandra Frimmel (Zürich)

The arts can take on very different functions in different societies. Moreover, different forms of society require and generate different forms of art for the expression and communication of their values. The most prominent examples of this are Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union, which stood for popular unity, class consciousness, and loyalty to the party line under Communism, and its counterpart in the Cold War, American Abstract Expressionism, which was supposed to embody the complete freedom of content, form, and ideology in a democracy. This dichotomy was consistently promoted by both superpowers and used as a cultural weapon. In a continuation of this struggle, the contemporary art scene in most states of the Global North virtually demands that art should provoke and question entrenched patterns of perception and thought of the viewer, while in many post-Soviet states a classical academic art with an unalterable division into genres, themes and media is seen as the epitome of “true” art that morally enriches the viewer. It seems, therefore, that the basic demands and expectations of art in society can be assigned to political systems—even if closer inspection reveals that the boundaries of artistic taste run not only between systems, but also right through the middle of societies.

In the conflict-ridden South Caucasus, where *artasfoundation*, the Swiss foundation for art in conflict regions, initiates and accompanies art projects with the goal of conflict mediation and peacebuilding, the arts are more likely to provide answers than to ask questions. In Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been escalating again since July and we are now at the end of the second Karabakh war, and Abkhazia, although de facto independent of Georgia after the Georgian–Abkhaz War of 1992/93, is still not recognized by the international community. This constant struggle for national recognition and demarcation means that the educational function of all artistic creation is here strongly oriented toward the development of a sense of national belonging. Against the background of the unresolved conflicts in the region, it is not enough for art to provide food for thought; state-funded art must convey clear messages and positions.

However, the promotion of national culture and the development of national pride through art is by no means limited to the South Caucasus or the post-Soviet region. The logic of state support is per se nationalistic and also ideological. But in the affluent Western states, there exists a multitude of private, semi-state and state funding instruments that (similar to the former promotion of Abstract Expressionism) seek to promote “freedom”—understood as a specific form of ideology. In the post-Soviet context, however, with the end of the Soviet Union, the manifold instruments of support for artists broke away. Due to the sparsely populated funding landscape, independence from state structures does not so much promise freedom as precariousness and insignificance—even more so than in the rest of the global contemporary art scene. Although art’s radius of meaning is constantly increasing—Armenia is establishing its second biennial after Gyumri with the Yerevan Biennial, which was postponed from 2020 to 2021 due to the pandemic, and Georgia was the guest country of the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2018—autonomy of artistic creation in this context is not nearly as attractive as in the international art world. The arts in the South Caucasus are going through a process similar to that undergone by the states where they are created: Although on the one hand they seek to define their independence and autonomy, they are still tied into the after-effects of the Soviet system.

Within the framework of transcultural art projects, *artasfoundation* works specifically with people who seek to reinterpret the socialist-realist concept of art and thereby simultaneously expand the Western understanding of art. The foundation and its project partners are committed to broadening horizons of experience through the exchange of ideas about art and joint artistic work, thereby promoting diversity of opinion and providing new impulses for (civil) society. On the basis of field reports and self-analysis of cultural practitioners, this issue of the *Caucasus Analytical Digest* on Arts in Society looks at how both artists and newly-founded grassroots institutions seek exchange with the so-called international art world without completely turning away from local traditions and starting conditions, and how the Soviet-style accessibility of art for the general population can be maintained under different political-ideological conditions and used to develop artistic (among other forms of) diversity. The four articles also discuss how different support mechanisms—or rather, their absence—determine the content orientation of the arts and how art finds its audience or even invents it. All articles emphasize the desire for and the necessity of exchange. But the authors also point out how unevenly the rapprochement often proceeds because privileges are not evenly distributed. They plead for the simultaneous recognition of different forms of knowledge and different concepts of art and, in their work, look for ways in which these can enrich each other rather than exclude each other.

About the Special Editor

Dr. Sandra Frimmel is project manager at *artasfoundation*, Zurich. She is also academic coordinator of the Centre for Arts and Cultural Theory at the University of Zurich (ZKK) and conducts research on the interactions between art and power / law / society.

Contemporary Art in an Alien Context

Building Up a Self-organized Space in Contemporary Abkhazia

By Nasta Agrba and Asida Butba (both SKLAD, Sukhum/i)

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Abstract

SKLAD (*depot*) is a cultural centre in the post-war town of Sukhum/i in the de facto state of Abkhazia founded in 2015. It is the first local initiative to engage with contemporary art. Its goal is to foster international connections, support local artistic initiatives and strengthen civil society in challenging contexts of isolation and post-conflict trauma. In this article, the initiators take a look back and analyze how SKLAD became a learning tool to get to know the place they live in better.

An Alien White Cube

In the beginning of the 2010s, Sukhum/i's cultural city life felt dull and boring for a curious young person. Theaters (both Russian and Abkhaz) had still not been reopened after the end of the war twenty years before, though from time to time there was an exhibition at the Artists' Union or a concert in the music hall. Streets now full of bright new cafes were then dark and empty. Only a couple of self-organized film clubs offered screenings and discussions beyond the mainstream "patriotic" rhetoric. They were places to speak about repressions, desires, loneliness, and social problems and to see international youth culture. This was the kind of energy that enabled us to create SKLAD in 2015 as a place for exhibitions, workshops, lectures and film screenings, and as a safe space for discussions, self-expression and learning.

There had not been any ambitious self-organized spaces before SKLAD. In Abkhazia, culture has mostly been produced by the state through its institutions. Besides the film clubs and certain art projects, there have been no independently-built structures in the field of culture. Being neither the type of peacebuilding NGO the public is used to nor part of the state structure, SKLAD has become an exotic animal. Despite its apparent transparency in terms of organization and structure, it provoked many questions by its mere existence. Why do the founders do it? Are they contemporary art missionaries? Or pro-Georgian agents? And not least: Where does the money come from?

Local Suspicions, International Support

Abkhazia is a small society. Everyone knows each other, everyone's reputation is transparent. From the very beginning, SKLAD was made possible thanks to a network of supporters and friends—both international and local. The Abkhaz State Drama Theater, for example, did not ask for payment for the first months of using their space, some construction work was possible thanks

to donated materials, and the local digital television station *Asarkia* put significant effort into promoting SKLAD's work. Overall, SKLAD got started in a friendly atmosphere in which people were eager to help and a lot could be negotiated. Also providing substantial support was SKLAD's international network of allies, who had a deep understanding of its mission and of

the questions and difficulties which occur while running a self-organized space. However, SKLAD's tight connection with *artasfoundation*, the Swiss foundation for art in conflict regions, and its network created a feeling of mistrust from those representing state structures and some visitors, who believed our new organization was supported by foreign donors and therefore supposedly represented some outsider's interests.

SKLAD's international connections started with a student exchange with the FHNW Academy of Arts and Design in Basel organized by *artasfoundation* in 2014, a joint workshop with young Abkhaz artists. The otherwise dusty space of the Artists' Union was filled with fresh energy, with the excitement of the unfamiliar on the part of the Swiss students and the excitement

Entrance to SKLAD in the Abkhaz State Drama Theater, 2015.

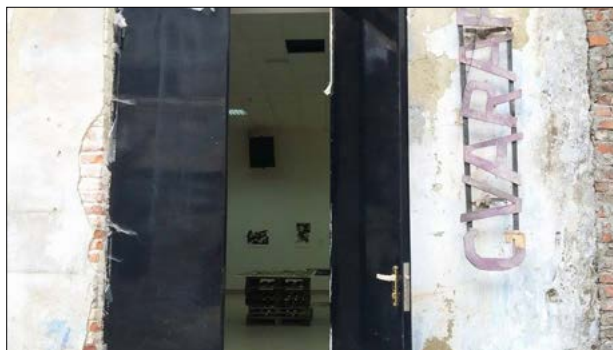


Photo: Asida Butba

of seeing a new notion of art and foreign minds on the part of the Abkhaz students. Brought up in the environment of traditional rules and Soviet discipline, the local students were disoriented by the change of stimuli at first. But contemporary art seemed like a democratic and flexible language to create self-reflections, having the potential to contain any possible idea or interest. We felt like we were drilling a hole in the isolation of Abkhazia, where hitherto no flow of energy had been possible.

A year after this exchange one of us, Asida Butba, together with Tatiana Ergunova, both part of the workshop, conceived *Tenses of Time and Space*, the first exhibition of what would later become SKLAD. It took place in a space in the Abkhaz State Drama Theater in the very center of Sukhum/i which was suggested by our artist friend Adgur Dzari. We painted the space white and brought together works by local artists, some by well-established artists such as Dzari and Arkhip Labakhua, but also some by younger artists at the beginning of their artistic development as well as works by the Swiss students of FHNW. The exhibition challenged the notion of labor in art and ideas of academic discipline by showing many works assembled with already existing objects, that is, “ready-mades,” or made following artist instructions. We felt like creating a space to explore diverse ideas. Some visitors were put off by the exhibition, some were amused, and a few people came to the space just to be in its novel atmosphere and absorb its uplifting, contagious energy.

Contemporary Art as a Stranger

Can contemporary art really be a part of the cultural landscape in a place like Abkhazia, with its legacy of the war and the Soviet cultural system still predominating? On the one hand, it can be one of the most democratic forms of artistic practice available, offering flexibility in subject matter, form, skills, and materials, as well as international networks of devoted cultural workers who are used to thinking beyond money and are most often politically left. They are not afraid to go into unknown territory and are interested in post-Soviet legacies, discourses of trauma, colonialism and other topics Abkhazia has to offer. Contemporary art comprises traditions of critical thinking, questioning and stating problems as well as giving new visual

and sensory experiences – something we feel was lacking in Abkhazia’s cultural scene. The enormous global exchange potential of contemporary art networks is also undoubtedly important given Abkhazia’s isolation. At the same time, the practice of contemporary art puzzles those who are not yet accustomed to its language. Often it simply doesn’t look like “art” in an academic understanding. At some exhibitions, SKLAD visitors literally stated that the space was empty or that there was no art in the room. Art pieces felt more like sparsely-placed furniture with an explanatory text. Guided tours often helped to establish emotional and intellectual connections with the artwork, and have become a part of SKLAD’s usual practice. For the artists who were brought up in the Soviet realist tradition and whose eye is trained to look at form, composition and colors, it is also often quite perplexing to look at art which doesn’t seem to require labor in the traditional sense or which isn’t concentrated solely on its visual form. For them,

SKLAD felt dangerous, like it was lowering the criteria for being an artist. SKLAD’s concentration on the new and experimental also led, for example, to the exclusion of salon-style art from its exhibitions. This felt problematic because it basically meant rejecting the already existing artistic scene and creating a conflict. This conflict doesn’t openly manifest itself but rather is felt subliminally through critical disapproval of SKLAD events

or declined invitations to participate on the part of some artists.

Institution or Not?

Sustaining such a project in an isolated region without similar initiatives is a difficult task. SKLAD started out imitating an idea of contemporary art institutions abroad, institutions that are usually run by bigger teams, are located in bigger cities, and have more funding opportunities. The problems that occurred in the process of its development were similar to problems of self-organized spaces globally. While trying to put out the best program we felt was possible, we got deeper into unpaid work, stress over creating constant output and being torn between our paying jobs, other projects and work for SKLAD. Different ideas regarding how much control over the program should be held or how labor and resources should be distributed also created tension.

Back to the Archives, exhibition view, 2018.



Photo: Asida Butba

Workshop within the First Sukhum Urban Forum, 2018.

Photo: Asida Butba

The main inner conflict started to arise after successfully organizing a few large-scale projects which created false expectations that we were capable of much more than we actually were. For example, when we initiated the First Sukhum Urban Forum, with its program spanning from lectures on post-Soviet cities to ecology and road safety, people expected us to get actively involved in urban planning and environmental protection. We projected the image that we had the capacity to sustain a high level of activity and to follow up on our projects, but our broadening interests and commitments grew disproportionately to our capabilities. Our ambitions grew to cover not only exhibitions and film screenings, but also an artist residency program, an urban forum, and a lectorium – all with a team of two to four people who were also busy with their day jobs. One solution could have been to become a proper institution, but it wasn't clear how to do this without sufficient resources. Another solution would have been to take on a more precise focus and to free ourselves from our self-imposed obligation to provide a steady cultural program for the general public. At this crossroads, we thought that the best thing to focus on was the youth of Sukhum/i and to invest in engaging younger artists and exploring possibilities of a horizontal structure, which could then lead to them actively co-running the space.

Our decision to focus on the local youth was encouraged by our reflection upon an experience of a project by the Swiss artist Augustin Rebetez in the mountain village of Tkvarchal, in which a group of 16 to 23-year-old participants experienced a creative flow which had nothing to do with the disciplined and regulated school-work they were used to. These artists became a persistent presence at SKLAD, but we never had enough time to seriously engage with them. Thinking of that workshop and our experiences with other student exchanges we had hosted made us realize that perhaps our main mission could be organizing a free, unregulated space

for the experience of self-rule and a place for the youth to incubate.

Conflict Spaces

Besides the organizational problems mentioned above, there are problems specific to the local Abkhaz context. SKLAD was conceived as a place for contemporary art and cultural exchange. For SKLAD, existing in an unrecognized state means that all the international donors present are peacekeepers or humanitarian aid organizations working in a “conflict space”. Art is not their field of interest. Securing financing in a country without cultural funding mechanisms is a task we constantly struggle with. Having anything near steady support, despite being the only organization of the sort in the country, seems impossible. For international cultural foundations, Abkhazia simply doesn't exist—except for *artasfoundation*, our regular cooperation partner. For the very few local donors such as World Abaza Congress (WAC), SKLAD is too “foreign” and does not fit into their mainly ethnic understanding of nation-building through art and culture.

A conflict space also means many taboos. Besides taboos enforced by the traditional society, which constrain conversations about gender and sexuality, there are even stronger taboos related to the unresolved conflict. This discourse is totally taken over by the state and peace organizations, which makes it almost impossible to say anything in this field for the moment. Under these circumstances, art in a state context tends to serve the purpose of nation-building or escapism. Visual art strongly follows either the traditions of Socialist Realism or modernist formal aesthetics; it is not currently understood as a tool to speak about complex experiences or social issues. At SKLAD, we nevertheless try to foster public debate in our deeply fractured and traumatized society through art, but notably the majority of projects dealing with the Abkhaz context came from for-

Renovation work in the new space of SKLAD in Sukhum-pribor, 2020.

Photo: Nasta Agrba

oreign artists. Be it in *Memory. Untitled* by Aron Rossman-Kiss or in *Deletion Marks* by Elizabeth Denys and Tareq Daud, it seems that these artists are more equipped to speak about Abkhaz history in a complex way than any of the local artists. In 2018, SKLAD initiated a call together with the local foundation Amshra granting Abkhaz artists funds to produce their exhibitions at SKLAD. Curiously, almost none of the applications reflected any local subject matter, but rather dealt with broader, more global topics such as “wonders of the world” or “the need to take selfies”. The few applications that dealt with Abkhazia revolved around national epics or fairy tales.

In another case, a video by Aron Rossman-Kiss called “Borderland” in the above-mentioned exhibition *Tenses of Time and Space* showed borders painfully similar to the demarcation line between Georgia and Abkhazia, e.g. in Cyprus, Kurdistan, Kosovo, and between Turkey and Greece as if there was one continuous border posing the same threat to human dignity. The reaction to the video was angry: “how dare this foreigner show us from this ugly side?,” visitors asked. There is still no distance from the conflict; any interference with the already-established public discourse feels dangerous. For the moment, it feels like there is no language to reflect the experience of living in contemporary Abkhazia.

Sukhumpriyor

In 2019 SKLAD relocated to the semi-abandoned factory Sukhumpriyor in the center of Sukhum/i, which in Soviet times was famous for producing balls for all ball-point pens in the USSR. At first, it seemed like a questionable choice. The space in Sukhumpriyor was in ruins and contrasted sharply with the previous clean white cube where anyone could be invited, including state officials. This inhospitable interior, however, coincided perfectly with our new intention to build an enclosed

About the Authors

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Asida Butba holds a degree in film production and cultural management from The Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (a. k. a. VGIK). She co-founded SKLAD, the first contemporary art initiative in Abkhazia.

Further Information

- <https://www.facebook.com/skladsukhum>
- [@hara_hakalak](#)

space to empower the younger creative community, feeling the need for more horizontal self-organization. At the moment the space is going through some renovation work in which a dozen young artists from the Sukhum Art School are involved, along with our SKLAD team. They are building studios for their future creative work where they will be able to collaborate, organize events and experiment. In order to let the new community function more independently, SKLAD has to find new ways of raising money for the rent of the space and its development. Closed parties, organized by one of the curators, may be one possibility. Another source of income could be looking for collaborations with local foundations and NGOs as well as international donors, but finding these collaborations is still very challenging. A good relationship with the factory administration will be important too, so that in the case of insufficient income SKLAD wouldn't get kicked out immediately.

Within its five years of existence, SKLAD has adopted artistic and social practices which before had not been a part of existing institutions. It has become a place to encourage artists to broaden their artistic language, a place to meet international artists, to learn what is going on in the world and to openly discuss challenging issues. SKLAD's projects have given rise to new ideas and helped create other self-organized groups such as, for example, the architectural and urbanist grass-roots society HARA HAKALAK, which largely consists of participants of the Sukhum Urban Forum or the Youth Art Festival who had been active participants in SKLAD's workshops and exhibitions. We hope that a new chapter will open in Sukhumpriyor, with its focus on youth empowerment – something which will form the further development of SKLAD and reflect in Abkhazia's cultural landscape in the future.

SKLAD team in Sukhumpriyor, 2020.



Photo: Nasta Agrba

War, Music, Memory—Ethnomusicological Explorations in Abkhazia

A Conversation Between Kerstin Klenke (Phonogrammarchiv, Vienna) and Olivia Jaques (Performatorium, Vienna)

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Kerstin Klenke, head of the Phonogrammarchiv of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, focuses on music and politics in Central Asia and the Caucasus in her research. While her studies in Uzbekistan explore the connection between popular music and patriotism, in the Caucasian de facto republic of Abkhazia she is investigating the connection between war, music and memory. In doing so, she understands music in a comprehensive sense, i.e. she does not limit herself to music, text or repertoire analyses, but rather examines music as a social phenomenon. In a conversation with the artist and cultural worker Olivia Jaques, who has led art projects supporting peacebuilding in the South Caucasus, she provides insight into the current Abkhaz musical landscape, in which the topic of war plays a major role.

OJ In your research in Abkhazia, the intertwining of music, war, and culture of remembrance plays a central role. In your experience, how are these issues perceived locally?

KK The idea that war should play a major role in the music culture is very widespread. Keeping the memory of the war alive and passing it on, especially to children, is a concern of many and is perceived as a task for society. The field of music is no exception here, but brings together many elements: sound, vision, performance.

From an Abkhaz perspective, during the Georgian–Abkhaz War in 1992/93, the Abkhaz people were on the verge of being wiped out as a distinct group, but against all expectations managed to win. It is important to convey this event, the victory, which many consider the most positive of the last 28 years, as well as the horrors of the war. This, of course, also creates images of the enemy. At the same time, this war is placed in a series of historical events such as the expulsion of Abkhazians to the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. Through this, a narrative is formed in which Abkhazians have always had to fight for survival, but are not aggressors themselves.

OJ How exactly does the fusion of sound, vision and performance in the remembrance of the war look like, what are the formats of memory?

KK There is a repertoire of war songs that crosses genre boundaries and is performed by various artists. Yet the film trilogy “Songs of Our Victory” by Emma Khodjaa—at least in the pop field—has become a kind of template for war-related remembrance music. Songs that played a role in the war were covered as rock versions and war was staged in accompanying video clips for these films. Children and young people often re-enact film scenes to the soundtrack of “Songs of Our Victory”—on war-related holidays or at events such as the regular youth festival at the National Library.

When children perform war songs at such events and re-enact war scenes in camouflage clothing, I think it is about them learning a very specific version of history. It’s also about being dressed for the occasion. The children are photographed, the parents are congratulated on dressing them in this way. For many people it is a matter of course to dress themselves or the family in uniform, camouflage or uniform-style clothes on war-related holidays—similar to people dressing appropriately for the occasion in Germany at Christmas.

Just as in the Russian Federation, for example, routes of attack by the Red Army are retraced in memory of World War II, so in Abkhazia, too, on the corresponding holidays of the Georgian–Abkhaz War, the paths of certain offensives are retraced and called “paths of heroes” or similar.

Announcement for a performance by the ensemble Kabardinka from Kabardino-Balkaria (RF) in honour of the Day of the Volunteer Fighter at the Philharmonics in Sukhum/i (August 2017).



Photo: Kerstin Klenke

OJ Does music possibly have the potential to come to terms with the past?

KK In my opinion, it's not about coming to terms with something on holidays or mourning days in Abkhazia. Mourning here is rather a revitalization of memory, a re-presencing of war. On days of mourning and beyond, one sees pictures of those who died in the war everywhere. Coping with mourning, overcoming grief, would rather mean that such images are allowed to fade instead of being permanently present.

Music is not only a mirror, it can also anticipate things—for example, in social movements, it can construct utopias and realities. The best way to deal with trauma musically is probably to listen to and make different, i.e. non-war-related, music. There are hip hop youth groups in Abkhazia that do not rap about war. Or in classical music there is a lot that has nothing to do with war. But in both cases, in my view, it's not about a decidedly avant-garde moment, or about consciously doing something completely different, anti-traumatic. One should also not overestimate the potential of music to have a socially positive effect. Music is often seen as something genuinely positive, something socially unifying across diverse forms of differences. But music is first of all neutral. Music is what you make of it, it does not always promote community, it does not make people happy per se, on the contrary, it is also used for torture. So, it can contribute to peacebuilding, but there is also a lot of music that divides and separates, and thereby spreads hatred.

OJ Does music by minorities play a role within this official narrative?

KK In my experience, music of the larger minorities in Abkhazia has no place in the culture of remembrance—unless representatives of these minorities fought in larger numbers on the side of Abkhazia. That is also the reason why music from North Caucasian republics has its place, because many volunteers who supported Abkhazia during the war came from there. Some now live as minorities in Abkhazia. Very present in the war-related culture of remembrance is, for example, the song “Hymn of the Caucasus” by the Chechen Khamzat Khankarov, who evokes a regional connection and unity through his lyrics—especially through the first and most prominent line of the song “Rise, Sons of the Caucasus”.

OJ Is there instead a kind of counter-music culture of minorities that rejects the narrative of the culture of remembrance?

KK The diversity of musical traditions in Abkhazia—ethnic or national or otherwise—is not necessarily due to any kind of resistance. There is also no mechanism of the kind in which music becomes more resistant the more tense the political situation is. Any kind of music can become resistant in certain political contexts. If you travel through Abkhazia in a minibus and the driver listens to Georgian pop, then that is a political statement. But perhaps Russian or Soviet pop can be a consensus for all passengers, and does not have to be politically charged. Russia is indeed a protective power and thus politically involved in Abkhazia, but especially for the older generation, Russian songs from the Soviet era, for example, can become something unifying, beyond ethnic or national conflicts.

The ensemble Kabardinka from Kabardino-Balkaria (RF) performs in honour of the Day of the Volunteer Fighter at the Philharmonics in Sukhum/i. On the background screen: original footage of the war with the Circassian flag (August 2017).



Photo: Kerstin Klenke

OJ How is nationalism reflected in music? Or do we need to be more specific here, is it about practicing different genres of music like heroic songs, or how war music is used?

KK Meaning arises in the reception of music and in the context in which music happens. In other words, if heroic songs from a much earlier period than the Georgian–Abkhaz War are constantly performed at commemorative events of this particular war, then they are naturally charged with additional meaning.

OJ In a previous conversation, you called the fact that war plays such an important role in everyday discourse and life and that it becomes an important moment of identification “warrification”. Do you see the potential within the music culture in Abkhazia to go beyond this state of warrification through music?

KK In order to go beyond a state of warrification of society, I think something new is needed, something positive, something other than victory in war, other points of reference in order to no longer define oneself as a victim of larger powers that have been successfully fought against. For many, the idea of positive identification with the Abkhaz present is not working. Everything is still in ruins. The crime rate is horrendous. Abkhazia is hardly recognized internationally as a state and is dependent on Russia. Younger people certainly hope to create a kind of model democracy in the Caucasus, but the political system looks quite different in reality. Russia is Abkhazia's protective power, and Abkhaz politics regularly produces scandals.

I believe that the reaction to the topic of peace is different between generations. The older generation is much more willing to consider peace than the younger because they know peace, just like multi-ethnic conviviality in the Soviet era. That was certainly not always unproblematic, but everyone had family members, friends or neighbors of different ethnicities and/or nationalities from one's own. Even if one found the situation difficult on a large scale, multi-ethnicity was lived on a small scale. Now there is no memory of this among the younger ones. On the contrary: I had the feeling that unforgiveness is more widespread in the younger generation than in the older. One tends to stir up the image of the enemy and can participate in patriotic military youth camps, which reinforce the state of being armed, the impression of being threatened. There are younger people who have never knowingly seen a Georgian in their lives.

OJ How does music/culture promotion work in Abkhazia, especially for Soviet-style cultural workers? Is there what we call an “independent scene” as a counterpart to this?

KK The Soviet idea of the cultural worker, who sings and makes music in the service of his or her country and works for his or her people, is still influential and thus present in many ways. During the Soviet era, it had much more positive connotations to be integrated into state structures, because the state institutions provided financial and material support for “their” artists. As an artist, one educated the masses and was there for the whole people, including the workers and not just the intellectuals. In many post-socialist countries, this is still an important understanding of the role of artists today. For many musicians that I know in Uzbekistan and Abkhazia, the integration into a political program is very important. They derive their professional pride from it and find it completely unattractive to be active without a decided social or political task. It gives them a value, a status. This is a completely different understanding of what role one should have as a musician in a society and a political system than in the common Western European perspective. According to this ideal, the arts, and with them music, are free—artists follow their personal inspiration, simply do their thing and are not socially or politically attached. This is a very romantic idea of being a musician or a composer. But: What does it actually mean in real life to be independent? The independent theaters in Germany or Austria also receive funding from the city council, the large orchestras are financed by the state, and composers compose commissioned works. It's the same in Abkhazia: here, too, people get commissions to compose pieces for holidays, but many musicians perform for little or no pay at these events.

You cannot receive tertiary education in music in Abkhazia. For this, you have to leave Abkhazia. There are few opportunities to make a local career in the classical music field. Of course, you can play in state ensembles or become a music teacher, but there is little opportunity for a big international career. Also, there is no symphony orchestra. Ambitious musicians from the classical field go mainly to the Russian Federation. Classical music has its own competition structures: with whom and where did you study, in which orchestra did you end up, do you have a solo career, did you win a certain competition ... There is less of that in the pop sector. Of course, you can win a Grammy, but that's not something that would be easily accessible to someone from Sukhum/i or Gal/i—like to most people in other parts of the world. It's different with genres that are of a more regional significance, such as bard music. There it is mainly about being recognized in the Russian–North-Caucasian bard landscape. Apart from that there are alternative amateur musicians in youth clubs, but there is simply no market to live on that.

From the collections of the Ardzinba Museum of War Glory. Exhibition at a youth festival in Sukhum/i (September 2017).



Photo: Kerstin Klenke

OJ What are the biggest changes in the music business that the war has caused?

KK State-organized competitions in music, the circles in which you moved throughout the Soviet Union and beyond in socialist foreign countries collapsed with the Soviet Union. There are also no longer any large pan-Soviet dance festivals, such things are only taking place on a smaller regional scale, in Russia, in the North Caucasus. Even in the field of pop music or “estrada”, as the Soviet counterpart was and still is called in many post-socialist states, the formerly wide circulation possibilities no longer exist. As a professional musician, one was employed by the state at that time; now, one finances oneself by playing at weddings or other festivities. One is dependent on personal contacts. At holiday events, as I said, one usually performs for free. You don’t earn anything by having your music played on the radio, because there is no collecting society. Due to the size of Abkhazia, there is also not a large enough audience to live from concerts. Therefore, it would be important to have a more international market, but at the moment the Russian market is the most accessible one.

OJ What is the effect of the disappearance of both the Soviet and Georgian frame of reference on possible exchanges and the current musical culture?

KK It’s not that exchange is not wanted or that there is no longing for more possibilities to create connections. Unofficially, via detours, people still meet, for example, with friends from Tbilisi. It used to be that musicians, composers or ensembles were invited back and forth on an official level. In the Soviet era, important musicians studied at the conservatory in Tbilisi or in the Russian Republic. It is different today: Tbilisi is no longer an option. A lot of infrastructure was also destroyed in the war, many people died or left, not only Georgians, but also, for example, Pontic Greeks, who also had their own musical culture. Musicians did front-line entertainment during the war, but after that many structures were gone, instruments were broken, buildings were destroyed. And who would have wanted to listen to a concert then? The time until the dissolution of the blockade, until the recognition by Russia, was really hard.

On Freedom Square in Sukhum/i after the procession of the Immortal Regiment. On the Day of Victory and Independence relatives, friends and volunteers parade photos of fighters and civilians that were killed in the Georgian–Abkhaz war through the city (September 2017).



Photo: Kerstin Klenke

OJ What do musicians say it is they need?

KK Better salaries and fees. You can’t live from music, so most musicians teach in addition to performing. But you can’t really make a living from that either, unless you’re a department head at a college or a soloist somewhere. For certain areas, it’s pretty clear how far your career will go, for example if you play Abkhaz folk instruments. If you are a woman or a girl, then you will join the Ensemble Gunda, as a boy or man you enter the music ensembles that accompany the dance ensembles.

OJ Are there any efforts to define the Abkhaz state through music?

KK The question would be, what does one need musically in order to be considered an independent state in the global community of states and to finally be recognized? In the cultural sphere, that would be—also due to the Soviet influence—ballet, opera, classical dance, classical music. Above all, the desire for a symphony orchestra came up again and again when I talked to people in Abkhazia. The big question, however, is for whom a symphony orchestra should play at present, because Russian tourists are mainly interested in Caucasian folklore and Soviet or post-Soviet Russian pop. But as I said before, one should not overestimate the power of music in general, so I am cautious about the nexus between music and identity. With the exception of dance, which is very much defined nationally, it seems to me to be more about something like the musical insignia of statehood.

Please see overleaf for information about the authors and suggestions for further reading.

About the Authors

Kerstin Klenke is an ethnomusicologist and head of the Phonogrammarchiv of the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna. She studied musicology, social anthropology and theatre, film and television studies in Cologne and Vienna. Her current research project is devoted to the subject of Abkhazia—War, Music and Memory.

Olivia Jaques is an independent artist and cultural worker based in Vienna. She co-organises the performance platform Performatorium, frequently teaches, organizes artistic events and writes. In her work she focuses on social, performative, discursive, collective, process-based and experimental formats, as well as curatorial questions.

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MIHR Theatre of dot-dot-dot

An Exploration of Performance Art, Performing Arts, Contemporary Dance and Theatre in Armenia Today

By Shoghakat Mlke-Galstyan (MIHR Theatre, Yerevan) and Olivia Jaques (Performatorium, Vienna)

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Abstract

MIHR Theatre was established in 2003 by sister and brother Mlke-Galstyan as the first independent contemporary dance theatre company in Armenia. It attempts to complement the state-dominated theatre with a dance system that is characterized by free expression and the combination of different genres, understanding art as always being connected with society and its changes. One of the founders, Shoghakat Mlke-Galstyan, together with her Austrian artist colleague Olivia Jaques in this article develops an explanation of the approach of MIHR Theatre—how it seeks to leave behind the traditional Soviet educational system in order to establish a contemporary dance scene in Armenia, as well as to incorporate Armenian traditions into their practice. But above all, the authors elaborate on the specific context MIHR Theatre finds itself in and works with extensively.

Performing Arts in the Changing City of Yerevan

MIHR Theatre was established in 2003 by a group of friends who spent their time gathering on the street and discussing art and the big questions of the world. They wanted to do contemporary dance performances in order to change the world they lived in. The group included non-artists, art students and artists from various fields like fine art, dance and theatre. From this huge group, the siblings Shoghakat Mlke-Galstyan, trained in Latino-American dances and contemporary ballet, and Tsolak Mlke-Galstyan, coming from contemporary dance and also having a fine arts background, continued with the

concept until today, more recently accompanied by Petros Ghazanchyan, a contemporary dancer. In 2014 the musicians Eliza Baghdiyan and Lusine Mlke-Galstyan from Tiezerk Band joined the MIHR Theatre crew.

MIHR Theatre chose performance art for its ability to facilitate the expressing and feeling of the issues of the present through movement, staging already existing plays as well as creating their own. In collaboration with musicians, fine artists, sound performers, and architects, its pieces combine different genres, such as action painting, storytelling, “music of movement”, audio performance, and drama theatre. Inspiration is derived from personal reflection as well as from political topics. *The Song*

of a Refugee (2018) refers to a special genre in Armenian music in which the historical experience of emigration is still part of everyday life. Inspired by Heriqnaz Galstyan's sculptural work "Horovel" (2008), it is not only about geographical migration, but also about the loss of and longing for the homeland. Longing used to be a process through which people found hope. But nowadays, alienation leads to the loss of hope that urges the vagrant to search for a new land and new aspirations. This special kind of alienation, by force and not by choice, is infused into the song, and thus into the performance. *Black Castle* (2010) deals with a more concrete political event, the so-called March First, the tragic events during the Armenian presidential election mass protests in 2008 in Yerevan.¹ The dancers, all dressed in black, try to conquer a steel framework, the Black Castle, which is made from envy, jealousy and betrayal. Whoever possesses the Black Throne is the king of the Black Castle, but that power only brings death.

The Song of a Refugee, 2018, Yerevan, Armenia.

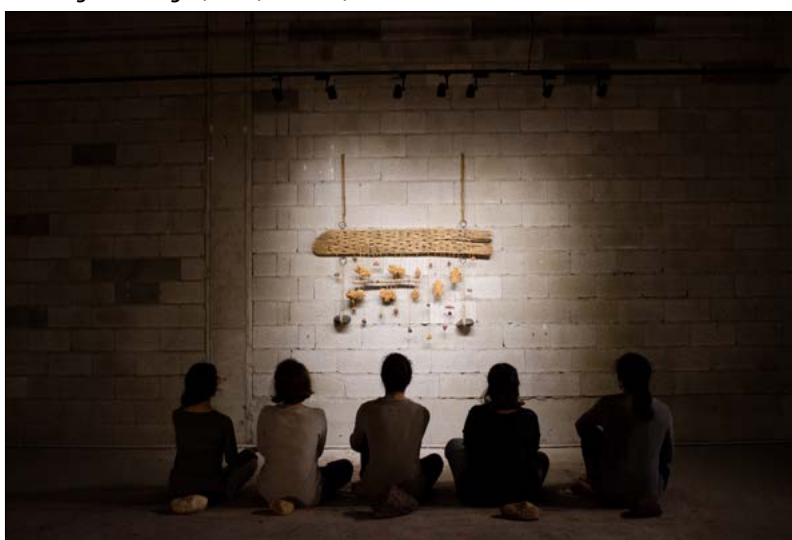


Photo: Seda Grigoryan

There are no heroes, there is only evil. On other occasions, MIHR Theatre works with more private topics, as in *Unreal Stories from My City* (2018), a project together with Tiezerk Band which reflected on the personal experiences of the group members related to the changes in the city districts they live in. The old buildings get demolished, the city transforms, and different perspectives on the transformation as well as individual memories are brought together in the performance—the private meets the political.

In 2015, MIHR Theatre produced a flyer saying "MIHR Theatre of ...", meaning that MIHR Theatre is a concept where one can express oneself freely by exploring new forms of contemporary dance. In English, "theater" is a more precise or more defined concept, while the Armenian concept of theatre (*թատրոն*—theatre, playhouse, play, stage), pronounced *tatron*, describes a more general concept of the performing arts, meaning types of

art (such as music, dance, or drama) that are performed for an audience, including e.g. site-specific performances. The term "performing arts" (*կատարողական արվեստ*) can be literally translated as "doing art" or "doers of art". Along with "performance art" (*պերֆորմանս*), it is a term without a proper definition and is mainly used within the art community. For the broader audience one would instead use "theatre piece" (*թատերական ներկայացում*).

MIHR Theatre is the first contemporary dance company in Armenia. It defines itself as the only truly independent theatre group in Armenia, understanding independence in a financial as well as ideological and organizational sense. In this regard it challenges

other independent theatre groups—such as Arina Araratyan Dance Theatre, Theater on the Roof, Epsidon Theatre Group, or Infinite Theatre Ireland—by demonstrating that surviving independently, even for such a long period, is possible no matter the difficulty of the circumstances. At the same time, it

is this challenge, along with the importance they assign to the freedom of production (and freedom of expression, of course), which fuels MIHR Theatre to stay independent in a radical sense. With its emphasis on its independence as well as its process-driven, experimental production, MIHR Theatre in many aspects might be closer to independent (fine) art spaces, e.g.: the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU Armenia), whose cultural program with its curator Anna Gargarian (2016–2019) aimed to connect the local art scene with the international art world; the Armenian Center for Contemporary Experimental Art (ACCEA, or NPAK in Armenian), being the starting point of various alternative art initiatives and a hot spot for the contemporary art scene for years; and the Naregatsi Art Institute (NAI), which supports young artists, provides space for the alternative arts free of charge and supports people with disabilities.

¹ See Thomas Hammarberg: "Special Mission to Armenia", Council of Europe: Strasbourg 20.03.2008, <https://rm.coe.int/16806db879> (23.08.2020).

Spaces and Places for the Contemporary Performing Arts

One of MIHR Theatre's first venues was a former Soviet amphitheatre at Mashtots Park in the city centre, then used as a spot for leisure. The decision to use this public venue was a practical one, as state theatres are expensive to rent. Renting theatre spaces would have only been possible if the company were to receive additional project funding to cover the costs. The amphitheatre attracted the passers-by to linger. That's why this place was the perfect starting point for an open-air performance as well as for MIHR gatherings (which therefore became public too), and one simple letter to the municipality got MIHR the permission to work there. This experience also led MIHR Theatre to develop site-specific performances at several other places such as AGBU, the Yerevan Modern Art Museum or open-air at Charles Aznavour Square, Freedom Square, and the amphitheatre at Kirov Park. But this ideal situation lasted only for one summer, as the frosty conditions of Yerevan's winter generally create an unwelcoming atmosphere, and already in Summer 2004 the location was closed due to so-called "renovations". Eventually, following Occupy Mashtots in 2012, which aimed to prevent the destruction of green zones in Yerevan, the old amphitheatre got demolished and in 2018 a restaurant opened at its former location.² Today MIHR finds a new place for each performance, places which are free of charge but inspirational, such as exhibition halls or open-air stages.

The Price of Independence

Being self-funded as an independent theatre company or self-employed as an artist often leads to having multiple side-jobs, in Armenia as in other countries. In the best-case scenario, it hence brings together fruitfully the independent and institutional art scenes. Shoghakat Milke-Galstyan and Tsolak Milke-Galstyan have been working at HIGH FEST International Performing Arts Festival within the organisation and coordination team from its inception in 2003. The festival is an important event for the performing arts in Armenia as it brings together Armenian contemporary performing artists of all sorts and connects them with international

artists such as Mark Ravenhill (UK), Maxim Gorky Theatre (FRG), Evgeni Grishkovec (RF), or Les Plasticiens Volants (F). HIGH FEST was created by Artur Ghukasyan and is organized by the Armenian Actors Union NGO. Its aim is to present the contemporary theatre arts in Armenia, including a variety of performing art genres such as drama, comedy, musicals, dance performances, puppetry, movement and text-based genres, mime and street performances by artists from Armenia and abroad. It introduces international trends to the Armenian art scene and fosters discussions between the audience and performers after the shows. From the beginning the festival has included a workshop format

whereby artists and the interested public can exchange and learn from each other, covering artistic practices as well as discursive topics such as cultural management, international cooperation or cultural policy issues. Through this exchange, MIHR Theatre members were able to contextualize their experimental way of working artistically in an international context as performance art.

The art scene in Armenia in general is fragmented due to limited resources. Instead of an artist lobby, there are only malfunctioning leftovers of the once-powerful Soviet Artist Unions—for performance artists either the Theatre Workers Union/Actors Union or the National Dance Art Union of Armenia. As these state unions date back to Soviet times, members are mostly elderly and profit from the unions' resources (studios, summer cottages or residences) in return for a monthly fee.

The main source of financing for art in Armenia is the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport. It supports mainly the state cultural organizations next to the art education sector, but also further applied projects. In return for its support, the repertoire of the state theatre—such as the Gabriel Sundukyan National Academic Theatre, the Stanislavsky State Russian Drama Theatre, the Hovhannes Tumanyan State Puppet Theatre, and NCA Small Theater—must be approved by the national government before each season. Plays about domestic violence, nudity, or LGBT issues are never seen on stage, although the total number of rejected productions is very low due to self-censorship. At the same time,

Black Castle, 2010, Tsaghkadzor, Armenia.

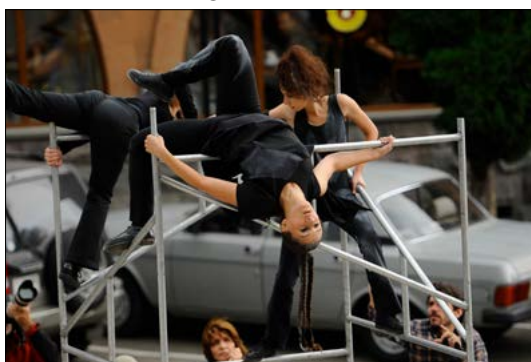


Photo: Asatur Yesayants

² In 2013 Sonia Leber and David Chesworth reflected on the transformation of the post-Soviet society in their 26-minute film *Zaum Tractor*, <http://leberandchesworth.com/filmworks/zaum-tractor/> (3.09.2020). Currently, artists are raising awareness about the demolition of Firdus, Yerevan's most historic district, e.g. documentary filmmaker Arthur Sukiasyan, featuring Christina Danielyan in the short dance movie *On Demolition and Preservation* (2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=c0zIs05JTxA&feature=emb_logo (3.09.2020).

the independent art sector is constantly lacking financial support, leading to rather short-lived art initiatives, singular events or performances instead of long-lasting theatre companies.

Alternative art collectives, ensembles or initiatives must be ready to work without money and, even more importantly, they must be ready to invest and to apply for international grants. Of course, there are fixed expenses, such as (taking MIHR as an example) the rehearsal space, as well as project-specific costs such as materials or (even if only symbolic) wages for the performers, as MIHR insists on paying the dancers for each project, even unfunded ones. Also, it is important for MIHR Theatre that the performances are free of charge as well as the workshops for the youth and, recently, also for dancers with physical and hearing disabilities. Usually the curation/organisation is not compensated.

All members finance themselves with art-related side jobs and also support MIHR Theatre via a joint cash pot and by sharing and recycling wherever possible.

(Alternative) Education

Generally, in terms of art education in Armenia today, one finds a mixture of the Soviet academic system and Bologna, as well as influences from artists abroad. This leads to a highly specific concept of what an “artist” is, specifically, one trained at a university. Graduates leave the art universities with a narrow idea of what contemporary art is. This is partly because of a generation gap within the contemporary Armenian art scene. On the one hand, there is the older generation with a Soviet education, and on the other those who work more independently and who are now in their late thirties or younger. Those in between, who were at the beginning of their careers when the Soviet Union ceased to exist, mostly changed their profession during the 1990’s (especially during the 90’s war for independence of Nagorno-Karabakh) or left the country.

To open up younger artists’ understanding of what is possible in art, MIHR Theatre has implemented a wide range of social and educational projects and offers

an alternative contemporary dance education in Yerevan. This includes offerings for both regular dance students and inclusive dance students, both through regular classes and training sessions, mainly in the field of dance and theatre, but also the arts in general.

Art education, especially within the performing arts, is still in the nascent stages of becoming more inclusive. Often the stage mirrors the problems of the society, which does not yet accept its own full diversity. Only a very few initiatives, among them the NAI with its

choir, have a truly inclusive approach, i.e. the goal that the performances take place in the usual theaters and thus reach a wide audience instead of just in the less-visited spaces of the implementing NGO, that disabled and non-disabled people work together on projects, and last but not least that disabled people also take over the function of teaching. Per-

formers with disabilities are in general excluded from the stage, especially in terms of large-scale productions. After having worked with performers with physical restrictions now and then, MIHR Theatre got inspired by one dancer in particular, Edgar Merjanyan, who found his own artistic ways to move, a unique way of dancing, using his disadvantage in daily life as his advantage on stage, discovering and training his own signature movements as a dancer. With the gained experience and following its vision of working with the uniqueness and beauty of each individual dancer, MIHR Theatre created an unparalleled educational program in 2016 which continues through the present day. The group of performers with disabilities trains regularly: sessions run three to four hours twice a week, including warm-up, physical training, rehearsals, contact improvisation, discussions, sharing of emotions, information and small showcases. The training program depends on the group, and the performances are developed with the input of everyone included.

MIHR Theatre’s alternative education is further based on reading fiction and professional literature about, for example, contemporary dance in the Soviet Union, moving identities, contemporary choreographers, and

We, 2017, Yerevan, Armenia.



Photo: David Jotyan

also films by Sergei Parajanov, Artavazd Peleshyan, and Andrei Tarkosvky. Each member can also bring other material to read. Ultimately, this kind of education aims to bring together a mixture of foreign, Eastern Armenian and Western Armenian literature (examples of the latter two including authors Yeghishe Charents and Zabel Yesayan, respectively)—two different traditions of artistic expression using the same language.³ Education in this context is understood as a process of sharing amongst peers, as peer-to-peer learning. An integral part of MIHR Theatre’s grassroots educational approach is the International Laboratory. In addition to MIHR Theatre’s workshops about “Storytelling as a Base of the Performance” or “Modern Technologies as Stage Expression”, international artists are invited to give a workshop, free of charge and open to the public. Within alternative education of the type MIHR Theatre envisions, a process of reflection on what has been learned has to occur.

But MIHR Theatre is not the only entity thinking about and offering an alternative art education. In 2017, the dancer Rima Pipoyan founded the Choreography Development, an educational and cultural foundation aiming to support the development of contemporary dance and modern ballet in Armenia, although dance here is understood in a more traditional and academic sense. The Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) in Yerevan, founded in 2006 and run by Nazareth Karoyan, promotes the operation of the art economy in Armenia, develops and implements art collections and exhibitions, archives and disseminates projects, conducts research, and organizes teaching programs in the field of curatorial practices, theory, and art education. Although not in the field of dance and performance, the ICA is an open hub for the design of cultural and contemporary art projects’ development and production.

About the Authors

Shoghakat Mlke-Galstyan, based in Yerevan, is a lecturer at the Yerevan State Institute of Theatre and Cinematography and is active within MIHR Theatre.

Olivia Jaques is based in Vienna, where she co-organises the performance platform Performatorium along with other projects.

Shoghakat Mlke-Galstyan and *Olivia Jaques* are both artists and cultural workers concentrating on the contemporary (performance) art field as well as art education and working in a transcultural context. They got to know each other during the CAS Arts and International Cooperation in Zurich in early 2017, and have developed a continuous exchange while working together on several occasions organizing cultural/artistic programs in Armenia and Switzerland.

See overleaf for Further Information and a Bibliography.

Perspectives

The well-known precarity of independent artists usually leads to a situation in which there are some gatherings of individuals for a project or a performance, but they don’t last for long. Each artist struggles alone. S/he finds alternative work in a different field or stays in the arts but within a state organization—educational field included. In order to improve conditions for the independent art scene, a yet-to-be-named initiative has recently been founded by individual artists and cultural workers, including Marine Karoyan (founder/director of the ARÉ Performing Arts Festival), Nazareth Karoyan (founder/director of the Institute for Contemporary Art), Nairi Khatchadourian (independent curator), Anna Gargarian (founder/curator of Hayp Pop Up Gallery and In Situ art agency), Harutyun Alpetyan (former governance expert at the American University of Armenia), Seda Grigoryan (head of the Creative Europe Armenian Desk), and Shoghakat Mlke-Galstyan (MIHR Theatre). In the last years it has become more and more important to join forces in order to present a united front, to formulate general demands and wishes and to represent interests in a united manner. For this reason, the initiative works towards the empowerment of the independent art scene in Armenia as well as the official establishment of support regulations for it. During the current circumstances of the reignited war over Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) and the recently agreed peace, the whole society is shaken and the need to improve the conditions for the independent art scene is now bigger than ever. MIHR Theater and Tiezerk Band, for example, are currently organizing cultural programs for refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh, but such initiatives are only possible in the long run if they do not remain isolated phenomena but benefit from mutual support and social recognition.

³ Before the genocide, all Armenians spoke the same Armenian language (Western/old). During the Soviet period, this old Armenian language got simplified and today is called Eastern Armenian. Hence, Armenian literature is split into two languages, Eastern Armenian, which is spoken in Armenia today, and the one spoken by diaspora Armenians, Western Armenian.

Further Information

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Film Awards as Cultural Institutions Towards a Diverse Landscape of Film in Georgia

By Philomena Grassl (ADAMI Media Prize, Tbilisi)

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Abstract

This article aims to give a short overview of the history of the Georgian film industry, with a focus on recent developments, new artistic formats and experimental approaches. In addition, it is also in part an experience report of the ADAMI Media Prize for Cultural Diversity in Eastern Europe, which was founded in 2015 with the aim to support new formats in film, audio-visual media and video art focused on ethnic, religious and cultural diversity.

From Soviet Cinema to Independent Film and Experimental Film Art

Georgia has a long and dazzling history of film. In the last few years, the small South Caucasian republic has

again gained international recognition as a producer of quality films, and international film festivals are keen to see what Georgian directors have to offer. In the following, the question of Georgia as a contemporary

“country of film” is examined on an institutional level: What does the state offer filmmakers? How can films be developed, produced and distributed? Does there exist an “economy of prestige”? What are the mechanisms of valuation (prizes, awards) inside the country? To what extent should the “national cinema” serve as a representation of national identity, and how does this influence the state funding system? What functions do international and non-governmental institutions serve, and how can they contribute to a more diverse system of funding, education and networking?

In Soviet times, Georgia was famous for its film production studio Kartuli Pilmi (also known by its Russian name, Gruzia-Film), which was founded in 1921 as one of the first film studios not only in the Soviet Union, but worldwide. The genesis of the film industry in Georgia came out of the pragmatic idea of film being a powerful tool to establish a new national self-perception inside the newly founded multi-national Soviet empire. For this reason, Georgian film in the beginning had a strong ethnographic dimension, and mostly served the centralist dictate of a national identity inside the Soviet Empire, and therefore inside the federal/imperialist discourse.² Founded as a means of Sovietization at first, the Georgian film studio quickly became one of the biggest film production companies in the USSR. At certain times, such as after the Second World War (the years of *malokartin'e*), Georgia even produced more films than any other Soviet republic,³ always under the organizational and ideological control of Goskino, the USSR's State Committee for Cinematography.

In the 1960s, a new generation of Georgian directors including Tengis Abuladze, Otar Iosseliani, the Tbilisi-based Armenian Sergei Parajanov and others emancipated themselves more and more from Russian cinema and went their own way, often with a more avant-gardist and critical approach. Nevertheless, Georgian cinema has always negotiated and mirrored national identity, be it in the beginning of the Soviet Union as folkloristic representation of the Georgian nation inside the multi-national socialist federation, or later with a more critical and conflictual examination of identity and social reality.

What came then with the independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union was at first not a blossoming and fruitful time for Georgian cinema, on the contrary: In 1994, the historic Georgian film studio was turned into a stock company and stopped receiving funding from the state. The society was tormented by civil war and conflicts, and due to this total economic

breakdown, many directors went abroad. National identity was negotiated from this exile perspective, and at the same time, Georgians entered the European film industry and had the chance to establish contacts and collaborations. Slowly, as a result of Georgia's economic upturn and an opening towards Central and Western Europe, the global interest in Georgia and Georgian film became stronger. The August War with Russia in 2008 led to a total break with the Russian film industry, with which Georgian film had to that point still been closely connected, further intensifying the shift in orientation towards the European (and international) film scene.

Funding, Education, Networking: What Are the Possibilities for Georgian Filmmakers Today?

The founding of the Georgian National Film Center (GNFC) in 2001 was a major step towards a new independent but state-supported film industry. The GNFC, which was established under the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport, is the main institution for coordinating state budget funding for cinema productions at all project stages, educational programs, international cooperations, and the development of Georgian cinematography. The Film Center strives to support the development of Georgian Cinema at all levels—project development, production, distribution and promotion. In 2003, in the course of the Rose Revolution, Gaga Chkheidze became its director, and the budget was increased to 900,000 GEL⁴ (at that time equivalent to about 360,000 Euros). Today, the budget operated by the Film Center is about ten times higher, with approximately 70% of it going into film production and 30% in educational programs, film heritage (restoration of vintage films, etc.), festivals and publications. Since 2010, Georgia has become a member of European funding programs, including Eurimages and MEDIA, and integration into the European co-production landscape has accelerated. Georgia joined the Creative Europe program in 2015, the first Eastern Partnership country to do so.

In addition, the Georgian Government launched the Film in Georgia incentive program through Enterprise Georgia to attract shooting and production of foreign films in Georgia. A cash rebate program for film production in Georgia was introduced, offering up to 20% rebate of expenses and an additional 2–5% for including Georgian elements like landscapes or cultural specifics in the production. The program also offers location scouting, assistance with permits and coordination

1 See English 2008.

2 See Radunović 2016: 8.

3 See Grashchenkova, Fomin 2016: 269.

4 See Interview of the author with Gaga Chkheidze, 2020.

with local institutions and businesses.⁵ In 2019, Universal Studios' *Fast and Furious 9* shot scenes on the streets of Tbilisi, being the first Hollywood production to shoot in Georgia, spending 31 million USD in the country. This success provides hope for those who have over the past decades worked to establish film as a major contributor to the Georgian economy.

In 2018, the Georgian Film Cluster was founded with the support of the European Union's EU4Business initiative and GIZ (German Society for International Cooperation). The membership of the Cluster consists of production companies and professionals in the audio-visual industry, its basic aim being to bring together stakeholders of the Georgian film industry and create partnerships and collaborations, both inside Georgia and internationally.⁶

As can be clearly seen, the film infrastructure has improved in many ways for local and international productions. But while the economic and professional dimensions of the film industry have grown quickly, there still exists no broad variety of cultural institutions such as festivals, film awards or even cinemas—while in Soviet times there were cinemas in almost every village or small town, now there are just a few multiplex cinemas in the big cities, with a growing tendency to integrate them into shopping centers. Nevertheless, there have been initiatives to organize screenings in the regions: the CineDOC festival has its program CineDOC on Tour, and small initiatives like the Moving Cinema organize open air screenings in villages. There is no arthouse cinema in Georgia, and the big cinemas show mostly blockbusters and Hollywood productions. The Tbilisi International Film Festival annually invites private sponsors to fund an award for Georgian productions in the Georgian Panorama section, in addition to the festival's international competition. In 2019, the Georgian Public Broadcaster also allocated two 20,000 GEL (about 6,500 USD) prizes for the best Georgian documentary and short film.

Considering Georgia's long history of foreign rule and the ethnic and territorial conflicts that intensified with the collapse of the USSR and continuing Russian aggression, there is a self-perception of "Georgian-ness" as something fragile and permanently threatened. In this context, the idea of a culturally diverse society instead of a homogeneous nation-state might still be threatening for many people, and ethnic minorities are often excluded from the self-representing mission of the "national cinema". On the other hand, Georgia is too poor to have the budget to support independent,

self-sufficient film production and is highly dependent on other countries to make co-productions: "Practically all films that the National Film Center supported in the last years were co-productions,"⁷ says its director, Gaga Chkheidze. This means that, although the country is independent from the Russian film industry, there is a lower budget than in Soviet times and Georgia is now dependent on other countries. With this "minority-status" that the Georgian cinema has, it might be even harder to consider Georgia as a multinational country with its own ethnic or religious minorities.

A unique tool in this aspect is the ADAMI Media Prize for Cultural Diversity in Eastern Europe, which was founded in 2015 to create a platform that operates not just nationally but transnationally (in the six countries of the Eastern Partnership of the European Union) to honor films, videos and TV contributions focusing on cultural diversity. The underlying idea is again the power of audio-visual media and its use in the direction of tolerance, integration of minorities, and a self-representation of an open and diverse society through institutionalization and cultural prestige.

New Concepts of Representation and New Artistic Formats

A new generation of Georgian filmmakers, many of them women, has found new artistic ways of expression and gained international recognition, for example Nana Ekvtimishvili with her film *In Bloom*, Rusudan Glurjidge with *House of Others*, and Tinatin Gurchiani with *The Machine that Makes Everything Disappear*. Others, among them Anna Dziapshipa, walk the line between filmmaking and conceptual video art and autobiography, e.g. in her piece *On Being Dziapshipa*. Documentary filmmakers have chosen to look towards the margins of the society, to portray people who live in remote areas, at the borders, or who have been displaced in the course of conflicts. Their thematic approaches and new video art formats often do not fit into the idea of a national cinema, which mostly focuses on big productions, full-length films, and representations with beautiful landscapes—films which attract tourism and are thus the main focus of the new governmental programs like Film in Georgia. Tako Robakidze and Salomé Jashi, both of whom were awarded the ADAMI Media Prize, number among those Georgian artists who have taken a different path.

Robakidze started her creative career as a photographer and experiments with video and multimedia art focusing on social and political content. For her piece

5 See www.filmingeorgia.ge.

6 See www.filmcluster.org.

7 Interview of the author with Gaga Chkheidze, 2020.

A Look Beyond the Headlines (2016), she spent several months in the Pankisi Valley in Georgia, which is known for its ethnic Kist inhabitants and which makes its way into Georgian headlines almost exclusively because of Islamist terrorism. Robakidze portrays the lives of ordinary people, showing their everyday problems and traditions, which are very similar to those of other rural Georgians. The main goal behind her work is to bring attention to the insufficient media coverage of the valley, coverage which stigmatizes the people living there. Her approach is a journalistic one and the format a very unique style of video art. She experiments with stroboscopic loops and moving images, layered with a soundscape of minimalist noise and atmospheric recordings as well as traditional songs. Her second video *Creeping Borders* (2018) portrays people living at the occupation line between Georgia and so-called South Ossetia, where the internationally unrecognized border is frequently moved by Russian soldiers and people are “falling asleep in their homeland and waking up in occupied territory,”⁸ as Robakidze puts it.

Jashi started her professional life as a journalist and started making films after receiving a scholarship from the Royal Holloway University of London, where she studied documentary film. Her works include *Bakhmaro* (2011), a film about a former Soviet hotel in a small Georgian town, thereby portraying rural society, *The Dazzling Light of Sunset* (2016), a portrayal of a small rural TV station which employs only three people and airs news only once a week, and her newest film *Taming the Garden* (2020) about Georgia’s most powerful oligarch and prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili’s hobby to collect and replant trees.

Like Robakidze, Jashi also deals with the displacement of Georgian families from the Tskhinvali region in South Ossetia in her short video *The Tower* (2018). In this four-minute fragment one can see people standing at a scenic overlook, looking through binoculars at their old land and houses. Jashi does not comment on the political circumstances, she does not show the tragedies and emotions, just people trying to recognize their houses, their favourite trees and gardens from a distance, thereby showing the uprooting of these families

who live in a settlement for displaced people—so close to their land, but unable to cross the demarcation line.

Both Robakidze and Jashi strive for new perspectives and a critical yet intimate exploration of the reality in which their protagonists live. They look for both new formats and means of expression and storytelling, making those parts of the society visible which are neglected, ignored or stigmatized. Their work can be located between film, art and journalism, which makes it on the one hand particularly interesting, but also harder to incorporate into traditional career paths or funding systems. The ADAMI Media Prize attempts to cover

exactly these new formats, making work by such artists visible to international audiences and film networks. Robakidze states:

“ADAMI really tries to promote your work as soon as there is an opportunity for that—show the film at different international festivals, connect with people who might be very helpful in the future, for exam-

ple representatives from ARTE. As a documentary photographer and filmmaker, I always want to see the impact, the result of the story, I want to make changes, so it’s very important to have the opportunity to show your work to people who can ‘change,’ to organisations which are decision-makers and might have impact on particular issues. ADAMI gave me the opportunity to talk about my work at the EU Parliament.”⁹

Georgia as a Country of Film?

Although Georgian film is regaining international recognition and the standards in filmmaking on a technical and professional level have increased, there is still a lack of money for film development and problems with distribution inside the country. Apart from the few film festivals like the Tbilisi International Film Festival or the CineDOC Tbilisi International Documentary Film Festival, there are—unlike in Soviet times—no state-funded prizes for filmmakers. The absence of an arthouse cinema makes it especially hard for Georgian filmmakers to show their work in the country, as Jashi explains:

Tako Robakidze, *Creeping Borders*, documentary film, Georgia 2018, 13’.



© Tako Robakidze

8 Interview of the author with Tako Robakidze, 2020.

9 Ibid.

“The art industry is rather neglected by the state in Georgia. The system of financing in general has been getting better in the last years by setting up a new schema of Creative Georgia, but still, it is not widely accessible and the funding provided is ridiculously low. Traditional art, like traditional singing or dance, that carry an already established form are much more appreciated than contemporary art and creativity. [...] The lack of awards and prizes for cultural activities speaks not only to the fact that the government neglects artists. It does not consider its population either. The general public needs not only actual food to exist. It also needs food for mental and spiritual development and well-being. Right now, the government concentrates on survival of the population or supports initiatives that could have a commercial benefit. Art does not fit in these criteria.”¹⁰

Filmmakers still depend on private funding, like banks or even casinos, as well as on foreign institutions like international organizations, festivals abroad and international funds to get their work funded or recognized. As long as the state does not provide the institutions nec-

essary for a complete film industry, non-governmental organizations and international programs will remain important players in supporting filmmakers on different levels of their projects. The fact that these organizations often have a thematic direction like human rights, women’s or LGBT issues or, like the ADAMI Media Prize, cultural diversity, can serve as a motivator for filmmakers to engage more in these minority topics, thereby creating a more diverse and heterogeneous landscape of film.

On the other hand, it will be the task of the government in the near future to establish a strong and independent cultural sector that can survive without private funding and does not repeat only a folkloristic, traditionalist or nationalist paradigm, but instead questions those representations and strives for new concepts of identities and society. In a multinational state, cultural policies have a responsibility to include all groups. Only with such inclusion can Georgia meet the high expectations which have often been expressed internationally, and keep its reputation of successful development since its independence and—even more—as a country of culture and film.

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Salomé Jashi, *The Tower*, documentary film, Georgia 2018, 4’.



© Salomé Jashi

¹⁰ Interview of the author with Salome Jashi, 2020.

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