



## **The Future is Now** **A podcast series | ArtsLink Assembly 2021: Future Fellows**

**Podcast by Elena Ishchenko**

Transcript abridged and edited by Anya Szykitka

Simon Dove:

Hello, and welcome to *The Future is Now*, a podcast series from CEC ArtsLink. My name is Simon Dove, the Executive Director of CEC ArtsLink. And for this podcast series, we asked 10 independent artists and curators from different parts of the world, whom we call the Future Fellows, to talk about the current context of their work and to share their vision for how they see the future of arts practice. In this episode, we hear from curator Elena Ishchenko, who's based in Krasnodar, in Southern Russia.

Elena Ishchenko:

My name is Elena Ishchenko. I'm a curator and researcher based in two Russian cities, Moscow and Krasnodar, a city in the south of Russia, and I work as a curator and manager in Typography Center for Contemporary Art. It's an initiative which goal is to create and open an inclusive platform for dialogue and provoking discussions, supporting communities and developing contemporary arts in the region, in the city. As a researcher, I'm interested in self-organized art initiatives and collectives, principles of their work in theory and in practice, and infrastructures of contemporary art in Russia, especially in non-capital cities.

It's really great feeling that working in self-organized initiatives and communities gave me. So as a researcher, I started to explore these self-organized art initiatives from 2014, and the main point about these collectives and initiatives, the organization, is all of them are based on collectives. And the history of art and initiatives is more about individuals. It's super important to imagine all of this process, the collective, because now, pandemic shows us that collectives and collective solidarity is important for our days.

Always have weekly meetings to discuss our events, our activities, but also we try to discuss our ideological principles and basics. Some weeks ago I realized that every institution and organization can be structured in another way. Every museum can be horizontal and without hierarchies, and be governed without departments and so on. This is the examples, these self-organized initiatives can show that everything can be organized in another way.

The Typography Center for Contemporary Art I work in, is a very good example of such kind of initiative. Another one I really appreciate and admire is Moscow International Film Festival, which was organized by Vladimir Nadein, a director, manager, and producer. But last year they decided to restructure their organization and start to work as a horizontal initiative. It's very brave experience, but the same time, the festival, which held this year in August, showed that it can work perfectly without any director.

It's very important not to see this self-organization as a main goal, because we should not forget the principles, and our dreams maybe even, what world we want to live in and how it should work, how all the structures and infrastructures should work. Sometimes it's really very inspiring that you can behave yourself as you already live in this imaginary world. But at the same time, sometimes it's frustrating because you still live in this world.

Any self-organized or horizontal organization, you are more open and attentive to others and more attentive to what surrounds you.

This term is inclusiveness, yes. Artists and maybe institutions play really important role in this process, and the strategies of art institution are very important here because they should be more inclusive and provide equal opportunities for different artists and participants of the process.

And not only for star famous, recognized artists, but for everyone, to be more attentive to local context and explore what's going on, and what artists live and work around your city, your neighborhood, et cetera. This question of quarters, which is really urgent now, it's important to keep in mind. It's not only about men, women, artists balance in your project, but we also need some, imaginary maybe, quarters for artists with children, artists from indigenous people, and who lives and works in non-capital cities. Every time we are making some projects in Typography Center, we always think to include artists from non-capital cities, and our city and region, into the project. Maybe it's easier to find budgeting and money for projects with famous artists, because these events will have better media coverage. But what is really important is to create these inclusive platforms and events and projects.

I see in Russia this division between what institutions doing and what artists and independent curators and small institutions really need, and there were very great discussions last year around the NEMOSKVA project, organized by Alisa Prudnikova. It was always about representation of the regional artist, and that's one of the main topics there: every artist in regions need this big project to be represented, to be visible and so on, so forth.

But is it really the thing that art needs? There are lots of artists, and of course there is this career that we see as something we should relate to, that you should graduate from school, then you should sign a contract with a gallery, then you should do a museum exhibition, then you should go to Venice Biennial. And this is like a prominent career of the artist. But of course there are lots of artists that do not want this career because they just want to do their project, want to live in interesting surrounding, and want to work and have some relative payments for their work. This is really more important than this big project, this international visibility and so on.

Unfortunately now in Russia, lots of these things we should do by ourselves, so it's self-organized, and one of the important initiatives, that were again started to discuss during the pandemic, is the basic income. This discussion was initiated by a performance artist and dance artist, because their work is most immaterial, and they do not have object to sell in art fairs or show in galleries. If we cannot gain this goals as basic income, we still should talk about it, to make it closer.

Yeah, this system should be transformed. What is important is to make our desires more visible for this system. Because of course, pandemic shows that art market system, and this system of big institutions, doesn't work for everyone. It's super exclusive. It creates possibilities only for few, few, few artists and for few curators and few researchers. If you want more sustainable and just society, we should reimagine it and create another platforms.

Also really important is the redistribution of resources. The majority of resources, especially in Russia, is concentrated in Moscow, and in Moscow, this huge institution, because if you're talking about contemporary art scene in Russia, there are two big institutions of contemporary arts. The first is Garage Museum and the second is V-A-C Foundation. I appreciate them, and they do lots of important work, but at the same time, they concentrated these resources too. They need this project and structures to redistribute their resources, to support artists and communities and small organizations in other cities.

Today's world and today's situation is super interested, and I see this pandemic as a real source for our imagination, this situation where you can reimagine everything and try not to adapt all your activities, but try to maybe deny something in order to create something new, more interesting, and relative to our new circumstances we live in. But the same time, lots of institution and big project are really interested in keeping this old format.

For example, we are talking about this transnational communication, and it's important, but the same time, from the ecological perspective, it can be not so good because it's this carbon dioxide and carbon footprint and so on, but the same time I'm thinking about Venice Biennial. The people who go to this event for two, three, five days, just to see the same audience they have met three days ago in Berlin Biennial, it's awful. This amount of people who go to Venice Biennial, it's quite comparable to the amount of artists who go to the residences in Europe. We shouldn't deny these residences, but maybe we should deny these big international events that have nothing in common with local context, but which serves only this big capital, big institution and their parties.

We should be more radical.

Last year, there is an initiative which I am part of, called RRR, like triple R. It's about regional art scenes. It's combined cultural workers and curators and artists from different cities in Russia, kind of a platform without any certain goals, but for co-communication. It really gives me and other participants the sense of solidarity and a space to communicate and share our project, our thinking, our ideas. It's a great start to be more visible and create other networks instead of these big institutions and infrastructures.

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I'm here for three years, and I see how the situation changed. Every year, it's changing, every month. The audience started to be more interested in our project in contemporary art, and all these questions we are rising and bringing up.

I feel supported by my colleagues and by community. It's important to feel this solidarity, that I'm not alone. That's why this collective project is very crucial for contemporary art scene in Russia, especially because the sense of, and feeling of, solidarity is the thing that make you optimistic and motivates you and keeps you alive in this process.

So we shouldn't stop.

Simon Dove:

You have been listening to *The Future is Now*, a podcast series from CEC ArtsLink with support from HowlRound. All interviews and post-production is by me, Simon Dove, Executive Director of CEC ArtsLink. The specially composed music is by the extraordinary bass player and composer Shri. This podcast is part of the ArtsLink Assembly 2021: Future Fellows, supported by the Trust for Mutual Understanding, Kirby Family Foundation, John and Jody Arnhold Foundation, and of course, generous individual donors. These podcasts are available to listen to, or download the transcripts at our website, [www.cecartslink.org](http://www.cecartslink.org), or at [howlround.com](http://howlround.com).