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

**Podcast by Leyli Gafarova**

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. I'm 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 Leyli Gafarova, based in Baku, Azerbaijan.

Leyli Gafarova:

Hi. My name is Leyli. I'm a filmmaker and, since 2016, have co-founded a self-organized community-based cinema and art space called Salaam Cinema. We do very process-based work, organize different cultural events, mainly concentrating on audiovisual and performative arts. I'm based in Baku, Azerbaijan, as is Salaam Cinema. It emerges from local needs because initially we felt there was a space like this missing in the city: an art space which is not an institute, not a gallery, not a clean white wall space, but a space that we can enter and feel like home.

Since 2015, alternative spaces started to emerge in the city, mainly self-organized forms of local businesses. So cafes where youngsters could go and sit and be themselves. But in terms of our spaces, there was almost none. And definitely no space which would practice a horizontal structure. So even if there were some independent cases, having a male director was often an important factor.

We live in a society that is very much based on hierarchies—your gender, social class, sexual orientation, and even ethnicity play a big part of what you can achieve, even if you have access to culture. So somewhere unconsciously organizing the space was a reaction to the status quo of the cultural state in Azerbaijan. At the same time, it was a reaction to gentrification of the city.

A lot of historical buildings were demolished and made place for these terrible skyscrapers. Even historical buildings were not meant for culture but became space for traditional things like KFC [Kentucky Fried Chicken], et cetera. Out of these realities . . . and I would not say we had this huge academic conscious plan; it was very intuitive. Okay, we miss such a place, let's do it. And we start and then people start to come with paint and brushes and they wanted to contribute. This is how it became a community space.

There is a huge list of different obstacles. I will just name a few. Unfortunately, we're still in this seventeenth-century situation where you have to be privileged to be able to practice arts. It's mainly people from artists' families or financially privileged families who can practice art. As I mentioned, hierarchies based on gender and social class play a huge importance in the accessibility of arts, but also with gender.

For example, when we organize educational programs, a theater laboratory, for half the young women participating, their parents should not know that they're coming to a theater class. Because if their patriarchal conservative fathers find out that, four times a week, they're dancing with boys, and they have a certain idea about what acting is for a woman, this is a problem. I would not say I have an answer right away how we as artists can fix or solve it, but we can definitely address it.

Another problem is institutional discrimination. We have several cases, even in the art institute well-known, well-respected older generation professors, film directors, allow themselves to comment things like, "a woman can never be a director" or, "as a woman, you will make no chance," or make very deliberate distinctions between gender. I'm not going to even talk about sexual orientation minorities. This is completely out of the question to discuss. We as a collective represent very fluid forms of identities. We want to create a more tolerant, equal, inclusive, and safe environment in the arts so that diversity of people feel safe and have access to practice culture.

As artists, what can we do? A lot. We can address this stuff in our own practice, whatever medium we're working in. More and more, my trust in the institutions, doesn't matter where, has become less and less. I've never felt safe in structured systematic institutions that deal with very different and concrete approaches. There should be more non-institutional institutes, run by artists with forms of horizontal approach, which is super difficult. There are a lot of beautiful cases we can read about these processes of commoning and self-organized platforms in different parts of the world. But very little we hear about difficulties they are fighting every day, because horizontal process is a long process, demands you constantly question your own ego.

It demands a constant active form of attachment to this ideology. And when you have a diversity of people, of needs, of characters, whether someone is an introvert or extrovert, it makes it so difficult, but also so interesting to get to know yourself better, an experiment on a micro scale of how a society can live together, representing different ideas.

Because of this autonomous format, we allow ourselves to make mistakes, are constantly trying different strategies in our programming, our approach, our selection process, our development process.

We see the situation of COVID, all these crazy lockdowns, financial problems, people stuck at home sometimes with their very conservative families. We also went through war. That was a huge impact on our psychological state, really difficult. So we drew a line on all our plans and said, Okay, let's think about how we can create a radically different approach. For example, this theater lab we're doing now for several months: we are learning to improvise with dancing and acting two times a week, where the main goal is to have fun. This was like, okay, whatever we do, whether you want to do any performance at the end, or performance each week, we are deciding it all collectively. But the main purpose is to forget about everything happening outside, at the moment just concentrate on your well-being, your self-care, taking care of each other and have a lot of fun.

We are not often allowed to have fun. We have to be constantly so productive, create all of this stuff, be everywhere. We forget to have fun. This was not our initial idea, but through the process we understood, the main idea is let's have fun together in a radical form, and see what happens.

It's too early to say what kind of impact it will have. I'm a very optimistic person, but trying to remain realistic in terms of the realities that I'm living in. This 20-year-old me who could believe that we can change everything and it should be very grandiose and so on, that part does not exist anymore. We concentrate on individual cases. If there is one person who would change somehow or feel better, for us, it's already a huge thing. We, as an organization, are also participating. There is no line between the participants and the organizers of the laboratory, which is super important. We are opening up, we feel better psychologically.

From childhood, you are told what to do, not go find out what you want or go find yourself. The school, your parents, they have programmed your life: this is what you have to do, and you should not go out of this norm. When you ask people their opinion, they have lost this touch to tell, not because they have nothing to say, but because they have not been allowed to say what they think or feel for such a long time. It doesn't happen within a click. Even that is a process to open up, to talk, to express yourself, your opinion.

Whatever this theater will be—I don't know what kind—it'll be a documentary theater, a traditional theater, or form theater. We will just bring different kind of methodologies, but the participants will collectively decide, there will be no director. When we were even talking to mentors that we wanted to engage locally, they just could not understand how there could be a theater without a director. That's not possible, they would say. Our aim is to show that it is possible, and we are going to do it.

I definitely see changes because even now we have self-organized forms in regions, which was not happening before; before it was all concentrated in the capital. We are witnessing more and more participation. This Soviet past is also very interesting, because previously we would think people with the Russian-speaking background, which are more often representing some kind of elite class, let's say that they were more active in terms of arts. But in terms of self-organization, nowadays we see Azerbaijani-speaking youth who is very active also in the field of activism, not only in the cultural field. Culture and activism is starting to collide with each other. Before it was two very different fields.

With artists, my personal opinion is, we have to create solidarity. That's really missing. We are all separately working on our personal thing, trying to survive. We see each other very little. There are some typical divisions of these different bubbles, let's say, but the public is ready to support.

A lot of people have been pessimistic about public support. But it was there when we had threat of demolishment of our building after we started for a few months. It was with public and community support that we were able to save the building. Our only power, only strength, was the support and energy of the community and people coming, bringing food, water. We were staying there overnight.

I define self-organizing a platform as an art project itself. The approach should not have these big, typical defining words. For me it's an art project on itself. Before we were like, okay, it's an inclusive space, but first of all, it's a safe space. So there were some kind of limitations to it: who can come in. It means it's not that inclusive, but now we want to try a very radical form of inclusivity and see how would that affect our safety or would that change something.

The huge thing is that since 2015 young people with no art education, no political or even high social background, started to be more active, to take more control of their practices. This starting up of small, even alternative businesses, selling their work, creating an Instagram page, having a TikTok account where they are expressing themselves, this internet played a good role that inspired people to do blogging, share their ideas, discuss. That's an important factor that we are going towards some kind of open society.

That feminism has been also a strong topic in debate is something great. We are having a lot of debate, but now we are hearing about those problems. That's important, but in terms of culture, oh my God, there is so much still needs to be done. I can only speak of small scale successes: some self-organized platforms practicing culture and bringing it to communities that didn't have access before.

It's not going to be easy, but like I said, I have not made a very big, definitive goal. I'm interested in experimenting with different strategies. Sometimes I don't want to read about other cases or studies that have been made to these practices, because I want to develop my own intuition. In terms of, for example, horizontal education, first, I started reading about it, and then I was like, okay, how can we implement these practices here? The situations are completely different. And then I was like, pardon of my French, fuck it. I want to just try. Let's try through super open communication.

What's going to happen if we try to communicate everything? Let's try to communicate our fears, our anger. Let's try this strategy. Okay, this strategy is not working. And then openly discussing that this strategy is not working, and then asking, what can we do else? Then listening to different proposals. This process is fantastically interesting. And I cannot say it's going to work, or we will achieve something huge, but we are definitely learning so much, and so much about ourselves that it's priceless. I'm optimistic. We all should be optimistic. Otherwise we cannot do anything. We have to believe, to dream and sometimes be crazy, and that's fine. And just do it and really, really believing.

Simon Dove:

You have been listening to *The Future is Now*, the 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, or at howlround.com.