

# **A MIRACLE OR MISUNDERSTANDING**

## **SOCIALLY ENGAGED PRACTICES IN THE ART PROSPECT NETWORK COUNTRIES**

**FIELD REPORTS FROM ARMENIA, AZERBAIJAN, BELARUS, GEORGIA, KAZAKHSTAN,  
KYRGYZSTAN, MOLDOVA, TAJIKISTAN, UKRAINE, AND UZBEKISTAN**

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# INTRODUCTION

# FOREWORD

## SUSAN KATZ

Program Director,  
CEC ArtsLink



CEC ArtsLink ([www.cecartslink.org](http://www.cecartslink.org)), an international arts exchange organization with more than 50 years of experience working in post-Soviet countries, created the Art Prospect Network program in 2016 to support the development of new creative methods to affect positive change through the arts and facilitate greater inter-regional exchange. Art Prospect is a carefully crafted multi-year program of projects and events that demonstrate creative agency and empower artists and their audiences by challenging standard notions of public space, nationality, and culture. The program is guided by the Art Prospect Network of thirteen cultural organizations, in ten post-Soviet countries, dedicated to developing innovative methods for addressing social concerns through the arts and promoting greater exchange and collaboration in the region. Through a program of international exchanges, residencies, and public art festivals, Art Prospect illuminates the vibrancy of local communities and advances the vital role that artists play in promoting understanding and respect among people of differing cultures and perspectives. In only two years, Art Prospect has supported more than fifty artist residency exchanges and five public art festivals, reaching out to thousands of individuals in ten countries. The Art Prospect website ([www.artprospect.org](http://www.artprospect.org)) serves as an open forum about socially engaged art and public art in the region by providing information about residency projects and festivals as well as news from our partners and project alumni.

This publication grew out of our commitment to exploring and sharing how socially engaged art resonates with artists and communities in the post-Soviet environment. CEC ArtsLink commissioned the

publication to address the need for greater information about regional creative initiatives that engage local residents, artists, and city government agencies to work together to address social concerns, improve their urban environment, and support multi-disciplinary, transnational collaboration and exchange. Recognizing the dearth of information about socially engaged art in post-Soviet countries, and the importance of this information for facilitating greater international exchange and collaboration, CEC ArtsLink decided to undertake a preliminary investigation of the history, practice, and perception of socially engaged art in the ten Art Prospect Network countries. We invited Network members to share their experiences and perceptions of the role of the arts in building society, and to do so in the form of “Dispatches from the Field.”

Art Prospect Network members were asked to answer a series of questions based on their experience, knowledge, and research about social practice art in their country/city, including history and practice today, impact and perception, and resources and documentation. What does the term “socially engaged art” mean in the countries of the former Soviet Union and how do artists in those nations creatively address social and political issues and engage local communities? How are these art projects perceived by local audiences, the media, and government? What resources are available to support socially engaged art projects? Publication co-editor Katharina Stadler, an Austrian artist based in Georgia, conducted interviews with the Network partners to supplement the information provided in written questionnaires. Their responses were edited and formatted into essays addressing three topics: Pioneers and Practices, Perceptions



*Student as a Guide.* Educational program and a tour as part of the Art Prospect Festival Memory Threads: Museum and Neighborhood, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2018. From the archive of the Silk Museum



Seri/graph studio, Anya Ivanenko, Zhenya Polosina, *From point A to point B*, game-tour as part of the Art Prospect Festival: Four Days on the Road, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2018. Photo by Aleksandr Kovalenko



Art Prospect participants in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, 2017

and Responses, and Resources and References. To provide a more in-depth look into the work of socially engaged artists in the region, we also asked four local artists and curators to write case studies about particular projects and critical issues in their cities.

Innovative practitioners who are conducting projects in their countries that address social issues and engage local communities wrote the “Dispatches from the Field” and case studies. Not surprisingly, these essays vary immensely, reflecting not only the diversity of cultures and socio-political situations in these post-Soviet countries, but also how these characteristics influence the role the arts play in building society. A theme the essays share is a reference to the lack of a framework for contemporary art in post-Soviet countries while also highlighting the diversity of arts practices and cultural traditions in countries little known outside the region. Without the information in these case studies and essays, we would not know how severely the development of contemporary art has been stunted by the lingering impact of Tajikistan’s civil war or how Kyiv artists reflect the status of the LGBTQI community in their work or why Moldovan artists are working to transform Chişinău through interventions and arts events.

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**THE ESSAYS VARY IMMENSELY, REFLECTING NOT ONLY THE DIVERSITY OF CULTURES AND SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATIONS IN THESE POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES, BUT ALSO HOW THESE CHARACTERISTICS INFLUENCE THE ROLE THE ARTS PLAY IN BUILDING SOCIETY**

# ART PROSPECT ILLUMINATES THE VIBRANCY OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND ADVANCES THE VITAL ROLE THAT ARTISTS PLAY IN PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING AND RESPECT AMONG PEOPLE OF DIFFERING CULTURES AND PERSPECTIVES



Viktoria Myronyuk, *Imaginary Wanderers*, participatory performance as part of the Art Prospect Festival: Four Days on the Road, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2018. Photo by Aleksandr Kovalenko



We invite readers to engage with this publication and the Art Prospect website ([www.artprospect.org](http://www.artprospect.org))—to post their impressions, to share their experiences in the region, and to ask questions. This publication is just the beginning of our initiative to support transnational exchange and new models for creatively addressing socio-political concerns, transforming urban environments, and engaging local communities. We hope it serves to connect the broader arts community to this fascinating region, engage funders, and advocate for the importance of transnational cultural exchange.

Public discussion as part of the Art Prospect Festival: Bishkek  
Green Zones Fresh Breath, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2017

# A MIRACLE OR MISUNDERSTANDING

**VIKTOR MISIANO**

Curator and art theorist



Socially engaged art in the former Soviet countries is either a miracle or a misunderstanding, for there are too many reasons why it should not exist. There are too many social, political, and discursive circumstances, occasioned by the post-Soviet condition, that should have mitigated against its emergence. However, things are more complicated and more paradoxical than that. We can say there are too many grounds for socially engaged art practices to make a name for themselves in the region and generate a need and understanding on the part of artists, critics, and audiences. However, it is these selfsame grounds that are the main stumbling block to the flourishing of socially engaged art.

The first thing that numbs the post-Soviet social aesthetic sensibility is the legacy of the Soviet aesthetic. Communist ideology regarded art as an agent of social change. The idea of art's autonomy was deemed something ideologically alien. So, since the end of the communist period was seen as a liberation in the Soviet republics, its standards, including its artistic standards, were rejected out of hand.

The paradox partly has to do with the fact that during the late-Soviet period official aesthetic standards were nearly completely ignored. The notion that art was valuable in itself was a commonplace shared not only by artists at odds with the state art establishment but also by artists who were the system's darlings. Despite the differences that existed among the trends and vectors of late-Soviet art, nearly all of them were inspired by pan-aestheticism.

This is the source of the late-Soviet art world's peculiar take on contemporary art in the West. Although it was a matter of course in those days that

the West was superior culturally, its art was seen as obscure and was not accepted with open arms. Conservative Soviet artists saw the works of their Western contemporaries as an aesthetic dead end, a historical mistake. On the contrary, their radical counterparts were programmatically focused on Western art canons, but they deliberately or unconsciously depoliticized them. Art & Language and Arte Povera, for example, were seen as purely speculative projects for playing with ideas and forms. The Western neo-avant-garde's critical thrust went unrecognized and was sublimated. From the Soviet liberal perspective, what could there be to criticize in the West if it was the best of all possible worlds?

This mindset naturally migrated intact into the post-Soviet period. Neoliberalism, which argues that political democracy is predefined by the market economy, took on cartoonish shapes in the former Soviet countries. After the state system of protecting culture and art had collapsed, the universal prejudice took hold that art's place was on the market and in the service of the new regime building the market. Many artists came to believe that attaining commercial success was a moral obligation, the natural contribution of artists to the cause of neoliberal social reform.

There were, however, a few artists who tackled the new social reality with a different set of tools and ideas. Since Soviet authoritarianism was a thing of the past, and our corner of the world was trying the principles of Western democracy on for size, artists, curators, and critics should adopt the stance of Western intellectuals, meaning they should serve as a source of critical reflection. It proved difficult to embrace this stance, however. Artists could try to appeal to society,

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thus finding their place in it, but the unstable, mutating, atomizing, and chaotic conditions that marked the first post-Soviet decade could hardly be labeled a full-fledged society.

The disintegration of society and its institutions blurred the lines between art and life. What passed itself off as art during the period was definitely not art in the social sense. There was no institutional infrastructure that could have vetted and legitimated it as art. Consequently, art's gambit of meeting society halfway was half-baked. Social critique and social engagement were purely rhetorical approaches or, as was the saying back then, a "matter of attitude." What the socially focused art of the period lacked was a real, rather than an imaginary, figure of the social other that could function as art's object of description and the subject of its conversation with society.

Engagement was made possible in the rough-ties, a byproduct of stabilization and the rudiments of an emerging art system. Once it had stabilized, society manifested itself as a clearly delineated reality, while art, snug inside the shell of institutions, obtained an outside purchase and perspective on society. Consequently, having secured its autonomy, art was able to violate it, to sacrifice it in order to serve society. However, the new, post-communist system, a work in progress by the new political and economic regime, was not conceived as that regime's obligation to society but as a gift or tool, a means of self-promotion. The system was, therefore, not expected to engage either in social critique or institutional critique. Critically minded artists were thus encouraged to defend the idea of refraining from criticism since it could damage the still young and fragile art system, which vouchsafed art's

autonomy and, thus, the possibility of adopting critical stances and engaging with society.

However, this paradoxical rationale—conformism for the sake of nonconformism sometime in the future—did not win over everyone. There were those who broke the implicit collective vow to abstain from criticism. Their analysis of post-communist society and the reaction to its vulnerabilities found its place and support amid the international critical mainstream. It immediately split the post-Soviet art world in two. Supporters of the new, Western-inspired art system accused the new engaged art of cosmopolitanism, for it was the previous regime that forced art to serve society whereas now, living by the laws of the Western, globalized world, art could finally deal with its own concerns. Therefore, the moral majority argued, generating yet another paradox, those who wanted to serve society were agents of anti-Westernism and alien to the new art milieu. They should be exiled whence they came, to the source of their support, meaning the West.

Finally, the third post-communist decade has sublimated most of the paradoxes and contradictions of the previous decades but seemingly so as to yield life up to new inconsistencies. Relationalism and participation are now standard tools in the kits of many artists. However, it is often unclear what artists hope, ultimately, to achieve by reaching out to others. Social reality remains critically under-described and poorly analyzed, and so participation is often invoked by artists for its own sake, while relations are constructed in a void, for the sake of constructing them. At the same time, the work of many other artists is impelled by a very clear sense of their social context, although their

critical sensibility is rendered somewhat mundane by a lack of understanding of the prospects of the society on which they expend their creative efforts. Finally, there are works in which society's prospects are imagined quite coherently, only it is unclear how they will transit from the current conjuncture to their final destination. The social ideal of these artists thus appears speculative, if not utopian.

But what most of these artists have in common is an inescapable focus on globalized Western benchmarks. The only problem is that the West itself is not unified, a fact that sometimes goes unnoticed in the post-communist back of beyond. It has fissured into parts and particulars, and today it is chockablock with all the same inconsistencies as the post-Soviet world. Moreover, the post-Soviet countries have now made such overwhelming progress (a fact to which the articles in this anthology attest) in evolving as societies and art scenes that they are strikingly different from one another. The differences are so great that we might doubt whether the term "post-Soviet" has any generalizing power left in it. The reality in these countries, however, has not yet attained a definitive shape and peculiar quality of its own. It has no name and no identity independent of its links to the Soviet past. So, if we are unjustified in calling these countries post-Soviet, the only other thing we can do is call them post-post-Soviet.

The last of post-Soviet socially engaged art's contradictions is that, over the past three decades, it has largely ignored the fact that contemporary art's social ideal is based on the Soviet avant-garde. When it rejected the Soviet avant-garde along with everything else Soviet, post-Soviet critical art abandoned a

legacy that has been a vital support of critical, socially engaged art in Western countries. The rediscovery of this heritage is underway, however, and the question of whether the post-Soviet world had to abandon everything Soviet so hastily and wholesale has been raised. If this had not happened, though, the progress I have described above would not have occurred. One outcome of this trajectory has been, in fact, a reconsideration of attitudes to the Soviet utopia.



**THE POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES HAVE NOW MADE SUCH OVERWHELMING PROGRESS IN EVOLVING AS SOCIETIES AND ART SCENES THAT THEY ARE STRIKINGLY DIFFERENT FROM ONE ANOTHER**

**THE DIFFERENCES ARE SO GREAT THAT WE MIGHT DOUBT WHETHER THE TERM "POST-SOVIET" HAS ANY GENERALIZING POWER LEFT IN IT**

# FIELD REPORTS FROM THE ART PROSPECT NETWORK COUNTRIES

# AZERBAIJAN

## SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART IN AZERBAIJAN: PAST AND PRESENT

Socially engaged art is a dynamic process, a collaboration between artists and members of communities that produces artworks reflecting the lives of these communities.

**SABINA ABBASOVA**  
PILLØ, Baku





Labyrinth, *Fire*. Absheron peninsula, Azerbaijan, 2000.  
Photo by Sanan Aleskerov

## PIONEERS AND PRACTICES

One of the earliest associations of artists in Azerbaijan was the [Baku Arts Center](#) (BAC). Founded in the mid-1980s and inspired by the democratic reforms launched in the Soviet Union, the BAC gave artists, photographers, architects, performers, composers, poets, filmmakers, and other creative professionals the opportunity to combine forces and promote new, free approaches to art. The BAC powered culture in Azerbaijan in those years, and it has continued to incubate ideas about society, art, the environment, children's art, and our region's cultural and historical legacy.

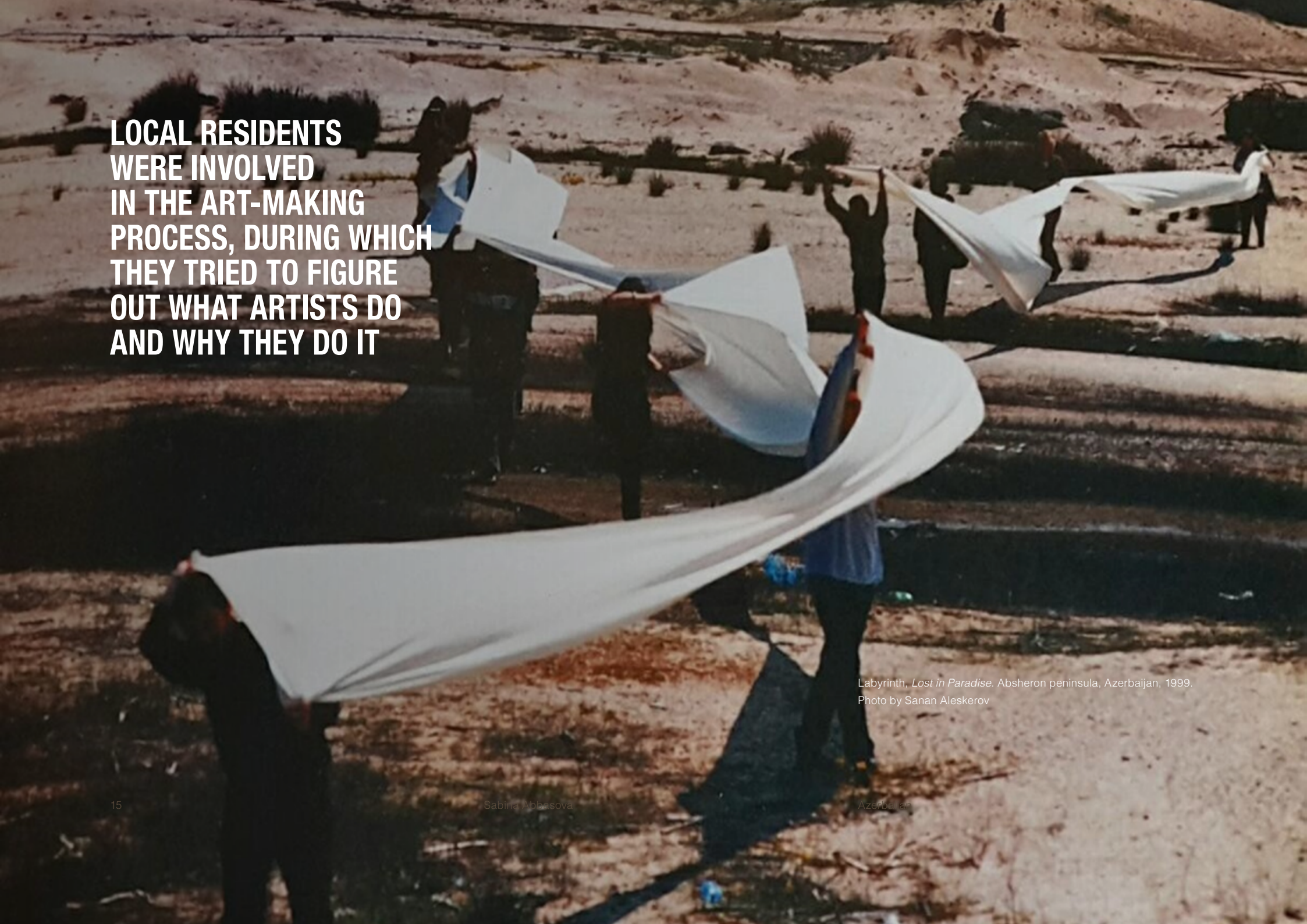
In Azerbaijan's post-colonization period, artists were able to voice themselves freely. Many of them wanted to talk about socially relevant subjects. Performance art, land art, and conceptual art came to the fore.<sup>1</sup> As the noughties approached, socially engaged art evolved as a tool for working with different communities. The aim was to involve those communities in urban life and encourage positive changes in the environment.

The projects produced by the group Labyrinth (1996–2005) exemplified this trend. The group was founded by artist and independent curator

<sup>1</sup> Teymur Daimi has written several articles about the pioneers of Azerbaijani contemporary art, including "Visual Art in Azerbaijan at the Turn of the Millennia" (in Russian, [https://www.baku.ru/blg-list.php?id=68621&amp;cmm\\_id=944](https://www.baku.ru/blg-list.php?id=68621&amp;cmm_id=944)). *Art Radar Asia* has also published a brief overview of Azerbaijani contemporary art in English (<https://artadarasia.wordpress.com/category/themes-and-subjects/ships/>).

Sabina Shikhlinskaya in collaboration with artists Sanan Aleskerov, Ujal Hagverdiyev, Elnur Babayev, Lena Hagverdiyeva, Eliyar Alimirzoyev, Huseyn Hagverdiyev, Aiten Rzakuliyeva, Shahin Shikhaliyev, Museib Amirov, and Zakir Huseynov. The group's primary impetus was to avoid returning to the modernist era, focusing instead on researching and applying new art practices, and working with natural and public spaces. Labyrinth's manifesto was not an outcome of but a meditation on the changes that had occurred in Azerbaijani society and art. Thus, in 1996, Labyrinth rented the entire second floor of the Sattar Bahlulzadeh Gallery for a month. The artists spent twenty-nine days living in the gallery and mounting an exhibition that involved transforming the gallery into a labyrinth, a space filled with dead ends and exits. A thousand people saw the show at its opening. This was the group's first attempt to involve viewers in the action.

Another of Labyrinth's projects was a Symposium on Environmental Disaster on the Absheron peninsula. It dealt with environmental problems in the Caspian Sea, mostly caused by the dilapidated state of the oil industry in the aftermath of Azerbaijan's exit from the Soviet Union. It was supported by the Azerbaijan Youth and Sports Ministry. The artists lived on the site, researching the uniqueness of Absheron and intervening in the environment by producing installations incorporating found metal, trash, and so on, thus underscoring the ongoing disaster. Many other artists, diplomats, and concerned citizens traveled to the peninsula for meetings and discussions.



**LOCAL RESIDENTS  
WERE INVOLVED  
IN THE ART-MAKING  
PROCESS, DURING WHICH  
THEY TRIED TO FIGURE  
OUT WHAT ARTISTS DO  
AND WHY THEY DO IT**

*Labyrinth, Lost in Paradise.* Absheron peninsula, Azerbaijan, 1999.  
Photo by Sanan Aleskerov



Labyrinth, *Bolshevik Nariman Narimanov*. Absheron peninsula, Azerbaijan, 1999–2000. Photo by Sanan Aleskerov

In 2000, Labyrinth held a series of master classes and staged theater productions at a tuberculosis sanatorium. Aiten Rzakuliyeva, Sabina Shikhliinskaya, and Elchin Nadir continued to work on the project for two years. At the same time, Labyrinth launched another project, *Fire*, which involved three locations: Yanar Dag Hill, the Ateshgah Temple of Fire, and the coast of the Absheron peninsula. Local residents were involved in the art-making process, during which they tried to figure out what artists do and why they do it. Ultimately, the group discussed important issues, including the direction in which Azerbaijan was headed. Labyrinth regarded this interaction as one of the project's most important outcomes.

*Nargen*, a work of land art, was one of Labyrinth's final projects. *Nargen* is a restricted-access island situated in the Bay of Baku, ten kilometers south of the city. During the First World War, Nargen housed not only a lighthouse but also a POW camp.

"As many as seven thousand Turkish, Hungarian, Czech, German and Austrian POWs were housed in barracks erected hastily from rotten boards. The unsanitary conditions, lack of drinking water and medicines, and hunger caused high mortality among the prisoners," wrote Irada Rustami.<sup>2</sup>

Later, the island served as a prison camp for victims of the Stalinist Great Terror. During the Second World War, Polish POWs were transferred to

2 Irada Rustami, "The Secret of Nargen Island," *Nash Baku* (in Russian), [https://www.ourbaku.com/index.php/%E2%80%9C%D0%A2%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BD%D0%B0\\_%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0\\_%D0%9D%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B3%D0%B5%D0%BD%22](https://www.ourbaku.com/index.php/%E2%80%9C%D0%A2%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BD%D0%B0_%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0_%D0%9D%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B3%D0%B5%D0%BD%22).



Equals, *Cəsur qızlar (Brave girls)*. Baku, Ganja, Sumgait, Barda, Azerbaijan, 2018. Photo by Aysel Akhundov

**WHOLE NEIGHBORHOODS  
HAVE BEEN DISAPPEARING,  
AND OUR MEMORY HAS  
VANISHED WITH THEM**

the island to build fortifications. After Stalin's death, the prison camp was closed, replaced by a military base that operated on the island until the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. Currently, the island is home only to ruined buildings and the lighthouse. Old ships lie rusting on the shoreline, the buildings are pockmarked with numerous traces of bullets, and human bones and snakes pop up at every turn. Fishermen who ply their trade near the island also find human bones—the remains of the victims of the Great Terror—in their nets. Labyrinth produced several photo and installation projects based on their study of the locale. Since Nargen is still closed to the general public, it would be inaccurate to call *Nargen* socially engaged art, although it grappled with historical subjects of paramount importance.

According to Sabina Shikhlinskaya, Labyrinth's curator, the group's work could be only provisionally defined as land art. In terms of Azerbaijan, Labyrinth's projects were classic public art, inspired by current social, environmental, and other hot-button issues. One of the last projects Shikhlinskaya curated for the group was *Disappearance*, which aimed to show the extremely shabby state of Azerbaijan's architectural heritage.

*Many things have been changing, in Baku in particular. Whole neighborhoods have been disappearing, and our memory has vanished with them. My show was a kind of protest. It took place not in a gallery or museum but in the most devastated section of the so-called Soviet District, in the Abilov Culture Club. This stunningly beautiful building, constructed in 1895, has no windows and the roof leaks, meaning it has been left to wrack and ruin, unfortunately. Several artists and I showed video works dealing with the disappearance*

*of the Soviet District. . . . There was a great deal of buzz about the show. . . I won't bother naming the names, organizations, and institutions, but literally the day after the opening the question was raised: if there is such interest on the part of Europeans, maybe the Abilov Culture Club should be a listed building? This question is currently on the agenda. If it happens that the building obtains protected status, you can say our efforts were not in vain.*<sup>3</sup>

Among other important undertakings, I should mention the multidisciplinary project *Treatment of Postwar Stress* (Sabirabad, 1994–1996), which involved refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>4</sup> The project team included physicians, psychologists, dance and gym teachers, and the artists Gyulara Esrafilzadeh and Elnur Babayev. Tarlan Gorchu curated the project, which had support from the Norwegian Refugee Council. Babayev later wrote about his experience:

*I was educated as a teacher, but I had no experience dealing with refugees. The team would travel every weekend to run classes for children. After a while,*

3 Leyla Mamedova, "Sabina Shikhlinskaya: 'Stupid clichés are embedded in the minds of many of our people due to a lack of cultural education,'" *1news.az*, April 18, 2019, [http://www.1news.az/news/sabina-shihlinskaya-suschestvuyuschie-v-azerbaydzhanе-programmy-delayut-cheloveka-bezyniciativnym-i-pokornym---foto?fbclid=IwAR3\\_7egNI8h51ED7Bzyd-fWVWoEoGh1V1S2kjK9iMuJeJrhtm4Pvf9mnFVrk](http://www.1news.az/news/sabina-shihlinskaya-suschestvuyuschie-v-azerbaydzhanе-programmy-delayut-cheloveka-bezyniciativnym-i-pokornym---foto?fbclid=IwAR3_7egNI8h51ED7Bzyd-fWVWoEoGh1V1S2kjK9iMuJeJrhtm4Pvf9mnFVrk).

4 The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nagorno-Karabakh\\_conflict](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nagorno-Karabakh_conflict)) is an ethnic and territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan that has long historical and cultural roots. It flared up during perestroika (1987–88), escalating into a full-scale war between 1991 and 1994.



Mədəni Niyyət (Cultural Intent), *Art Therapy*. Baku, Azerbaijan, ongoing since 2015. Courtesy of Mədəni Niyyət



Sabina Shikhinskaya, Emil Mejnunov (Moose), *Save the Earth*. Participate! Public Art Festival, Baku, Azerbaijan, 2013. Courtesy of Trend.az



Farkhad Hagverdi, *YardArt*. Participate! Public Art Festival, Baku, Azerbaijan, 2013. Courtesy of Trend.az, Gamid Amin-zade

*I realized that you should not teach children but play with them and tell them stories. By introducing children to the creative process, the artists wanted to distract the children from their problems and project their thoughts and feelings on producing a “product.” One of the girls, for example, wrote excellent poems, it turned out. She had published a small book under the pen name Kocharli (from the word meaning “immigrants”). The book brought her to the attention of the municipal authorities, who found an apartment for her family in Baku. The project was the best thing I have ever done.*

In recent years, Azerbaijan has been quite vigorously engaged with otherwise marginalized groups, such as people with disabilities. Mədəni Niyyət has been systematically involved in such projects, organizing numerous master classes in mental hospitals. ESA Theater also works with disabled people. Equals Baku occasionally holds feminist poetry readings. Recently, they published the children's book *Stories for Brave Girls*, a collection of fairytale-like stories about real women practicing different professions in Azerbaijan.

I should also note the young artist Agil Abdullayev, who deals with LGBTQ+ topics, for example, his project *Because We Are the Next*, a series of lecture-performances launched in November 2018 at the close of his solo show at ARTIM Project, in Baku. The lectures dealt with such timely issues as misogyny in social networks, sexual discrimination, LGBTQ+ rights, and equality. After a successful experience in Baku, Abdullayev delivered the lectures in other parts of the country (Qakh and Ganja). He is currently working on a way of presenting the lectures in the south of the country, where people are the most conservative.



Vahid Ali, *Urban gardening* (before and after).  
 Art Prospect: Urban Olum, Baku, Azerbaijan, 2017.  
 Photo by Matthew Soulnechnii

**IN 2017, PILLƏ, WITH SUPPORT FROM  
CEC ARTSLINK AS PART OF THEIR ART  
PROSPECT FESTIVAL, ORGANIZED  
A TWO-WEEK PROJECT TO CLEAN UP  
PUBLIC SPACES IN AZERBAIJAN  
BY BRINGING TOGETHER LOCAL  
AND FOREIGN ARTISTS WITH  
LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

Vahid Ali, *Urban gardening*. Art Prospect: Urban Olum, Baku,  
Azerbaijan, 2017. Photo by Matthew Soulnechnii

Sabina Abbasova

Azerbaijan



Samir Salakhov, *Fisherman*. Art Prospect: Urban Olum, Baku, Azerbaijan, 2017. Photo by Matthew Soulnechnii

Another project Abdullayev has planned for May 2019 is a Diversity Film Festival in collaboration with Salaam Cinema founders Leyla Gafarova and Ilkin Huseynov. It would be the country's first queer film festival, featuring screenings of twenty short and feature films, three workshops, five lectures by gay rights activists, and two art shows. The festival aims to generate an inclusive environment that would increase acceptance of different shades of gender identity and sexual orientation, and help outsiders join forces.

The following public art and socially engaged art projects have been noteworthy in recent years.

In 2012, Yarat Contemporary Art Space organized Participate!, a public art festival at which Sabina Shikhlinskaya (*Save the Earth*), Farkhad Hagverdi (*YardArt*), Orhan Mammad (*VIP Underpass*), Afat Baghirova (*Tell Me Your Secret*), and Azeri Artmongers (*Playing Numbers*) presented works.

Farkhad Hagverdi produced *YardArt* in a Baku courtyard in collaboration with artists Arif Amirov, Aydin Baghirov, Hasan Hagverdiyev, and Emil Mejnunov. The project revolved around the notion of interacting with a local community to paint murals and stimulating the courtyard's residents to improve their everyday lives by changing a public space. This was what Hagverdi himself had to say about the project:

*I had always wanted to paint a courtyard legally, in such a way it was not deemed graffiti, but the community's idea. That was how it happened. I went there ahead of time and talked over everything with the residents. Everyone supported the idea. While we were painting, the local kids would bring us tea and sweets. The atmosphere was fun and friendly. It was a joint project just as I had intended. Unfortunately,*

*the project did not go on. It is a complicated process. Besides, in socially engaged projects, you sometimes have to get over yourself and do at least a little something to help people. But hardly anyone wants to buy what you are selling, since this is not the kind of art that makes people money. It is primarily a species of solidarity and charity.*

*Playing Numbers* involved building a playroom at a children's hospital. It was the brainchild of the Azeri Artmongers—Patricio Forrester, Catherine Shovlin, Olga Martynova-Guliyeva, Aysel Nagiyeva, Sabina Abbasova, Dina Izmaylova, Shahribanu Abdulaziz, Lala Garayeva, and Bahar Alizadeh. The playroom was centered around the concepts of learning, play, and care. The children were asked to move the figures around to make different numbers from one to ten, or even make up new numbers. They could also build places for hiding or sitting with their parents. It was a way to have them spend time outside their rooms at the hospital.

In 2017, *PİLLƏ*, with support from *CEC ArtsLink* as part of their Art Prospect Festival, organized a two-week project to clean up public spaces in Azerbaijan by bringing together local and foreign artists with local communities. The goal was to inspire residents to get involved in the culture and civic life of their neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup>

I should likewise mention *Yaradan Project*, in which young artists from different genres volunteer to

5 Photos can be viewed at [https://www.facebook.com/pg/atelierpille/photos/?tab=album&album\\_id=565681677126593](https://www.facebook.com/pg/atelierpille/photos/?tab=album&album_id=565681677126593) and [https://www.facebook.com/pg/atelierpille/photos/?tab=album&album\\_id=498911287136966](https://www.facebook.com/pg/atelierpille/photos/?tab=album&album_id=498911287136966).

**IN THE PAST YEAR,  
SEVERAL INDEPENDENT  
ART VENUES HAVE  
EMERGED IN BAKU**

work with children, fostering a love of art while helping them to open up and sense their own importance to society.

Resuming our conversation about civic campaigns, I would like to mention several of them in the field of art education, since education directly impacts art practices in Azerbaijan. I have mentioned Sabina Shikhlinskaya, an Honored Artist of Azerbaijan and independent curator. Along with numerous exhibition projects, including shows involving young artists, Shikhlinskaya gave a master class in curating in 2013 at Yarat Contemporary Art Space. In 2014, she curated *Invading the Museum 2014*, which involved thirty up-and-coming artists visiting museums around Azerbaijan over six months and attending lectures on conceptual art before producing their own works, integrating them into traditional museums.

Another key figure was Leyla Akhundzadeh (1953–2010), who was an Honored Art Worker of Azerbaijan, art historian, chair of the department of art theory and art history at the Azerbaijan Art Academy, and president of Wings of Time, an association that supported creative work, and whose membership consisted of young artists, musicians, art scholars, and photographers.

Yarat Contemporary Art Space, which I have mentioned, was founded in 2011 by Aida Mahmudova and was the first official independent art organization in Azerbaijan. Yarat kicked off by bringing local artists together through group shows and education programs. Its infancy took place during an economic boom in Azerbaijan, and it was enthusiastically supported by the business community and Culture Ministry. It was then possible to recruit well-known

artists to take part in educational projects, stage large-scale shows (see above), and construct a large building featuring a library, a sizable auditorium, and exhibition spaces.

In 2015, however, when Azerbaijan went through an economic downturn, Yarat's financing dried up, leading to cuts in education programs involving international experts. Yarat continues to run master classes for all comers regardless of their ages and professions, courses for curators, film screenings, open lectures, and exhibitions, as well as *ARTIM*, its support project for novice artists.

In the past year, several independent art venues have emerged in Baku, including the movie theater Salaam Cinema Baku, which I have mentioned. Alongside alternative film screenings, Salaam Cinema serves as a site for educational programs, master classes, and discussions. It was founded by director Leyla Gafarova and photographer Ilkin Huseynov.

Art Garden Ganja is a unique venue, located outside the Azerbaijani capital. It aims to generate and cultivate ties in the art community, serve as a place where artists and their allies can come together, and act as a free venue for creative people to carry out their projects and educational undertakings (workshops, seminars, etc.). It was founded by Murad Nabiyeu.

Dreamer's Lab is a program aimed at young people seeking social change. Applicants had to write essays outlining their ideas for solving social problems. Fifty residents of Baku between the ages of eighteen and thirty were tapped for the program. Upon its completion, they plan on implementing projects in five different areas, including tactical urbanism and art. Dreamer's Lab was founded by Baku IdeaLab.

## PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES

Young artists are most often wary of working with people from outside their milieu since they lack experience and fear rejection, especially if the work involves public space, where they need to make contact with people themselves and interact with them directly. This was the conclusion we reached based on our own experience running the festival Art Prospect: Urban Olum. Artists found it hard to break out of the customary trajectory: me > my ideas > working in my studio > showing my work at an exhibition.

The Azerbaijan Art Academy still adheres to the principles of traditional art. The only opportunities for learning new methods are self-education and the periodic workshops at Yarat, where one can learn the basics of contemporary art but where socially engaged practices are still not on the menu, unfortunately. Many of the projects presented at the festival Participate!, aside from the ones mentioned earlier, thus avoided getting people involved in the production of those projects. In the case of Art Prospect: Urban Olum, although we organizers were open to participatory practices, the artists tended to avoid real grassroots participation, grounding their projects in places and local residents conceptually, not practically.

There are positive counterexamples, however. In 1999, as part of their project *Lost in Paradise*, Labyrinth staged a performance involving local residents. It took place in a dilapidated ancient bath in the town of Pirsagi on the Absheron peninsula. The artists wrapped the bath in white cloth, which the wind whipped into the most fantastic shapes. The artists and locals then carried the white cloth into

the sea. This was a more theatrical performance, of course, but it was prepped and staged with the local populace's direct involvement. The artists wanted to raise the issue of the value of the site's architectural and cultural heritage. Subsequently, the bath was restored. It is currently a regionally listed architectural landmark.

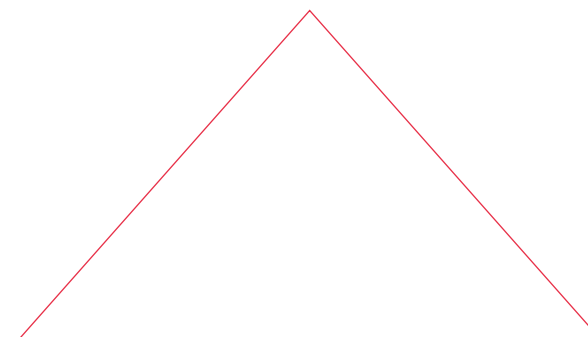
This story shows that calling on people to make something in common through art is one means of encouraging them to feel responsible for their common space. It all begins with small groups. Change is possible when people act step-by-step and regularly.

In this sense, short-term projects can be problematic and ambiguous. A striking example of this was our festival Art Prospect: Urban Olum. After it was over, we never went back to Baku's Bayil District, the festival's focus. Ultimately, everything we did as part of the project was destroyed by the local residents, and the space reverted to its condition before our interventions. Because we were busy achieving tangible outcomes, we had neither the time nor the energy for interacting with residents and didn't speak with them about the importance and pleasure of taking care of common spaces.

I regard this as a good example of how not to do a socially engaged art project. I am confident, however, that socially engaged art's strength lies in its direct dialogue with society, unlike conceptual art and other kinds of art, making it capable of having a considerable impact on life in Azerbaijan.

Most of the projects I have enumerated aimed to make a lasting difference in people's daily lives.

The outcomes of these practices have not always been satisfactory, however. Successful implementation of such undertakings requires, I would argue, the following auxiliary resources: curators with sociological training who could mediate between artists and communities; ways of monitoring and sustaining long-term projects, including programs for maintaining cooperation with communities; and the production of works not only by professional artists but also by "untrained" members of the public. Perhaps putting these arrangements in place will help us achieve more productive outcomes in socially engaged art in Azerbaijan.



**MOST OF THE PROJECTS I HAVE ENUMERATED AIMED TO MAKE A LASTING DIFFERENCE IN PEOPLE'S DAILY LIVES, BUT THEIR RESULTS ARE NOT ALWAYS SATISFACTORY**

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# ARMENIA

## SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART AND ACTIVISM

Contemporary art in Armenia evolved in a particular social and political context; in this regard, it has been characterized as social and political art. In recent years, many projects that emerged at the crossroads of art and activism came to be called art activism or *artivism*. The examples examined below could equally be described as social and political art, and art activism.

### EVA KHACHATRYAN

Suburb Platform, Yerevan



1 — Moldova 2 — Armenia 3 — Azerbaijan

Eva Khachatryan

Armenia

## PIONEERS AND PRACTICES

**3RD FLOOR WAS THE FIRST ATTEMPT IN 1987 TO DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT FROM THE USUAL UNION OF ARTISTS SHOWS**

**IT WAS MORE LIKE A FESTIVAL, AN OPEN VENUE WHERE EVERYONE WHOSE VOICE HAD BEEN STIFLED COULD BE HEARD**

## HISTORICAL REVIEW

Undertaken by the younger artists of the older generation, the so-called non-conformists, the first collective art actions took place in Armenia in the early 1980s. The first public art shows were held in places where the art scene was unaccustomed to presenting its works, for example, in workshops of artists, the foyer of the Yerevan Conservatory, and the half-functioning House of Education. Subsequently, during the perestroika years of the late 1980s, the sociocultural movement 3rd Floor (1987–94) was founded. Aware of the political reforms in the Soviet Union, the Armenia Union of Artists provided the avant-gardists with an exhibition space during the glasnost period. It was a conference room on the third floor, hence the movement's name. 3rd Floor was the first attempt in 1987 to do something different from the usual Union of Artists shows. It was more like a festival, an open venue where everyone whose voice had been stifled could be heard. The project involved not only artists but also musicians and poets.

More full-fledged shows were organized from 1988 onwards. They featured Dada-style manifestos that were later also published in newspapers and magazines. Generally, the movement attempted to be representative. It organized major art shows whose ceremonial function, exhibiting the "Western" art (i.e., pop art and abstract art) that had been banned during the Soviet period, played a particular role in legitimizing and popularizing avant-garde art and modernism. Despite the fact that the people behind 3rd Floor were mainly at war with the Soviet nomenklatura as embodied by the Union of Artists, and 3rd Floor's members

were primarily interested in a new aesthetic opposed to national traditions in art and socialist realism, several of their shows dealt with domestic political events. One of them, which focused on the Karabakh Movement, was entitled *3rd Floor 666* (1989), thus mirroring the prevalent anti-Soviet sentiments in Armenian society.

A more socially focused group of artists was Act, who made a name for themselves in the mid-1990s (1994–96) by resorting to new methods of self-expression. Their art was permeated by the politics of the time. Their arsenal included anti-institutionalism, interventions, demonstrations, new media, and analysis.

The anti-Soviet demonstrations of 1988–90, focused on the Karabakh Movement, gave way to the democratization and liberalization of society after the Soviet Union's collapse and the ceasefire on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. New protests erupted on the streets of Yerevan in the mid-1990s. Emphasizing their commitment to ongoing social reforms and the relevance of contemporary art, members of Act joined other artists in 1995 in organizing a march down one of Yerevan's main thoroughfares, the former Marx Prospect. Featuring slogans such as "Free art, free culture, free creativity," "Art referendum," "Political art," "Creativity will save the world," and "Build a new culture to match the new country," it was known as the *Art Demonstration*.

In 2007, Art Laboratory was founded. Its members saw protest and analysis of Armenia's political and social circumstances as their principal creative



3rd Floor, *Greetings to the Union of Artists from the Netherworld*.  
Performance, 1988. Photo © 3rd Floor

method. After a brutal crackdown against one of the largest opposition demonstrations, in 2008, led to the deaths of ten people, Art Laboratory made the switch to street actions, using street art as its primary means of making itself heard. The graffiti and stencil paintings they did during the night were mostly painted over by police as soon as they were spotted, usually the following morning.

Art Laboratory also carried out several performances. The first consisted of painting in pink the gilded fence surrounding the parliament building. It was crucial to Art Laboratory that *Parliament* (2012) was performed during the day. Another performance, *Cake for the President* (2012), involved congratulating the president on his birthday by bringing him a cake decorated with the word “resign.” In addition, Art Laboratory held several performances dealing with corruption, especially *election campaign bribes*. Recently, Art Laboratory’s projects have had a more educational-outreach bent, including a series of seminars and lectures by artists and activists.

In 2012, a new group, Counter Strike, emerged. Its young members resorted to the same methods as Art Laboratory. They dubbed themselves *artists* who contributed to civic movements with their actions. They quickly succeeded in opening the space *Home 45*, which was a kind of headquarters for artists and activists where they could plan and brainstorm upcoming actions.

We should note that one-off undertakings by feminist groups have also taken place, and from time to time the groups do performances in public spaces. They are mostly anonymous in nature, since they are not individual artworks but collective actions.



FEATURING SLOGANS  
SUCH AS “FREE  
ART, FREE CULTURE,  
FREE CREATIVITY,”  
“ART REFERENDUM,”  
“POLITICAL ART,”  
“CREATIVITY WILL  
SAVE THE WORLD,” AND  
“BUILD A NEW CULTURE  
TO MATCH THE NEW  
COUNTRY,” IT WAS  
KNOWN AS THE ART  
DEMONSTRATION

*Act, Art Demonstration, Yerevan, 1995. Photo © Act*

THE SOLIDARITY  
ACTION WAS A  
VIVID EXAMPLE OF  
ACTIVISM—

RESPONDING TO AN  
URGENT SITUATION  
USING A METHOD  
DESIGNED TO ACHIEVE  
A SPECIFIC OUTCOME—

OVERLAPPING WITH  
ART, WHOSE REPEAT  
OF ARAKELYAN'S ACT  
CONTAINED ELEMENTS  
OF THEATRICAL  
PERFORMANCE

An action of note that was not directly involved with women's problems per se dealt with the vulnerability of people who behave "strangely" in public places. On May 17, 2016, police forcibly committed civil rights activist and political scientist Armine Arakelyan to a mental hospital, since she had crawled into an empty fountain on Republic Square. The press engaged in a lengthy discussion of the reasons for her behavior, whether it had been a protest or a nervous breakdown. A week later, a feminist activist, supported by other kindred spirits, decided to reprise Arakelyan's action, thus underscoring the absurdity of the case while pointing up the vulnerability of individuals who resolve to do something deemed "bizarre" by society or the system. The activists showed how these individuals were treated by such authorities as the police, who wrote them off as mentally deranged and forcibly committed them to psychiatric hospitals; the press, who mainly represented them as mentally unsound; and, finally, the mental health authorities, who in Arakelyan's case were unable to make a diagnosis and were forced to release her. The solidarity action was a vivid example of activism—responding to an urgent situation using a method designed to achieve a specific outcome—overlapping with art, whose repeat of Arakelyan's act contained elements of theatrical performance.

On June 3, 2016, another performance took place, this time in front of the former Armenian KGB building, which currently houses the Armenian state security agency. Two female activists, one sitting on a chair, the other standing next to her holding an umbrella, chatted with each other and kissed. The performance had been inspired by two studio

photographs: the first photograph was of the artist Gayane Khachatryan and her girlfriend, the second, of filmmaker Sergei Parajanov and his boyfriend. The performers had transferred personal relationships from the privacy of the photo studio into the public space. Through their peaceful act, which spoke of love and understanding, they introduced an element of femininity into a hidebound patriarchal society, where all issues are resolved by means of power and violence. One of the performers is a member of the group Queering Yerevan, a team of artists, writers, culture critics, and activists who use Yerevan as a space for experimentation.

## PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES

### ART COMMUNITY AND ART ACTIVISM PROJECTS

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish activism from art, and vice versa. For many years, art and activism have nourished each other, resulting in an exchange of know-how and methods.

The art community's reaction to art activist projects has always been positive. It is another matter whether activist methods, especially direct action, are acceptable to most artists. Many artists still adhere to traditional means of exhibiting their work, while others are inclined to argue that educational outreach plays a more crucial role than direct action and analysis of events.

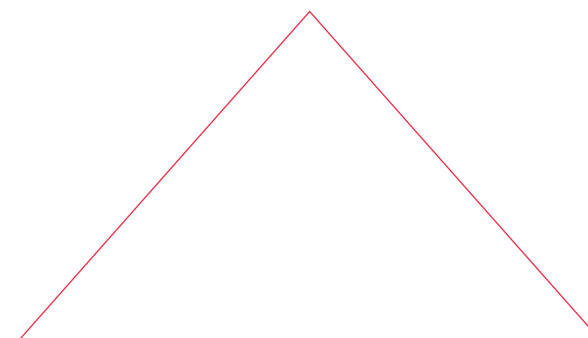
### PUBLIC, MEDIA, AND GOVERNMENT REACTIONS TO ART ACTIVISM

As we have mentioned above, some artist activists have been persecuted by police, but at the same time the Armenian authorities have been quite cautious in reacting, wishing to avoid the public controversies triggered by unfair and excessively severe punishments.

The Armenian press has provided quite robust coverage of all social and political performances, as they have served as more vivid reflections of grass-roots public discontent and public criticism. In turn, the public has either supported or not supported the activists, depending on the public's commitment to opposition views.

### INFLUENCE OF ART ACTIVISM ON THE COUNTRY

Some opposition activists who were involved in collective protest actions are currently in government, which encourages one to think Armenia might be on the road to political and social progress. The contemporary art community played a vital role in working out protest strategies and contributed to the overall campaign by running outreach programs and forums and, partly, by fusing art and activism.



**THE CONTEMPORARY ART COMMUNITY PLAYED  
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RUNNING OUTREACH PROGRAMS AND FORUMS AND,  
PARTLY, BY FUSING ART AND ACTIVISM**

## RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

All current contemporary art organizations in Armenia either undertook similar projects themselves or provided venues for carrying out social and political projects. They include ICA Yerevan, Art and Cultural Studies Laboratory, Commune, Art Lab Yerevan, and ACCEA.

Until recently, Armenia had no local foundations that supported social and political art. Most support was provided by international foundations and organizations. The new political regime in Armenia means the overall attitude to contemporary art could change. At any rate, the Armenian Culture Ministry recently decided Art Laboratory would represent the country at the 2019 Venice Biennale. Their project deals with the recent revolutionary events in Armenia.

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# BELARUS

## SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART IN BELARUS

Social art or socially engaged art is, in my opinion, an art project that aims for some kind of social transformation and/or change. It is therefore not only a way to create something interesting and participatory for the audience, but art with a clear focus on change.

**ANNA CHISTOSERDOVA**  
Ÿ Gallery, Minsk





## PIONEERS AND PRACTICES

It is hard to pinpoint the time when Belarusian artists started to work with socially engaged art. This practice probably began around 6 to 7 years ago. Ten years ago, artists and the art community started to think not only about how to create art but also how to become an active part of society and make some changes in social life. At our gallery, one of the first projects with a social practice aspect was an exhibition in 2010 by Swedish artists Anna Viola Hallberg and Annica Karlsson Rixon, *State of Mind*, which explored the LGBT community's position in contemporary society. The project opened the first dialogue about this issue in Belarus. Collaboration with the Swedish artists and curators helped us discover socially engaged art practice. Later, together with these artists, we organized a weeklong project, City ArtLab, an open laboratory of civic activism to research the urban environment and its problems as well as to develop future projects. In 2011, the Ÿ Gallery hosted the Belarus installment of the New Urban Topology project. Its goal was to re-think urban spaces, to consider an alternative urban development process that would involve not only the official agencies and players but engage the art community, civic activists, and NGOs that work in the fields of urban practice and public space.

For the past six years, the gallery, in partnership with the environmental organization Green Network, has been running an annual *en plein air* followed by an exhibition and an agricultural festival. The main goal of the E.V.A.A. (Environment Visual Audio Art) project is to encourage the Belarusian art community

to address environmental and sustainable development issues, strengthen interdisciplinary practice and collaboration between artists and environmentalists, and support the practice of working with local rural communities. One of the best examples was the exhibition project *Astravets of Culture*, which proposed an alternative look at the construction of the nuclear power station in the town of Astravets (more about this project later).

Inclusion of social components in the Ÿ Gallery programs has become a permanent part of our practice. One of the ongoing projects since 2011 is our response to the serious problems with art education. Public school curriculum in Belarus doesn't include the history of world culture; the state-run Art Academy does not teach art history beyond 1960. For us as an institution, it is very important to invest in the future, the younger generations. That is why we organized Children's Creative Workshops and Galleries, an informal educational project based on an interdisciplinary approach.

In June 2018, the gallery inaugurated its new space with the project Without Exceptions!, dedicated to creating best conditions for inclusion of people with special needs in our projects and events. We partnered with the NGO BelAPDiMI, which works with people with disabilities and developmental challenges to adapt exhibitions to the needs of this community, involve people with disabilities directly in the curatorial process, and support similar projects by other organizations. More about this initiative can be found in the references.

City ArtLab, Minsk, Belarus, 2011. From the Ÿ Gallery archive

**THE PROJECT OPENED  
THE FIRST DIALOGUE  
ABOUT THE STATUS  
OF LGBT COMMUNITY  
IN BELARUS**



Anna Viola Hallberg and Annica Karlsson Rixon, *State of Mind*,  
Minsk, Belarus, 2010. From the Y Gallery archive



*Burning Doors*, Belarus Free Theatre, 2017 © Nicolai Khalezin

One of the best examples of socially and/or politically engaged art is the Belarusian independent theater group Belarus Free Theatre, which was officially banned. In 2008, they organized Studio Fortinbras, a special theater laboratory for young artists. The Free Theatre performs in secret in private apartments and occasionally in public spaces in Minsk. Just recently, they organized a performance on LGBT rights in a shopping mall. Some artists were arrested and later released but have to pay fines. The Free Theatre is one of the best and most visible social art practitioners working on a regular basis.

The exhibition project *IMENA (NAMES)*, curated by Anna Karpenko and Antonina Stebur, is another great example of a socially engaged art project. Exhibitions were organized across Belarus in regional cities to support *Imena* magazine.

A few artists and curators work in the field more or less regularly. It depends on the situation. Sometimes artists reflect only on certain issues. For example, the art community organized the exhibition *Traditional Values*, about domestic violence, in reaction to our president's statement two months ago that it is permissible to beat your wife and kids because it is supposed to be part of the Slavic tradition.

**SOMETIMES ARTISTS REFLECT ONLY ON CERTAIN ISSUES**

**WE STILL HAVE  
A LAW THAT FORBIDS  
UNAUTHORIZED  
GATHERINGS OF MORE  
THAN THREE PEOPLE  
IN ONE AREA**

**AS A RESULT,  
IT IS DIFFICULT TO  
GET AN AUDIENCE FOR  
PUBLIC OR SOCIALLY  
ENGAGED ART**

## **ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS**

We don't have a strong platform in the art community to work with social topics. We at Ÿ Gallery invite artists to work within our projects, give them an opportunity to think about these issues, but it is not enough. It partly has to do with concerns over safety, both for the audience and the artists. This is still a problem in Belarus: because of our political situation people don't feel safe when they participate in any activity like this. We still have a law that forbids unauthorized gatherings of more than three people in one area. As a result, it is difficult to get an audience for public or socially engaged art.

A good example of this difficulty is a residency with GeoAIR, from Tbilisi, that we organized three years ago. We thought that including Georgian artists would be ideal for inviting people to participate in a project, in the context of the Georgian tradition of hospitality. But even that didn't work. As part of the program of residency exchanges known as S.M.A.R.R.R.T., we invited our Georgian colleagues to conduct workshops with members of our local community, residents of the neighboring buildings. We hoped that it would help us to involve the neighbors in our projects, to encourage them to use and maintain a small public garden in the gallery's courtyard as a place to meet for the local residents and art community, to conduct workshops on ecology for kids and adults. But our neighbors weren't interested. This reluctance might be explained by the lack of familiarity with public projects and the practice of audience participation. It is a big challenge for curators and artists to find a space, to open up to the

audience, and to get people engaged in a participatory project.

Participatory projects might perhaps work better in places that are neither a gallery nor a public space—in public institutions like a library, a museum, etc. People feel safer there, because these places are not connected to the political sphere. When we do projects with local communities outside Minsk, many people think they are connected to something political. This is partly because of financing, because usually projects and NGOs related to social engagement are supported by foreign institutions and funds. It is very difficult to change that mindset.

In general, concerning socially engaged art, from the state's point of view, we still have taboos on topics such as LGBT, history/rewriting history, rethinking the past and probably also the future, language, etc. There is also the issue of defining local communities. For some time we thought that our neighbors around the gallery were our local community, but we realized that it is not the case. Our gallery was located in the center of the city, where people are mostly temporary renters. Also, in the post-Soviet era, the multi-story buildings that weren't built by the residents ceased being the nuclei of local communities. So, we do projects for kids and young people, because in this way we can most likely change the mindset. The older generation is not so open-minded; they are stuck in something like a Soviet way of thinking.

The topic of ecology can also be a taboo. For example, two years ago we organized an exhibition as part of the environmental art project E.V.A.A. The



*Astravets of Culture*, 2017. From the Ÿ Gallery archive

main idea was to think about the nuclear power plant that's been under construction since 2012 and that will be launched in Belarus in November 2019–July 2020. Controversies surrounding construction of the facility are discussed in the official discourse, but we decided to address general tendencies, views, and visions of this nuclear power plant. We organized a small project called *Astravets of Culture*, after the eponymous small town where the power plant is located. The name Astravets evokes the Belarusian word *остров* (island), hence “the island of culture.” Our concept for this project was to create an alternative to the nuclear power station: a center for science, technology, and culture. We made videos, a special booklet with presentations of beautiful apartments, and exhibition posters as if Olafur Eliasson were having an exhibition there. For many people, it was a starting point for thinking differently about this problem, a proposal for an alternative future. This is one of the ways we relate to and/or deal with these kinds of projects.

Another issue is the binary system of official and independent media. The official media doesn't really pay attention to social problems and does not criticize the laws or policies of the state. There are a few publications like the online magazine *Imena* that deal with socially engaged issues. Through media, socially engaged (art) projects become more visible. That is an advantage for us.

In the visual arts, projects with kids and orphans, art therapy practices, and exhibitions of children's works draw attention to but don't really address social issues. Three years ago, we organized a project for the kids' hospice, financed by Belarusky Narodny Bank (<https://www.bnb.by>). This company is

**WHEN WE START  
WORKING WITH SOCIAL  
ISSUES, WE NEED  
TO THINK ABOUT  
SUSTAINABILITY, HOW  
TO SOLVE PROBLEMS**

**IT IS TOO EASY TO THINK  
ABOUT A BEAUTIFUL  
EXHIBITION, A NICE  
EXHIBITION, AND THEN  
LEAVE AFTER THE  
PROJECT IS FINISHED**

**THAT CAN CAUSE HARM,  
LEAVING A GAP BEHIND**

**WE NEED TO THINK  
LONG-TERM**

very active and engaged socially. The project combined art therapy and education. We organized an exhibition and worked with ten families; therapy was not only for the kids but for their families as well. Also, we introduced the hospice staff to a special methodology of working with kids. The project was not only with and for the kids but was also planned so that the employees can continue this work on their own going forward.

When we start working with social issues, we need to think about sustainability, how to solve problems. It is too easy to think about a beautiful exhibition, a nice exhibition, and then leave after the project is finished. That can cause harm, leaving a gap behind. We need to think long-term. Oksana Bogdanova, Director of Azgur Museum, Minsk, said that when you start working with kids, then it is for many years, and you can't just stop in the middle of the process.

There is a project organized by volunteer activists who work with mentally ill people living their entire lives in the state-run psychiatric clinic near Minsk. A few activists started doing art classes there. It is a lifelong project for the volunteers; they cannot leave. A few months ago, they decided not only to spend time together but to open a real café called Outsider Café, where clinic patients can work and make money. Ideally, the café will provide a more constant income for the patients, a long-term sustainable solution.

At Ÿ Gallery, we have special mediation programs for marginalized groups. We realized that it is quite easy to make something socially oriented, but one needs direct connection to the target audience. When we think about inclusion, then special tours, programs, etc. are really quite easy to organize, but

partners are very important, those who will be mediators, who will connect and bring people, etc. These partner organizations help with collaboration. For example, it is easy to raise money for braille exhibition text, but who are we making it for, if we have no connection with blind people?

A lot of work focusses on socially unprotected groups. Both the independent art scene and sometimes businesses support projects connected to socially engaged issues. For us, it is important that companies also think about how to incorporate social responsibility, because it becomes easier to find partners and support for these projects.

About 60% of socially engaged activities and art projects are funded by foreign foundations or organized in partnership with foreign organizations. We are currently working on a two-year project with a partner organization from Lithuania. This year, we will start a project with our neighbors on Oktyabrskaya Street (a postindustrial area with many cultural places, cafés, and clubs) about non-discrimination and its principles. We will work with the management on the rights of employees, different types of discrimination, and the human rights-based approach in daily work. In addition, we will organize open art projects with open audiences about the topic "What does discrimination mean?" because we always think that this is not related to us/me, that it is about people with disabilities or ex-prisoners, but it also concerns the creative class! It is important to think about both how we can relate and how we might discriminate. For instance, take our work with volunteers. We need to go beyond simply not exploiting volunteers to thinking of them as our partners, apart from the fact that it is

often easier to do things ourselves, since it can be faster than guiding someone. Volunteers are easy to attract, but it takes effort to guide and support them, to give feedback, to include them, and not just give them tasks and then quickly check on their work. Working with volunteers requires additional resources so that it can be constructive for all sides!

Currently, we participate in the project STATUS: The Role of Female and Male Artists in Transforming the Society as an associate partner. Funded by the Swedish Institute, the project researches the status of artists in contemporary society. There are many issues and questions related to labor, fees, basic needs, the necessity for artists be engaged socially/politically and to be connected to society, etc. We hope to create a publication that supports this discussion. In Belarus, artists have no recognition as professionals; being an artist is not seen as a job. We have an interesting law in Belarus about “people who have no official job” and who are called freeloaders (тунеядец in Belarusian). Most creatives are in this category. Annually, you need to pay a fine of about \$150 to the government. And when you pay, you need to prove how you have earned this money! Since December 1, 2018, you can check the main database to see if you are listed in this category. If you are not a member of the Artists Union, you need to present your portfolio to the committee formed by the government, and they will decide whether you are an artist or something else. And, if not, you fall into the “people who have no official job” category. So, maybe we should do some projects for artists when we talk about socially engaged art.

**IN BELARUS, ARTISTS HAVE NO RECOGNITION AS PROFESSIONALS**

**WE HAVE AN INTERESTING LAW ABOUT “PEOPLE WHO HAVE NO OFFICIAL JOB” AND WHO ARE CALLED FREELoadERS. MOST CREATIVES ARE IN THIS CATEGORY**

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It's hard to name particular organizations that support socially engaged art. Embassies of Western countries run small grants programs and cultural institute projects. Some programs are financed by the UN, UNESCO, and UNICEF. Unfortunately, we don't have any publications that specialize in socially engaged art. Below I have included references to the programs and projects discussed in the text.

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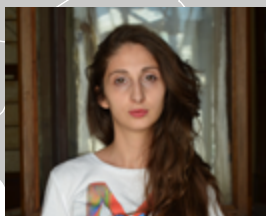
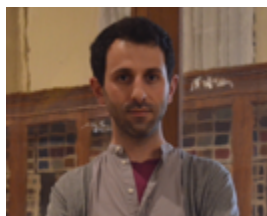
<http://ygallery.by/events/0009095/>.

# GEORGIA

## SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART IN GEORGIA

The definition of social practice in art can be very broad. Numerous terms describe such works from different perspectives. If we generally talk about art that reflects on the social environment, it can be very broadly interpreted and analyzed, especially in the context of Tbilisi, which witnessed diverse cultural activities from the beginning of the twentieth century. However, talking about it in the format of this text will take the discussion very far. Here, we would like to give an overview of the art practices that emerged in Georgia at the end of the Soviet Union and after regaining independence in 1991. The examples discussed below in the context of social engagement concern art that reflects upon the social environment, aims to engage the public, comes as a form of (artistic) protest, and/or is intended as an agent of change by author(s).

**DATA CHIGHOLASHVILI, MARIAM SHERGELASHVILI**  
State Silk Museum, Tbilisi



1 — Moldova 2 — Armenia 3 — Azerbaijan

Data Chigholashvili, Mariam Shergelashvili

Georgia

## PIONEERS AND PRACTICES

The first important examples are art projects as events, such as activities of the artistic group X Floor. They opposed academic structures in art and implemented their work in experimental ways and spaces starting in the 1980s. It was one of the first cases of showing public exhibitions in private apartments for interested public or staging events in urban spaces such as the underground complex below the current First Republic Square. Another example is the 1991 performance *Stand Against*, by Oleg Timchenko and Niko Tsetskhladze. It was an intervention in everyday urban life, bringing a different perspective to the country in crisis. A few other examples were the cases of spontaneous reactions during the time when such practices were just emerging and were not discussed broadly in art theory and practice.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1990s to 2000s, gradually the projects got an international dimension on the level of information and participation. Also, starting in the 2000s, different platforms supporting collaborations were formed (e.g., *MAF Media Art Farm*, *GeoAIR*), and all these processes somehow led to the situation we have today.

Generally speaking in terms of decades, many projects with tangible social-engagement aspects emerged in the 2010s, partly in parallel with some social issues and related protests. For example, the

<sup>1</sup> The earlier projects and processes mentioned here are also described in more detail in the catalogue: Nataša Bodrožić and Nini Palavandishvili, eds. *SPACES: Cultural Public Sphere in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine* (Weitra: Verlag Bibliothek der Provinz, 2014).

performances of *Bouillon Group* reflected on and critiqued a wide range of topics, from the social to the ecological. We could also group a few topics and art projects in this way.

One category concerns the works engaging with urban issues. Here the projects are collaborative, research-based, and/or interdisciplinary. An example is GeoAIR's project *undergo. the parallels*, curated by Nini Palavandishvili, concerning interventions and works in and about underground passages of Tbilisi. It has been argued that this project is specifically about urban issues that involved people from various backgrounds and that it made future connections.<sup>2</sup> Other examples of this are the projects of GeoAIR based on research, fieldwork, and engagement and/or events as a form, reflecting on urban issues from different perspectives (e.g., *Pirimze*, by Sophia Tabatadze, and *Cooking Imaginations: Tbilisi Migrant Stories*). Another example from this group is a series of art projects directed towards urban activism within the project *Iare Pekhit/WALK*; or interventions of individual artist groups, such as *The Garden on the Wheels*, by DontheC (Door on the Corner). Interesting parallels and connections can be seen

<sup>2</sup> Nano Zazanashvili and Data Chigholashvili, „ურბანული პროტესტის გამონატვის ფორმების ძიება თბილისში“ [Searching for the Forms of Expressing Urban Protest in Tbilisi], in: ქალაქი ჩვენია! ურბანული პროტესტი და პოლიტიკა თბილისში [The City is Ours! Urban Protests and Politics in Tbilisi], Tbilisi, South Caucasus Regional Office of the Heinrich Boell Foundation, 2016, pp. 51–80.

between some of the mentioned projects and urban activism concerning Tbilisi.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding urban topics, we can mention more recent events from fall 2018, such as the Art Prospect Festival *Memory Threads: Museum and Neighborhood*, organized by the State Silk Museum with the support of CEC ArtsLink. The Festival explored the historical and current relationships between the museum and its surroundings, as well as the issues of public space and the role of a cultural institution in the neighborhood. Both of us were directly involved in this project, and from the beginning we considered it as a step towards a collaboration between the museum and its neighborhood. Another case was the first *Tbilisi Architecture Biennial*, which took place mostly in the suburb of Gldani with various exhibitions, events, and activities related to the urban issues of Tbilisi. However, generally in such cases the question remains to what extent the local population was involved and what role the project could have played for the area “appropriated” for the events. Of course, to make such a study a certain amount of time should pass after the events take place. Also, perhaps long-term projects are more useful when looking at the relationship between art and public engagement. For such projects, organizers being based in the area is crucial. In the case of the Tbilisi Architecture Biennial, as it was the first one, we hope that together with future editions it will have a wider impact on the urban issues of Tbilisi.

<sup>3</sup> These processes are discussed in: *ibid.*



Onno Dirker and Elene Gabrichidze, *Mulberry Slow Race*. Artistic tour within Art Prospect Festival, Memory Threads: Museum and Neighborhood, October–November 2018. Project photo documentation, the State Silk Museum

The works about gender issues form another category. For example, a collaborative project of Tamar Chabashvili and Agnieszka Dudrak, *Supra of Her Own*, concerns the topics of gender-based violence against women. Speaking about this category, generally it should be mentioned that recently there has been a growing interest among NGOs working in the field of human rights to collaborate with artists. However, it is necessary to promote more dialogue between both sides in order to learn about each other's expertise, so that the possibilities of social engagement are stronger.

It is also remarkable how photography, as an important medium of visual art, is developing quite widely in Georgia. Several photographers are working with social issues. Among others, Natela Grigalashvili, Vakho Khetaguri, Daro Sulakauri, and Guram Tsibakhashvili not only visually document social topics but also engage with them and connect the narrative to wider issues.

In Georgia's case, most of the spheres, including the arts, are quite centralized in the capital city. Even though there are projects in other parts of the country, they are most often presented and discussed in Tbilisi. Some exceptions included bigger projects outside of Tbilisi, where various local and international artists participated and the projects took place on-site. The examples are *Batumi Backyard Stories*, annual projects by artasfoundation *Tskaltubo Art Festival* and *off/line* in Zemo Nikozi.

Currently, the majority of socially engaged projects are a matter of smaller and closed circles. Other exhibitions and projects seem to be "exhibitions for the exhibitions' sake" or are commercial, without much



Natalie Nebieridze, *Red*. Part of the project *undergo. the parallels*, May–June 2012. Project photo documentation, GeoAIR

social influence or change. During the past few years, we can observe declining interest and activity in socially engaged art in Georgia. Perhaps, fewer artists are dealing directly with social topics. This situation is linked to various interconnected issues and needs further analysis. However, to finish on a positive note, it could also be a period that might be followed by the emergence of new active projects.

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WITHOUT MUCH SOCIAL  
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Layla Musaeva, *Silk Pavilion*, installation process, Art Prospect Festival Memory Threads: Museum and Neighborhood, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2018. From archives of the Silk Museum



Tamar Botchorishvili, Naili Vakhania, *Cognitive Interactive Bench* as part of the Art Prospect Festival Memory Threads: Museum and Neighborhood, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2018. From archives of the Silk Museum

## PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES

A large part of the art community in Georgia is usually skeptical about socially engaged art or, perhaps, about contextualizing their work this way. Even authors of the works that clearly engage with social issues usually refrain from describing their artwork as such and often say that it is “not political or social.” The rare projects that are created with the agency of addressing particular social issues, that do not refrain from direct criticism in various forms and sometimes try to engage the public, are often seen by the wider art community as “less artistic.” In general, we surmise that the absence of an art object and the idea of an event as an artwork might be the reasons for this.

An interesting example in this context was GeoAIR’s project *Cooking Imaginations: Tbilisi Migrant Stories*, which dealt with the interconnected themes of migration, foodways, and public space. It aimed to collaborate with people who had recently moved to Tbilisi from other countries, providing a platform through foodways to speak about their experience of living here and to discuss other related topics. The events’ participatory character engaged interested people and passersby. But members of the local art community, except the participating artists, were rather passive and sometimes skeptical due to its nature as a socially engaged event that didn’t include art objects.

Arguably, the point can be made that art should not represent social issues directly. This depends on the context and, perhaps, this is exactly where art can have a powerful role. Artists, curators,

and other interested parties can find creative ways to address certain issues, engage the public, and raise awareness while considering subtleties of the addressed topic. This was the case in the above-mentioned project, where foodways served as a way to engage people, to get to know each other, to represent and/or discuss migration-related issues more openly.

Additionally, we can argue that these problems stem from the teaching of contemporary art, the lack of art criticism and discussion on institutional and informal levels in the local context of Georgia. Writings about and representation of works and exhibitions are rather more descriptive than analytical. Due to the small art scene, criticism of artworks, projects, and/or shows can be perceived as a personal judgment rather than a professional evaluation. This contributes to the absence of awareness and understanding of art’s social role in other fields and by the general public.

Officially, art in public spaces is not censored and can be implemented after informing respective authorities as needed for each project. But the reaction to the artwork and the public discourse often depend on the sensitivity of the issue or topic being addressed. For instance, if the work is critical of the Georgian Orthodox Church, the risk of public disapproval and limitations is higher. An example of this is the installation in a public space of *A Yellow Bus*, by Soso Dumbadze, in June 2018. The work reflected on the attack by thousands of people, mobilized by the church, against supporters of LGBT rights on

IDAHOT,<sup>4</sup> on May 17, 2013, in Tbilisi. The installation included multiple screens, showing videos taken from different angles, on N. Vachnadze Street, where a yellow bus full of activists and supporters had been attacked by “counter demonstration representatives” five years earlier. Because of the attack in 2013, while the installation was in a public space, it was nevertheless heavily guarded and isolated, depriving the work of its possibility to speak publicly. A demonstration against sexual minorities’ rights and gender equality took place across the street from the installation and no physical violence ensued. However, this case demonstrates the context and absurdity surrounding perception and acceptance of art that is publicly critical of social issues.

Moreover, we think that it is hard to evaluate the impact of socially engaged art projects at this stage. We need to consider it over longer periods of time, with distance, and in connection with various social aspects. Additionally, it is complicated to evaluate them as they happen here and now. But in general, we can say that socially engaged works, directly or indirectly implied as such, together with larger discussions and activities, have played a role in showing urgent social issues in Georgia and in shaping a discourse about them.

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<sup>4</sup> International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia.

**A LARGE PART OF THE  
ART COMMUNITY IN  
GEORGIA IS USUALLY  
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SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART  
OR, PERHAPS, ABOUT  
CONTEXTUALIZING THEIR  
WORK THIS WAY**

Cooking Imaginations: Tbilisi Migrant Stories. Public cooking event  
with participants from Trinidad and Tobago, September 2014.  
Project photo documentation, GeoAIR

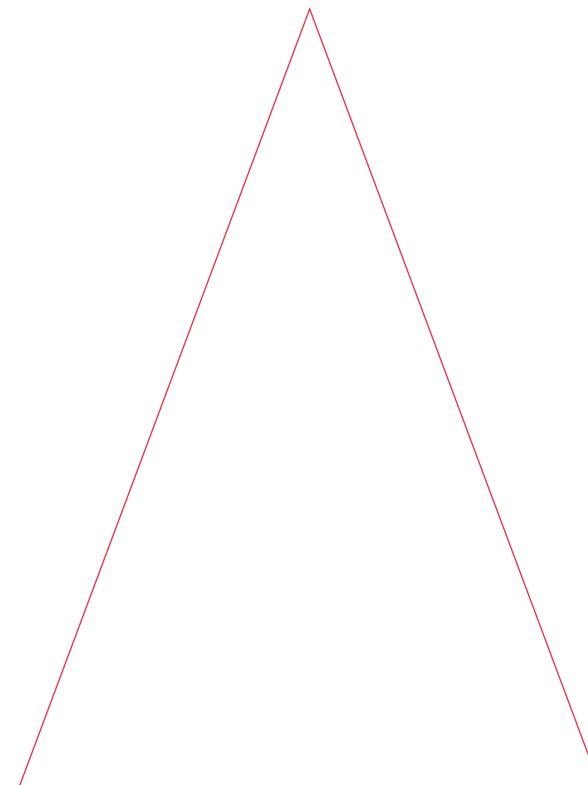
Dato Shovelashvili, Mariam Shovelashvili

Georgia





Soso Dumbadze, *A Yellow Bus*. Installation on N. Vachnadze Street, June 2018. Photo by Data Chigholashvili



**BUT IN GENERAL, WE CAN SAY THAT SOCIALLY ENGAGED WORKS, DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY IMPLIED AS SUCH, TOGETHER WITH LARGER DISCUSSIONS AND ACTIVITIES, HAVE PLAYED A ROLE IN SHOWING URGENT SOCIAL ISSUES IN GEORGIA AND IN SHAPING A DISCOURSE ABOUT THEM**

## RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

There are no local organizations that directly and specifically support socially engaged art projects. Local support of independent projects is still limited and challenging. On the state level, generally the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports finances art projects through a few programs. On the municipal level, art projects about urban topics can be financed by Tbilisi City Hall. However, there is no systematic and categorized framework for funding the arts, particularly socially engaged practices.

Some alternative funding sources are available. Recent examples include the Regional Art and Culture Project in the South Caucasus, which had open calls for general art projects and was managed by the Culture and Management Lab with the financial support of the Swiss Cooperation Office for the South Caucasus (SCO), and a series of open calls by the art organization Propaganda, some of which focused on social topics.

Socially engaged projects can be financed/co-financed by the funds, organizations, and/or NGOs working in the fields related to the project. For instance, gender equality projects might be supported by organizations such as:

South Caucasus Regional Office of the Henrich Boell Foundation. ————— <https://ge.boell.org/en>.  
WISG—Women's Initiatives Supporting Group. ————— <https://women.ge/en/>.  
Women's Fund of Georgia. ————— <https://www.womenfundgeorgia.org/en/Main>.

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It is noteworthy that the majority of funding for socially engaged art projects in Georgia comes from foreign and international foundations. There is no particular platform to showcase such projects. Documentation and archives are available on the websites of organizations or projects below; however, the list is not comprehensive and reflects the discussion above:

Aitsona-Daitsona. — <https://www.facebook.com/aitsonadaitsona/>.  
Artisterium. — [artisterium.org](http://artisterium.org).  
Culture and Management Lab. — <https://www.facebook.com/cumalab/>.  
Gallery Container. — <https://www.facebook.com/GalleryContainer/>.  
GeoAIR. — <http://geoair.ge/>.  
Iare Pekhit/WALK. — [www.iarepekhit.org](http://www.iarepekhit.org).  
Kolga Tbilisi Photo. — <https://www.kolga.ge/>.  
Propaganda. — <https://propaganda.network/home/>.  
Social Photography Caucasus Foundation. — <http://socialphotocaucasus.org/>.  
Tbilisi Architecture Biennial. — <http://biennial.ge/>.  
Tbilisi Photo Festival. — [www.tbilisiphotofestival.com/en/](http://www.tbilisiphotofestival.com/en/).  
The Center of Contemporary Art—Tbilisi. — <http://www.cca.ge/>.  
The State Silk Museum. — <http://silkmuseum.ge/>.

# KAZAKHSTAN

## SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART IN KAZAKHSTAN

First of all, I would like to address the question of what is meant by socially engaged art practices. Contemporary art in the post-Soviet countries has had a different history than its counterpart in Western countries. Even in the West, however, participatory art, socially engaged art, and community-based art have not yet jelled into fully definable things. We are witnessing their emergence, and so there is no consensus about them or universal definition of these practices. In this instance, I would like to rely more on the notion of socially engaged art outlined by Claire Bishop.<sup>1</sup> She defines participatory art as a reexamination of the relationship between artwork, artist, and viewer. The contemporary artwork is no longer a finished product. It has ceased being something that can be framed and presented as a self-contained piece of art. Art is a process in which the artist generates conditions for the general public to be involved. It is this notion of socially engaged art practices that I take as the basis for the remarks that follow.

<sup>1</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Verso: London & New York, 2012), 384.

**OLGA VESELOVA**

Eurasian Cultural Alliance, Almaty





Saule Suleimenova, *Bride*. Artbat Fest 6, Jibek Joly Street, Almaty, 2015. Photo courtesy of the Eurasian Cultural Alliance

## PIONEERS AND PRACTICES

Kazakhstani contemporary art emerged quite late in the day, fully coming out of its shell only after the Soviet Union's collapse. This circumstance marked its evolution while at the same time preventing the historical perspective necessary to assess this art's impact on society. If we speak about the peculiarities of contemporary art's progress in Kazakhstan, I would single out its lack of institutionalization.

There are still no educational institutions in Kazakhstan where contemporary art is taught, which means there is no continuity, sustained self-reflection, and documentation. A single archive of contemporary art that would enable further research has not been established. I know people who have done work on recording certain moments in the history of this art, but what they have produced are scattered works that do not fully capture what has happened.

Kazakhstan's contemporary art, as I see it, is in its formative stage, the search for its own identity. In this sense, I find it difficult to give examples of social engagement in art, since I was not an immediate observer of the scene until 2014. Otherwise, I run the risk of being challenged by more experienced colleagues, professionals who have invested in another definition of socially committed art, future researchers, etc.

A striking example of socially engaged art is the Kazakhstani street artist Pasha Cas's 2016 piece on Temirtau's environmental problems. His huge graffiti, which references Henri Matisse's famous painting *Dance* (1910), triggered a stormy public debate. Although, in my opinion, Cas's works do not have

great artistic merit, what matters is how society reacts to them, and they deliberately elicit this reaction. Since little time has passed since their appearance, it is hard to say what impact they will have on public opinion in Kazakhstan.

Art that underscores its social engagement often takes the shape of performance, an argument Bishop also makes in her book.<sup>2</sup> Thus, for two years in a row, the Revelation International Performing Arts Festival featured a collaborative project between artists and actors that involved recruiting theatergoers to become part of the art-making process. Consisting of several performances, *Qal qalai?* turned artists into theater directors and theater actors into their medium. One of the performances, *Playing in the City*, was staged by artist Alyona and ILI, a company of amateur actors. Later, their know-how was used to establish Neighbors Theater, a socially interactive venue located in an outlying district of Almaty.

Another successful recent example of socially engaged art is Katipa Apai, the alter ego of Kazakhstani artist Katerina Nikonorova, who deals with the place of faith in modern society, our attitudes towards it, and its role in a "post-truth" world.

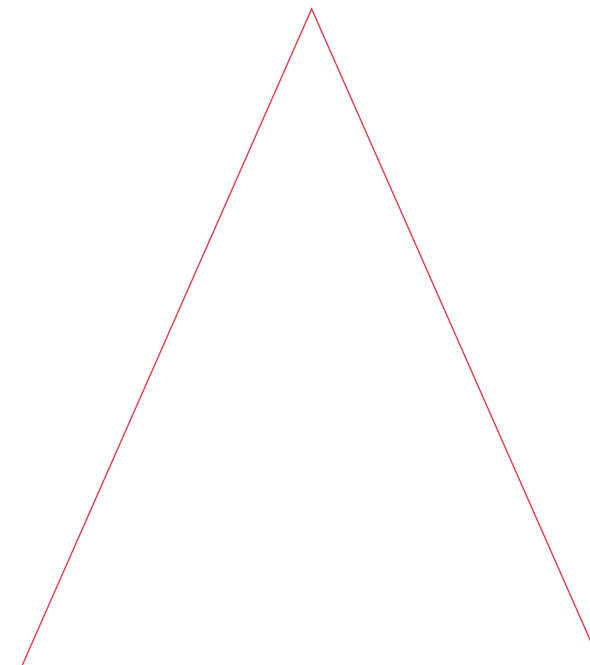
I should also note the fusion of art and lifestyle effected by Ruthie Jenrbekova, which cannot avoid impacting society. She and Maria Vilkovisky have raised the acute problem of gender self-identity, which is particularly relevant in Kazakhstani society, which still clings to traditionalism.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



Alyona Velar and ILI Theater, *Playing in the City*, performance.  
 (Text on the signs held by the man: "Shop, Hospital, Cemetery.")  
 Revelation International Performing Arts Festival, Lermontove State  
 Academic Theater, Almaty, 2016. Photo courtesy of the Eurasian  
 Cultural Alliance

In her works at the crossroads of painting and installation, Saule Suleimenova draws her audience into her art-making, asking people who care about the environment to bring her plastic bags, which she then incorporates into her pieces.



**KATIPA APAI DEALS WITH THE PLACE OF FAITH  
 IN MODERN SOCIETY, OUR ATTITUDES TOWARDS IT,  
 AND ITS ROLE IN A "POST-TRUTH" WORLD**



ЧЕМ БОЛЬШЕ СВЕТА,  
ТЕМ МЕНЬШЕ ВИДНО

Timofey Radya (The neon sign text: "The more light, the less you see").  
Artbat Fest 6, Three Bogatyrs Residential Complex, Almaty, 2015.  
Photo courtesy of the Eurasian Cultural Alliance

IT IS NOT YET  
POSSIBLE TO ASSESS  
KAZAKHSTANI ART  
AS PARTICULARLY  
SPECIAL WITH  
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WE CAN ONLY  
DISCUSS  
INDIVIDUAL ARTISTS  
AND INDIVIDUAL  
PARTICIPATORY  
PROJECTS

## PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES

It is not yet possible to assess Kazakhstani art as particularly special with regard to social involvement. We can only discuss individual artists and individual participatory projects.

We can, however, find a number of participatory art projects affiliated with the School of Artistic Gesture (SAG), an educational venue for young artists. It was a logical decision to make up for the lack of young talent by establishing an educational venue whose aim was to exhibit the work of its graduates at the Artbat Fest Contemporary Art Festival. SAG has been up and running for three years, recruiting not only professional artists and people who want to become professional artists but also people who support contemporary art and would like to have a better grasp of it. The well-known Kazakhstani curator Yuliya Sorokina has been a constant tutor at the school. The school's stated goal was to engender an independent art scene, an objective involving not only artists themselves but also viewers and other people who do not have an art education. Enrollment at the school has ranged from fifty to eighty students annually.

I would like to return to Pasha Cas's homage to Matisse's *Dance*, in Temirtau. The huge public response to the work made it impossible for city authorities to destroy, although the work violated private property laws. The wall of a residential building is the private property of its residents. Any alterations to it must be negotiated, not to mention their impact on the cityscape. Cas had earlier produced works that also caused a public outcry, but they were dismantled by municipal workers. One such work was Nobody

Could Give a Fuck (2012). It dealt with the problem of suicide, and it featured a defaced billboard with a mannequin hanging from it. It was left untouched for less than twenty-four hours and now exists only in photographs.

When the state imitates grassroots undertakings, does it have the same impact on the country? In summer 2010, father and son Igor and Vladislav Sludsky decided to hold a contemporary art festival in Almaty that would main focus on public art. It is hard to imagine anything less socially focused than art exhibited in places where viewers were not expecting it and had not chosen to encounter it. Artbat Fest gained its reputation for putting art in places not designed for it. Over the ten years of its history, the festival has not only proven the importance and relevance of alternatives to monumental and classical art but has also instilled audiences with a taste for public art. Proof of the festival's impact on Kazakhstani society have been the state-initiated Astana Art Fest and subsequent projects by a group of organizers established with state backing. In addition, in 2018, municipal authorities in Almaty established Park Fest, a landscape architecture festival that featured over sixty pieces installed around the city.



Art & Food Picnic. Opening of Artbat Fest 7, Botanical Garden, Almaty, 2016. Photo courtesy of the Eurasian Cultural Alliance



René Stessl, *Soup for a Friend* (performance). Artbat Fest 5, Jibek Joly Street, Almaty, 2014. Photo courtesy of the Eurasian Cultural Alliance



Exhibition of works by students of SAG (School of Artistic Gesture).  
Artbat Fest 7, Tram Depot, Almaty, 2016. Photo courtesy of the  
Eurasian Cultural Alliance



*Act of Creation*, an exhibition of works by students of SAG (School  
of Artistic Gesture). Artbat Fest 8, Arman Cinema Center, Almaty,  
2017. Photo courtesy of the Eurasian Cultural Alliance

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Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan has had an important institutional influence on the progress of contemporary art in Kazakhstan. I should also note the work of the British Council, which in recent years has focused on urban studies, a field that often employs participatory methods involving art.

The municipal authorities in Astana and Almaty have also shown an interest in participatory art practices.

As I noted at the outset, Kazakhstani contemporary art is little institutionalized and studied. Only a handful of researchers study it on a full-time basis. The work of chronicling it has been undertaken by enthusiastic individuals, such as the aforementioned Yuliya Sorokina, along with Valeria Ibrayeva, Aliya Tizengauzen, and Ekaterina Reznikova.

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# KYRGYZSTAN

## SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART IN KYRGYZSTAN

**GULNARA KASMALIEVA, MURATBEK DJUMALIEV**  
ArtEast, Bishkek





*Wall of Resonant Clay*, 1998. Kurak Festival (Soros Foundation).  
Courtesy of Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev

## PIONEERS AND PRACTICES

The first socially engaged art project in Kyrgyzstan of which we are aware took place in November 1998. Entitled *Wall of Resonant Clay*, it was produced by the art group Zamana (Shaylo Djekshembaev, Maratbek Djumaliev, Jylkychy Jakypov, Gulnara Kasmalieva, Talant Ogobaev, and Marat Sarulu).<sup>1</sup> In an exhibition space at the Gapar Aytiev National Fine Arts Museum, the group erected a twelve-meter-long wall of clay bricks. The entire room was spread with straw mixed with colored thread. Due to its malleability and archetypal suggestiveness, clay has been a popular medium among Central Asian contemporary artists.

The project was part of the Kurak Festival, sponsored by the Soros Foundation. The artists invited viewers to pin colored patches to the wall. The ritual of paying homage to the genius loci dates back to ancient times and still exists in many Eurasian cultures. Besides, in Kyrgyz, the word *kurak* can mean “patchwork” in the broad sense, as unity in diversity. Each scrap is an act of remembering the departed, a secret wish.

The artists wanted the wall to stand for a long while, until it was completely covered with colored scraps and thread. Viewers were offered the chance to complete the work by infusing it with new shapes and significances. The project, however, was not fully realized. Three days after the opening, Kyrgyzstan’s

<sup>1</sup> This was Zamana’s first and last socially engaged artwork. The group would go on to do a series of museum-based and open-air projects before its demise in 2000.

**THREE DAYS AFTER  
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**SHE THUS  
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nominal first lady, a patron of the museum, ordered the "disgraceful" wall dismantled. She thus contributed her own reading of the work by typifying the zeitgeist.

Socially engaged art projects and performances are infrequent in Kyrgyzstan, and so we would like to focus on the work of the students and graduates of the ArtEast School of Contemporary Art and the Art Prospect Bishkek Festival.

Nevertheless, we would first like to discuss an urban design project rather than an art project, not only because it was widely publicized and took on a long life of its own but also because the people involved in it regard it as a specimen of socially engaged art. We heartily concur, if only because the practices employed were powerfully emancipatory. Other artists have much to learn from it.

Popularly known as Elephants Park, it was initially conceived as a restoration of a playground and green space in one of Bishkek's new estates. The playground had been designed in Soviet times: it was chockablock with stylized concrete sculptures of exotic animals. After the country gained its independence, the playground fell into disrepair. The sculptures were in bad need of restoration, while the playground itself had to be cleaned up and beautified.

*Anonymous Parks* was the brainchild of Raushanna Sarkeeva, Aykanysh Derbisheva, and Dinar Kanybek Kyzy, from the grassroots foundation Urban Initiatives. They collaborated with architect Meder Akhmetov and a group of his architecture students to design the future recreation area. The neighborhood's residents were encouraged to help with the beautification project and organized a group of volunteers. Joining forces, adults and children

restored the six-acre park, which was reopened in the summer of 2015.

The park was popular among locals. It was not only a recreational area for children and adults but also a site for many other undertakings. For example, children's films were screened in the park and produce markets were held there, with the proceeds earmarked for the park's further improvement.

The problems began almost immediately. A construction company announced its claims to the lot occupied by the park. Citing a 2005 decree issued by city hall, it tore down the fence and cut down nearly all the trees and bushes in the square to make way for residential housing construction. The outraged locals drove away the workers employed in surveying and prepping the lot, petitioning the prosecutor's office to investigate.

The park was also squeezed when the roadway on the same street was expanded, with the municipal authorities ordering hundreds of roadside trees cut down. A handful of local activists tried to stop them by organizing a sit-down strike at the site, but they were detained by police.

Currently, the ruined and ravaged park has become a battlefield, in all senses of the word, between socially concerned residents and the powers that be. The confrontation between activists and the construction company over city hall's decision is now being adjudicated in the courts.

Among the early instances of urban intervention and participation was the October 2009 Trash Festival, a collective thesis work by the first graduates of the ArtEast School of Contemporary Art. The festival was held in one of the largest, most polluted



Elephants Park during restoration, 2015. Courtesy of Urban Initiatives



Elephants Park after restoration, 2015. Courtesy of Urban Initiatives



Sit-down strike, 2017. Courtesy of Danil Usmanov

markets in Bishkek, the Osh Market. The young artists focused on the Ala Archa River, which divided the market in two and was a place where people illegally disposed of food and other waste.

From the bridge over the river, one had a view of an enormous trash dump next to the high concrete wall that traced the river's flow. Dmitry Petrovsky's graffiti slogan "Let the ships through!" marked the garbage mountain's outline on the concrete wall, into which tiny colored paper boats seemingly butted. Nellya Jamanbaeva made the rounds of the proper authorities, finally persuading the city's environmental service to do its job and use an excavator and dump trucks to dredge garbage from the riverbed.

Nikolai Cherkasov chose to gesture towards both the social and sanitary contexts. He updated the typical Soviet-era baby stroller, which was then refitted by women for retail sales of snacks and drinks. Cherkasov rendered the stroller not only more aesthetically pleasing and easier to use but also outfitted it with a faucet for washing one's hands. Altynay Bekten used the market as a venue for showing a collection of suits fashioned from plastic bags, while Chingiz Aydarov handed out his illustrated booklet about a young boy who delivers produce and picks up garbage at the market. Bermet Borubaeva and her assistants manufactured an impressively sized dragon from plastic bottles. Carrying the dragon and facetious banners, emblazoned with the slogans "Clean Up Your Act!" and "Osh Market Is Flowering!" festivalgoers marched up and down the rows of stalls, noisily and merrily encouraging everyone to keep the market and the river clean.

The theatricality and fairground style were a natural fit for the market, whose vendors and regulars did not find them off-putting, while they also got the artists' message loud and clear.

The next day, after all the artworks had been removed, we accidentally witnessed a curious scene. An old female market vendor stood on the bridge telling a young man at great length about the events of the previous day. She told him about the garbage dump and how it had been cleaned up, and she urged him not to throw garbage into the river.



Trash Festival, 2009 (Text on the handmade sign: "Be responsible for your farmers market"). Courtesy of ArtEast



Trash Festival, 2009. Courtesy of ArtEast

**SOCIALLY ENGAGED  
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KYRGYZSTAN ARE  
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**HOWEVER, THEIR  
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BISHKEK, A LIMITED  
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CERTAIN COMMUNITIES**

## **PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES**

Bishkek's art community has a rather ambivalent attitude towards socially engaged art. As the curators of two public art festivals in Bishkek in 2017 and 2018, we had to extend the application deadline for local artists and meet with many potential exhibitors to discuss their projects and explain our expectations for the festival. Perhaps this had to do with the fact that similar festivals had been a rarity in the past, and many artists were prejudiced against events like it. The notion of *sotsialka*, implying something that had nothing to do with art, was invoked quite often.

We can relate differently to the interventions and social projects of artists. We can have different takes on the issue of whether the outcome or the process is what mattered. We would argue the two components are inextricably bound up in socially engaged art. Artists want to change their communities. This desire dates back to the Soviet avant-garde and its desire to infuse life with art.

A relatively recent example comes to mind—a 2013 project entitled *Art of Interaction*, which took place in a village near Issyk-Kul. We planned to set up an environmental art residency, and *Art of Interaction* was the first step in meeting the villagers. At the same time, we met administrators of the local school and, after discussing their needs, ran a series of workshops involving both teachers and pupils.

At the beginning of the project, the schoolchildren learned to take and select pictures with our student Nargiz Chynalieva. After a while, the pupils and their teachers became involved in publishing a school newspaper, and Aitegin Muratbek uulu held a

workshop for them on digital layout. The pupils found that their newfound photography skills came in handy. The newspaper's name was chosen collectively. We suggested topics for articles, the pupils chose them, and their teachers helped edit the final copy. The newspaper was printed on an ordinary color printer. The idea proved productive. It showed the numerous things the school's pupils were capable of doing, and many of the articles they wrote opened the eyes of their teachers. Finally, the newspaper shed a direct light on real life in the village. By talking about its inhabitants, it encouraged them to recognize their own importance.

Generally, the Kyrgyzstani public has reacted positively to socially engaged art. The press has enthusiastically covered each new project, while the authorities have so far refrained from banning events and painting over the façades of buildings that have served as canvases for murals.

Socially engaged art projects and installations in Kyrgyzstan are mainly an urban phenomenon, meaning they usually do not make a nationwide splash. However, their impact has been quite tangible in Bishkek, a limited number of other locations, and certain communities. We have witnessed it at the Art Prospect Bishkek Festivals we staged in 2017 and 2018.

When he saw the works at the festival, Billy Dufala, an American artist, exclaimed they were infrastructure installations. We agreed with him: the installations were primarily meant to solve infrastructural challenges, similar to the challenges faced by

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cities when providing public amenities. However, the aims of such installations can be directly opposed to those of public facilities. For example, the new infrastructure installed by municipal authorities on Bishkek's central Ala-Too Square seems attractive at first glance: patches of lawn have been planted, park benches have been set up, and decorative lighting installed. Once upon a time, the square had housed the tents and yurts of protesters during two periods of political and social unrest in Bishkek. Now, however, the space in Ala-Too Square is fragmented and complicated. Large rallies and protests can no longer be held there, and large groups of people would find it hard to navigate the square. The notion of that square as an agora—a place for assemblies and debates for solving society's thorniest, most important issues—has been minimized.

On the contrary, the point of the works, installations, and sites at art festivals is to encourage rapprochement, communication, proactivity, momentum, discussion, and reflection within society. That is also the main goal of such projects and festivals per se.

The support of such festival projects as *Platform for Public Discussions*, by Georgian artists Katharina Stadler and Tornike Asabashvili, is therefore so crucial to us. Their work is a collapsible wooden structure that can easily be used for meetings and discussions both inside and outside. Its large blackboard is also multi-functional: it can be used as a screen for projecting videos or as a blackboard. People have made vigorous use of the platform during numerous events in the Botanical Garden. In summer, its many wooden boxes serve as seating for the people gathered outside, while in winter they function as shelves for the

plants stored inside. The platform's principal function is generating new connections and opportunities, and inspiring and triggering discussions and debates. In short, it is meant to change the present and mold the future.

In her project *Connection*, Chinara Niyazova has worked with the community of amateur athletes who thoughtlessly had been using trees as exercise equipment. Her gentle intervention in their milieu and her counter-proposal to move their training site was not only approved by the community but also forced the athletes to take a fresh look at the damage they had unwittingly inflicted on the greenery. The new exercise area and equipment in the Botanical Garden have been popular, and the community has organized itself to keep the area clean and maintain the equipment.

Our final illustration of engaged art's community impact, the *Kuzmunchok* project, verges on the mystical. Translated as "amulet" and "talisman," a *kuzmunchok* usually takes the shape of a small round object resembling an eye. Artists Aitegin Muratbek uulu, Kanayym Kydyralieva, and Kuba Myrzabekov chose a glade deep in the Botanical Garden, removed the garbage there, and placed rocks painted like eyes along the edge. Conceived as a symbolic installation that would transform the space in a particular way, the rocks elicited an unexpected reaction. According to eyewitnesses and our own observations, the place was significantly cleaner after a year. People stopped discarding trash there.

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Aitegin Muratbek uulu, Kanayym Kydyralieva, and Kuba  
Myrzabekov, *Kuzmunchok*. Art Prospect Bishkek 2017.  
Photo courtesy of ArtEast

## RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

The projects we have described have been supported by the [Soros Foundation–Kyrgyzstan](#) through its Civic Participation program. In particular, they have supported the aforementioned projects of the grass-roots foundation [Urban Initiatives](#) and the [ArtEast School of Contemporary Art](#), which has usually been involved in socially engaged art projects.

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# MOLDOVA

**VLADIMIR US**

Oberlint Association, Chişinău



## SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART IN MOLDOVA

Socially engaged art practice has recently emerged in Moldova and the region as the art language and practice that borders and sometimes converges with activism, and that makes use of research methodologies and vocabulary. Complex and often painful transformations that followed the fall of the Soviet Union have contextualized the need for socially engaged art and other forms of cultural activism. The establishment of civil society organizations in the former Soviet Republics as representatives of the third sector, with the support of Western private and public funds, provided a platform for the production and communication of socially engaged art. The third sector is the main commissioner<sup>1</sup> of socially engaged art, as compared to public art and cultural services that are commissioned by the state; to cultural goods produced by creative industries; and to commercial art commissioned by galleries. The emergence of the figure of the artist who acts like a citizen in the

<sup>1</sup> To some extent, one can speak about the "NGO Art" phenomenon that refers to a wider context and time frame than the term "Soros Realism" coined by Miško Šuvaković in "Ideologija izložbe: o ideologijama Manifeste" in 2002. "Soros Realism" describes a type of post-socialist art financed by the American businessman of Hungarian origin George Soros, who financed a number of Soros Centres for Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe: <http://www.ljudmila.org/scca/platforma3/suvakovic.htm>. "NGO Art" makes no reference to the financial censorship ironically implied by the term "Soros Realism," since NGOs can attract resources from different organizations and people and are, in general, less dependent, as they do not rely on a single funding source.

1 — Moldova 2 — Armenia 3 — Azerbaijan

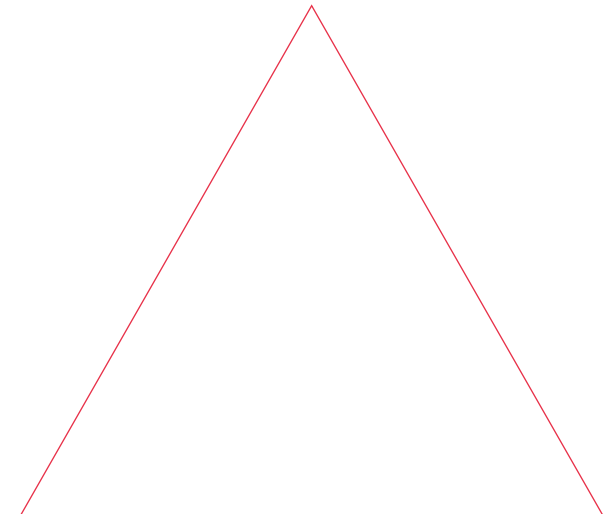
Vladimir Us

Moldova



Angela Candu, *Fruit Tree (Interventions 53)*. Chişinău, Moldova, 2008. Photo by Vladimir Us

context of a newly formed state is equally important to mention. The artist is a new cultural and political actor who touches upon societal and other issues through art, proposes new perspectives, and strives to effect change. Empowered through art and using his/her own skills, the artist aims to bring various issues to light and to build a community around them. As a result, an alternative to the existing system can be collectively imagined.



**THE ARTIST IS A NEW CULTURAL AND POLITICAL ACTOR WHO TOUCHES UPON SOCIETAL AND OTHER ISSUES THROUGH ART, PROPOSES NEW PERSPECTIVES, AND STRIVES TO EFFECT CHANGE**



Jarek Sedlak, *Power to flowers*. Chişinău, Moldova, 2011.

Photo by Vladimir Us

Chişinău, U.R.

Moldova

## PIONEERS AND PRACTICES

Examples of socially engaged projects and artworks date back to the middle of the 2000s, when social and economic transformations preceded by political change caught the attention of the art community and became the central topic of some art initiatives and organizations.

A decade earlier, in 1996, the Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) was founded in Chișinău, along with other SCCA branches in Central and Eastern Europe, marking a new stage in the development of the local art scene. With consistent budgets allowing international cooperation, at that time it was the only institution to introduce and support new art practices in Moldova with the goal of democratization of society, in line with the general objectives of its founder, the Open Society Institute in Budapest. However, the projects and works supported by the SCCA between 1996 and 2001 were rather formal, stressing the need to experiment with new art language and forms (installation, performance, new media art, etc.). Socially engaged art practices emerged later and were initiated by the independent players who became aware of social inequalities and grew critical of the new capitalist order that caused them.

One of them is the Oberliht Association, which, since 2007, in collaboration with artists, architects, researchers, and activists, has aimed to build a community around public space issues, the need to protect and develop public spaces as part of a democratic infrastructure.

Several organizations that have developed short- and mid-term programs dealing with social

issues and topics of public importance are worth mentioning:

### OBERLIHT

Founded in 2000 and positioning itself as an independent cultural actor, Oberliht's goals are to connect dispersed art scenes and to build an art community using public spaces. One of its objectives is to provide support to emerging artists and contribute to their professional development. Since 2007, it has been supporting artists and other cultural workers interested in the topics of public space and urban transformation in post-Soviet cities. Operating as a platform and a hub, it organizes projects that support art and advocacy actions, research of public space transformations, non-formal education activities, community organizing, documentation, publishing, and dissemination activities. Oberliht runs an artist-in-residency program and organizes community events, conferences, workshops, summer schools, screenings, concerts, film production, and publications. It develops and maintains interdisciplinary platforms (temporary infrastructures to support independent culture initiatives in the residential areas of the city, such as Stefan Rusu's Flat Space and the Zaikin Park project to revitalize the public park on the axis of the Cantemir Boulevard, which was planned in the 1970s but not built until today). Oberliht connects local and international contemporary art and culture initiatives and advocates for a strong and independent cultural sector in Moldova and in the region. Oberliht also

curates a screening program at Flat Space where films about sustainable urban development, socially engaged art practices, cultural and civic activism, ecology, etc. are regularly screened.

### SPALATORIE THEATER

Spalatorie Theater has been active since 2011 in the performing arts field and has positioned itself as a political theater. It stages plays that address linguistic segregation and nationalism, discrimination against women, sexism, and exclusion of members of the LGBT community as well as the participation by Moldova's population in the Holocaust, criticism of the corrupt education system, and so forth. Until 2017, the Theater ran as an independent space that also hosted art performances by invited artists as well as music events and parties. Other initiatives in performing arts are Foosbook Theater Laboratory and Center for Cultural Projects Azart. In the past few years, they have been producing plays in collaboration with state institutions (for example, in a prison with prisoners as actors) and new dramaturgy texts dedicated to social issues.

**OPERATING AS A PLATFORM AND A HUB, OBERLIHT ORGANIZES PROJECTS THAT SUPPORT ART AND ADVOCACY ACTIONS, RESEARCH OF PUBLIC SPACE TRANSFORMATIONS, NON-FORMAL EDUCATION ACTIVITIES, COMMUNITY ORGANIZING, DOCUMENTATION, PUBLISHING, AND DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES**

Studiobasar, *Picnic in Zaikin Park*. Chişinău, Moldova, 2014.  
Photo by Vladimir Us

## THE CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART IN CHIȘINĂU

The Center for Contemporary Art in Chișinău (former Soros Center for Contemporary Art) was reorganized as an NGO in 2000. Since then, it has been supporting independent curators and artists dealing with societal change. The projects *RO-MD / Moldova in Two Scenarios* and *Chișinău—Art and Research in the Public Sphere*, which were organized in collaboration with Stefan Rusu, provide a framework for artists to interact with researchers, stressing the need for analysis of the political, economic, historical, and social transformations in the Republic of Moldova and the city of Chișinău. In 2005–7, the Center also produced a program for national television, *AlteArte*, which was dedicated to contemporary art.

## STARE DE URGENȚĂ / REVISTA

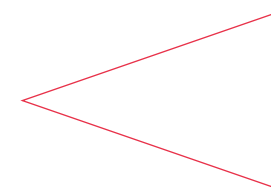
In 2007–8, the new culture magazine *Stare de Urgență* (*State of Emergency*) brought together various literary initiatives, publishing a total of 20 issues. In 2009, it was reorganized and the new magazine *Revista la Plic* (*Postbox Magazine*) continued publishing works by emerging literary authors, visual and video artists, etc. from Moldova, Romania, and other countries.

## SOCIALIST MODERNISM

*Socialist Modernism*, a project by BACU architecture studio, and *Insular Modernities*, an initiative by Stefan Rusu, map the most significant modernist architectural sites in Moldova and other countries in the region in order to popularize the achievements of modernist architecture, documenting the sites and saving them from decay and demolition.

## THE CENTER OF URBANISM

The Center of Urbanism, founded in 2016, deals largely with urban issues such as architecture, historical heritage, accessibility of the city, and the need for a network of pedestrian streets in Chișinău. One of its projects aims to transform a small street downtown into a car-free zone. Community meetings and public events are part of this process.



THE MAJORITY OF  
CITED ORGANIZATIONS  
AND INITIATIVES ARE  
BASED OR ACTIVE IN  
CHIȘINĂU, THE CAPITAL  
CITY

**MOST OF THE  
PROJECTS AND EVENTS  
ARE CONCENTRATED  
IN THE CAPITAL,  
WITH A FEW NOTABLE  
EXCEPTIONS**



## **CLUB 19**

Club 19, a culture space run by Apriori Informational and Legal Center, in Tiraspol, hosts events, concerts, visual arts exhibitions, and the Chesnok International Film Festival, which focuses on human rights and freedom of speech.

## **MOLDOX**

MolDox, a film festival in Cahul in its third year as of 2018, focuses its programs on a different social issue each year. The main topic of the last edition was “corruption.”

## **CRONOGRAF**

The older and quite well-known documentary film festival CRONOGRAF includes in its program films from all over the world covering a wide range of social problems internationally. In the past few years, CRONOGRAF has been organizing tours to screen films in smaller towns in Moldova.

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There are a few non-artistic organizations and initiatives in the field of social engagement who collaborate with cultural workers, organize cultural events like festivals and fairs, and integrate interdisciplinary approaches: Genderdoc-M Information Centre, the first LGBT rights advocacy organization in Moldova; *PLATZFORMA*, the online magazine founded by a collective of social scientists that publishes articles and interviews on social topics; and Eco-Visio, an organization with a focus on ecological education and leadership. In addition, #OccupyGuguță is a civic movement founded in the summer of 2018 in Chișinău, mostly by cultural workers and activists, to promote ideas of a democratic and just society through cultural means, publishing, campaigning, and other methods. The movement is organized horizontally as a political community. Its members use discussions as a modus operandi and rely on consensus in decision-making.

## PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES

It is rather difficult to evaluate the degree of interest the local art community has in socially engaged art practices, since no research or analysis has been conducted. However, the general perception of contemporary art introduced in Moldova through the Soros Center for Contemporary Art, and of socially engaged art practices, oscillates between misunderstanding (based on the statements of the local art establishment and members of the Union of Artists, who tend to exclude new art practices from the classical definition of the fine arts) and increased interest in new language and ideas in art expressed mainly by the younger generation, and by younger artists in particular.

This ambiguous state of the local art community can be explained by the fact that socially engaged art practices that developed within the ideological framework of civil society do not fit formally and conceptually into the pattern of public art commissioned by the state; these practices do not represent a commodity to be commercialized through galleries and art fairs. Having a set of social relations as a base (accumulated social capital<sup>2</sup>), artists use socially engaged practices to generate new art forms in a collaborative way, by opening a field of action for other participants and

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2 According to Izabel Galliera in *Socially Engaged Art After Socialism*, 2017, a number of artists from Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary, after the fall of socialist regimes, used social capital as an informal, collaborative mode of production, in order to propose an alternative agenda and found new institutions to help build a functioning democracy.

partners to join, thus sharing authorship and building a participatory process that allows a much more complex understanding of social reality and helps to identify proper answers to address it.

In addition to the different and sometimes conflicting perceptions of various art forms and practices, there are very few opportunities for artists to take part in such projects and just a few spaces in town to host such events. This significantly reduces opportunities for new artists to join the movement and to develop a larger audience.

Finally, the main obstacle is the traditional academic art education system, which is rather reluctant to integrate the teaching of new art practices into its curricula and doesn't consider socially engaged art worthy of promoting among students and teachers.

One should ask oneself: why is the phenomenon of socially engaged art publicly unknown? The explanation is simple: there are just a few information platforms (mailing lists, blogs, newspapers, TV channels, etc.) that give visibility to the projects and to the players in the field, and that *translate* the often-inaccessible art content for unprepared audiences. Due to the lack of Moldovan public media coverage of contemporary art and culture, there are few private programs that cover socially engaged art practices and regularly invite representatives of the art scene to discuss their work. The radio program *Pauza de cafea* (*Coffee break*), with Victoria Coroban, is one of them. The TV program *ContraCultura* (*Counter-Culture*), moderated by Vitalie Sprinceana, has just ended after 18 months on the air. Mihai Fusu,

initiator of the Foosbook project, edited the TV program *Republica* in 2013. In 2005–7, the show about contemporary art, *AlteArte*, was included on national television even though it was entirely produced by the Center for Contemporary Art in Chişinău.

There is also a structural reason for the slow development of this particular field of art. One of the main priorities recently established by the government is to foster the development of cultural industries in Moldova in addition to heritage protection, which is perceived as an asset for the development of tourism. Socially engaged art practices carried out by civil society actors receive very little attention from the Ministry of Culture, which is rather reluctant to support independent initiatives and organizations.

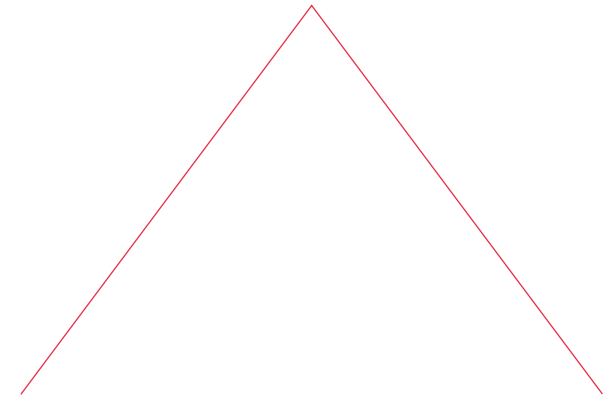
The question of whether socially engaged art has an impact on society is too general; it's like asking if art in general has any impact on the people of Moldova. On the one hand, we can say that socially engaged art practices do affect audiences, and that there are beneficiaries of such projects who feel its effects. But, without tools for data collection and the data itself, we can only guess. On the other hand, because our government prioritizes support for traditional arts and creative industries, we can surmise that socially engaged art couldn't have produced a significant change, given the minimal resources allocated to this field.

Based on existing observations, we can argue that new art practices are yet to reach the surface of the water in the lake in order to be accepted as a legitimate art phenomenon in Moldova. Currently,



*Public Façades, Communication Interphase* (building a temporary community center on Teilor Street). Chişinău, Moldova, 2017.  
Photo by Vladimir Us

it seems they just fill the gaps where public policies haven't yet arrived or perform poorly, highlighting the issues that are often ignored by the mainstream media, authorities, or other civil society actors. Despite the obstacles presented above, there is a significant number of art and culture organizations and initiatives that position themselves as socially and politically engaged actors. They organize projects and curate exhibitions focused on various issues of public importance, they support artists who act as citizens through their artwork. We can say that they are protagonists of the new art phenomenon, which is worth considering.



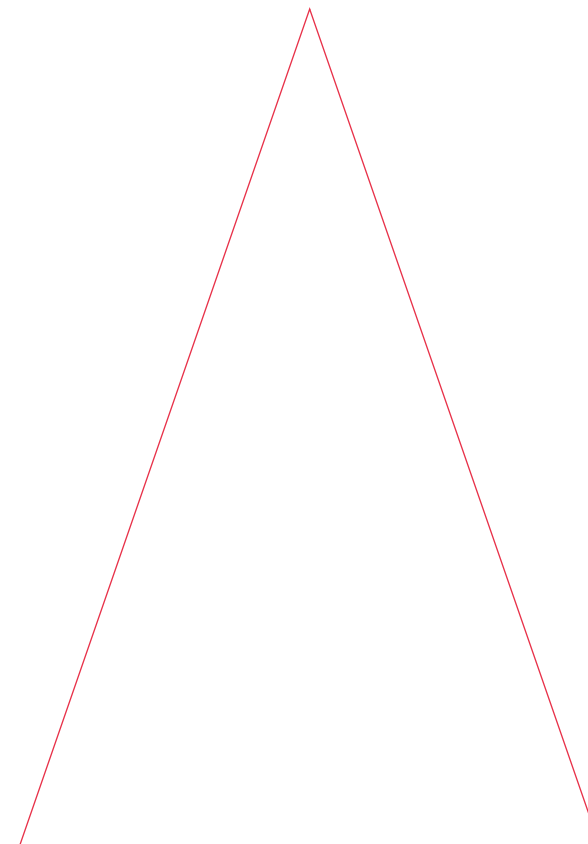
**BASED ON EXISTING OBSERVATIONS, WE CAN ARGUE THAT NEW ART PRACTICES ARE YET TO REACH THE SURFACE OF THE WATER IN THE LAKE IN ORDER TO BE ACCEPTED AS A LEGITIMATE ART PHENOMENON IN MOLDOVA**



Almaz Isakov, *Emergency Exit*. First International Meeting of Cultural Workers from Ciocana district in the name of Maria Drăgan, Chișinău, Moldova, 2018. Photo by Alexandra Novac



Almaz Isakov, *Emergency Exit*. First International Meeting of Cultural Workers from Ciocana district in the name of Maria Drăgan, Chișinău, Moldova, 2018. Photo by Vladimir Us



**DESPITE THE OBSTACLES . . . , THERE IS A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF ART AND CULTURE ORGANIZATIONS AND INITIATIVES THAT POSITION THEMSELVES AS SOCIALLY AND POLITICALLY ENGAGED ACTORS**

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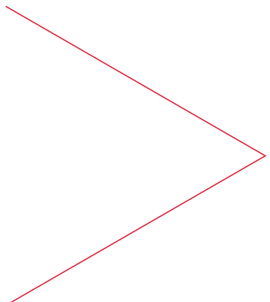
# TAJIKISTAN

## SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART IN TAJIKISTAN

**TEXT BASED ON AN INTERVIEW  
WITH JAMSHED KHOLIKOV**  
Dushanbe ArtGround, Dushanbe



**MAINLY ARTISTS  
WORKING IN THE FIELD  
OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED  
ART, ESPECIALLY  
THOSE ASSOCIATED  
WITH DUSHANBE  
ARTGROUND, ADDRESS  
ISSUES OF SOCIETAL  
CHANGE THROUGH  
THEIR WORK**



## PIONEERS AND PRACTICES

The civil war in Tajikistan, which ended in 1997 and officially lasted for five years, has had a profound impact on the nation. During the war, Tajikistan was quite isolated, particularly in comparison to other Central Asian countries. The war precipitated emigration, destruction of the national infrastructure, and high unemployment due to the closure of factories and industrial plants. Emigration, unemployment, and tensions related to Islamization led to a whole range of other social problems in the country, which are still felt today. Everyone suffered during the civil war; because of this pain, the legacy of the civil war is still not publicly discussed.

During the Soviet era, Tajikistan was a stable, multicultural republic with a strong economy. After gaining independence, Tajik citizens were not ready to face the new realities and changes in the country. These problems, which began with the collapse of the Soviet Union, are rarely addressed in the arts today. Among the “traditional” artists, only two painters work with these issues. Apart from them, mainly artists working in the field of socially engaged art, especially those associated with Dushanbe ArtGround, address issues of societal change through their work. The primary reason for this is that the wounds are still too fresh and the pain from the war persists. In their work, these artists do not directly address issues surrounding the civil war but instead discuss the problems caused by it, including emigration, the growing Islamic influence, etc.

Below are examples of some recent works that reflect on these issues. They have been exhibited in

Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries as well as in Switzerland and Germany.

*Generation Next* (2014), a video work by Surayo Tuychieva, the only professor of art theory in Tajikistan, shows a woman wearing a Soviet Young Pioneer red scarf that gradually transforms into a hijab. The work reveals the transformation of political ideology in Tajikistan through the prism of women’s changing work accessories. The red scarf has morphed along with the ideology, from a sign of atheism and equality between the sexes to a sign of religiosity and oppression.<sup>1</sup>

The video work by Alla Rummyantseva, *I met a girl* (2014), takes its name from a 1957 Soviet film about intergenerational problems and conflicts in which a father refuses to allow his daughter to follow her dreams and perform in the theater. Rummyantseva’s video reflects on the differences between traditional patriarchal structures today and in the 1950s. Juxtaposing fragments from the film with new interviews with women the video criticizes the religious values that are taking over society and making self-realization impossible for women.<sup>2</sup>

Another work refers to a well-known funny Russian riddle about the first two letters of the Russian alphabet: “A and B were sitting on the pipe. A fell down, B fell down. Who is left on the pipe?” In Bakhran Ismatov’s video *Ablyab* (2006), two male

1 Olga Stefan, “Dushanbe Dispatch: In Political Critique, Tajik Artists Work Around the System,” *Artslant*, July 8, 2015.

2 Ibid.



Surayo Tuychieva, still from *Generation Next*. Video, 2014



Alla Romyantseva, still from *I met a girl*. Video, 2014

artists are seen sitting with ropes around their necks discussing who will be the first one to fall off the pipe. The work addresses in an ironic manner the question, who will be the first to fall—the government or the opposition?

In his video *Falak* (2009), Jamshed Kholikov symbolically discusses the impact of male emigration, which has transformed Dushanbe into a city inhabited primarily by women. Hundreds of thousands of Tajiks, predominantly men, travel abroad each year to work, mainly in Russia. It is not common to be sad or to talk about your problems in Tajik culture. *Falak* is both a reference to a genre of Tajik songs and the tradition of going into the mountains, isolated from others, to reflect on your feelings. In a symbolic way, Kholikov's work addresses the situation in the city, when men go abroad to work, meet other women, start new families, and then forget about their home. Not only does this make the city empty and isolated, but it also brings the "falak" back.

Kholikov addresses the issues related to the status of women in Tajikistan in his photo series *Welcome to Eden* (2009–14). The series name comes from something Kholikov saw unexpectedly while walking down the street in Dushanbe. Next to a barred shop window with a wedding dress on display, the artist saw an old and damaged banner advertising wedding dresses with the words "Welcome to Eden." In his mind, together these two images—the barred window and Eden—gave a new context to the meaning of marriage: something between desire and imprisonment. The photograph of the "Welcome to Eden" wedding shop sparked a photo series presenting five photos in five years about the changes to a

**JUXTAPOSING  
FRAGMENTS FROM  
THE FILM WITH NEW  
INTERVIEWS WITH  
WOMEN**

**THE VIDEO CRITICIZES  
THE RELIGIOUS  
VALUES THAT  
ARE TAKING OVER  
SOCIETY AND MAKING  
SELF-REALIZATION  
IMPOSSIBLE FOR  
WOMEN**



Jamshed Kholikov, still from *Falak*. Video, 2009

woman's status after she gets married. For example, after a woman is married in Tajikistan she can no longer study and is expected to become a housewife. The second work from this series, *The Dream*, shows another wedding dress and a banner. Nearby, a mannequin in a wedding dress is positioned behind glass like a chrysalis on display. In another photograph, in front of the shop window with a mannequin in a wedding dress, the viewer sees a mannequin wearing a hijab. Another work, called *Cobra*, after the name of a wedding salon, suggests that some people compare marrying a woman with marrying a cobra, i.e., bringing a snake into your house.

The situation with public space in Tajikistan is quite complex. One of the first art projects that addresses issues of public space was organized ten years ago, with the support of CEC ArtsLink, by the Bactria Cultural Center, an independent institution in Dushanbe supported by the French government. Two artists with substantial public art experience, Kendal Henry from New York and Evgenii Makshakov from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, conducted workshops with local artists. Although the city authorities did not give them permission to work in public spaces, they found ways to get around the system. For example, at the famous chaikhana (tea house) Rakhat, which is very proud of its pastries, the artists offered to exhibit images of the chaikhana's famous pastries. In addition, the owners then allowed local artist Aleksey Rummyantsev to show a still from his video work on the walls of the tea house.

Henry returned to Dushanbe in 2012 at the invitation of CEC ArtsLink and the Bactria Cultural Center to conduct another public art workshop. During

the workshop, local artists created sculptures to be placed on Dushanbe's main street. Before the civil war, there were numerous Soviet-era sculptures in Dushanbe, but many were stolen, damaged, or destroyed. The idea of the project was to create sculptures that related to the location, history, and culture of the city center. Workshop organizers requested permission from the mayor to place these sculptures in public spaces but never received a response. In the end, the sculptures, financed through a grant from the U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe, were placed in the courtyard of the Design Institute.

At the workshop, Rummyantsev created the *Living Bench* project, a bench with roots, branches, and leaves that he planned to place next to the benches on Dushanbe's main boulevard. He was not able to receive permission to place it there, so the *Living Bench* was moved to the courtyard of the Design Institute. Over time, the courtyard became a depository of many artworks left by students and visiting artists.

The artist and curator Stefan Rusu, originally from Moldova and based in Dushanbe for several years, organized a two-year project about the transformation of public spaces. Although not all the proposed works were finished due to financial constraints, several public interventions actually took place! One of the most successful was a project by the Polish artist and architect Ewa Rudnicka, who created a tent that could be transformed into a bicycle stroller, enabling it to be easily moved and used in different locations for different purposes. The tent was used as a multifunctional platform featuring concerts, performances, and other events. The project team received permission from the former House of Youth

# THE SITUATION WITH PUBLIC SPACE IN TAJIKISTAN IS QUITE COMPLEX

Jamshed Kholikov, *Welcome to Eden*. Photographs, installation,  
2006–14

Text based on an interview with Jamshed Kholikov

Tajikistan



Jamshed Kholikov, *Welcome to Eden*. Photographs, installation, 2006–14

to put the tent in their park and organized a presentation about the transformation of public spaces in Dushanbe and about other changes in the city in recent years. After the presentation, the tent remained in the park and was used for other events.

Another example of a successful public artwork created during Rusu's project was a piece by Kazakh artist Bakhytzhon Salikhov. His idea was based on the Soviet tradition of publicly honouring "the best of the best" in different spheres. However, instead of portraits recognizing "the best," he installed mirrors with words written on them such as "the perfect people of Dushanbe."

Kholikov created a different form of public intervention in conjunction with his project *Bus Stops*. This series contains approximately 600 photographs of bus stops taken all over Central Asia in 2005–8. An event was organized at a bus stop shaped like a space ship on the outskirts of Dushanbe. The building stands on three legs, forming a hemisphere like a dome. The photographs were projected onto the dome using a generator for electricity, and the floor was covered with traditional Tajik carpets to enable people to lie down and look up at all the other bus stops, while also listening to a lecture. This work was shown at the 53rd Venice Biennale and other biennials and exhibitions.

**THE PHOTOGRAPH OF  
THE "WELCOME TO  
EDEN" WEDDING SHOP  
SPARKED A PHOTO  
SERIES PRESENTING  
FIVE PHOTOS IN FIVE  
YEARS**

**ABOUT THE CHANGES  
TO A WOMAN'S STATUS  
AFTER SHE GETS  
MARRIED**

ALTHOUGH  
THE CITY AUTHORITIES  
DID NOT GIVE THEM  
PERMISSION TO WORK  
IN PUBLIC SPACES, THEY  
FOUND WAYS TO GET AROUND  
THE SYSTEM

*Chaikhana Rakhat*, collective work for the project City Art,  
Dushanbe, 2011



Text based on an interview with Jamshed Kholikov

Tajikistan

**PROJECT GUESTS AND VISITORS ARE USUALLY VERY GRATEFUL TO SEE THE WORK, SINCE THERE ARE FEW OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE WITH CONTEMPORARY ART**

**OFTEN, THE AUDIENCE MEMBERS ARE SURPRISED AND CURIOUS, AND ENGAGE IN THE PROJECTS**

**MANY BECOME MORE INVOLVED WHEN THE CONTEXT AND MEANING ARE EXPLAINED AND INCREASE THEIR INTERACTION WITH THE PROJECT OR PARTICIPANTS**

## **PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES**

Although some articles were published about the projects mentioned above, they were generally weak in content. Local journalists do not know how to write about these kinds of projects because they know little about contemporary art and do not think about its context. Most of the articles are based on press releases written by the project organizers. Another problem with the print press and television is that typically one has to pay to be featured.

Within the art community, many people strongly support socially engaged art projects, especially when their context and meaning are explained clearly. At the same time, many people do not understand these projects because of inadequate art education. This is a problem both within the artist community and with the public. Inadequate education is particularly harmful within the art community because artists receive a traditional education that instills outdated definitions of what is art and what is not. Tajikistan still has a Union of Artists, which, along with the educational system, is not open to contemporary art practices. Slowly, the situation is changing as young artists with a new vision emerge, artists who are more welcoming to practices that might not be their own and who are eager to try out new things.

Project guests and visitors are usually very grateful to see the work, since there are few opportunities to engage with contemporary art. Often, the audience members are surprised and curious, and engage in the projects. Many become more involved when the context and meaning are explained and increase their interaction with the project or participants.

There is a need for more workshops, particularly for local administrators, in order to explain public art practices to the local authorities. To grant permissions for art projects in public spaces, they must understand that these projects and interventions are not vandalism. New educational programs will also help to encourage a younger generation to participate more actively. It is our hope that the administration will begin to understand that art in public spaces can be something very positive for cities and their inhabitants.

In summary, it is very hard for us to somehow go forward, because the civil war pushed the country back about 50 years. Also, located in the mountains, Tajikistan is very remote and quite isolated from other Central Asian communities and countries. But, let's hope for the best and that our efforts will be fruitful.

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# UZBEKISTAN

## SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART IN UZBEKISTAN

Socially engaged art is art that reflects today's realities, poses embarrassing questions to the authorities and society, and tries to mirror the most urgent issues, speaking its mind in the here and now.

### IRINA BHARAT

Ilkhom Theater, Tashkent





Ilkhom Theater productions of *Airport*, 2016 (top), and *Heart of a Dog*, 2017. Photos by Alexander Raevsky

## PIONEERS AND PRACTICES

Despite the absence of a framework to support the development of contemporary art and the presence of strong governmental censorship, a small number of artists in both the performing and visual arts have been creating works that address social issues and engage local communities in Uzbekistan for more than forty years.

Founded in 1976, the Ilkhom Theater sets its own repertoire and engages in avant-garde experimental art that often addresses critical issues facing Uzbekistan. The first independent studio theater created in the Soviet Union, Ilkhom is currently the only independent, non-state theater in Uzbekistan. The Ilkhom Theater has always identified itself as a Tashkent theater, the theater of the city where everything and everyone was mixed long ago, where streets were always full of various dialects and, for this reason, plays were performed in a mixture of Russian and Uzbek languages. Characters speak at least four languages—Russian, Uzbek, Italian, and Yiddish—in *The Happy Beggars*, one of their long-time repertory hits.

Recent productions address a variety of issues impacting Tashkent residents. The play *Airport* raises the question of whether to leave the country or stay, and reflects on how both are equally hard choices. Ilkhom's staging of *Heart of a Dog* deals with violence against individuals and repression of the free human personality. Television, businessmen, politicians, and cults fill our minds with their messages, shaping our desires and habits. Free choice has become an illusion for most people. Who nowadays can say that they are completely free?

The Ilkhom Theater also organizes and supports a wide variety of creative educational programs introducing new forms of art to Tashkent audiences and addressing social issues. In collaboration with CEC ArtsLink, the Ilkhom Theater organized two public art workshops in 2011 and 2013 for young artists led by U.S. artists Mark Jenkins, Kendal Henry, and Specter. Non-government-sponsored public art is virtually absent in Uzbekistan because it is nearly impossible to receive permission to exhibit artworks in outdoor public spaces. For this reason, local artists created imaginative sculptures and installations in and around the private space of the Ilkhom Theater addressing issues of drug addiction, poverty, prostitution, and depression. Ilkhom's recent project, Inclusive Theater Laboratory, curated by Boris Pavlovich, works with people with special needs to create an equal and accessible environment for their artistic work and to explore the potential of interactions between professional and non-professional actors.

The rock music scene in Tashkent developed in a similar way to the Ilkhom Theater with the emergence of the so-called rock clubs in the Soviet Union in the 1980s and early 1990s. Rock clubs were communities where musicians could pool their forces and play their own music for fans. The rock clubs subsequently ballooned into regular, large-scale festivals. A defining feature of Uzbekistani rock music has been its non-commercial focus, leading local rockers to become involved in their own form of socially engaged art. Their listeners are young people craving alternative music, since television and



Ilkhom Rock Fest, January 6, 2019. Photo by Anatoly Kim

THREE OF THE MOST  
ACTIVE VISUAL ARTISTS  
ADDRESSING SOCIAL  
AND CULTURAL ISSUES  
IN UZBEKISTAN ARE  
UMIDA AKHMEDOVA,  
VYACHESLAV AKHUNOV,  
AND SAODAT ISMAILOVA

the state concert venues are the exclusive domain of traditional and classical music. Young people are shaping Uzbekistan's future. The annual Ilkhom Rock Fest provides them with a platform for self-expression while encouraging the new generation's freethinking views. The Ilkhom Rock Fest fosters a nurturing environment for musicians, enabling the new generation's musicians to make the transition from spectators to performers by putting together their own bands. Rock music concerts and festivals generally take place inside. Open-air events are much rarer. Among the most promising groups are Krylya Origami (Origami Wings) and TurpatikON.

Three of the most active visual artists addressing social and cultural issues in Uzbekistan are Umida Akhmedova, Vyacheslav Akhunov, and Saodat Ismailova. Photographer and photojournalist Akhmedova participates in exhibitions addressing urban and rural issues, works on projects exploring issues of human rights, and documents the traditions, diverse cultures, and everyday life in Uzbekistan. In 2007, as part of a project sponsored by the Swiss Embassy Gender Program, she produced the album *Men and Women: Dawn to Dusk* with more than a hundred photos of simple and everyday scenes. The photo album was lambasted by the Uzbekistani authorities, who claimed it portrayed the people of Uzbekistan as "backward." In 2009, criminal charges were filed against Akhmedova because of her involvement in the project as well as her film about difficulties faced by women in Uzbekistan, *The Burden of Virginity*. She was convicted of "slander of the Uzbek nation" in 2010. Since then, she has been banned from all official exhibitions in Uzbekistan, and

the Museum of Cinema, where Akhmedova's husband, Oleg Karpov, regularly screened video art at his own expense, was closed. Akhmedova is currently working on another project that will likely provoke the ire of the authorities, the photo installation and exhibition *Pakhta (Cotton)*, which addresses the issues of forced labor and the near-worship of cotton, one of the country's main exports.

Vyacheslav Akhunov lives and works in Tashkent. He is considered a founding father of contemporary art in Uzbekistan, a representative of the independent art scene that links Soviet and post-Soviet eras of non-conformist art. In the late 1970s, he established his own creative movement, Socialist Modernism. Between 2011 and 2018, the Uzbekistani authorities did not allow him to travel outside the CIS despite his being invited to participate in numerous prestigious international exhibitions.

Akhunov is a typical representative of a generation of artists from Central Asia who have experienced the stormy times of stagnation and disintegration in the Soviet Union, *perestroika*, and the independence of post-Soviet republics. Viktor Chukhovich calls Akhunov's work "politicized aesthetics." His work *Cage for Leaders*, an installation presenting a cage stuffed full of 250 polystyrene busts of Lenin, was removed in 2000 from a Tashkent international exhibition. In a more recent video work, *Corner*, the protagonist, artist Sergey Tychina, wearing a Muslim headdress, recites a *namas* (prayer) in various places. For this, he does not turn towards Mecca as required by the rules of Islam, but goes close up into various corners, thereby completely focusing on himself. The corner becomes an iconographic motif of a sacred



Photo by Umida Akhmedova, *Untitled*. Namangan, Uzbekistan, 2001. Courtesy of Umida Akhmedova

**THE PUBLIC REACTS POSITIVELY TO INDEPENDENT ARTISTS, WHILE THE REACTION OF THE PRESS IS DEFINED BY THE EXTENT OF THEIR OWN BOLDNESS**



Umida Akhmedova, *Pakhta* (Cotton—editor's note). Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 2013. Courtesy of Umida Akhmedova

place, where spiritual quest and reality cross. Should it be a mosque, a museum, or an office, the type of buildings or spaces makes no difference.<sup>1</sup>

In Akhunov's project *Derivativeness as a lack of knowledge*, exhibited in 2017 at the Ÿ Gallery of Contemporary Art in Minsk, the artist compares the practices of Uzbekistani artists with those of artists from different countries and studies derivativeness in the art of Uzbekistan. He views art as devoid of the logic and methodology of a modern system of knowledge and disciplinary divisions, one that does not reflect the main trends of its time. The work addresses specific historical moments, using forms that are new for the art of Uzbekistan. It marks the end of the colonial era, the problem of a post-colonial cultural identity with the principles for its formation and representation, a turn towards a decolonial discourse.

Saodat Ismailova, an Uzbek filmmaker who lives and works in Paris and Tashkent, is one of the most internationally visible and accomplished representatives of a new generation of artists from Central Asia who came of age in the post-Soviet era and who have established cosmopolitan artistic lives while remaining deeply engaged with their native region as a source of creative inspiration. Her debut feature film, *40 Days of Silence*, a poignant depiction of four generations of Tajik women living in the complete absence of men, was nominated for best debut film at the 2014 Berlin International Film Festival, and thereafter was screened in more than two dozen prestigious festivals around the world. Her video installation *Zukhra* was

<sup>1</sup> Yulia Sorokina, "Vyacheslav Akhunov," *Nafas Art Magazine, Universes in Universe*, May 2006.



Saodat Ismailova, *Zukhra*, 2013. Courtesy of Saodat Ismailova



Vyacheslav Akhunov, *Reconstruction of the project Observation post (1976)*. Minsk, Belarus, 2017. Courtesy of Vyacheslav Akhunov



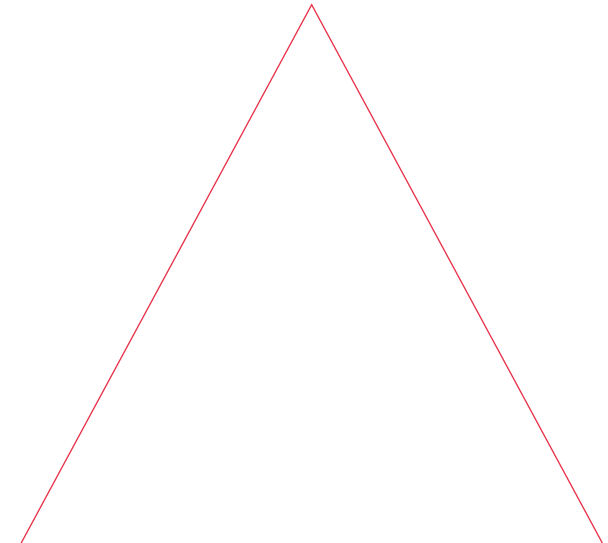
Rinat Karimov, *Fragile: Handle with Care* (photo series), 2018

featured in the Central Asian Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale, and her documentary film *Aral: Fishing in an Invisible Sea* won Best Documentary at the 2004 Turin Film Festival.<sup>2</sup> Ismailova writes, “My works are usually seen as deeply poetic and atmospheric art, which doesn’t exclude them from being engaged with social topics. I believe my background and circumstances shaped me in a way that my statement and messages are indirect, leaving plenty of space for audiences to think and decide. *Qyrq Qyz*, my recent cross-disciplinary performance, is one of the examples. It is inspired by a collective memory of a matriarchal society, where women were leaders, visionaries that created a society alternative to the one that prevails today. It is also an imaginary unification of the region that once was one and was divided into entities last century. *Qyrq Qyz* celebrates the spiritual dimension of women, and their ability to become the driving force of a civilization, in the part of the world where women’s position is still at urge to be supported.”

In response to recent protest marches and rallies in support of women’s rights around the world, the fashion blog *Uzbfashion* joined the campaign by collaborating with photographer Rinat Karimov on a project entitled *Fragile: Handle with Care*. Well-known Tashkent women from different professions were involved in the project. The project’s creators tried to show what women go through when they are violently assaulted and battered. Their primary objective was

<sup>2</sup> Aga Khan Trust for Culture Music Initiative website <https://www.akdn.org/akmi/artists/saodat-ismailova>

to raise public awareness of domestic and sexual violence against women and to discuss how to prevent them. It was the first time these problems were talked about openly in Uzbekistan. Society reacted strongly to the questions raised by the projection, discussing them in social media. The project was supported by various organizations, who showed the photo exhibition in their spaces.



**THEIR PRIMARY OBJECTIVE WAS TO RAISE PUBLIC AWARENESS OF DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND TO DISCUSS HOW TO PREVENT THEM**

## PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES

The Uzbekistani art community is mostly uninterested in socially engaged art projects. Due to its non-commercial focus, the community has grown slowly and poorly, and it tends to react enviously to successful projects.

Uzbekistan has entered a new stage of its history, and the art community has only begun to jell. For many years, the art community was forced to operate deep underground, and it had begun to go extinct. Nowadays, however, there are signs of a rebirth, although independent art projects still do not enjoy any government support. The government focuses on traditional ethnic Uzbek art. On November 28, 2018, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev adopted a [resolution](#) on the next step forward for Uzbekistan's national culture.

Time will tell how interested the country's art community—its independent theater groups, musical groups, and artists—are in socially engaged projects, whether they will have the opportunity to do this work, and the ways it could be implemented. Currently, there is no demand for independent art in Uzbekistan, and the government has not included it in its plans.

Every artist has the chance to do non-commercial, experimental art. It all depends on their personal attitude to art-making and their own motivations. The Uzbekistani government does not support independent artists. It does not pay subsidies to artists, nor has it instituted art educational programs. Here, then, artists, actors, and musicians make their own choices. Are they willing to spend their own time and creative juices on making something? Do they want to have an interesting creative life, which usually pays badly or

not at all? Or would they rather have a workaday job with a steady paycheck?

The community of artists is divided into state-supported artists and independent artists. These two camps sometimes mix. There is a difference between these creative types. There are musicians, say, who are employed by state institutions, where they are paid decent salaries, but they have no other reason to work. On the other hand, there are musicians who care about creative issues, whose lives revolve around them in the independent sector, and they do the work for free. Musicians who work only in state institutions have no interest in outside projects, because it is easier to do nothing and make a good wage. These “art workers” are not fond of the musicians who straddle two chairs. They are jealous of the second group of musicians who are able to realize themselves creatively by sacrificing their free time, constantly improving and experimenting. They can allow themselves to play avant-garde music that is not in the repertoire. Independent theater actors perform in bold productions full of new ideas, while visual artists go beyond the canons of traditional art despite the fact that they are barred from exhibiting their work in the national galleries.

The public reacts positively to independent artists, while the reaction of the press is defined by the extent of their own boldness. Government agencies often react negatively, failing to issue permits and licenses. They also engage in bans and crackdowns. Musicians can be stripped of their licenses due to their appearance, say, if a male singer sports a beard

or a female singer's shoulder is bared. An example of this was a concert by the group Pravda Vostok at Ilkhom Theater in 2013, a concert the city prosecutor's office tried to ban.

Until recently, there was an implicit ban on mentioning Ilkhom Theater on national television channels. The actors in our company were not recommended for parts on television shows.

The state has been engaged in a covert war with street art. Musicians who busk in underground pedestrian walkways are detained and taken to police stations, where they are accused of begging. It is impossible to paint graffiti and murals on buildings in Tashkent. Competitions for street artists have been held, but not a single proposed design has been approved by the mayor's office. Designs have to be vetted by numerous committees, and ultimately no one is permitted to paint murals on the sides of buildings.

It would be impossible to assess the impact of this kind of art, since no research has been conducted. It is obvious, however, that such projects show the country's residents that liberal art is still alive.

In particular, Ilkhom's whirlwind schedule of plays, concerts, art exhibitions, and film screenings gives us feedback. We have our own community of viewers. Thanks to Ilkhom, they choose to remain in Tashkent and not leave Uzbekistan.

The Ilkhom Contemporary Art Center continues to conduct a wide variety of projects, ranging from plays, workshops for actors, musicians, and artists to running our own theater arts school. A whole tribe of different people is employed or otherwise engaged



*A Narrative Drawing of Historic and Modern Tashkent* (mural), 2018.  
Photo courtesy of Alexander Raevsky

by Ilkhom, which has raised several generations of actors and other creative people. We can do whatever we like because state censorship does not apply to us, although the level of self-censorship is quite high. There would be an international scandal if they tried to shut us down. In fact, it is convenient for the Uzbekistani government to have a little island of independence and freedom to brag about. We are a tiny venue that seats only 150 viewers. Since not so many people can attend our events, the “threat” we pose to the government is not so great.

New trends have emerged in Tashkent. Theoretically, city officials have promised to support the grassroots undertakings of artists. It is crucial to show Tashkent and Uzbekistan that something is happening in the wake of Karimov’s death.

For example, it took us a very long time to get permission for artists from Kyiv doing a residency in Tashkent as part of the Art Prospect program to paint a mural on a city wall. We encountered multiple obstacles, getting the permit only after the mural had been completed. We thus always need to decide whether we want to play the games imposed on us by officials or whether we would prefer to find a place where we can work freely.

**THE STATE HAS BEEN  
ENGAGED IN A COVERT  
WAR WITH STREET ART**

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[https://www.goethe.de/ins/uz/de/index.html?wt\\_sc=taschkent](https://www.goethe.de/ins/uz/de/index.html?wt_sc=taschkent).

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“Was a Policeman Right When He Tried to Drive Away Street Musicians on a Square in the Capital?” *UPL 24*. June 9, 2018.

<https://upl.uz/report/7060-news.html>.

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<https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2018/10/05/mural/>.

A recent Art Prospect public art residency, focused on mural painting in downtown Tashkent, garnered a positive response from the public and has inspired local artists to implement their ideas.

# UKRAINE

## SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART IN UKRAINE

We understand the term “socially engaged art” to denote practices that involve people and communities in collaborations and social interactions in which the production of artworks is a consequence of mutual interaction or in which social intercourse itself is an artistic practice.

**YULIA KOSTEREVA**  
Open Place, Kyiv



**THE IDEA WAS TO  
GENERATE LINKS BETWEEN  
DIFFERENT GROUPS  
IN SOCIETY AND SUPPLY  
THEM WITH THE TOOLS OF  
SELF-REPRESENTATION**

*Migration of Bodies and Worlds* workshop. Ujazdowski Castle  
Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, 2017. Photo courtesy of  
Yuriy Kruchak

## PIONEERS AND PRACTICES

In the 1990s, Ukrainian art did not venture beyond the artist/creator vs. viewer/consumer paradigm. The art of the period was mainly concerned with its newfound autonomy from ethical, ideological, and institutional burdens. There was no doubt that artworks were primarily aesthetic phenomena.

Practices in which artists saw viewers as co-creators emerged in Ukraine in the mid-2000s amid the disappointment that came hard on the heels of the Orange Revolution. Grassroots political activism had already arisen in Ukraine: aside from the Orange Revolution of 2004, there had been several large-scale protests, including the 2001 Ukraine without Kuchma protests. Delegating power to politicians, however, did not produce the social progress ordinary people had wanted, generating public apathy. In these circumstances, it was not enough to criticize society and politics in Ukraine. It was necessary to work with society to achieve common goals, raise awareness, and stimulate discussion on crucial issues.

Thus, for example, the group Art Raiders, from Odessa, invaded the public space at the city's Starokinny Market. Its members constructed installations from items purchased at the flea market, exhibiting them right there and then. Art Raiders held their events in 2007–9 with the goal of escaping gallery spaces and bringing art closer to viewers.

Open Place was founded in 2006 as a platform for working with communities and people excluded from the art world and society at large. The idea was to generate links between different groups in society and supply them with the tools of self-representation.

In particular, the 2006–7 project *Invisible Way* focused on artists working with sightless people. The objective of the project *Fura Kultura*, which the group Garage Gang implemented in 2010, was decentralizing culture. The project's mobile laboratory traveled 10,000 kilometers. Along the way, it functioned as a center for public interaction in Uzhgorod, Donetsk, Kherson, Simferopol, and Vinnitsa.

Recent events in Ukraine have made obvious the crucial role played by culture in restoring trust and understanding in society. Over the past five years (2013–18), socially engaged art in Ukraine has focused on architectural activism, public performances, and collaborations with communities. The main purpose of the work is not to produce images but to interact directly with the beneficiaries of the art-making. Artists have mainly been tasked with producing a common discursive field, a space conducive to interaction, in which people with different viewpoints can rethink their own experiences and jointly reproduce the language of fellowship, a language meaningful not only to participants but also to the greater society.

For example, the team Pilorama (Sawmill) generates opportunities for participatory building. The point of their projects is not merely building things in public space but also returning public space to city dwellers and organizing a community of people who could shape public space. In her public performances, Alevtina Kakhidze discusses fraught political subjects and traumatic experiences based on the stereotypical questions people ask her.

Open Place runs interdisciplinary workshops with different social groups. The workshops identify subjects and experiences vital to the groups, and elaborate on them. The outcomes include direct actions in public spaces, joint statements, and artworks that redefine the group collaboration.

Theatrical practices based on individual experiences and urgent subjects are crucial tools for increasing social responsibility and stimulating discussion of vital issues. A good example in this would be Theater for Dialogue, which uses Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed as its method. Facilitators and participants use the idiom of the theater to discuss oppression. Together, they find individual strategies and systemic solutions to urgent problems. TanzLaboratorium's *Expertise* project involves stage productions in which the players perform the role of experts on their own lives as they are shaped by social and political circumstances in the here and now.



**THEATRICAL PRACTICES BASED ON INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES AND URGENT SUBJECTS ARE CRUCIAL TOOLS FOR INCREASING SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND STIMULATING DISCUSSION OF VITAL ISSUES**

**GOVERNMENT AGENCIES SHOW SPORADIC INTEREST IN SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART PROJECTS, SO WE CAN SAY THEY CONSIDER SUCH PROJECTS WORTHY OF THEIR ATTENTION**

**HOWEVER, THEIR LACK OF SYSTEMATIC INTEREST SUGGESTS EITHER THAT THESE PROJECTS ARE NOT PRIORITIES, OR THAT THE GOVERNMENT TRIES TO IMPROVE ITS IMAGE WHEN IT SUPPORTS SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART PROJECTS ON THE EVE OF ELECTIONS AND DURING CRUCIAL POLITICAL MOMENTS**

## **PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES**

The art community has shown an interest in getting involved in socially engaged art projects, but there are few examples of projects spearheaded by artists and art groups themselves or of long-term projects. Such projects require time and effort. Practices involving collaboration and cooperation with people and communities are quite often not recognized as “real” art in Ukraine and do not foster an artist’s individual career. Given the general instability experienced by artists in their careers and lives, and the lack of means for funding such projects, artists pursue their own endeavors.

The lack of internal critique of these projects and the tiny number of socially responsible institutions that would provide venues for them have not popularized socially engaged art. When artists and organizations have been able to find stable financing, for example, via international foundations, commercial educational work, or government support, they are more likely to invest their time in such projects, since, in most cases, participatory projects are evaluated positively, and their significance for culture is clear.

Government agencies show sporadic interest in socially engaged art projects, so we can say they consider such projects worthy of their attention. However, their lack of systematic interest suggests either that these projects are not priorities, or that the government tries to improve its image when it supports socially engaged art projects on the eve of elections and during crucial political moments. That is, they engage in manipulation, trying to use art to advance their political ambitions. On the other hand,

we can recall instances when the authorities and local communities have tried to prohibit socially engaged art projects.

The media have generally reacted positively to such projects, although they fail to critically analyze socially engaged art. Articles and news reports tend to be descriptive, meaning the audiences for this art, quite small in any case, are not encouraged to grow. Socially engaged art is primarily an object of self-reflection. The artists and groups involved in these practices attempt to interpret their own work or communicate their know-how in print and on the internet to other artists. This, however, leads them to become self-absorbed and impedes professional growth.

Socially engaged art projects deal with subjects and issues not covered by traditional visual art and institutions focused on visual art. Such projects often fill gaps and perform the work of government cultural institutions and local authorities, for example, when they serve as venues for dialogue among different social groups or contribute to the development of relationships in society. We can thus say that socially engaged art projects have a positive effect on the country’s well-being and contribute to the growth of civil society.

## RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

In Ukraine, socially engaged art projects are supported by nonprofit organizations, private initiatives, international foundations, international cultural institutions, and government programs, including the following organizations.

Velyka Ideya (Big Idea).	<a href="https://biggggidea.com/pages/team/">https://biggggidea.com/pages/team/</a> .
Visual Culture Research Center.	<a href="http://vcrc.org.ua/contacts/">http://vcrc.org.ua/contacts/</a> .
CSM/Foundation Centre for Contemporary Art.	<a href="http://csmart.org.ua/eng/about/">http://csmart.org.ua/eng/about/</a> .
Izolyatsiya Platform for Cultural Initiatives.	<a href="https://izolyatsia.org/en/">https://izolyatsia.org/en/</a> .
Polish Institute Kyiv.	<a href="http://www.polinst.kyiv.ua/eng/institution.html">http://www.polinst.kyiv.ua/eng/institution.html</a> .
Goethe-Institut Ukraine.	<a href="https://www.goethe.de/ins/ua/uk/ueb.html">https://www.goethe.de/ins/ua/uk/ueb.html</a> .
British Council Ukraine.	<a href="http://www.britishcouncil.org.ua/en/about/contact">http://www.britishcouncil.org.ua/en/about/contact</a> .
Swedish Institute Creative Force.	<a href="https://si.se/en/apply/funding-grants/creative-force/">https://si.se/en/apply/funding-grants/creative-force/</a> .
Ukrainian Cultural Foundation.	<a href="https://ucf.in.ua/en/about">https://ucf.in.ua/en/about</a> .

Unfortunately, there is no clearinghouse for information on socially engaged art practices in Ukraine. Individual studies and articles can be found in the following online political and cultural journals and websites.

<i>Commons: Journal of Social Criticism.</i>	<a href="https://commons.com.ua/en/">https://commons.com.ua/en/</a> .
<i>Politychna Krytyka.</i>	<a href="http://politicalcritique.org/">http://politicalcritique.org/</a> .
<i>Prostory.</i>	<a href="https://prostory.net.ua/en/">https://prostory.net.ua/en/</a> .
<i>Korydor.</i>	<a href="http://www.korydor.in.ua/en/">www.korydor.in.ua/en/</a> .
Open Place. <a href="http://openplace.com.ua/en/">openplace.com.ua/en/</a> .	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/user/OpenPlaceChannel">https://www.youtube.com/user/OpenPlaceChannel</a> .

# UKRAINE

## SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART IN UKRAINE

Socially engaged art mostly involves some form of social interaction and addresses social and political issues. This practice is a recent phenomenon in Ukrainian art. Projects that aim to collaborate with social groups, communities, and audiences outside of the art world are less common than critical art addressing social issues. That's why we will focus not only on collaborative and participatory art projects but also on the art practices that deal with the social and political, embrace new forms of collectivity and common action, and are often silenced or misrepresented in public debates.

**ILONA DEMCHENKO, ANNA POHRIBNA**

CSM/Foundation Centre for Contemporary Art, Kyiv



1 — Moldova 2 — Armenia 3 — Azerbaijan

Ilona Demchenko, Anna Pohribna

Ukraine



Mosaic of the City workshop. CSM, 2015.  
Photo by Natalka Diachenko

## PIONEERS AND PRACTICES

Ukrainian art of the 1990s was often criticized for political apathy, parochialism, and indifference to the social context. However, looking at many works of the 1990s now, we see not only postmodern aesthetics and irony but also a critical position and distinct political or socially engaged gestures. Examples include the Masoch Fund's projects (*Mausoleum for the President*, 1994; *Happy Victory Day, Mr. Muller!* and *The Last Jewish Pogrom*, both 1995); projects by the Fast Reaction Group (Sergey Bratkov, Boris Mikhailov, Serhiy Solonsky) created in 1994–96; and Arsen Savadov's *Donbass–Chocolate* (1997). These projects raised the issue of the place of art in society and sometimes quite radically intervened in the field of non-art. A breakthrough occurred in 2004 when the R.E.P. group emerged as a reaction to the politicization of public spaces in Ukraine after the Orange Revolution. Created as a political action by artists and activists, R.E.P. was founded by six artists who openly declared their artistic gestures as political. In the second half of the 2000s, with the emergence of the Hudrada curatorial group (2008) and the Visual Culture Research Center (2008), art entered public spaces and manifested the existence of artistic practices on the verge of activism and self-organization.

Participatory, activist, and research practices play an important role in contemporary art and are closely related to the current processes in the country. Thanks to, and yet despite, rather one-sided official historical politics, artists are increasingly interested in the issues of history and memory. In recent years, we have seen that art is a language that can be



A meeting with Florian Yuriev, the architect of the “UFO” that led to the creation of the #SAVEKYIVMODERNISM initiative. The Kyiv International—Kyiv Biennial 2017. Photo by Oleksandr Kovalenko

**BEFORE THE MAIDAN  
EVENTS OF 2014  
AND ESPECIALLY  
AFTERWARDS,  
SOCIALLY ENGAGED  
THEATER PROJECTS  
BECAME AN  
IMPORTANT METHOD  
OF INTERNALIZING  
CURRENT ISSUES IN  
UKRAINIAN SOCIETY**

used to talk about war, to articulate traumatic experiences. One example is the *Donbas Odyssey*, which tells stories of the cities and towns in the Donbas region of Ukraine. The project was initiated by Darya Tsybalyuk, Julia Filipieva, and Victor Zasyrkin as part of the CSM’s Mosaic of the City project. Since 2015, the artists have been collecting oral histories of internally displaced people and creating mental maps of their hometowns and houses. They share these oral and visual narratives through art interventions in public spaces and exhibitions in Kyiv, Lviv, Odessa, and at the Migration Stories Festival in Izmir, Turkey.

Several years ago, the processes of decommunization and decentralization inspired the new initiative DE NE DE. Its members travel to towns and villages in Ukraine researching public spaces, activities of smaller, local-lore museums, and methods of decommunization. They invite artists and researchers on their expeditions and work with the cultural infrastructure that was formed back in the USSR (cinemas, houses of culture, museums) together with the staff of local cultural institutions and their audiences.

In 2016–17, the program *Metacity*, organized by the NGO Garage Gang, helped the towns and residents of the Donbas region to discover directions for cultural, economic, urbanist, and personal development and to enhance interurban cooperation, in particular through art projects. Since 2014, annual Forums conducted by DOFA Fund have aimed to deconstruct myths and stereotypes about the Eastern and Western regions of Ukraine through art.

The topic of the city does not lose its importance. CSM/Foundation Centre for Contemporary Art has been working with this issue since 2012,

helping artists to discover new aspects of public spaces (non-conventional art spaces, art in remote parts of the city, participatory practices) and new locations. Modernist architecture that is not formally recognized by Ukrainian law as part of the country’s heritage and that isn’t protected from demolition and reconstruction was the focus of the Visual Culture Research Center activities. The main venue of their project at The Kyiv International—Kyiv Biennial 2017 was the “UFO” building of the Institute of Scientific, Technical, and Economic Information, which risked being swallowed up by a new mall. At the Biennial, a group of activists started the movement #SAVEKYIVMODERNISM to preserve and protect Soviet modernist architecture in Kyiv.

Before the Maidan events of 2014 and especially afterwards, socially engaged theater projects became an important method of internalizing current issues in Ukrainian society. Theater for Dialogue, PostPlay Theater, Theater of Displaced People, and others work with verbatim and documentary material, thus being able to reflect on and work through both personal experience/trauma and societal change. But these topics also influence playwrights who work beyond the scope of documental materials. The annual festival Week of Contemporary Drama has also experienced an influx of new authors and more public interest. Several projects that aim to engage the youth of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions as an audience and as participants also use theater. *Class-Act*, co-created by Ukrainian and British teams, teaches youngsters to write plays which are later staged in Kyiv theaters with professional directors and actors. The multi-disciplinary project *VIDLIK* sent Ukrainian artists

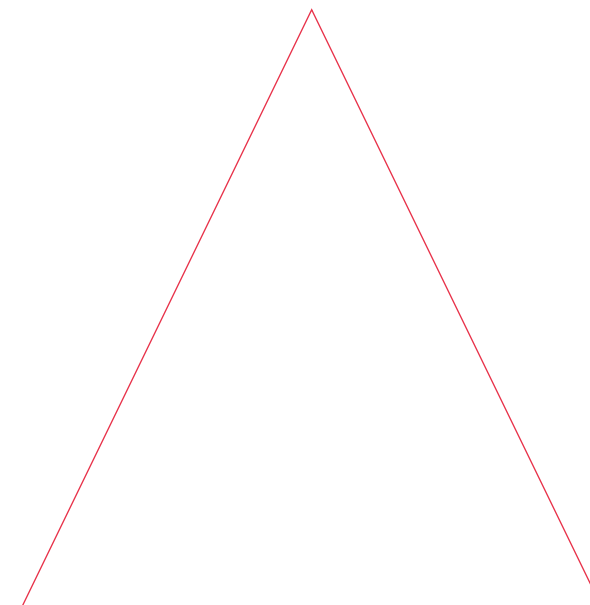
**PARTICIPATORY,  
ACTIVIST,  
AND RESEARCH  
PRACTICES PLAY  
AN IMPORTANT ROLE  
IN CONTEMPORARY  
ART AND ARE  
CLOSELY RELATED  
TO THE CURRENT  
PROCESSES IN THE  
COUNTRY**

Abandoned swimming pool and participant in DE NE DE initiative.  
Rubizhne, Luhansk region. Photo by Natalka Diachenko



ORLAN, *Petition Against the Death*. The Kyiv International—Kyiv Biennial 2017. Photo by Oleksandr Kovalenko

working mostly but not exclusively in performing arts on 10-day expeditions to the villages of Luhansk and Donetsk regions to help local teenagers create their own artworks.



**THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY PROJECT VIDLIK SENT UKRAINIAN ARTISTS WORKING MOSTLY BUT NOT EXCLUSIVELY IN PERFORMING ARTS ON 10-DAY EXPEDITIONS TO THE VILLAGES OF LUHANSK AND DONETSK REGIONS TO HELP LOCAL TEENAGERS CREATE THEIR OWN ARTWORKS**



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Зиронка  
и ансамбль  
народного  
танца.

## PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES

Ukraine has a relatively diverse art scene that is inter-linked by a myriad of horizontal connections. It is not unusual that these links, rather than certain types of work, define involvement in a particular project. Artists who consistently work with certain topics can collaborate on interdisciplinary/socially engaged projects. Of course, not all of them choose to work in a socially engaged manner, as the involvement of audiences can be difficult. Socially engaged practice is close to activism, which is why many artists prefer to focus on their own artistic expression rather than collaborate with people from the non-art fields or participate in social activism.

Past projects implemented by CSM demonstrated a lack of tools and techniques that can be used by Ukrainian artists and activists in public spaces or in work with specific communities. Therefore, in 2015–17 we implemented the Mosaic of the City and Points of Approaching projects, which had strong educational and practical components. The workshops in the framework of Mosaic of the City were dedicated to research tools for art project development, work with communities, participatory art theory and practice, and participatory strategies in public spaces. During the Points of Approaching project, artists took part in research residences in Kharkiv and Dnipro in order to become familiar with the local context of these communities closest to the frontline regional centers. After meetings with activists, volunteers, internally displaced people, the anti-terrorism operation (ATO) participants, and veterans, all groups tried to overcome the distance between those who listen and

those who speak. The participants who created their own art projects gained confidence and better understanding of the tools for social engagement and of the experiences of the communities previously excluded from consideration.

Arguably, there is no easily identifiable attitude towards socially engaged projects as such among Ukrainian artists. Many of them are interested in exploring new ways and forms of interacting with and attracting new audiences. We can expect that interest in socially engaged projects will grow both in the professional community and among audiences.

The Ukrainian contemporary art scene is very active, and it often causes artists to spread themselves too thin among many commitments and prevents them from active participation in others. However, artists are usually well informed about their colleagues' ongoing projects and can be easily mobilized in times of turbulence.

In general, the reaction of the public, press, and governmental structures to projects can be described as apathetic. Most of the art projects attract a relatively small number of audience members who are involved or interested in the local art scene. While rare, repressive or prohibitive acts do happen, each time drawing the attention of the art community. Governmental prohibition is especially rare. Usually, the authorities ignore artistic statements on sensitive issues. Institutions as well rarely resort to prohibition. For example, in 2012, the president of the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy banned the exhibition of the Visual Culture Research

On the previous page: Mental map of Luhansk made by Anna Dzloba, a 34-year-old participant in the *Donbas Odyssey* project, 2015. Some of the signs on the drawing: "Best events at the end of former life" (next to a maternity hospital); "Road to my mom's (I haven't seen her for 18 months)"; "This path was always slippery in winter"; "My favorite apple tree"; "Short path to work"; "Used to get our meat here"; "Favorite forest for mushroom foraging"; etc.

**ATTRACTING AUDIENCES  
AND PARTICIPANTS  
IS ONE OF THE MAIN  
CHALLENGES THAT THE  
UKRAINIAN ART SCENE  
CURRENTLY FACES**

**HOWEVER, WE ARE  
NOW EXPERIENCING  
A GROWING INTEREST  
IN SOCIALLY ENGAGED  
ART AS ONE OF THE  
COPING MECHANISMS  
FOR THE TURBULENT  
TIMES THAT UKRAINE  
FACES TODAY AS A  
SOCIETY**

Center *Ukrainian Body*, which explored the issues of corporality in contemporary Ukrainian society. The VCRC was forced to leave the exhibition space on the university premises. This decision by the administration of an otherwise liberal institution caused a backlash among artists and lasting discussions in the community. At the end of 2018, an ongoing conflict at the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture resulted in the destruction by two teachers of a sculptural installation by student Spartak Khachanov. The installation focused on the topic of military parades, which the student represented using sculptures of male reproductive organs. This was seen as an insult to the Ukrainian army, even though the student, an internally displaced person himself, tried to explain that his idea was misinterpreted. As of now, further administrative actions are pending; Khachanov is facing possible expulsion from the university.

During the last several years, following the rise of nationalistic views in Ukrainian society, representatives of far-right organizations had numerous run-ins with the left-leaning contemporary art community. Each of these events was heavily publicized by the media. For instance, in 2017, David Chichkan's exhibition *Lost Opportunity* was raided and trashed by masked men who claimed that the author was supporting separatists. In 2018, the exhibition of posters about the rights of minorities, *Respect Diversity*, was damaged by a group of masked individuals. The exhibition *Educational Acts*, which focused on censorship and violence in contemporary Ukraine, closed just a few days after the opening because the hosting organization (another Ukrainian university) was afraid of possible attacks. This can also be construed as an

example of how some Ukrainian institutions, artists, and media choose to self-censor in order to avoid possible conflicts.

The extent of art's impact on society is difficult to measure. Socially engaged art projects might affect the society by asking questions and by provoking the audience to question themselves and others. Art might not provide ready-made answers, but it could push people to reach personal conclusions about the issues independently. Art gives an opportunity to experience, feel, and internalize certain problems and topics on a new level. That is why its impact is evident most often among the individuals or communities that participate in or witness art projects.

As relevant studies have not yet been conducted in Ukraine, this topic is still waiting for its researchers. We can argue that in Ukraine access to art products and projects, including the socially engaged ones, and interest in them are still limited. This results from the lack of art education and promotion, narrow scope of activities, high prices, limited physical accessibility, problems with infrastructure, and so forth. It is particularly relevant for the Ukrainians who do not live in Kyiv or other big cities. Attracting audiences and participants is one of the main challenges that the Ukrainian art scene currently faces. However, we are now experiencing a growing interest in socially engaged art as one of the coping mechanisms for the turbulent times that Ukraine faces today as a society.

## REFERENCES

In Ukraine, no financing is available specifically for socially engaged art. Socially engaged projects compete with other art activities for limited funding opportunities. Art and cultural projects in Ukraine are mostly financed and supported by international foundations and institutions, including the following:

- USAID's Ukraine Confidence Building Initiative. ————— <https://www.facebook.com/USAIDUCBI/>.  
British Council. ————— <http://www.britishcouncil.org.ua/programmes/arts>.  
Goethe-Institut Ukraine. ————— <https://www.goethe.de/ins/ua/uk/kul.html>.  
International Renaissance Foundation. ————— <http://www.irf.ua/en/>.  
Visegrad Foundation. ————— <https://www.visegradfund.org/>.  
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. ————— <https://www.mott.org/>.  
European Cultural Foundation and MitOst e.V.—Tandem Ukraine program. ————— <https://www.tandemforculture.org/programmes/tandem-ukraine/>.  
Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. ————— <https://ua.boell.org/en>.

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During the past several years, socially engaged and other art projects received some financing from the government or local budgets. In 2018, the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation (<https://ucf.in.ua>) was established as the state institution to support art projects through a competitive selection process. The UCF is in its first funding round, and it is too early to evaluate its effectiveness. However, even the fact of state financial support being more attainable is already a positive change.

There are no archives dedicated to socially engaged art, but information about it is available thanks to several projects that archive, research, and analyze contemporary art in Ukraine.

*Korydor.*  
<http://www.korydor.in.ua>.

PinchukArtCentre.  
<https://pinchukartcentre.org/en/research-platform/about>.

Open Archive.  
<http://openarchive.com.ua/eng/>.

art(co)archive. Odessa Museum of Modern Art collection.  
<https://www.facebook.com/pg/artcoarchive/>.

Open Archive of Ukrainian Media Art.  
<http://www.mediaartarchive.org.ua/eng/>.

*Prostory.*  
<https://prostory.net.ua/ua/>.

*In Search of Spaces of Negotiation.* CSM/Foundation Centre for Contemporary Art, 2012.  
<https://issuu.com/csmart.org.ua/docs/search>.

*Art in the City.* CSM/Foundation Centre for Contemporary Art, 2014.  
[https://issuu.com/csmart.org.ua/docs/art\\_in\\_the\\_city](https://issuu.com/csmart.org.ua/docs/art_in_the_city).

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Some projects, institutions, and initiatives mentioned above:

Hudrada curatorial group.  
<http://hudrada.tumblr.com/>.

Visual Culture Research Center.  
<http://vcrc.org.ua/en/>.

DE NE DE.  
<https://www.facebook.com/denedenede/>.

*Metacity.*  
[https://issuu.com/garagegang/docs/transformations\\_of\\_the\\_ukrainian\\_ea/206](https://issuu.com/garagegang/docs/transformations_of_the_ukrainian_ea/206). (publication in English)

DOFA Fund's forums.  
[https://dofa.fund/en/category\\_state/experience/](https://dofa.fund/en/category_state/experience/).

SAVEKYIVMODERNISM.  
<https://www.facebook.com/Savekyivmodernism/>.

Theater for Dialogue.  
<http://tdd.org.ua/en>.

PostPlay Theater.  
<https://www.facebook.com/postplaytheater/>.

Theater of Displaced People.  
<https://www.facebook.com/theatredisplacedpeople/>.

Class-Act.  
<https://www.facebook.com/ClasActUkraine/>.

# ESSAYS

# ART IS NOT WHERE YOU THINK YOU ARE GOING TO SEE IT!<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The title is taken from the text on an anonymous banner in a public space in Venice, Italy, in 2009.

**VAHRAM AGHASYAN**

Yerevan, Armenia



## CIRCLE!<sup>2</sup>

/+Habit of starting a morning with a coffee mug in one hand++cigarette in another:: one day will kill you / that is an observation one might do, not necessarily should be a smart one. Wait/ I have a rationalization to make >> that is one part of me!<< destructive part which desperately wants to get out of the circle/ The circle we draw around us and whoever is in that circle is normal++ok/ whoever is outside should be restrained, normalized or tortured<<Leave the coffee mug / get something to eat / go browse newsfeed >>Ok now what? wait what the heck is that!= Another case of someone getting into the fountain in Republic Square / Something odd is happening/ I have this uncomfortable feeling of guilt not physically being present at this happening. No wait the guilt is fading / a jealousy that's what it is:: Jealousy of lack of being a part of all that:: Not even jealous, but definitely wanna be part of that/ to just stand nearby and be affected by the happening and observe // do the people who happened to be around at that time feel the same as I do?:: one may only speculate but they are part of this happening and I am not/ are they really?:<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Kenji Siratori used combined languages in his book «blood electric» including c++. In this text, a similar method is used to convey the mediated discussion and experience of the case published in the printed and social media. Dictionary of c++ operators: - // - end of block, / - separator, + - multiplier. ++ - postfix increaser, - - decreases value, <<= or << shift left, >> or >>= shift right, ! - reverses the logical state or logical denial, == - equals to, != - not equal, :: - end of sphere of action

<sup>3</sup> The dialogues appear in the video created by Tigran Khachatryan.



Screenshots of a video taken from [epress.am](http://epress.am), with video reportage by Tigran Khachatryan, 2016

## WHAT IS HAPPENING?

On May 24, 2016, around 11 am, a woman steps into an empty fountain at Republic Square in Yerevan. The air temperature is 17°C and it starts to rain. Unnoticed by the people around her, she approaches the fountain dressed in black tights, a shirt with black-and-white squares, a grey jacket with a cape, and sunglasses. She takes off her sneakers and crosses the little iron bridge connecting the basin of the fountain with its outer side. After entering the fountain, she turns back to communicate with her friends and participants in the happening to mark the moment of a successful start. She notices the rain.

A man in a maintenance worker's uniform enters the frame, telling her, "Brother, what are you doing, get out of there!" Failing to convince the performer to get out, he calls the police. Before the call, he asks the question, "Really? Starting when?" and receives the response, "Starting today, everything is allowed."

About ten armed policemen arrive to "resolve" the situation. The first one introduces himself and orders the woman to leave the fountain. After waiting for a while in the rain, with the help of two others he forces her out of the fountain. "I am not sexually harassing her, I am doing my job," he replies to the other participant after his hands touch the breasts of the performer and she screams. Six male policemen take her away from the fountain. The audience demands that the policemen stop touching her and do not use force against the peacefully sitting woman. One of the policemen counters, "It's for us to decide; the citizen has to be taken to a psychiatric hospital."

"A normal, conscientious citizen would not have stepped into a fountain. She needs a psychiatrist," they insist. "Who defines what's normal?," one of the participants asks. "To me, it's not normal that a person would want to become a police officer," she adds. Confronted with the group that questions their actions, the policemen do not respond. Having received instructions on the phone, the officers change their tune, saying that the citizen is free to decide whether she wants to receive medical treatment. After "the citizen" shakes her head, the policemen let her go and leave.

**STARTING TODAY,  
EVERYTHING IS  
ALLOWED**



Screenshots of a video taken from [epress.am](http://epress.am), with video reportage by Tigran Khachatryan, 2016

## ART AND JOB

Artist Tigran Khachatryan, who works at [epress.am](http://epress.am),<sup>4</sup> captured this happening in a video (9:31 minutes).

Khachatryan documents protests, demonstrations, and activist actions on the streets of Yerevan. His style of shooting these events is unique. Positioning himself at the heart of a protest, he manages to capture the “smell” of it. Although Khachatryan uses his footage in his short videos, for him these are two separate fields of art and job. In the case of this video report, we are not dealing with his artistic interests. The video was edited and shortened to give an understanding of what was happening to a “busy” audience watching the video in comfortable chairs on computer screens. The editing and style of montage distance Khachatryan from the action. He was not watching the performance, he was not participating or trying to reveal the reactions, comments, and atmosphere beyond the action-maker. He acted as a media representative. The video was never shown in an art exhibition. Supposedly, at that moment, art for him was somewhere else. However, the viewer understands that Khachatryan is sympathetic towards the happening and that his video is worth watching.

4 <https://youtu.be/xGxjF1ZzDDk>

## ACTION AS A HAPPENING

A week before this happening,<sup>5</sup> on May 17, Armine Arakelyan, founder of the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights NGO (IDHR), had gotten into the fountain basin at Republic Square. She was kept handcuffed for three hours and later forcibly taken in an ambulance to the psychiatric clinic in Nubarashen district.

Images from the scene quickly appeared in the media. In most of them, she was mocked or the report sided with the police. None of the passersby tried to intervene with the police or medical team, and no one followed her to the clinic.

In an interview in June, Arakelyan said that she was tortured in the clinic. “At Nubarashen, they dragged me across the floor and threw me on a bed, tearing my clothes in the process. They tied me up really tight; my arms and legs still hurt. They injected me with something, which I tried to resist but was unable to because there were six or seven of them. Then they began beating me up, just hitting senselessly everywhere. They’d leave for a while, then they’d return and do the same thing all over again. . . . They’d say mockingly, ‘What beautiful eyes you have’ and hit me in the eye. Or—‘Your hair is so nice!’ and pull my hair. I think they wanted to see how long I could psychologically endure it.”<sup>6</sup>

5 One of the participants in this happening is an artist. She always identifies her activities to the public as happenings.

6 Armine Arakelyan, after a period of silence, started speaking up, in interviews with media and on her Facebook page, about what had happened to her in the hospital.

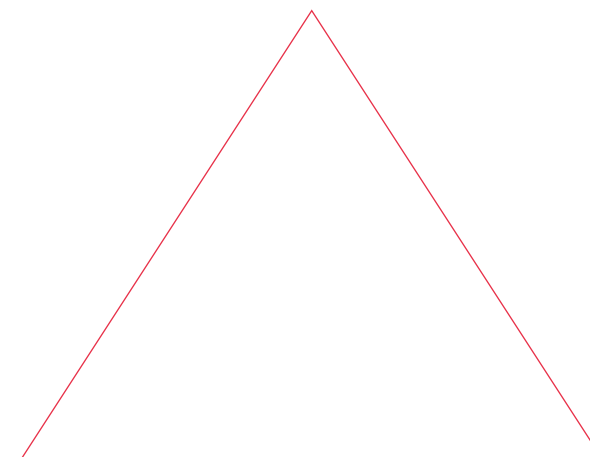
## MEANING OF THE MEANINGLESS

The happening took place a week after the incident with Arakelyan and was a reenactment of that very same event. Action, happening, performance—those were the definitions that started circulating in the discussions around this act. “Action” referred to the context of socio-political and human rights activism in public spaces in Armenia. “Performance” referred to the artistic component within that action. The term “happening,” coined and introduced by Allan Kaprow in the late 1950s, referred to the unplanned social games and the tradition of the happening from that time on. In reality, this act was tangent to all three definitions, touching upon each but not fitting into any of them.

During that week, there was a lot of speculative talk about whether or not Arakelyan was under stress or psychological burnout while getting into the fountain. The repetition of the same action was an experiment to clarify those speculations. What would happen if the same conditions were staged once again, and what would the state authorities’ reaction be? Obviously, it is not possible to repeat the same action twice, but by attempting to do so one might amplify the facts around the act and encourage further examination. An attempt to repeat the same action underscores the political aspect of Arakelyan’s action. This action is meaningless for the majority of people, and it doesn’t fall into the category of normality or offer a way to understand the general normality. In fact, that is the beautiful aspect of it. The simple act of entering a fountain, in both Arakelyan’s case and the reenactment of it, has no easily comprehensible

meaning. The fountain is not designed for swimming or for stepping into, so it is easily ruled out as an act of recreation. At first, it is easy to rule it out as a political protest as well. It doesn’t draw attention to an immediate problem, it doesn’t demand anything in particular. Only the fact of repetition reveals its political aspects. It raises questions: Who decides what is normal and what is not, and what follows that? How can abnormalities be punished, and why? How can anyone with specific authority from the state come to a conclusion about someone’s mental state only because s/he has entered a fountain? Before the medical team arrives, a decision has to be made by the policemen about the state of mind of the “subject.” Policemen in this case make the decision based on their understanding of common sense. Anything that veers from what is considered common sense is thought to be a mistake, a crazy, irresponsible act, or worse, an act of treason. In cases where common sense blurs into the very idea of the state, common sense and state approval are two different things; for example, it is common sense that a woman should get married when she is in her twenties. In some cases, when common sense becomes a law, to differ is to betray “public interest.” It is in these moments that conservative forces of common sense win over the forces of invention. The role of representatives of authority in this case is to restrain free action and to intimidate, to prevent it by the threat of punishment, to stigmatize the person who is performing the act, to invade his or her body with varying degrees of brutality, ranging from imprisonment to commitment to a mental hospital to

torture and harassment. Policemen act on behalf of the police state knowing that the power they serve is not legitimate. Hence, force comes into play and they quickly act as judges, executioners, medical experts, men, and other representatives of power. What is so threatening about this act of stepping into the fountain is the possibility of its shaking the foundations of normality. Sadly enough, the role of the restrainer is taken not only by the police but also by the passersby, and by the media in its self-censorship.



**WHAT IS SO THREATENING ABOUT THIS ACT OF STEPPING INTO THE FOUNTAIN IS THE POSSIBILITY OF ITS SHAKING THE FOUNDATIONS OF NORMALITY**

## COLLECTIVE ANONYMITY

The happening was initiated anonymously by a group of people who were present on site, and, judging from their voices and the images, it was a women's collective. In addition to ensuring security for the participants, anonymity serves other purposes; it establishes a horizontal and equal relationship between the "authors" of the happening, who do not necessarily share the same ideological beliefs; it shifts the authorship claim and opens up the happening as a universal action. The public is free to be part of it without institutional or individual control, and to be confronted with it without any clues as to what is happening. It changes the number of participants and encourages us to think that there can be more people who support the happening than is apparent. The anonymity of the act changes its meaning from being a product to being a practice and a free action. In a public space, it creates a new subject and opens up a crack in the monolith, which can often be mistaken for a smooth space.

Once we accept that identities are never pre-given, but that they are always the result of processes of identification, that they are discursively constructed, then we can understand why it is necessary to conceal identity by literally covering it up with a cape and sunglasses or with a collective anonymous act.

## ART AND ACTIVISM

Art and politics do not exist on two separate fields, one beside the other. There is an aesthetic dimension to the political and there is a political dimension to art. That is why the distinction between political and non-political art usually doesn't exist. Those who claim that their art is apolitical make a political statement by that claim. Art is a fantasy or analysis of, or a reflection on, the very concepts and imaginary figures that our societies depend upon. In this context, artistic practices and activism can find common ground. They necessarily overflow the terrain of production of knowledge and form new practices of living, dreaming, and collective appropriation of common spaces and everyday culture.

Another question is whether art activism can still maintain its critical role in a society where art and activism have become a necessary part of a participatory consumer democracy and the capitalist system. For example, in a society such as Armenia's, with its conservative political parties and operators, there cannot be a consensus on whether or not femicide actually exists. So public spaces are the battlegrounds where different political positions collide, without any possibility of a final reconciliation. Republic Square in Yerevan is a place where military parades happen alongside the so called "singing fountains" attraction for tourists, and where feminists protest by entering the fountain basin and sitting silently. These happenings are a counterbalance against the forces of militarism and tourism. It proves that assaults on women are not accidents at all, and it states that circles drawn around normality are to be challenged.

**ART AND POLITICS DO NOT EXIST ON TWO SEPARATE FIELDS, ONE BESIDE THE OTHER**

**THERE IS AN AESTHETIC DIMENSION TO THE POLITICAL AND THERE IS A POLITICAL DIMENSION TO ART**

**THAT IS WHY THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN POLITICAL AND NON-POLITICAL ART USUALLY DOESN'T EXIST**

# I AS THE OTHER: CURATING AN EXHIBITION IN THE BUILDING WHERE I LIVE

**LALI PERTENAVA**

Tbilisi, Georgia



## COMMUNITY-BASED ART PROJECT *BLOCK 76*, TBILISI ARCHITECTURE BIENNIAL

Tbilisi Architecture Biennial (TAB) took place the last week of October 2018. One of many innovations of the Biennial was its geographic preference for the Soviet suburbia of Tbilisi, the Gldani micro-rayon.<sup>1</sup>

The Gldani micro-district was developed in the 1970s for housing Soviet workers in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia since the fifth century. The planning was approved in Moscow as a series of successful models for the new socialist modernist visions in urban development. The planning was based on the idea of a “non-class”<sup>2</sup> system and divided residential, educational, or cultural spaces equally for citizens. Everything looked similar: residential buildings, yards, clinics, and other public buildings that confirmed the rule of one system, one vision of leaders such as Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev.

The idea of dividing people’s living places according to a socialist class system was abandoned after restoration of independence in 1991 and the emergence of a market economy. In the 1990s, the micro-district began to change without any state regulations. Loggias and balconies grew from the façades. Makeshift garages occupied parts of the courtyards. Cultural centers were replaced by supermarkets and malls. Public space was an entirely

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1 Micro-rayon is a residential area with modern construction in the Soviet and post-Soviet states further referred to as a micro-district.

2 Communist society purportedly was classless and all members were considered equal.

**THE PROJECT  
INTENDED TO ASK  
THE FOLLOWING  
QUESTIONS:**

**CAN URBAN  
TRANSFORMATIONS IN  
POST-SOVIET TBILISI  
BE RELATED TO THE  
TRANSFORMATIONS  
IN THE INTERIOR  
SPACES OF SOVIET  
APARTMENTS?**

**CAN COMMUNITY  
ART BE EFFECTIVE IN  
SOVIET BUILDINGS  
THAT HAVE NEVER  
FELT THE SPIRIT OF  
A COMMUNITY EVEN  
DURING THE SOVIET  
PERIOD?**

formal and artificial concept under the Soviet regime because public space was state controlled and did not belong to the public. In post-Soviet times it has totally disappeared. The post-socialist capitalism completely eradicated the culture of public ownership. Private space cut into public space. When handmade constructions for shops, garages, and street markets appropriate public spaces, they make urban suburbia diverse, loud, and alive.

TAB framed and represented Gldani's post-utopian functionality within the artistic discourse. With the concept "Buildings Are Not Enough," the Biennial illustrated "the outbreak of chaotic construction in Tbilisi that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Today, the processes of the previous 25 years shape the cityscape of Tbilisi, as well as many other post-socialist cities. On the one hand, this phenomenon can be discussed globally: it is the response of ordinary city dwellers to an absolute architecture, a solution to their constrained situation. On the other hand, 'Buildings Are Not Enough' is a demonstration of the existing socio-economic disorder."<sup>3</sup>

One week of the Biennial disrupted the usual rhythm and lifestyle of the district. It brought the international and local contemporary art scenes to the residents with indoor and outdoor activities including exhibitions, symposiums, public lectures, workshops, guided tours, film screenings, performances, and urban and architectural installations. One of them was the community-based apartment art project *Block 76*. It was curated by Biennial organizer Gigi Shukakidze

<sup>3</sup> From the concept of Tbilisi Architecture Biennial (<https://biennial.ge>).

and me. The idea of the exhibition was to change the private spaces of a residential building into public exhibition spaces for two days. The project intended to ask the following questions: Can urban transformations in post-Soviet Tbilisi be related to the transformations in the interior spaces of Soviet apartments? Can community art be effective in Soviet buildings that have never felt the spirit of a community even during the Soviet period?

Even though the Soviet past was ideologically based on the culture of collectivism, community-based art practices were unfamiliar in Georgia, as the collectivism was imposed by the state ideology and historical experience provided no ground for development of socially engaged and participatory art forms. Paradoxically, in the post-socialist world these art practices are considered to be the language of "Western art."<sup>4</sup>

The significance of socially engaged and participatory art has increased after some Western European countries made social inclusion part of their cultural policies (for example, "New Labour")<sup>5</sup> on the grounds that marginalized social groups are destructive to the welfare states. New policies created

<sup>4</sup> Western arts, the literary, performing, and visual arts of Europe and regions that share a European cultural tradition, including the United States and Canada. Encyclopaedia Britannica (<https://www.britannica.com>).

<sup>5</sup> A rebranding of the British Labour Party and its policies undertaken by Tony Blair and his supporters in the run-up to the 1997 general election in the United Kingdom and maintained during the Labour Party's period of government under Blair's premiership. Collins Dictionary ([www.collinsdictionary.com](http://www.collinsdictionary.com)).



Block 76. Tbilisi, Georgia, 2018. Photo by Johanna Padge

new ethics, ethics created new aesthetics, and aesthetics framed the development of particular art forms. Participatory art was employed by modernist avant-garde artists, situationists, Arte Povera members, etc. However, after the 1990s, when the “former east”<sup>6</sup> disappeared together with the “former west,”<sup>7</sup> community-based, participatory, and socially engaged art became contextualized in the framework of social development. Meanwhile, as the Soviet utopia of collective life survives only in the paper architecture and the art of socialist realism, the Western world is incrementally returning to the post-Soviet space the ideas of community, union, society, and citizenship.

In October 2009, Polish curator Johanna Warsza presented the socially engaged art event *Betlemi Mikro-Raioni*.<sup>8</sup> The main agenda of the project was urban development and community in the post-socialist system. The title underscored the fact that Tbilisi’s old neighborhoods created more collectivist environments than Soviet micro-districts built especially for this purpose. “Paradoxically, in the old Betlemi, one of the most heterogeneous districts of Old Tbilisi, the utopian idea of an inner city both concentrated on itself and open to the world is closer to the truth. Situated on steep slopes, Betlemi never entered into capitalist logic—you won’t find new luxury cars, advertisements, or even any new shops around

6 Eastern Block of socialist states in Central and Eastern Europe.

7 The policies of Western European countries and the USA changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Afterwards, “former East” and “former West” appeared.

8 Betlemi is an old district in Tbilisi.

here. Rather, everything is self-organised; even food is still conveyed by a handmade cable car.”<sup>9</sup> Art interventions were staged in private apartments of the so-called “Tbilisian houses” as well as in public spaces in the historical district of Betlemi. The artists worked with the local community. One of the participatory artworks performed by the art group Bouillon, *Birthday party of the Mother Kartli Monument*, united artists, neighbors, and passersby at the Sufra. It was held on the beautiful terrace of the Betlemi district overlooking the whole of Tbilisi, which is in the shadow of the Mother of Kartli, a monument that has dominated the view of the city for half a century. However, when local residents realized that the feast was critical of the monument, they got upset. The Soviet cult monument of a woman, in whose proximity they were used to living, was sacred and holy to them.

Much has changed since 2009. Gentrification undermined the communal spirit of old Tbilisian districts. Some historic parts of Tbilisi now look like the Soviet micro-districts but developed without the socialist ideology. Does new urban development follow the logic of a post-socialist citizen suffering from the trauma of the lack of individual space, of a deficit of comfortable household conditions, of limitations in forming a personal space? Or does the wild logic of capitalism lead to acquisition of all resources for individual profit?

*Block 76* is therefore intended to be an example of participatory and community art, aimed at bringing and sanctifying art into private dwelling space.

9 From the concept of the curator (<https://betlemimikroiraioni.wordpress.com>).

**THE ARTISTS WERE  
RELUCTANT TO ENTER  
THE PERSONAL SPACE  
OF APARTMENTS, AND  
THE NEIGHBORS WERE  
WARY OF ENTERING  
THE PERSONAL SPACE  
OF THE ARTISTS**

**I WAS AFRAID  
THAT THE TWO  
SPACES WOULD NOT  
INTERCROSS AND  
THAT THE NEIGHBORS  
WOULD NOT  
COLLABORATE WITH  
THE ARTISTS**

**MY CONCEPT WAS  
TO CREATE A TRULY  
COMMUNITY-BASED  
ART RATHER THAN  
TO SHOW ART IN THE  
APARTMENTS**

Contrary to the concept of Nicolas Bourriaud's "relational art" or "relational aesthetics," the artists did not serve to create a utopian reality, but a shared social environment.

Gldani micro-district is a post-socialist suburbia that reflects an individualistic mind-set rather than a state or social system: kamikaze loggias, garages intruding into the recreational areas, trees cutting the roofs of the garages, small shop kiosks handmade from secondary materials. The urban architectural metastasis of Gldani speaks about the unmet needs of its residents. The same can be said about their apartments, where Soviet interiors were changed with "Euroremonts."<sup>10</sup> The history and design of these apartments trace a trajectory of a human life cycle. Looking into the world behind the iron doors of an apartment (doors in Soviet times were mostly wooden, but during the military crisis in the 1990s residents changed them for iron doors) seems like peeping into the inner world of a particular person. When the co-curator and I walked through my neighbors' apartments (I live in this building), I had the feeling that each of us resembled his/her own apartment.

Initially, I planned to arrange a meeting of the artists and residents, to screen the presentations of the artists, and to let the residents and artists agree upon which project they would like to collaborate. The 9-story building has 32 apartments. It does not have a

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<sup>10</sup> Euroremont is a Russian neologism meaning renovation of an interior according to European standards. However, no specific European standards or materials are used during the "Euroremont" renovation. The word is used to emphasize high standards of the work done.

superintendent, and I could not gather my neighbors for the meeting. So the artists started knocking on doors to explain their ideas to the residents. One of the ideas was to have a neighborhood festival with exhibitions in the apartments and a party. After lengthy explanations, I and five families agreed to get involved and open our doors to the artists and audiences. Neighbors didn't seem to have great interest in art projects. Artists, in turn, did not actively communicate with the residents. At first, everyone avoided each other. The artists were reluctant to enter the personal space of apartments, and the neighbors were wary of entering the personal space of the artists. I was afraid that the two spaces would not intercross and that the neighbors would not collaborate with the artists. My concept was to create a truly community-based art rather than to show art in the apartments.

Discussions with the neighbors about possible artistic interventions took two months. The idea of a neighborhood party was ignored by the majority of residents. They were happy to support the artists' party with food but not quite willing to participate themselves, due to various reasons: job, family, not enough time, etc. As mentioned above, six families agreed to host artists, but no one was quite sure what they agreed to. Except for some young neighbors, most of the residents did not have much interest in contemporary art. Their notions of culture, leisure, and arts were quite different from what I was offering them. In fact, I was the only neighbor who was very much excited about the project. The project was self-investigative for me. I researched my own existence in the building where I have lived my entire life and realized that I was completely alienated from



Andro Eradze, *Wave (gesture)*. Gldani, Tbilisi, October 28, 2019.  
Photo by Sandro Sulaberidze



Esther Kempf, *Fountain no. 2*. Gldani, Tbilisi, October 28, 2019.  
Photo by Esther Kempf

I WAS A STRANGER

AND BROUGHT  
A STRANGE SCENE  
OF CONTEMPORARY  
ART TO THE HOUSE  
WHERE I LIVED

my own environment. It was I who still lived in the old system and saw Gldani as a sleeping quarter. The rest of the residents have adapted to and engaged in Gldani's urban life. I was a stranger and brought a strange scene of contemporary art to the house where I lived.

The following artists participated in *Block 76*: Alicja Pliszka (Poland), Andro Eradze (Georgia), Barbora Gallo (Czech Republic), Dodoshka Chkheidze (Georgia), Esther Kempf (Switzerland), Jan Chudozilov (Switzerland/Czech Republic), Johanna Padge (Germany), Mariam Natroshvili/Detu Jincharadze (Georgia), Mishiko Sulakauri (Georgia), MistoDiya Collective (Ukraine), Natuka Vatsadze/Temo Kartlelishvili (Georgia), Nino Sakandelidze (Georgia/Austria), Ninutsa Shatberashvili (Georgia), Nutsa Esebua (Georgia), Sarah Cowles (USA), Tamuna Chabashvili (Georgia/Netherlands), Thea Gvetadze (Georgia/Germany), Vazha Marr/Gio Kuchuhidze (Georgia). The works of art were shown in the apartments, at the building entrance, in the hallways, in the shop on the first floor, and in the building's surroundings. The artworks followed the concept of the Biennial as well as the logic of artist-neighbor relationships. Interventions were often barely perceptible. For example, you might not notice the work of Polish artist Alicja Pliszka, who filled the parts of the broken entrance floor with mosaics resembling its existing patterns. The interior wall was painted by Georgian street artist Mishiko Sulakauri, who also responded to the existing design patterns. Sulakauri decorated the walls, creating a certain rhythm with intervals between the storeys so that viewers could question whether the wall was transformed by an artist or time.

Memory of the 1990s, with its constantly transforming environment, was folded into the artwork *Memory Foam*, by Tamuna Chabashvili. The artist printed on the mattress the image of the façade of the house in which she used to live nearby in Tbilisi, a house that was in an endless process of change in the 1990s. Chabashvili relocated at an early age to Europe. The necessity of adapting to new environments has subjected the “façade” of her being to constant transformations as well. The mattress, as “the most intimate companion of our body, which often holds our imprints as stains and, as time passes, slowly adapts to the shape of our body,”<sup>11</sup> embodied not only her quest for home, for physical and mental refuge, but memories of other homeless people, emigrants, and nomads. *Memory Foam* was a subtle intervention in the hallway of the building where neighbors usually keep some household items.

“What are you doing?” I was asked several times by the neighbors while covering dirty walls of the building entrance hall with sketches of trees by American artist Sarah Cowles. It took time to explain that the 25 native zelkova trees we bought with Cowles at a plant nursery were a temporary memorial for the victims of violence in Gldani prison. The prison was proved to be a center of systemic violence. The quincunx design of the tree sketches symbolized prisoners surrounded by four walls. The trees themselves were planted around Lisi Lake, another district in Tbilisi.

Members of Bouillon group Natuka Vatsadze and Temo Kartlelishvili planted a palm tree in front

11 From the concept of the artist.



Tamuna Chabashvili, *Memory Foam*. Gldani, Tbilisi, October 28, 2019.  
Photo by Nino Alavidze

of the building. Gldani district is quite green, mainly due to the efforts of local residents who used to plant trees in the yards of their buildings. During the economic crisis of the 1990s, when electric power was cut, people planted gardens around their houses to grow produce. Often, one could see small cornfields between the blocks. Since the 1990s, Gldani has been quite densely populated by refugees from Abkhazia, a seaside region with subtropical vegetation. A lot of internally displaced people live in Block 76 and the surrounding buildings. The palm tree is a popular symbol of Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia. Performance action *Palm—my dream tree* attracted local residents despite my concern that only artists and organizers would participate. The palm tree created a sense of community. Neighbors, street vendors, even children came to plant the tree with happy or nostalgic shouts: “They brought us Sukhumi!” I realized that art does not need to be forced to be accepted, nor does it need to be interpreted. It is well understood and accepted if it comes from the community based on shared values. Art unites because “creativity cannot be recognized except as it operates within a system of cultural rules and it cannot bring forth anything new unless it can enlist the support of peers. It follows that the occurrence of creativity is not simply a function of how many gifted individuals there are, but also of how accessible the various symbolic systems are and how responsive the social system is to novel ideas. Instead of focusing exclusively on individuals, it will make more sense to focus on communities that may or may not nurture genius. In the last analysis,

it is the community and not the individual who makes creativity manifest.”<sup>12</sup>

A post-Soviet community is used to creativity that is state imposed and ideologically wrapped. It does not find an individual’s urge to create interesting. Urban developments in Gldani in the 1990s, the makeshift alterations motivated by the desire to adapt to drastic transformations, seem to me to be the works of art worthy of preservation as the cultural heritage of post-Soviet times. From this point of view, TAB’s goal to present Gldani as a museum of post-Soviet transformation proved successful.

MistoDiya Collective, from Ukraine, created an interactive game with the domino tiles that were parts of the master plan of *Block 76*. The group emphasized the importance of “Gldani as an architectural monument. . . . Above the modernist grid with distinctly outlined boundaries, Gldani inhabitants created their own network of everyday contacts, personal memories and, strange as it may seem, of vineyards. This network of horizontal links has been here for ages and can’t be simply re-built.”<sup>13</sup>

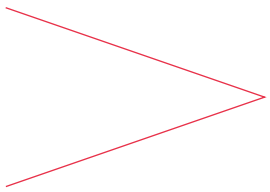
Apartments in the project *Block 76* represented expositions in the “Gldani museum.” Coping with the context and design of apartment interiors was a big challenge for each artist.

In the apartment where I live, Georgian/German artist Thea Gvetadze made the work *Tsisia in Gldani*. The artist replaced a reproduction of a painting by

<sup>12</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “A systems perspective creativity,” in *Creative Management and Development*, ed. Jane Henry (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2006), p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> From the concept of the MistoDiya Collective.

**ARE THE NEIGHBORS'  
APARTMENTS  
UNITED ONLY BY THE  
NETWORK OF WATER,  
GAS, ELECTRICITY,  
OR OTHER PIPES?**



a Dutch artist, entitled *French Boy with a Dog*, and its ornamental frame, with the original portrait of her grandmother Tsisia Shanshiashvili, who was herself a painter. The portrait of her grandmother was painted by the famous female painter from the Soviet period, Ketevan Maghalashvili. Using internet sources, I found out that the author of the reproduced Dutch painting might be one of the few female artists from the eighteenth-century Netherlands, C. Bremont. The Soviet interior of the apartment had been adapted to the reproduction's grandiosely ornamented gypsum frame, which had diminished the room. The painting by Maghalashvili, the genius Georgian female portraitist, completely changed the character of the room, drawing all attention to the woman portrayed. Not the frame but the portrait seemed to dominate the room, making it alive and spirited. The modesty, sincerity, and feminine power of the portrait won over the reproduction of the cute French boy framed in a way that drew attention not to the quality of the painting but to the presentation of an art object in the apartment. But there is another story behind this “change,” the story of the class society in the USSR. Officially, there were two classes in the Soviet Union—laborers (workers and peasants) and working intelligentsia. Tsisia Shanshiashvili, the lady in the portrait, came from a noble family and bore herself with the modesty and sincerity of a Soviet intellectual. As a representative of the intelligentsia, her apartment would have been quite different from the Soviet worker's apartment. Accordingly, the place for her portrait created by a genius woman painter should have been in a museum rather than in a small living room in a Gldani block of buildings.

Did the visit of the artists have an effect on the Gldani residents, or was it only a waving gesture by the artistic class to the middle class Gldani citizens? Andro Eradze created a triad with video, object, and the title of the work, *Wave (gesture)*. The HD video projected the majestic neo-classicist hall of the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia in the room of an Egyptian emigrant family while an inflatable, remotely controlled shark floated in the air.

Are the neighbors' apartments united only by the network of water, gas, electricity, or other pipes? Artist Esther Kempf had a 10-day residency in the building. The original idea of her work was to make a temporary fountain in the courtyard with water pipes from every apartment in the building. However, not enough neighbors wanted to participate, and the artist connected pipes from the water supply network to make a fountain in the bathroom of one apartment. The beauty of non-beautiful objects in her work *Fountain no. 2* was created not only by the multi-colored details of the water supply system but also by the idea of transforming a boring bathroom into a place of festival.

Even though the neighbors barely participated in the artworks of *Block 76*, and the powerful interiors of the apartments resisted the subtle artistic interventions, you could feel a sense of excitement in the neighborhood during the exhibition days. For the first time, I felt that our neighborhood was a community, and I was a part of it.

# PARA-INSTITUTION AS ART MEDIUM: THE CREOLEX CENTER

MARIA VILKOVISKY, RUTHIE JENRBKOVA

Almaty, Kazakhstan



## INTRODUCTION

The Creolex Center was established on paper circa 2012 as a thought experiment in generating weird cultural organizations.<sup>1</sup> Our interest in institutional practices and critiques had emerged from a whole grab bag of motives. First, it was like the interest of hungry people in food. Second, we wanted to imagine (cultural, regional, political, etc.) communities where we, Russophone half-Kazakhs who seemingly belonged nowhere, could feel as if we belonged. Third, it was an attempt at emancipation. If subjectivity is produced by institutions, all attempts at self-reflection and gaining control of one's life were inevitably bound up with a critique of the selfsame institutions. In this sense, we were curious to discover the institutional processes responsible in Kazakhstan for the emergence of the cultural workers we call contemporary artists. Fourth, we should mention the anthropological perspective outlined in 1960s-era U.S. conceptualism.<sup>2</sup> From the vantage point of conceptualism, the boundaries between genres were abolished by posing the general question of whether the aesthetic representation of objects was a Eurocentric,

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1 For more on the concept of the Creolex Center, see our essay "Istorii Transoksiany. Kreol'nost, kompozitsionizm, transfeminizm" [Histories of Transoxiana: creoleness, compositionism, and transfeminism], in *Poniatii o sovetskom v Tsentral'noi Azii* [Concepts of Sovietness in Central Asia], eds. Georgii Mamedov and Oksana Shatalova (Bishkek: Shtab Press, 2016).

2 Joseph Kosuth, "The Artist as Anthropologist" (1975), in *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966–1990* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).

WE ORIGINALLY  
BORROWED THE IDEA  
OF CREOLENESS FROM  
CARIBBEAN WRITERS

AS A WAY OF TALKING  
ABOUT ART THAT  
AVOIDED RECOURSE  
TO NATIONALITY  
AND ETHNICITY

androcentric convention, while being a woman artist meant questioning the very nature of art.<sup>3</sup> Fifth, amid post-Soviet ethnic sovereignty and national renaissance we thought it timely to popularize alternative—constructivist, queer, marginal, hybrid (not anthropocentric)—approaches to identity and locality. The need to imagine something beyond the nation-state was our principal argument for using the epithet *creole/creolex*. We found the word fit our quite peculiar circumstances, whose internal diversity often boiled down to the black-and-white distinction between *shala* and *nagyz*, to the struggle between Russian cultural imperial expansion and Kazakh cultural colonial resistance.<sup>4</sup> Sixth, we needed a meta-framework to give our artistic practices a certain institutional guise. We originally borrowed the idea of Creoleness from Caribbean writers as a way of talking about art that avoided recourse to nationality and ethnicity.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, it seemed like a crucial move within the local art scene, in which the notion of “sovereign nation” was still utterly taken for granted. As the years passed, the idea would expand, impacted by queer theory and the post-humanist critique of the subject:

3 “Being an artist now means to question the nature of art.” Joseph Kosuth, as quoted in Arthur R. Rose, “Four Interviews,” *Arts Magazine* 43, 4 (February 1969).

4 We have in mind two terms in common usage in Kazakhstan: *shala qazaq*, a half-Kazakh, a fake Kazakh, and *nagyz qazaq*, a true Kazakh, a genuine Kazakh.

5 We were particularly inspired by Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

the Creolex Center would become a slightly inhuman, flagrantly paranormal organization.<sup>6</sup>

That, however, is another story altogether. Back in 2012, we had merely wanted to present our work as female artists not as a bizarre Sunday hobby, but as genuine work produced by the staff of an imaginary institution, for the chances of finding a similar institution in reality were next to nothing. We merely had the strong sense that artistic innovation was simply impossible within the then-current Kazakhstani institutional system.

6 “Inhuman” should be understood to mean radical inclusivity, the superhuman, while “paranormal” indicates resistance to enforced norms.



Maria Vilkovisky and Ruthie Jenrbekova, *Intermedia* (performance).  
Moscow, November 2015

## ALMATY, CULTURAL CAPITAL

While the motives enumerated above had become obvious to us, the Almaty art scene seemed as if it had collapsed and atomized to the point of no return. As you may know, contemporary art in many post-Soviet countries was given a boost when the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art (SCCA) opened there in the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> The Central Asian SCCA, which operated in Almaty from 1998 to 2008, was no exception. Splitting the local art community into “sell-outs” and “independents,” the Soros Center educated, nurtured, and promoted artists abroad, provoked productive conflicts, and generally stimulated the art scene. One tiny art center was not enough, of course, but after it closed, the circumstances that ensued were altogether odd. Although Almaty had been home to a unique art scene since the 1980s, including internationally renowned artists, the city had no cultural institutions. The subject of building a contemporary art center was constantly discussed at informal and official gatherings.

<sup>7</sup> See, in particular, Nikita Kadan, “Zakrytaia stranitsa” [A closed page], *Moscow Art Magazine* 71–72 (2009), <http://moscow-artmagazine.com/issue/21/article/328>.

## A BUSINESS CENTER SUPPORTS ARTISTS

At one such gathering, organized by the city's department of culture, we met Nurlan Ahmetgaliev, a businessman and proprietor of a small business center for socially focused startups. The center was located in the heart of downtown Almaty and called the L.E.S., short for Local Experimental Society.<sup>8</sup> Ahmetgaliev wanted to turn the place into a so-called creative cluster, a community of individual entrepreneurs, united by commercial interests and sharing a common work space. The project included the idea of launching an art center, which would be a loss business wise but would generate the cultural content and attractive atmosphere that was all the rage.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, one of us (Maria) was asked to fill the specially created post of art director, while the other (Ruthie) worked there as a volunteer. Our duties included organizing regular events. We happily embraced generic variety, holding workshops, video screenings, and discussions on Wednesdays, performances and public events on Fridays, and monthly art exhibitions.

Although the L.E.S. and the Creolex Center worked in concert, we largely operated at completely cross purposes. We thought of the collaboration as

8 In reality, the place was still called Club Battler at the time. Artist Zoya Falkova suggested the name Local Experimental Society (L.E.S.) after our collaboration had been launched and we were in the process of collectively rebranding the space.

9 "Atmosphere" is used here in sense given to it by Richard Florida in Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Perseus, 2002).

an artistic experiment in generating para-institutional forms that would take advantage of the opportunities offered by the post-Fordist model of creative business. The L.E.S. itself probably saw the collaboration as an attempt to use contemporary art as a tool to improve its image. We saw it as our mission to popularize uncensored experimental culture, while the objective of the L.E.S. as a cluster was, rather, to attract audiences and generate the unforeseen business opportunities so crucial in the creative industries. Our common platform was a notion of art as collective social experiment.

The key point was our agreement with L.E.S. management that they would not interfere in our artistic policies. Another important aspect was the fact that the cluster's development strategy was largely based on the ideas of utopian socialism. When discussing the Creolex Center's role within the L.E.S. community, we would describe it in terms that were congenial to Tatlin and Rodchenko's ideas of Soviet constructivism and productionist art. Inspiring examples would pop up during these discussions: Beuys's notion of social sculpture, Suzanne Lacy's then-new genre public art, the Artists Placement Group's attempts to place artists in industry and government in the UK, and certain articles and books, published in the 1990s and 2000s, that played a role in turning relational aesthetics into an international trend. What mainly distinguished socially engaged art from others was its emphasis on the production of social bonds.

We were not overly hopeful our efforts would turn the L.E.S. into a collective of kindred spirits.

Rather, we were interested in any opportunity to support critical contemporary culture in the midst of the local institutional vacuum, and the time was ripe for exercises like it. We had at our disposal a venue that was hardly meant for exhibiting art, as well as carte blanche to stage whatever art events we liked. We launched the new space by hosting conventional art exhibitions. We had to advertise the new place as an art space, since it was not yet known as such. The simplest means of gaining the status of an art space was staging a series of solo shows by well-known Almaty artists. By February 2013, we had done exhibitions of works by Katya Nikonorova, Vsevolod Demidov, Saule Suleimenova, Kuanysh Bazargaliev, Yelena and Viktor Vorobyev, and Alexey Shindin. The space quickly became popular among the Almaty art crowd. The Creolex Center then shifted to producing more complicated exhibitions and educational events.



**WE THOUGHT OF THE COLLABORATION AS AN ARTISTIC EXPERIMENT IN GENERATING PARA-INSTITUTIONAL FORMS THAT WOULD TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE OPPORTUNITIES OFFERED BY THE POST-FORDIST MODEL OF CREATIVE BUSINESS**



Zoya Falkova, *But you are a girl. The Second Sex*, L.E.S., Almaty, March 2013. Courtesy of Ruthie Jenrbekova

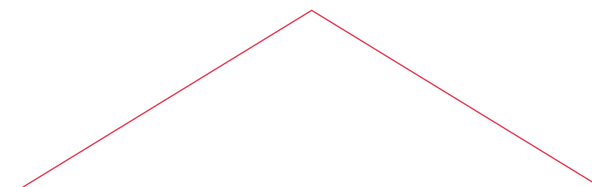
## THE SECOND SEX (MARCH 15–APRIL 15, 2013)

In February 2013, we happened upon a notice for an exhibition entitled *Cherchez la femme*, which treated femininity in stereotypical fashion as something mysterious. We decided the time had come for us to voice our feminist views, both on the mystery of femininity and the mystery of social equality in general. We decided to devote several of our weekly workshops to the history of feminist art, following them up with a group show. We issued an open call for which familiarity with Simone de Beauvoir's famous book was a condition of participating in the exhibition. To make things easier, we brought people up to speed by holding a series of lectures in advance. Since we wanted to introduce the women artists who might be in the exhibition to gender issues, we had no expectation the show itself would be a solidaristic collective statement. Rather, we wanted to research the opinions and stances that were extant in the local art community. Everyone was invited to participate. We exhibited nearly all the works submitted. We turned down only a few of the submissions, mainly for technical reasons. Aside from artworks, the exhibition's opening featured two complementary performances: sound poetry by the Creolex Center and physical theater produced by Natalya Novikova and Anastasia Strashinskaya.

The day after the opening, we held a roundtable on the history of the feminist movement in Kazakhstan. Among the participants were Zulfiya Baysakova, board chair of the Alliance of Crisis Centers in Kazakhstan, who gave a talk entitled "Women's Problems Have Always Been Men's

Problems," Elvira Pak, a fellow at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, who compared women's rights in Europe and Asia, and Svetlana Shakirova, director of the Center for Gender Studies, whose conversation touched on the variety of postcolonial feminist approaches to understanding differences, including class distinctions and imperial/colonial differences.

The idea of doing a follow-up event arose at the roundtable. Inspired by the works she had seen, Pak suggested organizing another pro-feminist exhibition in several months. Consequently, in November 2013, Umai Gallery hosted a second group show, *Women's Business*, sponsored by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Goethe-Institut. By that time, however, we had ended our collaboration with the L.E.S.



**SINCE WE WANTED TO INTRODUCE THE WOMEN ARTISTS WHO MIGHT BE IN THE EXHIBITION TO GENDER ISSUES, WE HAD NO EXPECTATION THE SHOW ITSELF WOULD BE A SOLIDARISTIC COLLECTIVE STATEMENT. RATHER, WE WANTED TO RESEARCH THE OPINIONS AND STANCES THAT WERE EXTANT IN THE LOCAL ART COMMUNITY**



Anastasia Strashinskaya dressed as Frida Kahlo.  
*Women's Business*, Umai Gallery, Almaty, November 2013.  
 Courtesy of Till Ulen



Exhibition view featuring an homage to Judy Chicago's  
*The Dinner Party*. *Women's Business*, Umai Gallery, Almaty,  
 November 2013. Courtesy of Ruthie Jenrbekova



Open call for exhibition *Anything Goes*. Design and photo by Ruthie Jenrbekova. Almaty, June 2013.

Exhibition view. *Anything Goes*, Almaty, June 2013. Courtesy of Ruthie Jenrbekova

## ANYTHING GOES: WHAT'S RELEVANT FOR YOU IS RELEVANT FOR ME, TOO (JUNE 28–AUGUST 1, 2013)

*The Second Sex* was the first group exhibition curated by the Creolex Center, and it predictably garnered criticism. We took certain shortcomings into account. First, there had been a contradiction between our committed position as curators and the neutral or even flagrantly anti-feminist stance voiced by several exhibiting artists. Second, the discrepancy between the traditional use of the rooms at the L.E.S. and the exhibition we wanted to do was painfully apparent. We decided the next group project would not involve attempting to impose our agenda on the exhibiting women artists. At the end of the day, what the community considered topical was actually topical. Besides, we wanted to shift from exhibiting artworks in non-white-cube spaces to creating something that was less object-focused. So, in April 2013, we announced a new group project that emphasized things like site-specific works, interventions, and social practices. In keeping with the traditions of experimental shows, we decided to focus on process rather than outcome, on forging a collective, not a collection.

Our conversations gradually evolved into the idea of a summer exhibition workshop during which the spaces at the L.E.S. would operate the entire summer as an open-access art testing ground, a place where people could practice artistic representation. By way of introducing the subject, we gave an overview lecture on participatory art and relational aesthetics. Unexpectedly, it aroused great interest. We then held a general assembly with all potentially interested parties, a brainstorming session we

code-named "Forest Storm" (a play on words, since the abbreviation L.E.S. can be construed as *les*, the word for "forest" in Russian). The plan was to come up with a pool of topical ideas and thus outline the set of possible subjects for the summer workshop. We wanted to use the L.E.S., which ordinarily functioned as office space, as a venue for presenting non-alienated art-making, art-making whose rationale would be at loggerheads with market-oriented art.

Despite the fact that we received tons of proposals from artists, including psychogeographical studies of cityscapes, reimaginings of buildings and neighborhoods, costumed outings, mappings of social stratification, projects involving children and pensioners, performances in the Almaty subway, environmental activism, street installations, anarchic noise orchestras, new sports including blindfolded soccer, fake business training workshops, and a paper apartment giveaway, we soon realized enthusiasm alone was not enough to maintain the same high level of energy in the group processes as we had witnessed during "Forest Storm."

Ultimately, almost none of the submissions were implemented. Our summer workshop opened on June 7, when we held a session with the American-Kazakhstani collective Artpologist (Zhanara Nauruzbayeva and Daniel Gallegos), who specialize in socially committed projects at the intersection of art and cultural anthropology.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See their website: <http://artpologist.com>.



## AT THE END OF THE DAY, WHAT THE COMMUNITY CONSIDERS TOPICAL IS ACTUALLY TOPICAL

Exhibition view featuring an homage to Louise Bourgeois.  
*Women's Business*, Umai Gallery, Almaty, November 2013.  
Courtesy of Ruthie Jenrbekova



Exhibition view featuring Mila Krivdina's *Epsilon*. *Anything Goes*, Almaty, June 2013. Courtesy of Ruthie Jenrbekova

Realizing we did not have the wherewithal and means to maintain an ongoing exhibition process, we decided to limit ourselves to a large-scale, inclusive show of everybody and everything in the spirit of the famous 1978 Walter Hopps–curated show *36 Hours*. Our decision was partly a response to criticism by art scholars who argued that our shows were exhibitions of poor-quality work by amateurs. On the other hand, it was impossible to do high-quality, intellectually satiated projects for free by taking advantage of the sheer desire of women artists to show their work. Besides, it was crucial to us to generate a kind of social environment.

For this reason, in June, we published an open call asking folks to bring anything whatsoever to a show entitled *Anything Goes: What's relevant for you is relevant for me, too*. We wanted to bring together professionals, amateurs, and people who had nothing to do with art in an inclusive space where they could express themselves freely without fear of censorship. Given the prevailing atmosphere of self-censorship in authoritarian countries, this made sense in itself. We attempted to generate a stream of social consciousness or, if you like, trigger a group automatic writing session that could provide the key to understanding the unspoken. Besides, it was simply fun to violate all the principles of curatorship and show egalitarianism in action. Whatever the case, people heeded our call. *Anything Goes* was our personal record-breaker in terms of numbers of participating women artists and the degree of engagement on the part of people who usually do not relate to art-making.

**OUR DECISION WAS PARTLY A RESPONSE TO CRITICISM BY ART SCHOLARS WHO ARGUED THAT OUR SHOWS WERE EXHIBITIONS OF POOR-QUALITY WORK BY AMATEURS**

**ON THE OTHER HAND, IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO DO HIGH-QUALITY, INTELLECTUALLY SATIATED PROJECTS FOR FREE BY TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE SHEER DESIRE OF WOMEN ARTISTS TO SHOW THEIR WORK**

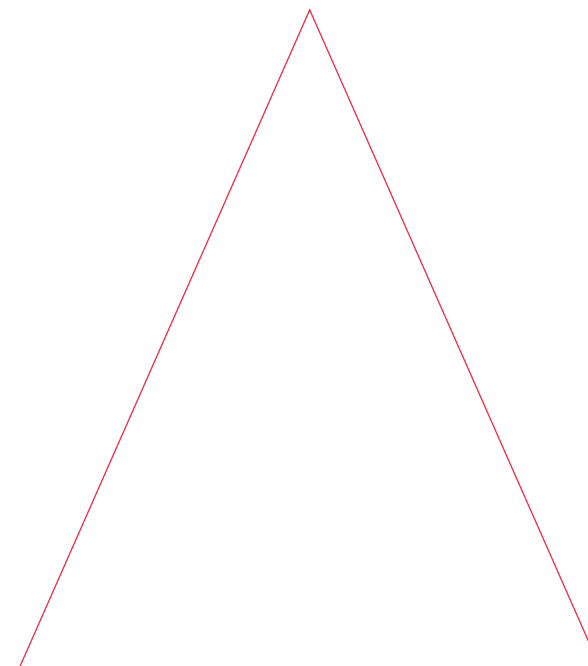
## CONCLUSION

Despite the efforts made by the L.E.S. management to ease our art space's integration into the business center, the process predictably generated friction. We quickly noticed the L.E.S. community was stratified in exactly the same way as larger communities in Almaty. The people involved in trainings and co-working were virtually uninterested in the Creolex Center's cultural events, while the art crowd was interested only in the events, ignoring the services and businesses supported by the cluster. One of the main ideas of the collaboration—combining different ideas in a single space—was not fully realized, unfortunately: the business end of the L.E.S. operates largely independently of the artistic end. Management was more and more inclined to the notion that it was inexpedient to maintain an art center under its roof. A major contributor to this challenge was our principled refusal to provide a venue for commercially focused artists whose work showed no signs they were familiar with (post) modernist cultural history. We thought they had many opportunities to exhibit in other venues. Although we were asked many times to exhibit figurative illustrations and painted ceramics, to host concerts by romantic guitarists and dissident singer-songwriters, we were steadfast in our commitment to unpopular genres. Meanwhile, the L.E.S., which supported us and expected our support in return, wanted popular, high-profile, respectable events and genres, something we could not offer them, even though we had no means whatsoever for promoting our own program.

Audiences cannot process innovation in art without supplementary, relatively large-scale investments aimed at legitimizing that innovation. The means of representing symbolic goods are quite expensive, involving appropriate architectural settings (exteriors and interiors), international connections, publishing, long-term institutional work, etc. In our case, we were managing a DIY artist-run space on the fly. What we saw as success, the L.E.S. management regarded as failed events for a narrow circle of friends. Since we had no budget for doing events, we could plan nothing that required anything more than our own performative actions.

As a result, these actions were clearly not enough to achieve visible outcomes, while we could offer the business nothing but worries. Our audience was not particularly solvent. On the other hand, they often brought their own drinks and had a hard time exiting the venue at closing time. The cluster's management obviously knew the work of the Creolex Center was unprofitable. It brought them nothing but the chaos occasioned by our events and the people who attended them. These often flagrantly interfered with the selfsame entrepreneurs in the business cluster who basically paid for everything. For this reason, it was no surprise to either party when our collaboration with creative business came to a sudden end. In the autumn of 2013, after eighteen months of intense work, we were forced to stop our experiment in grafting the branch of art onto the business center's trunk and to cease our work as an integral part of the L.E.S.

What happened to the Creolex Center afterwards is a totally different story.



**IN OUR CASE, WE WERE MANAGING A DIY ARTIST-RUN SPACE ON THE FLY. WHAT WE SAW AS SUCCESS, THE L.E.S. MANAGEMENT REGARDED AS FAILED EVENTS FOR A NARROW CIRCLE OF FRIENDS**

# SOME ARE MORE EQUAL

**YEVHENIIA OLIINYK**

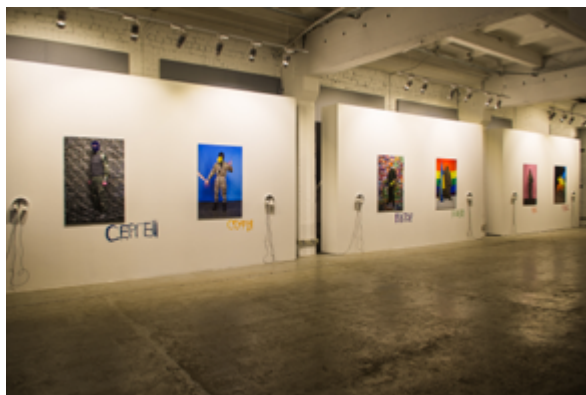
Kyiv, Ukraine



“They are more afraid of talking about their own experiences than facing a hail of bullets.” This was how photographer Anton Shebetko described his project *We Were Here* (2018), about members of the LGBTQI community involved in the ongoing military conflict in Eastern Ukraine. His photos depict both draftees and volunteers, men, women, and trans-genders. Shebetko was especially interested in how their identities coexisted and how their queerness had been impacted by a patriarchal organization such as the army.

As the project’s curators noted, no information was available about the number of people from the LGBTQI community among the more than 330,000 Ukrainian nationals involved in the war in Donbas. Since Ukrainian public opinion regards LGBTQI people, at worst, as a threat to national sovereignty and, at best, as annoying freaks who lack certain rights, many find it hard to inscribe them into the now-mundane discourse of war heroes. This was the task Shebetko and his curators set themselves in *We Were Here*: to help people empathize.

**SHEBETKO WAS ESPECIALLY INTERESTED IN HOW THEIR IDENTITIES COEXISTED AND HOW THEIR QUEERNESS HAD BEEN IMPACTED BY A PATRIARCHAL ORGANIZATION SUCH AS THE ARMY**



Anton Shebetko, *We Were Here* (exhibition view). Izolyatsiya, Kyiv, 2018. Photo courtesy of Valery Miloserdov. The exhibition was part of *Coming Out of Isolation: Through Art to Visibility*, organized by the Izolyatsiya Foundation and Kievpride with support from the EVZ Foundation.

The exhibition was presented in the autumn of 2018 at Izolyatsiya, in Kyiv. Six months earlier, in the very same contemporary art center, members of the Right Sector and the conservative Orthodox group Katekhon had tried to disrupt a lecture on the growing ultra-rightist movement in Ukraine, setting a recursive precedent that was as ironic as it was terrifying. Unfortunately, all other examples of the radical right's increasing activeness have not been so comical. 2018 saw the emergence of the Natsdruzhyny, paramilitary "national militias" who espoused flagrant xenophobia. According to a spokesman, Roman Chernyshev, they planned to patrol the streets and do battle with drug dens. (A year later, there was no information about their work other than a video showing members of a Natsdruzhyna being arrested for disorderly conduct.)<sup>1</sup> Various ultra-rightist groups have routinely attacked Roma all over Ukraine. During one such attack, 23-year-old David Papa was killed. It has been the only case among the dozen assaults that occurred over the last year that has a chance of being investigated as a hate crime. Ukrainian nationalists have shown the same frightening persistence and consistency when it comes to disrupting any event dealing with human rights—LGBTQI rights and feminism in particular.

Although the majority of these groups avoid openly associating with political parties,

<sup>1</sup> Yevhen Rudenko and Eldar Saraxman, "Altruists on the March: How the Natsdruzhyny Are Organized and Whether They Should be Feared," *Ukrainska pravda*, February 6, 2018 (in Ukrainian), <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2018/02/6/7170686/>.

discrimination, violence, and ignorance have been legitimized in national politics. Thus, three years ago, after anti-discrimination amendments were successfully voted into the country's Labor Code (the amendments were a requirement for liberalizing Ukraine's visa regime with the EU), Volodymyr Groysman, then chair of the Verkhovna Rada (the parliament of Ukraine), now the country's prime minister, felt it necessary to clarify that MPs supported family values and would never condone same-sex marriages. Two years ago, Ukrainian MPs passed in its first reading a law combating domestic violence only after the words "gender" and "sexual orientation" had been removed from the draft law's wording.

They thus imagined they were protecting "traditional values" and "spirituality," terms that no level-headed Ukrainian can ever utter seriously again, it would seem. According to the civil rights group Nash Mir, 198 assaults on members of the LGBTQI community had been registered last year as of August 2018. Most of the offenders are not charged under the Criminal Code's special article for hate crimes, because homophobia and transphobia do not exist as concepts in Ukrainian jurisprudence.

The Ukrainian government's most outstanding achievement in defending LGBTQI rights has, perhaps, been its protection of people attending the Equality March in Kyiv, which takes place every June. In 2016, two thousand marchers were guarded by six thousand policemen, thus plainly illustrating the scale of the threat to people who simply exercise their right to freedom of assembly. In 2015, however, two hundred law enforcers were unable to protect the two hundred and fifty marchers from smoke grenades,

**WE WERE HERE  
CONSISTS OF  
A SERIES OF PHOTO  
PORTRAITS AND AUDIO  
INTERVIEWS IN WHICH  
THE VOICES HAVE BEEN  
ALTERED**

**SHEBETKO'S SUBJECTS  
TALK ABOUT HOW THEY  
WENT TO WAR AND  
CAME OUT TO THEIR  
FELLOW SOLDIERS,  
ABOUT HOMOPHOBIA IN  
THE ARMY AND THEIR  
ATTITUDES TO THE  
EQUALITY MARCH**

tear gas, and harassment and assaults after the march. In the last two years, however, the Equality March in Kyiv has gone off fairly smoothly. The same cannot be said of other public events dealing with LGBTQI rights. For example, in late November of last year, ultra-rightists disrupted a Transgender Day of Remembrance event. Several people, including reporters, were injured, while the police, instead of countering the violence, simply pushed the people attending the event into a subway station.

Other Ukrainian cities have tried holding Equality Festivals, rather than marches, to avoid associations with gay pride parades, which are often regarded with aggression, but their organizers have faced threats from ultra-right groups and bans from conservative local officials, provoking self-censorship among organizers and activists. For example, at last year's Publishers Forum in Lviv, a presentation of Larisa Denisenko's book *Maya and Her Mothers* was canceled for safety reasons after the author was threatened. The organizers thus inadvertently supported the absurd and common argument of right-wingers that the country is at war and now is not the time for human rights. Only, for some reason, people who are hundreds of kilometers from the frontline have had to take extra measures to ensure their safety since the war kicked off.

This rhetoric has generated the impression that there are two worlds at odds with each other: a world where brave folk fight an external aggressor for the nation's survival while other people fight just as desperately for values alien to the majority. Moreover, these values are nearly as dangerous as Russian tanks.

Returning to *We Were Here*, Shebetko has fallen into the trap of a black-and-white narrative by trying to negotiate this conflict.

*We Were Here* consists of a series of photo portraits and audio interviews in which the voices have been altered. Shebetko's subjects talk about how they went to war and came out to their fellow soldiers, about homophobia in the army and their attitudes to the Equality March. With one exception, they covered their faces. Shebetko's visual and audio portraits are critical and ironic at the same time. The military uniforms and the poses his subjects strike are allusions to the propaganda photos of Ukraine's current heroes and recruiting posters urging people to swell the ranks of the volunteer army. The visual canon, however, is nullified when a soldier in camouflage is depicted against a pink wall or a shiny satin rainbow flag. Multicolored spots, whether in the shape of paint on a soldier's face and hands or as part of graffiti, provoke associations with carnivals and street festivals and even, perhaps, with gay pride parades, while a soldier decked out in a camouflage net to conceal his identity reminds us more of a fantastic beast than of a sniper. By the way, Shebetko treats the topic of privacy using the same technique as in his series *Common People*, that is, by defacing his subjects. Only instead of ordinary photos, *We Were Here* confronts viewers with rows of gigantic official photos of men in uniform splashed with paint. We involuntarily recall activists at rallies who have been doused with Brilliant Green by ultra-rightists.

The exhibition's curators stated that they wanted to show the diversity that exists in all societies: "There is no single right image of a hero or a member of the

LGBT community.”<sup>2</sup> Shebetko, however, represents his subjects uniformly: they are posed in uniform and shot in a studio. In looking at how the media reacted to the exhibition, we see that what tickled their fancy was not the notion of diversity, but rather that there were also “decent” members of the LGBTQI community, people who do not march in the streets shouting weird slogans, but who were doing “really important work.” This notion is reiterated by one of Shebetko’s subjects, who in his interview tries to vindicate the Right Sector by claiming the group is not homophobic. He notes, however, that he failed to come out to his fellow soldiers.

“I think there’s a time for everything, and it’s the same for LGBT rights. The military and the Right Sector are raising a ruckus because there’s a war on, while those guys march around with flags and do nothing. They also contribute to the war no less than the ones in combat. But everyone takes a narrow view of things.”<sup>3</sup>

Rhetorical figures typical of right-wing discourse are used by both Shebetko and his subjects. For example, in an interview with Radio Svoboda’s Ukrainian Service, Shebetko comments on the coming out of one of his subjects: “You see, something might

2 Kateryny Filyuk, as quoted in “We Were Here: An Exhibition about LGBT in the War Opens in Kyiv,” *Radio Svoboda*, August 30, 2018 (in Ukrainian), <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-lgbt-v-ato/29462207.html>.

3 Anton Shebetko, “‘There’s a War On, While Those Guys March Around with Flags’: Ukrainian LGBT Serving in the ATO Sector,” *Bird in Flight*, June 8, 2018 (in Russian), <https://birdinflight.com/ru/portret/20180608-lgbt-ato.html>.

change people’s minds, even if they previously had negative attitudes, if you show them an example of an individual—not a cartoon gay, as they are usually presented, and not an activist, because that is a slightly different image—but a normal guy who, for example, served in the army and defended Ukraine.”<sup>4</sup>

The very comparison between a “cartoon gay” (what is meant by this is often not clarified, so the parameters of “gayness” remain quite blurred) and a “normal guy” implies a framework through which Shebetko’s subjects must squeeze. He has no compunction about resorting to pretty but utterly baseless generalizations when asked how military service on the frontline is different for LGBTQI. “They don’t feel such fear before battle, before facing bullets, shooting and, perhaps, killing something, and seeing other people die. They find it more frightening to say they are gays or lesbians.”<sup>5</sup> By trying in this way to normalize a persecuted group, Shebetko only reinforces their otherness. The conclusion is that LGBTQI people are not only able to fight in wars but also do it better than their heterosexual cisgender comrades.

It is even more curious to see how this discourse intersects with the “friends vs. foes” discourse typical of a militaristic society. “If you think about it, any totalitarianism falters when it comes to this topic. The so-called Russian world is left high and dry in this

4 Ivan Lyubysh-Kirdej and Anastasiya Moskvychova, “Author of the Project ‘We Were Here’: ‘They Are More Afraid of Talking about Their Own Experiences than Facing a Hail of Bullets,’” *Radio Svoboda*, August 30, 2018 (in Ukrainian), <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/lgbt-v-armii/29460136.html>.

5 Ibid.

**YOU SEE, SOMETHING MIGHT CHANGE PEOPLE’S MINDS, EVEN IF THEY PREVIOUSLY HAD NEGATIVE ATTITUDES, IF YOU SHOW THEM AN EXAMPLE OF AN INDIVIDUAL—NOT A CARTOON GAY, AS THEY ARE USUALLY PRESENTED, AND NOT AN ACTIVIST, BECAUSE THAT IS A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT IMAGE**

**BUT A NORMAL GUY WHO, FOR EXAMPLE, SERVED IN THE ARMY AND DEFENDED UKRAINE**

THERE IS NO  
SINGLE RIGHT  
IMAGE OF A HERO  
OR A MEMBER  
OF THE LGBT  
COMMUNITY

Anton Shebetko, *We Were Here* (exhibition view).  
Courtesy of Valery Miloserdov

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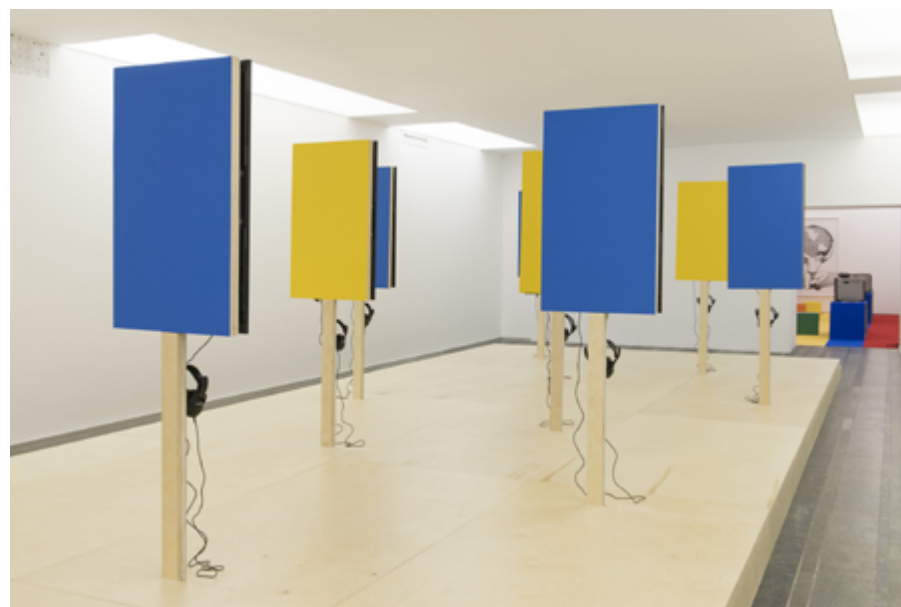
sense: its lynchpins come undone. I imagine there are a lot of gays among ‘lynchpin’ Russians, but they are unable to come out. We can do it, however, and stop living the lie,” said Viktor Pilipenko, the only openly gay man in *We Were Here* and a combat soldier with the Donbas Battalion.<sup>6</sup>

It would be difficult, however, to claim that Ukrainian society was more LGBTQI friendly than Russian society. Take, for example, the recent petition, posted on the website of the Ukrainian president, demanding that the government “defend traditional family values and stop the promotion of homosexuality [sic].” Twenty-three thousand people managed to sign the petition before it was removed from the website as discriminatory. That is, it fell only two thousand signatures short of the number necessary for the president to have considered it.

It is no wonder Shebetko’s project was more reminiscent of public service advertising than art. The visual idiom of his pieces and the deliberate mixing of allegedly contradictory symbols was on a par with other Ukrainian photo projects about soldiers that have been exhibited in the public space. Initially, Shebetko’s photos were also supposed to appear on the streets of Kyiv, but advertising agencies refused to place them on street-level billboards.

The same impression (of posters exhibited in a white cube gallery) was made by Carlos Motta’s exhibition *Patriots, Citizens, Lovers*, presented at

6 Lesya Hanzha, “Viktor Pilipenko, Donbas Battalion, Gay: Tanks Have Fired on Me, So I’m Not Afraid of Brilliant Green,” *Ukrainska pravda*, August 27, 2018 (in Ukrainian), <https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/2018/08/27/232864/>.



Carlos Motta, *Patriots, Citizens, Lovers* (exhibition view).  
Pinchuk Art Centre, Kyiv, 2015. Courtesy of Sergei Ilyin



Anton Shebetko, *Vladimir Hill*, from the series *Pleshka*, 2017  
 Anton Shebetko, *Park near Dynamo Stadium*, from the series *Pleshka*, 2017

the Pinchuk Art Centre, in Kyiv, in late 2015. Motta made his mark with works about homosexuality in pre-colonial and colonial Latin America. *Patriots, Citizens, Lovers* was a series of interviews with members of the Ukrainian LGBTQI community about activism, relationships with family and coworkers, and discrimination during wartime. The interviewees addressed listeners from individual screens decked out in the blue and yellow of the Ukrainian flag. The witnesses spoke of physical attacks, increasing xenophobia, and the rise of right-wing radicalism. However, as cultural studies specialist Anna Pohribna noted, the exhibition's narrative "[fell] into one of the traps with which the definition 'wartime' is chockablock. . . . The show's title, *Patriots, Citizens, Lovers*—the three common denominators of the stories told by the subjects—voices the desire, so common nowadays, to fit into the dominant discourse, meaning national identity and civic stances are foregrounded in 'wartime.'"<sup>7</sup>

Even in "wartime," however, there are other ways to talk about the problems of the LGBTQI community. For example, in *Pleshka*, produced for the 2017 Young Artists Festival in Kyiv, Shebetko presented a series of photos of the best-known Kyiv *pleshki*, or gay cruising spots. Gay men met at *pleshki* in nearly all major Soviet cities. They were usually located in city parks near public toilets. Since homosexuality was criminalized in the Soviet Union, the *pleshki* were among the few places where gays could meet and have sex. Situated away from lively streets

<sup>7</sup> Anna Pohribna, "I See, Son, That You're Not a Moskal," *Korydor*, December 25, 2015 (in Ukrainian), <http://www.korydor.in.ua/ua/equality/lgbti-exhibitions.html>.

and paths, they were gray zones within public space. The places are shown deserted in nearly all of Shebetko's photos, but what Roland Barthes termed "it happened to be there" fills the snapshots with a sense of history.<sup>8</sup> Shebetko literally shows how the LGBTQI community was invisible and remains invisible even now, despite the fact that homosexuality was decriminalized long ago.

Yevgenia Belorusets explores the same topic in her project *A Room of My Own*, shown at the Visual Culture Research Center, in Kyiv, in 2012. The subjects of her photographs, homosexual and queer couples, do not exist within the "traditional family" discourse. Belorusets captured their daily lives, actually living through parts of those lives with them. Although the exhibition opened a year and a half before the Euromaidan erupted, the topic of the intrusive right-wing agenda and growing xenophobia was already on her radar. "I realized if I wanted to oppose xenophobia, I had to deal with this topic, and it is timely. It is crucial we confiscate this fascist discourse from the right," Belorusets said.<sup>9</sup> A day before *A Room of My Own* closed, unknown visitors ripped up the photos, only reinforcing the importance of Belorusets' artistic message.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 42.

<sup>9</sup> Hanna Tsiba, "A Room of One's Own: A Port in the Storm or a Place of Exile? The Private Lives of Queer Families in Yevgenia Belorusets' Exhibition," *Art Ukraine*, May 4, 2012 (in Russian), <http://artukraine.com.ua/a/svoya-komnata-tihaya-gavan-ili-ssylka-chastnaya-zhizn-kvir-semey-na-vystavke-evgenii-belorusetsk>. XMYiF6Z7kht.



Yevgenia Belorusets, *A Room of My Own*, 2012



Some Are More Equal

Belorusets differed fundamentally from Shebetko and Motta in that she did not present herself as a subject endowing a victimized group with the power of speech. Rather, Belorusets asked persecuted people for permission to spend time with them and try to see life through their eyes. She claimed her subjects were her co-creators, and this was actually the case. At any rate, all of them had the courage not only to let a stranger into their rooms but also to show their faces. On the contrary, both Shebetko and Motta placed their subjects on the pedestal of a predefined identity and shined a spotlight on them, and yet they mostly averted their gaze, not wanting to be identified. Belorusets got very close to her subjects while leaving them the right to be who they wanted to be.

This artistic representation of LGBTQI families has often been criticized as an attempt to smuggle them into the traditionalist discourse and thus, allegedly, vindicate them by drawing attention to the fact they live in bedroom communities, sleep on foldout couches, and raise children—just like “normal” people do. Nevertheless, acts of self-censorship, motivated by a desire to avoid provoking the right, are much more alarming, even at the stage of defining the scope of the artistic utterance.

The war in Ukraine has gone on for almost five years. The more entrenched radical sentiments become, the more helpful it is to remember the Euromaidan, the revolution that marked the start of a completely new period in Ukrainian history. Along with the demands made by the crowds in the Maidan, we should also remember the demands individual members of the uprising did not dare to voice. Citing a communiqué by LGBTQI groups, entitled “The Euro

Revolution in Ukraine: The Role and Involvement of LGBT,” sociologist Tamara Marcenyuk wrote that the LGBTQI community was actively involved in the revolution, but flatly denied it was fighting specifically for LGBT rights.<sup>10</sup> Several of her respondents also spoke of an aggressive reaction towards their involvement in the Maidan and accusations that people who carried rainbow flags and feminist placards were provocateurs.

Moreover, during the Euromaidan, there were fake LGBTQI protests meant to discredit the revolution. Activists from actual LGBTQI groups were forced to deny their complicity with unknown persons who set up a so-called LGBTQI tent on the Maidan and to disavow reports the EU had demanded the legalization of same-sex marriages in Ukraine. Marcenyuk quoted queer researcher Maria Maerchuk: “So, the leaders of LGBT groups . . . issue appeals to ‘ridicule’ a pseudo-gay protest held recently on the Maidan, and ‘only peacefully and nonviolently try and prevent it from going ahead by chanting, “Provocation!”’ . . . When they request in their communiqués that gays, albeit fake gays, should be mildly harassed and ask to ridicule those who pretend to be gays, they are speaking the idiom of right-wingers.”<sup>11</sup>

These are all manifestations of a politics of homoantagonism, which has involved constructing a

<sup>10</sup> “But now we are defending the rights not only of LGBT.” As quoted in Tamara Marcenyuk, “Human Rights for the LGBT Community and the Euromaidan of 2013–2014,” *Commons*, October 15, 2014 (in Ukrainian), <https://commons.com.ua/ru/prava-lyudini-dlya-lgbt-spilnoti-i-yevromajdan-2013-2014/>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

“correct” gay identity. “There is a certain contradiction here,” wrote Marcenyuk. “When human rights are defended, the means for securing those rights should be inclusive rather than exclusive.”<sup>12</sup>

We can trace the same trajectory in the art projects I have described. The Ukrainian LGBTQI community completely lacks the legal means to combat homophobia and transphobia, but it would be irresponsible and absurd to demand that its members vigorously assert their rights or publicly embrace a leftist agenda, thus endangering themselves and their loved ones. Art, however, is a force capable of changing society. Unfortunately, attempts by artists to mold a “correct” image for the LGBTQI minority render pointless their struggle for visibility and respect.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



**THE UKRAINIAN LGBTQI COMMUNITY COMPLETELY LACKS THE LEGAL MEANS TO COMBAT HOMOPHOBIA AND TRANSPHOBIA, BUT IT WOULD BE IRRESPONSIBLE AND ABSURD TO DEMAND THAT ITS MEMBERS VIGOROUSLY ASSERT THEIR RIGHTS OR PUBLICLY EMBRACE A LEFTIST AGENDA, THUS ENDANGERING THEMSELVES AND THEIR LOVED ONES**

# BIOGRAPHIES

**SABINA ABBASOVA**  
BAKU, AZERBAIJAN

Sabina Abbasova is an architect. In 2015, together with a group of young architects, she founded the organization PILLƏ Atelier, which organizes lectures, workshops, and exhibitions about urbanism and architecture. She has participated in international workshops as part of the European Architecture Students Assembly (2012–15) and Yarat Education, and in a Capacity Building Training Program for Cultural Managers in 2016.

**VAHRAM AGHASYAN**  
YEREVAN, ARMENIA

Vahram Aghasyan is an artist whose work has been exhibited in Turkey, Finland, Greece, and France. He was part of the group show *Resistance Through Art* in the Armenian Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale, in 2005. His works are in the museum collections of M HKA, Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp, Museum on the Seam, Jerusalem, and many others. An experienced curator, artist, and theorist, Aghasyan was a founding member of the group ACT and the Commune political platform in Yerevan. For more information, please visit his website at [vahramaghasyan.net](http://vahramaghasyan.net).

**IRINA BHARAT**  
TASHKENT, UZBEKISTAN

Irina Bharat is an art manager and producer in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Since 2005, she has worked at the Ilkhom Theater as the Deputy Director for Communication and International Relations Manager. Under her leadership, the following projects have been conducted: Laboratory for Young Central Asian Directors, “Inclusive Theater” Laboratory, Art Prospect art residencies, and participation by the Ilkhom Theater in international theater festivals and productions.

**DATA CHIGHOLASHVILI**  
TBILISI, GEORGIA

Data (David) Chigholashvili is Curator of International Programs at the State Silk Museum and Project Coordinator, GeoAIR. His work explores connections between social anthropology and contemporary art through theoretical research and socially engaged art projects. In his collaborations, he connects visual and urban anthropology, ethnography, socially engaged art practices, public space, migration, foodways, and memory. Chigholashvili's works are strongly contextual. Through both direct commentary and subtle methods, he questions his surroundings and challenges conventional definitions and forms by exploring connections between disciplines and means of expression.

**ANNA CHISTOSERDOVA**  
MINSK, BELARUS

Anna Chistoserdova was the Art Director of the Podzemka Gallery from 2004 until 2009, when she co-founded the highly respected Ÿ Gallery of Contemporary Art in Minsk. She currently serves as Ÿ Gallery's Art Director and manages a variety of international art projects and educational programs. Chistoserdova received the European Diploma on Cultural Project Management and Cultural Policy from the Association Marcel Hicter, Brussels, in 2014 and currently serves on the advisory committees of the Eastern Partnership Culture Programme, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Platform for Culture, and the Oracle Cultural Network.

**ILONA DEMCHENKO**  
KYIV, UKRAINE

Ilona Demchenko is a cultural manager from Kyiv. She studied Philosophy at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and European Studies in Maastricht University (the Netherlands). Since 2014, she has been working at the CSM/Foundation Centre for Contemporary Art and the Goethe-Institut Ukraine.

**RUTHIE JENRBEKOVA**  
ALMATY, KAZAKHSTAN

Ruthie Jenrbekova is an artist, transfeminist, writer, and performer. Since 1997, she has been involved in various grassroots cultural undertakings. She and Maria Vilkovsky run the imaginary Creolex Center.

**GULNARA KASMALIEVA, MURATBEK DJUMALIEV**  
BISHKEK, KYRGYZSTAN

Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev are artists and curators based in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. They are co-founders of the public organization ArtEast and curators of the educational project ArtEast School of Contemporary Art.

**EVA KHACHATRYAN**  
YEREVAN, ARMENIA

Eva Khachatryan is an independent curator, Vice-President of AICA Armenia (International Association of Art Critics) and a member of CIMAM (International Committee of ICOM for Museums and Collections of Modern and Contemporary Art). She runs the [suburb.am](http://suburb.am) platform. Khachatryan was a curator at the Armenian Center for Contemporary Experimental Art (ACCEA) and a co-director of its Department of Fine Arts. Her curatorial work focuses on women's issues and new media in contemporary art.

**JAMSHED KHOLIKOV**  
DUSHANBE, TAJIKISTAN

Jamshed Kholikov is an artist, photographer, and curator. He is also one of the founders and directors of Dushanbe ArtGround, a cultural center dedicated to the development of contemporary art, including media.

**YULIA KOSTEREVA**  
KYIV, UKRAINE

Yulia Kostereva is an artist, curator, and organizer. She works in the fields of visual art and social practice art. The focus of her art is the stories behind the object and subject. Kostereva is a co-founder and member of the artistic platform Open Place, an organization dedicated to the broadening of creative research and the establishment of links between the artistic process and different layers of contemporary society.

**VIKTOR MISIANO**  
RUSSIA/ITALY

Viktor Misiano is a renowned art theorist and curator. His most recent curatorial project is a multidisciplinary initiative, "The Human Condition," supported by the National Centre for Contemporary Arts and the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, both in Moscow, and the Moscow Museum of Modern Art. Also in Moscow, Misiano was a curator of contemporary art at the Pushkin National Museum of Fine Arts and the Director of the Center for Contemporary Art. He served on the curatorial team of Manifesta 1, Rotterdam and curated the Russian section of the 3rd Istanbul Biennial, the 46th and 50th Venice Biennale, the 1st Valencia Bienal, Spain, the 25th and 26th São Paulo Bienal, the Central Asia Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale, and the exhibitions *Live Cinema/The Return of the Image: Video from Central Asia* (2007–8), at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and *Progressive Nostalgia: Art from the Former USSR* (2007), at Centro per l'arte contemporanea, Prato, Italy. Founder and editor-in-chief of the *Moscow Art Magazine* and co-founder of the *Manifesta Journal: Journal of Contemporary Curatorship*, Misiano is the author of many articles, catalogues, and books. He was awarded an honorary doctorate from the Helsinki University for Art and Design. Misiano divides his time between Moscow, Russia, and Cisternino, Italy.

**YEVHENIIA OLIINYK**  
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Yevheniia Oliinyk is a journalist and cultural commentator. She studied at the Institute of Journalism in Kyiv and the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. She has worked at Radio Svoboda's Kyiv bureau, the online journal *Korydor*, and the Human Rights Information Center in Kyiv.

**LALI PERTENAVA**  
**TBILISI, GEORGIA**

Lali Pertenava is an art critic and curator. She is pursuing a Ph.D. in Psychological Anthropology at the Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. Pertenava is a co-founder of the local arts organization Public Art Platform, which promotes participatory, community-based, and socially engaged art projects.

**ANNA POHRIBNA**  
**KYIV, UKRAINE**

Anna Pohribna has been working at CSM/ Foundation Centre for Contemporary Art since 2012 and at the National Art and Culture Museum Complex "Mystetskyi Arsenal" since 2017. As a project manager, Pohribna is responsible for different aspects of project circle management. She is interested in public history, public space issues, participatory practices, and community development.

**MARIAM SHERGELASHVILI**  
**TBILISI, GEORGIA**

Mariam Shergelashvili has an M.A. in Art History and Theory and is an independent curator and exhibition curator at the State Silk Museum. Her work focuses on researching and analyzing different contemporary visual art practices. As a co-founder of the group initiative ALGORITHM F5, Shergelashvili is working to develop a non-formal educational platform by researching curatorial and theoretical practices in collaboration with museums and other art institutions.

**VLADIMIR US**  
**CHIȘINĂU, MOLDOVA**

Vladimir Us is an artist and curator. He is a founding member of the Oberliht Association. He studied art, curating, cultural management, and cultural policy in Chișinău, Grenoble, and Belgrade. His current work examines the processes involved in the transformation of public space in post-Soviet cities along with the need for an alternative network of public spaces in Chișinău.

**OLGA VESELOVA**  
**ALMATY, KAZAKHSTAN**

Olga Veselova is the Director of Artbat Fest, an annual international contemporary art festival in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and the Deputy Director of the Eurasian Cultural Alliance. Veselova is also the co-founder of the public cultural space ARTPOINT and is an ongoing consultant for the annual festival Urban Art Astana. She has been a writer for the *Central Asian Journal of Art Studies* since 2016 and was recently a consultant for Astana EXPO 2017 and the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art.

**MARIA VILKOVISKY**  
**ALMATY, KAZAKHSTAN**

Maria Vilkovisky is an artist, curator, and poet. She has been curating art shows and contemporary art-related educational programs since 2011. Since 2013, she and Ruthie Jenrbekova have run the imaginary Creolex Center.

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**A MIRACLE OR MISUNDERSTANDING  
SOCIALLY ENGAGED PRACTICES IN THE ART  
PROSPECT NETWORK COUNTRIES  
FIELD REPORTS FROM ARMENIA, AZERBAIJAN,  
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**SHARING TEXTS AND IMAGES FROM  
A MIRACLE OR MISUNDERSTANDING:  
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ART PROSPECT NETWORK COUNTRIES**

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**HYPERLINKS**

All hyperlinks in *A Miracle or Misunderstanding: Socially Engaged Practices in the Art Prospect Network Countries* are valid as of the date of publication (2019).



CEC ArtsLink, founded in 1962, promotes international dialogue and understanding through innovative arts projects. CEC ArtsLink believes that the arts are the most deliberate and profound means of communication that can help overcome long histories of distrust, insularity, and conflict, and contribute to building more open and civil societies. The core programs—[ArtsLink Fellowships](#), [Art Prospect](#), and [Back Apartment Residency](#)—facilitate collaboration among leading artists, arts managers, curators, and communities in the United States and 37 other countries.

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