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Lundskonsthall

Preface

This exhibition with artists from Georgia is the result of a long-established interest that we have at Lunds konsthall. We are continuously following developments in contemporary art in contexts outside the traditional western art metropolises. What used to be called the 'Second World' (Eastern Europe and the countries of the former USSR) has been particularly close to us, not least because the curator Anders Kreuger, who has also worked on this exhibition, speaks Russian and travels quite frequently to these parts of the world.

We have also been interested, for some time already, in two of these artists from Georgia, without really connecting them through their country of origin. Thea Djordjadze and Koka Ramishvili both live in western European cities, they have both exhibit in many different contexts and impress viewers with their very different art practices. Now the audience at Lunds konsthall gets to see them together with several colleagues of a similar background.

To many, Georgia is probably quite unknown. Perhaps people know that Stalin was from there, that the country has a distinct language and a rich cultural heritage. Perhaps they know about Georgia's geographic location and the tense relationship to its powerful neighbour Russia. We believe that they know enough to be curious about finding out more. That is what we experienced.

Anders Kreuger has visited the Georgian capital Tbilisi to meet artists, curators and art historians. His trip was decisive for the concept

and composition of the exhibition. *To See the Dimensions. Artists from Georgia* features works by seven artists from different generations, with different goals and interests. The title suggests that there is still something connecting them in their disconnectedness. A way of seeing, an attitude, a desire for profundity, for precision and nuance.

This time the catalogue essay contains quite a lot of information intended to create a historical and cultural context for encountering the artists and their work. We think of our exhibition programme as a tool for inspiring and joyful learning, and this goes for ourselves as well as for the audience.

Many thanks to the participating contemporary artists, and particularly to Wato Tsereteli, who is also Director of Centre of Contemporary Art – Tbilisi, our collaboration partner in Georgia. Many thanks also to the art historian Ketvan Kintsurashvili, who has helped us with the experiment to realise an idea by David Kakabadze, deceased since almost 60 years. We also thank Thea Djordjadze's gallery, Sprüth Magers Berlin London, and M HKA in Antwerp for lending works by Koka Ramishvili. We have received generous support for the exhibition from the Swedish Institute, for which we are very grateful. Finally, thanks to Sweden's newly opened embassy in Tbilisi for being very kind and helpful.

Åsa Nacking
Director

To See the Dimensions. Artists from Georgia

Georgia

Georgian is among the very few languages that do not stress some syllables in a word more than others. This gives it a fleeting and curiously toneless character, but also an intense 'modular' rhythm, a bit like those monotonous but gradually changing pieces from the 1970s by Americans composers who took their inspiration from Eastern mysticism. We end up listening carefully, even if we understand nothing. Georgian is not related to any of the 'mainstream' languages that surround it in the Middle East (Indo-European Russian and Persian, Uralic Turkish or Semitic Arabic). Instead Georgian, or *kartuli* as the speakers themselves call it, is the largest of the many languages in the Caucasian group. This is a geographic rather than a genetic term, since only a few of these languages are actually related to each other. The Caucasus is the highest mountain range in Europe (or, perhaps more accurately, in an ambiguous zone that identifies with Europe but reaches deep into Asia). Linguists believe that a primeval state of affairs has been preserved in its many valleys. In prehistoric times, and until today in places like the rainforests of New Guinea or Brazil, people lived in small isolated communities. They would know their own language and those of their immediate neighbours, although these might be fundamentally different, but there would be no link language to connect them with more distant populations.

So while it is true that today's Georgia stands out in the region, its 'uniqueness' may be a reminder of an earlier norm rather than an anomaly. In a certain sense, all nations function as microcosmic systems, with political codes and rituals extending the particular linguistic codes that enhance their exclusivity as a community. What makes Georgia so special is not just the complexity of its language, and the alphabet that no other nation uses, but also its long written history and rich cultural heritage. In antiquity there were two kingdoms on this territory: Colchis (the land of the Golden Fleece in Greek mythology) by the Black Sea coast and Iberia (not to be confused with pre-Roman Spain) in the mountainous east. They were Roman client states for almost 400 years after the conquest of the Caucasus in 66 BC. In a momentous step Iberia adopted Christianity as its state religion already in the 330s, during the reign of Constantine the Great. Georgia has remained Christian ever since, with close ties to Byzantium throughout the Middle Ages, and its autonomous Orthodox Church is still a strong influence on both ethics and aesthetics. In Georgian the country is called *Sakartvelo*. Its name in Western languages is to do with the cult of St George, the dragon slayer. Since 2004 St George's Cross (which is also the symbol of England) features on the red-and-white state flag.

Parts of today's south-eastern Georgia and the capital Tbilisi (the name means 'hot springs') were conquered by Muslim Arabs in the 7th century, but Iberia retained considerable independence under the Bagrationi dynasty, which was to remain in power for almost a millennium. In the 11th century the western and eastern parts of Georgia were united. That inaugurated a period of greatness in the 12th century under King David IV 'the Builder' and his granddaughter Queen Tamar, who consolidated a Caucasian empire that lasted until the destruction of Tbilisi by the Mongols in 1236. This Golden Age or Renaissance saw a

revival of the characteristic Georgian religious architecture (churches and monasteries built as early as the 5th century are still in active use) and a flourishing of other arts. The perhaps best-known monument to Georgian medieval culture is the epic poem *Vépkhis tkasoani* ('The Knight in the Panther's Skin') written around 1200 by Shota Rustaveli, Treasurer at the court of Queen Tamar. His text, the story of an Arab nobleman and his Indian friend, shows the early maturity and sophistication of the Georgian literary language and has been translated into almost 50 different languages.

The Mongols were expelled and the country reunited by King George V 'the Brilliant' in the 1320s, but that could not stop Georgia's gradual disintegration in the 14th and 15th centuries. In the early 16th century, when western Europe was enjoying its own Renaissance, the weakened country was effectively swallowed by the Persian and Ottoman empires, and Georgia did not re-emerge as a political subject until the eastern kingdoms of Kartli and Kakhetia were unified by King Irakli II in 1762. He signed a treaty with Catherine the Great in 1783, supposedly guaranteeing Russian protection for the Orthodox Georgians. Yet Russia did not intervene when the Persians and Ottomans invaded in the last decades of the 18th century and finally broke the treaty by annexing Kartli–Kakhetia and dethroning the Bagrationi dynasty in 1801. A few years later the western Georgian kingdom of Imeretia was also conquered. Thus Georgia became part of the Russian Empire. The Georgian aristocracy was incorporated into its ruling stratum, just like the Tartar and Baltic German nobility before them, and at the same time as the Polish–Lithuanian upper classes or the Swedish-speaking elite in Finland. In the more than hundred years before the Russian Revolution, Tbilisi (known at the time as Tiflis) developed into an elegant and well-connected regional metropolis, receiving many foreign visitors. The more than 200 surviving works by Georgia's most

famous artist, the self-taught workman Pirosmani (Niko Pirosmanashvili, 1862–1918), help us visualise this imperial period. His figurative compositions, usually on black ground, were 'discovered' by the young artistic avant-garde in Tiflis around 1910, but he died in poverty nevertheless.

After the Russian Revolution in February 1917 the Bolsheviks under Lenin did not get a strong foothold in Transcaucasus (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan). The Mensheviks, a more moderate faction of what used to be the Russian Social Democratic Party, dominated the region, and Georgia in particular. During the devastating civil war that followed the Bolshevik takeover in November 1917 the Mensheviks first created a Transcaucasian Federation, but it did not last long. Already in May 1918 the Democratic Republic of Georgia was proclaimed, and it managed to stay independent under Menshevik rule until the Red Army invaded in the winter of 1921. The re-incorporation of Georgia into the Russian Empire (renamed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922) was plotted by prominent Georgian Bolsheviks such as Sergo Ordzhonikidze and the most prominent of them all, Ioseb Besarionis dze Djugashvili, better known as Joseph Stalin ('Man of Steel', 1878–1953), who at this time was Commissar of Nationalities in the Soviet government. Stalin also oversaw the brutal suppression of the Georgian uprising against Soviet rule in August 1924. Some say he even provoked it, to have an excuse for the mass execution of adversaries, mostly from the old nobility and intelligentsia. Several thousand people were shot under the command of Lavrenti Beria, another notorious Georgian Bolshevik and future head of the Soviet security police, and many thousand were deported to Siberia. Stalin said: 'Georgia must be plowed all under.'

The failed revolt marked the end of any organised resistance to Soviet rule in Georgia, part of the Trancaucasian SSR until 1936 and thereafter a separate Soviet Republic with – and

this is significant for understanding recent events – three so-called autonomous ethnic areas within its borders: the multi-ethnic coastal paradise Abkhazia in the northwest, linguistically Iranian South Ossetia in the north and Islamic Adjaria in the southwest. The Caucasian front of the Second World War never reached Georgia, but some 700,000 Georgians fought on the Soviet side (while some Georgians joined the Germans in special Alpine commandos). After Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation campaign of the mid-1950s, which in Georgia paradoxically led to massacres of students protesting against anti-Georgian sentiment, Georgia became known as the best-educated and economically most pragmatic (i.e. most corrupt) of the Soviet Republics. It was run by the party official Eduard Shevardnadze from 1972 until 1985, when he became Mikhail Gorbachev's Minister of Foreign Affairs. During the attempted *perestroika* ('reconstruction') of Soviet society previously repressed energies and ideas surfaced. At first, while the state-run apparatus was still functioning, this led to an upsurge of cultural production not least in cinema, which had always been a particularly nurtured (and restricted) art form in the Soviet system. Georgian filmmakers such as Tengiz Abuladze and Otar Iosseliani became internationally famous in the late 1980s, and the already world-famous Armenian director Sergei Paradjanov made some of his last films in Georgia before his death in 1990.

However, cultural production under new and freer circumstances spawned critical discourse, and reconstruction soon gave way to deconstruction as the fundamental ills and wrongs of Soviet society were aired in public one after one. Along with the no longer disguisable malfunctioning of the 'planned economy', the 'nationalities issues' (the impossible task of holding the world's last territorial empire together) would undo the USSR, quicker than anyone had predicted. Georgia and the Baltic states, where people had active memories of independence and

resistance to Russian rule, were the avant-garde of this centrifugal development in 1988–1991. Anti-communist dissidents from the 1960s and '70s re-emerged as nationalist politicians. In Georgia the literary scholar and Rustaveli specialist Zviad Gamsakhurdia became a leading figure. A demonstration in favour of Georgian independence and against separatist demands by the Abkhazian minority (understood as engineered by Soviet power) was violently suppressed on 9 April 1989, which contributed to a radicalisation of national politics across the whole USSR. In the spring of 1991 Georgia declared independence. Gamsakhurdia was elected President, promising to reassert authority over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. What happened instead, as the USSR officially collapsed during the autumn, was that Gamsakhurdia was deposed and killed in a coup d'état over Christmas and New Year and Shevardnadze returned to Georgia, where ethnic conflict and civil war raged until 1995. In 1992–1993 around a quarter of a million ethnic Georgians were expelled from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which were now effectively outside of Georgian control although still nominally part of the country. The 1990s are remembered as a period of chaos, poverty and darkness by most inhabitants. Quite literally so: the once enviable Georgian economy (based on agriculture and informal wheeling-and-dealing) had collapsed. Long power cuts were the norm rather than something exceptional.

Shevardnadze, now in his seventies, was officially elected President in 1995, but after a period of relative 'stability' (and corruption, and geo-political dependence on Russia during the Chechen wars) he was swept aside by the bloodless 'Rose Revolution' in 2003. His former protégé, the American-educated Mikheil Saakashvili, became the new President of Georgia in 2004, and the country switched allegiances and became pronouncedly pro-Western. Tbilisi must be the only capital in the world with a George W Bush Avenue (street signs being

bilingual in Georgian and English). In his first year Saakashvili succeeded to reincorporate Adjaria, which had also broken away under the erratic local strongman Aslan Abashidze, who even arranged to have a star in the sky named after him. Saakashvili's subsequent attempts to repeat this somewhat surprising success in Abkhazia and South Ossetia predictably led to a conflict with Russia, which had always supported the separatists both overtly and covertly. Still, Russia agreed to evacuate its Soviet-era military bases inside Georgia in 2005, although it failed to withdraw from Abkhazia and continued to support South Ossetia. In August 2008 this long-established low-level conflict escalated into a short but well-publicised war between Georgia and Russia, which appears to have been sparked off by Saakashvili's decision to bombard Tskhinvali, the South Ossetian capital. The 'results' were not very conclusive. Russia had a chance to show off its military prowess, which delighted domestic opinion but also reminded the international community to remain sceptical of its intentions and reliability. Georgia had a chance to rally international support but also saw its bid to join NATO and the EU weakened. Saakashvili lost much credibility at home and abroad. Abkhazia and South Ossetia stayed outside of his control, although only Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru and Vanuatu recognise them as independent states.

Dimensions

This tells us one or two things about Georgia, but what does it tell us about the reason to exhibit artists from there? The practice of creating a contemporary art exhibition as a portrait of a country is often questioned or even denounced. Enough of those 'geography shows'! In the history of Lunds konsthall they used to be named with a simple adjective followed by an exclamation

point. Norwegian! Irish! Romanian! This critique is not entirely misguided or unfair. Artists will not necessarily belong together in an exhibition just because they come from the same country or region or city. Art will not necessarily subscribe to ideas about statehood, regionalism or city branding. And finally, should we not always distinguish between good and bad reasons for doing what we do? Do we put up a 'country exhibition' because we *have to* (out of inner necessity, which is good, or external pressure, which is bad), because we *want to* (again, good if the desire is internal and 'free', bad if it is prompted by someone else's necessity) or because we *can* (almost always bad, since this seems to be the definition of opportunism and therefore of cynicism)? And what about the decision to organise a Georgian exhibition at Lunds konsthall with support from the Swedish Institute? Is it too pragmatic, or even opportunistic, to tap into the Swedish government's solidarity with Georgia's geopolitical choices?

What this polemic demonstrates is that we must discuss the political dimension of an exhibition like this before we can talk about its actual content. The decision to make a Georgian exhibition is in itself political, as is the decision to begin this essay with an attempt at situating the country in the reader's consciousness. If there were no need for that, if we believed everyone already knew the story we are telling, then the whole enterprise would be less political and perhaps less worthwhile. To a Swedish audience, Georgia is sufficiently unknown to provoke curiosity, yet sufficiently known to be representable, imaginable. For that reason Georgia is an interesting topic. At least this is our hypothesis. Yet for our exhibition to become interesting more is required. An exhibition should not be a one-dimensional representation, i.e. the equivalent of a straight line. An exhibition should not be a narrative that sticks to one topic and never branches off into the inexplicable, the incoherent, the infinitely nuanced. An exhibition should be multi-dimensional.

This sounds reasonable, but what do we actually mean by 'dimension'? The word itself is to do with measuring. It is related to 'metre' (the standardised measurement unit, but also the rhythmic system of poetry), 'moon' (the celestial body that helps us measure time), 'month' (the time unit measured out by the moon) and 'menstruation' (the bodily process that is repeated every month).[1] We might therefore expect 'dimension' to be a predominantly technical term with many precise nuances of meaning in various branches of science and the arts. But this is not really the case. Instead the word seems to be used metaphorically most of the time, as an image that creates new images. A dimension (for instance one of the three spatial dimensions of basic geometry or the forth one that creates space-time) is perhaps best described as a composite and dynamic mental model that demonstrates various approaches to the general idea of measuring: any act or intention to measure, any kind of measurable extent or magnitude or form, any of the aspects or attributes of what is being measured.[2] We might even suspect that measuring, when viewed from inside this logic of language, does not really concern itself with the exactitude of the result of the action. Instead it seems to express the speaking subject's ability to 'take measure' or to 'eyeball', to gauge the surrounding world by running different sensory faculties together. 'Multi-dimensionally', as it were.

Art does not reject exactitude, quite the contrary, but it tends to favour the specific and nuanced over the repeatable and measurable. Art keeps thinking new thoughts without overemphasising their newness. It stays close to a fundamental version of the human mind: both nurtured and restricted by the organism that shelters it, always ready to make use of embodied knowledge without worrying about technicalities. When we call our exhibition *To See the Dimensions* this is what we have in mind. The contemporary artists selected are all from Georgia, that is the outer framework, but they are

selected because their work seems to converge in a concern for the 'dimensionality' of art. This is the inner framework. The exhibition contains Thea Djordjadze's carefully plotted four-dimensionality (the spatial construction, the tangible objects, their dissolution in dreamt time), Mamuka Japharidze's insistence that we experience 'additional dimensions' (using visual tricks that are easily decipherable as such but nonetheless efficient), Koka Ramishvili's reworking of a recent and troubling past into images with an inbuilt 'political dimension' (in which the documentary is only one parameter, an input value), Alexander Rekhviashvili's cinematic rendering of the claustrophobic late Soviet everyday (where all dimensions seem to have contracted to one cluttered, eclectic interior), Wato Tsereteli's revival of his maternal grandparent's documentation of medieval architectural monuments (teasing out the photographers' subjectivity as a visible dimension of Romantic Modernism) and Guram Tsibakhashvili's snapshots of urban life twenty years ago, paired with quotes from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (contracting and displacing the dimensions of submerged time in his images of a shared unconscious).

To See the Dimensions is also about these artists' approaches to seeing. Seeing is traditionally associated with thinking, just as hearing is the action connected to willing and taste the faculty ultimately responsible for judgment.[3] One important legacy of 20th century Modernism is the new areas of thinking it claimed for visual art: the abstract, the concrete and other predominantly formal categories, but also the textual (beginning with the Cubist collage), the performative (beginning with Futurism and Dadaism) and what was known in the mid-20th century as 'social thought' (a more sophisticated forerunner to the 'relational aesthetics' of the last two decades). The contemporary artists in the exhibition have been strongly affected by these movements. They operate within established visual regimes (sculpture, photography, moving image,

performance) but they also question them and shift their boundaries around. All this is also true of David Kakabadze, a key figure of Georgian art history. His eventful and many-faceted career in the first half of the 20th century illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of Modernism, its advances and retreats, with almost hallucinatory clarity.

Artists

David Kakabadze (1889–1952) was born in Imeretia in western Georgia into a peasant family of very modest means. With support from a philanthropic society he went to St Petersburg in 1909 to enter the Art Academy. This plan failed, and instead he studied science at the University of St Petersburg, graduating after completing military service in the Imperial Army in 1917. But he also followed courses in the studio of the battle painter and illustrator Lev Dmitriev-Kavkazsky, picking up classic skills of pictorial representation after nature. He engaged with Cubist experimentation and art theory on the side and helped write a manifesto of 'analytical art' in 1914. In the beginning of 1918 Kakabadze was back in independent Georgia, where he painted landscapes, still-lives and portraits in a formally accomplished late Symbolist style. In 1919 he travelled to Paris on a study grant from the Menshevik government. The plan was to stay half a year, but he did not return to Tbilisi until 1927. In Paris Kakabadze created a substantial body of abstract work, based on his classicist approach to organic form. He also published theoretical writings in Georgian (*Paris 1920 1921 1922 1923*, 1923; *Art and Space*, 1924) and set up a company, employing engineers to commercialise a patent he had registered in 1923 for a stereoscopic cinema project, a recording and projection system that did not require the viewer to use 3D glasses.[4] This failed, but some of the lenses and mirrors manufactured were reused as components

in three-dimensional assemblages and in the abstract sculpture *Z* (1926), which was acquired by the American collector Katherine Dreier for her *Societé Anonyme* and is now in the Yale University Art Gallery.

Kakabadze returned to Georgia as the relatively open-minded Soviet cultural policy of the 1920s was being replaced by strict Communist Party control and implementation of Socialist Realism. Despite accusations of 'formalism' Kakabadze built a new career for himself as an experimental stage designer, again using cinema and optical devices in his collaborations with the avant-garde theatre director Kote Mardjanishvili in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Kakabadze was both Professor and Dean at the Tbilisi Academy of Art and, for a couple of years in the mid-1930s, Head of the Contemporary Art Department of the Georgian State Art Museum. In 1931 he made a five-hour documentary film about the history of Georgian architecture, which was deemed insufficiently Marxist, withdrawn from distribution and later lost. At this time he settled for a stylised continuation of his Georgian landscapes from 1918 and 1919, sometimes with 'socially-engaged' additions such as the crowd bearing oversized portraits of Lenin, Stalin and Beria (the latter two now painted over) in the canvas *Demonstration in Imeretia* (1942). Although he still had to defend his art against political attacks, by the late 1930 Kakabadze had become a celebrated public figure in Soviet Georgia. But after an inspection of the Art Academy by a visiting committee from Moscow in 1942 (such things were going on in the middle of the war) he was stripped of his teaching and administrative positions. During the last four years of his life Kakabadze had no livelihood, and friends and colleagues were unable or unwilling to help him in a climate of universal fear. He wrote many letters to institutions and officials, offering his services as a teacher and artist, but without result. In 1949 he even addressed a letter to Stalin to seek support.

It is in this context we must see his proposal from 1950 for another stereoscopic construction, this time a system for segmenting a still image into 'slices' printed onto glass plates, which were to be mounted at a specified distance from one another and lit from behind. For his 'analogue hologram' he used a photograph of Joseph Stalin's head, and he wanted to display it in the Exhibition of Advances in the People's Economy (a kind of socialist trade fair pavilion) in Tbilisi. Like all Kakabadze's proposals at this time, this one was ignored. It is realised in this exhibition as an experimental collaboration between Lunds konsthall and the art historian and Kakabadze expert Ketevan Kintsurashvili. The outcome of the experiment is difficult to predict. The Soviet patent authorities ran some tests of Kakabadze's stereoscopic cinema project in 1938 and remained unconvinced of its feasibility. This idea has never been tested before. It remains to be seen in which dimension Stalin's head will appear.

The jump from Tbilisi in 1950 to Berlin fifty years later is a long one. Conditions have changed for artists from Georgia. **Thea Djordjadze** (born in 1971 in Tbilisi, lives in Berlin) is among the best known of them. She studied in Amsterdam and at the renowned Düsseldorf Art Academy, in the class of Rosemarie Trockel, with whom she has collaborated on several occasions after graduating in 2003. There is clearly an affinity between the two artists, but Djordjadze's work does not mirror that of her more experienced colleague. The large installation shown at Lunds konsthall, *Explain Away* 0.0. (2009, wood, MDF, rug, fabric, ceramics, 350 x 505 x 900 cm) is a clear demonstration of how she understands and uses three-dimensionality. There are usually three layers of objects in her works: the pedestals or shelves or railings that serve as support structures or framing devices (in this case they have the dimensions of a small house), the found objects, often Caucasian or North African rugs, pointing to something absent that must be imagined or dreamt (a distant time, an unfamiliar

culture) and finally the crafted or moulded or painted image–objects (she calls them 'study sculptures') that are inserted into her built and arranged spaces.

Djordjadze's installations depend totally on precision. They both presuppose and produce nuance. Indeed the nuanced (which is not the same as the subtle or the poetic) has become something of a trademark for her art, along with an uncompromising commitment to the performative and the spatial. She usually keeps the works open to change and fine-tuning until the very last moment before the audience is allowed in. Yet what we get to see does not feel like a 'trace' of Djordjadze's movement through space as she was busy arranging and rearranging her various classes of objects. What goes on display is a composed image, a visual equivalent of the elegantly finished sentence. There is radical openness to the precision, and radical precision to the openness. Everything might have turned out differently a few minutes before the private view, but then the work would have meant something else. Another strong feature in Djordjadze's art is her interest in the interior, in both senses of the word. Her constellations of objects show an inner reality. Conventional distinctions between outside and inside, function and appearance, studio and gallery space are not upheld. At the same time the support structures are almost furniture, almost architecture, and the study sculptures could almost (but never quite) be decorative objects. The rugs evoke the paradox of the well-appointed apartment: a safe haven, offering protection against whatever is outside, but also a place for dreaming about elsewhere. Is it really sheer aesthetic whimsy that the textiles of nomadic tribes are among the most priced, and priciest, trophies of the bourgeoisie? They are also abstract images of mobility! Crumbling up the rugs into sculptural lumps does not rob them of their fetish value…

To the outsider Georgian culture appears to reconcile the contemplative with the theatrical. Djordjadze's art shows solidarity with both

approaches, but she only occasionally uses any explicit reference to her country of origin, such as the two letters from the Georgian Mkhedruli alphabet that follow the English title *Explain Away*. They can be translated as 'i.e.', the abbreviation of *id est* in Latin ('that is', 'which means'). The title is both self-referential and tautological, unapologetically making itself redundant in two languages and allowing us to read the installation as a statement on the pitfalls of translation between languages and cultures. *Explain Away* 3.0. is shown courtesy of Sprüth Magers Berlin London.

Mamuka Japharidze (born in 1962 in Tbilisi, lives in Tbilisi and in England, represented Georgia at the Venice Biennale in 1999) is a very different kind of artist, more ephemeral and inter-personal and much less formal. He often collaborates with his partner, the artist and writer Anthea Nicholson. We sensed the performative as one streak in Djordjadze's work. For Japharidze it is a central concern, and he will spare no effort to set up new and unexpected experiences for the viewer, who in turn is called upon to fully perform his role. Japharidze's take on interactivity is sophisticated in its apparent lack of political undertones. Taking part in his project *Opti-Mystic Translookation* (realised at several occasions since 2003, technical equipment and dimensions variable) means climbing into the sealed passenger box of a car or van (or a customised Danish bicycle taxi, in the version realised for Lunds konsthall) and ride in total darkness, with a real-time moving reflection of the outside world as the only visual stimulus. A tiny opening is pricked in the hull, so that the whole box becomes a pinhole camera. A very simple idea, it might seem, but the situation it creates demands an unfamiliar kind of effort from the eyes and the brain. The 'film' of the landscape or cityscape traversed is projected upside down and must be mentally reversed. The experience of sitting inside a moving movie camera and watching the outside world is impossible to document and difficult to

describe convincingly. Plato's parable of the cave comes to mind. What we think of as reality might just as well be metaphysical illusion. *Opti-Mystic Translookation* (Japharidze likes unconventional spelling) also illustrates the Modernist maxim that a work of art needs to be completed by a viewer. Japharidze challenges us to perform an act of viewing, which actively puts us in charge of the work, which in turn bestows agency on us in a circular development that becomes truly 'optimistic'. It would be a mistake to dismiss this form of interactivity as apolitical 'interpassivity'.[5]

The other two works by Japharidze in the exhibition, *Eye Trees* (1995, digital slide show, 6'30") and *Invisible* (several different versions since 2006, materials and dimensions variable) are not explicitly interactive, although they also depend on the viewer's participation in a game of seeing that moves across dimensions and again is deceptively simple. The redoubling effect obtained when a mirror (or a digital mirroring device) is inserted into an image is the whole story of the first work. Or is it? Trees really do have eyes, at least sometimes. The black-and-white chessboard pattern, which was also used on the outside of the opti-mystic van, makes it difficult for the eye to find the grey-toned image behind, or rather, it makes it impossible to bring it into focus by an act of will. 'The image does not like to be stared at', Japharidze says.

Artists have responded differently to the uncomfortable and degrading life inflicted on the people of Georgia during the 'phase of transition', which began in the early 1990s and still has not ended. **Koka Ramishvili** (born in 1956 in Tbilisi, lives in Geneva, represented Georgia at the Venice Biennale in 2009) has used it as his visual material. What is transition other than a euphemism for not knowing where you are going? Universal education was a cornerstone of the Soviet system, but it was technical and positivistic and not meant to develop analytical and critical thinking. People thought they understood their living conditions at the time of the *perestroika*, and they thought they

agreed that fundamental change was necessary, but when it actually happened they responded with indifference or cynical opportunism. Ramishvili, trained as a painter, found himself no longer able to create 'artful' images under these circumstances. Instead he embarked on a continuous visual analysis of the new reality that was thrust upon him and everyone else, using 'documentary' images (photographs of varying quality, video footage). The inverted commas signal the need for cautious viewing rather than distrust of Ramishvili's intentions. His art has a political dimension, but he does not sacrifice nuance.

War from My Window (1991–1992, 12 black-and-white photographs, each 50 x 60 cm) portrays the atmospheric evidence of a 'small and meaningless civil war' that 'coincided exactly with the twelve days of Christmas'. The Gamsakhurdia regime was being toppled in Tbilisi, smoke was billowing over the sombre and colourless city centre, 'and in other neighbourhoods everyday life went on as usual; shops, cafes, cinemas and other public places remained open, people went to work and came home.'[6] The photographs are just as disinterested, seemingly more concerned with the direction of the wind than with any sense of threat. In the postmodern world momentous events are designed to look like non-events and vice versa, so why pay attention at all? Already twenty years ago, at the very beginning of transition, the emotional register had been narrowed down to black-and-white. Yet *Pronostic Eventuel* (1997–1999, digital slide show and video, 12') is driven by curiosity, and eagerness to read meaning into inanimate objects, rather than despondency. Ramishvili drives around Tbilisi (black-and-white segments of a nocturnal 'road movie' illustrate how poorly lit and paved the city's streets are) to inspect the newly opened foreign embassies. Some of them are housed in opulent, newly refurbished pre-revolutionary mansions, but not all countries have bothered with such niceties. The embassies of France, Germany, the UK, the US, China, the EU, Poland and the Vatican are analysed from

four perspectives: the architectural context, the façade, the interior and one selected chair or armchair. The 'possible prognosis' reflected in the title (which does not seem to respect the norms of any identifiable language) is that an office chair or conference table or city address can demonstrate the visual essence of international relations, but the project also tested the boundaries of collaboration between official representatives of art and politics. Permission to photograph was refused by Russia, Iran, Armenia and Israel. *Change* (2005, video, 4'20") juxtaposes two pieces of 'found' footage: a slowed-down sequence of politicians and security guards, in suits and leather jackets, forming a jostling crowd in Georgia's parliament during the Rose Revolution of 2003 (we see Eduard Shevardnadze being ushered away from the tribune) and a singing scene from Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film *Veronika Voss* from 1982. Male ballet and female music, as it were. And the open question of what really constitutes change. *Tender Transitory Transport* (2008, video, 10') is a collaboration with Patricia London Ante Paris (the German-accented voice-over in different languages) and Nikakoi (the music). Ramishvili, usually limiting himself to the power of the footage, tries a more explicit form of narration in the 'constructivist' montage and the uninterrupted accompanying text. 'Georgia is a black hole of love. No one can get out of it. Help the imprisoned artist.' This composition of text, sound and image, but also the short and purposely one-dimensional *Coffee* (2009, video, 30") remind us that artists from Georgia use the contemplative and the theatrical to create their own contemporary baroque.

Alexander Rekhviashvili (born in 1938 in Tbilisi, lives in Tbilisi) is a celebrated director and scriptwriter. He has been compared to French New Wave filmmaker Robert Bresson for his visuality and 'sculptural' camerawork, but the topics and narratives of his too limited filmography are distinctly Georgian, directly addressing the nation's self-understanding at various stages in history. Rekhviashvili has only

made five feature films: *Nutsa* (1971), *A 19th Century Georgian Chronicle* (1978), *The Way Home* (1981), *The Step* (1986) and *Coming Closer* (1989). With one exception, these are epic moralities in black-and-white, drawing on extensive ethnographic and historical knowledge to portray ethical and emotional dilemmas. Like many of his peers in the intellectual cinema of the ex-USSR, Rekhviashvili has had little access to production resources after the collapse of *perestroika* culture around 1990. But at least his oeuvre was saved from destruction when the reels were removed from the Georgian Film Archive shortly before it was devastated by fire... *The Step* (*Safekhuri* in Georgian, 84') is his only film shot in colour. Alexi, the son of a bureaucrat of some prominence and a promising young researcher of botanics, moves into new accommodations. He has a narrow bedroom on the ground floor with only half a door to separate it from a semi-private, semi-public room that simultaneously serves as kitchen and bathroom, parlour and storage. A endless stream of people come and go in this stylised parody of a Soviet communal flat: the vaguely aristocratic landlady, her mysterious daughter (or is she the granddaughter?), functionaries of the housing board, forlorn characters who seek consultation on botanical matters, more or less distant family members and friends such as the pragmatic Mito, who grows mushrooms in the cellar and always takes showers in the presence of other visitors. The action is fragmented and circular, forever interrupted and restarted and thoroughly inconclusive, except for Alexi's decision to leave the city and become a village teacher in the mountains. The entire film becomes a hallucinatory image of Georgian society just before 'reconstruction' was launched. It is a hot summer in the mid-1980s, and an endless stream of Soviet cars and lorries passes by in the dusty street outside Alexi's window. *The Step* should be enjoyed as refined period comedy, but it also pays back attentive viewing by anyone interested in experimental cinematic storytelling and play-acting.

The artist who helped salvage Rekhviashvili's films is the active and well-informed founder of Centre of Contempory Art – Tbilisi, a not-for-profit organisation that organises exhibitions and runs courses for young artists and curators, often in collaboration with foreign internations. **Wato Tsereteli** (born in 1975 in Tbilisi, lives in Tbilisi) was educated in Tbilisi and Antwerp. He has previously worked with digitally generated imagery, staged photography and photographic documentation of places endowed with special significance: 'untouched' natural sites steeped in myth and history (Mount Kazbegi in the Caucasus), 'mainstream' tourist destinations (Varanasi in India) and locations for 'mythical' political events (Davos in Switzerland). For this exhibition he has researched the very extensive material left behind by his maternal grandparents, architectural historians Vakhtang Tsinsadze (1915–1993) and Rusudan Mepisashvili (1913–2001). They were among the founders of the Institute of Georgian Art in 1941, and from the mid-1940s until the early 1990s they helped research, document and restore historical architecture all over the country: pre-Christian and Christian religious monuments from Antiquity onwards, but also medieval fortresses and housing from the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries. *The Archive* (2011, 8 black-and-white photographs, each ca 100 x 150 cm) is a small selection of the more than 40,000 medium-sized photographic negatives preserved in their home, along with many unpublished scholarly papers, fieldwork diaries, blueprints and measurements, drawings and watercolours. Their private archive is particularly significant, since the Institute's archive was lost in the fires that created the decorative smoke plumes in Koka Ramishvili's photographs...

Tsereteli writes: 'When making an inventory of the archive I was struck by the enormous quantity of negatives, starting from snapshots of initial research expeditions in the 1940s and ends with the documented results of

conservation and restoration. The key strategy for me, with my background as an artist, was to review this scientific archive from the perspective of photography. The most impressive part must be the pictures from the first site-visits right after the war, the first encounter with an as yet non-contextualised cultural heritage. One interesting "dimension" of the archive is the crossover between scientific and aesthetic approaches.'[7] Some early photographs, those reproduced in the exhibition, convey the fascination with the overgrown ruins of the country's former greatness, the 'symbiosis' of landscape and buildings, nature and culture. A romantic approach to fieldwork, no doubt, but does it not also betray a Modernist pattern of reaction? There is no decay so thorough that it cannot be fixed with the right amount of willpower, scientific expertise and artistic imagination. Restoring the leftovers of the past is one way of building for the future.

The photographer **Guram Tsibakhashvili** (born in 1960 in Tbilisi, lives in Tbilisi) often prefers to work with diary-like series of numerous snapshots, capturing crucial aspects of his subject-matter through other methods than the selection and depiction of significant moments. Time, the so-called fourth dimension, can hardly be visualised in such a punctual manner. Tsibakhashvili instead decides to pay more attention to the flow of images in a series, observing what happens between them or outside them in the expanse of whiteness that rims the black-and-white in the middle. In other words, he is interested in the margins of photography, also in the literal sense. He will frequently use the margin of a print for his own additions, such as signs or stylised figures in red ink or notes in his stenographic-looking Georgian script. *Ulysses* (1989–1994, 74 black-and-white photographs, each 17 x 22 cm) contains observations on Tbilisi and its people in the time of troubles before and after Georgia's independence in 1991. Extracts from James Joyce's *Ulysses* first appeared in Georgian in 1971, an early date for a translation of a decidedly 'formalist' work into one of the languages of the Soviet Union and an indication of the relative openness and

sophistication of Georgian culture within the Empire. For several years Tsibakhashvili was working under the spell of this novel. '*Ulysses* changed my way of seeing and made it more extreme. I was shooting everything I saw in a different way.' He uses short, disembodied quotes as captions, sometimes directly overlaying Joyce's mapping of Dublin with his own visual survey of Tbilisi. 'Dear, dirty Dublin' is the annotation for an evening scene with young soldiers waiting for something (a tram or a bus?) outside what looks like a café or eatery but might just as well be a shop with generous opening hours. The image shows no details but 'says everything' about the city at the time. The quote is not specific but very precise. Another shot, of a bilingual political billboard proclaiming 'More Democracy, More Socialism!' is cropped so that the Russian word *bol'she* ('more') becomes *bol'* ('pain'). The caption reads: 'Will you join us, Miles? – Ned Lambert asked.' Tsibakhashvili's early 90s Tbilisi is populated by anonymous passers-by and passengers on public transport, by people 'in transit', but also by those known to him in the bohemian avant-garde. They were busy absorbing postmodern reality but still looked more attuned to the various –isms sorting under Modernism some seventy years earlier, when Georgia had also just become independent.

Anders Kreuger
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