



The Palace of Poetry is demolished.

PHOTO: DAVID BOSTANASHVILI

Aesthetics of repair in Tbilisi 2015.



GEORGIA: A MUCH-

This article outlines some afterthoughts about the project “Aesthetics of Repair in Contemporary Georgia”,¹ which I organized with the curator Marika Agu. In our visits to Tbilisi, we found a particular distress arising from the gap between the human desire to improve the current situation and the suffering caused by not being able to do so. To traverse this gap, the local people with whom we met had to oscillate between creativity and constraint, anxiety and possibility, repair and brokenness.

Our project delved therefore into the significance of material recombinations in this societal context, and how objects and dwellings are implicated in the transmission of affect.² We decided to reflect affective responses to brokenness and indigenous ways of solving problems through the manipulation of materials, their surfaces, and the addition of new elements to the assemblage, indexing the past through preservation and surviving efforts. The materialities and the social relations they are attempting to sustain are indeed working, albeit uncertainly within ever newer and more uncertain economic and social conditions.³

Georgian society appeared to us to be made up of contrasts and ill-organized forays into improvement, engaged in a never-ending process of renovation, which in turn has created specific frames of perception and skills in recombination. This is what Ssorin-Chaikov refers to as “deferred social order” or “development as forever” – as a display of work in progress,

disorder inscribes progress as an already stagnant yet “new” condition.⁴

It is at the level of the quotidian that one finds the clearest expression of acquired habits and expectations as well as important differences in their practice.⁵ We soon realized how difficult it is for art projects to endure, to be sustained, as if the endeavor were a marathon. This sense of temporariness paradoxically contrasts with the Soviet investment in timelessness, manifested in the belief that things might last forever.⁶ Yet Georgia’s recent history seems to be quite a mixture of continuities, breaks and reconfigurations. Martin Demant Frederiksen describes it as being affected by temporal disjunctures and short-circuits,⁷ while Katrine Bendtsen Gotfredsen⁸ presents it as a society led through antitheses and multiple nostalgias. She considers Georgian politics “evasive” – oscillating between presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, articulation and silence. As she points out, every time political realities change, interpretations of the past are turned into a battlefield, demanding a new understanding of history.

In “Aesthetics of Repair in Contemporary Georgia”, we draw on terms such as “scrappiness” to describe those arrangements that constitute finality without being finished, also *khaltura*, which expresses a state of unstable equilibria and low-key engagements, and *euroremont*, a practice that emerged from the desire to achieve social status by following what were seen as Western standards and values. Drawing on these terms, we have



PHOTOS: MIDDLE AND RIGHT: FRANCISCO MARTÍNEZ

Amalgamations of Tbilisi.

by **Francisco Martínez**

REPAIRED SOCIETY

put the emphasis on the radical processes of construction and deconstruction in which Georgia has been immersed, elaborating a kaleidoscopic depiction of what is left after twenty-five years of crisscrossing transitions.

This compelled us to ethnographically explore microworks of adaptation and a sense of distributed creativity – namely the way that people make use of what is around in order to cope with brokenness. Following this assumption, our exhibition and book illustrate how the construction of identity and the production of moral values can draw on aspects of craftsmanship and do-it-yourself explorations. Our project calls attention to these arts of combining and fixing up. In Georgia, the paradoxical interplay between innovation and tradition generates a particular indigenous curation and vernacular solutions. Every person seems to be a ruler, capable of actively making a world of his own, and at the same time a subject, at the mercy of circumstances beyond individual control.

THE FIRST SURPRISE for us was to discover that there has not been an exhibition of Georgian art in Estonia for forty-five years, which seems to clash with the assumed sympathy between the two societies. Also, while preparing the project, we repeatedly had to justify why we chose this country and the concept of repair for an exhibition of contemporary art. Too often the question “But is anything going on there?” was thrown at us; and it was irritating to hear advice to focus instead on the festive side of

the Caucasian culture or to reflect on political issues such as the border with the common “enemy” Russia.

So what is in fact going on in the Georgian art scene? Unexpectedly, we discovered powerful works of contemporary art and an emerging scene in the field. As we explained in the presentation of the artists’ talk in Tartu, when we arrived in Tbilisi we first used ethnographic methods, did archival research, met with artists and gallerists, and then outlined the concept of the exhibition. This combination of approaches allowed us to create different forms of engagement within the local context and to go beyond prejudices to address current social dynamics.

A key proposition behind this project was the idea that anthropology and art practice are increasingly in dialogue. By exploring the intersections and synergies between the two fields we cultivated new forms of experimentation and ways of seeing. After all, knowledge is conditional upon perception, in an aesthetic sense. Artists, curators and anthropologists are increasingly working across the boundaries of their respective disciplines to explore the generative potential of each other’s methods for engaging with communities and disseminating knowledge.⁹ For instance, when the practice of art becomes research, social ambiguities are made visible in a more direct and appealing way.

We were glad to discover that there are other projects also reflecting on the idiosyncratic material culture of the country. Looking back, we can even say that we were lucky to catch an art

To get rid of the past. Such a relief. And such a loss.

practice in emergence, in the sense that great efforts are being made to create a working art system, and international circulation of Georgian artists is increasing.

INDEED, DURING THE artists' talk that followed the opening of our exhibition in Tartu, Nino Sekhniashvili, Thea Gvetadze and Group Bouillon pointed to the new educational programmes at the Free University and the Center of Contemporary Arts of Tbilisi. They also mentioned the consolidation of galleries such as Nectar and the Popiashvili-Gvaberidze window project, as well as new residences and art programmes such as Artisterium and the Tbilisi Triennial.

They concluded that there is still work to be done in order to raise interest in contemporary art among collectors and to involve state institutions and local museums, but the Georgian art scene is already in a state of consolidation: first and foremost because of the emergence of a new generation of artists who are creating their own art history by reappropriations and approximations, combining multiple scales and imaginaries, and accessing global referents more freely, as the gallerist and dean of the school of Visual Arts and Design Irena Popiashvili observes. The art critic Lali Pertenava also shares this vision, adding that they can no longer be called "post-Soviet" (some of the artists mentioned by Pertenava are: Nadia Tsulukidze, Tamuna Chabashvili, Tamara Bochorishvili, Giorgi Khaniashvili, and Merab Gugunashvili).

The new generation is not repairing anything; rather, they are starting from zero. They are constructing a new art scene through approximations. They are almost there, almost skilled enough for that, approximately reaching the point, making it in a way, but not totally, not to the end. They want to be global, and soon there won't be any difference between a 21st-century artist in America, Egypt, or Georgia ... The problem is the lack of institutional support and spaces in which to exhibit. Today's 21st-century Georgian artists have completely broken with local traditions. First and foremost, they choose their cultural and visual references through the Internet. Their visual education happens via the Internet, accessing the information beyond our borders and discovering other ways of doing things. For them, everything is available at once, on the screen, with no time evolution as explained in art history, nor following the traditional canons of good and bad. We are talking about a clear break, not exactly generational, but more educational and practice-based. Some older colleagues see disrespect in this. Not me. The generation of the 21st century simply reappropriates what is there.¹⁰

Two of the recent shows organised at the Popiashvili-Gvaberidze Window

Project have reflected on these issues. In *Approximate*, they presented Georgian artists under the age of forty whose work is unknown to the general public. The title was taken from the artwork of Nino Sekhniashvili, also included in our exhibition. Nino documents the building of a DIY house created by a *bricoleur* architect,¹¹ who with limited skills made use of available materials. As Popiashvili states, this work is "about approximation, lack of professionalism, lack of knowledge, and the audacity of ignorance that can be encountered at every level of our society".¹² Then, in their show *(De)contextualization*, the Popiashvili-Gvaberidze Window Project cast back the useless role the equipment, furniture, and light fixtures of science labs are facing today in many research institutions.

Other examples of how repair reveals a hoard of significant meanings can be found in the ongoing "renovation" of Tbilisi Old Town, in which very little remains of historic buildings, and façades are rebuilt in an ersatz way. Paradoxically, UNESCO worked to list Tbilisi's Old Town as a World Heritage Site in 2000, but soon suspended the project due to the local authorities' lack of will. City officials were afraid that preservation would hinder the pastiche architecture in the form of cheap Turkish tiles, aluminum-framed windows and new balconies.¹³ As Angela Wheeler¹⁴ has shown, the remaking of Tbilisi marks a dramatic break with the past, since 'beautification' often meant excision of Soviet elements from the urban landscape, to be substituted by faux-historic confections. Wheeler also notes some side effects, such as the replacement of architectures that emphasized communality with new forms more amenable to private consumption and individual ownership, and therefore foreign investment.

This too is Georgia, affected by an ambivalent Westernization, which creates disrupted mosaics of contemporaneity and untemporaneity.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE is the Kamikaze Loggia project. For the Georgian Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale, curator Joanna Warsza and artist Gio Sumbadze added a parasitic extension on the roof of the Arsenale reflecting on the vernacular architecture of the city. However, as Warsza points out in our book, repair was not something the Georgian government wanted to represent the country abroad, so they missed the chance to keep the Kamikaze Loggia in Venice.

I still very much regret the fact that the Georgian government didn't agree to keep this pavilion as an official representation of their country for future editions...

"THE NEW GENERATION IS NOT REPAIRING ANYTHING; RATHER, THEY ARE STARTING FROM ZERO. THEY ARE CONSTRUCTING A NEW ART SCENE THROUGH APPROXIMATIONS."

financially speaking it would have been an amazing deal. Renting 60 sq. meters of the roof is far cheaper than paying for a white cube. Unfortunately, it looked too shabby and precarious to the Georgian authorities, evoking a possible notion of repair, if you will. And repair is not something the countries want

to represent themselves with in Venice... Authorities perform their own Euroremont in terms of representation.¹⁵

We got a similarly cold response from the officials of the Georgian Embassy in Estonia, who decided to ignore our project and rather concentrate their resources on reproducing the self-exoticizing folkloric side of their country.¹⁶

Practices of repair provide valuable information regarding social dynamics, effects of change and cultural appreciation, bringing to light the local system of values and standards. The combination of traditional skills and current needs defines the aesthetic and semantic density in Tbilisi. As the architect David Bostanashvili argues, there is a lack of urban planning in the Georgian capital and several buildings that were important parts of the cultural heritage have been demolished in recent years. He gave an example of this tendency with the documentation of *Palace of Poetry*,¹⁷ an ensemble of pavilions hand-carved by his father and destroyed a few years later by the invisible hand of the free market.

Unfortunately, demolition has become a common practice in the center of the Georgian capital. There has been little municipal control, and for many private owners it is cheaper to demolish than to renovate old buildings. Every new loss looks like a guilty negligence to my eyes, like a treasure sinking in the depths of the ocean.

The exhibition “Aesthetics of Repair in Contemporary Georgia” also shows Thea Gvetadze’s artwork *Esophageal Foreign Bodies*,¹⁸ a ready-made by the artist’s father – a doctor who collected obscure items from people’s throats during his career. We can also refer to the scatological performance of Group Bouillon in Tartu: all six members cut each other’s hair not only as an act of solidarity, but also as a way to get rid of bad energy, start from scratch, and escape civil pessimism. Full of tension and visually powerful, this act helped the audience understand basic aspects of the human condition such as rituals, the abject, sacrifice, dis-possession, and despair.

The work *Pirimze* by Sophia Tabatadze¹⁹ provides insights into the culture of repair in Tbilisi, as the central Pirimze building served anyone with anything broken for decades: shoes, clothes, watches, jewelry, electronic devices, etc. The artist’s work comprises a documentary, book, and installation – a replica of the artisan’s booth with the original tools and accessories. Sadly for many, in 2007 the old modernist building (built in 1971) was replaced with a new “Pirimze Plaza”, which now houses standardized, anonymous office spaces that are unaffordable to the previous tenants.

As outlined by Bostanashvili, the visual stimuli and chaotic opportunity inherent in the architecture of post-Soviet Tbilisi has produced a very particular semiotic system. Layers of history are revealed in tiny details. To outline certain microworlds is likened to a struggle that makes traces visible. This suggests a particular understanding of the aesthetic as concerned with the relationship between material change and social change, and how it affects our experience.²⁰



Top: *Esophageal Foreign Bodies*, by Thea Gvetadze, middle: *Pirimze*, by Sophia Tabatadze, bottom: *Untitled Archaeology*, by Levan Mindiashvili.

If we consider the materiality of the city as something more than a backdrop, we discover a condensation of power relations and temporalities.²¹ In this vein, the artist Levan Mindiashvili explores the effects of “thrown-away-ness” and reuse in compositions which carry a particular material sensitivity and experience of duration. The semantic distinction of materials and their private/public associations is also exemplified in our exhibition by Giorgi Okropiridze’s assemblages.²² The artist fictionalizes everyday life into art by creating unexpected contrasts between materials, structures and surfaces that are familiar from daily use.

Another outcome of our project is a volume published under the same title as the exhibition. The book includes a foreword, an introduction, and ten short essays. Besides the interviews

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Repair as an act of resistance. Taking back the initiative.

with Warsza and Popiashvili, and Pertenava's insights, the compilation includes a text by Paul Salopek, a *National Geographic* reporter, who recently journeyed across the Southern Caucasus. In his memory, Azerbaijan slips away and Georgia is remembered because of its human textures, shapes and scale. For Paul Salopek, Georgia is a handmade society:

The republic of Georgia was a primitivist painting.... The country people were crookedly built, too: swollen-handed and weathered. The women wore gumboots and strata of faded sweaters. The men favored old army camouflage: purely functional clothing. Which is to say: Craggy little Georgia is poor, and has many obvious problems, but it is also an exceptionally beautiful place, and comforting in its human textures, shapes, and scale: a handmade society.²³

The book also features a playful essay by Rene Mäe and Juuli Nava, who explore the pleasurable aspects of breakdown in different forms of mobility. As they write, "post-tourists" hunt for breakdowns and repairs in the city, while a "traditional" tourist would use the "hop on-hop off" bus line. In her contribution, the researcher Costanza Curro observes that hospitality is understood in Georgia as an element of national identity, yet she adds that generational change is actively reworking traditions and rituals in this patriarchal society.

Marcos Ferreira focuses on the nuances of the post-Soviet *poiesis* by accounting for the afterlives of Stalin in two museums of Georgia and in the Dry Bridge flea market of Tbilisi. As he shows, Stalin has become a bestselling commodity in the country, used by locals in their survival struggles despite the ideological stance of this polemical figure.

What sticks out at the Gori museum is the lobby where synthetic Stalin memorabilia is exhibited and sold: small-size Stalin busts, 40 lari; Stalin mugs, 10 lari; Stalin snow globes, 15 lari... Stalin becomes more oddity than father figure, more commodity than hero, whereby the cult of personality is transmuted into a material and symbolic resource for local communities.²⁴

Through an artistic intervention (sitting in a café for seven hours a day for five days in a row without a laptop or phone), the anthropologist Francisco Martínez²⁵ reflects on the daydreaming and rudderlessness that seems to attend everyday life in Tbilisi. He then includes microethnographies that show how hard it is to find or establish the middle ground in Georgian society – not surprisingly, people constantly compare the way things appear to be with the way they feel things ought to be.

In today's Tbilisi, everyone is surviving as best they can without much hope of any positive change, the ethnologist Aimar Ventsel²⁶ remarks. In his chapter, he shows how civil disengagement has

turned into a personal strategy towards the repeated failures of the Georgian state to protect the citizens' wellbeing. Alternative spaces are carved between the lines and on the margin of official discourses and most often characterized by both resistance and ignorance.²⁷ These failures also trigger various kinds of official activities and the idea that the state is not strong enough.²⁸

All this shows that is Georgia is not only still struggling to come to terms with its past; it is still striving to build up a functioning state and economy. Hence, the distinctiveness of the current dynamics rests not just on the influential legacies of socialism, but also on the personal experiences and expectations of these years.²⁹ As Frederiksen demonstrates in his ethnography about unemployed young men in Georgia,³⁰ widespread feelings of marginality and frustration are due more to present stagnation and negative expectations for the future than to questions about problematic pasts.

Once the exhibition was over, in June 2016, I revisited Tbilisi to present our project publicly and return some of the artworks. When I asked for spontaneous feedback from the managers of an art residency where I brought Tabatadze's *Pirimze*, they replied that "remont was already well sold by Joanna Warsza in Kamikaze Loggia". Also, they assessed that in our project we have been too positive about the work of the new generation. Legitimate criticism, even if the aggressive tone they used was out of place ("after nine months in Georgia you could not come up with anything else?"). On the one hand, they complained that foreign curators do not know much about the local art scene and manifested pessimism themselves about the current situation; on the other, they showed arrogance towards an international project that involved a dozen local artists, gallerists, and researchers. Sadly, they reproduced the typical proud attitude of "we locals know better" and dismissed the work we had done to mobilize people, raise funding, and involve institutions.

OUR PROJECT WAS inspired by Warsza's *Kamikaze Loggia*, yet goes beyond the post-socialist frame of *remont/euroremont* practices. Indeed, we found that to a certain extent, people were tired of the transition narrative in Georgia. Accordingly, we decided to put the focus on intimate and existentialist aspects of repair, the ambiguity and ordinariness of marginality, and how these practices are a way of handling loss in Georgia.

As our project shows, there is a connection between aesthetics and morality, between the way that we perceive the world and how we want to dwell in it. Aesthetics therefore appear as more than a rhetorical battlefield: a space of struggle to make something visible and participate in society ("the distribution of the sensible", as Rancière calls it).³¹

Repairing is both cross-cultural and culturally relative; it has similarities across the world and differences based on tradition and affordances. In this sense, the specificity of repair is not that it happens but rather that it highlights the values attached and its aesthetics and moral implications.³²

**"PEOPLE
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For the public presentation of the project in the Nectar/Atelier gallery, Nino Sekhniashvili and Group Bouillon shared a few impressions about their visit to Estonia, Pertenava summarized her essay, and I described the whole process from the conception of the main ideas to future steps of this “platform”: For instance, collaborating with the Nectar gallery in organizing an exhibition of contemporary Estonian artists in Tbilisi.

During the discussion, Irena Popiashvili observed that it is important to organize transnational projects. Indeed, she was particularly interested in the feedback this kind of exhibition received in Estonia. I stressed that we got very positive comments from artists and art critics (e.g. Liisa Kaljula’s and Angela Wheeler’s reviews), yet we were expecting more coverage from the media and better attendance. As for the reasons, I argued that the idiosyncrasy of Tartu and the fact that we did not rely on clichés about Georgia did not help. We might also have failed in not making the exhibition more accessible to the public.

Popiashvili noted that the number of visitors depends highly on the reputation of the museum and criticized the simplistic understanding of the arts that the Georgian government upholds – reduced to a tool that might attract tourists. On the other hand, the artist Nadia Tsulukidze suggested that perhaps this project was not meant to reach a wide audience, since all exhibitions of contemporary art have to create their own audiences. She added that the main achievement of this project was that it emphasized the “contemporary” and “the new” as much as “Georgianness”. Finally, this discussion made me realize that our project not only involved multiple scales and circulations; it also invited the audience to think about the various crossings, encounters, and friendships that happened during the process. ❌

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