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Food as the instrument of social engagement

Interview with Data Chigholashvili and Nini Palavandishvili

August 30, 2014
Bialystok, Poland

The **GeoAIR** independent art initiative operates from 2003 on, officially registered as a non-governmental organization in 2007. It's one of the very few art residences in Georgia. For the past year they are realizing the project connected with migration, cooking and public space. The team of GeoAIR believes that food can bring different people together. Furthermore, it's easier to talk about serious problems and solve them together after the tasty "dating".

Data Chigholashvili and Nini Palavandishvili from GeoAIR talked about the problems of art education in Georgia, attempts to influence the state policy and Tbilisi's stereotypes.



фото: Открытое Пространство (OpenPlace)

About the structure of GeoAIR

Yuriy Kruchak: How did the idea of GeoAIR appear?

Nini Palavandishvili: This idea came from Sophia Tabatadze, Georgian artist who lives in Berlin. That time she lived in the Netherlands, where she had lots of friends interested in Georgia. All together they came to Georgia to do something there. They made the first project called "Foreigner" in 2003 on the territory of the old vine factory. The backbone of organization formed during two or three years, and then its participants decided to give it an official status.

I came back to Georgia from Germany in 2004. I was curating a project by Goethe-Institute, where Sophia Tabatadze was also participating. Gradually we started to work in collaboration, some other people joined who shared our ideas and views and that is time when Archidrome – Contemporary Art Archive, one of the oldest directions of the organisation was born. **Archidrome** is an archive, library discussion platform, which contains diverse material (publications, periodicals, digital media) about contemporary art and culture in Georgia, the Caucasus region, as well as international theories and tendencies. At that time there was a lack of information about local artists, movements and art community in Georgia. We met with artists, gathered their portfolios and made presentations for each artist. Now we have quite an extensive database of operating artists in Georgia and the Caucasus Region.

In 2009-2010 I again lived in Germany, and after return to Tbilisi started to work as a curator for GeoAIR only. That time Sophia decided to organize residence. Working with foreign artists showed that organising a place where they would stay and work for longer period was necessary. Sophia built one more floor over her house, which was turned into a place for residents. Thus in 2010 **GeoAIR Residency** appeared. Since then we have new resident(s) for at least one month some for longer.

Our aim for the residency and residents is not production, as we understand that in some cases one month is too little time to create something. We have three main directions we're concentrating on, all of them are intertwined. Our residents, especially curators, work with our archive. We try, when it's possible, to involve residents in projects that we realize. All of our residents should have interest in Georgia, in environment and issues not only of the country but also in larger picture of global politics. We concentrate on work on public space, now our interest had also spread to work with communities. So, we're focusing more on working with people than with artists. In Georgia there are still not many artists who work on social issues and/or with communities, that's the problem.

Data Chigholashvili: Our residents also contribute to the archive and the library. There is material about art from Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia and not only. The library is open, everybody can use it. Our office is situated near the Tbilisi State Academy of Arts. Unfortunately, students of the academy visit us rarely, because I guess unfortunately they're not interested in such information.

Nini Palavandishvili: Educational system in Georgia is weak. The Academy of Arts is the old school academic type of institution, which doesn't want to change. At the Free University of Tbilisi, founded by Kakha Bendukidze, this year the faculty of Arts and Design will open. I think, it'll be a great competitor to the academy. There're higher prices at the Free University but there you can get knowledge. In my opinion, the Academy should be closed. Nothing changes there, things become worse and worse.

Yuriy Kruchak: Data, you're an anthropologist by education, right? How is it to collaborate with artists?

Data Chigholashvili: I'm studying socio-cultural anthropology, mainly working in visual and urban anthropology. For my MSc dissertation I wrote about intersection of contemporary art and anthropology practices. I also discussed one of Sophia Tabatadze's projects there and then I joined GeoAIR upon my return to Tbilisi. Now I continue research about the transformation of Tbilisi, especially in relation with different communities and city's visual aspects, as well as art projects that deal with it. As I collaborate with artists and curators, I can implement the result of my research into practical works and also learn a great deal from them. It motivates me to do what I'm writing about and working on at the same time.

Yuriy Kruchak: How do you share responsibility at GeoAIR?

Nini Palavandishvili: There're three of us, we work collaboratively and share tasks, but each of us can lead also different projects, which connect at some point. In contrast to the art collective, the members of which are constantly working together, we're an art organization that works with different projects, but all of them coincide with organisations vision and mission.

Data Chigholashvili: We have a big database, and we work with other organizations abroad to choose artists for their residences, provide recommendations, set up connections between artists and different institutions. Regulations and rules of competitions are sometimes read inattentively, I think more work needs to be done with art scene representatives here with regards of presenting their works more effectively, elaborate more and get more active on international level, we also try to work on that with them.

About working with "non-artistic" society

Yuriy Kruchak: Could you tell a bit more about projects realized with communities in Georgia?

Nini Palavandishvili: I even don't remember the first time when we've started to do it. It was always interesting for me to work with people, to do some research, but without any knowledge of special methodology, I was able to rely only on my instinct. Data (Data Chigholashvili) joining the group remarkably enriched our practice as he has more knowledge of ethnographic approach and anthropological research.

Last year we realized the first project with Data. In Tbilisi there's historical area called Betlemi, in the previous century lots of different ethnical groups lived there: Armenians, Jews, Greeks, Kurds etc. As a result of typical gentrification process representatives of these nationalities had to leave gradually, real estate property in that area became expensive. But the specificity of this area is that ICOMOS, which has an office there worked on rehabilitation of that district together with local inhabitants. Thus, fortunately the picture is very different from common "beautification" we face in most of the city, where we call restoration of Tbilisi old district but in fact we are destroying and just building copies of old.

Data Chigholashvili: Yes, local dwellers learned how to restore something. It started by 2000. Nowadays the "old city" changed a lot. It's often told that old Tbilisi is multicultural and open place, but not many people can feel it now. That's why we decided to work within the festival on the territory of Betlemi which is held annually on the 17th of May. In that framework we collaborated with people from different ethnic groups living in Betlemi district. Together with social science and graphic design students we worked on small brochures, which contained some typical for their origin or family recipe on the one side and with the story of the person, who provided this recipe, on the other side.

At the festival participants cooked meal and talked about it, they also opened their yards for public entrance. It was nice to unite people, and the festival was also marvelous. Though, unfortunately that day is remembered in Georgia because of the horrible things that happened. On the 17th of May, 2013 there was an attempt to have the demonstration in Tbilisi against homophobia, but a big group of people, lead by the orthodox church representatives bashed the demonstration, beat and chased some of the people who were there to protest.

Nini Palavandishvili: So, our first project was an experiment in a way. Its already quite some time that we are interested in topic of "new migration," we wanted to know more about people who move to Georgia nowadays. Some ten years ago lots of Chinese people appeared in Georgia and particularly in Tbilisi. Then they disappeared, their shops were closed, but people from India and Pakistan came instead. Now we have migrants from Iran, Iraq, African countries and "Western" countries, etc. We wanted to know for what reason all these people come to Georgia, what they are doing, how they feel and how the local people perceive and treat them. There's stereotype about "good" immigrants from Western Europe and bad criminals from all other countries.

Since Georgia is famous for its cuisine, we decided to connect migration with cooking. Last year we started to research on how migrants lived in Tbilisi, this work is still continuing. We learnt that many Indians study medicine. But to learn more, you need to communicate with someone for a long time, also you should set up trusting relationships. Student-anthropologists were involved in our research. The aim is to obtain material, which will contribute to our research as well as be included in publications we produce about chosen migrant groups, individuals with whom then eventually we do public cooking.

During the process we also realized that problem of migrants living in Tbilisi is deeper than it seemed before. And if a person, you collaborate with, has problems with accommodation, you can't just dismiss it. We contacted the public defenders office, went to chancellor's office to find out more about new migration law and regulation and try to assist those people in need in whatever we can. We also contacted the culinary show from one of the most popular Georgian TV channels to get more publicity and start discussing this crucial issue, as it was basically not addressed at all. As a result we did five programs with people from Nigeria, Thailand, Jordan, India and Iran. I can't say that things have changed, but we, as well as migrants and television workers, got an interesting experience. At least, people noticed that migrants don't come with aim to steal something, but for searching better opportunities. Even in our friends circle some think that immigrants don't have any problems, because they don't complain or simply they do not have an opportunity to raise their voice. But actually, the person with black skin can be refused to visit a swimming pool, it's that bad often.

Data Chigholashvili: We want to talk about discrimination and we're conscious that people in Tbilisi or elsewhere won't be completely tolerant all of a sudden, but we need to start from somewhere, so if we scratch the surface regarding the issue, it will be great. It'd be very useful to start similar activities in universities. Mostly, in one faculty where both Georgian and foreign students are studying, they even don't know each other and could be divided into separate groups. Through public cooking events and other related activities, together with migrants we engage with locals, living in their direct neighborhoods or generally in Tbilisi. As we are preparing and sharing food, social experience of migrants living in Tbilisi is also discussed, these include both, positive examples, as well as terrible cases of racism.

Nini Palavandishvili: We got so involved in this issue that we developed it further. In October we're organizing workshop with schoolchildren, with whom we will work on visual stories about their neighbouring migrants.

Yuriy Kruchak: What is the political direction of your institution?

Nini Palavandishvili: We are oriented "left" and try not to make compromises for money. For example, if Kakha Bendukidze offered the grant for artists, it would be difficult for me to decide whether to apply or not.

Once our artists protested against Georgian minister of culture. I signed the petition and helped to distribute it. That time I was going to go to the residence in Poland for one month. It was planned that the ministry of culture would fund this trip. I didn't know about such agreement between Polish and Georgian sides. When I found it out, I refused to accept the money from the ministry. It's important to think how to behave and be responsible for your actions and not to act in sake of comfort.

About money and an ideal institution

Yuriy Kruchak: Do you have a mechanism to get the financial independence? How can the society support your organization?

Nini Palavandishvili: We don't know how somebody can support us. I have my own vision of this situation, but I'm not sure that I'm right. The only source of finance for Georgian artists is the Ministry of Culture and Monument protection of Georgia, there is also municipality fund, but they rather give money for populist concerts. Also, the ministry covers only production costs, and it's not possible to get fee for administrative work.

We have been supported by the grants from European Union and the Open Society Foundation for various projects. Programs connected with these grants will end soon, and we don't know what to do next. The residency isn't something profitable, we can only take care about the space and artists. GeoAIR is a non-profit organization, and we can't open a cafe, for example. Maybe, we should propose guided tours for interested travelers or artists?

There was a case when independent gallery "Nectar", which offers a space for non-commercial artists to create experimental works, have asked the artistic society to support their project. I'm not sure, that it's a right way. We pay taxes to the state, which should provide such support. Using the system of crowd funding we make the state free from its responsibilities, and yet you must pay taxes. There's no way to fight with the ministry. I disagree with this system, but don't know about other options.

People collect money for social needs, someone's medical treatment and so on, but community is still not conscious that it's necessary to support art. I assume that money for the "Nectar" gallery's project was also mainly transferred from abroad.

Data Chigholashvili: And the projects we're doing are unclear for many people. Once, a German artist who was teaching at the Art Academy invited me to give a short talk about the connection of art and anthropology. I prepared a very general talk and decided to talk about the importance of context in art, no matter from which perspective we look at it. I had such a big rejection from students, they said that they're interested in other things, like abstraction and context is not relevant there.

Yuriy Kruchak: You create an institution with elements of social center. What is an ideal institution for you?

Data Chigholashvili: I'm interested in developing the institution this way. But it'd be better if it develops not just with our forces and sources. It'd be nice to have financial support as well as done together with students, young artists, researchers and activists.

Nini Palavandishvili: As a curator I'm interested to work with artists, but not in a way that I've proposed the topic and they adopt it. We should develop some certain direction together.

There's one more problem that Georgian artists don't understand that it's possible to collaborate with musicians, filmmakers and so on. I'd like to make a project, where artists could learn something from other disciplines. For me institution is a platform for self-development, discussions and communication. I almost don't make exhibitions and my exhibition projects involve panel discussions, workshops and educational programs. I think that the ideal institution is possible; otherwise, we wouldn't do what we do.

Speaking about funding, we try to communicate an idea of co-working between the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Economy. We propose to change the tax policy. Authorities don't want to allow paying fewer taxes to people who invest in culture. The government doesn't realize that it's not an exemption from the payment but taxes go on specific purposes.

Data Chigholashvili: We need a special law imposing an obligation on big businesses to invest in cultural activities. Also, there should be funds transferred to a special foundation, free of individual influences, that would allocate these resources on projects based on competitions.

Yuriy Kruchak: Is it possible to influence the cultural policy of Georgia?

Nini Palavandishvili: Two or three months ago there was an announcement on the website of the Ministry of Culture that it is open to ideas from non-governmental sector to develop cultural policy. In summer I submitted recommendations for transparent system and better distribution of the budget, selection procedures etc in the field of culture, to report how much money allocated on grants and reveal the selection mechanism. There has been no response from the ministry yet. As a community of artists, we write recommendations and it's unclear who will consider them. Especially now, when the minister changed again, and we need to lobby our interests again.

About collaboration with other artists

Yuriy Kruchak: I'd like to talk about the archive again, about the «Archidrome» project. How was the structure of the archive formed? How did you agree with artists regarding the copyright?

Nini Palavandishvili: Artists gave us DVDs with information, sent their CVs and newspaper clippings. We wanted to make it accessible through the internet, but there was not enough money for that. At the moment it's still a physical archive, which we also have difficulties to update permanently, but we still continue to work on it. When we make an open call, we always renew our data with the information from the applications.

About copyright, we don't sign any agreement with artists. But each time when somebody asks us about materials we redirect him or her to artist, we don't give anything without permission of the author.

Yuriy Kruchak: Do you have friends who develop similar initiatives?

Nini Palavandishvili: Yes, we do. For example, French curator Géraldine Paoli from Marseille, who has visited our residency, and who has a lot of connections with Arabian countries and Korea. She wants to create a platform to unite people, initiatives and organizations for collaboration, but out of the frames of existing partnerships and political prescriptions. The name of the project is "CONFLUENCES RESONANTS" (flowing resonances). She lives in the famous house of Le Corbusier in Marseille, in which architecture was planned with social purposes. Géraldine Paoli also turns her flat into a place for meetings and socializing. She organizes different kind of cultural programs and tries to involve inhabitants of the house to participate in it.

We also work with organization in Tirana, the capital of Albania. They lead thematic residencies. We collaborate with residence in Kosice in Slovakia and we work a lot with other countries.

In Georgia everything is centralized and concentrated in the capital. We try to expand our activity outside of Tbilisi as well. Last year we worked in Zugdidi, Rustavi and Mestia, we worked a lot in Batumi as well. But it's problematic to find artists interested in what we do in Tbilisi. Then, in other cities it's almost

impossible. However, we were able to work with local artists and communities, explained our ideas to them and engage them in our work.

And we do hope that with our activities gradually we will engage more people and make them interested in different approaches and more civil engagement and mediate social context of art.

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