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Food for a Museum

"Culinary traditions and a museum – these are not things that people associate in their mind. Our project is changing this situation," says Data Chigholashvili from the Georgian initiative GeoAIR.

August 25, 2015
Melitopol, Ukraine

Perhaps there would be fewer wars and more understanding in the world if people were more serious about what they cooked and how. Even if they just discuss recipes, and not politicians, domestic quarrels will definitely be less common.



Photo from the archive of Open Place

"No one thinks about the role of food in everyday life"

Yulia Kostereva: How does your previous experience intersect with your activities in Melitopol?

Data Chigholashvili: The context, of course, is different; here there is the active idea to bring together many ethnic groups and nationalities. In Tbilisi, we also worked with people from different countries who had moved to Georgia, but the context and the project there were different. It was very interesting to work in Melitopol. Many people wanted to contribute to the project, most of them were active and really did offer useful ideas. Interestingly, all these people were women. From time to time men came along, but the most active participants were women all the same. Maybe stereotypes played a role, because the project was about recipes and food. As we have emphasised, the exchange was the starting point for the project in Melitopol, which again gave an opportunity to look at food from a different perspective.

Nini Palavandishvili: While there was an exchange between us and the participants in the project in Georgia, that is, there were two separate groups, in Melitopol the sharing occurred among all the involved parties. Even the participants had to share recipes with one another. Overseeing this was very interesting.

Yulia Kostereva: Why did you suggest such an activity for Melitopol?

Data Chigholashvili: Since last year, we have been working with the topic of cooking food and now we wanted to look at this process a little differently. Although everything in Melitopol basically revolves around recipes and certain details - such as culinary notebooks, everything again revolved around culinary issues, at the same time this project was about memory associated with recipes and food.

A museum and culinary traditions – these are not things that people associate in their thoughts. Even if a museum has many exhibits relating to food, to the cuisine of a certain period, to how people obtain food, to what tools are used, and the like, why not bring aspects linked with food, as a social practice, to a museum? It is important that our project changes this situation and a good example of this is one woman who makes a TV cooking programme. Having participated in the first session of the project, she then brought a recording of her programme. She realised that it's okay to show a programme in a museum. A certain barrier in her mind shifted a little.

Nini Palavandishvili: It's strange. Often, when various activities related to the arts take place, especially the opening of exhibitions, there is food there. But nobody thinks to talk about the food, about why these particular dishes are present. Nobody thinks about the role of food and cooking in our daily lives.

"In the Melitopol Museum there is already a community"

Yulia Kostereva: To what extent have your expectations regarding this work in Melitopol come true?

Data Chigholashvili: I do not think it's right to have any clear expectations regarding process-based work. In addition, we have been working here for a very short time. What you see as the end result or the final event is one thing, but in general after working for a day or two, most things change in the process. However, this does not mean that something is wrong with the project, on the contrary, if nothing has changed, then maybe something is wrong. Sometimes, if the context and/or participants require it, I can move away from how I wanted to work initially. We pondered what path to take, to do things a certain way or another...

Nini Palavandishvili: But these thoughts are more about the process, not the final result.

Yulia Kostereva: Did you notice any particular issues connected with working in a small town?

Nini Palavandishvili: Everything is very dependent on the location and community. I think in the Melitopol Regional Museum there are already quite a lot of people who make up a community. These people are visitors, friends, museum employees, and active participants in your project. In a big city there might not be as many people who participate in such events. Such a situation may also occur in a village - there might simply not be any interested people. But in this case, of course, it was nice to see how many people came to the museum to see what had been done, and are now looking forward to new projects and to being involved in them.

Yulia Kostereva: How can the museum in Melitopol develop?

Data Chigholashvili: I personally would have added more modern elements on the ground floor, elements which are already present in a sense. But, I'd not only find a person who does caricatures or portraits, and organise their exhibition in the museum, but instead of that, I'd think about things, slightly different things, but which also say a lot about people. Perhaps it is worth holding an open contest and getting local people to submit ideas for what can be exhibited temporarily in the museum. For example, a book of recipes which could be very interesting in the context of this museum and the multicultural environment of Melitopol.

Nini Palavandishvili: It is always interesting to think once more and look at the collection afresh, to tinker with it. You can change the permanent exhibition, put on more thematic exhibitions from the collection which is already here, and also do so while adding new exhibits. And, of course, you can give various people access to it, make the museum more open.

Data Chigholashvili: We need to involve people in the work, not just offer them something. So local residents know and remember that the museum is part of their town. Importantly, it is easier to do it here than in big cities and big museums.

Yulia Kostereva: What other conclusions or thoughts following the project would you like to share?

Nini Palavandishvili: Maybe the wish that initiatives such as the "At the Heart of the Community" project were not temporary and one-offs. The museum receives such activities, and it would be good if it took them over. Neither you nor any other artist can work here permanently. I would like the museum to continue the work itself. I'd like different people to be sought, so that things were initiated here – things that would encourage creativity and the development of the museum itself.

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