

## **Nini Palavandishvili in conversation with Khatuna Khabuliani**

As part of a research for a contribution for XLVI AICA International Congress  
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**N: At first I started thinking that our history of the last 20 years has not been documented and analysed anywhere. This leads to the state we are at now, the fact that we still do not understand the concept of contemporary art.**

K: It really is because of this, but what makes it worse is that no one is able to write the monograph of the past 20 years. It would be productive if the research took place in parallel about different events and different media. Today for example a student for masters had their thesis on the topic 'video art in different contexts', this is a BA work, descriptive, but still good when someone tries something like this. The essay discussed the events in the West and America and then talked about Georgia. It would be helpful if the materials were collected this way, for the different opinions to appear. The other problem with Georgia is that the available literature sources are so scarce and very linear. Even from the undergraduate's point of view, when you don't have the habit of distancing yourself and critically apprehending the work, you might take someone's opinion as the absolute truth.

For example, this student has quoted the information printed in the magazine 'Counterculture'<sup>1</sup>. In this magazine mostly position of those people is stated who were participating in that periods cultural life. Other viewpoints might have existed too. Even the title Counterculture - was it adequate? The people participating thought they were creating the counterculture. If we look from other side, the term itself is debatable: was it the counterculture? Or was it subculture? Were there other opinions expresses at that time? This becomes the problem, the non-existence of different versions.

**I don't question why no one does it today, but why no one did it back then. Someone should have researched and have written about the events back then. Overviewing the events post-factum is not the only role of a critic.**

It is understandable as to why it happened this way. In Russia for example there is immense amount of documentation. The attitude towards the text has always been different; there were more publications, the scale was different too. The main problem with us is that only very recently have the art historians started to interpret contemporary art. They did not know the contemporary art, they did not know how to write about it, how to describe the methodology that existed out of the Soviet tradition. There is no single methodology that would capture the event in here. At some point it became impossible for them to approach the subject and the easiest way was to ignore it altogether. On the other hand there was the tendency of taking everything as new art, partly considering primitive copies of already existing forms as revolutionary novelty. Problematic was that when the artists started making postmodern art and used the adequate language, the context was absolutely

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<sup>1</sup> Contrculture, Bakur Sulakaushi publishing, 2000

different; therefore, to interpret and analyse it new methodology was necessary. If I speak from my and my colleagues' position, us who work analytically, we come out of the Western methodology. This becomes sometimes misleading. However, the appearance might be very Western, the artistic form might be the same that you have seen and analysed previously, but you realise it is not the same. This is something else that needs different conception and new methodological approach is to be found. During the 90s stereotypical Western approach was dominant, Georgia was a typical Third World country and the expectations were of something exotic; and not everyone was able to fight these stereotypes.

**This problem is still relevant; when I travel I often come across the prefabricated frame the Georgian art is to be put in; the stereotype that you are post-Soviet country and therefore you have to work on and out of this context. The artists struggle too; they are constantly apprehended in the post-soviet context.**

This preliminary attitude acts as a restraint for the local artists. It creates psychological barriers and obstruction for local art. Though it depends very much on local art and its scene how this preliminary attitude will change.

**The other problem for me is that during the Soviet system critical thinking was not welcome. When I studied in Tbilisi State Academy of Fine Arts on the Art History faculty, it was nonsensical to question anything; the dogmatic theories were the only way, without any alternatives. I think this has stipulated the environment where criticism does not exist. But it is very interesting that when I read western texts, the problem of the dying criticism comes across. The fact that nowadays the exhibition reviews and descriptions are dominant sounds comical with Groys - when something is good it gets mentioned, but the bad is just omitted.<sup>2</sup>**

This is the new form of criticism when you don't spend time on something that does not interest you this already is an answer and a position. But with our criticism there is one more misunderstanding that larger audiences have grown accustomed to the contemporary art forms, performances or video art does hardly shock anyone. But the changes in criticism taking place during the XX century have not been interpreted and accepted. The essence of contemporary art, which is critical in itself changes the role of a critic. They become interpreters of the artists who agree with the critical thought. In our society the understanding of a critic is equivalent to the western pre-modern definition, who was to evaluate, had enough knowledge and everyone trusted them; His competent evaluation was decisive for artists' recognition and commercial success.

**They were the mediators and enlighteners who contextualised the artworks. The other problematic issue is the need for criticism in the society, who is the receiver and for who is it directed to? Our artistic scene is very narrow and**

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<sup>2</sup> Groys, B. (2009), 'Who do You Think You're Talking To?' Boris Groys in conversation with Brian Dillon. [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/who\\_do\\_you\\_think\\_youre\\_talking\\_to/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/who_do_you_think_youre_talking_to/)

**closed; therefore, the blog posts and facebook are enough for them. However, it is questionable how many of them do actually read the posts rather than just liking the post. The dynamics of these 'likes' comes to it stating that I 'saw' the post. It becomes unclear and secondary/minor if I realised and formulated my attitude towards it/what I've seen.**

This is another topic of Groy's<sup>3</sup>: self-design and aesthetic responsibility, when a person constantly self-present on social networks and this does not require a gallery space.

Coming back to critique, taking Georgia as an example, there is hasty assumption about "nonexistence of critique". One side is scanty amount of publications and lack critique, but another side is the audience. Those people who do not even get interested in reading texts keep on repeating this phrase. It is absolutely problematic, that there is no serious interest in critical thinking in the society. There is no desire to read a complex text, which won't be written on a populist language, which will try to be reflexive.

**Reflexivity requires depth, because one text is not enough; there has to be a string of texts, thoughts that are attached to each other.**

**We have already mentioned artists who themselves have become critical. I see it as a huge disadvantage that in Georgia there are not enough artists who would think about the events that take place in the society and comment on it. I don't even mean criticism, just a comment. Elementary thinking and civil responsibility is very low in here.**

Besides that the reaction on some events happen retroactively, the decisions concerning the planning of public spaces are made without involving the society. I don't want to become a person who constantly disagrees with already decided verdicts. This has to change - you should not be made to have opinions post-factum. The society has to express that those spaces belong to us and we have to be included in the process of deciding. The manner of assertion is problematic too. Even if you are doing something right, the form of presenting is such as if you are doing something wrong, - monuments are erected in a furtive way, constructions start stealthily, eventually nobody takes responsibility; doing good things forcefully won't help the development of a civil society.

There is a severe problem of education. The problem I come across with the students is of reading a text. This to some extent comes from the Soviet methodology when most of the texts were to be learnt by heart, ideological approach to literature. The toasting model has ruined the tradition of thinking. All of this has caused the appalling result when a relationship with a text and its reading is problematic.

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<sup>3</sup> Groy, B. (2009), 'Self-Design and Aesthetic Responsibility'. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/self-design-and-aesthetic-responsibility/>

**The same problem surfaces with the fine art; acceptance of everything and aspiring towards aesthetics, something that does not require thinking and analysing is acceptable for the masses.**

Maybe contemporary art is not for the masses, but if a country has such aspirations, then the relevant art has to be taken in consideration, for example artistic reaction to something. A certain guru-type hybrid of an artist has formed in our society; a middle between romantic and contemporary, who creates relevant art which is liberal and democratic and is not narcissistic, who has a wise opinion about everything worth knowing. My biggest obstacle when socialising with Georgian artists is that I can't understand their attitudes towards their profession. When this is your work that you live on, you are involved in it; however, I've seen many who do not like their profession, as if it is distant to their personas.

**I often get impression that for Georgian artists their professional and public lives are different. One is a romantic understanding about an artist and their engagements in the studio and the second is their private everyday existence. And then we return to where we started from that the reflexive about their surroundings is not reflected in their oeuvre, the recycling of the information does not happen.**

I still think this is the inversion for survival, coming from Soviet times, as the art historical school, which at that time decided to focus on the art of the past. When I got annoyed and asked why no one wrote or did anything with the contemporary art and why there was such an omission, I got an answer that in order not to be forced to write about Social Realism and similar stupidities they intentionally chose to focus on medieval art. Maybe they have escaped formalistic research of the ideological art, but different kind of perversion resurfaced- the fetishizing of past art. It still remains a problem that there is no modern interpretation of the past art. You might have historical research but do engage in it with the up-to-date methodology, focus on the XXI context, coming from phenomenological analysis. Mostly this is the personification of the Soviet stress.

**If we come back to the criticism, is this the role of a critic engaging with these processes?**

Of course it is but one or two critics won't be able to change anything, more people are needed; tendencies are to be created. It is horrible when you with some other couple of persons alone are representative of a movement, there are no like-minded people, and there is no process and no context. Your position is ambivalent. Georgia's problem is also that identity is not defined, the borders are not fixed and it is problematic too. It is desirable to have a vigorous artistic activity, as it would contribute in searching for forms and contexts, even the political processes but unfortunately none of these happen.

**Maybe it depends on generations and time and in Georgia's case it is very complex. It is peculiar that in the West curators have substituted the role of a**

**critic, the museums and curators, who arrange discussions and other educational events along with the exhibitions, take up the educational role. In here we still have not reached this mentality.**

It might also be a social problem; when the living is so hard and banal, big percentage is hungry. The development of culture requires material stability as well as strategy. Unfortunately the only sponsor of large-scale programs is the Ministry of Culture. If there are any rich people interested in art, they do not see anything outside their tastes or anything related to the public space, all they do is satisfy their own caprices.

**Do you agree that the lack of the printed media defines the problems with art criticism?**

It does, but if you make intellectual and critical magazine, you should not have illusions that it will be profitable; it should be initially subsidised. There are couple of magazines about culture but they tend to be trendier and they do not have a specific profile or they are not directed to criticism. It is a big drawback for us that the important texts, philosophies, sociological researches- all the writings of the postmodern time had not been translated on time. In Russia there was the **ХЖ** (Художественный журнал)<sup>4</sup>, magazine that did it all. Today you cannot translate all that immense material that is preferable to be read.

**Not knowing the language is a very relevant problem too; the new generation does not speak Russian, does not know enough of English. There is no one who would finance the translation of the material; moreover no one is ready to read the vast amount of omitted texts when so many new things are being printed. Even for me, as a non-theoretician, in my everyday practical work it is hard to keep up with the flow of the information. The relation between my practical work and the theoretical knowledge might be subject to discussion for many.**

Having knowledge and being informed about everything is impossible and not even necessary, but generally lack of education should not be a tendency. There are different types of curating; some work intuitively, some come out of the artist's position, some base it on theories and researches; different curatorial projects are interesting.

**However, I still believe that there has to be a theoretician who would respond critically or analytically to my curating even if intuitive curating. The role of the audience is vital too; the way they apprehend the work or the project. The prefabricated frame that prepares and points at the reactions is different to the spontaneous, unprepared, uneducated reaction from the audience.**

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<sup>4</sup> <http://xz.gif.ru/>

Contemporary art is often criticised, in order to understand an artwork some pre-existing knowledge is needed. I would not agree with it completely; I have heard some striking comments and interpretations from the students who did not have any preparatory base- such interpretations are interesting for the researchers- how the consciousness devoid of preparatory mood is capable of apprehending the work.

**The role of art critic is dispersed among the critics, theoreticians, journalists, curators, artists and everyone has their designated roles in this system. I just think not everyone should be preoccupied with just describing the facts.**

The context remains definitive. Local artist might create an artwork employing the language of the contemporary art, internationally understandable and this will be interesting precisely for this matter, rather than being exotic. If there were critical processes it would be the criticism of the processes taking place in the consciousness. Nowadays, the artworks lack the depth and leave no space for interpretations.

Also media and the cultural overviews are quite problematic in here. I mean television mainly; if the public broadcasting channel had one educational program, the situation would change.

There are plenty of stereotypes around the criticism. The tiny part needs to have some kind of information about the contemporary criticism and even artists themselves have to be curious about critical discourse.

I only see a solution in students; when socialising with them I get the vibe that something might change, I believe in the next generation.

**My motivation and driving force is the communication with the people with my projects and when I see the possibility of me influencing one or two people, this gives me hope.**