

Contemporary Georgian art: some trends

Although there has been a great deal to be angry about here in the past fifteen years - separatist war, economic collapse and a series of corrupt and authoritarian governments – a Georgian art of protest has been conspicuous by its absence. There are historical reasons for this: unlike Russia, the Georgian avant-garde that emerged in the 1970s was principally influenced by Abstract Expressionism, being concerned with themes of the spiritual, the transcendent and the eternal. Even the Tenth Floor Group, an artists' collective of the 1980s whose groundbreaking and iconoclastic work showed a certain readiness for social engagement, still operated within this essentially mythic frame of reference. But this mythic art, though effective in dismantling the constraints of socialist realism, proved of little use in making sense of the disasters that so quickly overwhelmed the country after the fall of the Soviet Union. Faced with public events that were increasingly appalling and incomprehensible and against which protest seemed ever more pointless, most of these artists retreated - some into a defiant self-affirmation, others into disorientation, disillusionment and despair. Too often one notices in works of this period a curiously obscure and inconclusive quality, as if, rather than expressing the unfolding catastrophe, the catastrophe were expressing itself through them.

One artist not only to have survived but developed in the course of these crisis years is Mamuka Japharidze (born 1962). Unlike many of his generation, Japharidze has maintained his conviction in the emancipatory potential of a spiritual art, and it is this singleness of purpose, together with a remarkable receptivity to the possibilities of aesthetic experience, that has helped his work retain its relevance and power. Two recent pieces are illustrative of this: his *Flying Rocks* (2005), a piece of 'found art', is a volcanic rock on the Taiwanese coast which, the artist discovered, produced a sensation of weightlessness and flying when laid upon; while his *Optimystic Translookation* (sic, 2005) is a van whose rear compartment has been converted into a giant camera obscura, allowing passengers inside to watch a moving, inverted image of the landscape through which they pass. But both aim at provoking a sudden, and typically euphoric, perceptual shift in the viewer, as a means of opening up consciousness to what he calls a 'an alternative transrational space'.

The younger generation of artists, who were children under the Soviet Union and came of age in the 1990s, have a very different set of preoccupations. Their formative experience was not the country's struggle for national independence but its gradual incorporation as a peripheral state into a new world system. Spiritual themes find almost no place among their work, perhaps because for them this 'other space' is already present, and has turned out to be the empty and affectless one of international capitalism: defining this new situation, rather than formulating some means of reprieve from it, that becomes the primary task. Some, such as Kote Sulaberidze (born 1964), aim to record the new sense of cultural estrangement that has accompanied the market's gradual penetration of society. His coolly analytical drawings of *khinkali* (meat dumplings, a mainstay of Georgian cuisine) acknowledge both the absurdity of relating to his own culture in these terms and the impossibility now of doing so in any other. Others, such as Andro Wekua (born 1977), seek to define the present in relation to the past. His series of photocopy collages (2005), sinister portraits and landscapes in which the images of memory, film and nightmare are inextricably combined, express an alienated nostalgia for a childhood doubly lost to time and political upheaval (Wekua's hometown is the now war-ravaged and inaccessible Sukhumi). For still others, defining the new situation has meant confronting their contemporaries with truths about themselves they would rather not hear, and it is here that the beginnings of a contemporary critical art can be seen to emerge. Among these artists performance and video are rapidly establishing themselves as the dominant form, perhaps because when identity itself is in question the experience of embodiment provides a fixed point from which to establish it. Sleep and addiction are recurrent themes in this work, which often seeks to address the corrosive disaffection, apathy and emotional torpor affecting many young Georgians, who find themselves trapped between the constraints of traditional society on the one hand and the rigors of the newly competitive economy on the other. George Kevle's (born 1971) *Alubily* (2005), in which the artist received a general anaesthetic before a gallery audience and then slept for twelve hours, aimed at enacting a 'little death' which would, he says, 'wake up some of my friends', while Nik u. sha's (born 1979) *Hop*, a critique of militarism and popular notions of masculinity, involved the artist escaping from the 'enforced marriage' of the military draft by casting off a camouflage bridal dress and jumping naked from a bridge into the river below. For both, physical risk becomes a means of shocking their audience – and themselves - out of generalised insensibility.

By contrast, the work of Sophia Tabatadze (born 1977) relies for its effect on deadpan irony. Her *Subudiet* (2005), a text parodying western fad diets by advocating the use of the heroin substitute Subutex as a means of losing weight, was printed on posters and put up around Tbilisi. The parallels it exposed between the psychology of dieting and that of drug addiction drew attention to current efforts by the Georgian media to

'push' the new psychic economy of consumerism onto the middle classes - and suggested that increasing drug use among the poor was merely the obverse side of this process. Recent performances by Tabatadze in collaboration with Nadia Tsulukidze (born 1976) have lampooned attempts by women's magazines to get their readers to engage in 'retail therapy' - the absurdity of which, in a country where per capita income is just over \$1000 a year, hardly needs emphasising. Their work thus revives a Soviet tradition of jokes that turn on the vast disparity between official ideology and everyday life. That ideology may have changed drastically in the last fifteen years, but the disparity is as great as it ever was, and looks likely to remain so for years to come. It may well become the natural ground of this new critical art.

The difficulties of making art in Georgia today are not to be underestimated. Artists still suffer a lack of information about developments in the outside world (this despite the internet), an absence of a critical reception to their work and, perhaps most obviously, severely restricted access to institutional funding and international commercial galleries. The establishment of Art Caucasus, an annual art fair showcasing the work of artists from the region which attracts curators from Europe and America, may go some way towards redressing this. Yet it could be also that this very distance from the world's commercial art centres could have its advantages for artists here. There is much about life in Tbilisi that is conducive to making art: its small artistic community is highly sociable and mutually supportive, and exhibitions and performances can be mounted easily and at short notice, allowing for a spontaneity that would be inconceivable in the west. Perhaps more importantly, artists can develop their work here free of the pressures and constraints imposed by the market. What use they will be able to make of this freedom remains to be seen.

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