

EMERGING CULTURAL CONTINENT: ACTORS AND NETWORKS

ARMENIA, AZERBAIJAN, GEORGIA, IRAN, JORDAN,
LEBANON, SYRIA AND TURKEY

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INTRODUCTION TO THE CAUCASUS

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If I were asked to describe the Caucasus region, I would say Armenia was the most rational and knows where it's heading, Georgia knows it should be sensible and get things done but its innate irrationality gets in the way, and Azerbaijan impulsively—but unpretentiously—heads to no clear direction (this is why Georgians prefer Azeris to Armenians; Georgians claim that Armenians always have secret agenda, but the real reason may be resentment of the fact that the Armenians actually get things done).

One can observe the same thing in the field of contemporary art: in Armenia spaces for contemporary and experimental art, opportunities for discussion and information resources are the most developed. Art historians consciously try to put the work of young Armenian artists in the context of a recent tradition, thereby supporting their work and helping them develop it further. There is a catalogue of contemporary Armenian art; curators make international presentations of Armenian contemporary art, and every two years Armenian artists represent their country in the Armenian pavilion at the Venice Biennale (though when you look at the curriculum vitae of some of these artists what you find is a series of regional exhibitions interspersed with the show at the Venice Biennale).

Georgia knows it needs all this: work needs to be contextualised, the art scene needs to become more

unified, buildings need to be acquired for non-commercial artistic purposes, but all this remains at the planning stage, presumably due to lack of organisational skills and a sense of common purpose.

Azerbaijan simply neglects all this: its artists claim to be the first and only ones to be working in their respective fields, they rarely mention each other and each one considers himself/herself the first and the best, if only he/she were recognised as such. Exhibitions are organised in order to produce glossy and full colour catalogues, rather than the other way round.

Needless to say, no significant cultural development can take place in a region where national borders between states remain largely closed, especially when we are talking about countries as tiny as Armenia, whose territory covers 29,800 sqkm and has a population of 3.5 million people, Georgia, which covers 69,700 sqkm and has a population of 4.5 million people and Azerbaijan, which covers 86,600 sqkm and has a

These three countries also have a tendency to hate their immediate neighbour and to have friendly relations with their next neighbour but one—or in the case of Georgia, with neighbours quite some distance away.



Moreover I have noticed that the younger generation of artists are mentally more closed towards the neighbouring countries than, say, artists over forty. The youngsters have seen nothing of the Union (be it Soviet

Union), they are born in small countries that proudly show their nationality to be their identities, and when I asked some young Azeri artist to tell something to their Armenian colleagues in front of the video camera, as I had a show coming up in Yerevan, the only thing they could say was: 'give us Karabakh back!'

If artists don't start talking to each other, if we don't realise that ideas have to be shared and that we will only achieve something significant from a common ground, we will remain small countries with insignificant cultural lives slavishly following the dominant trends. We will condemn ourselves to always being one step—or several steps—behind.

If I were asked to describe the Caucasus region, I would say Armenia was the most rational and knows where it's heading, Georgia knows it should be sensible and get things done but its innate irrationality gets in the way, and Azerbaijan impulsively—but unpretentiously—heads to no clear direction [...]. One can observe the same thing in the field of contemporary art [...].

population of 8.5 million people. What is more, these tiny counties have a tendency to get smaller and smaller: some having regions in a state of semi-conflict, others in a state of frozen conflict; some with territories recognised by international bodies such as the United Nations and others with unrecognised territories, living in a state of legal limbo.