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Deconstructing the Aquarium

Intersecting Performance,
Place and Memory in Tbilisi

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INTRODUCTION

This essay is the final product marking the conclusion of my MA cycle of studies in Cultural Anthropology, Ethnology and Ethnolinguistics at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. The study is the result of a 9-month-long fieldwork which took place in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, between September, 2021 and June, 2022.

Tbilisi (in Georgian: თბილისი, *t'bilisi*, literally meaning “the warm one”, due to its numerous sulphur hot springs) is an eclectic city which escapes an easy definition: the districts (*raioni*) and neighbourhoods that compose it, arranged on a longitudinal axis on the right and left bank of the river Mtkvari and climbing steep hills and cliffs, present a layered and distinctive architectural appearance, encompassing elements from local and Byzantine, Neoclassical, Art Nouveau, Beaux-Arts, Middle Eastern, and Soviet styles, to which one should add the shiny glass-and-steel buildings and the flagship projects that started to be constructed after the 2003 Rose Revolution (which brought to the power the third president of Georgia after the independence acquired in 1991, Mikheil Saakashvili), in an attempt to Westernise the image of the city and of the country. This very mixture of eclectic elements and contradictions is what ensures the city an enduring fascination and energy, in my perception, as of a city that never stops and where something is always happening, or subject to unexpected changes.

This essay aims to be a testimony of my experience there and of the places and people whose encounter shaped it. It is also an experiment in exploring the inherent artistic qualities of anthropology as a discipline, a first attempt to combine my art practice as a performance artist and a photographer with anthropological research, a discipline in

which I had no previous practical experience. For this reason, I have chosen to use the research framework of Visual Anthropology as the one which is more attuned with my research objectives: the specific methodology I have adopted was then developed step by step in the practice, and it drew inspiration from other documented experiments in art-anthropology and visual anthropology (Schneider, Wright, 2013), as well as from practices of blending performance art and filmmaking, of which I have a direct experience (Stenke, Pagnes, 2020). In particular, this study is an attempt to test and demonstrate how performance can be a precious methodological tool for ethnographic research, in that it is capable to elicit certain hidden dynamics, interpretations and embodiments and to grasp a sense of an atmosphere and of the entangled mass of personal and collective issues that would potentially escape the *thick description* as a “traditional” methodology for ethnographic research. What I have been trying to do in my fieldwork practice and in the present essay is to elaborate a personal ethnographic methodology and to underline the role of performance in building knowledge and ethnographic understanding.

The initial methodological inspiration was born while preparing for the exam of Ethnography, where I had analysed in a short essay the art-anthropology experiment carried on by Alyssa Grossman (2014), who worked together with artist Selena Kimball on forgotten objects of the communist past in Romania, and which brought me to elaborate on the performative qualities of anthropology as a discipline and on the possibility of fruitfully bringing together the research methodologies that are at the basis of performance art and anthropology during a fieldwork research process, and also as an instrument for the creation of an ethnographic movie. For this reason, I had the idea to treat the

fieldwork as the construction of performances, and performances, created with local artists (with whom I have been involved in different degrees of collaboration and often as a co-performer), as a mirror through which to analyse the reality in which I was immersed and the specific topics that were urgent. Starting from performance, I had the possibility of eliciting and bringing together an entangled amount of personal and collective issues, emotions, nihilism, perspectives on the future, hopelessness and, on the opposite, firm determination in building a future on the ashes of traumas, senses of waiting (for something or from nothing), as they are captured and conveyed in the performative practice, in performances which hold in themselves a clump of anxieties, frustrations, affects, that come together as in the texture of a fabric. The essay therefore seeks to demonstrate how performance as a methodology for ethnographic research is fruitful in understanding and presenting how young people in their 20s and 30s in Tbilisi give a sense to their experience, to their relationship with the Soviet and post-Soviet past, to their expectations for the future, and how this is declined in their everyday artistic and life practice.

The final result of this process is a visual anthropology product, in the form of a performance-based movie, that aims to work as an evocative mediator of the research findings, accompanied by the present essay, which presents a more in-depth analysis of the works, linking them to other findings emerged during the fieldwork and to the ethnographical works of scholars who conducted research in the area or who confronted themselves with similar issues, with no claim of completeness, occasionally employing some elements of creativity in the writing process: the work needs therefore to be understood as a series of portraits, each one starting from a performative work, which is shedding

a ray of light on one or more of the aspects of the overall topic, and above all as the ground for future research projects. A strong inspiration for the form in which this study is written derives from the book *Georgian Portraits* by Martin Demant Frederiksen and Katrine Bendtsen Gotfredsen (2017), which presents the “afterlives” of the 2003 Rose Revolution, its hopes and failures, in the form of portraits depicting small events who point together to a bigger event and create a composite picture of it. The authors describe their methodology in the following way:

“The portraits – or variations – that are presented [...] do not lead toward the revolution but rather depart from it. They describe, each in their own way, the revolution as it took form in the ten-year period following November 2003, and how it ceased to be an event but became part of social life. The portraits are sequenced chronologically and although they concern different places, people, events or things, they generate each other’s context. That is, they extend each other as case studies of smaller events that are all somehow related to a larger one – the revolution.” (Frederiksen, Bendtsen Gotfredsen, 2017, 15).

The same can be said for the ethnographic part of my essay, which, by analysing and presenting single performance works, tries to create a composite picture of how the younger generations experience present life in Tbilisi, and how they relate to the Soviet and post-Soviet past, trying to build a hope for the future. To do so, I have also made use of the theoretical framework provided by the decolonial theory as developed by Madina Tlostanova (2012, 2017, 2018), a transdiasporic (Circassian-Uzbek) feminist thinker and writer, whose work is specifically focused on the post-Soviet space and on the relevance of

art in the construction of a decolonial practice, a personal and collective agenda of *re-existence* (a term that Tlostanova borrows from Columbian cultural theorist and artist Adolfo Alban Achinte). In my study, and through the portrait-like presentation of performances, I strive therefore to present a different image than that of a doomed country, one that is forever in-between two worlds: not able to get rid of its uncomfortable Soviet past, but not “good enough” to fit entirely in the Western model of modernity, and for this reason forever left behind. I try to do so by focusing on the experience of people and on their active participation in the re-appropriation of their Soviet and post-Soviet past, and of their present, without underestimating the issues that still affect the country but highlighting creative tactics (De Certeau, 2001, 69 ss.) to challenge the narrative of *Georgianness* in the external and, first of all, in the internal perception.

The first chapter of this work presents the historical context of my research, the 30-years’ time frame after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, by focusing on some specific issues that are relevant and connected to my research, namely the process of construction of the Georgian national identity in the official discourse and its frequent clashes with reality, together with the progressive development of the external image of the country and its citizens, especially in the Western perception. Moreover, in it I address the transformation of the urban environment of Tbilisi as a cross-cutting issue of my research and I conclude by introducing a first component of the theoretical framework that guided my practice, the already mentioned decolonial option conceptualised by Tlostanova, and by tracing a short history of the development of performance art in Tbilisi, to convey the sense that

performance has already been the means chosen by Georgian artists to express personal, social and political issues in many cases in the past.

The second chapter goes through an in-depth analysis of the evolution of my research methodology, and links it to previous experiences in the field of art-anthropology and of performance-based research and filmmaking from which I drew methodological inspiration (in particular, the *Manifesto on performance-based filmmaking*, developed by my art mentors Verena Stenke and Andrea Pagnes in 2020 as a collection of their 10-years-long experience in this practice) and to theoretical propositions on how to delink ethnographic research from the binary oppositions between reason and the senses and between analysis and aesthetics, opening the way to new modes of paying attention to the world: what Martinez, Frederiksen and Di Puppò call a *peripheral methodology* (2021, 1 ss.). Within this frame, by being available and open to getting lost, it is possible to resist the urge to extract meaning, to classify and categorise, forcing fragments into a coherent whole, before even allowing oneself to feel and sense the thing that is at the core of the encounter. And this was very important for the evolution of my research: I wanted first of all to feel and be affected by the reality I was encountering, instead of conducting a dry, categorising analysis.

The third chapter of this essay analyses specific places in Tbilisi that are used by the independent art scene, often as a creative tactic to counter the chronic lack of spaces for contemporary art in the city and of institutional support and recognition, and how the creative practice is engaging with the place as a memory aggregator and a co-performer, by developing a dialogue on a same-level with it and by allowing the

place to enter the work with its affective production (Navaro-Yashin, 2009).

The fourth chapter presents a portrait-like analysis of performance works to which I have collaborated to different degrees during my fieldwork, linking them with the personal stories of the artists involved, analysing them through my overall ethnographic research and through the ethnographies conducted by other authors in Tbilisi and in Georgia, and using the performances as a magnifying glass that allows to investigate the reality underneath: the topics that were urgent during my stay in Tbilisi (and still are), in particular the need to work on memory and to confront and recreate a relationship with the troubled past and its personal and collective traumas, in order to create a sense of a possible future. Through the entire chapter, the analysis is opened and mediated by vignettes and images, details of the works which I use in a non-explanatory way, with the aim of evoking a sensation or an atmosphere, rather than attempting at providing a documentation of a performance. The accompanying movie has been constructed on the same principle, and its evolution is presented in the final part of this essay. The vignettes themselves are written as they were a description of a photographic image or a series of snapshots, and in this I owe to recognise an inspiration derived from the short story *Thirteen views of a cardboard city*, by cyberpunk novelist William Gibson.

I will now move to the first chapter of this work, presenting the historical, ethnographic and theoretical context in which my research has been conducted.

CHAPTER ONE

GEORGIA AFTER THE FALL OF THE SOVIET UNION: 30 YEARS OF SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND SPATIAL MUTATION

1.1 independence as a state of mind: Georgia and Tbilisi after 1991

The last 30 years have been a particularly significant time for Georgia and its capital Tbilisi, a time of turbulent mutation, characterised by uncertainty, political instability, individual and collective trauma, with no clear idea of the future and no end in sight for the so-called post-Soviet transition.

It would greatly exceed the purpose of this study to try to recollect in detail all the events that took place during this time frame and for this reason in this chapter I have decided to focus on some specific issues that are relevant and connected to my research, namely the process of construction of the Georgian national identity in the official discourse and its frequent clashes with reality, together with the progressive development of the external image of the country and its citizens, especially in the Western perception. Moreover, I will address the transformation of space after the dissolution of the USSR, with a specific focus on the urban environment of Tbilisi as a cross-cutting issue of my research. I will conclude by introducing a first important component of the theoretical framework that guided my practice and the analysis of data collected over the 9-month-long fieldwork, namely

the *decolonial option* as specifically developed by Madina Tlostanova¹ (2012; 2017; 2018).

The fall of the Soviet Union on December, 26th 1991, which brought Georgia and the other republics to independence, was not a prepared act but a sudden overnight change, the dissolution of something which, up to that moment, appeared to be eternal and unchangeable (Yurchak, 2003, 480). Some months before this major event, on April, 9th 1991, the Georgian Supreme Soviet guided by former dissident and future first president of Georgia Zviad Gamsakhurdia, symbolically proclaimed the restoration of Georgian independence, with the endorsement of the Orthodox church and after a long discourse to commemorate Georgia's eternal struggle for its own preservation as an independent country. The choice of the date was not casual: it marked the second anniversary of the 1989 tragedy, the bloody repression of a demonstration taking place in Rustaveli avenue, the main street in Tbilisi, by elite troops from the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs, which left 19 dead and 427 injured. *Independence* became a state of mind, almost a magic word that people thought would solve the country's problems and automatically bring prosperity and democracy, while in reality it turned out to be a painful and bloody experience for Georgians (Jones, 2013, xxii). It caught the country and its citizens by surprise, following the dissolution of the power from the centre, instead of being the outcome of a local national struggle: in this context, the whole state apparatus, national identity, economy, democratic institutions and civil society had to be re-built or created from scratch;

¹ Madina Tlostanova is a transdiasporic (Circassian-Uzbek) feminist thinker and fiction writer, and a professor of postcolonial feminisms at the Department of Thematic Studies (Gender studies) at Linköping University (Sweden).

a revolutionary change to be performed with almost no (human and material) resources (Jones, 2013, 25 ss.).

This process unfolded over three decades, including four different governments (under Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1990-1992), under Eduard Shevardnadze (1992-2003), under Mikheil Saakashvili after the so-called Rose Revolution (2003-2012); the ones elected after 2012 can be considered as a single entity, being guided by the same party – Georgian Dream, which was founded and is still highly influenced by a single person, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili; Aprasidze, Siroky, 2020, 581 ss.), a civil war in Tbilisi (1991), two wars against the regions of Abkhazia (1992-1993) and South Ossetia (2008) proclaiming their independence, in both cases with Russian intervention, and a heavy social and economic crisis followed by the introduction of *shock capitalism* policies after 2003 Rose Revolution. The process contributed to the development of several features that still characterise Georgian society nowadays: a lasting distance between the state and the citizens, which carries along the necessity of adopting a tactical behaviour (De Certeau, 2001, 69 ss.) as a fundamental means of survival; an inevitable recycling of the Soviet state wiring, while at the same time the Soviet Union is largely deemed to be responsible for Georgia's problems (Jones, 2013, 13); the privatisation of civic life, which favoured the development of large areas of informality and of a focus on families and personal networks (which can be trusted, whereas the state and other citizens cannot; Jones, 2013, 10-11²); a deep urban-

² For an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of mistrust in connection with different aspects of Georgian society and with a global approach, see Mühlfried, F., 2019, *Mistrust. A Global Perspective*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. On opacity in the political and in everyday discourse in Georgia, and the feeling that everything is potentially not as it seems or as it is said to be, see Bendtsen Gotfredsen, 2015, 125 ss.

rural divide, which also implies a different perception on several issues by people living in the cities compared to people living in rural areas; a change in social relationships, with increased individualism and fragmentation, favoured by imported capitalism and Western cultural models. To this frame it is necessary to add the ever-present drama and performativity of Georgian politics and a more recent, strong polarisation of political life between the ruling party (Georgian Dream) and the opposition (United National Movement, the party founded by Saakashvili), which creates an environment of endless competition with seemingly no way out, deepening the distance between the government and the citizens and the perception of immobilism and generalised hopelessness. A situation which has worsened following Saakashvili's sudden return to Georgia (where he was going to face several criminal charges for abuse of power) on October, 1st 2021 (followed by his arrest, after 8 years of exile in Ukraine and ahead of the first turn of the municipal elections³), and following the start of the war in Ukraine and the decision of the European Commission which recently invited Georgia to perform a series of reforms before being granted the full membership candidate status, which was instead awarded to Ukraine and Moldova. All the three events stirred up huge waves of street protests.

To come to the core issue of the (re)construction of the Georgian national identity in the official discourse after the independence, Georgian philosopher Zaza Shatirishvili highlights the presence of three major national narratives in the country (2009, 59 ss.).

³ <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/2829> (last accessed: 17/07/2022);
<https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/2885> (last accessed: 17/07/2022);
<https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/2887> (last accessed: 17/07/2022);
<https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/2888> (last accessed: 17/07/2022).

The first one is a classical one, which can be traced back to liberal authors of the end of the 19th century like Ilia Ch'avch'avadze, and is centred around the story of the survival of Georgia as a nation, and of its language and culture, despite a history of imperial aggressions over ages, and it entails the insight that if the present is tragic, there will be a positive outcome. It is a narrative that implies salvation, which comes on the basis of Georgians' innate characteristics which make them incompatible with external domination, and at the same time a certain degree of self-victimisation and feeling of loss for a Golden Age which is not going to come back (Batiashvili, 2012, 190 ss.).

The second narrative has been advanced in the official discourse after the Rose Revolution and is strongly connected to it, making reference to the birth of a new, mighty, nation out of the chaos of Shevardnadze's epoch, a nation which is democratic, liberal, inherently European and Western, and in which Georgia's Soviet past undergoes a state-driven *damnatio memoriae* (De Leonardis, 2016, 24 ss.). It is a narrative of triumphal optimism, often contradicted by a pretty different reality (see for an example Frederiksen, 2014, 81 ss.). This narrative has been re-worked and mixed with a new kind of salvation narrative in the form of technocratic populism by the currently ruling party Georgian Dream and by its founder Bidzina Ivanishvili, who in his discourses repeatedly asked the population to trust his expertise as a businessman as a sign of his ability to solve the country's problems. This new narrative is also at odds with reality and with the people's perceptions (Aprasidze, Siroky, 2020, 583 ss.).

The third narrative is connected to the Orthodox church as the main cultural emblem of the country, and it claims that Eastern Orthodoxy is the genetically inherited religion of Georgian people. It is a narrative

that idealises cultural traditional values, that entails a strong anti-Western perspective, and is influencing politics and often positioning the church in direct competition for power and supremacy with the government. It is connected with identity rather than spirituality, and it tends to erase the existence and rights of Georgia's numerous religious minorities.

The three narratives have collided and mixed in different ways over the years in the national and nationalistic discourse but they are all connected by the so-called "Russian/Soviet argument": a sort of conspiracy theory rhetoric which implies identifying the Soviet past (and Russia, as the successor of the USSR) as the source of all evils and consequently searching for traitors and enemies to be blamed as pro-Russian or as nostalgic of the Soviet Union, and therefore as responsible for Georgia's failures. This is especially observed in the political discourse, while the church avoids taking an anti-Russian position, due to its persistent connection with the Russian Orthodox church (Berekashvili, 2018, 68).

The movie *Sunny Night*⁴ (2017), that I had the opportunity to view in a public screening during my fieldwork, is a good exemplification of the interconnection of these three narratives and of the repetition of the same cultural motifs and identity references in the political discourses and symbolism of the past 30 years, while at the same time giving a picture of the influence of the Orthodox church on Georgian society and political life. A co-production between Georgia and Germany, the movie, directed by Soso Dumbadze and Lea Hartlaub, is entirely composed of found footage, in a variety of formats and sources, news

⁴ <https://dafilms.com/film/10694-sunny-night>

reports and private recordings, assembled to provide a composite picture of a turbulent time frame that goes from 1989 to 2013, where amidst three ideologically very different governments, protests and war, the constants are the presence and influence of the church, which appears as endorsing and legitimising secular power, and the references to Georgia's lost Golden Age, in particular to king Davit Aghmashenebeli (David the Builder, XI-XII century) as a symbolic figure of the first king who managed to unify the country⁵. The movie draws its title from a sentence pronounced in December 2011, in which Georgian Orthodox Patriarch Ilia II described his, at the time, 34-year-long patriarchate as a "sunny night".

National identity narratives in Georgia after the fall of the Soviet Union, mixed with the influx of Western imported cultural and life models (and their associated terminology regarding, for example, queer experiences) which created confusion and refusal in many people, contributed also in shaping quite rigid and binary images of gender and sexuality, codifying and giving prevalence to certain cultural features and expectations, while obliterating or ridiculing non-conforming experiences that have, nonetheless, been present in Georgian society under different forms and over ages (Waterston, 2018, 7 ss.).

To conclude this brief analysis on the re-creation of Georgian national identity after the independence, I would like to mention the work of Georgian anthropologist Nutsa Batiashvili, who, in her research on the role of memory in the creation of the Georgian national and nationalistic discourse (2018), speaks about *bivocalism*, highlighting the

⁵ As an interesting contradiction, under the reign of Davit Aghmashenebeli religious minorities obtained great recognition and protection and the king actively promoted tolerance (Thomas, Mallett, 2011, 567 ss.).

simultaneous presence of a narrative of pride and shame: Georgians are at the same time the ones that produced and experienced the Golden Age of king Davit Aghmashenebeli and the ones who favoured the Soviet invasion in 1921, after a brief period of independence from the Russian Empire started in 1918. The author goes on identifying other binary oppositions in which Georgian identity would be entangled, starting with the dichotomy between cultural traditional values and Western and European incoming values and ideas. Moreover, in her presentation⁶ to the conference *What is Soviet in post-Soviet space*, organised by the Center for Russian Studies in cooperation with Ilia State University and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Nov 30th – Dec 1st 2021) and which I attended, Batiashvili spoke of the expectation for a final and decisive breakthrough that would solve all the country's issues, an idea that is haunting both the political discourse and public sensibility and which the author traces back to Soviet-era utopic narratives. Based on the results of my research, I am quite critical towards this author's positions, which I find often too simplifying and at the same time not granting any possibility to people's agency, a third way to escape the binary logic of conflict and oppositions. During my stay in Tbilisi and in Georgia I have encountered several people and community organisations that are active in countering the idea of a society that is stuck between incompatible ideas and life models, waiting for an external actor to bring a solution to its problems; these subjects are well aware of the impossibility to expect change to come from the outside and in a short time (in particular they do not expect it

⁶ Titled *Once and for All: The Haunting Fantasy of a Breakthrough and the Soviet Order*. For the entire programme of the conference and the book of abstracts, see <https://en.crs.ge/news/%22what-is-soviet-in-post-soviet-space%3F%22> (last accessed: 18/07/2022).

from a polarised political system like the one that is currently ruling Georgia) and are engaged in producing the social change that they want to see in their society, being also aware that it will require a long time and a lot of effort. Regarding this topic, I have the feeling that Batiashvili's position is, in this case, a "view of the society from above" that, on one side, does not consider the many realities that are working at a grassroots level to bridge the social fractures caused exactly by further promoting a stereotypical, non-nuanced and binary picture of the Georgian context, which seems to be modelled on the official political discourse and on the appearance of the country in Western media, while on the other side it forgets an important element of the context: the diffused nihilism (Frederiksen, 2020) and distrust, especially towards the idea of the revolution (Mühlfried, 2021).

1.2 *a transition in space*: urban transformations in Tbilisi after the independence

The hectic mutation that affected Georgia over the past three decades is reflected in the urban transformations of its capital, Tbilisi.

Following the civil war and military coup in 1991/1992, Tbilisi and its citizens experienced an economic collapse and a period of strong instability and uncertainty, accompanied by increased levels of crime and by significant changes in the composition of its population: on one side, many Tbilisians sought better chances by migrating in different countries; on the other side, many people coming from the even poorer rural areas of Georgia started moving to the capital in search for better opportunities and struggled to adapt to the new life in the city. At the same time, Tbilisi saw an influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs)

coming from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These changes contributed to transform completely the image of the city (Salukvadze, Golubchikov, 2016, 44).

In the following years, the process of destatization and privatisation of the land and of the real estate started, often creating conditions of *wild market*. Almost no planning or large investments were implemented during the 90s: on the contrary, a widespread phenomenon of DIY construction practices started to develop, based on a late Soviet legislation which allowed apartment building extensions like loggias, verandas and balconies at the owner's expenses. Following the privatisation process, a great number of extensions were completed, with no particular care for materials, safety and aesthetics (Salukvadze, Golubchikov, 2016, 46; for a cultural link between the urban transformations in Tbilisi and the change in the composition of its population, see also Manning, 2009, 90 ss.).

From the early 2000s macroeconomic conditions in Georgia improved and this favoured economic growth in Tbilisi, changing people's and businesses' demands for housing and space. Following a neoliberal approach, after the Rose Revolution the government guided by Mikheil Saakashvili introduced new urban policies and new rules for construction which were very relaxed, in opposition to the old Soviet planning rules which were deemed to provide "unreasonable restrictions" (Salukvadze, Golubchikov, 2016, 46-47; Gentile, Salukvadze, Gogishvili, 2015, 149 ss.). This approach failed to meet public needs in the end, and the urban development ended up to be determined by capital and investors, focusing on the more profitable central areas of Tbilisi, causing over-densification and starting a process of so-called *newbuild gentrification* (Gentile, Salukvadze,

Gogishvili, 2015, 149), where construction projects were aimed to the very few people with high income, pushing the majority of the population outside of the central areas of the city, and at the same time often damaging the historical and cultural identity of many areas (in many neighbourhoods old structures were carelessly torn down to make space for new constructions; Salukvadze, Golubchikov, 2016, 48). Paradoxically, as it is easily noticeable by taking a walk in every part of the town, Tbilisi is also a city which features a high amount of vacant buildings, both public ones (even new ones, like the opera theatre in Rike Park, designed by Massimiliano Fuksas and never opened) and private houses, which lacked care over the years and mostly lie there waiting for final collapse.

If in the beginning gentrification was mostly channelled by private investors and their capitals, sometimes including corruption and violence used to push the residents out of the buildings that had to be “renovated”, during Saakashvili’s era the process became policy-led and it greatly affected Old Tbilisi area in particular (ძველი თბილისი, *dzveli t’bilisi*: the historic part of the city, located on both sides of the river Mtkvari; one of the most touristically attractive areas, featuring an eclectic architecture and narrow cobblestone streets together with many important landmarks⁷). This is the moment in which ideology entered the urban development planning: Saakashvili’s policies (but also the ones promoted by the subsequent and current governments) were very much concerned with the external image of the country and of its capital

⁷ On the urban transformations in Tbilisi, while trying to analyse the persistence of the cosmopolitan image of the city, see Frederiksen, 2012. On paradoxes in the outcomes of the creation of Western-like cityscapes, and on deceptive façades in the rest of Georgia, see Frederiksen, 2013, Mühlfried, 2021 and Frederiksen, Bendtsen Gotfredson, 2017.

in the eyes of European and Western observers, and they were aggressively directed at positioning the city (and in this way, the country) naturally inside the European family⁸. This had to take place by changing and Westernising the image of Tbilisi (as well as other towns in Georgia), wiping out as much as possible everything that could remind the now openly demonised Soviet past (Frederiksen, 2016, 49 ss.) or any visual association with Asia or poverty and (perceived) backwardness, promoting instead the construction of shiny glass-and-steel buildings and huge flagship projects to be designed by world-known architects, such as the Bridge of Peace, designed by Michele De Lucchi, or the Public Service Hall and the already mentioned Rike Park Theatre, both designed by Massimiliano Fuksas (Salukvadze, Golubchikov, 2016, 48-49).

At the present moment, the city is experiencing a new wave of more traditional gentrification, due to the influx of Russian citizens escaping Putin's regime after the beginning of the war in Ukraine: this incoming migration (the estimate is more than 30.000 people up to now⁹, most of whom moved to Tbilisi, to which an influx of people from Belarus and Ukraine needs to be added), besides changing the composition of the city's population again and stirring up social tension, produced a skyrocketing increase in the rent prices in most of the neighbourhoods and a generalised rise in prices.

⁸ On the role of architecture in constructing Georgia's national identity and European aspirations, see Harris-Brandts, 2018 and Wheeler, 2015. On the intersection of national identity construction through myth-making, European aspirations, mythology and architecture, see also Khalvashi, 2018.

⁹ <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/georgias-new-wave-of-russian-migrants> (last accessed: 19/07/2022).

Tbilisi appears today as a city where many layers of urbanisation and architectural narratives¹⁰ have been piled one on top of each other and juxtaposed, not always harmonically, according to the successive historical and geopolitical evolution of the country and of the whole South Caucasus region, now laying bare “the contradictions of transition and globalization” (Salukvadze, Golubchikov, 2016, 52). In particular, that of *transition* is a concept that has for too long been understood as a phenomenon happening in time (Tlostanova, 2012, 131; Frederiksen, Harboe Knudsen, 2015, 9), implying an evolutionist and teleological interpretation (which includes a powerful rhetoric of salvation) of transition from the darkness of the Soviet and post-Soviet time towards something which is the only viable societal and economic model: capitalistic modernisation¹¹, together with the assimilation into Western social and cultural modes¹². But the post-Soviet transition seems to have “become its own goal” and to have no end in sight (Frederiksen, Harboe Knudsen, 2015, 2): “When do we stop being post-Soviet?¹³” is a recurring question that I have heard during my research in Tbilisi. Bringing to the strong hypothesis that the whole concept of

¹⁰ On the topic, see also Khabuliani, 2015, 35 ss.

¹¹ According to Krisztina Fehérváry (2013) this very binary opposition between state socialism and bourgeois capitalism needs to be criticised, because this politically and academically traced boundary did not always correspond to the reality of the everyday lives of the citizens of Eastern Europe and the Soviet bloc, neither during nor after the collapse of socialism. In this way, the author highlights the fact that the metaphorical Iron Curtain was in reality a porous border.

¹² And this implies a neo-colonial discourse, one in which we, as the West, hold all the answers and are in charge of teaching the societies that were part of the Soviet bloc how to become “like us” (though always in a subordinate level) by providing them with “the right incentives and the right democratic ideals, served within an overarching capitalistic and neoliberalistic framework.” (Frederiksen, Harboe Knudsen, 2015, 6). The authors correctly stress the need to overcome flattening generalisations, starting from those of power inequality, and of being well aware that the West is not necessarily representing something better or more advanced for the people that live in the former Soviet countries.

¹³ Which points also to the parallel question: “When do we stop being considered post-Soviet?”, as in being marked and categorised only on the basis of having been part of the Soviet Union.

transition, as applied to the analysis of the former Soviet countries, has to be deeply rethought and reconfigured, if not abandoned at all¹⁴.

1.3 *do we need to decolonise ourselves?* decolonial (art) practice as a means to challenge imposed narratives

From the previous context analysis, we might get an image of a somewhat doomed country, one that is forever in-between two worlds: not able to get rid of its uncomfortable Soviet past (which, in the political discourse, is named to be the source of all evils), but not “good enough” to fit entirely in the Western model of modernity, and for this reason forever left behind. This is also the image of the post-Soviet countries that has been most of the times depicted in the Western scholarship until recently, and that is still widespread in pop culture and literature: a narrative that is based on sensationalism, generalisations and a Euro-centric and Western-centric approach, which understands the post-socialist transition exclusively in temporal and not in spatial terms (erasing differences and the experience of people inhabiting these countries), arguing on the difficult evolution path that will lead these

¹⁴ Several scholars, and not only within anthropology, have criticised the transition paradigm because of its neo-evolutionist implications and because it underestimates the local uncertainties and confusion that accompanied the everyday management of the changing social and economic landscapes (for example, see Burawoy, Verdery, 1999; Creed, 1995; Humphrey, 2002b; Kaneff, 2002; Lampland, 2002; Lemon, 1998; Lindquist, 2005; Pine, 2002; Ries, 2002; Verdery, 2003). The paradigm of transition has been also criticised for its ethnocentric implications, also seen in how the models and terminology used to describe this so-called phase were fashioned on Western and European models of capitalism, and were transferred to the situation of the former socialist countries with no adaptation and without properly considering the influence of the previous system (see, for example, Hann, 1994; Humphrey, 2002a; Pine, 1993 and 1996). On the specific case of the Caucasus, see Mühlfried, 2020. Another important element in this context is the influence and the creation of new borders carried on by the European Union enlargement politics, and the accompanying, and similarly problematic, concept of *Europeanisation*, as promoting a one-size-fits-all model of Europeaness (at great regional and local cost) and as a form of re-organising territories and people and therefore exercising power over them (Borneman, Fowler, 1997; Harboe Knudsen, 2012).

societies to (a Western-based idea of) modernity, and without paying attention to the discourses expressed in the countries themselves (Tlostanova, 2017, 13 ss.).

In my study I strive to present a different image, by focusing on the experience of people and on their active participation in the re-appropriation of their Soviet and post-Soviet past and of their present, as they are re-elaborated by young generations through performance and art practice, without underestimating the issues that still affect the country but highlighting creative tactics (De Certeau, 2001, 69 ss.) to challenge the narrative of *Georgianness* in the external and, first of all, in the internal perception. To do this, I have made use of the theoretical framework (with some adaptations) provided by the *decolonial option* as specifically developed by postcolonial feminist scholar Madina Tlostanova (2012, 2017, 2018), that I will now briefly introduce.

After an effective critique to the application of the postcolonial theory to what was once the so-called second world, a “strange and disturbing agent” which acted at the same time as the coloniser and the colonised and which disappeared almost overnight, leaving a void and apparently granting victory to the only remaining option of liberalism and capitalism, the author advocates for a *pluriversal* theory which refuses to compare everything and everyone to a Western ideal used as a model for the entire humankind, and instead pays attention to the knowledge which grows out of local histories, experiences and subjectivities in the post-Soviet countries (Tlostanova, 2012, 131-132).

This is what the author calls a *decolonial option*: a theory that has as its main task that of

“a critical analysis of modernity and its darker side – coloniality – tracing the genealogy of modernity’s violence in relation to its internal and external others, and restoring the alternative genealogies of decolonial struggles in order to offer ways of delinking from modernity / coloniality and decolonizing our being, knowledge, perception, gender, and memory” (Tlostanova, 2017, 17),

challenging the Western monopoly on these topics and the hierarchical order of the world and of humanity as imposed by global coloniality, systematically marginalising non-western and not quite western people (Tlostanova, 2012, 133).

The author proceeds then to clarify the specific interpretation that she gives to the term *decolonial*, as an active stance that implies delinking from the various manifestations of modernity and coloniality in every aspect of life and practice (which does not mean to fall into the trap of romanticising pre-colonial “tradition” and the conservative values that might be associated with it; Tlostanova, 2017, 12), to take research into the world and deal with problems and not with disciplines (Tlostanova, 2017, 19; 2012, 134), to formulate and put into practice a personal and collective agenda of *re-existence* (a term that Tlostanova borrows from Columbian cultural theorist and artist Adolfo Alban Achinte) as

“a model of positive (re)creating of worlds, lives and subjectivities. Such an impulse is based not on negation or self-victimization, nor on violence, but on the creation of something different, other than modern / colonial / socialist, taking its own path, superseding the contradictions inherent in these categories” (Tlostanova, 2012, 138).

The author identifies contemporary activist art connected with corporality and affectivity as the most effective tool to implement a decolonial practice (Tlostanova, 2018, 22), a type of art that puts into question aesthetics and art themselves as Western products and frees itself from the existential constraints of modernity and coloniality (Tlostanova, 2017, 28).

To do so, art first of all needs to give birth to a decolonial aesthetics (and I would add, drawing from my fieldwork experience, to a decolonial interpretation of the whole process of producing an artwork), one that consciously deconstructs and subverts strict formulations regarding experience, corporality, creative mechanisms, modes of perception (including the Western predominance of the visual as the main category of world perception) and the concept of what is beautiful, appropriate, urgent. Moreover, a decolonial art acts as a tool to produce knowledge, not a traditional (rational) one but a different attempt to understand and (re)construct the world (Tlostanova, 2017, 33 ss.).

In this essay, I take into consideration body-based art in its potentiality of conveying multi-layered stories, and therefore as a methodology for ethnographic elicitation, while at the same time being often employed to develop a decolonial practice. The performative act becomes then a tactical answer (De Certeau, 2001, 69 ss.), conveying personal and collective memories and experiences in an action that involves an extended, multi-sensory perception, a way of thinking and speaking (and listening, in the case of the audience) with the entire body. The performer's body acts as a conductor where their own story and the audience members' stories flow and encounter, giving rise to multiple possible interpretations, making space for dialogue and for a challenging alterity that cannot be reduced to Western stereotypes (easy

to be tamed and neutralised). Performance is explored in this essay as a form of art which creates a narrative through an action, a making, and as a source of knowledge production, for the artists, the audience, and for the ethnographer employing it as a methodological tool.

The title of this paragraph (“do we need to decolonise ourselves?”) was the theme of this year’s InVisible Festival which took place from May 19th to 22nd 2022 at Salaam Cinema Baku, in Azerbaijan: an event co-produced with Untitled Tbilisi, an art and community space with which I have collaborated several times for my research, starting from November 2021. The festival featured the screening of queer-related movies, together with a series of talks, workshops, performances and community activities (I had the chance to participate myself, by holding a 3-day-long workshop that led to a collective performance). The main aim of the festival (this year in its third edition) is to provide access to “invisible” stories of the world, and the choice of this year’s topic was directly related to the need to discuss and take back the shared past and present of the region, to challenge stereotypical perceptions by creating new and alternative narratives¹⁵.

This reference is a first example that highlights the fact that the decolonial issue is an important topic gathering people of different ages in Georgia as well as in the whole South Caucasus region around the need to talk about their shared Soviet and post-Soviet experience, in

¹⁵ From the text announcing the festival: “This year we dedicate our festival to highlight the need to reflect on our local and regional past. We will observe various methodologies in art and academia to understand what connects us in a post-soviet region within existing social, cultural and representational narratives. What kind of a history do we share, and what are the ways to reflect on it?”

We want to discuss collectively how artists and cultural practitioners can influence which narratives and histories are told. What does it mean to facilitate an exchange of knowledge? Can we use culture as a tool for care and healing?”.

For more information, see Salaam Cinema’s page on Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/salaamcinemabaku/> (last accessed: 21/07/2022).

order to reconstruct their present and get rid of the sense of a lack of future. After all, it is not by chance that this need stands out so clearly in a symbolic time that marks the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Soviet Union.

A decolonial (art) practice thus means to refuse self-victimisation and binary oppositions of national(istic) pride and shame (as theorised by Batiashvili, 2018) and of traditional culture vs European and Western values; it is staying with the trouble and working on it and with it. In this frame, I consider the performances that will be presented in the following chapters as a form of exposing this problematic issue, in different degrees, and trying to find a possible way out, a form of resistance.

At this point, a final reflection is necessary: while I agree on most of the aspects of Tlostanova's theoretical reflection, I am not fully convinced of her choice regarding the artists to be presented as an example of a decolonial art practice: this is not to criticise these artists' work, which I find very interesting and important; but I have the feeling that choosing artists which present their work mainly within high-level exhibitions in European and Western institutions is on one side quite limiting, and on the other side it signals a focus on the external perception of the post-Soviet countries in the eyes of a Western observer. This is surely important, but in my opinion the first thing that needs to be challenged is the internal perception of the people inhabiting this region, and this cannot be done at a "high-art" level that prevents the access of the majority of people, but only within a community-driven practice that aims at inclusion and dialogue. This is why in my research I have decided to work with young artists and cultural practitioners who operate at a grassroots level, who use the available

space and their bodies in a tactical way to re-appropriate the city and their personal and collective memory, posing questions to themselves and to the audience rather than giving answers, allowing their bodies to speak of the past and of the present.

1.4 a brief introduction to performance art in Georgia

Performance art in Georgia is not a new discipline: already since the mid-80s Georgian art scene saw the formation of underground art collectives that used different artistic media to express and discuss socio-political issues and the uncertainties of their present and future; frequently, they turned to performance as an artistic medium that can easily comply with a limited access to art materials, needing only one's body to create a work. Art groups¹⁶ such as *Archivarius*¹⁷, *10th Floor*¹⁸ and *Marjanishvilebi*¹⁹ (partially involving the same members) critically engaged the society in a conversation about the issues of the time and about the boundaries between art and society.

Underground artists in Georgia

¹⁶ A limited amount (possibly due to the difficult conditions in which these artists found themselves operating, which prevented the collection of proper documentation) of information about the work of these artists can be found in Skangale, 2022, on Artarea TV YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/user/Artareatv>) and on the online Contemporary Art Archive curated by Propaganda Network, a Tbilisi-based organisation established in 2013 with the aim to promote the professional development of the artists and increase their visibility, as well as to initiate research and educational projects (<https://archive.propaganda.network/en>).

¹⁷ An art collective founded by artist and writer Karlo Kacharava (1964-1994) and named after the fictional character Archivarius Lindhorst mentioned in the novella *Der Goldne Topf* (The golden pot) by E. T. A. Hoffmann (Skangale, 2022).

¹⁸ A collective formed partially by the same members of Archivarius, which took the name by the fact that one of its members had the chance to get a studio on the 10th floor of the State Academy of Art in Tbilisi, where the collective established its main seat (Skangale, 2022).

¹⁹ An art collective which gained its name from the fact that the artists were given the possibility of using studio spaces inside the Marjanishvili Theatre in exchange for creating theatre sets (Skangale, 2022).

“looked upon art as an idea and form of knowledge, and the role of the artist as that of an interpreter” (Skangale, 2022)

and adapted tactically to an environment that did not provide neither public nor private spaces that would host their exhibitions, nor any other channel for the dissemination of their works (and, as I will argue later on in my study, lack of space for art practice and presentation is still an issue nowadays).

2008 saw the foundation of *Bouillon* group²⁰ (ბულონი, *bulioni*), a collective focusing on creating artistic interventions in public non-artistic spaces and on bringing non-artistic activities inside art-dedicated spaces, trying to blur the separating line between art and life and criticising different aspects of Georgian post-Soviet reality.

Nowadays, many Georgian underground artists gather around *Project Fungus*²¹, a platform founded in 2020 to unite the voices of queer and feminist artists in Georgia and the Caucasus²², while many other artists prefer to keep working independently or to create their own spaces and platforms, out of which to engage in collaborations.

²⁰ <https://archive.propaganda.network/en/artist/text/69/boullion> (last accessed: 22/07/2022). <https://bouillongroup.com/> (last accessed: 22/07/2022). In their performances, most of which are carried out in the public space, the Bouillon Group artists reference the multi-layered Georgian culture, as well as scrutinize and critically analyse the reality of life in post-Soviet Georgia. By drawing on regional traditions in its performances, the collective transfers these rituals into new, supra-regional contexts, thereby opening up new historical and social levels of meaning.

²¹ <https://www.instagram.com/projectfungus/> (last accessed: 22/07/2022).

²² The group’s manifesto states: “The fungus thrives in damp and dark places. It plays a vital role in the ecology of the biosphere. By decomposing any organic matter, it creates rich soil. Like mushrooms, we do not often appear on the surface, but we grow strong underground and cause intoxication” (Skangale, 2022).

1.5 conclusions

In this chapter we have seen how the narrative of Georgianness has been flexibly constructed and reorganised by the official discourses promoted by the major political and social forces in the country, including the Orthodox church, over the 30-year time frame after the fall of the Soviet Union, and how this, among the other things, produced distrust, nihilism and distance towards the political establishment in the citizens, who more and more often perceived it as manipulating memory and covering with façades the underneath reality, which is often at odds with how it is presented in the official narratives. We have also analysed how other narratives are formulated, often in a stereotypical way, in the perception of external observers, foreign scholars and in the pop culture. The combination of these internal and external narratives is reflected in the architectural landscape of Tbilisi and in the transformations it has undergone over the considered time frame. We have introduced the need of implementing decolonial tactics in order to escape the binary of being stuck between two worlds with no expectations on the future, and art as a fundamental means to carry on such a practice. We expressed the intention to explore the performances, through which my ethnographic analysis has been constructed, also as attempts to expose the problem of the *futureless ontology* (Tlostanova, 2018), telling stories and asking uncomfortable questions, not always providing an answer; a practice that has already a history in Georgian art collectives born after 1980. I will now proceed to analyse in detail how my research methodology has been constructed, in its theoretical background and in the field practice.

CHAPTER TWO

FIELDWORK AS A PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMANCE AS A MAGNIFYING GLASS: ON CONSTRUCTING A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 *for a performative anthropology: an inquiry into the artistic qualities of the discipline*

We don't go to a place to tell a story.

We go to a place to find the story.

– Verena Stenke and Andrea Pagnes (VestAndPage), STRATA²³

I arrived in Tbilisi on the late night of September 22, 2021, after a two-days flight and a stop in Istanbul due to a missed coincidence. After a week spent adapting to the new city and its chaotic and at the same time energising environment, I had the unexpected opportunity to immediately be thrown into my fieldwork, by meeting a French journalist and dancer whose contact was forwarded to me by a university colleague who conducted fieldwork research in Georgia in the months before my arrival. By talking to her I started to have an idea of the composition and functioning of the local art scene and I was introduced to the first artist I have then collaborated with, local dancer and performer Natia Chikvaidze. Through her, I started entering the Tbilisi art scene and it became quite easy (and this was partially unexpected, given my previous experience of working in the cultural sector in Italy) to contact and get to know the people I was interested to meet, talk to and collaborate with. Social media helped a lot in

²³ <https://www.vest-and-page.de/strata> (last accessed: 07/08/2022), <https://www.stratafilm.de/> (last accessed: 07/08/2022).

preparing the research and in mapping the local artists and art venues, a mapping that constituted also a visual archive, not only a collection of names and contacts. Since my arrival I have been collecting visual field notes in the form of pictures, analogue but also phone photographs, videos, screenshots of texts and images, and sound recordings: this archive formed an important part of my field diary and served as a strong visual inspiration in the creation of the movie that is the final product of this research, but also it provided an insight into the local aesthetics that was very useful when it came to work with artists on several projects and performances. The things became even easier after Natia and me did the first performance together on November 13th, 2021: after that evening, I acquired a kind of recognition in the art scene and I started being directly asked for collaboration or for having a conversation on specific topics.

When approaching fieldwork, I asked myself what would have been the most fitting research methodology to be employed, and also the one that could work better with my personal characteristics. Building on my previous experience and on my personal interests, I decided that I wanted to try out the possibilities of anthropology as an artistic discipline, as well as those of art as a way to conduct anthropological research. I do not refer here to potentially confused interdisciplinary approaches where one discipline borrows some elements from the other. Rather, I fully agree when Alyssa Grossman states

“I steer away from the notions of «borrowing» from art practices or «applying» artistic methods to my anthropological activities. Instead, I regard anthropology as a discipline that possesses inherently artistic dimensions and

capacities, which need only be recognized and embraced by its practitioners.”
(Grossman, 2014, 132).

As I am interested in exploring the body and performance as an instrument of knowledge creation, and being involved in performance art as a curator and artist since 2014, I knew that I wanted to take this (and the accompanying concept of embodiment, as the permanence and re-elaboration of experience within one’s body as inseparable from the mind²⁴) as the basis for my study, engaging in the co-creation of performances as a methodology to explore my research topics, focusing on corporality and emotion as the principal tools, and engaging in a form of radical participation in the artistic and everyday lives of the people I have collaborated with. In particular, I wanted to focus also on the non-verbal, to challenge the predominance of words-based communication: as anthropology itself is a discipline that is based on conversations, my aim was to explore the ways in which a conversation can be created without necessarily using words. This comes also from a consideration regarding my personal approach to the world and to the research practice: as an introverted person, I have always found it challenging to speak loudly about myself and about sensitive and personal topics and histories, like the ones I have researched in this work, and at the same time I knew that it would have been difficult for me to bluntly ask questions about those themes to others (that, moreover, I did not want to consider as research subjects and

²⁴ The conception of the body as a memory unit where experience, history and culture are stored, re-worked and re-created continuously goes openly against the *inscriptive* model of embodiment, where the body is seen as a *tabula rasa*, with no content of its own and on which social meanings are carved by external forces. This model traces its origins in the Foucauldian discourse and has been effectively criticised by several anthropologists for its being eurocentric and for reinforcing binary oppositions such as those between human and animal, man and woman, subject and object, which are, in reality, far from being universal. See for example Biddle, 2001, 177-178.

informants, implying a clear distance from myself); a set of traditional interviews would not have been a suitable research methodology for me, and the same would have been for the thorough description of behaviour, because I tend to favour intuitive knowledge, and feeling before analysing and categorising. Over the years, I have found for myself a way of expression in performance practice. For this research, I have searched my personal approach in the development of performances together with local artists as a way to create a communication and share our personal stories. This allowed me to not feel like an intruder into a very personal world which, as will be seen in the following chapters, often holds traumatic memories and experiences. It also turned out to be a very good methodology in working with some specific people, who admittedly tend to avoid going to “dark places” in their everyday life, preferring to approach the world with loudness and high energy, for example (as is the case of my friend Natia), but habitually exploring the dark corners of their experience and memory within their performance practice.

I also knew that in my research I wanted to discover a topic (*to find the story*), rather than having a preconceived idea in my mind of what was the precise issue I was going to talk about: I started with a methodology idea, and through that, by creating and curating performances together with local artists, and working with them on an everyday basis, I came to discover what were the urgent matters that they wanted to express and speak about, instead of deciding by myself what was important from the beginning. This means that I did not push any of the involved artists to speak specifically about the post-Soviet experience, memory and the Soviet past, but that *it happened* that these were the topics which everybody wanted to explore, in their different

aspects. The one I have applied is, in a way, what Martinez, Frederiksen and Di Puppò call a *peripheral methodology* (2021, 1 ss.): with this concept, the authors refer to an approach that can pass over the conventional boundaries between reason and the senses and between analysis and aesthetics, opening the way to new modes of paying attention to the world. Within this frame, by being available and open to getting lost, it is possible to resist the urge to extract meaning, to classify and categorise, forcing fragments into a coherent whole, before even allowing oneself to feel and sense the thing that is at the core of the encounter. While this approach might be seen as a challenge by anthropology and the other social sciences, it is fundamental for other disciplines (e.g. art), and for this reason it became particularly suitable for me. For the authors

“practicing ethnography entails creative invention and not merely writing and description. [...] anthropology has been too verbal and rational, and insufficiently graphic and sensorial.” (Martinez, Frederiksen, Di Puppò, 2021, 8),

which takes us back to the inherent artistic qualities of the anthropological discipline which I previously mentioned and which I have explored during my research and in this essay with a specific focus on performance as an ethnographic methodology of investigation.

To define a working approach that could allow me to both use performance as a research practice and to create an art product in the form of a movie to which these written notes could be a companion, I have been guided, among the other things, by my art mentors’ method as collected in their *Manifesto on performance-based filmmaking*

(Stenke, Pagnes, 2020), balanced by a constant reference to previous similar experiments in art-anthropology. But before addressing how I have specifically adapted and applied this method in the composition of the movie, I will need to spend some time in the analysis of how performance can become a specifically fruitful methodology to conduct ethnographic research.

2.2 a movement of the body comes back as a movement of thought: **(artistic) action as a mode of research**

A performance-based research must be informed by the inherent characteristics of performance itself, as an art discipline, in its wider connection to ritual and its structure (Turner, 1988), and in its general meaning of *making*. Performance has for me an immediacy which is not present in a regular interview: it does not create distance between the speaker / performer and the listener / audience, it is not read nor listened to, it is *experienced*, both by the performer and the audience, calling into question a multiplicity of meanings and an extended perception that involves the whole body; performance is strictly connected to time and it is ephemeral: though it can be recorded and documented in many ways, the action exists only in the moment, when it is finished it is gone forever (and if repeated, it will never be the same thing); moreover, performance is at the same time an investigation and a presentation (Leavy, 2008, 343-344; the author refers mostly to “traditional” theatre performances and therefore she speaks about *representation*: it is my choice to use the term *presentation* instead, as a reminder that what happens in performance art happens for real, and it is the result of a personal research, the public sharing of what one has found during the

process). This presentation creates a collective experience and has always a real impact on the body, both physical and psychological: it is a practice of discovering the unknown, *while* doing the action (Arsem, 2011). Performance is a practice of thinking and speaking with the body, and producing a metamorphosis.

Within this frame, I am particularly interested in the concept of *research-creation* proposed by cultural theorist and political philosopher Erin Manning (2016, 133 ss.): a practice which generates new types of knowledge that are often extra-linguistic, which considers the movement of the body as a form of thought and the act of making as a way of thinking; a mode of investigation which refuses initial categorisations, such as those of *subject* and *object*, and focuses on experience and on the process, questioning the assumption that knowledge is based on data and quantification. *Research-creation* is in this sense the

“transversal activation of the relational fields of thinking and doing.”
(Manning, 2016, 138).

2.3 *filmmaking as a performative practice in itself: experiments in art-anthropology*

The choice of relying on performance-based filmmaking, following some operational hints offered by artist duo VestAndPage²⁵ in their

²⁵ Since 2006, German artist Verena Stenke (b. 1981) and Venetian-born artist and writer Andrea Pagnes (b. 1962) have been working together as VestAndPage internationally in performance art, performance-based film, writing, publishing and temporary artistic community projects. VestAndPage's art practice is contextual and situation-responsive, conceived psychogeographically in response to natural surroundings, social contexts, historical sites and architectures. They are focused on the liminal, spectral and ritual nature of performance art. They are the people who introduced me to performance art and thanks to whom I am now writing this essay in this form,

manifesto (Stenke, Pagnes, 2020), was dictated by the many affinities I can trace among these artists' specific way of combining time-based live art and filmmaking, anthropology's main features as a discipline and as a practice, and my personal sensibility when it comes to transmitting and communicating the details and results of a complex experience which I feel would not be entirely expressible by words only.

Creating their movies in different parts of the world, which they consider as their studio, the two artists strive to create a *poetics of relations* (inspired by Édouard Glissant's book of the same name), which

“is to be found in the interconnectedness of bodies, beings, spaces, objects, and matter, as well as thoughts, actions, and emotions.” (Stenke, Pagnes, 2020, 4),

and for which they have designed a process which comes out of the experience of the creation of six (at the time) performance-based movies. What follows is a summary of the methodological elements coming from this process that I have attempted to adopt during my fieldwork and in the collection of video, audio and textual material to form the movie.

Regarding both filmmaking and performance as a way of reading the world, I have made mine their consideration of reality as scattered shards, fragments of a whole that lend themselves to continuous reassembly. In this way, the filmmaking process becomes a collection

among the other things. Their practice can be further explored on their website: <https://www.vest-and-page.de/> (last accessed: 09/08/2022).

of fragments along the way, with which new relations are created; the meaning of the movie is born at the crossroads of these new correlations. The process is a way of reflecting on the collected material, and of discovery of what is there but is still hidden. During my fieldwork, I have co-created and participated in several performances, others I have curated, to others I have simply assisted and started a conversation with the artists after that: in every occasion, I have collected scattered material, video and sound recordings, focusing also on space and context, what comes before and what comes after the action, photographs, recordings of conversations, poetry and texts coming from the performances or connected to them, fragments of reality that I felt where there to take part in this process of discovery of latent relations. But, as the authors state,

“no links or connections between the shards are made until the moment of editing [...]. Through the same process of editing, a non-linear narrative can come into being – one of the many possible configurations of the shattered shards.” (Stenke, Pagnes, 2020, 6).

Another interesting aspect of these artists' working process which I fully agree with, is their way to treat and interact with the elements which form the physical matter of the performances created while conducting the movie research process, and thus of the film itself, namely space, objects and matters, atmosphere: by treating these elements as performance companions, who can affect and be affected by our proposals, and onto whom meaning cannot be externally imposed, the artists pose these elements on the same level as them, and blur the boundaries between the person in action, place and context,

between the human and the non-human. This is what I also mean when I understand and analyse performance as the creation of a landscape, not limited to the body of the performer; in this way it is possible to recognise the presence of *agency* in relation to the non-human elements that are involved in a performance, in one way or another, to acknowledge their ability to enter in the performance creating a dialogue.

The process of collecting the fragments, and the final phase of editing and composing the shards into a new whole, require an extended attention and sensibility (also because production is not planned from the beginning), a further reflection and fine tuning that will make everything fall in its place. In my case, the problem of composition and editing has been a challenging one, because my process of collecting the fragments was partially different from the usual one followed by VestAndPage: while in their case they perform actions along a journey in a specific place, filming each other and being ready to perform whenever and wherever it feels necessary, guided by an overarching topic, in my case I could not act in the same way; it was impossible (mostly because it would have needed a long time to create a shared working process and language that anyway I did not want to impose) to bring together all the different artists I have worked with in the same place and at the same time to work on a common project. The shards I have collected were therefore much more heterogeneous, and I had to pay much more attention and sensibility to respect the work done by others while at the same time having the possibility to undergo this process of discovery of hidden relations, and in order to respect the work I had done in co-creating these works as well.

The idea of considering filmmaking as a performative act and film as a liminal experience has been already explored within practices that are more clearly grounded in anthropology but use art as a way to investigate and communicate a topic, and these experiences have been my main source of inspiration when it came to assemble the material I have collected into a new whole.

For example, Laurent Van Lancker (2013, 143 ss.) works as an artist-anthropologist with the aim to convey cultural encounters as experience, not just as a description, and for doing this he employs a series of practical strategies that allow him to create *sensorial documentaries*: positioning sound and image on the same level of importance and paying attention to the development of a creative dialogue between them; working on the materiality of the image and the sound, by employing different recording supports and approaching filmmaking as a painter; decontextualisation and asynchronicity as techniques, while also focusing on the creation of haptic images (images that require the viewer an extended perception and attention to grasp the meaning); different corporeal approaches to the production of images. His work was particularly inspiring in the editing process of my movie, in particular regarding the fact of placing sound and image on the same level of importance; in the editing process I have shifted several times in the predominance of the visual and of the aural in different moments of the movie, letting the one or the other be a guide in the construction of meaning. Asynchronicity is also a technique I have used throughout the entire movie, as a way to bring together fragments referring to different locations and art works in a non-linear way, but searching hidden meanings and correspondences, both in the visual and aural narrative, trying to convey an atmosphere of the works

and locations rather than simply editing a sequence of performance works.

For this reason, I became interested in what Ruth Jones proposes (2013, 125 ss.) when she states the aim of drawing the audience into experiencing liminality, by employing both performance and filmmaking, and intending the term in the strict sense of

“an experience during which the normal, linear, and day-to-day experiences of time and space are suspended, a different state of consciousness is achieved, and the possibility of transformation, however small, arises.”
(Jones, R., 2013, 125).

The author directly refers to Victor Turner’s understanding of the function and importance of the ritual performance and of the liminal phase, which is able to suspend everyday social structures and to create alternative relations and a sense of community in the people who attend it (1988), and this function continues also, at least in part, in performance art. But, as the author notes, to intend a movie as something that is able to draw the audience into a liminal space it is necessary to transport the ritual also inside the filmic structure and flow, otherwise the experience will be totally different, when trying to transfer a performance into a movie. It is necessary, in my opinion, that the movie becomes a performance in itself. In the construction of my movie, I have been trying to apply this principle, creating a film that is divided in chapters and employs rhythm, sound and recurring motifs (both visual and aural: the recurring presence of flashing lights, the overall winter-like atmosphere, cold tones, a focus on circling and

repeated movements, together with the repetition of the same sound excerpts as a guiding pattern).

2.4 conclusions

In this chapter I have analysed how the methodology that I have employed in my research and in the writing of this essay has been developed, in its theoretical and practical aspects, and in particular I have outlined the guiding inspirations in the collection of visual and aural material for the movie, and in the composition and editing of the fragments into a new whole, focusing in particular on the attempt to not create a movie which displays a sequence of performances, but instead to create a film which is a performance in itself.

I will now proceed in the next chapter with an analysis of place and its ability to enter into a dialogue with performance and produce affect, and on how young artists in Tbilisi interact with the city and confront the memories embedded in places.

CHAPTER THREE

PLACE, MEMORY AND PERFORMANCE: AN AFFECTIVE MAP OF TBILISI

3.1 *introduction: Tbilisi, a multifaceted city*

Tbilisi stretches for more than 30 kilometres along the banks of the Mtkvari river and it features a very diverse composition of districts and neighbourhoods, still reflecting the configuration settled up during the Soviet time but also bearing the traces of different architectural layers accumulated during the centuries, as well as displaying several renovations, Western-style buildings and shiny glass-and-steel flagship projects which, as analysed in chapter 1, started to widespread after the 2003 Rose Revolution in an attempt to promote a westernised image of the city and to wipe out Soviet and oriental appearances.

During my stay in Tbilisi I was renting a flat in Marjanishvili area (part of the wider Chugureti district), on the left bank of the river: formerly known as a German neighbourhood, it is now a vibrant area inhabited by the Turkish minority. It is not far away from the proper city centre, revolving around the most ancient part of the town (Old Tbilisi), Freedom Square (თავისუფლების მოედანი, *tavisuplebis moedani*) and Rustaveli Avenue, all on the right bank of the river. Over this area, the district of Mtatsminda extends up until the top of a hill, where the television tower and a panoramic wheel are placed. Continuing north of this area, the elegant residential area of Vake is to be found, and further north the district of Saburtalo, mainly a residential area but with a less posh appearance. The areas where my research activities took place happened to be mainly situated on the left bank of

the river Mtkvari, in the district of Isani-Samgori (situated in the South-Eastern part of the city, a nice residential district that feels already very peripheral in the perception of many people in Tbilisi, despite being located at a distance of two metro stops from the already mentioned Freedom Square), in upper Chugureti, Dighomi and Didube areas, mainly industrial neighbourhoods inhabited by workers.

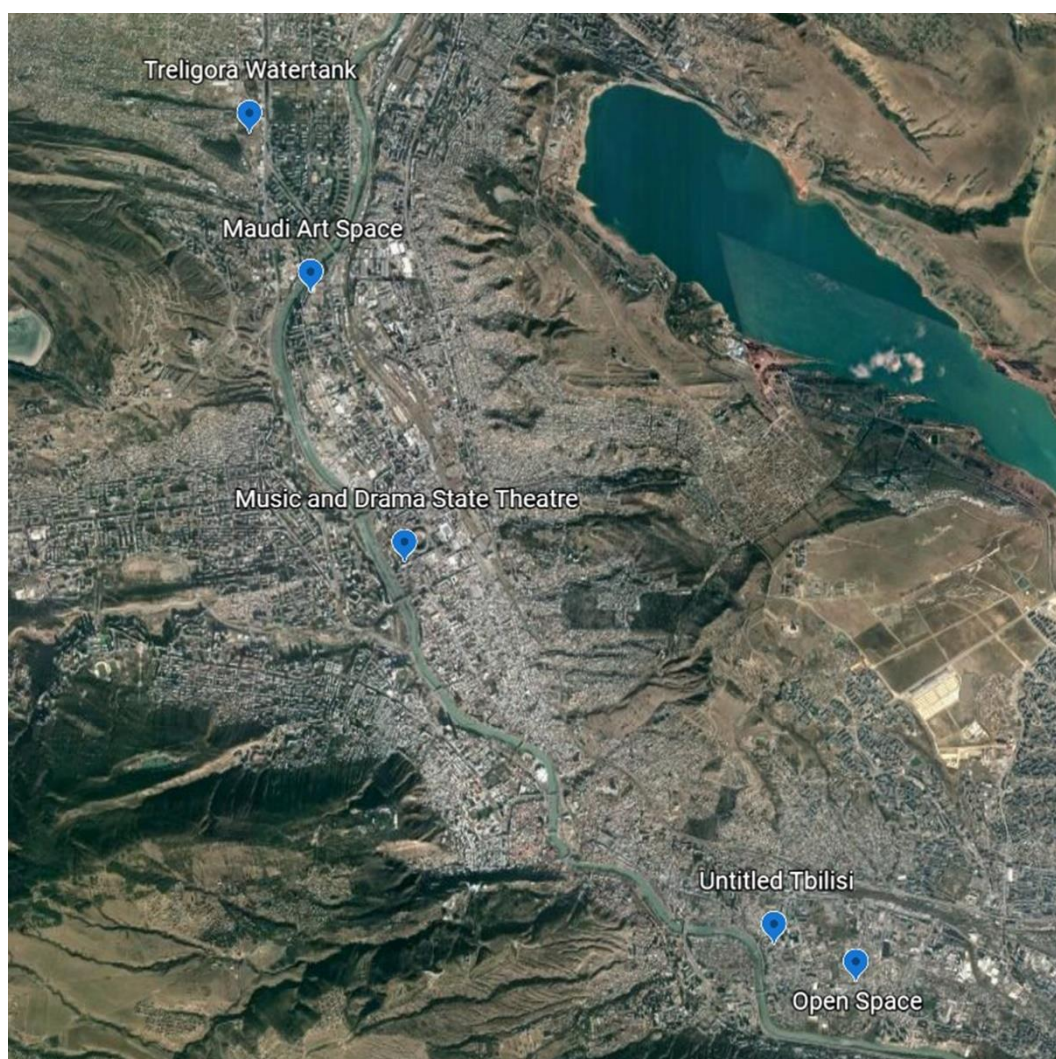


photo 3.1: Google Earth map of the places investigated in my research as performance sites.

In the second paragraph of this chapter I will present and analyse these places in their relationship with performance and in their role as

memory aggregators, arguing on the importance of considering place as a performer at the same level of the humans who interact with it while creating art.

3.2 *place as a memory aggregator and performer: creating a dialogue in the reciprocal production of affect*

it is impossible to tell how big the place is. a slow descent from a metal ladder brings you down where your feet will walk on layers of scrap newspapers, mud, tin foil, water and decades of leftovers. a shift in perspective: outside, the barren hill is swept by the winter winds and the moon is high in a clear, cold sky. you can see it right in front of you when you go back, and climb the same ladder to get out in the fresh air. the darkness inside is warm, with no particular smell, though the space is resounding and you can feel a pressure on the body, the sensation that the air is thicker than it should be. people are reduced to points of light coming from the torches on their heads. the hall is round, and someone is tracing the contours of the ceiling, slowly moving their headlight while lying down on a blanket at the centre of the space. a concrete pattern of rays and squares becomes visible. light is reflected on the pools of water on the ground while someone sits crouching on the opposite side of the room, playing a flute. if you sing, your voice gets back to you from all the directions; if you walk, the sound of your steps gets in the musical composition. time makes no sense.

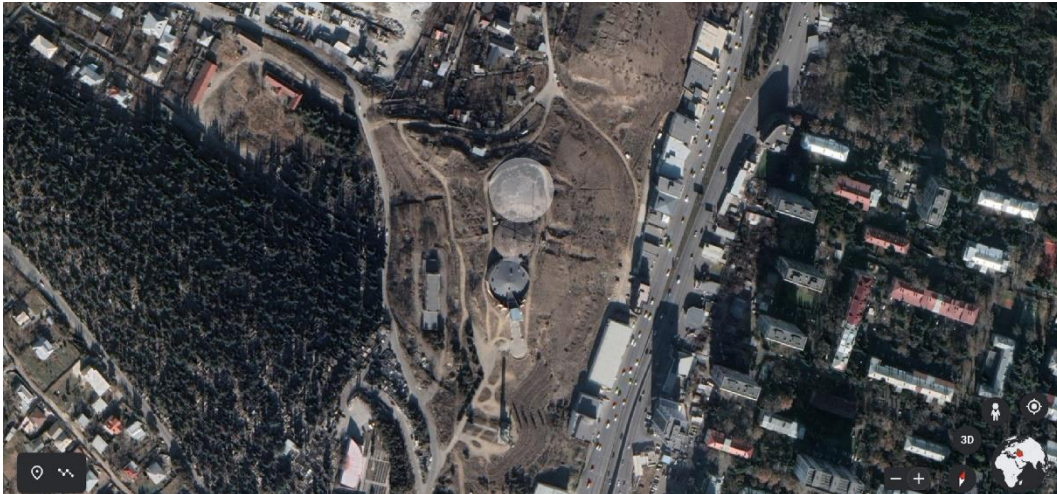


photo 3.2: Google Earth; photo 3.3: inside the abandoned Treligora water reservoir, on the evening of Nov, 20th 2021; still from video shot by the author.

a soft light enters from the window while you pull out your old family carpet from the storage room in the back to spread it on the wooden floor of the main room, while you tell me that it once used to hang from the wall behind me. the floral drawings are confused in the dusty and worn-out pattern. you are not worried that it will be ruined if we spill red wine on it, as you say that the carpet has seen much worse and anyway it will die in this art installation. I climb first on the windowsill

and then on a ladder to take pictures of you. a shift in time: on the day of the performance, the floor is still wet from the day before, water is lingering in the cracks. someone is swiping the floor with one of those very short brooms that are so common all over the country, someone crosses the room singing, the black cat is changing place to keep his distance from the broom. we have stolen unused bricks from the neighbours. the light of the late afternoon comes in from the three windows and projects the shadows of the trees outside on the white walls. a shift in time again: you are playing a melancholic tune on the accordion while sitting next to our white table, that I have recently painted anew, while that same golden light comes in from the windows and reaches you in the corner. on the table are books and toys assembled from different plushies, that formed part of the previous exhibition.





photo 3.4: Google Earth; photo 3.5: the main room of Untitled Tbilisi and the cat Shadow, late afternoon of Dec, 26th 2021; still from video shot by the author.

the theatre is half-abandoned: apparently, it would be more expensive to renovate it than to tear it down completely; so it stays like this, suspended, waiting for self-paced collapse. but the building is not empty. the light is cold in the room and you would expect the floor to be covered in water. everything has the colour of ice, light blue and grey from the linoleum dance floor, the walls, the corridor. a wall is covered in mirrors. you hear the music getting louder while you walk towards the entrance. a shift in time and perspective: in the corridor, you hear the music coming from the dance room getting mixed with the sound of the rain and the traffic outside of the window, and the voice of someone speaking on the radio or on the television, that someone is listening to in another room. if you move along the corridor, the mixing of sounds changes sensibly. the way in which they come together, they complete each other, they get confused with each other. there is a tiny shelf in the corner at the end of the corridor, full of religious icons. a

shift in time and perspective again: just as the room on the ground floor is filled with musical instruments, in the garden behind the building there is a broken piano. it is covered with remains of what looks like wallpaper, with a design of birds, leaves and flowers, and pieces of branches and dead leaves from the trees above. the wind and the sunlight seem to play a silent tune on it. the old man who allowed us to visit the closed part of the building is explaining its architecture; we are looking at the theatre from below the main stage, standing next to the rotating mechanism which made the scene turn.

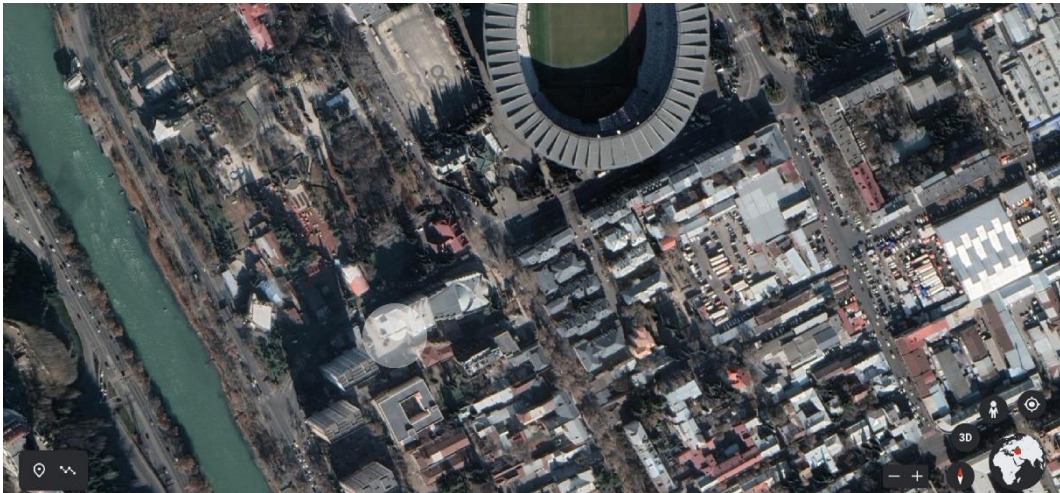


photo 3.6: Google Earth; photo 3.7: the dance studio at the Music and Drama State Theatre on the morning of Nov, 10th 2021; still from video shot by the author.

follow the rail tracks behind the huge shop that sells relatively cheap furniture and household items and you will find a dark alley with an entrance. if it is the first time, you are probably following someone that is going in the same direction as you do, and that will help you through the confused search for the place. you cannot see them now in the darkness but hanging on the wall next to the entrance to the squared building that you are looking for there are several wrought iron decorations that at first glance look like musical keys. you walk up to the fourth floor still wondering if it is the right place, until you are there, and you see the bar at the entrance with the remains of a huge concrete chimney pending from the ceiling, the long exhibition hall, the smaller room with concrete walls and big windows covered with black curtains, where concerts and screenings take place. a shift in time and perspective: this is just a small part of a biggest building, once a factory, still partially working as a deposit. there is a covered bridge connecting this building to the next one, but it is not in use. a worker brings us to the entrance and lets us visit the place, which is covered in glass shards and debris, but we will not be allowed to work there so we have to move out.

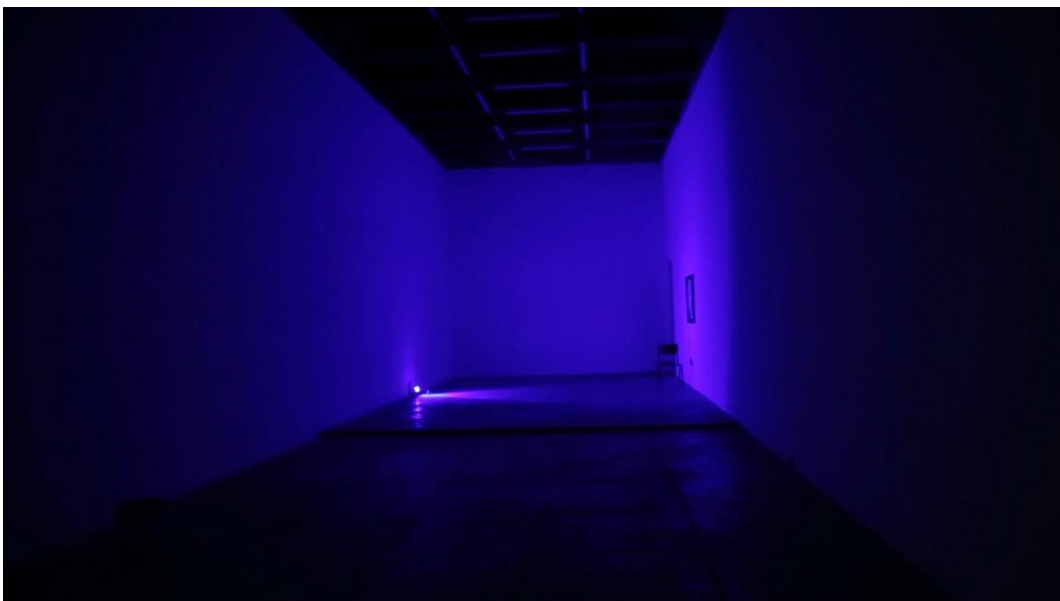


photo 3.8: Google Earth; photo 3.9: the main hall at MAUDI Art Space on the evening of Nov, 13th 2021; still from video, courtesy of: Saba Shengelia.

on the wall next to the entrance of the factory complex there is a mural depicting a girl with a light grey dress and black hair, balancing, as if dancing, on a pile of wooden chairs. another one, barely visible in the dark courtyard, is on the right after the entrance and it is a huge blue eye resting on what could be green tentacles or vines. climbing the stairs, you encounter window-holes with no glass cover, through which you see a distant view of the city at night. you are on a hill; a cold wind

enters through each hole in the concrete wall. a yellow-lit corridor brings you to the door. a shift in perspective: you enter the main room and find a place to sit. metal plates and soil, silver fabric creates the shape of a barrel vault. a person is riding a bicycle, a second one is playing the piano, a third one is lying on the floor covered in a white and heavy blanket. but you cannot see her yet.



photo 3.10: Google Earth; photo 3.11: a partial view of the set for the performance *Unmemory*, in the main hall of Open Space on the evening of Nov, 27th 2021; photo by the author.

the house is all white. every object is covered in white fabric. the walls are freshly painted. on the back, a long metal ladder is held in place by strong orange straps. if you climb it, you pass through a door that is a hole in the wall and enter the third floor. someone is singing. the house is all white.



photo 3.12: Google Earth; photo 3.13: a view of one room of the house in Napetvrebi where a collective performance by Material Hunters took place, on the evening of May, 28th 2022; photo by the author.

The ones I have briefly described above are only some of the places where the independent art scene in Tbilisi finds a home for their activities²⁶; I have been visiting some of them only a few times, while others feel like a home: the abandoned Treligora water reservoir²⁷ in Didi Dighomi (part of Saburtalo district), that is now used by a group of locals and expats to hold musical jam sessions; the old house in Isani district, built in the 1910s, that is now the seat of Untitled Tbilisi, a local art and community space²⁸; the Music and Drama State Theatre in Aghmashenebeli Avenue, dismissed with the construction of the new opera theatre in Rike Park (that never entered in function), which is currently used as a rehearsal space by several contemporary dance and music groups; the dismissed manufacturing complex in Didube that hosts MAUDI Art Space²⁹; the closed Sakelektromankana electromechanical factory in Samgori district that is now the seat of Open Space³⁰, a contemporary theatre and art venue; a family house in

²⁶ I have decided to use satellite images to present these places, alongside views or details of the inside of the place in a very specific moment, because I wanted to give an overall impression of the place as nested inside the urban environment, not separated from it; it also gives an idea of volumetric proportions and of the shape of the places. On the possibilities for anthropology in the use of satellite imaging, see for example Conant (1990, 357 ss.).

²⁷ The water reservoir, alongside the two others located next to it on the same hill, was dismissed in the 1950s after the creation of the so-called Tbilisi Sea, a huge artificial lake in the eastern part of the city that still nowadays constitutes the city's principal water reserve. The reservoir, a circular object with a diameter of around 40 meters and 9 meters high, built underground to preserve the stability of the water's temperature, was subsequently abandoned due to the high cost and difficulty of demolition. In 1978 the three water reservoirs became object of an impressive project for the excavation of the site and its transformation into the new archaeological museum of Tbilisi. The site was chosen for its dominant position on the top of a hill overlooking the entire city, which despite its peripheral position was considered perfect for a highly-symbolic building, and the project envisaged the re-use of the existing circular halls of the water reservoirs. The project was slowed down by the Soviet bureaucratic machine and the works did not start before 1988, to be subsequently stopped after the fall of the Soviet Union. The whole site is now semi-abandoned, though the principal building of the museum (the only one that is almost finished) is guarded. This information comes from collective research made by the group using the site for their music jam sessions, and from the research work made by architect Alvise Romanzini (2021, 74 ss.).

²⁸ <https://www.instagram.com/untitled.tbilisi/> (last accessed: 31/08/2022).

²⁹ <https://www.instagram.com/maudiatmaudi/> (last accessed: 31/08/2022).

³⁰ <https://www.instagram.com/openspaceea/> (last accessed: 31/08/2022).

the village of Napetvrebi, 15 minutes by car from Tbilisi, which was entirely adapted to host a group performance in May, 2022.

In the first chapter of this work I have briefly addressed the transformation processes that took place in the urban environment of Tbilisi starting from the 1990s. In this chapter, I would like to introduce a different perspective, a more dynamic one and one which is grounded in action and in tactical behaviour in response to a challenging environment. This paragraph is first of all an investigation in how the independent art scene in Tbilisi uses and engages with buildings and places charged with a specific history, in different ways connected to the Soviet and post-Soviet period, out of necessity (as I found out immediately at the beginning of my research, the lack of spaces and of public and institutional recognition is one of the main problems affecting the city's independent art scene) but also in a way that is always in the process of creating a dialogue with the spaces and their layered history. On the other hand, it is important to analyse how these buildings and spaces react and enter the work as an agent and performance companion, influencing it in various degrees.

A preliminary specification is necessary here: the buildings I am analysing carry in their histories a strong connection with the Soviet and post-Soviet experience, and their associated traumas, but none of them is a highly symbolic building, a direct expression of the Soviet power structures and ideology; we are not, at this point, in the realm of the *indispensable eyesores*, the undesired buildings investigated by anthropologist Mélanie van der Hoorn (2009). We are addressing everyday architecture, bearing personal and collective memories but not what we could define as *public* memories. Regarding this kind of architecture, I could identify, in the people I have collaborated with,

two opposite modes of perception, that often overlap creating nuanced approaches: to a negative association towards Soviet architecture, that leads to traumatic refusal, it is opposed an attitude of curiosity and a desire to explore and understand the past and its connection to the present. The background of all of this is the practical consideration that dismissed or private buildings are often all that there is, when it comes the time for art practitioners and cultural workers to find a space in Tbilisi where to carry on their activities: a generalised lack of recognition and of public spaces dedicated to the contemporary art scene calls for tactical solutions that involve the interstices of the city. This is a solution that allows great freedom in the programming of the activities and in the artistic content, which are not dictated by overarching institutions' limitations and desires, but at the same time it requires a constant research for alternative sources of funding and economic sustainability, or the use of (the limited) personal resources.

For example, for contemporary dancer and performer Natia Chikvaidze the attraction towards interstitial, dismissed places (besides the practical reasons of having low-cost spaces for rehearsal and performance) can be explained in this way:

"it's about the history, or the darkness, or the non-traditional spaces, spaces that can bring ghosts. Something was passing through and these places have energy so that energetically-wise you always carry that weird feeling, because you know that something was before and is not now, and you feel like you are that kind of person that would bring that different sensations and layers of time together, time-traveling. And it's about finding the beauty that people don't see, because one has to be actually taking you to observe."
(12/06/2022).

For musician and performer Nino Davadze the relationship with the past and its buildings as spaces for the arts is complex and inextricably connected with the intervention of people:

"I don't have a good association about Soviet architecture...if we were done with that then it would become interesting and I understand why for example tourists come and are excited about the brutalist architecture but as a person who's part of it still, and who doesn't want to be part of it, that's a little traumatic for me, to still be part of this kind of architecture and try to think differently...MAUDI [art space] was comfortable because of the openness of the people [...] and also MAUDI for me is not that Soviet thing being honest."
(31/05/2022).

"What if this space also included people from older generations? for example what if the man who works in there, even just one, and one who has like similar power as you...for example he's not just the security guy but for example he's managing part of the space...like would that be easy to...the problem with architecture is not just walls...yeah it becomes just an object when it's empty and then you can take over but if you need to take over with a space that is already taken but not well, and you just want to interact to make it better, I don't think it would be that easy then to kind of deal with the people...yeah with the relationship to the past I still need these old generations of Georgians who are still living in the same spaces and using them."
(31/05/2022).

For artist and curator Giorgi Rodionov, moving the seat of Untitled Tbilisi (the art space he founded in 2019) from its previous location in the Sololaki district to his old family house in Isani was a choice dictated by the impossibility to pay the rent for the space during the pandemics in 2020, but at the same time it gave him and the other

members of the team the possibility to work with the 100-year-long history of the building complex and the memories it holds (including the personal memories of Giorgi's family), an art space that is able to attract different audiences and engage them precisely because it feels like a home and not like an art gallery, and the desire and opportunity to work with the neighbourhood and the people living there.

Theatre director and sound artist Davit Khorbaladze recalls in this way the search for the building that now hosts Open Space and the beginning of the activities there:

"when we were looking for the spaces, we've seen everything everywhere in this city and nothing was available. Actually it's very difficult to find abandoned factories because it's already someone's property and nobody is interested into it to make an art space or something like this and then we found them [the people who own the building and run the club Elektrowerk inside it] and we cleaned the space...it was a lot of trash [...]. This was 5 years ago...before we were walking around using different places, it was also a very good time. [...] people helped us to take out all of this and it was not only simple trash, it was heavy stuff, because when they made this club they were so stupid that all the materials, they moved it there...as every Georgian would...then Ana [Gurgenidze, Open Space's co-founder and scenographer] found the money to renovate it and she was really a hero because it costed too much, unbelievable...but it was so crazy to do it because...it's very big this space, very beautiful but actually we didn't need it so big, why we decided just to have 1000 sqm...it was so difficult to open it, we had an amazing opening with a lot of events and we were very little, and then when this opening finished we sat down and we didn't know what to do and had a big depression after it...and also it was very difficult because we had two performances ready and we had a space but then winter came and we didn't have heating [...] it was very difficult but at some point we grew up and now it works well, it is developing." (03/06/2022).

For him, as well as for Giorgi Rodionov and Liza Zhvania (co-founder and director of MAUDI Art Space), and the people who work with them, it is also of particular importance the practice of decentralising the art scene by locating their art venues outside of the main tourist areas of the city, in order to organically involve the city in the cultural work, including areas that are perceived as distant, and, when possible, trying to work with the communities. Open Space is located in Samgori district, a neighbourhood expanding on three hills (from which it derives its name) in the south-eastern part of Tbilisi, home of a well-known open air market. MAUDI has its seat in a former factory in Didube, a mainly industrial district on the left bank of the river Mtkvari, in the northern part of the town. Untitled Tbilisi is in the Isani district, a semi-peripheral neighbourhood in the south-eastern part of the city, once a residential district for the militaries.

Regarding this point, Davit Khorbaladze notes that, with Open Space,

"we also wanted to be outside of the centre even if some people laugh at it still...Lazy people...I don't understand but it seems that these people don't use metro and buses...In a way I understand, because buses for example are very unstable, you never know if you get somewhere in time, and metro...They are, like, when I'm teaching them how to come here, very simply, then they think «oh, all of these streets, is it not dangerous?»...Some people when they come, I just don't understand, it's just fear of the space that you have not been, because I think it's same dangerous as anywhere else, and also they should realise that things are not depending on their space...Every space has its spot and, like, for me, to come here I need one hour because I live outside the centre, so why should I come from my outside to the centre? Why do they think it's far from their flat...only Vake is another city, and Gldani as well,

Gldani is very sad...It's really another type of living, it's mostly just living places and restaurants and shops, and everything is so chaotic noise...Strange place, but at the same time there are these places with very good flats, not expensive and with mountains..." (03/06/2022).

There is an element of urban exploration in the case of the water reservoir, which is in many ways different from the other places mentioned here, being only occasionally (and respectfully³¹) visited by a group of people interested in creating a connection with an uncommon underground place and its history through music improvisation that plays with the resounding acoustics of the dome-like building. On the topic of urban exploration and in connection with my analysis of place, I find particularly interesting the approach proposed by Małgorzata Nieszczerzewska (2018, 258 ss.), who, in her investigation of urban exploration practices in Poland, argues on the compresence of void and absence, on one side, and of a sense of freedom and expectance, on the other, within the empty buildings involved, making these places sites of the possible and “signs of melancholy in a productive sense”. The author goes on presenting her view of urban exploration as a form of *interior tourism*, a “journey towards the within” (spatially and metaphorically, as a journey through personal stories and collective memory), describing empty places as spaces that are outside of the

³¹ I am in this case speaking about the group of people that I know and with whom I have visited the place several times. The site is open and pretty easy to access, and many other people go there. I am aware of the many contested aspects of urban exploration, which cannot be addressed in the context of this study: I am mentioning this specific place and group of people because on one side this building is not carrying a particularly traumatic history (it just fell out of use and did not get demolished) and it is not a case of fetishization or dark tourism, and on the other hand these people mainly go there to play music because of the acoustics of the place, and for socialisation. On the social life of ruins, and thus for a nuanced evaluation of the manifold (often informal) activities that can take place in them, see Dawdy (2010, 776).

(colonial) discourse of modernity and therefore as spaces of freedom³², a kind of *objectivity chamber* outside of the everyday reality which makes contemplation possible. A quality that the author, citing Dylan Trigg, defines as *nothingness*,

“the vantage point in which the absent past is traceable in the unformed present. [...] a volatile and active force, which gathers thought rather than destroying it.” (Nieszczerzewska, 2018, 259).

It is interesting at this point to trace a connection with the performance practice as described in the previous chapter about the research methodology, to notice how the same *nothingness* is a searched condition and a productive state often at the basis of the creation of a performance work. At the same time, this condition of reflexivity that can be found in a particular place is precious to introduce the analysis of how the art practices I have investigated are constructed around the creation of a constant dialogue with the buildings where they take place and their stories, and with the city at large, where places (in themselves and as memory aggregators), people and practice are influencing each other in the creation of landscape³³, as we will see in detail in the following chapter.

³² See again the analysis provided by Madina Tlostanova on the global coloniality embedded in the very notion of modernity, previously mentioned in Chapter 1. The ruined building is the glitch, the element of disturbance in the narrative of modernity, the uncontrolled and uncontrollable, and a meditation on the ephemeral.

³³ As stated by Barbara Bender in an interesting article (2002, 103), landscapes “are always in process of being shaped and reshaped. Being of the moment and in process, they are always temporal. They are not a record but a recording, and this recording is much more than a reflection of human agency and action; it is *creative* of them. [...] Nor are they *a* recording, for they are always polyvalent and multivocal.”

Tsypylma Darieva and Wolfgang Kaschuba, in their introduction to the collection of essays about urban spaces after socialism (with a specific focus on the Eurasian cities) that they curated, speak of attempts to “inscribe its own signs into the cityscape” when referring to the civil society’s interventions in the urban space in the form of subcultures, artistic performances and youth culture (2011, 14). Similarly, Madina Tlostanova argues that, as space takes over time in a post-dependence context, places can be recognised as pervaded by multiple histories intersecting:

“space becomes a palimpsest of overlapping traces left by a succession of inscriptions. The function of inscribing names on the symbolic cultural map then comes forward. It turns into an experiment field of constant crossing of borders, spaces, and times [...]” (Tlostanova, 2017, 98).

Personal and collective memory is thus materialised in places and in the city as landscape³⁴, and it often brings along “contaminated” elements of the past that a person, a group, or society in general, would like to forget (which, in the case of my research, is not referred only to the Soviet past but also, and even more, to the painful time frame after the dissolution of the USSR, and to the context of today), and the author remembers the many tactics adopted in the countries that were part of the USSR to overcome this impasse³⁵. What she deems fundamental

³⁴ On the many ways in which the past is present in places and on the necessity to be aware that places also stretch through time, see also Massey (1995, 186 ss.). For an in-depth research on the *aliveness* of places, and against the concept of space as an empty and anonymous container, see Ingold (2011, 141 ss.).

³⁵ One of which has been that of deliberately destroying undesired architectural signs “capable of holding the people’s collective memories together” (Tlostanova, 2017, 102) so that it proves sometimes impossible to decipher the merged layers of the past from the debris that is left.

(and I agree on this point) is “a painstaking effort of gazing into the face of the past” (Tlostanova, 2017, 98) as the only way to start building an idea of the future³⁶, and again she identifies art as the best instrument to carry on this kind of investigation.

Other authors criticise the idea of considering buildings, and places in general, as a text composed of subsequent inscriptions made by the human beings, and try to give back to places the “dignity” of an autonomous constitution, of being able to exist and produce effects independently from the human interaction, and to create a dialogue with people on a level of symmetry (Kotus, 2022, 127 ss.). Emily Orley, for example, understands sites as *embodied* and grants them anthropomorphic qualities, saying that places remember events and that it is possible to create *encounters* with them. According to this author, while place has the capacity to remember, this memory work does not necessarily function in a human way: rather, it could be understood as “fluid, transitory, and open-ended”, activated by the interaction of other beings (Orley, 2012, 36-40).

I do not think that the two ideas are necessarily incompatible, if we just consider the stratification of human memory as an addition to the autonomous existence of the place, and not as all that there is. Both ideas are also fruitful for my analysis, because they allow me to point out two important things: first of all, considering places as a sort of storage unit of memory means that there is a material in them that can be discovered and with which it is possible to work, in its multisensory

³⁶ We will see in the following sections how this art-based investigation of the past, as the only way to plant a seed for the future, is quite central in the practice of many of the artists I have collaborated with during my research; in particular, in the case of the curatorial programme of Untitled Tbilisi as an art and community space, it became the subject of a year-long research project in 2022, which is dedicated to the topics of mutation and solidarity in the South Caucasus over the 30 years that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

and layered substance³⁷ (and I deem that this is at the basis of the performance practices I will present in the following chapter, as a way of working with and creating a dialogue with the past); secondly, considering place as a subject that can interact and that can have its say in a symmetrical dialogue with people means that, when it comes to performance, place acts as a co-performer (as already anticipated in the methodology chapter), not just as an empty container. It is important at this point to specify what I think performance *does* when it creates a dialogue with a site, which often, in this research context, hosts a traumatic or melancholic memory: I am not trying to support the idea that a performance will change the meaning of a place or that the action will replace the past, nor that this is at all desirable; the adding of new layers will not erase the previous ones, but it will work on them and starting from them. If change has to happen at all, it will be a slow shifting in perception that unfolds over a long time, and it will be negotiated in a dialogue (with the site itself, first of all, and with the community at large).

To conclude this chapter dedicated to the places in Tbilisi I have investigated as performance sites, it is important to understand in which way they, as well, interact with the performer, the audience, and with people at large. How does the place perform? How does it respond to a performance proposal and enter the work?

³⁷ I think it is very important to underline that the interaction with a place is, and cannot be, reduced to the reading of a text, of the different inscriptions made upon it by human beings across time. This kind of idea is a continuation of the inscriptive model proposed by Foucault and by the post-structuralist thinkers, and already criticised in chapter 2 in its application to the body considered as *tabula rasa*. So, I choose to understand the affirmations made by the cited scholars, about the accumulation of memory in a place, as a reference to an undefined and indefinable substance, not to a form of writing. For a further analysis on this topic, see the work of geographer Nigel Thrift, as cited by anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin (2009, 11-12).

To provide an answer to these questions, I would like to make a reference to the work by anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin regarding *affective spaces* (2009, 11 ss.). The author draws from the theoretical framework provided by geographer Nigel Thrift and his definition of *affect*, as something that broadly refers to an emotive domain but that goes beyond the subjectivity and the self, and in this way as something that it is not necessarily connected to or produced by a human being, though it is “a sensation which may move through the subject” but in an unmediated fashion. She then moves to consider the famous distinction made by Deleuze and Guattari between the *root* and the *rhizome*³⁸ to blur the borders between the two within the concept of *affective space* (a *ruin*, as the author defines it, intending the concept not in a literal way but in the meaning of a place that bears traumatic or melancholic memories). The affective space is rhizome and root at the same time: it expands in uncontrollable and unpredictable ways, but it is also the trace of historical events, either personal or collective (and usually a mix of the two), and in this sense it is remembered, kept, discussed and cherished by people. From these considerations, the author constructs a concept of affect that is inherently *relational*: neither places nor people are affective on their own, but “both produce and transmit affect *relationally*”.

That memory is embedded into place, producing affective atmospheres, is a fact acknowledged by all the people I have talked to

³⁸ Where the *root*, which is vertical and has the tree as a reference, stands for Western modes of thinking, memory, the unconscious (it is a force that traces, locates, defines a structure), while *rhizomes* are "about multiplicity; they cannot be sited, cornered, controlled, curbed or located. Nor can they be given any shape, structure, or hierarchy. And going especially against what Deleuze and Guattari perceive as modernity's vertical or perpendicular imaginary, a rhizome moves smoothly in a plain, in an endless surface, which knows no bounds or limits." (Navaro-Yashin, 2009, 13).

and worked with during my stay in Georgia, and it is something that is related to different places in the country, not only to its capital.

Davit Khorbaladze, for example, recounted his perception of the cities located on the Black Sea coast of Georgia in the following way:

"Have you been in Batumi? It's also very interesting, it's terrible and becoming worse, and these buildings are...It really kills...I can't imagine living there, I would become crazy...And it's not even about noise or something...Of course there is noise, but these buildings are made of so cheap materials, and these dead buildings...I don't know why they are building that much, just because it's a symbol to attract people to be there, but it's not enough space and the really expensive hotels or buildings have been built all attached to one another, in a fight for the view on the sea...Such pity that there is no balance in this development and non-development, because there is another example in Poti, for example, which is very underdeveloped...It's just...Still it's very beautiful town, built in the 90s on...swamps, it is built on the swamps, and it was very difficult to plan it, but it happened, it was a draining project, and after it it exists, this perfect model of the city, planned and really beautiful, but now it's dead, people are just living in boredom, nothing is happening, the port is sold and whoever lives there they are not allowed to enter into it...Seaside is terrible because of trash and everything...People are so terrible, not, like, terrible in relationships, but very lazy and not doing anything, and very hopeless also, and they don't see any perspective, everyone is running out from this city. I just said it because of this, there is no middle balance between this...Yeah, because it's all the times for someone's personal interest, and, yeah, they are poisoning too the city, because of this private factories...They make some fish powder and for, like, months in the city there was terrible smell, you can't open the windows, walking in the streets is terrible, it's really terrible...I've been living there for some time, I made a performance about the city, that's why I know that much."
(03/06/2022).

Memory and affect are accumulating in places, in the debris ashore, producing a portrait of society and its history in the perception of Nino Davadze:

"last year, or two years ago, I went in Ureki [another well-known seaside city on the Black Sea], it was winter time, I was just kinda sick of this city and had ten days out, and I rented this little cottage...It was really interesting place, and I lived there and go in and out...Like, in the morning, that would be my routine, to go to the sea [...] and I would see this kinda...This is dead jellyfish, and loads of stuff in the banks, because it was winter and they clean the banks just in the summer, and I would find these kinda stuff, that was kinda in the sea [...]. So, like, walking on these banks of the sea kinda made me to think about, like, how we consume the sea, and, yeah, I've seen really weird objects on that banks, like kids toys but also shampoos so, like, everything...If you walk in there you kinda know what kinda people we are, how we live, what we use, what is important for us, what kinda kids we have, what is funny, what is beautiful, what, like...this kinda hundred-meters-long bank would tell you the whole story about the nation, and also the shells, it was not diverse, but it was like a lot, it would be, like, all white, like to have floors of shells, you could have, like...and there would be, like, birds coming and seating and having a break, and sometimes eating something like leftovers from the sea...But, at the same time, Bidzina Ivanishvili's buildings on that bank, so, like, that area was full of the stories." (31/05/2022).

Therefore, the dialogue created with a place through a performative action is developed in a reciprocal affective relationship and in the exchange of memory, in the exploration of this substrate of stories embedded in places, to which the performer and their action add a new layer of meaning and memory, a new story (and although this might not change the reality of the place, it definitely produces effects on the body

of the performer and on the audience, in a way that it might contribute to change *their* reality or their perception), while the place intervenes in the creative process, providing a part of the substance of which the action is made and acting as a companion, and introducing its own layers of meaning in the action, its own memory and material history and culture affecting lives and actions.

Place can actually be determinant in the definition of the multiple meanings a performance action can take, and its interaction is manifold: it can involve memory connected to the place (connected to specific events or with a time frame at large), but it can also intervene with the materiality of its surfaces, shapes, objects and sound. The audience that is present in a place to witness a performance produces and transmits affect as well, and this also enters in the work. A paradigmatic example of how a performance action was repeated in a different location with different objects, conveying completely different interpretations and understanding, will be presented in the final part of this work, also as an example of the intrinsic unrepeatability of a performance, which, being part of the domains of reality and presentation and not of that of representation, is ephemeral and tight only to the moment in which it happens. It can be repeated, but it will produce new experience and new knowledge.

In the following chapter I will present a series of portraits of the young generations in Tbilisi elicited through performance, and performances understood as a mirror reflecting a wider reality. As already mentioned, these portraits need to be understood as sketches, drawings, the catching of an atmosphere and of personal and collective issues through the performative practice: there is no attempt of presenting a full picture of the reality of youth in Tbilisi, but rather the aim of creating an inductive

and composite depiction of it, through small events that point all to a bigger event.

CHAPTER FOUR

PERFORMATIVE PORTRAITS: MAKING SENSE OF PAST AND PRESENT THROUGH ART PRACTICE

4.1 *deconstructing the aquarium: memory, silence and deceptive surfaces in the work of Nino Davadze*³⁹

on the evening of February, 27th 2022 we gather at MAUDI art space for Nino's performance. the time is conveniently set at 9pm to give the people the time to participate in the demonstration in support of Ukraine in front of the Parliament on Rustaveli Avenue, and then cross the city to get to Didube and to MAUDI. by 10pm the room is filled with people, many of our common friends are there and everyone is very emotional in these days. the performance is live music and voice, accompanied by a video projection. the spatial organisation of the room makes clear that the main focus is on the video work: fish are floating gently in the dirty water of a market aquarium, their skins reflecting warm sunlight with their silver, pink and brown which turns to gold. through the water, you can see glimpses of the city. people passing by, parked cars, massive concrete buildings. the fish seem to pass through them, overlapping people. now the images have inverted colours, you may think you are observing that underwater world at night. massive concrete buildings, white over a dark-green background,

³⁹ Nino Davadze is an emerging music producer and sound art enthusiast based in Tbilisi. Raised in the country-side of Georgia, Nino has travelled a long road from Classical and Orthodox church singing to experimental soundscapes. Currently, in her compositions she experiments with socio-ecological aspects of sound, she collects field recordings, explores the industrial soundscapes around Tbilisi and processes the raw materials with her vocals. The vulnerability that has been shaped in new urban lifestyle of Tbilisi, the people and noise from this place have been an inspiration for her. https://www.instagram.com/nino_davadze/; <https://soundcloud.com/nino-davadze-690125351> (last accessed: 04/09/2022).

slowly collapse on themselves. sometimes you can see them in a flash, sometimes you are given a bit more time. the same buildings keep falling in a huge cloud of dust. now the screen is grey and what you see is a wet image of cooked skin while one single fish is frying in a pan, turning orange and red, its eyes growing bulgy. the sound alternates crackling noises and melodic patterns. the voice, treated with effects, seems to come from very far. after one hour, the performance ends.

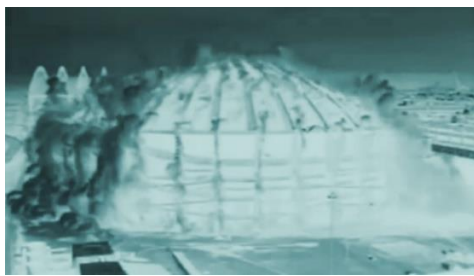




photo 4.1-4.2-4.3-4.4: still from the video DECONSTRUCTION, courtesy of Nino Davadze; photo 4.5: Nino Davadze wearing a mask made of mussels' shells, to be used for performances; photo courtesy of Ann Svanidze; photo 4.6: still from the video DECONSTRUCTION, courtesy of Nino Davadze.

I remember having talked with Nino about this concept for the first time some weeks before, on February, 3rd. We were sitting in the yard of a café in the Saburtalo district where she lived at that time, and she started explaining me her thoughts about fish and the aquarium as metaphors: fish as a symbol of silence and misunderstanding, for the inability of most of them to communicate and produce sound (at least, sound that can be perceived by human ears), and therefore the aquarium, full of fish that gently float, as an image of the people living in Georgia after the fall of the Soviet Union. Being one of them, Nino had in mind to work (together with me) also on a performance costume, dress and head mask, that would take a hint from a mask she previously made out of mussel shells but deemed too uncomfortable to perform in; the idea was to embody this gentle and silent marine creature that is at the centre of the work. This idea was then temporarily set aside in view of the first replica of the performance, because the time was too little.

We had an in-depth talk about the performance a few months later, where we discussed the concept and its origin in a form of “loud-thinking” that brought to the surface some interesting aspects:

"I've been always interested in fish but not in a symbolic way, I just think they are beautiful and also...Oh, I remember where it came from exactly as a symbol of silence: my friend made a short movie and I was supposed to write the music about it [...], she used this fish aquarium, like just one fish in the really little bowl of aquarium, and she said that, yeah, our fish is a symbol of silence. And then I realised that actually fish don't talk and don't really make any kind of sound [...], fish as fish, little ones, ordinary ones, kinda innocent...But also the fact that they get eaten...They have aesthetical side as well [...]. But at the other hand you don't really get fish as fish, and we also know that they have a short memory...We don't get it serious, they are just beautiful and there is not, like, complicated psychology behind this kind of shapes they have [...]. From their side we don't know what fish is, what they are, what they think, what they represent. They don't have memory, they don't have psychology, they don't have anything apart from their existence. And for me this whole set is the kinda representation of our society today, their relationship with memory, speech. And any kinda reason to be seen and visible and understood is kinda removed nowadays, right?" (31/05/2022).

"They're changing...in they I mean the political system but in more concrete way I mean the kinda leftovers of Soviet Union...I find it fascinating how they try to replace our memory...like, how to manipulate our memory: something was important, like, yesterday, but no, it's not important anymore...and for example for the first year of the ruling of the Ministry of Culture, you know the Tea Tsulukiani...I was watching her last night a lot, like hours, and I compared her public speeches to one another, the speeches that was spoken early years of her ruling and right now...how they go against each other [...]. So it gives you this error [...] and there are lots of details like this...So the way

they manipulate with this kinda details...it was just an example of what I mean in memory manipulation: the fact that you are not understood, you're not understood, you're not listened and cared...at least you can protest, but then this woman can call this [...]. So yeah, this kinda, I don't know, to have just a one-way communication...I feel like a fish being honest." (31/05/2022).

The work is the analysis and presentation of a situation that I have found to be quite diffused, though definitely not universal, among the young generations and in particular among those people who were born on the verge of the changing times, like my friend Nino, a perception that is ingrained in the progressive distrust towards the political system (that I already mentioned in chapter one) and its ability and will to produce positive change for its citizens, and in the feeling of impotence, of not being able, as a single person and as a group, to intervene in this situation. This has been interestingly analysed by Martin Demant Frederiksen in his research on nihilism among youth in Tbilisi and on the topic of waiting (2020, 163 ss.): on how, during the 30 years from the fall of the Soviet Union, the feeling towards the political system has rapidly mutated from one of hope, and thus of waiting for something (good) to happen, to one of stagnation, where people are left waiting for nothing in particular, a situation where, even when everything changes, in the end everything stays the same. The political system is not immune from this kind of thinking as well, and it is blocked in its game of sterile contrasts and binary oppositions between the two principal parties, where everyone is anxiously looking for scapegoats to justify their own failures and the persistence of the country's problems, be they "pro-Russian agents" or other types of internal or external traitors (Batiashvili, 2022). This might sound strange in a country where, over

the past years, political turnover has been often achieved through revolutionary processes: but the reality that none of these revolutions achieved the envisioned and promised changes brought to the diffuse distrust towards the idea of revolution itself, seen as leading to “difference without difference” (Frederiksen, 2020, 165; Mühlfried, 2021, 7). The distrust in the idea of the revolution as a sudden change that would solve the things *once and for all* is not necessarily a bad thing: though on one side it might favour nihilism and disengagement, on the other side, as Mühlfried notes (2021), it can bring an ability to look through the political system’s game of constructing façades, a capacity which is not negative in itself, and that instead can promote a realistic and even activist approach. And I believe it is, in general, a positive sign of awareness, a recognition that social change cannot take place overnight. It is the opposite of what Nutsa Batiashvili mentioned in her presentation⁴⁰ to the conference *What is Soviet in post-Soviet space*, that I have already cited in chapter one: the author clings to the idea (that she deems to be a leftover of Soviet utopianism) that Georgian society is haunted by a fantasy of final breakthrough, usually led by someone with almost messianic features, that will solve all the problems once and for all. While this might still be real for some people, I did not really meet this kind of attitude during my fieldwork: the Georgians I have met (and I am speaking in this case of the young generations, people in their 20s and 30s) are either “waiting for nothing to change” (Frederiksen, 2020) or actively working to produce by themselves the social change that they know they cannot expect from the institutions

⁴⁰ Titled *Once and for All: The Haunting Fantasy of a Breakthrough and the Soviet Order*. For the entire programme of the conference and the book of abstracts, see <https://en.crs.ge/news/%22what-is-soviet-in-post-soviet-space%3F%22> (last accessed: 18/07/2022).

or from any other external actor. One thing I have noticed many times is that nihilism is sometimes reinforced by a kind of “laziness” (and vice versa), that prevents from noticing the signs of positive change, and the people and organisations that are actively engaged to produce them. These might be few but they are nonetheless present: many people are working (alone and within groups) to discuss the past and the present, creating community and dialogue around sensitive topics of different kinds (such as the Soviet and post-Soviet experience, women’s, queer and minorities’ rights, for example), and engaging in a decolonial practice, and not only in Tbilisi; I have noticed that many times the realisation of the existence of such practices is met with surprise, even in cases in which certain realities have been operating for years. So the point is not so much if there is some change going on or not, but if the elements of change that exist are noticed or not, and to notice them it is necessary to search for them (this position of mine, expressed also in our conversation, was met by Nino saying: “I think because you’re a foreigner you’re more resilient”).

The aquarium, with its sad fish swimming in the dirty water, floating through Soviet-era architecture and being brutally fried in a pan, is thus a presentation of the *futureless ontology*, conceptualised by Madina Tlostanova (2018) as a situation that is common to the post-Soviet countries and onto which a decolonial practice needs to be constructed, in order for these societies to build a future.

Nino connects this situation to issues of memory (and its manipulation by the political system) and to the construction of deceptive façades, that reveal a glitch once they are dismantled.

In a way, memory and its manipulation are at the basis of the national narratives⁴¹ promoted by the political system and that came to form the conception of Georgianness over the last 30 years, memory narratives which Karli Storm paradigmatically defines as *flexible* in her paper (2019, 131 ss.), and imprinted in the physical landscape, consequently manipulated through building and demolition processes. The author's explanation of her use of the term *flexible memory narratives* is particularly relevant to an analysis of how memory is by now frequently perceived as being (often contradictorily) manipulated by the political system (and this is definitely a form of awareness that I have encountered in most of the people I have met, not only in Nino), which points to the fact that this game of constructing façades in many cases does not work anymore (see Mühlfried, 2021):

“I use the term *flexible memory narratives* in order to shed light upon the ways in which elites in Georgia make selective and flexible use of popular meta-narratives of collective memory. These meta-narratives, in turn, serve to reproduce and disseminate official conceptions of collective («national») identity⁴² among Georgia's citizenry.” (Storm, 2019, 134).

Regarding the construction of deceptive façades, Nino identifies them in the following way:

⁴¹ The three narratives addressed in this paper are partially different from those mentioned in the first chapter of this work, so it is worth to quickly summarise them here: 1) foreign aggression and oppression; 2) uniqueness through antiquity; 3) Georgia's “return to the West”. These three narratives partially overlap, and in any case do not exclude, the ones previously mentioned, which are grounded on the construction of national identity.

⁴² A national identity which, as the author notes, is still nowadays pretty much exclusive of the numerous minorities that reside in the country (Storm, 2019, 131).

"To be this kinda set of the beautiful nature, as an aquarium...that's a natural heritage that we are given, no one did it, apart from just a coincidence that we're living here...and I think Georgia has a kinda exceptional nature and especially out of the urban spaces...but on the other hand that gets really artificial and little, like, glitchy...like, what's going on? what do I do in here?" (31/05/2022).

"And then this kinda symbolic understanding of fish was really intensified after a day I was shopping on Vagzali [one of the open-air markets in Tbilisi] and you know this kind of whole video in aquarium [...]. While I was shooting then I saw these Soviet buildings through the aquarium so at some point this fish would kinda dive into these buildings and people would walk in the streets so it would be all aquarium but with the fish going through, in and out, with these buildings and cars...and I said, ok, that's it, that's how I see the whole projection of being in Georgia, with all its aesthetical beauty but also this kinda absurd combinations of things we do and things we believe." (31/05/2022).

A reference here can be made to the process of *touristification* (and in many cases, *disneyfication*, as highlighted by the paradigmatic example of the renovation of the historical centre of Signaghi (a city in the Kakheti region) on the model of Old Tbilisi's cobblestone streets and balconies, that were deemed to be attractive for tourists; Mühlfried, 2021, 7-8) of Georgia and its environment, a process which unfolded rapidly after the 2003 Rose Revolution and contributed to the creation of an artificial picture of Georgia, one that makes use of the undeniable beauty of the natural environment of the country, and that highlights some specific cultural characteristics of Georgia and its inhabitants (for example, hospitality), to create a reflective surface, in which the onlooker (e.g. a potential visitor or tourist) will see a reflection of

themselves and of their own expectations towards the country, but will not be able to penetrate the hidden world behind. The same discourse is valid regarding other forms of deceptive façades, like those that are still often reproduced in foreign media and cultural products, and that involve a stereotypical and sensationalistic approach, or a neo-colonialist one.

The aquarium is thus, metaphorically speaking, a submerged world, in a way a heterotopia as described by Foucault, a space that exhibits a dual meaning and produces an affective atmosphere (see Frederiksen, 2014, 87 ss.). Frederiksen (who is in this case talking about the city of Batumi, on the Black Sea coast) speaks here of *heterochronic atmosphere*, to describe the compresence of different layers of time in a place and how this is productive of affect, which can be another interesting reference both to the perception that nothing changes and that people and their memory are just being manipulated, and to the feeling that the real world is kept well hidden under a cover surface, thanks to internal and external actors as well.

But the work is not trapped in the realm of the immediate present, and thus of the *futureless ontology* described by Tlostanova (2018, 126): it reminds us of the situation, in spite of all the efforts made by the official narratives to cover it, and then it tries to present a tactic response, a possible way out, by suggesting the need to actively deconstruct the imposing past and the deceptive layers of the present, starting from the manipulations of memory carried on by the political system. Clearly, this is not something that can be expected from the political institutions themselves, because they are part of the problem. Here is where communities and individuals need to start doing the memory work and

confront the troubled past, in order to build a future (Tlostanova, 2018, 119-120).

Nino expresses this point metaphorically in the work, taking as a symbol the massive concrete architecture that is supposed to be an objectification of time, the embodiment of a timeless idea like that of the Soviet Union (without forgetting all its internal contradictions) but also of the grandiose ideals and fallen utopias of the post-Soviet experience (Frederiksen, 2014, 88-89):

"I just thought, what's the solution here, like, how can we compete with this kind of really powerful past we have [...] and I thought, like, individual human beings cannot really go against it without understanding what does it mean to be manipulated and how that's done [...] and to understand you need to deconstruct...And I just tried to deconstruct the most visible kinda expression of post-Soviet politics and that was this brutal architecture...So I thought it's, like, impossible to build on these kinda leftovers, you need to ruin them and then start something new...Because these leftovers are that powerful still that they wouldn't let us have something new...And I thought, ok, this is the reality of the fish, this is what we are, and if we don't wanna be this, we need to deconstruct...And plus if these buildings in the aquarium and buildings in the video were kinda connected, for me that kinda made the whole, not solution, but cycle of how we should live." (31/05/2022).

In the video, we see imposing architecture metaphorically collapsing at night, or in the underwater world, leaving behind a white cloud of dust.

Frederiksen, citing Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov, recalls the episode of the pomegranates sent in 1949 as a gift to Stalin for his seventieth birthday by an Azerbaijani schoolgirl, which arrived in Moscow partially dried and rotten, and made it impossible to display them in the museum

exhibition that was supposed to portray the glory of the leader and the timelessness of the Soviet Union, and notes that:

“there is no greater threat to an idea of timelessness than that of decay [...] a tension between the momentary and the eternal was created that revealed «an additional linearity which was that of entropy and not teleology».” (Frederiksen, 2014, 89).

4.2 *unmemory*: performance as an enigma activating reminiscence

this evening the new theatre performance about memory, directed by Davit Khorbaladze, is premiering at Open Space, in Samgori district. it is the first of a trilogy, and it will have only a few replicas, to be then discontinued. it is my first time in this part of the city so I get lost a couple of times before finding the venue. I think I am late, but then I remember that being late is the norm here, so there is nothing to worry about. while waiting in the corridor, having a glass of wine, I notice a young man wearing a floral headscarf and sunglasses, holding a little bunch of flowers in his hands and softly speaking to a woman. I think I know who he is but we will get back to this later. people are entering the main hall now. the set is a tube made of mirrors: metal and soil pulled together under a barrel vault made of silver fabric. it is an ambiguous place, located in a time that is not clear, possibly out of it at all. already something is going on while we take our seat. on the set is a piano which is currently being played by a middle-aged woman (actress Marina Jokhadze) wearing a long satin dress, its colour is ice-white. another person (actress Tamara Chumashvili), barely visible, is lying on the floor in the front part of the scene, covered by a white,

heavy blanket, on top of which lay a series of white plates, with a small flowers design. a third person (actress Gvantsa Enukidze) is riding a bicycle, describing ample circles, passing behind the stalls where the audience is sitting and crossing the set on its back, from side to side. for most of the show, she will speak and sing through an ear microphone which seems to be connected to a transistor radio, so that her voice always acquires a metallic tone which appears to come from far away. Unmemory is a 2-hour unstoppable flux of signs: objects, projected images, words, repeated words and repetitive motifs, music, songs and sound. everything can take multiple meanings. everything can point to different directions. the performance is a riddle. I know that I will be here again, and it will not have the same meaning. many stories are told here. fragmented and overwhelming.

““

უკან არ დავბრუნდები,
მაგრამ ვიცი გიპოვებ.

ვიცი.

ვიცი, გიპოვებ
ამ სიბნელეში.

UNMEMORY

““

I WILL NOT GO BACK,BUT
I KNOW I WILL FIND YOU.

I KNOW.

I KNOW I WILL FIND
YOU IN THIS DARKNESS.

UNMEMORY

““

ALL THE DRAMA IS OUTSTRETCHED.
DEAD.FORGOTTEN.

UNMEMORY

““

ყველა დრამა გაწელილია.
გკვდარი. დავიწყებულა.

UNMEMORY

photo 4.7-4.8-4.9-4.10: some examples of the Instagram posts used to promote the performance. The texts are part of the performance script, some of its repetitive motifs. Courtesy of Open Space. photo 4.7 reads: ukan ar davbrundebi, magram vitsi gip'ovi. vitsi. vitsi, gip'ovi an sibneleshi. photo 4.10 reads: q'vela drama gats'elilia. mk'vdari. davits'q'ebuli.

Unmemory is a musical performance which plays not so much with bringing together a series of personal and collective memories and stories related to the Georgian history of the Soviet and post-Soviet period, but with the way in which memory in itself functions, and it has as its main goal that of activating the audience's memories. The performance is a complex and layered work which acquires a multiplicity of meanings that are changing according to the viewers' perceptions, and that are never stable and fixed (not even in the case of a second view of the performance, as I can attest). The text used to present and promote the performance states it clearly:

“UNMEMORY is about the continuous transformation of memory. Over time, memory fades, and eventually, events and facts become so damaged that nothing is left of them. Change is the only constant. Interesting how much the human body adapts to variability. The main target of the performance is the audiences' memory, which the play manipulates through music. Music that gives you the sense of incompleteness is the most crucial element of UNMEMORY. With a visual narrative full of dementia music, allusions, and associations, the group seeks to create a model of a damaged and transformable world that escapes the static past and selflessly strives to join the fluidity of the future.” (Open Space, Instagram post, 25/02/2022).

I could not take part directly in the development of this performance because the creative process had started before my arrival in Tbilisi and

was already at an advanced stage. I have decided to include it nevertheless in my analysis because of its relevance to my research topics, and I have discussed the creative process with the play director, Davit Khorbaladze, one of the co-founders of Open Space.

"Every time I start talking about it, they're asking me about this performance saying that «you're talking about our history and Georgia». Yeah, probably it seems so, but for me, while doing the work, I wasn't thinking about the political events of this country or something, I was just...For me the most important thing was memory and how it works, and of course when I was researching it I connected it with my memory and collective memory [...]. If I talk about form in this performance it is also very difficult because it's all about sound and music, and how can we explain this...I can say that this play was dealing with deconstructing the performance but..." (03/06/2022).

"SB: How did you work with the actresses? How did it start, the searching for this material?

DKH: It was very difficult actually in the beginning because, as I can't explain it for now, it was also the same at the beginning...and I was trying to explain to them and I looked in their eyes and...But I'm very lucky because they trusted me very much [...]. then there were these amazing costumes [made by local fashion designer GOD ERA (Nini Goderidze), who works with vegan leather and bio plastic, mostly made out of recycled materials] and set design [made by Ana Gurgenedze, Open Stage's main stage designer] and everything worked not for me but for the performance, and everyone was feeling it from their point of view, and we didn't even talk about the main ideas or something, so it was really not explained idea, but everything was...

SB: The things came together.

DKH: And it was beautiful feeling of it. At the same time, it was very risky because at the end, when we finished the performance and when we saw it complete for the first time, it looked so terrible because I didn't understand anything what happened, anything what I did because [...] I can't distance from it [...]. About the actresses the challenge was that this woman who's playing the piano, she is not pianist and for her in her age it was more difficult to start learning. She did it but she all the time was complaining about the thing, how she couldn't, and «why do you do this to me»...But then she was very proud that she did it...And what was very interesting was to search intonations: it was main thing, like, in this text finally the main thing was just this...Because [...] in this case I decided to make the sentences as much as possible short and I think it's one of the main things that worked in this performance [...] and these repetitive motives." (03/06/2022).

The performance was thus constructed in a rhizomatic way and was in itself an exemplification of how memory works: the excess of signs, which goes against any idea of minimalism, together with the multiple uses of the glitch, made a lot of sense in this case, as the (re)presentation of a chaotic mind and of its processes, a mirror of a chaotic reality, a mind that is a leaking and collapsing storage unit, fragmentary and overwhelmed by objects, flashing images (infinitely multiplied in the hall of mirrors which is the set), words (reduced to the essential and often repeated, not as a mantra but more as a broken record, one of the most repeated words being “permanent”: *permanent damage*, *permanent marker*, *permanent wedding day*). In all of this, the music (a mix of famous songs by international artists reworked for the performance and of original music) played a very important role in pointing not to specific memories but to memory in itself, an area of memory where the play leads the spectators from time to time, and where the personal and the collective keep overlapping. What is

interesting for me in this performance is the fact that many stories are told in it, and even more arise and get associated to it in the minds of the audience, but no attempt at telling an official (hi)story is made. The work keeps moving on an ambiguous plane, being both representation and non-representation at the same time, displaying a space haunted by ghostly images⁴³ and affective objects. Moreover, the performance slides across different time planes, which is interesting in reference to what Tlostanova keeps repeating about the need to face and reflect on the past in order to build the future, and the need for art to not remain stuck in the present of the *futureless ontology* (2018):

"SB: And I was also curious about this «futuristic» set, because it seems like the work is talking about the past, but what is happening in the scene, it is happening in some kind of future, that we don't know exactly what it is...

DKH: Yes, for me it is a combination of past, future and present...Like, this ground is more like past that is already dead, and nothing will come out of it⁴⁴...But as a construction, yes, it looks like something that you don't know the likeness. Yeah, it is also abstract, we never talked about it, me and Ana, of what exactly it would be...But during the time she was making it, I had these connections...The first time we had this scenography I didn't have text or music, or even clear concept, but when she was making this whole, and these three figures, how they were connected with each other, it inspired me and a lot of things are based on this contrast and shapes...How these shapes

⁴³ As an interesting parallelism, one of my Tbilisian friends repeated many times that "Georgian past is a ghost". Meaning not so much that it is a haunting presence but that it is elusive and difficult to catch, and requires active searching. My friend took as an example that of sound, stating that for him it is impossible to have a picture of how Georgia sounded like, for example, in the 1950s, while this is pretty easy regarding many other countries.

⁴⁴ I find this a particularly interesting and unusual association, that of imagining soil as a representation of the past, something dead out of which nothing will grow. Especially if we consider that the rest of the set is made of movable metal plates and silver fabric.

were contacting with each other and then I used these connections in text too and in music, like the translation of visual into text and sound." (03/06/2022).

Only at times, the three women themselves can be interpreted as a personification of the past, the present and the future, and there is often a reference to a task that needs to be completed, the content of which is never specified. Moreover, there is a fourth, ghostly character that keeps being mentioned all over the performance, a *you* that is never acquiring a definite or definitive identity:

"SB: There's a constant talking about someone, talking about «you», «I will find you», and this «you» can be many things. There's almost a fourth person in the scene but you don't know what that is, and even if it's a person or what.

DKH: Yeah, someone told me: «you mean USSR? » [laughs].

SB: I was also thinking about that for a while, but then I said, no, it's more than that...

DKH: And someone even counted the plates, and they were the same amount as the countries in the Soviet Union...It was too much [laughs]...Because it's just that we had this amount of plates in Open Space...But I like that it was so open that people could see whatever they wanted, and at the same time it had some construction." (03/06/2022).

““ შენ იმპერია არა ხარ,
თუმცა ხარ სისხლი, სიბნელე
და სიჩუმე.

ისტორია შენი ტრაჟედია
შენი ჰიმნი ტყუილს უგალობს

მიწა შენი ტკივილია,
ქვები შენი გულია,

შენი შვილები შენს
ხრიოქ გულში განისვენებენ

შენ, გენიზმერაბა

გენიზმერაბა, რომ
ერთხელ კარგად იყავი.
ერთხელ მზე და პარღები
შარავდნენ გალებს,

შენ გენიზმერაბა

შენ გენიზმერაბა გამარჯვება

სიხარულის შექიპვლება ტანში
დაგიკვლისდა წითელ ჯვრებს
დგამენ შენი მარცხის

თეთრ სოფლავეზე. ““

UNMEMORY

““ YOU ARE NOT AN
EMPIRE, THOUGH YOU
ARE BLOOD, DARKNESS
AND SILENCE.

HISTORY IS YOUR TRAUMA
YOUR HYMN EXTOLLS A LIE

THE LAND IS YOUR PAIN,
STONES ARE YOUR HEART,

YOUR CHILDREN WILL REST
IN YOUR BARREN HEART.

YOU ARE DREAMING

YOU'RE DREAMING ABOUT
WHEN YOU WERE WELL
ONCE THE SUN AND ROSES
COVERED THE GARDENS,

YOU ARE DREAMING

YOU'RE DREAMING ABOUT VICTORY

THE PAIN OF JOY WILL TREMBLE
YOUR BODY AND RED CROSSES ARE
ERECTED ON THE WHITE GRAVES OF

YOUR FAILURE ““

UNMEMORY

photo 4.11-4.12-4.13-4.14-4.15-4.16-4.17-4.18: some examples of the Instagram posts used to promote the performance. The texts are part of the performance script, some of its repetitive motifs. Courtesy of Open Space. Photo 4.11 reads: shen imp'eria ara khar, tumtsa khar siskhli, sibnele da sichune. ist'oria sheni t'ravmaa, sheni himni t'q'uils ugalobs; Photo 4.13 reads: mits'a sheni t'k'ivilia, qvebi sheni gulia, sheni shvilebi shens khriok' gulshi ganisveneben; Photo 4.15 reads: shen, gesizmreba. gesizmreba, rom ertkhel k'argad iq'avi. ertkhel mze da vardebi paravdnen baghebs, shen gesizmreba; Photo 4.17 reads: shen gesizmreba gamarjveba, sikharulis shek'ivleba t'anshi dagivlisda ts'itel jvrebs dgamen sheni martskhis tetr saplavebze.

The performance ends with a very personal memory of the director, who is also the author of the whole script, included in a last monologue; a memory connected to his family and to the experience of war, which made very difficult and emotional, both for the people at Open Space and for the audience, the experience of the last two replicas of the performance in March 2022, after the start of the war in Ukraine. Because, all of a sudden, a strong connection emerged.

"It was so terrible when war started, we had planned this performance and...Before it was also war time, when I was writing this text, but I don't know, I don't remember where was it [...] and I was inspired by it, but it was so distant that I could have this humour still, about the war...And I also have these memories from my grandfather, from war...This last monologue, if you remember, that he told to my mother that when they were coming back from the war he saw his relative in the way, and he screamed to express the happiness, and this insect, this jumping locust, jumped into his mouth and he almost died after this, after the war...So it's a very strange thing, that someone is alive after the war but suddenly he's happy because he survived this war but then suddenly the nature is killing him. Yeah, so when this war started it was really difficult, we had this performance and everyone was silent after the show [...] and it was very hard to play it because this ending that it sounds quite happy then it becomes...It's not like happy ending, but harmonies are

going into joyful something...And it sounded very creepy this time. So it was very interesting experience, how it was connected, because the main problem here in Georgia (I don't know, probably in other countries too, but I have not staged anything outside) is that all the time, whatever topics you choose or whatever you make, I always have this lack of connection with what's around you, because people who come to see the performance mostly are the same people who are into theatre as well, and I hate it, and I'm very tired of it...And this feeling of connection with something really big was exactly what a performance should have but at the same time this event was such a big disaster and terrible, so we had very mixed feelings." (03/06/2022).

“

არა, ომი რა თქმა უნდა არ
დამთავრებულა, ესე რომ
გზვიდობის ნამდვილად არ
უნდა გვეუინოდეს.

“

NO, OF COURSE, THE WAR
IS NOT OVER, SO DO NOT
BEWARE OF THE PEACE.



photo 4.19-4.20: some examples of the Instagram posts used to promote the performance. The texts are part of the performance script, some of its repetitive motifs. Courtesy of Open Space. Photo 4.19 reads: ara, omi ra tkma unda ar damtavrebula, ase rom mshvidobis namdivlad ar unda gveshinodes. photo 4.21-4.22: two moments of the performance *Unmemory*; photos shot by the author.

The performance, therefore, revolves around three different aspects:

1) the (re)presentation of memory and its functioning, and of its fading over time, treated in a way that poses the overall work as an inductor of reminiscence, a way to collectively recall and address personal and group memories from the troubled past, recent and less recent, but also joyful memories. The personal and the collective level are here always overlapping⁴⁵.

2) the audiences' memories form an integral part of the performance, as they are activated by the work. Edward S. Casey states, in his

⁴⁵ This is not the ideal seat to recollect the entire evolution of the studies on personal and collective memory, and on their intertwining, but it might be useful to remember that Lewis A. Coser, in his introduction to the 1992 edition of *On Collective Memory* by Maurice Halbwachs, highlights how people had to “shed their own collective memory like a skin” after the fall of the Soviet Union, and to reconstruct an entirely new set of memories (1992, 21). In this sense, the performance is also a representation of the traumatic glitch that is inherent in this process. Moreover, Halbwachs underlines the continuous entanglement of human experience, and thus memory, and the social context, constructing memory as something that is always relational and never solely individualistic (1992, 23). Wulf Kansteiner (2002, 185 ss.) warns instead against the mistake of perceiving and conceptualising collective memory only “in terms of the psychological and emotional dynamics of individual remembering” and underlines the impossibility to apply a psychoanalytical model to collective memory. Collective memories can change, and in this case it is important to focus on the social, political and cultural factors at work, instead of treating collective memory as a unitary product of a unitary collective unconscious. The author also underlines the fundamental influence that social and political agendas have on the shaping of collective memories, which brings us back to the *flexible memory narratives* that we mentioned, in the previous paragraph, regarding the case of Georgia (Storm, 2019). I would remind again that this does not mean that this kind of manipulation cannot be challenged by active community work on memory, which is the pre-requisite to initiate a decolonial process (Tlostanova, 2018), and one of the things which this performance calls for. Moreover, collective memories originate from the material and the practices of a group, their inventory of signs and symbols, and we need not imagine this group to necessarily coincide with society at large (Kansteiner, 2002, 188).

introduction to *The Phenomenology of the Aesthetic Experience* by Mikel Dufrenne, that “the aesthetic object is completed only in the consciousness of the spectator” and through their active engagement (1973, xxviii) and I think this performance is a perfect exemplification of the need for an active audience. This involvement cannot be limited to pure perception though, as stated by the author immediately after: I think this is a widespread characteristic of performance art and contemporary theatre as well, that of challenging the imagination and requiring a further step in the engagement with the work. In the case of this performance, creating a link with the personal memories of the audience is the aim.

3) the use of objects and music/sound as active inductors of reminiscence. In this case, objects and sound work in a quite different way: the chosen objects are everyday things associated with the Soviet and post-Soviet experience in Georgia (plates, bottles, a plastic Christmas tree, a transistor radio, LP records, a vacuum cleaner, a musical doll widely diffused in the Soviet Union (*nevalyashka*); and the official flag of Georgia that was adopted after the independence from the USSR, and that was then changed in 2004 after the Rose Revolution: the flag was the same adopted by the country in its short experience of independence from 1918 to 1921, wine-red, with two bands in the left corner on the top, one white and one black; the new flag is the five-crosses one, originally a banner from the medieval Kingdom of Georgia), while music and the chosen songs have no direct reference to the Georgian past but point to specific areas of memory, aiming at inducing reminiscence with the force of “the stereotype” (for example, the use of a reworked version of *Oh my love* by The Beatles in a section

of the performance which addresses sentimental memories). While objects act here as activators of concrete memories (Hoskins, 2006; Tilley, 2006; Grossman, 2014), originating in the fact that everybody had that kind of objects in their houses and had used them, sound performs an affective quality, inducing (a less concrete) memory to travel (on sound see for example Cox, 2018, and the work of Steven Feld).

4.3 *once I had a dream I was inside of my mouth: the past as a collapsing archetype in the work of Natia Chikvaidze*⁴⁶

a point of cold light is tracing the margins of your body. your subtle and arching movements draw a path in the darkness of the hall, illuminating the faces of the audience, passing swiftly over the painting hanging on the wall, depicting the most famous queen (to be more precise: king) of Georgian history. a silent conversation, your lips move but no sound comes out of them. your movements are twitches and explosions. now I can hear your voice but your whispered words are in a language that does not exist. they rise up and in some moment you are almost shouting. a vibrating and tense body colliding with the wall and the floor. the point of light is flashing like a Morse code. the performance ends.

⁴⁶ Natia Chikvaidze is a professional contemporary dancer, performer and choreographer based in Tbilisi, who grew up as a dancer in an international environment, in France, Israel and Portugal. Collaborating with artists from various cultural backgrounds and disciplines deeply impacted her relationship with dance, society and movement, and contributed to the cross-contamination of her practice with the visual arts and installation. Her artistic aim is to explore, broaden and challenge the range of physical expression, finding different qualities of movement and emotional states. <https://www.instagram.com/natiachikvaidze/>; <https://vimeo.com/user43234162> (last accessed: 08/09/2022).





photo 4.23-4.24-4.25-4.26: Natia Chikvaidze performing at MAUDI Art Space on the evening of November 13th, 2021; stills from the video, courtesy of: Saba Shengelia.

I met Natia one week after my arrival in Tbilisi, a common friend introduced me to her and to her contemporary dance classes, held regularly three days a-week in the studio at the second floor of the Music and Drama State Theatre, dismissed and half-abandoned as mentioned in part 1 (being guarded only by what became known, inside our group of practitioners, as the “*insecurity guys*”). We got along very well soon, having a similar aesthetic taste regarding art and sites for performance, and decided that we would work together combining our practices of contemporary dance and performance: over the course of my staying in Tbilisi we did two performances together and started planning new ones. It was clear from the beginning that one of her main concerns was her condition as a contemporary dancer in Georgia, in relation to the challenging situation she faced while trying to have her art recognised (as an independent practitioner who collaborates on a daily basis with several artists but has no stable dance company), in relation to the overwhelming presence of the Georgian traditional dance

scene (with which she would like to engage more, in a transdisciplinary way, but which is still manifesting closure to certain forms of experimentation), and in relation to her being a gender-fluid woman who believes that dance transcends gender and who actively builds her performative practice as a way to challenge strict, imposed gender constructions.

Regarding the problem of receiving recognition and support for her art, she is particularly concerned with the issue of delimiting her contemporary dance and performance practice towards other disciplines such as ballet, for example, and having it recognised by local practitioners, who are also potential collaborators⁴⁷, and by public institutions⁴⁸, which can provide funds to support her activities.

“I feel very sad. Maybe country just doesn’t want to have dance developing. That makes sense. [...] Things happen but at the same time it is not something that I am aiming to go, you know? Maybe it is also because this place works that if you are someone, like Mariam Aleksidze [the director of Tbilisi Contemporary Ballet], who has family with important names in the past, or you have important friends, then you can make it, but for me it’s really hard

⁴⁷ Regarding them, she laments how it is difficult to deeply involve people in a project on a long term, so that a stable group can emerge: on one side, this is due to the difficulty of characterising and explaining the peculiarities of contemporary dance to people, in a city where the dance scene is constituted almost exclusively by folk dances, followed by hip hop and contact improvisation, plus one company which does contemporary ballet and is considered to be representing contemporary dance (in the eyes of many of the audiences and practitioners, and in those of the public institutions). This situation partially changed after the start of the war in Ukraine: the influx of Russian people fleeing their country brought a high number of contemporary dancers to Tbilisi. On the other side, funds are a strong issue when trying to found a stable working group: a certain time is needed before a group is able to sustain itself economically on its own, at least partially, but at the same time a group is very difficult to form when all the people that might want to be involved need to balance their time between other jobs. This last situation is of course not limited to the case of Georgia.

⁴⁸ In this case, the lack of a stable working group is a strong impediment to obtaining recognition and funds from public bodies such as the Ministry for Culture. On the other side, Natia highlights a repeating pattern of public open calls for projects issued by the Ministry which assign funds always to the same people and groups, pointing to the fact that the winners of the calls seem to be chosen before even issuing them.

and it is also not my style to look for this kind of contacts, for me it is very provincialist to put the family in front of me when I can just do it. [...] and the problem with the country is the ephemerality. Once that the project is made, it is done. No repetition. They create a project, get financed, and then stop. Create a new piece, and again. [...] At the same time, I don't wanna leave but I wanna leave because it's hard to have a future. Imagine, if something is not existing in your place and you're trying to do it. People think that Mariam Aleksidze is contemporary but it isn't. And it comes from mentality, tradition, ways of perceiving the body⁴⁹ and in general.” (09/10/2021).

Under a different aspect, the folk dance scene (in its institutionalised form, as staged by state folk dance companies who also tour internationally, and among which the most famous is the Sukhishvili Georgian National Ballet⁵⁰) takes a lot of space in the cultural imaginary of Georgian citizens and institutions: due to their antiquity (archaeological excavations in Trialeti⁵¹ found for example a silver bowl from the 3rd millennia B.C., depicting scenes of the ritual round dance *Perkhuli*⁵²), Georgian folk dances form a strong part of the country's national identity and entered in the national(istic) narratives used to reconstruct Georgian identity after the fall of the Soviet Union, under the paradigm of the antiquity of Georgian civilisation (Shatirishvili, 2009; on the relationship between state folk dance companies, power and nationalism, see for example Shay, 2002). Their relationship with gender constructions is complex and it cannot be fully

⁴⁹ Regarding this issue, even a quick look at the repertoire of the company is enough to highlight how the image of the body that they propose is strictly heteronormative, especially regarding the case of women. <https://tbilisiballet.ge/eng/home> (last accessed: 09/09/2022).

⁵⁰ <https://www.sukhishvili.net/> (last accessed: 09/09/2022).

⁵¹ One of the historical regions of Georgia.

⁵² <http://polyphony.ge/en/georgia/georgian-traditional-music/history-of-folk-music/> (last accessed: 09/09/2022).

addressed in this work⁵³, due also to the fact that it would require a comparison between the practice of folk dance companies (institutionalised as state companies or not) who stage their works and often tour outside of Georgia, and the popular expression of folk dance in convivial events such as weddings, banquets and other festivities.

Natia is very interested in projects where different practices form a dialogue and contaminate each other, and has already worked on projects mixing contemporary dance, folk dance and club culture⁵⁴, but she expressed many times the desire to go deeper in creating a dialogue between the two practices and to work with local folk dancers. Her concerns regard the still persistent closure of the folk dance scene to experimentation, despite the fact that the Sukhishvili National Ballet

⁵³ Regarding their form, it might be interesting to notice, as it emerged from several discussions with people in Tbilisi (it is very common for children to be involved in folk dance schools, so almost everybody has a direct experience of practicing Georgian folk dance; I have attended some classes myself over a few weeks and plan to go deeper during further research projects), that gender roles are partially “interchangeable”, meaning that while men learn only their part, women learn female and male parts of the dance as well; moreover, both dance on their toes, a thing which is not common, for example, in ballet (Fisher, 2014). Some types of dance, such as those associated with *kinto*, include elements of male cross-dressing and homoeroticism, though this specific practice has almost disappeared (Manning, Shatirishvili, 2011). A reference here can be made to the association of Georgian folk dance with nationalism, where it got connected to expectations on how true Georgian men and women should appear and behave. Local anthropologist and gender studies researcher Nukri Tabidze, also a participant in Natia’s dance classes, stated during a conversation that “folk dance is an exact representation of the role and the condition of the woman in Georgia: always standing on her toes, always vigilant, always watching her back, being chased by man.” (20/10/2021).

⁵⁴ These projects were led by or created in partnership with international organisations and crews and led to different results: the performance *Marry me in Bassiani* has been created as a collaboration between (La)Horde – Ballet National de Marseille and the Georgian dance ensemble Iverioni, choreographed by Natia, and it was a reflection on the political power of dance, a comment on the spontaneous mass protests which took place in Tbilisi in May 2018 (under the slogan “We dance together – We fight together”) after a brutal police raid on the well-known Bassiani club took place, and at the same time on the role of resistance that also Georgian folk dance assumed during the Soviet time. See <https://www.ballet-de-marseille.com/en/company/performances/marry-me-in-bassiani-69> (last accessed: 09/09/2022). Natia also took part in the realisation of the known 2019 movie *And then we danced*, directed by Georgian-born, Sweden-based Levan Akin and addressing the topic of homosexuality within a state folk dance company, where she choreographed the final scene in which the main character dances a mix of contemporary and Georgian folk dance. The movie, while receiving praises in a Western environment, encountered strong critiques from the local queer community for its stereotypical and Western-centric depiction of Georgian society, besides receiving a violent opposition from the Georgian Orthodox Church and the folk dance establishment.

started to introduce elements of contemporary dance in their recent performance *Qarabsha*⁵⁵ (in my opinion, with some interesting results, though definitely a lot more can be done):

“This is funny, how the folk dance just already gave the country something, like when the folk dances already are *created naturally* [emphasis is mine], it is so contemporary for them that it never has to raise, it has to stay like that. And I feel that for Georgian dancers and people it’s enough, what they have. I feel that this mass of information about dancing, for the country is enough, they don’t wanna anything else. It’s like if Spanish people had only flamenco and they dance only that, and they say «we don’t want to transform flamenco». It’s the same with Georgian dance [...]. Of course they put some innovations, when the company travels of course they see contemporary dance and sometimes they have choreographers coming here, but [...] they just take one or two movements, without understanding the idea of the movement, and they put it in the choreography where it is not really embodying anything, you’re not really going through it, you just see small pictures or phrases which are not connected with each other. There’s no connection between these things and idea, movement, body. [...] it is just because they are in contemporary time, then they need to put something to make the audience more interested, like costumes or music or lights, because people are less interested to see the covered woman or long dresses. And of course today’s audiences are more young, more interested in electronic music, styles, different people, so they put some elements. Almost same choreography, but different. If you talk with dancers and you ask what do you feel or what it is or how is the rehearsal, what is research...they don’t know. Why the dancer doesn’t have to understand? [...] So I don’t know if their dancers really go with that deep research, it’s just showing off and technicality. Giving the idea of having something new, innovative things.” (09/10/2021).

⁵⁵ https://youtu.be/GYOokR_xmAk (last accessed: 09/09/2022).

I do understand these concerns because at the core of Natia's practice lays a strong work of transformative analysis of the body through movement, and by working with her on several projects and attending her classes I have noticed many times the extremely precise way in which she teaches contemporary dance or she guides the dancers in choreography⁵⁶, decomposing movement in its essential components and researching the origin of each in the contraposed tensions of the body. In the movement, a point of compressed energy is gathered. Sequences of points which implode and explode produce the performance. Her understanding of the body (and in particular of the dancing body) goes against gender binaries and strictly-coded roles, therefore at the ground of her concerns about being a dancer in Georgia lays her uneasiness in having to conform to a female standard of appearance and behaviour which has been imposed on her since she was a child, in her family and in the society at large (to delve deeper into the condition of women in Georgia and for a need to decolonise local feminist movements by the neo-colonial imposition of Western standards, see Waterston, 2018, Tskhadadze, 2018 and Tlostanova, 2010). We decided to start working together on this issue and we produced the performance described at the beginning of this paragraph, which took place in MAUDI Art Space on the evening of November 13th, 2021. I have noticed, after many conversations, that for Natia it is difficult to go deep in the research on very personal topics, especially when they imply negative or sad emotions and feelings, and she usually

⁵⁶ We spoke also many times of the occasional tendency of several components of the local artistic scene to conform to European models in order to be accepted and included, many times losing their strength in this way. The decolonial stance is therefore well present also in Natia's practice.

prefers to confront her issues through loudness and explosive energy. For this reason, we had the idea to research and work on dreams as a form of communication and creation of knowledge. Performance art has a long history of working with dreams as a source of creative material for the creation of artworks, and anthropology is as well paying an increasing attention to dreams as culturally significant elements. According to anthropologist Jeannette Mageo:

“Nightly, dreams dramatize our most profound and troubled encounters with the sociocultural and political worlds that coerce and exploit us. [...] Dreams are descents into unguarded experience – into preoccupations, questions, fears, wishes, and mental wanderings. Hence, they give special access to lived subjectivity in particular historical moments. [...] Dreaming [...] is ever engaged with the social and the political, yet it is best understood as the subjective pole of culture – often more personal and more deeply lived than waking life. In waking, thoughts and feelings are routinely concealed and belied but also predicated by polite and normative surfaces and routines. In dreams, one sees the underside of daily cultural life played out on an inner stage.” (Mageo, 2021, 3).

At this point, Natia recounted a dream in which she was having a conversation in a non-existing language with a painting depicting Queen Tamar of Georgia, the first woman king of the country, who reigned in the 12th century. The painting was responding to the conversation and instructing Natia to do certain things in the future (Natia reported that these things turned out to happen for real), and the dream concluded with Natia going to a desert. Queen Tamar is an important figure in the political narratives in Georgia: on the basis of her powerful role and prestige, and on the account of her position being

defined as "king" (მეფე, *mepe*) for lack of a female equivalent in the Georgian language (Eastmond, 2018), political leaders and members of the general public dismiss the necessity of women's emancipation. She, and other female figures such as Queen Ketevan (17th century) and the Tbilisi monument "Kartlis Deda" (Mother of Georgia), are frequently mentioned as a proof that the historical and cultural roles of women in Georgian society is recognised and respected (Gaprindashvili, 2018, 21). Queen Tamar has also come to represent a strong symbol of purity for Georgian society, in a country where a high importance is still attributed to virginity before marriage (ქალობვილი, *qalishvili*; Natia noticed at this point of our conversation that in Georgia virginity reconstruction is one of the most diffused plastic surgery operations) (see, for example, Kamm, 2015). Besides the specific content of the original dream, the performance became then an opportunity to challenge and publicly discuss the archetype represented by the queen, and its social and political meaning, through a tense dialogue created with body movements and a particular use of the light. It was also a concretization of androgynous fluidity of gender, presented through Natia's body but embedded also in the figure of King Tamar, and in many other figures of Georgian cultural history (for example, the famous Soviet-era actress Sofiko Ch'iaureli, who played both male and female roles in cinema and theatre and is remembered in particular for her life-long collaboration with director Sergej Parajanov; Weir, 2018, 176 ss.).

4.4 *cleaning the body / cleaning the memory: the heart-breaking past* in the work of Andro Dadiani⁵⁷

მე გიჟი არ ვარ	I am not crazy
მე გიჟი ვარ	I am crazy
ვმუშაობ ხარივით	I work hard like a bull
ვფქვავ ფსიქოტროპულებს სახელგანთქმული	I take psychotropic drugs with the infamous
წვიმის კონცეფტით და ვსუნთქავ ცეცხლს,	concept of rain, and I breathe fire,
ზაფხულში ისედაც ბევრი მიზეზია	There are too many reasons to die in summer,
სიკვდილისთვის	anyways
მე თავი არ მომიკლავს,	I did not kill myself
მე თავს ვერ ვიკლავ	Nor killed anyone
და არავინ მომიკლავს	Police don't know me
პოლიცია მე არ მიცნობს	Next door neighbour doesn't know me
კარის მეზობელი მე არ მიცნობს	My mother doesn't know me
დედა მე არ მიცნობს	You don't know me
შენ არ მიცნობ, ჩემ თავს არ ვიცნობ და	I don't know myself
ჯერ კიდევ არ მქვია მკვდარი როგორც	As it appears, I am still not pronounced dead
ამბობენ	And what's the need to be called anything at all
ან რა საჭიროა მერქვას რაიმე, როცა	when calculating machines work
გამოთვლითი მანქანები მუშაობენ	I work too
მეც ვმუშაობ	I will say
მე ვიტყვი	Or They will say it better
ან ისინი იტყვიან უკეთ	More precisely
მეტი სიზუსტით	beautifully, laconically
კობტად, ლაკონურად	

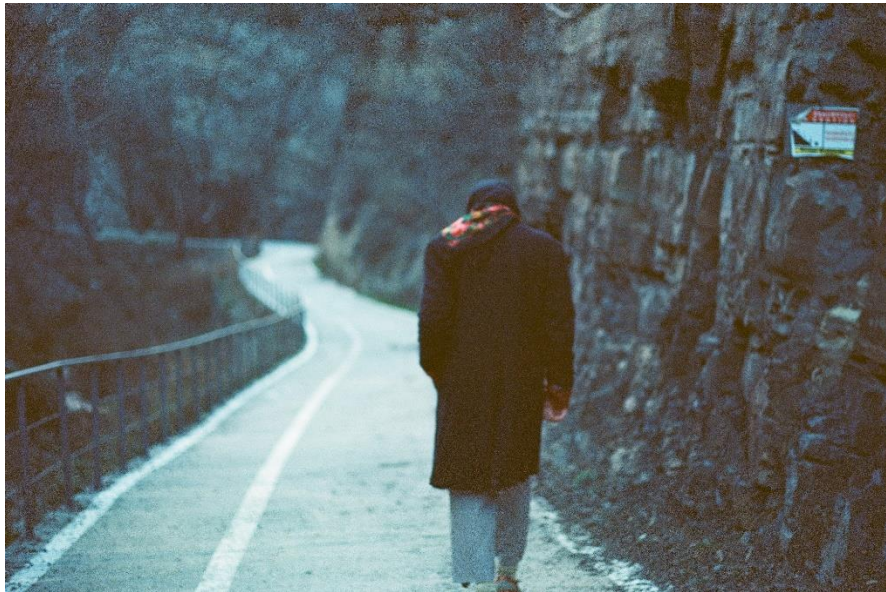
შეხედე, რა ლამაზია ვარდი რომელიც ვერ
მოგიტანე

Andro Dadiani⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Andro Dadiani is a performance artist and poet. His work is characterised by homoeroticism. The works are a constant reflection on social issues, of which the examiner and the mediator is himself. He always speaks personally on global issues such as labour rights, homophobia, violence against women, religious fanaticism, occupation, independence, the destroyed intellectual heritage of the Soviet Union, etc. The artist presents himself with a pseudonym and a mask for social self-preservation and for other reasons that will be addressed in this paragraph. Andro Dadiani is a famous artist in the country, but his family is not even aware of his activities, and this repressed nature makes his works clear and emotional. <https://androdadiani.wordpress.com/>; <https://www.instagram.com/andro.dadiani/> (last accessed: 10/09/2022).

⁵⁸ Poem published on Instagram on 07/08/2022.

impacting against reality like a bump in the head. the atmosphere is compressed; a thief is in the house. single drops of water from a broken tap. a silver bell. a New Year's Eve dinner with a soup made of pills, the gift is a tombstone carrying two dates, encompassing a time frame of ten years. a lonely walk up a winding road with the sound of the river rushing beside you, wearing old Soviet-era heel shoes and a mask made of a black shawl with red flowers. searching for death and rebirth: cleaning the body to clear out the ghosts, naked skin, naked rocks. blue water. pray to nature lighting candles on your spine, a waterfall. the dinner table is covered in moss, water and soil gather on the wooden floor of your house. a long time has passed. the glasses are filled with mud; water is dripping in tears. snails are crawling there.



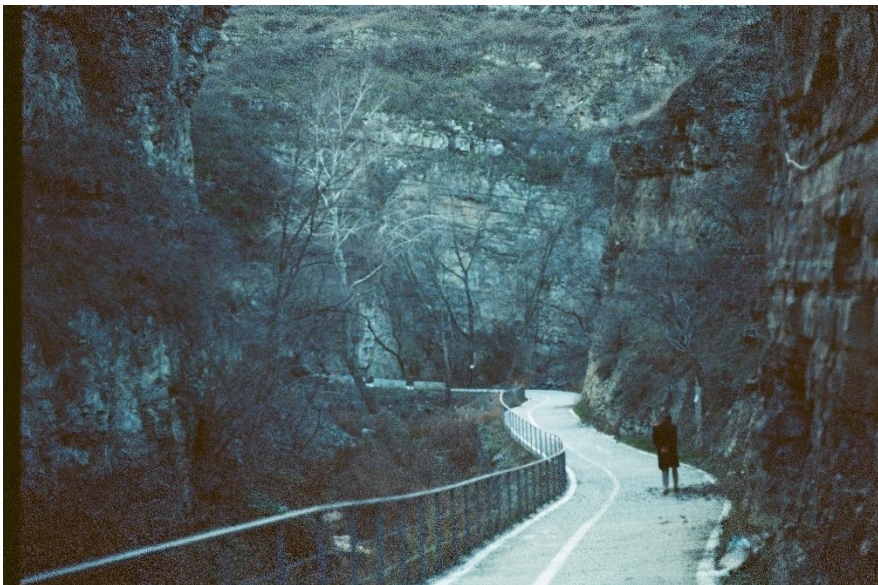
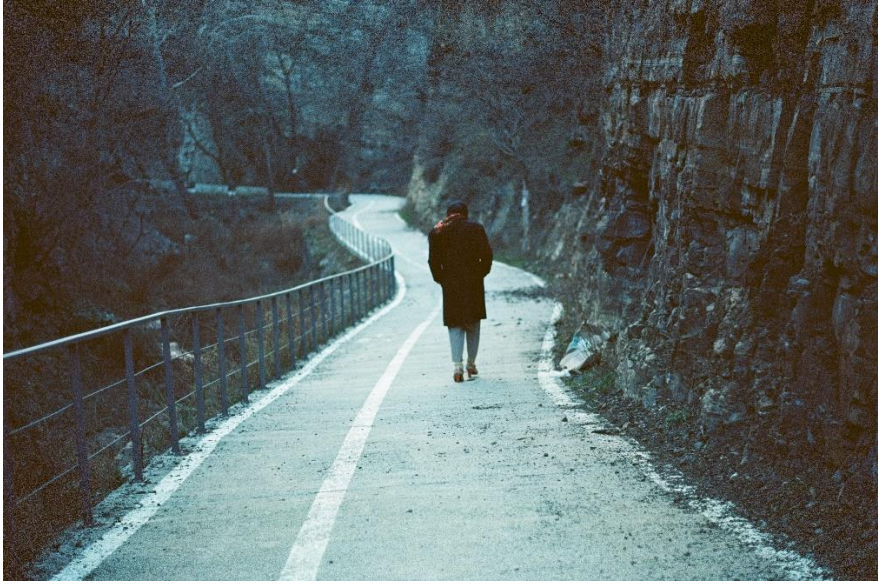




photo 4.27-4.28-4.29-4.30-4.31: images taken during the realisation of the video performance *კობო* (*k'op'i*, head bump), late afternoon of January 2nd, 2022; photos by the author.

In *The Sacred in Everyday Life* (1937), Michel Leiris asks himself what constitutes the sacred for him:

“What objects, places, or occasions awake in me that mixture of fear and attachment, that ambiguous attitude caused by the approach of something simultaneously attractive and dangerous, prestigious and outcast—that combination of respect, desire, and terror that we take as the psychological sign of the sacred? [...] it is a matter of searching through some of the humblest things, taken from everyday life and located outside of what today makes up the officially sacred (religion, fatherland, morals).” (Leiris, 1937, 24).

When I think of the time spent with Andro and of the work we did together, this is the kind of thoughts that come to my mind. Our

collaboration started from his desire to create a performance movie as a way to confront the end of a 10-year-long love story, through the cleaning and renewal of the body in order to let the sadness be washed away, but it came out to be also a dive into an archive of memory objects and symbolic things (most of the materials used for the costumes and of the things used in his performances are found either in the trash or in street markets, and his apartment is a museum-like display of the found treasures, which are also always ready to be used and/or transformed – staple gun, sewing machine and hot glue gun being his unfaltering working tools). The archive in this case is also composed of the shards left by the broken love, iconic objects and gifts of the loved one which in the video work get poetically mixed with Soviet- and post-Soviet-era objects which form the environment and the atmosphere of the work (as Andro repeated many times, “it’s Soviet Union, and I was born in it”). Strong personal memories of grief and desire overlap with the collective memory that is embedded in the material culture of a specific time (which is both the Soviet past and the current time; objects that are in many ways refused form the material substance of the performance, creating its affective atmosphere; Anderson, 2009): the work is in a way a form of response to the performance *Unmemory*, previously addressed, and some of the objects used in both works are the same (in particular, the musical doll); but here every object produces a specific affect that is related to the personal story of the performer, and it is directed to creating first of all an influence in his existence, through a series of actions that represent a presentation to the audience of the different steps of the process. I also did not mention any specific place as connected to this performer in the previous chapter, and the reason is that for him his apartment constitutes his main artist studio, but then

the entire city can become a site for performance. In particular, for this work we spent a lot of time on Mtatsminda hill, above Tbilisi, in a part of the park which is usually not very much visited by people, and that would therefore allow to work with nudity. This physical connection with natural elements was also very much researched in the work, as the substrate that is not failing to give hope in a troubled present and in this way the ultimate resource to turn oneself to. In this sense, the symbolic act of entering a pool of cold water in front of a waterfall, bearing three lit candles attached on the spine, is a final act of cleaning the heart-breaking past and present outside of one's body, and therefore we can connect also this work with the decolonial task advocated by Madina Tlostanova (2017, 2018) for art, a task that in this case is first of all performed on the individual level of one's body and one's memories, but that can then create an emotional bridge with the personal histories of the audience (the specific reaction to this work has not been explored yet, for the video performance is still in the editing phase and waiting to be presented to the audience).

Another interesting aspect in the work of this artist is the use of anonymity (both in the form of using a pseudonym and of always wearing a mask covering his face entirely), so that not even his family knows who he really is and what he does: this is due to safety reasons, for his constant use of homoerotic motifs in his work in a country that is still displaying homophobia in particular in the public discourse, primarily prompted by the Georgian Orthodox Church (Górecki, 2020; Batiashvili, 2019) and its strong capacity to mobilise people and

resources⁵⁹, and by some far-right political movements and parties⁶⁰. In particular, these two forces are basing their complaints on the idea that sexual and gender dissent have never existed in Georgia, where they have been imported by “the victorious West” after the fall of the USSR. Many researchers have proven how these phenomena, and the forms of knowledge associated to them, had instead deep roots on the whole territory of the Soviet Union, roots which moreover formed way before its foundation (see for example Healey, Stella, 2021).

The choice of anonymity is however also dictated by other reasons, that can be expressed by the following excerpt from an interview published on his website:

“The world is overwhelmed and tired of remembering faces, names and surnames. I wanted to be anonymous, Andro Dadiani was to be a conditional sign and not a specific one.”⁶¹

The idea was then, as I perceived many times during our collaboration, to create an umbrella name and an enigma, a very particular character with a distinct aesthetics and behaviour, but behind which nobody knows who is hiding, therefore a mask for the “common man” that could finally dissolve in the crowd; this also brings to the desire he expressed of transferring his artist name to someone else in due course: Andro Dadiani is thus on its way to become a collective

⁵⁹ As seen for example in the physical attacks directly led by priests on a small group of people attempting to celebrate the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia on May 17th, 2013.

⁶⁰ The topic is very complex and multifaceted and deserves further research and a separate dissertation, though of course the theme of queerness was transversal and omnipresent during all my research, and is a subtext to all the works presented in this essay.

⁶¹ <https://androdadiani.wordpress.com/2021/08/25/andro-dadiani-olis-interviews/> (last accessed: 11/09/2022).

name. Andro better specifies this in an interview⁶² he gave for a documentary about his work:

“If art is only there to reflect the reality like a mirror, and there is nobody creating ideas and types of a new life, who can shift the boundaries of liberty beyond their current point? [...] This is the time not for emotional honesty, but for producing rational, critical, often merciless discourses - a time of overcoming own truth and own taste, in my view, if our goal is to return to art its role, and to avoid being attached to the present and the past for much longer. I will also add that I am far from the idea of art being there to raise an individual, and of artists being designated with some sort of divine mandate. To the contrary, I see the artistic process as one of *removing an individual* [emphasis is mine] from universal and damaged morals, and shaping a rational, personal thought in them.”

In the same interview, he also gave an interesting articulation of his choice of wearing a mask and hiding behind an invented name:

“In an interview from 2018 I introduce myself by saying: "I am Andro Dadiani, because I am unable of being myself." It is 2021 now, and I would begin speaking about myself with the same words. Due to the mask I have to keep on while standing in front of you, an appearance forced by an inescapable necessity, rather than one that is a part of a provocative image. My orientation has served as one of the principal tools of my oppression throughout life. The things I have wanted to discuss, but could not openly talk about, accumulated over time, leading to my adoption of the mask as an element in self-censorship - the face of Andro Dadiani can now only represent his attitudes toward the outside environment. Unfortunately, the discussion of human rights and liberation around us is framed not as a human need, but as

⁶² Published on Instagram on 17/04/2022: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CccRu0QFLVc/> (last accessed: 11/09/2022).

a liberal, Western, imported product - which results in a cheapening of values and an emergence of mutual distance and fear in society - a natural outcome toward the alien "other". Inadvertently of me, I have been labelled an alien and a sexual citizen, which deprives me of the right of leading a common life. In their observation of my politicised life, everyone has forgotten that I am a human, and not a battlefield, or a weapon of politics.”

This constitutes a clear exemplification of the tactical behaviour as described by Michel De Certeau (2001, 69 ss.), a form of response to an unbearable and overpowering situation that cunningly plays with the codes of this situation to create a space for freedom: in this way, what can be seen as a necessary form of self-censorship dictated by personal safety issues, is also a way to bypass the oppressive environment. Tactics are calculated actions who do not own a proper place, but are forced to operate in an imposed and heteronormate space and context. Their field of action is time, for they are tightly bound to the occasion, to the quick possibility of making use of a flaw in the oppressive environment to maintain a space of autonomy.

4.5 the time has come for us to become madmen in your chain: bridging interpersonal borders in the work of Material Hunters⁶³

⁶³ Material Hunters started as a research group of five young architects and artists in 2015 in Tbilisi. At that time, their main focus was exploring different spaces and environments throughout Georgia, through architectural and artistic approach, hunting for any kind of material that spoke to them about certain auras and feeling, that spaces, they believe, do have. Since 2018 their main working field in art is performance. Their first performance was “I dedicate this jump to love” at Tbilisi art fair (2018) (duration 5hrs), after they did the performances called “show” (2019) and “is that all there is” (musical performance) (2021) at MAUDI Art Space. On December 31st, 2021 they did a performance called “holy slip” at Haraki theatre (duration 10hrs). Performance seems to them the purest and sharpest medium in the contemporary art world, employing least materials (one’s own body/mind/soul): for you are present in the moment of creation with the audience and beyond cultural enclosures, you carry on a real attempt to operate on a metaphysical level, being completely disarmed, sharing your raw / real-time experiences. <https://www.facebook.com/materialhunters/>; <https://www.instagram.com/materialhunters/> (last accessed: 12/09/2022).

on May 1st, 2022, in the main room at Untitled Tbilisi, five white tables with chairs. for one hour, the five performers sit, holding a conversation with their mothers.



photo 4.32: image used by Material Hunters to promote the performance *SIT*.

the house in Napetvrebi, 15 minutes by car from Tbilisi, is entirely covered in white fabric. as you enter, two black dogs are in a little room on the left, the entrance is closed by a glass panel. a voice is heard. looking through the keyhole of the next door, you can see one of the performers (Mariam Karchkhadze) reading in front of a microphone, repeating the instructions to reach the third floor, strongly asking to pay attention. on the back of the house, a metal ladder, leaning on the wall and held in place by straps, leads you to the third floor. you enter through a hole in the wall. inside, on a table, are several objects: clothes, shoes, knives. in the corner, sitting on a chair, a performer (Rezi Gvaramadze) is quietly singing out his own poems, some in English and some in Georgian language, printed on a stack of a4 white paper. the terrace outside is filled with an inflatable, transparent

balloon. on the second floor, a performer (Giorgi Namgaladze) stands next to a table where the family albums and photos of the performers are spread. he shows the photos and talks with the audience.

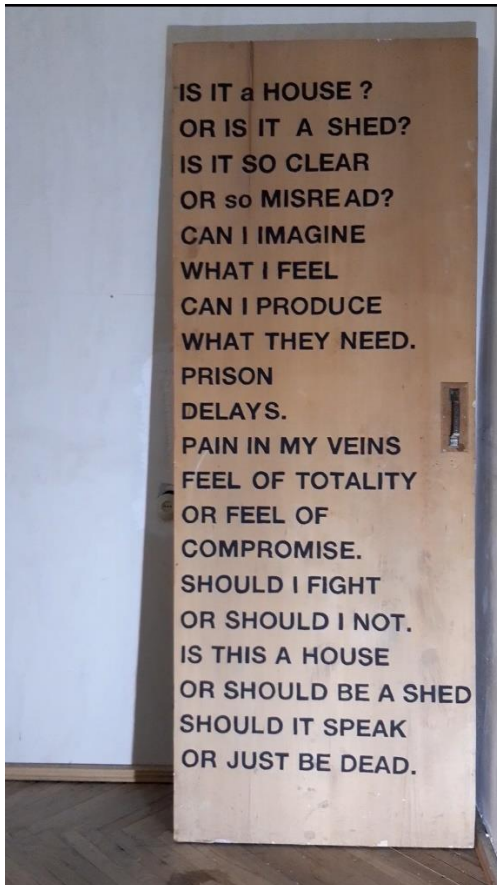


photo 4.33-4.34: details of the installation at the house in Napetvrebi, photos taken by the author.

The first performance described was part of a one-week performance art festival I have curated at Untitled Tbilisi at the end of April, 2022. To the participating artists, I gave the topic of borders, that they could address in different ways, highlighting political or personal meanings, or any combination of the two. The performance *SIT* took part on the last day, and it was a reflection about interpersonal borders, in particular

those between different generations. As the performers themselves described the action in a presentation text:

“In the main room, there will be five tables and ten chairs for participants. Performers face to face with their Mothers will sit at the tables and try to talk about what is happening, about art, what they are trying to do, and where all their roads go. In a limited time, participants will try to re-evaluate the concept of borders in human communication in the most intimate and humble form.” (01/05/2022).

While the performance was going on, with voices overlapping and the audience moving around, a deeply emotional atmosphere was created almost immediately, even though it was possible to catch only fragments of words and discourses, and not every person in the room was able to understand Georgian language.

The second performance took place on May, 28th and it was a reflection on what ultimately constitutes a home, presented by an installation (activated by performance) that encompassed the entire building, reducing it to the essential, to the minimum, trying to investigate memory as it constructs itself and accumulates in a lived space. The starting point of the work was the fact that two members of the group began living together after 2020 pandemics. As they described the idea:

"It's been a year since circumstances turned in the way that two lonesome humans became cohabitants. House that existed before those two, objects that simply were and are there where they are, in our mind cannot describe what we call home. For the exhibition house will be wrapped, sliced, inflated and

hidden away, in an attempt to explain its metaphysics-place where real cohabitation takes place.

Overall exposition will be dedicated to this experience of living together, meaning of home and attempting to hide it away.

How long does it take to be somewhere to call it a home? What characteristics make it possible to call it a home? How living in a four walls should be to call it cohabitation? How is it possible that living together can be captured on the spot, physically? What is the ethics of living together? What do humans have in common and how can a house represent itself and represent humans living in it?" (Instagram post published on May, 27th, 2022).

What is interesting in both performances is the focus on dialogue and on the (re)building of interpersonal relations as a tactical response to a difficult context, where almost twenty years of neoliberalistic policies have produced atomisation and fragmentation in the society (Jones, 2013, 9 ss.). Very important is also the emphasis on the creation of a dialogue between generations, as a way to create a communication with the past, the access to which has been blocked by the voluntary creation, in the political and public discourse, of the image of the Soviet experience as the source of all evils in Georgian society (often described as being 70 years backwards in the process of modernisation, while the Soviet experience is presented as something that has to be forgotten and not discussed, a sort of "Dark Ages" which drew Georgia away from its natural position in the Western and European "family"; De Leonardis, 2016, 27 ss.; see also Bendtsen Gotfredsen, 2014, 247 ss., where the author argues about the memories and life experiences belonging to the older generations, which, being mostly connected with the refused and silenced Soviet past and with the "dark 90ies", are rendered void and devalued in the public and political discourse after the 2003 Rose

Revolution, as a past that means nothing and has to be cancelled). Creating opportunities for dialogue between people from different generations can be said to constitute thus a form of decolonial practice, and re-appropriation of experience through art, a way to confront the troubled past and present in order to have the possibility to develop a hope for the future: trying to understand and discover the past and the memory in their multifaceted appearance, rather than erasing them and covering them with a convenient and flexible mask (see Tlostanova, 2017 and 2018). As the artists go on in defining the concept of the work, they also clarify what is their point on the issue of addressing the troubled present, and what is for them the role of art in this process:

“What is art? What do we call performance? Should we be open to the happenings and stories around us (outside)? Or should we try to see the cause and resolution of the problems within human nature, within the core of our relations with each other? We should catch the moment of free individual productive potency to generate the creative powers of the social. Art as a creative power should revolutionize all the structures formed as a duty and find the ways to reconsider the potential of creative powers inside every human.” (01/05/2022).

Art has thus for Material Hunters the task of re-creating the possibilities for living together in the society, and performance becomes then a mirroring instrument, which reduces all the simulation to nothing and embarks in the analysis of reality in itself, where all the actions are true and sharp:

“What do we call performing? We call it reduction. Reduction of doing, reduction of simulation, reduction of performing itself. Trying to analyse real-

life purity, shift the borders of understanding art, as not doing extraordinary, but simple and sharp. There are no details to catch up, there is nothing separate from the whole, but the reality with its pure form (reality in its pure form we believe is atomic-irreducible). The Act and its form is the way in which the whole is hidden by exploiting the nature of the individual parts, rather than their position, action or number. Only by expanding the perception and approach to art, and its role, is it possible to realize and shape its real essence. Not the ideas, not the forms but the intensity of doing, the intensity of thought and the moment of understanding is the main thing for art to be shared.

What do we call performing? Trying to disappear. Not to hide, but *to sit and think about the long-range definition of love*. [emphasis is mine]" (01/05/2022).

Love, in its broadest meaning, is a central topic in both the performances. The decomposed house, reduced to a minimum in order to highlight the essential knot of feelings, memories and emotions that constitute the substance of the living together, creates the space for the analysis of a concrete cohabitation between two people and how it unfolded through time and space. A time that is both the past, the present and the future, bringing together the life experience of two people who grew up in Georgia after the fall of the Soviet Union. It is a very personal take on the importance of taking care of interpersonal relationships (and of the relationship with the lived environment) in the process of creating hope for the future. I will close now this paragraph with two of Rezi Gvaramadze's poems that he sang during the performance:

To the weather
To the senses

If I'm used to be broken
My sort of spirit

Directly through me.
Pitching
And snoring.
Soothe me with your whispers
With your body heat.
I hear you
Hear your broken breath
On my plain red leaves.
For the weather.
For our liquid senses.
Direct flows in indirect dimensions
Indirect me and you for a few
Minutes and I was thinking about
This place.
Broken bones, barrels and guns,
Fluids are the way of getting to see
Love and croustades.
Love you!
Praise the boy and Lord!
Measuring tools of our living
Conditions,
Architecture!
Oh, the Lord!
Oh, the me!
Come to me,
Prove my heart to your beats –
Not the beaming mornings.
Not the starry nights.
Nor the revolution.
Not the death
Nor the pupping.
Only the love and fears in
That days when we google for
Something new,
Something special.
Witnesses say that we
Are in the middle of an investigation.
Into my house I think I'm a bit off.

Will brace some kind of filthiness.
If water inside is
Dark
I'll challenge the destination
And screw hell as romance.
Like warrior of touches,
And views.
I say:
Fishermen must die!
Recent extremes of myself should
Redictate morning beams
And kiss purple haze
Inside of every note
Of these voices around our deadly margins.

When I'm straight outta my head.
My extinction is broken
My words are sewing, seeking to the point.
Praise the Me!
My heads in the air
I'm real!
My lies are flows of cosmic Godness
I'm real!
Gene and I will see kids on that
Skeptical scripts
Of surrounding sorrows.
I'm real!
Praise the me!
Praise the Lord!
Shear pains,
Share pants,
Praise the wound.

4.6 *the changing of the colour: to kill the past in order to forgive it, in the work of Giorgi Rodionov*⁶⁴

a circle of bricks on the wooden floor, still partially wet from the day before when we tried to flood the room for the installation. two bricks, then two bricks, then other two bricks. the exact space for the people from the audience to stand on them. in the middle, the old carpet with its stains and cuts, green leaves and branches on the dusty brown-

⁶⁴ Giorgi Rodionov is a Tbilisi-based artist and curator focused on social and political stories that change eras. Having grown up in a post-Soviet country, his interest in social structures and identities grew a lot. After graduating in journalism, he moved to Europe and continued studies in contemporary arts.

Most of Giorgi's works are based on his researches that are later transformed into installation, performance, participative art, books or other different media. His artistic activity list includes many exhibitions in different European countries and Georgia, as well as personal projects published in different media. Giorgi founded in 2019 an art space called Untitled Tbilisi, which aims to bring artists from South Caucasus together to talk about social and political issues in the region and to promote queer and minorities' rights. <https://www.instagram.com/giorgi.rodionov/> (last accessed: 12/09/2022).

yellow fabric. a glass jug filled with red wine and an empty glass. soft, warm light is coming from the ceiling, illuminating only the carpet, which is covered in seeds. the young man is kneeling down in the middle, wearing only black underwear, raw emotions passing on his face, tears. a sound is heard, scratching and glissando and music fragments, then silence. he pours wine in the glass and drinks. the wine would not go down his throat. overflowing from his lips, it runs down all over his body and on the carpet. changing the colour. after seven minutes and ten seconds, the sound starts again. the man is now standing, he repeats the action until the jug is empty, slowly moving in circle, looking in the eyes of the people. the jug and the glass fall on the carpet and he leaves. days and weeks later, the seeds start to grow wheat grass on the carpet.





photo 4.35-4.36-4.37-4.38: details of the carpet before the performance *peristsvaleba/710* by Giorgi Rodionov on December 26th, 2021, immediately after it, and three weeks after it; photos shot by the author.

The title of this performance, presented at Untitled Tbilisi (the art space founded by Giorgi Rodionov and located in his former family house in Isani district) on the evening of December, 26th 2021, is the Georgian word ფერისცვალება (*peristsvaleba*), which literally means *transformation, transfiguration*, while the number 710 refers to the number of days in which Giorgi lived within the Soviet Union, before its fall on 26th December, 1991. The performance, and the installation which accompanies it, work on multiple levels of symbolism and meaning, as an art-based instrument to confront the personal past, which is inseparable from the collective experience, with the condition of trauma and vulnerability that the generation of Georgians born on the verge of this drastic change had to face, starting from the experience with their families. As specified in the text presenting the performance:

“On 26th of December the world counts the 30 years’ anniversary of the last day of the Soviet Union. *Peristsvaleba/710* is a response to the confusion and traumas experienced by our families or societies caused by South Caucasus’s constant mutation over the last three decades without any clear idea of the future. It is trying to transform the past into the birth of new life instead of imagining it has never happened.

How do we deal with the trauma of being vulnerable while just starting a new life? The total collapse of the social structure and the confusion regarding the future utopias or the hopes for even the next day, brought a lot of families into the troubling present. The ones who could not respond to the radical changes tried to find the ways to alternative realities.

The new generation born in the 1990s, that had to play the role of the sign of a brighter future, was left alone in their houses with darkness and constant drama.” (Instagram post published on January 6th, 2022).

The difficult history of Giorgi’s family and his troubled relationship with his father (which brought, as a side effect, his decision to dismiss his family surname, except on the official documents, and assume instead the surname of his grandmother, who is also the one who inspired him to become an artist) are the starting point of this work, a decision to definitively confront the remains of the past, to let it die and decay in order to grow something new out of it. This is where the carpet comes into play, the old carpet which used to hang from the wall in the house which is now *Untitled Tbilisi*, an affective object (Navaro-Yashin, 2009) which carries in itself memories of violence, of a traumatic life condition in a traumatic time of societal change. The work comes to be also a take on how family (which is supposed to be a safe space) and society can transform into oppressive structures that violently impose silence, codified behaviour and the creation of a deceptive façade of well-being to mask the reality underneath, a reality of which one is not supposed to speak, with anyone (again, also a repetition of the curtain that has been imposed to erase the Soviet past from the public discourse)⁶⁵:

“So when I took my father from the hospital, dead, everybody was telling me that you should do this, you should do that, so even after he died he continued

⁶⁵ Against the imposed silence see for example Tamara Hundorova (2016, 94): “the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist system is [...] increasingly conceptualised as a trauma, which, on the one hand, erases memories of the totalitarian past and which, on the other, has a social and cultural impact, manifesting itself in the body, language and subjectivities of future generations. Studies of trauma suggest that trauma has to be thought and talked through, otherwise it transforms into a spectre – one that pursues, provoking excessive behaviour and melancholy.”

pressuring me...Because, again, it's not only him, it's just, like, the image of our society right here, right now. As a kid, like 5-years-old Gio, when I saw the knife floating in front of my eyes, and I, for the first time, I've promised my father «I would never take care of you, it doesn't matter how horrible troubles you have, if you don't stop now», and he didn't stop for, like, next 13 years. So, like, I almost forgot, I almost got rid of everything, I fought a lot to not care about him, both mentally but also with the society...But there was still one thing in my family apartment left that reminded me the horrible stories from my childhood. There was a carpet, hanging proudly on the wall, and it had, like, the cuts with the knife and the bloodstains, and all the drama was concentrated into one carpet...Because, I think it's the same here, we used to use carpets for sound isolation, so neighbours could not hear what's happening in our family. With this I really want to fight against the silence, against all the pressure from the society, that we should never talk about our families' traumas and we should never report that, or we should never talk to anybody about it because this is our family...So I wanted to destroy the carpet itself as the symbol of the silence but a carpet also that keeps all the traumas that are happening in our families. But nothing goes away, like, without any traces so I just didn't want to put it in the trash, because of many reasons...I just didn't want to burn it because it would just destroy the whole ecological system in Tbilisi, because it was produced in the Soviet times where it was still made by plastic. So instead I decided to use the trauma, use the history as the start of something new. This is my dream, that, like, I forget everything in my life...Then I become a god...But this is impossible as human being, so I think we need to learn how we deal with traumas, how we deal with our personal histories, and how we build something out of it. So I decided to make the performance but also plant the wheat grass seeds, and this will grow, and the roots of the grass will destroy or will find the new start of the life inside our history, so the roots will do the job of getting rid of the carpet." (speech

held after the repetition of the performance in Baku, Azerbaijan, on May, 21st, 2022)⁶⁶.

The carpet was thus taking over personified characteristics and it embodied both forced silence and violence, a personal and collective history of trauma, as repeated in the similar stories of other families in the time after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The wine is a direct reference to the alcoholic habits of the father, and it is thus refused, but in its overflowing back out of the mouth it is also a substance that changes the colour of the body. Here we can trace a connection with the specific choice of the title of the performance: *peristsvaleba* is a reference to the Orthodox feast of the Transfiguration (which, in the calendar followed by the Orthodox Church, falls on August, 19th), related to the biblical event (Matthew 17, 1-8; Mark 9, 2-8; Luke 9, 28-36) in which Jesus is said to change his appearance and the colour of his clothes and body, and which is also associated to an idea of the changing of the season and therefore to a change in the colours of the natural elements⁶⁷; at the same time, Giorgi mentioned also the importance attributed to the colours by the political ideologies, and in this sense the colour shifting is also a reference to the major political change represented by the fall of the Soviet Union, and as well an allusion to the polarised political situation of the present in Georgia. Red wine running down the breast and the body is also reminding of the aesthetics of the iconic movie *The Color of Pomegranates* by Sergej

⁶⁶ I will analyse at the end of this paragraph how the performance partially changed its meaning and its focus, by being repeated in a different place and with a different carpet; in particular, it shifted from a very personal level, of a personal purifying ritual, to a collective level of acting as a symbol for people who find themselves trapped in similar situations.

⁶⁷ This connection has been reported by all the artists I have been working with in Tbilisi, but I was not able to find a specific reference to this fact in the literature.

Parajanov and of the scene where an androgynous figure dressed in green and wearing a crown of flowers and green leaves (possibly a muse, but definitely embodying multiple meanings) pours an amphora of red wine on the exposed breast of the white-dressed poet, kneeling down beside them (possibly a metaphor of poetic inspiration but in itself open to multiple interpretations) (Steffen, 2013, 114 ss.).

As previously anticipated, this performance was repeated on May, 21st 2022 in Baku, Azerbaijan, during InVisible Festival at Salaam Cinema Baku, which, as explained in chapter 1, this year had as a topic the question “Do we need to decolonise ourselves?”. The performance was repeated in a place that was much less charged with personal memories and emotions, and used a different carpet as the central object of the piece. This brought a change in the interpretation of the performance, both for the artist and for the members of the audience who saw both replicas of the work: its focus turned somewhat outside, in a way that the new performance felt as addressing other people much more than addressing oneself; in a way, this is connected to the fact that the work on the personal traumatic memory was already completed, and in itself it could not be repeated. The action became then free to address the personal experience of others and it became an invitation to face the troubled past (Tlostanova, 2017 and 2018) and the affective entanglements of state, family and society (Laszczkowski, Reeves, 2015, 1), let them decay and become fresh soil to grow a new present and future. This is even more relevant if we consider that the performance in Baku was carried out at the end of a three-day workshop with local young people, which explored personal histories of the participants and brought as a result an installation where passport-size photos of the workshop participants and of the other artists,

collaborators and visitors of the festival were nailed upon half-split pomegranates and attached to a wall to form a sort of canvas, a direct reference to the story of the pomegranates gifted to Stalin as reported by Frederiksen (2014, 89). Over the one-month long exhibition following the closure of the festival, the pomegranates, as the original ones of the story, would rot and dry, a metaphor of (creative) decay threatening and overcoming supposedly timeless ideologies, but also the apparent timelessness of a troubled present and of oppressive superstructures.

4.7 *praise the wound*: notes of production

our small planet

she's pale dizzy
holding her hand in the other
hand

let her alone

she's turning the colours

let her alone
let her alone

Ideal Unsee. Floor. Silicone under the floor, concrete under the silicone, iron under the concrete, air under the iron, chandelier in the air, crystal under the chandelier, bulb under the crystal, dead midges under the bulb. Air under dead midges, table under air. Cup on the table, cup stain. The shadow of the cup. Dark tablecloth-

If there is no relief
there has been no tragedy
So
don't worry

No, of course,
the war is not over,
so do not beware of the
peace.

once I had a dream
I was inside of my
mouth

earthquake
march
grabbing
arched body

falling
collapsing
instability
the military sign for shooting

look at the rose I could not
give you

how beautiful it is

pain in my veins
feel of totality
or feel of compromise.
should I fight
or should I not.

is this a house
or should be a shed
should it speak
or just be dead.

the roots of the grass
will destroy

or will find the new start
of the life

inside our history

praise the wound

photo 4.39-4.40-4.41-4.42-4.43-4.44-4.45-4.46-4.47-4.48: titles of the different sections of the movie.

The movie⁶⁸ unfolds through the landscape of performances mentioned in the previous paragraphs and in the places described in chapter 3. Through the whole research period I have been collecting visual and aural shards, together with a very diverse amount of texts related to the performances or to the places investigated, and for this reason I have decided, on one side, to treat the whole movie as a performance in itself, trying to work on inducing the audience in a liminal experience (following the example of Ruth Jones mentioned in chapter 2; Jones,

⁶⁸ The movie can be viewed at the following link: <https://youtu.be/v0DXcOf7ZRU>

R., 2013); on the other side, I thought it could be interesting to construct the movie as an accumulation of the same text collected during the research. For this purpose, I have thus considered as text, fragments of interviews, poetry, performance concepts or scripts, but also the text which is embedded in sound, in the words that are sung in different parts of the movie and that often act as the guiding force in constructing the meaning of a section. The movie can therefore be looked at, but also “read”, and texts are inserted into signs dividing the film into “chapters” and resembling of the signs once used in silent movies, that I have reproduced at the beginning of this paragraph, and in the sound composition, requiring a specific attention to the aural side of this movie as the main guiding principle. A constant dialogue between the sound text and the written text is created.

The film opens with a sequence recorded inside the abandoned Treligora water reservoir: a person is using his headlight to create reflections and flashes in the darkness, throwing rocks into stagnant water pools, echoing voices are heard. *Our small planet* is the way in which one of the members of the group named the hill inside which the water reservoir is located, while sharing a photo in our Telegram group chat: I found it very fitting as a definition of the space inside the reservoir, which is in many ways a place detached from reality and the outside world; a place which in the continuation of the movie is revealed by the light that takes on a performative role in itself (in this specific section of the movie, but also in others, as I have employed repetition as a technique to create the sense of a movie that is also a performance).



photo 4.49: *our small planet*, the Treligora hill. Photo courtesy of: Anna Voyaka.

The movie goes on presenting an excerpt of Nino Davadze's performance, where the text is constituted by the words the artist repeats in her song, while the visuals present an extract of the video of the aquarium, the frying fish, the falling buildings. Video fragments of the performance *Unmemory* are then presented, partially overlapping and focusing on rendering an idea of the atmosphere of the performance and of its multiple layers of images, objects, signifiers and sound. The written texts presented here are part of the script of the performance. We move then to the Music and Drama State Theatre, where Natia Chikvaidze rents a dance studio where to train and work. A long sequence of a whirling dance is presented, deriving from the work we did together in preparation for the performance which follows, related to the dream in which Natia is speaking to a painting of Queen Tamar

of Georgia. A fragment of the whole performance is presented, where the performer creates a dialogue through light with the space, the painting, the audience, with what looks like a Morse code. The title of this section (*once I had a dream I was inside of my mouth*) is the brief recount of a dream that the artist actually made. The following section is dedicated to a part of the work created with Andro Dadiani: the title (*look at the rose I could not give you, how beautiful it is*) derives from the final line of one of his poems and creates a dialogue with the song accompanying the images, his execution of the traditional Megrelian song *მა სი ვარდი* (*ma si vardi*, I am your rose), that is in this case played in reverse as it is in the full version of the work, to create a sense of estrangement and of time reversing. A song that talks about the broken love that is at the centre of the performance:

მა სი ვარდი თიშენ მერჩი
 ბაღის ოკო დორგი-კონი
 თინა დღასუ ვახომუდუ,
 მა სი ქოგიორდი-კონი...

I gave you the rose because
 You had to plant it in the garden
 It would never wither
 If you'd love me

ააბა რერო ორუდილო რანინა
 ააბა რერო ორუდილო რანინადა

Aba reeo orudilo raninaa
 Aba rero orudilo
 Raninada

ირო თისი ვოცადუდი
 სქან ხოლოსუ ვორდი-კონი
 უბედურქუ ვეპი-კო დო
 ბედნიერქუ იპი-კონი...

I always tried
 To be beside you
 To not to be unhappy
 And to be happy

ააბა რერო ორუდილო რანინა
 ააბა რერო ორუდილო რანინადა

Aba reeo orudilo raninaa
 Aba rero orudilo
 Raninada

ჩემი გური სი დოვილი	You killed my heart
ანწი ესუ მუ ოხვარუ	What will heal it?!
ღურელ გურიშ გაცოცხლება	I cannot make a dead heart alive
ვეშემლებუ, ვარუ, ვარუ	I cannot, no, no
ააბა რერო ორუდილო რანინა	Aba reeo orudilo raninaa
ააბა რერო ორუდილო რანინადა	Aba rero orudilo Raninada

The following section is dedicated to the performance that Material Hunters created together with an installation encompassing the entire house in Napetvrebi, on May, 28th 2022. A low-quality cell phone video presents a fragmented vision of the performance and of the audience interacting with the installation, focusing on circular movements and repetition, while the meaning is here constructed in the words sung by one of the performers as reproduced in the sound recording accompanying this section of the movie. The final section is dedicated to Untitled Tbilisi and to the performance by Giorgi Rodionov: the visuals are an extract of the integral video of the work I have recorded and edited, and include a section dedicated to how the carpet installation evolved in the weeks after the performance, with the wheat grass growing and covering the carpet itself. *praise the wound* is the title I have chosen to give to this movie: the sentence comes from one of the poems related to Material Hunters' performance, the text of which is presented within this chapter. It seems to me to be an interesting overarching concept and title to cover the experience of young performers who painstakingly use their art practice to make sense of their present and their past.

CONCLUSIONS

In this essay I have explored different aspects of the post-Soviet experience in Tbilisi, Georgia, focusing in particular on how this, and the relationship with the Soviet past, are processed in the work of local artists and cultural practitioners, who are actively engaged in a painstaking practice of gazing into the eyes of the past and of the present in order to make sense of them through their art practice, in order to recreate community bondages and make the future thinkable, also by applying a decolonial model to their everyday practice, with the aim to challenge static and stereotypical views of the Georgian context and society, both internal and external ones.

In chapter one, I have analysed the social, political and spatial transformations that Georgia and the city of Tbilisi have undergone as a result of the fall of the Soviet Union, focusing on how Georgian national identity has been (re)built in the official discourse (and in the perception of external observers such as the Western countries), on how these national narratives, which are also memory narratives, have been often flexible (Storm, 2019), have tried to mask frequent clashes with reality, and have been reflected in the transformations in the urban environment of Tbilisi (and other cities in the country). I have concluded the chapter by analysing how a decolonial practice can be fruitful in order to challenge the image of a somewhat doomed country, one that is forever in-between two worlds: not able to get rid of its uncomfortable Soviet past, but not “good enough” to fit entirely in the Western model of modernity, and for this reason forever left behind; an image which is both internal and external. According to postcolonial feminist scholar Madina Tlostanova (2017, 2018), contemporary

activist art is the most effective tool to carry on a decolonial agenda, and I have decided in this work to focus in particular on performance, due to my personal connection to the discipline, my desire to explore the inherently artistic qualities of anthropology, and my conviction that performance is a precious methodological tool for ethnographic research, due to its capacity to elicit certain hidden dynamics, interpretations and embodiments, and to grasp a sense of an atmosphere and of the entangled mass of personal and collective issues that would potentially escape the *thick description* as a “traditional” methodology for ethnographic research. What I have been trying to do in my fieldwork practice and in the present essay is to elaborate a personal ethnographic methodology and to underline the role of performance in building knowledge and ethnographic understanding.

In the second chapter, therefore, I have proceeded to elaborate on how the research methodology for this study has been constructed theoretically and step by step in the practice, by treating the fieldwork as the construction of performances, and performances, created with local artists, as a mirror through which to analyse the reality in which I was immersed and the specific topics that were urgent; a practice which brought as a result the present essay and a visual anthropology product in the form of a performance-based movie.

In the third chapter of this work, I have focused on the entanglement of place and memory, and on the creation of the interaction of performance with places, through the production and exchange of affect, while in the fourth chapter I have presented a portrait-like narration, conducted through performance works, of different creative tactics employed in the art practice of the artists I have collaborated with in order to make sense of their present and their past and to

challenge the ingrained image of Georgianness as described in chapter one, by questioning memory and recreating the relationship with their time. Each paragraph is dedicated to a different artist or artist group, presenting several performative works that have been created during my stay in Tbilisi, mostly in collaboration with me as per the research methodology presented in chapter two. We go from a call to peel away the layers of deceptive surfaces and to deconstruct memory manipulation in the political discourse, to an analysis of memory as a fragmented and unstable storage unit, ever subject to change, to the challenging of cultural archetypes by creating a non-heteronormative dialogue with them, to a process of cleaning the body and reconnecting with the natural environment as a tactic to clear the personal past, to the focus on recreating human relationships and on love in a society where years of aggressive neoliberalistic policies and the influx of Western cultural and life models have had a profoundly divisive effect, to conclude with an invitation to allow the traumatic past to rot and decay in order to become fresh soil out of which something new can grow.

Within this narration, I hope I have been able to demonstrate how performance can be an important methodological tool for ethnographic research (and how it can become my personal methodology of conducting ethnography), in particular how, starting from performance, it is possible to elicit and bring together an entangled amount of personal and collective issues, in the case of this study emotions, nihilism, perspectives on the future, hopelessness and, on the opposite, firm determination in building a future on the ashes of traumas, senses of waiting (for something or from nothing), as they have been captured and conveyed in the performative practice, in performances which hold in themselves a clump of anxieties, frustrations, affects, that come

together as in the texture of a fabric. I also tried to convey my personal take on the research context and on the energy and strength I have witnessed in the art and everyday practice of the many people I have encountered, which openly challenge the static and doomed view of the country, and the stereotypical or neo-colonialist paradigms with which it is still often described, by engaging in a constant production of sense of their present and past time. A personal and collective decolonial practice is not entirely free from internal contradictions and detours, as its own theoretical framework is not, but the experience I had in Tbilisi is that of a society where change is slowly running below the surface, a change that requires imagination, and will, and a painstaking effort and work, but that is nevertheless present. Personally, I take each of the portraits I have sketched, which have no claim of presenting a complete picture of the reality, as an invitation for further research on the topics highlighted, as well as for deepening the collaboration with the independent art scene in Tbilisi.

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