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## **Cultural Integration and Georgian Art**

### **Analyzing the life and works of Georgian Émigré Artists**

(in Austria, Germany, Switzerland)

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**Mzia Chikhradze, The Principle Investigator in the Project**

#### **Introduction**

In 2016, the group of scholars - Mzia Chikhradze, Ketevan Shavgulidze, Mariam Shergelashvili, Marita Sakhltkhutsishvili and Lana Karaia, started working on the project *Integration and Identity*. The main focus of the study is the life and works of Georgian émigré artists.

The topic in itself is of an acute actuality, as on one hand this phenomenon of Georgian art is still the arcane field of study and on the other hand, the role of Georgian émigré artists is immense in contributing to cultural integration of Georgia with the western culture and vice versa, i.e. in enriching and diversifying local art scene with the artistic values transmitted from the west.

There has been a tendency for artists to migrate from Georgia to the West since the 1990s. The age of these artists is different, as are the motivations and reasons for their departure. The economic reason for their departure abroad in the 1990s may be more

apparent than later, but the expansion of the creative or cognitive perspective, professional perfection, the desire to integrate into the contemporary Western art space are the main motivations for this process. This is confirmed by the professional achievements and successful artistic careers of many of them - participation in important international projects, biennials and exhibitions, evaluations of art critics, their pedagogical practice in various art schools in the West.

Despite the fact that the professional careers of Georgian émigré artists have been largely formed abroad and therefore, their works are the part of the international art scene, they are equally important for the development of local Georgian contemporary art as a whole. Furthermore, the comprehensive analyses of contemporary Georgian art today would be utterly impossible and incomplete without considering the role of these artists. In this regard, not only the aspects of their professional life, but also their values, attitudes, the *weltanschauung* and the social practices should be considered. Unfortunately, the information about these aspects has been very limited until now.

The study also touches the period of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when some Georgian artists travelled and worked abroad, mostly in Paris. Some of them have been sent by the state to study and gain experience (amongst them were David Kakabadze, Shalva Kikodze, Lado Gudiashvili, Mikhail Chiaureli, Elene Akhvlediani and Ketevan Maghalashvili), some of them left the country on their own initiative (i.e. Dimitri Shevardnadze and Ilia Zdanevich). Part of them returned back to their homeland later, while part remained in emigration (I. Zdanevich, M. Bilanishvili, etc). They altogether formed the generation, which played an extremely important role in shaping such a significant phenomenon of Georgian art as Georgian Modernism. Our interest towards this generation of artists has been determined by the fact, that this was the first and only important period before the 1990s, marked by the intensive migration flow of Georgian artists abroad. During the Soviet era, which arose shortly after the first émigré artists

went abroad (1921), the migration flow seized and consequently, the logical development of Georgian contemporary art, which started with Georgian Modernists (including those, who migrated in 1919 to Paris) has been interrupted under the pressure of Soviet censorship. And this was the situation until the 1980s, when the Soviet pressure has been loosened and the natural process of the development of Georgian contemporary art started to re-emerge again. This tendency increased in the 1990s, after Georgia gained back its independence. The possibility to cross the borders enabled Georgian artists to travel abroad, to become familiar with the artistic processes taking place in western contemporary art and to advance their careers in this new, vibrant cultural setting.

In order to get a deeper insight into the artists' migration process of the 1990s, which is the core of our research, we think it is necessary to juxtapose this phenomenon with the earlier 1920s period. This altogether will be analyzed in light of the accompanying aesthetic, mental and social aspects. As an outcome of the study, we will try to analyze Georgian émigré artist's values and worldviews and find answers to the following questions: How naturally did the émigré artists integrate into the western environment? What was their conscious attitude towards Georgian artistic traditions? And can we still consider their art as specifically "Georgian" in the circumstances of cultural integration with the western culture? As a result, the study will highlight the role of Georgian émigré artists in the formation of Georgian contemporary art, the artistic and aesthetic consequences of these processes, the interrelation between two intensive migration periods of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the 1990-2000s, and finally, the contribution of Georgian émigré artist into the Georgia's cultural integration with the West.

For the effective management of the research project, the preliminary list of countries, where Georgian émigré artists live and work has been elaborated by the scientific team. The list of artists has been drafted as well. On the first stage of the study the team of

scholars visited Austria, Germany and Switzerland to meet with émigré Georgian artists, to become familiar with their works, their lifestyle and provide onsite in-depth interviews and sociological survey.

After the interviewing process, the research team collected the full information on the main subject of the study, and particularly on the following questions: Why and in what conditions did Georgian artists migrate abroad? How did they manage to get established in a new, western environment? What kind of relations do they have with western artistic groups and do they still keep close ties with Georgian artistic circles? To what extent do they see themselves as the part of Georgian artistic milieu? How would they evaluate on-going artistic processes and particularly, what is their opinion on the issue of Georgia's integration into the international artistic scene? Based on the abovementioned information we came to certain conclusions, which will be discussed in the major part of the article below.

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### **Mariam Shergelashvili**

In order to get a deeper insight into the contemporary Georgian art processes, it is utterly important to discuss the works of those artists, which live and work abroad. By exploring the life and artworks of émigré artists, the project *Integration and Identity* sheds light on the latest development tendencies of contemporary Georgian art and enriches our limited knowledge about the life and works of Georgian émigré artists living in Europe and the USA.

At the first stage of the study the scholars' visits in Europe (Austria, Germany and Switzerland) were carried out. During these visits 31 respondents have been interviewed. The majority (18) lives in Germany, 9 in Austria and 4 in Switzerland. The

age of the interviewed artists varies between 64-25 years. Despite the age differences, the views of artists (working in different media and in various countries) on the migration topics are quite common: they often share the same views and experiences on the issues why did they leave the country and how did they establish themselves abroad. The analyses of common features and the identification of existing differences enables us to put forward the arguments on main factors, which gave impetus to the migration process, determined the circumstances for adaptation with new places and developed alternative ways for self-establishment. This in turn, enables us to speak about the importance of these processes for local Georgian context. The examination of these issues helps us to highlight émigré artists' opinions on Georgian cultural space and on such questions as: How émigré artists see Georgian artistic scene? To what extent do they perceive themselves as parts of this artistic phenomenon and how do they interact or feel the logical continuity with Georgia? While analysing this topic, the notion of "nationality" versus the universality of the language applied by the contemporary art acquires a broader meaning.

Georgia's cultural and political development has always been largely determined by the external factors: locally evolving culture was always influenced by various foreign civilizations through time. These influences though have been mingled and transformed into the authentic local phenomenon shaped in Georgian multicultural setting.

The openness to absorb new influences and interact with the rest of the world was determined by the geo-political location of the country on the crossroad. The mixture of oriental and western influences is clearly reflected in different fields of art, speaking to the fact that Georgian culture was historically an open transmitter and a melting pot of various influences throughout the centuries. Therefore, alongside with many other drawbacks and challenges, the 70 years of isolation brought by the Soviet Regime in

Georgia was the main factor, which hindered this process of continuous development. The Soviet ideology, censorship and the propaganda of the pseudo-national themes, obviously created obstacles for the natural development of Georgian art at the international level. The informational vacuum was one of the vital problems. The search for ways to overcome it, though chaotic and sporadic, was the inevitable reality for creative and intellectual individuals soon after the Soviet Union collapsed, the Iron Curtain was demolished and Georgia gained back its independence. Due to the free flow of the information, the opening of the borders dramatically changed the course of development. However, despite an overall positive effect, the situation can be considered as largely chaotic, fluctuating and unstable from the beginning of this process until today.

The insecurity of the political situation was especially evident in the 1990s. The Civil War, the economic turmoil and the subsequent negative effects had a destructive impact both on the society's social and cultural progress and on the personal development of individuals. This particular situation was a main motivation for many artists in the 90s to escape from this chaos and severe socio-political situation and search for the ways to advance their personal careers abroad.

The process of breaking through an Iron curtain started already in Soviet times and particularly, in the 80s by the underground groups in Russia. Georgian artists, who shared their views and ideas, also joined them. One of our respondents mentioned that: "*Perestroika* was already in progress. Nothing happened in Tbilisi, but did in Russia: The foreign diplomats, who were interested in art, started to go throughout the basements and underground studios. I was also there, visiting my friends quite often. There we met with cultural attaches, who helped artists to sell their works abroad, get in contact with gallery owners and frankly speaking, it was by then, when the door to the west opened for us". Stimulated by the existing negative situation and transformed

into the wave of protest and criticism, it was the quest for freedom and the desire for self-realization, which paved the way to the development of latest Georgian art. At the same time, the foundation for the first flow of the migration was formed. The part of the respondents of this particular study left the country in the 1990s.

After the opening of the borders, artists' migration became an on-going process. The motivation for further development and self-establishment is the key factor, which in turn, is enhanced by the fluctuating and fragile economic and political situation in their home country. The next migration stage in the 2000s is obviously connected with the circumstances of 2008 August war and the subsequent social background. This stage is followed by another flow in 2010, when number of young artist left Georgia for educational reasons to study abroad or participate in mobility and exchange programs. To sum up, the key factor stimulating the migration was the quest for the professional development and self-establishment, which occasionally was determined by the existing unfavourable situation, the weaknesses of the educational system and most importantly, the unstable socio-economic situation in Georgia.

There are some cases, when a decision to leave the home country was determined by personal factors. There were groups, which members left the country together (i.e. *The Wet Circle*). The members of these groups now act separately on the international art scene. Occasionally, the decisions were driven by important international contacts or network opportunities. i.e. the visit of Michelangelo Pistoletto became a decisive factor for some Georgian artists, while in the case of *The Wet Circle* professional contacts in Switzerland and Netherlands (Koka Ramishvili acted as a middle person) were the reasons for their decision to leave.

The majority of surveyed artists received their higher education in Tbilisi State Academy of Arts, however, there are some, who did not graduate the academy and continued their studies abroad. In this process, some changed their profile, individual

style and working medium. Some even shifted from art to the neighbouring professions like i.e. conservation.

The role of the artist and the academic education of the artist were other important topics discussed with the émigré artists. For the majority of them the higher education and the process of obtaining the academic degree is not just seen as the direct path to gain knowledge, but rather as a way for socializing, finding contacts and sharing ideas.

Their role as teachers enrolled in the educational process is another important sphere, where the majority of the surveyed artists work or sees themselves in future. Moreover, they perceive it as a thread, which could reconnect them with Georgia. The majority of the émigré artists do not consider returning back for permanent living, the sharing of their experiences through the participation in different educational programs and projects is assumed as a way to re-join with friends, their homeland and even as a commitment to Georgia. This view on artist's role and function is widespread amongst the émigré artists. Each of them speaks differently, but with equal importance, about the role of art and, consequently, the artist, which is directly related to the development of society and the formation of public opinion. Despite the critical views and eclectic multi-discursive and controversial ideas, the processes taking place in the contemporary art have an immense impact on the general development of the society. This is clearly seen in the common views expressed by the respondents: the artists, reflecting on the social or political issues, or those more of a distant poetic visions, all share the views on the power possessed by the artistic individuals, as they often precede their time or provoke critical thinking among the public by offering different viewpoints and alternative perspectives on the processes and events happening around: "Art translates the discussion into the artistic language and means. Life, which is vanity, is filled with art and culture, and the artist has a great importance in this."– says one of our respondents. Thoughts embodied in different artistic mediums and with any



attitudes are gestures towards dialogues. The function of art that is in a state of chaos today often creates this very field of conversation, be it a perversive monologue, egocentric expression, political gesture or philosophical statement – it is targeted towards active audience and thinking. The artists working outside of Georgia with different views, styles and handwriting also speak about the relationship between art, thinking and everyday reality. Alongside with challenges, the life abroad is associated with freedom of thoughts and the abundance of opportunities. At the same time, the artists, which tend to be free thinkers, are always in conflict with the existing setting. “The artist should always be opposing the mainstream, but must remain an aesthete” - said one of our respondents, “This world is dreadful enough not to make it even uglier and therefore, the artist must create a critical beauty”. “A Critical beauty” is a fascinating term, which in the highly commercial and design-oriented environment is often undermined. When analysing the role and power of an artist, respondents put forward critical views on the contemporary artistic processes, which are seen as chaotic and eclectic, coping with the commercial demand and often drained from values, but still, very important for the continuity of the development. “Today the situation in art is very unclear” - one of our respondents said, “But still, artists have the possibility to say anything they want, anywhere and anytime they feel it is needed. This is the freedom and at the same time the knowledge, where to say what. The art is always developing”.

It is also noteworthy to discuss the path and the process of self-development through which Georgian émigré artists went during these years. As it was mentioned above, the reasons to leave the country were different for each age category. Amongst these: the willingness for individual development, search for the freedom of expression, new opportunities for self-realization, intellectual background or promising contacts – all are the key motivating factors revealed during the interviews with various émigré artists in different countries.

Some of the respondents said that, they were already established artists in Georgia before they left. That time they observed fascinating tendencies evolving in electronic music or fashion there. Despite that, they decided to leave the country and follow their longing for something new. The process of self-establishment in a new socio-cultural reality, however, was not an easy path to go through. The majority of émigré artists talk frankly about these difficulties faced in this progress. The success was achieved thanks to the artists' restless work and great efforts. Among the main problems in the process of integration were the language barriers and the issues around the community building and the adaptation in a completely new world. The financial problems were also equally important, as working on parallel projects and finding the additional sources of income was an indispensable part of émigré artists' lives. The process of self-establishment and self-realization are linked with the inner explorations, which progressed along the course of adaptation with a new setting. The memories on the first years of migration vary from artist to artist: Some do not speak about the difficulties and recall this phase of their life as a positive experience and the "adventure". Nevertheless, for others, it was more "a period of hardship, worth to be forgotten". The majority of surveyed artists are neutral to these obstacles met during the first period of migration, as in their opinion these challenges, which are already over, urged them and acted as creative impulses to their careers.

The émigré artists' perception of Georgia is another issue worth mentioning: Is it just a local space or a codified, identifying cultural environment for them? By opposing these two perceptions, the topic of national identity in the context of contemporary art arises. What does the globalism or the international narrative mean for the dominant visual categories, which define the contemporary art? Though eclectic and subjective, different contexts and discourses, (which have been discussed above when we spoke concerning the role of the artist), act as inspirations for these international artistic processes. In this

respect, “Georgianness” with its exotic flavour and the subsequent socio-economic and political background contains the threat to be “victimized” on the international art scene. The majority of respondents however do not favour the idea of exoticism to be emphasized in order to attract the international audience. Such attitude in turn, shows the high level of responsibility of émigré artists to put forward the objective rethinking of the past and their ability to observe and analyse the local in a global context. Such “transit openness” indicates on attempts at dialogue, the effort to explore national identity and the synthesis of universal values.

For émigré artists working in different media (video, performance, installation, painting, photography and cinema) Georgia is perceived as a hidden, inner bond, an inevitable factor, and a continuous source for inspiration and exploration. This is how Georgia becomes a cultural code, while “Georgianness” is transformed into an identifying trait, which is further unleashed in various artistic forms in accordance with the media, style and objectives of the artist. This position occupied by the émigré artists could be determined as a state of distant observation, which is only possible through the separation from the everyday routine and rhythm of the home country. Detachment, doubling of personality and nostalgia are those feelings which hidden or directly shown, are clearly reflected in the works of émigré artists. The process of self-establishment in a foreign cultural area and in a new setting forced them to go back to their identity and look for a unique language for their art. While overcoming the verbal and communication barriers, the language itself became a symbolic-metaphoric mean of a great importance: “Time of individual languages is over,”- one of our respondents said, “Now everything is up to the communication. The contemporary humans understand the semantic of signs, which is transformed into the language. The communication is being held at different levels. And this is a mainstream now. Everything is messed up. The language works and you can talk about everything by

applying the language which is the best to express your thoughts. Thus, the language became an inter-subjective phenomenon, a trait upon which Modernism was often criticized." Thus inter-subjectivity, so characteristic of the aesthetic and conceptual understanding of visual art today, developed impersonal origins in the bosom of Modernism. It seems though today's ideology still differs from the Modernist one, because it is often based on the personal, private experiences, observations and reflects the inner state of the artist. The contemporary art today doesn't follow any stable or singular model. "The story seen from the individual viewpoint is lost". And in this dispersed and at the same time collective epoch, in a vibrant setting with dynamic informational exchange "the self-representation doesn't offer anything fundamentally new, but rather implies just a re-examination of the already existing, yet shown in a new form." The question what does it mean to be a "Georgian artist" and what's the sense behind the term "émigré artist" is also an important topic to be addressed in our study. For some of the interviewed artists it doesn't imply any meaning, as the contemporary art develops globally. However, it is noteworthy to examine to what extent the émigré artists perceive themselves as parts of the Georgian art scene? Two main attitudes have been revealed during the interviews – On one hand, we come across an absolute denial and detachment from Georgian roots, which positions the artist as a world citizen; On the other hand, we see a great emphasis on a cultural identity, which makes artists different and unique on the contemporary art scene. For some of them this is the doubling of personality, which is a difficult process, though it stimulates creative artistic practices. "The main advantage is to look at yourself from another perspective, to leave your comfort zone and become a stranger. It involves some risk factors, which in turn, helps you to evolve further"- said one of the interviewed artists.

The advancement and the creative explorations through the participation in different projects and sometimes also shifting from one artistic medium to another are the major factor for émigré artists. Some of them have achieved significant success (i.e. three of the interviewed artists have participated in the Venice Biennale, others have been working with such important exhibition spaces as Kunsthalle Wien, Documenta, MOMA Projects, Vienna Secession, Tate Modern, Lost gallery, Hamburger Bahnhof). The self-realization on the other hand is not just associated with a successful career, but rather with a general creative process of exploration, which in Georgian local contexts would be impossible. The main advantage of working abroad is this openness and the global scope. The artists are quite cautious about working with the commercial galleries. They avoid contacts, or work without contracts with these institutions. The main partner galleries in Austria, Switzerland and Germany are: Micky Shubert; Spruth Magers; Kaufmann Repetto; Frewein- Kazakbaev Galerie; Petra Rinck Gallery; Häusler Contemporary (Munich, Zurich), Galerie Eva Meyer (Paris); Some of them work with such Georgian galleries as: Popiashvili-Ghvaberidze Gallery, Gallery Nectar, MOMA Tbilisi, TBC Gallery, Gallery Container, Baia Gallery, Gala gallery.

The majority of respondents speak about the absence of art market in Georgia, which hinders the professional development of artists locally. Another problem is the lack of art criticism and the weaknesses of theoretical education. Contrary to this situation the theoretical analysis and background is clearly seen in the activities of UDK Artists, which work in Berlin (Hito Steyerl's influence and her political activism in art). The differences are evident not only between the artistic spaces in Georgia and abroad, but also between various European countries as well. i.e. the art spaces in Berlin are far more open to international players (it is much easier to get in touch with new contacts), compared to Austrian ones, where the bureaucratic mechanisms are evident.

Émigré artists still go on working today; their future plans include the participation in many exhibitions and projects. Some of them also consider reuniting with Georgian artistic circles. This exchange, intensive mobility and openness is an important factor, which plays a vital role in the establishment of Georgian art on the international scene.

Today, in the era of internet and open source information Georgian émigré artists consider integration with the west as an inevitable and on-going process. It is important to note that “frequently, this desire of integration with the west is expressed in direct imitation or copying, which is a bigger problem for such a small country as Georgia. At the same time, it is very important to speak the contemporary language to be understood globally.”

Often, the local perception of contemporary art is tightly linked with the local history and namely with the Soviet past: the belated and chaotic introduction of latest artistic processes sometimes resulted in the superficial developments, where the direct imitation and copying also happens. This conveys the threat of standardization and biased judgments. “What could be negative in this process is the danger of confusion, loss in one language (by this I do not mean losing of the national features).” - said one of our respondents, “Maintaining visual language is very important Because there are no more borders, there is a danger of going beyond the borders.”

All discussed above enables us to conclude that the integration of Georgian artists with western culture is a challenging and binary process: on one hand, this is a universal, inevitable and very important process and on the other hand, it is vital to maintain the identity in the process of assimilation. This requires the deep rethinking of the values, which makes the contemporary art a multi-layered and a complex phenomenon.

Overall, the survey of the émigré artists living in Germany, Switzerland and Austria, shows out that today artists’ mobility and migration is an open process, which enables the constant self-assessment and the distant evaluation of the on-going processes in their home country. The participation in educational processes and the exchange of knowledge

supports creation of a new context. In this regard, the analysis of the contemporary art language, its aesthetic and ideological categories in connection with individual explorations and local challenges in Georgia, opens up further perspectives, which might become a breaking point in the development of Georgian contemporary art - the field emerging, gaining power and finding its legitimate place in country's cultural development.