

Two Shapes of Leaf on Tree

Exhibiting artists:

Nikolas Bernáth (b. 1993), Anton Čierny (b. 1963), Ana Gzirishvili (b. 1992), Gvantsa Jishkariani (b. 1991), Ketí Kapanadze (b. 1962), Denis Kozerawski (b. 1990), Jaroslav Kyša (b. 1981), Levan Mindiashvili (b. 1979), Michal Moravčík (1974 - 2016), Ilona Németh (b. 1963), Nino Sakandelidze (b. 1993), Ján Skaličan (b. 1989), Gio Sumbadze (b. 1976), Sophia Tabatadze (b. 1977)

Curator: Erik Vilím

Architect of the exhibition: Matej Gavula

Production: K.A.I.R., Erik Vilím

Installation: Erik Vilím, Matej Gavula, Peter Vrábel', Richard Tomory

Technical support: Peter Vrábel'

Venue: East Slovak Gallery

We are only voices of other ourselves
forever lost in a jam of millions of cells.

Sme iba hlasy iných JA
navždy stratené v zmätku miliónov buniek.

Keti Kapanadze

After the fall of communism and collapse of borders, all countries in the former Soviet bloc faced difficulties generated by the new geopolitical situation, characterised by a rapid process of globalisation and political and economic homogenisation. The onset of privatisation of state property, the establishment of new democratic institutions and the adoption of a market economy have opened the way to the spread of corruption and the emergence of organised crime, which has often been in close connection to top government officials. In Georgia, which has experienced one of the most traumatic processes of transformation, this period was accompanied by civil war and an ongoing struggle against the power claims of Russia (see for example the events of June 20, 2019).

The value legacy of the previous regime remained deeply rooted in previous generations and slowed down the creation of an open society. The contradiction between socialist and liberal thinking is clearly reflected in the words of Wato Tsereteli, a Georgian artist, photographer and curator: "The actual manifestation of the first problem is the expectation in our society that somebody (the government) will come and do what needs to be done, provide employment, support, etc. At the same time, Georgia has chosen a liberal-democratic system as a guarantee of its freedom."¹ Liberal democracy by its very nature calls for civic participation in the economic functioning and trajectory of the state. The behaviour and thinking of Slovak citizens is characterized by the same expectations. They demand social and economic security from the state that, at the same time, has to face changes in the global market. Simple but above all ineffective solutions to current social and economic instability are now being brought forward by populist politicians.

¹ Tsereteli, Wato: Initiative in Post-Soviet Space. In: Tchogoshvili, Nino (ed.): TransRElation. Tbilisi: CGS Ltd., 2010, pp. 25 – 26

The recent rise of nationalist and conservative thinking in all post-Soviet countries – the breeding ground of which has often been the Church – demonstrates a specific collective mood, which is often labelled as “exhaustion from democracy”.² The roots of populism and nationalism, germinating beneath the surface of parties proclaiming social orientation, were established in the 1990s, or more precisely in the wild transformational period of post-Soviet countries. The repercussions and “seismological” tremors of this change are felt to this day. The historical transformation took place primarily at an economic level – the importance of acceptance and constant application of values such as tolerance, safeguarding of basic human rights, moral responsibility or respect for otherness, took second place. The desire for the material luxury of the Western world, which has long been denied to the populations of these countries, has outweighed other priorities. In Georgia, the situation in the 1990s was much more complex – the new political era was accompanied by civil and wartime unrest (the separatist conflict with Abkhazia between 1992 and 1993) and overall economic instability during the controversial rule of Eduard Shevardnadze. The economic unpreparedness to implement the liberal market model has led to mass emigration.

Although both Slovakia and Georgia have undergone numerous reforms³, thirty years later both countries are struggling with the same problems: nationalism, an unstable collective identity, the unresolved legacy of the darker periods in our history, the uncertain direction of foreign policy, populism, neglected education, the vague notion of public space and infrastructure, the exclusion of minorities. In addition, new challenges are emerging, such as the consequences of the absolute integration of digital technologies, information warfare, and the disintegration of boundaries between leisure and working time. From the current perspective, it seems as if the pursuit of the economic and political homogenisation of European states has engendered major contradictions. On the one hand, post-communist countries adopted a capitalist model of state administration and, on the other, rejected democratic and liberal values. The pursuit of a plurality of views, which was the original aspiration of these states, has been recently replaced by the targeted production of “old-new narratives” – the peoples of the former Soviet bloc are restoring faith in their own national identity and system of values. The result is a negative mythologisation of *the other*.

The fall of communism and the onset of the neoliberal globalisation of capital brought along a new position of visual art, which gained its own autonomy, but also became commodified. Contemporary art⁴ is an ever-evolving phenomenon that defies uniform style, media definition or coherent aesthetic and formal categories (as opposed to modernism). This variability is determined by the basic need to seek new ways of expression which would reflect social and political tensions and flexibly respond to the contemporary changes of the system and its values.

² Further reading: Appadurai, Arjun: Democracy Fatigue. In: Geiselberger, Heinrich (ed.): The Great Regression. Cambridge: Polity press, 2017

³ For example, the so-called “Rose Revolution” in 2003 launched a series of pro-Western reforms in Georgia. Within the context of the Slovak Republic, we can mention the accession to the EU in 2004.

⁴ On the problem of the periodization of contemporary art after 1989 in post-Soviet countries, see the chapter The Fiction of the Contemporary: Osborne, Peter: Anywhere or Not at All (Philosophy of Contemporary Art), New York: Verso, 2013

Visual art in both Slovakia and Georgia underwent a similar transformation – it rapidly changed its role, as well as the position of artists in relation to institutions and society as a whole.⁵ After the fall of the Iron Curtain, its development was based on the foundations of the Western version of conceptualism. It served as metacriticism, challenging established and widely accepted systems of knowledge and deconstructing social and political reality for the purpose of criticism, transformation and emancipation. The art of the countries of the former Eastern bloc initially had to be confronted with Western theory and criticism, which resulted in its gradual re-politicisation in the late 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium⁶. The total absence of cultural institutions (in Georgia, contemporary art is still a matter of independent initiatives and private galleries) has caused an outflow of artists to the West. They have gradually absorbed not only the delocalised, globally understandable language, but also presentational practices. As a result of this self-colonization, their identities were split.⁷ This is the reason why, for many authors, the contextualisation of subjective experience in understanding the geopolitical, economic and cultural situation remains a key artistic tool. Their artistic strategies still incorporate an effort to understand the paradox of a post-communist identity.

A key aim of the exhibition *Two Shapes of Leaf on Tree* is to contextualize two artistic scenes – Slovak and Georgian. The concept of the exhibition seeks to outline the specificities of the transformation of both countries after the break-up of the Soviet Union, with a focus on the economic, political, social, cultural and ethical consequences that we can perceive to this day. The aim of the project is to redraw the complex aspects of the post-transformational situations of both countries, which have been marked in recent years by an increase in anti-democratic, nationalist and xenophobic tendencies. This demanding and complex thematic focus has been processed into the exhibition architecture by Matej Gavula. It brings together works related by both theme and content, while creating a more intimate space for individual dialogues within countries or generations.

The exhibition opens with the work by Gio Sumbadze named *Spa from the Soviet period, Tskaltubo* (2015), which evokes new beginnings and hopes. Sumbadze is a conceptual artist whose artistic programme builds on the discursive potential of architecture through the medium of which he develops a socially oriented visual testimony. The following section of *Two Shapes of Leaf on Tree* brings us through an architectural link to the present. Levan Mindiashvili and Denis Kozerawski formulate broad contours of hateful tendencies that spring from the aforementioned mythologisation of *the other*. Mindiashvili draws attention to hidden racism and nationalism reflected in the language and form of architecture, which has been violently imposed by Stalinist thinking. The pejorative word “ChiornoJopii”, contained in his spatial installation, is used by the Russians to refer to Georgian men. It can be translated as “the one with the black hole”. In addition to highlighting the racist expression, the artist also points to the decontextualisation of cultural references of the past.

⁵ Further reading: Weibel, Peter – Danilova, Alexandra: *The Role of Art in Changing Times*. In: Spinelli, Aria (ed.): *Shaping Desired Future*. Poznan: Moś & Luczak, 2018 and the chapter *1990s: Critical Exposures*. In: Fowkes, Maja and Reuben: *World of Art (Central and Eastern European Art Since 1950)*. London: Thames&Hudson, 2020

⁶ In the case of the Georgian art scene, see more: Chigholashvilili, Data – Shergelashvili: *Socially Engaged Art in Georgia*. In: Ergens, Natasha – Katz, Susan – Stadnik, Zhenia – Stadler, Katharina (eds.): *A Miracle or Misunderstanding: Socially Engaged Practices in the Art Prospect Network Countries*. New York, St. Petersburg: CEC ArtsLink, 2019

⁷ See more about this phenomenon in the Georgian art scene: Chikhradze, Mzia – Shavgulidze, Ketevan – Shergelashvili, Mariam: *Georgian Emigrant Artists in the Complex Landscape of Contemporary Art World*. Available at: http://science.org.ge/bnas/t13-n3/23_Chikhradze.pdf

The next part of the exhibition is devoted to a generational dialogue, the central theme of which is nationalism, fuelled by the need to define itself against “others” and *the other* by creating a fictional enemy as a projection of guilt. The famous work of Michal Moravčík *Which Nationalism is Better?* (2003) is further developed through the photography of Ján Skaličan entitled *They* (2019). Their proximate placement in space points to the continued legacy of this thought in society. These two works are complemented by Gvantsa Jishkariani with the piece named *Jos Jos Jos*, which is an ironic and critical testimony. Jishkariani in her work focuses on cultural symbols and collective memory within the contemporary world. It also depicts how customs, phrases and words reflect our faith, values and relationship to the past. Her artistic approach is based on the re-contextualisation of images, objects, phrases and words from everyday reality. At the heart of her method is deconstruction as a tool of understanding, but also as a way of handling artistic material. In the presented tapestry named *Jos Jos Jos* (2019), she works with a machine-made tapestry and the term “Jos Jos Jos”, which is very difficult to translate. It is an abbreviation of the term “Gaumarjos”, which means “victory”. In Georgia, it is mainly used by men during the traditional “Sufra” as a toast. The phrase “Jos Jos Jos” is encountered particularly in moments of collective engagement, enthusiasm and passion for important social events.

The space of the *East Slovak Gallery* gradually opens up to the dominant theme of the exhibition, which is economic contexts. It is introduced by two professionally and personally related artists – Anton Čierny and Jaroslav Kyša (*Euro Eclipse*, 2016). The work named *Vehicle Counter* (2012) is a recording of a flight over the production car park of the largest and most famous car company in Slovakia – KIA. It deals with the impact of globalisation on shaping the economy. However, Čierny also draws attention to the transformation of landscape and environment due to the strategic focus of industry in Slovakia. The artist’s performance is complemented by a meditative mantra on car production.

Another piece in this section is a social documentary by Sophie Tabatadze called *Pirimze* (2012 – 2014). Its theme is the impact of neoliberalisation in post-Soviet countries, this time from the perspective of crafts and services. The artist explores this notion through the personification of the Pirimze building in Tbilisi. It tells the story of the craftsmen who worked here for many years before Georgia became an independent state with a free market. After the fall of communism, Pirimze could no longer serve its original purpose and the craftsmen had to move out. Sophia Tabatadze in her film traced the social consequences of this transformation. Her starting point was a memory from her childhood when she visited this place with her father.

A subjective experience was also at the starting point of the long-term project called *Eastern Sugar* by Ilona Németh⁸, which transferred the above-mentioned topic of transformation to the sugar industry. In the 1990s, at the time of the privatisation processes of Vladimír Mečiar, the largest sugar factory in Slovakia, *Juhocukor*, based in Dunajská Streda, acquired its largest foreign shareholder since 1969. In 2002, after being taken over by the British-French capital company Saint-Louis Sucre and Tate & Lyle, the company was renamed *Eastern Sugar*. The

⁸ The project was first presented at Karlin Studios in 2017 under the title *Sugarloaf Manufactory* (curator Caroline Krzyszton) and then at the Kunsthalle Bratislava in 2018 (*Eastern Sugar*, curator Nina Vrbanová and assistant curator Krisztina Hunya).

promise of “kick-starting”, modernising and stabilising the company in the market was not fulfilled and the factory announced its closure in 2006, despite an increase in sugar production. This meant the loss of employment for many people whose lives were literally “entwined” with the sugar factory. The cessation of production took place despite the European Union’s generous financial compensation for the reduction in sugar production due to the restructuring of the sugar industry in 2006. However, the complex story of the sugar industry, which has become the subject of extensive interdisciplinary and collaborative research by Ilona Németh, can also be understood differently – it symbolises the transformation of the Central-Eastern region, representing a means of visualising the complex geopolitical and economic contexts. The exhibition *Two Shapes of Leaf on Tree* presents perhaps the most important fragment of this large-scale project – two boards originally located on the roof of the office building of the *Juhocukor/Eastern Sugar* factory in Dunajská Streda. This massive ready-made object installed in the semi-public space of the courtyard of the East Slovak Gallery is a “silent narrator”, telling the stories of the two boards coming from distinct periods of the sugar refinery’s history. The object materially represents the country’s economic transformation and presents it to the viewers passing through the entrance hall. This demanding task is supported by two videos installed directly on the premises of the exhibition, which further contextualise its meaning.

The section of the *Two Shapes of Leaf on Tree* exhibition dedicated to the contemporary economic aspects also features a generational dialogue, conducted by Nikolas Bernáth and Ana Gzirishvili (b. 1992). Gzirishvili presents a piece of video artwork bearing the features of a musical film, which is in contrast to the strategy of Ilona Németh anchored in documentary. *Where is Rosa* (2019) takes place in a garage complex in the suburbs of Tbilisi, which has lost its original function. Today, the complex primarily serves for storage purposes. The video features four actors – luxury hot tubs – which perform monologues in these depopulated and isolated spaces and sing their own stories of “transportation”. Ana Gzirishvili thus thematises the global circulation of goods and the transfer of capital through personified commodities.

The end of the exhibition is dedicated to the photographic installation by Ketí Kapanadze (b. 1962), a conceptual artist who was active as early as the 1980s when Georgia was part of the Soviet Union. The work named *Medea* (2020) depicts disgusted women bearing signs of suffering. This ancient Greek mythological story has a strong significance in Georgia, especially in its recent political history. Medea, who helped Jason and the Argonauts obtain the Golden Fleece, became the subject of many artistic interpretations. In the tragedy by Euripides, Medea was supposed to become Jason’s wife after helping him. Her devoted love allowed her to overcome the sorrow of leaving her own country. However, Jason’s failure to keep his promise led to her cruel revenge – murder of their two children and Jason’s new bride. As many intellectual authorities agree, this mythological narrative takes place on the west coast of the Black Sea, which lies within Georgian territory. The myth of Medea therefore defined Georgia’s imaginary national borders and, at the same time, created a fundamental relationship with Europe and their shared cultural heritage. For the Georgian society of today, the figure of Medea represents an analogy of betrayal and unfulfilled promises, but also a link with the European geographical and cultural space. Mikheil Saakashvili, the president who led the country after the so-called “Rose Revolution” (2003), commissioned a monumental statue of Medea in 2007 as a symbol of Georgia’s pro-Western orientation. Kapanadze uses this mythological image in a much more critical way, highlighting strong feminist associations. She links the myth to the present as a recurring universal story of betrayal and unfulfilled promises.

