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An Open Field; A Dog Named Poppers: Tbilisi 16

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A small field, roughly 1760 miles as the crow flies from Zürich, in Shindisi, a village in Georgia. This is where the Tbilisi 16 project took place on September 1–4, 2016. «Extra muros»! — this is how the website of the Kunsthalle Zürich announced Tbilisi 16 during its occupation by Manifesta 11 *What People Do For Money*. Away from the institution, away from capital, «off to hear, see and feel what people do for no money…!»



Daniel Baumann, the curator and co-initiator of Tbilisi 16, considers this international-local exhibition project — one he has repeatedly and variously realized on site in Tiblisi with artists, curators and theorists over the last ten years — as a kind of temporary, highly concentrated, mobile open-air *Kunsthalle*. The Georgian artist Gela Patashuri who had worked together with Baumann on site early on once remarked, in turn, that the project is not related to «Western» relational aesthetics, that it is neither «service» nor «product».[i] This is certainly true of this year's edition as well, for despite the involvement of some internationally visible players and networks this «art event» does not benefit and circulate as an exotic event destination between fairs in some art calendar. Its purportedly intentional under-the-radar status seems, in fact, also due to the fact that *Tbilisi 16* as well as previous editions do precisely not exploit and use the venue as an Eastern alternative of sorts to the Western contemporary art hegemony, a by now common concept of a number of biennials that are oftentimes merely geographically located outside of the Euro-American art circuit anyway. Even though the site-specific conditions — economic, confessional, botanical, culinary, meteorological etc. — definitely influence the production and reception of *Tbilisi 16* in purely infrastructural terms, it is precisely this almost random, arbitrary choice of location in favor of a claim to ubiquitous unpredictability and ideological undefinability, the true potencies of contemporary art, that makes this event interesting and visionary.

Aside from returning protagonists of the previous editions of *Tbilisi*, such as Patashuri, Ei Arakawa, Tobias Madison and Nikolas Gambaroff, Tbilisi 16 also served as the venue for the presentations of this year's *Kadist Production Award,* which in the past had been accompanied by an exhibition at the Kunsthalle Zürich. One of the award recipients, the Zürich offspace Up State (Marc Hunziker, Chantal Kaufmann, Rafa? Skoczek, here with their temporarily adopted Georgian street dog Poppers), built a tree house without a tree in a quasi «DIY-Swiss-brutalism»-style which at the same time functioned as stage, observation platform, movie theater and the only covered refuge for the participants and visitors who had come from near and far. Hence it was the centerpiece and plenum of the lectures, performances, screenings and debates of the four initially sweltering and soon stormy and chilly September days that followed. Another architectural contribution came in the form of Patashuri's intriguing avant-gardist little outhouse.

In fact, *Tbilisi 16* seemed to be primarily concerned with gestures and forms of the «excretional», i.e., with forms of processing, of both personal and communal relief, of letting-go, discharging, of free, that is, senseless expression and uncontrolled (over)flow of speech and, finally, of territorial marking. Tue Greenfort, for instance, worked for days with the voluntary assistance of many to build a constructivist-inspired kite. During the same period of time at the aforementioned phallic tree house, Ei Arakawa moderated his sex talk show *Deda Bodzi (Mother Vertical) – Love Sex SOS!* with the more or less voluntary cooperation of so-called sexperts such as the psychotherapist, couple coach and group dynamics specialist Marina Gambaroff (admittedly, the only certified (s)expert) and eloquent lay(wo)men such as Ketuta Alexi-Meskhishvili, Karl Holmqvist, Paata Sabelashvili and Lisa Jo. After several issues and dilemmas of contemporary intimacy had been clearly articulated («pegging», «threesomes», shoe fetish etc.) and accordingly discussed (Sabelashvili: «Follow Nike: Just Do It!…»), the result of this three-day panel can be summarized as follows: have sex, with whom or whatever you like — but if you can, make love. In this context the absurd-absolute aphorisms such as «smart critiques, stupid creates», uttered by the wheelchair-bound trailer-trash puppet of Tobias Madison's *Red Lace, Moon Unit, Black Comet Cometh!* are worth mentioning. In this performance, which was presented by the Berlin curatorial team Dingum, Madison seemed to caricature the established stereotypes and alleged dependencies — creative-ignorant producer vs. passive-intellectualizing recipient or reviewer — within the art market, just as they, perhaps, sort of characterize macro-social phenomena such as the

polarization of the electorate in the U.S.

Not all contributions were dialectically harmonizing in such fashion. Georgia Sagri delivered a charged and electrifying «mumble trance» performance from her repertoire, *Long Live the ~~Lions~~ Wolves*. (The fickle, irritating microclimate that would subsequently come to dominate the evenings in Shindisi, can finally not be explained without taking into account Sagri's conceptual shamanism). Sagri was also the one who tried to explicitly address the varying reception and appropriation of allegedly charged symbols such as burning swastikas in contemporary Georgian art following the video *Armed Forces* of the Tbilisi artist collective Nik O Nik. For even though one can find trend-setting youths wearing all kinds of vetements «avant la lettre» in the streets of Tbilisi, xenophobia and LGBTQ-phobia remain the advocated ‹values› of the Orthodox Christian society, which in the course of the country's nationalization and neo-liberalization have become more explicit as a concrete threat to such minorities, including vegans (!), not least with respect to the local art scene. (In the Military Bar, for instance, which is run by nationalists and neo-rightists, they serve a dish called «Lesbian Omelett» — the same scene that in May of this year, in turn, attacked the hipster-artsy-faggy Café Kiwi with bratwurst).

Also worth mentioning as a de facto site-specific intervention was the performance Rant Chant by the Boyband flown in from abroad, whose members include Stefan Tcherepnin, Tobias Spichtig, Tobias Madison and Karl Holmqvist. Set in the steamy atmosphere of the traditional and usually gender-separated Abanotubani Hamam in the old town of Tbilisi and accompanied by Tcherepnin's cosmic electronic sounds, catchy pop tunes such as Ru Paul's queered post-Fordist *Supermodel (You Better Work)* or Willow Smith's silly Whip My Hair were interpreted as Sulphur-befogged mantras of an existing/future creative class.

Finally, the sweet-and-sour, rain-soaked finale of *Tbilisi 16* was celebrated in culinary form with first-rate and progressive-minded «mtsvadi» (Georgian shashlik), curated by Andro Wekua, accompanied musically by Tcherepnin's spooky jam-session held in the trunk of a station wagon. The latter ended in a polyphonic Hawaiian group chant during which all protagonists and guests gathered one more time on the by then completely muddy field, half of them still sick and exhausted yet happy.«Primordial soup as social glue: ‹Sludge doesn't judge».

[i] For this see the contribution by Patashuri and other authors in «Dispatch. Contemporary Art and Architecture in the Caucasus,» Artforum 51, Vol. 8 (April 2013).



Opening *Tbilisi 16*



BBQ with Gela Patashuri and friends



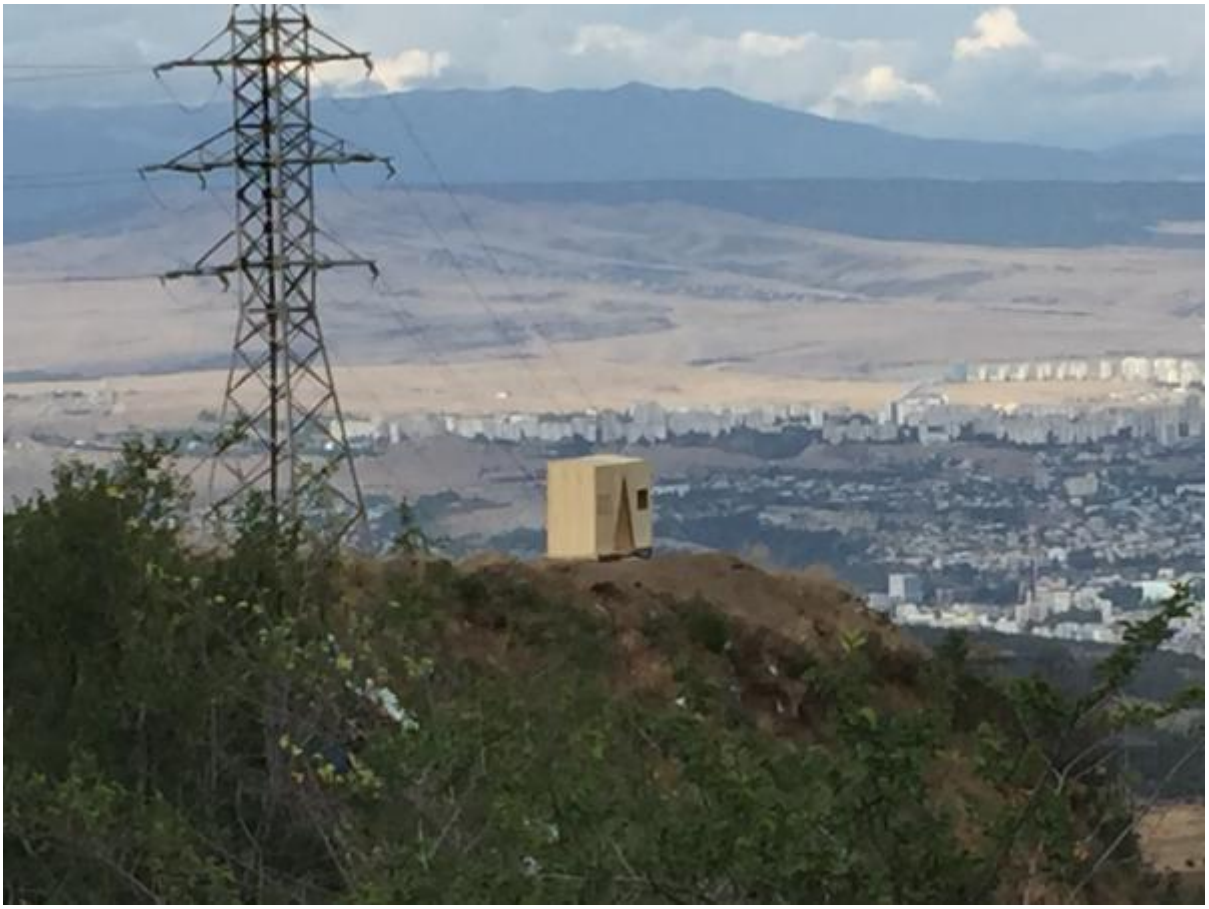
Kühe in Shindisi



Ei Arakawa and Deda Bodzi



Construction by Gela Patashuri, front view



Construction by Gela Patashuri



Performance Georgia Sagri



Performance Hanna Toernud



Julia Moritz Curator Theory & Programs Kunsthalle Zürich in situ



Julia Moritz Kunsthalle Zürich



Performance Leila Peacock and Poppers



Tobias Madison *Red Lace Moon Unit, Black Comet Cometh!* presented by Dingum



Marie Angeletti und Emmanuel Rossetti



Screening Nik O Nik



Treehouse by Upstate with entrance gate by Georgia Sagri



Tobias Madison



Tobias Spichtig



Public



BBQ with Andro Wekua



Nikolas Gambaroff



Performance Stefan Tcherepnin



Sexperts by Deda Bodzi



Ramaya Tegegne

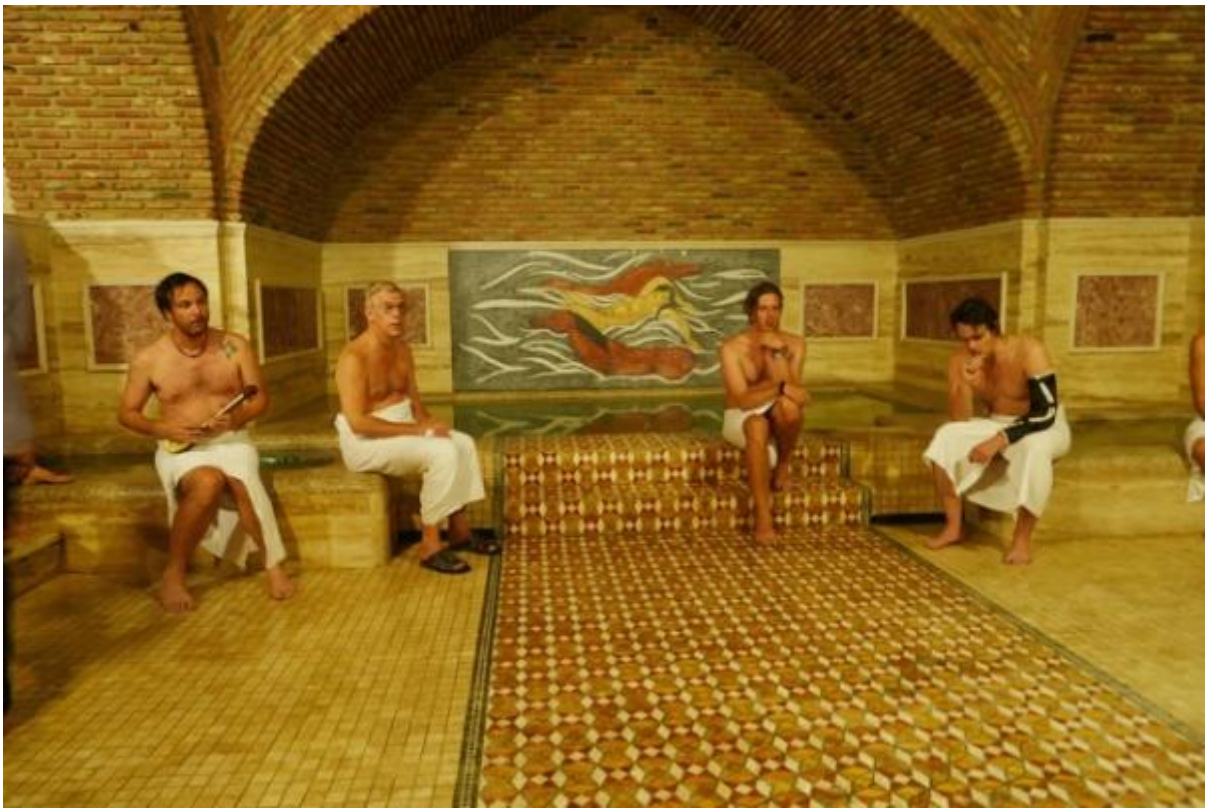


Poster for *Tbilisi 16*


Poppers and building by Gela Patashuri



Panorama Tbilisi 16



Rant Chant by Stefan Tcherepnin, Tobias Spichtig, Tobias Madison and Karl Holmqvist

All images: Daniel Baumann, Kunsthalle Zürich, 2016

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