

THE ART OF *PERESTROIKA*: NEW MOVEMENTS IN GEORGIAN ART OF THE 1980s

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Abstract

The study of Georgian art of the *perestroika* is very important, especially in the context of the history of art movements of the 1980s, linked to the establishment of the non-official art groups in Tbilisi.

The aim of this article is to analyze the history of the establishment of the art groups *Archivarius* (1984) and *Tenth Floor* (1986) and to discuss the art movements of the 1980s in Tbilisi. The generation of Georgian artists involved in the non-official art groups fundamentally changed the art scene of that period and played an important role of the development of contemporary art in Georgia. *Perestroika*, associated with Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of openness, contributed to a shift in political and sociocultural discourse throughout the Soviet Union and also played an important role in the artistic processes in Georgia. All the events that took place in the 1980s art scene of Tbilisi portray a vigorous willingness to hasten away from the Soviet dimension and maintain the memory of a historical discourse. Some artists found a way out through emigration; others discovered an intangible shelter via working collectively. *Perestroika* had clearly formed a special environment in which things that were previously unseen became visible. The Georgian *avant-garde* managed to create its own *sui generis* aesthetic and theoretical principles in just a decade, alongside expressing postmodernist hues at certain points.

Keywords: *perestroika, non-official art, Georgian art, art groups, Soviet Union.*

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Introduction

The period of *Perestroika*¹ was an important time for post-Soviet countries. In general, the social-political events which occurred in the 1980s touched all aspects of living, including Georgian cultural life. The changes were associated with the softening of administrative and ideological control over artistic life. It was evident that the cultural isolation that had been widely established in the 1960s and 1970s was approaching its end. After this period, we saw events which broke away from the official regulations regarding culture. Before the *perestroika*, such activities were systematically suppressed.

Since the 1960s a distinction can be made between official and unofficial art.² The unofficial art appeared in Georgia in the years 1974–1975. Georgian non-official art – in comparison with the Russian non-conformist art, which evoked social-political themes – reflected on historical and political aspects, as well as on aesthetic-conceptual issues [Kipiani 2020].

What does the dichotomy of the official/non-official concept imply? Often this confrontation is interpreted as a matter of political or social engagement in contemporary art.

However, the art form and context of the non-official art were essentially different in the late decades of the Soviet republics or even in the cities. In general, the status of non-official art can be explained as follows: unlike the recognized and established Soviet socialist art, non-official art established itself in the so-called underground space. It existed in flats, studios and in open public spaces; however, it appeared in state museums and exhibition halls very rarely even in times of *perestroika*. After the non-official art emerged from the “closed” local context and was presented in international exhibitions it became visible to the general public. The political context of non-official art was not a definitive problem for the Soviet system, inasmuch as in some Soviet republics, art itself did not occur against a political background. The main problem, rather, was the alternative form and context of this art. Thus, the existence of non-official art in daily life propagated the allowance of “different” and indicated the possibilities of the transformation of the existing system.

¹ 1985–1991 – the ruling period of Mikhail Gorbachev: beginning from his election to the position of central secretary on the committee of the Communist party (11 March 1985) until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Mikhail Gorbachev, during his seven years of governance, implemented two important reforms, called “*Perestroika*” (“reconstruction”) and “*Glasnost*” (“openness”).

² Art which was not recognized by the Soviet State is called non-official, dissident or non-conformist art. Non-official art included several different artistic directions and forms.

Non-official art in the Soviet Union and the West

For the Soviet system, non-official art was the representation of the Western aesthetic and moreover, was considered as an instrument of information and ideological warfare.

The Soviet art scene of the 1980s was very diverse in Georgia, as in other former Soviet republics, in addition to its large permanent exhibitions at the local and international levels. Also of note is the importance of Western interest in non-official Soviet art, which can be seen in the quantities of purchased collections in specially organized show-rooms and art auctions.

Western attraction to Soviet non-conformist art was in evidence since the 1960s. We can say that the famous Sovietologist and economist Norton Dodge (1927–2011) was the first foreign collector of Soviet non-official art.¹ Among works by other artists, he kept the art works of several Georgian artists (Gia Edzgveradze, Alexandre Bandzeladze, Ketik Kapanadze, etc.) in his collection.² In the 1980s, historian and art collector Peter Ludwig began to buy large quantities of Soviet non-official art. In his interview with Martin Kunz, he notes that he and his spouse, art critic Irene Ludwig, became interested in Soviet non-official art during the 1970s and 1980s.³ By the end of the 1990s they had accumulated a very large collection of non-official Soviet art [Dodenhoff eds. 2021].⁴

Interest toward non-official Soviet art reached its peak on 7 July 1988 at the Sotheby's auction of Russian *avant-garde* and modern Soviet art organized in Moscow.⁵ In this auction, Gia Edzgveradze's art works were presented from Georgia. The art works at the Soviet non-official art auction were purchased for seemingly high prices relative to their contemporary standard art-market value. However, very little was known about Soviet non-official art even among art dealers, collectors and art researchers. The auction created new opportunities for painters who worked in

¹ Norton and Nancy Dodges donated their Soviet non-conformist art collection from the 1960s–1980s to the Zimmerli Art museum in 1991. This collection included works not only by Russian nonconformist artists, but also by Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Belarusians, Estonians, Latvians, and many other nonconformist painters from other Soviet republics.

² See <https://zimmerli.emuseum.com/collections>

³ Martin Kunz interviewed Peter Ludwig at Ludwig's house near Lucerne in 1989. At this time, Martin Kunz was director of the Art Museum in Lucerne. The interview was first published in: Von der Revolution zur Perestroika: Sowjetische Kunst aus Sammlung Ludwig: Ausstellungskatalog/Hrsg. Martin Kunz. Luzern; Stuttgart, 1989.

⁴ The collection of the Contemporary Art Museum in Ludwig (Budapest) includes the works of Georgian artists of the 1980s. Among them are: Koka Ramisvili, Gia Edzgveradze, Mamuka Tsetskhladze, Oleg Timchenko and others. See <https://www.ludwigmuseum.hu/>

⁵ The first auction of non-official art in the Soviet Union was organized by Sotheby's Institute in 1988.

non-official art disciplines, and changed the path of the future for some of these artists.

The ongoing emergence of non-official art from the underground was realized at different scales and in different forms.¹ Non-official art activities clearly took place on the art scene in Moscow in 1986–1988 [Kovalev 1995]. Various exhibitions, concerts and performances spread in the outskirts of Moscow near the Kashirskaya metro station, demonstrating the diversity of the non-official art scene. In addition, its success was evident in the Sotheby's auction. Thus, an interest in and respect for this phenomenon was growing, even in places where it was suppressed or at least ignored. This trend is associated with *Perestroika* in Georgia as well. In 1985–1991, exhibitions in private flats in Tbilisi were still ongoing.² Such activities had happened since the 1970s, but at this moment the movement was gaining access to official exhibition spaces.

Establishment of the art groups

There are two important phases to be observed as we explore the creative process in Georgian art in the 1980s. The first includes the years 1970–1980 and the second phase is directly linked to 1984–1985 [Kldiashvili 2015].

In the second half of the 1980s in the time of *Perestroika*, the art scene was becoming more open and diverse in Georgia, as well as in other Soviet republics. During this period, the confusion, chaos and intensified tempo of life was remarkable. In this short phase we can distinguish various activities charged with different contexts.

The establishment of art groups and implementation of practical art collaborations in shared spaces was very characteristic of the *Perestroika* period.

These groups were often formed informally and spontaneously, but sometimes created manifestos or declared their values in advance. Unlike art collectives of other Soviet republics, a characteristic of Georgian art communities was that experiments, research and discovery were their basic features. Their creative life was more oriented towards self-reflection than exterior environmental factors. Consequently, their artistic aesthetic remained inside the creative process. For these art groups, the main driving impulse for artistic exploration was the experience of Western art and its context.

¹ Comparison between Russian (Moscow and Leningrad) and other Soviet republics' nonconformist art scenes is quite a difficult task due to its different historic circumstances; this area needs comprehensive research.

² The center of the Georgian non-official art scene in the 1980s was Tbilisi. All important art initiatives, meetings, exhibitions, performances and concerts were held in the city.

The history of art groups in the 1980s Georgia has not been fully researched; however, it is possible to gain an overview in the context of recently collected archival documents, which have been processed in this research.

Archivarius

Archivarius (1984) was a group of significant painters, who publicly realized their own exhibitions as one united collective under this name beginning in the 1980s. The name *Archivarius* comes from the German writer Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann's (1776–1822) novella *The Golden Pot: A Modern Fairytale* [Hoffmann 1819], where the main protagonist's name is Archivarius Lindhorst. The idea to form this art group was born in 1983, and by 1984 it was realized [Kacharava 1990].¹ Members of *Archivarius* included: Mamuka Tsetskhladze (b. 1960), Gia Loria (b. 1960), Goga Maghlakelidze (b. 1962) and Karlo Kacharava (1964–1994). Their first exhibition was held in Gia Loria's flat in December 1984. Four painters exhibited their art works under the name of *Archivarius*. At this event, Georgian painter Gia Bughadze made a speech. Besides this was the introduction of the manifesto² written by Karlo Kacharava. The second and final exhibition of this art group was held in the hall of the Merani publishing house in 1991. In advance of the art group's formation, its members had declared their shared values, principles and aims, which became the basis of their creativity. Beyond a conceptual understanding of the common principles, each of them had their individual artistic style, but the conceptual approach was a permanent trait in these young artists' art works.

In the first half of the 1980s these young painters were seeking their own forms of creativity, but by the 1990s each of them had found their individual style and aspiration as they continued to work independently. In the *Archivarius* period, the artists of this art group were focused on revealing a spirit of tales and mythology, as well as the nobleness of heroic and knightly ideals. That is why Karlo Kacharava defined his manifesto with the subtitle: "*The Archivariuses – an attempt to establish neoromanticism*". In the works of all four painters, we find religious themes, mystical passages from fairy-tales and characters placed on the border between reality and the mythical. The Hoffmannian approach in the paintings of the members of *Archivarius* is remarkable; it erases existing reality and goes beyond the material, tangible subject matter. Thus, their approach to the construction of storyline, manner of narration

¹ Interview with painter Gia Loria.

² The manifesto written in 1984 is lost. The text to which we refer here was read by Karlo Kacharava at the second *Archivarius* exhibition in 1991; it included the earlier version as well. Thus, this text can be identified as a group manifesto.

and characters are integrated into one path within their art works. Since the founding of *Archivarius*, their interest was oriented towards Western culture, literature and philosophy, as well as Christian art and Georgian culture. Art historian Dimitri Tumanishvili¹ considers the art of this group to be one of the most interesting episodes in Georgian art of the 1980s. He also distinguishes the importance of Karlo Kacharava as someone who established, named and then guided this group in its future path. Kacharava was an art historian who represented an intellectual basis for this art group.

The Tenth Floor

Beginning on 1 March 1986, the group members worked together on the tenth floor of the Tbilisi State Academy of Art building. We can identify the date of formation of the *Tenth Floor* group from the date when painter Mamuka Tsetskhladze began to work on his diploma art project. Following on from March, young painters began to gather at Mamuka Tsetskhladze's art studio. As the painter Oleg Timchenko says, those meetings implied active and daily work, art experiments in various materials and explorations of new artistic forms.

Different opinions are expressed about members of the *Tenth Floor* art group in both Georgian and foreign art criticism texts. Few studies and texts about this art group exist [Kacharava 1990; Khatishvili 2000; Kikodze 1989; Mchedlishvili 2013; Merewether 2021; Kacharava 2006; Kacharava 2000], but among all of them the most significant works are those of art historian and artist Karlo Kacharava, who himself was a member of this group. Some of his texts, such as his diaries and notes, still remain unpublished.

This art group formed spontaneously. Unlike the members of *Archivarius*, they did not have any shared ideas or manifestos. It is noteworthy that the *Tenth Floor* art group was the only art group of the 1980s where artists worked collectively in a shared space. The practice of the “collective” collaboration led to the art group and its members developing in an interesting way. The art group included Mamuka Tsetskhladze, Mamuka Japaridze (b. 1962), Karlo Kacharava, Oleg Timchenko (b. 1957) and Niko Tsetskhladze (b. 1959). Gia Loria, Goga Maghlakelidze, Temur Iakobashvili, Gia Dolidze, Lia Shvelidze, Maia Tsetskhladze and Zurab Sumbadze were also actively engaged in the art group. Over the years, the membership of the group changed many times. However, only the art works of Mamuka Japaridze,

¹ The book *Georgian art of the XX century and its historic context* was written on the basis of Dimitri Tumanishvili's lectures, which were recorded for the Tbilisi State Academy of Art's radio program. The text of this book was not intended to be published. However, after the death of Dimitri Tumanishvili, the editors transcribed the audio recordings and published the book with funding from the Shota Rustaveli Georgian National scientific grant in 2020.

Mamuka Tsetskhladze, Niko Tsetskhladze, Karlo Kacharava, Oleg Timchenko, Maya Tsetskhladze and Temur Iakobashvili were presented in an exhibition organized at Mamuka Japaridze's art studio on 25 July 1986. If we consider this art group as a unified system, which worked by experimenting and collective elaborations, and, in addition, if we observe the stylistic similarities of various art works painted in 1986–1987, then we can conclude that Mamuka Tsetskhladze, Niko Tsetskhladze and Oleg Timchenko clearly shared common artistic principles. Art by members of this group shares basic artistic principles of “new figuration”. Major themes of their art works are associated with kings, dwarfs, knights and demons, which are expressed in a neo-expressionist manner by the painters. In this period, we can also observe in their art images of animals, which almost completely filled the painting surfaces. In 1986–1987, painters who were engaged in this art group began to experiment with unusual materials like technical paints, iron, wood, charcoal, emulsion and gouache. The majority of these artworks were painted on cardboard using experimental painting materials. The cardboard format allowed the artists to conduct bold experiments.

For the young artists, working in a group was a spontaneous solution to continuing their creative work and development. As Oleg Timchenko recalls, the artistic experiments and collective collaborations in the art group contributed to a boost in their creative progress, which, according to the artist, otherwise would be harder to achieve. The meetings of the young artists on the tenth floor could be called periods of self-reflection, and the adoption and sharing of new art forms and information. After the tenth-floor meetings began, the art group began to take different actions and organized exhibitions for wider publicity.

The art group's first two big expositions¹ were held in the Tbilisi History Museum (Qarvasla). The first one was opened on 8 July 1986. The third exhibition followed at the staircase of Painter's House² in 1987. The art group stopped working on the tenth floor in 1986. After that, with the help of Gia Bughadze, they continued to work in several auditoriums in I. Nikoladze's high art school. In 1986–1987 the young artists spent the winter in this space. As a result, the construction of a famous ladder cell panel was planned. As the painter Mamuka Tsetskhladze recalls, the exhibition had a transient character, because it was held not in the exhibition hall of Painter's House but on its staircase. The works of different artists were exhibited on a

¹ The participants were: Niko Tsetskhladze, Oleg Timchenko, Mamuka Tsetskhladze, Karlo Kacharava, Gia Loria, Lasha Sulakauri, Dali Mukhadze, Gia Bughadze, Gia Goglidze, Goga Maghlakelidze, Mamuka Japaridze and Levan Choghoshvili.

² “Painter's House” was at Rustaveli avenue N7 before 1991.

panel that was three floors high, positioned through the staircase, and the art pieces themselves were not distinguishable from each other, so nobody could recognize where one work ended and another began.¹

After 1987, the Tenth Floor art group moved to the art studio of the K. Marjanishvili theatre, where the artist Mamuka Tsetskhladze had started work as an art decorator, and thus he was able to use the space freely in order to work with other painters. At the same time, it is worth mentioning that Gia Bughadze played an important role in acquiring this space for Mamuka Tsetskhladze and the other artists. In most research texts and articles, this change of location to the studio of Marjanishvili theatre is highlighted as having renewed the form of the *Tenth Floor* art group with slightly changed artistic approaches and members. Thus, this period of 1987–1990 for the *Tenth Floor* group can be distinguished as the Marjanishvili art studio period. In 1991 some painters returned to this art studio, but with some new artists who had never worked with them joining as well. We can call these times the second phase of the Marjanishvili art studio period.

The art group at the Marjanishvili studio essentially transformed its methods. Karlo Kacharava, in his article “For the history of the Georgian *avant-garde*”, notes that Koka Ramisvhili (b. 1956) had joined to the group. In his diary, at several points in 1989, Karlo Kacharava mentioned a group of artists he called “the five” – Mamuka Tsetskhladze, Niko Tsetskhladze, Oleg Timchenko, Mamuka Japaridze and Koka Ramisvhili. He considered them the nucleus of the art group. It is worth mentioning that the painter Lia Shvelidze (b. 1959) who was not involved in the working process, but participated in exhibitions, also began to engage actively in art collaborations with this group.

¹ “We worked on large cardboard and some of it we did in Painter’s House. Together with us worked Gia Loria, Lia Shvelidze, Gia Bughadze, Gia Dolidze, Temur Iakobashvili. This was a construction panel, because at that time we had no access to large size canvas, so we cut rolls and then sewed them together. In that way we made very large panels in a size of 10 X 5 and wrapped this up on the wall. That’s how we created the canvas for Lia Shvelidze’s *Exile from Heaven* and other art works. Painter Temur Iakobashvili created a very interesting art-piece for the staircase, he visited the Tenth Floor art group before and after at the Nikoladze’s college as well...”

... It is clear that the exhibition in the staircase was misunderstood by the public, because the spectators expected art works to be hung on the wall, as usual, in the same manner as it was presented in the same building during the summer art exposition. Despite that, visitors saw large-scale panels constructed from different painters’ art works through the three-floored height of the staircase. It was almost impossible to identify different part of this panel, as far as one art work was merging into another. In the beginning it was implied that we could make a project in the hall of Painter’s House, but at the end we were denied it. Apparently, that provoked us to realize such an exposition...”
Interview with Mamuka Tsetskhladze. Recorded in the summer of 2020.

During the Marjanishvili art studio period, a number of artists collaborated with each other and held collective group exhibitions at different times. They were “the five” painters as mentioned above, and also Lia Shvelidze, Gia Loria, Goga Maghlakelidze, Maya Tsetskhladze, Gia Rigvava (b. 1956),¹ photographer Guram Tsibakhashvili (b. 1960),² Gia Dolidze, Temur Iakobashvili, Niko Lomashvili, Zura Gomelauri and Dato Chikhladze. Since the founding of the Marjanishvili art studio group, they began to undertake larger art projects. The artists worked on large-size canvases and continued to experiment with various painting materials.

As well as local exhibitions, the *Tenth Floor* group also participated in international events, which took place in international exhibitions in 1988–1989. In 1989, the works of the artists Mamuka Tsetskhladze, Oleg Timchenko, Koka Ramishvili and Niko Tsetskhladze were exhibited at the “Black and White” gallery in Budapest. The initiator and organizer of this exhibition was Agnes Horvat and the curator was Lorant Hage. In the same year in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) at the state Ethnography Museum of Nations of Socialist Republics, an exhibition of Georgian *avant-garde* art of the 1980s was opened. One year earlier, all members of the art group participated at an international symposium of *avant-garde* art in Narva.³

The art group worked actively until 1990. In 1991, a new generation of artists joined the main core of the group and used their space during the next two years, as mentioned above. After an exhibition named “America 500”, the art group began to lose its main principles of unity. The next exhibition which some members of the group participated in was named “Heat and Contact” and was curated by Suzan Reid in London. It represented the art projects of two British galleries – Mappin Art Gallery (Sheffield) and Arnolfini Gallery (Bristol)⁴ – presented others’ works as well as those of the art group. According to the catalogue, this event presented painters whose creative lives included the evolution of Tbilisian art within three phases. Thus, the concept of this exposition united two different artistic directions of the 1970–1980s.

¹ In 1987 Gia Rigvava came back from Moscow and in 1988–1989 began to work with the *Tenth Floor* art collective.

² The majority of the photo documentation of Tbilisi art scene in 1988–1989 was photographed by Guram Tsibakhashvili.

³ Participants: Niko Tsetskhladze, Lia Shvelidze, Oleg Timchenko, Koka Ramishvili, Mamuka Japaridze, Karlo Kacharava, Gia Loria, Niko Lomashvili, Gia Rigvava, Guram Tsibakhashvili and Karaman Kutateladze.

⁴ Participants: Aleksandre Bandzeladze, Koka Ramishvili, Gia Edzgeradze, Gia Rigvava, Oleg Timchenko, Mamuka Japaridze, Niko Tsetskhladze and Iliko Zautasvili.

Conclusion

Processes in Tbilisi's art scene, in spite of its chaotic and spontaneous character, clearly manifested the strong aspirations of young people to "escape" from the Soviet system and at the same time to preserve historic memory and values. A certain circle of painters found the solution in emigration, but some used collective working principles in order to survive. In the 1980s, the artistic groups *Archivarius* and the *Tenth Floor* were engendered in two different social-political and cultural contexts. Even more, if we compare the *Tenth Floor* art group's first and the second periods (at the studio of the Marjanishvili) we will see not only that their painting style changed but that by 1989–1991 it had already adopted diverse conceptual aesthetics.

As we mentioned at the beginning of this article, although the Perestroika period was brief, it was an especially significant and intense era, which revealed seemingly hidden processes in the underground art scene. Georgian *avant-garde* art traveled a long path to form its worldview and aesthetic principles in one decade. It distinctly manifested the postmodern in both appearance and nuance, with notable differences from the Western version because of its local and historic contexts.

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