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Georgian Modernism: The Fantastic Tavern

August 25 to November 4, 2018
Media Conference: Friday, August 24, 2018, 10AM
Opening: Friday, August 24, 2018, 6PM

Press Release

Georgian Modernism: The Fantastic Tavern brings a highly interesting, yet largely ignored chapter of western art history to Europe for the first time, calling for the overdue acknowledgement of the artistic accomplishments of the Georgian Modernist movement.

A hundred years ago, in 1918, the Democratic Republic of Georgia declared its independence from the Russian Empire. A brief period of freedom, which lasted until the invasion by the Soviet Red Army in 1921, followed. In those years, Tbilisi became the "Paris of the East" as international artists, some having fled Russia, encountered the local Avant-garde which stood in frequent exchange with Europe. The open, experimental, interdisciplinary art which arose seems instructive for our polarized times. Painting, sculpture, drawing, literature, folk art, ethnography, research, typography, and bookmaking all inspired and challenged each other. This not only led to Georgian Dadaism, Irakli Gamrekeli's groundbreaking stage settings, Niko Pirosmani's paintings, David Kakabadze's art and research, and the Georgian version of Zaum by Ilya Zdanevič, as well as his interdisciplinary endeavor 41° (41 degrees; a university, a group of artist, a magazine, and a publishing house all in one), but it furthermore yielded magnificent films, typographic experiments, radical theatre performances, painted taverns, and a general attitude towards life that continues to inspire.

The exhibition, *Georgian Modernism: The Fantastic Tavern*, takes the shape of a book, displaying remarkable works that are largely unknown. Among those, advertisement films promoting the theatre, socio-critical comedies, and impressive documentaries can be found, including works by Noutsia Gogoberidze, Georgia's first female filmmaker. The exhibition is also a call to writing history by oneself: It was put together in the spirit of DIY, and in close collaboration with Nana Kipiani, one of the leading art historians in Georgia. While historical, *Georgian Modernism: The Fantastic Tavern* is neither museum-like and authoritative, nor is it complete, as there are more films, texts, and documents keep coming to light. Thus, the exhibition is open to all sides, as is reflected in the contributions by Lia Bagrationi (Tbilisi), Levan Chogoshvili (Tbilisi), and Emil Michael Klein (Zurich).

The two simultaneous exhibitions, *Georgian Modernism: The Fantastic Tavern*, and *100 Ways of Thinking. Universität Zürich in der Kunsthalle*, for the time-being, mark the end of the "stress test" Kunsthalle. Starting in 2015 and through a variety of exhibitions, we have posed the question of the role of a Kunsthalle in the present day. When it was founded in 1985, Kunsthalle Zürich was one of a few. By now, it is one of a few thousand: There are hundreds of biennales and art fairs, thousands of museums, galleries, museums, artist-run spaces, and auction houses. Our stress test meant having the Kunsthalle take on different roles in order to test its boundaries and its identity – as well as opening it up to a broad audience. Thus, Kunsthalle became, among others, a theater (*Theater der Überforderung*, 2015), a playground (*The Playground Project*, 2016), a festival (*Tbilisi 16*, 2016), a church (*Rob Pruitt: The Church*, 2017-2018), and now it is temporarily becoming a university and a museum. In time and to our surprise, the stress test turned into a homage to the wealth and openness of our cultural institutions, and thus, a homage to democracy itself. Open spaces define our society, and they are more vital than ever in our polarised times. It is them, which made Georgian Modernism possible before the Soviet Union under Stalin put an early end to it.

Daniel Baumann, Director Kunsthalle Zürich

The exhibition includes research by Nana Kipiani (Art Historian, Tbilisi) and is curated by Kunsthalle Zürich.

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