



The Drama of Ideological Art

Review on Nina Sanadze's installation *100 Years After, 30 Years On* by Dr. Khatuna Khabuliani, art critic and curator, Tbilisi, 2018 (Translation of the online publication at.ge)



Nina Sanadze is a Georgian-born artist residing in Australia. Her installation, *100 Years After, 30 Years On*, is presented at the 3rd Tbilisi International Triennial.

With a solid background in book design and illustration, Nina's more recent art practice best manifests itself via sizeable installation projects, such as barricades or barriers with massive blocks (bollards) marking the borders of conceptual territories. The

ABC of these installations is simple - concrete, sculptural shapes, imbued with a mixture of textured surfaces and written messages.

One such large-scale project carried out in her home town of Melbourne was a collaboration between Nina Sanadze and Julie Shiels, combining text with symbolic, anti-terrorist bollards. The large, concrete blocks with rough surfaces were marked with oil pastel writings that created a juxtaposition between existential, poetic phrases and the functional brutality of bollard shapes. The installation, entitled "Concrete Knowledge" (2017), featured sayings by



Jean-Paul Sartre, Vaclav Havel, Martha Nussbaum and Martin Luther-King. This work of philosophical street-art was stretched across footpaths and aimed at pedestrians, urging them to look down, read the messages and pause to reflect.

Concrete Knowledge, the first part of Nina Sanadze's *Bollard City* series, questions our vision of the world in its current state and the role of the artist in society. The installation, ephemeral in nature, accommodated contradicting realities, containing them in a single dimension with an artistic solution. It combined modern urban rhythm and the existent dangers of unforeseen realities with themes encouraging separation from these settings. To prevent the bollard structures from becoming disassociated from their initial purpose as objects used for terrorism prevention, the phrases drew attention to the issue of terrorism while also raising existential questions.

Bollard City itself – Nina Sanadze's first solo exhibition – saw the installation of internationally recognizable bollard structures within a gallery setting to create an immersive arrangement that mimicked a sizeable cityscape. No longer had using text to contrast the notion of civilised thought with terrorist threat, these artificially constructed bollards become arguably beautiful sculptural objects in themselves. Their recontextualisation within an interior and therefore irrational/incongruous space served to evoke reflective consideration of objects that openly signify violent threat, and their rapid acceptance as commonplace objects within the global urban landscape.

The Divide, her final (to date) rendition of the *Bollard City* series, saw the bollards installed randomly as a subtle but menacing presence within the Incinerator Gallery interior in Melbourne for the Incinerator Art award Exhibition (2018), and was winner of the Boathouse Award.





Generally speaking, Nina Sanadze's work is conceptual art dressed in classical form. The element of text is underscored by dynamic tensions between various materials and shapes. Text did not feature in the installation that Nina presented at the 3rd Tbilisi International Triennial, however, the title of her work, *100 Years After, 30 Years On*, is itself an actively conceptual component of the project. The installation consisted of two piles of heavy sculptures, arranged like a dumping ground for statues that formed a barricade across the width of the gallery space. Visitors had a chance to walk between these piles, symbolising a journey through history, and appreciate the remains of discarded sculptures from every angle. With this installation Nina Sanadze conflated the process of turning ideological art into useless trash – a subject particularly relevant to post-totalitarian societies – with the biography of a specific artist, sculptor Valentin Topuridze.





Nina Sanadze views the dramatic biography of a famous Soviet sculptor as a single account from the long history of iconoclasm, leaving us to wonder: should we abolish all ideological art as soon as the ideology in question loses its power, to be replaced by authorities of opposing convictions? Is there a place for these powerless, worthless images, some of them well-made or just earnestly true to their faith, despite the trivial messages behind them? Does the destruction of past artefacts equal the erasure of history, its falsification? Or, if not destroyed, where are these pieces to go? Is an artist participating in the production of ideological art a victim of a regime, or merely a conformist?

In his essay, *Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology*, Hans Belting notes:

The iconoclasts actually wanted to eliminate images in the collective imaginations, but in fact they could destroy only their media. What the people could no longer see would, it was hoped, no longer live in their imagination. The violence against physical images serves to extinguish mental images.

He also addresses the destruction of Soviet sculptures, describing the annihilation of artefacts as an anachronism quite similar to these sculptures themselves, something that



makes them an easy target for vengeance. The war on these monuments was just as extensive as totalitarianism itself. What survived destruction was erased by time. The role of once highly praised artists became vague and ambiguous. The installation *100 Years After, 30 Years On* deals with the biography of just one particular artist, however, it is concerned with these larger issues. The archives from Valentine Topuridze's studio - plaster casts, copies, academic sculpture learning samples, small plastic elements - all tell stories about the learning practices and aesthetic standards of the Soviet era.

The theme is developed further by the acknowledgement of two significant anniversaries. As the artist's own statement describes; *In 2019 Georgia will be celebrating 30 years of independence from the Soviet Union. This is also a year when all Soviet propaganda sculptures were toppled in a symbolic gesture. Ironically, this year, it will be 100 years since Lenin's Plan of Monumental Propaganda ordained the removal of monuments erected in honour of tzars and their servants.*

Nina Sanadze's project artistically addresses an issue very relevant to the post-totalitarian discourse: the process of rationally appraising, processing and converting history into experience, particularly problematic in the former Soviet republic's new, conflict-ridden history. The non-existence of analytical and rationalization skills is the Soviet inheritance, manifesting itself in infantilism, captivation with myths, and vagueness of values.

This was probably the reasoning behind iconoclasm as well, since the end of the Soviet regime was mainly demonstrated through the toppling of symbols by the government in charge, marked by the demolition of ideological monuments and memorials in the early 1990s, sometimes via collective, irrational, frenzied rituals. The economic crisis that followed only helped the further destruction of these artefacts, a large portion of which were sold off for scrap. Without a dedicated space for storage, preservation or presentation, the pillaged pieces of discarded monumental art popped up randomly in suburbs and abandoned spaces.

After the crisis of the 1990s, what was supposed to contribute to the new image of an independent country in search of modern forms of artistic expression, brought about yet another subject for critical discourse. Changes in architecture and urban renewal that followed the Rose Revolution were criticized by many urban planners, architects and art historians. The critique concerned the loss of authenticity and the creation of fake history, as if the capital and other major cities were undergoing the so called “evrobremonti”, erasing the actual past and replacing it with a fabricated version. Attempts to introduce modern architectural shapes that society was not quite prepared to accept looked artificial, the presentation itself lacking competence and making these new additions seem contrived and unnatural. This process of architectural experimentation in Tbilisi, Batumi and Kutaisi, the eradication of the works of Soviet architecture and the relocation of monuments, were all met with a backlash.

100 Years After, 30 Years On provides us with a warning, as well as reminding us of the continuing



relevance of iconoclasm. Its every recurrence calls for new research, hinting once again that iconoclastic behavior is not quite yet a thing of the past. Just recently, ISIS wiped out the cultural heritage of the Near East because of its extremist ideology. The “Fourth Plinth” project – a work addressing this issue – was displayed in London by an American artist of Iraqi heritage, Michael Rakowitz. A replica of the Lamassu statue that was destroyed by ISIS, along with other artefacts, was installed in Trafalgar Square. The obvious parallel we can draw between Michael’s and Nina’s works is that they are both concerned with iconoclasm, with both artists touching on the same basic issue; from an ideological standpoint, destruction of art is a dangerous thing to tolerate. Allowing even a single precedent can trigger an irreversible chain reaction, and what kind of world will we be living in if every successive government destroys the previous government’s artefacts?



As for Valentin Topuridze, his body of art is one of many that history has already erased. Ideological art, monumental propaganda, Stalinist style - these concepts defined art, artists and their fate for about a century under Soviet rule. Its end was marked by the symbolic gestures of statue destruction, demolition and ritualistic toppling. In his work, “Gezamtkunstwerk Stalin”, Boris Groys discusses the Soviet State as an aesthetic realm created by Stalin, a totalitarian work of art. He also examines the early 20th century avant garde influences on social realism, drawing parallels between socialism and the avant garde:

The Stalin era satisfied the fundamental avant-garde demand that art cease representing life and begin transforming it by means of a total aesthetico-political project.

The time for utopias is over, for now. However, they are still being processed and rationalized, and the art from this time period still raises questions, sometimes even in the form of art itself.