

GIA EDZGVERADZE:

GEORGIAN-SOVIET HYBRID WITHIN NONCONFORMIST CIRCLES

Georgian born German artist Gia Edzgveradze, or Georgian born Soviet Nonconformist artist now residing in Germany. Gia Edzgveradze, a Georgian nonconformist artist, was born in Tbilisi in 1953 when Georgia was still a part of the Soviet Union, but now resides in Germany. As is the case with many artists who have left the former Soviet Union for the West, he has had to confront questions of identity and different self-identification – questions prompted by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the explosion of the government-inspired myth of the Soviet Union as a paradise, inhabited by people bound together by friendship, without regard to gender, race, or nationality.

Once united against Soviet ideological structures and totalitarian control, nonconformist artists today are searching to find their own individual places within the international art scene. The purpose of this paper is to examine the identity of Gia Edzgveradze as a non-Russian nonconformist artist, and his relationship with nonconformist art in general, with Western modernism, and with national Georgian art. Is Edzgveradze an outsider, as he could be perceived to be by the majority of Russian nonconformist artists, or is he a fully integrated member of the nonconformist circle (as other colleagues maintain he is)?

Being a Georgian artist (non-Russian) Edzgveradze not only need to respond to Soviet Reality, but as well as to question of "minority" (other) within the nonconformist circles. Thus, it seems Edzgveradze needed to respond to the double estrangement of being a nonconformist, and a non-Russian. As many nonconformists artists, Edzgveradze choose to "embrace" Western modernism, as well as and spiritual search into the self, in order to avoid the ideological abuse of the Soviet system. On other hand, Edzgveradze's

combination of Eastern philosophy (Hinduism) and contemporary means of expression (Western modernism) can be viewed as one of the characteristics of Georgian culture, which artists always have perceived as a culture of crossroads.

In the paper, I hope to clarify Edzgeradze's relationship with nonconformist circles and his response to their perception of him, as well as his strategy in presenting himself to the dominant culture. The treatment of other nationalities and hierarchy of Russian language and culture over other national cultures within Soviet Union (as it will be shown below) can be identified as orientalist, which was carried over from the perception by the Russian Empire of Georgia as "the (frontier) provinces" of Russian Empire.¹ Thus, if we relate to Babha's statement that "the effect of colonial power can be the production of Hybridization² rather than ... authority or silent impression of tradition."³ As it would be suggested later, one can perceive that Edzgeradze is a hybrid of both cultures (Soviet and Georgian).

First, I would like to trace some features of Georgian culture. Georgia lies at the junction of two continents, Europe and Asia, a geographical position clearly reflected in Georgian civilization, which has been influenced by Western as well as Eastern cultures. Indeed, articles describing Georgian art usually start out by stating that Georgian Art

¹ With the fall of the Byzantine capital to the Ottoman in 1453, Georgia lost an important Christian ally. So when Russia announced itself as a successor of Byzantine, Georgia looked at Russia as potential savior against Muslims (Safavid Persians and the Ottoman Turks). By the Georgievsk Treaty of 1783, Georgia accepted the protection of Russia. In 1801 in violation of the treaty, Russian troops were brought in to eliminate the kingdom as an independent entity. By 1803 Russia other provinces of Georgia, from Imereti to Abkhazeti were annexed to Russia. Until 1917, Georgia was referred to in Russian imperial document as "the (frontier) provinces" and served as a center of military action against Turkey and Persia. Ori Z. Soltes "The Eternal Crossroads," *National Treasures of Georgia*. London: Philip Wilson Publishers, in collaboration with The Foundation for International Arts and Education, 1999, 27.

² Hybridity, according to Babha, reverses the formal processes of disavowal so that violent dislocation of the act of colonization becomes the condition of colonial discourse. Homi K. Babha "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817," *The Location of Culture*, 1994, New York: Routledge, 1994, 14.

³ *Ibid.*, 112.

emerged under the influences of neighboring cultures of Assyria, Byzantium, and Persia.⁴ The ancient art of Assyria is still visible today in the relief facade decorations of ancient cathedrals, in the folk sculpture of tomb-stones, and in the architecture of watch-towers. Byzantine influences are evident in religious frescoes in churches, while Persia left its imprint on Georgian miniatures and book illustrations. Yet the national creative spirit managed to transform its borrowings from these ancient cultures which enriched Georgian culture without overwhelming and overshadowing it. In many cases archeologists are not certain which objects found in Georgia were created there and which are imported, yet artifacts - their visual and conceptual connection between Georgia and neighboring lands in a symbolic representation of the "other" by artisans help to contribute to our sense of Georgian culture and its relationship with other cultures.⁵ Divinities were depicted with a combination of human and animal traits: scorio-man, lions who walked on two legs - which were part of near east vocabulary, etc. Georgian culture did not simply absorb what the dominant power offered but they tried to adapt only those ideas which fit within traditions of Georgian culture. When Byzantine was the dominant force in Georgia, the impact was evident in all aspects of art from enamels to manuscripts and wall painting, however, these traditions were tempered by introduction of local Muslim culture in the design. Other examples can be found in 18th century portraits of Georgian nobility which looked in the court styles of Persia, yet the faces (narrow with wide eyes) and dress reflected Georgian's own fashion. It seems

⁴ Solt' s Ori S. ed *National Treasures of Georgia*. London: Philip Wilson Publishers, in collaboration with The Foundation for International Arts and Education, 1999, introduction.

⁵ Ibid.

that one of the features of Georgian culture is its "hybridity," "the displacement of value from symbol to sign"⁶ in regard to the dominant culture.

Becoming part of the Russian Empire did have positive effects: some cultural traditions were revived, museums and newspapers were founded, and Georgians had access to Russian and European universities. However, the danger was that Georgia became part of the imperial colonial system, which meant active measures to Russify non-Russian people. Constant efforts were made to eradicate Georgian language, one of the important mediums of cultural identification in Georgia. In 1817, the autocephalic Georgian church was subordinated to Russian patriarchy. However, these only produced more hybrids within Georgian culture. For example, St. Simeon Stylites and St. Nino (Georgian saints) still remained in Georgian religious art in addition to customary saints, apostles, and scenes from the life of Christ.

Beginning in 1860 a national liberation movement became active and for a short while Georgia received independence on May 26, 1918. Though there was a general pessimistic comprehension of the future, the great majority of those contemplating the future of Georgia could not fully realize that having sacrificed the Romanov dynasty and the embryonic liberalism, the Russian Empire was in the process of revival under the disguise of the Communist internationalist ideology (nevertheless still considering itself in some paradoxical sense as heir to the Byzantine Empire). Hence, now 'Soviet' - Russia was to revitalize soon its century-old longing towards the southern seas and taking over Constantinople. Only a superior force would be able to block this power, and of course none of the Transcaucasian republics possessed such force, and none of those who did

⁶ Homi K. Bhabha "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817," *The Location of Culture*, 1994, 113.

possess it considered at that time Transcaucasia as a worthy investment. The Bolshevik Party led, ironically, by two Georgians Joseph Stalin and Sergo Orjonikidze invaded Georgia and declared Georgia a Soviet Republic on February 25, 1921.

Soviets still viewed Georgia as the "other" which was inherited from the Russian Empire. According to Susan Layton, Mikhail Lermontov, Alexander Pushkin and Alexander Bestuzhev-Marlinsky, three 19th century "revolutionary"⁷ figures of the Russian literature contributed greatly to the invention of Georgia as oriental "other" - as a symbol of oriental woman⁸. Their writing on Caucasus had the three following features: insistence on Georgian quasi-Islamic character, exclusion of Georgian male protagonists, and importance of gender relationships, where Georgian woman has to be protected and dominated by men stronger than those of her country.⁹ These ideas of feminized orient also coincided with romantic era, its mania to visit East and expectation of exotic experience, and developed as a consequence of, or tandem with Russia's securing political control of Georgia.¹⁰ Thus, starting from the beginning of the 19th century Romantic orientalism prevailed and was carried over to the Soviets. During the Soviet era, official Georgian art was allowed to be somewhat colorful, thanks to the myth of the "jolly Georgian," and to the clichés of romantic Orientalism, popular with Soviet

⁷ Ironically, Lermontov and Pushkin were considered by Russians and later, by Soviets "revolutionary" (anti-imperialist) poets. Lermontov was exiled to Georgia for poem *The Death of Poet* (1837). These writers did not find an inspiration in the East in order to create an "artistic program for Imperialism." However, in their search for "lost world" they created powerful feminized colonial construction of Georgia. We can apply notion of cultural conservatism (as McKenzie describes it in *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995, 67) to these writers.

⁸ Susan Layton. *Russian Literature and Empire: The Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 192.

⁹ These features aided Russian writers to create an erotically charged cultural mythology about themselves as powerful and rational European agents, capable of protection of Georgia and keeping Georgia under control. *ibid.*, 193.

¹⁰ At the time, construction of orientalized Georgia - as alien "Asia" (instead of viewing it as antagonism to Islam) validated brutality of Tsarist Russia against Georgia people.

officials. Georgian visual culture was also associated with a taste for subjects like beautiful women and nature in bloom.

The history of Georgian art would not be complete without mentioning Niko Pirozmanishvili (c. 1862-1918). Pirozmanishvili can be considered symbol of Georgian culture for both the Soviets and Georgians.¹¹ Pirozmanishvili embraced the multiplicity of all cultures. Expressing the primitive culture and high cultures. One can trace the heritage of ancient cultures in many of his works. For example reference to reliefs from Assiria in works such as "Black Lion," Byzantian last supper was source for the artist's *kutezh* paintings. Rooted in folk art Pirozmanishvili also fully aware of developments in the West. In the spiral composition of a painting of fisherman, Pirozmani's palette and his exposure of primed canvas can remind paintings by Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Andre Derain (1880-1954)¹². These interests in multiplicity of different cultures from the East and the West is one of the features of Georgian art. However, overall, the Georgian art was subject to the same ideological and political constraints as the other part of the Soviet Union.

An examination of the above mentioned transformations of other cultures into Georgian art, the incorporation of elements from both East and West is relevant to understanding Gia Edzgeradze's works and his identity as Georgian artist.

¹¹ Pirozmanishvili is considered national painter of the modern era - a symbol of Georgian culture as surely as Shota Rustaveli. For Soviets, selected works as well as life of Pirozmanishvili symbolizes tragic romantic fate which went well with views of romantic orientalism. Pirozmanishvili's contemporaries (representative of the Georgian Avant-Garde) as well as Russian Avant-garde artists working within framework of Primitivism were "banned" by the Soviets.

¹² Kirill Zdanevich "Pirozmanishvili," *Pirozmanishvili*. Tiflis, Georgia: Gosudarstvennoie Izdatelstvo Gruzii, 1926, pp. 84, 87.

In an essay on Gia Edzgeradze, Boris Groys has tried to place Edzgeradze into the international art scene, arguing that his work is not in the Georgian tradition, lacking its exotic Mediterranean-flavored characteristics. Groys writes:

The viewers in the work of Gia Edzgeradze look in vain for the mild Exotic eastern Mediterranean cultural area. Completely in the opposite: the pictures of the artist are characterized by an extreme asceticism, which excludes all usual life references. It concerns a type of writing, which deconstruct the boundary between picture and text and possesses at the same time no unique semantics. The writing becomes here the ornamentation, and the ornamentation becomes the writing. If the Georgian is to be discovered thereby at all, then perhaps only in the experience of the heterogeneity one of the own writing system, that from a certain cultural distance, like ornamentation and the imagination is felt to all possible measures of interpretations.¹³

It seems to me that Groys' denial of any direct reference to Georgian art is, in fact, a deliberate strategy, he wants to avoid the pitfall of colonial construction of Georgian culture¹⁴ and to emphasize the link with Western modernism. Groys tries to discuss Edzgeradze's works in term of post-war Western modernism, despite the latter's years of isolation from the West. By detaching Edzgeradze from the Georgian tradition, Groys presenting Edzgeradze as an exponent of international trends. Groys maintains that it was Western critics who were looking for traditional, national and religious values in Edzgeradze's works, values that upon closer examination, proves to be illusory.¹⁵ He further suggests that it is only when the national form, perverted by socialist artistic ideology into folksy kitsch, is overcome that the international language of the kind artists were striving to create can emerge. However, Edzgeradze can be considered to continue Georgian traditions.

¹³ Boris Groys "Art-Asket" Maksimka #5, 2000 (in Russian). Translated by Maksim Raiskin from Kunsforum, BD.142, 1998.

¹⁴ Romantic and exotic views of Georgian culture - clichés of Romantic orientalism.

¹⁵ Groys writes: "...The Georgian modern trend at the beginning of this century was determined particularly by a combined love for the joyful colors of the French Postimpressionism and for the own, Georgian way of life. One does not find both in the work of Edzgeradze". Ibid.

During his career, Edzgveradze developed two different painterly styles: he painted both colorful, textured abstractions, sometimes with sand, and black and white calligraphic paintings limited to controlled-line drawings. The combination of saturated vivid colors (as in *Noise of My Heart*, 1986) is reminiscent of traditions of Georgian painting. Edzgveradze was also the first artist of his generation to use soil in his works. According to Edzgveradze¹⁶ the first use of soil was accidental. He recollects he was working on one of his black and white paintings and out of frustration he brought dirt from the street and covered parts of the surfaces. However, the choice of usage of sand and dirt in later colored abstraction can be viewed in connection with Georgia, where soil can be a symbolic representation of the country. Calligraphic writings (in Georgian language) on Edzgveradze's works also contribute to links with Georgian culture. Edzgveradze's writing-drawing technique (which will be discussed below) and even Edzgveradze's signature, in the Georgian script, on his canvases reveals a connection with Georgian tradition. The very fact of Edzgveradze's interest in combining the heritages of Eastern and Western cultures can be viewed as his identification with tradition of Georgian art and its "hybridity".

In the early 1980s a group of young artists¹⁷ formed by Edzgveradze, united in their search for personal truth and in their desire to learn about the spiritual world. They gathered information on world religions and immersed themselves in theology and other occult interests. One of Edzgveradze's special interests was Indian Philosophy. In the works from the black and white period, like *Yantra Atman* (1983), one can find the

¹⁶ Telephone conversation with Natalia Kolodzei, 2001.

¹⁷ The Group included such artists as Iliko Zautashvili, Soso Tsereteli, Dato Mikaberidze. Elena Kornetchuk "Nonconformist art of Soviet Georgia: A synthesis of East and West," Rosenfeld, Alla and

coexistence of Western modernism and eastern philosophy. According to Barbara Rossi, a Yantra is a symbolic diagram, which occurs throughout India in great variety.¹⁸ Sometimes employing mantras, sometimes purely geometric forms, these special images are created by devotees under the guidance of gurus, and are employed as a focusing device for meditation, or as the physical entity into which a deity can be invoked to reside in private religious rituals. Yantras frequently embody conceptualizations of the universe radiating from a divine center; they are also believed to be abstract representations of aspects of the Godhead. The basic elements in Yantra are extremely rich in metaphysical allusions.¹⁹ With a central point called *bindu* and its enclosure which form a circle, such form closely resemble one of Edzgveradze's work.

In the early 1980s, Edzgveradze was devoted to Hinduism. The notion of acceptance of life in all its complexity, and the transcendency of it in a final stage rising above oneself, attracted the artist. Here the chaos of the world could be transformed into divine energy.

Edzgveradze explains about his art:

I am trying to work in the span between the rational and the humane, on the border of the idea and of the substance, I am trying to create a line on the other side of which would be situated the subjective and on the other - the exterior. In one case my pictures are traces remaining in my consciousness of splashes of pure energy by which specific events are created; in other case they are ideas reduces to graphic scheme (spatial formulae), <sometimes the pictures represent extremely simple imprints of specific objects in the subconscious> These black and white images carry with them dramatism as a potency but always remain abstract with respect to it. Their mission is to create a transcendent image of drama - a psycho-physical element²⁰

Norton Dodge, eds. *From Gulag to Glasnost: Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1995, 256.

¹⁸ Barbara Rossi *From the Ocean of Painting: India's Popular paintings 1589 to the Present*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 190-191.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Edzgveradze, Sotheby's, July 1988

On the formal level, it is a duality of black and white colors and lines which aggressively or passively operate forms and signs. It is also important to mention the techniques Edzgveradze used in black and white series. The artist scratches the outline of the object or shape on the slightly textured spiritually charged white surface with the pointed end of paint brush, then he paints in black along the line²¹. This technique gives the painting the subjective writing-drawing gesture and sometimes it produces a nervy script-like effect. In *Yantra Atman* the concentration of the slow scratching and emphasis on the artist's presence together with symbolic representation of "god" produce a powerful effect indicative of the artist's metaphysical quest.

Interestingly, Edzgveradze describes his first black and white picture as a "Concept of the Concept" (1974) as a kind of unconscious act (he was just twenty-one at the time and was about to start the State Georgian Academy of Fine Arts).²² Edzgveradze saw the painting in the dream. One can be reminded of Malevich's *Black Square*.²³ Edzgveradze tried to build his black and white painting, as an act of liberation from the studies at the academy as well as from Soviet painting.

Let us more closely examine the relationship of Gia Edzgveradze to Soviet art and to nonconformist art circles.²⁴ It seems it is important to identify some features of the Soviet mentality and to examine its effect on Edzgveradze's upbringing in the Soviet Union and as well as on the nature of his art. Edzgveradze was raised in the Soviet

²¹ Color white can be viewed as a sign of inexpressible and potentially open spiritual space.

²² Renate Damsch-Wiehager and Knut Nievers, *Gia Edzgveradze: Mind the Gap*, Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1994, 12.

²³ For both Malevich and Edzgveradze the mentioned works were an act of liberation and the new beginning (of course, both artists experimented with completely different formal ideas).

²⁴ For the general outline of the state of the Soviet mentality and its relation to nonconformist art, I would cite descriptions by Ilya Kabakov and Erik Bulatov who can be considered representatives of muscovite conceptual nonconformist circles. In his interview, Kabakov claims that he is a Soviet artist, that is why it would be interesting to compare Kabakov's model to Edzgveradze's.

Union and so he would probably have experienced the duality of the Soviet system: that is, the sharp division between the public sphere and the private sphere, which caused people to feel they were living two different lives simultaneously. This schizophrenic existence, coupled with his sense that the Soviet system was eternal even if absurd, led Edzgeradze, like many other nonconformist artists, to search within himself. Starting with school, one can see how the duality of the Soviet system could have shaped Edzgeradze. At school, he must have seen that the split between public and private spheres extended to language as well. One language was used at home (in his case, Georgian), but another (Russian) was used at work and school. In Georgia as well as in other Soviet republics, the use of language was especially important. At school the Russian language was enforced. In those days, every Soviet child was told that he could have a very happy childhood and a variety of educational experiences: all he had to do was “to study, study, study,” as Lenin put it. Real life, by contrast, was very different: it was miserable. Ilya Kabakov, who represents an older generation of artists, and who can be considered representative of the feeling among some nonconformist artists regarding public and private life, remembers those days as follows:

You must sit very carefully, control all your own movements, particularly the words. This had very interesting effect on children, because all words are divided into two groups: the first words are for others and the other words for yourself. And you get like a little schizophrenic.²⁵

Language itself carried the huge weight of Soviet ideology and was indispensable to the functioning of society. A Soviet person had to speak carefully, but to the point. He or she could not be either quiet or garrulous. Over all, the Soviet person was supposed to be tolerant, friendly, happy, and positive. School was one of the most important public

institutions to develop and teach these values. But if one looked underneath the surface of Soviet “happiness,” one would find a struggling inner self. The gap between official life and everyday life, between what one thought and what one was allowed to say, caused a split in the personality. The person needed to live a double life in order to survive in the system.

The ideological purpose of an art education at that time was limited to produce faithful followers of Social realism, the only acceptable style of the time. It was a completely ideological style. Like other members of the society, artists were forced to contribute to the Soviet image, which, in their case, they did by depicting heroes and the Soviet Paradise with optimism and conviction. These idealized images were expected to be executed with simplicity and plastic clarity, so, that they would be easily accessible to the masses. This is why the schools taught only classical art that Socialist realism could draw upon. Art courses covered art from the Egyptians to the Renaissance, from the Renaissance to the Barbican painters, and, finally classical Russian realism²⁶, considered the forbearer of Socialist Realism. Official art education did not include either Russian avant-garde art or modern Western art.

The 1970s saw renewed censorship and harassment, included the deportation of Alexander Solzhenitsyn and the exile of Andrei Sakharov. It also precipitated an emigration of artists and critics to the West. The unexpected crackdown caused an incalculable loss of artistic talent and led to a stifling period of stagnation and conservatism in politics. That, in turn, led many people to feel that the Soviet system was eternal. As Ilya Kabakov puts it:

²⁵ Amei Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov - The man who never Threw Anything Away*. Harry N. Abrams, Inc, Publishers, 1996, 22.

Our generation believed that Soviet power would last for 10,000 years, that nothing would ever change. Therefore each of us oriented his art not to the future but to the varied spaces of the past or to the existing Soviet environment.²⁷

This sense that the Soviet system would endure forever also played an important role in many of nonconformist artists, including Edzgeradze turn inwards towards a search for truth within the self.

Another important point for understanding the relationship of Soviet reality to the arts can be found in a discussion of two crises that unofficial art underwent. Eric Bulatov, a Muscovite nonconformist artist, has written that the first crisis occurred when the artists confronted the lies of Socialist Realism and rejected them. Most “unofficial” artists were interested in defining their identity within the "true" art of Western modernism. Formalism was their escape from ideological pressure and everyday life. That is to say, artists tried to define their existence by removing it from its political context, as if they lived in a void.

The second crisis (at least for Kabakov’s conceptualist circle) seemed from the recognition that neither Social realism nor Western modernism had anything to do with reality. As Bulatov describes it:

The second crisis was even more important than first. It was the understanding that in order to deal with the life which existed around us, one had to invent a new language, because with the language of this “real” good art it is impossible to deal with reality. All art is born of the real material and cannot be grafted onto another material. One has to understand the language of this life.²⁸

Many Muscovite artists like Kabakov, Bulatov, and others were concerned with the

²⁶ Ibid., 28.

²⁷ Robert Storr "An Interview with Ilya Kabakov." *Art in America* 83, no. 1 (January 1995), 125.

²⁸ Amei Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov - The man who never Threw Anything Away*, 39.

destructive effect of Soviet reality on the individual. They thought to rework the Soviet language and to examine the social and political context of the Soviet regime in their art.

Being a non-Russian Edzgeradze not only needed to respond to Soviet Reality, but as well as to question of "minority" within the nonconformist circles. Thus, it seems Edzgeradze needed to respond to the double estrangement of being a nonconformist, and a non-Russian. Edzgeradze at that time did not use his art to comment on Soviet socio-political realities, although the formalist aspect of Edzgeradze's works, in itself, was already an act of rebellion against Soviet – and Georgian – ideological structures.

For Georgian, there exists the challenge of reestablishing an identity separate from the Soviet cultural identity imposed upon them during colonization. Inevitably, the construction of a Soviet cultural identity is inseparable from "Other-ing" the native as its object. To include words in Russian can be viewed as a tool for gaining independence. For writers it can be viewed as a form of writing against the colonialist discourse established externally to them, but to which they were inevitably subjected. Engaging the discourse of the authority fueled the self-constitution of the native subject's history. However, the question still remains, though: Can Russian language²⁹ ever belong to the "colonized"? It seems that Edzgeradze chooses to include a different kind of writing - his own scripture-drawing writing system. This system can be viewed as Edzgeradze's

²⁹ Idea of language: language consists of much more than words on paper; the spirit of what is communicated is more significant than what is printed as text. The use of written language requires an understanding of its construction, the ability to apply language, and a cultural context. Cultural context comes about as a result of writing as a member of a particular society or culture, enabling the writer with techniques, clichés, and phrases particular to the given society. It is only when a writer intends to write from a non-native perspective that the cultural context is minimized, and even then few aspects are still evident in the produced work.

tool for "writing back" and an aspect of hybridization of both Soviet and Georgian cultures.³⁰

A search for metaphysical in art can be considered one of the elements which unite a number of nonconformist artists. Edzgveradze consciously embarked upon finding a way of integrating the color white into his works as a conceptual element.³¹

Edzgveradze said "The black and white approach to painting takes over the function of unification, it shows that everything is a modification of one and the same material: those archetypes black and white."³² Edzgveradze wrote in a manifesto:

By turning away from color, I carry the principle of convention to its limit. For color, by its nature, is something suspended between life and convention, on the other hand, perceived (and presented to us as something real, on the other, somehow elusive, ephemeral, flowing). Black and White is a medium of natural duality, of conflict, which is the foundation of the manifestation of existence.³³

The conflict between black and white, between Soviet and Georgian cultures, between East and West, the black and white colors allows him to passive or aggressive interplay of signs and forms. *Which One is the Murder Knife* (1985) is another painting from the Black and White cycle and is one of the most powerful pieces by Edzgveradze at the Zimmerli Art Museum. The work is from the simple and sacred objects series, in which Edzgveradze tries to extricate and express the ideas of a knife and a murder.

Edzgveradze writes, "The line is absolute reality. The line is conventional mode of expressing the outside world. ... A subtle interplay between the two poles of reality and

³⁰ Being non-Georgian and non-Russian in its structure, this visual writing system allows Edzgveradze to avoid limitation of Soviet and Georgian colonial constructions.

³¹ Renate Damsch-Wiehager and Knut Nievers, *Gia Edzgveradze: Mind the Gap*, Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1994, 12.

³² *Ibid.*, 12.

³³ Elena Kornetchuk "Nonconformist art of Georgia: A synthesis of East and West," Rosenfeld, Alla and Norton Dodge, eds. *From Gulag to Glasnost: Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1995, 256

convention, awareness of reality and symbols."³⁴ In tearing these everyday objects out of their usual context, the artist has the power to charge them with different connotations and new symbolic meaning, giving them a second life. On the other hand, if we consider black lines cutting through the white spiritual surface of the painting as a symbolic representation of fear and the experience of death, it is possible to make some allusions to Georgian and Russian cultural relationship.³⁵

Let us compare the situation in Georgia and Russia (in general). After continuous changes in Georgia a new intelligentsia emerged, characterized with nationalistic aspirations and ideological pragmatism. The number of Russians decreased (from 1959 to 1970 - from 10.1% to 8.5%), and unlike other Soviet republics, the social status of Russians was relatively low. Fewer children went to Russian schools compared to the previous period when career seekers learned Russian³⁶. The difference in the ideological atmosphere at Georgian and Russian schools, ideological cynicism versus loyalty to Komsomol slogans, was stark. The period was also characterized by a revival of visual arts and the cinema. The success of the Georgian films and of Georgian football teams became the source of national pride and concern.

By mid-1970s ethnic Georgians became a majority in Tbilisi, due to a rapid growth of the city due to rural migration. In general, while on the surface the Russian cultural intervention seemed to become more evident, in fact Georgian nationalism preserved its impetus, after late 1950s still had strong roots. The process of "hybridization" was on the way. Apart from Abkhazia where the Russian language dominated, fewer and fewer Georgian children studied at Russian schools, every cultural

³⁴ *Gia Edzgeradze*. Exhibition Catalogue. Germany

³⁵ Edzgeradze does not articulate any political meaning in his works.

event or sport battle of a national significance attracted great interest and support. Discussions of the historical chronology of Georgian (as compared to e.g. Armenian) cultural monuments, were common even among less competent but nevertheless fervent speakers. As a result, the society gradually ripened for resisting any attempt to reduce the role of national language and culture, which were undertaken from time to time by Moscow ideologists, who understood the danger of nationalism in multi-ethnic society with dying ideology. At the same time, according to Elena Kornetchuk it was during "decade of revelations" that the 1983 retrospective of David Kakabadze took place. Kornetchuk suggests that this exhibition greatly motivated the abstract work of many younger artists, including Edzgvradze, Iliko Zautashvili, and others.³⁷

In the respect to Abstract art, the name of Alexander Bandzeladze,³⁸ the founder and mentor of the unofficial abstract school of painting in Georgia, is important to mention. Many artists, including Edzgvradze, took his "secret course in abstract creativity". Bandzeladze taught how to separate beautiful curving lines and an open painterly gesture in the painting, and how to emphasize the canvas both as material and spiritual support.³⁹ Bandzeladze consciously tried to distance himself not only from Soviet ideological imperatives, but also, as Renate Damsch Wiehager has suggested, from the primitivist pictorial Georgian tradition of Niko Piromanishvili.⁴⁰ It seems that

³⁶ However, the state language was Russian and even in Georgian school, children had to learn it.

³⁷ Elena Kornetchuk "Nonconformist art of Georgia: A synthesis of East and West," Rosenfeld, Alla and Norton Dodge, eds. *From Gulag to Glasnost: Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1995, 255.

³⁸ Alexander Bandzeladze began his career teaching at the Tbilisi Art Academy and worked in impressionist style. In 1955, he broke away with official painting and started experimenting and exploring abstract painting.

³⁹ Damsch-Wiehager, Renate, and Knut Nievers, *Gia Edzgvradze: Mind the Gap*, Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1994, 10. I could not find any confirmation in writing by Bandzeladze.

⁴⁰ Artists "used a pictorial language that has become abstract in terms of form and content, and cut themselves off from the ideological interest of the State." Damsch-Wiehager, Renate, and Knut Nievers, *Gia Edzgvradze: Mind the Gap*, Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1994, 10.

one of the reasons of estrangement from Pirosmanishvili was his association with the romantic orientalist construction of Georgia by the Soviets. However, as we have seen earlier, exploring juxtaposition and the use of colors in some of Bandzeladze's works, similar to Edzgveradze, one can trace some similarities to Georgian culture.

Edzgveradze was one of the artists interested in establishing links with Russian nonconformist artists. How did Russian nonconformist artists react to non-Russian nonconformist artists? The first exhibition of nonconformist Georgian art was organized by Leonid Bazhanov, an active promoter and advocate of the Georgian school of abstract painting in Moscow.⁴¹ Even though many nonconformist artists came to see the show and were very supportive, the members of the Georgian school, as led by Bandzeladze were still seen as "outsiders," as representatives of an exotic culture at the beginning. One should also consider the role of "center-periphery" in the colonial discourse, where Moscow was the center and the rest of the country was periphery.⁴² Moscow was considered the cultural center of the Soviet Empire. The exposure and acceptance in Moscow was important, in the respect that it could open many possibilities for the artists. Edzgveradze was selected for the Sotheby's auction after his success and recognition in Moscow. One can draw an interesting parallel between reception of Pirosmanishvili's works by the Russian avant-garde artists and reception of Edzgveradze's works by nonconformist Russian artists. Even though in both cases, the artists were fascinated by works and helped to promote Georgian works in Moscow by including them in

⁴¹ The exhibition was held in Moscow in 1987.

⁴² First, the Russian Empire and its successor, the Soviet Union, were contiguous empires; there were no natural boundaries between the center and the periphery. In the Russian and Soviet cases, the center was represented by the capital city - St. Petersburg and, later, Moscow - not by some well-defined core territory.

exhibitions, the Georgian artists were seen as an "alien," as a representatives of Georgian culture.

The late 1980s, notably the 1988 Sotheby's auction, marked a turning point in Edzgveradze career. Prior to 1989, Edzgveradze never mentioned his origin, eventhough he was included in Sotheby's auction as a representative of the "other" culture and was the only artist from Georgia.⁴³ Only after Edzgveradze arrived in the West and found himself facing a different audience, did he start to question his identity. Edzgveradze's work became more narrative and biographical, revealing an internal psychological or philosophical conflict, between the East and the West, duality of both being Georgian Soviet-born and living in the West. When Edzgveradze moved to the West, there was a change. He seems to have sensed the loss of a "stagnant" situation,⁴⁴ and to have begun thinking more clearly about the society surrounding him.

Examining Edzgveradze's relationship to Georgian and nonconformist art, we realize that Edzgveradze's works do represent hybridity and metonymy of presence when "cultural differences are not simply there to be seen or appropriated."⁴⁵ Hybrid discourse helps Edzgveradze to "write back" against domination and objectification. One could hypothesize that Edzgveradze tried to utilize a number of Western and Soviet discourses in order create a system of painting-writing which, according to Babha "the presence of colony often alienates its own language of liberty."⁴⁶ Can we then say that

⁴³ Of course, he writes that he was born in Tbilisi, Georgia and that he is a Georgian by nationality. However, he never makes any reference to any of the Georgian artists, except for Bandzeladze (who Edzgveradze considers to be advocate of Western Modernism).

⁴⁴ As referred by Kabakov

⁴⁵ Homi K. Babha "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817," *The Location of Culture*, 1994, 115.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, 115.

"Edzgveradze" is the colonial "other" produced by mimicry?⁴⁷ Probably, yes. As we have seen earlier Edzgveradze is a hybrid of Georgian and Soviet cultures.

Edzgveradze has lived abroad since 1989, but his connection with Georgia is now more apparent. He emphasizes the problem of context (and what happens when the context is removed). Edzgveradze's works become more narrative and biographical, and imply a psychological or philosophical conflict within himself. Looking at the relationship between the vanished Soviet reality and his art work, one immediately notices a change in his attitude to the Soviet Union. In previous works, the artist was haunted by the duality of the Soviet system, by its seemingly unchanging, eternal nature. In those days, the only salvation from Soviet ideology was the spiritual search into the self. But the works done outside of Georgia present another view of the Soviet reality: it is now the past, and the artist himself realizes that he was the part of that past. He is looking from the outside towards his past.

Natalia Kolodzei, July 2001.

⁴⁷ The metonymic strategy produces the signifier of colonial mimicry as a effect of hybridity. *ibid*, 120.

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