

Dear Joseph,

I arrived here in Tbilisi three days ago after a long trip and delays from the other side of the Atlantic. My first time back since I left in 1988 and my bags have not yet arrived and this makes me happy as I have collected too much over the years and I need to become lighter one way or another.

It was a hard decision for me to accept this invitation to my own hometown after all these years, and I feel the challenge and the responsibly: The challenge to be able to experience the place in itself as it exists today without projections and expectations of my past, and the responsibility to bring back something that is of use and interest to everyone here, my friends, relatives and the artists at this event I am invited to attend. "Frozen Moments: Architecture Speaks Back" is a contradictory yet interesting title for such an event. Is there such a thing as a frozen moment, since a moment by definition is the most fluid of notions and a moment can be described as the gate at the crossroads of the two avenues of the past and the future. As for Architecture, that was yet another challenge since my interest in Architecture, as it is practiced or understood today, dissipated a while ago.

It is not easy for me to go in detail into this past, but I felt the need for creating a new space for myself that would not force me into one identity or one nationality or one profession isolated from the rest of the world of peoples and ideas. Ideology had weighed heavy on me, I needed to get away from it to be able to see and think clearly. But soon enough I discovered living in the former west, that the more you think you are away from ideology the closer you are entrenched in it. This revelation brought me to a different process that lead me to art.

But art, what forces give rise to art? I have returned to this same question time and again: What is the need - i.e., what is the truly objective constellation of forces working in us and the world - that justifies the creation of something like art? This question has certainly had an important place in my life recently, and has led me to distance myself from my initial involvement in architecture.

My dear Joseph, I have thought of you as I was drifting down Rustaveli Avenue the other morning. I saw a poster announcing some Free University, I quote: Free University of Tbilisi and Harvard University Professors Present International Summer School on Leadership. I found out later from Sophia that in fact it is not free at all, that it is closely related to what has been happening in Georgia for the past few years.

For a moment, I wish I was transported by ambulance on a stretcher here to this little room directly from the airport, so as not to see what I saw. I am thinking of drafting a letter to everyone here in this city, my city, that I do not recognize any more. My intuition is right that there is a kind of missionary capitalism opening business schools and centers as a new kind of church everywhere in the world, with priests in government and believers recruited especially here in the east.

On my way back I saw a large billboard opposite to the parliament with a photoshopped image of the Georgian flag which reminded me of our conversation at Antje's dinner in Berlin a few weeks ago in relation to the cross and christianity. Indeed and here it is most obvious, that this equilateral red cross on the flag is almost exclusively translated in neo-liberal terms as the plus and minus signs and in the field of military and war as the sight in a weapon or a machine gun and not to forget the scientific context which uses it as the rational coordinate system. For me however the cross stands for something else: since I see its vertical part alluding to the political divisions between North and South, to the artificial separation of cultures and peoples and its horizontal part insinuating the inner cracks of modern man and society. The actual unity of the cross has been shattered into factions, nations and into all the other forms of alienation.

It is very hot today, and the temperature is almost 42 degrees Celsius. Are you still in Berlin? If you have time, I will try to call you next week to speak further about your research in Croatia this fall. In any case my number here is +995-93-272-269 and my new mobile in Germany is 01578-8475437. I'll try to keep at least one of them on. I am attaching the letter addressing the citizens of Tbilisi, I have managed to enlist two young art students to help me distribute them across the city. I will be happy to receive your thoughts.

Many hugs to Eva,

Vova

p.s. I am also helping initiate a discussion on the subject of architecture, entitled 'What is to Be Undone,' at Gela's family dacha in a small mountain village north of Tbilisi. But more on this front later.

Dear Comrades,

Consider this letter as an update from me to you. As someone who lived through the transition or crash or fall of the Soviet Union and has now lived through the future of another illusion in the United States and Europe culminating in the financial crisis of 2008 and 2009. And I am writing this letter to reflect on these double crashes. We are unable to ignore the first, but it would be equally foolish to ignore the second.

It has been nearly 20 years since the independence of our country. And a lot has happened in that time that needs our time, our time to think, or just to understand what that experience was, and what could be made from this experience that could in fact be worthy of it. I guess, in some way, I am also writing to you about your time, or what could be 'worth' your time. Or maybe my letter is about this relation between time, money, life, and our shared existence with all life forms on this planet and beyond.

What is really the value of your time, and what is it that we value in our life? What is the measure of what is valuable?

Growing up in Tbilisi, already by the early 80s, talk of the party or communism was not to be taken seriously, ideology or the illusion of a future of communism was unravelling for most of us. And the national aspiration seemed the only path toward emancipation. What was so exciting in that time was that something new was taking shape, and the future seemed open ended. I was in Moscow studying by the late 80s and it was an incredible moment returning home to Tbilisi and finding an electric energy. But this time was short lived.

Soon after our independence, came the civil war, the realities of a failed state, the slow steady dispossession of whatever was previously held in the name of the people but controlled by the state, and the new dependencies. We suffered a kind of dark age and it seemed our only hope was to leave. I managed to leave to Berlin, hoping to investigate the new challenges facing the eastern cities after the fall of the Wall and what appeared to be the dawn of a new era.

Those first years were very difficult for me, away from my home, family, and friends. But all of them, except maybe my grandparents, encouraged me to stay out and to continue my studies. I slowly made some close friendships, but my studies lead to a series of great disappointments. At the border of the former east and the former west, I discovered a great complacency. My teachers and my fellow students were not ready to embark toward a new world. But were instead wanting to assimilate to the conditions of an old one. For them, this moment meant the end of history, a time of a great new consensus: communism was a failure and the victory of capitalism and liberal democracy together signaled the only possible course for a future of a world community.

In my studies in architecture, I found this unbearable complacency. There was little possibility of inventing or escaping the logic of the ruling ideology. Architects were not interested in constructing a new world by imagining a different role for themselves. What did it mean for me to come and be educated in a context which could not or did not want to understand the reality I was coming from? For many of my colleagues studying abroad meant understanding why capitalism was triumphant, and why the ways of the West were superior to our own. But I simply saw the last stages of another ideology crumbling. An ideology which spoke of freedom and equality, but was based on an idea that humans are motivated by self-interest, find their value through private accumulation, relate best to others through competition and understand their brothers and sisters as mere obstacles or a means toward their own self-realization. In short, all individual decisions should be conducted with the same cost-benefit analysis of a businessman.

But I had no interest to relate to my family, friends, and neighbors with the calculation of a businessman. On top of this, I saw the same blind idea of progress which marked my Soviet experience. Even the role of religion was not used as an access to our spiritual bonds with the planet, but was instead being used as an instrument to control the people and to mobilize their energies, much like a football club.

Through a series of events with my family, I arrived to live in New York instead of returning to Tbilisi. And even though I was already very skeptical, I interned and later worked for several of the best architecture firms, trying to see if there was something more a young Georgian could get, other than earning a living. The more I worked, the less meaningful the work became. And though my colleagues were creative, the degree of specialization, and the isolation of their work from the larger questions facing our collective existence remained impossible for me.

I guess, as I write this letter, I am a part of the group that could refer to itself as having 20/20 vision. We lived through 20 years of so-called communism and 20 years of so-called capitalism and maybe, this is the moment that we can briefly see things most clearly.

For me, there is no question, that the answers to our future cannot be found repeating the failed experiments of the past. And it is no coincidence that the war here in the summer of 2008, was followed by the beginning of the financial crash of 2008. We are intrinsically implicated in the reshaping process of the world and we cannot pretend to be outside these forces. Capitalism knows no other way to save itself from its own failures then through inventing new ways to continue the game, and exploiting false antagonisms between peoples and manufacturing crises to govern the multitudes, buying itself time to reinvent new promises.

And, as with our Soviet experience, we are once again being asked to sacrifice the present for the better future. But what is this future? Where can we see the signs of it?

I recently visited Detroit, which was one of the key engines of the American economy and one of its great cities of promise. A utopia of the industrial revolution, of Fordism, of the march toward the future. Today, the city lays largely abandoned. The car manufacturing industry which once provided most of the city's jobs is in the final phases of its expiry. The recent bubble in housing prices was the final step, as the people who borrowed money against their homes could no longer afford to pay the banks back without jobs. Thousands of houses remain empty and left abandoned to fall under their own weight and the long hand of the clock. While we are busy destroying our market stands in the city and preaching to ourselves the modern conveniences of supermarkets, the citizens of Detroit have no supermarkets to speak of. In the centers of the city, communities are attempting to organize themselves, using abandoned land to build urban organic farms and to create common spaces once again, where people can meet and have more in common than their own gradual demise.

And one may ask, where is the state, to help care for the people? Well, since over the last 35 years of US economic policy, the role of the state was not to care for people, but to care for the well-being of corporations. Healthy commercial environment, means a healthy people. But what to do when the commercial environment is no longer healthy? The logic, which is the one arriving to our students in the universities today, is that the best role a state can play is to get out of the way, so that corporations can improve the world.

But what corporation do we know of, whose interest is to improve the world? Despite all of their beautiful billboards of clean skies and healthy people, the only logic of corporations is to make money. So what fool would entrust the well-being of our planet to that logic? And if we say no, do we really believe that the nation or the church will be our protectors against such a logic?

I remain doubtful of this proposition. Maybe because with my 20/20 vision, I see clearly that not one of these individuals who invokes Christianity or the great Nation believes for one second in what these words called to. They were historically attempts to free us from the bonds of slavery, to emancipate our minds, our spirits and our time, to help us find a voice together, to discover an equality between one another. But today, we are more than ever, divided, voiceless, impoverished, and enslaved. Our borders have become the walls of a self-made prison. The only free flow is that of capital. And the only government rescue or assistance comes not to the people but to the companies.

The current crisis in the former west is not economic bankruptcy, or the threat of losing material resources, but it is an impoverishment of imagination and minds. Whatever intersection of lines we may find ourselves in, my comrades, we will need to create a different path than those paved by the logic of war, exploitation, and fear.

As I write this letter, I am staying with a friend of mine here in Kala. And we can take this neighborhood as our example for many of the problems we confront. For most, this area, is at best, a lucrative site, only for its location in the center of the city. In such a logic, its value is not the people who inhabit and give life to this place: its value is not the living history and biography of the diversity of our city. Its value is not the richness of the knowledge and tradition that resides within its crumbling walls. But it is simply seen as a possible site of renovation or simply, continued neglect, which could lead to eventual collapse and even more lucrative conditions for investors who might buy cheap and sell high.

But is this the best future we can see for such a place? Are human beings and the rich ecologies which they create over decades of so little value? Does it, for instance, make sense to invest tens of millions of dollars to pay for an alien bridge adjacent to this neighborhood, while its residents suffer from unemployment and no resources to improve their surroundings or to organize sustenance for themselves?

A bridge connecting peoples is not a bad thing, but why not invest in those people as much we might in the structures that connect them?

In a place like Kala, resides a treasure, a heritage of the diverse families and lives which are a living testimony of our great history of co-existence and cosmopolitanism. We don't need to make of this history a theme park with false facades and a projected uniform monoculture. We could rather imagine it as a living and breathing experiment in preserving not just the physical and material traces of our past, but the cultural diversity which lives and breathes in our city's quarters. I could write you at length of ideas and proposals for such a place and such processes. And if we look West, rather than look at London or New York, we can look to cities like Baltimore, Detroit and New Orleans to understand the future of Capitalism. We will find out that no corporate logic nor individualist paradigm of self-entrepreneurship will resolve our common challenges.

If our world requires self-organizing, it cannot be of the sort that rests on the exploitation of others. We have to understand where we may construct the grounds for solidarity and build around our common concerns today, not for some abstract tomorrow. And more and more it becomes clear to me that there is no such thing as a solution in one country for all these questions and problems. Please consider this letter as a first step towards this kind of movement. I know that we may not be able to meet each other this time, but when we meet each other one day in the near future, we will find in each other's faces this mutual recognition and we will smile.

Sincerely Yours,

Vova Volnovik

