

Dialogues with Power

Introduction

This publication, entitled “Dialogues with Power,” comprises the final stage of research work that I carried out in February 2017 in the framework of the “Field Research” program at Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow. I learned about the program when I, as a curator of art projects, was discussing an idea about a monumental installation with an artist of Armenian descent from Iran named Raffi Davtian. For the realization of the project, the light, durable, and efficient cellular surfaces of twofold curvature, hyperboloid constructions, which were first developed and used by the engineer Vladimir G. Shukhov (1853-1939), seemed quite suitable.

We started the research by finding out the technical details, approaches, and methods for constructing Shukhov’s hyperboloids, and shortly afterward I became interested in the political motives of Shukhov’s activities. Initially, and more specifically, it was the subject of collaboration between the scientific and artistic intelligentsia with the Soviet authorities. Most of Shukhov’s projects were realized during intense political and social upheavals that overwhelmed not only Russia but the whole world at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Shukhov, having made a name for himself as a brilliant pioneer, scientist, and practicing engineer during the last Czarist regime in Russia, continued his engineering practice after the October Revolution as well, engaging in a collaboration with the Bolshevik regime.

Shukhov’s name is associated with the notorious broadcasting (Shabolov) tower (1920-1922) in Moscow, which became one of the most well-known symbols of the Soviet period and its ideology. The Soviet propaganda considered Shukhov’s “steel architecture” as part of its own ideological scenario, where the identity of Soviet citizens was, among other things, being constructed through large-scale projects meant to unite them around the “great Soviet achievements.” Lenin ordered the tower’s construction, and, through realizing his plan of monumental propaganda, a material object became a bearer of Soviet ideology. A number of researchers mention that Shukhov did not approve of the Bolshevik regime and called them “ignorant people with red IDs.” However, he went on to collaborate with a system that was alien to him, while having

the opportunity to work in Germany and America, where he had been invited many times.¹

Shukhov's political views were quite naïve. One of his assertions stated that Bolshevism emerged and established itself as a result of the deep devastation that dominated Russia. He believed that if the devastation were to be eliminated through a civilizing mission of the thinking class, the violent Soviet imperial hegemony dominating over a vast territory called the Soviet Union would self-destruct. Meanwhile, the Bolshevik government had Shukhov under its sight (just like all the other "bourgeois specialists") and often accused him of incompetence and sabotage, while making use of his high professional expertise. Simultaneously, the government was building a proletariat class, which was mostly ignorant and was supposed to replace the "bourgeois survivors" in different areas of expertise as quickly as possible.

Many representatives of the thinking class were often blamed for the fact that, after surviving the Bolshevik "red terror" and Stalin's purges, they continued to serve the Soviet system. The ethical complexity of the ambivalent situation—recognition and disfavor—touched many prominent people of that period. This ambivalence is rather a tragedy than duplicity. It is a tragedy of a "double mind" that tortured some Soviet scientists, artists, musicians, and others. In every field with its own specificities and level of fatality, these people, stigmatized as "bourgeois specialists" and "fellow travelers,"² continued to work and create often without a choice. According to a widespread opinion, it is hard to consider the people involved in scientific-technical or engineering fields (Shukhov was among them) innocent in their service to one or

¹ Here and further I have used information on Shukhov's biography and political views from his diaries available at the Library of Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow and research by I. Pryadko, M. Volodina, and E. Shukhova.

² The expression "fellow traveler" is part of the Soviet political slang. In the years following the October Revolution it did not have a negative connotation—it was used to refer to those representatives of the thinking class who sympathized with the Soviet power without being members of the Bolshevik Party. A "careful" attitude toward these people with "transitional ideology" had been adopted, as they were considered qualified specialists. Later on, the expression obtained a negative undertone and started to be used for stigmatizing the enemies of the Revolution.

another totalitarian system. In this regard, the example of the arms race between the USSR and the West is quite relevant. It resulted in the creation of nuclear and hydrogen bombs, which were invented by scientists and not the military. On the other hand, an opposite view exists as well, which defends the rather influential idea of the “purity of science”—the abstract pureness of science and the value of scientific thought in itself, regardless of whom it serves. This is a predicament that thinking people often have to face. It is the ethical dilemma that the thinking class is still facing today: we all have to somehow deal with the conflict between our values—the inmost meaning behind whatever we do—and the ruling systems that appropriate the results of our work.³

Rather on the level of private conversations than theoretical approaches, Shukhov is often attributed to the Soviet artistic-architectural avant-garde movement, being considered as one of the builders of the new avant-garde world of forms, the father of Russian constructivism, especially in the context of the often mechanical coupling of technics and art. “Shukhov is reconstruction, steel, and avant-garde,” I was told by Shukhov’s great-grandson and researcher of his heritage Vladimir Shukhov during a private conversation. However, one can only speak about the aesthetical coincidence of Shukhov’s “constructivism” with the avant-garde: formally, features of avant-garde architecture were being emphasized in Shukhov’s aesthetics, but, as it turned out, that was not justified, since ideologically Shukhov does not fit into the group of avant-garde activists in any way. The most consistent researchers of Shukhov’s heritage, like Igor Pryadko, consider him an adherent of the Vitruvian geometry, natural proportions, and evolution of nature, which contrasted with the violent geometry of the avant-garde design. Moreover, the Russian avant-garde and constructivism that emerged from it followed the ideology of totality and the absolute, rejecting historicism.

Vladimir Shukhov was a “lonely architect”—the architectural community did not accept an engineer who tended, though unintentionally, to occupy an architectural-artistic niche. On the other hand, the architectural community that dove into the Stalinist

³ From a verbal conversation with curator and art historian V. Misiano.

neoclassicism did not only stop being perceptive toward any constructivist innovations but even boycotted them.⁴

After looking at the social, political, and cultural aspects, at the events and the period during which Shukhov's activities took place, it becomes obvious that Shukhov's subject-matter has a significant potential for a more expansive discursive generalizations related not only to the experience of the heterogeneous Soviet past but to the periods following it. My research surpassed the subject of Shukhov, and I proposed to discuss with experts from Moscow and Yerevan the following topics within the framework of my research: the thinking class in dialogue with power (ideological aspects, political views, and collaboration of the Soviet intelligentsia and post-Soviet intellectuals with power and the changing dynamics of these relationships); Soviet avant-garde and the hegemony of the empire (similarities and difference of cultural hegemony of the Soviet avant-garde with the "hegemonic ambitions of the Soviet national and international politics"); and whether the post- in postcolonial means the post- in the post-Soviet⁵ (about the usefulness of the theoretical tools of postcolonial researches for rethinking the Soviet past and the phenomenon called "post-Soviet"). In the context of this rethinking, references to the Soviet-Armenian and the post-Soviet national contexts were also important, and many topics were being discussed around a vector directed toward an analysis of the local Armenian context.

Cultural critic from Armenia Hrach Bayadyan, artist Dmitry Gutov, and curator and art historian Viktor Misiano kindly agreed to discuss the above-mentioned topics. I will step back here and state that Gutov proposed not to follow the questions posed but instead constructed an autobiographical narrative about the evolution of his attitude toward the Soviet system and its political leaders during the different eras of the Soviet regime with a small commentary on today's political elite of the Kremlin. The conversations were videotaped, edited, and, along with a laconic research material on Shukhov, combined into a project entitled "Dialogues with Power: The Case of Shukhov." I presented the

⁴ From a verbal conversation with architecture historian Mark Akopyan.

⁵ David Chioni Moore. 2001. Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique'. *PMLA*, 116 (1): 111–128.

project at the international exhibition “Field Research: To Liberate Knowledge” organized by the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in October 2017. The exhibition incorporated works related to Soviet subject matter from international curators, artists, and researchers.

This was a period when many of the significant events and discussions in Moscow were directly or indirectly related to the 100th anniversary of the October Revolution. Among the “October festivities” that had overwhelmed the city with a large number of exhibitions, the subject of Russian or Soviet avant-garde was given importance, the appraisal of which was apparent in many verbal and visual representations. The unfading *sacral* light framing the “avant-garde of the geniuses,” along with an aureole of martyrs fallen during the years of Stalin’s terror, surrounds the history of avant-garde with an impenetrable aura that does not seem to allow the voice of critical rethinking to seep through. Irina Sandomirskaia preliminarily suggested some fundamental features of the avant-garde version of hegemony, which partly coincide with the rhetoric on Kremlin-style hegemony, allowing a discussion in postcolonial terms. In accordance to her theoretical reflections, the avant-garde and the Kremlin hegemony differ, however, in their methods and goals. Notwithstanding these differences, the presence of hegemonic imagination in the avant-garde can be identified in their concepts and terms, such as thinking in terms of global expansion, whether expressed in terms of a world revolution (Trotsky), or the utopian belief in the inevitable triumph of socialism throughout the world (which Stalin’s program of industrialization accepted but postponed indefinitely); thinking in terms of “the East and the West,” “civilization and wilderness,” “progress and regression (otstalost),” and “obscurity (temnota) and enlightenment”; thinking in terms of “majority and minority” (natsmeny, “ethnic minorities”) and “center and periphery”; thinking in terms of, and actively inventing and implementing, various unified, universalizing systems of representation (like alphabets and normalized linguistic standards); and imagining and constructing universal languages in order to overthrow historical, national, and literary systems of representation.

The subject of the Soviet avant-garde has been quite urgent in the context of contemporary art in Armenia. The most politically and socially engaged artists started to

compare themselves with the Russian avant-garde, considering it the forerunner of non-servile, revolutionary art and a vivid example of radical civil and political activism. It must be said that this revolutionary zeal of the artists is also being supported by the non-commercial nature of the local artistic scene, which is largely due to the complete absence of opportunities to get involved in the Western flows of cultural and financial capital and the lack of local funding. During the process of merging local artists with civil activism, which has been most active during the past few years, in Armenia's local contemporary art scene, a so-called "post-conceptual turn" can be observed. By this I mean the rejection of new theories and contemporary discourses, even though at earlier stages of the process of ideological formation of the local scene, references to post-structuralist and post-modernist discourses were very common. In recent years, certain art projects in Armenia have been references to the activities of LEF⁶ and Proletkult.⁷ LEF's method of factography, invented in the second half of 1920, was, according to Devin Fore, a documental fixation of the facts of reality, which did not have the intention of simply describing the world in a precise manner but tended toward changing the world order through a new way of writing and revolutionary intervention (As B. Shklovsky said, "If facts destroy theory, then all the better for theory.").

The method of factography became a favorite for some Armenian artists, while others started to actively apply visual reductionism and visual references of the formal method of avant-garde (Karen Ohanyan's recent works, early concepts of the "Art Laboratory" artistic group, projects by Karen Andreyan, for whom the factography method became a necessary "substance of ontological materialism," and so on). Vahram Aghasyan's "Reading Huts"⁸ project was followed by an idea to form—with a group of civil activists—a cultural-political or social platform "Commune," the activities of which can

⁶ Left Artistic Front (rus. Levy Front) was an association of avant-garde writers, photographers, critics, and designers in the Soviet Union. It had two periods—from 1923 to 1925 as LEF and from 1927 to 1929 as New LEF (rus. Novy LEF).

⁷ Proletarian Culture (rus. Proletarskaya kultura) was an experimental Soviet artistic initiative formed after the October Revolution in 1917. It was meant for avant-garde artists and different cultural communities to create revolutionary working-class aesthetics.

⁸ Reading huts (rus. izba-chitalnya) were widespread in the Soviet Union during the 1920s. There were one of the methods of struggling against illiteracy among adults.

be interpreted as a reference to the principal of the Soviet “commonality” — early Soviet communal coexistence. Apart from many projects and participation in almost all the protest movements in Armenia, the platform carried out a sort of a “likbez” (campaign against illiteracy)—political readings and studies of Marxist and leftist literature.

In today’s Russia, it is also difficult to hear an unbiased opinion about the Soviet avant-garde, where the idea of a new universal commonality of the former Soviet republics seems to be in demand once again, and where the danger of reproducing the model of imperial multitude, where nations, territories, culture were united within Russian imagination, is not taken into account.

It is interesting to note that the topic of “dialogue” gave an opportunity to the intellectuals from Armenia and Moscow to have conversations on the given topics, although not face to face. In the Soviet period, there was a tradition of inter-communication, and it was developed in relation to the ideological “friendship of the peoples.” Nevertheless, today this tradition no longer exists, as H. Bayadyan notes in his speech. Some representatives of postcolonial research think that former Russian colonies are not able to respond to their colonizer, and this discourse, with little exceptions, is not making any progress. Bayadyan claims that one of the reasons behind this is the absence of a listener, which refers to the Russian intellectuals—people from the Center of the former and current Russian Empire who are not really perceptive and responsive toward issues that are important for the local contexts.

We know a lot of women in the avant-garde movement, but in the triumph of socialism around the world and global expansion of communist ideas, important works of avant-garde activists were secondary or not considered at all.

For the discussion of certain aspects of feminism in the early Soviet years—the years of formation of the so-called State feminism (the term “feminism” did not exist then, and the “women’s question” was on the agenda), of Lenin’s and Stalin’s’ gender policies, as well as feminist manifestation in today’s Armenia, the following experts were invited: Anna Nikoghosyan (queer feminist scholar and activist) and Tamar Shirinian (anthropologist, scholar and specialist on Women’s and Gender Studies). Feminist and especially radical feminist and queer discourses along with postcolonial studies are

marginalized in Armenia. As Bayadyan notes, there is no hope that in the near future they will be included in the university curricula and will be paid attention by academic structures. Therefore, any opportunity to analyze these discourses is highly important.

Shirinian presents the historical dynamics of the development of the dialogue of women's activism and radical Bolshevik feminism with the State, starting from the early Soviet years up until the 1990s. During the early Soviet period, radical Bolshevik feminists collaborated with the leaders of the Revolution (a consensual, yet conflicted dialogue). Moreover, women were given the opportunity to occupy certain executive positions within the State institutions and influence the sexual policy of the Soviet Union all the way from the Center to its peripheries, which came to an end during the period of systematic extermination of women's political movements by Stalin. Shirinian concludes her analysis with the 1990s, when neoliberal feminism emerged in the post-Soviet area, which, according to her, is due to the improvement in the functioning of the markets. Shirinian notes, "One of the ways in which markets began to work better was by liberating women to be able to enter these markets and produce in the privatized space that centralized gender as an issue." Nikoghosyan presents a few examples of feminist resistance in Armenia, such as liberal, radical, and queer feminisms. She also emphasizes the aspect that within the framework of gender issues, most of the financial means received from abroad are addressed to the liberal (or neoliberal) agendas and for implementing programs that fit in the discourse of rights. According to her, these means are allocated "[...] for agendas that do not problematize, for instance, capitalism and neocolonialism, do not make demands for fair redistribution of resources, and do not go against neoliberal principles and the appropriation of feminist politics by big corporations and governments. Not all organizations supporting these agendas generally question the dominance of men from the perspective of feminist criticism, consider violence and discrimination against women from the perspective of patriarchy, and position themselves as feminist groups."

The effectiveness of women's involvement in government institutions is problematic if women officials and politicians work in patriarchal institutions in a quiet and peaceful manner and respond to the "traditional" expectations of their audiences. Therefore, feminism comes forth forming *the other* policy and resistance, which cannot exist along

with the power or collaborate with it.⁹ There is an opinion that, in order to have a proper dialogue with power, both sides need to have knowledge about one another. But is being informed sufficient, and is power willing and able to understand intellectual and feminist or queer discourses that, first of all, are difficult to understand without professional background and are also quite subversive and critical toward any power and patriarchal system?

The given publication does not include reflections and analyses of the revolutionary events and the transition of power that took place in Armenia in Spring 2018, since the content of the book was prepared before these events. However, I consider it necessary to touch briefly upon the post-revolutionary situation in Armenia in view of the main topic of this publication, “Dialogues with Power.”

Different claims regarding reorganization of all the spheres of life in the “new” Armenia have been made, yet nothing has yet been mentioned about the development of and contribution to the humanitarian and intellectual thinking in the country. Instead, in the vision of society’s future positive development, the most important role is given to the development of a society with good management, a developed and competitive field of information technologies, and so on. We witness many discussions on fiscal privileges for small and medium-sized business, and a lot is being said about the development of non-intellectual economic activities. The desire to have a society that would be impacted by intellectual and even anti-patriarchal thinking, despite who is leading the country, seems unrealizable. These discourses, as mentioned above, remain marginal in a negative sense. Thus, the possibility of interaction, mutual understanding, and dialogue between the intellectuals and the new authorities is under question. Here, I mean the intellectuals that are not willing to serve the big politics and prefer to keep the critical distance and the possibility of critical rethinking of social, cultural, and political issues of the country.

⁹ This question was in the center of the Queering Yerevan Happening №XI international event (December 21-23, 2018). I discuss the issue in greater detail in my talk within the framework of the event. Available at: <https://queeringyerevan.blogspot.com/2018/12/qy-happening-xi.html>. Accessed on December 19, 2018.

In the rhetoric of political leadership of today's Armenia, again and again the importance of direct interaction with society is being articulated. This interaction is perceived as a dialogue that is similar to the democratic form of interaction between the power and society based on joint decision-making. An emphasis is made on the consensual nature of the dialogue with all social strata regarding issues related to politics, economics, law, ethical issues, and others. Currently, the wider public calls for abandoning the conflicting, polemic, critical nature of the dialogue with the new Armenian government, which itself has claimed that all representatives of Armenian society are from now on united in their vision of a better future. As a result, a sort of ban on constructive criticism of the country's political leadership currently exists.

Gilles Deleuze even further radicalizes the impossibility of a dialogue between an intellectual (in his case—a philosopher) with power. He prefers to use “negotiations” instead of “dialogue.” In the short introduction of the book of the same name, *Negotiations*, he writes that philosophy is not power. Religion, the State, capitalism, science, law, public opinion, and television are forms of power but philosophy is not. Philosophy, not being a form of power, cannot engage in a battle with the latter. It has its revenge in a war without battles, in a partisan war. It cannot talk with the forms of power, as it does not have anything to say to them, and it carries on the negotiations, which have lasted so long that it is not clear whether the sides are negotiating on peace or their incompatibility carries on. Deleuze seems to urge us not to love power and not get involved with power. Indeed, constant reflection, self-reflection, and doubt are typical of an intellectual and need to be left behind when entering big politics.

Armenia's new government needs to pay attention to the opinions of the intellectuals and the critically thinking class in general and engage them as experts to solve urgent issues and reorganize many of the spheres of life in the country. This valuable asset of thought and experience still exists in Armenia, but, unfortunately, there is a risk that it might soon disappear.

Let us hope that those civil activists who have entered the new government will remain faithful to their principles of non-conformism and even radical resistance if needed, since there is danger of losing the critical potential for the sake of being compatible with the still-loved revolutionary government.

The Armenian revolution did not come about in a wink of an eye. It was, among other things, the result of civil disobedience, continued and consistent resistance, protests against corruption, social injustice, lawlessness and democratic deficit, and myriad other reprehensible practices made by the country's authorities that had become everyday happenings for over a quarter of a century.

History has many examples of the consequences of a non-critical and non-resistant post-revolutionary consensus, of universal unanimity in a dialogue with power. This publication contains, among other things, a number of examples on this.

In conclusion, I would like to note that the speeches and conversations with all five authors—Anna Nikoghosyan, Tamar Shirinian, Hrach Bayadyan, Dmitry Gutov, and Viktor Misiano—make up the contents of this book, while a short, edited version of the conversations is attached to the book as a DVD.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Video recordings of conversations and speeches are also available at <http://acsl.am/dialogues-with-power/>.

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