

Spaces: undergo. the parallels

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Abstract

In the spring of 2012, the exhibition project "undergo. the parallels" was installed in ten underground passages throughout Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. Two immediate goals (one practical, one artistic) were to be fulfilled by the exhibition. The practical goal was to restore these passages as safe spaces for urban navigation and engagement with the cityscape and encourage Tbilisi-dwellers to use them more frequently. The artistic goal was to confront the general public with unconventional ways of perceiving art and its engagement.

Introduction: Passages¹

The notions of both "public space" and "art in the public space" have acquired a new significance worldwide in recent years. We associate the word "public" with "democracy," as well as "clarity," "openness," "involvement," "participation," and "responsibility," not only from governments toward their people, but among people as well. The discourse of art in the public space not only defines the notion of the public but also realizes the idea of democracy.

In the spring of 2012, the exhibition project "undergo. the parallels" was held in ten underground passages in Tbilisi, Georgia's capital.² Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, these underground passages have undergone successive stages of existence: first, they were abandoned and became "no-go" areas due to muggings and robberies. This led to pedestrian avoidance, resulting in increased street-level crossing, which, due to arbitrary observation of traffic rules in Tbilisi, led to a significant increase in traffic deaths. Later, these underground passages became sites for alternative, unofficial markets. More efficient sellers developed kiosks, shops, gambling spots, etc. Some underground passages evolved their own distinct lives, parallel to "normal" city life above. These passages were transformed into spaces for meeting and communication, gambling, playing music, and market transactions of merchants and customers.

Today these underground passages remain under development: some are being "re-organized" into new commercial infrastructures, and some are in danger of collapse. Some have lost practical functions, and are a place for garbage or public toilets.

The project "undergo. the parallels" sought to achieve two direct goals, both practical and artistic. The practical goal was to encourage Tbilisi-dwellers to use these underground passages more frequently. The artistic goal was to work directly onsite in the passages, with both long-term exhibition and short-term or site-specific actions and performances held in different passages. The joint outcome for both goals was to use art to induce city-dwellers to enter the passages and provide input to local officials to improve pedestrian conditions in Tbilisi.

¹ Translated from the Georgian by Adam Siegel.

² Images from this project can also be seen here: <https://picasaweb.google.com/InfoGeoair/UndergoTheParallels?authuser=0&authkey=Gv1sRgCL--5rnw8uGFdQ&feat=directlink>. Thanks to GeoAir and curator Nini Palavandishvili for their assistance.

On the artistic level, site-specific works (light installations, sound installations, photography, street art, etc.) installed especially for the passages address the aforementioned socio-political and concrete practical issues. Traditionally, Tbilisi and Georgian audiences are not accustomed to art in the public space or participatory art. The aim of the project "undergo. the parallels" was to confront the general public with unconventional ways of perceiving art and its engagement. The intent was for artwork, such as street art and light installations produced during the project, to remain onsite and act as a long-term attraction, both practically and aesthetically, for the passages of Tbilisi.

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About the author(s)

Nini Palavandishvili was born and raised in Tbilisi, Georgia. After studying Art History in Tbilisi, she graduated from the UDK Berlin in Faculty of Public and Industrial Communication. After returning back to Georgia in 2006 Nini joined artist initiative GeoAIR and since then she is actively engaged in curating and organizing international exchange projects in Georgia and beyond its borders.

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