

Spirals of Dialogue in Tbilisi

THE ART PEACE PROJECT



The Framework

The Art Peace Project

The Art Peace Project has grown out of a number of experiments to see whether producing art or analysing art can help to generate fresh ways of seeing oneself and the world, and thereby make a contribution to stimulating a culture of human rights. Methods used in workshops have ranged from improvisation theatre, puppetry, storytelling and photography, to the critical analysis of films and novels. Included in this testing of methods has been working with professional artists. In the “art school” or “writer’s retreat format” there is opportunity for ordinary people to be taken seriously as artists.

The Art Peace Project serves therefore as a forum for the exploration of ways in which the creative arts can contribute to Human Rights and Peace Education in conflict situations. Documentation and analysis of the divergent experiences of participants in the workshops provides the necessary information for ongoing improvement and experimentation.

Impact

- A multifaceted view of their own identity and collective narrative.
- Through artistic experimentation with new and different ways of being and of relating to others, a greater awareness of the need to be open to a range of possibility in daily life. With this sometimes comes a willingness to engage with utopian possibility.
- A degree of self-empowerment through describing oneself as well as redescription as a means of dealing with negative stereotyping.
- A greater capacity for self reflection and an appreciation for someone else’s view.
- Experience of dealing with controversial issues, in ways which are both playful and intense.



Spirals of Dialogue in Tbilisi

Conflict in Southern Caucasus is against the backdrop of post cold war geo-political rivalry over influence in this strategically very important region. Small nations here - Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan - are themselves in tension with each other, with memory of past injury and ethnic mobilization highlighting unresolved territorial claims. Most recent conflicts have been the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region (1988-1994) and the August 2008 war with Russia.

In cooperation with the Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, the University of Hamburg conducted an interdisciplinary workshop in Tbilisi in May 2014. The aim was to explore the potential of the creative arts to develop patterns of thoughts conducive to peaceful co-existence. The concept was developed in relation to three factors: group composition, stage performance and academic reflection.

1. Group Composition

Participants were from countries with a reputation for conflict: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and also Germany. According to the Contact Hypothesis¹, prejudice reduction through interpersonal meeting is most likely when it:

¹ Pettigrew, Thomas F. (1998). Intergroup Contact Theory. In: *Annu. Rev. Psychol.* pp. 49:65–85.



- involves people of equal status
- is an activity where participation in group activities is both pleasurable and understood to be meaningful
- is supported by an authority
- is an opportunity to formulate shared goals
- has potential for the development of friendship

The workshop participants were from various academic disciplines. Almost all of the students who attended the workshop were in their early twenties, had learned English as a second or third language, and were equally inexperienced in stage performance. There was thus a foundation for equal status contact.

Prior to the workshop, the participants received reading material on everyday communication processes, as well as concepts of collective narratives and cultural violence.² An opening lecture presented by a German-South African professor, on the campus of the Tbilisi State University, offered a further academic stamp of approval on the activity. Because much of the workshop activity involved stage training by an professional drama teacher, they needed in the beginning to be convinced, that it would be worth the discomfort.

In the introductory lecture, two arguments were then presented: a) that aesthetic forms offer an important means of research, reflection and communication; and b) that being able to act constitutes an important life-skill. Taking roles and interacting on a stage encourages risk, experimentation and playfulness.

The latter means being aware of one's own bodily presence, and often unconscious gestures, mimicry and poses in communicating with other people. It is a relatively new method in the academic field to address personal opinions, issues and experience through using the creative arts as a tool for expression.

The participants stayed altogether in a small youth hostel, where they prepared food together and where they had the possibility of spending time together in a very cosy common room in the evenings.

The accommodation, where the workshop participants were the only guests, the communal preparation of food, and the sight-seeing tours all facilitated very personal discussions between the workshop participants.

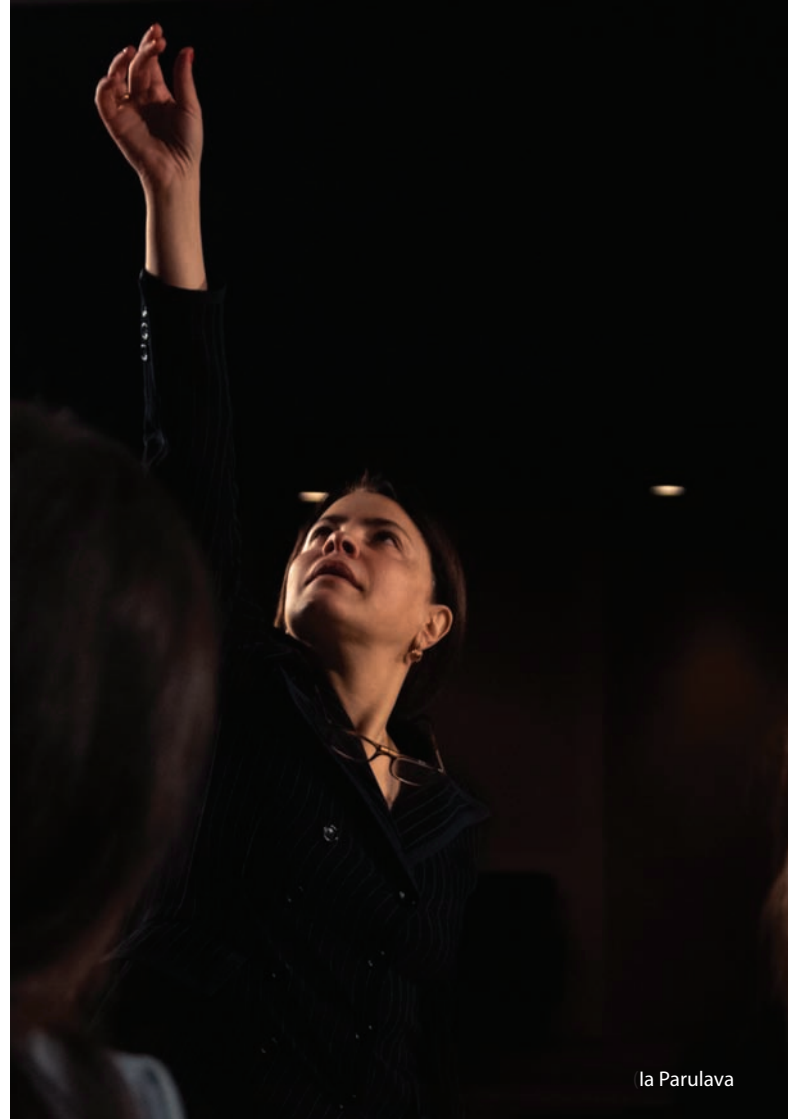
² Goffman, E. (1956). *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday; Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural Violence. In: *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 291-305.



The Artist

Ia Parulava is a prominent Georgian stage and television personality. After completing her initial studies at the Georgian Theatre Institute, she spent five years in Los Angeles working with George Shdanoff. Together they refined and adapted Russian-American Michael Chekov's (1891-1955) approach to actor training. Subsequently, she has used this method not only with actors, but also in therapeutic work with patients in the state psychiatric centre in Tbilisi.

"Human beings are diverse multilevel creatures, with lives full of inner and outer resistance. The Chekov Method is built on the idea that people have the capacity to draw on a universal power that is both within and beyond themselves. Conscious and unconscious energies can be awakened. This is the material from which the 'soul' of the character is created. Learning to gain access to this treasure can awaken new energies. As a result of such exercises, the creative state of mind enters a transe-like state, which uplifts with its inspirational energy. During this process we move from the 'everyday self' to the 'higher self'. It calms down the system, increasing self-confidence, and this is why these exercises can be used in everyday life by ordinary people." (Ia Parulava)



2. Stage Performance

The stage is a place where it is possible to suspend for a while the normal way of doing things. Performance is within a designated time and space. This is an unspoken agreement between performer and audience, and is evident in many societies.

On the first workshop day, the participants received a basic and very intense acting training, to facilitate authenticity through playing and performing together, and by being in an equal position. The participants were left with no doubt that they were in a new place: not for thinking or judging, but instead for careful observation, intuition, improvisation and courageous self disclosure.





Sight-seeing excursions in the subsequent workshop days offered then a travelling stage, in which the scene in front of the camera became the place for performance. The contribution of a professional photographer and his assistant confirmed the aesthetic nature of the activity. Participants had been encouraged beforehand to study the history of the places to be visited. These places had mostly a long history, involving Georgians, Azerbaijanians and Armenians, and had witnessed both shattering conflict and surprising reconciliation. Places, which evoke strong memories served as starting points for ongoing dialogue. At this point, the activity of performance, practiced intensively at the outset of the workshop, made the expression of a range of feelings and ideas possible. Photography served thereby as a form of self-reflection and storytelling. Each participant had during the workshop days the opportunity to compose a picture by drawing in other members of the group.

Being involved in such a choreography offered a means to connect self to place in such a way that there was an engagement with themes

highlighting contradictions in society, culture and history. With their common history as part of the Soviet Union, students from the three South Caucasian nations, shared many similarities in the way they responded during their excursion to Gori, birthplace of Joseph Stalin. Remarkably, many Russians and the peoples of the Caucasus region (approximately 68% according to a recent survey³), particularly amongst the older generation, continue to hold him in high regard. This ambivalence is taken up in the ways in which each of the participants choreographed a photo shooting.

The city of Tbilisi itself has many profound and unsettling locations. In some cases students had prepared the concept well in advance, but often there was a degree of spontaneity in the choice of Place and Theme.

³ De Waal, Thomas (et al.) (2013). The Stalin Puzzle: Deciphering Post-Soviet Public Opinion. In: *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Report March 1.*



3. Academic Reflection

"We do not learn from experience, but from reflecting on experience."

(John Dewey. *How we Think* 1919)

Once the pictures had been mounted a shift to the role as audience began. This was reinforced by an exercise at the start of the final day where a selection of photographs taken in the course of the five-day workshop was waiting at the breakfast table. Participants were encouraged to insert speech and thought bubbles. This provided a means of thinking about and discussing how people had felt *then* and how they felt *now* about various turning points in the workshop. As a method of abstraction and synthesis, it served to consolidate experience.

Photography as research is nothing new. 'Photo elicitation' is the use of photographs in a research interview. This offers not just new information, but a different kind of information, a sharpened memory. Photographs facilitate shared interpretation and can "jolt subjects into a new awareness of their social existence"⁴ Another well estab-

lished research method in the social sciences is 'stimulated recall' which is designed to gain insight into group interactions.

Within the workshop, processes of abstraction are not simply there as evaluation, but as an integral part of the workshop itself. Participants are understood not as objects of research but as researchers! Reference to theoretical literature, is for students a recognisable distancing device. Had there been sufficient time at the end, discussion in relation to texts, which they had been required to read beforehand⁵ could have occurred within this clearly demarcated scientific space.

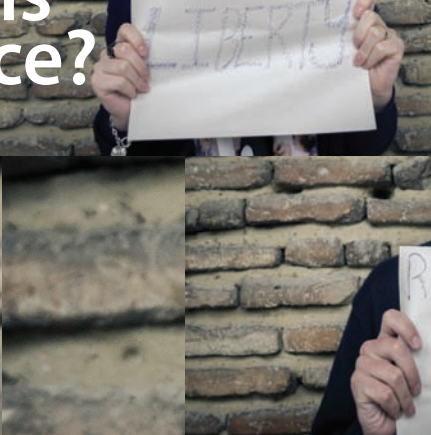
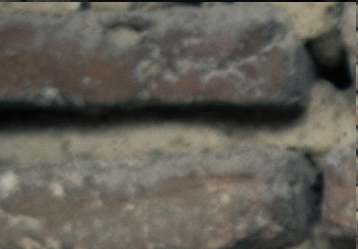
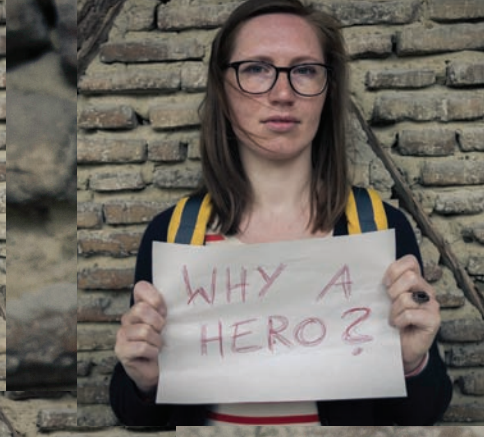
In the weeks that followed, the entire collection of digital photographs was made available to the participants. These would be ongoing reminders of moments of uncertainty, warmth, empathy, or alienation. And like everything in life, the process offered windows of opportunity which may be used or not used.

4 Douglas Harper, "Talking about pictures: a case for photo elicitation", *Visual Studies* 17:1, 2002, 13-26.

5 See Note 2

**“In the end,
works of art
are the only media
of complete and
unhindered
communication
between man
and man
that can occur
in a world full of
gulfs and walls
that limit
community
of experience.”**

(John Dewey. Art as Experience, 1934)



What
do
you
think
about
this
place?



NORASHEN CHURCH

PHOTO CONCEPT: GOHAR GRIGORYAN

Layers of History

< NORASHEN CHURCH

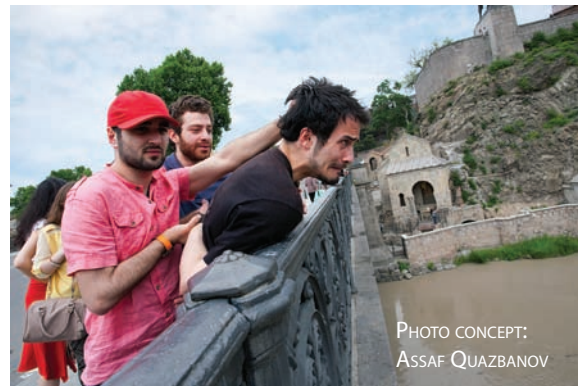
Traces of Tbilisi's multicultural history are preserved in minority religious communities and in sacred places. Drawing attention, to cracks running down an Armenian church building (built in the 15th-century) serve as the backdrop for reflection on a fractured but shared history.

MEETING OUTSIDE THE MOSQUE >

In this predominantly orthodox Christian country, the occasion of the return of one of the workshop participants from Friday prayers, provided the scene for reflecting on interreligious fear.



MEETING OUTSIDE THE MOSQUE



The Place of the Martyrs

The Metekhi Bridge spanning the Mtkvari river is one of the best known tourist landmarks in the capital. Every year in November citizens gather for a ceremony organised by the Georgian Church to commemorate the Hundred Thousand Martyrs who are reputed to have died there. According to tradition, these were those who refused to renounce Christianity when the city was captured in 1226 by Sultan Jalal ad-Din. The waters of the Mtkvari, we are told, ran red with their blood.

< BIGGER PUNISHES THE SMALLER

“Due to realistic approaches countries are like animals in the forest. Usually their futures are decided by bigger ones. They can eliminate them easily just for their interests. In this ritual, one victim is needed which was selected randomly. The saddest point of the ritual is that nevertheless, if all of the participants don't deserve the death one of them must be punished.” (Assaf Quazbanov)



The young Stalin

The Stalin Museum

Joseph Stalin was born in the small town of Gori, 62 kilometres north of Tbilisi. Gori's main tourist attraction is the museum which honours Stalin's illustrious career and was built in 1951. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the museum was closed for a while in 1989, and then again after the South Ossetia War in 2008 there were efforts to re-conceptualise the exhibition. A banner was placed at the entrance with the words "This museum is a falsification of history. It is a typical example of Soviet propaganda and it attempts to legitimise the bloodiest regime in history". A few years later the Gori Municipality voted to put an end to any such reinterpretation of history. With the exception of a small room where his crimes against humanity are addressed, the exhibition continues to glorify Stalin.

The humbleness of the small cottage where he spent his early years, is emphasized by the classical marble pavilion built over it. In the grounds nearby is Stalin's personal armour plated railway carriage used to attend the Yalta and Teheran Conferences. The controversy surrounding the Stalin legacy is evident in the scaffolding surrounding a pedestal recently built to support a large statue. It had been removed from the town square and for many years stored at a local military base. Local politicians planned to reinstall it, this time on a new pedestal in front of the museum, but the job remains unfinished. A remarkable physical likeness of one of the participants with the youthful Stalin provoked some playful controversy.

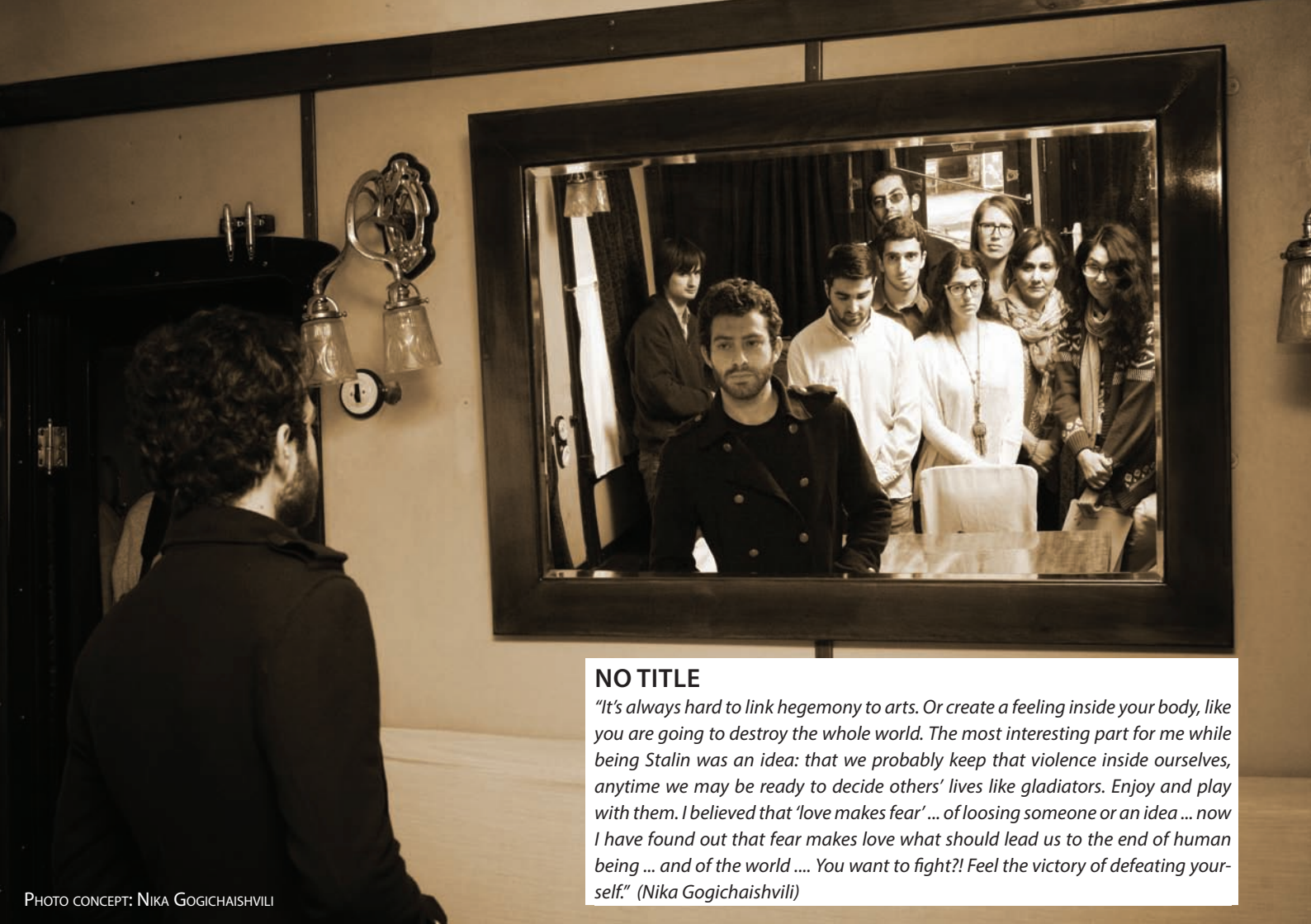


THE THREE DOGS

"The author shows three persons (an Armenian girl, an Georgian and an Adzeri guy) lifting heavy stones which represent the hardship they had during Stalin's regime. The Georgian has more stones than the other two as Stalin was from Georgia but didn't share the interests of his motherland.

In the background you can see the museum of Stalin and three dogs (one white and two black). The dogs represent Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Although they want to be independent from Russia they are dogs by nature and loyal to their master even if they sometimes rebel!"

(Nika Borashvili)



NO TITLE

"It's always hard to link hegemony to arts. Or create a feeling inside your body, like you are going to destroy the whole world. The most interesting part for me while being Stalin was an idea: that we probably keep that violence inside ourselves, anytime we may be ready to decide others' lives like gladiators. Enjoy and play with them. I believed that 'love makes fear' ... of loosing someone or an idea ... now I have found out that fear makes love what should lead us to the end of human being ... and of the world You want to fight?! Feel the victory of defeating yourself." (Nika Gogichaishvili)

Refugee Towns

On the road between Tbilisi and Gori, there are geometrically laid out refugee towns, with rows of blue or red roofs. These were built in the months after the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008. The hills on the horizon mark the new border.





PHOTO CONCEPT: SARINA ADAMBUSSINOWA

THE THREE MONKEYS

"As the background of this picture I chose one village of refugees which was built after the five-days war between Georgia and Russia. And three people show us the well known Japan sculpture of three monkeys. So, the concept of this photo included in the protest against the war. Not to see, not to hear, not to speak about an evil, what war is." (Sarina Adambussinowa)



FOTO CONCEPT: NIKA GOGICHAISHVILI

RELATIONSHIPS

On the banks of the Mtkvari river, about 10km east of Gori is Uplistsikhe, an abandoned cave city on the hillside. It was occupied from the early iron age to the middle ages, and is famous for the Hall of Queen Tamar (1160-1213). In her days it was very unusual for a woman to be in such a role. Today, in the three countries - Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia - the question of gender roles and same sex partnerships is very contested, religiously and politically.

Out of Place and out of Time

“When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him [...]. For those present, many sources of information become accessible and many carriers (or ‘sign-vehicles’) become available for conveying this information. If unacquainted with the individual, observers can glean clues from his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experience with individuals roughly similar to the one before them or, more important, to apply untested stereotypes to him.” (Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1956)





In Tbilisi with outfits hired from the Tbilisi State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre



FOREIGNNESS AND DISPLACEMENT

"We often expect, of course, a confirming consistency between appearance and manner." (Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1956)



Lecturers and Organizers

Prof. Dr. Gordon Mitchell is Professor for Religion and Intercultural studies at the University of Hamburg. His research and teaching explores the role of he creative arts in human rights and peace education.

M.A. Juliane Tutein is a cultural anthropologist and skilled in theatre pedagogics. She is also program assistant and researcher associate in the Art Peace Project at the University of Hamburg

Art Peace Research Projects

- History, Places and Memory
- Self-images and othering
- Human Rights Education
- Creative Arts Education

Contact:

Prof. Gordon Mitchell (gordon.mitchell@uni-hamburg.de)

M.A. Juliane Tutein: (juliane.tutein@gmail.com)

M.A. Sofie Olbers: (sofie.olbers@uni-hamburg.de)

blogs.epb.uni-hamburg.de/artpeaceproject

<http://blogs.epb.uni-hamburg.de/artpeace-caucasus>

Cooperation Partners

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DAAD Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst
German Academic Exchange Service





Impressum

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Universität Hamburg
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Text: Gordon Mitchell

Concept and Layout: Juliane Tutein

Photographs: Nico Klischenko, Kakha Pkhakadze, Nino Mgebrishvili

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