



Art Space Connect - strengthening international exchange with and amongst independent art initiatives and artist-run spaces in Central and Eastern Europe and the Caucasus

On 06 and 07 November 2020 more than thirty cultural producers and artists from Central and Eastern Europe and from the Caucasus met for the digital Art Space Connect conference to strengthen the international exchange amongst independent art initiatives and artist-run spaces.

In discussing issues of international artists' exchange, the focus must be on independent art initiatives and on artist-run project spaces. They are an important part of the international art scene, not market-oriented, often interdisciplinary and internationally active. Independent art initiatives and project spaces are important impulses for civil society participation and for forming public opinion.

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- *What is the specific profile of independent art initiatives and artist-run spaces in the focus regions of Art Space Connect and what is the current status of exchange amongst them?*
 - *What is and remains independent and specifically artistic in view of today's challenges?*
 - *How do we find creative ways to support independent art initiatives and their international cooperation? How can they claim more control and flexibility over their respective programs?*
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In our current times, artistic work without cross-border exchange is inconceivable. However, international exchange between independent art initiatives and project art spaces is often characterized by individual artists being active in temporary networks. There are not yet enough permanent platforms that help establish international contacts and advance intercultural discourse.

Against the background of authoritarian and nationalist movements in many European countries, artists and their initiatives today are finding themselves increasingly restricted and often excluded from exchange. It is important that spaces for international dialogue and intercultural discourse are maintained and protected. This requires both moral and especially financial support at various levels.

In Central and Eastern Europe as well as in the Caucasus, obstacles to mobility ("EU barrier"), political, social and economic upheavals and insufficient support and funding for culture are a massive hurdle for the international artists' exchange. Furthermore, existing exchange is often perceived as a one-way street. With the Corona crisis, working conditions for independent art initiatives in the above-mentioned regions have become even more precarious within the shortest time. This puts the entire independent art infrastructure at risk.

It is urgent to connect independent art initiatives with each other and with other like-minded initiatives and to raise awareness on the independent art scene of Central and Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. Independent art initiatives are not alone in this crisis.

"(...) The space for contemporary art (...) is not a "modern", neutral space, but rather a space charged by a variety of factors: operators, artistic and theoretical contributions, the audience, reception, exchanges with spaces in other locations, and especially the local conditions, which may differ fundamentally. It is a civil space, which becomes political - especially in times of crisis."
("Dreams of Art Spaces Collected", Albrecht/Schmid/Zoiti, 2014

What we discussed in the 2020 Art Space Connect talks and conference:

Independence means "coming from the ground" and "being closer to you".

- Independent art initiatives and artist-run spaces address the audience by speaking up about problems in the community and by developing projects together with local audiences.
- Independent art initiatives and artist-run spaces are often more flexible than larger institutions. They work process-oriented rather than function-oriented and they can be fast and efficient - a true advantage in a time of crisis!
- And, if that weren't enough, they often have the advantage of being able to work in a seamless way across borders.
- There are many independent organizations that have been operating and cooperating for many years now in Central and Eastern Europe and in the Caucasus, despite often-turbulent times. It is important to localize these structures and to promote their collaboration!

What independent art initiatives and artist-run spaces do: They provide opportunities!

But there is a high level of self-exploitation. Small organizations have weaker structures and face more obstacles in obtaining funding.

- Despite positive developments in recent years, funding concepts are often not adapted to the needs of smaller initiatives. Short-term funding also often makes it very difficult to maintain structures and develop networks. Diverse starting and funding conditions, as well as challenges unique to certain regions, should be considered more, especially for the focus regions of Art Space Connect.
- An exchange at eye level often cannot take place. In many cases, it is not a real "exchange" but rather a "one-way street" due to unequal levels of funding.
- Many people involved work for free or do not derive their main income through such initiatives.

Participants of Art Space Connect have reported from their respective working and living situation in Central and Eastern Europe and the Caucasus:

- Right-wing developments have grown considerably stronger in many European countries in the last ten years. There are unstable political systems in some of the regions and there is a lack of transparency.
- For many states of the former Warsaw Pact, the “transformation” to liberal democracy is still on-going.
- There is still a reporting emphasis in the media on western Europe and a strong feeling of an “EU barrier”.
- Economic problems result in a main focus on just one’s own issues and in a lack of solidarity. There is a high level of emigration from Eastern Europe to the West. With COVID19, the already difficult situation in many regions is getting even worse.
- There is a lack of exhibition spaces, and artistic residencies are often offered only in “attractive” countries.
- Art education is very outdated in many art schools and existing funding often goes to traditional “crafts” rather than to contemporary art.
- In Armenia and Azerbaijan, there is a full-scale war going on in the middle of the pandemic. In this conflict region there is no funding at all.

What is needed for independent art initiatives and artist-run exhibition spaces in the focus regions of Art Space Connect:

- More international exchange is needed, with long term partnerships and substantial cooperation, to share knowledge from different regions and to create a support system. This needs to happen on an eye-level. It is important to listen to each other and not to start with a fixed formal framework.
- Exchange must be developed in such a way that forces can be truly joined and resources shared. For this, promoting a network could help as a basis, with a funding period that allows sustainable relationships to be established. Eventually, a project space exchange residency program could be developed.
- Furthermore, fast accessibility to funding is needed for small structures, with small and highly flexible open calls. Cooperation can be more effective by taking out the middlemen.
- International funding and open calls can be a solution to the lack of private and state funding in a given country. A diversified funding from the EU together with the support of internationally active foundations would be the ideal scenario.
- When travel is not possible, digital spaces need to be used as an alternative.
- Building strong partnerships with the focus on regions (for example with a “Supermarket East”) can help smaller organizations to access funding and to share resources.
- The concept of communities has worked well for cooperation. It can help to cooperate “out of the box” with other spheres of everyday-life and with other NGOs.
- Independent art initiatives need freedom of speech. They need independence not only from politics but also from the economy. They need a strong civil society.

Who is Art Space Connect

It is under these impressions, that the three organizations, Internationale Gesellschaft der Bildenden Künste (Berlin), Centrala Berlin and GeoAIR (Tbilisi), started Art Space Connect already at the end of 2019 under the project leadership of Alicja Kaczmarek ([Centrala Space Birmingham](#)), Berenika Partum ([Centrala Berlin](#)), Marcel Noack ([IGBK](#)), Moira Zoitl ([IGBK](#)) and Sophia Tabatadze ([GeoAIR](#), Tbilisi).

The principles of all three organizations include supporting international exchange amongst visual artists by bringing different cultural contexts together, addressing the social role and status of the artist and sharing and debating current perspectives on contemporary art.

Many experts and organizations have joined the Art Space Connect talks in 2020

Aleksi Soselia (Gallery Warehouse, www.videoimage.ge, Tbilisi), Alicja Kaczmarek ([Centrala Space Birmingham](#)), Andrea Křístek Kozárová ([Slovak Union of Visual Arts](#)), Anna Kamay ([Artsakh Fest](#), Yerevan), Ara Petrosyan ([Artlabyerevan](#)), Asmer Abdullayeva ([ASMART Creative Hub](#), Baku), Giorgi Rodionov ([Untitled Gallery Tbilisi](#) / [Collective 90x](#) / [Salaam Cinema Baku](#)), Irena Lagator Pejovic ([ISU - Institute of Contemporary Art Montenegro](#)), Dr. Katharina Koch and Sylvia Sadzinski ([alpha nova & galerie futura](#), Berlin), Lea Stöver ([Creative Europe Desk Kultur Deutschland](#)), Marcel Noack ([IGBK](#)), Mariam Natroshvili ([Museum on call](#), Tbilisi), [Maria Wildeis](#), Marie Le Sourd (Cultural Mobility Information Network [On the Move](#)), Dr. Marika Kuźmicz ([Arton Foundation](#), Warsaw), Margarethe Makovec ([<Rotor>](#), Graz), Matthias Mayer ([Netzwerk freier Berliner Projekträume und -initiativen](#) / [Spor Klübü](#)), Moira Zoitl ([IGBK](#)), Nastia Khlestova ([127garage](#), Kharkiv), Natalija Vujošević ([ISU - Institute of Contemporary Art Montenegro](#)), Nino Klingler ([Allianz Kulturstiftung](#)), Pavel Bräila (ArtWatt, Chişinău), Philipp Dietachmair ([European Cultural Foundation](#)), Róna Kopeczky ([easttopics](#), Budapest), Sabina Shikhinskaya ([Platform ART](#), Baku), Selda Asal ([Apartment Project](#), Berlin), Sibylle Feucht ([DAS ESSZIMMER - space for art+](#), Bonn), Tina Gurgnidze ([Tbilisi Architecture Biennial](#))

More information

Find more information on the events of Art Space Connect in 2020, as well as details on the participants and videos of the talks [here on the IGBK website](#).

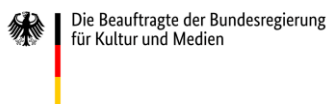
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Art Space Connect cooperation partners



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