



MAGYAR KÉPZŐMŰVÉSZETI EGYETEM

DOKTORI ISKOLA

Perception Excavation

*Artistic Research on Art as an Active
Participant in Memory and Perception*

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Dedicated to my Grandfather

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Theses

Over the past five years of artistic research and, later, while writing and analyzing my dissertation manuscript, I have uncovered findings that have significantly affected my thought process and my way of seeing, observing, and working with art. Some of these findings are listed below.

1. Artworks are active participants in perception and memory. They co-create perception of reality with the viewer and the artist, intervening in how experience is formed and felt.
2. Borrowing perspective and methodological inspiration from archaeology, perception and alteration of it can be revealed by following a certain attitude, which I call perception excavation. Through slowness, self-observation, and repeated return to documentation, perception excavation made the transformation of perception traceable.
3. An artist becomes a participant observer through embeddedness in a situation, double attention (participating while observing), and translation of that experience into artistic form.
4. Art participates in memory by triggering hidden layers. These memories resurface as a bodily experience of familiarity. Artworks, images, and places can reorganize mnemonic chronology and produce new recollections, which are half-memories and half-fiction.
5. Documentation became a model of memory: it presents a fragment of an absent event. Because it points to what is hidden or no longer present, documentation can activate associations and operate as a cryptic encounter in itself.

6. Authentic artistic encounter requires intimacy and personal connection; working from distant or borrowed sources without lived proximity produces ethical and creative distance.

7. In the project Archive of Absence insight, archiving is also subtraction, in the sense that removing and preserving an artifact creates an absence at its place of origin, and that absence later also ceases to exist and is overwritten by time.

8. Materials are active memory agents. Dust, touch, wear, and prior use charge objects with specific energies. When objects from different sources are placed together, their material histories interact and affect perception.

9. There is a metaphorical parallel between artist and archivist. Neither of them is neutral. They both create meaning through selection, omission, and intuitive human choices. Therefore, an archive and an art exhibition are both subjective curated narratives.

Abstract

This dissertation is a subjective artistic research into art as an active participant in memory and perception. I work through my own ‘cosmos’ (heritage, biography, intuition) using a method I call perception excavation—slowness, attentive observation, self-observation, and documentation of shifting impressions. Chapter I frames the dissertation within the context of artistic research (Mika Hannula, Henk Slager) and phenomenology (van Manen). It sets the theoretical base for the dissertation. Chapter II turns to anthropology (Tim Ingold) and asks how an artist can be a participant observer. The thought process unfolds through Georgian painter Niko Pirosmani (1862-1918) and a meditative dialogue with his painting, *The Feast of Molokans*. Chapter III enters Jung’s cryptomnesia and participation mystique, tracing how an image of Macedonian/Serbian painter Ljiljana Blaževska (1944-2020) rearranges my architecture of memory and leads to a research trip to Belgrade. Resources from Walter Benjamin and Boris Groys sharpen the problem of documentation. Chapter IV gathers five years at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts as layered reports of practice, failures, and reorientations. What I have learned in this process and how my perception of art has shifted are synthesized in the chapter. Chapter V, on the artistic project *The Lingering Presence*, threads through an exhibition and two films; this triad forms my masterpiece for the dissertation. This project treats the archive as an active, non-neutral process.

Introduction

*Excuse my wandering
How can one be orderly with this?
It's like counting leaves in a garden,

along with song notes of partridges,
and crows. Sometimes organization
and computation become absurd.*

Rumi, The Book of Love 1

I. On the open-ended Research

This dissertation is a subjective inquiry. I have positioned myself not only as the researcher but also as one of the subjects under examination. My questions and insights frequently emerge from intuition or non-rational reflection. These arise from my particular and idiosyncratic position in the world; by “position,” I mean my heritage, personal history, memories, perceptions, and physical presence. We will be going through numerous topics of my interests, which have affected my art-making. The topics include art history, archaeology, anthropology, psychology, and art making. It is crucial to note that all these topics will be viewed through the prism of my perception, using my methodology, which I call “perception excavation.” I also regard this work as a phenomenological study in artistic research.

¹ Barks Coleman, trans., “Spontaneous Wandering,” in Rumi - The Book of Love (HarperCollins, 2003), 3.

I understand artistic research as an open-ended process that encourages risk and reinvention. I return to this in Chapter I, where I frame artistic research more precisely.

The whole dissertation will revolve around the question of how art is an active participant. Artworks engage in a reciprocal relationship with their environment, the creator (artist), and the viewer. They are both influencing and being influenced by the perceptual and cognitive frameworks through which they are experienced. In this sense, artworks actively co-create reality. They function as sensory and sensitive agents that reveal new ways of engaging with the world around us. This dissertation explores how exactly art participates in the formation, deconstruction, or alteration of memory and perception. The main problem or focal point of my study is how art acts, how it intervenes in perception and facilitates new experiences that would not exist without its presence.

In this context, we also have to note that we will be dealing with this problem through the prism of my perception and memory; I, myself, will become one of the central case-studies of the dissertation.

The central questions of the dissertation are:

1. How can an artist be a “participant observer”?
2. How does art participate in the formation and reactivation of memories?
3. How does an artist experience art in a way that transforms their relationship to it?

The first question is explored in Chapter II, where I frame the artist as an anthropological “participant observer.” The second question is addressed in Chapters III and V, where I examine the notions of cryptomnesia, archive and their roles in the architecture of memory. The third question is present in various places throughout the dissertation, but becomes more focused in Chapter IV, the reflections of my five-year research and Chapter V, which is about the masterpiece project – The Lingering Presence.

II. Contextualizing the Research (Hungarian University of Fine Arts)

Artistic research entered the institutional academic system only relatively recently (several decades ago), primarily within higher education at the doctoral level. My research has been conducted at the Doctoral School of the Hungarian University of Fine Arts (HUFA) in Budapest, Hungary.

The Doctoral School at HUFA operates in a separate building known as *Feszty Ház*—an old Italian-style eclectic villa once inhabited by the 19th-century Hungarian painter Arpad Feszty, his wife, Róza Jókai, and her father, also a famous Hungarian writer, Mór Jókai. The building changed ownership several times before becoming part of HUFA's facilities in the 1990s. This separate space allows the Doctoral School to maintain a certain degree of sovereignty. In the daily lives of the artists working there, studio practice fosters deep relationships with the space itself. It creates a sense of attachment to it. Each year, approximately 10-15 students work in the Feszty studios.

The Doctoral School community comprises both local Hungarian and international artists, with the population fluctuating annually depending on admissions. I have worked in the Feszty studios for the past five years, and even now, this dissertation is being written within the walls of this Venetian-style villa. This context is essential to note, as the space itself has undoubtedly influenced me, both as an observer and an artist. The same has to be said about the community of artists. There has been an extensive exchange of information through discussions, through spending time together, and undoubtedly, this exchange has often led to interesting, inspirational impulses for me and my artmaking. In this context, I also perceive Feszty haz as an experimental site, where the processes of artmaking and theory contemplation have led to new insights.

III. What to Expect – structure of the dissertation

In **Chapter I** (*About Research*), I begin by framing the research through the methodologies I have used. I explain my understanding of artistic research, describe why this study follows a phenomenological approach, and explore how this contributes to my understanding of knowledge production. I also situate myself as the researcher. I offer context about my background to help the reader understand the subjectivity that frames the project.

In **Chapter II** (*Artist as Participant Observer*), I explore how an artist can act as an anthropological observer within society and how this dual role of participation and observation can give rise to a unique, idiosyncratic form of art-making. I first explain the concept of *participant observation* as it is used in anthropology and then discuss my reasons for adopting this perspective. Then follows a case study, the biography, and a painting analysis of Niko Pirosmeni. The analysis will be subjective and meditative. I aim to engage with the artwork and, possibly, enable a dialogue between the painting and my perceptual lens.

Chapter III (*Cryptomnesia & Ljiljana Blazevska*) engages with the psychoanalytic concept of *cryptomnesia*. I begin by discussing how I encountered this concept and why I chose to integrate it into my research. Drawing primarily on Carl Gustav Jung's understanding, I then present a case study: a painting by the Macedonian-Serbian artist Ljiljana Blazevska. Upon first seeing an image of this artwork, I experienced what could be described as a cryptomnesic episode in a Jungian sense. I will meditate on how the artwork influenced my architecture of memory. I will also discuss my research trip to Belgrade, which I undertook to locate and learn more about Blazevska's works and life stories.

Chapter IV (On the 5-year research) - In this chapter, I recall five years of artistic research conducted at HUFA. I will reflect on how theory influenced and transformed my creative process. My research reports serve as documentation of emotional and practical changes. They tell the story of what was occurring inside my perception while undertak-

ing specific projects at particular times and places. The aim is to uncover the thesis and new knowledge that has emerged through this journey of experimentation.

Chapter V (The Lingering Presence [About Masterpiece]) – In this chapter, I present my masterwork project, *The Lingering Presence*, as the physical synthesis of my method of “perception excavation.” The project includes the exhibition at tranzit.hu (April 2025), a video essay, and an experimental documentary connected to my Belgrade research. I focus on the archive as an active process of curation—how history is reconstructed and fictionalized. The central material of my masterpiece project is my grandfather’s book “The Hymn for Heroes,” which becomes the trigger for building the exhibition as a mental landscape of lingering fragments.

Chapter VI (Conclusion) - In the concluding chapter, I return to the three research questions and how they have been answered throughout the dissertation. I summarize what the dissertation uncovered through theory and practice. I clarify the main thesis and contributions of the research, and how the five-year process and the masterwork project brought the dissertation’s threads together. I also briefly reflect on limitations and possible future directions.

NOTE ABOUT STYLE

This dissertation follows the citation and formatting guidelines of *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 18th edition, using the Notes and Bibliography system.

Chapter I – About the Research

1. Framing the Research

In the 21st century, it is evident that every existing concept can be interpreted and defined in countless ways. There is no a priori certainty that my understanding of art will align with that of any other reader of this dissertation. The same applies to key terms I address, such as knowledge and artistic research. These concepts are interpreted differently across disciplines, professions, and, I would say, even geographic locations. Therefore, we should note that each interpretation may be as valid as my own.

Nevertheless, the logic of this dissertation rests upon how I define these core concepts. I find it necessary to explain and situate them as I understand them in the following pages.

2. What is My Methodology?

My methodology is something I have arrived at gradually, through lived experience of repeated attempts to understand how my perception transforms over time. I call this methodology “perception excavation.” I experience perception as a notion layered with deposits of memories, instincts, cultural imprints, and various forms of sensations. Perception excavation method is a deliberate attempt to uncover what is buried in these layers, yet it is not visible to my present state of consciousness.

I call it excavation because of a very concrete origin point: my encounter with the archaeological site in Dmanisi². That experience taught me the value of slowness as a method and that time can also be perceived as a vertical structure, where each layer represents a different period. I return to my story with Dmanisi in more depth in Chapter II, where I

² Dmanisi is a village in southwest Georgia. It is also one of the most important paleo-anthropological excavation sites in the world. *Homo erectus* was first discovered there. First excavations there took place in the 1930s. Long-term methodical excavations began in the 1980s.

discuss the influences that the field of anthropology had on me and participant observation.

It is not a method that aims at precise outcome. It is a way of moving through research slowly and attentively, with the willingness to be vulnerable to change in the light of what I observe. This is also why I relate my research to phenomenology. The “knowledge” I seek is not detached information. It is the kind of internal knowledge that resurfaces when perception shifts, when something internal reorganizes itself in response to an external encounter.

MAP OF THE METHOD

I include the following diagram as a simple map of how I visualize my methodology’s functioning. It is not a strict system, but a cycle that repeats itself in various forms.

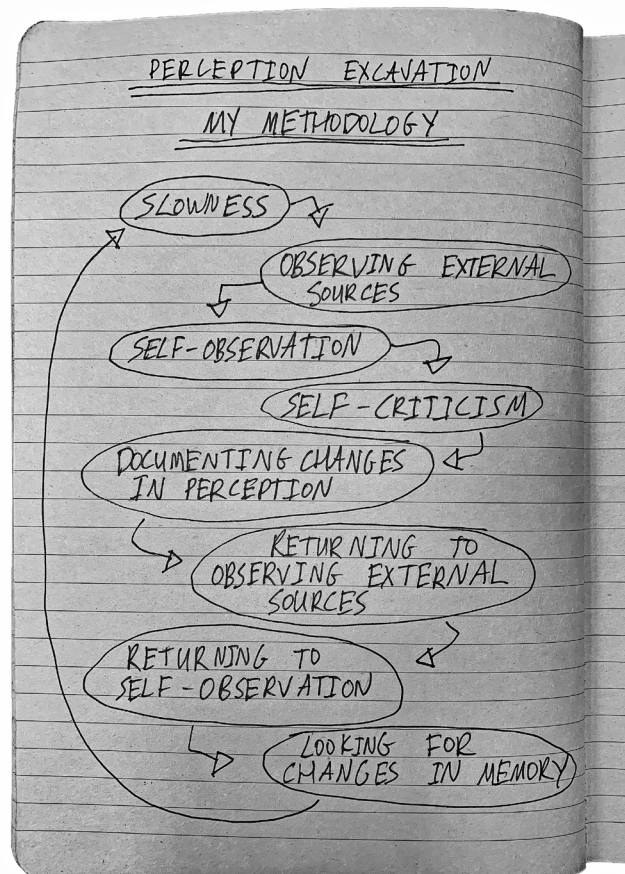


Figure 1 - Visual illustration of my research method.

The cycle can be described in the following phases, which are constantly looping:

1. Slowness
2. Observing external sources
3. Self-observation
4. Self-criticism
5. Documenting changes in perception
6. Returning to observing external sources
7. Returning to self-observation
8. Looking for changes in memory

SLOWNESS AS A CONDITION

The first principle, which is also a pre-condition of my method, is slowness. This is a condition that allows perception to become more aware and notice its own transformations. This allows me to enter a meditative state in which self-observation heightens my sensitivity.

My experience with excavation in Dmanisi was crucial in this regard. It taught me that “excavation” is not an act of digging, but of gently brushing dust away, carefully and meticulously, without disturbing the layers that are hiding underneath, to be respectful of what time has accumulated and how it has done so.

This experience also made me realize that to enter the state of slowness as a condition, I have to adjust my body, my mind, and my perception on a frequency that aligns them on the same rhythm. This is a bodily experience intertwined with perceptual experience, a state that involves all the senses.

TWO COMPONENTS OF PERCEPTION EXCAVATION

In *perception excavation*, I rely on two components or let us call them *tools*, that recur throughout the dissertation.

Sensitivity Apparatus

This is an intuitive instrument of perception, precisely at the border between internal processes and what I encounter in the external world. It is an inner filter that reacts to visual information and emotional charge.

To be aware of the “sensitivity apparatus” means to be mindful that I am looking from at least two simultaneous perspectives. One is my initial, subjective perspective, and the other is me, observing myself from the outside. Of course, this is not entirely possible, but the attempt matters. These attempts might lead to new knowledge that shows itself only through observation.

Method of perceptual communication

It is a specific working mode in which I approach an artwork (or a place, or my own work) as something I can enter into dialogue with, and I observe what happens within my perception during that dialogue. (I will expand on this later in Chapter II)

DOCUMENTING THE PROCESS

Since these methodologies are very subtle and delicate, documentation of the process is essential. My documentation is mainly in the form of written journals, notes, drawings, diagrams, and photos. This opens up the possibility of returning to these sources later and reflecting on them from a distance.

RESEARCH MIND MAP

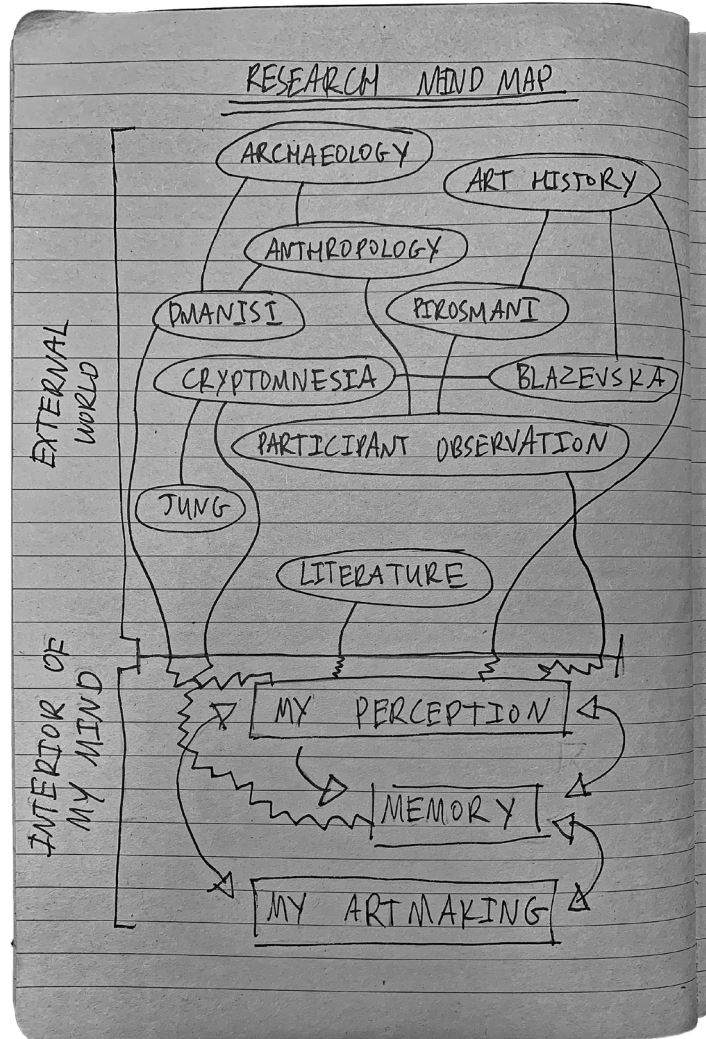


Figure 2 - Visual illustration of my research mind map.

3. *What is Artistic Research?*

Artistic research, unlike scientific research, is inherently personal. It does not strictly conform to the methodologies of art history, philosophy, or any other pre-existing field of academia. Nevertheless, it may intersect with all of them. It is a form of research unto itself, an autonomous domain of inquiry. Therefore, it demands to be understood on its own terms. It has only recently been institutionalized within academia at the doctoral level. I have also been researching literature around it and found several voices that have mirrored with my own methodology. The two figures that I would like to mention in this regard are Mika Hannula and Henk Slager.

Mika Hannula in his essay “*River Low, Mountain High. Contextualizing Artistic Research*,” writes:

*“What actually is artistic research? It is a combination of artistic practice and theoretical approach, while aiming at the production of knowledge. Within that combination of theory and practice, I would like to argue, we need some kind of common ground—not implying strict rules, but basic guidelines for the continuously shifting methodology of artistic research. Methodology is the semi-solid base and the framework enabling outreach and experimentation. It is there to guide and to help, not to restrict or to limit. I believe that without such methodology, artistic research as an interdisciplinary field could become lost.”*³

Artistic research is presented as a mode of knowledge production. Fortunately, now it is also welcomed into the academic sphere because it is believed to open new, experimental pathways into research. Scientific research, having dominated the academy for centuries, has developed a rigid framework. Artistic research emerges as a response to that rigidity. It proposes a more open-ended process that invites risk and reinvention.

Hannula also frames the field as carrying inherent risk alongside its possibilities. This suggests that the researcher must remain vigilant. The openness of the field can easily lead to a conceptual void if one does not actively construct a methodological framework and document one’s own actions and thought processes. That openness is an opportunity to derive new knowledge through experimentation. The positive side of experimentality is that if research does not yield what was initially hoped for, it can still offer valuable insights by highlighting the specific challenges it encountered. This, too, contributes to the field’s evolving discourse.

Henk Slager’s perspective also closely aligns with Hannula’s. He strongly affirms the idiosyncratic sovereignty of artistic research. He highlights its right to exist independent-

³ Mika Hannula, “River Low, Mountain High. Contextualizing Artistic Research,” in *Artistic Research*, vol. 18, ed. Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager, Series of Philosophy of Art and Art Theory (Lier en Boog, 2004), 70.

ly from traditional narratives of philosophy and art history. Slager sees artistic research as a unique generator of experimental thought, where theory and practice are mutually coexisting forces. Slager distinguishes artistic research from academic-scientific research by arguing it produces experiential rather than expert knowledge. Nevertheless, Slager insists that this freedom does not remove accountability. He poses two essential questions: *“Firstly, how can autonomous research take place significantly in the domain of visual art? Secondly, how can the chosen methodology (as compared with research projects of other artists) be described?”* ⁴

This underlines a crucial point: artistic research enjoys freedom from conventional academic goals, but it carries a responsibility with that freedom. The researcher must articulate why this particular investigation belongs within visual art, and how the methodology has been selected and applied. The researcher has to be inside the process and outside it (as an observer) simultaneously, to be aware of what happens inside and, at the same time, observe these changes from a distance.

4. Why a Phenomenological Approach?

This study focuses on art as an active participant in the processes of memory and perception. These two faculties, memory and perception, do not exist independently of the human subject. They are always part of the human interior world. Thus, it is necessary to include a subject, a human being, in the research to observe change and transformation.

In this case, I have positioned myself not only as the researcher but also as one of the subjects examined. This makes the entire process subjective. I do not observe from a detached perspective; instead, I am actively involved. My questions and insights are often intuitive or irrational. They arise from my specific, idiosyncratic position in the world. By “position,” I mean my heritage, my personal history, and my physical existence in the world; we can also call it my “cosmos.” I describe this work also as a phenomenological

⁴ Henk Slager, “Methodological Mapping,” in *Art/Research* (Jelenlét, 2006), 39.

study. Phenomenological studies establish frameworks based on lived human experience. To define the approach more precisely, I draw on the work of Michael van Manen and Max van Manen, who write that phenomenological study, which was founded by Edmund Husserl, examines lived experience as perceived by consciousness, without imposing any preconceived frameworks.⁵

Given the fact that the author of this dissertation is both the observer and the observed, we must accept that understanding this study requires accepting its subjective nature. For this reason, I will share elements of my biography in the sub-chapter “Situating the Researcher” (pg. 11) so that the reader can better understand the context through which I initially began to perceive and relate to art. I am also aware of the potential danger within my research: the risk of producing a self-indulgent or narcissistic narrative. To avoid this, I will adhere to specific methodological principles designed to maintain the inquiry’s rigor and reflectivity. In practice, this means the following:

1. I return to the same artworks and situations repeatedly over time;
2. I document my experiences in writing, drawings, and diagrams immediately after encounters;
3. I revisit these records at later stages to trace shifts in perception and memory;
4. I continually compare emerging insights with existing theoretical concepts rather than accepting first impressions as final.

These principles help me distinguish between fleeting impressions and more clear transformations of perception. This is crucial for examining how art participates in the formation and reactivation of memories and how my relationship to artworks changes over time.

⁵ Michael Van Manen and Max Van Manen, “Doing Phenomenological Research and Writing,” *Qualitative Health Research* 31, no. 6 (2021): 1069–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323211003058>.

5. *What is Art?*

Art is a subjective field of knowledge. It is a medium through which human emotions, experiences, and thoughts are translated into tangible artifacts. These artifacts have a static material form, but they remain active agents. They have the potential to initiate change in human perception through interaction. This quality of art is central to my research.

My focus will be on the knowledge accumulated through five years of lived experience and research. Yet this inquiry cannot proceed without also traveling, metaphorically, through memory, searching for the roots of certain impulses and experiences.

In this study, I adopt a non-traditional approach, treating artworks as living entities. This does not imply a singular metaphysical being, but rather that each specific artifact is perceived as having its own subjective presence. By “living entity,” I mean that each artwork holds a unique essence, a kind of life of its own. I aim to engage with their existence. To make it clear, I do not mean that all artworks are “living entities” a priori; this is a methodological shift in my perception. If I am particularly interested in a specific artwork, I attempt to make a perceptual shift in my approach to it and enter into a dialogue with it, as with a living entity.

My relationship with art is not based on analytical scrutiny but on an intuitive drive toward dialogue. This urge to “speak with” artworks, rather than merely observe them, has accompanied me since childhood. I greatly value the insights of art history and philosophy, but these frameworks often do not suffice to describe the intimacy I seek with art. This more profound need has been a major driving force behind my choice to engage in the following research. I will explore the origins of this urge for personification later in the sub-chapter “Searching for the Sources of the Urge to Personify Art”, pg. 14.

6. *What Is Knowledge?*

My research is concerned with generating new forms of knowledge. Before going any further, I want to clarify what I mean by “knowledge.” The work of an anthropologist Tim Ingold has had a formative impact on my understanding of this term. For Ingold, knowledge does not exist in a fixed or pre-formed state. It emerges through continuous interaction with the world. I share this view. In my practice, knowledge is sensing through feeling and intuitively connecting to material qualities of objects, of substances, of paints, of canvas, of bitumen, etc. All the materials that spark my curiosity. If I want to gain more knowledge about a specific notion, be it material or intangible, I need to experience myself interacting with it. If it is something physical, then I intend to interact physically, if it is something intangible, then I engage intuitively, using my sensitivity.

Tim Ingold writes:

*“To know things you have to grow into them, and let them grow into you, so they become part of who you are.”*⁶

This speaks of a kind of knowledge that unfolds through lived engagement. Ingold also emphasizes that thinking is not separate from material processes:

*“In the art of inquiry, the conduct of thought goes along with and continually answers to the fluxes and flows of the materials with which we work. These materials think in us, as we think through them. Here, every work is an experiment... not in the natural scientific sense... but in the sense of prising an opening and following where it leads. You try things out and see what happens.”*⁷

I recognize this in my own practice. I do not divide conceptualization from execution; for me, they are co-dependent, they affect and rely on each other. This interweaving allows for more nuanced investigations of memory and its formation as a materiality.

⁶ Tim Ingold, “Knowing from the Inside,” in *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (Routledge, 2013), 1.

⁷ Tim Ingold, “Knowing from the Inside,” in *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (Routledge, 2013), 6.

Through artmaking, I have come to understand that even failure can lead to discovery. A door that seems to close, might lead to a new opening on the other side of perception. It is always a matter of perspective; from which side I look at the situation. This, too, is knowledge born from doing.

7. Situating the Researcher

GROWING UP IN POST-SOVIET GEORGIA

Now, it is time to introduce myself as a subjective entity. I am Erekle Chinchilakashvili, born in 1992 in Tbilisi, Georgia. My current research is influenced by the historical and cultural context of my birthplace, as well as the roots and trajectory of my life, which have shaped my perception.

This context includes the civil war that erupted in Georgia at the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, just several months before my birth. Shortly after two subsequent wars with Ossetia and Abkhazia, the separatist regions of Georgia supported by the Russian government, took place.

From my earliest memories and from my current mind, I recall growing up in a post-war country that operated under the principles of an anarchistic society. Governing bodies lacked the power and infrastructure to take full responsibility for their citizens. Unwritten rules emerged to oversee various aspects of daily life, social conduct, or informal economies. These rules were society's response to the vacuum left by the collapse of institutions.

Among numerous challenges for my country, one of the most severe was financial instability. There was no functioning economy: no jobs, no public services, no working factories, and deteriorating infrastructure. Bread became the most essential and symbolic product, yet since it was also scarce, long lines formed outside bread stores due to the

profound imbalance between supply and demand. This was a complex, multi-layered period in Georgian history. This specific period marks the beginning of my lived experiences, slowly outlining the contours of my worldview.

I do not remember my first encounter with art. It is a sensation similar to that of knowing a childhood friend. It is like a feeling when you recognize their presence more than the moment you first met. Art entered my life early. My father was a student at the Tbilisi Academy of Arts, studying Interior Design. I remember our home was filled with art. Drawings and sketches piled up on wooden shelves. Framed images and reproductions were hanging on the walls. Plaster sculptures, often replicas of classical pieces, were scattered throughout the apartment, sometimes used to hold potted plants. Paints in various forms could be found in the apartment. Once I was old enough to understand that paint was not food, I was given complete freedom to use it, as long as I didn't damage the interior walls. In time, I gradually discovered how to handle them and the fun of playing with them.

At that time, art did not have a name for me. It was simply there as an ambient presence. As my world expanded and I became entangled in external concerns, my direct engagement with artistic materials faded. Still, my curiosity remained: a fascination with pigments, textures, how things were made, how they felt in space. These early experiences, embodied and intuitive, continue to inform my relationship with art and my perception of it to this day.

SEARCHING FOR THE SOURCES OF THE URGE TO PERSONIFY ART

Children possess an immense talent for transforming the world around them. They can easily, through imagination, turn harsh or unfamiliar environments into stages of play. For those of us born in the wake of civil war, this post-war landscape became simply the playground of our childhood. And we perceived it not as dystopia, but as a possibility of play. We did not know any other reality; this was the only one.

Some of my most joyful memories are of playing in the rubble of former Soviet institutions. These half-destroyed, dusty, abandoned buildings became our hideouts. Each space offered new possibilities. Sometimes we fell from a crumbling wall, or wandered into territory claimed by a stray dog, or a suspicious, irritated landlord.

Among those memories, one game clearly stands out. This was a game I never shared with anyone else. It was a solitary act. If I ever found myself alone at a ruin site, I would imagine my field of vision as a film frame. Everything I saw became *cinema*. Everything I heard became its *soundtrack*. I would begin by reciting imaginary opening credits aloud, naming myself as the protagonist.

This game was a perceptual transformation of the environment. It allowed me to recast my surroundings. I re-created it into something new. Strangely, these films never had endings. They simply reset. Looking back, I recognize this as an early expression of my urge to personify mediums. The imaginary film, though intangible, became a living entity. It also served as my friend, a legitimate co-author of my experiences.

The dialogue between us began the moment I invoked it, when I recited the “opening titles.” From there, the film responded. The sound of my footsteps was not a simple sound anymore, it was *sound design*. The texture of asphalt, soil, or grass became heightened, elevated. I could focus on the resonance of the sounds, the layers of noise as if they were narrative cues coming from the highest-quality speakers. The film replied in feeling. We together shaped the world through creating a sensation for my own perception.

REDISCOVERING ART

Between those childhood impressions and my later university years, I experienced my life as a search for someone or something, once familiar but now missing. It was the search for art. As I wrote earlier, it felt like looking for an old friend: someone who disappears for a while but whose presence never entirely leaves you, whose traces you can always think of in your memories.

In my teenage years, influenced by both internal ambition and external societal projections, I did not expect to become an artist. I envisioned a path aligned with financial success. This expectation was self-imposed and deeply socialized, part of the collective imagination that emerged from our post-war generation. Children raised in the ruins of a collapsed system were expected to fix it. We were the ones who were naturally expected to turn things around.

Given that reality, the idea of attending art school after high school was not even a consideration. Art schools were not seen as institutions that produced financially successful individuals. Instead, in my final year of high school, I applied to the economics faculty at Jacobs University in Bremen, Germany. With good grades and moderately high SAT scores, I was accepted. I moved abroad at the age of eighteen.

I first arrived in Bremen in September of 2010. After three months of attending lectures, I realized I was in the wrong place. Not physically, but rather intellectually. I liked the place, but I did not like my major, what I was studying. I struggled to understand the material, to grasp the framework and scale of the subjects. I lacked the focus and mental clarity to continue. I soon changed my major to cultural studies, fortunately it was possible, but still I never fully regained the sense of orientation or concentration that I needed. Looking back, I now recognize it as a form of culture shock. I had left my comfort zone too abruptly, and emotionally, I was far more vulnerable than I realized. But still, living there for two and a half years, in the dormitory, with more than 2000 students, literally from all over the world, I had a great experience of gaining new knowledge. It is true I did not gain any certification or diploma, but the amount of new information and insight I got about human beings, still feel absolutely invaluable. I realized there for the first time that human beings no matter from which continent of the world, have so much in common. We all shared same human feelings, which somehow put in a situation where we could perceive each other more closely, was immensely interesting.

After two years at Jacobs University living in shared dormitories and attempting to adapt to the educational program, but without success, I returned to Tbilisi without graduating.

I transferred to the Tbilisi Academy of Fine Arts, this time enrolling in the Art History faculty. There, finally, the subject of my studies also slowly began to make more sense.

Up until now, I have focused on providing my personal background, since it is a crucial criterion for understanding my way of thinking, my worldview, or, let us say, my cosmos. In the following chapters, I will shift my attention to the research itself. What particularities have emerged in my open-ended research, what turns and twists have occurred, and where it has led me. The next chapter, in particular, will address the question of the artist as participant observer.

Chapter II – Artist as Participant Observer

1. Introduction

Art, as a creation of human beings, represents and conveys the intensity of the emotion its creator has transformed into physical form. If we take this into account when we discuss art as a participant in perception and memory, I believe it would be interesting to first address the artist and how he participates.

This chapter explores how the artist moves between the roles of creator and observer, how artists can engage with the world through the lens of anthropology and in particular through participant observation. In this sense the chapter concerns one of the three central questions of the dissertation: *How can an artist be a “participant observer”?*

Key highlights of this chapter will focus on Niko Pirosmeni, a Georgian artist from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I attempt to show that Pirosmeni, in his own idiosyncratic way, was a participant observer of his society. Through this prism, I would like to show how Pirosmeni observed certain layers of his contemporary society, and that this was precisely one of the central motives of his work: his social commentary. It is not necessarily clear if this was an intentional motive. However, looking at his work, it is clear to me that he attempts to transmit the feeling, emotion, and texture resembling a specific society, which is the society contemporary to his times, a society which he was also part of - the lower classes of 19th-century Tbilisi.

I will talk about one particular painting by Pirosmeni. It will be more of a poetic analysis, rather than an art-historical analysis. This experiment will allow me to see what this artwork communicates to my perception. I will use what I already mentioned in previous

chapter “*method of perceptual communication*,” one of the components of my methodology, in which I attempt to engage in dialogue with the artworks and, at the same time, be aware of the internal perceptual transformations that may be occurring in my mind. This method involves an intensive, observational engagement with the artwork, in which I let the artwork speak directly to my “*sensitivity apparatus*,” which is not an analytical cognitive tool but an intuitive field of perception that reacts to the visual information it encounters. This is different from a traditional art-historical perspective in that I do not analyse the painting solely from its historical or compositional context, and I will not be using a pre-existing formula or method to approach the painting, but rather I will allow my imagination to reflect on and respond to it, drawing on its emotional impulses. I have to note here, that I do not claim that the method of dialogue with an artwork is my invention, there have been numerous approaches of this kind in the past. For example as James Elkins, art historian, writes,

*“Painting is an unspoken and largely unrecognized dialogue, where paint speaks silently in masses and colors and the artist responds in moods”*⁸

In this specific context it is clear that Elkins means the relationship between the painting and the artist who is in the act of creating the painting. Whereas my situation is quite different, since I am observing a painting which has been created more than a century ago. In any case, this approach of mine has entered my sphere of interest intuitively and has stayed in my curiosity.

I do not seek to “analyse” artworks in an academic sense; instead, I investigate:

- How do my perceptions shift as I engage with specific artworks?
- What emotions arise that I had not previously been aware of?

My approach is experiential. Of course, I am aware that my approach has limitations, as it is very subjective and might easily neglect the broader perspective that various methods of art-historical analysis could offer. On the other hand, its strength also lies

⁸ James Elkins, “Introduction,” in *What Painting Is* (Routledge, 2000), 5.

in subjectivity, since this way there is a possibility that my thoughts, activated through my “*sensitivity apparatus*,” might bring new information and perspective about an individual’s visual perception. How an artwork can activate the structures of memory in an individual and how it alters that individual’s perception.

Before we turn to the life of Niko Pirosmiani, I want to explain why I am interested in the concept of “participant observation” and anthropology in general. My first real encounter with the field of Anthropology occurred when I worked with Archaeologists in Dmanisi, Georgia. I have already mentioned this before, but I will elaborate here further. Dmanisi is one of the most important archaeological sites in the world. This is where the earliest hominid fossils were found, outside of Africa. This is the *Homo erectus sensu lato*. It is a recognized fact that the discovery of these hominids, which were later named *Zezva* and *Mzia*, has changed the understanding of the migration of homo from the African continent.

My experience there was immensely influential on my perception of time in human history. I had the privilege to be included in the team of the excavators. I was working in the ditch together with professionals, trying to discover something with my naive enthusiasm. Discoveries happened almost every day, and it was fascinating to see that what was emerging from the land was often categorized by the attending professionals as a potential “artifact.” Of course, these findings were not revolutionary, but they were enough to document and archive for later research.

What was particularly remarkable in these times was the fact that when I was standing in the excavation ditch, which happened daily from 8 am to 4 pm, I was often looking at the soil around me and was realizing that the time here was not perceived horizontally, as I was used to from calendars, but rather it was perceived vertically. In front of my eyes, I could see the layers of time accumulated on top of each other, layers which, if properly observed with concentration, one could differentiate by color and texture. They were distinctly unique, even though they often merged into one another. This shift in perception would later significantly impact my art-making, my meditations on psyche,

and, especially, my memory, since memory became an essential part of my art practice.

So, to go back to anthropology, I met several interesting young people pursuing anthropology, talking about how these two fields, anthropology and archaeology, were feeding off each other and trying to understand the complexity of the human story, how the fields needed each other to attempt to create a clear picture of the story. They once mentioned an anthropologist, Tim Ingold, and spoke of him with very high esteem. This made me very curious, and I wrote down his name in my small notebook. I did not return to this name soon after. It became a vague memory one writes down in the notebook but forgets. I have many like this; notebooks are sometimes filled with notes written in similar situations, but the beauty of writing down is that it creates a theoretical chance of resurfacing. This is precisely what happened with Tim Ingold. This name resurfaced for me during my second year of artistic research.

I started reading his articles, listening to his lectures, and thinking more about anthropology. What was particularly fascinating about this field was how lucid and flexible its boundaries were. I realized that the word science is not necessarily about extracting data. I realized it is not necessarily about formulas. However, it is about life and existence, and it can be as complex in its understanding of boundaries as existence itself. This lucidity got me thinking about how close anthropology is to art – that both fields ultimately aim to observe, connect with, and comment on humanity's stories. Of course, they have their own understanding of how to do this and what tools one can use to get involved in the project of discovery. However, the goals still seemed very similar to mine.

Anthropology, as art, seemed to me a very creative field, but also, like art, a very physical field, particularly interested in physical artifacts created by human beings. It is crucial to understand that I am not an anthropologist and that this field has entered my field of interest as an amateur. However, it has become so influential in my thinking that I have consciously sought to integrate aspects of this field into my research. However, this contemplation and integration has been done from the perspective of a visual artist. This is an essential fact that we should be aware of. I see artistic research as a field that allows

us to break down disciplinary boundaries when this is a genuine, organic desire and need that can possibly lead to an interesting path. Therefore, everything I say here is from the perspective of an artist.

I found out about the concept of “participant observation” through Tim Ingold’s writings. This means that the one undertaking a specific practice is simultaneously aware that they are in the act of practice. One follows and observes what is happening in the unfolding process. I also call it “awareness of the involvement.” This is very close to my understanding of artistic research. Ingold suggests that anthropology is not just about collecting data but involves deep involvement in the process, engaging with and responding to what unfolds. Later on, Tim Ingold writes more about participant observation:

“For participant observation is absolutely not a technique of data collection. Quite to the contrary, it is enshrined in an ontological commitment that renders the very idea of data collection unthinkable. This commitment, by no means confined to anthropology, lies in the recognition that we owe our very being to the world we seek to know. In a nutshell, participant observation is a way of knowing from the inside....Only because we are already of the world, only because we are fellow travellers along with the beings and things that command our attention, can we observe them. There is no contradiction, then, between participation and observation; rather, the one depends on the other.”⁹

It is utterly fascinating how, when I read these lines, the connection between Tim Ingold’s description of participant observation and my perception of art was almost synonymous. I see art-making as the activity that translates participant observation in the ecosystem that the artist inhabits. In this context, it is crucial not to forget the awareness of the process itself, the process of creating. This is precisely how I understand and perceive my artistic research: to be aware while working, to be awake, to make notes and document the work process as an observer, and at the same time, to be the creator.

⁹ Tim Ingold, “Knowing from the Inside,” in *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (Routledge, 2013), 5.

For example, in my masterwork project, “*The Lingering Presence*,” which will be discussed in detail in later chapters, I employed a systematic approach. I kept a daily journal, where I wrote down and visually documented my daily shifts in perception. Each morning, I would sit with my journal and reflect on the previous day’s work, thoughts, and emotions before they faded away. Later on, this helped me follow the developmental stages of my ideas and how they translated into physical artifacts.

This is precisely where the thread was connected, and I decided to experiment with appropriating the understanding of the concept of a participant observer used in anthropology. I decided to explore the topic and began thinking of the artists to whom I was emotionally connected and who I could perceive as participant-observers.

These thoughts naturally brought me to Niko Pirosmani. His life story is full of mystery, unfortunately we do not have many first-hand sources, nevertheless, there are still some sources here and there that we can accumulate; even though these sources do not preach the ultimate truth, they are the only sources we have access to, and therefore, we can recollect his biography, at least to a certain extent. While choosing my sources, I attempted to include not only Georgian sources but also at least one source by an international researcher. Also, I researched the authors whose names were unknown to me and ensured they were credible, published authors. Unfortunately, I did not have the privilege of choosing from a big list, since literature about Pirosmani’s life is very scarce.

2. Life of Niko Pirosmani

As a basis for knowledge about Pirosmani’s life, I will use several sources. One source I used is the fascinating book *Character in Georgia* by Aka Morchiladze¹⁰, published in 2020. These series were written about the 19th century of Georgian history, mainly focusing on social transformation, revolutions, political changes, art, and central historical

¹⁰ Aka Morchiladze is a pen name of Giorgi Akhvlediani (born 1966). He is one of the most prominent and recognized contemporary Georgian writers. His works have been translated into numerous languages.

figures of the time. It is not a strict historical book in the sense that it attempts to pinpoint exact dates, but rather a creative, poetic take on documentary prose—Morchiladze’s appropriation of historical sources. He has been working with it for several years. The other sources include Giorgi Papashvili’s article for *Ars Georgica* (2012): “*Niko Pirosmashvili’s Picture Language and Photography*.”¹¹ This piece is an art-historical study of the various methods Pirosmashvili employed in constructing his compositions, primarily painting from life, from memory, and from photographic sources. The next source is Ulrica Söderlind’s article, titled “*Georgia’s Food and Drinking Culture in the Eyes of Niko Pirosmashvili*,”¹² published in January 2012. I used these sources to frame the key events in Pirosmashvili’s biography and to examine his involvement with contemporary society.

Pirosmashvili’s birth date is unknown, but it is assumed to be around 1865. He was born in the village of Mirzaani, in Georgia’s wine region, Kakheti. He was the son of a peasant. The time of his birth is significant in Georgia’s history because it marked the abolition of the nobility. So, it is a time of critical transitions. In his early childhood, his elder brother died, followed by his father and later his mother. He became an orphan in his teenage years. From a moderately large family, only he and his sister remained. He was then sent to Tbilisi to live with relatives. There is no clear evidence that he attended any school or other educational facility. One thing known from his close circles is that he enjoyed drawing from an early age, and when asked what he would like to do for a living, he usually replied, “painting.”

Pirosmashvili was soon sent to work in a printing house, which, for some reason, did not last long. They say he was determined to become a painter, but the elders who were caring for him did not take it seriously, since, for the lower classes, a painter’s job was not seen as very practical. As Aka Morchiladze also states, it is interesting that being a painter held different meanings for different social classes.

We are approaching the latter part of the 19th century, an utterly absorbing period for

11 Giorgi Papashvili, *Niko Pirosmashvili’s Picture Language and Photography*, 2012, https://www.academia.edu/10455088/Niko_Pirosmashvilis_Picture_Language_and_Photo.

12 Ulrica Söderlind, “Georgia’s Food and Drinking Culture in the Eyes of Nikoloz Pirosmashvili 1,” *Review of Applied Socio- Economic Research* Volume 3 (January 2012): 170–83.

Georgia's capital. The city was divided into two parts, the older town and the new one, which was continually growing and transforming. The older city was a habitat for the lower classes, whereas the upper, newer city, built by Russians, Austrians, and Armenians, was gradually being inhabited by the wealthier citizens. Aka Morchiladze writes:

“...His ground was mostly the Asian, poorer section of the city. So it is worth making a brief distinction between Tbilisi's old and new towns(...)In the upper part, built by the Russians, artists tended to be educated with solid academic backgrounds. New city men. In the lower, painters were usually poorly educated, in Niko's case, learning to write mostly from the necessity of painting shop signs and words without mistakes. But beyond the worlds of words, a man with instinctive understanding of shape and color, also enough practicality to learn how to render it efficiently onto tin or cardboard.”¹³

This is what the painter of the lower city, the old city, meant. It was a sign painter for shops, taverns, and diners. These were their primary sources of income. In Pirosmiani's case, this was not only a source of income but also the places where he socialized most. He often lived in taverns and was fed and given drinks as part of the payment the owners offered for his work. This is where he started to form as a character of his era, an observer from the dark shadows of underground tavern ceilings. What he observed there often found its way into his paintings, which were sometimes murals painted directly on the tavern walls. In this sense, metaphorically speaking, the tavern functioned as both studio and ethnographic field site, offering a vivid intersection between art and the public. It created a duality, where people, the kintos¹⁴, the workers, the merchants, the soldiers, who were dining, drinking wine around supras¹⁵, singing Georgian polyphonic songs while being literally surrounded by a parallel world – the wall murals and hanging paintings created by Pirosmiani. The wall became the mirror world reflecting the one unfolding

13 Aka Morchiladze and Peter Nasmyth, “The Painter, Nikala,” in *Character in Georgia* (MTA Publications, 2022), 181.

14 Kintos were mostly small-time merchants and/or performers of the 19th-century Tbilisi social landscape. They were coming from the lower classes of society.

15 Supra is a long-standing traditional feast in Georgian culture. It has its own rules of conduct, with toasts led by the Tamada (toastmaster). This tradition is based on listening to one another's toasts with careful consideration. Supras are often accompanied by Georgian polyphonic singing.



Figure 3 - Niko Pirosmiani's Portrait, n.d., accessed February 22, 2026, <https://www.peramuseum.org/blog/niko-pirosmani/1358>.

before their eyes. There is a fascinating duality in this: the surreal mirror of reality and the experienced reality entering into dialogue with one another. Most of the taverns that commissioned work from Pirosmiani also unintentionally served as exhibition spaces for his work, since their walls were full of his paintings, which hung or were painted directly on them as murals.

The society Pirosmiani socialised with comprised the majority of Tbilisi's population at that time. These were the newcomers to the ever-growing capital. People who came to test their luck, to try and grasp better and bigger opportunities. These were the lower classes, mostly peasants, who had recently been freed by law and were now transitioning into a new status, the free men. As a result, they faced the struggles of this new, once-utopian condition. He socialised with workers, merchants, outlaws, poets, the forming proletariat, and street artisans. This is how Morchiladze describes his social circle:

“With no home or workshop, he’d sometimes hide himself away in craftsman’s shops, or the room of the poet Davit Givishvili, in Avlabari. The two could sit for hours, chatting, leafing through books, waiting for work to arrive—usually, in Niko’s case, from a tavern owner.

And it’s worth saying a word about those Tbilisi publicans. Tough, hard-working, often of peasant stock, recently arriving in the city, trying on new business. Their motivations were many, not all concerned with the bottom line. Some started as karachokheli (nomad street artisans, members of the Hamkari guild); others were thieves; some were pirdali trying to make good. Thus, they had a good eye for human character, particularly criminals, whom they’d either shelter or quickly eject onto the street. But they always welcomed Niko as one of their gentler, more gracious customers.”¹⁶

Pirosmani’s unique perspective was shaped by his close involvement with Tbilisi’s merchants and workers. He lived among them, day in and day out, year after year. His social circle did not include the intellectual or artistic elite of the era. Instead, he was deeply connected to the ‘ordinary’ people, the lower strata of society that formed a significant part of Tbilisi’s social fabric.

What made Tbilisi historically unique was its multiethnic character. Tbilisi has long been a place where diverse ethnic and religious groups have peacefully coexisted. The city, Georgia’s capital since the 5th century, was home to Georgians, Armenians, Russians, Jews, various Muslim peoples from the Caucasus, Asians, and Turkic groups such as Azerbaijanis and Turks. Despite their differences, these communities managed to coexist without any large-scale interracial conflict. Tbilisi could provide the peace for coexistence.

Of course, these communities had their economic classifications, with both rich and poor. The poor lived with the poor, and the rich moved to the newer parts of the city. This cre-

¹⁶ Aka Morchiladze and Peter Nasmyth, “The Painter, Nikala,” in *Character in Georgia* (MTA Publications, 2022), 187.

ated a social divide, but ethnically, society was mixed, and the different ethnic groups socialised and worked together.

One interesting, idiosyncratic ethnic group that resided in Georgia at the time was the Molokans. They are a non-canonical Christian group, often referred to as a sect, originating from the Eastern Orthodox Church. Not canonically recognized as a religious group, they were usually called heretics even by the broader Eastern Orthodox Church. The name Molokan originates from the Russian word moloko, meaning “milk.” The group was referred to in this way because they allowed themselves to consume milk products during Orthodox fasting periods. From the 19th century until the 1990s, a significant Molokan population lived in Tbilisi. Today, they have largely disappeared from the city’s social landscape. The painting that I will be discussing in the next section is a group portrait of Molokans.

3. The Painting - “Feast of Molokans”

Note – I will be using a method of “perceptual communication.”

This is a striking work by Niko Pirosmani, which is titled “The Feast of Molokans.” This is the one painting that I will discuss in the following pages. The work is dated to 1905. The National Museum of Georgia currently owns it. It is a picture with a dark background, like most of Pirosmani’s paintings, featuring a choreography of figures aligned around the “supra.” There is a simple, circular symmetry in how these six figures are arranged around the table. The background appears homogeneous at first glance. However, upon diligent, slow observation, it evokes a subtle depth in the viewer’s imagination. The figures are sculpted out of the black background, with no contours; instead, contrasting light colors are applied directly and aggressively. And, interestingly, when needed, Pirosmani uses the background’s darkness as the defining tone in the rendering of figures.

This painting creates its own ecosystem, where the glimpse of the universe depicted

within it is self-sustainable; it can exist independently. The microcosm of the ghostly moment, which has been stuck in eternal time, with movement that is so slow that it rarely passes. There is a feeling, as if there is no need for the outside world for this painting to exist; it can exist on its own, anywhere – in a room, on a wall, on the floor, on the ceiling, in the black darkness of the night, in the darkness of the vacuum. It is the vacuum itself that freezes the lives of the Molokan figures in the moment of a feast. I look at them, and I see a paradox, a paradox of wholeness that their unity creates, but once I start observing the figures separately, I realize the loneliness of each of them. The paradox lies in the fact that, at first sight, they are communicating with each other through their gestures, sounds, and gazes around the table, around the supra, which has not been touched, and nothing has been eaten. The chicken, the bread, the heavy, massive cups stand like sculptures in a blue desert.

The table, which is there as if to gather figures around, with its gravity that brings them together. However, at the same time, all of them are stuck in their microcosms and auras. These ghostly faces, which almost resemble masks sculpted from white candles, were made from cold wax, as if to cover the darkness of their souls. Each of them, at the same time, is slender, trying to be elegant in their actions, but being paradoxically comfortably grotesque. This grotesqueness shines out from the figures, almost as a struggle of their morbid souls, which in the artist's eyes are imperfect, but self-sustainable. In this cosmos of the picture, they exist harmoniously. Every single one of them contributes to the balance of the idiosyncratic composition, which, while being static, still transmits a lot of choreography of movement, gestures, and communication. Pirosmani is trying to tell a story of this feast, a feast of a small group of Molokans, who are perhaps merchants of the milk products, or of carpets layered with dust and cotton, or maybe street sellers of silk, of fruits, or something else. This feast is their intimate moment, where they try to forget the day that has been left behind, to try to forget the day that is about to come and instead cement themselves in the moment of the feast.

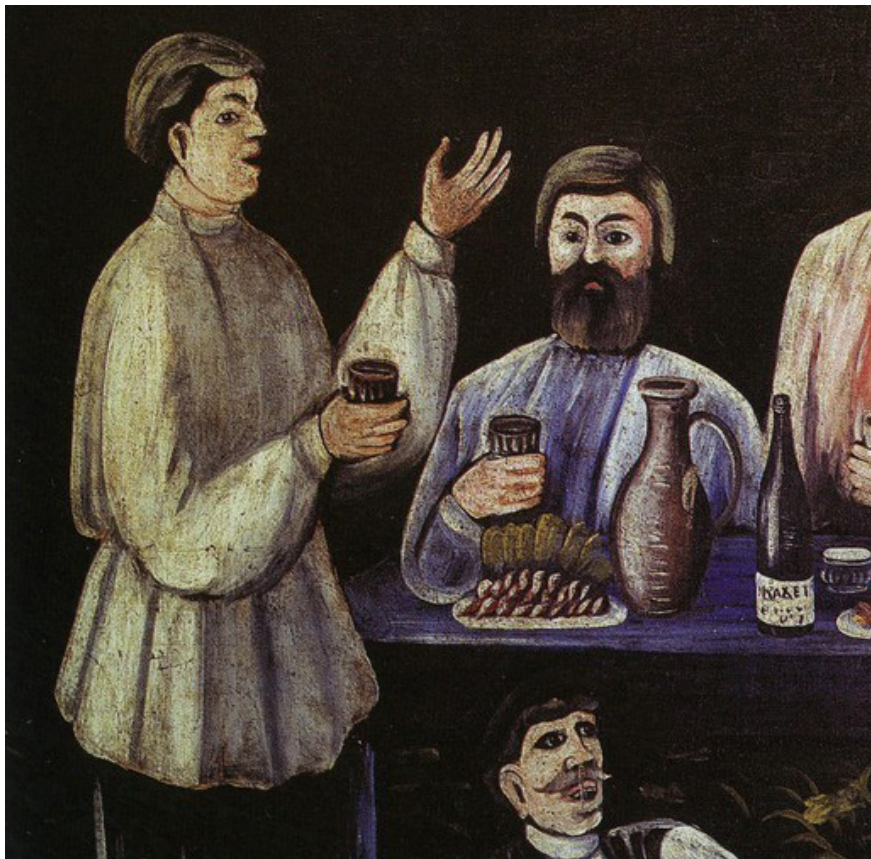
I see Pirosmani telling their tale, transmitting their energy and aura, but I also see his

attempt, while painting, to become a Molokan himself. To join the feast himself. The amount of empathy he directs towards these figures becomes so intense a concentration of attention that it paradoxically puts Pirosmeni in their position, transforming him into a Molokan and, at the same time, transforming the figures in front of our eyes from Molokans into Pirosmenis. I look at six Molokans, and simultaneously, I see six lonely, tired ghosts of Pirosmeni. I see his brush, his subconsciously calculated touch of the tip of the brush to mark the shapes of the eyes, lips, noses, fingers. The shapes that are not attractive and are not measured, but they are accurate in their expression of empathy. As if a man looking in the mirror and realizing that he is not as handsome as he sometimes thinks he is, and suddenly sees the dissonance between the angles and shapes and forms of the organs of his face; he realizes how big his nose is, how far his eyes are from each other. This is what is seen in the figures of Molokans: the strangeness and grotesqueness that result from self-projection onto the figures, derived from empathy. The question is: how can he know what it feels like to be a member of a minor ethnic group? What information does the artist transmit? This is definitely not scientific knowledge. It is not



Figure 4 - Niko Pirosmeni, The Feast of Molokans, 1905, oil on oilcloth, Georgian National Museum, accessed February 22, 2026, <https://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/handle/1234/85890>

Figures 5,6 (on page 37) - Details of Figure 4.



a data of some kind. But it is still a sort of knowledge that comes from observation. He transmits the aura, the character of this specific small society. The aura that can only be felt from a visual encounter with the painting. Pirosmanni attempts to get impulses from experiencing, observing, and interacting. Then he imagines beings in their skin. What does it feel like? He wonders, and this wondering is what is being born before our eyes in the skin of the Molokans, painted on the black oilcloth. He participates, and in that participation, he observes, notes, acts it out, and shows us, the viewers, what it feels like. This is how he is, simultaneously, inside and outside of the moment, participating and observing at the same time.

This research of his is not a traditional type; it is a search and again a re-search for the impulses beyond verbal or written communication. It is attempting to detect gentle intensities of the subtle hints, which might help to understand more about the human being who is observed - the gestures, the laughs, the pitch of the voice, the textures and ages of the clothes, the mimics of the facial features, the ability to listening or not listening to others, and then recalling all this attempting to depict the intricacies of these observations through oil paint, with its greasiness and oiliness, shining out from the black surface of the night. As Elkins describes:

*“ To a nonpainter, oil paint is uninteresting and faintly unpleasant. To a painter, it is the life’s blood: a substance so utterly entrancing, infuriating, and ravishingly beautiful that it makes it worthwhile to go back into the studio every morning, year after year, for an entire lifetime. As the decades go by, a painter’s life becomes a life lived with oil paint, a story told in the thicknesses of oil. ”*¹⁷

I look at Pirosmanni’s painting, and it is calling me in to join this blue ultramarine table, with wine and chicken and bread and mtsvadi¹⁸, which are all as if untouched, or instead consumed and simultaneously reincarnated. It is calling me in to my memories of supras

17 James Elkins, “Introduction,” in *What Painting Is* (Routledge, 2000), 4.

18 Fried meat on a Georgian-style barbecue, usually over the vine wood. It can be pork, veal, or salmon.

where I am sitting, gently tipsy with the effect of dry, cloudy amphora white wine from a clay cup, feeling the earthiness of the wine notes and cup on my lips, and being in an idle moment of satisfying numbness, when time is slowed down. One has a capacity to listen endlessly, with utter curiosity to the simplest stories of fellow humans sharing the *supra* with me.

I look at the painting and it is calling me in to look around the figures and to see in them friends of mine, sitting around, together with me, being able to find time and space to be present for each other, even in a state of ancient tranquility, when being together, makes so much sense that the setting and the time and space lose concrete trails and transform themselves into the deep, black oily background.

I look at the painting, and it tells me to think about myself to recall how many times I have been amongst the circles of my Hungarian friends or acquaintances, colleagues, where, after a specific time and a certain amount of alcohol, people rarely feel comfortable speaking any other language than their native one. Thus, I have been in the position of observing from the perspective where the words do not necessarily communicate meaning to me, and I try to follow the flow of the situation. This puts me in a situation of an outsider, who is still inside, much like Pirosmeni observing Molokans. I concentrate on the intuitive level, where the choreography of the conversations, the laughs, the mimics, the reactions become bits of information to follow, to create a scenario in my head of what is going on. This is a very peculiar and interesting situation to be in, since at first glance it might seem boring or vulnerable. Still, over time, it becomes a practice in sensitivity and imagination, as one has to use their imagination to reconstruct the flow, topics, and accents of the communication. In this sense, I assume I feel empathy also towards Pirosmeni, as being the observer, being the participant, but still a sort of outsider of the context, even though I am almost sure that he did understand the language of Molokans, because either it would have been Russian or maybe even bits of “broken” Georgian.

4. Afterthought

In this chapter, I approached the artist as a participant observer and used my method of perceptual communication through a dialogue with Pirosmeni's painting. I examined how the way of life Pirosmeni was leading, naturally positioned him as an anthropological observer and how he uses this observer position to transmit the impulses of the observing through the language of painting, through the materiality of oil paint. In the next chapter, the anthropological approach will be joined by a psychological perspective, examining the hidden mechanics of memory and, specifically, how encountering an artwork can activate the layers of memory's architecture.

Chapter III - Cryptomnesia & Ljiljana Blazevska

1. Introduction

Cryptomnesia is a concept that has gained scientific recognition in the field of psychology in the 20th century. I am bringing this concept into the dissertation because it touches the core question I set out in the introduction: *how art participates in perception and memory?* Cryptomnesia is one of the notions that makes the participation visible. It shows how memory can disguise itself as a new occurrence. In the following chapter, I will discuss how artwork can shift and affect the architecture of memory. What if the shift is not only emotional, but also mnemonic? What if a specific artwork encounter reactivates something buried in my field of memory?

Cryptomnesia was first introduced by Théodore Flournoy (1854–1920), a Swiss psychologist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was one of the most influential figures in Carl Jung’s life. Jung became deeply interested in the idea of cryptomnesia. Later it proved to be a breakthrough in his study of the unconscious mind.

“The term is composed of two Greek words: kruptos – hidden – and mnèmè – memory. What happens in cryptomnesia, meaning ‘hidden memory’, is the following: one remembers something without realising that it is a recollection. One is convinced that it is an original thought or intuition.”¹⁹

This quote describes a moment when the mind forgets the source of a certain impulse. This is exactly the kind of moment that occurred to me while doing research. This quote is from Tjeu van den Berk, one of the prominent researchers of Jung’s views on art. His book had a substantial influence on my understanding of Jung and his relationship with creativity. It is also one of the primary sources I will be using in this chapter, as it has

19 Tjeu van den Berk, “Art Originates from ‘Hidden Memories,’” in *Jung on Art: The Autonomy of Creative Drive* (Routledge, 2012), 3.

been a central text in shaping both my ideas and later, emotional response to the subject of cryptomnesia.

I also treat this chapter as a method of “perception excavation.” The material excavated is the hidden mechanisms behind a sudden feeling of familiarity, which happened during an encounter with a specific painting.

Jung’s first encounter with the phenomenon was through his niece, a somnambulist, who later became his doctoral research subject. Discovering her unique mental condition at an early age was a decisive moment that led him to pursue psychology as his life’s work. He writes:

“In 1896, something happened to me that served as an impetus for my future life. (...) The thing that started me off in my interest in psychology was the case of a fifteen-and-a-half-year-old girl. (...) This girl was a somnambulist, and it was discovered by her sisters that she could obtain extraordinary answers to questions put to her when she was in a sleeping state. (...) I was impressed with the fact that, notwithstanding appearances, there must be a hidden life of the mind manifesting itself only in trance or in sleep. (...) During the trance several personalities would manifest themselves and, little by little, I found I could call up by suggestion one personality or another. (...) I said to myself, however, that there must be some world behind the conscious world, and that it was this world with which the girl was in contact. I began to study the literature of spiritism but could find no satisfaction there. Then I turned to philosophy, always seeking for a possible clue to these strange phenomena.”²⁰

This fifteen-year-old girl sparked Jung’s first sustained encounter with the phenomenon of cryptomnesia. He regarded her case as a clear evidence that the unconscious mind existed. He began to explore the concept more deeply. He discovered that memories could either vanish from consciousness or become so deeply buried in the unconscious that

²⁰ Carl Jung, “Art Originates from ‘Hidden Memories,’” in *Jung on Art: The Autonomy of Creative Drive*, by Tjeu van den Berk (Routledge, 2012), 2.

they reappeared unexpectedly without any rational connection to their origin. Most importantly, Jung found that these resurfaced memories often returned not as recognizable recollections but as seemingly “new” emotions. In his view, these were not new, rather they were disguised reappearances of forgotten memory.

As Jung continued his research, he became especially interested in how cryptomnesia affected artists. He believed artists were particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon and was convinced that it lay at the heart of what is commonly referred to as “inspiration.” This is where the question of art becomes crucial for me in the context of memory. If a forgotten memory can return as a “new emotion,” then hypothetically an artwork can become the trigger that gives that emotion a specific form. In this case the artwork is not only something I observe, rather it becomes a participant that rearranges my inner mnemonic chronology.

Over time, Jung extended Flournoy’s original idea into more complex territory. He began to theorize that cryptomnesia could work not only with personal memories but also with collective memory, what he later called the *collective unconscious*. This insight eventually led him to a closely related theory: the concept of *participation mystique*. This concept brings the discussion back to wider environments. It connects memory to a relational condition – how the self merges with objects, places, and atmospheres. This echoes with my approach to treat artworks as living entities, as presences that I can “speak with,” than that neutral objects of observation.

Participation mystique, similarly to cryptomnesia, was not a term Jung coined himself. He encountered it in the early 1900s through the work of French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939). As it is clear from this example Jung’s approach to research was very interdisciplinary. In addition to psychology, he also drew from anthropology and other social sciences to understand the full complexity of human experience. I highlight this interdisciplinary nature, since it also resonates with the structure we are dealing with in this dissertation. The Chapter II leans toward anthropology and observation, whereas here I lean towards psychology and the subject of unconscious. Later on, in the

Chapter IV, which is about my own practice, these two threads will meet again inside the field of art-making.

Meanwhile we get back to the Participation Mystique. Tjeu van den Berk summarizes Jung's interpretation of the concept in this way:

“According to Jung, Lévy-Bruhl was correct in his observation that people from so-called inferior societies do not generally see themselves as independent individuals, as this is what the concept of participation mystique means. In their awareness, they almost merge with the things around them. The outside world and the interior world are merged in an awareness of unity. Stars, trees and animals are not separated from the ‘I’ and are mentally just as close as the tribe, children, parents and ancestors.”²¹

This idea speaks directly to the mental and emotional attachment individuals form with their surroundings. It also represents an intriguing pre-individualistic worldview, suggesting that the boundary between self and world is very fluid. For Jung, this kind of relational awareness helped explain why artists often express or attempt to express the surreal. Their creative instincts may not arise from personal ego or deliberate thought but from the deeply embedded forces of memory and unconscious perception.

Jung believed that there are two types of *participation mystique*. He called them a healthy and an unhealthy states of the concept. The difference between the two lies in the individual's development of self-awareness. In the “healthy form,” a person continues to cultivate their individuality while remaining part of a larger unity. In contrast, the unhealthy form involves the suppression of individual feelings and perspectives. In such cases, the self is projected into an external participation, whether that be a cultural group or an external object. As a result, if something disrupts this external projection, the individual is deeply affected emotionally. In more simple words, the person's emotional experience is directly attached to external factors.

²¹ Tjeu van den Berk, “Art Is Rooted in Participation Mystique,” in *Jung on Art: The Autonomy of Creative Drive* (Routledge, 2012), 37.

Jung was practicing art himself. He loved to draw, paint, and he often incorporated visuals into his journals. He also experimented with sculpting, ceramics, and music. This is a reasonably well-known fact among his biographers and researchers. It is a significant point in our discussion because it makes a tremendous difference when a psychologist, or any scientist, comments on art from the perspective of direct, personal contact with materials and crafts. This differs profoundly from someone theorizing without hands-on knowledge.

When someone knows how a material behaves in the human hand, how it feels to touch raw clay or to press pigment onto canvas, when they have felt the tip of a brush absorbing paint or noticed how oil interacts with pigment or how water changes the flow of color on a surface, they speak from personal experience. Artists constantly deal with these sensations and decisions, whether consciously or unconsciously. There is no way around them. When a theoretician is also aware of these complex, embodied experiences, they can observe art-making from a deeply empathetic and internal perspective. This is why Jung's approach to art is so fascinating. I realized that he speaks about artists and art-making with immense and authentic empathy. This empathy drives his thoughts and conclusions. Jung's central idea is that artists are in constant contact with the ancient collective psyche of the human race. He writes:

“This re-immersion in the state of participation mystique is the secret of artistic creation, and of the effect which great art has upon us, for at that level of experience, it is no longer the weal or woe of the individual that counts, but the life of the collective. That is why every great work of art is objective and impersonal, and yet profoundly moving.”²²

In the next section I will talk about my cryptomnestic experience, which got me interested in this topic in the first place, to research it more deeply and figure out sources of this occurrence.

22 Carl Jung, “Art Is Rooted in Participation Mystique,” in *Jung on Art* by Tjeu van den Berk (Routledge, 2012), 43.

2. *My Cryptomnesic Experience*

I encountered digital reproductions of Ljiljana Blaževska's paintings while researching various contemporary art exhibitions online. There is a curated database of contemporary exhibitions worldwide—with a main focus on Europe—available through the website *artviewer.org*.²³

I browse this archive very often; it is almost a daily act for me. I do it out of curiosity, to stay updated on what is happening in the art world, and also for inspiration, because it gives me a clearer view of what kind of art is being made and exhibited nowadays. One day, while looking through some exhibitions on the website, I came across a show from 2021 in New York based gallery, *Orient 15*, which was a solo exhibition of a painter Ljiljana Blazevska.²⁴

THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF THE ENCOUNTER OF DIGITAL DOCUMENTATION

The encounter with the documentation of artworks is a widely used method to research art nowadays, but of course, this does not make it a legitimate source for deeply reflecting upon a painting, especially that painting, even if it is often perceived as two-dimensional, is a three-dimensional artwork. It is never flat, it always has its depth, together with its height and length (even if its several centimeters long). Painters are well aware of this, especially when they need to pack and ship their artwork. They must calculate the volume weight of the paintings, which is always calculated by multiplying the three dimensions together.

It is also a well-known fact that painting is a very physical form of art, characterized by its texture and specific materiality, the greasy mass of oil paint, which somehow resembles the texture of butter, of wet soil, or even human flesh. We know that chemically, oil

²³ “Art Viewer - Contemporary Art Platform and Archive,” Art Viewer, accessed February 3, 2026, <https://artviewer.org/>.

²⁴ “Ljiljana Blazevska at 15 Orient,” Exhibitions, Art Viewer, February 24, 2021, <https://artviewer.org/ljiljana-blazevska-at-15-orient/>.

paint is constantly transforming; it is never entirely stable, which is why ancient paintings often change their surface form and color. This liveliness is undoubtedly one of the most important traits of paintings. Therefore, it was very problematic for me to attempt to engage in a dialogue with a painting that I had never seen in person, which I had never physically approached, and had not observed from close-up views. I did not know how to proceed because the urge to think and write about the emotion I felt while encountering the documentation of this work was compelling, and the urge was not letting me relax. So I realized this is the exact moment when I should think more about the current state of viewing art in digital format.

We live in an era when viewing documentation of various kinds has become a significant part of our daily lives. This is often a fact that is not always pleasant for me, and, of course, I am aware that millions of people share the same sentiment in this era, which is over-saturated with digital imagery. This got me thinking about the nature of documentation itself and the fact that, since it is our daily encounter, one must also enter into contemplation to uncover the particularities of this phenomenon. As Walter Benjamin states: *“Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”*²⁵

The specific place where the artwork is located, as argued by Benjamin, is the essential denominator of the aura that the artwork presents to the viewer. This aura is supposed to immerse the viewer. This, he states, is not possible from the reproduction. I can agree with this statement without a doubt because seeing the artwork in person provides a direct connection with both the artwork and the artist simultaneously. In this moment of observing the artwork physically in space, the observer has a chance to put himself in the position of the creator, to have a chance of intimate empathy towards the act of creating this specific object. One can observe the tiny details, which are superficially present (or even absent) in the most elaborate photo documentation. Details like – what is the texture of the surface? What do the sides of the work look like? Do they have stains of the paints that were on the artists fingers? Or are they clean from these “imperfections”? What is the

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Aesthetics* (Routledge, 2017).

consistency of the paint that has been used? Was it diluted? Or was it applied like a butter paste, with texture? These details bring the possibility of understanding or imagining what was the artist's relationship with the object that is before our eyes, how this specific encounter of the artist and the energies of the material has transformed the specific materials into the shapes and forms and constellations that are in front of our eyes and bodies to observe. These facts are of immense importance, and nothing can substitute for this way of observation.

On the other hand, while it is not a substitute for physical observation, it is clear that the existence of digital documentation is gaining more and more weight in the art world, as well as in the social and political reality of the 21st century. Documentation, especially a genuine one, is gaining importance of its own, which also requires dedicated attention. This is why I thought it would still be interesting and important to explore the feeling that the image of Blazevska's painting had on my perception. I thought, 'Let us see where this leads.'

In the book *"Art Power,"* Boris Groys presents important opinions on the relationship between art and art documentation. He states: "*Art documentation is by definition not art; it merely refers to art, and precisely this way it makes it clear that art, in this case, is no longer present and immediately visible but rather absent and hidden.*"²⁶ This situation closely resembled the one I was in, where I encountered an image of a painting of Ljiljana Blazevska and had a feeling that a particular fragment of memory was resurfacing, one that had been hidden away for a long time. This correlation between the documentation and the essence of memory itself, where it can be hidden away, but the glimpse of the experience can resurface, was a unexpected one. The documentation of the artwork, or more precisely, the act of observing the documentation, is also a sort of cryptic experience, a sense that you are looking at a fragment of the experience that is currently absent, hidden from your perception.

26 Boris Groys, "Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation," in *Art Power* (The MIT Press, 2008).

With this invitation born from my thoughts, I decided to engage into the conversation with the documentation of the Blazevska painting. I realized that I am engaging in the dialogue with the documentation and not the artwork itself, which would bring another layer, seemingly controversial, that could lead to some knowledge about the nature of the phenomenon of “art documentation” itself.

At first, I was viewing the installation shots of the exhibition. At some point, my attention was caught by something that triggered a bodily sensation—a kind of warming, intuitive feeling born from the exposure to the visual. I looked more closely at the image, which was a view of a room with a door leading to another room. Next to the door hung a painting in a rather small condensed space. The painting had a general tone of light sky blue. As I looked at it, I felt a strange familiarity—almost as if I had seen this work before. Then I found a closer image of the painting and began to observe it more carefully. I became curious about this sudden feeling it evoked. It was as if I had encountered the aura of this work before—the shapes, the colors, and the format felt familiar. I took a piece of paper and a pen and began to write down what the painting was offering to my perception. Here is what it looked like:

“The first interesting impression that comes is the feeling that is attached to the transparent shape representing a chair—the type of chair that I know very well, one that we have at home in Tbilisi. I have sat in this chair so many times; I have moved it around, and I have been involved in discussions while sitting on it. I have also been quiet and thinking while sitting on it.

This image of the chair in Blazevska’s painting, which doesn’t feel like a material one due to its lack of color, weight, and concreteness, is still amazingly real to my perception. I can fill in its color in my perception; I can feel the texture of the seat, which has a round, circular wooden relief. The color is dark brown, almost blending into tones of Indian red. Although this is not



Figure 7 - Ljiljana Blazevska, 2021, Exhibition View, 15 Orient, New York, February 24, 2021, <https://artviewer.org/ljiljana-blazevska-at-15-orient/>.

visible in the picture, I know it is—because it is the only way I can perceive it.

There is also a candle, which is not on top of it or in front, but instead merged with it into one shape—a candle that is burning, but this burn is silent and without temperature; rather, it is a burning of light, without the involvement of heat.

Next to the candle, on the left, there is a creature—a cat-like creature with a small body and pointy ears—looking directly at me, as if observing my actions, my attention, and listening to my movements, including the sound of my pen on the paper. And the candle is holding a string instrument of some sort.

On the right side of the candle is a swimming fish with a human eye, gently inhabiting the ecosystem of the picture. There is another candle that merges with the sky in the upper left part of the surface, contributing to the relationship between the colors on the surface.

The shapes that seem to represent objects or subjects have a double nature, in the sense that they exist physically but are also overlapping each other, double-exposed onto each other. They have transparency and a lack of gravity, which allows them to be in a constant state of flow, and movement.

This is an interesting paradox: objects coexist on the same plane, yet they don't need their own autonomous space. On the other hand, they can and seem able to merge into one another's space without losing the sovereignty of their individual existence. This lucidity reminds me of how memories coexist in my perception; they are not as concrete or definite as a movie scene, but they can merge, transform, and swim in these layers of perception, which are in constant motion.

There is a blue, darker figure in the lower right corner of the picture—a figure that has the morphology of a chair but has an evident creature-like presence

at the same time, almost an alive chair, some sort of a creature. This is the space on the canvas that has the most gravity, concreteness, and heaviness of its own. Yet it still exists within the background, within the texture of the surface, constructed from the same molecules as the rest of the environment around it.

Its head-like shape is in profile, directing its gaze toward the chair, the candle, the fish, and their space in the picture, as if observing what is happening there in the center of the image.

In the top right corner is a shape that somehow resembles a humanoid head looking down, flying into the corner of the picture. With a sandy, airy, and warm texture that also resembles desert sand, it coexists with the cold blue shades of the mass that form the majority of the picture's background. The interesting part is also that there is no factual background and foreground; rather, these planes interchange their positions in a lucid and organic choreography.

Next, my attention shifts to a different point, where the background is the second candle tip, in the shape of a tiny one, which creates a layer of light around itself. When I look with more concentration, I also see a human figure—a more masculine one—with ephemeral contours on the shoulder and breast and the right hand, as if this figure is embedded deeply into the mass texture of the background, which is very much full of sand and light, incredibly light beige tones which are transforming into white.

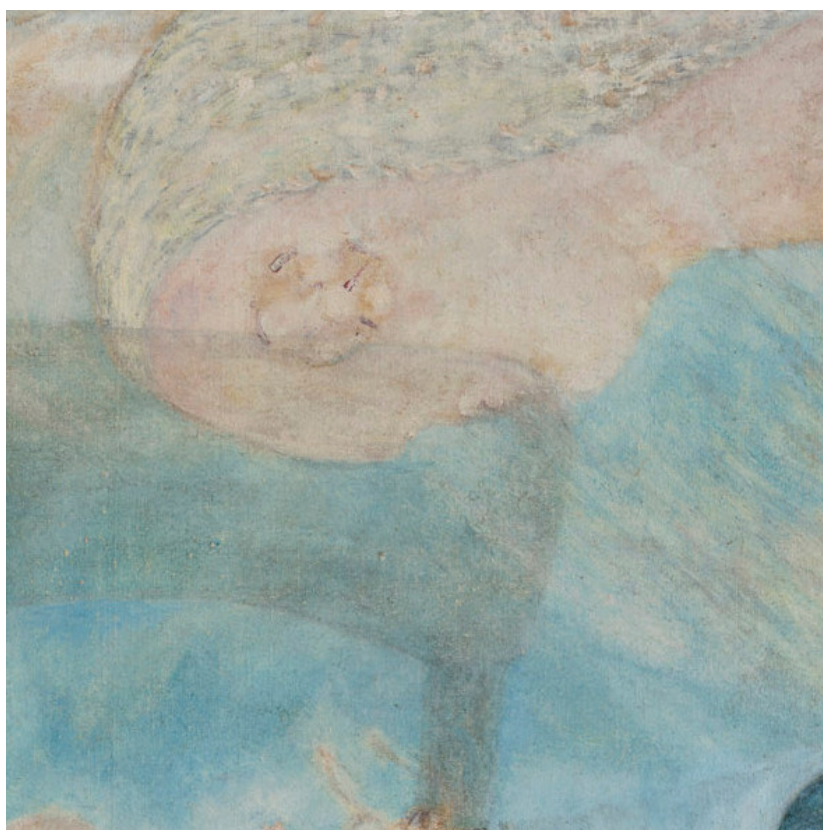
It is interesting how much this all makes sense together. I have no rational explanation for it, though. I have a sense of being in this particular moment, which is not a moment meant to pass but rather a moment paradoxically embedded in numb stillness, which gently vibrates. A moment that is reminiscent of a dreamy state, a state when light penetrates into the eye and makes it diffi-



Figure 8 - Ljiljana Blazevska, *Untitled (2)*, date unknown, -1990 1984, oil on canvas stretched on cradled panel, 88 x 121 cm, <https://artviewer.org/ljiljana-blazevska-at-15-orient/>.

cult to perceive what exactly is the image in front of it. The feeling is like when I close my eyes—but not totally. There is still sunlight entering the retina, and the particles of light are swimming in a state of non-gravity.”

After this initial acquaintance with Ljiljana Blazevska’s painting, I became increasingly interested in her art. Seeing her painting solely in a digital image was not sufficient to experience her art and learn more about it. This gave me a strong urge to research where I could find her paintings and whether I could arrange a visit to see some in person. This urge naturally led me to a research trip to Belgrade, which I will discuss in more detail in the next section.



Details of painting - *Untitled (2)*.

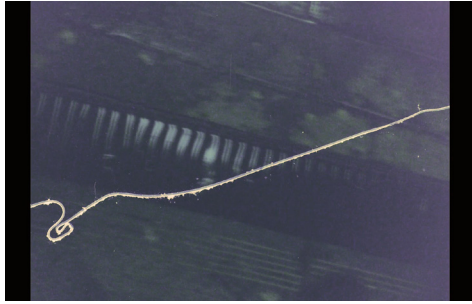
3. *Trip to Belgrade*

“The landscape itself tells – or rather is – a story. It enfolds the lives and times of predecessors who, over the generations, have moved around in it and played their part in its formation.”

- Tim Ingold, *The Temporality of Landscape* (1993)²⁷

This is a chapter which works as a travelogue and an anthropological report of the research trip. It is about a trip from Budapest to Belgrade and about what happened there. It is also a letter about Ljiljana Blazevska, a Belgrade-based Macedonian/Serbian artist whom I have never met in person. She passed away 5 years ago in 2020. I came to Belgrade to track down traces of her existence and understand how her art was influenced by this city. As I mentioned before, there was one specific event that sparked my curiosity about Blazevska’s life story and her work. One evening, approximately one year ago, I was sitting in a bar in Budapest, having a cup of red wine and a smoked meat stew. I had my laptop open and was looking through photos of various exhibition documentations online. When I realized that I had an urgent desire to make a research trip to find out more about Blazevska’s paintings and her life story, I started researching who I could contact from her family. By accident I found out the name of her son, Viktor Shekuralatz, and managed to find him on social media platform, on Instagram. I wrote him about my interest and curiosity about his mother’s work. Victor was very happy to hear and he did a very helpful job in making me a map of where I could see more of Blazevska’s works in Belgrade. He also connected me to the artist’s older sister, Aleksandra Blazevska and her younger brother Vladimir Blazevski.

²⁷ Tim Ingold, “The Temporality of the Landscape,” *World Archaeology* 25, no. 2 (1993): 152–74, JSTOR.



Figures 9, 10, 11, 12 - Stills from *Letter from Belgrade*, 2026, HD video, directed by the author.

BELGRADE - TEXTURE OF THE CITY

Every city has pigeons and dust of its own. They might seem similar to those of other towns, but in reality, they are very particular to the city of their origin. This is how my perception sees it. The dust of Belgrade smells only like Belgrade, it is the dust that has been accumulated over hundreds of years, layer by layer on top of each other, generation after generation, creating a bouquet that can be found only here.

One of the first characteristics that struck me when I walked by Zeleni Venac (Green Market) on the frosty morning of early November was how similar this city is to my hometown, Tbilisi. The street had similar shades of colors, of textures, of reflections in people's faces. The architecture, the way people dressed, and the general atmosphere were reminiscent of Tbilisi. Everyone was dressed in black, just like at home, and the sense of familiarity was a warming feeling in my chest, it was somehow the continuation of the familiarity feeling I had when I first encountered Blazevska's painting online. The apartment, where I was staying during the trip, resonated closely with the city's texture. The place of one's stay always sets the tone for perception, for the awareness of the senses. From different windows, I could observe different angles of the city, the extroverted and introverted angles of Belgrade's



Figure 13. Still from *Letter from Belgrade*, showing a street view of Belgrade.

portrait. In these observations I also got very curious about the city itself, as if it also had a story to tell and share with me.

In the view from the bedroom, the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes in the morning. Also, it was the last view I saw by the end of the day. The view, with bricks, pigeons, steel stairs attached to the deteriorating concrete building, the grey shades of the sky, the stains on the window glass, and the reflections of light, acted as a constant reminder of the city's texture. The window glass acted as a filter between the pigeons and me, and a reflection of my own perception.

MEETING WITH ALEKSANDRA

The first family member who I met was Aleksandra Blazevska, the artist's older sister. My meeting with Aleksandra was deeply emotional. It was evident that she shared a special bond with her sister, a bond that had been nurtured over a lifetime of shared experiences. When I asked if I could film our conversation, she was honest and humble in her refusal, expressing her discomfort with the idea.

Her English was very understandable, her mind was very sharp, and it was clear that she remembered many details from the family's past, especially from Ljiljana's past. She was pleased and proud to talk about Ljiljana, speaking slowly and emotionally. Her energy was pleasantly slow, and, as it usually happens with older generations and her slowness was very contagious.

While listening to her, my biological clock and my perception also slowed down, and I synchronized with her tempo. Aleksandra was the first one I talked to from the family, and she was the first to tell me that Ljiljana was very "skromna," which means humble in Serbian. Later on, all the family members I met would repeat this to me. This is the point that they all agreed on. Aleksandra told me that Ljiljana did not like talking much about her paintings. She told me that she had to work every day to feel good, and if she did not work for one single day, then she would not feel well. She told me a story about how they went to Paris, where Ljiljana was doing a residency at *Cité Internationale des Arts*. One day they went to a museum. While they were looking around, at some point, Ljiljana saw a painting by Piero della Francesca, and she stood in front of it. She told Aleksandra that she would stay here and that Aleksandra could go on to see the rest of the museum. Ljiljana stayed in front of this painting for two hours. She did not see anything else in the museum that day. Aleksandra could not remember the painting's name, but she did recall that an egg was depicted in the work. I looked this up and the one she was describing seems to be *Brera Madonna (Pala di Brera)*, painted in 1472–1474

Aleksandra said Ljiljana started drawing when she was 13. They went on family trips to Croatia by the sea. Aleksandra also told me that Ljiljana did not make portraits; she did only two in her life. One was this portrait, which is of Aleksandra's daughter, and another was of her grandfather, who was from Macedonia.

It was clear that she was very proud to talk about Ljiljana and that she believed in her as a great artist. At Aleksandra's apartment there was one beautiful work by Ljiljana. Just several years ago, soon after the artist's death, there was a possibility to exhibit the blue painting in New York. Aleksandra refused to accept sending the painting there, saying she is already an old lady and does not know how long she will be around, but she does not want to send this painting away even for a minute. She told me she did not want to spend a moment without this blue painting of the staircase by Ljiljana.

This led me to an interesting point. Once I started researching the story of the Brera Madonna, I could not find any sources whatsoever indicating that it had ever been exhibited in France. On the contrary, most of the sources I have found state that once the artwork was rediscovered in the 19th century, it has never left its permanent home, the Pinacoteca di Brera.²⁸

28 "Madonna and Child with Saints, Angels and Federico Da Montefeltro (San Bernardino Altarpiece)," Pinacoteca Di Brera, n.d., accessed February 10, 2026, <https://pinacotecabrera.org/en/collezioni/collezione-on-line/madonna-and-child-with-saints-angels-and-federico-da-montefeltro-san-bernardino-altarpiece/>.



Figure 14 - Piero della Francesca, *Madonna and Child with Saints, Angels and Federico Da Montefeltro* (*San Bernardino Altarpiece*), 1472, Tempera on panel, 251 × 172 cm, <https://pinacotecabrera.org/en/collezioni/collezione-on-line/madonna-and-child-with-saints-angels-and-federico-da-montefeltro-san-bernardino-altarpiece/>.



Figure 15 - Interior of Aleksandra Blazevska's home, Belgrade. Photograph by author, November, 2025.

Figure 16 -



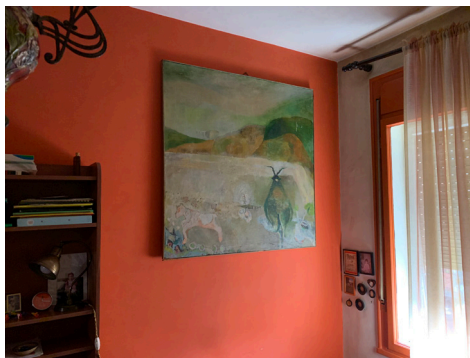
Figure 17 - Still from *Letter from Belgrade*, showing Vladimir Blazevski's portrait.

MEETING WITH VLADIMIR BLAZEVSKI

The next meeting was with Ljiljana's younger brother, Vladimir Blazevski. Vladimir himself is an artist, a film director, and a screenwriter. His neighborhood was more towards the heart of the city; the buildings were shorter, and the streets were busy with people having loud conversations over coffee on a sunny November morning.

The entrance to the building was beautiful, with red and earthy green marble, a very spacious ceiling, and the stairs, lit by warm morning light filtering in through the built-in glass windows. Vladimir opened, and I went inside. The culmination of this aesthetic experience was Vladimir's apartment itself. Clearly, an apartment of an artist, collector of stories, of objects charged with the energies of different times and shades of the past. It was a beautiful apartment, which was a storyteller itself.

It was clear to me right away, from the very first seconds of our meeting, that I was a guest of a very sensitive soul, someone who is aware of his mind, aware of his presence in the room, and of the room itself. Clearly an observer. Being a filmmaker himself,



Figures 18, 19, 20, 21 - Stills from *Letter from Belgrade*, showing interiors of Vladimir Blazevski's apartment.

he was comfortable around the camera and happily accepted my question about whether it was all right to film him speaking about Ljiljana. It seemed he would talk with pleasure. He lit up a cigarette on a long holder and let the smoke out very slowly.

The works of Ljiljana in Vladimir's apartment were very organic to the interior itself, and it was clear to me that they felt well in the places they were placed. Among other objects and artefacts of the past, swimming on the wall with dust and the electrons running behind the walls in the cables of various sorts. We should never forget that our walls are full of electricity. Paintings have to coexist with these vibes.

These were among the strongest works by Ljiljana that I have seen. So I started wondering: was it because they felt well in the ecosystem they existed in, or was it because it was the works that were powerful? To be honest, it was challenging to say.

I made a video recording of Vladimir's free flowing interview, which I have incorporated in the short experimental documentary, "Letter from Belgrade." This work is part of my masterpiece and can be viewed through the following link:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1xFi3bH2g75T-BR5guMiGftODCC9aS2NgJ/view?usp=drive_link



Figure 22 - still from *Letter from Belgrade*, showing Staro Sajmiste (Old Sajmiste) tower.

STARO SAJMISTE

My next destination was *Staro Sajmiste*, or “Old Sajmiste,” in English. This site was inaugurated in 1938 and intended to host an international exhibition with pavilions representing various states.²⁹ Later on, it operated as the Semlin concentration camp during the Nazi occupation of Serbia. During the Yugoslav period, the government handed the spaces in these buildings to both prominent and lesser-known young artists to use as studios. Many of them also relocated there and lived and worked there. With time, it formed itself into a sort of artist’s neighborhood.

In the later part of her life, Ljiljana Blazevska also lived and worked here in Old Sajmiste. This was her last studio. I visited the place, and it had a significant impact on me. First of all, I could feel the powerful presence of the past; the feeling I had as a visitor was of complex layers that could not be described as positive or negative. It was a mix of those. Somehow, the atmosphere was dark, eerie, and mystical as if the ghosts of the past were still present. As if they have settled in between the cold walls of the buildings and found

²⁹ “Living Death Camp: The Archaeology Of Staro Sajmište,” accessed February 27, 2026, <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/living-death-camp-staro-sajmiste>.

their refuge from the past. On the other hand, there was a transparent, dominant layer of messiness and creativity that characterize places saturated by art. It had a soul of its own, a warm soul that was somehow grieving. While walking, I felt that my perception was trying to personify this specific space. I was somehow treating it as a living being, also somehow in a similar way as I engaged with artworks before through the method of *perceptual communication*. There was an urge to enter into a dialogue, only instead of the artwork, here was the space itself, with its atmosphere and aura.

That day of my visit was a grey, hazy one, as if a thin layer of smoke was a filter between my eyes and the environment. I could feel my curiosity with the building. The November day was growing dark quickly, and I tried to grasp the place's feeling with my two cameras in the several hours I had. At that point I knew that camera could not grasp the feeling that was creeping in my perception, but rather it would be one part of the documentation. Simultaneously I was taking voice notes, which later I transferred on paper as texts, I was trying to track the changes inside my perception, so later I could go back to it and excavate the feeling. These notes also work as the basis of this research trip report. At 5 pm, I was meeting with Lidija Bogdanović, an artist who, at the time, lived and

Figure 23 - still from *Letter from Belgrade*, stairway towards Ljiljana Blazevska's old studio.



worked in the same studio where Ljiljana Blazevska passed away. Lidija Bogdanović told me that when she first got there, there were still Ljiljana's things lying around the place: her paintings, her personal objects, her family photo archives.

Lidia also told me an interesting story: when they moved the bed where Ljiljana slept, they found a cross and an Orthodox Christian icon on the floor. Lidia said she did not know whether it was there on purpose or by accident, or whether it had fallen, but she felt as if Ljiljana had placed it there on purpose. Of course, we will never know the truth. There was an interesting coincidence in others' stories about the artist, I mean Ljiljana Blazevska's family members' stories. They also told that in the later years of her life Ljiljana became a believer, but not in a traditional sense. She was not visiting the church regularly, as far as we know, was not following the canonical rules of an Orthodox Christian life, but she deeply believed in god, in her own way. Also, the biblical motives began to appear in her later painting.

What was particularly strange about all this was that I kept tasting a sense of familiarity throughout. As if these places were not unknown to me, as if it were not the first time I was walking on this soil of Old Sajmiste, which I would assume has seen a lot of human blood. This familiarity gave a harmonizing feeling to the melancholy of the place, to the darker side of the story, making it somehow an aesthetic feeling in my perception. It was weird, to be honest. The familiarity I felt was not a clear memory, it was not a certain scene I could name. It was more of a bodily experience, as if the feeling that my body was going through there was something that has happened to it before.

Then I started to imagine Ljiljana walking in between these buildings. Lidia told me she was not friends with her, but they did know each other from Sajmiste. Lidia worked in Sajmiste before moving to Ljiljana's studio for the last several decades. However, she then lost her studio when the government had new plans for the building where it was located, and the artists were kicked out. This is how and why she had to move and found

out about the free studio after Ljiljana's death, since it was still possible to occupy this particular building, though she told me it was uncertain how long this would last.

Lidija Bogdanović described Ljiljana as a lovely, calm, and quiet old lady. She said she seemed very modest (*skromna*) and she was a tiny, sweet old lady, mostly talking little and walking around Sajmiste alone. I started to wonder whether Ljiljana ever thought about the ghosts of the old times, from the concentration camp days. I had a strong urge to ask her what her sensitivity was letting her know about the energy of the space. But of course, this is not possible. I am left with secondhand descriptions, traces of her stories, and my own projections and sensations. In a certain way, this limitation gives flow to imagination, since one is aware that the real-life encounter is not possible, one has to imagine the continuation with what remains.

Then I remembered my first university, *Jacobs University* in Bremen. I remembered our campus, which was beautiful and huge, like a park. In the past, it was a soldier camp for American soldiers after World War II. Furthermore, before that, it was a camp of Nazi soldiers during the Nazi dictatorship. I remembered how early it would get dark, still in the first half of the afternoon, and how intense and saturated the sunsets were, because Bremen is so far north. I remembered the warm, comforting melancholy that would creep into the evergreen fields of our campus. I remembered the laundry rooms in the basements of our living buildings and how I would walk down the stairs with my laundry bag in my hand, wondering what had happened in these basements before, these cold, thick beton walls, which were now listening to the sounds of humming washing machines and laundry driers, what have they been listening to before, decades ago, when they were not operating as laundry rooms.

4. Afterthought

While I was recalling the experience of the Belgrade trip later on, I thought about the mechanics of it. The environment was acting on my perception, and my perception was answering back with familiarity, with various sorts of projections. This is where Jung's idea of participation mystique - the concept that connects memory to a relational condition – how the self merges with objects, places, and atmospheres. I am outlining parts of these phases here, after the Belgrade trip section, because they can now serve as a tool for understanding.

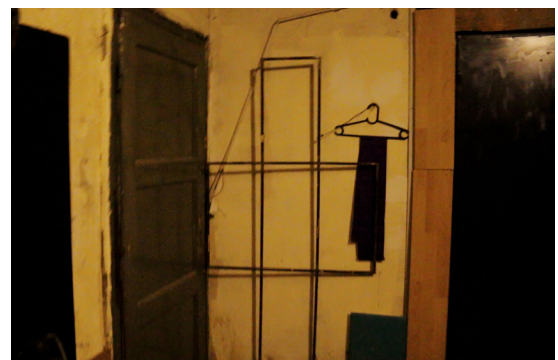
Jung devised a scheme according to his understanding of participation mystique in which the process of individuation could be seen in five phases, providing a framework to deepen understanding of personal experiences like mine.

Jung notes that in the first phase of life, humans are actual participants without a need for individualized perception. As the child grows, they enter Phase Two, the projection phase. This is where the child begins to attach unconscious content to external objects or people, believing that the projected qualities are inherent in them.

According to Jung, the fifth phase is a regression. In this phase, an individual reconnects their conscious awareness with the unconscious realm they were given before birth. One who admits that they originate from the ecosystem finds themselves in the most natural form of mind. Tjeu van den Berk puts it in these words:

“Overall, phase five is a regression and an a posteriori awareness of our participation mystique. The archetypes that have a grip on us should not be identified haughtily with the functions of our conscious ego. When a symbol reconnects the conscious and the unconscious, we usually experience this as numinous. A work of art can be such a numinous moment upon which we project our psyche and its stirrings.” (p. 42)

Seen from this angle, my experience in Sajmište begins to look less mysterious and more like a complex mental process. The familiarity I describe was not a clear personal recollection. It was my projection finding a surface to land. The place, Sajmiste, which was loaded with layered time and history, offered this possibility. The boundary between my inner memories and outer observations began to fade, and the memory of my university campus resurfaced as an atmosphere that felt already familiar and connected to the atmosphere of Sajmiste. This is also why the experience felt both melancholic and harmonizing simultaneously. It carried the weight of a harsh history of the space, but it entered my perception and touched a recollection that, at the same time, was something intimate from my own past.



Figures 24, 25, 26, 27 - stills from *Letter from Belgrade*, showing various scenes from Old Sajmiste visit.



Figure 28 - still from *Letter from Belgrade*, showing the creative messiness in front of the building entrance of Ljiljana Blazevska's last studio.



Figure 29 - still from *Letter from Belgrade*, showing the entrance door of one of the buildings in Staro Sajmiste.

Chapter IV – On the 5-year re- search

*An empty mirror and your worst destructive habits,
when they are held up to each other,
that's when the real making begins.
That's what art and crafting are.*

Rumi, from “*Your Defects*,” *The Book of Love*

1. Introduction

The vital aspect I realized about the research process is that it is a road, not a destination. What matters is how one walks the journey. It is the road itself that matters. It can be compared to a midnight stroll in misty weather, a stroll under a sky of stars, where each star offers the walker a new possibility. This open, wandering approach echoes what I described at the beginning of this dissertation, that artistic research does not move toward clear outcomes, but follows threads of perception, of internal friction. The stars, they seem to offer new knowledge, but it is the walker who must decide which of these stars is worth observing. In this allegory of mine, “stars” are all the potential sources of new knowledge. The “night” is the external world. The artworks I encounter, the books I read, the conversations I have, even the streets I walk, all begin to participate in how my perception forms my worldview, my cosmos. This is where my central claim in the dissertation resurfaces: artwork as a participant.

I realized that all the information I intake during the process of research adds a new layer to the existing knowledge of my mind. It is also essential to identify which information makes me react and which I let go of. We can call this process “classification.” This

classification happens through reaction. Sometimes I understand later what struck my sensitivity, and sometimes I never fully understand. This is why I call the research an open-ended process. I classify which information might be useful for my research and how. These are fundamental questions I have to consider. The following chapter will be a collage of highlights of my 5 years of research at the Doctoral School at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts. The five years did not unfold as a straight, chronological line. They unfolded as layers of sediment. In this sense, this chapter is also a form of perceptual excavation. I am looking back at my journals, artworks, photo documentations, and I am attempting to figure out what was forming, dissolving, or what themes kept returning and resurfacing.

Through this reflection, I will talk about various projects and how they have been connected to each other. I will discuss the failed attempts, which have eventually opened new doors in my perception and understanding. I will discuss the more successful projects, which in my opinion worked in accordance with my evolving interests and taste. This chapter will later on lead to Chapter V, which will deal with my final project, the masterpiece of the dissertation. In this process I am trying to show how the final project came out of repeated attempts and the slow transformation of my perception over time.



Figure 30, 31 - photos showing the author's studio in Feszty ház, Doctoral School of Hungarian University of Fine Arts, 2023.

2. *Initial Attempts - Theoretical and Visual Sources*

“He walked, he trudged, he flitted – as his great friend once said, not entirely without point – ‘blindly and tirelessly... with the incurable beauty of his personal cosmos’ in his soul [...]”

- László Krasznahorkai, *The Melancholy of Resistance*

ATTEMPTS OF ACQUAINTANCE

For an artist, it is of crucial importance to understand the reality around one's self. The reality around us leaves vast marks on us. They are sometimes visible right away, we feel them soon, but other times they tend to act like icebergs. We don't realize the scale at a given moment, and then after some time, the imprints become visible. Everything around us matters to some extent. Streets, houses, weather, air, temperature, and people.

It was the year of the pandemic, September, 2020, when I first arrived in Budapest. One of initial urges upon arriving and settling in my rented flat, was to learn more about Hungarian culture, something that seemed completely new to me. I wanted to get intimate with it. It was an intuitive feeling.

Since September 2020, the reality for me has become Budapest. So, I realized I had to make attempts to understand the real nature of this place is. How do things work here? Why do they work this way? How has this country come up to present times?

I thought literature has the power to offer a more intimate view of the local context. This way I tried to take a look into the intellectual world of Hungarian culture. The attempt to dig into the culture is essential because this is the only way I can allow myself to live in a place that is not my “homeland.” I need to be in a constant attempt to get more information about the specificities of local culture and history. This way, my stay in a specific place, which in this case is Hungary, becomes more authentic and inspiring. I realize

now that a vast amount of influences and inspirations for my art-making come from the information and impulses that I encounter here, on this land, from this society. Of course, I must admit that this information intake can be challenging to digest. However, on the other hand, this difficulty also makes the process more beautiful and stimulating. In one of the book shops in Budapest, I discovered an English language copy of *Melancholy of Resistance* by László Krasznahorkai. I did not know much about Krasznahorkai, but I have heard positives about his writing. I got curious right away, I bought the book and started reading the same evening.

Melancholy of Resistance by László Krasznahorkai felt like a journey into the unconscious psyche of the Hungarian society. I feel that this text helped my imagination to understand and get closer to the specifics of the collective memory of Hungarian culture. The exciting part of the experience of reading the novel was the fact that it changed my perception of time. I had to considerably “slow down” to get the taste of the words in an attempt to understand what was happening in the plot. The development of characters of this little Hungarian town society is also slow and meticulous, where the writer himself takes time to observe the thoughts of the characters he created.

The tone and the way of expressing the plot in Krasznahorkai’s novel are very meditative, with a stream of consciousness flowing onto the reader in constant waves of poetic impulses. This process of reading the novel has been particularly influential for my meditations about perception of memory and the taste of dystopian themes and abstractness of the stream of subconscious has been very much associated with the themes that I played around later on in my research.

PHILOSOPHY & QUESTIONS ABOUT ART

After having initial tasting of the literature, I also had urge to jump in more theoretical, let’s say philosophical texts. I had time, since the pandemic was in full bloom and I did not have a chance to use the studio, so reading felt very natural act to do in the given

situation. Apart from this, in general to make anything of importance, an artist should understand the age in which he lives. He should analyze the complexities of the present. In the initial phase of my research, when I was still new to this systematic approach, I decided to concentrate on texts that attempt to understand the tendencies of contemporary art. I wanted these to become the basis for any further research of mine. I did not know how exactly yet.

I decided to focus on contemporary texts to understand how I can relate to the narrative of human history. Where am I now? What are the complexities of the world I live in? What aspects of today's life do I need to address? Why do they need to be addressed by artists at all? And what is my position on other points in human history, let us say?

I became interested in the French philosopher, Alain Badiou. There was one specific text of his that caught my attention. In this lecture text, Badiou formulates *15 theses for contemporary art*. He poses a big question to art, which he calls "sort of a goal," a problem of how not to be formalist-romantic. For me, it was exciting to read how Badiou comes up with a vivid and concrete goal for today's art. I saw it as a compelling proposition. The text has many points, which I agree with. One of the examples is the third thesis, which is "a definition of the universality of art." This is what Badiou states:

*"And so, today, artistic creation is a part of human emancipation, it's not an ornament, a decoration, and so on. No, the question of art is central, and it's central because we have to create a new sensible relation to the world. In fact, without art, without artistic creation, the triumph of the forced universality of money and power is a real possibility."*³⁰

While thinking about this situation in the contemporary world and looking at the background of where we're coming from in recent centuries of our history, I realized that many problems we face today stem from the colonial past. In various ways we are still living the aftermath of this life. By today's processes, I mean the discourse around neo-colonialism

³⁰ Alain Badiou, "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art," Lacanian Ink, accessed February 3, 2026, <https://www.lacan.com/frameXXIII7.htm>.

and neo-imperialism notions, closely connected to neo-liberal capitalism and globalization in general. So, it seemed like a logical thing to do to explore these depths on a more intimate level.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Following this chain of thought, I slowly drifted into the history of colonialism. I became more interested in the historical and visual aspects, as well as their documentation. I decided to look into anthropology archives of 19th and early 20th century, because of their connection to colonial history. Early signs of colonialism were something I knew only on the surface, but I did not have any in-depth knowledge of them. Once I got into the archives of colonization times, it drifted me into a notion of human violence.

I came across photo documentation of an early missionary, Alice Seeley Harris³¹, who was primarily investigating the native society of Congo under Belgian rule. These photos mainly documented people who had their hands and legs cut off. The people depicted in these photos are clearly aware they are being photographed. This awareness of the subjects, adds a distinct documentary layer to Harris's photos.

These are shocking images. They were among the first examples to be used as documentation by human rights movements. These photos stayed in my mind for a long time and I tried to use them as starting point for my painting practice at that time. I thought that repainting them would somehow refocus the attention of my viewers to this period of time, shedding the light once again, to this period of human history. I was naive enough that this was actually my honest motivation. Later on, I would realize that this project in its nature would not work as a way of communicating through artmaking. But before realizing that I needed to go through the process of trial and error.

After Harris, I explored deeper into anthropological questions through my research, leading me to discover a German anthropologist named Egon von Eichstadt. He was not

³¹ "Alice Seeley Harris: Kodak in the Congo | About the Hero," Lowell Milken Center, April 6, 2018, <https://www.lowellmilkencenter.org/projects/view/alice-seeley-harris>.

documenting violence. Von Eichstadt was attempting to categorize humans into distinct races by deriving racial formulas, through categorizing facial features of human beings³². I explored these images. I was printing them out, trying to keep them around, attempting to recreate them in my own way. I realized that I wanted to deconstruct the images, take different parts from various photos, and reconstruct new compositions. Given that some images were causing sort of tension, I wanted to react. During this process of playing, the initial images were seriously altered. This way, I showed how I saw them, given that one does not see an image in an exact same way as the initial photographer has seen. After all, you see it in your own perception. You connect it with your own sphere in your conscious, put it directly in touch with your personal experiences. So, you ultimately make the photograph part of your own life story. At least, this is what I believed in.

The idea was to question myself, because it is easy and even tempting to criticize things, such as a historical event, from a distance. But I wanted to question myself. I thought that by recreating these images through my prism, I would immerse myself in this state of *“the civilized person.”* By this term I mean the intruder of course, because most of the colonial processes were justified by the fact that European powers were bringing civilization to the underdeveloped world per se.

I became interested in these aspects of the human desire for the exotic or the unknown, that lust that drives you to conquer or possess something that is not yours. How would I feel? How would I question these feelings within myself? Am I entitled to judge from distance? Later on, while I was highly influenced by black-and-white photography, I slowly drifted toward more recent photojournalists and photographers, let us say, who are more artistic in their representations, while retaining the documentary style and approach.

The Czech-French photographer Joseph Koudelka caught my attention. He was documenting street minorities in Eastern European and Post-Soviet states. The majority of his

32 Eickstedt's Classification of Indian Ethnic Groups: A Cultural and Physical Perspective • ExploreAn-thro.Com, Anthropology of India, January 8, 2025, <https://exploreanthro.com/anthropology-of-india/eickstedt-classification-indian-ethnic-groups/>.

photographs document Gypsies in the Czech Republic. He created photographs, which have a somewhat dystopian nature. Surprisingly, when I looked at them, I felt a strange sense of nostalgia. It was a contradiction, a paradox, in a way, within myself. And then I thought about it and realized that these features I am looking at — these facial features and even the clothes — are something I could relate to my past.

Since I was born in Tbilisi, Georgia, in the 1990s, which back then was ethnically very diverse, including Gypsies, Kurdish people, and Armenians, who mainly operated on the streets, these images brought back memories of my childhood and strongly resonated. Another fascinating point to me was the aesthetic in how Koudelka constructs the image. It was done in a way that I got very curious to what was happening outside the image. It is as if I get a glimpse of the situation, but outside the frame, there are endless narratives I could continue in my mind.

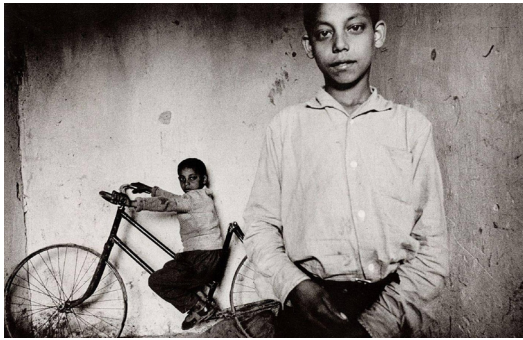


Figure 32 - Josef Koudelka, *Gypsies*, 1966, Photography, <https://www.magnumphotos.com/newsroom/society/josef-koudelka-gypsies/>.



Figure 33 - Bruno Barbey, *Campania Region. Town of Naples*, 1966, Photography, <https://www.vintag.es/2018/10/the-italians-by-bruno-barbey.html>.



Figure 34, Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Streets*, oil on canvas, 2021, 70x100 cm.

THE PROBLEM OF SOURCES: DEPENDENCY & FAILURE

At the end of year one of my studies, I had to create an exhibition for the Doctoral School yearly presentation in the *Fesztváz*, where I would present my work from the past year. Since my artistic research had already taken a direction of critique, questioning, and self-reflection, I decided to approach this presentation in the same manner, analyzing what was problematic in my art-making of the initial phase and bringing it to the surface. Discussions with Judit Csanadi and Balázs Kicsiny, brought certain issues to surface that I also had been feeling were problematic

The first critique that I could feel and highlight was that the photographic sources themselves were too distant. Even though I tried to recreate them and get intimate with them, the sources were still too distant, in time and space. There were too many complex processes between us, for me to honestly get close to them. The fact itself that I tried to repaint them, somehow seemed dishonest after some months have passed. I felt guilt with this dishonesty of mine. I felt that I made these work not because I truly cared, but rather to impress.

On the other hand, the sources themselves were aesthetically already strong, and my attempt to recreate them a priori was a failure. Because there was no need for them to be re-elevated. Even though I changed the texture, format, and, in most cases, the compositions of the works, the outcome was still too dependent on the pre-existing image, the pre-existing source. Another aspect was that I did not provide enough scrutiny of my own reasons for choosing one particular image and for wanting to recreate it.

While I was working on the exposition of the exhibition, I would put paintings on the floor that I was not content with. As I did so, I realized I liked how they looked on the floor. I liked it because it was almost like a preparation for a fireplace. It was also similar to *lomtalanítás*³³, which meets us on the streets of Budapest every month on the designated dates. However, it was not an illusion that I meant to create the impression that I

33 Hungary's monthly "bulk waste" collection day - when people can take out what they do not need and put it on the street. Others can collect what they seem fit.

was going to throw them out, rather it was a gesture from my side to indicate that I was not content with these works, This small artistic gesture felt very satisfying It felt much more honest than the hard work that I put to paint these pictures in the first place. It felt honest, because with simple act of changing the placing of the paintings in the space, I could change the meaning of the work, I could highlight personal narrative that were not necessarily visible in the compositions itself.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TIME

As my open-ended research progressed, a very interesting encounter happened with the novel by Peter Nadas³⁴, *The End of a Family Story*, which I read very soon after the up-
per mentioned *Feszty haz* exhibition.

What was particularly interesting to me here was how Nadas approaches the structure of narrative. It is peculiar, but I was not necessarily interested in the story itself, or how it would unfold, but rather in the technical side of the novel. There are several simultaneously told narratives in the novel, which somehow are running in parallel to each other, but what is crucial is that they are happening in the same dimensions of time and space. The concept of time is very lucid in this novel. Nadas allows himself to navigate from “present time” of the novel to archaic times, which also become the “present” once the novel narrative is focusing on it. This makes the whole novel very abstract, deformed and surreal. This deformation of the structure allowed me to identify connections between different dimensions or “universes.” The narrative effortlessly merges one event or situation with another from a completely different historical period. This happens in a way that makes a dialogue between these dimensions possible. They almost occur simultaneously, yet in a non-tangible parallel universe that can seem connected but not directly affecting each other. Simultaneously the narrative itself is very ambiguous and open to interpretation.

I could interpret the events myself. I could see myself following the stories, then losing

34 Prominent contemporary Hungarian writer and playwright.

them and discovering them again, similarly to a state of meditating. Since if someone would ask what exactly is happening in the novel, I could not properly answer. It was more about the journey as a reader and the possibilities that the experimental format allowed, rather than the stories themselves. Many moments in the book I didn't understand. But I was finding pleasure in the non-understanding, precisely in the fact that understanding was not possible, rather I had to concentrate on my intuition.

Here, somehow drifting from the novel, two very central questions for me came to the surface:

What are the specificities of the contemporary society that I am part of?

And what are the central points in my own "cosmos" that I am addressing, reflecting and re-examining?

These two points are *psychological time* and *perception of memory*. How the psychological time works in human being? What are the mechanisms behind my perception of memory? As a human being, I realize that my actions come from my thoughts, and my thoughts come from my memory, and my memory is part of psychological time, and that my perception works with this certain frame of psychological time. So, I realized this is something I want to think about, something I want to reflect on. These themes would later bring me to the concept of cryptomnesia, which we already discussed in the Chapter III.

After reflections of complexity of memory and perception another evident feeling that emerged was the tendency of contemporary times to over-rationalize, the constant desire to simplify and translate the complexity of existence. There is this constant struggle for a contemporary human to translate every piece of information they encounter into something psyche can easily understand, digest. I feel there is an urge to simplify everything, and a constant urge to view the world in extreme polarities, in black and white. There is a deficit in accepting the complexity of existence, with its numerous shades, and in embracing the fact that many things will always be beyond our understanding.

3. Practical Experiments - Digging in the field of memory

DOUBLE EXPOSURE OF MEMORIES

The concept of psychological time, organically brought up the concept of memory transformation. Since looking at the notion of time from idiosyncratic lens, it made me think about the notion of perception of memories. Perception itself is a notion which fluctuates depending on affecting factors on the mind of the individual, and since perception contains memories, therefore memories also are in constant flux. Memory is a sort of living organism, constantly transforming and distorting in the perception of human being. I got particularly interested how to capture the intensity and the experience of memories in my artworks. I started to get interested particularly how my perception distorts these memories.

Consequently, I became a case study for my own research. This is how it started: we were sitting at my parent's apartment in Tbilisi. It was me and my parents. During our conversation, my mother, Lela Kerashvili brought out very old drawings of mine from my early childhood. Interesting fact is that I could not remember anything about these drawings, not even the visual traces on them. It was a paradoxical feeling to hold these papers and to know rationally that these are yours, but emotionally have absolutely no connection to them. This was the moment when I became curious to experiment with these drawings of my past.

The experiment began as follows - I started grouping these artifacts of old memories alongside newer memories I could remember and relate to. This led me to the technique of double exposure. For example, we can look at the painting with the horse. This horse comes from a newer memory. I have ridden this horse on one of the mountain trips we take with my friends every year in the Caucasus, and I have a photo of it from one of the mornings, while we were getting ready to start the day. This photo was with me for a while. I knew I wanted to use it somehow at some point, but I did not know how. Now, I

realized I wanted to merge it with an older memory of mine. It was an intuitive feeling. I took one of the drawings my mother had given me. A strange composition that seems almost like a prehistoric drawing from a cave. Through the act of painting, I created a double exposure with my newer memory, in an attempt to visualize the complexity of the architecture of how memory shows itself in visual form. Since memory field is a terrain with very fluid boundaries, where memories from different times can co-exist without the logic of chronology.

I continued to do these experiments with various other memory artifacts. Of course, many of my experiments were unsuccessful, and I was not happy with how they turned out.

The “finished” artworks did not have anything to say to me. As with any other process involving art, it was a trial-and-error process.

As for the process itself. It was not that I double-exposed two compositions together and then stopped. Rather, I continued intuitively, and I kept going until I was somewhat satisfied. Then I let the artwork sit for some time, so I could forget it again and after a week or so, I would go back to them and see if they would speak to my “sensitivity apparatus.” When I felt that the artwork started to speak to me and take on emotional weight, I thought, maybe this is something that visually works for me. The other that had hard time resonating with me emotionally, ended up being repainted.

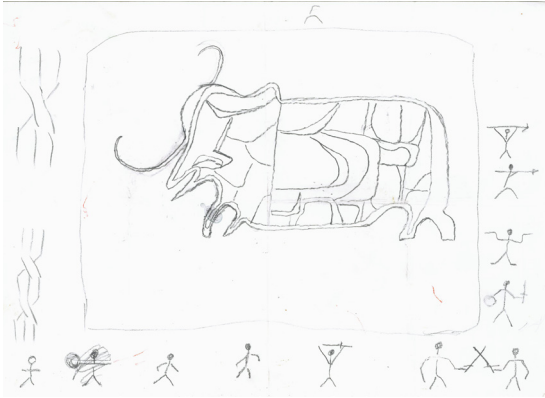


Figure 35 - Childhood drawing by the author, ca. 1998, pencil on paper, A4.



Figure 36 - Digital photograph of mine from a mountain trip in 2021, Tusheti, Georgia.



Figure 37 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, Untitled, oil and oil stick on unstretched canvas, 150x240 cm, 2022.

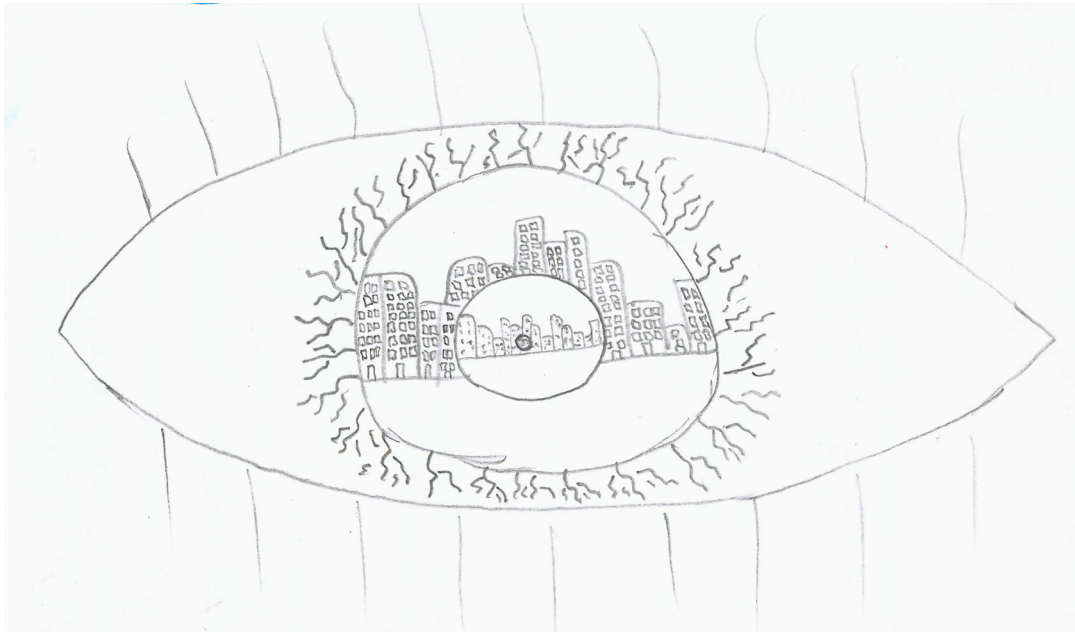


Figure 38 - Childhood drawing by the author, ca. 1998, pencil on paper, A4.



Figure 39 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Untitled*, oil on unstretched jute, 150x220 cm, 2022.

WATERCOLOR EXPERIMENTS

Later on, I became curious about experimenting with the concept of how these “memory works” can be executed in watercolors – how could the change of technique affect the development of works. I did not want to paint on paper, but on canvas, because what’s interesting about primed canvas is that it doesn’t absorb water as quickly as paper does. So, water has time to behave on the surface of the canvas. It was interesting to use water, this essential organic material, , and to see how it behaves.

This was a challenging experiment because I couldn’t over-paint to “fix” the compositions as in oil painting where one can change and modify compositions, until one gets it “right.” In watercolors I could not over-paint, because if you over-paint, you activate the layer underneath. This was challenging. I didn’t have much control over the final version, and what came out was to a degree spontaneous.

The watercolor experiments brought me back to Dmanisi — specifically, to the shift in how I perceived time there, which I described in Chapter II. If time could be experienced vertically rather than horizontally, then it was not an absolute notion but a relative, subjective one. This realization began to shape what I wanted to paint. I started a specific experiment practice - to paint one particular object on a very neutral background. Before beginning the painting, I had to think for several days about what object or subject I wanted to paint. The idea was that it should resonate with my emotional sensitivity, not my rational mind. As I thought about it, Dmanisi’s memories came back again. I had drawings of the humanoid skulls found in Dmanisi in the 1990s. I made those drawings on site from models of the original skulls. They were straightforward, quick drawings. I realized I had an emotional reaction to them and the urge to make a watercolor painting using them.



Figure 40 - Three Hominin Skulls Found in Dmanisi, July 14, 2012,
<https://georgiaabout.com/2012/07/14/about-history-the-oldest-europeans/>.



Figure 41 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, Species (Zezva), watercolor on linen, 40x40, 2023.



Figure 42 - Interior of my apartment in Budapest, altered digital image, 2022.



Figure 43 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Untitled*, watercolor and gouache on linen, 50x50 cm, 2022.



Fig. 44 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Untitled*, acrylic transfer & mixed media, 24x18 cm, 2023



Fig. 45 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Untitled*, acrylic transfer & mixed media, 24x18 cm, 2023



Fig. 46 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Untitled*, acrylic transfer & mixed media, 30x20 cm, 2023

ACRYLIC TRANSFERS

Some things you can express in painting you cannot express in other media, and vice versa. So later on I had an urge of experimenting with other forms of mediums also - like video, collage, and installations. This was when I tried to use acrylic transfers for the first time, a technique that was totally new for me. The initial idea was to use reproductions of my own paintings and analog photos as artifacts of memory. These would be printed out, deconstructed and used as collage material, thus parts of them would come up in a different contexts, on different surfaces, with other found images from 19th century archives. The process of making was totally intuitive. I would tear the printed photos and add them intuitively to the new chosen surface (mostly small size canvas), then, sometimes I would put ink on it, I continued to paint parts of the surface, usually with chalk paint. Later I started adding organic and inorganic materials as frames. For example, organic materials like dried moss were often used alongside concrete. This was a continuation of the idea I used in last year's exhibition, where I tried to bring beton, dried flowers, and steel together in one installation to contrast the polarities of how natural and artificial materials differ in essence, texture, and consistency.

Conceptually, this action was intended to highlight the contrast between materials and their properties.

What is a product of nature, like a plant, is so ephemeral and soft. When one touches it, it just breaks in your hand. And then, on the opposite end, you have steel and concrete, which are so strong and dominant, and they try to be so persistent over time and resist it. And these construction materials also somehow act as a symbol of our species' determination to resist time.

There is also the use of found material as I mentioned before, these were usually 19th-century daguerreotypes and family archives that I typically found online, digitalized archives. Then I printed them out and double-expose them, or sometimes triple-expose them with my paintings, or parts of my paintings. Interesting and curious feeling about family archives in general is that when looking through them, one sees photos of people from several generations before. These are people that one has never met in person. Yet, one knows they are from the family tree. When I look at family archives, I try to pay attention to facial features. Then I realized that I don't remember these facial features, I have never seen this specific expression in these eyes in person. I am looking but I cannot really recall. Somehow similar to a feeling I had about my own childhood drawings. .

Hence, for the viewer, too, or for me as a viewer of these daguerreotypes, I can relate to other family archives also to some extent, there is this interesting mystical feeling of relating to these blurry old images that could be anyone's past.



Figure 47 - Childhood drawing by the author, ca. 1998, pencil on paper, A4.



Figure 48 - Digital photograph by the author, Budapest, 2023.



Figure 49 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Untitled*, giclee print, 29x21 cm, 2023

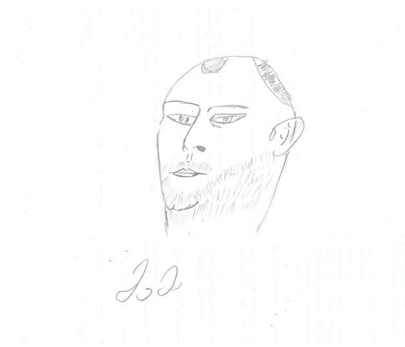


Figure 50 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Untitled*, charcoal on canvas, 120x80 cm, 2023



Figure 51 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Untitled*, ink on paper, 21x29 cm, 2023



Figure 52 - Analog photograph by the author, Budapest, 2023.



Figure 53 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Untitled*, acrylic transfer and watercolor on linen, 30x40 cm, 2023.

FROM PERIPHERAL MUSEUMS TO THE QUESTION OF THE ARCHIVE

I became very interested in the concept of archives in 2023. The first spark of inspiration came from visiting various historical museums in Hungary and Georgia. I conducted several research visits in different contexts, focusing on historical museums located in peripheral regions, particularly in Georgia and Hungary. These museums often operate with limited financial resources and minimal maintenance. As a result, the exhibitions often appear to be deteriorating, with visible imperfections. This was a particularly interesting phenomenon for me, which reminded me of scenography - how were these specific museum expositions built up and constantly repaired to keep their shape and content?

This interest crystallized into a specific work of mine, included in the Parallel Hungary exhibition “Presence-Absence” at 2B Galéria in Budapest. First, I wrote a short piece of text, which can be understood as a fragment of an imaginary literary text; this text then served as the basis for the installation I built for the exhibition. Here is the text that also became part of the work:

Archive of Absence

“Act of archiving is an attempt to resist transformation or in other words to strengthen the memory of a specific state of being.”

- *An unknown source, early 19th century, (from the Letters of the Shiibeediom).*

He entered the room. The floor was wooden and loud, making high-pitched screechy sounds under his feet. The room was a Biodiversity Section of the Historical Museum of the Shiibeediom. He could feel the odorant molecules of pastness, the smell of archival chemicals and dust in the air. The room was full of arid, preserved plants and taxidermied creatures of the past.

These flora and fauna, which seemed drying and decomposing in front of his

eyes in a hanging manner; were definitely here, in front of him, in this particular room. They were being held by steel, the steel by screws. The artifacts of the exposition were part of the space, that specific constellation of walls, floor, and ceiling, which mapped the borders of that room in his mind.

The presence of these artifacts in this particular space also creates an absence in their original areas of existence, where they were grown and taken from. This absence is also a kind of existence, he thought. But the empty spaces they left behind in the soil were probably now being overtaken by the over-growth of weeds, by new flora, new molecules. Therefore, their absence, their only remaining trace of existence in the area of their origin, was also ceasing to exist.

The archive of absence. The floor was made from wood, and as he walked, he could hear it under the rubber soles of his shoes.



Figure 54 - Work in progress for *The Archive in Absence*, the author's studio in Feszty ház, Doctoral School of Hungarian University of Fine Arts, 2023.



Figures 55, 56 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Archive of Absence*, materials: wood, jute, oil paintings on canvas, styrofoam, concrete, light box, drawing on found paper, steel, screws, dry plants.

Size variable, 2023, installation shots from *Presence-Absence* exhibition at *2B Galeria*, 2023.



Figure 57 - detail short from *Archive of Absence*, materials: dry plants, steel, styrofoam, concrete.

Preface to Masterpiece

My dissertation masterpiece consists of three components. The first component is the physical exhibition, *The Lingering Presence*, which was held in the spring of 2025 at the exhibition space of *Tranzit.hu*. The second component is the essay film, also titled *The Lingering Presence*, an experimental attempt to reveal and express the hidden layers behind the exhibition's making. This will offer a different perspective on the textual explanation of the concept. For me, as the author of the project, making this film has been a meditation on the process of making and the inspirations behind the project. The third component of the masterpiece is directly connected to the dissertation text and my research about memories. This is an experimental film, *Letter from Belgrade*, an extension of *Chapter 3 (Ljiljana Blazevska & Cryptomnesia)* of my dissertation. I went to Belgrade on a research trip to learn more about the Macedonian/Serbian painter, Ljiljana Blazevska. On this trip, I also took footage with two cameras, a digital one and an old analog Super 8 camera. I was taking footage while visiting the apartments of Blazevska's family members, seeing her old paintings, and exploring the texture of the city of Belgrade, where she was based for most of her life. The triad of these three components comprises the masterpiece I am submitting for my dissertation.

The Lingering Presence, Essay Film by Erekle Chinchilakashvili

available here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Xh9bW7_DAQa3nIODyfN9_8DVufu-JnDmh/view?usp=drive_link

Letter from Belgrade, experimental documentary by Erekle Chinchilakashvili

available here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1xFi3bH2g75TBR5guMiGftODC-C9aS2NgJ/view?usp=drive_link

Chapter V - The Lingering Presence (About Masterpiece)

1. Project Overview

The Lingering Presence is an exhibition that can be called the physical synthesis of my method of “perception excavation.” In this project, I approach the concept of archive as an active process of curation, a process which re-imagines history as a constructed narrative.

This project brings together the earlier threads of my dissertation: participant observation, architecture of memory, cryptomnesia, and process documentation. The central basis of this project is inherited material: my grandfather’s, Tristan Chinchilakashvili’s, book, *The Heroes of the Soviet Union*. Rediscovering this book was a trigger for this project.

The exhibition space of *The Lingering Presence* is curated as a mental landscape, as an activist’s mind, a field of fragments of memories, which somehow linger as fractures of their original states. I will discuss the specific artworks and materials, as well as the choices behind my decisions, in detail in the following chapter.

Photo documentation of the exhibition by Zsuzsi Simon.

2. The inherited archive: my grandfather's book

A few months ago, before the planning of the exhibition, while considering ideas for my final project, I had a conversation with my father, where he reminded me of a significant detail from our family history that I had entirely forgotten.

This detail concerned my grandfather, who was a historian. He grew up in the period following World War II. Although he was born earlier, 1930s. His formative years occurred after World War II, during a period marked by Soviet propaganda celebrating the defeat of the Nazis. The prevailing narrative emphasized the heroism of figures such as Stalin and the Communist Party. This propaganda shaped the dominant narrative of the time, leading many in that generation strongly believe in and participate in the Communist Party.

My grandfather belonged to this generation and later became a historian with a particular interest in military history. During the 1980s, he researched in an archive in Podolsk, Russia. During his time there, he researched and documented Georgian nationals—both men and women—who died in World War II. After compiling this information, he set the project aside for several years before publishing a book based on his findings.

The book contains little information about the individuals. I assume it was not possible to find out, so Tristan included the information that he could retrieve from the archive. Typically, each page features a large photograph of an individual he identified during his research. Each picture is accompanied by a brief text in both Georgian and Russian. In some cases, the place of birth is known; in others, it is not. For some individuals, additional details such as their battalion or place of service are provided. In certain instances, it is known whether they died in the war, while for others, their fate remains unknown, since they never returned and/or their bodies were never found.

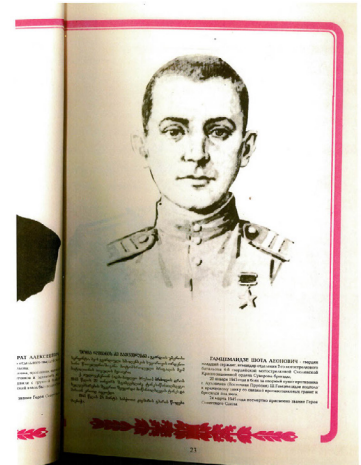


Figure 58 - My grandfather's, Tristan Chinchilakashvili's, book - *The Hymn for Heroes: Heroes of the Soviet Union from Georgia*, 1999.

3. *What an archive does?*

When my father reminded me of this fact, I realized it was something I wanted to explore further. Over the months, I began to think more about the concept of the archive itself and what an archivist does. How does an archivist make choices? Because there is an immense amount of information, sometimes reachable, sometimes not, an archivist chooses from it. The act of choosing and classifying a set of information also becomes an act of curating it. I began to reflect on how archiving can reconstruct history in a manner that borders between fiction and reality.

4. *The locked cabinet at Feszty Ház*

While thinking about this, I was also working on artmaking in the studio and reflecting on the materials I was using. For example, the blue-grey steel cabinet which is part of the installation, *The Architecture of Memory*, comes from *Feszty Ház*, where we have the Doctoral school studios. For five years, I have been spending most of my time with this cabinet. I was also using this closed part of it, the left part, which is locked.

When I passed by this cabinet almost daily, I always had the feeling that something interesting was inside. It is really generic in its design, in the sense that it tells the story of the 20th century or the children of that epoch, because this type of industrial cabinet was used in many places, especially those influenced by the Soviet Union. It is somehow a symbol of that era.



Figure 60 - *The Architecture of Memory*, installation, size variable, 2025, materials: steel cabinet, lightboxes, found objects, dry plants, bitumen, polyurethane resin, light bulbs.



Figures 61, 62 - Installation views from the exhibition, *The Lingering Presence*, at tranzit.hu, 2025.





Figure 63 - details shot of the installation, *The Architecture of Memory*.



Figures 64, 65, 66 - details shots of the installation showing lightboxes, the steel cabinet, and the dry plant object from *The Architecture of Memory*.







Figures 67, 68, 69 - details shots of the installation, *The Architecture of Memory*.





5. *Bitumen*

Simultaneously, while doing my studio work, I was thinking about and testing other materials, and how they change or transform over time.

For example, the materials we use in modernity, such as bitumen. One day, I was walking from the studio to my flat, and on the way, a group of workers was patching the asphalt, fixing the surface. It was winter time, and the air was crisp, and as I passed by, the smell of bitumen hit me very strongly. It was a strange feeling, disturbing in a way, since the smell is toxic, but on the other hand, it was pleasant, as if it were a smell of familiarity. Something that I was familiar with, that my body has been exposed to before. Bitumen is used today for numerous industrial and residential purposes. For example, it is used for sealing the roofs of residential houses, mainly because it is waterproof. Also, as we already mentioned, to make asphalt. I became interested in the material and started reading about it. I read an article *Use and Trade of Bitumen in Antiquity and Prehistory* by J. Connan, that said bitumen has been used for thousands of years, making it one of the oldest used materials in the history of humankind.³⁵

Natural bitumen mainly originates from seaweeds. Seaweeds, which would lie underwater for thousands of years, slowly transform into a black, heavy, and oily mass. Somehow, humans discovered them during ancient civilizations and removed them from the lakes. They would dry them out, then recycle them by hand.

In Egypt, for example, it was used to mummify the dead. It was also used in Mesopotamia and Elam. In Mesopotamia, they were using it to fix broken clay pots that were dripping. Interestingly, nowadays we also use it for waterproofing roofs.

Embalming the dead is also a process of archiving, since it is meant to help the body resist the changes that time brings, slowing the process of deterioration. Then I decided to use bitumen for this project of mine, and I created black-headed sculptures. They are

³⁵ J. Connan et al., “Use and Trade of Bitumen in Antiquity and Prehistory: Molecular Archaeology Reveals Secrets of Past Civilizations [and Discussion],” *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 354, no. 1379 (1999): 33–50.

sculpted from styrofoam, then they are covered with gauze and later treated with beton (concrete). After that, it is treated with various acrylic washes, and the final layer is bitumen. In the sense that they were created, I was also thinking a lot about the layering perception, becoming interested in perception and the mechanisms of memory as sedimentary layers accumulated on top of each other.

Now, to continue with the materials, what we do nowadays is metaphorically very similar to how bitumen was used for embalming in Egypt, since embalming is also a form of archiving. We can think of what we do today as similar to archiving in many ways. We create modern architecture using bitumen, concrete, and steel, all robust and durable materials that often resist the passage of time. After all, even if humans hypothetically disappeared, the architecture we have built will remain for thousands and thousands of years. So it is also an archival material, and how we use it. In these meditations on thought, the idea for this project slowly emerged: how these materials interact, materials that, for me, could symbolically represent the act of archiving.



Figures 70 - detail shot of Bitumen heads from the installation, *The Architecture of Memory*.



Figures 71, 72 - detail shots of Bitumen heads from the installation, *The Architecture of Memory*.



Figures 73 - detail shot of Bitumen heads in the cabinet, from the installation, *The Architecture of Memory*.

6. Dry Plants

Another sort of material that arose from the process of contemplation was more fragile materials, such as dry plants. These specific dry plants are actually planted flowers on Margit Sziget. They got my attention several years ago, in winter, January, when I was going for evening walks on Margit Sziget, which is usually very empty and deserted in winter. Somehow, this emptiness gives it a mystical feeling, which is also calming and comfortable. Moreover, on one of my walks, I noticed these plants sticking out from the soil. In my perception of imagination, they resembled antennas.

Also, in the exposition of the exhibition, we have artworks partially covered with dry moss. This is natural moss from Iceland, which dries in a way that keeps it evergreen. And then we have resin. It is a polyurethane resin used in these two artworks. I found this drawer, which comes from an ancient archive of furniture, then I put this dry plant in and poured two components of resin on it. The resin freezes, and once frozen, it also begins to act as an archival material, since it halts the deteriorative processes in the organic plant. It freezes it in time and space.

So, metaphorically, we have industrial materials that act as archival materials. On the other hand, we have these materials, such as dry plants and moss, which are organic, fragile, and vulnerable to the passage of time. I was interested in finding ways to bring these two types of materials into proximity; how would they affect each other? How would they complement or contrast each other?



Figure 74 - Installation view from the exhibition, *The Lingering Presence*, at tranzit.hu, 2025.

Figures 75 (below) - detail shot of the dry plants from the same wall.



7. Memory mechanics and method synthesis

In Chapter III, I explore the concept of cryptomnesia. As already discussed, ‘crypto’ means ‘hidden’ in Latin, and ‘mnesia’ means ‘memory’. So the word literally means hidden memories. It also introduces us to the anthropologist Levi-Bruhl and his concept of participation mystique. These two ideas made me contemplate human perception, particularly my own. Is there a possibility that we might have memories that are not ours? Memories that could be coming from a collective memory field genetically inherited from our ancestors from a different time. Could these memories resurface as our own?

Naturally, when this kind of story about my grandfather working in an archive popped up during our conversation with my father, Zurab Chinchilakashvili, I right away got excited

Of course, though, there is a big difference between what my grandfather, Tristan, was trying to do and what I am trying to achieve with this project. His motive, as a historian, was to find out and preserve the truth or what he was trying to understand and formulate as “the truth.” However, my motive is to introduce a new fictional perspective to this narrative.

Specifically, the historical material from his archive that comes from real, legitimate sources remains, but the context in which it exists is fictionalized.

All the faces the viewer encounters in this exhibition, in the lightboxes and paintings, are from grandfather’s book. The photo materials we encounter are no longer historical artifacts; instead, they become elements in a dialogue with one another, with the space, and with the viewer. The idea, which is also interesting and which I did not realize during the work, but only after, is that there is a significant parallel between the work of an artist and an archivist. The parallel is that none of them are completely neutral; both of them make choices based on their intuitive feelings.

The archivist, even if they try to be neutral, they can not totally be, because of the decisions they make, they are subjective human decisions after all, of what to include, what to omit. The outcome cannot entirely be neutral. The artist, in this case me, in this project becomes the archivist, because my choices while making these artworks are not neutral. I use some pre-existing material – for example, photographs of these people - but I digest it in my own way. I create something new out of it, a new context.

The idea was to create a space where we are in the mind of an archivist, and therefore, hopefully, the viewer also comes in as an actor who is not neutral. Even though there is a story here. Still, viewer does not get any specific answers about the narrative.

Artworks resemble fragmented artifacts of memories, for the viewer to reconstruct, re-imagine, or recreate. We engage with the fractions of memories. These fractions and bits of memories, which I hope the viewer can continue in their imagination.



Figures 76 - Installation view from the exhibition, *The Lingering Presence*, at tranzit.hu, 2025.

8. *Exhibition encounter: space, scale, Ingold, and slow observation*

The exhibition space of *Tranzit.hu* was a deliberate choice for this exhibition, which I also perceive as one-room installation. It is a small room, which makes it an intimate space where one is surrounded by four walls, encircled by the exhibition's artifacts. I wanted the exhibition to be oriented toward the details, not necessarily toward spaciousness. How can these artworks, which are mostly reconstructed from found materials, interact with each other in this tight space? Another reason I liked this room is two details about the interior: the brick wall and the old sienna-colored leather doors. The brick wall, somehow industrial-looking, resonated with me as a fitting background for the installation – *The Architecture of Memory*. The grey bricks' cold texture evoked a 20th-century institutional interior, reminiscent of Soviet-era interiors. As for the doors, I thought the artworks I planned to make would enter into a dialogue with these retro, leather doors, which also evoke uneasiness, since they are reminiscent of doors used in psychiatric hospitals.

As for the artworks and their alignment in the space, the main point was that most of these artifacts, especially the object-based ones, are constructed from found materials. Furthermore, we also have the stories of the materials themselves. As Tim Ingold mentions, materials are never neutral. They are also active agents of memory, since they have been grown through people's ownership; people have touched them. Human dust has accumulated on them over the years, charging the object with specific energies.

When you look at the material, for example, these drawers are coming from furniture that was used in archives. This was symbolic for me because they would also be used as part of a fictional space - the archivist's mind. Therefore their current use as artworks is still in touch with the original role, or intentions of use, when they were "ordinary" objects of life. If we perceive that the objects are active agents of memory, carrying past lives as experiences within them, we also have to think about how they interact with one another

in the same space. How do these stories and energies affect each other? For example, dry plants have their own story, which comes from the field, and they are now in a totally different context. How does their meaning change with the change of context? How does their energy change with changes in context? These are open questions that can be interpreted in various ways by various individuals.



Figure 77 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Untitled*, 35x21x20 cm, 2025, materials: found drawer, styrofoam, plaster, chalk paint, dry moss.



Figure 78 - Artwork on the left described on previous page.

Artwork on the right: Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Untitled*, 36x15x12 cm, 2025, materials: found drawer, dry plant, polyester resin.



Figure 79 - detail shot of *Untitled*.



Figure 80 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Re-arrangement of His-story*, 25x15x2 cm, 2025, materials: found book, dry plant, polyurethane resin, concrete.



Figure 81 - 1. Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Untitled*, 15x10x10 cm, 2025, materials: found drawer, found photo, glycerin soap.

2. Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Untitled*, 44x34 cm, 2025, materials: pencil on found paper in found frame.



Figure 82 - detail shot of *Untitled*.



Figure 83 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Untitled*, 45x55x10 cm, 2025, lightbox.

9. Thoughts about the three paintings from the exhibition...

I created a small triptych for this exhibition, each panel measuring only 25x20 cm. The frontal portrait format is a distant reference to images widely used in bureaucratic documents of the era of modernity. These paintings emerged from my ongoing engagement with my grandfather's book, yet unlike other works, I did not rely on direct replication of the photographic source material. Instead, I absorbed the images, set them aside, and worked from memory. This act of detachment allowed the portraits to transform. They came into existence within the space of recollection rather than documentation. These paintings are not reproductions of the faces but disturbed, dissonance presences formed in the liminal space of memory.

I began by treating the wooden panels with gesso and perlite, creating a rough, sandy texture that disrupts the surface and refuses smoothness. It was about the physicality of the object, of its weight, even though its size itself is small. This wax-like, distorted surface acts as another filter between past and present, between tangible history and the fragmented past. This is another contrast between the paintings and the photographs, where the rough, uneasy texture is almost the opposite of the glossy, clear, and clean texture of the paper on which the image is printed.

Since I found out that bitumen was also used in Egypt to embalm the dead, I started watching a lot of Egyptian portraits from the Fayum basin. These small-scale funerary portraits, which were painted in encaustic, have been an influence for using the format, the wooden panel, and the waxy, dominant texture. These portraits were created to be attached to the wrapped mummified humans to document their faces. With this parallel to bitumen, which was also used in embalming the dead in Egypt, I wanted to create another hidden parallel in the space. Then I started to paint them. I painted not their initial pose but the mirror reflections of them. The portraits are painted in dark, muted tones, existing in a dreamy, atmospheric state because they are visions, not realities. They are visions in the archivists' minds, visions of faces haunting him.

The whole installation is not an archive, but it is the mind of the archivist. The space does not follow the logic or expectations that we, as viewers, might have regarding the concept of an archive. Instead, we are in the archivist's mind, where his distorted memories (which I call half-memories) exist in unfinished, fragmentary episodes. These artifacts in the space are showing just pieces of this fragmented episode of his dreamy memory.

There is an intentional weight to these images, a deliberate uneasiness. The eyes, in particular, bear a frozen opacity, a frosty layer that makes direct contact impossible. Another intentional gesture I used is the deformation of facial anatomies. I did this deliberately but intuitively, not with calculation. The paintings do not adhere to the logic of realism. Their dissonance is absolutely intentional. Instead, they fracture and dissolve, creating new, ambiguous topographies on the landscape of the human face.

The color palette that I used resonates with the existing artifacts of the installation. Blue shade resonates with the cabinet and the sculpture with the drawer and half head. The red-dish tone resonates with the drawer with resin and plant that is located in the cabinet on the second shelf, and the orange resonates with the shade of the light bulbs in the cabinet and also with the color of old found paper drawings and the rotting resin used on different artworks in the space.

These paintings refuse conventional aesthetic points of view, the traditional notions of 'beauty' and 'pleasure.' Instead, they try to grasp and convey the feeling of a disturbed dream where forms are not entirely definable. They allow themselves to exist beyond these conditions, highlighting feelings rather than rational visuality. I intended that these faces remain in the viewer's mind even after leaving the space, not because of grace and aesthetic niceness but because of their tension, heaviness, and gravity.

In this way, these paintings extend the more significant concerns of my installation. They do not seek to comfort or please the viewer but rather to disrupt and act as a controversy to reality. They are echoes of a past that is impossible to grasp. They are also about my struggle to connect with the images of the archive and my struggle to empathize with these

faces. My subjectivity attempts to transform and re-curate their existence, which comes from the pages of the book. They exist in the atmospheric realm of inherited memory and unspoken histories, and their distortion opens a space for something beyond sight—a space of tension.

On the other hand, their presence within the exhibition introduces a layer of physicality that cannot be observed in other art mediums. That is why I didn't paint paintings that would directly resonate with lightbox images. I wanted to use different mediums to explore various angles of the narrative.



Figure 84 - Installation view from the exhibition, *The Lingering Presence*, at tranzit.hu, 2025.



Figure 85 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Untitled (triptych)*, 25x20 cm each, 2025, oil and perlite on wood in artists's frame, dry plant.

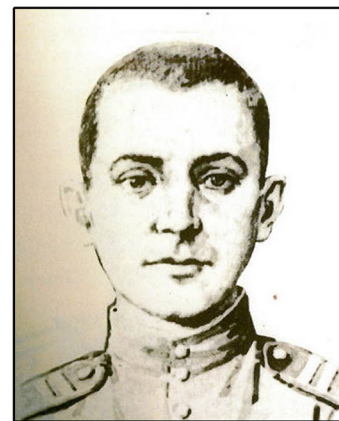


Figure 86 - Paintings from the triptych next to their original sources coming from Tristan Chinchilakashvili's book.

10. Memory as fiction, transmission, lingering presences

So we come back to the concept of archiving and the construction of history. Here, I had a question that arose from contemplating the construction of a historical narrative. What if memory is also constructed by our psyche? Then what is the difference between a memory and an imagination? This is also one of the crucial points I had to think about. For me, as an individual, one specific memory is never the same. As I transform over time, get older, change habits, and chemical reactions in my body continue various changes are taking place. The same goes for my memories, which are part of me.

They are no longer what they initially were. This means the moment I had remembered also changed in my perception, and since it has transformed, it now also has a degree of imagination - part of it is fictional.



Figure 87 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Untitled*, size variable, sculpture: found drawer, styrofoam, polyurethane resin, dry moss, wood, 2025.



Figures 88, 89 - Installation view from the exhibition, *The Lingering Presence*, at tranzit.hu, 2025.



Figure 90 - Erekle Chinchilakashvili, *Untitled*, size variable, sculpture: found drawer, styrofoam, polyurethane resin, dry moss, wood, 2025.

11. Artistic text on the exhibition

While working on this exhibition, I also wrote a text in parallel with making physical artworks. This is not a concept, but rather a poetic text on a person, a fictional archivist, going through a specific experience. This was a vision that originated in my imagination.

“This road didn’t seem long, yet somehow he was always losing himself in what was to be observed from the van’s scratched windows. The road stretched on, spilling over the outskirts of the city, leading toward a smaller town, crossing through the steppe-like fields of flatness and rigid horizons. The sky felt dry, stretched thin, carrying a silence that settled on the landscape like dust.

They passed the bitumen factories. Dark clouds climbed, slow and determined, out of the round, cracked brick chimneys, dissolving into the dry, cold air. He watched them rise until they lost their shape. And then the smell—dense, sharp, seeping through the thin steel window frame of the van, wrapping itself around him like a second skin.

He remembered an article he had read. He remembered the smell of that newspaper, the trace of tobacco on his moustache. Bitumen, he recalled, was ancient. Mesopotamia, Elam—places that existed more in words than in time. There it was used to build castles. In the Neolithic era, it was used to seal water inside clay. The Egyptians used it to embalm their dead, wrapped bodies in layers of linen and darkness.

And now this scent was here with him, squeezing through the nickel-rimmed window frame, filling the van with something thick and stubborn. The air, trapped inside the window’s steel, whistled as the van rolled on.

He looked at the field, at the dry steppe, at the far horizon where clouds hung, motionless. The land extended out endlessly. He saw the plants—thin and sharp, sticking out of the ground like antennas, almost as if transmitting

something of a message to somewhere... To the ghosts of old fields.

Then, he saw the face. The face he knew too well. He knew all of them. He kept seeing them. This was where he was going. To the temple of dust. To the archive where the lost did not vanish, but lingered. Where they had been placed on shelves, side by side, close to each other, where they continued to live on the ledges of the gods.

How had they felt when those photographs were taken? Probably you know, when it's your time. Or maybe not. The bitumen's thick scent made his thoughts sharper, drawing them into focus. He felt the weight in his eyes—the tiredness of the observer. Yes, he was an observer of the past.

The van stopped in front of the concrete building, which was a huge beton block, grey to its core, a building which was cold from the outside, but was hiding something special in the inside, hiding memories of the ones who were not amongst the ranks of the living anymore. He thought about their faces again. He stepped out of the van and started walking, cutting through the dry winter air, his thoughts were trying to catch up with the speed of smoke and dust and the lives lived in the century of modernity, of progress, of chimneys and rubber wheels rolling on dried bitumen. He was an archivist.”

Chapter VI - Conclusion

Wandering

At the beginning of the dissertation, I opened a chapter with the quote by Rumi:

Excuse my wandering

How can one be orderly with this?

It's like counting leaves in a garden,

along with song notes of partridges,

and crows. Sometimes organization

and computation become absurd.

I bring this up again in the conclusion because this "wandering" has been a crucial part of my research. It was not an accidental choice, but rather a method I followed deliberately.

Throughout these chapters, I have tried to show that art is an active participant in how we remember and perceive. The Pirosmeni dialogue, the cryptomnesic encounter with Blazevska, the Belgrade field trip, and the slow accumulation of materials for *The Lingering Presence*: each of these was an instance where an artwork or an environment intervened in my perception and reorganized something within it.

This could only be traced because I placed myself inside the research as both observer and subject. My heritage, my memories, the logic of what I have called my "cosmos" — these were not obstacles to objectivity but the very material through which the research became possible.

Three research questions guided the dissertation:

1. How can an artist be a "participant observer"?
2. How does art participate in the formation and reactivation of memories?
3. How does an artist experience art in a way that transforms their relationship to it?

These questions do not have simple answers. Rather, they were answered through the dissertation's layered structure, that I aim to give a summary about in this section.

Methodologies - what "perception excavation" achieved

Perception excavation — the method of slow, layered self-observation developed throughout this dissertation — achieved several things that a faster or more conventional methodology would not have. First, it made the transformation visible. By returning repeatedly to the same artworks, places, and materials, and by documenting each encounter, I could distinguish surface impressions from deeper perceptual shifts. Second, it revealed connections that were not intellectually available to me at the outset — the cryptomnesic link between Blazevska's painting and my childhood chair, the resonance between Sajmište and Jacobs University, the parallel between archivist and artist. These emerged only through sustained attention over time. Third, the method produced the masterpiece project itself: *The Lingering Presence* could not have been conceived without years of slow accumulation of materials, of memories, of trust in the process.

How each question was answered...

1. HOW CAN AN ARTIST BE A "PARTICIPANT OBSERVER"?

This dissertation approached the first question primarily through the case of Niko Pirosmani (Chapter II). This chapter presents Pirosmani as a researcher using the method of "participant observation," an ethnographic research method in anthropology. His way of life placed him inside the world he painted. From what is known of his life, his observational position did not stem from an understanding of anthropology as a social science; he would not have been aware of this academic field, which was very young in the 19th-century world. This act as a participant observer came from his instincts and lived proximity.

He worked as a sign painter for shops, taverns, and diners, where he often lived in exchange for this service. In this sense, the tavern functioned as his studio, an exhibition space, and an ethnographic field site, where he encountered the subjects of his paintings, mostly people from lower classes of society. He was particularly interested in painting Georgian feasts, or "supras," in which human interaction is a crucial aspect.

My "perceptual communication" with Pirosmani's painting—The Feast of Molokans—continued this chain of thoughts in a more loose and poetic form. Molokans are mostly ethnically Russian spiritual Christian minority, who lived in various places around the world. In Georgia they settled in first half of 19th century. Pirosmani's painting is depicting a scene of their feast. The painting becomes a record of participant observation, since it transmits something that can only be felt through direct encounter and participation: the aura, the inner tension of a small society. In my reading of the picture, Pirosmani's empathy becomes so intense that through the act of painting the scene, he attempts to become a Molokan himself, to join the feast. He participates, and in that participation, he observes, notes, acts it out, and shows the viewer what it feels like to be in that specific moment, part of that specific society. This is how he becomes simultaneously inside and outside the scene, participating and observing at the same time.

From this perspective, the artist becomes a participant observer when these conditions come into play:

1. Embeddedness: the artist is embedded in a situation or milieu rather than looking from a distance.
2. Double attention: the condition of embeddedness should not cancel observation. Instead, it produces a second awareness, which gives an artist a toolset to watch and observe the event while being inside it, living it.
3. Translation into form: the new knowledge produced through this experience is later translated into a certain language of art medium—this way, the intensity of experience is transmitted to the artwork.

2. HOW DOES ART PARTICIPATE IN THE FORMATION AND REACTIVATION OF MEMORIES?

This question was mainly addressed in Chapter III, which is mainly concerning with my cryptomnesic experience triggered by Ljiljana Blazevska's painting. The concept of cryptomnesia was central in the process of thought and judgment. Cryptomnesia gives a frame to a specific phenomenon, when old memories, already seemingly forgotten ones, buried in the unconscious, later reappear unexpectedly, often not as clear recollections but as seemingly "new" emotions or experiences. In my process of thought, and through my lived experience, an artwork can become a trigger that gives such emotions a specific form. In that moment, the artwork becomes a participant that rearranges the viewer's inner mnemonic experience and chronology. My cryptomnesic episode with Ljiljana Blaževska's painting began with encountering documentation rather than the artwork itself. I encountered a digital image and felt a powerful bodily sensation, a warming intuitive familiarity. Later, I realized that the feeling was attached to the transparent shape of a chair—the type of chair I know well from home in Tbilisi, a chair saturated with countless memories for me.

The digital documentation of Ljiljana Blazevska's painting became a cryptic form of encounter—a way of looking at something absent and, simultaneously, feeling something hidden resurface within my perception. This duality has also sparked the urge to see Ljiljana Blazevska's works in person. Unfortunately, I could not physically locate this exact artwork that caused cryptomnesic experience.

The Belgrade field trip extended this question from artwork-trigger to environment-trigger, exploring how the environment can cause a cryptomnesic experience in an individual. In Old Sajmište, a place saturated with complex, layered historical narratives, I felt a strong presence of the past. The atmosphere was eerie, dark, and mystical, but also really familiar creative mess of making. Walking there, my perception attempted to personify the place—as if the space itself were a living being. This brought an urge to initiate a metaphorical dialogue with the site.

Later, this familiarity connected itself to another site from my life: my former university campus at Jacobs University. The campus was also layered by complex histories—operating as a Nazi soldier base in the 1930s was called Flak Kaserne. The boundary between inner memories and outer observation began to fade. The place offered a surface for projection to land, and memory returned as atmosphere rather than narrative.

From these findings, the dissertation's answer to the second question becomes clearer:

- Art participates in memory by acting as a trigger: it can reactivate hidden layers of the human mnemonic architecture, bringing long-forgotten memories to consciousness.
- Art participates in memory by offering surfaces for projection. Artworks, art documentations, images and even certain environments saturated with art can become surfaces where the projection of human perception can land and be shaped into a new experience.
- Art participates in memory by generating reconstructions in memory's architecture: memory returns rearranged, mixed with present perception, often partly fictional.

3. HOW DOES AN ARTIST EXPERIENCE ART IN A WAY THAT TRANSFORMS THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO IT?

The third question concerns perceptual transformation, in particular what art does to the artist's relationship with the perception of art itself across time. In Chapter IV, I metaphorically framed the research process as a road—a midnight stroll under a sky of stars, where each star is a potential source of knowledge, and the walker must choose what to observe. The artworks I encounter, the books I read, the conversations I have, and even the streets I walk all begin to participate in how my perception forms my worldview—my cosmos. This is where the claim “artwork as participant” returns as a “lived experience.”

Over five years of artistic research, my transformation in perception towards art became visible through slow observation and constant documentation. Systematically returning and observing the same subjects—artworks, places, images, materials—allowed me to distinguish surface impressions from bigger perceptual changes. Self-observation and self-criticism trained attention to become aware of its own shifts. The process of constant documentation made changes measurable. It allowed me to return later, to see what changed and what remained, to see the bigger picture of my own road from a distance, while simultaneously being inside the process. This goes back to the double awareness.

Within this process, my relationship to art shifted in several ways:

- From seeking “understanding art” as the ultimate goal, to accepting ambiguity as an acceptance state.
- From treating artworks as static objects to approaching them as “living entities” with which I can enter into communication.
- From focusing primarily on the process of making to recognizing myself also as an observer inside a field of relations, which is a precondition of the making process, in the sense that it prepares the ground for it.

These transformations later on become tangible in the masterpiece exhibition. While

working and meditating upon the concept of archive, I encountered the limits of my own empathy. Imagining my mind as the mind of the archivist, which was inspired by my grandfather's project, I realized that it was hardly possible for me, as an imaginary archivist, to stay a neutral choice maker. My practice could not remain neutral. Therefore, I translated this realization into the artistic project of *The Lingering Presence*. I began to re-curate the inherited narratives into fictional traces of memories. This somehow exposed the instability of historical narrative and the subjectivity embedded in every archival gesture.

Therefore, the dissertation's answer to the third question is as follows: transformation occurs when art is experienced as an event that reorganizes perception. In my specific case, this reorganization is visible only through slowness, self-awareness, self-criticism, and constant documentation of various kinds, such as photos and note-taking. Over five years, the relationship with art became more vulnerable to change and more aware of its own entanglement with memory.

Limitations of the study

This study is highly subjective: it is based on my personal lived experience and approached from an artists perspective. It is not meant to be statistically generalizable, and it does not claim universal validity. The research is also highly context-bound. Specific places and cultural landscapes shaped the conditions under which these questions were asked and answered. Other artists in different environments may experience perception and memory completely differently.

The theoretical scope is interdisciplinary but selective. The dissertation engages artistic research, phenomenology, anthropology, and Jungian psychology. But it does not fully develop dialogues with cognitive neuroscience of memory.

Finally, the dissertation relies primarily on my documentation and artworks as data. It

does not include systematic audience research on how other subjects experienced my art. The absence of these upper listed notions does not contradict the aims of this dissertation, which from the initial point was meant to be subjective, leaning on my experiential knowledge.

Endnote

If this dissertation has achieved anything, it is perhaps to show that wandering can be a form of research, and the traces it leaves behind, in words, in artworks, emotions, experiences, and findings of new knowledge, can invite others into their own processes of perception excavation.

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