

Essay

We regularly collaborate with editorial offices and other projects in the form of secondary publications for our newspaper. This time, cultural scientist and cultural manager Rana Yazaji describes her work in the context of artasfoundation. She provides insights into the complexity of the work of artists in conflict regions.

«Do you have Armenian ancestors?»

Rana Yazaji, July 2025

This is a question I've been asked more times than I can count over the past three years, ever since I began working with *artasfoundation* and became closely involved in the foundation's activities in Armenia alongside Shoghakat Milke-Galstyan, an artist and team member of *artasfoundation*. For the Research "Contemporary Art, Popular Culture and Peacebuilding in Eastern Europe" I interviewed Shoghakat asking for her perspective on how art can be meaningful in Armenia. She told me not to try to find answers: "In the past, we sought answers, but now, our focus has shifted towards posing open-ended questions and maintaining the courage to discuss matters for which there are no clear solutions. Now we grapple with more nuanced inquiries."

When I respond, "No, not that I'm aware of", there's often a pause. A flicker of confusion. I can almost hear the unspoken follow-up: *Then why do you care?* Or sometimes it's carefully phrased, tucked inside polite conversation, but the expectation remains, that I will somehow explain myself.

«How to turn the question from being deeply embedded in power-relations dynamics to creating a togetherness in an international system that works against it?»

It's not a unique situation. Just a day before sitting down to write this brief essay, I was speaking with a Spanish cultural professional who has worked extensively with the oral history and narratives of the Syrian diaspora. At some point in the conversation, he shared the story of his grandparents and parents, who lived through Franco's dictatorship and the Spanish Civil War. It is through that lens, he said, that he feels drawn to Syrian heritage, communities, and stories.

Perhaps he needed to tell me this because I am Syrian. Perhaps, like me, he has learned to explain himself before the question is even asked.



*Aufwärmen für den Kampf gegen das tägliche Trauma: Für das Projekt «Tbilisi Crossroads» kamen Künstler*innen aus Georgien, der Ukraine, aus Belarus, Russland, Polen, Palästina und Japan zusammen. Copyright: Tamara Janashia*

This is one of the core questions present in artistic international cooperation, especially in fragile contexts. What are the limits and possibilities that "outsiders" could bring to the normative cultural and art system in regions in conflicts? How to turn the question from being deeply embedded in power-relations dynamics to creating a togetherness in an international system that works against it?

Since it was established in 2012 *artasfoundation* has been working daily with these questions and has been active in the South Caucasus almost from the very beginning. Across more than sixty projects, the foundation has remained in an ongoing dialogue with artists from every region where it works. The foundation initiates and shapes its own projects. These are often best understood through the lens of aesthetic experience.

Around the world there are many answers, and hundreds of lived experiences, that have explored the role of the arts in transforming conflicts. One possible answer lies in how we understand aesthetic experience as a social phenomenon. This perspective suggests that participating in an aesthetic experience, across different artistic forms and disciplines, is, in itself, a step outside the logic of everyday life. A life that tends to demand productivity, responsibility, and measurable outcomes.

That functional relationship to action fades during aesthetic experience occupied with sensational relation. In that space, the focus shifts – not to outcomes, but to the experience itself. If we can imagine thousands of people engaging in experiences that are not driven by practical goals, but by a desire to understand themselves and others beyond usefulness or immediate impact, then we begin to see how our understanding of the world might expand. Emotional perception begins to matter as much as intellectual analysis.

Mara Züst, an artist and member of the *artasfoundation* team, captured this profoundly when she described a moment from “Wishing Wishes”, a dance project in Dilijan, Armenia: “There was a magical moment. The 24 young people – girls and boys aged 12 to 17 – danced to warm up, danced to soft and wild music, their arms raised in smooth motions, circling each other in twisting movements, rhythms in their legs, and laughter on their faces. They had completed four workshops with the Swiss dancers and choreographers Meret Schlegel and Kilian Haselbeck, their dance teachers from the border villages of Berd, Ayrum and Koghob, the two musicians of the band Tiezerk from Yerevan, the interpreter Stella Loretsyan, and the founders of the Mihr dance company Shoghakat Mlke-Galstyan and her brother Tsolak. Everyone was now dancing together. A special moment of coming together across socially defined differences, whether age or nationality.”

«Art does not gather people around an actual or presumed conflict. Instead, it brings them together through a process of making.»

This is one of the most powerful things arts can offer in (post-)conflict times: the ability to hold the complexity of emotions in spaces that, by their nature, cannot be violent, and cannot be reduced to identity-based conflict.

Art also offers space for shared action. Unlike other methods of organising social dialogue, particularly those aimed at negotiating new social contracts, art does not gather people around an actual or presumed conflict. Instead, it brings them together through a process of making. People don't gather in aesthetic experience to declare something, but to create something together. And that creative experience is a transformative one. When it is disregarded in peacebuilding, something vital is lost. Something not easily restored or replaced.

“Tbilisi Crossroads” is an art residency that was conceived in 2024 mainly based on this idea, bringing artists from varied backgrounds and political views to come together in Arteli Racha, Chkvishi. It is led by Dagmar Reichert, founder and president of *artasfoundation*, Tamara Janashia, founder and director of United Gallery and *artasfoundation* team member Giorgi Rodionov. The residency brought together 11 artists from Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Poland, Palestine and Japan. All of them were living in Georgia at the time of the residency and all were dealing with the unpronounced divisions they lived in. Coming to Chkvishi, they mostly created together, examining how they could connect beyond their political and national divisions.



Magischer Moment des Zusammenkommens: «Wishing Wishes», ein Tanzprojekt mit Jugendlichen in Dilidschan, Armenien. Copyright: Mara Züst

This dimension of exchange assumes particular significance in conflict-affected settings, where isolation often constitutes a dominant experience. Individuals living through conflict frequently feel disconnected in their trauma and daily struggle, convinced that their realities are overlooked or dismissed. In many cases, global systems fail to effectively address or mitigate this perception. Rather than fostering recognition and solidarity, international responses often fall short in demonstrating to affected populations that they are genuinely seen, heard, and valued.

The “Sharing Stories” project exemplifies a form of artistic exchange that seeks to disrupt this dynamic. Designed as a cross-generational and cross-cultural initiative, it brings together individuals from remote mountainous regions in Switzerland and the South Caucasus, creating space for dialogue across borders and experiences. In doing so, the project aims to counteract prevailing political tensions by fostering human connections between communities often separated by propaganda, conflicting narratives, and severe travel restrictions. Currently led by artist and *artasfoundation* team member Olivia Jaques, the iteration of “Sharing Stories” in the unrecognized territory of Abkhazia faces particular challenges due to the region's constrained mobility. These restrictions have prompted the team to explore alternative, sustainable forms of engagement that can maintain and deepen translocal ties even in the absence of physical co-presence.

These and many other projects are examples of the "aesthetic" relation or perception of reality that lies at the core of this essay. They are also foundational to why aesthetic theory, rooted in philosophy, has increasingly shaped my understanding of art in regions of conflict.

In this context, I argue that when artists choose to engage with war, peace, conflict, and the suffering and trauma of people, art is not an escape. It does not simply allow us to process personal traumas or contain our fears in a safe space. Instead, art and artistic practices offer a non-functional relationship with the world, where resources can be “safely” wasted, and efficiency becomes irrelevant. Guided by our senses, we perceive a chaotic world that is ordinarily structured and compartmentalised. Aesthetic theory is a philosophy of experience. It is a philosophy of the possibility of experience. It is about the possibility of relief and liberation in a world of total administration.