

Portfolio – Nina Sanadze

Nina Sanadze

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“Revised Commemoration” in Public Art: What Future for the Monument?

État des lieux de la « commémoration corrigée » en art public : quel avenir pour le monument ?

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My childhood was spent in a surreal, enchanted-playground-like setting in the centre of Tbilisi, Georgia, in the late 1970s and 1980s, where I climbed giant fragments of Lenin and Stalin's heads, noses, and hands, scattered within a beautiful fruit tree garden. As a close family friend and neighbour of the prominent Soviet monumental sculptor Valentin Topuridze (1907–1980), I grew up amongst models and sculptural works in progress, in the artist's home-studio and garden. Famous for Lenin's monument in the center of Tbilisi, as well as for sculptures at the front of the Georgian parliament building, Topuridze also created many monuments to writers and other Soviet figures that were situated across various cities in the USSR. | fig. 2 | When his sculptures were violently torn down upon the fall of the Soviet regime in 1989–1991, I witnessed the sculptor's grand career become a ruin. The Georgian civil war followed, displacing my family into Russia as refugees. I later emigrated to Australia in 1996, at the age of twenty. I now live on Boon Wurrung/Bunurong, traditional land of the Kulin Nation in Melbourne, Australia, to whom I pay my respects.



Figure 1. Nina Sanadze in the studio, 2020. Photo: Gonzalo Ceballos.



Figure 2. Valentin Topuridze (right) sculpting one of his Lenin public monuments in his studio in Tbilisi, Georgia (Former USSR), approximately 1960s. Photo: from the Topuridze family archive, photographer unknown.

In 2018, I travelled back to Georgia to stage an installation, *100 Years After, 30 Years On*, in the 3rd Tbilisi Triennial. | fig. 3 | Looking to re-examine my roots, I wanted to unearth Topuridze's surviving studio archive and reactivate it both physically and politically. There is still a mixture of shame, confusion, and aversion associated with Soviet propaganda art for many Soviet-born people, including myself. Valentin Topuridze's own family, in a double erasure, destroyed all the remnants of his Stalin and Lenin sculptures, leaving only the representations of other exonerated figures, amounting to about a hundred decomposing plaster models and molds in the garden shed of a family friend. Encountering the sculptures after such a long time, I uncovered something altogether surprising. No longer grand and victorious, they appeared poignantly small and fragile. Material deterioration through time and neglect reveals their sublime artistic beauty as well as speaking to the precariousness of the human condition, both socially and bodily. Simultaneously, the sculptures present us with the violent history they incarnate. The combination of this obsolete and frail beauty and the implicit terror behind them generates tension and evokes an emotional response. This contradiction is heightened through the seemingly violent and careless arrangement of the precious archive in my installation *100 Years After, 30 Years On*. Thrown together like a pile of garbage or a heap of corpses in the battlefield, it also resembles a street barricade. The installation seeks to raise questions about the sociological and historical value of defunct ideological art and iconoclasm. It asks: what are we to do with such pieces (some of them perhaps great works of art), and what is the responsibility of the contemporary artist in relation to such art?

Figure 3. Nina Sanadze, *100 Years After, 30 Years On*, 3rd Tbilisi Triennial, Georgia, 2018. Studio archive of Soviet sculptor Valentin Topuridze (1907–1970), plaster models, moulds, fragments and traces, plaster powder, acrylic paint, dimensions variable. Photo: Sandro Sulaberidze.



Figure 4. Nina Sanadze, *Curtain Call*, George Paton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia, 2020. Aluminium composite panels, original marble head of Russian Emperor Alexander II by Baron Peter Clodt (1805–1867), fabric, adhesive vinyl, acrylic paint, dimensions variable.
Photo: Christo Crocker.



As suggested in the title, *30 Years On*, we are presented with the reemerged traces of erased monumental Soviet history. However, in a multi-layered historical reprise, *100 Years After* also refers to the dismantling of all the tsarist monuments in Georgia and Russia by the Soviet regime. My installation *Curtain Call* | fig. 4 | refers to these events by resurrecting the original marble head of Russian Emperor

Alexander II by renowned sculptor Baron Peter Clodt (1805–1867). Decapitated from the Emperor's body, the head was once part of the grand public imperial monument torn down in 1920s. Salvaged by young Valentin Topuridze, it stayed hidden in the sculptor's family for nearly 100 years, until the event of this exhibition: a secret revealed. Becoming a prominent sculptor himself, Topuridze's own colossal Lenin would later replace this sculpture of the emperor in the centre of Tbilisi, only to be torn down in turn.



Having acquired and transported Topuridze's archive from Georgia to Australia, through various installation incarnations like *Monumental Shift* in Melbourne | fig. 5 | and *Apotheosis* in Adelaide, | fig. 6 | I have used it to develop a material language that addresses personal and political memory.

Figure 5. Nina Sanadze, *Monumental Shift*, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, Australia, 2019. Studio archive of Soviet sculptor Valentin Topuridze (1907–1980), plaster models, moulds and fragments, 4m². Photo: Christo Croker.



Figure 6. Nina Sanadze, *Apotheosis*, ACE Open, Adelaide, Australia, 2021. Studio archive of Soviet sculptor Valentin Topuridze (1907–1980), plaster models, moulds and fragments, dimensions variable. Photo: Grant Hancock.



Fig. 7. Nina Sanadze, *Terminus*, 2021.
Still from short experimental film,
34 mins.

Now, in isolation with my family during the times of pandemic, I found myself again surrounded by the artefacts of Topuridze's practice in a domestic setting, on the other side of the world. It is an eerie evocation of my childhood experience which I have tried to capture and contextualise in my experimental short films *Terminus* | fig. 7 | and *Embedded*. | fig. 8 |



Fig 8. Nina Sanadze, *Embedded*, 2020.
Still from short experimental film,
11 mins.

Living in Melbourne, a city rich with undisturbed monumental heritage, I developed my practice exploring the psychology of built environments and communities; I discuss three such projects in the following sections. Struggling to find a sense of belonging through my lived experience as a migrant settler to Australia of twenty-five years—all my adult life—I have challenged the colonial monuments of Melbourne as symbols of a dominant monoculture. Activating monolithic public sites (contested by some, unnoticed by others), I was interested in questioning how monuments distort history, reinforcing the cultural dominance of colonial narratives despite today's culturally diverse society.

Royal Parade | **fig. 9** | is the performance facet of the *Monuments and Movements* installation. | **fig. 10** | Whilst referencing colonial sculptures in general, this body of work presents replicas of the Queen Victoria, Edward VII, and King George V monuments adjacent to the exhibition location in the heart of Melbourne. Conceived as flattened and collapsible structures on wheels, these replicas invert the expected function of static and robust public monuments, interrogating the political powers they represent. The rumbling clatter of rolling wheels, evoking galloping horses, is deafening in this otherwise silent parade, a poetic gesture of protest. Imbued with the constructivist aesthetic—built from industrial materials and using simple geometric, abstract, and austere forms, these sculptures have a social purpose and act as kind of a propaganda, recalling Soviet agit-prop trains and Tatlin's famous tower—the performance is an homage to revolutionary idealism.



Fig. 9. Nina Sanadze, *Royal Parade*, Queen Victoria Gardens and Kings Domain, Melbourne, Australia, 2019. Video still from live performance, 19 mins. Documentation: Veronica Di Mase.



Fig. 10. Nina Sanadze, *Monuments and Movements*, Margaret Laurence Gallery, Melbourne, Australia, 2019. Steel, epoxy enamel paint, aluminium composite panels, castor wheels, dimensions variable. Photo: Christo Croker.

Grass Monument | fig. 11 | is a proposal for a permanent, site-responsive, botanical public art installation that has not been realized. The projected rewilding of the manicured lawn surrounding Captain Cook's monument in St. Kilda would recreate the pre-settlement natural environment that once stretched across this area, adding a parallel narrative to the dominant one. Conceived in 2019, the project was supported by the local government's environmental group. The native Indigenous foundation was also initially very encouraging. However, since the George Floyd uprisings began in June 2020 and the consequent worldwide expulsion of many monuments, their support has been withdrawn. I can only speculate that the movement has energised the local Indigenous community with the hope of dismantling colonial monuments instead; to see some justice, finally, symbolically restored through the removal or destruction of statues of genocide enablers. I respectfully stand back and pay my respects. And so, transcending its physical manifestation, the journey of the *Grass Monument* proposal becomes the outcome, leading me to consider notions of cultural permission.

Presenting appropriated original artefacts, replicas, or documentary films as witnesses and evidence, I seek to re-examine our grand political narratives from a personal position. Having no answers, but many questions, I see my work as a series of provocations, practice or rehearsals with speculations. ¶



Fig. 11. Nina Sanadze, *Grass Monument*, drawing for the proposed project, Captain Cook monument, St Kilda foreshore, Melbourne, Australia, 2020.