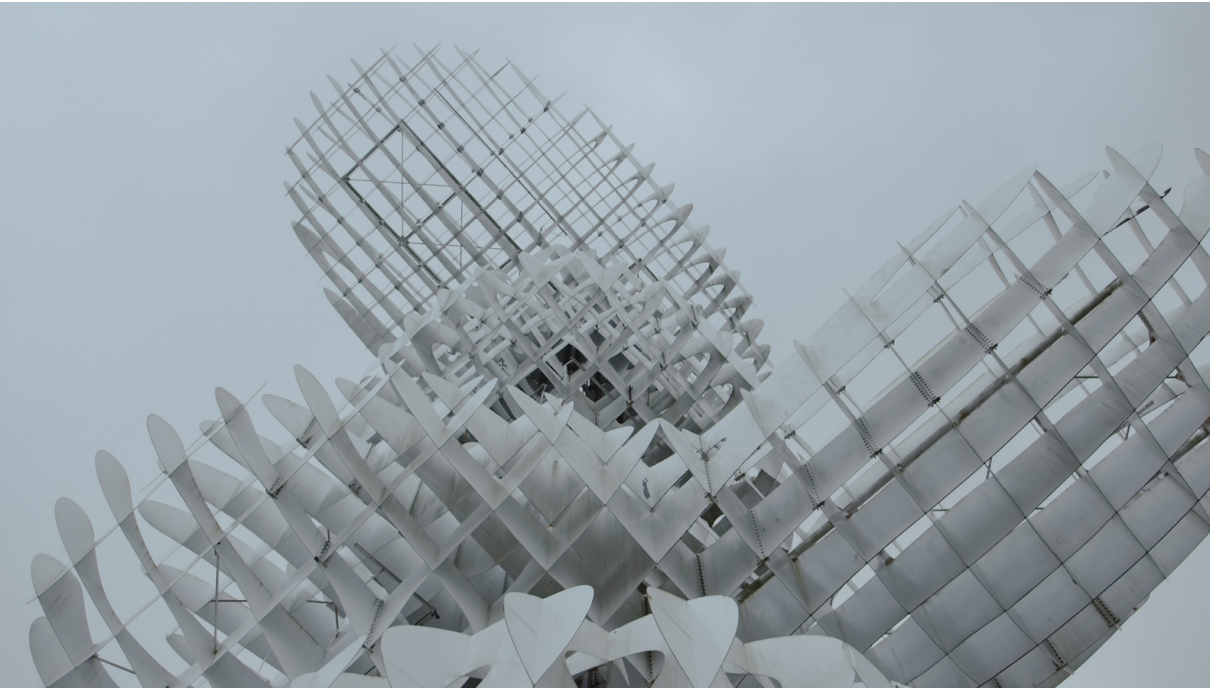# Anaklia, the city of future.
A conversation with Tekla Aslanishvili from her film *Scenes from Trial and Error*
Edited by Laura Romano

Scenes from Trial and Error (2020) investigates the tests of developing a futuristic city and Deep-Sea Port in Anaklia, Georgia. In 2011, the former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili announced a large-scale project on the Black Sea, consisting on the construction of a brand-new city and a port to be named Lazika, close to the existing fishing village of Anaklia, to grant the access to mobility and logistics in this wide area, according to the narrative of the institutional partners to 'open a bridge between Europe and Asia'. The place is nearby the border with the disputed territory of Abkhazia, planned to develop it into one of the luxury vacation resorts on the Black Sea. The ambitious project was never achieved and over time was handed by the private Anaklia Development Consortium in 2016, a Georgian-American joint venture. Since then, the Consortium has pursued new plans, now remaking the village into a private smart city called Anaklia City. Ultimately in 2020 it has been re-launched but without success and the future of Anaklia City remains uncertain. The project left on the ground some buildings, remnants of a futuristic city that has never been built, such as the completed but never opened city hall by the architectural firm Architects of Invention and a large-scale sculpture by Jürgen Mayer H., as well as the deep-sea harbor.*

Laura Romano: In your work you combine documentary techniques with an experimental and essayistic gaze, processing the information that the territory hides and/or reveals. In this new assemblage, we find fragments of history, geopolitics and design. In your film *Scenes from Trial and Error*, what is very interesting is the combination of the very physical, material impact of the logistics connected to the world of infrastructures and how it is combined with algorithm and data that are invisible processes that led the control of the space.

You have been working on it in different way, also in your previous work *Algorithmic space and its social implications* (texts by Tekla Aslanishvili, Luciana Parisi, Annick Leick, Soenke Zehle, published for Casino Luxembourg-Forum d'art contemporain, Luxembourg, 2017).

We are becoming more and more aware of the fact that simultaneously the material aspects of life cohabit with its immaterial construction, and that urban space is no longer conceived and lived only in its embodied implications, becoming a complex ensemble of interests, information and connections, both physical and not.

In this frame, Anaklia's project is on one hand the trial of an autonomous zone, a free-hold port settled in a city of 1.000 inhabitants, on the other hand the projection of an urban, yet to come, infrastructural island in which data and algorithms will be the framework of the logistics.

How do you combine in your work those two aspects, the material with the algorithmic space?

Tekla Aslanishvili: I think my practice is the very logical continuation of the text you've mentioned, conceived when I was making a residency at Casino Luxembourg. The thing is that the physical project that was a site-specific installation failed because of several issues, so I had to move to the more theoretical direction to understand what was happening there and I decided to organize a conference and in this process of researching data-based management of urban spaces, I came across many important researchers working in this field, like Keller Easterling and Orit Halpern. I remember when I was watching a video by Keller Easterling and she was showing many renderings of places that are copied and pasted in different kind of geographies,

to support the activities of transport logistics: she showed how they build this smart-cities following a replicable model, that is not very specific of the local spaces and local people. She called these videos of smart city renderings "urban porn". I remember she showed a render of Lazika (the city planned to be built close to Anaklia), that is the rendering for the space that you saw in the film. This project of smart city was initiated in 2011 and was never finished, leaving behind this urban triangle composed of three main pillars: the bit of the road that connects the municipality building designed by Architects of Invention and the sculpture by the German architect and artist Jürgen Mayer H. I had seen this urban embryo before, but Easterling's theory helped me to place it in a broader context. I saw potential in this minimalistic form of existence and decided to go back to Georgia and create a film that would talk about these methodologies of designing new spaces for living and working from scratch. But when I arrived, the new government led by the party Georgian Dream, announced the new trial of building the port and the city, so I started to follow that process until it failed again in two years.

LR: It is somehow an 'archeology of the future' what you did. Some of the recurrent words said by the people intervening in your film are logistic, infrastructure and trading, but also imagination and project, and we could add projection, that's related to urban planning such as 'imaging the future' that in this case is something that probably will never happen. As we saw in the film, this process leaves many traces on the ground, like those hyper-symbolic sculptures (The Honey-comb and the Ghost-tower by Jürgen Mayer) who's design is algorithmic made, that might be considered the symbols of this projection of a future city on the territory. Those evidences are symbolic elements in the space and can be fascinating, like many unfinished, abandoned spaces. Watching the film, I was wondering how people perceived this process. We have some indications in it – for example the family who got relocated and with the compensation that they have received from the government they decided to build a new one that is some sort of 'the house of their dreams'– right aside the construction site of the Anaklia port, most probably with the intention of being part of this new city once it will be constructed. As you argue in *Algorithmic space and its social implications* the

side effects are part of the process too, together with the impact on people's lives. Did something changed in Anaklia in the last ten years, in this process of overlayed *trials and errors* (as you depict them in your short film made by the *Algorithmic Island)?*

TA: Yes, that is really one of the main aspects of the film as well because... the person that is planning the city for example – that you see in the film – often talks about a methodology that they wish they wanted to test there. Like for example the smart-governance that supports all this logistic work and activities, also legislative models that they wanted to test there and in case of success apply on a larger scale, like on a whole state of Georgia. What is interesting is that when you call something a test, it means that it could also fail. This aspect of failure and 'ruination' is an integral part of planning and constructing such spaces. This logic is also represented in the act of building the house right next to the border of the port [she refers to the person we saw in the film, mentioned before]. This person has built it there because the port could be a success and in the case of its expansion he would receive farther compensation from the government, but it could be a failure as it happened many times before. So, he still built the house of his dreams. It's a simple speculation on possible future scenarios which embodies the principles of how the future is constructed today. It could be a ruin, and local people in Anaklia know it and position their lives around this knowledge. This is also what we witness on site: the way they dredged the 5 million cubic meters of sand from seabed right next to that family house, without having secured funding for the following stages of construction. The thing is, in order to prepare the port harbor, there are several procedures: after dredging the sand needs to rest for six months and after that you have to lay solid layers on it. But the private consortium speculated on finding investments for the next stages and failed. They might have had funding or they might not, no one knew or checked that and they were still able to just start the work of reclamation. And the house built right next to the construction site, ready to host tourists was soon covered by the abandoned sand, lifted by strong winds that raised in the village. Children had allergic reaction and the place became impossible to inhabit during the sandstorms. ...it had a huge impact on this place, but actually it didn't matter for the

government or the private company, because it is a test. It was an aspect that we raised, me and my collaborator Evelina Gambino [interviewed in the film] as we wanted to show that the ruination is an integral part of planning and constructing such spaces.

LR: The project impacts a pivotal geopolitical area, at the cross-roads of countries that have interests and raw materials and some of those countries compete to control the logistic over this territory. With the current conflict in Ukraine, perhaps the partners involved could try to relaunch the dock. How it impacted on the local economy?

TA: It had a big impact, also because another aspect of the project was the touristic potential of it, there's an electronic music festival running in Anaklia (that you saw in the film), that is part of the governmental strategy of using this territory as a stage for their performance of modernity. It is in an immediate proximity with the contested territory of Abkhazia, so they want to present Georgia as a modern state, which should become more appealing to people in Abkhazia. And with the electronic music festival some tourists used to visit Anaklia more, but now that the ecological situation has worsen, people have lost even that minor income from tourism. According to their announcement, the Government is now looking for stronger financial investors, as they had refused an investment condition demanded by the large financial institutions to secure the financial risks in case of decrease in cargo and reduced revenues. The Government didn't agree and that's why it failed in 2020, basically. There were also other interests, including Russia, and speculation around it. But the official position of Georgian Government is that they will commission the project to stronger investors, who will be able to build the port without insurances from the local Government.

LA: Your work considers different scales and from your film emerges an interest in frictions coming out in the processes of production of space, questioning how public space is determined by both the material aspects of planning and the immaterial data and algorithms that draws those processes. *How those elements have been further investigated in your latest art works?*

TA: *After Anaklia, I've had a project that was a collaboration with artist* Giorgi Gago Gagoshidze, *The experimental film Stone of Hell*[1], a work on extractive spaces and the relation between the extractive machinery and technology with war technology. I think that from this project I took the aspect of the relation between war conflict and infrastructure and from the Anaklia's project I took with me the aspect of infrastructure space and architecture, such as the idea of simultaneous flows of goods and people and the failure as well. And it all conveys in the third project I am working on, also with Evelina Gambino (Margaret Tyler Research Fellow in Geography at Girton College, University of Cambridge) in which we investigate on the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway which is one of the projects that started after the collapse of Soviet Union, with an idea to place Georgia on the larger geopolitical map as a transport and logistics Hub. I started to research for this project of the railroad that connects Azerbaijan and Turkey through Georgia in 2018, then I had the film with Giorgi Gago Gagoshidze in between, and in 2021 I came back to the railway project, which politically is very complicated.

In this project territorial conflicts and wars are directly intertwined with transport infrastructures: the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars project was initiated by Turkey in 1993 as a response to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. As an act of support towards Azerbaijan, Turkey has closed its railway links with Armenia and both Turkey and Azerbaijan started investing in Georgia. It excluded Armenia from the regional transport corridors, considering that the Armenian-Georgian transport connection was basically the only one in place. The railroad became means of exclusion in this conflict and bargaining chip as well. The territory where the new BTK rail line passes through Georgia is inhabited by ethnic Armenians and as local population reports, most of them were not allowed to work on construction of this infrastructure as the construction companies were Azerbaijani and Turkish. For me those are all important elements, but I am also interested in the idea of different temporal orientations that can be detected along this transport lines: J. Mayer H., which is the architect who built the sculpture in Anaklia, also designed

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1 The starting point for the essayistic experimental documentary film is the small mining town of Chiatura, in west Georgia. The film closely follows the raw material of Manganese, extracted on site through all the stages of processing and distribution, drawing connections with other spaces and temporalities.

and built the Akhalkalaki Railway Station Building, which marks the central point on the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway as it is the place where cargos need to be reloaded from Soviet broad gauge railways, to the Turkish standard narrow gauges. The architecture of station building mirrors this aspect of different scales coming together, and this algorithmically generated smooth forms, are also telling of pursuit for seamless transnational movement of goods and people. There is also an aspect of test, in the sense that this railway operates since 2017 in a test-regime, and it could as well become another failure. But in comparison to Anaklia, it can be considered more as a project for political speculation, rather than the financial one.

When I started researching for this project, the first time I went to see the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway was exactly because of the station building. I wanted to see why was this architect commissioned to design spaces that marking most of the transport logistical spaces in Georgia, such as ports, railways, Border Checkpoints, even gestations on the main highways. As it turned out through further research, creating the architectural landmarks through different roads was part of efforts by the Government led by Saakashvili, to redesign the perception of Georgia from the place of wine and food into a transit hub.

Another aspect that is central to the forthcoming film is how the regional wars and conflicts get translated into economic opportunities in a real time. While there are wars in Nagorno Karabakh or in Ukraine, conflicting processes are taking place on the supply chains, the discussion that I have followed are brutally pragmatic and calculated. For example, in the aftermath of Russian invasion of Ukraine, the cargo that used to pass through the North corridor is encountering barriers due to sanctions imposed on Russia and Belarus. As the logistics companies brainstorm on how to solve the crisis and what other ways to take, in many countries on the middle corridor, like Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, it is already considered as once in a lifetime opportunity. In reality this war has resulted in kilometers of lines of tracks at the borders between these countries, exploited lorry drivers stuck for days without extra payments and often without access to basic facilities, like toilet or shower. In the film we observe all these conflicting conditions, hopes, speculations and violence that emerge on the peripheries of wars and territorial

conflicts of the region.

LR: In the frame of this publishing of *Tracce Urbane*, one of the aspects we wanted to focus on is how visual production conveys the production of space, and imagery and imagination related to it, which is also part of your works. It can be a theoretical concept behind the artistic conception, but it can also be a methodology. What do you think about your work in this sense and how do you work on field?

TA: I come from an artistic background, I am not trained as a filmmaker, plus my closest friends, colleagues and collaborators work not only in cultural but also in the scientific fields. So, while producing a documentary film, I always place them in this cross-disciplinary context. Reading the call for paper of *Tracce Urbane*, I read your arguments that 'films itself are becoming the production of reality rather than its description' so they produce a new reality more that showing it and this is something I've been thinking a lot while making this film, and it explains how I think about my projects in general. For example, I went to Anaklia with a sort of artistic idea, so it was not only me going there wanting to see what was happening there and understand the reality of local people, but I came there with already half-baked vision of what the work should look like. I was interested in this model of replicable smart cities, which is often ignorant to the local geographic, cultural and social specificities. But once I arrived in Anaklia and talked with different people, not only with local population, but developers, architects, researchers, I saw that not only these narratives about the place didn't match each other, but none of them was fully in line with the landscapes of friction that I had encountered. So, I realized that there was no simple way of telling what these spaces were that I documented. They are complex, layered and their story can be told only through layers of different perceptions and understanding of what is happening not only on site, but in other places as well where the same model is being copy-pasted. In the film *Scenes from Trial and Error* you can see the interview with the architect who designed the municipality building in 2011 for the first failed trial by Mikheil Saakashvili. For him the project of developing the city is in the past, so he talks about it not only from design by also from a very specific temporal perspective.

Then there is an interview with the CEO of a new Anaklia City, she sees the same place just as a resource, for her the project lies in the future, she considers this territory as an empty uninhabited space, and she directly says it in the film arguing that «there are no people here and there are no constructions» so it could be used as a testing ground. At the same time, you can see people relocating from those sites and animals moving through this space in the film, but in her future-oriented perception they do not. And then you hear Orit Halpern in the film, which is a theoretician and she never seen Anaklia in her life, but she has researched other places that follow the same logic of smart management for urban spaces. Her narrative is as intended very detached from the local reality, from the images of the space. And then you hear Evelina Gambino, who was doing her field-work for her PhD there as I was filming. Her ideas matched the 'reality' most, as she had integrated failure as part of the model of building logistics, through addressing specific cases that you can witness in the film. In general I wanted to investigate was 'what the truth is', the truth about what is happening in Anaklia and what Anaklia is. Truth about Anaklia differs from its reality. And I was convinced that only by featuring all the layers of narration I would come closest to the truth about this messy place. The reality on Anaklia is not going to match with any single narration about it and this is actually my distinction between the truth and the reality. Reality is in images maybe, I hope so! I mean the spaces are empty and there are just a few people and this is my conscious decision not to show them. Coming from my background, I perceived this film not as a 'classical documentary' that intends to show the reality, I think was not really my intention. My intention was to show the clashes between many things, so this is why even from the beginning I imagined it to be a sort of 'fiction' documentary, although besides few staged scenes, it's mainly nonfictional. But it is constructed in a way that is more suitable for art context, because people don't come with the same expectations of a cinematographic milieu and surprisingly it worked for quite a broad audience! It was not only in art spaces but also in Festivals, not very large ones because it the topic is very specific but I was happy that it was not too niche. I use to research and produce at the same time, and I have always been working like that, because in this process you never know how situations could evolve and what's coming after in terms of

permissions and political access to the locations, there are border places that are not easy for example. The next film (on Baku-*Tbilisi*-Kars railway) has to be finished by October. It is supported by Han Nefkens Foundation-Fundació Antoni Tàpies Video Art Production Award and again it will circulate mostly in art context, but possibly also at the Festivals. I think my films are a bit at the edge between cinema and art, so it is always not very clear to me where they will fit mostly. The art context is very specific, so you always have to have in mind where the film is going to be shown. Scenes from *Trial and Error* is a shorter version of my feature film named *Algorithmic Island*, because the long version didn't work in art contexts and as a result, I had to give up on many details that were important to me. But I also have a problem with the expectation of Cinema and film festival context. The producers and festival labs always try to steer the film in a direction that would make it easy to digest for their audience. But it's nowhere near to what you want to do. So, that's why I'm trying to position my practice at the intersection of these fields and hope that the film will then naturally find its place and audience.

LR: I perfectly understand that. In my professional experience, when you work on a project you really need to have an angle to pitch and sell it, that is often being re-modulated depending on the interlocutors you are talking to, or the situation. Which is a sort of cultural process but on a certain extent, for the most, projects are often steered in a certain direction in order to fit some key-works that draws the market (and the audience) following to narrative patterns (for example, the spasmodic need to find strong characters that lead a story, or the universality of it and the possibility to empathize with the characters). As a consequence, the complexity of facts depicted is often simplified to fit a certain narrative strand. Despite documentary films are assuming more and more an expanded definition, the common idea remains that they are supposed to 'document' reality and it is a huge misunderstanding. It is a concept that visual practice and visual culture have widely questioned exploring languages that go through experimental, non-narrative and essayistic visual forms that enable to keep a wider vision and a certain complexity of the contexts.

TA: For me there is also the question of where I come from, that can be an issue of identity as I migrated, I left Georgia. If I go back and film the places that I have left, I film these places but the main audience is not Georgian. This is a challenge not only for me but for all Georgian film directors, migrated or not, and it is a huge responsibility of what you show and sell to the West. Because most of those films are collaborative projects between Georgian directors and western producers that have a certain kind of patterns of what how peripheral places should be portrayed in order to be successful on the market. What I am doing I don't think it is 'sellable' in this way, I don't intend to eroticize or capitalize on drama and poverty that people are going through in Georgia and in the neighboring countries. I am interested in the connections that this place has with the rest of the world, how are the realities produced on site not only through local politics, but in relation to different interests and processes elsewhere. This is something I kept in mind while filming in Anaklia and this is why the film is empty of local people, instead I was looking for other, non-human forms through which the conditions of anxiety, uncertainty and hope could shine through. Architectures and animals in the film serve as such mediums. This approach was conditioned exactly from the responsibility of being an immigrant director, based between east and the west. I don't want to meet the expectations of film industries, because those expectations are often very problematic.

LR: How was the film perceived in Georgia, if you have had the chance to screen it there?

TA: In Anaklia's project I tried not to make it too academic in terms of language, not too pretentious, so you have many interventions that mix the different layers, some scholars and all people speaking in English. I would say it is somehow intended to a specific audience.
It was ready right during the pandemic, so I was not able to present the film at the Tbilisi International Film Festival or at any other events that would allow me to show the film to a broader audience. In Tbilisi I had mostly exhibitions in the art contexts, the film has not been yet in Anaklia. Let's see what people will say when I will show it in Anaklia, that would be interesting!

All images are frames from the film Scenes from trial and error by Tekla Aslanishvili, 2020.

Tekla Aslanishvili Tekla Aslanishvili (b. 1988 in Tbilisi) is a Berlin-based artist, filmmaker, and essayist. Her collaborative, interdisciplinary practice explores the intersections between infrastructure design, history and geopolitics from multiple temporal and geographic perspectives. Tekla graduated from the Tbilisi State Academy of Arts in 2009 and she holds an MFA from the UdK Berlin-the department of Experimental Film and New Media Art. Aslanishvili's works have been screened and exhibited internationally at the n.b.k.-Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Baltic Triennial 14, International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, Kunsthalle Münster, EMAF-European Media Art Festival, Videonale 18 and Tbilisi Architecture Biennial. She is a 2018-2019 Digital Earth Fellow and most recently the nominee for Ars-Viva Art prize and the recipient of the Han Nefkens Foundation-Fundació Antoni Tàpies Video Art Production Award. tekla.aslanishvili@gmail.com

Laura Romano. After extensive experience in the documentary film Industry, in 2018 she co-founded the production company FilmAffair with four partners, focusing on films with a creative impact exploring new frontiers of storytelling. Since then, she produced with FilmAffair Normal by Adele Tulli (2019, premiere at Panorama Berlinale), SQIZO by Duccio Fabbri (2020), Los Zuluagas by Flavia Montini (2021, Festival dei Popoli, DOCAVIV, Bogota FF), Radical Landscapes by Elettra Fiumi (2022, supported by Women Make Movies, Sundance editing Lab, Graham Foundation for the Advanced Studies in Fine Arts, to be released).
She is currently developing a film project on Amazonian Rain Forest, conceived with Paolo Barberi and Riccardo Russo. She is occasionally a member of the referee board for Cultural Institutions, works as Festival programmer and consultant as creative producer on documentary film projects. She collaborated with CSC in Palermo (Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia), teaching development and creative production on Documentary film. PhD Anthropology (2020). laura.romano@gmail.com