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Groys, Boris, "Wait to Wait – Boris Groys with Andro Wekua," *fillip* 9, Winter 2009, pp. 8-10

Wait to Wait

BORIS GROYS with ANDRO WEKUA

The following conversation is an excerpt from a longer interview between Andro Wekua and Boris Groys published in Wait to Wait, edited by Christoph Keller, forthcoming in April 2009 from Christoph Keller Editions and JRP/Ringier Kunstverlag, Zürich.

Boris Groys: We've already spoken before about the fact that people have an ambivalent attitude towards the art situation today—at least I do, as someone who writes about art. On the one hand, that situation appears very rosy: everything is moving forward, artists are accepted and recognized as never before, they're economically successful, too, and being an artist or participating in the international art scene in any way is seen as cool. But, at the same time, there's a certain pessimism and depression, a feeling of arbitrariness and pointlessness with regard to what's being done in art. At least in the West there's that mood. Do you feel that, too? Does it have an impact on you?

Andro Wekua: I have the same impression, too, and I've noticed that nowadays it's very trendy to be an artist, and, consequently, there are a lot of them, and so many different self-contained scenes. But, in the midst of this boom I also detect a great loneliness. At the very time you find yourself in such a big, very active, very lively scene, you feel the other side all the more strongly. You almost have to decide if you want to stick with your work—or whether you want to join in all this activity in the context. Sometimes you don't know how to divide up your energy because the whole business is just too big.

Groys: Of course we both come from the same part of the world, from what used to be the Soviet Union, although we certainly belong to different generations. When I recall my youth—there were a number of circles in art and culture then, too. But, within a particular circle, you felt fairly well looked after. You had the good feeling of being in a friendly atmosphere. There was support from other artists or writers. There wasn't any feeling of competition. But right now in the West there's a prevailing and overwhelming tendency towards individualism, and, as a result, a corresponding feeling of competition. You speak of isolation and loneliness. I don't believe these feelings stem from the fact that you've come from outside. Indigenous, western artists are in the same boat.

Wekua: As I know a few artists from the older generation, I can well imagine that nurtured feeling. But to-

day the time pressure in itself is much too great. If you join in everything that's going on in the scene, you're simply much too busy. But, you know, you just have to have some time to hang out with your friends now and again and simply do nothing for three days or simply chat about things from time to time. I think that plays a very large role. We're always on the move, travelling a lot, so we're no longer tied to one place where it might also be possible to grow. So we're virtually always on the move with our own backpack and hoping we've got enough in there to fetch out.

Groys: I understand exactly what you mean. It's the feeling of constantly just giving out and being active, but getting very little back. For you can derive energy first and foremost from just those conversations that lead nowhere, from relaxed meetings with friends you can talk with about every conceivable thing—impressions, feelings, and moods arise from them that you can do something with. If we just work the whole time, then it really is as if we're living out of a backpack that we have to get everything out of. The question is: where does it all come from? How do you fill that backpack? Is it filled up once and for all and never again after that? Or do you always keep on filling it up?

Wekua: At the start of my work, my backpack was well stocked. What comes from outside helps me to give it shape and get my work moving. But it certainly wouldn't have come from there alone. Exchange and information also take your work forward. Despite that, I'd reckon that the major part of my work is derived from that same backpack.

Groys: It seems to me that's the case with almost everybody. Really everything is first accumulated before you begin to make art at all, before you start being active in this business. The artist creates from the store that's already been collected when he starts being active in the art scene. But that used not to be the case. Dalí or Picasso went to Paris and only once there did they start to observe new trends, accumulate them, and become artists. Perhaps we no longer do things that way today. You enter the art scene with the baggage you already have. If Dalí or Picasso were to come to Paris today, then I imagine they'd be seen as Catalan artists who'd live off their Catalan cultural identity. They wouldn't be able to sit around for days, weeks, and months in the Paris cafés and stock up on everything; they'd start working straight away so as to stamp out the label of their Catalan identity. In this sense, I think that outsiders and newcomers from other countries are often the most active and productive because they've got a bigger backpack so to speak,

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because they've accumulated more. Can you say that of yourself, too? Have you brought the material you work with from Georgia with you?

Wekua: Of course my memory, my life story, play a major role in my work. At the same time, whether I come from Georgia or Africa plays absolutely no role. But the intensity and variety of my feelings are so strong that I have to do something with them because it splits me, as it were. In principle I have to develop a doppelgänger in order to hold things together somehow. I have a great deal of contact with other artists—but the problem is that we simply no longer get together in that way, also because the need isn't really there any longer. Of course you can also pick up a great deal of information and lots of new things without being together like that—you don't have to sit with one another any longer to learn about this and that, information comes from everywhere.

Groys: Yes, you don't need personal contact any more.

Wekua: And that's why it comes about nowadays that everyone at some time takes a step back in order not to get lost.

Groys: It works almost the same way as with Marcel Proust. To start with he spent his time just living and writing nothing—and then he only wrote about what he'd experienced. At first he lost time—spent a lost, inactive period of time—and then he retrieved that time and processed it. It seems to me almost as if everyone's doing the same thing nowadays.

Wekua: That way of operating seems to me to be the natural one. For everything else you have to expend a great deal of effort. At least for me that way of working comes most naturally at the moment, and I think that in principle that's how things work.

Groys: But what's the nature of those memories, exactly? You say whether you come from Georgia or Africa plays no role. Is it a question of memories of your own feelings, the surroundings you come from, or memories of the political situation?

Wekua: They're weird memories—but ones that don't frighten me any more. Little stepping stones, but I can no longer put them together. Every single one of these phases could be the material for a film in its own right, but even so there's a red thread running through them all. They could also be memories that are just a year or a day old. I often feel the need to arrange my memories—even if that may sound funny.

Groys: Yes, if we look at your works, they do in fact resemble quotations from a dream. They have something symbolist or surrealist about them. They could also be stills from a film; they remind me a bit of David Lynch, who, of course, also works with dream sequences in his films. Are your "film stills," if I can call them that, related to the reality of your earlier life in Georgia—or are they purely subjective pictorial constellations that can simply arise in sleep, too?

Wekua: In my work it's a question of attempting to create something artificial and natural—artificial figures that have to do with something real. I can see many things sharply, while I can perceive others only as a blur. If someone tells me that I've just read up a memory and it doesn't correspond to any true experience, I'm almost ready to believe it. These things are at the boundary between memory and dream—especially because they're only present in fragments. So I try to create figures that function like actors, and are intended to play all those roles I can't play myself. And generally these figures don't have any eyes because they're not supposed to return your gaze. They're there purely as a projection, but they're definitely not Frankensteins or Pinochios or anything like that!

Groys: No, they're more like shop window dummies.

Wekua: And they certainly have no sex either. I'm happy when they assume their role and relieve me so that I can become the audience.

Groys: So, the figures play you?

Wekua: They act out what disturbs me. They allow me to become an observer.

Groys: If they're dummies acting out a role and representing a projection surface—we might think of Tony Oursler, who projects pictures onto dummies so that they start to speak—so then it's a question of scenes that you're not involved in yourself, in which you yourself tend to feature as a spectator?

Wekua: Yes, that's it. I'm only content if I feel I'm an onlooker.

Groys: But when you're not content, it means the opposite, that you feel you're a participant?

Wekua: That's how it is. And, I write my texts in exactly the same way. Then I have the texts translated so that they again acquire the maximum possible distance from me myself.

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Groys: Do you write in Georgian?

Wekua: I write in a mixture of Georgian and German, then have it translated into English. I keep only the English translation and destroy the manuscripts so that the end result has as little to do with me as possible.

Groys: Do you use the English language as a means of distancing? Really you're practicing something like a procedure for liberating the unconscious—but without resorting to psychoanalysis?

Wekua: For me it really is about a liberation, that's true, but, on the other hand, I'm always excited to see how such things that I remember and make visible by this means, and those other things I've forgotten, continue to develop. If I were to build a town and draw streets—whether something will develop of its own accord at the point where I no longer know how I should link it in? This is like a little theater stage where a different, artificial reality comes into being which isn't possible under natural, normal conditions.

Groys: Of course, classic psychoanalysis, classic Surrealism also worked with the unconscious, with obsessive ideas and figures that crop up in dreams, that pursue us and have a weird dimension. But, they also tried to explain it all, to find a model for it, with sexuality etc. . . . But, in fact, all that's necessary is simply to distance yourself from that unconscious a little. You can say that psychoanalysis was nothing more than a form of distancing, too, but does that settle the matter? Or, does it happen that when it comes back again you can't go on working?

Wekua: If I'd resolved the matter once and for all, I'd have to look for another career.

Groys: So, distancing is good, but you mustn't distance yourself too far either.

Wekua: You just can't distance yourself too far because the mask always remains there in spite of everything. Another thing I always find exciting is how you can turn time from both sides in such a way that it looks like a collage. But perhaps—now I come to think about it—all these things are simply relief measures for the maintenance of my health. All the same it always makes me very happy when something develops.

Groys: It's interesting that we have an ambivalent relationship towards such obsessions. On the one hand, we'd like to be free of them, and, as you say, stand aside as onlookers and write about them or paint them from the heart, but, on the other, we need them in or-

der to practice our profession at all. I wonder to what extent these obsessions are actually authentic—and to what extent they're constructs that have come about because you're simply an artist, and, therefore, know how such things come about. Or, is it not even possible to make a distinction?

Wekua: To what extent it's all authentic, I can't really say. The starting point is very obvious in my case, but, of course, I can also do what I want quite independently and then state that this and that are simply this way or that.

Groys: With you, was there always a feeling—even when you were still in Georgia and were not yet an artist—that you had to choose such scenes or figures or weird events as themes? Or, did that feeling really only come with your profession?

Wekua: The feeling does come partly with the profession. If I'd become something different, it would no doubt have taken a different form.

Groys: Yes, that feeling comes with the job. After all, we're both in a job where the weird is the real source of what we do. We can think that we're dealing with the weird in order simultaneously to liberate ourselves from the weird. At least that would be one explanation, but another explanation would be that we lead everyday lives that are fundamentally very monotonous and uninteresting, consisting of just the exchange of information and business transactions, and that we really long for the weird precisely so as to escape from everyday life. The weird is, in any case, better than all that business.

Wekua: We hope to penetrate into everyday life with this weirdness—or what we produce with it—and shift the perspective a little, to make it so that things function a little differently. We hope to get some air. The return to reality then looks different. We gain new perspectives.

Groys: We shift perception. Are you striving to achieve that change of perspective for yourself, or for your audience, too?

Wekua: That change of perspective interests me in the first place—it strengthens me in my work. What my work finally does with the viewer I can't say, but I believe very strongly that you have to experience artistic work at its intended location and in its period to experience these things—and that it's not enough to have read about it or discussed it.

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Groys: We really want to liberate ourselves from a reality that is too unambiguously framed, or at least change the perspective on that reality. Certainly, experience of a different reality like yours in Georgia or mine in the Russia of the seventies can be helpful. To be sure, we see things as they are, and as everyone else sees them—but, at the same time, we have the feeling of also seeing things a little differently. And, we also want to demonstrate that different vision to other people.

Wekua: I think what we're dealing with here is a comparison of different realities, which shows that there are fundamental differences, and, consequently, also a free space in which we can move, in which something can develop.

Groys: I don't really know Georgian art that well, but I've seen a few works by Georgian artists—in the Soviet era and later, too. I have the feeling that your art stands completely in the tradition of Georgian art, which for me is always associated with a latent elegance and a certain tendency towards symbolism, towards the an aestheticized reality. Georgian art was never as realistic as Russian, German, or even French art, it was always rather unworldly, always a bit more elegant and symbolic than reality itself. I can hardly remember any Georgian works that I'd call realistic or naturalistic. They always emphasize a certain artificiality. I don't know if I'm right, but that's how I remember it.

Wekua: That may well be so. [Niko] Pirosmiani was like that, too. But I left Georgia when I was fifteen or sixteen. I went to Tiflis when I was thirteen, at the start of a very turbulent, chaotic period. Consequently, I absorbed very few impressions there that could have influenced me. Then I absorbed most of my influences in the West. Therefore, to that extent, I wouldn't regard myself as a Georgian artist.

Groys: But you are... Georgian films are full of stylized and aestheticized scenes, too. [Sergei] Paradzhanov, who was admittedly an Armenian but lived in Georgia, also created these symbolic, weird and, at the same time, extremely aesthetic scenes. Just like [Tengiz] Abuladze and many others. I really don't believe in ethnic determinants, but in certain impressions that come not only from art, but from the cinema, television, etc.

Wekua: Yes, there is indeed that staged, theatrical quality that I work with, too—without me having any special knowledge of stage design. However, I don't work explicitly with symbolic representation...

Groys: No, I mean it purely stylistically, not in regard to content—but as regards the aesthetic side, the visual experience that shows up in the work. The theatricalization of life plays a major role here. What's more, that theatricalization of life is actually typical of Georgian daily routine. If you go to a restaurant, there's no need to go to the cinema!

So if we've now established that the style is theatrical—what are your themes? It's all to do with sexuality, power. A violent atmosphere is prevalent, wouldn't you say?

Wekua: You can call it violence....

Groys: Of course, it doesn't have to do with real violence—more with an atmosphere of violence, a threat, an oppressive atmosphere.

Wekua: It's a question of capturing that unreal violence in a frame in order to make it visible, to give it form, to turn it into a play that can be looked at from outside. Even so, it's all kept in such colours and forms and provided with smiling faces so that the viewer could also take it for a comedy. It isn't deadly serious, even if there are little problems. You mustn't lose your sense of humour!

Groys: So, you're striving first and foremost for the impression that it looks as if it's enacted or staged?

Wekua: Now, the figure here from *Get out of my room* (2007) has a smiling face, too, but it's a cut-out. I always try to shield my figures from the viewer's gaze. For me that also reflects the present-day situation in art that we spoke about at the beginning. Here the viewer's supposed to encounter a boy who could, of course, still look—but he can simply not give any longer. And that's why he's put his legs on the table. Around him on the wall hang little film stills that represent his dreams, which are part of him and circle round him. That's the nucleus of this work.

Groys: So, it's not so very much about threat, but more about loneliness—and in fact about deliberate loneliness? If you say "get out of my room," then you're in fact striving for loneliness.

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Wekua: I'm concerned with distance from the public. The whole figure expresses a defensive attitude towards the viewer.

Groys: In that sense, all your pictures are rather forbidding because they don't convey any message to the public. The works are there, but it's impossible to say exactly what they really mean. They're somehow neutral in what they express. It's even a certain act of discommunication, reluctance to communicate, interruption of communication. At least that's the feeling that emerges looking at your works, and I assume it's intentional.

Wekua: Yes, but, at the same time, there are different periods. Recently, my work has very strongly assumed the form you describe. But, at some time, I'll certainly make quite different works again. In my childhood, nothing could keep me indoors. I was permanently outside and moving around with other people—the more, the better. That suddenly changed, so that my mother was quite alarmed and wondered whatever had become of me. I don't know what that change can be traced back to, but I've got the feeling that a similar change has also occurred in my work.

Groys: Aren't you thereby also reflecting the artist's isolation in the present-day art system? That would mean that this isolation doesn't have all that much to do with memory, i.e. it doesn't come from the past, but it's more a reaction to your present-day situation—a situation not only you are in, but one that affects all artists today?

Wekua: I don't know if it affects all artists in that way, but different people deal with it in very different ways.

Groys: But, there are pictures of isolation in the present-day art milieu, though an isolation that doesn't necessarily have to be understood negatively. On the other hand, it mustn't be understood positively either, but it is just as it is and you don't combat it. At least there's no protest against that isolation in your pictures. It's simply accepted, because it's there.

Wekua: Yes, in fact, I don't have any need to fight in my work. Fighting with my work, I need to do that—but not fighting through my work or aiming to achieve something with it.

tion never to want to have anything to do with it came from. Perhaps I was too close to it to want to be political as an artist.

My father was killed in 1989. That was shortly before Georgia became independent, still under the Soviet regime. There were always secret meetings and discussions at our house. They hatched plans and printed newspapers. That was while we were still in Suchumi, then later we went to Tiflis.

Groys: So, you gained your impression of politics in a fundamental way, as it were.

Wekua: When war broke out in Suchumi, in 1991, we went to Tiflis. Then, in 1996, we emigrated. My mother now lives in Berlin. My brother studied here, too, but he couldn't imagine staying here and went back and has married there. He's got a small business there and a kid.

Groys: Well, that's interesting, because we started off talking about isolation. Isn't it the case that you simply have to experience this feeling of isolation in the West? In the art scene, in particular, perhaps, but generally, too? I don't mean that in the political sense, rather at the psychological level. You show it in your art, you accept it and even to a certain extent insist on it.

Do you see that as being in contrast with the collectivism of the East? Anyway that got on my nerves rather when I was in Russia—and in Georgia it was probably the same, too: You could never be alone.

Wekua: Absolutely, you could never be alone. When I got up in the morning, there were already people sitting in the living room, and until two o'clock in the morning lots of others kept coming. And if you hadn't visited someone, that person was immediately offended—and simply dropped by.

Groys: Yes, and people generally drop in uninvited, you can't protect the private sphere at all.

Wekua: There's simply no such thing as a private sphere there. People just come and go as they please. They live very intensively there, at the table, too. They talk and talk—and if you're not trained to cope with it, you become ever more silent.

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Groys: Or, to impart an ideological message—there's nothing of that kind in your work.

Although there are a great many political artists right now....

Groys: Yes, indeed, that's even the prevailing mood of our time, especially in Berlin where you live, but that's not the case with you, you don't have any message for mankind.

Wekua: No, I don't. My father was a politically committed person in the Soviet era, he campaigned for democracy and human rights. There were a lot of people from his circle who expected me to carry on his name in the political sense. Perhaps that's where my resolu-

Groys: Yes, if you lack social fervour, social enthusiasm.... This coolness, this isolation, this extreme individualism and rivalry—that only started in the West too in the mid-Nineties. Before that everything was much more relaxed. Suddenly you're a lonely fighter in an unreal space—the Internet for example—where you send or receive e-mails the whole time and meanwhile sit alone in a room and you're on your own.

On the one hand it's totally weird, on the other, you get used to it. Then when you're torn out of it, which happens to me now and then, you wake up and think: oh, what a nightmare!

Another question. Do you feel any ties with certain artists in the West? Do you feel linked to anyone if not politically, at least aesthetically? Do you have the feel-

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IMAGE

Andro Wekua, *Get out of my room*, 2006. Wood, wax, hair, fabric, leather, wax paint, bronze, lacquer paint. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York.

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ing that you have something like neighbours in your understanding of art?

Wekua: I certainly have the feeling I'm not alone—but neighbours? I don't know.

Groys: You see, there's such a thing as new German painting, within which the artists feel linked to one another by a certain attitude. There are the circles of a certain new political art, but you're more of a loner and don't get directly linked to certain waves, groups, or tendencies.

Do you think that right now you're in a situation where you'll carry on working as you have up to now? A friend of mine has always said that the critical point for an artist—and for an author—is precisely the point at which he decides he wants to carry on working like before and stick to what he's doing.

position in the art system. Artists are curators, they're critics, they write, make films, and so on. Somehow there's pressure to take up every possible position, to cover all options and do everything that can possibly be done in the art field.

Wekua: Precisely because there are so many different options, so many positions, and so many different themes, we try to sound out our own options and wangle our own very personal thing.

Groys: Does the artist want to create his own art system, as it were?

Wekua: Yes, you create your own planet for yourself.

Groys: If you're only an artist and only make pictures, then you're only part of the system, but instead of being part of a system, you can also want to be and have your own system.

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Wekua: As long as what interests me sustains me, I'll do it. Who knows, perhaps some day I'll do something completely different. Film work interests me greatly, for example.

Groys: At present, many younger artists have the desire to overstep the boundaries of the system, to do something different, to go into cinema, films, the music scene, to do something beyond the art business.

Where does that desire actually come from? Earlier that desire used not to be there! Cézanne and other artists spent the whole time painting, they had absolutely no urge to do anything different, but today a great many people want to.

Wekua: I myself couldn't constantly sit quietly in a studio either, making sculptures, for example. The interest in doing something different grows quickly, and the opportunities to do so are always there, too. Nor does it take an especially high degree of courage—whether you know how to do something or not is virtually irrelevant. The main thing is to do it: found a band, make a film, write a book, and so on.

Groys: But where does this dissatisfaction come from? Why do people as artists want to do something other than art at all costs? Do they perhaps want to reach a wider public?

Wekua: Perhaps it's because today as an artist you can simply allow yourself to use any medium, even as an amateur. Nobody pillories you for it! You used to have to be a master of your craft—but nowadays you can simply do what you want, without really having to be able to do it.

Groys: That's a good idea. After Duchamp and Warhol artists feel entitled to do whatever they want, without assuming any responsibility for it.

Wekua: And then, if you don't realize that something's extraordinarily intelligent, it's your fault—and nothing to do with the fact that it's a bad film!

Groys: Artists today generally tend to occupy every

Wekua: Even though there are also lots of artists who have spent their whole lives doing their own thing, and can afterwards attract a very high degree of recognition!

Groys: But there are very few of them. They're the lucky ones. . . . Lots of us no longer have patience for such an attitude. Yes, perhaps it really is a question of patience. We no longer have the patience just to be part of something: We want to be everything.

Wekua: You can also have the feeling that time's simply going by more quickly. You could admire so many little things and are constantly accompanied by the feeling of missing a lot. There's a lack of patience.

Groys: A little while ago I wrote about David Lynch—not about his films, but about his pictures. For Lynch does a lot of painting, he does a great deal of photography, too. A short time ago there was a major exhibition at the Fondation Cartier in Paris. Lynch has recently started working with video, too, his last "film" was a video. And Robert Wilson is now doing sculptures, films, and installations as well. They're all doing everything!

Wekua: For me, this phenomenon is justified by the desire to want to find out and try out which medium is best suited to your own ideas, which is best able to express them. And, if your ideas change, then the mediums of course have to change, too.

Boris Groys is a Professor of Philosophy and Art Theory at the Academy for Design in Karlsruhe, Germany, and Global Professor at New York University. He is the author of many books, including Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment (Afterall Books, 2006) and Art Power (MIT Press, 2008).

Andro Wekua is a Georgian-born artist living in Zürich, Switzerland. Recent solo exhibitions include those at Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich; and Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam. He is represented by Gladstone Gallery, New York.