

Fig. 1. *A State in a State,* Tekla Aslanishvili, image courtesy of the artist


A STATE

Tekla Aslanishvili and Evelina Gambino
in conversation with Ella Rowold Cavusoglu

A STATE IN A STATE

A State in a State is a 2022 video work by Tekla Alsanishvili, made in collaboration with Dr Evelina Gambino. The work straddles the boundary between documentary and film, in its exploration of railroads, in particular the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. It investigates the role that such infrastructure plays in the wake of the legacies of the Soviet Union, whereby infrastructure is entangled with the re-emergence, and maintenance of, political borders.

In this interview, Ella Rowold Cavusoglu talks to Tekla Aslanishvili and Evelina Gambino. It explores the work's themes of systems of infrastructure, their entwinement with politics, and the forms of sabotage and connectivity that emerge out of them.

Ella Rowold Cavusoglu: The film starts with you Tekla, talking about the house you grew up in, overlooking the Tbilisi train depot. We then hear from researchers, railway workers and yourselves in the video. Why did you decide to tell this expansive narrative of complicated systems, through these individual stories?

Tekla Aslanishvili: Initially it was a challenge to find a framing and a methodology for the story. We knew we wanted to talk about the railway being more than just a means of transporting goods and people, and we wanted to show how it was used as also a means of geopolitical sabotage, while simultaneously zoom into the experiences of those who live and work next to its tracks. The interviews we collected, with workers, local communities, scientists and researchers, helped us get a sense of the different sites connected together by this infrastructure, yet a question remained about how to bring them in dialogue with our discussion of the geo-politics of the railway. Access was also a major issue: I was trying to get permission for filming, and we were getting no response, or being denied access. Then my uncle said: "you grew up right next to a railway!" This was when I became aware that I had my own first-hand experience of the railway that I could build upon and that perhaps there was a link between my present interest and my past experience of the railway. I realised that me knowing this specific place and stories around it could be a fragment of the puzzle we were trying to piece together. This personal relation I had with a transnational infrastructure provided a cue for our methodology: rather than trying to assemble a linear account of the railway, our film is deliberately patchworked, bringing together intimate accounts with more detached analyses.



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Evelina Gambino: This process started during the previous film Tekla made, *Scenes from Trial and Error*. In that film, it's clear how transnational visions are translated into national contexts, where local peoples' lives are being transformed by the port. There is a gap between the futuristic image of an infrastructural development, pitched as something which will change people's lives, and people's actual lives, which are not much of a concern for the people in charge of these projects. So, already in the first film, we thought that it was important to show this perspective and to expose the patchwork of stories that lies underneath visions of development.

ERC: The film's title references a railway line in the Soviet Union that was considered a 'state in a state', as it had its own telephone line, shops and even police. Do you think our conception of a state is dependent on such things?

TA: Infrastructures define, or contribute to, securing the sovereignty of nation states. Infrastructures in general, not only railroads, are used to create borders. This is a big part of the film - we say railways were used to stitch the borders of the Russian Empire. This also applied to the Soviet Union. Such projects materialise certain borders but are also means of keeping connections and relationships between states. In *A State in a State*, infrastructure works autonomously as a parallel state, but also has a different logic. For example, the Soviet Union had a plan of rapid industrialisation, so transporting goods from one place to another was crucial, which is why the railway infrastructure was way more advanced and logistically efficient than the state outside of it. State interest therefore defined how the railway infrastructure was designed, but they were not completely on the same level, there were different states of efficiency.

EG: Recent conflicts over what it means to belong to a state are mostly actually about access to, or claiming infrastructures. Infrastructure is a very broad category, encompassing from a heating pipe to a railway, to the way in which our data is organised. Infrastructures are networks that underwrite larger systems, and often work to partition who is included and excluded from them. If we don't get heating, if we don't get water, are we really part of a community? This essential character of infrastructure is also inscribed in the term: the prefix 'infra' means underneath, so these are literally underlying structures. What you're gesturing to in your question is that there are systems that bind together communities or territories, and infrastructures very much do that. But how they do that is a political question. The presence of an infrastructural state within a state was particularly fascinating to us. It points to this nature of infrastructure, of bringing things into connection, but also to the fact that things are brought into connection in different ways by different actors. There is a nice definition of infrastructure by Brian Larkin, that infrastructures are things, but also relationships between things.[1] This is very much a thread we follow in the film; exposing what these relations are, and what kind of stories they tell.

ERC: The central focus of the work is the BTK, a new rail route that bypassed Armenia, to connect Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey. Evelina, you refer to this new route as 'political sabotage'. Could you expand on the idea of 'sabotage' and the disruption of such networks?

EG: We were very interested in sabotage, and its multiple meanings. In his book *Carbon Democracy*, Timothy Mitchell, one of the researchers we interview in the film, traces a history of sabotage and its relevance for the development of democracy in the 20th century. Sabotage entails a withdrawal of labour: workers who operate infrastructure are uniquely positioned to cause great damage by withdrawing their labour. In the film, we chased different ways in which sabotage is enacted. Perhaps the most striking and fitting example in the film is the sabotage that Belarusian workers caused to their own railways, to undermine Putin's attempt to carry arms into Ukraine. The idea of railways as a form of political sabotage, though, flips the logic of sabotage. Geopolitical sabotage is not liberatory, like the sabotage enacted by workers, it's a sabotage enacted by states as a means of violence. In the case of the BTK, the new line is explicitly built to bypass Armenia, thus cutting this country's potential to benefit from logistical connectivity. Additionally, by cutting the line in the aftermath of the first Nagorno Karabakh war, Turkey and Azerbaijan also contributed to disrupting the ties between the workers who previously worked on the railway, including Turkish, Armenian and Azeri workers who previously were connected by their shared work on the infrastructure.[2] In the film we wanted to show the many layers of sabotage that affect this railway.

ERC: Great. I was wondering more generally about the process of making and researching the film, and whether you encountered any forms of censorship when talking about these geopolitical issues.

TA: Yes, often. This railway, like many other infrastructures is not just an economic project but has political and strategic relevance not only for Georgia. For this reason my requests for filming were often rejected and people were reticent to discuss its operations with me. Throughout the process of applying for permits in different states it became clear that politics was the main issue. I went to Kars to personally request a response to my applications, and I was told to go ahead and film what I could, but they were not going to co-operate. It was clear that we would not get any permits or interviews.

EG: When I was researching for my PhD, between 2017 and 2019, it was extremely easy to access people in government. It was a moment in which the infrastructural refurbishment of Georgia was very much publicised, and so it was easy to do interviews. Then the political situation drastically changed, with the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, and external and internal geopolitical conditions curtailed the possibility for us to access certain interlocutors.



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ERC: There are quite a few moments of sarcasm and humour in the film. For instance, whilst audio plays of bureaucrats in Brussels discussing transport logistics, we're shown shots of sheep blocking a road. This seems to question the extent to which broad political structures can actually have an effect on individual locales, and I was wondering what you both think about this?

TA: In terms of sarcasm, what is clear is the way logistics companies see things pragmatically, including warfare which in the meeting featured in the film is often referred to as an annoying disruption or an obstacle to bypass. I was not sure about to what extent I wanted to have sarcasm in the film, such as the sheep and donkeys, but I just couldn't resist it. Those scenes are an essential part of our own experience of the railway. An important thing is

keeping the balance between sarcasm and things that actually affect people. For instance, in *Scenes from Trial and Error*, you do have those awkward scenes of cows walking in front of completely abandoned futuristic smart city buildings. There is a certain irony in this, but you have also the real expectations of people and their disappointment.

ERC: In the film, you juxtapose shots of the landscape with bold modernist architecture. How do you see the relationship between natural systems and human constructions and infrastructure, and why did you decide to juxtapose the two?

TA: My interest in architecture started with the previous film. It was very clear that the idea of reviving the Silk Road and activating all the infrastructure projects that are useful for transit was initiated by Georgia's second president Eduard Shevardnadze, but it became really animated during the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili, who was obsessed with architecture. During his presidency he developed a signature aesthetics that remains very prominent in the country. He wanted to redesign the perception of the country into a transit hub through roads. For example, two of the structures in the film, the checkpoint at the border between Turkey and Georgia, in Sarpi, and the railway building of Baku-Tbilisi-Kars, in Akhalkalaki both by the German architect Jürgen Mayer-Hermann are aesthetic manifestations of this committment of the smooth transit of goods and people; their design characteristics speak visually to the imagination of what Georgia's future should look like.



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EG: The film was shot throughout different seasons, and there is a seasonal arc. All of these projects, the roads and the futuristic buildings, are built into mainly agricultural landscapes. People in the region where *A State in A State* was mostly filmed work in agriculture, and so there is a contrast between the lives of people,

governed by the temporality of agriculture, and this transformation that is just superimposed over this. Nothing has been done to prepare people to work in this new environment; these projects are built, and no one cares about the local people. There is an idea that the effects will just trickle down, somehow, and of course they don't.

ERC: My next question is about the style of the film. I thought it was quite unnerving in its use of unstable camera-work, such as in the driving scenes, archival footage, and the ambient soundtrack. I was wondering what you wanted to evoke through the style of the video?

TA: The style of the video is defined by the way we worked. It was filmed over several years and multiple seasons, sometimes in really harsh conditions. When I was alone, the way I recorded and filmed things was really shaky. I didn't want it to be to be very polished, I wanted to show our attempt at navigating the spaces and complexities. We could have approached it differently and reshot many things, and some we did reshoot, but most of the time the way of research conditioned it.

ERC: Would you consider there to be a relationship between your work and soviet traditions of documentary filmmaking, such as Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, and the idea of revealing unseen truths?

TA: Because I grew up in Georgia, I am familiar with Soviet filmmaking, particularly Georgian filmmaking, but I didn't build many connections to that school. I am more interested now in understanding the legacy of cinema. Cinema has played a big role in creating feelings of enchantment around infrastructure projects. I think in this film there is less of an influence of Soviet cinema, and more of an influence of research-based films, like Ursula Biemann, with the Black Sea Files.

EG: I am no expert in Soviet film, but *A State in a State* is very much about fragments. It is an undoing of a narrative as much as it is a doing of one, and it feels to me to be quite a different language. What I really like is the way in which Tekla's cinematic language has changed between the two films, and is about to change with the third film again, so there is also a journey in the different films about different ways to tell similar stories, of Georgia's relationship to infrastructural transformations.

TA: I also think that Dziga Vertov's idea of the importance of montage, that meaning is created through montage, in the way you put shots together, is seen in the way we used interviews. Things people say mean different things in the context that they say them in, in the interviews, and in our own context, in the way we edit them. In this way, there is definitely an influence, in the idea of montage.

ERC: I first saw the work in Weils, a gallery in Brussels. As a work that bridges documentary and video art, and explores a geopolitical

story, what do you think are the merits of showing the work within art institutions?

TA: The films that we've made are at the intersection between film and art. I am trained as an artist, and later got more involved with experimental filmmaking, but still within the context of art. Sometimes films are too long for an art context, because people just pass by, or enter in the middle and then go out again, so the film has to really be able to capture people's attention in the middle, so that they watch it to the end, and then start over to understand what has actually happened. The film is 47 minutes long, so this is a difficult task. The risk is that art institutions won't want to present the film for this reason, but there are ways to get people to engage, like setting screening times. But there definitely is this problem of showing in art institutions. I enjoy one-time screenings more, because people watch from the beginning to the end; there is a collective experience of watching the film, and you see people's reactions. I have attended many screenings, and you always sense how the film works in the audience. With a Georgian audience, it affects people completely differently, than for example, elsewhere in Europe, or in Asian countries, where you have zero familiarity with the region, but you still see what parts catch what audience.

EG: It's been interesting to show it in academic settings, but also at times frustrating. Tekla's done screenings in lots of different places, but I've been mostly done screenings in academic settings. Often academics were confused about the division of labour between Tekla and I. They were always like so, Evelina, this is your research, and Tekla does the images, but I think if you watch the film it is very clear that that is not the case; in most of the research scenes, you see Tekla there, not me. As a process it was truly collaborative and that is what made it exciting and an important learning experience, at least for me. So showing it proved to be a way of reflecting on where the boundaries are in academic spaces, and what kind of stories one can tell, and the attempts of people to police their own disciplinary boundaries. We also, of course, had some very engaging and rich discussions with people in academic spaces. It's interesting to have made something that doesn't sit very well in specific categories, that challenges people and elicits interesting discussions.

TA: In the film, there are certain aspects that might be a bit boring for people who are not really into infrastructure, like the gauge sizes and the mismatch between the scales. These elements are exciting for people who work with logistics though, so I really enjoyed having such screenings. Evelina and I find it extremely exciting how this mismatch becomes a technical border, but it's inaccessible for most people, so you have to find a balance.

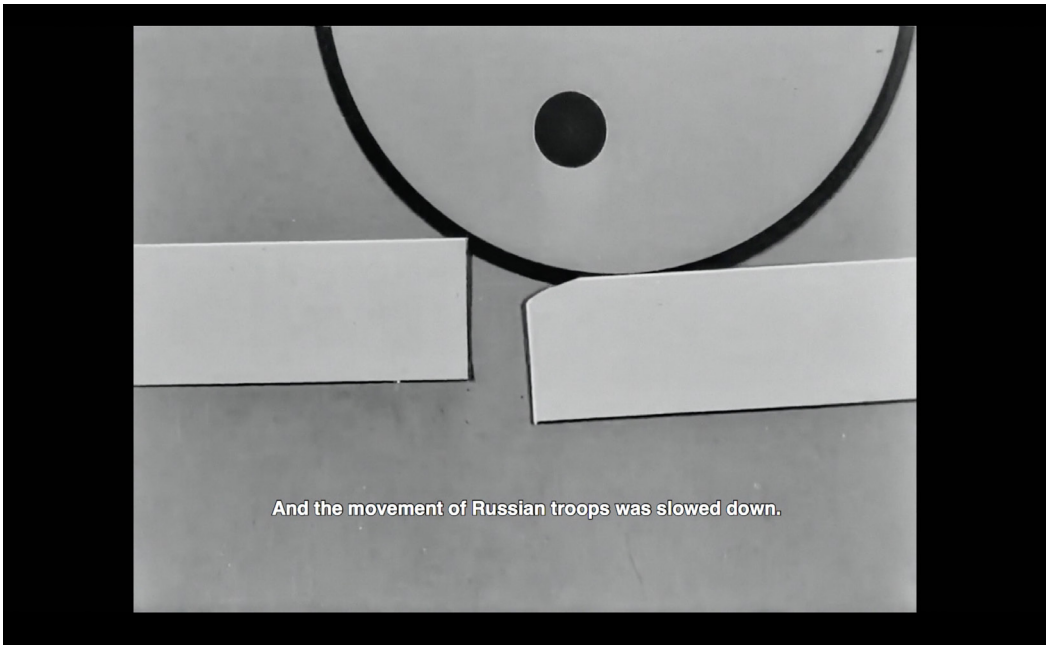
ERC: My next question was about the reception of the work. Do you feel as though audiences who are more familiar with these stories are more receptive to it, or not?

TA: The most surprising and positive thing was feedback from Southeast Asian countries. For example, the film was presented in the Philippines, and because of their colonial history and the role the railway played in this, the people there were able to relate to certain structures, even if they were unfamiliar with or maybe not interested in the region of the South Caucasus. It was nice because during that screening, the curators organised an extra programme, placing the film in the local context, which is very important. This is often a problem for this type of documentary, that it's too rooted in the local context. It's also not always that you get the response that you want. In some places, you don't even want people to like the film. I think it is important with this film to think about who sees it how. For me, reactions from audiences that know the geography, the Soviet Union, the post-Soviet space, the Caucasus, have been most important.

ERC: My last question is about how the end of the video discusses the destruction of the Belarusian rail line by Belarusian railway workers to prevent Russian troops from entering Ukraine. The final message of the video therefore seems to be one of hope, that such systems can be positively broken down. I was wondering if you could both expand on your perception of such, and the ways in which systems can be manipulated, to positive and negative effect?

TA: We wanted this hopeful note towards the end, but the reality of researching the railway's social structure made it clear that relations during Soviet times were radically different to today. What happened after the collapse of the Soviet Union was a splintering of the railway system. In the Soviet Union, railways were developed with certain standards that applied to all the republics, but now you have national and private investments into infrastructures, and checkpoints at every border, on both sides. It has become so fragmented that the connections we document in the film are mostly a thing of the past. This kind of kinship, of being part of the same structure, and this social infrastructure - for example, in the film you hear that a certain social tissue was woven around the railway, with kindergartens and schools and hospitals - is not there anymore. Today's railways are very different but there are people who have memories of friendships and solidarity can still be inspired to act. Memory plays a very crucial role in this.

EG: For us, that was exactly the point. I think that our responsibility as filmmakers, as writers, as academics, is to pay attention to these stories of solidarity and friendship burgeoning across infrastructural systems, because they are there, and they pose a challenge to the profit-driven and exclusionary logic on which many contemporary infrastructure projects rest. For us, it was important to tell this story as examples like this too often remain undetected. In some ways, unearthing these can be seen as what David Graeber and Stevphen Shukhaidis have called, an exercise of "constituent imagination" (2007), an effort to expose the presence of a more just world underneath the violence that constitutes our present.



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ENDNOTES

[1] Brian Larkin, 'The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure', *Annual Review of Anthropology* (Annual Reviews, 2013), 327–43, doi:https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522.

[2] The Nagorno-Karabakh wars refer to successive conflicts since 1988 between Armenia and Azerbaijan rooted in ethnic and territorial disputes over the Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions.