Utopiana.am invites you to
PUBLIC TALKS
a participatory art and culture events program

As a part of SPACES caravan PUBLIC TALKS brings together artists, curators, researchers, architects and other cultural workers along with civil society groups and students from Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in order to foster networking, self-education, social research and policy debates in the region. The program consists of several components: artistic interventions in various public spaces, talks and presentations by Armenian art and cultural critics taking place in context-specific venues, study visits to independent cultural institutions and a final cultural policy debate formatted as a panel discussion that will follow up the events and happenings program.

The overwhelming tyranny of neoliberal, ‘free’ market economy, ‘new capitalist order with Asian values’ [in terms of its suppression of democratic freedoms] as Zizek points it and its consequences in social and political realms both in Armenia and globally [rise of the new right, ecological nationalism, widespread protest movements, claims for the recuperation of public spaces and wider social benefits] stress the importance of rethinking a period or rather a condition, where the foundations of contemporary situation of rapid commercialization and social disenfranchisement were laid.

Heavy industrialization, ideological totality, claims for new types of social and physical environments, failed system of both state-planned and free market economies, these are all the bitter fruits of Modernism/modern condition that the contemporary society has to cope with.

But what does it mean to be a modern society? What are the consequences of becoming such? Is this a reversible process? Where can we find ourselves at this certain point of history? And have we ever been “modern”?

It is rather important to ask these questions, reformulating and reforming the conditions or the certain space, where and when the question is articulated in order to come up with certain suggestions regarding the direction of movement/dynamics a cultural worker can point at in the given time gap.

Each of the program components and participants will try to reformulate and pose the above-mentioned questions according to their own research and practice methods and specifics. The conference/discussion presentations/talks will be held in various context-specific public spaces/venues and will touch upon the topic of Modernism and/after the Soviets.

The aim is to focus on the structure and transformations of public sphere and its spaces of articulation throughout and after the Soviet period. From big squares to parks, kitchens to workspace couloirs the panel participants will discover the cases when the sphere and the space of the public coincided. How did the Soviet ‘society’ organize and form intermediate territories between the narratives of tiny elements of a big machine and the crowd scene in the big drama performance of a failed socialist dream? How and why do we need to rethink the communication between these subjects/society and the spaces it in/habited? There will also be a special concentration on the period and condition of “ex post facto”: post-socialism, post-communism, post-Soviet, post-war, post-independence... the aim is to review the experience and the processes of the past 20 years when the emptied space of the communist ideology was filled with rising nationalism and manipulated religiosity while the free market of unequal opportunities came to take the position of state-governed industrial economy. What changed and what remained the same? Is there a chance/ways to think about the public space of tomorrow that can incorporate both public and private interests?

These are the simple questions that will serve as very basic reference points for both panels and the final wrap-up meeting to start talking about Modernism, it’s space and legacy.

This project is funded by the European Union through the Eastern Partnership Culture Programme and is realized in the frame of the EU project SPACES
In the framework of the “Architectural Meetings” project of the Youth Club of the Union of Architects, a meeting with the chief architect of Yerevan Narek Sargsyan took place on March 15, 2012, at the Cafesjian Center for the Arts. The architect presented his own vision of the future of Yerevan and the activities of the organisation which he founded. The meeting was attended by a group of young architects, students, representatives of NGOs and civic initiatives as well as activists concerned with the architecture and the future of Yerevan. Harut Alpetyan’s observation and question was among the questions addressed to the architect at the end of the meeting. By calling Narek Sargsyan’s architectural projects examples of totalitarian architecture, Harut Alpetyan recalled Medvednik’s “New Moscow” film, arguing that if Medvednik shot the film at this time, then such examples would most likely be in the foreground. “I do not disagree. Such an impression is well possible. Perhaps, it is even true,” answered Narek Sargsyan and then asked, “Are you an architect?” “No, I am a piano tuner.” “In that case, I can easily overlook your term of totalitarian architecture because if you were an architect and would tell me that, I would really reflect on it. But if you are not an architect and you feel that way as a citizen, then you find totalitarian not only my architecture but also that of others.” “I would not say that,” answered Harut and continued by asking Narek Sargsyan to comment on the issue of public participation in the decision-making process of urban solutions, after concluding his speech about urban projects. To this the architect responded that there are sadly no mechanisms today which enable communication with the public.

It was the above-mentioned episode which prompted Anna Barseghyan and Harut Alpetyan to create an alternative architectural performative intervention with pianos at Swan Lake. There is supposedly no need for a long explanation to reveal the mimetism behind the pianos tuned on a single note and placed at the square. The deeply provocative open invitation calls the passer-by to the pianos. And if you even know how to play, you can share your skills with the public. Whereas the piano tuner knows that “there is no mechanism which would enable communication with the public.”

There are public spaces in the city of Yerevan which are arguably unsuitable for any purpose or unusable because of a number of reasons. From the ecological and health perspective, the Northern Avenue should be paid particular attention to. It is made of concrete, glass and stone, almost devoid of any green areas. A pulmonologist argues that there is “no air to breathe” on the avenue. Till today, at the expense of greenery various new buildings are erected in the city, whose construction is not always justified. At the same time, the exploitation of natural resources in Armenia, the destruction of nature in support of underground mining industries, particularly, the illegal deforestation of Teghut, reaches alarming numbers.

A Monument to Martyred Trees project enables us to simultaneously address the above-mentioned two spheres and to create a new edge of communication for discussions.

It is planned to move dozens of tree stumps to Yerevan and place them on the Northern Avenue, creating the Memorial to the Fallen Trees. Texts containing information about the types of trees, their ages, addresses of environmental protection sites as well as suggestions about the issue will be written on the stumps. The invited guests and passers-by will have the opportunity to add their own texts and share their impressions.

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THE PIANO TUNER
Anna Barseghian & Harutyun Alpetyan

A MONUMENT TO MARTYRED TREES
Davit Stepanyan

Monday
October 8, 2012
16:30 – 18:00
Swan Lake

Northern Ave.
2010 in Yerevan began with an unprecedented burst of activism and extensive public discussion after the Government of the Republic of Armenia removed the cinema Moscow open-air hall, one of the best examples of late-modernist Armenian architecture of the 1960s, from the list of the city’s architectural and cultural monuments and then decided to demolish this building so as to hand over the land on which it stood for reconstruction of a church destroyed in the 1930s as part of Stalin’s campaign against religion.

The problem regarding the Moscow Cinema Theater open air hall is actually more complex than it may seem at first sight. In a strange way, it ties up the epoch when it was built, with its tensions, emancipatory energies and paradoxes, to the neoconservative context of neoliberal socio-political and cultural actuality.

Being designed and built in the middle of 1960s Open Air Hall of Moscow cinema theater among other architectural forms created in the very same period in Yerevan and Armenia formed certain surplus spaces in the urban environment which could be regarded as kind of blank or so to say "extraterritories"; territories that shaped new perceptions of urban space, new urban cultures and politics, the formation of which was tightly intertwined with the appearance of the qualitatively and essentially new public spaces in the city terrain.

However, since the middle 90s those specific spaces have been vanishing from the urban environment either by being destroyed or corrupted beyond recognition. It could seem that in a newly developing post-ideological society these constructions and spaces have remained as examples or reminders of something else/different that could hardly fit in the economy and politics of a new socio-cultural paradigm. The tendentious demolition of these structures and spaces was evolving with the reconsiderations of historical narratives, and the occupation of these "extraterritories" of the city in a symbolic way was an erasure of certain zones from collective memory; a phenomenon that, in a paradoxical way, juxtaposes that certain trend in the period of the 1960s to form blank spaces in the urban environment with the formation of blank spaces in collective memory.

The more we get to a point when the headphones become something like a limb, when overwhelming images constantly talk to us, when noisy streets have become usual for us, individual voice is getting more mute. this project aims at bringing the muted speech out to the streets and distribute it publicly but in a discreet way - in order to distract the attention from the perceptive triviality. The direct speech of different people is recorded in a form of short messages on a tape and then played outside loudly on a sound system hidden in a bag so that the passers-by can listen to the speech directed to them from an uncertain place.

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Kond district is one of the oldest preserved districts of Yerevan from 18th century. Some standing structures even date back to the middle ages, e.g. St. Hovhannes [St. John] Church (18th c.) and the ruined mosque (17th c.). It is currently adjacent (1.5 km) to the main administrative Republic square of Yerevan. The district is situated on a small hill, which divides the central part of the city from Hrazdan gorge, where the only river of Yerevan, Zangu is flowing. During the last decade the central part of Yerevan, where the most historically and architecturally valuable environments and structures are located, started to transform to a high-rise residential district. The fact that Kond is close to the city center puts it under the danger of "development" and raises the need of a very thorough research.

Today Kond is one of the poorest areas of Yerevan downtown. The fear of being removed from their houses made people living there to be less concerned about their environment. They are less interested in renovation of their own houses and the improvement of their living conditions. Along with other old districts of Yerevan people, living for three-four generations, resided here with a temporarily status - "gentrification zone". As compared to the other areas of Yerevan with the same status, people living here had a very strong feeling of community. "kondetsi" (Kondian) was a respectful citizen of Yerevan.

This aspect and ongoing, spontaneous and non-formal development of the area makes it attractive for tourists and low profile – small (middle) scale developments. People are interested in sustainable development of urban areas. Meanwhile, the fact that previously very little attention was paid to the history and the analysis of the area and the "respectful" approach to its historical structure in current urban development programs highlights the importance and intense need of a complex and multi-layer study.

Since 2005 a civic initiative was shaped for the preservation of Kond. There were series of presentations and activities organized by the initiative. In recent years some media coverage has been made raising awareness for preservation of Kond. One of those was A. Ivanov's article, which can be considered as a rare case when a foreigner pays such attention to this area. "Here you can surf for hours without losing your "real" sense of plan. Narrow streets, twisted lanes, stepped alleys rested against cozy courtyards and cul-de-sac, wooden, chipped stairs. Labyrinth."

The cornerstones of the development of Kond "milieu" were sequence of indigenous population and continuity with the place. The following factors ensured this valuable material, intangible spatial environment and atmosphere that continued development and progress even in terms of weak economy.

LITERATURE AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE
panel presentation by Vardan Jaloyan

The first part of the lecture will focus on the function of literature in Ancient Greece, particularly the correspondence of the performative nature of democracy with that of literature. In democratic Athens, everyone is a politician, philosopher, athlete and why not a poet. The latter in the first place, because in the Athenian Polis everyone was equal by casting of lots. It wasn’t inequality which was natural in democratic Athens, but equality. Anyone who was either too rich, or too talented, or too smart had to be exiled. Socrates had the choice of either leaving or dying. He preferred to die. Why? Because following the principle of equality, democracy fell victim to the cliché of equality.

In the second part of the lecture, Joseph Brodsky's utopia of the society of political readers will be discussed and criticized. Armenia is viewed as the place to realize this utopia. Parallels are drawn between his and Kh. Abovyan's approaches.
How is the notion of the ‘Public’ perceived today? Are the other assumptions which refer to it clear and distinct? Is there any connection between the way public is perceived and the social structure? To what extent are the borders between the public, the social, the state, and the private tangible? The series of interviews held in the streets, squares, parks, and yards is an attempt to enquire opinions and conceptions circulating within diverse social groups, and at the same time to stimulate the process of rethinking and redefining those concepts.

The initiative aims at challenging and redefining the notion of public space in physical, theoretical and virtual formats by creating a multifunctional platform that pushes forward the development of contemporary socio-cultural processes. Although these processes are on going, they are mainly concentrated in the capital city Yerevan, and even other big towns in Armenia are almost white-handed from them because of a lack of information and communication. The project “Culture on wheels”, a truck mounted with a shipping container providing extensive programmatic content, a stage, an open bookshop, a broadcast studio, a cinema and an exhibition space provides an opportunity for initiating an effective socio-cultural network between the capital and other cities and towns in Armenia and will become a platform for sharing different actions, event and ideas across the country.

Since late 1990s, a number of changes have been made in the Yerevan city area, which give birth to various questions: How does the meaning of our environment change? Which new meanings emerge and which ones slowly fade away? Who is interested in these changes of meaning and who wants to preserve them? Who struggles for alternative meanings and how? The course of these changes can be described in three main dimensions: the continuing Soviet-Soviet-Armenian, which constantly changes its meaning due to context changes, as well as retaliatory actions against the nationalization and the commercialization of the city space. The accessibility of information concerning the city space, the growing social significance of the information-communication network can be mentioned as vivid characteristics of the general context (especially in the last few years).

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**IN BETWEEN PUBLIC AND THE PUBLIC**
short film presentation by Media Lab, Utopiana.am students and Harutyun Alpetyan

**CULTURE ON WHEELS**
project presentation by Stefan Press & Anna Barseghian

**POST-SOVIET URBAN SPACES**
panel presentation by Hrach Bayadyan

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The first years of independence were characterized by the desire to erase the unwanted traces of the Soviet Union and in doing so to nationalize the history of the city and its territory. By renaming the squares, the streets, the buildings and other places, by removing statues and replacing them with new ones, it was attempted to reflect the national historical past on the surface of the city in the face of glorious ancestors and great events. From the perspective of addressing the above-mentioned questions and particularly discussing the relationship between Yerevan's socialist past and the present processes, two monumental buildings should be paid special attention to: Mother Armenia (together with the Victory park) and the monument dedicated to the 50th university of Soviet Armenia (together with the entire area of Cascade) with their similarities and differences. These can be very briefly described in the following manner: both being full of signs of the Soviet ideology have essentially lost their monumental discourse dimension: their aphorisms inseparable from socialist utopias have mostly been changed or have become unreadable. Yet the former is better connected with the Soviet past and the post-Soviet period interferences are more related to the efforts of nationalizing the territory or conserving what can be perceived as socialistic. While the second can be described as one of Yerevan's extraordinary places which, in the cultural sense, is subject to constant interventions of westernization, preserving the environment created by replicating the Soviet monumentalism and the elements of national architecture.

This presentation will deal with the quality of the city and of urban life and of how urban sustainability can emerge at the intersection of society, architecture, urbanism, the environment, the economy and a new concept of urban governance. The as yet unanswered challenge of the current generation is to solve the dilemma of how to manage and live in cities in a way that can continue into the future within the carrying capacity of the natural environment. There are many modern patterns that have developed in our existing cities, which work against that possibility. Drawing from history and the best of modern theory and practice, a visionary approach to the future sustainable city is presented. Starting with a set of theses about the social quality of towns together with an operational definition of sustainability, it will be shown how sustainability oriented life in the town develops from a combined effort of architecture, social, economic and ecological aspects, through a stakeholder participation process in order to complement more conventional governance processes.

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