

MOVING — IN MOVING — ON

#7

**TEH Startup Support
Programme 2020**

Featuring:
Ta(r)dino 6 Art Platform,
Baku, Azerbaijan



teh.net

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JUST BEFORE THIS PUBLICATION APPEARED, IN OCTOBER 2020, WAR BETWEEN ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN BROKE OUT AGAIN. THIS HAS SERIOUS IMPACT ON THE EMERGING CENTERS PRESENTED HERE. THE CONSEQUENCES ARE UNPREDICTABLE.

MOVING IN, MOVING ON

TEH Startup Support Programme 2020 Publication #7 Ta(r)dino 6 Art Platform, Baku, Azerbaijan

Trans Europe Halles is a network of cultural centres initiated by citizens and artists. Our mission is to strengthen the sustainable development of non-governmental cultural centres and encourage new initiatives by connecting, supporting and promoting them. We facilitate international cooperation, provide opportunities for learning and sharing, and promote the practice, impact and value of arts and culture.

Read more at www.teh.net



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1. THE TRANS EUROPE HALLES STARTUP SUPPORT PROGRAMME: WHY AND HOW?



Through an open call, launched in July 2019, Trans Europe Halles (TEH) invited upcoming initiatives from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to apply for our Startup Support Programme.

Trans Europe Halles is a network of more than 100 cultural centres – initiated by citizens and artists who have revitalised vacant buildings for arts, culture and activism across Europe. We started our work in 1983 in Western Europe and we're now supporting emerging creative and cultural spaces in the Balkans, Eastern Partnership and Southern Mediterranean countries too. In 2017, we launched the Startup Support Programme – offering access to all the knowledge, experience and skills we've gained in Europe over the past 37 years.

Why now?

From 2017-2021, we have been and continue to run a wide range of activities under the strapline **Factories of Imagination: Investing in Cultural Changemakers**. This project is motivated by an urgent concern: In many European countries, non-governmental cultural centres are under-resourced and have neither

the funds nor the conditions in place to fully achieve their potential. This is especially true in regions and countries where neither civil society initiatives nor critical artistic production are encouraged by public authorities – and indeed are sometimes actively discouraged.

This is true in the Balkans, which was the focus of the first year of our **Startup Support Programme**, and also in Ukraine and Belarus, our focus for 2019. The same is true for Azerbaijan and Armenia, although these two countries are different from each other in many ways:

- In Baku, the capital city of **Azerbaijan**, a combination of private wealth and state control has produced arts venues and institutes of a highly glitzy and globalised nature, mainly aimed at the local elite and international visitors. The independent scene, however, is barely visible and is severely restricted.



ANALYSIS



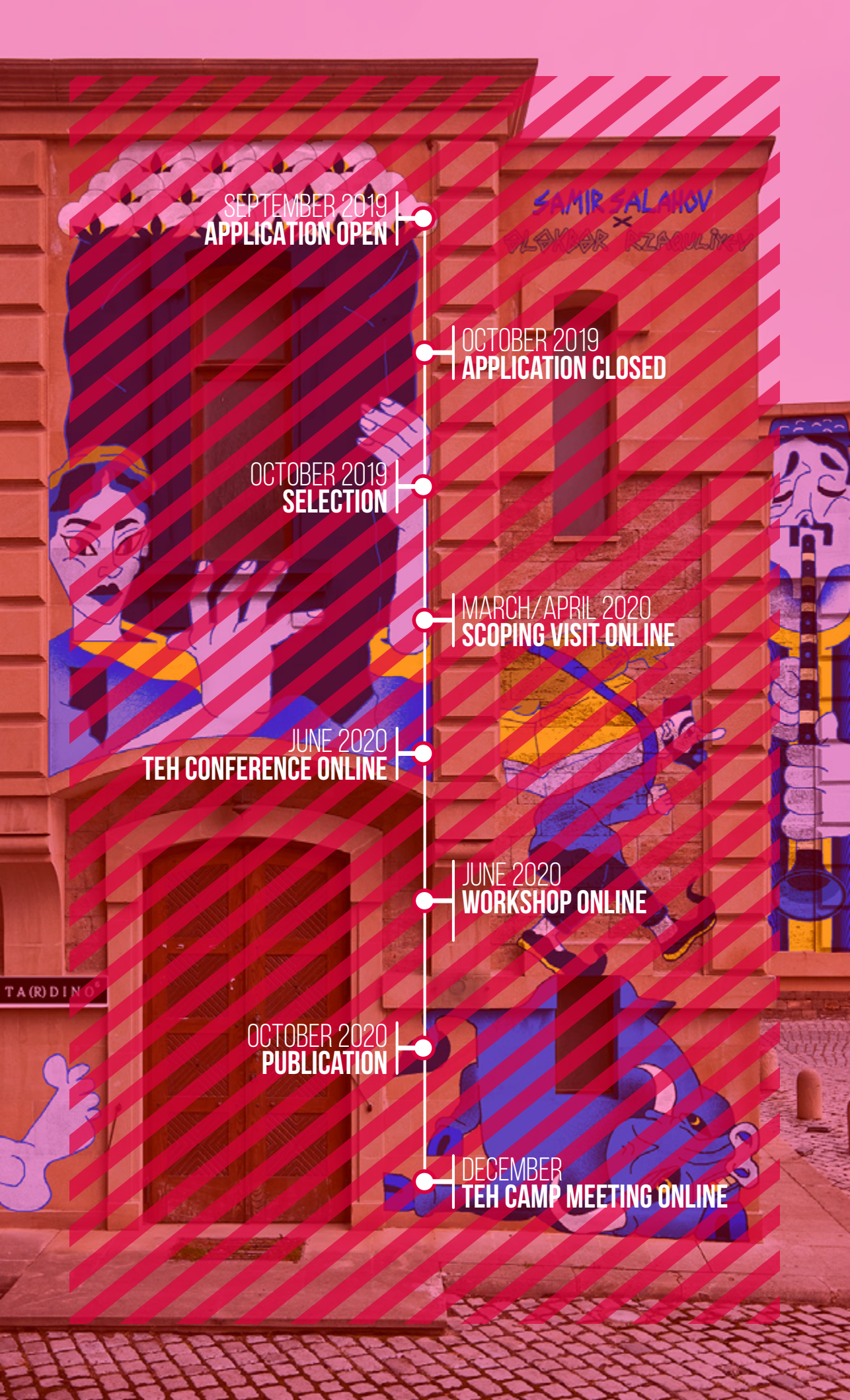
MATCHMAKING



COACHING



NETWORK



SEPTEMBER 2019
APPLICATION OPEN

OCTOBER 2019
APPLICATION CLOSED

OCTOBER 2019
SELECTION

MARCH/APRIL 2020
SCOPING VISIT ONLINE

JUNE 2020
TEH CONFERENCE ONLINE

JUNE 2020
WORKSHOP ONLINE

OCTOBER 2020
PUBLICATION

DECEMBER
TEH CAMP MEETING ONLINE

- **Armenia**, on the other hand, is redefining itself after its 'Velvet Revolution' of 2018. So far this has not resulted in a clear and transparent cultural policy to support citizen-driven initiatives. And yet, in the larger cities of both countries there are upcoming communities of defiant artists and activists who are determined to reclaim the vacant buildings and neglected public spaces in their cities.

Their ambitions dovetail with TEH's core values: to revitalise spaces that have the potential to become exciting social and artistic hubs. They are drawing on the energy of civil society in places where hapless or hostile public authorities, irresponsible capitalism and social conservatism are standing in the way of open-minded progress. At the same time, they have a strong understanding of their responsibility to mobilise the power of arts and creativity for the public good and conscious urban transformation.

The Startup Support Programme 2020 aimed to reach out to these kinds of initiatives across **Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia**. We launched a process that included an initial open call, a selection committee, scoping visits, conference participation, online coaching, organisational workshops and written reports – much of which was carried out online because of Covid-19 travel restrictions. To our surprise, no feasible candidates reached us from Georgia. But we are very pleased to welcome three of the applicants from Armenia and Azerbaijan into the TEH network:

- Kharatian Arts Center in Gyumri, Armenia
- Salaam Cinema in Baku, Azerbaijan
- Ta(r)dino 6 Art Platform in Baku, Azerbaijan

This case study will focus on Ta(r)dino 6 Art Platform in Azerbaijan.

2. CHALLENGES OF CREATING ART SPACES IN AZERBAIJAN: REGION & CONTEXT

During our work with the selected centres in the capital Baku in mid-July, military conflict broke out along the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The cease-fire – which had been in place since the war over Nagorno-Karabakh in the early nineties – was broken again, as it had been numerous times before. This added to the tension already caused by Covid-19. As elsewhere, the pandemic exacerbated existing divisions in society in Azerbaijan. Labour migrants, internally displaced persons and people fleeing neighbouring Iran were left to their own devices. Inside troubled households, domestic violence soared. Where such gaps open up, we know that cultural spaces, however fragile, are vital to bridging them. But cultural spaces too have been locked down. The two centres we are working with in Baku – **Ta(r)dino 6 Art Platform**

and Salaam Cinema – have shown admirable resilience in regrouping and redefining themselves during this period of forced social distancing. But even in pre-pandemic times, they were facing an uncertain future.

The concept they are pursuing – to revitalise vacant buildings with creativity and social commitment – is virtually unknown in Azerbaijan. Most of the essential ingredients that make it possible for civil society initiatives to flourish in Western Europe, where TEH was founded, are missing here. These ingredients include:

- clear options to rent or even own vacant property
- a cultural policy that makes funding accessible to new initiatives

- the education and mind-set among (younger) audiences and media to follow and understand upcoming artists and their work

- a minimum of financial security for artists and activists

- a certain understanding among municipal authorities of the potential contribution of new arts initiatives to the well-being and economy of their cities

- a tradition going back several decades of reclaiming vacant buildings for the common good

- and a sense among younger citizens that they have the right, even the entitlement, to create new collective spaces where those do not yet exist.

Even when these elements are all in place, it is never easy to create and maintain new spaces in old buildings. Across Western Europe, financial constraints, an overdose of regulation and a populist suspicion of the arts are

conspiring to produce an environment of ongoing precarity, causing many new initiatives to falter and disappear – even before Covid-19 reared its head. Similar threats, in still bleaker form, exist in neighbouring countries like Turkey, Georgia, Russia and Ukraine. But in Azerbaijan, even the most basic ingredients for creating fair and sustainable cultural spaces are missing.

The startups we work with in Baku certainly look promising and inspirational. Getting to know them better from a distance – through online conversations, practical assistance and workshops – we discovered how precarious their situation really is and how much support they will need to move from their current situation to realise their dreams.

The challenges are daunting. But the collectives behind these initiatives are working day and night, throughout these insecure and unpredictable times, to achieve their ambitions.

3. CASE STUDY:

TA(R)DINO 6 ART PLATFORM, BAKU, AZERBAIJAN

In an ideal world, Ta(r)dino 6 Art Platform would have shifted from running occasional events in someone's flat, driven by enthusiasm, to the well-planned public programming of exhibitions in a white-cube gallery in June. The building is perfect. There are two floors of exhibition space, 80m² each, with a working and storage space below and a roof terrace above. From the roof, there are spectacular views of the Icherisheher neighbourhood in the Old Town, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It borders on the historical pedestrian zone. The metro, the City Hall, the Office of the President, the Philharmonic, the Palace of Shirvanshahs, the photography museum and the seaside boulevard are all within walking distance. Once the gallery opens, the owner has agreed, as a form of in-kind support, that Ta(r)

dino 6 will just have to pay for energy bills and maintenance.

The ambitions are clear. In their own words:

"Launched on February 1, 2019, Ta(r)dino 6 Art Platform is a Baku-born self-organised art initiative with international outreach. With a gallery in Icherisheher, the historic part of Baku, and a vintage flat in downtown, the platform fills in the niche in providing art professionals from Azerbaijan and beyond with the opportunity to explore their ideas in depth. Programs to date include exhibitions, commissioned site-specific artworks, artist talks and workshops by local and international artists and curators to help grow Baku's emerging art community. Ta(r)dino 6 supports the discourse on Azerbaijani contemporary art within international

LAUNCHED ON FEBRUARY 1, 2019, TA(R)DINO 6 ART PLATFORM IS A BAKU-BORN SELF-ORGANISED ART INITIATIVE WITH INTERNATIONAL OUTREACH. WITH A GALLERY IN ICHERISHEHER, THE HISTORIC PART OF BAKU, AND A VINTAGE FLAT IN DOWNTOWN, THE PLATFORM FILLS IN THE NICHE IN PROVIDING ART PROFESSIONALS FROM AZERBAIJAN AND BEYOND WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPLORE THEIR IDEAS IN DEPTH.

**ASLI SAMADOVA,
FOUNDER OF TA(R)DINO 6 ART PLATFORM**

context, with a special focus on gender, identity and equality in the art world.”

By the time we met, at the TEH meeting in Timisoara in October 2019, **Asli Samadova**, co-founder of Ta(r)dino 6, had already produced exhibitions and installations in Venice, Istanbul and their private flat in downtown Baku. The team is young but experienced. Before turning 30, Asli has studied, worked and lived in 13 countries on three continents. While she calls herself “a curator by chance”, her taste is exquisite. She is well-connected internationally, she creates websites and spreadsheets in an instant, and she works non-stop.

- **Olga Seleznyova** is an arts manager, who has worked on numerous international projects and is a master of planning and strategy. Her day job is to manage the work of Faig Ahmed, the internationally well-respected Baku-based visual artist.

- **Azad Asifovich** is an independent curator and art talker living and working between Paris and Antwerp, always in conversation with artists about their biography, gender and political position.

- **Lesley Gray** is a curator, researcher and writer, based in Baku and Dubai, specialising in contemporary art in the Arabian Gulf and Caspian Sea regions.

- The newest member, **Sevil Zeynalova**, is a Baku-based art historian, who has worked on projects at some of the main cultural institutes in Baku.

This team brings together a wealth of knowledge, experience, taste and ambition. But: when Ta(r)dino 6 joined the TEH Startup programme, there was no official recognition for this project, let alone any support. There was always a shortage of money to keep the project afloat and everyone worked for free. And that was before Covid-19 struck.

In early April, Ta(r)dino 6 carried out a survey among 40 artists and art professionals to find out how the pandemic had affected them and their work. They wrote: “Being the first of its kind, this survey aims at mapping the needs of artistic community and develop a mitigation action plan not only for the time of crisis, but also for a more long-term perspective.” The majority of artists taking part were under 35 years old. Work had been cancelled and income had dropped severely. 29.4% of respondents had trouble paying the rent while 44.1% found it difficult to pay for food and living expenses.

Neither the Ministry of Culture (incidentally, the minister was fired later that month for corruption) nor the state-run Union of Artists of Azerbaijan

reacted properly to this survey. While the situation for independent artists continued to deteriorate, Ta(r)dino 6 swung into action. The survey led to a quick-fire series of artistic interventions that made the best possible use of dire circumstances.

In A week long romance, Azerbaijani artists were offered the very active Instagram platform of Ta(r)dino 6. They had the chance to respond to questions about their practice and inspirations, and became internationally visible:

<https://tardino6.art/A-Week-Long-Romance>

- Unbrushed Senses, a mesmerising collaboration between Baku-based poet Leyli Salayeva and Berlin-based visual artist Xenia Fink, was first presented on the same platform; through crowd-funding, which will result in a book.

<https://tardino6.art/Unbrushed-Senses>

- AThOME was a lighthearted but serious number of art works anyone can make at home, using the most basic materials, by following the instructions of the artists themselves.

<https://tardino6.art/Exhibitions/AThOME-Digital-Project>

- Art on the Wall is an ongoing series of virtual artistic decorations on the outside walls of the gallery building, all in life-like CGI.

<https://tardino6.art/Exhibitions/Art-on-the-Wall>

Eight local artists were offered a Micro-commission of €50 each, thanks to the Swedish embassy, to create or contribute a work to a collection entitled Flowers for Medics. Finally, the gallery itself was supported through the online sale of high-quality posters by the likes of Melanie Bonajo, Marlene Dumas and Andreas Gursky, offered through the 2020 Solidarity Project of Wolfgang Tillman.

So even while being forced to postpone the opening of its gallery, the Ta(r)dino 6 team worked relentlessly, under these crazy circumstances, to do exactly what it promised: “to help grow Baku’s emerging art community”.

One characteristic of Ta(r)dino 6 stands out. While the team is open to critical questions and urgent advice, the faith in the quality and relevance of their work is unwavering. From a distance, it has been frustrating to see how long it took for the authorities and (art) institutions surrounding their gallery to recognise them (the Icherisheher administration is now about to become an official partner, and a collaboration with the National Museum of Art is in the making). It is absolutely beyond belief how hard they have had to work to even be noticed, let alone supported, by the international embassies, the foreign institutions and the European Union (EU) delegation.

But Ta(r)dino 6 know what they stand for. They are able to discern the quality of the emerging artists around them as compared to the international arts scene that they are very familiar with. And they are right: follow them online <https://www.instagram.com/tardino6/> and you’ll see sophisticated works of art, sensitive to local traditions and iconography, thoughtfully poetic or subtly ironic, technically mature and conscious of the complicated interaction with the international gaze that wants to render them exotic but will not be allowed to do so. It is this conviction that has fuelled Ta(r)dino 6 so far.

Right now, they have outlined an agenda for the next 12 months. If the pandemic allows, they will open the gallery this autumn. From then on, they envision an ongoing combination of group and solo shows, always in conversation with each other. Current projects will continue, online and offline, and expand. The private flat in Baku will be turned into a slow art residency. They will contribute to international art fairs and exhibitions. All of this accompanied by detailed spreadsheets mapping the expenses of production, team, maintenance and communication – and the expected income through in-kind support, grants and commercial activities.

On paper, it’s all there. Now for the reality...



4. SETTING PRIORITIES

Each of these publications about the TEH Startups zooms in on a more general topic that is related to this specific case study but is also relevant to other emerging arts spaces.

It's almost cruel to start talking about priorities when an initiative's mere existence is already a miracle. Under such circumstances, in that society, facing the catastrophe of the Covid-19 pandemic, with most of their team forced to stay at home or even abroad, how could Ta(r)dino 6 be expected to think about priorities? And yet, they raised the question themselves.

They had all kinds of experience, but the team had never opened a public gallery. So their approach was much like someone who is creating their first book, film or album: everything had to be in there, everything was important, all at the same time. When we started working with them, they were planning to open the gallery within a few weeks. The (video) art works for the first exhibition were available, but apart from that: the team was scattered; there had been no prior communication to a wider audience; production work on the interior of the exhibition spaces had not started; there was no system of hosts and volunteers; and there was only a vague idea of the programme beyond the opening show. Not to mention the fact that there was no money. Fundraising, even at the minimal level possible within Azerbaijan, was in the preliminary phase. All they had was a handful of gifted people working on voluntary basis, a small community of local artists and a great building. Who knows, they might have even pulled it off. But then, of course, Covid-19 happened.

This sudden break gave us the time to discuss priorities. Asli, who is dedicating all her time to Ta(r)dino 6, is a classic example of a multi-tasking do-it-all: from social media to connections with the international arts field, from writing grant applications to interviewing artists, she is capable of everything. The others in the team provide ideas and connections but, especially Olga, mainly

steering and confining all this energy. If the TEH Startup Support Programme achieved anything at all, it was forcing Asli to sit down and prioritise.

We helped to point out funding possibilities and partnerships, edited applications (because grants, unfortunately, will never cover all your work all at once), asked about the planning and coherence of the upcoming programme, suggested ways of raising visibility by creating online interventions, wrote letters of support to authorities who eventually started paying attention. And we were able to offer two three-day workshops with more experienced TEH members: with Anna Chistoserdova of Y Gallery (Minsk) on how to organise a contemporary arts space, and with Relja Bobić & Balša Djuković of Nova Iskra (Belgrade) on setting up an online shop for arts and crafts.

The results?

The pandemic is still there. Currently, gatherings of more than five people are not allowed in Baku. But recent fundraising efforts have been paying off, although the available budgets are very modest. The original team is still on board, new members are arriving. International and local partnerships are being mobilised. The local community of emerging artists sees and appreciates what Ta(r)dino 6 has to offer them. And there is a detailed programme and budget for a year.

In the fog and thrill of opening up a new space, nothing is more irritating than someone who starts talking to you about setting priorities. Because you know they're right, and of course you've thought about it yourself, but there is never enough money, place and time. The pandemic gave us time. Ta(r)dino 6 will open its gallery. Its priorities are more or less in place. The future – and the unwavering energy of this team – will sort out the rest.

- Go to teh.net/resources for workshop and reports about Ta(r)dino 6 during the TEH Startup Support Programme 2020

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- + The pandemic makes us, our societies and our nations look inwards. For the art world, it should be a wake-up call to do exactly the opposite: open up, cross boundaries, involve others. In a society where social and economic gaps are deepening, we know that cultural spaces, however fragile, are vital to bridging them. Ta(r)dino 6 aims to do exactly that.
- + Over the past months, they have called on international embassies and institutions, not just for support, but simply to raise awareness to begin with. The response has been disappointing so far. Even at a time when so many of our members are struggling to survive, Trans Europe Halles wants to use our reputation and influence to make public representatives pay attention. If we are not able to do so in countries that we consider far away, we won't be able to do it at home.
- + The contemporary art world, after being eurocentric for so long, is finally opening up to other perspectives. The artists that Ta(r)dino 6 has presented so far, first online and later in the gallery, are yet another example that it is high time. Through this platform, connections can be made in order to kickstart the conversation between the Azerbaijani and the global arts scene. It's exciting to see how this Baku-born initiative is powered by the knowledge that they are surrounded by artists who deserve to be known.
- + It is the art itself that sets a high standard – at Ta(r)dino 6 as elsewhere. The quality and sophistication of the art should fend off ills that have polluted so many arts initiatives before: opportunism, nepotism, intellectual laziness. This is not easy in an environment of power structures that have no regard for contemporary art. Nevertheless, the standard is there, as long as you're willing to pay attention.
- + Circumstances in Azerbaijan are very different from many of the countries where TEH has members. But creating and maintaining an arts space is still comparable in many ways. The exchange of knowledge and experience is invaluable. And it goes both ways. People who have set up spaces in Copenhagen would not be able to do it in Baku, and the other way around. There is always more to learn on both sides. That's what Trans Europe Halles is here for.

Two international experts worked closely with TEH staff to make it all happen: Mykhailo Glubokyi is the development director of IZOLYATSIA, a platform for cultural initiatives and IZONE creative community.

Chris Keulemans, a travelling writer and moderator, was the founder and artistic director of Tolhuistuin cultural centre in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He is also the author of this report.

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