

ondan-bundan:  
inquiring on culture from this and thats

by  
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## Abstract

The installation *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and that* explores the intra-actions within Azerbaijan's continuously changing identity, by fragmenting projections of Soviet Azerbaijani films onto found objects. This research brings into conversation scenes from the films *Arşın Mal Alan* (Rza Tahmasib and Nikolay Leshchenko, 1945), *Bir Cənub Şəhərində* (Eldar Quliyev, 1969) and *Ötən İlin Son Gecəsi* (Gülbənzir Əzimzadə, 1983) to reflect on the construction of visual narratives as cultural identifiers in Azerbaijan. It combines Homi K. Bhabha's theory on culture's hybridity, alongside feminist theories from Nira Yuval-Davis and Giuliana Bruno to propose a *textility of culture*. One that derives from found remnants, fragments, reconstructions, refractions, and haphazards.

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## Introduction: Locating *ondan-bundan*

For this research, I'm curious to understand the relationship of (post)Sovietized Azerbaijani subjects parallel to the formation of *xalq mentaliteti* through Soviet Azerbaijani films. *Xalq mentaliteti* (or simply, “*mentalitet*” or “*mentalitemiz*”) directly translates to “(our) public mentality.” I will continue to use the Azerbaijani term, as it is more commonly and habitually used in Azerbaijani discourse. An equivalent in North American discourse could be the term “conservative” or “traditional.” The connection between conservation is in its efforts of protection – *xalq mentaliteti* exists as a public gaze, shaming, calling, nagging any unwanted behavior that is deemed “not ours.” It creates binarial understandings of “modernization,” protecting an abstract ‘supposed’ Azerbaijani identity. It assumes a puritan view on Azerbaijani culture/tradition, which can never be achieved. I am interested in exploring methods of reconstructing these links through film, as popular visual narratives are prominent in cultural discourse and in turn, influencing cultural formation. I will be flattening post-Soviet Azerbaijan and Soviet Azerbaijan a few times throughout this thesis. With this, I imply the continual affects of Sovietization, rather than understanding it as a definitive split.

I am exploring this interaction specifically within the capital city of Baku. The city rapidly grew with the developments of oil boom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, housing new migrants. Though the 1920s to 1980s Baku was home to a diverse group people – such as Armenians, Georgians, Russians, and people of Jewish communities – majority of Soviet Azerbaijani cinema highlight the concerns of Azerbaijani people (or specifically, Azerbaijani men). Hence why I am curious of the relative formulation of an Azerbaijani identity separate to these communities. The state film production company, currently named “*Azərbaycanfilm*,” has also since been based in Baku. Consequently, many films that narrated stories outside of Baku, would still pan through Baku's streets: For example, the story of *Arşın Mal Alan* is based in Şuşa.<sup>1</sup> However, some of the film's setup in the 1965 version is distinctly recognizable as the streets of *içərişəhər*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Şuşa, located in Nagorno Karabakh, is considered “the heart” of Azerbaijani culture. Many Azerbaijani artists, poets, writers, musicians, and intellectuals were born and raised there. Şuşa went under Armenian occupation during the first Karabakh war in 1992, and was liberated with the second Karabakh war in 2020. This was significant for Azerbaijan's nationalism and for people's cultural longing.

<sup>2</sup> İçərişəhər, “the old city” or more accurately “the inner city” is the oldest part of Baku, located in the city center. It is considered as the “truest” origin of Bakuviens. As opposed to the later migrated villagers (*kəndlilər* or more derogatory, “*kəndçilər*”). There is an odd quest to figure out who is not from Baku: “Where is your father from?” My father was born and raised in Baku (but not in içərişəhər). “No, where is your grandfather from your father's side

The inquiry of a cultural identity continually brings implications of building a national identity. The formulations of a national identity in Azerbaijan can be traced with Soviet's modernization projects – “nativization” (*коренизация*), education, institutionalization, ethnic homogenization, changing the alphabet, etc. When looking through film, national subject emerges with the depiction of idealized, yet imperfect and humble characters. The second demarcation of a national identity is linked with the devastations from the first Nagorno Karabakh war (1988-1994). With the collapse of the Soviet Union and its consequent disillusion, Azerbaijan reacted with its independent, nationalist narrative led with the images of Aliyevs. This had only been amplified in the last years with the second Nagorno Karabakh war (2020). Parallel to these narratives, contemporary Azerbaijani identity positions itself by commodifying its culture into digestible modes, available for the international gaze. My efforts are to definitively move away from any national, patriarchal, unique, binary, clearly stated implications of identity.

Understanding a critique of Soviet “modernization” that is distinctly imposed onto the “uncivilized” Muslim<sup>3</sup> Azerbaijanis brings questions. Is Sovietization a colonial force? I find this question challenging because, Sovietization projects differed through different Soviet leaders over the decades. From the beginning, the Bolsheviks saw the Soviet project as “de-colonializing” from Russian Empire's colonial regime. However, as Russia struggled within its own position to the West, many of its projects imbued its unique coloniality. I will turn to Madina Tlostanova, who extensively oscillates between a resistance to impose a western understanding of colonial theory, while also acknowledging that Sovietization, especially on Muslim countries, was colonial:

Russia has never been seen by Western Europe as its part, remaining a racialized empire, which feels itself a colony in the presence of the West and projects its own inferiority complexes onto its colonies, particularly Muslim ones, which today have

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from?” My grandfather, whom I had never met, is from Goranboy. “Ah, so you are not from Baku.” I greatly dislike this question.

<sup>3</sup> Azerbaijan has remained a secular country since the Soviets. As Farideh Heyat notes, during the Soviet Union, the Muslim communities practiced in private. Since then, many Islamic traditions have seeped as part of Azerbaijani traditions. Currently, there are communities of openly practicing Muslims within the country.



become precisely the South of the poor North, the multiply colonized others of the defeated Russian/Soviet empire.<sup>4</sup>

Madina Tlostanova later expands on how these inferiority complexes led to forms of self-racializing, self-orientalizing or a symbolic self-whitening on the colonized states. This becomes important when considering the gaze of *xalq mentaliteti*, with how self-deprecating criticisms become internalized into cultural identifiers. Statements commonly heard, such as “*Bura Azərbaycandı da*,” meaning “This is Azerbaijan,” become a form of inferiority complex that self-excuses accountability. In certain cases, it is helpful to recognize the nature of Sovietization projects, however, it should be applied cautiously. Acknowledging Sovietization as colonial helps to make sense of the ethnic deportations in the first decades, the execution of many poets and writers during the Stalinist purge, the continual classism on Azerbaijanis, the suppression of pro-independence protest in the 1990s. I do not aim to brush over this dynamic. But Madina Tlostanova links “modernization” directly with “colonization.” However, many modernization projects had already begun in Azerbaijan, even before the Soviets. Therefore, the implication of understanding Soviets as strictly colonial eliminates a deeper critical engagement with cultural theory. It does not impose a ‘given’ post-colonial theory by shaping the discourse around it, eliminating all fragments that are left out. I am particularly curious on the leftover fragments.

### **Contextualizing Azerbaijani History**

Azerbaijan is located in the South Caucasus, between Europe and Asia. The formulation of a distinct understanding of “Azerbaijani” had begun in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Before, Azerbaijanis were referred as “Muslims,” “Caucasian Muslims,” “Turks,” “Turkic speaking Muslims,” “Tatars,” “Persians.” None of these titles distinctly addressed Azerbaijanis. Even when reading for this research, the author’s positioning becomes evident with the term they stick to. For example, the Northern Iranian scholar Farideh Heyat uses the term “Azeri” or “Northern Azerbaijani,” positioning Azerbaijan to its historical connection with the Persian Empire. When I was a student in Baku Turkish Anatolian Highschool, our teachers would strongly emphasize the usage of “Azerbaijani Turks” against “Azeri.” As the latter referred to the Azerbaijanis currently living in Northern Iran. We would usually scoff at this, because we

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<sup>4</sup> Madina Tlostanova, “The South of the Poor North: Caucasus Subjectivity and the Complex of Secondary “Australism,” *The Global South* 5, No. 1 (Spring 2011): 71.

used “Azeri” as a shorter version of saying “Azerbaijanis.” The differences in the titles implied by the teachers were illusive and motivated by a Turkic nationalism.

For Soviets being Muslim was linked to “backwardness.” This is reflected in early 1920s Azerbaijani films. Many of these early silent films – *Qız Qalası Maiden’s Tower* (1923), *Bismillah* (1925), *Sevil* (1929), *Almaz* (1936) and others – were directed (or co-directed alongside Azerbaijanis) by Georgians, Armenians and Russians who were perceived as the “cultural” ones. The Azerbaijani staff was seen as incompetent for the first decades, while efforts were being made to educate new Azerbaijani film directors. Despite some collaboration cases with Azerbaijani directors, films like *Sevil* (1929), written by Azerbaijani playwright Cəfər Cabbarlı, indicates the emergence of cultural inferiority complexes. As rumored, Cəfər Cabbarlı was a “careerist,” prioritizing his position within the new Soviet regime instead of siding with the “traditional” Azerbaijani population. Some films, like *By the Bluest of Seas У самого синего моря* (1936), did not even include any Azerbaijani actors, despite including a “positive” Azerbaijani character. For the rest of Soviet audience the films exotified Azerbaijan’s landscape. Meanwhile for the local Azerbaijani’s the films served as an influence onto the “backwards” population that could easily digest modernization in visual images. Many of the early silent films depicted the revolution, exposing the corruption within tradition and religion, and encouraged women’s emancipation. Soviet projects particularly associated women’s emancipation with progress, their liberation as an exploited class, and aimed to incorporate them into economic and political life. Here, I turn to Farideh Heyat,

Women's emancipation under the particular form of Soviet modernization and in the context of its political and economic structure evolved in paradoxical ways distinct from the West and the post-colonial societies emerging from colonial encounters with Western powers. This was especially the case with the highly educated professional women who were made the showcases of Soviet emancipation and liberalization but who continued to be regarded by their ethnic community as the custodians of ethnic identity and preservers of ethnic custom.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Farideh Heyat, *Azeri Women in Transition: Women in Soviet and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan* (London: Routledge, 2002), 4.

With Farideh Heyat's understanding, an interesting correlation forms between women's position as "bearers" of traditional life for *xalq*. With a reconstruction of liberation associated with women, early stages of Sovietization efforts become a liberation from ethnic tradition.

However, as stated before, many of these modernizing projects had begun before the Soviet Union. The tracing of contemporary Azerbaijani formulations can begin with the oil boom in the late 1890s. Toğrul Abbasov points out the decision to "start" national Azerbaijani cinema from 1898 with the documentations of the oil barrels filmed by French filmmaker Michon:

"The decision taken in the year 2000 in post-Soviet Azerbaijan to push back the start of "national cinema" to 1898 accepts the developments in this dynamic, industrialised and cosmopolitan city as the foundation. Live Photographs" by A.M.Michon, a French-Russian photographer of Jewish origin, put Baku in a position that was different from the countryside... The first feature length film shot in 1916, called *Neft və Milyonlar Səltənəti* ("In the Kingdom of Oil and Millions") showed how Azerbaijan's modernisation process was based on the oil industry before the Soviet Union and that films were born out of this relationship."<sup>6</sup>

The modernizing developments were brought in with Azerbaijan's intelligentsia who gained a surplus of wealth with the oil boom. What was a port on the shore of the Caspian Sea turned into a city with opportunities.

While it is not an overriding part of the installation, an interesting part of my research was to look at the connection between women's emancipation and the relationship with religion within modernization projects. The first secular school for women opened 1901. Considered as one of the first operas in the Muslim world was written by Azerbaijani composer Üzeyir Hacıbəyli, performed in 1908. In 1918 Azerbaijan was one of the first nations to grant women's right to vote. These continuous efforts later developed in the political slogan "Modernize. Islamize. Turkify," which were also symbolically reflected in the contemporary flag, first adopted in 1918. I am counting these specific instances, because these are the historical events that is accepted by the *xalq*, priding Azerbaijani developments. However, many nationalizing projects were developed due to the competitive relationships between Georgia, and especially Armenia. When considering modernization projects that

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<sup>6</sup> Toğrul Abbasov, personal correspondence June 26, 2022.

specifically addressed women's rights to vote, women's education and women's emancipation, these efforts do not reveal a feminist inclination. To reference Nira-Yuval Davis, women become the biological reproducers of 'the nation'.

In spite of the fact that usually, if not always, in the sex/gender systems in their societies men are dominant, women are not just passive victims, or even objects, of the ideologies and policies aimed at controlling their reproduction. On the contrary, very often it is women, especially older women, who are given the roles of the cultural reproducers of 'the nation' and are empowered to rule on what is 'appropriate' behavior and appearance and what is not and to exert control over other women who might be constructed as 'deviants'.<sup>7</sup>

Modernization for women show to be nationalizing projects, aimed to produce the "educated mothers" to raise the sons of the country. It is interesting to track this addressing for women's emancipation through films. This narrative was very soon abandoned after the 1930s, despite including "female characters who had agency." I frequently received "female agency" as a feminist signifier in my conversations with Azerbaijani film critics and film enthusiasts. I am skeptical of this feminist implication and seek to find an alternative, especially through what I refer to as textility.

### **Sovietized Azerbaijani Identity through Cinema**

In my thesis I specifically look at three films to generate relationships within Azerbaijani culture. These films were curiously and consistently brought to my attention through my conversations with Azerbaijani film critics and enthusiasts (even when their significance was disputed). The films are popular and well recognized within Azerbaijani *xalq*, Hence, I intended to use visual and contextual imagery that is familiar to an Azerbaijani audience, both in film and in reference to reality. Despite their exact referentiality, the scenes from the films still render as recognizable enough for an unfamiliar audience. Furthermore, the films contextually correspond to their decade, reflecting the social and political change in Azerbaijani society. By flattening this timeframe in a singular space through distorted reflections and fragments, an interplay forms with reconstructing cultural narratives.

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<sup>7</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 1997), 49.

### 1. *Arşın Mal Alan* (1945)

*Arşın Mal Alan*, translated as “The Cloth Peddler,” has three adaptations. The first is the 1917 version directed by Boris Svetlov, which was not distributed extensively due to the film’s poor quality. The second is the 1945 which was directed by Rza Təhmasib and Nikolay Leshchenko, was a theatrically set-up version which has been colored in 2013. The third is the 1965 version directed by Tofiq Tağızadə, filmed to adapt to new visual technologies emerging. The state commissioned, commercial, musical-comedy films are based on the 1913 operetta written, while he was in Saint-Petersburg, by Azerbaijani composer Üzeyir Hacıbəyli.

The film narrates around Əsgər. He wants to personally meet a wife beforehand, instead of traditionally be handed a wife. Based on the gender restrictions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women had to wear a hijab in public. Əsgər pretends to be a cloth peddler, visiting the private space – the houses, where he could see and speak to the women while “selling” fabrics. Once him and Gülçöhrə fall in love, Əsgər asks Gülçöhrə’s wealthy father, Sultan bəy permission to marry her. Gülçöhrə does not realize the person she’s subjected to marry and the cloth peddler are the same person. She threatens to suicide. The plot is soon revealed, and the characters marry happily in the end.

At the time of its initial conception in 1913, the operetta was described to be breaking traditional grounds. Əsgər’s desire to break gendered customs is seen as radical. Gülçöhrə’s threat to suicide is interpreted as her feminist agency. Three decades after however, the film changes its context. The film became a bearer of traditional elements, dances, wedding, and music. These cultural elements are exhibited through the characters that portray higher and wealthy Azerbaijani class. On some accounts, the film was described as “rogue,” purposed to showcase the “backwards” way of the past century. The straightforward and simple-to-follow story, with its slapstick humor was well-received, especially when considering that in 1945 many Soviet Azerbaijani films were produced in support of WWII. Hence why I am particularly interested in the 1945 version. This version had international appeal. It has since been quite recognizable, popular, and engrained within the *xalq* psyche as a cultural token.

I am using four shots (22 seconds of footage) from *Arşın Mal Alan* (1945) in the installation *ondan-bundan*. The shots are from the same sequence, with a group of women in traditional garments twirling around, incorporating traditional Azerbaijani dance gestures, and laughing on the backdrop of a theatrically set-up scenic view. Judging from the film alone, it is hard to locate where the meadow and outlook into the town is located (could be a vast garden from a wealthy class home, based on the following scene). They sing “*Arşın*

*Malçı Mal Göstər*,” which can be translated as “The Cloth Peddler, Show the Goods.” In the original sequence, the women are dancing around and singing for the cloth peddler. For my installation, I removed the scenes where the cloth peddler is visible. With those scenes removed, the shots can be read as the group of women dancing in the meadows. Furthermore, adding to the fact that there are no distinguishable central women characters in these shots.



Figure 1. *Arşın Mal Alan*. Director Rza Təhmasib and Nikolay Leshchenko, 1945.

The film is originally black and white, digitally colored and in 3:4 aspect ratio. The camera is still, slightly above eye level, with a minor tilt down. The scene appears theatrical, with the dancing women outstretched on a stage. The scene is a full shot, with women in traditional garments dancing in a circle on the foreground. There are women in the background, some clapping and some dancing along. The backdrop is painted as a meadow with a small mosque<sup>8</sup> and a town visible on the left corner. I am particularly drawn to the hand gestures in this scene. It feels traditional, but not uniquely distinguishable as any particular dance. The dance feels stumbly and irregular, instead of being clearly choreographed.

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<sup>8</sup> In my research I was unable to identify the specific mosque. The film is set to be in Şuşa, but the depiction of the mosque is not referencing the iconic Şuşa mosque. Locating the details of this scene is an inquiry I would pursue for future research.



Figure 2. Rza Təhmasib and Nikolay Leshchenko, Arşın Mal Alan, 1945.

Full shot. Characters in the foreground and middle ground are playing with the cloths. Characters in the background are clapping along. The camera is still and below eye level. In the far-right corner, there are two characters brewing tea on a *samovar*. I am especially drawn to the motion of the cloth within this scene. The motion is playful. It does not seem as though the women are seriously inspecting the cloth for purchase. In the second still the camera is still and below eye level. Characters in the foreground and far background are clapping. Two characters in the middle ground are swooping the cloth across to the back. The fabric creates an illusion of wind. On either side of the center character, there are more women independently dancing in smaller groups.



Figure 3. Rza Təhmasib and Nikolay Leshchenko, Arşın Mal Alan, 1945.

Longer Full shot, the camera is still and below eye level. The characters are irregularly dancing in their smaller groups, playing with the cloth.

## 2. *Bir Cənub Şəhərində* (1969)

*Bir Cənub Şəhərində* (1969), translated as “In a Southern City,” is directed by Eldar Quliyev, with screenplay written by Rüstəm İbrahimbəyov and operator Rasim Ocaqov. They later became household names, producing some of the great and recognizable Azerbaijani films. It was filmed in the streets of “Sovetski,” an area located close to *içərişəhər*, once held cultural heritage buildings is now mostly demolished and surrounded by gentrification. The film was controversial to release, because it was one the first films to expose the failings of Soviet’s modernization projects right at the center of Baku.

The film narrates the story of Murad, who lives by old ethical norms still prevalent in the suburbs of the city. He had promised his childhood friend Tofiq to ‘hand’ him his sister for marriage. However, Tofiq falls in love with a different woman, not following through the promise. According to the code of honor, Murad must take revenge.

As Toğrul Abbasov points out, *Bir Cənub Şəhərində* is one among the many films where the optimistic tone of Soviet modernization was starting to be abandoned in the 60s. The film becomes self-aware of cultural conflicts, with scenes saturating the *xalq mentaliteti*. Despite focusing on “the struggle of one man,” the film does not isolate men, but reveals the greater system of cultural enmeshing of gazes. The gazes are multiple: the older generation, “thetwomanandchildren” – I am thinking of Nira-Yuval Davis in “Gender and Nation.” – and, of course, the *qaqaşlar*. Derived from the word “qardaş,” meaning “brother,” *qaqaş* or *qədəş* are a particular subculture of Baku men who are the self-proclaimed surveyors of cultural purity. They are recognizable for their iconic fashion choices, their method of speaking, and are usually found in the corners, sitting on the pavements, or in *çayxanalar* (tea houses, which are male dominated spaces). The film contextualizes the emerging conflicts between traditional values, while acknowledging that modernity had already seeped into cultural formulation. The young women in the film are judged as misbehaving ‘troublemakers,’ when they are only shown walking with men, or mentioned to have joined the workforce. To apply to Nira-Yuval Davis’ theory on “women as cultural bearers,” it becomes interesting that by this point in the 1960s, the film highlights men as the traditional carriers. The film is currently well received and very recognized by the *xalq*.

The cut version of the scene is 15 seconds. The scene appears close to reality: the men’s mannerisms, position and garments become representative and referential. Throughout the film, there is impressive camera and scene composition work. Indicating the development of cinematographic knowledge with the emerging Azerbaijani film directors.





Figure 4. Eldar Quliyev, *Bir Cənub Şəhərində*, 1969.

The film is black and white, with a 3:4 aspect ratio. The scene (cut from the original) is full shot, showing the men leaning against the wall. The camera is still. The angle is roughly below eye-level, with a slight tilt upwards. There is a perspective line following through from the wall from right to left. Creating a dramatic size difference between the men. In this shot, the main protagonist (second character from the left) is not highlighted. The men (or *qaqaş*, recognizable for their distinctive clothes, hat and moustache) are observing and commenting on the passersby on the street, who are off camera. I am particularly interested in this scene for its contextual and referential qualities. Paired against the chosen scenes from *Arşın Mal Alan*, it creates a tension between the collective women dancing and playing around (in supposed traditional garments and dances that are not distinguishably accurate), against the group of men that are gazing across.

### 3. *Ötən ilin son gecəsi* (1983)

*Ötən ilin son gecəsi* (1983), translated as “Last Night of the Passing Year,” is based on the 1960 play written by Anar, directed by Gülbəniz Yusuf Əzimzadə. The film had an earlier televisionplay version made in 1978. The films were commissioned by Central Television in Moscow. In an interview with Əlisəfdər Hüseynov, Anar reveals that the ending differs from the original play.<sup>9</sup> Based on Soviet ideology and censorship, the film needed to end happily.

The film revolves around Həmidə, a single mother that desires having all of her children gathered for New Year’s eve. The film goes through dialogues revealing tensions

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<sup>9</sup> Əlisəfdər Hüseynov, “Kinomuzda Anar Fenomeni” (Bakı: Elm və Təhsil nəşriyyat, 2015), 121.

within the family, while the family table is prepared. There are idealized family scenes, revealing Həmidə's dreams. In the final scene the camera pans the smiling faces of the family gathered together, listening to the recording of the father who had passed away.

It is interesting to consider this film for various reasons. Despite the play's popularity (in Azerbaijani), the 1983 version of the film – one of the very few films directed by women – is in Russian. As Toğrul Abbasov points out, by this point from the mid-1960s, “a return to essence” is proposed. It is one of the many films that cover loneliness, isolation caused from labor, and a search for community that was once present in the older years. Once again, the film centers the mother as the “carrier” of traditional values. The notion of women's emancipation is abandoned. While New Year's had only been celebrated in Azerbaijan from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the film showcases the holiday's influence as tradition and importance in traditional community celebratory practices.

The scene chosen for the installation is the mother's “fantasy” sequence. Dreamy music plays in the original shot, as the mother wishes the family to be gathered for New Year's Eve. They're at home, exhibiting a middle-class family. The cut version of the shot is 28 seconds.



Figure 5. Gülbəniz Əzimzadə, *Ötən İlin Son Gecəsi*, 1983.

Original scene is 3:4 aspect ratio, supposedly cut for Youtube's 16:9 ratio. Colored. The scene is a mid shot, with the camera slightly below eye level. The scene shows family members sitting across the table, with the mother serving soup. The focal eye is on the mother, with the family members harmoniously focusing on her. There is a tilt to the right and zoom towards the end of the shot, isolating the mother figure even more. I am particularly interested in this scene, as it places the family and the illusory figure of the “mother” at high value.

In understanding the dynamics of culture, between symbolic traditionality of the dancing women in *Arşın Mal Alan*, and the gazes of men in *Bir Cənub Şəhərində*, it is interesting to notice the role of ‘family’ in cultural making, as seen through *Ötən İlin Son Gecəsi*. If film is made for an audience to observe and learn “cultural,” or even “national” values, the traditional family becomes the ideal unit to instill Soviet modernism. The private space of home is where these tensions arise. Despite the focus on family in *Ötən İlin Son Gecəsi*, all three films have familial tensions between modernity and *mentalitet*. However, As Farideh Heyat notes, these tensions are not binary. They become an overlapping set of concepts that are performed accordingly in public or private spaces.<sup>10</sup> I am curious to further perpetuate these tensions, placing the observer in such space and reflect on these cultural formations.

### Textility of Culture

When thinking through the intra-action of Soviet Azerbaijan’s cultural identity, I have become concerned with the speculation of ‘culture’ per se – how it is formed, identified, located and re-shaped. The movement towards understanding the ‘becoming of’ culture suggests creating a momentary split between “culture” and its “identity.” This implies moving from an effort to identify culture in a simplified and generalized definition, instead to reflect through its process of conceptualization. This reflection is helpful to understand the dynamics between assumed binaries (modernization against *xalq mentaliteti*) existing within (post)Soviet Azerbaijani culture, and instead pairs them as already in-dialogue. Within this methodology, I want to explore an alternative to cultural reading, thinking with post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha, in tandem with feminist theorists Sara Ahmed, Nira Yuval-Davis that is meaningful for my thinking through *ondan-bundan*. Through the weaving of theories, I will come to illustrate the textility of culture.

Foremost, I would like to point out the challenges of utilizing cultural theory in post-Soviet spaces. As mentioned before, viewing Sovietization as a colonial force is not comprehensive to the nature of Sovietization. Therefore, applying a complete and exclusive post-colonial theoretical approach would ignore a deeper critical engagement with the nature of Sovietized Azerbaijan. A combination of theoretical fabric is necessary, and I focus on a feminist one.

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<sup>10</sup> Heyat, *Azeri Women in Transition: Women in Soviet and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan*, 167.

Secondly, my trouble with cultural theory is its preliminary assumption of finding its determinacy, with every counting effort to create an expanded definition adding a new constraint to understanding culture instead. The definition of culture becomes multiple. When considered, these multiples could instead breed multiple abstract denominators of differences, which justifies otherization. At its best, cultural defining acts as an ocular lens projected onto imagined communities' ways of being. A framework is proposed, the culture is viewed within those boundaries of understanding, and whatever that does not fit that definition gets eliminated. I, however, am particularly interested in these leftovers of cultural formings.

The echoing impression of cultural defining is culture's reflective self-indulgency, which I will call, *the pomegranate problem*. Homi Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* defines the mimetic performance of culture in the colonial context:

“Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.”<sup>11</sup>

However, this understanding can apply to the broader sense of cultural performance within the same bounds of culture. Much like the understanding of the amalgamation of cultural signifiers codified as “stereotypes,” the fetishistic performance of these signifiers become a form exoticized self-actualization. This self-actualization is never reached, as the amalgamated signifiers of culture are surface exaggerations without any added value. In the case for Azerbaijan, they're the pomegranate, the carpet (and its patterns), the *buta* (almond-shaped pattern) amongst many other elements that are visually (over)repeated. The pomegranate becomes a problem as its codification further perpetuates digestible modes, commodifying and flattening culture in a “multicultural” and international setting.

Furthermore, in a similar sense, performative cultural signifiers become abstract limitations used as justifications for power relations. They're the gazes of *xalq mentaliteti*, calling “*camata baxır, eləmə, ayıbdı*.” A shaming glee of “the people are looking, don't do it, it's shameful,” protecting an abstract cultural self-definition. To quote Nira-Yuval Davis:

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<sup>11</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 86.

‘Culture’ is never an essentialist and homogeneous body of traditions and customs, but a rich resource, usually full of internal contradictions, and a resource which is always used selectively in various ethnic cultural and religious projects within specific power relations and political discourse.<sup>12</sup>

Culture here, becomes a container of ‘cultural stuff’, with each element drawn out when convenient. These modes of power relations can become controlling when utilized against communities.

The counter to avoid a specific cultural definition is its complete avoidance and generalization. This approach is reflected in Terry Eagleton’s writing, *The Idea of Culture*. Eagleton derives the notion of “culture” from historical and theoretical developments, proposing a positioning of culture against its different challenges. Eagleton’s theoretical references position “culture” along “civilization,” “Enlightenment,” “belonging” and even when quoting Raymond Williams, “feeling.” Terry Eagleton seems to place culture from a Western viewpoint, pointing out that it exists within the reflections of its political (specifically, capitalist) ground. Eagleton’s Marxists pinning of culture is realized as an inherent deconstruction of nature, when considered as “culture as labor.” Not of one ‘to labor for’, but instead to have space to make culture when there is leisure. Eagleton’s proposes that “culture is a matter of self-overcoming as much as self-realization.”<sup>13</sup> As culture is made, it can be broken in its abstract, which becomes its continual making. Conceptually, this understanding of culture makes sense. However, my issue with Eagleton is his cultural positioning becomes scattered in its abstract, becoming hard to pin at all. These definitions of culture can assume an essentializing position, with nuances of gender imbalance, circumstances of minority communities and the influence of racism in forming cultural understanding overlooked. For this research on (post)Soviet Azerbaijan, I will also be considering the relationship of gender as both in abstract and actual, in the formation of cultural identity.

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<sup>12</sup> Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 50.

<sup>13</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 11.

## Two Exhibitions in Baku: İNSƏN and Rewriting Childhood

During my last trip to Baku, I had the great opportunity to visit the exhibition “İNSƏN” by Chingiz at YARAT Contemporary Art Centre, and “*Uşaqlığı Yenidən Yazarkən Rewriting Childhood*,” a two-artist-group exhibition at Gazelli Art House. For *Rewriting Childhood*, I will be focusing on Farhad Farzali’s installments, as his work revealed to be closer related to my thinking with culture. I intend to analyze their works, contextualize the cultural discourse within the contemporary Azerbaijani art scene, and reflect on my own practice.

I am curious on the positioning of Azerbaijan’s cultural identity within contemporary Azerbaijani art. It is not my personal desire to ‘locate’ a specific denominator of culture. But instead reflect on the peculiar curatorial framing around Azerbaijani artists’ practices. Azerbaijan’s contemporary art scene is directly linked with the country’s independence from Soviet Union that subsequently led to a grappling with Azerbaijan as a unique identity. The most recent and extensive collection written by Lesley Gray, *Azərbaycanın Müassir İncəsənəti* reflects this idea in the introductory chapter: “Because of Azerbaijan’s relatively recent independence from the Soviet Union, Azerbaijani art is at its essence an expression of identity and culture through the lens of individual experiences.”<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting to separate Azerbaijan’s cultural formation through the breakage point in 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union. This positioning assumes that individual artists’ practices only exist as a reaction to Soviet Azerbaijan, without recognizing the continual affects in a post-Soviet context. This ‘expression’ implies that there is an identity to “search for,” “return to,” or even find within the remnants of a collapse, rather than acknowledging Azerbaijani identity as already forming through its Soviet past. Among the foreword chapters of *Azərbaycanın Müassir İncəsənəti*, Cahangir Səlimxanov notes: “it is too early to make historically correct judgements towards the tumultuous events of the most recent past.”<sup>15</sup> Framing a narrative based on “historically correct judgements” is redundant. It presses an unnecessary and abstract responsibility to individual artists. This assumes an “objectively accurate” representation of Azerbaijani identity both within its historical context and to its contemporary developments. This representation can never be achieved because it is, as mentioned before, part of *the pomegranate problem*.

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<sup>14</sup> Leslie Gray, *Azərbaycanın Müassir İncəsənəti Azerbaijan Contemporary Art* (Baku: TEAS Press, 2022), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Gray, *Azərbaycanın Müassir İncəsənəti Azerbaijan Contemporary Art*, 9.

Continuing within this narrative, contemporary Azerbaijani art's timeline is divided into two:<sup>16</sup> the older generation artists that were already practicing during the Soviet period, and the younger generation that started practicing after the fall of the Soviet Union. The former years of Azerbaijani contemporary art scene, usually existing as artist collectives, are described as experimental and bold, and had strong incentives to shape a new discourse on Azerbaijani identity as it was 'newly' forming. The later to present years are described as stagnant, underwhelming, or uninspired. This is greatly blamed on the lack of governmental funds and lack of NGO support, lack of proper higher art education, art criticism and art curation to support the contemporary Azerbaijani art scene. For my research, I will not be covering why or how the efforts to support contemporary Azerbaijani art had dwindled over the years. I will only note that Azerbaijan, specifically Baku, has developed (economically, politically, architecturally) quite significantly over each decade. Even when considered at its continuum, the reality of living in the early 2000s compared to 2020s is significantly different. Hence why no artist's expression can be the denominator of "true representation" that effectively contextualizes the social and cultural reality within Azerbaijani contemporary art.

Following these understandings, I admit that it is 'unfair' to compare Chingiz, an older generation artist, with Farhad Farzali, who is part of a newer generation of artists, because their exhibits significantly differ conceptually, materially and aesthetically. However, because of their overlap in exhibiting timeline, pairing them in conversation can lay an interesting ground to observe the contemporary Azerbaijani art scene, as is. I will begin by examining Chingiz's exhibit, *İNSƏN*.

The vast floor space of YARAT is dimmed considerably dark, with individual sculptures placed within wide distances of each other, highlighted under their individual spotlights. The exhibit layout is intended as a prototype of the artist's studio: a table of sketches, another corner that resembles a material-fabrication station, and a wooden shelf holding the smaller sculptures and molds. Chingiz's exhibit title "İNSƏN" is a semantic play on the word "insan," meaning "human," and "sən," meaning "you." The pun implies to locate the "individual you" that exists within the collective humanity. This conceptual framework is reflected repeatedly through each work with the same logic, only differing in visual compositions. The compositions are usually formed by a mushing of modular forms (or

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<sup>16</sup> During my visit home, I was quite struck by the conversations where histories, concepts, people could perpetually and simply be "broken into two." Usually followed by an abstract and flattening definition that positioned them as opposing binaries.

human bodies), with singular elements (a human) sticking out. The sculptures' materials range from bronze, cardboard, polymer and papier-mache, usually placed on plinths, hung or attached to the corners of the gallery. All twenty works are Untitled, eighteen of them commissioned by YARAT. The exhibition is curiously dedicated to the artist's father, who is mentioned to play a strong figure in Chingiz's formation as an artist. The exhibition statement further mentions "the main hero of the exhibition is Human and his deeds, who lives/changes with time's pulse and breath."

As I entered the gallery space, I was painstakingly guided through each and every work by a YARAT staff member. They made sure every work was communicated correctly to me as the viewer. At times, they asked if some of the sculptures would remind me of anything – which I would respond with my first guess. They seemed to be delighted for the immediate connections I was making with the artist's intended concepts. I cannot confirm whether Chingiz intended for the gallery staff to accompany the viewer at every step – although, from my personal experience, this has been a common occurrence at YARAT exhibits. Either way, the works themselves read in conjunction with the title don't leave room for ambiguity. The walkthrough became an ironic experience. For a body of work that prided itself to push for an emerging individuality, every effort, both in the curatorial and artistic decision-making of the exhibition was contradictory to this. It becomes very "Soviet," so to say – there is one idea conveyed, everyone should collectively agree with it, and remember with every iteration.

I was frustrated with the binarial language present in the exhibit. In the work, *Untitled*, there is a singular desk placed with papers and two different pen colors. The viewer could write anything on the paper, then later place it in either the "introvert" or "extrovert" box, whichever they identified with. At the end of each day, those notes would be attached on the wall that made up the sea of quotes. When I asked my YARAT guide what happens if the viewer feels neither introverted nor extroverted (I like to describe myself as an ambivert), they mentioned that they could alternate between boxes based on how they feel that day. This form of binarial essentialism is consistently present throughout the exhibition in the form of "ego and love," "male and female," "old and young" etc.





Figure 6. Chingiz, *Untitled*, 2013-2022. Bronze, 20 x 20 x 23 cm  
YARAT Contemporary Art Space, Baku, Azerbaijan. Photo document, September 2022.

Furthermore, the aesthetic choices for the exhibition was modular – a standardized image of man, woman or “flesh sculptures” that were repeated with each of the works. What ends up conveyed is an abstract concept that is significantly removed from a tangible reality. There is a speak of “time” and “human” yet the image and composition becomes so generic it removes itself from being specific. What is the “individual” that Chingiz implies? Is it thought? Action? Or perhaps a plea to push the boundaries of “collective thinking”? This could have made a great case for *xalq mentaliteti* as I have been continually pointing out. Like the works *Untitled* and *Untitled*, Chingiz plays with the pressing gazes of *xalq mentaliteti*. However, the crowd’s gaze is always removed – they’re either looking inwards so the back of their head is seen, or there is no face at all. The individual human that sticks out of the composition becomes the gaze that watches the individual viewer. What could be intended as a moment of connection between the viewer and the work becomes another gaze, one that I couldn’t care for.

My issue with *İNSƏN* is that any effort to move from an understanding of culture or “true” representation instead becomes an overlooking. The exhibition bubbles into its internal logic, one that is frankly too simplistic to do anything more than it (over)states. From here, I would like to turn to an exhibit that achieves something far greater, with Farhad Farzali’s installation in *Rewriting Childhood*.



Figure 7. Farhad Farzali, *Rewriting Childhood* (Detail), mixed media, 1989-2022  
Gazelli Art House, Baku, Azerbaijan. Photo document, August 2022.

The space is dimmed, with groups of aggregated objects arranged on the floor along the room's length. None of the groups of objects exist in isolation, as the exhibition is intended to be read as the whole. The room resembles a home, or a memory of a home in moving. Many items are stacked – there's a plethora of books, big plastic containers with items in it, moving bags (which patterns immediately become very nostalgic). Some elements become very distinctive, like the calendar (with the iconic Baku image along the Caspian Sea) marking 1989. There's old tv, cassettes, CDs and a few old iPhones playing videos of Farhad in his childhood. Some common motifs around the tiger occur (I also owned the same plushie when I was kid). There was no guide, staff, or text present in the room, other than the brochure with a brief description of the exhibition. The exhibition statement mentions that the collections of archival items were maintained by Farhad since he was three years old.

It is worth noting the location of the exhibit. Located in the city center, Gazelli Art House is comprised of many floors, including a restaurant and wellness center, the interior's luxurious design attracts a higher-class demographic. The placement of old consumer objects, including the kitsch tiger plushies, kitsch leopard print socks, old singular shoe, wires and cables, etc., become very striking. Farhad Farzali does not disregard these objects even in their mass. In an Instagram case that had gone viral in Azerbaijan, one of the viewers had walked on top of the objects and posed in an Instagram-influencer manner in the middle. The image with the caption "art has no rules" spurred a debate on whether Farhad's work, or contemporary art in general, could have been interfered with. Farhad in many instances had

affirmed that these consumer objects, even in their plentitude were quite meaningful and valuable. Even when placed on the floor, stepping on the objects was disrespectful and unacceptable.

It is quite hard to dissect this exhibition since none of the objects exist in isolation. What happens with Farhad Farzali's work is that all these consumer objects pull from their distinctive origins, only to exist in relation to another object. Curious relationships form between the images and their cultural denominators as objects are taken from their functions. The exhibition becomes the relationship of these objects. The *cheburashka* toy – an iconic and lovable character from the Soviet cartoon “Gena the Crocodile and His Friends” – in relation to the image of *Mirmövsüm Ağ* – colloquially mentioned as the image of *ətağa*, an iconic image used for religious blessing<sup>17</sup> – next to an IELTS examination result should have no association. They are assembled through an instinctual logic. It is amusing to visually notice them in the pile, with every effort to find meaning redundant. Yet, what ends up revealing is a survey of small cultural tokens – ones that can be surprising (like the IELTS examination paper). It avoids *the pomegranate problem* with unapologetically placing the pomegranate, to later removing itself from being a pomegranate because of the object's continual recontextualization. This continual meaning of the objects, both internally and in relation with each other, create a space that perpetually self-creates surprising cultural meanings. The “rewriting” in the title affirms this cultural play.



Figure 8. Farhad Farzali, *Rewriting Childhood* (Detail), mixed media, 1989-2022  
Gazelli Art House, Baku, Azerbaijan. Photo document, August 2022.

<sup>17</sup> The image portrays Mirmövsüm Ağ, who was a person with physical disabilities, was believed to have supernatural powers by the people of Baku and its villages. The generational association with this image has significantly changed, and now has humorous connotations.

In this sense, I find Farhad Farzali's work quite successful. In his efforts to collect markings of his own childhood, he reveals otherwise negligible consumer objects to be cultural identifiers. Whether intentional or not, the process of moving around the objects, scoping out and identifying, gives a *vista* of the experience growing up in a post-Soviet Azerbaijan. He lovingly meddles with culture, acknowledging its strangeness, awkwardness and still places it as is, without romanticizing or scrutinizing.

To reflect on my practice, I am interested in creating this sensibility when grounding the textility of culture. As my project is comprised with found materials, I aim to pull these findings through their original context. The relationship of the visual and material elements would not be determined. But assembled and aggregated to perpetually emit cultural meanings, reflections, and impressions.

### **Tactile Culture**

Homi Bhabha in *Location of Culture* proposes an alternative to cultural pluralism and homogeneity. He proposes to understand culture in its *hybridity* – with the counter narratives that emerge from cultures' margins (minority, exiled, migrated, the colonized, women)<sup>18</sup> that informs the construction and dynamism of cultural making. I will use hybridity in a larger sense than its strict postcolonial understanding, as it applies to the Sovietized Azerbaijani context. Culture here, would not be located in the so called 'subject' or 'object,' but in the inbetween stage of enunciation. To quote Homi Bhabha:

For a willingness to descend into that alien territory – where I have led you – may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. To that end we should remember that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the inbetween space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture... And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 151.

<sup>19</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 38.

His particular usage of the words “carrying” and “emerge” propose not a definition nor a measurement of cultural formation. He instead creates space for change to continuously happen. To further expand on the space of enunciation, Bhabha points out to the moments of non-understandings as the tension points that heighten cultural differences, therefore, cultural makings. In the case of Soviet Azerbaijan, when thinking through the actual, this is the space existing between *xalq mentaliteti* and the forces Soviet modernization. The tension points that emerge as cultural confusion becomes the space in which cultural meanings expand from. The continual reflection that bounces in this in-between perpetually self-creates. These are the *intra-actions* in which complex systems emerge through the encounters of subject and object, and none that can exist without the absence of the other.

Although Nira Yuval-Davis critiques Homi Bhabha, her demand to locate gendered formations in cultural making becomes informative for Soviet Azerbaijan. Here, I would like to return to the “identity” of cultural making and how it is formed in nationhood. She notes that in cultural discourse, gendered bodies become the reproducers of narratives of nation-building. As mentioned before, notions of idealized ‘womanhood’ are tied to the reproduction and protection of culture’s identified making. The breakaway snaps of shameful ‘misbehavior’ (so to speak) become the forming of cultural change. These too, become the inter-weavings of opposing dynamics that make the textility of culture.

I noted that the actual of Soviet Azerbaijan’s cultural hybridity would be located in the inbetween space of *xalq mentaliteti* and modernization. Here, I will turn to the abstract space. Cultural meaning here would be located in the slow pace, slow hum, slow wind, a constant “*gəl*” – meaning “come” – the corners, the nooks, the aggregations.

I would like to position *ondan-bundan* as not emotional – in the sense that it does not, at least outwardly or immediately, intend to evoke a visceral reaction. Not in the sense that traditional cinema with a clear narrative arc would. Especially not with the material choices included the installation.<sup>20</sup> However, I acknowledge that, cultural making (as well as cinema *for* cultural making), or even cultural identifying is an emotional process. This includes collective reaction of historical events such as grief from collective loss, national joy from victory, shaming forces, and anger or even disgust to the enemy ‘other’. I hope to eliminate this sense of cultural emotion as much as possible, as I’m interested in this perpetual sense of

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<sup>20</sup> Here, I am thinking with Marcel Duchamp’s description of “visual indifference” in *Apropos of “Readymades,”* which I will return to later.

‘deconstruction’ and ‘reconstruction’ of cultural making that eliminates a strong (and often national) emotional bonding.

To move away from this sense of emotionally forming culture, I will turn to Sara Ahmed. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed explores how emotions work to shape surfaces and cultural positionings. She notes: “Bodies take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others... If emotions are shaped by contact with objects, rather than being caused by objects, then emotions are not simply ‘in’ the subject or the object.”<sup>21</sup> Here again, emotion – as similar to culture’s hybridity – does not reside at a specific location. Emotions become emotive, moving, movements and being moved that vibrate formations. To further connect emotions with film, I turn to Giuliana Bruno in her book *Atlas of Emotion*. She proposes to view cinema as (*e*)motive – the process of viewing moving images as movement itself, becoming a transit of exploration that exists between the viewer and the film-image.

“By working to conceive a methodological practice that is “in between,” we aim to corrode the opposition between immobility-mobility, inside-outside, private-public, dwelling-travel, and to unloose the gender boxing and strictures these oppositions entail...These spaces, which exist between housing and motion, question the very limits of the opposition and force us to rethink cultural expression itself as a site of both travel and dwelling.”<sup>22</sup>

In this sense, I am interested in a *passing* emotion. Here, emotion would not be located between object and viewer, but in the continual passing movement that perpetually shapes the other. To explore this movement or ‘passing’ I want to return to the *Location of Culture*. For Homi Bhabha, the “margins of hybridity, where cultural differences ‘contingently’ and conflictual touch, becomes the moment of panic which reveals the borderline experience.”<sup>23</sup> I am interested in this moment of ‘touch’ that occurs in this passing third space that initiates the so-called “others of ourselves.” This dimension of touch and emotionality add an additional layer of reflectiveness to the *textility of culture*. They reflect not on what the

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<sup>21</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 1 and 6.

<sup>22</sup> Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film*. (London and Brooklyn: Verso 2018), 99.

<sup>23</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 207.

differences are, but in the impressions that these differences emit. ‘Touch’ in textility, would not be read as contact per se, but in culture’s perpetual sensorial movements.

### ***An ondan-bundan Installation***

The phrase “ondan-bundan” can translate to “from this and that.” *ondan-bundan* implies a careless attitude of choosing from scattered elements to bringing them together. *ondan-bundan* plays with this tension between intentionality of bringing in, with the randomness of assembling and its disordered effects of dispersing. *ondan-bundan* runs with its internal pattern of logic, its dispersed parts perpetually generating relationships that could continuously emit outwards new meanings for Azerbaijan’s cultural textility. The name is humorous and self-aware.

The film scenes I have used in my installation are statically positioned in the space. Upon entering the gallery, the viewer is confronted with the men from *Bir Cənub Şəhərində*, returning the gaze of being looked at. The projector’s light hits the floor, creating an entryway with the men that slant against the walls in the shot. The footages of dancing women in *Arşın Mal Alan* are projected on the right wall next to the door. It is placed in the middle axis of the wall, only being contained there. The viewer faces *with* the traditional women and turns *to* them when viewing. If there is a centrality considered in the space, it falls on the white wall on the left, per the room’s orientation and proportion. The family footage from *Ötən İlin Son Gecəsi* is placed on the upper left corner. The spatial orientation creates a hierarchial dynamic within these footages. The three found footages pull from their distinctive origins to generate new relationships. The footage, although specific and referential to its Azerbaijani context, still become familiar to a foreign (in this context, unfamiliar with Azerbaijan) viewer. As the images and experience become universal in their context of men watching, women dancing and the family at dinner. It places the position of family dynamics as a moment of consideration between the gazes of *xalq mentaliteti* and the supposed traditionality of the dancing women. It asks the viewer to consider these films again with their Soviet context in relation to post-Soviet Azerbaijan and within each other. The space of the wall acts as the inbetween to emit dialogue. The presence of the effects of the materials distorts the gaping space between, creating passing moments of ‘touch’ and overlap.



Figure 9. *ondan-bundan*, 2023. Mixed media installation  
Experimental Media Space, OCAD University.

The materials used in the installation are predominantly found materials, which I have taken ready-made from OCAD's various reuse bins. The choice for the materials had to fit a few criteria. Foremost, they had to have textual qualities that could respond, refract, morph, or interact with the projector's light, and in turn the found footage from the three films. The found footage would be disrupted, dispersed, dissected, and *diffracted*<sup>24</sup> on the walls. Through the interference of the material silhouettes, the borders of the frame would be deregulated. By diffracting the found footage and its visual reconstruction, the film's linear narrative seizes. The supposed binary of *xalq mentaliteti* and Sovietization is expanded in the walls of the space through a feminist theorization. An alternative understanding in cultural formations is provoked through reading films with the senses.<sup>25</sup>

Through the viewer's positionings in the space, new cultural formations are found within the body. A visual *vista* forms with the fragments of refractions. Here, I connect with Guilana Bruno. She plays with the words "eye" and "I" that travels the panorama of the interior or exterior vista of a film shot. With the visual pleasure that derives from the "eyes" (or "I" as the passenger/observer that is viewing the shot), a haptic connection forms.<sup>26</sup> The

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<sup>24</sup> See Karen Barad, "Diffracting Diffractions: Cutting Together-Apart."

<sup>25</sup> For this research, I have purposefully not included Sergei Eisenstein's theory of montage. Although the relationships between visual images do overlap as spatial montage, I am more interested in going further with feminist theories applied to the installation.

<sup>26</sup> Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film*, 348.



interaction of materials and footage perpetuate multitude of meanings that are ‘caught’ with the eye. The eye traces the movement of the reflection on the walls, which is usually jagged, becoming illegible, even irritating. Through the perpetual motion created with the fans and the viewer’s movement in the space, the materials would begin swaying and rotating. Further dispersing, overlapping, and placing beside the dissected parts of the films away from their stationary positions and on the wall. As the final form of the installation was never stated, the reactions and footages in the space constantly change, perpetually avoiding a final statement. When spending a prolonged time in the room (and once the movements are not interfered with, falling into a slow rhythm) the chaotic movements of the reflections calm. The white noise of the fans continuously fills the space. There is a temporal space between the effects’ appearance and disappearance. As soon as it does reappear, it is never long enough and never the same way.

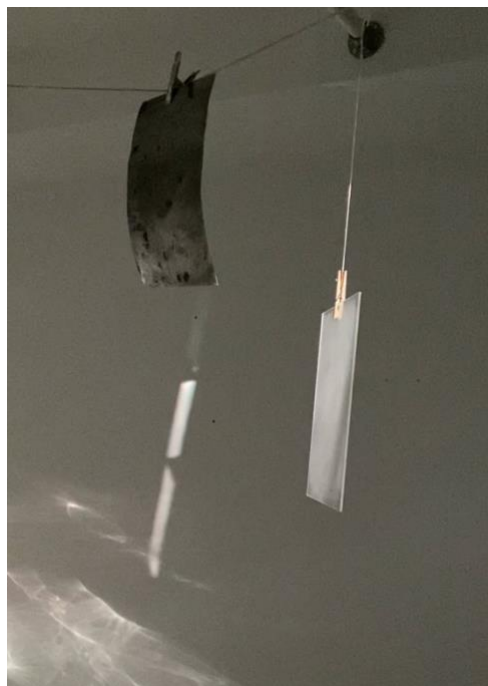


Figure 10. *ondan-bundan* (detail of hanging elements), 2023. Mixed media installation  
Experimental Media Space, OCAD University.

If the room is contained, spillage of the refractions occurs on the hallway once the door is opened. I embrace this as a natural consequence of the installation. The placement of the ‘stool’ – a tall, wooden box collected from a reuse bin – against the wall invites the viewer to sit *with* to view inwards into the room (if they desire to do so). The tulle curtains are folded on top, resembling a cushion. When thinking through the stool, I remembered the freshly ironed sheets that my grandparents would fold over on a chair next to their bed. Similarly, in

each finding and assembling process, *ondan-bundan* resembles these visual cultural vocabularies emerged from Baku: the streets, the nooks, the corners, the fragments, and the leftovers. They are referential, but not unique to Azerbaijan – this balance was important for me to reject *the pomegranate*. This vocabulary has helped me locate materials to imitate logics contextually in the available environment. Culture here, becomes a container of ‘cultural stuff’. Culture here, becomes where one is.

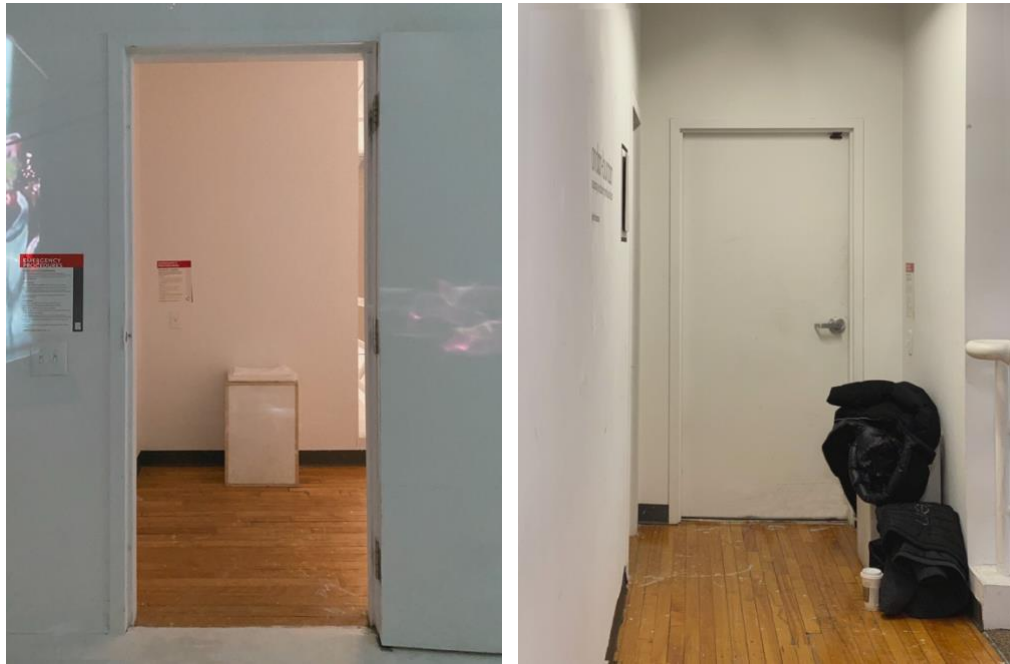


Figure 11. *ondan-bundan* (detail of stool), 2023. Mixed media installation  
Experimental Media Space, OCAD University.

Further on the hallway, there are two secondhand digital photo frames. Each small monitor displays two images and one video that was documented from my trip to Baku in August-September (see Figure 16 and Figure 17). They become an entry point for locating, a reference to the binary language, that would later be dispersed in the EMS room. The black frame displays *xalq mentaliteti*, the nationalism, and the gaze of men staring back at me (filming them). The brown frame shows image of alleyways, the clothes and carpets left to dry in the humid heat, with a video of *Bakının küləyi*<sup>27</sup> blowing construction material clung to *içərişəhər qala divarları*.<sup>28</sup> I hadn’t particularly sought out to document these images, but impulsively did so as I encountered them. They are away from the main city streets – showing sensibilities emerged from leftover fragments within Baku.

<sup>27</sup> “Baku’s wind.”

<sup>28</sup> *İçərişəhər*’s fortress walls.



Figure 12. *ondan-bundan* (detail of hallway in progress), 2023. Mixed media installation  
Experimental Media Space, OCAD University.

Each material's surface reacts to light differently, creating a sensorial hybrid through the relationship of re-constructed film, space and the body. When scavenging materials, I gravitated towards plexiglass, metals, fabrics and various soft papers. The clear plexiglass holds the projection faintly on its surface, tracing the highlights of the footage. The clear plexiglass transposes the image through its surface, allowing the footage to hit the wall that is behind. Simultaneously, it refracts the image clear and visible onto the opposite walls and the viewer that passes by. The black plexiglass reflects on its surface the viewer's body when approached closely, while still reflecting the projection onto the opposite walls. Some of the thinner plexiglasses are disfigured, morphing the footage in its reflection. The metals hold the projected image on its surface, rendering the image clearly. Its refractions are soft morphed colors of the projected footage. The curved metals refract the image in a half-halo shape. Its effects in the installation space are subtle, but noticeable. The metals' dark surface and effect act as grounding materials in the installation amongst the lighter and clearer materials. In contrast to the plexiglass and metal, the fabrics hold the image softly on its surface, morphing the footage with its folds. I included these fabrics as they closely relate to the curtains at homes and hanging cloths present in the streets of Baku. The materials were not changed, cut, majorly deformed from their original shapes, but kept within their found silhouettes. This was an important decision to avoid an imposition of meaning inherent to the material's shape. The qualities of these materials, especially in dialogue, play with the desire to feel nostalgia towards the three films.

The accumulated found materials, specifically the found pieces of metal and plexiglass, are displayed on a series of clothes lines near the ceiling of the gallery space. There are two types of clothes wire: the first is the classical rope, which I associate with the clothes lines in Baku's streets, the second is a metal line with a plastic coating, which I found peculiar (I've never seen them in Baku). I associated them with the metal wires dangling in the corners of Baku's streets. The organization of the found materials on the clothes lines are greatly instinctual – in this sense that I arrange them new each time. I am *indifferent*<sup>29</sup> to each individual material in the moment of choosing, instead focusing on the “in the moment” decision to use a given piece of plexiglass or metal. In fact, this instinctual approach means that the organization changes daily, an aspect of the installation I have reinforced by setting up and pulling down the materials each day of the exhibition. During this process of installing and de-installing, the ropes and strings became repurposed. It would be easier for me to tie in two ropes together to create a more desirable length to prop the materials from the clothes lines, than cutting out the correct proportion of string each time. The knots and excess rope becomes an added surface, the projection lands on its clumpy exterior.



Figure 13. *ondan-bundan* (details of the object and projections), 2023. Mixed media installation  
Experimental Media Space, OCAD University.

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<sup>29</sup> Here, I am thinking with Marcel Duchamp's definition of visual indifference described in *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (Cambridge: Da Capo Press. 1987), 21.

Over the course of the research and developments of the project, I have made numerous iterations of the installation. Throughout this process, I tested eliminating and eventually reintroducing these materials in their groups. The absence of the material group emphasized their importance. I *felt* their absence, and would immediately *feel* the impulse to re-introduce them in the next iteration. With each iteration, small moments of visual joy were lost. Some of the reflections and interactions between the footage would generate beautiful, morphed images. I would not be able to exactly replicate the effect. With this, the process of letting go became an integral part of the installation. Some objects broke, others got scratched, some developed rust.

The installation (and the objects that make it up) has always been mobile. The individual objects had been moved into the scrap bins before I took them. My (overloaded) blue cart has been greatly helpful in containing my collected materials, moving them from location to location. The materials are frequently moved from my OCAD studio space to the gallery, as well as earlier on between the 100 McCaul and 205 Richmond buildings. Upon entering the gallery space, I would always locate the cart against the black wall. Removing the materials from their bags and assemble them on the floor, I group them vaguely based on size and material qualities; for example, mirrored plexiglass, rectangular plexiglass, curved metals, anomaly shapes would each be a category. Since I have become fairly familiar with all of the materials I had collected, grouping them allowed me to quickly reach for any that I felt compelled towards. Inside the cart there are the fabrics, leftover wires, various pins, elastic bands, tools, and any bits and pieces that are leftover. As there is a timing component to the opening and assembling of the installation, knowing the orientation of the materials served me practically. I had to include the cart as part of the installation, keeping its natural orientation and assamblage for the final installation.



Figure 14. ondan-bundan (detail of the cart and objects in the space), 2023. Mixed media installation  
Experimental Media Space, OCAD University.

For the final installation space, the spatial orientation of the cart and materials are demarked with a simple black masking tape that extends up the walls. The demarkation serves as a space that I enter *into* and retrieve *from*. A found lamp that is attached to the cart with three tap lights surrounding illuminate the black wall space. The lamp has a blue film attached with a clip covering the lampshade's mouth. The subtle practicality of the film dims and cools of the light. It further gestures at the rest of the installation space, sharing the visual vocabulary. The space becomes active during the opening and closing hours, when the materials are moved inbetween the two sections. It sits quietly once the installment of the day is complete, only taking *on* the refractions from the projected footages.

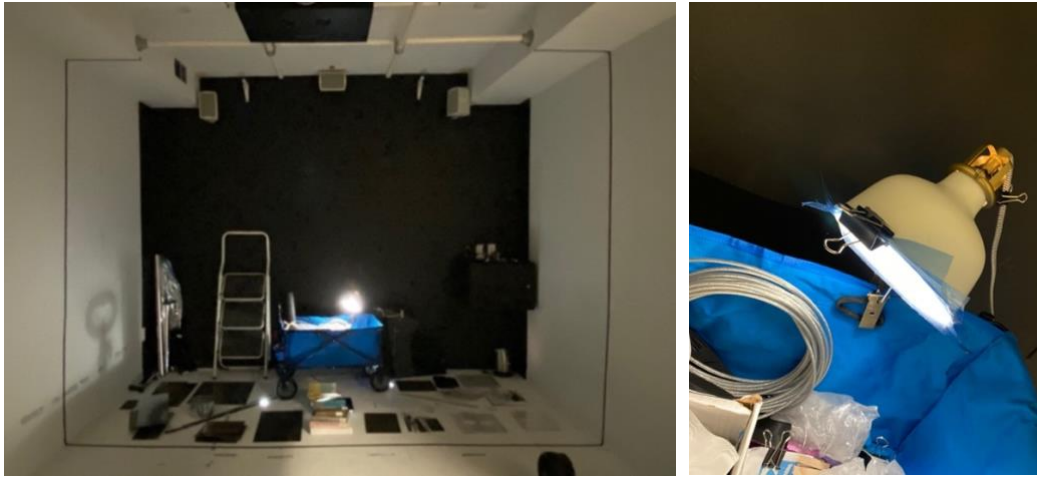


Figure 15. ondan-bundan (detail of the cart and objects in the space), 2023. Mixed media installation  
Experimental Media Space, OCAD University.

The process and logics of the installation revealed themselves to me as it came together. In many ways, this chaotic nature of the installation felt very “Azerbaijani” to me. I will not elaborate on what that implies, but instead conclude this research with the *this and thats* of my notes (exactly as they were written) from my last visit to Baku in late-August to mid-September 2022:

*I like how the light moves with the curtain and the wind. Everything feels animated, the wind is quiet but there are constant sounds from the road.*

*Much more rounded objects, woods, warm tones, colors, patterns, dust, mold, stains, papers, cables, plastic bags, smells of oil as you enter.*

*Slow pace, slow hum, slow wind, calling for fruit, calling for food, constant “gal.”*





Figure 16. Documentation, photo, video. Baku, Azerbaijan, August-September 2022.

*How the teapot will be under the cloth so it wouldn't cool down as fast, but that timeframe has passed a long time ago, so it has already cooled down.*

*Emergence of architecture.*



Figure 17. Documentation, photo, video. Baku, Azerbaijan, August-September 2022.

*Gazes of people look straight at you. Azərbaycanca insanlar ümumiyyətlə baxır.*<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Phrased humorously, roughly meaning “In Azerbaijan, people generally watch” (untranslatable).



*Aggregation, overwhelming, constant nagging, constant calling, pulling, oxşamaq sonra danlamaq,<sup>31</sup> we have always critiqued ourselves, blaring lights, hues of white piercing through, hues of yellow that puts you asleep. Green, reds, blues in neons. Flags flags flags.*

*Talks on the table are a ticking clock until someone mentions about war. Every conversation is a story recounting what happened. It doesn't feel like an exchange, but a lecture. There are clear hierarchies on the table, with the women running around and the men sitting on the table. My role as the daughter is to exhibit that good behaviour.*

*“Camaat baxır, eləmə, ayıbdı.”<sup>32</sup>*

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<sup>31</sup> “Praising, and then criticizing.”

<sup>32</sup> “The people are looking, don't do it, it is shameful.”

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## Documentation

The following documentations are from the iteration on March 9.

Includes documentation by Kalidas Unnikrishnan.

For video documentations refer to [aydanhasanova.com/ondan-bundan](http://aydanhasanova.com/ondan-bundan)



Figure 18. Aydan Hasanova, *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and thats* (hallway entry), 2023.

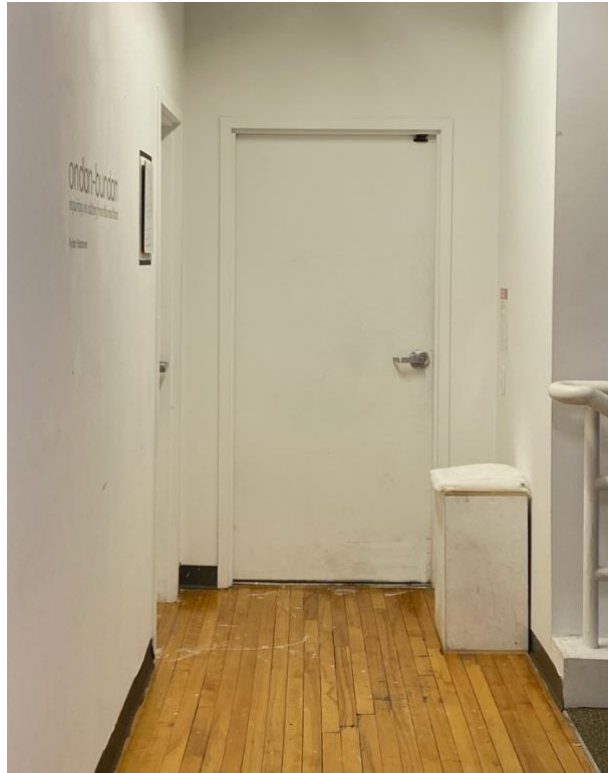


Figure 19. Aydan Hasanova, *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and thats* (hallway entry), 2023.



Figure 20. Aydan Hasanova, *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and thats* (hallway entry), 2023.

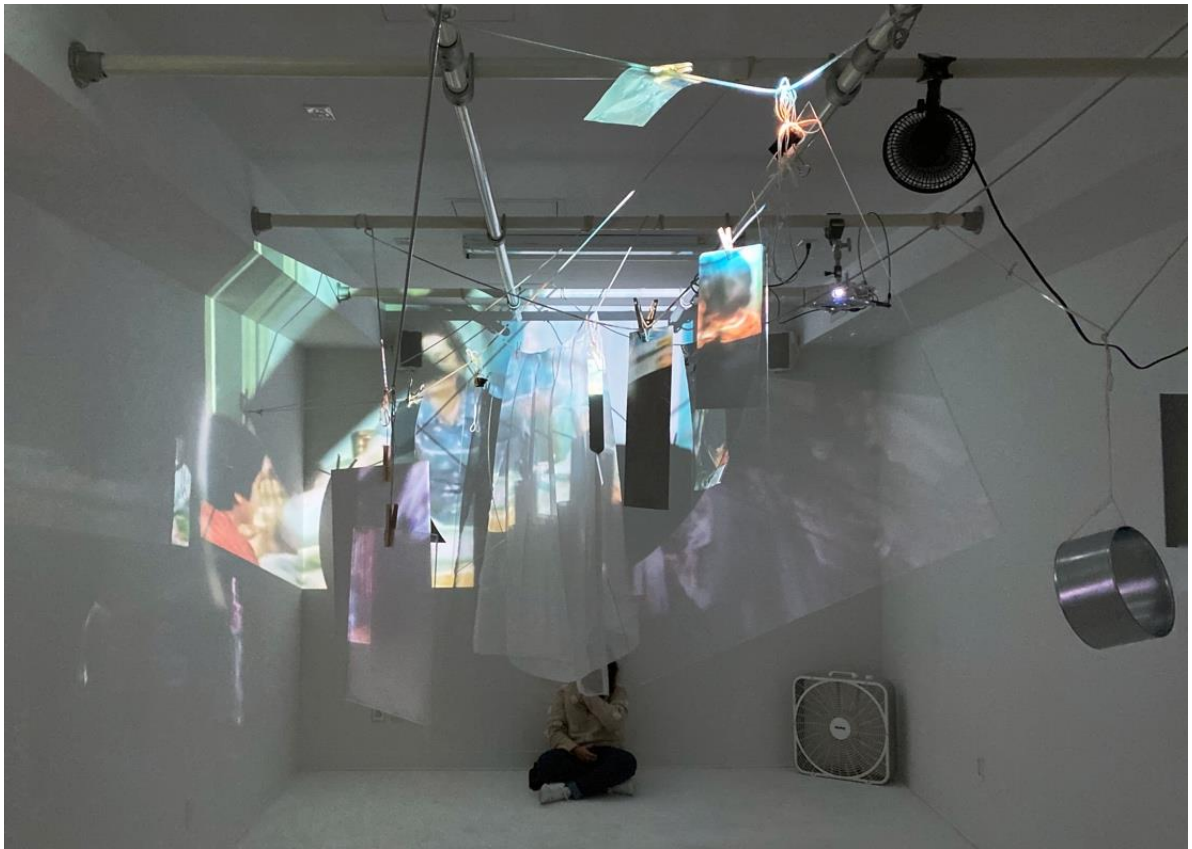


Figure 21. Aydan Hasanova, *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and thats* (installation view), 2023.



Figure 22. Aydan Hasanova, *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and thats* (installation view), 2023.

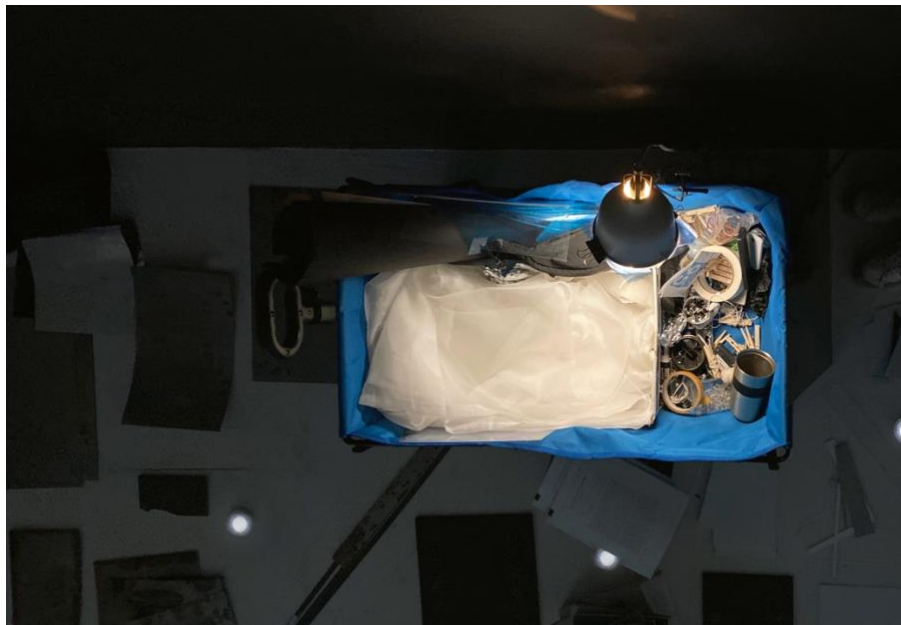


Figure 23. Aydan Hasanova, *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and thats* (detail), 2023.





Figure 24. Aydan Hasanova, *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and thats* (installation view), 2023.



Figure 25. Aydan Hasanova, *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and thats* (installation view), 2023.



Figure 26. Aydan Hasanova, *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and thats* (detail), 2023.

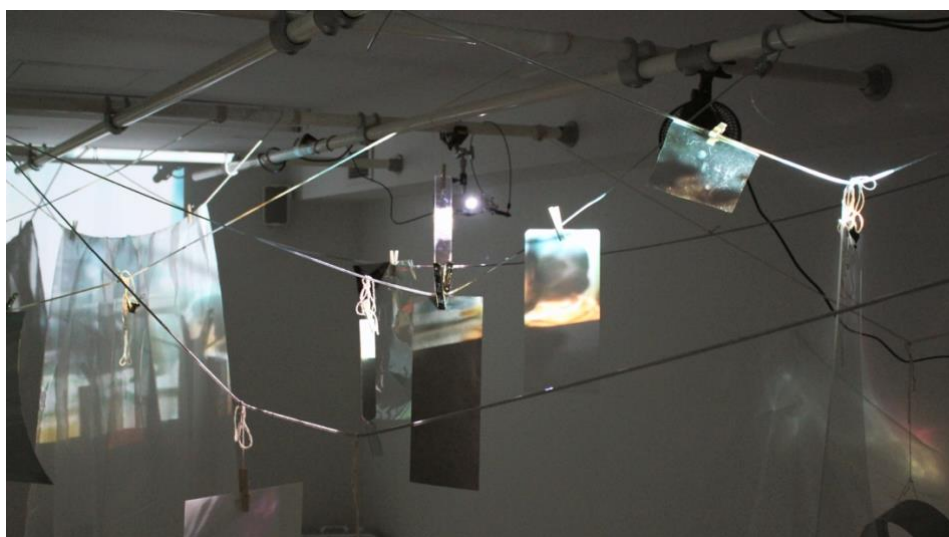


Figure 27. Aydan Hasanova, *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and thats* (detail), 2023.

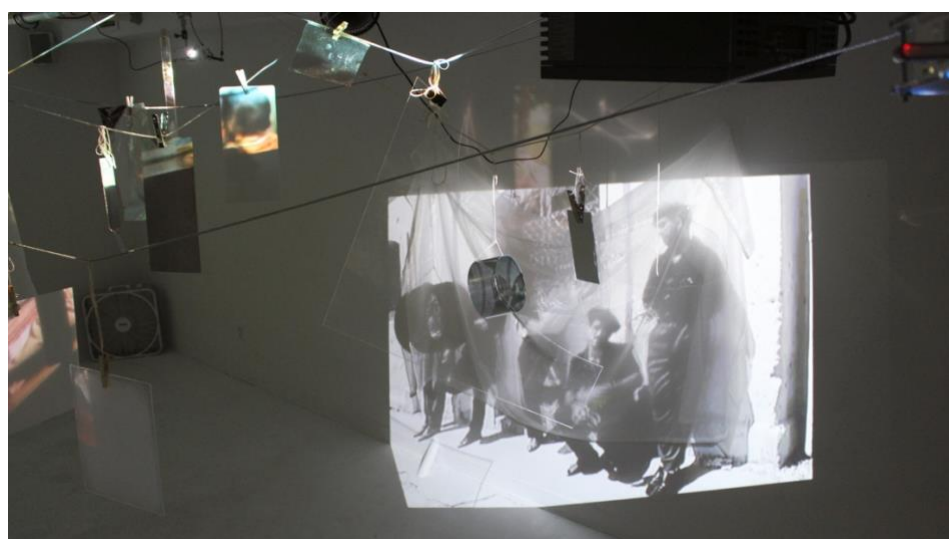


Figure 28. Aydan Hasanova, *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and thats* (detail), 2023.



Figure 29. Aydan Hasanova, *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and thats* (detail), 2023.



Figure 30. Aydan Hasanova, *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and thats* (detail) 2023.

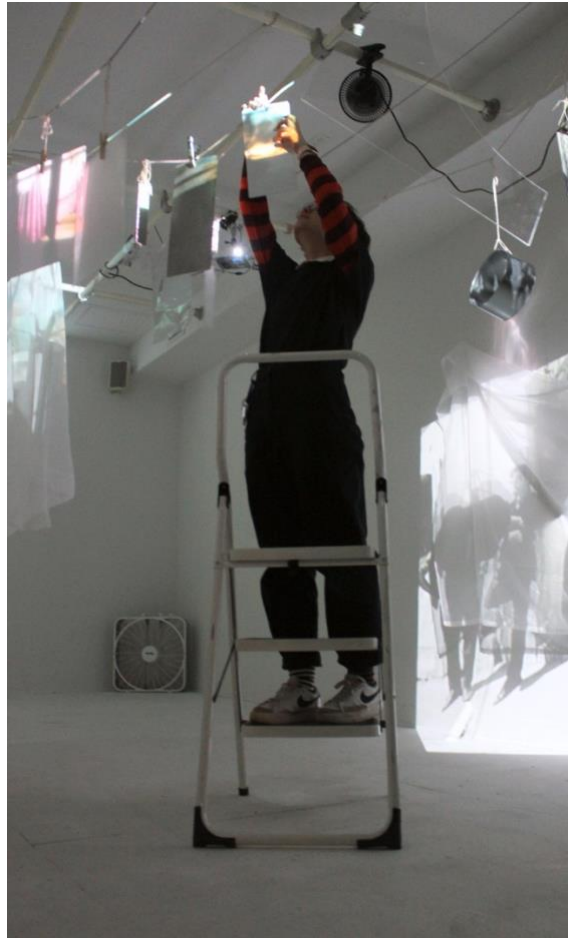


Figure 31. Aydan Hasanova, *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and thats* (installing), 2023.




Figure 32. Aydan Hasanova, *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and thats* (cart after de-install), 2023.



## Appendix: Exhibition Posters



Poster version 1



Aydan Hasanova  
MFA Thesis Exhibition

*inquiring on culture from*  
**ondan bundan**  
*this and thats*

**Experimental Media Space, 1<sup>st</sup> floor, 205 Richmond, OCAD U**


**1 March - 9 March, 11:30 - 15:30**

**opening reception March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 17:00 - 19:00**

for appointments email [aydanhasanova@ocadu.ca](mailto:aydanhasanova@ocadu.ca)

The installation *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and thats* explores the intra-actions within Azerbaijan's continuously changing cultural identity by fragmenting scenes from Soviet Azerbaijani films through projection onto found objects. It proposes a *textility of culture* - deriving from found materials, fragments, refractions, reconstructions, inbetweens, and haphazards.

Poster version 2



Aydan Hasanova  
MFA Thesis Exhibition

*inquiring on culture from*  
**ondan bundan**  
*this and thats*

Experimental Media Space, 1<sup>st</sup> floor, 205 Richmond, OCAD U

**1 March - 9 March, 11:30 - 15:30**

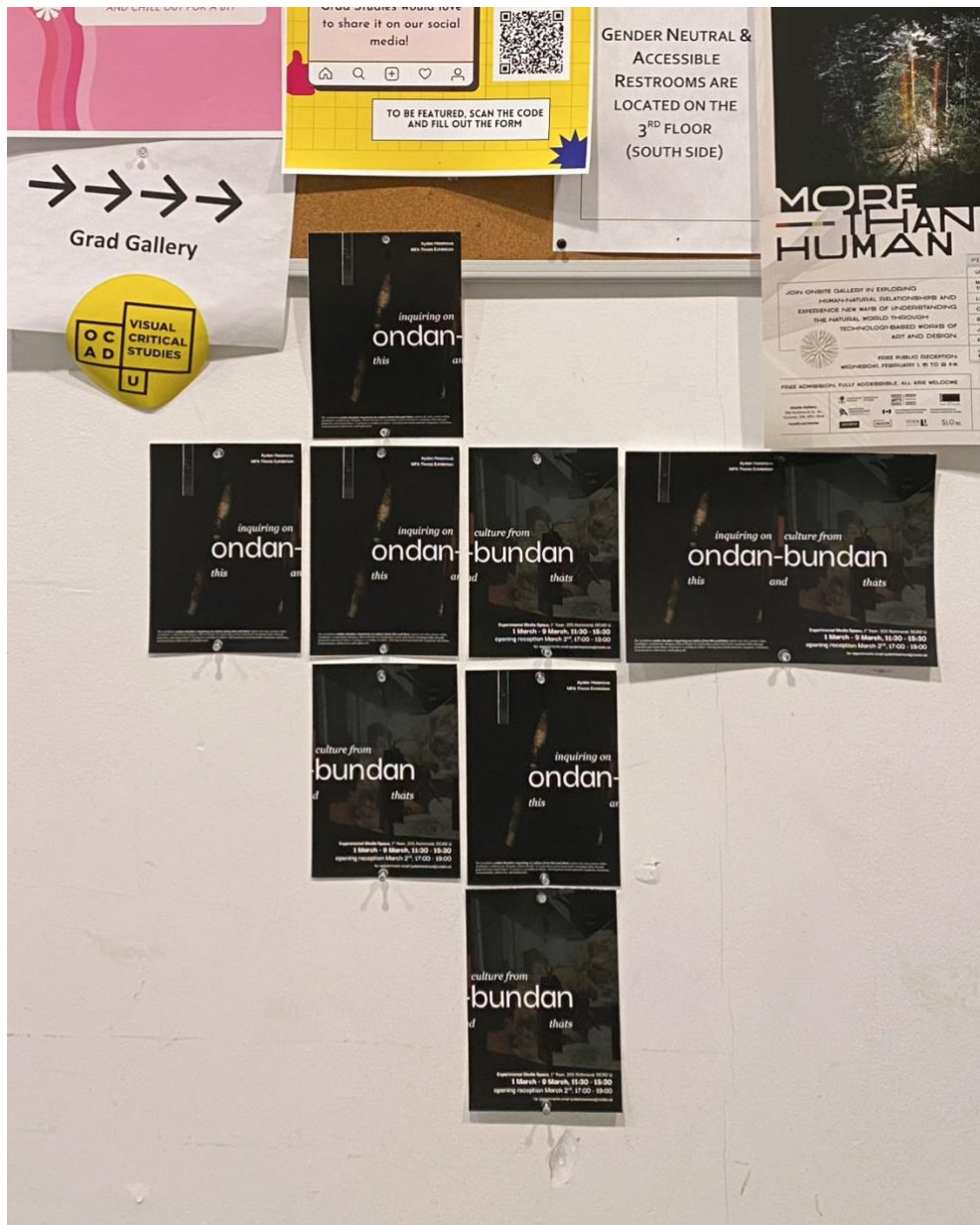
**opening reception March 2nd, 17:00 - 19:00**

for appointments email [aydanhasanova@ocadu.ca](mailto:aydanhasanova@ocadu.ca)

The installation *ondan-bundan: inquiring on culture from this and thats* explores the intra-actions within Azerbaijan's continuously changing cultural identity by fragmenting scenes from Soviet Azerbaijani films through projection onto found objects. It proposes a *textility of culture* - deriving from found materials, fragments, refractions, reconstructions, inbetweens, and haphazards.

Poster version 3





Poster outside of the gallery space, OCAD.