

Poulet-Malassis presents

# LETTERS TO

a film by Eric Baudelaire

with Maxim Gvinjia

# MAX



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Produced by Poulet-Malassis

Images: Eric Baudelaire · Sound: Juliette Navis · Editing: Eric Baudelaire & Laure Vermeersch

With the participation of:

Région Ile-de-France · Bétonsalon, centre d'art et de recherche · Bergen Kunsthall  
Argos, Center for Art and Media · Image/Mouvement, Centre national des arts plastiques  
UC Berkeley Art Museum / Pacific Film Archive

Design: Regular

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Paris, June 29<sup>th</sup> 2012

Dear Max,

Are you there?

Eric

--

“Abkhazia is something of a paradox: a country that exists, in the physical sense of the word (a territory with borders, a government, a flag and a language), yet it has no legal existence because for almost twenty years it was not recognized by any other nation state. And so Abkhazia exists without existing, caught in a liminal space, a space in between realities. Which is why my letter to Max was something of a message in a bottle thrown at sea, a wink to the world of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* that Maxim Gvinjia seems to inhabit. But my letter arrived, and somehow fiction has penetrated the real.”

And so Eric Baudelaire launched on a letter writing campaign, 74 letters sent over 74 days, a script for a voiceover to a film in which Maxim Gvinjia, former Foreign Minister of the unrecognized state of Abkhazia, becomes the narrator. The film is structured by this exchange: letters that should not have arrived and yet somehow reached Max, his recorded responses, and images that Eric Baudelaire filmed in Abkhazia once their correspondence ended.

**Letters to Max**

*a film by Eric Baudelaire  
with Maxim Gvinjia*

France - 2014 - 103 min  
1.85 - Dolby 5.1 - DCP  
English, Russian

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“As in *The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi and 27 Years Without Images...* (FID 2011), the tools of cinema are not only at the service of information, but also act as makers of artefacts. What landscape footage is shown here: that of an emerging nation or that of an old country? The mute landscape of nature or the talkative one of politics? Once again, Baudelaire drags us into the obscure and twisted meanders of history.”

Jean-Pierre Rehm  
FIDMarseille 2014

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Paris, October 9<sup>th</sup> 2012

Dear Max,

What does a diplomat for a country that isn't recognized do when he comes to the office in the morning?

Eric

--

Abkhazia seceded from Georgia, in the Caucasus, during a civil war in 1992-93. Like all disputed lands, Abkhazia is entangled in a conflicted narrative. To many Georgians, the breakaway State is a rogue nationalist regime, an amputated part of Georgia. To the Abkhaz, independence saved them from cultural extinction after years of stalinist repression and Georgian domination. To many observers, Abkhazia is simply a pawn in the Great Game Russia and the West have always played in the Caucasus. And while Abkhazia has had a territorial and human existence for twenty years, it will in all likelihood remain in limbo for the foreseeable future, which makes the self-construction of its narrative something worth exploring. If Abkhazia is a laboratory case for the birth of a nation, then it's Garibaldi and George Washingtons are still alive and active. Maxim Gvinjia is one of them.



When I dropped an envelope in a mailbox in Paris two years ago, I fully expected that a letter addressed to *Maxim Gvinjia, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sukhum, Republic of Abkhazia*, would come straight back to my studio with the notice “destination unknown.” But to my surprise, ten weeks later, I got a call from Max telling me he had received my letter, but could not reply on paper since the post office in Abkhazia cannot handle international mail. I have no idea how or why my letter arrived.

Paris, November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012

Dear Max,

Are we making a documentary or a fiction?  
Have we become characters in this film?  
What roles should we play?

Eric

--

I met Max in Abkhazia in the summer of 2000. Over the years, and frequent return visits, we became good friends. We talked, we drove around the countryside, I took pictures, wrestling with the question of how to photograph an imagined state, how to address the liminal existence of Abkhazia in an image. Meanwhile, Maxim was busy *constructing* Abkhazia, working on resolving the paradox of Abkhazia by seeking recognition by other states as an employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – a somewhat Ubu-esque occupation in a republic that had no official foreign relations. Maxim rose up the ranks of his day job, and in 2010, at age 35, he was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia. A few countries eventually did recognize Abkhazia: Russia, the world's largest country, was the first. Soon after, the republic of Nauru, the world's smallest country, followed suit. But the list isn't a whole lot longer.



In 2012, after new elections and a government shake-up, Maxim lost his job and returned to civilian life. That's when I sent my first letter to Max. A way to reconnect with a friend and test the waters to see how far Abkhazia had come. France still doesn't recognize Abkhazia, so my letter should not have reached him. But somehow it did. I sent a second letter. And another. I ended up sending a letter a day for 74 days. In each letter, a question, a story, a memory of the past 10 years. To these letters – a one-way correspondence since the postal miracle only works in one direction – Max responded by recording something onto tape. He spoke back to me, but I did not know what he was saying. When the correspondence ended, I went back to Abkhazia to collect the tapes and film some images. These images, and Max's recordings, became the material for *Letters to Max*: the chronicle of a friendship, its context in Abkhazia, and the particular history of a stateless state. An essay-film on how images relate to the fictional nature of the construct of nations, starring Maxim Gvinjia practicing the daily theater of statehood for a mostly empty audience.

## DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY

Eric Baudelaire is a French artist and filmmaker. His first feature, *The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi and 27 Years Without Images* (2011) retraced the revolutionary wanderings of the Japanese Red Army between Beirut and Tokyo. It premiered at FIDMarseille and won the Special Jury Prize at DocLisboa. *The Ugly One* (2013), which premiered at Locarno, was his first narrative feature. Also made in collaboration with underground filmmaker and former Red Army militant Masao Adachi, the film extended, through fiction, questions of resistance and regret raised in *The Anabasis...* Baudelaire's research-based practice also includes photography, printmaking and publications which have been shown in installations alongside his films in solo exhibitions at Bétonsalon in Paris, the Bergen Kunsthall, the Beirut Art Center, Gasworks in London, the Taipei Biennial 2012, and Berlin Documentary Forum 2.



## FILMOGRAPHY

*The Ugly One*  
2013, 101 minutes

Festivals:

Locarno Film Festival (cineasti del presente)  
DocLisboa, Lisbonne (New Visions)  
Dubai International Film Festival (Arabian Nights)  
Rotterdam International Film Festival (Bright Futures)  
Courtisane Festival, Ghent

*L'Anabase de May et Fusako Shigenobu,  
Masao Adachi et 27 années sans images*  
2011  
66 minutes, Super 8 et HD

Festivals :

DocLisboa, Lisbon (Prix special du jury)  
Punto de Vista, Pamplona  
CPH:DOX Copenhagen  
IDFF Jihlava  
Migrating Forms, New York (Opening film)  
San Francisco International Film Festival  
Visions du Réel, Nyon  
BAFICI, Buenos Aires  
FICUNAM, Mexico City  
International Film Festival Rotterdam  
Festival de Belfort  
52nd Festival dei Popoli  
Festival International du Film de La-Roche-sur-Yon  
Thessaloniki International Film Festival  
FID Marseille

*The Makes*  
2010  
26 minutes, HD

Festivals :

International Film Festival Rotterdam

[SIC]  
2009  
15 minutes, SD

Festivals :

International Film Festival Rotterdam  
Migrating Forms, NYC  
Courtisane Festival, Gent





**WITH**

Maxim Gvinjia

*and*

Sergueï Agumaa  
Sipa Labakhua  
Bagrat Gvinjia  
Ludmila Gvinjia  
Astanda Gitsba  
Arsana Gvinjia  
Arsou Gvinjia  
Rusto Agrba  
Batal Tarkil

**PRODUCED WITH  
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Argos  
Center for Art and Media

Image / Mouvement  
Centre national des arts plastiques

UC Berkeley Art Museum  
Pacific Film Archive

**CREW**

*Director*  
Eric Baudelaire

*Photography*  
Eric Baudelaire

*Sound*  
Juliette Navis

*Editing*  
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Laure Vermeersch

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Laure Vermeersch  
Juliette Navis  
Sergueï Agumaa

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Stéphane Elmadjian

*Sound edit and mix*  
Jean Holtzmann  
Julien Bonvicini