

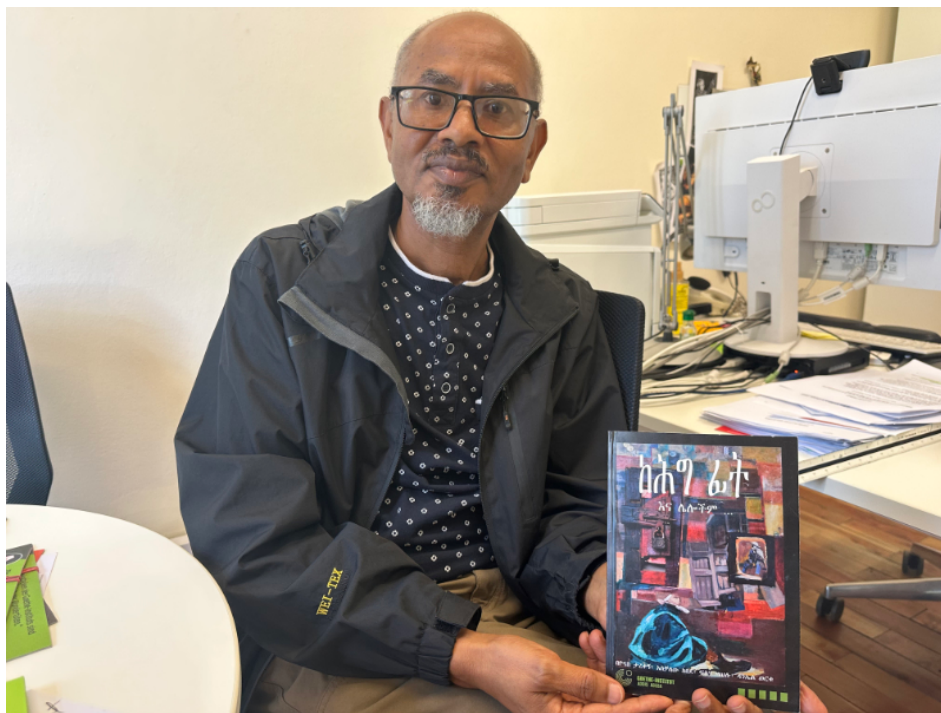
## SCHRIFT KUNST ÄTHIOPIEN | WRITTEN ART ETHIOPIA

### Research Trip Addis Ababa

Christa Baumberger

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‘Get to know the publishing scene? But which publishers? There aren’t any, are there...’. I’m sitting in Yonas Tarekegn’s office, my stay in Addis Ababa has barely begun, and my thoughts are swirling around in my head. Yonas has been running the Goethe-Institut library for more than twenty years in a beautiful old building near Sedest Kilo, Addis Ababa’s university district. He is a literary translator from German into Amharic – you can count those on one hand – and one of the best mediators between German and Ethiopian culture.



Yonas Tarekegn with a book he has translated, Goethe Institut Addis Ababa, May 2026.

I have come to immerse myself in Ethiopia’s current literary and arts scene. I’ve called my project ‘Schrift Kunst Äthiopien | Written Art Ethiopia’. I have long been fascinated by Ethiopia’s ancient written culture, and during previous visits I’ve already studied its languages. It is unique on the African continent, because Ethiopia, alongside Liberia, is one of the only countries that was never properly colonised. The Italians never got beyond establishing a protectorate; they failed to set up a colony. Around eighty different languages are spoken in Ethiopia today. They belong to

various language families – for instance, Amharic is a Semitic language, Oromo is a Cushitic language – to name just the two the most widely spoken languages.

This isn't my first time in Addis Ababa, yet I can hardly recognise the city. It is undergoing such immense change that it makes my head spin. Entire neighbourhoods are disappearing almost overnight; the small houses and communities are being torn down and high-rises erected – at a pace that is simply inconceivable to me, coming from sedate Switzerland.

And now this. Already I can envision my well-conceived project – which exists only on paper – going down the drain. 'But what about Shama Books, Ayaana Publishers?', I ask, 'Maaza Mengiste's anthology "Addis Ababa noir", or the many cultural-historical books by Richard Pankhurst, Fasil Giorghis, Denis Gérard or Hugues Fontaine about Emperor Menelik or the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway line etc.?' 'You have to take book publishing into your own hands here,' says Yonas laconically. 'From start to finish. Selecting texts, translating, editing manuscripts... even designing the covers, printing and distributing. If you want books to reach readers, you have to take them yourself to the small bookshops scattered around Addis, and negotiate their retail price there too.'

This marks the start of my research trip. And it's a hit. I hadn't planned the trip down to the last detail beforehand. Of course, I've done a lot of research and I bring with me the experience of five years with *litafrica*, a transcontinental literary project that aims to foster dialogue between authors and institutions from various African countries and Switzerland through exhibitions, events and a growing network. But this experience teaches me one thing above all: not to believe I can plan everything in advance from Switzerland.

Rather, to take the 'research trip' for what it is at its best: steps into the unknown, days full of surprises, traces of new smells and sounds, heightened perception, wonder, flashes of insight, upheavals, confrontation with my own cultural blindness, learning. And above all, this: encounters with people whose existence I am not even aware of upon my arrival. The research trip as an exercise in listening. Listening, I think, might actually be the most difficult art of all.

Back to Yonas's library office, where books are piled up high on the table. If publishing is largely left up to individuals themselves, I would like to hear from them, get to know their writing and their initiatives, and find out how they organise themselves and the structures within which they work. Yonas and the Goethe-Institut's director, Dr Angelika Eder, quickly put me in touch with a whole host of

literary figures. These days, his office is turning into a pop-up bookshop. In a metropolis that is so sprawling and in the clammy grip of the petrol crisis, getting about is often very difficult. Some authors therefore drop their books off at Yonas's, where I can collect them, and then the next time they come to the library, they collect payment for them.

Here I would like to report on my many encounters and introduce some literary figures and their projects. Of course, it's only a small glimpse of the literary and art scene. The very next morning I meet Yordanos Seifu Estifanos, who is an author, social scientist and translator from English into Amharic. For the past few months he has had his own office in a large building opposite the Abrehot Library in the centre of Addis Ababa, which he shares with the author and translator Hiwot Teffera ('Tower in the Sky' 2012, 'Mine to Win' 2016).



Yordanos Seifu in his office, Addis Ababa, May 2026.

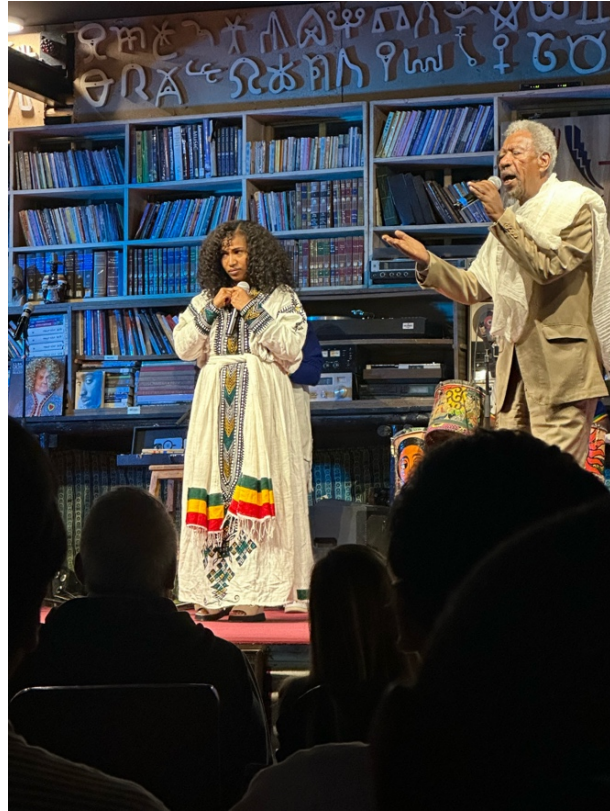
On the ground floor of the complex are small retail units and shops, including a small bookshop; upstairs, you find yourself in a labyrinth of corridors and rows of cubicle offices behind large glass dividers. A wide variety of companies are based here. Yordanos's office is tiny, yet his beaming face expresses what an immense privilege it

is to have his own little literary office right in the heart of Addis. Yordanos researches migration narratives on the continent, from Ethiopia to South Africa. In his books, he combines ethnographic research with oral narratives and forms of travel writing (e.g. ‘Wayfarers. Travel Journal’, translated from Amharic by Hiwot Tadesse, 2018). Our conversation revolves around migration, but also around ‘artistic research’ and the broad field of ‘mediation’, and we realise how closely our work aligns. We both explore the intersection between research and literature and, in our projects – be they books, exhibitions or other initiatives – seek out collaborative practices as well as the inclusion of as many voices and forms of dialogue as possible.

I meet the author Michael Shiferaw in Subcity Lemikura, a new city within a city in the east of Addis, where huge multi-lane roads wind their way through the urban canyons as so-called ‘corridors’. Michael earns his living as a consulting architect, but his passion lies in literature. As an author, translator and literary critic, he has published several novels and non-fiction works, as well as a study on the great Ethiopian poet and playwright Tsegaye Gebremedhin (1936–2006) (ሚስጢረኛው ባለቅኔ ‘The Mysterious Poet’. It is his best-known work and it shows me just how important this bridge to the past is. Writers engaging with their predecessors – something that may sound so self-evident in Switzerland and Europe – takes on a whole new urgency here. The literary tradition is vast, yet very few works have been translated, almost none into German, and there are very few literary studies.

The Ethiopian Academy of Sciences is of inestimable importance in this regard. Housed in the villa of former Foreign Minister Blaten Geta Hiruy Wolde Selassie and surrounded by a wonderful park, I am welcomed by Director Prof. Teketel Yohannes and Dr Tibebe Silassie. A permanent exhibition showcases cultural heritage with ancient manuscripts and special collections from the family library. The art section, headed by Ytagesu Getenete, makes an invaluable contribution to promoting this cultural heritage and provides a platform for contemporary literary and artistic creation.

The Fendika Cultural Centre, founded and directed by the dancer Melaku Belay, builds a very different bridge between tradition and innovation, between the past and the present. He had to give up his compound in Kazanchis when the entire neighbourhood was demolished as part of urban development, but has found it a new home, at least temporarily, at the Hyatt Regency Hotel. Tradition and innovation come together here in captivating performances; for example, the singer Nardos brings the ancient Azmari tradition alive in the present night after night.



Nardos and Fantu Mandoye, Fendika Cultural Centre, April 2026.

‘We cultural practitioners in Africa have as much to teach as we have to learn,’ concluded Sylvia Arthur, founder and director of the Library of Africa and The African Diaspora (LOATAD) in Ghana. A research trip organised by Pro Helvetia brought her to Switzerland in 2022, where she visited, among other places, Litar, the cultural institution I run in Zurich. We have been in contact ever since; in 2024, we jointly curated a litafrika exhibition at the Strauhof in Zurich, a collaboration that will continue this autumn at LOATAD in Ghana. ‘Learning should be a two-way affair,’ Sylvia’s words ring in my ears. Yes, that is precisely why I wanted to go to Ethiopia. To look inside the institutions there and learn how to establish them, build them up and make them flourish, despite all today’s uncertainties, without solid state funding or a comfortable cushion of private foundation finance.

Melaku Belay built the Fendika Cultural Centre in exactly this way: without outside help, but with a strong vision, optimism, a growing network and sustainable partnerships. Today Fendika is a ‘beacon’ in Ethiopia’s cultural landscape. I’m not sure whether this term from Swiss cultural funding really fits – certainly it does in terms of its influence, but it doesn’t come with the generous subsidies enjoyed in Switzerland.



Yimtubezina Museum, Addis Ababa, May 2026.

The Yimtubezina Museum and Cultural Centre is small, yet it is an absolute rarity, and is situated in a unique location. It is the former home of Mrs Yimtubezinash Habte. I mention this because very few houses in Addis used to belong to a woman. Abel Assefa had researched the history of the house and its family, and succeeded in ensuring that the house was preserved and turned into an exhibition space. By Swiss standards, that might not sound particularly extraordinary either. But there are very few houses left in Addis dating from 1900. Another example is the house of the Swiss engineer Alfred Ilg (1854–1916), who became the first Councillor of State under Emperor Menelik II (1844-1913). Both are historic buildings that have been carefully renovated and, what's more, furnished with original pieces.

One must also be aware of the Yimtubezina Museum's location: right in the heart of Addis, in what is now Friendship Park, a newly created, extensive park near the Presidential Palace. There it now stands alone, and Abel Assefa has made it his mission to convey Ethiopia's rich culture in an innovative way through changing exhibitions. He is a director, curator, scenographer, photographer and graphic designer rolled into one – a huge undertaking – and I am impressed by how thoughtfully and resolutely he tackles it all.



Helen Zeru und Netsanet Gebremichael, Addis Ababa, May 2026.

One of the most beautiful and inspiring meetings takes place on my last afternoon, with Netsanet Gebremichael and Helen Zeru. Netsanet is a researcher in African Studies at the University of Addis Ababa. She, too, is keen to transcend academic boundaries. That is why she founded Qibibilosh, a platform for film, dialogue and exhibitions that aims to promote intergenerational dialogue and pan-African knowledge exchange. In a unique discussion format, she brings together women from different generations: artists, authors, women's rights activists and many others. This format reminds me of our 'Pioneers' series, which we launched this spring at Litar. In both cases, older and younger literary and artistic creators engage in conversation with one another. Helen Zeru is an artist and performer; she explores mourning rituals and collective artistic processes and shows me little booklets she has produced with art students during a residency and workshop in Hamburg. Once again it becomes clear how fruitful it is when boundaries become permeable: between the arts, between art and science, between individuals and collectives.

I realise just how empowering this exchange was, and how powerfully it lingers, when I land back in Switzerland just a day later. The laughter rings in my ears, and stays with me throughout the following week.



Abrehot Library, people waiting to enter the library on Patriots' Day, Addis Ababa, 5 May 2026.

Literature – and reading in general – may seem like a luxury to many in a country where few people have a room of their own or a table at home where they can work undisturbed. That is precisely why public spaces where these things are available free of charge are all the more important: tables, a wealth of books and peace and quiet. The new Abrehot Library in the centre of Addis Ababa is just such a place. It's inviting and spacious, with a central atrium around which staircases wind their way up several storeys. Each floor has open reading rooms, and on the ground floor there is a long row of tables with permanently installed tablets. Newspapers are laid out on the tables and seating invites visitors to linger. It is an open, airy space that encourages reflection. And, most importantly, the Abrehot is accessible and free to everyone, including children. There is a dedicated children's library for them. On both of my visits, the library was completely full.

Just as important, however, are alternative spaces, smaller neighbourhood initiatives such as Sifra, which Yordanos shows me near Arat Kilo. This small book space has only recently opened and is constantly evolving: it is a library, a co-working space, and has recently started serving coffee too. Here, the books leave their shelves and transform into art objects. Books can even fly! Like summer birds, they hover from the ceiling and roll their pages along the walls. I am fascinated; for many years I have

been staging language in space, searching from exhibition to exhibition for new ways to present books as aesthetic objects. Here I find inspiring answers.



Sifra Alternative Space, Addis Ababa, May 2026.

Equally inspiring, in terms of the artistic treatment of language, is the Zoma Museum in the Mekanisa district. Over the course of eight years, the artist Elias Sime and the curator Meskerem Assegued have transformed the site – once an inhospitable wasteland where local residents dumped their rubbish – into a flourishing garden. A Garden of Eden in the heart of Addis. Perhaps one must have explored the metropolis on foot to appreciate the magical resonance the word ‘garden’ holds here. In a city where every plant must fight for survival, they have created an art project that preserves traditional mud-brick construction, with Amharic characters forming artistic ornaments on the walls. The Zoma Museum itself is a work of art, where art and language, ecological awareness and education (it even incorporates a comprehensive school) come together. I catch myself thinking: ‘that’s how I’d like Litar to be in ten years’ time’.



Zoma Museum, Addis Ababa, May 2026.

Ethiopia and Switzerland – at first glance, the two countries could hardly be more different. What do I take away with me? A strong impression of just how rich literary life is, the passion with which personal initiatives flourish, and everything that can emerge from them. Furthermore, I take a strong commitment to the niche. Here and there, it seems to me that literary innovation thrives and flourishes, particularly in small places. Litar, too, is a small institution, and that is a good thing.

Connections, interests, dialogues – which should all lead further, because the journey has only just begun. The aim is for us to organise an exhibition together in 2028. We shall see where this journey takes us. I'm looking forward to it...

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All photographs: Christa Baumberger.

## **Christa Baumberger**



Photo: Nakarin Saisorn, Zurich 2025

Christa Baumberger is an author, curator and researcher based in Zurich. She is the founder and artistic director of Galerie Litar, a unique space dedicated to literature and art, set in an old painter's studio. In her literary exhibitions, she works across disciplines, incorporating video, sound, and audio formats. Her approach is feminist, transdisciplinary and participatory. Her current passions are the intersection between written and oral practices, (body) archives, individual and cultural memory, as well as nature writing and ecocriticism. As artistic (co-)director of litafrika, she strongly believes in mutual learning and intercontinental dialogue and loves to work in changing collectives.

### **The “Written Art Ethiopia” Project**

Ethiopia has one of the oldest written cultures on the African continent; in Europe, however, the myth of ‘oral Africa’ persists. One goal of the artistic research was to dive into the history of the Amharic script, and explore how current artists use it in their work. A second aim was to engage in dialogue with contemporary authors, publishers and translators as well as with literary institutions. Two institutions in Addis Ababa were therefore of particular interest: the Zoma Museum, an environmentally conscious art project led by the artist Elias Sime and the curator Meskerem Assegued, and the Fendika Cultural Centre, led by the dancer Melaku Belay.

This artistic research aims to lay the foundations for a collaboration with writers, artists and institutions in Ethiopia, in order to realize a joint exhibition project, ‘Written Art Ethiopia’.