

Adieu Parajanov

Contemporary Art from Armenia

Armenia, situated on the border between eastern and western cultures, must balance radically different conceptual worlds. After a “romantic” phase of fighting for democratization and self determination and the declaration of independence in 1991, the former Soviet republic, with its three million inhabitants, is currently experiencing turbulent times: a boom in nationalism, the conflict over the Karabach mountain enclave, a severe economic crisis resulting in a wave of emigration, and a liberalisation of society. Today, Armenia is also the site onto which an increasingly active, globally dispersed Diaspora community projects its ideas of “home”. Of the art scenes on the border between Asia and Europe, those in the Caucasus republic are among the most diverse. For western audiences, this art remains much too unfamiliar. For many, the great filmmaker Sergei Parajanov (1924-1990) is still representative for contemporary art from the Caucasus. “Adieu Parajanov” offers insight into contemporary art in Yerevan, which has developed independently from institutions since the mid-1980s. The first museum of modern art in the Soviet Union was founded here in 1971, but, even before Perestroika, the first autonomous artist-run initiatives had also formed. With this as a starting point—the activities of the artists and the initiatives that they founded—“Adieu Parajanov” tells a little story of the scene in Yerevan in recent years through a selection of documents, manifestos, photos, and other materials being exhibited for the first time. New videos, photoworks, and actions present the work of a young generation of artists not influenced by the Soviet legacy or new nationalism.

Hedwig Saxenhuber
and Georg Schöllhammer



Invitation
to the exhibition Adieu Parajanov,
photo: Azat

Between Illusions and Reality

Hamlet Hovsepian

Untitled,
Installation in Ashnak, slide, 1981



Text: Ruben Arevshatyan

The processes that have been taking shape within the Armenian contemporary art scene over the course of almost two decades developed parallel to the country's serious and intense political and social changes. The new artistic wave that began to gain momentum locally beginning in the mid-1980s, subsequently coincided with momentous socio-political upheavals in conjunction with the romantic phase of struggle for democratization and independence, the nationalistic boom, the Karabach war, severe economical crisis, and the subsequent liberalization of society.

Though the development of these processes was chronologically interconnected, the artistic expressions of the new wave were essentially deprived of explicit social relevance. These expressions developed parallel to social turmoil, focusing more on representational and thematic reconsiderations of a domineering 1980s aesthetic and subject of both formal and also unconventional art of the time. This created strong opposition towards the new artistic movement from the part of already existing art institutions and critics as well as social opinion.

Confrontation might seem quite strange at first glance since by the 1970s, Armenia, which was Soviet, was informally considered one of the most liberal and open minded of the former Soviet republics. Or it might be better to say that central power systems in Moscow were obliged to tolerate the liberal habits

of its southern periphery in order to avoid the accumulation of tensions aggravating within society during the 1960s. The ideological pressure decreased to a minimum. There was a more or less constant import of information coming from the West due to Diaspora connections. Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, became one of the most important centers echoing the hippie movement, which by that time penetrated the Soviet Union with rock music and alternative art. The architecture of the 1970s was released from the classicist leftovers of a totalitarian style and applications of national motifs as found in architecture of the 1960s, and returned to modernist forms and principles. A new literary magazine "Garoun" (spring) appeared, which started to publish new local writers as well as translations of modern European, American, and Japanese literature and philosophy. The ideas of French existentialism became very popular due to these publications.

At the time, the Yerevan Museum of Modern Art was established: the first and for a long time the only modern art museum in the Soviet bloc. Its creation was initiated by art critic Henry Igutyanyan. The museum presented art that contradicted established perceptions but at the same time avoided an open confrontation with ideology. Art trends considered as alternative for that period were abstract expressionism and surrealism. Artists of the time, such as Hakop Hakopian, Valentin Potpomogov, and Yervand Godjabashian, etc., focused more on sensual individuality, phantoms of imagination, and mysticism which they formally referred to the forgotten medieval Armenian culture.

From the mid 1970s through the '80s, within and parallel to existing institutional systems, another situation was developed by the artists who considered themselves to be "nonconformists". In the beginning, that scene was exceptionally fragmented. Hamlet Hovsepian, for instance, together with Ashot Bayandour, were consorting more with left wing art circles in Moscow throughout the 1970s and '80s and after coming back to Armenia continued to live isolated life styles. Living in Ashnak village, cut off from the scene in Yerevan, Hamlet Hovsepian's



Samvel Hovhannisian
Untitled, 1994

art and explicit 16mm films were first introduced to an Armenian audience in the 1980s. The other artists such as Varoujan Vartanian, Seyran Khatlamajian, Vigen Tadevosian, Edouard Kharazian, the Elibekian brothers, and Vartan Tovmasian, etc., who were innovators in the already established aesthetic traditions in painting and sculpture, occasionally upset the balanced atmosphere of periodic exhibitions organized at the Artists' Union and sometimes provoked the Union's opposition towards their artistic "dissent". That opposition sometimes resulted in the exclusion of their works from exhibitions or even the closing of their group exhibitions before they had a chance to open. By the beginning of the 1980s, a new scene of younger artists also started to develop, which together with the "nonconformists" from the older generation initiated a number of artistic events at other public spaces outside of existing art institutional networks (outdoor exhibitions in 1978-1980, and from 1980-1986 exhibitions and happenings at the Yerevan State Conservatory, Education House, and the Aesthetic Center).

In 1987, a group of artists that had fragmented off from the scene initiated an exhibition held on the 3rd floor (non exhibition space) of the Artists' Union in Yerevan. That exhibition

became a starting point for the group, the "3rd Floor", which made the transition from a "nonconformist-cultural dissident epoch" to the alternative artistic situation in Armenia.

The artists that were initially involved in the group followed two main directions in their artistic approaches. Some followed and went deeper into metaphysical art's creative methods and philosophy and others were interested in the representational aspects of a new image relevant to the reality they were experiencing. That approach found its representation in artworks which are distinguished today in the local scene as Armenian pop art, an art that was ironically reflecting the imaginary world of the consumer more on the aesthetic and less on the social level, foretelling at the same time the advent of that type of society and the state of the lonely individual in those transformations.

It is worth mentioning two important works of two different artists done at two different times:

"Religious War" 1987 by Arman Grigoryan and "The Triumph of the Consumer" by Garineh Matsakyan 1996 (used as a title for a solo exhibition). Grigoryan deals with the problem of an individual revolting against society and its values. Matsakyan expresses the state of imaginary apathy with the emphasized formal aes-



Arevik Arevshatyan, Ruben Grigoryan
The Brotherhood of Humanity,
photo-installation, 1996

Norair Ayvazyan Shamiram
performance, 1983



thetics of pop culture as the only way out from deadlock and suicidal tendencies.

The appearance of new alternative artistic scenes coincided with the country's intensifying sociopolitical developments connected first with Perestroika and later with social movements for democratization and independence. The old state institutions such as the Artists' Union sensed the upcoming crisis and decided to concentrate on new art trends (the first and following exhibitions of the "3rd Floor" took place at the Union from 1987-1994), considering them as a secondary phenomenon. However, after the Ministry of Culture made a few attempts to present the new trends in Armenian contemporary art in the framework of officially organized representational exhibitions (Bochum 1995, Moscow 1995), the same Artists' Union criticized and shut its doors to these art groups. The reaction of the local audience to those exhibitions and that kind of art in general was not positive. The first limitation for acceptance of this kind of art was its form, and second, its content, which at first glance had nothing to do with local reality.

Little by little, the postmodern approach became increasingly relevant to the local art situation. The reality of political instability, war, and the trade embargo chilled the artists' revolutionary transport. The change in the social formation and the reappraisal of values brought up the old question of nature or reason. Installation projects like "Museum Hermeticum" 1995 and "The Brotherhood of Humanity" 1996 by the artist couple Arevik Arevshatyan and Ruben Grigoryan reflect both the state of isolation and the endeavor to reunite with the whole, working as a closed cycle. The "Act group", perhaps one of the most socially oriented, ("PS exhibition" 1994, "Art Demonstration" 1995), eventually found itself in a situation where social phenomenon could be considered as art itself without any artistic interference. Other artistic interventions such as "Geo Kunst Expeditions" had more the character of a seriously organized game, the goal of which was to interact in alternative ways with strictly developed structures without breaking the rules—(inofficial participation in Documenta X, 1997, pseudo-journalistic reportage at the Tbilisi biennial 1996). The "Exhibition of 9" organized by the Armenian Diaspora artist from New York Sonya Balasanian in Yerevan in 1992, became the first step in the process of establishment of the Center for Contemporary Experimental Art. By the time the center was officially inaugurated in 1996, it had realized a number of local and international joint projects and from 1995 till 2003 the center presented the Armenian pavilion at the Venice Biennial. The arrival of the Center evoked controversial reactions in social thinking and in the local institutional network. The essential point of discord was the perceptual reconsideration of con-

temporary art as a dynamic creative sphere of social thinking in contradistinction to the prevailing perception of art as a media for manifestations of particular irrational, subjective, lucid moments. The existing notorious social aversion to the influential essence of the new aesthetics had now shifted to a different critical level where an institution was blamed in the obscure policy oriented at annihilating the national core of local art and culture.

In these intense circumstances, in 1997 the director of the Museum of Modern Art, after negotiations with the Yerevan Municipality, decided to abandon the cylindrical pavilions it had been occupying since 1984 due to their technical inadequacy with the stipulation that the Municipality construct a new building for the museum in the same vicinity. This news sent out a real shockwave in the circles of the alternative art community. The "Barrels" were a beloved space for exhibitions and art interventions. Besides, due to their architecture, the "Barrels" had also gained a valid image in the left wing art circles in the countries of the former Soviet Union. It was hard to imagine those late Soviet modernist style buildings in a different use. But surprisingly (or because the municipality could not find a purchaser for rather utopian and quite inconvenient circle edifices), the municipality did not turn the Barrels into a supermarket. The newly established Municipal HAY-ART Cultural Center continued the tradition of using the Barrels as a public space for contemporary art.

The strategy that the center chose was oriented towards overcoming the dominant introverted character of local culture as well as contemporary art in order to focus more on international and joint projects. The exhibitions and projects organized by the center were oriented toward investigating the complex interrelation of social, political, and cultural phenomena considered in the paradigm of subjective artistic reproductions of reality.

Some of the projects realized by the center during those five years disclosed the institution's strategic orientation. In 1999, in collaboration with institutions in Tbilisi, Moscow and Vilnius the Center realized two major international joint projects—"Great Atrophy" and "Shut City". Both projects investigated through contemporary art the transformations of a world outlook in the context of the positions of diverse situations, which until recently shared the same social and cultural reality. "Parallel Reality", a joint project by Austrian and Armenian artists in cooperation with "Springerin" and "Utopiana", a project organized by the Utopiana association at the HAY-ART Center in 2001, investigated the urgency of utopian ideas in the context of global social, political, and cultural transformations through current artistic and theoretical perspectives. In 2002, the Center concentrated entirely on the investigation of the local contemporary art situations.



The Center for Experimental Art
ACCEA in Yerevan,
photo: Ruben Arevshatyan



One of the exhibition halls
of the HAY-ART Cultural Center
in Yerevan, 2000

In 1998, in Gyumri (the city that was destroyed by the 1988 earthquake), the first international Biennial of contemporary art was organized and the Gyumri Center for Contemporary Art was established. Within six years, the Center had organized three Biennials based on different concepts and structural models in tight collaboration with local and international art institutions. Besides offering different mottos, the curators Vazgen Pahlavouni, Tadevosyan and Azat Sargsyan, also offered different structural models for each Biennial, displaying an explicit example of juxtaposition of diverse and sometimes controversial artistic and curatorial positions of international, Diaspora, and local scenes oriented to rehabilitating the concrete cultural environment of a concrete dead zone.

Despite the diversity that developed in the institutional contemporary art scene in Armenia and the intensifying interrelations with international artistic, intellectual, and institutional networks, the situation for Armenian contemporary art today is still at a complex juncture in terms of the serious problem of local social demand. The vague illusions that the institutionalization of the artistic situation which began to develop sixteen years ago would have provided a social demand and would provoke the “civilizing processes” is failing today against the backdrop of “culturalization” developments in Armenian neo-liberal sociopolitical and cultural reality. Institutions themselves arose in a quite shaky, unstable state balance between political uncertainty and economic threat imposed by fragmented neo-liberal power systems.

In the artistic productions and different projects created within these last few years, the problem of interrelation of subjective reflections and autonomous politics to culture-based identity formation comes up in different ways and in different aspects.

A new society's attraction to universalism and formal, fetishistic conceptions of art as an economic and political product oriented towards filling the cultural rift created by the estrangement between the individual and the artificiality of social structures, has been reproduced in various ways in art, where neo-liberal social pragmatism has an inconsistent character as derived by artistic applications of the same social structuring methods.

In those reproductions, artists concentrate in addition to the issues of the lonely individual frustrated by ideological and social pressures as seen in the context of global changes in the micro world model in the age of the collapse of illusions, also on re-examining the meaning of art and its position in society.

Though the picture can seem quite dramatic, the artistic approaches comprise ironic attitudes towards those serious transformations, which in fact corresponds to the general situation. The state of the contemporary art situation in Armenia today perhaps could be considered as a quintessential evolution of inter-

connected social and cultural processes related to the social illusions that had existed in particular periods of Armenian modern history and their actual materialization. But the main focus that the artists in Armenia's contemporary art scene welcome is the problem of the interrelation of individual autonomous systems with the fractured and hybrid state developed as a result of social, political, economic, and of course cultural contradictions occurring between illusion and reality: A state, connected with internal and external processes, in which individuals are trying to sustain themselves as well as illusions and a sense of reality.

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Karine Matsakyan
The Triumph of the Consumer,
oil on canvas 1996



Metaphors of Transition, or: Contemporary Art in Post-Soviet Armenia



Samvel Saghatelian The body of love, painting, 2001

Text: Nazareth Karoyan

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, during the first years of independence, a unique intra-cultural interchange took place in Yerevan's contemporary art scene. A number of artists (Kiki, Hajian Armen, Sev Hendo, Ashot Ashot) left for the West, namely for either the U.S.'s west coast or for Paris. At the same time, another group, mainly from the U.S.'s east coast (Charlie Khachatryan, Markos Grigoryan, Sonia Ballasanian, and Kartash Onik), were making attempts to settle in Armenia. At least in the sense of creativity, they were already integrated in the Armenian art scene. Those who left, as well as those who arrived, were among the significant figures of contemporary Armenian art. Therefore, it is more important to find out what those who left took with them and vice versa (i.e. what those who arrived brought). But first, we should say a few brief words on how it was possible for the contemporary art scene to re-actualize itself in such "traffic".

Although contemporary Armenian art was able to expand in the last decade, we must nonetheless begin with the assumption that this is limited and has only partial acceptance. Its development is characterized by bursts, breaches, and hyperbolic transitions rather than permanence, regularity, and stability. But this is true not only of contemporary art, but also of national high art. The communication difficulties are determined by its heterogenous origins, dispersed in the environment of popular creativity, influenced by various eastern factors. The basis of this popular culture (which has the legacy to be a national one) is the project of re-creation of urban and political life. This project originated during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the Armenian Diaspora, which spread from India to Holland and England. The initial extent of the Armenian dispersal was formed in the early Middle Ages under the pressure of Turkish speaking nations which penetrated into the Caucasus and Asia Minor from central Asia. Hopeless attempts, first of the military-political, then of cultural-economic elite of Armenia to leave their homeland and move to neighboring countries began after the collapse of the great and gorgeous Ani; the final capital of Armenia, located on international transit routes. This disintegrating influence (which lasted for two or three centuries) also resulted from the fact that Ani had been frequently occupied, and that it was the site of major earthquakes: this all took place before the eyes of Armenia's spiritual and cultural elite. In Diaspora, the vision of Ani had already been transformed from a symbol of loss into a powerful stimulus for spiritual and intellectual existence. Hence the re-creation of Ani became a chief historical project.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, when the Russian Empire collapsed, the provincial center of Russian Armenia

became the capital of Armenia. The vision of Ani was then associated with the latter and even after "Sovietization" it is still perceived to be the polarization point of cultural-creative powers. Initially in the 1920s-'30s and then after World War II (in the 1940s-'50s), two waves of immigration took place. Those who arrived brought customs, ideas, skills, and values with them. Yerevan's contemporary art scene formed as a result of these two groups of immigrants. The first group founded an institutional system; the second imported a fresh stream into the visual arts. Besides these direct contributions to the contemporary Armenian art scene, there was also a huge influence from early twentieth century Armenian artists working in Moscow and Paris, and in mid-century in New York, too (M. Sarian, G. Yakulov, E. Kotchar, A. Gorky, and R. Nakian).

The intra-cultural interchange taking place in the 1990s is an expression of paradigmatic change. Those who left embodied a cultural dissidence of the late 1970s and early 1980s. They were working in the sphere of Informel and Action Painting referring to a general loneliness and transcendence. Losing their oppositional positions of dissidence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, they didn't conform to the loss of an absolute idea. On the other hand, those artists who arrived wanted to represent the world tangibly in their objects and installations, consequently from positions of sensitivity and corporeality. They hoped to find a place for themselves and a ground for their works in the land of their ancestors. A transition was taking place; from an art determined by collective consciousness and illustrating Soviet reality (ideology), to post-Soviet art determined by collective unconsciousness, illustrating the very post-Soviet reality (technology). This course became manifest at medial, as well as expressional levels.

This transition was especially obvious in the pictorial sphere. Among the thematic pairs of creation-work, object-sign, holiness-defilement, truth-falsehood was one with crucial significance: bodily and mechanical principles in general, and body-machine in particular. The treatment of this latter thematic pair prepares the ground for transitional metaphors.

The treatment of the subject of the machine in the Soviet Union created a steady iconographic tradition. In the crucial events of the birth of Soviet power (Lenin's first speech on an armored train after his return from Petrograd, an attack on the Winter Palace accompanied by the volley of shots from the armored ship "Aurora", etc.) the presence of the machine witnessed the uniqueness of its role and the importance of its status. It seems to operate like an angel, becoming a herald of the future. In addition to this ritualistic model, its canonic representation has an intellectual content which remained unchanged throughout the entire existence of the Soviet Union. The machine was considered



KIKI
Painting N4,
oil on canvas, 1980



Grigor Khatchatryan, Norair Ayyazyan
performance "Aratez",
photo documentation, 1995,
photos: David Ayyazyan

the means of conquest and domination; for the most part, cultural practices were neglected.

In dealing with the subject of the machine, Armenian artists usually rely on this iconography. In the "quotations" made from arbitrary magazines, renowned works of art, books, and motion pictures (in the works of Sargis Hamalbashyan, Ara Hovsepyan, Rouben Grigoryan, Karine Matsakyan, and Sahak Boghossyan), the diachronic inclusion of the machine begets a sort of suspension. This breach, initiated by the presence of an instrument which belongs to a different time, is in fact a trans-historical metaphor uncovering the connection of eras.

But sometimes this iconographic rule is exercised to dispute the actual intellectual traditions; that is to say, artists make the two traditions confront each other. Thus, Arman Grigoryan, one of the initiators and the main ideologist of the artistic movement "3rd Floor", in 1987, entitled his painting "To Cross the Borders by Bicycle". The canvas, covered by the prints of bicycle wheels, referred to the unity of the world, human rights, and civil values. This symbolic formulation expresses the revolutionary enthusiasm of changes taking place under the influence of the convergence of ideas. The Soviet border, which had been closed by the iron curtain can now be crossed, and one can reach Budapest or Prague by bicycle rather than by tank.

The collapse of the Soviet Union also gave birth to another widespread motif of the body. The disappearance of the former society, which had a decades-long history, couldn't occur without any consequences; despite the fact that it had been constructed on violence against individuals and on the violation of people's political, intellectual, and cultural rights. Retroactive remembrance of the social body became the most outstanding of those consequences. In the works of Armenian artists, treatments of the subject of the body didn't by-pass pictographic and intellectual traditions, which (as in the case of machine) formed in the Soviet Union. This pictography almost never represented people on their own. They always had to be armored with some instrument,

or were engaged in some process of labor. In this canonic model, the notions of human and worker were identical: the human is the one who works. Work, for its part, was the measurement of human existence where spiritual and bodily principles were the same.

These iconographic and intellectual traditions were implemented in order to express feelings of redundancy of the body. One of the ways to do so was to make the different activities of labor and creation identical. To grow flowers in thimbles (by Karen Andreassyan) is to disclose the uselessness of the work, and the beautiful and endless embroidery (by Harutjun Simonyan) is an attempt to make this activity absolutely unique. In this identification we can see the ridiculous implementation of the moral-intellectual maxim, pointing out the interrelationship of labor and beauty which was offered up to Soviet citizens as a spiritual ordinance. But partial and half-finished implementations of this ordinance (i.e., handicrafts and parasitism) were equally criminal. But in both these cases, the body's vastness and inadequacy in comparison with the labor ironically record the redundancy of the latter in a new paradigm, which is measured not by the horn or piston, but by the thimble and needle.

Another widespread manifestation of the feelings of redundancy of the body is the construction of exaggerated confrontations of spirit and body as something sacred and defiled. These constructions are examples of readiness to unveil the moral-intellectual traditions of a country that no longer exists. The artists (Ararat Sargissyan, Samvel Saghatelian, Grigor Khachatryan) seem to confront the ordinances by inertia, ordinances which connect socialist realism with medieval religious-ethical Christian traditions by rejecting the cult of the body through dealing with the moral legacy of depicting the body.

But the problem of body and machine in Armenian contemporary art is not solely connected with the social political collapse, i.e., with the fall of the Soviet Union. It also refers to the problems of a commercialized and materialized world. Twentieth-

century technological revolutions made it easy for humans to remove their material chains. This relaxation, a triumph of modern strategy, at the same time destroyed its position, for it gives artists the possibility to re-conceptualize their former readiness to arrive at their relations with heritage, organizations, and values in order to find their creative identity. Thus, regular references to archives, history, museums, memory, and remembrances are not made due to some spiritual activity, but in order to find the means of narration based on the oblivion, repetition, and reconsideration of time (Hovhannes Margarian, Arthur Sargissian).

The main conceptual issue being formulated within the scope of the paradigmatic theme of machine and body concerns identity. During socio-political revolutions and cultural transformations people experience a deep crisis of self-visualization and self-evaluation. This was a general crisis during the course of the entire twentieth century, and was expressed at all levels of identity, i.e., individual, collective, and general.

The first reason that the problem of identity was raised in the West was a gradual elevation in the role of the subject, i.e., the individual. This shift in contemporary western society was determined by the deep processes through which the weakening of the institutions of socialization, that is to say, the family, school, church, and state, make the individual the central figure within the structure of society.

In post-Soviet republics this process started in new and very peculiar conditions after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is marked by a situation where people lose (often unwillingly) the structures that once provided social stability and foreseeable security (working collectives, party-organizations) through the limitation of their own freedom.

In the case of artists, issues of identity are directed to its third, i.e., general-philosophical dimension in order to find out what it means, in general, to be human. In this sense, two opposite directions can be pointed out in the search for the body; ferocity and eroticism. In these vectors, originating from two different strategies of criticism and play, there is no room for individual-speculative manifestations of identity.

The first path is to go back to nature and infancy, to the discovery of one's own body (Anna Barseghyan, Grigor Khachatryan—Norair Aivazyan, and Azat Sargissian). The primeval; the ferocity and nakedness become metaphors of a sensuality which is confronted with a numbness caused by the mechanical mediation of human relations (David Kareyan).

Another way (which passes through mediation) of establishing identity is the path of alienation and metamorphosis. Here the border between object and subject is erased and the difference between the sexes disappears. From this point on they

are united by some total net, by the bright and unwinking eye through which they can change places (Vahram Galstyan, Arevik Arevshatyan). On the basis of this incorporeal sensuality the environment of fractal identities is spread. Objects, appearances, and organisms don't have any meaning peculiar to their species, but are mere sexual practices of biotechnological self-cloning and temporality. Is this identical to exhaustion and death? As Pierre Levy puts it, in virtual reality they don't coincide; new archives and barns are created when the light meets the script and consumption becomes the same as reproduction. The two types of pre-speculative and post-speculative (or post-mirror, as Baudrillard puts it) identities no longer describe the individual, but instead describe the representatives of a community. They appear in games and myths and establish themselves by taking an action. The source of their intensification is the frequency of gesture, which gains the power of custom by being transmitted to daily actions becoming a simple means for inflaming the passion of existence and restarting life.

What is indicated by the priority given to these types of identities in contemporary Armenian art? I believe it embodies a human forced to experience the revolutionary explosion which gave birth to a technological reality from an ideological one. This human, therefore, becomes the carrier of an experience of collective transition.

Translated from Armenian by Vardan Azatyan

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Samvel Baghdasaryan
Instead of complaining in silence
it is possible to write silently,
HAY-ART Cultural Center, 2003



Haroutyun Simonyan
Untitled,
video-installation, 2001



Informed but Scared

The “3rd Floor” Movement, Parajanov, Beuys and other Institutions

Text: Arman Grigoryan

It is very dangerous to possess and to pass on information in totalitarian and closed societies. In the Soviet Union there were informed people. In particular, there were artists in the 1960s and '70s who knew what was taking place in international politics, science, and art. But it was dangerous for them to show that they were informed. In the environment of struggle against illiteracy, it was preferable to pretend to be primitive or a clown (the shoot with a clown from Parajanov's "The Color of Pomegranates" was symbolic in this sense). The content of information was also scary: anticipation of a nuclear war and a threatening rapidity of development and achievement in the field of technology.

Although still obscure, abstractionism and pop art were considered the most dangerous. Artists preferred to be recognized through others; naturally, through more popular artists. In Parajanov's case, Sayat Nova and Ashigh Qerib. Henry Elibekyan, who has been doing performances since the 1960s, represented himself through Yakulov, M. Avetissyan and recently, even through myself.

Varuzhan Vardanyan, one of the most important representatives of 1970s art, has a photo in the role of Adam similar to Marcel Duchamp's. The show "Happening", which opened in Yerevan in 1982 and was curated by V. Tovmassyan, was an important show. Vigen Tadevosyan (previously an abstract expressionist, who later would play an important role in our art) presented a huge balloon that was constantly being filled with air. There was a wonderful poet named Belamuki. But focus was on two actors who, in a very strange way, resembled Salvador Dali and Picasso.

To be honest, it was neither a happening nor a performance, but theatre directed by the sculptor Vardan Tovmassyan. I was

not invited to the above-mentioned exhibition, and a month later decided to make a performance entitled "Exit to the city". Three artists took part—Karine Matsakyan, Gagik Vardanyan (who presented a collage à la Parajanov in the "Happening"), four sixteen years old school kids and myself. For about an hour we were screaming texts edited from politically oriented newspapers and art magazines. The speech of Henry Igityan (the first and "irreplaceable" director of the Museum of Modern Art since 1972) that followed the performance was very typical of the times: "Our people do not need your experiments" (we performed both "Happening" and "Exit to the City" in his museum space). It meant that neither my friends nor I could have exhibitions there any more, not to mention at the Artists' Union. We had to exhibit on the streets, at the conservatory and the education worker's house.

Gorbachov's perestroika seemed hopeless. But his declaration of "glasnost" (transparency) raised hopes. The exhibition of young artists that opened in autumn of 1986 in the Artists' Union was the result of great debates. I demanded, on behalf of myself and all my rejected friends, an opportunity to exhibit. We were given an opportunity but in the conference hall on the third floor (thus the name "3rd Floor", which stayed with us until April 1994). The first "3rd Floor" lasted until April of 1987. From 10-16 April there were daily discussions related to different fields such as painting, literature, cinema, alternative jazz, punk rock, minimalist music, and one day was devoted to mass media. Parajanov was not present in cinema at that time. Mostly there were documentary filmmakers (who were representing issues related to ecology, old people, and children). Parajanov appeared with Igityan accompanying him. First he was upset, walked around the hall, came



Poster of the 3rd Floor exhibition in Leninakan (now Gyumri) in 1988



up to me and pointed to Kiki's canvas, which was two meters tall, all painted in black, saying: "There is nothing in here. I was hoping to find a real masculine art." Then he turned around and left. Kiki and the others asked what he had said (we all used to respect Parajanov) and I said, laughing, "Parajanov understood that the 'ship of fools' epoch is over."

Despite the performance of Ashot-Ashot and Sev's work entitled "The burning of Mao Tse Tung book", Kiki's black monochrome canvas and my three pop art works left a strong impression on the audience. It was as if people were feeling dizzy from fresh air. We understood that it was important and in 1988 we were invited to Narva (Estonia) to the first Congress of Soviet avant-garde artists. We represented only minimalism and pop

art (Edward Enfiayan, who was the speaker, showed slides and photos). The result was applause and ovation. Everything was very clear; as much as Gorbachov was trying to build "socialism with a human face", everybody just as strongly viewed American capitalism as an alternative to Stalin-style socialism.

If you recall, Joseph Beuys had a dialogue in 1985 devoted to overlapping and uniting socialism and capitalism. Beuys was an unquestionable authority on post Soviet Republic avant-garde artists. To be frank, similar to Beuys, I also believe that when several artists (or people, as all people are artists) gather and discuss world issues, the world will change (American capitalism would mix with Soviet socialism). But it was hard to do that as the Russian avant-garde artists were still in Stalinesque nostalgia, or

3rd Floor group

Hail to the union of artists from the other world!
or The formal art has died,
performance, 1988



Henry Elibekian

Spit on the public taste,
performance, 2003

like Petersburg “mitskis” were not able to get over their “hangovers”. On the other hand, and in addition to this, there was Beuys’ mysticism, which every Soviet nation was interpreting as a way to keep its religious identity. Those who are in search of identities seek diversity but not unity. This was obvious in Narva. There were only declarations and nothing more.

When we returned to Yerevan, we showed a performance in a big republic exhibition that opened in the Artists’ Union. The performance was called “Greetings to the Artists’ Union from the Netherworld” (written on a board hung from my neck) but the media called it “Official Art has Died.” The Karabach movement started in 1988. And really, every official thing was dying. We all still had a strong belief in the possibility of “socialism with a human face”, but the 7 December earthquake and the arrest of the leaders of the Karabach movement in that year shook our belief in perestroika.

In the spring of the following year we organized an exhibition called “666”, a part of which we took to Paris in the same year. In order to help people affected by the earthquake, we organized an exhibition sale there; “The Armenian avant-garde”. In Paris we witnessed the opening of FIAC, which left such a strong impression on most of my friends that nothing was left from Beuys, especially when his clothes, his hat, and some other things were being sold at exorbitant prices. The commercialization of the “3rd Floor”, which organized an exhibition called “+ -” the following year, was like a simple and memorable sign for the consumer (minimalism upstairs and pop art downstairs). “The 3rd Floor is what you want to be.” But there were artists, especially those who gathered around Vigen Tadevosyan (Grigor Khachatryan, Ara Hovsepyan, and later Samvel and Manvel Baghdassarians, Azat Sarkisyan, and others) who were not involved in the “3rd Floor” and were preserving Beuys’ ideals. Vigen Tadevosyan was leading talks and did not accept the conceptualism of Moscow artists (or, as they used to call it, “soc-art”) but the artists surrounding him were often reminiscent of “soc-artists”.



3rd Floor group

Hail to the union of artists from the other world!
or The formal art has died,
performance, 1988

Nonetheless, especially after 1992, while the “3rd Floor” artists (led by Nazaret Karoyan) were busy with efforts to establish commercial gallery systems, the Armenian Center for Contemporary Experimental Art (NPAK) was established and until 1996 there was a strong anti-“3rd Floor” movement. It was led mainly by Karen Andreassyan who also had great respect for Vigen Tadevosyan. Artists involved with ACCEA wanted to take part in the Documenta and the Venice Biennial. It was mainly Beuys’ phantom that wandered around these major forums. Young artists led by David Kareyan, who came to the arena in 1993-1994, presented exceptions (in order to protect their independence they created a group called “Act” which lasted until 1996). In 1996, ACCEA found a building where they could operate. At the end of 1997, another organization, “Hay Art” opened. In 1998, the first Biennial in Giumry was initiated and in 2001 the “Utopiana” project started. Artists that exhibit at these centers continue to make us familiar with people’s fears—fears which originate in being informed.

Translated from Armenian by Angela Harutyunian

Arman Grigoryan, *1960,
lives in Yerevan and works as an artist, curator, writer, and activist.
He was co-founder of the 3rd Floor Gallery.

1970, 1980 ...

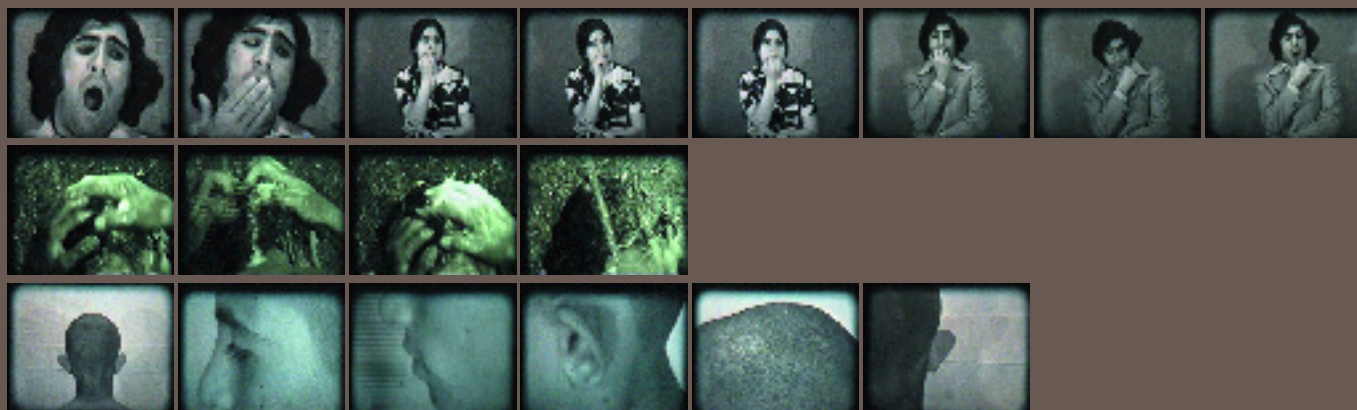
The 1970s

In the 1970s, Armenia was perhaps one of the most open minded and liberal republics in the Soviet bloc. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that central power systems in Moscow were obliged to tolerate the liberal habits of its southern periphery in order to avoid the accumulation of tensions aggravating society during the 1960s. Ideological pressure decreased to a minimum. There was a more or less constant import of information coming from the West due to Diaspora connections. Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, became one of the most important centers echoing the hippie movement, which by that time had penetrated the Soviet Union with rock music and alternative art. Architecture of the 1970s, released from the classicist leftovers of a totalitarian style and applications of national motifs prevalent in architecture of the 1960s, returned to modernist forms and principles. A new literary magazine "Garoun" (Spring) appeared, which started to publish new local writers as well as translations of modern European, American, and Japanese literature and philosophy. The ideas of French existentialism became very popular due to these publications.

The Yerevan Museum of Modern Art was established during this time. It was the first, and for a long time the only, modern art museum in the Soviet bloc. Art critic Henry Iguityan initiated its establishment. The museum presented art that contradicted established perceptions but at the same time avoided an open confrontation with ideology. Art trends considered alternative for that period were abstract expressionism and surrealism. The works of Hamlet Hovsepian, who did performances, films, and land-art projects, are rare examples of a conceptual approach in that period.

Hamlet Hovsepian

The Headwashing One, The Gnawing,
16 mm b/w Film on DVD, still, 13', 1975



1980—Signs of Change

By the beginning of the 1980s, resistance had developed between art and society, artists and state institutions, and local art scenes. The established dual social perception of considering art as a medium of propaganda for the official state ideology and, at the same time, national self-assertion as the only contraposition to Soviet ideology, was perhaps one of the major reasons for the increasing resistance, which reached a peak in the mid 1980s. New trends in the current mindset were first reflected in the visual arts, which were perhaps the most independent (in comparison with literature, theater, etc.) from state institutions. A new scene of younger artists also started to develop, which together with the "nonconformists" from the older generation initiated a number of artistic events at alternative public spaces outside of existing institutional art

networks—outdoor exhibitions in 1978-1980, and from 1980-1986 exhibitions and happenings at the Yerevan State Conservatory, the Education House, and the Aesthetic Center.



Opening of the exhibition "Exit to the City"
The show opened in Yerevan in 1982
with an happening curated by V. Tovmassian,
documentary photo, 1982

“3rd Floor”

In 1987, a group of artists, which had separated from the scene, initiated an exhibition held on the 3rd floor (non exhibition space) of the Artists' Union in Yerevan. That exhibition became a starting point for the group, the “3rd Floor”, which led the transition from a “nonconformist—cultural dissident epoch” to a situation of alternative art in Armenia.

The artists that were initially involved in the group followed two main directions in their artistic approaches. Some followed and went deeper into metaphysical art's creative methods and philosophy and others were interested in the representational aspects of a new image relevant to the reality they were

experiencing. That approach found its representation in artworks that today, in the local scene, are distinguished as Armenian pop art. The phenomenon of Armenian pop art was severely criticized by local art critics and ignored by foreign critics as cynical, non-artistic, cosmopolitan, and anachronous.

“Where is the power which will preserve our national art from that disgrace?”
(Soviet Art, July 1989)

The aesthetics of this type of art was entirely new for the local audience. It radically contradicted the established aesthetic norms and perceptions.

Arman Grigoryan one of the founders of the “3rd Floor” and its leading ideologist, wrote in a manifesto for the opening of its first exhibition: “... authors feel the time, the space, when they put their lyrical, philosophical world into psychological form. The art that we produce is not art but, rather, a declaration of war. We want to change the world, but we no longer have any hope. We find no support or help and almost no solid ground. We don't have a big name, but we aren't afraid as we fight off the ghosts...”



Arman Grigoryan
Logo design for the “3rd Floor”
Gallery, 1987

Arman Grigoryan a.o.
first “3rd Floor” exhibition documentary
photo, 1987



Arman Grigoryan a.o.
“3rd Floor” Manifesto, manuscript,
diverse sketches for the exhibition,
logo design 1987ff



The “3rd Floor” Group Belonging to the “3rd Floor” group, among others, were the artists: Karine Matsakyan, Ashot Ashot, Ara Hovsepian, Kiki, Rouben Grigoryan, Vahan Roumelyan, Armen Petrosyan, Arshak Nazaryan, Sarkis Hamalbashyan, Armen Hadjhyan, Arevik Arevshatyan, Araks Nergaryan, Ruben Arevshatyan, Maher Azatyan, Anita Arakelyan, and Sev.

Institutions and Initiatives

The need for qualitatively new institutions that would perceive, present, and investigate the dynamics of contemporary art trends was becoming more and more urgent. Between 1991 and 1998, there were several attempts—initiated mainly by the artists themselves—to create gallery type institutions. “Goyak” association, “Bunker”, “Ex Voto”, “TAAK”, Ch. “Khachadourian” galleries, and In Vitro art magazine realized exhibitions and projects over the course of seven years. Despite the brevity of these private institutions, this period remains as the brightest and most significant in the history of contemporary art’s development. The short-lived institutions created and directed by the artists provided an equal and open field for independent art. These galleries and the cultural centers established later, such as the “Yerevan Center for Contemporary Experimental Art” and the “HAY-ART Cultural Center”, were and remain the only venues and central meeting points for the alternative Armenian art scene; all initiated by artists.

Sev

Introduction to the first exhibition at the “Bunker Galerie”, hectography, 1990



AZAT

(Free) hanging in the Azatutyun (Freedom) square at the day Independence, performance, 2000, Yerevan



AZAT Sargsyan

performance “4004”, photo documentation of a performance in a derelict house in Yerevan, 1993
photos: Armenpress

Nazareth Karoyan (ed.)

In Vitro , no. III, artist’s project by Karen Andreassyan, 1999

The art journal “In Vitro”, was published by Nazareth Karoyan between 1998 and 2000. The editorial staff comprised, in addition to the art historian Karoyan, also the collector Vicky Hovanoissyan, the art critic Vartan Jaloyan, and the artist Karen Andreassyan.



War, Individualization, the Postmodern



Little by little, the postmodern approach became increasingly relevant to the local art situation. The reality of political instability, war, and the trade embargo chilled the artists' revolutionary transport. The transformed social formation and the reappraisal of values brought up the old question of nature or reason.

The existential state, in which society and each individual appeared, created a new kind of situation where global ideas were considered through a very intimate and personal angle. Individual originality, which had been perceived as art's sole significance, was reinforced at a level involving the investigation of human uniqueness.



Karine Matsakyan
The Triumph of the Consumer,
photo documentation of a performance
in a butcher shop in Yerevan, 1995
photos: Charly Khachadourian



Grigor Khachatryan
Manifesto 1990,
photo collage, 1990

"I am not a human, I am Grigor Khachatryan. You are not a human; you are the contemporary of Grigor Khachatryan. Grigor Khachatryan—a name high and delightful."
(The "1st Manifesto"
by Grigor Khachatryan, 1990)

Art Demonstration 1995

The "Act group", perhaps one of the most socially oriented, (PS exhibition 1994, Art Demonstration 1995), eventually found itself in a situation where social phenomenon as such could be considered as art without any artistic interference.

In 1995, the entire Republic, and particularly the capital, were overly saturated with political and socially-oriented meetings and demonstrations. It was also then that the "Act group" initiated an art demonstration (following all the formalities of demonstration organization), which from beginning to end confused a crowd that had already become used to the ordinary slogans. The demonstration took place in the heart of Yerevan and the group emerged proposing slogans such as:



FREE ART, FREE CULTURE, FREE CREATIVITY
ART REFERENDUM
NO ART
ART INSPECTION
CREATE A NEW CULTURE PARALLEL TO A
NEW STATE SYSTEM



Act Group
Art Demonstration,
documentary photos, 1995

Act Group
Art Referendum,
documentary photos, 1995

Geo Kunst

Manvel Baghdasaryan
photo project "Geo Kunst",
color prints, color copies, 1997



Participants in the Geo Kunst Expedition to Documenta X from l to r:

Ara Hovsepyan, Haroutyun Simonian, Manvel Baghdasaryan, Gagik Charchyan, Karen Andreassyan, Samvel Baghdassaryan, 1997, photo: Artur Assoyan



Artistic interventions such as the Geo Kunst Expeditions seemed more like seriously organized games, the goal of which was to interact in alternative ways with strictly developed structures without breaking the rules—(inofficial participation in Documenta X, 1997, pseudo-journalistic reportage at the 1996 Tbilisi biennial).

The expedition to Kassel organized by the Geo Kunst group in 1997 aimed to create for the X person, a passageway from the alternative space (underground passageways, railway stations, bus stops, etc.) to the space of Documenta X. The pre-concerted (with the organizers of Documenta) space (a poster) for interaction was used to confirm (or provide evidence of) the passersby's complicity in the Documenta; as a way to reflect on and recognize the importance of personal experience in alienated situations.

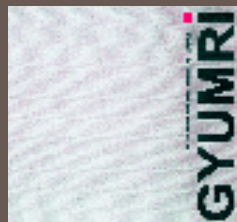


Manvel Baghdasaryan
My Green Belgium,
photos, 1996

The Giumri Biennial, Utopiana, 1998 ff



Alexandr Melkonyan
Supermobile,
installation, Gyumri, 2000



In 1998, ten years after the city was nearly entirely destroyed by a devastating earthquake, the first biennial of contemporary art was established in Gyumri. The 2002 biennial, organized for the third time by the local Center for Contemporary Art and curated by Azat Sargsyan, among others, presented diverging, sometimes controversial positions of international, diaspora, and local scenes and developed into an important factor for integration and information in the trans-Caucasian art scene. The project Utopiana, initiated by Geneva-based artist Anna Barseghian and philosopher Stefan Kristensen, had already been present for several years in Yerevan with events and exchange projects.



Arman Grigoryan
AZAT, project for the
Venice Biennial,
documentary photo,
1998



Cover of
the magazine "Art-
Today" edited by the
Gyumri Center
for Contemporary
Art since 2002

Catalogue
for the 3rd Biennial in Gyumri,
2002

The Issues of Alternative Art in Armenia Video, Media Art and the “Antifreeze” Art Festival

Text: Eva Khatchaturyan

Contemporary alternative art in Armenia has a history. The “3rd Floor” movement, which is related to more representative exhibitions, originated as a way to confront official state sponsored Soviet art in Armenia in the first half of the 1980s. The post-Soviet generation of artists, in its turn, confronted the “3rd Floor”. This generation started to emerge in the artistic field in the early 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The art was radically different from that of the “3rd Floor”. Later, centers for contemporary art began to emerge in Armenia, each of which presents its own version of alternative art.

And now, when we have a history of contemporary art, what do we mean by the expression “alternative art”? What does alternative art look like today? How is it presented? I will try to explain the topic through examples of activities of the Armenian Center for Contemporary Experimental Art where I have been working as a curator and coordinator of the experimental music department since 2000. ACCEA opened in a huge Soviet building in the center of Yerevan. Its activities were made possible by young artists and curators filled with enthusiasm, new ideas, and projects.

Even during the Venice Biennial (where ACCEA has presented the Armenian pavilion since 1995), ACCEA maintained and affirmed its policy by presenting fifteen, mostly young artists at the 2001 Biennial. Since then, video art has become rooted in contemporary art in Armenia; in 2001, Armenian artists presented exclusively video art at the Venice Biennial. Video art turned out to be the most accepted and popular medium and form of artistic expression.

On the one hand, this tendency is dictated by globalization and high technologies. Media art offers artists the chance to

easily transport their works any place in the world. Besides, video is the most inexpensive and accessible media. For instance, in our small artistic scene it sufficed for one person to have a video camera, which all the artists could use. Although distributing an art work across the world through net art is also possible, and is perhaps the most convenient way, net art has not yet developed in Armenia. Only a few artists are experimenting in this medium; Narek Avetissyan, Vahram Aghasyan, and Garen Andreassyan.

Thus, the development of video art in Armenia is tied in with a trend to be modern, to be associated with international contemporary art. Yet it is also dictated at a local level, by ACCEA. Video art has become a signature. Being capable of it means that an artist is modern and has a chance to exhibit at the Venice Biennial. The medium emerges in the foreground. In order to be modern and correspond to ACCEA's standards, artists work in video and focus solely on representation. Possibly, 2001 became a boom year for video art due to ACCEA's policy that year.

But objectively, the appearance of this medium in Armenia was connected to the emergence of hi-tech in our everyday lives, which does not date back to 2001, but to the mid-1990s. ACCEA activated the field of video art only because it had sufficient equipment and facilities; video projectors, video players, and monitors.

Alternative art moved into the world of new technologies and the role of ACCEA became one of representing that kind of art, i.e., the issue of representation enters the picture.

ACCEA, with its annual exhibitions and projects, is currently considered one of the most active centers in Armenia. The center began a series of solo exhibitions in a newly renovated building in 2003. The renovated interior gives a type of official status to the exhibitions and anticipates a serious attitude from the cultural and



David Kareyan
Dead Democracy,
video-installation, 1999



David Kareyan
Digestiblereality,
video on DVD, still, 2002

social fields. Until this time, experimental alternative art had not been exhibited in a newly constructed environment made especially for contemporary art. For this reason, many were doubtful of whether it would be possible to have alternative art in this kind of space traditionally associated with the bourgeoisie. But the projects that have been implemented thus far can be deemed successful. Even though the problem of representation still dominates, within the context of the exhibitions organized at the Artists' Union, galleries, and the Museum of Modern Art, ACCEA projects remain alternative in terms of medium (media), and content such as social issues. In addition to these individual projects, I would like to mention one of the alternative art festivals, "Antifreeze", which was organized at ACCEA. These festivals are implemented on the principle of open participation aiming to involve young artists who will be the future representatives of Armenian alternative art. Alternative art festivals date back sev-

eral years. In 1997, the first youth art exhibition, which later became an annual event, was organized at ACCEA. Later, when the departments of music and theatre opened in the Center, youth exhibitions turned into alternative art festivals. The majority of the participants were young artists; that is why the words "alternative" and "young" are often identical in the Armenian context. Curators of youth exhibitions and subsequently alternative art festivals were, at the same time, organizers and participants. Among them were Vahram Aghasyan, Mher Azatyan, and David Kareyan. Despite the recent appearance of young curators who cooperate with the Center, the responsibility to organize the most recent alternative art festival was entrusted to Vahram Aghasyan, who had experience in working with young artists. He worked in cooperation with the Center's theatre and music coordinators (including me). On the first day, the exhibition "Antifreeze" opened, on the second day there was an electronic music concert. This was followed by film screenings called "One frame, one minute", and a rock concert on the fourth day.

Unlike previous festivals, this one took place in a newly renovated building with clean, white walls and a new floor. Previous alternative art festivals had been organized in a dusty space at ACCEA where everybody could do anything they wanted on the walls, with a budget of next to nothing. These festivals were made possible by enthusiasm: they were the pioneers of post-Soviet alternative art, which was much more radical in nature.

The reason for the enthusiasm for the exhibitions organized in the 1990s was the political situation in Armenia. During the days of democratic power, contemporary art had its moments of communication with the state (for example, the exhibitions in Moscow and Bochum organized by the Ministry of Culture). After the change of power, when democracy was replaced with dictatorship, controversial political exhibitions were organized. Artists were in a state of panic and were trying to speak out against the existing social and political order. This situation of panic was intensified by the fact that the government wanted to take possession of the ACCEA building. Due to its location, authorities (the Ministry of Justice) wanted to turn it into an auction site for confiscated goods. The loss of the building would also mean the loss of positions that alternative art had already established. A number of artists would lose their exhibition space. This situation of panic and insecurity was the source of the extreme and anarchic nature of the works and alternative art in general. It is no coincidence that one of the influential exhibitions of this period was entitled "Crisis" (curated by artist David Kareyan).

But in the same period, alternative art gained a certain security; not because of the government's support of alternative art, but because of its indifference (and this indifference was also



Sona Abgaryan
Erotica, video, 2001

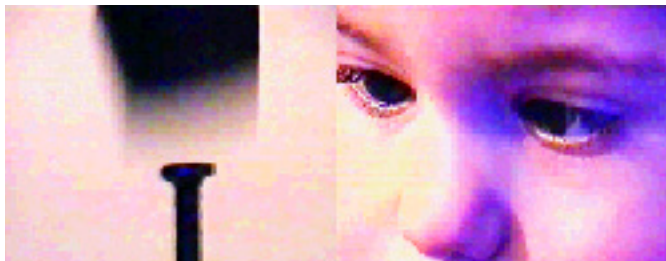
Hovhannes Margaryan
Crush N60528,
detail of the video and multi-media installation,
2003, courtesy ACCEA



Tigran Khachatryan
Color of the Pomgranate,
video on DVD, still,
2002



Vahram Aghasyan video-installation, 2002



Diana Hakobyan
Let Us Make an Artificial Smile,
video, still, 2001

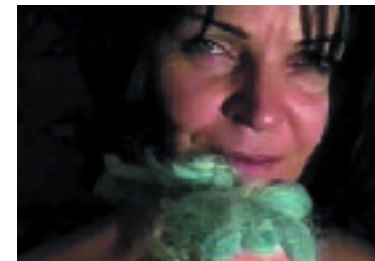
connected with the fact that the problem of the building was solved). The influence of this relatively secure situation on art was that art became more aesthetic, calmer, and concentrated more on representational issues. This is a general trend which can be noticed when scanning the history of Armenian contemporary art from the 1990s to the present. To be more specific: there are some artists whose work is more or less extreme than that of the others. What these artists produce can be found in their personal computers and CDs, hidden in secure places such as Vienna, not to be displayed in Armenia. But even in the case of these artists we notice that same tendency towards aestheticism and labor.

But let's return to the "Antifreeze" project. As you may know, antifreeze is a chemical element that is added to the water in radiators in order to prevent it from freezing. And water, for its part, prevents overheating of the motor. Contemporary art plays the same role in society. It is directed against culture but not towards harming it. In Armenia, weather (the winter season) reflects the activeness of the arts. But this is not the only factor that "freezes" the artistic environment. The main source of this ice is in people's minds. It is only possible to overcome it by establishing strong communication between people. And art is a way of communicating which helps overcome the emptiness or "ice" between people. We invited artists who were against something and whose presence could contribute towards warming up the artistic environment. There were also some foreign artists from Germany, the U.S., and Iran, who took part in this exhibition. This factor was greatly important for us as ACCEA usually represents only Armenian artists. Now, young curators are trying to change the so-called "Armenia for Armenians" policy by focusing on internationally oriented projects. Besides, the organizers of "Antifreeze" paid special attention to providing publicity and tried to remain closely connected with society. Before the opening, the festival was advertised and featured on radio and television introducing the general public to the concept and program of the

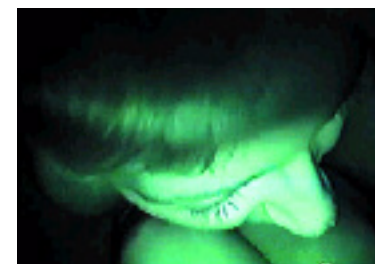
festival and the activities of the Center. A live, experimental electronic music concert was organized for the first time within the framework of "Antifreeze". On the day of the opening, there were so many visitors that clashes were inevitable. The band "Reincarnation" performed. The band describes itself as a fascist band, but following the lyrics, it becomes clear that they have anti-fascist views. They presented an anti-Semitic performance showing passages from the film Fanatic where the main topic is the hero's dualism of religion and fascism. The clash took place after the band's performance and on the second day of the electronic music concert we had to call in bodyguards. This time the festival was open to both the public and participants. This factor gave the festival a feeling of extremeness.

In general, the festival was a mixture of new and old times and trends. There was some nostalgia for the former extremeness, which, however, was placed in a reconstructed and sanitized environment. Hence, we can conclude that today, alternative Armenian art has already gained a certain position and in order to strengthen and promote it we are engaged mainly in the organization of international projects.

Eva Khatchaturyan
works as a curator at ACCEA
in Yerevan



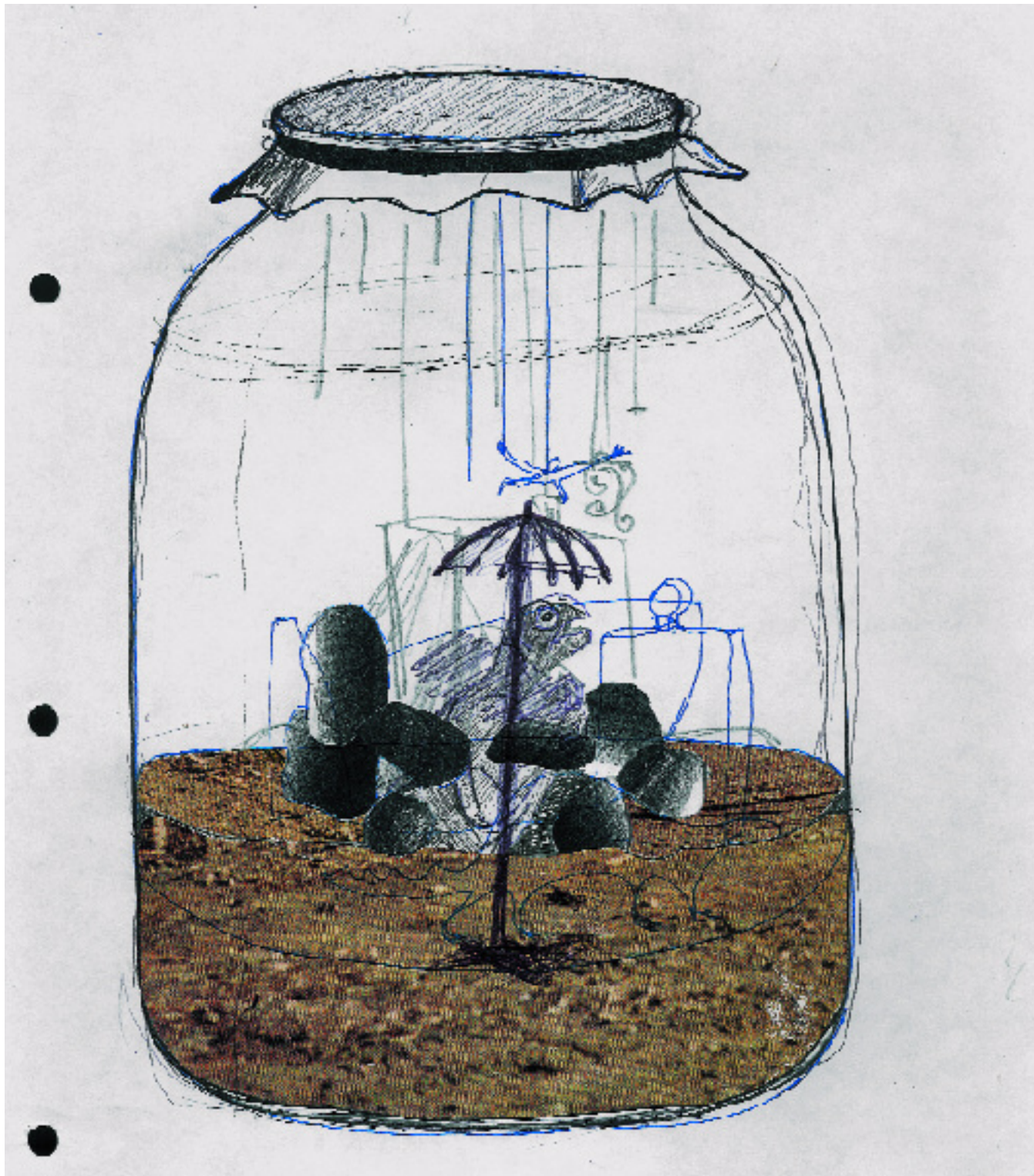
Karine Matsakyan
Doll, 4' 41, video on DVD, still,
2002



Lusine Davidian
Untitled, 32' video on DVD, still,
2004



Azat
performance at the opening of the
São Paulo Bienal 2002,
videostill



Alexandr Melkonyan

sketches for the installation-project
"The Anxiety, House of Man, Woman and Son",
2001, Courtesy Astghik Melkonyan

Alexandr Melkonyan † 2002

The biography and art of Alexandr Melkonyan could be a bright illustration of the complex relation of a private life story to the evolution of social transformations during the last two decades. The romantic revolutionary spirit of 80's Armenia created confrontations in social and cultural perceptions. With the collapse of the Soviet Union the internal confrontations became an external character. From the very beginning of the war Alexandr Melkonyan had left the art scene and volunteered in the Karabach self-defense troops as a military officer. He retired the army just before the cease-fire because of the contusion he had had on the front line. His return to the art scene in 1995 signified the beginning of a new, quite intensive creative period. In his actions and installations Melkonyan accentuated the dramatic aspect of the already sharpening focus in the local art situation on the aestheticism and the philosophy of the lonely individual frustrated by ideological and social pressures. In 2000, Alexandr Melkonyan was presented to European art scene in Manifesta 3 in Ljubljana with his "Emotional, Logical Victorious, Instinctively Suicidal Ancient Urban Anti-Armenian Archetype" installation. The model of urban structure, proposed by artist was based on the principle of harmonic coexistence of different autonomous situations (objects) despite the fact of their individual incoherence and asthetical incompatibility. In his last installations Alexandr presented the concentrated dramatic essence of his philosophy where he had reflected the sensation of end of romantic spirit and shift of social perceptions which for him was understandable but at the same time unbearable.

Ruben Arevshatyan


Karen Andreassyan

The Angle, 2001, Recreation of the masonry and the degree of the angle of the central part of the building (KGB, Republic of Armenia)

Karen Andreassyan

The projects or, to be more exact, artistic actions initiated by Karen Andreassyan since 1996 do manifest aggressive traits in their interaction of social structures and artistic situations. "Expeditions" initiated by Andreassyan have become an inseparable, or even traditional, part of the Armenian contemporary art scene ever since the very first expedition, conceived as a pseudo-journalistic report on the Tbilisi Biennial in 1996 or the "Geo Kunst" at Documenta X in 1997. Andreassyan's subjective adaptation to social, political and economic strategies in the intensively concentrated time within the new reality creates a new cultural consciousness in which the estrangement from the predetermined social discourse becomes the main topic for subjective consideration and analysis based on private experience.

Ruben Arevshatyan