

Between Plentitude and Void: An Incomplete History of Performative Acts and Actions in Armenia (1987-2008)

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Introduction

A historicization of a number of artistic practices as “Armenian performance art” is necessarily a retroactive institutionalization of these practices as “performance art”.¹ The reason that is retroactive is that at the time of their inception many of them did not self-consciously adhere to the genre. Therefore, instead of writing a “history of performance art” and thus calling it into existence merely in the space of this writing, what I present is an attempt at historicization of a set of practices that involve performative acts, actions and gestures in Armenia since the 1980s. Even this gluing together of acts, actions and gestures as “performative” and their separation from other media-specific and multimedia practices defining contemporary art in Armenia, entails an imposition of a certain retrospective construction. Nevertheless, I hope that this construction is not a result of an authorial fiction, or a manufactured story in which the art historian takes up the poetic license of invention. Neither does the art historian function as a positivist scientist who inserts a set of discreet and unrelated practices to a ready-made historical timeline and explains their advent as caused by social conditions and economic infrastructure. “Performance art in Armenia” does contain elements of fiction since the art historian interpretatively intervenes and constructs chronological, topological, thematic, strategic, iconographic and other kinds of relations between artistic practices and interprets their unfolding in concrete institutional, social and cultural situations, relations that would otherwise either remain latent or poorly contoured. The emergence of a set of practices defined as performative, practices that exceeded the boundaries of media, genres and institutions by introducing the body and temporality in artistic practice, are inseparable from the emergence and institutionalization of contemporary art in Armenia.

As a first attempt at historicization of a discreet genre,² this effort is necessarily partial and incomplete. Instead of offering an exhaustive catalogue or an authoritative “history” within a limited span of a single article, this is an invitation for further research and inquiry into complex and multifaceted relations between artistic practices, social and cultural institutions, narratives and discourses that constitute their context of production and reception. “Performative acts and actions” are those that incorporate a temporal dimension in the very structure of the artwork, are either collective or individual acts and interventions performed for a live audience or for a video camera and available through often scant and scattered documentation,³ which in turn need to be

¹ I would like to thank Vardan Azatyan for reading and commenting on the earlier draft of this text.

² Varduhi Kirakosyan’s and Vigen Galstyan’s brief article “Rediscovering the Body: The Painful Birth of Post-Soviet Performance Art”, EVN Report, May 21, 2021 is the first attempt to outline a general thematic and chronological trajectory for performance art in Armenia. The format of the article for a popular website and the brevity of the contribution do not allow us to consider the article as an attempt at historicization in any systematic sense.

³ Amelia Jones discusses the problematic of art historical interpretation of performance art when the author has no access to the “live” event. Grounded in the Derridean notion of the “supplement”, Jones’s argument is that, for an art historian, the difference between witnessing a live event and writing about it through documentation, is merely phenomenological rather than epistemological and ontological: an

supplemented with artists' interviews and witness accounts that involve often flawed and partial recollections.⁴

Because of the very nature of performance art – temporal, ephemeral, involving the body, almost always carrying a social message or content, and often addressing a concretely defined public – the historicization of performative acts may reveal broader social and cultural contradictions within a society more explicitly than media-specific artworks such as paintings or sculpture with their artistic and formal dimensions. As we will see, these practices were often not only symptomatic but also, at times, prognostic of broader socio-political developments in late Soviet and post-Soviet Armenia. The chronological scope of the historicization attempted here is 1988–2007 – from the 3rd Floor exhibitions at the Artists' Union of Armenia to the performative live or video actions concerned with the body and sexuality. The timeline stops before the violent crashing of political dissent by the outgoing president Robert Kocharyan in 2008, an event that triggered the returned of artistic actions as political actions to the streets of Yerevan and in many ways marked the end of the dominant iconography of sexuality and the bodily suffering prevalent at the time in artistic practices.

The twenty years are conditionally demarcated as the period of transition from the late Soviet to the post-Soviet condition (with an ideological implication of being a transition to liberal democracy⁵), and ultimately, with the 1999 October 27 parliament shootings, from the post-Soviet condition to a marriage of neoliberalism and nationalism. The late 1980s' political and cultural discourses of glasnost' would herald the 1990s' market capitalism with an "inhuman face" (as opposed to "socialism with a human face") combined with the construction of the liberal democratic nation state on the ruins of Soviet modernity. However, with the 1999 coup in

experience of a live event does not necessarily generate a truthful account of the artist's any more than an interpretative engagement with its documented trace. In any case, "intentionality" is a flawed category for interpretation. For Jones, this is because of the supplementary nature of the body as such; the body is always already a supplement rather than being expressive of authorial intentions or plentitude. Moreover, meaning construction in every work of interpretation, especially when it comes to performance art (where the distinction between subject and object is questioned), is contingent upon the interpreter as a desiring subject who no longer subscribes to the "idealist myth" of the detached and disinterested critic. While we are with Jones that the documentation of performance art may generate interpretative possibilities for a critical and historical engagement than the immediacy of witnessing a live event, we disagree that the art historian's attempt to construct an objective historical situation is simply a myth, or a projection of one's subjectivity upon the material of interpretation. Even if the art historian cannot present or reconstruct a historical situation in its totality, the very desire to do justice to the past in its specificity and foreignness, opens up a space for truth in interpretation. See Amelia Jones, "Presence in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation" (*Art Journal* 56.4 (1997), 11–18) and *Body Art/ Performing the Subject* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

⁴ Vardan Azatyan refers to the problematic of uncritically relying on oral witness accounts in the work of art historical interpretation in "Hishoghutyun ev/kam moratsutyun: patmakanatsnelov Hayastani jamanakakic arvesty", *Aktual Arvest* 6 (2008), pp. 50–66.

⁵ In *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: Collective Actions before and after 1989* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2013), art historian Octavian Esanu refers to contemporary art in the post-Soviet sphere as the art of the post-socialist transition, with transition understood as the triumphalist shift to market capitalism and liberal democracy, assumed to be the natural course of history.

the parliament and the consolidation of state power by Kocharyan, market capitalism and liberal democracy are decoupled, and late capitalism's Armenian variant triumphs alongside the ideology of neoliberalism under the protective umbrella of political authoritarianism. This periodization, however, is not solely guided by political events. It also follows the internal development of performative practices as they unfold within the complex contradictions and tensions of the late-Soviet and post-Soviet conditions. If in the late 1980s and throughout most of the 1990s, artists participate in the construction of a new state and its cultural discourses through collective actions and interventions in the public sphere, in 1999-2008 artists, with a few exceptions, conduct solo performances and actions. If in the first instance, the artistic collectives lay claims to social participation and engagement, in the second instance individual artists explore the embodied, sexed, damaged and event annihilated subject violated by political and social forces of control and repression.

As part of the explosion of a political and cultural practices that challenged the officially sanctioned discourses, institutions and narratives, and encouraged a spirit of reformism licensed and encouraged by late Soviet glasnost' since the mid 1980s, performative gestures executed in the context of multimedia and multi-genre exhibitions therein formed within and in response to the perestroika's imperative of reforming official institutions from within.⁶ Performative acts and actions came to signify unmediated communication between the artist and her publics, an aspiration for the late Soviet Armenian avant-garde artists. In their very origin, performative acts as discreet as they may seem— whether happenings and art actions in the late 1980s and 1990s or performance and video art in the late 1990s and 2000s – share one fundamental characteristic: they saw themselves in opposition and resistance to dominant political and cultural discourses and narratives, even in moments when they adopted an overtly affirmative tone.⁷ *The performative gesture becomes a necessary means for pointing towards and critically challenging the boundaries of institutions, disciplines, discourses, established cultural narratives and dominant aesthetic regimes, at times when the relationship between the center and the margins of culture was shifting and unstable.* Attached to the advent and institutionalization of semi-official and non-official art in the late Soviet period (which in the 1990s came to be referred to as “contemporary art”⁸) and part of the broader context of overcoming the medium-bound imperatives of officially sanctioned art, performative practices carried with them the dilemmas and ambiguities characterizing late Soviet and post-Soviet avant-gardes: the desire to remain marginal and resistant (even if the political conditions were at times ripe for occupying “the

⁶ Angela Harutyunyan, *Political Aesthetics of the Armenian Avant-Garde: The Journey of the “Painterly Real”, 1987-2004*. Manchester University Press, 2007.

⁷ Often, the rhetoric of resistance and transgression has been a retrospective construction by the artists themselves when remembering their earlier practices from a historical distance. See, Angela Harutyunyan, “Veraimastavorelov hanrayin volorty. Sahmanadrakan petutyunn u Akt xmbi hastatoghakan qaghaqakan geghagitutyuny”, *Hetq*, Sept. 23, 2011, <https://hetq.am/hy/article/305930> and David Kareyan's response, “Akt xmbi araspely”, *Hetq*, Sept. 27, 2010, <https://hetq.am/hy/article/30594>.

⁸ For the discussion of the later-Soviet dissident ideologies that prepared the assumption that “contemporary art” is anti-Soviet, see Angela Harutyunyan, “Towards a Historical Understanding of post-Soviet Presentism”, in *Contemporary Art and Capitalist Modernization: A Transregional Perspective*. Ed. Octavian Esanu, Routledge, 2020.

center”), self-institutionalizing yet espousing a quasi-anarchic anti-institutional rhetoric, adopting grand and absolute gestures that aimed to constitute their own artistic context as “more real than reality itself” and ultimately being formed by the negation of the Soviet historical experience.

1980s: Resurrected Ghosts, Underground Heroes and Sainly Saviors

The show “Happening”, which opened in Yerevan in 1982 and was curated by V. Tovmassyan, was an important show. Vigen Tadevosyan ... presented a huge balloon that was constantly being filled with air. There was a wonderful poet named Belamuki. But focus [sic!] 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..., 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... 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 anymore, not to mention at the Artists’ Union. We had to exhibit on the streets, at the conservatory and the education worker’s house [sic].⁹

This quote from Arman Grigoryan’s recollection of the early to mid 1980s’ artistic scene in Yerevan is one of the very few published testimonies on performative artistic gestures in Armenia at the time. The photograph documenting “Exit to the City” shows the protagonists of the happening dressed in medical workers’ uniforms and facemasks. One of the actors reads from a music stand. There are a few other fragments: apart from the above quoted recollection, the catalogue of the 2003 exhibition *Adieu Parajanov* in Vienna also printed photo documentation of Hamlet Hovsepian’s performative actions, documenting everyday gestures and banal tasks such as handwashing, itching and yawning with a 16mm film camera.¹⁰ But Grigoryan’s testimony is more than symptomatic: it reveals discontent that he and his peers experienced not only with non-official artists of the previous generation (such as Vigen Tadevosyan and Vardan Tovmassyan) but it also places them antagonistically in relation to the “officially oppositional¹¹” Museum of Modern Art and its director. This anti-institutional ethos –

⁹ Arman Grigoryan, ‘Informed but Scared: The “Third Floor” Movement, Parajanov, Beuys and Other Institutions’, in Hedwig Saxenhuber and George Schöllhammer (eds), *Adieu Parajanov: Contemporary Art from Armenia* (Vienna: Springerin, 2003), pp. 13–15.

¹⁰ The catalogue mentions 1983 as the date of Norayr Ayvazyan’s “Shamiram” performance. However, artist Grigor Khachatryan confirms that the performance dates to 1997. This is one amongst the numerous factual errors in the haphazardly compiled publication.

¹¹ Vardan Azatyan, “Disintegrating Progress: Bolshevism, National Modernism and the Emergence of Contemporary Art in Armenia”, *ARTMargins* 1.1 (2012), pp. 62–87.

even when enacted from within institutions – was to characterize the first large artistic/cultural movement of non-official artists in Armenia – The 3rd Floor. The assumption that truly free art has the power to break from institutional boundaries and conventions, was to become formative for contemporary art in Armenia and act as a key signifier for resistance and subversion attached to performative practices. These practices were often seen as a means of revealing the truth that the deceptive façade of official narratives and institutions concealed. As the figure of truth, the performative gesture occupies a structurally marginal and at times, a subterranean position vis-à-vis the official institutions.

In 1987, then young art critic Nazareth Karoyan - as if echoing Grigoryan's retrospectively expressed discontent with the Museum of Modern Art in Yerevan – first discovered and then meticulously categorized the garbage accumulated on the roof of the Museum. The accumulated garbage was documented in an inventory that Karoyan presented at the Union of Artists' official meeting of the same year, to the distress of many of those present. It is interesting that garbage, as a signifier of contradictions buried behind the beautiful façade of official cultural politics, was not merely revealed but categorized and itemized. This conceptual gesture became one of the triggers for the 3rd Floor's first exhibition in the same year and marked the movement's position as reforming cultural institutions from within and resisting official culture from its very margins.

In the same year of Karoyan's "garbage action", a group of artists embarked upon the reformation of the Union of Artists of Armenia. This first event was more of a festival than a coherent exhibition and it took place in the conference hall located on the third floor of the Union, a space not designated for exhibitions. It was the location of their first convention that gave the movement its name: "the 3rd Floor." The 3rd Floor began to form when several young artists were invited to be part of the youth division of the Union in 1987. Ideologically, the 3rd Floor movement presented a mixture of romantic liberalism, nationalism and libertarianism, with anarchist dreams of omnipotence and contradicting ideologies that often-worked hand in hand. The members romanticized symbols of Western consumerism and subcultures to the degree that they came to denote ideals of individual freedom and autonomy. The critique of the Soviet through its opposite other – signs of capitalist consumer culture as inherently democratic – situates the 3rd Floor within the intellectual climate of the late Soviet and socialist intelligentsia's romantic alliance with liberal democracy. In the practices of the 3rd Floor these ideals were understood from an artistic perspective: the citizen's freedom was equal to that of the artist's "absolute and universal right to mix different artistic styles and images on the surface of the canvas."¹² The seminal performance of the movement of 1988 *Hail to the Union of Artists from the Netherworld: the Official Art Has Died* reenacted the opposition to the Soviet and its cultural policy on metaphorical terms.

On December 12, several artists of the movement, dressed as resurrected ghosts like their heavy metal heroes walked into one of the Union of Artists' conventional exhibitions and declared the death of official art. In this happening, recorded under two different titles – *The Official Art Has Died* and *Hail to the Union of Artists from the Netherworld* – they walked silently through the exhibition hall, viewed traditional paintings hung on the walls of an art institution defending

¹² "Cucadrum e 3rd harky" [The 3rd Floor is showing], *Arvest* 11–12 (1992), pp. 3–8

Soviet official orthodoxy, and with the realization of the symptomatic significance of their action took photographs of themselves in various groupings and positions and walked out. This event crystalized the 3rd Floor's belief in the incommensurability of art as a space for free creation and the institution ruled by the tyranny of banality: if art was the collectively constructed dream of the underground heroes, the institution was the counter-image of the conventional domain of a properly dead and officially sanctioned reality. Through the metaphor of the netherworld the 3rd Floor artists strove to discover the pure, socially unconditioned freedom of a radically individualized subject who had managed to overcome the contaminating layers of ideology, and arrive at a "zero point of ideology", a collective belief perceived as if it were individual and subjective, that political ideology was overcome and transcended in and through art. The disappearing world of the Soviet historical experience supplied a negative content for the conception of art as a space of an ideology-free utopia.

Within the framework of perestroika's belief in change from within, the 3rd Floor oscillated on a thin and delicate line between official recognition and rejection, occupying the cultural mainstream and its vanguard margins. The official discourse of the pre-perestroika period of stagnation, identified with the Soviet experience as such, returned in the practices of the 3rd Floor's members as a trauma never able to be articulated but transformed through recurrent returns of various invented and real personages. These personages were born from the anti-Soviet realm. Sometimes they occupied the margins of official discourses, styles, forms and techniques, at other times they hid underground from the watchful eyes of the Soviet collective consciousness. The "Soviet" recurred in the haunted figures of resurrected ghosts and "authoritarian personages", such as a personage found in the works of Grigor Mikaelyan (known as Kiki) who was then adhering to the 3rd Floor. Kiki constructed and consistently pursued the "revelation" of a character called Bobo. This is an abstract and fictional character whose name is commonly invoked to scare children. In Kiki's series of abstract paintings that materialize through performative gestures, Bobo is the secret service agent, the KGB officer, the immaterial eye that controls: it is the scarecrow for the dissident intelligentsia. The figure of Bobo had to be constantly reconstituted, constantly in process, never fully materialized (the first Bobos appear in the mid-1980s and they continue appearing today). This figure would be indexed through a performative action enacted on a canvas spread on the floor around which the artist circled in mad movements and threw scribbly brushstrokes (or rather 'broom strokes', as Kiki would always use a broom). The horizontally positioned canvas itself became a site of exorcism of the official and of the ideological. The repetitive reconstitution of this personage – whose formal features include two circles created through expressive gestural application of paint, sometimes enclosed in a triangle and surrounded by the painterly traces of the performance – reveals the compulsively repetitive structure of trauma, a repetition that paradoxically recurs as a unique event each time it is reproduced. The canvas appears as a space of psychic discharge upon which the repressed returns.¹³

In the framework of the 3rd Floor's exhibitions Ashot Ashot executed several performances that made metaphysical claims of transcendence through the overcoming of "facts". For this Ashot Ashot adopted a self-designated strategy called *afaktum* which comprised of a strategic and methodic reduction of matter and speech to their basic elements pointing towards "permanent art". A photograph of his performance *A Structure of Communication* for the 1989 exhibition

¹³ Angela Harutyunyan, *Political Aesthetics...*, p. 59.

666 shows a figure of a woman standing in the middle of the action with threads diagonally stretched from her head towards the ground and forming a web around her. Here, communication is revealed as a cultural imperative of a supposedly closed world opening up to the outside, but as soon as it is revealed, it is destroyed: the threads pulled and fixed on the ground forming a cone around the woman's body are subsequently unthreaded and destroyed.

Another “underground” hero of the netheworld Sev (Herik Khachatryan) involved performative actions to produce objects from scrap materials. His adopted persona was itself performative with his signature color black in clothing and his authorial name.¹⁴ As early as 1985 (since his first encounter with Kiki), Sev had been visiting junk yards, collecting scrap metal and welding them in front of audiences as *objets*, a practice he still continues. A photograph from 1987 shows one of those expeditions to the Yerevan Thermal Plant with photographer Aram Udinyan. In the photograph, both protagonists are squatting by the side of materials gathered. One can only imagine Sev's “sinister” dressed all in black marching with a fire torch and manipulating metal in front of bewildered later Soviet audiences. Sev's work was directly inspired by the post-war neo-dada and Nouveau Realism which he encountered for the first time through catalogues and slides brought to the milieu of the young avant-gardists by art critic Nazareth Karoyan.¹⁵ In a 1989 action the artist pays an homage to his idol of Nouveau Realism, Césaire during the 3rd Floor's visit to Paris on the occasion of the opening of their exhibition. The artist executes a reverse summersault in front of one Césaire's assemblages. For Sev, artists of the historical avant-garde and neo-avantgarde such as Malevich, Césaire and Alberto Burri were his guides and inspirations towards a counter-cultural constitution of art as a sphere of freedom.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the imperative formulated by the late Soviet anti-Soviet artistic avant-garde in Armenia was the revelation of the authentic and yet subterranean layers of reality as truth that had been distorted and falsified behind the ideological façade of official lies. The allegorical personifications of this subterranean truth were various dwellers of the netherworld as in the case of the 3rd Floor's 1988 happening, anti-heroes whose painterly materialization invoked deep-seated scopophobia (Bobo's main feature are the two empty circles that gaze back from their void without forming a look – a “location” of the scopic drive that circles around the organ but never dwells in it, as per Lacan's formulation of the gaze) and the surpassing of the empirical and factual in search for a quasi-mystical pure reality (as in Ashot Ashot). But paradoxically, these anxieties of visibility were not revealed through disappearance and immaterialization but through loud gestures and actions of excess and plentitude that were positioned as constituting a counter-sphere to the official and the ideological. Ultimately, the 3rd Floor was striving for cultural and social visibility.

Aesthetically, the artists associated with the movement engaged with painting in an “expanded field” in order to exceed it from within, through the body and temporality: artists of the *Happening* walk through an exhibition of paintings with their faces painted, Bobo is invoked in paintings and Ashot-Ashot “overcomes” paint by spilling it over the model's body. Painting here is both affirmed and surpassed through its multimedia expansion, and this dynamic of affirming

¹⁴ According to Sev, he chose the name because of his attraction to Malevich's Black Square and because the practical character of the color in clothing: for a young bachelor black clothes were convenient since they would dirty easily. Interview with Sev. April 8, 2022.

¹⁵ Ibid.

a traditional medium while exceeding its specificity and at times negating it altogether, rhymes with the structural positioning of these gestures from within the official discourse and in resistance to it. In other words, these performative gestures were articulated from within the margins of the officially sanctioned glasnost' policy as its avant-garde. Retrospectively, the 3rd Floor artists, however, often situated their exhibitions as a resistant and anti-institutional subcultural response to what they perceived as the violence of the official culture that hindered freedom and creativity. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Armenia's independence, this understanding of avant-garde art as a mode of subcultural resistance to the dominant culture entered a certain crisis. As the Soviet world was disappearing through fast-paced privatization, financial collapse, de-modernization of urban spaces and socially induced historical amnesia of the recent past, to the late Soviet avant-gardists, the 1990s promised a reconciliation between art (imagined as a realm of free creation) and dominant culture (understood as a regressive and repressive mechanism of conformity).¹⁶

Forms and rituals and performances of power: performing politics (1991-1998)

Performative practices and "art actions"¹⁷ in the 1990s are characterized less by grand gestures of plenitude and excess and more by austere, minimal and often barely visible acts engaging with the triviality of the everyday, intervening in "closed systems" of communication, overidentifying with or ironically repeating forms and procedures of the newly constituted democratic state and its official rituals and demarcating the institutional boundaries of art. In the maelstrom of the rapid transformations marked by the collapse of the old world, many artists greeted a new-found quasi-anarchic freedom, the establishment of severed communication with the outside world and the possibility of participating in the construction of the new world and the new state. In the mid 1990s, for the first time, contemporary art from Armenia was presented abroad under the aegis of the Republic's Ministry of Culture.¹⁸ In this context, the artistic avant-garde largely positioned itself as the self-appointed vanguard of the culture of the new state, and no longer as a resistant subculture at odds with reality. Its agenda often (but not always) coincided with that of the cultural politics of the new Republic – to represent Armenia as a progressive nation with an ancient culture that is finally joining the progressive and free family of nations on the international stage.

The 3rd Floor finally dissolved in 1994, partly due to the mentioned crisis of resistance and partly because of the need to institutionalize (and its inherent anti-institutional stance), paving the way for a generation of artists who saw themselves as the avant-garde of the independent republic. This generation made its collective entry to the scene of contemporary art in 1994-1995 under the name ACT, comprised mostly of students from the Terlemezyan College of Fine

¹⁶ Arman Grigoryan rejoices what he considers the final reconciliation between art and culture, which he sees as culminated in the Catholicos's gesture of "bless[ing] the Armenian avant-garde", in the 1996 exhibition at the Armenian Center for Contemporary Experimental Art dedicated to the 5th Anniversary of the country's independence. Arman Grigoryan, "Katoghikosn orhneq hay avangardy" [The Catholicos blessed the Armenian avant-garde], *Garun* 1 (1997), p. 93.

¹⁷ This was the preferred term of the young artists coming to the scene in the 1990s.

¹⁸ This includes official exhibitions organized in Moscow's Central House of Artists, in Bochum's Galerie Bochumer Kulturrat and in Cyprus, Nicosia, all in 1995. The year also marks the first participation of the Republic of Armenia at La Biennale di Venice organized by the ACCEA and representing Samvel Baghdasarian and Karen Andreassian.

Arts.¹⁹ They imagined the artist as the engineer of this new world, but paradoxically from within the realm of art understood as “pure creation.”²⁰ This latter denoted both a conceptual procedure of cleansing the artwork from subjective, material, institutional and other determinations not imminent to the process of creation, and adopting concrete strategies for making those procedure visible through “fixation (inscription)”, “intervention”, “inspection” and “display.” ACT understood art and the political sphere of the state as separate institutions both constituted by procedural mechanisms, and it aimed at demystifying both art and politics. The different protagonists of the group, however, understood demystification differently. If for David Kareyan, demystification meant the destruction of specialized artistic labor in order to embrace a broader and more elementary notion of creation, for Hrach Armenakyan the concept of “pure creation” placed the artist as a specialized functionary within the larger social mechanism, securing the unhindered operation of this seemingly clockwork mechanism. Meanwhile, for Narek Avetissyan “pure creation” signified the impossible limit of art to guard its realm against the penetrations of the impure reality. These different understandings are embodied in different actions performed between 1993 and 1996.

Since 1993 Kareyan had been working on a project called POLIT-ART, which involved three different strategies directly borrowed from the political procedures of liberal democracy: referendum, demonstration and agitation, most of which were realized as collective actions after the formation of ACT. In the exhibition Act of 1995 in Karoyan’s Ex Voto Gallery, Kareyan prepared leaflets with texts such as “POLIT ART”, “Referendum”, “Agitation” and “Demonstration”, and “Actayin hosank” [Actual stream]. After announcing these words through the open window with a megaphone, he threw the leaflets at the audience standing downstairs. A “referendum” was enacted in the same year, in January 1995, at the exhibition of Armenian art in Bochum, Germany. *Art Referendum* constated of a transparent ballot box with the label “referendum” on it. A photograph, reproduced in several newspapers and periodicals, shows the artist standing behind the box, with a pen in one hand resting on a stack of papers, and inserting a folded paper into the ballot box with the other hand. The action is carried out with uttermost seriousness as the artist’s gaze is fixed upon the action he is performing. The audience members were invited to fill in a questionnaire about various mundane issues and drop them in the ballot box. Finally, Kareyan’s seminal action *Art Demonstration* involved the entire group ACT and their “fellow travelers”. It enacted a democratic form of expression as an artistic action. This much-discussed action is the perfect example of ACT’s identification with the political procedures of liberal democracy as formal procedures and from within a conception of art as a sphere of “pure creation.”²¹

¹⁹ Naira Aharonyan, Hrach Armenakyan, Vahram Aghasyan, Narine Aramyan, Narek Avetisyan, Diana Hakobyan, Samvel Hovhannisyan, David Kareyan, Rusanna Nalbandyan and Arthur Vardanyan. Occasionally Harutyun Simonyan and Mher Azatyan identified with the artists without becoming members of the group.

²⁰ David Kareyan, in an earlier translation I referred to “*maqur steghtsagortsutyun*” as “pure creativity”. David Kareyan, “Pure Creativity”, translation and introduction by Angela Harutyunyan, *ARTMargins* 2.1 (2013), pp. 127–8. Originally published in Armenian, “Maqur Steghtsagortsutyun”, *Garun* 8 (1994), p. 59.

²¹ Vardan Azatyan, “Art Communities, Public Spaces, and Collective Actions in Armenian Contemporary Art”, in Mel Jordan and Malcolm Miles (eds), *Art, Theory, Post-Socialism* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2008), p. 46 and Angela Harutyunyan, “Veraimastavorelov hanrayin volorty. Sahmanadrakan petutyunn u

On 12 July 1995, during the opening of the exhibition *Yerevan Moscow: The Question of the Ark*, and exactly one week after the constitutional referendum in Armenia that approved the first constitution of the independent state, ACT, together with several other artists, marched along the main avenue in Yerevan. They covered an artistically defined public space - the area between the statue of the early twentieth-century Armenian modernist painter Martiros Saryan (and the site of early youth exhibitions in early 1980s) and the Museum of Modern Art. Approximately twenty people carried slogans in Armenian and English, almost always in black letters on a white background, including signs calling for “Interventions into Systems”, “World Integration”, “Polit-Art”, “Decentralization”, “Market Relations in Art and Economy”, “Realization”, “No Art”, “Art Referendum”, “New State, Art, Culture” and “Demythologization”, or demanding to “Expel the Information Monsters from Rationality”, proclaiming that “Every Small Mistake Can Result in Big Catastrophes” and asserting that “Creativity Will Save Humanity”. After reaching their final destination, the museum, the artists hung the banners on the wall as part of the Yerevan-Moscow group exhibition. In this action, the politics of “pure creation” directly met the pure creation of politics, as the slogans were both formal interventions in the art institution as well as manifestations of democratic proceduralism in the form of a public demonstration on the street.

As opposed to the methodical assertion of the boundaries of art, and politics, Avetissyan’s performative actions of “pure creation” were “contaminated” with the “impure” trivia of the everyday. In the exhibition Act of 1995 Avetissyan’s project involved him walking from his home in downtown Yerevan to the Ex Voto Gallery with a tape recorder documenting the street sounds on his way. In the exhibition venue, the audience could rewind the tape and replay the recording. The participatory promise of this *Audio Fixation* tempted several rock musicians to subvert the work by changing the audio recording and putting on rock and roll music instead. The following dialogue between the artist and audience members was recorded:

Avetissyan: “What are you doing?”

Audience member: “We are changing the tape.”

“But this is *my* work.”

“What? We thought this was an action.”

“But this is my action. I don’t need others’ interventions.”

“What kind of a free artist are you if you are not letting others participate in your action?”

“If you want to make your own action, go ahead. But this is *my* action.”²²

ACT’s affirmative strategies of over-identification with the political forms of the liberal democratic state through performative actions could be considered as unique in contemporary art in Armenia, in terms of relating to the state and its institutions affirmatively. Grigor Khachatryan’s gestures of ritualistic mimicry – most of the time ironic and often grotesque – relate to the mechanisms of the constitution of power and authority. Khachatryan’s work renders

AKT xmki hastatoghakan qaghaqakan geghagitutyuny” [“Rethinking the Public Sphere: Constitutional State and the Affirmative Political Aesthetics of the Group ACT], in *Hetq*, 23 September, 2010.

²² *Ex Voto* 3, *Garun* 4 (April 1995). Interview with Narek Avetissyan conducted by myself. 18 October 2007. The direct speech is quoted from the interview with the artist.

political institutions simply as forms through which power and authority are enacted as and through ritual. He performatively assumes “absolute power” through self-mandated award ceremonies (The Grigor Khachatryan Award ceremony), self-aggrandizing declarations (“You are within the radius of the sexual rays of Grigor Khachatryan”), pseudo-institutions (“Center for Planning Accidents”), ceremonial renaming of city streets (Groghneri poghots,) and “official meetings” (hosting then Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili in the specially designated room for official meetings as part of the Armenian Pavilion in the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011). The fictitious persona created by the artist “cannibalizes” the artist’s body as raw material and uses it in the repetitive rituals. In the Grigor Khachatryan’s award ceremony (“tested” in 1974 and launched since 1990)²³ there are a minimum of three Grigor Khachatryan’s – the artist-author who conceives the work, “Grigor Khachatryan” as the name of the award and finally, Grigor Khachatryan’s body as the trophy for the awardee. The latter is honored with the requirement to hold the award (Khachatryan himself) and be photographed with it. Khachatryan’s actions are not confined to the rituals that constitute officialdom. With humor and irony he has been rendering everyday mythologies strange (television interventions on Ar TV, the series “City” produced with Suren Ter-Grigoryan in the 1990s), national myths banal (“Vanna Lich”, Gyumri Biennale 1998) and male friendship as a fantasy of recovering a primordial and infantile state of jouissance (Aratez, 1993 with Norayr Ayvazyan). Khachatryan’s gestures are repetitive and often tautological, a logic that is constitutive of power for its own sake. As sarcastic and anti-heroic his performances might seem, his signature laughter that often accompanies them invokes the figure of a joker as the truth teller in the face of power, a romantic whose heroism is precisely in his anti-heroism.

Performative iteration as an intervention into institutional “systems”, combined with the conception of the artist as an itinerant whose role is to demarcate the boundaries of art’s permissibility characterizes several actions conceived by a loose group of conceptual artists in the mid 1990s. Initially affiliated with New York-based Iranian Armenian artist Sonia Balassanian’s activities in Yerevan since 1993 and ultimately with the foundation of the Armenian Center for Contemporary Experimental Art (1995), artists Karen Andreassian, Ara Hovsepyan, Samvel and Manvel Baghdassaryans and Gagik Charchyan organized an unofficial intervention in the Tbilisi Biennial of 1996. The Biennial coincided with the artists’ schism with Balassanian and became a tacit protest against the ACCEA that organized the official Armenian pavilion for the event.²⁴ Inspired by the scandalous artist Alexander Brener’s rhetorical question: “Why haven’t I been taken to this exhibition?” (“Почему меня не взяли на эту выставку?”), artists went to the biennial with “*Geopolitical Cards*” (the title of the intervention), carrying name tags with their own names along with those of famous artists and acting as representatives of a fictitious foundation named “Local Global”. On the one hand the intervention voiced a locally articulated discontent with ACCEA’s collaboration with artists other than the group through a construction of a fictitious and situational counter-institution,²⁵ and on the other hand it brought to the surface a key problematic for post-Soviet Armenian artists – that of a desire to

²³ A photograph showing Khachatryan being held by artist Vardan Tovmassyan in his arms from 1974 has been retrospectively refunctionalized by the artist as the “testing of the Grigor Khachatryan award.”

²⁴ Nare Sahakyan’s graduation project “Drvagner 1990-akanneri hayastanyan konseptual arvesti. Haraberutyunner ev dirqoroshumner”, [“Passages in the Armenian Cocenptual Art of the 1990s. Relations and Positions.”], Institute of Contemproary Art, Yerevan, unpublished text, 2014.

²⁵ Nare Sahakyan, Ibid.

participate in a global art world through a language and means characterizing conceptual art.²⁶ It is especially the latter aspect that informs their expedition of the next year to the German town of Kassel.

In 1997, the same group of artists— a collective that was situational rather than long-lasting and cohesive— organized an unofficial intervention in the authoritative 1997 Documenta X exhibition in Kassel curated by Catherine David. “GEO-Kunst Expedition” documented the artists’ journey from Yerevan to the Documenta. Once in town, the group posted its route along with the blank of the expedition stamped by a fake logo of the Documenta in various locations in Kassel calling for interventions on the white page. The blank acted as a parasitic “institution” proposed by the uninvited guests within the institution of the Documenta. The artists claimed to be providing a ready-made space for exhibition while inserting themselves into the global contemporary art context that had allegedly bypassed the Armenian artists.²⁷ This self-insertion was understood quite literally as the artists made sure to be photographed with David, and have the curator perform as an “artist” in the unofficial Documenta by signing their self-made blank. For a moment, the unofficial artists and the official curator exchanged places.

The Fragile Body and the Damaged Subject: A Decade of Crisis and Resistance (1998-2008)

If the performative actions of the early to mid- 1990s were to a large extent launched by situational or strategic collectives and groups as interventions, correctives to institutional operations of the state and the artworld and motivated by the desire to communicate beyond the regulated boundaries of “systems” and borders, the late 1990s marked a shift towards individual actions, enclosure within interiority and exploration of the body as fragile and the subject as damaged and violated. In the meantime the earlier stress on text, factorgraphic strategies, ephemeral “fixations” and interventions is replaced with the newly available medium of video and multimedia installation involving often theatrically infused live performances where the focus is on the body as a site of antagonism to the social and the political, *tout court*. The body in these actions acts as the tragic locus of the irreparable schism between nature and culture, as a site of a technologically inflicted hyper-alienation. This shift from collective actions and interventions to solo performances and video were partly reactions to the social and political transformations in Armenia in the late 1990s. While fermenting within the social and political processes in the 1990s, these transformations were experienced as violent and tectonic.

The 1990s’ wild and unregulated free-market reforms prepared the ground for the raise of the new oligarchy while the Karabagh war enflamed nationalist sentiments. Yet, the parliament shooting on October 27, 1999 and Kocharyan’s subsequent usurpation of power were experienced as cataclysmic events that heralded the end of post-Soviet aspirations for the construction of a democratic nation state at the level of the state ideology. Politically and economically, the transformation from post-Soviet processes of building institutions of a sovereign state along with free market reforms and liberal democracy gave a way to a convenient marriage between ethnocentric nationalism and neoliberalism. The official cultural policy of the 1990s of representing Armenia as an ancient and yet modern and progressive nation to the world

²⁶ Vardan Jaloyan, “Turismy ev nuynakanutyun”, [“Tourism and Identification”], *In Vitro* 1, 1998, p. 30.

²⁷ Vardan Jaloyan, Text of the catalogue “GEO-Kunst Expedition”, *In Vitro* 2, 1998, p. 42.

began to retreat in the face of the “one nation, one culture” rhetoric under the umbrella of Christianity, an identity that became both ideologically expedient and commercially lucrative for the reproduction of the new nationalist elites. This new social world left the contemporary artists in its margins foreclosing any possibility of identification with dominant social and cultural processes and narratives. If in 1998 artist Sev could have an exhibition at the National Assembly triggering art critic Vardan Jaloyan’s anxiety over art’s identification with power,²⁸ or if Azat Sargsyan could wash his feet in a 1996 exhibition at ACCEA, the day after the Catholicos visited to the Center, after the 1999 parliament shootings the relationship between state institutions and dominant cultural narratives on the one hand and the contemporary art scene on the other, could be defined only on negative terms.

Meanwhile the late 1990s were also marked by a triumph of postmodern mediatization of the public sphere where the world produced on the screen came to be perceived as more real than the social reality replete with contradictions.²⁹ As opposed to the deceptive spectacle of media representations, contemporary artists used video as a technology signifying resistance and “truth”. Here the performed, screened and displayed body could act as a conduit to an authentic reality beneath and beyond the cultural “screen”. Video as a medium of subversion, truth and exposure had its roots also in the earlier 1990s’ proliferation of sexually explicit content on VHS tapes.³⁰ The proliferation of video was technically possible because ACCEA imported cameras, DVD players, TV monitors and projectors, and made these available to the artists, while the theatrical and ritualistic pathos of performative practices found nourishment through Balassanian’s own theatrically infused multi-media performances, an aesthetics also encouraged by ACCEA’s Theater Department.

The triangulation of theatrical video-performance, the conception of the fragile body as a site of violence and the belief in art as a means of resistance is crystalized in David Kareyan’s works of 1999-2007. From ritualistic sacrifices (*Dead Democracy*, 1999) to eating the victim’s flesh (*Eucharist-450*, 2000), to splitting bones with an electric saw (*Gastritus*, 2002), these works place the video monitor displaying the body, often naked, amongst incongruent materials such as earth, plants, bones and fleece as signifiers of nature estranged and alienated from the subject. Kareyan’s work of the period counterposes art’s promise of dealienation to the false sublation of alienation within the social sphere – where the technologies of the cultivation of the self in a society of standardized consumerist desires and behaviors promise fulfilment but in reality, mass produce subjects of conformity. These social technologies of desire shape the body as an image of power (in an edified and upright-standing form), while at the same time they subjugate it to control. The effects of political control and consumerism are inscribed on the body of the normative subject whose complicit performance of militarism, patriotism and conservative morality naturalizes patriarchal domination. These ideologies produce auto-erotic subjects whose frustrated desire can only be expressed a primordial return to the mud (*The World Without You*, 1999) or invoked through the impossible return to murder and incest (*Sweet Repression of Ideology*, 2000).

²⁸ Vardan Jaloyan, “Arvesty ev Qaghaqakanutyuny”, *Haykakan Jamanak*, April 9, 1997.

²⁹ I trace this transformation in “The Real And/As Representation: TV, Video, and Contemporary Art in Armenia”, *ARTMargins* 1:1 (MIT Press, 2012), pp. 88-109.

³⁰ Vardan Azatyan, “On Video in Armenia: Avant-garde and/in Urban Conditions”, www.video-as.org/project/video_yerevan.html.

The culmination of these series of videos and performances is Kareyan's *No Return* (subtitled "Suicide for Eternal Life, Oral Hysteria, Speech Capability Paid [for] by Madness") of 2003.³¹ Realized in collaboration with curator Eva Khachatryan, Kareyan's work is a three-channel video installation with the two side screens showing a montage of found footage from documentary films and world news reports of various turbulent events of recent years superimposed on politically charged signs and words, and with the central screen showing a Bill Viola-esque video of Kareyan in a white nightdress digitally superimposed on fire (in different versions of the work, the images on the screens vary). An audio piece composed of electronic bits and lyrics by the early twentieth-century Armenian writer Eghishe Charents played in reverse accompanies the videos, as does a live performance involving seven female figures, most of whom members of the punk band Incest, dressed up in hooded black gowns and drumming on tin plates and logs. These works echo Sonia Balassanian's multimedia theatrical performances of the period infused with myth and ritual. Balassanian's performances reference Armenian ecclesial traditions, enact victimhood, sacrifice and various rituals of domination and subjugation (*Shadows of Dusk and Collapse of Illusions*, 2000, *There Might Have Been*, 2003, ACCEA). The construction of a total environment that overwhelms the audience with its production of affect combines video projection, ready-made objects, voice, music, performance and other media and encompasses the entirety of the viewer's sensorial sphere, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of sorts. Often, such as in *Collapse of Illusions*, this total environment as a grand theatrical setting accommodates other artists' performances (David Kareyan's, Karine Matsakyan's, Sona Abgaryan's, Diana Hakobyan's and others). *Collapse of Illusions* is formed through multiple discrepant activities performed by subjects in solipsistic self-enclosure and constitutes a negative side of reality where everything is as in the social world, but dysfunctional, futile, completely deplete of time and context. Sewing, knitting, hammering nails, dancing, "cooking" pages in tar, are all actions performed in a dystopic and atemporal landscape littered with media images, objects, art works and debris.

Several artists in the early 2000s produce videos and performances where the body is explored as a fragile yet subversive locus of sexuality, eroticism and desire. Tigran Khachatryan's videos pursue sexually explicit content montaged onto the signs of youth subculture and remixed with ready-made references to film and youth culture. Repetitive and futile masturbatory gestures or their metaphorical representation through juxtaposition of image and rhythm often follow the structure of male orgasm (such as in the "explosive scene" of the gas stove burning and extinguishing in *Romeo*, 2003). This image of the virile subject is juxtaposed with the figure of a male subcultural anti-hero as an average representative of a bored and jaded generation (Stakler, 2004). In a 2002 performance *Bread and Cheese* in Ayrivank, a religious site, the artist approaches a miniature football field marked on grass with white paint, seats in front of the camera dressed up as a punk football fan mimicking a football player from the Turkish national team (Umit Davalan) and eats bread and cheese throughout the duration of the performance. Soon the viewer of the recording realizes that the artist is not filming the performance of eating bread and cheese. Instead the camera, positioned in front of him, displays a football match on its display screen. This action literary enacts the widespread Armenian saying that one should eat

³¹ The work was performed at the 3rd Biennale of Gyumri in 2002 for the second time after its initial presentation at the ACCEA in the same year, and ultimately transported to the Venice Biennale in 2003.

much bread and cheese to grow up or to become an adult.³² This “rite of initiation” of the young punk in Ayrvank is an ironically enacted oedipal patricide. However, instead of assuming the father’s place after the symbolic murder, the male subject remains forever juvenile.

If the male body in Kachartyan’s work is at times virile and sexually provocative (in “Garage Film” productions such as *Romeo*, 2003; *Entertate*, 2010, *Theodicy*, 2005), and at other times bored and indifferent, in Harutyun Simonyan’s video performances it is fragile and vulnerable. The performances are framed by a decontextualized and compressed space, where the naked artist assumes a fetal position on the screen conceived as a maternal womb (Untitled, 2001). Simonyan’s naked body dances, it slips and tumbles in a room covered with black linoleum and smeared with Vaseline (Untitled, 2003), it falls asleep (*Sleep*, 2001) or performs the feminine work of sewing and attempting to put an undersized feminine dress on (Untitled, 2001). The sexualized male body is masochistically exposed to voyeuristic scopophilia as the audience “infiltrates” the artist’s private space. Yet, masochistic exhibitionism and exposure here do not unambiguously grant the viewer visual control over the fragile body; the subject is also protected and sheltered by the screen/womb in the fantasy of a return to the maternal origin. In Lusine Davidyan’s video *Untitled* (2003) the embryonic state unfolding on the TV monitor is not the prelapsarian fantasy of the whole and undivided subject but the horror of the certain and always already predetermined death. An abstracted form of a body flickers on the screen while a black text on the white wall issues the verdict: “Embryonic Death Embedded in Your Body”, paraphrasing heavy metal band Slayer’s song “Embryonic Death Embedded in Your Brain”. The temporality of Simonyan’s work is a regression to an ahistorical and pre-subjective time before birth, to the mother’s body, while Davidyan’s is that of the future anterior – a future that will have happened in the past.

If the above described works confine the body to a claustrophobic self-encloser refusing any relationality or an “outside”, other artists of the same generation explore the intersubjective dimension of bodily communication. In Sona Abgarian’s work of early 2000s friendship is conceived as a medium of intersubjective exchange where play and violence, communication and its failure appear as rudimentary forms of sociality. In *Untitled* (2001) two female subjects (the artist and her friend Astghik Melkonyan) assume a four-legged position and engage in a play of love and envy, empathy and violence as they circle around each other, hug and bite.

Diana Hakobyan’s videos of early 2000s position the active body as disruptive of the induced passivity of media spectacle and consumerism as she engages with the deconstruction of the rhetoric of mediatized images and social clichés. In *I Can’t Believe in Your Dreams* of 2002 the artist is seen in a close up (either face, abdomen, chest or legs) skipping a rope while the action is rhythmically interrupted with a hammer smashing a glass pane with social ideals written on them such as “Collaboration”, “Productivity”, “Success”, “Imagination”. In another, the artist is boxing against a pane of glass covered in incomprehensible scribbles in red paint. This figure of the female artist as a warrior against social clichés and consumerist desires can be traced to an earlier work by Karine Matsakyan. In 1995 as part of her solo exhibition *Triumph of the*

³² The work is a direct commentary to the notorious Armenian sport’s commentator Suren Baghdassaryan’s remark that Armenians should eat a lot of bread and cheese to play at the same level as the Turks.

Consumer at Charlie Khachatryan Gallery, Matsakyan walked into a butcher shop with a toy gun and “fired” at hanging flesh (“Suicidal Tendencies”, 1995).

Anna Barseghian’s performative photograph of 1999 taken in the toilette of the Grand Théâtre de Genève intervenes in the sexual division of intimate spaces. The photograph shows the artist dressed in a ceremonial consume all in black as a widow or a theatrical performer. She is standing still and upright in the man’s bathroom against a urinal suggestive of the male position of urination. The contrast between the artist’s stern and austere appearance and the “hooliganism” of the act, the assumption of a phantasmatic phallus by a conservatively dressed female figure juxtaposes two incongruent frames thus estranging the social reproduction of sexuality as it is conducted through the demarcation of segregated, sights and signs.

Up until the early 2000s, these actions were not overtly framed as feminist, perhaps with the exception of Barseghian’s work.³³ A shift takes place at around 2002-2003 when Sonia Balassanian on the one hand, and Austrian curator visiting Yerevan Hedwig Saxenhuber, on the other hand, encourage explicitly feminist framing of women artists’ work concerned with the social reproduction of sexual divisions, gender roles, anti-patriarchal manifestations and the body. The feminist exhibitions Women’s City curated by Arpine Tokmajyan, Heriqnaz Galstyan and Narine Zolyan in 2004 and Rocks Melting In the Depth of the Earth in 2004 and Women’s City by Eva Khachatryan in 2005 testify to this shift towards revealing explicitly feminist concerns through a language and discourse of difference and identity characteristic of the US third wave feminism of the 1970s and 1980s. Displayed at the festival Rocks Melting In the Depth of the Earth Tsomak’s video juxtaposes the artist’s frantically dancing naked body with a video of a dancing stripper filmed in a club in Yerevan, whereas Sona Abgaryan’s work shows the artist buttoning her blouse, taking her shirt on and off in awkward movements as a text describing violence against women from the first person account is subtitled.

Astghik Meklonyan’s work Bokhcha of 2004 also engages with traditional feminine roles and tasks. But this engagement is not guided through a subversive reperformance of sexual roles but in their exaggerated over-performance, to an extent that the female subject becomes the object of her own labor. Bokhcha is a video performance in which the artist’s body wrapped and desubjectivized is barely visible amongst other colorful and patterned wraps as it moves slowly through them. These wraps made of blankets and sheets are signifiers of feminine household labor while also pointing at the experience of displacement and migration as “bokhcha” (originally a Turkish word used in Armenian slang) designates a self-made wrap that functions as a carrier for the belongings of immigrants, nomads, travelers and the displaced.

The dominant paradigm of performative artistic practices in the late 1990s and early 2000s could be construed as one of a critical deconstruction of socially imposed gender roles, sexual identities and forms of subjectivization. In this context Azat Sargsyan’s performative interventions propose another strategy: not to rearticulate the body, identity and the subject as subversive of dominant discourses but to annihilate the very material upon which ideology conducts its wicked schemes - the subject itself. Free Hanging at the Azatutyun (Freedom) Square (2000) in Yerevan is an action where the artist hangs upside-down from a light pole on

³³ Heriqnaz Galstyan and Arevik Arevshatyan were perhaps exceptions. Arevshatyan articulates feminist concerns in her 1995 work entitled The Belt.

Armenia's Independence Day. The photograph of the action shows the artist anthropologically opposite to the human orientation and iconographically contrasting with the statue of composer Alexander Spendiaryan at the background on the right side of the photograph. This anthropological reversal or repositioning as a means for the annihilation of the subject is repeated in the action *Welcome* of 1999 performed at the exhibition *After the Wall* in Stockholm in 2000 and in 2002 at the Sao Paulo Biennial. This time, the artist positions his body horizontally as a doormat to mark the entrance to the exhibition space. This willful self-objectification as a lowly and abject doormat under the visitor's feet marks a desire for the obliteration of subjectivity, a desire that reaches its extreme in Azat's subsequent performances involving death and the politics of its commodification.

Welcome to Armenia, Museum Under Heaven of 2003 for the exhibition "L'environnement du corps génétiquement modifiable" curated by Barseghian and Karoyan, the artist studies the economy of cemeteries and especially real estate speculations through which the municipal cemeteries spread towards residential neighborhoods and become "last destinations" for expat Armenians who live abroad but dream to be buried in the homeland. Azat distributes funerary accessories across the city including a guide to the cemetery "Armenia" placing the country itself as a cemetery under heaven. The artist is photographed next to funerary statues and tombs wearing a black garment with a white painted inscription "Welcome" on it. His identification of Armenia as a place of death exposes the commodification of this myth and positions it as an object of touristic consumption. The illegality of the act (of advertising funerary products prohibited by the law) puts the artist in an extra-legal territory as a subversive subject.³⁴ Continuing identification with death and dying, this subject is finally obliterated in the impossible act of witnessing one's own funeral (the Gyumri Biennial of 2008).

Azat's works return us to the practices of the 1980s unofficial artists of the Soviet Union for whom disappearance and death become the means of escaping the watchful eyes of the Soviet apparatus. But paradoxically, this self-annihilation is also a road to absolute freedom (Azat-Azatutyun). Enacted in 2000s this anachronistic dissidence is a remainder of the ghostly reverberations of a world that had supplied a negative content for the conception of art as a free space for dreaming, a conception formative for contemporary art in Armenia and performative practices within it. This world is the disappearing landscape of Soviet modernity. In the 2000s, in the conditions when the identification with the social context could no longer be secured, nor could the artist's social function be affirmed in the conditions of increasing alienation, the imaginary world of artistic creations becomes a shelter of sort, a compensatory mechanism, while the artist was ever more marginalized in the context of rampant nationalism and neoliberalism. The comeback of the first president of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrosyan to politics in 2007 was to open up a space for renewed participation in politics and public life for the artists, a space that was soon to be violently shut with the 2008 March 1 repressions.

³⁴ Vardan Azatyan, "Azat Sargsyan, *Welcome to Armenia*" in *L'environnement du corps*. Exhibition catalog, Metiss Presses, 2005, p. 50.