

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”.



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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

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