

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

