

Armenity/Hayoutiouun

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In honor of the one-hundred-year commemoration of the Armenian Genocide of 1915, the Pavilion of the Republic of Armenia at the 56th Venice Biennale provided an occasion to rethink the notion of “Armenianess” and broaden this reflection to include the concepts of identity type and memory, justice and reconciliation, in the name of which many contemporary struggles are still taking place.

Whether we think of painters, sculptors, architects, photographers, musicians, writers or poets, filmmakers or actors, Armenia’s history is replete with artists. Historically speaking, situated at a transitional point between East and West, Armenian art thrived on Christian soil where the representation of icons was not feared. This resulted in great pictorial talent, passed on over many generations.

I was inspired by the French word “Arménité” to call the exhibition *Armenity/Hayoutiouun*. It seemed to me an appropriate new word to describe a new generation of artists and intellectuals in constant flux, with a large diversity of self-defining, which however kept a subjective sense of being-in-the-world.

Armenity/Hayoutiouun questions the concept of Armenian identity as being the result of the historical connections characterizing Armenian culture through the millennia from the lands of Anatolia, the Caucasus and throughout the diaspora since its inception. The richness of the exhibition finds expression in the diversity of creative ideas and narrations and the vision of each of the artists and intellectuals involved – it is a direct reflection of a continuous process of preservation and enrichment that has allowed the Armenian culture to be integrated but not assimilated in even the most adverse conditions.

In the last one hundred years, despite the *medz yeghern* or Great Calamity, an expression that Armenians use to denote the period of massacres and deportations that peaked in 1915, Armenian culture has survived and artists of Armenian origin have remained genuine citizens of the world-at-large: on the one hand deeply attached to their roots and aware of their own historical individuality, but on the other hand also able to create productive connections with the culture of their country of adoption.

Armenity/Hayoutiouun is composed by sixteen artists, all of them grandchildren of the survivors of the first genocide of the 20th century. Whether they were born in Aleppo, Los Angeles or Yerevan, and whether they may now live in Europe, America or the Middle East, their works have kept up with the artistic flow while developing a unique aesthetic approach with a specific ingrained concern for the notions of territories, borders and geography.

In the catalogue, Neery Melkonian’s and Stephanie Bailey’s essays accurately identify this strong feeling of “Armenity.” The artists have also participated in the construction of the catalogue, in writing about their own work, or in choosing appropriate art writers to analyze and dialogue with their work.

The exhibition itself is being held on the island of San Lazzaro which is located on the Venetian lagoon where the Armenian monk Mekhitar, fleeing persecution from the Ottoman Empire, arrived in Venice in 1717. It is here that along with seventeen disciples Mekhitar received permission from the Venetian Republic to found a congregation and monastery – the Mekhitarists of San Lazzaro island – that came to be referred to as “Little Armenia” by both ordinary people and the Armenian intelligentsia for its capturing and rejuvenating the spirit of their nation. Hovannes Shiraz, one of the most popular Armenian poets (Alexandropol 1915–Yerevan 1984), described San Lazzaro as “an Armenian island in foreign waters / with you it renews the light of Armenia.” Over its three-hundred-year history the Monastery of San Lazzaro has helped to preserve Armenia’s unique cultural heritage, much of which might otherwise have been lost. This precious fragment of Armenia in the heart of Venice (with its pier, its garden, its former printing shop, its courtyard, museum and precious library of ancient manuscripts and first editions of printed volumes) provides the framework for some of the most prominent contemporary artists from the Armenian diaspora.

San Lazzaro island itself may be the ultimate example of this unique phenomenon of Armenia.

It is impossible to think of Armenian culture without specifying the importance of its alphabet and the related preservation of its literature and poetry. The essay in the catalogue by Valentina Calzolari emphasizes this strong aspect of Armenian identity. On the other hand, the book on Armenian Poetry that accompanies *Armenity/Hayoutioun* is an example of the flowering of Armenian poets born after 1915 and the Russian Revolution. The poems were selected and edited by the prominent French-speaking poet Vahé Godel.

Curator’s Acknowledgements

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Neither Victory or Defeat... But the Best Possible Participation

Q+A between Ginevra Bria and Adelina Cüberyan v. Fürstenberg

Venice, February 2015

Ginevra Bria: What meaning does the anniversary of the Armenian Genocide acquire in relation to one of the leading international events devoted to contemporary art?

Adelina Cüberyan v. Fürstenberg: *The Biennale has always been a mirror of its times and the 56th edition falls precisely in 2015, which coincides with the hundredth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. Its commemoration acquires a deeper significance when it takes place within the walls of the Monastery of San Lazzaro. The artists of the Armenian diaspora, who are called to represent Armenia in an international context, have different nationalities and backgrounds. Armenian identity for them is a link with a "lost paradise," a land which never coincides with the one they live in. Because of this discrepancy, the artists can represent their own knowledge and awareness, as inner realms, through absolute notions – values which create analogies and feelings shared within the same community. Each artist of the diaspora who interprets his own personal experience and "hearsays," sublimates the contemporary world he lives in, not least through the culture of his host country. This creates a resolved dichotomy between the two lands of reference – a uniting of the two relocations.*

G.B.: *Armenity* presents itself as a place which is superimposed upon physical and geographical regions, and hence automatically coincides with the detailed description of the experience of an "other place" – as one's universal land of origin. The collective encounter between the various narrative and formal fabrics presupposes not just a spatial condition, but also a shared sensitivity enabling the Armenian artists to (re)discover their own land as an intangible heritage, which has always been familiar to them. The aesthetics connected to the Armenian diaspora, moreover, necessarily transcends the binary thought made up of contingent limitations and categories, setting one's own visual culture in given *terres du milieu*, and bringing out interstitial elements through which to re-interpret the present.

A.C.v.F.: *Although the artists of the diaspora may be Lebanese, American, French or Brazilian, and although they belong to different generations, they are still Armenian. Their nationality cannot be detached from the connotations of their origins or from the denotations of the country they live in. Their Armenity becomes an example for contemporaneity, for it reminds us of how, in very difficult conditions, emigrants in the past managed to adapt and find a new place, building a new life for themselves. This is a model for all countries.*

G.B.: Through de-territorialization and re-territorialization, over the following centuries whole social groups will have to start living in a constructive context. So it is crucial to understand, through events such as *Armenity*, how these changes are modifying the cultural map and forms of artistic production, to avoid interpreting each presence in the world in superficial terms. But how do the artists of the Armenian diaspora deal with memory and portray their identity? What hybrid or conflicting forms of identity are reconciled through their work?

A.C.v.F.: *Each artist of the Armenian diaspora is like an inner, personal assemblage of different cultures. He is like a Wunderkammer, which brings together very different objects, without ever accumulating them. Consequently, the Monastery too represents a centuries-old cabinet of wonders. This has been the case since 1717, the year in which the pre-existing leper hospital was renovated by Mekhitar and turned into a place devoted to prayer, as well as to the transmission of knowledge and the conservation of sacred manuscripts. It was typical of the culture of that age for wealthy merchants to donate to the Order not just objects purchased during their travels, but also rare and valuable manuscripts and books. The Monastery museum boasts an extensive collection of ancient volumes, which for almost three hundred years has distinguished and shaped the mission of the monks on San Lazzaro. And the reason for this is that books were the privileged medium for the conservation and transmission of Armenian culture.*

In the exhibition, Nigol Bezjian's works on the poet Daniel Varoujan, or those by Rene Gabri & Ayreen Anastas, engage with the volumes of the monastery – a written testimony to the medz yeghern, or Great Calamity, which perfectly fits within the monastic context of the island, becoming part of it. What emerges is a kind of integration free of contrasts, a presence operating according to different registers and superimpositions devoid of any form of concealment, and reflecting the individual mark of every Armenian.

G.B.: *Armenity brings together artists from different generations, across a forty-year time span. Some of them approach art as an intersubjective experience, while artists such as Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, Anna Boghiguiian and Sarkis – both formally and in terms of their background – belong to the age of protest of the late 1960s, which over time was translated into a form of art. Artists more or less belonging to today's generation, such as Gegisian, mutually engage by looking to their country of origin and assessing its independence. For the artists of previous generations, by contrast, the artists of the 1960s, Armenia did not exist as an independent state, but was rather identified as a Soviet Republic.*

The exhibition further brings together, alongside even younger artists such as Aivazian, among others, the works of Nina Katchadourian, an American artist who draws upon her own family background to follow a trajectory retracing her origins, and those of Hera Büyüктаşçıyan, an artist who lives in Turkey, displaying a full awareness of her family history and personal memories.

A.C.v.F.: *Armenity is also represented by a range of people whose identities are never perfectly connected or overlapping, since each carries its own self-definition. Each of these people is a separate and complex individual who nonetheless shares a common entity, which brings into play their shared past and way of looking at things, but also their being citizens of the world. This is reflected in the varied yet common use of often perishable and transient media and materials of little intrinsic value, which are used to leave marks and can be easily removed or protected – materials that have also been chosen to substantiate Armenty and the culture of change it conveys. Büyüктаşçıyan, for instance, has redeveloped printing blocks with the characters of the Armenian alphabet; Bezjian has carried out in-depth research on the poet Daniel Varoujan, one of the first intellectuals to have been murdered in 1915, focusing on a poem he published in a newspaper of the period. This collected material testifies to a civilization that was wiped out, empowering visitors by offering them a new account.*

G.B.: *Armenty does not present time as an additional framework to Armenian life, but rather as the ethos through which each artist, positively projecting himself into contemporary society, embodies a universal existence (Mekhitar Garabedian). Embarking on a journey across the boundaries of history (Sarkis), these artists – with the benefit of the doubt – mistrust anyone purporting to possess absolute forms of knowledge and are suspicious of all-encompassing explanations and allegedly complete systems of thought. The artists*

of Armenty shun all interpretations of the sense of loss based on nostalgia (Aram Jibilian): with them, the present-past becomes part of the necessity to live, as opposed to the lack of life. Moreover, the liminal development of their culture calls for a process of discovery which is not part of the continuum between past and present, but nonetheless engenders a sense of what is new as an act of revolt against a cultural tradition (Yervant Gianikian). Consequently, the artists of Armenty have learned that each reality gives rise to a range of artifacts (Melik Ohanian), whereby nothing exists until it can be represented; and that, like any other artifact, reality can be made well or badly – or, indeed, can be undone.

How do you perceive your own Armenian identity?

A.C.v.F.: *I was born in Istanbul and spent a sheltered and very happy childhood there, until the age of ten. When I moved to Europe with my parents, in my teenage years, I set the story of my origins aside in order to experience the everyday life of the country in which I was being raised. My contemporary reality, by then, was a European one. Then, over the years, a process of personal development I underwent through art reinforced my Armenianness, also allowing me to open up to different cultures. It was precisely thanks to two Italian artists that I first awakened to the fact of being Armenian-in-the-world. Alighiero Boetti told me about an ancestor of his, an adventurous Dominican friar who, starting in 1769, had served as a missionary first at Mosul and then in Armenia. Gino De Dominicis instead projected his own alter ego in my land of origin – as well as in the Sumerian civilization and in the figure of Gilgamesh, a king who was such by virtue of being not a warrior but an artist, and who had discovered an antidote to death. Both these artists landed on the island of San Lazzaro in 1993, for the Trésors de voyage exhibition I was curating as part of the 45th Venice Biennale. Later, building on this specific experience I had acquired, I traveled to Armenia and discovered a homeland that no longer belonged merely to my private, family sphere, but was directly connected to my real origins – to my “Armenty”.*

I trust that, through this unique opening of Armenia to the diaspora's artistic experience at the 2015 Venice Biennale, the Armenian diaspora will exist through Armenia rather than existing “only” through the world. It means rediscovering a common stability for new generations within a single sphere of identity. May each artist become an opening, a means through which the sense of being Armenian may manifest itself.