

Undoing Denials: Mapping a Curatorial Terrain

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*But they will also be different – different from how they used to be, these songs.
For I have turned and found longing at my side, and I have looked into her eyes,
and now she leads me with a steady hand.*

Rilke - In a lengthy love letter dated July 6, 1898

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Introduction

Since its inception a couple of decades ago following Armenia's independence, the curatorial direction of the national pavilion at the Venice Biennale leaned predominantly towards showcasing artists who work/live in Yerevan. Except when sponsors were needed, the participation of the global diaspora was largely bypassed and limited to one or two expats and an occasional celebrity artist.

Logistical and material difficulties in organizing such international undertaking noted, the making of the events reflected the insular cultural policies/politics of the local powers that be, with a diaspora elite willing to support them mainly out of patriotism. Such approaches have to date proven to be insufficient to cultivating a sound culture of giving that recognizes artistic production as a necessary investment in a society's growth.

Regardless, the pavilion has served as an important platform to introduce to international audiences the contributions of some remarkable local artists, as well as art professionals whose combined efforts imparted valuable insights about the post-soviet predicament, as well as the complexities and challenges of undoing official narratives, that facilitate the writing of new (art) histories.

The broader potential of such platforms, however, remained untapped particularly as it applies to bridging the existing socio-political gaps between inside/outside or homeland/diaspora. This preferential treatment of the "native as more authentic" at times intensified the "othering of the diaspora" that could be found amply elsewhere, especially across the severed borders of Armenia.

Armenity in many ways attempts to make up for the deficit created in the processes outlined above. As its title suggests, the undertaking proposes a transnational definition of a collective identity. With diasporan roots that span across time and geography, the exhibit highlights artists who are mostly the grandchildren of Armenian Genocide survivors, marking one of the worldwide centennial commemorations of the 1915 Catastrophe, even though it does not seek to re-present genocide.

The word "Armenity" is seldom used and rings as foreign or even invented, particularly to the ears of those not well-versed in the nuances of the Western Armenian language, which has been officially recognized as endangered. By choosing it the curator, Adelina Cüberyan v. Fürstenberg, opens a window to imagine a polity beyond the confines of geography, and the identity politics implied by the more commonly used label "Armenianness." *Armenity's* curatorial selection also transcends the political correctness of groups within the boundaries of diasporan communities that tend to instrumentalize artists for the sake of a given charitable cause, rather than caring about and supporting a broader understanding of cultural production as a driver of substantive change.

Closer to the more philosophical and literary currency of the term *aghet* (catastrophe), *Armenity* reminds us that a polity may have parallel and not necessarily contradic-

tory or oppositional self-namings that project a wealth of stances. As revealed by the overall concerns addressed in the exhibited works, the term *Armenity* delineates the less familiar, more complex and quieted perceptions of identification. *Armenity* then, like many of the participating artists, exists in the margins of collective consciousness, patiently and rigorously engaging the viewer with the contemporary realities of its constant making, un-making, and remaking. It offers a cluster of universal visual languages that mediate, bridge and translate particular issues.

Marginalization is also evident in the selection of San Lazzaro island as a venue. Also born from exilic conditions of silencing and persecution, the monastery became a dynamic transnational site for the collection, maintenance, translation and dissemination of “great texts” to and from Armenia. A utopia built out of necessity to serve cultural exploration and renewal is at risk today. As discussed below, several of the artworks made specifically for *Armenity* respond to the diasporic predicament of this important site.

With the exception of senior or more established artists like Sarkis, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, and Anna Boghiguian, the majority of the sixteen artists exhibiting in *Armenity* have gained prominence or entered the contemporary art scene in the last decade or so. Like the curator of the exhibition, they are better recognized in Europe and the Middle East, where many are based. While two are from Brazil and Argentina, three are from the United States, and a couple more collaborate with their partners, also artists, who are of Italian and Palestinian origin. Possessing historical links to the Ottoman Empire, all are multilingual and polycentric. Many come from immigrant families who experienced the Lebanese civil war, the Iranian revolution, or Soviet rupture. Some are also back and forth-ers to Armenia, while others have just begun to discover their ancestral homeland in Turkey. The exhibit’s emphasis on artists from Europe and the Middle East reflects several factors including the emergence of new art-destinations and art-economies in places like Dubai, Sharjah and Istanbul; the support for more modest initiatives in cultural hubs like Beirut, Cairo and Jerusalem, and the push towards multiculturalism and integration, all of which mark a shift from New York’s dominance of the international (art) scene since World War II.

As global citizens, these artists grew up navigating through the precarious times of the last several decades caused by momentous developments including the fall of the Eastern Block, the formation of the European Union, man-made and natural disasters like Chernobyl, the end of Apartheid, accelerated globalization and migration, the technological revolution which provided greater access to Internet and social media, the murder of Hrant Dink, the resurgence of Cold War politics, and recent political upheavals in the Middle East and beyond.

Conscious of other kinds of ruptures, violence and displacement, and not simply historical or Armenian ones, the ensuing existential push-and-pull led these and other diaspora artists and intellectuals to question their prescribed / inherited collective identities, and to gain agency through translating their newly-found subjectivities into artistic practices which tend to reinscribe, revalue, renew, even disrupt fixed cultural identifications.

Inherent in this repositioning of former cultural signifiers is a shift from representing (i.e. the genocide) to investigating modes of (its) representations. By forging aesthetic strategies that intervene with the lingering effects of the continued denial of the Armenian catastrophe or *aghet*, these experimentations give new relevance to iconic historical artifacts, figures, places, and events. In doing so they resist the perpetuation of sentimental images of victims, ruins, etc. that unconsciously repeat the initial intent of the denier, rather than enabling new possibilities of being or becoming.

As tools of subtle criticism and persuasion, the exhibited works collectively offer us alternative histories and cultural mappings that bypass official narratives entrenched in preservation ideologies and exhausted nationalist rhetoric, that date back to the 19th-

century ethos of national awakenings which coincided with the advent of the technological revolution that gave us the printing press.

Artistic practice for these artists also transcend the commodification of art. Incorporating diverse media, particularly archival materials, performance, sound, and light, many of the works assembled here trigger a transformative experience. They help shed residues of displacement and loss by instigating new memories.

Encountering these works is like holding a mirror to internal states of conformity, inertia, and stagnation that repeat denial, negation and transference of trauma, as perpetuated by denialist regimes.

The worldliness of this post-1990s generation derives in part from an awareness of the contributions of their artistic precursors (such as the Conceptual, Minimalist, Situationist, Happenings, and protest artists of the 1960s), whose works marked formal and contextual departures from the aesthetic sensibilities of what came before (i.e. Abstract Expressionism exemplified by Arshile Gorky and the subsequent generation of modernist practices) and addressed the socio-political concerns of the time (i.e. the Vietnam war, civil rights, feminist and peace movements).

In this context, the inclusion of works by Sarkis and Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi – pioneers in their respective practices of early Conceptual and Installation Art, as well as in the innovative use of archival film footage – dot artistic lineages found with the younger generation. By exhibiting these works side by side for the first time, *Armenity* attests to continuities, despite discontinuities, that span across time and space.

Some of the works reference the rich threads and textures of ancient Armenian traditions (i.e. folklore, mythology, manuscript illumination, engraving, embroidery), not to replicate but to free their contextual stasis by infusing them with contemporary meaning and relevance. The commitment of these artists recalls medieval monks whose experimentations contributed to cultural rebirths (i.e. the invention of an alphabet in 405 AD and distinct architectural styles of the 5th–7th and 10th–12th centuries) which in turn were influenced by the flow of capital, ideas and trends (in art, literature, design, fashion) made possible through older global networks of trade and patronage systems.

The hybridity of their inspirational sources motivate these artists to investigate a multiplex of particularities and to translate them into singular aesthetic languages. But these are not narratives of proof and externality; rather they are intimate expressions of the silences that give us pause from the weight of the unspeakable. They are like a collection of love poems that no longer long to belong – they belong.

Artworks

Now I come to you full of future. And from habit we begin to live our past.

Rilke

My Ani do not cry

Please do not cry

But we can collect your ashes

Your past in a vase that is part of our history, there you can meet the eternal

In a recent email this is how Anna Boghiguian describes the photo and drawing installation that she is preparing for *Armenity*, which deals with her visit to the ancient city of Ani that lies on the border of Armenia, in Turkey. Her statement refers to a popular early modern image produced by the Mekhitarist monks, which has been reproduced for over a century in Armenian language and history textbooks, as well as in calendars, key chains and other such souvenirs. Rendered in a neoclassical style, Ani has been personified as a

larger than life female figure, stoically sitting on the ruins of the many churches that the city is known for, mourning her (self?) destruction. The poet in Boghiguiian finds no comfort in what's become a banal portrayal, and is in the process of inscribing a more fitting identity to the city's past greatness where "... caravans from Asia came to deposit their wares and to receive more wares and silk to continue their way towards Arabia." For her project, Boghiguiian has chosen a small room in the monastic complex where sparse furnishings like a desk, a chair and some books invite the visitor to sit and contemplate "the traveler as a monk," which also alludes to Boghiguiian's own nomadic life. She considers the entire world her country. This is reflected in the small-scale drawings done in different media, which she carried by hand in a *boghcha* from place to place, visually chronicling an intuitively perceived universe, be it Ethiopia, India, Turkey, Egypt or Canada. The drawings and photos presented here, as a rare book if you will, are inspired by her sojourn to Ani, and incorporate her lyrical writings, particles of wisdom. Like the beeswax that channels prayers through candles, the artist applies the medium to erase separation and pay equal importance to the written word and the visual image. Touched by the roses she encountered during her travels in Armenia, Boghiguiian envisions her room filled with roses (can you smell the perfume?), just as several free birds, like the ones that hover over Ani's spectacular natural landscape (do you feel their freedom?), transcend the geopolitical entanglement of Ani, while a rainbow lights *this* wandering monk's room, where new narratives are conjured.

Artists Silvina Der-Meguerditchian and Rosana Palazyan pay homage to the memory of their grandmothers by piecing together their respective life-journeys as genocide survivors, immigrants and mothers. Their memories are resurrected by revisiting the nearly muted legacies that each woman left behind – a lace handkerchief made in a Greek orphanage that traveled to Brazil, and a booklet on the folk medicine of Aintab printed in Argentina. Der-Meguerditchian does her *re-member-ing* through a mixed-media installation that uses the old bookcases and cabinets of the monastery's library to display samples of the rich and colorful herbs, flora and fauna associated with the book's content.

Palazyan, on the other hand, combines animation and embroidery techniques to weave a video tapestry that follows her subject's journey which starts from a turbulent Anatolia, passes through the calm of the Aegean, before settling on another distant shore to build a family. The strength and resilience of these women sip through both works without resorting to the violence and nostalgia commonly found in the objectified representations of female genocide survivors. Such modernist traditions of illustrating misery (of death marches and starving women and children) has been the preoccupation of several Armenian male artists since the 1940s and 1950s (i.e. Jansaim) who were influenced by the French Miserabilist aesthetics (with roots in medieval Europe) and aimed for mass appeal and consumption. By breaking away from such habitual and unchecked transferences of trauma, pity and guilt, Der-Meguerditchian and Palazyan free the imagining of female bodies of genocide survivors from the patriarchal gaze.

One of the early examples in history during which Armenians experienced a diaspora (= dispersion of sperm) came with their forced conversion to Christianity – which resulted in the destruction of pagan temples, goddesses and songs that had existed for centuries. Mikayel Ohanjanyan's *Tasnerku* sculptural installation revisits the megaliths at Carahunge – one of the few remaining pagan sites in Armenia – to invoke an ancient belief system based on cosmology and the twelve tenets of observational astronomy. The artist, who is Yerevan-born and Florence-based, resorts to architectural floor plans, mixed size basalt blocks and steel discs to recreate the site on one of the island's terraces. His re-charting also correspond to the twelve provinces of classical or Greater Armenia to resonate the belonging / not belonging of a myriad of civilizations that have crossed it. Similarly, the theatricality of Ohanjanyan's geometric abstractions indicate affinities filtered

through post-World War I artistic movements such as Constructivism – i.e. Tatlin's "counter-reliefs" and Malevich's Suprematism – as well as Arte Povera's use of common objects, which were then displaced by Soviet Social Realism.

How does one portray silence, its deep roots and deafening ring, without violating its identity? That is the challenge that the Damascus-born and London-based photographer Hrair Sarkissian tackles. His emotionally charged "portraits" deal with Muslim Turkish citizens who have in recent years been coming out or attempting to reclaim their Christian Armenian lineages. These bare photographs contain no people, just the interiors of their subject's private environments, enhanced by dramatic lighting and sharp contrasts that highlight the mundane. Yet Sarkissian craft-fully captures the psychological intensity involved in coming out, as they convey (not document) the fears, the shame, the burden and the alienation experienced in this process.

Hera Büyüktaşçıyan's appreciation of her heritage gets rekindled when she reads Lord Byron's letters related to his sojourns at San Lazzaro to learn Armenian. The British poet's fascination with the culture and the "language of the other" causes the artist to question her own ambivalence about most things Armenian while a young student at the Mekhitarist school in Istanbul. Her use of oversized Armenian letter-stamps that excerpt a selection of the poet's writings (i.e. *Lost Paradise*) augment the customary setting, and use, of Lord Byron's room at the monastery by giving voice to and making visible the forgotten memories of the island that once stood as a beacon of spirituality and knowledge.

Aram Jibilian's photographs activate memories of a very different place in another corner of the world. They deal with his sojourn to Arshile Gorky's studio-home in Connecticut and the town's cemetery where the renowned painter – a survivor of the Genocide who hung himself at the age of forty-four – is buried. Taking clues from ghost stories recounted by Gorky's neighbors, Jibilian channels the un-dead-ness of the late painter in ways that make us question what is remembered or forgotten about Gorky. The unassuming photographs of a tree, a white sheet, and a sparse tombstone pose as mere clues to the unknowable. Even with the haunting gaze of one of Gorky's masks based on the iconic self-portrait of the late artist and his mother, Jibilian seems to remind us that to comprehend the truth about Gorky's predicament, and the experience of the Catastrophe, requires more than facts as evidence.

Rene Gabri & Ayreen Anastas's participation involves taking photographs from books housed at the Mekhitarist library which trace Near Eastern histories and physically intervening on them – by cutting, cropping, writing, coloring, manipulating and typing over them to create poetic collages, as a form of research that enables one to overcome the inertness of the historical artifacts. As the artists are interested in the notion of parody, another aspect of their project manifests as a walk through the grounds of the monastery where traces of their work were left for surprise encounters. Known for applying similar approaches at other art destinations, the couple's alternative "survey" of the Near East extends a palimpsest of historical lines to reconsider: the relation of early Christianity to certain philosophies and practices of late Antiquity, the Mekhitarist community and history of the island, the European imagination of the Orient, the crusades, the massacres of the 1800's, the Armenian Genocide, the Russian Revolution, the World War I and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, the question of language in the context of these histories, narration, storytelling, testimony, truth-telling, the contemporary struggles in the region, forgiveness, mourning, and ethics.

Aikaterini Gegisian's collages and artist's book project recycled reproductions found in various publications from Greece, Armenia and Turkey. Produced in the 1960s and 1980s, they functioned as instruments of nation building to lure tourists, and commerce. The artist's canny and visually layered regroupings of these easily consumable ideological "ready-mades" bring forth, despite their particular differences, the commonalities bet-

ween the failures of these nation-states. As each nation's construction/branding of an aura of uniqueness dissolves into Gegisian's inventive reconstructions we are left belonging to a utopia, a non-existent country.

For several decades, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi have been making use of early 20th-century archival film to produce new work that alters the meaning or intent of the originary footage. Without spoken words or voice-over narration, and with minimal interjections of color and original sound compositions, their experimental documentaries stand as poignant commentaries against world wars, fascism, and colonialism.

One of the two works included in *Armenity* is an exception to their mostly silent film approach. Made in 1986, *Ritorno a Khodorciur* is about Gianikian's father Raphael – a genocide survivor – who in 1976, after months of preparation, returned to Turkey. The film shows Raphael reading from his unpublished diaries which he kept throughout his life but refused to talk about its content. He travels alone on foot in hiking boots and a super 8 camera and records with great detail what remains of his lost childhood town, including abandoned villages, houses in ruins, mountains, rocks and vegetation. With photos of the old country at hand his "pilgrimage" – a promise made to his brother in Georgia – also makes him a guest in places where he once belonged. As people begin to remember his family, Raphael's knowledge of the Turkish and Kurdish languages is regained, and conversations about what happened to the Armenians unfold with him appearing like a ghost to his hosts. The film interweaves past and present as the father organizes the traces that document his childhood, while his son, the filmmaker, learns about his family's tragedy for the first time.

To remedy irrecoverable loss, rectify wrongs, and give absences a presence sometimes requires the gifts of an alchemist. These are the types of philosophical speculations involved in conceptual artist Sarkis's practice. Take his *Atlas de Mammuthus Intermedius*, for instance. This sculpture made of what looks like the remains of an ancient colossal structure, perhaps even a perished creature, also carries traces of a recent intervention made visible through a belt-like ribbon of gold that holds the fragile fragments of the piece together. To restore the dignity of this mammoth bone, the artist turns to the Japanese art of Kintsugi used to repair broken pottery, with seams of gold, in a way that makes the broken vessel even more beautiful and valuable than it was before. One website describes the technique as an appropriate metaphor for ways of dealing with the broken places that life gives all of us, or finding treasures in life's scars.

What if what's broken is a country, as the juxtaposition of one of the other works included in *Armenity* suggests? Photographed in Armenia, *Croix de brique* depicts two bricks marked by burn marks, otherwise resting intact in a pile of stones and mud, side by side and forming a cross. Despite the image's ambiguity, the comparison of the crosses' discarded state with the dire socio-political and economic state of Armenia is unavoidable. And while it conjures many reasons for its condition – including the country's fragile geopolitical position and the closed borders with its wealthy and mighty neighbor(s) – the juxtaposition implies that a Kintsugi-like performance for Armenia in the foreseeable future seems improbable.

This modest proposition gains further gravity given the fact that this year Sarkis has also been selected to represent the national pavilion of his country of birth Turkey, at the Venice Biennale. It might be worth noting that Sarkis exiled himself to Paris in the 1960s, which has been his adopted country since. Recent developments surrounding "dialogue and reconciliation" – aside from his acceptance of the invitation to this significant moment of "return" – is a prime example of how the artist lives, acts upon, what his works have stood for many years.

As part of his large-scale, multimedia installation for this momentous occasion, the artist has chosen to hang from the cathedral-like ceilings of the lush Turkish Pavilion at

the Giardini, the monumental portraits of Paradjanov, Hrant Dink and Gezi Park. A grouping that clearly draws parallels between several disparate yet similar oppressive pasts and presents, pasts that do not pass, but rather reincarnate.

Another segment of his project involves a young Venetian girl carrying an antique silver belt from Van back and forth between the Armenian and Turkish Pavilions – two neighboring nations that used to be part of the Ottoman Empire but have existed with severed diplomatic relations for a century. While the context of the portraits in the main pavilion compels us to contemplate the transnational nature of internal and external exile, this smaller, quieter, gesture points to the fragility and uncertainty of reconciliatory measures. Like the rainbow that radiates on and off of the installation site – a transnational home away from home – the wandering belt also promises a glimmer of hope in undoing wrongs, mending a century of disconnects, letting go of exhausted means, experimenting, starting afresh. Just as the sheer weight of the silver belt makes an improbable fit on a tiny waist, the artist's proposal may at first seem merely ceremonial. But his staging involves a repositioning as well, not via a return to old "customs and costumes" but by instigating a process of transformation, whereby the reversal of the effects of denial and the redefinition of kinships and neighborliness begin with the recognition of the "other" as equal.

The demanding process of undoing "otherness" travels through a different path in Nigol Bezjian's five-channel video projection *Witness.ed*. Here the task is internal and relies on the incremental yet steady efforts of an assembly of colorful "actors" in a vast and disjointed transnational space of Armenia. The piece deals with a series of readings, or takes on the life and work of Daniel Varoujan, one of the poets of the late Ottoman Armenian literary Renaissance (*Zartok*) who in 1915, at the age of thirty-one, was among several other prominent Armenian intellectuals arrested and killed not far from Istanbul. This work is excerpted from Bezjian's longer documentary on the same subject that excavates the *past-present* importance of the poet whose dissident voice was marginalized within both Turkish and Armenian intellectual circles, ultimately leading to his tragic death. Through the film we travel to places like Venice and Ghent (Varoujan was educated at the Mekhitarist school and the university of Ghent before returning to Turkey to teach), as well as Aleppo, Beirut, Yerevan, Paris, Milan and New Jersey: the poet's imprints are gradually retraced in the filmic clustering of cross-disciplinary and multilingual interpretations. As their passionate performances filter, each with distinct intonation, the poet's stances on love, lust, paganism, metaphysics and spirituality that critiqued oppression, slavery, corruption and gender inequality in the Ottoman Empire, we better understand not only the mystery surrounding his historic death but its perpetuation. As viewers we become witnesses to the poet's betrayal particularly in the segment of the video projection where contemporary French-Armenian philosopher and literary critic Marc Nichanian, sitting in an Istanbul high-rise (with the Bosphorous dotted by minarets and the Turkish flags as background), eloquently reframes Varoujan. As Nichanian states, Varoujan was aware of the pending catastrophe and used his poetry to part with a testimony which, among other things, cautioned that total annihilation occurs when a society is not allowed to mourn, or if a society forgets how to mourn, and that artistic practice is the only way to reverse that (self) denial. Varoujan, who had once observed that thought becomes color in Venice, was also at odds with the transcendental teachings of the Mekhitarist. It is fitting indeed that *Witness.ed* is being shown in the 300-year-old printing facility of the monastic complex that has been turned into a museum.

Mekhitar Garabedian who has lived in Ghent most of his life, also has a piece on Varoujan that consists of a stack of posters which visitors can take away as souvenirs. Embossed on this white-on-white minimalist composition are phrases in Armenian lifted from a memorial plaque dedicated to Varoujan that hangs at the university of Ghent's

library. Unnoticeable at first, the poster through its infinite numbers intentionally reproduces the unintelligibility of the plaque as encountered by most library visitors. In addition to posing as a commentary on the consequences of the displacement of the Western Armenian language, this piece also makes us think about how a foreign script in a host country risks becoming an artifact, a decoration stripped of meaning and of the possibility of becoming a functioning language. Another piece by Garabedian duplicates the table of contents of a textbook in French called *Histoire de mes ancêtres* (History of my Ancestors) which was produced by the Mekhitarists in 1977, the same year that the artist was born in Aleppo, once a dynamic cultural hub. The worn out dark ink against the white page echoes the fading currency of its content. As outlined in the taxonomy of the table of contents, history here limits the imagining of a collective identity to a long sequence of oppositional paradigms (good/evil, hero/villain) and the collapsing of mythical and actual figures or events, framed mostly as tragedies turned into miraculous victories, whereby any contextual or critical reflection is obstructed. *And the World Is Alive. And Van Is Alive* is a neon light piece that quotes from *Burning Orchards* – a novel by Kurken Mahari who as a child lived through the uprising and subsequent seizure of his native town of Van near Ani, before arriving in the newly-formed Republic of Armenia which, like the establishment of modern Turkey, was created artificially. Written after being exiled ten years in Siberia for his earlier writings, Mahari's novel was banned in Soviet Armenia upon its first publication in 1966, a period of national reawakening marked by massive demonstrations and the building of the first genocide memorial complex. Censors banned the book, even forced him to rewrite it, because Mahari had depicted Van not as a glorified historical place frozen in time but a world that's very much alive, breathing through his subjective recollections of ordinary people and life, and often speaking in conflicting tenses: present, past and future. In an unexpected yet intimate setting on the island, Garabedian's piece waits to be discovered, creating a sense of awkwardness that comes from not belonging to a place, and from being outside history.

Nina Katchadourian's *Accent Elimination* offers an ironic account of what happens when one attempts to eradicate strangeness. For her multiple-screen video installation the artist employed a renowned speech specialist to standardize her parents' distinct yet difficult to trace accents and then teach her theirs. Scripted by the parents, the video's simple narrative is based on questions asked from strangers dealing with where they each come from. As the intensive coaching and rehearsals unfold, we learn that the accent of the father, Herant, is a mixture of Armenian, Turkish, Arabic, and French, with a touch of Swedish, which is his wife's mother tongue. When attempting to place his accent, Herant discloses that most people mistake him for a Hungarian. Then we learn that the mother's accent is actually Finnish-Swedish, because Stina comes from a Swedish-speaking minority living in Finland. Stina also learned Armenian after marrying Herant in order to communicate with his family. The couple met in Beirut and have been living for decades in the United States, where the artist was born. At a frustrating yet comical moment the video captures Nina practicing how to say the word "Armenian" with a typical forced "R," and the sounds "AR – ARM – ARMY" are repeated with varying pauses and emphasis till she gets the right pronunciation. Since AR means "take" in Armenian, this unscripted sequence of utterances transform the scene, as well as the work, into a symbol of defiance and survival.

Resistance takes on another form in Melik Ohanian's *Streetlights of Memory – A Stand by Memorial* which is part of two related projects called *Presence*. This large-scale public sculpture that sits in the garden of the monastic complex consists of close to two hundred pieces that are individually cast in aluminum and then reassembled to expose, if you like, the "guts" of its former existence. Collapsed ruins that cannot be ruins because they have been resurrected, not to replicate its previous identity but to forge a new one that embodies

entangled fragments of its past. The story of this piece begins in 2010 when Ohanian's design for a memorial in Geneva unanimously won the competition for the city's public art project. Submitted by representatives of the Armenian community in partnership with the city as a gift to Geneva, Ohanian's proposal was/is based on a streetlight from 1920s New York – an ordinary but forgotten object of an urban landscape, now remembered by assigning it a new function. To be multiplied in numbers and dispersed throughout a public park in Geneva, each eight-meter-tall streetlight's source of light is replaced by a chrome tear, while its pole becomes the support for engraved texts.

Contextually particular and universal at the same time, the implementation of this sensitive and poetic memorial, after going through lengthy processes of approvals by engineers as well as a number of authorities (including location changes and topographical revisions) is currently stalled due to pressure from the Turkish community, involving politicians and the UN. The San Lazzaro version, then, gives us a glimpse of the memorial's ongoing life while also addressing a broader condition. As Ohanian states, what would existence be like if seen from a distance... as archetypes appear and converge, between origin and destination, in perpetual constructions? Belonging to the present for the artist means to belong to several places, several times, at the same time. The second installment of *Presence* involves a detailed publication that chronicles the life of *Streelights of Memory* and a series of related workshops held at off-site venues by Ohanian in Venice.

Hastayım Yaşıyorum (I Am Sick, But I Am Alive) is Haig Aivazian's inaugural piece, related to his ongoing and extensively researched project on Turkish-Armenian oud master Udi Hrant Kenkulian (1901–1978). In order to "cure" his blindness, Udi Hrant, as he was known, traveled the world to perform and teach. Here, this exquisitely-crafted sculpture in the shape of a larger-than-life, stringless, oud which is turned upside down rests disquietly on two stools. Aivazian's larger project involves the untangling of a complex modernist construct that resulted in the standardization of art, music, literatures, and folklore at the end of the Ottoman Empire. Based on European models, this drive towards ethnography arrived to the Armenian milieu in the 1890s through polyphonization and Western musical notation and spread by the 1920s with the establishment of the Turkish Republic.

Taking cues from how the instrument is actually played through *Makams* and *Taksims* as well as the etymological nuances of both terms, Aivazian helps us understand how this process of Turkification or "purification" implies a coming together and parting of altered or silenced Ottoman and post-Ottoman music. (*Taksims* are improvisations of the *Makams*, initial and resident modes, which migrate throughout a performance then slowly return to the original to conclude.) Classical Turkish art and music were very much a part of the Turkification process that pitted one set of claims of "purity" against the other.

The title of the piece comes from a song, which aside from the easy association with the "Sick Man of Europe" used to describe the late Ottoman Empire, alludes to Hrant who was also lovesick, longing or melancholically waiting, not only for his ghostly love but for his sight to return.

In addition, as Aivazian has pointed out, the title refers to an overall malaise present in Turkish culture and cosmopolitan discourses related to survival and to the persistent memories of "minority others." These are in reality deeply bruised and diminished historical absences/presences that resonate in the physicality of the stringless oud, as if it were a conversation that turned inward, yet still wishes to be heard.

The stools that are part of the composition denote the master-pupil lineage in transmitting via repetition and practice, while the knowledge is never entirely passed on or at least remains partly a secret for the student to explore over time. This is similar to the manner in which the making of the instrument itself is taught, a trade in which Armenians and Greeks were among the most prominent and respected practitioners. Aivazian's oud,

which poses as a mystery since it also looks like a boat or a tomb, serves as a key motif to inspire further reflections on the migratory patterns of Udi Hrant, and the manner in which those intertwined patterns that are often perceived as “Armenian” culture are transmitted, spread and preserved.

Author’s note: As one colleague observed, I have tried to highlight the connections within the diversity of works presented in *Armenity* through a *décalage* of fits and stops, articulations and disarticulations, claims and challenges. Mostly, all the pieces appear as “drop-outs” from the hegemony against which we are in common struggle. Even though some of the pieces were still in their planning stages, this writing was facilitated by my familiarity with many of the artists’ past works as well as by our recent correspondences. Any misreadings of their intent or work is mine alone.

Armenia, Country of Stones – Armenia, Country of Books

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According to what has become a current expression, Armenia is a “country of stones” – in Armenian, *Hayastan K’arastan*. This expression, which recalls Osip Mandelstam’s verses on the “land of the screaming stones,” suits Armenia perfectly. It is a reference to the country’s rocky landscapes, but may also be regarded as an allusion to its difficult history, or even to the stones of the *khatchkars* and medieval churches that stand as vestiges of an ancient past. To this well-known expression another one may be added. By taking advantage of the flexibility of the Armenian language, which lends itself to the creation of endless neologisms, and legitimized by a volume which – on the occasion of this outstanding event – has coined a new English word, *Armenity*, we have launched the formula *Hayastan Matenastan*, “Armenia, country of books.” Writing and books have been among the main sources of Armenian identity over the centuries: they are an integral part of *Armenity*, to which the present exhibition is a tribute.

In ancient Armenian, the word *matian* means book, scroll, or manuscript. A *matenadaran* is a repository of medieval manuscripts. Alongside the *Matenadaran* par excellence, which is to say the manuscript library in Yerevan, we find other *matenadaran*, or libraries, including the Armenian library in the Mekhitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro, which plays a prominent role on account of its wealth of documents and art objects, not to mention its scholarly tradition.

The importance of books in Armenian history cannot fully be appreciated without considering the origins of the Armenian alphabet, dating back to the 5th century. Sources of the period describe the creation of letters with strokes that find no parallels in other traditions and which perfectly illustrate the great symbolic value the Armenians assign to their way of writing.

Creating an Alphabet to Build an Ethnic Identity

In the early 5th century, Armenia witnessed one of the most critical moments in its history. Towards the end of the previous century, the country had been partitioned in two and divided between the Roman and the Persian empires. Within a few decades, Armenia lost not just its independence and territorial integrity, but also the royal dynasty that had ruled it for over four centuries. Soon, it found itself facing the risk of religious assimilation, especially on the Persian side. It was in this troubled period that the Armenian alphabet was created, as a weapon of resistance against the catastrophe. “Seeing that the Kingdom of Armenia had come to an end,” the historian Moses of Khoren writes in his *History of Armenia* (III, 47), the monk and former royal court secretary Mesrop Mashtots devoted all his energy to creating an instrument that might help consolidate the Christianization of Armenia (which had become a Christian kingdom in the early 4th century) and constitute a powerful marker of ethnic identity, in opposition to the Zoroastrian Iranian invaders. Mashtots thus set out on the quest for an Armenian alphabet, with the aim of translating

the Bible. Thus Mashtots searched for new national letters by embarking on a journey to Edessa and Samosata in Syria, which already had an alphabet for their own language. Fifth-century Armenian historians, however, are keen to stress that it was not through the help of expert foreign calligraphers that Mashtots found his letters (although to define the final layout of the alphabet he resorted to the help of an expert in Greek writing). Historians rather describe the creation of the Armenian alphabet as a divine revelation.

Just after creating the alphabet – an alphabet quite unlike any other form of writing and marking a unique, unmistakable link with the Armenian language – the Armenians started producing their first translations of religious works (most notably the Bible), followed shortly afterwards by the first original works in Armenian. These are for the most part historiographical works which reflect upon the meaning of events and the Armenians' place in sacred history. Based upon the Hebrew model, ancient historians suggest that the Armenians are a chosen people. They present the "gift of letters" as one of the unambiguous signs of the alliance between God and the Armenian people (Koriwn, *Life of Mashtots*, Preface, 5th century). Regarded as a key to the divine realm, Armenian writing continued to retain its symbolic value.

The letters of the Armenian alphabet, which according to Moses of Khoren appeared to Mesrop in a vision, as though they had been traced "upon a rock by the palm of a hand," were used for stone inscriptions and a large number of manuscripts.

Manuscripts: as Valuable as the World

"For the fool a manuscript is of no value, for the wise man it is as valuable as the world": this annotation made by the copyist of ms. 2178 of the Matenadaran in Yerevan (in the year 1391) reflects the deep respect which the Armenians have always shown towards manuscripts. In the medieval age, a large number of Gospel Books – and smaller number of complete Bibles – were copied down in the *scriptoria* of Armenian monasteries. In the Gospel Books, the relation between images and text is crucial. The cycle of scenes encapsulating the history of the redemption of mankind are reproduced in full-page plates. In older manuscripts, the plates are brought together at the beginning of the volume, whereas in later manuscripts they tend to be interspersed between the pages of the text. At an even later date, images are often inserted directly within the text, as illustrations.

The relation between images and text in Armenian manuscripts reflects the sense of the sacred which distinguishes medieval Armenia. This history of the redemption of mankind through Christ's incarnation was regarded as something that is constantly renewed in the present. Among other things, this explains the practice among persons commissioning the Gospel Books of having themselves portrayed in the miniatures. Entering directly within the scenes of the biblical cycle meant taking part in sacred history and bearing witness to the fact that the boundary between past and present had been abolished. For this and many other reasons, manuscripts were sacred in medieval Armenia. This is also reflected in liturgical practice, where the Bible is scented with incense and never touched with bare hands.

The relation between text and image reflects the various aspects of religious devotion in medieval Armenia. In this respect, it is fascinating to consider that through the use of illumination canonical texts were enriched by elements drawn from non-canonical literature. This is the case with Nativity scenes, which often feature details inspired by the apocryphal Gospels of the Infancy of Jesus. The "boundaries" between canonical and non-canonical are abolished through the use of images.

The religious significance of manuscripts aside, the deep respect shown towards them as objects is reflected by the many personal notes (colophons) which copyists added in their works. These notes often draw a contrast between the transient nature of human life and the endurance of manuscripts, generation after generation. Regarded as an offering and

act of devotion, manuscripts are at the same time viewed as privileged intercessors with God. Many colophons even appear to personify their manuscript. Some copyists express shock at the idea that a manuscript was stolen by foreign invaders: a manuscript snatched from a monastery and lying in the hands of infidels is perceived as a captive to be ransomed. One well-known episode is that of the famous homiliary from the Mush region (ms. 7729 of the Matenadaran in Yerevan, dating from 1202–04), an area which had always been inhabited by Armenians. The bulkiest of all Armenian manuscript (27 kg), it was ransomed from the Seljuk Turks in the 12th century. In 1915, however, during the deportations, the codex was split. One half was buried in the courtyard of the church in Erzurum, while the other half was further partitioned and stored by some women. In this way, the manuscript survived: in later years it was reassembled and deposited in the Matenadaran in Yerevan, where it remains to this day.

The Armenians have entrusted manuscripts with the preservation of the written heritage of their national language, which consists not just in religious works but also in scientific, historical and poetic ones, among others. These are the many genres covered by the collection of 30,000 codices stored in Armenian libraries, including that of San Lazzaro in the Venice lagoon.

From Manuscript to Print

The roots of Armenian printing are in Venice. In 1512, six decades after Gutenberg's invention of printing, one Hagop Meghapart ("James the Sinner") published the first printed book in Armenian. This was soon followed (1512–13) by another four books that reflect the interests of the Armenians at the threshold of the modern age. These early volumes include a collection of propitiatory formulas combining prayers, magic charms, curses, empirical medical advice, and exorcisms. One also finds a book on horoscopes and astronomy; a calendar; a missal; and an anthology of poems in vernacular Armenian.

Whereas the very first book to have been written in Armenian, in the early 5th century, had been a translation of the Bible, the first printed Bibles in Armenian were only published one century after the invention of printing. It is worth noting here that the history of books closely reflects the religious history of Armenia and its often difficult relations with dominant churches. Unable to obtain permission to print an Armenian Bible in Venice, on account of Catholic censorship, the Armenian Oskan Erevantsi moved to Protestant Holland, where in the years 1666–68 he published the first printed version of the Bible in Armenian. By one of those strange twists of fate, the same control organ of the Catholic Church, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, was later to promote the publication of many printed books in Armenian.

Manuscripts did not disappear after 1512: for many years, codices and printed volumes continued to coexist. Besides, the earliest books often imitate the illuminations of medieval Armenian manuscripts. Most of the iconographic repertoire soon changed through the influence of European incunabula, and printed books started exploring new subjects. The earliest volumes include religious texts and historical works, as well as medical and mathematical texts, trade manuals, spelling books, grammars, and dictionaries. These printed volumes were intended – among other things – to meet the requirements of a people largely made up of merchants and travelers, and contained everything one might look for when embarking on a long sea journey. Mention should also be made of the first oreries (crafted by the Vanandetsi brothers in Amsterdam), a fitting symbol for a people that had set out to explore the world and, through print, was now approaching modernity.

In that age, the many maritime routes connecting East and West were bustling with Armenian traders. It is important to bear in mind that the many seaports for Armenian commerce in the West often coincided with the main printing centres.

At the time of the invention of printing, the Armenian people were already scattered

far and wide, well before the Great Diaspora which followed the genocide of the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire in 1915. The Armenians, then, were dispersed across East and West. Alongside the Venetian colony, one might mention those in Livorno, Marseilles, Amsterdam, Lvov and – in the Levant – Smyrna and Constantinople. Further to the east lay the colonies of Kolkata and Madras – where the first works of Armenian political philosophy were published – as well as New Julfa. This Iranian city was home to the *khodja*, the Armenian merchants who, along with the Armenian Church, were the foremost promoters of printed books. Printing reached the Armenians of Russia and the Caucasus in the late 18th century. On its part, the Mekhitarist congregation had been among the principal institutions for Armenian typography ever since the time of its founder.

Traveling Books

One of the many chapters in the history of Armenian printing is a tale of fruitful cultural patronage. Armenian merchants ensured capital and channels of distribution. Along with spices and precious textiles, their ships also carried books. In many places, the collaboration between booksellers and traveling merchants contributed to the spread of books.

The history of Armenian traders sailing the seas between East and West overlaps with that of the circulation of the Armenian cultural heritage. This in turn contributed to shaping a shared feeling of national identity, despite the fragmentation of the Armenian people into colonies and the lack of an independent homeland. Within this context, books played a crucial role. Given that for centuries the history of the Armenian people has been one of dispersion and lack of independence, Armenia has partly been built on the spread of a shared cultural heritage. Manuscripts and books – along with the centers preserving them, such as the island of San Lazzaro – are among the cornerstones of a history that is still in progress, and in which contemporary art is now revealing and creating new forms of Armenia.

Essential Bibliography

Many exhibition catalogues have been published over the last few years. These include various articles on the creation of the Armenian alphabet, medieval Armenian manuscripts, and the origins of Armenian printing. Among the most recent catalogues, see: V. CALZOLARI, ed., *Illuminations d'Arménie. Arts du livre et de la pierre dans l'Arménie ancienne et médiévale* (Geneva-Yerevan, 2007); C. MUTAFIAN, ed., *Arménie. La magie de l'écrit* (Marseilles-Paris, 2007); G. ULUHOGIAN, B. L. ZEKIYAN and V.

KARAPETIAN, eds., *Armenia. Impronte di una civiltà* (Milan, 2012).

On Armenian printing: R. H. KÉVORKIAN, *Catalogue des incunables arméniens ou Chronique de l'imprimerie arménienne (1511-1695)*, (Geneva, 1986); see also R. H. KÉVORKIAN, V. CALZOLARI, eds., *Arménie-Hayastan. A l'occasion du 500^e anniversaire de l'imprimerie arménienne* (Geneva, 2011).

Transition Times

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ART PAPERS and *LEAP*

I am not ashamed of my identity, it is still under construction.

Mahmoud Darwish

There are so many crosses for us to bear these days: so much that weighs down on us as individuals, communities, and nations. The 21st century has only begun, and the clash between the past and the future is already underway. From nationalism to post-nationalism to a kind of neo-nationalism, the very foundations with which we identify as citizens are being re-negotiated. Take the battle between Israel and Palestine – an instance of a nation maintaining its statehood, and a nation asserting its right to statehood, respectively; or the conditions in Europe, where a kind of post-nationalist unification has produced a rise in neo-nationalism. Then we have ISIS: what *The New Scientist* has described as hypermodern, “more of a network than a nation,”¹ which has declared war on, amongst other things, the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement that carved up the Middle East into British and French “spheres of influence.”² And on the flip side, there is democratic confederalism – a political approach that aims to escape, as Abdullah Ocalan explains, “the trap of nationalism” by offering a “non-state social paradigm.”³

More and more, we are witnessing the world as a historical, geopolitical mesh: a space of rampant and often volatile negotiation in which there is as much to untangle as there is to assert. We have so much to deal with, and yet so little time to take it all in. Lessons are not learned, wounds of the past are festering, and healing feels as remote as the stories that define who we are because so much has been forgotten, and even denied. Take the Armenian Genocide: an event that Raphael Lemkin used as an example for a term he coined to describe what Churchill called, during the Nazi purges, “a crime without a name.”⁴

It is no coincidence that the Armenians call their genocide *aghet*, which means catastrophe: the same word the Palestinians use to remember the loss of their homeland, which they call *al-Nakba*. Nor is it chance that the Nazis returned the remains of Talaat Pasha – one of the key architects of the Armenian Genocide – to Turkey in 1943 (Turkey was allied with Germany in World War I). It is fitting also that these catastrophes took place during the two world wars that defined a violent century in which, as Mark Levene observed in 2000, a global system of nation states came into full fruition.⁵

On the study of genocide, Levene insists on understanding the phenomenon through an investigation not only of the historical context of each individual genocide, but also “the macro-historical record” – “the broad and moving canvas in which we might chart and hopefully analyze the emergence and development of the current international system.”⁶ But as individuals, how do we navigate this contested space of world history in the new 21st century? How do we make sense of it all? How do we position ourselves in the network? There is no map – no beginning or end: not one single starting point. There is just relation, for better or for worse; and histories – an infinite number of them. We can see these histories unfolding in such spaces as the World Wide Web – a place where the distances between people and places are collapsed with the click of a button, and where the world

is – quite literally – at our fingertips. As our contemporary Library of Alexandria, the Internet is a networked space where individuals, communities, nations, regions, and indeed, worlds co-mingle, existing autonomously, or atomically, in such a way that recalls Muriel Rukeyser’s observation that the universe is made of stories, not atoms.

The vastness and complexity of our historical world is palpable, too, in such events as the Venice Biennale; an event with its roots in the National and World’s Fairs of the 18th and 19th centuries, and which evolved in 1895 – at the turn of the 20th century – into an international exhibition of art and culture organized according to national pavilions so as to offer a worldview once every two years. Indeed, as Lawrence Alloway wrote, the Venice Biennale is a “a big exhibition” that represents “a compressed journey ... taken by the exhibition visitor in a single day.”⁷ And the journey just keeps getting longer and more complicated. Even in 1968, Alloway observed how unprecedented quantity and multiplicity was rendering art an uncontrollable subject: “Its boundaries are no longer clear; its scale is no longer compact. This holds true, also, for the past, which obviously is steadily increasing as a result of the passage of time, and ever-more-sophisticated techniques of inquiry into the periods.”⁸

Ultimately, when faced with the ever-lengthening scroll of human history as represented in such world spaces as the Internet or the Venice Biennale, it is down to the individual to take what they can from what they see and understand. After all, as Paul Crowther noted in *Art and Embodiment*, “the structure of embodied subjectivity and of the world are directly correlated.”⁹ Thus, when entering spaces like these, you might say we all become global wanderers, as we move from webpage to webpage, or from national pavilion to collateral event. We become bodies that exist between frames, like those of the displaced: bodies that relate to the world – and to each other – through personal experience first and foremost.

This is where *Armenity* comes in: a pavilion that is dedicated to artists of the Armenian diaspora. Or more specifically, the grandchildren of survivors of the Armenian Genocide, who were born all over the world, be it Beirut, Lyon, Los Angeles, or Cairo, and whose “concerns transcend notions of territory, borders and geography, precisely because this is their legacy, heritage and birthright.” They are, like so many other paradigmatic diasporas, the embodiment of what Arjun Appadurai has called one of the crucibles of an emergent post-national order: a diasporic public sphere that is established and maintained through international migration and the transnational mediation of national ethnicities who – for one reason or another – operate beyond the confines of a single nation-state.¹⁰ They are true global citizens of the 21st century, a “transnational assembly” intimately connected with the history that brought them into being. Their birthright is to mediate systems that do not reflect their own particular state of existence. Think about the Kurds, for instance: a nation that exists “mostly within the present-day borders of Turkey, Iraq and Iran, with smaller parts in Syria, Armenia and Azerbaijan.”¹¹

It is this precise condition: a nation that is at once confined by its borders as much as its borders are dissolved by its diaspora, that gives this exhibition a vision of what Greek-Armenian artist Aikaterini Gegisian describes as “utopic potential.” For the artists showing in *Armenity*, it is the individual who draws the map; the artists who become what Deleuze called Foucault: new cartographers leading the way to a future that has not quite taken shape. Take Rosana Palazyan’s video installation, ... *A story I never forgot...*, which traces Palazyan’s grandmother’s journey from Thessaloniki to Rio de Janeiro: a legacy the artist decided to confront when she was invited to show at the 4th Thessaloniki Biennale in 2013–14, as a kind of homecoming. Here, remembrance becomes a tracing of a self that is rooted in a violent displacement: a history that has been passed down as a personal, albeit collective, recall. In Palazyan’s tracing is the assertion of a continuation: a demonstration that a journey, which started in 1915 and has led to all points of the globe,

has not ended. After all, as she the artist writes: “to forget [the Armenian Genocide] would mean forgetting one’s own being.”¹²

Indeed, Palazyan’s project positions the artist as a cartographic “chronicler.” What Walter Benjamin described as one “who recounts events without distinguishing between the great and small,” and in doing so “accounts for the truth, that nothing which has ever happened is to be given as lost to history.” The chronicler uncovers a past worthy of a “resurrected humanity.”¹³ It is here that we might consider the role of the artist through Nigol Bezjian’s effective study into the life and work of the poet Daniel Varoujan in *Poet/Mourner* (2013). In this twenty-minute video, Bezjian presents an edited version of a lecture by associate professor of the department of Armenian studies at Columbia University, Marc Nichanian, on Varoujan, one of the first Armenian intellectuals to be arrested by the Young Turks in 1915. In his lecture, Nichanian presents three poems by Varoujan – “Vahakn,” “Among the Ruins of Ani,” and “To the Cilician Ashes” – so as to explain the position of the poet as a mourner: one left to pick up the pieces after a massacre. Yet, in a kind of reversal of Benjamin’s famous Angel of History, the poet in this proposition is not pushed forward by progress. Rather, the poet “sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage” and in fact stays to “awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.”¹⁴ This is the recuperative effort of recalling, reviving, and illuminating a history that was so savagely forged, and which is woven into the fabric of the world through the bodies that represent it. Our histories walk among us.

Consider Haig Aivazian’s research into the life of Turkish-Armenian oud master Udi Hrant Kenkulian: a project that reflects on the life of a musician who traveled the world, sharing his craft, by producing a sculpture that considers the modal structures in Ottoman and post-Ottoman music. The sculpture Aivazian presents here, *Hastayım Yaşıyorum (I Am Sick, But I Am Alive)* is constructed to formally express what Aivazian calls the “oppositions and entanglements inherent in terms such as *Makam* and *Taksim*, simultaneously embodying an irreconcilable coming together and a partitioning.” For him, it is a work that ultimately considers the “migratory motifs of an Armenian, and the manner in which the resonances of these motifs may be historicized or silenced.” Here, the act of tracing produces an ever more complex constellation of meaning. With the dispersal of the Armenian diaspora comes an even richer intermingling of culture with culture, which brings us back to the transnational order this exhibition proposes through its artists.

As James Tatum observed of Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*, “the wounds and deaths in wars denationalize us, reducing us to a fundamental, stateless human identity.”¹⁵ For Scarry, “the ‘unmaking’ of the human being, the emptying of the nation from his body, is equally characteristic of dying or being wounded, for the in part naturally ‘given’ and in part ‘made’ body is deconstructed.”¹⁶ In this process of “unmaking,” Scarry notes, an “unmaking of the civilization as it resides in each of those bodies” occurs, too.¹⁷ You might call it an unraveling. Take Hera Büyükaşçıyan’s sculpture *Letters from Lost Paradise*, for example, which maps out a journey of language through Lord Byron’s time studying Armenian on the island where this exhibition takes place: San Lazzaro degli Armeni, established in the 18th century when the Mekhitarian community was expelled from the Peloponnese. The island was also home to the longest running Armenian printing house, established as part of the Mekhitarist Monastery complex, which ran from 1789 to the early 2000s. It was this house that printed Lord Byron’s *Armenian Exercises and Poetry* in 1870, and it is from this house that Büyükaşçıyan unwinds a history that expands into the world.

Büyükaşçıyan’s sculpture – which presents moving letter stamps spelling out English text written with Armenian script – reflects on what the artist describes as a tension that “exists between the process of reaching out to understand the other, and the process of becoming totally assimilated and thus alienated from one’s own identity, culture and language.” On the work’s composition, Büyükaşçıyan considered the use of the Armen-

ian alphabet in Anatolia in both the past and present day, with some Armenian communities producing texts in Turkish written in Armenian letters. In so doing, she touches on the way Armenian culture has been at once disseminated, assimilated, modified, and contained within such cultural strongholds as San Lazzaro: widely-known to be a focal point for Armenian culture. Indeed, in 1913, Daniel Varoujan wrote in a letter to Garegin Levonian: “Tread softly on the island consecrated by the Mekhitarist Fathers, each step could be on the ashes of a genius.”¹⁸

Yet, Büyüktaşçıyan’s project is more expansive, still. By relating to the history of the printing press on San Lazzaro, she produces a connection to the history of the Armenian press in general, which goes back to the end of the 18th century, with roots not “in the historic territory of Armenia,” as Mark Grigorian writes, but “within the diasporan Armenian communities.”¹⁹ The first newspaper, *Azdarar* (The Herald) was printed in Madras, India, between 1794 and 1796, while another, *Taregrutian* (The Chronicle), was launched in 1799 right here on the island of San Lazzaro, printed by the Mekhitarian monks in the modern Western Armenian language, Ashkhararabar. Indeed, by the beginning of the 19th century, Grigorian notes, “Armenian communities as far apart as Bombay and Calcutta in India, Astrakhan in Russia, Vienna in Austria, and Constantinople and Smyrna in the Ottoman Empire, were all enjoying the opportunity to read locally produced newspapers in their native Armenian language.”²⁰

The dissemination of Armenian culture in this history reflects on the dissemination of Armenian bodies, too, and the vast global network that makes up the Armenian diaspora. This recalls a trope in Büyüktaşçıyan’s practice in which water is treated as a material metaphor for the traces of memory and history that exist all around us. Take a project the artist recently presented as part of the Jerusalem Show VII, *The Recovery of an Early Water*, in which the artist used fabric to re-imagine one of Jerusalem’s lost water supplies, Hezekiah’s Pool: a reservoir that was built during the reign of King Hezekiah, and which has been dry since 2010. Both projects are about fluidity; a visualization of a state of flux, in which movement and change become the constant. In so many ways, they express the simple fact that we are all connected, one way or another, whether we know it or not.

In this state of flow, the body becomes a mediator of the unexpected, the unforeseen, and the uncontrollable: it is always in the process of a certain unraveling and rewinding. As Paul Crowther wrote, the human subject “is just one amongst other such sensible beings and things, with whom and which it is engaged in a constant process of reciprocal interaction and modification. The reason why this process is constant is because embodied beings are *finite*. This means that no matter how thoroughly they engage with the sensible world – with Otherness (in the broad sense of both other beings and things) – they cannot fix it into absolute, unchanging place.”²¹ It is a state of being that Rene Gabri & Ayreen Anastas explore in their long-term collaborative project *The Meaning of Everything*, which constitutes a series of books that act as archives for methods with which the artists consider questions that concern them. As the artists state, one series is an attempt at giving form to the intellectual and affective movements or “becomings” that constitute a life, while allowing room for a “speculative and prospective dimension” that factors in the potential for “unforeseeable incidents.”²² After all, such a constant state of becoming is a state of unknowing, too, which brings us back to the contemporary moment and the challenges we face.

As globalization continues to combine, what Eric Hobsbawm observed as “regional, national and other cultures” in “a peculiar way,”²³ things are changing, as are we. Even in the 1990s, Arjun Appadurai picked up as much when he wrote that the “materials for a post-national imaginary must be around us already.”²⁴ Those materials, however, include the living bodies that transcend the frameworks laid down by history, including those of-

ferred by the nation state and its borders. These bodies that have been displaced are destined to a life of perpetual otherness – a state that is, as Crowther noted, “radically transcendent” because “there is always more to be perceived, always more to be done; always more than can be contained in any present moment of perception or sequence of actions.”²⁵

But these days, everyone is an “other” in some way. We are all, as Homi K. Bhabha wrote, “free to negotiate and translate [our] cultural identities in a discontinuous intertextual temporality of cultural difference.”²⁶ This is something to remember as we wander through the Venice Biennale in 2015, when new political imaginaries reacting to the historical machinations of modernity and imperialism are emerging. When we move from pavilion to pavilion, we are engaging in a kind of border thinking as mediators, one and all: a perspective Walter D. Mignolo describes as “thinking in exteriority in the spaces and time that the self-narrative of modernity invented as its outside to legitimize its own logic of coloniality.”²⁷ Today, it is the perspectives of the displaced, the wanderers, and the outsiders that offer guidance on how we might live in a world on edge. Borrowing Bhabha’s words again, they are “the bearers of a hybrid identity [who] are caught in the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation” – what Fanon called “the liberatory ‘people’ who initiate the productive instability of revolutionary cultural change.”²⁸ In these transition times, to see the world from hybrid perspectives might allow us to recognize how change is as much a constant as the shackles of stagnation, and it is always possible.

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² Malise Ruthven, “The Map ISIS Hates,” *The New York Review of Books* (June 25, 2014), <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2014/jun/25/map-isis-hates/>.

³ Abdullah Ocalan, *Democratic Confederalism*, translated by the International Initiative (Transmedia Publishing: London, 2011), <http://www.freeocalan.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Ocalan-Democratic-Confederalism.pdf>.

⁴ Raphael Lemkin, “Genocide,” *American Scholar*, vol. 15, no. 2 (April 1946), 227–30, accessed at <http://www.preventgenocide.org/lemkin/americanscholar1946.htm>.

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⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895–1968. From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 38.

⁸ Ibid., 126.

⁹ Paul Crowther, *Art and Embodiment*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 2.

¹⁰ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 22.

¹¹ Amir Hassanpour, “The Kurdish Experience,” *The Middle East Research Project*, published in MER189 and accessed at <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer189/kurdish-experience>.

¹² Rosana Palayzan, ... *A story I never forgot...* (2013), text viewable at <http://www.ibraaz.org/projects/96>.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, III, accessed at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>.

¹⁴ Ibid., IX.

¹⁵ James Tatum, *The Mourner’s Song. War and Remembrance from the Iliad to Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 117.

¹⁶ As quoted by James Tatum, *ibid.*

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Daniel Varoujan, Letter to Garegin Levonian, 27th March 1913 ([Letters], Yerevan, 1965, 202), courtesy of The Armenian Mechitarist Congregation, <http://mechitar.com/island/index.php?iM=6>.

¹⁹ Mark Grigorian, “Media and Democracy in Armenia,” in Edmund Herzig and Marina Kurkchyan, eds., *The Armenians. Past and Present in the Making of National Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 180.

²⁰ Ibid., 180.

²¹ Crowther, 1.

²² Artist statement courtesy of Tanya Leighton Gallery, <http://www.tanyaleighton.com/index.php?pageId=266&l=en>.

²³ Eric Hobsbawm, *Fractured Times. Culture and Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: The New Press, 2014), 26.

²⁴ Appadurai, 21.

²⁵ Crowther, 1.

²⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences,” on Atlas of Transformation: <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/c/cultural-diversity/cultural-diversity-and-cultural-differences-homi-k-bhabha.html>.

²⁷ Walter D. Mignolo, “Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing,” *eipcp: European Institute for Progressive Cultural Politics*, published September 2011, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0112/mignolo/en>.

²⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences,” on Atlas of Transformation: <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/c/cultural-diversity/cultural-diversity-and-cultural-differences-homi-k-bhabha.html>