

Island of memory

The art of the Armenian diaspora at Biennale 2015

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The Golden Lion for Best National Participation at Venice Biennale 2015, whose slogan is “All the World’s Futures”, has been awarded to the Republic of Armenia, “for forming a pavilion based on a people in diaspora . . . [in] a year that witnesses a significant milestone for the Armenian people”. The winning pavilion bears the title “Armenity/Haiyutioun: Contemporary artists from the Armenian Diaspora”; and “milestone” is a polite euphemism for the centenary of the genocide of Armenians by Ottoman Turks. The pavilion houses the work of sixteen artists who live and work outside Armenia – in Aleppo, Istanbul, New York, Buenos Aires and elsewhere – but have one thing in common: they are descendants of genocide survivors, part of a network that is transparent, yet tangible. What could make a diaspora, marked by a century of genocide and its denial, the best representative of our future?

We have a starting date for the Armenian genocide: April 24, 1915, when the Turkish police arrested hundreds of Armenian intellectuals in Istanbul, marking the beginning of a

vast project of mass deportation and murder. What we do not have is an end date. Compare this to the Holocaust, which is remembered on the day the Red Army liberated Auschwitz, putting an end to the atrocity. For Armenians, the end never came, since Turkey continues to deny the crime. Much of the debate has focused on whether what happened is technically a “genocide” or not – but that is silly. What matters is that Turkey is not ready to recognize its responsibility. This fact has consequences: survivors cannot bury their dead, refugees have never been allowed to return to their land, and Turkey still imposes a severe blockade on land-locked Armenia.

Armenians were, of course, a people of diaspora even before the genocide of 1915. Following the nomadic invasions from Central Asia in the eleventh century, which destroyed the Bagratid Kingdom, Armenians lived for many centuries without a proper state. They survived by preserving their distinct identity, thanks, in part, to the Armenian Apostolic Church (the national Church of the Armenians), and to the distinctive features of their culture, which crystallized around the Armenian alphabet and language. Diaspora communities sprang up and blossomed in distant merchant colonies, from Isfahan to Dacca, Cairo to Warsaw. This dispersed nation, globalized before its time, could always count on new recruits from its historic heartland where a significant number of Armenians remained, divided between the “East Armenians” living in the Persian and later Tsarist Empire, and “West Armenians” under Ottoman domination.

The deportations and massacres during the First World War brought a fundamental shift not only in the ethnic composition of the Middle East, as its major Christian populations (Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians) were uprooted, but also in the numerical balance between the two components of the Armenian nation, two-thirds of whom were living under Ottoman rule. The emergence of an independent Armenia following the collapse of the Soviet Union brought yet more complications: Armenia became an independent republic, which had the effect of marginalizing the diaspora. In the Middle East, war and instability threatened the survival of Armenian communities, leading to further exodus. Today, large traditional Armenian communities in Syria are being dispersed once again, as Armenian neighbourhoods in the historic centre of Aleppo have become battlefronts. Recent communities, such as the growing Armenian population in California, face problems of a new type: today’s generation is losing its historic knowledge of the Armenian language, and churchgoers are dwindling in number. As a result, increasing numbers of people have become pessimistic about the survival of an Armenian identity abroad.

“The Armenians are exemplary as a people, in the sense that in the last hundred years they



“Respiro”, 2015, by Sarkis Zaubunian

were migrants par excellence”, explains Adeline Cübeyan von Fürstenberg, the curator of “Armenity/Haiyutioun”. “They show how it is possible to live within the culture and laws of the country while preserving their proper culture.” The title she gave to the pavilion derives from the French *arménité* (loosely, “the art of being Armenian”), and the pavilion itself is located neither in the Giardini nor the Arsenale (the two traditional exhibit spaces of the Biennale) but on San Lazzaro degli Armeni, a twenty-minute journey by *vaporetto* from San Zaccaria.

There could be no better place to represent *arménité* than the tiny island that bears the name of the patron saint of lepers. In 1717, the Venetian Republic gave San Lazzaro to the Armenian monk Mekhitar to found a monastery. Mekhitar was born in Sebastia (Sivas, in today’s Turkey), and established an Armenian Catholic order in Constantinople. But he was persecuted both by the Sultan and by the majority Armenian Apostolic Church, eventually finding refuge in the Peloponnese, then under Venetian rule. When Ottoman forces attacked and occupied the Morea peninsula, Mekhitar and his followers fled with the retreating Venetian forces. From this small island in faraway Venice, armed with the power of a printing press, the Mekhitarist Congregation played a central role in the revival of Armenian culture, printing dictionaries and books, educating teachers, and providing shelter for the persecuted. It was here on San Lazzaro that Lord Byron came in late 1816 to learn classical Armenian. He is considered the island’s most famous visitor, and the room where he stayed still bears his name.

Standing today on San Lazzaro, in the midst of the Venetian Lagoon, one is initially struck by the contrast between this small island and mountainous Armenia – between the heart of Renaissance Europe and a lost corner of Asia Minor. Yet, on closer consideration, they bear

a deep similarity. Both are fragile: the smallest of the post-Soviet republics, Armenia has been under siege by two of its neighbours since it gained independence in 1991; bordered by hostile states, it is itself like a Venetian island in the mountains of the Caucasus. Both have had a global influence incompatible with their size: Armenia through its diaspora, San Lazzaro through the Mekhitarist Congregation. “We have a pavilion which has existed for 300 years”, von Fürstenberg says.

For Biennale 2015, the walls of the San Lazzaro monastery have been transformed into showrooms, its ancient manuscripts raw material for art. Just like the Mekhitarist Congregation, the sixteen artists have gathered remnants of an Armenian past in order to give them new life. References to this traumatic past are omnipresent: Nigol Bezjian in his installation “Witnessed.ed” introduces the tragic poet Daniel Varoujan, symbol of the Armenian intelligentsia, who was arrested on April 24, 1915 and murdered in deportation. Through old newspaper texts and contemporary video installation, the artist gives life to the poet. “Treasures”, Silvina Der-Meguerditchian’s installation, is inspired by a text about folk medicine written by her grandmother in Turkish in the Armenian alphabet; the introduction of additional texts and various objects makes for a meaningful exploration of identity and longing. In the photographs of Aram Jibilian, subjects wear masks based on characters in the paintings of the Armenian-American Arshile Gorky.

By reviving fragments of the past, the artists of “Armenity” overcome both the pain of annihilation and the borders of modern nation-states. This is well illustrated by the work of Sarkis Zaubunian, who exhibits “My memory is my homeland” on San Lazzaro, and, as the sole exhibit of the Turkish pavilion in the Arsenale, his new magnum opus “Respiro”. For this, a large hall in the Arsenale has been divided by two huge mirrors marked with large coloured fingerprints painted in watercolour by seven children from Istanbul. At the two extremities of the hall are neon rainbows representing “the first magical breaking point of light”, the beginning of existence. Lining the walls are thirty-six stained-glass panes on which one can find Hrant Dink, the Turkish-Armenian journalist assassinated in front of his editorial offices in Istanbul on January 19, 2007, holding a pomegranate and smiling; a reproduction of the Archangel Gabriel as depicted on the walls of Haghia Sophia; Christ on the cross; a woman participating in the Gezi Park protests of 2013; war in Africa; candles in an old medieval church; and the filmmaker Sergei Parajanov sitting on his bed. There is much suffering in these images, yet Sarkis has made from it something beautiful. After one hundred years of separation, Sarkis, a diaspora Armenian who was born in Istanbul and lives in France, has brought his art back to Turkey.

An even more poignant expression of diaspora art is “Streetlights of Memory – A Stand



“Les Réverbères de la Mémoire” (Streetlights of Memory), 2010–15, by Melik Ohanian

by Memorial 2010/2015”, by the French-Armenian Melik Ohanian. It is placed at the entrance to the island, outside the walls of the Mekhitarists, and away from the rest of the exhibit. One’s first impression on disembarking is that the work is simply a heap of metal, or outsized parts of pipes or trumpets; in fact, “Streetlights of Memory” (“Les Réverbères de la Mémoire”) is a work which was supposed to have been erected long ago and has never been completed. It was intended as a gift by the Armenian community to the city of Geneva, an expression of gratitude for the refuge provided by that city to the orphans of the genocide, and for the humanitarian aid Geneva supplied to survivors. It followed Geneva’s recognition in 2005 that the mass killings of 1915 were indeed a genocide, following earlier acknowledgements by the Canton of Geneva in 1998, and the Swiss Federal Assembly in 2003. Given these precedents, the city authorities did not imagine that they would be triggering controversy in 2008 when they announced an international art competition for the construction of a memorial. The work was to have been unveiled on April 24, 2009.

The jury’s choice of “Streetlights of Memory” was unanimous. The artwork was to be composed of nine streetlights, each 8 metres high and with unique forms and ornaments. Each lamppost is engraved with words in Armenian or French. The text runs upwards towards the chrome teardrops that take the place of lightbulbs. These were to be illuminated at night by orange lamps on the ground. An individual standing beneath the teardrop would thus see his own reflection, and a walk in the park would be transformed into an invitation to meditate on collective trauma.

The municipality of Geneva proposed the Bastion de Saint-Antoine, in the old part of the city, as the location for the sculpture, but this idea was opposed by conservationists who had discovered ancient remains at the site. They proposed that “Streetlights” be placed instead in the international part of the city. The municipal authorities consequently made a second suggestion: the park of the Ariana Museum, located on the Avenue de la Paix, midway between the Palais des Nations (the Geneva

headquarters of the United Nations) and the offices of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Surely no better spot could be chosen to commemorate the victims of war and crimes against humanity. A new deadline was given: 2013. But in October of that year, the Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu visited his Swiss counterpart, Didier Burkhalter, in Bern, and the two sides agreed on a “strategic partnership”. One of the prices paid by the Swiss side was to oppose the construction of the memorial for the Armenian victims. The Turkish authorities were also exercising heavy pressure on the United Nations to prevent the project’s completion. Although the Turkish arguments were never made public, their diplomats succeeded in blocking the artwork, winning over politicians already willing to listen.

The necessary permits were delayed. Although the construction plans did not face any administrative obstacles, cantonal authorities opposed the project, concerned that “Streetlights” might cause difficulties for the leadership of Geneva’s UN offices. The association Les Réverbères, which was composed of Swiss-Armenians supporting the project, contacted the United Nations Office at Geneva, and received written assurances that the UN had not intervened and that it was the responsibility of Geneva’s authorities to take the necessary decisions. Based on this, in November 2014, a few months before the centenary, the cantonal authorities promised that the permit was finally ready to be issued: the monument would be erected by April 24, 2015.

Soon after, however, Bern intervened, and the Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs sent a letter to the cantonal authorities, demanding that the project be stopped. According to information leaked to the Swiss media, the Swiss foreign ministry argued that in order “to preserve an impartial and peaceful setting allowing the United Nations and other international organizations to carry out their functions in the best possible working conditions” it was necessary to “refuse to grant a building permit in the planned location”. It is a great irony that this declaration was made in the name of the UN, an organization founded to prevent wars

and genocides, and to protect civilian populations. The UN officials in Geneva made no public statement to distance themselves from the manoeuvres of the Swiss foreign minister.

These interventions by the Swiss minister raise a number of questions: what is the value of democratic decisions – in this case, the

Swiss parliament recognizing the genocide of the Armenians as such – when the executive is able to censor that recognition and override the democratic process? How can the UN and other societies for global peace defend us from future calamities, if they dare not even mention the name of a genocide committed a hundred years ago? Are we surprised to see the UN, tasked with preventing atrocities in Syria and elsewhere, so helpless? After seeing “Respiro” in the Turkish pavilion, the censorship of art by politicians looks even more ridiculous.

The members of the Les Réverbères association were becoming anxious. “Armenity” had never been popular – and nor were the descendants of genocide survivors. Since the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923 that created the foundations of modern Turkey, their quest for justice has never been a cause célèbre. The great powers of Turkey mattered; Armenians did not. Now, a century later, the rejection of Streetlights was reopening old wounds.

The artwork did what diasporas have always done: it found a new home, and became the very story it was representing. Yet this success remains fragile. Not only did the name of the sculpture have to be qualified for the Biennale by the addition of the phrase “A Stand by Memorial 2010/2015”, but the sculpture itself changed its appearance: instead of proud, erect lamps, their base deep in the soil, it became a heap of broken pieces, eighty-seven in total, piled on the ground. Where these pieces will go when the Biennale ends in November remains to be seen.

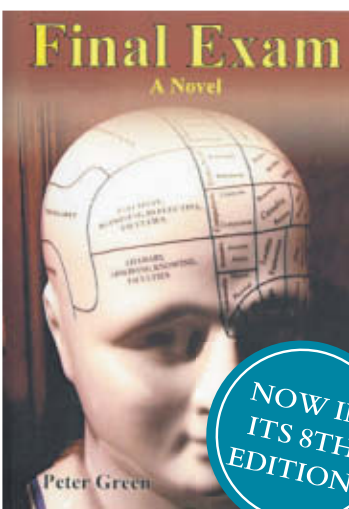
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