

Importing the “Curator”: Politics of Representation and Recognition in Contemporary Armenian Art¹

Introduction: Denaturalizing the “Curator”

There is a humorous rumor circulating within the artistic community in Armenia that every villager in literary and cultural critic Vardan Jaloyan’s native village Urtsadzor reads Derrida. The humor and morale of this anecdote is not as much in the exaggeration of Jaloyan’s ability to convert the villagers to deconstruction as it is in a seeming discrepancy between the villagers stuck in the pre-modern age and French post-structuralism.

The connection of this story with the curatorial practices in Armenia might not be very obvious at first glance. However, it will support the argument I hope to develop here: the term ‘deconstruction’ as well as curator, participate in the same system of signification as other terms and signs imported from the West. Due the fact that they are Western and are related to contemporary art, ‘curator’ as well as ‘deconstruction’, have shiny and seductive qualities for Armenian contemporary artists. They view themselves in the vanguard of progress and development, avant-gardist heroes who, by the virtue of claiming ‘special’ access to Western values, signs and technologies, are above the banality of everyday life. Western signs in the context of Armenian contemporary art are misreceived on the same level. They are perceived as possessing a phantasmagoric layer, where the subject projects his/her desire, as in the case of Benjamin’s dialectical images.² The mere fact that the term ‘curator’ is an imported term from the West, permits it to be romanticized and idealized the same way as, for instance, “Cadillac”, “deconstruction” and “Led Zeppelin”. To illustrate my point, here is a story told by Armenian artist Arman Grigoryan:

During one of the never-ending discussions accompanying the first *3rd Floor* exhibition, I recall that an artist frustrated by my works directed me an accusatory question; “Why did you paint *Cadillac*? There is no such car in Armenia”. I gave him [an] *hamasteghtsakan* answer, saying, when we were students my friend Ruben Grigoryan told me his dream where he saw a *Led Zeppelin* concert (except photographs [my friend] saw neither movies, nor video films (which were not widely spread at that time) about *Led Zeppelin*”. So, now,

¹ I wish to thank Vardan Azatyan who provided me with insightful and subtle comments and helped me to go beyond blatant criticism. I would like to express my gratitude to Nazareth Karoyan who, as both a witness and participant in the art scene since the late 1980’s, ‘remembered’ some of the undocumented events. Special thanks to Eric Goodfield for his close reading, constructive engagement and critical comments.

² Walter Benjamin, “N [re the theory of knowledge, theory of progress]”, in Gary Smith ed., *Thinking Through Benjamin*. University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 43-83.

can you accuse Ruben Grigoryan for not seeing Tatevik Sazandaryan or Tigran Levonyan and seeing Led Zeppelin?³

Signs like *Cadillac*, *Led Zeppelin*, and we can extend this to cover ‘curator’ and ‘deconstruction’ though quite different within themselves, were received the same way in the community of Soviet avant-garde artists in a sense of being “non-Soviet”. As Vardan Azatyan argues, “Western cultural signs were significantly transformed in the process of being transferred from one context into another, thus producing a false conception about the contextual meanings of the signs; this means in the Soviet context they could literally refer to anything.”⁴

In order to understand what the term ‘curator’ signifies in Armenia and move on to consider ‘curatorial practices’, we not only have to look at the internal development of the curatorial work within the Armenian art scene but also at the artistic community’s desire to communicate with the outside world, mainly with the West.

In order to trace the origins of the term ‘curator’, more precisely that of its Armenian equivalent- *hamadrogh*, I will discuss the late Soviet alternative artists’ movement named the *Third Floor*. Through my discussion of the concept *hamadrogh* that has been extensively used to denote the term curator in Armenia, I will argue that the concept implies a specific and historically concrete curatorial practice and should not be generalized.

The Third Floor and the Construction of “Hamadrogh”

The *Third Floor* was the first major contemporary art group formed in Armenia in the late 1980’s (fig. 1). Not having an opportunity to exhibit in official spaces of representation such as the National Gallery, Museum of Modern Art and Painters’ Union’s exhibition hall, a group of artists inspired by the promises of *Perestroika* and *glasnost*, and particularly by the slogan of constructing socialism with a human face (human face – meaning capitalism for them) opened their first event on the third floor of the Painters’ Union. This was not a designated exhibition space, but a conference hall. Hence the group’s name- *the Third Floor*. The group that lasted until 1994, organized various exhibitions, happenings, performances, discussions on different subjects and was fluid enough to accommodate literally any media, style and school, from pop art and abstract expressionism to minimalism and conceptual art and performances (fig. 2). First formed as a dissident artistic movement operating outside official art institutions, in places such as private houses, studios, etc., since 1987 the group extended its activities to occupy public and official places for representation attempting to subvert them from within. However, what is ironic in this case, is that the group’s non-conformist stance had already been licensed by Gorbachev’s promise for reforms. Being against the outmoded official

³ Quoted in Vardan Azatyan, *Art Communities, Public Spaces, and Collective Actions in Armenian Contemporary Art*, paper presented in the conference “Public Spheres: Contested Monuments, Meanings, Identities, and Spaces” in the University of Plymouth, June 21st, Exeter.

⁴ Ibid.

dogma of socialist realism, the group had already been accommodated within the framework of *Perestroika* and *glasnost*.

Comprised of artists as diverse as Arman Grigoryan (who was the ideologue of the group), Karine Matsakyan, Ashot-Ashot, Kiki, Rueben Grigoryan, Vahan Roumelyan, Sargis Hamalbashyan, Nazareth Karoyan, Sev and others, the group strove to accommodate everything, both in terms of artistic practices, genres and disciplines. Through its *gesamtkunstwerk* strategies it had ambitions to make up for the lack of contemporary art discourse within the framework of a limited number of exhibitions.⁵ The group members actively appropriated Western signs and symbols: from Black Sabbath, Marlboro to Joseph Beuys were used to signify the non-Soviet. At the same time, these signs were romanticized to a degree that they denoted the ideal of total freedom without any societal constraints whatsoever (which, was of course, bourgeois in nature) (fig. 3).

Since the group had an ambition to make up for the lack of discourse in the field of contemporary art in Armenia and at the same time had no positively comprehended conceptual framework to operate on (they were united merely against the soviet ideology), in 1993 exhibition “Subjective Integration: *hamasteghtsakan* art in Armenia” Nazareth Karoyan used the term ‘*hamasteghtsakan*’ (hama-all, pan- and steghtsakan – creative, collectively created) to describe the art practices of *the Third Floor* and to designate a style in the absence of any coherent style or artistic strategy within the group’s activities.

Hamasteghtsakan is a fabricated term that had ambitions of becoming a descriptive analytical concept (as Karoyan stated in his 1995 article⁶) which arose from the need to retroactively make sense of incoherent and incomparable things brought together in the virtual potpourri of the Armenian avant garde movement – Western signs, artistic practices, styles, everything imaginable that could be anti-soviet.

The ideologue of the group, Arman Grigoryan, commented on Karoyan’s initial conceptualization of the term. In his outline of the essential question of *hamasteghtsakan* art, after setting up the difference between art (as an autonomous sphere of individual creation) and culture (as a weapon in the hands of power, and/or mass kitsch) Arman Grigoryan states in his 1993 lecture at the Academy of Fine arts in Yerevan that “The main task of *hamasteghtsakan* art is to resolve the tension between art and culture.” Continuing in a more teleological pathos he quotes Sarte’s lines: “*Hamasteghtsakan* art is based on the belief that the human is a human’s project in the future.”⁷ According to this narrative, *hamasteghtsakan* art, in its way of defining art as an autonomous sphere, surprisingly enough falls into an absolute relativism accommodating virtually everything under its guise: “*Hamasteghtsakan* art once and for all liberates creation from the constraints of high and low, old and new, ours and theirs, cheap and expensive, objective and subjective, figurative – non-figurative, styles and schools” where Walt Disney is as great as Leonardo.⁸

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Nazaret Kayoyan, “Inch e Hamasteghtsakan Arvesty?”, *Ex Voto, Garun*, February 1996, pp. 95-97.

⁷ Arman Grigoryan, “Inch e Hamasteghtsakan Arvesty?”, www.naac.am.

⁸ Ibid.

If the practices of *the Third Floor* had this all-encompassing, all-inclusive (*hamasteghtsakan*) quality, why did Nazareth Karoyan feel the need to conceptualize them starting from very detailed and complex structural and semantic analysis of the term itself and ending with typologies that would describe the movement and its practices in a methodologically and conceptually rigorous manner? One of the reasons is, perhaps, Karoyan's relationship with the group itself. Already in the early 1990's, trying to enhance the commercial institutional field of contemporary art in Armenia, Karoyan became actively involved in the establishment of the gallery system. Even though officially part of the Painters' Union and comprising of its Youth division, *the Third Floor* artists favored to present themselves as anti-establishment. Hence, the institutionalization of avant-garde art and particularly, its commercialization, was opposed to *the Third Floor's* stance as an anti-institutional and anti-art movement (paradoxically, this anti-art stance itself strove to establish art as a distinct sphere of creation). But the differences and contradictions were obvious even in the late 1980's. While Arman Grigoryan's practices and those of the majority of the group members were based more on spontaneity, disorganization, rupture, discontinuity, Karoyan was mostly troubled with methodological problems of displaying the works. He was concerned with conceptual and expositional tasks such as making "holes in the walls", accommodating specific objects in certain places in order to reevaluate, accentuate and re-signify separate aspects and features of already existing and in the late Soviet Armenian context politically charged representational spaces.

At the moment Grigoryan, inspired by Azatyan's paper⁹, is building up a thesis that Karoyan was the founder of conceptual art in Armenia. What Karoyan himself favors to stress is that even in the late 1980's he was not so much trying to create conceptual work as he was involved in curatorial work. So much for Karoyan's anachronism, since the term 'curator' is itself a misnomer here: it simply did not exist at the time. However, this discussion points out that the development of curatorial work in Armenia was strongly connected with the development of conceptual art which Karoyan calls "from within" – as a result of exposition making practices. Here the exponenter, using his/her methodological and theoretical background, tries to incorporate visual and semantic signifiers of the site of representation into the organization of the exposition itself, even accomplishing semiotic tasks. As an exponenter, or a conceptual artist or even a curator (whichever you chose), Karoyan was mainly concerned with creating a conceptual framework for talking about the extremely fluid and elastic practices of *the Third Floor*. Hence comes the term *hamasteghtsakan* (collectively made) as a descriptive analytical category. Karoyan's conceptualization of the practices of *the Third Floor* was perhaps informed by his desire to construct a discourse for art criticism and at the same time it can be viewed as an extension of his conceptual work. In the light of the fact that Karoyan himself was a member of the group since 1992, we can not dissociate him from *the Third Floor's* tendency to make up for the lack of discourse in the field of contemporary art in Armenia. At the same time, the structuralist-

⁹ Vardan Azatyan, "Hishoghutyun ev/kam Moratsutyun: Patmakanatsnelov Hayastani Jamanakakic Arvesty", *Journal Revisor*, No. 1, 2007 (upcoming publication).

analytical strategy and construction of typologies Karoyan deploys in his conceptualization of *hamasteghtsakan* art, can be read as an attempt to critique *the Third Floor* “objectively” from the “outside” (since any attempt to construct taxonomies and typologies is pregnant with the danger of reductionism).

It is more significant for my discussion here that in the early 1990’s, in connection with *hamasteghtsakan*, Karoyan coins another term – *hamadorgh* (*hama-*collectively, all, *pan-*, *dnel-* to put). The term *hamadrogh* is now synonymously used with the word ‘curator’ as the Armenian equivalent of the latter. Hence, *hamadorgh* inherited from *hamasteghtsakan* the same tendency of putting together and equating incomparable styles and practices, which is prevalent up until now.¹⁰ *Hamadrogh* is then someone, who, by inventing a description, analogy, taxonomy, etc., puts together incoherent things, fabricates a meaning in order to legitimize the artist and his/her creation and justify it as art, thus, once again, reasserting the old formalist *l’art pour l’art* notion. The discussion of the origins of the two terms I have carried out here illustrates that *hamadrogh* is simply the curator of *hamasteghtsakan* art. In the context of contemporary Armenian art it has been taken to denote any type of curatorial practice without reflection upon the genealogy as well as implications of the term. Contextualizing *hamadrogh* within the framework of its emergence, helps to denaturalize the term by pointing out to its historical specificity.

The Institutionalization of Curating: ACCEA

With this grand detour through the early years of the Armenian avant-garde, I have only discussed one prevalent mode of curating. Now I will turn to the second mode or attitude, i. e. the curator as an artist, and aspects of self-representation in the curatorial work. This is not to say that this mode is completely separate from the previous one – *hamadrogh*. Quite the opposite, they often reinforce each other.

As far as I have managed to find out from artists active in the early 1990’s, the term curator was introduced by diaspora Armenian artists such as Sonia Balassanian and Marcus Grigoryan. Sonia Balassanian’s role was especially important in the institutionalization of contemporary art in Armenia. A New York-based Iranian-Armenian artist, she came to Armenia in 1992 and gathered artists around her who were mostly at odds with the *Third Floor*, such as Karen Andreassian, Samvel and Manvel Baghdassaryans. With them she organized the exhibition “9” (fig. 4). Exhibitions *Identification* and *the Third* in 1993 served as a basis to establish the Center for Contemporary Experimental Art (herein referred as ACCEA). However, since as early as the exhibition *Identification*, it was apparent that there was a tension between Sonia Balassanian and Armenian post-Soviet artists. If for the first the title of the exhibition implied identification of a Diaspora-Armenian artist with her national and cultural heritage as preserved in post-soviet Armenia, for the post-Soviet Armenian artists who preferred to forget both the historical and communist

¹⁰ Vardan Azatyan, in one of our private discussions, connected the tendency of *the Third Floor* to bring together incoherent signs and symbols to comprise a single discourse with the *Perestroika* politics that had the ambition to combine (*hama-drel*) the outmoded one-party Soviet system with neoliberal free market economy.

past and construct a new identity deprived from memory, identification meant the equation of art with the surrounding environment.

Being an artist herself, Sonia Balassanian throughout her curatorial practice never had an intention to abandon her artistic ambitions. Hence, every curatorial work was itself an artistic project focused on self-representation. Instead of conceptualizing exhibitions according to the discourses the works were participating in within the context of larger social, political and cultural realms, she often conceptualized the whole exhibition according to *her* interpretation of *her* own artistic works. It is not incidental, that she was often not only the curator of the show but the main artist as well. Other invited artists were merely there to legitimize Balassanian's artistic works and support the meaning she was suggesting for them, establishing the artist-curator as the origin of her work. This is apparent in a 1996 art festival dedicated to the 5th anniversary of Armenia's independence Balassanian curated at ACCEA. Vardan Azatyan at length discusses the instance when the performance of a reenactment of the religious ritual of feet-washing by Azat Sargsyan was moved from the day of the opening to the next day, as part of theatrical performances¹¹. Balassanian's argument was that the ironic reenactment of the ceremony could insult the Catholicos (the head of the Armenian church) who was to be present at the opening. However, the performance was also against Balassanian's agenda of paying tribute to Armenian national traditions and the construction of a nation-state.

This type of practice of an artist-curator behaving as an artist became characteristic for most of the exhibitions organized at ACCEA since the late 1990's. Exhibitions *Crisis* (1999) (fig. 5) and *Civic Commotion* (2001) curated by David Kareyan, are exemplary of such a practice. These exhibitions as well as Balassanian's *Collapse of Illusions* in 2000 have to be viewed not only as extensions of these two artists' artistic practices in the curatorial field but in the larger socio-political context of the late 1990's Armenia. This was a period when with the neo-nationalist government coming to power (1998), the community of Armenian artists, previously optimistic about the promise of democracy and the hope of constructing a new society, experienced the failure of these social and political utopias. Many artists were disenchanting and disillusioned from the earlier aspirations of the role of the artist as possessing social agency or the free will. The culmination of this crisis came with the 1999 parliament shooting that killed the prime minister, the speaker of the parliament along with six other officials. This was a moment when the seemingly dematerialized body politic that operates through mostly invisible mechanisms of power and control, was seen as literally composed of human flesh, bones and blood. In particular, David Kareyan's and Sonia Balassanian's *artistic practices* of the time reacted quite radically to the new state of disillusionment. By this time, David Kareyan's earlier public actions and demonstrations as a form of artistic practice within the framework of the Act group¹² (fig. 6) were replaced by universalizing and totalizing discourses of myth and allegory, which Vardan Azatyan

¹¹ Vardan Azatyan, *Art Communities, Public Spaces*.

¹² Act was a conceptual artists' group that operated from 1994-1996. Through public actions and art demonstrations they were calling for reforms in art and society.

has characterized as “sexual- political rituals”.¹³ The violent massacre in the Parliament was literally translated into the visual representational field in Kareyan’s videos and performances of the late 1990’s and 2000’s. In these works the political is traumatically internalized and then expressed through brutality, violence and bodily suffering (fig. 7). In this context, the exhibition *Crisis* (and later *Civic Commotion*) was an extension of themes such as the crisis of individuality, the search for the lost wholeness of the body Kareyan was elaborating in his art. In one statement he makes this quite explicit:

“It was the demonstration of protest to overcome an existential loneliness and crisis of individuality when we organized the exhibition “Crisis” in 1999 (which synchronized with the bloody events of October 27 in The Armenian Parliament) and exhibition “Civic Commotion”. Till then the main aim of [these] exhibitions as well as of my own [work], was to show the controversy between mind and body, and to insist that it is possible to overcome the sufferings caused by this conflict. These sufferings in no case are the ways leading to perfection and holiness but, [on the] contrary are the aspiration of committing a suicide. It is impossible to be in harmony with yourself, with other people, with nature and industry if one does not take into account the reality, and if one does not refuse the romantic illusions.”

Again, the curator does not so much conceptualize the exhibition as an arena, where meaning and signification are constantly contested, affirmed and negated, but interprets his own work as an artist and chooses other works by other artists to illustrate that the meaning s/he implies or intends to produce is justified. In this case, the artist-curator’s role seems to be close to that of a psycho-analyst who takes works of art to illustrate a psychoanalytic theory and identify a psychological condition.¹⁴ Thus, Kareyan as a curator is more like a doctor who prognoses the syndromes of the diseased society in crisis and takes hold of art to assert that there is, indeed, a crisis. This notion of artist-curator as a psycho-analyst was reenacted in subsequent exhibitions of political art organized by Kareyan (*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (2005), *Resistance Through Art*, Venice Biennale (2005) and *Don’t be Scared* (2006)).¹⁵ These exhibitions of political art that present the heroic figure of the revolutionary artist who ‘triumphs over the stagnant world’¹⁶ resist the notion of ‘art as inherently political paradigm...[and presents it] as merely a commentary on

¹³ Vardan Azatyan, *ibid.*

¹⁴ This was particularly the case with Freud in his analyses of Leonardo’s homosexuality as well as with Young in regard to Picasso’s works.

¹⁵ The following statement illustrates that Kareyan never abandoned the stance of an avant-gardist hero who stands morally above the everyday kitsch: “In Armenia groups of dissident artists started to be formed since the Soviet era. These groups found opportunity of expression in the post-Soviet Armenia as well. These artists are trying to stay clear of “dictatorship of the majority” they are searching for alternatives for social development. When the artist reaches his state of personal emancipation he starts imposing it on the society, by attempting to publicly show the potential he has discovered within himself. “Don’t Be Scared” is an exhibition aimed at overcoming the milieu of cultural fear in Armenia”, www.accea.info (from the exhibition leaflet).

¹⁶ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*, Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 94.

the political and social conditions which leaves out the suffering avant gardist artist(s) from participation.”¹⁷

While in all of Kareyan’s curated projects the main theme is the political and social body in opposition or tension with the corporeal body, and art as a reflection of social and political dystopias, the representation itself is viewed as politically neutral and disinterested. Not only in Kareyan’s curatorial work but that of most other curators, politics and representation are viewed as mutually exclusive categories.¹⁸ There is no elaboration whatsoever on the “representational systems as apparatuses of power”, borrowing Marin’s expression.¹⁹

The political art exhibitions organized at ACCEA time and again establish politics and representation as separate from each other, while since Foucault there is strong consensus that not only is politics representational but that representation is necessarily political as well. This lack of self-reflectivity and awareness that every exhibition to a large extent represents the subjective viewpoint of the curator, I would argue, is due to the fact that artist-curators in Armenia are focused on self-representation; that is, they don’t abandon their artistic ambitions while curating an exhibition. I am convinced that instead of curatorial self-representation, what is needed (given the legacy of the Soviet past) is a critique of representation or at least a deepened awareness that the strategies and spaces of representation the curator chooses and adopts, are ideologically charged reflecting not only the curator’s subjectivity but that of the politics and power at play in spaces of representation. In his article “Utopian Encounters and Encountering Utopias”, Nazareth Karoyan, in my opinion rightly identifies the reasons for the failure to establish a strong institutional field of contemporary art in Armenia and fruitful dialogue with the West. For him the main obstacle is both artists’ and curators’ ambitions to focus on (self)representation (which in turn brings out the notion of art’s authenticity and the author-creator as the origins of his work).²⁰

Politics of Representation and Recognition: In Pursuit for the Other

The above-discussed aspect of power and recognition in the field of representation brings me to another issue I consider rather significant. At the beginning of this essay I have noted that the connotations of the term curator in the context of contemporary art in Armenia are not only to be looked for in the internal structures of the contemporary art field but also in the artistic community’s desire to communicate with the West. Within the current status quo art market relations, where the *West holds ownership of the means of representation*, for most Armenian

¹⁷ Marina Grzinic, “Total Recall, Total Closure”, in *East Art Map*, ed. IRWIN. Afterall Books; London, 2006, p. 321.

¹⁸ Perhaps the exhibition “Politics under 180 degrees” (2003) curated by Vardan Azatyan, is a exception. The curator refused to present a causal unilateral relation between art and politics but rather the complex web of interconnection, interrelation and interaction between the two.

¹⁹ Quoted in Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, Culture*, University Of California Press, 1992, p. 98.

²⁰ Nazaret Karoyan, “Handipogh Utopianer u Utopiakan Handipumner”, www.bnagir.am, issue 9.

artists the promise of being merely represented, packaged and sold in the West is itself seductive.

Most projects with Western Europe so far have been taking place as vertical communicative exchanges: the self-defined “advanced” West exoticizing its Other. Namely, several curators from Western Europe have so far constructed exhibitions of contemporary Armenian art based on the notion of the “Eastern” Other. For instance, the 2003 exhibition *Adieu Parajanov*, a retrospective of Armenian contemporary art organized by Austrian curators Hedwig Saxenhuber and George Schöllhammer at the Kunsthalle in Vienna, particularly crystallizes the exoticization of the Other. The very title of the exhibition - *Adieu Parajanov* can serve as evidence for this. The story we are forced to believe is narrated by Arman Grigoryan. It describes Soviet film director Sergei Parajanov’s encounter with the avant-garde artists of the *Third Floor*. According to Grigoryan, Parajanov entered one of the *Third Floor*’s exhibitions in the late 1980’s and staring at Kiki’s abstract expressionist canvas complained that he did not see any ‘real masculine art’ (masculine denoting a qualitative meaning).²¹ This story served to retroactively conceptualize the Armenian avant-garde as a reaction against Parajanov’s aesthetics. Now, it is not my goal here to explore Parajanov’s influence on unconscious drives and the psyche of Armenian artists. Rather, this example illustrates not only the Austrian curators’ apparent Orientalism (which they themselves would like to avoid) but also the group politics of Armenian artists.

Arman Grigoryan’s personal narrative is told from a privileged position of a witness who claims to have special access to the truth or what **really** happened. Almost all entries to the catalogue are written from this privileged witness-position. While I am not denying that several Armenian contemporary artists’ works to a certain extent had been a reaction against Parajanov’s aesthetics rooted in Eastern traditions of representation (such as Tigran Khachatryan’s video, *The Color of Eggplant, 2002*), to view the whole scene as an answer to Parajanov is to take a narrative of a single artist-witness and to universalize and objectify it.²² At the same time, the Austrian curators, constructing a retrospective based on the mere representation of the Other rather than raising conceptual and theoretical questions regarding the context within which the works were both produced and received, were not interested in the discursive field and structures of Armenian contemporary art. This is reflected on their tendency to suggest answers rather than ask questions, to represent rather than interrogate.

²¹Arman Grigorian, “Informed But Scared”, *Adieu Parajanov: Contemporary Art from Armenia*, ed. Hedwig Saxenhuber, George Schöllhammer, Wien: springerin & authors, 2003.

²² That the status of a witness is no more privileged than the status of a retroactive analyst in terms of having unmediated access or soliciting the truth, is brilliantly argued in Amelia Jones’ essay. The only difference, according to the author, is the phenomenological experience of being present in a live performance and viewing the video or photo documentation of the performance. “Presence” in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation”, *Art Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 4, Performance Art: (Some) Theory and (Selected) Practice at the End of This Century (Winter, 1997), pp. 11-18.

In agreement with Craig Owens, I hold that there is a hierarchical relation ('indignity') implied in merely representing the Other.²³ Nevertheless there is a paradox here, since from the first glance it might seem that the Armenian artistic community is speaking for itself, and this is made rather transparent in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition. This is precisely what Vardan Azatyan has termed *postcolonial counter-transference*. In order to "fully comprehend" what is actually taking place in a non-western context, the Western curator suggests that locals ought to narrate their stories by themselves. In "letting" the local speak for himself/herself s/he believes that s/he will solicit the "reality". In their turn, local artists try to imagine what kind of art a westerner would expect to see according to their own notion of the West, and by putting themselves in the place of the Westerner. However, since this is an impossible endeavor, they *counter-transfer* what they think the Westerner would want from themselves onto the Westerner himself. The result is a dialectic of miscommunication and misrepresentation, a vicious circle fed by misconceptions and misperceptions of the Self and the Other. These mostly vertical relations between the Western curator and Armenian artist does not only have negative consequences for establishing dialog but also has had an impact on the development of the discourses as well as art production within the artistic community in Armenian.

In my view good examples of counter-transference are feminist art exhibitions organized and curated by Eva Khachatryan and Sona Abgaryan in ACCEA since 2004 (fig. 8). The feminist projects as alternative ventures to International Women's Day on March 8th, are extensions of ACCEA's founder Sonia Balassainian's (who leaves and works in New York and visits ACCEA once a year) desire to construct explicitly feminist art in Armenia. They are also informed by their marketability within the West (for which it is exotic to see feminist art from Armenia) and by the possibility of getting funding from local and Western NGOs.²⁴ These exhibitions do not only represent already existing art works in a new frame set up by Eva Khachatryan and have had an impact on the retroactive conceptualization of art works but on art production itself. Particularly, the shift in Diana Hakobian's work from her earlier videos (1999-2004) that establish the "Presence of the Other"²⁵ to militantly angry strivings to hijack the place of the Self, is exemplary in this regard.

²³ Owens, Craig, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, Culture*, University Of California Press, 1992. p. 259.

²⁴ In order to attract funding for the project as well as meet Western expectations, Eva Khachatryan has been persistently packaging the gender relations in terms of black and white male/female, the corrupt patriarchy/progressive matriarchy dichotomy: "...The mentality of the regressive Armenian society also plays its part. In spite of admission of European values, it is not easy to get rid of deep traditional notions, which have been accumulated over the ages. Division of roles between woman and man, the stereotypical perceptions of "typical roles" of men and women are very strong and deeply rooted in our society. Women and men can hardly imagine themselves in other roles and positions outside the framework of the existing stereotypes." Eva Khachartyan, *Women in Dialogue*, exhibition leaflet, ACCEA, Yerevan, 2005.

²⁵ "The Presence of the Other" was the title of Diana Hakobian's solo exhibition at ACCEA, 2004, Curator Vardan Azatyan.

In many of her earlier videos, such as “I Don’t Believe in Your Dreams” (2002) (fig. 8), Hakobian explores the ways the body is inserted into social discourses through the immobilizing effect of the stereotype inherent within and instrumental for the social processes of subjugation and control. The deconstruction of stereotype in “I Don’t Believe in Your Dreams” is both being carried out metaphorically and literally. Shattering the words that are social clichés such as Imagination, Activity, Success, Friendliness, Sincerity, Consent, Collaboration and Productivity that constitute a part of the binary logic, she deconstructs the dominant word within the hierarchy of the pair-oppositions. By destroying the stereotypes that circulate within the society as positive slogans to ensure social coherence and unity, Hakobian does not embrace their opposite either (for instance, Passivity, Failure, Hostility, non-Productivity and etc.). Instead, this is an avoidance to affirm any other hierarchical position altogether. This is driven by the recognition that within the matrix of social relations and the subject’s position as a node both produced and conditioned by this matrix, any act that one performs, is in a sense ‘an act that has been going on before one arrived on that scene.’²⁶ The body as a projection surface for public identities, in Hakobian’s works, both participates in and is affected by the discourse of power and domination as well as the struggle over situating the female body within society.

Unlike these earlier works, where Hakobian exposes the ideology of images and words probing behind their rhetoric, her video trilogy of 2005 “[The] Logic of Power” shown in feminist art exhibition *Women in Dialogue* and Venice Biennale 2005, launches a direct and explicit attack on the logic of patriarchal culture (fig 9). The work presents a collection of female stereotypical images taken from the Internet, beauty magazines, women body builders, photos of nature and a woman cooking, an animated doll shooting from a gun accompanied by banal feminist texts that themselves may be seen as clichés in the post-1960’s world. The liberation of women from housework as well as ensuring an equal place for them within the society, according to Hakobian, is possible through hijacking power from men and appropriating it. The clichéd statements such as “Girls are not chicks”, “Connection between women and nature is altogether a social construction”, “Woman is a complete human being and not a collection of things made of pieces”, “Women has been told to shut up a million times” are accompanied by statistical data (“5% of men do laundry compared to 65% of women...”). Emancipation is viewed as a process of reversing gender hegemony, calling for gender war as the only solution to give the power back to women.

I attribute this shift in Hakobian’s work from exposing the ideology of the discourse and deconstructing its power altogether to appropriating a position of power for women and reversing the gender hierarchy, to the internal and external pressures to produce explicitly feminist works with a seemingly more direct political message and social investment. For Hakobian, as well as within the emerging feminist discourse in Armenia, “woman” as a stable identity accessible to knowledge has to carry out her missionary fight against men as another coherently steady group.

²⁶ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, No. 4, Dec. 1989, pp. 519-531.

This type of essentialist feminism based on rage and negation, conforms to the expectations of a variety of forms of international feminism, including Balassanian's own agenda and Western-funded non-governmental organizations that present the gender-war in unambiguous terms and tend to spread their influence in yet undiscovered and exotic geographical spaces such as Armenia.²⁷

'Beyond Representation, Recognition, Power²⁸': Post-Note

This brief and fragmented outline of the development of curatorial practices in no way claims to objectively encompass and grasp all of the curatorial attempts in the contemporary art scene in Armenia in their totality and construct rigid taxonomies. I am well aware that I have omitted the discussion of the practices of those individuals who go beyond the politics of representation and recognition inherent in the suggested (constructed) models: *hamadrogh* (Nazaret Karoyan), *artist as curator* (Sonia Balassanian and David Kareyan) and *curator as artist* (Eva Khachatryan). Nevertheless, the aim I wanted to accomplish, was to touch upon some of the problematic aspects in the practices of those curators who possess the means to dominate the access to mechanisms and institutions of representation in the field of contemporary art in Armenia and to initiate a discussion on curating as a reflective conceptual work.²⁹

Following the practice in recent critical writing of including a confessional note of self-reflexivity, I would also like to stress that my earlier lecture at SCCA-Ljubljana (January 23, 2007) as well as this text as an outcome of the lecture, largely reflect my subjective experience as a former full-time organizer of exhibitions (I deliberately avoid the term 'curator' here as I do not consider myself one) at ACCEA. It is informed by the recognition that my background as an art historian, initiator of the summer program for contemporary art curators in Yerevan³⁰ as well as someone who researches Armenian contemporary art from a territorial 'outside' (well realizing the problematics of such a venture) necessarily leave their imprint on my interpretation. Perhaps, my experience of (not) being in the context in recent years reflects my concern with establishing horizontal communication between "inside" and "outside", Armenia and 'the rest', the desire not to import or export a discourse but to exchange it. I hold that it is precisely when the curator manages to facilitate dialog between artists, the artist and the audience, as well as the artist/audience and her/himself, curating takes on the role of a cultural hermeneutic and intermediation beyond self-representation. This resists the hierarchical relation of artistic

²⁷ It is also exemplary that male artists and critics, even those speaking from feminist positions, have been denied participation to the annual exhibitions of women's art as well as their group meetings and discussions.

²⁸ This is the title of the collection of Craig Owens' essays published posthumously. Craig Owens, *ibid.*

²⁹ Apart from Vardan Azatyan's text "An Outline of Curatorial An Outline of Cultural Theory of Curatorial Practice, Or, Supernatural Phenomena in Armenian Contemporary Art Scene", www.accea.info, there has been no single publication that interrogates the role of a contemporary art curator in Armenia.

³⁰ The summer program for art curators that was initiated in 2006 brings together prospective and practicing curators from former socialist countries, Turkey and Iran into a series of seminars and workshops in Yerevan, Armenia.

representation over and above the act of curatorial reflection. Such an approach I argue, complicates the curator's role as someone who combines the intermediation of relations with the function of evaluation and reflection.