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Threading Cultural Space-less-ness:  
A Summation of a Groundbreaking Forum on the Armenian Diaspora

March 8th, 2008 brought together Armenian artists, writers, journalists and scholars to Columbia University's landmark Lerner Hall (designed by Bernard Tschumi) to discuss the state of the Diaspora culture in a groundbreaking conference entitled: "Speaking Beyond Living Room Walls: The Armenian Diaspora and its Discontents." The day-long symposium was organized by New York based independent critic/curator Neery Melkonian and a team of dedicated professionals.

The event, the first in decades to analyze, question and propose new directions for what was coined as 'threading cultural space-less-ness' of the Armenian diaspora, was a resounding success. A near-capacity auditorium was treated to 18 engaging presentations, grouped into two sessions, each followed by lively discussions among the panelists and with the audience which included members of the international press, cultural theorists, psychologists, businessmen, patrons of the arts, community activists and graduate students.

In her introductory remarks Melkonian thanked the Armenian Students Association of Columbia, the Ellen Sandrik Foundation and Mr. Razmig Aslanian for hosting the event. A heartfelt appreciation also went to the participants for not 'abandoning ship' when funding for the project fell through. She noted that the forum had been in gestation for couple of years. Initially intended to invite presenters from Armenia as well but upon further consideration the organizers realized that at this juncture the diaspora needed to address itself – both as a form of collective homework and to makeup for the general lack for public platforms and initiatives devoted to exploring Armenian contemporary culture in trans-national contexts. "A lot has changed since the break up of the Soviet Union that has affected all of us," Melkonian commented "yet defining or projecting ourselves predominantly through past accomplishments and/or traumas still prevails. These types of representational imbalances have created 'blockages' of more nuanced articulations of who we are and how we are perceived."

Melkonian elaborated by giving an example from her area of specialization, "If we assess how Armenians 'register' on the 'radar' of the international art world we learn that our contribution, beyond the

middle-ages, pretty much begins and ends with the tragic figure of Arshile Gorky.” She added that, “For decades now dozens of immensely talented Armenian artists remain under-appreciated or are kept at bay.” Similarly, within community structures, “Artists are too often remembered only when there is a need for charitable contributions, and even then selections are made to please rather than inform.” She stated that such conditions have perpetuated visual illiteracy and continue to displace the potential power of our polycentric cultural landscapes. What can be done to overcome such disparities? Melkonian observed, ‘We are resourceful people whose ability to build or renovate over a hundred churches during the last decade alone is indicative of one such ingenuity, perhaps the time has also come to create an independently-run Center for Armenian Arts and Culture and become integral part of a multicultural society like the United States where we have enjoyed a hundred-year of history.’ She concluded that the first step is to make the public aware of the importance and relevance of such an investment. Speaking beyond living room walls is one way of achieving the latter.

#### Summary of Morning Session Presentations:

The morning session aimed at ‘Locating Culture in/of Dispersion’ from more up-to-date approaches and perspectives. Moderator David Kazanjian (Chair of the English Department at the University of Pennsylvania) reminded everyone to critically reflect upon the currencies/meanings of commonly used terms such as ‘community’, ‘Armenia/Armenians’, “Diaspora”, “Transnational” etc. Independent scholar/author Seta Dadoyan deconstructed long-held assumptions that make up the core narratives of ‘all things Armenian’. She outlined two dominant trends ‘Meta-Polis and Apeiron’ which she referred to as ‘Regimes of Truth’ that are exercised by institutions/parties of interest and other centers of power. Both forms of knowledge projected through such frameworks she argued are too vague, iconic, primordial, etc. As creators of alternative culture, she urged the audience to cut through the sediments of such narratives and generate bolder discourses of history and identity. Using a slide presentation, architect Edgar Papazian described the prevalent state of contemporary Armenian architecture, both in the diaspora and in Armenia, as being more concerned with structural ‘super-sizing’ than putting forth design innovations. Citing as an exception the new wing of the Rose and Alex Pilibos school in Los Angeles (designed by Studio Works) he added that, “The genius of our ancient architects cannot be improved upon by repetition, especially in a

community where criticism of such practices and choices is considered unacceptable". He summed up by asking the audience to contemplate a pertinent issue: as this generation of leaders and tastemakers, who often confuse financial authority with vision die off, what hegemonies will replace them and what kind of architecture will result? NYU graduate student Lerna Ekmekcioglu evoked how Hrant Dink had remained largely unknown to Armenians worldwide until his assassination. She offered various idiosyncratic characterizations of Bolsahays who remain marginalized not only in the Republic of Turkey but also in the American-Armenian diaspora where their native tongue -Turkish- is perceived as the language of the 'enemy' in places like community churches and schools. Crediting the 1960s social upheavals and revolutions as a factor that marked a turning point in the response of Armenians to the genocide, journalist/lawyer Michael Bobelian outlined how the modes of mobilization shifted from being predominantly community-based commemorative activities to pursuing justice and recognition trans-nationally through the formation of lobby groups. Viken Attarian's witty power point presentation paralleled the role/place of modern Armenian intellectual to the painstaking experience of a canary caught in a mine-shaft. In one of his participatory exercises with members of the audience, and as an attempt to rescue 'Armenian democratic deficit and pseudo intellectualism' from destruction, he asked if anyone could remember feeling spiritually enriched/fulfilled through a sermon delivered from a community pulpit? By giving a brief overview of social struggle and public activism encountered in recent years in Armenia, Karen Hagopyan touched upon the 'nationalistic' character of activism and mentioned the cultural barriers within the correlation of 'Armenia-versus-the Republic of Armenia,' emphasizing the momentum of the current political landscape.

#### Summary of Afternoon Session Presentations:

Dedicated entirely to the topic of diasporan Armenian art/artists, the afternoon session included fascinating visual presentations in response to the probing title: "Why have there been no great Armenian artists, since Arshile Gorky? Contemporary Armenian Art in a Transnational Context" Independent scholar, curator and writer Radhika Subramaniam began moderating the panel by explaining how feminist art historians Linda Nochlin and Michelle Wallace had raised almost identical questions to bring attention to the absence of women and black artists in the exclusionary practices of the white, male-dominated art world of the

1970s and 80s. Then, she pointed to the panelists and said “Here are great Armenian artists, beyond Gorky!”

Art Historian Christopher Steiner spoke about how Elizabeth Tashjian (1912–2007), an outsider artist who reinvented herself by converting her family home in Old Lyme, Connecticut into a “Nut Museum” where she often performed for the visitors dressed in Ottoman–Armenian costumes. As a way of re–writing a subjective history, video artist Jean Marie Casbarian discussed her new project where she deconstructs family stories and mythologies to re–examine her father’s diasporic life as an officer in the chemical warfare, transporting mustard gas and napalm to England via Liberty ships and convoys of WWII. Abelina Galustian showed how her paintings are concerned with ‘relocating/displacing’ the highly sexualized and objectified female subjects abundantly found in renowned 19th century European art. By appropriating Orientalist aesthetic vocabulary, her detailed compositions invert gender stereotypes to introduce ‘femininities’ that are outside the typological confinement of the exotic Near East. Sculptor Linda Ganjian explained how her “carpets” which are made of unusual materials and are based on a personal vocabulary (i.e. childhood fantasies and memories) respond to her urban surroundings as well as local histories. By sharing examples of his ephemeral work and conceptual paintings Hrayr Anmahouni Eulmessekian addressed the continuously ‘migrant place’ of diaspora artistic practice, and how such positions challenge the norms of acceptability claimed by mainstream paradigms of dominant cultures, as a means to re–assert the artist’s right for self–determination. Thea Fahradian’s laptop music performance, which integrated traditional instruments such as the violin with processed (i.e. street) sounds, was inspired by her research on modern practices of covering the human body, as in veiling or tattooing. Multi–media installation artist Silvina Der Megerdichian, who curated the first alternative Armenian pavilion at the Venice Biennial (2007) and runs an on–line forum with other diaspora artists, discussed how she began to explore the very concept of “Armenia” in her native Spanish–speaking Buenos Aires. This in turn led her to make art that deals with identity beyond fixed national, religious, linguistic and traditional borders. Photographer Aram Jibilian discussed how his premeditated and often staged compositions expand the nature of ‘portraiture’ to deal with notions of masculinity and multiplicity while also echoing issues related to displacement and homeland. Skewing the role of the writer as an observer, reflector and subject Nancy Agabian read an essay called “On the audience” which is part of her recent anthology about contemporary Armenian women and creativity. Harout

Simonyan (who spoke in Armenian) proposed that the post-soviet predicament might have parallels with the post cold war diaspora condition, with nationalism as a possible common factor. He showed a video piece in which the artist is depicted patiently trying to fit in an outgrown ballet costume- a metaphor for failed hegemonic systems - but he repeatedly fails.

Conclusions:

Reflecting upon the singular threads that wove a spirited cultural geography Subramaniam summed up as follows: "The artists brought a textured and sensory dimension to the questions of diaspora and identity discussed that morning. The materiality of their work - variously painstaking, detailed, honed through observation yet eccentric, even contemplative - brought to life in that room, with startling rawness at times, the sheer lived experience on which conceptual formulations stand."

Judging from attendee remarks, media interest and e-mail requests (to host such events more frequently and to allow more time for discussion) the March 8th forum marked an important departure in the public life of Armenians by providing more nuanced analysis of contemporary Diaspora culture and art. The organizers have resolved to use these overwhelmingly positive responses to (a) publish the proceedings and (b) organize a sequel to the forum in southern California this fall. For related inquiries kindly write to ADAID08@aol.com or call 212, 842-4868.

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