

HYPERALLERGIC

ESSAYS

Undoing Denials at the Venice Biennale's Armenian Pavilion

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A view of the island of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, the site of the Armenian Pavilion for the 2015 Venice Biennale. (all photos by Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)

Editor's note: The following essay was first published in the catalogue for Armenty, which accompanied the Armenian pavilion of the same name at the 2015 Venice Biennale. The Armenty exhibition won this year's Golden Lion for best national pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

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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

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.



Mikayel Ohanjanyan, "Tasnerku" (2015) (click to enlarge)

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 contradictory 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, unmaking, 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.