

Transition in Armenia

This text is a fragment from the conference “Transition” that Andreassian and Miren Eraso jointly presented at the *Writing Europe* congress, organised by the British Council in Kiev from 28 June to 3 July, 2005. The conference, which took place with two voices, presented the political context of recent decades in Armenia and the Spanish State, places of residence of the conference participants. Apart from outlining a situation or a determined space/time, it established a bridge between two sociopolitical realities with the common denominator of artistic practise.

When I first thought of *transition* as a title for this project, I suddenly remembered the performance in Yerevan in 2004 by Sarkis, a French artist from an Armenian background. The performance consisted of using watercolour on water. At first the drop of watercolour is a bright flash in the water; then it gradually loses its brightness until it is completely dissolved and lost in the water. This reminded me of the initial enthusiasm at the beginning of the revolutionary situation or transitional period in Armenia. Actually my approach to this research repeats the same algorithm. People are the bright spots in the water and by following them we trace the path they have taken which coincides with the algorithm of the watercolour drop in the water. What remains in the end is troubled, turbid water.

My wish here is to create a possibility for the context to be revealed by itself, through the people who directly deal with the relevant problems within the given context. These people represent the political and socio-cultural spheres. From the very beginning it was clear for me who was to be interviewed for

the cultural part. Yet, I can't say the same for the political sphere, which is difficult to pin down because it is so slippery - the troubled, turbid water. The problem was solved quite by chance. I accidentally ran into my old classmate who during this transitional period had joined one of the radical parties which had a key role during that period. The artistic situation has always been the most flexible one in the cultural sphere as it worked directly with reality and its problems. It had quite a current and significant role in the period of transition, whereas the literary aspect was the most dogmatic field. And only in recent years, perhaps influenced by the artistic situation, some part of it proved to be alive by transferring to a new stage of development, creating an interdisciplinary space, a forum for various discussions. The aim of this magazine is to revise the field of dogma, thus acquiring a role for itself.

The crisis in the political situation has put its stamp on urban planning and architecture as well. The construction of the so-called Northern Avenue in the city centre, where some one or two years ago the oldest buildings still stood, is a vivid outcome of this transitional period. Violation of human rights, people being uprooted from their houses with very small financial compensation — only enough for a one-room flat somewhere on the outskirts of the city, foreign investments, clashes amongst the clans, etc. That is why I see navigating through the Armenian context in a transitional period only via people, their biography and their experience.

Photographs, courtesy of the author



Northern Avenue, Research into urban planning and architecture. In 1924 Alexander Tamanyan, author of the Master Urban Plan for Yerevan, proposed the construction of Northern Avenue, which was to join the Opera House (on the left) with Lenin Square (the present Republic Square, far right). This plan is currently being carried out, and the name Northern has acquired a symbolic meaning pointing at certain geopolitical problems and tendencies.

4.02.2005 YEREVAN

Gabriel Ter-Karapetyan (GTK) graduated from the Department of Cybernetics at the Yerevan State Polytechnic Institute and worked at the Computer Engineering Institute, etc. He is currently unemployed.

Karen Andreassian (KA) When did you join the Union for National Determination (UND) and why?

GTK I joined UND in 1990 when Paruir Hairikyan, its leader, returned from abroad where he was in a kind of exile. I began to participate in its activities more actively from 28 May 1988, when the first meeting devoted to the first independent Armenian Republic took place. This was still in the Soviet period and naturally not encouraged, even by the Karabakh Committee, the then leading party of the national

movement, which later grew into the organisation of the Armenian National Movement (ANM)¹. They thought that it would interfere with the so-called successful process of the Karabakh² movement in providing a solution to the problem of independence. Why did I join it? I have never been and never wanted to be a party functionalist/functionary. Yet, I wanted to support the people who carried the idea of independence. I had the feeling that many people were reluctant to join, perhaps because they lacked courage, and it seemed that this party consisted only of brave young people, fighting for radical changes. They were ready to take actions which seemed unreal for more mature people. Even at my workplace people would say that this party consists of people having a lower educational level. This



Gabriel Ter-Karapetyan

kind of opinion was especially put abroad by the ANM which longed for power. Taking into consideration all these facts, I made up my mind to be closer to this people, I wished to be present there, to have a man like myself (head of the programming laboratory), not just young people, represented in UND.

KA What is the aim of UND?

GTK The main objective of UND is to overcome the situation created after the genocide³ and its consequences - the restoration of independence in Armenia. If we go a bit deeper into the history, the first movement for independence started on 24 April, 1965, the 50th anniversary of the genocide. Of course, this day was commemorated not by the government but by a group of patriots who organized a procession with the slogan "give us back our lands". The authorities were taken by surprise by the demonstration and they couldn't prevent it. Next year the same day was accompanied with arrests and violence. Since then, an active part of the population has been eager to unite in a party, the United National Party (UNP). This was the first underground organisation in the USSR. It aimed at the restoration of independence in Armenia and served as a basis for UND. UND was founded in 1987, when Paruir Hairikyan was released from prison and went to Gorbachov to inform him that he wanted to establish a party (perestroika, glasnost). Though

he didn't receive any answer, the party was set up and, what is more important, the UND adopted the notion of a referendum based on the right of the nation to self-determination as the only means to achieve independence. Before that the UNP leaders hadn't identified how to get independence.

KA What are the objectives of UND nowadays?

GTK As for the present-day objectives, it can be stated that the main objective, i.e. an independent Armenia, has been achieved. Nevertheless, it was just as important to get a free Armenia, which does not exist today. To create an independent Armenia⁴ didn't mean the abolition of the external dictatorship and the creation of an internal dictatorial system, which does exist in our country now. As far as freedom is concerned, in some cases a decline can be seen. This decline was not accidental. Just from the very start of independence, power in Armenia was transferred. No elections were held, there was an imitation of elections. Everything was done by Moscow to transfer power to the ones they deemed more suitable. It is a well-known fact that the then prime-minister, Vazgen Manookyan, after he resigned in 1991, openly announced that the Head of KGB, Krjuchkov, had ordered that everything should be done so as not to have Paruir Hairikyan at the wheel of power. In other words, Moscow did not want to see national leaders at the head of the independent states, otherwise the processes would have been faster and more efficient.

KA What were the similarities and differences between the subsequent elections?

GTK The similarity was that the results of the elections were predetermined - the authorities made an attempt to pre-arrange the results of the elections and interfere with them; power, in fact, reproducing itself. During the 1990 elections we had imperfect Soviet laws yet, in spite of this, elections were more or less clean; there were only a few violations. Later the laws were improved; every subsequent election had better regulations. And the technologies were falsified, too. Why? What was the reason? After each reproduction, official power intertwines with clan structures and acquires certain

economic levers -even some criminal elements appears in the whole matter. When the time for the new elections came, the authorities were afraid that, after losing power, especially if the elections were to be fair, the new justly-elected power would reveal everything. Thus, so as not to lose the power they had, they were to organise the next elections so that they would preserve power or transfer it to their 'own folk/clan'.

7.02.2005 YEREVAN

Nazareth Karoyan (NK), art critic, curator.

KA What are your main concerns now?

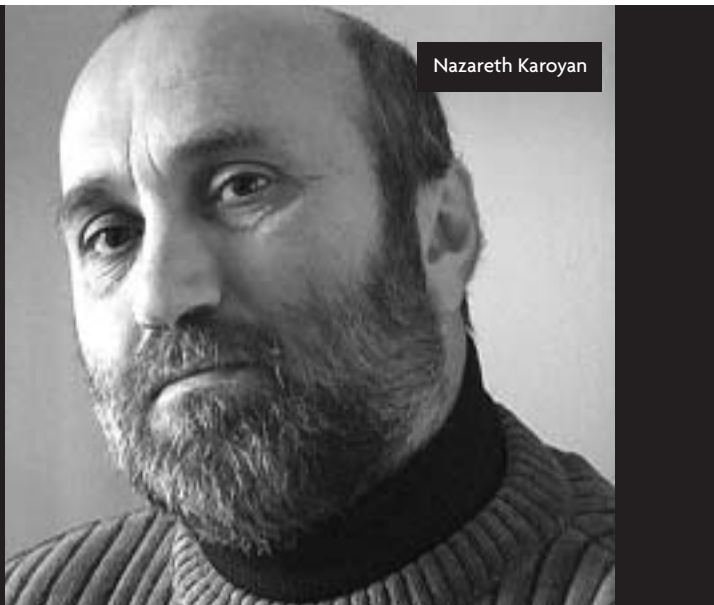
NK My main strategic interest is the interrelation of discourses and structures, and my so-called tactical interests are the communicative structures, both inner and external types of communication. The present artistic situation in Armenia can be characterized as diffuse. There is no relation as such between various planes of discourse. For example, nowadays there exist three planes for artistic discourse. The first one is the internal plane which is on the level of work of art, the second is external, i.e. it operates within the artistic situation, it is a discourse on the public plane of art; and the third one is the discourse between art and social or other activities. This diffuse, discrete artistic situation is determined by two historical realities, i.e. the underdeveloped artistic situation, and other realities, conditioned by, let us say, psychological political features, still prevailing today. As a result the contemporary artistic aspect as such, as a phenomenon or cultural sphere, is invisible. It does exist, it functions but it is unseen. This invisibility is determined by the fact that the internal and external spheres of discourse do not coincide, i.e. the creative artistic mind operates on one plane and the opportunities for artistic presentations are on another.

KA A few words about the origin of the contemporary artistic situation.

NK If you remember, I came up with the following statement on the origin of the contemporary artistic situation in Geneva: the contemporary artistic situation originated as a result of artists' activities, as if it were formed due to the explosion of art work. The artists themselves have tried to get out of the isolation of their work and to create an artistic situation, a situation which they think to be a necessary condition for the public presentation of their work. On the other hand, this situation has never been able to gain firm ground, to stabilise; and the artists, who initiated various presentational projects, caused their own isolation, their own dissolution. In other words they destroyed their own creation. It could not have been otherwise as the aims related to those structures were impossible to be undertaken by them. Another reason might be the traditional historical cultural features existing in Armenia.

KA What investments in contemporary art were carried out?

NK The contemporary artistic situation has been realized in Armenia thanks to foreign investments, particularly made by the Armenian diaspora. The investments made by the diaspora are very specific. The representatives of the diaspora intelli-



gentsia understood the significance of art as a means of representation of the contemporary situation. However, these investments were made in a very special way. The diaspora representatives did not take into consideration the local features of the given space, context and historical development present before that very investment. Consequently, through investments, they materialise their dream which quite often may contradict local artistic interests, the ones that want to go beyond the sacred, precious space. This means interrelation with the context beyond the artistic situation, with our neighbours beyond the Armenian borders (this doesn't seem a very good idea to the diaspora for concrete historical reasons). As a result we have to be secluded in the shell of our sacred project. There appears a shift of discourse and structure. Thus, these various discourses and interferences are scattered about. The post-Soviet Armenian society seems to lack artistic context as such. There are very interesting artists, very interesting projects, yet they don't have an influence in any way on the mental, spiritual, cultural aspects of social life and are isolated, closed within their own projects.

5.02.2005 YEREVAN

Violet Grigoryan (VG), poetess, co-founder of the literary magazine / Bnagir / www.bnagir.am

KA What were the motives for founding the magazine?

VG My personal work published in the then existing magazines and newspapers caused a lot of noise which could turn to personal insults. I wanted to create a forum for serious talk. Still, the talk was limited only by what is allowed and what is not (e.g. a word, a sacred topic), it didn't go beyond that. I wanted to be in a place where I would get feedback on what I said, which would give a chance for debate. Such a place didn't exist. There was another problem. Nowadays there is a great pressure by video and audio production on speech. The speech undergoes crisis. It is a tough time for literature, they say. I never believed that. I do believe that speech has an exceptional function. This belief and my personal problem made me establish the magazine.

KA What are the resources for the magazine?

VG Besides the problems connected with freedom, there are others connected with dependences in Armenia. Together with Vahram we decided to minimise as far as possible all the dependences (including the financial one) and create a laboratory which would serve as a forum for writers and people like us, who have something to say. With our own financial means we created the literary magazine, which in a sense enunciated new principles for us. The magazine has proved the value of the word through this freedom.



Violet Grigoryan

6.02.2005 YEREVAN

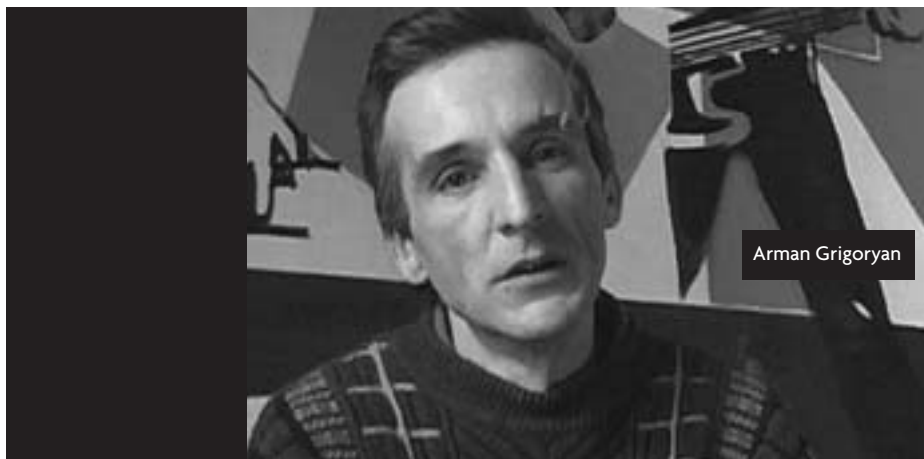
Arman Grigoryan (AG), artist, writer, the author of the novel, "Long live the Revolution", published in 'Bnagir'.

KA Has your initial attitude to contemporary art changed?

AG I try to keep it as it was. I thought that, as we lived in a totalitarian country, art has to be freed from the licensed artists, be it the Artists' Union or the Writers' Union, it doesn't matter. In my opinion, creative work is something that can be done by anybody, it has an emancipating role. The Third Floor was based on this idea. I think the same is true for the present time.

KA Why did you write a novel?

AG Just to read it in the small circle of Bnagir, not more. We often gathered there and talked and I often criticised them for being greatly influenced by Russian literature. This is how I think: Who did we want to be independent from? The Russians. Then art should gain independence from them as well. That is why I took the very first moment of independence, the revolution of 1917, as a theme of my novel. This revolution gave nations the opportunity for self-determination. But there is something about the Russians connected with the notion of Tsar, particularly Nikolay II. Russians have a sense of guilt connected with his assassination. Perhaps this is the reason of their constant wish to turn back to monarchy. If the need for compromise had been explained to aristocrats, the Tsar wouldn't have been killed. In other words, I wanted to show in my novel that, instead of killing the slave in a man, one should kill the aristocrat in a man, as if they are the same, slave and aristocrat. This logic should be borne in mind on the threshold of the new world, which is to come after the revolution. The changes and possibilities I thought of, that might have been undertaken after World War I, would have prevented the tragedy of World War II. This is what my novel is about in general terms.



Fragment from the novel:

LONG LIVE THE REVOLUTION

Vladimir Ilyich appeared in the doorway. He seemed embarrassed. I didn't know if Sovnarkom had made a decision or not. But I was sure that it was not too late. Something could be done. I elbowed my way to Lenin through the people gathered in the corridor. He was about to return to the Meeting room.

- Vladimir Ilyich, cancel the discussion of the problem at least for a week. I have something important to tell you, - I whispered the last words not to be overheard. Lenin stood there for a moment and asked:

- Has anything happened?

- I am sure we haven't discussed the best variant yet.

- Which variant?

- If the Tsar takes the Bolsheviks' side, the situation will drastically change. The world will be shocked. The Civil War will come to an end. And there will be a real opportunity for the World Revolution to win.

- Nikolay has become a Marxist, hasn't he?,- mocked Lenin in whisper and giggled.

- I can organize it. I can persuade Nikolay. Vladimir Ilyich, use your influence and contacts,- I spoke very quickly, I was excited and my voice became louder and louder,- We mustn't make a fatal mistake. Execution won't solve the problem. We mustn't repeat the Englishmen's and Frenchmen's mistake.

We entered the Meeting room, Lenin closed the door hurriedly and turning to the members of Sovnarkom, he said: - We should make another decision,- then looking at me he continued ,- comrade Arman has come up with a very unexpected solution. It seems interesting though quite fantastic.

KAREN ANDREASSIAN is an artist. He lives in Yerevan, Armenia. Information about his Voghaberd project can be found at www.voghchaber.d.am and www.format.am

NOTES & REFERENCES

- 1 Organisation which was at the head of a powerful national movement supporting the fight of the Karabakh people for self-determination. Later it became the ruling party of the independent Republic of Armenia.
- 2 In 1921, by Stalin's decision, Nagorny-Karabakh (the historically Armenian region of Artsakh) was joined to Azerbaijan by force. In 1988 it voted to secede from Azerbaijan and join Armenia.
- 3 The genocide of Armenians was carried out by Ottoman Turkey in 1914-1918. 1.5-2 million Armenians were murdered and several thousands left for foreign countries. As a result the notion of the Armenian diaspora appeared. The most powerful communities are in the USA, France, Australia, the UK, etc.
- 4 In 1991 Armenia became independent of the USSR after holding a referendum.