

Preparation Trip
DAI project
Armenia Dreaming
Partizan Publik
Yerevan 17-22.01.2008

Post-Soviet urban imaginaries in Yerevan

16.01 Wednesday

The doors of the airplane are frozen so we have to leave it via the rear doors. After we made our way through the shiny new airport, we enter the first taxi we can; it's minus 20 degrees! The airport construction is a mad max like thunder dome, a circular colonnaded series of fly-overs with something resembling the pyramid of Ur in the middle. The concrete is hard-frozen. Probably that's what keeps the whole place from crumbling down in the first place.

Our taxi driver, a huge poncho with a dumb 50 Cents like grin, is bent over the wheel, determined to get us home, although he does not know where that might be yet. No worries, the first part is easy. With the other Ladas we make our way down airport road, the one overtaking the other. Some kind of turbo folk on the radio, Gypsy Kings on LSD.

Then the road plunges down. The grey frozen fog dissolves a little, and a burst of color takes over. The first color of Armenia, and as sudden as it is vicious: a string on casinos on either side of the road. Since casinos were banned from the capital Yerevan, they have found refuge on this stretch. It is a Las Vegas gone wild. The Lucky King next to Rich Man.

17.01 Thursday

We meet Vardan Azatyan, an art historian, in front of café Marco Polo at the beginning of Northern Avenue. Northern Avenue is the final realization of the old city plan. This plan which was designed by architect Alexandr Tamanian and approved by the Bolshevik government of Armenia in 1924 was inspired by the book by Thomas More, *Utopia*.

'This street makes me afraid', he says. The new avenue, connecting Republican Square with the Opera House, stand for a new repressive regime, a new oppressive totalitarianism. This street is funded by Russian money, but very much formatted according to a Los Angeles style of urbanscape. It's a clear product of the reversed colonization, which is happening to this country. 'This is how Armenian Neo-Conservative authorities with Russian money play on the nationalist sentiments of Diaspora elite, this is how they wish to see our country, our capital, our identity. I think I will call it "high-tech nationalism".' (Interestingly, the axis of the avenue is just off the central axis of the looming black structure of the opera house at its end..)

Vardan asked us how we thought we would format the project, how we would intervene, for that was a question he was pondering on already for a while. Before we could answer,

he gave us his cultural analysis of the country. According to him, a strategy of mourning, because of a loss of habitat, leads to at least three extreme ideological currents in Armenia: religiosity, nationalism and “mythologization”. ‘We don’t forget, more than that, we make the suffering endure.’ The prevention of loss leads to a perpetual destruction and remaking of the country’s capital Yerevan city. Interestingly Vardan argues that, ‘in Armenia, memories are erased by mythologized history’.

To really understand Armenia, Vardan warned us, you have to know our ghosts: the ideology of the Armenian Orthodox Church (as embodied by the Katholikos), the nature of Armenian nationalism (as embodied by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation) and the remnants of the Soviet legacy (the afterlives of Stalinism and Brezhnevism). These are at the roots of the “high-tech nationalism” that is Armenia today.’

In relation to the Soviet legacy Vardan mentions that Armenia used to have a very special status in the Soviet Union. Moscow looked at the southern mountain republic with a romantic Orientalist gaze. Therefore, the Soviets in parallel with the rhetoric of “socialist construction” of the country supported the development of a folkloristic traditionalist identity. In many ways, this is still the case in modern Russia. Putin holds the same tourist view as his communist predecessors, namely highly determined by a romantic view of a virulent Orthodox identity. The Soviet legacy is also present in other parts of Armenian social life, for example, the remnants of the so-called ‘kitchen culture’ are still there, as a result, the continuing distrust and fear Armenians still have towards the public ways of dealing with the problems. Also, the way Armenians archive and classify their past in the libraries and archives of this city is, according to Vardan, still done according to praxis of the Soviet times.

We leave Vardan in front of the backdoor of The Club.

18.01 Friday

We meet Vardan again the next morning to be introduced to local artists.

First we go to Utopiana, a small cultural organization located in a complex with an NGO “Women’s Resource Center”. A kind of public space for several artists according to Vardan. The artists we meet with, Astghik Melkoyan, Lusine Devatyan and Tsolak Topchyan, present their personal projects. They worked previously on a collaborative project about the body and the city. Currently, the two women produce art to critique how in state discourse art is purposely misrepresented to promote a nationalist ideology. The materials they use are stencils. Also, they are involved in a project focused on queer issues: mapping queer spaces and activities and researching the institutes where knowledge on queer issues is produced.

By taxi we drive to another part of Yerevan to meet with Vahram Aghasyan, an urbanist or an artist who calls himself sometimes an architect. Vahram works on the city in general and recently he started researching the Northern Avenue. His works seem thorough digging into the design as well the political and economical dimensions of this

street. He argues that, in a way, at Northern Avenue Stalinist architecture is becoming a carrier of new Armenian nationalism. To underline his claim he refers to the importance of the coalition of local power, international business and Diaspora with the aim of developing a new rich boulevard in Yerevan. Interestingly, the architects of downtown Beirut's Solidere were consulted as part of the design process. The companies involved in the project are, amongst others, Nord, Garni Group, Progress Armenia, Moscow Investment Construction Company. According to Vahram, these are all mafia-type business enterprises. 'Northern Avenue is the embodiment of the corrupted system.' They develop Northern Avenue at this moment without any kind of public resistance. Initially, many people protested against the demolition of the houses and the trees (for example at Pushkin Street) as well as the displacement of the people living there. In order to pacify the people, the government promised to number the stones of the houses, store them and rebuild them on a later moment. Most inhabitants of Yerevan expect these storage houses to be a myth. Vardan told us about a painter who portrayed the Northern Avenue as a continuity of the Bolshevik revolution.

19.01 Saturday

Today we meet again with Arand Hovakimian, a Dutch Armenian, who we met during our Armavia flight. He picks us in front of the Marriott and explains that in the early days of the independence there were days that even the Hotel did not serve breakfast and also sometimes it did not have warm water and heating. In those days, the people of Yerevan took the trees from the streets as fuel for their heating.

Arand brings us firstly to *Kino Rossia*, the old Russian cinema. The building lies on the northwestern side of town, just outside Tamanyan's circular park road, which is enclosing the inner city. One of the qualities of the cinema is certainly its size: it is enormous. Its general shape, resembling two hands pressed together at the wrist, opening their palms to the skies, allows for two cinematic viewing halls. While the entrance is on either side of the fingertips, the two halls are connected by a grand staircase, lighted from the sides through massive, church-like gilded glass panels.

While the original structure still much in tact – it has been twenty years since the collapse of the Soviet empire - its function has radically altered. The once grand entrance has been boarded up except for a small iron framed door. The old foyer is barely discernable. In fact, the interior space of the building has been plotted up and divided amongst small entrepreneurs. Hundreds of small shops now fill the room, demarcating their space through flimsy hardboard walls and sheets of agricultural plastic. Here and there, the old design peaks through, for example the twenty feet wide stairs.

The central staircase provides the only point of tranquility in the whole market. It is connecting the two sides of the movie hall. The central nave now is only used to cross from one foyer to the other; the whole upward thrust of people pouring into the cinema has been lost. However, if you do go up under the gilded glass, you can still access the old cinema hall.

The chairs have been removed, and the place is littered with packaging material from the markets downstairs, but you can still sense the former grandeur. The stage area has been boarded up for the first few meters, but nevertheless the decorated background looms over. The ceiling is dotted with hundreds of stars and an intricate mosaic of modernist light sculptures.

The business magnate, who is the supporter of Levon Ter-Petrosian, Armenia's first democratic president, owns the building. By the way the magnate now seems to be arrested for supporting Ter-Petrosian. And since Ter-Petrosian is running for president as the chief opposition candidate they are being constantly attacked by the state tax agencies. Thus, after taking too many photographs a few muscled men started shouting and forced us to leave the building immediately.

20.01 Sunday

Our first meeting today arranged by Vardan was with Karen Ohanyan. A young painter who makes large pieces, which he stores in the basement of his father's juice warehouse. Karen can work as a full time artist because his father sells juice. His work gives evidence to the disappearance of the old buildings to the benefit of the Northern Avenue and other old buildings in the city built by German POWs. Moreover, it communicates a certain nostalgia and hope at the same time. According to Vardan it's 'dealing with making tangible what is lost or what we're losing.'

Vardan thinks Karen's paintings give account of a strategy of mourning. Karen wishes to give a critique of the authorities that are responsible for the creation of Northern Avenue. 'It's a critique though within the boundaries of the discourse of painting.' Karen stated that his paintings are an attempt to capture a piece of history, which is gone. To our suggestion to paint to numbers on the new buildings, he responded that that would be an intervention in the style of the government. He seems to pursue a strategy of nostalgia and activism.

The discussion that followed between us and Vardan and Karen touched upon several issues. One was the thought that Karen's paintings have as its effect both closure and openness. Closure, in that he's attempting to document or to record. Also, an interview, which was held with Karen was banned from TV, this can be seen as another account of closure. Yet, other people who would watch these paintings might experience critical revelation. These works make up a fabrication of evidence. In a way, they are a way of fixing memory in a society where nothing is what it seems. In that respect these paintings are a very temporary account of what is happening at Northern Avenue. It's a way of documenting in the pursuit of closure. Yet, it generates opposition, leading to an opening in the debate. As soon as the Street is finished, nothing but the memory of the old place will remain. The fading memory means in a way a fading context to Karen's paintings.

Karen told that the price of this piece was about 2000 dollar. He was open to the suggestion of selling/giving his piece to the architectural office that designed the NA.

The second artist we spoke to was Karen Andreassian, who works on a performative project on Voghchaber, a village nearby Yerevan. His project is related to a whole network of artists, art critics and art magazines through a website. His piece of network art functions as a sort of intuitive infiltration mechanism, linking the diminishing village, as the results of landslide, to a broad variety of art scenes and institutions. As such, he uses the (story of the) village as context (compare with *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote) producing an object, which is not there. (It can also have some references to Walter Benjamin's *Arcade project*). Karen mentioned about his project that it focused or displayed a strategy for a fragmented network, showing at the same time empathy for the narrative of the people who lived in the village. The web, according to the artist, was a way of anchoring the project in reality, anchoring a memory.

After Karen left the discussion continued with only Vardan at the table. We articulated Karen's project as one, which makes you stumble into a network, almost as an intuitive way of archiving. And more in general we discussed that 'reality (or: the facade) belongs to the powerful.' And then perhaps meaning belongs to the dreamer.

Moreover, we outlined some practical and conceptual ideas for the project. The artists' personal encounters should be the entry points in the city; as such the process is focused on a way of challenging practice through engagement. Also, the internationals will never understand Armenia; they should be searching for what the city of Yerevan tells them about themselves and their own practice. We suggested limiting the engagement of the international artists in some ways.

One way could be by focusing on a small number of sites. Such sites should at least allow for a number of different entry points. Also, they should show a dream colliding, one or more points of tension or friction, where different interests or dreams meet, or where dreams and realities meet. The dream is the starting point. From there we could identify four vectors. Backwards: into the past. Left: soviet legacy. Right: nationalism. Forward: disaster capitalism. Of course, in reality, every dream will consist of multiple vectors. However, the vector approach allows us to identify four sectors.

Thus, a possible outline of the project might be as follows:
Start with an official municipal city tour; continue with four private tours, given by four (groups of) Armenian artists, based on their fascinations and practice; continue by a short assignment, mapping the four sectors (identifying the glossary, discourse, localizing the carriers of imagination (monuments etc) and the people, media and organizations supporting the vector). And from then on the artists could start with autonomous work. Finally tours by the international artists, including power holders, practitioners, etc. involved in the subject and locality of their dream fields.

21.01 Monday

Another day we had with interesting meetings with artists.

'I Had A Parrot That Said I Love You But I Sold It.' Mher Azatyan is a sturdy we meet at Utopiana. Rather a timid guy, he shows remarkable humor in the titling of his work and his lucid little haiku's. Mher is making solidified memories. He goes around town as a

field worker, documenting the remnant or ghosts of Soviet Armenia. The titles of his works are usually taken from comments he hears when taking the photograph, or very common Armenian proverbs. A bench in a Soviet park, used to be used by old people to talk about the politics of those days. 'Russia says that if Maskhadov will not enter into negotiation processes everything will fail'. Since words are very central to his work, you could almost see his pictures as annotated words, observations and memories in words annotated by a picture (compare what we did in the Lost Room of the Lebanese National Museum). Under a picture of two other benches, worn with age and covered with a thick layer of snow, is written 'It is cold. Moscou already said it would be, but ours did not'. Under a picture of a recently finished high rise apartment complex in down town Yerevan: 'I am here but me soul is elsewhere'. Under a picture of a variety of small little things, neatly laid out on a piece of cloth on the pavement: 'What should we do if things get better?'

Next up we are introduced to Tigran Khachatryan, who shows a film he made for the 2001 Armenian Pavillion on the Venice Biennale. It's a video mixing lyrics by the *Dead Kennedys* with images of the body (more specific: a nose hole, a mouth chewing and drawling, a dick pissing in a pants). He sees his work amongst others as a reaction to the appropriation of Armenian cineaste Sergei Parajanov by nationalist and commercial interests. Another video (2004) shows a guy preparing to spit water. Tigran makes here reference to and uses a text from a dissident Armenian painter and poet from the seventies. Moreover, he takes scenes from among others Tarkovski films. Then follows a reference to a poem about vomiting. A third video deals with the 90th anniversary of the October revolution, and Armenian documentary maker Artavazd Peleshyan's way of dealing with the 50th anniversary. Tigran enacts the revolution, by means of old, well-known video material with new, jackass visual stuff, home video of mainly Russian youth, in the same rough resolution. It's a rather well-made, associative, not really disturbing way (for so far as we can value the contexts) of making audiovisual art. Moreover, this artist also made a series of small stickers, trying to start of a leftist youth movement, anti-fascist, punk style movement, to balance the big extreme rightist movement in Armenia.

From Utopiana we went to visit Arman Grigoryan, an somewhat older artist. The 3rd Floor movement of which Arman was one of the main protagonists was a direct result of the atmosphere of the Perestroika. Since Armenia was on the border of the Soviet Union, political and cultural control was not so strict as in the centre. A general feeling that everything was stagnating caused the embracement of the punk, hiphop and glamrock subcultures simultaneously. This strange mixture of cultural elements signified merely otherness. The appropriation of cultures was a kind of mimicking. One of the association which came up was that mimicking in the former Soviet Union is a metaphor, which can perhaps also be used to qualify post-Soviet political and economical behaviour.

Vardan described the 3rd Floor by the epithet used in Perestoika times "non-formal grouping" its cultural production consisting of a broad variety of decontextualized signs. These signs were merely supplements used in a symbolic sense. According to Arman the 3rd Floor held happenings, events and festival producing positive, hopeful art objects in a

variety of styles. Although, Western cultural influences were clearly visible, the main exchange took place with artists from other parts of the Soviet Union. According to Arman the break that occurred inside the the 3rd Floor with the show that has the symptomatic name “plus/minus,” has split the movement into two opposing streams, formalist and pop oriented. A little later, in reaction to the 3rd Floor the younger generation of artists organized the show P.S. which laid the foundations for the emerging ACT group.

Tigran Katcharian’s work can be seen as kind of mimicking of the 3rd Floor movement. Clearly, he dreams of these types of social movements.

22.01 Tuesday

Vahram, the artist we met a few days earlier took us to the industrial outer skirts of Yerevan. We used the city’s subway, which lost a great deal of its function since the industrial plants do no longer operate. He showed the different type (Stalinist, Khrushchev and Brezhnev) social housing. On the north western outskirts of town lies Bangladesh, one of the latest Soviet social housing additions to the city. The neighborhood, consisting of concrete high-rise, is a direct result of a law passed in the seventies, which stipulated that bigger families should live in bigger apartments. Many families thus moved out of the city centre. Because the new settlement was far away, arid and hot, it became known as Bangladesh.

After Bangladesh we took a taxi to the Yeraz factory. The Yeraz [Armenian for dream] is the old Soviet Armenian van. Since the production quality was so bad the car brand did not survive the transformation of the country. Unfortunately, the factory was closed down and we were not able to access it.

During a meeting at the Open Society Institute we met up with an interesting group of artists, dj, museum people and scholars. Marine Haroyan and Hripsime Pikichian of the Association of Musea, for example, they suggested to use the museum for intervention. Aram, the previous head of the cultural program at OSI, became very excited about the idea to open up a temporary public art space. He spoke of ‘Armenia Dreaming. A Temporary Archive of Dreams and Desires’. Melik, a film maker and director of the film gallery, suggested to re-humanize the totalitarian imagination of the Northern Avenue, by hanging lines of laundry from one facade to another.

After a nice vodka party in what is called Masiv, a far outer skirt of the city, we said good bye to Vardan and his friends and packed our bags to be driven to the airport at 5.30am.