

Armenity: The Armenian Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale

Youtube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCA1vxtYE4yq8UXM9jA83-mA>

History

Armenia is a West Asian country, bordered by Georgia, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. People have been settled in the region currently known as Armenia since prehistoric times, and geneticists theorize that Armenians emerged as an ethnically distinct group around 5000 years ago.

In 301 A.D. Armenia became the first nation to adopt Christianity as its official religion, founding the Armenian Apostolic Church. In fact, it is thought by some that the Biblical Garden of Eden was located in the area surrounding the Ararat Mountains in Armenia. Armenian culture thrived, particularly art and literature in the middle ages, though during the 16th century the Kingdom of Armenia was conquered by the Ottoman Turks.

Armenian-Turkish Tensions

Located at a juncture between Eastern and Western cultures, maintaining a Christian religious affiliation among Muslim powers, and with the increasing influence of Russia in the following centuries Armenia became a distinct secular nationality. Toward the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, as the Ottoman Empire was largely being dissolved and its territories redistributed, an Armenian Independence movement led by young left-leaning intellectuals began. The remnants of the Ottoman Empire in Turkey fought to keep hold of territory, and viewed the Armenian Independence movement as a threat by a radical, Westernized, Non-Islamic population.

April 24th, 1915: Armenian Genocide

This led to a plan by the Young Turk government to systematically eliminate the Armenian people from their historic land of Eastern Anatolia and the southern Caucasus mountains, which now lie within present-day Turkey.

The genocide was carried out in three stages:

The conscription of Armenian men into the Ottoman Army. The arrest and deportation or massacre of Armenian intellectuals and nobility on the 24th of April, 1915, known today as the Genocide Memorial Day. And finally the march of women, children, and elderly through the Syrian desert. It is estimated that there were between 800,000 and 1.5 million victims of the Genocide, greatly reducing the total Armenian population.

San Lazzaro degli Armeni

“Saint Lazarus of the Armenians”

The location of the Armenian Pavilion at the 56th Biennale is a prominent site of Armenian culture and a landmark of the diaspora. San Lazzaro degli Armeni, a small island in the Venetian Lagoon has been an Armenian Catholic Monastery since 1717 when monk Mekhitar fled from the Ottoman Empire. From the late 18th to early 20th Century it was a major center of Armenian printing, and today houses a collection of over 150,000 printed books and periodicals in addition to a number of artifacts from Ancient Armenia and other Eastern nations.

Armenian Pavilion

At the 56th Venice Biennale curator Adelina Cüberyán Von Fürstenberg highlights the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide by the selection of eighteen contemporary Armenian diasporic artists. The title of the show *Armenity* is a hybrid of Armenia and identity, a word invented for the exhibition, which takes up Okwui Enwezor's urge in *All the World's Futures* to position the art exhibition as a unique space for public discourse.

This is the first time the Armenian pavilion has shown artists (as well as curator) exclusively of the diaspora. Which leads to some questions by the Armenian art community, many of whom are descendants of survivors of the genocide, why artists living in Armenia were omitted on the year of the anniversary?

Though with a larger population of Armenians living globally than within Armenia, Von Fürstenberg poses the question of Armenian identity to this group which have Armenian heritage but perhaps have never lived in the country, and are the grandchildren of those that remember the genocide.

Installed in the San Lazzaro degli Armeni alongside antique printing presses and ancient Armenian artifacts a variety of work both curated and produced for the Biennale are shown. The range of artists chosen for the exhibition also varies widely across generations, home countries, and media. In the positioning of these works a conversation opens about what is shared between people across time and distance.

Mikayel Ohanjanyan (b. 1976)

is the only artist included in *Armenity* who was born in Armenia, though his ancestors had been forced to flee their homes in the ancient region of Salmast, which is now part of Iran, because of the Russian-Persian war in the early 19th century. Ohanjanyan has lived and worked in Florence, Italy since 2000. He constructed his piece *Tasnerku* especially for the 2015 Biennale. A sculptural work, it is made of blocks of basalt and corten steel disks, which are installed in a ring outside of the monastery. In the video Ohanjanyan talks about the sculpture's relationship to

the will of man and the natural world, combining references to Karaunj as well as the twelve capitols of Armenia. The holes bored through the basalt stones mimic holes in the vertical stones at Karaunj, and in his other work in this series he calls “Materiality of the Invisible” these blocks are representative of human bodies and the holes of an emptiness or unknown.

In Neery Melkonian’s essay she highlights Karaunj’s significance as a potential site of pagan ritual. And says “One of the early examples in history during which Armenians experienced a diaspora... came with their forced conversion to Christianity – which resulted in the destruction of pagan temples, goddesses and songs that had existed for centuries.” This reference draws us back in time long before the Armenian Genocide in 1915, and brings into question the link of Armenity to Christianity, is religion what really holds a people together?

Nina Katchadourian (b. 1968)

grew up in California, spent her childhood summers in Finland, and currently lives in Brooklyn, NY. In her piece *Accent Elimination*, 2005 she hires a voice coach to teach her parents who are of Armenian and Finnish-Swedish decent how to “neutralize” their accents to “sound more American”, while at the same time trying to learn to mimic their accents herself. It is a playful but poignant piece installed on six monitors in a chamber inside the monestary along side historical Armenian art and artifacts.

In this video Katchadourian talks about the attributes of her parents’ that have been passed on to her, although their accents, having grown up in the United States, have never been something she’s been able to replicate. And for her parents, a piece of their history they have not been able to shed. She comments on the significance of having shown the work in Venice alongside other diasporic Armenian artists, but also that the piece speaks to a very common American experience of belonging to the proverbial melting pot where some aspects of your home culture shape you identity and some fall away as you assimilate.

Success

The Armenian Pavilion won the 2015 Biennale’s Golden Lion Award for best national participation. *Armenity* captured the ambitious goals set by Okwui Enwezor for the 56th Biennale to invoke the past and confront the present in order to open dialogues and set forth thoughtfully into the future. By selecting such a diverse group of artists who engage with Armenian history, geography, art history, literature, religion, and their own families curator Adelina Cüberyan Von Fürstenberg does not prescribe to any single narrative of Armenian identity but instead presents it as a complex multiplicity. After winning the Golden Lion Von Fürstenberg talks about the lessons to be learned from Armenian Genocide as going beyond Armenia itself, that we find ourselves on the verge of history repeating itself in the region. She says, “art can change the world, art is an instrument of awareness for the important issues of this time... it is one of the strongest tools to talk about human issues.”

Annotated Bibliography:

"Aikaterini Gegisian, " Artist's Website, Accessed May, 30 2016, <http://www.gegisian.com/>

Website for artist Aikaterini Gegisian whose photography and collage work is shown in the 2015 Armenian pavilion. She was born in Greece and currently lives and works in Greece and the UK.

"Anna Boghiguan, " *Sfeir-Semler Gallery*, Accessed April, 17 2016
<http://www.sfeir-semler.com/gallery-artists/boghiguan/>

Website for artist Anna Boghiguan at Sfeir-Semler which has galleries in Hamburg and Beirut.

Arango, Tim, "A Century After Armenian Genocide, Turkey's Denial Only Deepens," *New York Times*, April. 16, 2015, Accessed April, 17 2016,
http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/17/world/europe/turkeys-century-of-denial-about-an-armenian-genocide.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FArmenia&action=click&contentCollection=world®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=25&pgtype=collection

The New York Times has a number of articles about the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide and Diaspora. It is interesting to hear about Armenia's tense relations with neighboring countries Turkey and Azerbaijan who also have pavilions at the Biennale. I chose this article because it was published during the 2015 Biennale, and outlines the history of Turkey's denial of the genocide as well as its continued denial today.

"The Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute" , *The National Academy of Science of The Republic of Armenia*, Accessed April, 17 2016, <http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/hamidian.php>

Website for the Museum of the Armenian Genocide in Armenia. There is quite a lot of information and historical documentation of the genocide including photos, maps, and timelines. Particularly relevant is the section called Cultural Genocide.

"Armenian History, " *Armeniapedia*, Accessed May, 30 2016,
http://www.armeniapedia.org/wiki/Armenian_History#The_Ancient_Period

Online Armenian wiki encyclopedia with a very detailed historical information on Armenian history.

"Armenity", *The National Pavilion of the Republic of Armenia*, Accessed April, 17 2016, www.Armenity.net

The official website of the National Pavilion of Armenia. It is an excellent resource for information about the 2015 Pavilion and the artists exhibited.

"Ayreen Anastas & Rene Gabri," *Tanya Leighton Gallery*, Accessed May, 30 2016
<http://www.tanyaleighton.com/index.php?pageId=189&l=en>

Website for artist collaborators Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri at Tanya Leighton Gallery in Berlin. Ayreen Anastas was born in Bethlehem, Palestine and Rene Gabri was born in Tehran, Iran, both currently live and work in New York.

CivilNet TV, "Armenity at the Venice Biennale," YouTube video, 11:45. Posted Feb. 26, 2015.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPJL_TtEC7g

Interview with curator, Adelina Cüberyan von Fürstenberg, by an Armenian internet newspaper. The interviewer notes that there is some controversy over the pavilion within Armenia about the choice to include only diaspora artists, rather than artists living in Armenia who are also descendant of survivors of the genocide.

Danforth, Nick, "What we all get wrong about Armenia, Turkey and genocide," *Aljazeera America*, April. 24, 2014, Accessed May, 30 2016,
<http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/4/what-we-all-get-wrongaboutthearmeniangenocide.html>

"Our popular understanding of genocide presumes a neat division between a nation of collectively guilty perpetrators and their collectively innocent victims." This article attempts to contextualize the current Turkish attitude against the naming of the atrocities carried out in Armenia during World War I as genocide, and problematize easy good vs. evil or right vs. wrong narratives each side has held on to for years.

Elwazer, Schams, "Film director shares sights and sounds of Beirut's 'Little Armenia'," *CNN*, Feb. 6, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/02/03/world/meast/bourj-hammoud/>

Clip of Armenian film director Nigol Bezjian, who is included in the 2015 Pavilion, talking about an Armenian community in Beirut.

Gonzalez, David, "Following the Global Armenian Diaspora," *The New York Times*, April. 24, 2014, http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/04/24/following-armenias-global-diaspora/?_r=0

Beautiful photographs by Armenian artist from Boston, Scout Tufankjian , and article about her project photographing people affected by the Armenian diaspora around the world.

“Haig Aivazian,” *Sfeir-Semler Gallery*, Accessed April, 17 2016,
<http://www.sfeir-semler.com/gallery-artists/aivazian-1/>

Website for artist Haig Aivazian at Sfeir-Semler which has galleries in Hamburg and Beirut.

“ Hera Büyüktasciyan, ” *Green Art Gallery*, Accessed April , 17 2016,
<http://www.gagallery.com/artists/hera-buyuktasciyan/biography>

Website for artist Hera Büyüktasciyan at Green Art Gallery in Dubai. la Biennale Venezia Channel,

“Biennale Arte 2015: Armenia,” YouTube video, 7:08. Posted May 22, 2015.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wM5CE6hYLRs>

Video presented by the official Venice Biennale channel. The curator and some of the artists speak about their work while the video pans through the pavilion.

“Mekhitar Garabedian,” *Albert Baronian Gallery*, Accessed May, 30 2016
<http://albertbaronian.com/artists/193-mekhitar-garabedian>

Website for artist Mekhitar Garabedian at Albert Baronian Gallery in Brussels. Mekhitar Garabedian was born in Syria and currently lives in Belgium.

Melkonian, Neery, “Undoing Denials at the Venice Biennale’s Armenian Pavilion, ”
Hyperallergic, Aug. 25, 2015,
<http://hyperallergic.com/231777/undoing-denials-at-the-venice-biennales-armenian-pavilion/>

Essay first published in the *Armenity* catalogue and posted on *Hyperallergic* concurrent with the exhibition

“Silvina Der-Meguerditchian, ” Artist’s Website, Accessed April, 17 2016,
<http://www.silvina-der-meguerditchian.de/>

Website for artist Silvina Der-Meguerditchian, whose installation *T reasures* was shown

in the Armenian Pavilion.

“The Venice Questionnaire 2015 #16: Adelina Cüberyan von Fürstenberg, ” *ArtReview* , April 24, 2015, http://artreview.com/previews/2015_venice_16_von_furstenberg/

A brief question and answer with Adelina Cüberyan von Fürstenberg, curator of the Armenian pavilion.

Thackara, Tess. “Adrian Piper and Armenia Take Golden Lions, But does the Prize Matter?” *Artsy*, May 9, 2015,

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-adrian-piper-and-armenia-take-golden-lions-but>

Article about the Golden Lion, awarded to the Armenian Pavilion in 2015, its history and what it means for present-day winners.

“World Report 2015: Armenia,” *Human Rights Watch*, Accessed April, 17 2016,

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/armenia>

To get an idea of conditions in Armenia during the time of the 2015 Biennale, here is a rundown by the organization Human Rights Watch. It gives an idea of what it is like to live in Armenia, differences and similarities to the US, and priorities of the government.