

FIFTYSECOND BIENNALE OF VENICE ARMENIAN PAVILION

From 10 June to 21 November 2007

With "Who is the Victim?" Sonia Balassanian representing the Republic of Armenia at the Moorat Raphael College (Palazzo Zenobio)

By Chaké Matossian

The 52nd Biennale of Venice, entitled "Think with the senses, feel with the mind" was inaugurated on the 10th of June to welcome the contemporary art of countries of all continents, at the very official sites of Giardini or the Arsenal and simultaneously at a multitude of sites dispersed among the different islands of the lagoon. Among these sites, the island of San Lazzaro of the Armenian monastery of the Mekhitarists chosen by Joseph Kossuth, one of the founders of conceptual art, and in Venice itself, the Moorat Raphael College where Armenia was exhibiting next to Scottish artists, Latin Americans and Australians.

The magnificent Zenobio palace that houses college of the Mekhitarist Fathers, where unfortunately all instruction has disappeared since a number of years now, is still known under the title of "Collegio Armeno" as a witness of important educational and intellectual activities that gathered together young Armenians from all corners of the world. As a reflection of this disappearance that relates our history, Sonia Balassanian, poetess and artist, transited from painting to video, having moved from collage and installation vibrates the Armenian language and the landscape of Armenia over and on the walls of several halls of the college.

Born in Iran in 1942, Sonia Balassanian has settled in New York during the fall of the Shah and, endowed with diplomas, equipped with her know how, goes to Armenia, which since its independence, had filled her with enthusiasm. She lives most of the time in Yerevan where she founded, along with her architect husband, Edward Balassanian, the NPAK (Armenian Center for Contemporary and Experimental Art, www.accea.info) in order to help the young talent in whom she believes to be the only possible avenue. Sonia Balassanian, presents herself as political artist, she speaks for all those who have no voice and the oppressed. She traces, by way of video images, the history or rather the histories which make up History, or that they depend upon. In "Who is the Victim?" she works the fogginess and the static interference in order to express with the strongest of languages, the lack of communication at the heart of communication. A woman relates her marriage, the birth of her children, the war, the loss of her husband, whose name will be given to the child who is just born as inheritance. At the same time, on another screen, a man in uniform, a soldier of Karabagh, a resistance fighter, describes his life. He is also the phantom, the representative of all those who have died in this war that Sonia Balassanian considers to be the continuation of the Genocide.

The voices get mixed up, create static, sweet and profound voices, of a man and a woman who do not know each other, who meet without seeing each other on the walls of a Venetian palace, creating a dialog of deaf people indicating our own deafness. An armed man who has nothing to lose, and a woman who has lost everything, two beings among whom we must chose if we want to listen to a text, and not to chose, if we want to live an instant by representation, the chaos of war and suffering, the loss of reparations. Or rather the description or even the intensity or even still the empathy or even the immersion.

Balassanian remains very attentive to the destruction of the family structure which transforms a being into a victim, and this attention of family structure cannot be dissociated from its belonging to a people who have suffered Genocide. As Helen Piralian says, with Genocide, "it goes first and foremost beyond the actual murder of the living, to destroy the genealogical order whence they had come and this, by destroying the genocidality of those who have existed."¹

We shall appreciate better the title of the installation presented by the Turkish pavilion, "Don't complain", written in neon letters intended to denounce the power of publicity and the spirit of intrinsic superiority of such an injunction. Having come from a denialist country, it is permitted to doubt with the critical view of the artist, and to note that this title fits perfectly with the reality of Turkey's anti-democratic stance. Turkey has succeeded, in spite of the intention of the represented work, to be chosen by the commissioner of the exhibition, Robert Storr (American). The latter, has therefore set a pavilion for Turkey, even though he affirms, in an interview given to the *Journal de Arts*: "...I am convinced that the militarization of civil society contradicts the international treaties on the subject of human rights and that the violences inflicted on prisoners in detention camps are far from 'liberty'". He adds: "I am confused vis-à-vis the idea of 'national culture', it is sufficient to think of all the political and artistic crimes committed in the name of cultural nationalism during the 19th and 20th centuries!"²

Wishing to take into consideration not only the new artistic language, but also the personalities, the countries and also the emerging tendencies of five continents³, Robert Storr has, "as a result" privileged Turkey: "Robert Storr has therefore chosen to include a Turkish Pavilion at the Artiglierie dell'Arsenale", the press release informs us (my underline). Let us be clear, it is not a Turkish artist that has been welcomed in the framework of the biennale, but Turkey itself, who receives a pavilion and therefore the assurance that it will be able to occupy that most important space henceforth, which Robert Storr pretends nevertheless to have conceived as "a democratic space for contemporary art".

Sonia Balassanian following the Socrates precept, wishes to disengage the work from its envelope, form its packaging, to be able to scrutinize the interiority, another dimension, that of reality. She establishes connections between the filmed bodies and those present, the bodies and the elements, as the man seen from the back, in the nude, sitting at the shore of a lake, pensive, seeming to meditate the terrible image left by the description given by the American consul stationed in Kharpert, Leslie Davis in his report of 1918:

"Few places could have been better adapted to the execution of the diabolic plan of the Turks aiming to exterminate the Armenian population of this tranquil lake with its shores mutilated, its valleys encircled by Kurdish villages and far from all eyes. Thousands and thousands of Armenians, mostly women and children were massacred on the shores and mutilated in a barbaric fashion. It is difficult for someone living in a civilized country to believe that this sort of thing is possible, but as Lord Byron says 'those things that we find unbelievable, evoke no surprise in Turkey'. That which took place around the shores of the beautiful lake of Geoljuk, in the summer of 1915 goes beyond imagination."⁴

Translated from French
By Armen Garabedian

¹- Helen Piralian, "Reconnaître, sanctionner: retour sur les lois mémorielles", in *Chimères*, No. 63 "Eclats d'Arménie", Paris, winter 2006, p. 139.

² Interview with Robert Storr, conducted by Franco Fanelli, *Le Journal des Arts*, No. 261, June 2007, pp. IV-V (file)

³ The phrase appears as follows in the press release: "*Think with the senses – feel with the mind. Art in the present tense* is a result of the vision that he (Robert Storr) has conveyed beyond the frontiers of international art, looking not only towards rapidly evolving artistic languages, but also towards personalities, countries and emerging trends from all five continents. Robert Storr has therefore chosen to include a Turkish Pavilion at the Ariglierie dell'Arsenale..."

⁴ Entretien, p. VIII.