

INTRODUCTION TO DAVID KAREYAN'S “PURE CREATIVITY” AND HRATCH ARMENAKYAN’S “POST-ART SITUATION: LOGICAL SYNTAX”

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Hratch Armenakyan, a member of the conceptual artists' group ACT, which operated in Armenia in the mid-1990s, remembered in a recent interview that the first president of the republic, Levon Ter-Petrosian (1991–98), would occasionally host artists, musicians, writers, and other creative workers and engage them in discussions about the new order of things pertaining to all spheres of social and cultural development.¹ These meetings with the highest officials of the newly forming state and its institutions reinforced the belief among artists and intellectuals that it was possible to participate directly in politics. This participation was imagined as a form of concrete input that would shape cultural policies and redefine art as an institution capable of offering alternatives beyond the state's monopoly on commissioning, representing, and evaluating art production. In addition, the artists were consulted in matters regarding the ideological orientation of the new state and its larger political, social, and economic programs.

Operating in 1994–96 after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, ACT comprised ten young artists in their early twenties. The group developed affirmative artistic actions and exhibitions to support the constitution of the new state based on the principles of liberal democ-

¹ Hratch Armenakyan, interviewed by Vardan Azatyan, January 23, 2008.

racy and market capitalism. Its conceptual interventions and actions— in conventional exhibition spaces, on the street, and in the already dysfunctional factories—were often formally minimal and austere, but almost always prescriptive in that they offered a model of political and aesthetic participation.

A case in point is the 1995 action Art Demonstration that the group conducted one week after the July 5th referendum, which approved the first constitution for an independent Armenia. Marching through the city center of Yerevan from early-20th-century modernist painter Martiros Saryan's statue to the Museum of Modern Art, the artists and their supporters carried slogans. Written in both Armenian and English, the slogans read, "Interventions into Systems," "World Integration," "Expel the Information Monsters from Rationality," "Every Small Mistake Can Result in Big Catastrophes," "Polit-Art," "Realization," "No Art," "New State, New Art, New Culture," and "Demythologization," among others. After reaching their destination, the Museum of Modern Art in Yerevan, the artists hung the banners on the museum's walls.² What was at stake in this and similar interventions was the constitution of a new subjectivity in the context of the newly independent state. ACT perceived and embraced the ideal citizen as a disembodied but participating agent plugged into bureaucratic-administrative, political, economic, and cultural structures. This subject was to be an informed agent and, to a lesser degree, a new consumer. Endowed with specific socially inscribed roles and functions, he or she would not only contribute to the formation of the state but would also be capable of being in the forefront of the public sphere.

While ACT's members rigorously strove to service the state's agenda, this service was carried out in the sphere of art understood as an autonomous domain of "pure creativity." Throughout their short life as a group, ACT's young members developed often contradictory, but almost always dogmatic and rigid propositions regarding the role of the artist in the new society, as suggested in published and unpublished

2 It is noteworthy that the artists insisted on receiving an official permit from the municipality to conduct the action, which was accompanied by emergency personnel and police cars, as the law required. For a detailed discussion of ACT's work in relation to the contested notion of the public sphere in post-Soviet Armenia, please see Angela Harutyunyan, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: The Constitutional State and the ACT Group's Political Aesthetics of Affirmation in Armenia," *Art and Public Sphere* 2 (2012), forthcoming.

texts, personal notebooks, and manifestos. These propositions were saturated with an underlying neopositivism that the artists adopted while carefully reading and discussing Bertrand Russell's and especially Ludwig Wittgenstein's early writings.

ACT's identification with the newly forming constitutional state was especially poignant if we examine certain speeches by the republic's president at the time. Art historian Vardan Azatyan argues that ACT, alongside the then president of Armenia, Ter-Petrossian, strove to demythologize politics and history, constructing a myth of the positivistic demythologization of art and the figure of the artist. For the president, a philologist and historian of the Middle East, politics was a philological operation that could be solely argued in the domain of rational language. While ACT frequently used the term "demythologization" in its slogans and unpublished texts to demystify the figure of the artist, for Ter-Petrossian, it was a tool to establish the positivist myth of a constitutional state without "any myths and puzzles."³

While the politics of the first democratically elected president of post-Soviet Armenia was informed by philological positivism (the methodology that informed his scholarly work), ACT formulated its programs in a way that followed neopositivist trends. Developed in early-20th-century Vienna and based on the writings of Saint-Simon and later Auguste Comte, neopositivism appealed to the artists and to the country's president alike with its promise to objectively decode reality.⁴ In the context of the social and economic transformations in Armenia in the 1990s, marked as they were by the shifting status of the intellectual within the new society, the president and ACT supported and advanced the argument that society should be governed by an intellectual elite that could discern objective laws and use these to

3 In his famous article "War or Peace?" of 1997, just two months before his resignation from presidency, Ter-Petrossian rationally refutes all "myths and puzzles" regarding foreign and domestic policy issues on which his opponents were criticizing him. Levon Ter-Petrossian, *Collected Works* [in Armenian] (Yerevan: Archive of the First President of Armenia, 2007), 195. Vardan Azatyan, *Image/Inings of Armenian Reality*. Lecture series delivered at Utopiana Association, Yerevan, Armenia, 2008.

4 One of the basic premises of neopositivism was that all knowledge could be coded in a standardized scientific language, and that all valid and meaningful knowledge was necessarily empirically verifiable. For neopositivists, the social world was governed by natural laws, and all a social scientist could do was to identify these laws. "Logical Positivism," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998), CD-ROM ed.

solve social problems.⁵ The basic premise of creating a universal scientific language to describe social phenomena, with this description itself believed to be empirically driven and verifiable, empowered the ACT artists to reassert the objective impact of their artistic actions during a time of economic hardship and social chaos. In its reliance on logical deduction, neopositivism provided them with a doctrine of methodological individualism that held that all social phenomena could be explained as the outcomes of individual behavior. Nevertheless, even though they had a shared philosophy, many of ACT's members offered contradictory recipes for art's dissolution into larger social structures or into a broader understanding of creativity.

The two texts presented here in translation illustrate certain aesthetic and methodological contradictions that two of the group members—Hratch Armenakyan and David Kareyan—embodied and propagated. It was the tension between Armenakyan and Kareyan that defined the group's practice of "showing together," while insisting on one's individual practice and its philosophy of art, until one of ACT's factions abandoned the group in 1995. Both Kareyan and Armenakyan aim to define what they call the "post-art situation." However, if Kareyan's programmatic and somewhat romantic text titled "What Is Pure Creativity?" lays out a post-art situation for an all-encompassing creativity, Armenakyan's "Post-Art Situation: Logical Syntax" of 1995 adopts a language reminiscent of neopositivism to argue that the artist, like any other social agent and citizen of the new state, has a specifically assigned role within the larger social machine. Using logical deduction, Armenakyan argues that the artist's role is the functionalization of the idea. Nevertheless, both positions share a belief that what is needed in the new and rapidly transforming reality is the artist's self-instrumentalization in service to the construction of the new state in the broadest sense. They voluntarily put aesthetics at the service of politics.

Given its identification with the state, ACT stood for a version of positive liberty; however, in the post-Cold War era of the triumph of negative liberty, ACT's idea of freedom presented a peculiar hybrid between a positive sense of freedom and its negative opposite. While

5 Though this argument was originally developed by Saint-Simon, there is no evidence that the artists and the president referred to him explicitly.

adopting a functionalist and operationalist rhetoric, ACT never abandoned the ideal of radical individualism rooted in the discourses of classical liberalism, and with it the ideals of negative liberty. According to these ideals, there should be a distinct space for individual freedom that remains outside of social control. However, there was a paradox in the group's belief that the idea of negative liberty should be instituted by the state, through the positive mode of freedom. What seems to be at stake in both art and politics was a desire to avoid ideological contamination by a bygone age, with modes of thinking and acting that were supposedly nonideological. This is why the Armenian president and the young artists of ACT considered liberalism in art and politics nonideological, while this elimination of ideology was in truth highly ideological in itself. ACT understood art's function as assisting the process of implementing or imposing the new freedom.

ACT's voluntary self-instrumentalization on behalf of the state's discourses and its simultaneous propagation of radical individualism was also paradoxical. The extreme self-instrumentalization the group promoted referred to the Socialist Realist artist's role as an instrument for advancing a larger transhistorical ethos, as opposed to the modernist notion of the individual creator. But it also relied on the notion of self-sufficient methodological individualism and liberal ideals of a free-speaking subject as an individually participating agent.

This paradox lays at the foundation of yet another paradox, that of aesthetic autonomy and its simultaneous demise. While in Armenakyan's "post-art situation" art's overprofessionalization would bring about the ultimate dissolution of art's autonomy, Kareyan's "pure creativity" proposes a foundational aesthetic paradigm that is autonomous and yet no longer has clearly defined boundaries. The degree of self-instrumentalization and the reduction of one's subjectivity to narrowly confined functions was made explicit in a hand-written note from early 1994 signed by Vahram Aghasyan: "I see myself as a particle in the system who examines, discovers, edits, adds and continues. [I am] someone who possesses alternative, experimental and sanitizing functions."⁶ This statement reverberates in a paragraph from Armenakyan's text ("Post-Art Situation: Logical Syntax"): "The transformations of ideas throughout time are what guarantee human progress, and this progress is achieved by putting the idea into practice, as well as by the

6 Vahram Aghasyan, unpublished handwritten note, Mher Azatyan's archive.

idea's materialization and, most importantly, its functionalization. These operations are carried out by various specialists and specializations that are particles in the system as a whole and its implementation and regulation nodes. The thinker, the artist, is thus someone who reveals and exposes the secrets of reality, who controls and categorizes them.⁷⁷

As opposed to Armenakyan's version of rigid positivism, Kareyan's idea of "pure creativity" provided a philosophy of art to ACT that was paradoxically based on defining art as an autonomous sphere with its own internal logic. Ultimately, the idea was to eliminate the boundaries of what constitutes art as a historically defined category. For Kareyan, one of the ways in which pure creativity could be achieved was through *naming* the physicality of the medium as a work of art itself. This was both a technique and philosophy; as a technique, it allowed Kareyan to document on a piece of paper the materials he was using for this very process of documenting. The work of art was thus presented as a linguistically transparent phenomenon. According to the philosophy of art as developed by Kareyan, the creative process was a calculated operation of fixing ideas, of framing and displaying them through rational thought processes.

The imaginary constructed by ACT and Ter-Petrossian—that "reality" was orderly and logical—was a secession from the ever-present dilemmas of the everyday that included the blockade of Armenia's two borders, a humanitarian disaster in the aftermath of an earthquake, a war with neighboring Azerbaijan, and an economic collapse, among other issues that resulted from the recent cataclysmic social and economic transformations the country had undergone. The imaginary of an already existing rational political and social order had a "reality" function for the artists' group of independent Armenia and its first president. This I call an *imaginary realism* in both arts and politics; it disintegrated when confronted with the actual traumatic conditions of everyday life and with the problems of daily survival in the face of economic hardship, power cuts, cold winters, and the dissolution of the former Soviet intelligentsia as a privileged class. Perhaps this was the reason for ACT's disintegration in 1996 and for the failure of Ter-Petrossian's politics, resulting in his resignation in early 1998—two

7 Hratch Armenakyan, "Post-Art Situation: Logical Syntax" (unpublished, 1995), Nazareth Karoyan's archive.

different but strikingly similar processes. While the group collapsed in large part because most of the artists could no longer survive in the harsh economic conditions and had to emigrate to Russia, Ter-Petrossian resigned due to the insurmountable gap between his own ideals and the nationalist (“mythological”) sentiments that were afoot in Armenian society at large.

After Ter-Petrossian left . . . a whole generation of artists, writers, and activists felt deceived . . . but they were distressed precisely because they allowed themselves to be deceived; because they believed [in politics], they started blaming themselves for blurring the boundaries between art and politics, art and life. And perhaps this was the reason why many of them, all of them, abandoned activism, all kinds of activism.⁸

8 Armenakyan, interview, January 23, 2008.