INTRODUCTION TO ARMAN GRIGORYAN'S "WHAT IS *HAMASTEGHTSAKAN* ART" (1993) AND NAZARETH KAROYAN'S "WHAT IS *HAMASTEGHTSAKAN* ART" (1996)

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The documents presented here are attempts from within the early post-Soviet Armenian art scene to define late-1980s artistic practices that would later be thought to constitute the "primal scene" of Armenian contemporary art. Published in 1993 and 1996, respectively, by artist Arman Grigoryan and art critic Nazareth Karoyan, the two articles with the same title locate these practices in relation to local and global cultural discourses in the wake of postmodern and postconceptual developments in art.

The word *hamasteghtsakan* (համաստեղծական) can be translated as "collectively created" or as "Conceptual art." The word is derived from the Armenian word համաստեղծ (*hamasteghts*), with the suffix ական (*akan*) turning the word into an adjective.[1] In Armenian, the verbs ստեղծել (*steghtsel*) and հղանալ (*hghanal*) both denote "to create."

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[1] Համա (*hama*) is a prefix with multiple meanings: it means being similar (such as the Latin prefix *homo*), general or overall (synonymous to *pan*), and finally, it denotes "together" or "collective." The noun ստեղծ means "conception" or "creation." Stephan Malkhasyan's 1944 dictionary states that the primary meaning of the word is "created together" and the figurative second meaning is "innate" or "naturally born," whereas Ashot Suqiasyan's 1967 dictionary of synonyms mentions only the second, figurative meaning. Stephan Malkhasyans, *Hayeren bacatrakan bararan* [*Dictionary of Armenian*], vol. 3 (Yerevan: ASSR State Publishing House, 1944–45), 28; Ashot Suqiasyan, *Hayots lezvi homanishneri bararan* [*Dictionary of Synonyms of the Armenian Language*] (Yerevan: ASSR National Science Academy, 1967), 358.

Հղանալ (*hghanal*) is derived from the noun հղացք (*hghatsq*), which also translates as "concept." In *hamasteghtsakan*, "creation" and "conception" meet at a semantic level, marking "creation" as being identical with "Conceptual art"—that is, an art of conception.

The use of *hamasteghtsakan* as a concept to delineate a set of artistic practices was never straightforward—at times, it was used as synonymous with Conceptual art, while at other times it was used to refer to "postconceptual" or even "postmodern" art. Elsewhere, I have translated the term as "collectively created," suggesting a way of putting together distant and incommensurable realities, images, and styles.[2] However, the semantics of *hamasteghtsakan* are not of primary interest here, but rather the cultural context in which the term circulated.

Karoyan originally proposed *hamasteghtsakan* as a neologism in a 1993 exhibition titled Beyond Idiom: Contemporary Crossover Art in Armenia (the Armenian title read: Subjective Integration: *Hamasteghtsakan* Art in Armenia). The exhibition took place at the newly established American University of Armenia in Yerevan, symptomatically occupying the building of the Communist Party Central Committee's House of Political Enlightenment (*Qaghlustun*).[3] Organized in collaboration with the US-Armenian artist Charlie Khachadourian, the show brought together post-medium art practices by the late Soviet generation of artists in the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic who were constructing an artistic sphere designed as an alternative to both Socialist Realism and the National Modernism of the 1970s.[4] In the English title of the exhibition, *hamasteghtsakan* was arbitrarily translated as "crossover," thus eliding entirely the Armenian title's reference to the need for communication and integration with the outside world after the collapse of the Soviet Union. By contrast, the English title foregrounded the international presentation of a group of artists whose work extended beyond the familiar idioms of "totalitarian" art.

2   Angela Harutyunyan and Eric Goodfield, "Theorizing the Politics of Representation in Contemporary Art in Armenia," in *Culture & Agency: Contemporary Culture and Urban Change*, ed. Malcolm Miles and Monica Degen (Plymouth: University of Plymouth Press, 2010), 120.

3   These were institutions for the political education of the party bureaucrats, housing also large halls and auditoria for public functions such as congresses and conferences.

4   Vardan Azatyan, "Disintegrating Progress: Bolshevism, National Modernism and the Emergence of Contemporary Art in Armenia," *ARTMargins* 1.1 (2012): 62–87.

Karoyan's short contribution to the exhibition catalog neither refers to the word *hamasteghtsakan* nor does it explain it. Replete with avant-gardist pathos, the text instead performs a postmodern relativization by mixing "high literary" style with vernacular references:

> The new generation strives toward the satellite *Crosna* similarly to the Mediterranean sailors who were striving toward the lighthouse of Alexandria. . . . The new generation identifies with Madonna and Schwarzenegger with the same passion and enthusiasm as Ekaterina II fornicating with an entire legion. . . . (Dude, how do I get to the airport?)[5]

It may be argued that in this instance, *hamasteghtsakan* is performative rather than conceptual, in that it brings together incommensurable realities and references. From this initial exhibition onward, *hamasteghtsakan* entered into circulation to denote a set of post-medium practices that were formally, stylistically, ideologically, and aesthetically distinct from each other—and, in addition, often incoherent—and that nevertheless came to refer to an alternative cultural sphere in opposition to official culture.

Karoyan introduced the term *hamasteghtsakan* in order to retrospectively define the practices of late Soviet and post-Soviet Armenian artists who were part of a cultural movement called the 3rd Floor. Coming together in 1987 in the context of Mikhail Gorbachev's programs of liberalization and reform, *glasnost* and *perestroika*, the 3rd Floor originated when a group of young artists was invited to organize the annual youth exhibition of the Union of Artists of Soviet Armenia, a state-sponsored, artist-run institution that commissioned, represented, and circulated art along official lines. The exhibition took place not in the designated exhibition spaces of the Union, but in a conference hall on the Union's third floor—hence the movement's name. The proposed format did not include a jury, suggesting that anyone could be an artist. In this way the young artists associated with the 3rd Floor challenged the conventions of the Union's youth exhibitions, whose goal was to provide exhibition opportunities to young artists, provided that they affirmed and reproduced the inherited styles, techniques, and compositional rules that excluded anything other than figuration.

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5   Nazareth Karoyan, "Preface," in *Beyond Idiom: Contemporary Crossover Art in Armenia* (Yerevan: American University of Armenia, 1993), exhibition catalog.

The spatial positioning of the 3rd Floor artists both within the Union and on its periphery reflected their subsequent structural positioning as both a kind of "perestroika avant-garde" *and* as marginal in relation to the cultural politics of the Soviet artistic establishment. This ambiguity, of course, was in itself a reflection of the contradictions inherent in *perestroika*, as Gorbachev's efforts at reform were met with staunch opposition and resistance from within the calcified Soviet bureaucracy.

The 3rd Floor's intervention in the 1987 Union of Artists exhibition included musical performances, happenings, poetry readings, and even a break dance show, a mix that was to become paradigmatic for the movement's lack of both stylistic coherence and a positively defined, unified aesthetic, political, or cultural agenda. Between 1987 and 1994, when the group disintegrated, the 3rd Floor used a broad variety of references that could accommodate literally any medium, style, or school: from Pop Art and Abstract Expressionism to Minimalism, *objet trouvé*, neo-Dada performance, and Conceptual art. Throughout the six years of the 3rd Floor's loose association, according to Karoyan's calculation, approximately 50 artists participated in or organized events that actively appropriated Western signs and symbols, often mixing high art with middle- to lowbrow cultural icons, from Joseph Beuys and Black Sabbath to the worship of blue jeans and Marlboro cigarettes.[6] Ideologically, the group combined romantic liberalism, nationalism, libertarianism, and anarchist dreams of omnipotence, all of them highly contradictory ideologies that could nevertheless work hand in hand for as long as they were perceived to be in opposition to anything that connoted Soviet ideology.[7]

When in 1993 Karoyan first conceptualized *hamasteghtsakan* by applying the term to the 3rd Floor's incommensurable practices, his was a retrospective act of naming. By that time, the stark antagonism between libertarians and anarchists and those who were eager to build new, now market-driven art institutions in post-Soviet Armenia had become manifest and paved the way for the disintegration of the movement.

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6   Vardan Azatyan, "Art Communities, Public Spaces, and Collective Actions in Armenian Contemporary Art," in *Art, Theory, Post-Socialism*, ed. Mel Jordan and Malcolm Miles (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2008), 46.

7   Angela Harutyunyan, *The Political Aesthetics of the Armenian Avant-Garde: The Journey of the "Painterly Real"* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 46.

If Karoyan coined the term *hamasteghtsakan*, it was the movement's main ideologue, Arman Grigoryan, who presented its first recorded analysis, during a lecture delivered at the Yerevan State Institute of Fine Arts in 1993. We offer the text of his address, in English for the first time, as our first Document. In his outline of the problem of *hamasteghtsakan* art, Grigoryan first establishes the difference between *art* as an autonomous sphere of individual creation, on the one hand, and *culture* as a weapon in the hands of the powerful, or as mass cultural kitsch, on the other. Then he asks: "Can the contradiction between art and culture, between the individual and society be resolved? Can humanity reach its age-old 'city of love' where the individual will be able to discover his potentialities without clashing with society? *Hamasteghtsakan* art sees the solution to this question not in the principle of 'we know it,' but in the approach 'we can do it.'"

In Grigoryan's view, *hamasteghtsakan* art is both autonomous and heteronomous: it is part of culture yet also antagonistic to it, since it separates the ideals of liberation from the constraints of cultural institutions and thus contains the seeds of political freedom and social equality. The autonomy of art is founded, in Grigoryan's words, upon "its own logic of development," and legitimized by the artist's absolute right to mix anything and everything. As he writes, "*hamasteghtsakan* art once and for all liberates the artwork from the constraints of high vs. low, old vs. new, ours vs. theirs, objective vs. subjective, figurative vs. non-figurative, cheap vs. expensive, accepted vs. unaccepted, as well as styles, schools, techniques and technologies," inviting a world where "Disney is as great as Leonardo." In Grigoryan's view, *hamasteghtsakan* art is both "truly democratic" and "totalitarian." It is through these contradictions that *hamasteghtsakan* art, characterized by "serious joy," stands above culture. At the same time, it understands its mission as one of creating a truly liberated culture as the ideal of the individual's emancipation from the imperatives of the collective.

As opposed to Grigoryan's mobilization of the term, which defined it as a kind of all-encompassing creation in art directed against the repressive mechanisms of culture, Karoyan had deployed the same concept to emphasize the need for cultural communication. It was only later, in 1996—three years after the collapse of the 3rd Floor movement—that Karoyan, driven by an "author's responsibility" of saving *hamasteghtsakan* from misuse, revisited the term with the aim of conceptualizing it in relation to the art practices of the 3rd Floor. By that

time, the term had already acquired retroactive significance and historical value and designated a style, of bringing together incommensurable artistic expressions such as Pop Art and Abstract Expressionism, art and Minimalism amongst others, that had characterized the movement.

Karoyan's 1996 text "What Is *Hamasteghtsakan* Art," the second translated Document in this issue of the journal, reflects his interest in poststructuralism, especially the work of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. At the time, Karoyan was in the process of abandoning the Hegelian historical and logical framework that he had used to historicize contemporary art practiced in the early 1990s. Its stylistic and terminological inconsistencies, including Karoyan's complex and ambiguous usage of the poststructuralist jargon that he made operational in Armenian, make the text especially difficult to translate. The goal of Karoyan's analysis was to shift the semantic focus from "creative" to "collective." Just as the 3rd Floor sought to abandon the idea of a single author, Karoyan emphasized the collective aspects of the 3rd Floor's exhibition-making practices and stressed their communicability across time and space—with respect both to the history of Armenian art and the contemporary globalizing world. Karoyan discusses contemporary art as *information* that restores a connection with the national art of previous epochs after the collapse of the "totalitarian" Soviet system. He argues that it is from the perspective of the continuity of national culture that historical Armenian art can serve as a means of communication with the contemporary global context.

Despite the humanist and creational implications of the term, Karoyan claims that *hamasteghtsakan* functions as a pointer to the dissolution of the self-sufficient modernist subject, and that this dissolution is no longer taking place in the "us" of Soviet collectivity but in the multiplicity of postmodern subjectivities. The authorial "I" neither represents the subject of enunciation, nor does it provide transparent access to that subject. Rather, it always implies the Other, one that is always already a representation, a culturally coded image and a type of cultural readymade: "In this case the ready-made image is nothing but an information image. The material of *hamasteghtsakan* art is a layer of this image-information. . . . In the frame of *hamasteghtsakan* art, the ritualistic desacralizing strategy of the information-image is the already de-ideologized reproduction of the method of Soviet anti-propaganda."

Karoyan's agenda was to align those artistic practices that at first

opposed Soviet cultural politics but then came to be seen as foundational for the art of post-Soviet Armenia with what he saw as global postmodernism. This involved a great deal of cultural, linguistic, and theoretical translation. If, culturally, Karoyan was to make a case for the specificity of Armenian postmodernism and, at the same time, its communicability with global trends, linguistically, he needed, for the first time, to translate poststructuralism into Armenian.[8] Of course, linguistic translation also implied a process of theoretical translation. Karoyan's understanding of postmodernism as a kind of fluid communicability across time and space betrayed his indebtedness to *glasnost*'s politics of free and accessible information. Indeed, accessibility is highly romanticized in his article, to the degree that this information space itself figures as a collage-like *dreamworld*, a space for "collective dreaming."[9]

It is here that Grigoryan's and Karoyan's texts, which bear the same title, betray deep affinities: they both position art as a space for such "collective dreaming," one that is more real than social reality itself. If for Grigoryan the *hamasteghtsakan* gesture constitutes a collage-like surface made up of images where all cultural heroes are granted equal participation, for Karoyan, this surface is a purely textual interface of transparent and communicable information. Both ultimately reflect the post-Soviet subject's desire to traverse formerly closed borders and to be part of a world that it sees as triumphantly liberated. One could argue that the Other of such a world without borders was a version of the Soviet Union conceived as a closed and claustrophobic system. In the post-Soviet conditions of neoliberalization in which both authors wrote, one could further argue, the ideal that art promised had already been realized in the capitalist "utopia" of consumer choice and transparent communication. In this sense, *hamasteghtsakan* could also be translated as the "post-Soviet condition."

8   The present translation of Karoyan's text involved several discussions with the author. Twenty-three years after writing this text, Karoyan himself was barely able to decipher some of its passages. While we preserved the complexity and convolutedness of some parts of the text, we have translated some of its most complex passages liberally and interpretatively in order to render them more transparent for the uninitiated reader.

9   Vardan Azatyan, "Art Communities, Public Spaces, and Collective Actions in Armenian Contemporary Art," in Mel Jordan and Malcolm Miles (eds.), *Art, Theory, Post-Socialism* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2008), 46.