

## WHAT IS *HAMASTEGHTSAKAN* ART

ARMAN GRIGORYAN

(Original in Armenian, translated by Angela Harutyunyan)

During one of the discussions about the 3rd Floor's first exhibition, an artist who was evidently disturbed by my work addressed me with an accusatory question: "Why did you paint 'Cadillac'? There is no such car in Armenia." I gave him a *hamasteghtsakan* answer, saying that when we were students, Rubik Grigoryan told me about a dream of his. He was in a LED ZEPPELIN concert. If someone had enough self-confidence as to ask me why, instead of seeing Tatevik Sazandaryan or Tigran Levonyan,<sup>1</sup> in his dream, Rubik saw that band in particular, only then would I consider the question addressed to me worth to be taken seriously.<sup>2</sup>

*Hamasteghtsakan* art, as opposed to Surrealism, doesn't identify the dream with reality, that is, reality with art, or art with dream;

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\* This text was first delivered as a lecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Yerevan in 1993. It was subsequently published in the literary magazine *Garun* (no. 1, 1994, pp. 63–65). The present translation is based on this publication.

<sup>1</sup> These are renowned Armenian opera singers.

<sup>2</sup> The anecdote refers to the expectation from Grigoryan's interlocutor that dreams should match empirical reality. In addition, it has the connotation that only national Soviet "icons" are dream-worthy. In contrast, Grigoryan's dream refers to the rock 'n' roll counterculture.



the same thing—then this would be enough for us to continue searching for a possible compromise between wild art and solitary culture. I will intentionally refrain from mentioning those individuals who, by overcoming culture, have reached, in *hamasteghtsakan* terms, serious joy in their art. The examples are many, and each of you at this moment can think of numerous names of genius. But please do not hurry; for the love of humanity, listen to a story that is very typical of our cultural condition.

Let's say the painter N. loved to paint from early childhood. The only object in N.'s home that could be viewed as an art piece was Ivan Kramskoy's painting *Unknown Woman*.<sup>6</sup> The painter's parents often mentioned this framed reproduction as a masterpiece of skill. When little N. went to art school, he observed with surprise that the artists teaching there did not only not mention Kramskoy, but instead admired and praised N. exactly when his work seemed to him an utter failure. The next step for N. was Terlemezyan College,<sup>7</sup> where young N., after dedicating himself to imitating Kramskoy without success, ultimately became convinced that it would be safer for him not to remember Kramskoy any longer and to be satisfied with those artists who replaced this initial influence, that is, those who are appreciated nowadays.

Upon entering the Institute,<sup>8</sup> N. had already forgotten Kramskoy as someone with any importance for art, even in his household. The Institute's role in cultivating skill and information was indisputable. But in his last year, when N.'s own identity became his main concern, he found himself confused and disappointed: the classics were so perfect and unmatched, while reality and modern art were so incomprehensible, that N. didn't know what to do. He constantly asked himself: "Is art a profession or a calling?" "Does the artist create for himself or for the consumer?" or, most importantly, "How should one paint today?"

There are various solutions in regard to how N. might paint in order to escape from the extraordinary, vicious cycle [*sic!*] that passes from the artist to the gallerist to the ministry of culture, and on to

6 Ivan Kramskoy was a late-19th-century Russian painter, a reproduction of whose painting *Unknown Woman* of 1883 was often found in Soviet households. Grigoryan here uses the reference as a prime example of kitsch.

7 A college of fine arts in Armenia that would often serve as a gateway to the Institute of Fine Arts.

8 Here Grigoryan refers to the next stage in N.'s career, the Institute of Fine Arts.

world fame. I might even presuppose that my advice will get him somewhere, but I prefer to immediately move on to reveal what the problem looks like from the point of view of *hamasteghtsakan* art. *Hamasteghtsakan* art doesn't give advice, and instead declares that both Kramskoy and Leonardo da Vinci are equal giants. No need to be surprised here: had N. been inspired to become a painter by Walt Disney's "Donald," I would have declared similarly that "Disney is as great as Leonardo da Vinci."

*Hamasteghtsakan* art has no desire to re-edit the history of art or to cast doubt on the authenticity of any universally accepted values. It is too traditional and coherent for this, and therefore it cannot reject hard-won principles that established themselves, step by step, over centuries—including freedom of will, humanism, equality, or the human striving for self-perfection and self-knowledge—while realizing that even an adult cannot escape from these principles, and will make ceaseless efforts to bring to completion the incomplete business of his or her childhood. *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. Art is simultaneously high and low, old and new, ours and theirs, figurative and non-figurative, expensive and cheap, accepted and unaccepted. It's a style, a school, a technique, and a technology. It is totalitarian art, [and] absolute illusion. No need to be terrified, though, since, all told, art remains the only place where man's insatiable striving both toward wild nature and the superhuman "terminator" will fully reign.

Certainly, the above formulations call for "cultural studies" interpretations.

The fact that *hamasteghtsakan* art acts as post-Conceptual art should not be a cause for confusion. By "Conceptualism" we do not mean art that is gelatin-like, generally individualized, and sensually all-embracing, as it is understood in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, and often also by us. We mean a Conceptualism that accepts as its beginning and its foundation the tradition of "pure art" or "art for art's sake." That is, art that is autogenic and self-fulfilling, and not subject to either time or space. Whatever art shows is not art. Art has its own logic of

development and charts its own course. Art is cognized through the act of art [making]. Being conceptual, *hamasteghtsakan* art does nothing more than carry on a conversation, presenting art as a cultural phenomenon, showing this connection as art or the conversation about art as art.<sup>9</sup> And perhaps, the only thing that makes *hamasteghtsakan* art an “art of resistance” and different from Conceptualism is its rejection of intellectual self-admiration and deception, as if only knowledge could directly bring about the liberation from desires.

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9 The formulation in the original text is convoluted and might be paraphrasing Ad Reinhardt’s “Art as Art” (1962).

## NAZARETH KAROYAN

(Original in Armenian, translated by Angela Harutyunyan)

In our artistic context the word “*hamasteghtsakan*” was first used to delineate certain artistic manifestations that go back as far as 1990, and it was moreover used as a noun (“*hamasteghtsakanutyun*” in *Mshakuyt*, 1990, n. 2). However, only in 1993 when it appeared in the subtitle of an exhibition (“Subjective Integration”: *Hamasteghtsakan* Art in Yerevan [*sic*])<sup>1</sup> did the term come to be used as the name of an artistic style.

Circulating throughout these years, *hamasteghtsakan* has acquired the status of a concept with a multi-layered structure from which I want to separate one nuanced layer delineating the above-mentioned artistic manifestations as well as the spaces they project. I am driven by a concern for greater precision and accuracy in using the concept, as well as a sense of authorial responsibility. The word “*hamasteghtsakan*” in Armenian is synonymous with “primordial” and “divine creation,” but the sphere of its functional usage is significantly narrower than these synonyms. As adjectives, these words are predicated on the act of

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\* Published in *Garun*, no. 2, 1996, pp. 95–96.

1 The subtitle was “*Hamasteghtsakan* Art in Armenia.” The English title of the exhibition differed from the Armenian title, and was *Beyond Idiom: Crossover Art in Armenia* (Yerevan: American University of Armenia, 1993). The word *hamasteghtsakan* was arbitrarily translated here as “crossover.”

the substance (God) and point to the qualitative feature of the result of that act.<sup>2</sup>

Departing from the paradigm mentioned above, the word “*hamasteghtsakan*” undergoes certain semantic transformations in its structure. This does not bring about a horizontal dispersion (it stays unchanged) but creates instead a vertical depth where we find a certain degree of shallowness. Such decrease in verticality is due to the fact that in the word “*hamasteghtsakan*” the stress is transferred from the root *steghts* [in Armenian, “creation”] to the prefix *hama-* [corresponding to the English prefixes *con-*, *pan-*, and *inter-*]. As a result of this shift, the inner balance of the word is displaced, and the horizontal plane of the semantic layer acquires a dominant role over the vertical plane. As a result, in “*hamasteghtsakan*,” the expression of the semantic nuance is placed on the prefix “*hama-*.”<sup>3</sup>

In Armenian, the prefix *hama-* means connection, unity, and relationality, and is as such identical with the Latin prefix *con-*. Semantically it incorporates the prefixes *ner-* (*in-*), *mij-* (*inter-*), *arta* (*ex-*), and *andr* (*trans-*), as well as the Latin prefix *syn-*. Although as a prefix *hama-* is not differentiated, in certain functional usages either its horizontal semantic layer (for instance, *hamapatasxanutyun* > correspondence, *hamadasutyun* > coordination, *hamagortsaktsutyun* > cooperation) or its vertical semantic layer (*hamakentronatsum* > concentration, *hamaparpak* > contained, *hamashxarhayin* > international) is emphasized, along with neutral emphases that correspond to the prefix *syn-* (conjoining, concurrence).

As already mentioned, in the word *hamasteghtsakan*, there is a semantic imbalance. Therefore, the sphere of its operation, whereby the prefix *hama-* appears as semantically neutral, is of no interest to us because it is a rare phenomenon in artistic manifestations as well. Meanwhile those semantic expressions of the prefix *hama-* or the other prefixes within its semantic orbit (*ner-* > *in-*, *andr-* > *trans-*, *mij* > *inter-*) whose transitive character is stressed to the utmost cannot escape our attention. In *hamasteghtsakan* art and in postmodern artistic

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2 This passage is especially convoluted in Armenian. Karoyan means that the synonyms refer to the results of divine creation and point to the latter’s qualities.

3 This is another convoluted passage where Karoyan argues that rather than emphasizing the word “creation,” *hamasteghtsakan* focuses on the prefix—*hama* (collectively). He does so through a structuralist linguistic analysis of the word in which contradictions are presented and then resolved.

manifestations generally one finds the latter prefixes more often, as in Italian *transavanguardia*; among artistic methods [such as] intervention; among artistic forms [such as installation art—within the limited environment of its site], as well as in the artist’s public creative activities, such as excursions, expeditions, and so on.

*Hamasteghtsakan* originated in the Armenian milieu that has come to describe specifically the Yerevan situation of the second part of the 1980s. Therefore, examples drawn from the manifestations of post-modernism are irrelevant here. Rather, while such manifestations share many commonalities with the [*hamasteghtsakan*] aesthetic (in particular, the same method of intervention), they do not reveal any of the local nuances, which, even if they could be ignored on other occasions, in this case present themselves as elements of an aesthetic structure. I can back up this argument by returning, once again, to the semantic analysis of the term *hamasteghtsakan*. The Latin equivalent of this word is the word “conceptual.” From here, the reader can arrive at two inadequate conclusions: first, the word *hamasteghtsakan* is an arbitrary translation from Latin (several years ago the terminological committee<sup>4</sup> started circulating the term *hayetsakatgayin*<sup>5</sup>); and second, the concept “*hamasteghtsakan* art” is meant to localize the manifestations of Conceptual art. Regarding the first of these conclusions, we can say that “*hamasteghtsakan*,” while differing from “divine conception” and “primordial creation” with its autogenic [semantic] nuance, shares with them the primary semantic field and has as such nothing to do with “*hayetsakargayin*.” Meanwhile the artistic manifestations demarcated by *hamasteghtsakan* art not only have no connection with Conceptual art from the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 70s, but they are also counter-conceptual in terms of their content. (They are not aimed at predicating the concept which was the summation of the content of Conceptual art and of the neo-avant-garde in general, but at its counter-predication). The word “*hamasteghtsakan*” preserves the idea of Immaculate Conception, one of the most important amongst the impersonal Catholic dogmas with its specifically carnal (humanized) undertone. The emphasis on the prefix *hama-* manifests a tendency toward the limitation, if not eradication, of the

4 The linguistic committee was established in 1993 to adjudicate national policies regarding the Armenian language.

5 The Armenian word for “conceptual.”

artist's creative consciousness, of his "I" that reached the peak of its absoluteness in the neo-avant-garde. In this case, *hama-* signifies the striving of the artist's "I" for the impersonal, including all the interpersonal and suprapersonal manifestations of such striving.

In the self-recognition of the authorial "I" are reflected those profound shifts that have been registered in the transformation of the cultural paradigm brought about by the transition from modernism to postmodernism. This narrative of transition affects the whole system of postmodern civilization, running like a red thread through all of its structures and inter-structural nodes—from economy to morality, from politics to art, and from religion to law. The sense of living in two parallel realities, which is the prevailing feeling among those who have found themselves in the postmodern condition, is born from this narrative of transition. (Current attempts at the technological modeling of virtual reality are merely the realizations of the project of reflecting subjective reality materially.) The postmodern fine arts are entirely saturated with the above-mentioned discourse; not only can they not escape it, they also claim to be the subject that models these parallel realities. Their grand Narrative is a history of that transition, and their small Narrative [is a story]<sup>6</sup> about the dissolution of the narrative of history. The artist's "I" tries to find its place within these parallel narratives. The Grand Narrative places him within a field that restricts the "I," whereas the small one [puts him] on the path of the multiplication of the "I." In both cases, what is being curtailed is his traditional "I."

Within the boundaries of *hamasteghtsakan* art, the curtailing of the artist's "I" doesn't necessarily mean the proposition of the affirmation of the "we" so familiar from Soviet reality, even though this is not precluded. This transfiguration only presupposes that the artist no longer speaks from his name or with his "own mouth," but largely in the name of others, mainly for others, mostly for others, and finally simply that he speaks because he cannot not speak. It seems that this postmodern passion for tattling is no different from the desire for silent tattling and the suspension of action that filled neo-avant-garde art of the post-war period and the 1960s (existentialism, the theater of the absurd, minimal, and Conceptual art). We could recall the Beckettian heroes buried in sand ("Happy Days") who were left with nothing else

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6 All the capitalizations are in the original Armenian text, and we have chosen to follow the original.



to do but to speak, or the multifaceted and anonymous hullabaloo of N. Sarraute's novels reminiscent of oriental bazaars.

But if in the case of modernism, the author was constituted through a disjointed connectivity of syntactic components realized through the plurality of anonymous "I"s, what remains inaccessible to postmodernism is his supra-self which is constituted as a record from the rubbles of the ruined speech of a linguistic catastrophe, torn asunder (and therefore unique and authentic). This inaccessibility is conditioned by the uncontainability of the authorial "I," which, however, never appears as such but always already represents the Other. In postmodernism this authorial status, which has been formulated as "representativity" (Ch. Jencks) came to replace modernism's authorial authenticity. (The fact of this transformation of authorial status within the framework of *hamasteghtsakan* art is registered through the artist's name, [and through] the mainly thematic articulations of his authorial rights, as a kind of signature.) With this shift, the classical author, who continued to exist in late modernism (during the years of the neo-avant-garde), starts to become history and gives way to the Myth-monger. The difference between the real author and the Myth-monger is that the material of the latter's work [the original always already belongs to another and relates to the Myth-monger only in the case of the work's recitation, while the result is directed outside of the Myth-monger, and is again transferred to the Other. The meeting of the self and the Other, their identification, becomes possible only because both are simultaneously motivation and medium but never ever a purpose (immanent existence). *Hamasteghtsakan* art stands out from within postmodernism's overall landscape solely because of the choice of its characteristic specificity vis-à-vis the above-mentioned Other, which is only due to the particularity of the local conditions. In the case of *hamasteghtsakan* art, this "Other" is not "art in general," and neither does it refer to that art's history (of styles, names and events), even if with its subject matter it closely recalls the "return to its substance" (Bonito Oliva).<sup>7</sup> The Other is the already extant ready-made image in which the name of the author, his worth and history, are of no importance. In this case the ready-made image is nothing but an information

7 Karoyan insists that while part of the postmodern condition, *hamasteghtsakan* art also stands apart from it because of its local specificity. It does not establish itself within an art historical trajectory but in relation to communicability.

image. The material of *hamasteghtsakan* art is a layer of this image-information.

The appearance of layers of information as a motivation for creative work has exclusively to do with the closed system of culture during the Soviet period. Exogenous and transfigured, the fragmented distribution of the rubble of information alien to the regime contributed to preparing the grounds for their sacralization, especially since [this distribution] temporarily coincided with the moment when the organization of information management systems started taking place around the world. Under these conditions, the problem of accessibility, that is, the right to receive and broadcast information freely, clashed with the totalitarian cultural system, since it was contraindicated for the latter. But in addition to its juridical-political and moral-psychological aspects, the dissemination of pure information has objective patterns. In this sense, by simultaneously being continuous (wavy) and intermittent (particular), information, like any other (physical, psychological, historical and so on) phenomenon, is dualistic in its structure. This structural duality brings about its dual state (solid and fluid).<sup>8</sup> Therefore, even in closed Soviet culture, information, even if discrete, was characterized by the same antinomies. Simply appearing in a powerful informational-ideological field, it served as an anti-informational layer. 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.

But how are ready-made images generated, and what are they?

As ready-made images, information images are born from the self-reproduction of information systems, and materialize as a result of the entropy accompanying the latter. Ready-made images (objects) are therefore [those that have been] left out of the circulation of information; [they are] the residue of that circulation. Being collective public ideas, they entirely belong to the realm of feelings, to the world of public dreams and nightmares. But their accumulation is so opaque, self-sufficient, and gradually increasing that they produce a sense of a parallel reality.

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8 Here the reference is to wave-particle duality in quantum mechanics.

In *hamasteghtsakan* art, the strategy of ready-made images directed toward ritualistic desacralization pursues one crucial aim: the reconstitution of the information flow between parallel realities, which creates a holistic and concrete reality and the possibility of a full and real sensibility.

Accordingly, the *hamasteghtsakan* image, in its structure, is a binary image. The ready-made image posited in its structure is only realized through the empty canvas, which symbolizes a mental image or an image archetype. Therefore, this discourse of the ready-made image and the image-archetype prevalent in the microstructure is carried out on the vertical plane. This means that the prefix “*andr-*” (trans) is here semantically dominant in the prefix “*hama*” (con-). This discourse posits an ontological problem: the questioning of the existence of a ready-made image and the possibility of a meta-image, which, in a constructed (համադրված) situation, is read as a rhetorical question pertaining to the possible existence of the image in general.

In the microstructure of the *hamasteghtsakan* image the horizontal plane dominates, or in the prefix “*hama*”- the semantic layer “*mij*” (inter) prevails because the *hamasteghtsakan* image here evolves in parallel to the surface of the canvas and doesn’t have depth. Even the greatest optical recesses of the *hamasteghtsakan* image are incapable here of creating visual depths because with their outlines they are conjugated with the network of fragments woven through the macrostructure.<sup>9</sup> But on this plane the ready-made image is already severed from its state of existence as a public myth and is placed onto a new plane, that of the personal, sacral icon. As a result of this intervention, which becomes possible due to the status of the Myth-monger, the ready-made image already ceases to be a dream and becomes embodied, that is, the flow between the object and concept, between subject matter and history, text and context, is restored.

The profile of *hamasteghtsakan* art as one of the expressions of the newest Armenian art came to completion in the period between the second half of the 1980s and the beginning of the 90s. Depending on [one’s] attitude toward ready-made images, here we can single out two streams: sanitary-hygienic and archeological. The artists included in

9 Here the author means that because of the vertical discourse of the frame, what is ultimately constructed is a network rather than depth, where the latter appears as a surface.

