

Travelogue Armenia

April – May 2011

Southwest Yerevan, May 2011

Introduction

First of all, sorry to all Dutch readers, but I decided to write in English this time, so my foreign friends and colleagues can read along.

Since April 14th (Iris) and April 21st (Arno) have started working as artists-in-residence at the "Art Commune" International Artist-in-Residence program run by [ACSL](#), based in Yerevan, Armenia. We intend to work here until May 25th.

For those who may not know, since 2004 we do 'community based art' all over the world and have done similar projects in the [Czech Republic](#), [Ukraine](#), [Vietnam](#) and [Finland](#). Armenia was next in line, simply because (in all honesty) we didn't know anything about the country and it's culture and this residency was available and ACSL invited us over.

Our method of working is the same as ever: we won't do much research before we arrive, so that all our impressions are fresh to start with. And when on location we start to venture into the social fabric of our surroundings, followed by research and the creation of an artwork which can be any form we wish it to be: a performance, a video, installation or composition or the combination of the last two (which mostly is the case). We can even decide to do nothing if we feel we haven't found a subject or a strong way to convey our findings into a final result. Luckily this has never happened...

Before I can start writing about our personal observations, I think it's necessary to sketch a short outline of the country and it's roots.



Armenia is a little smaller than the Netherlands with 3.2 million inhabitants and a vast diaspora of 8 million by some estimates, living outside the country. This has everything to do with a very turbulent history as one of the first countries in the world to adopt Christianity in 301.

It is a former republic of the Soviet Union, but being on the crossroads between Europe and Asia, it has been invaded by Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Mongols, Persians and Ottoman Turks. Since it's independence in 1990, it still has tensed relations with its neighbors on either side. Since the war with Azerbaijan over [Nagorno-Karabakh](#) between 1988 and 1994 (with 30,000 people killed and over one million displaced), it is officially still at war. As a result of this conflict, it's big western neighbor Turkey has closed it's border ever since, economically crippling Armenia and forcing it to seek ties with Russia in the north and Iran in the south. At the same time it has strong relationships with the US. Suffice to say the [Armenian Genocide](#) (1915 – 1923, est. 1.5

million Armenians died) does not make things easier: Turkey vigorously refers to this as ‘acts of self-defense and government responsibility’, avoiding any reference to the term ‘genocide’.

Modern day Armenia is by many standards a country in transition: its economy is changing from a centrally planned economy to a free market, but also politically, it is opening up to democratic principles. On paper, it is already a democratic republic, but a 2008 report by Freedom House still calls it a "Semi-consolidated Authoritarian Regime". In that year, during protests against the elections, police killed at least 10 people and censorship took hold of the media. The Freedom of the Press index ranks Armenia 146 (on a total of 195). According to these rankings, Armenia is called “not free”.



In Armenia there's almost no middle-class

First impressions

Yerevan is home to a third of the total population and half of it lives within a 60km radius of the capital. The city center is as modern as Berlin or Beirut with proud and sharp dressed people living at an easy pace. Armenians are friendly, hospitable and helpful, but sometimes only after you get acquainted. But also it seems a rather patriarchic society, with men looking like macho mobsters and women like dolls and where men are about cars and politics and women about fashion and shopping. Also my long blond hair raises eyebrows everywhere, sometimes even downright ridiculing me. I didn't expect that here and it shows Armenia can be pretty old-fashioned in places.

Our residency is located quite far from the center in the southwest and (therefore) the area is oftentimes referred to as “Bangladesh,” also due to the high level of poverty among the more than 140,000 residents living there. To the uninitiated, indeed the Soviet-style flats seem not very inviting, there's trash in the street in some places and wild dogs run among it. Potholes in the road, weeds on both sides and a constant exhaust of bad Russian cars.... But if you take away the Western interpretation of ‘ghetto’, you see different things: people are neatly dressed and well behaved, there's not so much noise and the green is actually is quite charming, since there are many places where there's no green at all.



A mixture of concrete and green, in some places well looked after

A few weeks have past and we have been studying our surroundings. The residency actually is inside one of the buildings of the "[Mkhitar Sebastatsi Educational Complex](#)", a large-scale ‘campus’ (7 buildings in total) setup by the former minister of education (and strong oppositional force) Ashot Bleyan. This school is really something else: it reminds me of the ‘Free School’ we have in

The Netherlands, but Ashot has never heard of it. His main idea is that children should learn by playing and expressing themselves, particularly through modern media. The students are allowed to discuss with their teacher, question his or her findings and speak their mind. How progressive this is for Armenia, we learned when we visited 'School 181', right opposite of the school. This is a regular, far more conservative school where children are told what to think and how to express that and it's the place where you remember that there is this other Armenia where progression goes slow. It reminded me of my own junior schooldays 35 years ago.



An aerial view on the left shows the giant sizes of both schools. On the right, the area as seen from the north.

Bangladesh

So here we are: in a socially deprived area (they say), inside this 'art school' with students all around us and yet another 1000 or so, right across the street. So we decided to get to know the area through them: what better way into those anonymous flat buildings than through the kids that live there?

During two days we interviewed students of both schools and made questionnaires for their parents, thinking we might use their answers and handwriting somehow.

The questions were:

1. When did you move into your apartment?
2. Name 3 positive and 3 negative things about Bangladesh
3. Do you have relatives abroad?

The answers on question 1 were varied of course, and not very revealing. The blocks have been built by Russian immigrants in the mid seventies and most went to live there themselves, but moved after the USSR collapsed. So there was only one family that stayed there from 1973 on. The rest moved in mostly in the eighties and early nineties.

The answers on the second question gave a good view on the satisfaction of the inhabitants, since the answers were amazingly similar (even for both schools) and showed that most are happy with the green, the shops and schools nearby and the beautiful newly built church and the complaints are relatively sober: there's no cinema or theater, the roads are bad and the air is dirty and there is no underground (a *maršrutka*, a mini-bus, takes 25 minutes to the center).

So not even one complaint about criminality, high cost of living, beggars, drugs, loud music and what not; the things that you'd expect in 'ghettos'. Of course we don't know how trustworthy the answers are, but it seems all is well in Bangladesh and its problems are not depressing beyond belief.

So for question 3, the answer was most interesting: there was almost nobody that does not have relatives abroad. There were many students that have relatives in more than one country, some of them even in 6 countries! And these are all over the globe: Russia, Syria, The Netherlands, Italy, Poland and of course the US. This in itself is not new, but it gave us insight in this huge (social *and* economic) network the diaspora is. We were also told that Armenians can assimilate quite well, but will always hold strong ties with their heritage culture, the country and their family. Not strange at all, considering all the bloodshed it has cost to hold on to their birth grounds and religion.

This will be our subject: actual, equal for all Armenians, not politically sensitive and open for a lot of artistic expression.



The Armenian script is very old and looks beautiful, just so difficult to understand....



View of Bangladesh from our residency with mythical Mount Ararat in the distance, sadly for all Armenians in Turkey.



Inside the art school, there's proof of creative thinking....

Brainstorm

The brainstorm could begin: what would be a communicative way to work with this?

We came up with the idea to let the relatives abroad in on the project. On both sides there's longing, hope and nostalgia, wrapped in a sort of LAT-relationship being fed by Skype: on a daily basis family members are in touch with their cousin in Nicosia, daughter in Brentwood, uncle in Lodz or brother in Oestgeest.

Aside from this subject, I had already seen the great possibilities of the flats as places to put big speakers on the rooftop, overlooking the square between the schools: a gigantic open-air surround system, several hundred meters wide. So the combination Skype and speakers was quickly made: what if we would have the voices of the relatives playing over the air, like they are coming from abroad, straight to Bangladesh?

Of course it would be nice if this would be a surprise for the inhabitants, in this case the parents of the students. So we asked them to use special software to record a short wish, poem, nice memory or greeting for me to use in a soundscape to be played from the roofs. So far for the audio-part.

Also visually, this square with a big 30m circle inside seems an ideal location to present an installation and the more we started working with the students of both schools, the more obvious it became to have the installation or artwork there. The disadvantage for Iris is that it forces her to think of materials and construction that is weather-savvy and kid-resistant.... Also it would be good to include the kids in the actual making of the artwork, so some of it's content needs to be simple enough to organize with a large group of young non-artists.

As usual, I have left Iris a bit alone for a day or two, so not interfere with her 'meditation' too much. And out comes the idea: white umbrellas... 42 to be precise, hanging upside down in a metal construction in the middle of the square. On the inside (or outside to be more precise) there is a short message from a relative abroad, written in a circle. An umbrella turned inside out looks like a satellite dish; a perfect receiver for the messages from abroad!

After the presentation, they could be returned to the addressees to be used as beloved protection against rain or sun... This was the initial idea.



But as usual, one has to be flexible: 42 white umbrellas were nowhere to be found. We even tried ordering them from China ("Sorry, only 500 pieces per order") and The Netherlands (difficulties with payments, shipping etc.). Finally we found pastel-colored ones on the bazaar. We paid for them ourselves, since the Dutch Embassy (based in Tbilisi in Georgia) had no money to support our plan. Also this would mean that the metal construction could probably not be made (\$300 in material only). Luckily that problem was solved 'somehow', since just yesterday we learned the metal master, who teaches welding and so on, had started working on it!

Yet another setback was that once we started experimenting with the umbrellas, it was clear that they could not be used as intended, since they could not be turned inside out: that worked only halfway. So we decided they will be used in their regular shape, still with the text inside.



Aerial views created with Photoshop, to get a feel for the dimensions.

But meanwhile, it was becoming clear that we should not only have just the presentation of installation, since that would be a too short event to generate publicity for: 15 minutes max, my soundscape included. So like we had learned in Vietnam, we could organize a 'festival' around it: with some performances by the students of both schools. Also the idea surfaced to make a kind of choreography with the umbrellas before hanging them in the installation. There are dance classes at both schools (that also double as activity-centre for learning judo, using internet, doing aerobics or as library) and the teachers of both schools are enthusiastic to cooperate.

And here we notice a hidden force of this whole project: like said earlier, the schools are two worlds apart and have never ever cooperated before, although they are just 100 meters apart. But on our instigation, things change and teachers of both schools join forces for the very first time, and it seems to go well. This can be seen as model of the current Armenian society that is opening up, but still consists of an intellectual progressive part and a conservative part that somehow will have to work it out together.... The kids are the future for both.

Back to the festival: we need acts to fill the program. Luckily there are four other artist staying in the residency that will also expose their work:

[Martin Kay](#) – Soundartist and composer from Australia. (My mate, you can imagine)

[Heesun Choi](#) – Conceptual artist and illustrator from Korea (married to Martin)

[Agneta Sofiadotter](#) – Painter from Sweden

[Bernhard Sallmann](#) – Filmmaker from Austria, now living in Berlin. He will show "The Bad Field" and we have a local filmmaker from Yerevan: [Arthur Sukiasyan](#) will show his film "Master of Doves".

But there are of course youngsters involved and not all people in this area might appreciate an art-only affair. So we contacted a breakdance-group from the city center that will battle with breakers from the schools and we have boldly contacted Armenian top-musicians like jazz-star [Vahagn Hayrapetyan](#), (he wanted to, but is unfortunately on tour in Greece) and the world-famous Duduk-player [Gevorg Dabaghyan](#). He said he wants to perform for free (radical for his doing), but wants not to be the only star. So we said we were trying to get the [Karen Folk Dance Ensemble](#) that recently won the first prize at the 16th World Folkdance Festival 2011 in Palma de Mallorca. "*If you have them, I will join too*" he said. So yesterday at 8.30 pm we met the artistic director with sweat in our hands, because just days before our (now still little) festival, he would probably be booked, since they are the hottest thing around after their prize.... But being a true patriot, he agreed, saying he was thankful for our interest in Armenian culture and especially aimed at the common people. "*If there is something they can do for us as gift in return?*" ... Wow. This outfit sometimes organizes big open-air dance lessons as you can see [here](#).

But although reading this, it looks like we're there, unfortunately a familiar 'East Block Easiness' seems to get in our way; many people, especially the female students, are wildly enthusiastic about it and like talking for hours about the options. But when it gets to actually *doing* stuff, it seems too much or too complicated or upon seeing the amount or effort that's needed, one is all of a sudden way too busy to get involved. Promises are everywhere to be found, but it has been a week and I have only two Skype-recordings and the group of students that are involved in the choreography has shrunk from 42 (needed) to a meek 25 or so. So with just 5 days before the festival, there is still a lot of negotiation and planning to do. So much that we both sometimes feel that our own artistry is just a sideshow and that getting this thing on the road is the main event. Well, putting your ego aside is an art in itself and we don't give up that easy.

More to follow....



Practicing with the choreography and the umbrellas.