

# Season 18

A curatorial project by Session 18 of l'Ecole du Magasin.

## Soviet AgitArt. Restoration



Samvel Baghdasaryan and Armine Hovhannisyan  
*Soviet AgitArt. Restoration*, BM SUMA Contemporary Art Center, 2008

The fourth episode introduces a project called *Soviet AgitArt. Restoration* which has recently been exhibited in 2008 at the BM SUMA Contemporary Art Center in Turkey, realized by two artists Samvel Baghdasaryan<sup>1</sup> and Armine Hovhannisyan<sup>2</sup> and curated by Beral Madra. The project is based on a collection consisting of propaganda posters from Soviet times with images of Lenin, Brezhnev, Khrushchev, and Stalin set in correspondence with archival audio material associated to each of the historical figures, the artworks of Samvel Baghdasaryan and the documentary photographs and a video of the Soviet remains in the contemporary Yerevan urban space by his student Armine Hovhannisyan.

The history of the project is related to the position of Samvel as an artist that has worked in the Communist system and since 1990's focused on two ways of re-constructing memory and its documentation through artistic processes collecting the agitation material. One of these ways was to reconstruct and re-embody the agitation materials by interpreting their aesthetics using didactic meaning. Another way was through Baghdasaryan's pedagogical activity. Being an artist-pedagogue he always combines his creative process with that of young artists. In the frame of this project Baghdasaryan suggested a collaboration with one of his students, Armine Hovhannisyan.

The interview is interested in the project based on archival materials and also the different positions of involvement from two artists of different generations who are questioning the importance of the project as another model to transfer the artistic experience from the position of collaboration and education.

Interview with Samvel Baghdasaryan and Armine Hovhannisyan.

Marianna Hovhannisyan

*Soviet AgitArt. Restoration* project is a long-term project based on the archival materials and agitprop posters from the Soviet time. Your works are re-embodying the conceptual and aesthetical meaning of the posters, produced along with the intervention of a young artist Armine Hovhannisyan. You had a recent presentation focused on collaboration with Beral Madra and involving different people. How do you consider your choice of work as an artist- pedagogue?

Samvel Baghdasaryan

The things from the past which remain are not always a pleasant memory. By their history they can orient you to different activities and reactions. Like in my case, during the Soviet time every event was evaluated by a degree of the awareness of the social-cultural situations, which had hidden tense relations. These relations, depending on your artistic position, were comfortable for some and uncomfortable for another. In my case memory became material when

I started to share it with my students. The question you asked brought me to the idea that the values of whomever you don't agree with today only can be re-considered from the view of the artificial education of that time, which at the same time had an obvious disciplinary aspect. The Soviet agitation machine was regulating the human thinking in such a way that the repeating, print-run production was becoming a politics of teaching like a refined motor, which could be at school, at the university, at the work place, daily life etc. The young artists of that time also were involved in this politics in order to build their future dreaming about the coming of the bright Communism. When I realized that most of these didactic materials are now witnesses of my past education and could be renewed with the help of young people, gradually I reconsidered their new conceptual and aesthetical problems.

The party machine, which had been educating and bringing up the artists with the big success of that time, had created a set of relations that was today in our work always in the center of the students interest. Step-by-step the project has become interesting in its concreteness and perspectives but always parallel with its educational impact, especially in the case of the Fine Arts department. In relation to these kinds of projects the department's methods usually bring the students to the understanding of the recent past with their creativity. Due to this the project becomes more open and educational, involving people who are even included on different levels. For example, the involvement was to bring things like posters, pins, photos which stand for the memory belonging to their family and past. Some of the people trying to understand the question deeply were searching the remains from Soviet Armenia, which will live on for a long time in the urban space. Armine Hovhannisyan, an artist working in the field of photography and video art, has noticed the opportunity to complete and add to the project by exploring and chronologically explaining each of these traces of cultural values which correspond to a certain period of Communist leader.

The project became more complete when in 2007 at the Fine Arts department of Armenian Open University there was a workshop in the context of the *Changes through Exchanges* experimental educational project. The workshop at that time was led by Beral Madra and Xurban collective group. Beral Madra, one of the famous curators in Turkey, had noticed the project and with the coordination of Marianna Hovhannisyan developed a new stage and levels of development.



*Archiving*, Samvel Baghdasaryan, installation, 2008



*What is the Soviet Power?*, Armine Hovhannisyana, video, 2008

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In the project you present your photo-video research of the remains in Yerevan city. How do you define your position in the project as a young artist?

Armine Hovhannisyana

I was four years old in 1987 when my father came home with an ice-cream cake. I asked him where did you find this big cake and he answered Grandfather Lenin has sent it to you. And I remember when the sculpture of my 'Grandfather Lenin' brought down in the Lenin Square in Yerevan in 1991 I was upset. Of course it was the unconscious, but very emotional moment, a memory which was nailed in my mind, while all around I started to notice that my environment slowly does not relate and talk about Communism, yet the traces of Soviet Armenia still remains actual and visible in the city. When I had the chance to see the project by Samvel Baghdasaryan, especially the biggest part which was a collection of the Soviet era, I suggested to explore the urban space of contemporary Yerevan and from those remains, to start a new section in the collection.

1. Samvel Baghdasaryan is an artist based in Yerevan. He is one of the founders and professors at Fine Arts department of the Armenian Open University, Yerevan. Since 2004 he is Dean of the Fine Arts Department.
2. Armine Hovhannisyana is an artist based in Yerevan. She often is involved in the collaborative projects. Since 2003 she works at the National Center of Aesthetics, Fine Arts and Decorative Applied Art studio-college.

Posted by Marianna Hovhannisyana on Sunday, March 1, 2009 at 13:25.

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