

Armenian Total-Art in a Milanese Event-Space: Minoritarian Performance

Temporalities and Spatial Performativity

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The framework of performance studies allows us to acknowledge space as a cooperative transformative entity which *does* rather than *is*, underscoring its capacity to affect performance itself. As Dorita Hannah argues, a theory of spatial performativity necessitates a foundation in the concept of *event-space*, “an enfolding of the evental with the spatiotemporal [which] can be *cited* (as significant *historic* moments that shift [through]), *sighted* (as *dramatic* spectacles, shows and displays) and *sited* (as embodied *quotidian* performances in time and space)” (Hannah 2019: 18). The focal point of Hannah’s inquiry lies within avant-garde movements, which frequently leverage a confluence of media fostering anti-hierarchical artistic encounters.

The same convergence informed the Armenian avant-garde produced within the Milanese cultural milieu of the 1970s. In March 1977, Milan-based Armenian painter Herman Vahramian and Armenian composer Ludwig Bazil staged *Ararat*, a ‘total-art’ event featuring music, poetry, and paintings, at the church of San Maurizio. The performance’s core consisted of 15 musical pieces encompassing string quartets, arias for soprano and bass and an a-cappella composition for choir. The lyrical content was derived from Armenian poems spanning various periods, including odes by Grigor Narekatsi, Sayat Nova and victims of the Genocide Komitas Vardapet, Siamanto, and Daniel Varuzan. Throughout the musical performance, a video projector reproduced scenes of the Armenian archeological site in Shirak, photographs of miniatures and *khatchkar* (i.e. “crosses of stone”, the typical memorial monuments of Medieval

Armenia) and a collection of black-and-white non-figurative pictures sketched by Vahramian. Owing to its intermediality, the catalogue of the performance (see Ronfani 1977: 11) and the press release (see Cavalleri 1977, Manin 1977, Notte 1977) described *Ararat* as an Armenian avant-garde project aiming to salvage a culture.

I thus intend to test event-space's performativity within a minoritarian context. Specifically, I investigate how diasporic communities negotiate their relationship with time through the performing arts and performative space. Particularly within the avant-garde, spatiality also implicates temporal considerations. The aspiration to dissolve boundaries among disciplines and cultivate mutual medial co-relations interweaves a future-oriented political commitment predicated on the ideological rupture with forms and taxonomies of the past (see Cunningham 2001, Hannah 2019: 27). Moreover, in accordance with José Esteban Muñoz, minoritarian performances conceptualize a “coterminous time” unveiling an already-occurring future within the present (see Muñoz 2009: 56). Given the pervasive role of temporality in contexts of abjection, as within Armenian diasporic communities, the Milanese context presents a fertile ground for exploring the question of spatial performativity. Abjection, both as an expelling operation and a destructive condition, involves a temporal process which threatens established power structures. Through performance, abjected individuals envisage an alternative narrative of future possibilities, overcoming the constraints imposed by past traumatic events (see Balce 2016: 3-4).

The concerns about futurity were tangible in *Ararat*. Nevertheless, it was primarily a past-oriented recovering endeavor, which further conflates the temporalities inherent in this avant-garde performance. The title derives from the biblical mount where the Ark of Noah is said to have come to rest after the Flood, serving as a geographical landmark deeply intertwined with Armenian history, culture, and Christianity. Equally challenging was the involvement of the event-space. San Maurizio performed as a venue defined not only by spatiality and

architecture but also by its artistic and historical connotations, as I will demonstrate. The co-operation between space and performance succeeded due to a shared intermediality undetectable in most other Milanese or Milanese-Armenian buildings. Hence, I will explicate the complex temporal dynamics a minoritarian intermedia show can involve, thus questioning avant-garde conventions by relying on past cultural heritage to conceive futurity. The event-space's performativity supported this attitude more effectively than similar spaces strongly connected to the Armenian community of Milan.

The emergence of a structured Armenian community in Lombardy dates to the final years of the 1910s, coinciding with the diaspora resulting from the Genocide. Armenians who migrated to Italy during this period boasted a high level of education and sought urban environments which offered financial assets conducive to their liberal pursuits. Milan, being one of Italy's major economic centers, provided these opportunities. Over the ensuing decades, Milanese Armenians became integrated into the entrepreneurial fabric of the city. In the 1950s, they bolstered their presence by supporting the construction and organization of their most cherished communal spaces. Casa Armena - Hay Dun (Armenian House) in piazza Velasca was instituted in 1953 and became immediately the primary venue for concerts, balls, and conferences. Similarly, the Armenian Apostolic Church, erected in via Jommelli in 1955, provided a location for Armenian Christian rituals and their distinctive liturgy (see Manoukian 2014: 118-122; Del Zanna 2022: 23-31). Two decades later, these buildings represented the political and religious institutions of the community. In the meantime, the 1968 movement spurred young Armenians to criticize the cultural programs proposed by Hay Dun (see Del Zanna 2022: 30-32). It is difficult to know if Vahramian and Bazil were actively involved in these social upheavals. Nevertheless, the countercultural climate of the period probably influenced their decision to stage an Armenian performance in a former monastery rather than opting for the church in via Jommelli. However, I contend that a key factor was centered on

San Maurizio's performativity. The event-space acted not only through architecture but also history, artistic heritage, and ritual as well as musical performance. Therefore, it served as an intermedia space which aligned with the 'total-art' aesthetics of *Ararat* in a manner that Hay Dun and especially the church in via Jommelli could not afford.

The architectural design of San Maurizio is entangled with its history. Until the late 18th century, the building served as a cloistered monastery for benedictine nuns. This historical context shaped the internal configuration with a double-spaced layout intended to separate different groups of attendants. The devotees occupied the courtroom at the entrance, while the nuns prayed and sang in the exclusive chamber behind the altar. After the suppression of the convent during Napoleonic's dominance in 1798, a narrow aisle beside the apse connected the Public Room and the Nuns' Room, establishing an allegorical link between the communal and the secret (see Agosti et al. 2016: 68). In *Ararat*, the suggestion prompted by the double-space was leveraged initially by placing the spectators in the Public Room, where the flutist Cecilia Vallini, dressed in black, performed instrumental improvisations (see Manin 1977). The preamble served as an initiation into the sacral acknowledgement of the upcoming performance. Upon concluding her solos, Vallini guided the audience from the Public Room to the Nuns' Room, where the 'total-art' event was set to begin (see Ronfani 1977b: 106).

In addition to spatiality, the painterly heritage of the event-space served as a notable influence. In the church of San Maurizio, Mount Ararat takes on a material presence. One of the chapels of the Nuns' Room features a triptych depicting the Biblical Deluge, realized by Aurelio Luini and culminating in a panel portraying the Arc atop the sacred mountain (see Agosti et al. 2016: 62). This artwork is just one example of the way the Room's artistic elements interacted with the performance. Due to their musical as well as scenographic significance, the imposing wooden choir stalls and the lavishly decorated 16th century organ

were seamlessly integrated into the intermediality of *Ararat*, illustrating the spatial inclination towards a ‘total-art’ experience (see Palmieri 1996: 49).

The urban landscape in which the event transpired nurtured a similarly comprehensive artistic disposition. In the 1970s Milan was one of the most dynamic cultural hubs of the country, with a significant interest in multimedia approaches. Institutions as Collettivo La Comune, Centro di Ricerca per il Teatro, Salone Pier Lombardo, and Teatro Out Off promoted experimental theatrical programs incorporating music, painting, and poetry (see Ponte di Pino 2011). Meanwhile, avant-garde Milan-based opera composers Luciano Berio, Sylvano Bussotti, Giacomo Manzoni, and Luigi Nono aimed to foster a broader interaction between music and the linguistic and visual components of the playwright productions (see Borio et al. 2017: VII-XXXII, Gentilucci 1980: 6-7). Even music festivals apparently unrelated to avant-garde entailed intermedia concerns. *Musica e poesia a San Maurizio* serves as a pivotal example, as it has been held in the church of San Maurizio since 1976 – just a year before *Ararat* was performed in the same event-space. Conceived by musicologist Sandro Boccardi, the festival featured Renaissance music concerts and poetry readings. The scenographic presence of the church’s frescoes enriched the performances. Just like *Ararat*, *Musica e poesia* thus represents a convergence of three main media: music, literature, and image (see Palmieri 1996: 57-59).

Indeed, intermediality was central to *Ararat*’s theoretical focus. Rather than being simply juxtaposed, music, poetry, and painting were interwoven in a collaborative web of references. Musicologist Khachi Khachik compares Basil’s compositive development to a literary narrative, describing it as a “musical story [...] transforming the real musical background into an abstraction” (Khachik 1977: 62). An abstract sensibility is similarly evident in Vahramian’s paintings, which exhibit a heightened intermedia awareness. Art critic Vanni Scheiwiller

elucidates that his sinuous arabesques aim at “the merging of hearing and sight [...], seeking to operate musically in order to obtain a ‘sound painting’” (Scheiwiller 1977: 95).

All the media involved in *Ararat* intentionally referenced an Armenian artistic past. The musical compositions incorporate ancient styles of religious chants and Medieval modal scales. The poetic themes span a period of eight centuries, with the most recent ones originating in the late 19th century. Additionally, imagery encompasses not only archeological ruins and antique monuments. Through his abstract works, Vahramian engages with Armenian art history, which has frequently focused on non-figurative representations (see Ronfani 1977: 15). Khachik emphasizes that in Basil’s music “the abstraction of tradition by means of harmonic components and suitable techniques led to a reproduction of the original idea deeply-rooted in the Armenian musical tradition” (Kachik 1977: 63). In reviewing the show, musicologist Quirino Principe expresses a similar and more peremptory assumption by arguing that, notwithstanding its avant-garde inclination, *Ararat* “was not an ‘experimental’ initiative” (my translation from Principe 1977: 305).

Conversely, Ugo Ronfani observes that the performance was not “a purely archeological retrieval of the past” (Ronfani 1977: 21) but a means “to interpret [its] existential significance and compare [it] with the tensions of the present” (ibidem: 25). Moreover, the spectacle also conveyed the imagination of the future. The Mount Ararat can be in fact understood as a metaphorical bridge between the old and the new. The mountain is not only the symbol of an identity which has endured successive catastrophes, with eventual allusions to the Genocide. It also suggests the renewed possibility of envisioning and constructing futurity. After the systematic campaign of deportation and annihilation initiated by the Young Turks in 1915, Armenians confronted the expropriation of material properties and cultural symbols, undergoing a definitive process of abjection. In subsequent decades, Armenian diasporas devised various strategies to cope with the trauma, including through artistic performances.

The healing and progressive passage of time from these harrowing events enabled communities not only to scrutinize the repercussions of the past, but also to access a future narrative aiming to preserve their denied culture (see Scott 2010: 11).

Musicologist Michele Straniero interprets *Ararat*'s relationship with intermediality through a temporal lens, framing it as a ritual "projected towards the future" (Straniero 1977: 37). Another factor to consider is the political and geopolitical prospects which diasporic Armenians in the 1970s envisioned. In 1977, Armenia was a Soviet Republic under the influence of Moscow. The regime effectively continued centuries of external dominance, denying autonomy to the ancestral homeland of Vahramian and Bazil. In this regard, Vahramian himself provided a future-oriented retrospective. In a 1992 interview, one year after the Armenian Republic gained independence from the collapsing Soviet Union, the painter retraces his career as an effort driven "by the hope that one day what [he] was trying to produce and create would become something important for that 'elsewhere' for which [he] was basically working". He also remarks, regarding the artistic partnership with Bazil, that "his music is constructed principally thinking of the 'independent' Armenia that when he was composing [in 1977] was not yet there" (my translation from Vahramian in Manoukian et al. 1992: 18).

The sacral encoding of the event-space remained a relevant aspect of San Maurizio's performativity. Reviews of *Ararat* all noted "a certain sacred aura, arising from a sense of belonging to the Armenian world" (my translation from Arruga 1977). Due to the ritualistic nature of the church setting, a sense of liturgical sacrality instilled the performance (see Cavalleri 1977). A sparse arrangement of ceremonial candles dimly enlightened the nave where the audience gathered. Furthermore, a pervasive aroma of incense infused the space (see Manin 1977). Armenian liturgical tradition eventually influenced Bazil's musical compositions, truthfully transposing the modal structures of Medieval religious chants (see Principe 1977).

San Maurizio thus provided both the sacral atmosphere and the intermedia engagement Vahramian and Bazil were seeking. By showcasing a cultural legacy imbedded in the past, *Ararat* expounds a notion of futurity which, instead of subverting the artistic forms and values which have shaped a communitarian identity, embraces them. The multiplicity of media involved reconnects the performance to the avant-garde category, albeit challenging its aspiration to disrupt past forms and conventions. By accurately interpreting Armenian art traditions to conceive the future of a yet-to-be self-determined homeland, *Ararat* complicates performative temporalities to delineate a minoritarian avant-garde in a Western urban context.

Ararat served as the catalyst of a wide range of cultural projects spearheaded by Vahramian and Bazil. Shortly after the ‘total-art’ concert, they co-founded the I/COM (Institute for Research and Dissemination of Non-Dominant Cultures), a multidisciplinary association focused on non-hegemonic cultural studies (see Manoukian 2014: 150-154). In 1981, in Munich, where Bazil had relocated permanently, the MUSICAM Institute was established with the goal of reviving the Armenian musical tradition (see *ibidem*: 259). Meanwhile, the editorial strategies of the newborn Armenian-Milanese publishing house Oemme incorporated the activities of I/COM. Their publications also encompass a dozen musical scores and recordings by Bazil and his MUSICAM projects (see *ibidem*: 359-361).

The ‘total-art’ experience pioneered by *Ararat* found new expressions at the Dominican Centro San Bartolomeo of Bergamo. Here, Vahramian’s art exhibition, aptly called *Ararat: Immagini per un’Arte Contemporanea Armena* (Images for An Armenian Contemporary Art), was hosted for three weeks between February and March 1983. During this period, Bazil delivered a lecture regarding Armenian music and supervised two classical concerts (see *ibidem*: 312). This legacy highlights the proactive engagement proffered by Milan-based Armenian artists and musicians in negotiating their diasporic identity. For them, experiencing abjection entails envisioning the future through the commitment of art to signify the resilience

of their community. According to Muñoz, artistic performances within minoritarian contexts wield the capability of anticipating futurity (see Muñoz 2009: 64). Abjected individuals thus emerge as active agents within a durational process rooted in a “not-yet-there” temporal dimension. Inheritance of the past does not solely blend collective trauma alongside cultural and artistic history. It reflects a yearning for utopia.

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