The Political Aesthetics of the Armenian Avant-Garde
Angela Harutyunyan

The book addresses late-Soviet and post-Soviet art in Armenia in the context of turbulent social, political and cultural transformations in the late 1980s, throughout the 1990s and in early 2000s through the aesthetic figure of the ‘painterly real’ and its conceptual transformations. It explores the emergence of ‘contemporary art’ in Armenia from within and in opposition to the practices, aesthetics and institutions of Socialist Realism and National Modernism. The book presents the argument that avant-garde art best captures the historical and social contradictions of the period of the so-called ‘transition,’ especially if one considers ‘transition’ from the perspective of the former Soviet republics that have been consistently marginalized in Russian- and East European-dominated post-Socialist studies. Throughout the two decades that encompass the chronological scope of this work, contemporary art has encapsulated the difficult dilemmas of autonomy and social participation, innovation and tradition, progressive political ethos and national identification, the problematic of communication with the world outside of Armenia’s borders, dreams of subjective freedom and the imperative to find an identity in the new circumstances after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This historical study outlines the politics (liberal democracy), aesthetics (autonomous art secured by the gesture of the individual artist), and ethics (ideals of absolute freedom and radical individualism) of contemporary art in Armenia. Through the historical investigation, a theory of post-Soviet art historiography is developed, one that is based on a dialectic of rupture and continuity in relation to the Soviet past. As the first English-language study on contemporary art in Armenia, the book is of prime interest for artists, scholars, curators and critics interested in post-Soviet art and culture and in global art historiography.
Watching the red dawn
Barnaby Haran

Watching the red dawn charts the responses of the American avant-garde to the cultural works of its Soviet counterpart in period from the formation of the USSR in 1922 to recognition of this new communist nation by USA in 1933. In this period American artists, writers, and designers looked at the emerging Soviet Union with fascination, as they observed this epochal experiment in communism develop out of the chaos of the Russian Revolution and Civil War. They organised exhibitions of Soviet art and culture, reported on visits to Russia in books and articles, and produced works that were inspired by post-revolutionary culture. One of the most important innovations of Soviet culture was to collapse boundaries between disciplines, as part of a general aim to bring art into everyday life. Correspondingly, this book takes an interdisciplinary approach by looking at American avant-garde responses to Soviet culture across several media, including architecture, theatre, film, photography, and literature. As such, Watching the red dawn considers the putative area of ‘American Constructivism’ by examining the interconnected ways in which Constructivist works were influential upon American practices.

Robert W. Cherny

Arnautoff emigrated to the Soviet Union in 1963 and lived there until his death in 1979. Living first in Mariupol (then called Zhdanov), he again created large public murals, this time using small ceramic tiles. In adjusting to Soviet society under Khrushchev and then Brezhnev, Arnautoff was privileged by his status and his American dollars from his small Stanford pension, and his marriage to a Soviet art critic. He and his second wife moved to Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) where he continued to paint until his death.
The ‘painterly real’ of contemporary art: resurrected ghosts, living heroes and saintly saviours on the 3rd Floor, 1987–94

Angela Harutyunyan


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This chapter discusses the 3rd Floor – an artistic movement of the late Soviet and early independence years in Armenia (1987-94) – in its complex relationship with the cultural politics of the perestroika period, the official art of the Union of Artists of the Soviet Republic of Armenia, and National Modernism. It argues that the 3rd Floor, thought its strategy of hamasteghtsakan art both reproduced the dynamic of the perestroika politics and surpassed it. The 3rd Floor affirmed the separation between autonomous art and all that falls outside this autonomous sphere – the social world replete with antagonism and discontent.

Suspending the ‘painterly real’: ACT’s procedures of ‘pure creation’, 1993–96

Angela Harutyunyan


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The chapter is dedicated to the conceptual artist group ACT. Its historical investigation of the group’s aesthetic strategies attempts to situate them within those structural changes that took place in the aftermath of independence following the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and defined the trajectory for this decade. The chapter investigates, describe and critically revisits the social and cultural context defined as one of a ‘crisis of negation’. Further it analyses those spaces and possibilities that emerge in the gaps between ‘pure creation,’ and are made operational throughout the group’s existence, and the intensity of everyday life in Armenia in the mid-1990s. It argues that the concept of ‘pure creation’ emerges in the clash between autonomous art, and the intensity of turbulent transformations affecting everyday life. It is this clash that transforms the agenda of ‘pure creation’ into a political-artistic program
that rhymes with the positivist assumptions of the post-Soviet liberal democratic state.