

Introduction

Art's contiguous ideal of autonomy

This book addresses the discursive and representational field of contemporary art in Armenia in the context of the post-Soviet condition, from the late 1980s through the 1990s up until the early 2000s. Contemporary art, I argue, is what 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. Occupying a sphere distinct from other social and cultural spheres of productive activity and yet inextricably connected to social institutions, contemporary art in Armenia has become a negative mirror for the social: art has been viewed as that which reflects those wishes and desires for emancipation that the social world has been incapable of accommodating in both late Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. Contemporary art's status as a negative mirror is due to its particular historical emergence in transnational (Soviet) and national (post-Soviet) contexts, its peculiar institutionalization in relation to official cultural discourse, and to a prevailing belief in art's autonomy. 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 beyond 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. These are questions that have occupied culture and society at large, in the post-Soviet context and beyond. Yet the contradictions embedded in these questions are best crystallized in contemporary art, because of its peculiar position within the social sphere. This historical study aims at outlining 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 in post-Soviet conditions from a critical perspective and in ways that point towards the limitations of the aesthetic

and political horizons of contemporary art in the post-socialist context. Rather than a comprehensive survey, the primary aim of the work has been to define the historical logic of contemporary art in Armenia. This has been done through dealing with the dominant discourses, narratives and formative artistic and exhibition-making practices, an approach that has ultimately resulted in the exclusion of many important artists and their practices from this project. A comprehensive history of contemporary art in Armenia has yet to be written, and this task lies beyond the scope of this book.

The period under discussion starts in the late 1980s and reaches to the early 2000s, roughly comprising two decades. However, the occasional historiographical venture will often take us to previous decades formative for contemporary art's development, or bring us to the very present in order to show continuities and breaks within the cultural logic of the late Soviet and post-Soviet worlds. This book does not offer a general survey of contemporary art in Armenia: many important protagonists and discourses are not discussed, and a certain historical lineage has been constructed at the expense of other relations. Instead, the book proposes a study of the selected instances of contemporary art – of artistic, institutional and art critical practices – that provide a window to the aesthetic and historical logic that underlies these practices. I call this logic the 'painterly real'. Painting, therein, is considered an underlying condition – even when there is no paint or canvas used – that determines the relationship between everyday life (or reality understood as the empirical field of experience) and the ideal of autonomous art. By drawing from the philosophical debate between Soviet philosophers Evald Ilyenkov and Mikhail Lifshitz, I approach the ideal of autonomous art as a realm of human universality constituted through a material historical process. In this, art becomes an instance of universality.

This book traces the transformations and development of autonomous art in Armenia: from the late Soviet unofficial artists' conception of art as an ideal of emancipation from everything falling under the category of the Soviet experience, to the conception of art as the ideal of the constitutional state in the works of the conceptual artists of the so-called generation of independence, to the conception of the ultimate irreconcilability between autonomous art and the social world from the late 1990s on. Even though in all three instances, art negotiates its autonomy within and from the social world differently, these historical moments of contemporary art share an understanding of art as an ideal, but one that is objective to the extent that it endows art with the ontological status of reality, displacing the empirical world of experience. In short, *the ideal is conceived as more real than reality itself*.

I consider the 'painterly real', taken as a structural support for art, as an ideal that underlies autonomous art as differentiated from other spheres of productive social activity. The 'painterly real' as a structural support for the

ideal has been constituted as such in a historical process. This constitutive process has evolved through capturing the sedimentations of wishes and desires that occur through human engagement with the material conditions of painting (canvas, paint), and turning this engagement into a promise of freedom, understood as emancipation from the unfreedom of the social world. The 'painterly real' as a support structure for the ideal in art and as a marker of its separation from everyday life, I argue, is always present, even when we refer to practices that do not use paint as material. Historically, the 'painterly real' constitutes the relationship between art and everyday life differently at different times: sometimes this logic is more pronounced and present, sometimes it is repressed, only to come back to haunt the practices of contemporary art with a vengeance. Historically, the 'painterly real' as I trace its transformations throughout the book corresponds to the long process of 'the disintegration of the Soviet'¹ as a historical body, as an ideology and as experience.

Cancelling the Soviet: between utopia and nostalgia

This book offers a critical historical reading of the late Soviet and the post-Soviet condition through contemporary art, conceptualizing this condition as a state in between utopia and nostalgia: from perestroika efforts to salvage utopia as a pragmatic *modus vivendi* at the expense of the soon-to-be Soviet past, to a striving to rethink nostalgia as a progressive revocation of the Soviet in the present, to contemporary attempts to eliminate the radical difference of that very past and prevent it from becoming history. There are many ways of conceptually placing the 'former Soviet' between utopia and nostalgia in the so-called post-ideological age, and the examples that follow outline the discursive context in which this book will intervene.

According to a 1996 decree issued by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Armenia, the pedestal of what had formerly been Lenin's statue in Yerevan – a pedestal that for more than five and a half decades had proudly borne the leader of the Bolshevik Revolution, before the statue was toppled in the heat of the nationalist anti-Soviet wave in 1991 – was to be preserved, according to international law.² Citing the importance of preserving historical monuments regardless of their ethnic, religious or ideological belonging, the ministry's decree called for projects to substitute for the pedestal's original inhabitant, which had first been decapitated and then removed altogether in the now classical move of founding the future of constitutional democracy on the headless body of the 'monarch'. Between 1991 and 1996 several competitions were announced, first to fill in the material and ideological gap that the statue had left, and then to replace the pedestal itself after its ultimate de-installation in 1996 – for the ministry, despite its decree, approved the de-installation, citing the 'financial difficulties' involved in maintaining it. The prominent place that

Lenin's statue once occupied in Lenin Square, subsequently named Republic Square, is still empty, whereas discussions regarding filling this empty space are ongoing.³ A contested representational space – which has become a symbolic battleground for various historical narratives and ideologies mostly occupying poles between patriotic religious nationalism and consumerism, and often for their marriage – is left empty, an emptiness that marks the absence of a compelling ideology and an inability to come to terms with the legacy of the Soviet experience within the confines of a nation state.

The gradual disintegration of Lenin's monument in Republic Square – its head in storage at the National Museum of History, its decapitated body lying in the courtyard of the museum, the remnants of its pedestal supposedly in municipal storage on the outskirts of Yerevan – bears witness to the disintegration of Soviet ideology. However, the scattered parts of the monument also signal the subliminal material presence of the Soviet historical experience, in the subterranean layers of the national post-Soviet present, in the avenues, universities, institutes, museums, factories and other infrastructure built throughout the Soviet project of modernization. Discursively, the presence of this ideology is ghostly: on the surface, the Soviet Union is an object of either vilification or nostalgia. These two attitudes complete each other, while foreclosing the possibility of revisiting historical experience critically on the one hand, and of proposing an emancipatory vision for the future on the other.

Even months before the collapse of the Soviet Union, most people in the USSR still envisioned the transformation of society within the framework of perestroika.⁴ Shortly before the watershed moment of the Belavezha accords and the disintegration of the USSR, the Moscow-based publishing house Progress published an anthology of foreign literature titled *Utopia i utopicheskoe myshlenie*.⁵ Edited by Irina Chalikova, the book included texts as varied as a history of utopian thinking,⁶ writings of the philosopher Ernst Bloch,⁷ Karl Mannheim's 1920s elaboration of the differences between ideology and utopia,⁸ and a theorization of revolutionary utopia and utopian revolution⁹ alongside fictional literature on dystopian, utopian and anti-utopian technomyths. *Utopia i utopicheskoe myshlenie* was published in the context of ongoing attempts by the late Soviet intelligentsia to overcome Stalin's legacy and to salvage the concept of utopia from its associations with totalitarianism. But it also attempted to offer an understanding of utopia and ideology that departed from Marxist theory. The book's central premise was that utopia does not impede individual liberty, and the whole can reconcile with the part as long as the latter is granted autonomy from the former.

Chalikova's volume, as a product of Gorbachev's reformist agenda, captures the dilemmas of perestroika in its later years – in its task, for example, of liberalizing politics without abandoning the one-party system, and introducing market relations without embracing capitalism wholesale.¹⁰

Utopia here is perceived as an active possibility, an operational concept that might emancipate the Soviet subject from its (Stalinist) recent history and the individual from the collective, yet also create a pragmatic political framework for the cohabitation of autonomous individuals. It is this latter premise, which establishes perestroika's liberal pragmatism, that characteristically conceals liberalism's own ideological operation behind the façade of commonsensical individual freedom.

Sixteen years later, in 2007, the socialist ideals of collectivism no longer threatened with their spectre of grand utopias, and the former Soviet republics – once, under the umbrella of the Soviet Union, individually unrecognizable for most outsiders – had reclaimed their specific histories with the aid of the discursive tools provided by nationalism and liberalism, and often by the two together. During that year, *Khudozhestvennyi Journal* [*Moscow Art Magazine*] – a leading publication on late Soviet unofficial and post-Soviet contemporary art in Russia – published a special issue called 'Progressivnaya Nostalgia' in its Russian-language edition.¹¹ The goal of the issue was to find a concept that could establish a common discursive ground for post-Soviet intellectuals from the various countries of the former Soviet republics. The editorial claimed that one concept that might unify the diverse post-Soviet contexts was nostalgia, albeit a progressive nostalgia, emancipated from its negative connotations as a regressive reactionism and given the meaning of rethinking and revisiting the Soviet past from the position of the post-socialist present.¹² If Chalikova's anthology on utopia aimed at eliminating the discursive reverberations of Stalinism, what was at stake in the 2007 issue of *Moscow Art Magazine* was the disavowal of the perestroika liberalism that had shaped the allegedly post-ideological landscape of the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

The editors explained that the need to reconsider the Soviet past came from a growing discontent with the post-Soviet present and a resurgent tendency to recuperate the communist promise of universalism, internationalism and collectivism in many countries of the former Soviet bloc. The issue 'Progressivnaya Nostalgia' was an attempt to go beyond the usual post-Cold-War-era polarities, where 'the East' used every stereotype of the Cold War to characterize its own past 'as totally unique, totally totalitarian', while 'the West' mouthed a standard New Left criticism of capitalism and commodity culture.¹³ The editorial claimed:

Nostalgia for the Soviet can be understood as a form of its new existence and fuller realization. And that is the reason why this nostalgia is deprived of *passéisme* – mourning for an irretrievable past. Rather, it is a form of constructively inhabiting the present and outlining a perspective. That is why in its essence, this is a 'progressive nostalgia'.¹⁴

The goal of *Moscow Art Magazine's* 2007 issue was to reconcile two opposing terms – progress and nostalgia¹⁵ – by reversing the temporality of these concepts and by locating nostalgia in the present and progress in the past. This shift of temporality, as a postmodern strategy of delinearizing of time, was thus meant to challenge the common meaning of these two terms, for nostalgia usually comes across as a moralizing prevention of progress for the sake of retrogressive mourning, while progress is seen as a constant reproach of the past. However, the functionalization of nostalgia for the Soviet past ‘as a form of its new existence and fuller realization’ relies on the assumption that it is possible to reactivate the past in the present without the very material fabric that constituted the Soviet. This assumption turns the ‘Soviet’ into an apparition, a ghost without a shell, and thus collapses its historical existence. And it was indeed a reading of the Soviet as pure ideology – a reading most influentially offered by Boris Groys – that had informed most scholarship on the post-Soviet condition. The reclamation of the ‘Soviet’, as the editors of the *Moscow Art Magazine* conceived it, did not bring about a proposition to rethink the Bolshevik project of emancipation as an experience that had actually happened. Instead, it reiterated the ‘Soviet’ as a generalized term connoting identity, uncomfortably reminding one of the Stalinist-era references to the ‘Soviet man’ or the ‘Soviet homeland’.¹⁶

In the case of both Chalikova’s publication in 1989 and Viktor Misiano’s volume of 2007, the historical experience of the Soviet is forsaken. In the first case, a late Soviet intelligentsia haunted by the spectre of Stalinism overcomes the Soviet experience by combining social democracy with liberal pragmatism, while in the second, the past is brought into the present, and thus disavowed as such (this is postmodernism enacted as a historiographical method). While Chalikova’s volume predicted the ideological horizon of the 1990s, *Moscow Art Magazine* marked an attempt to historicize that horizon, to think beyond it. And in an uncanny manner, it foretold contemporary developments, in which Cold War dynamics would be re-enacted with the annexation of Crimea and Russia’s involvement in the civil war in Ukraine.¹⁷

As opposed to the examples above, in which the post-Soviet condition is conceived in terms of a rupture from Soviet experience – from the removal of Lenin’s statue and the attempt at salvaging a non-totalizing concept of utopia, to rethinking nostalgia as a progressive notion – the present work does not consider the post-Soviet as simply an outcome of some temporally punctual dissolution of the Soviet Union. Consequently, the 1989 collapse of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 are not regarded only as ruptural events in the sense of being formative and transformative of social and historical life. Rather, these incidences were largely structurally prepared in the long process of the disintegration of the Soviet experience and are seen as ‘eventful’ only from the perspective of the victorious side – that of

neoliberal capitalism and political liberalism. Indeed, it is within the very structure of global capitalism to swallow 'events around the globe into its own appearance' in what historian William Sewell calls the 'eventful temporality' of capitalism.¹⁸ This eventful temporality of capitalism, with its recurring cycles of 'crises' and 'recoveries', conceals the perpetual reproduction of the same brought about by the universal expansion of capital. The year 1989 has become just such an event, one that has been taken as a moment of radical rupture with the fall of the Berlin Wall, signalling the triumph of the globalization of capital and its cultural logic. However, I hold that in the historical disintegration of the Soviet Union two different temporal regimes converged: an evolutionary and gradual disintegration was combined with the ruptural event of its actual legal and political demise. The convergence of two social and historical temporalities in the breakdown of the Soviet Union calls for an approach that conceives history through a dialectic of rupture and continuity.

History as a horizon of possibility

The dialectic of rupture and continuity calls forth a historical approach to the study of the period. As opposed to a genealogical approach that particularizes concepts and traces their discursive constitution independently from each other, without a larger historical logic connecting these concepts, historiography considers concepts as part and parcel of a historical logic. Historiography connects the discursive as well as material constitution of concepts to a logic that is internal to the development of these concepts, but also contingent upon external material factors. Instead of applying ready-made theoretical models from twentieth-century Western theory to interpret contemporary art in Armenia – an exercise that became paradigmatic in Eastern European scholarship throughout the 1990s and thereafter – this book offers an approach that treats bits of historical evidence as facts, while constructing historical and interpretative bridges between these facts. Here, it is out of a 'thick' historiographical work that theorization emerges.

The historical-theoretical approach developed in this book does not lay claim to being a radical challenge of the Western-centric assumptions of the discipline of art history, one that often arises from the present-day imperative to position so-called non-Western contexts subversively in relation to the Western art canon and the history of art. This imperative for subversion in art history from the supposed geographical margins of the discipline has been shaped, in the wake of identity politics, by the incursion of postcolonial studies, calling for a cultural representation of the Other that might undermine the Western establishment. Its particularization of identity supposedly promises to puncture the universalism of Western modernity and unmask its colonial logic, and by extension, the frameworks of the discipline whose

emergence has been part of the project of modernity. A discourse of subversion, in this way, reduces the contexts unknown to Western European and North American scholarship to the status of cultural tools serving the need for representation and inclusion of the Other, while it robs the Other of universality. As a disciplinary approach, it reduces art history to a politics of representation, of inclusion and exclusion.

Neither can this study be subsumed within emerging discussions on global art history that respond to the increasing globalization of art following the globalization of finance throughout the 1990s (even though the very fact that it is possible to publish this book with an Anglo-American academic press is an outcome of the structural changes brought about by global art history). Global art history often functions as an umbrella term that subsumes inconsistencies and contradictions, a tendency that it has inherited from the 1990s globalism debate. The discourse of globalism – as a product of the globalization of capital and its false universalism which establishes equality among all things – threatens on the one hand when transposed to the field of art history to repeat capital's real abstraction (the reign of commodities) in the field of art-historical discourse by homogenizing this discourse under the heading of cultural difference. On the other hand, it encourages particularism and exceptionalism, understood in terms of identities. Global art history, an offshoot of the discourse of globalism, has often performed a similar operation of simultaneous homogenization and particularization. Here, histories and accounts of contemporary art are often positioned in relation to global contemporary art and its institutional networks, rather than in relation to national traditions of fine arts, avant-gardes and modernism. By severing contemporary art from a historical context and subsuming it within the disciplinary context of art history as a tool and example of subversion, global art history circulates contemporary art from the so-called peripheries of the Western world in a way similar to the increasingly deterritorialized and networked circulation of goods and ideas in global capitalism. Here, for instance, 'contemporary art from Egypt' is not discussed in relation to its constitution vis-à-vis the national fine arts and the cultural politics of the place but as constructed by the art market, art institutions and curators who apply ready-made theoretical tropes such as 'hybridity', 'identity', 'subversion' and so on to situate it in relation to other contemporary art contexts, for example, 'contemporary art in Lebanon'. Thus, this approach cancels the historical dimension of time and spatializes contemporary art from a particular place in a relational network of other 'contemporaries'.

The discourse of 'alternative modernities', the offspring of global art history and postcolonial studies, performs a similar operation of othering and particularization. The basic argument offered by the proponents of this discourse is that modernities are multiple and contextually particular.¹⁹ On

the one hand, it empties modernity of its universalist ethos (liberalism and capitalism) rather than offering an immanent critique, and on the other hand, it dismisses alternative visions of modern universalism. But most importantly, it overlooks the fact that capitalism (and modernity as its product) is ultimately a universal, even if a false one, and thus it pre-empts any critique of this false universalism.²⁰ The interrelated methods and approaches of global art history, postcolonial critique and alternative modernities have all followed a broader paradigm prominent in the global art world, one that approaches artists from different parts of the world as informants about their specific contexts, and treats artworks as ethnographic objects that can decipher these different contexts for a mobile audience of art curators, dealers, critics, art historians and art lovers.

This book, I hope, intervenes in current art-historical scholarship by offering a specific historical account without claiming any exceptional status for that history. It looks at contemporary art in Armenia in its specific historical context, yet treats that context as one that both participates in and shapes broader discussions on the possibilities of art's autonomy today. Ultimately, this method follows the assumptions coming out of the context of contemporary art in Armenia itself, which has held on to an internationalist project of being part and parcel of the larger world while conceiving of art as a universal possibility for emancipation. In addition, contemporary art in Armenia developed in and responded to a context that did indeed propose a project of universal modernity – that of the Soviet Union. And perhaps, one can come back to the identity-infused imperatives of art history today from the perspective of the collapse of the Soviet universalist project: ultimately, the proliferation of the discourse of cultural 'otherness' is what follows the breakdown of the Soviet project.

This work calls for self-historicization. Such a historical project, I argue, challenges the dominant national discourses in Armenia by showing how the present is constituted historically, instead of locating the present in the homogeneous empty time of ethnic belonging. While participating in broader discussions on art and autonomy taking place today in art theory, history and criticism, it comes to fill an art historiographic gap in the field of contemporary art in Armenia, as very few systematic attempts at historicization exist locally. The art historian Vardan Azatyan's scholarship of the past decade, with which this work engages extensively, is an exception. Azatyan has tirelessly attempted to situate contemporary art within a historical perspective, an attempt that the very protagonists of the contemporary art scene, caught up in the urgency of the present, have often resisted and at times resented, before reconciling with it. The absence of historicization, however, is not simply to be blamed on the context of contemporary art, but is also an outcome of institutional art-historical scholarship in Armenia that privileges

medieval art. In academic institutions in Armenia, contemporary art is not even a legitimate topic for MA and PhD dissertations; no 'serious' scholar would engage with a field that is full of 'dilettantes' who ended up being 'contemporary artists' because they could not paint or draw.²¹

In the above context, the historical approach that this book advocates is a difficult one to take, as there are only a handful of art-historical writings on contemporary art in Armenia, and as little documentation has been preserved from the various exhibitions, actions and discussions that might serve as material for a historical investigation. This investigation involves piecing together otherwise scattered archival material, interviewing artists and cultural actors, collecting journal and magazine articles that deal with art, culture and everyday life in Armenia in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, and conducting research in the National Archive to explore the official cultural policies of the period. I hope that in the gap between the striving to achieve historical truth and the realization of its unattainability, a story of a specific period will emerge, one that does justice to the complexity of the epoch. This approach also calls for a difficult attempt to eject the subjectivity of the author from the historical narration, to un-remember a decade formative for my generation, in order to re-remember it as history.

As someone who reached maturity in the 1990s and witnessed the historical sea change from one epoch to another, I realize that the attention this book pays to the decade is partially driven by my own desire to situate my subjectivity and the ethos of my generation historically, to understand the period in ways that are impossible when one lives it as a present moment. While watching numerous VHS recordings of exhibitions and discussions involving the protagonists of this book, in the constant tension between subjective identification with the young protagonists and the distance that the medium created, I found my own historical approach to the documents. This was an uneasy detachment, since my memories of the period are implicated through the very media now mediating my scholarly return to the historical period. The VHS recordings specifically, more than photographs and typewritten or handwritten texts on aged glossy paper, materialize the passage of time and the epochal shifts from the 1990s to the present. The texture of the 1990s for me lies in the texture of the VHS tape's transmission, not simply because this medium was our main mode of visual access to the larger world (by then, most households owned or desired to own a VHS cassette player and almost all television channels used VHS tape recorders), but also because I myself was directly inserted into this grainy world of VHS recording as a host of a weekly television programme called *Bravo Baby* between 1995 and 1997. From my generational perspective today, if the political and aesthetic horizon of possibility in the 1990s was visually constituted through the noisy chroma video signal of the cassette player and its linear audio track, the contemporary

closure of that possibility lies in the pixelated ambit of the digital transmission and surround sound that arrived with the triumph of commercialism and consumerism at the turn of the millennium.

An uneasy subjective detachment from one's own formative period, and a withdrawal of memory, is not an erasure of subjectivity but a temporary suspension of it, so that subjectivity may be situated historically, as intimately as possible, and thus regained. Neither does historicization suppress living memory. Just the opposite: historical writing enables the return of living memory against the forces of the status quo. What is at stake in historical writing is the possibility of denaturalizing the present through the historical work of writing about the past.

The journey of the 'painterly real'

The structure of the book emerges from its strategy of tracing the three main instances wherein the logic of the 'painterly real' as a supporting structure of art's autonomy evolved and manifested itself, albeit differently: the late Soviet and early post-Soviet art practices of the 3rd Floor movement that became paradigmatic for establishing the 'painterly real' as the logic of contemporary art; the conceptual artists' group ACT of the period of independence in the mid-1990s, which strove to break away from this logic and establish a notion of autonomy and of the ideal based on a conception of politics as form; and finally, the post-ACT practices of some of the group's protagonists in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the 'painterly real' sees a pronounced return. I argue that what has been forfeited, across this peculiar historical trajectory of art's autonomy in Armenia, is the consideration of the everyday life that has time and again come to haunt the logic of autonomy. The historical study of the relationship between art and everyday life in post-Soviet Armenia serves two major purposes. First, it reveals an aesthetic understanding of conceptualism that characterizes the Armenian avant-garde. Secondly, I believe that the critical examination of the constitution of art's autonomy in relation to everyday life in Soviet and post-Soviet Armenia can help us rethink the possibilities and imperatives of art's autonomy today, beyond Armenia's borders. This rethinking is important at a time when the contemporary consciousness of capitalism, which is a post-historical one, threatens this autonomy, while also homogenizing everyday life.

The chapter that follows this introduction offers a conceptual clarification of some of the main terms and categories deployed in this study. This clarification is necessary, given that the actors involved in contemporary art in Armenia – artists, curators, critics and historians – have used a variety of often contradictory terms and concepts for self-designation or as descriptive categories for contemporary art. At first glance these terms – modern, contemporary,

alternative, avant-garde – can be taken for granted by any student of art history, yet they have functioned in ways that distinguish them from their counterparts both in Western European and North American contexts, as well as in Eastern Europe. In addition, given that art taken as ideal is a key category in the version of art's autonomy that contemporary art in Armenia proposed, a conceptual discussion is dedicated in this first chapter to the notion of the ideal and to, what I argue, is its dialectical opposite – alienation.

Chapter 2 discusses the practices of the 3rd Floor movement – a cultural movement active in Armenia in the late 1980s and early 1990s – in the framework of late Soviet perestroika politics and the restructuring of social and political institutions. The temporality of the 3rd Floor's discourse and aesthetics corresponds to the extended temporality of the post-ideological discourse of triumphant liberalism, and reaches far beyond the six years of the movement's activities between 1987 and 1994. I argue that the discourse and aesthetics of the movement have had a formative impact, in the domain of Armenian contemporary art, on the understanding of contemporary art's relationship with everyday life, the social world and the institution of art. In Armenia, the 3rd Floor's understanding of the 'painterly real' as that which realizes social dreams through and in art has become paradigmatic of and even synonymous with contemporary art as such. The 3rd Floor institutionalized the early 1980s paradigm of an unofficial art that negated painting through painting.²² The movement used imagery and styles that denoted Western consumerism and freedom vis-à-vis the ideological imperatives of official art. For the artistic movement, the 'painterly real' is constituted through the negation of ideology through a supposedly non-ideological form of freedom, and of official painting through the painterly gesture. Thus, it is through this gesture that art as an ideal is secured. In the movement's practices, the 'painterly real' sets in operation a complex relationship between tradition and innovation. The 'painterly real' as the ideal of art configures art's relationship with everyday life, wherein art is conceived *as more real than reality, and thus ideal*. Here the 'painterly real' provides a ground amid a loss of all social ontological grounds in the changing world of the perestroika years.

I argue that the 3rd Floor unwittingly shared the Socialist Realist belief in the affirmative power of images that uphold the ideal of art's autonomy (though the content of the image, for the former, was very different from that of its Socialist Realist counterpart, even its opposite). In this belief, the image is seen as capturing a utopian promise for the future and actualizing it in the present through art. However, the movement's aesthetic philosophy relied on Socialist Realism's adversary, Armenian modernism, and on its aesthetic regime. The Armenian modernism of the 1960s and 1970s reconciled modernist form with national content and conceived of the painterly gesture as that which exceeded the subjectivity of the artist while at the same time

constituting it. And it is this ethos of the painterly gesture as constitutive of subjectivity that for the Armenian modernists secured the autonomy of art and resisted the social world of the Brezhnev years. The 3rd Floor inherited this understanding of artistic gesture in both its constitutive and resistant aspects. The painterly gesture of negation both establishes the 3rd Floor as the cultural vanguard of the perestroika epoch and allows it to surpass this political context. The discussion of the aesthetics, politics and ethics of the movement situates it within perestroika's cultural politics, the official institutions of art, and the tradition of Armenian modernism that preceded the movement, in an effort to understand the movement not only on its own terms, but also from an art-historical and critical perspective. *Hamasteghtsakan* art – a concept developed by the two protagonists of the movement, Nazareth Karoyan and Arman Grigoryan, to denote an aesthetic of making incommensurable styles, images and techniques cohere – provides a conceptual lens through which the movement is considered.

Similarly, Chapter 3 adapts a key term, 'pure creation'²³ – developed by the protagonists of the mid 1990s' art scene, the group ACT, to denote the foundational processes and materials that go into art-making – as a historical and conceptual lens for considering the artistic practices of the period of independence. The chapter explores the aesthetics, politics and economy of 'pure creation' in the context of paradigmatic shifts in the constitution of social and political structures and of everyday life in Armenia in the period of early independence, after the collapse of the USSR. Operating between 1994 and 1996, ACT faced what I call a crisis of negation, when it became structurally impossible for contemporary art to negate the transformed and still transforming post-Soviet world. Instead, contemporary art was to affirm and embrace this 'brave new world'. However, affirmation was still taking place within art understood as a sphere of autonomous creativity, though one that appropriated forms of politics as forms of art. ACT's aesthetic, and the way the group saw itself in historical terms, creates a temporary rupture from the 'painterly real' and its *hamasteghtsakan* aesthetic of making the incoherent cohere. Yet the group upholds art as the ideal of the political. In mid-1990s conditions of the confluence of contemporary art and the newly constructed state, the everyday is overcome – both by the artists of this generation and by the first president of the independent republic, Levon Ter-Petrosyan – for the sake of art as ideal, and for the state as ideal. And this confluence takes place when the everyday is most present, with its violent perturbations in the drastically changing world. I consider the everyday as the realm of material culture, empirical experience, and social institutions, languages, symbols, mores and norms that are mutually constitutive.

Chapter 4 discusses the return of the 'painterly real' in the aftermath of the collapse of ACT and the failure of the first president Ter-Petrosyan to

institute constitutional democracy. This chapter situates the return of the 'painterly real' as that which informs the dominant mode of historicization of contemporary art. This mode can be characterized as an evolutionary convergence of tradition and contemporaneity. In turn, the reconciliation of the two poles of nationalism and progressivism formed the core agenda of the national cultural politics. I argue that in this particular period of the mid to late 1990s, contemporary art played a vanguard role in sustaining and advancing the national cultural politics through its reliance on the 'painterly real'. This advanced a paradigm of representation, both in contemporary art and in national cultural discourse, that aimed at a difficult reconciliation of democracy and nationalism. Aesthetically and in terms of its own historical self-understanding, contemporary art reconfigured its relationship with the national artistic tradition as one of continuity rather than rupture. Here, the 'painterly real' was re-established via the rearticulation of *hamasteghtsakan* art – a return that marked the temporary alliance of contemporary art and official cultural politics – only to break down soon after as the state abandoned progressive discourse.

The fifth and last chapter considers the transformation of the 'painterly real' in media art and performance into an impossible ideal of autonomous art in the late 1990s and early 2000s. By focusing on the works of two artists – David Kareyan and Narek Avetisyan – in the context of the political crisis and consolidation of consumerism in Armenia, the chapter argues that the painterly real here becomes an 'excessive remainder', in a Lacanian sense, of art's ideal, after a traumatic split is realized to have occurred between the subject and the social, art and democracy, nature and culture, mind and body. If Kareyan's videos and performances of the period attempt to regain the ideal of wholeness through rituals of bodily suffering, Narek Avetisyan's work adopts an opposite strategy of techno-utopian bodily dematerialization that is nevertheless 'stained' by the presence of the body. The works of the two artists are discussed in the context of complex political, social and technological transformations that led to what was experienced by the community of contemporary artists as a condition of crisis. What we witness in the period of the late 1990s and early 2000s is the abandonment of the progressivist pole in the cultural politics of the nation state and the embracing of ethnocentric nationalism with its regressive emphasis on 'One Nation, One Culture'. A consequent and deepening misalignment takes place between national cultural politics and contemporary art: while the former unequivocally embraces nationalism, the latter identifies itself as progressivist. In a way, the contemporary artists who actively produce work in the late 1990s and early 2000s view art as the only sphere wherein the ideal of democracy persists, one that the social world is no longer capable of accommodating.

Notes

- 1 Vardan Azatyan, 'Disintegrating Progress: Bolshevism, National Modernism and the Emergence of Contemporary Art in Armenia', *ARTMargins* 1.1 (2012), pp. 62–87.
- 2 National Archives, Folder 80, List 20, File 22. 13.05.96.
- 3 Angela Harutyunyan, 'State Icons and Narratives in the Symbolic Cityscape of Yerevan', in A. Harutyunyan, K. Horschelmann and M. Miles (eds), *Public Spheres after Socialism* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2009), pp. 19–29. Most recently, the Yerevan municipality announced a competition for projects in 2012, which did not yield any concrete outcome.
- 4 Peter Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 200.
- 5 Irina Chalikova (ed.), *Utopia i utopicheskoe myshlenie* [Utopia and utopian thought] (Moscow: Progress, 1991).
- 6 F. Manuel and Fr. Manuel, 'Utopicheskoe Myshlenie v Zapadnom Mire' [Utopian thought in the Western world], in Chalikova (ed.), *Utopia i utopicheskoe myshlenie*, pp. 21–49.
- 7 E. Bloch, 'Princip Nadejdy' [Principle of hope], in Chalikova (ed.), *Utopia i utopicheskoe myshlenie*, pp. 49–79.
- 8 K. Mannheim, 'Ideologia i Utopia' [Ideology and Utopia], in Chalikova (ed.), *Utopia i utopicheskoe myshlenie*, pp. 113–70.
- 9 M. Lasci, 'Utopia i Revolutisia' [Utopia and revolution], in Chalikova (ed.), *Utopia i utopicheskoe myshlenie*, pp. 170–210.
- 10 The 1988 Law on Cooperatives allowed the operation of private enterprises, though under restricted conditions.
- 11 'Progressivnaya Nostalgia' [Progressive nostalgia], *Khudozhestvennyi Journal* [Moscow Art Magazine] 65/66 (July 2007), <http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/65-66/> (last accessed 13 October 2016).
- 12 In May 2007 the editor-in-chief of the journal, Russian art curator Viktor Misiano, organized the show 'Progressive Nostalgia' at the Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci in Prato, Italy, featuring artists from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine, and Central Asian and Baltic countries. The curatorial concept introduced *Moscow Art Magazine's* issue of that year with the following statement: 'This exhibition comes at the right moment because as more time separates us from the fall of the Berlin wall, the wider is the distance that separates us from the previous age, and the more vital becomes the task of understanding that past' (http://www.centropecci.it/uk/html/mostre/07/nostalgia/progressive_nostalgia.htm, last accessed 28 June 2008).
- 13 Susan Buck-Morss discusses several meetings between Euro-American academics and Russian philosophers that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In these workshops the Russian intellectuals were trying to find affiliations with what was understood as the monolithic 'West', while the other side was persistently quoting Marx to bring itself closer to what it perceived as the 'East'. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. 237.

- 14 Editorial, 'Progressivnaya Nostalgia'. Here and elsewhere, translations of Russian and Armenian texts are my own unless otherwise stated.
- 15 Svetlana Boym's work on nostalgia has been influential for the conceptualization of this issue, even though she is not directly acknowledged. In her seminal 2001 book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym considers the notion in three registers: as a symptom of our age, a historical emotion that presents a rebellion against the temporality of modernity, or progressive time; as a longing for a time rather than a place; and finally, as a yearning that is not only retrospective but prescriptive and can be directed towards the future. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
- 16 This conceptual recirculation of the term Soviet was ideology at its best, since the concept acts as a substitute for the disappeared and disappearing material conditions that had constituted the Soviet experience. Ironically, a similar recapitulation of the Soviet is taking place today in the dominant discourse of Putinism. Here the Soviet experience itself is forsaken, and only the memory of its imperial grandeur is evoked as a tool of postcolonial critique of the West.
- 17 Yet a third moment could be identified in the *longue durée* of cancelling the Soviet. The project *Former West: Documents, Constellations, Prospects* was launched in 2008 at BAK (Basis voor Aktuelle Kunst) in Utrecht, The Netherlands and is ongoing. Funded by various European foundations, the project's various iterations invited scholars to contribute to the ongoing debates on Europe's geographical and cultural constitution in the post-1989 era. Over the six years of the project's duration, multiple seminars, congresses and exhibitions were organized and publications emerged, with the participation of more than one hundred scholars, artists and curators. *Former West* first and foremost relied on the premise that the age-old Cold War divisions no longer sufficed to understand and analyse current power constellations and a new political situation, and that a new cultural cartography needed to be drawn up.
- 18 Angela Harutyunyan and Nadia Bou Ali, 'Discussing the Event: On Thinking of the Present as Radical Transformation', *Beirut Humanities Review* 1.1 (2014), AUB, Beirut (<http://www.beiruthumanitiesreview.com/issue-1/>, last accessed 22 January 2015); William Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
- 19 For instance, the blurb for the volume *Alternative Modernities* declares: "The idea of "alternative modernities" holds that modernity always unfolds within specific cultures or civilizations and that different starting points of the transition to modernity lead to different outcomes." D. P. Gaonkar (ed.), *Alternative Modernities* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011). Another name for this discourse is comparative modernities, where it similarly relies on the assumption that modernities are multiple, as for example in the case of the Institute of Comparative Modernities at Cornell University led by Salah M. Hassan.
- 20 Peter Osborne convincingly argues that any discussion of so-called alternative modernities presupposes, without admitting to doing so, a conception of contemporaneity as a totality. He suggests that 'the discourse of nationally or regionally specific "multiple modernities" can achieve theoretical coherence at the level of

the whole (history) only in articulation with the concept of the contemporary – despite the discrete conceptual content of modernity and contemporaneity as temporal ideas. For the idea of an imminently differentiated *global modernity* presupposes a certain global contemporaneity as the ground of its immanent production of the temporal differential of the new.’ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere Or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 25–6.

- 21 This is a stereotype without any basis in reality, as many contemporary artists graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts, where they practise artistic craft and learn artisanal skills.
- 22 This is opposed to the strategies of unofficial late Soviet artists in Russia, who negated Socialist Realist painting through politics. Artists such as Vitaly Komar, Alexander Melamid and Erik Bulatov among others utilized political tools of ideological critique to unmask the aesthetic regime of Socialist Realist painting.
- 23 In an earlier translation I referred to ‘*maqur steghtsagortsutyun*’ as ‘pure creativity’. David Kareyan, ‘Pure Creativity’, translation and introduction by A. Harutyunyan, *ARTMargins* 2.1 (2013), pp. 127–8. Originally published in Armenian, ‘Maqur Stegtsagortsutyun’, *Garun* 8 (1994), p. 59. Even though the concept, as theorized by Kareyan, does not make a distinction between the act of creativity and its end result in the form of an artwork, I believe that ‘pure creation’ is a more accurate translation and is semantically more justified than ‘pure creativity’.