ESSAY

WHERE DO PICTURES LIVE?

Dr. Omar Kholeif, Director of Collections and Senior curator, and guest curator *Hrair Sarkissian: The Other side of Silence*. On view: 29.11.2022 — 14.05.2023.

Preceptor of Time and Quiet

Oh Father!
It's me
There
Standing amidst the stillness
Freeform and ablaze![i]

There is no uniform grammar for seeing. Sight alone is composed of a series of confluences – of lived experience, of human subjectivity. Constellations of suppressed memory, rising to the surface as one processes the picture.[ii] Vision is all but a dream – lurid fragments in formation as light enters the cornea, the lens. The retina is our photographic paper, seventy micrometres in diameter.[iii] Does the eye beg for a new metric system?

Minds schooled in reflexive theory might have considered putting the brakes on photography as a critical field of inquiry when Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* was published in 1980. A review published at the time in the *New York Times* dubbed the poststructuralist theorist's final publication a 'frustrating meditation' on the relationship between photography and mortality.[iv] But this narrow frame of reference evades the most striking aspect of the analysis. Through sparing words, the slim volume uses the theorist's personal biography to construct a seamless rejoinder to Susan Sontag's resistance in Against *Interpretation* (1966), where the author summoned for a more embodied study of art. Indeed, Barthes was to forgo rationality in favour of an examination of the personified experience of photography.[v] By liberating the medium from the graduated codes of semiotics, *Camera Lucida* ostensibly resolved to a composed manifesto that situated modern-day 'picture theory' in the firmament of Walter Benjamin's auratic sphere, where the object fosters a multitude of experiences for the spectator.[vi]

Fast forward to the present. To the age of anxiety, the age of heightened digitality, where the concept of time is amorphous.[vii] In the aperture of history, visuality has become subsumed by the implementation of a placeless digital aesthetic, from David Hockney's iPad paintings to the clickbait that reigns supreme in the virtual sphere, filling RSS feeds and photo streams on social media. Obsession with the malleable and instantaneous image, one subject to continuous manipulation, has become de rigueur. At this art historical juncture, the life and work

of Hrair Sarkissian, a Syrian Armenian artist who works predominantly with the medium of large-format analogue photography, exists not merely in stark opposition to the accelerationist panoply of image play, but equally as a form of benevolent resistance.[viii] A summoning, an invitation to stand still.

Sarkissian's photographs, which often manifest as human-scale archival inkjet or chromogenic prints, are often the result of a singular lived experience.[ix] Each picture's birth is seeded through a lengthy process of research and manifests with an act of theatre. Nonconforming subjects occupy the artist's mind, sometimes for many years, before they come into focus. Comprehensively studied and choreographed, many of the images emerge from the convergence of rhizomatic resonances with his multiple 'homelands'. Sites of birth and renewal – some genealogical, others adopted. Every work is laboriously composed of multiple elements that form a series or that create an ongoing conversation. As he commences, thus begins a mission, a fashioned travelogue. The end result is subject to the risk stimulated by the medium of analogue photography itself. Sarkissian in many an instance may travel great expanses, spending weeks on end working akin to an archaeologist, unfolding seats of obsession. On return, he may hold an entire archive of pictures, or just a handful of negatives for printing.[x] Scarcity does not deter, but enlivens. Sarkissian's work is not only of and about time, but also demands its own temporal order in its formation.

The artist may be known for his expressive images of the disappeared and the dispossessed, but Sarkissian's staged pictures are most often devoid of his or other human presence. Like a phantom, he vanishes behind a black cloak, becoming one with the apparatus. In the viewfinder of his architecturally situated camera lives the image. Underneath the shrouded cover, exists an image that is upside down; black bars running across the viewfinder, segmenting the picture. The splintered edges of the scene are almost spectral. A single click ensues. The outcome is not revealed until a photo lab has processed the image. Although Sarkissian describes the thrill of chance with simultaneous bouts of pleasure and anxiety, it is evident that, as Louis Pasteur once noted, 'chance favours the prepared mind'.[xi] Sarkissian is almost always primed.

Time is the essence of preparation. Sarkissian's approach to lens- and time-based media involves setting up a 'space of becoming' and a duration for and of looking.[xii] These facets hark back to pre-Socratic philosophy and literature, where time was personified by figures such as Father Time, or the hourglass, and later in the Renaissance through depictions of the mythological god Chronos.[xiii] Chronos was believed to have been invigorated by Earth and water as the ultimate creator of the cosmos, a planetary field of chaos quite unlike our tidy, modern-day comprehension of the universe. The personification of this body existed, as Sontag once reflected, to create 'order . . . [so] that everything doesn't happen all at once'. This it is understood, is to create space for critical distance and reflection.[xiv]

The slowdown, the deceleration, is a critical mode of looking at lens-based media as articulated by the philosopher Louis Althusser and later by the film theorist Barbara Klinger.[xv] In this distantiated sphere, the image becomes a unit of time, open to self-reflexive evaluation. In Sarkissian's series *Stand Still* (2009), hollowed concrete blocks, all similar in scale, occupy a deserted landscape. Some resemble tessellating forms in a video game – a maze for the human eye to decode. Heaps of manicured sand butt up against these perfectly formed cubes, leading

our gaze down a parade to a potential sign of life. Squint and release: there is nobody at the end of this path looking back at us.

Stand Still presents a series of buildings in Damascus that were abandoned, one assumes, while still under construction. Are these remnants a signal of a depression to come? Could one see this absence, the stillness and quiet, as an allusion by our preceptor to the revolution that would enmesh this country from 2011 up until today? The interplay of questions provoked by these pictures leaves the viewer unsettled. For Sarkissian, it does not take a face or a body to express the wounds of a history in freefall. All that he demands is that we take the time to look.

Constructing Vision

Cornea malfunction:
You dissipate into fragments
Descending into the Earth
Like acid
Scorching the soil

Sarkissian's career began in his father's Damascus photo studio, which opened its doors in 1979. Initially dubbed, Dream Color, it was the first photo lab in Syria to print colour photographs. Prior to this, colour film was often couriered to Beirut for processing, or otherwise remained with the nostalgic imprimatur associated with black and white ink. As Stephen Sheehi has articulated, the turn of the twentieth century bore witness to the rise of Ottoman ideals of modernisation and Westernisation in the area once known as the Fertile Crescent – the Levantine nations of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine.[xvi] The subsequent dissolution of the Ottoman Empire dissected the region evenly into the imperial hands of the French and the British, before independence was granted to Syria in 1946; neighbouring Lebanon assumed its supposed sovereignty in 1943.[xvii]

Sarkissian's father, Vartan, grew up as a first-generation Syrian; his own father had fled the Armenian genocide seeking refuge and shelter. Vartan Sarkissian came of age in a Syria mired in an identity crisis, the subject of constant rupture, a nation torn then reconceived as whole. Unlike the ideological stance held in other Levantine states, Syria was initially entrenched within the Pan-Arab ideal spearheaded by the second President of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser. This concept of Arab-ness suggested a uniformity of ideology as a form of resistance to colonial history.[xviii] This constellation of exceptionalisms was not purely based on ethnic origin, nor was it initially intended to be divisive; rather, it was an anchor for unity.[xix] So much so that Syria and Egypt momentarily merged into one nation, the United Arab Republic, from 1958 to 1961. That is, until the infamous uprising of the Syrian army 'restored' the nation back to independence under the auspices of the Ba'athist regime, which remains in power today, although embodying altered dogmas.[xx]

The international disputes in and around Syria have continued to the present, and many parts of the nation still sit amid the ruinous detritus of an ongoing civil war. When Hrair Sarkissian was born in 1973, the nation had reached a temporary stasis. The Arab-Israeli War of 1967 had thwarted Abdel Nasser's fantasy. Instead, Sarkissian grew up aware of Syria's sites of

classical antiquity, such as the ancient seat of Palmyra, the majestic Roman theatre in Bosra in the province of Arabia, and the lush biodiversity of the city of Latakia. Hitherto, as this story reveals, the invisible scars of memory left an imprint on the young artist. It is for this reason that Dream Color became a beacon for Hrair Sarkissian. With jubilant glee, he reflects on exhilarating afternoons spent there after school.[xxi]

By the time Sarkissian was a teenager, his father had trained him in the processes of photographing, developing, and archiving the image.[xxii] Vartan Sarkissian made a name for himself locally, capturing anniversaries, graduations, and wedding portraits of a society on the ascent. Father and son developed an unwavering bond that would see them in the studio late into the night, Hrair often reluctant to leave. The pair examined tales, stories, and images of celebrated Armenian figures.

Notable in this respect was the late Yousuf Karsh, an Armenian photographer exiled in Canada who made a name for himself capturing celebrities. Twenty of his photos appeared on the cover of the popular weekly magazine *Life*.[xxiii] Karsh's most iconic work was taken at the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, where he was invited to photograph former British prime minister Winston Churchill. In an infamous tale, narrated with zest by the photographer, Karsh grabbed Churchill's cigar from his mouth and captured him in a brutally honest pose. The second photo saw Churchill soften, a suggestion of a smile. 'You can even make a roaring lion stand still to be photographed', Churchill observed.[xxiv] This perceived diplomatic triumph, Sarkissian suggests, hints at photography's potential to fashion mythologies of its own. It instilled a desire in the young man to engage with and intervene in every aspect of the photographic process, and marked a conscious shift in the manner in which he framed his subjects.

Situating the Gaze

You are upside down
Waiting, wanton and longing
Behind a magician's cloak
Prison bars run across your bewildered face

I am prone, indeed fond, of instrumentalising Saidiya Hartman's concept of critical fabulation when narrating histories of conflict and trauma where erasure is a clear by-product of the circumstances under discussion.[xxv] In the case of Sarkissian's work, one could posit that his multiform practice, developed in a part of the world where archives are governed by a history of epistemic violence and erasure, has equally encouraged art that blends narratives of fact and fiction. Sarkissian seeks to offer visibility and integrity to his subjects.

This tendency was sown in the 1990s, when François Cheval, then director of France's Musée Nicéphore Niépce, gave a public lecture in Damascus.[xxvi] The curator's background in history and ethnology inflected the contents of his talk, which included discussions of conceptual photography, illustrated by the photographic artists Patrick Tosani, Antoine d'Agata, and Sophie Ristelhueber. Ristelhueber's images in particular seized Sarkissian's imagination, forging a lasting impact. Expounding upon her approach in one of her early essays, she quoted Alain Robbe-Grillet's comment that 'man looks at the world, and the world does not return his look'.[xxvii] The

intimation of a singular gaze reflects her approach to photographing images of conflict. Her pictures of Beirut from 1984, during the Lebanese Civil War, are a case in point. Her ruins are hollowed of people, of the agents of violence, the debris of bodies are instead illuminations of a concept: to frame the unseen.

The invisible edges of history are evident in one of Sarkissian's earliest official bodies of work, *Unfinished* (2006). One of these life-size pictures reveals a dusty black tarpaulin concealing an unknown expanse, invoking Kazimir Malevich's iconic *Black Square* (1915). In another, a concrete crevice funnelled of life is bathed in warm red light, evoking Mark Rothko. Is this a sanctuary, or a remnant of blood, a life stained from within? In another photo, slabs of uneven concrete line a wall. Is this triptych a formal referent to the building blocks of art history, or stand-ins for bodies that no longer exist? The ambiguity of Sarkissian's gaze initially intimates a silence. But peer more closely, and the images begin to howl, sing, and scream at you, a suggestion of a story that may never be told. *Unfinished* was a purposeful start for the artist. The sites pictured, archaeological relics situated across the expanse of the so-called Middle East, are temporally dislocated from informative data or 'Orientally-identifying' features.[xxviii] A form of political abstraction, *Unfinished* is an attempt at seeing, as Jean Fisher argued, 'modernism as a form of negotiation', a hybrid field that exists without the burden of 'naming the Other', producing what she deemed a form of 'haptic vision'.[xxix]

In 1998, Ristelhueber was to undertake a photographic assignment in Syria, and arranged to meet Sarkissian while she was there. At their shared encounter, she encouraged Sarkissian to depart from working at his father's lab and to consider the artistic pursuit of photography as his fundamental contribution to society. The young Sarkissian followed her advice, undertaking a yearlong residency in Paris. When he returned to Damascus, his focus was now elsewhere, and his feet itchier than before. Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle was playing out in full force, performing phantasms running rife.[xxx] Sarkissian was keen to cut through the interstices of a world that was increasingly becoming hyper-mediated. A calling had presented itself: to fashion images that speak not only to, but for, the voiceless. His purpose now was to make visible what official history would never allow to come to the surface. He would attempt to 'unlearn imperialism', and to expose this process as an act of contra-colonial endurance.[xxxixxxii]

It could be said that Vartan Sakissian was one of those voiceless figures. He had hoped that his son would continue his legacy in the family business, creating an enduring vestige for a family whose genealogical roots had been displaced. Without the potential bequest being carried forward: Would it now all go up in smoke? In 2010, a year before the Syrian civil war erupted, Sarkissian staged the set for *Sarkissian Photo Centre & My Father and I*. Pivotal to this setup was a final photo shoot by Vartan. Hrair notes, 'My father orchestrated all the poses . . . as if somehow all these poses would disappear.' (Handheld selfie culture may have indeed erased them forever.) Sarkissian rushed home to shave, and cut himself without realizing it. In the pictures, droplets of blood stain his neck, the open wounds sediment in the pictures taken. 'I was anxious. This was a very sad process. We had a very emotional conversation, in silence . . . tension and . . . anger.'[xxxiii] The portraits of Hrair are presented alongside black-and-white portraits of his father over the course of his life – an index of movement, two parallel histories, wilfully separated from one another.

Re/configuring Trauma

They say it is not a plague
The haunting

In his essay 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', André Bazin asserted that although 'all the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence.'[xxxiv] Part of Bazin's claim was that the invention of photography itself freed the artist from the burden of representation, creating a separation from historical vision. Photographers could now devise a fundamentally situated mechanism for seeing. The claim of 'absence' in the statement outlined above can be located in relation to the birth of conceptual photography – a field of making where the primacy of the idea is paramount. The influential artist Kenneth Josephson explicates it thus: 'I make, not take . . . photographs. . . . [Indeed] the idea is more important . . . not the image.'[xxxv] Conceptual photography remains contested as a categorical field of study.[xxxvi] Interleaving Sarkissian's pictures into this dimension is not sufficient. His photographs exist beyond the scope of an idea, puncturing as they do through site and specificity, forming an affective relationship to the viewer. As the artist has noted, his work is concerned with feelings – feelings approached in a manner that proffers dissonant perspectives on the experience of trauma.[xxxvii]

Trauma theory emerged as an independent field in the 1990s. It initially relied heavily on Freudian thought to develop a model that imagines an extreme experience that extends beyond the limits of language and its meaning. The argument then was that trauma is un-representable.[xxxviii] The DSM, the canonical bible for psychiatrists, had been updated in 1980 to reflect this, implementing and expounding upon the now-familiar disorder of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder).[xxxix] Discussions of suffering in this form were examined in parallel with semiotic theories of the gaze, from Jacques Lacan's concept of initial self-awareness to Laura Mulvey's ideas of scopophilia –a form of subjugation and voyeurism.[xl]

In a certain regard, Sarkissian's embodiment of trauma mirrors the original belief that it is un-representable. This is achieved without supplanting the affective qualities of the experience itself. Within the silence, author and witness become implicated. In the series *Execution Squares* (2008), Sarkissian presents municipal squares in three Syrian cities: Aleppo, Latakia, and Damascus. These locations, used for public hangings of supposed criminals, sanctioned by the state, were ingrained in the artist's mind from a young age. The traces of limp bodies were etched there, faint lines always visible, akin to Francisco Goya's iconic drawing *A Heroic Feat! With Dead Men!* from his 1863 *Disasters of War* series. Similar to Goya, who did not publish these violent drawings of mutilated limbs and hanged bodies until later in his life, Sarkissian used the camera as an object of erasure and enclosure. The *Execution Squares* were photographed at dawn, the serenity of the mise-en-scène in stark contradiction to the title. The documentation of these locations nevertheless enshrines into a public archive the ghosts that haunt the artist.

Despite certain suggestions of objectivity, Sarkissian's art obstructs the perception that lens-based media can embody an overriding truth. The artist is consistently imbricated with his subjects, using the frame as a space to negotiate affective anxieties that cannot be sutured. In 2014, Sarkissian manipulated one of the most iconic of cinematic techniques, the time lapse, as a means to negotiate an all-consuming angst and frustration. On one of two adjoining video

screens we see a faithfully rendered replica of his family's apartment building in Damascus, where the artist's parents continue to live to this day. As it holds our gaze, it begins to deteriorate, to crumble, becoming all but rubble. A jolt enters from the other screen as we see Sarkissian with a sledgehammer, apparently the vengeful agent of destruction. We watch fastidiously as his expressions oscillate from disorientation to despair.

Why is Sarkissian destroying what he has dubbed 'the container of his memories'?[xli] Is this a suggestion of inevitability? The two-channel video, *Homesick* emblematises a place that was once home. Having taken flight from Syria in 2008 for good: Is this an act of guilt-laden revenge? Or rather, a gesture of caring for his parents who chose to be left behind? Redemption awaits. The artist uses this performance to make a claim for life; if his home is to be displaced and decimated as his grandfather's Armenia, it shall be at his own will. Hrair Sarkissian's life is one of evolving loss, a life book-ended by political violence and displacement. The blemishes of which the artist most often felt and experienced second-hand.[xlii] To derive rhyme or reason from the vehement act of violence in *Homesick* may be futile. Formally, it pivots the artist into the trauma victim's chair. Here, Sarkissian can be seen expressing and a multitude of gazes conjured by a myriad of causal tensions and effects.[xliii] The artist is a subject absolved from 'self and other', the body that we are gazing at is 'separated from personality'; the sheer visceral act of destruction is a hermetic enclosure, a redemptive site for the viewer to witness the artist's purifying act of self-repair.[xliv]

The Myth of Belonging

Fickle hands
Rub against each other
In the midst are incandescent lights
A germinating movement
Drawing you to life

One of the most divisive conceptual and biological tools to be widely deployed since the 1700s is the conception of race. Simultaneously a conceptual mechanism for human categorisation based on physical, social, and linguistic qualities, this framework has repeatedly been critiqued for its propensity toward essentialism.[xlv] Biologically, race was conceived to denote 'genetically distinct populations' – sets of subspecies of humanity. Of these formations, the now outdated construct of the Caucasian as a 'white skinned person of European origin' was considered prevalent among 'free men' in the United States and Europe as well as the Middle East and North Africa.[xlvi]

The irony of course is that the term 'Caucasian' is derived from the site of Caucasia (now known as the Caucasus), a mountainous seat that encompasses Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and parts of southern Russia. Although European in makeup, these modern-day nations are firmly situated in the Eastern fold of the geographic and ideological planes of what we have come to understand as the Global South, having been the subject of ongoing conflict around religion and ethnicity.[xlvii] If one interrogates the racial makeup of Armenians today, the literature argues that they are a class of Indo-Europeans, who were referred to as Aryans in the nineteenth century.[xlviii] If we query the ethnic origins of the majority of Syrians, then, we encounter the outmoded definition of Semitic peoples – a categorisation based on linguistic and religious confluences.[xlix]

Sarkissian was born in Syria, and that is how he has primarily been identified in the canonical field – as an Arab artist now living in the diaspora. In truth, Sarkissian was raised with tales of his motherland, Armenia, which unfolded in contours that at times resembled fiction. Over the years that I have grown to know and work with Sarkissian's art, he has come to reveal a sense of absence – a body without organs, a body without an image, in constant pursuit of a site of 'origin' or return.[i] He is now a British citizen fluent in Arabic, Armenian, French, and English whose cosmopolitan tongue initially masks any semblance of ethnic affinity, eschewing the seeming aspiration toward home. Little did I realise at first that his quest for belonging is a living pursuit that transcends the mythologies of race and identitarian politics, creating a contextual lens through which to view his pictures. The notion of heritage, and by proxy a sense of belonging, are pivotal points of return for the artist. The constant spectre of indigenous conflict in his native Armenia has also unearthed multiplicities of questions, which he explores through a lens of opacity.

As much as one assumes a synergistic or uniform identity among diasporic Arabs, circumstance fashions an altogether different reality. The majority of Armenians, many of whom are extended refugees of the genocide, live chiefly in the diaspora. The statistics assert that between seven and eleven million Armenians are living predominantly in Russia, the United States, France, Argentina, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, and Turkey, whereas Armenia's official population is estimated to be in the region of three million individuals.[ii] In the Arab world, Armenians are often isolated from the larger societal fold. In Syria, the majority live in the city of Halab, with a smaller population in Damascus, many of whom constellate around or near Hayy Al Arman (Neighbourhood of the Armenians). In Beirut, Lebanon's capital, Armenians largely live in Bourj Hammoud, a semi-industrial area of overbuilt apartment blocks many of which are wedged amidst narrow streets.

Sarkissian's narrations of Armenia seek to explore the concept of what Benedict Anderson dubbed in 1983 an 'imagined community', a socially constructed sense of society imagined through the interplay of folklore and media play.[iii] One of the artist's earliest photographic series, *In Between* (2006), is worth citing here. It scenes reveal thickets shrouded in snow, and panoptical views of villages drowned in the white of a blizzard. In a rare instance, a missile appears. It is simultaneously a sign of scientific progress, yet its timid, bolted-down status, restrained from flight, intimates a sense of decay. Here, Sarkissian's Mother Armenia is sedated, wailing for dear life, a mere ruin. A contradiction from the prosperous wonder carved into the artist's imagination.

Sarkissian's first trip to Armenia as an adult occurred in 2001, when he was twenty-seven. He arrived with two cameras on his back with verve and pronounced enthusiasm. But unsurprisingly, he noted that 'the Armenia that I felt was not the one I saw in the picture that I held in my hands.'[iiii] Whether Sarkissian is referencing a literal postcard or a metaphor of a world that he clung to intimately matters little, and makes this encounter all the more poignant. The mournful atmosphere of the post-Soviet collapse, the artist articulates, negated any sense of the 'homeland' that his expectant reverie had conjured. Living conditions baffled him. Witnessing Tsitsernakaberd, the Armenian Genocide Memorial erected in 1967 in the capital city of Yerevan, may have fostered an awakening – that the artist wanted to 'memorialise' the dispossessed.[iv]

Archaeologist of the Unseen

Remnants
enter my veins,
sully me,
What is there left between me and you, you and me?

Historical objectivity presupposes a distance, a detachment, that is difficult to assume from Sarkissian's *Unexposed* (2012). The first picture that I encounter shows a pair of feet at the bottom of the large frame. A suggestion of life emerges only from the shallow light that weaves its way between this human being's legs. The carpet beneath could be an object of exquisite magnificence or something entirely malformed; the spectator will never know. The image is shrouded in blackness. Of all of Sarkissian's photographic works, *Unexposed* is perhaps the only one completely hollowed of the most crooked of concepts – hope. In the shadows of shrouded darkness, *Unexposed* becomes a work of sheer bravery. Whether evident or not, each of the artist's subjects are Armenians who reluctantly converted to Islam during the Armenian genocide, which began during the Ottoman era in 1915. For their families and themselves, forgoing their identities was their only means of protection. In adulthood, they have disbanded from the patriarchal context of empire and exhumed themselves of interior suffering, returning to Christianity. Could this act function not only as reform, but as return?

In the lives of these subjects, who still reside in what is now modern-day Turkey, religion is tethered to a public imaginary where belief, race, and nationalism converge. Sarkissian's subjects have assumed that becoming Christian would reinstate them as authentically Armenian, but this metonymic process, as Homi K. Bhabha once argued, leaves the subject split from the 'official' or 'authentic' sense of self to which they aspire. They are perceived as agents of mimicry.[lv] Neither accepted by Turkish society nor embraced as Armenian, they exist in the interstices. Sarkissian withholds the light of his camera, positing the invisibility of these vulnerable subjects – human beings who exist as ghosts of themselves.[lvi]

In 1997, the Nigerian poet and curator Okwui Enwezor spoke of histories as 'restless' and 'contingent'. Narrative, he argued, was predominantly constructed of violent 'epistemological enclosures' of a society still overcoming the stained residue of Western imperialism.[lvii] The bookends of history, he proposed, must be unbound, shattered. Manthia Diawara, expanding upon the writings of Frantz Fanon and Édouard Glissant, argues for the latter's belief that 'thoughts must tremble', shiver, and quake. Humans must fragment into difference as a means through which to understand interstitial identity.[lviii] Glissant's deftly articulated 'poetics of relation' is of significance. In this treatise, the Martinican author and philosopher builds on concepts of *négritude* and 'Black emotion' to argue for 'diversalism' – a contrary sphere to the Christian tradition of Universalism that assumes that all humans will one day be saved. In this space, ideologies are not fixed, but intermingle into open processes of thought, forming 'archipelagos' for and of the voiceless and the oppressed.[lix] Could it be possible for Sarkissian to reengage his subjects in *Unexposed*, to propose a new means through which to build society? A collective community, a celebratory space, crafted through the diffident chimes of their difference? Does art – or, indeed, do artists – bear the responsibility, or hold the affective power, to transform not only our visual sphere, but also the lives of their subjects?

The Aperture of Freedom: Opacity and Beyond

These are no amateur dramatics
This is me walking into the light
No longer a secret
Exercising a right to be seen
Eternity is here
Silence clear
Blindness, near
Take your Final Flight

Sarkissian's practice as an artist developed independently of any particular 'collective affinity' and outside the confined market for 'Arab art' that was spearheaded in the Gulf states in the late 1990s and the new millennium.[lx] Rather, the work has developed through a assiduous disciplinary approach, as well as through interdisciplinary dialogue, exploring countless dissonant histories. A scholar of photography, Sarkissian has sought to deconstruct what E. Ann Kaplan dubbed 'the imperial gaze' and the default position of the hegemonic Western gaze.[lxi] His sensibility, to invoke bell hooks, is consistently oppositional, aiming to move beyond decolonisation in favour of an active reimagining of the photographic subject.[lxii]

Barthes dedicates the latter part of his book *Mythologies* (1957) to demystifying the contradictory manners in which the signifier and the signified subject are moulded to imbue contradictory politics enabled by agents of media power. Author Jacqueline Rose examines this from an intersectional perspective, exploring how the female subject is instrumentalised by the echo chambers of the media loop to propagate ethnic and classist stereotyping.[lxiii] For Sarkissian, these politics are permeable. Rather than addressing them from a direct ontological perspective, his gaze is governed by a form of opacity. His subjects exist, idealised in their difference, without calling attention to themselves for further suppression or domination.[lxiv]

In *Last Seen* (2018–ongoing), the artist returns to the subject of disappearance, forming a composite representation that stretches across the Earth. Working with community organisations from Argentina to Bosnia, Sarkissian has travelled to interview families and relatives – sons, fathers, brothers, husbands – of those who have all but vanished. Living men and women undeclared – denied life, or the right to die. Through an affective relationship developed with each family unit, he photographs the location where each of the disappeared individuals was last 'remembered' to have been seen. The picaresque results expound upon the distinctive qualities of these tumultuous places. It is nearly impossible to imagine these wholly familiar-looking spaces as sites of perennial scars, places of wanton longing. An abandoned piano bearing meticulously configured ephemera – pictures, scarves, a globe. A passageway with second-hand art draped across walls in a pink hue. A plump sofa, as intact as it was decades before. A wedding dress in cellophane pressed against a wardrobe. A hurriedly made bed unbuckling at its seams. A semi-manicured garden. These scenes are as quotidian as they are perturbing in their muteness. They hearken to the souls of the disinherited, remnants holding still. Father Time's clock continues to push forward.

As Sarkissian ventures on these pursuits, his gaze often returns inward. As these words are authored, he is preparing for a definitive reconciliation with a work tentatively titled *Little Apple* (2021–22). The artist's grandfather, whom he never met, hailed from a village in the Sason region of what is present-day Turkey, an enclave called Khantsorig (literally 'little apple'). A picture of this place was situated in the firmament of the Sarkissians' Damascus household. It conjured an imaginary world. The town was the focus of abundant folklore in Armenian popular culture – the subject of revolutionary song, a dance, and a heroic adoption of a collective identity. Adopting the form and style of a road movie, Sarkissian will be travelling to Khantsorig and recounting his family's relationship to the village through personal relationships and rendered affinities. Following his journey 'home', he proposes to return to Damascus to share his findings with his father; to document him bearing witness. The ambition here, one assumes, is to make sense of the stories we tell ourselves. Where do they live? Perhaps it is not truth that shall set us free, but our own experience of witnessing history. For within the apertures – in the cracks in the glass, between the flicker of light and the screen – we learn how to find ourselves, even temporarily, the way we aspire to be seen.

Biography Dr. Omar Kholeif

Dr Omar Kholeif CF FRSA FKA Blake Karim Mitchell is an author of prose and poetry, a historian of the academy and its peripheries and a curator of vanquished and/or suppressed archives. They have worked as a broadcaster, filmmaker, editor, publisher, museum director and LGBTQ+ campaigner in South Africa, Britain, the United States, Lebanon, the GCC and North Africa. Over the last 17 years, their work has concentrated on the evolving nature of networked image culture in relation to the intersectional questions emerging in the field and study of ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality. Specific attention is focused on how these concepts are reified through the language of equality, ableism, and public health as expressed through the critical fabulation around contemporary social justice movements.

The probing questions gleaned from these lines of inquiry have come to life in over 60 exhibitions, and in over 30 authored, co-authored, and edited books, which have been translated into 12 languages. Dr Kholeif was co-curator of Sharjah Biennial 14: Leaving the Echo Chamber and currently serves as Director of Collections and Senior Curator, Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE. Their forthcoming monograph, *Internet_Art: From the Birth of the Web to the Rise of NFTs* is published by Phaidon in April 2023.

Notes

[i] All lyric passages preceding section headings are authored by Omar Kholeif.

[ii] John Berger, *About Looking* (1980; repr., London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 31–41.

[iii] Seventy micrometres is the standard retinal thickness of healthy eyes, according to the National Eye Institute, Baltimore.

[iv] Andy Grundberg, 'Death in the Photograph', *New York Times*, August 23, 1981, 11.

[v] I consider this 'resistance' of semiotic rationality an act of decolonisation – a refusal to correspond with the epistemic structures of entrenched European Enlightenment thought, where rationality reigns supreme and emotions are relegated to the realm of the 'hysterical' Others.

[vi] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (London: Penguin, 2008). Also, commonly known as (and more appropriately) as, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility.*

[vii] I explore the concept of the 'age of anxiety' in relation to digitised visual culture in Omar Kholeif and W. J. T. Mitchell, 'A Story Starts with an Event' and 'Art in the Age of Anxiety: For Omar Kholeif' in *Art in the Age of Anxiety*, ed. Omar Kholeif (Sharjah, UAE: Sharjah Art Foundation; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), pp. 81-120 . For further reading on this subject see Omar Kholeif, *Goodbye, World! Looking at Art in the Digital Age* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2018). The concept of an age of anxiety presupposes rationalizing historical periods through emotional states.

[viii] For a summary of reflections on accelerationist politics see Antonio Negri, 'Reflections on the "Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics"', *e-flux journal*, no. 54 (2014): https://www.e-flux.com/journal/53/59877/reflections-on-the-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics/.

[ix] Sarkissian notably does not work with large crews, but rather takes every photograph independently with his large-format camera. Traditionally, his collaborators are subjects in or of his work. His film is most commonly developed at photo labs in London or Holland. The negatives are then scanned before they are sent to print, a process that he supervises. On rare occasions, the artist has noted that inexperienced lab technicians have 'erased' certain details of colour or light from his pictures as he recalls them. The only intervention in this case is a slight digital manipulation to reconcile the final image with the one in his memory. Whether or not this rare intervention is a subjective inflection by the artist in/to the work is open for discussion.

[x] I observed this during my collaboration with the artist on his photographic work *Last Seen* for which the artist undertook extensive work in Argentina, Bosnia, Brazil and Lebanon, among other countries.

[xi] Quoted by the pioneer of microbiology at a lecture on December 7, 1854, at the University of Lille.

[xii] Articulated at the event *Imaging Time: Understanding Photography as Time-Based Media*, Photographer's Gallery, London, February 23, 2019.

[xiii] Samuel L. Macey, *Encyclopedia of Time* (London: Routledge, 2013), 209.

[xiv] Susan Sontag, *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 5–6.

[xv] See Louis Althusser, 'On the Reproduction of the Conditions of Production', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, (1971), 13-25; Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

[xvi] Stephen Sheehi's *The Arab Imago: A Social History of Portrait Photography, 1880-1910* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). There are few 'definitive histories' of the so-called Levantine states. One could begin with Philip Mansel, *Levant: Splendour and Catastrophe on the Mediterranean* (London: John Murray, 2010); Andrew Arsan, *Lebanon: A Country in Fragments* (London: Hurst, 2018).

[xvii] James Barr posits a sophisticated argument on the histories of war and independence in the so-called Middle East in *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggles That Shaped the Middle East* (London and New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012).

[xviii] Nada Shabout, 'Imaging an Immortal Arab Art', in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, ed. Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout (Durham, NC: Duke University Press; New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 140-150.

[xix] Robert Fisk, *Syria: Descent into the Abyss* (London: Independent Print Limited, 2016).

[xx] It is also worth consulting Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen, and Nawara Mahfoud, eds., *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline* (London and Beirut: Saqi Books, 2014).

[xxi] Author interview with Hrair Sarkissian on January 21, 2021, London. Unless otherwise noted, recollections of this nature come from this interview.

[xxii] Sarkissian's knowledge of photographic histories and processes is extensive, as evidenced by his role as an ongoing advisory board member (general assembly member) of the Arab Image Foundation, where he has served for more than a decade.

[xxiii] Yousuf Karash and David Travis, *Yousuf Karsh: Regarding Heroes* (Boston: David R. Godine, 2009).

[xxiv] '60 Minutes with Morley Safer: Churchill', available at https://karsh.org/videos/60-minutes-with-morley-safer-churchill/.

[xxv] This idea was first introduced in Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1–14. The concept, which Hartman has expanded upon in later writings, is a tool that considers the potential of storytelling and narrativisation in relation to 'suppressed' and 'oppressed' voices. It is an author's aid in telling the stories of those whose lives and histories remain incomplete. Just as much, it allows for an imaginative interplay between fact and fiction in order to push such suppressed stories forward. I acknowledge that as historians working with living artists, but also as individuals who work with incomplete archives, this act of becoming informs our process of narration. Equally, I believe it implicit that artists such as Sarkissian are also authors, who in their process of uncovering unofficial histories embody this spirit.

[xxvi] Email from Hrair Sarkissian, March 17, 2021.

[xxvii] Sophie Ristelhueber quoted in *Trade Routes : History and Geography*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Amsterdam: Prince Claus Fund for Culture, 1997), 189.

[xxviii] From the artist's website, https://hrairsarkissian.com/work/unfinished/.

[xxix] Jean Fisher, 'The Work Between Us', in *Trade Routes*, 20–22.

[xxx] Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle* (1967; repr., New York: Zone Books, 1994).

[xxxi] Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019).

[xxxii] In the beginning of Azoulay's *Potential Histories: Unlearning Imperialism*, the photographer, semiotician and author begins her analysis by describing the imperial status of the camera shutter. She invites the reader to consider it as a site for potential decolonization. In these lines, she proposes that the reader imagine a world where photography is not developed by Western figures at the turn of the 19th century but from a previous era. When I queried Sarkissian regarding this specific point, he argued that his belief is that 'photography was developed by Arabs and thus the apparatus itself is not imperial.' He cites Ibn al-Haytham also known as Alhazen (c.965-c.1040), an Arab mathematician and astronomer who was is often dubbed 'the father of modern optics.' Sarkissian notes that it was Alhazen's understanding of 'pinhole projection' that led to the development of the 'pin hole' camera, which Sarkissian argues to have laid the foundation of modern photography as we know it.

[xxxiii] Email from Hrair Sarkissian, March 29, 2021.

[xxxiv] André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in *What Is Cinema?*, ed. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 9-16.

[xxxv] Kenneth Josephson, *The Light of Coincidence* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 4.

[xxxvi] See Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen, eds., *Photography after Conceptual Art* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

[xxxvii] From a public conversation with Sarkissian at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, January 21, 2020, accessible at https://youtu.be/mwzraNuVQUI.

[xxxviii] These initial theories were gleaned from Freud's iconic texts such as *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Proponents in this field include Joseph Breuer and Morton Prince. In more popular cultural psychological and psychiatric fields in the contemporary arena, Judith Lewis Herman, Bessel van der Kolk, Griselda Pollock, and Bracha L. Ettinger have come to the fore.

[xxxix] DSM is an acronym for the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, updated regularly and published by the American Psychiatric Association.

[xl] See Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.

[xli] Interview with the artist 20 January 2019.

[xlii] Sarkissian often cites his trauma as being mediated. Gleaned from and through the lived experience of his parents, relatives, or the lives of others who come into the frame. Modern trauma theory as articulated by the likes of psychiatrist, Bessel Van Der Kolk, argues that the emotional response to trauma is situated and sediments within the physical form of the body. Thus, one can argue that continual exposure to trauma by the artist whether through first-hand field work, collaborating with dispossessed subjects, or engaging with his own family's loss, has conditioned a latent form of trauma. This creates a situated context for the spectator's gaze when exploring Sarkissian's renderings of post-traumatic landscapes.

[xliii] Here, Sarkissian can be seen to be embodying the schematics of the gaze as articulated by Michel Foucault in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963) and nuanced further in his book, *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Initially, a receptor of singular 'gaze' by the 'complex' of power; as Sarkissian's work evolves, I argue that he begins to understand his agency and 'right' to be 'seen'; to look back from within the system of entrenched hermetic power.

[xliv] Michel Foucault (1963/2003) *The Birth of the Clinic*. London: Routledge Classics.

[xlv] Francisco Bethencourt, *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014). See also John P. Jackson and David J. Depew, *Darwinism, Democracy, and Race* (London: Routledge, 2017).

[xlvi] Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011). See also Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997).

[xlvii] Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[xlviii] Charles Morris, *The Aryan Race*, rep. ed. (London: Forgotten Books, 2016).

[xlix] Graham Richards, *Race, Racism and Psychology: Towards a Reflexive History* (London: Routledge, 2012).

[l] This iconic phrase has become a lyric for many. It was originally used by Gilles Deleuze in relation to discussions of Antonin Artaud's work in *The Logic of Sense* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969), but was popularised in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980; repr., London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[li]Matthew J. Gibney and Randall Hansen, eds., *Immigration and Asylum: From 1900 to the Present* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005). See also Edmund Herzig and Marina Kurkchiyan, *The Armenians: Past and Present in the Making of National Identity* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2004).

[lii] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London and New York: Verso, 2016).

[liii] Email from Hrair Sarkissian, March 30, 2021.

[liv] This specific point is an inferred and explicit act of narrativisation by the author conjured from interviews conducted both formally and informally with Sarkissian between January 2020 and March 31, 2021.

[lv] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 121–30.

[lvi] One can argue that these subjects are stripped of the liberty of embodying W. E. B. Dubois's concept of double consciousness, as their identity is negated within both spheres in which they exist. Thus, could one argue that they operate in a liminal state of consciousness?

[lvii] These theories were explored both in the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale and in Documenta 10, for which Enwezor served as the artistic director. An initial elucidation of this can be found in Okwui Enwezor, 'Travel Notes: Living, Working, and Travelling in a Restless World', in *Trade Routes*, 7–13.

[lviii] Manthia Diawara, 'Edouard Glissant: A Demand for the Right of Opacity', lecture delivered at the European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, Switzerland, August 4, 2019, available at https://youtu.be/2-KJpd2wyf8.

[lix] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 89–121.

[lx] There are number of known expatriate 'Arab' artists or of Arab origin living and working in Britain. (Note: I use Arab in quotation marks to denote the contestation of the term, 'Arab art'). Many of them settled in the country in the 1980s and 1990s, some earlier. An exemplary grouping would include Mona Hatoum, Zineb Sedira, and Jananne Al-Ani. Some developed in relation to and/or found voice in the British Black Art Movement in the 1980s and 1990s, which emerged in tandem with the rise of the postcolonial journal *Third Text* and the staging of exhibitions such as *The Other Story*, curated by the artist Rasheed Araeen in 1989 at the Hayward Gallery in London. This moment fostered what the artist Lorraine O'Grady once dubbed a form of 'political blackness' and solidarity among artists and cultural practitioners in Britain. See Lorraine O' Grady (2020) *Writing in Space* (1973-2019) (edited by Aruna D'Souza). Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1-6. Although Sarkissian's work bears affinities to these figures, his work has not been enabled or fostered by the same politics or institutions.

[lxi] E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film and the Imperial Gaze* (London: Routledge, 1997).

[lxii] bell hooks, 'The Oppositional Gaze', in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115–31.

[lxiii] Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (London: Faber and Faber, 2019). See also Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London and New York: Verso, 2020).

[lxiv] For further context see Natalie Melas, *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).