

## How We Fight Back: Sarkis's Two Rainbows, a Case Study in Decolonizing the Italian Museum

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## **John Cabot University**

Department of Art History

Master of Arts in Art History

### **How We Fight Back:**

**Sarkis's *Two Rainbows*, a Case Study in Decolonizing the Italian Museum**

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## Abstract

This thesis focuses on *Two Rainbows*, a large neon work by conceptual artist Sarkis Zabunyan. It has been exhibited multiple times in different forms and in several international venues, most notably as part of *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*, a 2015 exhibition curated by Hou Hanru and Donatella Saroli at the MAXXI - National Museum of 21st-Century Art in Rome.

My methodological approach is informed by the art-historical literature on identity and cultural politics, as this is a central debate in contemporary art and its histories. Sarkis' identity as a Turkish-born man of Armenian descent provides him with a unique perspective to weigh in on these contemporary discussions. His background and biography are part and parcel of the idea of resistance present in many of his works. This in turn impacts the way his work is received in various cultural and political contexts.

Much of Sarkis' work addresses the idea of hope and new beginnings following political conflicts, like that of the 2013 Gezi Park uprisings in Taksim Square. *Two Rainbows* is no different. It stands as a bright symbol of resistance and civil disobedience against an oppressive government following the Gezi Park repression, and remains a beacon for opponents of Turkey's far-right dictatorial regime. In the context of decolonizing Italian museums, and the concept of decolonization in the art historical field, the MAXXI took early steps in challenging the Italian museum, the concept of Italian art as exclusive, and the inherent Eurocentricity of the art historical canon.

The process of decolonization necessarily takes different forms in different institutions and countries. In Italy, perhaps, this might imply situating Italy in a more extensive and inclusive definition of the Mediterranean, rather than as a pillar of Western civilization, or promoting non-Western artists in ways that do not propagate primitivism or exoticism. Indeed "decolonization"

has, over the past twenty years, gone well beyond a narrow dictionary definition of holding colonies in other countries. It has become short-hand for challenging the Western canon in art history and in museum studies, for challenging the white (and frequently also patriarchal and heteronormative) bias inherent in a Eurocentric view of art and culture.

Ultimately, this thesis focuses on *Two Rainbows* as a case study to enquire about the specific cultural, social, and political context that Italy, and Rome in particular, presents with regard to one of the most powerful, and necessary, endeavors of contemporary art history. While “decolonization” is a subject of crucial debate in art history and museum studies in England and the United States, in particular, the question seems somewhat peripheral still in Italy. Sarkis’ work, and the exhibition cycle that *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury* contributed to is one the rare instances of an Italian institution broaching this topic. Might this be a decisive instance of taking steps towards decolonizing the Italian museum?

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the victims of colonization, both past and present. There is nothing I can say that will change what has happened, but it is my fondest hope that scholars will read this thesis and others like it, and realize there is still work to be done.

Hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost at the hands of colonizers, from the indigenous cultures around the world who were so carelessly snuffed out for man's greed of land and glory, to the slave trade which destroyed a continent, and modern-day colonization which continues on unchecked in countries around the globe. "Forget the past" everyone says, as if the standing statues of slave owners is no big deal.

This thesis is dedicated to the forgotten victims of the Armenian Genocide and the Diaspora, to the victims of colonization and slavery, Fascism, and terrorist groups that perpetuate iconoclasm around the world. To the BAME and POC artists who were once told their art was not good enough, that their names were too hard to pronounce, or that maybe they should try again at next year's competition. To those same artists who now are only included as part of tokenistic engagement, and who were paraded as evidence of "diversity" and "inclusion" during the Black Lives Matter protests, but no one is listening to them now.

To forgotten art practices, lost languages, and names that were never written down because they were female. To the indigenous art stashed away in dusty cupboards, and that which is out, but in a folk and craft art museum because it does not mean the white Western standards of "fine art." Art history cannot progress if it is still dividing itself along class and racial lines.

Decolonization, repatriation, and restitution are the only way forward.

## **Acknowledgements**

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# 1. Introduction

This thesis is predicated on two research questions, one that explores Sarkis Zabunyan as a conceptual artist, the decisions he makes in his practice, and why the curators and other museum officials involved at the MAXXI choose Sarkis and *Two Rainbows* for this particular exhibition. What does his inclusion bring to the table, and what issues is he exploring in his work? Further, a second question attempts to investigate where the idea of “decolonization” currently stands in Italian museums and art historical research.

Decolonization is not a new idea or theory; it has been circulating through various fields, academic and non-academic alike, for decades, supported by its predecessors, post-colonial and subaltern studies. It is, however, becoming increasingly popular and paramount amidst calls for the repatriation of looted items, the removal of statues heralding slave-owners, and the diversification of cultural and historical education, museum collections, and the art historical canon. This thesis endeavors to explore those topics in a specifically Italian context.

This thesis has been a months-long process that builds off the work of previous post-colonial and decolonial scholars. As stated above, decolonization is not a new novel idea, but it is one that is often overlooked or disregarded in Italy, especially in the context of museums. Scholars and activists have been calling for a decolonizing effort in museums and institutions around the world, but many of those calls are pointed at countries like the United Kingdom, France, and the United States. Italy, however, also needs to reassess its history and practices within museums.

Chapter 1 is a two-part literature review on Sarkis as an artist, and on the state of decolonization in the art historical field. Chapter 2 focuses on Sarkis' artistic practice and his oeuvre, as *Two Rainbows* has many important variations throughout multiple years and exhibitions. Chapter 2 also looks at the political situation surrounding the Gezi Park riots in 2013, which is important contextual information for *Two Rainbows*. Chapter 3 analyzes the 2015 exhibition *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury* at which Sarkis exhibited *Two Rainbows*, as well as the MAXXI itself. Chapter 4 takes a deeper look at sources I pulled from the MAXXI archives and analyzes how the exhibition and Sarkis' work were received.

In the course of this thesis, I amassed various sources which ranged from archival research at the MAXXI archives, to in-person interviews with Sarkis, MAXXI Artistic Director Hou Hanru, and his co-curator Donatella Saroli, to primary and secondary literary sources. My methodological approach was two-fold: first, to explore Sarkis as a practicing contemporary artist, to understand how his background might possibly impact his work and how it is received. From there, I delved into the Armenian Genocide and the Gezi Park protests as two key points in his life which are also explored in the exhibition *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*. The second half of my approach to this research looked at decolonization; how it is defined, how it evolved from previous post-colonial research and scholarship, and what it means to apply it to cultural institutions, contemporary museums, and above all, Italian museums.

## 2. Chapter 1: Sarkis and *Two Rainbows*

### *Two Rainbows*

In 1960, Sarkis Zabunyan, who goes by Sarkis, graduated from Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University in Istanbul and inaugurated his career as an artist with his exhibition at the Istanbul Art Gallery.<sup>1</sup> His work has been exhibited at a number of prestigious institutions, including the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and the Bode Museum in Berlin. Sarkis has also been invited to exhibit in the biennials of Istanbul, Moscow, São Paulo, Shanghai, Sidney, and Venice. He was notably included in the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* curated by Harald Szeemann in 1969, at Documenta VI in 1977, and Documenta VII in 1982 in Kassel.<sup>2</sup> As an established artist, Sarkis has been awarded many honors.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elvan Zabunyan cited in Güler Canbulat, "When Memory Takes the Stage: The Forms of Unrepresentability in Sarkis," Master's Thesis, Kadir Has University: Graduate School of Social Sciences, June 2012, 31-32. Sarkis has stated that the first artwork he saw that influenced him was Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, printed in the newspaper he used to wrap meat with his father as a child. So remarkable was *The Scream* that in the 1990s, Sarkis attempted to reinvent the image for himself. His daughter, Elvan Zabunyan, has written that the repeated references to Munch's work in Sarkis' work is part of "the connection that Sarkis established with the memory of a moment passed through that desire to translate it."

<sup>2</sup> "Turkish Pavilion in Venice Biennale to mark Sarkis' works," Daily Sabah, 7 August, 2014, <https://www.dailysabah.com/arts-culture/2014/08/07/turkish-pavilion-in-venice-biennale-to-mark-sarkis-works>.

<sup>3</sup> Sarkis began as a painter, but he did dabble in other forms of artistic practice including sculpture and multimedia sound and video installations. He was the Director of the Art Department at the Ecole des Arts Décoratifs in Strasbourg for ten years from 1980 to 1990. He has received awards such as the 1967 Prix de la Peinture at the Biennale de Paris and the 1991 Grand Prix National de Sculpture. He has worked in France for over five decades, and has had an established workshop in Villejuif, a suburb of Paris, for two decades, but says that the place he works goes beyond the idea of a workshop; it cannot be reduced down to that single definition.



Figure 1. Sarkis. *Two Rainbows*, 2015. Neon installation. Exhibited at *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury* at the MAXXI Museum in Rome, Italy. Provided by MAXXI Archives with permission on 25 March 2022.

Some of Sarkis' trademark signs of production include fingerprints and a variety of colors, combined with a powerful expressive force. This can be seen in *Two Rainbows* (Fig. 1) as exhibited at the MAXXI with the bright neons, as well as *Respiro* (Fig. 2) from the Turkish Pavilion of the 2015 Venice Biennale where a version of *Two Rainbows* was also displayed, across from a smorgasbord of children's fingerprints in paint. The fingerprints are a repetitive keystroke; his Colmar exhibition was likewise titled *In the beginning was touch*.<sup>4</sup> Even more relevant are his words about the symbolism of the rainbow, connecting it to that of the big bang and the beginning of life as we know it.

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<sup>4</sup> Philippe Piguet, "Sarkis: Au commencement le retable d'Issenheim," *Semaine 25.19*.





Figure 2. Sarkis, *Resprio*, 2015. Neon installation. Venice Biennale Turkish Pavilion in Venice, Italy.  
<https://www.hisour.com/sarkis-resprio-turkish-pavilion-venice-biennale-2015-55033/>

## Artistic Practice and Art Theory

Sarkis has developed a “hybrid work” which blends his own history and practice, as well as “humanism nourished by spirituality.”<sup>5</sup> He incorporates components of life and work into one space, saying that things accumulate there, and over time, it became “a bit like a brain.”<sup>6</sup> It formed out of his multiplication of the modes of installation between 1980 and 2000, “sometimes in a monumental way.”<sup>7</sup> Some objects that he made were only for one specific work or

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<sup>5</sup> Philippe Piguet, “Sarkis,” Interview by Philippe Piguet, ArtInterview, <https://www.artinterview.com/interviews/sarkis/>

<sup>6</sup> Piguet, “Sarkis.”

<sup>7</sup> Piguet, “Sarkis.”

exhibition, but “others were more important creations that aspired to continue to exist beyond their first presentation.”<sup>8</sup> Here, Sarkis’ works took on a life of their own; they obtained agency and moved throughout multiple existences.

His multilayered and mixed media work pushes the boundaries of contemporary and conceptual art. He conceives of the space in which he installs to be an empty void that experiences love, suffering, and transformation in the way people do. He has explained that he pushes an idea to its limits until it is gone, then waits for the idea to either come back to him or stay away.<sup>9</sup>

Sarkis is a visual artist in the broadest sense, regularly incorporating multiple types of media in his artwork. Sarkis has reprised *Two Rainbows* from its past lives, since at least 2013. Reinventing work amplifies its message and breathes new life into it. Rather than acting as a mere copy, recreating a past work allows Sarkis to develop it further. In a new space and new context, the work can foster new dialogue. It is not a recreation of mere image and presence, but a recreation that starts a new conversation.

Sarkis’ work is a metaphorical commentary on the state of the world. The rich tapestry of tradition, the forgotten histories of marginalized non-European peoples, and contemporary visual culture all meld together in each work. Memory and identity are central to his work, to himself, and to the cultures he references.

German art historian Uwe Fleckner writes that Sarkis’ focus is on objects nourished by art, cultural history, and his own personal iconography. He builds his installations from his inner

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<sup>8</sup> Piguat, “Sarkis.”

<sup>9</sup> Geneva Bria, “Venice Biennale. The Turkish Pavilion as Told by Sarkis,” *Artribune* 26 March 2015, <https://www.artribune.com/attualita/2015/03/biennale-di-venezia-il-padiglione-della-turchia-raccontatoda-sarkis/>.

trauma to address past collective social traumas. He writes that Sarkis does not “speak of recollections,” but instead talks about memory. Memory, for him, is “a dynamic, life-sustaining, and contemporary entity, not an asylum for sniveling.” It is about accepting, not mourning.<sup>10</sup>

Sarkis’ work goes beyond geopolitics, as far back as the creation of the universe and the beginning of time, to what he calls “the first-ever rainbow - the very first magical breaking point of light.”<sup>11</sup> This is where he and others can “embrace contemporaneity” where the past and the present meet in a concerted effort to resist becoming stagnant.<sup>12</sup>

Though his work is situated in the contemporary field, Sarkis’ work always includes a relevant historical or cultural component. His work becomes an immersive environment that invites participation from viewers, but does not necessitate a response; the work creates its own dialogue without needing it from an external source. They carry with them a certain rhythm that Sarkis utilizes to complete the space. It is gentle and enveloping, like something to feel but not touch. You cannot command it, just be in it.

Sarkis operates his exhibition space like a theatrical stage. The director brings up the actors and the set, but once in motion, the play moves on with a life of its own without the director. Sarkis creates his work to breathe and live and transform without him. He brings in a work that converses with the space and the visitors that step inside it. There is a relationship present that grows with each day, with the passing of time and the changing of the shadows.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Guler Canbulat, “When Memory Takes the Stage: The Forms of Unrepresentability in Sarkis,” Master’s Thesis, Kadir Has University: Graduate School of Social Sciences, June 2012: 30.

<sup>11</sup> “Respiro by Sarkis: Pavilion of Turkey at the Venice Biennale,” e-flux Announcements, 12 February 2015 <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/30001/respiro-by-sarkis/>.

<sup>12</sup> “Respiro by Sarkis: Pavilion of Turkey at the Venice Biennale.”

<sup>13</sup> Sungar, Hazal Gençay, “Sarkis: Icon of Installation Art,” Magnet, 1 December 2020, <https://www.magnet.istanbul/blog/icerik/sarkis-yerlestirme-sanatinin-ikonu>.

With his high sensitivity to time as an artistic medium with which he can sculpt, Sarkis brings memory, spirit, and conflict together into each artwork. He manipulates and personifies phenomena like memory, space, and time to produce original metaphors that he then invites viewers to partake in. With his ingenuity, Sarkis has gained celebrity status and can be considered a leading icon in installation and neon work.

### **Kriegsschatz: Memory and Trauma**

His artworks are made of layers of depth, and emotional symbolism. His passion for collecting items and memories, keeping them alive by weaving them into his art like mementos, and reinventing the work, is present in every piece.<sup>14</sup> In 1976, Sarkis coined the term *Kriegsschatz*, which translates roughly as “war treasure” or “war chest,” a recurring theme in his work that deals with trophies or spoils of war. As objects are stolen through acts of violence, they become symbols of power; this links *kriegsschatz* to the history of humankind and the civilizations that arose out of it. As his parents lived through the Armenian Genocide and diaspora, Sarkis is well acquainted with it, and his oeuvre involves elements relevant to the debates regarding diaspora and memory - the desire to forget and the duty to remember.<sup>15</sup>

Sarkis has essentially anthropomorphized his works in this sense. When there are so many that cannot all exist in their full forms in one space, some creations have to stay packed away in storage crates and bins. This causes him “real suffering with regards to works which are thus frozen,” as he has always felt an “irresistible need to bring them to life.”<sup>16</sup> This led him to

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<sup>14</sup> Gencay, “Sarkis: Icon of Installation Art.”

<sup>15</sup> Jasmine Lark, “Sarkis,” Widewalls, 2 June 2016, <https://www.widewalls.ch/artists/sarkis>.

<sup>16</sup> Piguet, “Sarkis.”

find a new place for him and his work, a former printing house that measures 450 square meters, allowing his work to live and breathe in the space without overcrowding.

Everything stays; he cannot destroy a memory, and this holds true for his new workshop as well. He only removed walls as absolutely necessary, preferring to leave the architecture the way it was found. In describing the move to this new location from his previous studio, Sarkis said: “I opened their boxes, lit the neon lights that could be there and I installed them in the place, organizing a whole game of correspondence between them. [In] short, I brought them back to life. They started to breathe again.”<sup>17</sup>

Part of Sarkis’ personal war chest is the memory of his family. His parents lived through and were at the mercy of the exile in 1915. His mother would talk, but his father, perhaps perpetually remembering the horrors he managed to survive, lived and died in silence, living “as though he had no tongue.”<sup>18</sup> Though Turkey has never apologized nor made any attempts to remedy its wrongdoings, Sarkis does not believe the situation to be hopeless. There is progress that has been made, and more is on the way with books about Armenian journalist Hrant Dink who was assassinated. Sarkis has said he learned much from Dink and his mother.

Because of his love for the woman who raised him, he does not consider himself to be a product of the Armenian diaspora. She lived and died as an Anatolian woman, according to Sarkis, and though she is gone now, he still cares for her home, a testament to his affection and filial devotion. Hrant Dink once said that “Diaspora is a huge village in Anatolia,” an image that

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<sup>17</sup> Piguet, “Sarkis.”

<sup>18</sup> Zeynep Esra, “Armenian Artists to have Turkish Pavilion at Venice Biennale,” DailySabah, 17 February 2015, <https://www.dailysabah.com/arts-culture/2015/02/17/armenian-artist-to-have-turkish-pavillion-at-venice-biennale>.

gives Sarkis and others hope.<sup>19</sup> It does not mean there will never be attacks on Armenian people, but it offers a sort of emotional refuge to have a sense of community, even in the wake of exile.<sup>20</sup>

1955 was a memorable year in Sarkis' life, particularly during the events of September 6-7. On Tuesday, September 6, 1955, Sarkis heard on the radio that Armenian shops and other minority groups were going to be attacked by gangs. Elvan Zabunyan, Sarkis' daughter and a reputed art historian of multiculturalism in museums, has written about some of her father's experiences, despite him having spoken very little about it:

He went out and stood in front of his father's shop to defend it. The shop, by some miracle, was not destroyed, but an iron bar left a mark on the shop-front that remained visible until the butcher's shop closed at the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>21</sup>

The windows were broken, and everything they could get their hands on was thrown into the street and smashed. In Sarkis' words, cited by his daughter:

The smell of olive oil, vinegar and other spices from the greengrocers were mixed with the materials and unrolled carpets in the street, the smell was a smell of the town that I can still smell today.<sup>22</sup>

German art historian Aby Warburg coined the concept of *leidschatz*, or "humanity's treasure of suffering."<sup>23</sup> This parallels Sarkis' *kriegsschatz* and helps inform his conceptual

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<sup>19</sup> Sam Thorne, "Pavilions of Turkey & the Republic of Armenia," *Frieze* Issue 172, 28 May 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Esra, "Armenian Artists to have Turkish Pavilion at Venice Biennale."

<sup>21</sup> Elvan Zabunyan cited in Canbulat, "When Memory Takes the Stage: The Forms of Unrepresentability in Sarkis," 32.

<sup>22</sup> Elvan Zabunyan cited in Canbulat, "When Memory Takes the Stage: The Forms of Unrepresentability in Sarkis," 32.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Diers, Thomas Girst, and Dorothea von Moltke, "Warburg and the Warburgian Tradition of Cultural History," *New German Critique* no. 65, Spring-Summer 1995: 68.

framework. Fundamental to Sarkis' art is memory, the memory of pain, and love, all part of the same treasure trove. By reifying one's personal treasure trove, art can alter the temporal distance between the past and the present. Sarkis' daughter Elvan Zabunyan states that memory is beyond time, it does not belong to the past nor the present.<sup>24</sup>

Zabunyan believes those events greatly impacted her father and his artistic research, forging memories and trauma that he continues to work from. Sarkis once said that

For me, silence really was a weight. (...) In the house we always spoke Armenian in a low voice and generally, we didn't talk about anything, and we didn't speak to each other.<sup>25</sup>

Further emphasis on the importance of memory to Sarkis is his first solo exhibition in Istanbul in 1986; it is titled *Caylak Street*, the same name as the street in Beyoglu, Istanbul, where he was born and raised.<sup>26</sup>

## **Regeneration**

Sarkis incorporates different media in his works and frequently re-composes and re-installs variations of a given work. Reinventing the work amplifies its message and breathes new life into it. Rather than acting as a mere copy, recreating a past work allows Sarkis to develop it further. In a new space and new context, the work can foster new dialogue. All of Sarkis' work,

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<sup>24</sup> Elvan Zabunyan cited in Canbulat, "When Memory Takes the Stage: The Forms of Unrepresentability in Sarkis," 30-31.

<sup>25</sup> Elvan Zabunyan cited Canbulat, "When Memory Takes the Stage: The Forms of Unrepresentability in Sarkis," 32.

<sup>26</sup> Canbulat, "When Memory Takes the Stage: The Forms of Unrepresentability in Sarkis," 32-33.

he has explained, stems from this idea of perpetual regeneration with a unique dialogue at the very core. Sarkis is adamant that he makes his work *work*.

Nothing is rehearsed or staged or even encouraged to lean in one direction rather than the other. “The viewer doesn’t make the work,” he relays, “but the work is there, and you have to converse with it.”<sup>27</sup> The exhibition is a stage, a veritable “arena” for conversation, for the back and forth that breeds understanding and connection. This is a common practice for Sarkis, whose oeuvre is polymorphic, teeming with his commitment to art, history, spirituality, and politics.<sup>28</sup>

Regeneration can also be seen with *Two Rainbows*. Exhibited in 2014 in Bucharest, Romania, in 2014 at Istanbul Modern in Turkey, and in 2015 at the Venice Biennale and the MAXXI in Rome, it is renewed afresh with each version. *Two Rainbows* continues to live in a new setting and a new context. In each exhibition, there are different viewers, different conversations, and a different reception. Sarkis does not need to fabricate conversation but lets the work express itself in the space and speak for itself. What each person takes away from it is up to them. Each new version is unique but doubles down upon its former lives.

As one of Turkey’s leading and most famous contemporary artists, Sarkis has become a figurehead of installation and conceptual art. His work is often multisensory, involving auditory and visual components to accompany the sculpture or exhibition. Sarkis’ work is highly original in the way he explores their relationships and in turn, the personal connections individuals and communities have with them.

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<sup>27</sup> Piguet, “Sarkis: Au commencement le retable d’Issenheim.”

<sup>28</sup> His 2018-19 reinterpretation of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1512-1516) at the Chapelle de la Visitation is another example.



Sarkis constantly renews his installations, living memories adorned with stained glass, sentimental images, and neon. He combines his own memories of his family and growing up in Istanbul with the collective memories of the Armenian Diaspora, and the continued oppression of minority groups in Turkey. The renewal of each work every time it is exhibited in a new space adds to its meaning, for it absorbs and adopts the context of its new temporary home. The light, the structure of the room and building, and the context of the city are incorporated into the work. Like an organism, his works continue to breathe and shed light in their exhibition space long after the lights are turned off and the doors are closed.

In 2014, Istanbul Modern, the first private museum of modern and contemporary art exhibitions in Turkey, celebrated the tenth anniversary of its foundation. For this event, Sarkis' *Rainbow* (Fig. 3), which bears a striking resemblance to his more recent *Two Rainbows*, shined brilliantly, affixed to the outside of the building, starting on 1 January 2014.<sup>29</sup>

Sarkis' *Rainbow* was deliberately chosen to open the new year as the first exhibition, for it serves as a reminder that art never ends, and signifies the joy and movement in life. Measuring 7.5 meters tall and 15 meters wide, *Rainbow* was shown for the entire year. Sarkis said that *Rainbow* is a miracle, as art always references new beginnings and fresh ideas in a never-ending process of creation.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> "Sarkis' Rainbow," <http://howtoistanbul.com/en/sarkiss-rainbow/13440>.

<sup>30</sup> "Sarkis' Rainbow." The museum serves as a "versatile platform for communication where everyday life meets art." Chief Curator Levent Calikoglu emphasized the metamorphic intent behind *Rainbow*: "Sarkis [talks] of the concepts of memory, cross-cultural interactions, and history." In his work, he builds a physical reference to the relationship between humans and nature, and similarly, the relationship between an artist and the process of creation. Calikoglu chose *Rainbow* to represent the way Istanbul Modern is also changing and exhibiting different types of art.



Figure 3. Sarkis, *Rainbow*, 2014. Permanent neon installation. Istanbul Modern Museum in Istanbul, Turkey. <https://www.sarkis.fr/2014-rainbow-installation-permanente/>

In *ArtInterview*, Philippe Piguet asked if “the principle of creation is more powerful in the preparation of the work than in its final presentation.”<sup>31</sup> To this, Sarkis responds that these two temporalities cannot be separated. Even when complete, a work of art carries the memories of its creation, and shares a resonance between that and the reaction evoked in the viewer.

Sarkis is constantly concerned with bringing his objects to life, although that will look different with every work. This life he gives to his work comes from that moment of excitement upon creation, the emergence of the idea in the beginning. He compares it to a “love at first sight,” and says that he is waiting to find his part in the work.<sup>32</sup>

In its MAXXI incarnation, *Two Rainbows* was made to function as a work of civil disobedience and “fighting back” - to quote the exhibition section’s title - but not only against

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<sup>31</sup> Piguet, “Sarkis.”

<sup>32</sup> Piguet, “Sarkis.”

the authoritarian Turkish state. Sarkis systematically frames *Two Rainbows* as a point of departure for issues central to his practice, foremost of which is the Armenian Genocide and authoritarian oppressive regimes, as evidenced in Taksim Square. In this context, *Two Rainbows* is also fighting back against ethnocentric canons and challenging the dominance of Eurocentric content.

*Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury* undertakes a new level of gravity when understood as part of a larger prospectus on the cultural realities of the Mediterranean and the relationship between Europe and the Middle East. Specifically, in the section *Can We Fight Back?* where Sarkis' work was shown, the exhibition created an arena of discussion on subjects of social and political conflict, cultural identity, and the violation of civil rights and freedom of expression. Decolonization encompasses all of these topics as part of an ongoing process.

### **Why is Decolonization Necessary?**

Principally understood as the history of artists, art history solidified the notion that history belonged to great men, namely, wealthy white men.<sup>33</sup> Though times have changed and museums continue to engage in talks of diversifying collections and exhibiting artists, many museums still subscribe to the Eurocentric art-historical canon. Decolonizing the museum began decades ago with the closure of colonial museums but is a complicated and unfinished process.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum," *Art History* 3, issue 4 (1980): 456.

<sup>34</sup> Beatrice Falucci, "Sources for Colonial Historiography: Museums and Colonial Collections, a Mapping and Memory Project on the Italian National Territory," *Cahiers d'histoire* 37, no. 1 (Fall 2019): 30. Colonial museums were absolutely essential to furthering the reach and acceptance of colonialism. It showed public citizens that there was a vast, untouched world out there they could play a part in taming, and the industry leaders that they could benefit financially from that world. The items pillaged during expeditions and displayed during exhibitions highlighted the "otherness" of these cultures, which defined "Italianness" in contrast.

Many of these problematic museums have attempted to cast the formerly colonized areas as actors rather than an invaded people. It is past time for museums and cultural centers to take an unbiased look at the narratives they push when they create and display their exhibitions.<sup>35</sup> The exhibitions within museums served to naturalize the established hierarchies of cultural differences, “visually distinguishing between the museum’s public and the ‘other.’”<sup>36</sup>

Sarkis’ lived experience is markedly salient to conversations of decolonization, being pulled between two identities, Turkish and Armenian. Istanbul is strained between the East and the West, but Sarkis’ work attempts to move beyond this binary paradigm of the “West and the rest.” His work challenges the dominance of Euro-American with contextual iconography of cultural memory, politically-guided amnesia, colonial hierarchization, and insidious structures of oppression. His work endeavors to be international, to oppose the state-led fragmentation of the multitudes of identities and cultures in Istanbul, and the privileged locus of colonial legacies. Sarkis’s work, with *Two Rainbows* as a case study, unhinges tightly held narratives and the uneven attention towards Euro-centric art.

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<sup>35</sup> When museums, including Italian museums, still possess objects from other cultures, they need to question all pre-conceived notions of its acquisition, display, and contextual milieu. These objects are the history of another people wiped from the books. They are not merely things to be possessed, oohed, and awed at, but items with cultural significance. They are not to be exoticized or objectified, but restituted or displayed with the same respect and dignity as Euro-American objects.

<sup>36</sup> Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, and Carl Grodach, “Displaying and Celebrating the “Other”: A Study of the Mission, Scope, and Roles of Ethnic Museums in Los Angeles,” *The Public Historian* 26, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 52. Objects were arranged via progressive stages that suggested the object’s sophistication reflected the creator. Thus, exhibitions created by museum anthropologists and curators displayed frozen “primitive” cultures as objects of the past by way of constructed evolutionary narratives of humanity and constructed racial differences. While publicly claiming to be proponents of social equality, anthropologists and museum officials were actively constructing a narrative of racial inequality within what was supposed to be a democratic public space.

## Defining “Decolonization”

The question of world art or global art history has been a central concern of the past years. Both of these are attempts to “decolonize” the eurocentric canon. Decolonization in the contemporary methodological debates about art and its histories is a method. There are three interrelated methods: postcolonialism, decolonization, and subaltern studies, three facets of one method with one commonality. Decolonization “is an approach to the past and an *attitude* towards the modern.” That is, it can be used as a theoretical approach to art history and its adjacent subjects, like the art market, museums, and art criticism. In the past, subaltern theorists have called for an art history that covers multiple modernities, which was often understood as trying to create a more inclusive canon.<sup>37 38</sup>

Decolonization is about employing counterexamples to disturb what were previously seen as canonical facts. This can be universities mandating more non-Western art history courses, cities removing the statues of long-dead racists, or museums repatriating looted art and labeling and displaying non-Western art appropriately, with as much care and attention as they do Western art. Studying the Empire and its global impacts provides necessary context for de-

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<sup>37</sup> Zehra Jumabhoy in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 27-28. Zehra Jumabhoy, an art critic and lecturer at London’s Courtauld Institute of Art, reminds us that while the use of the term “decolonization,” is commonplace now, the movement behind it started long before it became part of art historical vernacular. Jumabhoy believes that decolonizing art history involves decolonizing our judgments of what is considered “art.” She raises a spectacularly important question, asking why, in an exhibition on modern Indian art at New York’s Asia Society Museum, were the works shown considered historical artifacts with cultural significance rather than works of art with aesthetic significance?

<sup>38</sup> One example of this is Western museums and universities checking off the boxes required by postcolonialism and including token insertions of art outside Europe and the United States. Decolonization endeavors to take it a step further than this, and in that sense, subaltern studies actively participate in this radical correction. The scope of this thesis is by design, limited, and does not allow me to delve more deeply into the question of subaltern studies. However, it is necessary to mention this other state of the field and literature as one of the academic interdisciplinary fields that attempt to advance this progress.

colonializing the physical and social space where art history operates. It means airing art history's dirty laundry in public, a necessary acknowledgment of former colonies and their contemporary repercussions that still survive today.<sup>39</sup>

Important then is recognizing that many institutions appear publicly enthused about embracing decolonization and reparations, but in practice, rarely adopt realistic praxes to address the problems, the labor, and people involved with the theory. It may not be intentional, but "business as usual," making it even more insidious. Keeping with the status quo is why change rarely moves forward. To truly make a difference, there must be a thorough overhaul of the field, how it processes, and who is involved.<sup>38</sup>

The methodology employed in education still tends to view the world as polarized, charged with binarisms, between primitive and civilized, developed and undeveloped, advanced or third-world, and Western and non-Western. This impacts the way museums can be "decolonized". A further component of decolonization includes questioning the exclusivity of Western museums and institutions that have previously and continue to kidnap artworks from former colonial continents including Africa, Oceania, and Latin America.<sup>39</sup>

In many ways, the colonial period is over, but its effects still remain and the impact of actions from hundreds of years ago is still felt all over the world. As Susan Pui San Lok refers to it, modern colonialism engenders and enforces a whole host of problems: capitalism, supremacism, slavery, genocide, ecocide, domestic and environmental violence, the exploitation of cheap and

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<sup>39</sup> Zehra Jumabhoy in Grant and Price, "Decolonizing Art History," 26-29.

<sup>38</sup> Sumaya Kassim in Grant and Price, "Decolonizing Art History," 29.

<sup>39</sup> Dele Layiwola in Grant and Price, "Decolonizing Art History," 30-31. New curricula in universities globally need to reinterpret history and what has been left out, either intentionally or ignorantly. Displaced products of colonization and looting, such as the particularly well-known "Benin Bronzes" from the British expedition to Nigeria in 1897, need to be reconsidered in their indigenous, natural context, rather than as another object in a Western museum. Further, they need to be returned.

invisible labor, human and natural resources, even death.<sup>40</sup> Colonization is not gone, it has simply been repackaged.

Decolonization necessitates the severing of the towering narratives that mask historical violence, which continues to ring through discriminatory structures and systems, still dividing and conquering along arbitrary lines of gender, race, heteronormativity, class, and ableism. Decolonization cannot move forward without confronting the murderous systems we are complicit in and the silences we abide by for the sake of not rocking the boat. Existing systems, structures, laws, institutions, pedagogies, and praxes, must at once be dismantled.

Decolonization necessitates the acknowledgment of the ghosts of imperialism and colonialism that actively deny and negate Indigenous peoples around the world and their right to stolen lands. Countries and institutions continue to deny and negate the lived experiences of former enslaved, immigrant, displaced, and minority populations. Scholars and educators need to recognize the pervasive histories and legacies of domination and exploitation in Britain and that the ‘after empire’ is the same as the empire, with museums and archives and collections that are unceasingly imperialist and colonialist. Decolonizing the museum is not only ending the practice of stealing work, but ending the hoarding of it in Western spaces and appropriating it as part of Western culture.

Director of the University of the Arts London Decolonising Arts Institute, lok calls for a Decolonizing Fight Club where the first rule is to talk about the fight club, and the final rule is

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<sup>40</sup> susan pui san lok in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 31. It should be noted that susan pui san lok purposely spells her name with all lowercase letters and this is not in error.

the break the rules. An institute that is founded on decolonizing is paradoxical in nature but reinforces the idea that decolonization must start within the institution.<sup>41</sup>

North American museums are making concerted attempts to decolonize by way of becoming more inclusive, however, they are “still being restricted by a knowledge produced through colonial eyes.”<sup>42</sup> That necessitates re-examining and reimagining history and knowledge, how it was obtained, and how it is disseminated. Decolonizing museums and institutions is not a fix as simple as hiring non-white or non-Western artists for an exhibition, although this is a legitimate step that needs to be taken. It requires a conscious and intentional move away from Euro-centric ideology in the art historical canon.<sup>43</sup>

Despite decolonization being an effort in introducing a more globalized study of art history, it is not universal or unified from one country to the next.<sup>46</sup> Decolonization is specific, and what it looks like in the United States will differ from that of the United Kingdom, other European countries, or Australia and New Zealand. It will undertake different characteristics and imperatives of the lived experiences in each country or culture, much like colonialism and postcolonialism.

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<sup>41</sup> susan pui san lok in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 31-35.

<sup>42</sup> Nada Shabout in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 52.

<sup>43</sup> In their answer to Grant and Price's questions, Deniz Türker, Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in the Department of History of Art at the University of Cambridge, reminds readers that some institutions are already taking steps towards decolonizing their spaces and collections, such as the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum, and Cambridge's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

<sup>46</sup> However, no amount of globalization, this relatively well-intentioned movement, resolves the flattening and reductive results of Western thought and education as universal. Where Western museums find themselves currently is grappling with the intersection of shedding the European reference while operating within a still colonized art history.



The point of decolonization is not to destroy or replace. It is not simply undoing or removing the Eurocentricity of a university or museum. It does not involve reversing or rewriting history, but can be considered from a revisionist, additive intent. It undermines “the universals, binaries, and essentialism associated with the imperialist image of Western thought.”<sup>47</sup> It introduces nuanced perspectives and becomes anti-imperialist rather than pro or neutral.

Decolonizing a museum means confronting Western complicity with colonial thought, and ending the practices that reinforce and uphold the empire’s sovereignty and supremacy.<sup>48</sup> Thus, part of decolonizing art history and the museum is also decolonizing art itself. Moving beyond outdated binaries such as the West and non-West, primitive and advanced, fine art and crafts. Beyond including non-Western artists, expanding curricula, diversifying art, and even exposing the existing colonialist historiography, decolonization must address the very *thought* of art history. These actions are wonderful components of anti-Imperialist activism but alone are not enough. Addressing the core values of what bred Eurocentric art history and what upholds its structure today must move alongside rethinking the content of art history.

In the words of Kamini Vellodi, Professor of Contemporary Art and Theory at the

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<sup>47</sup> Kamini Vellodi in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 62.

<sup>48</sup> Francesco Ventrella in Grant and Price “Decolonizing Art History,” 65. Decolonization also implies rethinking the accessibility of museums and galleries. In an article, Tristram Hunt, Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, celebrates that more BAME [Black, Asian, and minority ethnic] schoolchildren are visiting the V&A Museum, but fails to ask about their experience during the visit. Visitor experience is an integral part of the museum as an institution, but experience is not universal across the board. Many minority and marginalized groups report not feeling welcome, relevant to the discussion of decolonization. Hunt defended the structure of the encyclopaedic survey museum, calling it “essentially valuable,” but he fails to question how the universal museum were fabricated categories based only on what is “essentially valuable” to justify the museum’s mission. There is a deep connection between decolonizing Western museums and the experience of non-white visitors, but which cannot be completely fleshed out in this thesis.

University of Edinburgh, for decolonization to succeed, it must progress as a reanalysis of the “epistemological, rational and representational *thinking* that marks art history’s scholarly debt to its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European roots.”<sup>49</sup> Further stressed is an important distinction between ‘decolonizing art history’ and a ‘decolonized art history.’ Actively decolonizing art history is a crucial process designed to rattle the discipline’s ground so it *cannot continue as it did before*. A so-called “decolonized art history” would reappropriate the term as a new feature of a discipline *that continues as it did before*. Decolonizing requires a series of confrontations and arguments to be waged against the status quo, rather than refastening the term as a disciplinary method.<sup>50</sup>

Carving out space for anti-colonial narratives of resistance in museums and the field of art history is an indispensable transformation if we are ever to break away from the tired echoes of the voice of the colonial museum and a white male director whenever we talk about decolonization.<sup>51</sup>

## **Decolonizing Academia and Museums**

The current thrust to decolonize culture and its institutions - the art-historical canon and its museums especially - centers on “implementing forgotten narratives.” Less than reorganizing existing cultural spaces, it is about forging new ones that create dialogue and navigate decolonial resonances in the same way.<sup>52</sup> How did the word and concept of “decolonization” evolve from

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<sup>49</sup> Kimini Vellodi in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 63.

<sup>50</sup> Kimini Vellodi in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 61-64.

<sup>51</sup> Francesco Ventrella in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 65-66.

<sup>52</sup> Fabian Villegas and Cindy Sissokho, “Decolonizing the Museum is Not a Performance, Nor a

national independence or emancipation to the current meaning, spanning from subaltern studies to an equitable understanding of global or world art? As the canon opened, after the waves of politically progressive social art history especially, the persistent prejudices of the Eurocentric canon became the source of increasing art-historical and cultural attention. The “redistribution of social materiality” was extended beyond class and gender to look now at race and culture.

Further, what are the implications of decolonization in the cultural field, if what we mean by “culture” was constructed as an incubator of deeply colonial dynamics and structures? Movements to begin the decolonization of art history or the art world are likely started with the best of intentions, but it is still an outdated model that hails from the nineteenth century. It inevitably ends up as a system that silences, invisibilizes, and residualizes other cultures and the racialized experiences exterior to colonial paradigms.<sup>53</sup> If postcolonialism is the denaturalizing of colonial thought, decolonization will literally unsettle colonial spaces.<sup>54</sup>

Ethnographic museums have, in the past, been a way for the West’s cultural “Other” to be displayed. The unknown, unchartered, unexplainable, and uncanny have become the homogenized “other” by the anthropologist. It is something previously unknown that they felt a desire to control, claim, and classify. Ethnographic objects in Europe were founded on their acquisition date rather than production, “as if they had been orphaned and needed to be parented

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Metaphor,” Terremoto, 30 October 2020, <https://terremoto.mx/en/online/decolonizar-el-museo-no-es-un-performance-ni-una-metafora/>.

<sup>53</sup> Villegas and Sissokho, “Decolonizing the Museum is Not a Performance, Nor a Metaphor.”

<sup>54</sup> Kajri Jain in Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 24-25.

anew.”<sup>55</sup> Rarely did anyone ask who these artworks came from, nor *how* they came to be in Western hands, only cared for when they became part of the colonial world.<sup>56</sup>

It is this removal of a non-Western object from its original context - with no explanation of the original cultural context - that must be addressed in the art world. To strip an object of its *original* history and replace it with the history of its oppressors, of its settlers and looters and appropriators, is nothing short of cultural genocide.<sup>57</sup> Once in another setting, these objects lose their significance. They begin to appear patinaed, even anachronistic, and past their expiration date.<sup>58</sup> It is not difficult to realize that these institutions, which are supposed to be educational for the public, have been sucked into “the corporate culture of consumption on an increasingly global scale.”<sup>59</sup>

To author Clementine Deliss, the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris was once described as an institution whose exhibitions were intended to “provide well-produced, colorful, attractive, and topic visions of the world with a touch of popular exoticism.”<sup>60</sup> It remains controversial,

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<sup>55</sup> Clementine Deliss, “Collecting Life’s Unknowns,” in *Decolonising Museums*, ed. Natasa Petresin-Bachelez (L’Internationale, 2015), 24.

<sup>56</sup> Falcucci, “Sources for Colonial Historiography,” 26-28. Imperial powers metaphorically battled for dominance with their exhibitions, which paralleled the physical battle for dominance over African land. The “primitive” cultures and their objects were used as an attention-grabbing backdrop against which national prestige was weighed. Colonialism did not exist only with soldiers and weapons but was a legitimate ideology that could be thrust upon unsuspecting populations. For many who would never travel and experience the might of the empire in person, an exhibition of items from various other cultures “was the tangible proof of the supremacy of his race and culture over another.” The museum became a veritable vacuum of imperial power where anything brought inside was subsumed under the paradigm of the dominating culture. This “regime of representation” gave viewers the ability to participate in a selective retelling of history, memory, and identities. The objects themselves were malleable in the sense that their meaning was warped to contribute to the new regime’s slogan. Said slogan was the “white, European man[’s]” supremacy and benevolence of their willingness to take care of “undeveloped” or “primitive” populations. It served as testimony to the benefits of colonialism to European people’s lives and wallets at the expense of someone else.

<sup>57</sup> Deliss, “Collecting Life’s Unknowns,” 24.

<sup>58</sup> Deliss, “Collecting Life’s Unknowns,” 25.

<sup>59</sup> Deliss, “Collecting Life’s Unknowns,” 26.

<sup>60</sup> Deliss, “Collecting Life’s Unknowns,” 26.

however, being praised for excellent archives and criticized for its role in cultural looting through its ethnographic collections. Deliss writes of remediating the ethnographic collections to demystify them but seems to leave out that the peak of remediation is repatriation. Non-western art is equally mystified as it is commodified. It is stolen and kept, displayed inappropriately. Conversations swirl around the topic of repatriating culturally significant art, but few seem to land on the idea of it just being the morally right decision to make. Whether there is a recipient or not should not be the deciding factor; African tribal art does not belong to the white Western world, not Germany, not the United States, and not Italy.

Deliss loses steam with her closing remarks, arguing that claims of restitution to return millions of looted, plundered, and displaced objects to where they truly belong, is “the most active form of commodification that is taking place.”<sup>61</sup> Not only blatantly wrong, but this is a painfully, ostensibly offensive, illogical, and ignorant comment to make.

An unmistakable connection can be made between colonial histories and the current state of the museum. While postcolonial studies in the university and critical race theory in schools are making important headway in educating individuals on exactly how education and art history came to be, there needs to be a further challenge.<sup>62</sup> That further challenge that has been posed by

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<sup>61</sup> Deliss, “Collecting Life’s Unknowns,” 30.

<sup>62</sup> Like the United States, art history programs in the UK still center heavily on Western tradition. The United States does make some semblance of an attempt at covering global art history, but there is still a massive disparity between the way, say, the arts of Africa are taught compared to the arts of Europe.

<sup>63</sup> However much progress has been made in this endeavor, it can often feel like one step forward and two steps back when exhibitions such as the Tate Britain’s ill-advised *Artist and Empire* from 2015 still take place. This colonial exhibition furthers the cause and reach of imperialism as a “force for good,” as Dominic Sandbrook wrote, rather than one of cultural genocide fraught with ignorance and condescension. Surely the entire subcontinent of India, the vast majority of Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and the Polynesian Islands, to name only a few former British colonies, would strongly oppose the idea of the empire doing anything remotely resembling “good.”

students and visitors and museum officials alike, is to decolonize the museum.<sup>63</sup> Authors Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price have sewn themselves into this debate. Their edited survey of responses, “Decolonizing Art History,” asks curators, educators, and other museum officials guiding questions that center around the existing perspectives, such as postcolonial, feminist, queer, and Marxist, in reference to decolonizing the museum, while also acknowledging that new theoretical perspectives may need to be assessed.

But to ask someone to “decolonize” something, first requires an understanding on their part that it was indeed, first colonized. This may feel like an attack to some professors and curators, as it demands a reassessment of their educational and scholarly work thus far. This is not an easy task, and as such, the idea and physical demands of decolonizing the museum have been met with nearly as much backlash as it has support.

Grant and Price’s article brings in questions posed to art historians, curators, and artists, and published them and the responses. Among others, two important questions asked were “What is your understanding of decolonizing art history now?” and “What does a decolonized art history look like?” Though this answer cannot be reduced to a simple equivalency, a good starting point for a decolonized art history is the inclusion of “multiple narratives so that it’s about different histories and not a story that becomes *the* canon.”<sup>64</sup>

What becomes of art history in the realm of decolonization can only truly come to be if those within the study acknowledge and confront that Euro-colonial art and the entire discipline are products of the imperial empire.<sup>65</sup> Removing pillars that laud the actions of racists like

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<sup>64</sup> David A. Bailey in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 3.

<sup>65</sup> Colonialism was quick to manifest itself within museums as well as international colonial exhibitions. Museums’ permanent collections were attractive, but temporary exhibitions garnered much more attention

Robert E. Lee only does so much, it does nothing to address the foundations of the field. Tim Barringer, a Paul Mellon Professor in the History of Art at Yale University, writes that art history is a discipline that is racialized down to the core. It is a grand disservice and a bald-faced lie to pretend that art history is one of the colonized lands fighting against their oppressors. “Art history is never innocent,” and for anyone to pretend it is entirely clean of the blood of colonization is ideological corruption.<sup>66</sup>

It is, however, more than capable of a great and much-needed transformation. If the proponents of art history can take a cold, hard look at its colonial roots in the empire, the privileges that exist can be used to move against the grain. Those within the field must take a critical look at the legacies and lexicons that are being taught, and then how they are teaching it. The way to move the field of art history forward onto the path of decolonization is to diversify the field. As part of the Western canon, European art history is broken down into chronological and regional sub-sections to specialize in. African art history, or any non-Western art history for that matter, tends to be taught collectively in a one-semester course without any room for categorization or specialization.<sup>67</sup>

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than aided pressing political agendas. As such, colonial exhibitions became a staple in life from the 1890s to the 1930s, allowing visitors to experience the “world in a day” and participate in furthering the colonialist agenda.

<sup>66</sup> Tim Barringer in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 4.

<sup>67</sup> Tim Barringer in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 5. When it comes to “settler-colonial environments such as the Americas (and most especially the United States under the presidency of Donald Trump),” as well as Australia and New Zealand, the most important conversation concerns Indigenous populations and their association with and inclusion into art history. Before the twenty-first century, Native American art history was conclusively marginalized, regularly considered an “ethnographic” or “folk and craft” art rather than fine art. Scholars from the Maori, the indigenous population in New Zealand, as well as scholars from the Aborigines, the indigenous population in Australia, have shown that “the structures of art-historical thought can be disrupted, reconfigured, and ultimately strengthened.” This demands, of course, that the cosmological Native American perspectives are considered central and irreplaceable within the core of Western art history education and research, a necessary move that has yet to be realized.

Western institutions for the study and research of art history, such as the Tate Gallery and Tate Britain in London, the Paul Mellon Centre in London, and the Yale Center for British Art in Connecticut, were “unthinkingly limited” to white male artists, who then researched and wrote about white male artists. This “conspiracy of silence,” is a nationalist and imperialist strategy that will not yield to any questions about the blood the empire has spilled, both physically and metaphorically.<sup>68</sup> It was only “bad art” that would dare question the toxic relationship between the colonial empire and race.

The first step on the long road to recovery from the evildoing of racism and colonialism in the world of art is to recognize that the empire was part of the origination of art in the modern world, nearly “coterminous with modernism itself.”<sup>69</sup> This is not to say that companies were not started, that trade routes were not founded, or that jobs were not created. This is to say that economic success for the white man’s gain does not outweigh the atrocities committed against Indigenous populations around the entire globe for hundreds of years in the name of ill-fated manifest destiny. Selective retellings of history is not history at all; it becomes narrativized historical fiction with a specific agenda.<sup>70</sup>

One necessary step on the path to decolonizing the museum and art history is decolonizing our view of what is considered “fine art.”<sup>71</sup> There can be no more classifications

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<sup>68</sup> Tim Barringer in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 7.

<sup>69</sup> Tim Barringer in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 7.

<sup>70</sup> Artists such as Kara Walker, Kehinde Wiley, Hew Locke, and Yinka Shonibare MBE are being included in a new reinterpretation of the art-historical canon, victoriously if not dilatorily. To include Black and African artists in the core of the art historical canon will continue to be an essential step forward in re-organizing existing narratives of imperial art history. The contributions of colonized territories and descendants of colonized peoples are far more important to the movement of decolonization than the culture of the colonizers. If history is written by the victors, in this case, the colonial empire, then there is another side of that coin that has been entirely shrouded by history.

<sup>71</sup> There is also a need to remove the lines between “fine art museums,” such as the National Portrait Galleries in London and Washington, “decorative art museums,” such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, and “ethnographic museums” like the National History Museum in New York.



based on “quality” or “aesthetics,” for those too stand on principles founded in the Western canon, which is ignorant at best, and exclusionary at worst. This obligates art historians to use their knowledge “to reveal the power, complexity, and, on occasion, the beauty of objects traditionally banished from the canon.”<sup>72</sup> This has been done before with Victorian art, and there is no viable reason it cannot be done with non-Western art; those in charge simply lack the drive to uplift and care for the fine artwork that exists outside the white Western canon.<sup>73</sup> To many, decolonization is equal to the destruction of history and heritage. It is prudent to understand that is a scapegoat, a devil’s advocate to avoid committing any real work towards confronting existing opinions and teaching methods about what “art history” is as a field. This thesis will argue that decolonization is not synonymous with the destruction of history. Decolonization is about breaking down existing barriers, racist prejudices against Black history in America and globally, misogyny against women, homophobic ideals against the LGBTQ+ community, and xenophobia against immigrants. Decolonization is about including more women and gender non-conforming individuals in museums. It is about opening museums up to people from lower socioeconomic statuses. It is not about erasing history, but instead, including more that was intentionally, maliciously, pushed to the margins. For every tale of a Euro-colonial point in history, there is a parallel story of a BIPOC individual who has been intentionally excluded from the conversation. Decolonization necessitates their inclusion.

Art historian Jaś Elsner makes the important point that decolonizing art history, no matter how it may look to different scholars, is an incredibly difficult task to undertake. The difficulty comes not in changing the topics studied, as that is a process he considers a simple switch of

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<sup>72</sup> Tim Barringer in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 7.

<sup>73</sup> Tim Barringer in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 7.

curriculum, but in the way art history is conducted around the world: in a fundamentally Eurocentric way. Everything in art history “is inherently Eurocentric, which means ... colonialist and worse.” The starting point in a decolonized art history, as opposed to a Eurocentric art history, “is the conversation that begins with categories not our own and discombobulates all the starting points we normatively and unselfconsciously employ.”<sup>74</sup>

However, for Jaś Elsner to claim that changing curricula and the focus of education in art history departments and textbooks around the world as well as the Eurocentric art historical canon would be easy is a monumental misunderstanding of the situation. Decolonizing an educational field requires decolonizing thought processes. Furthermore, as authors Eve Tuck and K. Yang argue in “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” decolonizing one field demands the decolonization of all fields.<sup>75</sup>

Richard Hylton, a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Pittsburgh, believes that in decolonizing art history, the subject cannot be divorced from politics. This stems from the fact that close connections between the museum and academic sector create a paradox, where the academics must check the retrospective, all the while the larger art history department stays obstinate against the pluralistic nature of the field. It is a step in the right direction that previously marginalized groups are being placed in the spotlight, but can the politics of ‘historical recovery’ be ignored? That is, in a system that has adamantly excluded a multitude of

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<sup>74</sup> Jaś Elsner in Grant and Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 21.

<sup>75</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 2 (2012): 1-40. In their 2012 article, Tuck and Yang state that the ease with which the word “decolonize” was adopted has turned it into a metaphor. This metaphORIZATION allows the “settler moves to innocence” process to take place rather than properly reconciling wrongs against native people. Perhaps well-intentioned movements still center settler perspectives within social justice and critical methodologies that is incommensurable with decolonization. Decolonization can be unsettling, as it offers previously unexplored approaches and perspectives to human rights, civil rights, and social justice endeavors.

marginalized groups, or lowly offered tokenistic engagement to these groups, the system itself must also be part of the critique. Academia plays a key role, one that extends beyond merely complying with the museum sector's latest agenda.<sup>76</sup>

## **Decolonizing Contemporary Exhibitions and Museums**

Questions concerning the representation of the past, what can be considered art, or whether it even belongs in a Western museum, have been topics under discussion for years. This has spurred debates over the larger issues of national identity and moral values. Museums in the past have generally been institutions that sponsored collective remembering, settled in the nation-state, that served as storage space for elite culture and approved national heritage.<sup>77</sup> They were also spaces with categorized cultural differences based on an arbitrary hierarchy of race and class.<sup>78</sup> This has led to increasing challenges for today's museums, including the integration of cultures that have been largely left unremembered and unacknowledged by museums in the past.<sup>79</sup>

Critics have charged that mainstream museums have failed to include the "other" voices and cultures in the city, or, if they are included, have continued to exhibit them under the

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<sup>76</sup> Richard Hylton in Grant and Price, "Decolonizing Art History," 22-23. Hylton writes that the benefits of decolonizing art history and expanding it are incalculable, and to exclude certain less than savory parts of the narrative is a massive disservice. He continues to say that it is also necessary to include the role of the art market in conversations surrounding change in the field of art history. To exclude it from the discussion is like addressing climate change without including capitalism and mass consumerism.

<sup>77</sup> Falcucci, "Sources for Colonial Historiography," 23-24. Museums like the British Museum in London hoard treasures such as the stolen Koh-i-Noor diamond, the Benin bronzes, and the Parthenon Marbles, and the Louvre in Paris created galleries in the early 1800s dedicated to objects Napoleon brought back from Egypt.

<sup>78</sup> Loukaitou-Sideris, and Grodach, "Displaying and Celebrating the "Other,"" 52.

<sup>79</sup> Loukaitou-Sideris and Grodach, "Displaying and Celebrating the "Other,"" 50.

reductive categories of “primitive” or “exotic.” In response, many museums have begun to recognize the calls for different histories and have employed new methods of self-modes of display.

The history of exhibitions became an important field of study in recent years for scholars committed to re-evaluating existing ideas of the world. Visions of the world are being reconsidered from a historical point of view that embraces the “globality,” as written by Edouard Glissant.<sup>80</sup> These reconsiderations include global knowledge, colonial empires, postcolonial critical studies, alternative art practices, gender and racial studies, “and the deconstruction of hegemonic centres and peripheral realms.”<sup>81</sup>

Decolonization ideologies and practices are not about rewriting the history of art, but about opening the canon and removing the boundaries that limit our understanding of art. There are missing narratives within the Eurocentric art historical canon, and contemporary art exhibitions allow for the introduction of these. Viewing contemporary art from a more globalized rather than a specialized point of view allows curators to ask questions about culture and historical events that are neglected by mainstream history and have not been considered for their

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<sup>80</sup> Edouard Glissant cited in Elvan Zabunyan, “Decolonizing Contemporary Art Exhibitions: Okwui Enwezor (1963-2019), the Turning Point of Curatorship,” In *Decolonizing Colonial Heritage: New Agendas, Actors and Practices in and Beyond Europe*, edited by Britta Timm Knudsen, John Oldfield, Elizabeth Buettner, and Elvan Zabunyan, (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), 153.

<sup>81</sup> Elvan Zabunyan, “Decolonizing Contemporary Art Exhibitions: Okwui Enwezor (1963-2019), the Turning Point of Curatorship,” In *Decolonizing Colonial Heritage: New Agendas, Actors and Practices in and Beyond Europe*, edited by Britta Timm Knudsen, John Oldfield, Elizabeth Buettner, and Elvan Zabunyan, London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2022: 154. Reflections and experiences at conferences like The Tricontinental Conference, the Belgrade conference of the Non-Aligned, and the First Solidarity Conference play a large role in contemporary art today. The struggles addressed in these conferences and others like them have influenced artists and artistic production and how artists participate in social movements and cultural production. This work, via curators like Hou Hanru, has broadened the horizons for interpretation of a world art history.

significant contributions.<sup>82</sup> There is a burning need to study “the way art and artists confronted the disillusion of colonial empires” in the past, and how history informs ideas of resistance and reformation today.<sup>83</sup>

## Decolonizing Italy

Italy, it appears, has not fully come to terms with its colonial past.<sup>84</sup> Upon investigation, Arnd Schneider, Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo, and his colleagues discovered that a number of employees at the Pigorini Museum were the descendants of Italians responsible for the colonization of Libya. Schneider interviewed them to better understand the

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<sup>82</sup> Zabunyan, “Decolonizing Contemporary Art Exhibitions,” 154. Likewise, large-scale international exhibitions such as the 1986 Havana Biennial, the 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre*, and the 1993 Whitney Biennial presented issues of difference and marginalization. Non-white artists with little to no institutional visibility at this point in time were being exhibited. Cultural and postcolonial studies then converged to form a new critical apparatus that decompartmentalized art history for arguably the first time since its conception. Artists and scholars began to view colonization and decolonization and immigration and exile through a contemporary lens, enabling them to question how inclusion and exclusion operate in social and artistic fields. Decolonization tools were then applied to deconstruct their various fields.

<sup>83</sup> Zabunyan, “Decolonizing Contemporary Art Exhibitions,” 153.

<sup>84</sup> James Imam, “Racist or Responsive? Italy to Exhume Mussolini’s Colonial Museum Collection in ‘Critical’ New Display,” *The Art Newspaper* 4 December 2020, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/12/04/racist-or-responsive-italy-to-exhume-mussolinis-colonia-l-museum-collection-in-critical-new-display>. Libya sent a formal request to Italy in the 1950s to return the belongings of Libyan resistance leader Omar al-Mukhtar. Di Lella, one of the new colonial museum’s curators, claimed they will “discuss” repatriation and restitution, but only if Libya elects a government Italy recognizes. Lucrezia Cippitelli, a professor of postcolonial theory at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in Milan, has called the museum’s management “arrogant” and “parochial,” with stakeholders not being adequately represented. No one of Somalian descent is part of the museum management, nor have they been invited to weigh in on the tragedies held in these works of art. Despite the museum’s management claiming they have been fully transparent, Cippitelli states otherwise. In June, she and Congolese photographer Sammy Balaji’s research proposal was rejected by the director, Filippo Maria Gambari, who also denied them access to sixteenth and seventeenth-century fabrics from the Congo, held in the Museo delle Civiltà’s collection. Gambari told them in a meeting “I decide who can enter the museum,” reflecting the paternalistic ideology that apparently persists in Italy.

lack of awareness of Italy's colonial history. These encounters revealed the unreflected upon and uncontextualized colonial past.<sup>85</sup>

The responses from the descendants of Italian colonizers in Libya are truly concerning from the decolonization perspective.<sup>86</sup> They remember it with a conservative political stance and a fondness bordering on self-congratulatory. The majority strongly believe that Italy contributed positively to Libya's development, heedless of the racism and destruction their parents and grandparents are responsible for. Generally, they feel that Libya progressed well in terms of modernity, infrastructure, and agriculture, which would not have occurred without Italy's intervention.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Arnd Schneider "Art-Anthropology Interventions in the Italian Post-Colony: The Scattered Colonial Body Project," In *Across Anthropology: Trouble Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial*, edited by Margareta von Oswald and Jones Tinius, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020: 224-228. The Ministry of Culture and the Ethnographic Museum localized the scattered materials into one museum to allow for a critical re-examination and later, a display open to the public. Despite this, there was scarce public exposure of knowledge of the happenings and little media. The lack of critical attention parallels Italy's colonial legacy where critical discourse is generally reserved to academia. The objects went through a defamiliarization process alongside their packaging, but rather than being obscured from public view and knowledge, they gained meaning as historically complex and poorly studied icons.

<sup>86</sup> Schneider "Art-Anthropology Interventions in the Italian Post-Colony," 232. The colonizers and their descendants did not leave Libya until 1970, after Mu'ammarr al-Gaddafi's *coup d'etat* in 1969. Libya's colonization and subsequent decolonization, therefore, presents a notably interesting case, as it cannot be separated from international politics at play; post-colonial scholars often struggled to use standard conceptual tools to classify it. A struggle for independence did not directly give way to decolonization, though resistance movements did fight Italian colonizers from the very beginning.

<sup>87</sup> Falcucci, "Sources for Colonial Historiography," 23-24. The first and arguably the greatest historian of Italian colonialism was Angelo del Boca and his 1965 book *La Guerra d'Abissinia 1935-1941*. Next was Giorgio Rochat's *Il colonialismo italiano: la prima guerra d'Africa, la guerra di Libia, la riconquista della Libia, la guerra d'Etiopia, l'Impero, and Militari e politici nella preparazione della campagna d'Etiopia. Studio e documental, 1932-1936* published in 1973 and 1971, respectively. These were great early steps forward but lacked a critical judgment of the perpetrators.

These books generally paid attention to military aspects and ignored the cultural and social history of the countries before and after colonization. Italian are firmly convinced of the generosity of their intentions and actions in Africa, so much so that in 2005, Angelo del Boca wrote *Italiani, brava gente?* (Italians, good people?).

In the strictest sense, Italy's colonies were part and parcel of Mussolini's plan to compete with other European colonial powers.<sup>88</sup> Subscribed to the colonialist rhetoric of civilizing "other" or "primitive" cultures, the objects that were imported into Italy to promote, on national soil, the colonial enterprise, wound up in two different museums. Current debates on these museums strongly suggest that neither in a literal nor a figurative sense, Italian national institutions of culture have yet been "decolonized." Italy's post-colonial landscape is still littered with widespread and partially willful amnesia concerning the events surrounding Italian colonialism.<sup>89</sup> Included in this is the former Colonial Museum, whose remaining pieces were scattered around Rome at various other institutions.<sup>90</sup>

After examining the historical context of Rome and Italy as a colonial power, the current context is best introduced with a case study of how colonial legacy is being reframed in the new opening of the Museo delle Civiltà in 2020.<sup>91</sup> But a colonial museum that "does not explicitly

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<sup>88</sup> Falcucci, "Sources for Colonial Historiography," 29. From 1882 to 1911, the Kingdom of Italy tore through the countries of Eritrea, Somalia, and Libya, competing with Europe's major powers who were all racing to claim new colonies. Following Italian Unification in 1861, the late nineteenth century saw many Italian explorers participate in the "Scramble for Africa." Those expeditions brought back pieces that would be spread throughout various Italian museums, an oft-overlooked component of Fascist propaganda in the twentieth century.

<sup>89</sup> The Pigorini National Ethnographic Museum in Rome, part of the Museo delle Civiltà, houses a large portion of the former collection of the L'Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, which closed in 2012. In 2017, the rest of the collection was distributed throughout other museums like the National Gallery of Modern Art, the Zoological Museum, the National Library, and various military museums. Thus, the collections constitute a "scattered colonial body." The exhibition, *Bel Suol d'Amore - The Scattered Colonial Body*, was shown at the Pigorini Museum from June to July of 2017. The title is a reference to both the scattered objects and the scattered bodies of those subjected to imperial violence.

<sup>90</sup> Now, space formerly used for offices has been reimagined as a space for the Museo Italo Africano "Ilaria Alpi," named after an Italian journalist killed in 1994 in Somalia. The museum will reportedly explore and address the history between Italy and African countries with an emphasis on the violence imposed by colonialism and pervasive imperial ideology. Many are discomfited with a colonial museum opening whilst artists, educators, and activists are increasingly demanding the decolonization of Western museums. Reinstating a museum forged by one of the world's most infamous Fascist leaders is perhaps not approaching the topic in the most magnanimous way.

<sup>91</sup> Imam, "Racist or Responsive? Italy to Exhume Mussolini's Colonial Museum Collection in 'Critical' New Display." Like many others, the museum's public support for the Black Lives Matter movement was

name or seek to redress its complicity in that violent past and this violent present, is not one worth reopening.”<sup>92</sup> Historical museums as institutions often present traumatic memory couched in the didactic language of distance, pastness, and transcendence. This makes invisible the continued presence of that trauma and the forces that continue to cause it. How does one exhibit a phenomenon, like Europe’s exploitation of Africa, which has not yet been fully resolved?<sup>93</sup> This begs the question of why Italy thought it was a good idea to reanimate the colonial museum rather than resettling the artifacts into a museum that examined the forgotten and ignored histories of Italy’s colonization of Africa or repatriating the items.<sup>94</sup>

Exhibitions can be viewed and utilized as a “medium,” and are effective in being used as such in large-scale group shows like biennales. The merging of various fields such as pictorial, sculptural, filmic, photographic, and performative actions, creates a dialogue between their assemblage. The ebb and flow between art and politics, art and history, and art and cultural comparisons is the harbinger of a new mode of historical study dredged in artistic and

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superficial. That said, it is still an opportunity for the museum to make moves and involve more black and African artists and educators. The BLM movement was relatively muted in Italy, though a statue of Indro Montanelli, an Italian journalist and pedophile who bought a twelve-year-old Eritrean girl as his wife in the 1930s was defaced in Milan, and rightfully so. The experience of PoC and BAME individuals is essential to this discussion of decolonization, but deserves its own focused paper.

<sup>92</sup> Timnet T. Gedar, “The Colonial Museum is Reopening in Italy and We Have Questions,” *PenEritrea*, 18 June 2019, <https://peneritrea.com/blog/the-colonial-museum-is-reopening-in-italy-and-we-have-questions>.

<sup>93</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Duke University Press, 2016: 20. As English Literature and Black Studies Professor Christina Sharpe asks in her theory of wake work, “How does one, in the words so often used by such institutions, “come to terms with” (which usually means move past) ongoing and quotidian atrocity?”

<sup>94</sup> Gedar, “The Colonial Museum is Reopening in Italy and We Have Questions.” Timnet T. Gedar, a Ph.D. candidate in African history, penned their thoughts on the reopening of the Museo della Civiltà, writing in 2019 that until this problem is understood, addressed, and steps are taken to remedy it, “there is nothing the Italian Colonial Museum or any other Western museum can do to ethically exhibit stolen cultural wealth.” To assume a shared world heritage and shared world experience is universalist rhetoric. It is unquestionably problematic then, that a large number of African heritage items are found in museums outside of Africa. Reopening this museum will do little besides repackage black and African trauma as part of a vulgar spectacle for visitors.



intellectual intent, which will make obsolete the pervasive authoritarian and conservative modalities.

Exhibitions can act as a medium in this context because artworks meet in this space with an intermingling of meaning, form, and various narratives. It is a place of convergences, where encounters and dialogue between different people and works from all over the world can share a common experience. Curators have a responsibility to foster and direct visitors' critical thinking with art as the backing. They challenge history, and the exhibitions reflect this.<sup>95</sup> Decolonization is a confrontation, a contestation of Western imperialism and its continuing effects.

The term “decolonization” might appear to only affect territories that were the victim of colonization, but this is far from the truth.<sup>96</sup> It is not only the responsibility of countries that were used and abused to decolonize but rather, should be the responsibility of countries that furthered colonization. This is why many calls to decolonize the museum are often made to American and British museums. In the same vein, Italy is responsible for colonies in Libya, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia.<sup>97</sup> No longer holding colonies is not enough to say one has done the work of decolonizing.

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<sup>95</sup> Zabunyan, “Decolonizing Contemporary Art Exhibitions,” 159.

<sup>96</sup> Beatrice Falucci ‘The Issue of the Mediterranean and the Colonies has now Moved to the Forefront of Cultural Life’: Curating Museums and Curating the Nation in Fascist Italy’s Colonies,” *Modern Italy* 25, no. 4 (2020): 421. The policies on museums and exhibitions implemented in Italy and her colonies were a key part of creating “a coordinated image for empire,” in the words of author Adolfo Mignemi.

<sup>97</sup> Falucci, “The Issue of the Mediterranean,” 429- 430. Italy noted Somalia as a “colonial adventure” and opened the Museo della Garesa in 1934, now the National Museum of Somalia. The native population, typically shepherds, were treated as sub-human. Being on the low end of Italy’s hierarchical and racial order meant they were seen as a social and economic commodity for wealthy Italians. The vegetation was worthy of meticulous attention and scientific cataloging, but the Somali people were “*tutti uguali*,” “all the same.” Displays in the museum portrayed the Somali as childish, whose “curious” items like drums and religious items used in ritual dances, were over-represented as compared to functional items. The exhibits had no context nor description, and pieces from multiple distinct ethnic or cultural groups were regularly combined in one display, drawing a sharp comparison to how many museums similarly display non-Western artwork still today.

Furthermore, decolonization is not a metaphor, not an exaggeration, and not a kindness. It is a moral and ethical requirement that stands for much more than just returning looted items from the colonial past, though that remains an integral part. Decolonization is a theory and a method to be applied. Individuals and institutions hoping to play a part in the process of decolonization cannot be so one-minded as to read it in the literal sense.

Museums can and should be fostering progressive social change and holding political positions on social issues that impact the communities they serve. The problem lies in the fact that many still live within the Western art historical canon, a historically elitist, colonialist, male, heteronormative, cis-gender, and Euro-American perspective. Museums may well be institutions of education and participants in nation-building, but they have never been equally accessible to all demographics.<sup>98</sup>

This makes the MAXXI's efforts in exhibiting non-Western artists from different countries and backgrounds, on a regular basis, more meaningful. Even more paramount is the context surrounding the exhibition *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*, as it deals with painful social issues close to Turkish and Armenian individuals, like the 1915 Armenian Genocide and the 2013 Gezi Park protests. People and institutions who try to publicly address these points of conflict often find themselves the victims of Erdoğan's politically and socially oppressive policies. Sarkis' *Two Rainbows* shines amidst other works in the exhibition that directly open

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<sup>98</sup> Dana Carlisle Kletchka, "Toward Post-Critical Museologies in U.S. Art Museums," *Studies in Art Education: A Journal of Issues and Research* 59, no. 4 (2018): 299-300. A shift has begun to take place in art museums in the United States, as they necessarily migrate from institutions centered around objects, to institutions that respond to and contribute to society. Following the formation of the modern museum, museum staff has operated within an object-based epistemology that views objects as bearers of knowledge. Museums have begun to bridge the gap between curatorial and community needs in an effort to foster a more dialogic relationship between museums and their patrons, becoming more visitor-based than object-based. But until all museums ground their work and perspectives into radical and ethical public inclusion, museums will not become truly responsive social institutions.

these conversations. Though neither Sarkis nor curators at the MAXXI explicitly call this part of a “decolonizing” process, the content shown in the exhibition is a deliberate choice that is opening the Italian art-historical canon and perception of what can be considered “Italian art.”

### 3. Chapter 2: *Istanbul. Passione, Gioia, Furore*

#### Visual Analysis

*Two Rainbows* (Fig. 1) is iconically a rainbow, complete with all seven colors: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. In that order and from top to bottom, they zig-zag across the composition. Though the composition in this version includes only one rainbow, the title, *Two Rainbows*, might possibly imply the presence of connection and conversation that Sarkis emulates in his works. Though many variations of this work have been shown throughout the years, they are practically identical.

In every version, the neon light glows and spreads throughout the space it inhabits. The neon of *Two Rainbows* is bright, but the radiance of the colors themselves is subdued, not blinding. As the light spreads throughout the space, bouncing off other surfaces and dust particles floating throughout the air, it fades. The colors come together only at the tubes themselves, like the beginning and the end of things, much like the scientific theory of the big bang itself, which this specific rainbow is directly referencing; the creation of the universe and the very point at which time began, to the first rainbow ever formed, the very moment the first ray of light had shown through the darkness.<sup>99</sup>

The tubes move like wandering lines, arcing and dipping in irregular fashion that somehow still coordinates together. The lines are as jagged and broken and separate as they are one whole, fully functional being. They speak to each other, with the colors mingling, as much as

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<sup>99</sup> "Sarkis: Respiro, Turkish Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2015," Hisour, <https://www.hisour.com/sarkis-respiro-turkish-pavilion-venice-biennale-2015-55033/>.

they speak on their own, with individual pieces of refracted light being clearly visible throughout the room. The work is as broken as it is mended. This is comparatively different from American artist Dan Flavin, whose neon installations also provide interaction between light and space, but is more connected to the sublime and spirituality. In Flavin's own words, the transcendence of light combined with industrial construction creates a "modern technological fetish."<sup>100</sup> Sarkis' work is more deeply connected to memory and recurring motifs such as breathing, conversation, and the connectivity and intermingling between light, context of place, and space.

The neon rainbow is a large-scale and site-specific installation, made from gaseous neon encased in fragile glass tubes. Despite being a form composed of tangible materials, the work still *breathes*. The work itself is much more than something to look at. Sarkis often speaks of his works having a life of their own; after he begins creating them, they dictate for themselves how he continues, and when a work is selected and placed for an exhibition, it commands the room of its own volition. He breathes life into them so they can breathe it into a space for the duration of the exhibition.<sup>101</sup>

Sarkis has explained: "My works don't like to stay motionless." Once he creates them and breathes life into them, they are their own beings who command their own space. Wherever they move, they absorb and adapt to the local environment. Sarkis' works come to life as he

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<sup>100</sup> Jonathan Fineberg cited in Figen Girgin, "Sanatta Neon Isiklari" (Neon Lights in Art) Hitit Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi – Yıl 11 Sayı 3 2018: 2320.

<sup>101</sup> Piguët, "Sarkis: Au commencement le retable d'Issenheim." Another common motif in his work and creative process is the idea of metamorphosis, declination, and transmutation. "All that happens through humanity, pain as much as love, is in us," Sarkis has said. This resonates well in each of his works, whether it be the conceptual *Two Rainbows* or his more figurative reimagination of Matthias Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*.

creates them, as he manipulates the three constant elements of light, word, and context of place.<sup>102</sup>

Sarkis is “fiercely attached” to each work's internal movement, and intentionally highlights the individual life in the work. For him, this is where the expression begins, where the exhibition is born. The way he works as an artist is comparable to that of a poet or filmmaker. In his own words, “the poet looks at his poem, considers how the words come about,” and “the filmmaker ensures that the shots dialogue, live with each other.”<sup>103</sup> It is the same in his workshop: “nothing should be fixed there. Everything is in a shared energy.”<sup>104</sup>

In a press conference where he announced his participation with the Turkish Pavilion in the 2015 Venice Biennale, Sarkis talked about his neon rainbows, claiming that he is taking viewers back to the beginning of time, and simultaneously, experiencing the past and the present. There are no fixed moments in history, just breathing, and feeling.<sup>105</sup>

### **Sarkis’ Variations on *Two Rainbows***

In the Turkish Pavilion of the 2015 Venice Biennale was another rendition of Sarkis’ neon *Rainbow* (Fig. 2). Sarkis’ extensive oeuvre includes many repeating elements and works. *Two Rainbows* has had many lives and different names throughout the years.

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<sup>102</sup> “Sarkis. Angel Rainbow,” Zacheta National Gallery of Art, <https://zacheta.art.pl/en/wystawy/sarkis-tecza-aniola>.

<sup>103</sup> Piguet, “Sarkis.”

<sup>104</sup> Piguet, “Sarkis.”

<sup>105</sup> Esra, “Armenian Artists to have Turkish Pavilion at Venice Biennale.”



Figure 4. Sarkis, *At The Other End Of The Rainbow*, 2014. Neon installation. National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest, Romania. <https://www.sarkis.fr/2014-at-the-other-end-of-the-rainbow-national-museum-of-contemporary-arts-bucarest/>

In 2014, Sarkis exhibited *Rainbow (Big Bang)*, also titled *At The Other End Of The Rainbow* (Fig. 4) at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest, Romania, which reflected his 2015 *Two Rainbows*, exhibited at Rome's MAXXI museum. In speaking of Sarkis' inclusion in the 2015 Venice Biennale, Defne Ayas, Curator of the 2015 Venice Biennale's Turkish Pavilion, said that Sarkis displayed a deep concern for humanity in his work. He is "intense and perfectionist," and his art is transformative and timeless.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Mario Finazzi, "Turkey that Speaks Armenian," *Exibart*, 14 April 2015, <https://www.exibart.com/personaggi/la-turchia-che-parla-armeno/>.



Figure 5. Sarkis, *Angel Rainbow* and *Rainbow*, 2017. Neon installation. Zacheta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, Poland. <https://www.sarkis.fr/2017-angel-rainbow/>

In a 2017 exhibition at the Zacheta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, Poland titled *Angel Rainbow* (Fig. 5), Sarkis exhibited twenty-one sentences selected by the gallery's team and hand-written in Polish by employees, then made into the neon signs that hung on the walls. They assisted Sarkis' *Rainbow*, specifically produced for this exhibition, though explicitly reminiscent of his earlier versions.

In his essay accompanying the exhibition, Andrzej Wajs, a researcher at the National Polish Research Center with the Light and Fine Arts Team, wrote that "the classic museum is a





Figure 6. *Rainbow Stairs*, Fındıklı Neighborhood, Istanbul, Turkey. <https://www.maxxi.art/en/events/istanbul-passione-gioia-furore/>

frozen memory,” but Sarkis’ studio and the works themselves are the physical process of memory developing and changing over the years.<sup>107</sup> Sarkis’ powerful visual awareness is more than apparent in the way he commands exhibition space with ease. Art history is not a stagnant field, nor is memory. Rather, it is more like a circle, where the future and the past conjoin with the present.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> “Sarkis. Angel Rainbow,”

<sup>108</sup> “Sarkis. Angel Rainbow.”



Figure 7. Destroyed Rainbow Stairs, Fındıklı Neighborhood, Istanbul, Turkey. <https://www.exibart.com/speednews/mario-rizzi-the-outsider-italiano-per-istanbul-ecco-il-film-che-racconta-unaltra-turchia-fatta-di-ambientalismo-popolazione-armena-e-movimento->

*Two Rainbows* complements the rainbow-painted stairs in Istanbul which began to spring forth in defiant support of the Gezi Park movement (Fig. 6). Even when painted over a dull drab gray by the government, somehow, the colors always seem to reappear. They had been painted back on by relentless protesters who had rallied in Taksim Square, protesting the new shopping center that was yet another sign of Erdoğan’s conservative politics, oppressive ideology, and regressive government.<sup>109</sup> Now, it appears the stairs, at some point, were destroyed, as documented by Italian filmmaker Mario Rizzi, but the symbol of critical resistance they had stood for has not faded<sup>110</sup> (Fig. 7).

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<sup>109</sup> David Kazanjian, “Cognition, Storation, Paration,” In *Icindekiler*, 2015: 62.

<sup>110</sup> Lea Mattarella, “Istanbul. Tra Lotta e Repressione la Rivoluzione Turca Spiegata con l’arte,” *La Repubblica* 20 Dicembre 2015, 50.

## Meeting Sarkis and Artistic Theory<sup>111</sup>

On the wall of Sarkis' studio are four images he purchased, which do not include an author's signature or have faded with time, as some are as old as the seventeenth century. Sarkis tells me that each work has a signature, but not always in the form of initials or a name. It has an identifier, something he singles out as a central feature of the work. With these four pieces, he identified what he considers the work's central feature, which he then creates out of neon and fastens to the work. This highlights the unofficial "signature."

His studio is sprinkled with pieces of his life and past: his father's shoes, Armenian and French books, sketchbooks, and pencils litter every flat surface. The word "kriegsschatz," a fundamental part of his practice for many years since the 1970s, is found in nearly every room.<sup>112</sup> This exemplifies the importance of memory to his work and daily life.

Hrant Dink is a name any Armenian or Turkish person would know, and his life and memory are a critical part of Sarkis' oeuvre. Sarkis was invited to participate in the exhibition 23.5, *The Hrant Dink Site of Memory, or Museum of Memory*. (Fig. 8) Alongside Dink's family,

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<sup>111</sup> On 26 November 2021, I was able to meet Sarkis in person at his studio in Villejuif, just outside Paris, France. We spent several hours together, speaking of memory, his oeuvre, and the various critical components such as memory, connection, and conversation. He asked about my meeting with MAXXI Artistic Director Hou Hanru, and we spoke briefly about their friendship and careers, including how Hou Hanru curated Sarkis' one-man show in San Francisco.

<sup>112</sup> On one of the large exterior walls is one of Sarkis' past works. It is a multilayered work with distinct components that work together, a long collection of portrait photos fastened high on the wall, above eye level. There is a long piece of neon that passes through the head of each portrait on the work. Some of them are his friends, like fellow artist Sergei Parajanov who appears in several of Sarkis' works and exhibitions. Another is Hrant Dink, a Turkish-Armenian journalist who was murdered on 19 January 2007 for requesting basic human rights for Armenian people in Turkey. Also notable is the portrait of a man with a bloodied face, who bears resemblance to a young Hou Hanru who participated in the Tiananmen Square riots.

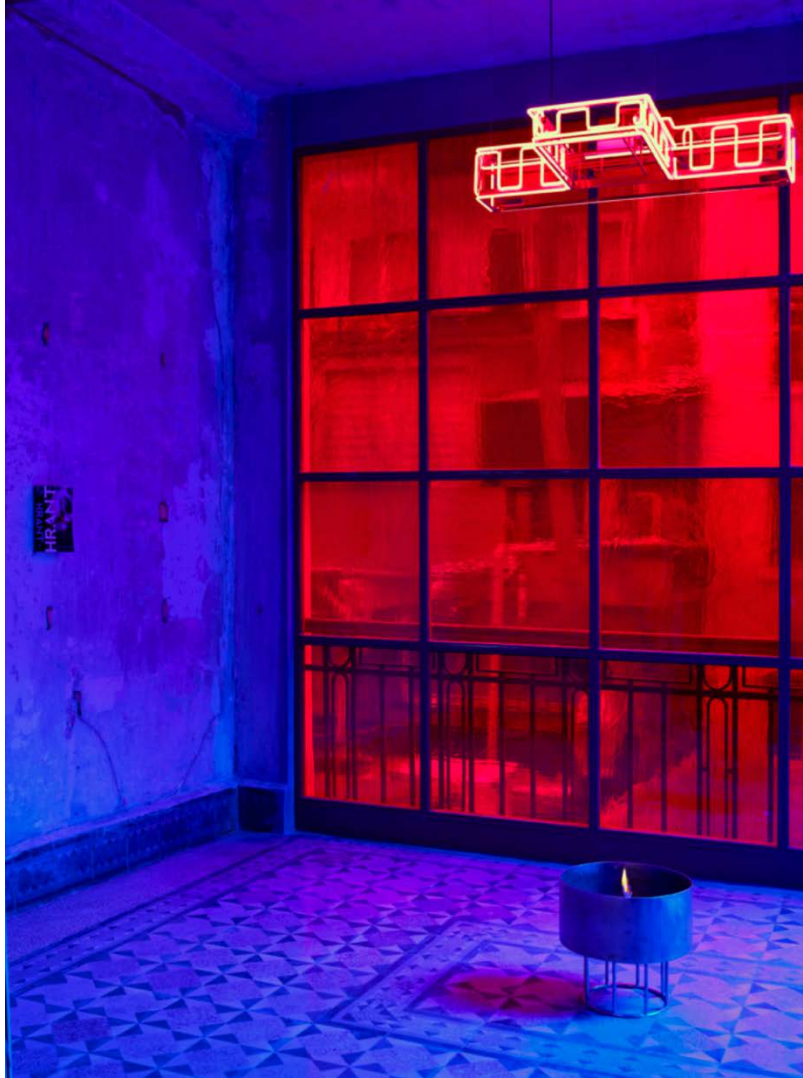


Figure 8. Sarkis, *Hrant Dink Museum of Memory*, 2019. Installation, Istanbul, Turkey. <https://www.sarkis.fr/hrant-dink-museum-of-memory/>

his employer, Agos Newspaper, had asked him to turn his office into a museum of his life with Sarkis' work, and he obliged. Hrant Dink's memory has permeated so much of his work and has taken on such an integral role in resistance efforts in Istanbul, that it would have been surprising for him to refuse.

## Political Disobedience and Resistance

In Turkey, Istanbul is a city geographically stretched across two continents, Europe and Asia. This puts Turkey in a unique political situation, the city in a unique topographic situation, and creates a unique social experience for its residents, immigrants, and emigrants. In the center is the Bosphorus, a body of water that separates Istanbul into two halves, one on European ground and the other, on Asian ground. It affects the way people work and live.<sup>113</sup>

The first bridge across the Bosphorus was built in 1973, physically closing the barrier that had prevented Istanbul's two sides from connecting.<sup>114</sup> Istanbul is characterized, in significant part, by the Bosphorus, which both connects and separates the two halves of the city. It also acts as a contact zone with Turkey's neighboring countries, via the Sea of Marmara, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean. For this reason, migration, trade, and tourism are unquestionably important topics in the city and served as a basis for the 14<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial in 2015.<sup>115</sup>

In the summer of 2013, protests began as part of a longstanding campaign trying to stop the destruction of Gezi Park, one of the few remaining green spaces in Istanbul's heavily urbanized center, and highlighted an already dismissive attitude held by the government. The police were provided with tear gas, water cannons, plastic bullets, and batons, to brutally engage with protesters despite the fact that they had been largely peaceful.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Burcu Dogramaci, "Arrival City Istanbul: Flight, Modernity, and Metropolis at the Bosphorus. With an Excursus on the Island Exile of Leon Trotsky," In *Arrival Cities: Migrating Artists and New Metropolitan Topographies in the 20th Century*, edited by Burcu Dogramaci, Mareike Hetschold, Laura Karp Lugo, Rachel Lee, and Helene Roth, Leuven University Press (2020): 206.

<sup>114</sup> Dogramaci, "Arrival City Istanbul," 211.

<sup>115</sup> Dogramaci, "Arrival City Istanbul," 214.

<sup>116</sup> Amnesty International, "Gezi Park Protests: Brutal Denial of the Right to Peaceful Assembly in Turkey," October 2013, 6.

The protests continued into June and early July before dwindling in August. Even protesters taking no action, standing alone and silently, were detained for participating in the “standing man” protests. It quickly became clear that the government would not respect or listen to any opposing opinions. Even journalists reporting on the protests, doctors treating the wounded, and lawyers defending their civil rights, were arrested and subjected to uncouth levels of police brutality. Authorities then moved against business owners who had allowed protesters to hide out in a desperate attempt to escape the abuse.<sup>117</sup>

Prime Minister Erdoğan calling protesters “hooligans” who set out to “provoke the people” certainly set the stage for the kind of response the protesters would receive.<sup>118</sup> On 30 May 2013, the Istanbul police violently interrupted a small protest put on in Gezi Park by a few hundred environmentalists. They beat them, drove them away with tear gas, and burned their tents. It did not dissuade the protesters, however, as, over the next ten days, tens of thousands of protesters would take to the streets in large cities across Turkey in support of the protestors. By mid-June, hundreds of thousands had participated in Gezi Park protests in nearly every single one of Turkey’s eighty-one provinces.<sup>119</sup>

It is still a sore spot, as the protesters essentially lost, despite their ferocious display, and “the privatization of the public sphere and the clampdown on freedom of speech ... continue unchecked.”<sup>120</sup> The public and the media are being increasingly censored under an extremely conservative neo-Ottoman government and the municipal budget for Istanbul rivals that of

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<sup>117</sup> Amnesty International, “Gezi Park Protests,” 6.

<sup>118</sup> Amnesty International, “Gezi Park Protests,” 5.

<sup>119</sup> Amnesty International, “Gezi Park Protests,” 5.

<sup>120</sup> Nevdon Jamgochian, “In the Wake of Gezi, Taking Stock of Istanbul’s Art Scene,” *Hyperallergic*, 9 February 2015, <https://hyperallergic.com/180922/in-the-wake-of-gezi-taking-stock-of-istanbuls-art-scene/>.

American police budgets, with enormously large amounts reserved for anti-protester equipment such as tear gas.

The mainstream media failed on all accounts, airing little of the realities of the protests. Turkey then became a painful reminder of what censorship in the national media looks like, as CNN Turk absurdly aired a pre-scheduled two-hour documentary on penguins during the first week of the mass protests across the country. Social media even suffered a blow, condemned by the government as protesters used it to gain support for their cause.<sup>121</sup>

The protests were not without risk when standing up against a government willing to go to any lengths to subdue its citizens. With nearly 4,900 detentions from the protests, over eight thousand injuries, and five deaths with strong evidence to suggest that at least three of them could be linked to excessive police force, it becomes clear that democratic conversations about the development of Istanbul never occurred to Erdoğan and his authoritarian government.<sup>122</sup>

## **Local and International Politics**

Istanbul has made itself a sort of “bastion of contemporary art,” with the biennale active since 1987 but gaining global attention in the latter 1990s and new spaces for contemporary art emerging continuously.<sup>123</sup> During the Gezi Protests, artistic practices in Istanbul became more of an outlet for protest than ever before. The protests continued for over a year, from May 2013 to September 2014. While these protests and demonstrations were met with horrific and violent

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<sup>121</sup> Amnesty International, “Gezi Park Protests,” 6.

<sup>122</sup> Amnesty International, “Gezi Park Protests,” 6-7.

<sup>123</sup> Julia Ramirez, “Mapping Gentrification and Urban Resistance in Istanbul,” *Hyperallergic*, 10 May 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/297767/mapping-gentrification-and-urban-resistance-in-istanbul/>.

force at the hands of the government, the fallout could perhaps be even more serious, and very complicated to say the least.<sup>124</sup>

Two years later on 24 April 2015, the presidents of France and Russia were in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, laying flowers. That evening, they attended a concert in remembrance of the centenary of the Armenian Genocide, sometimes called the Forgotten Genocide. 24 April is a significant day, as it is the very date when Ottoman authorities began to arrest Armenian community leaders in Istanbul. Armenians call it *Medz Yeghern*, or the Great Calamity. It was the first systematic extinction of the twentieth century, three decades before people even began to use the word genocide. Predictably, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, discredited the memory of the genocide, calling it “claims constructed on Armenian lies.”<sup>125</sup> It was carried out at the hands of the Ottoman Empire’s military in eastern Anatolia “amidst the final paroxysms of empire, the atrocities - torture, death marches, deportation, concentration camps, massacres” continuing for years until nearly 1.5 million people were dead.

A week following Erdoğan’s dismissal, the 56th Venice Biennale began, open from 9 May to 22 November 2015, with the Turkish and Armenian national pavilions approaching the ever vexing questions of commemoration and memory. Sarkis said in an interview in early 2015 that “we have been stuck and locked for a century; we need to get loose and breathe.”<sup>126</sup> Both

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<sup>124</sup> Jamgochian, “In the Wake of Gezi, Taking Stock of Istanbul’s Art Scene.” The protests did not weaken however and continued to fuel creativity, especially in the younger generations. For many, the apolitical stance was acceptable and common, but that changed following the protests, and fighting in the political climate became a necessity in the wake of government-sanctioned oppression. However, others see artists desperate to escape abroad. Despite the support many galleries and exhibitions receive, they are also the victims of crowds of disapproval. Many artists feel forced into self-censorship, principally when the Turkish government creates roadblocks for artists trying to obtain a visa to leave. Contemporary Turkish art is thriving with new visitors and supporters, but it is also “limited, privatized, and quite commercial,” two sides of the same coin.

<sup>125</sup> Thorne, “Pavilions of Turkey & the Republic of Armenia.”

<sup>126</sup> Thorne, “Pavilions of Turkey & the Republic of Armenia.”



national pavilions are desperately seeking ways to remember the past without hindering their ability to face the future, addressing persistence and exile, forced displacement, and a strained sense of national identity.

With some estimates reaching one and a half million Armenians murdered or starved to death when they were deported by Ottoman forces from Eastern Anatolia to the Syrian desert in 1915, the Armenian Genocide is one of the worst in the history of the world. In what should not be a controversial move, the Biennale included an exhibition marking the centenary of the Genocide. Open from 6 May to 18 October, the *Armenity* exhibition held in the national pavilion of Armenia includes works by Turkish-Armenian artist Sarkis, who is simultaneously representing Turkey at the Biennale.

### **Identity Politics and the Museum**

In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that a narrative of identity is necessary for agency to exist; philosopher Hannah Arendt, in her 1958 book “The Human Condition,” too stresses the need to hear other stories to construct one's own identity. But for Turkish Armenians, the poignant lack of existing narratives of identity led to deeply painful memories, buried deep with politically ambivalent identities.

From not being allowed to be friends to getting into fights, all because of their Armenian identity, children in Turkey had to grow up quickly. This in-between two identities continue to affect them in their daily lives and often became an intrinsic part of their personal identities.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Sossie Kasbarian, “The Istanbul Armenians: Negotiating Coexistence,” in *Post-Ottoman Coexistence: Sharing Space in the Shadow of Conflict* ed. Rebecca Bryant, New York: Berghahn Books 2016: 222-223.

This is particularly true for Sarkis, who lived in Istanbul in his early life and still negotiates his dual identity of being both Turkish and Armenian.

Identity is intimately tied to museums, the representation of culture, and consequently, decolonial movements. The identity of the self is heavily predicated on the idea of the “other.” Identity politics is tightly wound with cultural marginalization in the 1980s. It was an “art sphere” where marginalized groups could be included but still display their own personal identity. Artists felt a profound need to be seen and identified and understood for who they were, often through their art. Part of this includes the very factor of their marginalization - i.e. race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or immigration status.<sup>128</sup>

Identity politics plays a crucial role in postcolonial critique, which in turn was a large majority of discussions on globalization, migration, and contemporary art in the 1990s and early 2000s. Though restrictive, using a binary distinction like Western and non-Western is inescapable in conversations about the art world, as it currently stands. It is important then, to define what Western and non-Western refer to from here on out. The term non-Western can be characterized as a “Euro-American perspective and its projection of what it is ‘not’, i.e. its embedded notion of the non-Western ‘other’ that has been shaped historically by the still active logic of colonialism, but which has also been challenged by postcolonial critique.”<sup>129</sup>

Identity is a composition, a construction of “symbolic boundaries” or “frontier-effects.” Cultural identity has been relevant in contemporary art since the 1980s, but conversations about identity politics in the world of art have fundamentally changed the dominant Western concept of

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<sup>128</sup> Nav Haq, “The Invisible and the Visible Identity Politics and the Economy of Reproduction in Art” in *Decolonizing Museums*, 10.

<sup>129</sup> Anne Ring Petersen, “The Politics of Identity and Recognition in the ‘Global Art World,’” in *Migration into Art: Transcultural Identities and Art-Making in a Globalised World*, ed. by Amelia G. Jones and Marsha Meskimmon (City: Manchester University Press, 2017), 64.

the ‘international art world’ as a club only for Westerners. It is this lack of inclusion that allowed for institutional multiculturalism that transformed the inclusion and exclusion of non-Western artists “in the art institutional system of the West.”<sup>130</sup>

When it comes to biennials, Documenta has been regularly, and generally still, considered one of the most influential events. Ever since Documenta 15, Documenta has shown increasing interest, especially since the mid-1990s, and sensitivity to these issues. By 2002, nearly half of the artists included in Documenta were from a non-Western background, and in 2007, 56 percent of participants were born outside of the West. Even an increasing number of Western artists were working, living, and producing art from outside the West. This is an active example of decolonization, as well as a decentralization of the Western art historical canon. This is a new level of international integration and a testament to the globalization of the art world.<sup>131</sup> However, this newfound institutional multiculturalism is not without side effects, as there exists an overemphasis on the ethnic categorization of artists.<sup>132</sup>

The importance of Sarkis’ inclusion in various biennials and Documenta VI and VII cannot be overstated. Sarkis’ identity as both Armenian and Turkish is unprecedented and inherently controversial. Sarkis does not shy away from speaking of his heritage or the rift between these two countries but does so through his work more than verbally.

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<sup>130</sup> Petersen, “The Politics of Identity and Recognition in the ‘Global Art World,’” 66.

<sup>131</sup> Petersen, “The Politics of Identity and Recognition in the ‘Global Art World,’” 67.

<sup>132</sup> There is a severe lack of, and desperate need for, intersectionality in museums, rather than the study of diversifying components as individual pieces that fall before or after one another. It is not enough to have a “diverse” panel of speakers or artists; only long-term exchanges, begun from within the system, will offer any level of restitution and change.

## ***Respiro*: Turkish Pavilion**

Sarkis' participation in the Turkish Pavilion was unprecedented for many reasons, not least of which is that he comes from an Armenian family. Whether this was an intentional decision made to represent a reconciliation between Turkey and Armenia, his work still “contains and distills themes concerning cultural and historical consequences of the war.”<sup>133</sup> Sarkis' *Respiro*, Italian for ‘breath’ and for ‘I breathe,’ was curated by Defne Ayas and coordinated by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts. In the press conference announcing his participation, Sarkis talked about his neon rainbows, claiming that he is taking viewers back to the beginning of time, and simultaneously, experiencing the past and the present. Sarkis said that it is more important to “breathe and make people feel” instead of “being fixed to certain moments in history.”<sup>134</sup>

In an interview with Geneva Bria for *Artribune*, Sarkis stated that the title *Respiro* is a gift from him to Venice.<sup>135</sup> It feels fitting for Sarkis to choose an Italian word, not only because it takes place in Italy but also because this exhibition, and many of his others, are trying to expand beyond “territorial limits.”<sup>136</sup> The great effort of Sarkis' life is for exhibitions like his to be open to all cultures, religions, and creeds throughout all countries. His stated intent to “establish an

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<sup>133</sup> Finazzi, “Turkey that Speaks Armenian.”

<sup>134</sup> Esra, “Armenian Artists to have Turkish Pavilion at Venice Biennale.”

<sup>135</sup> Finazzi, “Turkey that Speaks Armenian.” One of the guiding questions asked by curator Defne Ayas was: “how can turbulent emotions and emotional registers be maintained while keeping the energy of cultural memory alive?” With its cultural and historical references, Sarkis' conceptual work indirectly involves painful memories that are still relevant today.

<sup>136</sup> Bria, “Venice Biennale. The Turkish Pavilion as Told by Sarkis.”



Figure 9. Sarkis, *Respiro*, 2015. Installation. Turkish Pavilion of the 2015 Venice Biennale in Venice, Italy.  
<https://www.sarkis.fr/2015-respiro-biennale-de-venise-pavillon-de-la-turquie/>

infinite dialogue” and the transformations they take through their creation “shapes the heart of [his] work.”<sup>137</sup>

The Turkish Pavilion was set up like a theater stage, with objects and images functioning in coordination with thoughts and codes. The main attraction was the two gigantic neon rainbow installations that “represented the space of the breath” in the Pavilion<sup>138</sup> (Fig. 9). The two

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<sup>137</sup> Bria, “Venice Biennale. The Turkish Pavilion as Told by Sarkis.”

<sup>138</sup> Bria, “Venice Biennale. The Turkish Pavilion as Told by Sarkis.”

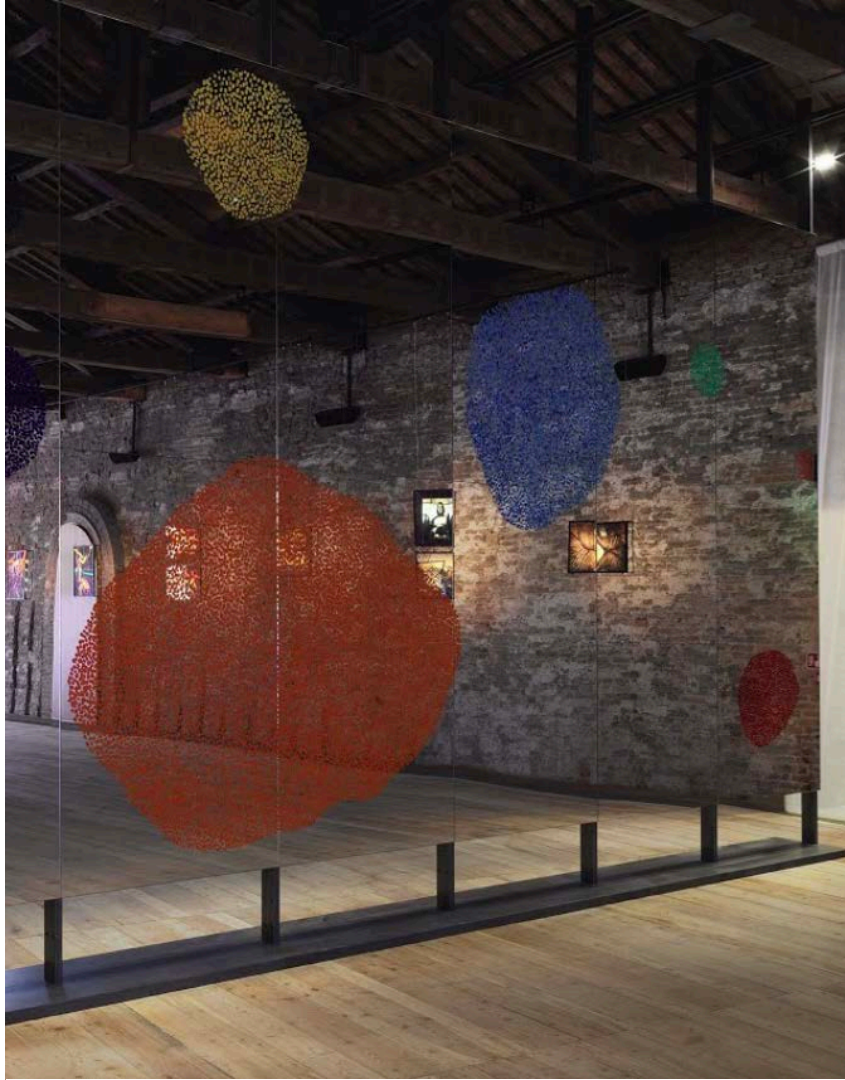


Figure 10. Sarkis, *Respiro*, 2015. Installation. Turkish Pavilion of the 2015 Venice Biennale. <https://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2015/sarkis-respiro/img/03>

coordinating rainbows span around 500 square meters of the pavilion. The colored beams “are positioned as if to represent a sort of Big Bang and thus turn into something unexpected.”<sup>139</sup>

Other features included were two large mirrors that divided the rainbows and reflected the colors back to their point of origin. Seven children placed painted fingerprints on the mirrors in seven colors to take the shape of galaxies (Fig. 10). Another meaningful addition was

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<sup>139</sup> Bria, “Venice Biennale. The Turkish Pavilion as Told by Sarkis.”



Figure 11. Sarkis, *Respiro*, 2015. Installation. Turkish Pavilion of the 2015 Venice Biennale.  
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/sarkis-respiro-installation-view>

thirty-six of Sarkis' works, images created with stained glass that were hung in the space and intended to represent many different cultures and countries (Fig. 11).

Sarkis also hung monumental portraits and images of his close friend the film director Sergei Parajanov, the protests at Gezi Park, and Hrant Dink, a Turkish-Armenian journalist who was murdered for his public advocacy of Armenian rights in Turkey and for being outspoken about Turkey's role in the Armenian Genocide. This intentional grouping clearly highlights the present parallels between several disparate but still similarly oppressive pasts and presents, almost as if the past is reincarnating.<sup>140</sup>

Displayed in Sarkis' work is an intensely personal political statement. Sarkis had been waiting for this invitation to the Turkish Pavilion for the last nine years, in which his own

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<sup>140</sup> Neery Melkonian, "Undoing Denials at the Venice Biennale's Armenian Pavilion," *Hyperallergic* 25

Armenian and Turkish cultural backgrounds were brought to the forefront. *Respiro* “is complemented by a musical composition by Jacopo Baboni-Schilingi, which is based on the artist's rendering of the rainbow’s seven colors as a system of partitions.”<sup>141</sup> The music plays throughout the day and into the night, working in tandem with the neon works that breathe for the duration of the exhibition.<sup>142</sup>

Another piece of his work includes a young girl from Venice carrying an antique silver belt back and forth between the Turkish and Armenian pavilions, calling attention to these neighboring countries with a past that is tense at best, and unforgivable at worst. The portraits lead viewers to ponder the international impact of exile. This quiet movement allows one to see the fragile political relations and the lack of reconciliatory steps taken.<sup>143</sup>

Attaching a heavy silver belt to a small girl's waist might seem inconsequential at first, but its wandering motions provide a sense of home, mending painful severings, and starting anew. Sarkis is not trying to return back to history as it was a century ago but is rather trying to install a transformative process, whereby the marginalized and “othered” groups can be seen as equal, friendships can evolve, and neighborhoods can grow.

To Sarkis, the context of the space used for the exhibition deserves as much attention as the work itself. The history, architecture, and memory, all help build a frame on which the work hangs. Sarkis’ entire goal for the exhibition was to find and expose “all that is repressed and

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August 2015, <https://hyperallergic.com/231777/undoing-denials-at-the-venice-biennales-armenian-pavilion/>.

<sup>141</sup> “Sarkis’s *Respiro* at the Pavilion of Turkey,” e-flux Announcements, 8 May 2015, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/29570/sarkis-s-respiro-at-the-pavilion-of-turkey/> <http://turkiyepavyonu15.iksv.org/indexen.html>.

<sup>142</sup> “Sarkis’s *Respiro* at the Pavilion of Turkey.”

<sup>143</sup> Melkonian, “Undoing Denials at the Venice Biennale’s Armenian Pavilion.”



compressed,” and “open up all the possibilities of space.”<sup>144</sup> The neon rays of the rainbows breathe into the space and fill it with light and life, long after visitors are gone, and even after the pavilion is closed to the public.<sup>145</sup>

### ***Amenity: Armenian Pavilion***

In an interesting turn of events, Sarkis is also showing work at the Armenian pavilion.<sup>146</sup> Emphasizing the motifs of conversation and breath, Sarkis said: “It is very important for me to keep the production going for culture but also to keep the dialogue open. We are the link between two pavilions. We are the breath.”<sup>147</sup> Adelina Cuberyan von Furstenberg, curator of the exhibition and founder of the non-governmental organization Art for the World, has worked with Sarkis on various projects since 1974.

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<sup>144</sup> Bria, “Venice Biennale. The Turkish Pavilion as Told by Sarkis.”

<sup>145</sup> Gozde Kazaz, “Censorship of the book ‘turning pain into treasure,’” AGOS 14 May 2015, <http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/11583/acilari-hazineye-donusturen-kitaba-sansur>. For his work in the Turkish Pavilion, Sarkis also prepared an accompanying book. The distribution of the book was initially blocked due to the inclusion of the phrase “Armenian Genocide” in it, a real-world example of the censorship Armenians face when trying to remember and commemorate their past. IKSIV, the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, did not release an official statement regarding the issue, but an officer from their Media Relations department said that the book “will be published in the coming days without changing its content.” Sarkis took the undistributed books and turned them into a work of art, placing 144 books in their gold leaf cases next to his 2007 work *Leidschatz*. With this decision, Sarkis said “I turned the negative into a positive. I don't want to spend an exhibition that I made with so much effort and so much faith around the catalog gossip.” Curator Defne Ayas supported Sarkis' comments, arguing that censorship should not be a roadblock when it comes to art. Ayas said “we have turned pain into treasure and we continue to transform it. We did our job.”

<sup>146</sup> Gareth Harris, “Centenary of Armenian massacre to be marked at Venice Biennale,” *The Art Newspaper* 22 June 2015. In total, Sarkis contributed four works to the Armenian pavilion, including *Danseuse dorée en Haut du Toit* (2012) and *Atlas de Mammuthus Intermedius* (2014). *Mammuthus* is a 150,000-year-old bone of a mammoth that addresses topics of irrecoverable loss, righting wrongs, and the ever-present longing of absence. The sculpture is composed of thousand-year-old bones from the paleontological site at Romain-La-Roche, and contemporary additions such as resin, glue, and gold leaf.

<sup>147</sup> Harris, “Centenary of Armenian massacre to be marked at Venice Biennale.”



Figure 12. Vartanian, Hrag. “A view of the island on Zan Lazzaro degli Armeni, the site of the Armenian Pavilion for the 2015 Venice Biennale.” Photo. <https://hyperallergic.com/231777/undoing-denials-at-the-venice-biennales-armenian-pavilion/>

*Armenity* was installed on the island of San Lazzaro degli Armeni (Fig. 12), gently butting up against and intertwined with the Catholic Armenian Mekhitarist Monastery, named for the Armenian monk Mekhitar who fled to the island in 1717 to escape persecution under the Ottoman Empire.<sup>148</sup> It is now the headquarters of the Mekhitarist Order and what Armenian poet

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<sup>148</sup> San Lazzaro Island as the venue for the pavilion is not random. Also born of painful exilic conditions, marginalization, and persecution, the monastery became a dynamic, international site for collecting, maintaining, translating, and disseminating the “great texts” to and from Armenia. As such, many of the artworks included in *Armenity* converses with the diasporic past of this site and Armenian heritage.

Hovannez Shiraz has fittingly called a home on San Lazzaro island, “an Armenian land in foreign waters.”<sup>149</sup>

To address the connection between *Armenity* and the Genocide, von Furstenberg wrote in an online statement:

In honour of the 100-year commemoration of the Armenian Genocide of 1915, the Pavilion of the Republic of Armenia provided an occasion to rethink the notion of Armenianness and broaden this reflection to the concepts of identity and memory, justice and reconciliation, in the name of which many contemporary struggles are still taking place.<sup>150</sup>

The Armenian Pavilion brought together eighteen artists from around the globe, one for Mekhitar and one for each of his original seventeen disciples. Moreover, all artists selected to participate were the children or grandchildren of people who survived the Armenian Genocide. The title of the exhibition, *Armenity*, was coined by von Furstenberg and echoes the French word “Armenite” that “refers to the particular characteristics of the descendants of the survivors.”<sup>151</sup>

At its core, *Armenity* is about the fluctuation of national identity, the way it is scattered, picked up, and pieced back together but is never quite the same. Sarkis’s exhibitions, *Armenity* for the Armenian Pavilion, *Respiro* for the Turkish Pavilion, and his contribution to *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*, often install a sense of quietude that is then filled by the vibrant neons vibrating throughout the space.

Sarkis fills space like a man who has had more than a few decades to build a connection between memory and homeland that others unfamiliar with his background can still recognize.

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<sup>149</sup> Thorne, “Pavilions of Turkey & the Republic of Armenia.”

<sup>150</sup> Harris, “Centenary of Armenian massacre to be marked at Venice Biennale.”

<sup>151</sup> Thorne, “Pavilions of Turkey & the Republic of Armenia.”



Figure 13. Vartanian, Hrag. “Sarkis’s installation in the front room of the church at San Lazzaro.” Armenian Pavilion of the 2015 Venice Biennale. Photo. <https://hyperallergic.com/231777/undoing-denials-at-the-venice-biennales-armenian-pavilion/>

His contribution to *Armenity* does just that, with a network of stained-glass pieces hanging high in the monastery’s chapel (Fig. 13). Hrant Dink once wrote that “diaspora is a huge village in Anatolia.”<sup>152</sup> In this sense, Sarkis and his work have taken root and made their own living there too.

Artists who lived and worked in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, were the typical choice of the curatorial team. Unless they needed sponsors, the Armenian diaspora was largely ignored.

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<sup>152</sup> Thorne, “Pavilions of Turkey & the Republic of Armenia.”

The idea of “native as more authentic” was adopted, and any attempts to bridge the existing socio-political gaps between those inside or outside of Armenia, living in their homeland or in the diaspora, was a vein untapped. It intensified the feeling of those in the diaspora being “othered,” even by their own people. In many ways, *Armenity* was attempting to make up for their lack of inclusion in the years before.

The title proposes building up the deficit from previous ignorance. The pavilion is attempting to suggest a more international definition of collective identity, including those in the diaspora, whose roots span time and geography. *Armenity* specifically focuses on the children and grandchildren of survivors of the Armenian Genocide, powerfully marking the centennial commemoration.

“Armenity” is a word rarely used, but von Furstenberg chose it with the intention of opening up the definition of “Armenianness.” The selection of artists and artworks transcends the “political correctness” of groups within diasporan communities. Both in terms of philosophy and literary currency, Author Neery Melkonian argues that “Armenity” is closer to the word Armenian word “*aghet*,” meaning catastrophe. *Armenity* then addresses and delineates the less popular, more complex components of self-identity and identity politics. It stands on the outside margins of collective consciousness and identity, like so many of the participating artists, carefully encouraging the viewer to engage with the contemporary realities of the diaspora.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Melkonian, “Undoing Denials at the Venice Biennale’s Armenian Pavilion.”



Figure 14. Vartanian, Hrag. “A 17<sup>th</sup>-century Armenian manuscript by Hakob Yereks of Tiflis, left, on display in the manuscript library of the San Lazzaro monastery, and on the right, Sarkis and Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi’s ‘Rotolo Armeno’ (2012), watercolor on paper scroll, which was on display in one of the painting corridors of the complex.” 2015 Venice Biennale. Photo. <https://hyperallergic.com/231777/undoing-denials-at-the-venice-biennales-armenian-pavilion/>

The inclusion of Sarkis, one of the pioneers of early conceptual and installation art in Turkey, helps mark artistic lineages in the younger generations. With his work displayed next to a seventeenth-century Armenian manuscript by Hakob Yereks of Tiflis, it serves as a continuity across time, space, and geography<sup>154</sup> (Fig. 14).

Sarkis also employs the ancient Japanese technique of pottery and ceramic restoration known as *Kintsugi*, which dates back to the fifteenth century. The vein of gold stands out like a belt, holding the fragile pieces of bone together. This practice of *Kintsugi* makes the formerly broken object even more valuable than before it was even broken. Perhaps Sarkis is suggesting that sees people and countries in much the same way, that a discarded people, broken by socio-political and economic oppression can find a way to become whole again.

<sup>154</sup> Melkonian, “Undoing Denials at the Venice Biennale’s Armenian Pavilion.”

## Reparation

Though Sarkis' works in the *Armenity* and *Respiro* exhibitions in the 2015 Venice Biennale are indeed separate, it is hard to keep them entirely distinct. They both stem from his working through catastrophe, diaspora, exile, and ultimately, regeneration. To many, including English and Comparative Literature author David Kazanjian, the word genocide is too calculated, simple, and judicial. Genocide as a term was not coined until 1944 by author Raphael Lemkin, nearly three decades after the Armenian Genocide. With this in mind, Kazanjian finds it fundamentally separate from what occurred in 1915. The word catastrophe, or other older words used by Armenian people who lived and died in the massacres and deportations: *yeghern*, *medz yeghern*, *darakrutiun*, *aksor*, *chart*, *aghet*, are, he argues, more applicable.<sup>155</sup>

Sarkis' oeuvre and specifically its iteration for the MAXXI *Two Rainbows* (Fig. 1) and its 2015 Venice Biennale version (Fig. 2) argue that the catastrophic events that occurred in 1915 and beyond do not need to be "recognized, restored, or repaired."<sup>156</sup> His work unhinges and unbinds the prefix "re" that dreams of a melancholic, hopeless return to a time before.<sup>157</sup> Removing the "re" from reparation leaves paration, which refers to the process of preparing or making ready. With his work, Sarkis takes viewers to the point of preparation, a point of departure, the threshold of time and space and creation.<sup>158</sup>

Reparation is an earnest attempt to repair what has been broken. To use it necessitates a level of acknowledgment and recognition that a breaking event even occurred. To ask for

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<sup>155</sup> Kazanjian, "Cognition, Storation, Paration," 50.

<sup>156</sup> Kazanjian, "Cognition, Storation, Paration," 50.

<sup>157</sup> Kazanjian, "Cognition, Storation, Paration," 50-54.

<sup>158</sup> Kazanjian, "Cognition, Storation, Paration," 54.

reparation invokes a sense of melancholy and nostalgia, the impossible idea that something broken can return to its status prior to the point of breaking, that there can feasibly be a return to a whole, unmarred state before being reduced to its parts.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Kazanjian, "Cognition, Storation, Paration," 54-56.



## 4. Chapter 3: Decolonizing Italy

### *Istanbul. Passione, Gioia, Furore*

Artistic agency, via museum or gallery exhibitions or an artist's personal practice, has significant power to transform social experience, political positioning, and political dimensions neighboring their word. In the case of Sarkis' *Two Rainbows* (Fig.1) these relevant events include identity, memory, trauma, and the double colonial nature of the Armenian Genocide and the over-prevalence of Western art and the Western canon. In the context of the exhibition *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*, this work functions as a reminder of the catalyst of social upheaval, the Gezi Park protests. The main focus of this research is to discover how *Two Rainbows* may have functioned as a concerted attempt to decolonize contemporary art and Italian museums on a larger scale.

MAXXI artistic director and curator of *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*, Hou Hanru is well versed in “observation and narration of the phenomenology of the art of the new generations.”<sup>160</sup> He is no stranger to the political situation in Turkey, as he directed the 2007 Biennale in Istanbul titled *Not Only Possible, But Also Necessary*. This is like the generating perspective for *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*, as it all comes to a head in conversations about Gezi Park and the mass urbanization and modernization of Istanbul.

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<sup>160</sup> Simonetta Lax, “Feeble or Strong?: Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury,” LuxFlux no. 59, 2016, <http://www.luxflux.net/flebili-o-forti-istanbul-passion-joy-fury/>.

Erdoğan's pursuit of an Ottoman neo-imperialist Turkey is cleverly "disguised as a neo-liberal neo-technological development" that is strengthened by military-esque police activity designed to repress freedom of speech and opinion.<sup>161</sup> Can Dundar, director of the Turkish newspaper "Cumhuriyet" had been accused of treason and imprisoned in November of 2015, but was released 92 days later. In one of his first interviews post-release, he said "my imprisonment made the Turkey of censorship known to the world."<sup>162</sup>

*Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*, focused on a country in the midst of a revolt and a transformation. The local political drama in Istanbul juxtaposed against the globalized war on rights and freedoms in Turkey, both of which citizens were and are still subjected to, is explicitly bared to the viewers. It is a conscious decision to address such topics publicly. The titles of the six sections were phrased as "existential questions that apply to all of us," and featured forty-five artists and architects who came together and created over 100 works to present a city, in all its conflict and glory, that became "the symbol of contemporary change."<sup>163</sup>

Istanbul was built of conflict at its very core, between "modernity and tradition, cultural ferment and urban renewal," and social and political outcries.<sup>164</sup> Even its geographic location situates it at the very crossroads between Christianity and Islam, East and West. Giovanna Melandri, President of Fondazione MAXXI, wrote that Istanbul and Rome reflect each other: "This is so because of the crucial historical link between the two cities, and the themes that

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<sup>161</sup> Lax, "Feeble or Strong?: Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury."

<sup>162</sup> Lax, "Feeble or Strong?: Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury." His capture and holding were hugely controversial and remain so years later. If there can be any good to come from it, it would truly be that the entire world could no longer shy away from Erdoğan's unjust wrath that he had been forcing upon Turkish citizens since his election in 2014. Erdoğan became furious in March of 2016, this time turned upon the Constitution Court which ruled that the imprisonment was unjust and violated an individual's right to freedom of expression and the press.

<sup>163</sup> "ISTANBUL. PASSION, JOY, FURY," Press Kit Text, 12 November 2015, 1.

<sup>164</sup> "ISTANBUL. PASSION, JOY, FURY," Press Kit Text, 5.

concern us so closely: urban transformation, social unrest, the yearning for a peaceful future.”<sup>165</sup>

There are also the categories of “East” and “West” that must be deconstructed and redefined.

Turkey borders eight countries; as such there is an intense need to understand the interconnection between different cultural populations.

Because of Turkey’s international presence, *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*, is comparably relevant. Especially at the MAXXI, which uses *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*, as a “way of confirming its own multicultural and transnational vocation.”<sup>166</sup> Turkey, and Istanbul, have again found themselves as “the vanishing point of world geopolitics,”<sup>167</sup> particularly with the Gezi Park incident as a case study on contemporary creativity, immigration, and urban development. In a position of poignant balance between the East and West, this “theater of conflict” between religion, identity, politics, and culture has yet to be resolved.<sup>168</sup>

Istanbul’s mode of urban development is inherently contradictory. Despite being founded on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, it took hold of a radical westernization program to make Turkey modern. But Turkey’s idea of modernity deals in negotiations with different historical momentums, leading to a pendulum swing between “East” and “West”, secular and religious, modern and traditional, local and global, and national and imperial.<sup>169</sup>

Massive urban development creates homes for the influx of migrant workers since the 1950s, but the cost is a massive wave of gentrification that expels the poorer populations out of the city.<sup>170</sup> This increasing urban expansion combined with the increasingly autocratic rule and

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<sup>165</sup> “ISTANBUL. PASSION, JOY, FURY,” Press Kit Text, 5.

<sup>166</sup> “ISTANBUL. PASSION, JOY, FURY,” Press Kit Text, 5.

<sup>167</sup> “ISTANBUL. PASSION, JOY, FURY,” Press Kit Text, 5.

<sup>168</sup> “ISTANBUL. PASSION, JOY, FURY,” Press Kit Text, 5.

<sup>169</sup> “ISTANBUL. PASSION, JOY, FURY,” Press Kit Text, 7.

<sup>170</sup> “ISTANBUL. PASSION, JOY, FURY,” Press Kit Text, 7.

conservative faith-based ideology reached a boiling point in late May 2013 when a large group of protesters nearing the thousands flooded Gezi Park to protest its imminent destruction. Since then, a new passion for social and political engagement and change has arisen, including amongst the artistic community.

During and after the demonstration, many artworks were created that shared contradictory feelings about the reality of life in Istanbul, the love people have for it coupled with concern over what feels like its demise. This intense dynamism was driven by their *passion, joy, and fury*, leading to newfound defiance of political oppression as well as the current urgent geopolitical situation including rising social division, the refugee crisis, and wars, both local and global.<sup>171</sup>

The Istanbul art community and the larger Turkish art community have long engaged with struggles for freedom amidst social and political oppression, becoming a cornerstone of many artists' practice. With an uptick in the number of artworks and events focusing directly on the exchange between urban transformation and artistic production, it comes as no surprise that *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*, should also address this topic.<sup>172</sup>

In the exhibition's press materials, Hou Hanru notes how Istanbul can be seen as "a major laboratory of urban and social mutation."<sup>173</sup> The gentrification of Istanbul's urban fabric has long been heralded by the hegemony and official policy of the political party. Over half of the urban space in Istanbul was illegally constructed as shelters for immigrants, bringing with it informal economics. These "illegal cities" are known as "*gecekondu*" meaning "landed at night," and

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<sup>171</sup> "ISTANBUL. PASSION, JOY, FURY," Press Kit Text, 8.

<sup>172</sup> "ISTANBUL. PASSION, JOY, FURY," Press Kit Text, 8.

<sup>173</sup> "ISTANBUL. PASSION, JOY, FURY," Press Kit Text, 6.

were built by the inhabitants with cheap materials and improvised techniques. Though considered socially unacceptable, these territories represent the new needs that industrialization and modernization have created in Turkish cities, Istanbul especially.<sup>174</sup>

From the earliest beginnings of the contemporary art movement in Istanbul, it has actively been experimental. Many artists work in the public eye in the streets, and groups are always self-organized, one of, if not the only way for artists to publicize work. Despite the recent boom of infrastructure and growth of the contemporary art market, many artist collectives continue to self-organize and keep their roots firmly planted in the reality of urban life.<sup>175</sup>

Ceren Erdem, one of the curators of the exhibition, says that they felt a responsibility to “remind people what is happening in Istanbul and in Turkey, which is happening in the region. And how the government does not implement liberal policies, creating extremely unbalanced classes in the country that can be easily polarized and can be separated, and so people can forget to cry together and raise their voices together.” That said, it can be hard for Turkish residents to speak out, as simply insulting President Erdoğan results in automatic imprisonment.<sup>176</sup>

What is so significant about this exhibition is the commitment to the works shown by Hou Hanru. This is not an exhibition that steps back and remains objective. Hou “explicitly takes sides” and describes the exhibition as “defying the powers of the neo-liberal capital city and authoritarianism” through the work of artists.<sup>177</sup> There is no way to miss the ample references to the three-week occupation of Gezi Park in Istanbul in 2013.

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<sup>174</sup> “ISTANBUL. PASSION, JOY, FURY,” Press Kit Text, 9.

<sup>175</sup> “ISTANBUL. PASSION, JOY, FURY,” Press Kit Text, 9.

<sup>176</sup> Lax, “Feeble or Strong?: Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury.”

<sup>177</sup> Julia Ramirez, “Mapping Gentrification and Urban Resistance in Istanbul,” *Hyperallergic*, 10 May 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/297767/mapping-gentrification-and-urban-resistance-in-istanbul/>.

*Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*, Ceren Erdem was in Istanbul in June of 2013 when the famous resistance in Gezi Park in Istanbul took place. In Taksim Square, the Park was going to be destroyed to make way for a new shopping center, prompting inhabitants of the city to rise up against “the oppressive politics, conservative ideology and regressive democracy of the then Prime Minister Erdoğan.”<sup>178</sup>

Out of the painful strife came a functional community of colleagues and friends numbering in the thousands, some anti-capitalist Muslims, and some members of the notoriously oppressed LGBTQ community. A brotherhood formed and bonded in solidarity, representing what many considered a breaking point for Istanbul. Erdem “grew up mostly apolitical,” but saw her’s and other “politically committed parents” forced to quiet themselves firsthand following the 1980 military coup. Torture and systematic investigations by the police and military became the norm, but falling into the shadows did not mean that the spirit of resistance had disappeared with their voices, and Gezi Park is evidence of that.<sup>179</sup>

Gezi Park was lost on 15 June 2013, when police raided it and forced protesters out in violent fashion, but it was too late to stop the spread of defiance:

After Gezi, the artists began to form solidarity groups, platforms to discuss social and political issues, but also issues related to the artistic practice itself. Individual projects were put on stand-by, because the reality was so strong that we just wanted to be part of it, to be out on the streets, to work together, instead of focusing on our own business. Real life became more important than locking yourself in your studio to work.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Marta Pettinau, “Istanbul. The Future after Gezi Park,” 16 March 2016, *Artribune Magazine* 29, <https://www.artribune.com/attualita/2016/03/istanbul-futuro-arte-politica-gezi-park-ceren-erdem/>.

<sup>179</sup> Pettinau, “Istanbul. The Future after Gezi Park.”

<sup>180</sup> Pettinau, “Istanbul. The Future after Gezi Park.”

Unfortunately, following the situation in Gezi Park, the political and social climate in Istanbul only worsened. The government began pushing heavily towards transforming Turkey into a “neo-Ottoman empire,” and enforcing rapid urbanization which puts the “extra-urban territory at risk of an ecological and social crisis.”<sup>181</sup> Freedom of expression and press is fading with opposition newsrooms and TV channels being forced to close, and mass amounts of people are being arrested, convicted, and indicted. Erdem said that the situation in Istanbul was suffocating and for many, life-threatening. As the post-Gezi period continues, the contemporary art world in Istanbul mirrors “the state of its city in being enthusiastic, proud, dynamic, but also agitated, conflictual, contradictory.”<sup>182</sup>

While the events in Gezi encouraged artists to become more politically involved, they were also forced to be extremely cautious when politicizing their work. If not, they risked being axed by government censorship, or even ostracized from a system monopolized by private capital and which views contemporary art as an “‘easy to digest’ consumer good for the wealthy” as well as uninformed collectors.<sup>183</sup>

Urbanization is unequivocally tied to class; *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury* proved this in 2015. Hou Hanru and his co-curators Ceren Erdem, Elena Motisi, and Donatella Saroli stated the exhibition was to investigate “the cultural milieu of the Mediterranean Basin and the relationships between the Middle East and Europe.”<sup>184</sup> This continued the MAXXI Museum's work, following an exhibition of contemporary Iranian art from 2014 to 2015, and preceding an exhibition of art in Beirut from 2017 to 2018.

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<sup>181</sup> Pettinau, “Istanbul. The Future after Gezi Park.”

<sup>182</sup> Pettinau, “Istanbul. The Future after Gezi Park.”

<sup>183</sup> Pettinau, “Istanbul. The Future after Gezi Park.”

<sup>184</sup> Ramirez, “Mapping Gentrification and Urban Resistance in Istanbul.”

## Zaha Hadid and the MAXXI

The design of the MAXXI is unparalleled, staged by the architect Zaha Hadid. The layout of the museum allows for each new exhibition to have an individual presence; this holds true for *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury* as well. Between the first and second floors of the museum, the exhibition was divided into chapters, with each room following a narrative on the conflicting forces in Istanbul. There were two clear opposing viewpoints in regard to the urban metropolis: the city as above, namely gentrification and a top-down development scheme, and the city as below, namely social resistance and a bottom-up response to social issues.<sup>185</sup>

Zaha Hadid's design for the MAXXI was successful, even "Contro tutti i "gufi" che avevano inveito contro," "against all the 'owls' they had railed against."<sup>186</sup> In Italy, owls, or "gufi" are often used to predict negativity, something akin to a bad omen. The use of this in an article talking about the MAXXI's success and the "bad omens" or resistance Zaha Hadid likely faced is not an accident. Hadid has claimed that in response to her design for the Cardiff Opera House, which was rejected, twice, after she won both rounds of the competition in 1995, she faced untold levels of racism, misogyny, and xenophobia.<sup>187</sup>

By the time Zaha Hadid won the design competition for the rights to create the MAXXI and its subsequent completion in 2010, she had already made a name for herself with buildings such as the Guangzhou Opera House in Guangzhou, China, and the Riverside Museum in

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<sup>185</sup> Ramirez, "Mapping Gentrification and Urban Resistance in Istanbul."

<sup>186</sup> Renato Barilli, "L'arte Trasformata in Furore dai "Ragazzi" di Gezi Park," *L'Unita* 3 Gennaio 2016, 21.

<sup>187</sup> Simon Hattenstone, "Zaha Hadid: 'I'm happy to be on the outside,'" *The Guardian* 9 October 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/09/zaha-hadid>.

<sup>188</sup> Hattenstone, Simon, "Zaha Hadid: 'I'm happy to be on the outside.'"



Glasgow, Scotland. The museum took over ten years to complete and won the Stirling Prize for her design of the MAXXI in 2010.<sup>188</sup>

The MAXXI is a world-class institution and its choice of a non-Western and non-Italian architect suggests an attempt to think both internationally and outside the western vs “other” divide. So too, Hou Hanru being selected as artistic director suggests an engagement with non-Western or non-Italian artists and curators. Born in China, Hou Hanru later immigrated to work in France, the United States, and Italy, but grew up during the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. He saw the Red Guards confiscate his parents' vinyl records, art, and books, all banned by the Communist Party as “bourgeois.” His parents kept some items like books and sheet music, at great risk to themselves, from which Hou learned that “culture is resistant to all kinds of oppression.”<sup>189</sup>

Hou participated in the Tiananmen protests in May of 1989, saying that the environment resembled that of a carnival, but also intensely anxious. When the tanks came, Hou continued to participate in protesting and pushing the tanks back, even seeing several friends become injured.<sup>190</sup> He is no stranger to using art, culture, and education to fight back against oppressive regimes, evidenced by his own actions and his display of artists in the midst of their own fight.

As an expatriate himself, Hou uses his experiences to inform his curatorial practices today. He is constantly aware that “Italy is a country with migration in its memory,” but today's challenge is helping refugees find their place.<sup>191</sup> Italy is a country tightly drawn between

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<sup>189</sup> Sheila Pierce, “Hou Hanru, Chinese-born artistic director of Rome’s MAXXI museum,” *Financial Times*, 6 May 2016. <https://www.ft.com/content/82e4b1dc-0d47-11e6-b41f-0beb7e589515>.

<sup>190</sup> Pierce, “Hou Hanru, Chinese-born artistic director of Rome’s MAXXI museum.”

<sup>191</sup> Pierce, “Hou Hanru, Chinese-born artistic director of Rome’s MAXXI museum.”

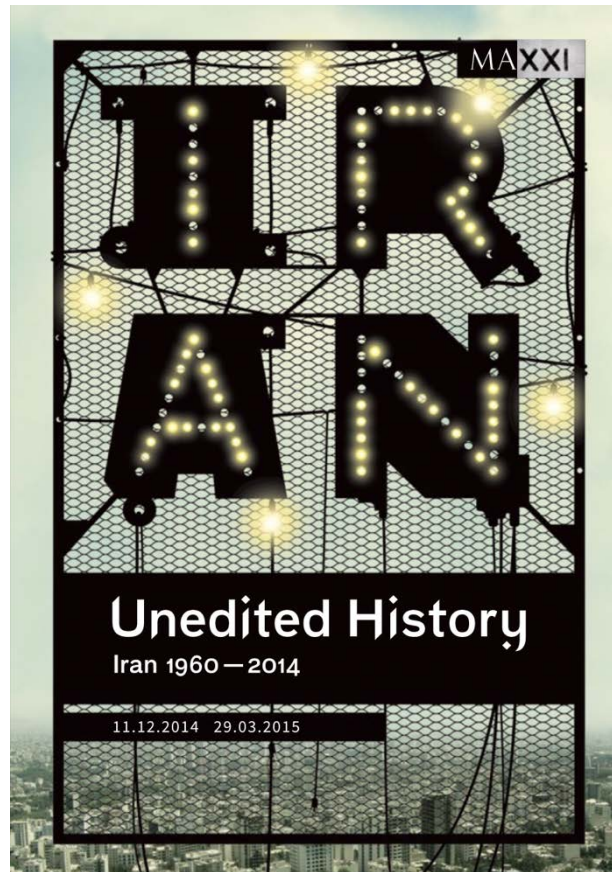


Figure 15. Front cover of exhibition catalog for *Unedited History: Iran 1960-2014*, an exhibition at the MAXXI, part of the series *Interactions across the Mediterranean*.

[http://www.maxxi.art/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Brochure\\_Unedited-History\\_Iran.pdf](http://www.maxxi.art/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Brochure_Unedited-History_Iran.pdf)

modernity and conservatism, and as a result, Hou has had to find a way to navigate that delicate social balance.

Nowhere perhaps is the concerted effort to promote non-Western artists more evident than in a number of the exhibitions and programming done in the context of artistic director Hou Hanru's series of exhibitions exploring the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Titled *Interactions across the Mediterranean*, it began in 2014-2015 with *Unedited History: Iran 1960-2014*. This was followed by the second chapter, *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*, in 2015, then *Home Beirut. Sounding the Neighbors* from 2017-2018 as the third chapter.

*Unedited History. Iran 1960-2014* (Fig. 15) ran from 11 December 2014 to 29 March 2015 and included multiple forms of Iranian visual culture from the 1960s to 2014, as the title suggests. The three chronological sections included works of art such as paintings, photographs, graphic arts, and installations, and documents such as journals, videos, posters, and material from archives. These materials and images helped to “reconstruct the social and political reality underlying the different manifestations of visual culture and modernism in Iran.”<sup>192</sup> Over the past five decades, several important events have taken place in Iran, ideas and changes birthed from manifestations, such as the period of the Shah, the Revolution and the birth of the Islamic Republic, and the Iraq war.

*Home Beirut. Sounding the Neighbors* (Fig. 16) was shown from 15 November 2017 to 20 May 2018. This is the MAXXI’s latest installment in their series exploring interactions between the artistic communities of Europe and the Middle East, with a special focus on “a new trans-Mediterranean culture that is significant for the global panorama of artistic creation.”<sup>193</sup> The exhibition is divided into four sections, each functioning as a metaphorical “home” for one aspect of the kaleidoscopic artistic scene in Beirut: *Home for Memory*, *Home for Everyone?*, *Home for Remapping*, and *Home for Joy*. Respectively, they address memories of war, the refugee crisis, Beirut’s ever-changing urban territory, and the joy that can be found in Beirut’s cultural panorama.

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<sup>192</sup> “Unedited History: Iran 1960 – 2014,” Brochure Text, 2014, 3.

<sup>193</sup> “Home Beirut: Sounding the Neighbors,” Booklet Text, 2017, 2

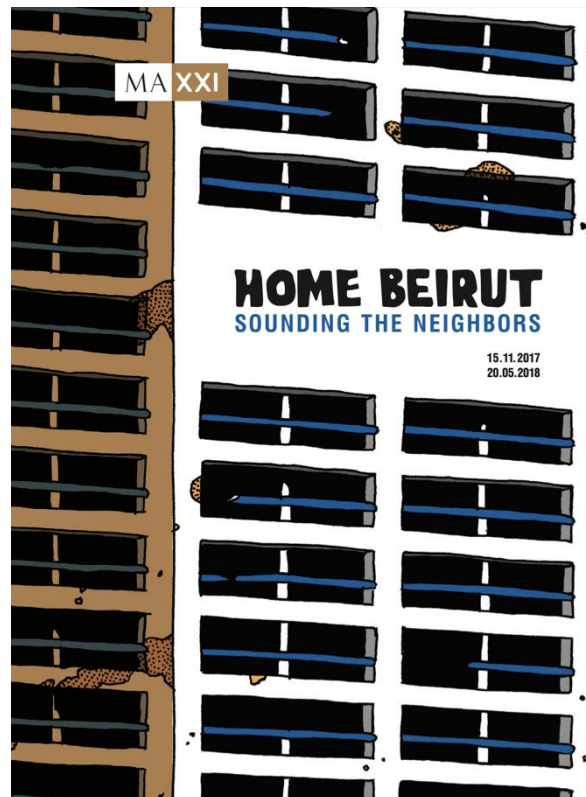


Figure 16. Front cover of exhibition catalog for *Home Beirut: Sounding the Neighbors*, an exhibition at the MAXXI, part of the series *Interactions across the Mediterranean*. [https://www.maxxi.art/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/20171102\\_BOOKletHomeBeirut.pdf](https://www.maxxi.art/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/20171102_BOOKletHomeBeirut.pdf)

Each of these exhibitions was immensely effective on its own at exposing Italians to the art and culture of other Mediterranean countries. Even more so when the exhibitions are viewed as a cohesive series, they form a powerful cohort that is questioning Mediterranean identity. This was a conscious effort made by Artistic Director Hou Hanru and his team, but the efficacy of these shows at the MAXXI extends beyond curatorial decisions. While they may not have directly addressed the idea of decolonizing Western institutions, this exhibition series was compelling in decolonizing Italian culture, at least in terms of the art, which requires an in-depth look at the reception of *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*.

## 5. Chapter 4: Whose Passion, Joy, Fury?

### *Istanbul. Passione, Gioia, Furore: Reception*

On 11 December 2015, *L'Unita*, a historically communist newspaper in Italy, wrote “Da Istanbul al Maxxi con Gioia e con Furore,” an article that was largely supportive. It does not directly mention Sarkis and his work *Two Rainbows* but does not mince words about the social and political situation in Turkey, particularly, Istanbul. The focus of the article centers around the protest against the destruction of Gezi Park, a beloved green center in Istanbul that was lost and now serves as an example of regression of democracy.<sup>194</sup>

An article by Lea Mattarella published by *La Repubblica*, a center-left newspaper that began as more far-left on the political spectrum, also noted that Sarkis’ *Two Rainbows* (Fig. 1) evokes mental images of the famous rainbow staircase in Istanbul<sup>195</sup> (Fig. 6). *Il Manifesto*, another left-wing newspaper in Italy devoted a paragraph of a 2016 article to Sarkis and *Two Rainbows*, also taking care to mention the destroyed rainbow stairs of the Fındıklı neighborhood, which stood as a symbol of the Gezi Park uprising.<sup>196</sup> Articles written by more liberal or left-leaning newspapers such as *La Repubblica* and the far-left newspaper *Il Manifesto* tended to have a more focused view of the exhibition, as a commentary on the political situation in Turkey, expressed by the artists present in the exhibition.

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<sup>194</sup> Stefania Scateni, “Da Istanbul al Maxxi con Gioia e con Furore,” *L'Unita* 11 Dicembre 2015, 11.

<sup>195</sup> Mattarella, “Istanbul. Tra Lotta e Repressione la Rivoluzione Turca Spiegata con l’arte,” 50.

<sup>196</sup> Teresa Macri, “Il corpo ibrido di Istanbul,” *il manifesto* 2 Gennaio 2016, 10.

The centrist Italian newspaper *La Stampa* was also enamored with Sarkis and wrote that “ed è il più autorevole tra gli artisti in mostra, ad esprimere al meglio il sentimento del possibile,” or that “he is the most authoritative of artists on display, to best express the feeling of the possible.”<sup>197</sup> His neon installation “indicare proprio l’arrivo della speranza quando nulla sembra poter cambiare,” or “indicates precisely the arrival of hope when nothing seems to be able to change.”<sup>198</sup> Much of the rest of the article was devoted to addressing the reflection between Rome and Istanbul, and the tensions that existed at the time of the exhibition: gentrification, massive urban expansion, a strained relationship between the East and the West, and how it all came to a head over the Gezi Park uprising.

*Il Messaggero* is a more conservative, but not staunchly far-right wing newspaper. In the article, author Massimo di Forti mentioned that Sarkis and *Two Rainbows* were the “Splendid icona dell’intera mostra è “Two Rainbows” di Sarki[s],” or the “splendid icon of the entire exhibition.”<sup>199</sup> It serves as a magnificent signature reminiscent of the colored staircase in Istanbul which, according to this article and supported by images, no longer exists (Fig. 7). di Forti wrote that Istanbul is inviting, but elusive. In a liquid, liminal space such as Zaha Hadid’s MAXXI, *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury* asks questions of the viewer in much the same way as the city.

This exhibition stimulated fidelity, contemporaneous chaos, and a city that “summarizes the epochal challenges posed by Third Millennium at the Global Village.”<sup>200</sup> All themes of Istanbul were present, from the aspiration for European identity, the “oriental tradition” without

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<sup>197</sup> Elena Del Drago, “Quarantacinque artisti raccontano passioni, gioie e furori di Istanbul,” *La Stampa*, 30 Gennaio 2016, 29.

<sup>198</sup> Del Drago, “Quarantacinque artisti raccontano passioni, gioie e furori di Istanbul,” 29.

<sup>199</sup> Massimo di Forti, “Istanbul, Tutti i Colori del Furore e della Passione al Maxxi,” *Il Messaggero* 13 Dicembre 2015, 58.

<sup>200</sup> di Forti, “Istanbul, Tutti i Colori del Furore e della Passione al Maxxi,” 58.

stereotyping, the frenetic urbanization, the suffering of refugees, religious decouplings, and democratic struggles.<sup>201</sup> This article, “Istanbul, Tutti i Colori del Furore e della Passione al Maxxi,” more from *Il Messaggero*, and other conservative newspapers, viewed the exhibition as a more international assessment of the merging between art and politics. Rather than a sole reflection on Turkish politics, it was seen as a reflection on the overlapping of European and Middle-Eastern identities over the Bosphorus.

Based on newspapers from the months surrounding the exhibition, the more left-wing newspapers saw it as a critique of contemporary Turkish politics, namely Erdoğan and his actions in Turkey. The right-wing newspapers tended to view it as analyzing more than just Turkish politics, seeing a host of issues such as immigration, religion, identity, and political struggles. It becomes apparent that Sarkis and his rainbow have taken hold in Rome as much as in Istanbul. Whether right or left-wing, the media seems taken with the exhibition and Sarkis’ centerpiece.

In an interview, Ceren Erdem quoted Sarkis saying that “Un arcobaleno spezzato, questa è l’immagine che ho pensato per Istanbul,” or “A broken rainbow, this is the image I thought of for Istanbul.”<sup>202</sup> The defense of Gezi Park is relatively well-known and understood, but few know that Erdoğan’s oppressive sociopolitical acts extended far beyond the 600-tree park. The neighborhoods of Sulukule and Tarlabasi, largely inhabited by Roma people, Kurds, and immigrants, were completely razed to the ground to make way for residential homes, with no plan to replace the community. They were thrown out of their homes in the name of “urban

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<sup>201</sup> di Forti, “Istanbul, Tutti i Colori del Furore e della Passione al Maxxi,” 58-59.

<sup>202</sup> Francesca Sforza, “Incontro con Ceren Erdem curatrice della mostra al Maxxi. L’islamizzazione di Istanbul: ruspe nei quartiere popolari,” 10 Febbraio 2016: 5.

transformation” and replaced by wealthy pro-Erdoğan supporters.<sup>203</sup> The generation of Gezi park took a big step against the forceful Islamization of Turkey, and there remains hope that “l'opinione pubblica internazionale non smetta di guardare cosa sta avvenendo in Turchia,” or “international public opinion does not stop looking at what is happening in Turkey.”<sup>204</sup>

Sarkis' *Two Rainbows* is not only aesthetically pleasing neon, but also the idea that its light continues to shine on issues such as the ethnic cleansing of Turkey, even now, seven years after the exhibition. As the MAXXI continues its plan to acquire *Two Rainbows* into their permanent collection, it can serve as a beacon to Italians and inhabitants of Rome on this social and cultural battleground.

### ***Istanbul. Passione, Gioia, Furore: Archives***

The front cover of the exhibition catalog released with the exhibition is a graphic image created by artist Extrastruggle, or Extramücadele (Fig. 17). He designed all the graphics for the exhibition, including the elaborate titles of each section.<sup>205</sup> The curators chose a graphic designer who was politically involved, and even in the graphic identity of the exhibition, they sought out an artist who was very much interested in the Armenian question, identity, and politics, as suggested by one of his works from 2012 titled *1915 (Dedicated to all Armenians living in Turkey)* (Fig. 18).

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<sup>203</sup> Sforza, “Incontro con Ceren Erdem curatrice della mostra al Maxxi,” 5.

<sup>204</sup> Sforza, “Incontro con Ceren Erdem curatrice della mostra al Maxxi,” 6.

<sup>205</sup> More work by Extrastruggle, also known as Memed Erdener, can be found at their website: <http://www.extramucadele.com/en/>.





Figure 17. Extrastruggle or Extramücadele. Front cover of exhibition catalog for *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*, an exhibition at the MAXXI, part of the series *Interactions across the Mediterranean*.  
[https://www.maxxi.art/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/031205\\_Istanbul\\_booklet.pdf](https://www.maxxi.art/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/031205_Istanbul_booklet.pdf)

The image on the front cover includes black text against a bright red background meant to echo the *passion, joy, and fury* that Istanbul is experiencing. The text itself appears to actively be moving across the page and is interspersed with mechanical-esque lines and dots. These additions stretch away from the letters and often create connections between various letters. This signals urbanization, networks, and connections rather than a more rationalist and centralized spacial architecture.



Figure 18. Extrastruggle or Extramücadele, 1915 (*Dedicated to all Armenians living in Turkey*) 2012. Mixed media work. <http://www.extramucadele.com/en/isler/sculptures/1915>

In Istanbul, where the increasing gentrification of the city is an ever-present problem, progress and modernization parallel Westernization. With the intense urbanization of the city, hotels, shopping malls, and residential spaces for the wealthy, mass numbers of people are displaced, as well as increasing harm to the environment. Art historian Julia Ramirez calls Istanbul “a neoliberal idea of the city - the result of massive urbanization and social cuts applied by a conservative government.”<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Ramirez, “Mapping Gentrification and Urban Resistance in Istanbul.”

A particularly unique part of Istanbul is that half of the built environment was constructed illegally, most of it in response to mass immigration from the rural mountains in the 1940s. This is the ‘people’s architecture’ that Hou Hanru references, and could be the inspiration for the mechanical and fabricated lines and dots on the cover of the exhibition catalog. The forced urban expansion by the government and the subsequent response is displayed in material form in *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*, which represents both the city and what it needs.

The center of this image is a large serpentine-like figure that stretches from the top of the composition to the bottom, crossing through several of the words (Fig. 17). It acts as the letter *s* in *Istanbul*, the first letter *s* in *Passion*, and part of the letter *R* in *Fury*. This winding line begins with the head of an animal that evokes images of a snake with its forked tongue and ends with a curved tail. Perhaps it is meant to be a snake, a reptile that fights back, or is a caricature of the Bosphorus, a naturally occurring, narrow straight that bisects Istanbul and contributes to a significant portion of Turkish culture.

On the back cover of this press release is another image by artist Extrastruggle. The form is a speech bubble with “*Istanbul. Passione, Gioia, Furore*” inside (Fig. 19). The speech bubble is black, and the text inside is red, matching the red background. The point of the speech bubble points down to the bottom left corner of the page to where the name of the MAXXI is, suggesting that it is the MAXXI and its artists speaking on the *passion, joy, and fury* of Istanbul. The text itself is clearly meant to represent birds: nearly every single letter is shaped like a bird, complete with wings, feathers, beaks, and a black dot for the eye. The letter *o* in *Gioia* is even shaped like an egg.

These birds may be a reference to the general association of birds with freedom, or the lack thereof, a reasonable possibility given the oppressive government policies being

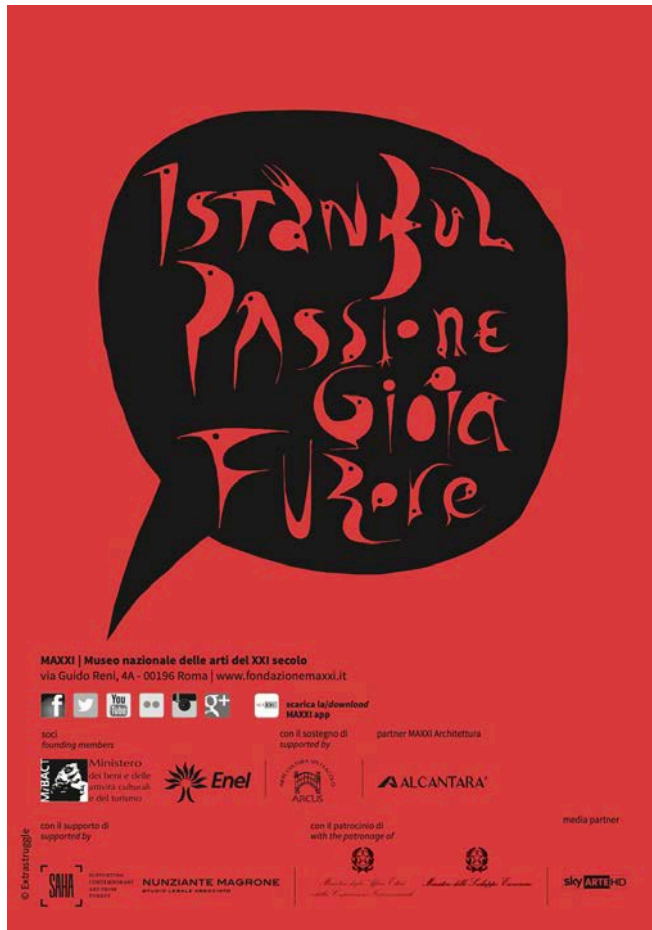


Figure 19. Extrastuggle or Extramücadele. Back cover of exhibition catalog for *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*, an exhibition at the MAXXI, part of the series *Interactions across the Mediterranean*. [https://www.maxxi.art/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/031205\\_Istanbul\\_booklet.pdf](https://www.maxxi.art/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/031205_Istanbul_booklet.pdf)

increasingly enforced against many minority groups in Turkey. The birds may be a reference to the illegal bird cafes in Istanbul, where men capture birds and hold them captive in cages, and encouraged them to sing increasingly mournful songs.<sup>207</sup> It is a dying, traditional practice that dates back to the Ottoman empire, once booming because of Anatolian peoples' love for birds. Today, many buildings left over from the Ottoman period are adorned with birdhouses on the

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<sup>207</sup> Karin Andreasson, "Locked out of heaven: inside the illegal birdsong cafes of Istanbul," *The Guardian*, 24 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/mar/24/photography-istanbul-bird-cafes-cemre-yesilmaria-sturm-for-birds-sake>.



Figure 20. Extrastruggle or Extramücadele. Title for exhibition section *Can We Fight Back?* where Sarkis' *Two Rainbows* was shown..

[https://www.maxxi.art/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/031205\\_Istanbul\\_booklet.pdf](https://www.maxxi.art/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/031205_Istanbul_booklet.pdf)

side of the facade that receive the most sun, with the best examples dating back to the so-called “Tulip Period” of the eighteenth century. Architect Cengiz Bektas says that birds are meaningful to their faith, as “humankind must be in balance with all creation,” sponsoring an integration between man, nature, and architecture.<sup>208</sup>

For the section *Can We Fight Back?*, where Sarkis' *Two Rainbows* was shown, the image of the title is in ornate cursive (Fig. 20). It appears to be one complete line as there is no break between any of the letters; the only additional lines are one that serves as the “dot” for the letter *i* and the “cross” on the letter *t*, as well as a “dot” to complete the question mark at the end of the title. The dynamic movement in this image, from the connected nature of the text to the

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<sup>208</sup> Melis Alemdar, “Ever notice birdhouses on Istanbul's buildings? They carry a lot of history,” TRT World, 10 June 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/ever-notice-birdhouses-on-istanbul-s-buildings-they-carry-a-lot-ofhistory-37156>.

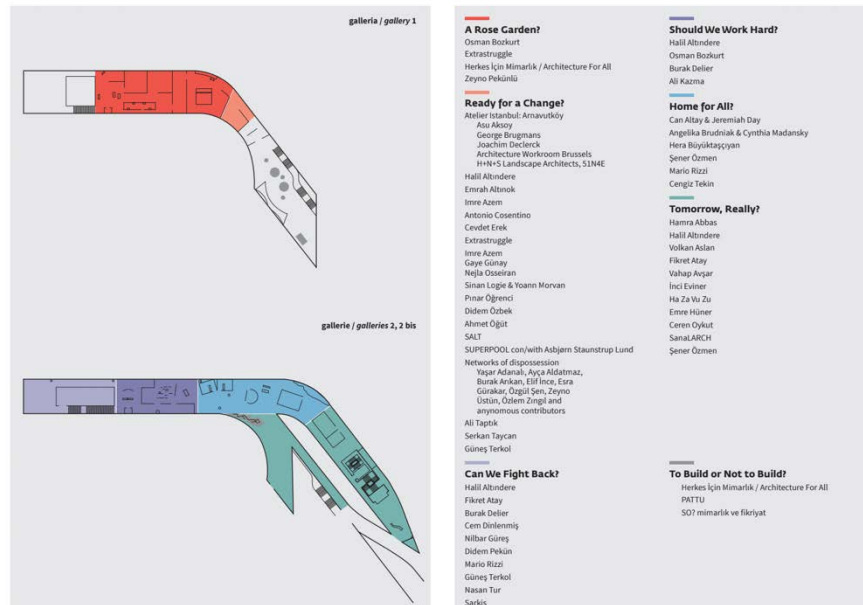


Figure 21. Floorplan of Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury in the MAXXI.  
[https://www.maxxi.art/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/031205\\_Istanbul\\_booklet.pdf](https://www.maxxi.art/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/031205_Istanbul_booklet.pdf)

swooping lines and wandering loops reflects the ever-changing nature of Istanbul, politically, socially, and culturally.

Based on the floorplan (Fig. 21 and 22), *Two Rainbows* appears to have been placed in a very strategic position, sitting at the back of the hall where the light could spread out and act as an invitation to visitors, who may be drawn into the room by the neon rays of light. Photos provided by the MAXXI Archives appear to suggest that there were indeed two rainbows, as in two neon rainbows, hence the title. One photo is taken from a position standing directly in front of the rainbow (Fig. 1) and the other is further away and at an angle to offer a view of the room (Fig. 23). The images behind each of the rainbows are different, however, leading to the suspicion that there were actually two rainbows, and the title of Sarkis' work is not a euphemism.<sup>209</sup> The images behind one rainbow (Fig. 1) are the notorious painted stairs in Istanbul

<sup>209</sup> Unfortunately, I was unable to confirm or deny this, as there are no photos showing both rainbows at the same time.

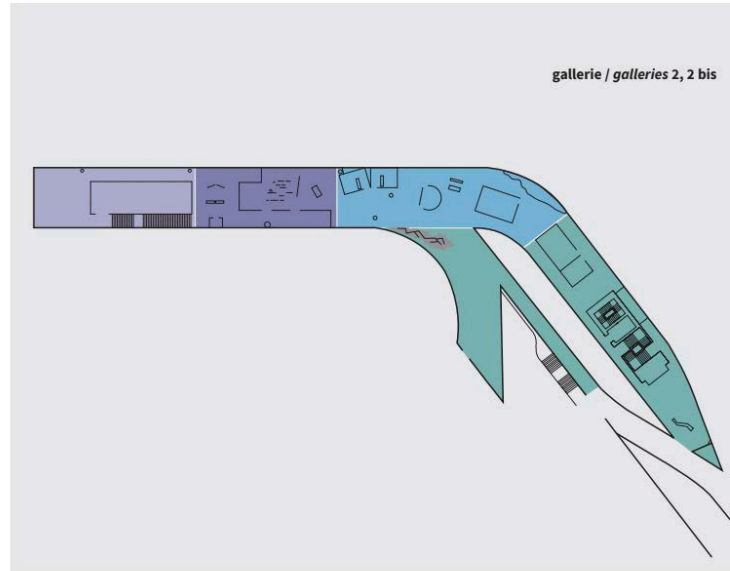


Figure 22. Close-up of floorplan detailing where the section *Can We Fight Back?* was shown [https://www.maxxi.art/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/031205\\_Istanbul\\_booklet.pdf](https://www.maxxi.art/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/031205_Istanbul_booklet.pdf)

(Fig. 6), while the image behind the other rainbow (Fig. 23) looks like an image of Sarkis' 2012 work *Ballads*, installed at the Boijmans Museum-Submarine Waff in Rotterdam, the Netherlands from 2 June 2012 till 30 September 2012 (Fig. 24).

Despite the mention of *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury*, in many different newspapers with either neutral or positive tone, there is still the sense that the debate on decolonizing Italian museums was not really opened, just starting the inkling of dialogue but lacking significant conscious efforts or the declaration that decolonization is relevant to today's society and the study of the art historical canon and requires further attention. This paramount series of exhibitions paved the way for non-Italian artists in Italy, but did not create, or did not allow for the creation of the conditions for discussing what is, in many other western countries, one of the current central issues, if not *the* central issue for cultural institutions.



Figure 23. Sarkis, *Two Rainbows*, 2015. Neon installation. Exhibited at *Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury* at the MAXXI Museum in Rome, Italy. Provided by MAXXI Archives with permission on 25 March 2022.

The MAXXI's counterpart in Rome's modern and contemporary art is the GNAM, the National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art. On 9 November 2021, the GNAM opened an exhibition called *decanonizing*, a continuation of the work that started in 2018 with the exhibition *I is an Other/Be the Other*, curated by Simon Njami. It begins with the *Canon* project by Spanish artist Mateo Maté and endeavors to focus on power dynamics and imbalances that allow for racism, focusing on subversive and resistance practices that highlight missing voices, experiences, and perspectives.

Decanonizing is an interesting word choice, both close to “decolonizing” in spelling and definition. This euphemism appears to try and start a conversation on the Eurocentric art





Figure 24. Sarkis, *Ballads*, 2012. Installation. Boijmans Museum-Submarine Waff in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. <https://www.sarkis.fr/2012-ballads/>

historical canon, hence the “decanonizing,” but mirrors the MAXXI in that it too falls short of starting a movement. Because of existing social and economic disparities, it is not by putting things on the same level that you are decolonizing or even decanonizing. Power gradients exist, and to be willfully blind to them leads to intentional exclusion.

Further, the argument can be made that decanonizing can be considered a subsection of decolonizing; it can stand on its own as a necessary alteration to museum culture, structure, and education, but decolonizing is a step beyond. The canon needs to be ruptured, but that alone is not enough to wipe away previous misgivings. In his 1983 article, American musicologist Joseph Kerman asked the increasingly relevant questions of “*How* are canons determined, *why* and on

*what authority?*”<sup>210</sup> These questions are a good starting point, both for decanonizing and decolonizing.

Decanonizing has the potential to unmask and unveil the inner mechanics of the art historical canon, but this requires facing some unsettling music. It could possibly include rejecting and reclassifying some artworks; this could lead to a flexible and elastic canon which is essentially a non-canon. This requires, in kind, that museums like the GNAM and the MAXXI who embark on decanonizing or decolonizing efforts, participate in the dismantling of the very hierarchical structures that produce canons in the first place.

Conversations must be had, but that is not enough. “Opening one canon to another canon is never a revolution,” it is just business as usual; there are symbolic, rather than intentional and in-depth investigations on how to open the canon in a more profound and sustainable manner.<sup>211</sup> Dancing around or euphemizing it in such a way has prepared the field for conversations of decolonization to happen, but it still remains at the dialogue level rather than a deliberate action, both at the MAXXI with their series *Interactions across the Mediterranean* and at the GNAM with *decanonizing*.

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<sup>210</sup> Joseph Kerman, “A Few Canonic Variations,” *Critical Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (September 1983): 124.

<sup>211</sup> Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, “The Globalized Museum? Decanonization as Method: A Reflection in Three Acts,” *Mousse Magazine*, 5 April 2017, <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/the-globalized-museum-bonaventure-soh-bejeng-ndikungdocumenta-14-2017/>.

## 6. Conclusions

My initial research questions are two separate but interconnected ideas. One questions why was Sarkis included in this exhibition, why did he choose to exhibit this particular work, and what are the museum officials, other decision-makers, and curators attempting to achieve for the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Italy? This was the foundation of my research and serves as the crux upon which my methodological approach is based. My second main research question asks what is their evaluation of the necessity and state of decolonizing the museum and art history in a specifically Italian context?

Though my findings do not appear to support the notion of Italian museums actively engaging in efforts to decolonize their museums and cultural institutions, the conversation has been started and can bear the weight of further examination. The MAXXI's exhibition series *Interactions across the Mediterranean* has been, and will continue to be, absolutely vital to questions and discussions concerning culture, oppressive governments, migration, and harmful stereotypes, but does not go so far as to deliberately involve conversations of decolonization. Italy, and by proxy, Italian museums, could still take steps further into acknowledging their past and remedying the present.

With this thesis, there are nearly infinite possible avenues for future research. One sadly unexplored but relevant component, excluded in the interest of space, is the exploration of the foundation of the modern museum in the West and how ideas such as the "other" and the exoticization of other cultures are both a product and foundation of colonial enterprise. Other potential avenues include how museums and nation-building are related to Italian Fascism in the

early twentieth century, identity politics, and the lack of accessibility in today's museums. Further research could and should be conducted on the 1915 Armenian Genocide and resulting diaspora, the militant oppression at the hands of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the current state of the gentrification and mass urbanization of Istanbul and the connection to Gezi Park in 2013.

Above all, there are innumerable related facets of decolonial studies that could not be explored in this thesis. First, how it is a product of previous scholars who paved the way with subaltern studies and postcolonialism; decolonization is a continuation of earlier research that is not yet finished itself. Second, further attention needs to be paid towards ideas of repatriation and restitution which satisfies the affected country. Finally, intersectionality as integral theory to support decolonization is paramount. There is no way to equate or compare the lived experiences of all people and cultures, “no simple parallelism or equidistance” that can be drawn between cultures with different historical pasts, as written by scholar Homi Bhabha.

In his critical review of *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration*, an exhibition at Washington D.C.'s National Gallery from 1991 to 1992, Bhabha wrote that rather than being treated as their own subject worthy of study, the remains of formerly great cultures subjected to colonial violence, much like the Inca or Aztec worlds, are treated as “the debris of the Culture of Discovery.”<sup>218</sup> With presentation, there must be distinctions made between works of art whose cultural pasts have experienced violent colonial destruction and domination, and works, typically European, that are regarded as antiquity, aging in a continuous way from courts to collectors, mansions, and museums.

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<sup>218</sup> Homi Bhabha, “Double Visions,” in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, 240.

In an impactful final sentence, Bhabha writes that without these distinctions, without recognizing colonial violence, “we can only be connoisseurs of the survival of Art, at the cost of becoming conspirators in the death of history.”<sup>219</sup> It is my greatest hope that art historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists alike will instill decolonization into their practices as a foundational perspective through which history and art should be viewed. To let art survive in a world of value judgements will induce the death of history, specifically, the death of histories of people already being forgotten. Decolonization is a methodological approach that will allow art and history to thrive together and must be applied to all educational fields.

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<sup>219</sup> Bhabha, “Double Visions,” 241.

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► 03 Gennaio 2016

# L'arte trasformata in furore dai "ragazzi" di Gezi Park

Una mostra da non perdere al Maxxi di Roma: 45 artisti operanti in Turchia espongono le loro opere "ribelli" nel segno della passione, della gioia e dell'impegno civile

Renato Barilli

**U**na mostra da non perdere è quella che si può ammirare al Maxxi di Roma: 45 artisti operanti a Istanbul, in Turchia, con un centinaio di opere, foto, installazioni, disegni, video, altri manufatti, da cui, intanto, l'edificio creato dall'architetta Zaha Hadid si dimostra valido ed efficiente, contro tutti i "gulf" che avevano inveito contro. Basta far accedere il pubblico da una scala interna, e subito si arriva allo spazioso primo piano che ospita la maggior parte dei lavori, condotti, una volta tanto il titolo è azzeccato, con "Passione, gioia, furore".

Verrebbe da dire che una mostra del genere rivela la maturità della nuova generazione di artisti turchi, il loro pieno diritto di entrare in Occidente, confermato del resto dalle Biennali di Istanbul felicemente operanti da anni, se non fosse che la tema dei valori espressa dal titolo è tutta rivolta a condannare il regime di Erdogan, e cioè proprio l'autorità che pretende di essere accolta in Europa.

#### Diritti e doveri

I giovani sono i protestatori di Gezi Park, e dunque li muove il furore indicato dal titolo, una carica di "impegno", ma per fortuna mai come in questo caso avviene una conciliazione tra la molla ideologica e la qualità delle opere, ovvero il furore, la passione dei combattenti si tramutano in gioia per gli occhi. In genere il tema dominante è la protesta contro una "città che cresce", ma in modi prevaricatori rispetto ai diritti dei residenti, con nessuna attenzione per gli emarginati. Esprime per esempio un sentimento del genere Ahmet Ogüth, che riproduce una cassetta attestata nel vuoto degli scavi, resistente al desiderio di fare grande. I nuovi fabbricati vengono visti come una schiera di formazioni ostili, come fantasmi o mostri alieni, tanto più che, in contrasto con questa volontà di fare nuovo, le strade che vi portano sono solcate da crepe micidiali

(Vahap Avsar, La strada per Arguvan). Magari per reagire contro un'invasione così ingiustificata ci starebbe bene innalzare una barriera di palloncini festosi e policromi. Oppure, se proprio si vuole edificare, meglio farlo riciclando vecchi materiali di scarto, come propone l'oriundo italiano Antonio Casentino.

#### Anima antica

Ma in definitiva molte di queste proposte tentano di conciliare una antica anima turca con le esigenze di un progresso che non sia schiacciante. È un buon simbolo di questo tentativo di sintesi la petroliera, modellino costruito da Volkan Aslan che non si svolge rettilineo ma si snoda in bracci e gomiti, per meglio passare tra gli stretti. Oppure Atil Altindere ci svela il trucco: la nobile arte dei tappeti persiani, ammettiamo, è ormai insostenibile, date le condizioni attuali di vita dedita ai consumi, e dunque meglio ricorrere a volgari contraffazioni, che però si devono distendere a coprire un'intera vallata per poter ricevere una preziosa quanto fallace patina del tempo. Oppure si rimanga fedeli alle tappezzerie, alle arti del ricamo, come fa Günes Terkol, ma la si pratichi in formati giganti, da gareggiare con muralismo e graffitismo.

L'intento della protesta aguzza l'ingegno, come ci dimostra Cevdet Ereğ, basta prendere gli sbarramenti, i tramezzi che la polizia oppone all'attacco dei dimostranti, e trattarli come se fossero elementi di una installazione minimalista, da accumulare tra loro, al modo dei bastoncini nel gioco "shangai".

Insomma, mutiamo il furore in gioia, come vuole il programma dell'intera esposizione. Oppure, visto che siamo in un mondo caduto in povertà, accontentiamoci di poco, come fa Firket Atay, che si limita a ruotare dei vecchi copertoni per la via, in sostituzione dell'auto che non riesce a procurarsi.

*Istanbul. Passione, gioia, furore a cura di H. Hanru, C. Erdem, E. Motisi, D. Saroli*

**Il tema è quello della "città"**

**che cresce" ma non lascia spazio ai deboli**





11 Dicembre 2015

# Da Istanbul al Maxxi con gioia e con furore

Si apre oggi al museo di Roma una mostra che racconta la città, i suoi cambiamenti, la politica, le rivolte e la nuova creatività

Stefania Scateni

«Istanbul fu Costantinopoli / ora è Istanbul, non Costantinopoli, / è una felicità turca / di una notte di luna», cantava allegramente il duo alternativ rock They Might Be Giants negli anni 90. Il fascino di questa antichissima città colpisce al cuore anche ai giocherelloni. E fa in namorare tutto il mondo, anche gli scrittori - ovviamente Orhan Pamuk che ci vive - ma anche gli stranieri, ad esempio l'inglese Jason Godwin, docente a Cambridge, che, per amore, ha scritto sei gialli ambientati nell'epoca del impero ottomano. In fondo Istanbul è una vecchissima signora che ha visto di tutto e di più, ed è non solo una musa, ma anche una vera e propria opera d'arte.

Forse pochi sanno che «negli ultimi dieci anni lo scenario dell'arte contemporanea di Istanbul ha vissuto un rapido sviluppo. La città viene ormai considerata uno dei centri più dinamici nel mondo dell'arte internazionale. Un gran numero di artisti, non soltanto turchi ma di varie nazionalità, vengono qui a produrre alcuni tra i loro lavori più interessanti e significativi, e al contempo diversi artisti di Istanbul lavorano ed espongono nei principali eventi e istituzioni artistiche mondiali», spiega il direttore artistico Hou Hanru.

Con *Istanbul. Passione, gioia, furore*, la mostra che si inaugura oggi al Museo Maxxi a Roma torniamo nel presente, alla politica interna, all'oggi della crisi geopolitica in corso e alla creatività del nostro tempo, che non scorda la politica dura e repressiva di Erdogan. E ancora, le trasformazioni

sociali, la tensione politica, i conflitti e le nuove dinamiche comunitarie, che hanno reso la città il simbolo di un cambiamento globale.

La prima tappa del percorso espositivo ci porta subito *in media res*: la rivolta a Gezi Park, che a Istanbul - e non solo a Istanbul - è diventata simbolo della resistenza della società civile contro la regressione della democrazia, in cui artisti e intellettuali hanno avuto un ruolo centrale. Le opere degli artisti e degli architetti di questa area raccontano le tracce e le riflessioni scaturite da quell'esperienza.

Sei le sezioni a tema, dove l'arte immagina e dialoga con la realtà culturale, sociale e urbana di Istanbul e pone molte domande: siamo pronti per un cambiamento? È giusto combattere? È davvero necessario lavorare così tanto? È possibile una convivenza pacifica tra i popoli? E soprattutto possiamo ancora sperare in un domani migliore? Quarantacinque tra artisti, architetti e intellettuali hanno risposto con il loro lavoro, e un centinaio di opere, costruendo una mappa di tutte le esperienze maturate nella città e grazie alla città.

Come usa il museo, la mostra si arricchisce con altri contenuti: il Maxxi propone la rassegna *La storia in movimento. Racconti del cinema turco dagli anni Sessanta ad oggi*, curata da Italo Spinelli: due appuntamenti, il 30 e il 31 gennaio, che attraverso film, cortometraggi e documentari ripercorrono la storia sociale, politica e culturale, e la continua trasformazione della Turchia contemporanea.

Curata da Hou Hanru con Ceren Erdem, Elena Motisi e Donatella Saroli, la rassegna prosegue fino al 30 aprile. Info su [www.fondazionemaxxi.it](http://www.fondazionemaxxi.it)

Con *Istanbul. Passione, gioia, furore*, il Maxxi prosegue e arricchisce uno dei progetti molto cari all'istituzione: fare rete con le realtà cultura-

li del Mediterraneo e dialogare con il Medio Oriente ed Europa. Iniziato nel 2014 con la mostra dedicata all'arte contemporanea dell'Iran, proseguirà nel 2017 con un progetto dedicato a Beirut.



# Istanbul

## Tra lotta e repressione la rivoluzione turca spiegata con l'arte

LEA MATTARELLA

**S**e state pensando a Istanbul di Orhan Pamuk, a quella bella e struggente malinconia da tramonto sul Bosforo, a una città in cui si passa, e si guarda la vita da uno stesso palazzo, toglieteviela dalla testa. Entrare al **Maxxi** significa trovarsi in un luogo in cui tutto si trasforma in maniera frenetica, senza sosta, rifiutando ogni tipo di ordine. L'intento dichiarato dai curatori della mostra *Istanbul. Passione, Gioia, Furor*, Hou Hanru, Ceren Erdem, Elena Motisi e Donatella Saroli era quello di portare il visitatore all'interno del pulsare incessante di una megalopoli. E indubbiamente ci sono riusciti. Fino al 30 aprile, più di 100 opere di 45 tra artisti e architetti conducono in un'autentica e imprevedibile immersione in immagini, movimento, parole, musica, odori, spazi da abitare e da spiare, oggetti con cui interagire, progetti realizzati, sognati oppure distrutti e contrastati, suoni. Di alcuni di questi, come l'assordante sirena che strilla senza darti tregua al primo piano, se ne sarebbe volentieri fatto a meno. Ma è la metropoli, bellezza. E per raccontarla l'esposizione sceglie una divisione in sezioni che terminano sempre con un punto di domanda: Un giardino di rose? Pronti per il cambiamento? Possiamo combattere? Dobbiamo lavorare sodo? Domani davvero? E allora, benvenuti in un universo colorato, rumoroso, vitale e pieno di interrogativi. Per visitarlo prendetevi molto tempo. Ci sono film che durano a lungo e video che raccontano storie impossibili da lasciare a metà. Come la narrazione di Zeyno Pekinli che racconta i fatti di Gezi Park visti dalla parte dei manifestanti, attraverso parole chiave di cui ti sembra

quasi di scoprire il contenuto per la prima volta: attesa, vittoria, paura... Ed ecco la protesta che prende corpo rivelando la passione, i ruoli, le domande, la quotidianità, il rischio di chi l'ha vissuta in prima persona. Sappiamo che tutto è nato perché Erdogan e il suo governo volevano modificare l'assetto di Piazza Taksim con la costruzione di un grande centro commerciale in stile ottomano. Appena giunti i pericolosamente incerto tra Oriente e Occidente, tra islamizzazione e modernizzazione, tra crescita e sviluppo selvaggio, con la difficoltà di dover gestire anche la recente immigrazione siriana. Molti lavori raccontano la difficoltà di chi è costretto a lasciare la casa, il proprio quartiere per trasformazioni edilizie che espellono i ceti meno abbienti, costringendoli a veri e propri esodi da una parte all'altra della città. Di questo parlano i corti di Nejla Osseiran che inquadrano le conseguenze delle trasformazioni di due quartieri storici come Sulukule e Tokluded che hanno visto la migrazione dei vecchi abitanti in zone lontane anche 40 chilometri. Guardi le loro facce, le vecchie baracche che li ospitavano e senti sulla pelle il significato di ogni sradicamento. Anche il video di Halil Altinder si concentra su Sulukule, dove da sei secoli abitava la comunità Rom, e a ritmo hip hop, ci pone di fronte alla rabbia dei giovani delle periferie che, anche con le manette ai polsi o i proiettili della polizia in corpo, si ostinano a cantare la loro collera. Ahmet Ögüt con le sue sculture tiene in mano la bandiera di chi resiste, realizzando modellini delle *naal houses*, abitazioni che i cittadini si rifiutano di abbandonare e che rimangono come piccole isole di opposizione

**Al Maxxi di Roma**

### un percorso sul presente del Paese

buldozer e abbattuti i primi alberi, i cittadini hanno cercato di impedire quello che consideravano un inutile scempio del verde, riunendosi in un raduno pacifico che finirà per durare interi giorni, diventando il motore di un dissenso capace di contagiare il paese. Com'è finita lo sappiamo. Gezi Park è la Tiananmen turca. Cose che succedono in paesi in cui le manifestazioni del disaccordo sono bollate come episodi di terrorismo per giustificare la violenza della loro repressione.

Da lì, da quegli episodi del 2013, prende l'avvio la mostra, privilegiando opere realizzate negli ultimi anni che parlano di rivolta. O rivelano sogni e contraddizioni di una metropoli che si muove in un equilibrio a volte circondate da lavori in corso. Lo scrittore Aravind Adiga ha raccontato in un romanzo, *L'ultimo uomo della torre*, la caparbia di chi non se ne vuole andare. È un grande plastico, ma tutto di latta, il lavoro che Antonio Cozzolino ha creato con i recipienti di olio, vino, carburante.

Tra queste sale si parla anche di condizione femminile, di diritti negati, ma anche di chiacchiere e confidenze che liberano e aprono la mente. Lo fanno le fotografie di Nilbar Güres attente a restituire l'atmosfera di riunioni di migranti in rosa, o i suoi foulard annodati a creare quella che appare una percorribile anche se pericolosa via di fuga. Anche Günes Terkol, nata nel 1981, dichiara la sua volontà di emancipazione a colpi di stoffa: con questa tesse, insieme a compagne di avventura e attiviste femministe, colorate storie di battaglie di piazza in striscioni con figure femminili che sventolano bandiere. Esi serve del ricamo per raccontare ciò che appar-

tiene invece al lato intimo e quotidiano delle donne. Illumina la scena l'arcobaleno di Sarkis, allestito davanti alle foto delle scale di Istanbul colorate dai manifestanti con le tinte delle battaglie omosessuali (oggi distrutte, come documenta Mario Rizzi in mostra). Non lontano ecco la fusione di tre pezzi di piombo di Sener Özmen, dedicati al Medio Oriente, al mondo e alla lingua curda, quella del suo popolo, che sembrano essere vittime del malocchio. Non vi perdetevi i lavori di Extrastuggle: qui, tra neve e animazione, la rivolta si fa poesia.



02 Gennaio 2016

# Il corpo ibrido di Istanbul

La grande mostra al Maxxi di Roma dedicata agli artisti turchi tenta di rispondere ad alcune domande: «Siamo pronti al cambiamento? È giusto combattere? Possiamo sperare in un futuro migliore?»

Teresa Macri

**P**otente e coraggiosa, la mostra *Istanbul. Passione, gioia, furore* ha ridato pregnanza al Museo Maxxi di Roma (visibile fino al 30 aprile prossimo). Artefice di cotanta arditaggine intellettuale è il curatore Hou Hanru e la sua lucida visione del presente.

La rassegna da lui curata, insieme a Ceren Erdem, Elena Motisi e Donatella Soroli, è una sorta di attestato dello scontro socio-politico in atto, traslato in opere pulsanti da artisti che hanno un forte contatto con l'urbanità, con il disagio economico-culturale e con la conflittualità subliminale che la società turca, soffocata dalla politica reazionaria di Erdogan, ha accentuato negli ultimi anni.

Istanbul non è una metropoli come le altre: veloce e caotica come il suo traffico infernale è un miscuglio di comunità e di stili architettonici, di lingue e di orizzonti, di conflitti e di aspirazioni. Per molti versi, la mostra richiama in causa le due passate edizioni della Istanbul Biennial: la decima, *Not Only Possible But Also Necessary: Optimism in This Age of Global War*, curata dallo stesso Hou Hanru nel 2007 e la nona edizione, *Istanbul*, curata da Vasif Kortun e Charles Esche nel 2005. Quest'ultima, una biennale osmotica, coraggiosa, anti-mainstream e affatto compiacente. Sia l'esposizione del 2005 che quest'ultima al **Maxxi** rimandano alla scoperta della città nella sua distrofia, tra una memoria schiacciante e una modernità accelerata, sfidando quello stereotipo che l'industria mediatica tenta di congelare in una palla di vetro, quasi come un souvenir. Quella stereotipia che la disbriga, *ex-abrupto*, in moschee, lokum e danza del ventre. Oblivando o ignorando la sua storia dura e contraddittoria, cadenzata da conquiste civili e assurdi massacri delle minoranze, da diaspore continue e da galoppanti inflazioni economiche, dall'intrico tra azeri, armeni, curdi, ebrei, russi, da Atatürk e Erdogan.

**Dopo Gezi Park**

Bisogna, inoltre, tener conto anche del fatto che l'arte contempo-

anea turca ha visibilmente scavalcato, negli ultimi decenni - per compattezza, potenza espressiva e aggregazione sistemica - il resto dei paesi europei. Basterebbe elencare le edizioni indimenticabili delle varie Biennali di Istanbul degli anni passati, distribuite nei luoghi più visionari della metropoli, i site specific estasiati nei budelli sconosciuti (alla massa di turisti); le nuove gallerie aperte, gli spazi pubblici temporanei e permanenti che hanno ridato un volto contemporaneo a una città imprigionata nella sua memoria.

In ultimo e non da poco, va segnalata l'importanza geopolitica che la Turchia rappresenta, specialmente in questo momento, nello scacchiere internazionale grazie anche alla ambigua politica del suo presidente.

L'incipit di *Istanbul. Passione, gioia, furore* è la protesta di Gezi Park (il giardino affacciato su Piazza Taksim, cuore politico cittadino fin dai tempi di Atatürk) del 2013, il cui bilancio fu di nove morti e oltre 8.163 feriti. E chi non ricorda la mobilitazione sociale capillare di quei giorni, il sostegno internazionale a distanza che attraverso i social si era diffuso in tutta Europa, i messaggi e le immagini che artisti, registi e intellettuali inviavano al mondo intero contro l'arroganza militare schierata da Erdogan?

Da qui il percorso espositivo si sviluppa sul processo di espansione e trasformazione metropolitana, sull'evoluzione della gentrificazione e speculazione edilizia, sui dispositivi di inclusione/esclusione comunitarie, sulle problematiche di identità culturale che fanno di Istanbul un fascinoso giocattolo in ibridazione e un luogo abitato da continue contraddizioni. Elettronica e melodia tradizionale, grattacieli di ghiaccio e minareti, shopping center e bazar, madrase e modernissime università, short e foulard neri si mischiano nella contraddizione esacerbante di un presente rivolto essenzialmente al «new post-islamic power».

I sei capitoli progressivi su cui è architettata la mostra, visivamente scansionata dalla grafica di Ex-

trastruggle, tentano di rispondere e riflettere su interrogativi essenziali (Siamo pronti al cambiamento? È giusto combattere? È davvero necessario lavorare così tanto? È possibile una convivenza pacifica tra i popoli? Possiamo sperare in un futuro migliore?). All'interno del perimetro disegnato da queste domande, si staglia una rassegna vasta e multisensoriale in cui architettura, arte, cinema (nei prossimi mesi), riarrecano quel processo paradossale di modernità che si schianta sulle nuove metropoli abbruttendone contenuti e vivibilità.

**La calligrafia della resistenza**

Il percorso di indagine dei quarantacinque artisti e architetti è ricucito dai lavori taglienti e ammaliati di Halil Altindere, mirabile artista turco di Mardin, da sempre concentrato sui problemi di marginalizzazione e sulle strutture di repressione dello stato turco. Le sue opere, politiche-poetiche, ammantate di visibile ironia scandiscono le sezioni della mostra al **Maxxi**, riassumendo tutte le sfaccettature. Le sue perturbanti sculture (quasi un richiamo al grande Duane Hanson) dislocano nelle varie sale, restituiscono in filigrana la moderna società turca. Nondimeno è lo strepitoso *Wonderland* (2013), un video musicale sul gruppo rapper Tahribad-i Isyan (*Rebellion to Destruction*) che solidifica l'attenzione intorno ai problemi di alienazione generazionale.

Ziz-zagando tra le sezioni, il film d'animazione *Rose Garden with the Epilogue* degli Extrastruggle introduce alle manifestazioni antiliberaliste del 2013 e alla risposta autoritaria del governo. Il suo stile metaforico sintetizza e magnetizza un avvenimento che sarà il collante di tutta l'esposizione.

Alla nuova ventata di politica liberista e alla domanda: «Dobbiamo davvero lavorare così tanto?», l'artista Ali Kazma contrappone il video *Resistance - Calligraphy* del 2013 e *The Butcher* del 2009 che interagiscono fra corpo umano e controllo sociale, ma che unificano lavori molto diversi tra loro, come quello del calligrafo e del maccellaio, o di Burak Delier che, in





► 30 Gennaio 2016

## ROMA Quarantacinque artisti raccontano passioni, gioie e furori di Istanbul

Al **Maxxi** installazioni, foto, performance e film dalla capitale turca

ELENA DEL DRAGO  
ROMA

«**F**orse amiamo il posto in cui viviamo perché non abbiamo altra soluzione, come in famiglia. Ma dobbiamo scoprire dove e perché amarlo»: possiamo probabilmente prendere questa citazione dello scrittore Öhran Pamuk, dedicata a Istanbul, come guida per adentrarci nei sentieri della mostra che il **Maxxi** dedica alla capitale turca. «Istanbul. Passione, gioia, furor», infatti, seconda tappa del progetto dedicato alle realtà culturali del Mediterraneo dal museo romano, racconta molte cose, ma più di ogni altra l'amore, difficile e contrastato, per la propria città da parte di diverse generazioni di artisti e di cittadini. E nessuno meglio di Pamuk ha saputo esprimere l'essenza di una metropoli che è la perfetta metafora di tutti i mutamenti, più o meno drammatici, che sta sperimentando la nostra società.

Come d'altronde raccontare i suoi abitanti, alle prese con domande che riguardano tutti noi, con maggiore o minore forza, a proposito del nostro futuro e della possibilità di rimanere se stessi guardando anche verso altre culture. Curata da Hou Hanru, Ceren Erdem, Elena Motisi e Donatella Saroli, l'esposizione è allo stesso tempo, il ritratto di una città e lo specchio di molte altre metropoli occidentali attraversate da cambiamenti sociali e geopolitici che non è più possibile ignorare. A Istanbul, però, da sempre sospesa tra Oriente e Occidente, tutto, anche questo processo, avviene con più forza e i 45 artisti selezionati ci restituiscono con suoni, immagini, fotografie, colori, installazioni e arazzi proprio quel caleidoscopio di sentimenti contrastanti costretti a convivere sul Bosforo.

Tutto comincia con le proteste di Gezi Park del maggio 2013, che vedono dopo tanti

anni, le giovani generazioni in prima fila per difendere la propria città, aggredita da uno sviluppo urbano senza precedenti.

Una protesta iniziata in sordina e poi cresciuta parallelamente alla violenza della repressione, giorni e giorni in cui il numero dei manifestanti aumenta e si organizza una sorta di cittadella politica, con tanto di centro medico e libreria. Tra loro ci sono anche diversi artisti che portano ora quel sentimento di partecipazione all'interno del **Maxxi**. Alcune opere cercano di concentrarsi sull'aspetto più riflessivo, come il film di animazione *Rose Garden with the epilogue* di Extrastuggle, cominciato prima delle proteste e capace di una narrazione di rara potenza simbolica attorno a temi urgenti come il fondamentalismo religioso in una società capitalistica. Altri lavori puntano invece sull'emotività, come il racconto di Zeyno Pekünlü che cerca di raccontare come un moderno aedo chiamato non nei Paesi, ma nelle sale dei musei, sentimenti come la fiducia nell'altro: facili a perdersi eppure unica strategia in momenti di tensione, quando si dipende necessariamente dal comportamento degli altri. Il suo è un racconto che sembra voler creare uno spazio dove sia possibile considerare anche le implicazioni emotive dell'azione politica, e forse il mondo dell'arte è il posto più adatto.

E invece la violenta trasformazione urbana tout court al centro di un'apposita sezione chiamata *Ready for a change?*, con il progetto di mappatura opera degli architetti Superpol, o il video ipnotico di Hall Altindere che ci porta a ritmo rap per le strade periferiche della città. Ci sono poi lavori come quello di Volkan Alslan che si affidano alla forma di una barca per raccontare le idiosincrasie e le passioni per la sua città, mentre è attraverso il sapone che Hera Büyüktaçyan evoca la possibilità di

una convivenza pacifica tra popoli e culture differenti. Artista di origine greca armena proprio attraverso la produzione e l'esposizione di un sapone utilizzato da sempre negli hammam ricorda infatti la propria infanzia e tenta di immaginare un futuro comune. *Tomorrow, really?* è la sezione che invita a riflettere all'avvenire di Istanbul e insieme della società occidentale. Il punto interrogativo del titolo contiene tutta l'incertezza per un futuro che si fatica ad immaginare dalla prospettiva di una città antichissima e piena di contraddizioni. Ci provano gli artisti che mettono in campo i propri strumenti: il collettivo Ha Za Vu Za con la performance oppure Ceren Oykut con i suoi disegni che si espandono a formare un'installazione appositamente pensata per il museo. Ma è forse Sarkis, che ha rappresentato la Turchia alla scorsa Biennale di Venezia, ed è il più autorevole tra gli artisti in mostra, ad esprimere al meglio il sentimento del possibile. La sua è un'installazione che lascia immaginare un arcobaleno di luce colorata e sembra indicare proprio l'arrivo della speranza quando nulla sembra poter cambiare.

**ISTANBUL. PASSIONE, GIOIA, FUROR**  
ROMA, **MAXXI**  
VIA GUIDO RENZI 4  
FINO AL 30 APRILE



13 Dicembre 2015

## Istanbul, tutti i colori del furore e della passione al **Maxxi**

### L'ESPOSIZIONE

Inafferrabile. È la metropoli più liquida della società liquida. Istanbul non dà risposte. Pone domande. Come l'arte (lo pensava Kraus). Perché questo è il motore della creatività, che sulle sponde del Bosforo si esprime in un turbine di mutamenti, idee, sperimentazioni, rivolte, speranze. E così accende mille fuochi "Istanbul. Passione, gioia, furore", la grande mostra curata da Hou Hanru, Cerem Erdem, Elena Motisi e Donatella Saroli che il **Maxxi** dedica alla città che più di tutte riassume le sfide epocali poste dal Terzo Millennio al Villaggio Globale. Negli spazi fluidi creati da Hadid che rispecchiano con stimolante fedeltà l'enigmatico caos vitale della contemporaneità (che morirebbe nelle sale scatolari dei musei-palazzo dei tempi andati...) si resta catturati dal ritmo impetuoso delle opere di 45 artisti, architetti, intellettuali espresse in una pluralità di linguaggi (installazioni, sculture, dipinti, foto, video) sottolineato felicemente dall'allestimento di Dolores Lettieri.

### LE SEZIONI

In sei sezioni, le passioni, la gioia, il furore di Istanbul scandiscono tutti i temi del presente-futuro: l'aspirazione europea, la tradizione orientale, le lotte democratiche, la frenetica urbanizzazione, il dramma dei rifugiati, la coesistenza multietnica, i nuovi modelli di produzione, l'orizzonte religioso. Dice Giovanna Melandri, presidente del **Maxxi**, ricordando che la Turchia confina con otto nazioni e Istanbul è lo storico crocevia tra cristianità e islam: «I riflessi del Bosforo tornano a essere la tavolozza da cui trarre i colori necessari per dipingere le contraddizioni dell'attualità mondiale». Le fa eco Hou Hanru, direttore artistico del museo: «La mostra sviluppa il nostro progetto di ricerca sull'arte contemporanea nel Medio Oriente avviato lo scorso anno con quella sulla cultura visuale iraniana, che proseguirà nel 2017 con un'altra grande esposizione dedicata a Beirut. I mutamenti che avvengono in quei paesi coinvolgono noi europei e influenzeranno il nostro futuro». Splendida icona dell'intera mostra è "Two Rainbows" di Sarkin, l'artista che ha rappresentato la Turchia all'ultima Biennale veneziana. Due arcobaleni al neon attraversano le magnifiche gigantografie della scala colorata di Istanbul (che purtroppo non c'è più) fa-

cendo rivivere lo spirito di Gezi Park, il movimento di protesta del 2013 quando gruppi sociali eterogenei, spesso in contrasto, trovarono un'entusiasmante alleanza per lottare contro la soppressione del parco.

Denunce, testimonianze, proposte si susseguono senza posa. Le immagini di Taycan, il video del gruppo di architetti Superpool, le installazioni di Patru e di Architecture for All documentano l'impetuoso avanzamento della modernizzazione edilizia al fianco delle baraccopolis sorte nei precedenti decenni. Gli arazzi femmininisti di Gunes Terkol... A Istanbul il laboratorio continua.

► **Maxxi**, via G. Reni 4

**Massimo Di Forti**



Hali Altindere, "Carpetland"



## Incontro con Ceren Erdem curatrice della mostra al **Maxxi** L'islamizzazione di Istanbul: ruspe nei quartieri popolari

**Francesca Sforza**

Una città-laboratorio di 14 milioni di abitanti, che ha visto migrazioni di massa dalle campagne negli anni Quaranta, che è stata assalita dalla speculazione edilizia nei vent'anni successivi e che con Erdogan sindaco, dal 1994 al 1998, è diventata la messa in opera di un'utopia politica.

Istanbul, capitale della Turchia, doveva essere il luogo della magnificenza del XXI secolo, il motore della ripresa economica che avrebbe trascinato tutto il Paese fuori dall'arretratezza, grazie a un misto di vecchie ricette keynesiane e nuove spinte moderniste. Il risultato? Per i 40 artisti e creativi contemporanei che l'hanno raccontata al **Maxxi** di Roma, Istanbul è davvero - come dice il titolo dell'esposizione - "Passione, gioia, furore", luogo di scontro tra il disegno politico di Toki - l'autorità governativa che decreta i mutamenti urbanistici e decide gli investimenti - e la resistenza attiva della comunità cittadina.

Tutto il mondo ha assistito alla difesa di Gezi Park, ma in pochi sanno, ad esempio, che il quartiere di Sulukule, abitato dalla comunità Rom, è stato raso al suolo per farne case residenziali, senza che nessuno si preoccupasse di sistemare altrove chi ci abitava. «Un arcobaleno spezzato, questa è l'immagine che ho pensato per Istanbul», ci ha detto Sarkis, uno dei maggiori artisti contemporanei turchi, nell'illustrare l'opera esposta al **Maxxi**, che però chiamato a rispondere dei rapporti tra urbanistica e democrazia fa un passo indietro, mostrando quella riluttanza che tanti artisti hanno nei confronti del "parlare di politica". Per questo ci siamo rivolti a Ceren Erdem, la curatrice della mostra, che ha scelto gli artisti con gli occhi di un'attivista, e che è consapevole di aver dato luogo a una mostra d'arte che è anche, soprattutto, un gesto politico.

**Quando Erdogan lanciò il suo progetto di ricostruzione e rinnovamento di Istanbul, voleva in primo luogo rilanciare l'economia. Ha funzionato? Con quali conseguenze?**

«L'intenzione non era tanto rinnovare la città, quanto approvare tutte le politiche e i programmi dell'Alp. Ricostruire Istanbul non era una necessità, e chi ci vive sa che non ci sono stati miglioramenti, né nei servizi, né nelle infrastrutture. La ricostruzione di Istanbul voluta da Erdogan è semplicemente a scopo di lucro, e se l'economia turca ne ha beneficiato è stato solo in un senso cosmetico, visto che gli investimenti più importanti sono stati in partnership con imprese di costruzione basate nel Golfo. Ci sono state privatizzazioni massicce e discutibili, e non si contano i permessi di costruzione concessi per le aree verdi; mega-progetti per il nuovo aeroporto (il terzo a Istanbul) e il terzo ponte sul Bosforo sono letteralmente un pugnale nel cuore della città. Rovineranno l'ecologia di Istanbul e con il "Progetto Canal Istanbul" sarà compromessa anche l'intera regione del Mar Nero e Mar di Marmara».

**C'è una relazione molto stretta tra pianificazione urbanistica e politiche sociali. Come è stata gestita secondo lei nel caso di Istanbul?**

«Sì, c'è, come dimostra la "pulizia sociale" nei quartieri di Sulukule e Tarlabasi, che erano tradizionalmente abitati da fasce a basso reddito e di diverse etnie. Il risultato della "riqualificazione" è stato che Rom, curdi, migranti nazionali e internazionali, travestiti e molti altri sono stati buttati fuori dalle loro case nel nome della "trasformazione urbana", privati oltretutto del diritto di avere un nuovo appartamento nei nuovi blocchi residenziali. Inoltre, la segregazione attraverso la pianificazione urbana crea comunità che non hanno alcuna quotidianità sociale, né interazione culturale. Per far spazio a chi? A facoltosi turisti arabi provenienti dal Golfo, che poi diventano proprietari di condomini nelle zone più attraenti di Istanbul. In un certo senso i nuovi abitanti musulmani arabi si