

Melik Ohanian: Atlanta College of Art Gallery - Atlanta

Philip Auslander

It all started promisingly enough. While surfing the Web, Armenian-French artist Melik Ohanian discovered someone with the same name as his living on Long Island. This reminded him of a family story, typical of the Armenian diaspora: After the Turkish genocide of 1915, family members of his grandparents' generation traveled in three different directions: to the United States, to France, and to Argentina. Unable to find evidence of a Melik Ohanian in Buenos Aires, Ohanian imagined collaborating with his American namesake on an art project for which the two of them could work together to fabricate an Argentine Melik Ohanian, thus filling in the third, missing branch of the family. The show that would result, to be called "You're mY DestinY," would involve elaborate sculptural and video installations tracing this quasi-genealogical process and its results.

But the show on view was not that show. The primary component of the exhibition was a text, Ohanian's diary for March 2003, displayed on eleven light boxes. Reading this, the visitor learned why the show the artist originally conceived did not come to fruition. Though he did experience a series of setbacks--including a tragicomic failure to establish contact with his Long Island namesake--it was the US war on Iraq that led him to abandon the project altogether. As global tensions mounted, Ohanian found it increasingly difficult to continue his work and experienced a crisis of political conscience. "I can't write anymore," he declares in an entry from March 19. "The project is on standby.... How can I insert/integrate/ inject into the project what is happening over there right now?... What is my responsibility?" Ultimately, Ohanian decides that he cannot travel to Atlanta to work on, install, or speak about his show, and arranges to "direct the exhibition hands-off from Paris."

Ohanian wants his physical absence to express his opposition to the war. It is, he contends, "a political stance--[it] is not a boycott but something that derives from the project itself." Ohanian's decision to offer his explanatory text as the installation is the result of his conclusion that it was his responsibility as an artist to allow his negative feelings about the developing geopolitical situation to shape his work, to let the work reflect his experience and position in a direct and spontaneous way. He goes on to say that "the western artistic and intellectual sphere ... needs to distrust a certain conceptual sophistication."

Ohanian's revised installation did include video shot for the earlier version: Three video monitors showed footage from New York, Paris, and Buenos Aires (Ohanian intended to use this to evoke the imagined lives of diasporic Armenians). What we heard, however, was media coverage, in English, Spanish, and French, of the Iraq war: the very news that brought Ohanian's project to a halt.

I cannot fault Ohanian for allowing global conflict to cause him to doubt the relevance of the project he had conceived or for making the question of the artist's political responsibility his subject, but I am troubled by some of his tactics. For one thing, his professed rejection of a "certain conceptual sophistication" seems disingenuous. He wants his audience to accept that he had the right to make a spontaneous and radical change of plan and that doing so is an artistic statement in itself. Yet this depends more on a "conceptually sophisticated" audience than if he had simply declared his opposition to the war on Iraq and refused to exhibit altogether. Similarly, Ohanian's decision to absent himself and "direct the exhibition hands-off" from afar reads to me as a refusal to engage in dialogue. The darkened gallery space invited us to immerse ourselves in his narrative, displayed on the glowing light boxes. But there was no indication that the artist was interested in any story other than his own. In light of Ohanian's meditation on "how completely exploded the whole collective idea now is," such solipsism is truly unfortunate.

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