

INTERVIEW:

**Kurt Vanbelleghem:** Several of your works are based on highly personal references in which your position as an immigrant clearly plays a central role. How did you actually land up in Belgium?

**Mekhitar Garabedian:** My father was born in Haleb in Syria and my mother in Beirut in Lebanon. They grew up in the Armenian communities of Haleb and Beirut. The suburb of Bourj Hammoud in Beirut is also known as Little Armenia. My grandparents emigrated to both countries respectively in 1915 when they fled the Turkish atrocities. Throughout the Middle East you see Armenian communities living with their language and their religion in the midst of various Muslim communities. Through the civil war in Lebanon and the resulting instability in the Middle East, my parents finally emigrated to Europe and they found themselves in Belgium more by chance than anything else.

**Kurt Vanbelleghem:** Armenian history and culture still have a huge impact on your lives even though you are separated from it by two generations.

**Mekhitar Garabedian:** I was brought up according to the Armenian orthodox tradition of my parents. ...Armenians, and you see this all over the world, are very conscious of the possibility of disappearance of their own people, their history, language, culture, etc. This feeling is strengthened further by the fact that the world seems to have forgotten our history. Armenians instil this as it were in their children. "You must not forget this. This is what happened. This is your language. This is our history."

**Kurt Vanbelleghem:** Of course in Belgium you encounter quite a different system, with other customs and a language not your own. You went to school here. What impact did these two worlds have on your education and your personality?

**Mekhitar Garabedian:** Well, it already starts with your name; it is pronounced differently in the two worlds. When you are growing up you adapt; you don't create another personality but you become divided, as it were. There is a constant movement back and forth.

**Kurt Vanbelleghem:** This duality also plays a central role in your artistic activities.

**Mekhitar Garabedian:** You find the most direct translation of this back and forth movement in the work entitled MG. I stand in front of a mirror and pronounce my name alternately in Armenian and Dutch. I look at myself and constantly move from one context to the other. A name acts as a signifier, it contains who you are for other people, it represents your identity.

**Kurt Vanbelleghem:** You base your own interpretation of the concept of identity on a highly personal situation. You refer to your own family history and you also use this explicitly.

**Mekhitar Garabedian:** In the M.Verdoncklaan video I show someone looking at family photos, but these family photos function on a more abstract level. Everyone has a pile of these family photos lying somewhere at home, but it is about what is missing when you watch how someone looks through a pack of photos like these. These photos show a history, our history, but if you look at the images you see nothing of the history we have experienced. You don't see the ruins of buildings in Beirut even though they are there and we lived there. What interests me is precisely what has disappeared and how you show that something is disappearing. When watching this video one is constantly wondering whether we can learn anything from it, what we can find out about this family, but in fact...

**Kurt Vanbelleghem:** The 'Beirut/Beyrouth 1963' video has a similar starting point.

**Mekhitar Garabedian:** In this video I literally show the disappearing. The image, a very traditional family portrait which appears in its original, crumpled state and becomes an image in perfect condition, that is technically speaking contemporary. I then show what can no longer be seen. What also interests me in this process is how memory works, the way memory grows analytically, but its deterioration occurs erratically and does not appear to be subject to any rules.

**Kurt Vanbelleghem:** Several of the works you have made so far are self-referential. Though one is not immediately aware of this, as in the series of photographs entitled 'Happy when it rains'. Do these photos reflect your own position?

**Mekhitar Garabedian:** They act as self-portraits. They are about a feeling of not belonging anywhere, or of being somewhere in between, between two different positions. Being unable to take root, to flourish. Even though you learn to speak the new language perfectly and you master it, even though you do not hear a single melody to remind you of your origins, you are constantly reminded that you are different. Every time I introduce myself, 'I am Mekhitar Garabedian', I also continue to belong to this other world. This experience is both positive and negative. Consequently, my Armenian origins will certainly continue to be a starting point, but not just defined by a context of migration. It is also about realising that you are – as a second or in fact as a third generation migrant, if you look at it from an Armenian perspective – responsible for the disappearance of a history, a culture and a language. How does one deal with this fact? This is something I often translate into my work. I feel like a vampire looking in a mirror, and there is no reflection, you see nothing, and yet you are there, you are looking into the mirror. The video work entitled Learning Piece: Be patient, my soul shows this double attitude inherent in my own position. On the one hand it is a retake of an earlier performance by the American artist Vito Acconci. It is a work from 1970 in which Acconci teaches himself a song on stage. Using a tape recorder he repeats a couple of stanzas over and over. He keeps on doing this until he has learned the whole song perfectly. In a certain sense I have appropriated that work. On the other hand, Learning Piece: Be patient, my soul also expresses my responsibility with regard to Armenian history. In the remake of Acconci's performance I am on stage with another man, an older Armenian who is passionately teaching me an old Armenian revolutionary song. It is about the genocide and it is the old man's sacred task not only to teach me this song but to also make me aware of this history. He demands that I become engrossed in it, in the absolute belief that in this way we will keep these facts alive and that we will survive. One could almost describe his motive as fear; "look, we have a young Armenian who does not know this song, who does not embrace his own history." What particularly interests me in this learning process is what both Augustine and Wittgenstein refer to, namely that learning a language is not a form of instruction but of training, a conditioning.

**Kurt Vanbelleghem:** Another important element in your work as a whole is the concept of language. It almost seems as if you are conducting some kind of research into the position of language in migration. Language includes and excludes, language is a home and a hostile environment.

**Mekhitar Garabedian:** This definitely has to do with the experience of growing up in two languages, Armenian and Dutch. In addition to this my parents used a third, Arabic, as a secret language. When we, the children, weren't supposed to hear something they would switch to Arabic. Of course this immediately creates an atmosphere of inclusion and exclusion. If you wish to stigmatise someone as a stranger then you simply have to speak a language he does

not understand in his presence and you heighten the feeling that he is undesirable to an incredible degree.

**Kurt Vanbelleghem:** In this sense the sound installation, 'Pararan (Dictionary)' has an alienating effect. You are engulfed in a torrent of words from 38 loudspeakers, but it feels very unpleasant to walk in a space filled with language you don't understand at all and where there is nothing you can get a hold on.

**Mekhitar Garabedian:** I am very interested in the position of the foreigner-translator. As a foreigner you are constantly forced to translate. You find yourself in a position in which you can no longer speak of a mother tongue; neither Armenian nor Dutch suffices as you are in fact constantly translating. The position of the foreigner-translator interests me in a poetical, literary sense but I am also drawn to its socio-political aspect. An immigrant is supposed to assimilate both in his home and in a broader social context. He should abandon his own language, but I see this as having an added value. The foreigner's accent is a strength, it is precisely this that distinguishes him, not just his appearance but his melody. In Pararan (Dictionary) you get an inverse process. Here the non-ethnic person feels like a stranger, he experiences the same as a migrant who lands up in a totally alien language structure and has to orientate himself in it. This appears to be a difficult and nerve-wracking experience. When meeting and receiving the foreigner, his discourse, and his strange language the non-ethnic person feels very uncomfortable. Personally, I find listening to a language I do not understand a special, enriching experience. It is the fate of the foreigner to experience a break. He has left something behind him permanently. He does not choose this break; it is often the result of actions which are forced upon him and he must adapt accordingly. Through the process of migration there is inevitably a break with the traditions of your original environment, with your language and with your history. This gives rise to a great many questions: forgetting, losing, shifting, betraying, evaporation, erosion – of identity, language, family, culture and history. The extinguishing of tradition. The disappearance of an image. Exile reduces the old body, the old language, to a corpse. What is language, what is speech, when the language and the voices that feed it are being extinguished? What is the image that remains of the country that has been left behind after living an entire life in a new country? Then there is a new context, a new history; what effect does this have? Is this a new history? What happens to the old? I find dealing with the break and its translation into language highly intriguing. It is about living in sounds and associations that have no ties with what the body remembers at night. I speak Dutch to my brother. The second generation migrants speak Dutch to one another. I do not address my brother in my mother tongue, but in a foreign language. The absence of a language; I speak Dutch out of habit. Switching languages is the same as losing, betrayal... of the language of the country, the language of the group, the mother tongue. On the basis of this fracture, the old and the new, the original family and the new community appear to be as attractive as they are problematic: there is no end to the questions and the unrest cannot be quelled. The Pararan (Dictionary) sound installation is partly the translation of something my mother used to say: "To hear our language is a joy for us". The linguistic nature of man is that he names things. Naming things and events (speaking) in Armenian is a joy. Like Elstir, a character in Proust who recreates things by taking away their name and giving them a new name, Armenian recreates reality. Dutch does not have the lexical ambivalences or the multiple, often indeterminable meanings of the Armenian idiom, which is insufficiently familiar with Cartesian notions and in which the prayer of the heart vibrates together with the darkness of the senses. Visually, Armenian also means a different representation of reality (through language); it has its own alphabet with thirty-eight letters. This is not me. This is my mother memory, that warm corpse that still speaks, a body within my body.

**Kurt Vanbelleghem:** Through your work you often place yourself in a position that could be described as a nonlocation; the place in which you find yourself can only be defined on the basis of an external questioning. Is this also how you approach the presentation of your work?

**Mekhitar Garabedian:** I often present my work in ensembles. In a previous exhibition I presented the Agheg sound installation and the Beirut/Beyrouth 1963 video as the central works, and two other works, the series of photos entitled Happy when it rains (self-portrait) and the video M.Verdoncklaan acted as a sort of commentary. The one work questions the other. The choices I make here depend on the type of presentation. There are times when these choices are reversed. The works refer to one another – not only visually but also intellectually.

**Kurt Vanbelleghem:** This non-location, the absence of a clear starting point, also makes up the substance of the video work L'étranger, in which you place a person in a completely nihilistic situation in which he does not wish to retain a single reference.

**Mekhitar Garabedian:** Man sometimes asks the animal: why don't you tell me about your happiness; why do you just stare at me? The animal wants to answer and says: it is because I always immediately forget what I wanted to say - but then it forgot this answer too and was silent: and this surprised man. However he was surprised at himself: that he could not learn to forget and consequently always remained attached to the past: no matter how far or how fast he walks he always carries the chain with him. It is a miracle: the moment, which appears in a flash and passes in a flash, and before which there is nothing and after which there is nothing, nevertheless returns like a ghost and upsets the tranquillity of another moment. A sheet from the scroll of time constantly detaches itself and flutters away – and then suddenly flutters back into man's lap. Then man says 'I remember' and envies the animal who immediately forgets and actually sees each moment die, disappearing into mist and darkness and being extinguished for ever.

L'Étranger is a 'petit poème en prose' of the same title by Baudelaire in which a man admits to no longer having any ties, no memory, no desires, but it is impossible to take grasp this state of being. What is past is never past, but a ghost; it continues to return and disturb the fullness and peace of the present. Consequently, man is not just what he is, but is marked by what he no longer is. What typifies human life is that it turns back on itself; it must come back because man is pursued by his 'having been'.

Ghent, 24-2-2006, translated from Dutch by Gregory Ball