

KADIR HAS UNIVERSITY  
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WHEN MEMORY TAKES THE STAGE:  
THE FORMS OF UNREPRESENTABILITY IN SARKIS

GRADUATE THESIS

GÜLER CANBULAT

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WHEN MEMORY TAKES THE STAGE:  
THE FORMS OF UNREPRESENTABILITY IN SARKIS

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“I, Güler Canbulat, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.”

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## ABSTRACT

### WHEN MEMORY TAKES THE STAGE: THE FORMS OF UNREPRESENTABILITY IN SARKIS

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While reaching the end of 20th century, contemporary understanding of space and time began to threaten history's centralist, linear and causal structure. In the appearingly accelerating and tightening world, the individual feels the need for deceleration and adherence. The perspective offered by history and *grand narratives* can no longer be adequate for the *individuum* seeking a sense of identity and belonging. Therefore, the individual clings to his/her verity and thereby his/her memory.

In the scope of my Graduate Thesis, I examine the language and the forms of expression enabled by memory through Sarkis' (born in 1938, Istanbul) art. In his works, memory emerges as symptoms of traumas that agitate the individual and the society. While positioning the trauma, traditional understanding of history - based on the experiences and linear references - remains insufficient. Hence, the artist expresses his feelings imprisoned in the past via his memory. He makes traces of trauma discernible, thus he creates the forms of unrepresentability. While these works abstain from descriptive sentences, representation, nostalgia and lament, they are such a sudden return of what has been repressed.

Sarkis is aware of the impossibility of representation. Through his memory he builds a territory for himself and makes it his homeland. This thesis examines his life and art, particularly through the works of "Caylak Street" (1986) and "In the Beginning, The Scream" (1998). It also discusses the notion and the forms of unrepresentability in the titles of: Leave and Return, Repetition, Absence and Silence, Illegibility and Ambivalence, Imprisonment.

Keywords: Memory, Trauma, Contemporary Art, Representation

## ÖZET

### BELLEK SAHNEYE ÇIKTIĞINDA: SARKIS'TE TEMSİL EDİLEMEZİN BİÇİMLERİ

Güler Canbulat

İletişim Bilimleri, Yüksek Lisans

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20. Yüzyıl sonlarına gelirken, çağdaş zaman ve mekân anlayışı, tarihin merkeziyetçi, doğrusal ve nedensel yapısını tehdit etmeye başlamıştır. Gittikçe sıkışan ve hızlanıyor gibi gözüken dünyada, kişi yavaşlama ve tutunma ihtiyacı duymaya başlar. Bir tür ait olma ve kimlik arayışına giren bireye, tarihin ve büyük anlatıların sunduğu perspektif yetmez hale gelir. Bu yüzden birey, kendi gerçekliğine, dolayısıyla belleğine tutunur. 20. Yüzyıl sonlarına gelirken bellek, tüm dünyada pek çok alanı etkileyen yaygın ve eşzamanlı bir kamusal diskur haline gelmiştir. Bu süreçte sanatçı da artık tarihin bir figüranı olmaktan çıkıp, kendi gerçekliğinin izlerini, belleğiyle görünür kılma arayışına girmiştir.

Yüksek lisans tezim kapsamında 1938, İstanbul doğumlu sanatçı Sarkis'in sanatı üzerinden belleğin imkân verdiği dil ve ifade biçimlerini inceledim. Sarkis'in işlerinde bellek, kişiyi ve toplumu sarsan, bir ömrün sınırlarını aşır önceki kuşaklara uzanan travmaların semptomları biçiminde ortaya çıkar. Travmayı konumlandırırken deneyim ve doğrusal göndermelere dayanan tarihin geleneksel anlayışı yetersiz kaldığı için, sanatçı geçmişe hapsolmuş duygularını bellek aracılığıyla iletir ve travmanın izlerini görünür kılar. Böylece temsil edilemez biçimlerini oluşturur. Açıklayıcı cümleler, betimlemeler, nostalji ve ağıttan kaçınan bu işler, bastırılmış olanın ansızın geri dönüşü gibidir. Sarkis temsilin imkânsızlığının farkındadır, belleğiyle kendisine bir mülk inşa eder ve onu kendi vatanı yapar. Sanatçının hayatının ve sanatının incelendiği bu tezde, özellikle "Çaylak Sokak" (1986) ve "Başlangıçta: Çılgılık" (1998) işleri üzerinden temsil edilemez kavram ve biçimleri analiz edilmiş; Gidiş - Dönüş, Yokluk - Sessizlik, Yineleme, Okunamazlık - Belirsizlik, Hapsolme başlıkları üzerinden tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bellek, Travma, Çağdaş Sanat, Temsil

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When I consider the period retrospectively, I ground my formation in the program based on three persons, three powerful source of wisdom, Louise Spence, Jalal Toufic and Levent Soysal. I have tried to gain an insight into their profound scholarly knowledge forming a well-built, three-legged trivet to me. This trivet has based and supported all my works and this thesis, through Prof. Spence's emphasis on sense, Prof. Toufic's emphasis on thought and Prof. Soysal's emphasis on system. I would like to thank them with all my heart. Above all, they made me think, look and see the world differently.

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## 1. Introduction

When, in 2007, I saw a photograph of Gülsün Karamustafa's 1998 installation, "Stage" (Fig 1), I was suddenly taken back in time to the moment when, as an eight year-old child, I had discovered a newspaper clipping hidden in a box with a snapshot of my mother and father. In that photo, from 1980, my parents were stood on trial in the dock of a military court, just like Gülsün Karamustafa and her husband in the image here, from 1971. Two married couples in identical poses in the same situation, accused following a military coup.<sup>1</sup> In the newspaper clipping of my parents' were incriminating headings like "Anarchists", and "State Enemies", but in this art work, the photo of Karamustafa and her husband was projected onto a wall, below the circle of words, "stage.regime.control.ideology".<sup>2</sup> Thus, the first spark of an idea that led to this thesis: What purpose was this artwork serving? Was it history? Did it attempt to bring justice and restore the dignity of a generation? Did it heal the artist? Could it heal my memories too?

The effect in this installation was very much like that of a spotlight on a *stage*, or the searchlights used by police or in prison yards. The artist was sentenced in this court and imprisoned for three years until the amnesty law. Thereafter, she was blacklisted and all her applications for a passport were turned down for sixteen years.

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<sup>1</sup> There were military coups in Turkey in those two years, 1971 and 1980.

<sup>2</sup> In German ("*bühne, regime, kontrol, ideologie*").

She describes her work thus: “If memories become a stage where unknown actors are wandering, an unsurpassable distance is created between the self and the person. If this projection reminds the person the memory of the prison yards, even twenty seven years later, the memory cut the person to the heart ” (cited in Sağır 2008: 174).

The latency in the expression of the senses, relating to the traumatic experience, is not an extra, “even twenty seven years later” – on the contrary, it is a prerequisite. She explains her approach in allowing her work to emerge over time thus:

For me to be able to carry out my work, the subject has to be distilled for a while; and after such a period, I allow it to surface and take shape. I believe that this is what protects me from giving direct messages and from staying in the shallows. It took 27 years, before one of my photographs, related to the 1971 military coup, could appear as a work of art (cited in Fereli 2007: 7).

Karamustafa constantly focuses on memory and dares to incorporate very personal materials, very intimate moments; in this way she states that it is primarily a personal therapeutic. Nonetheless, she notes that she tries to minimize the personal content of her works, indeed tries to generate “a dialectic not only between past and present, but between individual and collective history as well” (Heinrich 2007: 65). Thereby, she maintains a memorial wealth of the past generations: “My work comes alive at the point where I manage to combine this wealth (...) with the volatile reality of art; and I don’t interfere after that; I just share” (cited in Fereli 2007: 7).

My initial affinity for Gülsün Karamustafa’s “Stage” (1998) soon became a vibrant involvement in the subject of memory, which led to this thesis. My first conviction was that the main memorial characteristics of her work converge historically and psychologically with her contemporaries. Some fragments from her

words above should be highlighted in order to indicate what the thesis deals with. They refer to the existence of a trauma, a repression or “incubation” period, vivid impressions lying very deep inside, a succinct expression evading explanatory words, memories transcending boundaries of a lifetime and referring also to traumas of the ancestors, a mental imprisonment in the past sometimes triggered by a physical imprisonment or exile, and finally allowing memories to surface nearly as an involuntary act. In the content of the thesis, I discuss these simultaneous, memorial initiatives in their historical and theoretical context, and in their search both for new forms making the *unrepresentable* visible, and for new languages making the *unspoken* heard.

### **1.1. Structure**

My work here researches the late twentieth century Turkish contemporary art scene, which burgeoned in the late eighties and won recognition in the nineties. In this context, I focus on *memory*, one of the main subjects of the period, and look at some works of Sarkis Zabunyan whose art constantly referenced the subject of memory in the most sophisticated and inspirational ways.

Structurally, the thesis divides into two parts, with research on memory followed by the case study of Turkish contemporary art and Sarkis Zabunyan in particular. The research on memory considers three principal subject areas: memory as a public discourse, the contemporary conception of time and temporality, and traumatic memory that leans towards new forms of expression in art.

## **1.2. Context**

I want to introduce memory as a public discourse, which appeared on the scene in the nineties and has since received favorable notices and acceptance. Andreas Huyssen is my primary source in analyzing this discourse as a “memory boom”, which has taken the legitimacy of the “historical past” and offered instead various alternative pasts. Huyssen discusses how the discourse of memory shifted our ways of thinking about and experience of temporality and became part of the wider public discourse and cultural life. Since then, over the past decade, the past has started to be seen in re-creations, re-readings and re-productions in memorial sense.

Huyssen asks why it was that memory in relation to history became such a dominant, ubiquitous discourse during this era in particular. And he concludes that 1) it was a natural consequence of the ongoing criticism of historiography as a tool for domination and ideology; 2) mass markets and the global media promote memory for the sales opportunities it offers; 3) we try to counteract the fear and danger of forgetting with survival strategies of memory, in order “to anchor ourselves in a world characterized by an increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space” (Huyssen 2003: 18); and finally, 4) historical discourse and its structure seems to fail to articulate the temporal and spatial compression of late modernism.

## **1.3. Argument**

In my thesis, I seek answers to the questions of how memory became a prevalent public discourse in this period, and how this operates. To this end, memory as discourse is considered, and the Turkish case used as illustration. Memory is

investigated from various aspects, but primarily in the light of Huyssen's approach to memory as discourse, which thus stands, together with the analysis of traumatic memory and Sarkis Zabunyan's case, as fundamental to this work.

First and foremost, I agree with Huyssen's explanation of the issue at hand, but I believe it leaves too much out. To begin with, Huyssen declares that memory replaced history, but the reasons he formulates do not themselves require the overthrow of history and victory of memory. They are, that is, logically insufficient. For instance, the ongoing criticism of historiography was already quite sophisticated and discussed within the discipline (c.f. Benjamin). Secondly, while it is true that global media and culture industry is mass-marketing the memory, this is of itself a rather bald fact with a somewhat limited explanatory value. The global media and culture industry could just as well subsidize and commercialize another concept, including, indeed, that of history itself. In fact, one might very well argue that history *is*, likewise, in fashion. The issue of why memory has become a prevalent discourse and a common expression in art in the last decades is not resolved thus.

Huyssen's subsequent arguments seem more convincing. In these, Huyssen argues that people use memory to anchor themselves in this unstable, precarious and temporally compressed, spatially fractured world. This argument appears somewhat paradoxical, however, in that these features (and many more that might be similarly employed to describe today's world) are precisely those of memory. In addition, if Huyssen means that people need to anchor themselves to a past which is more determined and more stable than the present and/or future, this would seem to militate for history as *more* relevant than memory, which is generally known to be

unstable, ambiguous, fragile, deceptive, etc. Again, the question of quite why it is that memory has prevailed remains unanswered.

To resolve this principal question, we need to analyze the paradox of why people credit memory rather than history with the power to anchor them through instability. Therein, I believe the search of identity stands out as an essential tool to read the meaning of our existence and to place ourselves in this world. The period when memory has been obtaining credit was also a period when surface identities have been losing credit; therefore, we need memory to personalize and authenticate our selves. People may indeed feel a “deep anxiety about the speed of change and the ever-shrinking horizons of time and space” (Huysen 2003: 18), but it does not appear very obvious to me that memory constitutes the opposite pole alleviating this anxiety.

Huysen’s last argument, the failure of history to articulate the temporal and spatial compression of late modernism is a plausible reason for the prevalence of memory, I believe, only insofar as memory became a common discourse because its particularities fit perfectly with the contemporary conception of time and temporality. This is why memory did not disarm history earlier in time. My argument is that memory became a discourse not because it is the sheltering opposite of today’s world, but, on the contrary, because memory and the postmodern condition intersect and overlap so extensively. There is not a duality at work here or oppositional pairing, but an alliance, an affinity. Hence, we cannot properly analyze the memory discourse by dismissing theoretical aspects of memory and its expressive possibilities.

Another confusing case in the literature of memory discourse also supports my argument. The boom in memory is accompanied by a boom in forgetting. To Huysen, “the contemporary public obsession with memory clashes with an intense public panic of oblivion” and finally ends with amnesia. (Huysen 2003: 18). Replete with memorial acts, at the same time we yet complain about a society that has no memory. In my opinion, what is explanatory in this case is again the paradox itself. We experience this situation precisely because not necessarily belonging to one of the positions between remembering and forgetting concords so well with the “postmodern condition”. They are, that is, already indissolubly linked to each other.

A corresponding relationship is also valid in the prevalence of the concern with traumas of the past century. Huysen abstracts trauma as “a psychic phenomenon” which is “located on the threshold between remembering and forgetting, seeing and not seeing, transparency and occlusion, experience and its absence in repetition” (2003: 8). I argue that memory – as a discourse, a language and a manner of expression – carries the imprint of trauma for the most part. Both are marked by instability, ambiguity, transitoriness, and structures of repetition, and which I ascertain in the case of Sarkis Zabunyan’s works.

Finally, I want to discuss the premise of the argument, that memory replaced history. Despite the fact that memory has become significantly superior to history in influence, they still coexist. Two different conceptions of time, temporality, causality and relationality have violated each other under different guiding pleasures and in support of different priorities. Modern history was the story of control, repression, loss and the denial of memories under the sign of trauma. It was an organized



forgetting of the past, in favor of the future, the progress and the assets of “imagined communities”. For me, memory discourse is based on “the return of the repressed”, and history suffers now under the symptoms of recollection creating its own forms. While memories emerge, our conception of temporality undergoes a significant non-reciprocal shift:

Whatever the specific content of the many contemporary debates about history and memory may be, underlying them is a fundamental disturbance not just of the relationship between history as objective and scientific, and memory as subjective and personal, but of history itself and its promises (Huysen 2003: 2).

Instead of replacing history, I believe memory just gets ahead, becomes dominant. As Huysen assents, “Memory after all, can be no substitute for justice, and justice itself will inevitably be entangled in the unreliability of memory” (2003: 28). Currently, it is endowed with special characteristics, which meet the contemporary tendencies. Memory works as a language and a manner of expression that goes beyond the reparation of history’s deficiencies; and further, it creates a fruitful temporal milieu where the past, the present and the future intersect. Furthermore, memory manifests like symptoms of a trauma that has victimized the person and/or the society. The symptoms fill the void in the absence of experience of the trauma and make it corporeal. I take into consideration various acts of memory in various fields; however, I concentrate on contemporary art, which, I argue, has explored the potentialities of memory to extend beyond representation.

Essentially the question of representation in art has been discussed since the modern period, with the “Sublime” favored over the “Beautiful” (c.f. Lyotard). The initial negation of *mimesis* then turned into the rejection of representation in the aftermath of Auschwitz:

The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own (...) To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today (Adorno 1949: 34).

This problematic of reification and legibility lead to Abstract-Expressionism and Minimalism in search of “self-satisfied contemplation” and the “Absolute”, parallel of the remarks on “the end of art” (c.f. Adorno). I believe the sensibility in representation has taken a new meaning in contemporary art, and has differed from the early attempts to reach the “Sublime”. Here, memory is a subject matter evolving out of the personal and insignificant, and creates a language raising doubts about history, representation and legibility.

#### **1.4. Content**

Here, I introduce the structure, context, argument and the content of the work. Then, in the second section, I look at memory as a prevalent discourse at the end of twentieth century. I focus on its theoretical background and representation in the city.

In the third section, I explore contemporary conception of time and space, and the way in which this leans toward memory. I introduce concepts like “Poetic space”, “Time-Space Compression” which help us to tackle the expanded understanding of the reality that empowers memory. The fourth section comprises of the discussion of traumatic experience and the possibility of representation. In the fifth section, I first introduce the contemporary art scene in Turkey in the late twentieth century.

During this period, the conception of memory began to appear markedly in the works of certain artists such as Sarkis and Gülsün Karamustafa. Exemplified by the case study of Sarkis and his “Çaylak Street” (1986) the Conclusion finalises the argument that memory became a prevalent discourse in the late twentieth century because of its affinity to contemporary conception of time and space and its possibility of a new language beyond representation.

## 2. Memory Discourse in the Late Twentieth Century

Andreas Huyssen, in his 2003 book *Present Pasts*, defines a crisis in the discourse of history. According to Huyssen, history used to construct a narrative, which was stable in its pastness and based on selections and exclusions that functioned to frame traditions in social, cultural and political life. Huyssen defines history as the “mise-en-scene of modernity”, which finds its traces and representations mostly in the urban space of large-scale monuments, government buildings, museums, palaces, etc. The modernist conception of history serves to justify the present and to envision the future with the help of a monumental (national or universal) past. This is a linear correlation of past, present and future that leads us to the motto of modernism: “Progress”. Such a definition (as criticism) is not new to Western thought (c.f. Nietzsche, Benjamin, Foucault etc.), but Huyssen takes it a stage further with the empirical judgment that the model no longer works. Like the other acknowledged conceptions of modernism, history too has fallen victim after the eighties to the postmodern critique.

As history lost its grounding at the end of the twentieth century, so did memory gain legitimacy, disturbing our notions of the historical past as singular, fixed and objective. Thus, various pasts, especially untold, personal pasts, replaced the historical past and became undeniable parts of the present “through modern media of reproduction like photography, film, recorded music, and the Internet, as well as through the explosion of historical scholarship and an ever more voracious museum

culture” (Huysen 2003: 1). During this period, according to Huysen, historical discourse assigned all its credibility to the memory discourse, which soon became “an obsession... a significant symptom of our cultural present” (2003: 3). So, as a consequence of the new conception of memory, temporal boundaries between past and present collapsed and the past was transformed into a constituent element of the present in ways that would have been unimaginable to previous generations.

In former times, memory used to be a topic for poetic references to a golden age, or conversely, haunting traces of a restless past. Today, however, we rather think of memory as belonging ever more to the present, and as a site for global social and political concerns. The form in which we think of the past becomes more like “memory without borders, than national history within borders”, and formerly stable links of family, community, nation and state have weakened “to the extent that national traditions and historical pasts are increasingly deprived of their geographic and political grounding, which are reorganized in the process of cultural globalization” (Huysen 2003: 4). These are written over, erased and forgotten in this context. And while history is receding, memory is promoted.

In *Present Pasts*, Huysen reads memorials, public spaces of commemoration, art works and literary texts as forming the media of a critical cultural memory which invades the urban space that once seemed stable and fixed. Born and raised in Germany, he showcases the reconstruction of the center of Berlin as a key example of how the memory discourse works, with its traces of the past, its erasures and its losses.

In order to frame the way in which history is contested today, we need to position it in the context of earlier criticism dating back to the late nineteenth century. It was then that socialist historians began to see and analyze historiography as a tool for domination and ideology and that Nietzsche attacked its linearity and causality, an approach which would later be comprehensively articulated in the work of Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida. Andreas Huyssen argues that this critique today forms an essential part of the power of memory discourse.

Memory as a discourse first emerged in the West after the sixties, in the wake of decolonization and the new social movements emphasizing freedom and rights (especially for women and Afro-Americans) and their attendant search for alternative histories. Memory discourse accelerated in the early eighties with the debates on the Holocaust and trauma. Then, from the late eighties, parallel to the academic integration of gender and post-colonial perspectives, it became “a narrative in its broadest scope” (Huyssen 2003: 14).<sup>3</sup>

During this process, memory emerged in many acts and productions, ranging from large-scale restoration projects, national heritage enterprises and new wave museums, through the boom in nostalgia and retro-styles in mass-marketing, to historical films, serials and documentaries – and the production of distinguished artworks. Furthermore, with the aid of digital photography and video recording, we have also witnessed an obsessive “self-musealisation” parallel with a rise of biography and autobiography and confessional literature. Finally, these acts were

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<sup>3</sup> Huyssen points out that the weakening of temporal boundaries between past and present that enabled the emergence of memory discourse has occurred in tandem with the shrinking of spatial boundaries as a result of developments in transportation and communication. The recent explosion of the Internet, it might be added, has collapsed even the distinction between the temporal and spatial.

completed with the performances of formal apologies, politically painful anniversaries, commemorations and international law cases (Huysen 2003: 17).

Memory as a cultural obsession was experienced in both academia and popular culture during the 90s. The rise of this “cult of memory” later became a veritable “memory industry”. In the book *Memory Culture and the Contemporary City*, Staiger, Steiner and Weber describe this epochal commitment to the past and its representation in the present as “a memory culture” (2009: 1). Memory may seem a phenomenon concerning “the individual”, they argue, but it is always bound up with the social and cultural context of the remembering subject. It may also seem to be a temporal phenomenon, but, as Edward Casey suggests, “memory is naturally place-oriented or at least place-supported” (cited in Staiger, Steiner and Weber 2009: 1).

In today’s memory culture, the manmade environment of the urban center occupies a focal point. Nonetheless, the form of this occupation differs from earlier periods. In the essence of the new memory practices, we can identify a fragmentary counterculture reactive to totalizing discourses:

Mapping memory at and through such sites is thus often shot through with more complex dynamics of the guilt and redemption, challenging the representative nature and function of the monument or memorial site. Particularly in the 1990s, and often with reference to the Second World War, so-called counter-monumental strategies were supposed to provoke a new and very different kind of memory culture (Staiger, Steiner and Weber 2009: 8).

Connecting the individual with particular places, memory began to play an increasingly important role in creating identity and selfhood. Especially in the late twentieth century, moreover, memory culture responded to a social context in which the individual was both emphasized (through a liberal capitalist valorization of

personal choice, human rights, etc) and yet negated (through new practices and ideologies linked to, or summarized as, globalization). Memory culture thus developed through and functioned in a society in turmoil with the contradiction inherent in this combination of de-individuation and over-individualization.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A similar argument might be made at the level of group identity and differentiation, with social distinction flattened by political and economic democracy, equality etc., and yet also highlighted by (minority, oppressed) definitions of gender, sexual preference, ethnicity, etc.



### **3. Contemporary Conception of Time and Space**

#### **3.1. Linear History and the Individual**

Hasan Bülent Kahraman states that the linearity in the conceptualization of modernist history has an exclusionary effect on memory. “At the line that the assumption of an absent past makes with the idealization of future inference, that future is formed. Hence, the notion of memory becomes abnegated or in a larger extend neglected. Or at least, it regresses to the mechanical” (Kahraman 2005: 135). Lyotard emphasizes that one of the most interesting aspects of modernity is *periodization*. Periodization suggests a system of history comprising a straight line with a succession of temporal units – where one period ends and new one begins. Based on a before-and-after mentality, one obsession of modernity was to *re-write* (reformulate the line, redefine the periods, revise the endings and beginnings, etc). Modernity was an ideology that rewrote everything (Akay 2005).

Steeped in this ideology, history as a discourse was constructed around the idea of one thing superseding another, which generated the continuous rewriting of linear narrative. The idea of a “new era” was determined as the primary characteristic of modernity. According to Lyotard, one of the re-writing forms was that of “beginning”, “rebirth” and “revolution”. The idea of “beginning”, of (reaching) the null point and (re)commencing from there, was concreted with birth of Jesus. Thus,

history was composed of before and after the birth of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> The idea of “rebirth” is related to the Renaissance, and that of “revolution” concretized by the French Revolution. These were propounded by means of the idea of history re-writing, and transformed into “*Re-writing / reécriture ideologies*” (Akay 2005).

According to Ali Akay, a commonly suggested argument in recent years that history is not written yet has endured through what he terms “the new modernist approach.” Akay advocates that the discourses represented by statements like, “The history of working class has not been written yet’, ‘the history of women has not been written yet’, ‘the history of Kurds has not been written yet’” do not digress from the framework of the dual problematic of power and the modernist center of resistance.<sup>6</sup> To my point of view, it is at this point that memory interferes and becomes crucial. Memory offers a different temporality to the revisionist approach in history.

During the postmodern era, many transformations have been experienced and new notions entered sociocultural life. These include concepts such as hybridization, deterritorialization, pluralism, heterogeneity, deindividuation and individualization. As indicated by this list, one of the distinctive features of the postmodern era has been to overlap and merge times, places, identities and style values in a coexistence of paradoxical situations. Assuming something integral and whole, the traditional (modern) concept of the individual has been a primary target for analysis.

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<sup>5</sup> Or, there was one period, that of Christianity, defined by what had been before, which was pre-history. In earlier times, this notion was also supplied by the Flood, as Antediluvian, while these were both structured within the meta-narrative of Genesis.

<sup>6</sup> From which it follows that works attempting this are essentially modernist projects.

According to Hasan Bülent Kahraman, in order to engender a significant and consistent model of the individual for this period, its association, first, with the notion of *identity*, and later on, with *belonging*, *space* and most importantly *memory* is requisite. Kahraman states:

Identity is a matter of belonging and in that sense it is specifically aligned with space. When the formation of space opens towards an internalization of time, they experience their crystallization around the notion of memory. Erased, abolished, exterminated and neglected by modernity, memory reaches a kind of reconstruction stage in the late modern era. The pressure of time and space necessarily and contemporaneously correspond with memory's "continued discontinuity" and transform it to a "discontinued continuity" by reverting the formation. Memory thus no longer exists for remembering a connected past, but rather for recapturing so that it can be disjointed (2005: 210).

Thus, the pressure of the postmodern spatiotemporal framework on the one hand and structural features of memory described as "continued discontinuity" by Kahraman on the other are indissolubly embedded in each other.

### **3.2. The Experience of Time and Space**

Time and space are among the basic categories of human existence. If modernity was a certain mode of experience of space and time, therefore, it follows that we can position postmodernism as a shift, a crisis in this experience (Harvey 1995). Time-space compression is one of the most common concepts used to describe the contemporary era. David Harvey explains his understanding of the concept as a process that radically altered our representation of the world and revolutionized the objective qualities of space and time. "I use the word 'compression' because a strong case can be made that the history of capitalism has been characterized by speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial

barriers that the world sometimes seems to collapse inwards upon us” (Harvey 1995: 240).

The idea of spatiotemporal compression signifies a world that seems to be shrinking with the expansion in technology, especially in transportation and telecommunications. Harvey describes this state in which “time horizons shorten to the point where the present is all there is” as the world of the schizophrenic (Harvey 1995: 240). Harvey concludes that the greater the ephemerality and obsolescence, the more pressing the need to reach an eternal truth sheltering the self (1995). It is for this reason that the individual clings to memories and home.

### **3.3. Poetic Space**

According to David Harvey, spatial and temporal practices and conceptions in any society contain manifold subtleties and complexities which determine the processes of reproduction and transformation of social relations. Therefore, the history of social change is at the same time the history of the conceptions of space and time (1995).

In this context, postmodernism, articulating a significant social and cultural change at the end of the twentieth century requires its own concepts of time and space, such as “poetic space”. David Harvey formulates this poetic space (referring to Bachelard), as the space seized by the imagination; and since “[this] space contains compressed time” (referring to Heidegger), poetic space is the space of memories, that is to say *home*:

Being is already a value. Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house... This is the environment in which the protective beings live. ... In this remote region, memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for their mutual deepening... Through dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days (Harvey 1995: 217-218).

Harvey conceptualizes the idea of poetic space around *nostalgia* and *memory*.

Being has a spatial memory representing both nostalgic memories of a lost childhood world and place-bound nostalgias of collective memory. Therefore, memory is always bound up with space and a sense of longing. He concludes that “if it is true that time is always memorialized not as flow, but as memories of experienced places and spaces, then history must indeed give way to poetry, time to space, as the fundamental material of social expression” (1995: 218).

#### **4. The Imprint of Trauma**

In this chapter, I investigate the complex theoretical framework of the trauma that pertains not only to the possibility of writing a history from within it, but also to the possibility of representation. As suggested in the Introduction, memory works as a language and a manner of expression which conveys the senses of the beholder and makes the imprint of personal and historical traumas “visible”, as in the work of Sarkis.

An early attempt to position trauma in a historical context was Sigmund Freud’s history of the Jews entitled “Moses and Monotheism”. Cathy Caruth, in her article “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History”, proposes an analysis of the work of Freud in order to find a way through our own catastrophic era, and to understand the difficulties of writing a history from within it (1991).

Caruth describes trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (1991: 181). Hence, in the attempt to position the trauma, a traditional understanding of history, based on simple models of experience and reference becomes insufficient. Caruth asks for the recognition of the possibility of a history which is no longer straightforwardly referential (1991).

In reference to Freud's own attempt to explain the trauma, we find a somewhat different understanding of what it means *to leave* and *to return*. He put the emphasis on a kind of "latency", a period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent. Freud gives the example of an accident to outline how this latency works: someone gets away from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, apparently unharmed, but over the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of symptoms indicating a "traumatic neurosis." Freud marks the time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms as the "incubation period" (cited in Caruth 1991: 186). According to Caruth, what is truly striking in this situation is that the victim of the crash was never fully conscious during the accident itself, hence, the fact of latency refers more "an inherent latency within the experience itself" than to the forgetting of a reality (1991: 187).

On a historical scale, Caruth tries to outline the possibility of a history of trauma underlying this enigmatic "latency" referring the historical experience of Jews in Freud's "Moses and Monotheism":

The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. And it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of the Jews' historical experience (...) For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence (Caruth 1991: 186-187).

In addition to her emphasis on the inaccessibility of the occurrence, Caruth also stresses the potentiality in the compulsive repetition of the symptoms that release "a sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound", this voice addressing a reality or truth which is otherwise unavailable (1996:

3). Hence, the subject of the trauma may be able to hear the voice that cries, indeed for the first time, and may finally get a chance to relieve the grief of which the subject cannot fully know its occurrence. Caruth deduces that this happens where knowing and not knowing intersect: “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 1996: 4).

On the grounds of this interconnected process, memory became the subject of “the source”, as well as the “therapy” of trauma that Freud investigated intensively in his studies on hysteria. Thereby, he brought a new perspective to the analysis of memory, emphasizing the power of the past over the present through the “unconscious”. That’s why, memory lies at the core of psychoanalysis, which attributes both the source and the therapy (of the malady) to the memory. Anne Whitehead explains Freud’s contribution in the field of memory thus:

From the very origins of his work, Freud thus focused on precisely those moments when the past called out for attention in the form of symptoms, dreams, and linguistic slips. Faced with these encrypted riddles, which remained oblivious to their own origins, Freud recognized that what seemed inexplicable in the present could be readily interpreted by invoking the presence of a painful, and hence hitherto unacknowledged, memory (cited in Whitehead 2009: 87-88).

In this context, Freud linked the hysterical symptom to a buried memory of a trauma from childhood. Although the memory itself is unavailable to the patient, its influence persists into the present. Freud believed that the patient needed to bring to light the “repressed memory” of the event in order to become free of the malady (cited in Whitehead 2009). At this point, I want to match the therapeutic intervention



from which Freud anticipated the fading in or the release of the trauma, with the artistic intervention from which the same may be anticipated. Even if art makes “the voice heard”, “the wound seen”, it cannot represent what is inherently inexpressible.

Jill Bennett looks into the possibility of theorizing trauma through the visual arts in her article “The Aesthetics of Sense-Memory”. On the grounds of the assertion that “It is impossible to feel emotion as past,” Bennett suggests that emotions are transferred into ideas and representations in memory (2003: 27). If emotions are not retrievable from memory, therefore, recalling a situation cannot produce the authentic sensations. Instead, it produces a new bout of emotion which is more “affect” than “representation”. Bennett elaborates this differentiation relating to trauma and memory with reference to the studies of the French psychologist Pierre Janet:

In the normal course of events, experiences are processed through cognitive schemes that enable familiar experiences to be identified, interpreted and assimilated to narrative. Memory is thus constituted as experience transforms itself into representation. Traumatic or extreme affective experience, however, resists such processing. Its unfamiliar or extraordinary nature renders it unintelligible, causing cognitive systems to balk; its sensory or affective character renders it inimical to thought – and ultimately to memory itself (cited in Bennett 2003: 27).

What is striking in this situation is that even if we mention something as “traumatic memory”, still we find that “the subject is often incapable of making the necessary narrative which we call memory regarding the event” (Bennett 2003: 28). In other words, the trauma cannot even be represented in the memory, which thus complicates its public representation twice over.

Bennett argues that “traumatic memory is of a ‘non-declarative’ type, involving bodily responses that lie outside verbal-semantic-linguistic representation,” and calls attention to the potentiality in visual arts to evoke immediate affective experience bearing “the imprint of trauma” (2003: 28). Such imagery may serve to register subjective processes that exceed forms of representation.

Bennett criticizes common theories of expression which “regard the artwork as the transcription or deposit of a prior mental state.” Instead she commends a substantive category of memory and image-making in which “experience is not simply referenced, but activated or staged in some sense” (2003: 28). This is because “traumatic memory” inherently exceeds or goes beyond the past experience or its objects of memory, and attains the present experience of memory. According to Bennett, such imagery, namely “the aesthetics of sense-memory”, retains “a capacity to touch and affect, to trigger emotion in the present” (2003: 28). The aesthetics of sense-memory does not claim to represent the original traumatic experience through remembering, but rather it enacts posttraumatic experience “as a continuous negotiation of a present with indeterminable links to the past” (Bennett 2003: 33).

## **5. Contemporary Art in Turkey Dealing with Memory**

### **5.1. The Turkish Contemporary Art Scene in the Late Twentieth Century**

In this section I focus on Turkish contemporary art that blossomed in the period beginning with the late eighties and won recognition in the nineties. I will first illustrate the general context of the period which lays the groundwork for this significant transformation in art. Then I will focus on Sarkis whose work has dealt with memory.

According to art historian and curator Levent Çalıkoğlu, the main dynamic in Turkish art during the 90s came from the economic and cultural transformation that took place after the 1980 *coup d'état*. The link between this transformation and the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of Eastern Bloc coupled with the introduction of globalist neoliberal policies is undeniable. Çalıkoğlu states that with the reformist trend we see in many artworks from the beginning of the 80s, a strong sense of tension and discontent resulted from the sharpening and deepening effect of modernism on various contradictions. Çalıkoğlu explains these contradictions as a “tension”, thus:

On the one hand, there was the legitimacy of culture and eagerness to speak of disparate cultural groups, and on the other the obstinacy of power in attempting to control this demand of freedom. On the one hand, there was a superabundance and ostentation in every aspect of social needs due to the capital flow into the market, and on the other injustice and the abyss between the classes in terms of consumption surplus. On the one hand, there was

statist discourse claiming art to be the most important vein of culture, and on the other, negligence, the lack of museums, a cultural infrastructure crisis... (2008: 8).

For artists informed by these contradictions, art was addressed as an attitude and aesthetic of opposition and a problem of self-confidence and existence. The initiation of the Istanbul Biennial towards the end of the decade (in 1987) also established a strong center where new artistic styles could gain attention. According to Çalikoğlu, we can talk about the formation of a pluralist and democratic structure in Turkish art during this period (2008).

In this context, many artists departed from the conventional forms, materials and topics that had predominated in the local art scene established around the Fine Arts State Academy (today's Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, in Istanbul). Curator Vasıf Kortun describes the atmosphere at the time thus:

That was the late eighties, many dictatorships were dying or fading away, mutating into neo-liberal political systems. When you are in an isolated place, local truths are prevailing things and pretty harmonious. But when the walls start to come down, suddenly new work, culture and new visual proposals flood the situation (Kortun, 2003).

Another significant transformation of the 90s can be observed in the context of the mission of artists and state-society-art relationship. In this process, the role of “enlightened artists” who came to prominence in republican history was questioned. The approach of artist-as-guiding-light in favor of social development, advancement and collective values was abandoned. The elitist, introvert and class specific approach of the language of modern art yielded to an enthusiastic, communicative and pluralist language. According to Çalikoğlu, this change was nourished by the multiplicity of languages brought into visibility from the “histories of the excluded”.

In parallel with this, artists began also to question the apparently narrow aesthetic structure of art and relate this to interdisciplinary approaches involving sociology, philosophy, popular culture, technology, etc.

One of the most important and distinguishing characteristics of the contemporary art scene in Turkey that began to mature in the 90s was its opposite positioning in respect of the modern history discourse. According to Çalıkoğlu, “an artist whose acceptance is promised if s/he is articulated to the edge of the history, begins to construct her/his own nominative history” (2008: 10). History, like other *grand narratives*, was being dismantled during this time. “Authenticity cannot be fastened or indexed to the hierarchy of grand narratives. Thus, artists see into truth with a somewhat narrower scope. Knowing that authenticity never can and never will be represented outright, they reconstruct it” (Çalıkoğlu 2008: 12). And when artists associate with this convolution of authenticity and temporality at the personal level, as individuals, we deal with *memory*.

In the period beginning with the late eighties, some artists, such as Gülsün Karamustafa, Sarkis Zabunyan, Nur Koçak and Cengiz Çekil became initiators of the use of memory in their work. These artists mostly belonged to the generation of the sixties. They had grown up while modernism and the nationalist ideals of the Republic were still vibrant. During their formative years, this generation witnessed the events of 6-7 September,<sup>7</sup> rising leftist movements, armed conflicts in the streets,

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<sup>7</sup> The events of September 6-7, 1955 (in Greek, the ‘*Septemvreneat*’) was an organized riot aimed at persecution of minorities in Istanbul.

and three military *coups d'état* (in 1960, 1971 and 1980).<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, after 1980, they also witnessed a metamorphosis of the old system, with the introduction of neo-liberalism and a rapid departure from former statist ideals.

In this period, one full of contradictions and ruptures, the issue of memory gained a particular significance. The artists that came through these times – especially those working with contemporary formats – worked with memory in various ways, such as through autobiography, nostalgia, time and temporality, the act of remembering, the act of collecting, the critique of history and especially facing up to traumas. In this context, I focus on *memory*, one of the main subjects contemplated from all sides in this period. I look especially at Sarkis whose art involved *memory* constantly, and in the most sophisticated ways (which inspired me during my research).

## **5.2. Sarkis**

Born in 1938 in Istanbul and educated in Interior Design at what was the Fine Arts State Academy, Sarkis Zabunyan left Turkey in 1964 and based himself in France where he dropped his surname for the simple *nom d'art* of Sarkis. He first achieved recognition in 1967 when he won the Paris Young Artists' Biennial Prize, and this ethnic Armenian conceptual artist has since exhibited worldwide – including many times in Turkey after an interruption of 22 years (between 1965 and 1987).

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<sup>8</sup> Except Sarkis, who left the country in 1965. However he usually states that he was always mentally bound to Turkey and keenly interested in its social and political developments.

According to Uwe Fleckner, the objects in Sarkis' productions are nourished by the components of art and cultural history or the artist's personal iconography. In his installations, Sarkis constitutes architecture of memory by responding not only to his inner traumas, but also to social traumas of the past (Fleckner 2005). His art represents a collective as well as a personal past. His main subjects are related to suffering, but they never emerge as a drama (von Drathen 2005: 180). By stating, "I never speak of recollections, but I talk about memory", which is explained as "a dynamic, life-sustaining, and contemporary entity, not an asylum for sniveling" (Sarkis 2005: 130), the artist refuses any kind of past-oriented mourning.

In the conceptual framework of Sarkis' art, proposes Aby Warburg, is the important notion of a "treasure trove of sufferings" (*Leidschatz*). Warburg advocates the idea that art may seek to overcome the fear embedded in social memory, and the accumulated sufferings of humankind be thereby transformed to treasures. According to Warburg artwork is a document of one's experiential archive of suffering. Therefore, the art historian and artist "should work as seismographers to detect the mnemonic waves that have been encumbered with passion and sentiment" (cited in Fleckner 2005: 9). Sarkis follows an Armenian filmmaker, Serguei Parajanov in the sense of tragedy and lamentation in his films. Though great dramas are experienced in Parajanov's films, he does not show that a suffering person is suffering - therein Sarkis believes, "Pain becomes a treasure," because "with him, pain has been devoured and swallowed, giving birth to poetry" (Altuğ 2006: 7).

Sarkis states frequently that the fundamental foundation of his art is *memory*. To him, what has been hitherto produced with pain and love resides inside of us as

our most precious treasure. The experiences, actions and agonies of each one of us compose our own, personal treasure trove of sufferings. By reifying this process of personal treasure trove production, art has the power to transform the temporal separation between past and present (Fleckner 2005). According to Sarkis' art historian daughter Elvan, the notion of memory in the Sarkisian term is beyond a trace, a recollection from the past or a finite and defined act that is impossible to belong to the present. Memory is ascendant and wages war against everything that might be irreversible. Memory is a continuous experience that nourishes artwork (Zabunyan 2005).

Were we to take some fragments from his life, the year 1955 would be an obvious choice, when Sarkis was 17 years old and his interest in art was beginning to develop. A theme which he would use frequently later in his art, emanated from a coincidence that occurred that year. While helping his butcher father, he noticed a certain image on the page of the magazine he was using to wrap up the meat. He was struck without knowing what it was, and only later learned that it was Edward Munch's "The Scream" (1893).

Elvan Zabunyan believes that Sarkis' affection for the representation of that moment of scream had psychological resonance in his childhood, when, aged 10 or 11, he had awoken in the night screaming in a phase of acute trauma following failed nasal surgery (Zabunyan 2010). In the 90s, he reproduced this image in a series of films in which he recorded his unachievable attempt to paint a watercolor in a bowl of water: "Film no 028, in the Beginning, The Scream" (1998) (Fig 2). Zabunyan states that the recurrence of the reference to Munch is a part of "the connection that



Sarkis established with the memory of a moment passed through that desire to translate it” (2010: 39).

1955 was also the year of another important moment in the life of the artist, when the districts and the properties of non-Muslim minorities in Istanbul were attacked and devastated on 6-7 September by their Muslim neighbors provoked by sovereign power. That disreputable moment in Turkish history affected deeply the lives of those communities, and thus of the ethnic Armenian Sarkis. Elvan Zabunyan conveys some parts of his father’s experience:

My father was at home at the end of the afternoon on Tuesday, the 6<sup>th</sup> September, and heard on the radio that the shops were going to be attacked, that groups had formed everywhere in the city and were starting to bang on the windows. 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 (2010: 40-41).

Elvan Zabunyan states that his father has spoken very little about the events or other issues linked to politics and their community, like his own parents. She cites Sarkis: “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” (cited in 2010: 39). Sarkis sketches his memory of the events with a succinct recollection:

They broke the windows and threw everything there was into the street. 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 (cited in Zabunyan 2010: 39).

Zabunyan believes that the traces of those events form a significant part of Sarkis' artistic work and that in the silence of his family he has always suffered from the burden of the implied and the unsaid.

In 1986, twenty-two years after leaving Istanbul, Sarkis was invited to hold his first solo exhibition in the city. Hence, he finds himself back in the land where he was born, which he has left some two decades previously, but mentally never relinquished. Sarkis explains his installation, "Çaylak Street"<sup>9</sup> (Fig 3, Fig 4) at Maçka Art Gallery with the following:

The location of the gallery in Istanbul bizarrely reminded of a Turkish bath or a butcher's shop. Speaking to myself I said, 'Shall I mention it? How I discovered the world by working?' I started to work at the age of 7 or 8, during the summer holidays. I worked with my paternal uncle, a shoemaker. All I had to do was to straighten skewed nails (...) I asked him whether or not he still had that small, fifty-centime working stall that he used to put his paraphernalia and make the shoes on. We searched and found it. My uncle was almost blind now. When I saw that counter in front of me, I decided how to establish my exhibition. Embarking from that object that enabled me to affiliate with the world and with working world (Sarkis 2005: 125-26).

Çaylak Street is the street in Beyoğlu, Istanbul where Sarkis was born and raised. He had his first small studio in the attic of the apartment building which his family built on this street and where they lived with his aunts. The shoemaker's shop where he started to work was also on the same street and his father's butcher's was also close. According to his daughter, the notion of working has been a significant element in Sarkis' life and art born of having always seen his close relatives, and especially his father, at work (Zabunyan 2010).

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<sup>9</sup> "Çaylak": inexperienced or naive person, rookie.

For this exhibition, Sarkis found and brought some items from his childhood to the gallery space to act as plinths for his sculptural figures. He interpreted this form as his autobiography establishing a plinth for the exhibition as a whole, just as such obsolete objects do for the figures formed by sound tapes of the film *Nostalghia* by Tarkovsky. In addition to the shoemaker counter, there were also an old radio belonging to his aunt from which he remembers having heard music for the first time, and a little old bathtub. He emptied the bathtub which then was serving to house tomato plants, refilled it with water and put a model ship afloat. As on the counter, there were sound tape figures on the radio and on the ship; and also tape bunches piled in different places in the gallery. One of these bunches sheltered a pair of shoes like a roof or open wings of an angel above it. These shoes with the letters forming the word “*Kriegsschatz*” on them belonged to his father, who could no longer walk by that time (Fig 5). As part of the installation, there was also an old oil canvas from 1963, before the artist had left Istanbul and was still using a classical painting approach. Finally, the exhibition was complemented with dangling tapes over the street sign of Çaylak Sokak and newly painted watercolors of the objects in the installation (Zabunyan 2010).

“*Kriegsschatz*” which we read on his father’s shoes in “Çaylak Street” is an important concept developed and frequently referenced by Sarkis in his works. He first envisaged this concept during a museum tour in Berlin in 1976. He realized that miscellaneous items from various parts of the world had been exhibited in the same fashion, as well as in the same conditions of space, light or temperature, regardless of their authentic characteristics. This kind of both corporeal and incorporeal usurpation

inspired the artist to develop the concept of *Kriegsschatz* (spoils of war), and to use it in German because he had first considered it in Germany and the word *Kriegsschatz* has had a strong resonance (Zabunyan 2010).

### **5.3. Forms of Unrepresentability in Sarkis**

#### ***Leaving and Return***

*Leaving and return* has always been a background motif in Sarkis' life and work. As in traumatic experience, *leaving* and *return* exists both on physical and psychological levels. Sarkis mentions a joke he had with Beuys: Whenever they met, Beuys would ask Sarkis when he would go back to his country. Finally this became a jest which Beuys would repeat even from 100 yards away, and they would laugh (Sarkis 2005).

Although Sarkis was a voluntary immigrant in France, he embraces the terminology of exile and the diasporic . *Return* is the main notion differentiating the diaspora from the immigrants. I believe Sarkis identifies himself with the Armenian diaspora and holds their collective memories. To Sarkis, culture is an image of a state which continually regenerates and which the artist has to reconstitute again and again. This is not a territory which has already been conquered and granted to the artist. Thus, he needs to construct this territory and make it his "homeland". He believes he may own a house if he constructs it as exactly as what it is, but he cannot represent it. To him work is always the return from exile. He says that he carries his culture on his back from somewhere to anywhere. He needs to make it corporeal through his art in order to own a territory, a homeland (Harding 2005).

Sarkis usually states that there is no place for *abandonment* in his life and work, and that abandonment is a big drama. He envisages all his works and exhibitions as connected to one another. “As soon as they come into the world they quest for a notion of solidarity (...) If there is abandonment, there will be suffering” (Sarkis 2005: 132).

Roland Recht interprets Sarkis’ art as an history always under construction, not as the ravaged remains of a static individual biography. According to Recht, Sarkis’ objects form a diaspora whose identities are base on their dispersion, leaving no place for nostalgia (2005). Sarkis usually states that he always needs a place to which to connect and attach himself, a point where he returns to at the end, both physically and psychologically. He created his work “Çaylak Street” as an object of *return* after 22 years. This physical return in the art scene in Turkey undoubtedly constituted a psychological return of repressed memories and collective traumas. As Freud identifies a latency in the symptoms of trauma, Sarkis would refer to Çaylak Street 22 years later, just as Gülsün Karamustafa did of the military coup 27 years on. After its first staging in 1986, “Çaylak Street” appeared many times in other exhibitions in different forms or creations, and when his mother died in 1996, Sarkis reinstalled the objects back into the original apartment in Çaylak Street, and let them find their own silence there.

Sarkis purports to create a zone which is nothing but itself and yet leads to a new kind of reality rather than any representation. Roland Recht argues that Sarkis resembles Tarkovsky in his conception of zone, iconography and exile. An exhibition space designed by Sarkis states a zone like that in Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*, a place where

a person can remodel his/her conception of existence. According to Recht, ruins and fragmented pieces link the person to the silent past regardless of culture or history. The person has to move through to reach him/herself, and the artist is a stalker guiding this zone (Recht 2005). Thus, the departure to the zone is at the same time a *return*, the relieving of a burden.

Sarkis resists any kind of frozen art. His zone has always been nomadic. He creates his work piecemeal, in a small studio. After the exhibition, he dismantles the work and sometimes uses the pieces in new projects. He is not obsessed with permanency, but continuity. He only sells pieces providing that he can modify them whenever he wants. He explains his attitude as a rebellion against the fixed and stable characteristics of *Kriegsschatz* (spoils of war).

### ***Repetition***

There have always been repetitive forms, concepts, materials, objects and personages in Sarkis' works. He analyzes the recurrences as periods such as "Blackout", "Crisis", "*Kriegsschatz*", "*Leidsschatz*", "End of Centuries, Beginning of Centuries", etc. He explains the first appearance of a material in his works like an involuntary act, a necessity, and then, similarly, its disappearance. I believe *repetition* works in the form of symptoms in Sarkis' art. For instance, he used tar in 1970s in his series "Blackout". He has used red and green neon lights since 1979, magnetic tapes since the 1980s. He created personages such as Captain Sarkis, Blacksmith, Fisherman, Wall Painter, Angel of War or Lulu. Sarkis mentions them as independent characters who were born someday somewhere and lived their own life. Same character, or material, or object likewise can be seen repetitively in a

period then usually disappears. I believe art is a system which relieves Sarkis' burden of relating to the past, through recurrent symptoms.

### *Absence and Silence*

During the modern period of the early twentieth century, Maurice Halbwachs articulated the theory of collective memory. For Halbwachs, the memory of social groups is usually transmitted orally and continually across generations. Participants in any social order must presuppose a shared memory, including shared experiences and assumptions which draw the present social order. The individual past and the collective past tend to merge, and our temporal horizons thus develop far beyond the limits of our own lives (Le Goff 1992). In Sarkis' case, I believe he has been enriched not only by the presence and gains of older generations, but also by their absence and losses.

Sarkis' series of "Blackout" from the 1970s referred to blackout under bombardment, or loss of memory or consciousness. Sarkis applied paint in layers covering each other but hinting at blemishes, smashes, fringes and paint drips underneath. Wolfgang Becker interprets this act as an aversion to forgetting: "Covering something up does not mean enclosing. It is possible to make the face of the beloved visible under cover of curtains. Busted faces of sculptures, scratched and erased epitaphs may still disclose themselves, besides they ask for it" (Becker 1979: 29).

In "Çaylak Street", objects belonging to Sarkis' relatives designate their absence. For the shoemaker counter Sarkis states that it had existed before his came

into being and still exists even though its owner is almost blind now. Likewise his father's shoes are "spoils of war" from now on. Sarkis' father cannot walk anymore near the end of a life throughout which he had worked on foot continuously. Sarkis makes their absence matter in "Çaylak Street".

Another significant absence in the installation is the absence of sound. There are signs of sound like the old radio and bunches of sound tapes everywhere, but we do not hear them. To me, this is how Sarkis makes the silence visible. This is not an ordinary silence where there is no sound. Instead we have them recorded, buried in the memory, but without the facilities to make them heard. They are untold, they are unheard. Sarkis does not tell this in words, he only designates their existence.

Sarkis has a series of films dating from 90s recording his various drawing performances, called "In the Beginning". This refers to the holy phrase, "In the beginning was the word." However Sarkis's phrases end differently such as "In the Beginning, the Cast" (1997), "In the Beginning, the Treasury" (1998), "In the Beginning, Red" (2002), "In the Beginning, the End Continues" (2005), "In the Beginning, Newborn" (2006), etc. "The word" is missing in Sarkis' versions of "In the Beginning" indicating what cannot be told. "In the Beginning, the Scream" (1998) (Fig. 2) is part of this series, in which he reproduces an image of Edward Munch's "The Scream" in a bowl of water with watercolor. I believe this is a repetitive and unachievable attempt to make a scream "heard", instead of words which in some situations cannot express or explain.



### ***Illegibility and Ambivalence***

Illegibility seems to me to be one of the main concepts in “Çaylak Street”. Mostly illustrated with the use of magnetic tapes, this work has Sarkis handling them as formal elements, discarding their original function. He informs on the recording on the tapes, but the sound is illegible.

Sarkis uses magnetic tapes frequently like other insubstantial materials, such as water, melted candle-wax, melted lead or watercolor. These are materials difficult to mould. They dissolve, strew and resist concreteness or fixity in shape. In “Çaylak Street”, magnetic tapes form fragile ambivalent characters who try to exist in between, and negatively refer to strict words of history. Sarkis states that his objects resist frozen states. They do not represent, they do not talk. They think about their plinths and listen to their bodies in the silence of the room.

### ***Imprisonment***

Imprisonment appears as another determining concept in Sarkis’ works. The magnetic tapes of “Çaylak Street” form sculptural figures by a bonding, or bondage, without which these figures would be vulnerable to dispersion. I believe imprisonment has an equivocal meaning in Sarkis, such as the person wants to be free but at the same time needs his restriction in order to belong. I read this bondage as imprisonment in the memories of the past. Even if the magnetic tapes with the sound of the film *Nostalghia* are illegible, they take form through the bondage, and explore an identity through the imprisonment in the memories of Çaylak Street.

In Sarkis' works, boats and ships are very common. They appear as drawings, as small scale models or as *objets trouvés*, and always symbolize leaving. In many works, Sarkis used the epithet "Captain" for himself. In "Çaylak Street", the ship is afloat in the old bathtub and there is a figure composed of magnetic tapes on the ship. In an interview, Sarkis states that the ship floating in the bathtub makes it possible to travel a long distance, to go far away. This may have been "Captain" Sarkis' dream while still living in Çaylak Street, just as he actually did it, when he left. On the other hand, I believe the ship is stuck and which is expressed through the disproportionality between the little bathtub and the ship. It rather gives the impression of the imprisonment than a voyage.

I want to enrich the argument of imprisonment with the example of "The Scream". Sarkis' meeting with this particular painting overlaps with a particular period in his life, when he was seventeen and experienced tragic events against which he was helpless. This painting affected him deeply. I believe his attempts to draw "The Scream" in a bowl of water, are acts to free the figure screaming, with whom I believe Sarkis identifies unconsciously himself. He painted "The Scream" in the water many times as performances recorded on film. In these repetitive acts, the boy is freed from the imprisonment through the dispersion of the watercolor in the water, just as Sarkis wants to do it for himself as a youngster.

## 6. Conclusion

A well known and highly acclaimed German painter and sculptor Anselm Kiefer (born 1945), has repeatedly drawn attention to his own obsession with memory and the themes of German history and the horror of the Holocaust. He states that he feels like he lives and works with “a gigantic sack of culture” in his back (Assmann 2011: 346). The metaphor of a sack in his back, not only refers to the pain and sorrow it includes, but also refers to the difficulty to access it. Whatever is contained in this sack is elusive to the conscious mind and gives an insight only indirectly through art, detecting like “a seismographer of mnemonic waves in a cultural memory” (c.f. Warburg). Here lies Kiefer’s “anamnestic sensibility” which is a common cause promoted a “culture of memory” in the late twentieth century.

German philosopher Herman Lübbe affirms this retrospective sensibility and claims that “never before had a cultural present been obsessed with past to a similar extent” (cited in Huyssen 2007: 22). All the same, German scholar Andreas Huyssen asserts that this obsession emanates from a state of uneasiness and apprehension for the present and future. The accelerated cultural environment and the advancement in technology distort our conventional understanding of time and space, and overload “our psyche” and “our senses” with a burden that they are not adequately equipped to handle yet. “The faster we are pushed into a global future that does not inspire confidence, the stronger we feel the desire to slow down, the more we turn to memory for comfort” (Huyssen 2007: 25).

Hodgkin and Radstone support the idea that the contemporary memory boom represents “late modernity’s equivocations and ambivalences concerning truth, embodiment, location and the temporality of hope, equivocations which had their source in the disruptions and discontinuities of post-revolutionary urban society” (2003: 8). Furthermore, memory is acknowledged with its capacity to destabilise the authority of modernity’s universalising, monolithic generalities, its linearity, causality and objectivity (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003).

To me, the context in which memory has become a prevalent discourse has been intensively just as Huyssen and other theorists have depicted. However, memory’s role, as a discourse, is not quite simple and direct, which suggests a kind of stability for this precarious world. There are some vulnerable points of this argument outlining some contradictory features, and the unexpected consequences of the memory discourse after a few decades. Such as that politically, memory discourse counteracts the triumphalism of modernization theory (Huyssen 2007) however, it fosters the nostalgia for the modern too (Huyssen 2007, Boym 2001, Özyürek 2007). Likewise, memory discourse justifies forgetting by making it available more than needed (Huyssen 1995). Moreover, if memory suggests a shelter in the past, I would ask what kind of a “past” it is: “a unique history of genocide and mass destruction” and “the histories of atrocities and repression” (Huyssen 2007: 25). And I would also ask what kind of “a shelter” it is, because that “memory is always transitory, notoriously unreliable, and haunted by forgetting” (Huyssen 2007: 28).

As I've suggested in the introduction, and later I've analyzed in the sections, and now I conclude that memory became a prevalent discourse as a result of its intersection and overlapping with the contemporary conception of time and space structurally, in their diverse, elusive, inconceivable, multi-dimensional, inter-textual, atemporal, nonlinear, ephemeral, equivocal and paradoxical characteristics. Furthermore, memory works as a language and a manner of expression that the artists in my case study adopt and put into practice in their art. At this point in history, I am strongly convinced that the deficiencies of memory became its power which response to the zeitgeist of the era and to the search of those artists who express themselves only with the subtle forms of memory.

This argument is actually based on the basic crisis concerning the capacity of representations where memory/history distinction becomes untenable. So why do people anchor themselves to the world through memories even if memories are not accurate? As suggested, it is because of their potentiality in the search for self-recognition and identity. Memories through which we recognize ourselves are scenes constructed through mental processes, which, "while not constituting actual representations of the past, are nevertheless the core of ourselves" (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003: 13). Thus, the contemporary obsession with memory cannot be separated from the rise of possessive individualism and the history of selfhood.

In this context, where memories guide self-recognition, I determine a new perspective commonly adopted by contemporary artists, as illustrated by Hodgkin and Radstone:

[M]emory has been positively valued and deployed as that which bears traces of that which cannot enter discourse or representation. On this account, the unspeakable or the unwitnessable makes its incognisable mark on the mind as traumatic memory, or in the body, as embodied memory (trauma theory), leaving traces that can only be read (if at all) through belated witnessings (2003: 11).

This is also defined by Jill Bennett as a distinction between sense memory versus ordinary representational memory. She suggests that “an attention to modes of memory that by-pass representation may offer a fuller and more adequate account of human experience” (Bennett 2003: 25). Bennett acclaims “sense memory” as “seeing feeling” and links it to Deleuze’s assertion that “voluntary thought is not what leads us to profound truth” (2003: 37). Therein, the artist regenerates a feeling and stimulates an involuntary thought based on memory. To Bennett, there is no better guide in the area of traumatic memory, “where we would rarely choose to go, and where ‘unknowability’ is the key motif” (Bennett 2003).

In 2010, Sarkis restaged “Çaylak Street” in his retrospective exhibition, “An Icon”. It is certainly no coincidence that he chose this title, referring, as it does, to a form of painting refusing mimesis. An icon inherently praises what is unknown, and accepts that reality cannot be obtained through representation. In the booklet accompanying this exhibition, Sarkis recommends the viewers to indulge themselves even if they cannot sense it right away. This evokes Deleuze’s quest for involuntary thought leading to profound truth.

In conclusion, I argue that the contemporary “memory boom” at the end of a century full of atrocities has become significant through the inherent potential of memory to face trauma. I believe a fascinating field has been opened via contemporary arts which praise affiliation of the senses beyond representation.

Adorno's famous dictum that it is no longer possible to write poems after Auschwitz, actually discusses the possibility of both remembrance and representation after trauma. I agree with Shoshana Felman's argument that "Adorno's dictum did not imply that poetry could no longer and should no longer be written, but that it must write 'through' its own impossibility" (cited in Radstone 2000: 5). Therein I read Sarkis' art through the unrepresentability of a scream sentenced to silence.

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## Appendix



**Fig 1.** Installation view from Gülsün Karamustafa, "Stage", 1998  
(Duben and Yıldız 2008: 175)



**Fig 2.** Film still from Sarkis, "Film no 028, in the Beginning, The Scream", 1998  
(Zabunyan 2010: 35)



**Fig 3.** Installation view from Sarkis, “Çaylak Street”, 1986  
(Duben and Yıldız 2008: 54)



**Fig 4.** Installation view from Sarkis, “Çaylak Street”, 1986  
(Zabunyan 2010: 109)



**Fig 5.** Detail from Sarkis' installation "Çaylak Street", 1986  
(Zabunyan 2010: 102)