

Jean Marie Casbarian for Alwan for the Arts / Haunted (Hi)Stories

First, I want to send my deep regrets for not being able to attend this conference tonight—one that I very much wanted to be a part of....

I also want to thank Alwan for the Arts for contributing their space tonight, my colleagues that are playing part in this symposium, to Neery Melkonian and Defne Ayas for their hard work at conceiving, gathering, and realizing the Blind Dates Project, and especially for the beautiful voice of Nancy Agabian who has generously agreed to sound these words from me to you....

I was invited here tonight to tell ghost stories. ...to talk about the curious weight and power that we hand over to the image...and to challenge this imaginary space that we travel in and through as we look at a photograph.

My life is (and has always been) drowning in images. My mother kept them in a large cardboard box in the concrete basement. There was no organization to any of it. One visual memory was tossed in after the other in a historical, nonsensical mix. As a little girl I would visit the basement often and sift through all of them, examining each with serious intent, trying to sort out the mysteries, and constructing my own narratives about who these people were that I never met or did not recognize. As an adult, I would return to visit my parents always with the intention of going back down into that cold basement to sift through the photographs. It was hard-core ritual up until one night a few months before my father's death several years ago. I slipped away, stealing the box of photographs that had now been weeded through by older siblings and painfully absent of clues that I was certain would have offered up some answers. I'm not sure that I can say that I'm even clear about my questions. It's been more of an obsession about defining *what was*. As though having some indication about who I am, where I come from, and what I'm made of, will somehow define and validate my existence. (I'm embarrassed to say that my thievery was quickly found out and with head down and tail between my legs, I quietly returned the box of photographs to my father's closet several days later)

What *is* an archive? And more importantly....what to *do* with an archive?

When Neery first approached me with the idea of working with the Near East Relief Archive, I was all ears. She took me to the Rockefeller Foundation in Tarrytown where we were taken into a cold basement to look through the boxes of photographs. *I had come home*. Unbeknownst to *anyone*, this was a familiar activity for me and one in which I was delightfully comfortable.

I was in awe of the abundance of memory.

And it was here that I really began to understand the notion of reconstructed narrative.

I was, of course, immediately struck by the photographs of the orphans. The image of a child suffering has been etched in all of our peripheral minds – these ravages directed at the innocents that have been told and retold and reinterpreted over and over again through oral stories, painting, photography, media, etc.

I wanted to know more. I quickly made crude prints of a couple hundred of these images, sat on my studio floor, spread them around me, and attempted to sift through and make sense of the narrative, *my narrative*, that I was placing on these images. I soon became frustrated at my own ignorance. I have no reference to the history, to the landscape, to the architecture, to the clothing, to the body type, to the facial expressions, to the dying, to the stories, to the mythologies. All I have is the image. No information written on the back --a common strategy that my mother used and one that I was hopefully expecting.

I'm told that a catastrophe happened in these images and that a relief organization from the U.S. came in to rescue the children and help build and organize orphanages. Yet the distance between me and *it* can never be realized. It was, is not, will ever be, a part of my experience. I only have the romanticized narrative of my own making. It's obvious in many of these images what's occurring. There is a sign on the side of a building that tells me that an NER office existed *here*. But why is there this image of a Christmas tree? And who is this guy wearing a sombrero and playing a ukulele? Who is this well-dressed child with a fur muff? Who are these children in white dresses standing in lines waiting for their picture to be taken? And where are they from? Who were their parents? Why are these children working in gardens? Where is this hospital? Who are these men? Why are thousands gathered in this square? Is this horse being lowered into the ship? Or is it being taken off of the ship?

It's a challenge not to aestheticize these images. Almost as much as it is to remain neutral. They are extraordinary photographs. Fantastically peculiar and complex. Painful. Beautiful. Painterly. In short, this archive and all that surrounds its sheer existence, is dangerously loaded material for an artist.

I met with my collaborator in Berlin. Nazan Maksudyan is a historian and an Armenian Jew born and raised in Istanbul. We would sit in cafes and discuss what it is to be an archive. I was quite struck by her comment that *History is not about the past but about the present – we (inevitably) look back from where we stand – it's always about our today.*

As Nazan and I have shared and exchanged over this past year, we've come to find a common ground. Our personal stories and family myths are forever interweaving. Not only within the recesses of our own blurred memories and imaginations, but with each other's. Nazan's great grandmother, Antaram, was a survivor of the 1915

genocide and Nazan set out to send me story that she had written about her. Nazan has become my storyteller, and in a sense, my narrative for these photographs.

She tells me that Antaram used to tell how the family first reacted to the news about tehcir (the central order for "forced deportation") and that the news of deportation had been circulating in the village, especially thanks to the presence of the American missionaries in the village....

She goes on to say that at the very beginning of the journey, the men were separated from the convoy an hour away from the town and they were executed on the banks of a river near Barzudağ. So Antaram's father and one of her older brothers were killed right away.

She tells me that, As her mother, most probably together with many others, quickly realized that the lives of the males were in danger, and that she decided to dress her youngest son, Antaram's little brother, as a girl and hopefully save his life.

That With a tone of unforgettable gratitude, my great grandmother used to say: "the British put us into a boat and brought us to Istanbul."

That Curiously in rhyme with the meaning of her name, "unfading", Antaram was the only one to reach the refugee camps in Syria, Der Zor.

Needless to say, as I read her words and looked at the photographs, the ambiguity of what I was looking at was immediately activated by the fragments of language and memory.

Most interesting are those images that are ill-defined, obliterated, nearly erased. They do not operate as representation but instead speak to the fragility of the archive, the invisibility of a culture, the attempt to erase a people, the veil of memory. They present a canvas in which to explore and reconstruct our beautifully vague and imagined recollections that have somehow transformed into family histories and mythologies.

Nazan and I continue our weavings of words and images. Using Antaram's story as a guide, we are creating layers of Nazan's imagined spaces of her family myth with my obsessive attempts to reconstruct a narrative that I can't seem to comprehend. Through this process I'm coming to learn that we can never construct *what once was*. But perhaps, as we look back from this place of *now*, we can re-mine a metaphoric landscape that has been so indelibly scarred by its own history, into one that we can return and call *home*.

Thank you.....

