

ARTISTIC FREEDOM IN ARMENIA



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This research aims to study one of the issues of the Armenian art scene - the condition of artistic freedom. The research tries to show how the representatives of art scene perceive their freedom of expression. The study reveals the fields and gaps which will need an additional inquiry. One of the goals of the research to trigger a deeper analysis of the revealed gaps in the future. The research was implemented within Art Interrupted. Further and Closer project implemented by Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom in collaboration with its partners.

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INTRODUCTION

While speaking about artistic freedom, the most common violation that comes to mind is state censorship. Nevertheless, there are multiple and more subtle ways in which the rights of artists are being violated such as censorship by political and religious groups, social media platforms, art institutions etc. Artistic freedom is defined as “the freedom to imagine, create and distribute diverse cultural expressions free of governmental censorship, political interference or the pressures of non-state actors.” (UNESCO, 2018). The rights to create without censorship; have artistic work supported, distributed and remunerated; freedom of movement; freedom of association; protection of social and economic rights; and participation in cultural life are all protected under international law as a part of the freedom of artistic expression.

Armenia, as a small post-Soviet state which during its years of independence was challenged with state building, conflict with neighbors and political turmoil has been mainly researched from the political and social paradigm, lacking research on arts and culture. Although spiritually and discursively the local culture and arts have always been given high importance by the general public, politically and on a more practical system- and policy-levels those have been pushed to the bottom of priorities. Given the Soviet legacy and the systemic corruption which has been the main mechanism for governance through the past decades, it is not surprising that the cultural sphere has become a beneficial arena for rent-seeking and financial resource appropriation by certain groups. Despite the difficulties we should still consider that researchers have to face the chal-

lence of studying how the cultural sphere broadly and the arts specifically have been affected by these developments and what are the current needs of this seemingly fragile scene.

Remarks by the Researcher

This research aims to study one of the issues of the Armenian art scene - the condition of artistic freedom. Clearly, the scope of this research is broad and making far-reaching conclusions will not be possible as a result of this endeavor, but it will among others reveal how the representatives of the art scene perceive the state of their freedom of expression and further propose areas for future research. Thus, a disclaimer should be made for the reader not to perceive this research as a prescription, but rather a map through which it will be possible to understand the nuances related to artistic freedom in current-day Armenia. The paper does not aim to give a comprehensive picture of the Armenian art scene, it is focused narrowly on the limitations of the freedom of artistic expression as perceived by the art community representatives. Acknowledging that the local art scene is by far not perfect, the reader should beware of perceiving this research as an all-encompassing description of it. Quite the contrary, despite COVID-19, 2020 war and the following political crisis in the country, first time in independent Armenia, an Armenian film was nominated to Cannes film festival; an Armenian author won the EU Book prize, there is a growing amount of art initiatives and support programs. The final remark is that the paper focuses on arts, rather than culture taken broadly. Thus, issues such as cultural heritage, culture industries, tourism, larger cultural vectors, mentality etc. stayed out of this research, and were mentioned only if they were deemed relevant in the interviews.

Please note that the viewpoints expressed in the Findings and Discussion section are exclusively based on the reviewed materials and conducted interviews and do not represent the opinions of the researcher.

Data, Sources and Method

This research aims to understand how different representatives of the art scene perceive the state of artistic freedom in Armenia and what are the issues that they highlight as caveats to their activities.

Prior to presenting how this objective will be met, we should underline that one of the biggest issues in the art scene in Armenia is that it is highly under-researched. There is no systematic research done even on the level of specific art activities neither by private organizations, nor by the state. There are only individual pieces that rarely pop up in media, which however, are not enough to get a general understanding about the art scene.

This research takes a qualitative path to answer the research question and focuses on self-perceptions of the artistic community. The data that served as a material for analysis is comprised of two sets:

- 1) *Around 230 interviews with art scene representatives available online:*** The four main sources (but not limited to them) of these interviews were “Vernatun” broadcast by the Public Radio of Armenia, “Artbox” by Sputnik Armenia, Boon TV’s productions and “On the Wave” by Aliq Media Armenia. Those programs consistently follow and reflect the developments of the art scene in Armenia through regular interviews with artists, art critics, researchers, officials etc.
- 2) *18 in-depth interviews:*** In scopes of this research 18 in-depth interviews were conducted with independent artists, young artists from the regions of Armenia, art critics, representatives of art institutions, NGOs etc. The full list of interviewees is available in Table 1.

The research also takes account of relevant articles in the print and online media, statistical data, reports produced in scope of international projects, research pieces by artists and art critics, and other online materials as deemed necessary.

The gathered data was analyzed through content analysis as a result of which the answers related to artistic freedom were grouped into categories. Each category is presented in detail below (not rated by importance).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

General Information and Remarks

Prior to discussion of the topic of concern, it is necessary to introduce the turning points that affected the cultural sphere during the past years. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union the Armenian cultural scene has largely maintained path-dependent as its main vector and the logic of governance remained untouched. Starting 1930s the key model of Soviet art management relied on creative unions, which were employed by the state as effective mechanisms controlling the cultural community and subordinating it to the ideological demands of the Party bureaucratic structures. The aim was to confine cultural activities into these state-funded institutions limiting any independent/freelance intellectual and cultural endeavors. The unions had their established infrastructures such as periodicals, studios, publishing houses etc. at their disposal and anyone out of this ecosystem found it impossible to perform, get published, exhibited etc. It is needless to mention the content limitations that were imposed on the creative communities in the USSR requiring art of the time to maintain ideological correctness, accessibility to masses and proper party spirit. Meanwhile, the members of these unions were eager to get the benefits that those provided such as status, connections (both of which were highly valued in the Soviet Union) as well as access to stores and goods not available to the rest of the population, ownership of country houses, vacations, health resorts, special healthcare and

even access to foreign goods (depending on the specific union and area) (Sanders, 2015).

Armenia was of course a part of this system having five creative unions. After the independence those gained a status of NGOs and starting 2019 established a Council of Creative Unions. Despite the significant state funding, the Council attempts to gain a special status which would require the state to prioritize these Unions (Danielyan S., 2020). Under previous regimes the state was orienting its policies towards these unions and a group of loyal state-sponsored artists using the culture allocated resources as an easy income for certain networks of people. In a sense, it was a continuation of the Soviet tradition of art management where certain creative communities and the state enter into a mutually beneficial transaction. When it comes to censorship the situation slightly improved after independence: the levels of sophisticated Soviet censorship were no longer there but certain forms and content (especially political) of art were closely controlled. The situation further improved after 2018 with both in terms of liberalization of the art sphere and censorship, but still the path-dependent development remained relevant. The state pressure was replaced with a public one: after the independence the hegemonic discourse was centered around nationalistic narratives including all 'shades' of it resulting in prioritization of certain more traditional creative groups and censorship (and at times targeting) of critical voices.

In Armenia's recent history, the first turning point for the art scene was the 2018 Velvet Revolution. These series of nationwide protests and their success in overthrowing the previous regime brought hopes of democracy and for the artists specifically - hopes of liberalization of the cultural sphere. The significance of these events was high for the artists since starting mid-2000s, many of them have joined efforts with the civil society in attempts of resisting the increasingly authoritarian, corrupt regimes and bringing social

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change. When the 2018 protests were completed with success there were expectations among the artists that the scene will become freer and reforms will take place in the state cultural policy especially considering that the new prime minister Pashinyan seemed to give high importance to independent artists (a few meetings and discussions were organized with previously marginalized art scene representatives). Nevertheless, these promises failed to materialize and with the general polarization of the political discourse deprived the artists of their hopes. Several small-scale important projects were implemented by the Ministry of Culture after 2018, but they came with no comprehensive vision or meaningful policy change.

The next milestone was COVID-19 global pandemic the effects of which left significant negative but also positive influences on the scene. The initial stage of the lockdown was relatively positive in terms of providing the artist with new material and time for self-reflection and creation. They were able to practice their art through using technological tools, which in their turn opened up more room for international cooperation. If prior to COVID-19 participation in international events was connected to high costs and complex bureaucratic travel-related arrangements, afterwards many events allowed for online participation. On the other hand, the pandemic revealed many gaps in the state cultural policy, especially in the legislation - the most important one being the complete collapse of the independent art activities and the lack of social security for freelance artists.

Having to deal with the political turmoil and the pandemic, the community was faced with another shock – the 2020 war, which added the final level of disappointment and stagnation in the field. Together with personal and collective trauma, identity crisis and dramatic change in the country the artists also lost the last dregs of hope for the liberalization of the sphere considering how the nationalist grievance discourse may/would take over the critical voices once more.

Having all these in mind, it is still important to mention that as opposed to pre-2018, the artists now have a consensus that currently they do not have severe obstacles to their artistic freedom. The question, though, is whether there are mechanisms, institutions, suitable environment and open platforms for them to create and distribute their works, overcome trauma, reflect and reevaluate their role. Most interviewed artists consider the art scene stagnant with no significant changes or improvements. This is not to say that there is no potential or no development at all, but there is no systematic development path as such. Moreover, there are no institutions to facilitate change in the sphere. All initiatives whether they bring negative or positive change happen on behalf of individuals or single organizations, which (according to the interviewees) is not enough to impact the broader dynamics in the scene. Since each sphere of art is unique when it comes to the level of development and potential, it is up to professional groups to research and understand where those function differently.

Problems of the State Cultural Policy

The executive body responsible for development and implementation of the cultural policies of the Republic of Armenia is the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports. Prior to 2019 Ministry of Culture was a separate body, which was later merged with the two other ministries as a result of the optimization of the government in 2019. The new format of the ministry has three culture related departments: Department for cultural heritage and folk crafts, department for modern art and department for protection of historical and cultural monuments (The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of the Republic of Armenia). Apart from the structural and individual units the ministry's functions are implemented through over 70 state non-profit organizations (such as theaters, museums, libraries, concert halls and educational institutions) and closed joint-stock companies (Grigoryan, et al., 2017). The ministry cooperates

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with non-governmental organizations, as well as participates in international cooperations and programs. The ministry also works with and through local government bodies and territorial administrations. The key strategic aims of the state cultural policy are maintaining, replenishing and popularizing cultural heritage, promoting contemporary art and improving cultural education (Government of the Republic of Armenia, 2021).

The interviewees of this research consider insufficient state policy (or the lack thereof as many formulate) as an obstacle to artistic freedom. The transition from a socialist state to an independent state had not resulted in major revisions in the state cultural policy and the perception of culture in general. The state failed to liberalize the cultural sphere which means it still functions with the logic of providing subsidies to state non-profit organizations and cooperating with “GoNGOs” (NGOs which are treated by the state as state non-profit organizations, i.e., they receive government funding and guide their activities according to the demands of the state). The cooperation of these GoNGO’s and the state, has traditionally been based not on effective partnership, but on rent-seeking, cronyism and corruption channels. The number of these organizations have been growing during the independence as a means of appropriating state funds or for sustaining ineffectively extended staff for personal and group benefits. Although after 2018 the situation has improved, still a significant part of the ministry’s budget is being provided to over 70 state non-profit organizations and is mainly solving the issue of preserving what is existent this time not because of rent-seeking but in order to avoid unrest. The issue is that the authorities stepped back from reforms because around 40,000 people who are employed in these state-funded cultural infrastructures express discontent with every attempt of introducing change (Ohanyan, 2018).

The state of artistic freedom before and after 2018 differs significantly. If before 2018 it was possible to claim that there was state censorship, after

2018 it is no longer the case. Members of the Counterattack art group and ArtlabYerevan shared how as a result of their politically and socially engaged art they have been illegally detained by the police, appeared under constant surveillance, received threats by the authorities and were emotionally and physically harassed. However, ironically these policies were making their art even more popular pushing the state to shift the approach: instead of pressuring the artists they started to ignore their artworks by immediately removing them and avoiding media/public exposure. In current day Armenia this harsh censorship is no longer noticeable.

Another key change after 2018 was the shift of focus of the ministry from the loyal groups of artists to the individual creators who were previously marginalized. This was done through various grant projects, solving basic issues such as decreasing the prices of facility rents, limiting the creative decision-making of the political officials and engaging the professional community instead etc. The authorities no longer seem to use the state non-profit organizations as a tool for elections and gaining political benefits (at least to an extent that they used to). It can be claimed that the cultural sphere has seen improvements after 2018 in terms of artistic freedom, however below are several groups of problems that still remain caveats for the representatives of the art scene.

1. Lack of professionalism

The representatives of the field mention that the state institutions lack comprehensive knowledge of the art scene and professionalism in art management. The cultural scene is still not properly mapped and the field-specific issues remain under-researched. The ministry is lacking deep knowledge of the needs of the artists and art institutions, which means they cannot have a targeted policy towards the development of the field. There have been attempts of engaging with the professionals and providing various state grants, but the approach remains deeply faulted and unorganized.

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Many of the art scene representatives find the small-scale projects by the ministry positive, at the same time admitting that these initiatives are not a part of a single strategy, but are rather isolated projects the effects of which are not meaningfully researched, measured and targeted. The grant schemes introduced after 2018 failed to overcome the prioritization of formalities and superficial use of terminology, leading to a decrease in effectiveness. Many of the beneficiaries of these programs as well as selection committee members confirm that the process of cooperation with the state was highly bureaucratic and unprofessional. This gap between the creator and the state was further increased after the merging of the Ministry of Culture with the Ministry of Education and Science.

There is increased willingness of professionals to engage in policy development and consulting, but their attempts of providing expertise are often ignored or left hanging despite. The conclusion for the professionals is that their voices are unheard and the state does not take the independent platforms (especially contemporary art institutions) seriously, thus cooperation with the state becomes a useless experience. The state does not manage to take on its role as a regulator of the field, and fails to be inclusive and provide opportunities, platforms and physical spaces to the creators, therefore the representatives of the field are left alone in their creative, fundraising and organizational endeavors. As a result of COVID-19, the 2020 war as well as the economic and political crisis in the country the cultural field is among the first ones experiencing budget cuts and decreased state attention, hence the impression that culture is not given proper significance.

2. Mismanagement and misallocation of funds

As a result of the priorly-mentioned 'Soviet approach' to the culture management, the state does not undertake enough actions to research and understand how the liberalization at least of some spheres of art

and culture is possible. There is a lack of understanding on which spheres have a base for independent development and prospective market, thus the budget is not spent purposefully on the spheres which are highly unlikely to be self-sufficient. Thus, the limited number of private art institutions, as well as lack of policies that would provide promotion mechanisms for them.

Meanwhile, the state non-profit organizations which would prefer some level of self-financing and increased commercial activity are limited to do so because of the strict regulations by the state (although there have been some improvements in providing the state non-profit organizations some freedom to undertake commercial activities) and the underdeveloped cultural market (Danielyan, 2020). The result is that the state policy promotes more traditional art institutions though providing them resources and does not encourage experimental forms of art, that is - some fields of art are already 'on track' and have a consistent working mechanism, venues, platforms, and others have to find methods to self-sustain.

3. Centralized scene

The cultural life of the country is highly concentrated in Yerevan. With few exceptions, the regions lack purposefully functioning infrastructure including art institutions, educational institutions and opportunities to dynamically work in the art scene. The first problem it brings is the migration of the cultural representatives to Yerevan and abroad. Another problem is the more conservative environment and outdated approaches to art management. The regional representatives of the art scene often face increased censorship due to prioritization of personal connections and conservative mentality. Some interviewees confirmed that there are many artificially created caveats to self-actualization in the regions including pressure from the environment (discussed in detail later) and the local authorities. Regional youth is limited in their activities and not provided with proper

platforms for development, since the regional infrastructure such as houses of culture or local governance bodies responsible for culture do not implement projects to re-actualize their role in the development of the scene. Therefore, it is possible to claim that the center-periphery relations between the state bodies in art management are mismanaged and the approaches sometimes contradict one another.

4. Unregulated activities of art institutions and institutional caveats for development

Formally speaking the state bears responsibility to ensure artistic freedom, however in Armenia there are no mechanisms that ensure that art institutions including museums, theaters, venues, unions, publishing houses etc. are not engaging in some types of censoring. The interviewees confirm that there is lack of transparency in these institutions - many of them do not have accessible information about their regulations and selection criteria. Very often artists are rejected in their attempts to use certain spaces for their art activities if the renter/owner does not share their artistic approach. In other cases, the publishing houses propose revisions of certain aspects of written works with the condition that otherwise they will not publish it. Yet another example is when certain institutions implement discriminatory or highly selective approach to the artists without consideration of the artist's work, but rather their social position, political views, appearance etc. There are also internal disagreements between the 'clan-like', nepotistic and self-reproducing institutions, which refuse to be inclusive. On the one hand there are no extrajudicial mechanisms to deal with these issues and on the other judicial processes are long-lasting and often unproductive due to the lack of specialization. Consequently, the artists are left in a very fragile situation. The extent of the institutional censorship varies depending on the field, which is yet another unaddressed research question.

There are several technical and institutional caveats that prevent the artist from freely creating. Some examples include the lack of integration with the global monetary mechanisms which will allow trading artworks globally, or receiving compensation for digital creations: absence of YouTube monetization in Armenia, absence of PayPal, high international transaction costs and complicated and costly means of export/transportation. The artists also mentioned how difficult it is to arrange travel to international events, since as an addition to complicated visa procedures the travel costs from Armenia are also quite high.

Final issue is that the lack of state's competence results in loss of opportunities for international cooperation. Some artists mentioned that the state was reluctant in cooperation even when foreign funding had already been granted to the artist and the authorities were only supposed to assist in the implementation and provision of permissions. Furthermore, in many cases international funding requires co-funding by the state, however the limited fund allocation to the independent institutions does not allow them to take advantage of various co-funded programs.

A recent case which demonstrates a few of the above-mentioned issues is Artlabyerevan's exhibition in Kapan. On September 17, Artlabyerevan organized the exhibition called "Scenarios of the Future" at the Kapan Museum of Art (previously the name included the term 'Contemporary' but was removed by the Kapan City Government). As it later turned out, by the order of the city authorities a part of the exhibition was removed. Another work which was already being exhibited was taken out since one cleric was offended by the word "sex" on it. Yet another work which comprised of upside-down photographs and a text, was hanged in the exhibition hall in a reversed form as a regular set of 'normal' photographs and the description was taken out (Epress.am, 2021).

Legislative Gaps

The most significant gap revealed in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic was the complete social vulnerability of the independent/freelance artists. Amid the lockdown a few artists voiced how they were deprived of their sources of income due to the pandemic and there were no economic support mechanisms available for them. The issue is that in Armenia independent artists are not registered or identified in any official manner: they do not have registered employment and are mainly functioning through service contracts when/if applicable, which do not provide any benefits or social security. This also means that they are not eligible to receive state economic support. After the issue was voiced and widely discussed in online and social media some representatives of the field were invited to the ministry to discuss these problems. The question entered the agenda of a parliament session, there were online discussions, interviews etc. in search of solutions. The ministry started to comprise a registry of freelance artists. Meanwhile, a group of 6-7 field professionals were voluntarily working on researching the international experience, policies, legislations and social packages available for freelance artists with the aim of providing recommendations to the ministry. These processes collapsed after the 2020 war started.

The only tangible step that was quickly taken by the ministry was the introduction of a grant program that aimed at supporting the independent artists during the pandemic, however it did not have a significant impact on providing short-term solutions to the most affected groups (Creative Europe Armenia). After the start of the war the initially planned funding of around 20 projects was reduced to around 5 without clear explanation (even to the committee members) and therefore this lack of transparent decision making furthered the gap between the ministry and the representatives of the scene. Neither did this crisis result in a policy change or any development on the processes that were initiated at the peak of discussions. Of course, the

2020 war had its impact, but until today it is unclear whether any steps were finalized or if there are any processes going on at all.

Besides being crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic, the issues of freelance artists opened a Pandora's box showing layers of issues related to the creators' status, social benefits, general social protection as well as tax obligations. As already mentioned, the artists prefer to work through service contracts or as individual entrepreneurs. However, even in these contracts they tend to orally agree on a bigger payment but contract only a part of it to avoid paying high taxes. In case of bands or collectives, many prefer to have a single service contract with the name of one individual and later informally distribute the profit among the group. The already low income of freelance artists makes them agree both to poor contract conditions and problematic agreements with contractors. In this regard freelance artists do not have a stable income, social benefits, any mechanism for ensuring taxpaying and legal protection which would encourage them to create and seek legal record of their activities.

Another legal gap is present in the copyright law and specifically the monitoring and oversight mechanisms that can prevent copyright violations and apply penalties when relevant. In current-day Armenia the culture of registering copyright is not widespread. Moreover, even if registered there is no body that follows the violations (even on the most easily regulatable media). For instance, most television channels and increasingly the online platforms are using artists' works (both local and foreign) without having a license. The only channel that follows formal procedures is the Public TV. This means that the authors of these works are not receiving any compensation for the usage of their intellectual property. The only means to seek protection are through judicial processes, which artists try to avoid as already mentioned.

Finally, the legislation is important not only in terms of solving practical issues but also synchronizing with the international legislation allowing to benefit from large scale international projects (especially EU-sponsored projects). After joining the culture component of the Creative Europe program, it became clear that in order to join its Media component, it is necessary to have a law on cinematography, synchronize the audiovisual media legislations etc. Thus, the law on cinematography - versions of which were being suggested to the ministry for multiple years - has materialized, although with no much substantive discussion. The broader question is whether other fields also need targeted laws and if so, what should their content be. There are discussions in the art scene about the need of laws which would allow for formation of a creative market and exemption of taxes for priority areas, however it is unclear what scenarios are implementable in case of Armenia and what are the possible outcomes.

Politics and Pressure from Non-state Actors

After the 2018 revolution and even more so after the 2020 war the political and social discourse in Armenia is highly polarized to an extent that any public expression of opinion serves as a reason to personally attack each other not only on social media but also in real life. The social solidarity at the aftermath of the revolution did not last long with increasing disappointment in the government's competencies, failure to reform state institutions coupled with provocations and media interventions by the 'oppositional' forces. The 2020 war and the 2021 snap elections were the culmination point, since some of these oppositional forces managed to enter the parliament further polarizing the public and political discourses. It is important to understand that the Velvet revolution was based on democratic values as perceived by the masses, but very often the opposition purposefully misinterpreted those as imported from the 'morally corrupt West' which aims at LGBT propaganda, perverting traditional family values and promoting morally and sexually unacceptable behaviors (this was especially capitali-

zed on, since many new government officials were previous representatives of the civil society, which by past regimes was framed as a danger to the Armenian values and interests). Quickly after the revolution the media was flooded by this discourse promoted by certain so-called 'anti-revolutionary' groups. Now connecting this to the artists we should understand that in Armenia artists and civil society have been cooperating closely since mid-2000s and many artists and art organizations have received international funding. Thus, any public manifestation of non-nationalistic art was risking to become target of political misinterpretation. In other words, art was weaponized to discredit the political opponents.

The most famous case of using art for earning political dividends was the performative art project "huZANGuZANG" which was a research-based experimental re-reading of 1920s Armenian futurist poetry funded by a Ministry of Culture grant. It was supposed to take place near the Republic Square metro station in an open space, where the rehearsals were also being held. The last rehearsal of the performance was interrupted by a group of activists resulting in clashes. Narek Sargsyan (a well-known 'anti-revolutionary' from an organization called Adekvad) tried to spill "brilliant green" dye on the secretary of the "My Step" faction - one of the organizers and supports of the performance. Later Sargsyan stated that by this act he was fighting against the LGBT community which is rooting in Armenia, the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and other vicious and anti-national morals (Qocharyan, 2019). However, the issue is that the performance had absolutely nothing to do with any of the mentioned points. And this is just one example among many art initiatives after 2018 that were intentionally utilized for political reasons.

The artists' reputation is also harmed by receiving funding from any political actors or even international organizations. Although artists apply to funding because of lack of resources and not because of their willingness

to cooperate with one or the other political group, almost exclusively their decision of accepting funding is interpreted as an act of ‘selling their voice’ and ‘taking orders’ resulting in marginalization and devaluation of their work.

Problems in Education and Lack of Professionals

Although not a topic which will be discussed in depth here, it is important to mention that the general crisis in the humanities and social sciences (as well as critical thinking and research skills) in Armenia undermines the importance of the cultural studies as well. The research on culture and art is limited, highly canonized and non-academic in many cases.

This creates a series of problems in professional education as well. There is a lack of professionals who will teach up-to-date approaches and tools, a significant amount of professional literature is not available in Armenian, educational institutions are politicized, the role of education in providing practical skills is lagging behind. Finally, professional training is not synchronized to the market needs: some professions are popular despite the low demand and others are absent despite the field being in urgent need of these professions. This also means many students seek education abroad in these scarce professions, but later decide not to return, since their qualifications are underpaid in Armenia. Additionally, the local scene representatives often have to find someone working in a related field who self-educated to perform other roles or they simply try to find shortcuts for skipping certain parts of production resulting in low quality (for example there is a lack of lighting directors in Armenia).

Just as globally, the artists in Armenia have to learn about fundraising, grant writing, business, marketing and other tools in order to sustain themselves, however if in developed countries these tools are more accessible and integrated into the education, in Armenia this is still not the case.

Public Censorship

The current day art world globally is facing many taboos especially connected to any “politically incorrect”, religion-, gender- and sexuality-related expressions through art. Those are usually viewed as “mine-fields” for the artists all around the globe (Redmond, 2020). Armenia is not an exception and which is more the public has taken the role of the censor. It is generally agreed among the interviewees that the art scene is functioning under the dominance of two hegemonic narratives: nationalism (from civic nationalism to radical nationalism) and modernism. These bases being the ‘taken-for-granted’ realities of the general public, people are very reactive towards art that raises alternative viewpoints, taboo topics and/or equips experimental forms. Certain topics are extremely sensitive to explore and speak about through art. Those include gender and sexuality (especially LGBTQ issues), environmental issues and opinions that contain criticism of religion, nationalistic ideas or patriotism. As a recent example we can review the case of a street art in Kond (open-air) gallery. The artist put illustrations of a bottle of “Molotov” side by side with mountain Ararat. Later the locals cleaned the “Molotov” but not Ararat (Yeghiazaryan, 2021).

Additionally, the current dominant mentality is highly traditionalist (partially resulting from the Soviet policies)¹. The art forms that existed beyond the iron curtain did not exist locally, therefore the contemporary art and experimental forms of art did not have a fertile soil to grow on. Many traditional art and educational institutions, as well as media, are promoting the nationalist paradigm and functioning under Soviet inertia creating a society of ‘shame’ where artists are limited in their ability to freely express due to

1 It is important to highlight that there is a need for in-depth research of the Armenian culture, its developments under different historical periods, the Eastern and Western influences that it bears and how the art world was influenced by these trends. This research does not go into the roots of the claims compiled as a result of the analysis, thus the reader should not take these cultural conclusions at face value since they might be oversimplified.

the fear of being targeted. This leads to another issue, which here we call canonization of art. The Soviet legacy leads the public (including the art sphere representatives) to conceptualize art in limited terms, which leaves out the contemporary, conceptual experimental arts and other novel forms of expression. According to this logic art should be noble and harmonious – like what DaVinci or Rubens have created. Therefore, the alternative art is pushed to exist only in legitimized contemporary art institutions, where the viewer expects to be exposed to such forms of art, however, when this art leaves the walls of galleries it immediately is labeled as madness. And on the contrary, the national art is sacralized and left untouched to an extent where there is no critical opinion accepted towards the ‘great Armenians’, who are perceived by the masses as the only possible pioneers of the Armenian culture (These great Armenians are no longer alive and are buried in the Komitas Pantheon.). Thus, there is a need for ‘de-pantheonization’² of art which would both allow to better explore the Armenian culture and be more accepting of new forms and contents of art (instead of viewing culture as something dead and sacred).

Lack of Dialogue

The next problem is the lack of dialogue in three different dimensions:

- a) **Dialogue and cooperation among groups of artists: Many interviewees mentioned that there are multiple layers of unhealthy competition among various art circles (again depending on the specific field). This is mainly connected to the attempts of self-actualization and establishment of some dominance in the field. Very often the underlying reason is the competition for resources with a flip side – the lack of cooperation limits the opportunities of participating in joint initiatives as well as pushing the state and art institutions to establish favorable policies in the field.**

2 A term used by Tigran Paskevichyan

Some fields are driven by intergenerational competition and mutual rejection of the approaches to artistic activities. The set of these issues also does not allow for joint efforts of creating common creative and research hubs. As an addition, the newcomers of the field have difficulty integrating into the art scene because they do not fit into the networks of already established 'armies'.

b) Local art scene and the regional/global art world: The Armenian art scene being formed in the nationalist paradigm is often 'narcissistic' about its own value which prevents the artists firstly, to see themselves in the context of the regional and global art developments and learn best practices where possible; and secondly, to establish strong connections with foreign stakeholders which provides broader opportunities³.

c) Artists and audience: Many interviewees assert that the audience attending art events is limited to a certain group and it is rare to see new engagements. This shows that art is not popularized and it is hard to integrate it into the life of the public.

The lack of dialogue with the audience is especially noticeable in contemporary art. One interviewee formulated it as the public and the artists living in parallel realities that intersect very rarely. Since for decades the society was not encouraged to be culturally active and critically engage in art, they are lagging behind and cannot understand the transformations that art has gone through. Therefore, when these novel forms and contents of art leave the spaces of legitimized art institutions and go into public spaces,

³ With the immigration of many Russian art and humanities representatives after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there have been new dynamics in the scene the effects of which should be researched. From the first sight we can see a growth in participation in local art initiatives (such as the Golden Apricot, or exhibitions etc.), organization and experience sharing in form of open lectures, new art pieces created by them in street art, photography etc., which inevitably will affect the art scene.

they cause shock to the audience. As one of the interviewees mentions “It is like selling cigarettes at the bakery”.

Lack of Art Criticism

An article by Emma Harutyunyan published in Yerevan Magazine is named ‘There’s no criticism’ and the first paragraph states: “One day someone had to do this. I take on all the labels - “unwilling”, “hater” (continue the list at your discretion) and I calmly present to you a critical article about an exhibition. By the way, a rare phenomenon in our reality, which, however, in my opinion is very important, I will elaborate now why.” [translated by the researcher] (Harutyunyan, 2021).

This fragment echoes the opinion of most interviewees, who claim that the lack of professional and meaningful art criticism stands as an obstacle to the development of the art scene. They share the approach that it is the middle layer of the trilateral art creation and circulation mechanism consisting of the artists, the public and the art critics. The latter should have a function of serving as a net between the other two layers through explaining, unpacking and discussing artworks.

One of the reasons for this gap is that there are no professionals in the media to present the work of artists in an educated manner. The majority of those who currently write about art-related matters are not specialists, thus often misinterpret the contents and contexts. There are no media that have paid positions for art critics losing a whole area of public life and the society does not get the chance to engage in this sphere through accessible language. On the other hand, the art critics are discouraged from producing their pieces and publicizing them, since in their perspective there is no demand. Additionally, they are concerned that their pieces might be perceived as a personal attack or an act of aggression by their colleagues.

Some interviewees mentioned that this trilateral model may not be applicable to the Armenian environment and that one of the issues of the art scene is that there are attempts to take Western models and apply them to the domestic art environment which often has very little connection to the actual practices in the art scene.

Lack of Resources and Financial Security

Most of the interviewees of this research claimed that there is no art market in Armenia, meaning that there is no stable operating mechanism. This is not to say that individual artists do not engage in commercial activities, but rather that these activities fall short of providing sufficient and relatively predictable financial security. The market is spontaneous. We have already discussed how state policies do not promote the emergence of the art market, but at the same time there is a need for detailed research to understand which fields are likely to function with the rules of the market and which still need state assistance. As some representatives of the field argue, it is logical that the communist legacy and the instant switch to market economy coupled with sociopolitical hardships would not allow for a smooth liberalization of the art market. Thus, the corporate sponsorship, cooperation with businesses is a young phenomenon in the art scene and the scale of its contribution to the sphere still has to be researched.

The access to the global market is quite limited, the number of independent institutions able to provide that access is small. Partially, this problem arises because there are no art management and art marketing professionals in the field.

The state funding was already discussed in detail in the Problems of the State Cultural Policy Section. One additional problem related to this is the lack of resources especially evident in the early years of education and beginning of the career. Many students simply are not able to purchase

art supplies, equipment, instruments etc. Later they also do not have physical space to freely create or showcase their art. There is a need to create spaces and platforms for learning, cooperation and creation. Just as elsewhere, the lack of resources and financial stability pushes the artists to shift to unrelated fields or use their creative potential in commercial and entertainment activities.

The last source of funding to be discussed in this section is the international one. The beneficiaries of these mechanisms include mainly the individual artists and organizations dealing with non-traditional forms of art. Since they have not received much attention from the state and were functioning in the non-consistent art market, they had to find alternative sources of funding abroad. The limited number of groups of artists and institutions which have indeed managed to develop skills of grant writing and participation in international schemes are dependent on their abilities to fundraise. On the other hand, the artists who function within the more traditional scopes cannot benefit from these funding opportunities, since they do not speak the same 'language', possess the tools or share the culture of the donors.

The Role of Social Media

Facebook is one of the most widely used social media platforms in Armenia. In the light of the recent political developments, this platform has been growing increasingly toxic with social media trolls and bullies (but not only), who hunt for non-popular opinions and personally target those with diverging views. It has become harder to engage with the public through Facebook.

The social media agenda is the biggest censorship in Armenia as some interviewees formulated. These agendas push the artwork to fall victim to bullying, political (mis)interpretation, polarization etc. Even if the artist's work is irrelevant to the ongoing polarized discussions, it simply will not

get exposure or be artificially drawn into it. This is of course partially due to the mechanisms through which social media works, but it is even more crucial for the artist in Armenia. That is to say the Armenian artist is in a sense required to deal with this political agenda one way or another.

Finally, the media platforms which use Facebook as a way of spreading information sometimes have very harmful effect on the artists since they intentionally misinterpret the artworks in order to provoke the reader and by doing this, they diminish the role of the art and put the artist in a vulnerable position.

Psychological Factors and Self-censorship

The artists face disappointment because of the selective institutions and scarce (especially in the regions). They often tend to either quit their creative career, or move abroad (or to the capital). The artist is constantly fearful of being misunderstood and marginalized because the hegemonic narratives are very hierarchical and exclusionary of those who express diverging opinions. This not only can have psychological implications but directly affect the life of the artist. Many interviewees mentioned that they cannot freely create because of fear of isolation in their communities, in the family and at the workplace. One of the artists mentioned that he has been approached by his employer (in an unrelated field) and has been told to not to include some content in his social media. This drives the artist to limit their self-expression in form and content because they feel unease regarding the possible consequences. This is mainly conditioned by the tight community relations, where anything daring will reflect not only on the artist but also on their family members and friends. These pressures do not necessarily imply harsh physical consequences but rather isolation and sometimes bullying by other members of the community. However, many artists take the precaution of self-censorship assuming the reactions that they might receive from their surroundings.

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Besides the more practical caveats for artistic freedom, there are also certain psychological matters which result in stagnation. Many artists mention that they could not find motivation to create especially after the 2020 war, which affected the societal mood. Nevertheless, even prior to the war creating was seen as a pointless experience, since firstly it is misunderstood by the public (if the public engages at all) and secondly it fails to result in a meaningful impact.

CONCLUSIONS

To summarize the main findings of this research we can argue that there is no direct and pressuring state censorship in Armenia, nonetheless there is a high level of public censorship especially with the increased use of social media. The artists have to self-censor to avoid becoming a target for political utilization or social pressures/isolation. The political polarization and the 2020 war have made public utterances even riskier for the artistic community. As an addition to these limitations a significant group of art representatives remain socially and economically vulnerable due to the gaps in the legislation. They are deprived of many opportunities as a result of the insufficient state policies.

This research took on quite an ambitious and broad agenda simply because the lack of previous research did not provide grounds to ask more specific and focused questions. Taking this 'risk' it was possible to come up with a few recommendations for future research presented below:

- There is a need for quantitative research projects that will use statistical data in order to understand the numerical indicators of the art scene: funding sources and proportions, the approximate numbers of those engaged in each of the fields and the financial needs according to the size of the target.
- Research pieces that map each art field, present their indicators, size and prospects of the market will allow to propose more targeted funding policies (to the state,

the international actors and corporate actors). The same research should be applied to the state non-profit organizations to evaluate their effectiveness and ability to self-sustain.

- The legislative mechanisms should be examined by the relevant professionals and evaluated in order to understand how much practicality they contain in current-day Armenian art scene and what are the possible steps to be taken to make the scene more dynamic and encourage participation.
- More research should be conducted about the situation of the art scene in the regions. This is one of the most socially and economically vulnerable group among the scene representatives and there is an urgent necessity to understand what are the local needs and opportunities.
- It will be beneficial to research the state cultural infrastructure including intra-ministry dynamics and decision-making mechanisms as well as their connection with regional and local authorities. This will allow to understand how these structures can become more productive in art management.
- The role of social media is crucial for the art scene yet there is still no discourse around the limitations and opportunities that it provides to the Armenian art scene representatives.
- Finally, there is an urgent need to engage humanities and social science professionals into the research of the local culture and identity. This is crucial since the art scene suffers great damages from the inability to self-reflect and understand the local practices. If these practices and the models (usually generated in the West)

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that we are trying to apply to evaluate the field do not coincide, the endless cycle of problems will be hard to overcome.

As a closing remark, we should acknowledge once again that the Armenian art scene is quite dynamic and there are many dedicated individuals and organizations that continue their work despite the hardships. Thus, we should view these gaps as helpful guides in looking into novel areas and engage more people in pushing the art scene forward.

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TABLE 1. PARTICIPANTS OF IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

#	Name	Vocation
1	Marine Karoyan	Founding Artistic Director of ARé Cultural Foundation, Director of Hay-Art cultural center
2	Arik Bambir	Musician, Member of the Bambir band, Founder of TmbaTa band
3	Vahe Budumyan	Director of Focus Art NGO, Former Deputy Minister of Culture
4	Artak Gevorgyan	Artist (musician, street artist); Co-founder of "Counterattack" art group
5	Shushana Sirakanyan	Lawyer working with independent artists
6	Vardan Azatyan	Art historian and translator of theory and philosophy, founding member of National Association of Art Critics
7	Liana Stepanyan	Art critic from Gyumri
8	Vahan Khachatryan	Film director
9	Anonymous artist	Filmmaker from Vanadzor

10	Sona Harutyunyan	Founding President of KulturDialog Armenien
11	Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan	Novelist
12	Arevik Ashkharoyan	Ari Literature foundation
13	Silva Chobanyan	Executive director at Armenian Center for Contemporary Experimental Art (ACCEA)
14	Artur Avanesov	Composer
15	Armen Ohanyan	Fiction writer
16	Tigran Paskevichyan	Poet, journalist, documentary filmmaker and scriptwriter
17	Tsolak MLKE-Galstyan	Art director of MIHR Theatre
18	Hovhannes Margaryan and 2 members of the ARTLABYEREVAN	ARTLABYEREVAN cultural NGO

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Azniv Tadevosyan is a Junior Research Fellow and Doctoral Student of Political Science at the University of Tartu's Johan Skytte Institute of Political studies, where she completed her MA studies in International Relations and Regional Studies in 2021. She has experience working in local and international NGOs in Armenia, where in different stages she was engaged in research, regional dialogue programs, local capacity building and parliamentary support programs. Apart from her main area of work, she has been engaged in various short term research projects and her own initiative of 'Come to Gyumri' designing and conducting cultural and political tours in her hometown Gyumri for the past 7 years. She is interested in visual and conceptual arts and storytelling. Currently Azniv is continuing her research started in 2021 that studies the connection between politics and aesthetics on the case of dissident music and cinema in post-2012 Russia.

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Սույն հետազոտությունը քննարկում է հայաստանյան արվեստի ոլորտում առկա խնդիրներից մեկը՝ ստեղծագործական ազատությունը: Այն փորձ է անում բացահայտել, թե ինչպես են արվեստի ներկայացուցիչներն ընկալում իրենց արտահայտման ազատությունը, ու առաջարկում այն ոլորտներն ու բացերը, որոնք հետագա հետազոտության կարիք ունեն: Հետազոտության նպատակներից է նաև նպաստել առաջարկած բացերի ավելի խորքային վերլուծությանը հետագայում: Հետազոտությունն մաս է կազմում «Ընդհատված արվեստ. հեռու և մոտ» ծրագրի, որն իրականացրել է Ֆրիդրիխ Նաումանի «Հանուն ազատության» հիմնադրամը՝ իր գործընկերների հետ համագործակցությամբ:

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