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Sarkis

By OLIVIA SAND

There are many things to explore in the work of Sarkis. A *Gesamtkunstwerk* by himself, he is a true multi-disciplinary artist who bridges the diverse aspects in the world that surrounds us in order to create works of art. It is tempting to say that artists such as Sarkis are no longer working in this way today by exploring, questioning, and reaching out to film, music, literature, theatre and the science to name just a few. Therefore, it is no surprise that his art is seen as demanding, requiring the active visual and intellectual participation of the viewer.

Born in Turkey, and based in Paris since 1964, Sarkis has pursued his quest to tackle the complexity and the endless possibilities in relation to making art. In the interview below, he discusses his work and approach with the Asian Art Newspaper.

ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER:

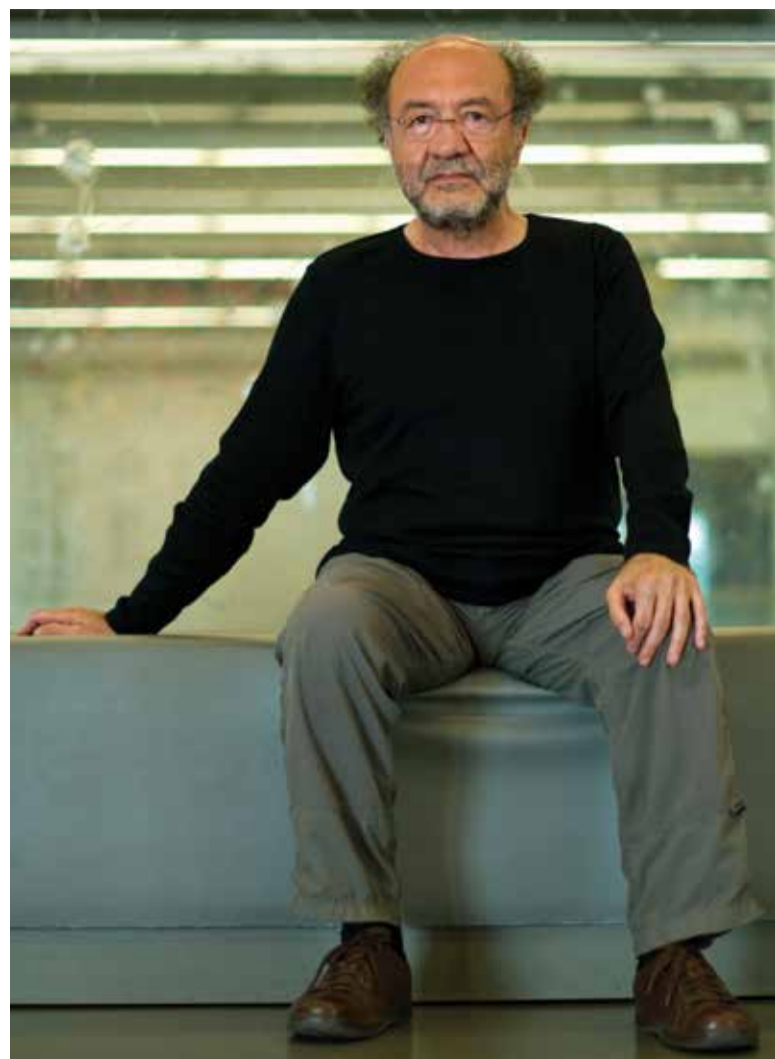
On the one hand, many people know your name, but on the other, it is hard for people to associate your name with any specific type of work. Paradoxically, you are extremely well known, and yet, unknown. SARKIS: That is because I have

always fought against becoming a kind of brand.

AAN: You came from Turkey to France in the 1960s. Why did you leave Turkey?

S: Actually, I did not want to leave, but the overall conditions at that time were not easy. Nevertheless, I did have a few exhibitions then and I remember the first show I had after graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul. I was twenty-two years old – and I did everything myself – from finding the exhibition space, printing the opening invitations, hanging the pieces and explaining my work. Decades later, I have not changed and I still work that way today. I may collaborate with specialists in their respective field, but I remain the one that oversees everything, for all my exhibitions, whether we are dealing with the Louvre, or the Centre Pompidou. This is simply my way of working.

When I started, I had never seen an original painting. Therefore, culture primarily came from reproductions. This is exactly what the late Roy Lichtenstein summarised so well: what we learn about art history is from books, and from magazines. In my case, there were very few magazines available and the only original painting I saw was a small painting by Bonnard at a museum. All the rest, all the other



Portrait of Sarkis © Muhsin Akgn. Courtesy Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Bruxelles

works were copies. So it was because of these circumstances, really, that I came to France. Also, it is often a language that encourages you to go somewhere. As I spoke French, as I attended a French school in Istanbul, France was the natural choice. Of course, I could also have gone to

Germany, all the more so, as my work had nothing to do with the Ecole de Paris. A few years after my arrival, I probably felt closer to a certain momentum that was taking place in the art world in general rather than to the specific situation in France. So

Continued on page 4

news in brief

Travelling widely in Asia, he was a Professor of Anthropology for over two decades at the University of Hong Kong and during that time he wrote numerous outstanding books on Laos's history and culture. Dr Evans eventually moved to Laos in 2005 to live permanently in Vientiane with his wife Keomany Somvandy and their daughter. He became a Senior Research Fellow with the prestigious École Française d'Extrême-Orient and also co-operated on many projects with Ministry of Information and Culture as well as with the Lao Institute of Cultural Research and the Lao Academy of Social Sciences. This year, his most recent publication *The Ai-Lao and Nan Chao/Tali Kingdom: A Re-orientation*, appeared in the *Journal of the Siam Society*.

NAGEL JUBILEE AUCTION, GERMANY

From 8 to 10 December, Nagel, the German auction house is holding its 25th anniversary sale of Fine Asian Art in Stuttgart. The Fine Asian Art sales, Nagel's flagship events, have taken place twice a year since 1990. In the December sale, there are over 2,800 lots with a total estimate of 10-14 million Euros.

Highlights of the ceramic section include an early Ming *yuhuchunping* vase, Hongwu period (1368-1398), height 33 cm, from a Singapore private collection, with an estimate of Euro 200,000. The vase is painted in copper-red with flowers of the Four Seasons, comprising camellia,

pomegranate, chrysanthemum and peony. Also on offer is a lime green-ground *famille-rose* Hundred Boys vase, iron-red sea mark and period of Jiaqing (1796-1820), height 69.5 cm, estimate Euro 150-250,000. Another highlight, from a private South German Collection, is a *famille-verte* rouleau porcelain vase depicting the Eighteen Scholars, originally from the collection of Comtesse Mona Bismarck, sold at Sotheby's Monaco in 1986, China, Kangxi period (1662-1722), height 78 cm, with an estimate of Euro 100-150,000.

Elsewhere in the auction, highlights include two lots from the Lingèro Collection, Brussels: a gilt-bronze figure of the first King of Tibet, 15th/16th century, height 15.5 cm, estimate Euro 60-100,000, and an historically important figure of Chögyel Phagpa, member of the Five Great Masters, Tibet, 15th century, height 10 cm, estimate Euro 30-50,000. Finally, a conch shell trumpet with gilt-copper mount with The Eight Auspicious Symbols, Tibeto-Chinese, Qianlong four-character Yuzhi mark and period (1736-1795), 11 x 22 cm, estimated at Euro 60-100,000.

More information on www.auction.de.

LONDON AUCTIONS

The sales during Asian Art in London in November brought some surprises, especially where Chinese ceramics were involved.

At Dreweatts' Chinese Ceramics and Asian Works of Art, on 10

November, a blue and white 'Five Dragons' vase, Jiaqing seal, sold for £230,000 (est £8-12,000), with two bidders battling it out on the phones. Another top seller was a bronze model of a recumbent deer with coral antlers, possibly dating to the Southern Song dynasty and in a Warring States revival style that was typical of the time. The pre-sale estimate was £3-5,000 and after intense bidding finally sold for £60,000.

At Christie's two-day sale the total was £4,451,126, with 78% sold by lot, 90% sold by value. The top lot was a 19th-century jadeite censer and cover, which sold for £278,500, against its pre-sale estimate of £30-50,000, it went to the Asian trade. The next two top lots also sold well over pre-sale estimate, a crackle-glazed *cong*-form vase, Qianlong six-character seal mark and of the period (1736-1795) sold for £104,500 (est £20-30,000) and a pale celadon 'dragon and *chilong*' disc, *bi*, Qianlong period (1736-95), which sold for £98,500 (est £3-5,000), again both to the Asian trade.

BROOKLYN MUSEUM

Arnold L Lehman, Shelby White and Leon Levy Director of the Brooklyn Museum, has announced that he will retire in mid-2015. Lehman, who turned 70 in July, joined the Brooklyn Museum as Director in September 1997. Under his leadership, the Brooklyn Museum has undergone nearly two decades of sustained growth, more than doubling its audience and its endowment.

NEW GALLERY, LONDON

Rossi & Rossi, leading dealers specialising in South Asian Art, is moving its London premises. On 4 December, the gallery opens its new gallery at 27 Dover Street, in the heart of London's Mayfair. One of the highlights of the opening show is a rare early 13th-century Tibetan *thangka* of the Buddha Mahavairocana. Never previously exhibited in the UK, it is considered one of the most important early *thangkas* of its kind, depicting a principal figure in Buddhism: the universal Buddha from which all buddhas emanate, and the representation of wisdom and omniscience in Tibetan tantric practices. More information on www.rossirossi.com.

OBITUARY: SHEIKH AL-THANI

Sheikh Saud bin Mohammed Al-Thani of Qatar, at one time the biggest art collector in the world, died at his home in London in November, aged 48. Sheikh Al-Thani, a distant cousin of the current Emir, served as Qatar's minister of culture from 1997 until 2005 and oversaw an ambitious museum building programme for the oil and gas-rich Gulf state. He also built large collections of antiquities, photography, Chinese and Islamic art. Many of his purchases in the Islamic art field are now on display in the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha. Other areas in which he amassed collections were furniture, vintage cars, natural history, and jewellery.



Portrait of an official in front of the Beijing imperial palace. Hanging scroll, ink and colours on silk, China, c. 1480–1580. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

The Golden Age of China has arrived (in London).

Visit the British Museum from September 18th to experience the BP exhibition *Ming: 50 years that changed China*. Having partnered closely with China for 40 years, BP is proud to make some of their finest art accessible to people in the UK, helping bring to life a snapshot of China's rich cultural heritage. The beautiful pieces on show encapsulate a hugely successful time for China, from AD 1400 to 1450. So come and enrich yourself by witnessing the treasures of China's 'Golden Age'.

For more enlightenment, visit [bp.com/arts](https://www.bp.com/arts)



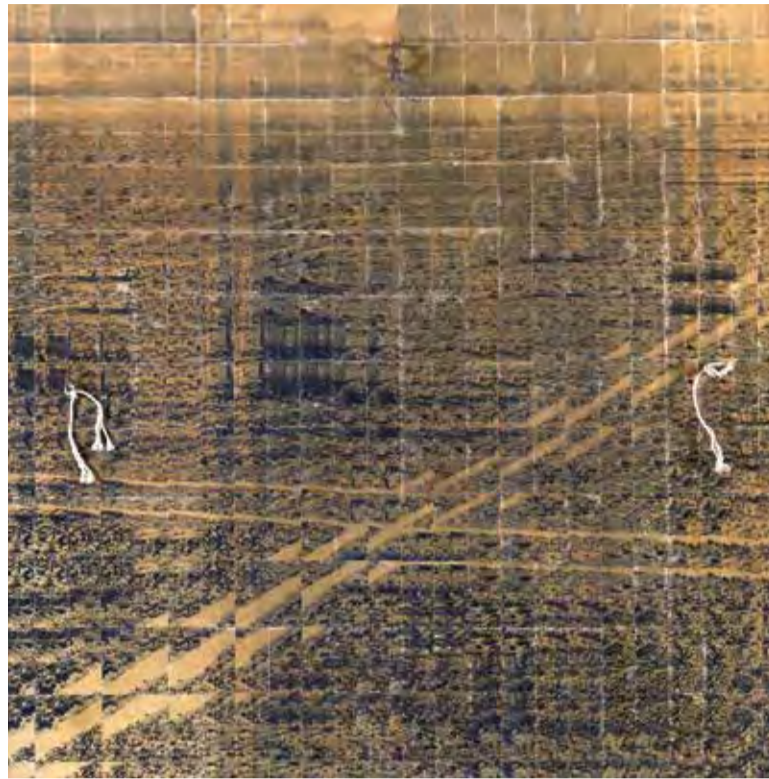
starting 1968, I was better acquainted with the young American artists of the time. I got to know Robert Rauschenberg quite early and we became friends in around 1967, and I also became acquainted with Robert Morris. I was close to these artists because I had started working with the Sonnabend Gallery in New York. In the late 1960s, Robert Rauschenberg was already well known, Robert Morris much less so, and Bruce Nauman not at all. It is also around this time that I met Joseph Beuys. There were some encounters then that had a critical impact on my way of working.

AAN: What were the encounters, or the events, that particularly affected your work?

S: In 1967, I was making collages relying on a certain technique. Looking back, I realise that the technique was referring to what in music is called the dodecaphonic technique, which is the repetition of a note, or an image, after the other parts have been used. At that time, there was a biennale taking place in Paris and I was awarded the first prize for painting, although I was making a collage. Two months later, a gallery contacted me to ask me to have a show with them. Then there were no curators, rather it was art critics and art historians that advised these young galleries. I did the show with my collages and within one day everything was sold. The next day, the gallery started to pressure me. I was a young artist with no experience and instead of being flattered as the gallery asked me for additional pieces in a certain size and in a specific colour, I was unable to respond to their request.

For the first time in my life, I fell into a kind of depression, because between the content and the formal aspect of my work, it became obvious that the formal aspect had taken over and become more important than the content. Consequently, I could not meet their request. Also, the events of May 1968 were close, and during the next six months, I was unable to do anything. Then, I moved forward, relying on images bearing a political and social connotation that came from magazines such as *Life* and *Paris Match*. Surprisingly, people did not care about this work – they only cared about the formal aspect, as apparently I had created pieces featuring very interesting formal qualities with the result that six months later, I did the exact opposite, creating pieces where all the energy remained inside.

In 1966, the late Harald Szeemann came to see me with Pierre Gaudibert, who was the director of the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, which led to my participation in the landmark



Reproduction of a collage that Sarkis was awarded first prize at the Salon de la Jeune Peinture in 1966



Sarkis' contribution to the exhibition 'When attitude becomes form' at the Berne Kunsthalle in 1969

exhibition *When attitude becomes form* at the Kunsthalle in Bern in 1969. Following that exhibition, I was more active abroad, as in France there had not been that open-mindedness or any interest in the anti-form movement. Therefore, I then mainly began exhibiting in Switzerland and Germany.

Speaking of awareness, I realised that I was completing pieces very much linked to the medium, to the thought, to the moment. I am deliberately not using the word *Zeitgeist*, but I felt that there was a common ground between myself and some film directors. Take Robert Kramer (1939-1999), for example, in New York, who has made underground movies on the border of

clandestine productions. The film *Ice*, and later *Milestones*, are both born out of, and connected to, life in general and to what we have experienced. John Cassavetes (1929-1989) was also quite close to the live creation of that specific language.

At that time, I had no studio, so I ended up taking a space in the basement of a garage. There was no electricity and I basically set up a clandestine studio. I plugged into the garage's electricity supply and I completed my toughest pieces during this period. However, for me, the main question whilst working in this hidden space was how to show my work in the open? Using a metaphor, how do you tell a fish living in the water that it should get out of it? All these things that can be shown, how do you show them? When you get up in the morning, you wash your face and you get ready to go out. For an artwork, it is the same – because you have to find out how they will work and speak in the space. These essential questions have remained the same over the years.

AAN: As you had already established friendships with some of the young American artists, did you consider moving to New York and keeping a studio there?

S: No. Germany would have been an option, because early on I got to know Joseph Beuys and Dieter Roth. I was also close to the so-called Arte Povera artists, Pistoletto, Calzolari, Zorio, Anselmo, and Merz, although Italy attracted me much less than Germany. Had I moved to Germany, it would have been to Düsseldorf where I once had a large exhibition.

AAN: Earlier, you spoke about museum directors and museums. Do you feel that today the museum is the best mechanism to get your work and its message across to an audience?

S: There are some museums where I am very attached to the institution, as well as its director. For example, one of the museums that understands me best is Mamco in Geneva with Christian Bernard, who is also the founder of the institution. Two or three years ago, we wanted to stage a retrospective of my work. It was simply impossible. So we tried to identify a way to make the retrospective happen and by which means. I thought about it from my side, trying to figure out a concept,

yet making it clear that I did not want to make the exhibition myself and that Christian Bernard would be the one curating it. That was the first time I had given such freedom to someone to do a project of that scale. I must add that over the past 20 years, I have kept a small studio there, too. I visit it once or twice a year and whenever I spend time in this studio, something happens. The whole idea of Christian Bernard's museum was not far from the Academy in Florence where there are the suites of monastic cells decorated by Fra Angelico. Within the museum, in the past, there had been some other artists' studios, but after 20 years, I think mine is the only one that has survived.

The concept I had figured out for the exhibition was the following: I looked at my work and realised that I was interacting with many other disciplines in which there were artists, musicians, architects, writers, philosophers, or film directors. As a result, by interacting with them, I had created works of art. From the very beginning, as I started to be interested in art, I have been very attached to certain artists. For example, I started off with Munch, when I was fifteen or sixteen, and over the years I completed many films and watercolours with Munch as the starting point. It still continues today. I also have done several pieces based on the work of Louis Kahn, John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Andrei Tarkovsky.

Initially, I thought I was interacting with approximately 30 thinkers, but we ended up with more than 80 and eventually the number of pieces amounted to more than 300. So we decided to set up the exhibition by showing how my work was born out of the interaction with other artists. I selected all the pieces, made two or three huge files, and gave them to Christian Bernard. On his side, he worked on the files as if it were a music score. To me, Mamco is one of the best museums around.

Another museum I like is the Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam and their director Sjarel Ex. He started out by conceiving exhibitions taking a certain situation as a starting point. In 1987, the exhibition *Century 87* took place in Amsterdam and around 15 or 20 artists were invited to show in different places. I have been working with Sjarel Ex since then, which is unusual, because most of the time the relations with a museum, or a gallery, are not the same.

AAN: You were head of the art department at the School of Decorative Arts in Strasbourg, France, for 10 years, from 1980 to 1990. I know that teaching and the transmission of knowledge are very important to you. What were you trying to convey to students?

S: In my opinion, teaching is a creation and it is this that I have been trying to make them understand. Also, I wanted to show them the importance of being able to read their own works, for example, after putting this, than that, why then move away from the initial step in order to go in another direction? What is this experience? Each artist does this differently. I am not talking about a diagnosis, but how they actually go about the process.

I tried to teach them that they had to create a conversation, a language within what they were doing. I asked them to do this not just on paper, but for real, in action. Everything comes from action. In my teaching, I have always been very direct. When I took



Ikon 43 after Matthias Grünewald, 9.11.1996

the students to exhibitions, I asked the museum director to talk to them for about an hour about the exhibition. Then, once we were alone, we started talking amongst ourselves to discover how we saw things and how we saw the world.

I was very fortunate to be part of various projects that were very innovative in their approach to teaching. I was invited to collaborate with the Institut des Hautes Etudes en Arts Plastiques in Paris, which was set up by the late Pontus Hultén. Here, there were experts in other disciplines like the artist Daniel Buren, or Serge Fauchereau, who was a great connoisseur of Malevitch and of Russian and German art from the 1920s and 1930s.

We invited 20 young artists from around the world – artists, not students. They would spend a total of six months with us (two segments of three months) in order to hold a dialogue and to talk. We started at 9.30 in the morning, closing the doors, and never making our work public, or allowing any outsiders to attend. Then, for six, seven, or eight hours in a row, we tried to examine what was happening. For example, the first day, we tried to identify the territory called 'art'.

We invited great thinkers, film directors, and musicians. At this time, Samuel Beckett and Robert Kantor were still alive, so we thought about inviting them, but both of them sadly became ill and passed away. So we invited their loved ones to speak about the issue of the interpretation of the works. We also invited musicians – Luciano Berio and we were also in touch with Pierre Boulez – in order to understand at what moment music conductors, or film directors, were 'born' and identified as proper disciplines. Needless to say, we had fascinating discussions.

Similarly when we discussed the AIDS virus. The discovery of the virus was made by a group of French scientists, so we invited one of the scientists to join us as we wanted to find out how a cell that had existed for a long time suddenly had become so dangerous.

Then by the year 2000, I had started my mobile school: whenever I have an exhibition in a museum in France, Switzerland or Canada (French speaking countries because I cannot hold a conversation in English and I do not speak German), young artists have the opportunity to discuss their work with me over five hours. This happens on a first-come, first-serve basis, without any selection. They come at 9.30 in the morning and I see the person just once. I have done this at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, at the CAPC in Bordeaux, in Nantes. It is an ongoing project.

AAN: Speaking of interactions with other disciplines, have you ever been tempted to collaborate with a theatre, or opera house, in order to



On the Breaking Bad's Wallpaper Between the Cry and the Masks, 2014, photograph mounted on aluminium, neon, six African masks, 144 x 235 cm. Courtesy Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Bruxelles

design the stage sets and the costumes of a production?

S: I was invited to design the sets for *Richard II* at the Festival d'Avignon. If I were to do it again, my approach would be different in regard to my inter-reaction with the director. In my field, one does something from the start to the very end, even if one has to rely on assistants or outside experts. Ultimately, I am the one overseeing every single aspect of my undertaking. I am not saying that I am controlling everything, but it has to work both ways: I have to accompany the director and the director has to accompany me.

On one occasion, around 1995, a project did not work out as I had hoped: an opera house in Germany had asked me to do Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. I do not deny that in a certain sense, I may be naive like a child – when giving a toy to a child, he wants to find out how it works, how it functions and he wants to see the toy from the inside. I tend to act a little like that. I considered giving two years of my life to the project, because I thought it would be fascinating to work on the *Ring* (works that I know, more or less, by heart) together with a director and a conductor. Ultimately, I was naive.

They wanted me to do only the sets without the costumes and without being in touch with the conductor. There was nothing for me to do really, as there was no global vision. However, there is a beautiful example of a truly global vision of these operas with Patrice Chéreau's *Ring* in Bayreuth from 1976, done in association with Pierre Boulez. It was simply magnificent. Unfortunately, these days the system wants names – and nothing else. This does not interest me.



Les Innocents V5, 2007, glass, metal body, LEDs, 64 x 48 cm. Courtesy Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Bruxelles

AAN: You are working on a great project as you will be representing Turkey at the upcoming Venice Biennale in 2015. Is the space featuring your exhibition still located in the Arsenale?

S: It is still in the Arsenale. However recently, approximately 20 private sponsors have decided that the Pavilion of Turkey should have a space for the long term. They have rented a 500-square-metre space for the next 20 years at the Arsenale. If everything goes according to plan, the space will be inaugurated with my installation.

AAN: Have you got total freedom in your installation for the Pavilion of Turkey, or were you asked to avoid certain issues?

S: I have given it a great deal of thought when I was approached to do the project at the Venice Biennale. I have been living in France for the past 50 years and, as an artist, I do

not need an exhibition at the Venice Biennale. In addition, 2015 marks the anniversary of the genocide and I am of Armenian origin. I am taking all precautions to avoid any kind of polemic, because many people are wondering why I have been chosen for the Venice Biennale. I have to mention that the selection process for the Biennale has also been changed. Today, there is a foundation that deals with the various biennales (Istanbul Biennale, Venice Biennale, Music Festival in Istanbul, etc), which is independent from the government. The foundation chooses one curator and he is the one that selects the artist. This year, the process is different. Perhaps they may have been ashamed that a curator would select me? Consequently, they did the contrary – they set up a jury of five people that included the artist selected at the last Venice Biennale in 2013, two scholars from Turkey, and two scholars from abroad who are currently teaching in Turkey. The jury came up with one name: mine. And I would also be the one selecting my



Mon atelier Villejuif en fluo, 2003, neon, pates a modeler, lead, wax and sur planche, with the drawing covered in Plexiglas, 16 x 66 57 cm. Courtesy Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Bruxelles

curator. I chose the director Defne Ayas from Witte de With in Rotterdam. I have the entire project figured out in my head, including the smallest detail. As you can imagine, there is a lot of pressure at all levels. So, I have a solo show at the Pavilion of Turkey and, in addition, the curator of the Pavilion of Armenia, has invited me to be part of her exhibition, which I have accepted. It will be located on Isola San Lazzaro (an Armenian island with Catholic background since the 18th century). Then, the curator of the upcoming Istanbul Biennale (the former curator of the last Documenta, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev) has also invited me to the Biennale. Then, at the same time as the Istanbul Biennale, an exhibition of my work will take place at the Villa Empain in Brussels. This exhibition means a lot to me: my work will be shown together with the work of the Armenian film director Sergei Parajanov. His film *Sayat Nova*, in my opinion, is probably one of the greatest films in the world.

To go back and answer your initial question regarding my work for the Biennale in Venice, no-one can tell me 'do not do this', or 'do not do that'. No-one. I may have other pressures (mental, historical), but no-one can impose any kind of censorship. So this exhibition is a great responsibility, as there are numerous parameters. All throughout my life I have tried to unfold things. Always.

AAN: In the past, you have completed numerous pieces in relation to collective memory and humanity. Do you find that the passage of time has had a great impact on your own work? Today, would you complete your pieces in

the same way? How do you view the notion of time, in regard to collective memory?

S: We are fortunate to be talking in my studio, because certain things have been here since 1965! Certain pieces were completed a long time ago, others about two days ago, but all these objects and pieces live together. It is true that there are certain things where I am not sure I would be able to do them again today. I think that every piece is connected to its time, but I am, indeed, trying to find a way of how one piece can talk to the other. There are some pieces that are older, with a past, which really give a strength and energy to the others. Other pieces are further in the background, but I am not going to eliminate them. At Mamco in Geneva, I brought a piece from my studio from 1979 that had never been seen before and, even next to recent pieces, the dialogue worked out very well. It all depends on the scenography.

AAN: Some of your pieces are now permanent installations in various museums around the world. Do you keep track of them?

S: I follow the faith of my installations and pieces that are with museums. For example, the museum in Istanbul recently sent some stained glass windows abroad, and one of them ended up broken. I contacted the craftsman who had produced the window in the first place and asked him what could be done. I suggested that he add some lead to repair it, as craftsman did in the Middle Ages, which he then did. Even if in terms of process these windows relate to the 16th century, this time, it is as if the window had made a trip to the 16th century and had come back.

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