

THE ARMENIA PROJECT
BY UNNI GJERTSEN AND LIV STRAND

Հայաստան նախագիծը



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ABOUT THE PUBLICATION

THE ARMENIA PROJECT – TALES OF FRATERNITY, POWER AND TIME

This publication is a result of an ongoing artistic collaboration between Unni Gjertsen and Liv Strand, using a research journey to Armenia in June 2009 as its starting point. The text in the publication is a record of processes and observations from the journey. The project further consists of individual installations that will be on show in August 2011 at 0047 in Oslo, where the art works will be exhibited in the same room, overlapping each other in the space. The Armenia Project has been presented earlier, as a work in progress, as part of The Eternal Tour 2010, a nomadic art festival in Jerusalem and Ramallah.

UNNI GJERTSEN is a visual artist engaging in subjects relating to historiography and the function of memory, geography and perception of places. Studying the role of esthetics in shaping conviction and beliefs, using a self-reflexive approach, she alternates between affirmative strategies aiming to influence future chains of events and reflective pieces based on processes of observation. In recent years she has conducted a series of works in relation to travels. Unni Gjertsen is currently working with her artist pages for A Prior Magazine and is organizing together with Runa Carlsen a reading group and lecture program going to take place at Kunsternes Hus in Oslo 2011–2012 having a text by Bruno Latour as its starting point.

LIV STRAND is a visual artist immersed in the practice of re-shaping. Re-shaping as a means to reflect definitions by translating them into form; information is transposed materially, or from one field of art to another, manifesting gaps and cracks between disciplines as a performative space. Currently working on a staged collaborative examination of a text from 1926 by Gertrude Stein, in which words become objects and movements. It will be performed at Moderna Museet and Weld in Stockholm 2011–2012. In 2011 Liv Strand started the forum Salon Material with Johanna Gustafsson Fürst, with the aim to take on academic theory from the perspective of artistic practices and to materialize theory — no experts allowed.

0047.org

www.eternaltour.org

IMAGES FROM ARMENIA

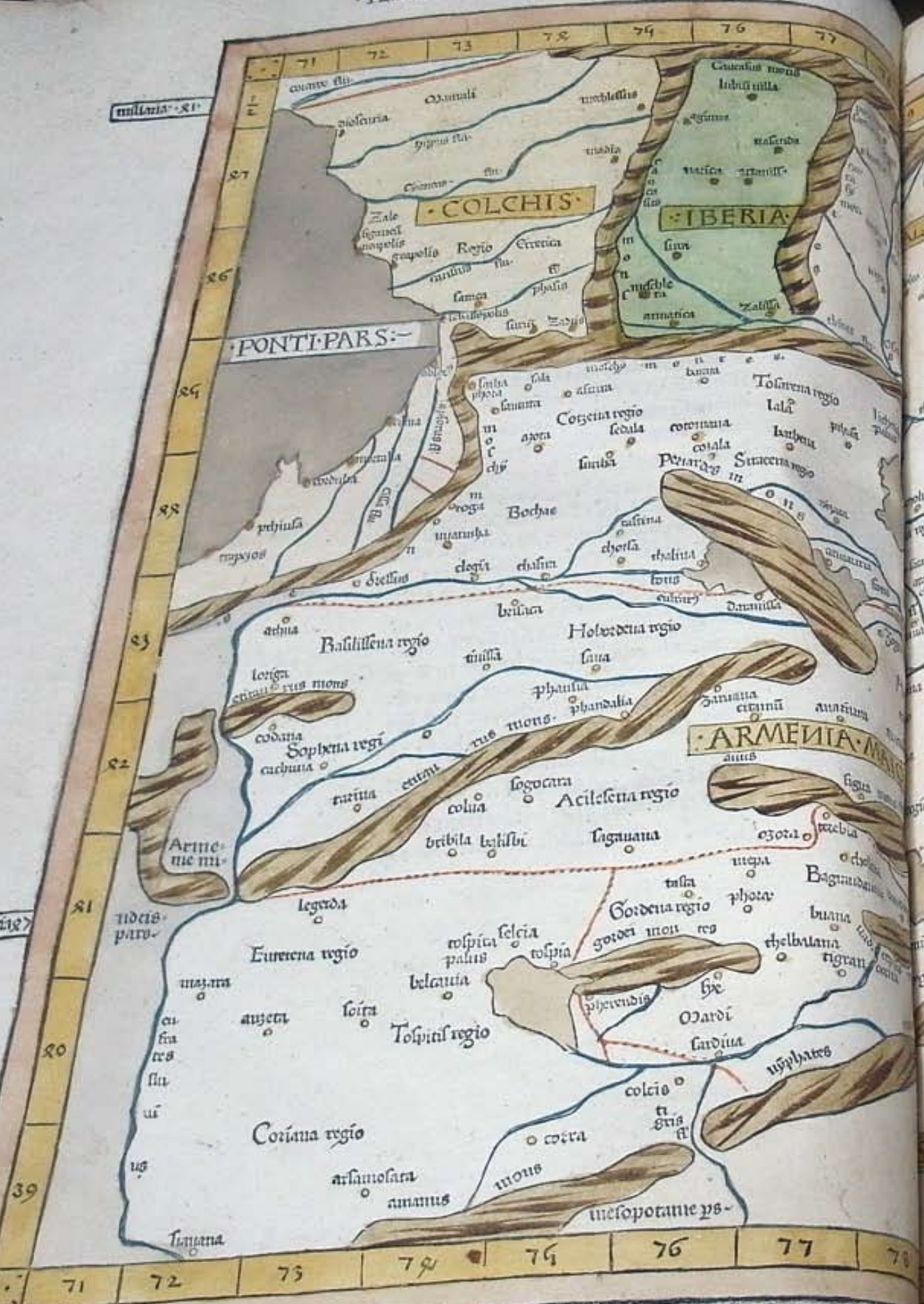




Treaty, 1920, including the first republic)







12 ponal per pontum dicitur
 aequinoctialis hō 3 4 habet
 diem mēnsis hōmē 14. et
 Climatērum

13 per Byzant
 ab aequinoctial
 diem mēnsis hōmē 14. cum qu







VISITING ARMENIA IN JUNE 2009

– My most predominant impression before going there, was that a country such as Armenia, which has changed its borders and been conquered so many times through history, would be a great place to look for a strong and well pronounced Nationalism.

Liv

– Armenia was a blank spot for me, ambiguously situated somewhere in the southern region of Caucasus, perhaps gradually starting somewhere east of, or just beyond Turkey and with strange links to ancient times and early Christianity.

Unni

For two weeks in the summer of 2009, we visited Armenia. We rented a flat in Yerevan and travelled in different directions into the Armenian landscape and into and out of new cultures. We had contacted some artists and curators beforehand, and met others via them or just by coincidence. Sharing a meal was often how we met and connected. Homemade fresh cheese, a mix of freshly picked herbs from the kitchen garden, a bouquet of dill, coriander, mint, parsley and red basil. Lavash: thin breads baked in stone ovens. Freshly chopped onions, lamb koftas, often grilled vegetables, peppers and mushrooms perhaps, and sometimes cooked weed-like greens that we have still not been able to identify. The most refined version of this supper, was served at Mkrtych Tonoyan's studio, prepared by his mother and enjoyed during his lively introduction to Armenian history.

For a year we had read about Armenia and also discussed more theoretical texts, loosely linked to the actual location and more concretely to our respective thinking. In addition to finding facts, broadening our theoretical knowledge and fundraising, our preparations involved talking about the problem of traveling as artists to gather material from a new almost "unknown" location. How can you filter the experiences from an unfamiliar place without ending up with your own prejudices as a result? And how can you challenge the position of viewer? One year after our Armenian journey, we both engaged in making art installations for *The Armenia Project* as we met in Stockholm to start writing this dialogue, tracking the journey and our collaborative relation.

SETTING OUT FOR ARMENIA

Liv: Transformation as a re-shaping, re-shaping as my first vision that it was Armenia we were going to visit, a country positioned where the Ottoman and the Persian empires met. My inspiration was triggered also by Ryszard Kapuscinski's writings in *Imperium*, where he is traveling across the Soviet Union in the very last months of its existence. Add to this inspiration a shortage in my knowledge of what the map look like in the region of Armenia, a mental white spot on my internal global map and the search for knowledge and seductive coincidences had begun.

Ryszard Kapuscinski writes about Nagorno-Karabach, which he visits just as the war between the Armenian Republic and the Azerbaijan Republic started (at the time both republics of the crumbling Soviet Union). Nagorno-Karabach is the most recent revision on the map since the Armenian siege of that area - a change that has not been recognized internationally. People from different ethnic groups were supposed to move "home" to where they belonged or originated from. During the Soviet era, the eastern shore of Lake Sevan marked the border between Armenia and the Azerbaijan republic. At that time, there was no clear distinction between areas where ethnic Armenians or Azeris settled.

One consequence of the Nagorno-Karabach war was a massive relocation of homes. Agreements were made between individual families to exchange houses. Less fortunate people still live in refugee camps in Azerbaijan. Today, 97% of the Armenian population is ethnic Armenian. For me, this becomes a historical analogy to the death marches in the beginning of the twentieth century. The Armenian population was expelled from their residential territory along with other ethnic groups when Turkey was created.

Unni: You sent me excerpts of Kapuscinski's text and suggested a journey to Armenia. The text arrived in the mailbox, stamped. That was in the beginning of spring, 2008. At the time, I was working on a film about the perception of places (right then Istanbul). We were already on the same track since I was trying to get an impression of Turkish history by reading a novel that you had recommended, *Birds Without Wings* by Louis de Bernières, a story set during the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of the Turkish state. The novel touched upon Atatürk growing up in Macedonia. In fact we spoke a lot about the Balkans when we were in Armenia, comparing the Balkan engagement in history with the one we encountered in Armenia. Both digest their communist heritage while dreaming of more ancient times. However, I think the associations started with coffee. In Armenia coffee is prepared in a small, narrow kettle with one handle - like the one I got in Slovenia, going by the name Turkish coffee.

STORIES OF ORIGIN, IMAGINED IDENTITIES

Liv: I recall the evening with Eva and Vahram, so pleasant and smooth. They posed a question about what we think is the reason behind the relatively low rate of corruption in the Nordic countries. It functioned as a reference to my own questions and I experienced a relevance in being generalized and objectified along with my own nation. It was a question that set the exchange of prejudices and concepts of nation branding in motion.

Looking for nationalism in a foreign country is to ask for stereotypes and the populist story. I recall other conversations that via stories we had already heard versions of many times, added further variation and some new information. Often, personal experiences suddenly gave depth to generality. The conversation helped me locate Armenia. To Armenian curators, their East European networks within the arts are the most natural reference. We were looked upon as distant visitors. With fellow artists I can easily share interests in democratic questions and in artist conditions and what kind of art that is supported and exhibited; at some level we are all part of the same global art scene. At the same time, we belong and act in accordance to the conditions of the countries we live in. So sharing a plate of tapas, looking for paths in the conversation that would spark curiosity or that we could get lost in together, was an important activity.

Unni: An aspect of storytelling is personal identification, and the risk that identifying with a group transforms into a destructive stigma. Say I become obsessed with the miseries of women in history, and this becomes the only narrative I care to look for. The repeating of stories may turn into a handicap reproducing the regrettable. In psychotherapy, talking is the cure, but trauma should be retold a very limited number of times to avoid re-traumatization. In Armenia, our interest in their history was warmly welcomed. But can over-focusing on history also become an obstacle? Who needs their story the most? What does the new look like? Is it more or less homogeneous?

An urgent perspective from the Armenian point of view is featured in Stefan Kristensen's text on Atom Egoyan's film *Ararat*. Here it is a question of revisiting a place as the scene of

crime. He deals with different ways of processing memories of the genocide, comparing destructive denial to creative reformulation. The traumas are individual and/or collective, even inherited.

Rosie Braidotti and Wendy Brown both suggest, each in their own way, a new strategy for thinking ahead. Braidotti scrutinizes our obsession with history by way of a critique of modern melancholy, and insists on the wound as a healing force. Brown points towards problems inherent in identity politics. Choosing to build an identity by identifying with a discriminated group may in the long run have self-fulfilling consequences. They both suggest more affirmative strategies and ways out of locked polarized positions. It is about the premises for change or re-shaping, to use your word. If I would draw lines to my own work, it would be in the relationship between space, perception of space and imagination. Imagination is mobile, space is not. Imagination comes before change — not in the case of earthquakes though.

Liv: Isn't everyone attracted to hearing one's history — to become visible? A story told by him/herself or by others. At the same time the question of what a story of oneself can be is ambiguous. Doesn't it rely on the repetition of material gathered from others? Repetition and circulation of material structured in a new order to deliver the message (a story about oneself). The "material" in a personal story consists, for example, of collective histories and things read or overheard, a filtering out of the omnipresent (popular) culture.

What is the instinct at work in narrating and performing "oneself"? Is it to mediate a true and sincere presentation of oneself, or rather to propose a concentration of personal characteristics to be tested out and adopted (compared with the *normal* in the larger group). "An Armenian must be surrounded by mountains", our artist colleague Mkrtich Tonoyan said about the Armenians. All through the visit I loved to gather these kinds of short sayings that built a more and more complex picture of what it is to be Armenian. They have a lot of them! Can the most obvious story also be the most central one? Like a blind spot that actually helps focusing?

Unni: In Robert Byron's travelogue *The Road to Oxiana* (which I have borrowed as a title for my series of travel-related works) he exposes his personality openly. In writing juicy factual fiction, Byron succeeds in communicating a reality where more factual reporting genres fall short.

At the Persian block-house in no-mans-land we found an officer who had only been two days in command there and was already depressed beyond speech by the companionship of few troopers, a savage dog, and a yardful of scraggy mares with their new born foals. Not a tree nor a stream or any hint of garden warded off the sodden yellow cow-parsleys in the desert.

Liv: The concept of nationalism became my focus, nationalism as an -ism. Even more so after returning home and reading. In the later half of the nineteenth century, "natural" connections within a population was articulated and established as the foundation for democracy. Benedict Anderson writes about this in his acknowledged studies on the development of nation states. Relations between a population and the territory, shared language, shared origin based on a long history and even kinship in appearance became primary causes for what was looked upon as "natural". The mechanisms of constructing "the natural," are still at work in the writing of history, in establishing academies, in archeology and the structuring of collections in museums. One may say it is about designed and mastered "personal stories." Nationalism is about creating unity and belonging.

When reasons for uniting a certain group of people began to be expressed through nationalism, obvious problems arose concerning what is natural and what is a construction, for example when different segments of society did not share the same language. In Germany, the German ruling class did not even speak German, rather Latin and French. Some territories were “fortunately” inhabited by an almost homogeneous population. On the other hand, central areas in Europe and the Middle East have “always” been inhabited by a large variety of ethnic groups co-existing or conflicting over thousands of years, as in the case of Armenia, squeezed in between the neighboring Persian and Ottoman empires.

MAPPING

Liv: *Census, map, museum* is the title of a wonderful chapter in Benedict Anderson’s book where he connects the drawing of maps to the development of science and aspired accuracy. The drawing of maps was performed by the military, often carried out practically, through hostility or in war, to pin down borders distinctively, once and for all — until the next aggression. However, wars intended to move borders are almost out of fashion nowadays. Current warfare is more concerned with altering the direction of desires and the general mindset of populations... Further back in history, land areas were controlled by central powers; areas as vast and as far stretching as the controlling power could possibly reach, linked to the next central power, by a fuzzy transition.

Unni: Accuracy or exactness. Exactness is often separating one thing from another, promoting clean categories. Accuracy is often misused, to prevent scrutiny from external “amateurs,” in disciplines where specialists have been free to narrow down the curriculum to fit their specific qualifications.

Liv: In September 2009 I held a six-minute lecture on the journey to Armenia, as part of *Eight Short Ones*, an event of experimental lectures by artists at Fylkingen in Stockholm. My reading was peppered with facts on Armenia mixed with my own impressions and stories from the journey. It generated a mantra out of those stories most often repeated by Mkrtych, Susanna, David and tour guides. It struck me as almost parodic how strong and symbolic the language used by an Armenian could be when talking about Armenia and the characteristics of their group — often the person we met laughed about it and recognized the parody themselves as they went on delivering series of symbols. To get outside of your own group and identity really requires a trick. Being someone, becoming one among others, showing oneself by difference. Accompanying the text, I showed a large number of maps of the region, found on the internet. The maps show areas named Armenia in different epochs, and verify how the location of “Armenia” has changed. They are fascinating in the exactness by which they draw the line of truth of every time period. They were arranged in a chronological stream of stills, including maps photographed in the *Matenadaran* — the museum of handwriting and scripts in Yerevan.

Unni: I am interested in mind-maps and the possibility to organize places and events by the experience of near or far, experiences that are individual, as well as collective. The experience may be connected with history but inhabit associations that are obscure. The old maps we saw in the *Matenadaran* were made before they had instruments to measure distances accurately. They reflect the experience of space belonging to the person who constructed the map and his contemporaries. The Mediterranean Sea must have been drawn on the basis of travels made by the designer or on stories told to him.

Colors and recognizable figures illustrate experience. These drawings are somewhere in-between maps and mind-maps.

IDIOTS

Unni: We could read from the bus driver’s face that we had made a strange choice to travel to the so-called Hotel in the outskirts of Sisian village. We were the only guests and the house was more like an abandoned office building than a hotel. After we had gone to bed at night the family started refurbishing downstairs and soon they were fighting. The woman had lived in Yerevan but returned to the village to get married. The scary part was the husband. He was totally unpredictable to us. He did not seem used to relating to anything beyond his local ways, into which we had no insight. It sounds like an invented dramaturgy, but in between their shouting, while we were placing the bed in front of the door that was not possible to lock, a violent thunderstorm was building up outside. It practically rained right through the closed windows.

At breakfast today you asked me to elaborate on something I said about the idiot. The original meaning of the word idiot is a local person — someone who is limited to one place (Vilém Flusser discusses this, but I am no longer sure how far he goes and where my own associations take over). Reflecting along these lines, an idiot must be someone who does not see herself from outside herself. In fact, a person is often perceived as an idiot when she enters a new culture, from the position of the new locality. If I have a strong sense of unity with the place, I may view a newcomer as an idiot when she does not know how to operate a bottle-collecting machine in the supermarket. But it is I who am the idiot — the local.

I guess it is possible to bring along your internal idiot when you move to a new place. A person who is rooted in her origins to the extent that she cannot function or interact in relation to a new place remains an idiot. But new physical structures make it hard not to gain new insights as a foreigner. The potential for learning is precariously present. The idiot is the constant local — protected in the realms of what one knows. Safe. With no need to ask questions or learn new things.

If I as an artist, take up an interest in philosophy and decide to bring experiences from my field to the table in a philosophical debate I run the risk of appearing as an idiot. But in this situation, is it not the philosopher who occupies the role of the idiot — the one being at home, safe? She may of course be willing to take the challenge of thinking from a different position. In that case she is not an idiot. Ideally one would always be aware of one’s inherent idiot, and have the possibility of being with people who are also aware of their own idiocy.

Liv: There is a tension between what one can and cannot share. When I am in a new place I am lost. I cannot interpret the signs that speak of different quarters and draw invisible lines. To experience a new place is to collect impressions without being able to structure them. I think much about the position of the listener or the viewer, the one trying to understand.

Unni: I think it is interesting whenever one takes something, say for example a term used in one type of discourse, out of one context and see how it works in a different setting. Experimenting along horizontal axes as in the case of trying to act across disciplines, carries with it the risk of a failure in communication, confusion and crisis, yet hopefully also some gained experience.

Liv: I enjoy encounters beyond language because then it is as though you initiate a game as kids do: as long as the participants pitch in, the play continues. Armenia is one of the best places I have visited for these kinds of encounters. Many of the people we met willingly offered an attentive delicacy in seeing, hearing and interpreting our attempted messages in a very refined way, and so did we.

Attributing the one you meet on a level of equal intelligence despite the lack of vocabulary — I consider this advanced knowledge. Acquired perhaps only through practice? The key is to recognize what is seen. Jaques Rancière writes about the knowledge of the spectator as acknowledging what one does not know, comparing that with what is already known, and through this analysis, incorporates the hitherto unknown into one's own knowledge.

He directs us via symbols and the way in which symbols are perceived. Rancière claims that the one without (prior) knowledge (the spectator) can be just as actively involved as the one who already possesses knowledge in performing "the predetermined" (In this example learning about another culture).

NATIONAL HORIZONS

Unni: You asked me earlier what one can and cannot share. I imagine that we share space. It is possible for one person to occupy the same position in space as some one else. (There has to be a short time delay, of course, but apart from that.) We do not share history. If I am in the same place as someone else we will still have different perceptions based on our experience and how the past was transmitted to us, even with our bodily constitution and so on. There is dimension to history, somewhere in between the personal and the collective, that has to do with heritage passed on unconsciously from your ancestors and places where they lived. It colors your own present perception. Scrutinizing these layers is a source for making conscious the unconscious. The perception of a place, based on some kind of formalistic approach – heavy, yellow, rough, thin, floating – can be shared, and perhaps is it also is why I am attracted to concepts relating to geography.

Nevertheless the driving force for this curiosity has to do with what is different, the impossibility of experiencing things from the position of someone else's body, knowing what the other body remembers, what it looks at — history from a different perspective. I try to open myself to other histories via geographies. I study landscape as an extension of the body in understanding "a position that it is possible to share."

I am working on a composition of words for the floor in my installation using the World Atlas as my dictionary. I look for different kinds of rhymes when combining names of places. The names have associative qualities insofar as the audience knows something about the place, and even if they don't, the words resonate different characteristic ways of spelling, reminiscent of the language they originate from. One rule I have is to break with spatial and cultural categories. The places I combine are neither situated close to each other on the map, nor deliberately put together (or "selected") according to any criteria other than shape and sound. There is an abstract dimension in the familiarity between sounds, endings and letter rhymes, and finally the visual shapes of the letters. In the installation you move between these "islands" of letters.

In science theory the word horizon is sometimes used as a metaphor for the limits of understanding. The horizon is what you can see from the present position. It illustrates that understanding is conditional. I was always interested in the aspect of the philosophy of science as having to do with questioning the limits of understanding and how to capture new ways of thinking about something. Changing the landscape or changing the

perception of landscape by linguistic efforts are ways to go about this. Maybe it is all about a kind of capacity for the future after all. Wanting to want the new, new form — and strategic amnesia. Encircling what is to be forgotten.

Liv: Lets link to topography — the study of surface shape. I imagine the landscape as a sculpture shaped by erosion and earthquakes. Changing a place from within, and from below at the same time as from above: the landscape as an ongoing material flow.

I recall the wonderful resemblance between the black hood of the priests and the shape of mount Ararat that rises over the capital Yerevan. It is the backdrop of the capital, yet lies beyond the closed borders in Turkey. Chains of associations concerning shape and the narrations these shapes form, come to mind. One thing resembles another, material flow as physical reality. I make a connection between my impression of the constrained possibilities for people to earn a good living from local conditions, to the picture of the circumscribed distance a free roaming herd of horses can wander, while being physically limited by a short string tied between the back legs of the mares.

In Yerevan, at the grocery store on the block where we were staying, while choosing food mixtures, beyond language, together with the staff, a woman came up and invited us over for dinner — just like that (what is the name of our friend?). She was working in the same area and we popped up in her neighborhood. We met for dinner the day after and got to know her history, how she was married in former Yugoslavia and then the break, and how she is now living with her mother and is a lovely strong woman in search of a new partner.

Unni: Susana! We were going out to buy breakfast on our first morning in Yerevan. I remember some small, sweet, pickled tomatoes with cheese filling. In our local supermarket they were playing the Norwegian tune from the Eurovision Song Contest non-stop. Do you remember how we towards the end of our stay wanted to find a gift for her to show our appreciation for her hospitality? We decided on perfume and spent an hour to pick the right smell. Mimosa, with yellow flowers on the flacon. Then we went looking for her in the publishing office where she worked and got invited for tea as she was getting ready to leave. She was refreshing her make up, organizing her handbags and putting on her summer coat.

Liv: In the flat that we rented in Yerevan, you were reading aloud from the sofa in the evenings from a book of testimonies about the massive relocation of Armenians during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. I remember holes in the ground in a desert-like place in North Lebanon or Syria, and the dusty greyness the words in the book described, as these holes became the final resting place for many weakened bodies. Was it the testimony of one or several voices? What was the title of the book? The book is in Oslo in your part of our collective project library.

Unni: *Marsovan 1915: The Diaries of Bertha Morley*. She was an American missionary and music teacher. In her diary she describes the intensification from day to day, of the persecution of Armenians in Marsovan in 1915. Another book we purchased in Artbridge, the bookstore café in Abovyan Street in Yerevan, was a biography written by Mary Terzian; *The Immigrant's Daughter*. Her family emigrated to Egypt during the exodus in the early 1900s - Cairo is one of the major Armenian Diasporas.

From where does one picture a place? Terzian describes a visit to Aleppo, another important Diaspora, traveling there from Cairo as a child together with her family. The travel writer William Dalrymple arrived in Aleppo from Turkey following the traces of Christian heritage in the region. As I imagine an arrival in Aleppo from Egypt and

another from Turkey, the place becomes increasingly real. I am able to picture myself there. Gazing in different directions. A place is defined by the places it links to, what constitutes its borders.

ABSTRACTION, CHANGE AND SENSE OF TIME

Liv: I think of how you chose to define “abstraction” during our walk today, when comparing the sunlight reflected on all lakes between Oslo and Stockholm, flying over them on your way here, and the reflection of the sun in the weather vanes created by the chimneys from a block of flats. What is it to speak of one thing by comparing it to another? Replacing one thing with another in the practice of using language. Personal interpretations and preferences are inevitably involved.

My installation is a kinetic sculptural landscape which abstracts and presents different parts of my perception of Armenia. The piece considers mechanisms used as tools to define a nation, with potential transformation and a degree of uncertainty. Mechanisms being constructions all the while aiming for mathematical accuracy, as in the case of *Census*. One sculptural element is a retelling of a quote by Osip Mandelstam: “The tall steppe grasses on the lee hump of the island of Sevan were so strong, juicy, and self-confident that one felt like coiffing them with an iron comb.” It is given form by the sound of paper sweeping over iron sticks.

Materials can communicate with precision: form and space and substance can stimulate and affect a person. A hotel in Dilijan where we stayed was a beautiful example of the importance of combinations. The whole building was a wunderkammer overloaded with stuff and at the same time strict. Furniture and different surface materials were arranged in numerous surprising meetings and wild combinations of materials became genuinely simple within the loving frame of that house. The same objects arranged in a different way might have become hysterical. It was obvious that the Madam of the hotel also was the originator of the interior of the house.

I enjoy making my art installation a communication tool, being a specific spatial site linking segments of knowledge and conveying it physically to affect the viewer. How can abstract knowledge and sentiment be shared?

Unni: If you add time and repetition almost anything can communicate I think. As precisely as it is possible to communicate, which is not very precise, I imagine. But it is about recognition. Association is creative observation. To discover that something resembles something else. The abstract is a container for carrying meaning — can one say that? — or identifying similarity? It does take some experience though. Without experience what we see with our eyes would be unrecognizable. Then again there is always the present — the body and the senses. Sentiments are part of it. Babies cry when other babies cry. Imitation is perhaps sharing.

Liv: History can be used as a nationalistic tool by establishing roots way back, or find traces from a long time ago. When brought forward as a legislative tool, the old time is so to speak brought up to date, or at least claimed to still be of great importance. Here one should take notice that some states very carefully choose which layers of soil to dig in when it comes to archeology, selecting which history to discover. Basing the present on the past is linking different times together or creating a fold in time, the fold being shaped to benefit future political-/power-situations. During the Soviet Union era, Armenian intellectuals could work quite undisturbed within the field regional history while subjects

like religion and politics/ideology was dead. In this way, a large amount of information was gathered, strong and well pronounced, to be picked up by newly formed nations in the Caucasus region and brought forward in demands directed to other new neighbouring nations (who were there first).

A VERANDA IN GORIS

Liv: I remember a family in Goris running a restaurant on the street by their home. Our adorable taxi driver brought us there in response to our gestures showing that we needed something to put in our mouths. He jumped out of the car and asked a man on the street for directions. We got to visit the kitchen to point out what meat we wanted — all other parts of the meal came according to the standard.

Unni: What I recall most vividly from the visit in Goris is a scene on the roof terrace. We were shown around the house by the woman in the household, while the man prepared our barbeque. I unfolded the map and gesticulated to her to express something about her relation to the neighboring countries. She pointed towards South: “Iran: thumbs up, good!” Then towards North: “Georgia: good!” Then to Azerbaijan: “Thumbs down.” And finally towards East: “Turkey, dark face.” Her description really situated the veranda politically and geographically.

Liv: There is a connection to abstraction within this meeting, as we could gather the same information from this family as from the intellectuals and the news websites that we visited about the current political position and the exchanges between Armenia and its neighboring countries in June 2009.

I recall the last day of our journey, it was as if the attention had shifted from a close-up view to something different. We were going back home and that brought upon a refreshing distance to the present location. You were in a bad mood and after a while we discovered that the reason was that we had been affected by, and were drawn into, the framework offered for women to act within. This role was much more narrow than what we experience in our daily lives back home. I think the bad mood came from the proximity of relief.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ARTWORKS

UNNI GJERTSEN

The Road to Oxiana, Station III: Armenia
3 channel video projection and floor text

this page: videostill

next page: illustration for floor

The Road to Oxiana, Station III: Armenia, is the third in a series of four travel related works. Borrowing their title from Robert Byron's famous travelogue, they explore how conceptions of places come about and become fixed collective bodies. The working method is partly deconstruction, reflection and composition of new juxtapositions.

The Road to Oxiana, Station III: Armenia, is concerned with geography and positions. In science theory the horizon is used as a metaphor for the limits of understanding – referring to a position that must be transgressed to be able to capture new ways of thinking about something. The three video projections in the installation dwell on the horizon of three mountainous views, facing respectively towards The Black Sea, The Caspian Sea and The Mediterranean Sea, that were once incorporated in the Armenian cultural sphere.

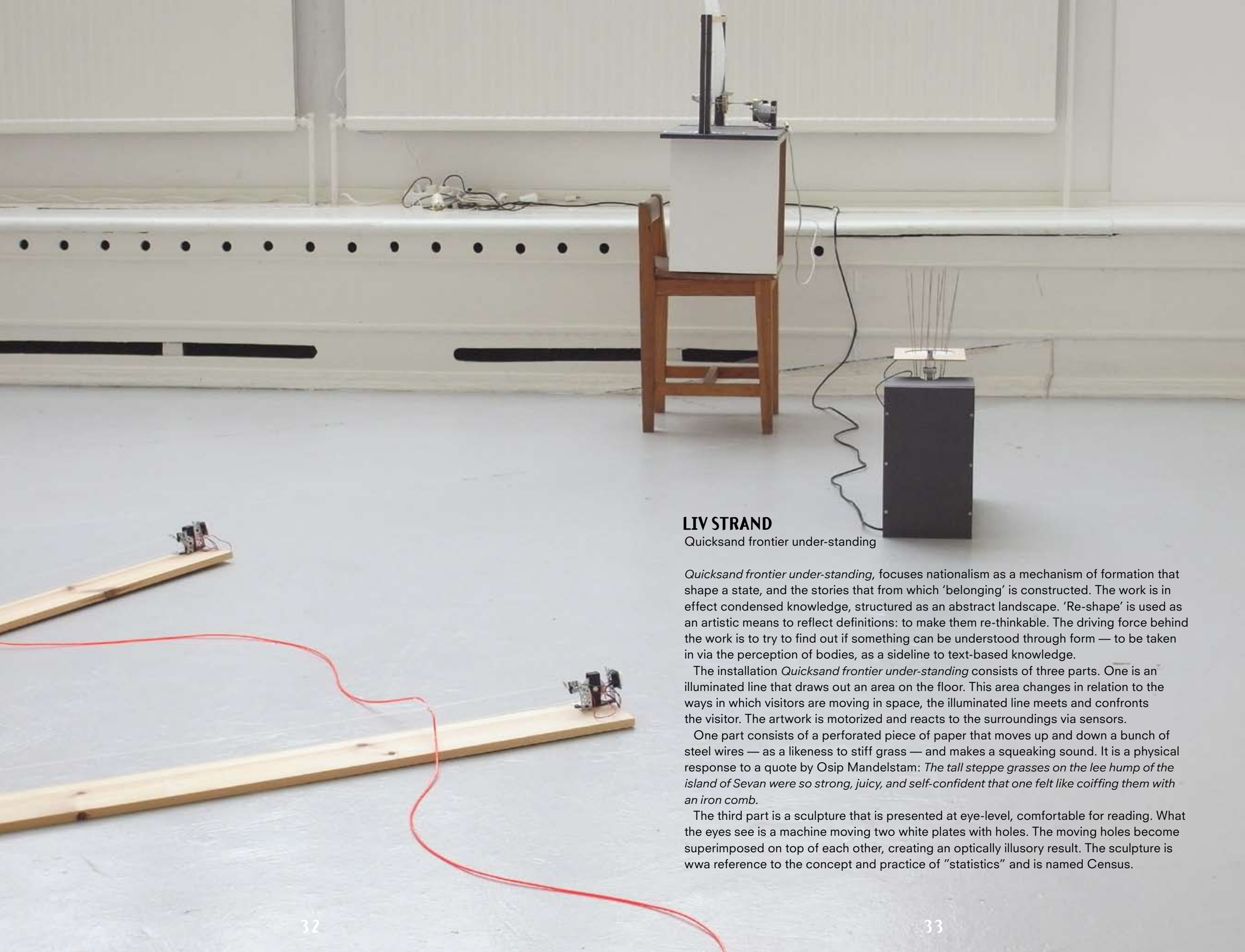
The World Atlas is used as "dictionary" for the composition of words for the floor and which plays with reorganization of space by linguistic efforts. Different kinds of rhymes have been favoured, often with a humorous result. The names have associative qualities insofar as the audience knows something about the place, and even if they don't, the words resonate different characteristic ways of spelling, reminiscent of the language from which they originate.

Breaking with spatial and cultural categories, the names of the places are grouped together although they are neither situated close to each other on the map in reality, nor deliberately combined according to any criteria other than shape and sound. In the installation the audience moves between these 'islands' of letters.

**Karabakh
Battambang
Chu Chiang**



here near – in line



LIV STRAND

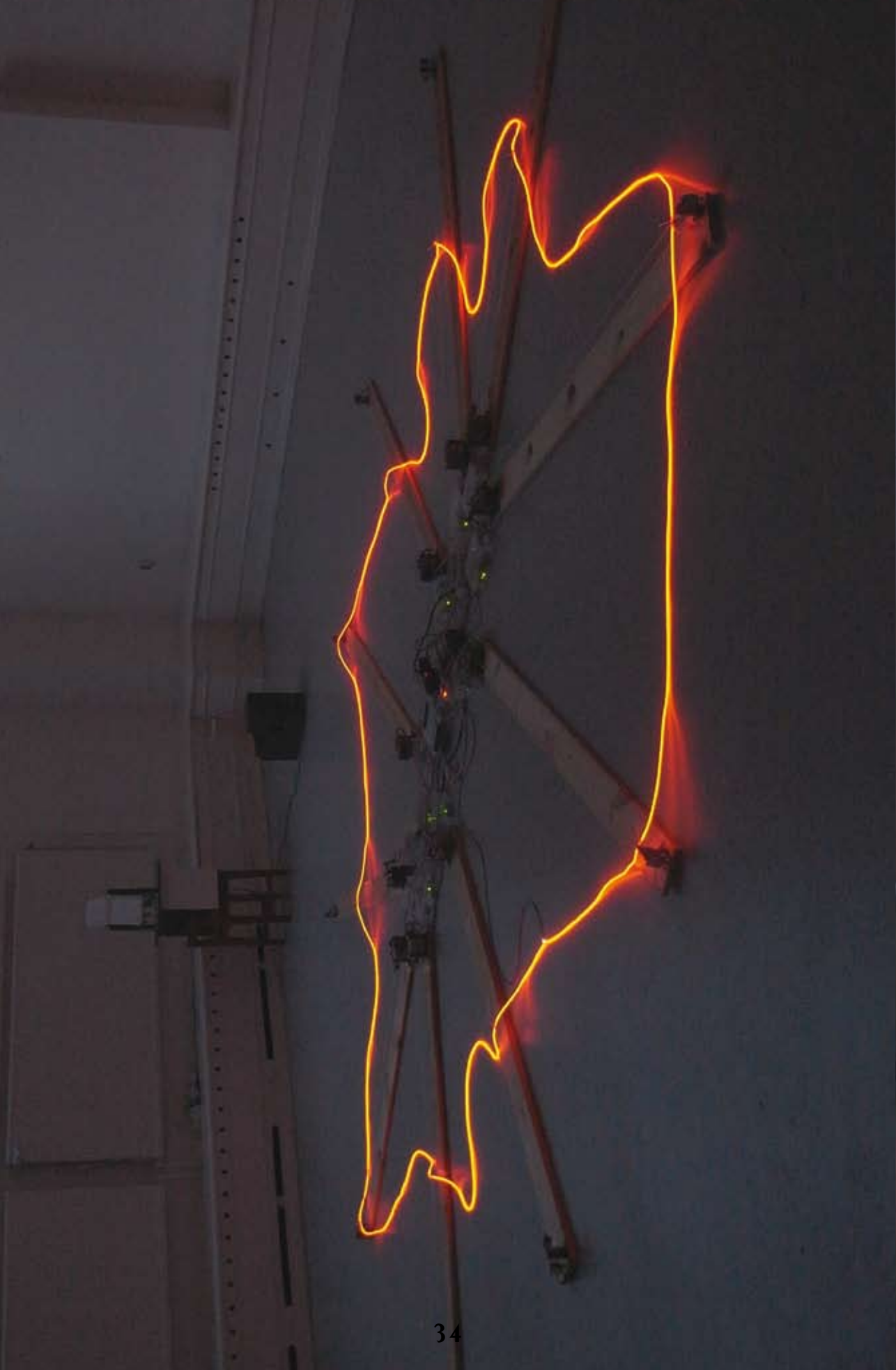
Quicksand frontier under-standing

Quicksand frontier under-standing, focuses nationalism as a mechanism of formation that shape a state, and the stories that from which 'belonging' is constructed. The work is in effect condensed knowledge, structured as an abstract landscape. 'Re-shape' is used as an artistic means to reflect definitions: to make them re-thinkable. The driving force behind the work is to try to find out if something can be understood through form — to be taken in via the perception of bodies, as a sideline to text-based knowledge.

The installation *Quicksand frontier under-standing* consists of three parts. One is an illuminated line that draws out an area on the floor. This area changes in relation to the ways in which visitors are moving in space, the illuminated line meets and confronts the visitor. The artwork is motorized and reacts to the surroundings via sensors.

One part consists of a perforated piece of paper that moves up and down a bunch of steel wires — as a likeness to stiff grass — and makes a squeaking sound. It is a physical response to a quote by Osip Mandelstam: *The tall steppe grasses on the lee hump of the island of Sevan were so strong, juicy, and self-confident that one felt like coiffing them with an iron comb.*

The third part is a sculpture that is presented at eye-level, comfortable for reading. What the eyes see is a machine moving two white plates with holes. The moving holes become superimposed on top of each other, creating an optically illusory result. The sculpture is a reference to the concept and practice of "statistics" and is named Census.



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TRAVEL ROUTE

— coming and going from Yerevan

Daytrip to Fortres Amber (50 km North of Yerevan) stopping at Oshakan where Mesrop Mashot is buried, Mughni Monastery, Saghmosavank and Hovhannavank Monastery.

Two day trip to Sisian in South East Armenia including excursion to Tatev Monastery and Goris.

Two day trip to Dilijan in North Armenia via Lake Sevan.

One day trip to Geghard Monastery (40 km east of Yerevan) stopping at the Garni Temple.

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