

Inheritance

Hripsimé Visser

On a hiking tour across the hills of Eastern Turkey in the early nineties, the English anthropologist Philip Marsden finds a bone wedged in between two lumps of stone. He frees the bone and takes it away with him. Just like the ruins of a village on the Kharput Plain he is crossing, the bone appears to be a trace of the Armenian presence, of a people with whom Turkey has little interest in fostering relations, to say the least. The reaction from the herdsman to whom Marsden shows the bone pointing questioningly in the direction of the ruins, makes this delicate relationship very clear.

Marsden's book *The Crossing Place* (1993) begins with this anecdote. The tone is set, but the writer is not focusing as much on the horror of 1915 and the official Turkish denial of the first genocide of the 20th century as he does on the survivors themselves. Intrigued by the traces of this old culture and its persistent presence in the faraway highlands of Anatolia, Marsden starts a trip that will take months. He travels from Beirut to Syria, right through Turkey to Istanbul and from there through the Balkans to Ukraine and Georgia, before arriving finally in the present, small Armenia which was the first Soviet Republic to gain its independence shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall. His quest takes him to Armenian communities in all these regions. Outside of Armenia itself these are tiny groups, sometimes only a single family, individuals even, but they are all connected through their language and religion. These people are the heirs to the endlessly recurring history of oppression and expulsion from Anatolia, but also to adventurous wanderlust and entrepreneurship. Marsden's report is a sequence of encounters with Armenian Christians far away from their indigenous territory. It tells of their unlikely histories of loss and resilience, whilst at the same time constituting a hymn to their cultural acquisitions – of which architecture is certainly not the least. For centuries, the Armenian people were builders of magnificent, solid and refined orthodox churches and monasteries and they succeeded in transforming Roman architectural heritage into a unique style; they were also the architects of the palaces, mosques and fortresses of the Islamic rulers of the Ottoman Empire.

Claudio Gobbi's photography project, with its focus on Armenian churches, reminded me of Marsden's book, which I read about 20 years ago. The writer/anthropologist and the photographer/political scientist share their wonder of the presence of the Armenian culture outside of its indigenous territory. Philip Marsden weaves a multicolored carpet of dialogues, histories and traditions. The book can be read as an elegy because it becomes clear that the old Armenian diaspora has little chances of survival in the countries of the Middle East or in the former Soviet Republics in the Balkan and the Caucasus.

Ten years ago, Gobbi became fascinated by the seemingly unchangeable shape of Armenian religious architecture in these regions and even further away to the east. In the beginning, he was mostly surprised by its uniform style, the firm structures and the specific use of material. As a matter of fact, although there was definitely a continuous evolution of architectural plans and construction volumes right up until the 14th century, the Orthodox churches can always be recognized as Armenian architecture. This is the case for churches in Kiev, Amsterdam, Yerevan or Singapore, in any case outside of Anatolia where the national identity barely tolerates other cultures and where churches mostly function as a ruin or serve other purposes. Whereas Marsden, who did not travel to the Far East, presents a historical narrative of perpetual and inevitable emigration, Gobbi offers a collection of Armenian churches in twenty-five countries as incontestable evidence of that migration, as cultural marks.

It is tempting to call Gobbi's *Arménie Ville* a typology, but the systematic and organized qualities inherent in such a research definitely do not dominate in his approach. This is reflected in the way he has presented his work until now. The churches are featured as quiet objects on small, carefully framed prints. For museum exhibitions his work is hung on the wall in a fan pattern as if he wants to avoid any association with a grid, with the serial aspect and aims at reflecting the geographical dispersion of the Armenian heritage. *Arménie Ville* is undoubtedly based on a conceptual approach. Gobbi is clearly not trying to accentuate his own signature. Some of the pictures are his own creation; others were found on the internet or made by a third party on his request. You could say the project is more closely related to Ed Ruscha's *24 Gasoline Stations* than to the analytical, monumental architectural photography and city landscapes of his teacher Gabriele Basilico. Nevertheless, it would be overly simplistic to describe Gobbi's photos of Armenian churches as an inventory of *vernacular* architecture. However the question is: how can the project be interpreted in a photographic manner? Gobbi is playing a complex game with notions as a document, mediatized reality, reproduction and format as well as with connotations such as memory, marks, authenticity and distance versus proximity. Gobbi's strategy is extremely serious and recalls the exploratory spirit of a former generation of Italian photographers, such as Ugo Mulas and Luigi Ghirri. However, the crucial difference between their approach and his work is that Gobbi has to come to terms with a world in which the status of the photographic image and (digital) technology has become more and more problematic and complex. Whereas at first sight *Arménie Ville* is a moving homage to the cultural inheritance of a small and tough people, Gobbi at the same time profoundly questions his medium through his approach and presentation.