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*Silene Manissadjiana*  
Freyn plant collected  
by and later named  
after Professor J.J.  
Manissadjian from  
Akdağ, Amasya,  
Turkey, 1892.  
Courtesy the  
Herbarium of Ankara  
University, Faculty  
of Science (ANK)

## Empty Fields and Crying Stones

– Helena Vilalta

*The destroyed city stretches out under the generous and dazzling sun like an endless cemetery. Nothing but ruins on every side... Nothing has been spared. All the churches, all the schools and all the dwellings have been transformed into heaps of charred and deformed stones, among which rises here and there the carcass of an apartment building. [...] A dense crowd comes to us, made up of widows, orphans, old men covered with bloody rags and soaked in tears. This is all that remains of the population of Adana. [...] At times they burst into tears, their faces drowned in an instant by such an abundance of tears that their cries and lamentations are stifled by them; their faces, tanned and dried by the sun, are furrowed with horrid wrinkles and terrible grimaces, and the entire crowd, struck by an access of grief that knows no rest, twists and turns in despair. It is impossible to imagine the sum of sorrows represented by each one of the people who make up this crowd.*

– Zabel Essayan, *In the Ruins*, 1911<sup>1</sup>

These are the words of a fugitive – a fugitive not yet fleeing death but fleeing the killing of death. An Armenian writer in her early thirties, Zabel Essayan visited Adana in the aftermath of the massacres of April 1909 in Cilicia, an ancestral Armenian land on the southern

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### In response to a recent exhibition at SALT in Istanbul, Helena Vilalta reflects on how to exhibit histories that remain unacknowledged.

coast of Anatolia that had fallen prey to the anti-Armenian sentiment afflicting the Ottoman Empire in the throes of its collapse. At the request of the Armenian patriarchate of Constantinople, Essayan assisted the survivors, pleading with Ottoman officials to defend the rights of Armenian prisoners

and of the thousands of orphans who endured the destruction of the Christian quarters of Adana and the surrounding villages of Cilicia. But that September, Essayan unexpectedly abandoned the Armenian delegation and returned to Constantinople, where she spent the next two years putting into writing what she had witnessed amongst the ruins of Adana.<sup>2</sup>

This was not Essayan's first flight, nor would it be her last. Born and raised in Scutari (today's Üsküdar), on the Anatolian shore of the Bosphorus, Essayan moved to Paris in December 1895, in the wake of the massacres of thousands of Armenians in eastern Anatolia. The killings came on the heels of the Great Powers' call on the Ottoman Empire to reform its eastern provinces and protect Christian communities living in the region. Crippled by military losses in every corner of the empire, sultan Abdul Hamid II saw foreign intervention as proof that Armenians were the empire's fifth column. 'By taking away Greece and Rumania,' the sultan said, 'Europe has cut off the feet of the Turkish state. The loss of Bulgaria, Serbia and Egypt has deprived us of our hands, and now by means of the Armenian agitation, they want to get at our most vital places and tear out our very guts.'<sup>3</sup> But as one German diplomat put it, the ailing empire was not 'willing to die without exerting one last, bloody effort to save itself'.<sup>4</sup> Bloody indeed: the pogroms of 1894–96 resulted in the destruction of countless villages, the death of nearly 200,000 Armenians and 50,000 orphaned children.<sup>5</sup> Such atrocities did little to pre-

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1 Quoted in Marc Nichanian, 'Catastrophic Mourning', in David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (ed.), *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, pp.103, 112.

2 Zabel Essayan's book *In the Ruins* was first published in 1911 by an Armenian press in Istanbul, where it was reissued in 2010, also in Armenian, by Aras Publishing. It has recently been translated into English by G.M. Goshgarian as *In the Ruins: The 1909 Massacres of Armenians in Adana* (Boston: Armenian International Women's Association, 2016).

3 Quoted in Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (1999, trans. Paul Bessemer), New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006, p.32.

4 *Ibid.*

5 See Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (2006), London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011, p.11.

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vent the regime's inexorable collapse. In 1908, as the empire was faced with yet more losses in the Balkans, the revolution of the Young Turks forced Abdul Hamid II to restore the Ottoman constitution, which he had suspended in 1878, and proclaim elections. Like many fellow Armenians, Essayan hailed the new government of the Committee of Union and Progress and

***The difference between exhibiting the museum's skeleton and its carcass couldn't be greater: if the former shows that modern art is defined by the museum's armature, the latter presents the remains of the museum's structure as a trace of its destruction.***

its aspirations to create a pluralist modern state. After years spent travelling back and forth between Constantinople and Paris, she finally settled in her hometown in late 1908 in a climate of political euphoria.<sup>6</sup> How quickly and tragically these hopes were dashed. In April 1909, amidst the confusion ushered in by a short-lived reactionary counter-coup in Constantinople, tensions escalated in Adana, whose majority Muslim population was growing ever more distrustful of their newly empowered and prosperous Armenian neighbours. Seeing their predominance threatened, local Muslim leaders stirred up deep-seated fears by spreading false rumours of an imminent Armenian insurrection. It wasn't long before a mob set fire to Armenian dwellings and shops, with violence spreading to nearby villages. In Constantinople, Armenians stood firm in defence of the constitutional regime and their Young Turks allies; in Cilicia, the latter condoned, and possibly instigated, the massacre of 25,000 Armenians.<sup>7</sup> And yet, in spite of all the atrocities she had witnessed in Adana, 'despite the gallows raised on still-smoking ruins',<sup>8</sup> in 1911 Essayan addresses her Turkish compatriots as if she were a full citizen, as if the 'tribute of blood [that] had been, once more, spilled on [Armenian] land' was the sacrifice that would seal equality.<sup>9</sup> As news of the Adana massacres spread in April 1909, the preface to *In the Ruins* explains, Armenians 'clung to this idea: "We too had had our victims; this time our blood flowed for our Turkish compatriots. This will be the last time."<sup>10</sup> *This will be the last time.* Essayan's phrase is ominous, for it hints at that which she desperately strives to deny: that this will not be the last time, that blood will be spilled again. Yet there is no naïvety in her words; the pages that follow leave no doubt as to the new regime's involvement in the massacres.<sup>11</sup> Even worse, her articles for the Armenian press, published in the same year, denounce how Armenian orphans were being shipped off to Cyprus or otherwise 'Turkified'.<sup>12</sup> Still, the preface to her chronicle of the Adana massacres clings to the sacrificial narrative as the only means to give sense to the catastrophe, in full knowledge that the senseless looms beneath each word.

The impossibility of comprehending what she would later call 'the constitutional massacres',<sup>13</sup> clearly marking their lineage in the Hamidian massacres that had preceded them, pierces Essayan's testimony. She writes of emaciated orphans and crippled bodies, of vacant eyes and maddened mothers, of villages in ashes and shattered skulls. But the repertoire of atrocities is overshadowed time and again by the unspeakability of the killings. She tries to picture this impossibility in the inscrutability of the crowd, in the survivors' blank stares, yet every effort at naming the catastrophe pushes her further away. And still, amidst the wails, sobs and howls, she trains her fugitive prose back on the boundless horror.

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6 For a fine account of Essayan's biography, see Léon Ketcheyan, 'Préface', in Z. Essayan, *Dans les ruines*, Paris: Phébus, 2011, pp.7-28.

7 For a discussion of the Young Turks' involvement in the massacres, see R. Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, *op. cit.*, pp.71-117.

8 Z. Essayan, quoted in M. Nichanian, 'Catastrophic Mourning', *op. cit.*, p.104.

9 Z. Essayan, *Dans les ruines*, Paris: Phébus, 2011, p.29. Translation mine.

10 Z. Essayan, quoted in M. Nichanian, 'Catastrophic Mourning', *op. cit.*, p.105.

11 In 1909, Essayan wrote in a letter to her husband Tigrane: 'Cilicia is devastated. Everyone has the same impression. I have not yet gone to Adana but everything I have heard, everything I have been told up until now proves that the Armenians were sacrificed in totality according to a known, premeditated plan... The complicity of the current government is evident.' Quoted in M. Nichanian, 'Zabel Essayan: The End of Testimony and the Catastrophic Turnabout', *Writers of Disaster: Armenian Literature in the Twentieth Century, Vol.1: The National Revolution*, Princeton, NJ and London: Gomidas Institute, 2002, p.228.

12 The four articles she published in *Aragats* in August and September 1911 are available online, in a French translation by Léon Ketcheyan, alongside a selection of Zabel Essayan's letters to her husband Tigrane from Adana. See <http://www.imprescriptible.fr/rhac/tome3/p1d5#n16> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).

13 Quoted in M. Nichanian, 'Zabel Essayan: The End of Testimony and the Catastrophic Turnabout', *op. cit.*, p.218.

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*And what seems irreparable and irremediable in this undefinable catastrophe are not the houses reduced to ashes, the ravaged orchards, nor is it the immensity of the number of the dead. It is the discouraging feeling that hangs around everyone's eyes, pitifully, desperately: the feeling of having been trampled collectively, of having been crushed by savage claws. These heads that had risen up humanly for an instant, in search of light and freedom, had been smashed with incomparable cruelty.*<sup>14</sup>

Cruelty here is political as well as physical. Not only did the dead of Adana fall on the still-warm corpses of Van, Trebizond and Erzurum (the towns that had borne the brunt of the 1895–96 massacres), they also fell on the promise of ethnic reconciliation. What Essayan's lament insinuates yet cannot name is the ghastly thread connecting Van and Adana, 1895 and 1909, the despotic regime of Abdul Hamid II and the nominally secular state of the Young Turks: the Ottoman Empire's determination to annihilate an entire culture. As literary critic Marc Nichanian poignantly puts it in his exegesis of this passage, 'What disintegrates people ... is therefore not extermination as such ... what disintegrates is not the deaths in tens of thousands or in millions. No, it is the will to annihilate, *because it cannot be integrated* into any psychological, rational or psychical explanation whatever. [...] What disintegrates is the interdiction of mourning.'<sup>15</sup> Her writing in the face of such interdiction, Nichanian tells us, marks Essayan as modern Antigone.

Six years on, Essayan found herself fleeing catastrophe yet again. In Constantinople, in April 1915, she only just escaped the round-up of Armenian intellectuals that presaged the empire's brutal and definitive answer to the so-called Eastern Question. That summer, the Young Turks implemented a plan, drawn up the previous year, to 'homogenise' Anatolia and extirpate its 'non-Muslim tumours'.<sup>16</sup> In the wake of significant Ottoman defeats in the Caucasus, they ordered mass deportations of Armenians living in the eastern provinces, disguised, in the fog of war, as a measure to prevent the Christian minorities from siding with the Russian enemy. But very soon expropriations, executions and deportations extended across the peninsula, well beyond the front, with survivors (mostly women, children and the elderly) put in convoys and transported to concentration camps along the route to the Levant and Mesopotamia – most notoriously the desert land of Der Zor, south of Raqqa – where they were systematically starved, tortured, raped and killed. It is estimated that a million and a half Armenians had been slaughtered by the end of 1916.

Seeking refuge in Sofia, Essayan began a life in flight that would take her to Tbilisi, Baku and Paris, via Tehran, Baghdad, Basra and Cairo, then back to Soviet Armenia in the 1930s. In exile, she tirelessly gathered, transcribed, edited and translated survivors' testimonies, though she would never again write about the disaster herself.<sup>17</sup> In this turn from mourning to testimony, from literature to archive, Nichanian locates the injunction of the extermination: when all witnesses have been suppressed and any traces of death obliterated, the victims are forced to prove their own death.<sup>18</sup>

Such was the suppression of death that Essayan defied in 1911, but to which she succumbed after 1915. In a cruel twist of fate, in 1943 she fell victim to Stalinist deportations, and vanished from the record.



For Nichanian, the suppression of death is not ancillary to, but the very essence of, genocidal will. That is, the purpose of genocide is to exterminate both a people and their memory, to efface their death as well as their life by obliterating every possible witness and every possible trace. 'The erasure of the archive', he argues, 'is the destruction of that which constitutes the condition of possibility *for a destruction to become a historical fact*.'<sup>19</sup> Paradoxically, it is the destruction of the archive that has entrapped witnesses and survivors in its vaults – its positivist logic of figures and ciphers, documents and proof, verification and refutation.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.209.

<sup>15</sup> M. Nichanian, 'Catastrophic Mourning', *op. cit.*, pp.115–16. Emphasis in the original

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in R. Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History*, *op. cit.*, p.243.

<sup>17</sup> In Baku, in February 1917, Essayan published the first testimony of 1915, co-signed with the witness and survivor Hayg Toroyan. See Z. Essayan and H. Toroyan, *L'Agonie d'un peuple* (1917, trans. M. Nichanian), Paris: Garnier, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Nichanian has discussed Essayan's turn in M. Nichanian, 'Zabel Essayan: The End of Testimony and the Catastrophic Turnabout', *op. cit.*, pp.187–242.

<sup>19</sup> M. Nichanian, 'On the Archive III: The Secret; Or, Borges at Yale', *Boundary 2*, vol.40, issue 3, Autumn 2013, p.33. Emphasis in the original.

Testimonies are summoned to give evidence and calculate damages: to catalogue the instruments of torture, to weigh the dead bodies, to number the rapes. This was certainly the case for Essayan's generation; intent on making the world see what it ought never to have seen, they worked to have survivors' testimonies translated and published widely.

Today the interdiction of mourning persists in the Turkish state's continued denial of the extermination of the Western Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire. The current government has deployed the logic of the archive at will, couching its rebuttals in pseudoscientific positivism by accusing historians of inaccuracies and omissions, and claiming the fallibility of about every possible historical source, while itself suppressing evidence of the scale of the massacres and the genocidal intent underpinning them. In its attempt to restore



neo-Ottoman autocracy, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government has perpetuated the Ottoman Empire's justification of the so-called 'tragedy' as well as its repression of Armenians and other religious and ethnic minorities.<sup>20</sup> Take, for example, Erdoğan's proposal to erect 'a military museum in Gezi Park with a display of past German, French and American misdeeds' in response to the German parliament's recognition of the Armenian genocide in June this year.<sup>21</sup> The knee-jerk tone belies a perverse travesty of history, for Gezi Park was itself built on the ruins of a memorial to the victims of the genocide.<sup>22</sup>

As long as the Turkish state seeks to legitimise an exclusionary definition of Turkishness as a singular religious and ethnic identity there is little hope that it will ever recognise the genocide of 1915. Nonetheless, after a century of ruthless revisionism, Nichanian suggests that it may be time to retrace Essayan's steps from testimony back to mourning; that is, to write the disaster not to redress the wilful erasure of proof, but as defined by that very erasure. This is why

Nichanian refers to the events of 1915 not as 'the Armenian Genocide' but as *Aghed*, which translates from the Armenian as the Catastrophe. Whilst *Medz Yeghern* (great crime) and *Ak'sor* (deportation) have been commonly used since the aftermath of the genocide, *Aghed* has its roots in a markedly literary heritage. It first appeared, as a common noun, in Essayan's *In the Ruins* to designate the Adana massacres, and was later adopted by Armenian writer Hagop Oshagan to refer to the events of 1915. Since the 1980s, Nichanian has used the term as a proper noun to signal these writers' attempts to name both the event and the impossibility of naming it.<sup>23</sup> It is this sense of *Aghed*, as articulated by Nichanian, that an exhibition this year at SALT Galata in Istanbul tried to conjure.<sup>24</sup> When I visited 'Empty Fields' on 19 May, a public holiday that saw Istanbul awash with Turkish flags commemorat-

Makeshift polystyrene tombs made by the activist group Nor Zartonk during the Gezi Park protests of June 2013 in Istanbul. The signs in Turkish read: 'Surp Hagop (Saint Jacob) Armenian Cemetery: 1551-1939' and 'Equality, Brotherhood, Peace, Freedom.' Courtesy Nor Zartonk

20 A lengthy article on the Turkish Government's Foreign Affairs website, tellingly titled 'Controversy between Turkey and Armenia about the Events of 1915', describes deportations as 'relocations', insists on the victims' 'guilt' and denies that any 'racist attitudes' existed in the Ottoman Empire. See <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/controversy-between-turkey-and-armenia-about-the-events-of-1915.en.mfa> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).

21 'Erdoğan backs Ottoman replica in Istanbul's Gezi Park', Anadolu Agency website, 18 June 2016, available at <http://aa.com.tr/en/politics/erdogan-backs-ottoman-replica-in-istanbuls-gezi-park-/593918> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).

22 The memorial stood from 1919 until 1922 as part of a centuries-old Armenian cemetery, which was expropriated by the Turkish state in 1939 and subsequently demolished to build today's Gezi Park. Erdoğan has long wanted to reconstruct Ottoman military barracks on the site, to the dismay of many. See Emily Greenhouse, 'The Armenian Past of Taksim Square', *The New Yorker*, 28 June 2013, available at <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-armenian-past-of-taksim-square> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).

23 See M. Nichanian, *The Historiographic Perversion* (2006, trans. Gil Andijar), New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, pp.7-8.

24 'Empty Fields', SALT Galata, Istanbul, 6 April-5 June 2016.

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ing Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, this seemed no small feat – not least due to Atatürk’s role in cementing the denial of the massacres in the founding myth of the new republic. Housed in a narrow basement gallery, the exhibition seemed particularly sombre and austere in contrast with the festive, patriotic atmosphere in the streets of Beyoğlu. On display were documents, photographs and specimens from the archive of a US missionary organisation – The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions – relating to its missionary activity in Anatolia from the 1820s to the 1930s. The crammed vitrines typical of archival shows were ditched, however, in favour of a wall-based display that activated few documents thanks to a sleek exhibition design and abundant wall texts.

Because the US missionaries worked primarily with Armenian and Greek Christian communities and reported back extensively to their headquarters in Boston, their archive provides a rare glimpse of the lives of non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire prior to the genocide. Yet the exhibition’s curator, Marianna Hovhannisyan, chose to focus less on the information the archives yield than on what remains irretrievable, namely the experiences and accounts of the Armenian and Greek communities. Mining the polysemy of the term ‘empty fields’, the exhibition showed the extermination of the Armenian population from the Anatolian land – the decimated fields – as gaps in the archive – missing data fields – and considered how these layered material and symbolic fields related to the missionaries’ own ‘fieldwork’. A fairly conventional timeline presented on an azure-blue wall, with portraits of the founding missionaries and all, introduced visitors to the missionaries’ view of the world as a field to be sowed with the Gospel. In the Ottoman Empire, this translated into the so-called reformation of the Eastern Churches (primarily the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic churches) through the construction of Protestant churches, schools and hospitals. Compiled by the archive’s current caretaker (the American Research Institute in Turkey), the organisation’s narrative intersected with traumatic events in the history of these communities, though it avoided directly naming them, nor the complex ethnic and religious divisions at the root of the Ottoman Empire’s convulsions. These were instead shown as unexplained interruptions in the timeline, most notably the brief but staggering gap between 1914 and 1923, when the American Board’s operation was suddenly reduced from 450 schools, 19 hospitals and several printing presses to virtually nothing: a reflection of the dramatic passage from the proud rebirth of Armenian culture and institutions following the end of the sultanate to its obliteration in less than a decade.

What manifested here as a discontinuity in the narrative became a linguistic gap in SALT’s digital archive. The exhibition design sought to underline the passing of the baton from one institutional voice, or archival domicile, to another: the American Board’s story gave way to a blue-on-white grid listing the data fields used by SALT to digitise the archive – a metadata system that it applies to all its archival holdings, and which frames ‘Empty Fields’ within a wider institutional project to catalogue, digitise and make public local and regional cultural archives.<sup>25</sup> The display showed that if one were to search the archive for documents in the languages used by Christian communities – Western Armenian, Armeno-Turkish, Greek and Greco-Turkish – most fields would remain blank.

The blue grid lines continued through the next section of the exhibition, overlaying a brown wall displaying archival documents from another institution, Anatolia College. Part of a comprehensive American Board compound, which included a hospital and other facilities, Anatolia College was a mixed boarding school for Greek and Armenian children in Merzifon, a small town in the central Black Sea region of Anatolia. School bulletins, management reports, graduation photographs and so on, as well as supplementary video interviews, guided visitors through the school’s activities, the missionaries’ pride now inevitably tainted by tragic irony. A particularly striking photograph shows school staff in allegorical fancy dress, each relating to either a discipline or a region represented in the school – from music to agriculture, Edinburgh to Pantos – and framed by the flags of Turkey and the US. The picture was part of a 25th-anniversary fundraising campaign to expand the campus, including the construction of a library-museum. Completed just before 1915, the museum was the

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25 Marianna Hovhannisyan’s engagement with the archive began in 2014, when she was awarded a residency at SALT, supported by the Hrant Dink Foundation, to catalogue and classify the archive prior to its digitisation; she was subsequently commissioned to curate an exhibition based on her research. Though SALT might be better known internationally for its art exhibitions, the preservation, activation and publication of personal and institutional cultural archives ranging from art and design to urbanism is at the very centre of its mission. SALT’s digitised archives can be accessed online at <http://www.archives.saltresearch.org> (last accessed on 3 July 2016).



MESOZOIC TIME

PERTRIARY AGE  
AGE OF REPTILES

CARBONIFEROUS AGE  
OR  
AGE OF COAL PLANTS

C I M E





brainchild of Professor Johannes ‘John’ Jacob Manissadjian, an Armenian-German botanist and teacher who was instrumental in developing the school’s interdisciplinary and experimental curriculum, focussed on the study of the Anatolian land through fieldwork. In pedagogical excursions around Merzifon, and thanks to Manissadjian’s travels across Anatolia, the school had gathered an impressive natural science collection of roughly 7,000 specimens, including fossils, minerals, pressed plants and stuffed animals, which were catalogued and displayed under Manissadjian’s guidance. But Manissadjian wasn’t able to enjoy his role as curator for long. In late June 1915, he was one of the first Armenian teachers to be arrested, though he was later spared (thanks partly to a bribe and partly to his German ancestry). Despite the efforts of the Board and the American Embassy, hundreds of Armenian teachers, students, doctors and nurses living in the compound weren’t so fortunate: most of the men and boys were axed to death and the women and girls deported after refusing to be given over to Turkish officials. They were only a small proportion of nearly 10,000 Armenians to be terrorised, plundered, abused, deported and killed in Merzifon alone during the long and dark summer of 1915.<sup>26</sup>

And yet, we know that Manissadjian returned to the site of the disaster not long after. It was in Merzifon, in December 1917, that he signed the preface to the museum’s meticulous, handwritten catalogue, explaining: ‘The universal war put a stop to all scientific work, except the continuation of arranging, labelling and cataloguing the specimens.’ The detailed inventory of each of the specimens in the collection – their source, name, location, description, etc. – provided a means of embalming the museum before its imminent dispersion, as well as registering the irrecoverable loss that marked its end – the loss of Anatolia’s ancestral culture, inextricable from its flora, fauna and landscape. Seeing the bare book inside a glass case, sporting a label with the scrawled words ‘MUSEUM - CATALOGUE’, it was difficult not to think of Marcel Broodthaers’s museum fictions. The recreation of the empty museum of Anatolia College, showcasing copies of Manissadjian’s inventories organised in ‘cases’ according to the museum’s original classification and display system, didn’t dispel the likeness. Barring one butterfly drawer, there was little to see except for the museum’s taxonomy – its carcass, if you will.

Undoubtedly, the use of exhibition design in ‘Empty Fields’ to address the Catastrophe’s politics of representation was indebted to the self-reflexive language of display that

<sup>26</sup> See R. Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History*, *op. cit.*, pp.452-55.



Above and left:  
Installation views,  
'Empty Fields', SALT  
Galata, Istanbul,  
2016. Photographs:  
Mustafa Hazneci.  
Courtesy SALT

Previous spread:  
Professor J. J.  
Manissadjian with  
his students,  
Merzifon, Turkey,  
date unknown.  
Courtesy United  
Church of Christ  
(UCC), American  
Research Institute  
in Turkey (ARIT)  
and SALT Research,  
Istanbul

Broodthaers pioneered in his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section XIXe siècle* (*Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, 19th-Century Section*, 1968).<sup>27</sup> But the analogy between both museums without works only stretches so far because, crucially, at SALT the museum-in-ruins was not merely allegorical. Whereas in 1968 Broodthaers subtracted the museum's contents so as to call attention to its institutional shell or skeleton – to circulation and reproduction as the conditions of the existence of the absent works – here the staging, or monumentalisation, of the museum's frame was put to the opposite effect – to exhibit the works' absence or, to be more precise, the conditions of the specimens' disappearance.<sup>28</sup> In fact, the difference between exhibiting the museum's skeleton and its carcass couldn't be greater: if the former shows that modern art is defined by the museum's armature, the latter presents the remains of the museum's structure as a trace of its destruction.

This, I would argue, is a residual gesture of mourning – a gesture performed in two acts: first by the curator Manissadjian, in writing the catalogue of the collection he knew was lost, and later by the curator Hovhannisyán, in her display of the carcass of the museum of Anatolia College at SALT. The collection's inventory bears witness to the particular worldview inscribed in the museum: the knowledge amassed of Anatolia's native geology, flora and fauna and its classification by the school's staff and students. But in making an inventory of the collection in the immediate aftermath of the genocide, literally amongst the ruins of the museum, Manissadjian also inscribed his own failure as a witness insofar as he was only able to preserve that culture as a vestige. It is this relationship to history in ruins that marks the work of mourning in Essayan's 1911 book as much as in Manissadjian's 1917 catalogue. What is mourned is not a personal loss but a collective one: the loss of historical memory. In the interwar years, Walter Benjamin defined this experience of collective mourning as 'the state of mind in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of a mask'.<sup>29</sup> The 'empty world' to which Benjamin refers is a world 'in which history, and the narrative coherence and direction it once promised, has been shattered': seven-

27 There is, in fact, a direct link between the exhibition's critical approach to the politics of representation and institutional critique via the participation of Kontext Kunst-associated artist Fareed Armaly, who advised curator Marianna Hovhannisyán on the exhibition design.

28 Rachel Haidu has argued that Marcel Broodthaers's *Musée d'Art Moderne* (1968) exhibited the institutional conditions of modern art, namely reproducibility and circulability, in her *The Absence of Work: Marcel Broodthaers, 1964-76*, Cambridge, MA; The MIT Press, 2010, p.120.

29 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* (1928, trans. John Osborne), London: New Left Books, 1977, p.139.



teenth-century German tragic drama and its mourning for the narrative of salvation offered by Catholic eschatology, but surely also the devastated world of post-World War I Europe.<sup>30</sup> If Manissadjian's 'MUSEUM - CATALOGUE' can be said to act as a funerary mask, it is because it attempts to hold together the memory of the object lost and the history of its loss, which is also the loss of history.

Nichanian has drawn attention to the common structure of cultural testimony and the testimony of survivors - what he calls 'catastrophic testimony' - by invoking Benjamin's famous statement on the inextricability of culture and barbarism, already prefigured in his early writings on mourning. Testimony, Nichanian argues, is defined by a 'double structure, since testimony is always a testimony of culture and, at the same time, a testimony of the barbarism that proceeds with the erasure of all culture'.<sup>31</sup> While Benjamin's sentence is often read as a call to consider the exploitation and violence underwriting the production of culture, Nichanian here asks us to read it in reverse, for 'any catastrophic testimony will be, of necessity, a document of culture'.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the inscription of the disaster is itself subject to the law of the archive and its curse of political appropriation. This is echoed in the exhibition's examination of both the collection's history and the conditions of its survival. If Manissadjian tried to hold together memory and loss in anticipation of the specimens' dispersion, Hovhannisyan retraced the collection's dispersion in order to locate its few, scattered remnants and rejoin them with the memory of the Catastrophe inscribed in the museum's carcass. Though the museum's collection remained in Merzifon long after the school's closure,<sup>33</sup> in 1939 most of its 7,000 specimens were shipped to another American school, in Tarsus, near Adana. But lacking context, they remained 'unclaimed and covered in dust' before being dispersed yet again.<sup>34</sup> Because Manissadjian had been active in scientific and

30 Judith Butler, 'Afterword: After Loss, What Then?', in D.L. Eng and D. Kazanjian (ed.), *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, *op. cit.*, p.471.

31 M. Nichanian, 'On the Archive III', *op. cit.*, p.21.

32 *Ibid.*, p.28.

33 After 1915 Turkish authorities closed Anatolia College and repurposed it as a military hospital. It reopened in 1919, under the direction of the American Board, to mainly cater to orphans and displaced children. In 1921 most of its activities were transferred to the Greek city of Thessaloniki, where it still functions today under a new leadership. What remained of Anatolia College in Merzifon was closed down in 1939.

34 Ateş Aykut, quoted in 'Empty Fields', *op. cit.*, unpaginated.

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Undated photograph taken in Merzifon, Turkey. Courtesy United Church of Christ (UCC), American Research Institute in Turkey (ARIT) and SALT Research, Istanbul

commercial networks prior to 1915, some of the butterflies and plants he collected have been preserved in collections across Europe. The over one hundred specimens kept in the herbarium of Ankara University, however, have remained unattributed, their history severed from that of the atrocities that unfolded in Merzifon. In locating these specimens and bringing them together with the history of the collection to which they once belonged, Hovhannisyan has kept alive the work of mourning that Manissadjian initiated in the immediate aftermath of the Catastrophe, and she has contemplated its afterlife.

Contemplating the afterlife of the Catastrophe implies challenging a double interdiction of mourning: the suppression of death inflicted by genocidal will and the suppression of memory inflicted by a revisionist state. Over a long trail of absences, 'Empty Fields' exposed the continuity between the brutal annihilation of Western Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire and the continued repression of religious and ethnic minorities under Turkey's democratic autocracy. Confronting the interdiction of mourning is, of course, not the same as overcoming it; it implies incessantly pushing against the limits of what can be said - philosophically, historically, politically. As Essayan wrote, it requires straining one's imagination 'beyond the limits of human imagination' and, 'despite superhuman efforts', failing time and again.<sup>35</sup> 'Empty Fields' shared the fugitive quality of Essayan's prose in that one was never quite able to grasp its object fully - just slivers of the destruction left behind in anodyne school files, and the sheer difficulty in accounting for so many gaps. In exposing these gaps as open wounds, it also recalled Saidiya Hartman's engagement with another archive of violence and erasure: that of transatlantic slavery. Reflecting on her project of writing a cultural history of slavery as a history of the present, Hartman recognises the omissions in the archive as the very parameters of her work, which she describes as an attempt to 'to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling'.<sup>36</sup> At SALT, such amplification was best captured in the image that opened and closed the exhibition: a poplar-lined field of rocks with the foreboding caption 'stones crying out'. Though the picture was taken before the events of 1915, as part of Anatolia College's effort to expand its campus, in retrospect it signifies both the opacity and the excess of the archive of the Catastrophe. While the bare stones evoke the impossibility of telling a story without witnesses, the reverberations of their lament across decades points to the incompleteness of the past. In present circumstances, I suspect that these stones' hushed cry will have been drowned out by the uproar that has followed the failed coup of 15 July 2016, the persecution of all forms of dissent bearing a frightening resemblance to the Ottomans' obsession with the empire's fifth column. All the more reason to heed the warnings of crying stones.

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35 Z. Essayan, quoted in M. Nishanian, 'Catastrophic Mourning', *op. cit.*, pp.112, 110.

36 Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *small axe*, no.26, June 2008, p.11.