



Images: Hrair Sarkissian, *Istory*, 2011, courtesy of the artist and Kalfayan Galleries

During his two-month residency in Istanbul in 2010, Hrair Sarkissian sought access to the history sections of various public and semi-public archives in the city. He didn't speak a word of Turkish, but had a clear sense of what the gatekeepers of the archives meant when, having identified him by his name, they muttered among themselves about the "Ermeni". Many refused access.

Tales of inaccessible archives have been told aplenty. Often found in the introductory chapters of history books of the unofficial variety, and depicting a particular breed of the uncanny, the absurd, and the Kafkaesque, this literature on the vagaries of archival access begs to be considered a genre of its own. In viewing Sarkissian's *Istory* (2011) series, one can only imagine the performance piece that must have been his audience with the gatekeepers. And yet the human encounters that condition these photographs as their immediate history are missing from *Istory*. Instead, there is another history at work here.

In 1915, Sarkissian's grandfather was forced to flee his village in eastern Turkey, a space reconstructed from imagination by the artist in a highly stylized, formal register in his earlier series *Construction* (2010). At work in *Istory* is the wider context of that personal past: the systemic elimination, expulsion and erasure of Armenians and their history from Turkey and its archives. It is well known that following the 1915 genocide,

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1 Taner Akçam, 'Ermeni Meselesi Hallolunmuştur'. *Osmanlı Belgelerine Göre Savaş Yıllarında Ermenilere Yönelik Politikalar* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2008), 33.

certain incriminating documents literally disappeared into the fog of war and regime change. Later, in the first few decades of the republic, a mix of nefarious operations and ridiculous recycling efforts have resulted in further archival losses. After Turkey's 1980 *coup d'état*, the historical archives were targeted even more systematically as befits the military regime, with a cohort of experts and translators deployed to eliminate "harmful" documents.¹

Then again, someone like historian Taner Akçam, who has done extensive archival research on the Armenian genocide, suggests that a "systemic cleansing" of the archives can never be fully achieved as such. For any document that is destroyed, there could be, and often is, another one which speaks of its having existed, whether by casual or anxious reference. Then there are records and testimonies attesting to the destruction of the documents themselves, various individual deeds and institutional campaigns, such as the injunctions to "burn after reading".

It is perhaps the possibilities opened up by such archival traces that establish the viscerally felt dramatic tensions in *Istory*. Access is granted and we are past the first doorkeeper. The photographs depict a spatial diversity of sorts, but there is a common underlying principle with which we are familiar from other state-engineered public spaces in Turkey—the classroom, the courthouse, the public park. It is a style that redefines the meaning of "public", as if in saying "This space is for your