Études arméniennes contemporaines

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Towards Inclusive Art Histories: Ottoman Armenian Voices Speak Back
Réflexivités

Female Photographic Representations in the Post-Ottoman Landscape: the Female Body as a Battleground of Imperialisms and Nationalisms

Représentations photographiques de la féminité dans le paysage post-ottoman : le corps féminin comme champ de bataille et de domination

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Résumés

English Français
The paper explores how contemporary artistic practices employing archival methods can intervene in colonial, nationalist and gendered photographic representations. Taking as a starting point the photographic installation *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* (2012, on going) comprised of postcards featuring women in traditional dresses and national costumes of the post-Ottoman landscape, it examines the complex processes in the production and consumption of photography related to Orientalist practices, Ottoman Imperialism and various nation-building processes. Considering how the collection of postcards problematises the historical accuracy of the female representations, the paper argues that alluding to the idea of the "Ottoman woman" constructs a collective space of belonging for a series of conflicting and oppositional social, ethnic and religious positions. In emphasising the instability of gender representations, *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* treats images of the past not only as documentary evidence but also as unstable bodies layered with contradictory significations. Rejecting chronological and geographical taxonomies and

organising the postcards based on the posture of the women, the work shapes a series of movements that disrupt specific ideologies and question the male gaze.

Ce texte tente d'évaluer la manière dont des pratiques artistiques actuelles peuvent agir sur des représentations photographiques genrées ou empreintes de présupposés coloniaux ou nationalistes. Utilisant comme point de départ l'installation de photographies *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* (2012), composée de cartes postales où figurent des femmes en habits traditionnels et tenues nationales issues du contexte post-ottoman, l'auteure met en relation sa réflexion sur les processus de production et de réception des photographies et sa critique des discours de domination.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : Photographie ancienne, femme ottomane, orientalisme, transculturel, autoportrait
Keywords : early photography, Ottoman woman, orientalism, transcultural, self-potrait
Index géographique : Empire ottoman, Moyen-Orient, Turquie, Trabzon, Arménie, Meghri, Égypte

Texte intégral

1 Taking as a starting point the photographic installation *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* (2012 – ongoing)[1] the paper explores colonial, nationalist and gendered photographic representations in the post-Ottoman landscape, particularly focusing on a personal collection of postcards featuring women in traditional dress and national costumes. The paper examines how the postcard as tourist imagery is linked to complex processes in the production and consumption of photography related to Orientalist practices, Ottoman Imperialism and various nation-building processes. Considering how the collection of postcards problematises the historical accuracy of the female representations, the paper argues that alluding to the idea of the "Ottoman woman" constructs a collective space of belonging for a series of conflicting and oppositional social, ethnic and religious positions. This emphasis on the instability of gender representations in *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* becomes the motor in foregrounding the fluid and hybrid nature of identity.

2 The collection of images that now form the installation *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* begun when I came across a contemporary reproduction of an older postcard featuring an image of an Armenian woman from Meghri, a town that currently is situated in the Iranian border of The Republic of Armenia but which historically was not part of the wider Ottoman Empire [see **figure 1**]. However, in an ironic twist, the postcard reminded me of my Greek grandmother and brought back memories of her everyday rituals and activities, while also drawing my attention to the similarities in the dressing codes of women of a certain era. Reflecting back on the experience of my grandmothers (a Greek-Ottoman and an Armenian-Ottoman) I started researching images of women in traditional costumes in the former Ottoman territories, looking at a first instance to reconnect, by tackling the similarities in the dressing code, with a break with an Ottoman past. The collection grew to include postcards that geographically represent women from the whole of the post-Ottoman landscape (from current Turkey, the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa) but chronologically individual postcards refer to various historical moments (Ottoman and post-Ottoman, original publications or more recent reproductions of older images). Based on such diverse sources, the collection also juxtaposes different ideological contexts, bringing together heterogeneous material drawing from Ottoman, Orientalist and nationalist perspectives, in other words images produced by Ottoman photographers, Orientalist images produced by western photographers, as well as images of women in their national dresses from the nation states that emerged after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, either produced in the new nation states or the states carved out by colonial powers.

Figure 1 Detail from *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman*, 2012
On going, work-in-progress
93 archival postcards in 3 panels, unframed: 123.5 x 43.6 cm each;
Courtesy of the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens-Thessaloniki

3 Amassing the postcards over a four-year period has slowly built up a new subjective body, forming an archive both "inappropriate" in the sense that the materials are historically and geographically inconsistent and "incomplete" since the collection does not follow any rigorous archivist principle. Although the *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* follows an archival logic, the work rejects archival classifications based on geographical and chronological taxonomies. Instead the postcards are organised on strips of movement delineating the position of the women in front of the camera, as well their posture and hand gestures [see **figure 2**]. The work, thus, can be approached as an artistic inquiry into the function of the archive and the role of photography as an instrument of modernity. However, since the collection brings together diverse sources referencing Ottoman, Orientalist and nationalist perspectives, it also offers the possibility for a comparative study of various contexts, as for example the development of photography in the late

Ottoman Empire, in relation to the colonial photographic legacy and the various nation-building processes in the post-Ottoman landscape. For this essay, I will map the above relations as a way of pointing to the instability of photographic representations and the complexity of the historical and geographical contexts, in order to examine how in the photographic installation *Self-portrait as an Ottoman woman* such discourses enter artist's based research not as historical contextualisations or documentary evidence but rather shape a series of movements that disrupt specific ideologies and question the male gaze.

Figure 2 Aikaterini Gegisian, *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman*, 2012
On going, work-in-progress
93 archival postcards in 3 panels, unframed: 123.5 x 43.6 cm each
Courtesy of the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens-Thessaloniki

Production and consumption of photography in the late Ottoman Empire and in the post-Ottoman Geography

4 Postcard production in the post-Ottoman geography has mainly been addressed as part of an Orientalist critique, as post-colonial scholarship set out to unmask the colonial agenda in images of the Middle East and North Africa[1]. This genre of postcards was also read as an affect of the symbiotic relationship between the new technology of photography

and the new investigative sciences of ethnography and anthropology[2]. Finally, they were framed as products of the colonial tourist industry that contributed to the development of studio photography in the Middle East[2].

5 Academic studies that look specifically at visual representations of women are still relatively few. One such example is Sarah Graham-Brown's[3] comprehensive study of images of women of the Middle East (1860-1950) examining the repercussions of a visual mass culture in the writing of social history in the area. Graham-Brown does not only look at popular tourist postcards but examines a diverse set of photographs, ranging from ethnographic images, to family portraits emphasising their function as Orientalist fantasies that represent the Middle Eastern woman as the embodiment of both the Orient and of sexual licence. Similarly, the Algerian poet, writer and literary critic, Malek Alloula[3] links the seemingly non-political Orientalist iconography of Algerian women to the French colonial project. Alloula reproduces postcards of belly dancers and harem women (typical Orientalist iconography) and arranges the images into a narrative so that the models are progressively unveiled. Using metaphors of penetration and possession, he compares the unveiling of the women with the French colonial conquest of Algeria. He assigns to the ubiquitous postcard the aggressive act of uprootedness and he engages in an act of subversion by reversing the colonial gaze and "return[ing] this immense postcard to its sender"[4].

6 Alloula's account, although powerful, is highly problematic since it overgeneralises the metaphor of sexual conquest, gives a male voice to the colonised women and assumes a heterosexual male consumer. He also fails to consider how the postcards might have functioned differently depending on the circumstances of their use. By examining the written messages on the same type of postcards sent from Algeria to France, Rebecca DeRoo[5] demonstrates that a large number of them were addressed to women. Furthermore, by scrutinising articles on postcard collection in French women's magazines of the time, she highlights the fact that these postcards were also published with a women collector audience in mind. DeRoo argues that although French women reinforced the dominant colonial stereotypes of racial hierarchies, by becoming collectors, by organising and displaying erotic postcards of Algerian women, they were also assigning to them functions that were not intended by the colonial industries; they were using the postcards "to displace and expand definitions of bourgeois femininity"[6].

7 Maria Golia[4] in her study of studio photography in Egypt also highlights the relation of photography to a female audience that addresses sexual fantasies through dressing up. As she points out:

> [...] genre portraits of semi-clothed dancing girls or country women also had a local audience, as evidenced by the small caches of nudes sometimes found in discreet envelopes in Egyptian family archives from early decades of the 1900s. Not only foreign, but middle – and upper class Egyptian women enjoyed having their souvenir portraits taken in native costume, sometimes as *fellahin* with water jugs, or as harem women, lounging on divans and pretending to smoke water pipes.[7]

8 The fact that images of women were produced locally as part of practices of masquerade or by using hired models not only complicates as Golia mentions the colonial construction of such imagery but also raises questions of authenticity in photographic representation. During my own research and in the process of collecting the material that forms the photographic installation *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman*, I also unearthed instances that suggest a more complex interplay between the production and consumption of such imagery. To begin with, I identified a series of motifs that reinforce Golia's claim, such as the use of the same hired models wearing different costumes. For example it is evident that the same hired model poses firstly as a street dancer and secondly as an Egyptian Arab woman [see **figures 3** and **4]**. Apart from the use of hired models, the collection also made visible other complications in the production of photography, such as cases of hand-tinted variations of the same image of women of different nationalities posing in

front of the same backdrop, and of commonalities between studio settings [see **figures 5** and **6**].

Figure 3 Detail from Aikaterini Gegisian, *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman*, 2012
On going, work-in-progress
93 archival postcards in 3 panels, unframed: 123.5 x 43.6 cm each
Courtesy of the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens-Thessaloniki

Figure 4 Detail from Aikaterini Gegisian, *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman*, 2012
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Figure 5 Detail from Aikaterini Gegisian, *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman*, 2012
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Figure 6 Detail from Aikaterini Gegisian, *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman*, 2012
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Courtesy of the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens-Thessaloniki

9 Considering the development of photography in the late Ottoman Empire the question of the complexity of the production of photographic images and the fraught relationships between who is represented by whom and how is again surfacing. Engin Çizgen[8] in her account of the emergence of photography in the Ottoman Empire traces the establishment of the photographic studios of Istanbul, such as the by the well-known studios of Abdullah Frères (three brothers of Armenian descent) and Pascal Sébah (a Syrian Catholic). These photographic studios operating through a mixture of official patronage and private

consumption produced series of albums and picture postcards of various "scenes and types" for tourists and visitors to the Empire. In her account Çizgen once again highlights how images (including the representations of women) were produced using often non-Muslim hired models and how the ladies of the Harem, the street dancers and other ethnic types represented followed an Orientalist aesthetic. I have to note here that the topology of Orientalist representations does include a large number of images of male workers and street sellers that could also be analysed as colonial constructions of types of masculinity especially in connection to notions of masquerade, but for the purposes of my work and this paper, I have specifically focused on images of women.

10 At the same time, the official Ottoman state faced with territorial and economic loss, during the reforms of the Tanzimat period used photography to construct and project an image of a modern and progressive identity. The most celebrated example here is a set of 51 albums containing 1,819 photographs produced in 1893 by Sultan Abdülhamid II documenting and celebrating the Ottoman Empire and its people. In recent scholarship these albums have been interpreted as deliberate and conscious projections of modernity and used as case studies for framing the late Ottoman Empire as an alternative form of modernity. For example, for Zeynep Çelik the albums highlight the attempt of the Ottomans to "speak back to Orientalist discourse"[9]. However, as David Low[10] has demonstrated such proclamations conveniently forget to highlight how the Empire was also enacting an imperialist agenda. Low explores how the albums exclude, supress or homogenise a range of minorities (including women) and claims that they are not only examples of an alternative modernity but are also examples of "alternative imperialisms and imperialistic practices"[11]. Thus, as in the case of the colonial Orientalist gaze and as in the case of the late Ottoman Empire, photography is implicated in practices of control and domination.

11 In highlighting the conflicted actors in the production of postcards in the late Ottoman Empire and the use of hired models to represent women in traditional dresses, my aim is to problematise the notion of historical accuracy and to emphasise the instability of photographic representations. Is what I am looking at a Christian woman representing a demure Turkish woman of Istanbul, or a hired model representing an Armenian woman of Trabzon or an upper class Egyptian dressed as a *fellahin* and carrying a water jug? Reflecting back on my postcard collection of women in their traditional costumes and national dresses, the ethnic, social and cultural markers become unstable. However, what remains and what is the starting point of the photographic installation *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* is the fact that women finally become visible.

12 The women become visible but they still are not part of a shared history. As I have mentioned earlier, academic research has mainly focused on early female photographic representations in the Middle East and North Africa, while the Ottoman woman has not been taken on as a specific case study. Not only the images of Ottoman women have not been studied in relation to each other, but also as relevant literature argues the "Ottoman woman" has not been addressed as a historical category in Turkish, Ottoman or Orientalist studies. The reasons that helped obscure Ottoman female histories are linguistic and political, since the establishment of the Turkish Republic and the adoption of a Latin script (instead of the Arabic that Ottoman texts were written) forged a literal break with the Ottoman past[12]. After the collapse of the Empire, the new nation states (and in this I include Turkey) in their drive to be both western and modern repressed Ottoman subjectivities and especially female experiences, since women were considered liberated from Ottoman suppression. And in the case of the new nations being built embracing modernist values, women, their bodies and their clothes become symbols instrumentalised in the very construction of national narratives.

13 It is only recently that academic studies started addressing the complex interplay between geographical, religious and ethnic markers in the construction of the identity of the Ottoman woman, as for example Reina Lewis's[13] account in *Rethinking Orientalism* (2004) of the travel writings of a range of Ottoman female authors differentiated in their

ethnicity, class, politics and nationality and the recent study *A Social History of the Late Ottoman Women: New Perspectives* (2013)[14] edited by Duygu Köksal and Anastasia Falierou that brings together new research on women of different geographies and communities of the late Ottoman Empire. My interest in such research lies in the attempt to map out Ottoman female subjectivities that consists of a series of regional, ethnic and racial identities that are not familiar to a Western audience, and at the same time, account for a shifting set of identifications, that slip between the position of being Oriental for an Occidental audience, while holding onto a modern Western identity.

Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman

14 I have so far explored how the heterogeneous material that compose the *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* highlight a range of geographical, ethnic and social positions, as well mapped the complex processes in the production and construction of such imagery. From the way the images are collected, to the construction of an "incomplete" and "inappropriate" archive and the rejection of archival taxonomies, the photographic installation looks at images of the past not only as documentary evidence but as unstable bodies layered with contradictory significations. In bringing forward the instability of photographic representations *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* uses movement as its central organisational principle. Firstly, through the construction of the idea of the "Ottoman Woman", it underlines movement as the traversing of the different historical, geographical and ideological contexts and through the many ethnic and social positions. This desire for continuous movement that expresses the fluidity of social and subjective relations is also marked by the very focus on the gestures and posture of the women. The collection of postcards is organised based on these very gestures and arranged into strips of movements (that echo Muybridge's[15] famous experiments). Finally, the work as suggested by the title *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* utilises the movement across a collective body to allude to the image of a self-portrait.

15 As I have indicated in my analysis, *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* addresses a curious gap in the study of female representations by bringing together images of Ottoman women and of women of the post-Ottoman geography. It incorporates images of women from the Ottoman landscape that fall outside Orientalist discourses, including women in their national dresses from the Balkan areas. It also includes images of a Greek woman of Egypt, or of a Turkish woman of Thessaloniki that as categories problematise national identification. The juxtaposition side by side of women from similar, contradictory and oppositional ethnic and social backgrounds allows for the construction of a hybrid photographic terrain that visually forms the category of the "Ottoman woman" as a multi-layered site. This visual demarcation of the "Ottoman woman" as a composite category, apart from creating a passage across the many social and ethnic positions, it also gives voice to a collective mass. And as the collection of postcards gives visibility to this new collective body, the work departs from a documentary, historical or purely archival sensibility, looking instead at constructing and deconstructing the category of the "Ottoman woman" as a potential space for subjective identification. In this inappropriate grouping, the women become part of a common visual space, with the potential to disrupt and conflate the function of both orientalist fantasy and nationalist symbolisation.

16 In assembling heterogeneous images into a new collective space of identification [see **figures 7** and **8**], the *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* does not only move across subjective positions and geographical spaces but also moves through time. Charting the changes in photographic technologies and following the movement form original images to later reproductions, the varied textures of the postcards temporally situate the images. The postcards as the move across time periods, they change slightly in colour and format, from black and white, they become bathed in colour through hand-tinted techniques, they are dressed with stamps and marked by personal narrations. And as they move in time,

they also move in space through the chronological and spatial identification of the stamps and the languages of the narrations. The movement from an original photograph produced in specific studio settings to its reproduction as tourist imaginary or national symbol, not only marks the many temporal and geographical trajectories of the images but also brings to the forefront their use by diverse agents. From the consumption of Orientalist fantasies, to the construction of national identities, from the playful dressing-up to the use of hired models, and from a tourist memento to the reimagining of bourgeois femininity, the diversity of postcards resists once more any attempt of rigid classification. Thus, the complexity in the production and consumption discussed previously becomes in *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* a strategy for accentuating movement and revealing the instability of photographic representations.

Figure 7 Aikaterini Gegisian, *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman*
Installation shot, Peltz Gallery, Birkbeck College, London, 2012
On going, work-in-progress
93 archival postcards in 3 panels, unframed: 123.5 x 43.6 cm each
Courtesy of the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens-Thessaloniki

Figure 8 Detail from Aikaterini Gegisian, *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman*
Installation shot, Peltz Gallery, Birkbeck College, London, 2012
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17 Movement also influences the way *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* is arranged in a tableaux formation. The work is organised according to the position of the women in front of the static camera (their posture); the direction of their gaze (looking straight at the camera, right or left), the types of shots (close up, medium shot or long shot) and the particularities of posture and hand movements (standing tall, lining against something, putting the hands up, looking at the horizon, sitting down or lying on the floor). The visual motifs and bodily postures are put together as strips that attempt to create movement, echoing Muybridge's early photographic studies of motion. Although they mimic the grid like symmetry and sequencing of the motion study, the strips are arranged into panels where overall movement is created not by homogeneous frames but through diverse women representing different visual environments. Unlike the gendered determined function of Muybridge's work (he mainly portrayed women in sexualised poses or doing domestic tasks, in contrast to the sports and muscular activities that his motion studies of men depicted) and the ideological role of the postcards (which I referred to earlier as the different ideological contexts of their production), these retrospective motion strips challenge the types of mobility available to women by containing within one panel a diversity and heterogeneity of poses, ideological contexts, types of dresses, visual backgrounds (the hired entertainer, the national symbol, the upper class lady). Furthermore, the arrangement of the work into strips of movement is neither symmetrical nor linear. The strips are of different length and are punctuated by gaps. The work as much as it brings together a diversity of material, it also reminds us through its gaps of all that it excludes. It refuses the authority of formulating the "Ottoman woman" as a historical category. It, thus, refuses to produce knowledge that is institutionalised in a way that a historical study on womens' representations would have done.

18 The collective body is created as much as a way of addressing the dominant ideologies inscribed into the body of the women, and as much as a way of producing a space of subjective identification. In the desire to coexist with the women in the postcards and to explore my own subjective slippages, I echo the French women collecting and displaying the eroticised images of Algerians and the Egyptian middle-class ladies dressing up in folk costumes in order to be photographed. It is without doubt that I place myself with caution inside this new space of collective belonging, while never allowing to fully rest into a single fixed position. In the absence of a shared history, the movement from a collective body

(constructed as a composite site) into a self-portrait, reflects what I have already described as an attempt to move from being Oriental for an Occidental audience, to holding onto a modern Western identity. Out of the fragments of oriental dresses and national costumes, out of snippets of pre-modern identities, there emerges a portrait of the artist inserted into Western representational histories of self portraiture, an image that is in itself unstable reflecting on the fluid and hybrid nature of identity.

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19 Reclaiming the term “Ottoman woman” is a strategy for making visible a mostly hidden collective female body and creating, through an “inappropriate” grouping, a new space of belonging, while questioning complex and contradictory national, ethnic and social positions. In foregrounding the instability of historical documents and turning photographic images of popular culture into new potentialities of movement, the work projects fluid collective and subjective positions and thus destabilises specific ideological formations. The postcards move away from being historical documents of specific popular cultures, to becoming in themselves parts of bodies, parts of bodies that construct a refracted self-portrait. And this movement from the collective body to the self-portrait as Virginia Woolf reminds us in A *Room of One’s Own* is “[…] the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that experience of the mass is behind the single voice.”[16]

20 Which brings me to the full view, the larger picture of women coexisting in the photographic space, sharing the same place in the wall, while slowly and cautiously they create a pattern of movement from centre, to left, to right, from top, to bottom. And as the women attempt to move, they have to work together in order to escape the boxed in photographic representations. In the process of collecting and placing together the postcards the boundaries between the sexualised object and the national symbol are dissolved and the costumes start to lose their distinctiveness. What remains is their trial to move and regain space. In this act of movement, the women perform dressing up and express sexuality, rather than become fixed into stable gender and ethnic positions. From centre to right, from top to bottom, the women in their movement refute the male (or any other for that matter) gaze.

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Notes

1 *Self Portrait as an Ottoman Woman*, Work-in-progress, 2012 – ongoing, Archival Postcards, Various Panels, 123.5 x 43.6 cm each unframed. A part of the work was firstly presented at the exhibition *East and West: Visualising the Ottoman City*, Peltz Gallery, Birkbeck College, London, 6 to 30 June, 2014.

2 M. Banta and C.M. Hinsley, 1986; N. Monti, 1987.

3 S. Graham-Brown, 1988.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

5 R.J. DeRoo, 1998.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 155.

7 M. Golia, 2010.

8 E. Çizgen, 1987.

9 Z. Çelik, 2000.

10 D. Low, 2013.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Z.F. Arat, 1999; E.B. Frierson, 1995; R. Lewis, 2004.

13 R. Lewis, 2004.

14 D. Köksal and A. Falierou, 2013.

15 Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904) was an English photographer who worked mainly in the USA, exploring early photographic technology and documenting human and animal movements in multi camera experiments that are known as "motion studies".

16 V. Woolf, [1929] 2011, pp. 59-60.

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	Fichier	image/jpeg, 184k
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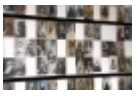
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/eac/docannexe/image/951/img-7.jpg
	Fichier	image/jpeg, 448k
	**Légende**	**Figure 8** Detail from Aikaterini Gegisian, *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman*Installation shot, Peltz Gallery, Birkbeck College, London, 2012On going, work-in-progress93 archival postcards in 3 panels, unframed: 123.5 x 43.6 cm eachCourtesy of the artist & Kalfayan Galleries, Athens-Thessaloniki
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/eac/docannexe/image/951/img-8.jpg
	Fichier	image/jpeg, 373k

Pour citer cet article

Référence papier
Aikaterini Gegisian, « Female Photographic Representations in the Post-Ottoman Landscape: the Female Body as a Battleground of Imperialisms and Nationalisms », *Études arméniennes contemporaines*, 6 | 2015, 293-305.

Référence électronique
Aikaterini Gegisian, « Female Photographic Representations in the Post-Ottoman Landscape: the Female Body as a Battleground of Imperialisms and Nationalisms », *Études arméniennes contemporaines* [En ligne], 6 | 2015, mis en ligne le 10 mars 2016, consulté le 12 mars 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/eac/951

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