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THE TASTE OF OTHERS

research & curatorial project 2005-2006

ASIA ART ARCHIVE MARTELL CONTEMPORARY ART RESEARCH GRANT



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Cover Image: Muratbek Djumaliev and Gulnara Kasmalieva, *Asian Pastoral*.
Video still, 2004.

The Taste of Others: Contemporary Art in Central Asia

By Leeza Ahmady

Chapter 1

Introduction

Is a contemporary visual culture thriving in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan—that is, in Central Asia? Are there practitioners of new media, video, and performance art? Are we overlooking the beginnings of a vital, untapped link between East and West in our preoccupation with terrorism, war, and conflict?

While not entirely thriving, contemporary art is indeed developing in Central Asia.

This essay combines analysis from my thesis work (Pratt Institute, New York, Master of Arts, May 2005) along with research from my latest trip to the region (August–September 2005). It was made possible by Asia Art Archive's Martell Contemporary Asian Art Research Grant.

In this essay, I offer a broad spectrum of analysis related to the arts and culture of Central Asia, alongside an overview of history and recent developments in contemporary art. Included is a description of a number of exhibitions and activities by art organisations in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan. The essay also includes documentation of the increased visibility of contemporary Central Asian artists in the international art arena and addresses the lack of artistic dialogue between Central Asia, or more generally, Asia and the United States, thus making a case for the importance of global institutional engagement in this region.

Along with this analysis, a contact list and an image archive of art works, as well as documentation of several exhibitions in the region is posted on the Asia Art Archive website (<http://www.aaa.org.hk/index.html>).

Research Methodology

Research methodologies include qualitative and quantitative processes. Primary research is especially applied, so that an accumulation of first-hand sources contributes to the narrative, formulating the premise of the essay. These sources include travels to Central Asia; professional interaction with artists, administrators, and art communities; expert interviews; artist interviews; and other administered research tools such as notes on selected local and international conferences, panel discussions, exhibitions, workshops, seminars, and more.

Critical to this analysis is my evaluation of a number of related exhibitions and lectures presented in Central Asia and in the U.S. Secondary sources have provided further support; articles, books, journals, dissertations, and other published statements have helped build content, synopsis, and justification for the project. The essay is written in a narrative style to engage the reader with its content. It includes excerpts from published articles and essays by the author.



Statement of Purpose

Over the last three decades, a contemporary art explosion has occurred, as regional art communities all over the world have reached out to one another through the Web and new media. Through contacts, collaboration, and shared exhibitions, artists have established a variety of arenas that are at once local and global, based in existing cultures but expanding to create new forms worldwide.

The art landscape, previously dominated by the West, is currently flooded with interpretations of art and modernity by artists from regions that were once considered remote—the Middle East, Africa, South America, and Eastern Europe, joined more recently by yet another newcomer, Central Asia.

"The Taste of Others" is an on-going project, which aims to close the gap that exists in the international art community by connecting the scattered and unidentified artists and art practitioners of Central Asia with art professionals in other parts of Asia and the world. I launched "The Taste of Others: Contemporary Art in Central Asia" at Apex Art, New York, in March 2005 as an on-going series of educational programs. The project includes a series of lectures, screenings, artist talks, essays, and articles, as well as a proposed exhibition of works to travel through university museums in the United States and abroad.

The basic premise for "The Taste of Others" can best be described by a quote from CEC ArtsLink's mission statement: "The arts are a society's most deliberate and complex means of communication, and artists and those who work in the arts can help nations overcome long histories of reciprocal distrust, insularity, and conflict" (CEC ArtsLink Website/About).



Yerbossyn Meldibekov, *Pastan 6*, 2004. Room and wall installation with about 50 plates. © Photos: Haupt & Binder, *Universes in Universe* online magazine

Chapter 2

Central Asia: Challenges and Opportunities

More than ten years have passed since the collapse of the former Soviet Union. The past decade has seen Central Asian republics move towards developing free market economies and creating democratic cultures. According to a statement by the organizing committee of the Second International Festival of Arts: "Peace & Respect," despite the progress these nations have achieved, much remains incomplete: "Regional stability is a concern for all regional governments, especially in these post-September 11 environments" (Umuralieva, "Second International Festival of Arts: Peace & Respect").

According to Filip Noubel, former analyst for the International Crisis Group, the challenge remains for local and international entities to continue to support the development of a democratic culture and to build strong societies to offset the authoritarian behavior of Central Asian governments. Unfortunately, developing citizen participation and activism remains a challenge, given the lack of community trust in official processes and the lack of civic knowledge and awareness of political processes. Therefore, the shift towards the implementation of diverse cultural activities aimed at promoting peace and tolerance among different countries is of crucial importance.

In this context it has been noted by Central Asian cultural scientists that the attention of the world community given to the cultural values of Central Asia has been consistently increasing. "The rich cultural legacy in combination with a significant number of gifted art practitioners draws the attention of the international art community to the Central Asian region, to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in particular" (Public Foundation of Arsen Umuralie, "The Second International Festival: Peace & Respect"). In this regard, cultural exchanges between American, European, Asian, and Central Asian art representatives seem to be vital at the present moment.



Unknown artist. At "Peace& Respect" Festival, 2004. © Photo: Leeza Ahmady

The Situation of Art & Culture in General

According to Larisa Dodkhudoeva and Muattara Bashirova, the development of arts in post-Soviet Central Asia varies considerably from country to country. However, at the same time they have very common features, including "a worldly outlook, concern with post-Soviet territory, return to national origins, and desire to revive historical memories as a catalyst for development. Concurrently, artists are working to find their own ways of solving problems" (Dodkhudoeva and Bashirova, Situation Analysis 1.1).

Enrico Mascelloni, in his work *Caravan Café: Art from Central Asia*, comments on how visual experiences dated after 1989 are marked by a nonchalant crossing over from "socialist realism to a kind of Islamic realism/abstraction." Works commissioned by government agencies are considered official. In these works, for example, the figure of Lenin may have been replaced by famous Central Asian historical figures like Tamerlane. "However, this return to 'tradition' or pre-Soviet 'origins'... is actually in the spirit of typical post-modern nationalism, invented more or less from scratch in its principles and its rituals, in the context of which Islam is relegated to a role of decorative background" (Mascelloni 29).

In some countries, development in the arts was halted by civil war or by violent periods of political conflict. In Tajikistan and Afghanistan for example, many cultural institutions were destroyed. In these countries, cultural facilities that are still in place have "obsolete material base and lack new technologies." On the other hand, the two countries that have shown what Mascelloni calls "bold

experimentation" in the arts are Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This is possibly due to the fact that government pressure for nationalistic themes are slightly more moderate there than in other Central Asian republics.

The Legislative Base

Larisa Dodkhudoeva and Muattara Bashirova, in a work entitled *Situation Analysis in the Sphere of Fine Arts, Handicraft, Design, and Museums of Tajikistan*, assert that the legislative basis for the arts in Central Asia is just beginning to develop. "The main law regulating this sphere is general decrees that define cultural rights of the population, utilization of cultural values, for establishing new cultural and art facilities" (Dodkhudoeva and Bashirova, Situation Analysis 1.3).

According to Yusupova Ajibekovna, Director of The Kyrgyz National Museum of Fine Arts, regulations on issues such as museum collections, inventory, and financial accountability have been implemented by all Central Asian governments since the middle of the 1990s. Art organisations in Central Asia are essentially organised and regulated on the basis of what is called "Creative Associations" or "Creative Unions." In some of the republics, these associations are exempt from taxes. Uzbekistan's creative economy for example, has benefited from several tax-exemption policies (Dodkhudoeva and Bashirova, Situation Analysis 2.3).

Key Obstacles in the Arts

According to Kurama Art Gallery director Churek Jamgerchinova, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its transition to free market economy have presented a number of problems for the arts in Kyrgyzstan. "There was a fall in the total level of professionalism of artists, sculptors, art experts, and critics in our country" (Jamgerchinova, interview). When the state funds for the arts disappeared, administrators had no skills to seek alternative income sources.

Ekaterina Luzanova, in her published manual on cultural development entitled "Administrative Methods of Management," reports that funding for the arts and cultural facilities in Central Asia is inadequate. Although many art institutions have progressed in developing strategies aimed at self-sustainability, salaries for museum staff remain

scant and "deficiency in trained art managers jeopardizes the organisational and administrative functions of cultural structures" (Dodkhudoeva and Bashirova, Situation Analysis 2.3).

Generally, in a healthy art environment, numerous independent galleries along with non-profit arts organisations contribute to the development of the competitive process in the arts. Currently, Central Asia's art market consists of professional associations of artists known as artist unions. "These unions, while quite efficient during the Soviet times, are no longer sufficient for the growing and pluralistic artistic communities" (Dodkhudoeva and Bashirova, Situation Analysis 2.4).

Another major area of concern highlighted by many art administrators is that art markets do not meet the ratio of working artists. In Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, there are about 200 artists in a population of one million people. Yet there are only two private art galleries in operation, alongside an exhibition hall belonging to the Artists Union.

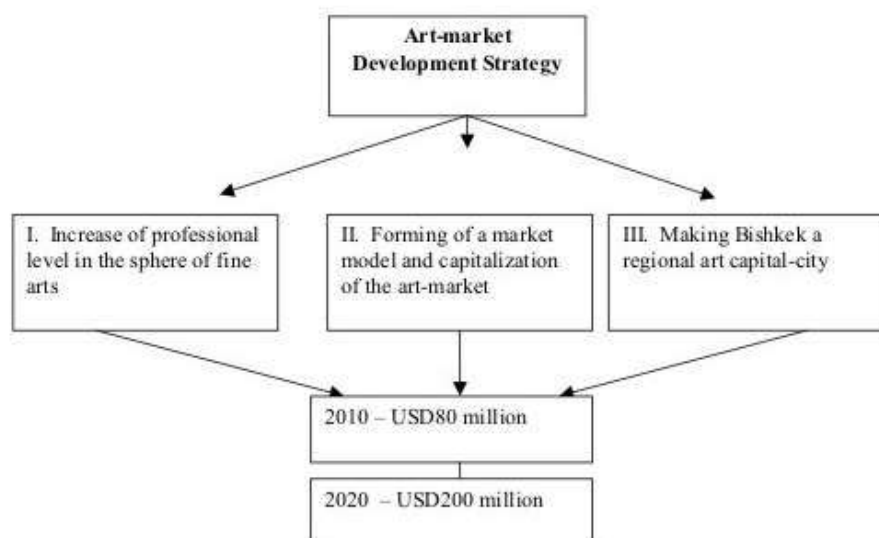
In Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, there is only one private art gallery specializing in contemporary art. ArtEast, a nonprofit arts organisation, has recently launched programs and exhibitions that engage local contemporary artists while attracting international artists and critics to travel to Bishkek. Other activities such as symposiums and exhibitions organised by artist and art manager Shaarbek Almankul, for example, contribute to an ongoing dialogue but are not sufficient for instigating a collector base.

In Kazakhstan, surprisingly, there are a number of art galleries in operation. However, many artists have complained about a decrease in local exhibitions and programs. This is due to cuts in funds by international organisations, specifically the Soros Foundation. In addition, the recent success of Kazakh artists in the international sphere has shifted the focus of many local art establishments to organise exhibitions abroad. This is cause for legitimate concern. There is a danger of losing momentum in further developing an environment that cultivates younger generations of artists who are instead becoming increasingly attracted to commercial art industries.

In an interview, Valeria Ibriva—art historian, curator and director of Soros Center for Contemporary Art-Almaty (SCCA)—attests to this exact concern, relating that many of the young candidates that the center painstakingly trained in video art have turned to careers in the television and graphic design industries.

According to Jamgerchinova, a factor that negatively influences the creative development of visual culture in Central Asia is its isolation from the world. Artists and art managers consistently complain about an “informational vacuum” and about having little means for expanding their cultural and educational outlets. Psychologically, many people still believe in a centralized decision-making system. This leads to reluctance to form public organisations as an alternative to governmental cultural institutions; meanwhile, “sponsoring agencies still lack the spirit of competitiveness with the desire to support innovative and unfamiliar projects” (Dodkhudoeva and Bashirova, Situation Analysis 3.3).

In her essay “Kyrgyzstan’s Art-market Development Strategy,” Jamgerchinova contemplates a plan for the formation of a functioning art market model. She observes that the absence of agents such as art critics, art experts, art dealers, and art galleries negatively affect the development of an art market in Central Asia. “It is they who perform functions of analysis, criticism, expertise, rating, promotion, and sales . . . It is the activity of such agents, which can attract attention and money to the art-market . . . It is they that make the art-market harmonious, transparent, understandable, and segmented in preferences” (Jamgerchinova, “Kyrgyzstan’s Art-market Development Strategy”).



Art Education

Art education has become limited in scope since the transformation of the Communist system into the market system. Privatization of education has resulted in few art schools operating. Tuition fees for these schools are too high for most of the population.

During the Soviet era, a relatively high level of training was available for artists as they were considered valuable contributors to the society's social and moral status. Artists were highly respected and cared for by the state. Indeed, artists between the ages of forty and sixty talk about their experiences with much nostalgia. They reminisce about the time when artists studied not only in local art institutions but also in renowned universities in other Soviet cities. The curriculum in most institutions however, emphasized the study of painting, printmaking, architecture, and monumental sculpture, since such disciplines allowed better corroboration of the communist ideology: art as an exercise for the social good as opposed to an individual pursuit. After successful graduation, artists were admitted to specially organised associations known as artist unions. These unions would ensure their access to studio space, public commissions, monthly salary, and exhibition opportunities throughout the Soviet territory.

Currently, most artists graduate from local fine art schools. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, they attend Kyrgyz State University of Construction and Architecture (Fine

Arts Faculty) or Kyrgyz Academy of Arts. Artists no longer have the opportunity to be trained in higher educational institutions of the former Soviet Union, such as Moscow State Institute of Fine Arts; All-Union State Institute of Cinematography; Leningrad Institute of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture; Moscow Secondary School of Fine Arts; Moscow Higher Art and Industrial School; Moscow Polygraphic Institute; etc.

Contemporary art is almost entirely absent in fine-art curriculums in the all-state universities and museums. These institutions are still dominated by the slow and bureaucratic Soviet mentality. Continuing education is not required, nor are educators inspired to personally renew their education. Thus most art educators' knowledge, methods, and resources for teaching extend only as far as the early Modernist periods. This means that faculty members are generally lacking knowledge and awareness of the last thirty to fifty years of world art theory and practice. Kazakh curator Julia Sorokina feels that only an entirely new generation of educators would make a difference in the situation of art education in Central Asia. Young artists, therefore, have limited access to the contemporary art forum and are just beginning to approach new mediums, such as video art.

Most of the artists interviewed think that the process of education should not stop at a local level. They expect private and state schools to initiate relationships with and secure opportunities for aspiring young artists and art critics to obtain education in schools abroad.

In their interview, art critic Dodkhudoeva and designer and art activist Jamshed A. Kholikov explained that young Tajik artists pushing for change are seldom trained abroad because the attitude of the international community towards Tajikistan has remained politicized. Tajikistan experienced a devastating civil war after it gained its independence in the 1990s. "The Americans do not want to have relations with us because they are apprehensive of reoccurring political fraction in our country," said Dodkhudoeva and Kholikov. Not having natural resources like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan could be another factor. Training programs that are offered by international organisations usually focus on political, economic, and socio-science spheres only. This is not only the case for Tajikistan but for all countries in Central Asia as well. Moreover, artists lack the

knowledge in foreign languages necessary for training in art centers abroad.

In the case of Afghanistan, the only opportunity to study fine arts is at Kabul University's Faculty of Fine Arts. Rahraw Omarzad—an art professor at Kabul University, the publisher of Afghanistan's only art magazine, and the founder and director of the newly established Center for Contemporary Art Afghanistan (CCAA)—complains of the poor level of art education in Afghanistan. "He feels that the antiquated perception of art and teaching methods in today's institutions have to be changed; they fail to foster the students' individuality, and instead only discourage it. This makes promoting art education and the further education of the teaching staff a pressing goal for the CCAA"

(Haupt and Binder, "Center for Contemporary Art Afghanistan CCAA").

Despite all these drawbacks, several universities in Central Asia have begun to offer curriculums in art management. However, "in the absence of state investment programs, expansion of private financial sectors is most essential" (Dodkhudoeva and Bashirova, Situation Analysis 2.3). Beyond this task and as suggested by Jamgerchinova, art managers must learn to act as intermediaries between artists, art markets, and the public at large.

Chapter 3

Contemporary Art in Central Asia: A Brief History

When thinking of Central Asia, most people think of its history. They say that at one point it had a marvelous culture. Yet Central Asia is living, producing, and creating in the present. It contributes to world culture now. This tendency to discount the dynamism of Central Asia along with the lack of information about its contemporary artists is one of the causes for the region's lengthy isolation from the international art forum. One of the main purposes of this essay is to provide international art practitioners some insight about the status of contemporary art in the Central Asian region in order to encourage future participation. Thus, the following chapter will trace the history and development of Central Asia's current

contemporary art scene and provide a general description of its art movements, most active artists, artists-groups, and arts organisations.

The First Half of the 20th Century: Traces of the Avant-Garde

Arts such as craft, music, theater, and dance are important aspects of each Central Asian nation's heritage. Many centers continue to present and preserve these more traditional arts. Fine arts from the European schools and museums began developing activity in Central Asia in the early decades of the twentieth century. This period brought a transition to the arts where the traditional plastic system of plain portrayal shifted to incorporate principles of European modernism. During the Soviet period, a new style of social art developed; art schools and numerous state-organised museums were established. From the 1930s through the early 80s, art in Central Asia could be said to have adopted a bi-cultural identity: local-national and Russo-Soviet traditions (Dodkhudoeva and Bashirova, Situation Analysis 1.2).

One of the peculiarities of Soviet art was its multi-ethnic composition. The peripheral regions were expected to produce art that was to be "national in form and socialist in contents. The thesis of "national form" soon turned into an empty slogan. Indeed everybody had to base on the academic tradition and to orient herself to the Russian realistic art of the second half of the nineteenth century. This process was painful and difficult in places where local traditions of professional art existed. (Yushkova, "On Professional Art in Kyrgyzstan")

As part of the Soviet Union, artists of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan inherited the twentieth-century Russian avant-garde, which included earlier European art traditions. In the 1920s and 30s, artists from various countries of the Soviet Union immigrated to Central Asia from places like Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, and Siberia. Influenced by artists like Malevich, Konchalovsky and by other Russian European art movements such as constructivism and primitivism, these artists found themselves in an Islamic periphery of the Soviet empire.

The development of the Central Asian avant-garde therefore went through a process of orientation, which, according to Svetlana Gorshenina, involved "the creation of a bipolar artistic system, taking into account the functioning of the avant-garde in an Eastern context, that offered 'oriental' entourage and very specific traditions of decorative art." Other artists rejected strict abstraction in order to "synthesize the methods of eastern painting, particularly miniature, with the largely understandable European tradition, including Russian icon painting, Italian Renaissance, and European avant-garde of the twentieth century" (Gorshenina, "Art of Uzbekistan of the 1920--1950s").

During the 1960s and 70s, some artists found strange but funny and ironic ways of catching glimpses of art outside the Soviet world. "We would struggle to buy Russian and Eastern European art magazines that featured negative propaganda against Western artists. These magazines in their effort to discredit Western ideology actually helped expose us to what was happening with art in other places. These rare glimpses of imagery, while negative in criticism, were food for those of us hungry for something different, something that we could call new, a point of reference . . . We discovered Rauschenberg and Warhol and many other artists in this way" (Ibraeva, interview).

Also in this period, in an effort to go beyond the Russian avant-garde and into the realms of conceptual art, there were many examples of "counter-action against the officially showcased and acknowledged art," the mainly socialist art by artists belonging to state unions. In Kyrgystan, for example, artist Ramis Ryskulov appeared at a May First celebration wearing shoes that he had painted bright red. In Uzbekistan, Vyacheslav Akhunov switched off the lights of a state exhibition hall during the official reception for his paintings.

Most of these actions in the peripheries of the Soviet Union were perceived as the simple protest of a drunkard against the order of the Soviet East, that everybody had become annoyed of.. Soviet ideology allowed for interpreting all of these examples as formal searches in the field of decorative art, and Party officials did not strongly assail these curious experiments. (Bokonbaev, "Introduction to Contemporary Art of Kyrgyzstan")

The 1980s: The Road to Perestroika

Muratbek Djoumaliev, contemporary artist and co-director of ArtEast, a non-profit arts organisation in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, reports that the activity of many artists and architects at the end of the 1980s marked the genesis of contemporary art in Kyrgyzstan. These activities translated into a movement called the "New Wave," a sort of underground art network organizing art gatherings and festivals that were exploratory and experimental in nature. Djoumaliev believes that the artists of the "New Wave" movement did not limit themselves to post-modern styles and created "sharp social artworks" (Djoumaliev, "Contemporary Art in Kyrgyzstan").

The most outstanding representatives of the "New Wave" trend were Jylkkychi Jakypov, Talant Ogobaev, Kadyrbek Bekov, Yuristanbek Shygaev, Erkin Saliev, and Emil Toktaliev. Their openness in the selection of topics, the monumental character of paintings and the courageous use of new formal methods were unprecedented at the time... These were alumni of the Soviet school of painting, who demonstrated to the whole world that in a society based on postulates of "scientific communism," pluralism of opinions was possible. (Bokonbaev, "Introduction to Contemporary Art of Kyrgyzstan")

Parallel to the "New Wave," another movement called "Paper Architecture" also rendered a powerful influence on conceptual and creative actions of many young architects and designers in Kyrgyzstan. This movement began by accident when Soviet architects discovered they could enter international competitions for their conceptual projects. A number of Kyrgyz architects also participated in these competitions and many were awarded prizes. For the first time in their professional careers these architects were free from obligatory ideological constraints. This practice helped other visual artists realize that their individual works were valuable and could survive even as concepts on paper. Thus emerged a conceptual approach towards art making and what Gamal Bokonbaev calls the development of "intellectual opposition" in the field of visual culture as a whole.

Early 1990s: The Post-Soviet Era

In the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Central

Asia confronted its 70-year period of stagnation and absence from the international art scene. While there was more access to information, "the shattering of the Empire limited movement, making it far too expensive and bureaucratically complicated for artists to move about" (Mascelloni, 89). During this period, artists' studios became centers for the initiation of ideas, discussions, and exhibitions of contemporary art. Multi-disciplinary activities without the support of any official organisation became possible, "and the studio was, as a matter of fact, a club of creatively gifted people" (Djournaliev, "Contemporary Art in Kyrgyzstan").

Most artists interviewed in Kazakhstan cannot help but become excited when talking about the 1990s Almaty art scene. The country's independence in 1991 sparked hopes and fervor for new creative expression by artists. "A kaleidoscope of co-existing artistic methods, styles, individual visions, and trends created a crowded and colorful picture of the time" (Yuferova, "The 1990s: Sweet Decade of Hope"). People enthusiastically gathered around an unprecedented cluster of unofficial artists' activities, such as those of the artist group Green Triangle, who in turn responded with extravagant approaches to deliberately provoke awe and shock. Another group well remembered and led by Sergey Maslov was the Night Tram. This group "viewed art as a spiritual, magical practice, a form of contact with subtle, immaterial worlds and extrasensory phenomena" (Yuferova, "The 1990s: Sweet Decade of Hope").

Aspects of art that were basic to twentieth-century art discoveries occupied another group led by Rustam Khalfin. They sought "analytical and scientific methods of working on a painting" (Yuferova, "The 1990s: Sweet Decade of Hope"). Their inquiry was not, however, limited to formal pursuits on canvas but included exploration of intuition in performance, installation, photography, and later, video.

Artists' groups were formed even in far-off places like Shymkent, a city in the south of Kazakhstan, where a dynamic group by the name of Kizil Traktor began "re-launching the strong ties of continental Asia" (Mascelloni, 91). To describe the intentions of the group, Enrico Mascelloni quotes Valeria Ibraeva, director of Soros Center for Contemporary Art-Almaty, saying, "The Art of Kizil Traktor transforms traditional ethics into aesthetic values through the representation of daily life, and the rituals

in which the typical materials of nomadic life are used: leather, wood and felt" (Mascelloni 91).

Two members of Kizil Traktor, Said Atabekov and Moldakul Narimbetov, remain active although they now mostly work individually. They continue to prescribe creative methods and older, perhaps nobler, Central Asian ideals of "nomadism, collectivism, and improvisation" to comment on contemporary realities such as economic and environmental decadence and other technologically driven mass global deliriums.



Yerbossyn Meldibekov, *Sheepwolf*. Mixed-media sculpture, 2002.

© Photo: Leeza Ahmady

In Uzbekistan, where artists are more severely indoctrinated by government policies to revive national pride and art-historical identity, contemporary art continues to appear in various disguises. Viewed as work in non-traditional media during the 1990s, contemporary art was generally considered in terms of Western versus local art. A number of artists however, by translating Uzbek theatrical traditions into the contemporary medium of performance art, resolved these seemingly opposing approaches. According to Boris Chukhovich, art historian and curator of Musée d'art Centre-Asiatique, "this love for theater . . . became an essential part of every exhibition with artists [Erken Kagarov, Mikhail Djalalyan, Timur Akhmedov, and Alexander Nikolaev], creating their works in public and interacting with spectators as if it was a spectacle . . . in the settings of the Ilkhom Theatre and the Cinema House."

Meanwhile, some Uzbek artists such as well-known anti-official artist and art advocate Vyacheslav Akhunov tackled art as an environment. His many installations and sculptural performances such as *Stairs to the Sky* and *Turk*

Project I & II expressed his assertion that "art simply moves on, it roots up from local places and identities, but it must seek to impress beyond geographic and aesthetic boundaries" (Akhunov, interview). His *Cell for Leaders*, an installation mimicking a prison cell piled with hundreds of sculpted heads of Lenin in white wax, was banned at the last minute from the Tashkent International Biennale of Arts 2003, an event which was ironically both organised as well as censored by the Academy of Arts Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

The Late 1990s and the New Millennium Years: Artists as Art Institutions

In the late 1990s, artists' activities became far more professional and organised in the sense that these artists began to see themselves as art institutions. The triumph of independence in creative activity eventually brought to artists the opportunity to direct their own destinies as art administrators. In the absence of official art institutions, many artists realized that alongside their art making, they needed to acquire management and negotiation skills in order to secure venues, funding, and promotional routes for their exhibitions and projects.

The artists who succeeded in this endeavor were the ones most willing to take on risks in initiating activism and showing enthusiasm in contrast to less motivated artists and communities. The Studio Museum and ArtEast in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, are two successful examples of this phenomenon of artists becoming art institutions.

Relationships and collaborations between artists of the various countries of Central Asia developed, especially between Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. In Kyrgyzstan, the activities of a number of artist groups resulted in large-scale local exhibitions such as "Parallel City" (1997), "Labyrinthos" (1998), and "PlusMinus" (1999). In 1999, the Kyrgyz artist group Armour Train made numerous videos such as *Tea Ceremony* and *Artist 2*, which are distinguished by the group's remarkable sense of irony and humor. Another team called Art Connection, which included Shaarbek Amankul and Lizzy Mayrl's 2001 project *Signs of Eternity*, required its participants to live on a deserted coast of Lake Issyk-Kul for one month to create objects, video, and photos, using only local material.

An architectural studio and an offspring of the Paper Architecture movement, Museum is headed by Ulan Djaparov and run by a number of artists who have been active for over ten years. It gathers artists, architects, designers, poets, and other creative individuals into project-based opportunities to create and exhibit both conventional and non-conventional works. It has been especially effective in negating definitions about contemporary art to ensure diversity of thought and practice while encouraging experimentation. Many of its exhibitions have connected artists of different genres from different countries of Central Asia in theoretical and aesthetic investigations. Museum's most valuable curatorial activity is an annual exhibition entitled "Bishkek April Fools Day Competition."



Studio Museum, Bishkek Kyrgyzstan, 2005. © Photo: Leeza Ahmady

Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djoumaliev, an artist couple in Kyrgyzstan, are the founders of ArtEast, a non-profit arts organisation. Their now-fully-incorporated organisation, active since 2003, is actually the result of many accumulated organisational experiences. With the initiation of the artist group Zamana in the late 1990s, for example, they carried out many projects such as an interactive installation entitled *The Wall of Talking Clay* and a video project entitled *Paradise*. These works won first prize at the annual exhibition of the Soros Center of Contemporary Art-Almaty in 2000, alongside a performance-photography project *Encounter with the Shadow*. Finally, for one of their projects, which required a trip to the Siberian border cities, the artists found themselves committed to incorporating an organisation while taking on the management of a number of other projects in order to receive substantial funds from the Christensen Foundation (Djoumaliev and Kasmalieva, interview).



Muratbek Djournaliev & Gulnara Kasmalieva's *Encounter with the Shadows*, 1999.

Performance Installation Image: Courtesy of the artists

The Soros Foundation's Open Society Institute: "Uncle Soros"

At this point, we must acknowledge the role of another, more global institution active in instigating the development of contemporary art in Central Asia. A certain breakthrough in the organisation of contemporary art occurred with the Open Society Institute's major initiative in the region in the mid-1990s. Soros Centers for Contemporary Art (SCCA) were founded in seventeen countries of Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union.

SCCA strived to contribute to the development of local arts communities by organizing exhibitions, documenting the work of local artists, awarding small grants to visual artists, and promoting educational programs. The Soros Centers also worked with one another along with other art organisations to promote contemporary art in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and beyond (Open Society Institute, "Arts & Culture Program").

In 1999 and 2000, following the restructuring of the Soros Foundation—or what many artists of Central Asia refer to as "Uncle Soros"—all Soros Centers for Contemporary Arts shifted towards becoming independent and ultimately non-governmental organisations. One of the most effective of these centers was founded in Almaty, Kazakhstan, which remains active even though it faces major struggles against its loss of funds and a lack of interest by the general public.

Chapter 4

Recent Exhibitions and Projects in Central Asia

As mentioned earlier, the activities of Central Asian artists in the late 1990s eventually led artists to view themselves as art institutions. The triumph of independence in creative activity encouraged artists to direct their own destinies as art administrators. In the absence of official art institutions, many artists realized that, alongside their art making, they must acquire management and negotiation skills in order to secure venues, funding, and promotional routes for their exhibitions and projects.

The exhibitions described in this section are successful examples of this phenomenon of artists becoming art institutions. The organisers of these exhibitions are mostly artists who are also directly responsible for Central Asia's recent successful appearances in the international arts arena. Generally, the exhibitions described fall under the wide scope of formal and conceptual contemporary art practice aimed at addressing local and universal contemporary issues: globalization, immigration, integration, colonization, ethics, and culture.

"Video Identity: The Sacred Places of Central Asia" (2004)

Soros Center for Contemporary Art-Almaty

One of the most remarkable projects undertaken by SCCA-Almaty was "Video Identity." The project announced a call for video artists from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to honor the sacred places and monuments of every faith, "anchored to the mentality of the region." The objective of "Video Identity" was to "highlight with use of contemporary language, technology, the unique diversity of religions and cultural beliefs which co-exist peacefully in the territory of Central Asia" (Haupt and Binder, "Video Identity").

As a result of the region's complicated history, multinational population, interweaving of many

cultures . . . on the territory of Central Asia there exists a firm historical memory of pantheistic faith, fire-worshippers, Mithraism, Nestorians and Tengriasm. Also co-existing in harmony are contemporary religions—Buddhism, Islam, Orthodoxy, and Catholicism, as well as numerous modernized confessional unions. (Haupt and Binder, "Video Identity")

The series of events held in conjunction with "Video Identity" began in March 2004, and concluded in October 2004. "Video Identity" opened with a theoretical seminar held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, in which fifty artists and theorists participated. The second phase was a practical training period in which professors from Russia introduced twenty-four artists to the specifics and technical aspects of video art. During the course of the competition, twenty proposals were selected. Their authors received financial support and equipment for the realization of their projects (Soros Center for Contemporary Art - Almaty (SCCA) "Video Identity").

About Soros Center for Contemporary Art-Almaty

Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan founded the Soros Center for Contemporary Art-Almaty in 1998. In its eight-year history, SCCA-Almaty has achieved an impressive track record of events involving the entire region of Central Asia. It has ventured to expand its activities beyond Russia, to other former Soviet republics in Eastern Europe, and to Western Europe (Germany, Switzerland, and Italy). Furthermore, one of its most recent exhibitions was presented in Mexico City, Mexico.

SCCA-Almaty's main goal for its activities is "the support of contemporary art in Kazakhstan and its integration to the world artistic process." As a unique institution in the region of Central Asia, SCCA-Almaty is supporting all kinds of cultural activity: education, research, information dissemination, and events. (Soros Center for Contemporary Art - Almaty (SCCA), "SCCA-Almaty's Activity Description")



Almagul Menlibayeva, *SteppenBaroque Series: Apa (Ancestors)*, 2003.
 Stills from video performances. Photos courtesy of the artist and
Universes in Universe online magazine

**"CONTEMPORANEITY": A PRELUDE TO "THE TASTE OF OTHERS" (2004)
 SECOND INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF ARTS: "PEACE AND RESPECT"**

The Second "Peace and Respect" festival brought together 200 artists from countries in Central Asia as well as Russia, Belgium, Japan, and Switzerland with contributions and performances from the fields of theater, music, dance, fashion, design, visual arts, and crafts. An international conference was dedicated to the subject "Culture, Dialogue, and Sustainable Development in Central Asia."

In the framework of the festival, the Kyrgyz Museum of Fine Arts presented "Contemporaneity," an exhibition of video works curated by myself. The exhibit featured thirteen contemporary artists' works from various countries. Among the artists were Muratbek Djoumaliev and Gulnara Kasmalieva, from Bishkek, and four Afghan artists living and working in the United States. The aim was to generate a larger audience for video art by international artists, which is relatively unknown in the region.

About "Contemporaneity"

As curator of the exhibit, I feel that there is a tendency for people to think of some areas of the world only in terms of the past. Asia and Africa are especially perceived in this way. I titled the exhibition "Contemporaneity," which means "the state of being in the present," to challenge this perception. Most scholarly studies in the areas of art focus on Central Asia's historical achievements and/or its folkloric traditions. Yet Central Asia is very much a part of the modern world. It is living, producing, and creating in the present.

As an exhibition, "Contemporaneity" welcomed art that falls under the boundary of formal and conceptual contemporary art—what it is, who decides what it is, and the scope of its language, materials, ideas, and histories. One of the goals of the exhibit was to increase the visibility of contemporary art to the region by featuring the work of international artists, both Western and non-Western, who share their perspective and their views on modern society through their work. "Contemporaneity" therefore represented a stepping-stone to "The Taste of Others" in establishing the region of Central Asia as a vital element in the international cultural network and to developing its national cultural value by communication with the other participating artists.

"...And Others" International Exhibition of Contemporary Art (2004) Kurama Art Gallery

"...And Others" International Exhibition of Contemporary Art was curated by Ulan Djaparov (Kyrgyzstan) with Elena and Victor Vorobyev (Kazakhstan) and was organised by Kurama Art, a gallery for contemporary art in Bishkek. "...And Others" included installation, painting, sculpture, and video works by twenty-five artists. It was a thrilling exhibit with works of impressive quality dedicated to the memory of one of the most influential artists in Kazakhstan, Sergey Maslov.

The curators of "...And Others" were mainly concerned with exploring the personality of the contemporary artist, that is the perception, uniqueness, creative expressiveness, and reasons for behaving within (or outside of) the context of the processes taking place in Central Asia, as well as in all the countries of the former Soviet Union. It was based on the notion that very often a contemporary artist combines the identities of the everyday outsider and hero to create artistic forms and express ideas, feelings, and concepts about life. A contemporary artist uses his right to research the changing world and his own private life to reveal the "other" sides, new aspects, and phenomena in trivial things (Japarova, ". . . And Others").

The exhibitions "Contemporaneity" and "...And Others" overlapped in time and content, attracting many participating artists, critics, and curators from Central Asia, Russia, and Eastern Europe. Those in attendance

included Viktor Misiano, curator of the Russian Pavilion in the Venice Biennale 2003, the famous Slovenian artist team Irwin, and the impressive Kazakh artist Yerbossyn Meldibekov. The simultaneity of the two exhibitions certainly provided a new impulse in the spread of new artistic practices in the region.

About Kurama Art: Kurama Art has been established as a private art gallery since 2003 and is engaged in the promotion of Central Asian art in the international market. The mission of the gallery is to "open up the fascinating world of Central Asia—its aesthetics, philosophy and wealth—to other countries through art." It was the commissioner and organiser for the Central Asian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2005.



"Contemporaneity" curator Leeza Ahmady talks at the Museum of Fine Arts, Bishkek, on the occasion of the Second International Festival of Arts: "Peace & Respect," April 2004.



"Transformation" Symposium & Open Air Museum (2001-2005)

ArtConnection, Kyrgyzstan

"Transformation," held in August 2005 alongside the vast, beautiful southern shores of the mountain lake Issyk-Kul near the village of Ton in Kyrgyzstan, gathered twenty-five contemporary artists of various mediums and disciplines and included critics and art historians from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Austria, and U.S.A. The site, referred to as Shop #7, is a former military plant consisting of several large structures, including underground tunnels connected to a two-storied laboratory built in 1952 to produce uranium.

"Transformation" was the third artists' meeting held on the

shores of Lake Issyk-Kul in five years, and was organised by artists Shaarbek Amankul and Lizzy Mayrl, founders of ArtConnection, a non-profit organisation based in Bishkek. Since the beginning of their partnership in ArtConnection, Amankul and Mayrl have launched many projects in Kyrgyzstan as well as Austria. Their former projects include "Signs of Eternity": Central Asia-Europe Artdialogue 2001 and "In Search": Central Asia-Europe Artdialogue 2002.

According to Amankul, "'Transformation' is a Central Asian-style symposium." In his view, a symposium that calls for artists sitting around a table inside closed doors to theorize about art is fine, but bringing artists together in nature to camp, eat, sleep, relax, think, collaborate, and to make art is another kind of experience. The plant, which was closed and has remained abandoned since 1982, served as a perfect site for artists in attendance to contemplate their relationship with nature, civilization, and art. An exhibition of all the works created on site during that week's gathering was held in Bishkek in January 2006. The Open Society Institute-Budapest, Soros Foundation-Kyrgyzstan, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), OJSC "Reemtsma, Kyrgyzstan," the German Embassy in Bishkek, and several private companies supported the project.

About ArtConnection

ArtConnection's main goal is to create interactions between artists in Central Asia and those of other nations. Its project "In Search": Central Asia-Europe Artdialogue 2002," which was documented at the Venice Biennale 2005, resulted in several permanent large-scale land-art installations to be seen on the mountains surrounding Lake Issyk-Kul. One of ArtConnection's ambitious future projects is to create a permanent artists' residence center on Lake Issyk-Kul. This would give practitioners from around the world the opportunity to create art near one of the world's largest naturally preserved high-altitude lakes.



Yulia Tikhonova. *Untitled*. Installation plus participating artists in "Transformation Symposium & Open Air Museum" August 2005. © Photo: Leeza Ahmady

"In the Shadow of Heroes" (2005) ArtEast, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

In the wake of an impressive array of original works presented at the Venice Biennale in June 2005 that surprised the art world, Muratbek Djoumaliev and Gulnara Kasmalieva curated "In the Shadows of Heroes" in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in October 2005. It was an ambitious exhibition featuring forty of the most dynamic contemporary artists of Central Asia and its surrounding nations: Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Russia, Georgia, Uzbekistan, and China.

"In the Shadows of Heroes" brought dozens of international critics and artists to the country for the first time. It was held inside the underground tunnels of Alato Central Square, in Bishkek, a site that had remained desolated for over fifteen years and served as a shelter for the homeless. The exhibition's main theme tackled humanity's long-standing relationship with heroes, whether cultural, mythical, artistic, and so on.

The exhibition comprised of a special project by the London-based curator and art critic Sara Raza, who presented a number of artists from Great Britain, Germany, and Iran. The exhibition was also accompanied by a panel discussion, which included Alena Boika of *Umelec* magazine in Prague; Aron Brudny from the American University of Central Asia, Bishkek; Valeria Ibraeva, SCCA-Almaty; and Viktor Misiano, Editor of *Moscow Art Magazine*.

About ArtEast

ArtEast is a non-governmental organisation founded by artists to develop contemporary art in Kyrgyzstan. It aims to increase levels of artistic practice through education and new technologies in art. Since its inception in 2002, it has proven indispensable to artists, art administrators, and art institutions in Central Asia. It is an exemplary provider of information as well as organisational and technical support, running projects such as a media-art laboratory, art books, a video-art library, and various exhibitions and seminars. Hivos Foundation Netherlands supports ArtEast's organisational and building capacity.

"Young Kabul Art" (2005–2006)

Center for Contemporary Art Afghanistan (CCAA)

"Young Kabul Art" was an exhibition produced by the Center for Contemporary Art Afghanistan (CCAA) at the French Cultural Center in Kabul and recently at the Leonhardi Kulturprojekte in Frankfurt, Germany. Rahraw Omarzad, an artist and art professor at Kabul University, Faculty of Fine Arts, established the Center for Contemporary Art Afghanistan (CCAA) in October 2004 with encouragement by a number of international artists and curators. Through the center, Omarzad has been actively working with young artists in an effort to foster their sense of independence and individuality. Art education is therefore a pressing goal for CCAA. Through local and international activities such as workshops, seminars, and exhibitions (plus a planned multimedia center), CCAA aims to renew artistic processes and atmosphere for artists who continue to be offered antiquated teaching methods by the few prevalent institutions in Afghanistan. Given current funding limitations, the center's accomplishments are limited to small-scale interactions between Mr. Omarzad and young students who have created a number of impressive video works and installations. In addition to "Young Kabul Art," The Center has organised the following exhibitions since its inception: "Women Artists in Afghanistan" (2006), "New Medium: Video" (2005) and "Remigration of Young Afghans" (2004).

Rahraw Omarzad is one of the protagonists of the young Kabul art-scene. He investigates with his students new artistic styles in current photo and video works. In films like *Circle*, *Reopening*, *Two-dimensional*, *Close Door*, *From the world of Darkness*, *Yesterday and today*,

and *Sympathy*, the students are dealing with current problems of their society. The photo-works from Omarzad circle around the sad wakening of the city, or about children who become the fathers of their own families. From a formalistic standpoint he reveals himself of contemporary artistic techniques. But his subject matter remains of local motives and themes. (Leonhardi Kulturprojekte, "Young Kabul Art")



Rahraw Omarzad in collaboration with CCAA Members, *Circle*. Installation, 2004. Photo courtesy of CCAA.

Tashkent Biennale and The Academy of Fine Arts, Uzbekistan

The Artist Union Dushanbe, Tajikistan

More prominent than other countries of Central Asia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have great historical traditions in both the performing and visual arts. Music, dance, and theatre are integral aspects of both public and private life, while fine arts such as miniature, fresco, glass and wood carving (*kandakari*) continue in either classical or contemporary form. Chapter Three of this essay offers an overview of the historical and present status of the arts in Uzbekistan and provides an analysis about art in Tajikistan with insights from Larisa Dodkhudoeva and Muattara Bashirova's work entitled *Situation Analysis in the Sphere of Fine Arts, Handicraft, Design, and Museums of Tajikistan*.

The Academy of Fine Arts in Tashkent, although an official governmental institution, has organised three international exhibitions: the Tashkent Biennales of 2001, 2003, and 2005, under the direction of art historian and curator Akhmedova Nigora. It has hosted works by fifty to seventy-five artists each year. According to some participating artists, the Tashkent Biennale truly is an ambitious undertaking, but it has not yet achieved the kind of independence that

would allow it to avoid state censorship of art works submitted. It also lacks the funding necessary to commission original works. Nevertheless, it has managed to attract various artists and jury members from countries such as Russia, France, Greece, Egypt, Italy, and South Korea, as well as the Central Asian states.

"I was outlawed for criticism of the Academy's upper echelons in independent media outlets, and for my views on the March revolution in Kyrgyzstan and the May 13 events in Andizhan," Akhunov told Ferghana.Ru news agency. According to Akhunov, the Academy chose artists and pieces for Biennale 2005 from the point of view of political reliability of artists and "neutrality" of their work (this latter is not supposed to dwell on problems of Uzbekistan or Central Asia). Even though a lot of gifted young artists participate in Biennale 2005, Akhunov said that it reminded him of a "toothless shark." (Kudryashov, "The Third International Tashkent Biennale 2005 Opens in Tashkent")

While my visit to Tajikistan took place as part of my research trip to the region in the summer of 2005, I visited Uzbekistan in 2004 by an invitation from the Academy of Fine Arts in the capital city of Tashkent. As an offsite participant in the "Peace & Respect" Festival of Kyrgyzstan, the Academy presented my video exhibition "Contemporaneity" alongside a lecture in which I spoke about the history and development of video art in the West.

During these visits, I discovered many artists, most of them highly educated and exceptional painters and sculptors producing works in twentieth-century modern modalities, fused with local and Eastern stylistic traditions, but I found only a few artists working with contemporary mediums. Much of the reason for this is explained in Chapters Two and Three of this essay. However, opportunities for the practice of contemporary art are far more accessible in Uzbekistan than in Tajikistan. Uzbek artists have had more interaction with the Kazakh and Kyrgyz art scenes and therefore have had access to international artists, while artists in Tajikistan remain isolated. Another reason for the delay or weakness in the development of contemporary art in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan lies in the lack of strategic and continued support by active international organisations in Central Asia, such as the Soros Foundation.

The Swiss Corporation Agency and the Hivos Foundation, however, are beginning to support more projects in this area.

Three artists making a difference in the contemporary art scene of Uzbekistan are now known internationally as a result of their participation in the Central Asian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2005: Vyacheslav Akhunov, Sergey Tichina, and Alexander Nikolaev. My official and unofficial talks with artists, managers, and art practitioners in the two countries (with the Ilkhom Theater and Gallery in Tashkent, Tajik National Artist Union, and the Artists Studio in Dushanbe) revolved around contemporary art, its visibility and practice in the region, and the need to create further East-West exchange and dialogue. Many of my interactions with artists, however, led me to detect deep feelings of resentment and frustration with regard to the conditions for the arts. On the one hand, the artists wish to be independent, while on the other, they complain about the lack of support that they had received from their governments under the Soviet system.



Suhrob Usmanovich, *The epic of Shahnama*. Detail of Painting, 2005. ©
Photo: Leeza Ahmady

Chapter 5

Central Asia in the International Arts Arena

For over seventy years, Central Asian artists were isolated from international art discourse by the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. While artists continue to dialogue and exhibit with the artists and curators of the ex-Soviet states, their focus is to become more globally connected. Indeed, through the efforts of a number of dedicated scholars, curators, and art institutions both in Central Asia and abroad, artists of this region are gaining access to international exhibitions.

The appearance of works (by Alexander Uguy, Murat Djoumaliev, Gulnara Kasmalieva, Erbossyn Meldibekov, Almagul Menlibayeva, Rustam Khalfin, Julia Tikhonova, Said Atabekov, Roman Maskalev, Yelena and Victor Vorobyev, and others) in recent biennials (Venice and Istanbul in 2005 and Sydney and Singapore in 2006) contributes a fresh perspective on art and its practice and also redefines the Asian continent.

The following section provides descriptions of recent exhibitions by Central Asian artists outside of the region and the ex-Soviet nations in the past five years.

The year 2001 marked a significant turning point for Central Asian arts in the international realm. Tashkent in Uzbekistan hosted two contemporary art biennales in 2001 and 2003, while three major exhibitions from Central Asia took place in Europe from 2002 to 2004: "No Mad's Land" in Berlin, "Reorientation" in Weimar, and "Trans-Forma" in Geneva.



Said Aktabekov, Untitled. Installation, part of "Re-orientation," ACC

Weimar, Germany, 2002.

"Re-orientation" (Germany & Kazakhstan, 2002-2003)

ACC Weimar: Galerie-Kulturbetrieb organised "Re-orientation," which was essentially an art caravan of artists, critics, and curators who traveled in search of art in Central Asia (2002-2003). The project included an exhibition and seven lectures held at a symposium called "Orientale 2: Multiple Post-Soviet Identities." "Political, scholarly and artistic statements on the Russian-speaking Orient and poetic descriptions of a roaming art workshop's on the road experiences, [formed] a cheerfully suspenseful alliance while also providing background information on a region hitherto little-known in Europe" (ACC Galerie Weimar. Re-orientation: Art on Central Asia, exhibition catalogue). All these activities were presented in text and images in a 300-page book documenting the works of many of the artists and projects previously mentioned in this thesis.

"New countries-new identity-new art" (Istanbul Biennale 2003)

"From the Red Star to the Blue Dome" (Stuttgart)

Another significant event for Central Asian artists came by way of invitation to a conference, "New countries-new identity-new art" at the Istanbul Biennale 2003, curated by Dan Cameron of the New Museum, New York. Furthermore, an exhibition entitled "From the Red Star to the Blue Dome," focusing on the re-Islamization of society in Central Asia and its effects on people's lives, traveled from IFA Gallery in Berlin to its second branch, IFA Stuttgart. In addition to the visual arts, the exhibition encompassed documentation of about fifty contemporary architecture projects in Central Asia (IFA Gallery Berlin, "From the Red Star to the Blue Dome: Art and Architecture in Central Asia").



Elena & Viktor Vorobyeva, *Self-portrait in Muslim Style*, 2002, photographs. Photos courtesy of the artists.

"Pueblos y Sombras" (Mexico)

In February 2004, Olivier Debroise, program coordinator of CANAIA (National Chamber of Artistic Industries) in Mexico City, and Valeria Ibraeva, director of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art in Almaty, organised an exhibition entitled "Pueblos y sombras" in an effort to transport Central Asia to Mexico.

In the exhibition text for "Pueblos y Sombras" ("towns and shadows"), the curator wrote that, due to the fact that Central Asia is so unknown in Mexico, she "emphasized works of art that deal with the day-to-day life of the peoples there." The exhibition mainly showed photographs, videos and video games of customs and practices, the working world, social life of nomads, and pre-Islamic shamanistic techniques (Haupt and Binder, "Pueblos Y Sombras: Contemporary Art from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan").



Galim Madanov & Zairesch Madanova, *Popular Images*, 2004.
Wall installation of small paintings. © Photos: Haupt & Binder
Universes in Universe online magazine

Venice Biennale 2005

As documented above, Central Asia's period of absence in the art scene is slowly coming to a close. European institutions are beginning to include this region in their art forums as they have recognized the importance of interconnectivity. The invitation to the Afghan Ministry of Culture to present at the Venice Biennale 2005 is a strong example. This was Afghanistan's first pavilion in the 110-year history of the Venice Biennale, long recognized as one

of the most prestigious international art exhibitions in the world. Lida Abdul, an Afghan-American contemporary artist living in Los Angeles and Raheem Walizahda, who is renowned in the world of design for his contemporary rug works, were selected to represent the Afghan Pavilion at the Biennale in June 2005.

Three other countries were also included for the first time: Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, whose artists were featured under the Central Asian Pavilion, organised by Kumara Art Gallery in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and curated by Viktor Misiano, who had also been the curator of the Russian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2003.

The organisers of the Central Asian Pavilion, Kurama Art, asserted in a public statement about the Biennale that despite tendencies towards globalization, national representation seems to be a main focus in the Venice Biennale. In other words, an artist representing a given state is not merely viewed as successful on an individual basis but is also representing actual artistic processes in his or her given country. The Venice Biennale is exclusive in its ability to attract an array of art world leaders, as well as highly respectful representatives of international politics and business.

The Venice Biennale is heavily covered by the art press and by leading mass media. Therefore, having a national pavilion at the Venice Biennale is the most prestigious representation of a state and of its culture. The opening of the Afghan and Central Asian Pavilions at the Venice Biennale 2005 was "an important event in the cultural life of the region giving a powerful stimulus for integration of Central Asian art in the International arena." (Kurama Art, "Central Asian Pavilion 2005")

In my role as an independent curator, educator, and arts administrator, I have promoted and exhibited the works of seven of the artists that were exhibited at the 51st Venice Biennale, 2005. These artists are: Lida Abdullah (Afghanistan), Yerbossyn Meldibekov (Kazakhstan), Sislej Xhafa (Kosovo/Albania), Muratbek Djoumaliev & Gulnara Kasmalieva (Kyrgyzstan), and Alexander Nikolaev (Uzbekistan). My exhibitions "Contemporaniety" in 2004 and "The Taste of Others" in March 2005 featured the works of all the above-mentioned artists.



Lida Abdul, *White House*. Video performance. (Photo courtesy of the artist.)

Since the unveiling of the Central Asian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, a number of Central Asian artists have been featured in other recent biennial exhibitions, including the Istanbul Biennial 2005, the Sydney Biennale 2006, and the Singapore Biennale 2006.

"Art in Afghanistan" (2005) The 9th International Istanbul Biennial

As part of the program "9B Talks," which was the Biennial's "intent to expand its presence beyond the formal and temporal limits of the exhibition," a panel discussion entitled "Art in Afghanistan" was organized to explore "the contemporary art practices of Afghan artists through the examples of diaspora artists and artists living in Afghanistan" (Ninth Istanbul Biennial, "Art in Afghanistan").

Rameen Moshref Javid, Executive Director of *Afghan Communicator*, an academic, cultural, and literary magazine, moderated the panel. Speakers included Rahraw Omarzad, Tawfiq Rahmani, Ghafaar Ghafoori, and myself.

Omarzad—an art professor at Kabul University, the publisher of Afghanistan's only art magazine *Gahnama*, and the founder and director of the newly established Center for Contemporary Art Afghanistan (CCAA)—noted that in the capital city of Afghanistan, the only opportunity to study fine arts is at Kabul University's Faculty of Fine Arts.

Omarzad complained of the poor level of art education in Afghanistan.

Artists Tawfiq Rahmani (Head of the Department of Fine Arts in Herat University, Afghanistan) and Ghafaar Ghafoori (Herat Province, Afghanistan) talked about their own works, giving an overview of the different artistic approaches in the region. They reported that 195 students were enrolled in Herat University's Faculty of Fine Arts in 2005. Sixty-five percent of these students are women. Herat is a famed Afghan/Central Asian city, once the center of the Islamic arts renaissance, where the art of miniature painting reached its heights. Considering the cultural cleansing that this city endured during the Afghan-Soviet war and then later at the hands of militant factions like the Taliban, the situation is very promising.

I mainly talked about Afghan diaspora artists and their works and the importance of the development of contemporary art, cooperation and interconnectivity between artists of other Central Asian nations, and their exposure to and within the international art scene and discourse.

The works of Afghan diaspora artists Lida Abdul and Mariam Ghani explore the realities of war and recovery, which are in many ways by-products of various acclaimed heroisms. In April 2005, Lida Abdul returned to Afghanistan to create three new works that were shot in 16mm film and transferred to video for the Venice Biennale 2005. In her work *White House*, Abdul is seen painting the ruins of a beautiful 1920s Romanesque-style building on the foot of a hill in Kabul. In a silent, serene, and repetitive gesture she paints everything white: the building's remnants, heaps of stones and rubble on the ground, and the back of a yielding young Afghan man dressed in black. Maybe by this act, in a kind of Sufi-Fluxus tradition, Abdul is calling for a new kind of hero: that of hope and prosperity.

(Ahmady, "On Heroism and the Afghan Diaspora Artists")

"Tamerlano's Syndrome: Art and Conflicts in Central Asia"
Orvieto, Umbria, Italy (2005)

"Tamerlano's Syndrome" was an exhibition of works by the most recognized artists of Central Asia, curated and

organised by Valeria Ibraeva, Enrico Mascelloni, and the artist Sarenco at the Palazzo Del Sette in Orvieto, Italy from July to October 2005.

Timur Lang (Tamerlano in Italian), a descendent of Genghis Khan, the notorious Mongol conqueror, was referenced by the organisers in order to shed light on Central Asia's historical collective behavior and to indulge in inquiries about Central Asia's relationship to itself and the world at large. "How is it possible that the whole of Central Asia—conquered by the Russian Empire only a little at a time through centuries and not without difficulty and later defended tooth and nail by the Soviet Union—has been allowed to dissolve away in such a short space of time? Would it not be more correct to speak about the Opium Route or the War Route rather than the Silk Route?" (ACAS Services/Palazzo Dei Sette, "Tamerlano's Syndrome")

The curators believed that the exhibition "Tamerlano's Syndrome," which was accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue published by Skira Editore, provided a window to a world that is still substantially hidden from the Western world. These artists presented "protagonists of a new Central Asian generation" through mediums such as video, photography, installation, painting, and sculpture. Artists like Said Atabekov, Smail Bayalev, Muratbek Dzhumalev, Alimzhan Gorobaev, Gulnara Kasmaleva, Rhustam Khalfin, Roman Maskaliyov, Erbosyn Meldybekov, Almagul Menlibaeva, Saken Narynov, Gennady Ratushenko, Georgy Tryakin-Bukharov, Alexander Ugai share their take on the issues of "violence and warfare, shamanism and Islam, Soviet Metropolises, and the timeless steppes" (ACAS Services/Palazzo Dei Sette, "Tamerlano's Syndrome").

About Enrico Mascelloni, Valeria Ibraeva, and Sarenco

Enrico Mascelloni's writings are dedicated to art and geopolitics. He has traveled throughout Central Asia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Mongolia. Valeria Ibraeva is the director of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art of Almaty, Kazakhstan, and is the foremost expert and one of the most adventurous sponsors of artistic research in Central Asia. Sarenco is an artist, poet, gallery owner, and promoter of contemporary art in Africa and Central Asia.



Muratbek Djonmaliev & Gulnara Kasmalieva, *Revolution*. Video, 2005.

Chapter 6

Current U.S./Central Asia Dialogues

Nineteenth-century European imperialistic environments also known as the Great Game permitted little incentive for the United States to cast its eye as far off as Central Asia. The results of World War II created the bipolar world of the Cold War era, which once again denied the United States access to this strategic area in the world. Thus, U.S. relationships with Central Asia opened only about a decade ago as a consequence of the demise of the Soviet Union.

The fall of the Soviet Union resulted in a "rise of intense political and commercial competition for control of the vast energy resources of the newly independent and vulnerable states of the Caucasus and Central Asia." The United States is at the forefront of what has been called a new chapter in the Great Game of control over Eurasia (Arvanitopoulo, Master of Fine Arts thesis).

While Central Asia was named "the Last Mystery to the Western art world" by Thomas McEvelley in the December 2005 issue of *Art in America*, there are a few U.S. art organisations that are active in Central Asia and working on opportunities for exchange between the two regions. However, as mentioned earlier, American interests including exchange and training programs have generally been focused on political and economic realms. The oil and weapons industries as well as the maintenance of strategic military bases in the region seem to be top priorities for American involvement. Only a handful of organisations in the U.S.

have connected the importance of art and culture to political and economic development. These organisations are the Aga Khan Foundation, Christensen Foundation, Starr Foundation, Soros Foundation Network, Ford Foundation, Eurasia Foundation, and Trust for Mutual Understanding.

An organisation currently invested in exploring the contemporary arts of Central Asia is CEC ArtsLink, an international arts service organisation supporting the exchange of artists and cultural managers in the United States with counterparts in Central Europe, Russia and Eurasia (CEC ArtsLink, "About CEC ArtsLink"). Interest in Central Asian art can be seen from the internationally recognized gallery Apex Art in New York, which introduced "The Taste of Others" project as part of its exhibitions, while the Bose Pacia and Chuk Palu galleries recently hosted talks and screenings of Central Asian video works as part of the Asian Contemporary Art Week 2006 program.

A continuous and substantial commitment by these and other U.S. organisations to present programs on the contemporary arts of Central Asia would not only contribute towards positive reciprocal dialogues between artistic spheres, but also educate the public beyond what are generally negative and narrow perceptions of Central Asia created by popular mass media. The following section will provide details about the above-mentioned Central Asia/U.S. exchanges with the aim to inspire further opportunities and future collaborations.

VisArt Central Asia

In 2005, CEC ArtsLink initiated VisArt Central Asia, a number of exchanges in visual arts and contemporary music between the U.S. and Central Asia, which were funded by a grant from the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA). The program allowed CEC ArtsLink to embark on cultural exchange projects from 2005 to 2006, involving the works of artists, musicians, and arts managers. Through CEC ArtsLink's efforts, six Central Asian artists participated in month-long residencies at the Vermont Studio Program in September 2005. Artists Shaarbek Amankul & Kerimbek Akmatov from Kyrgyzstan, Yerbossyn Melidibekov, Natalia Dyu, and Assel Alpysbaeva from Kazakhstan, and Alisherb Primkulov from Tajikistan shared residency with about fifty other international and U.S. artists and writers.

According to CEC ArtsLink's newsletter of spring 2006, the response of the above named artists, chosen from eighty-five applicants, to their experience at Vermont Studio Center "was overwhelming." The environment provided intellectual and aesthetic stimulation as well as contacts to artists, educators, and curators. During their short residency, they produced works in their preferred mediums such as video, photography, print, sculpture, and installation. Ellen Pearlman, a writer, photographer, and filmmaker based in Brooklyn, said the following about her experience with these artists: "We were all impressed by the level of sharp visual sophistication and wry humor inherent in their work, coupled with the obvious technical proficiency which we saw at the twice-a-month Open Studios and their exhibition in VSC's Red Mill Gallery" (CEC ArtsLink, "At A Glance").

In Central Asia, CEC ArtsLink's VisArt Central Asia program allowed four U.S. artists specializing in photography and new media to travel to Central Asia to conduct hands-on workshops for local artists and to give lectures to the wider public on contemporary trends in the arts in the U.S., Almaty, and Bishkek. In addition, CEC ArtsLink's management team provided opportunities for U.S. festival organisers to conduct training seminars in festival management. The exchange in contemporary music enabled members of the U.S. musical ensemble Bang on a Can to conduct workshops and master classes and to perform in Central Asia in September 2005. In return, Central Asian musicians and composers with an interest in new music were selected to attend the Summer Institute of Music at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in July 2005 (CEC ArtsLink, "VisArt Central Asia Program").

**"The Taste of Others: All You Can Eat Keecheeri Quroot"
Apex Art, New York (March 2005)**

As mentioned earlier, "The Taste of Others" was inaugurated on March 5th, 2005, at Apex Art New York, as the first presentation of this thesis, to introduce and promote contemporary Central Asian art and artists of the diaspora in the United States. The program at Apex Art marked the first official presentation of contemporary Central Asian art in New York and in the U.S. Besides works by the

artists of the diaspora, the exhibition included works by artists that I had encountered in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 2004.

The following text is an excerpt from my curatorial statement:

The word taste refers to the subjective experience, yet we often view it as something objective. Our taste in things are informed by the taste of others but often we are ruled by our own. This may be related to our sense of comfort. When we don't have an acquired taste for something, its uncomfortable to try it on. This discomfort causes rejection or curiosity for the taste of others.

Taste can mean a preference, or that which is acquired or possessed. It is parallel to the concept of having or not having. Central Asian artists come from places with centuries of accumulated tastes invested in collective pride, but today no taste is safe, nor pure. We are forced to look at other examples and other ideas that flood and overwhelm our taste. Mass communication like the Internet and satellite TV confront us with competing tastes from around the world. Yet artists have a special role in creating culture. They are not mere manufactures of taste: they question certainties and ridicule rigidities. Their art relieves us from our totalitarian attitudes. Abiding by these ideals, contemporary art works reveal the wisdom, connection, diversity, absurdity, and contradictions of various tastes in the world. (Ahmady, "The Taste of Others," exhibition brochure)

As the main event of the program, I conceived and created *All you CAN eat Keecheerrii Quroot*, a live performance and installation that commented on cultural comforts and discomforts, inspired by particular practices during the winter in Afghanistan and other countries of Central Asia (Tajikistan, Iran, and Uzbekistan). This was the first event where I collapsed the role of artist and curator, breaking my own preference for boundaries.

A famous Afghan dish, *Keecheerrii Quroot* is usually served during the winter. It is delicious, visually delightful, and has a very ceremonious preparation and serving process. Like many other things in Asia,

eating happens close to the ground. Although twentieth-century modernisms have brought Western furniture into Afghan homes (*Saalune* or western-style salon), it has not affected their dining habits, as Afghans still prefer eating with their hands while sitting on the floor, on rugs and mattresses. They find eating with their hands far more comfortable and consider it an art form. One has to work on his/her technique to eat gracefully. (Ahmady, "The Taste of Others," exhibition brochure)

All You CAN Eat Keecheerrii Quroot also referred to the difference between American and Afghan ideas about food and its consumption. To taste the dish, audiences had to remove their shoes and sit down on carpets to eat with their hands while sharing a platter (*koori*) with a number of people. Artist, poet, and musician Zak Sherzad demonstrated how to make a bite (*logma*) with the hand. A special demonstration video was also created by Zak Sherzad to help the audience on the mechanics of eating with one's hands.

The intention was to give an opportunity for people to observe their reactions, enjoy a communal experience, and gain different perspectives on hospitality. In America "all you can eat" refers to an abundance of food that an individual may enjoy. For Afghans it is much more about an energetic abundance. The culture looks down on excess of food and waste. Moreover, the practice of sharing is a perfect remedy for when there is little food to go around.

Sandalee was an installation inspired by Ahmady's memories of winter in Afghanistan. To beat the freezing cold of the long winters, Afghans have several ways of heating their homes. The more universal apparatus is the wood-burning furnace. The second tool, common and most endeared amongst all classes of society, is called a *sandalee*.

The process of installing a *sandalee* is most interesting. It is an event that signifies the coming of winter in a ceremonial gesture. It begins with the placement of a large square wooden table in the center of a carpeted room. The table is custom-built, about two feet high, and very sturdy. All around its four sides one lays mattresses (*tooshaks*) and pillows.

Then a metal container full of hot burning coal is placed beneath the table. Next a large cotton-filled comforter (*leeaaff*), especially designed for the *sandalee*, is thrown over the table, covering it entirely and spilling out over the mattresses on all four sides.

After a long day of playing in the snow, my twin sister and I would run inside and slip under the *sandalee* to warm up. Sitting on the *tooshaks*, we covered ourselves up to our chests with the *leeaaff* and didn't come out for hours. A *sandalee* is so cozy that it can be addictive. In this manner my family would lounge, play cards, eat and even sleep under the *sandalee*. I have always thought of *sandalee* as an incredible visual and experiential installation. It's thoroughly geometric, invested in space, time, and physical sensation. Yet in relationship to culture and function, *sandalee* represents the opposite of Western taste. It's communal, it's all about the family unit, it's about the collective purpose and experience. It's an intimacy that's very different. Often, the husband, wife, kids and grandparents, all sit together under the *sandalee*, which essentially is one big mattress and a blanket. This type of space is an awkward idea (taste) for Westerners who are accustomed to individual space and privacy. (Ahmady, "The Taste of Others," exhibition brochure.)

Along with *All You CAN eat Keecheerii-Quroot* and *Sandalee*, "The Taste of Others" included a live performance by Lida Abdul and a video exhibition program with works by Roya Ghiasy, Mariam Ghani, and Lida Abdul (Afghanistan); Yerbossyn Meldibekov (Kazakhstan); Muratbek Djoumaliev & Gulnara Kasmalieva (Kyrgyzstan); Alexander Nikolaev (Uzbekistan); Nikhil Chopra (India); Sislej Xhafa (Kosovo); and Jacob Fuglsang Mikklesen (Denmark).



Leeza Ahmady, *Sandalee* and *All you can eat keecheerii Kooroot*. Installation performances, plus untitled performance by Lida Abdul, "The Taste of Others" exhibition, Apex Art, NY, 2005.

© Photos: Leeza Ahmady & Apex Art

Asian Contemporary Art Week (ACAW) 2006

Asian Contemporary Art Week is an annual New York City-wide event in celebration of the richness and diversity of contemporary Asian art through exhibitions, lectures, performances, and public programs in galleries and museums. In 2006, its fourth year, ACAW reached beyond conventional representation to include Central Asia in two participating venues: Chuk Palu and Bose Pacia Gallery.

Chuk Palu, which is a commercial rug gallery in midtown Manhattan, is also "the sole provider of a connecting point for contemporary Afghan Artists." On the occasion of Asian Contemporary Art Week 2006, Chuk Palu introduced Center for Contemporary Art Afghanistan and its activities through a lecture and exhibition of works by four contemporary Afghan artists: Roya Ghiasy (installation), Rahraw Omarzad (video works in collaboration with CCAA students), Zolykha Sherzade (textile and fashion designs), and Rahim Walizada (carpets).

The following text is an excerpt from my introductory lecture to the exhibition at Chuk Palu:

The fact is that, as members of the artistic Afghan community but also as New Yorkers, we have had to bring visibility to our own works. It is through our own merit and efforts that we have managed to exhibit here and abroad. And why should it not be this way? Ultimately, artists everywhere are learning to become the masters of their own careers. No single community or artist is ever simply lifted up from a vacuum by art establishments.

No art institutions in New York, for example, were willing to engage Afghan artists until after the events of September 11th, when Afghanistan suddenly became news material. This is when Afghan artists were paraded about in a kind of a "flavor of the month" style and subjugated to lollypop issues in exhibitions and discussions revolving around the Taliban, Afghan women, and the most tasty of all candy-issues: the veil.

A number of us Afghan architects, artists, and curators finally got tired of the negative and fragmented ways that Afghanistan is portrayed by the mainstream media, which continues to spread convoluted east/west, oriental/occidental notions about the country. Thus we decided to educate and to re-direct the public to focus on real issues that Afghans face today such as education, security, financial stability, health and environmental safety, etc. We found that we can do this best through contemporary art.

In this respect, we can now speak about the space we are in today. Just as there is no necessity to stick to creative formulas, there are no reasons to exhibit works in defined artistic spaces. Chuk Palu is a commercial gallery, yet in the past six years it has acted as the primary venue for the launch of a variety of events related to contemporary art and culture of Afghanistan and those of the Afghan diaspora in New York. It is a space completely open to interpretation, based on the desire to be creatively expressive. Two weeks ago it served as a runway for contemporary Afghan fashion designs, and today it serves as the space for the Center for Contemporary Art Afghanistan (CCAA). Afghans, like most people of Central Asia, have a nomadic history, which still dominates our collective psyche. So it is not difficult for us to break rules, move about, and

plant our creativity whenever and wherever possible.

Turning our attention to artists who are on exhibit, you can see that each work dares to challenge notions about what art is. In my opinion, that's one of the best things that an artwork could help to engage us in: questioning itself and pushing boundaries, all the while being culturally specific but remaining open to universal phenomenon.

Roya Ghiasy is an international artist who was born in Kabul and works between New York and Europe. Her biography describes how her work deals with "researching phenomena that are related to cross-cultural intersections. She highlights her themes by using various mediums, from drawing, to multimedia to sculpture." She is one of the founding members of Center for Contemporary Art Afghanistan and the Director of Chuk Palu Gallery.

Her piece is loaded with cultural specificity. While this may not be intentional, it is safe to say that none of us are born in a vacuum. We therefore incorporate our cultural experiences in what we do. Her installation—a carpet made out of rice, carrots, and raisins—is related to the idea of a nomadic culture specific to Afghanistan but it is also a commentary on installation art as a nomadic practice; the nomad moves from place to place just as this piece can be removed and recreated elsewhere. The carpet is a sacred object in Afghanistan, it communicates many things—family, wealth, status, but also creativity—and yet many tragic things have happened to the Afghan carpet in the past few decades. Houses have fallen on them, and they have had to be smuggled out and consumed in different ways.

Rice, carrots, and raisins are ingredients to a famous Afghan dish called *khabuli palow*, served almost exclusively in celebratory occasions and when receiving guests; the reference to food is also a reference to hospitality. A carpet's primary function is to receive people, yet this one denies us the privilege to do so, keeping us away, to contemplate it from a distance. This work is also a commentary on art, design, and functionality versus mere aesthetics.

Rahraw Omarzad is the conceptual author of the video

works presented, as mentioned earlier, in collaboration with his students and members of Center for Contemporary Art Afghanistan. These videos are very specific to Afghanistan's current situation. *Closed Door*, for example, explores adoptive behaviors through societal realities. A young man is seen jumping to get inside various spaces through windows as opposed to doors. One cannot pinpoint how the character is being criticized; it is a "Catch-22" of some sort—in his effort to move forward, the man becomes completely unhinged.

Another piece called *Sympathy* offers a sobering and humorous depiction of a lone shovel digging out dirt from the ground at the same time that twice the amount of dirt is being thrown right back into the same spot. It is specific to the problems in Afghanistan: people trying to create and produce while squeezed between natural and unnatural destructive forces, either related to their own internal psyche or external factors. Yet the work is universal in the sense that there exists an entropic reality in nature. *Sympathy* is also a message to young artists: when it comes to ideas, your means of expression can be very simple. (Ahmady, "From Kabul to New York: Center for Contemporary Art Afghanistan" lecture)

Bose Pacia was established in 1994 as the first gallery in the West to specialize exclusively in contemporary art from South Asia (including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh). Over the past decade, Bose Pacia has held over forty exhibitions and is internationally known for promoting the South Asian avant-garde.

After seeing the Central Asian Pavilion in Venice, the Bose Pacia directors felt it was appropriate to program an exhibition of Central Asian art in their own venue. Thus, during Asian Contemporary Art Week, as part of "The Taste of Others" project, Bose Pacia hosted a lecture and screening of video works by recognized artists of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. The screening was a prelude to a larger exhibition scheduled for January 2007 and curated by myself, entitled "The Paradox of Polarity: Contemporary Art from Central Asia."

Chapter 7**The Paradox of Polarity:
Contemporary Art from Central Asia****Excerpt from Curatorial Statement**

For over seventy years, Central Asian artists were isolated from the international art discourse by the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The presentation of "The Paradox of Polarity" at Bose Pacia Gallery is part of my ongoing curatorial project entitled "The Taste of Others," which is a series of lectures, screenings, and exhibitions at various local and international art venues, aimed at closing the gap that exists in the international arts community by connecting the scattered and unidentified artists and art practitioners of Central Asia to art professionals in other parts of the world.

Indeed, recent appearances of works by artists such as Alexander Uguy, Murat Djoumaliev, Gulnara Kasmalieva, Erbossyn Meldibekov, Almagul Menlibayeva, Rustam Khalfin, Julia Tikhonova, Said Atabekov, Roman Maskalev, Yelena and Victor Vorobyev, and others in recent biennials (Venice and Istanbul in 2005 and Sydney and Singapore in 2006) contributes a fresh perspective on art and its practice and also redefines the Asian continent.

The most impressive works of contemporary artists embody paradoxes that continue to perplex our minds. This indeed is a common denominator in the conceptual works of contemporary Central Asian artists. Some common aphorisms come to mind when looking at Central Asian artists' works: "Everything is and isn't, at the same time," "Each truth is half-false," "There are two sides to everything," "There is a reverse side to every shield," etc. It may be that a combination of peculiarities that are embedded in the collective mind of this region, such as a multiplicity of nurtured philosophies—Shamanism, Buddhism, Sophism, Marxism, Bolshevism, Sovietism—together contribute to the artists' exploration of paradoxes.

Common in the works of many of the selected artists are regional-ethnic subjects, archetypes, nomadic and Sufi traditions, sacrifices, pagan rites, etc. However, there is no attachment to the authenticity of any narratives created. They serve as tools for constructing new methods, meanings,

and relationships that could last or be immediately destroyed as a resolution for something else.

There appears to be a conscious utilization of opposite extremes in the works of many of the artists selected for the exhibition, which is not the subject but rather a solution to various existing paradoxes. Some critics have seen this tendency as an added feature, something new, or a method of survival. Yet what's most refreshing in this is the element of open-endedness in the works. Given the region's long period of authoritarian political history, this open-endedness in art seems ironic but is not when viewed from a wider scope of history.

Clearly visible are the Russian avant-garde movements and, more recently, the Eastern European conceptual and formal influences on the activity of artists in Central Asia. However, the strength of many of the artists' works lies in their intense desire to integrate those references with new models and new standards to create an original discourse.

Identity continues to be a problem that artists focus on, since their countries recently obtained political independence. New myths and myths long believed but recently forgotten tend to reappear in forms of installation and video, which are actively used by the artists of various generations, from Rustam Khalifin, the founder and patriarch of the Almaty scene in Kazakhstan, to the younger Almagul Menlibaeva.

Installation is primary to the means of contemplation in the works of Erbossyn Meldibekov's *Pol Pot* series, Said Atabekov's *Supersoldier*, Gulnara Kasmalieva and Murtabek Dzhumaliev's *Paradise* and *Trans-Siberian Amazons*, Vyatcheslav Akhunov's *Sand of Oblivion*, and ZITABL's *Asian route*. All these works are a cry for something, appealing to Central Asia's close experience with danger: new national totalitarian rule, poverty, ruin, threat of war, new colonization, general degradation, ecological accidents, geopolitics, Islam, democracy, a free press...

Chapter 8

Central Asia and the Modern World: Confrontation, Dialogue or Interactivity?

The contemporary art world has expanded, advancing ever forward by the efforts of artist-collectives from regions that were once considered remote. In the past two decades, Asian diasporas have launched artists who are formulating new aesthetics and who are bringing to the fore issues that in the past were simply repressed. Mona Hatoum, Shirin Neshat, Emily Jacir, Shahzia Sikander, Lida Abdul, Ghazal, and many other artists have created works that link concept and form and that broach subjects that international artists and curators seek to work with.

Fereshteh Daftari's essay "Home and Away" invites reflection on how "escalating interconnections throughout the world have made globalization a master concept and a key term." She discusses globalization in terms of disagreements: "Euro-centrism or American capitalism, antagonism or emancipation." She concludes, however, that contemporary artists "often cross cultural boundaries; their traffic within the network of globalization is multidirectional" (Daftari, "Home and Away").

Western artists, such as John Cage, Francesco Clemente, Wolfgang Laib and Bill Viola, by immersing themselves in the cultures of the East, have reaffirmed a familiar linkage between modern art's dominant centers and formerly peripheral cultures. But other artists, of non-Western origin, have also created more complex and unprecedented hybrids in their physical and in their spiritual "residences." Transition has been the order of the day, shuttling between a variety of global terms and an equal mix of local identities.

(Daftari, "Home and Away," 513-515)

Among the numerous subcultures of globalization, the growth of festivals, biennials, and triennials has undoubtedly brought greater visibility to non-Western artists aside from broadening the sometimes-conflicted relationship between aesthetics and politics. In this respect, academic institutions too have entered this transient space and appear to occupy a unique position in opening up dialogues concerning contemporary identity and the friction it

provokes among people, and the production of culture as a whole.

Mass communication tools such as the Internet have been a major source for collaboration. Indeed, this is one reason for my wish to make this essay available on the World Wide Web.

According to regional experts, Central Asia may remain extremely unstable and vulnerable, given the "corrupt practices of the regional governments, the delicate state of affairs in Afghanistan, the constant threat of terrorists' incursions and unstable political situation." Art administrators feel that there is a lack of input from governmental structures towards art and cultural education, while furthermore there is a "lack of dialogue between cultural entities in Central Asian Republics and other regions of the world." (Public Foundation of Arsen Umuralie, "Peace & Respect Festival")

The past few decades, and especially the events of September 11th and its aftermath, have proven that no nation or people exist in a vacuum. The world is interconnected. Nations either benefit or suffer the consequences of one another's policies and actions. This is precisely why the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), was created. It was founded on the conviction that connection between culture and knowledge facilitates the process for achieving peace.

In November of 2003, UNESCO largely funded a conference entitled "The Unifying Aspects of Culture," organised by the Research Institute for Austrian and International Literature and Cultural Sciences (INST) in Vienna, Austria. As an art curator, I was invited to present in a section titled "Central Asia and the Modern World: Confrontation, Dialogue or Interactivity?" Over fifteen hundred leading cultural practitioners, educators, and advocates from around the world attended the conference in an effort to set the world stage for scholastic cultural connectivity in the next few decades.

The connection between culture and knowledge made UNESCO central in the quest of achieving peace; the connection between culture and politics made cultural identity crucial to the quest for political independence; the connection between culture and

development allowed new countries to build economic power and to assert themselves on the world stage; and the connection between culture and democracy focused attention on intra-state as well as inter-state cultural relations. (Research Institute for Austrian and International Literature and Cultural Sciences—INST)

One of the main themes for the conference was for participants to contemplate the idea that there is "an implicit connection between culture and security," and that this connection can be utilized to "reinforce the importance of positive intercultural relations as a cornerstone for international peace." Participants were also asked to reflect on "programmatic, financial and administrative support that this new priority would require" (Research Institute for Austrian and International Literature and Cultural Sciences—INST).

I was encouraged by the vision of the INST-Project for the world community, and upon my return to the U.S., began to plan for the creation of a virtual museum to showcase contemporary Central Asian art. However, as I began to write a strategic plan, I quickly realized that there was hardly any information available on the status of contemporary art in Central Asia. There were literally no resources available on the subject—no books, articles, or essays that related directly to contemporary art in Central Asia, not even on the World Wide Web. Thus, I began to seek ways to visit the region to do on-site research, remaining in contact with the few Central Asian activists I had encountered at the INST conference.

"The Taste of Others" is a result of my efforts to unveil Central Asia's art community based on a personal belief that the arts, and especially contemporary art, are a key ingredient to modern society's prosperity. Indeed, a common element in all developed, peaceful nations is their established infrastructures for the arts and their ability to nurture strong art markets. We must recall specific eras in U.S. history, when the development and collection of fine arts were given utmost priority as a policy by its government and private sectors. In the 1930s and 40s, for example, the artists of the New York School could not have achieved their historical and international success without the support of President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) and the Federal Art Project.

The Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) began the Federal Art Project in 1935 expanding commissions from mural painting to easel painting, sculpture and other media . . . The project produced hundreds of thousands of works, and by 1936 it employed around 6,000 artists... [It] formed a real community of artists... Stuart Davis, Jackson Pollock, William de Kooning, Archile Gorky, Lee Krasner, David Smith, and Mark Rothko—most of the key artists of the New York School—all worked on the project. (Fineberg, Jonathan, Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being)

A variety of forums are required in order to encourage the cultural development of nations in Central Asia. Therefore, one of the main operating concepts of "The Taste of Others" is that cultural values and principles can play a critical role in ensuring peace, tolerance, and mutual understanding among nations of different states.

"The Taste of Others" as a project is therefore also focused on the establishment of a cultural network among the United States, Central Asia, and other nations in Asia where art critics and representatives can interact and facilitate dialogues that reciprocally benefit the various regions. As a traveling exhibition and series of educational programming, "The Taste of Others" will contribute toward evaluating the state of contemporary art and cultural policy and identify the directions of further developments in contemporary art in Central Asian republics and their neighbors.

As observed in previous chapters, despite many obstacles, there is a new generation of artists, designers, and art administrators emerging in Central Asia. They are enthusiastic yet aware of the fact that their work must begin to meet contemporary standards. They are eager to learn about integrating into the world culture. The fact that various government agencies, the press, and private art agents comprehend and criticize the current situation attests to a profound desire for fundamental change.

The importance of exposure cannot be over emphasized. Tremendous signs of growth are now evident, especially in the art communities of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. This is no doubt due to their recent successful interactions with international art venues. It is not a coincidence that

these two countries are also the most tranquil nations in Central Asia. In fact, interest from other countries in the arts and culture of these two nations has been steadily increasing, especially in Europe. It is time for cultural institutions in the United States and other parts of Asia to join the effort in broadening the contemporary art frontier.

Artists Interviewed or Referenced:

Kazakhstan

Sergey MASLOV
 Yelena VOROBYEVA
 Viktor VOROBYEV
 Rustam KHALFIN
 Julia TIKHONOVA
 Almagul MENLIBAYEVA
 Erbossyn MELDIBEKOV
 Abilsaid ATABEKOV
 Ganyia CHAGATAEVA
 Kanat TURSUN
 Marat BEKEYEV
 Akmaral ZHIYENGALIYEVA
 Victor PROSTAKOV
 Demidov VSEVOLOD
 Rashid NUREKEYEV
 Moldakul NARYMBETO
 Valerey KARTUN
 Alexander MAHNO
 Yuliya SOROKINA
 Alexander UGAY
 Margarita AMUROSOVA
 Georgiy TRYAKIN-BUHAROV
 Dastan KOZHAHMETOV
 Sahen NARYNOV
 Sultanbaeva and Ablikim AKMOLAEV
 Nekressov ALEXEY
 Marat SAGITOV
 Roman AREFIEV
 Pavel OUCHINNIKOV
 Aligerim Issabekava SAGADATOVNA
 Kairat OSPANOV
 Kostya TIMOSHENKO

Kyrgyzstan

Muratbek DJOUMALIEV
 Gulnara KASMALIEVA
 Roman MASKALEV

Maxim BORONILOV
 Ulan DZHAPAROV
 Gamal BOKONBAEV
 Adis SEITALIEV
 Ivan MOROZOV OLEGOVICH
 Olga MAKEEVA
 Talant OGOBAEV
 Shibek (Shailo) JECHEBBAEV
 Kerimbek AKMATOV
 Valery RUPPEL
 Shigaev YURISTANBEK
 Shaarbek AMANKUL
 Lizzy MAYRL

Uzbekistan

Alexander NIKOLAEV
 Vyacheslav AKHUNOV
 Sergey TYCHINA
 Karimove TAHIR
 Ahmadaliev FAIZULLA
 Elena KAMBINA
 Zaur MANSUROV

Tajikistan

Alisher PRIMKULOV
 Ilyos MAMADZHANOV
 Akmal KHASANOV
 Suraie TUICHIEVA
 Jamshed KHOLIKOV
 Mukharam KOMILOVA
 Rahim SAFAROV
 NosizBek NARZIBEKOV
 Ismatov BAHROM
 Farukh NEGMATZADE
 Suleman SHARIFI
 Ilyos MAMADZHANOV
 Olim AZAMOVICH
 Akmal MIRSHAKAR
 Murod SHARIPOV
 Sabzali MURODZODAI SHARIF

Avaesho SAIFUTDINOV
 Parvin GUPOV
 Suhrob SHARIPOR
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 Lida ABDUL
 Roya GHIASY
 Mariam GHANI
 Masood KAMANDY
 Raheem WALIDZADA

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