

## Central Asian Art-Traffic

Submitted by [Yuliya Sorokina](#) on Sun, 2008-07-20 04:53

When I am visiting the next symposium about contemporary art issues, organized by some famous international biennale or any other international forum, I am sure that this or that issue relating to the geopolitical identity in contemporary art will be raised. Presenters speak about 'Eastern' art and I am sure that they mean the so-called Far East: China, Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, or maybe India... And when European art is presented, then it's about Central and Western Europe, or Eastern Europe and Russia. Central Asian art is situated somewhere in-between these fundamental poles. It is neither good nor bad; it is just what it is. Art-Traffic, we call it. This situation is the logical continuation of a cultural territory, which was established where the ancient Silk Route passed and where the global Soviet experiments concerning the deportation of nations and cultures, took place. Central Asian museums are nowadays full of various works of art- connecting with the classic civilizations of ancient times, i.e. remnants of Alexander the Great and the Chinese Empire. Our Soviet heritage includes adequate collections of the Soviet Vanguard, which were deported from the Soviet cultural capitals, such as Moscow and Leningrad, as well as deported creative arts professionals, who were the prisoners of Stalin's camps here, and influenced our contemporary culture in a special way.

On the one hand, Central Asian contemporary culture has the visible oriental identity; on the other hand, this identity is not actually clear and on the other, extremely current and mixed. That is why the contemporary art phenomena in Central Asia have a very special structure and a very special circle of problems.

Additionally, Central Asian contemporary art can be regarded as a freelance institutional sector. After the former USSR collapsed and the Central Asian republics became independent, the new art of these new countries has never been supported by their respective governments. The actual, perceived art appeared to be very strange, uncomfortable and even dangerous for the governmental employers. Therefore, to be a contemporary artist/curator here means to be an enthusiastic person, with no institutional support, no stable salary, and no local recognition... Local contemporary artists themselves feel as citizens of a different, separate state, or even as members of one big (around 50 people per one region) family of strangers. From time to time we try to organize some exhibitions/workshops/seminars in Central Asian countries, but they never captured the attention of governmental structures or business corporations. They do not yet want to open up their minds for contemporary art.

Since 1997 the Soros Center for contemporary art is operating Almaty, Kazakhstan. In the very beginning this center developed the situation within contemporary art in the region, but later occupied all rights to act on behalf of Central Asian contemporary art community. The majority of this art community do not really want to act under one institution.

Therefore, the policy of contemporary art professionals has developed into becoming intensively nomadic. Central Asian curators and artists alike have established a good functioning system of freelance projects that are carried out on an international level, with international partners (both regional and world-wide) and promote intercultural dialogue between Central Asian and art outside this region. The following projects can be seen as examples of these dynamic processes:

- In the spring of 2002 an international nomadic workshop entitled the “Non-Silk Way -

Asian Extreme” was initiated under the aegis of the “Asia Art+” public foundation, with the financial support of the Open Society Institute (Budapest) and other commercial sponsors. Participants of this “extreme workshop” included 25 artists/curators from nine countries. For two weeks they traveled around South Kazakhstan by bus, actively participating in all ‘happenings’ and building many interesting site specific works of art. An international network of artists and supporters of the arts was established as the result of this trip. The participants in the workshop depicted Central Asia completely differently than that of artistic experience in their respective countries. It resulted in a new form of coexistence for a rather large group of artists/curators with different methodologies, mentalities and cultural backgrounds.

- Parallel with freelance curators, SCCA-Almaty has developed its own policy for the development of contemporary art. The Center has conducted various educational events for young artists and new curators: seminars, workshops, round tables and conferences. In 2002 the Kazakhstani festival “Inventarisatio” was held and in 2004 the Central Asian Video Festival “Video-identity, Sacred places of Central Asia”. These festivals provided the opportunity not only to present regional video art scenes collectively, but also to discuss problematic issues of new-to-the-region artistic methods. Web-site: [www.scca.kz](http://www.scca.kz)

- Since 1998, the leading Central Asian contemporary artists/curators have participated in

different exhibitions, seminars and conferences overseas on a regular basis. Since 2000, the participation in international projects has resulted in general nomadic strategy. In 2002-2004 a wide range of exhibitions of Central Asian contemporary art was exhibited. “No mad’s land”, The House of World Culture, Berlin, Germany; “Trans Forma”, CMA-Geneva, Geneva Switzerland; “Reorientation”, ACC Gallery, Weimar, Germany, “From Red Stars to Blue Cupolas”, IFA-Gallery, Berlin/Stuttgart, Germany and others.

- From the year 2002 “KURAK”, International Art & Culture Magazine, edited by Ulan

Djaparov, - a freelance curator from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, is function in the Region. This unique magazine is the only publishing contemporary culture institution in the Region. “KURAK” is issued on a quarterly basis. It includes information on different contemporary art issues both locally and internationally. Ulan Djaparov is a leader of the Studio “Museum”, which is also active in the region.

- One of the most well known non-governmental institutions in Central Asia is the Public Organization ArtEast. The leaders of the organization, Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Jumaliev, initiated a few important international events in Bishkek – the capital of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan: “In the Shadow of the Heroes” - II Bishkek International Exhibition of Contemporary Art 2005, “Zone of Risk. Transition” - III Bishkek International Exhibition of Contemporary Art 2007, as well as a few workshops and seminars for young people. Due to these efforts the marginal geo-political situation of Bishkek became a special Central Asian brand among contemporary art communities world-wide. The activity of Gulnara and Murat is a good example of curating artists, who can also find the way to develop not only their own curriculum vitae, but the situation of local art-scenes as well. In October 2008 ArtEast are going to organize IV Bishkek International Exhibition of Contemporary Art in collaboration with Ulan Djaparov and his studio “Museum”.

- Since 2005 a new type of the exchange project named “Central Asian Project.

UK+CA”, has been initiated by co-curators Anna Harding, Kathy Rae Hufmann, Yuliya Sorokina, under the support provided jointly by the British Council Kazakhstan, Arts Council of England, Visiting Arts, OSI Foundation and Air Astana, and is currently under way in Central Asia and the United Kingdom. The exchange program and proposed works are focused on the preconception of each others cultures and achievements and are carried out through meetings and cultural exchange. During their residency in the respective countries, four artists from Central Asia and three artists from the UK created new works, which reflected their own preconceived ideas about their hosting countries. The final works answered the question how we interpret each other’s cultures. Exhibitions took place in 2007 at: SPACE Gallery, London and CORNERHOUSE Gallery, Manchester, UK; Tengri-Umai Gallery, Almaty, Kazakhstan; Public Organization ArtEast Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan and Center of National Arts of Uzbekistan, Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Web-site: [www.caprojects.org](http://www.caprojects.org)

- In 2007 two co-curators Guldana Sapharova and Larissa Pletnikova from the independent

“Desht-i-Art” center, Karaganda, Kazakhstan, initiated “MUSEUMstan Program” under the support of HIVOS Foundation. They conducted a program of seminars, workshops, competitions and exhibitions aimed at further development of the existing Central Asian museums (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan). The organizers plan to develop and reconstruct the archaic systems of the regional museums and to find the ways of renovation. Web-site: [www.museumstan.com](http://www.museumstan.com)

- The debut of the ‘Central Asian Republics’ in Venice took place at the Fifty First

Venice Biennale in 2005. Newly established post-Soviet states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan) acted as a “regional group”, and presented the programme entitled “A Contemporary Archive, Art from Central Asia” (Victor Misiano, curator) – a distinctive business card with historical information. The show initiated a new level of quality in the development of the Central Asian contemporary art scene.

- The 2nd Central Asian Pavilion in the 52 Venice Biennale 2007 has been named

“Muzykstan” (curator Yulia Sorokina and Ulan Djaparov co-curator), which means the ‘country of music’ and where “Muzykstan” is not a criteria, it is rather a treaty for an alliance.

The programme of the exhibition “Muzykstan: Media-generation of Contemporary Artists from Central Asia”, included the participation of already known countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, as well as a new player, Tajikistan, which joined the Central Asian art team this past year. The exhibition also included a special education program: DVD-collection Screening Show and Felt Craft Program.

Organizer: “Asia Art+” PF, under the support of: HIVOS Foundation, OSI Foundation, DARA Foundation, SHEZHIRE Gallery.

This above strategy has been a fruitful one – Central Asian contemporary art now has world-wide recognition. For the continuation of this strategy we are looking for new links and networks from all over the world and specifically for further development of Central Asian infrastructures. We are also looking for the potential cooperation with such organizations as contemporary art institutions, museums, centers, magazines, university departments, summer schools, international art-residencies. This will enable us to share our experience of such development in other countries and adapt it to the Central Asian cultural reality. We also strongly believe that our openness for all new information within contemporary culture will influence wider layers of the population in our society, including governmental structures. This may change the possibilities for further development of Central Asia

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contemporary art and definitely support our so-called 'art-traffic'.

## [Re: Central Asian Art-Traffic](#)

Submitted by [Rich Streitmatter-Tran](#) on Tue, 2008-07-22 23:41

I had the opportunity to visit Muzykstan at the 52nd Venice Biennale and it remains one of the highlights of my memories of last year. Yuliya points out in the first paragraph that "Presenters speak about 'Eastern' art and I am sure that they mean the so-called Far East: China, Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, or maybe India..." I agree there's much value to be gained in an expansion what conceptually, geographically, or culturally constitutes Asia.

In 2005, the Asia Art Archive awarded the first Martell Contemporary Asian Art Research Grant to two projects: "Unveiling Contemporary Art in Central Asia: Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan" by Leeza Ahmady and my report "Mediating the Mekong: Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos". I believe that the committee selected these two projects with the understanding that the lack or distribution of contemporary arts information from certain regions/nations in Central Asia and the Mekong subregion compromises our understanding of a more complete Asia.

Thailand remains the only nation within the Mekong subregion to establish a pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The Central Asian pavilion completed its second exhibition. A Treaty for an Alliance. As Thailand and Cambodia continue to raise the stakes for confrontation at Preah Vihear and where ASEAN struggles to pass its own charter this weekend in Singapore, I wonder when the Mekong will see the same traffic.

## [A Treaty for an Alliance](#)

Submitted by [Yuliya Sorokina](#) on Mon, 2008-07-28 05:15

I am sorry for a bit late response! I have really crazy period now. I have to prepare everything to replace my work and family to The Netherlands, as Vanabbemuseum (Eindhoven) invited me to take part in curatorial residency for next year. And I have to finish my work at The State Museum of Arts, for which I tried to work during this year... So, It is a pleasure to know that you like our pavilion in Venice and we really should think about any kind of collaboration.

First of all, because it's interesting to move to new, undiscovered direction (I can say the South Asia is more undiscovered for our art-community, then Europe...).

Secondly I am sure we have to develop “Asian” art-network as I can feel a real diversity in the perception of several issues within art-activity in-between European and Central Asian colleagues. I am very curious about Asian perception as well, as I guess we also have quite different background. I already wrote that we really feel our position somewhere in-between (Europe and Asia). Kazakhstani political leaders like to call this position “Eurasian” (maybe?).

But we also have a kind of common “heritage” – our Soviet past... So, we have so many things for alliance actually! Let’s think...

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