



CENTRAL ASIA PROGRAM

Contemporary Art as a Public Forum in Kazakhstan

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Jurgen Habermas describes the public sphere as a space that can bring individuals together to generate debates about the exercise of power and the relationship between the governing and the

governed.¹ If freedom of expression is requisite for a public sphere to function, how does the public sphere operate in societies with restricted freedom of speech? In 2016, Kazakhstan was ranked 160th in the

Press Freedom Index produced by Reporters without Borders. It is marked by legislative restrictions, censorship, and the absence of strong independent media outlets.² In closed societies, where governmental control prevents the formation of a space for open public debate, the public sphere manifests itself in more unconventional ways. In this paper, I analyze the role of contemporary art as a public sphere in Kazakhstan. I argue that contemporary art constitutes an arena for alternative narratives and oppositional meanings, and contributes to launching new debates on online platforms and social networks.

The evident failure of Kazakh traditional media to create a public sphere triggers the formation of online and offline countercultural spheres. Due to governmental control and censorship, traditional mass media do not allow for dialogue between society and state. Critical voices therefore have to look for new channels of communication and produce alternative narratives. In such a situation, contemporary and street art becomes an important arena for free artistic expression. As an alternative and affective form of communication, art transcends the status quo and the established official discursive framework in less than open societies, creating alternative narratives. Contemporary and street art thus plays the role of a public forum. It offers new platforms for dialogue and debates through the cultural production of new discourses, intervening in urban public space and engaging people in discussion around artwork and art actions on online platforms and social networks.

This article, an empirical study on the role of contemporary artistic expression in post-

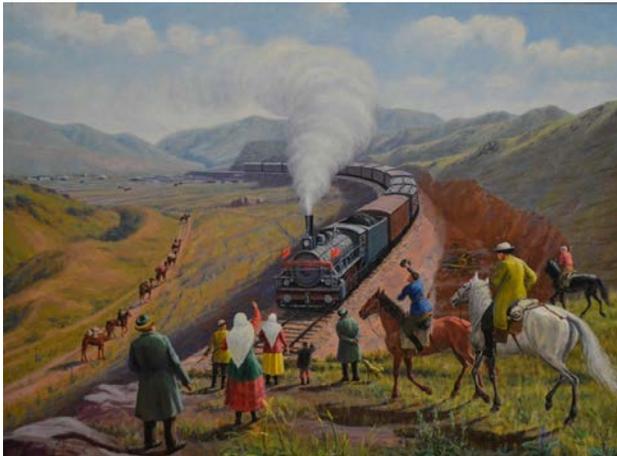
socialist Kazakhstan and its capacity to generate public debates, makes reference to the work of a range of contemporary Kazakh artists, including Said Atabekov and art-group “Kyzyl Tractor,” Almagul Menlibayeva, Saule Suleimenova, Yerbossyn Meldibekov, Yelena and Viktor Vorobyovy, Pasha Cas, and others. My goal here is to analyze the main narratives of contemporary art in Kazakhstan, which include: (1) reimagining nomadism; (2) constructing new identities; (3) social critique; and (4) debates about current political issues. The research deploys several qualitative methods of analysis: literature review, interviews with local artists, critical analysis of artwork, and content analysis of online debates and discussions. In addition, I am myself a part of an art community in Kazakhstan, and have curated several contemporary art exhibitions involving more than 20 contemporary artists.

Historical Background: Art in the Context of Authoritarianism

The history of fine art in Kazakhstan started with the Soviet period, when Russians introduced paintings to the region as a new form of cultural product that aimed to educate the masses and support the Soviet ideological worldview.³ Indeed, the first Kazakh painters—such as Abylkhhan Kasteev (1904-1973) and Kanafiya Telzhanov (1927-2013)—studied in institutes and art academies in Moscow; many works that depicted the region were also created in Moscow.

Kazakh fine art has its origins in socialist realism, a movement created by merging ideology, propaganda, and aesthetics. Boris Groys argues that, “Socialist realism was not

supposed to depict life as it was, because life was interpreted as being constantly in flux and in development—specifically in “revolutionary” development, as it was officially formulated.”⁴ Socialist realism was looking toward something that has not yet come into existence, toward a certain dream of the socialist future, toward the ideals of a socialist world. It rejected the idea of autonomy in art, instead considering art as but one element in a wider socialist realm, an instrument that supported the construction of a desired future and the creation of the new socialist individual. It was a creative method that valued art for its social relevance.



Abylkhhan Kasteev, “Turksib,” 1969

The construction of the new man and the new world required the eradication of past heritage, and the destruction of previous cultural identity. Boris Groys writes that in Russia, the October Revolution constituted a radical break with the past, destroying individual and collective heritage.⁵ In Central Asia and Kazakhstan, the destruction of previous cultural identity was even more radical, since the relationship between Moscow and Alma-Ata was a relationship between center and periphery, between dominant and subordinate culture. Art historian Aliya Abykayeva-Tiesenhausen

describes the relationship between Russia and Central Asia using concepts from postcolonial theory; she argues that through Orientalist images, the Communist Party was able “to pursue several of its goals, namely state unification, imperial expansion and the acceleration of national differences.”⁶ The Soviet state used art as a tool for achieving political goals and establishing its dominance through the complete demolition of preexisting cultural heritage. The government focused on art’s functional and instrumental value, and was interested in instrumentalizing art as propaganda.

The Soviet center had strong feelings about the scenes, landscapes, and subjects that had to be depicted in paintings. Joseph Stalin famously remarked that art should be national in form and socialist in substance, a phrase that became the manifesto of art production in national republics, including Kazakhstan. Artists depicted scenes of modernization and the construction of a new world: new combine factories against the backdrop of a mountain landscape symbolized the changes that Soviet rule had brought to the region. Painting was a means to educate, to construct official and mainstream narratives of Soviet power, which (unlike Tsarist Russia) sought to represent itself as anticolonial. The official themes artists could work on were rapid modernization, liberation from archaic traditions, and economic development. The Communist Party did not allow any alternative perspectives on the radical social and cultural changes that were taking place. Though nomads were made sedentary on a massive scale under Soviet rule, a process that caused famine and resulted in the deaths of nearly one-third of the Kazakh population (another third of the population fled to neighboring countries), socialist

realism was supposed to show only the bright side of the road to the desired socialist future.

Art after Independence: Traditional and Contemporary

During the Soviet period, the state heavily subsidized art, considering it a form of propaganda and the only creative outlet that could serve official purposes. At the same time that the Western art world was going through a process of commodification, creating a market for art, Soviet art was part of a political project. Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, governmental support for art lives on in official organizations. In Kazakhstan, the post-Soviet government to some extent maintains an instrumental approach toward art, using it as a tool to transmit and promote state ideology. State-supported art continues the realist tradition in painting. An art movement known as “steppe romanticism,”⁷ which depicts colorful landscapes, idealized yurts, and nomads, can be seen as a successor of Socialist realism. It, too, does not show the present, but invents it; it does not reflect on reality, but presents a vision, creates a dream. Abykayeva-Tiesenhausen describes the main themes and preoccupations of traditional artists working in a naturalistic manner as the philosophical, the beautiful, and the nationalistic, with the construction of a heroic national past and heroic nationalism⁸.

Contemporary art as a reaction to traditional art began to develop in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Artists who called themselves contemporary artists experimented with medium and form; they

started to break the rules of traditional realist painting, which was associated with official educational institutions and the ideologically-restricted socialist realism. Arystanbek Shalbayev, along with Smail Bayaliyev, Said Atabekov, and Moldakul Narymbetov (who passed away in 2012) organized the art group “Kyzyl Tractor.” Arystanbek Shalbayev, a pioneer of contemporary art in Kazakhstan, said that the radical turn in their perception of art occurred in Shymkent in the late 1980s, in the studio of artist and art teacher Vitaliy Simakov:⁹ “I realized that art is not a mimesis, is not a copying of reality, but it is a creation of new space, of a new concept and a new gaze.” Shalbayev pointed out that he was attending an art academy at that time, but he felt that he did not receive “sufficient knowledge and skills there.” “The story of our group started with a search for newness in art, we experimented with media and performances and we were eager to understand through our practices what art is for,” he said. Through experimentation and practice, Kazakh artists discovered and developed contemporary art in the 1990s. They broke traditional narratives, applied new media and materials to art, raised new questions and problems, and looked beyond the rules of naturalistic oil painting.

There are two major art academies in the country: T.K. Zhurgenov Kazakh National Academy of Arts in Almaty and Kazakh National Art University in Astana. In addition, there are several fine arts departments in universities and a number of art colleges. Many artists who graduated from art departments in the 1990s insist on the continuation of the naturalistic tradition their teachers taught them.¹⁰ Several self-described “contemporary” artists I interviewed mentioned limitations and expressed concerns about education in art

academies. As socialist realism was the only creative outlet in Soviet Kazakhstan, art education was restricted by the norms, traditions, and approaches of realist tradition, especially in painting. Though no institution specializes in contemporary art, most of them offer training in naturalistic painting and sculpture. During my interviews, artists listed a lack of critical approaches, the absence of cultural theory classes from curricula, the limited number of workshops on working with new media, including digital media, and a lack of training in critical thinking among the weaknesses of art education.

Art historian Terry Smith theorizes the global phenomenon of contemporary art using various frameworks and approaches. He considers it “a content-driven art, aware of the influence of ideologies and problems of translation, intensely local but also mobile internationally, and concerned above all with issues of nationality, identity, and rights.”¹¹ It is a set of artistic practices that analyzes and works with the concept of contemporaneity, including current class divisions within societies; inequality; the threat of domination by states, ideologies, or religions; changing modes of communication; and the emergence of an infoscape, or regime of representation, capable of instant and thoroughly mediated communication of all information and any image anywhere.¹² Contemporary art is art preoccupied with processes, changes and issues in the modern world, be they political, social, economic, or cultural. Boris Groys writes that the essence of contemporary art is challenging the status quo.¹³ The mechanism for launching such a challenge is built on critical thinking and the ability to test boundaries, definitions, and established worldviews.

Contemporary Kazakh art is a process rather than a definitive phenomenon, a constant work in progress with frameworks and norms continuously being developed by artists through their artistic practices. It breaks with traditional realist painting, which is associated with support for state ideology. Artists apply and use new media and materials, and through that process, they look for new messages and stories, new themes and objects outside official narratives. Though they do not engage in politics directly, they increase the number of critical voices and challenge the status quo. It is the essence of art to question the way things are organized in the world, the established understanding of the world, common perceptions and propositions.¹⁴ In a restricted society, art as an arena of alternative meanings and narratives becomes even more important.

Since the 1990s, an art market has slowly begun to develop in Kazakhstan, but in the sphere of art, the transition from a socialist system to a market-based economy has taken a long time.¹⁵ The country lacks the infrastructure of private and public galleries, museums devoted to contemporary art, high-quality educational institutions, journals, and magazines. Contemporary art does not have a wide audience, so much as small circles of connoisseurs, intellectuals, and cultural producers. A number of artists have become successful and established outside Kazakhstan, participating in international biennales, exhibitions, and art fairs. By gaining recognition in the international arena, artists establish themselves on the Kazakh art scene. At the same time, in the absence of an art market, art has yet to become a commodity; ontologically, it still exists in a wider social realm. There is a tradition of perception of artists as poets,

philosophers, social actors, *akyn* (poets of spoken-word poetry in nomadic culture), or “unacknowledged legislator[s] of the world.” The real situation is far from that tradition, but the perception persists among artists. Contemporary art is viewed as an area related to the social sphere, an area of alternatives discourses, intellectual ideas, and free artistic expression. There may be boundaries, structural limitations, and censorship, but I argue that in restricted societies, contemporary art arena can be analyzed as a public forum, a site for social critique and public debate.

Topics and Narratives in Kazakh Contemporary Art

Reimagining Nomadism

One of the main narratives of contemporary art in Kazakhstan is reimagining nomadism, or the revival of symbols, cultural codes, norms, and artifacts of nomadic, pre-Soviet culture. Artists use different media and different approaches to recreate a visual representation of nomadic culture, trace its presence in contemporary life, and locate forgotten artifacts in today’s art scene. Reimagining nomadism is closely connected with another narrative that is constructing new post-Soviet identity. A number of established contemporary artists who are well known outside Kazakhstan work within and develop the theme of nomadism, local culture, and local landscape. Kyzyl Tractor as a group and its members – Yerbossyn Meldibekov, Saule Suleimenova, and Almagul Menlibayeva – as solo artists are among those working within the grand narratives of neo-nomadism and new post-Soviet postmodern identity. The artists

discover rituals, games, objects, and visual patterns in search of visual representations of a nomadic culture that was suppressed and eradicated during the Soviet period. Geography becomes an important element of their artwork: the steppe appears both as a physical space and a poetic symbol, as the homeland of nomads and a spiritual space of expelled local culture. Through cultural production, artists raise issues of lost identity and lost heritage during the Soviet period and reimagine the Self and inhabited space.¹⁶

Said Atabekov, a member of “Kyzyl Tractor” who is one of the best-known contemporary artists outside Kazakhstan, develops the nomadic narrative through different series of artwork. His recent series, produced between 2009 and 2016, including “Wolves of the Steppe,” “Battle for a square meter,” and “Kokpar,” depict scenes from the traditional Kazakh game “Kokpar.” In Kokpar, horsemen fight for a dead goat body. The game is still popular, and some tournaments gather several thousand participants. Atabekov regularly attends games that are organized in Shymkent, where he lives. His black and white photographic works portray grandiose battle scenes with contemporary warriors and nomads, capturing the spirit and energy of the game. Atabekov takes pictures from a helicopter, capturing the scale of the scenery and the hundreds of horsemen. His works embody the spirit of the violent game, an almost archaic ritual; he transmits the poetry and intense energy of “Kokpar,” portraying nomadic heritage in the language of contemporary art and locating that heritage in contemporary space.

In the series “Wolves of the Steppe,” he moves closer to participants, capturing their “uniform,” jackets and sweaters with

different chevrons and logos, such as famous luxury brand Dolce and Gabbana, Twitter, Coca-Cola, Toyota Panasonic, and others. These symbols are the only colorful elements of the otherwise monochrome images. It is a postmodern gesture both on the part of the horsemen, who are choosing new symbols to identify themselves, and the artist, who is highlighting that element of identity construction, emphasizing the desire of neo-nomads to acquire a new identity, to be part of a globalized world with its luxury brands and international labels.



Said Atabekov, "Moscowkokpar," 2014



"Wolves of the Steppe," 2013

Yerbossyn Meldibekov is another acclaimed and successful contemporary artist, whose works employ postmodern irony in

depicting the nomadic narrative. Meldibekov's art practices both depict and develop the nomadic narrative and deconstruct and criticize processes that occur within the reimagining of it. His ironic art installation, "Monument to an Unknown Hero," presents hooves that have apparently been chopped off; the rest of the horse—and the supposed warrior—are invisible, but a viewer can imagine them. The warrior on horseback is a classic subject of Central Asian art, both under socialist realism and in the post-Soviet period. Meldibekov reflects on an iconic art subject, highlighting the tendency to mythologize the past and create monuments to new historical figures and heroes. A piece of art contains several layers: it is a humorous postmodern reflection on the transition of a society and its efforts to construct post-Soviet symbolic capital, while at the same time it portrays a nomadic figure in contemporary art. Meldibekov presents his version of a nomadic warrior, the hero of contemporaneity, where the hero is leaving the stage.¹⁷ As a postmodern work of art, his installation contains both a depiction of the subject and a deconstruction of it.

The artist has continued to work with the concept of monument, looking at how different public monuments reflect political regime change. His works "Family Album" (2006-2011), "Contest" (2010-2013), "Transformer" (2013), and "Pedestal" (2016) reveal the evolution of public monuments in different post-Soviet cities. For example, for his visual series "Contest," which consists of archival pictures and project drafts, Meldibekov studied ten monuments replaced one another on the territory of Amir Timur Square in Tashkent over the past century. The ever-changing monuments reflect changes in political structure from tsarist colonialism to the

post-Soviet period. As Meldibekov put it, “Central Asia lives in a special time zone, with time rapidly passing but as a wheel turning in the same place.”¹⁸

Almagul Menlibayeva, who lives between Almaty and Berlin, works with the themes of gender, Soviet heritage, and nomadic culture. Steppe is an important element in her fine art photography and video installations. She depicts the character of woman, revealing and rediscovering the Self and culture, or spiritual domain, suppressed by Soviet rule. Through her art, the personal becomes the political. In an artistic statement, Menlibayeva said that archaic atavism, which is a shared cultural-physical experience, is a goal of her artistic practices: “It is as if *he* has been awakened by the post-Soviet experience of the indigenous Kazakh people, who are becoming their own after 80 years of Soviet domination and cultural genocide.”¹⁹

Menlibayeva rediscovers and recreates a pre-Soviet cultural space through images of the steppe, the main landscape of her pictures, where a person—usually a woman—is always a central figure. At the same time, she reflects on Kazakhstan’s Soviet heritage. The video work “Kurchatov 22” (2012) is devoted to the Soviet Semipalatinsk nuclear testing polygon, its history, and the lasting damage it caused in terms of health and ecological problems. Her photographic artworks “Aral Beach” (2011) and “Maiden and Wrack” (2011) show a woman, with her face hidden, in front of the dried-up Aral Sea. She continues the theme of ecological catastrophe in the Aral Sea with a video installation, “Transoxiana Dreams” (2011). Menlibayeva speaks about the recent Soviet past, raising social and ecological issues; looks for and reinvents the authentic,

archaic Kazakh culture and spirit; and searches for its place on today’s global art map. In the work “Madonna of the Great Steppe” (2009), Menlibayeva inscribes the nomadic narrative and nomadic culture on the paradigm of Western art using one of the archetypal figures of the latter tradition: Madonna. It is an artistic construction of nomadic identity and a search for that identity in contemporaneity.



Almagul Menlibayeva, “Madonna of the Great Steppe,” 2009

Constructing post-Soviet Identity

References to nomadic culture, imagined geography and the reinvention of past heritage constitutes another important theme of contemporary Kazakh art: that is, the construction of a new post-Soviet identity. These narratives are closely related to one another and embrace a number of artists, who are searching, studying, and constructing the form and substance of new post-Soviet identities. Identity appears as a process, not as a definitive construction; in its construction, artists both respond to and oppose Soviet Orientalism and post-Soviet government policies.

Artistic duo Yelena Vorobyeva and Viktor Vorobyev analyze the post-Soviet condition through their art. Their conceptual photographic series “Kazakhstan: Blue period” (2002-2005) explores how blue, the official color of independent post-Soviet Kazakhstan and the color of the Kazakh flag, is occupying physical space, crowding out the red color associated with Soviet rule. The Vorobyevs photograph urban architecture, small blue walls and doors, signs, children’s uniforms, and ordinary urban and rural scenery.

They study the emergence of a new color palette, and this artistic quest creates a visual representation of changes in social and political structures; one color (or idea) replaces another. At the same time as the artists trace changes in the urban and rural landscape, they observe the durable structures of the post-Soviet condition. Post-colonial conditions produce nationalism: that is, anti-colonial in its discourse, but “derivative” or situated within the epistemological frameworks of the colonial system of knowledge.²⁰ In “Blue period,” the Vorobyevs question whether the previous social structure and academic knowledge are reproducing themselves during Kazakhstan’s transition. They examine the process of identity formation in order to deconstruct post-colonial patterns and elements.



*Yelena Vorobyeva and Viktor Vorobyev,
“Kazakhstan: Blue period,” 2002-2005*

Saule Suleimenova works with concepts of memory and identity, treating different art media as different layers of time. With her search for the ordinary beauty of everyday life, she opposes the grand ideological narrative of heroic past and polished bright future. In her series “Kazakh Chronicle” (2008-2014), Suleimenova uses a technique of painting over photography and creates a series of portraits over photos of walls from different Almaty buildings. The walls she chose are ragged and scratchy, with handmade paper posters and

announcements. Suleimenova adopts the concept of *aruakh*, the spirit of ancestors, whom she projects onto the modern buildings and streets. She uses archival pictures of Kazakh people from the beginning of the twentieth century to create her own images of children and adults in traditional clothes. She is looking for the spirit of the people who lived here before these walls were ever built. Her works are poetic and intimate. Suleimenova connects past with the present, but most importantly, she emphasizes everyday beauty and ordinary people, rather than ideologically approved scenes and subjects. Suleimenova has said that it is important to create a local visual language in order to tell local stories. Her art language is poetic, personal and alive compared to traditional naturalistic art with official plots.



*Saule Suleimenova, "Three Brides,"
"Kazakh Chronicle," 2014*

Contemporary artists discuss, study and work on major public issues, such as the reimagining of local culture suppressed during Soviet domination and the construction of new identity. Artistic development highlights the complexity of identity construction and treats it as a process, rather than a solid phenomenon.

Recapturing Urban Public Space

Through its unconventional essence, street art has become an arena for social critique and reflection on socio-economic and ecological issues in Kazakhstan. The most provocative and interesting street artist in Kazakhstan is 22-year-old Pasha Cas. He began to use urban public spaces for artistic interventions, raising social issues and problems through street art and interaction with the city. He uses the concept of an urban public forum, a central place in the city that gives people the opportunity to meet with each other to dialogue or debate. Pasha Cas is already widely known in Kazakhstan, and his works "Plyashem!" (Dancing) and "Portrait of Kharms" were nominated for the prestigious Kandinsky award in neighboring Russia.²¹

One of Cas' first works was an installation with a mannequin; it highlighted the high level of suicides among teenagers. The installation, named "Vsem Pokh" ("Nobody Gives a Fuck") was placed on an advertisement banner in a busy intersection in the center of Almaty in 2013. The artist used filthy language to make a statement and draw attention to the tremendous social problem that seemed to be sidelined in public discussions. "I was shocked by the statistics of teenagers' suicide, and the numbers are increasing, but nobody cares, neither government nor public. Why don't we ask what is happening, what pushes people to that decision," wrote Pasha on his website.²² He added that he wanted to draw attention to the problem; as such, he chose the busy city center as the site for his work. The artist separates himself both from the government and from the public, criticizing and blaming both parties. The city

administration removed his banner and announced that he could be subject to a penalty. Though the work was only visible at its urban location for about a day, the art protest was covered by local mass media²³, and images were widely circulated on social networks.

This use of art in urban space is an attempt to engage both the government and the public in a discussion about an important social problem that needs to be resolved. The artist notes the absence of public discussion, and through his work highlights both the important social issue and the limitations of the existing public sphere; he wants to raise the social profile of an issue, which his art action does. The highly emotional form of the message makes it effective in communicating the problem and raising public attention and interest. At the same time, the nature of the social problem, the unconventional use of public space, the prohibition on his art intervention, and the reaction of the city administration mean that his street art installation becomes a story that is widely covered by local mass media. Mass media coverage and the discussions it triggered on online platforms and social networks constitute the digital public sphere. Despite the fact that the physical urban public space was occupied for a very limited time, street artwork triggers coverage of the issue by mass media and the dissemination of pictures of it online constitute digital public sphere. Street artwork connects physical urban public space with public debates taking place online and on social networks²⁴.

In 2016, Pasha Cas made another important – and in many ways a breakthrough – street work, “Plyashem!” Taking Henri Matisse’s famous painting “Dance” as his point of departure, the artist depicted white-collar

individuals dancing around a smokestack in a metallurgical factory. Cas painted his artwork on the wall of an apartment building in Temirtau, a small metallurgical town near Karaganda that is famous for being a mono-industrial city with many socioeconomic difficulties. Cas’ work has both direct and metaphorical significance. He pointed out the ecological problems that metallurgical site brings to town; Cas wrote that his team tested the soil on five children’s playgrounds, and the level of lead was five points higher than allowed. At the same time, he refers to a wider context. He shows the dominant position that big corporations are gaining in Kazakhstan as it transitions from socialism to capitalism. His work symbolizes the ritualistic dance around new sacred values and symbols in a capitalist society.

Through his artwork, Cas offers a sense of space and time. In one sense, time seems to have passed; the flow of time is represented by the reference to the Matisse painting produced almost a century earlier and by the movement of the dancing people. At the same time, nothing has changed. Despite the ritualistic movements, there are no changes; the situation is static. To him, Kazakh society is undergoing social and political transition, yet there are many constants, from social and ecological problems to the reproduction of the closed political system of the past. The transitional period keeps reproducing the old political regime; movement without change become the repetitive dance of society. The official reaction was straightforward. Police opened a criminal case against the artist, but it was later closed, as they did not find any evidence of criminal activity.²⁵

“Plyashem!” embodies a new form of interaction with urban space. It appears not

at a busy intersection, but on an apartment building in a small town that rarely appears in mass media or public discussions on online platforms and social networks. Through his action, Cas is not just bringing a social issue to an established public forum; he is bringing a public forum to a remote area. He is including a small town in his notion of the public. It is an act of inclusion, of giving different publics a sense of belonging to a bigger community that faces the same problems across time and space. The public becomes acquainted with the territory it occupies, receives images of it, images that look both familiar and different from their urban environment. Space is important to this work, as pictures of works disseminated online include the urban landscape of Temirtau and real factory smokestacks in the background. The artist shows the public the space it occupies and gives it a sense of belonging.



Pasha Cas, "Plyashem!," 2016

After "Plyashem," Cas released another work, and he is actively using the digital public sphere to disseminate it. "This is silence" echoes Edward Munch's "The Scream." The artist created the work on the wall of an abandoned building in Semey, the site of the former Soviet nuclear polygon.²⁶ The medium is a manifesto-type video that showed artwork on the polygon, narrated by

the artist. The artist discusses the consequences of nuclear tests on the local environment and human health in nearby areas, pinning the blame on the Soviet and current governments. "This is silence" highlights one of the artist's main themes: the absence of public discussion on important issues.

This work is located not in an urban area but on an abandoned site that cannot be reached by the general public. It emphasizes the importance of medium to artwork and highlights the power of online dissemination. The initial artwork cannot be presented to people; the artwork is not an object, but a creative process. The difficulties and dangers the creative team faced are incorporated into the final artwork: it is not just street art but a kind of performance recorded on video. It is an art protest where art is not an object, but a radical act. A spectator cannot interact with the artwork in physical space, but the recorded "scream" generates discussion and public reaction online and on social networks. The artist documented the whole process of creating the work, and a member of his team published commentary on the expedition to Semey on online media outlet.²⁷ The strategy of engaging an online audience in a discussion and expanding the vision of digital public space becomes clearer and more organized in this work.²⁸ "This is silence" does not interact with urban public space, as it is located on abandoned territory. Yet it provides online discussions with a sense of physical space filled with pain and damage. This pain, sorrow, and damage, both to people and environment, is invisible in the public sphere, but the artist makes it present and material.

Current political issues in art and online

Cultural production and works of art trigger online debates and create an arena for public discussions: the digital public sphere. Not only do works of art engage the public in discussions, but online debates also trigger the creation of works of art. In August 2016, artist Zoya Falkova, who produced critical works on gender issues for an exhibition earlier in summer 2016, posted a link to a media article about Kazakh feminists on her Facebook page.²⁹ She quoted one of the respondents without attributing the quotation. The quote included a statement about a post-colonial condition and a false “traditionalism” that supports a certain kind of violence, such as domestic violence and bride kidnapping. An immediate – and harsh – response came from another artist, Anvar Musrepov. Musrepov accused Falkova, who is ethnically Russian, in colonial “cynicism.” Musrepov wrote in his Facebook post that prohibition of local traditions could be compared to the repressions carried out by the Bolsheviks, such as the forcible sedentarization of nomads, which resulted in a high number of Kazakh casualties.³⁰ Both public entries attracted a lot of attention and prompted heated discussion of the nature of Soviet rule and the position of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan.

A few months later, Falkova created an artwork “The Chronicles of Mars” for an exhibition “Post/Nachalo,” devoted to the post-Soviet and postmodern condition.³¹ “The Chronicles of Mars” displays the slogans “Tvar’ ya drozhashaya ili pravo imeyu?” (“Am I a cowering colonizer or exercise my rights?”) and “Kolonizirovali,

kolonizirovali, da ne vykolonizirovali” (“Were colonizing, colonizing, but would not have colonized”). The work calls to mind Soviet posters, and both slogans are paraphrased idioms, the first a quote from Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* and the second a Russian proverb. Falkova raises the complex issue of the identity of the Russian ethnic group in Kazakhstan and the perception of them as inheritors of the legacy of Soviet domination and colonial abuse of an allegedly superior culture. The case demonstrates overlapping relationships between the digital sphere and the sphere of cultural production, which functions as an arena for debates over important public issues.

Conclusion

Contemporary art and contemporary artists discuss and develop issues such as identity, memory, social structures and power relationships, and engage the public in online debate. Reimagined nomadism, the revival of suppressed culture, and the construction of a new post-Soviet identity are not only narratives of contemporary art, but reflect the cultural transition processes Kazakh society is undergoing. Artistic interventions into urban public and abandoned places and online dissemination of their works constitute an alternative public sphere, one that is open for criticism of the government and can generate public debates and discussions. Art visualizes and vocalizes social and ecological issues, sheds light on themes that have been marginalized in public consciousness, and transforms painful problems into solid aesthetic representations. A polyphony of different artistic voices challenges a closed society, creates areas of free expression and free thinking, and generates public debates and

discussions, thus preventing the state from monopolizing the public sphere. In countries like Kazakhstan, where classic forms of freedom of speech may not be respected, contemporary art plays a unique

role, offering alternative narratives and practices and contributing to the structuring of an independent public sphere.

¹ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

² “2016 World Press Freedom Index,” Reporters without Borders, 2016.

³ Aliya Abykayeva-Tiesenhausen, *Central Asia in Art: From Soviet Orientalism to the New Republics* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

⁴ Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 144.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁶ Abykayeva-Tiesenhausen, *Central Asia in arts*, 59.

⁷ Unofficial term, mentioned by artist Saule Suleimenova during interview with author.

⁸ Aliya Abykayeva-Tiesenhausen, *Central Asia in art*, 252.

⁹ Arystanbek Shalbayev, personal interview with the author, October 25, 2016.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011), 82.

¹² Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 6.

¹³ Boris Groys, *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism*, (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2010), 16.

¹⁴ Lena Jonson, *Art and protest in Putin's Russia*, (London: Routledge, 2009), 10.

¹⁵ Zhanara Nauruzbayeva. “Refurbishing Soviet status: Visual artists and marketization in Kazakhstan.” PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 2011. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing). Accessed May 26, 2017. <http://proxygw.wrlc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/885875483?accountid=11243>

¹⁶ See Diana Kudaibergenova, “My Silk Road to You”: Re-imagining routes, roads, and geography in contemporary art of “Central Asia,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 1 (2017): 31-43.

¹⁷ Viktor Misiano, ed., *Eternal Return: Yerbossyn Meldibekov* (Almaty: Aspan Gallery, 2016), 63.

¹⁸ Yerbossyn Meldibekov, personal interview with the author, March 15, 2017.

¹⁹ “Artist’s statement,” Almagul Menlibayeva’s personal website, accessed May 30, 2017.

<http://www.almagulmenlibayeva.com/artist-statement.html>

²⁰ Partha Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 17.

²¹ “Raboty skandalnogo khudozhnika Pashi Cas nominirovani na premiyu Kandinskogo”, *Informburo*, September 9, 2016, <https://informburo.kz/novosti/raboty-skandalnogo-hudozhnika-pashi-kas-nominirovani-na-premiyu-kandinskogo.html>

²² Pasha Cas, “Matom i poveshennim manakenom privlyok vnimanie obshchestva almatinec,” *Pasha Cas blog*, <http://pashacas.ru/2013/10/matom-i-poveshennym-manakenom-privlek-vnimanie-obshchestva-almatinec/>.

²³ See, for instance, “Avtor installyatsii hotel privilech vnimaniye obshchestva k samoubiystvam”, *BNews.kz*, October 4, 2013, http://bnews.kz/ru/old/news/obshchestvo/avtor_installyatsii_v_almati_hotel_privlech_vnimanie_obshchestvennosti_k_samoubiystvam-2013_10_04-1009367

²⁴ See, for instance, “Zhutkoy billboard v centre Almaty ispugal gorozhan”, *Nur.kz*, October 4, 2013, <https://www.nur.kz/284727-zhutkij-bilbord-v-centre-almaty-ispugal-gorozhan-foto.html>

²⁵ “Avtora samogo bolshogo graffiti ishet policiya Temirtau”, *Tengrinews*, April 20, 2016, https://tengrinews.kz/strange_news/avtora-samogo-bolshogo-graffiti-ischet-politsiya-temirtau-293003/

²⁶ “This is silence”, *Pasha Cas' Youtube channel*, June 27, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRHqB_sjhII

²⁷ See, for instance, “Cas skvoz Kz. Chast pyataya: Poligon,” *Vlast*, <https://vlast.kz/life/18078-cas-skvoz-kz-cast-pataa-poligon.html>

²⁸ For instance, the initial entry about the “This is silence” manifesto posted on the artist’s Facebook page received 37,000 views and 781 shares, and was reposted by many popular Kazakh bloggers.

²⁹ Zoya Falkova’s Facebook page, <http://bit.ly/2tiQi2M>

³⁰ Anvar Musrepov's Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/anvar.musrepov/posts/745380408938137>

³¹ The exhibition "Post/Nachalo" (December 14 – December 24, 2016, Almaty, Kazakhstan) was curated by the author.