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100 Years of Solitude:

Cultural Decolonization and its
Artistic Forms

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The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

Valeria Ibraeva

100 Years of Solitude: Cultural Decolonization and its Artistic Forms

Kazakhstan is a country located in between the great Chinese Wall and the walls of the Kremlin. In the eyes of the global artistic community Kazakhstan is but a blank spot between these walls, symbolizing much more than purely geographical frontiers. The national history of professional art started 100 years ago, with the arrival here of N.G.Khludov, the first teacher of many local artists. At that time the Kazakh people were still nomads, and their art was meant to meet the needs of a nomadic way of life - each yurta presented a movable museum of applied art. Import of the Russian Socialist revolution and de-nomadization of the indigenous population brought about, among other things, an intensified import of the Russian art.

Since then Russia became for Kazakhstan the only source of artistic (to say nothing of other) ideas. Due to this the professional art of Kazakhstan all throughout the history of its existence has always been oriented to Europe, while all the incoming information was sifted through by the censors that imposed one common artistic standard throughout the entire Soviet Union.

This notwithstanding, the art of Kazakhstan has always faced the problem of self-identity. As anything brought from the outside, professional art had to undergo adaptation to local conditions. And the accelerated process of absorption was not just a mechanical transfer of the world cultural heritage on the new soil, it was a difficult period of mastering a new vision of the world.

One can clearly define several stages in the history of professional art in Kazakhstan: the 20-40-ies of the XX-th century - the period of forming the basis of professional school; the 50-ies - the period of propagating soviet academism; the 60-ies - development of Kazakhstani version of "austere

style"; the 70-80-ies - implantation of the "executive" school. This cardiogram reveals quiet stagnation periods of the Russian school domination: the 20-ies and 50-ies, and the 70-ies and 80-ies, alternating with the tumultuous 60-ies and 90-ies. Its parabolic curves indicated broadening of the world vision, change of artistic epochs in Kazakhstan.

The 50-ies saw the return to Kazakhstan of young national artists educated in Moscow and Leningrad. Oriented to Soviet "cultutregerism", they were called upon to create the art "national in form, and socialist in content". Yet, as seen by contemporary spectators, their works do not comply with the thesis: on the contrary, the classical compositional scheme was filled in with national content.

Not Romans now, but Kazakhs swore solemn oaths, bid farewell and left for battlefields as heroes, did not give in to interrogators. Alongside with this, a thematic picture has always betrayed a nostalgic yearning for patriarchal life, untouched by civilization, for the lost "golden age".

Strange as it may seem, search for "the national form" was started by artists of the next generation - of the 60-ies. Their disregard for the academic tradition shocked and enraged their elder colleagues.

As is well known, there appeared a small hole in the iron curtain of the thawing 60-ies, and through this hole people started getting information about the world at large. Still, the flow of information was strictly regulated : one could learn about Guttuzo, but not about Italian futurists; one could learn about Rockwell Kent, Matisse, but not about Warhol or Duchamp. Filters, however worn-out, were still in place. Together with information about foreign art there came understanding of value of one's own cultural traditions.

Kazakhstani version of the Soviet "austere style" evidently lacked austerity. The positive-negative large-spotted ornament of a Kazakh carpet, the texture of ancient Turkic sculptures turned out to be closer to it than the rigid icon scheme. There appeared flat pictures of Aitbaev and Sariev built on local stains, large-module graphics of Sidorkin. The senior colleagues found it hard to recognize Kazakhstan in their works. They were the first to discard imitation and to generate original artistic ideas.

Then the hole was closed, if not too carefully, and information about "bourgeois art" leaked sparsely into the country, to break in a flood in 20 years.

Confrontation between the major artistic trends of the 80-ies and 90-ies in principle resembles that between the 50-ies and the 60-ies.

In the 70-ies and 80-ies, known as the years of stagnation, Russia remained the only source of information, just as formerly acting as a mediator between the world and Kazakhstan. Starting from the 70-ies, the art of Kazakhstan clings to its former principles, lazily digesting the discoveries of the 60-ies, camouflaging its reluctance to react to the reality of life by the mask of aestheticism. There prevailed an assumption in Kazakhstan that its art should make the most of its differences, unlikeness, uniqueness. But the national idea, necessary and original in the context of the 60-ies, became an irrelevant anachronism as early as by the end of the 80-ies. The political, economic changes could not but change the cultural life. Since the middle of the 80-ies, with the disappearance of the iron curtain, the fine arts of Kazakhstan take to active processing of "prohibited" ideas. The first exhibition of informal art "Crossroads", opened in 1989, demonstrated practically all artistic trends of the middle and the second half of the XX-th century in their local variety. Starved artists devoured everything related to modern art - posters, magazine pictures, promotional prospectuses. On the other hand, the volume of information from Moscow decreased - magazines got closed, the Union of Artists ceased to exist, the art of Kazakhstan was in the jeopardy of isolation. Acquisition of sovereignty, the policy of democratic and market reforms took their toll of the art as well. There appeared foreign firms, diplomatic representation offices and embassies, and consequently - foreign buyers.

Artists started living a new life: they were invited to exhibit their works abroad, asked to sell their pictures, give interviews to foreign journalists. Exhibition halls were flooded with visitors, galleries mushroomed, people got constantly invited to varnishing days. The most exotic, and least imitatory works of art, displayed at the exhibition "Aluan-Aluan" in the self-same 1989, enjoyed the greatest popularity (artists Bapishev B., Khairullin K., Esdauletov A.; sculptors Kazaryan E., Esenbaev A.; drawer Madanov G). Overwhelmed, they one by one left for France, Belgium, Luxemburg, and returned home withdrawn and somewhat puzzled by the sudden awareness that temporary commercial success does not mean accomplishment of their creative goals.

Meanwhile, in the home country other artists, who had not been in the limelight before, continued organizing exhibitions, established a new artistic environment, differing greatly from the former : artistic associations and galleries, and not the Ministry of culture or the Union of artists, initiated artistic events on their own, in which everyone could find one's niche.

One of such large-scale events was the exhibition "Parade of Galleries" organized in the central museum of the country - the State Museum of Fine Arts named after Kasteev (SMFA) every year, beginning with 1995. This exhibition demonstrates the general trends in the fine arts of contemporary Kazakhstan. 12-20 galleries take part in it annually. Of late it displays not only Almaty artists, but also galleries from other cities of Kazakhstan. 5-6 of them specialize in the so-called modern art. These are Almaty associations "Asia-Art", "Kokserek", "Voyager", "Kyzyl Tractor" (Shymkent), "SAK" (Semipalatinsk), several painters from Karaganda and individual artists from Almaty (Galym Madanov).

Within 3 or 4 years they have managed to radically change the situation in artistic Kazakhstan by implementing a number of large-scale artistic projects. They are so much in the news. The artists professing new kinds of art are accused in an absolutely soviet manner of worshipping the West. The situation is quite funny: the classical triad - painting, sculpture and drawing - is declared as inherent and intrinsically organic for Kazakhstan, while the new-fashioned genres are seen to be adopted from the West. Yet, regarding a yurt as a symbol of the universe (which it is, in addition to its utilitarian functions), one might truly call it an installation. The situation of "non-recognition" repeats itself over and over again. It seems to emerge each time when an artistic idea, having gone all through the braking road of mass edition, at the new stage of its development places priority on the creative function. "Recognition" occurs when passions subside and the new artistic language gets deeply rooted in human consciousness.

At that, the techniques used by the artist in creating a new language do not matter very much; the trend-setters in the art of Kazakhstan gravitate to the archaic ones. And this is quite understandable - first of all, felt, leather and wood are as natural for Kazakhstan as pentelicone marble for Greece; the second reason is the technological backwardness of the country, expensiveness of new materials, or their unavailability. But to a still greater extent it is explainable by the ideological "search of roots" and maintenance of an illustratively interpreted tradition as an attribute of national identity.

Another reason is absolute lack of support and even neglect on the part of the state.

But in any case, a negative reaction to absolutely new forms of artistic expression is tantamount to the negation of long-forgotten ones. With some effort, trying to present Brener as a Kazakhstani artist, which he indeed used to be, one might provide a theoretical basis for his action in the Stedelijk museum, where he created a sort of palimpsest, unrecognized by anybody as a work of art even in such a well advanced country as Netherlands.

In modern art of Kazakhstan such a phenomenon may be exemplified by the group "Kyzyl Tractor". It seems that the creative activity of this group must be readily accepted in a country striving for its self-identity, for a new image, for a break-away from the uniformed soviet cultural space by means of developing and supporting and even falsifying history. Yet, only a handful of intellectuals seem to be interested in this group, because "Tractors" are so deeply archaic that the state does not discern in their activity any advantageous ideas. It may well be due to the fact that the "Tractors" do not use canvas and oil so traditional for Kazakhstan, but apply "uncivilized" clay, felt, wood, so untypical of "high art". Paradoxical as it may seem, but the work of this group is so modern in its archaism, that it annoys even the ultra-traditional state functionaries. Actions and performances of "Kyzyl Tractor" do not carry along any chauvinistic ideas, nor do they propagate any ideas of revival, renovation and other time-serving idioms. Their art hinges on an unusual plastic intuition and seems to be oblivious of anything except for modern art.

In principle, any resident of Kazakhstan can see all they do in everyday life, during folk festivals, even on official TV programs. But collected together, processed and served as modern art, these neo-folk pieces in reality present an unfalsified remarkably organic artistic investigation of the almost unknown past. As it is, actions of the "Tractors" must have had a great impact on the establishment of a new artistic paradigm in a newly established state. This is the reason why we regard their art contemporary, not folkloristic.

The art of Rustam Khalfin seems to be as down-to-earth as that of the "Tractors", if more civilized. His complex ideas tend to concentrate on processing the national, or, to be more exact, the pre-national tradition. In point of fact both the "Tractors" and the Khalfin groups try to restore the

broken line of natural artistic development, which, coded in applied forms and shamanistic performances not yet seen as true art, existed in Kazakhstan even as far back as the end of the last century. (No one can say what the art of Kazakhstan would be like were it a colony of China, not Russia).

Khalfin lacks the genuine plastics of the "Tractors", he is more on the mind side. He is not only an artist; he is a sculptor building his installations in strict compliance with the academic principles. The latest work of his group - "A Clay Project" - is a huge figure cutting through two floors upwards. It revives the days of Creation - clay, human skin, dough, biblical animals which are simultaneously recognized as unofficial symbols of Kazakhstan, shanirak taken, on the contrary, from the official state symbols; takyr rejuvenating the desert landscape of our vast territory; grass growing through mountainous rocks... Straining the feeble imagination of an art critic, I can imagine the world and the man in it, and, contrariwise, the man and his inner world. Besides, there may be given a long row of associations: grass as a cover, cover as clay, clay as dough, dough as skin, skin as the walls of a building, walls as a shell for human life, man as state, state set-up as levels of the building, levels of the building as parts of human body, and so on.

Nevertheless, the Khalfin group's work was once characterized in the press as an image of "bellicose anti-traditionalism". One could take it as a compliment, but still, does it really stand so much in the teeth of honored traditions? The whole lot of the enumerated parts of the environment is quite typically used in everyday life, during festivals...(see above). Its "non-recognition" as a work of art, its being counter-opposed to the abstract "tradition" is a result of following the self-same tradition : the fine arts of Kazakhstan have very little to boast in the way of well-articulated sovereign, culturally-distinctive identity, apart from the accomplishments of material culture and of the soviet period. What we have these days is a look at one's reflection in the mirror, search for the uncommonality of one's face.

One should admit that not everything happening now is so pathetic, not everything created by our contemporary artists is of high artistic quality. And this is quite natural. It is normal that new art agitates the public - it is often easier to break than to make. A child gets to know itself by making faces in front of a mirror. Standing prominent among notorious scandals has been the action "Neue Kasachische Kunst" of "Kokserek" group shown in Moscow in 1997. Its keynote was the idea of art as ritual, and ritual as art.

The fact of sheep slaughtering within a sacral space alludes to the first book of Moses, but such actions do regularly take place in rural areas of Kazakhstan. It is indeed a horrible sight, but remembering I.E.Repin's cry that Serov's *Ida Rubinstein* is a galvanized corpse, one can suppose that the slaughtered sheep would be a much less unpleasant sight to a classic of Russian naturalism, despite the influence of Ms. Nordman.

Having traced the above works to their roots, one can conclude that the major impetus for modern art is the usual normal life, naturally processed and reconceptualized by the artist, by no means raising it to the rank of "high art". On the contrary, the artist tries to maximally actualize the situation. If the contemporary art of Kazakhstan is referred to as cruel, it is because our life in Kazakhstan is not a bed of roses.

Live art is nourished by live creative environment, as opposed to the dead museum zone: when transferred to it, a work of art becomes an object of worship, not analysis. It is reminiscent of Wagner's words that art starts from where life ends.

Contemporary art does not only react to the real life, it serves as a catalyst of social processes, actively, even aggressively affecting them. Its materialization in Kazakhstan gave birth to the ever first national, vibrantly social, artistic project. Only 3-4 years ago the word "social" disgusted artists - it brought back memories of industrial landscapes, thematic pictures and portraits of the front-rank workers. In other words, officially recommended pseudo-social stuff. But thanks God, life is changing, and now we can see implementation of projects which have a keenly felt civic orientation. Among them are "Criminal reportage" (1997, Voyager Gallery, curator E.Vorobyeva), "Wall-window" (1997, Erbosyn Meldibekov), "Asian Project" (1999, Kokserek group), "Second Art" (1998, "SAK" group from Semipalatinsk), video-projects of Karaganda artists exhibiting under pseudonyms of Yashcher and Khomyak, installation "Classics Bid Farewell to People" (1997, Elena and Victor Vorobyevs), "Terra Incognita" (1997) and "Second wind" (1998), the Soros Center for Contemporary Art, "Dull Art of Almaty" and "Artists' brotherhood" (both 1997, curator Sergey Maslov), "Patriotic Project" (1997, Kokserek group), "Babylonian Tower" (1998, curator Galym Madanov), "Provincial Art" (1998, Shymkent group "Kyzyl Tractor). I would like to repeat that for the first time in the history of Kazakhstan art has reacted to such things as the plundering state policy (the happening "Patriotic Project", in which artists distribute among people bread and wine, "naively" sharing the oil dollars; crime situation : "Criminal

Reportage" - an environment, "truthfully" recreating the image of the robbers and the robbed; tragic insulation of the country from the bigger world (Wall-Window" - an installation, where a "a window into Europe" is cut in a traditional adobe wall); problems of migration (1998, "Have a Safe Trip" - a performance in which Elena and Victor Vorobyevs set jars with live fish floating along the river); the theme of production collapse in Kazakhstan and the abundance of Turkish commodities on the market (an environment "Provincial Art"). On the one hand, the enumerated works testify to the artists' being deeply rooted in local problems, on the other hand, the ideas of equal sharing or problems of migration are understandable to the whole world. It is important that artists speak of them in a modern language, translating local problems into global ones. A quick glance at the history of world art brings forward two banal conclusions

1. Art has never been content with how the world goes, it has always tried to re-make it.
2. Art has always been seeking ways of self-expression most adequate for the time; there are lots of examples to prove this: from Van Dyke to Duchamp.

The contemporary art of Kazakhstan in this sense does not in the least deviate from the mainstream global art: it does what it needs. Maybe, this determinism does not suit many people, but the practice of stopping the natural development process by force, used by various totalitarian regimes, show that this process can be procrastinated, but not stopped. Another way out is to abort it by means of eradicating these vanguardists, who are so persistently pursuing their line.

Cultural decolonization is not only provision of a broad and free access to information and exchange of artistic ideas, but a way of changing the feudal-soviet mentality which we have not got rid of as yet. As a consequence, we have an awakening of interest in our own country and a desire to change things here for the better, which make us participate actively in its life.

Contemporary art of Kazakhstan needs not only a theoretical conceptualization of its problems, not only development of its infrastructure, not only state support - it needs state protectionism. Remembering that the world at large knows next to nothing about the art of Kazakhstan, modern art for us is the only way to enter this world. Only a fresh implantant can be grown into a live body. This is the only way for the

country to acquire a unique face of its own and become a full-fledged member of the world cultural community, but not a colony, no matter whose.