



“My Silk Road to You”: Re-imagining routes, roads, and geography in contemporary art of “Central Asia”



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ABSTRACT

This paper re-focuses the Silk Road discussions from the position of contemporary art in Central Asian region. Since the late 1980s contemporary art in Central Asia boomed and it eventually became an alternative public space for the discussion of cultural transformations, social and global processes and problems that local societies faced. Initially the questions raised by many artists concerned issues of lost identity and lost heritage during the period of Soviet domination in the region. Different artists started re-imagining the concept of the Self in their works and criticising the old rigid approaches to geography, history and mobility. Nomadic heritage became one of the central themes in contemporary art of Central Asia in the 1990s. Artists started experimenting with symbols of mobility, fluid borders and imagined geography of the “magic steppe” (see Kudaibergenova 2017, “Punk Shamanism”). Contemporary art in Central Asia continues to serve as a space for social critique and a space for search and re-conceptualisation of new fluid identities, geographies and region’s place on the world map. In this paper I critically evaluate three themes connected to the symbolism of Silk Road heritage that many artists engage with – imagined geography, routes, roads and mobility. All three themes are present in the selected case studies of Gulnara Kasmalieva’s and Muratbek Djumaliev’s *TransSiberian Amazons* (2005) and *A New Silk Road: Algorithm of Survival and Hope* (2007) multi-channel video art, Victor and Elena Vorobiev’s *(Non)Silk Road* (2006) performance and photography, Almagul Menlibayeva’s *My Silk Road to You* video-art and photography (2010–2011), Yerbossyn Meldibekov’s series on imagining Central Asia and the *Mountains of Revolution* (2012–2015), and Syrlybek Bekbotaev’s *Kyrgyz Pass* installation (2014–2015) as well as *Defenders of Issyk Kul* (2014). I trace how artists modernise, mutate and criticise main discourses about Silk Road and what impact this has on the re-imagination processes.

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1. Introduction

In the late 1980s and 1990s contemporary artists became the new active cultural force in post-Soviet Central Asia. By

the mid-1990s the contemporary art scene boomed and became the new public sphere for discussions and creative dissent against the dominant state policies and projects in nation-building and cultural politics. Art as it “has increasingly become part of cultural commentary and of political discourse, involving a reflexive critique of the artist’s own society” (Morphy & Perkins, 2006, p. 11) became the theme of exploration but of the very little academic

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concern still. In Central Asia contemporary artists started finding ways to break away from the old structures of cultural production and engaging with the international art scene. In these processes different artists started re-imagining the concept of the Self in their works and criticising the old rigid approaches to geography, history and mobility. Contemporary art scene started producing new body of knowledge and new ways to communicate with the transformations the society was going through at the time. Contemporary art is closely connected to the concept of culture which is crucial for our understanding of social and political transformations in the region:

Art is associated almost equally with the two senses of the word “culture” – culture as a way of life or body of ideas an knowledge, and culture as the metaphysical essence of society, incorporating standards by which the finest products of the society are judged (Morphy & Perkins, 2006, p. 1).

In this article I critically explore and evaluate one specific theme of the public and political discussions in the region – the symbolism and importance of the Silk Road and re-imagination of the regional geography. The heritage and historicity of the Silk Road has long occupied the political imagination of the Central Asian states – from the national museums to the billboards of the main cities and speeches of the presidents. Local Central Asian artists engage with political discussions through the production of their own works and performances, now that there are many different mediums for the local contemporary art (Nauruzbayeva, 2011; Ibrayeva, 2014; Kudaibergenova, 2016a). In this artistic debate contemporary artists are able to challenge and direct the public discussion into many alternative views apart from the one dominant discourse coming from the regime or the state. In this article I focus on the ways some of the most renowned Central Asian contemporary artists engaged with their own understanding of imagined geographies, routes and roads, as well as mobility and how they did so within the dominant discourse of the Silk Road. I argue that these artists were able to channel out creative dissent and alternative understanding of the classical terms associated with the Silk Road, terms that in themselves become too rigid and too rooted in historicity and post-independent propaganda of the local regimes.

Contemporary artists on the contrary view Silk Road concept as an endless and fluid space, as a terrain for critique of the contemporary socio-economic and political-cultural transformations, as well as an abundant space for the reconceptualisation of the Self. The framework of contemporary art allows them not to focus on one or two dimensions of the given aspect but rather provide the vivid multiplicity of ideas, views and symbols. If some artists see the heritage and history as the opportunity and space to search for their identities and create new artistic post-colonial language (Menlibayeva), then others see it as a historical sarcasm and try to re-imagine the un-divided pre-colonial territory of the region (Meldibekov), or others see it as a critique of all the mentioned frameworks altogether (Vorobiev). Through the works of these artists: Gulnara Kasmalieva's and Muratbek Djumaliev's *TransSiberian Amazons* (2005) and *A New Silk Road: Algorithm of Survival*

and *Hope* (2007) multi-channel video art, Victor and Elena Vorobiev's *(Non)Silk Road* (2006) performance and photography, Almagul Menlibayeva's *My Silk Road to You* video-art and photography (2010), Yerbossyn Meldibekov's series on imagining Central Asia and the *Mountains of Revolution* (2012–2015), and Syrlybek Bekbotayev's *Kyrgyz Pass* installation (2015)¹ as well as *Defenders of Issyk Kul* (2014), I trace how they provide new discourses of heritage and Silk Road.

In doing so, I focus on three themes that I come across in most works of contemporary artists in Central Asia and in the works of the seven selected artists for this study – imagined geography, routes and roads, and mobility that is partially also connected to the nomadic heritage. What is captured in my analysis are the ways artists are able to work with these themes and produce new types of discourses through their criticism, re-moulding and re-interpretations of the political messages and historicity that was dominated by the political realm rather than intellectual and creative input and debates. I rely on interviews and the most recent fieldwork in Astana, Almaty, and Bishkek and Naryn where I was able to both observe and work with some of the most renowned contemporary artists in the region.²

Contemporary art in Central Asia is in a perplexed situation where local artists remain the avant-gardists but there is very little the state does to support this movement. Despite the vibrant civic culture many artists produce in Almaty, Bishkek, Tashkent, Dushanbe and Astana, they still lack an institutionalised network of communication or even a museum of contemporary art where many of their works can be gathered and displayed. The new National Museum in Astana in that sense is the first “hybrid” space where certain works of contemporary Kazakh artists were exhibited since the opening of the museum last year. These included exhibitions by Askhat Akhmediyarov (Singular Plural), Almagul Menlibayeva, Syrlybek Bekbotayev and Ainura Sadenova (Archipelago Karlag), Elena and Victor Vorobiev, Saule Dyussenbina, Rashid Nurekeev, Yulia Sorokina, and Saken Narynov (The Gaze into the Future: The Contemporary Heritage), and several works by other Kazakh contemporary artists exhibited on the ground floor of the museum. However, these exhibitions are not permanent and contemporary artists elsewhere in the region have to find their own place and space within the local cultural institutions. They do so either through the active participation in the public art and public festivals (ArtBat Fest in Almaty and other events) or through their participation in international art fairs and biennales, most notably the Venetian biennale but also biennales and fairs in Singapore, Brisbane, Paris, Basel, New York, London, Berlin, and Luxembourg.

¹ Bekboytayev's installation was part of the exhibition “On Love and Other Teachers” more available here: <http://www.buro247.kz/culture/art/v-ramkah-artbat-fest-otkrilas-vystavka-on-love-and-other-teachers.html>, Last accessed on 10 September, 2016.

² Most of my interviews with contemporary artists in Central Asia were conducted from 2011 to 2016. I used a mixed method approach with semi-structured interviews, participant observation and art ethnography on sites of production (Naryn fieldtrip), in galleries and museums as well as artists' own studios. All of the interviews are used with the prior permissions of artists themselves, all of the interviews were recorded and then transcribed and translated by the author.

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