

THE ARTIST IN CENTRAL ASIA

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A Report consequent on research conducted during travel across Central Asia – August-October 2017

1. Introduction

a) Context

My recent journey across Central Asia was undertaken, at least in part, to research the proposition that artists can and should play a role in the continuing development of the Central Asian Republics post-Independence, ie, since 1992. I took as my subject the republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, with some reference to China where my journey began. I had the opportunity to interview 20 artists and arts-related professionals, and I have audio recordings of 16 of these encounters. Before I set out I was given considerable assistance by the British Council in London, Almaty and Tashkent and I built a list of potential interviewees from these and other contacts as I travelled. This mainly accounts for the predominance of interviewees from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, but I have integrated other creative encounters from the wider region into the overall text. None of the interviews took place in Turkmenistan which proved to be the least susceptible republic in terms of ready access to independent artists. I also carried out various actions as an artist during my journey and have incorporated some conclusions from this work in the report which follows.

b) The Research

This is not a statistical report- nor does it contain very much factual evidence to support or refute the proposition. It should rather be seen as a review of the wide range of experiences and aspirations held by artists in Central Asia and an attempt to thematise, codify and analyse them. If it has a particular purpose this research aims to make more widely known the ideas and issues which impinge upon Central Asian arts practitioners in the second decade of the 21st Century.

c) Central Asia – a brief overview

When in 1992 the Soviet Union collapsed the many socialist republics which had constituted the U.S.S.R. were placed in a position of some difficulty. Decisions about how to manage a polity and an economy without the over-arching support of the Russian-dominated Union were taken with some urgency and various pressures for internal areas to secede from the existing republics, or to create Islamic sub-states, were resisted. It was also a significant challenge for each of the new “nations” to establish a unique and coherent identity for itself. Matters of culture, history, language and tradition needed to be debated and resolved. The resulting process of self-identification has been affected by the, sometimes severe, economic problems which attended upon the advent of exposure to a global market and, later, the downturn in that market in 2008. Each of the five Central Asian republics has found its own response to those problems according to its localized resources and to issues of landscape and geography. The political and

religious divisions which were deliberately exacerbated by the Soviet imposition of borders and regions upon what had been a loosely defined regional organization brought about different tensions in each country. In some cases they produced civil war and inter-ethnic conflicts, many of which continue today.

Among the commonalities experienced by the five republics is the ever-present pressure exerted by neighbouring super-powers Russia and China, with the distant super-power the United States, and the political instability of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. It would be easy to take one of two opposed views of the region, - that it is, as Peter Frankopan has suggested in his book “The Silk Roads”, the fulchrum of a new geopolitics centred upon Asia, or that it is a cluster of historically-weakened subject-powers destined for exploitation by the existing (and competing) global economic giants. The truth will, almost inevitably, fall between these extremes, and be the result of forces as yet unappreciated. Central Asia may be the arena for new tendencies and I hold to the view that much of the future of the region will depend on cultural development in its widest sense in which the artists of the region will have a role to play.

d) The Questions

I took with me the following questions as the basis for most of my encounters with artists and cultural operators,-

Please describe your artistic activities

Where were you born? Where do you feel you belong?

Does the idea of Central Asia mean anything to you? Is there any sense of a region?

How far does Russia represent the past? How far does China represent the future?

How far is Islam a cultural force?

What is the role of the artist in Central Asia?

What part has art and culture played in nation-building?

What art and cultural work is notable to you?

Does your art belong in a tradition?

In practice several of these questions were un-necessary to a discussion of current experiences and issues, and alternative questions suggested themselves as the interviews proceeded. I have therefore chosen a separate structure for the report,-

Introduction

The Current Situation

Various Alternatives

Versions Of The Future

The People and The Artists

What I did?

I have not included any wider recommendations here. I simply hope that ideas and observations in the report may refresh people's thinking in relation to their own future actions.

2. The Current Situation

a) Ever-present influence of the Soviet Union/Russia

It might be a reasonable expectation – and it was certainly mine – that after 25 years of independence the complexion of cultural and political life in the Central Asian republics would have emerged from the prevailing influence of the Russia-dominated Soviet Union. I found that whilst change has occurred this was far from being the case. Virtually every interviewee, for example, used Russian as a language for local interaction in preference to, and sometimes in default of, the national languages, eg, Kazakh, Tajik. This is not to say that these national languages are not increasingly current, especially among the newly-educated young, and I did have the advantage that English was also a usable language for conversation and discussion, but Russian is still a lingua franca across regional borders, and the Cyrillic script is still the most common script on, for example, signage and phone texting. Soviet institutional structures are still predominant in government and politics, in education and administration. These are often deeply conservative and cumbersome.

It is also apparent that the withdrawal of many workers and artists to Russia from the Central Asian republics has left a kind of economic and cultural absence to match the country's continuing presence. In a way institutions, through losing people who knew how to operate within them, have lost some of the life which gave them their flexibility and responsiveness. In this sense Central Asia has lost twice in gaining independence.

In cultural terms although over-arching state subsidy is now a thing of the past much of, for example, post-Soviet theatre in the region follows the old forms and practices in production and management. Detailed research into theatre management (or the art-market) was not however part of my limited brief. Whilst the above observations are general my own research was instead particularly alert to the many ways in which new, more flexible and responsive structures are emerging as Central Asian history advances.

b) The Establishment

It is important to offer a few more detailed observations about how the “tradition” of Sovietism retains a presence in the five republics through which I travelled.

- In three of the republics the political leadership is still formed on the model (and in one case the actual leader) inherited from the Soviet period. Only in Uzbekistan has a recent change of leadership come with an apparent intention to develop and liberalize the regime (including enhanced co-operation with the other republics). The changing

leadership in Kyrgyzstan has had an ostensibly liberalizing aspect but retains much of the authoritarian and dirigiste structures of Sovietism.

- Much of the built environment in the region is an inheritance from Soviet-era construction. Where large-scale re-building or development has been instituted post-independence, as in Astana and Ashgabat and increasingly in Dushanbe, it has followed a new style and aesthetic but large areas of cities and much of the structure of smaller centres conform to principles of Soviet planning and building-design.

- The contents of many museums across the region are the result of collections and excavations carried out in Soviet times.

- The industries which dominate the Central Asian economy, oil, gas, cotton, mineral-mining, are those which were developed and exploited most vigorously during the Soviet era and the adverse environmental consequences, predominantly in terms of water-usage and flow, are being felt even more intensely in the post-Independence years. Many Central Asian economies, moreover, are not yet fully open to global trade in ways which may be prejudicial to future development. Turkmenistan is the most extreme example of this tendency.

- Russian academic institutions and art-markets are still providing a significant outlet for the educational and cultural needs of Central Asians.

Not all of the above is an inevitable adherence, or reversion, to type. The impact of a global awareness was inevitably going to keep Russian and Soviet influences current amongst many others, but it seems that Russia's predominance in the region derives from its need to keep its sphere of influence intact, coupled with a local need for familiar forms in a time of uncertainty.

c) The “Recovery” Of The “Past”

The advent of Independence in 1992 resulted in strenuous efforts in the area of nation- and identity-building in which cultural gestures would play a major role. There were, within the Sovietist political apparatus at least, determined attempts to recover from the past emblems and signifiers of strong leadership and national pre-eminence, - The Golden Man in Kazakhstan, the warrior Manas in Kyrgyzstan, Ismael Somoni in Tajikistan and Amir Timur in Uzbekistan. In Turkmenistan the President himself became the totemic figure of the State. From these pivotal figures (sometimes only tentatively related to their “home” countries) it was possible to extend a view of literature, visual art, epic and craft-based work which confirmed the separateness and uniqueness of each republic, - what we might call its “unique selling point”. Some “selling” was indeed necessary to give the region a place in the worldwide tourism and service economies.

All such activity produced a narrative of development which emphasized the inevitability and successful eminence of Independence. This was established at some cost to the cultural actuality of the republics. It was based upon those cultural activities which were able to be manipulated by the government – museum collections, statuary, architectural commissions, Festivals, etc – and it projected a view of history which did not respect the

pre-Soviet (or pre-Russian) complexity of ethnicities, borders and allegiances in the region. It paid little attention to smaller independent cultural entities and to the idea of an “alternative” response to history and independence. Also, since each republic was nominally secular, it did not admit of the growing pressures for a resurgence of religious, and particularly Islamic, values.

For the Establishment therefore the past therefore became, in many ways, the alibi for both autocracy and the imposition of cultural conformity. It was history as a guarantor of stasis and stability rather than as a medium for productive change. It is against this background that we should see the perspectives of artists and arts-workers who have come to express a desire for another kind of independence.

d) Conservation of The Past

It would not be fair to view conservation as retrograde or reactionary. Alongside the confection of national “emblems and mythologies” has come the protection and preservation of traditions. Two artists I met seem to embody this important cultural function in their work – the Uzbek ceramicist Alisher Rakhimov, and the Uzbek photographer, Shavkat Boltaev. Both see part of their creative destiny in acknowledging established practice – ceramics, local culture, - whilst moving it forwards with responses to the present.

For Alisher the key idea is tradition, not a strict and unalterable aesthetic but a developing practice, one which grows from generation to generation and which is enriched by contact with the wider world and other artists, also by experiments with new and different ceramic technologies, as these statements suggest,-

“if you look to the history it’s really exciting to see the evolution of the monuments,”

“Central Asia is a mixture of cultures, - you have to learn China, Persia....”

“It’s like a circle, always turning – you can feel this”.

“The spirit will come from outside, it will go to the inside, ... and with the hands it will go up and you will work, because you have the spirit, you have to transform.... the spirit it goes through you, and will transform into art.”

“you are learning always”

I asked Shavkat why he had laboured for decades to create and sustain a photographic record of Uzbek life. He talked of a time, 45 years earlier, when he was a small boy with a camera, captivated by the photographs from the Magnum Agency, and Salgado, Capa, and how he was inspired to keep archives of his pictures, of for example gypsy life, of Jewish life, and to use his house, a former caravanserai in Bukhara, as a repository of his work, which now numbers about 100,000 pictures and scanned film, as well as work by other local artists. Like Alisher he has pupils to teach. Why is the archive so important to local Uzbek’s? “So that they will not forget,” he says.

All across the region the formal cultural and heritage structures are geared to conserving a view of the past, from Sufi folk-museums in the Pamir Mountains to National Art Museums in the capital cities, but this is almost always presented as curation of the past, and not a celebration of the artistic process in the present, so the work of these two artists, with their evolutionary and active attitude to creation, is an encouraging sign which may indicate a focus for future development.

Many cultural workers perceive the need for an organization like UNESCO to protect culture, to encourage traditions and the values which infuse them. In this view the existence in Uzbekistan of what have been called “museum villages” - like Langar - is supplementary to the support for arts “industries”.

My own concern that references to past history are often manipulative and retrograde would be rebutted by at least one of my Uzbek interviewees who sees the period of Timur, the poets Navoi and Omar Khayam, as the time “when Uzbekistan became proud,” linking the need for national positivism to the potential for cultural development.

e) The craving for change

Since I was interested in the changing culture of Central Asia I sought out individuals who felt some commitment to, or craving for, change. What exactly were they longing for? What kind of change did they crave?

For Ruth Jenrbekova, the Kazakh arts activist, -

“I think it would be the world where patriarchy is gone, and [there are] much less hierarchies, much less violence, - the changes we stand for is change to a world without boundaries and without all these hierarchies that we carry from the past – this is a kind of historically-determines burden,... I believe that it’s now time to get rid of it.”

“Art is always something that provokes change, even if it is not obvious, - it can be delayed, postponed somehow, but change will happen, somehow, because art as we understand it, is something that makes people doubt, and makes people think, and makes people change their opinions,”

For workers at SHTAB in Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan, - “We want society to be more leftist, more open, more LGBT-friendly, “

Several key words characterize these views of change. One is “freedom” which can be a most overused and mis-applied word where cultural oppression is felt. The young professionals represented at a pagan LGBTQ wedding in Almaty feel the oppression in terms of lack of freedom and attribute it to the legacy of Sovietism –

“Russia is Big Brother – we want to be in Europe.”

“There’s a lot of homophobia out there.”

“This is where we meet.”

“I want to go to London - I like fog.”

“I am Kazakh, not Russian.”

“We are an army out there.”

but their image of freedom is mainly of an independent space for expression with freedom from interference. This still supposes the overseeing and controlling presence of the State, a sense of oppression also felt by the cultural activists SHTAB in Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan.

Creatively autonomous spaces feature widely in the aspirations of Central Asian artists. My meetings in Almaty in Kazakhstan brought to light two contrasting ideas of “space”. Architect Asel Yeszhanova talked to me about her work with the Urban Forum, which is essentially an idea-space in which new conceptions of urban design and living can be explored.

“The fact that Urban Forum Almaty exists... it is proof that there is space for the imagination. Of course architecture has always been a political tool, and especially in countries like Kazakhstan, new independent countries... architecture will be a tool for political statement, - at the same time I think decision-makers realize that, the city - it's not all about controlling, it's about the comfortable space, for people of different identities, lifestyles, ambitions, age, everything to co-exist together, - to create that kind of environment, we need to collaborate, to talk, - when we organize meetings the City Administration comes, to listen, - hopefully it will soon be a true collaboration.”

By contrast the city's yearly alternative arts festival ARTBAT, now celebrating its “8th Edition”, began in Almaty's public spaces, modelled on the famous Arbat pedestrian street in Moscow. It is only recently, due to changing relations with the City Authorities that the organizers have taken their activities off the streets and, this year, into the basement of the Arman (“Dream”) Cinema and to an out-of-town Arts Building in Algabas. This is avowedly a political decision but also a strategic one, which corresponds to a new impulse to connect with a wider community, demonstrating how far spaces are crucial to the conception and programming of artistic events.

Also in Almaty is the Bunker Theatre, one of more than 30 small independent performance venues in the city which have developed in the freer atmosphere of Independence. The Bunker, which is described as an “art-refuge”, developed in the abandoned space of an old Cold War bunker, as Edgar, one of the volunteers explained,-

“It was just a place nobody does anything with, and actors knew about this place, and just decided to do something with it, - at the beginning it was about 20 young people, they were actors, and they decided to take all the trash from here, to clean the space – it took about two years to make this place in a good condition, and then... they began to build the theatres, create the scenes [Stages], - if you had lights in your house, you took it here, sound, everything, it was absolutely do-it-yourself, ... absolutely no money from everywhere, no sponsors, no support from government, ... it's all absolutely about creating, creative people, - all creative people can do something here, if they have good ideas,...”

Another dimension to artistic aspiration is “innovation” which in practice means access to new influences and practice from outside of individual countries and outside of the region. One person who feels this need is gallery director and cultural activist in Tashkent, Shakhnoza Karimbabaeva, whose Bonum Factum Gallery brings together art for sale with community-based mixed-media work and experimental productions. She cites her International contacts with Japan, Israel, Germany, France, Kazakhstan, Russia, Romania, Iran, China, -

“I sell to Uzbeks and foreigners. They know about the gallery from the Internet”.

A third key term in this lexicon of aspiration for artists is “open-ness”. Again in practice this means the existence of a society which is ready to embrace difference. It is what the Almaty LGBTQ group want to belong to, and open-ness to sexual difference is part of that ideal.

For arts managers the open-ness is more geographical, –

“If you open up borders there will be more contact.”

Vladislav Sludskiy, the director of ARTBAT Fest, is frustrated at a logistical lack of open-ness. For him the lack of a major institution in Kazakhstan committed to bringing new art into the country and sending Kazakh art abroad for exhibition is something that prevents greater international cultural dialogue.

The last major aspect of artistic and personal aspiration is the creation of “new structures”, inasmuch as the atmosphere and ethos of a society is generated by its structures. At the level of social structures many artists see themselves at best in opposition to existing structures, but the weakening of structures generally, post-Communism, has left some individuals keen to take advantage of the failed structures to create new ones, as here Ruth Jenrbekova outlines as one of their organization’s manifesto assertions,-

“Our mission: means of identity production has to be expropriated from state powers and given to individual societies and bodies.

Our specialty is mixing, which means creating new quasi-identities out of old ones.”

If Soviet doctrine was monolithic, intolerant of diversity, is not a time of recession and economic upheaval the time for a review of new possibilities?

f) Addressing issues

Does the artist have anything to do with change? I joined a group of arts managers for a breakfast colloquy to discuss aspects of this question. When the question about why business does and should invest in culture was raised one of them brought up the idea of the arts addressing issues,-

...there are some acute/sharp issues in the society, ... we need to have a discussion, to be close, at least to see how it could be interpreted, for example the topic of violence in the family, the topic of the national minorities, the gays and lesbians, - we have a big gap

between the residents and the people coming from the suburbs,... and the role of the artist is to disclose this, and to express different views on this, ... and to see how people react to it. There is not just one official point of view on certain issues, ... when the artist and theatres are strong enough to have their own point of view and express it in their scenes and their paintings, and they do find the spectators who are interested, who are eager to find, maybe, these common points of view, ... and they start thinking of it, they start thinking of probably changing their point of view, or trying to perceive the other's point of view, ... [so they say] 'Violence in families, intolerance, does not make my life better', ...

One of the managers is also a drama worker who has been using the interactive technique known as Playback Theatre with a group of girls from one of the outlying estates in Almaty. Is this Neighbourhood Theatre in touch with social reality in a way which allows it to connect with people's daily concerns? I was able to attend one of the sessions which was held in an outdoor space within the estate during an evening session. I can vouch for the involvement of the young group but I did wonder whether the more overtly political Forum Theatre of Augusto Boal might have been more suited to those "sharp" issues in Kazakh society. However I came across relatively little "arts for social engagement" going on in the region and this example, funded by the Soros Foundation, is a token of the possibility of development in this area.

3. Various Alternatives

If the future for artists in Central Asia is in finding alternatives to the past and to the present then it is useful to consider that range of alternatives. From my contact with artists and cultural workers in the region I have discovered that no one alternative is embraced by all. The energetic debate between the arts managers I met brought up the issue of priorities, and this is a kind of debate which can be held in all cultural contexts. It focuses around a dichotomy between collaboration and consolidation as against opposition and subversion. It raises issues about self-presentation and the market, about independence and adaptation. I have here tried to focus these questions around some key themes.

a) Introducing the New- One route to change is by bringing new ideas and practices to bear upon existing ones. I came across this in many locations, and much of the influential new work was from outside the region. In Astana Murat Muturganov, the Kazakh circus artist, spoke to me of the stimulus to new work he felt when in contact with Cirque De Soleil who were performing a specially created work at the World Energy Expo. Meanwhile the British Council in Tashkent is having considerable success in introducing Uzbek theatre artists to the work of the Royal Shakespeare Company and tutors from Rose Bruford College in the UK. In Almaty arts entrepreneur Aigul Sultanova chose a Russian director for her independent theatre production which went on to win the Grand Prix in St Petersburg and is now in repertory in Almaty and chose a Russian writer for her course/workshops for playwrights.

The ARTBAT Festival in Almaty invites overseas artists to lead and curate the Festival each year, and is ready to include work by outside artists in its exhibitions. The Festival

Director Vladislav Sludskiy also has a base in New York and curated the public art which was commissioned for the World Expo. The Expo itself acted as a catalyst for new and non-native art to be exhibited via the International Pavilions (eg, the Brian Eno soundtrack which graced the British Pavilion) and for new work to be commissioned from Kazakh artists. This is something that the ARTBAT Festival concentrates on, both in the field of visual arts and Live Art, and it has invited a director to work with locally-based students to develop new work. This is a combination of externally-led and internally-generated new work which can be a model for development across the region.

b) Developing/Improving the art-forms

There is an awareness among many arts practitioners that the post-Independence period has seen a decline in the professionalism and originality of the cultural sector, and that for the region (and individual countries) to regain confidence and prestige in the wider world this situation needs to be addressed. Murat Muturganov, as a performing artist, feels this very strongly from first-hand experience,-

“After the Soviet Union disappeared, when we became independent,... all the money was invested in medicine, in education, and for the moment they forget about arts, - the country had to survive, they have to invest money for the future of the country, - and a lot of artists went to the US..., they wanted to eat, and they have families, they need money, and the good quality of the artists went out of the country ... the quality now it’s really low,... this is not the fault of the country, not the fault of government, not the fault of artists, it’s the fault of the Soviet Union, but now we become independent... we are growing up, our country, and a lot of artists are coming back now. I think in the next five years we will become really strong in circus artist quality. Even me, I came back in 2009, I was travelling all over the world, and I’m back here because I really care about circus, - my dream is to create my own show in a circus tent and travel all over Kazakhstan, - there’s a lot of circus artists like me who really care about circus.”

It is a view shared by Aigul Sultanbekova,-

“the problem when I came into the theatre-world was that old good, Russian theatre started disappearing,... if we can recover that with the addition of modern influences, modern flavours, I think that will be good,... “

“Basically it was an idea about training, about how to expand people’s way of thinking – out-of-box thinking – then I was more aware of the situation our theatre-people are faced with, and now I am more concentrated on improving the theatre environment in Kazakhstan.”

Aigul is aware that local arts workers need exemplary work to help them raise their standards. One of her exemplars is the Uzbek theatre company, Ilkhom, which has survived for decades without state subsidy and retains an independence of aesthetic and practice which has a special energy to it, a combination of established Russian practice and Central Asian character. Aigul considers that Kazakh theatre practitioners could learn a lot from the company.

c) Internationalism

Internationalism is an alternative to the cultural stagnation which may result from the influence of an Establishment. Veteran Uzbek artist Bahodir Jalulov has had the opportunity to travel outside the region and to enjoy the benefits of international contact. He senses the advantages in a new, more open attitude to the arts -

“Since Independence our countries in Central Asia have been able to enter into the international community... we know what’s happening and, in addition to our own national culture, our own artistic traditions, we are able now to understand and appreciate the new tendencies, to bring into our own art and transform it, through Biennales and Triennales.”

“We are integrating our own art into the most progressive trends happening in the global scene in arts and culture... for example installations which is a new art-form we didn’t have before, ... and we’ve now mastered this art-form,

“famous artists are now coming to our country... they’re giving masterclasses, and our own mentality about how to approach art is now being transformed,”

Shakhnoza Karimbabaeva, also in Uzbekistan, also envisages an international dimension to new work, in the form of joint exhibitions of Uzbek and foreign artists and in Tashkent an international art salon.

In Kazakhstan Aigul Sultanbekova feels the outcome of such contact is likely to be a greater sense of individual initiative,-

“we will not be the same because we did this, we made it happen... it means to me that our society will become more responsible, people becoming more responsible for themselves, for their lives.”

She is quick to point out how her own profession would also benefit from external stimulus. There are plenty of government-set performance indicators which are frequently missed but, “there is no arts management”, and she considers University Courses in Arts management to be insufficient. This is an area currently being addressed in Uzbekistan by the British Council.

Overall in terms of cultural development Aigul is optimistic and upbeat but one of her fellow arts managers questions the commitment of the Kazakh government to internationalism,-

“Although the government says a lot of great words about support of culture..... in reality there is no support for the culture of diversity, for instance the government has signed the Convention of UNESCO on Cultural Diversity, but the Parliament has not ratified it. [There is a pledge to commit budget] but if the government starts paying the fee to UNESCO Kazakhstan can be in receipt of funds to support cultural diversity.”

d) Working In Opposition

An alternative to highly public collaboration is low-level cultural work focusing on education and working to develop a counter or opposition to established practice. This is

the “alternative” embodied as a strategy rather than as an adjunct to existing culture. In Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, I was fortunate to make contact with the work of SHTAB, an independent organization which relies for its financial survival on money from abroad. SHTAB arts-worker Ayjibek described the organization’s work to me,-

“[It is] leftist, - through different art projects it tries to influence people and to make them more leftist, some of their projects, but some of them are just artistic...performance, video, and researches, - one of SHTAB’s projects was to collect old mosaics which were built during the Soviet time in Bishkek and just to make postcards, with their history,”

I was helped to establish contact with SHTAB by the Creolex company in Almaty who practice a similar kind of opposition. Both organizations work independently of local cultural support which allows for an equivalent independence of mind and aesthetic. They both also emphasize gender and sexuality as key motifs in establishing a new social consciousness. There is a strong need for independent and separate space for this work to flourish, as Ruth Jenrbekova, one of the duo with Maria Vilkovisky who work as Creolex, states,-

“Gender is very important in all of this, because it’s very difficult to separate these processes of racialization from processes of genderization – all of these divisions are intrinsically connected to each other because all of them are used for building power hierarchies, - when I say that I am a feminist it’s because I see all of these inequalities as something inseparable from contemporary patriarchal capitalism”.

Such oppositionalism is not widely embraced by artists. Ayjibek told me how a prevailing orthodoxy coupled with a drastic reduction in support for the arts had created this situation in Kyrgyzstan,-

“The Government should support artists, but our government now they have other problems. Artists they are now self-sponsored, and they are poor. If they are artists they disappear very fast because they don’t know how to live. People who are artists, -they are not artists most of the time, they have other jobs, and this artistic job, it’s like a hobby, maybe, but it’s not their main thing, where they can get money.”

Those who work in opposition to the system however would argue that it is the only honest response to a society dominated by old structures and frames of reference. Aigul Sultanbekova, by contrast, emphasizes the importance of mastering those frames of reference,-

“If you ask me about political theatre... first of all you need to be a good professional theatre, before having power to do something about politics... you need to know rules very good to be humorous enough, to get your messages right, - when people say something about government, for me it’s about your own responsibility, you need to become responsible for yourself, your life, the place where you live, how you live, ... [now we have crowd-funding] our society will not be the same anymore, and people have taken responsibility for the independent theatre to expand. They did this act of goodwill, they

donated money, they contributed money, to make it happen, - that's why I say that we are changing."

e) Consciousness-raising

The traditional tool of opposition is education and consciousness-raising. Many are aware that the cultural sector is not well-understood or even known about. I asked Ayjibek of SHTAB if they had encountered much opposition to their work,-

"Not a lot because most of the people they don't understand what we are doing, and some of them don't even know that we are partners with this LGBT organization"

"A lot of people here don't know what queer is and this school – it was even called "Queer Art And The Future!""

Kazakh architect and cultural activist, Asel Yeszhanova, emphasizes the same theme, -

"artists have a really big mission, consciousness-raising, going to the places where it might hurt, but it needs to be done, ... people who are brave,..."

Outside of the world of activism there is a whole level of arts management attempting to nurture smaller, more independent projects, and for these managers education is both a crucial and debateable force in society,-

"Spectators, the number of people who are eager to find these different points of view are very limited. The problem is that even the state theatres, they have very good performances, but always a lack of spectators,... the galleries, you will find the same people coming every month,... – it's maybe too snobbish to they are more prepared, more clever, more intelligent, ... and they do understand the culture... they want to belong to this circle of people that are considered to be more educated than others – if we talk about the educational factor the influence is very much limited, - it's a question of the basics, the economics, the people are striving in their own lives, they would like to earn more, they have children, they would like to eat, they need to get more earnings,... why are they coming to Almaty? They are coming here to earn, but these are the people who need to be involved in these different projects where we show the diversity..."

This is, in many ways, an aspect of the arts – audience development – which is a challenge in most parts of the world. In Kazakhstan it isn't just about raising the consciousness of the citizens, but also of the administration,-

"They're just not aware of what's happening in independent theatres and independent projects, ... my parents they know only that I am working in a theatre area, but they only know some theatres, state theatres....so I think the same is with government, they don't know that our city has interesting independent theatres that can change people.... I don't know how to make them know about us, and that we are educated, and capable, and modern and we can solve something they really want to be solved. – I wish I could be friend of our Mayor and he could know that we have independent theatres, and he can help us."

“Maybe it’s also our fault, that they don’t know us very well, because we are not competitive enough, they would say [of the independent theatres], ‘They’re just Amateurs’”,

There has, however, recently been a Round-Table event in Almaty where the independent arts sector had the chance to inform and impress the cultural establishment including leading policy-makers.

f) Subversion and Individualism

It could be said that subversion, especially in an age of post-modernism, is the most creative form of opposition to a culture perceived as both oppressive and oppressed. It is almost the nature of subversion that it should not be conventional, - even conventionally subversive. The ARTBAT celebration of Live Art in the Arts Centre in Almaty was not confrontational or disruptive. It showcased work from nearly a dozen young artists and its aim was to engage with the visitors and estate residents of all ages, including children. Each live installation was subtly strange but within a convention which related to the lives of the public – games, lessons, etc – and if the artists were somewhat unconventional in appearance or behaviour their presence invited familiarity and indulgence. It was playful and good-natured and made effective use of some empty spaces both inside and out. If subversion was at work it was inclusive not exclusive.

Vladislav Sludskiy insists that the ARTBAT mission has changed,-

“Now it has several functions, I believe education is one of the main directions, again we trying to keep exploring the cities through culture and developing the audiences, the artists, I think it’s about exchange within the community, for those who can call themselves art-lovers and those who don’t care about contemporary art... .. the attempt now is to act rather than curate – as a curator I’m a little bit tired of this idea of the beautiful sacral object in the white cube gallery, the object of desire if you wish, ... I think it’s interesting to explore the action which comes before the artist comes up with the object, so in this sense digital art, media art, performance, is intangible processes, creative processes that require almost zero production, but the gesture is equally strong.”

One of the artists represented at Almaty was Katipa, the White Goddess, who had also officiated at the LGBT wedding ceremony I had attended earlier in the month. Katipa, or Katya, sees her work as shamanism, and spiritual in practice. It does however embody a playful and humorous element,-

“My personal religion [is] Katipapism.”

Katipa *“is a Central Asian Goddess,... based on a local religion Tengrianism, ... a re-incarnation of Umai, ... goddess of Earth, I am doing this religion, at the same time this art movement, ... what if a new messiah will come, and she will be woman, - and why not? she comes here to save the world, to stop war, and to legalize queer, LGBT unions, so every “marginal” will be involved in this religion, and they will be happy together.”*

and appropriately enough Katipa’s work involves improvisation.

“If she wants to lead the youth... she goes to the truth and only she knows where to go, ... in every situation it's improvisation, it's always improvisation with space and time, and people and creative forces, - I feel force, not always when it's happening, and a shaman is a transition-person between higher and lower worlds, and Katipa she's always between heaven and earth, only one channel, she's the channel. - If she wants to lead the youth... she goes to the truth and only she knows where to go, ... in every situation it's improvisation, it's always improvisation with space and time, and people and creative forces, ... I want to give the impulse for making a new culture... with the woman in the centre, “

And the idea behind Creolex, a deliberate blurring of boundaries and lineage, is another kind of subversion, as suggested by Ruth Jenrbekova -

“I cannot identify with any country, which is where the idea of creolization, the name of the Creolic Centre came from. It came from this realization that we do not have..., this feeling of belonging to any particular ethnicity or nationality group – we're just creatures from the Planet Earth, which means that we are mixed, culturally, - I believe that all the people are Creole in some sense, ... we exist as a mixed population, and when we divide ourselves into different nations, different cultures, it does not convince me.”

She describes herself as a “transfeminist” artist as part of a widening of perception and understanding,-

“Gender is important but... transfeminism is for me something which goes beyond, - because trans is beyond, - not only gender, but goes beyond the human, because there are so many other creatures on our planet and we have to think of them [as well], - for me it's important to think about women, but also about children, and animals and plants, - I believe that diversity goes far beyond this kind of cultural diversity we used to speak about.”

g) Creating New Structures

I have considered here the new in its international dimension, stimulated from outside and producing new work. The other aspect of the new is structural and self-generated. The arts managers I talked with were clear that new organizational structures are emerging

“independent theatre is becoming more prominent these days, much more significant, the change is coming from there.”

and that support too, in the form of crowd-funding, is evolving.

New independent companies are one development – the new venues in Almaty, the touring circus envisaged by Murgat, not all bound by buildings and venues.

Vladislav Sludskiy, -

“because after this Soviet Union the infrastructure never made it to capitalistic reality, in my opinion, all the really talented artists here belong to themselves, they can't possibly be institutionalized, like the situation we have in the West for instance, - artists are way more independent, in this reality than anybody who has an art-dealer, curator, adviser, this crew

of professionals round artists, so here they belong to themselves, ... they're decentralized and isolated enough from the market while they're still encoded into the discourse."

h) Urban Space as a medium for debate and change

In several ways the identification of the artist and arts manager with discrete art-forms from the established canon has been superseded by a looser but more integrated conception of artistic activity. Whilst architecture and town-planning have always been seen to have creative aspect now they can be seen as the context for, and partner in, expressive work, and a powerful means of shaping consciousness and potentially radicalizing it. The three predominant kinds of urban space in Central Asia currently are the pre-Soviet sites of historical interest, the Soviet structures, and the patterned renewal of urban areas through new building. Beyond all of these is the raw landscape, by no means untouched by human intentions. All of these various spatial and constructional expressions are now susceptible to debate and question. They have also become test-areas for public control and re-nascent democracy.

One significant debate, particularly in Kazakhstan, where the legacy of Soviet building and architecture is considerable and where the frequency of earthquake damage (and therefore the need for major rebuilding) has been low, is about how to value the Soviet legacy. I talked to artist and architect Aida Issakhan about the campaign in Almaty to conserve these buildings. There is a feeling in the public mind, she says, that Soviet building represents historic oppression and this has produced a general antipathy or indifference to it. This is in a population whose millennia-long history of nomadism was forcibly ended by the Soviet regime. Campaigners like Aida take the view that there is a style and substance to much Soviet-era building which exceeds that of most new building. The intention to redevelop combined with the need to involve major commercial developers in the process has seen inroads into existing building stock. The other motive for wide-scale demolition has been the political impulse to clear space to offer up new monuments to a post-Soviet, Independent nationalism.

At a deeper level the preservation of links with historic structures has been seen as a defence against the spread of a cultural amnesia which is being exploited by capitalistic forces. The rejection of these forces also is seen as a way to open a debate about the longer history and tradition of Central Asia with all of its animist and non-linear reference-points, as a means of achieving real cultural renewal and an enduring identity. This "take" upon the ideas of Walter Benjamin has particular point in a region where investment is often led by external organizations and businesses with no particular investment in localized identity. The artist has a role to play in this process of revaluation, in creating a new reading of the present through an educated consciousness.

i) Revaluing (Soviet) heritage

This is all connected with the Soviet legacy, of course. I talk to Aida about this. Her work has been part of a "Research Project On The Preservation Of The Architectural Identity Of The City Of Almaty" –

“an attempt to archive the architectural DNA of our city by inventorying the surviving buildings of the old architecture that are its carriers. Archcode Almaty is a cast of the architectural landscape that we inherited and which we will give to those who will live in the city after us. We want to popularize the theme of preserving the architectural heritage of Almaty, as well as to bring the discussion of this issue to a qualitatively different level: to create an active professional community and a stable information field around this topic, to involve wider circles of the population in the discussion, to draw the attention of the city administration”.

She talks of “modernism with original character”, a kind of post-post-modernism, at odds with the pseudo-classicism of the buildings in newly-established Astana, for example, or the bland modernism of the commercial malls. Her own work has turned towards more playful built interventions in, for example, parks.

I find it encouraging that the issue of the past is so current amongst arts practitioners. The alternative would indeed be cultural amnesia. This idea of historical re-valuation, particularly of the Soviet legacy, has stimulated a lot of reflection amongst the arts professionals of Almaty.

Ruth Jenrbekova,-

“I think that any past, and any part of our history, including very ancient history, including pre-history, including the history when there was no history, ever, including the time when there were no humans, - there is still something there and we have so rich history and every part of it is somehow valuable and can be used for the construction of the future,”

Vladislav Sludskiy,-

“You see, the problem with the past is that you can easily manipulate it, in its own interest, political or economic, it doesn’t matter, ... that’s why we need to be careful, why we need to educate ourselves better, and know for sure the history – clearly it’s problematic that almost nothing was written on paper, so it’s hard to keep the historical background, but there are people to study, “[the Soviet/Czarist history] has a huge significance, - those people who were active in the late 1990’s are still trying to deconstruct this whole historical background. Of course so many identities are contradicting here. You have the idea of Soviet heritage, with its own issues obviously, - it takes years and years to really understand what was happening - ... as well of course as Tengri, and the magic approach, I think it’s incredibly interesting – I wish Kazakhstan could make it a cultural trademark, because barely anywhere in the world you had such an interesting culture with its own imagination, its own artefacts, and the years of Independency, it’s hard to put it all together, and not forgetting Islam is getting bigger and bigger here, and this is another identity, another approach, - so far all of those social groups and constructs and cultures have been co-existing very nicely here, and effectively, but it’s a big challenge in my opinion and I think culture can help with that –culture creates common places, common spaces for the people with different identities, so with the help of the art community we can probably help all those people to live together happily, ...and be in a dialogue with each other.”

Asel Yeszhanova, -

"I just think that it's gorgeous architecture, beautiful, very unique and we should cherish it, and we should appreciate it, and it's such a shame that they are decaying and they are ignored, but at the same time I try to avoid a nostalgic feeling about it, - there should be appreciation and... it's important to restore it, to keep it"

"you can't talk about architecture, architectural heritage, without touching on overall culture...."

[If we support the activists] – "I think we just need to overcome and accept our past, as citizens and Kazakh people, then once it happens I think we will get back to architectural heritage, taking care of it, - it may be too late by that time. – it's not just about culture and about the past it's about the genes, the DNA of people who live in this area, we just had this conversation about the nomadic past, about state apparatus, Deleuze's idea of the "war machine"...."

This invocation of Deleuze's theory, expressed fully in the essay, "Nomadology", which he wrote with Felix Guattari, prompts the thought that the "nomadic" element in Central Asian history may be the element which empowers the region to resist the impositions of statist and establishment economics and symbolisms. A deep inclination towards a stateless "Independence" which combines autonomy with an accumulation of creative difference may, as the "memory" of the Soviet model fades or is absorbed and transmuted, produce new forms of cultural organization in the longer-term. All this would take place as a result of a conjoining of forces and sympathies between artists and a wide section of the population.

At a practical level this is the motivation for SHTAB in Bishkek encouraging people to make postcards of their history. It's important,-

"because SHTB thinks the understanding of our past will help people to learn – I think without knowing our past we couldn't do better in the future."

j) Islam

It seems pertinent to ask to what extent the resurgence of Islam as a moral and cultural force since Independence has offered an alternative to the established polity and art. In Kyrgyzstan where the Islamic opposition has made a considerable impact on the political scene we have evidence of what an Islamic alternative might look like, but my contact there from SHTAB is dismissive of Islamic values as a liberating force.

"I think this is not to do with religion but because this place is a closed community – I hear that a lot of people are afraid to be influenced by Western Culture, because they think it doesn't fit here and it will bring disruption of our society."

When I asked Murat Murgatunov about Muslim attitudes to circus he rebutted the idea that such attitudes affect the work,-

“We never think religion, - Muslims come to circus, in Dubai they do. There are Muslim acrobatic acts.”

It may be an issue which centres on the opposition between public radicalism and private belief and between a Central Asian Islam which has been diverse in its forms and expressions and a global Islamic orthodoxy which has supra-national ambitions. Most artists I talked to, it would be fair to say, did not feel a strong affinity with Islam in their creativity. One who did feel a connection was Katya in Almaty whose work aspires to absorb Islam into a synthesis of belief,-

“so I think Islam needs an extension, in Kazakhstan there is a very strange situation with total Islamization, and some people are afraid of that, ... what if we extend this story of Islam... I want to give the impulse for making a new culture, based on women’s needs, feminist needs, world peace needs.”

At the historic site of Merv in Turkmenistan, moreover, I found evidence of building renewal being used to serve the needs of a resurgent Islam. It was clear to me that an Islamic revival does involve an arts dimension not least through this physical renewal and an intention to reclaim of historic structures and spaces for worship and education. I believe that the impact of a resurgent Central Asian Islamism – as with the incipient influence of China – will be felt much more in the next decade.

Perhaps meanwhile there can be in Central Asia a coalition of forces between liberally-minded, education-conscious Muslims and the oppositionally-inclined but non-aligned artists. At present no such coherent opposition (or “war-machine”) seems to exist.

4. Versions Of The Future

a) The World

As I said at the start of this report there are two competing views of the future of Central Asia and the actuality may well be more nuanced and richly characterized than either. It is time to review those more diverse and maverick aspects of the future which may save Central Asia from being entrammelled in both the west-ward-tending march of capitalistic progress and the ‘failure economics’ of subjected nations.

One answer to subjection is an extended network of contacts across the globe and the ability to engage in trade and exchange on equal terms with other countries which have an equivalence of diversity and plurality. Might, for example, Kyrgyzstan have something to gain from alliances with, say, New Zealand, or Malaysia? This kind of international linkage is dependent on the acceptance that Central Asian societies are complex in their ethnicities, and that their layered cultures, - a kind of historical palimpsest - empower rather than disempower them as proto-nations to engage with the wider world. Realizing this global power will also depend on the republics’ ability to assert a combined regional identity as well as individual national characters – in other words an acceptance of interdependence and co-operation, something which decades of Soviet exploitation, paternalism and enforced division have made very difficult. In this, as in other areas, the artists and cultural community can and should play a part.

b) Heart Of Asia

The future also therefore contains the possibility of a federated polity which can play upon its flexibility and diversity in a period when China is asserting ever more regulation and state control and Russia is engaged in a complex game of territorial influence. Currently many questions are being asked about the role of China in the development of Central Asia. Its phenomenal investment in infrastructure across the continent has been much remarked on but few of the artists I talked with had a strong sense of Chinese influence on their work. Meanwhile the political instabilities of Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan have a subtle but strong influence on the region.

In between periods of major hegemonic struggle and the transfer of geo-political influence it often falls to the interim national aggregations like the Pacific nations or Central America to bear the burden of adaptation and innovation. Much was expected of the Pacific region as power shifted to Asia from the Americas in the mid-to-later 20th Century. Whilst there was nothing in the disparate geography of the ocean region to allow it to demand major concessions from global players its sheer diversity enabled it to find creative solutions to its own problems. This may be the case with Central Asia. On the other hand another region, fractured and divided rather than disparate and segmented, the Balkans, has historically more than once found itself the focus of a global game which resulted in war. It will be important for Central Asia to achieve a set of autonomous (but inter-related) and prosperous economies if it is to avoid being a flashpoint for regional rivalries.

c) Youth and the New Generations

Against this possibility we find, as the Pacific nations have done, that new generations bring new aspirations and tolerances to the present. Around half the population of Central Asia is under 30, and this generation has the potential to be newly aware of the global perspective, to be newly schooled in ethnic identity and with access to a wide availability of digital capabilities, a generation which is powerful in its demographic and numbers and which has a widespread taste for avoidance of conflict. It is certainly in the interest of national rulers intent on nation-building to use education as a tool of cultural renewal but of course the global dimension does not come without its price - a culture of consumerism has also developed across Asia amongst the under-30's. All the same that generation seems to have an innate resistance to manipulation and readiness to make its opinions felt in the public arena which will emphasize its independence and make it a force to be reckoned with.

Bahodir Jalulov also sees the new generation was the key to cultural advance-

"They can hear and see the new order – if you are open-souled you can access the world..."

The contrary forces at play in Central Asian youth were captured by SHTAB worker Ayjibek, when I asked her about conservatist tendencies in Kyrgyzstan,–

"I don't feel pressures, and, for the recent years I noticed that there are more people who think like us, especially in Bishkek, ... there's a younger generation who thinks differently,

they're more open, but the older generation they think that the younger generation are being brainwashed."

Aigul Sultanova is positive and inclusive, as always, on this subject –

"new generations are always coming, thank God, ... I don't like when people segregate old generation/new generation, because we all belong to one society, and we need to be able to communicate with each other.... I believe in the progress that when you remember your history,... You remember the rules, in a way, you can expand the rules or do this out-of-box thinking,...."

"the important issue of growing the audience, - and growing the audience through arts courses, that is spreading quite widely these days."

The result is a continuity, the resuscitation of history,-

Alisher Rakhimov, –

"If the student will love his work he will have no problem with the future... that's the reason we are trying to choose students who will continue."

d) The Business model

One future for Central Asia is an economic one based on the idea of the "business model". In some areas, not least in the cultural sphere, initiatives are being advanced to move beyond the state-dependent financing of projects. In fact the idea of projects – as in discrete initiatives/activities with separate and dedicated support rather than a programme with a continuous income-stream - seems to be relatively new in the region. Alternative forms of funding are being tried out – crowd-funding, business sponsorship, commercial outlets. As the global market impinges on the Central Asian economies more emphasis is given to what is saleable, to assets and resources and marketing, to design and creativity.

It is generally agreed that the dividend from oil revenue in Kazakhstan and the other oil-producing republics has been declining for some years. At the same time a sector is growing which works in opposition and may provide the ideas and expertise necessary for innovation without which the renewed economy cannot function. One response, as we have seen, is to recover and redevelop basic and institutional skills. The other is to invest social capital in relevant initiatives, a particular pre-occupation of Aigul Sultanova,-

".....to me it's not only about government, it always goes both ways, from government on one side and the people the other side, ... we are taking the responsibility, for our lives, for culture, for our country, not on a big scale, what we can do to make it better we are doing with our arts projects, without complaining or yearning, "Give us money, give us money!" because very often we do without money."

But - *"It's unfair to say that the government is not interested in culture or arts, - they do a lot of things, money is invested, but not enough."*

“They have to create the conditions for other, not-State-supported projects... they should at least give some incentives to business, if we ask for support for projects, business should enjoy certain privileges.”

“I strongly believe that if there is the energy and the talent, people will do it, - at the end of my first year.... I realized that it’s not about finance, it’s not about budgets, it’s just about energy, talent and a real drive to do it. If these three happen the money comes after that.”

“Our independent theatre Artishop it finished its crowd-funding programme that they announced in early summer...it’s the first crowd-funding programme in Kazakhstan – and they collected 40% more than they planned.It’s a huge achievement for Kazakhstan because it means that the country, the culture, it will never be the same – the world changed, the country changed, the people changed, ... we didn’t have the culture of donating before, because in the Soviet Union the government was financing everything...everything is changing – of course we want to keep our identity, our Kazakhstani face in a way, ... we are, I hope, progressing.”

In Tashkent the main Art Gallery is run by a major bank, but Shakhnoza Karimbabaeva is as wary as Aigul of progress, pointing out the general lack of arts-favouring foundations, Investors, Banks. “We work and we wait,” she says. One of her gallery’s recent productions was “Alice In Wonderland.” For a number of dedicated arts workers in Central Asia their situation may seem as peculiar and complicated as that tale.

e) Peace

There is also a future based on a recourse to other values. Given the troubled post-Independence history of the Central Asian republics and the perceived instability of the world which surrounds them it is not surprising that there is a craving for peace and a wish that cultural activity should work towards such a state. As an aspiration this universalism may seem almost conventional but, by contrast, a conflict-weary West has somehow, it often seems, lost sight of what a peaceful world would be like. I sense that in Central Asia a potential coalition between a younger generation of artists striving for a new structure for society and an older generation of artists who retain a sense of idealism from the Soviet era waits to be established and that it is capable of realizing the idea of peace. The co-ordinates for such a society can be found in Soviet visions of progressive development, the countercultural traditions of the 1960’s and 70’s in Europe and America, contemporary thinking in areas of ecology and human rights, and in the Central Asian pre-history of, for example Tengrism, Nomadism – what Murat Muturganov calls “not wild nomadism, but strong nomadism.”. It also partakes of a kind of mysticism.

Bahodir Jalulov, with experience of a wide range of alternative belief-systems, has this vision, derived from his sense, shared by other artists from Uzbekistan who I interviewed, that their national identity contains, amidst its pragmatism, an element of mystery,-

“I think we can achieve fabulous things in this world if we have peace and so I if I could talk about Uzbekistan’s contribution to all this in one word I would say “Peace”, because only that will allow us to make progress in our art, ... I am a peacemaker.”

This is from a pupil of the classic avant-garde, follower of Malevitch, Klee, Chagall, Kandinsky, who cites the science of Stephen Hawking and Indian meditation techniques as creative influences. For him the 21st Century could be a golden age, to experience and realize the potential of being human. “I’m interested in everything”, he says. The role of an artist for Jalulov is to be a medium, to take on the pains of the world, to be a citizen of that world.

Almost inevitably this element is fundamentally environmental and planetary. It may be something which gives Central Asians a greater purchase on the continuity of their region and access (or recovered access) to pre-national and pre-colonial values. These values may be important for real Independence, collaboration and survival in an apparently disintegrating world. It could be argued that to have cultural roots in nomadism is peculiarly fortuitous in an era of migration and emigration. Certainly the possibility of reaching backwards to a point of origination to use this as a departure-point for moving forwards on a different path to a different destination is not given to every region of the world at present.

Central Asia’s cultural workers and artists will need to play a significant role in leading this change.

Vladislav Sludskiy –

“it’s also a social responsibility, and a matter of civil society, to go back in time, and really make it clear, - that’s what some artists do. Kazakh ornaments have their own patterns and many, many symbols that we see now have nothing to do with those original patterns, - it’s some kind of post-modernistic, chaotic, element that sometime someone came up with, but it’s nothing to do with what was there at the time. The more stories we know the more we can deconstruct, and put it back to the origins, and, even better, find its place in the contemporary context. I think that’s another goal and people are doing it.”

f) The People and The Artists

So what is, or can be, the role of the artist in Central Asia? Here is a selection of responses to this question voiced by various interviewees,-

Katipa –

“I think this is a very special role, - you have to be very conscious with your forces, so if you make the world better you will get it. – I will make it.”

Vladislav Sludskiy –

“I see a lot of people who are speaking up, social activists, but I think artists are wise enough to have those multiple roles, and it is something that the world is forgetting – ...only the artist is this weird person who can be interested in all the industries, who can

switch topics and themes, and be the social glue that brings the whole picture together, because they are not narrow-minded, they can observe and explore and even the formation of the problematics or the resolution of the issue is half-way through, and artists are very good at noticing things. – then society can decide if it wants to implement the change or it doesn't."

An Arts Manager,-

"– if we talk about the educational factor the influence is very much limited, - it's a question of the basics, the economics, the people are striving in their own lives, they would like to earn more, they have children, they would like to eat, they need to get more earnings,...why are they coming to Almaty? They are coming here to earn, but these are the people who need to be involved in these different projects where we show the diversity..."

Ayjibek from SHTAB – *"The Government should support artists, but our government now they have other problems. Artists they are now self-sponsored, and they are poor. If they are artists they disappear very fast because they don't know how to live. People who are artists, -they are not artists most of the time, they have other jobs, and this artistic job, it's like a hobby, maybe, but it's not their main thing, where they can get money."*

For Dinvara Dultaeva, publisher and P.R. consultant, based in Tashkent and speaking from the perspective of Uzbekistan's thriving cultural scene, the arts are already doing positive work in a regenerating Central Asia. She tells me about the abundant energy present in the country's film and music industries and how national industries like automotive and textile manufacture are doing well, - also how the country is benefiting from an open attitude to tourism with a yearly increase in visitor numbers, which should increase further with a liberalization of the visa system. She admits that the lack of an art market (as elsewhere in the Central Asian republics) hinders the economic benefits which can accrue from cultural development, but points out that, unlike in the Soviet period when sustainability was not considered, there is now a long-term view of how this can happen.

How much of this development is unique to Central Asia? How much will be affected by its geopolitics? Although this is perhaps the key question pertinent to the proposition on which this research is based I can only here suggest a number of areas where further investigation and research may make things clearer.

- There is a need to map cultural development across the whole region. My instinct is that development is stronger under more liberal regimes and in the other republics more a function of state control.

- A number of systematic studies might be undertaken to compare Western cultural manifestations like Installations, Live Art, Public Art, Site-specific work, with particular developments of the same forms in Central Asia to identify their Central Asian character. What art-work I have seen across the region has had a particular and peculiar quality adapted to local and national needs which makes it distinctly interesting.

- I do not believe that audience research has reached a sophisticated enough level in the region to establish what demographics derive benefit from arts spending and activity. I believe that new audiences and awarenesses are growing across much of the region.

- There would be some value in undertaking research into governmental attitudes to cultural development across the region. It seems to me that inter-republic contact is too limited in scope at present and too pre-occupied with image-building.

If I were to venture one personal observation about the uniqueness of the artist and their role in Central Asia it would be that despite years of subjection a special kind of impulse to free expression never disappeared and that it is now beginning to emerge in cultural creations of distinctive modernity, - a new kind of “modernism with original character”, perhaps.

5. What I did?

Given the relatively short time I would spend in individual countries my own work as an artist in Central Asia was never going to be of this order, yet I did lead the Live Art element in ARTBAT’s Algabaz base, and I did collaborate with photographers, all Asian-based, to create recorded interventions in local life in various settlements in all of the five Central Asian republics. I learned much about local sensibilities and aesthetics and, in my transgender mode, as a gender-artist, I connected with a number of local people for whom transgender appearance was not a common experience in city life. From this I could draw a number of provisional conclusions about the relationship the artist might have with the wider populace in Central Asia.

As is often the case with gender experimentalism the public’s tolerance of a kind of magic realism is greater than many would anticipate. Whereas the photographers I worked with in liberally-inclined Kyrgyzstan were wary of taking pictures of a transgender artist in public spaces, the older photographer in Ashgabat, the capital of famously suppressive Turkmenistan, stepped boldly out and captured many shots with sometimes bemused but mainly accepting individuals in a busy public market and various tourist spots. I have noted it as a truth in many parts of the world that strangeness and oddity are welcome and a source of curiosity and admiration. When I led the work in ARTBAT’s day in Algabaz it was in full transgender mode and I experienced a great deal of co-operation and encountered much pleasure in participation on the part of residents of all generations. This “difference” can also be a rallying-point for independent-minded creatives in local communities.

I wonder if there is a further dimension of tolerance in Central Asia which derives from the often extreme diversity of ethnic and cultural identities prevailing across much of the region. I sense also that public spaces are now seen as more negotiable and debateable areas. The Soviet period is still, as I have suggested above, a more powerful influence on social attitudes than might be expected but in many ways it has been only an interlude in a long, deep history of shifting powers and cultural adaptation. Are the roots of this perpetual instability deep enough to anchor a wider tolerance in this majority of the population?

Gender experimentation in the Central Asian region, and transgender in particular, has almost no public profile at all and little in the semi-underground of the counter-culture. As an artist myself in Central Asia I conformed to the “alternatives” which I described above as “Subversive”, “Urban Space as a medium for debate and change”, and, “consciousness-raising”. I was also offering collaboration to the photographers I encountered, and was delighted by how ready each was to work with my version of the “unconventional”. My only regret may be that I did not have the opportunity to make more public in the region the images which I had created there. That dimension of my work, as was the case in Southern China, should be the focus of any further projects and research I carry out in the Central Asian region.