

# MANKURTISM, MONUMENTS AND MARKETING: IDENTITY AND POWER IN POST-SOVIET CONTEMPORARY ART OF CENTRAL ASIA

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# MANKURTISM, MONUMENTS AND MARKETING: IDENTITY AND POWER IN POST-SOVIET CONTEMPORARY ART OF CENTRAL ASIA

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## ABSTRACT

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The following article will cover three contemporary notions of identity and power in Central Asia through the use of post-Soviet contemporary art studies. Case studies will consist of topical artworks on the thematics of *mankurtism*, monuments and marketing within post-Soviet Central Asia. The themes transition from what has been seen as an erasure of long-standing cultural tradition, language and lifestyle by Soviet colonisation, known as *mankurtization* in Chingiz Aitmatov's literary language. After which, crucial in the creation of memory, fostering allegiance and modern credence has been the indoctrination of new identities. Based on nation-building while still under the Soviets, propagandising through monuments has been an example of this. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, borders were drawn for the Central Asian Independents. Nation-building was already complete, having begun under the Soviets. What came next was a repurposing of existing tools by nation-branders left behind by the Soviets and the marketing of new identities both internally and internationally. The practice of nation-branding emerged in the mid 1990s, shortly after Central Asia's independence. Marketing of Central Asia was aimed at building internal and international identities which have been the product of public relations campaigns, as well as government and the elites' exercise in power. Despite the recent shared history of the region, post-independence growth has been uneven, due to the influence of geopolitics and the adoption of international models of state governance. My arguments will stem from the examination of several artist practices from different Central Asian countries coupled with their current political discourse. My aim is to show that complete identity erasure and reconstruction has not happened, but rather there has been a selective forgetting and privileging by the new elites in an attempt to solidify the importance of one's standing on an international platform.

## INTRODUCTION

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He had become a mankurt, or slave, who could not remember his past life.

– Chingiz Aitmatov<sup>1</sup>

Yet the permanence promised by a monument in stone is always built on quicksand. Some monuments are joyously toppled at times of social upheaval, others preserve memory in its most ossified form, either as myth or as cliché.

– Andreas Huyssen<sup>2</sup>

Personalities are reincarnated throughout Central Asian state institutions – from mythic to real, and ancient to contemporary. A vividly drawn historical persona, usually a male warrior, reinforces notions about the “important history” of the Central Asian peoples. Abylaikhan in Kazakhstan, Manas in Kyrgyzstan, Amir Timur in Uzbekistan, Ismail Samani in Tajikistan, and Turkmenbashi in Turkmenistan – all represent masculinities within national ideologies reinforced by Central Asian political elites. Like the “golden ages” of national prosperity and the “glory of the homeland” now found in every Central Asian presidential speech, the legends of a nation’s “great sons” depict qualities and virtues of a genuine national hero.

– Dr. Erica Marat<sup>3</sup>

The discourse surrounding thematics of identity and power in the contemporary art of Central Asia developed as a symbiotic relationship with the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. It was at this juncture that the individual nations of this region were once again opened to the rest of the world and began to position themselves internationally, ideologically and economically, outside the colonial grasp of the Soviets as they had been in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The post-Soviet Central Asian countries developed independently, at different rates. The region I will be discussing consists of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Depending on the circumstances being discussed, Afghanistan and Mongolia can be included under the term Central Asia. For my purposes I will focus on the former five nations and in particular, Kazakhstan.

The case studies presented will discuss aspects of post-Soviet contemporary Central Asian identity and power politics. I will look at themes of mankurtism through *Global Society* (2013) and *Markurt 1 (2011-2012)* by Gulnur Mukazhanova (KZ); monuments through *Family Album* (1978-2009) by Erbossyn Meldibekov (KZ) and marketing through ‘Untitled’ from the *Bus Stops* series by Jamshed Kholikov (TJ), *Racing* (2007) by Muratbek Djumaliev (KG) and Gulnara Kasmalieva (KG) and *Paradise Landscape* (2004-2005) by Alexander Ugay (KZ). The artworks selected will progress through a discussion on identity erasure as introduced in the literature of Chingiz Aitmatov who wrote about mankurtism as the Russification of the non-Russian elite within Central Asia. From erasure to a reconstruction of national identity, monuments in Central Asia were widely used under the Soviets, and the tradition has been kept alive under the new regimes. It was under the Soviets that nation building began, Dr.

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<sup>1</sup> Aitmatov, Chingiz. *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years*, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, p. 249.

<sup>3</sup> Marat, *National Ideology and State-Building in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan*, p. 25-26.

Erica Marat states, “The impact of Soviet nation-building in the 1920s-1950s is visible in Central Asian national border delimitations, the structure of local languages, and even in material and visual cultural artifacts.”<sup>4</sup> The new leadership adopted the Soviet strategy of nation-building with the use of public national displays of parades and monuments. Currently, nation-branding is taking place as a way of differentiating the Stans’ historical and cultural legacies. The direction under the Soviets was very forward-looking, the future being of prime importance. Once Central Asia became independent, they went from communism to nationalism and then began looking into their ancient pasts in order to contextualise themselves within an international trajectory with national representation.

The development of what is known within art history as contemporary art begins post World War II within the West. Central Asia, at the time, was being introduced to Socialist Realism. Painting was not a traditional art form in the steppes; utilitarian craft was more commonplace, including decorative tapestries, carpets, ceramics and jewellery. It was from the time of Soviet colonialism and the propagandist-enforced school of Socialist Realism that conceptual art was beginning to be made in secret. Prior to 1991, there was no patronage for the arts aside from all that was government-sponsored. In fact, patronage remains very low for contemporary art in the present day. Under Soviet rule, creating works outside of Soviet ideology would have been seen as a critical stance; as Dr. Aliya de Tiesenhausen explains, “The year 1934 marks the establishment of Socialist Realism as the official Soviet style and therefore the only acceptable style not only in which to write but, crucially, in which to create art.”<sup>5</sup> The 1920-50s and 1970-80s were periods of influence by the Russian School, while the 1960s and 1990s are described by art historian Valeria Ibraeva, as generating new ideas brought on by fissures in the iron curtain, which allowed glimpses of something beyond the then Soviet condition.<sup>6</sup> The breakdown of the Soviet Union in the mid 1980s led to the first exhibition of unofficial art “Perekrestok” (1988). It was with independence that artists could begin to examine the current state of events.

## MANKURTISM

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The mankurt did not know who he had been, whence and from what tribe he had come, did not know his name, could not remember his childhood, father or mother—in short, he could not recognize himself as a human being. Deprived of any understanding of his own ego, the mankurt was, from his master’s point of view, possessed of a whole range of advantages. He was the equivalent of a dumb animal and therefore absolutely obedient and safe.

– Chingiz Aitmatov<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Tiesenhausen, “Socialist Realist Orientalism? Depictions of Soviet Central Asia, 1930s -1950s”, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Ibraeva, *Self-Identity: Futurological Prognosis*, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Aitmatov, *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years*, p. 26.

...mastering Russian was more than just a survival tool; it also became a source of personal and collective empowerment and an emblem of becoming 'cultured' and 'civilized'.

– Bhavna Dave<sup>8</sup>

It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.

– Homi K. Bhabha<sup>9</sup>



Mankurtism is a term deriving from an ancient Turkish legend, which appears in *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* (1980) by Kyrgyz author Chingiz Aitmatov (1928-2008). He writes the tale of one man's journey to bury his long-time friend in a traditional manner, whilst interweaving his personal narrative with societal and cultural observations, which are themselves interlaced with folklore, custom and science fiction. Aitmatov's Asiatic steppe is transformed into a metaphor for the loss of culture and one's place in a newly formed society. The running theme of the mankurt is a mythical reference that stems from the legend of tribes torturing their enslaved captives by covering a victim's shaved head with camel skin. As the camel skin would dry in the heat of the desert steppe, it would become tighter and tighter around the captive's head resulting in a slow and painful death. Those that managed to survive were said to have suffered complete memory loss, ceasing to be rebellious, but passive and without any knowledge of who they were and from where they had come.

<sup>8</sup> Dave, *Kazakhstan: Ethnicity, Language and Power*, p. 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Bhabha, "Homi K. Bhabha on 'hybridity' and 'moving beyond'", p. 1111.

<sup>10</sup> Gulnur Mukazhanova, *Global Society* (2013), photographs, Courtesy IADA

<sup>11</sup> Gulnur Mukazhanova, *Mankurt 1* (2011-2012), photograph, Courtesy IADA

In contemporary Central Asia, the term *mankurt* can be applied to the inhabitants of those post-Soviet countries that have succumbed to either the inability to part ways with their old Soviet master, as Aitmatov described, “The *mankurt*, like a dog, only recognized his masters”<sup>12</sup>, or have become enslaved to a new globalised society in which they’ve substituted tradition for modernisation causing loss of heritage, culture and values. It is a Russification of the non-Russian elites from the region. The works of the artists that will serve as my study on the topic of *mankurtism* in post-Soviet Central Asia come from Kazakhstan. Gulnur Mukazhanova was born in 1984, only seven years before Kazakhstan became independent on 16 December 1991 and four years after Chingiz Aitmatov wrote his novel. This post-independence period was one of great upheaval in Kazakhstan because of the region’s close geopolitical, economic, social and linguistic ties with Russia. Kazakhstan’s history was particularly prone to its people succumbing to *mankurtism*. Language policy became one of the main points of discussion in post-independent Kazakhstan. Kazakhstanis yearned to assimilate into the Soviet order and became very proficient in the use of Russian. The erasure of the Kazakh language, paired with the 1920s-1930s collectivisation drive under Stalin and the consolidation of individual landholdings, destroyed the nomadic pastoral lifestyle, along with a significant portion of the nomadic population. As language and lifestyle were transformed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, it was in the post-Soviet era that *mankurtism* became stigmatised, following a resurgence of language reclamation. Language, at this time, became an asset and was utilized by the Kazakh population as a means of power:

The Kazakh language proponents expediently argued that the loss of the native language, or *mankurtisasiia*, of their brethren was reversible. The Kazakh language came to be seen as a powerful symbolic resource because only one in a hundred Slavs could claim any proficiency.<sup>13</sup>

President Nurlisultan Nazerbayev made it each Kazakh citizen’s duty to learn Kazakh, which proved challenging because of the wide use of Russian as the lingua franca within the education, job and government sectors. Kazakh was named as the state language in Article 7 of the Kazakhstani Constitution, and within that, Sub-article 7.2 communicated that, “in state institutions and local self-administrative bodies the Russian language shall be officially used on equal grounds along with the Kazak language.”<sup>14</sup> Language proves to be a source of power concludes Paige Brewer after investigating the relationship of power and language by linguist Pierre Bourdieu in her thesis, going on to say: “In this environment, a certain language provides access to power structures, such as education, the political system, and greater job opportunities. A less powerful language is associated with less powerful structures, such as domestic, rural, and uneducated life.”<sup>15</sup> The Kazakh identity becomes bipolar, needing to rely heavily on globalisation, implementing old Soviet strategies and the use of Russian language to progress, but at odds with the ways of Communism which was very forward-looking and futuristic. Now, in contrast, the Central Asian states must look into their past in order to build up their identities and communities.

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<sup>12</sup> Aitmatov, *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years*, p. 126.

<sup>13</sup> Dave, *Kazakhstan: Ethnicity, Language and Power*, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> “Официальный сайт Парламента Республики Казахстан”, Article 7.

<sup>15</sup> Brewer, “The Mankurt Remembers”, p. 4.

The fear or accusation of mankurtization becomes a source of national identity formation. The possibility of forgetting triggers the desire to build identity in public spaces through monuments, language, tradition and ethnicity. One of the topics present in Gulnur Mukazhanova's body of work is the recurring topic of identity. This is certainly not unique to her, as the topic is present in the works of many artists working in post-independent Central Asia. We begin with an image from the series titled, *Mankurts in the Megapolis* (2013), *Mankurt 1* (2011-2012), in which a Central Asian woman with dark hair covering her face stands atop a high-rise with a cosmopolitan city for a backdrop. She's wearing a white felt garment, felt being a traditional material used in Kazakhstan. The dress represents a traditional Kazakh wedding garment and the minaret-like feature above her head is representative of a headdress, which is now replaced by modern city architecture. Mukazhanova addresses loss using the notion of a mankurt, in which one becomes enslaved to one's master. Interestingly, the city that is photographed is that of Berlin, the artist's new place of residence. The *Global Society* (2013) series juxtaposes three distinct elements: the person, the mask and the setting, with each of these becoming foreground and background simultaneously. The settings in this series are not of Berlin, but rather of Mukazhanova's native Kazakhstan and there are also elements of trade in a global economy. The covering and uncovering of the face is an almost paradox between mankurtization and self-mankurtization. Having something put upon you by a regime versus adopting it yourself, a type of self-colonisation. At this point in the Central Asian paradox, the independent nations are no longer under Soviet rule, but must now appropriate globalised values and codes of conduct in order to move forward, subjecting traditions to an even higher rate of dissolution. As Alexander Kiossev writes, "the birth of these nations is connected with a very specific symbolic economy. It seems that the self-colonising cultures import alien values and civilization models by themselves and that they lovingly colonise their own authenticity through these foreign models."<sup>16</sup> The adoption of foreign values does not have to culminate in self-colonisation but rather can be a foundation of building one's own structures. It becomes a balancing act between the authoritarian regime of Nazarbayev, who has been the sole president of independent Kazakhstan since 1991, preserving and articulating a cohesive past for nation branding, and creating new opportunities based on geopolitics and natural reserves.

As a Kazakh woman and artist, Gulnur Mukazhanova, adopts a western contemporary visual language, working within the West whilst discussing post-Soviet social issues. Central Asian artists, especially those working within a conceptual contemporary art discourse, struggle to find patronage within their respective countries. There are limited galleries, museums and collectors presenting and collecting contemporary works and government support is also limited. Most successful in the region is Kazakhstan, but - with only few museum and galleries - interest is developing slowly. The height of experimentation within the contemporary arts of Kazakhstan came after independence, when artists felt free to experiment without the confines of creating for the state. In 1998, George Soros founded the Soros Contemporary Centre for Arts (SCCA-Almaty), a place where the promotion of contemporary art within a local setting could be achieved, and with Valeria Ibraeva as its head director it was a success. This was an NGO and NFP initiative that served as a

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<sup>16</sup> Kiossev, "Notes on Self-Colonizing Cultures", p. 114.



community centre, based on organic, rapid, non-traditional growth of the arts; all the major actors within Kazakhstan were participating. In 2010, the organisation closed and along with it the excitement of the '90s and early 2000s. There hasn't been anything of the kind to replace the former organisation since. However, international interest grew again around 2005 with the Venice Biennial creating a pavilion for Central Asian arts. As international interest outpaced home interest for contemporary artists, it became easier to work outside Central Asia, making it inevitable that forgetting one's past and adopting an alien way of working became the current paradox of the region.

## MONUMENTS

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Currently, cultural memory is skilfully used as a tool for building national identity.

– Elena Paskaleva<sup>17</sup>

Monuments are applied toward the constant need to reassert claims to territory, resources, and positionality within the local and global arena.

– Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez<sup>18</sup>

A society's memory is negotiated in the social body's beliefs and values, rituals and institutions, and in the case of modern societies in particular, it is shaped by such public sites of memory as the museum, the memorial, the monument.

– Andreas Huyssen<sup>19</sup>

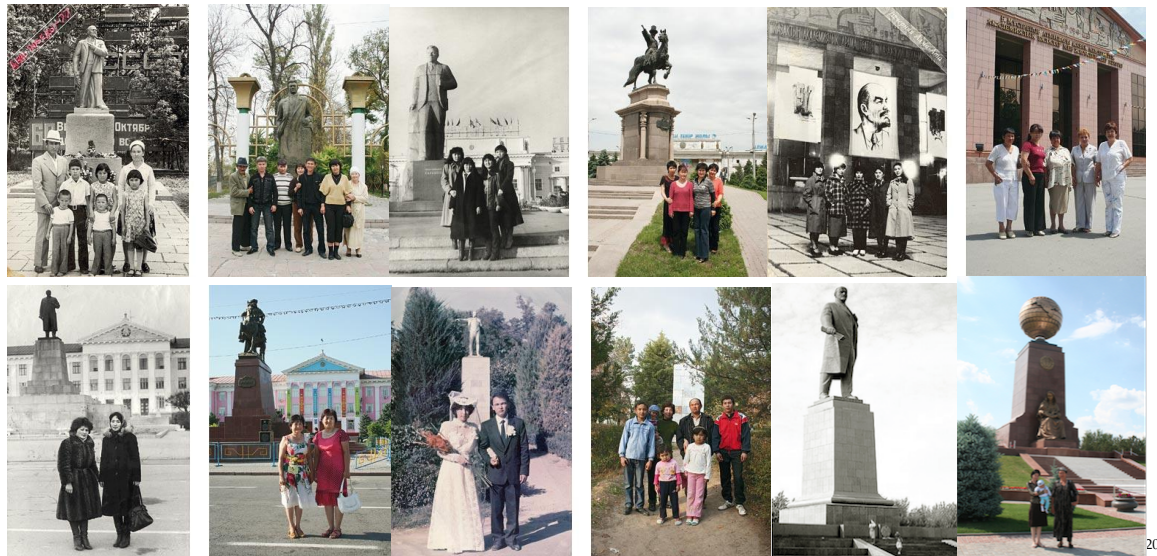
The monument, a physically dominant public sculptural object, serves to commemorate a great hero or significant event, one that represents important history, which is not be forgotten in the present and the future. The monument lays claim to territory, commemorating and performing the attempted homogenisation of cultural identity from past to present. Its role is twofold: to be didactic and to create a uniform history. As carriers of historical markers and political agendas, monuments also become spaces of questioning through occupation, protest, defacement and artistic appropriation. Each monument, whether in disrepair or newly erected, protrudes from the ground and can hardly be avoided. The etymology of the word monument is based in the Latin *monere*, which means "to warn" or "to remind". It is through their representative nature as a vehicle of power that they become platforms for gatherings and the perpetuation of state-sponsored agendas, markers of time, hegemonic cultivators of solidarity and nationness. They reassert and construct history and identity, whilst positioning both internal and external attitudes towards the current society. It is precisely this construction of the singularity of nationness and identity that Erbossyn Meldibekov of Kazakhstan is reacting to, as he takes heed of the warnings that each newly erected monument presents.

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<sup>17</sup> Paskaleva, "Memory and commemoration in Central Asia", p. 30.

<sup>18</sup> Legaspi-Ramirez, "The Monument."

<sup>19</sup> Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, p. 249.



In Central Asia, it is not only the advance of newly-masked agendas that are implemented under the guise of democracy. It is also the voracity with which monuments materialise and are publicly displayed, changing many times throughout a short historical span. The monuments being replaced within post-Soviet landscapes are those of Soviet heroes – Lenin and Stalin. Their replacement comes from an anthropological excavation of so-called indigenous heroes, writers, poets, musicians and present heads of state. This becomes a cultural phenomenon of revival, restoration and reclamation of what has been erased through Soviet occupation. The monuments across Central Asia are numerous: the 97 metre high Bayterek monument (KZ) that embodies the legend in which a mythical bird Samruk laid a golden egg containing secrets; the Arch of Neutrality (TK) erected to celebrate the Turkmenbashi's 1998 policy of neutrality; statues of Lenin and the tiny figure on a very large Central Asian platform surrounded by fountains (TK); commemoration monuments to the Uzbeks who died in WWII (Karimov built similar ones, such at the Crying Mother Monument near most city centres); a 1928 truck on a plinth below a hydroelectric dam commemorates the opening of the Pamir Highway (TJ); a statue of Ismoil Somoni (TJ). The 10<sup>th</sup>-century founder of the Samanid dynasty; and the many monuments to Timur and especially the Gur-e Amir (UZ). One commemorative site in particular, the Central Park in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, has witnessed ten transformations in the past 100 years.

It is especially difficult within the post-Soviet states to move forward, as the Communist mentality was relatively forward-looking and modern. How can one go 'beyond' if one has already been in the future all this time? Boris Groys gives an account of why a post-Communist state must travel back in time:

...but the Communist community was in many ways more radically modern in its rejection of the past than the countries of the West. And this community was closed not because of the stability of its traditions but because of the radicalism of its projects. And that means: the post-Communist subject travels the same route as described in the dominating discourse of cultural studies—but he or she travels this

<sup>20</sup> Erbossyn Meldibekov, *Family Album Series* (1978-2009), Digital Photographs, © Photos: Yerbossyn Meldibekov & Nurbossyn Oris

route in the opposite direction, not from the past to the future, but from the future to the past; from the end of history, from post historical, post apocalyptic time, back to historical time. Post-Communist life is life lived backward, a movement against the flow of time.<sup>21</sup>

As it begins to have universal and homogenising effects, however, globalisation reproduces a single ideological narrative within the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With the proliferation of virtual traffic and trading among economies newly incorporated into the free market, there is a new engagement and consumption of cultures. In order for culture to be consumed, it must first be produced and disseminated. This is why the post-Communist must travel back into the past because of an external demand for representation, which lies in the time before Sovietisation. It is a fallacy to think that the nation is in *statu nascendi*, a state of being born, for it is not something new that has taken place within Central Asia, but in fact, a mutation.

In the Soviet Union, the monument was an object of ritual, with newly married couples partaking in the tradition of being photographed in front of the local Lenin memorial. All across the vast USSR, family photographs professing loyalty were taken in front of these memorials. The Lenin memorials have since been replaced, but a deeply rooted ritual remains alive with the new wave of nation building. Valeria Ibraeva, the Director of the now closed SCCA-Almaty states, "The Soviet Union is long gone and the elemental force of post-Communist iconoclasm has swept away countless Lenin memorials, but the tradition of paying homage to some symbol of state power remains...."<sup>22</sup> Erbossyn Meldibekov, in collaboration with his brother Nurossyn Oris, created *Family Album* (2007-2009). This series of discovered photographs and newly produced digital prints, juxtaposes family and friends' photographs from years past, alongside current re-stagings of the same scenes. The subject is asked to re-perform the ritual aspect of paying homage to the head of power. We can look at the relationship between the two as a stage, asking, who are the actors? What is the backdrop? What happens in the moment of a reversal? As the actors become the constant static entity whilst the stage becomes the active agent in a performance of power. What is there to be said of civic volition when it is the body politic that has become the platform for ideological dissemination through the monumental? For Meldibekov, this ritualistic act between man and monument, with the monument as a symbol of power, becomes a topic of inquiry as he captures the re-masking of the political arena. *Family Album* opens several discussions about the role of the monument within society: a post-Soviet return to the past; the dynamics of the individual in relation to new national ideologies; and the irony found in the repetitious nature of new politics that only offer a re-masking of old political structures. Meldibekov's inspiration for examining the topic further began after discovering that Dzhambul, formerly in South Kazakhstan, had been renamed six times in the preceding 120 years. At the time known as Taraz, it was formerly known as Jambyl or Zhambyl until 1997, Dzhambul until 1993, Mirzoyan until 1938, Aulie-Ata until 1936 and Talas until 1856. *Family album* offers an opportunity to rediscover the site at which the memorial to Lenin once stood in Dzhambul, now replaced with an equestrian statue of a local hero, Bajdibek-batyra (n.d.). By placing the two images side by side, comparison is made between the original from 1978

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<sup>21</sup> Groys, *Art Power*, p. 155.

<sup>22</sup> Ibraeva, "Yerbossyn Meldebekov & Nurbossyn Oris: Family Album in 1989-2009: Turbulent World – Telling Time."

and a modern-day restaging taken in 2009. These archival discoveries reveal the repetitive nature with which individuals ritually approach the memorial as an idea, almost unaware or uninterested in the fact that they stand for conflicting ideas.

In Meldibekov's opinion:

... in the conditions of post- Soviet nationalism, all our numerous new heroes are very monotonous: they are heroes of the past, invoked to confirm the historical credibility of our new governmental forms. But since nobody knows what these heroes looked like, there is a mushrooming of ethnic characteristics.<sup>23</sup>

For Meldibekov, each of these representations is a fabrication; as he specifically declares, "ethnicity is a story."<sup>24</sup> Boris Groys attests to the factitious nature of both Communist and capitalist ideology:

Ultimately, privatization proves to be just as much an artificial political construct as nationalization had been. The same state that had once nationalized in order to build up Communism is now privatizing in order to build up capitalism... The post-Communist state is, like its Communist predecessor, a kind of artistic installation. Hence the post-Communist situation is one that reveals the artificiality of capitalism by presenting the emergence of capitalism as a purely political project of social restructuring and not as the result of a "natural" process of economic development.<sup>25</sup>

The irony lies not only in the work of Erbossyn Meldibekov, as he captures so directly the histories around him, but also in the fact that he cannot escape the cyclical nature of things himself. When he graduated from the Department of Monumental Sculpture at the Almaty Theatre and Fine Arts Institute in 1992, the need for highly skilled monumental sculptors to be producing busts of Soviet heroes on a huge scale had passed. Today, Meldibekov does not create official monumental sculptures; however, he documents the irony of them. His practice deconstructs the Kazakh identity, one that is a constantly mutating paradox. Interestingly, in the last decade he has had the opportunity to help a friend, an official artist, create a monument of President Nazarbayev. The final cast is not bronze, but a composite of waste material and scrap metal debris.

## MARKETING

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Since 1991 all Central Asian states have created national ideologies, but only three—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan—have programmes in place to capture the attention of foreign businessmen, politicians and tourists. Following the pattern of crafting national ideologies for domestic audiences in all three states, the ruling elites have led the effort to create a unique national 'brand' identity for their country.<sup>26</sup>

– Dr. Erica Marat

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<sup>23</sup> Raza, Erbossyn Meldibekov: *The (Dis)order of Things*, p. 35.

<sup>24</sup> Raza, Erbossyn Meldibekov: *The (Dis)order of Things*, p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Groys, *Art Power*, p. 166.

<sup>26</sup> Marat, "Nation Branding in Central Asia", p. 1123.

Heritage is about selectivity and power; it is used to assert local, national and international interests.

– Tomás Skinner<sup>27</sup>

...paradox – the communist-turned-nationalist phenomenon...

– Bhavna Dave<sup>28</sup>

In the 1990s, the concept of nation-branding emerged. Countries began to synthesise and disseminate the unique features of their culture, history, people and government into a slogan or image towards both their own populace and that of the greater world. The reliance on nation-branding is to create a perception of one's own government, people and country that will attract business, tourism, and open lines of communication. Central Asian leaders began for the first time making a concerted effort to promote their countries locally and globally through spectacle, expositions, sport, publications and reclamation of long lost histories and heritage. Internal and external perceptions gained increasing importance in order to: position power at 'home', foster a sense of national identity post-independence, and create unity as a nation whilst securing a place in a globalised economy. In a post-Soviet Central Asia, power comes back to a clan-like structure, similar to that which existed prior to Soviet rule. The clans, which now rule the region, are those of the elites or families of authoritarian leaders. It is from the elite that culture is produced and marketed. Dr. Erica Marat expounds when writing of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan:

Central Asian political elites had to create and reinforce the positive image of newly acquired independence, as well as justify their hold on power. With an urge of fostering nationalism in the early 1990s, the elites produced national ideologies based on revised history without allowing any broader scholarly or policy debate. In this way, the elites became the sole producers of national ideologies whilst other public sectors, including academic circles, worked merely in a support role, not putting forth competing interpretations.<sup>29</sup>

Nation-branding efforts have worked more successfully in some states within Central Asia than others. For each, branding their countries has been the next step after independence that allows for further identity consolidation and the securing of power. In order to discuss nation-branding through globalisation, I will review the work of three artists from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan and the approaches they have taken: The *Bus Stops Series* by Jamshed Kholikov, *Racing* (2007) by Muratbek Djumaliyev and Gulnara Kasmaliyeva and *Paradise Landscape* (2004-2005) by Alexander Ugay.

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<sup>27</sup> Skinner, "Urban Heritage of the Silk Road", p. 44.

<sup>28</sup> Dave, *Kazakhstan: Ethnicity, Language and Power*, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Marat, *National Ideology and State-Building in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan*, p.29.



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Selective cultural reclamation by the Central Asian nations has been crucial to securing unique identities and creating slogans that can attract international interest within sectors such as tourism, business and international relations. Kazakhstan gave credence to its geopolitical weight to create the slogan ‘Kazakhstan: Heart of Eurasia’. It is the 9<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world, with a significant amount of natural resources, including coal and oil and it has the most political weight of the countries in the region. In 2006, when the film *Borat*, starring English comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, was released, Kazakhstan was furious over the negative publicity. Robert Saunders synthesises these feelings in his article, “Kazakhstan accused the British comedian of being the agent of foreign powers meaning harm to the country and then removed his website from Kazakhstani servers.”<sup>33</sup> The amount of free press that the country received due to the film’s popularity allowed for Kazakhstan’s nation-branding policies to be even more widely circulated, although it took massive efforts to disassociate itself from the film’s stereotypes. On the other hand, Uzbekistan has taken to promoting its culture and history around the cult of Amir Timur, a 14<sup>th</sup> century Turko-Mongol leader, and the Tajik government chose to emphasise the period of Ismaili Samani, a Persian ruler of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Uzbekistan’s most popular slogan has been ‘Uzbekistan: Crossroads of Civilizations’ and Kyrgyzstan has been mentioned in circulation as a ‘Land of Wonders’. Each country has promoted a historical figure both internally and externally and

<sup>30</sup> Alexander Ugay, *Paradise Landscape* (2004-2005), digital print on canvas. Courtesy of AhmadyArts Curatorial and Educational Platform.

<sup>31</sup> Jamshed Kholikov, ‘Untitled’ from the *Bus Stops* series (2005-2008), Photographs taken in TJ, KG, and UZ. Courtesy of AhmadyArts Curatorial and Educational Platform.

<sup>32</sup> Gulnara Kasmaliev and Muratbek Djumaliev, *Racing* (2007). C-print, 40 x 60 cm. Courtesy the artists and Laura Bulian Gallery.

<sup>33</sup> Saunders, “The Winners and Losers of ‘Nation-Branding.’”

it has been in many ways culture that has been leading the branding efforts. Laura L. Adams writes how Uzbekistan specifically used *spectacle* for national cultural production:

While artists resented the state meddling in their creative affairs, the idea of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs playing an active role in the arts was rarely questioned. Because of their desire to renew their national culture, many artists (if they did not give up their careers to earn a living in business) found themselves more invested in the new nationalist states' control of culture than they were during the Soviet period.<sup>34</sup>

To take the example of Uzbekistan: in its post-Soviet approach to national branding and dissemination of culture, it has not allowed for the creation of a western contemporary art and theory. Artists have found that a western approach to art-making has not been state supported, although individual voices have found means not only to produce works internally and internationally but also to create centres for contemporary art production in environments which still strive to keep a tight control over cultural production.

In Alexander Ugay's *Paradise Landscape* (2004-2005), the Kazakh artist of Korean descent assembles a myriad of juxtapositions for the creation of Central Asian identity and branding. The scene is filled with the promise of what post-independent Kazakhstan should expect or what is expected through following western standards of development. However, oil production, urbanisation, globalisation and the many façades of spectacle in nationalist form have not fulfilled expectations or rapid growth. Instead, images of the post-Soviet nation, which is facing numerous paradoxes, juxtapose the disparity on the local and the global level. There is an element of spectacle and performing nationness of which Laura L. Adams writes with a focus on Uzbekistan:

These mass spectacles allowed periodic, limited mobilization of society to take place within an ideological framework that appealed to both nationalist and cosmopolitans. Political elites were happy with how the tightly controlled spectacle form allowed them to shape and monitor the production of meaning and the participation of spectators in these events.<sup>35</sup>

The following set of four photographs is by Jamshed Kholikov. 'Untitled' from the *Bus Stops* series (2005-2008), covers three countries and close to 200 bus stops in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, documenting the utilitarian-turned-monumental as representation of history, ideology and tradition. Writing for the 53<sup>rd</sup> Central Asian Pavilion, Baral Madra says:

He bestows these bus stops with another function; for Kholikov they are like stops in our voyage from birth to death that gives opportunity to pause and think. They are the beginning and the end of our trips, our wasted hopes and wasted illusions and they are the stops when people ask themselves the well-known post-Soviet question: "What to do now?"<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan*, p. 155.

<sup>35</sup> Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan*, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> Madra, "CENTRAL ASIA PAVILION, 53rd VENICE BIENNALE, 'MAKING INTERSTITCHES.'"

The works encompass not only the comings and departures of those who will be travelling from these points but also the nation's shifts from scientific development, Soviet displays of allegiance and cultural motifs for the local population.

The final series of images are stills from a five-channel video installation, Gulnara Kasmalieva's and Muratbek Djumaliev's *Racing* (2007). This follows a Kyrgyz-Chinese scrap metal trade via truck. The caravans travel through the high mountains as the trade routes of the Silk Road once did. The video installation captures the voyage through a historically significant merchant route - one that has been reawakened for Kyrgyzstan because it lacks the mobility for growth due to limited funding and almost no manufacturing infrastructure. Faced with a crisis of limited possibilities in a newly post-Soviet globalised future, the Kyrgyz struggle for survival using traditional merchant routes in dilapidated Soviet trucks whilst Chinese 18-wheelers roll by, powerfully pushing on. The title indicates, as the installation videos show, that the once famous Silk Route is not intended to cause nostalgia, but rather highlight the difficulties faced by forced collectivisation resettlement under the Soviets, and the current reliance on an old trade for survival. Although not a criticism of nation-branding as seen in previous artworks detailed above, this video installation is a much more sober reality: reliance on the monumental Silk Road is the only option left after the historical disruptions of nation-building.

Nation-branding serves to precede a country by reputation with the hopes that a positive image will attract business potential, tourism, natural wonder and resources and cooperation between governments. However, in the five former Soviet Union countries of Central Asia, the current positive image of culture, energy development and trade is only a façade of the repressive governments under which they live. The five Stans do differ, with

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan being more productive in their nation-branding efforts, although they still have a long way to go.

## CONCLUSION

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Except in myth, there is no moment when cultures and identities emerge from nowhere, whole within themselves, perfectly self-sufficient, unrelated to anything outside themselves and with boundaries which secure their space from outside intrusion.

– Stuart Hall<sup>37</sup>

Moorings to the past, spatial markers of identity, and feelings of 'belonging to' or 'owning' a place are processes that can be managed to secure loyalty and assimilate people into imagined communities, as well as to evoke ideas of shared heritage that bridges nations and cultures.

– Tomás Skinner<sup>38</sup>

The profusion of investigations within Central Asia into one's own identity through the individual and through the nation has been intense post independence. It has been reflected

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<sup>37</sup> Hall and Maharaj, *Identity and Difference*, p. 36.

<sup>38</sup> Skinner, "Urban Heritage of the Silk Road", p. 44.



deeply within the contemporary art of the region. The region was not made to be artificially split along border lines that do not reflect differentiation between the countries on either side. Old heritage has been shared, along with recent history. Artists have been deconstructing their identities, while new ones are currently being formed as part of post-Soviet nation building and branding efforts. Coming from tribal-based organisations of centuries past - neither European nor Asian - Central Asia is attempting to balance its position within a set of complex contradictions including multiplicity of ethnicities, religious practices, social structures and modern day globalised desires. The artists from the former Soviet Republics are performing and exploring identities in the interstices of mutating regimes. In reaction to both soft and hard power plays, artists have been able to document changes with a critical perspective that is not often heard from within their respective homelands, all the while using international interest to their advantage in order to have their voices heard.

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Kasia works across all three Frieze Art Fairs, in London and New York, as an Exhibitor Data Coordinator, while also pursuing a PhD. She is in the second year of her MPhil/PhD at SOAS, University of London with a working title of *Contested Convention? Contemporary Art & Politics from post-Soviet Central Asia*. It is the shifting of border lines and relationships with history and place that drives her research forward to examine how we reflect on our current changing climate through contemporary art.