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

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ABSTRACT

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

1. Introduction

In the late 1980s and 1990s contemporary artists became the new active cultural force in post-Soviet Central Asia. By the mid-1990s the contemporary art scene boomed and became the new public sphere for discussions and creative dissent against the dominant state policies and projects in nation-building and cultural politics. Art as it “has increasingly become part of cultural commentary and of political discourse, involving a reflexive critique of the artist’s own society” (Morphy & Perkins, 2006, p. 11) became the theme of exploration but of the very little academic
Nauruzbayeva,
Most of my interviews with contemporary artists in Central Asia were as well as Bekboytayev’s installation was part of the exhibition “On Love and Other Teachers” (http://www.buro247.kz/culture/art/v-ramkah-artbat-fest-okrylas-vystavka-on-love-and-other-teachers.html), which featured contemporary artists in Astana, Almaty, and Bishkek. In this article, I focus on three themes that I come across in most works of contemporary artists in Central Asia: 

1. Contemporary art in Central Asia is in a perplexed situation where local artists remain the avant-gardists but there is very little the state does to support this movement. Despite the vibrant civic culture many artists produce in Almaty, Bishkek, Tashkent, Dushanbe and Astana, they still lack an institutionalized network of communication or even a museum of contemporary art where many of their works can be gathered and displayed. The new National Museum in Astana, in that sense is the first “hybrid” space where local artists remain the avant-gardists but there is very little the state does to support this movement.

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

Contemporary art in Central Asia is in a perplexed situation where local artists remain the avant-gardists but there is very little the state does to support this movement. Despite the vibrant civic culture many artists produce in Almaty, Bishkek, Tashkent, Dushanbe and Astana, they still lack an institutionalized network of communication or even a museum of contemporary art where many of their works can be gathered and displayed. The new National Museum in Astana, in that sense is the first “hybrid” space where local artists remain the avant-gardists but there is very little the state does to support this movement.
This double position of “underground” activists at home and celebrated indigenous artists abroad leaves many artists and their works less visible to academia. However, it is important to consider this booming field and the alternative discourses it is able to produce. Our understanding and engagement with contemporary and public art in the region can shed more light onto the processes of cultural and socio-political discussions on the ground; it would allow to step away from the state-centric perspective and focus on the production of creative dissent instead. It is too often considered that the “state” category in the region has an omnipresent and almost personalised role in both controlling the power field but also controlling the public sphere. Some recent works shift our attention more to the actor-based approach where elites are seen the main “builders” of the regimes that then construct institutional nature of states. What is missed in these discussions on many occasions is the perspective from the active grassroots activists or creative dissent. I do not claim that all or majority of contemporary artists in Central Asia produce political or oppositional art. What I attempt to demonstrate is that contemporary artists take an active role in shaping an alternative agenda to the political propaganda and ideology. Because the contemporary art movement is so strong in this region the artists are able to produce lasting effects and influence the political and societal collective decision-making and collective perceptions. They are also able to engage in the production of the new symbolic language.

What is more important then is to consider how different groups of cultural and political as well as cultural underground nature engage in discussions, criticisms and exchange of discourses. Laura Adams (2010) has demonstrated how cultural and political elites engage in the production of mass spectacles as new ways of national identity building and propaganda of the state, other authors focused on the power of political elites (Adams & Rustemova, 2009; Cummings, 2005, 2006; Kudaibergenova, 2016c; Schatz & Maltseva, 2012; Suny, 1999). However, the field still lacks a greater discussion on contemporary artistic production in the region. In this article, I attempt to initiate one of the discussions on how contemporary art engages with heritage and how contemporary artists position themselves in the power dimensions of state ideology, state history and state heritage. In the next section, I discuss the emergence of spatiality of Central Asia as a region and contemporary Central Asian art as a field; and then I use the examples of three themes discussed by the artists – imagined geography, routes and roads, and mobility to analyse their interventions into the political and cultural discourse dictated by their respective political regimes.

2. Where is Central Asia?

The understanding of regional locality and, moreover, of regional art and cultural production poses important questions, namely, What is Central Asia and Where is Central Asia? “Central Asia” is a multi-layered jigsaw that appears as a fairly simple and well-defined but in reality as a very complex yet very exciting “lively space”. This is the space where borders melt and ethnicities overlap and where creative processes and networks of people will offer perspectives in the study of social and cultural reality. But what is at play when we imagine and research “the region”? And what are other ways in which academic discussions and studies of Central Asia can reveal the cultural debates, debates on heritage and identity on the ground? Are in fact these identities as fragmented?

Place and space in Central Asia as elsewhere is defined as a unique local production, regardless of the fact that “the local uniqueness” is already a product of wider contacts because “the local is always already a product in part of ‘global forces’ where the global is “the world beyond the place itself” (Massey, 1995, p. 183). So the way the Silk Road symbol is specifically tied up to one locality in Central Asia – by the forces of the museum directors in Tashkent or the numerous committees across three different ministries in Kazakhstan or elsewhere, is only imaginable to the point of that locality of the museum or ministerial committee. In the reality the place is a lot more complex and disruptive than that. Of course the national imagination process persists to the point until people start believing in the fact that the main route of the Silk Road indeed passed only through the main cities within one borderland and not twenty of the contemporary state territories across different geographies and continents. The way geography becomes rigid in political imagination of the Silk Road is particularly intriguing as the concept of the Silk Road and mobility across its routes was never singular, rigid, or fixed in time and space as many nation-builders are trying to portray it.

The spatiality and geographical placing of the region, however, play an important role in defining its regional identity. Routes, geography, terrain and landscapes all constitute the “uniqueness” of what Central Asia and Central Asians represent. What is more important for the artistic production and knowledge that contemporary artists in Central Asia rarely accept the political and historical borders as a fixed given. For many of the artists, borders became a lived experience and a frequent encounter since artists from different Central Asian cities and countries tend to travel to other states within the region for the few yet still available artistic events and festivals. The greatest flow of art and cultural exchange goes between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. First two countries already became the main spaces for contemporary art development in the region and also produce the greatest number of artists, initiatives, independent galleries and festivals; Uzbekistan hosts the only art biennale in Central Asia. The development of contemporary art scene in Tajikistan is underway and there were many interesting initiatives and festivals in the past but many local artists still describe this development as “poor” (see Kuziev, 2014, for example). So the border encounter and state territoriality in this region is seen by many artists whom I interviewed as “imagined” and “constructed” (see also Reeves, 2014).

These discussions about the importance of spatiality occupy many non-European artists who have to comply with the imaginable and divided grid of political geography:

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3 Author’s interview with Saule Dyussenbina, contemporary artist from Kazakhstan, June, while crossing the border between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan on our way to Bishkek and Naryn.
The challenge begins with “Asia” itself. As a term, it is more of a discursive concept than a homogeneous physical, social or even cultural entity. It is an idea more than a location. (Chiu & Genocchio, 2010, p. 10)

In Central Asia too, these questions had occupied not only politicians who engaged in a number of attempts to create a unified Central Asian regional bloc in the past (Allison, 2008; Bohr, 2004) but also practitioners of art – curators, artists themselves, and art critics. “Central Asia” persisted to be united in the artistic realm of its representations at the Venetian Biennale and even at home, during exhibitions and events in Bishkek, Almaty, Astana, Tashkent, Dushanbe, and beyond. Since the first Central Asian Pavilion at the Venetian Biennale in 2005 – “Central Asia” and its art has been “packed” and crumbled into a single entity as indigenous and unknown, non-European art but “it is crucial that in the present moment we pose investigative questions in relation to both the region as a whole and each separate country?” (Abykayeva-Tiesenhausen, 2016, p. 2).

What politicians view as a political map and geopolitical chess board or terrain of power relations, borders and regional dimensions, the artists perceive as a livelihood of cultures, diverse, colourful experiences and imagination. Every artist has his or her own perspective and viewpoint on their own cultural production and on the object or theme they engage with. If the first generation of Central Asian artists still focused on the finding of “authentic” national past and identity (see Kudaibergenova, 2016a, 2016b), they also engaged in the processes of re-conceptualising it, criticising it and providing new frameworks of thinking and imagin-“nation.”

In this process of constant re-conceptualisation, artists also become the creative collectors and archivists of what Central Asia presents to the foreigners who may not know anything about contemporary Central Asian culture and society. As the art curator David Elliot writes that, in the early 1980s, during his first encounters with the post-Soviet space he did not know anything about Central Asia apart from “its archaeological and geographical significance for the Silk Road.” However, in his “frame of reference, Central Asia did not really exist in the present” and it did represent the frame for his “hope for an Asiatic or, at the very least, non-Soviet experience” (Rossi and Rossi gallery catalogue, 2014, p. 3).

The place and space of Central Asia is perceived at once as a trespassing field of trade, mobility and numerous nomadic tribes as well as the contemporary clearly defined but escapeable border works (Reeves, 2014). But can contemporary art of the region perhaps help us to expand our horizons and our imagination about the territory, borders, terrain and culture of this vast region?

The power of art and specifically contemporary art is in its limitless imagination and framework-less reinterpretation of the present, past and sometimes the future. Contemporary artists I interviewed in Tashkent, Almaty, Astana, Naryn, Bishkek, and Berlin have all expressed flexibility with their views on how their work or previous experiences influence their future work. Many of these independent contemporary artists quickly change their agenda and are not limited by the use of one medium only, for example, many of those working with digital art production are also engaged with the contemporary sculpture and landscaping. What unites many of them apart from the typical symbolic language is also their understanding of regional spatiality. Where politicians divide the region and contextually decide to include one or another non-Soviet country, Afghanistan, Iran or Xinjiang, for example, the artists are more at ease to imagine what Central Asia means in their artistic representation. For Erbossyn Meldibekov, Kazakh contemporary artist who lived through the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the peaks of Hindu Kush constitute a great part of Central Asia and contemporary Central Asian art. For Almagul Menlibayeva, another contemporary artist from Kazakhstan, the term “heritage” is not divided between five or more states in the region. She uses numerous “Central Asian” symbols that translate to the international context of the region – ikat material, Turkestan, steppe, music and even female bodies – as a way to create her own symbolic language and artistic style that distinguishes her regional identity. In the words of art critics, Menlibayeva is able “to build many of her works at the meeting points and changes of different symbols that originate in all sorts of ethnic and historical-cultural paradigms” in Central Asia (Misiano, 2008, p. 180).

In their works, these famous contemporary artists from Central Asia are constantly faced with the double dilemma: how to produce the indigenous art that no longer depends on the old structures of power and ideology but also not to fall into a trap of narrowing it down to the new globalised conceptions of regional break-downs and rigid colonial frameworks of borders and territoriality. For them, the creation of a specific local style and symbolism is a way to come to terms with the post-Soviet postcolonialism but also a challenge to escape from the exoticism the international curators might try to position them in. For Meldibekov, this was a particular challenge when he tried to escape from the so-called Kazakh or Central Asian “kitsch” – the art of imitation of the new official symbolic language, an artistic critique of the contemporary political projects of nation-building he revoluted against in 1997. Meldibekov “exaggerated the absurdity of the fake folk art and picturesque images of the ‘Kazakh-hood’ that were being promoted by the new government as national identity” (Rossi and Rossi gallery catalogue, 2014, p. 6). By 2016, he was looking for new ways to engage in his “sarcastic” and critical perspectives of the everyday life, politics and transformation in the region but without associating his work with Kitsch.

In the space where the “process of spatializing the state is neither smooth nor uncontested” and where the borders become the “messy” and contextual process of constant mobility, such domains as culture, history and heritage are also not fixed and uncontested (Reeves, 2014). On the contrary, contemporary art and other types of contemporary cultural production, film, music, and theatre are able to produce a powerful critique and offer an alternative to the political domains of the provided concepts. If the respective Central Asian states and regimes position Silk Road heritage as a sacred and almost rigid concepts of bargaining for historical dominance along the Silk Road, or insert this symbol into the historical inception of the nation, then many contemporary artists can even be critical of such political mythmaking. Some even criticise the contemporary
These examples demonstrate how contemporary art
Meldibekov plays with the idea
Even in this act of careless ap-
From author’s interview with the artist in June 2016, Almaty,
Syrlybek Bekbotayev interview with the author, June 2016, Almaty,
gallery catalogue, 2014, p. 5
provisional borders that Stalin had fixed" (Rossi).
His installation "Borderline" (2014) "draws out in the
temporary art scene. Some of the artists, notably, Erbossyn
Meldibekov used "imagined geographies" concept as a form
for his artistic creation in the series of Central Asian moun-
tains peaks that he produced from the old metal saucepans
or carton boxes (Mountains of Revolution Series, Rossi and
Rossi). His installation "Borderline" (2014) "draws out in the
mazelike cardboard and paper constructions the arbitrary
provisional borders that Stalin had fixed" (Rossi and Rossi
gallery catalogue, 2014, p. 5). Meldibekov plays with the idea
of geographical terrains in Central Asia being fragile as card-
board but also brought about by the deformation and power
when he disfigures the metal sinks, metal casseroles, and
even bathtubs to create a series of white and green "peaks"
of Central Asia in their literal and picturesque installation
in museums in Brisbane, Hong Kong and Singapore (See
Figs 1, 2). In this way not only he re-imagines and re-
materialises the actual geography that the region is known
for abroad but he also re-spatialises it by moving these
mountains further into Asia or Europe and placing them in
the plain quietness of the museum.

In Meldibekov’s artistic imagination, geography is as
mobile and as fluid as his own journeys across the region.

What is even more exciting for him is the ability to pick up
his “mountain peaks,” pack them into boxes and shift them
hundreds kilometres away, specifically further into the imagi-
inary Asia – to Singapore or Hong Kong that have become
hubs for thriving Central Asian art. He was the witness of
the constant border re-drawing from his personal biogra-
phy – born on the border between contemporary Southern
Kazakhstan regions (oblasts), Meldibekov travelled and
fought in Afghanistan (in the 1980s) as part of the Soviet
army draft, and then experienced the re-drawing of the post-
Soviet Central Asian states. To him, borders and fixed
territories are the space of the constant conflict and power
struggle. This is why in his artistic imagination, geography
is a mere “material” that can be moulded, packed and moved
away with no pain whatsoever. In his half-studio in Almaty,
he shows me numerous coloured copies of his “moun-
tains” reproduction, “Don’t worry I have many of them,” he
tells me while placing my tea cup on one of them and sees
my protest against it. Even in this act of careless ap-
proach to the “copy”, Meldibekov expresses his neglect to
the sacredness of geography – its rigidity, its fixed mapping
on political maps and its sovereignty and belonging to one
particular state but not united in the concept of regional
cultures and peoples beyond citizenship and ethnicity.

Meldibekov’s imagination is unbounded and not
framed by the rules of the post-Soviet nation-builders
who strive to fix and delineate borders, territories and maps.
Moreover, as Madeleine Reeves (2014) writes, “Soviet and
post-Soviet dynamics have created a situation where eth-
nicity and territory are symbolically overdetermined: that
is, they have come to be so firmly linked in popular and of-
official understandings of this that the border is “read”
according to the ethnic distribution of villages and homes”
(Reeves, 2014, p. 62). However, the nationalist imagina-
tion also claims the idea of rigid borderline, territoriality
and “my nation” narratives. As Anthony Smith (2013, p. 90)
writes,

According to the new nationalist vision, the idea of “au-
enticity” was regarded not just as signalling what is
“mine”, “my own” and nobody else’s, or “ours” alone, but
as that which is “original”, “innate” and “pristine” to us,
stripped of all later accretions, and therefore “true”,
“guenuine” and “real”. Hence the increasingly wide-
spread rejection of all that was “false”, “corrupt” and
unsubstantial as “inauthentic”.

After independence in Kazakhstan and other Central
Asian states, the national or state, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Uzbek
land in general became the issue of heated social debate with
mass protests against land reform which allowed foreign-
ners for lend or occupy the state-owned land for a certain
period of time, for example, for up to 30–45 years. The recent
Land Reform discussion in Kazakhstan, for example, raised
the most heated debates and demonstrations in the country
since the 2011 Zhanaozen events. These debates evolved into
mass protests in April and May 2016 leading to the most
active and geographically widespread protests since 1991.

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4 Syrylbek Bekbotayev interview with the author, June 2016, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

5 From author’s interview with the artist in June 2016, Almaty, Kazakhstan.
The land issue is clearly a sacred symbol of the nation and its inviolability. Meldibekov is interested in the concept of imagined geographies that encompasses the new understanding of the Self and the Other through the complex web of post-Soviet traditions, imaginations and conceptualisations on state geography and ethnicity (Clowes, 2012). In another work related to the similar idea of the map and geography, The Map of Genghis Khan or the Skin of the Red Horse (2007), he connects the two historical periods crucial to Central Asian identity – the Mongol period and the Soviet period (see Fig. 3). The photo depicts “fragments of the skin [of the horse] with the bits of meat and fat that were photographed from the close range and that remind [the viewer] of the topographical photos and depictions” (in Misiano, 2008, p. 38). On the skin of the iconic Petrov-Vodkin’s “Bathing of a Red Horse”, Meldibekov sows the borders of contemporary Central Asian states with the red thread. In his own words, what he tried to depict was both the attempt to direct it to Genghis Khan whose figure became very symbolic for the contemporary Central Asian nation-builders and “allude it to the Petrov-Vodkin’s famous painting “Bathing of a Red Horse”. The way Meldibekov re-interprets these two historical periods is that the iconic Red Horse of the Soviet revolution was killed and skinned, “and the legendary Red Horse’s insides revealed the ancient map of the founder of the Mongol empire” (in Misiano, 2008, p. 38).

This “map” represents the typical depiction of nomadic “traditions” – memorised routes, the sacredness of the horse but also the important nutrient meat of the horse that many Central Asians consider a delicacy. Yet skinned and exposed like that it also reveals the artist’s own vulnerability to the realities of the present – to the fragile borders and his own

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Fig. 1. Erbossyn Meldibekov, Borderline. Courtesy: Erbossyn Meldibekov.

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6 From author’s interview with the artist in June 2016, Almaty, Kazakhstan.
Fig. 2. Erbossyn Meldibekov, “Mountains of Revolution” series. Courtesy: Erbossyn Meldibekov.

Fig. 3. The Map of Genghis Khan or the Skin of the Red Horse (2007), Courtesy: Erbossyn Meldibekov.
understanding and placement on the global map. Although Meldibekov is one of the most celebrated artists from “Central Asia”, he remains both localised and cursed by this same locality at the same time. Meldibekov does not deny his “roots” and strives to create a regional Central Asian identity for all contemporary artists and citizens of numerous countries of this region – without borders, and without constructed cultural or historical differences (from the interview with the author). However, at the same time he specifies his Otherness to the outside world – the Otherness that granted him with the title of the grandeur of Kazakh Kitsch – something he tries to avoid in his works at the moment. This brings us to the important criticism of the cliché and curatorial power to Other non-European contemporary artists. The multiple geographies of the region disallow Meldibekov and others to join the scene of Asian art instead of the accompanied compartmentalisation of “exotic” locations and “post-Soviet Asiatic lands.”

4. Routes and roads

Connected to the concept of imagined geographies and placement are routes and roads. The symbol of Silk Road in general was perceived by Central Asians as a route, mobility and exchange of ideas. The artists took that idea in a lot more fluid way. For them, routes and roads represent contemporaneity itself. Routes and roads depict labour migration (Bekbotayev), hopes and lives-in-the-making (Kasmalieva and Djumaliev) as well as places imagined along the routes and roads (Vorobievs). In this section, I discuss how the symbolism of routes and multiple roads of the contemporary Silk Road proliferated in the production of local contemporary art.

Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev are contemporary artists from Bishkek who work together on a number of video art works and installations. The focus of their work is on the spatiality and temporality of the contemporary Silk Road and the Soviet past and its legacy inscribed in numerous roads but also deepened economic crisis in the wake of the Soviet collapse that sent many people abroad as labour migrants seeking better lives. The local Central Asian and Kazakhstani based Aspangallery that represents Kasmalieva and Djumaliev’s works describe the focus of their work in the following way:

The artists, curators and educators Kasmalieva and Djumaliev explore the harsh political and economic realities of their native Kyrgyzstan, highlighting the vitality that characterises the people of this turbulent region. Using photography, video and performance within a critical and conceptual framework, they unpack the multiple layers of Kyrgyz identity: the country’s traditional nomadic and shamanic roots, its recent Soviet Communist past, and its current global capitalist reality.7

Kasmalieva and Djumaliev’s works are very poetic and very mobile. In their video art, the viewer is exposed to the constant movement of trucks, trains and peoples. The stillness is absolutely absent and the changing landscapes of the roads and major highways along the ancient Silk Road occupy the main background of the videos. In the TransSiberian Amazons (2005), the video art that was produced during artists’ tour in Siberia, we follow two women on the train (Fig. 4). According to the narrative, these are the real protagonists of the post-Soviet “shuttle trade” – a semi-illegal and highly gendered economy of trading commodity goods bought in Turkey and China across the numerous localities of the former Soviet states. An elderly woman, a shuttle trader, travels on the train and sings a popular Russian song by Alla Pugacheva, Russian and Soviet pop star, about the consequences of broken relationships.

7 From the Aspangallery website, http://aspangallery.com/en/artists, last visited on September 10, 2016.
“Without me, my love, you would fly with only one wing,” the protagonist sings on the background to the imaginary male ex-lover. This sad lyrical song is combined with the depressing surrounding of this gentle woman – economic collapse, old Soviet train and cold steppes of Siberia in winter. Yet there is something hopeful and beautiful in this narration that was demonstrated on an old TV set surrounded by the typical “Chinese” bags used by shuttle traders. Although the context probably is more "local" for the Central Asian and post-Soviet audiences, the video was very popular at the Venetian Biennale in 2005 where it was presented.

Kasmalieva and Dzumaliev continue their "poetic" exploration of hope and disappointment in *A New Silk Road: Algorithm of Survival and Hope* (2007) multi-channel video art. The video focuses on roads in an unidentified Central Asian borderland where we see numerous trucks and peoples passing through the mountainous peaks on their way to the Kyrgyz border with China. Alongside the roads and trucks are people who travel too. In their short stops on the roads, we see how they live – with their families and kids, with their hopes for the better life and better future. All of these motions are depicted on a multi-channel display, each showing one particular part or side of the road without much narrative or explanation. We can hear the sound of passing heavy cars as a background until someone starts singing folklore Kyrgyz song. The video ends with the continuous sounds and images of the passing by trucks and we know that life on contemporary Silk Road never stops. As critics mentioned, Kasmalieva and Dzumaliev combine “the poetic with the political, they employ beautifully haunting imagery with minimal narrative structure in order to recount poignant tales of human struggle, determination and hope for a better future”.

And if their works still have the hope projected to the endless road and constant motion and “contemporary nomadism” of Central Asians, then other artists attempt to focus on the feeling of the loss and tragic absence of those who travel.

Syrlybek Bekbotayev’s work are in particular positioned on that border of the individual and almost personal and collective. This young artist from a small village near Shymkent became a sensation in 2010s when he finished his art degree in Shymkent, joined the famous *Kyzyl Traktor/Red Tractor* art group, and moved to Almaty. Bekbotayev’s self-positioning as a genuine and sincere Kazakh artist allows him to produce very engaging and touching works. In 2014, his *Kyrgyz Pass* installation (2014–2015) became the most popular work at the young artists’ exhibition "On Love and Other Teachers" in Almaty (Fig. 5). The artist hung more than 30 traditional Kyrgyz kalpaq (head garment) in an improvised installation of one of the passes from the Kyrgyz border to Kazakhstan and then to Russia. The installation attracted the most attention at the exhibition, and soon after the opening, many pictures of the visitors engaging with the installation appeared online – on popular social networks of Facebook and Instagram. Many visitors believed that Bekbotayev’s installation was exciting and imaginative. The kalpaqs hung on almost indivisible threads but were supposed to represent the absent places of Kyrgyz men who had to travel to Russia and elsewhere to become labour migrants. For Bekbotayev, this was an unfinished installation as he envisioned to incorporate a larger number of kalpaqs and place the installation somewhere in Kyrgyzstan to attract

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8 From the Aspan Gallery website, [http://aspangallery.com/en/artists](http://aspangallery.com/en/artists), last visited on September 10, 2016.

9 This famous art group also includes such celebrated contemporary artists as Smail Bilyayev, Said Atabekov, Arystanbek Shalbayev and Vitaliy Simakov and deceased Moldakul Narymbetov who were group’s leaders. Narymbetov passed away in February 2012 and he was a known figure in contemporary art scene of the post-Soviet states, organised his own school and had a number of followers. He was an active leader of Kyzyl Traktor (along with Simakov who remains group’s leader).
more attention to the grave problem of mass out-migration, separation of families and absentee fathers and brothers.10

For Bekbotayev, borders and constant mobility of Central Asian labourers across these borders is not a depiction of a happy or hopeful life. On the contrary, the artist takes a critical stand on the issues that lead to this out-migration: worsening economic crisis, political instability and the consequences of the migration: the “absentee” citizens. Although his installation was highly acclaimed as a success story and although it became highly popular online, Bekbotayev plans to re-install it to demonstrate the growing negative effects of the nation where more than half of its population is displaced across the numerous “Kyrgyz passes.” In his earlier work on the similar theme, the **Defenders of Issyk Kul** (2014), he depicted three young Kyrgyz boys in traditional kalpaqs who turn their backs to the viewer in their attempts to hold on to the heavy metal structures or lattices that they have on their backs. Their gaze is directed to the famous Issyk Kul Lake in Kyrgyzstan as if they are looking into the future of their nation. According to Bekbotayev, he wanted to show how in the absence of their fathers, the little Kyrgyz boys have to take over their responsibilities but how also they look into the future on their own Kyrgyz land rather than leaving the homeland.

Bekbotayev’s bitter views and interpretations of contemporary migration in the region are combined with his criticism of the neo-liberal system that “displaces” people and space. He himself had to move to the central city of Almaty in order to build his career – away from the small village “in the periphery.” Yet Bekbotayev’s conflict and criticism of the contemporaneity results in a deeply moving symbols and depictions of the ordinary people. He is a talented master of the individual narrative where every work of him has a personal touch; it tells a story of one particular character who might be lost, hopeless or on the contrary full of excitement and sincere hope for the better future. It is this combination of his almost naïve sincerity and harsh criticism of inequality, economic and political crises and uneven development of post-Soviet Central Asian states Bekbotayev pictures real people in real Central Asian spaces. These are villages, passes, borders, and other small places on the periphery where people continue to survive, and this personalised approach makes his works particularly touching.

5. Mobility and nomads

Routes and roads as well as geography are also united in the themes on mobility, nomads, and heritage. In the official regime perspectives, or what artists prefer to call the state perspective, even nomadic heritage was usually lined to a specific fixed locality – “Kazakh steppe,” “Kyrgyz mountains” or specific historical sites and built structures – mausoleums, real or invented historical nomadic camps. For example, the numerous archaeological studies of the contemporary Astana territory, the capital of Kazakhstan, claim that it was the last nomadic “capital” of Khan Kenesary – the last Kazakh khan. So the spatiality and localisation of the different discourses is of a particular importance for the officialdom and their discourses. However, this does not stop disputes on the local level where the UNESCO protected Silk Road Routes in Almaty region of Kazakhstan are under attack of the local governors who tried to pursue a plan of building a highway at the heritage site.11

UNESCO heritage site of “Silk Roads: the Routes Network of Chang’an-Tianshan Corridor” (2014) includes a considerable property of 5000 km stretching from the territory of contemporary Peoples’ Republic of China to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

The Tian-shan corridor is one section or corridor of this extensive overall Silk Roads network. Extending across a distance of around 5000 km, it encompassed a complex network of trade routes extending to some 8700 km that developed to link Chang’an in central China with the heartland of Central Asia between the 2nd century BC and 1st century AD, when long distance trade in high value goods, particularly silk, started to expand between the Chinese and Roman Empires. It flourished between the 6th and 14th century AD and remained in use as a major trade route until the 16th century.12

This expanded project was seen as an extraordinary agreement on heritage convention between the three states and UNESCO and is a unique heritage site of its kind. However, the local realities of the highway construction near Talgar village in Almaty region and the local governors’ pre-occupations with “contemporary” infrastructure processes highlight how the contemporary mentality of some governors accepts heritage as built-in structures rather than spatiality in itself. This is of course a paradoxical conclusion given that the attempts of the central governing political regime in Astana, for example, widely engages with the process of inscribing spatiality with nationalism – through the protection and promotion of national parks, visiting sites, mausoleums, spiritual monuments and places. Perhaps this demonstrates the disconnect of the political and cultural programmes on the periphery. One undisputable site of heritage for majority of Kazakh citizens is Turkestan and its iconic architecture.

In 2002, an international mobile project “Non-Silk Road” invited local and international contemporary artists to participate in a trip to Turkestan organised by the “Asia Plus” art community. Victor and Elena Vorobievs, the famous husband and wife duo of the contemporary art scene in Kazakhstan decided to participate in the trip as well. Within the 10 days spent on the road, they engaged with the surroundings and the lifestyles of the local people. Vorobievs work with a variety of artistic mediums – they have series of graphics, installations, texts, and photography. Their works are directed to the “post-Soviet realities of constant change, disorientation and their effects on everyday life” where they

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10 From the author’s interview with Bekbotayev, June 2016, Almaty, Kazakhstan.
11 UNESCO World Heritage Convention, “Silk Roads: the Routes Network of Chang’an-Tianshan Corridor” (2014), http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1442, last accessed on September 10, 2016.
12 This dispute stirred numerous debates in Kazakhstan and was covered in the media. See http://www.time.kz/articles/territory/2016/07/15/bednij-velikij-shelkovij-put, last accessed on September 10, 2016.
inhabitants of these iconic sites, including Turkestan, for example, and capture how these two localities blend in one image. As part of the performance, Vorobievs were collecting the addresses of the local people who posed for photos and sent them their “postcards” once they returned to Almaty. This whole “performance” also alludes to artists’ own mobility and their “placement” in contemporary Kazakhstani reality – the ironic element present in most of their works. Elena Vorobieva was born in Turkmenistan, Victor Vorobiev – in Pavlodar, northern city of Kazakh-Russian borderlands and both can be identified as Russian-speaking artists – an ethnic identity that too often bares the contradictions between the “ethnic” artistic themes and “cosmopolitan” perspectives. This is how Elena Vorobieva described the project as it was unfolding:

Ordinary and random people formed our sphere of interactive action [of the performance], we did not know any of these people. Having had all of the necessary instruments for the photo shoot we acted as mobile photographers on a tour, asking anyone interested to take a picture with their chosen “background” [poster] in every new place [town, village alongside the old Silk Road routes] that we visited. (...) People were eager to pose as soon as they found out that it was for free; they imagined themselves to be transported to a completely different space – from the Kazakhstani provinces [or the periphery] to the famous centres of the Western world. There was something touching in the way these people focused on the camera with sincerity and trust, for the time being they forgot about their everyday routine and problems, and looked into the camera.¹⁶

Vorobievs printed and sent off more than 50 photographs to the people they photographed. Their gaze at the ordinary, modern dwellers of the ancient routes of Silk Road in Southern Kazakhstan represented the hybridity of the Kazakhstani contemporary ethnic and cultural make up. One may only hope that the depictions of these ordinary people were not objectified or would not be interpreted through the lenses of non-artistic and judging or scandalous perspective that the artists did not intend to present. However, the growing antagonism and divisions along the ethnic and cultural lines in the perspectives of the audiences rather than artistic field itself is alarming in Central Asia.

There are number of local artists who engage with the themes of nomadism, mobility and heritage sites of the ancient Silk Routes. Nomadic heritage became one of the central themes in contemporary art of Central Asia in the 1990s. One of the chief producer of these themes and works in contemporary art of Central Asia is Almagul

combine “a precise record of the ephemeral and quotidian details of daily life, local particulars, subjects that have been often overlooked and are not exactly photogenic”.¹³ During the Non-Silk Road trip Vorobievs engaged in a performance “Memorable Photos. If the mountain does not come to Magomet…”¹⁴ (2007) repeating the famous proverb that the Prophet Mohammed (or Magomet in Russian) should go to the mountain, which is used in friendly discussions of making things happen despite the numerous obstacles.

In this performance, Vorobievs carried a number of posters with the typical tourist landmarks from Paris, New York, and Moscow including Eiffel Tower, the World Trade Center that was destroyed on 9/11 and the Kremlin (See Fig. 6). The artists offered local dwellers along the Silk Route – in the numerous cities and villages of Southern Kazakhstan, including the ancient cities and sites of Turkestan and Taraz, Shymkent and Zhanatas to take pictures in front of these landmark posters. The whole point of the performance was to depict the local dwellers with the reprints of the famous landmarks – places that most of the people want to visit. But because the landmarks were “mobile”, this created a double imitation of mobility and neo-nomadism staged alongside the ancient Silk Road routes, with modern

Fig. 6. Victor and Elena Vorobievs. “Memorable Photos. If the mountain does not come to Magomet…” (2007). Courtesy: Aspan Gallery.

¹³ Aspan Gallery. http://aspangallery.com/en/artist/vorobyevs, last accessed September 10, 2016.

¹⁴ In original it is: “Фотографи на памят’. Есі гора не іде к Магомету” Elena and Victor Vorobievs (2007), photos available in Misiano, 2008, Progressive Nostalgia. Contemporary Art of the Former USSR. Moscow: New Museum Foundation and at the Aspan Gallery website.
Menlibayeva, a well-known creator of the new nomadic aesthetic and feminist art in Kazakhstan (see Kudaibergenova, 2016a, 2016b). Unlike many other artists who may criticise, ridicule and produce ironic works related to heritage sites, Menlibayeva engaged with the in-depth search of her own cultural routes that in the end guaranteed her a celebrated international status. Menlibayeva’s work have their own recognisable aesthetic with the symbolism of the “homeland” steppe, mystical figures of Peri – nomadic fairies, strong Central Asian women and their flawless naked bodies representing the Mother Nation (see Kudaibergenova, 2016a for the further discussion on gendered national narratives in Menlibayeva’s works). Menlibayeva is instrumental with her use of the recurrent symbols of Central Asia – even if her works are depicted in front of the Akhmed Yassavi Mausoleum and with the use of the traditional “Central Asian” ikat colourful material, it remains consistent with her neo-nomadic aesthetic and “steppe baroque.” In her own words she explains that:

I use specific modes of expression in modern and contemporary art as a vehicle to investigate my personal archaic atavism as a certain mystical anthropomorphism. In other words, I explore the nature of a specific Egregore, a shared cultural psychic experience, which manifests itself as a specific form of thought among the people(s) of the ancient, arid and dusty Steppes between the Caspian Sea, Baikonur and Altai in today’s Kazakhstan.

In the Russian language, Archaic Atavism is personalised as a being – which points to and creates a different meaning. We are not just speaking about an idea or archaic element in the collective subconscious of a people, but about the embodiment of our archaic atavism, which becomes an active entity, just like a creature itself. Our archaic atavism is not just internalised, but also externalised. It is as if It, like a being, has been awakened by the post-Soviet experience of the indigenous Kazakh people, who are becoming their own after 80 years of Soviet domination and cultural genocide. Suddenly, It (Archaic Atavism) became interested in enculturation and in modern behaviours. It also began to have entertaining dialogues with the trans-national circulation of ideas in contemporary art.17

In doing so, Menlibayeva experiments with her cultural production as she learns new techniques along the way – establishing the connection with the camera, producing video-art, investigating ways to collaborate sound with an image and so on. It is also important to mention that Menlibayeva collaborates a lot with a number of other artists and producers – she is a very open-minded and thus successful artist.

What is peculiar about her works is the way she uses heritage as a field of fluid, flexible symbols and identifiers that one can enter and explore. To her heritage and history are multiplex sites of abundant creativity and self-search. As she mentioned in her artist credo, Menlibayeva is pre-occupied with her lost cultural identity and her lost cultural memory (see also Kudaibergenova, 2016b). So Menlibayeva travels a lot in Kazakhstan to find specific sites where she can produce her works. In the mid-2000s she got interested in exploring the Aisha-Bibi mausoleum and visited it with her group. Menlibayeva is not the first local artist to explore the ancient spiritual sites or mausoleums – Kyzyl Traktor had a number of performances of “shamanistic” nature at these sites in Southern Kazakhstan – practically their homeland territory. Menlibayeva’s works in that sense develop along the lines of the self re-discovery when contemporary women transform into the spirit of the ancient saints, fairies, and female nomads.

It is perhaps Menlibayeva’s “multi-layered” approach to different unspecified ethnicities, cultures, and regional symbols that make her work universal for the Central Asian art scene and global art scene in general. She uses the traditional colourful silk material, ikat, to cover up the face of the Central Asian or as curator, Victor Misiano called it, Mongoloid face in one of the videos where she then takes time to “unveil.” Or in the Butterflies of Aisha Bibi (2010), we see a young Central Asian woman and her butterfly wings made up of the traditional Central Asian silk flowing in the air while he rises from the ground. In My Silk Road to You (2010–11), we see the same model in the traditional Kazakh or Kyrgyz layered dress wrapped in the colourful ikat silk that prolongs beyond the frame of the picture to symbolise the literary Silk Road in its contemporary re-interpretation. For these series, Menlibayeva uses the walls of the mausoleum and the barren steppe around it as a background. However, the lyrical story, the story of Aisha Bibi’s love is unfolded with the central figure of the young Central Asian woman who symbolises her. What translates from that image is the local aesthetic presented to the eye of the wandering foreigner. A certain aesthetic is expected from the Asian artist and his or her “multi-modernism” – “the disparate modern artistic directions that were manifested in Asian countries in accordance with local conditions” (Chiu & Genocchio, 2010, p. 15). Menlibayeva created these series already as a famous Central Asian artist abroad and while living in Berlin.

6. Conclusion

This paper positioned a question about heritage and the themes of cultural and political appropriation of the heritage, history and culture from a different perspective of the power relations. Through the discussion of the booming artistic field, I demonstrated how even the themes related to the recurrent ideas of the Silk Road heritage can be disputed, ridiculed, criticised and re-interpreted in a new cultural domain of the region’s contemporary art. Very few of these contemporary artists take the idea and symbol of the Silk Road in its official and literal state – none of them repeat the unoriginal caravans and ubiquitous illustrations to the Soviet orientalist history books or booklets that some “official” artists continue to do. Contemporary art in Central Asia, on the contrary, attempts to be independent from the state perspective and state frameworks. Unfortunately, this means that artists are still dependent or endangered by the possibility to be framed within rather

17 Artist’s Statement, reproduced by Aspan Gallery, available at http://aspangallery.com/en/artist/menlibayeva, last visited on September 10, 2016.
limited boundaries ascribed by some (not all) curators who envision “Central Asia” as a bastion of the Asiatic post-Sovietness, and an exotic space of barren steppes and sheep.

Yet Central Asian contemporary art is still capable of producing creative dissent and its own alternative understanding of these “traditional” historical and cultural symbols associated with the region’s role as a passage and corridor of the famous Silk Road. Caught in-between power struggles for defining the ownership of the Silk Road “locality” in each Central Asian state’s official propaganda and nation-building, the experience of many of the contemporary artists discussed in this paper demonstrates that they are immune to these artificial bordering and division of cultural and historical heritage that unites many diverse people beyond just the mentioned five post-Soviet states. On the ground, there is a constant discussion and debate among the local artists from various regions and “places” of Central Asia who find ways to meet, organise exhibitions, participate in art festivals, and educate new generations of young artists. In many ways it may remind one of the guerrilla movement – with almost no financial or institutional support from the state, the contemporary art in Central Asia remains a bastion for like-minded activists and public figures united in their passionate agenda for the change. Their attempts too remind one of the activism – in some places they remain the only dissident voices against local regime’s propaganda and the entangling re-traditionalisation of the society.

Conflict of interest

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