Contemporary Public Art and Nation: Contesting "Tradition" in Post-Socialist Cultures and Societies

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Abstract

The contemporary art movement attempts to remain independent from official sources of power in order to generate ideas and discourses focusing on temporality and contemporaneity. In addition to art works and performances, some artists transmit their ideas through their public discussions and activism. But without a new value systems, a post-socialist society may fall into the trap of "inventing and re-inventing traditions," and thus many social actors tend to block artists' access to the discourses of temporality, "tradition," nation, and gender. This article analyzes three instances where these "traditions" guided artistic discussions in the fields of sexuality, gender roles, and the sacredness of nation, which are all connected to the newly formed conservative values of the national and traditional that allow many nationalist conservatives to justify control over and criticism of independent cultural production.

Keywords

contemporary art – public art – tradition – nation – post-socialist culture

The article focuses on the frameworks of "re-traditionalization"—powerful and power-seeking discourses about one's culture, nation, and traditions in the wake of globalization and growing nationalism. What happens when the state or society finds itself in a state of cultural and political disorientation? Who guides the dominant discourses of national belonging in the absence of vivid civil society? Can public art take an active part in these discussions due to the weakness of the intelligentsia? To answer these questions, I explore public art

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and contemporary artists in Central Asia who use their artistic production and agenda as a space for dissent and activism.

It is important to note that while the current discussion about re-traditionalization focuses on the "new" or post-independent states like Kazakhstan, these discourses of endangered cultural authenticity and the loss of genuine traditions can emerge in any society in ideological and ideational crisis. This condition, according to Clifford Geertz, is influenced by

> the attainment of independence, the overthrow of established ruling classes, the popularization of legitimacy, the rationalization of public administration, the rise of modern elites, the spread of literacy and mass communications, and the propulsion willy-nilly of inexperienced governments into the midst of a precarious international order that even its older participants do not very well understand all make for a pervasive sense of disorientation, a disorientation in whose face received images of authority, responsibility, and civic purpose seem radically inadequate. The search for anew symbolic framework in terms of which to formulate, think about, and react to political problems, whether in the form of nationalism, Marxism, liberalism, populism, racism … or some variety of reconstructed traditionalism (or, most commonly, a confused mélange of several of these) is therefore tremendously intense.[1]

In this article, I assume that there is a "variety of reconstructed traditionalism" where many nationalist or narrowly defined ethnic-cultural ideas flourish in opposition to the threat of globalization. Traditions discourse becomes a very powerful source of legitimation for new elites who can claim to be the guardians of the sacred traditions. This discourse, in return, allows some people to feel a sense of security and connection to the past and some values, even if these traditions can be invented.[2] In their classical study Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger stated that:

> "Invented tradition" is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact,

1 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973),221.

2 Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

> where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suit-able historic past.3

In the context of post-socialist cultures and their sociocultural and socio- political as well as economic transformations, the invention of traditions and even the re-invention of traditions—building upon previously invented traditions—is seen as a stabilizing effort. In other ways, under conditions of constant crises, transformations, and ruptures, inventing and re-inventing traditions help many social actors and collectives to create a sense of continuity with the lost past, and traditions that might have appeared to be lost under the previous ideology or state—in this case, the Soviet state. Post-socialist inertia also influences many people in their perception of the state and the myth of the solid, "fundamental" national ideology that the state is supposed to construct and disseminate. Inevitably, the claim for establishing the most "authentic" understanding of traditions then becomes a power struggle among many elites, social actors, and opinion leaders. Those who are in charge of re- inventing new traditions and following strict re-traditionalization trends possess more power over those who have to contest it because the guardians of the traditions also legitimate themselves as guardians of the nation.

In non-democratic states or in states where the political regime is unable to provide a unifying agenda, that voice may be filled by non-political actors who could satisfy the growing demands for definitions of the national, traditional, and historical guiding principles and identities. In this setting, the invention of new traditions or the re-traditionalization of society can happen spontaneously. There is not one, dominant actor defining what is correct and what is not. On the contrary, the production of re-traditionalized discourses is diffused among the multiple collective discussions and imaginations of the "tradition" that are usually connected to the neoconservative values and perceptions of the family, nation, ethnic group, private sphere, and gender roles.

In this article I analyze this second scenario of re-traditionalization, one that is almost divorced from the regime's inability to provide any values beyond the neoliberal slogans of the developmentalist state.4 In this context, there is a higher possibility for multi-layered socio-cultural, socio-linguistic, rural–urban, nationalist–cosmopolitan, and other divisions and antagonisms that might impede pluralism or, on certain occasions, produce it and provide space for heated discussions and conflicts.

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3 Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Traditions*, 1.

4 For example, see A. Bissenova, "The Fortress and the Frontier: Mobility, Culture, and Class in Almaty and Astana," *Europe-Asia Studies* 69, no. 4 (2017): 642–667.

As long as these conflicts are not entirely encapsulated in one dominant or culturally hegemonic discourse, but rather are constantly contested and re-interpreted, these discussions and conflicts are vital for the formation of new post-socialist civic cultures and spaces of creative dissent. The more in-depth conflict happens when the conflicting sides cannot come to a certain consensus and when the power of one opinion, in this case, re-traditionalization and nationalism, prevails in demarcating the borders between "us" and "Others."

The puzzle of the present article takes place within these power struggles of non-political actors in Kyrgyzstan. Taking a perspective of grassroots activism research and digital ethnography of public discussions that spur online among artists and nationalists, I attempt to demonstrate how these power struggles from the public art scene try to re-focus the re-traditional discourses and how nationalist groups continue to shape the debate of national belonging within very conservative and almost Soviet frameworks of ethnic codification.

Contemporary art in Central Asia has become a viable venue for public engagement on these issues. Contemporary artists add new perspectives and objections to the discussion of disoriented value systems in the society. They also offer independent voices—independent from the state but also independent from the re-traditionalized framework. By the nature of their work—that is, as creative production focused on the problems of temporality and contemporary social problems—they are able to add new values and content to discourses of sexuality, gender, and nation. Their success is particularly demonstrated through the debates, online discussions, more frequent art events and exhibitions, and even public scandals that facilitate further public interest in the regional contemporary art scene. Thus art becomes public not only through the actual positioning of art in the public spaces, but also through artists' public engagement in socially relevant conversations on values.

I discuss the context of contemporary public art involvement in society using three ethnographic accounts, specifically: (1) contradictory interpretations of Kazakh artist Askhat Akhmediyarov's installation in Astana in 2016, (2) sexuality and deviance, as addressed by the Bishkek-based group SHTAB's activism, and (3) gendered canons in Central Asian societies as expressed by Kazakhstani artists Zoya Falkova and Anvar Musrepov. I use ethnography and participant observation; specifically, I attended exhibitions, interviewed artists, and engaged in public online discussions on these issues. It is important to note that an artist's position within this public activism is not always expressed just through their artistic production (installations, performances, exhibitions, or paintings) but also through their active engagement with the public (discussions, online presence books, manifestos). I take all of these positions into consideration when analyzing this complex data. In order to demonstrate my argument, I first explain the concept of public art and public contemporary art in the Kazakhstani

and Central Asian context, followed by analysis of three symbols of re-traditionalism online: sexuality, gender roles, and the sacredness of the nation.

Contemporary Public Art and Society: Conflicting Interpretations

Contemporary art seeks to provide alternative views on the social, political, and cultural transformations of their respective societies. For example, dissent art of contemporary post-socialist societies "is defined by its open disagreement with the official consensus."5 Artists use their works to ridicule and expose a society's contradictions and problems, such as growing authoritarianism or religious extremism.6

> Art production has also been integral to dynamic processes in the producing societies: changes in the relations between men and women, in religious ideology, in employment and occupation. Art is nearly always produced in contested environments and the study of art in colonial and post-colonial contexts provides a means to access those dynamic processes.7

The rise of the public art in the post-socialist societies of Kazakhstan, Russia, and Kyrgyzstan is seen as the popular attempt to engage the public in these artistic discussions through artists' participation in urban festivals. Public art is situated away from museum buildings and the strict or official curatorial selection of specific works to exhibit. Art works exhibited in public space—in parks, plazas, and public squares—are regarded as art exposition in the "public space." This public space is also a "democratic space"—available to all city dwellers and visitors free of charge.8 So as "artists and critics eager to counter- act the power exercised through neutralizing ideas of the public have sought to re-appropriate the concept by defining space as a realm *of* political debate and public art as work that helps create such a space."9 Therefore,

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5 Lena Jonson, "Post-Pussy Riot: Art and Protest in Russia," *Nationalities Papers* (2016): 2.

6 Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009); Jonson, "Post-Pussy Riot"; Diana T. Kudaibergenova, "Punk Shamanism, Revolt and Break Up of Traditional Linkage: The Waves of Cultural Production in Post-socialist Kazakhstan," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2017).

7 Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins, eds., *The Anthropology of Art: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 19.

8 Rosalyn Deutsche, "Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy," *Social Text* 33 (1992): 36.

9 Deutsche, "Art and Public Space," 39.

> The public sphere idea replaces definitions of public art as art that occupies or designs physical spaces and addresses independently formed audiences with a definition of public art as a practice that constitutes a public by engaging people in a political debate.10

Public art festivals are designed to engage the public in a number of discussions, including those on political and national themes. The only problem with the organization of public art festivals in Kazakhstan, for example, was that the local administration of the cities (Astana or Almaty *akimat*) used these festivals both as a form of public engagement and as a way to promote official themes and slogans.

The first Astana Art Festival in 2015 invited contemporary artists to engage with the themes of Kazakhstan's hosting the Expo 2017 under environmental sustainability slogans and asked artists to focus on sustainable energy issues. The theme of the second Astana Art Festival in 2016 was human energy, which allowed for a wider array of works and artists to be presented. The works included in the Astana Art Festival also had to follow strict selection criteria based on the symbolic capital of the artists—well-known contemporary artists were given priority as a way to attract attention to Astana's new public event.

The artists were invited to submit a preliminary application with their initial proposals and draft constructions. Some of the more famous artists were exempted from this stage and went straight into the final selection pool. Several artists inevitably focused on the issue of "traditions" as the search for the national identity and "traditions" of Kazakhs remain a hot topic as much in Kazakhstan as in many other post-socialist societies. Many contemporary artists disagree with this traditions-based view and promote their own interpretation of how the nation can be imagined.11

Contemporary artists are able to explore historicity and contemporaneity freely, without the constraints and frameworks known to historians and social scientists, but not without some obstacles. Contemporary artists are at ease with history and they openly question "tradition"—an issue that becomes especially problematic in post-socialist cultures and societies where the most recent historical traumas and experiences, as well as the painful transition to indigenous democracies and neoliberalism, have created their own challenges in the exploration of temporality. However, tradition, history, and nation— three of the most problematized keywords of post-socialism—remain deeply intertwined with the temporality that fascinates many contemporary artists.

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10 Ibid.

11 Kudaibergenova, "Punk Shamanism, Revolt and Break Up of Traditional Linkage."

> It comes as no surprise that many artists today are deeply interested in the nature of time, in temporalities of all kinds—social, personal, bodily, geologic, world historical, scientific, eternal—and in the intersections between them. Many artists are fascinated by how temporality was treated by their predecessors, from which they draw inspiration in their efforts to deal with present concerns. For some, this becomes a way of approaching art's internal history, that is, the densely textured interplay between artists, those who knew each other as well as those connected by imaginative sympathy.12

As contemporary artists question and explore all three post-socialist themes in their work, they are likely to create conflicts and debates. Some artists in Central Asia, for example, compare their work to that of "a litmus test of society" and "their actions or their apathies and their support of certain [political] regimes demonstrates their inability to pursue the cause—transform societal perceptions."13

The population may view artists as public, socially conscious actors, but there are also political and nationalist groups that challenge artists' independent perceptions of "tradition." For example, in 2016 Astana Art Festival, the polemics arose around "Azhemnin Kozi" (Grandmother's Eyes)—an installation by famous Kazakh contemporary artist Askhat Akhmediyarov. The installation was placed at the central Nurly Zhol boulevard and featured 34 *kazans*—large metal iron cauldrons used widely in Central Asia and other parts of the world for outdoor cooking. Assembled in pairs, they formed 28 beads of an improvised necklace (see Figure 1). The defenders of national traditions accused Akhmediyarov, a self-described patriot, of producing in- authentic and "unfortunate" installations. They claimed that in "traditional" nomadic society, overturning kazans meant a calling for tragic events such as famine and bad omen. A group of distraught citizens even addressed a letter to the Astana mayor and claimed that Kazakhs only overturned kazans in times of Great Sorrows. According to one post in the heated online debate on Akhmediyarov's Facebook page, kazans were displayed this way during the Great Famine, *Asharshylyq* in 1931–1933.

The denunciation of Akhmediyarov's installation was not the first time that traditionalists and Kazakh national-patriots had taken their debates

12 Terry Smith, "The State of Art History: Contemporary Art," *The Art Bulletin* 92, no. 3 (2010): 368.

13 Author's interview with Kazakh artist Kanat Ibragimov, who lives in exile in San Francisco, August 6, 2016.

Figure 1 *Askhat Akhmediyarov's installation "Azhemnin Kozi" (*Grandmother's Eyes*), July 2016 (Courtesy of Astana ArtFest).*

online. They frequently discuss issues of cultural authenticity, the sacred- ness of Kazakh national traditions, and the adequate norms of behavior on Facebook—the most globalized social network in the world.14

The online debate over Akhmediyarov's installation provides vital back- ground to explain the conflicting puzzles of many post-socialist cultures where some people expect to hold on to notions constructed based on the authority of the "re-invented" traditions without realizing how such actions

14 In fact, Facebook and other internet-based platforms, such as Kazakh websites dedicated to the issues of nationalism (most notably abai.kz, zhasalash.kz), popular blogging plat- forms (gonzo.kz, yvision.kz) and even Instagram occupy a major and possibly the only space for these discussions. See David Lewis, "Blogging Zhanaozen: Hegemonic Discourse and Authoritarian Resilience in Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Survey* 35, no. 3 (2016): 421– 438; Katy Pearce, "Two Can Play at that Game: Social Media Opportunities in Azerbaijan for Government and Opposition," *Demokratizatsiya* 22, no. 1 (2014): 39–66; Katy Pearce and Jessica Vitak, "Performing honor online: The affordances of social media for surveil- lance and impression management in an honor culture," *Social Media and Society* (2015): 1–11; Marlene Laruelle, "Which Future for National-Patriots? The Landscape of Kazakh Nationalism," in *Kazakhstan in the Making: Legitimacy, Symbols, and Social Changes,* ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lanham, md: Lexington Books, 2016), 155–180. The most popular de- bates are then picked up by more conventional media and published in print newspapers and online.

limit cultural and political pluralism. Cries of "This is not traditional!" transformed into "This is not acceptable in our society right now" among nationalist groups and commentators. The temporality of post-socialist imaginations and re-conceptualizations of the nation allowed many political and non-political actors (activists, public figures, writers, and opinion leaders) to justify their narrow, yet very powerful, view on what constitutes national culture, tradition, and nation in the post-socialist period. In other words, the ruling regime's dominant nationalist agenda combined with the conservative traditionalism from the various non-political groups allows it, to effectively crowd out alternative views and identities. Public art, through the artists' public display of their art and their activism online, becomes a form of resistance to—or deviation from—re-invented traditions. Not only does contemporary art create dissent, but also provides further pluralistic views on these issues.

In the remaining part of the article I explore three such deviations from re-invented traditions—homosexuality, feminism, and non-traditional approaches to *national* traditions to demonstrate how this mechanism unfolds. The responses to safeguarding traditions in these three realms include the special legal procedures against so-called gay propaganda, setting and justifying *new* traditions of bridal abduction for marriages, the traditionalization of the daughter-in-law (*kelin*) institution—or spurring online and media scandals over "inappropriate" artistic performances and monuments.

Sexuality, "Normalcy," and Deviations

How can artists engage in the public debate and change the way a public discourse is forming? Does the artist have a role in engaging in these debates and can performances, works of art, or art education and dialogue become viable forms and frameworks for this public engagement and debate? These are the questions asked by many contemporary artists across Central Asia. Some pre- fer to call themselves pioneers of political art or oppositional and nationalist artists, others want to remain in the realm of art for the sake of art. Yet there are many forms of artistic representation and public engagement. During the Soviet era, art was supposed to be part of the collective struggle rather than remain in the realm of pure aesthetics:

> The tendency in the contemporary art system to strive for the dissolution of art into other fields of social practice is informed, however faintly, by the dream of the historical avant-garde to liquidate the bourgeois institution of art itself, understood as a specialized, individualized realm of

> aesthetic appreciation whose aura of autonomy served to cut it off from collectivity with struggle.15

Bishkek-based artistic and social activists Georgy Mamedov and Oksana Shatalova, art curators and contemporary artists themselves, might agree with Yates McKee, author of a recent study on contemporary art engagement in the Occupy movement. According to McKee, art was historically separated from its idea to become an arena for the social, class or ideological struggle. Mamedov and Shatalova themselves actively engage in artistic and public activism by creating a platform for activism and art intervention—stab (School of Theory and Activism Bishkek) or SHTAB in Russian. stab's activities vary from provision of education, information, and library access to public engagement. They have formed a very clear agenda—against neoliberal capitalism, patriarchy, and class domination, but toward grassroots democracy and equality. In their manifesto, "The Politicization of Experience," Mamedov and Shatalova write,

> Art, theory and critique haven't been truly public disciplines so far, rather they have been exclusively professional activities that could only be- come the territory for private emancipation and non-alienation. Artists, theorists, and critics have been a kind of caste that was allowed to have another outlook and another experience, while that outlook and that experience have been nothing more than their private outlook and their private experience, which however created an illusion of multitude, or—a favorite liberal word—pluralism.

Theirs is not the only critique, however, but also an alternative proposition that provides them with an agenda for the future activities and publications.

> Today, when due to the economic crisis the global capitalist system takes more and more cynical moves in its pursuit to preserve the status quo and to make the rich even richer and the poor even poorer; when the countries and regions like Central Asia are doomed for the eternal position of the Third World and the peoples of these countries are exclusively seen as oppressed and almost free labor force, it is obvious that the language common and familiar to us—the language of theory and art cannot be longer our private and personal language. Art and theory should become

15 Yates McKee, *Art Strike: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (London: Verso, 2016), 27.

> public instruments to empower the fight for human dignity and for the emancipation of people from both—centuries' long prejudice and traditions and modernized mechanisms of exploitation and oppression. And it is important that these instruments are accessible not only to professional artists and salaried intellectuals, but to everyone—an employed worker, an activist or a student. Theory and art should serve the mission of public emancipation and critical thought contributing to the change of the current social system.16

stab has also put forward what they describe as a "queer communism agenda," in which they propose moving away from gender-biased categorization and homophobia to facilitate the future creation of an egalitarian society. They provide an in-depth historical study of the gendered order in the Soviet Union where the state's emancipation of women, for example, was directly linked with its goals to incorporate women into the workforce, but not as a political and social force.17 They believe that this unfinished project of full emancipation led to the further re-traditionalization of gendered roles and categories in post-Soviet society, including homophobia and deviation from the gendered normalcy of the heterosexual traditional family.

Similar to stab's discourse and critique of the Soviet gendered order, other activists analyze the legacy of the 1930s mass terror on the formation of the intolerant and gender-biased society of contemporary post-Soviet states. Rodulgina, for example, argues that homophobia "as identity" is an attack not only "against gay [and queer] but also against everyone who considers that the private experience can be a base for the political agenda."18 She argues further that any attempts to ridicule feminism or deviant social and sexual identities such as homosexuality that do not fixate on the conservative, traditionalist family values propagated by the Stalinist regime are attempts to destroy the "private sphere" in the public domain of post-Soviet social and cultural discussions. Instead, she argues, the "construct of the 'traditional' that has nothing to do with the real-life practice of those who propagate it" remains a field of escape from the "private" independent and liberal views.19 People affiliating

16 Fromstab website, http://www.en.art-initiatives.org/?page_id=6830 (accessed September 5, 2016).

17 See Oksana Shatalova and Georgiy Mamedov, *Kvir-kommunizm eto etika* (Moscow: Svobodnoe Marksistskoe izdatel'stvo, 2016).

18 Ira Rodulgina, "Russian Homophobia: The History of Production," *Colta.ru*, August 26, 2016, http://www.colta.ru/articles/raznoglasiya/12008 (accessed September 15, 2016).

19 Ibid.

with the mythical "traditional values," she contends, do not have anything of their own, a real independent idea of the Self.

> Homophobia is always a configuration or framework that has direct and inviolable links to the regime of power, to the type of statehood, to the level of accessibility of knowledge in humanities and to the level of [personal] development, freedom of speech and the standard of living.20

Mamedov similarly attacks Kyrgyzstan's 2014 attempt to pass a "law on homophobia," calling it "a restoration of Sovietness" and Soviet ideal of the traditionalist society.21 He argues that the initiative to control and regulate the "sexuality and bodies of the citizens" reflects the new turn of conservatism and re-traditionalism in Kyrgyzstan, where the political regime or the state is attempting to spread this "conservative rhetoric that appeals to the 'family values' and 'national traditions' in the shrinking public space."22 Mamedov and other activists consider the power to regulate the discourses of normalcy in sexuality and reproduction cycles (including those of homosexual families) related to the "bodies" and "families" of the ordinary citizens to be an illegal and unlawful sanction by the state to determine who is normal and who is not. Irina Rodulgina, the author of the "Russian homophobia" text, also highlights this alarming tendency of the state and political regime to abruptly enter the "private sphere" and define "appropriate behavior" based on the mere following of the "traditions" and "traditional values" technically ascribed by the new post-socialist political order, its elites, and powerful social actors who are able to control the production of these "orders."

Both the Kyrgyz and the Russian "laws on homophobia," which Mamedov calls "almost identical," shed more light onto the alarming formation of this discourse and its connection to state power. In the discursive analysis of the parliamentary speeches in favor of the law in Kyrgyzstan, Mamedov highlights deputies' justification of this law for the sake of "our citizens" and "our society" that needs to be safeguarded from the "alien Western cultural values."23 In this conjuncture of the political with the pseudo-traditional, the deputies go through numerous layers of re-inventing traditions by constantly appealing

20 Ibid.

21 Georgiy Mamedov, "Illusiya sovetskogo: konservativnyy povorot v Kyrgyzstane. Zakon ob 'anti-gey' propagande i sovetskiy diskurs o gomoseksual'nosti," in Shatalova and Mamedov, *Kvir-kommunizm eto etika*, 63.

22 Ibid., 64.

23 Ibid., 67.

to "our Eastern mentality" (*vostochnyi mentalitet*). This mentality is a com- plex discourse in itself that can mean a million things in different contexts and when pronounced by different actors—from Orientalizing tendencies to attempts to define an indefinable concept that resembles the mysterious "Russian soul" in its abundant meanings and contexts. It is also unclear what each deputy or re-traditionalizer means by the "traditional family" that they feel is threated even by mentioning non-heterosexual relations or identities. Is this a conservative, *vostochnaya* family, where the role of women are reduced to oppressed housekeepers and child-bearers, or is it a nationally homogenous family where Kyrgyz or Kazakh girls ought to marry only within their re- invented "ethnicity"—sometimes to the absurdity of marrying only within the same region or village?

The possible problem with the re-traditionalization constructs is that these volatile and contextual discourses have enormous power by their simple connection to the sacredness of "traditions" and the nation that have suffered domination and endangerment for almost the whole twentieth century. At least this is the discourse of endangerment of the traditions that re-traditionalists constantly ascribe to it. In other words, this power to define the "normal" and "appropriate" can spread across time and space and can be used contextually by the actor who justifies his or her actions by the sacredness of the traditional behavior or set of rules. Does it really matter, then, if these actions may be unlawful, such as bridal abductions, or limiting pluralism and liberties of others, such as imposing laws regulating one's sexuality or sanctioning the assault of young women for talking or engaging with men of a different nationality (ethnicity) or religion? The latter issue, in fact, spurs extensive debates in Kyrgyz and Kazakh internet space, where the clash over the "traditional" and justification over imposing rules on women is located on female bodies as "honored bodies of the nation."[24]

So is it true, then, that in re-traditionalized contexts the patriarchal and nationalist slogans and discourses tend to attack the non-patriarchal minorities—sexual minorities and women? By establishing the order of the "sacred national traditions" and manipulating this discourse through the contextual re-traditionalization when needed, the power of the patriarchy extends over laws, non-traditional values, and the freedoms and rights of all citizens.

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24 See also Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995); Oluwakemi Balogun, "Cultural and Cosmopolitan: Idealized Femininity and Embodied Nationalism in Nigerian Beauty Contests," *Gender and Society* 26, no. 3 (2012): 357–381.

However, ruptures happen, and creative dissenters as well as the online community of mostly urban dwellers in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are still able to resist this totalization of male patriarchal control.

"Mortal Combat" over Gender Roles

On August 25, 2016, the popular Russophone internet magazine *The Steppe* featured five well-dressed "Kazakh feminists" talking about their views on feminism in Kazakhstan.25 It is important to notice that feminism is considered by many re-traditionalists as a "useless" and "foreign" concept. Feminist and women-related issues, in general, occupy a specifically sensitive space for re-traditionalists where "men and masculinity" become de-centered from the power positions and cultural norms that traditions or beliefs about traditions used to grant them. The roundtable in *The Steppe* was just one event in the chain of similar publications in 2016 alone.

Asel Bayandarova, a popular Kazakh blogger who caused media scandal by posting a topless photo of herself on Facebook in April 2016, told one interviewer from another media outlet that, according to re-traditionalists, a Kazakh woman's world "should be very narrow: [her] husband, children, parents, kitchen, pirogi, borsch … but wait, borsch is not from our context, maybe *besh* [*beshparmaq*—the national Central Asian and/or Kazakh dough and meat based dish]."26 And, she continued, "work and self-actualization" for women are considered by re-traditionalists as "naughtiness [a whim]," that can only be allowed "under the patronage of the father, brother, husband … [or] lover." Bayandarova specifically highlighted the "lover" part and continued into a discussion of the institution of *tokal*—the second wife. This practice is usually regarded as acceptable behavior and a venerable tradition among Kazakh men of upper-middle or upper class.

Tokal is, in fact, one of the trendiest "re-traditions" in contemporary Kazakhstan. Bayandarova and others have tried to link this re-traditionalization discourse to the relocation of Kazakhstan's capital from Almaty to Astana in 1997–1998. According to her, many Almaty-based wives refused to move to

25 Kristina Nikulina, "Kazakhskie feministki o lifchikakh, legalizatsii prostitutsii i zhenskom tele," *The Steppe*, August 25, 2016, https://the-steppe.com/news/lyudi/2016–08–23/ feminizm (accessed August 28, 2016).

26 See Gul'nar Tankeeva, "Asel' Bayandarova: Chto eshche nel'zya kazashke," *Ratel*, August 26, 2016, http://ratel.kz/outlook/asel_bajandarova_chto_esche_nelzja_kazashke (accessed September 14, 2016).

Astana, fueling a market in Astana-based "second-wives."27 Others connect it to the rise of neoliberalism. Interestingly, second-wife discourse is also present in Soviet Kazakh literature where only rich tribesmen could "afford" more than one wife (*baibishe*), and where tokal was the younger and most favored wife. However, such behavior was considered by Kazakh Soviet classics as backward, retrospective, and disrespectful to women who were supposed to be the equal citizens of the new Soviet state.28 In contemporary Kazakhstan the re-traditionalization quickly shifts toward defining *tokalization* as appropriate behavior for those who control this discourse—rich Kazakh men with second wives—but condemn those who personify the practice—young Kazakh women subjugated in the role of second wives. In the words of another popular Kazakh blogger, Diana Idris, who penned of the first "anthem of tokals of Kazakhstan," women are "slut shamed" for being tokals, while men are honored for having tokals.29 According to her online evaluations and popular consensus, "a Kazakh woman cannot be successful on their own" but "she must be someone's mistress, daughter, or just a young [sex worker]."

Female blogging is something very new to Kazakhstan. Bayandarova, Idris, and popular Mada Mada (Madina Musina) bloggers all are part of the new wave of Kazakh feminism in one way or another. If the popular bloger Madina Musina (known online as Mada Mada) openly declares her affinity to feminism and calls for a "girl's *toi*" [celebration], similar to Central Asian celebration of young boys' circumcision, but on "girl's first day of menstruation,"30 then Bayandarova sarcastically attacks the stereotypes of "Kazakh woman's appropriate behavior." Another blogger, Diana Idris is eclectic and offers critical parodies of the many characters she portrays on her publically available Instagram account—including the depressed Kazakh public servant; the vicious and authoritarian Kazakh mother-in-law; and the lonely, career-oriented "thirty-something" single woman. Finally, there is an interesting feminist discussion around the *Esquire Kazakhstan* bloggers and editors—Gulnara Bazhkenova who wrote a piece, "Why I do not love traditions,"31 and Kazakh- speaking blogger Gulnur Zhakimbai who writes about "Kazakh sex" and the

27 Ibid.

28 See Diana T. Kudaibergenova, *Rewriting the Nation in Modern Kazakh Literature: Elites and Narratives* (Lanham, md: Lexington Press, 2017).

29 See Diana Idris, "The premature baby of the nation," *Gagarin.tm*, http://gagarin.tm/article/think/1001-nedonoshenniy-rebenok-strany-zagovoril-kolonka-diany-idris/.

30 Mada Mada Facebook page.

31 Gulnara Bazhkenova, "Pochemu ya ne lyublyu traditsii," *Esquire Kazakhstan*, http://m.esquire.kz/content/454-pochemu_ya_ne_lyublyu_traditsii.

absence of vocabulary to define sexual encounters in the Kazakh language. Her July 2016 piece featured a discourse analysis of Kazakh literature and eposes (epics) where she analyzed the ways "Kazakh sex was written about" in traditional literature.32

Bazhkenova's campaign "against traditions" is one of the most notable. In her typically coherent critiques, she takes apart the archaic structure of the ancient world order and worldviews that are no longer compatible with the contexts of contemporary and globalized life in Kazakhstan. She uses recent and medieval historical examples to demonstrate how rote following of "traditions" leads to the stagnation and break up of even the best social and economic systems. Her colleague Gulnur Zhakimbai's attempt to provide a discursive perspective into the "sexual revolution" of the Kazakh literature ends up in a discussion of a typical male gaze.

Mukhtar Auezov and Olzhas Suleimenov are two of the very few authors who can write about women and intimate scenes without the vulgar imagination mainly directed toward the "Kazakh female body" and its objectification and stereotype production. The "body" had to be fair-skinned, considerably toned, and most importantly, very feminine. The "bride" or the female lover in those literary discourses usually had to have long black or dark hair—a beauty- racial stereotype that is currently re-traditionalized in the popular beauty standards for young Kazakh girls. This discourse only "allowed" female sexual freedom within marriage and only until her first pregnancy. This discourse is very clearly written out in Abdizhamal Nurpeisov's *Qan men Ter* (Blood and Sweat) trilogy, for example, that many readers remember for one of its main female characters—the "unfaithful" and miserable Aqbala, the ex-wife of the main protagonist.33

The sexual behaviors of "Kazakh women" are still one of the sacred and least discussed themes of the re-traditionalized discourses. The outburst of Mada Mada popular blogger, who openly talks about the "Kazakh oral sex" online, or Diana Idris who, like Mada Mada, eschews censored language, are the newest generations of the feminist bloggers. They are also considerably younger and more open-minded—both are in their mid-20s and early 30s. However, it was the publication of another faction of Kazakhstani feminists, many of whom were not ethnically Kazakh, that instantly spurred online discussions and heated debates on Facebook.

32 Gulnur Zhakimbai, "Seks, literatura i kazakhi," *Esquire Kazakhstan*, http://esquire.kz/1912-seks_literatura_i_kazahi.

33 Ibid.

It appeared that female sexuality discussions can be dismissed as whims and jokes, but openly declaring that feminism is well and alive in Kazakhstan was very poorly received, and the reactions often broke down along ethnic lines. Kazakh national-patriots attacked revived discussions of "Communist feminism" and the legacy of the Red Terror in Kazakhstan; others initiated the debate on bridal abduction, which many consider to be a long-lost Kazakh tradition. Some male bloggers framed and justified bridal abductions as a more economic decision to "save" the groom from paying the dowry (*qalym*) or to avoid negotiations with the bride's parents who might be against the wedding. Meanwhile bridal abductions flourish in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and many female commentators alluded to the human rights discourse and legal prohibition of abductions. Local statistics are very scarce, but at least 51 cases of bridal abductions were filed in Kazakhstan in the first five months of 2015, but many more were likely settled without involving the local police. Until the power to define the appropriate or romanticized discourse is in hands of the patriarchal actors though, it will be hard for female voices to be heard, unless these voices are radical or in some ways contradict the re-invented traditional values (re-traditionalization).

The Steppe journal published one such counter-discussion that involved a number of young contemporary artists. On August 26, 2016, Zoya Falkova, a young Kazakhstani contemporary artist, shared a link on her personal Facebook page to a transcript of the *Steppe* discussion. The text had five Kazakhstani feminists of different ages and ethnicities talking about their feminism, beauty standards, conservative family life, and refusal to wear bras. The link directed readers to a passage about "the postcolonial syndrome of Kazakh patriarchal society." Falkova, however, forgot to include quotation marks, so initially it appeared as if the passage was her own reflections, instead of a statement by activist Aliya Kadyrova. Falkova shared the following quote from the activist Aliya Kadyrova,34 that later spurred a scandal involving another talented Kazakshtani contemporary artist Anvar Musrepov:

> Aliya Kadyrova, journalist and liberal feminist:
>
> Many former colonies have a tendency to painfully search for their own identity and to desperately protect national culture. Moreover, this identity is not searched for through the study of literature and history, but is based on some erroneous myths. In our case this unfortunately results in sanctimony and inward looking. People strive not to forget "traditions

34 Kadyrova's interview is fourth in the series, https://www.the-steppe.com/news/lyudi/2016–08–25/feminizm.

> of the ancestors" even if these traditions are mere myths and norms that maybe were useful at some point but nowadays lost their relevance and only impede the social development.35

In the next paragraph of her feminist text against "invented traditions" published at The Steppe website Kadyrova rightfully addresses the problems that such re-traditionalization brings to everyday life of ordinary women in Kazakhstan—"domestic violence, rape victim blaming, unequal payments" and widespread sexism that leads to the "acceptable" norm of crimes against women, "including the bridal abduction." In the process of re-sharing (this article was highly popular and widely discussed online at the end of August 2016) Falkova, the contemporary artist made a mistake that made it look as if she blamed "Kazakh traditions" for backwardness and bridal abductions. Another young contemporary artist from Kazakhstan, Anvar Musrepov, soon found himself caught up in this miscommunication. Musrepov is best known for his brilliant works against religious re-traditionalization, for example, his work *Kharam* (Sin), he defended bridal abduction as a romantic Kazakh tradition in this online discussion.36 When Falkova changed her discussion status to "private" mode, Musrepov posted the following explanation on his own Facebook page on August 26, 2016, where it was accessible to Musrepov's Facebook friends:

> There are two categories of bridal kidnapping in contemporary Kazakhstan. The first scenario is when everything happens according to the mutual consent of both families and bridal kidnapping is staged as a symbolic gesture and when people are happy to take part in this pretend process and feel their connection to the tradition.
>
> The second variation is a banal criminal abduction of the person that is prosecuted by the law for five to eight years of imprisonment without any justifications of traditions.
>
> The ordinary folk lives in its own world where going to the familial celebrations and participation in symbolic plays [like bridal kidnapping] remain the only entertainment and these [traditions] did not appear out of nowhere.
>
> To disallow people to enact the traditions that they sincerely love means to return to the times of the Bolshevik repressions, and I hope we all quite clearly remember how many people died [during these

35 Ibid.

36 Anvar Musrepov's Facebook page, discussion on bridal abduction and *The Steppe*'s publication about Kazakhstani feminists.

> repressions] when the Soviet power [*vlast'*] decided to teach nomads how to live as settlers.
>
> The criminal background around bridal abductions is not rooted in the national culture, but is the wider social problem, a consequence of the living standards and access to the quality education.
>
> Poverty that turns people into animals is not connected to the problems of our mentality in any which way. And one ought to be brave to admit that the root of the problem is in the economy and politics, and one should not arrogantly ridicule it with the colonial cynicism to the trauma of the national identification.37

I use this whole discussion as part of the "Facebook ethnography" technique used here to demonstrate the re-traditionalized debates in contemporary Kazakhstan. Musrepov's discourse is in many ways postcolonial as well—it does bear the trauma of Soviet unlawfulness, and in his attempts to defend re-traditionalization of the bridal abductions he tries to reclaim power over defining what is "appropriate" and "acceptable" and what is not. Interestingly, neither Musrepov nor Falkova nor Kadyrova mentioned the discourse of *shame* that is directly connected to the bridal abduction and the fact that if a woman refuses to marry the abductor, she does not have many options to recovering her "honor."38 The honor of the bride in this traditionalist narrative is directly connected to her virginity, and many bridal abductions involve rape and other forms of physical violence—an issue not explicitly mentioned anywhere in the discussion. The discussion on "traditions" here becomes as distant from the context as it might get in a cosmopolitan urban setting—most of the Facebook participants of this discussion simply never participated or experienced bridal abduction on their own, were not dragged into a car or held against their will in a house away from their family who may not know anything about the abduction. In fact, these discussions about the physical and moral violence against women are rare on Kazakh websites. Websites like Zhasalash have family-related rubrics (*Otbasy*) where bridal kidnappings are discussed as part of the five types of marriages—out of love, out of arrangement, and so on,39 or in the letters sent

37 From Anvar Musrepov's Facebook page.

38 See Cynthia Werner, "Bridal Abduction in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Making a Shift towards Patriarchy through Local Discourses of Shame and Tradition," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009): 314–331; R. Kleinbach and L. Salimjanova, "Kyz ala kachuu and adat: non-consensual bride kidnapping tradition in Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 2 (2007): 217–233.

39 http://www.zhasalash.kz/otbasy/16225.html?lang=kz.

to the Kazakh-language newspapers and websites where authors claim that marriage is the best outcome for a young Kazakh woman.40

The nationalist paradigm tries to cover and protect the honor of the nation that is transmitted through the female body and her reproduction of the nation. Therefore many re-traditionalized discourses related to gender roles or freedoms that might endanger the female honor—her virginity—are considered anti-traditional. The voices of Kazakhstani feminists, including Falkova, become more vocal but still are considered radical and dangerous to the patriarchal social order against which they stand out—against the secondary or voiceless position of the woman where she is usually ignored and such active ignoring is justified by re-invented national traditions and "rituals where women's participation in decision-making is ignored or is completely absent."41 Young contemporary artists are taking part in these heated discussions and in the formation of these discourses. Falkova and Musrepov later found common grounds to their debates and even exhibited together at the Venice Biennale in summer 2017. Falkova also held a solo exhibition in June 2017 in Almaty where she openly displayed her feminist artistic ideas about the male body and shame (*uyat* in Kazakh), female division of labor, and unpaid housework (many of her works are painted with traditional Russian *borscht* soup on white canvas), and liberated female sexuality.

The Facebook discussion on bridal kidnapping in summer 2016 was just the beginning of a wider and possibly active and critical discussion of re-traditionalization in the Kazakh society where, in the words of Asel Bayandarova,

> We are so "highly moral" that even the smallest and non-specific knowledge about the human body is shameful and is discrediting our nation. At the same time, we live in the country where flourishes corruption and people commit wild crimes—but looks like we are more tolerant to the latter [than the former].42

Is it possible then for re-invented traditions (or re-traditionalized processes, as I term them interchangeably) to become the last remnant of the avail- able value system to which many social actors cling when other value systems fail or are absent? If we come back to Georgy Mamedov's discussion of what he calls the neoconservative turn in Kyrgyz society and its parliament's attempts to pass an "anti-gay law," then he claims that "neoconservatives" or re-traditionalizers "attempt to construct an illusion of a societal contract that

40 http://www.zhasalash.kz/makataev-22/6622.html?lang=kz.

41 Zoya Falkova Facebook page.

42 Tankeeva, "Asel' Bayandarova."

is based on the values shared by all members of the society regardless of their class background."[43] The only problem with re-invented national traditions and values is the narrow approach to another social construct and the legacy of the Soviet categorization—the institution of ethnicity.

In both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan everything considered as Kazakh/ Kyrgyz traditional or re-traditionalized, including the bridal abductions dis- course, became sacred elements or themes of the endangered Kazakh or Kyrgyz traditional discourse than no one can denounce or approach critically, any deviation from the hegemonic perception of what these traditions might mean. Those who might seemingly attack or criticize it from outside the Kazakh or Kyrgyz ethnic communities are considered the "Other," who is not capable of understanding "the true Kazakh/Kyrgyz values." The discussion about the sacrilege of Kazakh traditions in Askhat Akhemiyarov's kazans installations in summer 2016 in Astana clearly demonstrates this problem.

Following the initial discussion about sacrilege with kazans, Mukhtar Taizhan, one of the informal leaders of the Kazakh national-patriotic movement, wrote to Valeria Ibrayeva, the well-known cultural critic and self- identified cultural creole on Facebook: "You still cannot understand us [Kazakhophone conservatives]." Taizhan specified that the world he belongs to—Kazakhophone, nationalist, and conservative and the world represented by Ibrayeva—cosmopolitan, Russophone, in part creolized and self-reflexive "are two different worlds" where Taizhan and his followers see only sacrilege in the "overturned" kazan installation where others "cannot see it"[44] because they simply are not aware of the sacred Kazakh traditions. In other words, national- ism and re-traditionalization combine to create further ethno-social demarcations within civil society and socio-cultural discussions in general. And if those who accidentally or intentionally claim the traditions and the traditional field happen to be Kazakh, as happened with Akhemiyarov, all of their previous successes might be forgotten in the heat of the re-traditionalized justification of the sacred traditions. In both cases, this leads to the limitations of pluralityand cultural dissent.

The division and the demarcation into us and Others that Taizhan makes in this discussion is located within contemporary art, which by its nature con- tests the "relations and forces that are founded by discourses of power"[45] and

43 Mamedov, "The Illusion of the Soviet," 72.

44 From the Facebook discussion on Askhat Akhmediyarov's page that happened on July 31 and attracted more than 100 comments (within one day) from Kazakh national-patriots, artists, curators, political activists and popular bloggers.

45 Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 4 (2003): 58.

thus is supposed to directly contest discourses of re-traditionalization, nationalism, and gender. Besides, contemporary art by its nature is concerned with the free-floating temporality rather than established clear-cut divisions of the national historical continuity. Contemporary artists become the radical and critical voices of the present, the active critics and interveners of the "contemporary." As Terry Smith writes, contemporary art has a preoccupation with "an interrogation into the ontology of the present, one that asks: What it is to exist in the conditions of contemporaneity?"46

Finally, because many contemporary artists in Kazakhstan and other post-socialist states work independently from the official state structures or ideology and because many of them are not connected with any particular movement, including nationalist movements, contemporary artists tend to occupy a relatively independent position within the society. This allows them to be the rare voices of the civil society in formation, the producers of the new civic culture and cultural dissent. Other non-political social voices, including those united around the national-patriotic agenda in Kazakhstan, may also have nothing to do with the ruling regime but because their agenda precludes a plurality of views and, moreover, because it creates the categorization of discourses and binary views on Kazakh and non-Kazakh groupness, traditional or "loose" values, bad, "misunderstanding," "lost" and even "disgusting" individual or collective action (such as art, for example), it is hard to place them within the group that advocates for plurality. On the contrary, as a nationalist movement they advocate for the specific ideas of superiority and power of one group only without providing clear and equal positions to the Others. In the next and final section of the article I provide further discussion of the sacred national discourse and how artist and activist Askhat Akhmediyarov contests this nationalistic discourse through his art works and public engagement.

Artist Claiming Tradition and Sacred Nationness

Askhat Akhmediyarov currently lives and works in Astana. He is one of the first innovative contemporary artists in post-Soviet Kazakhstan who quickly assumed the authoritative role and carried out a number of well-known performances in Almaty in the 1990s. In 2015 he organized his first solo exhibition "in the last 20 years" as he himself puts it, called *Naphthalene*, followed by another personal exhibition, *Singular/Plural*, in 2016 in the new National Museum of Kazakhstan. Both exhibitions were highly acclaimed by the press, curators,

46 Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?*, 2.

and the public. Akhmediyarov works with a number of mediums including photography, performances, paintings, and installations. His works examine issues of inequality, economic transitions and political challenges.

Akhmediyarov's 2015 *Naphthalene* exhibition was inspired by the "transitionary" issues of the 1990s—financial as well as cultural and social crisis when the family heritage—his grandmother's possessions were sold or thrown away by relatives instead of passing them on to the grandchildren as family relics. According to the tradition that Akhmediyarov tried to transmit through this work, grandmothers in Kazakh society need to pass knowledge and traditions onto their grandchildren along with the family relics they kept in their dowry chest. In the artist's interpretation, his grandmother used naphthalene to preserve some of the possessions in the hope chest but after her death even naphthalene could not keep this heritage and knowledge together. So the exhibition was an attempt to reflect on this personal and wider lament over the loss of the heritage.

In the pictures presented at the *Naphthalene* we follow the artist into the steppe where he lives in a house with no walls or rooftop, watches tv with no electricity, draws his paintings and then burns them. In an interview he explains, "that it was an attempt to show the contemporary realities of the lost nomad consciousness."47 He continued the discussion of losing heritage and traditions in his 2016 installation for the Astana Art Fest, the annual urban public art event organized in Kazakhstan's capital city Astana since 2015. But it was that exact installation that in late July 2016 raised concerns and scandalous discussions about overturned kazans of the installation. These scandals were public and were widely discussed online. Some activists even addressed an open letter to the Astana governor, asking him to remove the installation immediately while it was supposed to be on set, in central Astana, for another two months.

The criticism started pouring onto Akhmediyarov after the festival ended and his installation became one of the most popular works of the year. According to the organizers, the Festival was designed to popularize contemporary art and to allow the viewers to "perceive new dimensions of contemporary art types and advance [their] cultural [knowledge] level."48 The festival was organized with the active help and financial support of the city administration (*akimat*). The Astana Art Festival was not the first attempt to organize public art festivals in Kazakhstan where Almaty-based Artbat Fest was successful for a number of years and attracted international and local audiences. The Astana

47 Askhat Akhmediyarov's interview with the author, June 2016, Almaty-Astana.

48 See ArtFest official website, http://artfest.kz/o-artfest/.

Art Fest in 2016 was the second attempt of the organizers to "direct the attention to Astana's growing art scene"49 and away from Almaty. It was organized on 4–6 July to coincide with the Astana Day (6 July 6) and included a number of theatrical performances, artistic installations and public art exhibitions.

In the artist's own words, the installation symbolized "Kazakh traditions and forgotten values" of the Kazakh people where "women take care of the family and of the household."50 In this installation Akhmediyarov focused on the tremendous and sometimes harmful effects of globalization on local culture and traditions. He defined "local" as Kazakhstan's postcolonial past and present—society's turbulent and traumatic relation to the lost heritage of nomadism and *qazaqshiliq* (nation-ness). The giant necklace made of kazans represented Kazakh women's "sacrifice" to their families when they had to spend so much time around a kazan or in the kitchen nourishing and caring for their loved ones.51 So in Akhemiyarov's own words—his attempt was to remind Kazakh women of their special role as the keepers of traditions, but some re-traditionalists eventually wanted to see only overturned kazans, not an art work in this installation.

Conclusion

The criticism around Akhmediyarov's work illustrated the contradictions happening in Kazakh contemporary society. There is a growing gap—or, as some commentators prefer to call it, parallel worlds emerging—between those claiming re-traditionalization as the only way to survive in the rapidly globalizing but slowly decolonizing context of post-Soviet Kazakhstan and those who also defend the pluralistic views of art and cultural production. This created a peculiar situation where those who claim to be Kazakh nationalists or patriots were equally condemning the Kazakh political contemporary artist Akhmediyarov and his cosmopolitan, Russian speaking urbanized supporters—art curators and critics who were told to "start learning Kazakh first" to understand the sacred Kazakh traditions.52

This conflict, however, demonstrates how Kazakhstani society remains antagonized and polarized on very specific national and ethnic issues. Regard- less of the political order, prevalent or absent ideologies, the society is able to

49 Interview with one of the participants of the ArtFest.

50 Askhat Akhmediyarov's interview with the author, June 2016, Almaty-Astana.

51 Ibid.

52 From August 2016 Facebook discussion on Akhmediyarov's wall.

Figure 2 *Askhat Akhmediyarov, "Azhemnin Kozi" (*Grandmother's Eyes*) series, Dubai, UAE (Courtesy of Askhat Akhmediyarov)*

produce and circulate its own value systems, frameworks of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors and re-invent traditions in this whole messy process of trying to stabilize their system of meanings in the new social and political context. The only problem is that the dominant re-traditionalized discourse tends to limit the participation of non-Kazakhs or non-Kazakh speakers and all those who might be critical of this new dominant system.

Throughout the discussion of this article we have seen how sexual minori- ties who are not supposed to be categorized as "minorities" in the first place or "vulnerable" yet honorable female bodies and even striking contemporary artists are divided into "appropriate" or "inappropriate" categories. The volatile re-traditionalized discourses that depend on the context and the power of the actor who is using these discourses should not be the base for any type of order in these post-socialist societies and states. It is simply a dangerous and undemocratic discourse. Akhmediyarov's attempt to go against this tendency is remarkable—he refused to remove the kazans installation and recently created another installation to add to "Azhemnin Kozi" (*Grandmother's Eyes*) series, now in Dubai—the multi-layered "grand" traditional necklace is made of the traditional Central Asian and Kazakh *kese* or *piala*—cups with different colours and traditional ornaments (see Figure 2). Ever since the initial scandal, Akhmediyarov was "dubbed" by the local art community as the "Kazakh Ai Wei Wei" and hopefully he will not stop anytime soon.

This discussion is important due to the growing power of alternative voices and platforms for discussions that contemporary art and contemporary artists in Central Asia provide. As independent actors bounded only by their desire to produce cultural content and valuable cultural critique, these actors soon will be able to spur further debates and thus create more discourses in order to give way to further pluralism in the society with its growing anxiety over cultural, social and economic disorientation in the light of heightening political authoritarianism and myopia of the political elites on the context of social problems.