

Review of *Making Interstices* – Central Asia Pavilion: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan 53rd International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, Ed. By Beral Madra

Echoing the grandiose optimism of *Making Worlds*, the designated theme of the 53rd International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, the Central Asia Pavilion has responded with *Making Interstices*, a title as self-aware as the art it represents. In her lead essay, Beral Madra, pavilion curator and editor of the accompanying catalog, reminds readers that an interstice is a small space in body tissue, an “empty cell compartment.” Interstices, she suggests, are where the potential for real creativity and social responsiveness exist. At its strongest, the catalog’s scholarly essays and featured artworks are assessments of the accuracy of Madra’s belief.

Much about the contemporary art, cultural identity, and scholarly discourse of this region reflects the relative newness of these territories as independent political nations. This newness is the source of both challenges and opportunities for the regions’ artists. Not least among the issues these artists face is the lack of knowledge in the larger global art scene about their respective country’s artistic traditions and contemporary production. Thus, among the highlights of the catalog are the four short thematic essays, each featuring one of the included nations: Oksana Shatlova writing on Kazakhstan; Gamal Bokonbev on Kyrgyzstan; Larisa Dodkhudoeva on Tajikistan; and Boris Chukhovich on Uzbekistan. Particularly useful are the contributions by Bokonbaev and Dodkhudoeva, which survey artistic developments in their respective regions over the two decades since independence.

Beyond an introduction to the contemporary art scene in central Asia, the scholarly essays respond to Madra’s search for socially engaged cultural forums. There is a constant tension running throughout these essays as the authors attempt to balance claims to cultural particularity with both a regional affiliation and a global art scene, or recognition of traditional cultural elements with an apparent disdain for the legacy of the Soviet past. Thus, when these authors contradict each other or even their own assessments (as they often do), they reveal their engaged effort to contend with the particularities that make this region fascinating and promising as a source of artistic inquiry and cultural criticism today. Herein, these essays leave many questions unanswered: what distinguishes the particular identities of these post-Soviet states and how does their shared Soviet legacy unite them, or how will these newly independent nations contend with the diversity of their own histories or relate to the politically contentious nations that surround them? Nevertheless, these questions provide a foundation for what is already a growing presence of these nations’ artists in the global arena and, thus, what will surely be a growing interest in and study of the region.

The subsequent portion of the catalog provides images from each of the five artistic installations paired with a statement. Unfortunately, inconsistent and partial documentation in this section limits the voice of the art and artists in the debates begun in the previous section. Although Madra’s curatorial essay highlights video as the central component of the pavilion, no video stills or installation shots are included in the catalog.

Such a fundamental disconnect between text and image provides readers a partial understanding of the exhibition. The catalog also lacks an exhibition checklist cementing the catalog's failure to serve as the permanent document of an ephemeral exhibition.

Other omissions also disturb the success of this publication. Place, location, and issues of proximity versus distance are chief concerns throughout the catalog. The central design strategy of the catalog is a stylized brown and white pattern that stretches over both the cover and a centerfold of the interior dividing the essays and images. Sited with pinpoint dots, the names of the artists, curators, and the Venice Biennale commissioner draw the pattern into focus as an interpretation of the landmasses and seascapes that stretch between Venice and central Asia. (Inexplicably, the names of the essays' authors were not included on the map and the contributors' section contained only select biographies.) Elsewhere, the pavilion's artists' and administrators' names are labeled with their respective city of origin, but without national location. Given the desire of the pavilion to see these artists as part of a region, rather than four separate nations, or given the globalized culture of the contemporary art economy, it may make sense to remove the political boundaries and to see these people as relatively proximate or distant within space. However, I argue, it is precisely the recognition of these political boundaries as marking independent national territories that permits their inclusion among the pavilions of Venice Biennale. For that reason alone, the catalog would be stronger had it included a detailed map demarcating the territory of these nations and, also, those surrounding them. This visual design omission is a ready symbol for the stunning absence of any reference to the extremely dynamic cultural geography of this formerly Soviet region, located at the crux of the its former ruling empire, China, India, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

Moreover, contextualization into the larger contemporary art world is conspicuously lacking. Indeed, contrary to Oksana Shatalova's statement that "Kazakhstan arts ... [do] not hav[e] an empiric referent," or Boris Chukhovich's statement that "Uzbek contemporary art takes its own way," the images in *Making Interstices* are laden with cultural references and read as post-modern montages of charged symbols from the global art scene. Specifically, Uzbeki artist Anzor Salidjanov's Photoshop montage *Danae, Tribute to Rembrandt* works with countless referents from the likes of Lisette Model to Yasumasa Morimura, in addition to the obvious titular reference. Meanwhile, Shatalova's own performance-based photographs of herself wearing scarlet accessories and submerged in milk recall the feminist photographic performances of Hannah Wilke in their awareness of the feminist strategy of self-subjectification as a means of reclaiming power as well as their use of the bathtub as a place of illness, rest, and healing. Such striking quotations of international art can be found throughout the featured artworks, suggesting that no matter how stifled by Soviet rule or disenfranchised from the art economy this region was previously, its artists have quickly subsumed the aesthetic language of the global art era.

Indeed, *Making Interstices* proves itself to be a fitting title as this modest catalog brings together a group of artists and cultural critics determined to use their small space in this much larger body to agitate, question, and prove themselves, often it seems, to each other as much as to any others. They reveal a territory of cultural production at the crossroads

of significant issues facing contemporary art today and, perhaps more importantly, they leave this space open to further research and new voices.

--Mitra Abbaspour

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