

Resistance in the Asian Way

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The romantic word “resistance” is being widely and eagerly circulated in the field of contemporary art, as it encloses in its essence one of the key symbols of faith in contemporary art – its claim and volition of resisting the “natural order” of capitalism.

To be more precise, the word “resistance” usually designates a credo of neo-avant-garde art-activism – political gestures in the aesthetic field such as the creation of autonomous enclaves on the map of global neo-liberalism, and the criticism of institutions and systems of power. The Situationists in the 60-70s, or contemporary interventionists may serve as examples of such a “resistance.”

If we attempt to apply this term to art in Central Asia, or more specifically in the Republic of Kazakhstan, we might discover that our art doesn’t “resist” actively enough. In any case this is a euphemism. We have no such “political” art practice. Or, it would be better to say that the most interesting and representative examples of our art just do not belong in this category.

Let’s start, for instance, with a “collateral evidence” that in Kazakhstan, all significant art collectives broke up into atoms, whereas a *collective* of like-minded persons is a typical form of self-organization for art-activists who unite as protest groups or fighting brigades. In Kazakhstan, the art collectives of the past were rather *supporting groups* – groups that were supporting the development and rooting of local art and art institutions –, i.e., they were united, not against, but for something. Despite all their differences, art collectives formed in Kazakhstan during or right after the disintegration of the USSR (*Kokserek*, Red Tractor, Green Triangle, etc.) were powered by the shared pathos of pioneerism, the pathos of “new, free and fashionable art,” the pathos of populism and even a prophetic pathos. This was especially true for the *Kokserek* group with their radical, bloodthirsty animal killing actions that were rather conventional illustrations of the issue of the “Other” in an international context. It was the *time of manifestos*, a time of enthusiasm and inspiration – energies that can be transiently unifying.

It is no surprise that the pathos of pioneerism ran out gradually. All art groups formed in the 90s practically fell apart. A time of collective manifestos was turned into a period of personal research and expression, a period of post-avant-garde recording, documenting, and producing metaphors. that visualized the hardly explainable “Pan-Asian” mythologies, images of the “third world,” or metaphors of “empire debris.” The production of such visual images (the perception of which requires sensitivity to poetry and irony, creativity and even intuition rather than logic) is in fact the general line and specialization of Central Asian, and in particular Kazakh art. A wide range of examples is available here. We can recall a photo-series Said Atabekov has been working on for two years titled *Daroga v Rim* (The way to Rome): lone figures in the steppe – wanderers, animals, cars, technical constructions – all seem to be crossing the frame from the left to the right, imitating movement yet at the same time posing motionless. And the sculptures in Erbol Meldibekov’s photographs that are part of the series titled *Hallisyunatsiya* (Hallucinations) which replicate the shapes and textures of works by Swiss modernist Alberto Giacometti, yet are made of organic material – dead flesh and meat. *Pik Pabedi* (Victory Peak) is a series of objects made by the same artist – mountain reliefs on the bottoms of American foil plates and Soviet enamel pots. In his video *Çyorniy Kvadrat* (The Black Square), the “trade mark” of modernism is transformed into a random figure formed by a mass of wiggling worms. In numerous videos by Almagul Menlibayeva Asian women appear in the steppe like constant elements of Asian identity. We can turn around and recall junk-objects by Georgy Triakin-Bukharov, assembled from the recyclable waste of horses, pigs and camels and abundantly charged with irony. And so on, and so forth... Metaphors may be subtle and witty, precise, exact, and unexpected; in any case, this is the opposite pole of political art-activism which usually operates with clear and logical constructs.

In Central Asia Western neo-liberalism has led to intentions of solidarity rather than criticism until now, because it has been perceived as an unreachable utopia. In our region there is no established art system and there is no contemporary art market – its creation being the desired dream of artists. Our art is a zone of *loyalty and solidarity* rather than of resistance – of course, I do not mean solidarity with state authority structures, but with institutions in the international art-system which are legitimate components of the global capitalist system. That is why verbal fetishes of contemporary art like “institutional critique” are disseminating quite slowly in the Central Asian context. Institutions are not being criticized precisely because there is nothing to criticize.

With regard to artistic reactions to local political developments, the situation is much more complicated. There is a lack of any clear critical message in practice – just a compilation of more or less witty metaphors.

Let us recall that after the collapse of the USSR the map of Eurasia witnessed the emergence of strange geopolitical structures – Eastern despotic states with cosmetic puppet-democratic institutions. Kazakhstan is a presidential, and after the so-called “democratic reform” in 2007, a “presidential-parliamentary” republic. However, as a matter of fact, it is essentially an authoritarian state where political processes are stipulated by competing clans, their leaders being either members of the president’s family, or persons from his inner circle (almost a medieval struggle for throne between relatives). As foreign press calls it, the opposition here is “tamed and in the pocket,” launched by the president himself to create an illusion of pluralism, and citizens feel completely removed from the management of the state. Consequently, the society in Kazakhstan became increasingly apolitical, distrusting democratic institutions in general, and regarding state authority structures as things-in-themselves. However, apolitical attitude and indifference are sometimes transformed into a love of the power system as a sort of God-sent substance that obeys the principle “there are no bad seasons in nature” (love here obviously stems from a mixture of fear and caution). The safest way for persons who are hypnotized by the official propaganda is to follow it in a humble way. During the “pre-crisis” period, the constant element in the rhetoric of the government was the mantra of “stability” (the regime became stronger due to the increase in hydrocarbon prices); today, it is “restoration of stability.” Citizens are loyal to government. According to foreign media, 1990 elections in Kazakhstan were forged; yet in 2007, people unanimously voted for the presidential party *Nur Otan* that became the only party that passed the 7 percent electoral barrier and flooded the whole parliament.

The state is perceived by its citizens as closed, autistic, and inaccessible, like a mystical Kafkaesque Castle. And talking about the situation in post-Soviet Asia is possible only through using a figurative language resembling the language of myths.

Or – following a rational approach – it is possible to record and document the situation without having any ambitions to influence it; and this, as a matter of fact, is what is reflected in art.

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If you are still going to search for sparks of *resistance* in Kazakhstan art, then you must forget about the correlation with the logic and purposefulness of art-activism and attach to this word existential, metaphysical, and even irrational meanings.

Of course, this approach allows the definition to be extended infinitely; every work of art could be defined as “resistant” to something (even to magnetic storms).

However, I would like to choose a definition which could symbolically indicate a specific “resistance in the Asian way.” As it is in art, the most adequate means to employ to for describing an irrational reality here would be a poetic figure, a metaphor.

In this case I consider as a quite witty metaphor a performance by the video artist Natalia Dyu from Kazakhstan, who compared the caterpillar costume she wore in her work titled *Gusenitsa* (Caterpillar) to the fetters of a “*yurodivy*” (a Holy Fool). In Almaty, where Natalia was shooting her video performance, summer conditions are extremely hot even for a lightly dressed person, and this heavy costume turned an ordinary street stroll into a serious agony (during the performance Natalia lost 5 kilos).

Now then, the figure of “*yurodivy*.” This figure emerges from time to time in post-Soviet art, especially in so-called radical art. For instance, the *Siniye Nosi* (Blue Noses) group presented new *yurodivys* in a series of photographs titled “New Yurodivys,” where the members of the group posed with Moscow churches in the background. In contrast to Natalia, they were freezing as they were wearing only briefs in the winter. And yet, even though it may not be original, I would like to revive this image once again.

As we know, a *yurodivy* is a person who deliberately imitates madness and flouts everyday life ethics. This Slavic word originates from the word “*urod*” (i.e., “mad” or “fool,” but it could also mean a “deformed” or an “ugly” person) and contemporary artists in general are perceived by their fellow citizens as morally deformed persons (or rather immoral persons).

By their very lifestyle *yurodivys* exposed the imperfection of the mundane life – abasing themselves “for Christ,” sneering at themselves and others, thus reminding society that everything in this life is transient and empty. *Yurodivys* used to have an ascetic life style, deliberately experiencing deprivation and pain; they used to wear fetters and token clothes, or even used no clothes at all (just like the Blue Noses in winter), slept in the company of stray dogs, loudly rebuked tsars in city squares, and so on. Contemporary artists also happily justify their strange and sometimes provocative behaviour; however, theirs is not an ordinary hooligan act, but a hooligan act with a sublime goal, a message addressed to society, which can be a declaration or critique of injustice, an appeal for mercy towards the fallen ones, and so forth. It is as if these noble motives give them the right to all sorts of disgusting and scandalous behaviour.

Another important resemblance is that *yurodivys* – the “holy fools” – are public figures like contemporary artists. In contrast to hermits, they always tend to be the center of attention, provoking the reaction of the crowd; like artists, they try to convey their message by attracting attention through their scandalous gestures.

Finally and most significantly, *yurodivys* are accusers acting alone. This kind of “resistance” was typical in the Middle Ages and in conservative societies in general (that is why Tsar Peter I, a proponent of Westernization, had good reason to fight against *yurodiviyism* as a phenomenon).

Yurodivys did not try to change the existing order of things. They only emphasized the imperfection of the world through their own disagreement with it.

There was an absolute constant for them, a constant personified by Christ and his Kingdom – to this they compared mundane life, and this comparison was certainly not in favour of the latter.

We can only make assumptions about what this constant is for a contemporary artist, a representative of “resistance the Asian way” – it might be a Kantian moral law or something similar. In any case, the artist can see the imperfection of the world but, alas, would not repeat after an

activist, “another world is possible.” The artist does not believe in any changes. Therefore, the figure of the artist who “resists the Asian way,” and is stuck in autistic, imperfect reality, is more tragic than the figure of a *yurodivy* for whom the mundane world was only a threshold to the world of the good and the eternal.

This is the kind of passive resistance we can find in our art when the addressee of a protest seems to elude definition. This is like a protest in the ontological sense, a protest against the deaf, autistic reality.

Artworks by Natalia Dyu are quite representative in this respect. The artist always acts as the hero in her videos. And her recent works are, in fact, a practice of public *yurodivyism*.

In December 2007 she made a performance titled *Na Zemle* (On the Ground) in the South Indian city of Mumbai. In Moscow only several *yurodivys* slept on the ground in the winter, but pavements in tropical Mumbai are used by wide strata of society in the winter. Natalia, wearing a white suit, lied down by the paupers and tried to get some sleep, or at least some rest while reading a newspaper. She made the performance in about ten different locations in the city, such as the “European” shopping area, the slums, and the bazaar. While a domestic pavement sleeper did not attract any attention, the “Other” who tried to join in the local context elucidated a wide spectrum of emotions. Crowds of city dwellers laughing, yelling, and condemning invariably gathered continually around lying Natalia (in one instance, she had to interrupt the performance and escape as the populace started to throw stones and bottles at her). The message of the *yurodivy* was certainly heard, but as usual, it did not affect the status quo. However, *yurodivys* never aim at attaining such a goal – it was only a temporary boiling point that appeared and disappeared on the smooth indifferent surface.

Natalia constantly practices this kind of spiritual training. She spent a couple of days in extremely hot weather in July 2008 wearing a “caterpillar” costume almost made for the winter and shared the ordinary leisure time of Almaty residents in the amusement park. In April 2009 Natalia, dressed in a heavy “snail” costume, crawled slowly along Almaty pavements – and not on the friendly soil but on the rough asphalt.

That is how “resistance the Asian way” is being realized – just taking place, no impact intended. Nevertheless, some changes in the environment do accompany the appearance of *yurodivys*; and these changes are being expressed as well as limited by the personalities of *yurodivys* themselves.

This is probably even more than what could be expected.

Translated from Russian by Anaida Ghazaryan