

The ArtEast School for Contemporary Art: Interview with Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev

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In this interview Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev discuss how the ArtEast school provides a non-traditional and non-commercial forum for contemporary art that had not previously existed in their home country. Despite its financial and material constraints, the ArtEast School fosters a space of dynamic social engagement and its pedagogical success can be seen as a model for international education.

Introduction

The work of Bishkek-based artists Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev examines the social and economic dynamics of their region in Central Asia and more specifically Kyrgyzstan, their home country. Tracking the transformations undergone since the collapse of the Soviet Union, their videos, photographs, and installations reveal startling contrasts of past and present - the possibilities of a newly independent country as well as its new challenges. From the emergence of a “new silk road” for trade to the life of Central Asians in diaspora, Kasmalieva’s and Djumaliev’s works pursue questions of local identity under constraints of an emerging globalization.

While they trained at art academies in the former Soviet Union, their work contests the many orthodoxies of that system. Their large-scale multi-screen installations have been exhibited at numerous contemporary art biennials as well as international museums and galleries, for example the artists’ work was featured in the first Central Asian pavilion for the Venice Biennial of 2005. As contemporary art from Central Asia gained increasing international visibility, Kasmalieva and Djumaliev took a year out of their busy schedule of exhibitions to create a school for young Bishkek artists, which was run via ArtEast, their not-for-profit cultural organization that has been involved with several large-scale contemporary art exhibitions in Central Asia since the 2000s. The startling successes of the ArtEast School were revealed at the 2012 Korean Biennial of contemporary art when some of these young artists with one year of training exhibited alongside well-known mid-career artists.

Yet as the artists mention in the interview that follows, their concerns were never about economic success, but rather with providing a non-traditional and non-commercial forum for contemporary art that had not previously existed. Despite its financial and material constraints, the ArtEast School fostered a space of dynamic social engagement – and its pedagogical success can be seen as a model for international education.

The Interview

Question 1: In the 2012 Gwangju Biennial (Korea), you exhibited art works created with students in your ArtEast School for Contemporary Art. This school was a project that you facilitated during the course of one year. What motivated you to form the ArtEast School?

The idea of the school came spontaneously after being frustrated with the results of the contemporary art exhibitions and workshops that we had previously organized. Of course, we had anticipated educational and cultural results from these events of the 1990s. But relatively quickly we realized that these forms of exhibition and education were not really effective. Despite the high level of interest of international artists and curators in contemporary art from Central Asia, the Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan art community still had very few participants represented in international exhibitions. We understood that we needed to create a new contemporary art community but we did not know how.

There were many young people coming to visit ArtEast and among them were some friends of our son. They were curious and we often discussed contemporary art. We saw their interest in this topic and we decided to make an open call for students. Our curricula combined theoretical and practical elements. During the first year we worked without financial support. Then later, this project was supported by Artscollaboratory together with the Open Society Foundation.

When Mami Kataoka, one of the curators of Gwangju Biennale came to our studio and saw works of both our students and our own work, she was really impressed by the results and conditions of the school. The topic of the 2012

biennial was "Round Table" and she invited us to present our own works as well as the project of the School at the biennale.

Question 2: ArtEast School was a very successful educational experience in that it enabled students who previously held little to no formal training in art to participate after a year of schooling in the highest level of professionalism in the art world- the Gwangju Biennial which was recently declared by ArtNews to be the 5th most important biennial in our contemporary moment of the global proliferation of biennials and art fairs. What were the conditions of ArtEast during this year? Can you describe some of the educational strategies that ArtEast developed to prepare students for the biennial?

We had never had any special strategies to prepare students for the biennials. Moreover, we never engaged them in a paradigm of success. We think that aspiration towards achievement is very tricky thing particularly due to the ambiguity of art institutions as well as the absence of a commercial art market in Central Asia. Probably it sounds strange- but the success of the school was because we did not aspire to succeed. It was not important that the students have special art abilities; most important was their motivation and desire. There were students with diverse background and ages. The curriculum was the same for everyone, but we also worked individually because we saw that everyone had their own preferences and ability in art or art management or curatorship. But nevertheless we tried to give them opportunities to learn about contemporary art, and not only virtually. Many promising students had the possibility to travel to Europe and the United States, to see art events, to meet artists, and to visit different art institutions.

Our main project was to give the students a background in 20th Century art history, to have some knowledge not only about names, events, movements, and media, but also to have the ability to think through certain historical contexts. The most important thing in our school was the round table discussions we held after individual student presentations. Every week two or three students did research

projects on Dada, or Picasso, or Joseph Beuys, for example, which they presented to the group in PowerPoint presentations. Then we started group discussions on the presentation. Everybody had the possibility to interact. The same held true with practical matters. We remember how students were inspired by the 7000 Oaks action by Joseph Beuys. Immediately, the students had the idea to make a "Trash Festival" in the most crowded and polluted area of Bishkek- Osh Bazaar.

Question 3: After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, much of the infrastructure in the Central Asian states collapsed. However, there were also possibilities for artists to engage in new forms of training and new styles rather than the state sanctioned style of socialist realism. Despite the challenges that Kyrgyzstan has faced, the many successes of contemporary artists there, witnessed for example in the creation of the Central Asian pavilion in the Venice biennial beginning in 2005, reveal a prodigious energy and capacity to overcome material shortages. What have some challenges been for you and how did ArtEast address them?

We graduated from art academies in Moscow, Tallinn and St. Petersburg during Gorbachev's Perestroika. This "Wind of Change" inspired us and gave us a lot of energy. One of us participated in an exhibition of "underground art" in Estonia and another took part in student protests at the academy. Moscow and St. Petersburg at that time were cities with a very active cultural life. Coming home in 1991, we faced not only economic collapse but also cultural stagnation in the former Soviet Kyrgyzstan.

Art in the Soviet system was a part of the ideological superstructure and was therefore quite generously supported by the government, which created dependency and conformism among "official" artists. And significantly, with the collapse of social support alongside the growth of certain freedoms, we did not overcome conformism in life or art. Rather, we witnessed its magnificent blossoming. Now "creative forces" do not serve ideological requirements but instead market demands.

In these circumstances, contemporary art in Kyrgyzstan since the late 1990s has probably been the only alternative to the faceless and boring so-called "professional" arts. The main intention of contemporary art has become an a priori otherness, originality, and non-conformism and an atmosphere of creativity and unity. The transitional period, despite of all its difficulties, has become an ideal environment for the development of contemporary art.

ArtEast has been in operation officially for 10 years and has organized a total of three Bishkek International Exhibitions of Contemporary Art, which took place between 2005-2008 and have included many workshops led by international artists. We have created a very good international network so that our organization is now adept in communication with international art institutions and in promoting Central Asian artists in the international art scene.

Question 4: How was the ArtEast school different from the kind of art training an art student might receive in a formalized four-year baccalaureate program?

The main difference of our school from some typical baccalaureate program was that we decided that students might receive it in nine months. Some might say that is was a crazy idea; they are probably right. But we had limited time and we did not want to copy any educational curricula. ArtEast was not a school in the traditional sense. Moreover we did not want to be traditional art school with all the bureaucratic hierarchy. Theoretical and practical classes could freely merge together. Many ideas for artwork were generated together during our communal round tables. It is very effective way of creating art. The main condition of these round tables is a friendly atmosphere, mutual support and no hierarchy. We do not want to be mentors but only moderators who learn together with the students and give possibility to ask and answer for everyone. Probably this collective work allowed students to create a great deal of art in a very short time. And we think that this was a reason why many students started to work in groups.

Question 5: Do you see any particular relationship between the revolutions in Kyrgyzstan that sought to bring about social change and your ArtEast project and its desire for educational reform? Now that the United States is exiting Kyrgyzstan where it had used the Manas airport as a staging platform for the war in Afghanistan, do you see any change in international relations that may impact contemporary art and art education?

Our project started in 2009, more than a year before the last revolution. It was during the last presidential regime of Bakiev and we remember a mood of disappointment in the lack of social changes and reform. The Revolution of 2010 brought some hope for social change but the ethnic violence in the South of Kyrgyzstan right after that was a huge shock for the population of Kyrgyzstan. For ArtEast it was shock as well. Students made some art works dedicated to these social upheavals, but nevertheless we think that it was too much for our concise project. We think that it is impossible to answer immediately in art to any surrounding violence. Art needs time.

However, due to the limitation of support as well as the exodus of major international art donors, contemporary art in Kyrgyzstan has since returned to the stage of the 1990s when support for art was only the business of a few enthusiasts. Of course we still have great international interest in the contemporary art of our region and this interest is the result of work done by many protagonists during the last two decades. But in general, our young contemporary art community faces real challenges and hopefully despite these difficulties, they might generate a "new wave."



*ArtEast School of Contemporary Art (2012), Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
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