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GALIM MADANOV AND
ZAURESH TEREKBAI
Transgression (Detail)
2010–11
Installation of a series of acrylic on canvas
and cardboard, 280 x 320 cm overall.
Courtesy Central Asian Pavilion of
Venice Biennale 2011.

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SAID ATABEKOV
Farewell of Slavianka
2010
Still from a slideshow of photographs.
Courtesy Impronte Contemporary Art
Gallery, Milan.

INTERVIEW

Knowing Your Neighbors

BY IRINA MAKAROVA



In the run-up to the 54th Venice Biennale, co-curator of the fourth Central Asia Pavilion Georgy Mamedov weighs up the problems inherent to regional representation and the false assumption that universality has utopian beginnings.

Currently based in Moscow, where he is studying anthropology and the philosophy of culture at the Russian State Humanitarian University, curator Georgy Mamedov worked as the program director of Bactria Cultural Center in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, until 2009. As artistic director of the Central Asia Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale, he is co-organizing the exhibition with Uzbekistan-born and Montreal-based curator and art historian Boris Chukhovich and Kazakhstan-based artist and critic Oksana Shatalova. In February, Mamedov talked to *ArtAsiaPacific* about his team's plans for the show in Venice, titled "Lingua Franca / Франк тили."

The Central Asia Pavilion was initiated in 2005 with the original purpose of putting Central Asia on the international art map. Has it been successful?

The first pavilion aimed to fill in the gaps in the Central Asian contemporary art scenes. There's been this tendency to emphasize the need for the representation of the region. It continued with the third pavilion in 2009, which used a map of the region as its symbol. This year, we wanted to avoid this kind of representation. We don't want to treat Central Asia as something unknown and exotic for the Western community.

Why did you choose "Lingua Franca" as the theme this year? Does it pertain solely to the Central Asian art scenes or is it global as well?

Most people have heard of the 19th-century effort to create a new, universally comprehensible language called Esperanto. It still exists; it has a small community of some 2,000 native speakers. One way or another, humankind seeks a common understanding, so our goal was to look at contemporary art as one of these aspirations for a universal language. The exhibition has a double title, employing both an Italian expression common in English, and Cyrillic script—which is used across Central Asia—to show that all universality is ambiguous.

In certain attempts to establish universality we see an imbalance of power. For instance, the exhibition features works by Artyom Ernst. His work *Frank Tili* (2010) is a documentation of an English lesson in a regular Tashkent school. By comparison, American schools don't teach Uzbek and Tajik. It's a very simple interpretation but it's loaded with the message that universality isn't necessarily based on utopian beginnings.

What are the challenges of presenting artwork about post-Soviet Central Asia to an international audience that is largely unfamiliar with this context?

It's understandable that people don't know much about Central Asia but, likewise, little is known in Central Asia of

South America and Africa. The important issue for the pavilion is how these artists can communicate with other societies through some common language. Adis Seitaiiev's video *Our Friend Va Ngog* (2009) addresses this idea directly, focusing on Vietnamese artists who find themselves in this international process. One of them, Va Ngog, speaks no English—he just keeps saying "ok"—but he manages to converse through his own form of communication while doing a residency in the United States.

fabric works *World of Kind People* (2009), a take on art brut made in collaboration with Lika Panova, a Tashkent artist who has been making handicrafts for 15 years.

How do you feel contemporary art in Central Asia has changed, particularly when it comes to opportunities of young artists and explorations of new media?

The art scenes in Bishkek, Almaty, Dushanbe and Tashkent are all different. Right now the most active art scene is in Bishkek. There is



Some of the participating artists are veterans such as Erbossyn Meldibekov, Said Atabekov and Alexander Nikolaev, while others are very young and straight out of school, including Artyom Ernst and Marat Raymkulov. What led you to choose this group of artists?

Our goal is not to represent Central Asia at the Venice Biennale. We just want to have a great exhibit. We didn't choose artists; we chose works that address the theme. For instance, we were interested in Said Atabekov's objects and video works that attempt to marry traditions, clichés, and Western and Eastern imagery in four of his projects: *Bosphorus Prayer* (2010), *Red Cross*, *Red Square* (2010), *Farewell of Slavianka* (2010) and *Flags* (2010). Meldibekov adopts a similar approach in *Mutation* (2009). We prepared a miniproject with Raymulkov, whose drawings and animations we are also showing, called *L'Innomable* ("Unnameable") (2010), an ongoing project that reflects the personal life of the artist.

There will be a large installation of Zauresh Terekbay and Galim Madanov's 300 paintings, *Transgression* (2009–10), a serious attempt at reevaluating the painting medium. Also on display will be experiments such as Uzbekistan's Alexander Nikolaev's

a palpable difference between the artists of the 1990s and the 2000s. The young artists involved either have no art education or they just don't rely on it. They approach mediums such as film, theater, video and photography more freely than their older colleagues who were taught fine art and sculpture.

Almaty's economic conditions don't let people turn art into a practice, no matter how much they might want to. They can maybe do design and marketing. But whether you are in Bishkek, Dushanbe or Almaty, there is still no market or web of nongovernmental institutions that can provide residencies and other forms of support for artists.

There have never been any artists from Turkmenistan in the Central Asia Pavilion. Why do you think that is?

We really don't know anything about Turkmenistan. It's difficult to get in. There's no direct transportation between Ashgabat and other cities in Central Asia. All we know is what we see on Turkmen TV broadcasts. One of our projects will be to screen a direct transmission of one of their programs. We want to show that this is all we know of a country that chooses to speak through TV rather than its artists. It's impossible to say if there are any interesting artists there.