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Almagul Menlibayeva *SteppenBaroque* 2003
documentation of performance
courtesy of the artist, photo Renato Salo

galerie davide gallo

Linienstr. 156 - 10115 Berlin- Germany

Tel. +49 (0)30 30607269 · Fax: +49 (0)30 30607270 · info@galriedavidegallo.com · www.galriedavidegallo.com

born Almaty, Kazakhstan, 1969
lives and works in Almaty and Berlin, Germany

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 01 *SteppenBaroque*, Alma Ata, Almaty, Kazakhstan
03 *Reflex*, Rijoli, Amsterdam, Netherlands
01 *Colors of Intestation*, Tengiz Uima, Almaty, Kazakhstan

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 08 *Jihad*, 36 International Film Festival Rotterdam, Rotterdam, Netherlands
06 *On the Road, Central Asian Pavilion*, 51st International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
06 *Inner Asia*, 25 Biennale of Graphy, Arts in Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia
04-05 *From the Red Star to the Blue Kuppel, Islamic World, Art and Architecture*, IFA Gallery, Stuttgart, Germany
04 *Sacred Places of Kazakhstan*, video festival, Almaty, Kazakhstan

Selected Bibliography

- International Film Festival Rotterdam*, Rotterdam, 2006
Enrico, Masiacchi, "Central Asia", *RA y EDOA*, p. 22
Enrico Masiacchi, "Tamerlan's Sincroni", *Sicilia*, 2005
Saraeco, *Art in Italy*, 14 y. 2005
Vilija Šerokova, "Von rotem Stern zur Kugel", *Kupke: Islamische Welt, Kunst und Architektur aus Zentralasien*, II A, 2004

Even when viewed superficially, the works of Almagul Menlibayeva betray the artist's interest in the problem of identity. And this is natural: the question of national identity is the first thing the peoples of Central Asia encountered when they gained their state sovereignty and lost the Soviet identity that had anchored them in the internationalist ideological project. Apparently, for this reason, Menlibayeva's early works were created in the form of a *tekemet*, a national felt carpet, and the elements in her latest video performances *Apa* (2003), *SteppenBaroque* (2003), *Jihad* (2004) and others, include the Kazakh steppe, mazars (Muslim burial vaults), sheep's heads (totem animals), Oriental fabrics and allusions to regional folklore, ancient legends and Sufi wisdom. The artist herself also appears in these works, programmatically showing her typical Central Asian appearance.

However, it turned out that the discourse on national identity was also appropriated by the new post-Soviet authoritarian government, which was beginning to create a state ideology. For this reason, many Central Asian artists combine a genuine interest in regional tradition with a criticism of official policies surrounding identity. Menlibayeva created her personal version of this criticism – how paradoxical – based on the idea of nomadism, which is the basic, historical and culturally distinctive feature of the Central Asian peoples. For her, nomadism is both an organic way of existing in the world, sanctioned by her ancestors' way of life, and an anti-fundamentalist strategy sanctioned by contemporary critical thought (from Gilles Deleuze onwards). Thus, many of her works are built on the meeting, and incessant change, of images, ascending to the most varied ethnic, historical and cultural layers. In her video, *On the Range* (2004), some kind of pagan mystery is unfolding on a Soviet military range, while in *Jihad*, we see the artist herself, removing endless imaginary covers from her face. The nomadic image of the road was the focus of her installation – *On the Road* (2005) – in the Central Asian pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale. In this work, the Kazakh steppe invaded one of the rooms of a Renaissance palazzo, where the whole floor was sprinkled with earth, upon which a road grid was laid. The clatter of hooves was audible, as was the voice of the artist herself, asking the way to Venice.

It is well known that this inclination to work with a system of steady and constantly changing leitmotifs is a feature of a mytho-poetic type of thinking. Within myth, the dimension of the miracle, so unacceptable to pragmatic rationalism, is important for Menlibayeva. It is the miracle that allows the meeting with the impossible: the appearance of the Kazakh steppe in a Venetian palazzo, for instance. In Menlibayeva's performance, *Eternal Bride* (2002), the artist herself is a miraculous apparition. She went out onto the Almaty streets on a cold March day in a floating white dress – the artist's performance was not just a clash of the local and the global, but also of the everyday, one-dimensional and rational, with the festive, orgiastic and poetic. Hence her collaboration, which is so important for Menlibayeva, with the DJ QMFD (German Popov), who creates original club music soundtracks. The artist considers herself to be a representative (or pioneer) of punk shamanism.

The Surrealists were also fascinated by the effect of the clash of the incompatible. Real motifs within an irrational context are elevated from their commonplace and instrumental meanings, acquiring some kind of absolute status. Such juxtapositions excite with their 'emptiness', and conversely with the inexhaustibility of their possible meanings. In *Jihad*, in removing endless covers from her face, the artist is showing us an image of the 'fullness of nothingness', which, according to the ancients, is the hypostasis of inexhaustible wisdom. And this scene is set against the background of the Mausoleum of the Great Sufi Master, Khoja Ahmed Yasavi, the author of the *Book of Books* – an empty book.

Thus, the critical strategy of Almagul Menlibayeva – the female shaman / nomad – resists not only authoritarian fundamentalism, but also globalisation, which is arriving in Central Asia as a 'tool-house of rationality'.

Viktor Masiacchi

Moscow-based critic, curator and founder and chief editor of the *Moscow Art Magazine* and *Manifesta Journal. Journal of Contemporary Curatorship* (Amsterdam-Ljubljana)

Viktor Masiacchi has also contributed an essay to this catalogue; see page 205