

‘Central Asia should represent value and interest only for itself’.

**An interview with Dilda Ramazan by Sasha Baydal
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SB: You are a cultural worker based between Kazakhstan and France, the Director of the Rustam Khalfin Foundation, and a member of several self-organized collectives working across Europe and Asia. Could you tell us more about these experiences and describe, based on them, the perception of contemporary art coming from or related to Central Asia in the “Global West” or in some specific countries where you worked?

DR: It’s a very complex question because it encompasses a lot of different issues. Let me start from my own perspective. I deliberately position myself as an interconnected and interdependent worker and a part of many collective entities. This is very important to me because I always wanted to see myself not as an individual doing something but as part of a bigger group willing to change things together. Maybe it’s precisely because I’m coming from Central Asia, a region which is still underdeveloped, especially when it comes to infrastructure related to contemporary art. Now, I can see a lot of positive change, but it was not like this even five years ago. Therefore, I think that when you want to bring about change, if you want to be effective in that, and if you really want to address certain issues, you have to collaborate with others, and you have to come together with other people. I also must mention the fact that I’m part of a political collective and a political movement as well—of which I did not talk because it is out of the context of our conversation today. It is called *Oyan, Qazaqstan*, which can be translated as “Wake up, Kazakhstan,” and it is a movement for political reform in Kazakhstan. This experience is very important to me because it helped me imagine the direction of where I wanted to go and where I wanted to see myself. My interest in collectivity also certainly comes from that experience.

As for the Rustam Khalfin Foundation, it reveals another side of my personality. Rustam Khalfin is an important figure for Central Asian contemporary art: he is one of the founding figures of this art scene. He was a “classical” Central Asian born in Tashkent to a Tatar family, was formed and trained as an artist, and then

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he moved to Almaty where he worked as an architect and started doing apartment exhibitions. I think that working for this Foundation shows my interest in Central Asian contemporary art and its history, which is very little known and of course still not part of the global art *histories*—in plural.



Rustam Khalifin, *Love Races (Northern Barbarians, part II)*, 2000

Finally, concerning contemporary art from Central Asia, it's a challenging question for me because, on one hand, I don't see much of a difference. The only difference, or perhaps the most flagrant one, is how art labor is organized, supported, or unsupported, and the differences in institutional infrastructure. But when we talk about artistic work and the artists themselves as creative entities, I don't see a substantial distinction from artists based in Europe. Of course, the art market wants us to be different, wants us to be exotic, and tokenizes us. You certainly know this phrase: "show me your art and I'll tell you where you're from." And of course for some people, and even for some of my colleagues maybe, the only way to stand out in the Western art world is to highlight their origin, which is a bit different and could really be perceived as exotic. This is one of the mechanisms that serves the art market, and some artists are quite aware of it, using it intentionally. Others engage with the region's heritage, and because that heritage appears different, they are often perceived as the Other—they are othered. Yet, fundamentally, I don't perceive any substantial differences. I believe that culture and art are transnational and I

don't want to believe in the concept of French art or Italian art, Kazakhstani art, Uzbekistani art, or Russian art. I think that art exists throughout the boundaries, while nation states are constructs and concepts, which are also a part of the heritage of the Soviet regime and ideology. For instance, Kazakhstan did not exist as a nation before the Soviets arrived here. Our current ideology, promoted by the independent republics of Central Asia, calls to develop only our culture, in my case only Kazakh culture. I honestly don't know what this means and I don't want to think in this very closed and framed way, because I believe that we have to go beyond these artificial boundaries and borders.

On the outside, the region, despite some colonial and extractivist interests, remains very underrepresented. It's often a blind spot for many, whether geographically, culturally, or mentally. When people learn about the existence of these countries and their complex heritage, I'm uncertain whether they seek to produce knowledge or simply to learn and extract something. This is my perspective at the moment, but overall, I don't see much interest in Central Asian art. Among non-Central Asians, very few consider the fate of Central Asian art. The individuals in the West who are actively working to promote Central Asia are usually those with deep and personal connections to the region, whether due to their own origins, their parents' background, or because they've lived there. Perhaps interest in the region has grown lately, in the situation when calls to undo Russian colonialism multiplied, because the war brought the understanding that this colonialism was and is a real one. However, whenever something occurs in Central Asia, be it a natural disaster or a conflict, it receives a very small resonance outside. I think that westerners are pretty much concerned about themselves, which I understand—I don't have the illusion that some other people will think about my home region—, but it's important to me as a Central Asian partly living abroad to promote our culture.

SB: Since one year and half, I have been conducting a curatorial research “Two-Faced Janus” in a public-owned collection of the Centre national des arts plastiques in France. My idea was to approach the composition of the collection, and especially the presence of artists hailing from or related to the so-called socialist and post-socialist countries of Central Europe, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Baltic region, through a postcolonial lens. While the Cnap collects art works of living artists, it was—at least in the 20th century—focused on the artists who were somehow present in the French artistic landscape, or had connections with it. What struck me the most is that as of today, the Cnap owns no works of artists from any of the Central Asian countries. Among others, this might mean that there has been—and remains—

a very little connection between France and the countries of Central Asia, from the point of view of culture. This can also testify to a complex power dynamics both inside the socialist and post-socialist region and on the Eurasian continent. Do you share this observation and how would you comment on that?

DR: Apart from the Centre Georges Pompidou, which holds a few artworks by some contemporary Central Asian artists, the only French institution with an important collection of Central Asian art, although not contemporary, is Le Musée du quai Branly. I understand that it has its critics, given its ethnographic approach to art and art practices, however there you can find lots of objects from Central Asia: musical instruments, photographs, examples of textile, and so on, and so on. This shows very clearly that the West do not perceive our cultures as contemporary cultures, but as indigenous, producing objects of applied arts.



Consultation au cabinet du fonds précieux au musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac
© musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac
Photo : Julien Brachhammer

Another aspect of the problem is that, at least for now, the states themselves attempt to construct their identity based on these traditional art forms. When

you observe how Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are presented at international fairs and exhibitions, it is mostly traditional forms of art from the region that are promoted: objects related to Nomadic life, yurts, medieval objects,—and it is never about contemporary art. As a result and because of this traditionality and the messages that are being sent by our governments, the West also perceives us as people of indigenous cultures. There is a clear interest in the exotic, in something very different, related to what we were before the colonization. When it comes to contemporary art, we are not integrated into its global map. Although there are efforts that some of my colleagues and even a few state programs undertake to promote contemporary arts from Kazakhstan, this is not enough.

The fact that there is no infrastructure and no possibility for those doing contemporary art to survive within the region, contributes to the problem. Since only a very small number of people can have a contemporary art practice, they are not very much visible. If we make an overview of the culture from the region, we have more chances to see somebody who is a craftsman or craftswoman, who works with felt, rides horses, writes music or plays traditional instruments, because they are much more supported by different structures, financed by different programs, taken abroad to represent our culture. But contemporary art is still not something that the Central Asian states try to build their identity on, which is a mistake. I think that this will change soon, but for now I see that only private capital and a few oligarchs begin to understand the interest in investing in contemporary art: because it is sexy, because it gives them an image of someone progressive, liberal, democratic. Coming from an authoritarian country, such as Kazakhstan for example, it is important to send these messages, but it's not enough and maybe it's only the beginning of this process of re-evaluation of the art and culture from the region.

Therefore, the main reason why the only place where you can find us in France is an institution closely linked to colonial history and ethnography, rather than the visual arts.

SB: One of your roles is serving as the Director of a foundation dedicated to preserving and researching the artistic legacy of Rustam Khalfin, a prominent Kazakhstani artist from the 20th century. While you've touched on this topic, could you provide more specific insights, drawing from this case, regarding the challenges and strategies related to preserving cultural memory, archiving, researching, and promoting both artistic and curatorial practices in Kazakhstan over the past decades and in the contemporary context?

DR: One of the reasons why I accepted to join the team of the Rustam Khalfin Foundation is because very few people understand the importance of this figure and the importance of what he did for contemporary art of the whole region, not only for Kazakhstan, but also for Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan. For me, it is a classic example of doing justice to someone who lived a very ordinary life, didn't have much attention or support in his lifetime, yet who still changed so many things. Looking back on everything he did, noticing how even young artists reference him—things that he could never imagine during his lifetime—it is indeed about doing historical justice and paying tribute to this personality, while at the same time it is a process of building together, of writing together the history of Kazakhstani contemporary art, which is very short and very young.

I think that it's crucial to look back on all the people who made us because generally because we were colonized and, as the vast majority of Kazakhstani landscapes are just steppes, people usually say that it's a place in the middle of nowhere and there is and was nothing in there before. Some time ago, I had a conversation with a few colleagues and friends historians, who learned from the archives that when the Soviet Union was looking for areas where to build polygons, including nuclear polygons and testing sites, six out of eight options that they had throughout the whole USSR were from Kazakhstan because, as they said, "there is a huge steppe and nothing happens in there". This echoes a colonial and modernist approach: there is nothing there, we will come and bring culture. And I think that we somehow inherited this approach: our own governments and our own elites, and even some art workers reproduce this colonial narrative. We often hear the phrase "for the very first time in Kazakhstan", we can find it in almost every exhibition text or press-release, and it looks like there was nothing here before, nobody worked here before, and as if we came out of nowhere, out of a blank space.

For me, addressing the issues of heritage in general, working with the individual heritage of Rustam Khalfin in particular, through consolidating his archives means building the ground for the generations who will come after and who will be able to say that there were people before them and that there were people who were inspired by some other artists before them. In relation to this, there is an interesting story about Rustam Khalfin that I can share with you. Khalfin's teacher was Vladimir Sterligov, who was himself a student of Malevich and who actually ended up in Central Asia, because in 1935 he was sent to the *Karlag*, the Gulag of Karaganda. Very much related to the repression

mechanisms as it is, this is also a beautiful history of political continuity and that of artistic practices, which continue even despite this violence that was done.



Rustam Khalfin's archives
© Rustam Khalfin Foundation

We still hear about Kazakhstan that there was nothing here before, that it was just void. Which is why it is important to base ourselves on some maternal and parental figures that lived before us, in different times and in different economical and political contexts, but who still managed to leave a heritage which is very interesting historically, culturally, artistically. Which is why it was also important to me to work in this Foundation, pay the tribute, and make such heritage accessible to everyone, so that everyone could make it their own, to be able to do things after.

SB: If art from the Central Asian countries continues to be overlooked by many cultural figures and institutions in the 'Global West,' as a person working between Kazakhstan and France, what are your expectations for Western or EU institutions, notably how would you like to see them engage with local artistic scenes and institutional networks? In your opinion, what steps should be taken in terms of institutional policies, artwork acquisition, and exhibitions? What, in your view, is the appropriate balance between visibility and opacity?

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DR: These are important questions, yet again very complex. I think that two elements are necessary for solving this problem. On the one hand I think that we need to develop agency within the region, and again unfortunately, due to colonial rule and domination, I see that the elder generations of Kazakhstanis, that of my parents example, are not very much engaged in social issues because they grew up with this mentality that tells them: “it's better for you not to participate in any public discourse, public discussion, or public agenda”. Because there always was a very strong government or a party leader, people would tell you: “he knows it all, he can rule”, and I’m deliberately saying “he” because it's always men, and basically old men. As a result, people grew up very irresponsible of the country they're living in. In Kazakhstan there are only youngsters, people who are even younger than me, like Gen Z, who are now getting more and more concerned about the place we live in, about the political, economic and ecological situation in the region—something that our parents did nothing with for decades.

It is also about agency. The previous generations were traumatized and they did not feel like subjects and masters of their own faith, and thus could not engage socially. So, I think that if we want to change something inside—but this will also change things outside—we need to work on the agency of people from the region. We need to hear more local voices. We need to start thinking for our own, which is a very hard thing to do after everything that was done to Central Asia and to its indigenous population.



Saadat Ismailova, *The Haunted*, 2017
The collection of le Mnam - Centre Georges Pompidou

And from the perspective of the West, I think that Central Asia should represent value and interest only for itself, because everything I see for now is that Central Asia mostly represents interest because of what it can inform on Russia, or because of what it can inform on China, or because of what it can inform on Russian-British confrontation dating back to the previous centuries, but never for our own sake. We are never perceived as a place with its own history, its own dynamics, its own processes, but only as a battlefield between different colonial empires and powers. It is of course a part of our history, because of our geographical position, but it doesn't explain everything. This narrative continues to prevail even now. I can see it because I met so many young researchers who started working on Central Asia but, after looking through their CVs, I could understand that they actually wanted to work on Russia but had to change their research field because of the war: because now they know that they cannot go to the country to do their field trips and, as they probably speak Russian, they can go to Central Asia and continue the research,—but it's not how one should do the things. We should be of interest just because of who we are and just because of what we've been through. This is still not the case unfortunately, although I see a lot of hope in the younger generations, especially female researchers who were up till now very few, and I hope that the situation will change progressively.

Dilda Ramazan

Dilda Ramazan, born in 1993 in Karaganda, Kazakhstan, studied art history at the University of Strasbourg. Furthering her education, she honed her knowledge in visual arts and contemporary art at the University of Paris 8. She is currently pursuing her PhD at Sorbonne Université. Beyond her academic background, Ramazan is a co-founder of the women's art collective MATA. She also holds the role of director at the Rustam Khalfin Foundation. In 2021, Dilda Ramazan joined the Central Asian research group DAVRA, initiated by Uzbekistani video artist Saodat Ismailova. She is also engaged in the work of the collective Beyond the Post-Soviet. Dilda Ramazan's work is characterized by her interest in contemporary art and its development in her native Kazakhstan, particularly through the prism of art institutions.

Sasha Baydal

Sasha Baydal (ex-Pevak) identifies as an interdependent art worker and as an Eastern European queer. Their practice is centered around experiences of displacement, a certain cultural memory of the socialist past and memory loss, and their family's history shaped by different forms of forced mobility. Their work is influenced by postcolonial and queer theory, along with decolonial approaches, and involves daily exercise in recollection, remembrance, and decolonization. Baydal has collaborated with institutions such as Centre Pompidou in Paris, HISK in Ghent, Mudam Luxembourg, Triangle-Astérides in Marseille, Capc Museum in Bordeaux, Lviv Municipal Art Center, and Pickle Bar by Slavs and Tatars in Berlin. Their contributions span exhibitions, discursive and performative programs, workshops, and texts. In 2021, Sasha co-founded the collective Beyond the post-soviet. As a curatorial research fellow at the Centre national des arts plastiques in Paris (2022-2023), they conducted research titled "Two-Faced Janus," critically examining the presence of artists from (post-)socialist European, Central Asian, and South Caucasian countries within the Cnap collection through a postcolonial lens.