

THE VOICE OF A FEMALE CULTURAL WORKER, CITIZEN AND ACTIVIST

BY DIANA UKHINA

Art plays a key role in representing and contesting the realities of contemporary Central Asian life. Diana Ukhina describes the recent art exhibition “Art and Emancipation: O. Manuilova and her Contemporaries” held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. In the article, she traces the link between artwork, activism and gender equality back to the Soviet Union and discusses the potential for art to help in the struggle against patriarchy in modern Kyrgyzstan.

This article discusses the civic engagement of female artists in the political, economic, social and cultural affairs during the Soviet and contemporary periods in Kyrgyzstan. It examines the recent exhibition “Art and Emancipation: O. Manuilova and her Contemporaries” organised by the Public Foundation ArtFAQ in the Memorial house-museum named after O. Manuilova in Bishkek in May 2015. Addressing the period of women’s emancipation in the Soviet Kyrgyzstan, the exhibition explored the perception of women as actors and creators in their professional and public work.

While taking into account the complexities and contradictions of the emancipation process in 1920-1930s, we recognise the dramatic changes in the position of women and achievements linked to the key reforms of the Soviet-era. These achievements seem quite natural to us, but it is necessary to understand that behind them there was a struggle for women’s empowerment. Currently we find ourselves in a situation where instead of moving forward, it is necessary to defend the freedoms that the previous generations already struggled for. Gradually, patriarchal relations have come to dominate social life in Kyrgyzstan. Patriarchy manifests itself in obvious ways, for example increasing levels of domestic violence, and in less obvious forms, such as the objectification of women and the deprivation of their voice. Such rhetoric is present not only at the family level, but also at the state level. For example, in 2013 a draft law prohibiting girls under 23 years from going abroad without permission from their husband, parents or close male relatives was introduced to Parliament. In public discourses, both official and unofficial, the kidnapping of girls for marriage is represented not as a crime, but as a “tradition.” According to the Kyrgyz Republic review within the framework of implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action “Beijing +20”, “60 percent of marriages in mono-ethnic rural areas are accomplished through bride kidnapping or *Ala kachuu* in Kyrgyz. Two thirds of these marriages go ahead without the girl’s consent”,¹ 2013.



Exhibition «Art and emancipation: O. Manuilova and her Contemporaries», Memorial house-museum named after O. Manuilova, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. May, 2015. Credit: Author

Cultural and social stereotypes are disseminated through the mass media, cinema and the rhetoric of the government officials. The dominant discourse of power “naturalises” patriarchal attitudes and creates relevant patterns which are constantly reproduced. The representations of lifestyles, social groups and point of view are adjusted to fit certain stereotypes. It remains difficult to resist this process because constructed images often represent themselves as “norms” that are rarely questioned. This process creates not only femininity, but also masculinity. However, it remains difficult for women to produce meanings and visions of the world with the enduring dominance of the “male gaze”.

Irina Samorukova in the book *Gender for Dummies* writes that “it is important from which position female images are created. Here, we can talk about so-called “male” (mainstream, domineering) and so called “female” (alternative) perspectives on the question of whether women should be made objects or subjects of representation. That is why attempts are being made to create an alternative history of art and cultural history, based on different principles of constructing women's and men's images”. The strategy of rewriting history has emancipatory potential. Such histories problematise the processes and events that have prevented women’s voices being heard and, following this path, to focus on where we are now. This question remains

**“ATTEMPTS ARE BEING
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"Who Must Sit at Home?" V. Lomasko, series of stencils from the campaign "16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence", 2014

Credit: Author

quite relevant for us both today, whilst developing the exhibition and educational program and whilst writing this piece. We gradually developed an approach to gender history that we call **appropriation**.

Appropriation is the rethinking of artistic works of the past, their politicization and creation of new interpretations. It has a very concrete and practical meaning, namely:

- Revision of processes and ideas of the period in which the work was created;
- Tracking engagement or non-engagement of authors with the themes they represent;
- Tracking the transformation of the representation of the theme through time and thinking how their work can inform current debates.

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In our case, we use appropriation to revisit history through feminism and problematise patriarchy as the dominant discourse. We examined the actualization of women's representation through the social and political activities of the artists during the emancipation period in Soviet Kyrgyzstan. "Feminist art is a political position, a set of ideas about the future of the world, which includes information about the history of women and our struggles and recognition of women as a class. It is also developing new forms and a new sense of audience," Lucy R. Lippard writes in her "Sweeping Exchanges The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s".

In the exhibition we used not only artwork, but also archive documents, newspaper and photographic materials to highlight the life of Manuilova's and Ilyina's contemporaries from the 1920s to the 1970s.

The artistic works included in the exhibition focused on labour. Even though most of the artwork idealised emancipation, it remains of interest today. The early drawings of Olga Manuilova, sketched between 1920 and 1930, and made in the avant-garde style, reflect the ideas of new power, an emerging world order and emancipated lifestyle; she paints images of independent, uninhibited women.

During the early days of Soviet Union, Olga Manuilova was sent to a business trip to Tashkent and enthusiastically became involved in the work of broader society. "For A. Manuilov (my husband) and I it was not a question whether to accept the revolution or not. During the first months after the October Revolution, we already began to work on the Soviet government's assignments"³. On May, 1 1920 Manuilova arrived to Tashkent and was immediately mobilized to work for the production of posters on the topics of the fight with Basmachi, intervening foreign powers during the Russian Civil War and women's freedom. As a historian later recalled, "at the corners of Tashkent's streets and institutions huge posters with poems in Uzbek were put on display. These posters were about the emancipation of eastern women after the victory of the Great Revolution"⁴. Unfortunately none of the posters survive today.

Throughout her career, Manuilova continued to work actively on the topic of a woman as a worker, a cultural actor and activist. With the curtailment of earlier radical visions for the restructuring of society by the 1930s, her artwork, like the official rhetoric, became more 'traditional.'



Woman in paranja (full body veil), Tokmok city (KSSR), 1934. 0-51664, Central State Archive of audiovisual documents of Kyrgyz Republic

Credit: Author

Killing of the activist Rakhina Zakirova, 1932, Central State Archive of audiovisual documentation of Kyrgyz Republic

Credit: Author



Manuilova O. Sketches (left 1924 - 1927, right 1920). Memorial house-museum of O. Manuilova (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan)

Credit: author

During the establishment of Soviet power Lidia Ilyina was a small child, but by the 1930s she was an active artist. Like Manuilova, Ilyina created images of women that were close to official discourse: young women in social activities, students, women in power and workers in rural areas. As such, Ilyina's works were not critical of the state policies towards gender.

And we do not know what their true opinion on the plight of women was. In general, their works followed the official discourse. The Soviet government considered art to be an important tool in building a new society in the 1920s and 1930s.

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But it does not matter what views Manuilova and Ilyina themselves had. It is important that they were leading representatives of the professional and social activities of those days.

And their work forms the basis for discussion about the topics which are important for us - emancipation, women's subjectivity, gender equality. “If the purpose of art is to break ideas that were perceived as traditional and “natural” about women, it should bring to the light the social construction of women and psychoanalytical construction of gender differences. Finally, the theoretical approach involves giving up of the dominant understanding of art as a personal expression and puts it in a continuum that connects social with political, giving female artists the role of producers in this new situation... ”⁵.

**“IT IS RARE TO FIND
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Nowadays it is rare to find Kyrgyz female artists critically working with women's images, problematising their position and raising debates through artworks. Instead, various feminist activists, NGOs and initiatives which are raising questions about the situation of women and their representation in public discourse.

One of these initiatives is the celebration of Women's Day on 8 March in 2013. This included a photo exhibition, performance ‘Nonhuman History: Monologues of Subhuman and the presentation of the ‘I'm Not a Thing’ calendar⁶. The event constituted an intervention in the

existing discourse of the 8 March, gave people an alternative experience of its celebration, and aimed to politicize, realise the emancipatory potential of the holiday (2013).

Informal magazine *Weird Sisters* appearance in 2014 involved activists and representatives from the cultural field. In the editions, authors raise actual, but often silenced and invisible, issues of inequality.

Bishkek Feminist Initiative SQ's systematic work has grown and moved beyond just one team⁷. Today this activist organisation has renamed itself the Bishkek Feminist Initiatives (BFI) welcoming new members. The union organises closed, semi-open and public activities. In mid-November 2014, BFI led the '16 Days - 16 stencils' campaign, where activists from Kyrgyzstan joined Russian feminist artists Victoria Lomasko, Nadia Plungian and the participants of the Regional Meeting of Feminist Solidarity Activists from Central Asia, Caucasus and Eastern Europe that was held during that period in Bishkek. Activists and artists created a series of stencils with the name "16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence"⁸. Despite these successes there is a need for greater openness, of the breaking down of informational boundaries, and greater comprehension of formats and methods of communication.

**“OUR WORK LIES AT THE
INTERSECTION OF ACTIVISM AND
ARTISTIC PRACTICES”**

Through our activities, we have opened up a feminist agenda and produced a variety of visual materials. Our work lies at the intersection of activism and artistic practices, forming a feminist statement that is not separate from different identities (citizen, activists, feminists or artist).

Our exhibition formed one of the voices creating an alternative narrative to the dominant discourse of women's image and their position in society. Whilst official discourses use pre-Soviet history and ethnic identity, to build history and its symbols, for example through the celebration of Kalpak Day (Kyrgyz National men's hat), we are looking to other events as a source of inspiration. We choose our past by ourselves to decide what kind of connections to build with it.



Современная женщина «многофункциональна»: она заботится о семье, воспитывает детей, готовит-стирает, зарабатывает деньги, отвечает за «социальные связи» семьи и мужа, получает образование, занимается спортом и следит за своей внешностью. Отработав «первую смену» в роли профессионального работника, она заступает на «вторую смену» - дома, в качестве домохозяйки, матери, жены и невестки.

January page from the 2013 "I'm Not a Thing" calendar

Credit: Author

We see ourselves as cultural workers, citizens and in some senses as activists. It was important for us to go beyond the delineated spaces of artistic expression. That is why we conducted our lectures outside the exhibition space, in the Kyrgyz National Museum of Fine Arts named by G. Aitiev and Art College named by S. Chuikov⁹.

Through our work, we hope to instill a gender sensitive or feminist consciousness in Kyrgyz society. However, we do not form a homogeneous view on the topic. We understand that all women are in different social, economic and cultural conditions, which shape their unique experiences. Based on these varied experiences, it is necessary to work within the local contexts of inequality.

Feminism is the optic which helps us to think critically not only on the issues of gender, rights, equality and opportunities between sexes but also on the topics of all forms of oppression and discrimination. An individual exists in society not only as a man or a woman, as a worker or an employer. She or he exists at the intersection of the different categories such as gender, age, class, sexuality, disability and citizenship status. That is why it is impossible to fight for women's rights without raising issues of LGBT rights, rights of people with disabilities, internal and external migrants and the rights and opportunities for wide variety of social groups. In the present structure of society, each of us at some moment find herself/himself in the minority. And it is not our desire to fit into the existing hierarchy or to switch places with those who are in the positions of a power. Our work is about questioning existing structure and trying to design other forms of relationships at various levels.

The production of meanings within the artistic activity plays an important role in struggles for social equality and ability to express a position as a cultural worker and citizen. We perceive art as a space of emancipation, education and imagination which raises sharp questions about the social structure in our minds and in the minds of people with whom we interact, We are not trying to educate people, to enforce our view on them; we are inviting people into a dialogue on gender.



*Series of stencil in the frame of campaign “16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence”, 2014.
Left: “Aikanysh”, right: “Uzbek noodles”*

Credit: Author

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- ⁵ Barry J., Flitterman S. Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art Making // Gender theory and art. Anthology: 1970-2000 // Translation from English; Edition by Bredihina L, Dipuel K. - Moscow, 2005.
- ⁶ Organizers: A.Niyazova, G. Ibraeva A. Moldosheva, A. Bekturova, M. Suyarkulova with the support of the Asian Development Bank
- ⁷ Feminist activist commune organization working since 2011.
- ⁸ Meeting №1: zine of the regional activists meeting of feminist solidarity from Central Asia, Caucasus and Eastern Europe, 2014
- ⁹ There were two public lectures: "Art and the emancipation of women in the Soviet Kirgizia" by O. Kapishnikova (about local process of emancipation and participation of artists in it). "Art / Feminism / Social Order" by D. Ukhina (history of second-wave feminism and feminist art practices and theories at that time).

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