



Article

Ritual, Ritualization, and Religion in the Work of Kazakhstani Artist Anvar Musrepov

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Abstract: This article contributes to the study of ritual in art, which is an unconventional setting for ritual studies. It concerns ritual, ritualization, and religion in the oeuvre of the up-and-coming Kazakhstani artist Anvar Musrepov. We discuss the prayer ritual, the process of ritual erasure (by covering in black), consumption rituals, and a cleansing ritual with a drone and ritualization with computer-generated imagery. Musrepov seeks to reimagine Kazakhstani national identity. His art, we argue, draws on what Alfred Gell has called the technology of enchantment.

Keywords: Anvar Musrepov; Kazakhstan; art; prayer ritual; ritual erasure; consumption ritual; cyberritual; technology of enchantment



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1. Introduction

Anvar Musrepov (born in 1994) is one of the most fascinating and imaginative young artists of Kazakhstan. In this article, we focus on his works of art that have ritual as their theme and/or show the process of ritualizing. We ask what the perspective of ritual studies can contribute to an understanding of his art-making, and vice versa, how Musrepov's art might help to improve our grasp of ritual and ritualizing. Following ritual studies scholar Ronald Grimes, this study is about ritual 'out of place'; the appearance of the phenomenon outside the conventional settings in the study of ritual (Grimes 2006).

We are concerned with the relationship between ritual and art. "The historical discourse of art as a cultural phenomenon is dense with ritual," according to Townsend-Gault (1992, p. 52). Dissanayke (1979, pp. 27–31; also see, Dissanayke 1988, 1995, 2000) argues that ritual and art were closely related throughout human evolution. Harrison (1913) contends that "art arises from ritual". Grimes (2000, p. 75) writes that art and ritual connect domains "that Western adulthood has taught us to sever". As Ashley (1992, p. 10) notes, "The relation between them is not unidirectional (art used in ritual) but reciprocal; ritual creates its artworks while art or architecture enables ritual activity". Musrepov's interactive artwork *Namaz Maker* on the Muslim ritual of prayer, as we will see in the next section, is a case in point. Regarding art and ritual, Gell (1989, 1998; see also, Tuzin 2002) speaks of a "technology of enchantment"; we will come back to this notion. We will also discuss Musrepov's work in relation to what Freeland (2001, pp. 3, 1–8) has called the "ritual theory" of art or the "theory of art as ritual". However, Musrepov is not the only artist from Kazakhstan working with ritual as a theme. Other artists, such as Said Atabekov (Yessekeyeva and Venbrux 2021), Kanat Ibragimov, Yerbosyn Meldibekov, and Almagul Menlibayeva (Sorokina 2016a), also need to be mentioned. The latter, according to Sorokina (Sorokina 2016a, p. 248), is "one of the few women in the region who deal with video seriously." We have a further publication on the work of Almagul Menlibayeva in preparation.

Anvar Musrepov was born and raised in Almaty, Kazakhstan. A few years before his birth, the Republic of Kazakhstan had declared its independence from the Soviet Union (which was on the verge of collapse). As with many Kazakhstani in Almaty (the former capital Alma-Ata), his first language is Russian. In his childhood, he survived a life-threatening disease, which also affected his relationship with religion¹. In an interview with the first author, the artist states that due to the instability of the situation, he had a mythological consciousness at the time. Aside from his personal circumstances, Musrepov experienced his greater generation growing up in a society that had to reorient itself. Questions of identity, therefore, gained prominence; furthermore, he is part of the first generation of digital natives, growing up with the Internet.

Anvar Musrepov explores topics related to national identity in the Digital Age, comparing the nomadic culture of yore with the present-day culture of surfing. Cultural production and identity formation happens to be a topic that is increasingly drawing the interest of scholars, including scholars from Central Asia (e.g., [De Tiesenhausen 2021](#); [Kudaibergenova 2018](#); [Dubuisson 2017, 2020](#); [Dubuisson and Genina 2011](#); [Laruelle 2021](#); [Yessekeyeva and Venbrux 2021](#)). Musrepov's involvement with new media started with video art. Attracted to the experimental side of cinema, he first tried to get into the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography, but was told that what he was doing was actually video art. Largely due to a positive review of a work displayed at an exhibition in Almaty by critic Anna Tolstova, Musrepov was accepted at the Rodchenko School of Photography and Multimedia in Moscow in 2014, from which he graduated in 2018. He continued his education at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forced him to return to Almaty.

"New media is always about some illusion, a shimmering screen," says Musrepov.² He compares it to the mythical space that, according to him, we always live in; that is the stuff of identity. In this regard, Musrepov wants to bring across that it is "not necessarily deterministic" but a matter of choice. His work, he says, also challenges the political discourse of national identity enforced on him in high school and college, which he experienced as "aggressive":³ "Politics imprisons us in a version of reality, and the purpose of art is to break through these limitations and reimagine the new world," according to Musrepov ([Makarova 2021](#)).

Indeed, as [Tsai \(2019\)](#), observes: "In countries like Kazakhstan, where classic forms of freedom of speech may not be respected, contemporary art plays a unique role, offering alternative narrative and practices and contributing to the structuring of an independent public sphere." She singles Anvar Musrepov out as one of the most outspoken artists. "Emancipation of the imagination as a political tool is one of the main agendas of today's art," writes Musrepov.⁴

His art consists of digital media, photography, video, installations, and performances. From 2015 onwards, he took part in a great number of exhibitions in Almaty and Astana in Kazakhstan, but also abroad in Moscow, St. Petersburg (Russia), Venice (Italy), Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), Lublin (Poland), and Suwon (South Korea). In recent video art, Musrepov "questioned the combination of archaic ritualization and modern technology" ([Kudaibergenova 2019](#), p. 252). In addition to his artistic practice, he is also an independent curator and used to publish the online magazine *Horsemilk*, which focused on contemporary art in Central Asia. Recently, Musrepov curated the project *Ghost Expedition* in which three European and three Kazakhstani artists visited sacred sites, including pilgrimage sites, and produced an exhibition ([Satugaldina 2018](#)). During the pandemic, he curated the digital exhibition 'Cybernomadism'.⁵

We deal with his works on the ritual of prayer (Section 2) and (sacralizing) consumer rituals (Section 4). We will also discuss two works on ritual erasure or covering in black (Section 3) and the use of a drone and digital works (Section 5) that demonstrate ritualizing in Musrepov's art practice.

2. Prayer Ritual

His first general work was a series of photographs, called Bairoque.⁶ The photographic work *Prayer* (2015) was part of this series (see Figure 1). Mauss [1909] (Mauss [1909] 2003, p. 24) labels prayer a “fundamental ritual”. The ritual action of prayer, in his view, is a social phenomenon (Mauss [1909] 2003, pp. 32–37). Musrepov’s work depicts four men, three of them seated, around a table with a copious local meal engaging in a ritual of prayer. They hold their hands with the palms up. This ritual gesture is believed to improve the efficacy of their prayer (Katz 2013, p. 40).



Figure 1. Anvar Musrepov, *Prayer* (2015). Image courtesy of the artist.

In contrast to this, the ritual efficacy may be reduced “by the consumption of illicit food or drink” (Katz 2013, p. 39). As Kudaibergenova (2019, p. 250) points out, there is such illicit drink, namely alcoholic beverages, on the table. She comments: “In many ways, this work ridicules the contemporary approach to halal in Kazakhstan: in anecdotes, groups of Kazakh men are often described as buying excessive amounts of alcohol but asking whether the sausage they buy with it is halal.” Kudaibergenova adds that Musrepov is interested in the actual practices and the de facto norm rather than being judgmental. The five to ten percent of Muslims in Kazakhstan who are part of a piety movement uphold more rigid ideas about Islam (Schwab 2014, p. 27). Musrepov, however, believes that in olden times “we have always had our own type of Islam, more flexible and free”.⁷ He refers to Sufism during nomadic times; a mystical, non-mosque-based Islam, blended with Tengrism and Shamanism (see also Kudaibergenova 2018, p. 437).⁸ He says: “We haven’t had the kind of Islam that is now spreading in fundamentalist communities because most people think that’s the religion that ancient Kazakhs have followed since its inception.”⁹ For Musrepov, the Islam of the past in Kazakhstan was different, that is, inclusive, amendable, and undogmatic. The recent current of fundamentalist Islamic thought coming from the Middle East has nothing to do with it. From an artistic point of view, he considers this new Islam claiming to be of old in an imaginary field.¹⁰

“Most Kazakh rituals were, and still are, associated with food,” according to Aljanova et al. (2015, p. 33). Halal meat implies ritual slaughter. Food ought not to be spilled. Leftovers would be handed to associates to include them “in the rites of the family cycle”, while it provided *kut* and good luck, in addition to success, for the donors. The food served at festive ritual meals as well as the distribution of meat trimmings is of symbolic significance (Aljanova et al. 2015, pp. 32–33). For example, in Figure 1, there is a ram’s head on the table (the other dishes being part of the communal meal) that is only to be eaten by respected men. The seating also reflects age and social status (Aljanova et al. 2015,

p. 32). It is, therefore, no coincidence that the old man in Figure 1 is sitting at the head of the table. Men happen to be accorded higher status than women; the latter's absence in Figure 1 is telling.

With regard to the ritual of prayer, it is important to note that even within a religious group there are often different opinions about the proper practice (Bandak 2017, pp. 2, 8, 9). Furthermore, a distinction is often made between prayer inside and outside the mosque; prayer outside the mosque is seen as more prone to influence from local customary practices (Parkin 2000). This is certainly the case in Kazakhstan, where the influence of non-mosque-based Sufism and ancestor worship prevails. Reformist Muslims, who pray five times a day, form a minority, estimated at not more than four percent of the total Muslim population in Kazakhstan (Schwab 2014, pp. 26–27). Fundamentalist Muslims, however, are not averse to the use of modern technology. Smartphones and social networks impact the way in which religion is practiced. Muslims use the iPray program, and instead of the muezzin, they are called to prayer by a phone message that focuses on the user's location and time of year.¹¹ Anvar Musrepov elaborated on this in his multimedia project *Namaz Maker* (2016) with a virtual prayer rug.

A concise description of the project reads as follows:

“Interactive installation imitates a Muslim carpet and creates a virtual environment for ritual. The projection has five modes, with each color indicating different prayers (morning, noon, daytime, evening and night) and changeable with a clap. A special function allows for the individual setting of the prayer text. For automatic navigation, the prayer interface has a compass that updates every second and identifies the exact location of Mecca at all times. There is also a place for contextual advertising!”¹²

Musrepov stresses that there are “elements of irony and humour” in this project (see Figure 2). For instance, advertisements are ubiquitous, even in toilets, so why not have them on a prayer rug? Such a joke, Musrepov says, allows him to distance himself from the object.¹³

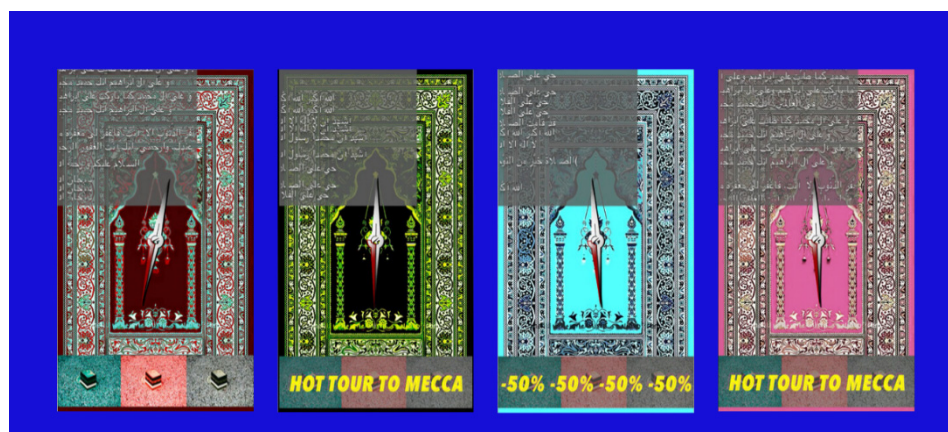


Figure 2. Anvar Musrepov, still from *Namaz Maker* (2016). Image courtesy of the artist and Aspan Gallery, Almaty.

Namaz Maker (2016) resulted from a thought experiment, he adds. The artist wondered:

“Is it possible to convey the sense of aura that will make this a sacred space through digital media, through material things?” That is to say, whether a material projection derived from computer code can have an aura similar to the physical object of a prayer rug, thus turning it into functional, sacred space? The question emerged from his concern with gaming rather than Islam, especially how multiplayer games created their own worlds. Referring to Walter Benjamin’s

essay ‘The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction’, Musrepov was eager to learn about the religious aura and its transmission in the context of a virtual mosque.¹⁴

The prayer ritual (*namaz*) in Musrepov’s new fashion entails a profanization of the prayer rug, representing paradise for the faithful (Venbrux 2004, pp. 57–58). Heidbrink et al. (2011, p. 171) found that in the virtual domain “conflicts over ritual occur when the medium is challenged or defined in divergent ways.” For Grimes, “A virtual ritual is not a ritual, but it is not *not* a ritual either” (Grimes 2014, p. 81). The extent to which a ritual is disembodied matters, in his view (Grimes 2014, pp. 81–83; see also Collins 2004, pp. 53–64). Musrepov’s interactive work responding to the clapping of hands is partially embodied. Both Kapferer (2004, pp. 35–54) and Van Beek (2007, pp. 49–50) argue that ritual in general produces the virtual. Thus, in theory, the aura can be maintained. Gell’s phrases of “technology of enchantment” and “enchantment of technology” apply to Musrepov’s work of art *Namaz Maker* (2016).

3. Ritual Erasure

Around the same time, Anvar Musrepov created two works on the cancelling of traditional culture by fundamentalist religion (see Figures 3 and 4). The ritual erasure in both cases consists of covering it, resulting in a black field. In the first work of art, the video *Haram (Sin)* (2016), a bearded man in religious attire is clogging the dome of a yurt, the *shanyrak*, with black boards (see Figure 3). When the opening on top is fully covered the screen has turned black. Meanwhile, judging from the sounds, the hammering on of boards continues. Metaphorically, Anvar Musrepov predicts a dark future for a country that allows for the expansion of religious extremists, and unequivocally speaks of the danger of abandoning historical identity in favor of aggressive religious sects (Sorokina 2016b, p. 206).

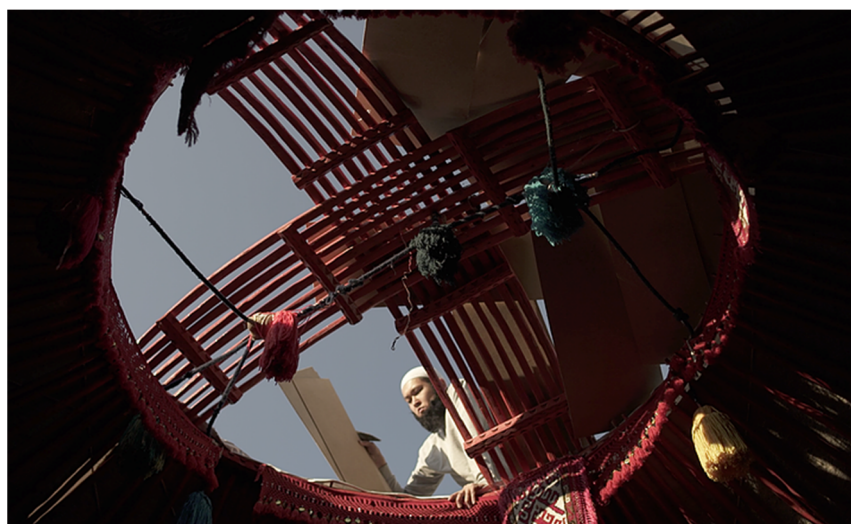


Figure 3. Anvar Musrepov, still from the video *Haram (Sin)* (2016). Image courtesy of the artist.

In an interview with the online Express-K journal Musrepov explains: “My work *Haram* shows our future if we do not resist religious extremism. Our centuries-old customs and traditions are going to be pounded in a coffin, and we will plunge into the darkness” (Zhenisov 2016). In fact, this ritual action can be seen as a symbolic inversion (Pandian 2001; Babcock 1978; Turner 1978). In nomadic times when people lived in felt houses (yurts) on the steppe, the *shanyrak*, or open top part, was thought to be sacred. It showed the open sky, so important in Tengrism, and was associated with heaven. The *shanyrak*, now central to the state emblem of the Republic of Kazakhstan, traditionally stands for stability, peace,

and well-being (Mikhailov 1980; Galiev 2016, p. 53). This is in stark contrast to the idea of it being haram or forbidden as expressed by the title of the video.



Figure 4. Anvar Musrepov, *Kazakh Woman in a Burka* (2016). Images courtesy of Anvar Musrepov.

The young Kazakh woman's dress, a national symbol, was thus substituted for a black outer garment associated with religious extremists, covering her body and face. This gesture is another instance of ritual erasure or symbolic inversion. With this ritualization in his art, covering core symbols of Kazakh identity in black, Musrepov wanted to make a statement. Upon reflection, he says: "I was only doing it in a Kazakh context, and then there was just such a wave, when so many people (Kazakhstanis) were going to Syria to join ISIS." Musrepov's intended statement was that "being Kazakh is not the same as being Muslim," while he pondered to what extent he could or should be a Muslim himself. He relates: "Well, it seemed to me, because of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, people kept trying to answer the question 'What to believe in then?'. So many of them fell into religion."¹⁵

Both works from 2016, *Kazakh Woman in a Burka* and *Haram*, have been spread widely and received wide acclaim. "So far, Musrepov has been the most active critic among Central Asian artists of religious fundamentalism and the controlling forms of these religious practices," according to Kudaibergenova (2019, p. 251).¹⁶

Although the works have been well-received by the international art world, Anvar Musrepov has second thoughts about them. His sojourn to Vienna in 2018–2019 made him aware of the danger of the pieces contributing to Islamophobia. Consequently, he has deleted the images from his website and portfolio. With hindsight, he regards them as "too postery", and they were created when he was still in his formative stage as an artist. Musrepov adds, "as time went by, I understood that statements on this subject had to be careful, and should not be from within any context. Now it seems to me that this was a mistake, that I did such works."¹⁷

The quest for identity not only came to the fore with regard to religion, but also in the advent of consumer culture in the era of globalization.

4. Consumption Rituals

"Modernity comes along with the feeling of bewilderment when facing self-identification," says Musrepov. He raises the question: "Should we raise the ambition of enhancing national identity or just give up and support globalization, where the role of developing identity is delegated to marketing companies?"¹⁸

The cargo-cult like embrace of elements found in American culture, in particular, caught his attention. Musrepov comments: "And it seems to me that all this has to do with

identity, including the postcolonial syndrome. It's not just one flat meaning directly about consumerism or criticism of consumerism, but it's directly related to consumerism."¹⁹ Raised in the post-Soviet era, the artist has the feeling that the materialism ingrained in Soviet ideology continues and is exacerbated by increased choice and availability of consumer goods.

Musrepov criticizes mass culture, focusing on the issue of rethinking modern consumer culture. Another message laid down by Musrepov is a search for a person's identity. Today, our identity shaped by consumerism. Vincenzo (2018) defines consumerism as a powerful ritual 'machine' that is able to compensate the modern lack of values with new symbols and rituals. In other words, for some, consumerism is now becoming a kind of addiction, adversely affecting a person, manifesting in the desire to own things; take, for example, oniomania, in which particular and well-known brands are sought (brand religion), during which oniomania develops. For a person suffering from such an addiction, goods lose their significance and become a kind of symbol of worship.

Strikingly, Anvar Musrepov seeks to merge symbols of Kazakh identity with icons of globalized American consumer culture. In his camera performance of the video *Eating Ram's Head* (2017) he pays homage to Andy Warhol's performance (surpassing it by exactly one minute), *Andy Warhol Eating a Hamburger* (1981).²⁰ Instead of using ketchup as Warhol did with his hamburger, Musrepov drinks from a bottle of Coca Cola (Figure 5) in front of a green screen. With the advent of globalization, there is a symbiosis with national culture, emphasizing the ongoing localization of brands to a particular environment.



Figure 5. Anvar Musrepov, still video *Eating Ram's Head* (2017). Image courtesy of the artist.

At the same time, *Eating Ram's Head* (2017) draws on Warhol's obsession with consumer culture and celebrities. The ram's head is "considered a delicacy to be offered to one's most revered guests" (Sorokina 2012, pp. 134–35). In other words, Musrepov portrays himself as a respected man, a celebrity in the Kazakhstani context. He turns his ritual consumption of the delicacy into a work of art signaling glocalization.

Another work linking globalized American consumer culture to local Kazakh identity is his installation *Place of Strength* (2016) (Figure 6). This sculptural installation was presented as part of the seventh ARTBAT FEST in the Botanical Garden in Almaty in 2016.²¹ *Place of Strength* consists of a huge arch, mirroring the iconic 'M' logo from the fast-food restaurant chain McDonald's, covered all over with pieces of colored fabrics.

Ritual ribbons (*zhyrtyys*), either white or colored, used to be tied to trees at sacred places to honor the spirits (Orynbekov 2013; Lymer 2004). This practice dates back to a long-distant past. It was part and parcel of Tengrism, the animistic religion of the nomads on the steppe. Musrepov refers to this and notes that the ribbons are tied "in a ritual [...] to share your energy with the spirit of the place".²² He considers his artwork *Place of Strength* "a modern cult object". Musrepov explains: "I didn't think of it as desacralizing this

tradition. On the contrary, I thought that the ribbons would sacralize the McDonald's logo, indeed turning it into a cult object."²³ In March 2016, the first McDonald's restaurant in Kazakhstan opened in Almaty. People stood in a line several kilometers long, because "they wanted to taste American culture". Musrepov took his inspiration from this phenomenon, the pilgrimage to the cult place, like the five thousand people that queued up for the first McDonald's that opened in Moscow in 1990.²⁴



Figure 6. Anvar Musrepov, *Place of Strength* (2016). Image courtesy of the artist.

Anvar Musrepov comments the following on the work (Figure 6) in an interview with the first author:

"The McDonald's logo as accidentally ancient pagan monument is found in the woods and covered by thousands of cloth strips. Ritual places for praying to consumerism and globalization which reaches our steppes with its long queues for hamburgers. The single McDonald's restaurants as outer spaceships having come from far space for the purpose of capturing a new planet. In different pagan cultures tying of cloth strips to trees symbolizes sacrifice to the spirits in the sacred places."²⁵

In their fashioning of a new (post-Soviet) national identity, the political elite of the Republic of Kazakhstan happened to use a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, they emphasized a glorious, nomadic past preceding Soviet and tsarist Russian domination: the Great Steppe civilization with rulers such as Genghis Khan. On the other hand, they embraced capitalism, consumerism, and futuristic modernist developments (Yerekesheva 2020, p. 86; Kudaibergenova 2015; see also Phillips and James 2001). As Akulova (2019, pp. 191–92) puts it, "the invention of the past and the projection of the future should be seen as two interrelated parts of a unified legitimization discourse."

Musrepov's comment here above can be seen as an allusion to this discourse, because the artist links the McDonald's brand to "an ancient pagan monument" as well as "outer spaceships". He speaks of "[r]itual places for praying to consumerism and globalization". The situational irony is underscored by the title Musrepov gave to his work: *Place of Strength* (2016). Casting the hamburger restaurant's iconic logo as marking a place of worship is reminiscent of the well-known work *This Is My Body* (2001) by the Russian-American artist Alexander Kosolapov. Kosolapov (born in 1943) placed the golden arch logo, together with the name 'McDonald's, against a red background. To the left he put a portrait of Jesus Christ, and underneath the McDonald's logo, the text "This is my body". In a similar work, titled *This Is My Blood* (2001), Kosolapov substituted McDonald's for Coca-Cola.²⁶ Furthermore, in his installation *Angel M (The Angel of Cholesterol)* (2010) Kosolapov turned

the MacDonald's logo manifested by an M-shaped yellow neon light into the wings of an angel, juxtaposed with a statue of a young man in jeans. Musrepov seeks to combine the local and the global. He does so in *Place of Strength* (2016), but also in his work *IKEA Costume* (2017). This consists of a traditional Kazakh coat and hat made out of blue plastic IKEA shopping bags, bordered with a double band with the brand name of the furniture retail company.²⁷ In nomadic times the coat, called *shapan*, and hat, called *takia*, were made of natural materials and worn in summer (Aljanova et al. 2015, p. 31).

5. A Cleansing Ritual with a Drone and Ritualization with Computer-Generated Imagery

Interestingly, Anvar Musrepov regards his home country as a “laboratory”.²⁸ Referring to developments under Soviet rule, he notes:

“In the 20th century Kazakhstan was a country that became a platform for large-scale experiments: a change of social structure and a sharp transition of nomads to sedentary life, the construction of a cosmodrome in the steppes, the launch of a man into space, testing of nuclear weapons. The usual horizon of the steppe closed the industrial constructions marking the progress.”²⁹

The current preoccupation with hi-tech modernity, futurist development, and progress has its antecedents in the Soviet era (Akulova 2019, pp. 198–200; Caron 2019; Bekus 2017, 2021). Anvar Musrepov, as mentioned earlier, pleads for the artworld to get serious in using “the imagination as a political tool” (see also Mithlo 2006). “And of course identity is a political theme,” he says.³⁰ For Musrepov, he explains, the issue of identity was also a personal matter. Raised by a Kazakh mother but sired by an unknown father allegedly without Kazakh features, in addition to speaking Russian rather than Kazakh and living in the Korean district in Almaty, Musrepov was uncertain about his Kazakh identity, hence his artistic interest in new media: “The new media were a conceptual solution for me because they show an imaginary space, digital and artificially created. It's something that doesn't claim to be authentic.”³¹ It allows him to (re)imagine past and future, tradition and modernity, and somehow bring them together.

In a videographed ritual performance, titled *Alastau* (2017), Anvar Musrepov combines traditional and modern technology (Figure 7). He connected a metal canister to a drone, which contained burning adraspan grass, so the smoke could be spread during the drone's flight. The burning of adraspan grass is widely practiced in Central Asia as a rite of purification.

This ritual from time immemorial he carried out on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition ‘Time & Astana: After the Future’. Musrepov sent the drone on a flight to fumigate the world's largest spherical building, established for Expo 2017 Astana (with the bold title ‘Future Energy: Solutions for Tackling Humankind's Greatest Challenge’). The purification ritual was performed to protect the futurist construction against demons and the evil eye. In the exhibition catalogue, the performance *Alastau* (meaning “purification”) is described as follows:

“The cleansing ritual, in which [a] quadcopter lifts a metal can with glowing adiraspane [adraspan] into the sky, the smoke dissolves over the sphere of the Expo, destroying evil spirits and clearing the way to a new modernized Kazakhstan.” (Kapar 2017, p. 30; see also Kudaibergenova 2019, pp. 231, 52).

In 2017–2018, Musrepov had his first solo exhibition in the Art Future Gallery (Smart Point) in Almaty. On the gallery's Facebook page, he states with regard to this exhibition: “I am interested in exploring national consciousness in the context of digital art, approaching identity from a different perspective, not through history and endless deviations, but through the modern situation of hyper-reality immersion”.³² In the exhibition entitled ‘Wonderstan’, Musrepov reflects on future identity in the digital world. “I grew up with the development of the Internet, and for me it is a very important aspect of everyday life,” he notes; therefore, he wonders “what will happen if our consciousness is digitized and

transferred to a computer? Can we preserve our cultural background? Can we consider ourselves Kazakhs, Russians?” (Popova 2017).

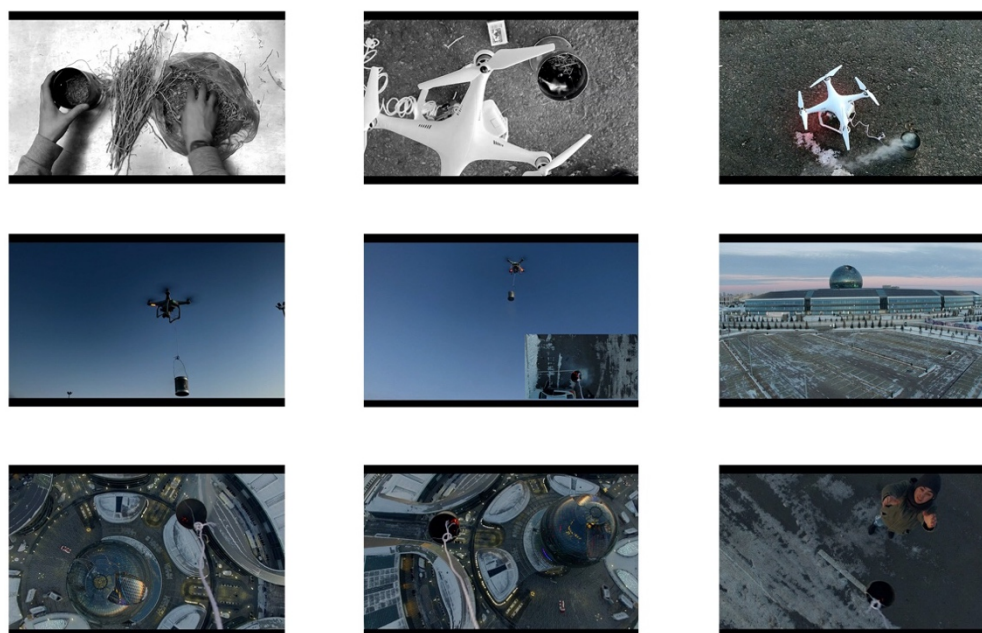


Figure 7. Anvar Musrepov, video stills of ritual performance *Alastau* (2017). Images courtesy of the artist and Aspan Gallery, Almaty.

Today, the Internet is an integral part of life for many indeed, and for the younger generation, it has certainly become a new reality. In the artificial digital space, you can be anyone, look however you would like, be immortal, have various talents, abilities, and even supernatural powers. To some extent, you can even feel like God. Musrepov compares the nomadic culture of the ancient Kazakhs with the modern culture of Internet surfing. In the exhibition ‘Wonderstan’, the video loop *Jigitovka* (2016) offers a demonstration of how he imagines cybernomadism. The artist makes use of computer-generated imagery (CGI). We see the animated character of Anvar Musrepov, his own avatar, performing acrobatic tricks while riding on a virtual rendering of a 3D horse (Figure 8).³³

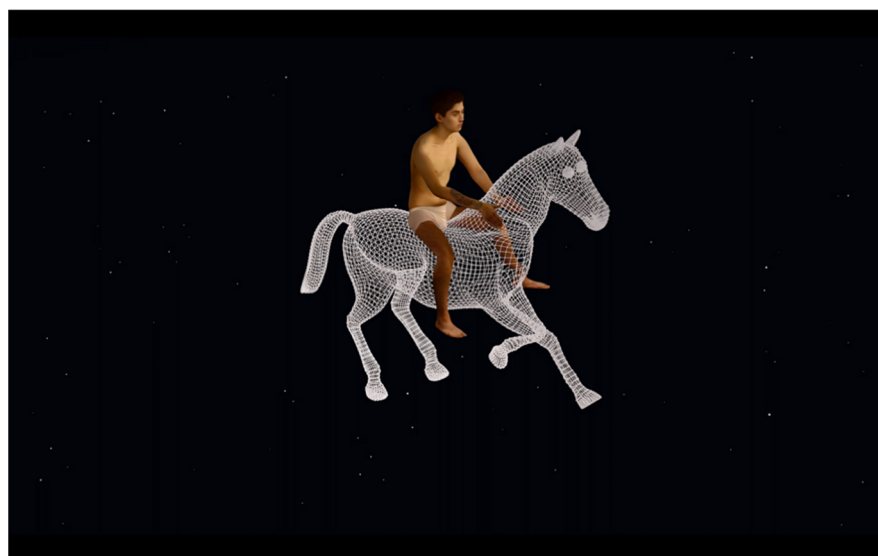


Figure 8. Anvar Musrepov, still from the video loop *Jigitovka* (2016). Image courtesy of the artist.

In the digitalized reality of Wonderstan he created himself, Musrepov can feel like a “genuine” Kazakh riding a horse. *Jigitovka* is the word for a style of horse riding, full of stunts and bravery, originating from Central Asia. The art critic Vladislav Sludskiy aptly comments on the work.³⁴

In his in-depth interview with the first author, the artist further reflects on the prospect of an exclusively virtual identity:

“If we talk about digitalization of consciousness in the future, do we retain our identity? In digital reality, if I were an avatar, would I perceive and identify as Kazakh? Or at that point will there no longer be a need to maintain an identity? If there is no identity, it means we will not have cultural pluralism. There will be some kind of a common hegemony, some kind of a certain standard, which is also there. From some, let’s say, decolonial position I see this in a negative light. I believe that if we get completely formatted and stop carrying our cultural code in digital reality, and have some kind of national identity, then we will become absolutely no different from bots, other digital objects, files.”³⁵

Musrepov thus fears a loss of identity, hence his efforts to imagine national identity in the digital world.

Another important CGI work in his exhibition ‘Wonderstan’ is *The Golden Woman* (2018). Regarding to an imaginary artifact of national heritage in his mockumentary in the exhibition ‘Time & Astana’ in the National Museum in Astana (now Nur-Sultan), Musrepov remarked: “As well as history and archeology that can be easily adjusted within the politics, hardly ever one can confirm the authenticity of artifacts, especially of those, that are used as the national brand. Why isn’t our knowledge of ‘Golden Man’ under any doubt?” (Kapar 2017, p. 35).

Golden Man refers to an archaeological find of human remains dressed in armored suit and conical headdress richly decorated with pieces of gold, dating back to the 4th–3rd centuries BCE, unearthed from a burial mound in Eastern Kazakhstan in 1969. Despite lack of evidence indicating whether the person in question was a man, gender bias made the name Golden Man readily acceptable, which became the symbol of the independent Republic of Kazakhstan’s independence. In Almaty, the first capital (1991–1997), the Independence Monument with a statue of the Golden Man replaced a statue of Lenin (Aydingün 2016, p. 140). The statue is placed on top of another statue of a winged snow leopard; and this image taken from the archeological find, that like the Golden Man, has become a ubiquitous national symbol of Kazakhstan (White 2018).³⁶ A replica of the Golden Man is on display in the National Museum in the present capital Nur-Sultan (previously named Astana) (Khassenkhanova 2019). The image of the Golden Man is reproduced on currency notes, but, for example, as Sharipova notes, in a “recycling of Soviet rituals,” also on the badge of the youth organization of the country’s dominant political party (Sharipova 2019, p. 149). In secular political rituals, the use of such symbols has a “traditionalizing” effect (Moore and Myerhoff 1977, p. 7); that is to say, as Moore and Myerhoff (1977, p. 8; see also Cohen 1979, pp. 100–1) point out, “it implies permanence and legitimacy of what are actually evanescent cultural constructs.”

In the case of the Golden Man, Aydingün (2016, p. 147) speaks of “a political instrumentalization of archaeology,” while Musrepov calls it “an acute example of history speculation to promote the discourse of power” (Makarova 2021). Both the scholar and the artist underscore Lukes’ (1975) argument that political rituals play a role in the “mobilization of bias”. Musrepov addresses the male bias concerning the national symbol in his CGI-video installation *The Golden Woman* (2018–2020). Simultaneously, he makes a contribution to political iconography.³⁷

With his digital artwork (Figure 9), in its various renditions and showings, Musrepov creates a new myth for the nation of the Golden Woman. Like the Golden Man, she is presented as a nomadic warrior. Rather than in a long distant past, however, Musrepov projects her in to the future: “the gold-suited heroine battles a number of adversaries in

outer space.”³⁸ This work in 3D is certainly not devoid of humor; art critic Ophelia Lai captures that very well in her description of how Musrepov refers to the “the patriarchal strongman politics of post-Soviet Kazakhstan” in his computer-generated imagery of the adventures of the Golden Woman:

“The fiery demise of a yurt-shaped, Wellsian automaton from her well-aimed arrow angers a pudgy man wearing nothing but a pair of VR goggles—a character influenced by Kazakhstan’s first president of 30 years, Nursultan Nazarbayev, whose techno-nationalism permeates Kazakh political discourse. By the video’s end, the Golden Woman stabs him and is carried out of frame on her winged snow leopard.”³⁹

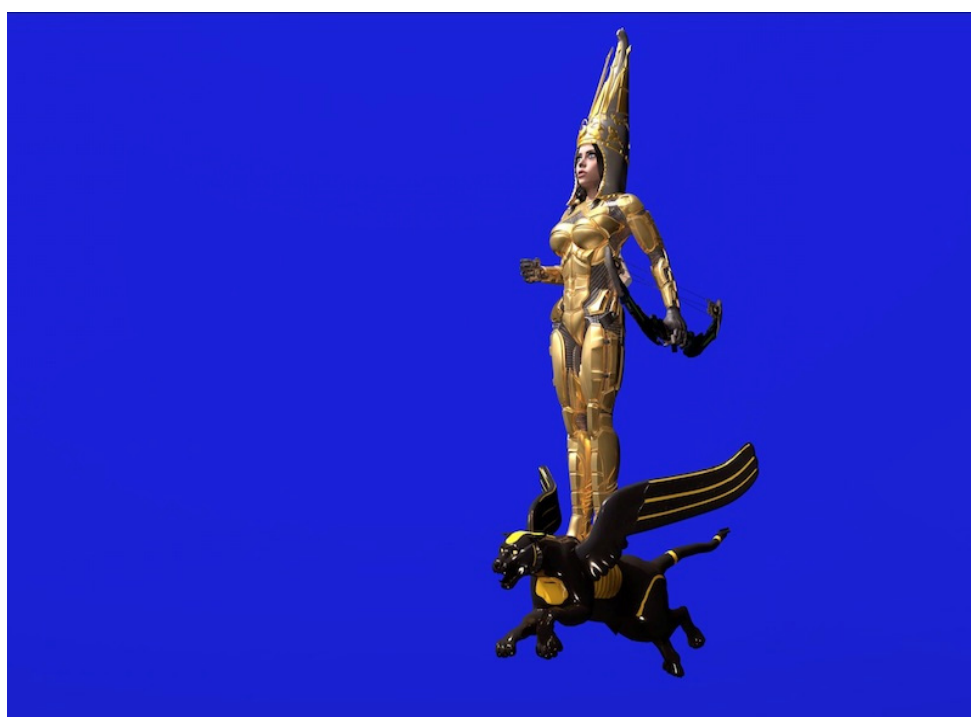


Figure 9. Anvar Murepov, video still from *The Golden Woman* (2018). Image courtesy of the artist.

The artist takes a courageous stand. Yet, he does not regard it as a form of activism. Musrepov has the following to say about this:

“Politics [. . .] is present in art. It is a kind of a priori thing—a fundamental thing that affects art. But an artist cannot make a political statement, because art is always in the space of simulation. If we make a political statement in the territory of art, we automatically turn it into a kind of simulation. We neutralize that political action. If I bring a slogan or a banner to an exhibition, this banner does not work according to its actual purpose. If I show this banner in the square, then it is a political statement, but not a performance; it is not art, no matter how beautiful and aesthetically pleasing it is.”⁴⁰

The context matters. While it is not direct political action, contemporary art makes use of the imagination to suggest alternatives. Following Turner (Turner 1973, p. 1100), the Golden Woman can be seen as a ritual symbol, the smallest unit of ritual.⁴¹ Goodin (1978, p. 282) reminds us “that rituals consist in re-enactments of important social myths”. Musrepov’s digital artwork puts the myth of the Golden Man on a different footing. In the words of art critic Irina Makarova: “It not only shows how the current Kazakh government artificially revives and appropriates patriarchal narratives, but it also reinforces that the discourse of power in a new Kazakhstan must begin to include women.” (Makarova 2021)

The traditional authenticity claims made by political rituals and icons are undermined by digital imaging (Battaglia and Favero 2014). Musrepov, as we have seen, is not so concerned with authenticity. To the contrary, what attracts him to new media is the “shimmering screen” with its “illusion of non-authenticity”.⁴² His generation, he feels, has been affected by the interventions and experimentation that took place when Kazakhstan was part of the USSR, ranging from the forced abandonment of nomadism to the launching of the first human spaceflight. In the artist’s own words: “we are mutants and hybrids, and only from this place can we reassemble our identity” (Makarova 2021). In this project of reimagining national and personal identity, Musrepov is critical of the Western hegemony and pretense of universal modernism in the international artworld. He is inspired by Afro-futurism (Makarova 2021).⁴³ Musrepov says, “I feel that we are just beginning, consciously or not, to construct the narratives of the future, and we are doing this from the standpoint of all those cultural codes embedded in our hybrid identity.” (Makarova 2021).

6. Concluding Discussion

In her introductory book on art theory, Cynthia Freeland (2001, p. xvii) begins with a discussion on “ritual theory” before any others. She writes, “A theory of art as ritual might seem plausible, since art can involve a gathering guided by certain aims, producing symbolic value by the use of ceremonies, gestures, and artefacts”. Freeland (2001, p. 4), however, does not regard it as plausible, because “audiences who see and react to a modern artist do not enter in with shared beliefs and values, or with prior knowledge of what will transpire.”⁴⁴ This implies that in her view ritual is invariant. She belongs to those, as Grimes (2021, p. 17) puts it, who erroneously “insist that creativity and improvisation have their proper home in the arts, not in ritual”. Even in the classic case of Australian Aborigines, there is ample evidence of creativity both in ritual and art (Layton 1998, pp. 57–65). Grimes (1992, p. 24) argued some thirty years ago that on occasion ritual “is invented and that it can be creative”.

Anvar Musrepov is an artist, we tried to show, who has a way with ritual. A theory concerning art and ritual befitting his work in multiple media has been formulated by the anthropologist Alfred Gell. Drawing on examples of art in ritualized settings, Gell (1988, p. 7; 1989) focuses on what art does and regards it as a “technology of enchantment”. An artwork, such as an Asmat shield, can be dazzling to spectators. For Gell (1988, p. 6; 1989, pp. 44, 49; see also Dissanayake 1995, p. 107), there is no opposition between technology and magic; art is some sort of technology to cast spells, and he views the artist as an “occult technician”. That is to say, technical virtuosity plays a role in working magic. “The *technology of enchantment* is founded on the *enchantment of technology*,” according to Gell (1989, p. 44).

As his works demonstrate, Musrepov is a master in the technology of enchantment. The work is diverse, but in the discussion here, we must draw attention to cyberritual; first and foremost because it is under-researched in the study of ritual (See Post 2015). Miller holds Gell’s ideas as particularly relevant to the digital world. Miller (2001, p. 153) writes, “It is as though the internet was almost invented to illustrate his theoretical propositions with particular clarity.” Musrepov combines technology-based art with the imagery of nomadism. As curator of the online exhibition ‘Cybernomadism’, he stresses “the creation of new narratives of a decolonized future”.⁴⁵ The exhibition includes Musrepov’s digital work *Golden Woman* (2019). It shows her as an idol on top of a running winged snow leopard (cf. Figure 9). At the Astana Art Show 2019, the status of this image as an idol was accentuated by the presentation of a CGI video-version, that relates a new narrative of the heroine, in a tent colored by the glow of purple light.⁴⁶ Therewith, Musrepov situates the cult object in the physical world, along with the clapping to operate the interactive, virtual prayer rug in *Namaz Maker* (2016). It looks almost as if Grimes (2014, pp. 81–83) is right that some measure of embodiment is needed to be a ritual.⁴⁷

Musrepov’s distribution of the imagery of the Golden Woman in various renditions and screenings may contribute to its ritual efficacy. In Vienna, for instance, he showed

Golden Woman (2020), a film of six minutes.⁴⁸ The national symbol of the Golden Man is widely distributed. Holiday parades tend to show the Golden Man “either in pictorial or dramatized form” (Adams and Rustemova 2009, p. 1261). A gold-cladded replica of the statue in Almaty is placed in front of the Embassy of Kazakhstan in the USA. The National Museum sent a replica on tour to museums in a wide range of countries.⁴⁹ When such a ritual symbol becomes ubiquitous, one might become more accustomed to it, but the enchantment, considered “an entrapment of the mind” by Pierre Smith,⁵⁰ comes from the ritual gestures and art, and brings about art and ritual’s efficacy.

In this article, we have looked at ritual and ritualizing in the oeuvre thus far of the up-and-coming artist Anvar Musrepov. He is seeking to reimagine national identity. Musrepov’s imagination and skillful execution warrants a tension that is enchanting indeed. The prayer ritual, the process of ritual erasure (by covering in black), consumption rituals, and a cleansing ritual with a drone and ritualization with computer-generated imagery have been discussed in the respective sections. They have in common profound elements of intrigue and imagination.

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Notes

¹ Anvar Musrepov interviewed by the first author, 25 July 2020.

² Interview, 25 July 2020.

³ Interview, 25 July 2020.

⁴ Anvar Musrepov (curator), “Cybernomadism”, exhibition, International Art Development Association (IADA), https://iada-art.org/cybernomadism?fbclid=IwAR3DwnQfuA_ejCRCBp_v1XIDzjX5SAzN5HPFkh4-j8EWaR_SjkY0u7M5wFI (accessed on 30 April 2021).

⁵ See Note 4.

⁶ Interview, 25 July 2020.

⁷ Interview, 25 July 2020.

⁸ See also Yessekeyeva and Venbrux (2021).

⁹ Interview, 25 July 2020.

¹⁰ Interview, 25 July 2020.

¹¹ See <https://theoryandpractice.ru/posts/13046-it-church> (accessed on 27 April 2021).

¹² Datasets vs Mindsets exhibition, Ars Elektronika, online: <https://ars.elektronika.art/keplersgardens/en/datasets-mindsets-exhibition/> (accessed on 24 April 2021); see also <http://nikonole.com/datasetsmindsets>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xvwYdvBRLcQ> (accessed on 26 April 2021).

¹³ Interview, 25 July 2020.

¹⁴ Interview, 25 July 2020.

¹⁵ Interview, 25 July 2020.

¹⁶ Said Atabekov (born in 1965) ought to be mentioned as another artist from Kazakhstan who has addressed this critically in his art (see Yessekeyeva and Venbrux 2021).

¹⁷ Interview, 25 July 2020.

¹⁸ Interview, 25 July 2020.

- 19 Interview, 25 July 2020.
- 20 Anvar Musrepov, Eating ram's head, 5:27, 16 May 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uwURNKg9ik&t=114s> (accessed on 27 April 2021); Kristensen (2020); "Jørgen Leth Interview: Andy Warhol Eating a Hamburger," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ynhdgc9ziw8> (accessed on 27 April 2021).
- 21 The first author attended this occasion. The main message of the art festival, devoted to the topic of symbiosis, was: "The immobilized anthropomorphic structure of the city: roads, intersections, architecture comes to life, filled with the energy of modern art. The lively direct action of the artist here and now, his interaction with the surrounding reality, with the townspeople, makes the entire urban landscape move." ARTBAT Fest 7. trans. from rus. "Ezhegodnyi festival sovremennogo iskusstva. City in motion / Gorod v dvizhenii." Facebook, 2 September 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/events/277891282596756/> (accessed on 26 April 2021).
- 22 Interview, 25 July 2020.
- 23 Interview, 25 July 2020.
- 24 Interview, 25 July 2020.
- 25 Interview, 25 July 2020.
- 26 Both works were seen as blasphemous by some (Kamioka 2012, pp. 23–24; Bernstein 2014, p. 423).
- 27 Noemi Smolik, "Alternative theses", Artforum, <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201808/alternative-theses-76822> (accessed on 27 April 2021).
- 28 Anvar Musrepov (curator), "Exhibition: First Contact," <https://iada-art.org/hhhh/firstcontact-en> (accessed on 26 April 2021).
- 29 Interview, 25 July 2020.
- 30 Interview, 25 July 2020.
- 31 Interview, 25 July 2020.
- 32 See <https://www.facebook.com/artfuturekz/> (accessed on 26 April 2021).
- 33 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eugnVq25veo&t=2s>. (accessed on 26 April 2021).
- 34 Vladimir Sludsky, "Not your Steppe's stone." Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, online: http://www.4a.com.au/4a_papers_article/not-your-steppes-stone/ (accessed 26 April 2021).
- 35 Interview, 25 July 2020.
- 36 On a comparative note: Bartetsky (2003, 910–920). Symbolically important, of course, is also the Kazakh language, actually a construct of Soviet scholars, see Fierman (Fierman 2009, pp. 1207–28).
- 37 "Political iconography, the study of the creation and deployment of images as political tools, is a relatively new field at the interface of social sciences, art and cultural theory" (Mitra and König 2013, p. 358).
- 38 Ophelia Lai, "Anvar Musrepov", ArtAsiaPacific 118, May/June 2020, p. 23, obtained via https://www.pilarcorrias.com/usr/documents/press/download_url/47/artasiapacific-divisive-devices-shota-yamauchi-may-june-2020.pdf (accessed on 27 April 2021).
- 39 Lai, "Cybernomadism", 23.
- 40 Interview, 25 July 2020.
- 41 As Kertzer (1990, p. 90) notes, "Political understandings, in short, are mediated through symbols, and ritual, as a potent form of symbolic representation, is a valuable tool in the construction of political reality."
- 42 Interview, 25 July 2020.
- 43 The term Afrofuturism was coined by Mark Dery in 1994, see Dery (1994, pp. 179–222). Dery (1994, p. 90) asks, "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?"
- 44 But see Duncan (1995). What is more, participants to a ritual do not always share the same beliefs, see Van Gennep [1909] (Van Gennep [1909] 1960, p. 146).
- 45 Anvar Musrepov, "Cybernomadism," <https://iada-art.org/cybernomadism> (accessed on 27 April 2021).
- 46 Lai, "Anvar Musrepov," 23. Gell discusses the rites of consecration of idols in *Art and Agency* (Gell 1998, pp. 143–53). See also Pinney (2001), pp. 157–79).
- 47 This is certainly the case for the largest community of Uyghurs outside of China, who resort to conventional rituals. Amongst the Uyghurs in Almaty, Kazakhstan, as Roberts (2004, p. 88) makes clear, "rituals have become an almost natural forum for the negotiation of nationalist ideologies." That is to say, "through ritual the Uyghurs of Almaty are able to create an inclusive nation that unifies around its diversity."
- 48 See <https://www.akbild.ac.at/Portal/universitaet/aktuelles/rundgang-2020-2/extern/screening-programm> (accessed on 27 April 2021).
- 49 In 2018–2019 the exhibit went to Azerbaijan, Belarus, China, North Macedonia, Poland, Russia, South Korea, Turkey, Uzbekistan and Malaysia. See Khassenknanova, "Kazakhstan's Golden Man".

- 50 “Pointing out Alfred Gell’s theoretical indebtedness to Pierre Smith does not devalue Gell’s own contribution to the understanding of artworks and rituals,” according to Halloy (2015, p. 369).

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