The Eurasian Utopia

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The primary objective of this article is to analyse the artistic practice of Rustam Khalfin (1949–2008), the founder of contemporary Kazakh art, as a precious legacy of local modernism. Although modernism belongs to a relatively recent past, it is already regarded as an important period in the history of culture, which has to be studied, understood and preserved. In the Soviet and post-Soviet period Kazakhstan found itself in an unusual socio-cultural situation, when universal modernisation started to percolate into the patriarchal way of life of the local population. Nomads have always been open-minded people ready to adopt new developments from other cultures and interpret them in their own way. Rustam Khalfin’s practice is an example of remarkable reflection on such methods of conservation and actualisation of traditions in the rhizomatic mode, which does not suggest a rigid linear construction: ‘It is a model, which continues to perpetually construct itself and deepen, and a process, which never ceases to continue, get fragmented and resume.’\(^1\) His practice exemplifies a specific approach to the conservation of the local modernity, although at times it may appear utopian compared with the European tradition of cultural heritage preservation.

INTRODUCTION: NOMADIC MODERNISM AS LOCAL MODERNITY

The country’s name, ‘Kazakhstan’, is an amalgamation of the ancient Turkic word ‘qaz’, which means ‘to wander’ and the Persian suffix ‘-stan’ (place, country) and is a reference to the nomadic history of

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\(^1\) Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1980], Brian Massumi, trans, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993
Kazakh tribes, which have long represented a mixture of peoples. The history of wandering continued in the Soviet era, when in the 1930s Josef Stalin transformed the steppe into a ‘Virgin Land’. At that time, the authorities began mass deportations of whole nations to this territory. A huge part of the infamous Karlag (Karaganda Corrective Labour Camp) was situated in central Kazakhstan. Hundreds of thousands of the intelligentsia were imprisoned in the Gulag camp. One of the best-known prisoners was Lev Gumilev, who developed the ‘Eurasian theory’ based on his concepts of ethnogenesis and passionarity. He believed that proactive ethne from the Great Eurasian Steppe could evolve into a new community. This idea has inspired politicians from some post-Soviet countries as well as the Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev. As a result of the forced deportation of Stalin’s regime, today over a hundred different ethnic groups are living in Kazakhstan. However, the country’s national elites promote the nationalistic idea of singular cultural identification. As a result, the President’s message to the people contains the following main slogan: ‘The Way of Kazakhstan 2050: one goal, one interest, one future.’ These developments provide a vivid illustration to the well-known research ‘Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation’ by Arjun Appadurai. In the chapter ‘Patriotism and Its Futures’ he writes:

Displacement and exile, migration and terror create powerful attachments to ideas of homeland that seem more deeply territorial than ever. But it is also possible to detect in many of these transnations (some ethnic, some religious, some philanthropic, some militaristic) the elements of a post-national imaginary. These elements for those who wish to hasten the demise of the nation-state, for all their contradictions, require both nurture and critique. In this way, transnational social forms may generate not only post-national yearnings but also actually existing post-national movements, organisations and spaces. In these post-national spaces, the incapacity of the nation-state to tolerate diversity (as it seeks the homogeneity of its citizens, the simultaneity of its presence, the consensuality of its narrative, and the stability of its citizens) may, perhaps, be overcome.

In contrast with this superficial cultural policy, the country’s progressive artistic community made efforts to develop a new cultural identity for the country. Attempts to discover this identity on the basis of the adopted and, to a certain extent, expropriated semantic codes of global cultural and artistic trends have been the main characteristic of the development of contemporary art in Kazakhstan since the end of the 1990s until the present. The social structure, formed from elements of the culture of cattle-breeding nomads and the Soviet propagandist cultural model, faces the threat of being torn between consumerist society and the level of conceptual being of society. This gap does not allow such a society to function as a fully-fledged and unique cultural identity within the contemporary world community. After Kazakhstan acquired political independence, modern Kazakh artists faced the urgent task of formulating and developing a new model of artistic practice that would combine international cultural paradigms of the current period with the conceptual cultural features of a complex local identity.

An attempt to develop a special form of artistic language in the new country, which has historically inherited both the Soviet social project

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2 Lev Gumilev (1912–1992) – Soviet anthropologist, ethnologist, historian and translator from Persian. He was the son of two prominent Russian poets, Anna Akhmatova and Nikolay Gumilev. N. Gumilev was arrested and executed as a ‘public enemy’, while Akhmatova suffered from the KGB’s repressions throughout her life. Lev Gumilev was a prisoner in labour camps from 1938 until 1956.

3 Ethnogenesis: the process of acquiring an ethnicity by a group of people on the base of common identity. It was described in the book: Lev Gumilev, Etnogenez i biosfera Zemli, Kristall, St Petersburg, 2001, p 640 (in Russian).

4 Passionarity: the compelling intrinsic drive towards purposeful activity that is always directed to changing the environment, both social and natural, and the attainment of the desired aim, which is often illusory or even destructive for the subject himself, seems to him more valuable than his own life. Passionarity accounts for the formation of a new ethnos and various innovations in society and culture in the established ethnos. Gumilev argues, for example, that all military and political history of the developing ethnos consists of various variants of passionary induction by which the crowds of harmonious persons are set in motion. It also lies at the foundation of the ant egoistic ethic where the collective interests, even if wrongly understood, prevail over the craving for life and concern for one’s own posterity. From: Dictionary of Creativity: Terms, Concepts, Theories & Findings in Creativity Research, compiled and edited by Eugene Gorny, Netslova.ru, 2007, http://creativity.netslova.ru/Passionarity.html

5 Arjun Appadurai, ‘Patriotism and Its Futures’,
and the nomadic way of life that had preceded it, is evident in the practice of Rustam Khalfin.

The innovation of Khalfin’s approach to the creation of the basic features and strategies for the development of a new kind of art in the new country, in the Great Steppe (Eurasia), is revealed in his complex and syncretic artistic practice. He managed to stay ahead of his time and offer his contemporaries a model of collective identity for Kazakh art that would, initially, unite all the artists of the multi-ethnic country on an essentially cultural ground, and not on an ethnic one. Second, this model absorbed and processed all the principal universals of the modernist legacy from the viewpoint of the local topos, resulting in a model of local modernity.

Local modernities influence each other, creating shared communal art territories, where each artist is unique in his/her own way and, at the same time, possesses a common legacy and a common modernist language. In the late twentieth century, it became apparent that a uniform modernity did not actually exist; there were many of them, each occupying a special space and representing certain experience. There are colonial and postcolonial modernities in African countries, a tropical modernity in Brazil, a socialist modernity of the European welfare economy, the modernities of state socialism in the Soviet Union (which were interpreted by each republic in different ways) and many others.

The phenomenon of local modernities was discussed in the interview given by a leading contemporary curator, the Director of Van Abbemuseum, Charles Esche:

What is possible and optimistic is that different local modernities start to affect each other at the present moment – which our different heritages intermix on a level field of planetary discourse. This effect has to be on an intimate, almost individual level for it not to revert to old hierarchies – at least for now. What is important for me here is Agamben’s idea of singularities. Local modernities can be used by humans placed in specific geographic situations to their own ends – and these singularities can then speak and exchange with each other about their own understandings of modernity. Those exchanges are probably agonistic and approach something we could start to imagine as a planetary public sphere that does not seek consensus but non-destructive recognition. So I would suggest that we need to see ourselves as all fundamentally provincial, that could be interesting as a resistant mode to [the] current form of globalisation.6

Within the context of a new country that has inherited the culture of the nomads of the Great Steppe the artistic language of Khalfin’s art may, within this discourse of local modernity, be called ‘Rustam Khalfin’s nomadic modernism’.


**VIS-À-VIS DIALOGUES WITH MODERNISTS**

Khalfin’s art developed in stages, each of which was related in a certain way to the modernist legacy and the most prominent representatives of modernism.

The first figure, crucial for the understanding of the discourse of Khalfin’s art is Vladimir Sterligov (1904–1973), the torchbearer of progressive ideas of the Russian avant-garde – an outstanding focal
point of progressive thinking in the twentieth century. In the early 1960s
Sterligov, who had lived for a long time in Kazakhstan after being
released from the Karlag, reverted to the development of the ideas of
Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935), his teacher and a source of inspiration.
Malevich used to say to students of the State Institute of Artistic Culture
(INHK): ‘... it will be a school, not a job in the field [of] art, which you
will be doing later, developing your OWN additional element’.7 Sterligov
found and developed his own additional element, which he called a
‘straight curve’ or the theory ‘the bowl-dome structure of the Universe’.8

In 1971 Khalfin met Sterligov, declared himself Sterligov’s disciple,
managed to take his teacher’s artistic method a step further and even-
tually found his own ‘additional element’ in art. In the period following
the years of being Sterligov’s disciple, from the early 1980s to the mid-
1990s, Khalfin became engrossed in studying painting and its potential
from his own perspective. At that time ‘shards’, ‘pulota’ and ‘transpar-
ency’ were the main themes of his works.9 He anatomises, analyses or
deconstructs popular works by such artists as Diego Velázquez, Paul
Cézanne and Henri Matisse.

Apart from the theoretical manifestos by Kazimir Malevich and
Vladimir Sterligov, Khalfin also took a great interest in the works of
Michel Foucault and José Ortega y Gasset, who, probably, inspired
him to study the works of Velázquez. It was while studying Velázquez’s
works that Khalfin felt an urge to master and express the concept of
‘void’ through artistic means. His works dedicated to Las Meninas
(1656) are characterised by voids and transparencies, which would
later appear in the artist’s other works as phenomenal properties of different objects:

The figures that perform the act of their appearance before us are depicted on the canvas to stay there forever, which makes them look like spectres. They can never become firmly established in reality and become quite existent; they always remain in a state of transition from nonexistence to existence, from absence to presence.¹⁰

Khalfin adopts Sterligov’s ‘bowl-dome’ system, but he changes its structure, dissects and analyses it on his canvases, introducing new concepts of ‘void’ and ‘transparency’. In that period of his work, which was still dominated by painting, Khalfin introduced the concept of ‘pulota’, which became so important for his artistic practices. The painter Lidia Blinova, Khalfin’s wife and companion, gave probably the best explanation of this concept:

You clench your hand to produce ‘pulota’, an elementary plastic object. ‘Materialised pulota’ has the shape of elementary sculpture. Being void, it can be used as a simple optical instrument, a means of fragmentation of the field of vision. Its contour becomes a fragmentary sign, an inner frame breaking into a picture and becoming its protagonist. . . ¹¹

In other words, Khalfin managed to discover his ‘additional element’ – pulota. The artist develops a phenomenology of vision, using pulota in


¹¹ Rustam Khalfin, exhibition catalogue, Soros Foundation, Almaty, Kazakhstan, 1995, p 9

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*Pulota*, 1990s, clay, object, 10 × 10 × 10 cm, collection by Astral Nomads Digital Archive
different ways. He was sure that the newly created object met all artists’ strategic requirements. For example, he often claimed that the Kazakhs (as representatives of nomadic culture) make traditional dry salty cheese (*kurt*) with a gesture identical to the one that creates pulota. He made the connection of his object with tactility the basic concept for the nomadic mentality. Moreover, an incompletely clenched fist forms the eyepiece through which he can contemplate the world, fragmenting it with his somatic optics. Finally, such optics allow the artist to develop his ideas with philosophical concepts vis-à-vis Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. Pulota in particular helped Khalfin to build the non-structural, non-linear and rhizomorphic approach to his concept of art, in which the ideal of an original work of art was replaced by the ideal of the construction of a stereo channel of explicit and hidden quotations, each of which refers to different and varied areas of cultural meaning; each of which is expressed in a language that requires a special procedure of ‘recognition’; and each of which may engage in a dialogue within any other form of relationship. Figuratively speaking, Khalfin ‘kneaded’ meanings and images in his hand, creating his own narratives.

Starting from the mid-1990s Khalfin once again realised that the pictorial medium alone was not sufficient for expressing the complex, mobile and fluid context that captured his thoughts. This understanding gave
birth to a new stage in his practice that involved the development of artistic projects. At that period, together with the Russian and European avant-garde, he suddenly found support in the practice of Sergey Kalmykov (1891–1967), an avant-garde artist from Almaty, whose artworks, taken together, seemed to Khalfin to represent a single major project. Khalfin quite understood the artist’s concern and dissatisfaction with traditional art forms. According to Khalfin, Kalmykov was a forerunner to many contemporary artistic trends.

In 1996 Khalfin started a project titled *Artist’s Skin*, which he completed in the spring of 1997. In this project, for the first time in his life and in the history of art in Kazakhstan, he played the role of curator. He invited several artists who, in his opinion, had great potential for artistic research. He wrote:

*Artist’s Skin* is the new metaphor of a picture... If we look back at the history of the *Artist’s Skin* concept, the first things that spring to mind will be the ‘outfit’ of a shaman, the clothes of Sergey Kalmykov, in which he treated himself as a moving object of art, the felt suit of Joseph Beuys (with the understanding of defence) and threat – seclusion, experiments with the pictorial by ZERO group, Lucio Fontana, [the] new realists and Jasper Johns... Each participant of the project offers his or her own version of the *Artist’s Skin* on the basis of their own tactile experience of the eye.¹²

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¹² Rustam Khalfin, concept for the project *Artist’s Skin*, press release for ‘Parade of Galleries’, Kasteev State Museum of Arts, Almaty, 1997, p 2
The Artist’s Skin project went on public display at one of the legendary Almaty ‘Parade of Galleries’, which were held several years running at the A Kasteyev State Museum of the Arts of the Republic of Kazakhstan (later - Kasteyev Museum). In those years Khalfin tried to find a way towards the implementation of a mega-project provisionally called The Eurasian Utopia, which, in his opinion, could offer a unique version of creating a new person in a new state:

Developing the strategy of cultural identification we face the problem of understanding cultural boundaries, priorities and grounds. The Eurasian Utopia is a long-term artistic project, which attempts to consider these problems from various aspects.13

The artist designed Artist’s Skin as the first part of this project. The exhibition consisted of a space connecting artefacts on the walls, objects hung on a cloakroom rack in the centre of the hall, and a TV screen at the far end of the hall, where the video performance the Flying White (1999) was shown. The Artist’s Skin project was conceived to some extent as a certain palimpsest of diverse ideas, methods, cultural traditions, political gestures and artistic reminiscences.

Khalfin had an almost obsessive passion for the ideas formulated by Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys, whose influence can easily be seen in most of his projects. He seems to have united and accepted both of them into his own alter ego. He scrupulously collected materials related

13 Rustam Khalfin, concept for the project the Flying White, Selfidentity: Futurological Prognosis, catalogue of the First Annual Exhibition of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) – Almaty, Complex, Almaty, 1999, p 65
to these two artists’ works – although it is not quite clear which sources he used.

Khalfin’s artwork at the time featured a special project, which took in all the main artistic paths of his double alter ego. The project called *The Large Glass: Towards Perception of the Boundaries (Towards Awareness of the Frontiers)* was completed in 1998 as part of the ‘Parade of Galleries’ event held by the Kasteev Museum. Apart from Khalfin, the project team included such artists as Georgy Tryakin-Bukharov, Yelena Vorobyeva and Victor Vorobyev, Yuliya Sorokina and Vadim Dergachev. The project included several statements by the artists, who acted as objects both trespassing on and opposing the territory marked by Khalfin. So what did *The Large Glass* environment look like? Verbally, it can be explained in the following way: a large installation consisting of rectangular fragments of mirror was placed on the floor inside the Kasteev Museum, in the transitional zone between a pyramidal domed space and a court, in front of a large pane separating the atrium from the museum gallery. There was another installation behind a window looking at the atrium. A real parachute was stretched between spruces in the court of the museum. The shroud lines went through the pane to the pieces of mirror on the floor. Khalfin’s idea was that fragments of the parachute were reflected in the installation of the rectangular pieces of mirror on the floor. The visitors were to decide for themselves whether or not they should step over the boundary of the mirror installation.

The white parachute and the hat, derived from Beuys’s, were brought to the space of the Kazakhstan art museum, demonstrating the continuity of nomadism and a specific yearning for the crossing of boundaries in contemporary art. The allusion to Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, (1915–1923, unfinished) was also an attempt to stress the transitional state of the local art and its association with global artistic landmarks. No doubt the questions that Khalfin raised in his project, such as the ‘viewpoint’ – the trajectory of a glance, which conceptually was to be cast onto the parachute in the atrium, penetrate through *The Large Glass*, be refracted by the fragments of the parachute in the mirrors and, finally, be directed, with the help of an artistic gesture, to the artist’s performance – were important for Khalfin’s artistic practice. However, the most important message of the project was perhaps the artist’s wish to create a new ‘transitional hero’ in contemporary Kazakh art. It is no coincidence that Khalfin used to repeat the following phrase in his texts:

Having survived an identity collapse in transition from the end of Socialism to the universal westernisation of our lifestyle, we, for the first time, are able to have a dialogue with the representatives of other cultures and mentalities.14

In 1998 Khalfin, in collaboration with Georgy Tryakin-Bukharov, won a grant from the Soros Center for Contemporary Art, Almaty, to create an innovative artistic project. He called it *Base Level: The Clay Project* (1998–2001). With this project, the artist made a kind of statement, a materialised manifesto. Khalfin was persistently defending the idea of a unique ‘Eurasian’, ‘nomadic’ way of develop-

14 Ibid
ment for the new art of Kazakhstan. He developed the logic of his own artistic method, including the use of diverse materials. He articulately ‘reconstructed’ the basic historical background, creating his own, utopian version of innovation in Kazakhstan. That innovation was based on several postulates, referred to by the artist as the main characteristic features of the nomadic world-view: tactility, curvedness and ecological compatibility.

A two-storey building of a former vegetable store in the territory of Kimep University in Almaty was selected for the implementation of the project. As an architect, Khalfin decided to turn the whole building into the central object of his project. As a result, a colossal clay figure of a recumbent man seemed to grow from the basement through to the ground floor of the building.

*Landscapes of the Body* appeared in different rooms of the vegetable store. These were conceptual objects, creating a discursive exhibition space that automatically involved all the artefacts, allowing them to play simultaneously in the context of the shared space. The surface of the floor was covered evenly with a layer of clay, which cracked as it dried.

Topographically the figure was placed between the basement and the ground floor, that is, at that very ‘zero level’. Its head was made of a real *shanyrak* (the round top of a yurt). The giant’s limbs had a metal frame, which the artist deliberately left visible. One of the hands grew from the floor of one of the ground-floor rooms and was clenched into a fist in the form of an eyepiece – to demonstrate his concept of the ‘pulota’.

All the visitors felt that they were part of the spirit and flesh of nomadism experienced as an idea that might unite the artistic community in Kazakhstan, according to Khalfin’s dreams:

> The figure of the clay hero is a metaphor for the disunity of people in today’s world, which, in particular, concerns our artistic community. It calls for consolidation, for understanding of the situation in contemporary art and for development of a strategy that could present Kazakhstan to the international cultural community.15

Later Khalfin accomplished his next project, *Look Gallery*, in that space (1999). He dedicated the gallery to his late wife, and companion, Lidia Blinova. The space of the gallery became the scene of several exhibitions presenting fragments or, according to Khalfin, shards of *The Eurasian Utopia*; however, other artists were expected to consider within the space of the gallery their own ideas in the context of the unifying Eurasian idea. Nevertheless, his colleagues perceived the invitation to unite under one idea pessimistically, and by and large ignored it. Khalfin continued the project in collaboration with assistants and demonstrated different forms of artistic nomadism in the gallery.


The first work, *Bride and Groom*, was a film about the ancient nomadic tradition, which allowed a loving couple to see each other prior to the wedding only through the *kerege*, a grating in a yurt. The

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film clearly hinted at the erotic motive behind the ancient tradition. Khalfin used his artistic and exploratory potential to great effect, having found the description of this tradition in the notes of John Castle, an eighteenth-century English artist-traveller.

The second part of the series visualises another find made by the artist, of which he wrote:

The book *The Chinese Eros* contains two series of watercolours made in North China in the 18th-19th centuries and depicting erotic horse rides. The series’ title, *The Northern Barbarians*, refers to the nomads the Chinese tried to protect themselves from with the Great Chinese Wall. The film reconstructs this ancient type of love-making.

The curator Viktor Misiano characterised the video in the following way:

... In fact, Khalfin’s Asian ‘steppe’ identity does not lie primarily in the Asiatic shape of his personages’ eyes, that is, not in what we call Orientalism. I think it is rooted in that specific way in which rational structures live in his mind. In his works they never become pure abstractions, that is, what European philosophers used to call ‘instrumental intellect’, but always remain ‘ecologic’, that is, dissolved in the universal natural origin. The true eroticism of Khalfin’s video lies in conceiving the video as the live experience of the eye capturing the world...
In spring 2001, Kimep University, the organisation owning the vegetable store rented for the LOOK Gallery and Base Level: The Clay Project, decided to terminate the contract with Khalfin. Khalfin’s team had to disassemble their work, for which they had had tactical and strategic hopes, with the intention to develop a new image of Kazakh artistic identity. This turn of events completely demoralised Khalfin, although at that very time he received an offer to take part in the biannual Art Residency Program, a prestigious international competition that took place on the seventy-fourth floor of the World Trade Center in New York. Khalfin applied for participation, and won, with competition from 400 candidates from around the world. Khalfin had obtained a visa and had already bought the flight tickets when he had a stroke, and had to give up his aspirations. The management of the residency understood...
the artist’s situation and suggested that the visit be put off until the autumn.

However, on 11 September 2001 the Twin Towers were destroyed by passenger planes with suicide bombers on board. The artist who had replaced Khalfin on the residency died in the tragic event. Khalfin took on the terrorist attack as his personal grief, and in his understanding the two events – the forced disassembly of *Base Level: The Clay Project* and the collapse of the Twin Towers – merged into a single existential tragedy. Nevertheless, he managed to survive as an artist and presented a special project called *My Ruins* at ‘Re-Orientiation: Art on Central Asia’, an international exhibition held in ACC Gallerie, Weimar, Germany (2002). *My Ruins* consisted of an installation of different objects united by the subject of catastrophe and lost hopes and humanitarian values.

The work was a conceptual and abstract way of presenting documents that did not relate to mythological or remote historical events, but were connected with catastrophes taking place in the ‘here and now’. Once again Khalfin entered into a virtual dialogue with Beuys, who also intertwined the mythology of his own fate with the texture of his world-view. The only difference was that Beuys’s mythology was composed of artistic symbols and archetypical materials, while Khalfin’s world-view was made of the ruins of his own life certified by documents – the ruins of *Base Level: The Clay Project*, the ruins of his own personality and the ruins of the Twin Towers. Thus, the fate of an artist from a peripheral Eurasian country was brought to the focal point of the world tragedy.

Tellingly, in the last period of Khalfin’s creative production (2005–2008), he lost control of his projects and their characters. He was not present at any of his exhibitions, excluding those held in Almaty; his works had become discursive, and their author did not have to prove the strength of his ideas any longer. However, each time Khalfin planned to visit the distant venues his installations were exhibited in, he was unable to do so, due to the exertion of travelling being extremely dangerous for his health. It seemed that the artist was searching for a respectable finale for himself; an artistic end, so to say. Late in 2008, the artist decided to make a little ‘hajj’ to the areas near the city of Turkestan, and got as far as Ungurtas, a sacred place near Almaty. He called from there to say that he felt better, hopeful and enthusiastic about his future. However, soon after that, he went into a coma, and on the night of 31 December 2008 he died: a pilgrim in a holy place.

This act of leaving the world was a logical end to the artist’s creative path. In a way, it was also the death of the last ‘body’ of modernism, an artistic construction of the new reality. People gathered to pay their last tributes to the artist at the Tengri-Umay Gallery in Almaty, under a stretched white parachute. The artist’s departure can be interpreted as a complex combination of his life, goals, ideas and concepts. In Khalfin’s case all the components, all the ‘shards’ merged into one – *Pars pro toto*, as one of his pictures was titled.

Khalfin mapped his methodology relative to all reference points: relative to himself as the subject and object of study; relative to the geopolitical situation of the territory in which he lived the life of an artistic individual; relative to the historical and mythological background of that territory; and, finally, relative to the modernist tradition that
would make it possible to include the contemporary art of Kazakhstan in the global artworld. Certainly, such‘stereoscopic’ or ‘rhizomorphic’ approaches look incredibly complex, but this complexity contains a strong synergetic effect, which probably offers the only possible means for Kazakhstan as a country to solve in a short time all the problems that took other countries centuries to solve.

Khalfin is rightly considered the founder of contemporary art in Kazakhstan, as he was not only the first to develop discursive practices, but also determined strategies for the development of the artistic community. Khalfin believed that the strategy for the development of a collective identity in Kazakhstan should be based on several conceptual and historical levels. First, there must be a base, which must be derived from the philosophy of a nomadic world-view. For him it was absolutely obvious that the concept of nomadic mentality, which he borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari’sNomadology, was to become the formative element of the new identity. Second, he attempted to introduce the new formal elements of modernist art into the local art process and constantly engaged with, and conceptualised, the country’s archaic and conservative artistic environment. He was the first in the region who began to present innovative projects in the form of installations, environments and performances to the public.

He is perceived now as a master for a list of emerging Kazakhstani artists, who started their careers in the 1990s and 2000s. Sometimes artists do not want to agree with this statement, but it is obvious that, willingly or unwillingly, Khalfin influenced such artists as Almagul Menlibayeva, Said Atabekov and Erbossyn Meldibekov amongst others. These artists produced their own form of ‘glocal’ identity, which used both international discourse and particular, local properties of nomadic culture. He also inspired other artists, such as Alexander Ugay (b 1978), who never reverted to any national identification but engages in a non-stop dialogue with modernism. At the same time, Khalfin insisted on the necessity of choosing a unique way for the art in Kazakhstan and again called for a return to fundamental plastic principles. It is possible that it was that paradoxical fusion of artistic practice combining the principles of international modernisation and the local traditions of the Great Steppe that his ‘Eurasian Utopia’ consisted in. Unfortunately, much of his legacy has survived only in the form of oral mythology and stories told by those who worked with him or visited his exhibitions.

His project justified its name – it was utterly utopian; he could not unify the artistic community. Officials in Kazakhstan continue to pursue an archaic cultural policy. The term ‘Eurasianism’ has been used by politicians to justify failed geopolitical projects, which discredited its original meaning. Nevertheless, Khalfin’s creative practices have given us hisNomadic Modernism – an example of a local modernity from Kazakhstan.

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