

Expertise on PhD Thesis:

**Contemporary art of Kazakhstan and Central Asia
as a potential cultural heritage**

from

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(Scientific specialty - 6D041600 Art History)

The Republic of Kazakhstan
Almaty, 2016

General appreciation:

In her thesis Mrs. Sorokina deals with very seminal and relevant topics in art- and culture-history nowadays. Since the consciousness of modernity/modernism has spread the boundaries between the past and the present and different cultures have become more fluid. The present can't be defined without questioning the roots to and with the past on one side and the contemporaneity of the past activated on the other part. It is not a surprise that the muse of all arts is Menmosyne the muse of memory and remembrance. Specially in agitated and quickly changing times art and culture are more than ever the agents of cultural memory and identity. In the late years one could observe that art and culture are not only materials for museums and education but also vivid testimonies and agents of social and cultural awareness. Aesthetic and artistic topics have changed the approach of society to art: Since the 1980ies modern and contemporary art have gained a growing presence and influence in public life, as the construction of a multitude of new museums worldwide (mostly for new art !) and the multiplication of Biennales and even art fairs all over the world demonstrate. Until the 1970ies modern and contemporary art was a subject for an elite, nowadays it has become a catalyst for larger public interests and participation. Art has become a platform dealing with autochton, indigen and local concerns as well as with international ones across the borders of countries, nations, cultures and times. This

transformations reach the eastern countries now slowly but steadily and Sorokinas work deals with them.

Globalization and postcolonial consciousness have initiated a broad revision of eurocentric criteria and values in all scientific research and thinking, the former western predominance is widely criticized and new categories are worked at in so called geoaesthetics in which thinkers, theoreticians and practitioners from all countries exchange their opinions. Thank to digital humanities communication exchanges between local and global topics have become the basis for promising new perspectives in which artists, curators art historians question and mediate not only new art forms but also new modes of approaching and mediating older art as well.

Mrs. Sorokina's research on Contemporary Art in Kazakhstan deals exactly with such new hermeneutics and methods of describing, interpreting and mediating art as a strong material for cultural identity- and heritage-discourses. Thanks to new methods (Digital Humanities and Digital Archiving) it is possible to inform and convey on a larger basis. Sorokina's thesis proves a deep knowledge not only from the local traditions, history and development in the arts of the last 25 years, but also a profound erudition in theory and methods of modern and postmodernist thinking and methods. She is familiar with traditional archeological methods and thinking ,but also with newer and latest hermeneutic approaches: not only in the field of art and aesthetics, but also in philosophy, history and sociology since the arts always needed a interdisciplinary perspective, now more than ever. In the field of western literature she is very well informed and I miss only a few authors: Pierre Bourdieu, french sociologist who coined the concept of 'cultural field' and studied his structures and networks, and his follower Bruno Latour who created the Agent Net Work Theory. But I must say, that although Sorokina does not quote them, her methods and results are absolutely in line with their thinking. And last but not least in the field of art history, specially since she works in a comparative mode: Aby Warburg, who specialised iconography and up dated it into 'iconology' (after Panofsky), showing that the subjects and topics can only be understood when imbedded in their cultural, historical and intellectual context, should be mentioned as well. Warburg was also a pioneer of transcultural studies, being one of the first taking interest in art and culture of for instance first nation indigenes in America. But also here I must admit that Sorokina's practice accomplishes and achieves all requirements Warburg's thinking would have had demanded. I must confess that I'm not very familiar with the thinkers and methods in Soviet and Post Soviet culture but I have now doubt that she is also very scrupulous in that field.

One of the most important aspect of Sorokina's research is that she not only focuses the material (the contemporary art practices in Kazakhstan, Central Asia and their international setting and reception) but also the methods and structures of displaying, collecting, preserving and mediating the artistic and

cultural material. Another very striking and relevant particularity is her concern with the historical impact and role of contemporary arts, their relatedness and relation with the past, their cultural function and preservation, as their potential for cultural identities and heritage. This is an eminent subject world wide, one of the top topics of ICOM which is reconsidering the criteria and categories for 'cultural heritage', creating even new possibilities of awareness like 'immaterial cultural heritage'. In time of globalization the consciousness for the own and the other, the local and the international has grown and creates new needs and demands to be dealt with. With her research and work - like the already existing virtual museum, digital archive - Astral Nomad - Sorokina proposes very effective creative and constructive models for a new and fruitful development of the possibilities and potentials of contemporary art practices for the whole society. Her examples show that the new art is not only meant to be some contribution to a museum's collection, but deal with very actual aspects and moments, changes in society and self definition. The most striking aspect is that one fundamental character of central asian culture, the nomadic aspect, which is massively challenged by the conditions of modern society is also a characteristic feature of postmodern condition at large ! The loosening of bounds, the quick changes in politics and cultures, all the migration problems have been declared characteristic of the postmodern status. Central Asian Art articulates not only fundamental moment of it's own culture but also of world wide changing societal, cultural and political conditions. That's why it is not surprising to find some of this artist already successfully exposed in some important international exhibitions (Venice etc.).

The contrast between the contemporaneity of this new Art from Kazakhstan and Central Asia, it's international recognition and too little public at home, which Sorokina addresses also, is a phenomenon also well known in other countries in the Western Part of the World. But it has been worked on, as I said earlier since the 1980ies modern and contemporary art has become very present and popular, because one discovered it's appeal for a bigger public, when it get's places (Museums, Public spaces) and mediation (schools, Media). This propagation of contemporary art has even been discovered as a source or gentrification and commodification, which is not always the best thing, but shows the potential of interest among a larger public.

All the Museums in the Western World have to rethink the display of their collections to revise the former eurocentric categories and to integrate better the new relation between past and present. With he thesis and her approach Sorokina analyses very astutely the specificity and potential of the Contemporary Art in Kazakhstan and shows very concrete possibilities of better recognition and mediation, not only for art's sake, but also for a broader public participation (schools, libraries, conferences etc.). The missing structures could be bridged by the possibilities of digital archiving but there

will also be a need of real presence and materials, specially to show the intertwining between the past traditions and the contemporary practices.

Sorokina's thesis has a very clear intelligent structure, which declares the solid, theoretical and historical thinking and hermeneutic talent of the author. Starting with clearing the broad basis and basic reference frame in global and local perspective, she then presents and analyses the historical, theoretical and artistic positions and protagonists from the past into the present. Once this is established she develops a clear vision of the needs and possibilities to create a consciousness for the role of contemporary art for the culture and cultural heritage of/in Central Asia, specially Kazakhstan. Her researches are based on a serious knowledge of international standards, theories and methods and a profound comprehension for the structures and needs in Kazakhstan. She can present the already existing digital archive 'Astral Nomad' as a well working model. It is very impressive how much besides the support to contemporary practices, Sorokina is driven by the wish for a bigger recognition and impact of those art practices as a positive and productive contribution to the cultural identity and the consciousness of the links to the past. She proves to be not only a good practitioner and artist, but also an astute theoretician and art historian, with a deeply rooted historical knowledge and social consciousness.

Conclusion:

The subject of Mrs. Sorokina Thesis is a very important contribution to a new international art history, which deals on the highest level of actual reflections about the relation between innovation and tradition, art history and contemporary art, the local and the global and further about the role of art and culture in society. This is also a very eminent issue in new research fields in english, german and french art history since the last decade, in which heritage questions and aspects of collecting and 'museologization' get growing importance. Sorokina has a great knowledge of the classical and the newest theories and methods necessary to deal with her subject, which focuses an interdisciplinary field, between art history and sociology, philosophy, cultural studies and art criticism. Her theoretical and methodical approach is that of an art historian, which goes further than an art critic with her arguments and materials. Her thesis proposes not only a clearly structured description and analysis of the states of the arts in Kazakhstan but also gives perspectives and models of building up a new culture and optimizing the possible resources. This research deserves without any doubt the PhD degree.

Further comments on publications by Mrs. Yuliya Sorokina:

Together with Svetlana Shklyayeva she recently published an article in 'Third Text'¹:

The Eurasian Utopia. The Legacy of the Nomadic Modernist

In this very dense article certain aspects of her thesis reappear, since the artistic practice of artists such as Rustam Khalifin (1949-2008), Vladimir Sterligov (1904-1973) whose works were dedicated to the conservation of the local modernity are analyzed, in the context their specific cultural setting and identity. The article starts with a fine analysis of the sociocultural status and complex identity of Kazakhstan between tradition and modernity, specially with respect to the nomadic tradition. With concrete description and analysis of their work one discovers complex artistic researches very aware of the development in western art and modernism but also of their own roots and belonging. Beside the art works Sorokina and Shklyayeva describe also the spare structures for art exhibition in the home country, and the reception abroad. This article proves again Sorokina great analytic talent and high capacity for hermeneutic differentiation.

Another article Sorokina's I read was: From Evolution to growth: Central Asian Video Art 1995-2015, in: *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*²

In a very thorough analysis Sorokina shows the developments of video art in Central Asia, as well on the level of individual artists in their personal contexts, as also on national and international levels and agendas. Video Art came up in the 1990ies in a period of historical, political and cultural changes when independent nations were created and one can observe that the evolution of video art reflects exactly the cultural changes in the region and at the same time their relation to global socio-cultural concerns. Video proves to be the perfect medium for a new articulation and it is universally understandable, offers a lingua franca without national borders. At the same time video allows the expression of specific individual, national and other concerns in a globally comprehensible and very contemporary artistic language. The video art in Kazakhstan proves to be absolutely up to date on an international level, where

¹ <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528822.216.1212512>

² <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17503132.2016.1221236>

it gains also deserved recognition but it misses adequate infrastructures in its home country to be seen and appreciated. Here again most practices deal with the search for a contemporary presence related to the own tradition, how to link past and present in a broader public acknowledgment. All the artists look for a specific artistic expression for their identity in present and past longing for being seen in Central Asia and internationally. These works deal with personal and collective issues and memory, bothering for the reflection of the transformation of culture and reality to be shared with a larger public. The concrete individual positions are described and interpreted in a very differentiated way. Sorokina's talent for detailed and descriptive analysis conveys the very quality and specificity of this artistic positions and their concerns.

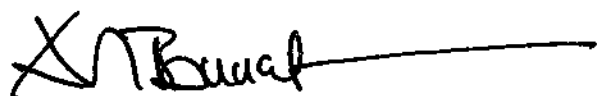
This article demonstrates Sorokina's art historical professionalism, profound knowledge of culture, art and history of her home country, but also of international art and criticism.

Final Evaluation:

Yuliya Sorokina is an impressively erudite artist and art historian, with great knowledge and familiarity with the tradition of art, art theory and history of the past and the present, as well in and for Central Asia, as in and for Europe (internationally).

Her analysis of the state of the arts in Central Asia, all the potential and her proposals for the establishment of better structures for a broader public recognition and understanding for contemporary art, are very concrete, constructive and promising. Her practice as artist and art historian is particularly important because she is also dealing with and preoccupied by the social impact and role of artistic and scientific research.

She deserves the PhD degree without any doubt.



Prof. Dr. A.-M. Bonnet

Bonn, October 30.th., 2016