Participants

Altan Khaluun Darkhan
appak
Ars Kerim
BaderNisa
Balapan
Gilyana Mandzhieva
Gul Altyn
Gul Zeile
Insaya
iskandaria kukchachak
Keto Gorgadze
klöna
Ksti Hu
Medina Bazarğali
Neseine Toholya
norma
Patimat Partu
Polina Osipova
Ptuška
Sanjin Jirgal
sn
Tegryash
Qalamqas
qodiriy
Victoria Sarangova
YumKai

MU collective
Never Odd or Even
unrest group

nGbK work group
FATA collective
Russia is a Colonial Empire

How was Russia — the world’s largest country — constituted within its current borders? Russian historical literature teems with narratives about “discovery,” “exploration,” “liberation,” and “accession.” These narratives often conceal the colonization of Indigenous peoples, the seizure of their territories, the elimination of their cultures and languages, the extraction of resources, assimilation, and even genocide. Having happened throughout a long period of history, these atrocities still affect members of non-white and Indigenous communities in Russia.

While Russia often presents itself as an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist force that supports oppressed people, it has, in fact, always had a strict racial hierarchy, with ethnic Russians as the most privileged group. Today, the situation is becoming even worse. One of the 2020 amendments to the constitution named Russian as the “language of the state-forming people.” Meanwhile, Russian propaganda uses an anticolonial agenda to criticize NATO and European colonial empires and describes the occupation of Ukraine as “liberation.”

Racialized violence happens not just to individuals; it’s a state-sanctioned structure with strategies such as deportation, resettlement, genocide, Christianization, modernization, russification, extractivism, and destruction of ecosystems. For example, the military conscription in September 2022 is part of an ethnocide committed by forcibly mobilizing a disproportionate number of non-white men into the Russian army.

What is Ωμα?

Μα [ome], an exhibition and public program, aims to be a platform for examining Russian colonialism and anticolonial resistance. It challenges the hegemonic image of Russia and the former USSR as non-colonial and anti-imperial states.

The Bashqort word “Ωμα” refers to collective self-help practices. It reflects the various stages the project has gone through — from a residency held almost two years ago for women, non-binary, and trans persons who had faced racialized discrimination in Russia, to the current exhibition’s intention to tell the stories of communities and their cultures that have been exploited and suppressed by Russia for centuries.

The exhibition presents commissioned works created by members of Indigenous communities and people from colonized territories, as well as artists with multi-ethnic, non-white, and migrant identities. They examine racism, colonialism, and imperialism in today’s Russia and the former USSR.

Russia is a Colonial Empire

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In 2004, the European parliament recognized the deportation of Chechen and Ingush people in 1944 as an act of genocide. Meanwhile, because it overlaps with Defender of the Fatherland Day commemorating people who serve or have served in the Russian army, the puppet Chechen parliament moved the day of genocide commemoration from February 23 to May 10. This is another act of violence, positioning the former as more important than a tragic event in Chechen and Ingush history. Furthermore, there have not been any consistent reparation programs for people forcefully displaced on ethnic grounds — Kalmyks, Crimean Tatars, Balkars, Circassians, and others. Open discussion and commemoration are not welcome in Russia. The state conceals these crimes as well as recent atrocities in Ukraine.

Instead, the Russian regime eradicates Indigenous ways of life and economic structures to facilitate the creation of efficient extractive systems. Oil, gas, diamonds, ores, and metals are extracted from people’s lands while ecosystems are destroyed. Oil pipelines in the Sakha Republic are truncating grazing lands for reindeer, which are traditionally bred by the Indigenous peoples of the North. Even though oil and gas are exploited in Sakha and the Buryad Republic, both are not entirely connected to Russia’s gas energy supply. The resource distribution system is centralized, and a greater part of the revenue is accumulated in Moscow.

The unheard and untold their stories of colonisation

The Russian state and most of the white Russian liberal opposition have been silent on these atrocities due to their imperialist vision of the present and future. In Russia, colonial their stories are systematically erased. Mainstream Russian culture, as well as Russian independent media, with few exceptions, support colonial politics, creating narratives of the country’s greatness.

The dissolution of the USSR and emergence of the Russian Federation gave rise to decolonial movements advocating sovereignty. It is these movements that were suppressed the most. Because of this, the decolonial agenda within the Russian Federation had no chance of being institutionalized. They remained few and unpopular among the structural opposition, which was mostly white Russian and imperialist. Decolonial discourse in Russia contradicts both Putin’s regime and the liberal opposition. Some of the prominent opposition leaders vocally express their racist and imperialist views.

Therefore, it is crucial to show support for anti-racist and decolonial initiatives, as well as activist, media, scholarly, and artistic projects of peoples colonized by Russia. Supporting these voices is a way to build solidarity of translocal decolonial movements and make these their stories heard and understood.

The war in Ukraine exposes a continuity of Russian colonialism

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine exposed the continuity of Russian colonialism and its appalling level of violence. Along with the occupation of Crimea and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine, it is evident that Russia is waging a colonial war based on revanchism and a desire to
maintain influence in all the so-called "post-Soviet" space. One of the propagandist points justifying the war is the intention to "protect and secure" the russian language and culture that were, in truth, forcibly imposed on the former Soviet republics/colonies of the russian empire. In the last 30 years, russia waged at least six colonial wars that were overlooked by the rest of the world. This invasion is a continuation of the russian colonial project.

Increasing levels of state violence and repression of decolonial activists have become exceedingly threatening. Political activism is considered an "extremist activity" that "calls for violation of the territorial integrity of the country;" activists can be criminally prosecuted. Despite this, the colonial and imperialist war in Ukraine has activated anti- and decolonial movements among the Indigenous peoples of russia who are tired of brutal repression, systemic racism, extractivism, the lack of the right to self-govern, and the centralized policies of moscow.

Towards decolonisation
Өмә seeks to create new narratives about russia by revealing the coloniality in the country’s structure and anticolonial resistance to it. Art can and should engage with de-metaphorization of decolonial discourse. This means to demand reparations, return of colonized lands, and independence for those who claim it — both territorial and cultural. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have contended in their article “Decolonisation is not a metaphor,” “Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life.”

We rely on their stories of Indigenous peoples, migrants, racialized communities, and their cultures. By referring to methods of micro- and oral their-stories, autoethnography, and working with memory through archives, we seek to represent the complexity of russia as a colonial realm. With works dealing with individual and collective experiences, the exhibition situates itself within the historical and political context of ongoing russian colonial expansion and violence in different territories.

— FATA collective

** With their decision not to capitalize the noun “russia” as well as adjectives and proper names derived from it, the curators of the exhibition express their support for the people of Ukraine.
Room 1
- Patimat Partu. Arba
- MU Collective. Θ
- Victoria Sarangova. Motherland

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- iskandaria kukchachak, norma, Sanjin Jirgal.
- Where is Abystai?

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- YumKai, Sanjin Jirgal, ꜧarry ꜧiv. Computer game. 108
- Ksti Hu. Two of Swords / Komi Niv (Komi girl)

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- Ptuška, Keto Gorgadze. Thyroxia
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Polina Osipova. Сактар-асаттесем патне вәсмөллө сүнөттө
qodiriy. 9 MOONS

**Room 6**
Medina Bazarğali. Aitys

**Room 7**
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**Room 10**
Qalamqas, Gul Altyn. ASHARSHYLQ
sn. tel açılу

**Room 11**
Never Odd or Even.
yes you can yes you can

**Room 12**

**Room 13**
Neseine Toholya.
Embankment Street
The installation examines ethnically motivated mass resettlements in the North Caucasus in 1944 and 1945. It represents an abandoned village in Dagestan. The project is based on the story of the artist’s great-grandparents, ethnic Laks (the Indigenous people of Dagestan), who were resettled from the mountain village of Nitsovkra to the Chechen flatlands. Despite promises of a prosperous future, the people did not want to leave their homes and their native land. Furthermore, each family was allowed to bring with them only one third of a single axle cart’s worth of belongings. Many of them died on the journey due to challenging weather and road conditions.

This resettlement was executed immediately after the deportation of Chechens and Ingush people to Qazaqstan on February 23, 1944. The deportation was accompanied by massacres and deaths: About a quarter of the population was eliminated, a de facto genocide that Russia does not recognize.

The colonial regime turned Indigenous people into settlers by uprooting them and forcing them to occupy the houses and the lands of their deported neighbors who suffered from state repression and genocide. For the Soviet regime, the deportation of the Chechen and Ingush people and the resettlement of the Dagestan people was a structural element of colonial politics that can still be traced in so-called “ethnic conflicts.”

MU Collective — five artists of Kalmyk* origin based in different countries — presents the periodical, self-organized zine “Ө” with contributions by Kalmyk artists. The local community is scattered. Some artists left Kalmykia after the beginning of the war in Ukraine and the rise of repression in Russia, while others stayed. This zine is a much-needed platform for supporting the community and keeping it alive.

“Ө” refers to the Kalmyk word for “flaw” according to the tradition of calling the most precious things names with negative connotations to protect them from evil spirits. This applies to “му” as well — the word means “bad.” The zine aims to explore Indigenous Kalmyk knowledge and concepts. The first issue explores non-Western concepts of time. While colonial linear time generates ideas

*Kalmykia is a republic northwest of the Caspian Sea. The Kalmyk people originated there after their migration from Central Asia and were colonized by the Russian empire during the 18th century. They have Mongol origins, speak the Kalmyk language (a form of Oirat — Western dialects of the Mongolian language family) and mainly practice Buddhism. Today, Kalmykia is a non-sovereign republic within the Russian borders.
of progress and causality, Kalmyk time, following the Mongol-Buryad tradition, is cyclic (as represented in the mandala circle). This concept blurs the lines between past and present, reflecting, for example, the idea of Kalmyks’ past lying in the future.

Victoria Sarangova

Motherland

2022

The project began with Victoria Sarangova’s desire to reconstruct her family history after her mother’s death. Her mother Nadezhda Sarangova was born in Siberia, where her family was exiled during the deportations simply for being Kalmyk. Unable to ask her mother directly, Victoria visited the website of Memorial, the main human rights organization collecting data about repression under Stalin, and found biographies of 194 repressed Kalmyks with the same surname, which in Kalmyk means Moon or Monday.

Even though more than five million people faced repression under Stalin’s rule, it is practically forbidden to discuss this subject in Russia. Memorial has recently been banned by the state, and many independent researchers were imprisoned based on fabricated cases. Meanwhile, the repression of the Kalmyk people under the codename “Operation Ulusy” should be recognized as genocide. The entire population was deported from their native lands to Siberia in December 1943 and up to 20 percent of the Kalmyk population was killed.

Embroidering the stories of repressed Kalmyks in the form of traditional Buddhist flags while spending time thinking of them, Victoria Sarangova commemorates the trauma of the whole nation as well as her personal loss and invites the audience to join her in this practice. After the exhibition, she plans to place the installation in the Kalmykian steppe in the form of a Mongolian ovoo — a divine space for gatherings and collective grieving.
iskandaria kukchachak, norma, Sanjin Jirgal

Where is Abystai?

Zine, audio 48 min, video 3 min
Editor: anastasia
2023

One of the fundamental aspects of colonial structures is the misconception of non-Western religions as "backward" and "dark," as opposed to "humanistic" and "progressive" Christianity. Islam is portrayed as oppressive towards women, which leads to Western feminists' attempts to "liberate" Muslim women from hijabs. However, Islam does not have the same strict hierarchical structures as Catholicism or Orthodoxy, permitting decolonial feminism and the critique of both patriarchy and the Western colonial gaze.

Researchers and artists iskandaria kukchachak, norma, and Sanjin Jirgal tackle islamophobia by interviewing Muslim women in three capital cities of mainly Muslim republics of Russia — Dagestan, Bashqortostan, and Tatarstan. Initially aiming to find abystai — women of the third age, well-versed in Islam — they have since revised their intentions and expanded the pool of interviewees to include educated Muslim women. Among them are workers of mosques and ustads (teachers of foundations of the faith and Arabic). How does patriarchy influence Islam? Does their religion support them? Does patriarchy affect their families and how? These interviews reveal the difference between the outer, mainly secular, perception of Islam and its experience among women practitioners.
There is no racism in Russia is a misconception widespread in so-called West as well as in Russia itself. However, non-white people, while being Russian citizens, constantly face racialized violence. Three artists of Bashqort, Kalmyk, and Buryad origins reflect on their experiences in a computer game addressing the multiple discrimination they face as female and Indigenous persons.

“108" refers to the number of prayer beads in the Buddhist japamala and symbolizes the variety of obstacles. The game starts with the mission of finding an apartment by scrolling rental ad listings with the racist words “only for Slavs." This is accompanied by the distortion of “difficult" non-Russian names and the supremacist desire to find analogs in Russian. The dating app section reveals both the prevalence of European beauty standards and the fetishization of Indigenous.

Artists also introduce activism as an integral element of the life of a non-white woman who is resisting colonial extractivism, the disparity in military conscription of Indigenous men, which is deemed genocidal, and the elimination of Indigenous languages.

Two of Swords / Komi Niv is a work by Artist Ksti Hu about her Komi* heritage. A portrayal, evoking the tarot card, of being stuck in imbalance while searching for your true self.

Komi is a republic west of the Ural Mountains with an Indigenous population whose history and cultural identity have been oppressed to the point of eradication by Russia's imperial and colonial history.

Assimilation is one of the main tools of colonization. Komi are commonly referred to by a racist expletive that portrays them as subjugated, uneducated, and rude. To escape this stereotype, many Komi choose to be seen as Russian, which further contributes to them losing their cultural heritage.

In Ksti Hu's work the Komi girl (Komi Niv), is awaiting her truth, soaked in blood and tied up blindfolded. To reveal and accept her own identity, to overcome the oppressive narrative.
The Chernobyl disaster is traditionally seen as a universal Soviet experience of an ecological catastrophe, hypocrisy of the state, and calamitous fallacy. This project addresses the disaster as a part of the structure of Russian nuclear colonialism. It occurred in Ukraine and primarily affected colonized parts of the empire rather than the center. Ukrainian scholar Svitlana Matviyenko highlights the continuity of this type of colonial violence. It is manifested in the nuclear terrorism that Russia has been employing in Ukraine during the war.

Keto Gorgadze and Ptuška are artists and researchers of Georgian and Belarusian origin who have one thing in common — thyroid diseases, the number of which increased in their countries after the accident. Belarus and Georgia were among the parts of the former USSR that suffered severely from the Chernobyl disaster due to their exposure to diverted rains. Radioactive iodine-131 rapidly spread through these territories, contaminating the water, soil, and crops, which people consumed because they were not warned otherwise by the authorities. The project uses bodily experience to link Russian colonialism in Ukraine with its other colonial atrocities.

“Soft series” by Gul Zeile, an artist from Bashqortostan, is an anatomical felt cabinet created by a non-white woman. Referring to the European tradition of anatomical medical atlases and the patriarchal view of the female body, the objects of the series rescind this tradition.

The project represents the female body as capable of metamorphosis, expansion, and inclusion of objects of the external world; sick, in pain, but still struggling, registering the other’s gaze of itself and resisting its objectifying power. The embodied experience of a non-white woman in a patriarchal and colonial system must constantly overcome not only internal but also external borders as the only way to gain control. In the system of white supremacy and the racialized labor market, a tired, non-white female body must think about decolonization while doing grueling physical work.

Inside out, not fully human, frightening, and monstrous — the body in Gul Zeile’s project acquires political subjectivity and strange integrity due to its combination of the familiar and the sinister, repulsion and attraction.
Room 5

Balapan

Имеезеү

Painting, video 6 min
2023

In this installation, the Bashqort feminist and artist Balapan depicts herself breastfeeding her child (Имеезеү in Bashqort). By showing it as a daily routine, she challenges the stereotypes that see breastfeeding as something that should be hidden or as a sublime image similar to the Madonna, widespread in Western art tradition, which perpetuates the male gaze.

To resist these oppressive stereotypes, she turns to a traditional Bashqort breastfeeding plate, one of the main parts of the painting and installation. Often used as a decoration in recent decades, it originally served as apparel that allowed women to feed their children safely and comfortably. She also displays a documentary to highlight the transformation of Indigenous knowledge and traditions into decorative yet purposeless products under imperial rule. The process, called exoticization or orientalization, was employed as a colonial tool by muscovites and then by the russian empire to represent colonized people — including the Bashqort — as under-civilized, cultureless, and inferior. By ascribing commonplace, mundane usage a traditional Bashqort object, Balapan juxtaposes it with colonial (self-)exoticization.

Polina Osipova

Ҫӑлтӑр-асаттесем патне вӗҫмелли сунатсем

Sculpture with metal, pearls, and archival photos
2023

The title of the sculpture by Polina Osipova, an artist of Chuvash* origin, means “wings for flying to the ancestor stars.” It is related to the Chuvash tradition of perceiving ancestors as stars in the night sky and to their concept of the world, of which the cosmos is an integral part.

During Soviet times, this perception was distorted and replaced with the colonial concept of space conquest, chiefly because the fifth cosmonaut was from Chuvashia. Many places were given space-related names; even the playgrounds had “rocket” slides. As a child, Polina made a drawing of a “spacecraft” suit to fly into space. She now decided to realize it, but instead of space, she dreams of using it to connect with her Chuvash culture. Thus, wings transform into the peresti — a Chuvash mythological creature who serves as a medium between humans and gods. The wings are rusty, however, like the playground from the post-Soviet past. The wings are also covered with the artist’s family archival photos — these help her connect with her Indigenous identity and its oppressed culture.

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*Chuvashia is a republic in the Volga Upland. The Chuvash people, a Turkic ethnic group, originated there in the eighth to tenth centuries. Chuvash is a Turkic language. The Chuvash practiced shamanism and Islam until their colonization by muscovites in the 16th century and subsequent forced Christianization. The Chuvash Republic is now included within the borders of the Russian Federation as a non-sovereign republic.

*Bashqortostan is a republic between the Volga River and the Ural Mountains in Eastern Europe. Bashqort, its main autochthonous language, belongs to the Turkic language family. Islam began to be practiced there in the 9th century. Starting from the 16th century, the Bashqort people and land were colonized by muscovite Russia. Bashqortostan is now included within the borders of the Russian Federation as a non-sovereign republic.
The project deals with family histories and women’s entangled identities in O’zbekiston*. It starts with an object that the great-grandmother of the artist, Oybibi, owned. Her name translates as “the moon lady,” and her dowry, which was a large piece of traditional suzani embroidery of the Jizzax region, depicted nine moons. It was cut into pieces and distributed among the many strands of qodiriy’s extended family when the artist was a child. Her part of the family was left with two pieces that are the starting point for the installation.

Creative reconstruction of this dowry piece uses the missing moons as structural points that depict different experiences of the women in the family since the 1920s. The loose pieces containing a mixture of embroidery techniques and local canons are connected by threads, creating a non-hierarchical genealogical tree, a rhizome of relations. A hidden layer of digital reality further explores the connections and, as a form, emphasizes the invisibility of these women’s experiences. Thus, the project reflects upon the untold histories of women in Central Asia — stories that unveil struggles with colonialism, religion, ideology, and patriarchal ways in what is now O’zbekiston.

*O’zbekiston is a state in Central Asia. The territories of present-day O’zbekiston were conquered and occupied by the Russian empire in the second half of the 19th century. After the collapse of the empire and the suppression of the struggle for freedom and independence, it became part of the Soviet Union in 1918. Armed resistance to Soviet rule continued in the republic until the mid-1930s. It declared independence and left the USSR in 1991.

Room 6

**Medina Bazarğali**

**Aitys**

2-channel video installation, sound, 31 min
Akyns: Biybigül Tileboldiynova, Bekjan Bazarbek
Camera: Damir Mukhametov
Assistance: Ayaulim Lenhan
2023

The work refers to the “aitys,” a song competition between two poets or “akyns.” It has a long tradition in Qazaq and Kyrgyz histories. The spoken word is crucial for both steppe cultures, which mainly produce and distribute knowledge orally, often without creating written archival documents. Akyns also used the spoken word to fight tyranny, to speak directly to khans, terens, bis, and beks. No issue is ignored by the aityskers, or debaters.

The situation drastically changed in Soviet times when Qazaq steppe nomads were forced to adopt a settled way of life — hence, to change their traditions. In the 21st century, aitys remains depoliticized and is used by political monopolists as a propagandist trope to solidify an illusion of free speech.

Medina’s original idea was to create a digital aitys with AI-generated poems and sound. While working, they discovered the coloniality of such an approach that deprives artists of their agency and filmed the performance without any digital interference.
In their video, Medina tries to restore political meaning to aitys. Experts in improvisation combine poetic flow with dombra sounds to create an aitys battle about different ways to achieve Qazaqstan’s decolonization. The first akyn is fighting the colonial regime to create his own hierarchy and to reproduce patriarchal power, control, and oppression. The second one reflects a feminist point of view, freestyling about mutual aid, sustainable communities, and solidarity networks. For this akyn and the artist, decolonization means freedom from any colonial, patriarchal, or capitalist regime.

Room 7

Altan Khaluun Darkhan
Memory 2.0
Print on fabric
2023

Memory 2.0 is deeply connected to the local history of the Tunkinsky district of the Buryad Republic — the homeland of the artist Altan Khaluun Darkhan. During the colonization of Buryad lands in the 17th century, the establishment of stockades (ostrogs) by Russian cos-sacks and the service class had an important function.

The Tunkinsky stockade, built in 1676, was one of the main connecting hubs of Russian colonial infrastructure in Buryad lands. It was set up on the site of the ancient ancestral lodge of Indigenous people of this land — Tunka Buryads — and served as a fortress, prison, and administrative center of colonial governance. Buryads were forced to pay yasak, a natural tax on the peoples of Siberia and the North, mainly in fur.

Combining images of the landscape, digital maps, and views of the Tunkinsky stockade, the project questions how personal, collective, and historical memories create something one can call a land, a home, a place, and evidence.
Room 8

BaderNisa, Balapan
Qorama

4 fabric tapestries, zine
2023

Named after the Bashqort* tradition of patchwork, "Qorama" reflects the attentive Indigenous use of resources, the empowering potentiality of oral history, and a feminist opportunity to oppose oppression and silencing. Bright tapestries were quilted by a circle of women who combined fabric patches left over from dressmaking. Sharing both positive and traumatic stories from their personal and collective lives, quilters also recorded history in a non-linear way and from a female perspective.

For these quilts, artists and Bashqort feminists and activists BaderNisa and Balapan collected stories of women from Bashqortostan as well as from the participants of this exhibition. Each tapestry reflects various experiences, from weddings, births, and deaths to the state of the women in Russia and Bashqortostan, as well as the famine of 1921-1922 and World War II.

The artwork "Xush kelibsiz" (O'zbek for "Welcome") by Insaya is a result of her observation of the reconstruction of the O'zbek SSR pavilion in the VDNKh complex in Moscow.

VDNHk, the Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy, was created in the 1930s to represent the success of the Soviet empire in particular industries and fields — engineering, space, atomic energy, the people’s education, Soviet culture, and many others. Another goal of the exhibition center was to demonstrate one of the key ideological narratives of Soviet national politics — “friendship among nations” — through the parade of the various Soviet republic pavilions.

Insaya, having herself experienced migration from O'zbekiston, critically examines the overlapping images of the Soviet representation of her homeland, the current economic consequences of its colonial past (labor migration from O'zbekiston to Russia), and the invisibility of this complexity in contemporary Moscow, where migrants reconstruct the symbols of their own historical oppression to survive without having the privilege to openly resist it.
appak presents a two-part research project on today’s colonial situation in her native Dagestan*. In the essay, she analyses the process of the elimination of Indigenous identity and continuous colonialism referring to inner migration flows — from Dagestan to central Russian cities and vice versa. She shared her experience of discrimination in Moscow’s academia on ethical, gender, and religious grounds despite her family’s efforts to make her more assimilated. At the same time, in Dagestan white Russian people still have a privileged status allowing them to occupy “expert” positions. During recent years, they’ve turned the stunning Dagestan landscape into the backdrop for their art and tourism projects.

In a series of interviews, appak talks to Dagestani women artists, lawyers and human rights activists to show the strength and variety of local voices. They show that to flourish, the region needs opportunities and autonomy rather than Russian projects. Unfortunately, these voices, as well as the voice of the artist, are anonymous due to safety reasons, which also indicates the colonial state of things.

* Dagestan is a republic in the North Caucasus along the western shore of the Caspian Sea. The Indigenous population includes more than 80 ethnic groups speaking mostly Caucasian, Turkic, and Iranian languages and practicing Islam. Dagestan was annexed by the Russian empire in 1813 following an agreement with Persia. It declared independence in 1921 but a few years later it was seized again by the Soviet Bolshevik state. Dagestan is now included within the borders of the Russian federation as a non-sovereign republic.
The project explores the genealogy of ideas within oppositional political groups and parties in Russia to show why the current political and cultural landscape cannot offer alternatives to the Russian imperial project.

From the perspective of regional studies and practices, un|rest group looks at the logics and dynamics that are reproduced in groups and communities under the guise of outdated and emasculated political slogans.

One can see the history of failed regional independence projects in Russia as well as struggles for peoples’ right to self-determination, the development of autonomies, and feminist policies over the past 30 years. The suppression mechanisms did not allow these movements to become a platform of mass decolonial and liberation resistance in the necropsy of Russia’s political corpse.

There’s still a shred of hope that this resistance is emerging now — as a response to the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine and fascistization of the Russian regime.

Asharshylyq (Qazaq: ашаршылық or “famine”) names the 1931–1934 tragedy in Qazaqstan resulting in the death of 49 percent of the population and in the de facto genocide of the Qazaq nation. The famine triggered the migration of Qazaqs into neighboring Soviet republics and other countries.

Soviet collectivization was the leading cause of the famine, characterized by the establishment of collective forms of agricultural farming and its industrialization to boost grain production. The nomadic or partially nomadic lifestyle of the majority of Qazaq herders contravened this policy. Hence, they were forced to settle down. The Qazaq steppe was colonized for agricultural needs. The Indigenous way of life of the Qazaq people and their culture were almost entirely destroyed. Until the 1990s, Qazaqs remained a national minority in their own country.

In their project, two Qazaq artists and researchers, Qalamqas and Gul Altyn, talk about the fate of their ancestors who disappeared without a trace in the Hungry
Steppe, using the language of comics. Turning to family and collective memory, the artists thereby protest the colonial policy of the Soviet empire, restore their own ethnic identity, and erased pages of their national history.

In this animated video, artist and designer sn combines and deconstructs the alphabets and fonts of the Tatar* language to liberate and explore its visual capacity. The Tatar language has its own extensive history of employing different alphabets — from Arabic, adopted with Islam in the 10th century and used until the 1920s, to Latin, and then Cyrillic script, which has formed the current official Tatar alphabet used since 1939. Even though the Tatar language is more recognized and privileged today compared to many other languages of Indigenous peoples in Russia, its complicated history still reflects the oppression of the language as one of the chief colonial tools.

Despite Tatar being an official language in Tatarstan, the number of Tatar speakers continues to decrease yearly. No universities and only a few schools employ Tatar as the language of instruction. Most commonly, Tatar language use is oral and domestic, which leads to the obsolescence of its literary form, especially among younger speakers. Referring to Tatar literature as well as everyday phrases, sn transforms them into written form using a combination of three alphabets.

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*Tatarstan is a republic in the middle of the Volga River basin with Kazan as its capital. In the 15th century, Kazan Khanate was formed there; in the 16th century, it was conquered by the muscovites. Tatarstan is now included within the borders of the Russian Federation as a non-sovereign republic.
Room 11

Never Odd or Even

yes you can yes you can

Installation, zine,
video loop 30 sec
2023

One of the most common things in all our lives, food is an ideal indicator of systems of colonialism, racism, inequality, and gender oppression. High-brow cuisine and “sophisticated taste” are associated with male chefs’ “European” food. However, on a larger scale food is often prepared by women, often Indigenous and with migration experience. The foods of Asia, Africa, and South America, despite increasing accessibility in restaurants around the world, continue to be fetishized and exoticized.

In their project, artists and activists from the Never Odd or Even collective manifest the value of food for the communities as a medium for communication. For many immigrants, food connects them with their families and traditions through countries and generations. For natives, food keeps them attached to their culture.

Sculptures made of mochi, a traditional Southeast and East Asian rice dough, are flexible and soft with enough care but hard and fragile without. Mochi symbolizes the trauma of migration and separated families that can be left unspoken for years. The zine includes traditional Indigenous recipes — Chukchi (or Lyg’oravêt’lêt, Indigenous people of Siberia) bone marrow, Buryad salamat, Korean kimbap, etc. This is white-colored food from non-white people, traditionally eaten with family. In many Asian cultures, white food is believed to have a healing capacity. By sharing these recipes artists hope to heal themselves and everybody who joins and to return uniting power to food.

Room 12

x inner creatures

Total installation
2022-2023

The project represents a world the artist creates based on her ancestors’ culture and ethnocultural roots. The installation invites the audience into a space of Buryad* mythological creatures and symbolic and imaginary patterns of Buryad culture.

Buryad mythology, as a system of beliefs, rituals, and ontologies based on shamanism, is still of great importance for local culture, influencing the people’s ways of thinking. However, from the perspectives hegemonic eurocentric culture in Russia, it is often perceived as an irrelevant relic of the past.
Local traditions and ontologies face attempts to be rationalized, which means they are denied intangible phenomena that are vital to them. For this installation, the artist also uses objects people made during the workshop she led devoted to expressing negative feelings. Visualizing them as creatures of a new Buryad culture, participants tried to make the distinction between “contemporary” and “local” disappear.

Room 13

Neseine Toholya  
Embankment Street

Handmade zine, drawings  
2023

The project consists of three parts. The first, through the narratives, collages, and drawings, reconstructs the street where the artist, Neseine Toholya, used to live in her home village Yar-Sale in Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug*. Another one is a zine made in collaboration with the Ωмё project participants to explore what it means for them to feel at home. Many of the exhibition artists experienced migration or came from the lands colonized by the Russian state and at various points of history they and their families had to leave their homes (as a result of deportation, repression, or uneven economic development).

Finally, the project provides an opportunity for the audience to share “recipes” from their lives that create a sense of home. A scrapbook at the installation space is free to interact with, make drawings, write down some memories of home, or share what makes them feel at home somewhere.

* The Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug is in the northern part of the West Siberian Plain and borders the Kara Sea. More than half of its territory is located beyond the Arctic Circle, and the entire district is inside the Arctic zone. The Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug is home to Indigenous peoples of the North: Nenets, Khanty, Mansi, Selkup, Evens, and others, 40 percent of whom are nomads.
Public program

The public program examines multiple dimensions of Russian colonialism, including racialized violence, extractivism, the elimination of Indigenous cultures, occupation, and more. With a particular focus on Russia, lectures, performances, and discussions trace out the interconnections between different colonial projects.

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