

**THE EMPTY PEDESTAL.
CONVERSATION WITH
VYACHESLAV AKHUNOV**

Marco Scotini, 2014

Interview in occasion of the show
The Empty Pedestal, curated by Marco Scotini,
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One of the most charismatic artists of central Asia, for years Vyacheslav Akhunov (born 1948) has been prohibited from leaving Uzbekistan or Russia for political reasons. His work is now on display in the exhibition The Empty Pedestal: Ghosts of Eastern Europe at the Archaeological Museum of Bologna, and in a solo exhibition The Red Line at the Laura Bulian Gallery in Milan.

Marco Scotini: *In the years 1976-1978 you conceived a project comprising 8 drawings containing a total of 32 pedestals. Representing different styles and time periods, these pedestals, located in various Soviet cities, represent the sole variants of a single statue, which is always the same: that of Lenin. But strangely, this statue is missing; it has been removed. Now in this work of yours titled The Empty Pedestal, we all see a strong anticipation of the Leninoclasm that would come after 1989. However, what interests me here is the novelty of this work, which, together with your other works, shows that at that time, you saw Communism as a thing of the past, as an era of the Stone Age that you were examining like an archaeologist.*

Vyacheslav Akhunov: In the 1950s my parents had rented a room in a hovel where fourteen families lived. There was just one bathroom made of planks of wood, with three latrines. The address of the hovel was СССР К – Soviet Socialist Republic of Kyrgyzstan – in the city of Osh, at number 382 Stalin Street. There were two main streets in the city and they were parallel: one was Stalin Street and the other Lenin Street. Two times a year, with the local band playing, columns of people marched down our street for the celebrations of major political events: in the autumn to celebrate the anniversary of the October Revolution and in the spring, on May Day, to celebrate international workers solidarity day.

On those days, the people who lived in the hovels, including my parents, filled tables with food and carried them out into the courtyard to celebrate together with the marchers. They drank wine and vodka, they danced to songs and music, using an old German gramophone that they had as a war trophy. Not far from our shack there was a monument to Stalin. But near the end of the '50s, the statue of Stalin – which we had all got quite used to – suddenly disappeared. As I was on my way to school the next morning, I found an empty pedestal. Stalin had vanished.

On the lawn in front of the building where the local chapter of the Communist Party had its headquarters there was another municipal monument. This one was made of cement. Lenin and Stalin were sitting on a bench engaged in conversation. Now Stalin's bust had disappeared and Lenin was sitting there all alone. The adults made jokes: Stalin had gone to the store to buy some vodka. And there had also been a figure of Stalin with two pioneers, a girl and a boy who were offering him a bouquet of flowers, at the rest home for the city's workers: that too was gone. As were the many busts of Stalin that were near the school named Stalin in the city park of culture and leisure, which was also named Stalin.

Two months later, they put a statue of Lenin on the empty pedestal. So now the city had two monuments to Lenin: the new monument on Stalin Street, whose name was soon changed to Jakov Sverdlov Street, and the old one on Lenin Street.

At the time, my father, Urumbai Akhunov, was working as an artist on the archaeological expedition of the CCCP Kyrgyzia Academy of Science, under the supervision of the archaeologist Yuri Baruzdin. During summer vacations from school, he took me with him to the digs, and later, when I was older, I also worked for an archaeological expedition as a manual labourer. It was around that time that I saw something that really struck my childhood imagination. It was a work by the Russian painter Karl Bryullov, *The Last Day of Pompeii* (1833), which depicted statues of the gods toppling from their pedestals onto the heads of the people as total destruction swept over them. This scene still haunts me, and in the 1980s I even produced a cycle of paintings titled *Volcanoes and Earthquakes*.

In some ways, the Empty Pedestal project is also the description of a part of my life, of my childhood memories, which overlap those of my youth, all to the strains of the musical culture of the time – the Beatles. I even learned how to play the guitar and founded my city's first rock band. We used to dream that – as we had seen with the statues of Stalin – instead of Vladimir Lenin, we could have John Lennon on the pedestals. There's even an uncanny resemblance in the names: Lennon-Lenin. Obviously there's a lot of irony in the work. If Stalin had gone to buy vodka and never come back, Lenin might now have gone to look for Stalin, leaving his pedestal empty (there were a number of variants – “gone to the party congress”, “to the sauna”, “to the supermarket”, etc.)

M.S.: In the Seventies, the years of stagnation under Brezhnev, when you were inventing these works, what was the cultural and political atmosphere in Tashkent? That was when Mark Weil founded the independent theatre Ilkhom. Was the revolutionary wave sweeping over Europe in '68 also felt in the deep Soviet provinces?

V.A.: In the 1960s through the '80s in Tashkent, there was no underground, no anticonformism and not even any people who thought along avant-garde lines. Among the poets in the late Seventies and early Eighties, there was just one – Muhammad Salih, friend of the Russian poets Dmitry Prigov and Alexey Parshikov – who was successful in his ventures into avant-garde poetry. The arts scene was extremely conservative. The Central Committee of the National Youth Communist and Leninist Union of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Uzbekistan, together with the Uzbekistan KGB instituted the Ilkhom youth cultural centre (Ilkhom means “inspiration” in Uzbek), which also included a youth theatre. They invited one of the “faithful” to direct it (one of them), Mark Weil. This all happened after the Moscow KGB opened an Exhibition Centre for anticonformist artists on Malaya Gruzinskaya Street, to keep tabs on what the artists were doing and to show the West that even in the USSR anticonformism could exist and was officially tolerated.

The central powers recommended introducing this Muscovite experience of the KGB of Brezhnev's time into the different Soviet Republics. It was all pretty mixed up, but no avant-garde theatre came out of the Ilkhom: Weil's shows of the time were typical imitations of the productions in Moscow. Ilkhom was labelled “avant-garde theatre” only towards the end of Perestroika, and later, during the transition to independence, the people leading the theatre tried to forget who their real patrons were, those who actually founded the theatre – the Central Committee of Komsomol and the Uzbek KGB – and declared themselves to be the founders. There was as much avant-garde in this theatre as there has been in Uzbek arts, cinema and literature to the present day. During all these years, the powers never cancelled or removed a single performance from the theatre repertory. And then, of course, no one can prohibit someone from calling himself an avant-gardist, and any Uzbek theatre, artist, poet, director can easily appropriate this *nom d'honneur*. Even more so given that the era of the avant-garde ended in the Sixties. But in order for a democratic art, literature or architecture to emerge, you need something more – an open society. Contemporary art is not possible in a society that is closed and authoritarian by constitution. If these things existed, it was just because they were mere mediocre clones.

It is really hard to find events here that point to the existence of, or a role for, contemporary art. They are virtually non-existent. And this applies to all of the art and culture of Uzbekistan. Every day, every step we take, we come upon poor quality imitations, and only rarely, in the best cases, works that resemble the originals.

At noon on 10 June 2013, I gave a lesson at the Ilkhom Theatre as part of the “Contemporary Art Likbez” project (Likbez was the name of a Soviet campaign to fight illiteracy). The lesson was titled “Contemporary art in the age of stagnation in capitalist finance” and it was addressed to actors, people who worked at the theatre and anyone else who was interested. Judging from the reaction of the audience, the only part that aroused any interest was my talk about “Money – engine of art or a burden on creativity?”. We had even agree to start some contemporary art courses at the theatre. But soon afterwards, the agents from the State Security Services warned theatre management that those courses were not acceptable, especially if associated with me. It all ended up that the theatre managers were forced to rewrite the employment contract and the lease, changing the name of the theatre to “Ilkhom Centre for the Arts”, while actually going back to its status prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. What can I say? The “revolutionary wave of ‘68” got lost somewhere on the steppes of Kazakhstan and still hasn’t made it to Uzbekistan.

M.S.: And the graphic project *Party Line* (or *Red Line*) is part of the same pursuit: the style of constructivist photomontage, supremacist abstraction, influxes of Islamic calligraphy, the modes of socialist realism, oriental mantras and miniatures from the Muslim east differentiate your work from the Russian conceptualists. In these extraordinary works, everything seems to be fused together (as in a sort of kaleidoscopic collage) to deconstruct rhetorical formulas, the propaganda images of the Soviet regime. However, these works seem to be “archives” in which you keep one story and a plurality of stories at the same time. And so the small leaves of your notebooks now look to us like grand frescoes – epic, choral, archaeological in the manner of Foucault – even if they are made by an individual who is rather isolated, who has sought to hide himself.

V.A.: During the years of Leninist and Stalinist terror, the hunt was on for the enemies of the working class – the so-called uklonists. A uklonist is someone who tried to deviate from the general line prescribed by the Party. The term “party line” existed officially and everyone had to hew to this guiding line, all USSR citizens, bar none. Those who didn’t follow the party directives, and those who didn’t respect them, were killed with a bullet or in a thousand other ways. As Andrey Fomenko correctly wrote in his article “The Lone Ranger of Contemporary Art”: *“the name Akhunov (or as the Uzbeks say, Okhunov) is now familiar to anyone who pays attention to what is going on in contemporary post-Soviet art. In the 1970s, living in Tashkent, Akhunov began developing works based on the official iconography of Soviet mass culture in a way that was completely independent of his Russian colleagues, using the images and texts of monumental propaganda, at times fusing them with western modernism, at times with eastern mysticism. These experiences were in line with what Erik Bulatov, Komar and Melamid, Dmitry Prigov, Aleksandr Kosolapov and Leonid Sokov were doing at the time.*

Akhunov was also interested in the relations between words and images. But unlike western conceptual artists, who showed the process of determination of the visual image through the use of text, Akhunov, as a result of his different cultural experience, transformed the text into an image, into an icon, into a material construction. For example, he integrated the portraits of Lenin and Stalin into a textual ornament, built by repeating the texts of various slogans ad infinitum. In other works he transformed words into architectural objects rising up from a desert landscape, in the manner of De Chirico.

“These works were created outside of the context of Muscovite conceptualism or the social art (soc-art) of the emigrants. Akhunov had neither colleagues nor anyone else around him who saw things the way he did. This is probably why the artist gave up his art quite easily in the 1980s, preferring to express himself through other means and in other disciplines (producing, in reality, the same concept of ‘nevlipaniye’ that the members of Muscovite Conceptualism talked so much about), and then returning to the field of art with equal ease in the early 2000s.

“Recognized as a classic of the Soviet underground, Akhunov has never lost his taste for experimentation. He creates things that are very different from one another, using different techniques and media to do so – text, video, ready-made, performance. His videos ‘Grain for Canary’, ‘The Clay Fish’ and ‘Ascent’ are fairy tales on the relation between art and life based on local Uzbek materials. More recently, Akhunov has participated in many exhibitions, especially in the West (at home in Uzbekistan, this possibility is denied him). And while I was writing this article, in Milan the very first ever solo exhibition of Akhunov was inaugurated, The Red Line, in the Laura Bulian Gallery. Vyacheslav Akhunov was not able to attend the inauguration because the local authorities do not allow the artist to travel outside the territory of Russia.”

The dispute over “nevlipaniye” (“not being caught”) by the Muscovite conceptualists is actually a discussion about how the western modernist experience of certain artists has marked certain projects and how it influenced the creation or birth of certain of their works. During the dispute a lot of criticism was thrown around, post-modernist acts of plagiarism and appropriation were unmasked in the practice of Muscovite conceptualism, starting with Ilya Kabakov.

Myself, perhaps I was saved because I live in the provinces, far from Moscow, from its insincerity and the delusions caused by the works of the Muscovite conceptualists, and also because of my curiosity, my passion for Sufism, Taoism, Buddhism, my respect for the grand tradition of art – socialist realism and the great desire to bring socialist realism into a new dimension, that of the contemporary. We had a “grand task” in mind, a “great objective” to achieve. I wanted to fuse socialist realism with modernism, creating what I called *Soc-Modernism*, since I considered the name *Soc-Art*, invented by emigrants to the United States, something that was pretty clever.

M.S.: The figure of the leader played a central role in your work in the '70s. Obsessive, he comes back multiplied, like the image of a man, like a slogan, like an object of your affection, a sarcastic demon, etc. There is an entire Carnival of masks that go beyond, that hide behind, that blend in with the party line, the red line of the horizon...

V.H.: The name of the leader blotted out all life in the city. His figure closed all perspectives and all vistas, and not just those that were visual. The political leader laid out the guidelines of the party and our style of life. The leaders died and, with every new Communist leader, the party line changed – our Soviet horizon. But every time it seemed like we were getting close to this horizon, it moved further away with every step we took forward. One of the immovable pillars of Communist propaganda was the figure of Lenin, until the dogmatic Marxist-Leninist doctrine arrived at its acme of complete nonsense, at its own negation, until the point where Karl Marx said: *“Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as a tragedy, the second time as farce.”* And it is precisely this farce that I have sought to capture and express in my work. When a political leader died, we finally understood in our conscience that he was a mortal being, a human being: not a demon or a superman. At the time, the TV broadcast the funerals of government leaders day and night (now you can only see this looking at North Korea, where the act of the funeral of the leader is taken to such extremes that it becomes absurd).

Your creative approach takes form, in effect, because of the events you have lived through, because of the events of which you are part, becoming a description of the reality that surrounds you and of your contemporary existence.

Take, for example, the funeral of a small man and of the leader. Once the Shipito Circus came to my town. They were enjoying a grand success, a lot of shows until suddenly the main clown died. His funeral left a deep mark on me. The casket with the clown's body was transported on a flatbed truck with the sides down. The circus orchestra marched ahead of the truck, playing the music from their repertory, while the acrobats, clowns, jugglers, illusionists, horseback riders, dog trainers and other actors did their circus numbers in their circus costumes all the way to the city cemetery. They were crying, but they went on doing the same things they always do, accompanying their friend on his final journey.

The Communists, on the other hand, performed their rituals with as much pomp and circumstance as they could muster. Rituals and ceremonies – yes, that's what life had become.

M.S.: After Perestroika you started working mainly with video, producing metaphors of traps, of having no way out, no exit. How did the fall of the Berlin Wall look from the Eurasian border, from these provinces that were as far from Europe as they are from China?

V.A.: I wanted to express myself with video art. And so in the 1980s I immersed myself in the life of cinema production. I even worked as an actor. Once they gave me the role of an old Kazakh soldier, who, according to the script, was to be present at a birth on the steppe during movements of a division of the colonial army. I played my role and “received” the new-born. The next day, the scenographer’s assistant drew me away from the set to talk to me in private. He told me that the cinematographer had actually got her pregnant and she needed an abortion and he wanted to know if I would agree to help them. Stanislavski would probably have cried out, “I don’t believe it!”

At the end of the 1990s, I finally got a video camera and started practicing video art. My latest video, which I did in 2012, is titled “Dead end” because the advent of wanton capitalism brought the spirit of new barbarism to the country and put people in a position from which they could not get out.

I perceived the collapse of the Berlin Wall as an event of extreme importance both for the USSR and Uzbekistan and for the entire world. Finally the winds of change were blowing. My friend the poet Muhammad Salih had founded a political party “ERK” (Liberty). New organizations sprang up, like the People’s Front and the political party “Berlik” (Freedom). We were finally for the first time hearing talk of independence. But I didn’t take part in any of these events. I always remained neutral.

Actually, I found out about the destruction of the Berlin Wall in a really strange way, since I was in Seattle at the time. I was part of a delegation of diplomats from our country and we were touring the United States. I was having lunch in a restaurant with my American friends when a group of Eastern Germans came in. After they heard that we were speaking Russian, one of them came over to our table and asked if any of us was Russian from the USSR. When they found out that I was, they wanted to hoist me up and throw me into the air. I was just worried that, since they were a bit drunk, they might make a mistake and drop me on the floor. Then I found out that they had agreed to hoist up the first Russian they met and toss him in the air. And so they were the ones to tell me, in this particular way, about the beginning of the dismantlement of the Berlin Wall.

In the United States I saw original works of contemporary art in the museums and it was there that I understood that everything had already been done before me by the western artists and that I really had to make an effort to think about how to continue to develop along my own artistic path. When I got back to Tashkent I immediately understood that a new era had begun. I put all my work, my entire archive into boxes and decided I would reopen them twenty years later. However, the course of events in central Asia went much differently from what we had expected. New states were founded with former leaders and prime ministers of the Communist party at the helm. No longer under Moscow’s control, they quickly transformed into lifelong dictators and introduced authoritarian regimes.

M.S.: We know that nationalist nostalgia and the return to clan rule have played a large role in the post-Soviet hinterland. You yourself, and your work, bear the marks, given that you have been forbidden to leave Uzbekistan. Can you tell us something about your current situation?

V.A.: The new times ushered in by the progressive construction of capitalism in Uzbekistan were characterised by constraints on liberty, the rise of the symbolic economy and nearly total social insecurity. Karimov, the previous Communist leader, was not able to bid farewell to his habitual take on the terms freedom and democracy, to his paternalism in forming his government. Naturally, year after year he plays the lead role in the main charade: the leader who “suffers for his people”, for the just cause, for the state that his people have entrusted to him. There is no nostalgia for a Communist past. And there is no lovelorn weeping for lost Communism – now he has everything: power and the boundless love of his people without the Soviets over him. And the more a leader has uncontrollable power, the greater his field of action for declaring and affirming this power. This means suppressing and liquidating, using all possible means, any attempt to change the status quo. For that matter, as in any autocratic system of government – where a person who refuses to leave office, manipulates elections and legislation, and for many years holds the reins to a personal power that cannot be controlled by the people – the leader will be the ultimate judge who condemns or absolves in the name of the government and of the people. As an alternative to all that which might hark back to the destroyed Communist-Socialist past, which is now seen as the “era of abundance and wellbeing”, the people are forced to live under a completely new hierarchy, symbology and organisation, with the leader at the top – the most precious symbol of local democracy and parliamentary rule.

Total power is a double perversion. The government begins to resemble a prison with the “*pahano*” as the warden (Pahan, from the word for “father”, is the leader of a band of criminals or thieves). Such a country/prison is not grounded in laws or a constitution, but in terms decided by the leader. Identities take shape in a prison atmosphere – both those of the *pahano* and of the people. House rules are created that all have to follow, instead of the laws, and each citizen forms his own identity based on these imposed conditions. Total corruption and a thousand other crimes that the people no longer see as being crimes, because to them they are not subject to the watchful eye of law, have completely destroyed the earlier identity of the nation and for two generations now have been bringing a new reality to life. Obviously the new identity is not one of the best. Absolute power is no longer the secret object of desire of the leader. Now when someone finds total power in his hands, he can rise above the symbolic order and above the Law, in that the law in this case is one and the same as the very person who holds absolute power. And here there’s not much moralising we can do. The gates to heaven (which is not at all symbolic anymore) are open only to those who hold the power and to their henchmen. All the others are potential lost souls.

A total majority of the citizens collaborates with the regime, something which is considered, given the current state of affairs, as being completely normal.

And it is no accident that I have called Central Asia “PCA” for “Pahanate of Central Asia”, which is perhaps closest in type to the Arab Emirates. In this PCA we can include the *pahanates* of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. This is my way of “joking”, but my “jokes” do not please the leaders of the Uzbek *pahanate*. This means that the National Security Services (SNB) carefully monitor my private relations, with whom I am in contact, with whom I am friends, to whom I write, with whom I swap opinions, to whom I speak, with whom I go to the “*chaikhana*” [teahouse] or to the market. And so people are identified, “the enemies of the regime”, the people whom I might meet when I am abroad for work. This means that all of my telephone calls are automatically recorded, that my mail is inspected, each letter opened and read. They are trying to understand what drove me to meet with their principal accursed adversary, Islam Karimov, and what I might have talked about with my old friend the marvellous poet Muhammad Salih. Why did I accept his invitation to visit the NDU congress in Prague as an independent observer? Why do I criticise the contemporary architecture of Uzbekistan in my articles and why do I define it as ugly, repetitive and devoid of ideas? Why have I never taken part in any political opposition, why have I never been taken to court, why have I never borrowed money from the bank and why do I have no debts? I have never turned out to be a collaborator of some closed and secret military factory or enterprise, I have never held state secrets or confidential information that, if revealed, might damage the government or the state. Why do I make fun of the glamour and lifestyle of Gula Karimova? Why do I make fun of power, the government and people in power in my art and my performances...? This and many other things, according to the agents of the National Security Service are clearly a blasphemous and unacceptable form of political disobedience.

The visits by the artist Akhunov to Documenta 13, to the 55th Venice Biennale, to the 5th Moscow Biennale, to the 4th Biennale of Singapore are deemed “unnecessary” by the Uzbek authorities. I can’t even go visit my solo exhibition in Italy. The nth refusal to allow Vyacheslav Akhunov to leave the country is perverted drift of Uzbekistan power – a clear reaction to the artist’s independent activity!

M.S.: I understand. So what should we expect to see on that empty pedestal in the near future?

V.A.: A huge banknote in dollars – reaching all the way to sky.