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# Without Claims to Purity: The Great Atomic Bombreflector and Its Designers

A February 1965 letter sent to Leningrad by a resident from Semipalatinsk—the eastern region of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic—reads: “I’m sitting on the couch and writing, and the couch is shaking and I can feel it vibrating. I’m thinking, it’s the underground [nuclear] test again ... Before that there was a test, so we got off with a strong concussion of the soil.”<sup>1</sup> This is one of many personal letters written by residents in those years which are available today in redacted form in Kazakhstani state archives. They describe the feelings and thoughts caused by atomic tests that were conducted at the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site, right next to civilian homes. Someone with a redacted name wrote to his brother in the city of Sudak, Republic of Crimea: “I have decided to leave Semipalatinsk as soon as I get my pension, so as not to be a guinea pig, not to hear the rumble of explosions.”<sup>2</sup>

What does it mean to be a test subject for power, which, outside this concrete example, might actually name the catastrophic state of being a human-subject under state sovereignty generally? If the concept of a “state of emergency” can be applied to the Semipalatinsk nuclear tragedy, how can this trauma be turned into a “real” state of emergency, to borrow Walter Benjamin’s encouragement to take up revolutionary activity?<sup>3</sup> What does such a “real” state of emergency look like?

In this essay I consider these questions through a discussion of a series of “Spectacular Experiments” that, last spring at La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club in New York, launched the long-term artistic project *Planetary Program of the Great Atomic Bombreflector*. *Planetary Program* is a new undertaking by the Kazakhstani artistic collective ORTA, which works at the intersection of theater, visual arts, engineering, music, and socio-philosophical research. The group was founded in 2015 by actor and artist Alexandra Morozova and composer and director Rustem Begenov. In 2022, ORTA announced itself on the largest of the art world’s stages when it turned Kazakhstan’s first national pavilion at the Venice Biennale into the *LAI-PI-CHU-PLÉE-LAPA Centre for the New Genius*, based on the life and thought of Sergey Kalmykov (1891–1967), a Kazakhstani artist, art theorist, writer, visionary, and self-proclaimed “Genius of the Absolute Interplanetary Category.”<sup>4</sup> Below I will discuss the conceptual connection between Kalmykov’s work and ORTA’s experiments in more detail. For now I will note that the (extra-)science-fictional Atomic Bombreflectors were Kalmykov’s invention, dating back to the 1930s. Back then, the Soviet Union had neither nuclear weapons nor the need to build a Belgian-sized test site for them in the Kazakh steppe. Everything changed after World War II, when in July 1945, at the Potsdam Conference, Harry Truman privately boasted to Stalin that America now had a new weapon of unprecedented destructive power. A few months later, on August 6 and 9, 1945, the United States dropped two nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After that, the Soviet government got serious about launching its own nuclear project.



Nuclear test crater in the Saryozen sector of the Semipalatinsk Polygon, 2008. License: CC BY 2.0.

The first atomic bomb test at Semipalatinsk took place on August 29, 1949. Between then and February 12, 1989,<sup>5</sup> more than 450 explosions followed: first atmospheric and ground explosions (including two thermonuclear explosions with a yield of up to 1.6 megatons), and after 1963, underground explosions.<sup>6</sup> These tests are a crucial part of the postwar history of the steppe. Some areas were contaminated with dangerous radionuclides that will continue to affect the region for centuries (the half-life of americium-241, for example, is 432 years). Included in this history are the humans and nonhumans who were sacrificed: the sheep, cows, pigs, dogs, and other animals used to test the effects of nuclear explosions on living flesh, as well as the several young men and women who were deliberately not from the village of Karaaul, the nearest village to the test site—only a few of them lived to be fifty years old. Old men from this and other similar villages calmly tell present-day researchers how their relatives and friends died young of cancer and heart disease. Their sons and daughters committed suicide because of mental disorders provoked by the tests, and their grandchildren and great-grandchildren were born without arms and with tumors instead of faces. All these stories unfolded against the backdrop of cynical

calculations accompanying the construction of the test site, according to which the territory in question was thought to be “almost uninhabited.”<sup>7</sup> Throughout the forty years of testing, the central government was not concerned with helping radiation victims: information about the effects of nuclear contamination on human life and health was collected and processed, but only for scientific and defense purposes. Doctors from regional hospitals were instructed to falsify diagnoses related to the effects of radiation exposure, and not a single rural hospital was built in the surrounding areas during the entire period the test site’s operated.

The explosions and its outcomes are the factual basis of ORTA’s new project in which speculative and performative scenarios are imagined to investigate this history.

#### *What Does It Mean to be a Guinea Pig?*

The main theme of ORTA’s new project is so-called “bare life,” or subjects who are not protected from the manipulation of power by any legal norms. These are lives lived in a state of emergency. According to Giorgio Agamben, the “state of emergency” is the latent principle



Guide-Performer Alexandra Morozova during the launch of the First Atomic Bombreflector at the Meyerhold Center, Moscow, 2021. Photo: Ekaterina Kraeva.

of any state, and in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries this has become explicitly evident. Today, we find ourselves in a paranormal situation where lives are entirely determined by sovereign power. Hence Agamben's demand to replace the previous political ontology "founded on the primacy of actuality and its relation to potentiality," with a new one that relies on the indistinguishability of these beginnings, represented by bare life and the sovereign law that permeates it.<sup>8</sup> For Agamben, the ultimate expression of this attitude is the concentration camp: "the pure, absolute, and impassable biopolitical space," conceived as "the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity."<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the Soviet nuclear test site in Kazakhstan and its surrounding settlements can be another crucial case study for how the state of exception is the foundation to state sovereignty. ORTA's project departs from this premise. For ORTA, this atomic history is one of "atomic inhumanity" and thus can be used as "fuel for the genius energy of transforming the world."<sup>10</sup> How?

Experiments is trash, in a loose sense. Along with the people acting on stage or on camera, their voices and movements, every ORTA performance (which they call "machines for activating one's Inner Genius"<sup>11</sup>) involves a huge amount of packaging and waste material, like craft paper, old fabrics, scotch tape, plastic, Styrofoam, foil, cardboard, used air conditioners, shopping bags, obsolete household appliances, and so on. The New York launch of *Planetary Program of the Great Atomic Bombreflector* involved twenty-five thousand "genionite"<sup>12</sup> stones rolled out of foil and strewn across La MaMa's performance space. Bare life (as a theme of the *Great Atomic Bombreflector*) and this trash-filled performative environment are well aligned with each other. "Trash" and its synonyms—"refuse," "impurities," "biomass"—are often used in contemporary thought to describe those who have been removed from the realm of normal, civil human life, the realm protected by the unconditionality of laws and the inviolability of rights; those who, by the very fact of their existence, show a society protected by laws and rights how, through its pure, prosperous *heimlich*,



The final stage of the launch of the First Atomic Bombreflector at the Meyerhold Center, Moscow, 2021. Photo: Victoria Ivleva.

The crucial material element of all of ORTA's Spectacular

*unheimlich* inevitably protrudes.<sup>13</sup>

However, what ORTA's work is able to offer the victims of the Kazakhstani nuclear genocide is not this naming per se. ORTA offers them a rehabilitation they could not and will not ever receive by relying on state support.

### *Where Could a Test Subject Escape To?*

Kazakhstan's policy during perestroika and the first post-Soviet decade was defined by the theme of liberation from its nuclear yoke. At first, it was a struggle to close the nuclear test site, which was finally achieved in 1991. The agenda then expanded to rid the country of its atomic weapons and related radioactive debris. With US and Russian participation, Kazakhstan removed its nuclear waste in the form of highly enriched plutonium, eliminated the remnants of blown-up mines at the sites of former "Satan" (as designated by NATO) missile deployments, and cleaned up and shut down the many kilometers of tunnels and boreholes beneath the surface of the abandoned test site. The culmination of this purification activity was Kazakhstan's adoption of the official status of a "nuclear-weapon-free zone," the signing of the international Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, and the subsequent transformation of President Nazarbayev into a global ambassador for nuclear disarmament.

Behind all this there was a desire by Kazakhstanis to, so to speak, stop being "garbage" themselves—in other words, to cease being a Soviet colony that the Moscow metropolis could do whatever it wanted with. There was a widely shared desire to integrate as an independent, promising participant in the world market system. However, as became immediately clear, this transformation from an oppressed minority into a national democracy did nothing to change the underlying principles of the state of emergency, particularly the principle of indistinguishability between sovereign power and bare life that permeated it. Scholar and nuclear policy expert Togzhan Kassenova argues this unequivocally in her book devoted to Kazakhstan's effort to sign and ratify the non-proliferation treaty. She argues that Kazakhstan's parliament was a puppet structure, with the country in actuality ruled by two men, Nazarbayev and his closest advisor, Tulegen Zhukeev.

As the post-Soviet history of Kazakhstan confirms, under contemporary iterations of state sovereignty, distinguishing between minoritarians and majoritarians becomes pointless. Or in Benjamin's wording, both groups are involved in "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage."<sup>14</sup> However, there is another reason why the emancipation of the "lower" race, which does not claim to be pure, cannot have anything to do with "our democracies."<sup>15</sup> After all, the majority always represses both its origin as "trash" and the becoming that, according to the logic of Deleuze and Guattari, is the only thing capable of ridding the world "rabble" of the status of bare life. Only those whose flexibility has been exposed to

the extreme by the state and the market, which for centuries have transformed this rabble into a living commodity, are capable (through the mediation of philosophers and artists) of the ultimate release of the forces of de- and re-territorialization from the fetters of the state and the market, of the enthusiasm of endless becoming-anyones, leading beyond the boundaries of the present.

Some hints at this path of resistance to minoritarian subjectivization are tangible in the history of Kazakhstan's struggle for independence. The emblem of the popular antinuclear movement Nevada-Semipalatinsk, initiated in 1989 with the demand to close the Semipalatinsk test site, was drawn by Umyt Sakkharieva and Zhamil Issin and depicts Indian and Kazakh elders sitting opposite each other in the middle of a hilly natural landscape. The emblem depicts not the "translucent" bearers of the civic values of legality, law, and freedom (of trade), but those who have always been excluded, those whose territories were perceived by European colonizers as terra nullius.<sup>16</sup> The same prominence of the minority side is evident in a conversation between representatives of Nevada-Semipalatinsk and the Soviet command of the test site, as described by Togzhan Kassenova. Murat Auevov, vice president of the movement, surprised General Arkadii Il'yenko and his officers by asking who among them knew the works of classic Kazakh literature originating from the Semipalatinsk region. He then shocked them by asking if they knew how many groundhogs had died since testing began. Il'yenko was taken aback and asked: "What groundhogs?!"<sup>17</sup> Auevov's reply is unknown, but an answer to the general's question can be found in the entire current artistic work of ORTA, which, becoming "acephalic, aphasic, or illiterate," transforms the atomic steppe into the earth, which "carries out a movement of deterritorialization on the spot, by which it goes beyond any territory."<sup>18</sup>

### *A "Real" State of Emergency*

In ORTA's Spectacular Experiments, which are always site-specific, mise-en-scène arises from the unpredictable monologues, sounds, and movements of a wide variety of people on the one hand, and equally surprising, mobile, sometimes exceptionally large-scale trash compositions on the other. One can always sense the endless, un-appropriable movement of thought and matter fluxes that carry, permeate, and reassemble all the moments of the performance, plunging it into a zone of indistinguishability between the imaginary and the real.

These experiments resemble the texts of ORTA's artistic inspiration, Sergey Kalmykov. His "poems," with loose plots, are shaky loops of multifarious images flowing into one another, with no need for interpretation, no need to search for hidden meanings. In the poem "Brandishing a Platinum Baton (A Man with Frayed Nerves)," the author's alter ego, "the Grand Master of Unidimensional Arts,"



In 1989, demonstrations, protest marches and peace marches held in Kazakhstan, Russia, the United States, and Japan by the anti-nuclear movement "Nevada-Semipalatinsk," organized by the Kazakh writer and public figure Olzhas Suleimenov, resulted in more than a two-fold reduction of explosions planned for that year at the test site and the subsequent cessation of testings.

makes an appearance, "a dapper thousand-year-old young man, ... the inventor of golden tumbleweeds." Two thirteen-year-old girls show him thirteen pale-blue eggs—each the size of a pigeon egg—derived from experiments conducted on a farm, and he advises them to "amplify [their] intimate secrets to the level of global publicity" and to announce to the whole world that they are laying the eggs themselves. Everyone travels to the farm in a zeppelin with forty-seven or forty-eight motors, commanded by "the great and contemptible Lai-Pi-Chu-Plee-Lapa, Designer of the Flying Tower-Vortexes." In the baskets of the zeppelin, where the passengers are seated, they find mountains of dead flies. They sweep the flies out through doors in the floor and "billions of dead flies pour down onto sun-scorched fields and croplands." Meanwhile, "iridescent thousand-kilometer-long letters hung above the fields": "This is no way to live!," "Even flies die of boredom," "The world must be renewed."<sup>19</sup> Kalmykov's stories have neither beginnings nor endings in the strict sense. This is

why ORTA calls the ten thousand manuscript pages in his archive, which they have begun to publish, "a novel in a thousand volumes."

The rejection of conventional beginnings and endings is one of the main artistic principles of ORTA itself. To borrow the vocabulary of Deleuze and Guattari, we can say that ORTA's Spectacular Experiments, as well as Kalmykov's texts, are more geographical than historical; they have only a milieu.<sup>20</sup> (The word "ORTA," translated from Kazakh, means "middle," "milieu.") This is evident in Taisiya Krugovykh's documentary *The Theory of New Genius* (2021), about the Moscow production of *The First Atomic Bombreflector* at the Meyerhold Center. In one segment of the film, Rustem Begenov protests against an announcement from the Meyerhold administration in which they apologize to the audience for assembling part of the show's set right in the foyer. Begenov objects to this because it opposed the "real" upcoming performance to the preparation of its scenography, when in fact both are



Technological mystery Svetoprestavleniye Sergey Kalmykov by ORTA at the Meyerhold Center, Moscow, 2018. Photo: Ekaterina Kraeva.

equal elements of a single artistic process: “The essence of mounting an exhibition is that it should be mounted in front of the audience, and when we write such announcements, we create a frame for them, we say: don’t look at this, but come on the 11th.”<sup>21</sup>

Here Begenov protests not only against the disregard for ORTA’s method, but also against the restoration of the positions of the majority (the audience who is uncomfortable with junk, who has come to a cultural place and not to a dump) and the rabble minority opposed to it (the messy and trashy preparation of the scenography). His objection attests to the fact that in ORTA’s performances, instead of the majority and the minority and their common destiny, there are only those who are overturned into an endless becoming-anyone.

One feels this even in a detail as specific as the medical masks worn by many of the audience members during ORTA performances in Kazakhstan and Russia amidst the Covid pandemic. What I watched videos of these performances, these masks evoke in me a subconscious squeamishness in the face of the abnormal human appearance associated with illness and rejection. Yet

during ORTA’s performances, this kind of detail of costume and its perception is completely transformed. The audiences in these performances not only watch the action, but participate in it. ORTA always has craft paper, foil, and other paraphernalia ready for the audience, which enthusiastically sculpts these into all sorts of improvised costumes. The masks no longer seem to be signs of “trash” life, but just one of the many random elements in the experimental environment.

In general, the audience at ORTA’s Spectacular Experiments is allowed much more freedom than usual—above all, freedom from the conventional reactions they are used to experiencing under the influence of art. Begenov told me how, at the launch of the *Planetary Program of the Great Atomic Bombreflector* in New York, one of the spectators shared with ORTA his experience of the performance, emphasizing that in the scene with the Kazakh folk song sung by ORTA’s Guide-Performer, Alexandra Morozova, the performance fell just a little short of the point where he, as an audience member, could shed a tear. But ORTA runs like hell from these modeled affects, because such modeling nullifies everything they do. Hence their principal orientation towards a conflict-free



Sergey Kalmykov, Tscheburaschka, 1946.

narrative, devoid of any dramatic confrontation, be it the struggle between freedom and doom, right and wrong, or life and death. Such a structure is always pedagogical; it leads to the purification of one truth or another, while ORTA and their characters make no claim to purity.

The very first of these characters is again Sergey Kalmykov. A painter of the first Soviet avant-garde generation, in 1935 he escaped the Soviet purges in the ranks of the intelligentsia by fleeing to the Kazakh SSR, having obtained a position as a production designer for a musical theater in Almaty. Neither during his life nor after his death was he ever recognized by the professional art community as even “a somewhat ‘good’ artist.”<sup>22</sup> A penniless old man whom many considered a lunatic, he almost died in his cluttered one-room apartment that lacked heat and electricity, where he had stacks of newspapers instead of furniture, but the door was broken down by neighbors and Kalmykov was sent to a psychiatric hospital, where, before dying, he enjoyed some hot soup. “Rabble” is the optimal description for such a person. But Kalmykov managed to bring this “impurity” to such clarity that he masterfully slipped from bare life. First he slipped away to Almaty. Then he slipped away into the images of the “Grand Master of Unidimensional Arts” and the “Designer of the Flying Tower-Vortexes,” with their fantastical looks (oversized pants decorated with tin cans, hair painted with black oil paint, red beret) that Kalmykov invented for these conceptual personae, so they could walk around the city in them. He slipped away into these walks as well, and one day returned home to write in his diary: “Approaching my house after my morning walk, I thought: ‘I have already entered the Strip of Immortality!’”<sup>23</sup> In short, Kalmykov managed to slip into a plane that he himself defined as “the infinite perspectives of rows of variations” that “create a separate row of points, carved out of a bundle of lines and threads, which we perceive as the present.”<sup>24</sup> With such a source of inspiration, ORTA knows how and from what rubbish a new people and a new earth can grow.

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Translated from the Russian by Denis Shalaginov.

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- 1  
*Kazakhstan Za Bez'iadernyi Mir: Sbornik Documentov I Materialov* (Kazakhstan for a nuclear-free world: A collection of documents and materials), ed. Vladimir Shepel (Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2011), 64.
- 2  
*Kazakhstan Za Bez'iadernyi Mir*, 65.
- 3  
"The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule ... It is our task to bring about a real state of emergency." Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken Books, 2007), 257.
- 4  
Sergey Kalmykov, *Guide to Sergey Kalmykov*, trans. Alex Warburton et al. (ORTA Collective, 2022). On the first Kazakhstan pavilion at the Venice Biennale, see Inga Lāce, "ORTA's 'LAI-PI-CHU-PLÉE-LAPA Centre for the New Genius,'" *e-flux Criticism*, June 10, 2022 <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/474279/orta-s-lai-pi-chu-plee-lapa-centr-e-for-the-new-genius>.
- 5  
This is the date of the last underground explosion. The official closure date of the test site was August 29, 1991, when Kazakhstan president Nursultan Nazarbayev signed a decree.
- 6  
All historical facts and evidence about the Semipalatinsk test site are taken from Togzhan Kassenova, *Atomic Steppe: How Kazakhstan Gave Up the Bomb* (Stanford University Press, 2022); and *Kazakhstan Za Bez'iadernyi Mir*.
- 7  
Kassenova, *Atomic Steppe*, 13.
- 8  
Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, 1998), 44.
- 9  
Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 123.
- 10  
From the author's personal correspondence with ORTA members.
- 11  
One of the main concepts behind ORTA's work is that every person is possessed of genius, which can be awakened by Spectacular Experiments. As Rustem Begenov, ORTA's cofounder and theater director, explains: "Kalmykov called himself a genius—and he *was* one. 'Was' as an active action, and not as a third-party assessment of his condition. Any person can do the same: call yourself a genius and be one. Claim. Decide. Practice. And do not compare yourself with anyone: genius is not an assessment of abilities. Genius is an absolute category from the Fourth Dimension: in this dimension there is no relativity, no dimensionality." Cited in Arseny Zhilyaev and Rustem Begenov, "How Do You Transfer an Entire Country to the Fourth Dimension? This Is a Task," *Cosmic Bulletin*, no. 3 (2022) <https://cosmos.art/cosmic-bulletin/2022/how-do-you-transfer-an-entire-country-to-the-fourth-dimension-this-is-a-task>.
- 12  
A reference to the particles of genius, "genions," first identified by ORTA in its Venice Biennale project *LAI-PI-CHU-PLÉE-LAPA Centre for the New Genius*. As Rustem Begenov explains: "Genions are the fundamental particles in the New Genius that are the manifestation of the Fourth Dimension in a person. Each person exists in the Fourth Dimension through their genions, and the Fourth Dimension exists in a person in the form of genions. The mechanism of the Manifestation of the Fourth Dimension in other known dimensions is not yet fully understood. But it is known that in some existing systems this mechanism manifests itself as 'nonlocality,' 'singularity,' or 'magic.' That is, genions are the particles that make up a genius." Cited in Zhilyaev and Begenov, "How Do You Transfer an Entire Country?"
- 13  
See Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, trans. Nadia Benabid and Rodolphe el-Khoury (MIT Press, 2000); Michael Marder, "Compassionate Genocide," *The Philosophical Salon*, April 22, 2024 <https://new.thephilosophicalsalon.com/compassionate-genocide/>; Slavoj Žižek, "We Are All Biomass," *Project Syndicate*, July 23, 2024 <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/environmental-predicament-basis-for-solitar-darity-by-slavoj-zizek-2024-07>.
- 14  
Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 257. Edward Said problematizes this continuity between majority and minority, calling on European and American orientalists to stop "keeping pure" and finally discern the colonial politics that has shaped their knowledge and writing. Said discovers, in the Western "us"—supposedly superior to "Oriental backwardness"—the same operations of power as the East that been "orientalized." Hence his demand to eliminate not only the "Orient" but also the "Occident." Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Vintage Books, 1979), 13, 7, 28.
- 15  
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (Columbia University Press, 1994), 109, 108.
- 16  
As Dilip Da Cunha explains, terra nullius is a legal term used by Europeans during the colonization of Australia and Africa, as well as when moving westward into North America. The people who lived in these areas were believed to be savages or nomads who had no concept of land ownership. "Terra nullius," however, means not only "no-man's-land" but also "land open to be shaped." Dilip da Cunha, *The Invention of Rivers: Alexander's Eye and Ganga's Descent* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 1–17. On "translucent bodies" see Laporte, *History of Shit*, 82.
- 17  
Kassenova, *Atomic Steppe*, 85.
- 18  
Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 109, 85.
- 19  
Kalmykov, *Guide to Sergey Kalmykov*.
- 20  
Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 110.
- 21  
*The Theory of New Genius*, directed Taisiya Krugovykh, 2021, 0:19:28. From ORTA's archive.
- 22  
Zhilyaev and Begenov, "How do you Transfer an Entire Country to the Fourth Dimension."
- 23  
Kalmykov, *Guide to Sergey Kalmykov*.
- 24  
Sergey Kalmykov, "Laws of Composition," *Cosmic Bulletin*, no. 3 (2022) <https://cosmos.art/cosmic-bulletin/2022/laws-of-composition>.