

ART RESIDENCY



in Bishkek and Talas, Kyrgyzstan

September
18th –
October
1st, 2026

WOMEN
AND THE
MOVEMENT
OF TOBACCO
LEAVES

MEMORIES
WOVEN
INTO THE
SOIL

Poster design by Veda Krieger



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ASIA
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF DEVELOPMENT
Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit



MEMORIES WOVEN INTO THE SOIL: Women and the Movement of Tobacco Leaves

18 September – 1 October 2026

Bishkek and Talas

Kyrgyz Republic

Cover poster design by Veta Khegai.

Design: Aida Tostokova.

The University of Central Asia (UCA) is a world-class centre for knowledge and learning, connecting isolated rural communities with the global community and building human capital needed for modern economies and stable governance. The Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit (CHHU) was launched in 2013 to generate new dialogues on Central Asian heritage and identity. CHHU advances the University's mission to help different peoples of the region preserve and draw upon their rich cultural traditions and heritages as assets for the future through research, documentation, teaching, and public outreach activities.

AN ART RESIDENCY & EXHIBITION

Women and the Movement of Tobacco Leaves

The art residency "Memories Woven into the Soil: Women and the Movement of Tobacco Leaves," taking place in Bishkek and Talas (Kyrgyzstan), is part of a broader series of residencies aiming to amplify voices that have long been marginalised. This residency, curated by Altyn Kapalova and Lucia Direnberger contributes to the history of Central Asian women's lives under the Soviet regime by bringing together researchers, artists, and women storytellers in a collaborative creative process.

The residency draws on social science methods, including the use of state and private archives, oral histories, and ethnographic observation. This year's focus is on the experiences of women who worked in tobacco fields and in the tobacco industry in Kyrgyzstan. Central Asian women played a central role in Soviet tobacco production, much of which was sent to the imperial centre. The residency addresses questions of (im)mobility – of both people and goods – within the Soviet empire. Through the creation of land art and public art, participants will develop new works that document and interpret the life stories of Central Asian women. Engaging with everyday life and labour, the artworks will explore how land, place, (im)mobility, and inequalities intersect in shaping Central Asian women's history.

The first art residency curated by Altyn Kapalova took place in Naryn in 2024, bringing together craftswomen, artists, curators, and researchers from Germany, Kyrgyzstan, and France. The residency combined craft sessions with theoretical discussions, during which participants reflected on the themes of coexistence and the connections between cultural heritage, contemporary art, and the art residency itself, exploring the role that curatorial institutions play in these relationships. The participants shared their insights at the final conference in Bishkek.

In 2026, the second art residency, curated by Altyn Kapalova and Lucia Direnberger, was entitled "Memories Woven Into the Soil. Women's Work in the Opium Fields." During the Soviet era, women in Kyrgyzstan played a central role in agricultural labour, often working under harsh and underpaid conditions. In many cases, work brigades included underage children. Central Asia, and Kyrgyzstan in particular, was a key region for the state-regulated cultivation of narcotic plants, primarily for pharmaceutical use. This residency aims to bring together researchers, artists, opium collectors, and women storytellers in a collaborative artistic process grounded in historical and ethnographic research. Using textual, visual, sonic, textile, and performative materials, including dance, participants created new works that document and interpret the life stories of women who worked in opium production.

The art residencies seek to amplify voices that contributing to a polyphonic understanding of women's lived experiences under Soviet rule. By revisiting the past, this memory work becomes a lens to understand the present better and envision possible futures of women's life.



CURATORS



Altyn Kapalova

is an artist, researcher, and curator, and the founder of Central Asia's Museum of Feminist and Queer Art. She is a Research Fellow at the Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit (CHHU) at the University of Central Asia, where she leads the Central Asian Museum Development Programme. Her practice combines art, anthropology, and cultural research, focusing on gender, women's labour, cultural policy, creative industries, and decolonial approaches to museum practice in Central Asia.

Lucia Direnberger

is a senior researcher in sociology at the CNRS, based at the French Institute for Central Asian Studies (IFEAC) and the MAJIC project coordinator. Her work focuses on social power relations, colonialism and imperialism, particularly in Central Asia. She is interested in subaltern practices and the politics of knowledge production within various social spheres (work, social movements, reproductive politics, and the arts).



PARTICIPANTS



Zina Bayalieva

is a museum professional and public sector specialist. Zina Bayalieva has more than 40 years of experience in public service, including extensive work in the social sector and leadership positions in district administrations. She currently serves as a Department Head at the Kyrgyz National Manas-Ordo Complex. Her professional and personal interests include promoting tourism through the cultural heritage of the Manas Epic, strengthening the role of women in society, supporting families, and contributing to environmental preservation.

Kim Đoàn Quốc

is based in Paris. She works at the intersection of installation, video, and performance. Her artwork explores the relationship between humans and ecosystems, addressing ecocides perpetrated during war time in layered narratives between ancient myths and stories of resistance.





Masha Golm

is a performance artist and theatre maker from Almaty, Kazakhstan. Working across performance, installation, object theatre, puppetry, and masks, she creates visual and participatory situations through play. Her practice brings together personal and collective stories, women's narratives, childhood, fairy tales, and everyday objects to create human connection.

Cholpon Isaeva

is Head of the Organisational Department at the Kyrgyz National Manas-Ordo Complex and a specialist in traditional music and dastan performance. She has extensive experience in researching, preserving, and promoting Kyrgyz traditional culture, crafts, music, and epic heritage, as well as organising cultural and educational programmes. A performer of traditional Kyrgyz songs and dastans who also plays traditional musical instruments, Cholpon contributes to the preservation and transmission of Kyrgyz musical heritage.





Zarina Nazar

is a Kyrgyz artist, graphic designer, and educator. Her practice explores cultural heritage, nomadic traditions, and their harmonious relationship with nature. She works with themes of ecology, creating artworks and installations from recycled materials while combining traditional approaches with a contemporary artistic.

Nurperi (Peri) Orunbaeva

is a contemporary artist. Working across mixed media, she addresses both the historical and present conditions shaping Kyrgyz identity. Her practice engages the country's deeply patriarchal structures, the ways in which they have shaped cultural norms, and the position of women within these narratives. She also brings the violence of Russian colonialism in Central Asia into focus, tracing its continuing impact on collective memory.



PARTICIPANTS



Aizat Sagyn

is an emerging artist, photographer, videographer, and drone pilot.

Aizat is an emerging artist exploring her artistic practice through different forms and materials. At this stage of her practice, she focuses primarily on photography and video documentation, using visual media to observe, explore, and capture people, places, and everyday life.

Anja Salzer

is a researcher and facilitator who explores the interconnectedness between humans and more-than-human worlds through artistic and collaborative practices. Their work weaves together ecological knowledge, memory and care, amplifying overlooked and unheard voices in diverse contexts. By engaging with plants, animals and landscapes, and the knowledge they offer, they create artistic encounters that encourage us to listen, reflect, marvel, and cultivate new kinds of relationships.



Zhyldyz Talant

is an art manager and co-founder of Central Asia's Museum of Feminist and Queer Art. Her practice focuses on developing exhibitions and supporting women artists throughout the creative process, from developing ideas and concepts to producing and presenting their work. She works to create collaborative and inclusive spaces for artistic expression and to strengthen the visibility of women artists in Central Asia's cultural landscape.



GUEST LECTURERS

Akjol Kapalov

Key Account Manager, Tobacco Division, Be Key Company

Anel Rakhimzhanova

PhD Student, New York University

Asel Murzakulova

Senior Research Fellow, Mountain Societies Research Institute, University of Central Asia

Baktygul Midinova

Director of the Osh Regional Museum of Fine Arts named after T. Sadykov

Meerim Emil kyzy

Senior Researcher, Kyrgyz National Museum of Fine Arts

PROGRAMME

DAY 1 – 18 September 2026

- 10:00–10:30 Welcome and Introduction:
Welcome Remarks by
Prof. Christoffer Gerry, UCA Rector;
Dr Irene Mestre, Interim Director of the French
Institute for Central Asian Studies (IFEAC);
Noni Lickleder, Director of the Goethe-Institut
Kyrgyzstan;
Étienne Lancelot, Cultural Attaché of France
- 10:30–11:00 **Art Residency Briefing:**
Theme, Format, and Guidelines
Altyn Kapalova, UCA;
Dr Lucia Direnberger, IFEAC
- 11:00–11:30 **Women's Labour and Mobility: Working the Fields
in Central Asia, Past and Present**
Dr Asel Murzakulova, Senior Research Fellow
with Mountain Societies Research Institute,
Research Lead at UCA's Graduate School of
Development
- 11:30–11:45 **From Field to Market:**
Tobacco Production, Processing, and Trade
Akjol Kapalov, Key Account Manager,
Tobacco Division, Be Key Company

- 14:00–16:30 Visit to the Kyrgyz National Museum of Fine Arts
Leaves of Labour:
The Tobacco Leaf in Art and Memory
 A guided museum tour exploring how tobacco, agricultural labor, and the lives of working people have been represented in Kyrgyz art and visual culture.
Meerim Emil kyzy, Research Fellow,
 Kyrgyz National Museum of Fine Arts

DAY 2 – 19 September 2026

Travel to Talas

- 14:00–18:00 Arrival in Sary-Bulak Village.
 Settling In at the Residency House.
 Rest and Recovery

DAY 3 – 20 September 2026

- 07:30–08:00 Morning Body Practices with **Masha Golm** (optional)
 09:00–12:00 Presentations:
Kim Đoàn Quốc
Foliating Memories, Collaborating with Science and Gathering Memories
Anja Salzer
Listening Across Species: Unheard Stories of Plants, Places, and More-than-Human Entanglements
Masha Golm
A Remedy for Loneliness
Nurperi Orunbaeva (Peri)
Becoming an Artist
Aizat Sagyn
May These Moments Last Forever



PROGRAMME

- 13:00–17:00 Visits to the Talas Regional Museum of Fine Arts and the Manas-Ordo Complex
- 17:00–19:00 Screening of the documentary film “Women Tobacco Pickers” by Baktygul Midinova, followed by a conversation with the film director

DAY 4 – 21 September 2026

- 07:30–08:00 Morning Body Practices with **Masha Golm** (optional)
- 09:00–12:00 Presentations by the Artists:

Zina Bayalieva

Working with People, Museum Work,
and the Tobacco Fields of Talas

Cholpon Isaeva

Museum Work and Representations
of Women at the Manas Epic Museum

Zhyldyz Talant

Supporting Women Artists and
Developing Exhibitions

Lucia Direnberger

Polyphony of voices. Collecting Memories,
Creating Spaces

Altyn Kapalova

Women, Life and Freedom: The Role of Art in
the Struggle for Human Rights in Central Asia

- 13:00–17:00 Visits to:
- T. Herzen Museum in Ak-Döbö Village;
 - Folk and Ethnographic Museum in Aral Village;
 - Museum of Batma Baiymbetova in Bakyian Village

- 18:00–18:30 **Moving Matters: Critical Logistics as a Historical and Cultural Research Framework**
Anel Rakhimzhanova. Researcher of Modernity, Movement, and Performance in Central Asia, Performance studies PhD Candidate, New York University

DAY 5 – 22 September 2026

- 07:30–08:00 Morning Body Practices with **Masha Golm** (optional)
- 09:00–18:00 Work in Three Groups to Gather Information:
- Archival Research — research in archives, led by **Lucia Direnberger**;
 - Oral Histories — conversations with women who worked in the fields, led by **Altyn Kapalova**;
 - Landscape Research — visits to agricultural infrastructure and tobacco fields, led by **Zhyldyz Talant**
- 19:00–21:00 Evening Reflections: Group Sharing and Exchange of Research Findings

DAYS 6-10

23–27 September 2026

Individual and/or Group Work

Individual and/or group work on the artists' projects and artworks. Each artist determines the most appropriate format and working environment according to the needs of their practice and project.

Working spaces may include:

- the courtyard of the Art Residency House;
- the museum where the final exhibition will take place;
- the designated working room in the Residency House;
- the sewing workshop in Sary-Bulak Village.

The working period allows artists to develop their projects, process the research and materials gathered during the residency, and work individually or collaboratively as needed.

DAYS 11-13 **28–30 September 2026**

Collective Exhibition Development and Installation

Three days of collective work dedicated to developing the exhibition concept, designing the exhibition layout, preparing the artworks and installing the exhibition.

The exhibition design and installation are developed collectively by the artists, curators, and the residency team, with tasks and responsibilities shared among the group according to individual skills, needs, and areas of expertise.

The work includes:

- development of the exhibition concept and spatial design;
- planning the layout and placement of artworks;
- preparation and mounting of artworks;
- installation of exhibition elements and materials;
- preparation of labels, texts, and other exhibition materials;
- collective review and adjustment of the exhibition before opening.

DAY 14 – 1 October 2026

Exhibition Opening

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|-------------|--|
| 10:00–18:00 | Final preparations, exhibition walkthrough, and collective review before the opening |
| 18:00 | Exhibition Opening |