

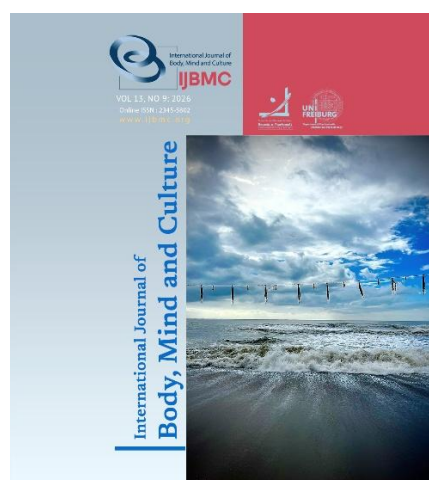
Article type:
Qualitative Research

- 1 National Museum of Art of the Republic of Kazakhstan named after A. Kasteev, Almaty, Kazakhstan.
- 2 M.O. Auezov Institute of Literature and Art, Almaty, Kazakhstan.
- 3 Almaty Museum of Arts, Almaty, Kazakhstan.
- 4 Temirbek Zhurgenov Kazakh National Academy of Arts, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Corresponding author email address:
sharipova.dilyara@proton.me

Collective Trauma, Cultural Memory, and the Psychology of Unfreedom in Contemporary Installation Art of Kazakhstan: A Psychocultural Analysis

Svetlana Zhumasultanovna. Kobzhanova¹, Dilyara Safargaliyevna. Sharipova^{2*}, Akzharkyn Asanovna. Kumarbayeva³, Moldir Mukhiddinovna. Kelsinbek², Aigerim Tursynkyzy. Yespenova⁴



Article history:

Received 23 Mar 2026
Revised 18 Apr 2026
Accepted 07 May 2026
Published online 01 Sep 2026

How to cite this article:

Kobzhanova, S. Z., Sharipova, D. S., Kumarbayeva, A. A., Kelsinbek, M. M., & Yespenova, A. T. (2026). Collective Trauma, Cultural Memory, and the Psychology of Unfreedom in Contemporary Installation Art of Kazakhstan: A Psychocultural Analysis. *International Journal of Body, Mind and Culture*, 13(9), Article e2026-1738. <https://doi.org/10.61838/ijbmc.v13i9.1738>



© 2026 the authors. This is an open-access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.

ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine how contemporary installation art in Kazakhstan articulates the interconnected fields of historical trauma, cultural memory, unfreedom, and collective identity, and to clarify how spatial, material, and affective strategies contribute to psychocultural meaning-making.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative interpretive analysis was conducted on selected installation-based works by Kazakhstani artists from 2013 onward. The analysis combined art-historical interpretation with concepts from trauma studies, memory studies, affect theory, postmemory, and expanded scenography, drawing on artworks, exhibition contexts, artist interviews where available, and selected digital materials.

Findings: Across the analyzed works, fragmented portraits, archival documents, textiles, ready-made objects, sound, and spatial obstruction functioned as material carriers of traumatic memory. Installations addressing the repressions of 1937 and contemporary social violence repeatedly transformed historical absence into embodied encounters with fear, mourning, vulnerability, and remembrance. At the same time, some works shifted from “dark” memory toward symbolic repair, compassion, and the possibility of working through collective trauma.

Conclusion: Installation art in contemporary Kazakhstan operates as a psychocultural space in which traumatic history is not merely represented but materially reorganized for reflection. Its immersive and affective capacities enable artists to connect postmemory, collective identity, and contemporary social concerns while inviting viewers to participate in processes of remembrance and critical interpretation.

Keywords: Collective Trauma, Cultural Memory, Affect, Installation Art, Visual Culture.

Introduction

Installation is an intermedial form that brings together sculpture, objects, moving image, sound, and spatial organization within a single experiential field. Unlike image-based media that place the viewer in front of the work, installation places the viewer inside or in relation to an environment in which bodily orientation, duration, and movement are part of meaning production. This spatial organization provides installation with a special relevance for representing historical violence and traumatic memory, since the work can embody not only an image of the past but also an embodied experience of absence, fragmentation, repetition, and constraint. As Antonin Artaud argued in a different theatrical context, the spectator can be exposed to an exceptionally intense affective experience (Artaud, 2000, p. 50).

Meanwhile, installation resists any one closed interpretation; its heterogeneous materials and open spatial structure allow various approaches and give the artists opportunities to engage with difficult and repressed topics and memories. For contemporary Kazakhstan, where the Stalinist terror has left much psychological and cultural debt unpaid, this is especially relevant, while the artists' attempts to come to terms with the legacy of repression and torture, the memories of the Soviet past, and the feelings of gender violence are manifold. Recent psychocultural scholarship on the Kazakh visual art practices also highlights the importance of engagement with cultural memory and reinterpretation as well as the viewers' perceptions and roles (Bokesh et al., 2026).

Accordingly, this article examines, through the medium of installation art, the processes by which the conceptual field associated with "the past," "memory," and "trauma" is articulated. The main objectives are to analyze representations of unfreedom and traumatic pasts in contemporary art, to demonstrate how the engagement with difficult subject matter generates diverse discursive practices,

and to identify the categories and expressive capacities of installation art mobilized by contemporary artists.

Methods and Materials

This study undertook a qualitative interpretive and psychocultural analysis of a selected number of installation works created by Kazakhstani artists since 2013 and displayed in national museums and contemporary art spaces in Kazakhstan. The sources of information included an analysis of the works themselves, the context of their presentation, and interviews with the authors if available, as well as publicly available information on the Internet about these works of art. The works were analyzed from the perspective of the narrative of traumatic history, cultural memory, and unfreedom, as well as the emotional experience associated with the embodied affect and its materiality, and the position of the viewer in space.

The article is informed by art historical and sociological scholarship addressing the problematics of installation and trauma. The analysis draws on art-historical and sociological scholarship on installation and trauma, with particular attention to the distinctive interaction between this genre and the viewer. The viewer is no longer positioned as a detached observer but is physically situated within the work, enabling a distinct embodied and phenomenological experience and intensifying the awareness of bodily movement within the installation space, that is, the very process of experiencing the artwork (Petersen, 2015, p. 45). This underscores the immersive nature of installation.

As an intermedial genre, installation allows for the incorporation of theoretical frameworks from adjacent disciplines. In this article, particular reference is made to the work of Rachel Hann and her concept of expanded scenography. This approach goes beyond understanding scenography as only a way of framing a performance or a particular form of

staging design which supports dramaturgy and proposes to perceive it as a novelty that generates communication between bodies and objects, provokes responses and relations, and creates new spatial-material environments that shape alternative worlds (Hann, 2019).

In the work of the art historian Jill Bennett, the rise of the category of “trauma art” since the end of the 1990s is explored. Despite traditional views of trauma as something that is beyond expression or representation, Bennett discusses how contemporary art deals with the phenomenon in a manner that respects its complexity and contributes to its political articulation (Bennett, 2005, p. 6).

The analysis of artworks is grounded in theoretical frameworks developed within Memory and Trauma Studies, which provide tools for understanding how the past is articulated through the present and for identifying issues of loss and the working-through of collective trauma in Kazakhstani art. These include the works of Jeffrey C. Alexander, Piotr Sztompka, Dominick LaCapra, and Marianne Hirsch.

In Alexander’s formulation of “cultural trauma,” the status of trauma is attributed to a real or imagined phenomenon not on the basis of the extent of harm it causes or its unpredictability, but because it is perceived as having inflicted a profound disruption to collective identity (Alexander, 2004, p. 9).

With regard to the work of mourning, LaCapra—drawing on the theoretical framework of Sigmund Freud and his distinction between melancholy and mourning, identifies two modes of engaging with collective trauma: uncritical “acting out,” associated with melancholy, and reflective “working through,” analogous to mourning (LaCapra, 2001, p. 36). Acting out involves the repetitive reiteration of traumatic events, as exemplified in the memory of the Holocaust, whereas working through enables a critical distance from trauma, allowing it to be reframed—for instance, through its institutionalization in museum contexts or its comparison with contemporary

conditions. It is within this framework that the article considers the development of installation practices addressing historical events whose traumatic impact has affected nearly every Kazakh family.

Finding and Results

Today, a significant interest can be observed among emerging artists across various disciplines in the reconstruction of cultural memory. Young visual artists, filmmakers, theatre practitioners, and writers in Central Asia seek to engage with the traumatic past of their families and lineages through the persistent articulation of these histories, the detailed reconstruction of events, and the use of diverse perspectives and artistic languages—documentary, narrative, metaphorical, and conceptual—aimed at rendering these experiences in their complexity. In this context, installation, as a synthetic and intermedial form, demonstrates distinct advantages in comparison with other fields of visual art. The recurrence of the use of such strategies, in turn, implies that not only historical but also psychocultural processes of reconstruction of cultural memory take place because artists rework the given narratives using such means as embodied symbolism, spatial tension, and involvement.

In Kazakhstan, the year 1937—tragic for all peoples of the USSR—is associated with the destruction of the political elite, particularly members of the Alash movement who sought to achieve national independence. The installation *Red Filter* (2014, [Figure 1](#)) by Syrlybek Bekbota presents portraits of figures from this political movement, often immersing the background in red. Within the broader context of this collective tragedy, the color assumes a symbolic resonance as both the color of blood and a marker of violence experienced by the country. Although the artistic device may appear somewhat direct, it nonetheless foregrounds the tragic outcome through the metaphor of a “bloody denouement” in the lives of these historical figures.



Figure 1. Syrlybek Bekbota. *Red Filter*. Installation fragment, 2014.

Piotr Sztompka argues that social (cultural) trauma emerges at the moment “when a significant event (or the memory of such an event from the past) strikes at the very foundations of culture and is interpreted as fundamentally incompatible with core values, identity, and collective pride” (Sztompka, 2001, p. 12). In his work, Syrlybek Bekbota seeks to convey this rupture and disruption of the life order through the very process of working with photographic material—cutting images into fragments and subsequently reassembling them, thereby introducing cubist dislocations and traces of formal disintegration. The fragmentation of portrait images within the photomontage, according to the artist, emphasizes the full tragedy of their distorted and broken destinies.

This stage can be described as a beginning of the coming-to-term process of coming to terms with the past, presenting a continuous narrative of the Kazakh history, restoration of the lost names and filling of blank spots in history. Further stages are associated with involving a larger audience and evoking a deep emotional response to the events of the totalitarian regime in order to ensure that these events will be properly kept in the collective memory.

The sustained interest in historical figures of the twentieth century who were silenced in Soviet narratives, as well as the effort to reconstruct their tragic memory, constitutes an important strategy among younger artists aimed at restoring the integrity of national history through the assemblage of fragmented historical narratives and the formation of frameworks of national identification. Within the framework of strong cultural sociology, Jeffrey C. Alexander has elaborated the role of cultural trauma in shaping collective identities in modern societies. Engagement with traumatic experience leads to processes of working through trauma and necessitates the rearticulation of cultural foundations of social life, fostering group solidarity, an awareness of moral universalism, and broader social critique (Alexander, 2016, p. 7). This emphasis on sociocultural meaning-making is consistent with contemporary accounts of collective trauma as a process that reshapes shared narratives, identity, and intergenerational interpretation (Goli, 2026).

The installation was originally conceived for the exhibition Zhoktau, whose title refers to a traditional mourning ritual. Contemporary artists turn to ritual forms as an initial step in the comprehension of collective trauma. The persistent reproduction of historical figures across different media and the repeated articulation of the names of the repressed parallels commemorative practices such as the “Return of Names” initiative in Russia, initiated in 2007. Each year on October 29, on the eve of the Day of Remembrance of Victims of Political Repression, people gather in Moscow near the Solovetsky Stone—brought from the islands where the first Soviet Gulag camp was located—to read aloud the names of those unjustly executed, thus performing a collective act of mourning.

In screen-based media, particularly in music videos, directors addressing the Soviet terror of 1937 emphasize intense embodied and emotional experience, aiming to produce affective tension.

Affect is understood here as a general capacity to act and to be affected, an energy, force, or intensity that belongs to the domain of pre-reflective and pre-individual experience, not fully governed by social or linguistic codes (Venediktova, 2020). This strategy can be observed, for example, in the 2021 music video “5000” by the group Irina Kairatovna (directed by Kuanysh Beisekov). The video gained significant popularity among young audiences both in Kazakhstan and beyond and is often regarded as a compelling example of social satire that exposes both the shortcomings of contemporary power structures and the unresolved gaps of the past. The opening scenes, depicting the final days of the Alash leader Alikhan Bokeikhanov, his torture in NKVD prisons, and subsequent execution, produce a powerful visual impact. The protagonist is placed against a wall densely marked by bullet holes, leaving no empty space, an image that evokes the systematic and relentless execution of innocent individuals. The video was released in 2021 (Irina Kairatovna, 2021).

In this context, Antonin Artaud’s theory of the Theatre of Cruelty—where cruelty is understood as an extreme intensity of scenic energy (Artaud, 2000, p. 21)—resonates with Gilles Deleuze’s concept of affect, which emphasizes a pre-rational, embodied state of the viewer (Deleuze, 2016). The reproduction of affect through cinematic design, sound, and video—aimed at provoking a repeated and conscious re-experiencing of trauma—has also been adopted by installation artists addressing themes of unfreedom.

In 2022, Askhat Akhmedyarov created the installation *Sabyr* (Aspan Gallery), in which inverted cauldrons (kazans) are suspended in space like bells. The viewer is compelled, according to the artist’s intention, to physically navigate through rows of heavy cast-iron forms in order to reach a focal point. Within this conceptual framework, the emphasis lies not on space itself, but on the affective and emotional relationships that emerge through interaction with it.

Disorientation and anxiety become key structuring affects, triggered by the unsettling image of inverted cauldrons and the emergence of uneasy, partially unconscious bodily responses. As a cultural symbol, the kazan traditionally refers to the hearth and the sacred domestic space of the Kazakh yurt, associated with security and well-being. However, when inverted, it also functions as a marker of death, as cauldrons are traditionally turned upside down during funeral rituals.

Despite the apparent simplicity of the artistic gesture, the installation resists univocal interpretation. The inverted cauldrons combine an internalized sense of fear and impending catastrophe with an upward movement toward a higher, spiritual realm. Much like the bells in *Andrei Rublev*, these resonant forms metaphorically call for an awakening from collective apathy. Here, installation operates as an expanded scenographic environment that, through the deliberate organization of space, constructs a specific experiential world for the viewer and enables an embodied understanding of the relations between material forces within that space, as well as its underlying “ideology” (Hann, 2019).

Another approach to representing unfreedom and violence lies in metaphorical interpretation. In this regard, installation practice aligns closely with scenography, particularly with what is termed “active scenography,” in which a material object assumes the role of the central expressive agent. This object functions as a visual metaphor that condenses and articulates the core tensions of a traumatic narrative.

At his solo exhibition *The Seal* (Esentai Gallery, 2019), Arystanbek Shalbayev presented the installation *The Last Drop*. The work is marked by a concise yet powerful formal solution: rusted buckets, gradually and inexorably filling with water, accompanied by the persistent sound of dripping. The vessels slowly accumulate liquid, evoking a build-up of resentment and suppressed tension, yet remain structurally intact, incapable of rupture. The rusted

bucket thus exceeds its utilitarian identity and becomes a charged visual metaphor. Through this installation, the artist introduces a strong authorial position, transforming the gallery space into a site of staged dramaturgy.

Here, the dramatic conflict—traditionally understood since antiquity as the opposition between the individual and fate—appears instead as a mundane yet no less tragic confrontation between the “ordinary individual” and the Other, embodied by structures of power. The slow temporal unfolding intensifies the visual articulation of the idea that “the lower strata can no longer live as before.” Shalbayev reconfigures everyday objects to reflect broader social tensions, concentrating a significant critical charge within a minimal formal structure.

As Olga Nikolaeva notes in her analysis of performances dealing with war and blockade, scenography, by reorganizing performative space and shaping viewer perception through empathetic processes, seeks to create conditions for an encounter with the trauma of the Other (Nikolaeva, 2021, p. 71). Shalbayev similarly works through installation, objects, and sound to produce an immediate and embodied experience for the viewer, unfolding in real time during the act of interaction.

The engagement with both historical and contemporary trauma among women artists in Kazakhstan is often mediated through textile practices. By drawing on weaving and the creation of tactile objects that invite physical interaction, artists seek to process traumatic experience and to affect the viewer. Through the construction of affective environments—frequently involving representations of bodily fragility and vulnerability—these works intensify emotional response and evoke empathy.

In the installation *Grieving Beauties* (2019, Figure 2), Aigerim Mazhitkhan presents containers filled with unsettling, ambiguous matter. These consist of fabric forms made from stockings, stuffed with fleece, with openings concealed by baby pacifiers, thereby

transforming them into evocative images of the female body, specifically the breast. The disruption of normative life processes becomes immediately perceptible, as the culturally stable and nurturing metaphor of motherhood is inverted, taking on the character of a helpless cry preceding destruction. The articulation of loss is direct and unambiguous: the installation evokes a trajectory leading from sexual violence and unwanted pregnancy to the abandonment of infants, confronting the viewer with a deeply disturbing social reality.



Figure 2. Aigerim Mazhitkhan. *Grieving Beauties*, 2019.

A topic that frequently appears in contemporary news reports in Kazakhstan and provokes strong public concern is presented by Aigerim Mazhitkhan in a condensed and concentrated form. The renowned French artist Christian Boltanski, in his representations of victims of concentration camps, filled vast museum spaces with piles of worn clothing in order to bridge the gap between the scale of tragedy and the limits of its representation in art. Similarly, the soft, fabricated image of a maternal breast—deprived of its nurturing function—becomes, in Mazhitkhan’s installation, a means of articulating the tragic dimensions of contemporary reality.

Behind this work lies an implicit program addressing the social conditions that give rise to such tragedies, including gender-based violence, forced abduction of young women, the fear of social stigma associated with unintended pregnancy, and economic precarity. In engaging with the theme of extreme and often inexpressible violence, Mazhitkhan adopts a methodology characteristic of many women artists,

drawing on domestic craft practices such as needlework, and combining them with a stark and “loud” allegorical object—the garbage container. The associative structure of the work is constructed with clarity and restraint, enabling the artist to evoke a precise emotional response without resorting to pathos or overt dramatization. The articulation of painful contemporary issues thus functions not merely as an appeal to emotion, but as a form of reflection and a conscious working-through of trauma.

Assel Kadyrkhanova, in her installation *Machine*, presented in 2013 at the exhibition 1937: Territory of Memory / Zhoktau at the A. Kasteev State Museum of Arts (Figure 3), turns to weaving and thread-based structures, drawing on the visual language of Chiharu Shiota. Through the material code of thread, Shiota articulates the idea that memory is continuous and unending, constantly weaving networks that connect moments, individuals, and objects. Each element of human life carries a memory, tightly bound by red or black threads—colors central to Shiota’s practice—and inevitably linked to others within a shared structure. For instance, Shiota often connects everyday objects such as shoes or keys, accompanied by written notes recounting personal memories, thereby constructing dense networks of collective remembrance.



Figure 3. Assel Kadyrkhanova. *Machine*, 2013.

The Zen-like approach to weaving threads characteristic of Chiharu Shiota is transformed in the work of Assel Kadyrkhanova into a metaphor of the bloody traces of tragedy. Red threads—representing

the lives of different individuals—cascade across the wall, connecting with sheets of paper that function as arrest warrants (the artist employs archival document copies she discovered). The trajectories of these lives converge at a single point: a typewriter, symbolizing the machine used to produce denunciations submitted to the NKVD during the period of Stalinist repression. Rather than depicting a past event directly, the artist represents memory itself—her reflection on it—thereby activating the process of postmemory, mediated through the “imagined” and linking individual memory with collective experience (Hirsch, 1997).

The artist seeks to comprehend traumatic historical episodes and the fates of her ancestors within a totalitarian system by conveying the experience of the victim through visual metaphor. The typewriter becomes a key symbolic device, enabling the articulation of grief and suffering that resist verbal expression. The red threads, functioning as tactile connectors between the elements of the installation, establish an intensified sensory engagement for the viewer. In constructing her own narrative of the past, the artist appropriates elements of global contemporary art and recontextualizes them within a local framework. By producing works oriented toward affect eliciting fear and discomfort—she achieves a powerful emotional response from the audience.

In the object *A Brief History of the North*, Askhat Akhmedyarov constructs monumental forms of the hammer and sickle—the emblem of Soviet power—using locally sourced reed. Presented at the exhibition *Time and Astana* (National Museum of Kazakhstan, 2018), these structures occupied much of the exhibition space, physically obstructing visitors’ movement. The reeds surrounding Astana (formerly Tselinograd) are themselves associated with the memory of the ALZHIR camp (Akmola Camp for Wives of Traitors to the Motherland): they were used in the construction of barracks, as fuel in winter, and

as burial sites for deceased prisoners. As such, this natural material is inscribed with a traumatic historical charge.

Given that reed is an invasive and rapidly spreading plant, its use may also be interpreted as a metaphor for an uncontrollable and pervasive form of violence. By combining a state emblem once an unquestioned ideological symbol, with an incongruous organic material, the artist invites reflection on suppressed historical narratives. The installation requires a prolonged process of perception and interpretation, encouraging the viewer to engage in a sustained act of remembering and reconstructing forgotten histories. The juxtaposition of a visually assertive symbol with a materially evocative substance proves effective in generating meaning through this process. In a subsequent performance, the artist burned the installation, enacting a ritual of purification and an attempt to symbolically work through traumatic experience.

Thus, in contemporary art, ready-made objects such as buckets and cauldrons, as well as textile and straw-based forms, acquire the status of ritual objects endowed with heightened semiotic significance. They become vehicles for expressing otherwise inexpressible concepts and values, such as fate, well-being, fertility, and continuity of lineage through tangible symbolic forms (Baiburin, 1989, p. 83).

In the context of the broader material turn, objects within installations increasingly function as equal participants in networks of interaction among various actors. They may operate metonymically, substituting for victims through fabric forms or embodying material metaphors of violence and suffering, thereby prompting viewers toward both emotional reflection and rational engagement with complex historical and contemporary issues.

Alongside mechanisms aimed at reactivating memory of past tragedies, installation practices also develop strategies for working through trauma. In

such cases, the environment functions as a form of theatrical space, producing a type of “orienting scenography” that does not merely serve as a backdrop but actively mediates relationships between objects and viewers. This generates conditions for embodied, affective, and interpretive engagement with traumatic imagery, which remains “overwhelming and resistant, often inaccessible” (Bennett, 2005, p. 10).

Work on positive and hopeful memory highlights the risk that an exclusive focus on traumatic and dark pasts may obscure other significant dimensions of collective memory. Such scholarship emphasizes the importance of “positive or hopeful memories” in constructing alternative visions of the future (Andersen & Ortner, 2019). This perspective finds expression in the installation *First Contact* (2019, Figure 4) by Syrlybek Bekbota.



Figure 4. Syrlybek Bekbota. *First Contact*, 2019.

Like Assel Kadyrkhanova, Syrlybek Bekbotayev engages with postmemory, representing not historical facts as such, but mediated recollections of the past. For the artist, it is equally important to engage the viewer through affect. The narrative of kurt, small, hardened balls of dried salted curd, a traditional food of nomadic cultures which local residents allegedly threw to starving female prisoners of the ALZHIR camp in order to keep them alive, is presented as a parable, devoid of graphic detail or depictions of suffering. All that is violent and oppressive is symbolically “washed away” by a purifying cascade of white kurt.

Suspended on metal threads, the small spherical forms resemble a paradisiacal garden, evoking associations of renewal, spring, and the persistence of human compassion. Like kurt, blossoming trees constitute a recurring motif in Kazakh painting. Bekbotayev incorporates the viewer into a spatial environment expanded through mirror reflections, producing a sense of contemplative and serene visual experience: the garland of kurt hanging from the ceiling functions as a translucent filter, allowing only light to pass through. The image of the garden, long embedded as a mythologeme within socialist realism, is here transformed into a sublime image, though one grounded in latent fear. As Edmund Burke observed, “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger... is a source of the sublime” (Burke, 1979, p. 159). The sublime, as an intense aesthetic experience, emerges in Bekbotayev’s installation through the viewer’s awareness of the suffering endured by innocent women and the violence of the twentieth century.

Methodological Scope and Limitations

The analysis is interpretive and corpus-based. It does not claim statistical representativeness of contemporary Kazakh art, and the selected installations should be understood as analytically rich cases rather than as an exhaustive survey of artistic production. In addition, the article interprets the affective and psychocultural potential of spatial and material strategies; it does not directly measure viewers’ emotional or physiological responses.

The use of exhibition documentation, artist statements, interviews, and digital materials also means that the available contextual information varies across works. Future research could combine curatorial and art-historical analysis with systematic audience interviews, reception studies, or comparative research across Central Asian contexts to test how different viewers interpret trauma, postmemory, and symbolic repair.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of diverse artistic approaches to memory demonstrates that contemporary art in Kazakhstan actively engages with both the traumatic legacy of the Soviet past—affecting nearly every family—and urgent issues of the present related to processes of social and political transformation.

Traumatic experience, which resists direct visualization—given that horror in classical art was typically rendered allegorically rather than explicitly—finds its most compelling articulation within installation practices. This is made possible by the medium’s immersive nature, its capacity to incorporate objects, video, sound, and spatial environments, and its ability to construct multisensory experiential fields.

A central concern of contemporary artistic practice is the restoration of memory related to the repressions of 1937, a subject long suppressed during the Soviet period. Through this process, artists contribute to a more integrated understanding of Kazakhstan’s historical development and to the preservation of this memory for future generations. A key mechanism in this process is the adoption of quasi-ritual forms of commemoration, including the repeated articulation of names across different media, echoing practices of remembrance for victims of Stalinist terror.

The use of affect within installation functions as a means of articulating traumatic histories that resist linguistic or representational expression. A crucial element in this process is the role of the viewer, who becomes a participant in the event through what may be termed a “memory of sensations,” experiencing vulnerability and embodied empathy. This engagement can support critical reflection on history and symbolically stage processes of working through trauma.

Visual strategies in installation art are employed to construct images of unfreedom and to address pressing contemporary issues in Kazakhstan, often

through recurring allusions to the totalitarian past. Within the framework of the material turn, the role of objects is significantly enhanced: things function not only as semantic focal points but also as generators of atmosphere and affective environments.

The commemoration of the past, combined with engagement with contemporary social concerns, contributes to the development of installation art as a form capable of producing striking visual metaphors accessible to a broad audience. In this context, emphasis shifts from historical knowledge toward subjective perception, associative thinking, and postmemory.

At the same time, alongside mechanisms of reactivating memory of past trauma, installation practices increasingly develop strategies for working through traumatic experience. Moving beyond exclusively tragic or “dark” representations, artists explore more complex and multidimensional approaches, including the use of trauma as an educational and reflective resource. In this regard, the category of the sublime becomes particularly significant, as it enables the articulation of experiences associated with suffering, fear, and danger within a transformative aesthetic framework.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their gratitude and appreciation to all participants.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

The study was carried out within the framework of project BR27101897, “Digital Transformation of the Ecosystem of Literary Studies, Folklore Studies, and Art Studies of Kazakhstan: Interdisciplinary Research,” Committee of Science of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

References

- Alexander, J. C. (2004). Toward a theory of cultural trauma. In *Cultural trauma and collective identity* (pp. 1–30). University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520235946.003.0001>
- Alexander, J. C. (2016). Culture trauma, morality and solidarity: The social construction of “Holocaust” and other mass murders. *Thesis Eleven*, 132(1), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513615625239>
- Andersen, T. S., & Ortner, J. (2019). Introduction: Memories of joy. *Memory Studies*, 12(1), 5–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698018811976>
- Artaud, A. (2000). *The theatre and its double*. Symposium. (Russian edition). <https://books.google.com/books?q=Antonin+Artaud+The+Theatre+and+Its+Double>
- Baiburin, A. K. (1989). Semiotic aspects of the functioning of things. In *Ethnographic study of cultural sign systems* (pp. 63–88). Nauka. (In Russian). <https://kronk.spb.ru/library/1989-I-eizsk.htm>
- Bennett, J. (2005). *Empathic vision: Affect, trauma, and contemporary art*. Stanford University Press. <https://books.google.com/books?id=HrCFQEAACAAJ>
- Bokesh, T., Meirbayev, B. B., & Tuna, Y. (2026). Cultural memory, identity, and digital transformation in contemporary Kazakh visual art: A psychocultural analysis. *International Journal of Body, Mind and Culture*, 13(8), Article e2026–1687. <https://doi.org/10.61838/ijbmc.v13i8.1687>
- Burke, E. (1979). *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*. Iskustvo. (Russian edition; original work published 1757). https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/On_the_Sublime_and_Beautiful
- Deleuze, G. (2016). *Lectures on Spinoza (1978–1981)*. Ad Marginem Press. (Russian edition). <https://garagemca.org/en/programs/publishing/gilles-deleuze-gilles-deleuze-lectures-on-spinoza>
- Goli, F. (2026). Collective trauma, political violence, and the critical need for an integrated mental health care. *International Journal of Body, Mind and Culture*, 13(2), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.61838/ijbmc.v13i2.1355>
- Hann, R. (2019). *Beyond scenography*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429489136>
- Hirsch, M. (1997). *Family frames: Photography, narrative and postmemory*. Harvard University Press. <https://books.google.com/books?id=W4rEQgAACAAJ>

- Irina Kairatovna. (2021). *5000* [Music video].
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jk7Ff9s2nkw>
- LaCapra, D. (2001). *Writing history, writing trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
<https://books.google.com/books?id=vA5ms7mSv0C>
- Nikolaeva, O. (2021). Infinite presence and permanent absence: The role of scenography, materiality and affective processes in the representation of trauma in contemporary Russian theatre. *Communications. Media. Design*, 6(4), 59–75.
<https://doi.org/10.17323/cmd.2021.13760>
- Petersen, A. R. (2015). *Installation art: Between image and stage*. Museum Tusculanum Press.
<https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/distributed/I/bo20193173.html>
- Sztompka, P. (2001). Social change as trauma. *Sotsiologicheskie Issledovaniya*, 1, 6–16. (In Russian).
<http://www.isras.ru/files/File/Socis/01-2001/Shtompka.pdf>
- Venediktova, T. (2020). Affect – na “A” [Affect – with “A”]. *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, 164(4). (In Russian).
<https://nlobooks.ru/article/15136/>