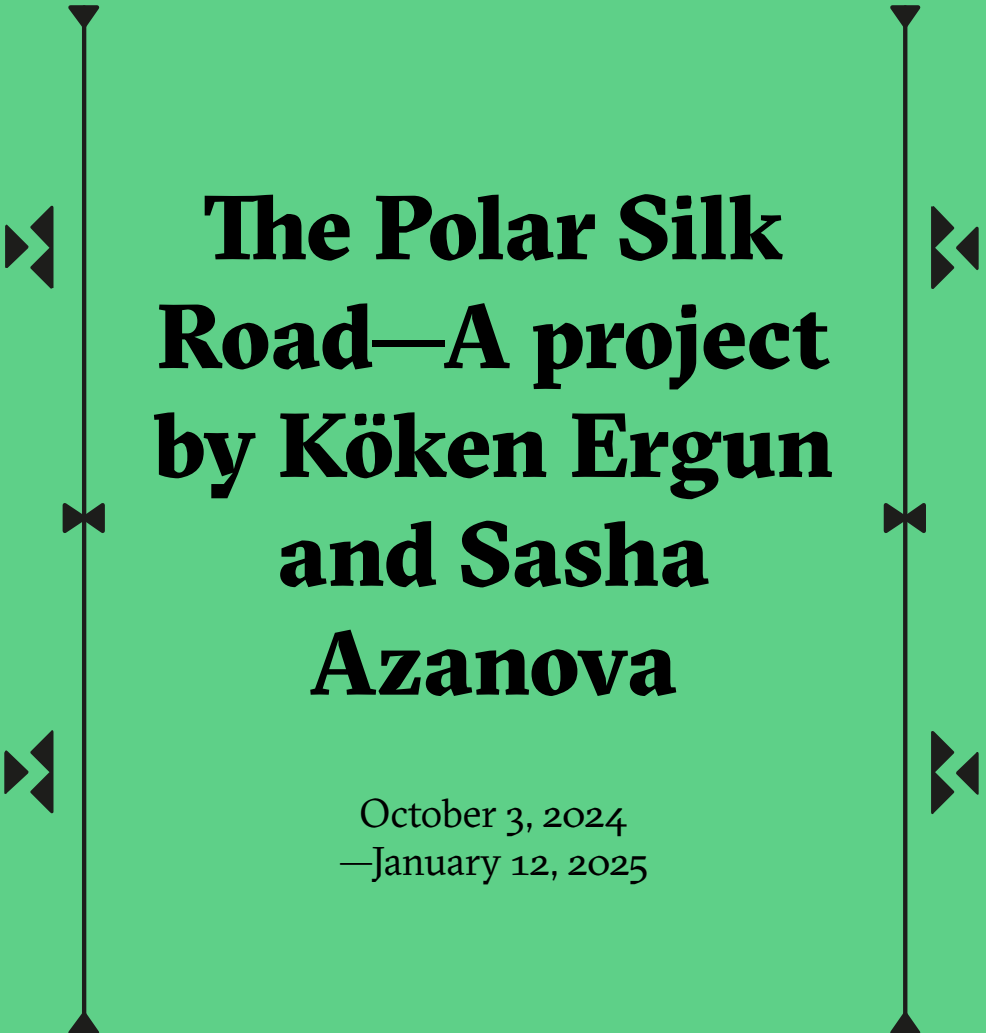


The Polar Silk Road—A project by Köken Ergun and Sasha Azanova



October 3, 2024
—January 12, 2025

**Kin museum för samtidskonst—dáládáidaga dávvirvuorká
nykyaijan taitheen myseymmi—Museum of Contemporary Art**

Thursday, October 3

**16:00–18:00 Opening and a conversation with the artists
and Maria Lind, director at Kin**

Location: Art Workshop

Saturday, October 5

13:00 Guided tour by the artists

Location: Art Workshop

A conversation with Köken Ergun and Sasha Azanova

The Polar Silk Road is a piece about the melting ice of the Arctic and the quest for new transport routes between China and Europe. One of the many effects of global warming are the ice sheets receding, melting away into the oceans, which in turn opens shipping lanes that were previously inaccessible for trade and other forms of transport. Artists Köken Ergun and Sasha Azanova have examined how China exploits this phenomenon to expand its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, an infrastructure project announced in 2013 by the president of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping.

The Belt and Road Initiative is a comprehensive network of trade corridors comprising railways, oil, and gas pipelines, ferry lines, ports, and military bases across more than one hundred countries. The Polar Silk Road aims to be a shorter, and thereby cheaper, alternative to the traditional route from China via the Malacca Strait, the Indian Ocean, the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean Sea, and then connecting into Europe. In this way, the Polar Region becomes a new strategic frontline via ports in Shanghai, Sabetta (located on the Yamal Peninsula where liquid natural gas is extracted), Kirkenes, and Rotterdam. Part of the plan is to create an “arctic corridor” not far from Kiruna, from Kirkenes to Rovaniemi, from where transportation can continue southwards.

The first part of Köken Ergun and Sasha Azanova's research-based art project is an installation consisting of two maps and a video. The vertical maps exhibited in the exhibition depict the world using the North Pole as a central point of departure. The unusual perspective highlights East-West relations and makes the ports on the Polar Silk Road clearly visible. The video is

a close-up of an icebreaker driving through the ice in the north. The installation will be on display in the Art Workshop.

Köken Ergun is an artist in-residence at Kin from September–October 2024. *The Polar Silk Road* is part of Kin's multi-year inquiry, which revolves around the intricate relationships among humans, animals, plants, earth material, and other forms of life between the surface of the earth to the ends of the atmosphere. As a term, "the critical zone" was coined in the early 2000s by earth scientists in order to grapple with the heterogeneous, near surface environment in which complex interactions regulate the natural habitat and determine the availability of life-sustaining resources. Therefore, to be able to tackle the climate crisis, and move away from the dichotomy of nature and culture, geoscientists, hydrologists, microbiologists, and soil scientists developed this integrative approach to overcome the divide between disciplines and methodologies.

Maria Lind: How would you describe your project to someone who has neither heard of you nor the Polar Silk Road?

Köken Ergun and Sasha Azanova: We are visual artists, both of us are making films, but also sometimes installations. This is our first joint project. The Polar Silk Road is a new trade route between China and Europe that passes through the Arctic Ocean, stopping at ports in Russia and Norway. Although it is not yet functional, global warming is expected to cause more significant melting of the Arctic ice, especially during the summers. This will make it easier for large container ships to navigate these waters, offering a much faster alternative to the usual route that travels through the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal.

For example, a mobile phone purchased online, likely produced in China or another Asian country, will reach the buyer in Europe more quickly if the seller uses the Polar Silk Road for shipping.

Additionally, shipping costs would be lower, reducing the overall price of the product. However, increased usage of this route by ships will lead to significant pollution in an area previously untouched by human activity.

Furthermore, the Arctic will never be completely free of ice, so icebreaker vessels will be required to clear the way for container ships. Some of these icebreakers are nuclear-powered, adding another layer of complexity and environmental concern to the situation.

For the mobile phone to reach the buyer, the ship must unload its containers either at the Norwegian port of Kirkenes (in the Barents region) or at other European ports like Rotterdam or Hamburg. Both Rotterdam and Hamburg have already extensive rail connections to the rest of Europe. Kirkenes, however, does not. As a result, Norway is planning to build a new railway from Kirkenes to Rovaniemi, which will pass through Sápmi. This is likely to cause environmental and social problems.

ML: What is the significance of addressing the Polar Silk Road at this point in time?

KE and SA: Traditionally, the Silk Road was a network of trade pathways spanning areas between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Over the centuries, these routes wove disparate regions into a large and increasingly interdependent community. The influence of Silk Road connectivity continues to resonate, affecting the people and their livelihoods in these regions.

Today, amidst relentless global socio-political crises, prolonged armed conflicts and the looming dangers of ongoing climate change, we are reminded daily that we live in an interconnected world, where changes in one part of the globe are echoed elsewhere.

As the sea ice rapidly melts at both the north and south polar regions, new opportunities for connection and trade emerge.

In 2013, China's president Xi Jinping announced a new strategy for international infrastructure development, known today as the Belt and Road Initiative. Similar to the historical Silk Roads, its aim is to create a network of economic corridors between China and Western markets. The initiative intends to develop global infrastructure projects such as railways, pipelines, shipping lines, ports, and military bases. These projects are designed to support Chinese exports and boost economic growth abroad as it slows down in China. In 2018, the Arctic was added as one of the regions of interest in China's ambitious plans, becoming part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Through our artwork, we wish to question whether these new opportunities are worth pursuing and who should be making these decisions.

ML: Can you describe your research process?

KE and SA: Upon the invitation of the New Visions triennial in Oslo in 2023, we began collaborating on a new project. Köken was already interested in the Polar Silk Road in line with his previous projects on China's global expansion, with a particular focus on its geopolitical aspects.

In her practice, Sasha concentrates on cold climate research, in particular the emotional burdens that are associated with this work. Since 2020, she has been observing how climate researchers handle the interconnected and often contradictory demands of their profession, primarily through the lens of permafrost thaw research in the Norwegian Arctic region and northern Mongolia.

Our collaboration for the New Visions triennial resulted in a work that merged our approaches. We started by researching maps depicting the Arctic region. During our research, we discovered the work of Professor Hao Xiaoguang from the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Wuhan, who in 2013 produced maps placing the polar regions at the center of the world. We decided to show the projected route of the Polar Silk Road on these maps. Another component of this installation is a short video showing the front of an icebreaker breaking through the ice. This video was borrowed from a Finnish ship engineer working for Aker Arctic, a company specializing in constructing icebreakers.

ML: Köken, how does this work relate to your previous projects?

KE: I have been working on global expansion strategies for the last ten years. I first started dealing with Turkey's global expansion through the network of international Turkish schools in more than one hundred countries. After making a film about this subject, I moved on to China's global expansion. There are similarities between the two, particularly in terms of their use of soft power. Both Turkey and China put emphasis on education and culture as part of their expansion strategies. Turkey has what they call the "Turkish Olympics," where students from different international Turkish schools in the world compete in Turkish poetry, song, and dance; first in their own country and then in Turkey for the finals. China's version of this competition is called the "Chinese Bridge," in which students of Confucius Institutes in different countries like Sweden, Australia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ethiopia compete in Chinese poetry, opera, and martial arts. Winners of national competitions are taken to Beijing for the finals in a televised event.

While working on a film about the "Chinese Bridge" competitions, the pandemic broke out and I was unable to shoot the film. So, I decided to collaborate with an Indonesian artist working in animation, to make an animation-documentary about this subject. During the

making of this documentary, my focus shifted to mineral extraction in countries which work closely with China for their electrical vehicle industry, such as nickel extraction in Indonesia and cobalt extraction in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The main characters of my film are Nickel Dust and Cobalt Dust who are both exiled from their earth by humans, who are greedy for energy and development. This is the research that eventually led me to Kiruna, where iron is extracted for similar reasons.

ML: What are the next steps for the project itself?

KE and SA: In general, we intend to continue speculating on how infrastructure expansion plans in the greater Barents region could impact local and global communities. As the next step in our collaboration, we plan to develop the project through on-site filming and sound recording in the Arctic region.

One of our potential focus points has long been the town of Kirkenes. During our research, we encountered proposals to expand its port to make it a major harbor along the Polar Silk Road. We found Kirkenes to be an interesting place to investigate, as it is a small town located in a geopolitical hotspot near the Russian border. We are interested in understanding how such changes might affect the lives of its residents. Would it create more jobs, attract further national and international investment, put the local community in a difficult position, or finally give it the attention it deserves?

Another important factor to consider is the war in Ukraine. Traditionally, Kirkenes has had close connections to nearby Russian communities. However, the war appears to have strained these connections, both locally and internationally, raising questions about how it might affect the plans for the Polar Silk Road and whether it could delay expansion efforts in the Arctic.

Köken Ergun (b. 1976, Istanbul) is an artist/filmmaker with a background in performing arts. His films often deal with communities that are not typically well known to the wider public and the importance of ritual in such groups. Ergun usually spends a long time with his subjects before starting to shoot and engages in a long research period for his projects. He also collaborates with ethnographers, historians, and sociologists as extensions to his artistic practice. His works have been exhibited internationally at institutions including Documenta 14, Paris Triennale, Jakarta Biennial (2015 and 2021), Kathmandu Triennale, Sydney Biennial, Martin Gropius Bau, SALT, Garage Moscow, Para-Site Hong Kong, KIASMA, Casino Luxembourg, and Kunsthalle Winterthur. His films received several awards at film festivals including the Tiger Award for Best Short Film at the 2007 Rotterdam Film Festival and the Special Mention Prize at the 2013 Berlinale. Ergun's works are included in public collections of the Centre George Pompidou, Greek National Museum of Contemporary Art, Stadtmuseum Berlin, Australian War Memorial, and Kadist Foundation.

Sasha Azanova (b. 1985, Yekaterinburg, currently living in Bergen) works with video, photography, and text to build semi-fictional narratives. Through these narratives Azanova explores concepts of togetherness and belonging in climate science communities, primarily in Northern Norway. Azanova holds a Master's degree in Fine Arts from The Art Academy—Department of Contemporary Art at the University of Bergen, Norway (2020–2022). Previous exhibitions include “Bokboden” (Bergen, 2016), “Rom8” (part of the Borealis festival of experimental music, Bergen, 2017), “CLB” (Berlin, 2017), “Prøverommet” (Bergen, 2016 and 2020), “Bergen Kjøtt” (Bergen, 2021), at Bergen Kunsthall (Bergen, 2022) and at the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter (Oslo, 2023).

Colophon

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and Emma Dettle

Graphics: Marina Sergeeva

Kin's visual dialect has been conceived by the artists Inga-Wiktoria
Påve and Fredrik Prost in collaboration with the designers Johanna
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Kin Museum of Contemporary Art is the regional art museum
of Norrbotten, founded in 2018 by the region and the Municipality
of Kiruna.

