

Independent research

Contemporary Art of Uzbekistan (2020–2024)

Malika Zayniddinova (2026) Tashkent -led Contemporary Art
of Uzbekistan in the Early 2020s

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Malika Zayniddinova (2026) Tashkent -led Contemporary Art of Uzbekistan in the Early 2020s

Abstract

This research examines the development of contemporary art in Uzbekistan, primarily in Tashkent, during the period from 2020 to 2024, as well as the contribution of institutions shaping the country's artistic environment. The study reveals an almost complete absence of digital archives and consolidated cultural data, which significantly complicates the study and documentation of the artistic ecosystem. The research simultaneously functions as a documentation of the current state and traces the discursive formation of the concept of "contemporary art" in independent Uzbekistan. Its goal is to provide future generations with access not only to artworks and archives, but also to the knowledge, methodologies, and institutions that determined the development of art during the examined period.

In the process of the work, one hundred artists and twenty-five institutions that exerted key influence on the formation of contemporary art in Uzbekistan were identified. Several case studies are examined in greater detail. The outcome of the research will be the creation of an online platform combining databases, maps, and publications, which will supplement and expand upon this work.

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From the Author

Research and analysis of the artistic field have always been and remain an integral part of curatorial and cultural work. In my own practice, I have repeatedly encountered shortages or limitations of public information about contemporary art in Uzbekistan. When attempting to trace the digital footprint of all contemporary including socially engaged art, one most often encounters materials about the Silk Road, reviews of recent exhibitions, publications from independent media, and several functioning websites of state museums.

The Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan, as well as individual independent researchers, annually release a significant number of articles and collections devoted to the work and influence of Usto Mumin, Alexander Volkov, or Ural Tansykbaev, late-Soviet modernism, "understanding the path of painting's development" in the 1990s, and other art-historical topics. However, despite the importance of historical context, I see an equal necessity for systematic documentation of the present time. Today, in the twenty-first century, both online presence and printed publications in contemporary art are largely limited to exhibition catalogs, media publications, and social media serving as artist portfolios.

This research is intended to serve as a starting point for further publications and analytical works on contemporary art in Uzbekistan. It creates a platform and instrument of representation, as well as a field of possibilities for one hundred cultural practitioners and a number of institutions participating in the development of the country's artistic scene

Introduction

In Uzbek art criticism discourse, the term "contemporary art" is often applied to artistic practices of the late-Soviet and post-Soviet periods, primarily because they relate to art created after 1991. However, such usage does not always align with the international concept of *contemporary art*, which describes not only temporal frameworks but also a specific type of artistic thinking. This includes conceptual strategies, institutional critique, interdisciplinarity, and engagement with expanded forms of artistic expression. In Uzbekistan's artistic environment, these approaches are only partially represented; therefore, the category "contemporary art" is more often used in a chronological rather than conceptual sense, which we maintain in this research.

According to the study's data, only approximately twenty percent of artists and institutions possess stable digital presence beyond social media. The absence of centralized archives, databases, and institutional analysis creates the phenomenon of a "digital shadow," whereby events and practices that are not documented in public sources become excluded from international academic and curatorial fields.

Uzbekistan's independence in 1991 indeed marked a new stage in the history of artistic culture; however, this stage is more productively viewed not as a "reset" but as a redistribution of meanings within already-existing artistic languages and institutional habits of the late-Soviet period. At the political-legal level, independence was formalized through the adoption of the Law "On the Foundations of State Independence of the Republic of Uzbekistan" (August 31, 1991). In the cultural sphere, this was accompanied by rapid growth in the symbolic significance of themes of the "national," "historical heritage," "tradition," and "distinctive character." These themes were already present in the late-Soviet artistic field, but under new conditions acquired the status of public cultural norm and politically-supported discourse.

Consequently, the art of independent Uzbekistan may be understood as a phase of post-Soviet transformation grounded in three interconnected foundations: Late Soviet Modernism as a professional language and artistic school; unofficial artistic practices and autonomous strategies as forms of alternative subjectivity; and the national school as an institutionally established framework for interpreting art through regional specificity. This approach allows us to avoid the oversimplified "break/continuity" dichotomy and more accurately describe the 1990s as a period of redefining cultural reference points, rather than "starting from scratch."

As Nigora Akhmedova notes, "the ideas of artistic self-identification and new principles of understanding art that emerged during the 1990s were, above all, characterized by the rejection of the double isolation in which the region's art had existed for decades—from both its own heritage and the global artistic process" (Akhmedova, 2004). It was during this period that an active search for new artistic orientations began, grounded in the combination of national cultural traditions and global artistic trends.

Research Methodology

Our research combines art history, sociological, and curatorial approaches, allowing us to trace how institutional and educational changes in Uzbekistan's contemporary artistic scene reflect broader social transformations. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of processes occurring during the five-year period, a working database was formed, including representatives of the artistic community and institutions that played a notable role in developing the art environment. Subsequently, it became evident that this community conditionally divides into graduates of the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan and young artists developing new practices.

As noted above, this research is based on the analysis of specific case studies—a group of one hundred artists and cultural practitioners, as well as twenty-five institutions that were actively operating in Uzbekistan between 2020 and 2024. This sample does not claim to provide a comprehensive representation of the artistic field; rather, it serves as an analytical tool for identifying trends, shifts, and recurring patterns. From the outset, it is important to emphasize that this list is not a ranking and does not reflect any artistic hierarchy. It is neither a catalogue of the “best” artists in Uzbekistan nor an instrument for assessing artistic merit or professional status. Its purpose is to establish a working framework through which the development of artistic practices and institutional processes during the specified period can be observed.

We include representatives from other regions partially and do not claim comprehensive coverage due to limitations in our knowledge of art community members in other regions, and partly as a consequence of Tashkent's significantly larger or relatively greater digital footprint compared to others.

The initial pool consisted of approximately two hundred representatives and thirty-five institutions. This broad list was gradually narrowed down in order to create a more focused set of case studies. To strengthen the analytical dimension of the project and reduce the influence of a single curatorial perspective, several experts participated in the process. Alexey Ulko, a contemporary art consultant, researcher, and writer, contributed insights grounded in contemporary discourse and the perspectives of the so-called “new school” of Uzbek art. Nigora Akhmedova, PhD, professor and academician of the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan, head researcher at the Fine Arts Department of the Institute of Art Studies of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan, provided the historical and art-historical framework. Aziza Sharapova, an art historian and curator, participated as a researcher responsible for the historical and analytical components of the project. Collectively, our methodology combines curatorial observation, expert consultation, and thematic research, enabling us to trace how artistic and institutional practices were formed, transformed, and reinterpreted throughout the period under examination.

The selection criteria functioned as methodological tools structuring the research process. They should not be understood as indicators of artistic quality, reputation, or career trajectory. The primary criteria included:

- participation of an artist or institution in projects and exhibitions in Uzbekistan between 2020 and 2024;
- positioning of their activities within the field of contemporary art;
- participation in at least four to five exhibition projects (local or international), with their scale and significance assessed through collective discussion;
- initiation or implementation of projects by artists or organizations operating in Uzbekistan;
- active professional engagement at the time of the research.

Once the criteria had been established, the question of information gathering emerged. The search for portfolios and data on participants in the art sector began with compiling a list of all active members of the artistic community. Introductory information was most often found online, as archives and printed materials were either unavailable or difficult to access. One of the few stable sources is *San'at*, the journal of the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan, published since 2004. It has become an important tool for documenting and subsequently archiving artistic events online. Established following the Cabinet of Ministers' Resolution "On the Organization of the Activities of the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan" (1997), the journal publishes materials on historical monuments, traditional crafts, the history of architecture, painting, design, music, theatre, and cinema, as well as reviews of international cultural relations. The publication is issued in Russian, Uzbek, and English, while its website provides access to articles in both Russian and English. Thanks to the work of its editorial team, it is possible to trace trends and the gradual transformation of the artistic process that became particularly visible during the third decade of the twenty-first century.

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Several relevant digital archives were also identified online, most of them created by enthusiasts. These include Jamshid Rashidov's online catalogue of artists of Uzbekistan (2019), Umar Kurbanov's art blog, maintained since 2007, the Central Asian contemporary art archive and media library *Astral Nomads*, dedicated to contemporary art from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan and organized by the Asia Art+ Public Foundation under the curatorship of Yulia Sorokina, as well as Oleg Karpov's *Turkestan Photo Archive*, the largest photographic archive in Central Asia. Rashidov's project presents photographs and scanned reproductions of works by forty-five artists, covering the period from the 1900s to the 2020s. The catalogue primarily reflects the academic school of painting and includes such masters as Ural Tansykbaev, Chingiz Akhmarov, Javlon Umarbekov, Akmal Nur, and Bobur Ismailov. Among the predominantly male artists represented in the catalogue, only three women artists are included: Layla Basharova, Tatiana Fadeeva, and Sarvinoz Kosimova (see Bibliography).

The most dynamic source of information proved to be contemporary communication channels—social media platforms and messaging applications. In the absence of centralized archives, Instagram and Telegram became the principal platforms for exhibition announcements, reviews, and discussions. Facebook, particularly in the pre-pandemic period, served as a space for criticism and debate within the art community. For the purposes of this research, personal and collective social media posts, art critics' blogs, and artists' pages

significantly expanded the scope of documented events and participants, complementing personal archives, media coverage, and exhibition reviews.

Following the application of all criteria, the list was reduced to one hundred representatives. Particular attention was paid to gender balance, resulting in an equal distribution of fifty women and fifty men. Although this balance does not accurately reflect the demographic structure of the artistic field, it was considered important in order to avoid reproducing existing disparities and to provide a more inclusive picture of the artistic landscape.

It is important to note that this list does not include representatives of the art community who carry out most of their professional activities outside Uzbekistan due to their place of residence or for other reasons.

Historical Context: 1992–2019

The 1990s: National Romanticism and Identity Reconstruction

The first decade of independence proceeded under the sign of intensive search and reconstruction of cultural identity. Artists turned to popular Eastern symbolism—pomegranates, peacocks, dervishes, motifs of pre-Islamic and Sufi heritage, elements of traditional life (*beshik, sunduk, arba*), as well as literary-poetic legacy. In academic literature, the artistic process of the 1990s is often interpreted as a stage of constructing cultural identity based on appeal to national historical-cultural heritage.

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However, Nigora Akhmedova emphasizes that the problem of tradition under conditions of independence does not reduce to simple reproduction of folkloric motifs. According to her, tradition must be understood much more broadly—"as a more complex system of cultural meanings, rather than illustrative folklore" (Akhmedova, 2004). During this period, there is a return to national visual memory and a search for new forms of artistic language. The artistic process of the 1990s can be viewed as a stage of organic formation of national artistic consciousness: the desire to master one's own heritage and integrate it into contemporary artistic practice preceded gradual inclusion in the global artistic context.

Researchers note another aspect of this process. Boris Chukovich points to the phenomenon of "post-Soviet exoticization," wherein "national" symbolism became transformed into a cultural marker demanded by the international art market, oriented toward representing "Eastern authenticity." As a result, elements of traditional symbolism functioned not only as a means of internal self-determination but also as an instrument of external representation in global artistic space (Chukovich, 2016). Thus, the 1990s artistic scene formed at the intersection of local cultural strategies and global representation mechanisms.

Institutionally, the key event was the creation of the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan (1997), which structured the artistic field and institutionalized state coordination. Facing the collapse of

the Soviet system of Artists' Union branches, there arose a need for a new institutional structure capable of preserving professional education, providing support to artists, and forming a representative cultural strategy. The Academy largely continued the traditions of the Artists' Union and constructed a vertically integrated model encompassing the entire cycle of artistic production—from education to international representation. In the 1990s, it promoted a nationally-oriented artistic agenda, supporting projects directed toward historical images, traditional heritage, and decorative plasticity. The result was a stable ethno-modernist paradigm combining national symbolism with modernist forms.

The 2000s: Expansion of Medium and International Integration

By the early 2000s, decorative ethno-modernism gradually exhausted itself, though it did not disappear. The artistic process moved beyond symbolic reconstruction of the past and turned toward research strategies. As Akhmedova notes, local artists "absorbed Western experience" and worked with a broad spectrum of artistic models, forming a brief but vibrant period of conceptual art in Uzbekistan (Akhmedova, 2020). Among significant authors of this stage are Vyacheslav Akhunov, Jamal Usmanov, Alexander Nikolaev, Yura Useinov, Sergei Tychina, Bobur Ismailo, Elena Kambina, and Alexander Barkovskiy.

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) played a substantial role in supporting contemporary art, realizing projects "Seismograph," "Underground Bukhara," "Constellation," "Constellation PS," and "Signs of the Time." Important channels for international integration became the initiatives of the Goethe-Institut and British Council, supporting exhibition and educational programs and fostering a new generation of media artists and curators.

Since 2001, the Tashkent International Biennial of Contemporary Art has played a significant role. Simultaneously, there occurs an expansion of artistic medium: the 2000s become a time of video art flourishing, active use of installation and performance. Artistic projects move beyond traditional museum spaces. The "Constellation" project (2005) is indicative in this regard, where Vyacheslav Useinov's "Konstanta" installation was presented in an abandoned industrial workshop.

The figure of Vyacheslav Akhunov acquires particular significance, whose "art-heology" concept and critical work with archives laid the foundation for an analytical approach in Uzbek contemporary art. Thus, the 2000s can be viewed as a stage of medium expansion, institutionalization of new practices, and gradual inclusion of Uzbekistan's artistic scene in international cultural networks, despite persisting institutional limitations.

The 2010s: The Evolution of Artistic Language and the Institutional Shift

Throughout the 2010s, a centralized model of regulation in the art world persisted: the Academy of Arts continued to set the standards for exhibition representation and expert

legitimization. At the same time, private and “semi-independent” initiatives developed, albeit on a limited scale. The emergence of Bonum Factum Gallery (since 2010) marked an important step in the formation of a platform for discussion and education in contemporary art (British Council, 2022). Large-scale projects such as Style.uz functioned as hybrid showcases where government agencies and private foundations promoted “contemporaneity” in acceptable public formats.

The period from 2010 to 2017 was marked by a growing complexity in artistic language and an expansion of media practices—including installations, performance art, and video art. Amid limited public discourse and entrenched practices of self-censorship, artists developed indirect strategies of expression, translating critical themes into the language of allusions, archival gestures, and symbolic codes. Key figures of this phase are artists working at the intersection of conceptualism and archival criticism: Vyacheslav Akhunov, Alexander Nikolaev, Elena Kambina, and Sergei Tychina. A separate strand is formed by the treatment of tradition as material for analytical transformation for example, the “Sufi Interpretation” in Jamal Usmanov's practice.

The year 2017 marked a new institutional turning point. A presidential decree established the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF), officially dedicated to integrating the country’s arts into the global cultural sphere (Presidential Decree No. PP-3325, 2017). In 2019, the Tashkent Centre for Contemporary Arts launched its program (in pre-opening mode), kicking off with Saodat Ismailova’s exhibition “Qo’rg’on Chiroq / “Light on the Hill,” featuring international curators, including Andrea Lissoni, then curator of Tate Modern.

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This phase can be viewed as a transition from a model of “controlled contemporary art” to a more open institutional framework based on international partnerships and cultural diplomacy. Key achievements included Uzbekistan’s participation in the Venice Architecture Biennale (2021) and the Venice Art Biennale (2022), as well as the establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Arts as a permanent institution.

Uzbekistan's Institutional Ecosystem

State Initiatives

The year 2017 marked a new institutional turn in Uzbekistan’s cultural policy. By presidential decree, the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation was established, with its mission officially framed as facilitating the integration of Uzbek art into the international cultural sphere. In 2019, the Foundation initiated the launch of the Centre for Contemporary Art in Tashkent through a pre-opening programme. One of its first projects was Saodat Ismailova’s exhibition *Qo’rg’on Chiroq (Light on the Hill)*, realized in collaboration with international curators, including Andrea Lissoni of Tate Modern.

The emergence of new cultural institutions has led to a new perception of the role of the Uzbekistan Academy of Arts—a key state institution that has shaped the country’s cultural policy since the late 1990s. However, in the context of contemporary art from 2020 to 2024, organizations such as the Foundation for the Development of Culture and the Arts, the Ministry of Culture, and the Cultural Heritage Agency—which focus on heritage preservation and international cultural integration—began to play an increasingly prominent role.

According to a presidential decree dated January 25, 2023, the Cultural Heritage Agency was reorganized into an independent state body. Its activities focus on the preservation of tangible heritage, museum collections, and archaeological sites, as well as the regulation of the circulation of cultural property.

While the Ministry and the Agency carry out their tasks and primarily promote projects in the field of figurative visual arts, within the scope of this study, a significant role in the development of contemporary art is played by the Art and Culture Development Foundation of the Republic of Uzbekistan under the Cabinet of Ministers, which was established in 2017 by a Presidential Decree and, at the time of the study, was headed by Gayane Umerova. The Foundation’s activities are aimed at creating an accessible and inclusive environment in cultural institutions throughout the country, fostering philanthropy, modernizing museum infrastructure, and raising the level of professionalism in the fields of culture and the arts. In recent years, the Foundation has developed a model for the cultural representation of Uzbekistan, in which contemporary art is integrated into the state’s strategy for the country’s international positioning.

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Over seven years, the Fund has managed to repurpose a former diesel power station and create the Centre for Contemporary Art in Tashkent, complete and open to the public the reconstruction of the Republican Children's Library, organize the first large-scale inclusive exhibition, open the country's first national pavilion at the Venice Biennial, represent the nation at Art Dubai and Dubai Expo through the Louvre in Paris, and open two residencies at the CCA in 2024.

Among the contemporary art exhibitions organized by the Foundation, local initiatives account for the smallest share of the total. Much greater attention and investment is directed toward international initiatives, ranging from the Foundation’s first participation in the Venice Biennale to the organization of the 4th World Conference on the Creative Economy (2020–2024 Timeline).

Nevertheless, despite a noticeable shift toward international cooperation, the Foundation creates a space for exchange among local experts and artists. As a result, Uzbek artists have participated in a coordinated manner at events such as Dubai Expo 2020 and in Uzbekistan’s national pavilion at the Venice Biennale. When inviting international curators and artists, government agencies have often involved local specialists as well both to exchange experiences and to gain a deeper understanding of the region’s cultural context.

It should also be noted that the Foundation initiated the activities of the Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA) in Tashkent, which is specifically focused on the development and representation of the local community of artists and cultural figures. Since its opening in 2019 until its closure for renovation in 2023, the Centre served as a venue for numerous projects and initiatives. Its infrastructure included a spacious courtyard for film screenings and gatherings, a high-ceilinged indoor pavilion for exhibitions and music festivals, as well as small rooms for workshops and meetings of the CCA's laboratory. In the post-COVID period, the laboratory's participants—artists and researchers—were able not only to engage with the space through public and internal events but also to use a studio where they could work and temporarily store their artworks.

One of the Centre's most significant initiatives was the CCA Lab, which ran in two cohorts in 2020–2021 and 2021–2022. Each group brought together about ten participants: artists, researchers, filmmakers, curators, musicians, and representatives of other disciplines. The laboratory was curated by Saodat Ismailova—an artist and film director whose exhibition opened the CCA in 2019—and by independent curator and art critic Alexey Ulko.

The laboratory was built on the principles of interdisciplinarity and collective exchange. Unlike the academic model of art education, which focuses primarily on disciplinary divisions and traditional art forms, the CCA program offered participants a horizontal format for interaction. Joint discussions, readings, viewings, open presentations, and experimental artistic practices—often going beyond institutionally recognized formats—played a significant role.

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Non-State Initiatives

Art Station Gallery

In 2023, under the direction of Dona Kulmatova, a new cultural space Art Station opened in Samarkand at the International University of Tourism and Cultural Heritage "Silk Road." The gallery is located in a brick building of the former Church of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker, built in 1899 and functioning until 1924. Following a 2009 fire and subsequent years of abandonment, the building was carefully restored and in 2023 reopened as Art Station, reclaiming its role as a space for meetings, artistic expression, and cultural exchange.

The gallery's opening was accompanied by the exhibition "Inner Horizon: Uzbekistan in the 1930s," which featured a series of photographs by Swiss researcher Ella Mayar. The project was carried out with the support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Silk Road International University of Tourism and Cultural Heritage. Art Station positions itself as an open, interdisciplinary space that brings together exhibition, educational, research, and theatrical activities.

In 2024, the Art Station Residency program was launched—already as an independent institution located in another historic building of Samarkand, the former Russian-Asian Bank built in 1905–1907 according to the design of architect and historian Boris Kastalsky. That same year, the residency organized a ten-day symposium, resulting in the interdisciplinary exhibition *Traces in the Sand: Contemporary Artists for the Aralkum Desert*, dedicated to climate change in the region and the ecological catastrophe of the Aral Sea. The project included artists from the United Kingdom, Egypt, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Latvia, South Korea, and Uzbekistan. Exploring the cultural context of the host country, local heritage, and the region's ecological situation, participants presented artistic statements based on their own experience of interaction with the territory and its history. Notably, such a large-scale project was realized with the support of Uzbekistan's Minister of Ecology Aziz Abdukhakimov, demonstrating state structures' involvement in developing cultural initiatives linked to ecological agenda. According to published residency materials, the exhibition was curated by Dona Kulmatova, with Sarvinoz Kosimova serving as project manager.

During 2023–2024, both Art Station venues conducted a series of exhibitions and launched public programs including lectures, discussions, seminars with international and local experts, as well as film screenings and musical performances. Beyond the mentioned projects, support and financing of Art Station included participation of partners, among which is the British Council (The Voice of the Trees project).

Zero Line Gallery

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Zero Line Gallery was a private contemporary art gallery opened in Tashkent on September 17, 2016, as an institutional and conceptual attempt to capture the "zero line"—a reference point for new possibilities for contemporary art in the local artistic field. The name "ZERO LINE" itself articulated the idea of a beginning: not only a new exhibition space but also a new way of thinking about art's role in Tashkent's urban and cultural environment.

The gallery's director was Bella Sabirova, and its curator was the well-known contemporary artist Vyacheslav Akhunov, whose position and critical statements about contemporary art in Central Asia set the tone for the gallery's work. His curatorial framework determined the project's conceptual direction and became important context for subsequent discussion.

The opening exhibition *Picture as an Image of Time* established the institution's key methodology. The exposition featured paintings, drawings, and sculpture from private collections, predominantly from the Soviet period. Despite chronological and genre heterogeneity, works were united by a curatorial framework of "image of time," in which individual artistic practices were read as reflections of general aesthetic and social tendencies of a particular historical period. This exhibition not only reconstructed separate lines of development of the Uzbek school of visual art but also indicated the importance of the collection as a form of knowledge and method of historicizing art.

The gallery's second key project was the exhibition *One Hand Clapping*, which expanded the curatorial strategy into fields of philosophical and interdisciplinary analysis. Alluding to the Zen Buddhist parable of "the sound of one hand," the exhibition was constructed around reinterpretation of categories of silence, meditation, and perception. Central to the exposition was a collection of Buddhist iconography from a private collection, incorporated into a contemporary artistic context through works by artists of different generations, as well as through media practices—video art, installation, and performance. The project involved artists M. Kagarov, L. Ibragimov, V. Akhunov, Sh. Abdullaeva, N. Negmatov, A. Gurevich, D. Bakhritdinova, as well as documentary works by G. Vakhidova.

The spatial and technical organization of ZERO LINE Gallery was also part of its curatorial logic. The gallery rejected the strict white cube model in favor of a more flexible and "human" environment where exposition architecture suggested adaptability and variability of perception. Regulated lighting, temperature control, projection systems, mobile screens, and multimedia surfaces allowed transformation of the space under various exhibition scenarios—from intimate displays to media and performative projects. In this configuration, the gallery became not a neutral container but an active participant in curatorial statement.

Special attention was devoted to modes of audience communication. Exhibition projects were accompanied by theoretical materials, press releases, public discussions, and individual tours, which formed a model of an "explanatory" institution wherein knowledge became part of the artistic experience. In this context, what became important was not only presentation of the work but creation of conditions for its interpretation.

Zero Line Gallery closed in 2020 after the pandemic made offline space work impossible and drastically increased the financial burden on a private art institution without state support. Falling attendance, absence of benefits for cultural initiatives, and necessity of transitioning online led to the decision to abandon a permanent location and lease the space. The project continued to exist in mobile and digital formats.

International Organizations

When discussing financing, several key players—or, as customary in the art world, patrons—come to mind. Since 2007, the Swiss Embassy, specifically the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), has implemented a regional program for culture and art in Central Asia (CAACP), through which numerous strong and long-term projects have been launched. The program established itself as an innovative and effective tool accounting for local conditions and promoting universal values—democratic principles, openness, diversity, as well as strengthening of social and cultural dynamics and social cohesion. Over the years of its work, the initiative created favorable conditions for development of independent art and cultural initiatives. By 2023, SDC had supported nine creative organizations, providing artists, performers, and their audiences, including vulnerable groups, with opportunities for free expression and interaction.

The CAACP 1.0 program became a platform for forming a professional community in the sphere of Central Asian art and culture. Through documentary film screenings, trainings, performances, festivals, concerts, and exhibitions, artists and activists were able to raise themes important to various population segments. Among successful case studies are the repertory of the Ilkhom theater, the Focus school, and Art Station. Participant selection occurred through a regional open competition, and it is important to note that the level of support was substantial, as it concerned institutional financing. Thanks to a three-year grant cycle, any creative organization meeting requirements could not only realize individual projects (exhibitions, festivals) but also cover current expenses, provide stipends, finance travel and professional development. This practice demonstrates the level of support so necessary for the country's creative industry. SDC representatives work in Bishkek, Dushanbe, and Tashkent.

Goethe-Institut in Tashkent

The Tashkent branch of the Goethe-Institut—one of 154 German cultural diplomacy centers abroad—actively works in the sphere of art and culture beyond popularizing German language and international cooperation, realizing diverse projects. It does not directly shape the art market but influences it through developing international connections, supporting local initiatives, and implementing institutional practices.

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Among the institute's projects are regular film screenings, "German Drama Week" (jointly with Ilkhom theater, 2023), and the Goethe Poetry Lab for young poets and writers (2022), curated by poet, musician, and art manager Ashot Danielyan. The Goethe-Institut does not seek direct financing of individual artists; its approach consists in creating an environment where creators can develop, explore, and discuss their own experience. In 2023, artist Mokhira Mullyadjanova participated in the Leipzig International Art Programme residency through the Goethe-Mobilitätsprogramm Kultur in Bewegung. The collaboration between Mullyadjanova (Tashkent) and Ramona Schacht (Leipzig) resulted in an exhibition project about women's experience of labor and employment, developed during the artist's stay in Germany.

Another example of international institutions' involvement in the development of the local scene is the annual Nomsiz Festival, dedicated to Central Asian film initiatives, experimental, documentary, and activist cinema. In 2024, the festival was organized with support from the Goethe-Institut and the British Council. The Goethe-Institut also supports exhibition projects by foreign artists in Uzbekistan—for example, a photography exhibition by Helga Paris, organized in collaboration with ifa.

British Council

Unlike the Goethe-Institut, which focuses on cultural exchange and discursive practices, the British Council builds its strategy around:

- developing the creative industries as an economic sector
- fostering entrepreneurial skills
- creating sustainable models for monetizing culture

The British Council in Uzbekistan should be viewed as an institution that rethinks the role of culture through the lens of the creative economy. At the heart of its programs are the conditions for the production, distribution, and sustainability of cultural projects.

The most significant initiative in the field of contemporary art was the Creative Producers program, which introduced the role of the cultural producer as an independent professional entity into the local context. In an environment where artistic production had long remained either institutionally dependent or individualized, this model facilitated the emergence of new forms of organizing cultural projects. The establishment of the Creative Central Asia Network also demonstrates the British Council's commitment to working at the level of regional infrastructure, supporting the exchange of knowledge and professional connections. The institution's financial model aligns with this strategy: the British Council initiates processes that are intended to become self-sustaining over time. Funding here is not a one-time grant but a tool for building sustainable structures. In the context of Uzbekistan's arts scene from 2020 to 2024, the British Council's activities primarily influenced the development of professional infrastructure. Through educational programs, production practices, and regional networks, the institution has facilitated the emergence of new models of interaction between culture, the economy, and international cooperation.

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French Embassy and Alliance Française

The Embassy of France in Uzbekistan and the Alliance Française occupy a distinct position compared to the Goethe-Institut and the British Council. Their activities are rooted in a more traditional model of cultural diplomacy, focused on representation, authorship, and artistic excellence. Unlike the British Council's systemic approach and the Goethe-Institut's emphasis on education and capacity-building, the French institutions operate more selectively through curatorial projects, festivals, and film programmes, maintaining a focus on individual artistic expressions.

This approach is reflected in the prioritization of cinema, visual arts, and performative practices, where the emphasis lies on the presentation and co-production of projects rather than on the transformation of local cultural infrastructure. In this context, funding is directed toward specific initiatives of high cultural value, resulting in a selective yet concentrated presence within the local cultural landscape.

A representative example is the programme of French film premieres organized by Tashkent Film School in 2024 with the support of the Embassy of France in Uzbekistan. The project not only provided access to contemporary French cinema but also situated local audiences within a

broader international cinematic context, functioning more as a cultural bridge than as a mechanism for institutional development.

2020-2024 Timeline

2020: The pandemic and lockdowns

The post-pandemic period in Uzbekistan was not so much a time of recovery as a moment of reboot for the artistic scene, when new formats and ideas emerged faster than they could be institutionally consolidated. A review of the number of events and exhibitions held in 2020 makes it clear that they were relatively few. Several online projects appeared, including the virtual exhibition *Isolation* in Tashkent. Many artists shifted toward digital formats, exploring graphic design, while some moved into UX/UI design. The pandemic compelled creative professionals to adapt to new conditions, and the cultural sector experienced a significant decline in attendance at theatres, museums, and galleries.

Nevertheless, by the autumn of 2020, events with limited visitor capacity gradually began to return. The annual exhibitions organized by the Directorate of Arts and the Academy continued to be held at the Central Exhibition Hall. The Art and Culture Development, like other state institutions, remained operational, postponing and reformatting major projects. Among the most significant initiatives was the launch of the first laboratory at the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Tashkent (CCA Lab). Housed in a former diesel power plant, the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Tashkent was transformed into a large-scale exhibition pavilion with a continuously evolving public programme of lectures, seminars, and workshops. The laboratory operated in a hybrid format, providing emerging artists with space for experimentation and curatorial support.

Graduates of CCA Lab went on to launch their own projects, become directors of institutions, and emerge as prominent figures in the contemporary art scene. During the same period, Uzbekistan's first National Pavilion opened at the Venice Architecture Biennale—an event that had been postponed from 2020 to 2021.

2021: A Post-Pandemic Surge

The year 2021 marked a period of rapid growth in artistic activity. From the country's own Contemporary Art Biennale to its debut at the Venice Biennale, Dubai Art Week, Art Basel, and Dubai Expo 2020, Uzbekistan entered the international cultural arena with unprecedented visibility. New private initiatives also emerged, including the interdisciplinary space *139 Documentary Center* (2020) and *Bonum Factum Gallery* (2016). Since 2021, the contemporary art festival *moc fest* has been held annually, initiated by graduates of the British Council's Creative Producers programme and the creative organization *moc*. Conceived as a response to a prolonged period of creative stagnation, the festival sought to stimulate engagement among both artists and audiences.

The sharp increase in the number of events in 2021 reflects the broader dynamics of post-pandemic recovery. One of the first large-scale projects of the period was the *48 Hours Tashkent* festival, organized with the support of the Goethe-Institut. The project spanned multiple locations across different regions of the country. Under the slogan “Art Is Here,” curators Gulnara Ishmuratova and Antonina Kadyrova launched the programme across several venues, including Tashkent, the Navruz Ethnopark, and the 139 Documentary Center. The development of a mobile application featuring a city-wide quest formed part of a broader strategy of decentralization and distributed audience engagement.

2022: International Projects

In 2022, two new gallery initiatives opened in Tashkent—*Hlmrdv Gallery* and *Artikel 32*—occupying an intermediate position between a commercial gallery and an experimental platform. Their emergence reflects a shift toward a more flexible model of institutional practice, in which a space simultaneously functions as an exhibition venue, a production platform, and an entry point for emerging artists working with new media.

One of the key events was the WE ARE ARAL exhibition, organized as part of the ELEMENT (Stihia) electronic music platform in Muinak. The project explored the connection between the ecological disaster of the Aral Sea, local memory, and electronic music as a form of collective experience.

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At the same time, Tashkent witnessed a growing emphasis on interdisciplinary practices. The festival *Tashkent Music Encounters*, held at the Centre for Contemporary Art, proposed a model of an open cultural space in which music, performance, and audiovisual practices coexisted within a shared environment. Another significant event was *Tashkent Futures*, the final exhibition of the second CCA Lab programme, presented at the 139 Documentary Center. Addressing themes of ecology, urbanism, and social inclusion, the exhibition proposed artistic strategies for reimagining the urban environment.

In Urgench, the local museum institution significantly expanded its exhibition activities. Among its most notable initiatives was the travelling exhibition project *Aral Dream*, organized with the support of the Ministry of Tourism of Uzbekistan and the Ministry of Ecology and implemented by the Urgench Museum of Contemporary Art. According to the museum’s director, Shirin Tasheva, “the project continued for two years and covered fourteen locations across the country, becoming one of the most sustainable environmentally oriented exhibition initiatives in Uzbekistan.”

2023: Institutional stabilisation

The year 2023 was the most prolific in terms of the number of exhibitions and festivals, marking the transition of the artistic scene into a phase of heightened activity and growing institutional

diversity. New venues opened in Tashkent, including the *Central Asian Expocenter (CAEx)* and *Gallery 81*, while *Art Station Gallery* was established in Samarkand, reflecting the gradual decentralization of cultural infrastructure beyond the capital.

The festival format emerged as the dominant mode of artistic production. Several projects that would later become recurring annual events took place in 2023, including the exhibition *NeUyat* (launched in 2022) at the 139 Documentary Center, *Nomsiz Festival 2023*, and *QizGap 2023*. Together, these initiatives fostered an alternative space for artistic expression, oriented toward emerging practitioners, performative practices, and the critical re-examination of social norms.

With approximately ninety-five exhibitions and festivals taking place throughout the year, 2023 recorded a historically unprecedented volume of artistic activity.

2024: Residencies and Festivals

The year 2024 marked a breakthrough in the organization of large-scale non-governmental cultural initiatives. During the summer, a group of young organizers launched the first privately initiated *Art Week Uzbekistan 2024* at CAEx Uzbekistan, with support from the Youth Agency and private sponsors. The programme brought together contemporary art, local brands, fashion, education, and music. Artists worked with scenography and media installations across dedicated pavilions. Participants included Bobur Alimkhodjaev, Laziza Tulaganova, Tamila Bismakhova, and Oyjon Khayrullaeva, whose large-scale digital canvases suspended from the ceiling became one of the event's most memorable visual elements.

The year concluded with *The RE/Generation Art Fest*, a festival-fair organized with the support of the Karimov Foundation and the *You Are Not Alone Foundation*. Curated by Bobur Ismailov, the project brought together seventy artists working across diverse media. It was accompanied by the publication of the *Contemporary Uzbek Art Collection Catalogue*, in which Ismailov described the initiative as a process of emergence and transition, emphasizing its significance for a new generation of artists. Participant selection evolved organically: an initial group gradually expanded through recommendations and self-organization, reflecting a characteristic pattern of community formation within the Uzbek art scene in recent years.

In 2024, two long-awaited artist residencies opened in Tashkent—located in Namuna and Hast Imam—as well as a residency programme at Art Station in Samarkand. In addition, Uzbekistan hosted the *World Conference on Creative Economy*, organized by the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation under the Cabinet of Ministers. The forum was aimed at strengthening international partnerships, facilitating the exchange of expertise, and promoting the development of cultural and creative sectors within society.

State Initiatives: A Case Study on the Art Gallery of Uzbekistan (NBU)

As part of this research, I conducted a series of visits to the Art Gallery of Uzbekistan (NBU), where Saodat Ruzieva, who was serving as a curator at the time of the study, answered my questions and shared valuable information about the institution's activities. Founded in 2004, the Gallery is one of the country's most stable cultural institutions, having maintained a continuous exhibition programme for over two decades. Unlike many initiatives whose operations have depended on grants or short-term project cycles, the Gallery functions on a permanent basis thanks to the support of the National Bank of Uzbekistan (NBU).

Ruzieva provided access to the institution's archival report covering the period from 2004 to 2024, which demonstrated the exceptional intensity of its programming. Over the course of twenty years, the Gallery has organized hundreds of exhibitions, educational programmes, conferences, lectures, international projects, and inter-museum exchanges.

Between 2020 and 2024, the Gallery maintained a high level of activity despite the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the period under examination, more than eighty exhibition projects were realized, excluding lectures, workshops, artist talks, and conferences. Although the Gallery was temporarily closed during the pandemic and resumed operations only in the autumn of the same year, it organized a record number of exhibitions in the following year. Starting from 2022, the institution sustained a stable volume and regular rhythm of exhibition activity for three consecutive years (see Table).

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An analysis of the programme reveals that the institution's activities are structured around several recurring thematic directions:

- **Preservation of national cultural and artistic heritage.** The Gallery's programme regularly features exhibitions drawn from the National Bank of Uzbekistan's collection, projects dedicated to major figures of Uzbek art, historical personalities, and cultural memory. These include

memorial exhibitions devoted to Medat Kagarov and Rakhim Akhmedov, projects focused on Alisher Navoi and the Jadids, as well as exhibitions of works from state museum collections.

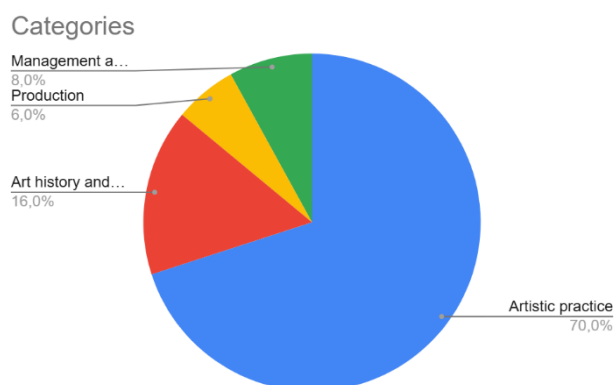
- **Representation of national identity through traditional culture and decorative arts.** A significant portion of the programme is devoted to ceramics, jewellery, folk artistic practices, and exhibitions marking national holidays and commemorative dates. Particularly illustrative are the Gallery's participation in the Tashkent Biennials of Applied Arts and its organization of international exhibitions dedicated to decorative and applied arts.
 - **International cultural cooperation.** During the period under review, the Gallery actively collaborated with foreign embassies, cultural centres, and museums. Among the most notable projects were *The Silk Road: Art and Contemporary Artists from Italy*, the exhibition of Italian jewellery design *Diva*, the project *Italy Dresses Cinema*, an exhibition of Turkish calligraphers, as well as international festivals and exhibitions featuring artists from across the Turkic world.
- The gradual incorporation of contemporary art into the institutional agenda.** Although the Gallery does not position itself as a contemporary art institution, its programme regularly includes projects related to contemporary artistic practices, research-based exhibitions, exhibitions by emerging artists, and interdisciplinary formats. In interviews, Gallery staff emphasized that they regard contemporary art as an important component of their work and seek to foster dialogue between historical heritage and contemporary artistic practices.

The educational dimension of the Gallery's activities is of particular significance. Nearly every major exhibition is accompanied by lectures, workshops, artist talks, and public discussions. According to representatives of the institution, audiences have shown increasing interest in contextual information, research materials, and curatorial interpretations in recent years, influencing the character of the Gallery's programming.

The Art Gallery of Uzbekistan therefore represents a rare example within the country of an institution that combines stable funding, long-term institutional memory, and consistent programme activity. Unlike many independent venues that operate on a project-by-project basis, the Gallery performs the function of a durable cultural infrastructure. At the same time, its development demonstrates a gradual shift away from a purely museum-exhibition model toward a more open framework incorporating research, education, and contemporary artistic practices. Within the context of Uzbekistan's artistic ecosystem between 2020 and 2024, the Gallery effectively compensates for the absence of a sustainable museum of contemporary art in the country. It is not a contemporary art institution in the strict sense of the term; however, through the scale of its operations, its resources, international partnerships, and the consistency of its programming, it performs several functions that in other contexts are typically associated with major state museums of contemporary art. This, in my view, is the principal conclusion to be drawn from its case.

Analysis

100 Representatives



For analytical purposes, the selected representatives were further grouped into four broader professional categories: (1) artistic practice, (2) art history and curation, (3) production, and (4) management or institutional work. Approximately 70 percent of participants fall within the category of artistic practice, while the remaining 30 percent are distributed across the other three categories. This proportion

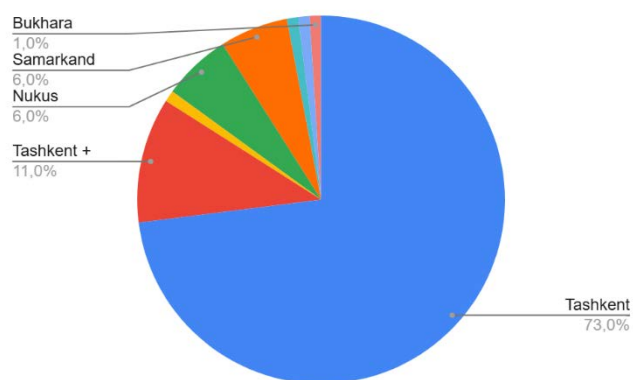
was maintained intentionally, as it allowed for a greater emphasis on artists and a closer examination of their often interdisciplinary modes of working.

The distribution within the three additional categories was as follows: eight representatives belong to the field of management and institutional work, primarily consisting of directors and founders of art institutions; six individuals work in production; and sixteen participants fall within the category of curatorial practice and art theory, making it the most represented of these three fields. The category of artistic practice was further subdivided, resulting in the identification of five principal media employed by artists: fine art, installation, photography, video, and sound art. Within this category, an important pattern emerged. Despite the visible presence of installation-based, photographic, video, and sound practices, approximately 87 percent of artistic production continues to rely on painting in one form or another. On the one hand, this predominance can be explained by the historical influence of academic art education and the enduring strength of the painterly tradition in the region. On the other hand, it is closely tied to existing infrastructure. Most exhibition venues in the country remain oriented toward conventional display formats, in which painting is perceived as the most accessible, institutionally supported, and logistically secure medium.

When assessing quantitative data, it is important to emphasize once more that this proportion does not claim universal description of the entire artistic scene and does not reflect its full volume. It captures only results of a limited research sample formed on the basis of available exhibition programs, institutional archives, and publicly documented projects. Increasing validity and representativeness of data obtained during such research is a task for the future. Conversations with artists and researchers repeatedly highlighted that the central challenge lies not in the absence of new media practices, but in the lack of conditions necessary for their sustainable development. Video art, sound-based, research-driven, and interdisciplinary practices require technical infrastructure, systematic archiving, mobile exhibition formats, and consistent curatorial support, all of which remain sporadic and limited in scope. As a result,

many such initiatives emerge outside major institutions, taking shape within self-organized collectives, temporary spaces, festivals, and independent residency programmes.

Table 2. Ratio of 100 representatives of the art scene to the city in which they carry out their practice



The chart clearly demonstrates that more than two-thirds of the identified practitioners conduct their professional activities in Tashkent. An additional eleven individuals work between the capital and their city of residence, while only sixteen both live and work in other locations, including Nukus, Samarkand, Bukhara, Khorezm, Urgench, and Almalyk. Beyond the scope of the dataset examined in this study, there exists a considerably

broader geographical distribution of artistic practices and professional trajectories. However, given the methodology employed and the limitations of the available sources, the analysis inevitably remains weighted toward the capital and its cultural context.

25 Institutions

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It is particularly important to note the institutional structure of the study. Of the 35 organizations initially considered, 25 made it onto the final shortlist. Slightly more than half of them are galleries, while the rest are divided among exhibition spaces, interdisciplinary venues, museums, and cultural centers. This proportion alone demonstrates the extent to which the local art scene depends on the exhibition-based model of art's existence. In Uzbekistan, there are still virtually no sustainable research platforms, independent archival centers, institutions of critical writing, or spaces for long-term artistic production. Many venues function as hybrid structures, combining a gallery, an educational platform, an event space, and a venue for temporary initiatives.

Therefore, when categorizing these institutions, I divided them into three groups: exhibition and/or interdisciplinary spaces, museums, and galleries. The geographical distribution turned out to be predictable: the overwhelming majority of institutions are located in Tashkent (19 out of 25), four are in Samarkand, and there is one institution each—the Museum of Contemporary Art in Urgench and the I.V. Savitsky State Museum of Art of the Republic of Karakalpakstan in Nukus.

Table 3: List of 25 Institutions by Year of Establishment

No	Name	Year of Establishment	Category	City

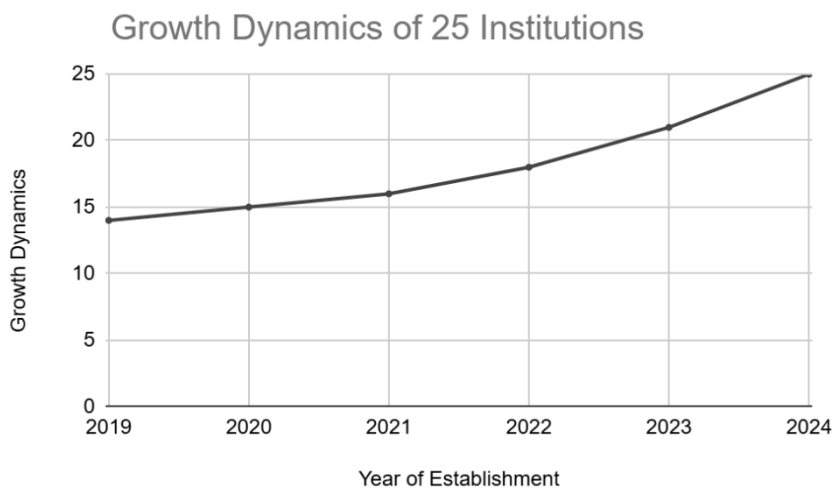
1	The State Museum of Arts of the Republic of Karakalpakstan named after I.V. Savitsky	1966	Museum	Nukus
2	Central Exhibition Hall of the Academy of Arts	1974	Exhibition and/or interdisciplinary space	Tashkent
3	Ilkhom Theatre	1976	Exhibition and/or interdisciplinary space	Tashkent
4	Urgench Contemporary Art Museum of Uzbekistan	1983	Museum	Urgench
5	Human House	2000	Exhibition and/or interdisciplinary space	Tashkent
6	Art Gallery of Uzbekistan (NBU)	2004	Gallery	Tashkent
7	Ikuo Hirayama International Caravanserai of Culture	2004	Exhibition and/or interdisciplinary space	Tashkent
8	Tashkent house of Photography	2005	Gallery	Tashkent
9	Bonum Factum	2010	Gallery	Tashkent
10	Aysel gallery	2010	Gallery	Samarkand
11	Zero line gallery	2016	Gallery	Tashkent
12	Nuron	2017	Gallery	Tashkent
13	Ruhsor Museum of Contemporary Art	2017	Museum	Samarkand
14	Centre for Contemporary Art Tashkent	2019	Exhibition and/or interdisciplinary space	Tashkent
15	139 Documentary Center	2020	Exhibition and/or interdisciplinary space	Tashkent
16	moc	2021	Exhibition and/or interdisciplinary space	Tashkent
17	Hlmdrv gallery.	2022	Gallery	Tashkent
18	Artikel 32	2022	Exhibition and/or interdisciplinary space	Tashkent
19	Central Asian Expocenter (CAEx)	2023	Exhibition and/or interdisciplinary space	Tashkent
20	Gallery 81	2023	Gallery	Tashkent
21	Art Station gallery	2023	Gallery	Samarkand
22	Regeneration art gallery	2024	Gallery	Tashkent

23	CCA Residencies	2024	Exhibition and/or interdisciplinary space	Tashkent
24	Meros gallery	2024	Gallery	Tashkent
25	Art Station Residency	2024	Exhibition and/or interdisciplinary space	Samarkand

The number of institutions grew gradually during the period under review. Most of these initiatives were launched before the pandemic, such as Human House (2000), Bonum Factum (2010), and the Center for Contemporary Art (2019), bringing the total number of existing institutions to 14 out of 25 as of 2019. (see Table 1)

The 2020 pandemic generally suspended activity throughout the world, and art sector budgets contracted everywhere. In this context, the closure of already-established Zero Line Gallery can be viewed as an inevitable turn of events. However, by year's end, the 139 Documentary Center space successfully opened, increasing institutions by one unit. During 2021–2024, consistent expansion of the artistic scene was observed, as new initiatives appeared, including moc, which played an important role in forming a more interdisciplinary and research-oriented environment, as well as private galleries and residencies at CCA and Art Station (see Table 3). The pandemic in this case became not only crisis but a point of reconsidering methods of artistic interaction. Precisely after 2020, notably strengthened interest in self-organized initiatives, collective practices, and independent educational formats.

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The collected data on exhibitions and festivals confirms a pronounced centralization of cultural production around Tashkent. However, this concentration can be attributed not only to the country's institutional structure but also to demographic and urban factors. As the largest metropolis in Uzbekistan, Tashkent benefits from a

denser population, more developed infrastructure, a well-established urban cultural environment, and a greater public readiness to engage with art institutions. Such conditions facilitate the formation of regular cultural practices, enable information to circulate more rapidly, and make it easier to sustain large-scale cultural projects.

At the same time, Tashkent-centricity cannot be reduced solely to geography. It also reflects the unequal distribution of resources, visibility, and access to professional networks. The capital concentrates state institutions, private galleries, international foundations, educational

programs, and the infrastructure necessary for implementing projects with complex logistical and technical requirements.

It is important to acknowledge that a more diverse and vibrant cultural scene exists beyond Tashkent than is reflected in official data. Information on informal initiatives, local art groups, independent organizers, and researchers remains fragmented. Many projects operate intermittently, lack consistent public communication, are rarely documented in the media, and therefore do not appear in statistical surveys. As a result, cultural life in the regions often appears weaker than it actually is, while horizontal connections between different cities remain limited. Tashkent-centricity, therefore, emerges both from the scale and infrastructural advantages of the capital and from the insufficient visibility of regional and informal initiatives, many of which have yet to be fully integrated into the country's broader cultural landscape.

Events: Exhibitions, Festivals and Organizers

Exhibitions and Festivals

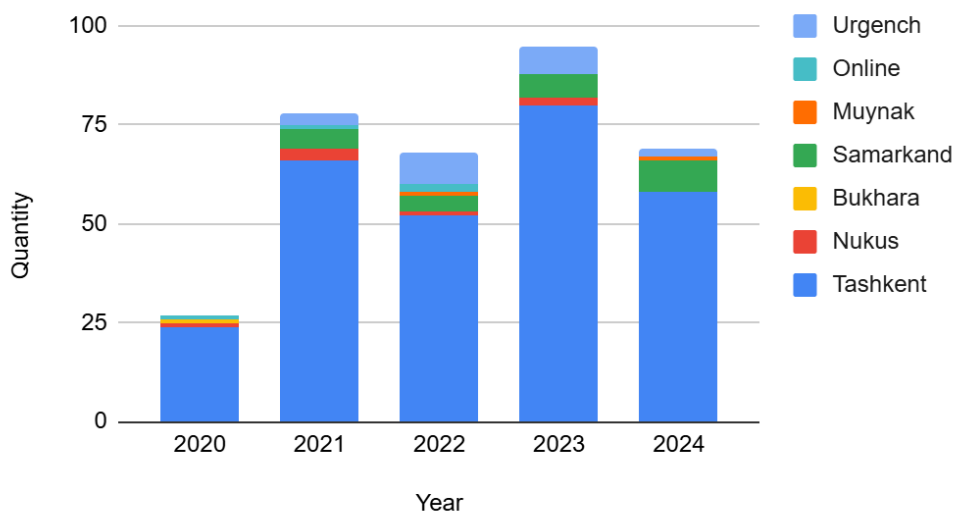


Table 4, which maps the geography and types of events, further confirms the dominance of Tashkent as the country's principal cultural centre. The overwhelming majority of exhibitions, festivals, and film festivals are concentrated in the capital, reflecting the density of its cultural infrastructure, including private galleries, state-run venues, and the activities of institutions such as the National Bank of Uzbekistan (NBU) and the Directorate of Art Exhibitions. By contrast, the regions—Samarkand, Bukhara, Nukus, and Muynak—appear far less frequently and are typically represented through isolated initiatives or travelling projects. Nukus constitutes a notable exception, as its relative consistency is sustained by institutionally driven events connected to the Academy of Arts and the Savitsky Museum, including annual reporting exhibitions.

Over the course of the research, more than 330+ exhibitions and contemporary art festivals were documented.

At the same time, another development gradually emerged through the research: the formation of alternative local art scenes. In recent years, Samarkand, for example, has increasingly become a site for more intimate and experimental artistic practices. This shift is closely connected to the activities of independent spaces and artists whose work engages with questions of place-based memory, ecology, local identity, and urban transformation. Unlike Tashkent, where contemporary art often operates within a more institutionalized and representative framework, initiatives in Samarkand tend to be less constrained by official cultural narratives and, as a result, frequently allow for greater artistic freedom. Since 2023, however, particularly following the opening of Art Station, a parallel trend towards institutionalization has become evident, bringing together international and local initiatives within a more structured cultural framework.

Organizers

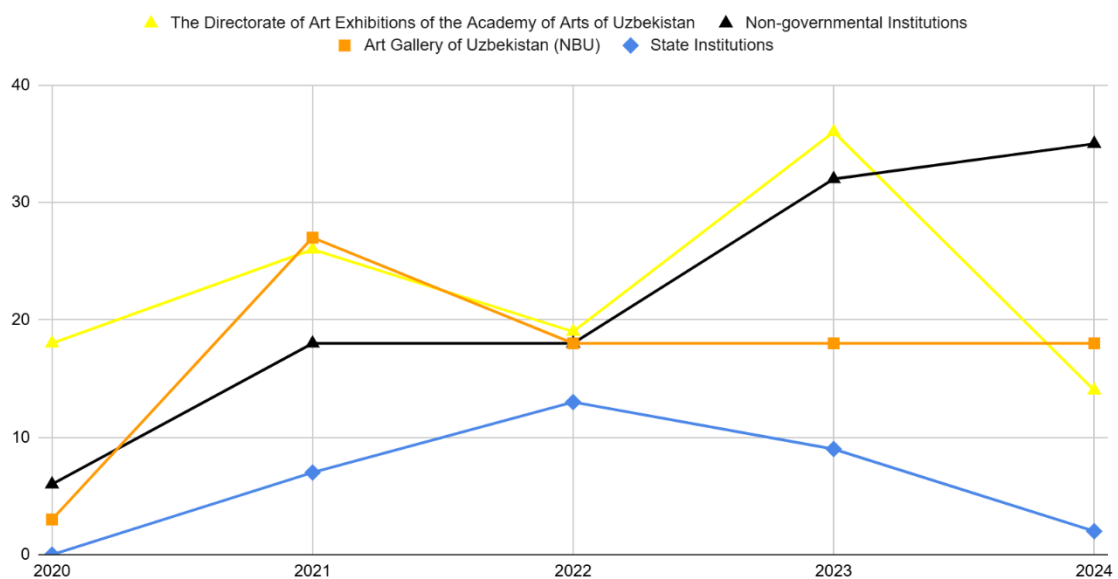


Table 5

It is important to note that the data presented in Table 5 is limited to cultural events that took place within the territory of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The information was compiled manually from media sources, personal archives, the exhibition records provided by the Gallery of Fine Arts of Uzbekistan in the report *“Activities of the Gallery of Fine Arts of Uzbekistan, 2004–2024”*, as well as from publicly available channels and social media platforms. The statistics presented here are based on the assembled database, media documentation, and institutional archives—particularly those of the Gallery of Fine Arts of Uzbekistan—and do not include international projects involving Uzbek artists, such as participation in the Venice Biennale or exhibitions held abroad. Educational formats, including lectures, seminars, and artist talks, were also excluded, placing the analytical focus specifically on exhibition and festival activity.

Based on the collected data, four categories of cultural organizers were identified:

1. Private and non-governmental institutions (grassroots initiatives and private galleries)
2. The Gallery of Fine Arts of Uzbekistan (considered separately due to the availability of its statistical records and archives)

3. The Directorate of Art Exhibitions of the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan
4. State institutions, including the Art and Culture Development Foundation, the Centre for Contemporary Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Urgench

Although the latter three categories are financed through the same state budget, their annual funding levels differ considerably, resulting in significant variations in the scale of their exhibition activities. At the same time, the number of state-funded exhibitions dedicated specifically to contemporary art remains relatively limited. A substantial portion of public resources continues to be directed toward projects related to cultural heritage, art history, and museum activities. The Art and Culture Development Foundation, in particular, places a strong emphasis on international projects and exhibition platforms abroad. Simultaneously, the state provides annual funding to the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan, the Art and Culture Development Foundation, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Urgench, ensuring the continued operation and development of these institutions. Despite the redistribution of responsibilities among different state bodies, their combined contribution to the development and representation of contemporary art remains significant and demonstrates steady growth throughout the 2020–2024 period.

In the post-pandemic period, the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan and its affiliated structures, including the Directorate of Art Exhibitions, remained among the most active cultural actors. Their activity reached its peak in 2023, reflecting both the restoration of public cultural life after the pandemic and the continuation of a stable model of recurring and reporting exhibitions. These activities extended beyond Tashkent to locations such as Nukus and the Savitsky Museum. A decline is observable in 2024, which may indicate either a reduction in programming or a redistribution of activity toward other sectors of the cultural field. Approximately one-third of all recorded exhibition activity is associated with projects organized by the Gallery of Fine Arts of Uzbekistan, underscoring its position as one of the most influential and consistent actors within the country's art ecosystem. Its activity increased sharply in 2021, coinciding with the post-pandemic reopening period and the release of accumulated demand for cultural events.

While the landscape of national institutional organizers is relatively clear, the most notable development in the post-pandemic period has been the growth of private institutions and galleries. Their presence was minimal in 2020, but by 2024 it had expanded steadily and substantially. This trend directly correlates with the increase in exhibitions organized by the private sector—from six events in 2020 to thirty-five in 2024, representing more than a fivefold increase. These figures suggest a gradual shift in the centre of artistic production away from state-led structures toward more flexible, independent, and privately driven formats.

Factors Influencing Discourse Formation

Throughout the course of this research, it became impossible to ignore the continuing influence of the Soviet institutional model on the local art scene. This influence is visible not only in the organizational structures of state institutions but also in the mechanisms of artistic production themselves: approaches to exhibition-making, hierarchies of artistic media, systems of art education, and the limited development of critical discourse. As Nigora Akhmedova has noted, Malika Zayniddinova (2026) Tashkent -led Contemporary Art of Uzbekistan in the Early 2020s

many institutions continue to operate within outdated frameworks in which experimental art exists more as an exception than as an integral part of the system.

Paradoxically, it is precisely within these constraints that collective and independent forms of self-organization have become increasingly active in recent years. The emergence of DAVRA, Qizlar, research initiatives, independent residencies, and interdisciplinary festivals reflects a growing desire to create alternative environments for collaboration beyond exclusively state-driven agendas. A particularly significant example was DAVRA's participation in Documenta Fifteen in Kassel in 2022, as well as Uzbekistan's national pavilion at the 2024 Venice Biennale, featuring *Don't Miss the Cue* by Aziza Kadyri and the Qizlar collective. In this project, technology, women's experiences, and craft traditions were brought together within a single artistic statement. Such initiatives demonstrate a gradual shift away from the representation of a singular "national image" toward more complex and critical engagements with memory, the body, migration, and identity.

Perhaps one of the key peculiarities of the examined period lies precisely in this intermediate state. Contemporary art in Uzbekistan today exists between several parallel realities: between the academic system and independent initiatives, between aspiration toward international integration and internal institutional inertia, between desire for decolonial rethinking and continuing exoticization of the region both from without and within the country itself. Therefore, this research should be viewed not as an attempt to formulate final conclusions but as documentation of processes undergoing active transformation.

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It is impossible to ignore the broader political and economic context within which the local art scene developed during 2020–2024. In many ways, these very processes directly influenced both the quantity of institutions and the character of artistic production in recent years. The period after 2016 was accompanied by gradual economic liberalization, border opening, and intensification of international cultural exchange. By the 2020s, the consequences of these changes became particularly visible in the cultural sphere. The emergence of new private galleries, growth in festival numbers, educational initiatives, and international collaborations became possible thanks to more open capital movement, grant programs, and inclusion of local institutions in international networks. Yet the infrastructure of contemporary art itself continued forming extremely unevenly.

The 2020 pandemic, on one hand, practically halted public cultural life, but simultaneously became a moment of reassessing existing work mechanisms. Many independent initiatives shifted toward digital formats, increasingly relying on self-publishing practices, Telegram channels, PDF archives, and temporary collective structures. In a certain sense, the pandemic accelerated awareness of the fragility of local cultural documentation. The disappearance of exhibitions from public visibility after their closure came to be understood not as an isolated occurrence but as a systemic problem.

At the political level, culture increasingly became a tool of international state representation. This tendency was particularly evident in the activities of the Uzbekistan Art and Culture

Development Foundation, as well as in the country's participation in international biennials, architectural forums, and major cultural events. On the one hand, these developments provided artists and curators with access to platforms and resources that had previously been unavailable. On the other hand, they raise important questions: which artistic practices become selected for international representation, and to what extent is this representation shaped by external expectations regarding Central Asia?

Is there a tendency toward the centralized formation of discourse, whereby a significant portion of artistic and curatorial statements is mediated through institutional frameworks?

In many respects, contemporary art in Uzbekistan continues to exist between two models: the desire to integrate into the global art world and the necessity of continually explaining local identity through images that remain legible to external audiences—craft traditions, heritage, ethnography, or narratives associated with the late Soviet period. Consequently, recent years have witnessed growing interest among artists in decolonial discourse, questions of self-exoticization, and critiques of cultural representation.

Economic factors also exert a direct influence on artistic production. Despite the growth of the private sector, the local art market remains extremely limited. Most independent initiatives continue to rely on grants, international programmes, personal investments, or institutional partnerships. The absence of a sustainable contemporary art market affects artistic strategies as well, forcing many artists to balance commercial work, institutional projects, and independent artistic practice.

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At the same time, it is important to recognize that the processes of cultural liberalization and international opening remain uneven. Alongside increased international visibility, institutional caution persists, critical discourse remains relatively weak, and opportunities for independent public debate remain limited. As a result, contemporary art in Uzbekistan today appears both highly dynamic and remarkably fragile: a field undergoing rapid formation while still lacking stable mechanisms for preserving and sustaining itself.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Our research has shown that contemporary art in Uzbekistan is currently developing under conditions of simultaneous growth and profound structural vulnerability. Over the past five years, there has indeed been an increase in the number of independent initiatives, festivals, collectives, and international projects. Artists are engaging more actively with research-based and interdisciplinary formats, and the local scene is gradually expanding beyond the boundaries of a predominantly painting-oriented field. However, behind this visible dynamism lies a fundamental problem: the infrastructure supporting contemporary art remains highly unstable and depends largely on state support, the enthusiasm of individual actors, or a limited number of institutions whose activities are not always systematic.

One of the most concerning symptoms is the absence of a stable system of documentation and public archiving. The excessive emphasis on the spectacular nature of artistic projects often results in exhibitions, festivals, and artistic initiatives disappearing from the digital sphere only a few months after their completion. Few practitioners recognize the importance of documenting and publishing their projects. In many cases, the only evidence that a project ever existed is an Instagram post or a personal photo archive maintained by its participants. As a result, a form of cultural amnesia emerges, in which the art scene itself is unable to preserve its own history and accumulated experience.

The lack of critical discourse remains just as problematic. Despite the growing number of events, the field suffers from a severe shortage of analytical platforms, independent art writing, regular public discussions, and professional reflection. Consequently, the artistic environment continues to exist in a fragmented manner, as a collection of parallel initiatives that rarely engage in meaningful dialogue with one another. This creates an illusion of dynamism without establishing a sustainable intellectual foundation.

The issue of institutional transformation also deserves particular attention. State structures continue to play a dominant role in the financing and representation of art, yet the system itself largely retains a Soviet organizational model. This is evident in exhibition strategies as well as in prevailing understandings of the artist's role within institutions. At the same time, the research demonstrates that the most vibrant developments emerge precisely at the intersection of official structures and independent initiatives, and between local contexts and international networks. However, these processes tend to evolve despite the system rather than because of it. In this regard, one of the key recommendations of this study is the creation of a more sustainable and diverse infrastructure for the functioning and support of independent and interdisciplinary art. This involves not only the establishment of new spaces but also the development of independent archives, residency programmes, research platforms, educational initiatives, and support systems for curatorial practice. Contemporary art requires a diverse ecosystem in which it can exist not merely as a series of isolated events but as a continuous process of knowledge production. The monopolization of this sphere is both undesirable and counterproductive. The issue of regional decentralization is equally important. Today, Tashkent concentrates nearly all institutional, financial, and educational resources. Yet regional initiatives in recent years have demonstrated the potential for the emergence of alternative artistic languages and new ways of engaging with local experience. Supporting such platforms could become a key factor in fostering a more diverse and polyphonic artistic environment through the development and strengthening of local initiatives.

In a broader context, this research raises the question of how contemporary art in Uzbekistan can exist beyond imposed models of self-representation. Positioned between national romanticism, the legacy of the Soviet period, and global interest in "Central Asian exoticism," the local art scene is attempting to develop its own language for addressing contemporary realities. Perhaps it is precisely in this state of incompleteness, contradiction, and constant searching that its most important and honest condition can be found today.

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