

ACTIVITY REPORT OF ARTLAB SATBAYEV UNIVERSITY (2023–2024)

ArtLab is an interdisciplinary educational and creative structural unit of Satbayev University that ensures the integration of humanitarian, artistic, and creative practices into engineering education for the purpose of developing students' creative thinking, communicative competencies, and humanitarian reflection.

In the course of its development, ArtLab has been formed as a center of creative industries operating within the university and at the same time building sustainable ties with the external cultural and professional environment of the city of Almaty. The activities of ArtLab cover several interconnected areas:

- an educational art platform embedded in students' learning trajectories;
- theatrical production (student and professional);
- digital and media art;
- experimental interdisciplinary formats, including a gastro-laboratory (launch stage).

2. Theater as the basis for the formation of an interdisciplinary environment

2.1. Formation and artistic experiment (2023)

The first stage of ArtLab's work was associated with theater as the main form of interaction with the university audience. This choice was determined by the potential of theater as a tool of collective thinking, reflection, and communication, especially relevant in the environment of a technical university. Theater was regarded not as a form of leisure, but as a space for analysis, lived experience, and comprehension of professional and personal identity.

During 2023, the first student theater group was formed, bringing together students from different years and institutes of Satbayev University. Regular acting classes, rehearsals, and lecture formats became an alternative educational environment in which skills of self-presentation, responsibility, attention to one's partner, and teamwork were developed. For many students, participation in ArtLab became their first experience of stepping beyond the boundaries of the familiar engineering role and trying themselves in a new capacity.

Author's performance "Mechanism"

The first completed artistic result of ArtLab's work was the author's performance "Mechanism," written by Anel Syzdykova-Bitossi and presented in December 2023. The project was structured as a metaphorical exploration of the inner world of engineering students. In a collective dream, the characters find themselves in ancient Crete and pass through a labyrinth of trials, facing personal fears, responsibility for choice, and the need to trust one another.

The work on the performance had a pronounced educational effect. The project required a high degree of concentration, discipline, and the ability to act under conditions of limited time and increased tension. Students demonstrated themselves not only as performers on stage, but also as a team capable of building backstage processes — from organizing rehearsals to technical preparation and mutual support. This experience contributed to the formation of stress resistance, self-regulation skills, and responsibility, directly applicable in future professional activity.

2.2. Expansion and professionalization (2024)

In 2024, the activities of ArtLab moved into a phase of active expansion and professionalization. The theatrical direction developed in the form of research-based and professional projects.

Research performance “Happiness in Polytech”

One of the key projects was the performance “Happiness in Polytech,” created on the basis of observations and research work with students of a technical university. The project raised questions of professional identity, expectations from education, and ideas of happiness in an engineering environment. The ambiguous reaction of the audience confirmed the research character of the production and its ability to initiate reflection.

The showing of the performance on the stage of a city theater became an important stage in integrating ArtLab students into the professional theatrical context and expanding the laboratory’s presence beyond the university.

Work with university staff: the performance “The Choristers”

At the same time, ArtLab began systematic work with university staff. The result was the performance “The Choristers,” in which representatives of various university divisions took part. The project contributed to the formation of horizontal ties, the development of trust, and the creation of a new culture of interaction within the university community.

Repertoire

At present, ArtLab has formed a stable repertoire consisting of 10 performances implemented in various formats — from student and research productions to professional theatrical projects. The repertoire of ArtLab reflects the interdisciplinary character of the laboratory and is oriented toward work with social, humanitarian, and cultural themes relevant to the university and urban audience.

At present, two new performances are in the production process and are at the rehearsal stage. One of the projects is based on the play by Mukhammetkali Khasenov “Pai-pai, zhas zhubailar-ai” set to the music of the group “Dos-Mukasan,” and is considered as an artistic statement rethinking cultural heritage through contemporary theatrical language.

Offstage Project

The Offstage project is aimed at expanding students’ understanding of theater as an industry. Meetings with professionals who work outside the stage make it possible to consider the managerial, organizational, and production aspects of creative activity.

Author’s lecture-performance “Synthesorum”

The project “Synthesorum” is a theatrical lecture devoted to the topic of rare earth metals. The project combines artistic form with an analysis of the technical, ethical, and social aspects of the use of resources.

As part of the expansion of the formats of theatrical activity, in 2024 ArtLab implemented the direction of street and clown theater. Together with the professional circus dynasty of the Muturganovs, the performance “Clown. Closet. Closet. Clown” was created, oriented toward work in open urban spaces and in a festival format.

The performance was presented at a street theater festival in the city of Astana, where it received high professional recognition and was awarded the Grand Prix. Participation in a festival beyond the university became a significant stage in the professionalization of ArtLab’s activities and confirmed the competitiveness of the laboratory in the field of street and clown theater at the national level.

Clown and circus practices as a pedagogical tool

A separate direction in ArtLab’s activities is connected with clown and circus formats. These practices are used not for external effect, but as a conscious pedagogical and educational tool that allows students and staff to work with the body, vulnerability, and internal constraints in a safe and structured form.

(In the academic and engineering educational environment, students are generally not provided with a space in which spontaneity, non-linearity, and bodily exploration are permissible. The clown approach, by contrast, creates conditions for consciously stepping out of habitual roles, safely “removing masks,” and exploring one’s own reactions and boundaries.)

Within clown projects, including the musical performance “Yanko Krul Albanskai,” students gain the opportunity to work with bodily presence, attention, and physical expressiveness. Conscious play, exaggeration, and working with awkwardness become tools for liberation from inner constraints and for restoring contact with oneself. The processes are structured and disciplined, with an emphasis on safety, rhythm, and responsibility.

3. ArtLab as an open interdisciplinary environment and center of attraction

Over time, ArtLab has been formed as a stable point of attraction for representatives of the creative industries of the city of Almaty. The laboratory space functions as an open professional environment oriented toward the long-term presence of specialists, collaborative project activity, and systematic exchange of experience.

In the autumn period of 2024, the festival “Where to Land?” was held. Within the framework of the festival, the industrial space of the university was used and adapted for cultural and educational events combining theatrical, digital, musical, and visual formats.

Within this format, ArtLab acquired its own residents — representatives of digital art and contemporary circus, who participate in the laboratory’s projects and interact with students in an educational format. Residents conduct master classes, share professional experience, and involve students in the processes of creating artistic and technological solutions. This contributes to the formation among students of an understanding of the creative industries as a professional sphere requiring a combination of engineering thinking, technological literacy, and artistic imagination.

4. Educational direction: Cycle of creative disciplines

4.1. Philosophical and methodological foundations

The Cycle of creative disciplines of ArtLab is the key educational instrument for integrating creative practices into technical education. The program is based on the philosophy of *Bildung*, oriented toward the formation of a holistic personality through meaningful education, as well as on the concept of “Tolyk adam,” which presupposes the harmonious development of reason, feelings, and moral orientations.

In this model, the engineer is regarded not only as a bearer of professional knowledge, but also as a subject of culture capable of making responsible decisions with regard to social, ethical, and human consequences.

The Cycle includes the following disciplines:

1. Acting and communication skills
2. Directing and project thinking
3. Fundamentals of design and fashion
4. Fundamentals of scenography
5. Creative entrepreneurship

4.2. Student body and scope

In 2025, 115 first-year students from various institutes of Satbayev University were enrolled in the Cycle of creative disciplines. Enrollment was voluntary in nature and had a university-wide interdisciplinary scope.

4.3. Structure of learning and project logic

The Cycle is implemented within a two-semester logic:

- the first semester is aimed at mastering the chosen discipline and forming an individual educational track;
- the second semester is built around mandatory interdisciplinary project work.

The key methodological element was an initial orientation meeting during which the students formed a “cloud of problems” — a map of current themes, anxieties, and challenges. These themes formed the basis of all subsequent project activity.

4.4. Final assessment — “Super-Exam”

The final form of assessment is a public attestation in the format of a “Super-Exam,” within which students present the results of their work in the form of performances, performative acts, short films, fashion shows, environmental and social projects. This format makes it possible to obtain a tangible, observable result of the educational process.

5. Implicit effect and social impact

The activities of ArtLab form a stable implicit effect manifested in the development of responsibility, empathy, communication skills, and the ability for public expression. ArtLab functions as an emotionally safe space where students feel heard and involved in dialogue.

Development prospects for 2026:

6. Experimental directions: gastro-laboratory (launch stage)

At the launch stage is the gastro-laboratory of ArtLab — an experimental platform exploring the interaction of taste, emotions, and technologies. The project presupposes work with multisensory experience, where gastronomy is combined with digital art, robotic elements, and technological solutions, forming new educational and user formats.

7. International and external interaction

An agreement on cultural exchange has been concluded with the University of Florence (UNIFI, Department of SAGAS). In the spring of 2026, a cycle of online lectures on theater history in English will be launched; preparation is also underway for a joint Kazakhstan–Italy theatrical laboratory, and negotiations are being conducted with the Italian Institute of Culture in Almaty, which has already shown interest in the project.

Conclusion

ArtLab Satbayev University has established itself as an educational platform and a center of creative industries that forms a new type of engineer — a specialist with developed humanitarian thinking, creativity, and social responsibility. The practice of ArtLab demonstrates the potential of university initiatives in the development of the country's human capital and creative industries.