

# A War in the Distance. Prologue An Embattled Ukraine in Video Art and Film

17.05.2022

## Neue Galerie Graz, Joanneumsviertel, 8010 Graz

Opening: 01.07.2022, 7 pm

Duration: 01.07.-01.08.2022

Curated by Mirela Baciak and David Riff

Information: +43-316/8017-9213

A cooperation between **steirischer herbst '22** and **Neue Galerie Graz**

For times immemorial, Styria has been surrounded by wars, many of them only heard echoing in the distance. This autumn, steirischer herbst festival addresses this looming presence of far-off battles. In the summer, a prologue to the 55th edition focuses on Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine—a conflict whose relevance and proximity are impossible to ignore now. In a special exhibition at Neue Galerie Graz running from 1 July to 1 August, steirischer herbst presents historical and contemporary video art and films. They offer a subjective, sobering, and human view of current events otherwise explained in military or geopolitical terms.

Today's war appears as an implosion of an already tragic and violent Ukrainian Soviet history—whose filmic documents belong to the masterpieces of 20th-century avant-garde cinema. Contemporary artists from Ukraine draw upon this history, showing its violent reversal in the present as they reflect upon the war with Russia, ongoing since 2014. Socialist utopia and fascist mobilization appear as embattled notions from the past with which artists critically engage on their own aesthetic terms. Simultaneously, in times of intensified combat, citizen journalism becomes a new form of anonymous activist filmmaking. Documentary films show the human dimension of how the war impacts economically depressed regions and the people who live there, revealing that there is a space for hope, heroism, and poetry in spite of the widespread destruction. The exhibition's opening on 1 July is accompanied by panel discussions and artist talks exploring the tragic consequences of imperial histories and the neoliberal present in Central and Eastern Europe, placing the Ukrainian war in its broader context.

## Artists

Pavel Bräila, Oleksandr Dovzhenko, Dana Kavelina, Zoya Laktionova, Kateryna Lysovenko, Mykola Ridnyi, Philip Sotnychenko

## Artists' biographies

**Pavel Brăila** (1971, Chişinău, Moldova) is an artist and filmmaker. His work addresses the fragile economies of post-Soviet realities in a mix of conceptual performance and experimental film. Brăila has participated in numerous exhibitions, including at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; the Tate Gallery, London; the Renaissance Society, Chicago; Kölnischer Kunstverein; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; documenta 11 and documenta 14, Kassel (and Athens); and Manifesta 10, Saint Petersburg.

**Oleksandr Dovzhenko** (1894, Sosnytsia, Russian Empire [present-day Ukraine] – 1956, Moscow, Soviet Union) was a Ukrainian Soviet screenwriter, film producer, and director, considered one of the pioneers of Soviet cinema. His Ukrainian trilogy *Zvenigora* (1927), *Arsenal* (1929), and *Earth* (1930) are known for their blunt depictions of war and hunger. His work was heavily criticized by Stalin and his acolytes and accused of Ukrainian nationalism. After making two films in the 1930s and 1940s, he gave up filmmaking and wrote novels. At the end of his life, he became a mentor to younger Ukrainian filmmakers Larisa Shepitko and Sergei Parajanov. In total, he made only seven films.

**Dana Kavelina** (1995, Melitopol, Ukraine) is an artist and filmmaker. She works with text, painting, graphics, video, and installation, and produces animated films that explore personal and historical trauma, vulnerability, and perceptions of war outside of mainstream narratives. Kavelina graduated from the Department of Graphic Arts at the National Technical University of Ukraine in Kiev. Her works have been exhibited at the Kmytiv Museum, the Closer Art Center, Kiev, and the Sakharov Center, Moscow. She received awards at the Odesa International Film Festival and the KROK International Animated Film Festival.

**Zoya Laktionova** (1984, Mariupol, Ukraine) is a photographer and filmmaker. Her first short documentary *Diorama* about the mined sea near Mariupol won a prize in the MyStreetFilms category at the festival “86”, Slavutych, in 2018 and participated in numerous European film festivals (DOK Leipzig, Ji.hlava IDDF, FilmFestival Cottbus, etc.). In 2020, the director shot her second film *Territory of Empty Windows*, in which she depicts her personal story.

**Kateryna Lysovenko** (1989, Kiev, Ukraine) is an artist who works mainly with drawing and painting, but also with performance. Lysovenko graduated from the Grekov Odessa Art School and the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture in Kiev. She has recently exhibited at the Memorial Museum “Territory of Terror,” Lviv, as well as at Gallery Voloshyn, Kiev; Gallery Tiro al Blanco, Guadalajara (as part of the exhibition *Transcending Boundaries*, 2021); and Gallery BWA, Zielona Góra, where she was also an artist-in-residence in 2022.

**Mykola Ridnyi** (1985, Kharkiv, Ukraine) is an artist, sculptor, filmmaker, and curator. He studied at the Kharkiv State Academy of Design and Fine Arts. His performances, installations, sculptures, and short films reflect the social and political realities of contemporary Ukraine. He cofounded the group SOSka in 2005, an art collective that has curated and organized numerous projects in Kharkiv. Since 2017, he has coedited the online magazine Prostory. His work has been shown in exhibitions and film festivals, including transmediale, Berlin (2019); the 35th Kassel Dokfest (2018); The Image of War at Bonniers konsthall, Stockholm (2017); All the World's Futures at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015); The School of Kyiv—1st Kyiv Biennale (2015); and other venues.

**Philip Sotnychenko** (1989, Kiev, Ukraine) is a filmmaker. He is a cofounder of CUC (Contemporary Ukrainian Cinema), a collective of young independent filmmakers. His short films Son, Nail and Technical Break have all won awards at major film festivals—in total, his seven short films have been selected 350 times and won over 50 awards.

### Curators' biographies

**Mirela Baciak** (1987, Warsaw, Poland) is a curator, researcher, and writer. She is interested in the systems of transaction that are used for profit around the globe, and in crisis as an inherent quality of things. She joined the curatorial team of steirischer herbst in 2019. She curated the exhibition Nature \ nature at Kunstraum Niederösterreich, Vienna (2019), was a curatorial assistant at Public Art Munich (2018), curator-in-residence at Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw (2018), talks fellow at Dhaka Art Summit (2018), and cultural fellow at Kunsthalle Wien (2017). In 2021, she cocurated an exhibition at Tank Shanghai as an epilogue to Shanghai Curators Lab II. Baciak lives in Graz and Vienna.

**David Riff** (1975, London, United Kingdom) is a writer, translator, artist, curator, and former member of the art group Chto Delat. He has been a curator at steirischer herbst since 2018. Among other shows, Riff cocurated the 1st Ural Industrial Biennial in Yekaterinburg (2010, with Cosmin Costinas and Ekaterina Degot) and headed the first Bergen Assembly together with Degot (2013). His most recent effort as an artist-curator was a large-scale exhibition on Mikhail Lifshitz in Moscow (2018, with Dmitry Gutov). Riff lives in Berlin.

## Statements

### **Christopher Drexler, Minister for Culture and Europe**

“The terrible events caused by Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine, which is contrary to international law, must be a reason for us to resolutely adhere to the EU peace project as a means of dialogue and international understanding and to continue our exchange across borders. Art too can serve as a peacemaker and mediator between peoples. I am particularly pleased that two of the major ‘players’ in the Styrian and Austrian cultural landscape, Universalmuseum Joanneum and steirischer herbst, are collaborating on a joint exhibition. It shows a war that is often perceived as distant but is actually very close.”

### **Wolfgang Muchitsch and Alexia Getzinger, Board, Universalmuseum Joanneum**

“The terrible events of a war, especially the current attack on Ukraine, need to be contextualized and made tangible. In our role as a cultural and educational institution, we see it as our duty originating from our core responsibility to create a platform for public discourse and to offer artists mainly originating from Ukraine the space to artistically work through their impressions of the war.”

### **Peter Peer, Head of Department, Neue Galerie Graz**

“The power of words and images, the reduction and simplification of complex relationships, can fan the flames in such situations. With Ekaterina Degot, we have a proven expert on the intricate conflict among us. While collaborating, it became obvious to develop a joint project here, which now places this war of aggression in a broader context in an exhibition and symposium.”

### **Ekaterina Degot, director and chief curator, steirischer herbst**

“I’m very pleased about this year’s collaboration with Universalmuseum Joanneum and Neue Galerie Graz, as well as the opportunity to present this prologue. It already introduces themes of the joint fall exhibition and the entire festival. As I left Russia in 2014 and have clearly positioned myself as a critic of Putin’s regime since then, it’s important to me to give voices from Ukraine a platform. I have deliberately kept myself out of this special exhibition as a curator, but I know many artists personally and value the exchange with them and their perspective on the war that has been ongoing since 2014.”

### **Mirela Baciak, curator of the special exhibition, steirischer herbst**

“It’s very interesting today to engage with artists from Ukraine—especially those who have such a sharp critical view of the larger developments in Eastern Europe. Their work is among the strongest dealing with controversial topics at the moment—and not only in the context of the war.”

**David Riff, curator of the special exhibition, steirischer herbst**

“Film and video art in particular provide the deepest insights into the political and historical complexity of the war in Ukraine, but also into its human and imaginative dimensions, and have done so since 2014, when the war in the Donbas was still all too often suppressed.”

**Zoya Laktionova, photographer and filmmaker**

“In my short films, I use microhistory, autoethnography, and creative storytelling to unpack the complexity of larger events and historical contexts. In doing so, I build a person-to-person language that doesn’t use complex political terms and is understandable by all.”

**Kateryna Lysovenko, artist (opening performance)**

“Much of my work deals with the history of monumental painting in the former Soviet Union—and its performative aspect. My actions reference ideological shifts after the collapse of the USSR and show how propaganda becomes something personal. Now, with the war, it all takes on a new dimension. Too few people today understand the full extent of the war, and that’s something my opening performance at Neue Galerie will address.