***A Letter from the Front***

A programme of filmic works and moving images by contemporary artists from Ukraine, curated in 2022 by artist Nikita Kadan (Kiev, b 1982) with Giulia Colletti, Castello di Rivoli.

This is the transcript of the conversation between Nikita Kadan and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev on March 10, 2022.

C.C.B: First of all, before speaking about the program, *A Letter From the Fron*t, which will soon be screened in the Castello di Rivoli theater, I’d like to ask you how you are, what you’re doing and what you’re thinking?

N.K:Thank you, Carolyn. I’m currently in my gallery, which has been turned into a bomb shelter. It was a bomb shelter during Soviet times, during the Cold War, so it’s quite a safe place, but it’s in the very center of the city, surrounded by museums and the university building. Today’s the 15th day of the Russian invasion, but it’s part of a war that’s already been going on for eight years, since 2014.

C.C.B: I’m going to stop you right there for a moment and go back to our Istanbul Biennial in 2015, when you showed a piece called *Shelter*. That piece included an installation with two levels. There was a-bomb shelter on the bottom and there was a scene on the top, like a diorama, where a bomb had gone through the ceiling. That piece seems like a premonition of now, but as you say, this war didn’t begin 15 days ago.

N.K:This war has been going on for eight years, but Donbass and Crimea turned out to be rather invisible places, or not so interesting to the media. It’s like this catastrophe that’s been removed to the periphery to make the center remain clean and safe, but on the periphery there are plenty of festering wounds, and at some point, this sepsis would touch the center again. I know that lots of people in the West were really surprised about what happened on February 24th. But for Ukrainians, it wasn’t so big a surprise. Lots of us knew that the catastrophe would move from the east to the center, from east to west, and we’re now not just on the 15th day of the catastrophe.

C.C.B: Can you remind the people who are watching us about that piece called *Shelter*?

N.K:Yes, I made it on the occasion of *Salt Water*, the Istanbul Biennial that you curated. The installation was in the Istanbul Modern Museum, and it was a huge construction, like a small building, something between a theatre box and a doll house, with two levels. On the top level there was a ruin with stuffed animals. I based in on a photo of a local history museum in Donetsk, destroyed by shelling. This was a very well-known photo for a certain period. I added rubber tires to the ruin, transforming it into something that looked like a barricade. Barricades and ruins seem quite similar in a morphological sense. But a barricade is optimistic, it’s about subjectivity, about being ready to defend yourself, and the ruin is about history that falls on our heads. The lower level of construction was like a-bomb shelter, a gray concrete space, with a very low ceiling and with beds with several levels. I used these beds, which are often used in agriculture, to grow mushrooms and to grow plants that don’t need much light. There were no people in the museum. So there was a ruined museum and a shelter, top-level and lower level.

C.C.B: Yes, and somehow the piece was a fraction or an equation that spoke to the horror behind rational thinking or rationality – the irrationality that’s behind rational projects. This makes me think of the dialectic of the Enlightenment and Adorno and the School of Frankfurt. Were you thinking about this irrationality of the rationality of war?

N.K:It’s a good question. Yes. It’s like being in between two very different logics. The logic of those who make decisions to start wars, to use weapons of mass destruction, and the logic of those who survive are very different. And it’s so weird that the first are the political representatives of the second. In fact, it’s not so: during the war it’s obvious that political elites don’t represent the interests of the population. They’re totally disconnected. This I say on a very simple level. But at the same time the rationality of war has something to do with the experience and political culture, the political thinking, of modernity.

C.C.B: There is something that realist artists understood about the irrationality of modernity, which led to Surrealism and was also a reaction to World War I – the horrors of, for example, aerial bombing.

Can I ask you a question about your President insistently asking the West to stop the fly zone over Ukraine? This hasn’t been done because it would drag the other countries into nuclear war. That’s what people are afraid of. Why do you think it would be a good thing in the long run to stop the airplanes above Ukraine?

N.K:I have a very simple answer: because each day brings new victims. The Russians are using missiles and aviation to kill people each day. Yesterday, a maternity hospital in Mariupol was bombed. They bombed pregnant women and small children, and this is what’s going on every day. So, when death falls from the sky, we need the sky to be closed. But sure, when I discuss this question with my European friends, mainly Germans, they say that it will be the start of World War III, and that’s unacceptable. And I don’t have an answer, because the people think about their own lives in the same way as we do, and their governments protect their own population and compare it with a question of political representation during the war. But there is one other aspect: during the last decade, Putin has spoken about red lines all the time, but he crosses these red lines himself all the time. And I’m not sure that Europe can really protect itself through passivity and by negotiating with Putin. All has turned to catastrophe and now he’s subjective, he’s responsible, he takes new steps, so I’m not sure that passivity can save us.

C.C.B:Another important point that’s not often discussed, while the preceding point is discussed every day, is that this war is somehow being framed as a question of the independence of an autonomous nation, while I believe that nationalism is the seed of all wars and has proved to be tremendously negative in history. I’d like your opinion, after I’ve finished summarizing my opinion. I was shocked when a university in Milan wanted to cancel the course on Dostoyevsky, which to me would have been like cancelling the course on Dante in Harvard in 1942 – crazy, you know? So, I think it’s very important to separate nationalism from the war. The history of Ukraine and the history of Russia are so very connected, and even your president speaks Russian fluently and many people in Ukraine are Russian. There isn’t necessarily an ethnic nationalism, I think. What I do think is very important is the question of where a particular state – not nation, but a state – wants to be in terms of political organization. So, if the majority of the state wants to be in a liberal democracy, with freedom of speech and certain forms of freedom that are connected with that political system which is dominant in western Europe, then it’s enough reason for them to fight for the right not to be within the orbit of a state that doesn’t believe in the same form of freedom. I’d like you to comment on whether you think this is a war that has to do with nations and nationalities or with this more political question of how a certain country and state wants to be run economically and politically.

N.K:What you said is quite obvious to me, and I totally agree. My position always was and still is anti-nationalist and in a relatively peaceful time most of my conflicts were with Ukranian nationalists. They were attacking our exhibitions, they were attacking my curatorial activity in Commutiv Museum, where I worked with the Soviet art collection. I’m a Ukrainian anti-nationalist. For me, it’s not even about a deep connection with Russian culture. We could speak about connections with Russian, with Polish, with Hungarian, with Czech, with German colors. All these influences during Ukrainian history are extremely important for us. And I’ll continue reading Dostoevsky or Kharms or Khlebnikov, independently of how this war goes on and what will be the result. For me, these are different issues, and also, a lot of Russian art works, pieces of literature, really help us understand what we’re dealing with. It’s about understanding Russia and also maybe understanding it through the lens of an early Russian dissident and genius who was considered a madman officially, who believed that somehow catastrophes are lessons for the rest of the world: in different periods, different countries step into catastrophes, which turn out to be lessons to the rest of the world. And we can also learn the lesson from Germany, Italy, and maybe after some new historical steps, from countries that are now bastions of liberal democracy.

On the other hand, I do support the idea of boycotting collaboration with the Russian state, with those Russian state museums whose directors signed the letter of support for the annexation of Crimea in 2014 – directors of the biggest Moscow museums and state centres of contemporary art. They signed a letter, saying that they were totally supportive of the annexation of Crimea, and they supported their president. And I had the honor to refuse to participate in a show at Garage, Moscow, together with a Ukrainian artist, as well as the Moscow Young artists Biennial. And just a short time ago, I was invited to quite a well-known show, *Diversity United*, under the patronage of Macron, Steinmeier and Putin, a show I rejected. For me it’s not about cancelling Russian artists or writers. Lots of them are openly anti-Putinist, but about cancelling collaboration with the Russian state and corporate money that supports Putin’s war machine. And there is a difference.

C.C.B.:Yes, I understand. I want to ask you about the relationship between art and art-making and the artist and the society. When I think about you in Kiyv, I remember Manet on the barricades in Paris during La commune de Paris around 1870, and I remember the letters that I read that he sent to his wife, who was in the South of France. I believe they were sent by pigeons, because Paris was under siege, and they were communicating through pigeons. What do you think is the capacity and the ability of an artist to have a positive impact on this situation? And why are you doing what you’re doing every day, talking to journalists, and setting up programs and projects like the one we’re going to see at Castello di Rivoli shortly? What’s your feeling around the ability of artists directly or indirectly to affect the world?

N.K:It works on different levels. In a situation of urgency, it works to increase the visibility of Uranian catastrophes. We make an artistic event, we get the attention of the cultural community and of the mass media, and the war in Ukraine becomes more widely known. But in the longer term, art works as an instrument of understanding. It uses the mechanisms of intuition and imagination to clarify the world. The Heraclitan darkness of art, its untransparency, makes the world more transparent. In 2014, during the start of the invasion in Donbass, Ukraine was in all the media and it was visible, well-represented. But a year later, it went out of fashion and this wound was rotting in silence. This gives no space, no room for art to do its work. But there’s a second level, which is working on a longer timeframe, and for our screening at Castello di Rivoli, I tried to choose works that can make the Ukrainian situation more transparent, more clear, more visible, but also to start our common work of understanding Ukraine in relation to the rest of the world. So I hope for a longer timeframe as well. I’m really grateful for all the possibilities of these projects in support of Ukraine, these acts of solidarity. It’s extremely important, but I also I have a hope for the possibility to work at a longer distance.

C.C.B.:Longer times, yes. So let’s think about longer times. What are your plans? Will you leave if things get worse? Will you stay? What do you think will happen over the next days?

N.K:As you may know, people of the male gender can’t cross the border of the country, but there’s still some possibility to move to the western part of the country, which is a little bit safer. As for today, we don’t know what will happen tomorrow. For now, I’m staying in my gallery shelter. I even arranged a small group show here, including historical works of Ukrainian early 20th-century modernism, and Ukrainian Soviet nonconformist art from the 70s, and contemporary works as well. So I have an environment for myself, and for the people who’ve remained in the city to come to see the show during shelling, when the siren wails from the sky. If I moved to the west of the country, maybe I could be more useful in terms of helping internal refugees and developing some internal cultural life in wartime. But western cities are a bit overloaded with people and there seem to be quite problematic psychological conditions. While I’ve been staying here for two or three weeks, my mental health has improved a lot. It’s in the best condition of the last two years. So let’s see. Maybe I’ll move if I feel that I’ll be more needed elsewhere. Maybe I’ll stay for a few more days, maybe for a week. Let’s see. I have a very low horizon of planning.

C.C.B:That brings me to the notion that art heals. Last autumn, the spaces of Claudia Conte in our museum were a center for COVID vaccination , and she created, with a collaborator, a soundtrack for the vaccinations. As you may know, since we worked together years ago, I’m very interested in the relation between art and healing in general, coming from a kind of Melanie Klein background of thinking. But I’ve always thought about ‘art heals’ in terms of and the audience, in terms of society, of the viewers. These days, emailing with you, I’ve been thinking that art also cures the artist. So all the work that you’ve put into selecting these videos and writing to the other artists and writing the short synopses with Giulia Colletti and so forth was somehow a form of therapy for you, for the artist, which is both a very ancient idea and maybe a new idea. What do you think?

N.K.:It can work as a healing. Sometimes it works like healing with small doses of poison. Art can work as a poison as well.

C.C.B.:That’s very interesting. It brings us back to Surrealism and to your roots in Surrealist thinking. That makes me think of AntiGonna. I didn’t know AntiGonna’s work until you showed it to me recently. Can you speak about this collaboration for your piece, *Lucid Skin*, that’s in the videos that we’re seeing, where you’re also referring to self-harming. How did you work with this other artist, and this edge between the horror movie, the porno and the contemporary art video, and who is he or she or they?

N.K.:AntiGonna is a star of the Ukrainian underground Queer scene. She makes an ongoing series of so-called porn horrors. And for her film, *Lucid Skin*, I wrote the scenario or screenplay and played the main role of a person punishing himself or his masculinity and transforming it into some sort of magic ritual. When he hurts his face and body with a knife in this film, he performs some sort of magic. And he goes to a nightclub, which is like a safe, non-binary space, but just near the entrance he’s is attacked by some brutal, aggressive, homophobic guys, actually played by brilliant Ukrainian, anarchist pro-feminist artists. All the roles in the film are played by Ukrainian artists.

C.C.B:How interesting!

N.K:It’s one of a long series of Anti Gonna’s films. In her practice she uses the base of her own experience, and it’s a really terrible experience – experience of rape, experience of violence. And also, her work deals a lot with mental health issues. It’s been censored a lot in Ukraine, in Poland. In Poland there were homophobic attacks on an exhibition called *Fear* showing her works. Exhibiting AntiGonna is very problematic. She’s very strong in her works and she fights on. Currently she’s in Paris. She’s a refugee.

C.C.B.: Are you making any artright now?

N.K.:Yes, I do drawings in my shelter. I make sketches of some sculptures and installations, work on some shows from a distance. Every day I give five interviews, cook some food at home to bring it here, and then in the evening I can draw and write a diary, so it’s quite a special working regime.

C.C.B.:If you’d like to add one last thing, something that you may have wanted to say, I invite you to do so, and then perhaps we should watch these fantastic videos and films that you’ve sent over the ether to Castello di Rivoli.

N.K.:Yes, these films were created in different years by artists of different generations, and I have a feeling that all together they’re tell quite a deep and complex story about Ukraine and the mode of survival and of life here, and of death. Most of these works could be considered openly political. All art is political, either being consciously politically engaged or being a product of political relations. And these works are politically engaged, but on very different levels of reflection, from journalism to philosophy, and they have a lot of different contexts. This screening isn’t deeply prepared; it’s an example of acting in a situation of urgency, but I believe the films will give a lot of new knowledge to the audience and that our project works both in the short term and the long term.