'Representing the inconceivable. Artistic practices and violence with multiple faces.'

A conversation between Oksana Karpovets and Sasha Baydal
July 2023

Reem Yassouf, *Cloud*("Nuée"), 2022-2023
Installation, variable dimensions
© Cité internationale des arts & Eva D Photographie

SB: You arrived in France from Ukraine in 2022 and later joined the residency program at the Cité internationale des arts—a place of artistic mobility *par excellence* which has welcomed art workers since its foundation in 1965. Several of the artists you presented in the exhibition 'When the Inconceivable Takes Form' in the Gallery of the Cité des arts are also its current and former residents. How did the memory of the place, as well as the past and present of this institution influence your choices?

OK: Since the fall of 2022, I have been participating in a 12-month curatorial residency at the Cité internationale des arts, organized in partnership with the Centre national des arts plastiques (Cnap). But I moved to Paris from Ukraine in the spring of 2022, fleeing the war with my son. When I was selected for the curatorial program, the Cité and its partner association Portes ouvertes sur l'art

offered me the opportunity to curate an exhibition. And since both organizations have a long tradition of supporting artists and cultural workers who have fled to France in search of refuge, it was obvious that I should work with artists in a situation similar to my own. So I brought together artists from Ukraine, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Belarus, and Myanmar for the exhibition 'When the Inconceivable Takes Form'. In it, I try to move away from a focus on 'victimhood' and concentrate on how artists are able to process and rework unsettling experiences, giving them conceptual, poetic or abstract form. The exhibition also raises a question that has been important not only to these artists, but also to the Cité since its inception: how to talk about and represent these experiences in the Parisian environment, to the Parisian public. In other words, the theme of the exhibition is naturally linked to the history and politics of the Cité. One could even say that this exhibition is the contemporary face of an institutional sensitivity to an artistic subjectivity going through turbulent times.

I think this institutional strategy refers to the concept of 'hospitality' that you outlined during a discussion organized at the Cité by the collective Beyond the post-soviet, of which you are an active member. The discussion was part of the satellite program of my exhibition and is being realized as part of the program 'Moving shadows. Colonial outlines', supported by the Centre national des arts plastiques (Cnap). Could you please elaborate on this concept of 'hospitality' and the aims of the 'Moving shadows. Colonial outlines' program? And what is the mission of the collective Beyond the post-soviet?

SB: The collective Beyond the post-soviet emerged in 2021 as a non-hierarchical group, and today it is an association that counts fourteen members. Since its beginnings, we've been researching the topics related to the past and present of (post-)socialist experiences and Soviet & Russian colonialism, from the perspective of Central Europe, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Caucasus region, and the Baltic States. As a non-academic group, along with postcolonial theory, we rely on our individual experiences, memory, artistic imaginaries, and emotions to produce and to disseminate knowledge on these spaces, and to develop decolonial approaches.

The program 'Moving shadows. Colonial outlines', initiated by Beyond the post-soviet and myself with the support of the Cnap, started in the fall of 2022 with the event 'Far from the Center', during the Open Studios at the Cité internationale des arts. It gathered Ukrainian artists who had to flee the country because of the full-scale invasion by Russia. For this program, just as for my curatorial research 'Two-Faced Janus' at the Cnap, the places of artistic mobility were of a crucial importance. While working on the art collection managed by the Cnap, I realized that one of the most tangible traces of Soviet and Russian colonialism in the 20th century that one could find in it—and probably even more largely in the French artistic scene as a whole—was the presence of artists displaced from the (post-)socialist countries: in fact, each new eruption

of Soviet and Russian colonial violence—the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution, the entry of Warsaw pact tanks into Czechoslovakia, and others—produced the exile of communities, and the exile of cultural workers.

With 'Moving shadows. Colonial outlines', we wanted to examine this continuity—and the *continuum*—of Soviet and Russian colonial violence highlighting how the French artistic scene was and is entangled into these processes, for example through the labor of hospitality. The French cultural circles have historically been sensitive to the topics of exile, and the institutions like the Cité internationale des arts have regularly hosted cultural workers, who arrived in France as refugees or *apatrides* (stateless persons). In fact, as the ongoing project *Émersions : archive vivante* by the Cité des arts shows, the first residents of this institution in 1965 were the musicians Jerzy and Joanna Gajek, who arrived in Paris as refugees from Poland, which is quite symbolic.

"Moving shadows. Colonial outlines". Round table organized in the framework of the exhibition *When the inconceivable takes form,* Cité internationale des arts, Paris—June 28, 2023
From left to right: Léopold Lambert, Patricia Couvet, Nikolay Karabinovych, Oksana Karpovets, Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, Sasha Pevak, Dilda Ramazan
© Cité internationale des arts

Coming back to visual arts, during my research at the Cnap, I was also particularly interested in how displacement and exile influence artistic practice and how these events are processed through art. Your exhibition addresses experiences of unprecedented violence and exile, while circumventing forms of direct representation. How do the artists in the show achieve such an indirect representation? Why was this important to you?

OK: To answer this question, I would first like to explain what 'inconceivable' means in the context of the exhibition, and why the 'form' of this inconceivable is so important.

3 *'Representing the inconceivable: Artistic practices and violence with multiple faces'*

In the practices of the artists I selected for the exhibition, I noticed a similar desire to explain what cannot be fully understood, accepted, displayed, and communicated to others. These are, of course, unimaginable feelings of loss, unthinkable pain, and the experience of having to face inconceivable violence, as well as the world's incomprehension and coldness toward such experiences of the remote Other. However, as I said, my main concern was not to dwell on the position of the 'victim', but rather to focus on the process, on how one copes and works through such experiences.

I also realized that I was interested in practices that subtly cross the border of indifference and force the viewer to become emotionally involved in a particular context—the situation of war, revolution, forced immigration. Strangely enough, I found that the most effective ways of doing this are indirect forms of representing events and feelings, signifying them through something else—a symbol, an action, an object, a sound, or a text. This kind of representation through a certain intermediate screen also points to the impossibility of crossing the border of understanding, the border between the actual lived experience and the viewer's perception of it.

For example, a signifier of the war in the video karaoke *Repeat After Me* (2023) by the Ukrainian collective Open Group (Yuriy Biley, Pavlo Kovach, Anton Varga) are the sounds, more specifically the sounds of various weapons, such as the shots of a T34 tank or a Kalashnikov assault rifle, which are reproduced in the video by people displaced from eastern Ukraine to Lviv. Viewers can repeat these sounds into a microphone placed in front of the video and illuminated by a red spotlight. This microphone plays the role of a portal that brings the viewer closer to the physical experience of the people in the video, and at the same time a barrier that denotes a certain theatricality and the impossibility of grasping the real experience of the war.

Open Group (Yuriy Biley, Pavlo Kovach, Anton Varga), *Repeat After Me* ("Répétez après moi"), 2023
Karaoke, film, 17'07"
© Cité internationale des arts & Eva D Photographie

4 *'Representing the inconceivable: Artistic practices and violence with multiple faces'*

Ukrainian artist Sergiy Petlyuk's video installation *Filling the Endless* (2023) takes this exploration of the barrier to understanding people who have been subjected to unimaginable violence one step further. A 4-meter-high body made up of human body fragments projected onto pieces of fabric stands in a pool of water. The digital water running down this body never reaches the real water in the pool, never overflows it, symbolizing the isolated experience of pain and the lonely process of constant cleansing with water or tears in the search for healing.

In her installation *Ephemeral Shelters, Transformed Places* (2019-2023), Iranian artist Bahar Majdzadeh explores this barrier of understanding in the context of Paris. For several years, she has been photographing the traces of the transformation of former refugee sites along the Seine, the main canal of Paris. These traces appear after the evacuation of refugee camps by the authorities (fences, concrete barriers, public gardens) to prevent repopulation. They are a sign of prohibition and the erasure of the memory of these camps from the collective perception of the citizens and the landscape of the city.

It seems to me that these examples of artistic practices that reveal what is hidden or too subtle to be perceived are more effective, communicative, and transformative for the viewer than works that reproduce trauma or depict scenes of violence and destruction. Not to traumatize the viewer, but to develop a deep sensitivity through this exhibition, was one of my goals.

But the exhibition is also about the continuum of violence, which, like a snake biting its own tail, is globally interconnected. Spawned by empires in their quest for influence in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe, it continues today not only in the independent states of these regions, but also in 'former' imperial countries such as France.

During the discussion, you raised a question about the continuum of violence and colonial history in the post-Soviet space. Does it have its own particularities here? Are there tools to break these cycles of violence? What do you think artists and cultural workers can do in this direction?

SB: The idea of a colonial continuum, which I already mentioned earlier, comes from the work of the writer and thinker Léopold Lambert, who in *États d'urgence: Une histoire spatiale du continuum colonial français* (2021), looks at the past and present of French colonialism through a transtemporal and 'trans-spatial' lens. He conceives "jumps in time linking a given situation to another whose spatial and temporal contexts are however significantly different" as a tool to reveal the strategies of colonialism, which unfold through time and space while taking on many faces. A similar framework can be used for the past and present of Soviet & Russian colonialism and imperialist thinking. What is interesting about it, from my perspective, is the existence of various intersections and links between the colonial continua. One can think, for
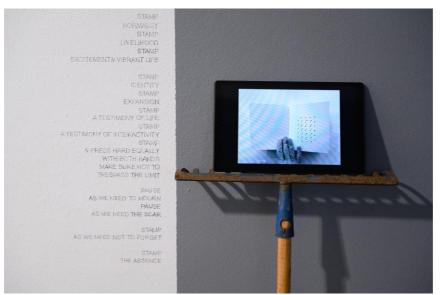
example, about the competing imperialisms, or the competing versions of modernity (for instance, the Western-based one, originating in Enlightenment versus Soviet modernity), but also, on the other hand, about the possible connections between imperialist ways of thinking. I call one of these connections—that taking the form of wordless understanding and unquestioned empathy—*empathy between Empires*.

As art workers, living and working in the so-called 'Global West', through our agency, we can directly influence these connections and different forms of violence they create—for example, empathy toward perpetrators and unwillingness to work on oneself—by making them visible, by deconstructing them, using the language of art and imagination. In this way, we can at least try to break one of the cycles of violence, on this side of the imperial connection. I think that the art field has so many ways, channels, and resources to appeal to the audiences, but unfortunately when it comes to the postcolonial agenda in the French context, especially today, one can see precisely the opposite trend, where 'postcolonial melancholia' and the generalizing xenophobia seem to prepare the comeback of uninhibited colonialism. I don't see any other way to counter this dynamic than to use any opportunity to engage into anti-colonial struggle in a broad sense, and build transnational solidarity.

In 'When the Inconceivable Takes Form', you also talk about the art becoming a sort of shield for the artists. To what extent do you think the works featured in the exhibition offer tools of resistance for both artists and audiences?

OK: I think art becomes a shield for artists when they use their practice to work through a difficult event of which they are a part. Many of the works in the exhibition demonstrate this approach and can therefore be described as 'processual'.

Some, for example, explore a process of transformation of memory and collective and personal identity in the context of forced immigration and constant socio-political unrest. The Syrian artist Reem Yassouf (*Cloud*, 2022/23), for instance, attempts to find an actual form; a physical representation of her ever-changing memory of past events, creating its equivalent in the form of a cloud made of metal mesh and burnt paper. Sirine Fattouh (Lebanese-French artist) presents a curiosity cabinet on wheels (*On Becoming*, 2023), filled with objects of memory given to her by her loved ones, or signifying key moments in her awareness of herself as an immigrant, a woman, an 'Arab artist', a lesbian. In their video *Peace and Tranquility* (2022), the Ukrainian duo Myro Klochko and Anatoliy Tatarenko convey the restlessness and lack of peace experienced by generations of Ukrainians as a result of Russian colonial politics.

Rana Haddad, *Disintegration/Making Of* ("Désintégration/Mise en œuvre"), 2021
Installation, dimensions variable
© Cité internationale des arts & Eva D Photographie

The process of repetition is also seen as a way to achieve catharsis, healing, and acceptance. Syrian artist Akram Al Halabi, for example, created his series of digital prints *Cheek* (2013-2017) in Damascus during the Syrian civil war. He abstracted the images of violence broadcast in the media by writing separate words for what he saw in these images (Cheek, Hand, Nose, Blood, Mother, Child, Cheek, etc.), thus formalizing the unthinkable, which helped him to keep his distance from the events, not to panic or fall into despair. The Lebanese artist Rana Haddad also uses a process in her installation *Disintegration/Making Of* (2021), in which she tries to come to terms with 38 seconds of the explosion in Beirut in 2020: over a period of 120 hours, she hammers nails into wooden panels in a specific order and imprints their heads on sheets of paper, creating a pattern.

There are also works that are emancipatory. Many of them turn 'weakness' (read: sensuality, marginality, fragility) into a powerful tool of resistance against violence and injustice. This is especially true of *Banner for Biopolitics* (2017) by Yana Bachynska, *Spring Heroine #1,2,3* (2021-2023) by Nge Lay, *Who is Afraid of Ideology?* (Part 1, 2017) by Marwa Arsanios and *I Want a President* (2021) by Marina Naprushkina, whose paintings and posters depict the key symbol of the Belarusian revolution of 2020 against dictatorship—white flowers. The women demonstrators carrying them were also dressed in white. The embodiment of peace and fragility, they stopped the police attack for a while, which triggered truly massive protests in the country. In her text, Naprushkina tries to imagine a new political being that takes fragility and human imperfection as the norm.

Also, emancipatory in its own way, is *The Dead Surface Won't Move* (2021) by Nikolay Karabinovych, who constructs a vertical structure out of used bullet casings, one of them painted in the color of the rainbow flag. The installation is

dedicated to the artist's friend, a nightclub owner in Odesa, who went to war and never returned. From these inessential elements, left to rust on the ground, Karabinovych creates a monument that simultaneously signifies the fragility and strength of the LGBTQ+ community. I believe that these works and artistic approaches encourage the emancipation of the viewers.

During the discussion at la Cité, the collective Beyond the post-soviet chose to screen Nikolay Karbinovych's film *Even Further* (2020). Can you tell why the screening of this film was important in the context of our discussion?

What did Rafal Lemkin see, was it this landscape?

Nikolay Karabinovych, *Even Further*, 2020
Installation and video, 15'14"
© Nikolay Karabinovych

SB: On many levels: individual and professional, through actual events and memories, in the present and in the past—Nikolay Karabinovych's practice is influenced by the experiences of displacement and exile. The artist often refers to the experience of the Jewish community in the context of Odesa, a city situated in the Ukrainian south, where he grew up and which is home to a great number of communities. *Even Further* is one of Karabinovych's recent works, and it actually is quite a mysterious video. What we see in it is an Ikarus coach—a bus of Hungarian production widely spread across the Eastern bloc—appearing in a desert landscape, which looks like a place beyond space and time. A group of people gets out of the bus, while a tourist guide, speaking in a specific Jewish dialect, in an absurdly poetic speech mixes seemingly distant cultural, regional, and historic references. These are actually related to the places that the artist visited in search of a filming location: Odesa, Kyiv, Ghent, Amsterdam, Sainte-Croix, Berlin, Zürich, Stuttgart, Istanbul, Tbilissi, Salonika, Groningen, Antwerp, Bratislava, Chernivtsi, and Sadagora. In the end, this peregrination brought him to the site of the saltwater estuary of Kuyalnik, in his home region of Odesa. As a musical background, the artist chose a song, the origin of which is shared by the Greek and the klezmer Jewish communities. At the end of the video, people get back on the coach, and it leaves.

By bringing together different temporal, spatial, and cultural layers, this dreamlike video offers a complex view of the diasporas in the Ukrainian south.

For me, it even transcends this specific context, creating a timeless representation of peregrination, errantry, and exile. For these reasons, it was important for us to screen *Even Further* by Nikolay Karabinovych during the event, along with Alexander Ugay's *Earth and Shape* (2014), both of which translate the experiences of exile and the continuity of colonial violence much better than any words could do.

To finish this conversation, I wanted to know more about your choice of the title 'When the Inconceivable Takes Form', as it refers to the name of the historical exhibition 'When Attitudes Become Form' by Harald Szeemann from 1969. In what way is this choice significant?

Alexander Ugay, *Earth and Shape*, 2014
Video, 16'47"
© Alexander Ugay

OK: Yes, there is some reference to Harald Szeemann's exhibition, but my curatorial approach is entirely different. The 'attitudes' in the title of his show refer to the processual nature of the works presented. They included conceptual art, land art, process art and *arte povera*. In other words, Szeemann sought to show practices that questioned the form a work of art could take, prioritizing the process of making and the performative display. In my exhibition, as I have explained, process has a broader meaning, not only performativity, but also continuity (some were created over several years), the study or presentation of collective and individual processes, and repetition as a mode of healing and acceptance. Moreover, if Szeemann saw the innovative artistic trend in going beyond form, I, on the contrary, try to find it, or rather to give at least some shape to the intangible and inexpressible. Besides, Szeemann showed only works by American and Western European artists, the trendsetters of the art world, whose art was beyond politics. I do the opposite by presenting artists from far away from the world's art centers, whose practices are deeply embedded in their local socio-political contexts. And in 'When the Inconceivable Takes Form', even when the form is conceptual, it is

9 *'Representing the inconceivable: Artistic practices and violence with multiple faces'*

never cold or detached. It is always emotionally charged. In general, it is sensitivity and vulnerability in art practice that I see as a new avant-garde and the basis for a new politics.

What do you think about this?

SB: I think that we share a somewhat similar vision of art, similar ethics and interests, which is probably due to our backgrounds and trajectories. To what you said, I would like to add that the movements you mentioned spoke from a position of supposed and unquestioned neutrality—a product of Western modernity. Put into the perspective of postcolonial theory for example, these positions and the artistic forms they produce prove to be irrelevant in relation to today. At the same time, the art institutions of the Global West at large continue to perform their ties to the colonial past and present. How to counter these strongly embedded structural issues? As for me, one of the paths for the institutions lies through understanding and acknowledging one's own responsibility and identifying, questioning, and problematizing one's own locality: spatial, temporal, sociopolitical, contextual. This process, although necessary, can also be very painful and emotionally charged. In this sense, situated artistic and curatorial practices, and especially collective practices, may be helpful for institutions that aspire for a structural change and desire to reframe their work into a more human and ethical dimension: considering individual and collective narratives and emotions, accepting vulnerabilities, practicing empathy, forms of collectivity, and listening.

Oksana Karpovets

Oksana Karpovets is a Ukrainian-born curator and art historian who grew up in Belarus and recently settled in Paris due to the war. Her research interests include: Eastern European video and media art, installation and performance, postcolonial, decolonial and critical theories. She has worked at MoMA in New York, SF MOMA in San Francisco, Zimmerli Art Museum in New Brunswick, and Jam Factory Art Centre in Lviv, Ukraine. As a Fulbright grantee, she received her MA in Museum Studies from New York University, USA. She is currently working on her PhD at the Sorbonne University with the support of the Institute national d'histoire de l'art and the PAUSE program. She is a curator-in-residence at the Cité internationale des arts in Paris as part of the "Cité x CNAP" curatorial program.

Sasha Baydal

Sasha Baydal (ex-Pevak) identifies as an interdependent art worker and as an Eastern European queer. Their practice is centered around experiences of displacement, a certain cultural memory of the socialist past and memory loss, and their family's history shaped by different forms of forced mobility. Their work is influenced by postcolonial and queer theory, along with decolonial approaches, and involves daily exercise in recollection, remembrance, and decolonization. Baydal has collaborated with institutions such as Centre Pompidou in Paris, HISK in Ghent, Mudam Luxembourg, Triangle-Astérides in Marseille, Capc Museum in Bordeaux, Lviv Municipal Art Center, and Pickle Bar by Slavs and Tatars in Berlin. Their contributions span exhibitions, discursive and performative programs, workshops, and texts. In 2021, Sasha co-founded the collective Beyond the post-soviet. As a curatorial research fellow at the Centre national des arts plastiques in Paris (2022-2023), they conducted research titled "Two-Faced Janus," critically examining the presence of artists from (post-)socialist European, Central Asian, and South Caucasian countries within the Cnap collection through a postcolonial lens.