

# FRIEZE

## ‘A Catastrophe is Unfolding’: Nikita Kadan on the Situation in Kyiv

Carina Bukuts and Chloe Stead speak to the artist about the war's threat to Ukraine's cultural sector

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BY CARINA BUKUTS, NIKITA KADAN AND CHLOE STEAD IN INTERVIEWS | 04 MAR 22



**Chloe Stead:** Just two days before you were due to fly to Vienna to take part in an artist residency in the Austrian town of Krems, Russia invaded Ukraine. Instead, your flight was cancelled, and you had to remain in Kyiv. How has your day-to-day life been since then ?

**Nikita Kadan:** I'm currently in Voloshyn Gallery – an underground exhibition space that has been reconverted into a bomb shelter, just as it was during Soviet times. Right now, I am here with the gallery assistant and her relatives. We're surrounded by artworks. Originally, there were several other artists with their families, but they managed to fly out to the west of the country.

**Carina Bukuts:** In the past few days you've been posting on Instagram about works by Ukrainian artists that have been lost, or are currently at risk of being lost, due to the war. For obvious reasons, we tend to focus on human casualties, but there's also a grave risk to Ukrainian cultural heritage. What is currently at stake for museums in Ukraine ?

**NK:** On Monday, The Museum of Local History in Ivankiv was hit by Russian military fire, destroying 25 paintings by the Ukrainian folk artist Maria Prymachenko, although I heard that local people have also been able to save some of the works. The family of the late artist Fedir Tetyanych – one of Ukraine's first performance and installation artists – has asked me to help them communicate that they are unable to move out of their small apartment in Kyiv because the artworks that are stored there are at risk. Tetianyich, who was inspired by science fiction and ecological thinking, combined found objects with garbage to create very fragile biotechnospheres – models for how people might live in the future. Many other Ukrainian museums cannot evacuate their collections, so the staff are now sleeping alongside the works in storage facilities to try and protect them. They are

putting their own lives in danger because they cannot bring themselves to detach from the art.



Nikita Kadan, from the series 'Broken Pole', 2019–21, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Jérôme Poggi, Paris

**CB:** In your own work, you've regularly addressed how history is narrated through museums.

**NK:** My practice has always been politically engaged, but my earlier projects were usually rooted in the present moment, containing elements of 'critical journalism'. Since 2014, however, my work has developed a historiographical aspect, with the central images often depicting destroyed museums or burnt archives. In recent years, I have also used lots of images from local art history, especially Ukrainian modernism, which is relatively unknown to the rest of the world. I'm particularly interested in the non-Western experience, in the marginal stories that question the very notion of the centre. Invariably, where you have a centre and a periphery, the centre will be protected while the periphery becomes a place where human life has little value and where cultural heritage is often reduced to ashes or left to ruin. And, somehow, I feel responsible for preserving the memories and experiences of those marginal zones – although, in a theoretical utopian sense, I refuse the very idea of the periphery.



Nikita Kadan, 'Project of Ruins', 2019, exhibition view, Mumok, Vienna

**CS :** Do you think that this focus, over the past few years, on forgotten or less-discussed histories has impacted how you view what's happening today ?

**NK:** A catastrophe is unfolding here and the Western world has to accept responsibility for the role it has played in normalizing what is going on in Russia. When I was asked to participate in 'Diversity United' – a large-scale exhibition, curated by Walter Smerling, which opened at Berlin's Tempelhof Airport in 2021, before touring to Moscow and Paris – I refused because it was being organized under the patronage of three presidents: Emmanuel Macron of France, Frank-Walter Steinmeier of Germany and Vladimir Putin of Russia. The exhibition not only featured some big names but also included some younger artists whose work is considered critical and politically engaged.

**CS:** So, you rejected the invitation from the outset ?

**NK:** Yes, because I would never participate in an exhibition under Putin's patronage. However, I took the opportunity to ask the curatorial team some pretty direct questions, such as: why not refuse this patronage, if it's so problematic for the artists they would like to include in the show? But, they merely sidestepped any pointed questions about Russian imperialism, and eventually stopped responding altogether.



Nikita Kadan, *Observations on Archives*, 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Jérôme Poggi, Paris

**CB :** You're a member of Revolutionary Experimental Space, an activist artist collective originally formed after the Orange Revolution of 2004–05. Further political turmoil followed with the Maidan Square protests of 2013–14. What impact has this upheaval had on the art scene in Ukraine?

**NK :** Before 2014, politically engaged artists comprised only a fraction of the Ukrainian art scene, which was dominated by postmodernist painting until the late 2000s. Following the protests of 2013–14 and Russia's annexation of Crimea, the situation changed and socially engaged art became more prominent.

**CB :** Would you say that Ukrainian cultural institutions also support these more politically oriented practices ?

**NK :** While they are inclined to avoid open criticism of nationalist and conservative tendencies, they're also aware that politically engaged artists are currently making the most interesting work. As a result, certainly in comparison to the 2000s or early 2010s, our profile has risen significantly. Museums are also more willing to show contemporary art now, although their lack of experience in the field can sometimes lead to compromises or conflicts. I've personally had disagreements with several Ukrainian state museums that tried to host exhibitions of my work but then felt some aspects of the content, or my means of self-representation, were too tough for them. I also know of several cases of censorship within the Ukrainian contemporary art scene.

**CB :** In 2015, your installation *The Shelter* addressed the destruction of the Donetsk Regional Museum of Local History during the Donbas War in Eastern Ukraine in 2014.

**NK :** The work is based on a photograph I found of the damaged building, in which taxidermy animals – bears, moose – stand amongst the wreckage as if they are alive and have broken free from their vitrines. I transformed the ruins into barricades, adding rubber tyres to echo those at the Maidan Protests. The lower part of the installation acts as a defensive wall but, behind it, vegetation grows in rich soil. When a country is forced to

shelter, it has to operate in survival mode, and nothing can develop. Here in Ukraine, we have been living this way partly for eight years. We have had to learn how to exist in a danger zone where our possibilities are often incredibly limited.



Nikita Kadan, *The Shelter*, 2015, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts

**CS :** Last week, during the early days of the invasion, you posted on Instagram about reading poetry and watching films by Ingmar Bergman. What art has brought you comfort during this time ?

**NK :** Sheltering here at Voloshyn Gallery, I am surrounded by works from the collection, including some fine examples of early-20th-century Ukrainian modernism. There are also some contemporary pieces by my friends, as well as my own works. I have books by Jean Genet, Bruno Schulz and the Russian poet Galina Rymbu, who moved to Ukraine and lives in Lviv with her family.



Portrait of Nikita Kadan, 2019. Courtesy and photograph: Klaus Pichler © mumok

**CB :** How do you find the head space to read right now ?

**NK :** It's very difficult but I'm here, day in day out, speaking to the press and, sometimes, I just need a distraction so that I don't go crazy. I've also been doing some drawing. **CS :** For our readers wanting to support people in Ukraine right now, what can they do ?

**NK :** We urgently need your solidarity. Please demand that your governments shut down Ukraine airspace. We are being bombed. Please demand sanctions. Please find a way to stop Putin. Our country is already partly in ruins and the situation is deteriorating every day. We know there are hard times ahead. After the war will come famine, and then we will really need your help. If we speak about the needs of the artistic scene – we'll need your support to reconstruct our cultural institutions and to restart our artistic lives, by increasing visibility for Ukrainian artists. But, ultimately, this is not about saving Ukrainians; it's about protecting yourselves, too. We are all in danger, because this is a war against the very idea of democracy and human rights. Castello di Rivoli presents a selection of filmic works and moving images by contemporary artists from Ukraine titled *A Letter From the Front\**, curated by Nikita Kadan with Giulia Colletti, from 10 – 13 March. Artists at Risk, non-profit network institution working at the intersection of human rights and the arts, have compiled a list of emergency temporary relocation resources for cultural workers and are currently taking applications by those affected by this crisis. To apply, donate or become a host organisation please visit: <https://artistsatrisk.org/>.