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Interview with the Ukrainian curator Vasyl Cherepanyn about the Russian war and the effects on and reactions from the art world

»This so-called pacifism is a petty-bourgeois ideology«

Interview Von **Fabian Bechtle** **Leon Kahane**

What the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine means for local art and cultural institutions usually goes under the radar. Ukrainian curator Vasyl Cherepanyn works in several initiatives that help those affected and, in an interview with »Jungle World«, criticizes the silence of Western cultural institutions and the »westsplaining« of the left.

What are you working on at the moment?

I've been on the international cultural and informational front for the past months trying to activate my colleagues in the EU and elsewhere. Our Visual Culture Research Center, which is the organizer of the Kyiv Biennial and a founding member of the East Europe Biennial Alliance, launched, together with the colleagues from Warsaw, Budapest, Prague and Riga, a series of international discussions and events on Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, for instance a special program within the second edition of Biennale Warszawa titled »Armed Democracy«. Here on the ground, from the side of the Kyiv Biennial in the first days of the all-out war, we launched the Emergency Support Initiative, which has been providing personal and institutional support to artists, curators, cultural workers and others in need. Since then it has grown extensively and now we are working more in an institutional manner.

What are the main activities of the Emergency Support Initiative?

We support the initiatives which have been helping to evacuate museum collections and artworks, especially from

the heavily bombed regions in the east and south of the country. We are also working with those who document Russian war crimes in Ukraine on the intersection of journalism and art activism, collecting different visual evidences from public and private sources. Also, we are assisting and cooperating with emergency art residencies based in Ukraine. This is a new cultural phenomenon, I would say. These residencies are basically providing conditions for artists and cultural practitioners to live and work in the west of the country, interconnecting people from different regions and backgrounds who often had never met before. This will be a defining aspect of Ukrainian cultural landscape in the years to come.

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When you say that you also act in the international debates, is there openness and understanding for your concern there?

What stroke me was a kind of incapability of many in the West to recognize the fascist nature of the Russian aggression. The term of »denazification« that was used to absurdly justify the war and the methods that have been applied during its conduct should have evoked much bigger outrage, especially in the German-speaking areas, than it was the case. In most west european countries, particularly in Germany, the idea of antifascism became a subcultural thing, rather a fashion than a real political practice. A sort of fetishistic modus operandi, when you just clash with police on the 1st of May, and the rest of the time it's the clothes you're wearing and to distance and differentiate yourself from other antifascist groups and so on. But the very idea of a united Europe would be impossible without anti-Nazism, otherwise we wouldn't be here. If we really recognize a fascist nature of this war of aggression and genocidal fantasies that are driving it, this demands a totally different level of political responsibility internationally.

The West's attitude should change faster anyhow ...

When we deal with fascism, it practically means that all the appeasement attempts and claims about making concessions are simply not relevant at all. This so-called pacifism is a petty-bourgeois ideology. In order to win over fascism, you cannot make concessions to it, you cannot make business with it, you perhaps may negotiate with it but, as we have

seen, it will be no success anyway. Fascism has to be defeated. And this implies all the variety of instruments one has to apply to make this possible – including the military ones. In that regard, we're just losing time.

Currently, we all live a borrowed life that was granted to us by the Ukrainians who are keeping the frontline. Without the Ukrainian resistance, my country as well as the EU itself wouldn't exist in their current forms. At the moment, the EU societies are privileged in the sense that they can still pay for the war crisis financially, whereas Ukrainians pay with their lives. But the more time passes, the less opportunities we have on the table. There is still a big chance to stop Russian fascism on the Ukrainian territory, if the West shows a more dedicated attitude.

Surely this observation regarding the attitude also includes the cultural field.

In terms of culture, when "Realpolitik" in the form of war arrived, many institutions in the art field within the EU and elsewhere, that have always been claiming radical political engagement, appeared to stick to a kind of white cube gallery radical chic. Most of the institutions have resorted to humanitarian issues, which is of course very valuable, but as it turned out, they were too afraid to trespass their boundaries. They were incapable of shaking up their authorities and the public to push the Ukrainian cause to a different level. Making exhibitions and helping refugees is always a safe way. A lot of Western institutions decided to restrict their activities within their bubbles and didn't really act as political subjects. We always criticize the business-as-usual model in politics, but this, unfortunately, is very much the case in culture as well.

So the language is more radical than the action?

Many in the West decided to go on as if there is no continental European war happening. There is still this perception that this war is somebody else's war. It also reveals a neo-colonial approach towards the European East, which is considered a second-hand Europe, not really Europe. All in all, what we hear now in the international debate is covered up by the fear of escalation, of provoking the Kremlin. But in essence, this discussion means maintaining a status quo in which only Ukrainians are doomed. I find this totally obnoxious and disgusting.

But yet we have a lot of debate on colonialism and exactly about these things in the art world. Do you have the impression that this hot war finds a place in these debates?

The discourse on decoloniality has become mainstream in culture and politics, every institution is doing something on it. But Russia's invasion has urgently highlighted circumstances, in which one has to reconsider the whole framework of the debates on colonialism as such. In Western countries, decoloniality is being applied mostly to an internal context, going back to the past and digging something out of it, along with keeping blind towards colonial experiences next to their nose in the present. And there is a kind of admiration or fetishization of the idea of the Global South without working with it in a more profound manner, in my view.

Why do you think there is a blind spot?

The thing is that the region of Europe's East, especially its post-Soviet part, complicates this typical dichotomy of the Global North and the Global South. Everyone somehow forgot that we still have an existing empire on the European continent, the so called Russian Federation. In fact, Russia has never been a federation; it's always been about imperial exploitation. Think of Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia as well as numerous national republics, who have been or are now subjugated to the control of Moscow. The political conditions there differ from what we call the Global South, though economically they may be on the same page.

In which way?

These countries have been living under Russia's direct military occupation for decades. And their liberation practices and anti-colonial struggles present the knowledge and experiences of a global importance. In the Cold War era, the approach towards this region was framed within the concept of Ostpolitik. The paradox of Ostpolitik is that it was a policy directed only towards Moscow. And after the crash of the USSR, this attitude to the post-Soviet European East has been defined by the EU as the Eastern Partnership policy towards its »neighborhoods«, not as »our common house« policy. This created conditions in which the countries of the region became exposed to Russian imperial grabs and that has been the case through the 2000s.

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In addition, in some circles in Germany there is a tradition of an anti-American, anti-western sentiment and at the same time the fear of escalation with Russia.

For those circles, Ukrainians are simply not supposed to defend themselves. This perhaps motivates, for example, German public figures to issue all those collective letters to Olaf Scholz appealing to stop the deliveries of armaments to Ukraine. Isn't it strange that such different people as Henry Kissinger, Noam Chomsky and Alexander Kluge, who all spoke up against weapons for Ukraine, found themselves on the same premise? A kind of political schizophrenia in itself. It's an example of typical »Westsplaining« – they are so much obsessed with the US and NATO themselves that they cannot even presume another imperial foe. At the same time, they don't really understand the context, most of them have never been to the region, they don't speak the languages, having a very vague idea of what is actually going on there, but willingly lecturing the locals what they should do, whom to join, etc.

The war did not come as a surprise, it was prepared linguistically and culturally and that was visible. Why do you think people like Chomsky can't see what Putin has been proclaiming for years?

They are defending their own world view, which was mainly shaped decades ago. In the European context, it's very much about unwillingness to accept that what used to be unthinkable became relevant again. One of the reasons lies in the slogan »Never Again«, which became a simulacrum of peace for the EU. The idea of peace has been cultivated to the extent that the realities of war got basically repressed as such. It has also been the case during the last eight years, when Russia's occupation of Ukraine started after the Maidan revolution in 2014. When the repressed returned, the EU was not prepared to face it. We observed this in many crises, including the so called refugee crisis, which is a totally misleading term as it's not a crisis of refugees but a war crisis. The general approach is to push conflicts and antagonisms to the outside in order to keep the interior safe. The EU tends to displace the unbearable, what you don't like also about yourself, to the peripheries.

At the same time, Germany has always tried to maintain good relations with Russia.

The relationship between Berlin and Moscow has basically been the relationship between two imperial metropolises who didn't pay too much attention to recognize what was in between. Germany is very much doing well with a false historical picture about Russians liberating Berlin in 1945 and that's why we shouldn't send weapons to Ukraine, and so on. It's a misconception of the Soviet Union as a whole, it was of course not the Russian but the Soviet army that liberated Berlin, an international army largely consisting of Ukrainians and Belarusians. Ukraine was a co-creator of the USSR, without Ukraine it simply wouldn't have existed. Now the Kremlin doesn't want to recognize Ukraine in its borders as it does not fit into its imperial vision.

Who are your allies in the current situation?

Symptomatically enough, the last edition of the Kyiv Biennial in 2021 was titled »Allied«. That's indeed what we need most at the moment. Militarily speaking, the allies are obvious. In the cultural sphere, there is a circle of institutions we cooperate with. The most allied spirit one can feel at the moment is of course coming from Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. They are willing to embark on endeavors that may seem too radical to the others. But all in all, it's mainly thanks to the pressure from the public side and citizens throughout Europe that their governments decided to react in a solidary manner after the invasion started. Journalists contributed immensely in this regard. But unfortunately, everything is being decided on the battlefield. And we don't know whether the last half a year is a prelude or a finale, and how long this finale is going to take and what it's going to entail. The only thing I'm sure about is that in a few years time, we all, especially in the West, will be thinking: How naive we were, we still had an opportunity to act, why didn't we do enough back then, we were so privileged worrying about energy costs.

The art world is proclaiming itself as politically engaged and informed, at the same time it seems they need people like you as a sort of translator in order to understand what is going I'm a strong believer in internationalism in an old good sense, acting as a translator in the cultural field will bring results in some time. But when it comes to this war, some Western publics, institutions or political circles may pretend that they need a kind of translation, whereas in fact I don't think they need any.

Consider, for instance, the vocabulary the Kremlin used to justify this full-scale invasion, all this talk about »denazification« etc. To be honest, it's hard for me to even physically pronounce these words in today's context. They are such an atrocity themselves, and no less despicable is that these words are out there in the global public sphere and everybody is unavoidably referring to them. How come that especially the German-speaking world could so easily agree with that? Isn't it unacceptable enough in itself that a fossil fuel oligarch with fascist views is justifying his disgusting crimes with references to the Holocaust? And then European politicians discuss how many tanks they are ready to provide, whether it's five or seven, because eight will already be seen as escalation by the Kremlin. You don't need translation to recognize fascism, especially when it's publicly and officially spoken out and laid clear its intentions. You don't need translation to understand what it means when someone comes to you and says that you don't exist, but since you do exist and you shouldn't, you have to be exterminated. It's not some exotic context for the West – quite the opposite, it's very recognizable.

They may also need translation to understand how involved they are, despite their fear. Creating awareness of this is also one of the tasks of media reporting.

There is still pretty often this pseudo-liberal illusion pretending at a »balanced« coverage and understanding of the ongoing war, shared by some media, institutions, political and cultural circles, like that there are two sides, so the truth might be somewhere in the middle, and so on. But you cannot just equalize two sides, if you search for the truth here somewhere in the middle of right and wrong, at the end you'll get it all wrong. Unlike many other war conflicts, this war is not just between two armies, and it's not between army and insurgency, this is a war of one country's military against the other country's people.

The choice today is pretty clear: either all the possible military, economic, and political instruments are involved so that Ukraine gets its territory back and is restored in its borders, or get prepared that Eastern Europe may become a battlefield, again. If it's not stopped here, it will be proliferated elsewhere. And of course everyone in Europe is afraid, maybe because they are now aware that it was about them from the very beginning.



Vasyl Cherepanyn is the head of the **Visual Culture Research Center (VCRC)** in Kyiv. The VCRC organizes the **Kyiv Biennial** and is a founding member of the **East Europe Biennial Alliance**. Cherepanyn taught at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder), the Free University of Berlin and the University of Vienna, among others. Most recently, he organized the **discourse program »Armed Democracy«** at this year's Warszawa Biennale.