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Nikita Kadan. Museum of Vegetation

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Commentary on Nikita Kadan's work.

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Nikita Kadan. Museum of Vegetation

I am convinced a new ethics will come into being one day. Similar to the way children think. They don't differentiate between more and less valuable life. Grandma died, the cat died, a hedgehog got run over by a car – in a children's worldview it's one thing. It's just: life is gone. I think in the future ethics will be equally uncompromising.

Svetlana Alexievich¹

Nikita Kadan's work restores memory and care for "a reality that has no way out,"² reduced to the body, its needs, survival and the experience of material decay. Through this filter, the artist works through both the period of the Soviet Union and the planet's most recent history as perceived from contemporary Ukraine. Since such a narrative has no place in the public sphere, Kadan's work can be seen as an imaginary museum. For him, like for many artists of the middle-aged and younger generation in Ukraine, art serves as a quasi-institution involved in marginalized areas of social life.

Beyond Property

A historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of all transformations.

Walter Benjamin³

The work with the past that Kadan cares for is rooted in popular contemporary art strategies derived from the Benjaminian tradition of historical materialism. The museum model proposed by Kadan is an attempt to reclaim the past from the "homogeneous, empty time", the "eternal image of the past,"⁴ i.e. historicism, which reproduces power through a chronological reconstruction that serves to represent victorious ideologies. Kadan reconstructs images that appear to the "historical subject at a moment of danger"⁵ – wars, violence, fear, and suffering, as

well as personal and collective disasters. Additionally, their working methods – the juxtaposition of ideological symbols with dispersed, anonymous testimonies of life and traces of matter invalidated in historical narratives – makes Walter Benjamin's ideas real. By transforming and reassembling broken and deformed fragments of reality, Kadan enters into disputes regarding what, who, and how things can be remembered, narrated, heard or seen. These juxtapositions express a refusal to treat individual bodies, deaths and material losses as anyone's property. They are an invitation to an autonomous quest for another form of community, one not yet socialized nor institutionalized.

I would like to go through Nikita Kadan's work by taking a path that weaves together dispersed "vegetative" threads. Other topics will also come into play here, as well as some guests. In the artist's works, vegetation is a metaphor that draws on the interplay of references to both meanings of the word: human life limited to a physiological minimum, and thus deprived of prospects for development, and plants' periods of growth, flowering and fruiting. I hope the proposed path will allow "this most inconspicuous of all transformations,"⁶ i.e. a sense of the ethics of the future, to be captured.

The Ethics of the Future

What has stayed in my memory from that time? Us digging and digging. I noted somewhere in the diary what I understood while I was there. [...] I realized how easy it is to return to dust.

Ivan Nikolaevich Zhmykhov, chemical engineer⁷

Learning about the experiences of individuals who recounted to Svetlana Alexievich their stories of the Second World War, the post-war Soviet Union, the Chernobyl disaster and the fall of Communism, allowed Alexievich to get a sense of an ethics of the

future. She avoids a utopian synthesis, but one can surmise that she would hope that it would be rooted in compassion for suffering, across borders, and in a sense of bonding with all forms of life. Her hope originates in an idea of the common strength of various unheard and absent voices, especially those of women. The writer pays special attention to *herstories* and emotions rooted in the body – stories of hunger, fear, discomfort, pain, cold, heat, compassion, mourning, anger, hatred, and also colors, smells, shapes and sounds. For Alexievich, as with Kadan, any ideology that suppresses these voices, in the name of a heroic story, is a lie and an appropriation.

Among the many testimonies noted by Alexievich, I recall/cannot forget an account by Maria Wojcieszonek, who spent the first few years of her life in exile with her parents in Siberia, “vegetating” in a dark, cold dugout and keeping herself warm next to the bodies of goats. The memory that helped her survive is associated with the coming of spring, a feeling of warmth and joy at the sight of rays of light and color that rarely come out of the darkness. Having returned from exile, Wojcieszonek became a writer and poet, one who cared very much for the presence of flowers and different colors in her surroundings⁸. I will always remember a scene when a Soviet soldier tries to save her wounded colleagues from a sinking barge during the night battle of Kerch. In the darkness, she touches a body and tows it ashore. When it turns out that the body is not one of a comrade-in-arms, but of a big dying fish – a whitefish – the woman first starts crying over her suffering and immediately afterwards joins in the grief of all creatures affected by the war⁹. Another story that has stayed with me is that of a cinematographer, Sergei Gurin, who, upon his arrival in the Chernobyl area to shoot a film, experienced shock and a sense of the unreal in the face of the stunning sight of a lush, blooming May orchard. He completely lost his sense of smell. He could not understand why the apple trees did not give off any fragrance,

nor that high levels of radiation can interfere with the workings of some organs. At a screening of his Chernobyl films for children, a boy asks, "why couldn't the animals that stayed there be helped?"¹⁰. Gurin wasn't prepared for such a question. He also remembers an older woman who refused to leave the contaminated area without her cat because she considered it a member of her family. Following that, Gurin decided to only make nature films and science fiction, "in which he wants to see everything through the eyes of an animal"¹¹. In the narratives of the heroines and heroes of Alexievich's books, any treatment of the consequences of disasters caused by humans can only begin if they reject blind faith in ideologies (those of the nation, progress, Communism, science, the free market...). Only then is there a chance to experience other dimensions of life.

The perspective present in Alexievich's literature can also be found in that of Achille Mbembe, who describes the long-term effects of Western European colonialism. One of its effects has been the global "politics of enmity" – the practice of producing serfdom, exploitation, exclusion and dehumanization of the Other¹². This is a logic coupled, on the one hand, with the nationalism and racism, and on the other hand, with valuing life according to the algorithms of profitmaking. Contemporary fascist tendencies, and the exploitation of bio-resources in post-communist countries and semi-peripheral areas, prove that despite their past – different as it is than that experienced by Western European – it does not exclude them from participating in the "politics of enmity" put to the test in the colonies. The only way out would be an "ethics of the passerby" which starts with a basic recognition of the fragility and transience of every life.

Bodies' Testimonies

how we might escape [...] the peril of the society of enmity. Starting from a multiplicity of places, the concern is then to traverse them, as responsibly as possible [...] What will then emerge [...] are the demands, if not of a possible universality, then at least of an idea of the Earth as that which is common to us, as our communal condition.

[...] Each of the fragments of this terrestrial language will be rooted in the paradoxes of the body, the flesh, the skin, and nerves. To escape the threat of fixation, confinement, and strangulation, as well as the threat of dissociation and mutilation, language and writing will have to be ceaselessly projected toward the infinity of the outside, rise up and loosen the vice that threatens the subjugated person with suffocation as it does his body of muscles, lungs, heart, neck, liver, and spleen, that dishonored body, made of multiple incisions, that divisible, divided body, in struggle against itself, made of several bodies that confront each other within one and the same body[.]

Achille Mbembe¹³

Nikita Kadan's works suggest, similarly to Alexievich's literature and Mbembe's philosophy, that no real community or utopia can and should exist without the recognition of hidden costs, without evoking the erased traces of life reduced to vegetation and suffering imprinted on individual bodies appropriated by imperial stories.

The vegetation of people, evoked by many of the artist's works, is a life deprived of opportunities for development, for hope; life reduced to survival and avoiding suffering, physical pain and death. For example, the hunger and oppression suffered by former builders (mostly workers and forced labourers) in the Soviet Union is recalled by an installation entitled *Babushkas (Mausoleum of Security)*, 2013. It is a model of a façade in the

style of a monumental socialist-modernist building without windows, and with stairs leading to a cemented entrance, the back of which is a wall filled with loaves of bread. The title of the work also refers to the condition of the elderly people in capitalist Russia and other post-communist countries, and to the need for a minimum of material security for which freedom and ideals can be sold, and which has fallen prey to the current, nationalist, fascist regimes.

When in Kadan's drawings (*Controlled Incidents*, 2013) a civil rebellion takes place, it is not entirely clear where and why it is happening, although the uniforms of the violent officers are reminiscent of the paramilitary forces that regularly suppress protests in Russia, or else the scenes echo the violence taking place in the streets of eastern Ukrainian cities. The scenes of beatings and torture reconstructed by the artist are suspended against a white background, while the fragmented bodies of the victims and perpetrators function as condensed carriers of unequal forces (group advantage and militarized aggression over individuals). Kadan abstracts these laboratory-like scenes of violence from ideologized media messages to expose and highlight the fragility and vulnerability of human skin, muscle, bone, and tissue.

In his series entitled *Chronicle*, 2016, Kadan worked with visual historical sources: photographs and texts related to Nazi crimes and those committed by the NKVD during World War II, the pogrom in Lviv, ethnic cleansing carried out by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UIA) on Poles, and the Polish Home Army's retaliatory actions against the Ukrainian population in Volhynia. The descriptions of some of the photographs were manipulated for propaganda purposes; some crimes were even attributed to the victims. The artist visited archives both in Poland and in Ukraine. On the basis of the materials found in them, he created a series of black-and-white ink drawings which depict fragments of scenes in a blurred manner, taking them out of their original

contexts. We see obscure fragments of silhouettes, gestures: a hand raised to strike, a husk, surrender, and finally posthumous paralysis. My first, very personal response (my grandmother and grandfather were refugees from a village in the Podolia region persecuted by the UIA) is that of resistance. Abstraction and decontextualization – guarantees of art's freedom – seem to too close to relativization and an obscuring of responsibility. Are we, or am I, ready for this kind of memory – without mutual recognition and naming what happened; without any possibility of reparation? Kadan explains:

Each image hangs in a vacuum, but behind each one there are fragmented contexts. Choosing a picture, I assume that one has to look at documentary photographs directly, acknowledging one's own misunderstanding and how easily one's gaze can be manipulated.¹⁴

Rather than participating in the war on images waged by nationalists, or in correcting false attributions and investigating factual truths, his art is devoted to the mediation of another kind of truth – that of the experience of victims as recorded in their bodies. The images included in the museum (which was established by the artist) are liberated from the control of state memory institutions and the media, and opened up to the possibility of conveying another memory, that of a "passer-by".

Decay, Deformation

An important element of the museum created by the artist is the ideological scenery surrounding human histories: architecture, monuments, Soviet and contemporary urban planning. Its changing functions are analysed from the perspective of decomposition, deformation and fragmentation – issues that need to be understood and arranged anew, taking into account the mass of things, their surface, shape,

composition, and erosion of particles that interact with various phenomena in nature. As Kadan puts it:

I am interested in the experience of feeling stones which were polished in a certain way, or glass, or metal, organic substances which destroy themselves... At the same time, I try to read the political narrative inside these materials [...]
This gave me the idea for a museum.¹⁵

A pedestal without any specific ideological representation, without a statue, fills the whole height and occupies almost the entire gallery space (*Pedestal: The Practice of Displacement*, 2009-2011). The geometric form and massive scale resemble pedestals for monuments to Soviet heroes. The text on the gallery walls is a chronicle of the "war on monuments" in post-communist Ukraine – acts of vandalism against both Soviet and the latest, national/patriotic monuments. Meanwhile, regardless of the meaning of the iconography, the very scale of the building is a violent appropriation of the public space. On the other hand, you can see the silhouettes of people on monuments which are deformed by snow caps and blurred by the drawing illusion of blizzards, so that recognizing them proves difficult, if not impossible. I can only guess that these are the *ogres* (men with too much power) who had an absurdly large influence on the sketching of the world maps (in *Drawing Borders*, 2014). While reconstructing images of the great, progressing degradation of Soviet architectural projects (*Dust Plans*, 2013), the artist used two seemingly conflicting scales: micro (fragmentation) and macro (cosmic distance). Kadan used dust to make drawings of buildings based on satellite images. This approach creates a distance from the historical functions of the buildings, and it becomes clear that a similar fate must also meet contemporary, gigantic investment projects.

Protection of Plants

In the depictions of the catastrophes, wars, and disintegration with which the artist works, the motif of plants recurs as a metaphor for ecological succession and processes of self-regulation by nature, as well as for the interdependence of people and other elements of ecosystems. Kadan sometimes directs the movement of these associations towards the idea of crises experienced by human civilizations, when - as a result of a reduction in the intensity of industry, investment, agriculture, or the absence of people - other forms of life develop on Earth with an accompanying increase in biodiversity. For example, in a series of collages entitled *Plant Protection* (2014), Kadan used photographs of houses destroyed by war and abandoned by people in eastern Ukraine. He overlaid them with plant illustrations from old Soviet textbooks, so that they partly obscured the buildings. The plants in Kadan's work were freed from their textbook classification "under protection" and moved freely around the photographic background. They can now exist independently of people or give shelter to, cure, and nourish others.

The theme of crisis and vegetative nutrition, strongly rooted in Soviet and post-Soviet culture, ready to cause further wars and social upheavals, resounds in installations such as *Shelter* (2015), *The Difficulties of Profanation* (2015), *The Limits of Responsibility* (2014), and *Moved Plant Bed Facility* (2016). *Shelter* was created in response to the war-time destruction of the Donetsk History Museum. The artist decided to commemorate it as a living ruin open to the future. He created a bunker-like installation, the upper part of which is an imitation of a bombed natural history room with a barricade of tires and taxidermy exhibits. In the lower part of the "shelter" he placed metal bunk beds (typical of refugee centers) to be used for growing celery; these ruins of an anachronistic museum turn out to be conducive to the growing of

plants and the survival of people. In addition, in a work related to the revolution that began in Kiev's Maidan (*The Limits of Responsibility*, 2014), the artist decided to commemorate a vegetable garden cultivated in the city center by activists. The grassroots cultivation of food and its sharing in the public space emerge in the museum created by the artist as a life-giving common good and the potential of revolutionary change. In Nikita Kadan's works, the depictions of human and plant relationships serve to combine the memory of human time with time as experienced by nature. This constellation, it seems to suggest, is the nucleus of future work on the "earthly" community.

- 1 Svetlana Alexievich, "5 tysięcy męskich wojen," interview by Agnieszka Sowińska, Grzegorz Sroczyński, *Wysokie Obcasy. Dodatek do Gazety Wyborczej*, February 15, 2011, https://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/1,53662,9087862,5000_meskich_wojen.html.
- 2 Nikita Kadan, "The Historical Museum," interview by Björn Geldof, <https://pinchukartcentre.org/en/interviews/kadan>.
- 3 Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, in: *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 255.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 261, 262.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 255.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 255.
- 7 Svetlana Alexievich. *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future*, trans. Anna Gunin and Arch Tait, Penguin E-book edition, 351.
- 8 Svetlana Alexievich, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, trans. Bela Shayevich, (New York: Random House, 2016).
- 9 Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*, trans. Richard Pevear, Larissa Volokhonsky, (New York: Random House, 2017).
- 10 Svetlana Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 125.

- 11 Ibid., 126.
- 12 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). Also, idem, "Thoughts on the Planetary," interview by Anastasya Eliseeva, *New Frame*, September 5, 2019, <https://www.newframe.com/thoughts-on-the-planetary-an-interview-with-achille-mbembe/>.
- 13 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 188-189.
- 14 Nikita Kadan, quoted in: Zofia Bluszcz, *Tematy i miejsca gotowe do przemilczenia tu i teraz*, an online publication accompanying Nikita Kadan's exhibition *Kości się przemieszały* at the Arsenal Gallery in Białystok (2016), https://galeria-arsenal.pl/images/upload/inne_tresci/zofia-bluszcz_tematy-i-miejsca-gotowe-do-przemilczenia-tu-i-teraz_2016.08.12-1.pdf.
- 15 Kadan, The Historical Museum.

