

ZHANNA KADYROVA. AWULSJA

5.12.2025 – 15.02.2026

curator

Monika Szewczyk

coordination

Yulia Kostereva

Arsenal Gallery Power Station

Elektryczna Street 13
(entrance from Świętojańska Street)
Białystok

exhibition open

Tue–Sun
10 a.m. – 6 p.m.
last admission to exhibition is at 5.30 p.m.

entrance fee

8 PLN
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Avulsion

It is most commonly associated with medicine, the detachment of a bone or soft tissue from its point of attachment, as well as the deliberate surgical removal of a body part. In geomorphology, the term refers to the natural process by which a river forms a new channel that bypasses previously existing meanders. It is also used in law and public administration to describe a situation where a state border shifts due to natural processes. We speak of industrial avulsion as well, when industry relocates to another region, separating itself from its original economic base. Metaphorically, avulsion can describe severing oneself from an environment, culture, or identity by rejecting traditions and social norms, or the abrupt breaking of social ties in the wake of a crisis. We usually have no influence over the natural processes unfolding around us, and only very limited control over those brought about by others; rather, it is these forces that shape us and our lives. Everything changes.

The Deer

On the concrete rise he looks both natural and majestic. His chest is broad, his head raised, crowned with antlers. The origami-inspired form is not fragile here. It grows out of the tradition of Constructivism, which was never fragile, and it is cast in concrete. Made specifically for this site, it looks as if it had always stood there, since prehistoric times, as if every day it climbed the rise to survey the land that belongs to it. That it replaced a Soviet aircraft is irrelevant when weighed against how deeply it is rooted in this place, how much it belongs here. The deer's journey from Pokrovsk to Vinnytsia, and then through Kyiv, western Ukraine, and Białystok to Venice is not a natural process. What drives it is not nature, but the imagination and choices of the artist – and, in a sense, of Ukrainian society as a whole, which, in the face of war, is devotedly rescuing cultural heritage and protecting it from destruction. Whether standing on the bed of an open truck or suspended from straps in a post-industrial power plant, the deer never loses its dignity or majesty. And yet we know that it must return to Donbas, that its place is there.

Zhanna

She seems like someone who never stops, never rests. She connects easily with strangers. They trust her, sensing her warmth and authenticity. She is sincere, and she does not pretend in her art either. If I had to describe her with a single word, I would choose "sculptor." Although, like many contemporary artists, she works across different media, in spirit she is a sculptor. Sculpture is her natural, primary state; it grows from within, it happens by itself, it is a necessity. It seems almost physiological. This naturalness and immediacy give strength to her works, but also to her. They keep her continually in motion, in constant, responsive readiness, open to people, nature, form, and the processes in which everything is changing.

War

Everything has already been said about it. I do not feel able to comment on the war in Ukraine, especially from the comfort and safety of my sofa. I do not feel I have the right. And yet nothing has been said on this subject. If anything truly meaningful had been said, there would be no turning back; the war would have ended. We utter the wrong words, the ones that do not stop the war. The right words are spoken by Ukrainians, but we do not listen. They are spoken by the protagonists of Zhanna's films: the librarian who is glad that the flowers taken from Pokrovsk will survive the war in the relatively safer Kyiv; the men who continue working despite the sound of sirens; the local residents who came to see an exhibition organised in a village house, even though they had probably never been interested in art before. Perhaps now they will be, since everything is changing.

Monika Szewczyk

ZHANNA KADYROVA

Ukrainian artist born in 1981 in Brovary, Ukraine. Graduated from the sculpture department of the Taras Shevchenko State Art School in Kyiv. Works with sculpture, mosaics, photography, video, installation, and performance, exploring social, historical, and urban themes. Member of the R.E.P. group (Revolution Experimental Space). Lives and works in Kyiv.

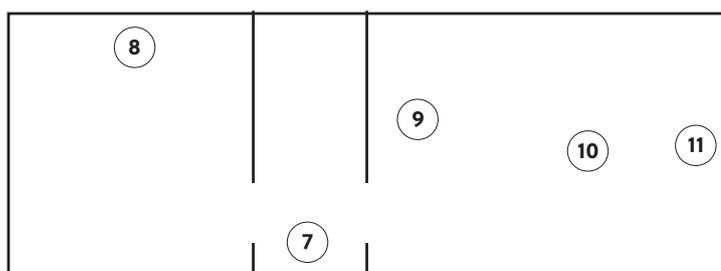
Zhanna Kadyrova is the winner of the 2012 Kazimir Malevich Prize and the 2013 Pinchuk Art Centre Grand Prize. In 2025, she won the Taras Shevchenko National Prize in the field of visual arts for her project *Flight Trajectories* and became the first winner of the Her Art Prize for a series of photographs *Refugees*, which depict the interiors of public buildings ravaged by war. She has exhibited twice in the Ukrainian pavilion at the 55th and 56th Venice Biennale and participated in the main project of the 57th Venice Biennale. She will also represent Ukraine at the 61st Venice Biennale in 2026.

Kadyrova's work was shown at the Arsenal Gallery in Białystok at the following exhibitions: „Places. Laureates of K. Malevich Award” in 2013; „Fear” in 2020; „Arsenal 60! On Collecting, Collection and the Love of Arsenal” in 2025. Her works are in private and public collections around the world. They are also part of the *Collection II* of the Arsenal Gallery in Białystok and regularly participate in exhibitions in Poland and abroad.

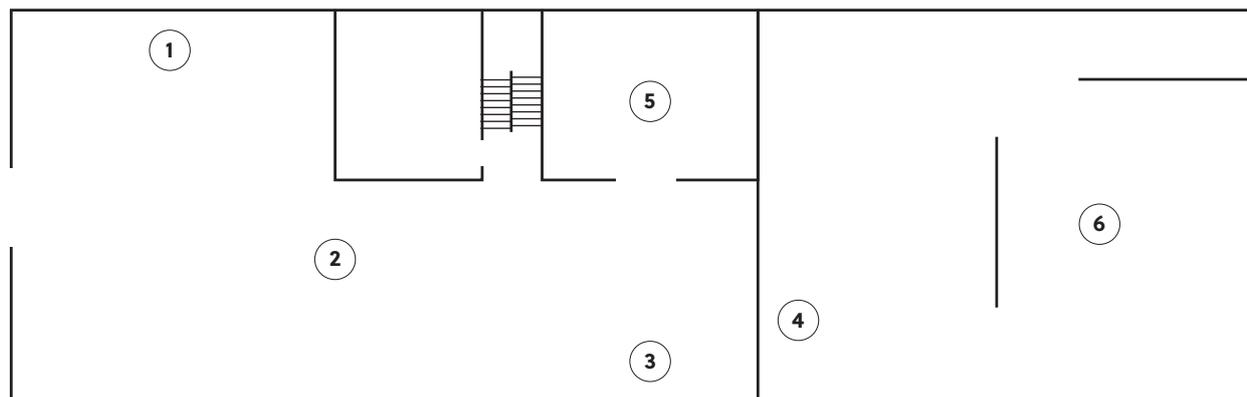
In her work, Kadyrova focuses on local contexts and interactions between people and their surroundings. From the beginning of the full-scale invasion, she has remained in Ukraine as she cannot imagine how she could talk about the war, which has been the central theme of her work since 2022, without being there.

EXHIBITION WORKS

FIRST FLOOR



GROUND FLOOR



1 **IDP (internally displaced person)**
2024, documentary film, 28'27"
Director: Zhanna Kadyrova
Cinematographer:
Natalka Diachenko
Editing: Zhanna Kadyrova,
Natalka Diachenko

The documentary film *IDP* tells the story of the evacuation of Zhanna Kadyrova's *Origami* sculpture, created in 2019 in Jubilee Park in Pokrovsk, Donetsk region. On August 30, 2024, amidst the ongoing war, it was dismantled and relocated from the city. The film captures the dismantling process, eyewitness testimonies, and the symbolic significance of this event which took place during the forced evacuation of the local population. This is not just a story about a sculpture — it is a story of loss, displacement, and the effort to preserve cultural heritage in times of war.

2 **The Origami Deer**
2019, sculpture,
reinforced concrete,
250 x 240 x 100 cm

The Origami Deer is the second work of the *Origami* series, which refers to the democratic form of arts and crafts, allowing anyone to fold a figurine from a sheet of paper by following step-by-step instructions. In *The Origami Deer*, Kadyrova uses a complex form but does not give up the basic principles of origami. The sculpture is designed as a digital 3D model and cast in concrete. The work refers to local traditions of garden art, as the image of a deer is commonly used in parks and other landscaped areas design. The sculpture was originally installed in the Leontovych Park in Pokrovsk, Donetsk region.

3 **REFUGEES,**
2022–2025,
plants, light boxes, texts
courtesy of the artist
and GALLERIA CONTINUA

Unlike her earlier works, *Refugees* incorporates living testimonies. In this project, Kadyrova rescued plants from destroyed public infrastructure across Ukraine, including libraries, hospitals, and schools. These plants, conceptualized as “refugees,” are literally uprooted from disaster zones to seek shelter abroad. Traveling with the artist from country to country, the plants undergo a process of healing while testifying to their own survival. There are many lost, and every day we lose more. This work serves as a poignant metaphor for displacement and endurance. The project expanded into a series of light boxes, ranging from small to monumental, featuring photographs that Kadyrova took while rescuing the plants. By presenting these images in light boxes, she consciously positions her practice within the context of Western art history, referencing both the tradition of still-life painting and contemporary photographic techniques. This dual gesture underscores the interplay between established historical narratives about art and the urgent realities of conflict.

Texts on the walls:

Bohdanivka

I am from Bohdanivka, a village located 20 kilometers from Kyiv. Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, I worked at a local school. On March 8, 2022, a column of Russian tanks passed through Bohdanivka. They were heading towards Kyiv, but our troops pushed them back and the Russians returned to Bohdanivka. We found ourselves under occupation and on the front line.

It was a terrible time. The Russians set up their headquarters and hospital in our school. Meanwhile, soldiers moved into empty houses, looted them, and carried out a so-called „cleansing“ of the village. They killed men suspected of having ties to the Ukrainian army and raped women. On March 30, the Russians suddenly began to retreat and left the town. As they were leaving, they blew up and burned down the school. I was there at that moment. There was an explosion and everything was covered in smoke. I and a few others miraculously survived. But most of the locals who were in the school were killed. The remains of my colleague lay next to me for a long time.

The survivors stayed in the building among the ruins. Only on October 18, 2022, six months later, a woman came and evacuated us to her house in Kyiv. IDPs from other regions who had survived the fighting were also there.

Kurylivka

We come from Kurylivka, a small village in the Kharkiv region, in eastern Ukraine. Before the full-scale war with Russia, we worked at the local hospital. The Russians occupied Kurylivka three days after the invasion, on February 27, 2022.

We lived in the hospital throughout the occupation. In September, our military launched a counteroffensive. During the fighting for Kurylivka, the hospital building was damaged. One day, part of the wall and roof collapsed, and all the windows were smashed. At the time of the shelling, we were inside. We could hear the whistling of shells and explosions. Shards of glass and debris fell on us, and the blast wave scattered us around the rooms. We thought it was our last day alive. Many were injured, but almost everyone survived.

On October 1, our military liberated Kurylivka. A few weeks later, a woman from Kyiv came to our building, said hello, took pictures of the damaged offices and decided to evacuate us. Everything happened quickly. We were placed in a cramped bus, where we sat on top of

each other. We traveled without water for almost seven hours. We arrived in Kyiv 45 minutes before curfew. We crossed the checkpoint without waiting in line.

We had to spend the night in the bus. We slept well – we were very tired. Although it was cool, some of us were very cold in the morning.

The next day we were placed in the yard of a house. Some man gave us water. It was warm, we were resting, and finally we were safe. However, we heard the sounds of a siren and several explosions in the distance, but we did not pay attention. We were promised to be accommodated in more comfortable conditions in a house. At first we had no other options.

Kherson

We come from Kherson, the capital of a region in southern Ukraine. We used to work in a library named after the Ukrainian writer Oles Honchar. It is a beautiful multi-story building on the banks of the Dnipro River.

On March 2, 2022, the Russians occupied our city. They set up an occupation administration, coerced local residents into cooperating, and imprisoned and tortured those who supported Ukraine. Eight months later, the Russians retreated to the opposite bank of the Dnipro River and our military liberated Kherson. Before fleeing, the Russian army looted the library's storage room and stole antique books.

A week later, on November 19, two powerful explosions occurred near the library. The blast wave blew out our windows, shattered the ceiling, and scattered furniture across the premises. Many of our employees were injured. As we later learned, the Russians were trying to hit the largest flagpole with the Ukrainian flag in the region, which is located next to the library. There was no heating in the building for a long time, and many of us got cold. On December 23, a woman from Kyiv came to the building and evacuated some of us. There was only enough space in the bus for seven of us.

REFUGEES

In early 2023, all of us – refugees from Kurylivka, Bohdanivka, Kherson and Kharkiv – decided to flee the war and set off for Germany. We were promised shelter in Hanover. We crossed the border secretly. We got into a big truck and hid behind boxes. The huge lorry was filled with them. Before we got in, we were warned that it would be warm in the truck, but there would be no light or water. That's how it was. Crossing the border took three days. We stood still for a long time, and then slowly moved a few meters. According to the documents, there were no living beings in the lorry, and the border guards did not notice us.

We lived in Hanover for about three months at the local Kunstverein museum (Kunstverein Hannover). When the agreed period of our stay expired, we had to return to Kyiv. Not everyone returned home. Unfortunately, two of us could not survive the journey and hardships, fell ill and died.

We did not stay long in Kyiv and found an opportunity to leave for safe Germany, this time to Munich. Due to constant moving, many of us fell ill, and in this condition we were not allowed to enter the Schengen area. However, false documents were drawn up for us. They were issued to people who had been examined by a specialist shortly before departure and had received all the necessary permits. After the check, the lorry with them went to the border, where they got out and we took their places. Fortunately, the border guards did not notice the change and let the vehicle through. In Munich, the Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism gave us shelter. We worked there, and in return we were given water and were not thrown out into the cold.

Then we went to Prague, where we initially lived in a cold room unsuitable for this purpose. Many of us fell ill and looked lousy after the move. In January 2024, we moved to the Rudolfinum Gallery (Galerie Rudolfinum), located in a large palace where the first Czech president, Tomáš Masaryk, once worked. We were allowed to live in the room where his office was located. Later, we returned to Kyiv again. In November 2025, some of us decided to leave Ukraine again and went to Poland. We were lucky because a Lithuanian diplomat unexpectedly helped us cross the border and drove us in his car. Unfortunately, not everyone made it here. It was difficult to leave our loved ones and friends in danger, but we were so tired of the constant threat that we decided to take the youngest ones with us. We settled in Białystok for two and a half months, in the spacious hall of the Arsenal Gallery power station.

The rest remain in Kyiv, which has recently been under frequent attack. The city is constantly experiencing power cuts, and our loved ones risk being left without heating in winter. But they categorically refused to leave because they are tired of being strangers that nobody needs. This winter will be hard. But we hope that everyone will survive and that we will meet again in a peaceful country that has won.

4 **REFUGEES, Yucca**
2023, video, 03'04"
Director: Zhanna Kadyrova
Cinematographer:
Natalka Diachenko
Editing: Zhanna Kadyrova,
Denis Ruban

Olena Olekhnovych, head of the Department of Culture, Tourism and Cultural Heritage of the city of Pokrovsk, spoke about her yucca — a plant that had been with her and her family for over 10 years and which she had to give away in order to save it.

5 **Military Mail Express**
2025, objects, drawings, video

Writing from the front line has never been easy. "I'm fine, don't worry about me" rings hollow when penned by a soldier in combat. Yet escaping such clichés is just as difficult, because life at the front resists verbal description. In the end, what matters most is the message itself — the simple fact that it exists. A letter that, by its very presence, testifies that someone is still alive to send it. It is enough to sign one's name or sketch the first image that comes to mind — to imprint one's existence on a sheet of paper. In her project *Military Mail Express*, Zhanna Kadyrova acts as a postwoman — literally — carrying mail from Colombian soldiers fighting in Ukraine from the front line to Colombia, specifically to the Biennale of Medellín. Kadyrova personally delivered their letters and brought back responses and messages of support to the soldiers at the front.

Taking communication as a performative act inseparable from materiality and the human body, Kadyrova has conceived an envelope that exceeds the logic of both the classical postal system and contemporary digital platforms. It is a metal envelope, too heavy to mail, its surface perforated by shrapnel. Inside are letters from Colombian fighters of the Guajiro unit, who joined Ukraine's struggle against Russian aggression. The unit is named after their first fallen comrade. Among the nationalities represented in the international brigades, Colombians form one of the largest groups and have suffered some of the highest casualties.

Unlike soldiers in past wars, today's fighters are not entirely cut off from society and sometimes have access to the Internet. Yet such digital exchanges lack a "body." The physical form of a letter corresponds more truthfully to what must be said: Russia's war of aggression is not virtual; it strikes real bodies, souls, and lives — of both defenders and civilians. After two weeks of travel across Poland, Italy, Spain, and Colombia, the heavy metal envelope carried on Kadyrova's back makes plain how difficult it remains, in an economically globalized yet politically fragmented world, to lend true weight and universal validity to a message sent by those resisting imperialism. Kadyrova's work fuses her sculptural practice with a reference to Mail Art, the movement that emerged in the 1960s with a vision of more egalitarian, transnational creation and distribution. The tension between a stubbornly material sculpture and Mail Art — which, by nature, flirts with dematerialization — embodies the paradox that certain messages remain hard to deliver, even in the so-called "information age" of the 21st century.

Amid the constant flood of data and news, we are reminded that empathy does not arise from the quantity of information, but from the subtle processes of sharing and the ability to connect information to lived experience. As a messenger, Kadyrova meets people along her route in peaceful transit countries — people for whom the daily reality of war feels distant, yet who are drawn to the "secrecy of correspondence." The sealed metal envelope provokes questions they had long since stopped asking. In Medellín, where the envelope was exhibited, visitors to the Biennale were invited to write or draw messages for Colombian soldiers serving in the Ukrainian army. Most had never met these fighters, yet the response was overwhelming. Solidarity, after all, is the willingness to engage — mentally, materially, physically — even when something does not concern us directly. To write or draw by hand for people risking their lives on another continent is a first step toward genuine international solidarity.

On October 17, 2025, representatives of the Colombian fighters received the messages from their unknown compatriots, personally delivered by Zhanna Kadyrova. Not much time had passed since the original letters were sent to Colombia — yet some addressees would never read the replies, as they were no longer alive.

The calm of the gallery and the presence of contemporary art audiences are as real as the soldiers fighting on the front line. To deny the existence of one and focus solely on the other is a kind of mental crutch — a refusal to face the breadth of reality itself. The flow of messages between gallery and front line that Kadyrova has enacted is not only a gesture of participation and the capacity to find joy in small things; it is also proof that it is worth keeping one's gaze steady — that the art world should not become a "safe haven" for escapism. Art is a multilayered form of communication between different worlds. In this project, Zhanna Kadyrova consciously steps back from the role of creator to emphasize the role of the messenger — the envelope itself, and the entire invisible mechanism of delivery and logistics that makes communication possible.

In this new work Kadyrova combines video, sound and camera-obscure photos with archival material. She examines the consequences of the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam by Russia in June 2023, the past and future of this region submerged under a reservoir, and nature's capacity for renewal.

The Forest has been in preparation for two years for IHME Helsinki Commission 2025 and realized together with partners in Ukraine: The Dovzhenko Centre film archive in Kyiv; the City of Zaporizhzhia; and the Khortytsia Museum. Numerous residents of the Zaporizhzhia region have also assisted Kadyrova.

The work *The Forest* is supported by Saastamoinen Foundation, Kone Foundation and Abakanowicz Arts and Cultural Charitable Foundation.

S A A S
T A M O
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T I Ö

KONEEN SÄÄTIÖ

ABAKANOWICZ
Arts and Culture Charitable Foundation

The Forest

2025, objects, texts, photos, video

6

The documentary provides insight into the daily life of Kadyrova and her colleagues in the small village of Berezovo in Zakarpattia, where they fled due to the war and the risk of Kyiv's occupation in March 2022. Before sending her *Palianytsia* to Venice for the Biennale, Zhanna organizes an exhibition in the village

Berezovo

2022, documentary film

7

Artists Zhanna Kadyrova and Denis Ruban spent two weeks in the basement of their home, hiding from missile strikes and diversionary intelligence groups of the occupiers, which were flooding the suburbs of Kyiv at the time.

When the danger had somewhat passed, they decided to evacuate to western Ukraine. Residents of one of the villages in the Transcarpathian region gave them shelter in a picturesque house on a hill near a river.

Doing the work you know and love for the good of Ukraine is the best an artist can offer in wartime. This is how the *Palianytsia* project was born — a series of objects made of stones carved by a mountain river.

Kadyrova's Palianytsia

2022, 19'56''
video by Ivan Sautkin

8

Work on the *ANXIETY* series began at the end of March 2022. Although Zhanna was hiding from military operations in a remote and relatively safe place, air raid sirens sounded almost every day, sometimes even three times a day, becoming a leitmotif in the lives of all the village residents. The quoted warning message, used in graphic sketches or traditional embroidery, embodies the omnipresence of the state of anxiety in which all people remaining in Ukraine live. They will be exposed to potential danger until the war ends. We are constantly reminded that there are no safe places in Ukraine.

Work on the series continues; exhibiting it in different countries, Zhanna began to work with local materials from those countries. The text has been translated into the languages of the local communities, reminding us that this war is not a local problem of Ukraine and that a theoretical threat exists for any civilised country if Russian aggression is not stopped.

ANXIETY

2022–2025,
embroidery on fabric, drawing

9

Palianytsia is the name of a Ukrainian round wheat bread that Russian occupiers cannot pronounce correctly, which is why it serves as a password or a way to identify other Ukrainians. *Palianytsia* is the first project that Zhanna Kadyrova and her co-author Denis Ruban have completed since the full-scale war began in Ukraine.

In March 2022, the artists left their home in Kyiv and moved to Transcarpathia to escape the shelling. While exploring the surroundings of this peaceful place in the west of the country, the artists noticed stones smoothed by the river current, whose shape resembles *palianytsia* bread. This gave them the idea to transform them into symbolic art objects. By cutting the collected stones, Kadyrova and Ruban created this series as a symbol of Ukrainian resistance.

All proceeds from the sale of these works of art are donated to volunteer organisations and artists who have joined the Ukrainian armed forces. To date, over half a million Euros have been raised.

Palianytsia

2022, objects
courtesy of the artist
and GALLERIA CONTINUA

10

Berezovo people

2022, drawings, ink on paper

11

EVENTS ACCOMPANYING THE EXHIBITION:

5.12.2025 (Fri), 6 p.m.

exhibition opening

6.12.2025 (Sat), 12 noon

curator and author guided tour

14.12.2025 (Sun), 11 a.m.

origami workshop

22.01.2026 (Thu), 6 p.m.

Meeting with Ksenia Malykh and Leonid Marushchak – curators of Zhanna Kadyrova's project *Security Guarantees* at the 61st Venice Biennale of Contemporary Art in 2026. A conversation about the protection of cultural heritage in wartime.

13.02.2026 (Fri), 6 p.m.

Performance by Waldemar Tatarczuk and Alina Kleytman

SPECIAL THANKS

Tomas Ivanauskas, Kristina Kisielovate,
Leonid Marushchak, Vlad Sharapov,
Elisabetta Negroni, GALLERIA CONTINUA

EXHIBITION OPEN

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last admission to exhibition is at 5.30 p.m.

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8 PLN

reduced 4 PLN

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