

Galerie für Gegenwartskunst, E-WERK Freiburg i.Br.

Gallery 2 | Sabina Shikhlinskaya, *Life on Borrow*

5 June – 14 July 2024

In her solo presentation *Life on Borrow*, the artist **Sabina Shikhlinskaya**, who lives in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, explores the ambivalent nature of the dialectic of destroying and rebuilding as an utopian idea of progress of progress and an experience of violence.

In her works the artist addresses in particular the repressed history of violence under Soviet rule and in the present. Based on her own biography, she creates spaces for remembering and reconsidering these forgotten or suppressed aspects of history.

In her installations fundamental questions about political violence are raised. Under what circumstances (if any) is it justified? Who is authorised to use it? Do the ends really justify the means? How can the human desire to preserve life, communities, memories and nature be maintained and strengthened in the face of the historically relentless repetition of destruction and construction? Questions about the ethics of violence are more relevant than ever in the present day.

1 *Petroleum Life Performance*, 2024

2 *Caspian Oil*, 2024

The two works address the human will to destroy that also triumphs over nature. For *Petroleum Life Performance*, Shikhlinskaya created a four-part acrylic painting that captures the beauty of the Caspian Sea. During her Life Performance at the exhibition opening she will paint it over with tar. With this gesture, the artist mimics the Caspian Sea being destroyed by oil extraction. Oil has been extracted in Azerbaijan since the end of the 19th century. Today, the state oil company SOCAR is one of Germany's most important suppliers. In *Caspian Oil*, a video of oil-contaminated seawater can be seen through a small opening in an oil drum.

3 *destruam & aedificabo*, 2024

At the centre of *Life on Borrow*, the words *destruam* (Latin 'I will destroy') & *aedificabo* (Latin 'I will build') are repeated as neon lettering on an LED bar as if they were a law of nature. As a necessary dialectic reversal this biblical quotation is reminiscent of the idea of historical progress manifested as anarchism and historical materialism. As stated in the final lines of the Communist Manifesto, revolutionary, political violence is considered justified and necessary for the realisation of a classless. However, the biblical quotation also evokes the baroque feeling of transience that Andreas Gryphius' poetry convey so impressively. Against the backdrop of the immeasurable misery caused by the 30-year religious wars in the 17th century, the sudden turn of flourishing life into death was most of all a futile experience of violence.

4 *Dacha*, 2016

An idyll of private happiness is imagined in *Dacha* as the antithesis to the destruction and misery caused by political violence.

The artist uses private video material. As a result, the work is interwoven with a specific historical and biographical context which takes on allegorical meaning in the artwork.

The garden is celebrated as a model for a creative community living together peacefully. Adults teach their children how to water a small piece of earth, to cultivate it and to enjoy nature. The bright, light mood of *Dacha* contrasts with the sombre, heavy atmosphere of the other videos in Shikhliinskaya's exhibition.

In the penultimate shot, the idyll is disenchanting. The sudden destruction of the ideal world suggests that the dynamics of *destruam & aedificabo* can ultimately only be interrupted for brief moments in art.

6 Claustrophobia, 2024

What could be the reasons that the dialectic of destruction and rebuilding in the name of progress does not stop despite failed social utopias and the enormous suffering that this justification has caused?

For the artist, ideological walls in the minds of powerful people close their horizons and tempt them to resort to the dynamics of destroying in the name of progress.

In order to create the experience of mental confinement, the artist has built virtual walls with two video projections facing each other. They form a corridor that closes off the viewer's view, only opening it up to the horizon of the sea and the landscape in rare moments.

7 Palace of Happiness, 2019

In this work, *aedificabo* triumphs over *destruam*, at least for a while. Thus it becomes an expression of hope that life-affirming constructive forces can prevail.

The protagonist of the installation is a magnificent building in Baku, whose fate was determined by the political upheavals of the 20th century. Built around 1910 as a private home by a successful industrial entrepreneur in Baku for his marital happiness, it was expropriated in the course of the communist revolution. When the Bolsheviks forced their way into the building, the owner fought back and eventually shot himself. Out of grief, his wife went mad and spent the rest of her life in an asylum.

Album: The artist uses historical photos from the Internet to create a photo album about the lives of the two lovers. They can be seen in their bourgeois robes before the Russian Revolution. The album contains numerous photos of the two buildings that the husband had built for his wife to celebrate their love. In addition to the house they lived in, he also dedicated a magnificent mosque to her.

Photo frame: Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the lovers' town house has been used as a venue for civil weddings. On the photo frame a recent civil wedding ceremony can be seen. It seems as if the building has regained its former purpose as a palace of love.

8 Dangerous Red, 2024

In *Dangerous Red* (Video Projection), the dialectic of construction and destruction is explored by means of a baroque still life. In a fight for prey, two cats suddenly jump on an arrangement with fruit, raw meat, a heart muscle, animal heads, offal and glasses, carefully composed by the artist in shades of red. The unexpected leap causes the upheaval that destroys the balance. With the jumbled still life and the decaying flesh, the artist refers to the realm of the domestic, into which violence and death can enter at any time. Red, the colour of revolution, embodies the political violence that threatens everyday life.

Politically instrumentalised violence for the suppression of human rights is the theme of the four-channel video work *Dangerous Red*. In each of the videos, the artist paints over a motif

on canvas with red colour. These motifs are taken from press photos documenting political violence aimed at suppressing freedom of expression and human rights. One image shows a squad of police deploying force to arrest an individual activist. On another is from the US prison camp at Guantanamo. The work illustrates that liberalism too regards violence as a legitimate means if it serves the defence of its ideals of freedom.

By painting over these motifs with red as the colour of political protest, the artist non-violently objects to the political violence that these images bear witness to.

9 *Carpet Bombing*, 2022

The video installation ***Carpet Bombing*** (2022) shows the enormous destruction caused by technically organised political violence that suddenly wipes out flourishing human lives. The artist montaged 33 b/w aerial photographs of historical and current carpet bombings. Every shot appears blurred at first, then in sharp detail. They show, among others, Guernica (1937), Barcelona, London, Rotterdam, Dresden, Grozny, Aleppo (2016) and Mariupol (2022). Every image accompanied by the sound of an explosion. The sequences of acoustically layered images convey the impression of endless carpet bombings. Shikhliinskaya's work thus emphasises the historically uninterrupted sequence of *destruam & aedificabo* through war.

10 *Talk with Father*, 2012

Political violence in the name of dialectical progress that turned a social utopia into tyranny is the subject of *Talk with Father*. In this Skype interview from 2011, the artist asks her father, living at the time in Israel, about the Soviet Union. As a member of the communist party and professor of (communist) history in the USSR, he owed a great deal to the Soviet State. Three years before the annexation of Crimea by Russia and 11 years before the war of aggression against Ukraine, the father as a historian speaks openly about the long-suppressed history of political violence in the USSR that cost the lives of at least 21 million people.