

G A L L E R I A

*Arsenal*

PLANTS

**Alevtina Kakhidze**

and people

**Arsenal Gallery in Białystok**

**24.10.2024 — 19.01.2025**

curator: Monika Szewczyk

Alevtina Kakhidze (b. 1973) is a Ukrainian artist of Ukrainian-Georgian descent. Her work primarily focuses on performance and drawing, but she also creates videos, installations, and texts. She lives in Muzychi, Ukraine, 26 kilometers from Kyiv, and grew up in the Donetsk region. She studied at the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture in Kyiv and the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. Her performances, writings, and drawings often explore the post-Soviet reality of Ukraine and Georgia. Kakhidze is a sharp observer of socio-political changes, and her drawings could be seen as a visual chronicle of Ukraine's recent history—from the Maidan protests of 2013–14, in which she actively participated, through the years of Russia's hybrid warfare (beginning in 2014), to the full-scale invasion by Russia in 2022, which continues to this day.

Kakhidze documents these dramatic events with the distance and objectivity of a scientist analyzing a system—or rather, multiple systems: legal, educational, colonial, consumerist, and systems of violence. She actively engages in contemporary discourses, often provoking significant debate. Her drawings created after February 24, 2022, frequently reflect on the cultural dynamics between Russia and Ukraine, going beyond the immediate realities of war to explore deeper themes within the history and culture of both nations, highlighting Russian colonialism and imperialism.

Kakhidze's longstanding interest in plants has taken on a deeper significance in the context of war. She sees plants as some of the purest examples of pacifism on our planet; to her, they represent a model worthy of imitation but ultimately unattainable. As she writes in one of her works: "If I am wounded, I wish I could regenerate the way plants do".

Monika Szewczyk



## How can we measure the value of works created during bombardment?

When the air raid ended  
people ran and shouted,  
they are buried alive here,  
you can hear them screaming.  
Three floors have collapsed  
onto this basement.

People dug with their hands,  
they tried to uncover three floors  
with shovels, with hands  
of five fingers,  
they dug day and night.

In the morning, there was another air raid,  
it killed those who were digging.  
No one could hear  
the screams from underground anymore.

*A scream from underground, Anna Świrszczyńska*

Alevtina Kakhidze was born in the Soviet Union and spent her childhood and early youth in the Donetsk region, in the town of Zhdanivka, which is now occupied by Russians. She always aspired to be an artist, although her first degree was in civil engineering. Only later did she enter the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture in Kyiv—a challenging endeavor—and eventually the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. Throughout her career, she has explored the experience of being an artist. Now, this question grows more complex: what does it mean to be an artist in Ukraine—a country that broke away from the Soviet Union and, despite its well-known struggles, consistently seeks integration with the Western world, the European Union, and NATO, pursuing the guarantees these institutions declare. Alevtina's mother was a kindergarten teacher in Zhdanivka. Despite many pleas, she refused to leave her home, even though the town was under occupation. The war in Ukraine has been ongoing since 2014, and yet, in the word "occupation," there are echoes of the 1940s—reflections of swastikas, sickles, and hammers. Over the eighty years since the end of World War II, much has happened culturally around this war, but some things have yet to be collectively processed. In contemporary culture, especially the visual arts, we have not fully told the story of what it meant to exist within the Soviet sphere of influence. In contrast, we have addressed the legacy of Nazi Germany much more effectively.

To receive her pension, Alevtina's mother had to cross checkpoints controlled by Russian terrorists who invoke Soviet mythology. The pension could only be withdrawn in

areas administered by Ukraine. Klubnika Andriyivna—or Ms. Strawberry Andriyivna, as the kindergarten children affectionately called her, blending a childlike nickname with the local adult custom of using patronymics—could usually speak to her daughter on the phone only at the cemetery, because it was the only place with reception in the summer of 2014. One day, while crossing a checkpoint, her heart gave out. Alevtina documented each of their conversations through drawings and text. To see the tombstone she designed for her mother, it's best to visit the cemetery in Muzychi. There, the artist recreated the layout of their house in Zhdanivka. The only vertical elements are slabs that symbolize doors and passageways. Alevtina brought her mother the home she never wished to leave, all the way to the cemetery.

The home of Alevtina, Suzi, Penelopa, and Volodymyr—both human and animal inhabitants—was built in Muzychi, a village near Kyiv. Alevtina feels deeply connected to the local community: her career is international, but she also teaches art to local children, hosts artists from around the world in private residencies, and has, for years, worked tirelessly to make contemporary art accessible to her neighbors. I have always found this inspiring. In February 2022, Alevtina chose to stay in her home, even as many of her neighbors fled. She was asked to care for their animals: chickens, cats, dogs, turtles, and fish—an entire menagerie that she looked after during the occupation. Together with Volodymyr, Alevtina also breeds Alabai dogs—beautiful yet formidable Central Asian shepherds. When I visited them in January 2023, one of these powerful dogs, capable of taking down a wolf to protect a flock of sheep, died of a heart attack on the very day of my visit. The dog's heart could not endure the prolonged stress of air raid sirens and gunfire. The worst period was between February and May 2022, when Russian soldiers advanced to less than two kilometers from Alevtina's village. Stress kills more slowly than rockets.

For the first three months of the invasion, Alevtina hid in her basement, taking breaks only to feed her animals and those left by her neighbors. There, she drew messages to the world and gave interviews. Volodymyr, along with other locals, defended the area's checkpoint. Should I mention that during this time, the Russians shelled a nearby school and maternity hospital? Yes, I should. And perhaps I should also note that, *de jure*, the targets of military operations are supposed to be military installations—not civilian infrastructure. It is important to underline that the killing of civilians and the destruction of civilian structures have long been elements of Russian military strategy—something rarely questioned by representatives of Russian culture, who play a crucial role in shaping the world's view of the country.

I write about Alevtina Kakhidze's private life because it forms the basis of her work—her concise, witty pieces that are often built on paradoxes. With drawings and commentary, Alevtina can focus her attention on any point in the world. In 2004, she began a series called *The Most Commercial Project*. While in the Netherlands, unable to afford items displayed in shop windows, she decided to draw them instead. The price of each artwork was set to match the price of the depicted item; she even drew artworks themselves. The works displayed at the Arsenal Gallery in Białystok follow a similar approach. This act of artistic self-nomination, confirmed by the media and art institutions, allows her to critique key points of global discourse—particularly when those discussions get bogged down in defending their own privileges, comforts, and beliefs. Alevtina is particularly annoyed by “westplaining,” especially the defense of the status quo in Russian culture.

It is ironic that global pop culture remains devoted to the notion that 19th-century works from the Russian Empire signify sophistication and—typical of pop culture—completely ignores both the context in which they were created and later developments that facilitated their assimilation into the global canon. Alevtina consistently conveys that Russian culture is a weapon wielded by the empire; this is a truth that everyone should confront before diving into their favorite readings.

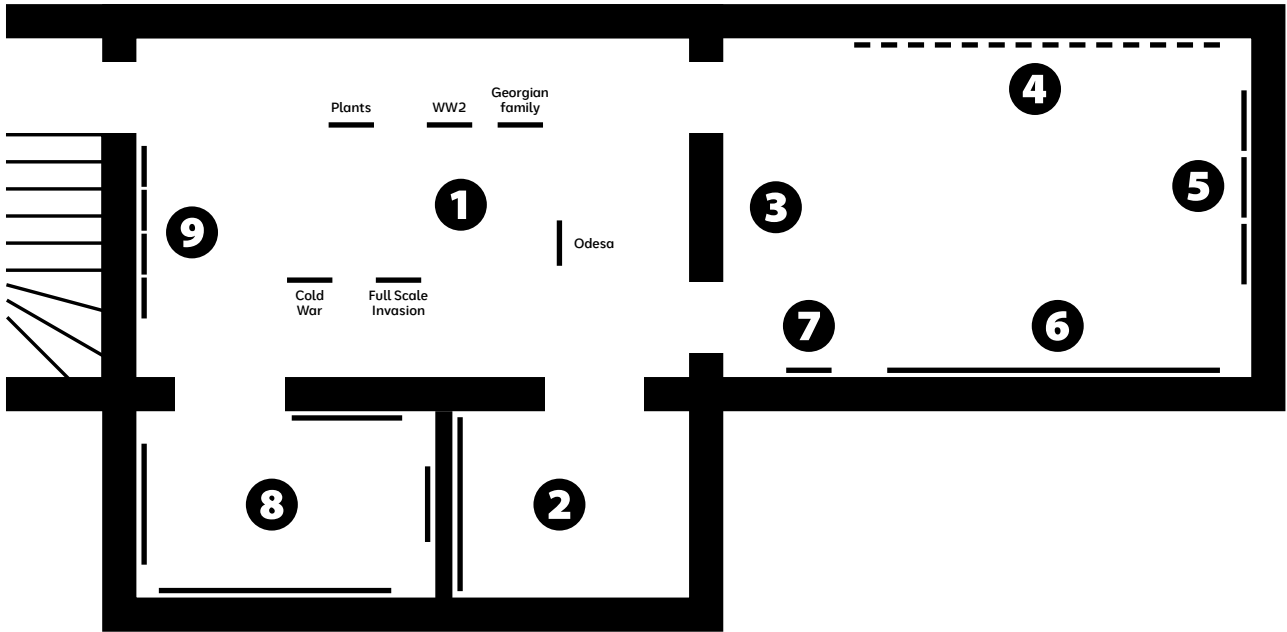
Here is an artist giving live interviews over the Internet to leading television networks worldwide in real-time broadcasts. She faces the threat of sudden death. How does the fact of being under fire affect the market value of her work? Her experience of existential crisis is on the edge. “What am I afraid of: being wounded? killed? occupied?” “I wish I could regenerate the way plants do” (severed limbs sprouting green shoots and growing back)—writes and draws Alevtina Kakhidze. She places herself within her drawings, striving to be visible and part of the global discourse. From a war-torn Ukraine, she introduces her unique perspective to decolonial and climate debates. With her distinctly situated viewpoint, she openly reveals her political stance and challenges the Western world, which often fails to recognize its own regressive tendencies.

Pairing the exhibitions of Alevtina Kakhidze and William Kentridge at the Arsenal Gallery in Białystok strikes me as a brilliant choice. Both artists consistently reflect on their condition as humans and artists. This unique status—the intersection of art and those who create it—serves as both a starting point and a medium for their work, as much as any other material (perhaps even more so). They have long embraced their roles, yet they continue to question, marvel at, and test the transformative power of art. A certain thread of our culture continuously works toward collective awareness, striving to respect people regardless of race, class, ethnicity, citizenship, sexuality, or socio-economic status. We often get swept up in this current, treating its proposed ideas as factual—as a canon with which everyone supposedly agrees. But reality often tells a different story—one shaped by circumstances, like passports, place of birth, resources, and influence. I don’t want to call the message of supporting those in need or upholding humanistic values a lie—perhaps without it, we would collectively plunge into an abyss. Perhaps without this, fewer minds would follow the path that leads to resistance and the bold decisions required to counteract aggression.

The works exhibited at the Arsenal Gallery were created during the Russian Federation’s invasion of Ukraine. This invasion has a clearly articulated genocidal aim, expressed through both official propaganda and the actions of Russian forces in Ukraine and beyond. My hands weaken as I write this. I think about my visit to Bucha, just a 47-minute drive from Alevtina’s village of Muzychi. I remember the photograph of a bloodied, still-living pregnant woman from Mariupol being carried on a stretcher. I recall a conversation with a minibus driver from Muzychi, who spoke of the occupation, saying that his late colleague had been foolish to go out on the road, as it was obvious the Russians would be shooting.

Anna Łazar

Essays by Monika Szewczyk and Anna Łazar translated into English by Anna Bergiel  
Other English translations courtesy of the artist



# PLANTS and people

## 1 ALL GOOD?

six panels, private archival and historical materials (interpreted by the artist), found objects, drawings, herbariums, 2024

Alevtina illustrates the destructive impact of the Russian Empire on the history of her Ukrainian-Georgian family, as well as on the events in Ukraine and Europe during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She then transitions to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, sharing her personal experiences during the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.

### TEXT ON PANELS:

#### Plants

We have domestic (native) hogweeds in Ukraine. They are modest in size, not like Sosnowsky's hogweed brought here from the Caucasus. The nickname in Ukraine for this one is "Stalin's revenge."

Stalin was from Gori, Georgia (Caucasus).

The cultivation of Sosnowsky's hogweed in Ukraine began in 1947, when Stalin was alive, and its first use for silage at Soviet collective farms dates back to the 1960s (after Stalin's death). The propaganda would advertise it as "a high-yield silage crop capable of ensuring a milk yield of 11,000 liters per cow annually." But animals would start getting blisters

on their mucosae from the plant's juice, which makes skin hypersensitive to UV rays and causes burns. Cultivation of Sosnowsky's hogweed would be stopped, but this plant would keep cultivating itself without humans, just like in my village near Kyiv.

Muzychi, 2023.

Everybody I met on the way to my studio to take a picture with this specimen would tell me that this plant is an abomination and an invader or occupant!

I would be collecting herbaria in my childhood years, winning biology Olympiads. At the time, I wasn't aware of the crucial difference between native plants and invasive ones. I wouldn't even fathom that something could go wrong in the plant world. But I would hear of Stalin. Dad would ask me not to believe the people saying he had killed millions of Ukrainians. (Ha-ha in the context of mom's side). But I would even try to look at the statues and paintings of Stalin out of the political context and say to myself: "He looks a bit like my Dad because he's Georgian, too!" But now I would say: Sure, there were individuals from Georgia and Ukraine who were on the side of the Russian Imperial State against their own people. Humans are not like plants, which behave the same inside a species.

## Odesa

My Mom

Odesa, 1969

My Mom. She adored the sea. But in the USSR, moving from one city to another city was quite a feat. Soviet people had a peculiar stamp in their passports—*propiska*—showing a residence permit. You could live and work only where you have *propiska*. Moving elsewhere was an option, like, if you landed a job at an industrial plant with poison conditions (hazardous work). So, Mom took up a job at rope works in Odesa.

Mom didn't necessarily have to go to Odesa if she was after a rope works job. A similar rope plant was located near our town of Zhdanivka, in Khartsyzk. The Russians captured the city during their 2014 occupation.

In this picture, my brother and I eat corn curls made in Khartsyzk.

Hello to all who has a simpathy to this state!

My Dad

My Dad would come to Odesa from Georgia to Marine college—after all, they were part of the same country at the time. He also adored the sea. After graduating, he would spend about 10 years at sea.

When I entered Jan van Eyck Academie in the Netherlands in 2004, Dad would say, "It's a beautiful, free country! I stopped there many times. But I'd never gone to the cinema there because I could be fired from sailing for that. A KGB person was always snooping on us, reporting everything we did."

In 2004, Malta joined the EU.

I would go to the EU to study.

And here's my birth certificate. It says my Dad is Adzhar, and my Mom is Russian. Why would they write that about her? She was Ukrainian.

Me

## WW2

This is my Great-grandmother, born in 1905.

First World War: Ukrainians were fighting in different imperial armies.

And this is my Grandma, born in 1921.

The twins—are missing here, died in Holodomor in Vinnytsia Oblast. My Grandpa (I have no photo of him) would say, “We will all starve to death here. It’s time to move out to Donbas. Mine workers earn themselves rations there, and we could use it for all of us.” I would hear this story countless times at home but not in my Soviet school.

As of August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023, the parliaments of 28 countries would recognize the Holodomor of 1932–1933 as genocide of Ukrainians. Malta is not between those countries!

Malta was still under the British rule at the time.

Another three Great-grandma’s children are missing here. They would get killed in the war. But Grandma would survive. She would go to war as well. See her at left on the bottom.

And her husband, my Grandpa, too! He is on the left. They all were Ukrainians fighting the Nazis. Still, in everyday conversations and even at Amsterdam’s Anne Frank House last summer, I would hear on the audio guide, “The Russian soldiers liberated Auschwitz”! What? It was “the Red Army!”

Some Georgian family members on my Dad’s side fought Nazis, too. The Red Army that fought in World War II wasn’t exclusively made up of Russians.

In the Soviet Union, WWII was called “the Great Patriotic War” with the beginning in 1941, when Nazi Germany attacked the USSR. Actually, the USSR joined WWII in 1939 as an ally of Nazi Germany. According to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (Hitler-Stalin Pact) Poland was divided between the USSR and Germany. The Western Ukraine, which became a part of Poland in 1920, was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939. I wouldn’t learn about it until the 2000s when I ended up in Lviv. Ask Russians about this, all those intellectuals moved to the EU and to the US.

This is what Donbas looked like when my family came there, fleeing the Holodomor. They would never return home from there. That’s also why I’m from Donbas. Notice, they are wearing traditional Ukrainian embroidered shirts – *vyshyvanka*.

Grandma would speak Ukrainian, while Mom remained exclusively Russian-speaking. Just think it over: they always live together, except for those few years when Mom tried to “break out of Donbas” and “settle down” in Odesa. In 2014, Russia would make the “protection of the Russian-speaking population”—primarily those like my Mom—a pretext for its hybrid war on Ukraine. Analogous contempt and malice is difficult to find in history. But I am searching, talking to people from colonized nations.

### Georgian family

After leaving his marine work, Dad wouldn’t join us in Donbas but return to Georgia. Mom wouldn’t come to him either. My brother and I would visit him in Batumi in the summer in 1992. We were supposed to go from Ilovaisk (Ukraine now) to Sochi by train (Sochi became a Russian city after the USSR’s collapse) and then take a *Kometa* hydrofoil to Batumi (that was independent Georgia already). However, all the *Kometa* trips from Sochi would get



canceled because one of the boats came under fire from the Abkhazia bank. We would have to wait a few days for a large catamaran, which entered neutral waters to avoid being shot.

1992, Russia provoked a war between Abkhazian separatists and the Georgian government by supporting the former. The war ended with the separation of Abkhazia from Georgia, which was what Russia wanted.

(Georgia-Abkhazia War)

We would also have an incident with the Soviet rubles Mom gave us for our travel expenses. We couldn't pay for anything with them while waiting for the catamaran or rent a place to stay in Sochi. Also, we would treat a lady with poor sight somewhat wrong. When she asked us, "Lenin? is here" (meaning, if he was depicted on the bills), we would answer, "No Lenin with us!"

This is my other grandma, Dad's mom. We would never actually meet—I wouldn't step into her house until after she passed away. She would tell my Dad: "I don't want those Russian children!" My nephew would also mistake me for a Russian and call me an invader for speaking Russian. His mom, my brother's wife, would be from Abkhazia. And then, I would use Google Translate while talking to my nephew.

2003 Georgia's Rose Revolution

2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine (Maidan)

It was important for Putin to convince the Russians that the Rose and Orange Revolutions were not the deal by Ukrainians and Georgians, but had been organized by America.

In 2008 Russia accused Georgia of planning to attack Russia and realized the short and rude intervention to Georgian territory. As a result a part of Georgian territory appeared under the Russian control. There were international tabloids, which warned Ukraine—you will be the next. The most part of Ukrainians thought that it is bullshit—Russians say that Ukrainians and Russians are Brothers. They can't attack their brothers.

Yet, there was no genuine Union, no "family of peoples."

## **Full Scale Invasion**

2013

As a response to Putin's attempt to control Ukraine via our president Yanukovich, who refused to move to the EU direction, the Ukrainians launched the Euromaidan. Putin conceived it as a danger for his own power.

This is me in Crimea.

2014

Russian troops invaded the Ukrainian region of Crimea

Russian-provoked war in Donbas (since April 2014)

Mom would say: "Russians already drove my grandmother, my mother, and all our family from our home," (she meant the Holodomor). "Am I supposed to flee again?"

She would spend 5 years under Russian occupation—from April 2014 and until she died in 2019 after her heart had stopped at the Zaitseve checkpoint controlled by the Russian

militia from the so-called DPR (Donetsk People Republic). Mom would have to wait in line outdoors for 11 hours in January to see her sister on the Ukrainian-controlled side.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine

I would resolve to stay in Ukraine during the invasion. Russian forces would be stopped 1.5–3 km from my studio. I prepared to die those days.

On January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2024, the house of my aunt, my Mother's sister, would be destroyed by a Russian S-300 missile. She also lived in Donbas. Six of her neighbors, including three children, would be killed. Not a single body would be found intact. Aunt would have to take the heel of her neighbor's child from her dogs. As I work on this project, my aunt treats barotrauma, and her dogs live with me near Kyiv. During the first year of the full-scale invasion, she would start messaging me in Ukrainian.

"When I visited her in the hospital, she looked at me and said that she was seeing numbers – 1,2,4,8,11 – and snowflakes on my face. Half a year later, she still has those same kinds of hallucinations."

## Cold War

"In 1974, Malta became a republic. The British forces were fully withdrawn from the country on May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1979." I wonder what was going on here over those 5 years?

In 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. In the years of the "Cold War" (1947–1991) the USSR nourished the multiple military conflicts in Africa, Middle East, Latin America.

These are my school transcripts. They're all in Russian because our city had no Ukrainian-language schools. I heard Ukrainian only from my Grandma and the cartoons aired on the Ukraina-1 channel in the evening. The cartoons themselves were in Russian, but the presenter—who went by the nickname Grandpa Panas—always spoke Ukrainian while introducing them.

This year I finished school in Mariupol, the city would be ruined in 2022 by Russia and thousands of people would be killed.

I would first speak Ukrainian in 2000 with somebody from the Ukrainian diaspora\* who didn't understand Russian.

From Iryna Bilyk, a singer who would come to perform in our city I would hear my city's name—Zhdanivka—in Ukrainian for the first time.

1989: From Yalta to Malta Summit. The meeting between George H. W. Bush (USA) and Mikhail Gorbachev (USSR). They would discuss their countries' future for several days, and the USSR would cease to exist in two years.

That year, the miners in my city and elsewhere in Donbas would come to Kyiv to protest because they were paid in clothes, TVs, and other electric appliances for their work instead of money. Dad, who came to visit us at the time, would say, "The Soviet economy will crumble. Let me show you how market economies live." And he would take me to Turkey.

Dad often visited Moscow, but we would never be there together. I wish I could see the reaction to his Russian, with his accent and mistakes in inanimate objects' genders. Much

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\* It was Jerzy (Yuri) Onuch, well-known in Poland.

like in English, all inanimate entities are “it” in Georgian. Why do I talk about it? So, during my first visit to Moscow, in 2000, people would point out mistakes in my Russian and my unfamiliarity with certain words, like, for instance, “otcheshnik” (a spectacle case, or “futliar dlia okulyariv” in Ukrainian). My Russian landlady in Moscow would ask me laughingly: “Kuda zhe vy otchki kladete?” (“Where do you put your spectacles?”)

## ② ALL GOOD?

video, 20', 2024

video performance based on true events

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Concept and Screenplay — Alevtina Kakhidze

Filming, Staging, Editing — Roman Khimei

Sound Director — Pavlo Litovkin

Colorist — Vadim Khudoliy

Choreographer — Kristina Shyshkarova

Costume — GA.EVA

Special thanks to:

PJSC “Stalkanat”, Odesa National Maritime Academy, Odesa National Fine Arts Museum, Museum of Odesa Modern Art, Kateryna Khimei, Diana Khalilova, Iryna Semenyuk, Oleksandr Semenyuk, Kabduhaly Sidekov, Nataliia Koval, Ilaria Sobolevska, Kateryna Iholkina, Oksana Dovhopolova, Kateryna Semenyuk, Kseniia Paltsun, Volodymyr Damaskin, Oleksandra Shevtsova, Oleksii Voronko, Anna Rybak, Otar Karalashvili

I am “Made in Odesa”—my parents became romantically involved there. When I think about their aspirations: his—to go to sea; hers—to live at the seaside—and the circumstances they found themselves in (mind you, it happened in the Soviet Union), I feel that they were meant to meet each other.

In order to move to the seaside, my Mom had to take a job at a hazardous industrial plant—the Odesa steel wire rope factory. Many of the Westerners I know tend to romanticize the USSR. But, as a Soviet citizen, you lacked the fundamental right to live where you wanted. My Dad had to leave Georgia and go to Ukraine to enroll in a maritime college (the one he studied at is now the Odesa National Maritime Academy). At the time, the two countries, as Soviet Republics, were considered to be part of “one big family”.

I don’t know his opinions on the Ukrainian language, culture, and history. We rarely saw each other, and he passed away in 2005. But there’s one thing I discovered that worries me. His mother, my grandma, didn’t want to see my brother and me. She said, “I don’t need those Russian kids.” Yet, we were Ukrainian kids, even if we were Russian-speaking.

What else can I add about my parents? Sometime after returning to Donetsk region, when she was pregnant with me (she hadn’t been able to get her Odesa residence permit), my Mom graduated from a teachers college—she was really fond of working with children. My Dad completed his studies in Odesa and went to sea. Later, when his seafaring days were over, he returned home to Batumi in Georgia and started working there as an engineer. He also had a gift to perform but never considered himself as a performance artist.

### ③ INVASIONS 1.2.3.

360° VR film, 2022

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Commissioned by: Manifesta 14, Kosovo 2022

Concept: Alevtina Kakhidze

Screenplay and Direction: Alevtina Kakhidze, Piotr Armianovski

Camera, Editing: Piotr Armianovski

Sound Design: Serhiy Kulbachnyi

Music: Maksym Shalyhin

Cast: Alevtina Kakhidze (artist), Alexander Krolikovski (artist), Oleksiy Kovalenko (botanist from the National Museum of Natural History of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, author of the book *“Alien Plants: How Hogweed and Ragweed Conquer the Earth”*, 2021), Anatol Stepanenko (artist, filmmaker, and poet), Tamara Hryhorivna (resident of the village of Muzychi in Kyiv region)

The film was shot after the liberation of the Kyiv region from Russian occupation in 2022. Alevtina Kakhidze reconnects with friends in Irpin, Muzychi, and Mostyshche. Through the 360° format, the reality of the Russian-Ukrainian war unfolds detail by detail: to the left, a destroyed bridge and ruined houses; to the right, children playing, a joyful dog named Chuck, and a newly planted garden bed. Throughout the film, Alevtina’s clothing shifts from mourning attire to festive wear, eventually ending with her in casual home clothes, cooking a meal using invasive plant species in her kitchen. Her walk with a Kyiv-based botanist reveals another conflict in Ukraine—a war among plants.

### ④ INVASIONS

story in drawings (14 sheets), 2022

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#### TEXT ON DRAWINGS:

P1

On February 24, that which they will later call in English the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, starts.

From all over the world, they start phoning me and offering to help me flee to peaceful countries.

P2

I behave like a plant: I stay in place, despite the shots.

No fleeing!

P3

But I still go down to the cellar, next to the beets and the cabbages, and lie there, hiding from the fighting between the Russian army and Ukraine’s military.

P4

Against the background of news about the Russian tanks moving in my direction, the definition of invasive plants creates a sustained sense of an experience in common precisely with the local species: “the invasive species easily move across space and time, entering new territories; these intruders cause some local species to suffer, and others to disappear forever.”

P5

In March, Russian troops occupy villages that are five kilometers from me... I recall how, in 2014, when Russia begins the war with Ukraine, occupying some territories in the east, the neighbors say, “Can we cut this plant next to your studio? It’s an occupier!”

P6

I ask back, “This beautiful one?”  
“This is *vatochnyk*. It is invasive.”  
“And where is it from, if it’s an occupier?”

P7

I cut it off myself and dry it.

P8

Sometime later, halfway across the planet, I saw *vatochnyk* “at home,” where it “came from,” where it is not an “occupier,” but a “local hero.” This was in Kansas, where this plant is known as milkweed!

There, I learned that monarch butterflies exist thanks to milkweed; they drink the nectar from its flowers and their caterpillars feed on its leaves. The US state’s environmental activists would likely not understand the pleas of my neighbors to cut down the milkweed, or *vatochnyk*.

P9

Milkweed arrives in Ukraine to satisfy industrial demands, but not successfully; it “goes wild,” “escapes from botanical gardens,” “flees back to nature,” “begins to live the way it pleases.”

And its life in “Ukraine” becomes “dominant,” “privileged,” a “life without enemies,” “beyond a system of checks and balances”...

P10

Because there is no one in Ukraine who could, like the monarch butterflies, weaken it, by consuming its parts.

Can I say anything about the life of other beings if I am not a plant?

It’s the same thing with solidago, commonly known as goldenrods. In Ukraine, this plant behaves invasively, as a “foreigner,” “occupier,” “intruder,” “colonizer”...

P11

I look at its root system: there is no place for other plants there. It sends up to 300 shoots per square meter; it is about to get into my studio.

“At home,” in North America, it is “controlled” by large herbivore animals; in Ukraine, the snails are the only ones who offer some resistance.

P12

In April, the occupied villages around me are liberated. Heavy weaponry is used. There are military casualties on both sides, and casualties among the civilians from the Ukrainian villages as well.

“And invasive plants, in difference from people, do not kill the local species instantly!”  
As I stand next to two graves in my village, I think:  
“shot at a checkpoint,” “blew up on a mine.”

P13

Invasive plants suppress local plants, but this is a bloodless struggle. Plants don't have blood; they only have juices, which are light green.

With the longer roots, they take in nutrients and water;  
with the larger leaves, they block out the sun  
—they “transform the environment to suit themselves,” and, in this environment, “there is no place left” for the locals.

P14

But plants do not kill other plants instantaneously, and that's that.

When the Russian troops were near, I wrote on the door of my studio:

“Follow the example of plants: they are pacifists on this planet. As much as possible!”

P15

How can the local plants then defend themselves from the invasive ones?

(I cannot affirm with full certainty that plants pose such a question to themselves).

“Can one arm local plants, so that they could resist the invasive ones?” I call a Kyiv botanist on the phone, hoping that he is OK; when you remain in Ukraine, there is no certainty about the next moment.

“One can't. They are pacifists. I saw your door on the news... The invasion of such species can usually be contained by humans – when they turn over the soil, when they use *amitrole* or *glyphosate* – against milkweed, for example.”

P16

But what if we start eating invasive plants, the way monarch caterpillars eat milkweed, or large herbivores eat solidago?

P17

I cannot affirm with full certainty that local plants are waiting for humans to save them.

“Within all the hypotheses about species' invasiveness on our planet, it is humans who are to blame, since the invasive intrusions of plant species begin when people build ships, then airplanes” — from definitions of invasive plants.

P18

I cannot affirm with full certainty that, because of human guilt, plants call upon humans to take responsibility.

In June, milkweed starts growing. I cut the young stems and eat them, like a monarch butterfly.

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But I fry them up first with cornmeal and vegetable oil.

I make it weaker, consuming parts of it.

P20

In July, I again descend to the cellar because of air raid sirens that warn about russian rockets. From those days' news: "russian occupiers continue stealing Ukrainian grain"... "It has been a long time since there was a war on the territory of a country that feeds a large portion of the world."

At that very moment, I think that we need to continue work on developing a perennial form of wheat, the variety that, I believe, was labeled M34085. Work on this variety stopped in 1937; this wheat is similar to the perennial grain developed in Salina, the agricultural hub in Kansas. When I touched its stem, my heart skipped a beat: "One can come to the field like to an apple tree and harvest some for my bread."

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The perennial wheat has roots as deep as the trees. This is why it does not emit carbon dioxide, like the annuals with which all Ukrainian fields are planted.

In my mind, I have a discussion with Bruno Latour, who read the news about the war in Ukraine and about climate change, and could not choose

P22

which tragedy to prioritize.

In this imagined exchange, I said: "Ha-ha-ha! I advise you to select Ukraine as tragedy No. 1, because of its occupied south and east, where battles are now raging. This is where we grow wheat and sunflowers. This is where there is a chance to replace them with perennials, and thereby lessen the emissions to hold back the climate crisis!"

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I come out of the cellar and call the Kyiv botanist, hoping that he is OK; when you remain in Ukraine, there is no certainty about the next moment.

"If we have more perennial plants, including in the fields, will this stop the intrusion of invasive plants?"

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"Yes, it would make it more difficult for them to intrude" ...

P25

«C'est ce que je ressens depuis que je lis en même temps les nouvelles de la guerre en Ukraine et le nouveau rapport du GIEC sur la mutation climatique. Je ne parviens pas à choisir l'une ou l'autre de ces deux tragédies...»\* [Bruno Latour]

'This is how I feel after reading news of the war in Ukraine and the new IPCC report on climate change at the same time. I can't decide between these two tragedies.'\*\* [Bruno Latour]

## 5 HERBARIUM

Plant specimens collected in Ukraine, starting from 2020

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During the international ArtsLink 2020 fellowship, Alevtina reached out to scientists at the University of Kansas with questions about plants originating in the United States that became invasive in Ukraine, and vice versa. It was at that time — two years before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, known in English as 'Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine' (in Polish, 'pełnoskalowa inwazja Rosji na Ukrainę') — that Alevtina began collecting samples of invasive plants and creating herbariums worldwide. She also became interested in the traditional plant-use practices of Native Americans, which are explored in her film *Invasion 1.2.3.* and her graphic novel *Invasions.*

## 6 PLANTS AND PEOPLE

drawing on paper, 2022

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Plants are fundamentally different organisms: the leaf of a plant isn't the same as a human's arm. In general, plants have different ways to pass information to each other, as well as recover and defend in front of danger. Kakhidze has been researching plants for many years, her optic on the plant world during war became even more sharp, as well as giving a hope for the future for human civilisation.

### TEXT ON DRAWING:

I wish our soldiers could regenerate like plants.

I stood there, wondering how to take my entire life with me... but I couldn't... I looked at the plants and took a piece from every part of my life, hoping to multiply them like seedlings.

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\* B. Latour, «Quelles entre-deux-guerres?», AOC, 13.05.2022, <https://aoc.media/opinion/2022/03/02/quelles-entre-deux-guerres/>, also available on: «Quelles entre-deux-guerres?» *Chronique du Jeudi N°1034*, Radio Univers, <https://www.radio-univers.com/quelles-entre-deux-guerres-n1034/>.

\*\* B. Latour, 'Between Which Two Wars?', in *Living in Overlapping States of War*, transl. and ed. by D. Bennett, *New Formations*, Volume 2022, Number 107-108, 191-197 (p. 191).



For trees, the leaves are their eyes; they are the most responsive to the world, allowing trees to see through them. When trees shed their leaves, it means they are closing their eyes and going to sleep. This spring, the trees awoke to see ruins.

Those who did not flee the war stood their ground like plants... always resilient.

Plants, teach me to be like you.

I envy you endlessly, plants.

The plants killed by the war aren't counted by journalists or politicians—only by gardeners.

Support native plants; they are fragile against invasive species.

Plants do not kill each other instantly like humans do.

## **7 PLANTS AND PEOPLE**

photo, 2022

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In March 2022, when Russian tanks were close to her studio in Muzychi, she wrote on her studio's door: "Follow the example of plants, they are pacifist as much as possible on our planet".

## **8 WAR DIARIES**

drawings on paper, since 2022

video of the drawing session *Dialogue #7*, 2024

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Following the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war on February 22, 2022, Alevtina Kakhidze began creating a series of diary-like drawings. The *War Diaries* feature quickly sketched scenarios accompanied by explanatory notes. They capture the artist's daily experiences during the war—living under the constant threat of missile attacks, without electricity or heating—while also addressing global political discussions. Through a blend of humor and critical analysis, Alevtina examines how Ukraine is depicted by Russia and how Russians are perceived by Ukrainians. These drawings, from a deeply personal perspective, are an artistic reflection on the current political climate.

Video:

On the eve of this exhibition, in October this year, Alevtina will invite Roman Khimey to film her reinterpretation of the *Dialogue 7*—a project originally undertaken in June 2014 in St Petersburg, Russia. This year's event will be organized by the European nomadic biennial Manifesta, futuring her participation alongside Mikhail Piotrovsky, Director of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia.

## **9 DATA**

a drawing on foil created specifically for the exhibition in Białystok

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### **TEXT ON DRAWING:**

#### **Demining and the land**

“Ukraine doesn’t produce any mines,” my tactical medicine instructor said.

April 2024: 29% of the territory of Ukraine (> 174 000 sq km = half of Poland 53%) is mined.

“In the Kharkiv region, we neutralized more than 2500 explosive devices per day,” *Serhiy Kruk, Head of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine*

Since February 2022, 128 farmers have died due to landmine explosions.

Demining 1 sq m costs \$2–8.

The eradication of 1 hectare of Sosnowsky’s giant hogweed cost \$675.

#### **Missile attacks and art**

The missile attack on Kyiv on 21 March 2024 cost Russia \$390 million.

Falling ballistic missile fragments set fire to artist Mykhailo Alekseyenko’s car. He had bought it from his friend for \$3,900.

Total donations by artist Zhanna Kadyrova since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion: 300 000 EUR

The Ukrainian PEN monitors the losses among cultural figures as reports emerge in the media. By August 2024, 122 people had already died.

A Ukrainian artist, when abroad, was told: ‘You Ukrainians are getting so much attention now that it would be a sin to complain!’ She replied, ‘Take our fate for yourself!’

#### **Corruption and mobilization (men and women)**

Ukraine is also one of the 17 countries in this year’s CPI that have shown their best performance ever.

Thanks to NABU (National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine) and SAP (Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office), nearly 2 billion UAH has been allocated for the country's defense needs since the start of the full-scale Russian aggression.

Total donations in 2023 – 27.4 billion UAH (683 million EUR).

Currently, at least 1.1 million people are serving in the armed forces, and the military and political leadership plans to mobilize an additional 500,000 this year.

Since February 24, 2022, approximately 812,000 men aged 18 to 64 have sought temporary protection in EU countries, including around 528,000 classified as 'war refugees.'

By early January 2024, the number of women in the army had reached nearly 70,000, with 6,500 in command positions and around 4,000 serving on the front lines.

In Ukraine, there are approximately 5 million men eligible for conscription. Mobilizing childless women would add up to 3 million more to the reserves.

### **Museums and the Wounded**

In two years of full-scale war, Russian forces have destroyed 1,946 cultural infrastructure sites, including 113 museums and galleries.

Historian Leonid Marushchak has rescued over 2 million works of art from front-line territories.

It will take 10 years and 9 billion dollars to restore all the cultural and historical sites destroyed by the full-scale invasion so far.

During the Russian invasion, nearly 50,000 people have lost limbs, a number comparable to the scale of World War I.

A limb prosthesis costs, on average, 20,000 dollars. 'Our patients joke that "being Ukrainian is very expensive right now,"' says Olha Rudneva, head of the Superhumans prosthetics center.

At Superhumans, I also met a Polish citizen from Zielona Góra who was undergoing rehabilitation and prosthetic limb fitting after an injury.

## EVENTS ACCOMPANYING THE EXHIBITION:

24.10.2024 (Thursday), 6:00 PM

Double exhibition opening: Alevtina Kakhidze *Plants and People* and William Kentridge *I am not me, the horse is not mine*

24.10.2024–19.01.2025 (Tuesday – Sunday),

10:00 AM–5:00 PM

*MAN-U-FACTURERS* – we invite visitors to use self-service baskets free of charge with “Notebook of Freedom” – set of creative tasks from Alevtina Kakhidze, available in the exhibition space

10.11.2024 (Sunday), 12:00 PM

Curatorial tour of the exhibitions with Monika Szewczyk

24.11.2024 (Sunday), 11:00 AM

Creative text workshop

Led by Anna Cieplak

28.11.2024 (Thursday), 5:30 PM

Authorial and curatorial tour of the exhibitions, preceding a discussion panel

28.11.2024 (Thursday), 6:30 PM

Discussion panel with Anna Łazar, Alevtina Kakhidze, and Kateryna Botanova  
Moderated by Edwin Bendyk

30.11.2024 (Saturday), 12:00 PM

Tour of the exhibitions with Agnieszka Tarasiuk

7.12.2024 (Saturday), 12:00 PM

Guided tour of the exhibitions in Ukrainian

14.12.2024 (Saturday), 12:00 PM

Guided tour of the exhibitions in Belarusian

18.01.2025 (Saturday), 10:00 AM

Creative film imagery workshop

Led by Katarzyna Zabłocka

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## COLOPHON

Curator: Monika Szewczyk

Coordination: Yulia Kostereva

Visual identity: Tomek Pawluczuk

Editing and proofreading: Ewa Borowska

Proofreading of Ukrainian texts: Kateryna Iholkina

Exhibition realisation: Maciej Zaniewski, Kacper Gorysz, Michał Małeczek, Mateusz Smorczewski, Tomasz Lelo, Zbigniew Świdziński, Ewa Chacianowska

Communication and promotion: Piotr Trypus

Education: Justyna Kołodko-Bietkał, Iza Liżewska, Katarzyna Kida

Exhibition supervisors: Maja MacKenzie, Małgorzata Kopciewska, Tomasz Lelo, Mateusz Smorczewski, Piotr Trypus

Accounting: Marlena Maleszewska, Anna Olesiewicz, Katarzyna Wilimas

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## MUNICIPAL CULTURAL INSTITUTION

G A L E R I A

Arsenal

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## Galeria Arsenal w Białymstoku / Arsenal Gallery in Białystok

ul. A. Mickiewicza 2, 15-222 Białystok, Poland

tel. +48 857420353, mail@galeria-arsenal.pl, galeria-arsenal.pl

Exhibition open from Tuesday to Sunday, 10 AM – 6 PM. Last admission to exhibition is at 5.30 PM

Entrance fee 8 PLN, reduced 4 PLN. Free admission on Thursdays

The Arsenal Gallery accepts Big Family Card, Białystok Big Family Card, and Active Senior 60+ Card

A detailed price list with a list of discounts is available at: <https://galeria-arsenal.pl/dla-zwiedzajacych>

**Галерея Арсенал у Білостоці пропонує всім біженцям безкоштовний вхід на виставки та заходи Галерія Арсенал у Беластоку прапанаує ўсім бежанцам бясплатны ўваход на выставы і мерапрыемствы**  
**Arsenal Gallery in Białystok offers free entry to exhibitions and events to all refugee persons**