



Press release

Ukrainian Dreamers. The Kharkiv School of Photography **October 12, 2023 – January 7, 2024**

Press Conference: Thursday, October 12, 2023, at 11:15 am

Curator: Sergiy Lebedynskyy

Curatorial Assistants: Carla Wiggering, Oleksandra Osadcha

It is an impressive collection of some 5,000 photographs and more than 70,000 negatives—a total of almost 2,000 kilograms of material—that Sergiy Lebedynskyy had transported to Wolfsburg a few weeks after the beginning of the Russian war of aggression. They all belong to the so-called Kharkiv School of Photography, a movement that has been experimenting artistically since the late 1960s and represents a kind of anti-attitude to official Soviet-style photography. The works were supposed to be exhibited in the Museum of the Kharkiv School of Photography (MOKSOP) in Kharkiv, which was newly founded by Lebedynskyy—but then Russia's war of aggression, in violation of international law, began in February 2022. The photographs found their way out of the war zone in otherwise empty humanitarian aid transport trucks and eventually ended up in Lebedynskyy's basement in Wolfsburg, where he has lived and worked for several years. The Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg has temporarily stored this collection in its art depot. Now, from October 13, 2023 to January 7, 2024, part of this important collection will be on display in the exhibition *Ukrainian Dreamers. The Kharkiv School of Photography*.

The Kharkiv School of Photography has already experienced several upheavals that have shaken Ukrainian society: from the "ambiguous" stability of the Brezhnev era to the rapid liberation brought about by perestroika, the subsequent collapse of the USSR and the country's regained independence, the economic crisis and turmoil of the 1990s, two revolutions, and the neo-imperialist war of aggression under Putin. All of these periods challenged many Ukrainian artists in different ways, making the school a fluid network that ultimately responded to the changes in its environment. The artists constantly found themselves in situations where their lives were placed in a state of limbo, and they lived through this with an urge to experiment. Isolated from all professional institutions and the market during the Soviet period and with little access to them even after Ukraine's independence, they mostly engaged in artistic activities in their free time, for example in amateur photography clubs. The artists either took refuge in the construction of subjective worlds or courageously expressed their views on social and political issues.

When it comes to examining the history of nonconformism in Ukrainian art, Kharkiv, which is also considered an important educational and industrial center, is represented primarily by the Kharkiv School of Photography. Otherwise, artists from cities such as Kyiv, Lviv, and Odesa stand out: Conspicuously few nonconformist artists come from Kharkiv. One of the reasons for this was the



particularly strict control exercised over the artistic community by the local branch of the State Union of Artists and the penal authorities. However, several small groups of photographers—altogether some forty artists from four generations can be counted today—ventured out at different times and created works that had little to do with Soviet directives. Thus, in addition to the experimental, such as double exposures or “false colors” achieved through solarization, there is also casual natural nudity—quickly condemned as pornography in the Soviet era.

“We were all looking for something very different from the trends of official Soviet photography. We felt that another time had come, and we experienced this time differently, looking for new points of reference,” says artist Boris Mikhailov about the origins of the new trend. He is probably the best-known international representative of the Kharkiv School of Photography. In 2011, The Museum of Modern Art in New York dedicated a solo exhibition to him; at the time, however, the museum made no connection with the Kharkiv School of Photography. The exhibition *Ukrainian Dreamers* now presents a selection of various experimental concepts developed by Ukrainian photographers from Kharkiv.

Participating artists:

Sergiy Bratkov, Herman Driukov, Viktor and Sergiy Kochetov, Bella Logachova, Oleg Maliovany, Boris Mikhailov, Evgeniy Pavlov, Roman Pyatkovka, Daniil Revkovskiy and Andriy Rachinskiy, Jury Rupin, the Shilo Group (Vladyslav Krasnoshchok and Sergiy Lebedynskyy), the SOSka Group (Mykola Ridnyi, Serhiy Popov, and Hanna Kriventsova), and Oleksandr Suprun.

Program:

On Friday, October 13, 2023, from 2:00 to 5:00 pm, the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg will offer an accompanying program. In an artist talk, Boris Mikhailov and Evgeniy Pavlov will discuss their artistic activities in the Soviet Union, as well as contemporary developments. The curator Sergiy Lebedynskyy will present the Museum of the Kharkiv School of Photography in a lecture and discuss its current situation during the war of aggression. Finally, Olena Chervonik, a PhD candidate in Art History at Trinity College, University of Oxford, will speak about the use of color in the artistic practice of the Kharkiv School of Photography.

MOKSOP

The MOKSOP (Museum of the Kharkiv School of Photography) is the first Ukrainian museum of contemporary photography. It was founded in 2018 by the photographers Sergiy Lebedynskyy and Vladyslav Krasnoshchok, together with the art historians Oleksandra Osadcha and Nadiia Bernard-Kovalchuk. The name of the museum is inspired by the movement of the same name in Ukrainian art history: the Kharkiv School of Photography. It gained international recognition mainly through Boris Mikhailov, one of the most influential contemporary artists.

The MOKSOP has amassed a significant core collection of Ukrainian photography since the 1960s: Today, the museum’s collection includes more than 5,000 prints and some 70,000 film negatives of classic documentary and art projects, as well as the work of young photographers. With the aim of making the country’s photographic heritage more widely known, the MOKSOP’s curatorial group



runs a nomadic exhibition program and organizes solo and collective projects with partner institutions in Ukraine and abroad.

Quotes for free use:

“A whole network helped to rescue these works from Ukraine and save them from the war. This is the only way Ukraine functions now: as a network of people helping each other.”

Sergiy Lebedynskyy, artist and director of the MOKSOP

“You can say that, in the beginning, there was the word! The most important thing for us at that time was to talk about photography, what photography means and how photography can be interpreted, how photography can solve the problems we were worried about.”

Boris Mikhailov, artist from the Kharkiv School of Photography

“The photographs shed light on the art-historically fascinating movement that has developed in Kharkiv since the 1960s, and which is little known in Germany. In addition to the idiosyncratic artistic means and the experimental aspects, they also reveal much about the mindset of the Ukrainians. The Kharkiv School also illustrates in an exemplary way Ukraine’s continuing will to maintain and further develop an independent culture.”

Andreas Beitin, Director, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg

“The great achievement of securing these and many other works of art and cultural assets from the consequences of war is an important task that many people on both sides support with us.”

Otmar Böhmer, Managing Director, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg

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