



THE BASILISK

YANA KONONOVA

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STIMULTANIA
STRASBOURG

Pôle de photographie

An exhibition organized by Stimultania, photography center in Strasbourg. The exhibition is co-produced with the Armenian Heritage Center in Valence. The exhibition is supported by the DRAC Grand Est, the Grand Est Region, and the City of Strasbourg."

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Networks



EDITORIAL

In the Saint Gérald street, one must think of Japanese gardens. One must crush the nettles and stop exactly at the spot where the trickle of water appears, the stones, the thick, palmate leaves, the branch reaching in from the right. There, every day – before, because now I am no longer there – I think: it is beautiful. Here, it is beautiful.

Since the beginning of the aerial battles, Yana Kononova says that contemplation has become impossible, because the past crackles against the present. The before of now is not the before of before. Things have shifted place. In this new theatre, there is no longer a fourth wall, and so what Yana contemplates is already beyond. Beyond the sky and beyond the mossy branch.

The photographer was in Strasbourg in May 2022, for the exhibition *Tell Them of Battles, Meteors, and Eggplant Caviar*. At that time, I thought we needed to keep artists working, to present their subjects from before the invasion, to ask them – for the duration of an opening – about their photographic craft, their personal themes, the representation of the male body, of motherhood, of student residences, and of eggplant caviar. Yana had come by bus, I remember very clearly the moment when I said goodbye to her.

Today, Yana shows us the visible and invisible impacts of war. She speaks of water and earth, of the Dnipro River and the fractures of Kaniv, the deepest ravines in Europe. The artist follows in the tracks of the wild boars who are already forging post-human geology. She prepares her threads of wool and weaves giant buffalo sleeping on the Danube. We are on Yermakov Island and on the new islands of Kakhovka, where the basilisk crosses the sky between the thick, palmate leaves. On the right edge of the tapestry, a branch.

Céline Duval



Radiations of War #54, 2022 © Yana Kononova



War does not end when the noise of explosions fades. It lingers, saturating the land, embedding itself in the silence of devastated landscapes. *Radiations of War* traces this persistence – not as a documentary record, but as an encounter with a terrain where disaster does not conclude with the impact but continues to unfold, turning the land into both witness and archive.

Book published by XYZ BOOKS.



What emerges when the frontline recedes? Ruins are not inert remains; they are landscapes in transformation, charged with what has passed through them. These images are not mere documents, but evidence of how war seeps into the topography, how violence settles into the earth and lingers in the weight of absence.

The term radiations evokes the composite, polluted nature of the war experience. It suggests more than what the eye perceives – a hum, a tremor – that alters our sense of space. It moves through memory, through the body, beyond the body, across generations.

Here, war is neither an event nor a singular catastrophe but a process without end, radiating outward, rippling across the land, inscribing itself long after the moment of violence.



Izyum Forest was produced with the support of the Pinchuk Art Center in Kyiv, Ukraine.

Izyum Forest by Yana Kononova is a powerful photographic installation dedicated to the exhumation of mass graves discovered in 2022 in the pine forest near the city of Izyum, Ukraine, following its liberation after Russian occupation. This work does not follow a traditional documentary approach: instead, Yana Kononova constructs a visual composition that feels almost ritualistic, where the act of excavation becomes a moment of silent and symbolic mourning.

The work unfolds in five large-format black-and-white photographic panels, forming a panoramic composition. This structure creates an immersive, almost liturgical experience, where the temporal layers of the exhumation overlap. The rescue workers and forensic medics, dressed in white or blue protective suits, appear as ceremonial figures: both participants in the excavation and silent witnesses to the tragedy buried beneath the earth. Rather than depicting the bodies directly, Yana Kononova focuses on gestures, human presence, trees, and the soil itself – elements that become vessels of memory and grief.

Using experimental techniques on film negatives – blurring, layering, and textural manipulation – she blurs the line between the human and the natural. Organic forms, silhouettes, and materials seem to merge into a spectral landscape, as if the forest itself had absorbed the violence of the past.

Through this work, Yana Kononova questions the ethical ways of representing horror. *Izyum Forest* bears witness without exploiting; it evokes the unspeakable without exposing it. The forest becomes a living archive of trauma – a place where collective memory materializes through gestures, earth, shadows, and silence. The installation serves simultaneously as a tribute to the victims, a meditation on collective mourning, and a reflection on the capacity of photography to capture what lies beyond words.



In *Desperation of Landscape*, Yana Kononova continues her investigation into the structural consequences of the war in Ukraine, confronting – directly, though not literally – the notion of ecocide. Created in the aftermath of the destruction of the Kakhovka dam in June 2023, which triggered an ecological disaster of major scale, the series explores the visual, symbolic, and political implications of environmental devastation caused by conflict.

The ambrotypes were produced in collaboration with Oleksandr Malyi.

Rather than capturing the spectacular moment of catastrophe, Yana Kononova chooses to depict the residual condition of the landscape: once flooded and now desiccated zones, collapsed riverbanks, decaying technical infrastructures, cracked surfaces of soil. The photographic image becomes a space of tension – between testimony and abstraction. Shot in black and white, the compositions are precisely constructed, sometimes reworked, reflecting a gaze where geopolitical analysis, restrained emotion, and visual experimentation intersect.

The series also incorporates photographs of individuals venturing onto newly exposed terrain – small islands and rocky outcrops emerging from beneath the water, precariously close to the immense hydraulic force of the DniproHES dam. These collective excursions across rocky elevations and sandy shallows, in stark contrast to the monumental structure of the dam, become a meditation on the entanglement of human imagination, land, and technology. Far from any form of naturalism, the landscape in Yana Kononova's work emerges as a matrix of memory. War is not represented through its agents, but through its deferred impact on territory, on the very morphology of the real. In this sense, *Desperation of Landscape* belongs to an ecocritical approach: it not only interrogates the representation of ecological ruins, but also questions the ability of the image to register the irreversible damage inflicted upon living environments.



Boar Gardening explores the dislocations of Kaniv – the deepest ravines in Europe, shaped by glacial pressure and postwar reforestation. In this stratified and shifting landscape, wild boars carve their own underground paths, inhabiting a terrain that is at once post-human and pre-political. Against the backdrop of war and climate crisis, the series traces how non-human agents – boars, clay, acacias – are reshaping the earth in a choreography of collapse, adaptation, and quiet insurrection.

These ravines were once grass-covered and dotted with villages. After the Second World War, the construction of the Kaniv hydroelectric dam led to the flooding of nearby settlements and the forced displacement of their inhabitants. As part of the terrain's postwar transformation, acacias were planted to reinforce the slopes. Selected for their hardiness and invasive growth, the trees quickly overtook the land. Today, these artificial forests have turned into unruly, flourishing thickets – impenetrable due to competing forces, both botanical and tectonic. The Kaniv ravines remain geologically active. Within their folds and cavities lie chambers – dry “throne rooms” adorned with formations resembling stalactites.

In the summer of 2024, during the third year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the region experienced extreme heat, amplifying global climate trends. The artist descended into the ravines to trace the logics of landscape formation driven by geological shifts, climate collapse, and the subterranean agency of wild boars.



The work *Thresholds*, created by Yana Kononova, is inspired by the iconostasis of Orthodox churches – a painted screen that separates the altar from the nave and establishes a sacred boundary between these two spaces. Traditionally, this structure displays hierarchized representations of angels, saints, and theological symbols. What particularly attracted the artist is the dual function of the iconostasis: to conceal what lies behind it while partially revealing its contents. This duality echoes her experience of war, during which the past and future seem absent, leaving only a fragmented present filled with uncertainties, radically different from ordinary reality.

During her travels in Europe, the artist struggled to convey this feeling of dissonance, as if individuals were moving through a parallel reality, comparable to the veil of the iconostasis – a boundary separating two distinct worlds. She set out to create an artistic space incorporating contemporary symbols, including a funeral procession expressing a sense of “abrupt finality,” as well as war-related remnants. Gradually, the composition expanded to include additional elements, comprising images predating the conflict or not directly related to it but created during the war period.

The *Thresholds* series thus brings together fragments of diverse landscapes, captured in black and white over more than two years. It notably includes views of Ermakov Island in the Danube Delta, sites marked by devastation, piles of twisted metal, and scorched earth. Some elements also derive from the diorama of the Siege of Izmail, symbolizing the brutal assault by Russian forces on an Ottoman fortress, marked by massacres and pillaging.

YANA KONONOVA

Yana Kononova is one of seven Ukrainian photographers exhibited at Stimultania in *Tell Them of Battles, Meteors, and Eggplant Caviar* in 2022.



Yana Kononova, 2022 © Marc Meinau

Yana Kononova is a Ukrainian artist whose practice combines photography, writing, and experimental printing techniques. Through her work, she explores the landscape as a historical process, in dialogue with her sensibilities, while adopting ecocritical and speculative approaches. Her work interrogates the materiality of the photographic image, oscillating between technical gesture and visual representation.

She holds a PhD in sociology and a degree in art and curatorial practices from the New Center for Research & Practice. Yana Kononova received the Bird in Flight Prize for Emerging Photography (2019) and the Hariban Award, presented by Benrido (2022). She was also selected by FOTODOK for the FUTURES talent network (2023).

Her work has benefited from grants and support from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts (2023), the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM, 2024), and Faktural0, a major Initiative of Ribbon International (2025). Her work has been widely exhibited internationally, including at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (USA), the Museum für Kommunikation, Berlin (Germany), FOTODOK, Utrecht (Netherlands), the Penumbra Foundation, New York (USA), Mystetskyi Arsenal, Kyiv (Ukraine), and the Jam Factory, Lviv (Ukraine).

The work of Yana Kononova, Ukrainian artist and photographer, lies at the intersection of art, documentary, and research into the traces left by war and ecological disasters. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion in 2022, she has been developing a body of work marked by a constant attention to the visible and invisible forms of trauma – whether human, territorial, or environmental. In several of her recent series presented at Stimultania (*Radiations of War*, *Desperation of Landscape*, *Boar Gardening*), Yana Kononova investigates the imprint of violence on landscapes, producing a reading of ecocide that is both critical and poetic.

The term “ecocide,” now at the heart of contemporary legal and ethical discussions, refers to the massive and intentional destruction of an ecosystem. In Ukraine, events such as the 2023 rupture of the Kakhovka dam – which caused widespread flooding, the death of animal species, and contamination of vast agricultural areas – fall within this dynamic. Yana Kononova captures both the tangible and diffuse consequences of these transformations. In *Desperation of Landscape*, for example, she shows the dried banks of the Dnipro, emerging islands, and combines scenes of collective excursions with the imposing ruins of the dam.

In *Radiations of War*, the series that punctuates the exhibition, Yana Kononova conveys what she calls the “radiations” of war – not only chemical contamination but the invisible wave of trauma that persists in bodies, soils, and objects. The land thus becomes archive, wound, and sensitive organ all at once.

The two installations, *Izyum Forest* (presented in 2024, during the Venice Biennale) and *Thresholds* (produced specifically for the exhibition at Stimultania), are conceived as immersive, almost liturgical experiences. The first is a tribute to the victims of Izyum; the second draws inspiration from the iconostases of Orthodox churches to explore the threshold between parallel and dissonant realities.

TO GO FURTHER

SELECTION OF EPISODES

- *Kharkiv: Capital of Alternative Photography*, Arte TV.

SELECTION OF BOOKS

- *Death and the Penguin*, Andrey Kurkov, Vintage Books, 2001.
- *Grey Bees*, Andrey Kurkov, MacLehose Press, 2020.
- *Journal d'une invasion*, Andreï Kourkov, Éditions Noir sur blanc, 2023.
- *Ukraine Fragments, 02-2022 / 02-2023*, Agence MYOP, Manuella Éditions.
- *Rousse*, Denis Infante, Éditions Tristram, 2024.
- *Radiations of War*, Yana Kononova and Joyelle McSweeney, XYZ Books, 2025.
- *N°4 – The Environmental Issue, Imagine a Ukrainian landscape. What do you see, smell, taste ?*, in collaboration with the Ukrainian Environmental Humanities Network, Solomiya magazine, 2025.
- *Notre guerre quotidienne*, Andreï Kourkov, Libella Éditions, 2025.

STIMULTANIA

33 rue Kageneck
67000 Strasbourg

Exhibition : free entrance
Wednesday to Saturday
14 h - 18 h 30

www.stimultania.org

