

SEVEN VIDEOS BY ELENA KOVYLINA For VIDEOINSIGHT

SHOOTING GALLERY 2002

Shooting gallery shows Elena Kovylna herself turning around behind a counter on a scooter, in front of a wall full of objects that may be shot with funfair rifles by the people in front of the counter. And in this funfair atmosphere, Kovylna herself becomes one target among others. The video tells us about women, about how women put themselves in danger, get eroticized, killed, victimized – or not; it talks about men and how they love us but still like to kill us – or not. Someone puts a gun into their hands, may be women themselves; the video also talks about how women can become the armed arm of patriarchy in a men's society, like these two girls who laugh while shooting on Kovylna. Shooting gallery tells us about mystery, despair, feast, love, melancholy, beauty and representation. "Beauty will save the world..."

DYING SWANS 2008

Soviet Union has used its classical culture as a “neutral” political instrument, promoting beauty and the sublime - “Beauty will save the world...” – from Shostakovich to Tchaikovsky, from Dostoyevsky to Tolstoy, from the Nutcracker to Swan’s Lake. This immense cultural patrimony remains immutable in the present and no sniper ever could silence Tchaikovsky nor kill the immortal ballerinas of Bolshoi. But after the fall of Soviet Union, as a counterpart to classical culture, we witness the emergence of a contemporary culture, a new, fragile culture that aims to anchor itself in novel values and realities. Journalism is probably the most fragile of the many manifestations of emerging culture (the culture of “sottobosco” according to the Italian anthropologist Carlo Ginzburg) and puts itself continuously at risk. So does in *Dying Swans* the artist-journalist, Kovylna herself, in the carnal encounter between the sniper and his targets: she becomes the mortal target in the sniper’s sights. The swan dies... and Elena Kovylna, with blood-maculated feathers in her hands, dedicates this work of perfection to the many journalists who gave their own life as a tribute to their passion of a culture of the present times.

CARRIAGE 2009

This video is a tribute to *Battleship Potemkin* by Eisenstein, and more specifically, to the unforgettable scene of the Potemkin Stairs in Odessa. Tragic memories: a woman, among many other people on the stairs, gets shot by the soldiers, while trying to protect her baby, bending above his pushchair. Her dying body glides in the stairs and she herself while dying pushes her baby down the stairs towards death. Kovylyna, few decades later, searches for exactly the same pushchair and films herself in the exact same Odessa Stairs – except that time has passed, in the stairs there are tourists and not anymore Cossacks, and her pushchair is empty. The mother, the artist, is presenting herself as an elegant woman lost in her thoughts. She is not trying to protect her baby, but addresses the issue of maternity and the difficult relationship of women artists – women in general – to their children. The symbolic absence of the baby underlines the codes of the allegedly free today's art scene: essentially no babies (Kovylyna has two children and is currently pregnant). The anxiety of women confronted to what seems at times unconquerable freedom is such that the mother, in this masterly performance, falls as did the mother in the Potemkin Stairs, but now she is collapsing under the weight of her own ambivalence, while the world continues to turn around, as do the wheels of the rejected pushchair.

RUSSIAN SOULS (Embedded Souls from Russia) 2012

“Until recently, in Russia, we used to envelop babies in swaddling clothes so tightly, that they could not move anymore. This tradition weighs on the people’s mentality. And because of our tense political situation, Russia is sleeping... How long will you be sleeping, you my country? I take young men, 18 to 28 years old, in their age to be in the army and envelop their bodies as if they were babies.

With this performance, I want to show that potential great power lies down here, without being able to move: the young men’s arms are embedded in the swaddling clothes and their eyes are closed...”

Elena Kovylna

Elena Kovylna

Gewickelte Seele von Russland (Video still)

Performed at Rizzordi Art Foundation, Saint Petersburg, 2012

HD video, single channel, 10'23''

EQUALITY ST PETERSBURG 2014

Elena Kovylyna's video "Égalité" (Equality) functions as a statement: inequality appears to be impossible to overcome, in particular in both past and present Russian society, but in fact that is the case everywhere, whatever the political, social and cultural backgrounds. "Égalité" is like a poem, rhymed in four-legged footstools, the legs of which have been extended, so that the people standing on them (who all differ in terms of gender, age, nationality, profession, and even health) are now all on one level: their heads lined up in a row. But the resulting "equalized horizon" is no more than an illusion.

Elena Kovylyna's project Equality is a satire on democracy in Russian society today. It creates a clear image of the many double standards in post-Soviet society, developing the idea of the "Procrustean bed," that is, a norm that will cause the individual unavoidable pain when he or she tries to fit in. The real difference is that today, you don't "try to fit in:" instead, participation in contemporary society is an inevitability that has become impossible to avoid. Deliberate social security, the declaration of rights and freedoms, and other slogans and formulas characteristic of Russian society are expressed with visual simplicity, and one might even say that they have gained a human face. But if "égalité" is a century-long project that has continued in Europe since the Enlightenment, its Russian version is very different after the fall of the Soviet Union. Illusory Financial equality has been replaced with a so-called civic equality that has become no less utopian than its Soviet counterpart.

"Égalité" is an octave poem of people, rhymed in four-legged footstools, demonstrating the impossibility of any global "golden age" of equality and freedom. The footstools' legs have been extended, so that the people standing on them (who all differ in terms of gender, age, nationality, profession, and even health) are all on one level. Though they otherwise appear as they usually would, bearing all the marks of those everyday jobs they always perform, the tops of their heads have now been equalized and lined up in a row. The resulting "horizon" is illusory to the extreme, and has nothing in common with reality. But if you look down from their cheerless smiles, you can clearly see the groundlessness of their equal footing.

Andrey Parshikov and Pyotr Bystrov

NEW WOMAN 2012

On March 8, 2012, Elena Kovylna is invited to participate to a Performance festival in Moscow, on the theme "The Revolution and the Women". Kovylna arrives, dressed as a magistrate, climbs on a stake and at first appears to be willing to get burned. But in her arms she holds a red fire extinguisher and in due time activates it and switches off the fire. "I am able to extinguish the fire myself, says Kovylna. I am able to construct, manage and solve any type of situation. In fact, my 'New Woman' has been there in all female beings forever, given by nature. But in the Middle Age, the outstanding women were burned alive along with the witches. Today, however, women have education, business, family, and may involve themselves in art and politics and whatever else they dare to get involved with."

Kovylna dares everything. She puts herself at her own risk everyday, in her performances and her life, as a daredevil. For her BA, she performed a blowjob on a friend artist who in the meantime became the father of her two sons. While in residency at Analix Forever Gallery in Geneva, during the summer of 2009, Kovylna performs "Voulez-vous un Café – ou Feu le Monde bourgeois" and in front of the gallery, on the street, the artist invites people to take part in an elegant, delightful "coffee time". But the tablecloth had been soaking in spirits and soon the whole party sets in smoke. The only guest to remain serene sitting at the burning table is Kovylna herself. And so she moves away from the stake at the end of "The New Woman": serene and proud. Kovylna plays with the fire, and wins. She is the New Woman.

ZARYA 2015

In this performance, Vladivostok's Russky Island will serve as a metaphor for Russia and the Russian world. Kovylyna sails on a boat around Russky Island and at its highest point, inserts a stake, which will be outfitted with the advanced technology of Noocvyaz (Krasnogorsk) so that anyone entering into its energy field will be able to reckon with his or her past mistakes and find the ability to move forward into the future, unencumbered. The text engraved upon the stake reads: "Aware of our past and the mistakes made along the way, we have the courage to see new opportunities and push on further, armed with a love for life, the world around us, and that something Bigger that fuels creation... Only by understanding our experiences in their entirety can we move forward to the next level. Good luck!"

Researching **Vladivostok** and its history, you come to understand how the city – while an extreme outpost of Russia – manages to encapsulate the essence of the entire country. Here you can find almost all of the key ideas underlying our country, including the discourse of the Russian empire and its greatness, its grandeur and vastness, the parable of its territorial ambitions. "From Lisbon to Vladivostok," "from ocean to ocean," "from Brest to Vladivostok" – these phrases map out the incomplete continuities of historical traditions, the gaps between successive historical epochs: the kingdom of Balhae; the empire of *I Ching*; the Tsarist era, known as the colonization of the furthest edges of the continent; the rupture between pre-revolutionary and Soviet life; and the Soviet and Post-Soviet period. In Vladivostok one feels a tremendous need for reconciliation between all these layers of life, all these ancestral spirits of the peoples and immigrants who once lived here, between the Red and the White, between the brutal history of the northern Gulags and the "ceremonial portrait" of the region. Vladivostok is a critical geopolitical point; by having it, we "have" the East. Here you can start to grasp the immeasurable expanse of our country, to understand the urgency of cultivating these territories. Herein lies the paradox of the Russian Empire, that in the big ideas, you lose the details.

In 1891, the last emperor of Russia, Nikolay I, then crown prince and heir to the throne, made a journey across Russia by water. As a monument to his visit, a **Triumphal Arch** was built in Vladivostok. The construction of this arch was considered as the first step in developing the Trans-Siberian Railway, which united otherwise unreachable areas of Siberia with the European part of Russia.

In Vladivostok, there is the extraordinary symbolic site of Russky Island, host to a naval base and a university. At the end of the 19th century, about the same time the Triumphal Arch was built, the island gained a fortress with a paved dirt road. This road is truly remarkable, wide and solid and perfectly smooth. Modern asphalt roads in Russia often look far less sturdy than this clay-based one, hailing from a much earlier era. This road is lined with **stakes**, marking the milestones along the way.

This performance was made possible through the support of the **ZARYA** artist residency in Vladivostok. In its past life, ZARYA was important for the region as a garment factory, located at a critical junction. In Russian, the word "*Zarya*" refers to the sunrise, the metaphorical dawn of a new day, a new journey, a new beginning in life. In pre-Petrine Rus, the people chose to call this "*Tse Zarya.*" *Tse Zarya – Caesar – Tsar.* The performance is dedicated to the "Journey of Tsars."

Elena Kovylna