

To detail darkness

It's the dark from the edge, a corner
that sends its mood
to the center

- is what I felt when visiting Lada Nakonechna's exhibition *Background Mode* at Eigen+Art Gallery, Leipzig. A great share of my approach towards it is shaped by that corner, a work of Nakonechna called *Trap*. Writing about the exhibition, this work then is my background mode.





The room is high-ceilinged, one of its corners darkened. Coming close to the *Trap*, you notice its darkness is made up of a myriad of thin graphite strokes, getting more and more dense towards the centre. A work of hours, days, during which someone stood in that corner, back to the room, excluded, trying to make something of it. An intuitive image. The process of creation resonates loudly in the work, subheaded: *Position of the Artist Towards the System*.

Obstinacy. The artist as Sisyphus. Receded into a corner. Or pushed into it. And how?



The dead end of *Trap* in mind, I turn around and face the centre piece of the exhibition titled *Following the plan*. It's an installation based on *Road to Kolkhoz*, a painting by Mykola Burachek of 1937. Nakonechna's work is made up of several sheets of large paper, propped up on two stands. Together, they form a collage of print reproductions and graphite replica, cut-outs and close-ups of Burachek's image. The presentation suggests that these variants of an image may be put to use somehow, the whole set-up reminiscent of stacked architectural plans or geographical maps and of their strategic use, in war for instance. Yet, Nakonechna's formal language suggests that it is not at all clear what the original image actually depicts.

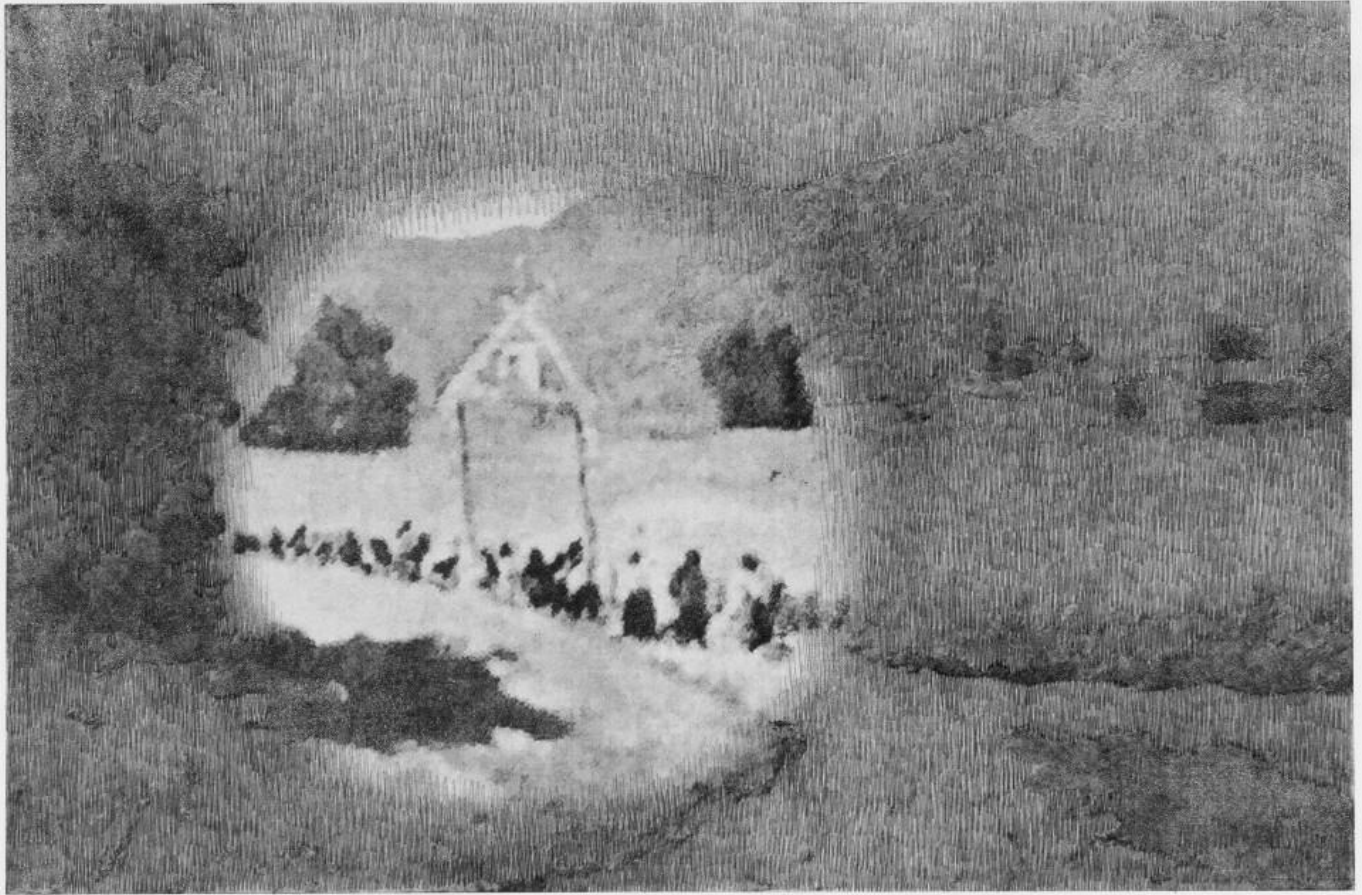


The artist's aesthetic incorporates care of the detail and fragility on the one hand, harshness and coarseness on the other. Fine graphite lines and pixel print. By both means she tries to unlock the meaning hidden in Burachek's painting: Does it meditate an innocent landscape, which even becomes abstract once zoomed into, suddenly more impressionist than socialist realism would allow for, a mere self-referential artwork? Or: Is it political, as the title suggests? Is it possible to focus the humans depicted in it, to define their strife? What's their relation to the Kolkhoz? Rhetorically, Nakonechna tries to find out just that in the series *Demonstration*, as she zooms in on the banner held up by the group of marching people depicted. The landscape recedes into the background as graphite covers the print and darkens it, save for a round space, an ocular, through which we see the group of people and their banner. The Blow-up effect: No matter how close, the banner cannot be read. Hence, it can be completed from outside the image.



The dysfunctionality of art, its refusal to be a commodity, for Theodor W. Adorno marked the subversive core of the idea of autonomy in art. Yet, there are no clear guidelines for how to *refuse* function, not just be devoid of it. Loopholes for instrumentalisation remain. If artists don't wish to transform their work into mere information politics, they somehow have to work their way through this dilemma. The corner.

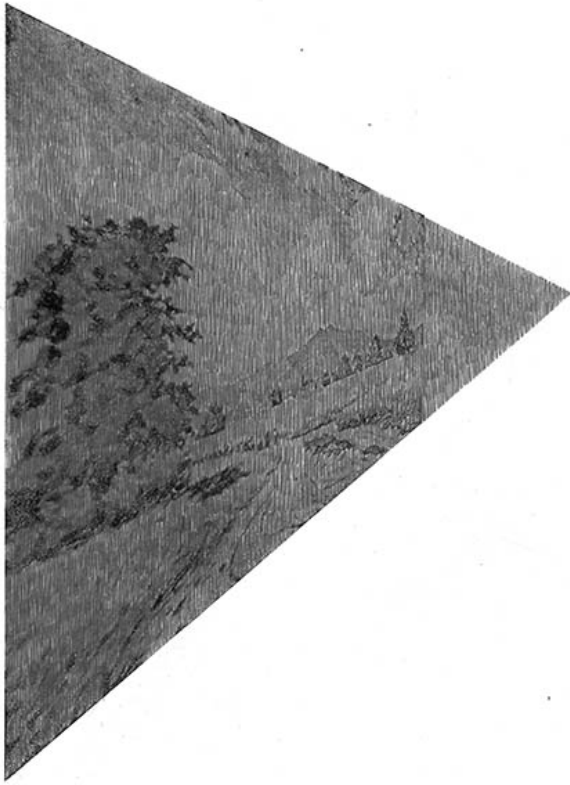
Habits of seeing and categorizing what is seen in political terms are confused by Burachek's painting, or rather: by how Nakonechna dissects it. With regard to its title and the subject – a group on a path –, one may assume it to depict a positively communist utopia, the way to a better future. However, the relics of impressionist style in *Road to Kolkhoz*, the subjectivism linked to that style, and the apolitical harmony of the landscape, which dominates the scene, all have the potential to contradict that first notion. This is supported further, as the specific historic context is considered: Given the history of collectivisation in Soviet Ukraine, where a resistance movement against the kolkhozes had formed in the early 30s and was violently suppressed by the Soviet government, the image may be interpreted altogether differently. The banner carried by the depicted group, the banner on which Lada Nakonechna zooms in, may now be regarded as a sign of protest.



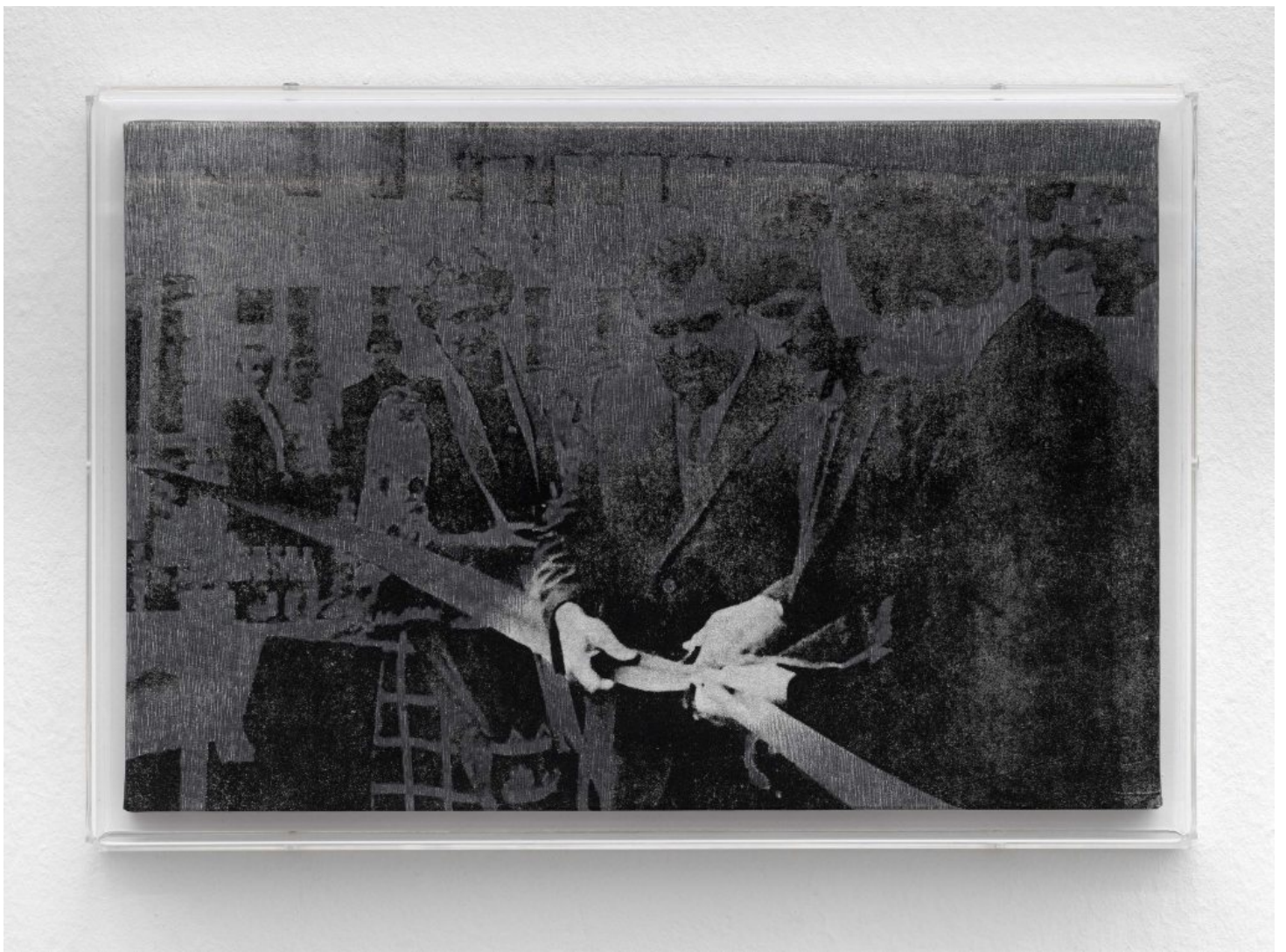
Finally, we are made aware by the artist, that we are in an exhibition, part of a process of relating things *now*. A floorplan tells us our position; as we sit down on a bench and look into a slide viewer, we merely read the word 'sitting' on the slide that throws us back onto ourselves. How does Nakonechna's surgical exploration and adaptation of Burachek's painting link to the present then, to the exhibition situation and to the contemporary artist?



The Soviet government let the resistance against collectivisation die out, quite literally so. The confiscation of crops and other measures caused a hunger catastrophe known as Holodomor. Nowadays, it is frequently referred to by nationalists, who also take pride in remembering the UPA (the Ukrainian insurrectionists' army), which actively collaborated with the German Nazis and helped make the Holocaust in Ukraine and East Poland possible. The collectivisation resistance then is in itself a functionalized symbol. In present Ukraine, that is: in times of war, national heroes are longed for and strategized. Heroes of the past are linked to the heroes of Maidan. A new kind of soc-realism in art has emerged. Murals for national freedom, memorials, pathos and nostalgia for war. A paradox, given that all signs of communism are carefully eradicated from the cities of Ukraine, street names, statues, and so on.



None of this can be found out by Lada Nakonechna's installation alone. What the exhibition does though, is to raise suspicion about the core of an image, about how far it can be stretched, condensed, twisted, put to pieces – all while staying outwardly intact. The artist demonstrates that by reversing that mechanism and attacking the picture's intactness. It seems, she sticks to her own version of an image ban: She does not solve the riddle, give the solution; information is not part of her enterprise. Opposite the central installation, however, political attempts of taming images are shown in the series *Some examples from the field of management*. Here, the political figures, faces, bodies are blackened out and relegated to the background, while focus is laid on their hands. An act of appropriation and negation: Again, the action is highlighted, while its representation in images is questioned; sticking to images, the artist hints at what is beyond them, while she thoroughly sticks to them. Hence, the exhibition refrains from yet another absolute, hence essentialist, critique of political theatre. For to dismiss representations altogether in favor of an assumed Platonian reality behind images is as much reactionary as laying the focus on representation only and entirely is short-sighted, convenient, thus apolitical.



Background Mode is a complex exhibition held together by Nakonechna's aesthetic, which is most consistent when being dialectical. It mediates between a rough overall image and its contours, details. It details darkness and what is hidden, without illuminating it. It is full of scepticism, reflects the trap, looks deep into it, but produces images nevertheless.