

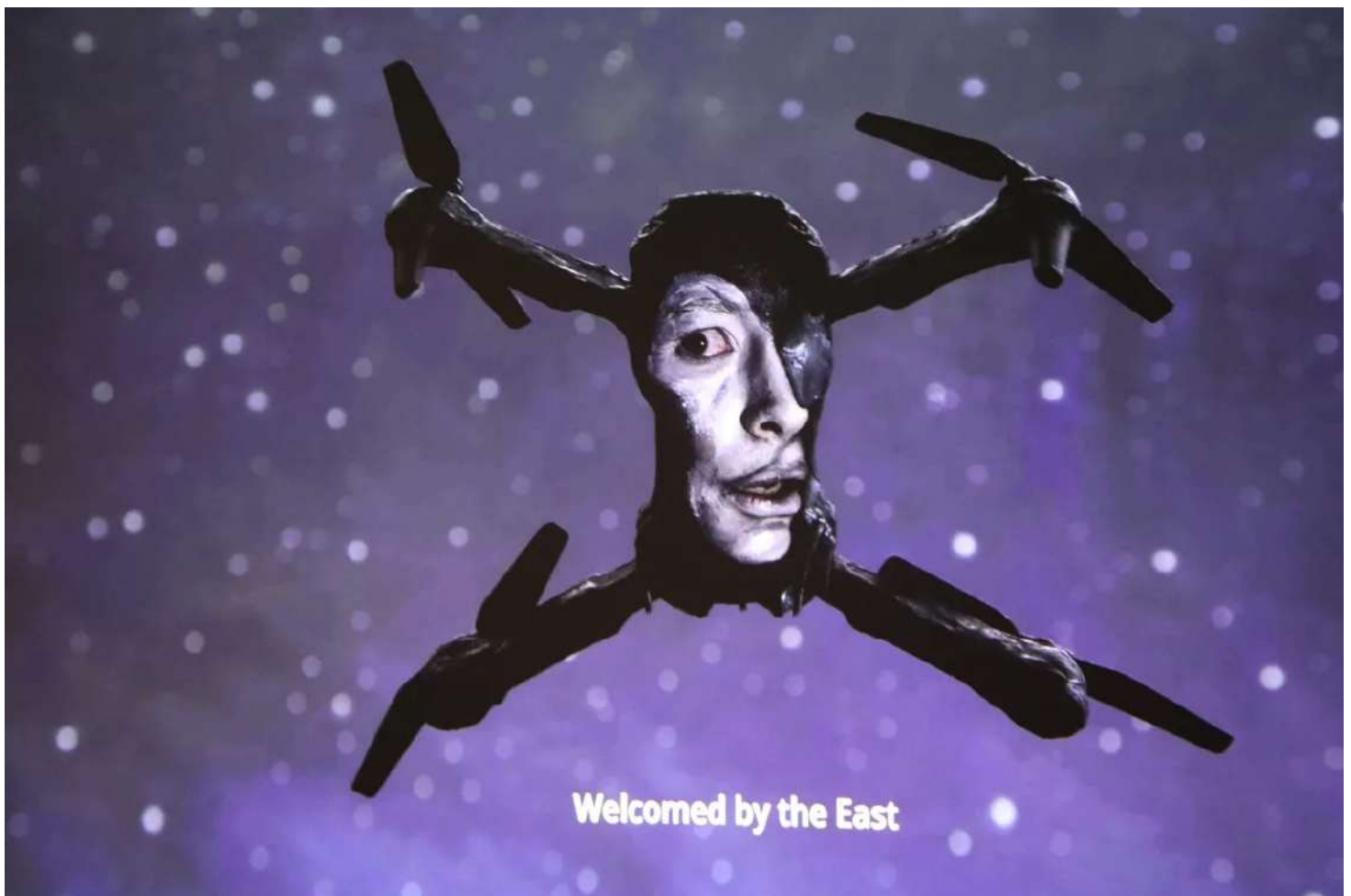
Art

In Germany, Artists Envision the Future of Eastern Europe

The fourth edition of the Pochen Biennale brought 22 artists together to reflect on reductive labels and the war in Ukraine, taking the concept of fire as its central theme.



Avedis Hadjian 9 hours ago



Still from Dana Kavelina, "Such a landscape" (2024), animation (all photos Avedis Hadjian/*Hyperallergic*)

CHEMNITZ, Germany — Chemnitz’s designation as the European Capital of Culture 2025 has put it on the map. However, the city has also been in the news as the epicenter of the far-right movement in German politics, with recent local elections won by the [Alternative for Germany](#) party. Against this backdrop, Chemnitz was a fitting location to grapple with the specter of war and the latest from the frontlines of Ukrainian art, reflected in the theme of the [fourth Pochen Biennale](#) that ran from September 26 to October 20: *Ex Oriente Ignis*, or “The Fire Comes From

the East” in Latin.

The title takes inspiration from Ukrainian writer Mykola Khvylovy, who in a 1920s modernist poem rephrased the Latin saying “Ex oriente lux” — “Light comes from the East” — as “Ex oriente fumis,” or “Smoke comes from the East,” to celebrate industrialization after the 1917 Russian Revolution. At the biennale in Chemnitz, the theme shifted back to the core element of fire both as a metaphor for and as a reflection of the current state of Eastern Europe, Ukraine, and beyond.



Kim Brian Dudek with the sculpture of Karl Marx

In a city anchored by a massive, 23-foot-tall (~7-meter-tall) sculpture of Karl Marx’s head, which locals chose to keep after the fall of the Communist regime, the biennale served as a counterpoint to the “Eastern State of Mind” theme behind its nomination as the European Capital of Culture.

“The ‘Eastern State of Mind’ slogan is an attempt to place Chemnitz and the mentality of its citizens in a European context,” Kim Brian Dudek, project manager of the Pochen Biennale, told *Hyperallergic* during a walk-through of the exhibition on October 12. “This is a simplification and reduction that ignores how discursive, intellectually complex, and profound the East is, exemplified by authors like [Milan] Kundera, Czesław Miłosz, or Ismail Kadare.”

The cavernous halls of the Wirkbau, the largest textile factory in Germany when it opened in 1883, hosted work by 22 primarily German and Eastern European artists. Across a range of

media, much of the work on view conveyed images, shapes, and sounds of the destruction wreaked by Russia on Ukraine, and a pervasive sense of fear, war, and death. The name of the biennale itself has its roots both in the history of Chemnitz and the German language: “Pochen” is a polysemic word, meaning to insist, to tap rhythmically on a surface, or to pound, as workers did and still do in the nearby uranium mines.



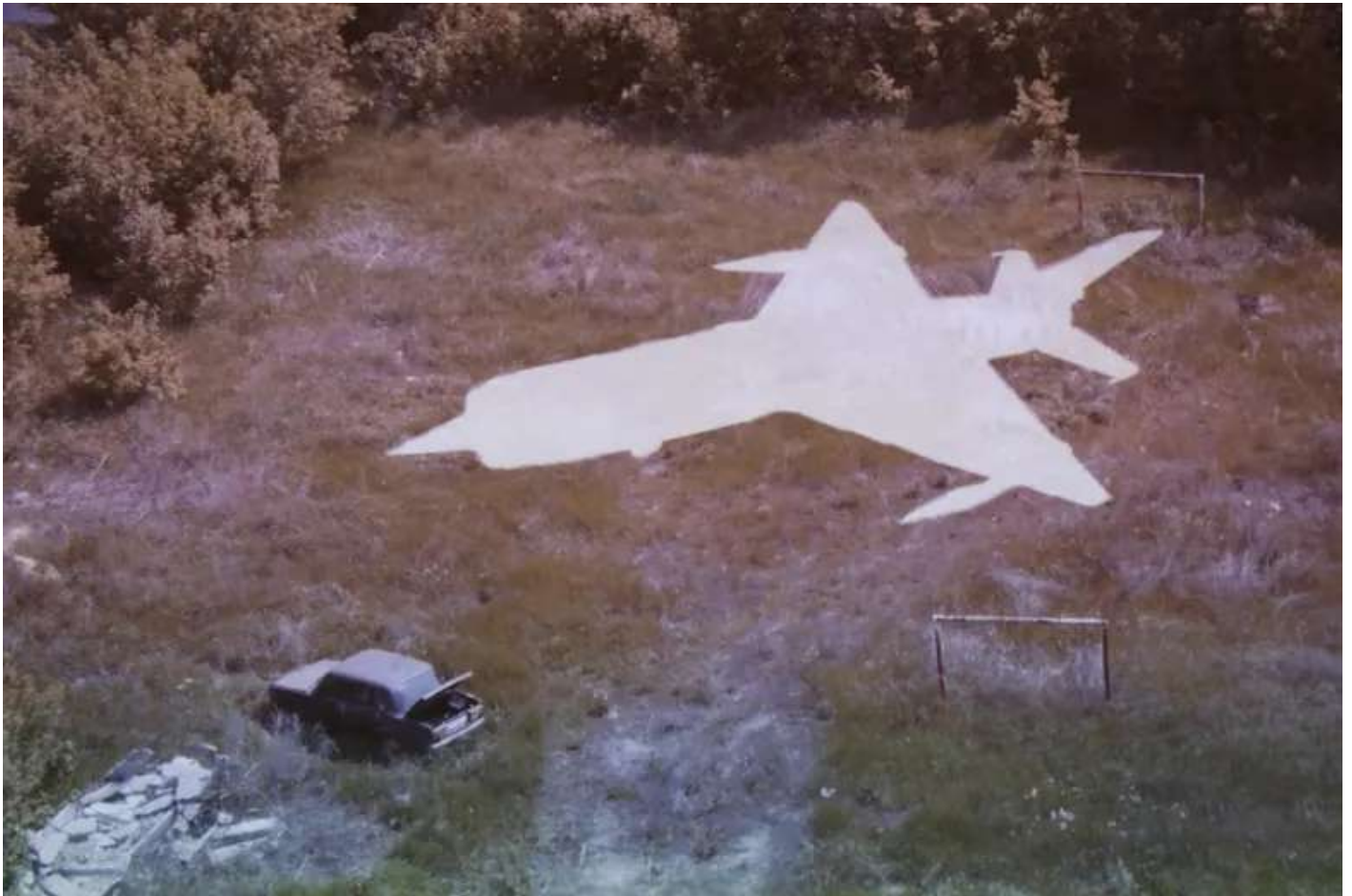
“Tachyones” (2022), a video by Ukrainian artist Lesia Vasylychenko, viewed through the one-way turnstiles of Danylo Galkin’s “Tourniquet” (2013)

Visitors first encountered “Tachyones” (2022), a video by Ukrainian artist Lesia Vasylychenko. An artificial intelligence program condensed a sequence of sunrise photos taken since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 to the present into this eight-minute work. The title refers to a tachyon, a hypothetical faster-than-light particle. The underlying theme addresses the “sunrise problem” in the theory of probability and statistics, a longstanding mathematical puzzle articulated by Laplace and other 18th-century scholars: “What is the probability that the sun will rise tomorrow?”

Nearby, Danylo Galkin’s “Tourniquet” featured two turnstiles that only spun in one direction. Developed in 2013 during the early days of the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine, the poignant installation now symbolizes the forced conscription of Ukrainian men and the restrictions on their travel.

The turnstiles led into a white room with fluorescent lighting, where a fog machine hidden above

a false ceiling released clouds of vapor resembling smoke. This was “European Sleep,” an installation by bergenissen (the pen name of Alisa Berger and Lena Ditte Nissen). The nondescript space evoked a gas chamber within what looked like an anonymous, modern office space.



Still from Mykola Ridnyi, “The District” (2022), 20 minutes

Mykola Ridnyi’s sculpture “Dark City” (2015) standing nearby comprised a model of a city with black government buildings, residential complexes, and transport infrastructure, all topped by a blank flag — both an ideological marker of territory and allegiance, as well as a military target. He complemented this work with “The District” (2022), a video that takes viewers through his childhood in Northern Saltivka, a now-destroyed neighborhood in Kharkiv that has been targeted by heavy Russian bombing.

A large hall in the Wirkbau housed most of the video works, which were perhaps the stars of the biennale. Maria Matiashova’s “Futile Words, Loud Noises” (2022) commented on the hypocrisy of international diplomatic organizations through paper planes made from the Geneva Conventions and other treaties banning particularly brutal weapons. Meanwhile, in “How to Disappear” (2020), the Austrian art collective [Total Refusal](#), which describes itself as a “pseudo-marxist media guerrilla,” illustrated the impossibility of escaping war in the *Battlefield V* video game. Even jumping off a cliff or shooting oneself does not result in death; the game will not allow it, nor the destruction of a flag. The only way to escape is to be killed or to disappear.



Still from Dana Kavelina, “Such a landscape” (2024), animation

While Ukrainian artists dominated the biennale, it was by no means limited to them. Vietnamese-German artist Sung Tieu presented a claustrophobic take on the “[Havana Syndrome](#)” — an alleged sonic attack against American diplomats — through a video based on a three-dimensional reconstruction of the Hotel Nacional de Cuba. Cyprien Gaillard’s short film “Ocean II Ocean,” which premiered at the 58th Venice Biennale in 2019, depicts New York City subway cars being dumped into the ocean and their subsequent underwater afterlife. Fish swim through the windows and doors of the discarded cars in the silence of the ocean.

The biennale also revived, in its own way, a mural that held iconic status in the German Democratic Republic: “The Mechanization of Agriculture” (1960) by Karl Heinz Jakob, which was covered with drywall a decade after the reunification of Germany. Jakob created the massive painting, which measures approximately 36 feet long and 12.5 feet high (~11 meters long and 3.8 meters high), for the city council of Chemnitz, then known as Karl-Marx-Stadt or Karl Marx City. However, in 2002, the Chamber of Industry and Commerce covered the mural with drywall to modernize the space and make it more suitable for conferences. Jakob’s granddaughter, artist Henrike Naumann, brought it back to life with a performance at the Chemnitz town hall alongside the Chem Valley Line Dancer eV and the hardstyle jumpers of Nischelhopper on September 26, the first day of the biennale. In the Wirkbau, Leipzig artist Susanne Rische erected a drawing of the mural, which Chemnitz residents were painting with guidance from members of the biennale

team.



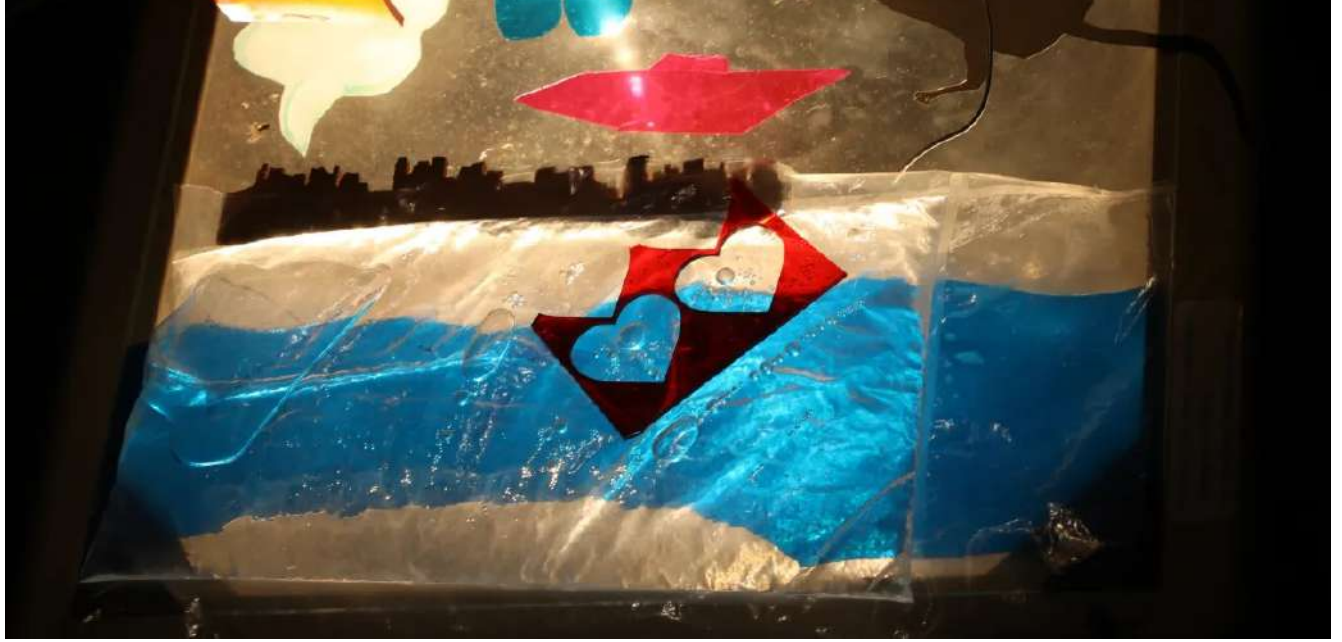
Chemnitz residents had begun to paint a replica of "The Mechanization of Agriculture" (1960) by Karl Heinz Jakob.

A youth art section at the biennale cleverly played on the event's theme with the title "Ex Oriente Polylux." Named after the Polylux brand of East German projectors commonly used in schools during the Communist era, the section featured projectors that allowed children to place objects on them and experiment with projecting shapes onto translucent, hanging screens.

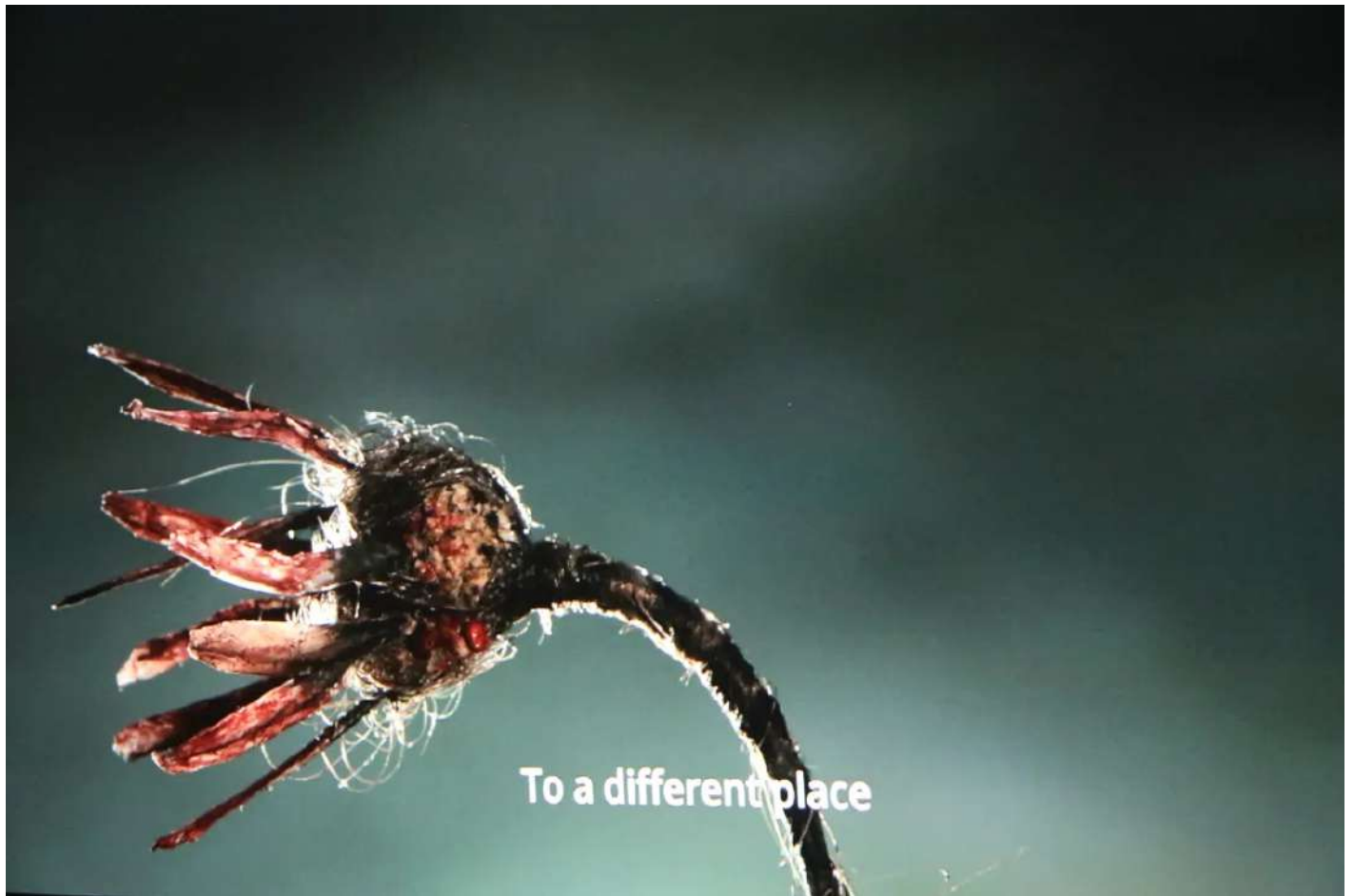
"The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the so-called 'Eastern Bloc' did not mark the 'end of history,'" Dudek said of enduring misperceptions about the formerly Communist countries, referencing the theory proposed in the 1990s by American political scientist Francis Fukuyama.

"The resulting new geopolitical orientations were commented on by Chancellor Scholz in his speech at Charles University in Prague, when he said that Europe's center is moving eastwards," Dudek added. "The Biennale aims to create a space for discourse, to discuss whose experiences and ideas shape the debate about our future, about the East, and about Ukraine, in order to start thinking of a common future in fragile times."





The prompt "What is youth for you?" written on one of the projectors in "Ex Oriente Polylux"



Still from Dana Kavelina, "Such a landscape" (2024), animation





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Installation view of *Dirty White* by Alina Kleytman





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