

Frieze

Opinion /

Can Art Founded Within Capitalist Structures Ever Be Truly Democratic?

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BY MITCH SPEED

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An exhibition at PinchukArtCentre, Kyiv, timed to coincide with the Yalta European Strategy conference, reminds of the corruptibility of culture



It's clear (isn't it?) that anti-democratic forces are at work when wealthy individuals exert the equivalent influence of political parties. And it's weird (isn't it?) when oligarchs start extolling democracy.

Take the stratospherically wealthy Victor Pinchuk, a former industrial pipe hawker, who in 1998 became a member of the Ukrainian Parliament, and who now heads Ukraine's largest private

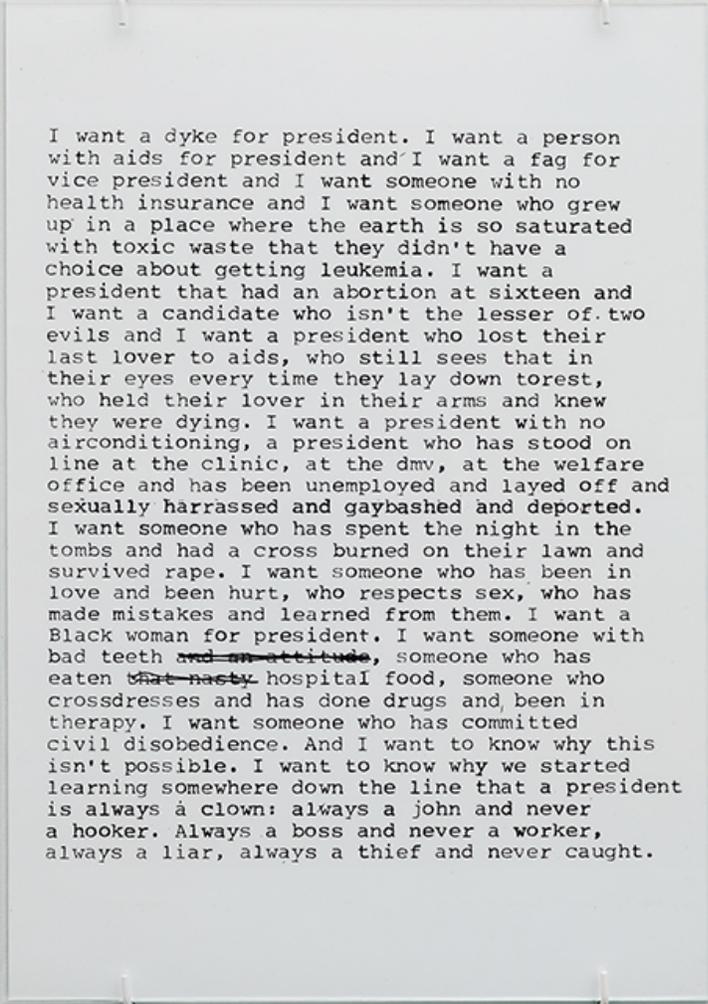
philanthropic foundation. In 2006, Pinchuk left Parliament because 'business and politics should be separated'. Just two years prior, he had put his fortune in service to politics, founding a conference about the future of Europe, called Yalta European Strategy (YES) – Yalta being the Crimean city where it took place, before Russia took Crimea. This year's conference, which is colloquially known as the 'Ukrainian Davos', was paired with an exhibition at Pinchuk's Kiev foundation, PinchukArtCentre, titled 'DEMOCRACY ANEW?' If the epithet is awkwardly direct, the question is apt. Corruption plagues Ukraine, while a tiger-slaying despot looms nearby. If not riotously political, the show is subtly so. But as political art exhibitions go, excessive subtlety can wash out a show's meaning, or integrity, just as surely as excessive directness can make it overbearing. Over time, this show came to mirror the eerie superficiality of the symposium across town.

Those who saw 'DEMOCRACY ANEW?' – which was given microscopic mention in the conference programme – met with a deceptively challenging image from Pascale Marthine Tayou. In one selection from Marthine Tayou's 2018 series, 'Fingers', a dark brown hand tears gently through white paper. The context of Black Lives Matter and the refugee crisis seem to cast the work in terms of black struggle, while its tenderness defies revolutionary cliché. But this reading is questioned by the equal possibility that the work expresses something more pan-human – maybe our blind grasping through fragile present time, towards something better. Like grist to democracy, these pictures strain, rather than satisfy, image literacy.

The show's most directly political notes are equally complex. Zoe Leonard's typewritten poem, *I Want a President* (1992), pleads for a leader born of disenfranchisement, while Francis Alÿs's two-channel video projection, *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River* (2008), shows children wading through waves, from Europe towards Africa and vice versa. As subtitles locate us in the Strait of Gibraltar and the figures clutch toy sailboats, an unmistakable allusion to tragic refugee migrations is made all the more gutting by a tangible sense of childish wonder. Maurizio Cattelan's ghoulish *Ave Maria* (2007) sees three brown-shirted, polyurethane arms Siegfried Heiling numb hatred out of the gallery wall. The work is like a condensation of Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil', which describes how fascism is first and foremost a separation of people from their minds. More quietly, Goshka Macuga stirred bizarre political dreamscapes, in drawn *mise-en-scène* of historical, political and pop-cultural figures: C3PO, Lady Hamilton, Trump, Berlusconi, Putin, Gaddafi ...

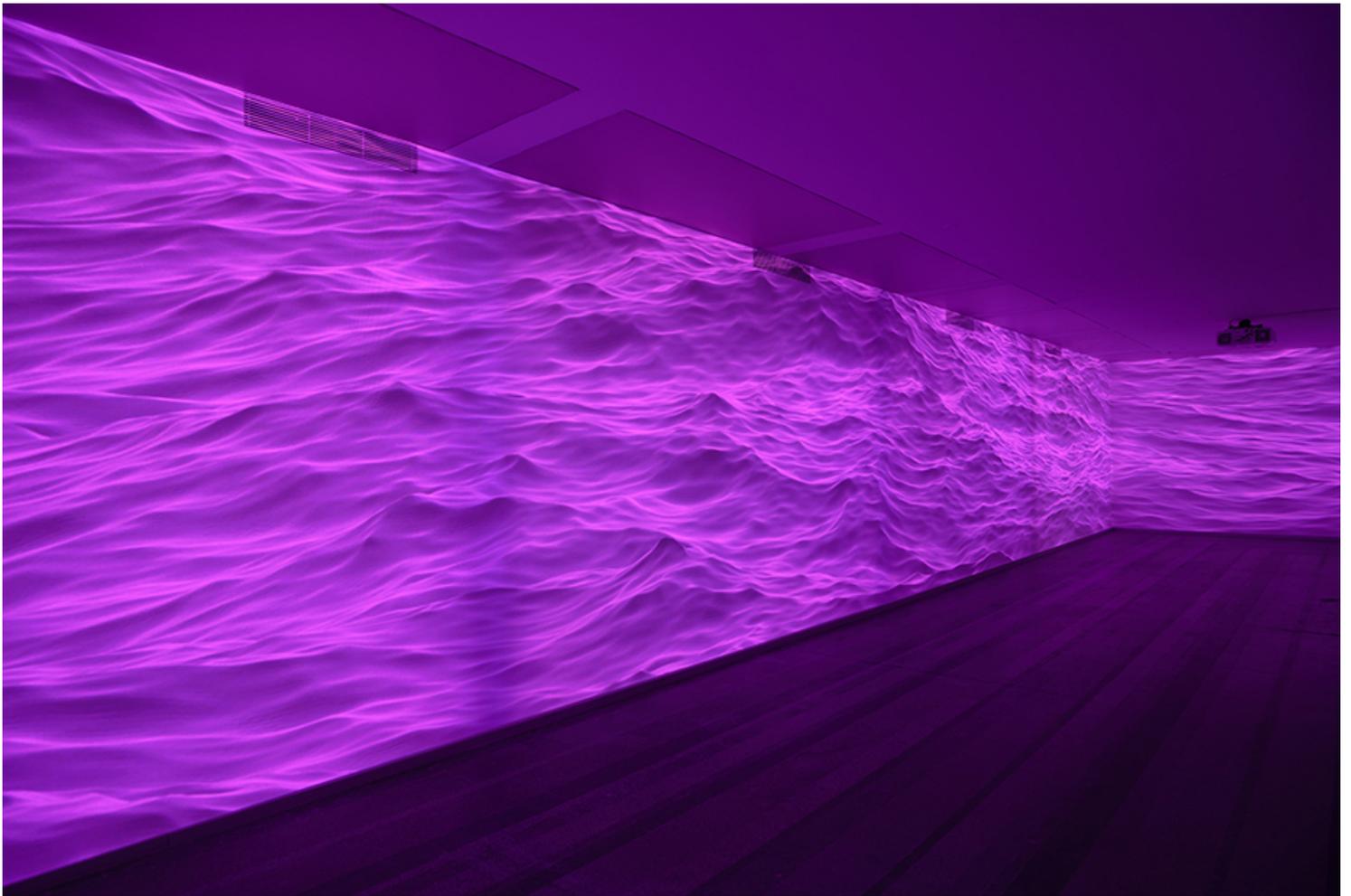
Alÿs's waves echo Sondra Perry's *Typhoon Coming On* (2018), wherein the walls of a darkened room are bathed in undulating surfaces, like radioactive plasma and fluid rock. Lusciously destabilizing,

Zoe Leonard, *I Want a President*, 1992, ink on paper. Courtesy: the artist and PinchukArtCentre, Kyiv



I want a dyke for president. I want a person with aids for president and I want a fag for vice president and I want someone with no health insurance and I want someone who grew up in a place where the earth is so saturated with toxic waste that they didn't have a choice about getting leukemia. I want a president that had an abortion at sixteen and I want a candidate who isn't the lesser of two evils and I want a president who lost their last lover to aids, who still sees that in their eyes every time they lay down to rest, who held their lover in their arms and knew they were dying. I want a president with no airconditioning, a president who has stood on line at the clinic, at the dmv, at the welfare office and has been unemployed and layed off and sexually harrassed and gaybashed and deported. I want someone who has spent the night in the tombs and had a cross burned on their lawn and survived rape. I want someone who has been in love and been hurt, who respects sex, who has made mistakes and learned from them. I want a Black woman for president. I want someone with bad teeth ~~and an attitude~~, someone who has eaten ~~that nasty~~ hospital food, someone who crossdresses and has done drugs and been in therapy. I want someone who has committed civil disobedience. And I want to know why this isn't possible. I want to know why we started learning somewhere down the line that a president is always a clown: always a john and never a hooker. Always a boss and never a worker, always a liar, always a thief and never caught.

Typhoon feels conspicuously unhinged from the show's theme, as is the case with Olafur Eliasson's pair of lukewarm, melting ice cubes: *Still River* (2016). It would be easy to concoct democratic metaphors for these works. But why? It's depressing to find oneself shoe-horning specifically political readings into pieces that simply model democracy in the same way that all good artworks do: as cryptic entities prompting conversation. This thematic dislocation continues through Allora and Calzadilla's *Stop, Repair, Prepare* (2008), a piano whose centre had been excised, allowing the player to stand within it; through several colourful casts, by Rachel Whiteread, of the negative space beneath chairs; through Luc Tuymans's 2017 painting, *The Swamp*, wherein a person crawls through purple-daubed muck and leaves.



Sondra Perry, *Typhoon Coming On*, 2018, installation view, PinchukArtCentre, Kyiv. Courtesy: the artist and PinchukArtCentre, Kyiv

Thus plays out an anxious discord between conceit and substance. If the exhibition often finds oblique poetics standing for political content, the conference often found rhetoric delivered by glamorous political figures, often doing the same. Condoleezza Rice and Tony Blair graced the stage, causing hearts to flutter with his faith in the European project. Then came Bono. Interviewed by Fareed Zakaria, the Irish bard delivered platitudes of unity and, because he really seemed to mean it, it was hard not to like him. But, given his curious habit of defending Ireland's skimpy taxation of multinationals, not to mention his predecessors in this special guest role, it was equally as hard to trust his purpose. (One such former guest now occupies the Oval Office, a pussy-grabbing paragon of democracy.) Meanwhile, BBC HARDtalk's Stephen Sackur did indeed 'talk hard' to Ukrainian functionaries, but his interviewees eluded questions about right-wing populism with serpentine political prowess.

One could surmise discomfiting explanations for this; like poisoned blood, bigotry flows unseen until it erupts in manic, shocking spurts. In private, I heard a former French minister defend mass border closure by invoking the changing ethnic face of France and the supposed laziness of Islamic people.

The right's popularity feeds on such racism, defended on the pretence that refugees suck up money needed by the European (white) working class. Enabling this screed is a blinding dearth of popular discourse concerning the actual causes of economic misery – namely, the radical upward consolidation of wealth. But subjects like that don't come up at parties like this.

On closing night, a Universal Studios-scale animation projected into the courtyard outside the conference gave action-movie form to Ukraine's recent history, from the 2014 revolution to its ostensible present-day freedom. 3D rendered explosions – both of bombs and democratic possibility – traded with gasps from the inebriated crowd. Back in the PinchukArtCentre, 'DEMOCRACY ANEW?' sat like a small, 21st-century Ukrainian version of America's post-war Marshall Plan, with many good artworks signifying open culture and open thought. But art, as we all know, has always operated propagandistically, and now as then and now as forever, the dilemma persists: can art's openness ever be truly believable when umbilically linked to this much power and structural inequality? Maybe we should just ask Bono. Maybe we should tell him: we still haven't found what we're looking for.

'DEMOCRACY ANEW?' <<http://new.pinchukartcentre.org/en/exhibitions/democracy-anew>> is on view at PinchukArtCentre, Kyiv until 9 January 2019.

Main image: Pascale Martine Tayou, Anvil of Democracy, anvil, engraving. Courtesy: the artist and PinchukArtCentre, Kyiv

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