

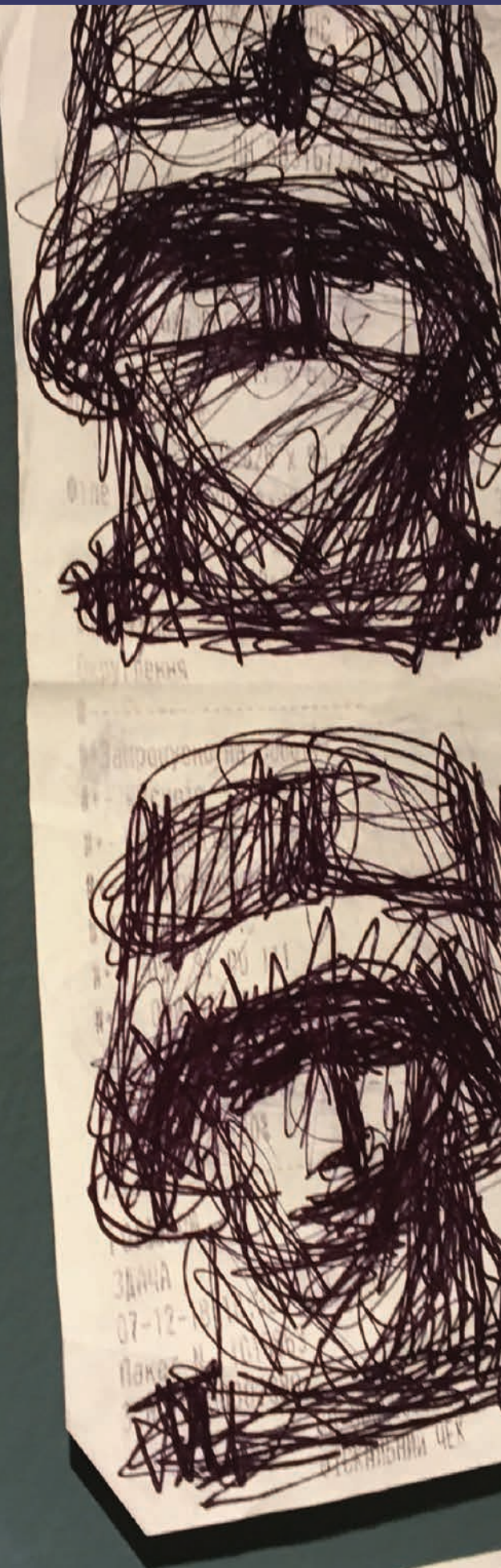
Vlodko Kaufman's *A Conversation* at the Ukrainian Museum

BY MARK ANDRYCZYK

A crowd gathered in the basement of the Ukrainian Museum in the East Village on a Saturday evening in November 2019. An annoying buzzing that emanated from the gallery was drawing people underground. Once they were allowed into the art space on the lower level, the people first noticed the noisy drone flying on a TV screen, as it flipped through hundreds of small pieces of paper, and then found themselves surrounded by four gallery walls plastered with those same paper scraps. Upon closer inspection, those papers were revealed to be receipts, transit tickets, and other everyday miscellany, each covered with a drawing of a soldier. Arranged in endless rows and columns, the multicolored miniportraits produced a dizzying effect on the viewer that was only intensified by the looping, piercing noise of the drone. Disturbed and dazed, yet chatty, the crowd was composed of art enthusiasts, members of the local Ukrainian community, and a group of scholars that had gathered in New York from various corners of the globe that weekend for a conference at Columbia University entitled “Five Years of War in the Donbas: Cultural Reflections and Reverberations.” The exhibit on display was Vlodko Kaufman’s *A Conversation*.

Organized by the Ukrainian Studies Program at the Harriman Institute, and cosponsored by the Ukrainian

Right: Photos on pages 42–44 by Mark Andryczyk, from the exhibition at the Ukrainian Museum, New York City; images on page 45 by the artist, courtesy of the Ukrainian Studies Program of the Harriman Institute.





Museum, the conference focused on the profound effect that the war between Russia and Ukraine in the Donbas has had not only on society but also on Ukrainian literature, music, film, and visual art. The war, which began over five years ago and has led to more than 13,000 deaths and the displacement of about one and a half million people, has inspired Ukraine's leading writers, film directors, musicians, and visual artists, resulting in artistic endeavors that provide fresh perspectives on such salient topics as memory, displacement, gender, and identity. Works discussed at the conference included Yelizaveta Smith's and Georg Genoux's film *School No. 3*; Volodymyr Rafeenko's novel *Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love*; Serhiy Zhadan's novel *Orphanage*; Alevtina Kakhidze's performance *Method for Construction of Political Truth*; and Serhii Zakharov's Russian insurgent caricatures. The conference provided an opportunity to bring to light some of the diverse forms and novel approaches that have been engaged by creative individuals throughout Ukraine as they attempt to comprehend and live with the war.

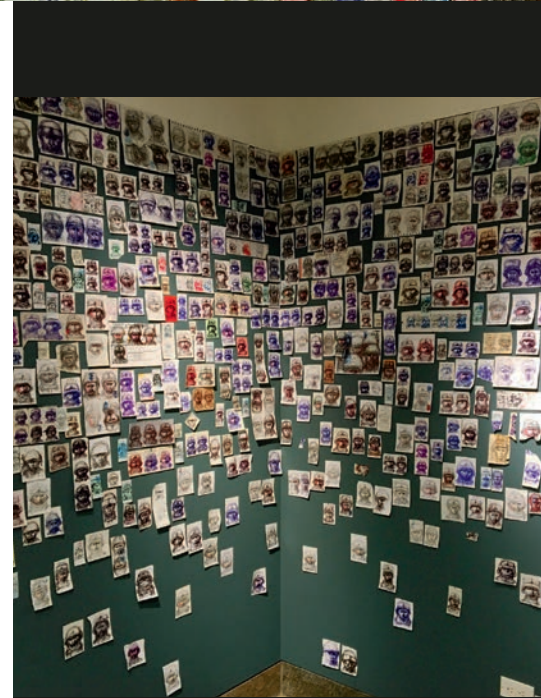
For the past five years, at the dead end of Virnenska (Armenian) Street, not far from Lviv's Rynok Square, Vlodko Kaufman could often be found upstairs at Dzyga, sketching and making stamps of soldiers on bits of paper that had been used by him or by others as they went about their day living in a country at war. Kaufman works in the genres of happening, performance, installation, painting, and graphics. He is the cofounder and artistic director of the Dzyga Art Association. Born in Karaganda (Kazakhstan), he received his education at the Lviv College of Applied and Decorative Arts and the

Lviv Polytechnic and was a member of the artistic society *Shliakh* (The Path, 1989–93).

He is cofounder and member of the Institute of Contemporary Art (Lviv, 2007); coordinator of the Festival Days of Performance Art in Lviv (since 2007); curator of the Week of Contemporary Art (Lviv, since 2008); and curator of the Triennale Ukrainian Cross-Section (since 2010).

Kaufman has mounted numerous exhibitions, performances, and projects in Ukraine and abroad, including the major, long-term projects (since 2002) *Quotes for Nests*; *Ekoteatr* (Ecotheater); *Ryboterapiia* (Fish-therapy); and *Ptakhoterapiia* (Bird-therapy). Dzyga has been a hub for cultural activity in Ukraine since the mid-1990s, where edgy visual art, music, film, and literature have found a home. Kaufman has designed books by many of Ukraine's leading authors,

Kaufman creates miniportraits of these anonymous soldiers both as a means of memorializing their deaths and dealing with the war on a personal level.





Kaufman conceived his *Conversation* as a manner of trying to coexist with the war that had invaded his homeland.

including Yuri Andrukhovych, Ihor Kalynets, and Zhadan. Recently, he designed the U.S.-published, English-language anthology of contemporary Ukrainian literature *The White Chalk of Days*. Upstairs at Dzyga, he was trying to strike up a conversation.

Kaufman conceived his exhibit of installed graphic art *A Conversation* (in Ukrainian, *Besida*) as a manner of trying to coexist with the war that invaded his homeland—as a way to continue to react to the daily news reports officially updating the numbers of casualties of the war.

It was a tactic that was developed to keep awareness of the war's destruction from being tossed away like a used trolley ticket or stamp.

Kaufman creates miniportraits of these anonymous soldiers both as a means of memorializing their deaths and as a way to deal with the war on a personal level.

Our conference wrapped up with the U.S. premiere of Kaufman's

A Conversation at the Ukrainian Museum. At the exhibit opening, the artist shared with the public that the soldier portraits they see on the gallery's four walls are just a portion of those that he has created. When the war began, he decided that he would continue making them until it ended; as the war endures, the number of portraits continues to grow. Five years on, Kaufman expressed that what he had most feared had indeed come true—that people had become used to the horrors of the war, that they had put it out of their minds, that they preferred not to think about it. As with other uncomfortable things, the war is perhaps best forgotten so that it doesn't impede you from going about the tasks of your everyday life, like sending a letter or catching a trolley.

It is summer 2020, and the war in the Donbas continues. Vlodko Kaufman's *A Conversation* still hangs in a gallery at the Ukrainian Museum. He continues to produce his portraits in Ukraine—he's trying to keep the conversation going. ■

Video from the conference and of the drone's interaction with the soldier portraits is available at <https://harriman.columbia.edu/event/conference-five-years-war-donbas-cultural-responses-and-reverberations>.

Mark Andryczyk is associate research scholar for the Harriman's Ukrainian Studies Program. His publications include The Intellectual as Hero in 1990s Ukrainian Fiction (University of Toronto Press, 2012) and The White Chalk of Days: The Contemporary Ukrainian Literature Series Anthology (Academic Studies Press, 2017).

