



PRESS RELEASE

Brussels, May 11 2023,

Five Belgian Museums and ICOM Belgium join to present *Explosions Near the Museum*, to raise awareness on the theft of Ukrainian museum collections

In a collective action, five Belgian museums - Royal Museum of Art and History, Brussels; Domain & Royal Museum of Mariemont, Morlanwelz; STAM, Gent; In Flanders Fields, Ypres; and M Leuven, Leuven - present together *Explosions Near the Museum*, a new video work by Ukrainian artists Yarema Malashchuk and Roman Khimei, starting on May 18th 2023, International Museum Day (ICOM).

This year's international museum day is dedicated to sustainability and well-being. The present initiative aims to remind us that museums are guardians of communities' identities, sources of community building and well-being. Protecting civilians and respecting shared heritage is essential for sustainable democracies.

Explosions Near the Museum is both a factual reflection on the plundering of the Kherson Regional Museum and a tender statement of the importance of cultural heritage and the care and commitment of museum work.

The artists captured image and sound in the city of Kherson itself, just recently liberated, and inside the Museum, situated 2 km from occupied territory and 6 km from the positions of Russian troops. This Museum of regional history housed one of Southern Ukraine's largest and oldest collections of antiquities, with over 173.000 objects spanning seven thousand years, from Scythian gold to World War II weaponry. But between 24 and 26 October 2022, two weeks before Kherson was liberated by the Ukrainians, the museum was looted by Russian occupational forces, in a strategic theft of centuries of Ukrainian history. The New York Times reported on January 14th 2023: 'The plundering is hardly a case of random or opportunistic misbehaviour by a few ill-behaved troops, Ukrainian officials and international experts say, or even a desire to turn a quick profit on the black market. Instead, they believe the thefts are a broadside attack on Ukrainian pride, culture and identity, consistent with the imperial attitude of Russia's president.' Human Rights Watch reported: 'This systematic looting was an organized operation to rob Ukrainians of their national heritage and amounts to a war crime.'

In the video (13'38", in English with French and Dutch subtitles), the artists look at the empty plinths and display cases of the Kherson museum and recall the former contents - paintings, gold, silver, ancient Greek artefacts, religious icons, and even historical documents of shared Russian and Ukrainian history - while the sound of shelling is heard in the background. The work is a strong statement of love towards absent cultural heritage and hope in times of loss. With every absence the artists reflect on the meaning of the artefact through their label description, evoking them, indicating their initial use, but also dwelling on the elegant shape of an amphora or the fact that a stele of the 5th century before Christ has been found 128 years ago by a villager in a specific village, to be remembered just as well. 'We plan to install again ...' is the silver thread through the work. Once in a while they add 'that is, if we find it' or 'I hope the text will not be damaged and we will be able to read it again'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41qO9hHAhow>



The artists wanted to show this work as an intervention in local history museums around the world. ICOM Belgium and the participating Belgian museums gratefully welcomed this idea, stating: *'This is a highly touching work of art, impressive for its fragility and resilience, efficiently revealing the horror of a war in the near background, and uncannily activating the importance of cultural heritage through its void. It makes once again clear how this war is not only killing people and destroying cities, but also the cultural fabric of a country. We want to give Ukraine the attention it is due and hope that the Kherson Museum's collections - as all other looted Ukrainian collections - will be returned soon. This work also serves to call attention to all other locations around the world subject to wars and heritage destruction'*. With this joint presentation, museums show their ongoing attention to the losses war causes to mankind, and stress the importance of localised cultural heritage as part of the hardware and the software that make communities, nations and all of us.

The video will be installed amidst permanent collections of the participating museums:

- At the Art & History Museum, in the middle of its ancient Greek section, to highlight the importance both the Brussels and the Kherson museum attach to the (Greek) antiquities, a shared European heritage;
- At the Domain & Royal Museum of Mariemont, in its Hainaut regional archaeology section, to highlight the direct relationship between local history and heritage preservation in museums;
- At STAM, in the 'Treasury', to emphasize the dramatic contrast between a museum deprived of its treasures and this lavishly decorated 17th-century office room;
- At In Flanders Fields Museum, at the end of the permanent exhibition where a drapery shows a list of armed conflicts that, since the "War to End All Wars", have taken place or are raging somewhere in the world;
- At M Leuven, in the forum, where the audience will be invited to visit Jill Magid's installation 'The Migration of the Wings', which also explores the theme of looted art as a weapon of war.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Explosions Near the Museum can be seen in:

- **Art & History Museum, Brussels**
Jubelpark, 10 parc du Cinquantenaire, 1000 Brussels
May 18th - November 5th 2023 | Tuesday – Friday 9.30-17.00, Saturday-Sunday 10.00-17.00
- **Domain & Royal Museum of Mariemont, Morlanwelz**
100 Chaussée de Mariemont, 7140 Morlanwelz
May 18th 2023 – January 7th 2024 | Tuesday – Sunday 10:00-18:00
- **STAM, Ghent**
Bijlokesite, Godshuizenlaan 2, 9000 Ghent
May 18th – November 5th 2023
Monday – Friday 9.00-17.00 | Saturday-Sunday & school holidays 10.00-18.00, closed Wed.
- **In Flanders Fields, Ypres**
Lakenhallen, Grote Markt 34, 8900 Ieper
May 18th – June 30th, 2023 | Monday - Friday 10:00-18:00, Saturday - Sunday 10:00-17:00
- **M Leuven, Leuven**
Vanderkelenstraat 28, 3000 Leuven
On May 18th 2023 | 20:00-21:00 (including introduction, followed by a museum visit)



PRESS CONTACTS

- **Art & History Museum, Brussels:**
Press contact: Anne Goffart a.goffart@kmg-mrah.be
- **Domain and Royal Museum of Mariemont, Morlanwelz:**
BECulture
General Manager: Séverine Provost
Project Coordinator: Florien Doods florien@beculture.be - 0032 (0)494 87 71 09
info@beculture.be - 0032 (0)26446191
Domain & Royal Museum of Mariemont:
Mélanie Thiry melanie.thiry@musee-mariemont.be - 0032 (0)64 27 37 44
Louise Lhoir louise.lhoir@musee-mariemont.be – 0032 (0) 64 27 37 58
communication@musee-mariemont.be
- **STAM, Ghent:**
Press contact: Frederik Verstraete frederik.verstraete@stad.gent – 0032 (0)474 29 77 63
- **In Flanders Fields, Ypres:**
Stephen Lodewyck Stephen.lodewyck@ieper.be 00 32 486 07 27 63,
Dries Van Robaey Dries.VanRobaey@ieper.be 00 32 497 38 49 72
- **M Leuven, Leuven**
Samantha Fadahunsi samantha.fadahunsi@mleuven.be - 0032 (0) 491 35 02 95
Celine De Geest celine.de.geest@mleuven.be - 0032 (0) 479 67 65 31
- **ICOM Belgium**
Sergio Servellón, ICOM Belgium Flanders Sergio Servellón
sergio.servellon@icom-belgium-flanders.be
Alexandre Chevalier, ICOM Belgique Wallonie-Bruxelles
presidence@icom-wb.museum



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Art & History Museum, Brussels

Located in the Cinquantenaire park in Brussels, the Art & History Museum wants to foster curiosity and wonder about the worlds women and men have made.

Founded in 1835 and still one of the largest federal museums in Belgium, it holds and researches some 250.000 art objects, tools and devices, and numerous scientific data and documents in trust for society, of which about 16.000 objects are permanently on show. Besides important collections on display such as national archaeology; Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek and Roman antiquities; art from the islam world; South-, Central-, & North American, Asian and Oceanic cultures; and European decorative arts, including outstanding collections of Mosan art, dinanderies, glass ware, tapestries, altar pieces, precision instruments, and art nouveau; the museum also keeps in it depositories collections of lace and textile, ceramics, Japanese prints, European ethnology, carriages, photography (prints and instruments), and post and telephone heritage.

Domain and Royal Museum of Mariemont, Morlanwelz:

Located about 50km south of Brussels, this beautiful 45-hectare domain is an important European '*lieu de mémoire*' boasting a rich history which dates back to the mid-16th century. Classified as an exceptional heritage site of Wallonia in 2003, Mariemont has two levels of heritage importance: the domain itself, related to the major events, cultural trends and personalities of European history of the last 500 years; and the museum collections of world heritage artefacts, initiated by a visionary philanthropist connected to the European industrial revolution. The Museum and its collections are property of the Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles since 1991. This Museum of art, history and archeology is also a research institution, in charge of conserving the second largest collection of Egyptian antiquities in Belgium, rare wall painting fragments of a Boscoreale Villa, regional archaeological remains and historical artefacts, rare books, non-European art, and domain architectural and sculptural heritage.

<http://www.musee-mariemont.be/>

STAM, Ghent:

As the City Museum of Ghent, the mission of STAM is to investigate what makes Ghent to Ghent and the city to city. A permanent exhibition leads visitors along a chronological trail of objects and multimedia which trace the growth and development of Ghent. Temporary exhibitions explore the concept of 'urbanity' from different angles. STAM defines itself as an 'open house', where inhabitants and users of the city connect with its past, while looking ahead to the future of the city and the many challenges of urban life.

<https://stamgent.be/>

M Leuven, Leuven:

M is a museum and visual arts platform that makes meaningful connections across time, with society and between art disciplines. With its mix of old and contemporary art in the historic centre of Leuven, M stands out. Top architect Stéphane Beel designed a sleek museum complex around the old Vander Kelen-Mertens city museum. M manages a collection of more than 53,000 objects. In addition to the historical art production in Leuven and Brabant, Belgian art after 1945 is also central: we present both masterpieces and new work by contemporary artists. Temporary exhibitions introduce visitors to lesser-known collection items, often in dialogue with loans from the

international museum community. M also has a second base, namely the historic St Peter's Church. There, we present a unique series of artworks - including the iconic 'The Last Supper' by Dieric Bouts - to a wider audience.

In Flanders Fields, Ypres:

In a country where war has raged, it lingers, even if that war is already a century behind us. For each of the more than 600,000 dead who fell in Belgium, for each of the more than 425,000 graves and names on memorials and for the hundreds of traces and relics in the front region, for each of the millions affected (physically or psychologically wounded, refugees and deportees) there is a story of grief, pain and ordeal somewhere in the world. The *In Flanders Fields Museum* conserves the link with this war past. Because the nature of war does not change over time, the museum considers presenting this war story to be a universal and contemporary message of peace, and therefore an important social mission. The museum works closely with partners who share its mission and works within the framework of Ypres City of Peace.

ICOM Belgium

The International Council of Museums is an international organisation of museums and museum professionals which is committed to the research, conservation, continuation and communication to society of the world's natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible. The Belgian national ICOM Committee is a two-folded structure. It is made out of two language-based museum associations, that act as (vice-) chairperson in turns for a 3-year term.

<https://icom.museum/en/about-us/>

www.icom-wb.museum

www.icom-belgium-flanders.be

Yarema Malashchuk and Roman Khimei are amongst the most remarked young artists in Ukraine. Their work often focuses on existential conditions and the fragility of human life. They recently presented, with Kyiv's PinchukArtCenter, a multi-screen installation at the Davos World Economic Forum, centered around two children dancingly walking on a sidewalk and singing what on further examination appears to be a rough soldier song belittling Putin. Antwerp M HKA (at the origin of this initiative) acquired one of their recent works 'The Wanderer', in which the artists exhibit portraits of reanimated dead Russian soldiers, reflecting on how the romantic tradition makes abstraction of concrete human life and suffering. The artists state that 'In Ukraine contemporary art is an important participant in civil society, characterised by a constructive critical ethos. As an outcome of this, Ukrainian cultural heritage became an important theme of the contemporary art scene since the turning event referred to as 'Maidan' in Western Europe, and called 'the Revolution of Dignity' in Ukraine. How can and should contemporary art be reactivated for its present society?'

To find out more about the artists' work: <https://www.yaremaandhimey.com/>