

Ukraine Pavilion



Mark Titchner. "WE ARE UKRAINIANS. WHAT ELSE MATTERS?". 2007, digital print on vinyl. © the artist. Courtesy Vilma Gold, London

What does it mean to be Ukrainian? Who are they? Where are they? These are the questions Peter Doroshenko, commissioner of Ukraine's national pavilion at this year's Biennale and director of BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, aims to tease out. Taking his cue from Ukrainian film director Alexander Dovzhenko, who asks those same questions in his own work, Doroshenko has organised a pavilion that includes work by foreign as well as resident Ukrainian artists. Artists Dzine, Juergen Teller, Sam Taylor-Wood and Mark Titchner explore what it is to be Ukrainian from the perspective of an outsider; meanwhile, Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov shows images from his latest series, *Shargorod* (2007), a portrait of a town southwest of Kiev; and artist duo Alexander Hnilitsky and Lesia Zaiats present videowork and paintings on the subject of memory and geography.

"I was interested in how global forces foreclose some forms of cultural life and open up others. And to better understand what the aims of culture in a globalised world are," Doroshenko explains. Though the foreign artists have no ostensible ties to Ukraine, their inclusion in the pavilion is part of a more general assertion of Ukraine's changing cultural identity, which, strangled for years under Soviet rule, is currently looking outwards to the world beyond its borders.

ArtReview caught up with Titchner to discuss his two works for the show, a large-scale banner and an eight-metre-tall mechanical sculpture. He explained that while his work would normally feature excerpts and sentences from found texts, this time the wording on his banner would be penned by an artist's collective in Kiev. "I wanted to get a sense of what it is like to be an artist in Ukraine", he says, emphasising that he didn't want to "spend a day in Kiev and just be done with it".

Still, one wonders whether the choice of foreign artists to exhibit at the pavilion was a source of resentment among those in the collective. But their reaction, says Titchner, was positive, and is reflected in the banner's defiant slogan, which reads, in both Ukrainian and English: 'We are Ukrainians. What else matters?'

He admits, however, that his participation in the pavilion is "slightly odd... people think I'm lying, and then they'll say, 'Oh, are you Ukrainian, then?'"

I ask Doroshenko whether this signifies, underneath it all, a dearth of artistic activity in Ukraine. "No, far from that. There are many emerging, mid-career and senior artists making amazing work in Ukraine, but I was interested in pushing the boring artworld boundaries of having national pavilions filled with artists for political reasons. Taking some risks, thinking differently and working with a group of international artists on some important questions could have its rewards" – the most important of which may well be improved relations between cultural centres in Ukraine and abroad.

Indeed the pavilion is underscored by twin themes of globalisation and diaspora: on the one hand the relentless spread of multinational corporations, and on the other, the scattering of peoples and cultures across the globe. Dzine, himself an example of this phenomenon of social and cultural fluidity (born in Puerto Rico and currently living in the US), has created work on the subject of a Ukrainian community in Chicago. And to further stress the pavilion's commitment to questioning national identity but not be bound up by issues of geographic specificity, several of the works will be exhibited outside of the pavilion's Palazzo Papadopoli space. Dzine has, according to Doroshenko, "produced a useable boat to be placed in the canal", while Titchner's sculpture (a meditation on Yevgeny Vuchetich's *The Motherland*, 1967, a towering sculpture in Kiev commemorating the Great Patriotic War) will be exhibited along the canal by the Rialto Bridge.

Naysayers may well sneer at the initially incongruous list of artists chosen to exhibit. But if the rate of globalisation increases at its current pace, it is tempting to wonder whether, in future, the nationalistic premise for the Biennale's pavilions will continue to have any real value at all.