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# Zhanna Kadyrova

by Kathryn Lloyd • 20.05.2022

In 2007 the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo created a 167-metre long meandering fissure in the floor of the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, London. The crack ran the entire length of the building, beginning at the top of the sloping concrete as a hairline crack, widening and deepening into gaps up to two feet deep and several inches wide. The following year it was filled in, leaving a snaking scar that sits, quietly omnipresent, beneath all subsequent artist commissions. Salcedo has described the work as a representation of racial hatred and the violence imposed by borders and their enforcement. However, after its installation, the work was discussed more for the way it was achieved rather than what it evidently communicated, evading Salcedo's concise rendering of pervasive sociopolitical injustice. This also contributed to another lacuna in the work's reception: its title, *Shibboleth*.<sup>1</sup>

The modern usage of the term *shibboleth* derives from the Book of Judges, where it was employed as a pronunciation test by the Gileadites in order to identify and subsequently eradicate their enemy, the Ephraimites:



Fig. 1 From the series *Palianytsia*, by Zhanna Kadyrova. 2022. Found river stones, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist and Ivan Sautkin; photograph Diachenko Nataliia).

Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay; then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said 'Sibboleth': for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took

him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.<sup>2</sup>



**Fig. 2** From the series *Palianytsia*, by Zhanna Kadyrova. 2022. Found river stones, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist and Ivan Sautkin; photograph Diachenko Nataliia).

The test relies on a sign that is impossible to forge; it is impervious to knowledge or willpower. In its original context, this test is not simply one of identification, but also one of lethality. By applying the potential violence of this word to her installation, Salcedo references the border as both device for exclusion and a weapon: it can be dangerous when crossed, but it is also dangerous when erected.

Since its introduction, the word *shibboleth* has entered many different languages and its various meanings fluctuate between autonomy and dependence, inclusion and exclusion, significance and insignificance. As Jacques Derrida stated, the *shibboleth* has a 'terrifying ambiguity [. . . it is] a sign of belonging and threat of discrimination, indiscernible discernment between alliance and war'.<sup>3</sup> For the Ukrainian artist Zhanna Kadyrova (b.1981), the term has come into renewed prominence during a time of violent conflict. Her project *Palianytsia* **FIG.1** **FIG.2**, which is currently on view in Venice in conjunction with the 59th Biennale, is also a manifestation of the *shibboleth*, but in contrast to Salcedo's rift, it evokes its potential for collective survival.

The Ukrainian word *palianytsia* translates as 'bread', traditionally in reference to a large, round, hearth-baked wheat bread. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, this word has become a symbol of resistance as Russian occupiers are unable to pronounce it correctly, distinguishing unequivocally

between allies and enemies. Kadyrova's project comprises drawings and a series of stone sculptures that resemble loaves of bread. The stones are taken from the rivers in the Carpathian Mountains, where the artist is currently residing after being forced to leave her home and studio in Kyiv. Honed and polished by the running mountain rivers, the stones have been partially sliced. They are placed on a long table covered in a white tablecloth, creating a banquet of staples that is proffered to the viewer – if not as a literal form of sustenance, then as a symbol of one, and of political resistance. For the duration of the Venice Biennale preview in April 2022, air-raid sirens were activated outside the exhibition space on Riva San Biasio, blaring out daily to bring a fraction of the reality of war into the oft-paradoxical environment of the world's largest international art festival.



**Fig. 3** *Volatility*, by Zhanna Kadyrova. 2020. Helium-filled balloons. (Courtesy the artist).

The scales of Salcedo's and Kadyrova's *shibboleths* are widely divergent – one is unassuming, while the other adapts to the size of a vast exhibition space. Kadyrova's practice can, however, be understood through the lens of monumental sculpture, even when its physical dimensions would appear to indicate otherwise. She is predominantly interested in the politics of public space, and many of her recent works take the form of outdoor, site-specific installations, such as *Volatility* **FIG.3** in the Semmering Mountains, Austria, in which dozens of helium-filled balloons connected to plummets on the lake bed below hovered above the mountain lake surface at varying heights. In 2021 she installed a series of 'modern ruins' in the small Italian village of Tolfa using recovered materials, such as ceramic tiles, slate, pebbles and marble **FIG.4 FIG.5**. These interventions are indicative of Kadyrova's preoccupation with the relationship between pre-used materials and historical narratives, as well as ideals of the monument and anti-monument.





**Fig. 4** *Landmarks (Found Village)* from the series *Landmarks*, by Zhanna Kadyrova. 2021. Collected roof tiles, concrete, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist and Galleria Continua, San Gimignano; photograph Monkeys VideoLab).

Kadyrova most frequently turns to the language of sculpture, but also incorporates photography, video, drawing and performance into her practice. What unites her diverse body of work is a consideration of the aesthetic heritage of socialist ideals still present in contemporary Ukraine. She explores the symbolic values of urban building materials and their connection to the consequences of human activity, which are often far removed from their emancipatory ideals. As such, architectural materials dominate her oeuvre: ceramics, glass, stone, concrete. The one to which she most often returns is ceramic tile, which she has used repeatedly since 2004. As well as being adopted for their cleanliness, ease of access and ability to produce uniform surfaces, in Ukraine, tiles and large mosaic panels often decorated the grey concrete blocks of socialist housing projects. Today, they are undergoing various transformations, restructuring strategies and the pressures of so-called 'urban rationalisation'. However, the tiles that have adorned buildings often display a stronger resistance to the impact of neglect and time. As Elena Sorokina, the curator of Kadyrova's 2019 solo exhibition *Resistance of Matter*, has noted: 'To all appearances, they are more durable than the architecture they are supposed to decorate'.<sup>4</sup>


Kadyrova has applied such materials to a host of objects and ideas, often manifesting the intangible or invisible. In 2008 she began *Calculation* **FIG.6**, a series of sculptures that became a 'portrait' of the global economic crisis that occurred in the autumn of that year. The sculptures resemble various graphs, diagrams and schemes that display indicators of exorbitant economic growth. In another series, *Invisible Forms* **FIG.7**, she solidifies the projection of

light beams, shadows and the gaze of security cameras in concrete. Her large-scale project *Market* FIG.8 FIG.9 resembles a typical food stall, replete with all necessary elements: scales, food crates, eggs, meat, vegetables and fruit. All objects have been fabricated from Kadyrova's favoured heavy building materials: ceramic tiles, cement and stone. The work has been shown in various iterations, during each of which the artist has sold items of the work by weight, with each gram equal to one unit of local currency.



**Fig. 5** *Landmarks (Found Mosaic)* from the series *Landmarks*, by Zhanna Kadyrova. 2021. Collected natural stone, concrete, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist and Galleria Continua, San Gimignano; photograph Monkeys VideoLab).

In her contribution to a book on the artist, published in 2013 in conjunction with Kadyrova's representation of Ukraine at the 55th Venice Biennale, the art historian Eugenia Kikodze observed that one of 'the most direct and striking achievements of perestroika was the movement of artists into public space'.<sup>5</sup> As such, she describes Kadyrova's interest in the immanence of life in urban environments as originating from the 'democratic upsurge' experienced in the 1990s art scene in Ukraine and Russia.<sup>6</sup> At times Kadyrova relies on the private connotations of her chosen, historical materials – the domestic or clinical nature of the kitchen or bathroom – whereas at others she relies on its public usages – in the creation or adornment of housing, institutions and factories. In *Diamonds* FIG.10, she applies the sterility of shiny, coloured ceramic tiles to the structure of a material notoriously associated with wealth and luxury. Conversely, for the series *Trash Monuments* FIG.11 she uses the same, fractured materials to produce enlarged sculptures of ubiquitous, invaluable objects, such as cigarette packs, tea bags, road signs and apple cores. The inconsequential is made monumental in size, and yet these objects are all depicted as broken, squashed or crumpled.

Given Kadyrova's interest in the domain of public space, it is perhaps inevitable that she has been invited to create a number of outdoor, permanent works of art. In 2009 she installed *Monument to a New Monument*  in the Ukrainian town of Sharhorod. At the unveiling ceremony, as is typical, a white sheet covered the sculpture, which was removed only to reveal an alternative white sheet below. Using concrete and ceramic tiles, Kadyrova created a monument that defies the necessary requirements of a monument in rendering only the draping that would traditionally precede its unveiling. A bodily mass can be inferred from the structure, but it is necessarily identity-less. At the time it was installed, twenty years after Ukraine gained independence, the artist referenced a deep national conflict in the interpretation of the country's heritage, which is often borne out in relation to historical monuments. *Monument to a New Monument* opposes the definitiveness that such statues display, instead operating on modes of uncertainty and the impossibility of unifying any history.

Tiles adhere to a surface like an architectural skin; they are a form of cladding that can protect or enhance. By contrast, in her sculptures, Kadyrova draws attention to their three-dimensional, geometric potential. The once-uniform material is often smashed and recomposed, at once indicating the obliteration and reformulation of a material that cannot evade its politics. Kikodze notes that in Kadyrova's fractured, tile sculptures, one can see a paraphrasing of late-Soviet monumental sculpture, at which point, 'following the omnipresence of academicism during the totalitarian period, artists tried to "modernise" officialdom, and the pant-legs of Lenin's trousers became wavy like Umberto Boccioni's *Speeding Muscles*'.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting therefore – and an indication of the artist's resourcefulness and relentless engagement with materials – that during a time of renewed conflict, she has opted to produce her *shibboleth* from a strong, rounded material, which has been worn down principally by water and not by man.

Kadyrova's ever-changing practice also bears traces of the sociopolitical changes that Ukrainian society underwent in the early 2000s, such as the Orange Revolution – a series of protests that took place in response to the 2004 presidential election, claimed to be marred by corruption and fraud. Her work will inevitably bear the imprint of the current war – as it is unfolding and in the aftermath. In March 2022 Kadyrova should have begun a residency at the Commanderie de Peyrassol, in the South of France, working on a permanent site-specific project, before returning to Kyiv to begin preparations for her first major retrospective, set to be held at the PinchukArtCentre, Kyiv, in 2023. Instead, the Russian army invaded Ukraine, displacing over 6.5 million people. The presentation of *Palianytsia* in Venice is already the work of art's third, and the project also serves a practical purpose, with all profits donated to volunteer



organisations and friends of the artist who have stayed in Kyiv and joined territorial defence forces.

In early 2022, while living and working in the isolated mountains and retrieving stones for *Palianytsia*, Kadyrova wrote:



**Fig. 6** *Pie Chart 01* from the series *Calculation*, by Zhanna Kadyrova. 2008–09. Ceramic tile, cement and polyurethane foam, 61 by 41 by 22 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andrew Yagubsky and Alexei Lerer).

For the first two weeks of the war, it seemed to me that art was a dream, that all twenty years of my professional life were just something I had seen while asleep, that art was absolutely powerless and ephemeral in comparison to the merciless military machine destroying peaceful cities and human lives. Now I no longer think so: I see that every artistic gesture makes us visible and makes our voices heard.

Like the *shibboleth*, Kadyrova's work is ambiguous. It contains within it both violence and survival. She addresses the anti-monumental by way of the monumental, and idealism by way of its

collapse and alienation. Her work is a critique that, like her *Monument to a New Monument*, veils itself while continuing to unfold.



**Fig. 7** From the series *Invisible Forms*, by Zhanna Kadyrova. 2015. Security cameras, wooden beams, concrete, dimensions variable. (Courtesy Le Centquatre-Paris and Galleria Continua; photograph Marc Damage).

*This is the first in a series of profiles on contemporary Ukrainian artists.*



**Fig. 8** *Market*, by Zhanna Kadyrova. 2017–19. Ceramic tiles, cement, mirror and natural stone, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist and Galleria Continua; photograph Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio).





**Fig. 9** Detail from *Market*, by Zhanna Kadyrova. 2017–19. Ceramic tiles, cement, mirror and natural stone. (Courtesy the artist and Galleria Continua; photograph Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio).



**Fig. 10** *Diamond* from the series *Diamonds*, by Zhanna Kadyrova. 2014. Tile, foam and cement, 35 by 40 by 40 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Galleria Continua).





**Fig. 11** *Tea Bag* from the series *Trash Monuments*, by Zhanna Kadyrova. 2008–10. Ceramic tiles, polyurethane foam, cement and rope, 140 by 120 by 60 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Galleria Continua; photograph Oak Taylor-Smith).



**Fig. 12** *Monument to a New Monument*, by Zhanna Kadyrova. 2007–09. Concrete, reinforced frame, polyurethane foam, ceramic tiles, stone, paving stones, benches and street lamps, (with pedestal) 256 by 150 by 256 cm. (Courtesy the artist).

## Footnotes

- 1** See M. Redfield: 'Shibboleth: Salcedo' in *idem: Shibboleth: Judges, Derrida, Celan*, New York 2021, n.p.
- 2** Judges 12:5–6.
- 3** J. Derrida: *Shibboleth: For Paul Celan* [1986], in T. Dutoit and O. Pasanen, eds: *Jacques Derrida: Sovereignities in question*, New York 2005, p.27.
- 4** E. Sorokina: gallery text for *Zhanna Kadyrova: Resistance of Matter* (13th October–29th December 2019), available at [https://www.galleriacontinua.com/assets/website\\_attachment/CP-KADYROVA-EN.pdf](https://www.galleriacontinua.com/assets/website_attachment/CP-KADYROVA-EN.pdf), accessed 20th May 2022.
- 5** E. Kikodze: 'Zhanna Kadyrova: public spaces – shake but don't mix' in N. Podgorskay: *Zhanna Kadyrova: Album 2013*, Moscow 2013, pp.11–16, at p.11. Perestroika was a political reform movement within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union during the late 1980s.
- 6** *Ibid.*
- 7** *Ibid.*

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