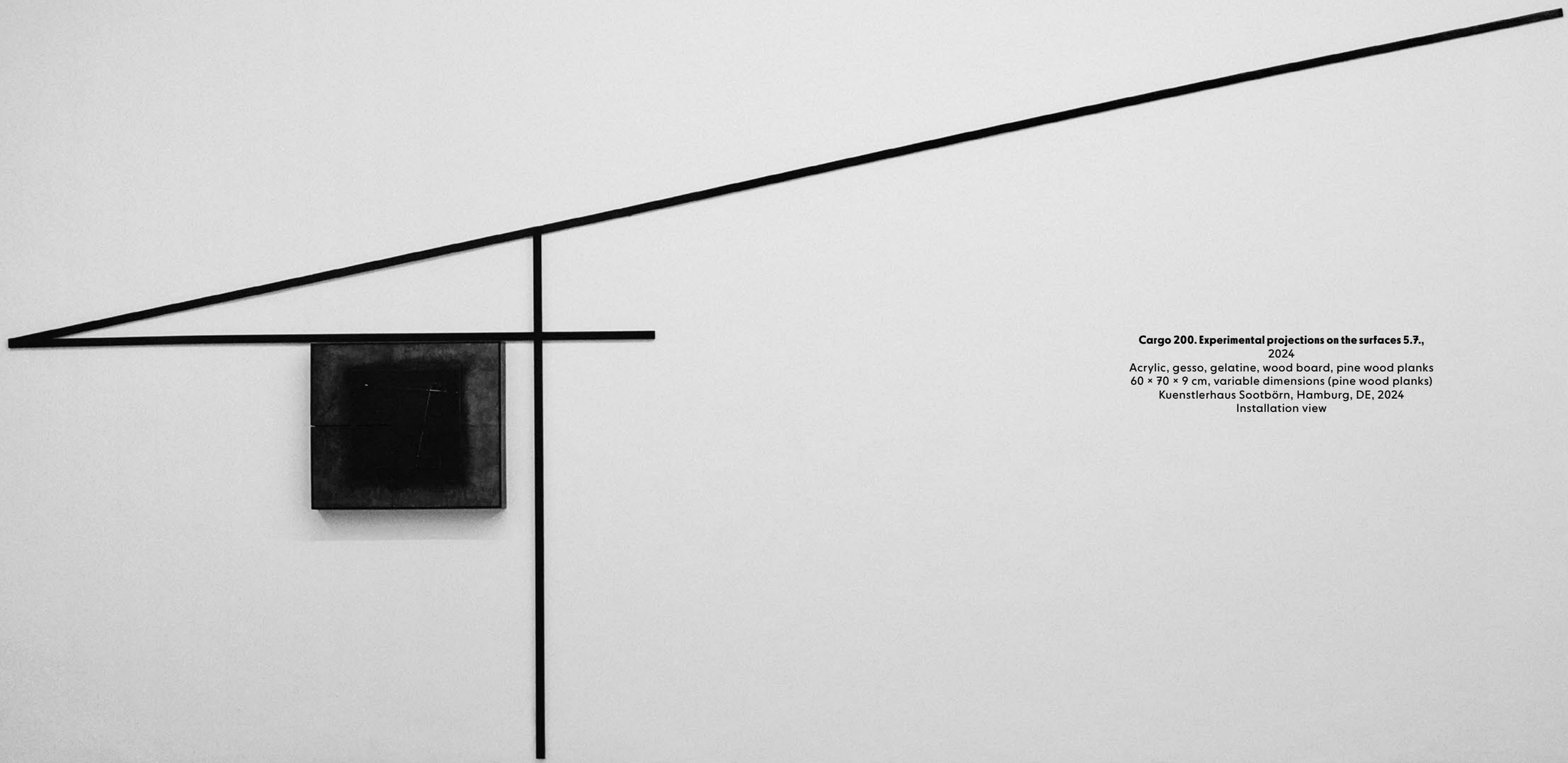
Sofiia Yesakova

Published by
Goldrausch Künstlerinnenprojekt, a professional development program for women artists, run by Goldrausch Frauennetzwerk Berlin e.V., Herzbergstraße 40–43, 10365 Berlin

Project Director	Hannah Kruse
Teaching Coordinator	Veronika Bartelt
Teaching assistant & PR	Manon Frugier
Administration & Finance	Klara Hülskamp, Ulrike Riebel
Text	Elena Voronovich
Design	Dima Verovkin
Copy Editing	Andrea Scrima
Photography	Sofiia Yesakova, Alice Stella
Image Editing	Eberle & Eisfeld | Berlin
Production Management	Red Cape Production, Berlin
Printing	Druckhaus Sportflieger, Berlin

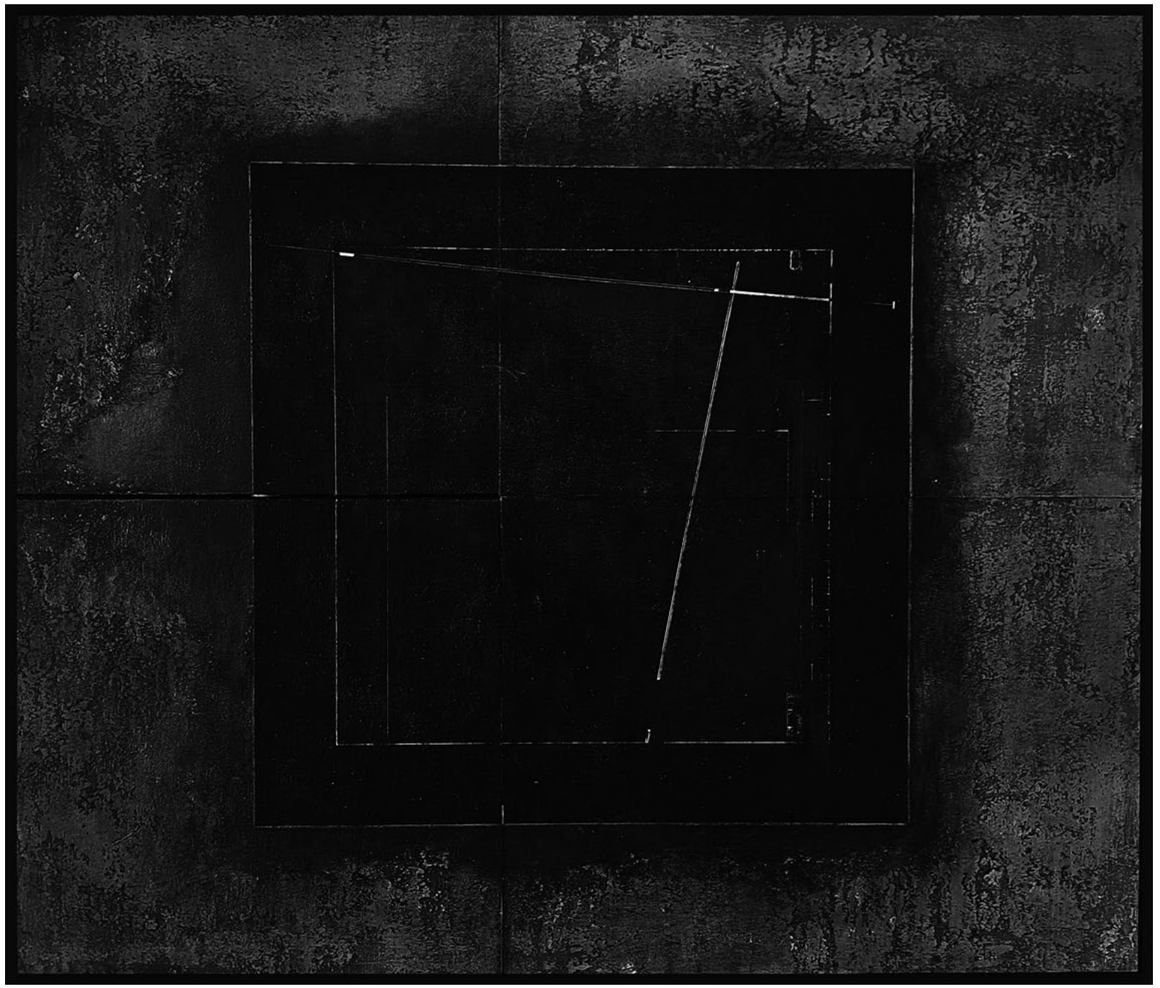
Published in conjunction with the exhibition
I only work with lost and found – Goldrausch 2024
August 31–November 3, 2024
Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien
Mariannenplatz 2
10997 Berlin

www.goldrausch.org



Cargo 200. Experimental projections on the surfaces 5.7.,
2024
Acrylic, gesso, gelatine, wood board, pine wood planks
60 × 70 × 9 cm, variable dimensions (pine wood planks)
Kuenstlerhaus Sootbörn, Hamburg, DE, 2024
Installation view

200



Cargo 200. Experimental projections on surfaces 5.7.,
2024,
detail

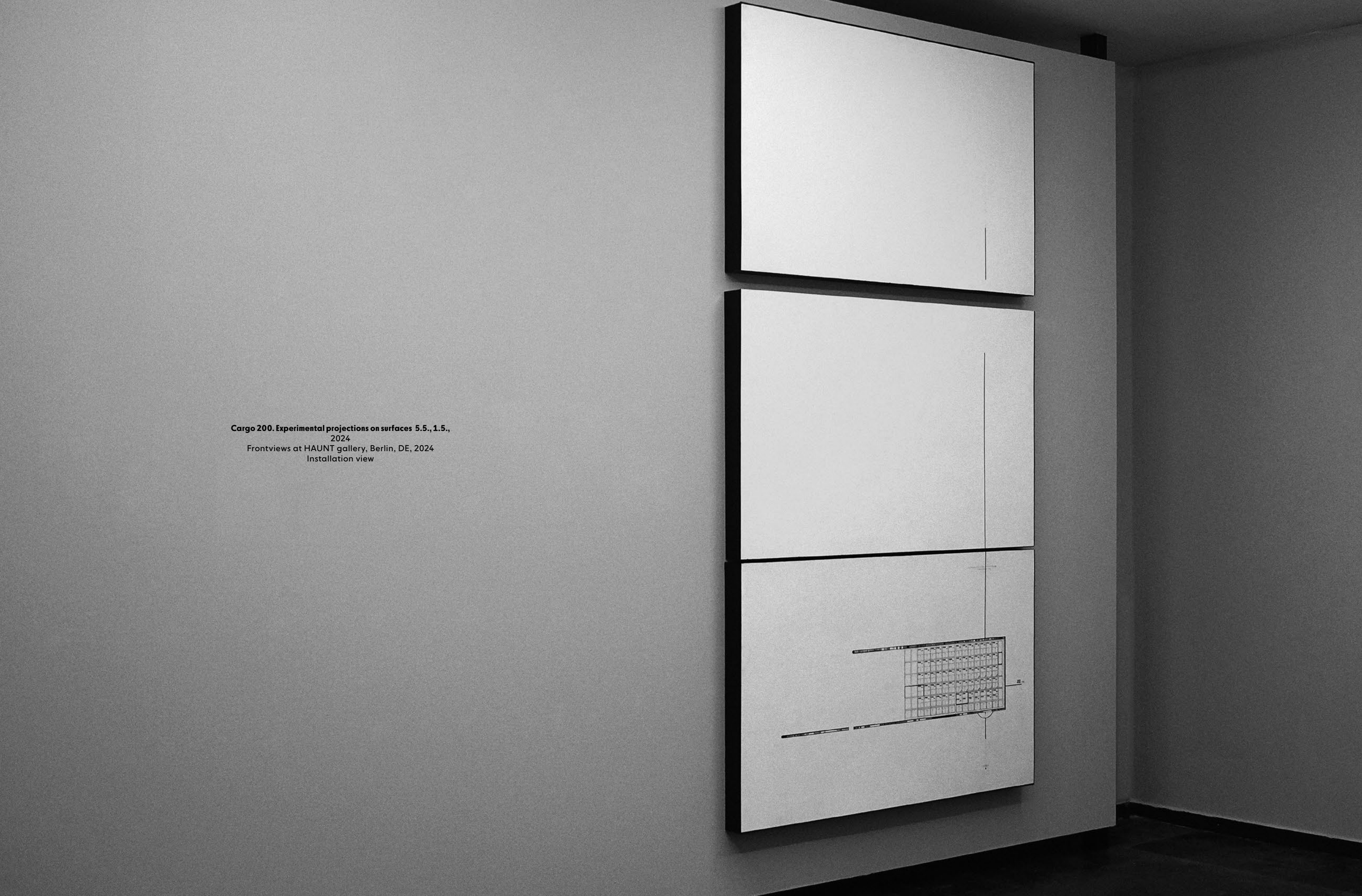
On Sofiia Yesakova's series Cargo 200
By Elena Voronovich

The latest project by Sofiia Yesakova, a Kyiv-born artist living and working in Berlin, is called "Cargo 200." The military term refers to a zinc coffin containing the body of a deceased soldier, roughly 200 kg of cargo, for transport to its burial place. It's also a euphemism for a casualty. In military jargon, the term is shortened to "two-hundredth"; it came into use among Soviet military personnel during the 1980s war in Afghanistan. Now, with Russia's war against Ukraine in its third year and the influx of news from the front, the term has become frighteningly well-known in both Ukraine and Russia.

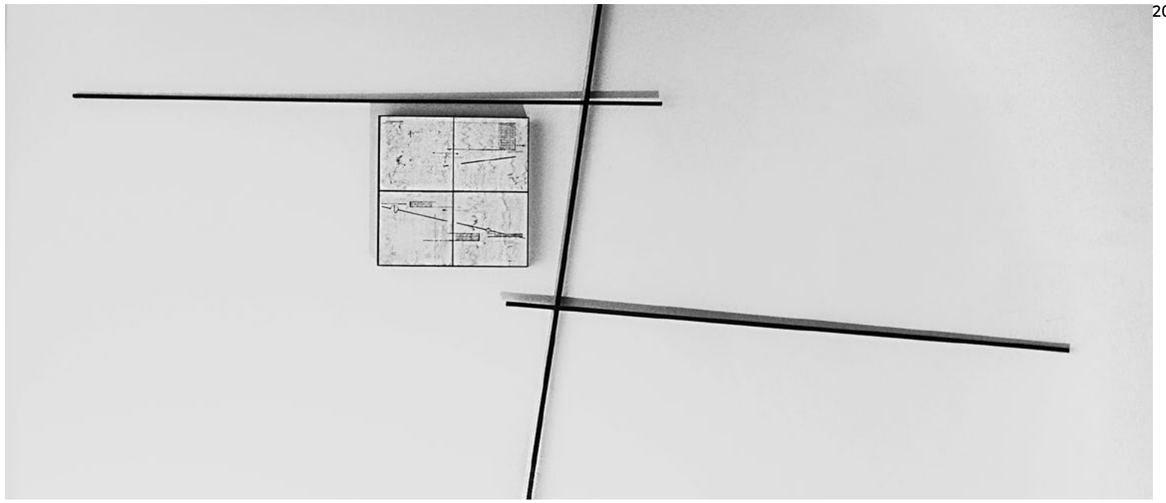
This brutal name contrasts with the refined, aesthetic works of Yesakova's series, in which white or black rectangles are covered with delicate, precise drawings of architectural plans. Yesakova says she uses blueprints of concentration camps and burial grounds "as a prototype, without redrawing or copying them. The visual language is important to me. Without knowledge of the context, my works look like well-composed abstractions, and only understanding the context reveals their dark side."

Yesakova's works evoke a sense of being outside of time. The modernity of the theme, paired with the almost guild-level craftsmanship with which she handles the material and her references to the works of the Constructivists, call to mind the outdated but still functioning concept of finding pleasure in pure art—the aesthetic pleasure of interacting with beauty.

An extreme detachment from the theme, the departure from crude, literal images into minimalism, is an attempt by the artist, who is Ukrainian, to minimize the feelings she experiences towards what is happening, to organize the chaos of the modern world. But more than this, she arrives at a visual solution that conveys multiple meanings.

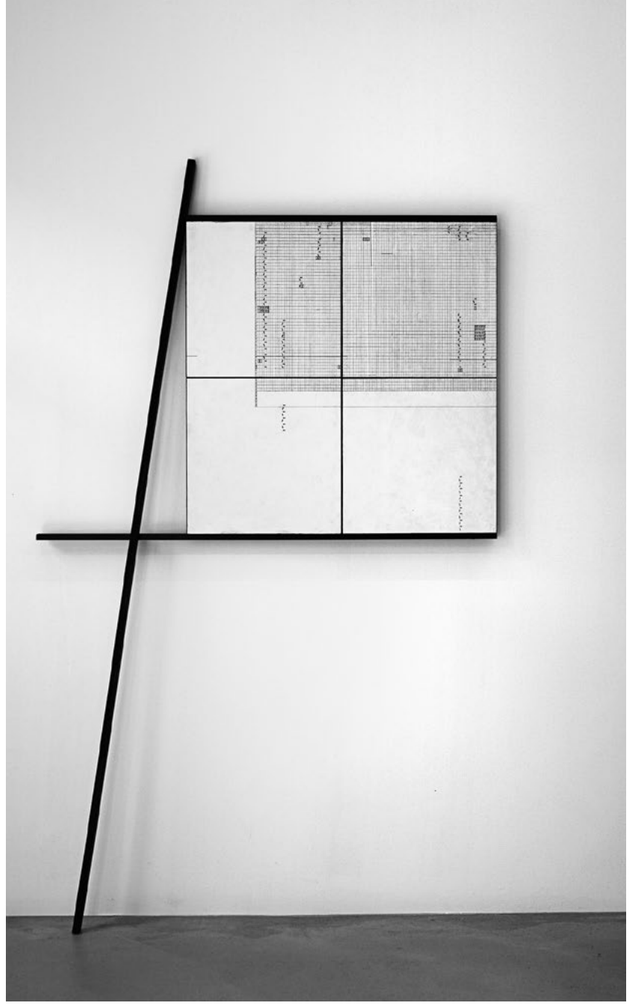


Cargo 200. Experimental projections on surfaces 5.5., 1.5.,
2024
Frontviews at HAUNT gallery, Berlin, DE, 2024
Installation view



Cargo 200. Experimental projections on surfaces 6.1.,
2023
Acrylic, gesso, gelatine, wood board, pine wood planks
60 × 60 × 9 cm, variable dimensions (pine wood planks)

Cargo 200. Experimental projections on surfaces 6.1.,
2023,
detail



Cargo 200. Experimental projections on surfaces 3.2.,
2022
Acrylic, gesso, gelatine, wood board, pine wood planks
100 × 104 × 5 cm
AS__EM gallery, Leipzig, DE, 2023

The first and most obvious is a dispute with the positivist belief in the power of humanity, internationalism, and the possibility of a universal language, all of which are characteristic of the avant-garde artists of the 1910s to 1920s, for instance Vladimir Tatlin, El Lissitzky, and Kazimir Malevich. We find their stylistic influence reflected in Yesakova's work, which also picks up on Tatlin's attention to material, to its weight and texture. In addition, the black square in one image of the series Experimental projections on surfaces 5.7 is a direct reference to Malevich's Black Square (1915, Tretyakov Gallery). One of Malevich's intentions was to declare the end of art. In Yesakova's work, we see a sooty square that appears to have survived a fire, superimposed with a bird's-eye view of burial sites; the piece speaks of war "as the black spot in human history," the end of life in general, and the possible end of humanity along with its art.

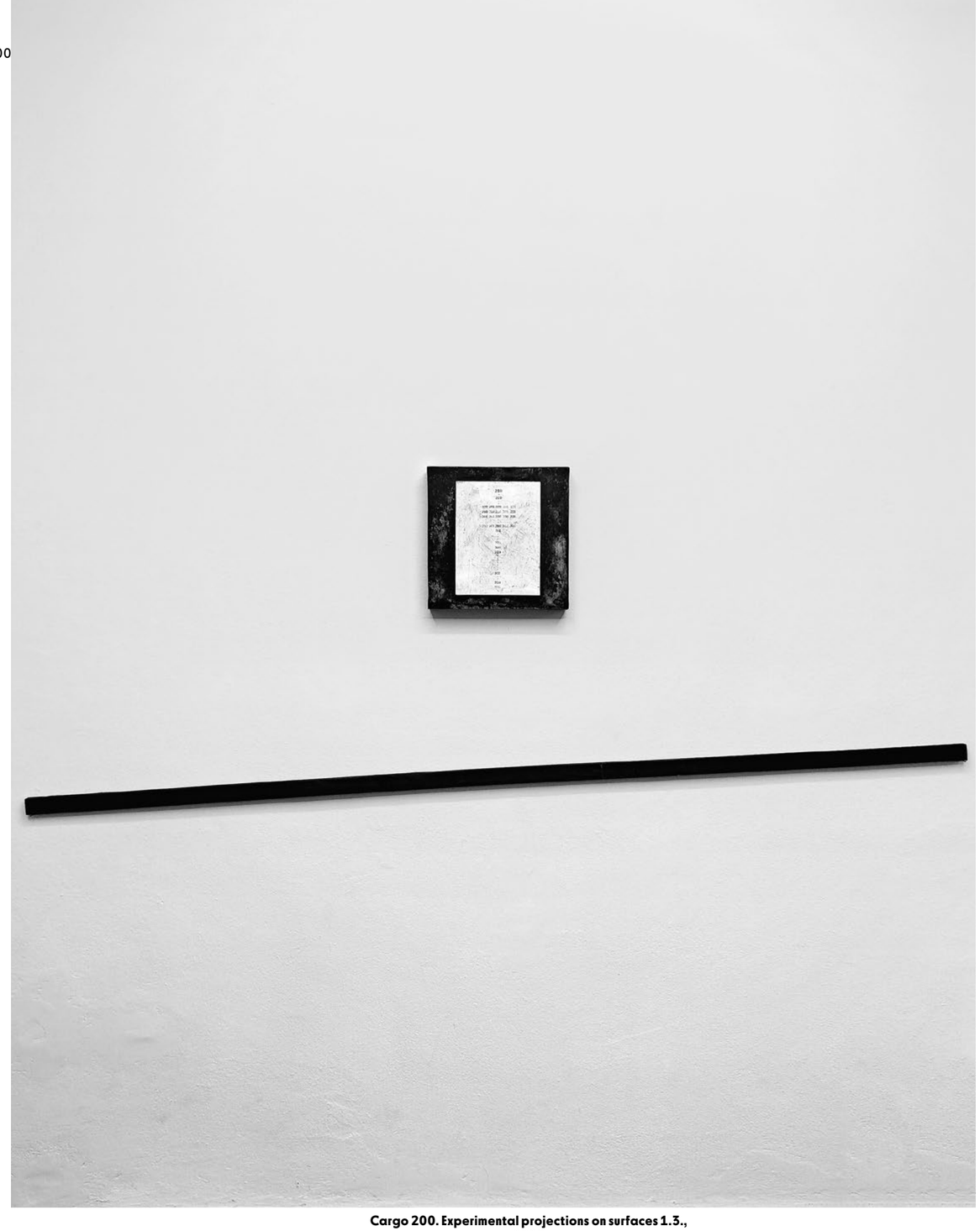
Cargo 200. Experimental projections on surfaces 3.1.,
2022
Acrylic, gesso, gelatine, wood board, pine wood planks
variable dimensions
Leibnizstraße showroom, Berlin, DE, 2022
Installation view

Kurt Tucholsky's statement "One death is a tragedy, a thousand—a statistic," which became famous thanks to Erich Maria Remarque's novel The Black Obelisk and later through Josef Stalin, is one of the keys to Yesakova's works. The precise, rational architectural plans of camps and burial grounds confirmed the relentless logic of calculating space for the functioning, killing, and burying of people considered to be no more than physical entities with minimal needs. This is Yesakova's attempt to convey that a person is not fully accounted for when he or she is merely a physical unit, that a person cannot and should not be reduced to a mechanism. And the deaths of thousands should not, despite the normalization of war, become a mere statistic; to achieve this, people constantly need to be reminded of this.

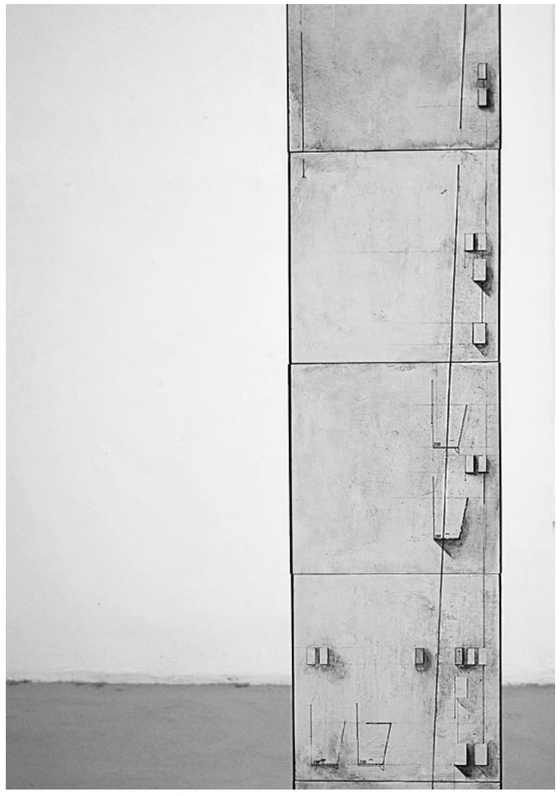
Yesakova has said that since 2022, she has been deeply interested in the theme of war on a global scale: its components, its causes, and the incomprehensibility of its horror, as well as the themes of data manipulation as it relates to media coverage and the impossibility of determining the truth. She refers to Giorgio Agamben's thoughts on violence and Hannah Arendt's remarks on the "banality of evil."

While studying at the Kyiv Academy in the studio of the monumental fresco artist Mykola Storozhenko, Yesakova adopted the practice of meticulously preparing a work's surface, treating it as if she were planning to paint an icon on it. Her works, which possess not only height and width, but also a significant thickness, resemble fragments of a fresco, parts of a temple wall. In the proximity of Yesakova's works, the viewer perceives this inherent potential for sacredness; they seem to breathe, invite being touched. This aspect recalls Mark Rothko, who viewed painting as a way to achieve a mystical experience.

In her diploma project "Altar in a modern context" (2021, Kyiv, NAFAA), which featured flexible medical tubes, Yesakova was still influenced by her teacher's concept of the "fold era," viewing, in keeping with Gilles Deleuze's essay "The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque," "the fold as living matter that can convey a feeling, tell a story." Conversely, in "Cargo 200," she adheres to strict geometry, questioning the perfect order of Leibniz's universe in the history of humanity.



Cargo 200. Experimental projections on surfaces 1.3.,
2022
Acrylic, gesso, gelatine, wood board, pine wood plank
30 × 30 × 4 cm
Frontviews at HAUNT gallery, Berlin, DE, 2024
Installation view



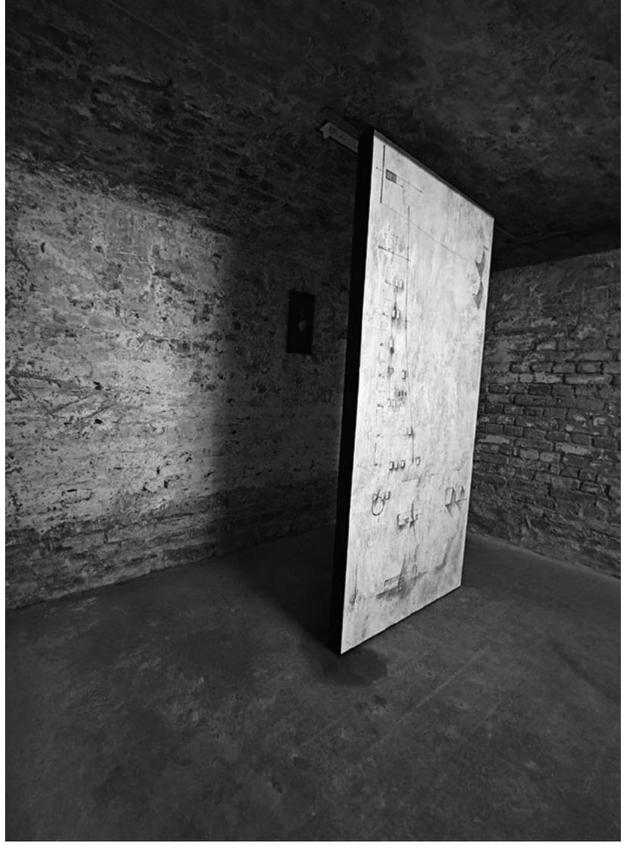
Cargo 200. Experimental projections on surfaces 4.2.,
2024,
detail

Cargo 200. Experimental projections on surfaces 4.2.,
2024
Acrylic, gesso, gelatine, wood board
150 × 25 × 9 cm
Kuenstlerhaus Sootbörn, Hamburg, DE, 2024
Installation view

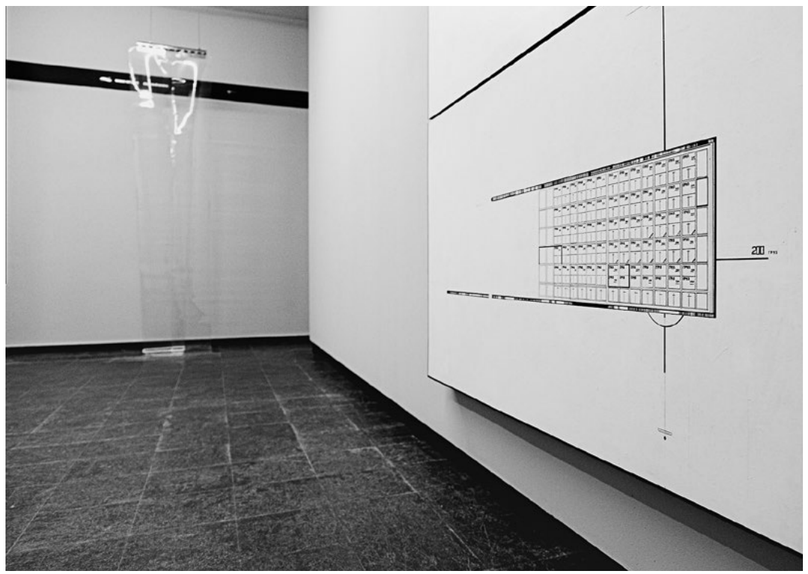
Anti-war art has a long history, but it emerged onto the world stage most vividly after World War I, during which, for the first time in human history, new weaponry led to killings and injuries on an industrial scale. Otto Dix, who experienced the war first-hand, responded with the painting The Trench (now lost), which depicted a gruesome scene of carnage and dismembered bodies that contemporaries found too horrifying to bear. Picasso's Guernica (1937, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía) ushered in a second wave of anti-war art catalyzed by World War II. Abstract artists, realists, Art Informel and Tachist artists, and actionists all sought ways to express their sentiments toward the war by pouring out their emotions or analyzing the past in the hopes of preventing its recurrence. For Yesakova, "the balance between emotionality and rationality (the direction that prefers the mind to the senses in cognition, turning away from sensory reality)" is important.

Creating works with elements of diagrams, plans, structures, or ciphers is a common practice in contemporary art. For instance, Jorinde Voigt visualizes Ludwig van Beethoven's sonatas on white canvases, while Simon Denny creates "Document Reliefs": "This patent is for a 'system and method for transporting personnel,' and describes a device that is essentially a cage to contain a human worker within a highly automated workplace environment. It is a stark vision of the changing relationships between humans and machines in a data-fueled economy, speaking of the interconnectedness of a globalized world [. . .] and the interactions of objects and bodies."*

* Simon Denny, "Worker Cage Document Reliefs", 2020, at Fine Arts, Sydney,
https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/simon-denny-worker-cage-document-reliefs-at-fine-arts-sydney-2020/



Cargo 200. Experimental projections on surfaces 5.1.,
2023
Acrylic, gesso, gelatine, wood board
200 × 100 × 7 cm
Pandora gallery, Berlin, DE, 2023
Installation view



Cargo 200. Experimental projections on surfaces 5.5., 1.5.,
2024
Frontviews at HAUNT gallery, Berlin, DE, 2024
Installation view

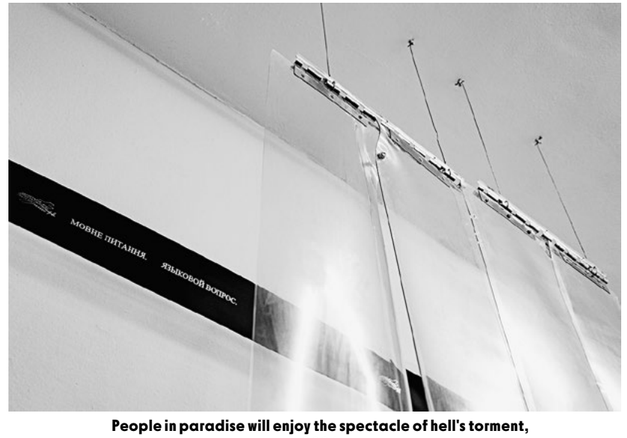
Cargo 200. Experimental projections on surfaces 4.1.,
2023
Acrylic, gesso, gelatine, wood board, pine wood planks
204 × 204 × 8 cm, variable dimensions (pine wood planks)
Fabbrica del Vapore, Milano, IT, 2023
Installation view

Cargo 200. Experimental projections on surfaces 3.1.,
2022,
detail

The concept of viewing humans as mechanisms initially emerged in the seventeenth century and became more widespread in the 1910s due to the rapid development of technology and the catastrophic events of World War I. The perception of the relationship between man and machine has undergone several transformations; it oscillates between admiration and horror. The most famous example is Fritz Lang's film Metropolis, in which humans are depicted as appendages to the machine and the machine appears once as a monster devouring people. The personification of evil—the robot woman—incites workers to revolt and drives them to their death. In contrast, Georg Grosz created two drawings in the 1920s in which the walls of rooms inhabited by mannequin-like figures are adorned with paintings of architectural plans. In 1921 he wrote: "Again stability, construction, functionality—for example, sport, engineer, machine, but no more dynamic, futuristic romance. [. . .] The objectivity and clarity of the engineering drawing is a better teaching image than the uncontrollable babbling of Kabbalah and metaphysics and holy ecstasy."* This pursuit of order amidst the chaos of the world resonates in Yesakova's works, reflecting a similar approach.

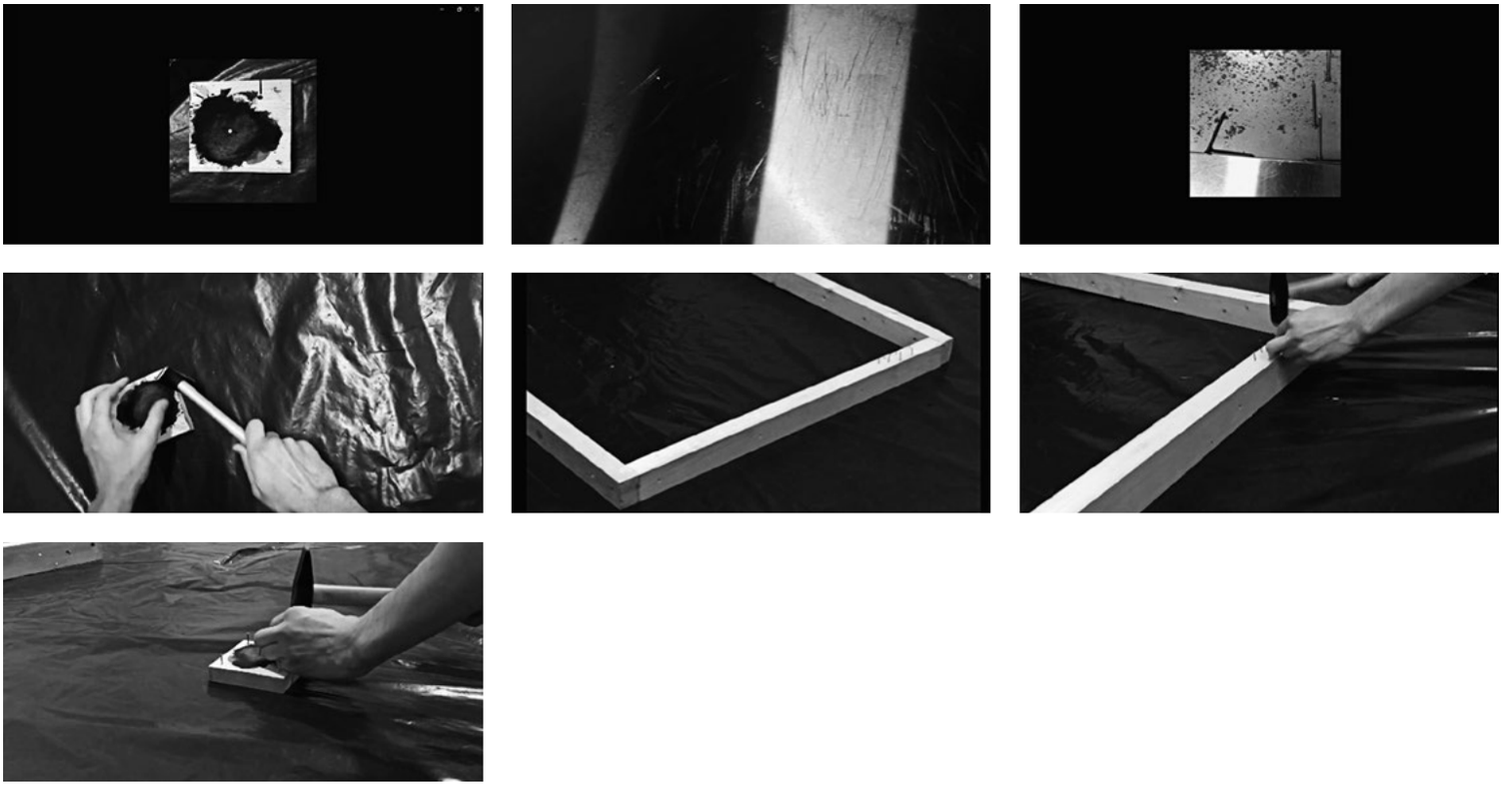
*George Grosz: „Zu meinen neuen Bildern", in: Das Kunstblatt, 5.Jg., 1921, S.14.

With the advent of AI, technology has soared to new heights. Yet amidst the current global landscape, it's evident that while technology evolves, humanity remains imprisoned by its crocodilian, primitive essence, having only learned to approach the killing of its own kind rationally.



People in paradise will enjoy the spectacle of hell's torment,
2024
PVC curtains, screws, mourning ribbon
Frontviews at HAUNT gallery, Berlin, DE, 2024
Installation view

Metropolis begins and ends with the phrase “The mediator between the head and the hands must be the heart,” and perhaps now, almost 100 years later, this remains humanity’s only hope. Yesakova’s works, at first glance, may not tug at the viewer’s heartstrings or evoke a visceral emotional response. They do not scream about war but rather assert the inevitability of death as its consequence. In addressing the mind first, they reveal the depth of their sorrow only upon contemplation.



Cargo 200,
2023,
23 min., video stills
Video design by Sofiia Yesakova
Sound design by WM

GOLDRAUSCH KÜNSTLERINNEN PROJEKT

The Goldrausch Künstlerinnenprojekt is co-funded by the European Union (European Social Fund Plus) and by the Federal State of Berlin.

Co-funded by the European Union

BERLIN