

# NIKO HAFKENSCHIED & VALENTINA STEPANOVA

## *Moshenka*

### INSTALLATION

WORKSPACEBRUSSELS

ongoing ∫ free

28/06 ∫ 18:00 › 22:00

29/06 ∫ 14:00 › 22:00

In the documentary installation *Moshenka* Niko Hafkenschied and Valentina Stepanova investigate contemporary rural Russian countryside. *Moshenka* focuses on the inhabitants of the village of Moshenka, who try to breathe life into the dilapidated cultural centre. They witness a rural Russia in transformation between forgotten traditions and post-war trauma. The installation wants to enter the vast, physical space of the Russian backlands. How 'different' is it for the foreigner? What can you dream of today in Moshenka? What can you hope for? How do nature and history act on you?

### BIO

**Niko Hafkenschied** (BE, 1977) and **Valentina Stepanova** (RU, 1985) work together as an artistic duo and focus on new forms of documentary. They are fascinated by the twilight zone where fiction and reality meet. Next to *Moshenka*, they also created the film-installation *Gorodets* and the performance *Fondamenta degli incurabili* that was presented during the opening weekend of the Venice Biennial 2017, a collaboration with local city painters in Venice that traces back Joseph Brodsky's steps through the Italian city. Their joint work is co-produced and shown by workspacebrussels, KAAP, nona and Territoria Moscow.

Creation and production **Niko Hafkenschied**

**& Valentina Stepanova**

Co-production **workspacebrussels**,

**Life Long Burning (Culture Programme of the EU)**,

**Territoria Moscow**

Supported by **the Flemish Community Commission**

**working title festival**

**Your project started with a research process in Moshenka, a small village in the Russian marshlands. What is your fascination for this place?**

**Niko:** There are two reasons for it: one is very personal and the other one has to do with the concept of exoticism. It is personal because Valentina has a family background there, which is why we became fascinated by the place, historically and geographically. The second reason is that there is a certain way of projecting otherness on that space, on that surrounding and on that nature, that comes with an exoticized attraction to a place you don't know really well.

**Valentina:** I am less confronted with this exoticism of course, because I am very much used to it. But seeing it through Niko's eyes and thoughts changes my perspective on that place too. It reconstructs the relationship I almost lost by moving away and gives it a new value. Since I am no longer alone, I am seen differently, even in a conversation. It feels like belonging there and not belonging there at the same time.

**Niko:** It changes my point of view as a foreigner as well. I am losing this outside position. That gives us the possibility to question the methods we use as human beings to see otherness and to frame otherness as romantic. Maybe we want to deromanticize this framing.

**You are portraying abandoned cultural places in the area of Moshenka. What do you think is their value for the communities living there today?**

**Valentina:** Today most of these cultural centres are ruins, which are present just as architectural leftovers. Two or three of them survived and you can still enter them, but the activities depend on the enthusiasm of a few local women.

**Niko:** The young generation will not stay in the villages we were filming. In probably 15 years there won't be any cultural centres anymore because there is no use for them. Stalin used them for the purpose of propaganda and to create ethnic unity when he moved a lot of different ethnicities all over the Soviet Union. As all those people had nothing in common, these cultural centres presented an adaptation of folklore and imposed the Russian language. Everybody was singing the same songs, in the same language, in the

same clothes, about the same topics. Now as this work has been done, people just meet there because they are bored and also because they just like to sing. The older people know hundreds of songs by heart and they really enjoy this social interaction.

**Valentina:** The real show also starts only after the concerts when people sit around tables, have a drink and improvise. Then they start their old singing games, almost like competitions, which are very critical towards the regime. As it has been forbidden, they can't sing those songs on stage, but after the official show the old traditional folkloric elements are celebrated.

**You describe these places as in-between spaces. Almost disappeared, but still kept alive, between cultural community work and political propaganda. What is the potential of that in-betweenness?**

**Niko:** It is very necessary for a human being to be in spaces where rules do not apply. Like a thinking space or boredom. We are so strongly focused on sense that these public spaces of non-sense are really important. That's what we see when we visit these cultural centres. There is a beauty in the innocence that comes with it. They could choose not to do anything, but they do. And that makes perfect sense in all kinds of ways, and no sense at all at the same time.

Interview with **Niko Hafkenschaid & Valentina Stepanova** by **Andreas Fleck**