

## **Switching off from the visual: an interview with Lucia Nimcova**

by Lucia Udvardyova

Lucia Nimcová is a photographer and filmmaker focusing on the artistic documentation of society at large but at the same time zooming in on the lives of individuals. She graduated from the Institute of Creative Photography in Opava and the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam. For several years, she has lived and worked in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Her work reflects the metamorphoses of “women’s destiny” in the Central/Eastern European region post-1989 in particular. One of her longstanding projects is research into Ukrainian and Ruthenian folk songs called Khroniky (chronicles). This has resulted in the film Bajka and the album DILO (in collaboration with sound artist Sholto Dobie), which was released this year on the label mappa. It follows their two-year journey through Ruthenian villages in the Carpathian Mountains that Lucia and Sholto embarked on, which coincided with the start of the war in Ukraine in 2014.

### **Do you still live in Ethiopia?**

*We were supposed to stay there one more year, but then, in early November, we were evacuated because of the civil war. This is a huge tragedy for the whole country and the continent.*

### **Do you do projects there?**

*I have a composition in the works – a sound installation for the last month of the Sphera at Nova Synagoga, Žilina, SK. It will be a sound composition sourced from buildings in Africa. Those buildings have a completely different sound than buildings in Europe. I’ve been observing and listening to them for a long time, and then I invited David to come to Addis Ababa to help me record them. I also make recordings in my neighborhood: the sound of people working there is almost slave-like. They sing while they work. Even the construction itself, often built with bare hands, sounds completely different. I’m also working on a photo book from Addis. I have one video in progress, which has been compiled over a period of time. In Africa, it’s hard to predict what’s going to happen, when to run and when it’s still cool to stay. I’m working in one street, but it’s risky. It’s about constant experimentation and improvisation.*

**Your projects draw on the environment you grew up in, whether it is a specific place in the Carpathians, a country (Slovakia) or a region (Central and Eastern Europe). One of your latest projects is a collaborative endeavour with sound artist Sholto Dobie, which resulted in a vinyl release on the label mappa, born out of your research trips to Ukraine.**

*I will continue working on it. The strategies of how to find these people and how to frame it transforms over time. It’s fascinating to return and, fortunately, there are still*

*quite a lot of resources there compared to Slovakia. I've done research in Slovakia as well, but there's a completely different energy to it. The assimilation has taken place in a profoundly different way to the Ruthenians in Slovakia or Poland. In Ukraine, in the Carpathians, even though people were sent to the gulags in the 1950s, many of them returned to the mountains after ten to 12 years, living a life that is completely independent of everything. The way to record it and find them develops with practice: how to explain exactly what you're looking for and then also find it and be there at the right moment, e.g. when someone's husband dies, they can't be singing there for three years. It takes a lot of time. I'm trying to get into the very environment in which those people live. It's not just about the song and the performance anymore, it's about the context.*

**On the record itself, there are not only songs, but also sounds and movements that were created during the recording process. It's a kind of a soundscape, an aural snapshot of the environment. And singing is just one of the elements.**

*I'm working on two more albums, one of which will be purely dedicated to "Vagina Songs". They're short songs that last just a few seconds. It's all about getting the moment right. You can't always afford to ask for a song about vaginas. You have to find a specific person who wants to share it with you. A lot of women know it, but they're shy, so it takes time.*

*Basically, I've done my research and I'm creating an archive that has different viewpoints, and whoever enters it will find something of their own. I have my specific focus, but at the same time, the research that Sholto and I did to figure out the ins and the outs took three years. Now when I go back, I know exactly which villages and what to look for. I'm trying new documentary strategies in the sense that I'm learning from those situations. Sometimes I'd arrive at a place and I don't even have time to set up the camera properly, and the woman is already singing. It feels as if she'd been waiting those 90 years for somebody to come, but nobody did.*

**Do they accept you?**

*Some people are pleased that someone has approached them and wants something like that from them. A woman might walk from the store, carrying two bags, obviously not feeling physically well, but she would start singing for an hour on her way. Often I just listen. I find it incredible that they want to share all this with me.*

**What is your approach as a documentary filmmaker – what do you focus on when documenting, and what do you filter?**

*It also depends on who I'm there with. Mostly I'm used to doing everything by myself, so it's quite refreshing for me to be with someone else recording the audio, because I've been pretty much immersed in the visual world. I know exactly which places I want to go. I'm fascinated by the language itself, the words and the way of*

*speaking when a person talks about their life. I try to spend as much time as possible with that person and get a feel for what's going on and how. I often go back to places more than once. I observe what people want to share with me.*

**It could be challenging to document authentic culture and from that create a work that is curated by the artist themselves. How to do it in a way that is ethical?**

*By accessing something that I know people have passed on to me in an equal relationship. As an artist, I'm dealing with the difference when you're making something into a work of art and when something is almost destined to be a work of fate. I'm interested in women's destiny – I'm often waiting for that unpredictable goosebump moment. When mappa label approached us about DILLO, I had only come to Slovakia for a week in March 2020. The pandemic had just started and I wasn't able to make it back to Addis Ababa and I didn't have my external hard drives with me. I structured the booklet according to what I was thinking about. We shared the archive with each other in different contexts. It's an energy that you accumulate, and you have to re-evaluate how to share it at any given moment. DILLO was a challenge because we had to rethink how to work with an archive that was not available to us at that moment and it was just in our heads.*

**Were you also in Ukraine during the war?**

*I went there specifically for that reason. I was living in Brussels during the Maidan. I followed it online. I was also in Ukraine in 2006, for half a year, during the revolution at the time. Whenever there was something going on, I wanted to be there. I was not interested in being on the front line though. Rather, I was interested in the Carpathians and what people were experiencing there. I knew that if they send boys to fight, they would send the poorest of the poor from the villages, because anyone with money could buy their way out of the war. I wanted to be on the front line of everyday life. I couldn't imagine talking about it, so I started to address it in the form of song. When you're doing research, you need to develop your own vocabulary, learn the dialects to be able to communicate, so you can explain to them what you're looking for. Every type of song has its own name in dialect, etc. In 2014, against the backdrop of the war, I was gradually recording that. Nobody felt like singing then, but when they did sing something, it had merit.*

**I guess you're treated differently as an artist than if you were a journalist.**

*If you're living at someone's place for a week and raking hay with them and you're really curious, they sense that you're not there to report. I needed to spend time with them to learn their language and how to communicate with them.*

**Can you imagine doing this project long term? The question is also how long will these traditions survive.**

*Dušan Hanák's Pictures of the Old World is probably the most straightforward analogy. What I'm seeing in Ukraine was perhaps in place in Slovakia in the 60s and 70s, but now it's barely there. Sometimes it feels like a matter of weeks or months. There is still a lot of work to be done. Some who have found similar people often frame them into certain expectations. For example, they brought one woman to a show in Kiev, and dressed her in 18th-century clothes. She told me afterwards that she found the whole thing laughable. A lot of people who do research can't accept these people for who they are. These people might have gone to jail for some of the songs in the past. They are cautious because you never know how the system may change. When you spend 12 years in the gulag, you're careful about what you say.*

**What does the Ruthenian community in Slovakia look like?**

*There's always the issue of social folklore, which is mostly subsidized by the state. Absurd events are invented where people are dressed up in costumes and the whole thing is a travesty, a spectacle. I have the feeling that in Slovakia people are more enclosed behind fences in their houses. It often happened to me that I found a great woman and her children didn't want her to talk to me. They have no clue that she knows 300 songs and sings them to herself. I feel like my ambition is to capture that woman in the moment when there's no one there to steer her. I have a sense of what I'm looking for, and I don't want to scare those people away with my interest. For example, if you go to see a woman who is considered in some way different, "weird" in the village, you know that this will close another 100 doors for you. You have to understand all this when you come to a certain village. And that's fascinating to me.*

**The long-term nature of the project is probably also necessary because of the development of work methods. What are you planning?**

*We're working on the Dole – Destiny album Vagina Songs, which will probably be released on CD so the women can play it at home. My dream is to have an old bus and drive around the villages and play it for people, organise parties in those villages; to meet all the people I've recorded, play them my film Bajka and present a performance the next day; take some of them on the bus.*

**How do you perceive the development of women's fate in our region? You've been documenting it for years.**

*I'm working on a book called Instant Woman. I've been documenting women's lives in Eastern Europe since 2000. I'm in no rush. I'd add four to five photos a year and then reassess them in the context of the whole thing. I analyse it through images.*

**The generational differences are enormous. Often it is as if there are centuries dividing the various generations.**

*It's interesting to observe that. My background is visual. I more or less switched myself off from sound; I guess it was distracting for me. I had a deaf child who was given implants. I taught him to listen and talk and I "switched myself back on". It takes time. Becoming aware of sound, language. It's an interesting process. I used to take it for granted, and now I'm realising how it's becoming more and more important to me: to switch myself off from the image.*

**Is it difficult for someone who is rather visual?**

*Sound has so strangely turned itself on to me together with my son on different frequencies. I'm experiencing that in my own way myself.*

**What do you do when you are in Addis Ababa?**

*I wanted to teach at an art college. But when I found out how it all works... it's not exactly easy. You can't pick six students when they have 60. I'm working on my own projects. I'm still working on a film about the late Slovak conceptual artist and my friend Michal Moravčík. Those projects are gradually maturing. I often delve into things that I don't exactly know how to do.*