

"The first hours in Kyiv I spent underground." Oskar Schlemmer's grandson has discontinued cooperation with Russia and is considering a performance in Ukraine.

OLHA DUDENKO – 9 September 2024, 16:00



Visits by foreign politicians, actors, and musicians have become common for Ukraine after the full-scale invasion. The war has made Ukraine visible not only geographically but also culturally, revealing a diversity of personalities to collaborate with and institutions where cultural projects can be organized.

Among those who visited Ukraine for the first time is curator, art historian, and anthropologist C. Raman Schlemmer. He is the grandson of the famous German artist, designer, and choreographer Oskar Schlemmer, who was one of the Masters at the Bauhaus School.

Raman is often mentioned specifically as Oskar's grandson — and it is no surprise, since he considers one of his responsibilities to be showcasing his grandfather's work in various countries. One of these was Russia, but the full-scale war ended that collaboration. Now Raman is in Kyiv, hoping that his first visit will mark the beginning of future Oskar Schlemmer projects in Ukraine.

UP. Culture spoke with C. Raman Schlemmer about his stay in Kyiv, his desire to teach art history in Kharkiv, performance art, the body, and working with his grandfather's archives.

TikTok in Kyiv

We are walking near the National Academic Opera and Ballet Theater, where Raman had taken a stroll the day before our interview. This is his first visit to Ukraine, and he has been here for less than a week. He still finds it difficult to remember the names of the neighborhoods he has been to. However, the first places he mentions on the list of those he visited are Babyn Yar and St. Michael's Square.



A tour of Kyiv as part of the visit programme to Ukraine for arts and culture professionals

"I saw tanks on the square and also candles with photographs. There were hundreds of candles." Raman's trip coincided with August 29th — Remembrance Day for the Defenders of Ukraine who died fighting for its independence. He pulls out his smartphone and tells me that just before his visit to Ukraine, he signed up for TikTok. He had planned to post only Oskar Schlemmer's art works there, but instead, he captured the very candles next to the photos of Ukrainian soldiers at St. Michael's Square.



This is Raman Schlemmer's first visit to Ukraine.
Photos: Artem Halkin

"I decided to publish art works I am involved with to present them to a different audience, not just the academic community. But now I am creating completely different subjects, like this video from Ukraine," says Raman, scrolling through the posts on his profile. @triadicdance

Always with Oskar's Art Works

After showing his TikTok account, Raman immediately presents Oskar Schlemmer's art works. It seems he always has them on hand to discuss his own research, the lesser-known aspects of Oskar's creativity, and what his performances from the 1920s can offer to contemporary audiences.

The most famous performance by Oskar is "**The Triadic Ballet**." It was first presented in 1922, and Schlemmer conceived it during World War I. "These are utopian costumes, and they are still impressive today. To some extent, they can be considered timeless," believes Raman.



After showing his TikTok account, Raman immediately presents Oskar Schlemmer's art works. Photo: Artem Halkin Halkin

On his colour printouts are images from the reconstructed "The Triadic Ballet." We immediately discuss the parallels with Ukrainian artists: the costumes created by Oskar closely resemble the sketches of Anatol Petrytsky and Oleksandra Ekster (Alexandra Exter). "My grandfather was not a friend of Oleksandra, but he knew her work because it was published in the 1920s. She was also aware of his works." Currently, Raman rarely acts as a curator for contemporary art projects, but he willingly agrees to help with research on Oskar Schlemmer's creativity when needed. "I have been invited to fill in the unexplored areas, to present material from my grandfather's archives."

"One of the most striking projects I recently worked on took place in Los Angeles at the Walt Disney Concert Hall. Over 2,000 visitors attended daily, and I witnessed how different audiences connected with Oskar Schlemmer's works.. In 2019, Frieze London asked if there was a possibility to present a piece from Oskar's creativity. We proposed a twenty-minute dance performance, for which we reconstructed Schlemmer's costumes. When people saw them, they were thrilled. Observing such reactions, I was convinced I had made the right decision."



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Photo: Artem Halkin Halkin

It is impossible to distance oneself from personal experiences, so the research on his grandfather's archives is influenced not only by Raman the scholar but also by Raman the grandson.

"For many years, I was asked to curate exhibitions. Then I declined, saying that I am Oskar's grandson, the owner of many of his works and the copyright to works. I played many roles, so the curator should be someone else."

For Raman, it is important to speak about Oskar as an artist whose creativity was largely defined by the contexts of World War I and World War II. "Oskar was one of the first to create performative art. The Second World War interrupted all of this in Germany. But I believe he can be a kind of pioneering father figure for 20th-century performative art."

We return once again to the "The Triadic Ballet": "One interpretation of 'The Triadic Ballet' is that it reflects on the experience of World War I. During this time, soldiers

wore distinctive attire, such as masks, to protect themselves from gas attacks. Their bodies were completely covered. Similarly, Oskar worked with masks, and you never knew who was concealed behind them."



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Raman says that this is what distinguishes Oskar's approach to performance in the early 20th century from contemporary performative art. However, in 2024, the Russian-Ukrainian war continues, and we too are donning new masks and attire that we had not known before, created by the realities of war.

Challenges Facing Performance Art Today

Oskar is known for his work as a set designer and choreographer, and someone who collaborated with dancers, which is why Raman predominantly discusses performative art.

The performance needed to be discussed, articulated, and expressed through dance, and given an appropriate form to resonate with the audience.

"Today, performance tends to be egocentric," Raman explains somewhat disappointedly. "It is more about the individual and their expression, not what Oskar was about. I have spoken with many young artists, and they mostly talk about

themselves and much less about art. They mention, for example, that their grandmother had such-and-such an experience and bring that into their art."



Oskar is known for his work as a set designer, choreographer, and someone who worked with performers, which is why Raman predominantly discusses performative art. Photo: Artem Halkin

Thus, Raman establishes a contrast between the artists of the 1920s, who were just discovering performative art, and contemporary performative practices. At the same time, he acknowledges that these are the same ideas of Oskar, but developed over time and reshaped in different contexts.

"Sometimes I feel that I am less interested in personal history. You undoubtedly have to deal with it and take it into account, but it does not sufficiently influence the artistic language; it is too focused on the self. This is a very characteristic phenomenon of our time, and we have many talented artists who have taken this approach to perfection. Their performances are completely their life story."

At the same time, performance is a rather intimate medium. The artist embodying it cannot remain distant from the audience; it is like attempting to convey one's own physicality to someone else, a stranger. Raman smiles and says that this is indeed a complex discussion. He later adds that art can be separated from personal experience and made into an abstraction: "I believe that only then can it become an artistic form that will have a longer life and significance."

Memory of War

In our conversation, we constantly shift between World War I and the current war taking place in Ukraine. This brings the figure of Oskar Schlemmer closer to our contexts, to Ukrainian artists who create in wartime, whose concepts, themes, heroes, and tools are shaped by the war.

It is equally important for Raman to discuss the history of art and any artist within the context in which they existed and created. Thus, art is unlikely to exist outside of war if it is still ongoing, and it certainly cannot become apolitical. After all, art also has its own responsibility.



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"I think one of the most dramatic experiences of our time is World War I, where all European nations fought against each other. Young artists at that time saw that they had to defend their own nation and eagerly went to join the army. The same is happening today in Ukraine — young men are enrolling as volunteers.

There were artists from Austria, Germany, and France, including Oskar Schlemmer, who enlisted in the army. When they arrived at the front, they could not believe the military armament that had been built up for this war. Many of these artists lost their lives. Oskar was wounded and was sent to a military hospital."

"We celebrate the avant-garde of the 1920s — Ekster, Malevich, Mondrian. But I think their creativity was largely shaped by the impact of World War I. So the beauty that emerged from their art was also born from the experience of that war."

Raman feels a sense of sadness that history is repeating itself, and we are once again confronted with extreme, boundary-pushing experiences. He is convinced that the invasion of Ukraine will impact countries around the world, regardless of their geographical distance.

"We must learn from history; we must remember. One of my greatest efforts is to keep the memory alive. I am not a witness to the wartime period, but in German, this is referred to as *Zweitzeuge* — a witness to history through the accounts of the previous generation."

Raman defines himself this way because he has been listening to the stories of the older generation since childhood. He regrets that, at a young age, one is not sufficiently aware to record all of this. As he grew older, C. Raman Schlemmer was glad to have the knowledge of two previous generations and considers it his duty to pass it on to the next generations.

"I have been invited to universities in China and Japan as a guest professor. They do not ask me solely to give lectures on art history, but to share personal experiences. Otherwise, students will not gain access to the historic context of the subject matter. Of course, you can talk about Van Gogh or Picasso, but for future generations, it is crucial to understand the environment in which they lived. This experience significantly explains the art they created.

Young artists who work with their own bodies also need to engage with the historical context. I hope they will find ways to navigate this as artists, not just as individuals."



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Photo: Artem Halkin

Presenting Oskar Schlemmer in Ukraine

The performance that Raman is contemplating in Ukraine is still a vision, not a concept. Therefore, his visit to Kyiv is an attempt to plant a seed and see if it will take root. So far, Raman does not have partners or a team for this project, and I am the first person to ask him about the details.

"Even before the full-scale war, I thought it would be possible to realize something here. I imagined how fantastic it would be if I could travel to Kharkiv and teach students there, as I do in China or Japan."



1 September 2024 in Vinnytsia at the EU4 Culture festival
Photo Olesya Sayenko

Raman was most affected by images of the bombed Mariupol. The researcher sought ways to help but did not have sufficient contacts for this. Over time, he managed to meet and connect with contemporary Ukrainian artists.

"I quickly got in touch with **Nikita Kadan**. At first, we exchanged emails, and then he sent an image of one of Oskar Schlemmer's masks that he had drawn in pencil. Nikita was creating a whole series of masks, and one of them was by Schlemmer. He then mentioned how wonderful it was that I had contacted him, as he had just been thinking about my grandfather's work."

Thanks to Kadan, Raman connected with cultural manager and co-founder of "Asortymentna Kimnata" (*artist residence programme*), Alena Karavai. He assisted with a text aimed at securing foreign funding for a project for Ukrainian artists from the eastern regions. At the same time, Raman was sending letters to the German government, detailing the situation in Ukraine for artists.

"I wasn't interested in just bringing a performance to Ukraine. By training, I am an anthropologist, so I am an observer. I document events, write about experiences. I did not want to travel to Ukraine out of curiosity just to say, 'Oh, I was here and saw this.' I believe what is happening in Ukraine right now is a shift for the entire world. It will change our lives, our societies. That is why I feel the need to witness this. In this

way, I become part of the story I am telling. This says a lot about how I perceive my life."

If something is to be staged in Ukraine, Raman hopes for something akin to "The Triadic Ballet" and "Bauhaus Dances".

"In this work, there was no narrative; all the dances were very abstract. The performance explored the human body moving in space. The main idea was to investigate the space and be aware of it. For my grandfather, this was very important: the dancers did not become machines or robots; their human existence remained at the center," Raman shares.



The images of bombed Mariupol had the most profound impact on Raman
Photo: Artem Halkin

During the performance, the dancers were able to explore themselves within the spatial environment: they moved to different rhythms, some twirled hoops, while others wore a costumes in glass that would create sound when the performer moved. Oskar Schlemmer developed all of this with his students during workshops at the Bauhaus. The readiness of the performance and its preparation were always a form of exploration. Raman describes it as experimental and flexible, making the project easily adaptable to any context.

Discontinuation of Collaboration with Russian Museum

For several years, C. Raman Schlemmer was in contact with the direction of the Pushkin Museum in Russia to present an exhibition of Oskar's works or one of his performances. In the 1980s, as part of an Indian delegation, the historian arrived in the Soviet Union while working on an exhibition of Indian textiles and tribal art in the Russian capital. Oskar Schlemmer's name intrigued the Russian museum community, as Bauhaus artists had strong ties with Russian institutions.

Raman used all these visits to build connections with cultural personalities and discuss the possibility of exhibiting Oskar Schlemmer's work.

"Westerners were consumers; capitalism prevailed. In the Soviet Union, cultural institutions played an important role: museums and theaters were full of people because shops had little to offer. People could not buy everything; sometimes they had to wait months for goods. I wanted as many people as possible to see Schlemmer's works.

Since my grandfather died in the 1940s, he could no longer convey the messages of his works. It was part of my moral obligation to spread his works and knowledge. At that time, the Soviet Union seemed like the ideal place where many people would see and discover the works in museums."



For several years, C. Raman Schlemmer communicated with the directors of the Pushkin Museum in Russia to showcase an exhibition of Oskar's works or one of his performances. Photo: Artem Halkin

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Oskar's works caught the interest of the director of the Pushkin Museum. There were communications, meetings, and agreements until the full-scale war broke out. For Raman, ending the collaboration was a logical response to Russian aggression, although in conversations with foreigners, I have gotten used to explaining why it needs to be stopped.

When Russia invaded Ukraine, it became clear that any art project involving Russia was no longer possible. The director of the Pushkin Museum resigned. Additionally, there were transport and financial difficulties — contact with Russia was lost. — Unfortunately, this does not always work when it comes to oil."

For us, the loss of contact with Russian institutions does not indicate transport or financial difficulties. Instead, we lost contact with the works of Ukrainian artists that Russia once stole and placed on the walls of its own museums.

Hard to Believe to Be in Kyiv

The first opportunity for Raman to visit Ukraine came in January, but he does not like the cold. When the chance to be here in the summer arose, he readily agreed. "I enjoyed walking late at night in Kyiv; the warm weather is wonderful," Raman adds. "But, of course, I had to make sure to get back before curfew."

Raman describes the journey to Kyiv as very smooth: he read the Financial Times on the night train and reminisced about his childhood. "My mother was a great traveler and showed me many places. She made travel a part of my education and upbringing. So it was nice to travel, especially at night."



Tour of Kyiv as Part of the Visit Program for Cultural Professionals from EU Countries
Photo: Artem Halkin

As an anthropologist and keen observer, Raman was curious to explore how human life unfolds during wartime.

"I did not prepare myself for this trip. I just wanted to dive into this city rather than look for something specific. Sometimes I woke up on the train and could not believe this could be true — I am currently traveling to Kyiv. I was picked up from the train at the train station and immediately taken downstairs. I asked why we had to go there, and the young veteran replied, 'We are going to the shelter.' So, my first six hours in Kyiv were spent underground, hearing rocket explosions."



Networking within the visiting program to Ukraine for cultural professionals from EU countries. Photo: Nastya Telikova

Cultural professionals that Raman was able to meet in Ukraine told him about the Mystetskyi Arsenal as a place where he could one day present the work. However, mostly, Schlemmer explored the city, studying its buildings, monuments and the people.

"I would have stayed for another day just to look at the historical monuments, mainly the churches, because that is something close to my nature, my character."

Visiting Babyn Yar was also an attempt for Raman to come to terms with his personal history. He is partly Indian and partly German and shares that it was difficult to accept his German heritage at Babyn Yar. "However, as part of my cultural memory, I felt compelled to visit this place to seek understanding and reconciliation," explains the researcher.

"My mother was a Red Cross nurse during World War II and worked on the Eastern Front. She accompanied evacuation trains of the Red Cross from the Eastern Front, as the Soviet troops advanced westwards. These trains were frequently used by the Nazis to transport weapons. So their transport was constantly attacked."

Raman tried to learn more about this from his mother, Ute Jaina Schlemmer, but she had experienced such horror that she reluctantly would talk about it. "Now I would

approach it differently, I would engage her in conversation, but unfortunately, it is too late."

"All these experiences are part of my history, and they have created the conditions for who I am today. This is also one of the reasons why I am in Ukraine. I want to share the experiences I gain here."

The visits of international artists to Ukraine in partnership with "Another Education" were organized by the Prague Civil Society Centre, Assortment Room, Post Impreza, Proto Produkciia, and the Antonin Artaud Scholarship.

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As part of the official program organized by the hosting organizations, the group of European art professionals visited alternative art and performance spaces, Opera Aperto Studio, as well as private and public theatres, providing opportunities for fostering personal relationships with Ukrainian artists, art practitioners, and curators.

At the end of the official program in Kyiv and Vinnytsia, C. Raman Schlemmer extended his stay in Ukraine to visit some of the oldest churches and monasteries in Kyiv. He attended a symphony concert by the National Philharmonic in front of the cathedral at the Lavra Monastery and gave a talk to students at the Academy of Performance and Circus Art in Kyiv.

Raman then continued his journey by night train to Lviv, where he met with artists and curators. He visited the Jam Factory Cultural Center, where he was impressed by the exhibition and excellent facilities for visual and performance arts. In the old city centre of Lviv was shown hidden architectural treasures by two artists and a historian. He presented a lecture, projecting images for students from various institutions at the Puppet Theatre and attended an exhibition opening at the National Museum of Lviv. Additionally, he dined with officials and senior military commanders, a contrast to the cultural agenda.

All of this unfolded amidst missile attacks, tragic loss of life, and the destruction of heritage buildings. From Lviv, he navigated numerous challenges on his journey to Poland, with deep gratitude for his visit to Ukraine.