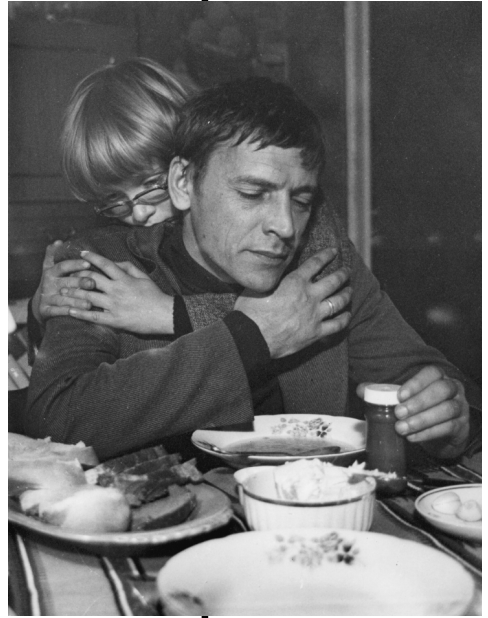


Lessons in Joy and
Pain

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fig. 42

Lessons in Joy and
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25 Apr—
14 Jul
2024

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On April 4th, 1985, in the midst of filming at the Arktika hotel in Murmansk, the director and actress Dinara Asanova passed away. She was only forty-two years old, yet she had already made more than ten films, many of which would become poignant emblems of the stagnation period.

Dinara Asanova made films about the lives of children and adolescents. Her films tell the stories of people going through their first crises as they stand on the threshold of the adult world. A subtle psychologist, Asanova spoke about first love, conflicts with peers and parents, the search for one's place in the world—and always worked on her films together with her actors, turning them into full-fledged co-authors. The sincerity and tenderness of her approach helped young actors behave entirely naturally on screen.

The title of this exhibition, *Lessons in Joy and Pain*, is a reference to an essay on Asanova of the same name by the writer and dramatist Alexander Zhitinsky. *Lessons in Joy and Pain* is an attempt to tell the story of Asanova's characteristic method, her attitude to actors, her emotions and forms of thought, and the remarkably laconic and lively cinematic language that brought her films close to the documentary genre. Asanova's collaborative, process-driven approach often led to deviations from pre-agreed scripts, and to consequent problems with the Soviet censors who decided the fate of any work.

A programmatic subject for Asanova was the conflict between generations. The theme of “fathers and children” was first addressed in Russian literature in the nineteenth century and was reconsidered many times over the course of the twentieth. At the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, cinematographers became increasingly attentive to the lives of teenagers. Against the background of economic recession and cultural starvation, the young were confronted with the impossibility of imagining their own futures, rejecting the ideological constructs imposed on them.

This exhibition is composed of three parts. The first centres on Dinara Asanova's debut short film, *Rudolfio* (1969), her graduation project at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography. Based on a short story by the Soviet writer Valentin Rasputin about a schoolgirl who falls in love with an adult man, *Rudolfio* concentrates on the emotions of its young heroine, who is confronted with strong feelings for the first time. This, however, did not sit well with the Soviet censors, who accused Asanova of

“Nabokovism” and of turning away from the socialist realist canon. It would be five years after the release of *Rudolfio* before Asanova was allowed to make a film again.

The second part of the exhibition acquaints viewers with a number of Asanova’s iconic films. Her full-feature debut *Woodpeckers Don’t Get Headaches* (1974) is a delicate study of the experience of first love and its influence on the unformed teenage psyche. Set in a high school, *The Key That Should Not Be Handed On* (1976) tells the story of growing up within a turbulent collective. The film’s dramaturgical plot is built on elder students finding a true friend in a young and progressive female teacher who helps them find a common ground with their parents. The film *The Wife Has Left* (1979) is the story of a ten-year-old boy whose mother decides to get a divorce and leaves her child with her husband for a time. Growing closer to his son, the father begins to analyse his collapsing relationship and to understand that a truly strong family cannot be built on material well-being alone. *Boys* (1983) is a drama about a summer camp for “troubled teenagers”—street urchins, petty thieves, children from dysfunctional families—that verges on the documentary. The film was a sensation in the 1980s and revealed an imminent problem—the increasing criminalisation of the world of adolescents in the late Soviet Union. The characters in the film were played by real children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The theme of the film was innovative—*Boys* came out before perestroika, in 1983, a time when the heroes of teenage cinema were typically sensible boys and girls with a tendency to mature reflection, not “troubled teenagers.” Pavel Antonov, the head of the summer camp in *Boys*, sincerely loves his wards. In the spirit of Anton Makarenko, a Soviet pedagogue who had a strong belief in the educational power of the collective, Antonov does everything he can to reintegrate teenagers into society. His character is given one of most piercing lines in the film, which could also serve as an expression of Dinara Asanova’s artistic credo: “Every boy needs an adult to whom they can say “Ti” [the informal form of you in Russian].”

The third part of the exhibition is dedicated to the figure of Dinara Asanova herself and centres on one of her late films. Radically modest in form and in many respects autobiographical, *Children of Discord* (1984) is about the tragedy of a family falling apart, in which the principal and most defenceless victims are the children. Like the main characters of her film, Asanova went through a painful divorce, and her former husband refused to look after their son, Anvar, who participated in many of Asanova’s films, including *Children of Discord*. The asceticism of Asanova’s mise-en-scène—which consists essentially of

interviews with characters that are made to look so naturalistic that a documentary effect is created—brings out the tragedy of a couple whose life paths have diverged, whose hearts are filled with spite and a desire to punish their partner.

Lessons in Joy and Pain combines screens showing Asanova's films with assemblages of photographs, fragments of television interviews with the director and her actors, and other archival materials. Visitors can also find extracts from Asanova's diaries, fragments from articles about her films, and recollections of her colleagues printed on sheets of paper throughout the exhibition space.

The exhibition immerses viewers in the world created by Dinara Asanova and turns away from traditional ways of exhibiting films outside cinema theatres. This approach is directly related to the reasonable question: "Why should film be separated from its natural context at all?" *Lessons in Joy and Pain* rejects the characteristic structure of museum exhibitions about cinema that leave no room for the films themselves—the costumes and sets that are usually made to stand for the films they appeared in do not work in isolation from their cinematographic context. However, by combining these objects with films and texts in the exhibition space, *Lessons in Joy and Pain* is able to create something akin to a total installation, and in doing so emphasise the cinematic medium's most important feature—direct impact on the viewer.

In "Media art in the Museum" (2001), the philosopher Boris Groys remarks that in the museum, the viewer holds sway over the film, choosing the mode of viewing that is convenient for him, while at traditional screenings in a cinema theatre, it is the film that masters the viewer. Encountering a film in a museum, the viewer is given the opportunity to independently choose the modes and methods by which they study the material. Telling the story of a director whose films are as abundantly saturated with the minutiae of everyday life as those of Dinara Asanova are requires a particular restraint, and the format of ascetic installation proves entirely appropriate to *Lessons in Joy and Pain*.

In one of her last diary entries, Dinara Asanova described the nature of her method, which was founded on a dialectic of high emotional charge and limited expressive means: "It sometimes seems to me that I am going mad. But then this is the natural approach to our sincerity. Sooner or later this wall surrounds each of us, even if you didn't manage to sing your song to the end. And only in the cracks of this wall do you see real grass, flowers. You want to reach out to touch them. Only never say it aloud, they will laugh at you. "Psycho"—they will say to you and they will be right. Listen to music, watch films, create! We are drunk when we do

anything, we lose consciousness—this is an equivalent to our high emotions and desires. I cannot receive this higher enjoyment—it is not in my hands and not in my mind—it is in this faceless, cultureless, and hypocritical wall. For me, of course, the struggle with this wall is not senseless. Something can grow in its cracks. I have no time to speak untruths.”

Dinara Asanova was given little time, yet she was able to say a lot. She spoke the truth in the way you do when you are young, and don't yet know the laws by which this world lives.

Curator

Andrei Vasilenko

Author

Dinara Asanova

Research curators

Angelika Artyukh

Maria Kuvshinova

Architecture

Kto Eto Studio

(Nikita Goynov)

Lighting

Kseniya Kosaya

Producers

Veronika Luchnikova

Valeria Motorueva

Technical production

Artem Kanifatov

Pavel Luzhin

Nikita Tolkachev

Art logistics and registration

Daria Krivtsova

Polina Kuznetsova

**Accessibility
and inclusion curators**

Vlad Kolesnikov

Vera Zamyslova

Graphic design

Olesya Voronina

Media specialist

Eva-Milana Lantsova

Editors

Daniil Dugaev

Olga Grinkrug

Alexandra Kirillova

Vyacheslav Nemirov

English texts

Ben Hooson

Charlotte Neve

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Dmitry Dolinin

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Dmitry Saveliev

Alexander Sokurov

Svetlana Trusova

Elena Zhitinskaya

Cover photo

Elena Karusaar

Scene from *The Wife Has Left*, 1979

Courtesy of Dmitry Saveliev

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