

“FIRE: From the Cosmos to the Commons”

Jesi Khadivi



Mark Morris, *The Chain Reaction*, 2026. Glycerin, diatomaceous earth. Site-specific installation, dimensions variable. Photo by Daria Kulnina.



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St. Nikolai Memorial, Hamburg

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Participants
Neda Saeedi
Mark Morris
...

Fire’s regenerative and destructive aspects have always figured as opposing forces in human thought: the cleansing fire of the seraphim (literally “burning ones”) in the Judeo-Christian tradition; the flaming hair of the fire god Agni who rises from the waters and, in Vedic funerary rites, engulfs the bodies of the dead in transformative flame. For Heraclitus, the cosmos was “everliving fire,” an animating process of consumption and regeneration. Prometheus’s theft of forbidden knowledge from the gods, an originary act of human overreach, established fire as a dual-edged inheritance, in which the desire to better oneself and one’s conditions comes up against the perilous consequences of this same ambition.

“FIRE: From the Cosmos to the Commons,” the second chapter in a five-year program of exhibitions devoted to the elements, takes fire’s mythic duality and examines it through a contemporary lens. It takes up the notion of apocalypse—from the Greek *apokalypsis*, “an uncovering” rather than an ending—and extends it toward the ongoing sense of permacrisis that marks our current condition, which curator Joanna Warsza positions as “a pervasive feeling of impending catastrophe” that we inhabit rather than an anticipated singular event. The exhibition begins with the hyper-specific: the historic St. Nikolai Memorial, a church that burned in the Great Fire of 1842 and, after being rebuilt, was subsequently destroyed in Operation Gomorrah in 1943, save for its historic spire. From this single scarred building, “FIRE” reaches outward toward the atmospheric and the planetary through a range of works, each anchored in the site’s specific wounds even as they gesture beyond them.

Annette Kelm’s *Die Bücher* (2019–21) photographs the covers of books banned and burned by the Nazis in 1933. Printed as posters, these Weimar-era volumes by Jewish, dissident, queer, and pacifist authors, designed by figures such as John Heartfield, symbolically return the works to the public space from which they were violently removed. Mark Morris’s *The Chain Reaction* (2026) reconstructs one of the memorial’s absent pillars from glycerin and *kieselgur*, a powdery rock composed from the fossilized remnants of microalgae from the Elbe region: the base compound and stabilizing agent Alfred Nobel used to create dynamite near Hamburg in 1867. *Act I (Le rachat des cloches)*, the final chapter of Billy Bultheel’s performance series “A Short History of Decay” (2026) responds to the site’s history during World War II, when the church’s bell was confiscated and melted down as raw material for the arms industry, a fate shared by thousands of bells during this period. Set into the voids left by the firestorm in 1943, Neda Saeedi’s stained-glass installation (*Vanished Topography*, 2026) replaces the lost biblical scenes from St. Nikolai’s former windows, including several from the Book of Revelation, with forms derived from the canals that once encircled the church, now filled with rubble and erased from view after the war.

Lene Markusen’s video and installation turns the notion of fire inwards, from architecture to the body, triangulating the city’s overheating infrastructure and warming climate with Barbara Haeger’s *Weiblicher Engel* (1960/72), a sculpture shaped by Haeger’s memory of watching Berlin burn, and Markusen’s own experience of menopause. Here, climate change is mapped onto the intensities of the menopausal body through the language of overheating and overload. Built around *tryvoha*, the Ukrainian word for air raid that doubles as a word for anxiety, Nikita Kadan’s sound work *Tryhova [the Sirens and the Mast]* (2023) channels the sonic language of modern warfare through myth, echoing the voices of sirens who lured sailors toward their ruin. Playing on headphones in the spire overlooking the city, the effect of Kadan’s haunting work, which oscillates between atmospheric noise and surges of air raid signals, pulls the listener outside chronological time altogether: an alarm built to mark a precise, locatable danger becomes instead a signal with no fixed address—the maneuver maps onto the productive dissonance of navigating a contemporary art exhibition that coexists with a functional war memorial.

Visitors to St. Nikolai, whether dedicated art audiences or tourists riding the glass elevator for the harbor view, encounter the contemporary works in this show as continuous with the building’s history. The same modern conflagrations (world war, industrialized violence, the arms production that melted the church’s bell for ammunition) that produced the ruin that now contains the exhibition are part of the same ongoing fires that kindle the extraction and burning of fossil fuel and industrial acceleration that have edged humanity closer to ecological and civilizational collapse. Yet fire feeds and lives off friction, as Michael Marder writes in his 2014 book *Pyropolitics*. Modernity, he argues, has tried to split fire in two, prizing “light without heat,” a dispassionate public sphere severed from the warmth that once made political conviction possible. Their reunification, he suggests, is treated as a kind of danger. What “FIRE” stages, across a memorial that has already burned twice, is something closer to that reunification: an insistence that revelation requires heat, that fire’s regenerative effects can clear the way for new growth.

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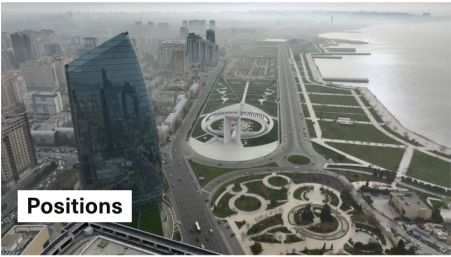
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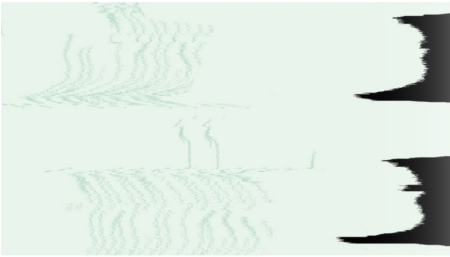
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