

Press information
Linz/Vienna, July 22, 2025

506 submissions from 76 countries

State of the ART(ist) 2025: Main Prize for Café Kuba by David Shongo

State of the ART(ist) is an international competition jointly organized by Ars Electronica and the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs. It honors outstanding projects by artists from around the world who are confronted with war, political persecution, environmental disasters, social inequality, or restrictions on freedom of expression. In 2025, there were 506 submissions from 76 countries. The prizewinners have now been announced.

The €6,000 Main Prize goes to David Shongo (CD) and his film project *Café Kuba*, which references the ongoing conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Following the trail of a coffee cart that turns into a hidden recording device, viewers are immersed in the fragmented history and fragile present of the metropolis of Kinshasa. David Shongo explores how one can capture a place shaped by instability, war, and resource exploitation on film while facing existential threats oneself. He invents a "fugitive cinema" with *Café Kuba*, a subtle cinematic practice that takes place in secret and invites attentive listening.

Two Additional Awards Presented

Additionally, two Awards of Distinction are presented, each with €2,000 in prize money. Anet Sandra Açıkgöz (TR) is being honored for the video installation *Fugue*, which uses a ball game to address how Turkey continues to neglect confronting its own history of severe human rights violations.

Issa Touma (SY) and the Art Camping community in Aleppo are being recognized for the project *Losing the freedom of choice*, which began in the midst of the Syrian civil war. Through photographs and short texts, the stories, fears, and perspectives of young Syrian women have been documented. The focus is on the generation of the 1990s, who grew up during the war and whose personal and professional challenges in early adulthood often go unnoticed.

The jury—composed of Sergio Fontanella (CU), Marita Muukkonen (FI), Ivor Stodolsky (DE/FI), Simon Mraz (AT), and Christl Baur (DE)—also awarded six Honorary Mentions.

“Art is freedom – yet freedom can no longer be taken for granted. Around the world, artists are facing increasing restrictions that hinder their work or silence them entirely. With State of the ART(ist), we have created a space of resonance for them—a space that gives voice to those who would otherwise go unheard. From Linz, we are sending a strong signal to the world: for artistic freedom, for diversity, and for the dialogue that holds our societies together across the globe,” says **State Secretary Sepp Schellhorn, who is responsible for foreign culture at the Foreign Ministry.**

“506 submissions from 76 countries powerfully demonstrate how actively artists around the world are engaging with political conflicts, war, censorship, and climate extremes – developing creative forms of protest and envisioning solidaric alternatives, often under precarious living and working conditions. The State of the ART(ist) initiative helps bring these perspectives to international attention,” says **Gerfried Stocker, Artistic Director Ars Electronica.**

Artworks on View in Linz and Online

A selection of the award-winning projects will be presented at the Ars Electronica Festival 2025, taking place from September 3 to 7 in the POSTCITY in Linz. The official award ceremony will be held on Thursday, September 4, 2025, at the Design Center Linz as part of the Prix Ars Electronica Award Ceremony. The works are also available online in the Virtual Art Gallery on Spatial.io, where they will remain accessible in the long term.

About State of the ART(ist)

State of the ART(ist) was jointly launched in 2022 by Ars Electronica and the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs—at the time, as a direct response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Since then, the initiative has developed into a global platform that supports creatives whose artistic work is restricted by systemic threats—such as political, social or ecological conflicts. Seeking works, projects, and actions engaging with art and human rights.

State of the ART(ist) 2025

Main Prize

Café Kuba

David Shongo (CD)

"Against the backdrop of war, colonial aftershocks, and economic exploitation, Shongo invents a 'fugitive cinema' — a practice of radical listening forged in movement, concealment, and survival. [...] Café Kuba maps the city not only as geography, but as a body marked by trauma, resistance, and unfinished struggle. The jury awards Café Kuba the 2025 State of the ART(ist) main prize for its aesthetic precision, conceptual clarity, and unflinching engagement with one of the world's most enduring and underacknowledged conflicts. In a moment when visibility is dangerous and silence is imposed, this work dares to listen. It is a deeply moving political-poetic response to survival in times of collapse—and a powerful example of what art can offer when the world turns away."

- Excerpt from the jury statement

In his artistic work, David Shongo reflects on the historical, political, and economic dynamics of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In his film project *Café Kuba*, the artist traces the connections between colonial legacy, collective memory, social tensions, and urban reality. The work is a direct response to the ongoing conflict in the eastern part of the country—particularly the capture of the cities of Goma and Bukavu by the M23 rebels in February 2025—and its far-reaching consequences for the population and cultural production.

The film invites viewers to immerse themselves in the metropolis of Kinshasa and become part of a cinematic and acoustic process of exploration. The central starting point is *Café Kuba* — a converted coffee cart from the streets of Kinshasa, which David Shongo has transformed into a mobile recording device to capture the sounds, voices, and social fabric of the city along its route. This immersive approach, which captures the essence of urban life, creates a sensory archive of resistance—one that understands listening as a political practice. It is a form of fugitive cinema that, in times of uncertainty, censorship, and violence, seeks out new modes of storytelling.

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A second fictional layer unfolds through the so-called “Spirit of Death” buses, driven by three silent, masked figures. Their heads are covered with electronic waste—a reference to the economically motivated conflicts over strategic raw materials, whose extraction is linked to millions of deaths. These figures embody the tension between a painful past, an unstable present, and an unknown future.

With *Café Kuba*, David Shongo—himself based in Kinshasa—succeeds in creating an artistic reflection on memory, identity, and geopolitical violence. For this work, he is awarded the 2025 State of the ART(ist) Main Prize, which comes with €6,000 in prize money.

youtube.com/watch?v=-trPHj9w3mk

Produced by Tommy Simoens Gallery & Studio 1960
Executive Producers: Tommy Simoens & David Shongo
Production Management: Olga Sherazade Pitton
Assistant Directors: Kevine Booto & Divin Kayanga
Cinematography: David Shongo

DoP: Kevin Booto
Costume Design: Divin Kayanga
Sound Recording: Djoe Wamba
Sound Engineering: David Shongo
With: Christian Tamba, Celeo, a.o.

State of the ART(ist) 2025

Award of Distinction

Fugue

Anet Sandra Açıkgöz (TR)

The video installation *Fugue* addresses the Turkish state's persistent failure to confront its own history of severe human rights violations and to face traumatic memories. Armenian artist Anet Sandra Açıkgöz sees this collective repression continually reaffirmed: state crimes accumulate over time, are subject to statutes of limitations, or are deliberately kept ambiguous in legal contexts. The project reveals how genocide, pogroms, and mass killings are increasingly disappearing behind a veil of impunity and forgetting.

This systematic repression is illustrated through the metaphor of a simple ball game: just as players dodge the ball, perpetrators evade accountability. In every new “game” — every political crisis — the same perpetrators reappear, rewrite the rules as needed, dodge the ball, and even when hit, are not disqualified. This also clarifies the project’s title: Fugue derives from the Latin *fugere* (to flee) and *fugare* (to chase), and is also known in music as a polyphonic compositional form.

vimeo.com/1081518504?share=copy

This project was realized in 2023 with the support of the Ali Ismail Korkmaz Foundation’s Young Artist Fund.

State of the ART(ist) 2025

Award of Distinction

Losing the freedom of choice

Issa Touma and Art Camping (SY)

Photographer Issa Touma is the founder of the “Le Pont Organization” in Aleppo, which operates the only photography gallery in the region. *Women We Have Not Lost Yet* is a powerful book project that documents the stories of Syrian women through photographs and texts—with a focus on the generation born in the 1990s, whose personal and professional challenges in the context of war and unrest often go unnoticed.

In April 2015, young people sought refuge in the gallery after news broke that a major military operation by extremists was expected to strike the city. Many of them already knew each other through the art project Art Camping, which had been initiated by Le Pont in 2012 in response to the Syrian conflict. While unrest persisted, twenty women and Issa Touma decided to leave behind a “last message from Aleppo” — merging photography with personal experiences, dreams, and fears. Later, a follow-up volume was created, featuring more women reflecting on life and coming of age during the war. The project portrays the individual stories of courageous women from diverse backgrounds, religions, and ethnicities in a country where war and destruction shape daily life and the future.

festival-aleppo.org/

Thanks to all the women for their courage to share their stories and thanks also to the Art Camping members for all the work and time they gave.

State of the ART(ist) 2025

Six Honorary Mentions

Спомини [Spomyny]

Sophia Bulgakova (UA)

Dear Jafar,

Maksym Khodak (UA)

Dust of the Ancestors – Resisting Through Clay

Oumar Sango (ML)

Friends of Fearness

Marwa Abu Raida (PS)

Pamalandong sa Danow (Reflection in the Marsh)

Breech Asher Harani (PH)

The Hole Open It

Mariam Ghalayan (AM)