Past, Future, Art

Olha Hvozdetska and Oksana Dovgopolova on the Connection with Odesa

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■ **Oksana Dovgopolova (O. D.):** I hold a Doctorate in Philosophy and serve as a professor in the Department of Philosophy at I. I. Mechnikov Odesa National University. Additionally, I am the curator of the *Past/Future/Art* platform dedicated to memory culture. I have been living in Odesa since the start of the full-scale invasion.

■ **Olha Hvozdetska (O. H.):** I am a TV presenter and journalist, and a graduate of the Faculty of Philosophy at Odesa National University. I have been in Odesa since the first day of the full-scale invasion. Although I briefly traveled to Romania through Moldova, I have mostly stayed in the city, working in the information sphere.

■ **O. D.:** I was also an advisor for Olha's PhD project, which, unfortunately, was never completed because Olha was already deeply involved in the media. But now I'm joking with her, saying, "We have the material, let's finally wrap this up."

■ **Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.):** Can you tell me more about what brings you together now—the project you started after the full-scale invasion? I'd like you to reflect on the spring of 2022 and share what motivated you to take on this work.

■ **O. D.:** Why did I do this? When the invasion began, if I had stopped working, I would probably have lost my mind. I needed to do something meaningful. Besides just surviving, we had to make a decision—whether to stay or leave. In order to hold together, we had to take action. But there were many things we could do: some useful in the moment, some for the future. We had to find a balance.

Why did I decide to record people? I could see how dramatically experiences were changing, how differently people were feeling. Given my focus on memory work, I noticed that at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, people often used metaphors from the Second World War, but it soon became clear that this was a very different situation. I understood that in six months, a year, or two years, these views would change completely, and we needed to capture them in the moment. It was important to record this now, as it would influence the development of our relationship with the past.

Very quickly, within about two months, it became clear that the experiences of those who stayed and those who left were beginning to diverge. People were interpreting what they saw in very different ways. For those living through it, their relationship with the city was changing. For those who had left, their connection to the city remained anchored in the past, the same as it was before the invasion. I asked myself: when they return, will they find a different city? For them, it's still their hometown as they knew it before they left, and they'll approach the conversation with the past from that perspective. But the city has already changed. How do they reconcile this? That's why it was important for me to document these transformations, to record the experiences of those who stayed and those who came back to the city.

I started recording in May-June 2022. Around that time, I brought Olha into the project, so it became a joint idea. We discussed it a lot together. Olha was still very active at the volunteer center at that point, and we recorded several interviews with internally displaced people (IDPs). We wanted to understand how they see Odesa.

■ **O. H.:** I'd like to start by saying that I didn't join the project right away—not in the spring. At that time, we were all confused. It wasn't until the end of the summer of 2022 that the idea came about. It started with communication with IDPs, because at that time, I was deeply involved in working with them. Some of them hardly spoke at all, and others gave short answers to simple questions. But there were some who really wanted to talk—it was clear they needed to share their experiences. I offered to record their stories: some refused, others agreed, and we recorded them. These were rather short interviews, lasting 40 to 60 minutes. After two interviews, I couldn't continue—it was very difficult for both the people and for me. I took a break for two or three days, as I couldn't think about anything else.

Then we spoke with different Odesans: those who stayed, those who left and hadn't returned yet, and those who left and came back.

It became clear that there weren't just two different experiences, but many more. In the end, we started conducting interviews that focused more on relationships with the past and active work in the present.

■ **O. D.:** We shifted our focus a little. Last year, we had the idea of recording a diverse group of people with varying experiences. We recorded interviews with IDPs, and it was important for us to understand their perspective on Odesa. But last year, we also launched a friendly newsletter with a Google form containing questions about changing relationships with the past. There was a section that said, "If you want to talk about something more, please leave your contact information." Some of the interviews arose from this Google form.

In the fall of 2022, people began returning, and we have several interviews with this group. For me, it was important to capture the moment when someone had just returned—what were their impressions of Odesa, and why did they come back? We collected some really powerful stories. It was also therapeutic for me—I feel very happy when people come back.

As time passed, I could already see a change in perspective. In 2023, I told myself, "The time for chaos is over. If we're going to continue this, we need to find a clear focus." In 2023, the picture of the city changed for me. I realized I needed to talk to those who were actively contributing to the city, whether by staying or by leaving. That's why we decided to focus on recording the stories of people who were seriously and consciously working on the city's development, with a vision for the future. We've conducted more in-depth, long-form interviews.

We immediately decided to record audio only—no video—so the person wouldn't be distracted by the camera. It's also important that Olha and I share our impressions after these conversations, since I don't see what's happening outside of the recording. We hope to continue this direction, but we don't yet have the time resources to fully pursue it.

■ **N. O.:** Are you two the team behind this project?

■ **O. D.:** Yes, that's right. This is actually an initiative of our platform dedicated to memory culture, *Past/Future/Art*, but Olha and I manage this part of the project ourselves.

■ **N. O.:** Speaking with you, two things stand out. First, the questions you bring into new situations seem deeply connected to your previous interests and skills. Second, initiatives like yours serve a dual purpose. On one hand, they address a real need for people to

share their stories, offering a therapeutic outlet for both you and the storytellers. On the other, they aim to create a lasting resource for the future. You talk about the importance of capturing these experiences before they settle into fixed forms, so we can later observe their evolution. This approach, you suggest, can help us understand the different ways people enter these conversations, fostering dialogue between very different experiences.

I'm curious about your thoughts on how to label this work: should we call it an interview, a conversation, oral history, documentation, or something entirely new? So far, we've been using an existing conceptual framework, but we're increasingly aware that it doesn't quite fit.

■ **O. D.:** We call them "in-depth interviews" because we're not merely documenting people's experiences—we have a specific focus. We're exploring how people's relationships with the past are evolving. When we began in 2022, we felt like we were capturing something immediate, yet we had no clear sense of where it was all leading. I remember telling myself back then that everything was shifting, that in two years, Odesa would have a different way of speaking about its past. It's fascinating to look back and see how we imagined the future during those fluid times.

Initially, the idea was to record in 2022, then again in 2023, and 2024, to create a timeline for comparison. But already, I can see certain patterns forming—trends that hint at how Odesa might come to understand itself, not only as part of Ukraine but as part of the wider region. I feel it's time to enrich our own imaginations with what we've heard in these conversations. In many ways, these interviews serve as a form of therapy, both for those sharing their stories and for us. Personally, some of these conversations have been deeply meaningful; they allowed me to connect and share experiences with people I might never have opened up to otherwise. They've had a real impact.

■ **O. H.:** Speaking of self-therapy, these interviews have brought so many revelations. I've wrestled with existential questions I couldn't answer—why didn't we leave? Why did we stay? What is the right thing to do? During one conversation, I asked the narrator, "Why did you come back? What waited for you here?" She answered, and in the process used the English word "rooting." She paused, unsure of how to translate it, and I repeated, now in Ukrainian, "Rootedness" [vkorinennia]. And then it struck me. Eight months after the full-scale invasion, I was still questioning myself daily: why didn't I leave? But in that moment, I found my answer—"rooting" became my answer. It was like a flash of clarity. Just roots! I realized that if you uprooted me

and placed me somewhere else, I simply wouldn't grow. This image means so much to me.

■ **N. O.:** There's one more observation I'd like to explore. I've noticed that researchers often start with a wide lens, capturing a broad range of stories and valuing diversity as a key selection criterion. Over time, though, the focus tends to sharpen. I've seen this in my own work and in the projects of colleagues—the perspective becomes more defined as clarity grows. If I'm understanding correctly, you're currently honing in on themes of relationship with the past and with place. Could you talk about the main challenges you've faced in this work and what you had to learn along the way? On one hand, you rely on your experience, but on the other, no one taught us how to conduct a project under the threat of missile strikes, with constant risks to your safety, to your narrators, and to the people you care about. How did you manage to navigate these challenges?

■ **O. D.:** Actually, I didn't have much experience recording interviews—I hadn't intended to work this way. When we first launched oral history field trips at *Past/Future/Art*, we collaborated with people who had the expertise. We did conduct some interviews ourselves, but the primary work was handled by others. So, although I'd been involved in previous oral history projects, my role was usually to frame the questions and interpret the results rather than engage directly with people. Here, though, I found myself in direct communication, which was new for me. I eventually asked Olha to join when I realized I couldn't do it alone—I needed her help to connect with the people I wanted to reach. Through this, we built our own approach and have been refining it since.

Before we even founded *Past/Future/Art* in 2017, I had collaborated with the *Odyssey Donbas* initiative in Odesa. There, artist and researcher Darya Tsymbalyuk, along with colleagues Viktor Korvik and Yuliia Filipieva, conducted in-depth interviews that transformed into drawings. One participant in the project went through an extraordinary change—after the interview, she "came out of her cocoon," reconnecting with joyful memories of her pre-war life and addressing life issues she had previously set aside. For me, this confirmed that working with people affected by trauma was meaningful, even though it was not in wartime conditions. Incidentally, one of Olha's interviews captures the sounds of explosions in the background—"bang, bang." Olha casually remarks, "Oh, a strike!" and her interviewee from Mariupol calmly replies, "No, no, it's not a strike. Strikes sound different. It's fine, let's continue."

■ **O. H.:** I have a lot of experience with TV interviews, but in a research project, it's an entirely different experience—a different level of trust and openness. There's a certain intimacy that can emerge in these conversations, something unique to the moment and the specific person you're speaking with.

When it comes to the emotional state of the interviewees, it varies. One person, for instance, cried through almost the entire conversation. Later that evening, she messaged me, saying, "Thank you so much! Talking to you made me realize I need to see a therapist. I thought I could 'handle it' on my own, but now I see I'm not actually dealing with it." This was a positive outcome, a step toward self-care. But there's a more challenging side, too. One interviewee had a panic attack right in the middle of our conversation. We talked about it afterward, but we couldn't pinpoint what triggered it. This was the only time I encountered such an intense reaction—usually, people felt a sense of relief and, in many cases, even admitted they felt better after the interview.

■ **N. O.:** Unfortunately, we can never be certain how a particular story might impact someone. This uncertainty means we need to be even more attentive, ready to respond in various situations. This is our reality now: we've been living in a state of war for nine years, and as interviewers, one of our essential skills is recognizing when an interviewee may be experiencing overwhelming emotions. This has become a fundamental part of our training—almost like part of our own internal system. How do you take care of yourself in these situations? You encounter a wide range of stories, either directly in the interview or later while processing them. What strategies do you use to cope?

■ **O. H.:** Oksana walks by the sea—it helps her. [At the time of this recording, she was actually walking in a coastal park.—N.O.] I can't live without the sea either. I go for runs. Jogging really helps.

■ **O. D.:** I haven't really had any traumatic interviews, but there was a moment that hit me hard. The first time I saw the aftermath of a strike was intense. At first, I only saw a photo, but eventually, I saw the impact site in person—the entry and exit points, how terrifying it all was. I ended up there by chance, about a month later. After that, I bought myself some ice cream. I realized I did it because I needed something simple, something grounding, to remind myself that I was still alive.

■ **N. O.:** Let's return to your project and the point when these interviews are transformed into digital records and text. How do you work

with the stories you've collected? How do you go about describing and storing them?

■ **O. H.:** I quickly gathered the last set of interviews, focusing on people involved in the development of Odesa. I had almost one interview every day. After that, I began transcribing them right away. But it's not a traditional transcription process—it's more of a thematic summary of the conversation, with selected quotes and additional comments on the points we're interested in. First, I record the interview, then transcribe it and add my notes. Afterward, Oksana listens to the audio separately, reads my notes, and adds her own. Finally, we compile everything into a shared spreadsheet.

The recordings are stored on my Google Drive, and I also make copies. I have this constant, almost panicked fear that something might get lost.

■ **O. D.:** We duplicate everything on the *Past/Future/Art* Google Drive and also transfer it to a hard drive, where we keep the most important materials. In general, this is one of the key issues when collecting interviews: how to archive them and make them live on. Even if they're well organized and stored on a disk, if no one is accessing them, it becomes a problem. This is something many oral history projects struggle with—they record a wealth of material, but it ends up sitting somewhere, out of sight and unused.

■ **N. O.:** So, how do you envision access to these materials and their continued relevance after you've recorded them?

■ **O. D.:** I genuinely envision these materials living on in this processed form, eventually being published. Recently, I came across a wonderful Swiss program focused on documenting in conjunction with transitional justice, where they proposed the idea of creating large archives to which individual initiatives could contribute their work, making it accessible. I'm not sure yet where our materials could be transferred, but we do plan to continue working and will think more about it. I realize that this could be useful not only for us but for others as well. When we record these interviews, we fully inform our respondents that the project is part of *Past/Future/Art*. We can't transfer any materials without their consent, so if we're going to create such a central archive, we need to have those conversations with all the people involved.

While most people allow us to use their materials, I don't always think they fully understand the consequences. If we decide to publish something, we will definitely contact them again. And if we want to transfer this archive—thankfully, it's not that large—we'll need to

ask their permission. Personally, I wouldn't hand over interviews with internally displaced people to anyone else, because their experiences are so specific. At the same time, many of our interviewees understand the importance of discussing certain topics publicly, and some even ask for approval before their stories are published.

■ **N. O.:** Absolutely, respecting the wishes of the person is key, and it's also essential to understand what our responsibility as researchers is. My final question is about advice: If you could go back to the moment when you first envisioned this project, what would you advise yourself?

■ **O. D.:** I think I'd advise myself not to be afraid to do it. But it's important to have a clear conversation with yourself: what do I want, why am I doing this, and why am I doing it right now? It's crucial to approach the process mindfully and to seek guidance from those who already have experience. Talk to them, ask them: what scared you, what scares me? For instance, I consulted with my anthropologist colleague, and she told me that I need to understand that conversations can sometimes take unexpected turns, and those moments can be the most fruitful. In other words, don't try to force someone into a box. Sometimes the person you're speaking with will take a roundabout path, and along the way, they may touch on important things and contexts that you didn't expect.

■ **O. H.:** I'm going to focus on the interview aspect because you need to take responsibility for your part in the process. My advice would be to find an inner balance where you can be both empathetic and detached enough to perceive history as history, rather than living it as your own experience. It's difficult; it's not something you're born with, but it's a skill you can develop. You need to be like a membrane through which the communication process flows. You can't avoid being empathetic, because if you aren't, the person won't open up and share anything meaningful. But at the same time, you can't get completely immersed in their story either, because then you risk losing yourself in it. I think that's the key.

■ **O. D.:** And it's essential to think about preserving these stories and ensuring they continue to have life, so that all this immense work doesn't go to waste.

■ **N. O.:** Exactly, that's why this publication was conceived—to help us think about the future together and understand that recording an interview is just the first step. There will be many more steps, and we can move in many different directions from here.