

Mystetskyi Arsenal in Kyiv: From the Therapeutic Retrieval of the Colonial Past to Wartime Narratives

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The Mystetskyi Arsenal National Art and Culture Museum Complex in Kyiv was founded in 2005 on the initiative of President Viktor Yushchenko.

The government-run contemporary art centre neighbours the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra¹, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that dates to 1051, the times of

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- 1 The Lavra is still connected to the Church of Moscow, which causes a lot of controversies, especially after the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (founded in 1992 and not recognised by other Orthodox churches) and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (founded in 1917) officially separated from Moscow in 2018 (after 300 years) to form the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Pechersk Lavra stayed under the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC), and only at the beginning of March 2023 did the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture issue an official statement terminating the lease agreement and asking monks remaining with the Russian-controlled church to leave the Lavra by the end of the month. Some monks refused to do so. See: Jadwiga Rogoża, “Ukraine: A Decisive Blow to the Moscow Patriarchate?”, *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich (Centre for Eastern Studies)*, 19 April 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-04-19/ukraine-a-decisive-blow-to-moscow-patriarchate> [accessed: 20.02.2024]. The Ukrainian government is taking steps to ban the UOC altogether, as the Moscow Patriarchate is an eager supporter of Vladimir Putin and Russia’s invasion in Ukraine: “the Kremlin heavily relies on the Moscow Patriarchate to provide ideological and moral justification for its aggression. [Patriarch] Kirill works to persuade the 71 percent of the Russian population who are Orthodox that their government’s war is righteous”. See: Nina Shea, “A Weaponized Church is a Threat to Ukraine”, *National Review*, 24 January 2024, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2024/01/a-weaponized-church-is-a-threat-to-ukraine/> [accessed: 20.02.2024]. The influence of Moscow and its entanglements with Pechersk Lavra reaches as far back as the 17th century. It was after the Truce of Andrusovo in 1667, which divided the territories of Cossack Ukraine between the Tsardom of Russia and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, when Kyivan clergy, supported by Inokentii Gizel, the archimandrite of the Lavra, started the campaign aimed at persuading the tsar that Kyiv should stay under the control of Moscow, not the Commonwealth and the Catholic king. Although they aimed to maintain the independence of the Kyivan metropolitanate, in 1685, it was transferred from the jurisdiction of Constantinople to that of Moscow. See: Serhii Plokhyy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*, New York: Basic Books, 2021, 143–144.

Kyivian Rus (Fig. 62). The building is located in the Pechersk district, which is often considered to be one of the three hearts of Kyiv, in addition to Old Kyiv and Podil.

The site is also connected to the Hetmanate and Hetman Ivan Mazepa and his mother, Maria Mazepyna. The fortress surrounding the Mystetskyi Arsenal was built by Peter I; the building itself by Catherine II. The massive construction is different from the architecture of the area, which was dominated by a baroque style that culturally connects to the period of the Cossack Hetmanate. Just like the churches built by Mazepa were symbols of Ukrainian presence, so was the arsenal a symbol for the Russian Empire. In this chapter, I look at the history of the arsenal in the context of its emergence as a powerful symbol of the Russian Empire's claims to the land, as well as its transformation into a contemporary art centre, which gradually introduced a decolonising frame into its programme and activities. The space that once served to strengthen Russian presence on these territories transitioned into a hub for Ukrainian self-recovery and rediscovery, a process that I propose to see as a 'post-colonial turn',² a phenomenon based on healing and the acceptance of history and of the past in hybrid form, without the imposition of either imperial or national patterns.

Mystetskyi Arsenal has the status of a state cultural and artistic institution and is under the governance of the Ministry of Culture. In the years preceding the opening of the art centre, there were multiple concepts for how to use the massive building of an arsenal, but none of them was carried out. They included the opening of the private PinchukArtCentre, an art institution founded by Viktor Pinchuk,³ or creating a state-run museum that would present treasures of Ukrainian art and culture collected from multiple establishments, a so-called Ukrainian Louvre.⁴ The concept was supported by Yushchenko and stayed in accordance with Arsenal's mission of "spreading the traditions of patronship in the arts for development of the Ukrainian nation and its cultural heritage".⁵ Finally, in 2007, Mystetskyi Arsenal

2 I am consciously referring to the 'postcolonial' rather than the 'decolonial' turn in this chapter, which looks mainly at the time before the full-scale Russian invasion. The terms are not interchangeable: the former describes the earlier phase of the postcolonial aftermath characterised by the reinterpretation of colonial entanglements, and the latter aims at the final liberation from colonial narratives.

3 The PinchukArtCentre was opened in 2006 in the Bessarabsky quarter in the centre of Kyiv.

4 Anastasiya Shkalyeva, "Chym ye Mystetskyi arsenal?" ("What is Mystetskyi Arsenal?"), *Ukrainer (Ukrainian)*, last modified 27 September 2021, <https://ukrainer.net/mystetskyy-arsenal/> [accessed: 03.07.2023].

5 The objectives of the foundation were further described as: "Filling the Ukrainian society with ideas of humanism and creative vision; accomplishment of charitable activities to meet social needs; popularization of best examples of art, widening access to the Ukrainian and world cultural heritage; creating and updating the Arsenal's museum collection, retention and development of Ukrainian cultural traditions, adjustment of international relations, relationships and cooperation in culture and art; support of outstanding contemporary artists and

opened as an art centre with no clear programmatic theme, a situation that changed after the political events of 2013–2014, the Euromaidan, the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, and the beginning of the war in the Donbas. The first director of the art centre was Igor Didkovsky, who was replaced in 2010 by Natalia Zabolotna. Since 2016, the position is held by Olesia Ostrovska-Lyuta. Mystetskyi Arsenal remains one of the most powerful cultural centres and biggest art institutions in the country. It owns a collection that currently holds around four thousand very diverse items, including archaeological findings, works of art, as well as ceramics and household items. The core of the art collection, which is being constantly expanded, are artworks from the Ihor Dychenko⁶ collection, donated to Mystetskyi Arsenal in 2015. Multidisciplinary international festivals, exhibitions, and various cultural events have been taking place there for nearly two decades. Mystetskyi Arsenal's goal as a state-run institution is to be the leading centre engaged in various art forms – from contemporary art, music, theatre, and literature to museum development. The lack of state-run centres for contemporary art is a huge deficiency in Ukraine but is partially filled with the work of such institutions as Mystetskyi Arsenal. With the still conservative art education – which leads to the teaching of safe, artisanal, and commonly accepted art practices, leaving no space for experiments of contemporary art – Mystetskyi Arsenal was, and still is, a meaningful place in terms of the presence of contemporary art.

From Cossack Baroque to Russian Classicism: The History of the Arsenal and the Fortress

The arsenal was built in the Pechersk district in Kyiv,⁷ which at the time of the Cossack Hetmanate⁸ and Hetman Mazepa was the most developed part of the city.

talented youth; conducting of educational activities, promoting development of Art". See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, *Mystetskyi Arsenal. Ukraine in the World. The World in Ukraine*, Kyiv: Mystetskyi Arsenal, 2015, no pagination.

- 6 Ihor Dychenko (1946–2015) was a Ukrainian collector and art critic. His collection of 510 works by Ukrainian artists of the 20th century was donated to Mystetskyi Arsenal after his death in 2015.
- 7 Kyiv was part of the Tsardom of Russia from 1686 until 1721, when the tsardom took the name of the Russian Empire.
- 8 The Cossack Hetmanate – whose historical name was the Zaporozhian Host or Army of Zaporizhzhia – was a political state located in central Ukraine between 1648 and 1764. It was founded by Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky and abolished by Catherine the Great, who in 1764 ultimately liquidated the institute of the hetman, the political leader of the Hetmanate, thus incorporating the Cossack Hetmanate into the Russian Empire. The Hetmanate's administrative system was abolished in 1780. See: Plochy, *The Gates of Europe*, 142. Paul Robert Magocsi refers to the territories of the Kyiv, Bratslav, and Chernihiv palatinates between 1649

The Kyiv Pechersk Lavra is located just across the street from the art centre. In the 17th century, another religious complex was built in the area: the Ascension Convent (Voznesenskyi Pechersk), with the Cathedral of the Ascension, including its main building with three apses and five cupolas, placed on a site that forms today's courtyard of Mystetskyi Arsenal (Fig. 63).⁹

Figure 62: The Kyiv Pechersk Lavra (left) and Mystetskyi Arsenal (right)



Image by author, view from Lavrska Street, November 2021.

(the Treaty of Zboriv) and 1711 (the defeat of Hetman Pylyp Orlyk and division of Ukrainian territories between Muscovy, Poland, and the Ottoman Empire) as the Cossack State. See: Paul Robert Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996, 231, 263.

- 9 There is yet another church complex just in front of Mystetskyi Arsenal – the church of Theodosius of the Caves (Theodosius Pechersky), built by Konstantyn Makiyevsky, Mazepa's cousin, in 1700. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, “Archaeological Research at the ‘Mystetskyi Arsenal’ Territory”, <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/musey/doslidzhenna/archaeological-research-at-the-mystetskyi-arsenal-territory/> [accessed: 10.07.2023].

Figure 63: The courtyard of Mystetskyi Arsenal



Image by author, November 2021.

Hetman Mazepa and his mother, Mazepyna, financed the foundation and construction of the baroque style monastery.¹⁰ Thanks to their patronage, the monastery developed and grew: between 1701 and 1705, the five-steeped cathedral replaced the wooden Ascension Convent, and the second church, the Protection of the Virgin Church, was erected.¹¹ In 1706, the Russian Emperor Peter I ordered the construction of the Pechersk Fortress¹² on the site of the Ascension Convent. Between 1711 and 1712, most of the nuns from the Ascension Convent moved to the Florovsky Monastery in Podil, and the destruction and deconstruction of the Pechersk area to build the fortress began.¹³ However, both churches were only dismantled in 1798, when the construction of the arsenal started – bricks from the churches were even used to erect it. The remnants, foundations, and a burial complex of the Cathedral of the Ascension were found in 2005 in the inner courtyard of today's Mystetskyi Arsenal during probably the biggest archaeological excavations

10 Mazepyna, under the monastic name of Maria Magdalena, was the abbess of the monastery from 1688 to 1707. See: *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*

12 At the time, Kyiv was beginning to be considered an outpost of the South and the Ottoman Empire; therefore, the fortress was built, making use of the earlier fortifications of the monastery complex. It was never used, however, for the purposes of defence or battle. In the Russian Empire, it mainly served as a symbol of the empire's military presence in this territory. Olena Onogda, interview with the author, online, 27 April 2023.

13 Shkalyeva, "What is Mystetskyi Arsenal?":

in contemporary Kyiv.¹⁴ The excavations took place both inside and outside of the main building, which, until the early 2000s and the announcement that the art centre would be founded here, had a military status that prohibited any earlier archaeological excavations.¹⁵ The advantage of the military status, however, is that the construction and its surroundings were preserved in their original forms, so these artefacts of the 17th century, and even earlier periods, were conserved and remained almost completely intact.¹⁶

According to historian Ihor Hyrych, the fortress and the arsenal building within its walls were never meant to serve as actual protection:

The fortress was intended not for protection but rather for controlling the area. Russian tsars, not expecting support in this region, turned fortresses into gathering points for Russian troops.¹⁷ [...] It was very important for Russia to keep its army here because this land was not Russian – it was Ukrainian.¹⁸ The region was hostile to the Russian state, and therefore, troops had to be kept here on a constant basis. [...] That is, this fortress¹⁹ was built not for use in military action but to intimidate the local population and show [them] who the boss is.²⁰

14 The excavations took place between 2005 and 2009. Olena Onogda, interview with the author, in person, 24 November 2021.

15 Ibid.

16 The excavations currently form part of Mystetskyi Arsenal's collection and are looked after by its art conservators and archaeologists. Included in this collection are a great number of ceramics, jewellery, church furnishings, and items connected to military history or leisure, like chess pieces.

17 The structure was also used to manufacture, repair, store, and fix military equipment. See: Shkalyeva, "What is Mystetskyi Arsenal?"

18 Hyrych refers to the fact that Kyiv was part of the Cossack Hetmanate, while administratively belonging to the Tsardom of Russia from 1667 to 1721 and the Russian Empire starting in 1737. At that time, however, Russia was fighting the Swedes in the Great Northern War (1700–1721), and, in 1708, the Swedish Army was heading towards Moscow through the territories of today's Ukraine. Therefore, it is unlikely that the fortress was built only to threaten the local people. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, "Yak tse pratsiuie: Olha Melnyk, Olena Onohda, Ihor Hyrych ta Oksana Ovsyuk proistoriiu", ("How It Works: Olha Melnyk, Olena Onohda, Ihor Hyrych about the Military History"), YouTube video, 59:07, 30 November 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-mBjmoW_qPw [accessed: 30.05.2022].

19 There were two fortresses surrounding the Mystetskyi Arsenal – the first one was built by Peter the Great, and the second, which surrounded both the arsenal and Peter's fortress, by Nicolai I Romanov. The old fortress had bastions, while the new one had six to eight towers. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, "Yak tse pratsiuie: Olha Melnyk, Olena Onohda, Ihor Hyrych ta Oksana Ovsyuk proistoriiu".

20 Ihor Hyrych in Mystetskyi Arsenal, "Yak tse pratsiuie: Olha Melnyk, Olena Onohda, Ihor Hyrych ta Oksana Ovsyuk proistoriiu", 5:30–5:44, 6:22–6:36, 14:25–14:30 [author's trans.].

It is common for imperial regimes to make powerful symbolic use of the physical environment, and architecture or urban design can often be manipulated in the service of politics.²¹ In the early 18th century, when Peter I built the fortress, Kyiv had great military and strategic importance, as it was an outpost of the western part of the Russian Empire. And when Catherine II planned the erection of an arsenal on the territory of the fortress (the decree was signed in May 1783, and construction took place between 1784 and 1803²²), the empire was embroiled in wars. Still, the massive construction was distinct from the area's architecture, dominated by a baroque style that culturally connected to the period of the Cossack Hetmanate (Figs. 64–65).²³

Figure 64: *Mystetskyi Arsenal, details of the façade*



Image by author, November 2021.

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- 21 Lawrence J. Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, 3.
 22 *Ibid.*
 23 The Hetmanate was created in 1649 as an autonomous state in today's central Ukraine. It was liquidated by Catherine the Great in 1764. Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, 231, 275.

Figure 65: View of the baroque tower of the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra from the top floor of Mystetskyi Arsenal



Image by author, November 2021.

After its liquidation and the full incorporation of the Cossack state into the Russian empire, the abolition of the internal borders and Russification became Catherine's priorities in the region²⁴: "When the hetmans are gone from Little Russia, every effort should be made to eradicate from memory of the period and the hetmans, let alone promote anyone to that office"²⁵.

24 Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, 155.

25 Ibid.

Building the arsenal in an architectural style beloved by the Empress appears to be a symbolic move in line with these assumptions. The arsenal, designed by Karl Johann Speckle,²⁶ the architect of the Russian Empire's Army Corps of Engineers, was the biggest building in Kyiv. It represents powerful, structured classicism, although it bears some baroque features, such as the rounded corners, grandiose design of the portals, and the composition of the façade, which is based on the play of light and shade.²⁷ It was the first classicist-style building in the city, so it strongly contrasted with its surroundings. Designed and built visibly bigger than many other arsenals of the Russian Empire, the structure mirrored the imperial ambitions in the architecture of Kyiv, one of the main cities of the empire and the capital of the governorate.²⁸ From the very moment of its accession to the Tsardom of Russia in 1667, and subsequently to the Russian Empire in 1721, the city, due to its political and strategic significance, as well as historical past and connections to Kyivan Rus, attracted the special attention from the Russian government in its aims to connect it with the Russian world. Just like the churches built by Mazepa²⁹ were symbolic of the Ukrainian presence, so was the arsenal of the Russian Empire's. Olga Melnyk, the Head of the Museum Development department, states:

And we have every reason to assume that the Kyiv arsenal not only performed a strategic military function, but to some extent asserted an imperial presence in the former Hetmanate. The construction of buildings of this type emphasised the owner of these areas. So that no one could remember the former historical victories and the former greatness of the Hetmanate.³⁰

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- 26 The construction was carried out by the military engineer Charles de Chardon and completed in 1801 by Kyiv merchant Mykhailo Hryhorenko. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, "Mystetskyi Arsenal History", <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/history/> [accessed: 30.05.2022]. Kateryna Honcharova also mentions two other names connected to the erection of the building, the bricklayer Helmer and the local contractor Matvei Begichev. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, "Yak tse pratsiuie: Olha Melnyk ta Kateryna Honcharova pro arkhitekturu Mystetskoho arsenalu" ("How It Works: Olga Melnyk and Kateryna Honcharova on the Architecture of Mystetskyi Arsenal"), YouTube video, 38:23, 09 December 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkz7dnuY_6U [accessed: 11.05.2022].
- 27 Mystetskyi Arsenal, "Yak tse pratsiuie: 50 rokiv v Arsenali z Olenoiu Petrivnoiu Shevchenko", ("How It Works: 50 Years at the Arsenal with Olena Petrivna Shevchenko"), YouTube video, 10:15, 02 December 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2RKZ5L_IXsk [accessed: 30.05.2022].
- 28 Mystetskyi Arsenal, "Yak tse pratsiuie: Olha Melnyk ta Kateryna Honcharova".
- 29 Mazepa financed, among many others, the rebuilding of Saint Sophia Cathedral and the Epiphany Cathedral in Kyiv, as well as the construction of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. See: Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, 258–259.
- 30 Shkalyeva, "Chym ye Mystetskyi arsenal?"

The project was prepared soon after the erection of the arsenal in St. Petersburg (1763–1769 and 1770–1776).³¹ Architect Johann Valentin Tobias von Diedrichstein designed that building in 1762, but he left St. Petersburg four years later, and was replaced by Speckle, who finished the work according to the original project.³² Catherine II followed Peter I's idea of “making Russia a great power” by means of politics, diplomacy, and military coercion.³³ According to Zoe Andre Bekeeff, “[e]ven more than her famous predecessor, she established contacts abroad, invited foreigners to her court, and sent students abroad. Of all the arts, architecture was Catherine's special passion”.³⁴ Her taste in neoclassical architecture mirrored her ambitions of turning the Russian Empire into a land of reason and enlightenment. At the same time, her choice of the language of an architecture that draws from the ancient empires of Rome and Greece remains meaningful. It is no coincidence that Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin also preferred classicism to other styles. St. Petersburg's arsenal, just like the one in Kyiv, is rectangular in plan, with rounded corners and with a large rectangular interior court. It combines some baroque details, with neoclassical elements such as simple geometric forms, a grandeur of scale, and a use of columns creating dramatic effects. Speckle never visited Kyiv, so he simply used the design previously created for this type of military architecture³⁵ and his experience of working in St. Petersburg. Having no knowledge about the surrounding area, he placed the St. Petersburg-sized structure into the limited framework of the Kyiv Citadel, which resulted in building a fortification unit that is very vulnerable and easy to attack. Historian Kateryna Honcharova writes, “[i]t is not a fortress building. It is an urban building, it is a building in a city, not a building in a citadel”.³⁶

In the 19th century, the arsenal was transformed into a warehouse complex and lost its theoretically defensive role. Many of the entrance gates were disassembled, and the ramparts were cut to fix and develop streets, passages, and railroad tracks.³⁷ In 1941, the building was severely damaged. Its reconstruction started after World War II and lasted until the 1970s. During this time, but mainly in the 1940s and 1950s, some new structures were erected on the territory of the citadel – a firing range, a

31 Valentina Mikhailovna Belkovskaya and Olga Valeryevna Novikova, “Arsenal zdes samyi pri-mechatelnyi. K istorii sozdaniya Starogo Arsenalu v Sankt-Peterburge” (“The Arsenal Here is the Most Remarkable: On the History of the Old Arsenal in St. Petersburg”), *Klassika v Ispuskstve Skvoz Veka (The Classics in Art through the Ages)* 22, 2015, 101–105, here 104.

32 Ibid.

33 Zoe Andre Bekeeff, “The Development of Neo-Classic Architecture in Saint Petersburg”, honours thesis, Radcliffe College, 1944, 17.

34 Ibid.

35 Mystetskyi Arsenal, “Yak tse pratsiuie: Olha Melnyk ta Kateryna Honcharova”.

36 Ibid.

37 Mystetskyi Arsenal, “Archaeological Research”.

sanatory house, a club, and even a museum but none of those exist anymore.³⁸ The Soviet history of the arsenal remains under-researched and unrecognised. Melnyk states that “[i]t is a blank spot in historiography and source materials, because all the archives relating to the arsenal ended up in Moscow and Podolsk, where the Central Archive of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation is located. These documents are still marked ‘secret’”.³⁹

In 1979, the complex, with its adjoining territory, received the status of architectural and military engineering heritage but until the early 21st century, it was used for military and industrial needs.⁴⁰ It was handed over to the city of Kyiv in 2005,⁴¹ and this is when the history of the cultural institution begins. The complex was not officially opened until 2009, and had no toilets, floors, lighting, or heating. Today, the area covers 9.8 hectares, but only small parts of it were conserved, while most remain abandoned and partly destroyed due to the constant lack of funds. The operation of Mystetskyi Arsenal as an art centre goes hand in hand with the centre’s attempts to preserve and renew the whole grand area of the complex. The exhibition space is 60,000 square metres, but most of it stays unusable, and is continuously either under construction or unfinished, awaiting the funding that could allow the conservation works to fully begin and end. The space that is currently in use is the first floor and a part of the second floor, an area covering 12,000 square metres. In 2021, there were hopes for bigger infrastructural reconstruction, but due to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, all plans have been suspended.

The Transformational Space of the Art Centre: New Exhibitions’ Narratives and Decolonising Practices

In 2007, Mystetskyi Arsenal was opened to visitors, while construction continued. Before its official grand opening in 2009, it hosted some events for external organisations such as GOGOLfest,⁴² the Museum of Contemporary Art – Laboratory-Im-

38 Mystetskyi Arsenal, “Yak tse pratsiuie: 50 rokiv”.

39 Mystetskyi Arsenal, “Yak tse pratsiuie: Olha Melnyk ta Kateryna Honcharova”.

40 During the Cold War, the arsenal became a place for producing high-precision equipment. See: *Ibid.*

41 In the early 2000s, the arsenal was one of many derelict outbuildings and was being used by the state for military-industrial purposes. It is still a state enterprise and is controlled by the Ministry of Culture.

42 International Festival of Contemporary Art GOGOLfest, 07–14 September 2007, Kyiv, Ukraine.

provisation,⁴³ and two solo shows of Ukrainian artists.⁴⁴ Mystetskyi Arsenal's first official project as a state art centre was an exhibition of Ukrainian art, *De Profundis*, in 2009. Initially, the programme was based mainly on big cross-sectional eclectic shows of traditional and contemporary art in all their themes and forms, international and Ukrainian. The programme covered pretty much everything, and a clear thematic line was missing. Although there were various events called 'fair', 'salon', and 'biennale', they were more entertaining than issue-specific or critical. The reason for this lack of thematic direction was the massive need for the representation of art – both contemporary and antique – in Ukrainian public space, which in the 2010s remained very limited. The programming has gradually shifted since 2014, which indicates that it was not the change of Mystetskyi Arsenal's director that initiated the changes – Ostrovska-Lyuta took office in 2016. I believe that what influenced the transformation were the political events that took place in Ukraine between 2013 and 2014.

The year 2013 marked the colossal crisis of self-presentation for the institution. On 25 July, one day before the planned visit of President Viktor Yanukovich to the art centre, Mystetskyi Arsenal's director Zabolotna made a decision that cast a shadow over the ensuing years of both Mystetskyi Arsenal and her own professional career. The director decided to censor a work by Volodymyr Kuznetsov of the R.E.P. (Revolutionary Experimental Space) group entitled *Koliivschina: Judgement Day*, a mural commissioned by Mystetskyi Arsenal for the exhibition *Great and Grand* dedicated to the anniversary of the baptism of the Kyivan Rus. Koliivschina was an 18th-century uprising by Ukrainian peasants and Cossacks against the Polish nobility, Jewish population, and Catholic and Uniate clergy. The assessment of these events varies in Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian historiography, but Kuznetsov addresses the uprising to illustrate the relations between the oppressed and the oppressors – the victims of corruption and lawlessness in Ukraine versus the Russian Orthodox Church and the oligarchs. Oleksiy Radynski, an activist and filmmaker, responded by saying:

These include Chernobyl emergency workers who died of cancer in their thousands, ignored by the government, and Irina Krashkova, whose savage rape and beating by two police officers this summer sparked protest marches and has become a symbol of police impunity. Kuznetsov represents the burning Chernobyl reactor as the gaping mouth of hell on the Day of Judgment, familiar from reli-

43 An exhibition of works by the finalists of the competition *Museum of Contemporary Art – Laboratory – Improvisation*, 18–27 May 2007.

44 An exhibition of works by Alexander Pechora and Alexander Zhukovsky, *Southern Colors*, 05–30 March 2008; and a photo project by Maxim Afanasyev, *Landscapes*, 01–20 April 2008.

gious art, with priests, judges and other contemporary figures half submerged in it.⁴⁵

Koliivschina was painted over with black paint, an act that caused protests, critical comments from the art world, a lawsuit from Kuznetsov, and the resignations of the curator Oleksandr Soloviov and Kateryna Stukalova, an editor of the magazine *Art Ukraine* (a publication led by Zabolotna). Furthermore, there was a boycott of the second Kyiv Biennale planned in Mystetskyi Arsenal for the following year and the ‘cancellation’ of Zabolotna from the art scene in Ukraine⁴⁶ – even though she continued to be Mystetskyi Arsenal’s director until 2017. In an interview with me, Alisa Lozhkina, a Mystetskyi Arsenal curator, stated:

It was a massive scandal, and everybody was traumatised. It was excruciating for all of us. It was a mistake and obviously huge reputational damage to the institution. However, the institution continued to exist, and the reason why the issue wasn’t solved quickly, was because the revolution and war started almost immediately. And when there’s war in your country, you don’t think that much about the nuances.⁴⁷

As it was widely referred to, the censorship scandal exposed the political connections of Mystetskyi Arsenal, a state art centre. As is often the case, the top management of state institutions is linked to the ruling parties, which in Ukraine in 2013 was the pro-Russian Party of Regions. Russian President Vladimir Putin and the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, came to Kyiv to participate in the celebrations of the anniversary of the baptism of the Kyivan Rus, which was to symbolise the brotherhood of the Russian and Ukrainian nations – the premise on which Putin based his reasoning and justification of the array of events to come in just a couple of months: the annexation of Crimea, the war in the Donbas, and, subsequently, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Zabolotna ruined her career and Mystetskyi Arsenal’s good name in fear of the reaction of pro-Russian president and oligarch Yanukovich, and the Russian Orthodox Church⁴⁸ to the artwork, which criticised the symbiosis of “regime and church”.⁴⁹ The symbiosis is indeed robust and reaches

45 Oleksiy Radynski, “A Storm in a Paint Pot”, *openDemocracy*, 01 October 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/storm-in-paint-pot/> [accessed: 20.02.2024].

46 Richard Solash, “Ukrainian Museum Director Destroys Critical Painting Ahead of President’s Visit”, *Radio Free Europa / Radio Liberty*, last modified 26 July 2013, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-art-destroyed-kuznetsov-kievian-rus-yanukovich/25058261.html> [accessed: 20.02.2024].

47 Alisa Lozhkina, interview with the author, online, 11 May 2022.

48 See footnote 1.

49 Radynski, “A Storm in a Paint Pot”.

far back. In 1674, the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra published what Serhii Plokyh names “one of the most influential texts of the premodern Russian Empire, the first printed ‘text-book’ of Rus’ history”.⁵⁰ In *Synopsis, or a Brief Compendium of Various Chronicles About the Origin of the Slavo–Russian Nation and the First Princes of the Divinely Protected City of Kyiv and the Life of the Holy, Pious Grand Prince of Kyiv and All Rus’, the First Autocrat, Volodymyr*, Kyiv is presented as the Muscovite tsars’ first capital and Muscovite Orthodoxy’s birthplace.⁵¹ The authors of the text, including the Lavra’s archimandrite Inokentii Gizel, further argue that the Slavic–Russian nation united Muscovy and the Cossack Hetmanate “in one political body”, creating a myth of the Kyivan origin of the Russian nation.⁵² The myth manufactured by the Lavra’s monks will have long-lasting consequences, including Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.⁵³

According to Radynski, the censorship scandal disclosed

[T]he dilemma of the Ukrainian political elite, whose whole life is a balancing act between “Western values” and “traditional Orthodox spirituality”, with all that that implies. Nothing unusual in that – Ukraine has after all traditionally straddled two cultures. On the one hand, it can’t disappoint the West, which in this case means ambitious, if risky, artistic projects and the creation of a cohort of “Young Ukrainian Artists” with an international reputation. On the other hand, it can’t afford to offend the Kremlin.⁵⁴

The long history of Ukraine’s colonial entanglements with Russia, including the place of the Orthodox church in it, reached its symbolic peak. In November 2013, the Maidan Revolution started in Kyiv, followed by the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the beginning of the war in the Donbas in April, and the creation of the separatist Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics in the following month.⁵⁵ It was then, in 2014–2015, when Mystetskyi Arsenal’s curatorial programme entered a completely new stage, distinguishing three clear programmatic lines.

The first line is based on rediscovering the key figures of Ukrainian art from the last three decades, the decades of independence and transformation, a time that brought economic collapse, unemployment, inflation, currency devaluation, and privatisation, but also the birth of the independent Ukrainian state in 1991,

50 Plokyh, *The Gates of Europe*, 143.

51 *Ibid.*, 144.

52 *Ibid.*

53 See, for example: Kristaps Andrejsons, “Russia and Ukraine are Trapped in Medieval Myths”, *Foreign Policy*, 06 February 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/06/russia-and-ukraine-a-re-trapped-in-medieval-myths/> [accessed: 20.02.2024].

54 Radynski, “A Storm in a Paint Pot”.

55 Both republics were annexed by Russia in September 2022 during the full-scale Russian invasion in Ukraine.

with its own currency, flag, and constitution. It was also a time of the emergence of new communities of artists who, through collaboration and the discovery of novel techniques and themes, contributed to the decolonisation of Ukrainian contemporary art. Exhibitions from this line of programming include presentations of the work of Ukrainian artists such as Oleksandr Hnylytsky or Oleg Holosiy.⁵⁶ In the 1980s, both artists were the representatives of the Ukrainian New Wave, also known as the Ukrainian transavantgarde or Ukrainian neobaroque, and, in the 1990s, of the Parkomuna. Although they were undisputedly very important figures in Ukrainian art history, they remained marginalised. The programme board of Mystetskyi Arsenal decided to exhibit their works to include them in the narratives of contemporary Ukrainian art history.

The second programme line is represented by projects related to the 1920s, which also focus on the rediscovery and redefinition of Ukrainian cultural heritage. In the 1920s, revolutionary artistic practices met the utopia of the Soviet system. It was also a time of unique creative experiments by Ukrainian artists, who later became widely recognised as part of the so-called 'Russian' avant-garde. In 2016, the *MALEVICH+*⁵⁷ exhibition pointed to the fact that many of the key artists of the avant-garde were born in Ukraine or considered themselves Ukrainian (e.g., Kazimir Malevich, Alexander Archipenko, Vladimir Tatlin, Sonia Delaunay, Vasyi Yermilov, Alexander Bohomazov, Aleksandra Ekster, and David Burliuk) (Fig. 66).

The exhibition *Boychukism: Great Style Project*⁵⁸ (2017) focused on the figure of Mykhailo Boychuk and artists from his circle belonging to the generation of the so-called Executed Renaissance,⁵⁹ who were killed during the Great Purges of 1937 and had their artistic legacy destroyed (Fig. 67). *Futuromarennia*⁶⁰ (2021) was dedicated to Ukrainian Futurism, considered a distinct artistic phenomenon, with representatives such as Alexandra Ekster and the Burliuk brothers – David, Nikolai, and Vladimir (Fig. 68).

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- 56 *Oleksandr Hnylytskyi: The Reality of Illusion*, 23 February–26 March 2017. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, "Oleksandr Hnylytsky. Reality of Illusion", <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavka/oleksandr-hnylytsky-reality-of-illusion/> [accessed: 15.05.2022]; and *Oleg Holosiy Non-Stop Painting*, 13 June–11 August 2019. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, "Oleg Holosiy. Non-Stop Painting", <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavka/oleg-holosiy-non-stop-painting/> [accessed: 15.05.2022].
- 57 *MALEVICH+*, 9 June–7 August 2016. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, "MALEVICH+" <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavka/malevich/> [accessed: 15.05.2022].
- 58 *Boychukism: Great Style Project*, 7 December 2017–28 January 2018. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, "Boychukism. Great Style Project", <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavka/boychukism-great-style-project/> [accessed: 10.05.2022].
- 59 'Executed Renaissance' is a term used to describe the generation of Ukrainian artists and intelligentsia that were executed, exiled, disappeared, or committed suicide during the period of Soviet repression in the 1930s.
- 60 *Futuromarennia*, 15 October 2021–30 January 2022. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, "Futuromarennia", <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavka/futuromarennia-2/> [accessed: 10.05.2022].

Figure 66: MALEVICH+, *Mystetskyi Arsenal*, 09 June–09 August 2016



Image by Bohdan Poshyvailo, 2016. Image provided courtesy of Mystetskyi Arsenal.

Figure 67: *Boychukism: Great Style Project*



Image by Yevgen Nikiforov, 2018, shown at *Mystetskyi Arsenal*. Image provided courtesy of *Mystetskyi Arsenal*.

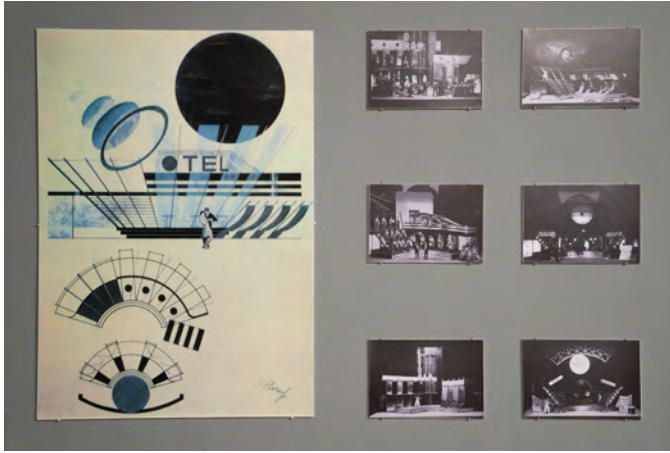
Figure 68: *Futuromarennia*

Image by Oleksandr Popenko, 2022. Image provided courtesy of Mystetskyi Arsenal.

The last programme line is devoted to the reinterpretation of the heritage of Ukrainian artists commonly regarded as folk or nonprofessional, such as exhibitions of work by Kateryna Bilokur,⁶¹ Maria Prymachenko,⁶² and Paraska Plytka-Horytsvit.⁶³ During the Soviet era, the myth of the Ukrainian village as the source and essence of Ukrainian culture was a construct that supported the colonisation processes. This deprecation affected both female artists and artists who considered themselves to be Ukrainian. Their work was relegated to the realm of folk and primitive art, a treatment also carried out on the Ukrainian language, which was perceived as a rural dialect of Russian.⁶⁴ Therefore, the reinterpretation of Ukrainian folk art became important in the processes of decolonisation. Works by Bilokur, Prymachenko, and Plytka-Horytsvit were presented in Mystetskyi Arsenal

61 *Kateryna Bilokur: I Want to Be an Artist!* 16 June–9 August 2015. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, “Kateryna Bilokur. I Want To Be An Artist!”, <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavka/kateryna-bilokur-i-want-to-be-an-artist/> [accessed: 01.05.2022].

62 *Maria Prymachenko: Boundless*, 9 February–13 March 2016. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, “Mariya Prymachenko. Boundless”, <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavka/mariya-prymachenko-boundless/> [accessed: 05.05.2022].

63 *Paraska Plytka-Horytsvit: Overcoming Gravity*, 17 October 2019–19 January 2020. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, “Paraska Plytka-Horytsvit. Overcoming Gravity”, <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavka/paraska-plytka-horytsvit-overcoming-gravity/> [accessed: 10.05.2022].

64 See, for example: Mykola Riabchuk, “Bila Shkira, Chorna Mova” (“White Skin, Black Language”), *Zbruč*, last modified 11 January 2021, <https://zbruc.eu/node/102635> [accessed: 12.09.2022].

as separate, unique, and modern artistic phenomena – not cheerful creativity by joyful peasants, as claimed by the narrative created by the Soviet regime.⁶⁵ Curators aimed to rediscover the much deeper dimension of the works and pay attention to the biographies of Ukrainian women and artists who chose to practise art in Ukrainian provinces during a period of turbulent historical and political circumstances.

All three lines of the new narratives present in the programming indicate the self-discovery practices – rediscovering, reinterpreting, but also accepting the past in its hybrid form – that are part of decolonising strategies.

Mystetskyi Arsenal during Wartime: Programming and Security after the Beginning of the Full-Scale Invasion

Futuromarennia was Mystetskyi Arsenal's last show before the full-scale Russian invasion. It was closed just weeks before 24 February 2022, and no further exhibition plans were made, as the art centre was expecting to start a general renovation. I find the title of the show somehow meaningful, as it translates to “dreams of the future”. These are the dreams of the futurists, whose works were presented in Mystetskyi Arsenal, the dreams of the cultural workers of the art centre about the development of the institution and further initiatives, and the dreams of the whole country – for a better future. Soon after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Kadi Polli, the director of Kumu Art Museum in Tallin, offered to present *Futuromarennia* in Estonia. As the geopolitical context has changed radically since the opening of the exhibition in Kyiv, the concept for the exhibition in Tallin was altered, and its focus was given to the continuity of the Russian aggression, colonisation, and appropriation, especially in the field of culture.⁶⁶ In an interview with me, Arsenal's curator Natasha Chychasova said that “it was a gesture of solidarity on the part of Estonian colleagues who wanted to educate their audiences about Ukrainian culture while, at the same time, protecting its heritage”.⁶⁷

Ukrainian cultural heritage has been severely destroyed during the Russian invasion; some of the most notable destructions include the Ivankiv Museum, which was home to artworks by Prymachenko; the Hryhorii Skovoroda Memorial Museum; Polina Rayko's house in Oleshky, flooded after the destruction of Nova Kakhovka

65 “The new image of Soviet Ukraine was communicated through the perspective of an agrarian, rural nation with fertile lands and happy creative peasants”. Tetiana Zhmurko, “Naïve (Un)Freedom: On the Oeuvre of Maria Prymachenko and Kateryna Bilokur”, trans. Taras Shulha, in: Kateryna Iakovlenko (ed.), *Why There Are Great Women Artists in Ukrainian Art*, Kyiv: PinchukArtCentre, 2019, 40–51, here 46.

66 Natasha Chychasova, interview with the author, online, 18 July 2023.

67 Ibid.

Dam; and the Drama Theatre in Mariupol, which was bombed while sheltering hundreds of people inside.⁶⁸ Mystetskyi Arsenal formed a rescue team already in 2014, and its members began taking practical measures to protect artefacts in case of full-scale invasion in the last weeks of 2021. Chychasova says:

At the beginning of 2023, the museum items started to be packed and prepared for evacuation to the temporary storage facility, where they were moved soon after the attack on Kyiv on February 24th. The content of the evacuated collection as well as the place where they are stored remains undisclosed due to security reasons.⁶⁹

The art objects are kept in multiple storage facilities to lower the risk of destruction. Another form of protection is the digitisation of Mystetskyi Arsenal's collection and documentation of contemporary artistic practices in Ukraine via the Ukraine Ablaze⁷⁰ project, initiated already in the first weeks of the full-scale invasion. The aim is to collect on a regular basis artefacts reflecting current events and experiences, and to spread these images as wide as possible. Thereafter, the works created as a response to the events of spring 2014 – the beginning of the war in the Donbas, the annexation of Crimea, the creation of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics – as well as artefacts fabricated after, will begin to be included in the archive. In doing so, Mystetskyi Arsenal emphasises the continuity of war and centres the observations of the transformations in artistic language and narratives present in cultural production. Safety precautions are taken for artefacts as well as people. Since the Mystetskyi Arsenal team decided to continue their work, a fully-fledged bomb shelter has been prepared in the building.

After the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, it became even more difficult for Mystetskyi Arsenal to receive funding: on the one hand, state support was never sufficient; on the other, the status of Mystetskyi Arsenal as a state institution hinders the art centre from applying for many grants. In addition, Mystetskyi Arsenal's income opportunities have declined during the full-scale war. Priorities have also changed – instead of investments into programme developments, the main challenge now became to sustain the institution and its functioning, including costs such as salaries, security, and the protection of the vast territory of Mystetskyi Arse-

68 Amnesty International, "Ukraine: Deadly Mariupol Theatre Strike 'a Clear War Crime' by Russian Forces – New Investigation", 30 June 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/06/ukraine-deadly-mariupol-theatre-strike-a-clear-war-crime-by-russian-forces-new-investigation/> [accessed: 02.02.2024].

69 Chychasova, interview with the author.

70 For more on the Ukraine Ablaze project, see: Ukraine Ablaze, official website, <https://ukraineeablaze.art/> [accessed: 10.02.2024].

nal and its art collection.⁷¹ In the first months of the full-scale invasion, Mystetskyi Arsenal lost one of its core components – visitors. It was a time to readapt, as the institution was still needed, if not for the audience, then for the professional circles of cultural workers.⁷²

Initially, the art centre expanded its online activities, as well as its international presence, by organising and taking part in actions and interventions in public spaces of various European cities. Soon, however, it became clear that Mystetskyi Arsenal wanted to continue its work as a place of exposition, dialogue, and interaction with visual objects. *An Exhibition about Our Feelings*⁷³ opened in June 2022 and was aimed at the difficult task of addressing the ambivalence of emotions, thoughts, and experiences present during the first weeks of the war. Anna Pohribna, the Deputy Director of Programming, mentions that the exposition was designed in a way to make it easy to take down immediately in case of a threat – it was relatively small and the presented artworks could be dismantled quickly.⁷⁴ In the second wartime exhibition, the *Heart of Earth*,⁷⁵ the Mystetskyi Arsenal team decided to give a broader picture of the situation, acknowledging the importance of Ukrainian soil and its place within the global food security system, while also reflecting on historical associations, specifically the terror of the human-made famine in the 1930s, the Holodomor.

The last project carried out at Mystetskyi Arsenal at the time of writing this text was *Forms of Presence*,⁷⁶ which, again, as in the case of *An Exhibition about Our Feelings*, deals directly with the war and its destructive power affecting both the physical, external world as well as the inner, less materially tangible, ways of daily operating. Just as with the first event, security issues for both people and artworks were a priority, so the scale and technical side of the project were adjusted accordingly. Pohribna

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- 71 Mystetskyi Arsenal, “Spilnota Mystetskoho arsenalu: yak hromadska orhanizatsiia mozhe pidtrymuvaty instytuttsiiu. Iryna Bilan” (“Art Arsenal Community: How a Non-Governmental Organisation Can Support an Institution. Iryna Bilan”), YouTube video, 18:10, 15 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTxgwHH87b4> [accessed: 15.02.2024].
- 72 Mystetskyi Arsenal, “Prohramna robota instytuttsii: vidpovidi na vyklyky 2022-ho. Anna Pohribna” (“Programmatic Work of the Institution: Responses to the Challenges of 2022. Anna Pohribna”), YouTube video, 40:06, 10 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7EnTykkYoA> [accessed: 15.02.2024].
- 73 *An Exhibition About Our Feelings*, 10 June–21 August 2022. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, “An Exhibition about Our Feelings,” <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavka/an-exhibition-about-our-feelings/> [accessed: 10.02.2024].
- 74 Mystetskyi Arsenal, “Prohramna robota instytuttsii”.
- 75 *Heart of Earth*, 25 November 2022–28 February 2023. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, “Heart of Earth,” <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavka/heart-of-earth/> [accessed: 30.01.2024].
- 76 *Forms of Presence*, 20 April–30 July 2023. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, “Forms of Presence,” <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavka/forms-of-presence/> [accessed: 30.01.2024].

describes how there was a need to formulate numerous plans B and accelerate the whole process of exhibition making.⁷⁷

Ukrainian energy infrastructure was repeatedly bombed, so it was impossible to predict whether the art centre would have light or how these attacks would influence the work of Mystetskyi Arsenal's partners responsible for printing informational materials or producing the technical infrastructure of the exhibition. The financing was also under question until the late stages of preparation, so the team decided to do as much as possible through their own efforts and to abandon the transportation of artworks that were not in Ukraine. Ostrovska-Lyuta says that the general rule of operation is to be fully flexible and quickly adjust to the changing and unpredictable circumstances.⁷⁸ The 'physicality' of those experiences is what the project addressed.

The concept of the exhibition was based on Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's idea of presence, "a moment of feeling time, a spatial relationship with the world and objects – something tangible".⁷⁹ As war brings the opposite – absence, destruction, loss, and death – presence is a choice to create and preserve material things – physical objects – that testify to the war solely through their existence, as well as through associated stories and memories. The physicality of the once well-known environment differs, as home might not feel safe anymore, or it may even cease to exist. Daily routes change. New safe spaces are created, and alternative definitions of safety and comfort emerge. The geographical (physical) conditions have changed too. There are places one cannot reach any more: those that are destroyed, annexed, or occupied; those that are no longer safe; and those that are shelled, flooded, or contaminated. They all form a new geography.

Next-Door Space: The Mala Gallery

Mystetskyi Arsenal's display area covers 60,000 square metres in the main building, but there's more. I purposefully have yet to mention the Mala Gallery,⁸⁰ designed

77 Mystetskyi Arsenal, "Prohramna robota instytutsii".

78 Mystetskyi Arsenal, "Mystetskyi arsenal: misii instytutsii ta zavdannia upravlintsiv. Olesia Ostrovska-Liuta" ("Mystetskyi Arsenal: The Mission of the Institution and the Tasks of Managers. Olesia Ostrovska-Liuta"), YouTube video, 26:58, 08 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QLb1kaUU4I&list=PLtj25ZLjRgOs4f9OZm8NbNoKcRrpiFU1F> [accessed: 20.02.2024].

79 Natasha Chychasova, "Forms of Presence", in: Anastasia Garazd and Andrii Myroshnychenko (eds.), *Ukraina v ohni/Ukraine Ablaze*, Kyiv: Mystetskyi Arsenal, 2023, 92–93, here 92, <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavky/vydannijj/ukrayina-v-ogni-ukraine-ablaze-2/> [accessed: 10.02.2024].

80 The full name is the Laboratory of Contemporary Art "Mala Gallery of the Mystetskyi Arsenal".

as a space for experimentation, cooperation, the stimulation of creative processes, support for emerging artists, and the facilitation of new projects.⁸¹ The ‘small’ gallery, located on 28 Lavrska Street, a two-minute walk from Mystetskyi Arsenal, does not ‘physically’ belong to Mystetskyi Arsenal’s architectural complex. Mala Gallery shares a space with the institution’s offices on the ground floor of a building from the late 1950s–early 1960s, the so-called Stalinka,⁸² that in Soviet times served as a dormitory for factory employees. Mala Gallery was closed after 24 February 2022, just like other art institutions in Ukraine. Chychasova, who oversees the space and its programme, recalls Mystetskyi Arsenal’s decision to initiate the first artistic project after the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the processual collaborative series of exhibitions entitled *One with the Other: Spatial Dialogues*:

In May 2022, it still didn’t seem like the right time for exhibitions, but we decided to open the Mala Gallery anyway. The first exhibition was offered to Inga Levi and Tamara Turlyun.^[83] We opened the gallery for the first time since February 24th when they came to look at the space. Everything was the same – empty walls, Taras’s^[84] texts and his photo – but we perceived it in an entirely different way. Inga and Tamara said that they really felt everything written in those texts because they were literally about reassembling the selves, about finding hope – and we decided to leave them. This is how the idea of dialogues appeared – dialogues in which, in addition to a conversation between two people, there is a conversation with the space and the previous artistic work.⁸⁵

The series of six dialogues–exhibitions was presented throughout 2022 and 2023, and the project is ongoing. Each participating artist is asked to interact with an artefact from the previous exhibition. Thus, the space has not been changed since

81 For more, see: Mystetskyi Arsenal, “Laboratory of Contemporary Art”, <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/laboratories/laboratory-of-contemporary-art/> [accessed: 12.02.2024].

82 ‘Stalinka’ is a colloquial name for apartment buildings built in the USSR from the early 1930s to early 1960s, mainly in Stalin’s Empire Style.

83 *One with the Other: Spatial Dialogues; Inga Levi and Tamara Turlyun*, 3–24 November 2022. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, “Mala Gallery of the Mystetskyi Arsenal Is Opening a New Project”, <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/povidomlennya/mala-gallery-of-the-mystetskyi-arsenal-is-opening-a-new-project/> [accessed: 12.02.2024].

84 Chychasova is referring to a previous exhibition: *Taras Bychko: Close*, 8 February–6 April 2022. The exhibition was closed due to the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, “‘Close’: Project by Taras Bychko in the Mala Gallery of the Mystetskyi Arsenal”, <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/povidomlennya/close-project-of-taras-bychko-in-the-mala-gallery-of-the-mystetskyi-arsenal/> [accessed: 12.02.2024].

85 Natasha Chychasova and Asia Tsisar, “A Conversation about Presence”, in: Anastasia Garazd and Andrii Myroshnychenko (eds.), *Ukraina v ohni/Ukraine Ablaze*, Kyiv: Mystetskyi Arsenal, 2023, 24–33, here 32, <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavky/vydannij/ukrayina-v-ogni-ukrain-ablaze-2/> [accessed: 01.06.2024].

24 February 2022, marking the moment that will linger forever for those who experienced it firsthand. Each intervention creates a conversation with what is indelible and contributes to forming a language that speaks of the same experience using different means of expression. The gallery became a tangible space of experimentation and conversation that responds to events happening in real time, the new space–time created after the beginning of the full-scale war.

Conclusions

Mystetskyi Arsenal, built as a symbol of Russian imperialism in Ukrainian territories, became a space for transitional artistic activities and experienced massive shifts in exhibition narratives after the political events of 2013 and 2014, including Russian aggression in Ukraine. The focus of art exhibitions shifted towards building memories and the postcolonial rediscovery and reshaping of history, with particular attention devoted to the Ukrainian avant-garde, reshaping the understanding of Ukrainian ‘folk’ artists, and the period of transformation of the 1990s. I propose that this shift can be named a postcolonial turn – a phenomenon based on healing and the acceptance of history, as well as of the past in its hybrid form, without the imposition of imperial or national patterns. In my opinion, these are the signs of a transition to postcoloniality (instead of neocoloniality), and further to the decolonial option via processes of self-discovery, healing, acceptance of a difficult past, and rewriting imperially imposed narratives of Russian (imperial and Soviet) domination.

The very name *postcolonialism* can give the impression that this is the stage where all the strings that today attach to the colonial past should be cut, and a new world should emerge. The unresolved past, however, along with the refusal to “remember and recognise its continuity with the pernicious malaise of colonisation”,⁸⁶ is causing a prolonged stage of postcolonial convalescence. Therefore, the first step to healing is to remember and acknowledge past events, to analyse mechanisms of historiography and the way the reception of history is shaped by those with power, and to go through the painful processes of self-discovery to finally decolonise both knowledge and memory. The change should come from understanding and healing, as well as from appreciation of history and culture, in contrast to the inferiority and peripheral complex stemming from the imperially imposed idea of a more prestigious Russian culture and language.

The symbolic, even if accidental, presence of the Lavra, whose history reaches back to the times of Kyivan Rus and the Cossack baroque, next to Mystetskyi Arsenal adds to the complexity of postcolonial entanglements, especially in the face

86 Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, 7.

of Moscow's Patriarchate's engagement in the war in Ukraine, and the centuries-long involvement of the Lavra's monks in pro-Russian activities. Mystetskyi Arsenal's walls bear imperial and Soviet history, critically addressed in the art centre's exhibition programme. The building's military and propagandistic functions were changed into the mission of protecting and preserving knowledge, artefacts, the museum collection, and cultural heritage, including the whole Mystetskyi Arsenal complex itself and, currently, during the full-scale Russian invasion, the physical and symbolic space of discourse about building a safe space under new conditions, while facing the disappearance of a world once known. The institution aims to promote the Ukrainian voice in the international art scene, to convey and shape ideas, and to be an active participant as well as transmitter of voices and narratives. As Ostrovska-Lyuta says,

It became important to see our ability as a society and professional community to understand what is happening to us. It is very difficult to reflect on reality, to come up with some ideas or interpretations in the situation of such extreme stress. [...] Such a situation reduces our horizon of thinking greatly. Therefore, the mission of the cultural institution will be to constantly extend that horizon of thinking.⁸⁷

Mystetskyi Arsenal not only tries to reflect on current events (e.g., *An Exhibition about Our Feelings, Forms of Presence*, and *One with the Other: Spatial Dialogues*) or to find a broader conceptual frame for them (e.g., *Heart of Earth*). Most importantly, Mystetskyi Arsenal still exists, the team still works, and that physical presence is symbolic in sustaining Ukrainian resistance in the field of culture.

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