

Natasha Klimenko,  
Miglė Bareikytė,  
Viktoriya Sereda (eds.)

# Images and Objects of Russia's War against Ukraine

[transcript]

Forum Transregionale Studien - Dossiers

Natasha Klimenko, Miglė Bareikytė, Viktoriya Sereda (eds.)  
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## Editorial

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Natasha Klimenko, Miglė Bareikytė, Viktoriya Sereda (eds.)

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### **2/2022**

Alshaar, Nuha, Beate Ulrike La Sala, Jenny Rahel Oesterle, and Barbara Winckler (eds.), *The Humanities in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Arab World and Germany*, Dossiers, Forum Transregionale Studien, 2/2022, Berlin 2022. Open Access: [https://perspectivia.net/receive/pnet\\_mods\\_00005616](https://perspectivia.net/receive/pnet_mods_00005616)

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Alshaar, Nuha, Beate Ulrike La Sala, Jenny Rahel Oesterle, and Barbara Winckler (eds.), *Al-insānīāt fī 'l-qarn al-ḥādī wa 'l-'ashrīn: wiḡhāt nazar min al-'ālam al-'arabī wa almānīā*, Dossiers, Forum Transregionale Studien, 3/2022, Berlin 2022. Open Access: [https://perspectivia.net/receive/pnet\\_mods\\_00005617](https://perspectivia.net/receive/pnet_mods_00005617)

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# On Images and Objects of Russia's War against Ukraine: An Introduction

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Miglė Bareikytė, Natasha Klimenko and Viktoriya Sereda

“The war of images is perhaps one of the major events of the end of the twentieth century”, writes Serge Gruzinski in the introduction to his book, *Images at War*.<sup>1</sup> The same year the book was published, 2001, two planes crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York. “Like no media event before, 9/11 became a shared point of reference for a global public, notwithstanding the different interpretations and positions it called forth”, reflected a panel discussion at Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen der Welt in 2011.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, beginning around this point (the late 2000s–early 2010s), with the proliferation of multiple social media platforms, developing in parallel with easy-to-use recording devices and increasing access to smartphones and the internet, most, if not all, major world events and conflicts have been documented and shared from a plurality of sources as they took place, creating the feeling of real-time and fragmented temporalities.<sup>3</sup> For instance, the Arab Spring, starting in Tunisia in December 2010, spread via social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter (now X) not only through connective action<sup>4</sup> but also its documentation. Similarly, the Syrian Archive (now part of the umbrella organisation Mnemonic) was founded in 2014 to

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- 1 Serge Gruzinski, “Introduction”, *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner (1492–2019)*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001, 2.
  - 2 Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Forum Transregionale Studien, and Stiftung Zukunft Berlin, “The Power of Images”, panel with Luca Giuliani, James Der Derian, Ibrahim Helal, Sinan Antoon, Tom Holert, and Cristina Nord, from the conference *Ten Years of 9/11*, 28–29 May 2011, [https://www.hkw.de/media/texte/pdf/2011\\_2/programm\\_3/10jahre911/zehn\\_jahre\\_9\\_11.pdf](https://www.hkw.de/media/texte/pdf/2011_2/programm_3/10jahre911/zehn_jahre_9_11.pdf) [accessed: 16.08.2024].
  - 3 Miglė Bareikytė and Yarden Skop, “Archiving the Present. Critical Data Practices During Russia’s War in Ukraine”, *Sociologica* 16/2, special issue *Memory under Fire: Data Practices During Russia’s War in Ukraine*, 2022, 199–215, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/15361> [accessed: 18.08.2024].
  - 4 Lance W. Bennet and Alexandra Segerberg, “The Logic of Connective Action”, *Information, Communication & Society* 12/5, 2012, 739–768, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661> [accessed: 19.08.2024].

collect documentation from the Syrian protests and the ensuing civil war.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, during the Euromaidan protests in Kyiv, starting in November 2013, social and legacy media platforms spread images and videos of the events including live streams.<sup>6</sup> Darker trends also emerged, such as the extremist group ISIS's use of social media to circulate ideological and violent content.<sup>7</sup>

In the third decade of the 21st century, these tendencies are escalating. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has swiftly spread through both social and traditional media. Data, including visual data, about the war rapidly expanded through digital infrastructures on a global scale. Media journalist Kyle Chayka has even called this "the first TikTok war", pointing to the dispersion of records of the war across new platforms.<sup>8</sup> Visual evidence has been used to show the experiences of the war, or, in cases of Russian propaganda and disinformation, to dispute and obfuscate them.<sup>9</sup>

Tensions between the digital and material have also appeared. On Instagram, for example, the Ukrainian art historian Asia Bazdyrieva documented the first months of the war in photographs taken on her phone and through screenshots of a diary recorded on her notes app. On 15 April 2022, she wrote, "I was numb when a fancy art magazine published a piece where a person from the west said that this is 'a simulacra [sic!] of a war' 'it is way too mediated' it is 'a war that has not happened'".<sup>10</sup> Two days earlier, on 13 April, Dean Kissick had written in *Spike*: "The simulacra of war grow weirder and weirder. War feels like a video game when you're watching, as

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- 5 Dia Kayyali, "Digital Memory, Evidence, and Social Media: Lessons Learned from Syria", *Sociologica* 16/2, special issue *Memory under Fire: Data Practices During Russia's War in Ukraine*, 2022, 253–259, <https://sociologica.unibo.it/article/view/15383/14820> [accessed: 16.08.2024].
  - 6 Tetyana Bohdanova, "Unexpected Revolution: The Role of Social Media in Ukraine's Euromaidan Uprising", *European View* 13/1, 2014, 133–142, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-014-0296-4> [accessed: 16.08.2024]; and Megan MacDuffee Metzger and Joshua A. Tucker, "Social Media and EuroMaidan: A Review Essay", *Slavic Review* 76/1, 169–191, <https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2017.16> [accessed: 16.08.2024].
  - 7 See, for example: Jarred Prier, "Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare", *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 11/4, 2017, 50–85.
  - 8 Kyle Chayka, "Watching the World's 'First TikTok War'", *The New Yorker*, 03 March 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/watching-the-worlds-first-tiktok-war> [accessed: 16.08.2024].
  - 9 For example, see: Reality Check and BBC Monitoring, "Bucha killings: Satellite image of bodies site contradicts Russian claims", *BBC*, 11 April 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/60981238> [accessed: 16.08.2024]; and Marianna Spring, "Marianna Vyshemirsky: 'My picture was used to spread lies about the war'", *BBC*, 17 May 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-61412773> [accessed: 16.08.2022].
  - 10 @asiabazdyrieva (Äsän), "Numb", Instagram post, 15 April 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcYmZhWtppW/> [accessed: 18.08.2024].

I am, artillery strikes filmed by drones in the sky then posted with an upbeat hypnagogic pop soundtrack; a vaporwave song for a vaporwave war".<sup>11</sup> Such debates recall Susan Sontag's critique of Jean Baudrillard and the hyper-constructivist perspectives on war mediation. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag wrote:

[W]ho claims to believe that images, simulated realities, are all that exist now; it seems to be something of a French specialty [...]. It is common to say that war, like everything else that appears to be real, is *mediatique* [...]. It is often asserted that "the West" has increasingly come to see war itself as a spectacle [...]. To speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism. It universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond the direct experience of pain and destruction during wars, suffering has been constructed through various media technologies for those who have not been in the direct conflict zones. The representation of the experience of war – war witnessing – has changed and corresponded to the development of various media technologies, as Susan Sontag,<sup>13</sup> John Ellis,<sup>14</sup> Lilie Chouliaraki,<sup>15</sup> Stuart Allan,<sup>16</sup> or Wendy Kozol<sup>17</sup> have pointed out. The witnessing of wars, including Russia's war against Ukraine, and its research – which we continue with the contributions to this volume – have been carried out by scholars, activists, cultural workers, and journalists<sup>18</sup> and have intensified in the present moment where multiple wars coincide with increased access to and consumption of digital technologies and platforms.

11 Dean Kissick, "The Downward Spiral Did Not Take Place", *Spike*, 13 April 2022, <https://www.spikeartmagazine.com/articles/the-downward-spiral-did-not-take-place> [accessed: 18.08.2024].

12 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London: Picador, 2017, 140–141.

13 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

14 John Ellis, "Mundane Witness", in: Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski (eds.), *Media Witnessing*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 73–88.

15 Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2006; and Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

16 Stuart Allan, *Citizen Witnessing: Revisioning Journalism in Times of Crisis*, Cambridge: Polity, 2013.

17 Wendy Kozol, *Distant Wars Visible: The Ambivalence of Witnessing*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

18 For scholars, cultural workers, and journalists beyond this volume who work specifically on Ukraine and whose work has inspired us, see: Felix Ackermann, Asya Bazdyrieva, Vasili Cherepanyn, Olha Honchar, Mykola Makhortykh, Natalia Otrishchenko, Ihor Poshyvailo, and Daria Tsymbalyuk. See also the organisations and initiatives: Bellingcat, Mnemonic, Civic Resilience Initiative, The Reckoning Project, Lviv Center for Urban History, Forensic Architecture, Center for Spatial Technologies, and many others.

Before Russia's full-scale invasion and more than two years after it, multiple conflicts and wars have been extensively recorded, and those records dispersed across social media.<sup>19</sup> Wars are physical and painful; their representations are pulled into the feeds of distant social media users and direct witnesses, and social media influencers, cultural producers, scholars, journalists, and unrelated bystanders contribute to the discourses around these wars. For over a year and a half, this has also and particularly been the case with Israel's war in Gaza.<sup>20</sup> Yet, as Chayka suggests, social media has changed drastically since Russia's February 2022 invasion: "Now the same platforms appear to be making conflicts hazier rather than clearer", as their algorithms have changed and facilitated mislabelling and disinformation.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, with the spread of widely available generative AI technologies and the misuse of contemporary media environments for strategic disinformation by authoritarian regimes like Russia,<sup>22</sup> the future of visualising war and conflict zones seems poised for more confusion and uncertainty.<sup>23</sup>

We therefore find ourselves, on the one hand, in a situation where historical media such as paintings, photographs, television reports, and films, and contemporary platform media – such as TikTok, Instagram, X, and YouTube – shape current forms of war experience, representation, documentation, and archiving. On the other hand, representations of suffering are challenged by practices of strategic disinformation. Contemporary environments of war witnessing, especially in the digital realm, are paradoxical: they are chaotic and ambiguous, but at the same time they aim to create an informative debate.

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19 See, for example, wars in Syria, Yemen, and Gaza, among others.

20 For an initial discussion, see, for example: Kyle Chayka, "How Social Media Abdicated Responsibility for the News", *The New Yorker*, 17 October 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/how-social-media-abdicated-responsibility-for-the-news> [accessed: 18.08.2024]. For opinion pieces by academics blogging on the topic, see, for example: Lee Edwards, "Reflecting on media coverage of the war in Israel and Gaza", *Media@LSE*, 20 December 2023, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2023/12/20/reflecting-on-media-coverage-of-the-war-in-israel-and-gaza/> [accessed: 18.08.2024]; and Adrian Daub, "All Eyes on Insta: On the dark side of worries about 'fake news', 'disinformation' and AI", *Dreams in the Which House*, Substack, 03 June 2024, <https://adriandaub.substack.com/p/all-eyes-on-insta> [accessed: 18.08.2024]. Finally, for early-stage data-analysis projects, see, for example: *The Israel–Hamas war on YouTube and TikTok*, Digital Methods Winter School and Data Sprint, University of Amsterdam, 8–12 January 2024, <https://www.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/WinterSchool2024IsraelHamasWar> [accessed: 18.08.2024].

21 Chayka, "How Social Media Abdicated Responsibility for the News".

22 Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia*, New York City: PublicAffairs, 2015.

23 Mykola Makhortyk and Miglė Bareikytė, "AI visions: Representing Russia's war against Ukraine for Humans and Machines", in: *Digital Wars*, edited volume, upcoming.

These digital practices, however, have mostly been preceded by material ones: destruction, murder, ideological attacks, and other forms of oppression. The war in Ukraine not only results in death and injury but also strikes on material culture, civilian infrastructures, and other spatial formations. These processes correspond to Russia's rhetoric and actions: the Russian regime denies Ukrainian sovereignty and its identity and culture, and targets not only 'military' infrastructure but also civilian and cultural sites.<sup>24</sup>

Massive and strategic destruction of civilian infrastructure during Russia's war against Ukraine includes the targeting of health, education, cultural, and energy infrastructure, such as the infamous bombings of the Mariupol hospital<sup>25</sup> and the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theatre in Mariupol,<sup>26</sup> the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam,<sup>27</sup> or the seizure of the Chernobyl<sup>28</sup> and Zaporizhzhya<sup>29</sup> nuclear power plants. Infrastructures are political, and they are targeted not only physically but also conceptually, misused as networks for spatial propaganda, as the fake reconstruction of the occupied and destroyed city of Mariupol in the style of a Potemkin village shows.<sup>30</sup> But targeting infrastructure can also be used to develop new politics of memory and to break out of unwanted dependencies, such as the

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- 24 For example, see: Timothy Snyder, "The War in Ukraine Is a Colonial War", *The New Yorker*, 28 April 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/essay/the-war-in-ukraine-is-a-colonial-war> [accessed: 18.08.2024]; and Natasha Klímenko, "Pulling Meaning Out of Matter: Reformations of Ukrainian Cultural Heritage", *post: notes on art in a global context*, 24 August 2022, <https://post.moma.org/pulling-meaning-out-of-matter-reformations-of-ukrainian-cultural-heritage/> [accessed: 18.08.2024].
- 25 Katie Polglasie, Gianluca Mezzofiore, and Livvy Doherty, "Anatomy of the Mariupol Hospital Attack", *CNN*, 17 March 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2022/03/europe/mariupol-maternity-hospital-attack/index.html> [accessed: 20.08.2024].
- 26 Lori Hinnant, Mstyslav Chernov, and Vasilisa Stepanenko, "AP evidence points to 600 dead in Mariupol Theater Airstrike", *The Associated Press*, 04 May 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-mariupol-theater-c321a196fbd568899841b506afcac7a1> [accessed: 20.08.2024].
- 27 James Glanz et al., "Why the Evidence Suggests Russia Blew Up the Kakhovka Dam", *The New York Times*, 16 June 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/06/16/world/europe/ukraine-kakhovka-dam-collapse.html> [accessed: 20.08.2024].
- 28 Laurence Peter, "Ukraine war: Chernobyl scarred by Russian troops' damage and looting", *BBC*, 03 June 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61685643> [accessed: 20.08.2024].
- 29 Agence France-Presse in Vienna, "Safety at Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant deteriorating, IAEA warns", *The Guardian*, 17 August 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/17/safety-at-ukraines-zaporizhzhia-nuclear-plant-deteriorating-iaea-warns> [accessed: 20.08.2024].
- 30 Alison Killing et al, "Inside Mariupol: Russia's new Potemkin village", *Financial Times*, 02 February 2024, <https://ig.ft.com/mariupol/> [accessed: 10.07.2024].

bombing of the Antonivka Road Bridge in Kherson to disrupt Russian supply lines<sup>31</sup> or Ukraine's unplugging of its energy infrastructure from the Soviet system in February 2022 and joining the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity in 2024.<sup>32</sup> Destroyed infrastructures can also be reconstructed and rebuilt. This requires not only the documentation and archiving of respected and well-known sites, cultural practices, and artefacts of the present to protect them from being potentially erased in the event of destruction, but also an awareness that the diversity of the precarious present, including minority cultures or uncomfortable monuments from the past, should be saved and secured for future discussions.

When turning to the past, Russia's invasion of Ukraine can be seen as the most recent iteration of Russian aggression towards Ukrainian identity and territory. Scholars like Timothy Snyder, for example, have placed the war in a longer history of Russian/Soviet violence.<sup>33</sup> The current intentional targeting of cultural and material heritage within Ukraine's borders<sup>34</sup> might appear as an echo of earlier violent events, such as the near-total purge of Ukrainian or Ukraine-based artists, writers, and cultural figures of the 1920s by the Stalinist regime.<sup>35</sup> The almost obsessive destruction of religious buildings (e.g., churches, synagogues, and mosques) and other symbolic spaces (e.g., cemeteries, monuments, and street names) by the Soviet government on the territory of Ukraine and other Soviet republics testified to the presence of unwanted groups or alternative memories and replaced them with the symbolic markers of a 'glorious' Russian–Soviet past.<sup>36</sup> This pattern has

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- 31 Tom Ambrose, Martin Belam, and Samantha Lock, "Russia Will not Take Donbas in 'Immediate Future', say Western Officials – as It Happened", *The Guardian*, 27 July 2022, [https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2022/jul/27/russia-ukraine-live-news-ukraine-attacks-key-kherson-bridge-in-bid-to-isolate-russian-forces?CMP=share\\_btn\\_url](https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2022/jul/27/russia-ukraine-live-news-ukraine-attacks-key-kherson-bridge-in-bid-to-isolate-russian-forces?CMP=share_btn_url) [accessed: 11.07.2024].
- 32 Aura Sabadu, "Wartime Ukraine's European Energy Integration Continues", *Atlantic Council*, 19 December 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/wartime-ukraines-european-energy-integration-continues/> [accessed: 19.07.2024].
- 33 For example: Snyder, "The War in Ukraine Is a Colonial War".
- 34 For example: Klimenko, "Pulling Meaning Out of Matter".
- 35 Bohdan Tokarsky, *The Un/Executed Renaissance: Ukrainian Soviet Modernism and Its Legacies*, Berlin: Forum Transregionale Studien, 2021, [https://perspectivia.net/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/pnet\\_derivate\\_00004810/Essay%20Bohdan%20Tokarsky\\_Open%20Access\\_A.pdf](https://perspectivia.net/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/pnet_derivate_00004810/Essay%20Bohdan%20Tokarsky_Open%20Access_A.pdf) [accessed: 19.08.2024].
- 36 Yaroslav Hrytsak and Victor Susak, "Constructing a National City: A Case of Lviv", in: John J. Czaplicka (ed.), *Composing Urban History and the Constitution of Civic Identities*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, 140–164; O.K. Mikheieva, "Sotsialnyy prostir mista: mozhlyvosti 'prochytuvannya' ta upravlinnya" ("Social Space of the City: Possibilities of Causation and Management"), *Zbirnyk naukovykh prats DonDUU: 'Sotsiologiya upravlinnya' (Collection of Scientific Works of the DonSUU: 'Sociology of Management')* 8/3 (80), 2007, 413–422; and Viktoriya Sereda, "Politics of Memory and Urban Landscape: The Case of Lviv after World War II", in:

been repeated on occupied territories of Ukraine since 2014 but now includes new forms. Among them are the outdoor advertising billboards analysed in our volume by Mykola Homanyuk. Similarly, the recent thefts from museums in the Kherson region as the Russian Army retreated<sup>37</sup> can be compared to the appropriation of items from Ukrainian museums and their storage in Russia following World War II and to this day, as Anna Aliyeva points out in her contribution in this volume.

The historical dimensions are also points of both resistance and occasional controversy. War and displacement have radically altered discussions (both in academia and in media outlets) about the memory, basic values, and politics of identity in the region (with some issues becoming less important or irrelevant, such as the Polish–Ukrainian ‘memory wars’,<sup>38</sup> and others becoming even more salient, such as the discussions around and processes of decommunisation and decolonisation<sup>39</sup>). Similarly, the experiences and myths of the Second World War have become the nodal point in historical discussions – in clashing representations of war by mass propaganda and in official discourses.<sup>40</sup> The war has also brought on a new stage of decommunisation and a rejection of Russian cultural heritage. In Ukrainian society

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Sean Dempsey and David Nichols (eds.), *Time, Memory, and Cultural Change*, Vienna: IWM, 2009, 1–17.

- 37 Oleksandr Yankovskyy and Olena Badyuk, “Vkradena kulturna spadshchyna: kudy okupanty vyvezly naitisinnishi muzeini eksponaty pivdnia Ukrainy?” (“Stolen Cultural Heritage: Where Did the Occupiers Take the Most Valuable Museum Exhibits of Southern Ukraine?”), *Radio Svoboda (Radio Liberty)*, 10 March 2024, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/novyny-pryazovya-vkradena-kulturna-spadshchyna-kudy-vyvozyat-okupanty-eksponaty/32853927.html> [accessed: 18.08.2024].
- 38 Andrii Portnov, *Poland and Ukraine: Entangled Histories, Asymmetric Memories*, Berlin: Forum Transregionale Studien, 2020, [https://perspectivia.net/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/pnet\\_derivate\\_00003948/PORTNOV\\_Essay%207\\_2020.pdf](https://perspectivia.net/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/pnet_derivate_00003948/PORTNOV_Essay%207_2020.pdf) [accessed: 20.08.2024].
- 39 For instance, see the list of articles compiled by the Ukrainian Institute: Ukrainian Institute, “Decolonization: Selected articles published in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine”, <https://ui.org.ua/en/sectors-en/decolonization-selected-articles-published-in-the-aftermath-of-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/> [accessed: 18.08.2024].
- 40 For example, see: Julie Fedor, Markku Kangaspuro, Jussi Lassila, and Tatiana Zhurzhenko, “Introduction: War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus”, in: Julie Fedor, Markku Kangaspuro, Jussi Lassila, and Tatiana Zhurzhenko (eds.), *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017; Volodymyr Kulyk, “Ukraine according to Zelensky: Populism and National Identity in Presidential Addresses to Compatriots”, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 30/3, 2024, 359–377; and Viktoriya Sereda, “Istoricheskiy diskurs i natsionalnoye proshloye v ofitsialnykh rechakh prezidentov Ukrainy i Rossii” (“Historical Discourse and the National Past in the Official Speeches of the Presidents of Ukraine and Russia”), in: Liudmila Drobizheva and Evhen Goglovakha (eds.), *Natsionalno-grazhdanskiye identichnosti i tolerantnost: Opyt Rossii i Ukrainy v period transformatsii (National and Civic Identities and Tolerances: A Survey of Russia and Ukraine during the Period of Transformation)*, Kyiv: Institut sotsiologii NAN Ukrainy, 2007, 69–96.

– and, beyond this, in ‘post-Soviet’ and Central and Eastern Europe spaces generally – debates rage over the meaning of monuments, architecture, and cultural heritage from the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. These debates have been occurring since at least after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. During several stages after Ukrainian independence, the country experienced the so-called ‘Leninopad’ (literally ‘Leninfall’), where statues of Lenin, as well as other monuments and architectural elements associated with the Soviet Union, were removed from public spaces.<sup>41</sup> Now, however, they are placed in the context of the full-scale invasion. Alongside this, ‘Pushkinopad’ – ‘Pushkinfall’ – started following February 2022.<sup>42</sup>

The war has also introduced new hard lines of identity within some historical perceptions as they relate to cultural and artistic figures and production. Yet, when looking at the 1920s, for example, literary scholar Bohdan Tokarsky writes:

[T]he concept of ‘Ukrainian Soviet’ points to the complex relationship between these two notions, as ‘Ukrainian’ and ‘Soviet’ were dynamic (bound up with the parallel processes of Ukrainisation and Sovietisation) and porous, mutually affecting each other during this time.<sup>43</sup>

But now, at times, and perhaps understandably, given the intensity and violence of the present moment, such complexity fades, to be replaced with narratives of distinct identities that are traced into the past. Similarly, in this framework, cultural production by Ukrainian Soviet artists at times also became targets of such decommunisation policies, with monumental works by such artists destroyed or left to decay<sup>44</sup> and the preservation of such work being made more difficult under conditions of war. Meanwhile, however, imperial heritage on the territory of Ukraine can also be reutilised and transformed in what might be termed a ‘postcolonial turn’, as has happened with the Mystetskyi Arsenal in Kyiv.<sup>45</sup>

41 Serhii Plokhii, “Goodbye Lenin: A Memory Shift in Revolutionary Ukraine”, *Digital Atlas of Ukraine*, Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University, <https://gis.huri.harvard.edu/files/leninfallpaper.pdf> [accessed: 18.08.2024].

42 Danylo Bilyk, “Pushkinopad v Ukraini” (“Pushkinfall in Ukraine”), *Deutsche Welle (German Wave)*, 23 November 2022, <https://www.dw.com/uk/puskinopad-v-ukraini-de-znosat-pama-tniki-rosijskomu-poetu-fotogalerea/a-63866461> [accessed: 20.08.2024].

43 Tokarsky, *The Un/Executed Renaissance*, 18.

44 For example, see: Yevgen Nikiforov, *Ukrainian Soviet Mosaics*, 2013–2021, <https://nikiforovyevgen.com/ukrainian-mosaics> [accessed: 19.08.2024]. Also see Natalia Revko’s chapter in this volume.

45 For the Mystetskyi Arsenal, see Ewa Sułek’s chapter in this volume. For further examples, see: *Odesa Decolonization*, project, <https://www.odesadecolonization.org/> [accessed: 20.08.2024]; and Dina Pletenchuk, “Dekolonizatsiya Odesy ta oblasti: pidbyttya pidsumkiv i novyy etap” (“Decolonisation of Odesa and the Region: Summary and a New Stage”), *Suspilne Odesa (Odesa*

Wars destroy individual lives, material cultures, and infrastructures. These processes are mediated, witnessed, and represented in the struggle for freedom from an occupying and destructive force – in this case Russia, which, however, also uses the tools of representation to spread destruction and confusion. This edited volume responds to these critical issues and considers them from varying dimensions through the contributions of scholars and writers. The contributors have written their texts under immense duress, conducting research under conditions of the loss of homes and loved ones, physical threat, forced migration, bombardment, power shortages, and the psychological and emotional strains of living and working under such circumstances. Many are currently still in Ukraine, and some are unable to leave. Others, forced to flee the country due to the war, have had to work at a distance in unfamiliar environments, some becoming the sole carers of their children while separated from friends and family who remained behind. One of our contributors is now serving with the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Despite all this, the authors have prepared complex texts that consider the war from a diversity of perspectives, methods, and disciplines, including personal testimonies of the realities of conducting research during war.

The volume is informed by the academic and creative activities of its editors, Miglė Bareikytė, Natasha Klímenko, and Viktoriya Sereda, in researching and commenting on Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine and in contributing to the production of critical knowledge about the region through collaborations with scholars and cultural workers from Ukraine and Central and Eastern Europe who work on the subject from cultural, social, and historical perspectives. The volume initially emerged from Klímenko's work for the research group Prisma Ukraína: War, Migration, Memory, which began at Berlin's Forum Transregionale Studien in summer 2022, that consisted of Ukrainian scholars and was led by Sereda. Using Russia's war against Ukraine as a focus and prism, in winter 2022, the editors invited contributors, including some fellows of the War, Migration, Memory project, whose texts would explore the visual and material aspects of the Russo–Ukrainian War and its regional and transregional reverberations. During almost two years, the editors worked with the authors on their texts, including having the chapters peer-reviewed in a double-blind process. Beyond this, this publication project also resulted in a video essay of the same name, *Images and Objects: Russia's War against Ukraine*, which explores the personal and academic dimension of images and material culture in the work of several of the contributors: Mykola Homanyuk, Svitlana Matviyenko, Gintautas Mažeikis, Denys Shatalov, and Bohdan Shumlyovych. The

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Society), 26 May 2024, <https://suspilne.media/odesa/750423-dekolonizacia-odesi-ta-oblasti-pidbitta-pidsumkiv-i-novij-etap/> [accessed: 20.08.2024].

video essay, edited by Klimentenko and Bareikytė,<sup>46</sup> was commissioned and published by the Agents of Concern exhibition and conference in 2023.

In its final form, the present volume consists of fifteen chapters by sixteen contributors, split into four thematic sections: Witnessing and Its Limits, Materialities of Archiving and Art, Politics of Infrastructures, and Problematizing Legacies. In the section Witnessing and Its Limits, the authors explore the role of media technologies and artistic practices in documenting and representing the experiences of war and violence in contemporary Ukraine. As Svitlana Matviyenko and Dmytro Larin argue in this volume, such work is made visible through the 'labour of witnessing', through which various groups of civilians are involved in producing, but also critically engaging with information about the ongoing war.

Matviyenko and Larin present the reader with Larin's shocking image of the exhumation of bodies of Ukrainians murdered by Russian forces in Motyzhyn in 2022. Their essay examines the role of (photographic) documentation as evidence and mediation in relation to acts of violence committed against civilians during war, with a particular focus on the iconic and indexical role of visual evidence and the labour of witnessing enacted by and forced onto those living through the war. Kateryna Botanova's contribution explores the role of art as evidence during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. She looks at documentative and diaristic forms of visual art by the Ukrainian artists Alevtina Kakhidze, Nikita Kadan, and Kateryna Lysovenko. Drawing on literature by scholars like Judith Butler and Sontag on war, visual documentation, and we/they dichotomies, the author discusses how artists and their works bear witness, create subjectivities, and form collectivities. Bohdan Shumylovych continues the exploration of artistic practices by analysing depictions of sexual violence perpetrated by Russian forces during the war in the work of Lina Chanturiia, Dana Kavelina, Kateryna Lysovenko, Danylo Movchan, and Vlada Ralko. He contextualises this work in scholarship on visual semiotics, artistic representation, and the capacities and limits of art to depict (sexual) violence. The author also looks at the potential of art to act as both egodocument and means of resistance. Finally, and importantly, despite widespread access to images, reports, and videos from the war zones, Lesia Kulchynska critically examines the complexity and ambiguity of knowledge strategies and the 'fog of war' during the full-scale invasion. Drawing on multiple cultural and artistic sources, she examines practices of opacity, a lack of information, information saturation, and falsehoods, as well as the role of strategic ignorance in the ongoing uncertainty of the war, which, crucially and despite its informational dimension, also has physical effects.

In the second section of this volume, Materialities of Archiving and Art, the authors consider the material dimensions of the war by examining various informal

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46 Miglė Bareikytė and Natasha Klimentenko, *Images and Objects: Russia's War against Ukraine*, video essay, 20:04, 2023.

and grassroots archiving practices and artistic projects. They look at the physical aspects of memory, strategies of preserving industrial heritage, the capacity of cultural objects to have a biography, and the representation of bodies and their limits in conditions of violence.

In his contribution in this section, Oleksandr Makhnetyshyn analyses the material conditions of moving images during Russia's war in Ukraine. Focusing on amateur film collections from the now-destroyed city of Mariupol, he considers these collections as objects and discusses their archiving and digitisation. Makhnetyshyn draws on the concept of 'object biography' to explore changes in the form and meaning of the films, as well as the broader issues of originals and (digital) copies in the context of immense material destruction during the war. Challenging the neutrality of archival practices, Victoria Donovan explores activist community archiving as a resistance to the epistemic erasure of marginalised histories. Working with interviews and participant observation, the author examines grassroots initiatives and infrastructures of voluntarism to preserve the historical legacies of industrial heritage after its precarisation with the passing of the 2015 decommunisation laws, as well as the groundwork such initiatives laid for preservationist practices after the full-scale invasion. Kateryna Iakovlenko examines the themes of home and memory in works by Ukrainian artists, including Alevtina Kakhidze and Kateryna Yermolaeva, and art collectives, such as Open Group and the Prykarpattian Theater. Considering questions of materiality (of living spaces, art, and memory itself), Iakovlenko discusses various projects that aim to recreate homes destroyed or left behind during the war, both before and after 2022. Such works span personal and collective loss and point to art's ability to commemorate the home not only conceptually but also physically through situated engagement. In the final chapter of this section, Svitlana Biedaríeva traces the transformations of how contemporary Ukrainian art has responded to the war, focusing specifically on representations of the body and its limits as well as the relationship of the body to war's violence. She analyses, among others, works by Kinder Album, Artem Humilevskiy, Alevtina Kakhidze, Dana Kavelina, Maria Kulikovska, Kateryna Lysovenko, Danylo Movchan, and Vlada Ralko. Following theories of the decolonial scholar Madina Tlostanova, Biedaríeva shows the decolonial tendencies in recent Ukrainian art and its push against the objectification of those affected by war.

In situations of war, infrastructures and their objects can be politically repurposed to serve war aims or to resist ongoing attacks. The four papers in the third section, *Politics of Infrastructures*, use genealogical, political-symbolic, and qualitative empirical approaches to explore the use of drones, bridges, war memorials, and political advertising for diverse and contradictory purposes: to occupy spaces and spread propaganda, to fight and resist, and to commemorate. The authors use multiscale optics to uncover tensions and interactions between local, national, and, in some cases, transnational or global models of the past and identity politics that

Ukrainian citizens experience or are subjected to in different urban settings located close to the front line or in occupied territories.

Taras Nazaruk explores the contemporary use of drone technology and its footage during Russia's war in Ukraine, situating it within the history of media technologies of reconnaissance and the genealogy of the panoramic view. He draws on the Soviet scientist Victor Glushkov to analyse the role of drones in the formation of new visual digital cultures and to thereby examine the function of network-based military strategies during the invasion. Gintautas Mažeikis considers the political mythology and dystopian narratives of the Russo–Ukrainian War, with a special focus on the blowing-up of the Antonivka Road Bridge. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the rhizome, which emphasises horizontal connections and disruptions as opposed to the verticals of hierarchical power structures, the author examines the Palmburg Bridge in Königsberg, the Antonivka Road Bridge in Kherson, and the Kerch Bridge in Crimea, as well as their metaphorical and metonymic meanings from the perspective of political-symbolic thinking. Denys Shatalov investigates current and future war monuments in the Ukrainian city of Kryvyi Rih, a former centre of iron ore mining and ferrous metallurgy. The author outlines the history of Soviet monuments, including their installation, repair, and dismantling, as well as the erection of monuments related to the Anti-Terrorist Operation in the city. Using semi-structured interviews with Kryvyi Rih residents, the author analyses the perceptions and experiences of commemorating the Second World War and the current war to illustrate how both wars and their remembrance are perceived by residents who are still experiencing the full-scale Russian invasion. He embeds his empirical research in collective memory studies and thus in the relationships between places, material objects, and memories, as well as in memory politics and cultures in Ukraine. Finally, Mykola Homanyuk examines political outdoor advertising by Russian propagandists in occupied Kherson. Using empirical examples, the author discusses how such propaganda campaigns are linked to the promotion of historical figures and events, especially from the Russian imperial period under Catherine II. Drawing on Charlotte Linde's models of institutional memory, the author examines how such campaigns aimed and failed to form new, pro-Russian identities and cultures of memory in Kherson by promoting narratives focused on the past and promises for the future, while avoiding debates about the present.

In the last section of this volume, *Problematising Legacies*, the authors delve into the past to reveal the broader contexts of contemporary cultural institutions, heritage preservation policies, and power dynamics and imbalances within artistic production in Ukraine. They show how institutions and individuals have dealt with and are still affected by historic events, such as Russian imperialist expansion, World War II, late socialism, Ukrainian independence, and decommunisation policies. Be-

yond this, they trace these histories into the present and show how they have shifted since the full-scale invasion.

Natalia Revko's chapter outlines the history of 'unofficial' art in Soviet Odesa between the 1950s and the 1980s. She considers the blurry boundary between 'official' and 'unofficial' artistic production, the opportunities provided to and restrictions placed on artists working during the Soviet Union, and the legacies of their works, including under decommunisation policies in independent Ukraine up until the present. Working with art and photo archives and interviewing surviving artists in Odesa, Revko also contextualises her contribution in the conditions of doing research and preserving archival and physical heritage during the full-scale war. Anna Aliyeva's text combines both firsthand experience and historical research to consider museum work and the movement of cultural artefacts in contexts of war. In parts of her essay, Aliyeva delves into her time working and living in the National Art Museum of Ukraine in Kyiv during the first ten days of Russia's full-scale invasion. Additionally, she discusses the Ukrainian art historian Polina Kulzhenko's experience and collaboration during the Nazi occupation of Ukraine in World War II, as well as the movement of the museum's collections first to Germany and later to Soviet Russia during and after the war. Lastly, Aliyeva outlines legal processes and initiatives aimed at reclaiming stolen art. In the final text, focusing on *Mystetskyi Arsenal* in Kyiv, Ewa Sułek follows the building's history, from its inception during Russian imperialism in the 18th century to its current role as the *Mystetskyi Arsenal National Art and Culture Museum Complex*, a government-run contemporary art centre. Suggesting a postcolonial turn in the building's use, Sułek looks at the building's symbolic meaning during the Russian Empire, the controversies surrounding it in independent Ukraine, and the institution's eventual work in promoting Ukrainian art and culture during the Russo–Ukrainian War, both before and since the full-scale invasion.

The four sections of this edited volume – *Witnessing and its Limits*, *Materialities of Archiving and Art*, *Politics of Infrastructures*, and *Problematising Legacies* – examine the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine in an engaged, embedded, and critical way. Their overall aim is to analyse – without turning away from – the difficult and painful environments that have emerged in Ukraine in the aftermath of various legacies of violence, including Russia's full-scale invasion. Through this gesture, they not only resist the occupying forces but contribute to the production of knowledge and set new narratives from and about Ukraine and Central and Eastern Europe.

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47 Natasha Klimenko is currently a doctoral candidate at the Graduate School of Global Intellectual History, funded by the DFG. See project GRK 2248: Global Intellectual History – Transfers, Ideenzirkulation, Akteure (18.–20. Jahrhundert).

48 Miglè Bareikytė is an assistant professor at the European-University Viadrina and PI of the War Sensing project (2024–2027), which investigates digital media and data practices during Russia's war against Ukraine, funded by the DFG. See: Project-ID 262513311 – SFB 1187 (Gefördert durch die Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) – Projektnummer 262513311 – SFB 1187).

49 Viktoriya Sereda is currently a Head Coordinator of the Virtual Ukraine Institute for Advanced Studies and a professor at the Kyiv School of Economics.

under the strenuous circumstances of war, and their patience with the project as it unfolded.

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# Witnessing and Its Limits



# The Edge of Evidence: On the Labour of Witnessing

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Svitlana Matviienko and Dmytro Larin

*Figure 1: Exhumation of the bodies in Motyzhyn on 4 April 2022.*



Photograph by Dmytro Larin. Image provided courtesy of the author.

## Photograph

A big group of people is standing on the edge of an open grave. They form a circle. The image composition situates the viewer on the opposite side from where their thin silhouettes seem even thinner, extended upwards by the thick background wall of thin pines that are widespread in the Ukrainian Polissia. The grave is unusual, not a rectangle. From above, it probably looks like a laceration on the earth's surface. The grave was dug either with extreme carelessness or in an extreme hurry or, most likely, both. It is very shallow, and the four bodies that bear signs of violent deaths,

with their hands bound behind their backs, are visible after the removal of only a thin layer of soil.

This is Motyzhyn. Together with other toponyms in the Kyiv region – Polisske, Kukhari, Zhovtneve, Andriyivka, Kopyliv, Severnyivka, Buzova, Horenychi, Bucha, and Demydiv – the name of Motyzhyn now denotes a site of trauma caused by torture and murder conducted by the Russian forces against Ukrainian civilians on the temporarily occupied territories in the first weeks following the full-scale invasion. This photograph (Fig. 1) documents one of the first encounters with evidence of extreme violence. It was taken by Ukrainian photographer Dmytro Larin on 4 April 2022; he stood among journalists from international and Ukrainian state media outlets who visited Motyzhyn after the withdrawal of the Russian troops. The camera in his hands becomes our mechanical eye to glimpse this moment of encounter.

## Mass Grave

This is the grave of Motyzhyn's village head, 50-year-old Olga Sukhenko; her husband Ihor; her son Oleksandr; and an unidentified male body.<sup>1</sup> As the forensic mapping of the area shows, the burial ground included another single grave of a lone woman near it, while a burnt-out, shelled house used by the Russian soldiers for the killings, a storehouse whose porch was a base for officers during torture sessions, and an officers' quarters nearby were set as their detention and torture sites across the woods on the north-east outskirts of the village, with several underground cisterns and wells in the field, also used by the invaders to confine the tortured villagers.<sup>2</sup> Equipped teams were working in the woods searching for mines; after the grave was discovered, the bodies were also checked for improvised explosive devices<sup>3</sup> before the exhumation process commenced.

When the Russian troops entered the village, the Sukhenkos chose to stay and coordinate aid for community members, territorial defence troops, and evacuation

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- 1 It was later identified as the body of Serhiy Kubrushko. See: Mykola Zamikula, "Russian Soldiers Execute the Village Mayor of Motyzhyn: Bodies of Olga Sukhenko and Her Family Found", *Virtual Museum of Russian Aggression*, 01 June 2022, <https://rusaggression.gov.ua/en/f7e9c26137f767fd1c8668af57706401.html> [accessed: 05.08.2024].
  - 2 Emma Graham-Harrison, Isobel Koshiw, and Lorenzo Tondo, "How the Barbaric Lessons Learned in Syria Came to Haunt One Small Ukrainian Village", *The Guardian*, 30 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/30/how-the-barbaric-lessons-learned-in-syria-came-to-haunt-one-small-ukrainian-village> [accessed: 05.08.2024].
  - 3 Andrii Tsapliienko, "Doslidzhennia zvilnenykh mistechok poblyzu Kyieva vidkryvaiut vse novi zvirstva rosiian" ("Research on Liberated Towns Near Kyiv Reveals More Russian Atrocities"), *TSN*, 05 April 2022, <https://tsn.ua/ato/podalshe-doslidzhennya-zvilnenih-mistechok-poblizu-kiyeva-vidkrivayut-vse-novi-zvirstva-rosiyan-2029042.html> [accessed: 05.08.2024].

convoys from Motyzhyn.<sup>4</sup> Olga Sukhenko warned people to stay home via her Facebook post. As a report by the International Partnership for Human Rights, Truth Hounds, and Global Diligence states,<sup>5</sup> following their failed attempts to surround and capture Kyiv, the Russian troops set their base in Motyzhyn, among several other towns and villages, and after the Ukrainian forces ambushed their positions in the area, the invaders retaliated against the civilian population by firing at their yards and houses, and at the civilians themselves.<sup>6</sup> Under the occupation of the Kyiv region, as well as throughout the country, the members of municipal administration and local government teams have been systematically targeted by direct threat, abduction, and torture to force their collaboration with the occupational regime. By the end of the month, when the Russian military managed to track local resistance efforts, they abducted, tortured, and, within several days, executed the Sukhenko family. Soldiers from the Ukrainian volunteer battalion ‘Crimea’ found their mass grave on 2 April 2022.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the consistent abuse of human rights and the reports of torture in the temporarily occupied territories of Crimea as well as the Donetsk and Luhansk regions after 2014, outside Ukraine, there was no substantial public discussion of the violence in Ukraine’s war zone. It changed ‘after Bucha’, when evidence of extreme violence against civilians opened the space for internal and international awareness about the cases of ‘genocide’ and ‘crimes against humanity’<sup>8</sup> committed by the Rus-

4 Zamikula, “Russian Soldiers Execute the Village Mayor of Motyzhyn”.

5 See, for example, the report by International Partnership for Human Rights, Truth Hounds, and Global Diligence, which sets out evidence of war crimes committed by the Russian Armed Forces: International Partnership for Human Rights, Truth Hounds, and Global Diligence, *Attacks on Civilians in Motyzhyn, Kopyliv, and Severynivka, Ukraine*, 30 January 2023, <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Attacks-Kyiv-Oblast-final-final.pdf>, 3–10 [accessed: 05.08.2024]; and Zamikula, “Russian Soldiers Execute the Village Mayor of Motyzhyn”.

6 International Partnership for Human Rights, Truth Hounds, and Global Diligence, *Attacks on Civilians*, 8, 9.

7 Ibid.

8 As British lawyer Philippe Sands explains the legal concepts that define different intents behind mass killing that became operative in the aftermath of the Second World War – ‘crimes against humanity’ and ‘genocide’, respectively introduced by Jewish lawyers Hersch Lauterpach and Raphael Lemkin – he summarises the distinction as follows: “Crimes against humanity focuses on the killing of large numbers of individuals. The systematic, mass killing of a very large number of individuals will constitute a crime against humanity. Genocide has a different focus. Genocide focuses not on the killing of individuals, but on the destruction of groups. In other words, a large number of individuals who form part of a single group. And the two concepts in this way have different objectives. One aims at protecting the individual; the other aims at protecting the group.” Robert Coalson, “What’s the Difference Between ‘Crimes Against Humanity’ and ‘Genocide?’ An Interview with Philippe Sands”, *The Atlantic*, 19 March 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/03/whats-the-differe>

sian state in Ukraine. Although the identification of the tragic events in Motyzhyn as genocide may still seem questionable to some legal representatives or scholars, the killing of the four citizens is not a standalone event but one systemically reproduced by the Russian forces in the context of the ongoing war, either in the form of killing and torturing groups of Ukrainians or Ukrainian individuals en masse. The slowness of such recognition is due to the rupture between the political and legal understanding of these war crimes. While in Ukraine the public recognition of such killings as crimes of genocide or crimes against humanity (depending on the intent in each case) is nearly univocal, it takes time and the tremendous effort of legal teams and witnesses for these crimes to be recognised as such in the court of law; even then, such recognition is not guaranteed as the nature of intent and individual responsibility remain difficult to prove. There is always the risk that the mass grave in Motyzhyn will remain perceived as a standalone casualty of war and not a systemic occurrence of war crimes.

Larin's photograph is one among many other photographic and video documentations of the evidence of extreme violence committed against Ukrainian civilians that plays an important role in establishing the scope and distribution of violence. Apart from its potential role as evidence in the court of law, this and other similar photographs perform another important role in the complex process that Ukrainian society must undergo to envision the future. It is a role of mediation – both in the sense of building a connection to or a necessary separation from the horrid nature of the war and of recovering from the trauma and shock – by building a relation with it instead of repressing it. To explain how the process of building such a relation occurs, we discuss the iconic and indexical role of this photograph; then I focus on the process of 'witnessing' of which the subject of war is part – by engaging simultaneously with the documentation of the war reality and the war reality itself.

## Icon

This documentation brought to public attention the methods of torture and killing of Ukrainian civilians employed by the Russian forces in the first weeks after the full-scale invasion. Quite expectedly, horrid media reports were countered by massive waves of instrumentalised denial in the form of official statements from the Russian government and then amplified and disseminated through the media sphere not only within the Russian Federation but also as far as the Russian state's soldiers

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nce-between-crimes-against-humanity-and-genocide/274167/ [accessed: 05.08.2024]. Also see: Philippe Sands, *East West Street: On the Origins of Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity*, New York: Knopf, 2016, 22, 26.

of the information front could reach by targeting the populations of other countries.<sup>9</sup> The reports put forward the reason for urgently addressing the entire scope of war atrocities during the ongoing ten-year war on the territory of Ukraine. Since early April 2022, the documentation of the Sukhenkos' mass grave in Motyzhyn has become one of the most recognisable representations of violence conducted by the Russian forces in the Kyiv region and elsewhere. Semiotically speaking, the photograph became 'iconic'.

To address the iconic nature of this photograph, I turn to the work of American philosopher, logician, and semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce, who, in his writing in the early 1900s, introduced his theory of semiotics that remains influential today. To Peirce, as well as other semioticians and structuralists, a sign is a composition of a signifier and a signified, a fundamental element for mobilising the processes of navigating reality or meaning construction. Peirce's important contribution to semiotics was in distinguishing different types of signs – icon, index, and symbol – based on the different relationships between a signifier and a signified, or between an object or event and their representations.<sup>10</sup>

"An *icon* represents its object insofar as it resembles that object", Peirce writes in *Notes on Topical Geometry*. "It conveys no information, nor does it put the mind into a

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9 For example, after my interviews for Canadian TV and radio about the war in Ukraine in spring 2022, I received emails from Canadian viewers and listeners with screenshots of messages from 'unknown people' warning Canadians that the scenes of violence in Bucha "were all staged".

10 The scholarship on digital media and iconic images is rich and extensive. "Iconic images are often credited with the ability to mobilise public opinion and influence political decision-making processes" or they are often criticised, as Mette Mortensen, Stuart Allan, and Chris Peters write, "for simplifying and diverting attention away from institutional power structures". Mette Mortensen, Stuart Allan, and Chris Peters, "The Iconic Image in a Digital Age: Editorial Mediations over the Alan Kurdi Photographs", *Nordicom Review* 38/2, 2017, 71–86, here 73. As means of publishing and dissemination, digital images have a tremendous impact on the meaning of iconic images: they amplify the rhetorical powers of iconic images. The nuances of these processes are well documented and broadly discussed by many researchers. See, for example: Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, "Icons, Iconicity, and Cultural Critique", *Sociologica* 9/1, 2015, 1–32; Marco Solaroli, "Iconicity: A Category for Social and Cultural Theory", *Sociologica* 1, 2015, 1–52; and Natalia Mielczarek, "The Dead Syrian Refugee Boy Goes Viral: Funerary Aylan Kurdi Memes as Tools of Mourning and Visual Reparation in Remix Culture", *Visual Communication* 19/4, 2020, 506–530. Having acknowledged this, I also want to note that in my essay, I only engage with the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, which inspired or became a reference point for most of such literature. Here, for the purpose of my argument, I engage with Peirce's semiotic framework by relying on his very basic yet important distinctions between different types of signs – icon, index, and symbol – hinting at each of these signs' evidential capacity.

position to acquire information.”<sup>11</sup> Yet the utility of icons for “all thinking” is undeniable, he insists several years later in *Definitions for Baldwin's Dictionary*: “An icon is a representamen which refers to its object merely because it resembles, or is analogous to, that object. Such is a photograph”, Peirce suggests, but also “a figure in geometry, or an algebraical array of symbols which [...] are analogous to the objects they represent”.<sup>12</sup> The objects in a photograph of a war crime scene look like their real-life counterparts and can be recognised in real life. An icon, thus, is the simplest among all signs: it establishes a relation of resemblance between an object or event and its representation by quickly linking it to deduce the meaning of a concrete representation. To achieve that, an icon operates within a horizontal chain of similarities by the logic of comparison; it appeals to a broad spectrum of identical representations and situates a particular representation among them. Larin's photograph is an icon that represents a scene of violence. As viewers, we come to this conclusion immediately; an icon forces us to jump to it: what looks like a scene of committed extreme violence shows us precisely that – a scene of extreme violence.

The photograph taken by Dmytro Larin is one of an extended variety. It is a networked multitude of invariants taken by those documenters – journalists, politicians, and activists – standing on the edge of the mass grave, who captured the scene of violence by different technological means and from various angles. A quick search of ‘Motyzhyn’ on Google Images returns a legion of variations of this photograph. Some of them are professional, compositionally perfect documentation. Others are products of the web's ‘digestion’ of original photographs: they are poor-quality “cop[ies] in motion” with substandard resolution,<sup>13</sup> adjusted to various purposes, compressed, and circulated through different media channels. As German artist and theorist Hito Steyerl notes about such images, they accelerate and deteriorate in the information flow across platforms in all possible formats:

[A] preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution.<sup>14</sup>

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11 Charles Sanders Peirce, *Notes on Topical Geometry*, manuscript, 1899–1900, 3–4, quoted in: Mats Bergman and Sami Paavola (eds.), “Icon”, *The Commens Dictionary: Peirce's Terms in His Own Words*, New Edition, 2014, <http://www.commens.org/dictionary/term/icon> [accessed: 06.08.2024].

12 Charles Sanders Peirce, *Definitions for Baldwin's Dictionary*, manuscript, 1901–1902, quoted in: Bergman and Paavola, “Icon”.

13 Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image”, *e-flux* 10, November 2009, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/> [accessed: 05.08.2024].

14 Ibid.

Altogether, it is a voluminous and multidimensional image that demonstrates the scope of extreme violence. The photograph is from Motyzhyn, but the crime scene it represents also resembles multiple scenes of violence from Polisske, Kukhari, Zhovtneve, Andriyivka, Kopyliv, Severynivka, Buzova, Horenychy, Demydiv, and other cities and villages.

The encounter with this joint image assembled of similar variants from across networks shaped the shared understanding of the point of no return that divided the war into 'before' and 'after': for an overwhelming part of the Ukrainian population, any negotiations with the enemy were no longer possible 'after Bucha', as the war crimes in the Kyiv region are referred to by the name of the largest massacre in the area, with a death toll exceeding a thousand civilians. The resemblance between the cases in this group of war crimes indicates their 'systemic' nature: they share common forms and methods of terror, torture, and the killing of people – hands tied behind the back and gunshot wounds to the knees and the back of heads were too often identified on the bodies buried in mass graves.<sup>15</sup>

The toponym 'Motyzhyn', just like other toponymic names in the region associated with the systemic violence against civilians, calls for 'differentiation' between similar tragedies by identifying nuances, circumstances, and variations in all the cases. Similarly, not only does Larin's photograph, along with other images, help viewers understand the meaning of resemblances between the war crimes in the Kyiv region, it also enables us to ponder the specificity of each case taken separately. Therefore, the photograph of exhumation in Motyzhyn is not only iconic but also indexical.

## Index

According to Peirce, 'indices' differ from 'icons' because they bear a physical relationship with what they represent: they look like their counterparts in reality and are directly linked to the objects of the event represented by the indexical signs. Importantly, indices point towards the meaning of visual representations acting as 'material traces' of an event. Smoke, smell, or footprints on the road are all indexical signs of what has passed or what is still coming. They are indexical of the extended reality outside the frame; they are the orientation for action by 'directing attention' towards something, like smoke signals do.<sup>16</sup> These signs imply a 'physical contiguity' with the

15 Oleksandr Stashevskiy, "Bucolic Ukraine Forest Is Site of Mass Grave Exhumation", *The Associated Press*, 13 June 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-kyiv-business-criminal-investigations-bed8a5fac1dab4cfcdf45aed815ff510> [accessed: 05.08.2024].

16 Albert Atkin, "Peirce on the Index and Indexical Reference", *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 41/1, Winter 2005, 161–188, here 163–165.

source of a photographic imprint – an object or an event; as Albert Atkin eloquently explains, indices are ‘caused’ by what they ‘signify’.<sup>17</sup> In other words, unlike icons, which operate at the level of ‘signification’ to enable ‘recognition’, indices bring together the processes of ‘signification’ and ‘causation’.<sup>18</sup> Larin’s photograph of the exhumation in Motyzhyn participates in establishing two types of relation between an object or event and its representation: first, the ‘relation of resemblance’ and, second, the ‘relation of causation’.

Being iconic, this photograph first opens the space for recognition, leading to the subsequent steps of processing or working through the trauma caused by extreme violence against Ukrainian civilians during the ongoing war. Because it is also indexical, this photograph then moves the viewers from the generalisation necessary to recognise resemblances to a microwork of differentiating and linking the scenes of violence to particular locations and communities. The photograph captures the scene caused by what the photograph signifies: the violent murder of a particular family with traces of specific methods of torture. It also grounds the work of recognition that is initiated through the photograph’s iconic qualities. As much as the role of the photograph is crucial for shaping societal knowledge about Russia’s war crimes, the effort of bearing witness is fully carried by the subjects of war.<sup>19</sup>

## Witnessing

The Russo–Ukrainian War has often been regarded as the most documented war in history. The kinetic action of this war is observed, analysed, and studied by various military, security, legal, and political institutions and organisations, academic and non-academic, as well as independent bloggers, whose work accumulates, organises, and processes big quantities of data produced by digital technologies that are directly or indirectly engaged in war. In part, the ongoing documentation is automated, since this war is led in the time of so-called intelligent machines, which span from individual devices to major corporate infrastructures with their means of collecting and analysing data that enter assemblages with combat technologies

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17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 In our book with Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyberwar and Revolution*, we developed the notion of ‘the subject of cyberwar’ to describe the embeddedness of the subject of war in its setting, where the subject’s position simultaneously establishes different subjective functions – a target, a worker, a soldier – in other words, the subject of (cyber)war is someone who, simultaneously, struggles against it and is fully entangled and often complicit in some of the processes. See: Nick Dyer-Witheford and Svitlana Matviyenko, *Cyberwar and Revolution: Digital Subterfuge in Global Capitalism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

to produce an evolving complex and multilayered record of a battlefield, an ‘operational image’ of its shifting map, part of which seems to be deadly grabbed by the Russian dragon’s teeth. Oscillating between non-representational and representational records, the swarms of ‘operational images’<sup>20</sup> opened a possibility for digital forensics, leading to the production of a new type of spectacle – a real-time view of the war – simultaneously characterised by ultimate immediacy and deferral, transparency and opacity, its apparent completeness, and extreme fragmentary nature, which, in addition to the augmented character of such images, makes it extremely hard to determine whether such an ‘image’ has the potential to become evidence in all or any of the settings – in a legal court, in the court of public opinion, and in history.

Using these various data, investigative journalist groups are working together with experts from international and state organisations to identify instances of war crimes to hold the offenders in the Russian government and military accountable. Due to the circumstances, this work is often done remotely.<sup>21</sup> Teams investigate digital traces by aggregating and cross-reading open data and open-source intelligence. The primary focus of my interest in this essay, however, is not only the documenting practices that are organised and curated by journalist and human rights organisations. In addition to these coordinated efforts, after February 2022, documenting war crimes has become a vast grassroots initiative that has reached an unprecedented scale as a national movement, involving people with different interests and occupations – ranging from professional journalists to popular bloggers. I read the broad spectrum of such diverse practices of documenting violence and war crimes committed against civilians and the military – on (de)occupied territories, in captivity, closer and farther from the front lines<sup>22</sup> – as a particular type of communal labour amid the war – the labour of witnessing.

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20 Jussi Parikka, *Operational Images: From the Visual to the Invisual*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023; Trevor Paglen, “Operational Images”, *e-flux* 59, November 2014, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/59/61130/operational-images/> [accessed: 05.08.2024]; and Harun Farocki, *Eye / Machine*, video work, 23:00, Germany, 2000.

21 For example, such investigations are led by the Netherlands-based investigative journalism group Bellingcat, or Forensic Architecture, a multidisciplinary research group based at Goldsmiths, University of London. For more, see the investigative work of the mentioned and other groups and organisations on their websites: Bellingcat, official website, <https://www.bellingcat.com/> [accessed: 05.08.2024]; Forensic Architecture, official website, <https://forensic-architecture.org/> [accessed: 05.08.2024]; The Center for Spatial Technologies, official website, <https://spatialtech.info/> [accessed: 05.08.2024]; The Reckoning Project, official website, <https://www.thereckoningproject.com/> [accessed: 05.08.2024]; and Truth Hounds, official website, <https://truth-hounds.org/en/about/> [accessed: 05.08.2024].

22 Here, the examples may include the Berlin-based Ukrainian investigative group the Center for Spatial Technologies, the Kyiv-based investigative group The Reckoning Project, or the war crimes research group Truth Hounds that, in addition to other methods, work with tes-

Again, as the value of synthetic<sup>23</sup> and operational images is on the rise, we still rely on the human witness, but this witness, as Shela Sheikh explains, “can no longer be a solitary figure”, but rather, “one within a collectivity”.<sup>24</sup> Bearing witness is a broader communal effort – with the emphasis on both ‘communal’ and ‘effort’. In other words, a significant effort is needed to pass from seeing, living, or even recording the evidence of violence, which we usually understand as ‘witnessing’. This effort moves towards finding the words and frameworks that would take the subject of war from the dimension of the unbearable, which arrests the body via extreme affect or anxiety attacking a fragile sense of self, to the dimension of the symbolic, where the trauma is not repressed, but inscribed in the subject’s new reality for the sake of finding or building the essential systems of care and survival. To me, the significance of Larin’s photograph is precisely how it captures the moment of encounter with the evidence of violence by a group of people surrounding the mass grave, who appear in proximity to the evidence and in the same frame with it.

After the full-scale invasion, and especially ‘after Bucha’, the flow of documentation indexical of extreme violence became overwhelming. In conversations with Ukrainian art historian Asia Bazdyrieva, we conceived the notion ‘labour of witnessing’ while thinking about the ways Ukrainian citizens are immersed, to different degrees, in the raw reality of war while simultaneously producing and consuming its documentation. There was a shared sense that the growing number of documented war crimes and reports on violence put a responsibility on us as a collective to be permanently engaged with this material – often too unbearable to watch, listen to, and read – but as the subjects of war who must know the enemy, we did not have a choice to withdraw. The lives of the subjects of war depend on that knowledge.

Taking this notion further in my work, I conceptualise the practices of diarising war in terms of the concept of ‘labour’ by delinking it from the production of objects as it has been traditionally used in critical theory. Instead, I draw from feminist scholarship to focus on its affective and, therefore, material component as the subject’s corporeal resonances that produce a labourer’s embodied subjectivity as part of a collective.<sup>25</sup> Speaking to victims, visiting sites of killings, and viewing records of testimonies became our national job, and the most important part of it was taking in this knowledge through the body and finding the words to speak about it – to people outside Ukraine and, probably, to each other – by restoring the visceral

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timonies of direct witnesses to document, verify, codify, and archive information about war crimes in Ukraine as grounds for cases for national and international justice mechanisms.

- 23 This includes images that have been created using computer-generated graphics and/or AI, rather than being captured by a camera.
- 24 Shela Sheikh, “The Future of the Witness: Nature, Race and More-than-Human Environmental Publics”, *Kronos* 44/1, 2018, 145–162, here 148.
- 25 See, for example, Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies”, *Social Text* 22/2, 2004, 117–139; and Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.

communal ties with each other across the mental and physical territories of trauma and rupture. As American critical phenomenologist and feminist philosopher Shiloh Whitney explains with her notion of ‘byproductive affective labour’, “the affects the affective laborer produces in the course of her work [...] are not alienated from her in the process of production: once produced, they do not take leave of her body, of her posture and disposition”,<sup>26</sup> which leads her to assume that “the work that concerns affective byproducts” is metabolised by a worker.<sup>27</sup> Understanding the *value* of this process requires a recognition of the image’s utter incompleteness, despite its multiplicity and indexicality; it requires a subversion of the popular understanding that an image is worth a thousand words. I read these practices of verbalising different war experiences – lived by narrators themselves or heard from other witnesses – as channelling such firsthand accounts of war to remote world audiences. But also, and more importantly, these practices are channelled towards other Ukrainian citizens with similar or different experiences of war for the purposes of the synchronisation and redistribution of knowledge and the burden of trauma among the members of a society for the sake of producing a shared understanding of the unfolding tragedy.

This labour of witnessing is a process that is produced by and contributes to the production of social relations; it participates in the ongoing recovery of social relations that are continuously targeted and damaged by the invading force of this war. What is clear now is that the ‘witnessing labourers’ are those who ‘choose to’ and, at the same time, ‘have no choice’ due to their embeddedness in the structure of war. In that context, they continue channelling the meaning of their direct encounter with violence or its documentation for the sake of sustaining the living memory of a community under the threat of erasure. The ‘witnessing labourers’ are those who simultaneously are ‘of’ and ‘against’ this war.

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26 Shiloh Whitney, “Byproductive Labor: A Feminist Theory of Affective Labor Beyond the Productive–Reproductive Distinction”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 44/6, 2018, 637–660, here 646.

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# Art as Evidence: Artistic Practices in Ukraine and the Materiality of War

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*Kateryna Botanova*

In mid-March 2022, Ukrainian artist Nikita Kadan described what he was living through as “an experience of being besieged”.<sup>1</sup> At that time, Russian troops were closing in on Kyiv, where Kadan was living and working out of the basement of what used to be an art gallery, turned into a shelter and an art storage after the full-scale invasion. Parts of northern Ukraine were already occupied, including the now sadly notorious Kyiv suburbs and satellite towns of Irpin and Bucha. The Russian Army was stopped five kilometres from the village of Muzychi, west of Kyiv, where another Ukrainian artist, Alevtina Kakhidze, was hiding in the basement of her house.

On 16 March 2022, her birthday, Kakhidze made a drawing: a single line outlining a house, a male figure with a gun (Kakhidze’s husband) guarding the house, a female figure (the artist herself) with two dogs in the basement, which is shaded deep brown with a little dash of blue (a screen of a notebook), and a message that takes most of the space on the sheet. It reads,

Since the first day of the war, people are offering me money and places to stay in peaceful countries, but that doesn’t solve the main problem that Russians are attacking my country, my home, my husband, my dogs, and my art. Also, it is not possible to take all the population – 42 million people – out of Ukraine. And what is the cost in money of us being on our own against the Russians? Still, thanks for any ideas to stop those Russians..!<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 Sergei Timofeev, “Voina pryshla ko mne v hosty” (“The War Visited Me”), interview with Nikita Kadan, *Arterritory*, 14 March 2022, [https://artterritory.com/ru/vizualnoe\\_iskusstvo/intervju/z6036-voina\\_pryshla\\_ko\\_mne\\_v\\_gosti/](https://artterritory.com/ru/vizualnoe_iskusstvo/intervju/z6036-voina_pryshla_ko_mne_v_gosti/) [accessed: 21.03.2023] [author’s trans.].
  - 2 @truealevtina (Alevtina Kakhidze), “All my drawings are drawn from reality”, Instagram post, 23 March 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CbdDm1N-Gd/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/CbdDm1N-Gd/?img_index=1) [accessed: 21.03.2023]. Social media has been an important communication tool for Ukrainian artists for quite a while. However, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine carried this importance to the next level. The overwhelming majority of Ukrainian artists – the ones who stayed in the country, the ones who were forced to flee, as well as the ones who emigrated earlier – started to use their social media accounts (especially Instagram) as their diaries. Daily or nearly daily posts captured their works, thoughts, and feelings. This activity allowed Ukrainian cultural

While besieged in the basement of her house, every day, Kakhidze depicted her experiences supported with messages to real and imaginary interlocutors, mainly ones in the West. In the gallery basement in besieged Kyiv, Kadan drew endless landscapes, masses of neatly ploughed earth stretching over whole sheets of paper and pushing the horizon to the edge, with human shadows cast over them. They are called *Shadows on the Ground*.<sup>3</sup> Another series he created around the same time, *Repeating Speech*, consists of messages or slogans written briskly numerous times on one sheet of paper until they are almost unreadable: “Close the Sky”, “Fuck War”, “Stop Putin”, “Cheap Gas Cheap Blood”.<sup>4</sup>

In the first weeks and months after 24 February 2022, Kadan, one of the most prominent and well-known Ukrainian artists of the generation that came about during the Orange Revolution of 2004, gave countless interviews. In one of them, among other observations, he mentions his physical and material limitations: “Of course, the experience of being besieged, this approaching front line have their influence, but rather on material things: one cannot buy paper now. This influences me more than some peculiar anxiety, than some emotional aspects”.<sup>5</sup>

However, the war is both an emotional and an inevitable material event. With it comes an overwhelming and mostly unwelcome abundance of experience and, paradoxically, simultaneously scarce and overabundant materiality. Both seem to come as a surprise. While the usually mundane reality is torn apart, emotions freeze to free inner space for dealing with the raging materiality of war. There is too much of it. There are human and nonhuman bodies that need to be saved and protected, moved elsewhere to a refuge, or hidden where they are; bodies that are held hostage, tortured, raped, or killed; bodies on the move through someone else’s reality; bodies that stay no matter what because of age, disabilities, or sheer exhaustion. There are houses with all the valuable and trivial possessions that – overnight – assume the pricelessness of family history, houses blown apart, and houses packed in small suitcases (called ‘anxiety backpacks’). There are artworks and cultural heritage that can be and are being destroyed. Weaponry and enemies are suddenly all around. At the same time, everything is scarce: food, water, medical supplies, ammunition, troops, safety, lives, family histories (written between the lines of photo albums, diaries, and memorabilia that are now lost forever), and artistic tools.

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researchers who were locked out of the country – researchers like me – to remain in contact with these artists and to follow their work online.

- 3 @nikita.kadan (Nikita Kadan), “The shadow on the ground”, Instagram post, 11 March 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca9e6-rNzS\\_/](https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca9e6-rNzS_/) [accessed: 21.03.2023]. Images of *Shadows on the Ground* were first posted on 11, 12, and 13 March 2022.
- 4 @nikita.kadan (Nikita Kadan), “‘Fuck War’, Secession, Vienna...”, Instagram post, 27 July 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CghkzaVMB76/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/CghkzaVMB76/?img_index=1) [accessed: 21.03.2023].
- 5 Timofeev, “The War Visited Me”.

The staggering materiality of war manifests itself in the rapid realisation of the simultaneity of resilience and vulnerability. While some human bodies can be mobile and thus resilient (unless they cannot), everything else that human life consists of, depends on, identifies with, and relies on is not. One can share their escape with their memories, a few photographs, maybe books, or even a couple of favourite wine glasses. But what about houses and everything in them, dogs, and, last but not least, art, as Kakhidze put it in her birthday drawing?

In the first days and months of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as artists lived through the war and experienced its staggering materiality – be it at home or on the move – they engaged in documenting it. Their corporal experiences translated into artistic evidence. Their constant questions about whether the inescapable materiality of a human body in war is a bonus or a burden are verbalised in their artworks. Their artworks turned into an ongoing conversation with themselves, inquiring about the roles of the artists and their art when surrounded and overwhelmed by the war and, simultaneously, with virtual interlocutors without immediate war experience. Kakhidze, Kadan, and others scribbled messages to those who must have had the power to “stop Putin” and “close the sky”, to those who could stop the “genocidal” war,<sup>6</sup> to those in the West.

## Reframing the War

In their renowned book, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Judith Butler looks at the materiality of the image next to other material instruments of war. They write, “Although we reserve some sense of materiality for the image, we tend to give priority to that materiality that belongs to guns, bombs, and the directly destructive instruments of war without realizing that they cannot operate without the image”.<sup>7</sup>

Although their particular focus is on war reporting and the camera as an instrument of war, Butler inquires into the wider visual dimension of wars. They suggest looking into the materiality of violence and destruction of war through framing, which is essential to creating any image. Moreover, the framing process as a choice of certain focus and, therefore, a choice to leave something or someone out of focus is already an inseparable part of war violence. Framing creates various versions of reality, and while some of them are appropriated by the governments that wage those wars and become ‘official’, others, the ones left outside of frames, form alternatives with resistance potential.

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6 Timothy Snyder, “You Can’t Understand the War in Ukraine without Knowing History”, *Washington Post*, 22 February 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/02/22/timothy-snyder-ukraine-russia-war-history/> [accessed: 21.03.2023].

7 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2016, 10.

“Efforts to control the visual and narrative dimensions of war delimit public discourse by establishing and disposing the sensuous parameters of reality itself – including what can be seen and what can be heard”, writes Butler.<sup>8</sup> Inside these sensuous parameters lies the allowance for grieving some lives and destruction, while the invisible and ungrivable remain outside. Here, the people behind cameras assume roles similar to soldiers on the ground, while the consumers of this visual narrative become spectators in the theatre of war waged by countries and/or their governments.

Paradoxically enough, aiming to expose the resistance potential on the margins of frames and questioning the sensuous parameters and power structures behind them, Butler ascribes little, if any, role to actual people who are neither reporters nor spectators, neither governments nor the troops inflicting destruction. People who live through the war, people on the other side of both guns and cameras, the ones in the basements of their houses, fleeing, in mass graves, seem to have no voice, own no frame.

A few months after the full-scale invasion, Kadan, who considers himself “an anti-fascist artist” and whose work has been concerned with various emancipatory discourses over the years, entered into a virtual discussion with Butler, emphasising the urgent need to create not hierarchies between dead people divided into “grievable” and “ungrivable” but a unity. He says, “I imagine a unity among those people, starting their own struggle against those who are alive – against their nationalism, their capitalism, their patriarchy. Like some Internationale of dead people: *Dead people of the world, unite!*”<sup>9</sup>

Kadan suggested this radical kind of unity and different frame of reference a few years before the full-scale invasion, already after the start of the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014, instigated by Russia. When reflecting on the relationship between art and history, he proposes:

The task: to begin to measure contemporary art against the execution pit. To count from the pit, to exist in relation to it. Even when the pit is far away, and the conversation seems to be taking place in a completely different space, it is inescapably present as a point of reference. We have bones in common. Our skeleton is divided and piled in pits in the Donbas and Syria, in Sandarmokh in Karelia, and on the former Janowska Street in Lviv, on every continent, under the strings of state borders running across the earth’s surface. This is the secret unity of the world.

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8 Ibid., 11.

9 Duncan Ballantyne-Way, “Nikita Kadan: How Culture Survives in Wartime”, *Exberliner*, 16 May 2022, <https://www.exberliner.com/art/nikita-kadan-culture-wartime-this-is-ukraine-defending-freedom-venice-biennale/> [accessed: 21.03.2023].

We are brought together by the great Internationale of Bones, a world assembly of burials. We are united in brotherly and sisterly graves.<sup>10</sup>

After February 2022, Kadan's task was completed. The execution pit became more than just a point of reference; it became the inescapable present for Ukraine, far beyond the Donbas region. The shadows of bodies in his *Shadows on the Ground* series from March of that year mark those pits. They hover over the neatly and evenly ploughed land (the famous Ukrainian 'black earth' – *chornozem*) that doesn't give away what happened or might have happened there. Unlike the majority of war photographs from Ukraine that consume the viewers on the news and social media – bombed and burnt buildings, landscapes shattered with missiles, cut by trenches, and covered with corpses of the invasion, and makeshift graves of mass burials – Kadan's drawings are almost peaceful and pristine, black and white, charcoal on paper. They are disturbed only by human shadows – unlike other material remains of the war, shadows are something the soil cannot absorb, digest, and hide. "A shadow marks places and times where and when, for the umpteenth time, human life ceases to be the ultimate value", says a caption, written by the artist.<sup>11</sup>

Here, the execution pit is also a time marker. In the literary sense of the word, it grounds the artist and their works in the inevitable, inescapable here and now of the war, of this Russo–Ukrainian War, and, at the same time, connects to all other pits in different times and places, often unmarked and forgotten (or wished to be forgotten), in "the secret unity of the world".<sup>12</sup>

Is this the unity of 'contaminated landscapes', as the Austrian writer Martin Pollack suggests in his eponymous book, where he writes about the places of mass murders and burials of World War II that, in time, were grown over by fields, forests, and gardens?<sup>13</sup> Unmarked and seemingly peaceful landscapes stay contaminated with the bodies' remains and hidden and unspoken (but not forgotten) memories. Is Kadan trying to prevent the landscapes from becoming contaminated, at least in the realm of memory, by already marking those pits, as the murder is happening, by writing "Fuck War" over and over on the facade of the Secession Building in

10 Nikita Kadan, "Zadachi. Zametki o realizme yamy" ("Tasks: Notes on the Realism of the Pit"), *Moscow Art Magazine*, 114, 2020, <https://moscowartmagazine.com/issue/102/article/2251> [accessed: 21.03.2023] [author's trans.].

11 *Heart of Earth*, exhibition, Mystetsky Arsenal, Kyiv, Ukraine, 25 November 2022–28 February 2023. For a digital tour of the exhibition, see: Mystetsky Arsenal, "Heart of Earth: 3D Tour of the Exhibition", <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/povidomlennya/3d-tour-of-the-heart-of-earth-exhibition/> [accessed: 21.03.2023].

12 Kadan, "Zadachi".

13 Martin Pollack, *Kontaminierte Landschaften (Contaminated Landscapes)*, St. Pölten: Residenz Verlag, 2014.

Vienna?<sup>14</sup> What happens to art when it moves inside the frame and takes up the task of constantly relating itself and measuring itself against the execution pit, especially when the pit exists in temporal and spatial proximity?

## War Diaries

On 10 October 2022, the day of one of the biggest missile attacks on Ukraine (at the time), Kakhidze drew a black-and-white human figure (herself) standing in a black-and-white garden and looking at the massive red missile flying over. The message, written in a mixture of upper- and lowercase letters, characteristic of Kakhidze's works, reads: "Seeing a rocket, I made a wish because I don't need victory in the war without dreams of future peace".<sup>15</sup> She literally saw a rocket flying just over her head that day.

On 8 November 2022, as Ukraine was going through weeks of blackouts, she drew herself knitting in candlelight: "I am knitting next to the candle while the artists in peaceful countries make their multimedia works".<sup>16</sup> On 24 December 2022, she posted a figure of herself sitting on the floor and hugging her knees in front of a huge sack: "My time, stolen by the Russians, and I".<sup>17</sup> On 18 January 2023, she is standing between two schematically drawn buildings: one is already on fire, and, on the other, a missile is closing in. "I am still alive in Ukraine, but it is by accident" (Fig. 2).<sup>18</sup>

From the first day of the invasion, Kakhidze engaged in a scrupulous daily recording of her experiences. Kakhidze works across all possible media but is mainly known for her performative practice and series of drawings by hand that interweave her personal history as a Georgian–Ukrainian from eastern Ukraine, which has been occupied since 2014, anti-imperial struggles, and human–non-human entanglements. Her visual diaries are quick sketches on the pages of her notebook in a brisk, schematic manner, done only with paper and a few pens,

14 Secession, "nikita kadan: fuck war", [https://secession.at/neuigkeiten\\_nikita\\_kadan\\_fuck\\_war\\_en](https://secession.at/neuigkeiten_nikita_kadan_fuck_war_en) [accessed: 21.03.2023].

15 @truealevtina (Alevtina Kakhidze), "General alert, art exhibition, Wien", Instagram post, 10 October 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CkBoC7etBPV/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/CkBoC7etBPV/?img_index=1) [accessed: 21.03.2023].

16 @truealevtina (Alevtina Kakhidze), Instagram post, 8 November 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CksWy-nNaYi/> [accessed: 21.03.2023].

17 @truealevtina (Alevtina Kakhidze), "When you use just flush...", Instagram post, 24 December 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/Cmjmt8\]Nz4t/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cmjmt8]Nz4t/?img_index=1) [accessed: 21.03.2023].

18 @truealevtina (Alevtina Kakhidze), "January 2023. Self portrait", Instagram post, 18 January 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cnjt6z4ths3/> [accessed: 21.03.2023].

often with an image of herself on the page, always with dates and some thoughts, observations, and messages written on them.

Her diary bears witness to the simultaneity and inevitability of multiple, often mutually contradicting circumstances: an overabundance of events, news, and experiences; the scarcity of material (from electricity and water to artistic tools) and symbolic things (time and safety); the overwhelming materiality of war (rubble, death, destruction). Kakhidze's works, like those of Kadan and many other Ukrainian artists, are minimalistic not only through artistic choice but also as testimonies to the reality of the war and the experiences the artists are living through. The needs of daily collecting and recording, of marking the growing number of pits, loom over the complexity of imagery. The need to spread the message of the war outside the immediate warzone, to render framing impossible, or to widen the frame aspiring for a unity "under the strings of state borders running across the earth's surface", as Kadan put it,<sup>19</sup> puts words next to the images.

Ukrainian writer and photographer Yevgenia Belorusets started her Kyiv diary on 24 February 2022. A collection of daily notes and photographs, it was published as a book in German with the title *Anfang des Krieges. Tagesbücher aus Kyjiw (The Start of the War: Diaries from Kyiv)*.<sup>20</sup> At the end of 2022 and in February 2023, her work *The Lines* was displayed over the city centres of Berlin and Dresden.<sup>21</sup> Next to a large-scale photograph of the graffiti "Das ist nicht unser Krieg" ("This is not our war"), one of many such examples covering walls in German cities, there is graffiti-like writing by Belorusets, "Das ist mein Krieg" ("This is my war"), where the word "my" is crossed out and written again several times. The artist subverts widespread German pacifism, which calls to stop the war in Ukraine by giving in to the perpetrator, by owning and embodying the war violence, annihilating the comfortable distance that ensures safety and enables judgement.

Words also appear in the works of Kateryna Lysovenko – in her watercolours and paintings – especially from the first months of the war.<sup>22</sup> In the first days of the invasion, she fled Kyiv with her two small children. She drew and painted almost daily, seeking refuge first in Poland, then in Austria. In her works are flattened and schematic human figures, often faceless, standing in mourning; mothers holding and protecting children; dead, shapeless bodies on the ground; erect penises, bloody vaginas, and severed limbs. In one of the works, made in early March 2022, a group

19 Kadan, "Zadachi".

20 Yevgenia Belorusets, *Anfang des Krieges. Tagesbücher aus Kyjiw (The Start of the War: Diary from Kyiv)*, Berlin: Matthes & Seitz Berlin, 2022. In English: Yevgenia Belorusets, *War Diary*, trans. Greg Nissan, New York: New Directions, 2023.

21 Yevgenia Belorusets, "Das ist mein Krieg / It is my war", <https://belorusets.com/work/das-ist-mein-krieg-it-is-my-war> [accessed: 21.03.2023].

22 Kateryna Lysovenko's Instagram handle is @lisovenko\_ekaterina.

of people is sketched next to two dead bodies on the ground, almost shapeless figures, grey and red. “Propaganda of the living world. Stop murder”, is written at the very top of the work (Fig. 3).<sup>23</sup> A desperate cry for help, a document of war crimes, a test of the limits of the language of art, Lysovenko’s works transfer the physical act of screaming onto the flat surface of a canvas, turning the corporeality of pain into the materiality of art.

Figure 2: *I am still alive in Ukraine but it is by accident*



Image by Alevtina Kakhidze, 18 January 2023, 21 x 29.7 cm, felt-tip pens on paper. Image provided courtesy of Alevtina Kakhidze.

23 @lisovenko\_ekaterina (Kateryna Lysovenko), Instagram post, 02 March 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CanbOU2NV6c/> [accessed: 21.03.2023].

Figure 3: Propaganda of the living world. Stop murder

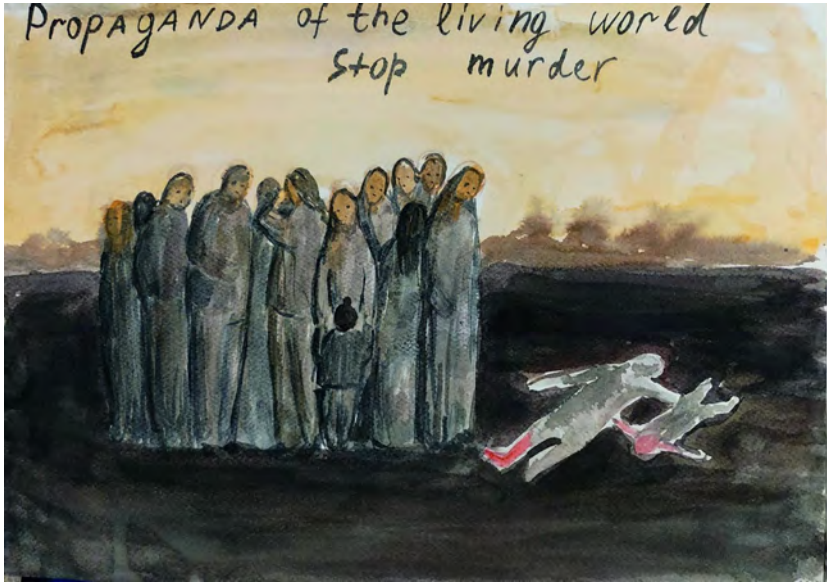


Image by Kateryna Lysovenko, 2022, 30 x 40 cm, watercolour on paper. Image provided courtesy of Kateryna Lysovenko.

One word, “Thank you!” in Ukrainian and Polish, is written and drawn on various sheets of paper by Stanislav Turina, a Ukrainian artist and curator who continuously works with artists with and without Down syndrome. These drawings first appeared in his Facebook album *Kyiv Diary of Mine*, full of pictures from Kyiv in 2022, where he decided to stay and support people with mental disabilities.<sup>24</sup> He calls those thank-you notes ‘checks’ or ‘tear-off coupons’, created to be given away to people who do something beyond gratitude, to whom one can never be thankful enough – from volunteers to people in the army protecting the lives of others. For Turina, materialising gratitude in these coupons is an action, a meeting of the two hands that give each other something important.<sup>25</sup> Through this work, life during the war becomes

24 Stanislav Turina (Facebook profile), *Kyivskiy shchodennyk, mii (Kyiv Diary of Mine)*, Facebook album, <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.5135079163284579&type=3> [accessed: 21.03.2023].

25 Stanislav Turina (Facebook profile), “Za slovamy Valdemara Tatarchuka...” (“According to Waldemar Tatarchuk...”), Facebook post, 29 July 2022, [https://www.facebook.com/stanislav.turina/posts/pfbid02U51ks27bVNxFR3HUdTUPfv3twcw5Eet61LD5C5gzzeJng4xgHnPiUm\)X M7MyyBeil](https://www.facebook.com/stanislav.turina/posts/pfbid02U51ks27bVNxFR3HUdTUPfv3twcw5Eet61LD5C5gzzeJng4xgHnPiUm)X M7MyyBeil) [accessed: 21.03.2023].

a series of such meetings, exchanges of multiple small and big acts of support and care, and desperate attempts to articulate the unspeakable, unutterable.

Is it this need to somehow face the unspeakable violence of the war – possible death or torture, or both – to comprehend stories and images of the atrocities happening in one's country every day since the invasion started that makes the artists in Ukraine resort to visual diaries penetrated by words? Is it the feeling that, in a reality oversaturated with images – from war photography to incalculable photos on social media – a mere image is not enough? Or is it how artists themselves turn into war reporters commissioned by no one but their consciousness?

Following Susan Sontag, Oraib Toukan writes about 'cruel images' – numerous photographs and videos of various war atrocities from the Middle East to Afghanistan and beyond that appear on the screens of mobile phones, laptops, and flatscreens in private and public spaces: "Hundreds slouched on couches in cafés in Amman or Dubai, each buried in a mobile phone casually scrolling through GIFs of disasters in the region. Shisha pipe in mouth, fruit cocktail glass between legs".<sup>26</sup> Her problem with cruel images is that they surpass the faculty of language; it is impossible to verbalise what one has just seen; it is beyond words. On the other hand, what is the point of putting one's feelings of pain, grief, or despair into words if this "is futile to the subject who is experiencing it"?<sup>27</sup> Sontag writes:

Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated. If one feels that there is nothing "we" can do – but who is that "we"? – and nothing "they" can do either – and who are "they"? – then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic.<sup>28</sup>

Compassion and sympathy, Sontag continues, allow distant observers of war crimes being committed elsewhere, separated from faraway sufferers by their screens that allow the illusion of proximity but without compromising safety, to reassure themselves that they are not accomplices to the suffering. But Sontag needs to be asked: who are 'we' and who are 'they'? Because "no 'we' should be taken for granted when the subject looks at other people's pain".<sup>29</sup>

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26 Oraib Toukan, "Cruel Images", *e-flux Journal* 96, 2019, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/96/245037/cruel-images/> [accessed: 21.03.2023].

27 Ibid.

28 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Picador, 2003, 101.

29 Ibid., 7.

## How Images Become Actions

Even though Sontag questions the we–they dichotomy, for her – as for Butler and as for Virginia Woolf, to whose antiwar writing from Francoist Spain Sontag refers at the start of her book – one way or another, ‘we’ are always on the other side of the screen, privileged by the safety of our homes, even if occasionally challenged by trips to warzones.<sup>30</sup> This questioned and reassembled ‘we’ is always the subject empowered by emotions, rarely actions, but certainly judgements. This ‘we’, as in the case of Butler’s analysis of the frames of war, is also capable of standing against the governments that are “waging wars”, and, by disclosing the frames, revealing the mechanism of popular mobilisation in support of the war (being waged elsewhere).<sup>31</sup> But this ‘we’ is not capable of transgressing the line that separates ‘us’ here in safety from ‘them’ there being bombed. Both the gaze and the voice that acknowledge the powerlessness to articulate the impacts of cruelty belong to the large collective ‘we’ that opposes war and suffering. What is left for ‘them’ then?

Even when it is next to impossible to deal with cruel images from a distance, someone still has to deal with them; someone has to articulate them, and someone has to witness them. The imagery one can see in the works of Ukrainian artists is rarely cruel. It is rather the opposite; it’s sublime, intimate, careful, and caring. It is sketchy, fast (or almost fast), and minimalistic. It is often private, very private, like in a blurry photograph of a child sitting in a sunlit room, her face covered with lush, curly hair, by Anna Zvyagintseva, a Ukrainian artist working across various media and known for her subtle and intimate works on human relations. The caption exhibited as a part of the artwork reads: “Air raid sirens sound all around Ukraine now. I didn’t know I could feel hatred so deeply. I saw a photo of a dead kid who had the same hair as my daughter has” (Fig. 4).<sup>32</sup>

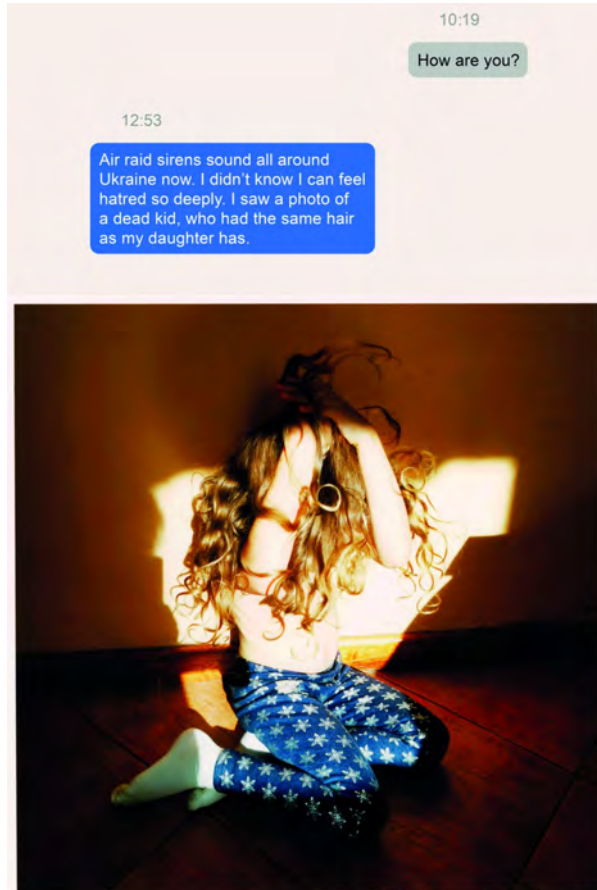
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30 In 1993, during the siege of Sarajevo, Sontag visited the city multiple times and lived there for months. There, she directed *Waiting for Godot*. See also: Susan Sontag, “Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo”, *Performing Arts Journal* 16/2, 1994, 87–106.

31 Butler, *Frames of War*, 17.

32 @zvyagintseva\_anna (Anna Zvyagintseva), “How are you?..”, Instagram post, 19 June 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/Ce\\_txGpt8Sh/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/Ce_txGpt8Sh/?img_index=1) [accessed: 21.03.2023].

Figure 4: *The Same Hair*



Anna Zvyagintseva, 2022, dimensions variable, digital print. Image provided courtesy of Anna Zvyagintseva.

Zvyagintseva's 'I' is about her private pain, fear, grief, and desperation, but it also immediately transgresses to 'we' – of the dead child's family, of people around her, of all the people in Ukraine, going through similar experiences every day, connected in their lack of safety and will to fight. This 'I' immediately flows into the bigger 'we', leaving no question of who these 'we' are. The 'I' starts speaking through the 'we', reappropriating and repossessing their agency and voice; there is no distance between this subject, a collective of individuals, and the atrocities of war. The subject becomes a witness. Here, images and words are already the actions that Sontag wrote about when reflecting upon compassion.

Analysing images during the war and the meaning of sensitive content, Ukrainian researcher Kateryna Iakovlenko presented an example: a photograph that appeared of mass graves that were discovered in the forests around the city of Iziium, de-occupied by the Ukrainian Army in the autumn of 2022. It showed a severely decomposed hand of a murdered Ukrainian soldier with traces of torture on his corpse; the hand had a blue-and-yellow rubber bracelet around its wrist, just like the one many other people, in particular in Iakovlenko's circles, had. This very day, a flash mob took over the pages of social and regular media: people posted pictures of their own hands with the same or similar bracelets, and artists posted drawings. Iakovlenko writes:

When Ukrainians posted the image of the soldier's tortured hand next to pictures of their own hands, they demonstrated the lack of distance between the photograph of the soldier and themselves [...] Such images are taken not by detached witnesses, but by those who experience violence directly. These images then become stories told by the participants themselves. Photography becomes action.<sup>33</sup>

This action is not detached and objective anymore; it is deeply subjective, painful, and emotional. The knowledge that comes through this action is embodied and uncomfortable; it is injured and emancipated.<sup>34</sup> It is rooted and placed deeply inside the war. Those images as actions are not framed from the outside but collectively and carefully assembled in solidarity and support. They frame and reframe themselves daily by setting Butler's 'sensuous parameters' of reality perception wider and wider. These images, as actions, as witness bearers, as evidence, redefine the language used to speak about the war by placing the speaking subject right in the middle of not just the war and violence but the liberating struggle to save and protect lives, where there is no more 'they', only 'we'.

Or, rather, 'we' and 'they' switch roles. Now the uncomfortable, burdensome, unsafe 'we' say to the safe and distantly watching 'they' (who nevertheless did not renounce the decision-making powers) the words written with the large black capital letters on one of Kadan's works: "We Are the Price".<sup>35</sup>

33 Kateryna Iakovlenko, "Exactly That Body: Images against Oppression", *e-flux Journal* 113, 2023, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/133/517485/exactly-that-body-images-against-oppression/> [accessed: 21.02.2023].

34 "Following decolonial, feminist and other critical scholars, we need to recentre embodied and uncomfortable knowledge, knowledge as a burden, knowledge as an injury and knowledge as emancipation". Darya Tsybalyuk, "Academia Must Recentre Embodied and Uncomfortable Knowledge", *Nature Human Behaviour* 6, 2022, 758–759.

35 @nikita.kadan (Nikita Kadan), Instagram post, 03 April 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb45TQJNNis/> [accessed: 21.03.2023].

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# Images in Spite of What? Russian War and Ukrainian Images

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Bohdan Shumylovych

“When images disappear, words and feelings also disappear.”  
Georges Didi-Huberman<sup>1</sup>

In the 1930s, Jean-Paul Sartre made a distinction between an image as a thing (or representation) and an image as an act (or gesture).<sup>2</sup> Sartre compared three ways the same object can be accessible to consciousness: imagining, perceiving, and thinking.<sup>3</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, who regularly mentions Sartre in his own writings, acknowledges that: “To speak of an image without imagination means literally to cut the image off from its activity, from its dynamics”.<sup>4</sup> Such a distinction between the image’s phenomenology (appearance), which is grasped by perception, and semiotics (meaning), accessible through thinking (and imagination), would be often discussed in the second half of the 20th century.

The Aristotelian distinction between ‘substance’ and ‘form’<sup>5</sup> prompted some scholars to introduce a more intricate differentiation between the signifier and the signified in a sign. For instance, Louis Hjelmslev delineated the ‘substance’ and the ‘form’ of the signifier: in the context of a painted image, this distinction can allude to the physical attributes of the work (such as the material it is made of, like paper, paint, or digital elements) and its formal characteristics, such as

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1 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012, 84.

2 *Ibid.*, 113.

3 Lior Levy, “Rethinking the Relationship Between Memory and Imagination in Sartre’s *the Imaginary*”, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 43/2, January 2012, 143–160, here 144.

4 Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 113.

5 Wilfrid Sellars, “I. Substance and Form in Aristotle”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 54/22, 1957, 688–699, here 689.

composition and arrangement.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the content of such a sign-image also possesses dual dimensions: its substance pertains to the imagination (personal) or the imaginary (social), while the form of content can be understood through concepts like iconography or discourse.

Although this text does not consistently analyse the form, content, and interpretation of war images and does not enter into a semiotic interpretation of the visible plan of images, I could not avoid thinking about the substance and form of expression and the subject (content) of this expression. The urgency of war (and dealing with personal shock) and thinkers such as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Sartre, and Didi-Huberman stimulated me to make a personal list of images (a small collection of visual testimonies of war<sup>7</sup>) that Ukrainians started to post on social media after 23 February 2022. As I scrolled through my Facebook and Instagram feeds, I noticed an increasing number of images responding to war. Images of war were entering my consciousness through perception and imagination, and they made me think. On social media, these images were not objects or physical forms that we usually perceive in galleries or museums, but rather gestures (like in Sartre's definition) that tried to bridge the distance, enter the mind, and create a situation of the presence of distress and grief.

Indeed, social media platforms have played a significant role in various aspects of the Russo–Ukrainian War. They have been used by activists to mobilise support, share news, and raise awareness about the situation on the ground. Emerson Brooking claims that people experience the war “very viscerally through social media feeds” and that the transformation of Ukraine into a nation at war was stark, which has especially resonated with audiences.<sup>8</sup> Moved by Didi-Huberman's insights, I have made a deliberate effort to approach these images not solely as historical evidence but as dynamic entities, active participants, and expressions that acted within the Ukrainian social imaginary. I have come to recognise that these images hold more than just a record of past events; they possess the potential

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- 6 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004, 14.
- 7 As a university lecturer, in spring of 2022, I encouraged students to collect various testimonies of the war, which resulted in a book; see: Bohdan Shumylovych and Magdalena Zolkos (eds.), *Psychosocial and Cultural Perspectives on the War in Ukraine: Imprints and Dreamscapes*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2024. I also kept a war diary and often saved social media posts, and these observations resulted in a collection of images, some of which I discuss in this text. Diaries of war are available online at the Lviv Center for Urban History. See the project: Lviv Center for Urban History, “Two Months of War: Diaries and Ego-documents”, <https://uma.lvivcenter.org/en/collections/178/interviews> [accessed: 15.06.2024].
- 8 Megan Specia, “‘Like a Weapon’: Ukrainians Use Social Media to Stir Resistance”, *The New York Times*, 25 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/25/world/europe/ukraine-war-social-media.html?smid=url-share> [accessed: 15.06.2024].

to play various roles: from powerful agents that engage with the world to thought-provoking gestures. These images transcend their role as static representations of history; instead, they become meaningful contributors to the evolving collective consciousness. Embracing this perspective, I firmly believe that images of war have the power to evoke emotions (the plane of perception) and spark dialogue (the plane of thinking), and their influence extends beyond the immediate moment of their creation, entering the collective imaginary.

Over ten years ago, Didi-Huberman delved into four photographs captured in Auschwitz-Birkenau, investigating the complexities surrounding the representation and comprehension of historical trauma through images. He meticulously explored the ethical and aesthetic considerations tied to employing images as symbols for the unfathomable horrors of the Holocaust, and he questioned the ability of images to fully convey the depth of suffering and trauma endured by the victims. However, while reflecting on our understanding of the past, he astutely observed that to know honestly, we must also engage our capacity for imagination: “In order to know, we must imagine as well”.<sup>9</sup> Seeing the image requires recognition, and here Didi-Huberman makes a distinction between “a certain knowledge of what is represented and an uncertain recognition of what is seen”.<sup>10</sup> Knowledge refers to understanding or awareness of what is being represented, while recognition implies a more uncertain or subjective process of perceiving and acknowledging what is seen. It suggests that there may be a gap between what we intellectually know about a representation and the emotional or intuitive recognition of what is depicted.<sup>11</sup>

This dilemma between knowledge (awareness) and recognition (understanding) was behind my selection of images of rape that appeared on my Facebook feed in the spring of 2022. I was haunted by these images and often recalled Didi-Huberman's idea<sup>12</sup> that what we see can become what sees us – as if these images were gazing at me, even if I was not looking at them.<sup>13</sup> I sensed that these images were symptomatic, visually representing a horrifying reality that was difficult for me to grasp. I felt compelled to understand or recognise what these images conveyed, since they

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9 Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 84.

10 *Ibid.*, 86.

11 Some visual testimonies of the crimes of the Russian war against Ukraine gained international recognition in 2024, becoming an important part of the collective imaginary. See: Abbey Fenbert, “20 Days in Mariupol’ Wins Oscar for Best Documentary”, *The Kyiv Independent*, 11 March 2024, <https://kyivindependent.com/mariupol-draft/> [accessed: 01.06.2024].

12 Kathia Hanza, “Images and Symptoms: Georges Didi-Huberman's Studies on Art”, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 45/1–2, 2014, 38–48, here 42.

13 Here, it is important to also mention W. J. T. Mitchell's agency of images, see: W. J. T. Mitchell, “What Do Pictures ‘Really’ Want?”, *October* 77, 1996, 71–82.

are semiotic entities situated between a historical event and a signifying structure,<sup>14</sup> resulting in ambiguity. Although I accepted that hermeneutic deciphering of such images might prove futile, I still felt driven to attempt to understand if my beholding of images has characteristics of presence.<sup>15</sup> Their symbolic nature presented a challenge, and I wanted to engage with them in hopes of gaining a deeper understanding.

In my endeavour to write about images of rape, I found myself grappling with the distinction between the ‘unimaginable’ and the ‘unrepresentable’. The unimaginable pertains to events or experiences that lie beyond our comprehension or ability to conceive, often due to their extreme or traumatic nature, much like the Holocaust. On the other hand, the unrepresentable implies that these unimaginable experiences cannot be adequately captured or conveyed through conventional means of representation, such as language or imagery. It suggests a limitation in our ability to express or fully understand certain aspects of traumatic events. I am not comparing images of the Russo–Ukrainian War and images of the Holocaust analysed by Didi-Huberman, which were produced ‘in spite of all’. But if images of rape are not made ‘in spite of all’, if they are not acts (Sartre’s gestures) of resistance against the real, what are they? Images in spite of what? In my further deliberations, I suggest that these are images that defy death – they are made in spite of death and oblivion – and, in this regard, they constitute human acts of resistance, gestures of remembrance, and commemoration of the committed violence.

On 2 March 2022, right after the battle of Kyiv started, artist Kateryna Lysovenko, who had to stay in a shelter with her two children, wrote that she felt like she was “a moving cemetery”.<sup>16</sup> This quotation is part of a short text accompanied by a sad image of a naked mother with a child in her arms, standing in the darkness of a mystical landscape where trees are interspersed with images of destroyed houses. When the battle for the capital was over and the massive atrocities of Russian soldiers, who left the town of Bucha on 31 March, were discovered,<sup>17</sup> many

14 Magdalena Krasieńska, “The Convergence of Phenomenology and Semiotics in Georges Didi-Huberman’s Aesthetics of the Symptom”, *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics* 49/2, 2018, 27–40, here 29.

15 Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 57.

16 @lysovenko\_kateryna (Kateryna Lysovenko), “[...] I Am Now a Moving Cemetery”, Instagram post, 09 March 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca4daUPNVFr/> [accessed: 15.06.2024].

17 Bethan McKernan, “Rape as a Weapon: Huge Scale of Sexual Violence Inflicted in Ukraine Emerges”, *The Guardian*, 04 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/03/al-l-wars-are-like-this-used-as-a-weapon-of-war-in-ukraine> [accessed: 15.06.2024]; and Viktor Ponomariov and Angelina Kariakina, “33 dni okupatsiyi Buchi: shcho vidbuvaetsia u misti pislia zvilnennia” (“33 Days of Bucha’s Occupation: What’s Happening in the City after Liberation”), *Suspilne (Society)*, 05 April 2022, <https://suspilne.media/224880-33-dni-okupacii-buc-i-so-vidbuvaetsia-u-misti-pisla-zvilnenna/> [accessed: 15.06.2024].

Ukrainian artists were shocked. Lysovenko responded to her mediated experience of wartime rapes<sup>18</sup> with an image that was made public on 13 April 2022, entitled *true love of a Russian soldier* (Fig. 5).<sup>19</sup> This image was published both on Instagram and Facebook and shows the naked body of a man making love to a human skeleton, as if a Russian man's living body penetrated a Ukrainian woman's already dead body. For me, it is one of the most striking images (accompanied by a text) of rape I have ever seen.

Figure 5: *true love of a Russian soldier*



Image by Kateryna Lysovenko, acrylic on canvas, 13 April 2022. Image provided courtesy of Kateryna Lysovenko.

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- 18 At that time, she had already moved to Poland with her two children and a cat, so she mainly learnt about the situation in Ukraine from the news and social media.
- 19 @lysovenko\_kateryna (Kateryna Lysovenko), *true love of a Russian soldier*, Instagram post, 13 April 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcSzU3ANnT7/> [accessed: 15.06.2024].

As a displaced mother experiencing the war through media channels, Lysovenko felt compelled to speak out, particularly when addressing the sensitive and critical issue of rape. Immediately following the full-scale invasion, Lysovenko became actively engaged in posting anti-war images, including the series titled *They can repeat*.<sup>20</sup> In this series, she responded to a slogan used in Russian propaganda, *mozhem povtorit* (we can repeat), which constantly emphasised the Russian army's capability to 'repeat' the actions of the Soviet army.<sup>21</sup> Lysovenko employed the same image depicting a violated woman alongside a child with the caption: "A raped and murdered woman, and her murdered child". However, she cleverly modified the captions to read "in Ukraine 2022", "in Ukraine 2014", "in Georgia 2008", and "in Chechnya 1994–1996".<sup>22</sup> The underlying message conveyed that throughout these incidents all the Russians had 'repeated' were acts of killing and raping innocent civilians.

In May 2022, Lysovenko created another image titled *These boys*,<sup>23</sup> featuring naked men (boys?) with erect and bloodied penises. Whether by titling the images, adding explanations, or playing with individual words (such as boys/men), Lysovenko tries to expand the form and substance of her depictions of violence; she extends and, at the same time, narrows the possible connotations. Adding further meaning through specific language use and contextual framing, personal or artistic visual expressions, like those in public media, have the power to either amplify or downplay the conveyed horror via titling or commentary.<sup>24</sup> By modifying the form of Hjelmslev's signifier, Lysovenko expands its substance, and this results in more ambiguous content for the images.<sup>25</sup>

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20 @lysovenko\_kateryna (Kateryna Lysovenko), *They can repeat*, Instagram post, 30 March 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CbvcoD2NaA3/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/CbvcoD2NaA3/?img_index=1) [accessed: 15.06.2024].

21 In official Russian discourse, the phrase "we can do it again" implies a warning and the ability to defeat the enemy (as in the case of the Soviet war against German Nazism), but in the popular field of memes and social media, this expression refers to the notion of Russian power and imperial dominance, including domination over neighbours or conquered peoples.

22 @lysovenko\_kateryna, *They can repeat*.

23 @lysovenko\_kateryna (Kateryna Lysovenko), *These boys*, Instagram post, 20 May 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/Cdxk\\_UuNx6k/](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cdxk_UuNx6k/) [accessed: 15.06.2024].

24 See similar arguments in: Tal Morse, "Shooting the Dead: Images of Death, Inclusion and Exclusion in the Israeli Press", in: Michele Aaron (ed.), *Envisaging Death: Visual Culture and Dying*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, 140–156, here 144.

25 Louis Hjelmslev distinguished between the 'substance' (watercolour) and 'form' (visual arrangement of elements) of the signifier (here, an image of rape), and the 'substance' (a personal imagination or social imaginary) and 'form' (iconography or discourse of violence) of the signified. When I say that by 'modifying the form' of the signifier the author 'expands the substance' of the signified, I mean that the text–image relations in the form of expression create opportunities to broaden the content field of the analysed images.

Figure 6: rape



Image by Vlada Ralko from the series *Lviv Diary*, watercolour, ball-point pen, and marker on paper, 29.7 cm x 21 cm, 4 April 2022. Image provided courtesy of Vlada Ralko.

Another female artist, Vlada Ralko, who had to flee Kyiv – escaping from the war – and briefly settled in Lviv, in western Ukraine, presented a similar mediated experience of war. After Bucha’s atrocities became widely known, on 4 April, she published on Facebook a drawing titled *rape* (Figs. 6 and 7), which was part of a series that Ralko calls *Lviv Diary* (using the hashtag #львівськийщоденник).<sup>26</sup> The picture has two dominant colours, red and black, and shows a fragment of the human body

26 Vlada Ralko (Facebook profile), *Gvalt (Rape)*, Facebook post, 04 April 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4725916647536323&set=pcb.4725917910869530> [accessed: 15.06.2024].

– namely, the legs – which seems to be torn off from the body and turned upside down. Ralko would repeat this iconography later, in May 2022, but the image still has an inscribed title, the striking word ‘rape’, which floats on the upper side of a drawing (Fig. 7).<sup>27</sup> Many Ukrainian artists in the spring of 2022 made drawings or paintings depicting human bodies, whole or dismembered. In early May 2022, art critic Kateryna Botanova wrote that “bodies, shapeless ones looking more like outlines or abstract figurines or more definitively feminine, are one of the main symbols in the imagery of this war”.<sup>28</sup>

On 14 April, just a day after Lysovenko posted her watercolour of rape on social media, a male artist from Lviv, Danylo Movchan, posted on Facebook a watercolour called *RUSSIAN RAPES UKRAINIAN WOMAN* (Fig. 8).<sup>29</sup> Even though the title strongly connotes human violence, the image shows a less ferocious representation. The work displays two bodies, one in pink (a sign of life) and the other in dark blue (a symbol of death),<sup>30</sup> which practically do not touch each other. The man, who does not even look at his victim, touches the female body with his hand, and the main sign of rape is an erection, although the penis is pointing in the opposite direction from the female body. The scene shows a rape in which even an undesirable touch provokes suffering and infects the female body with the poison of death and sorrow. Movchan’s image follows the visual conventions of religious icon painting, where figures are calm, as if eternal and solemn. But visuals are not enough for the author; he compensates for the lack of dramatic expression in visuals by indicating the brutality of the depicted scene through the title in capital letters.

Image–text relations are crucial for all works considered above. For Lysovenko, inscribed texts and titles are not denotative but rather expand possible interpretations. Ralko, as she shared in an interview with me, contemplates her visual diary as a sort of ‘writing’, a language that is rooted (in her perception) in the philosophy of the Cynics (*kynikos*), where a question may seem like an accusation or a provocation but not the explanation.<sup>31</sup> She is interested in bringing meaning to words, opposing poisonous imitative language in which lies can cover crimes. Therefore, she rarely uses sentences but rather single words, which themselves work as signifiers. If Movchan poses his verbal statements as a dialogue with the other (the viewer) or

27 Vlada Ralko (Facebook profile), *Gvalt (Rape)*, Facebook post, 19 May, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4844417622352891&set=a.177678712360162> [accessed: 15.06.2024].

28 Kateryna Botanova, “Defined by Silence”, *Eurozine*, 06 May 2022, <https://www.eurozine.com/defined-by-silence/> [accessed: 15.06.2024].

29 Danylo Movchan (Facebook profile), *ROSSIANYN GVALTUJE UKRAINSKU ZHINKU (RUSSIAN RAPES UKRAINIAN WOMAN)*, Facebook post, 14 April 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=7975843979108119&set=pb.100000477875902.-2207520000> [accessed: 15.06.2024].

30 Danylo Movchan, interview with the author, in person, 29 November 2022.

31 Vlada Ralko, interview with the author, in person, 29 November 2022.

explains what is visible and condemns the enemy with his words, Ralko practises philosophical questioning of the self. She states that her work as an artist is a comprehension and contemplation of her choice, which seems to be a closed dialogue with herself. This choice “is based on such a dialogue, where the question of principles requires an answer of responsibility”, while questioning and responsibility in an extended visual cycle become a continuity, a constant action.<sup>32</sup>

Figure 7: rape



Image by Vlada Ralko from the series *Lviv Diary*, watercolour, ball-point pen, and marker on paper, 29.7 cm x 21 cm, 4 April 2022. Image provided courtesy of Vlada Ralko.

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32 Ralko, interview.

Figure 8: RUSSIAN RAPES UKRAINIAN WOMAN



Image by Danylo Movchan, watercolour on paper, 40 cm x 35 cm, 14 April 2022. Image provided courtesy of Danylo Movchan.

Many more images of violence against women were produced by Ukrainian artists in the first months of the war, and they circulated publicly. Specific images depict more typical scenes of violence, wherein women are bound and encircled by military men.<sup>33</sup> For instance, Lina Chanturiia portrayed a woman with her hands

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33 @iamkinderalbum (Album Kinder), *Russian soldiers rape women in Ukrainian cities*, Instagram post, 25 March 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca9MUMPN\\_mb/](https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca9MUMPN_mb/) [accessed: 15.06.2024].

tied, drawing attention to her genitals covered in red paint while other parts of her body or face are largely concealed.<sup>34</sup> This image presents a depiction of a vulnerable (and generalised) naked female who appears to be in distress and unable to protect herself as her hands are tied. On the other hand, some images take a more abstract approach, aiming to explore and portray the experience of rape in a less 'conventional' manner, seeking to visualise the pain it inflicts.

The images of war and violence against civilians are hardly imitative or mimetic in nature, and although we know what is shown, the image functions more as a gesture that refers to broader meanings. Authors want to comprehend the violence; they aspire to communicate these acts through visual expressions, as if filling the gap between knowing and understanding. As forms of symbolic resistance, the images of rape function as 'egodocuments' (for instance, diaries), and, at the same time, they aim to oppose rapists' imaginations. The rape of women and men by Russian soldiers is seen as a threat to society as a whole, and, in this way, the uncomfortable and disturbing images of rape help bring the community together through the condemnation of the enemy.

As many academic studies<sup>35</sup> and media reports<sup>36</sup> show, rape as a weapon is as old as war itself. Among the possible objectives of a rapist is to "humiliate and degrade, to break the spirit of defenders, to shatter families and communities, to instil a sense of hopelessness and despair".<sup>37</sup> Among the things that distinguish rapes in wartime from those that take place in peacetime is their imaginary dimension. Scholars explain peacetime rape as a dichotomy between the (psychosocial) fantasies of the rapist and the social stigmatisation of the victim, which is expressed in terms of social ethics.<sup>38</sup> War greatly extends the space for imagining rape because it becomes a part of specific violent scenarios, including an instrument of genocide.<sup>39</sup>

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- 34 Lina Chanturiiia (Facebook profile), "Bil' z serii 'Viina'" ("Pain' from the series 'War'"), Facebook post, 07 April 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4789947727797993&set=a.1407701596022640> [accessed: 15.06.2024].
- 35 Marta Havryshko, "Zbroia viiny: seksualne nasylstvo rosiyskykh viyskovykh v Ukraini" ("Weapons of War: Sexual Violence by the Russian Military in Ukraine"), *Commons*, 27 February 2023, <https://commons.com.ua/uk/seksualne-nasilstvo-rosijskih-vijskovih-v-ukrayinu/> [accessed: 15.06.2024].
- 36 McKernan, "Rape as a Weapon".
- 37 Laura King, "Russia's 'Most Hidden Crime' in Ukraine War: Rape of Women, Girls, Men and Boys", *Los Angeles Times*, 21 August 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-08-21/russias-most-hidden-crime-in-ukraine-war-rape> [accessed: 15.06.2024].
- 38 Raphaëlle Branche et al., "Writing the History of Rape in Wartime", in: Raphaëlle Branche and Fabrice Virgili (eds.), *Rape in Wartime*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 1–16, here 9.
- 39 Doris E. Buss, "Rethinking 'Rape as a Weapon of War'", *Feminist Legal Studies* 17/2, 2009, 145–163, here 147; and Nicola Henry, Tony Ward, and Matt Hirshberg, "A Multifactorial Model of Wartime Rape", *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 9/5, 2004, 535–562.

For instance, research suggests that deindividuation, which causes the lack of empathy for victims, is more influential when people are in uniform (armed and uniformed rapists), and the diffusion of responsibility increases when a rapist has a group identification, like in the military.<sup>40</sup> Militarism, a characteristic arrogance among aggressors, shapes attitudes, norms, and beliefs often conducive to sexual aggression.

Ukrainian officials believe that the Russian promotion of terrorism against civilians was sanctioned at the highest levels because rape is among the instruments of subjugation and domination.<sup>41</sup> The Russian president publicly used the infamous quote “Like it or not, my beauty, you have to put up with it”, which comes from Russian popular culture and men’s (prison) ‘jokes’ about rape.<sup>42</sup> This act was a public threat to Ukraine, and the fear of rape provided an extended symbolic and even a metaphorical register for talking about domination. Putin often frames his machismo<sup>43</sup> and militarism with rape-culture discourses.<sup>44</sup> In such a discourse, to loot and ‘rape’ a country in its incarnation as a woman or man is close to the “symbolic soiling of the nation”, the act of dominance.<sup>45</sup>

Pictures of violence, especially posted on social media or on personal blogs, played a vital role in common mobilisation for war (especially in 2022), crystallising the fear of the enemy and serving to reveal its ruthless cruelty. Images of sexual violence became metaphors for invasion and occupation; they called for fighting and resistance. They were predominantly not conceived as acts of aesthetic expression because, in the first phase of the war, the shock was stronger than art. During the war’s first two months, many people in Ukraine were stunned and attuned to the media, searching for information and avoiding everything that could distract them from reality. One artist commented in April 2022 that even if people were not suffering bombardment or occupation, they still experienced the war: “Almost all

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40 Henry, Ward, and Hirshberg, “A Multifactorial Model of Wartime Rape”, 551.

41 King, “Russia’s ‘Most Hidden Crime’ in Ukraine War”.

42 Chris Jewers, “Putin Accused of Making Rape Joke about Ukraine during Conference with Macron amid Invasion Fears”, *Daily Mail Online*, 08 February 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10490623/Putin-accused-making-rape-joke-Ukraine-calling-country-beauty.html> [accessed: 14.06.2024].

43 Marko Dumančić, “Putin-Era Machismo and Anti-Feminism in Historical Perspective”, *Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia Blog*, 20 October 2021, <https://jordanrussiacenter.org/news/putin-era-machismo-and-anti-feminism-in-historical-perspective/> [accessed: 14.06.2024].

44 Nathan Hodge, “Putin’s Use of Crude Language Reveals a Lot about His Worldview”, *CNN*, 08 February 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/08/europe/putin-coarse-remarks-ukraine-intl/index.html> [accessed: 15.06.2024]; and Tom Parfitt, “Putin Praises Sexual Prowess of Israeli President”, *The Guardian*, 20 October 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/oct/20/russia.tomparfitt> [accessed: 14.06.2024].

45 Branche and Virgili, *Rape in Wartime*, 108.

emotions are militarized, almost everything that is not about war does not arouse interest or empathy”.<sup>46</sup> People who stayed in Ukraine during the war and those who escaped felt constant tension. Periods of concentration and mobilisation were followed by phases of decline and exhaustion, and, for many, the only way to work and live ‘normally’ meant moving somewhere. As the artist Olya Fedorova claims, one cannot persistently be a fighter or a warrior: “You need to regain your vulnerability, your ability to feel something”.<sup>47</sup>

Alla Petrenko-Lysak, Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, asserts that she could not watch films in late February and March 2022. She admits that listening to music or watching movies in the first month of war was impossible since her consciousness was continuously on alert: “I needed to listen to what is around me so I would not miss the alarm sound behind my apartment window”.<sup>48</sup> Immersing herself in watching movies or reading a book could distract her from reality, and she could return to usual cultural practices only in April 2022. Olha Yaskevych, a psychotherapist and an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the Ukrainian Catholic University, comments that it is normal for a person to be fixated on reality when external forces endanger their ego or self. If one is set in the current situation, it gives the illusion of control. Reading a book or watching a film in a time of danger may take a person into an imaginary reality with scattered attention, which is perceived (almost on the level of corporeality) as unsafe and may even cause nausea.<sup>49</sup>

The fear of losing connection to reality and the need to be in the here and now explains why social media was crucial for many artists in the first months of the war. The flow of social media allowed artists to produce public visual or textual diaries instead of complex artworks. Botanova, who made a short overview of artistic practices in the spring of 2022, acknowledged that many artworks were “mostly meant as notes to oneself, semi-public diaries available on social media, a regular exercise in seeing and feeling without a chance to escape”.<sup>50</sup> Certainly, numerous artists have created images akin to diaries and snapshots of historical moments, crafting visual records and messages as responses to media reality or to preserve the memory of significant war events.

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46 Ivan Chernickin, “‘It’s a Dream Now – Just to See Each Other, Just to Live’. Ukrainian Artists Show Their Art Depicting the War”, *Zaborona*, 28 April 2022, <https://zaborona.com/en/ukrainian-artists-show-their-art-depicting-the-war/> [accessed: 14.06.2024].

47 Olya Fedorova, Dana Kavelina, and Monika Fabijanska, “Two Ukrainian artists talk about making art during wartime, the importance of vulnerability, and who writes history”, *Bomb*, 15 September 2022, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/olia-fedorova-and-dana-kavelina/> [accessed: 14.06.2024].

48 Alla Petrenko-Lysak, interview with the author, in person, 18 January 2023.

49 Olha Yaskevych, interview with the author, in person, 18 January 2023.

50 Botanova, “Defined by Silence”.

For historians, such records and notes are called egodocuments, referring to autobiographical writing, such as memoirs, diaries, letters, and travel accounts. The term was coined around 1955 by Jacques Presser, who defined egodocuments as writing in which the ‘I’ is continuously present in the text.<sup>51</sup> According to Presser, egodocuments have an open border with art,<sup>52</sup> so it is difficult to establish the limits of the term since everything could become an egodocument. Artists document their own lives, thoughts, feelings, and identities, providing viewers with insights into their inner worlds. Just like traditional egodocuments such as diaries or autobiographies, visual works capture moments in a person’s life, serving as a form of self-expression and self-representation. The above-mentioned visual works document historical events, war, and violence, offering valuable insights into the period and context in which they were created.

Some historians would ask, however, to what extent egodocuments, consciously or unconsciously, differ from actual deeds and thoughts. How reliable is human memory or imagination, and how trustworthy are the authors? Presser alleges egodocuments represent feelings and emotions connected to specific events: “They are conditions of vision, and spirit can see nothing not focused in some living eye”.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the person’s memory or artist’s imagination can never create a replication of the past or a fair registration of life since we know that people shape a fictive ‘I’ and, from that personality, they assess life experiences, especially if these experiences are heavily mediated. The blurred boundary between the historical egodocument and fiction is essential in my argument, since a work of art could be treated as a form of imagination or creativity and, at the same time, as a diary and eyewitness of history. Posted on social media, images of war rape were acts of resistance and egodocuments – gestures and testimonies at the same time.

Discussing the specificity of egodocuments, Presser observed that fictionalising in the visual document is no crime since truth is essential (objective documentation), while truthfulness (imagination) is no less. Egodocuments are inherently subjective, offering a personal perspective on events and experiences. They serve as a bridge between the individual’s inner world and the external reality they navigate. In this context, truth refers to the accurate depiction of events, dates, and facts, whereas truthfulness relates to the authenticity of the personal experience, emotions, and insights conveyed by the author. Images of war, like dreams, are important because they function as a reflection of real life; they include the conscious experience of life. Mediatized instances of violence and rapes of Ukrainian civilians, perpetrated

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51 Arianne Baggerman and Rudolf Dekker, “Jacques Presser, Egodocuments and the Personal Turn in Historiography”, *The European Journal of Life Writing* 7, 2018, 90–110, here 90.

52 For instance, he gave examples of music, such as Bedřich Smetana’s string quartet “From My Life” (1876) or Leoš Janáček’s “Intimate Letters” (1928).

53 Baggerman and Dekker, “Jacques Presser, Egodocuments”, 96.

by Russian soldiers in the spring of 2022, caused not only public outrage. One of my students, Siania K., recorded in her diary a dream that took place when images of war were posted on social media networks and newspapers or magazines were reporting massive instances of rapes of civilians:

In my dream, we came to my grandma to celebrate Easter in Kolomyia. We invited some guests. But they called and said they would not come. Because the police were driving around the city looking for rape victims, raped by Russian soldiers. I was one of the victims. My mother told me that I had experienced violence and must inform the police. She said this in her regular voice. The day was very sunny.<sup>54</sup>

Another student, Liuda B., recalled that she saw in her dream a big supermarket in her hometown occupied by Russians, with a big sign: “Rape is allowed”.<sup>55</sup> Such instances of rape appearing in the dreams of Ukrainians were probably caused by the media and the spread of information. But in both cases, visual expressions posted on Facebook and narrated or recorded dreams can be treated as egodocuments of war. Reinhard Koselleck, while arguing that such egodocuments are recorded dreams, stated that historical reality takes its place from the split of two fundamental dimensions. The present is stored in the ‘space of experience’, both conscious and unconscious. Still, reality also intersects with a ‘horizon of expectation’, something that has not yet been experienced but which we can feel or desire.<sup>56</sup> Koselleck argued that fiction or art is about possible and viable eventualities that control the imaginary. In this sense, aesthetic experience is like a dream, influencing us even if we cannot clearly define it.

An image (in the form of a painting or drawing) holds a social dimension – it is shared, received, and interpreted in a particular manner. Its perception is intertwined with awareness and observation. Conversely, a dreamt image does not seek to be understood. Dreaming entails a sense of isolation, which, consequently, grants the dreamer a powerful gaze. Didi-Huberman stresses that paintings (or other fictional images) are, of course, not dreams: “We see them with open eyes, but this may be what hinders us and makes us miss something in them”.<sup>57</sup> The value of images produced as egodocuments is that, like diaries, interviews, audio recordings, video testimonies, movies, or books, they are the source of the history unfolding before our eyes. Robert Harvey indicates that “seeing clearly and effectively into the eye of

54 Siania K., Diary, Lviv Center for Urban History, 19 April 2022, Lviv, Ukraine [author’s trans.].

55 Liuda B., Diary, Lviv Center for Urban History, 17 November 2023, Lviv, Ukraine [author’s trans.].

56 Reinhard Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, 255.

57 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman, University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2005, 156.

history requires far more participation than just that of the direct witnesses”,<sup>58</sup> because when artists find themselves amid war, whether near the battlefield or in exile, they encounter the initial moment of the Kantian sublime, evoked by the imminent threat to life.<sup>59</sup> Ralko, who often calls her visual war series ‘diaries’, did intend to make art in the early phases of war; she was searching for a sign of life in solitude:

I started my so-called diary series when I encountered something that completely turned my idea of certain things upside down or threw me into a space where I was alone. It’s when the obviousness of familiar places or common meanings leaves you, and you seem to have to move without landmarks in a minefield.<sup>60</sup>

The horror of war generates silence; it causes mutism and an inability to find words, so one needs to reinvent the meaning of words, which is lost to horrifying reality. Transparent language<sup>61</sup> cannot represent the silence, the absence, which requires muteness. However, the image has the power to represent nothingness since it is nothing by nature; its fundamental function is to present something that is absent. According to Sartre, imagination is the epitome of human freedom since it allows consciousness to detach itself from experience and negate reality.<sup>62</sup> Speech and the text written on the image (as in the above-mentioned cases) obviously have different functions, and we can assume that although many artists experienced mutism at the beginning of the war, they could express the invisible (and unspeakable) through the combination of words and images. This allowed the use of indexical and iconic signification (image) together with the denotative power of words.

We can accept that fictional images by Ukrainian artists posted on social media in the early phase of the military invasion constituted a nonverbal experience (imagination) combined with (visual) words, being more an expression or a gesture, or as Ralko affirms: “A series of many drawings became a chance for me to overcome numbness”.<sup>63</sup> Even though she managed to escape from her native city of Kyiv to a safer location, she still felt humiliated. Humiliation is a coercive state of immobility (as if someone binds your body), which induces irrational thoughts and renders one

58 Robert Harvey, “Eyes Wide Open: What the Eye of History Compels Us to Do”, *Angelaki* 23/4, 2018, 91–102, here 92; See also: Stijn De Cauwer and Laura Katherine Smith (eds.), *Critical Image Configurations: The Work of Georges Didi-Huberman*, London: Routledge, 2021.

59 The idea of sublime combines both fear and beauty. See: Terrence Des Pres, “Terror and the Sublime”, *Human Rights Quarterly* 5/2, 1983, 135–146; and Thomas Huhn, “The Kantian Sublime and the Nostalgia for Violence”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53/3, 1995, 269–275.

60 Ralko, interview.

61 Here, I refer to neutral language, which supposedly can describe reality, and Vlada Ralko doubts that words could precisely describe what was happening and what she observed.

62 Levy, “Rethinking the Relationship”, 143.

63 Ralko, interview.

speechless or numb.<sup>64</sup> Humiliated by the war, Ukrainian artists, for a specific moment, could not look into ‘the eye of history’<sup>65</sup>; they could only imagine, and what they imagined was humiliation.

Images of rape posted in the early spring of 2022 represent stories and events of violence that had not yet been culturally processed or could not be fully identified at that time. The media’s role in disseminating these images brought immediate visibility to the atrocities, yet also highlighted the challenges of contextualising and processing such raw trauma. The Italian novelist Italo Calvino stressed once that media transforms the world into images:

These are images stripped of the inner inevitability that ought to mark every image as form and as meaning, as a claim on the attention and as a source of possible meanings. Much of this cloud of visual images fades at once, like the dreams that leave no trace in the memory, but what does not fade is a feeling of alienation and discomfort.<sup>66</sup>

But, at the same time, these fictional images of rape and violence are different from ‘media images’; they ought not to fade. Images of rape constitute mediated and, nevertheless, actual, embodied experiences of war, and they need to persist – at least in culture and memory.

For many, war violence became present and known due to media, often integrated by the persons’ bodies and expressed through images or dreams. The bodies of image makers and the bodies of viewers also became sites of trauma. The visceral nature of visual representation evokes a bodily response, highlighting the physical and emotional toll of the violence. Dreams and artistic expressions that incorporate these traumatic images can serve as symbolic representations of underlying fear, pain, and confusion. These forms of expression can be therapeutic, offering a way to process and make sense of the trauma.

While traumatic historical experience requires the production of meaning, language, and a narrative to explain and assuage it, aesthetic experience deals with the discomfort that no description (at least not one that conforms to conventional models) can represent or atone for the trauma. Ralko clarifies: “It’s even hard for me to recognise this image-making as a practice because, in such periods, it seems that I can’t do anything, I don’t know anything, and I’m doing something that no one needs but me [...] but at least I’m talking”.<sup>67</sup> Here ‘talking’ does not mean explaining, but

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64 Harvey, “Eyes Wide Open”, 98.

65 Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Eye of History: When Images Take Positions*, trans. Shane B. Lillis, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018.

66 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Patrick Creagh, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, 57.

67 Ralko, interview.

rather visual parlance, utterance, expression – it does not lead to an understanding of reality but a recognition of its horrors. Some things, like wartime violence, cannot be seen, and what cannot be seen should be shown (or turned into fiction) to provoke thinking. The very notion of the artistic image is inseparable from the constant attempts to show what cannot be seen. Instead of talking about rape or violence, artistic images show the veracity of the ferocity.

As humans, we may struggle to confront and comprehend a horror directly; therefore, we rely on deflected or mediated images to make sense of it and distance it from our own lives. This process involves transforming the horror into something imaginable, something that can be mediated through images and narratives. By using deflected images, whether through art, media, or other forms of representation, we create a buffer between ourselves and the raw reality of horror, allowing us to approach and engage with the subject matter from a safer emotional distance. Viewing these images becomes a way for someone to process and understand the unimaginable, as artists or image-makers attempt to bring it within the boundaries of our comprehension. Through the use of mediated images, we construct a framework that allows us to grapple with the horror of gendered violence while maintaining a certain level of psychological and emotional stability. It is a way for us to confront the unfathomable without being overwhelmed by its immediate impact.

In September 2022, Ukrainian artist Dana Kavelina wondered, in an interview with Monika Fabijanska, if it would be possible to preserve all the complexities of what is happening now (in Ukraine) on so many different levels. She was thinking about the possibility of an inclusive memorial in which countless voices would not be silenced and would not be left unheard after a war, since such overlooked voices of victims could turn into ghosts that will haunt us.<sup>68</sup> “[The] Russian army uses mass rape as a weapon of war right now”, claims Kavelina, and contends that we will have much work to do to find a way to record histories and preserve war memories to avoid blind spots, “which are repeatedly used to manipulate the history of violence”.<sup>69</sup>

Kavelina has worked for several years on a video installation that aims to show wartime rape in all its complexity and not just as a collateral consequence of war. She was interested in women’s experiences of the Balkan Wars and, suddenly, war arrived in her country. In a 2019 drawing entitled *woman kills the son of the enemy* (from the series *Communications: Exit to the Blind Spot*), Kavelina shows a woman holding a child hung by the umbilical cord, which enters the woman’s body in the form of a bloody ribbon. Another image, titled *nation (from Latin: giving birth)*, shows a machine

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68 Fedorova, Kavelina, and Fabijanska, “Two Ukrainian Artists Talk about Making Art during Wartime”.

69 Ibid.

gun in which a firearms cartridge looks like a man's penis; a torn red spot next to it refers to the image of a scratched vagina. These images were exhibited in 2019 at the Kmytiv Museum of Art (Ukraine), placed between monumental Soviet paintings that glorify the history of the Second World War. The artist is critical of celebrating the consequences of war as she looks at it through a gendered lens. Kavelina acknowledges that she works with archival footage to revise history and, in a way, reshape the historical facts to create the model of history as a space of imagination, a space for utopia:

History is located in the human body [...]. History doesn't actually have truth or a set of objective facts [...] the right and the power to write history must be given to the ones who were deprived of it for thousands of years [...] and to the dead who would be resurrected and tell their history the way they would like to.<sup>70</sup>

Can art become a memorial or help people, proposing a remedy? Can images of war 'write history'? For Kavelina, "speaking out about the whole extent of the terror" or visualising and articulating the most nightmarish experiences is the way to heal wounds. Similarly, for Movchan, his images of war are witnesses of a harsh reality and a testimony of the war: "Art, especially in times of war, helps us to experience important events, to think about them, and even, to some extent, to convey the truth to the world [...] what I do is necessary because, thanks to my watercolours, people learn what is happening in Ukraine".<sup>71</sup>

Movchan considers his images of rape as visual metaphors, which can bridge someone's reality (for instance, viewers on Facebook) with the act of violence (making a quasi-experience of war reality).<sup>72</sup> Making images whose meanings might extend beyond the visible, he is not interested in showing the act of sexual penetration. Instead, he aims at the aesthetic generalisation of the crime. He represents the invasion of a person's private space (a male rapist is 'poisoning' a female body by touching it) as an act of ferocity, and one can see it as a metaphor for the raped country. He states: "When I show a scene of violence, I want others to see it and not to repeat it", and for him, the viewer's response is critical.<sup>73</sup> A friend of Movchan, the Polish poet Dariusz Pado, commented on his image of rape with the following strophe: "Rape breeds hatred; you can't scrape it away".<sup>74</sup> These verses indicate that a rapist pro-

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70 Ibid.

71 Elena Mishchenko, "Bilder zum Krieg von Danylo Movchan" ("Pictures of the War by Danylo Movchan"), *Max Hartmann*, 15 May 2022, <https://www.max-hartmann.ch/2022/05/15/bilder-zum-krieg-von-danylo-movchan/> [accessed: 14.06.2024] [author's trans].

72 Movchan, interview.

73 Ibid.

74 @daro\_pa\_pa (Dariusz Pado), tak się rodzi, Instagram post, 14 April 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcVPvaCoxWZ/> [accessed: 29.08.2024] [author's trans].

duces cultural abhorrence instead of achieving subjugation, and this hatred is not ‘surgically’ removable.

## Conclusions

Besides resistance and testimony in the form of the egodocument, it is essential to look at images of humiliation produced by Ukrainian artists because they show us how one humiliated person (the artist) gazes at another humiliated person (the victim).<sup>75</sup> The person who acts through the imagination of violence is humiliated by war as well as by the humiliated subject they imagine. The gesture of imagination (in the form of an image) extends a humiliating look towards their compatriot, turning them into an object. To imagine rape means to look upon this violence and to see it. This objectification of violence doesn’t necessarily imply a lack of empathy. The act of looking and capturing the moment itself involves a certain level of empathy, despite the shared experience of humiliation both (the artist and their imaginary subject) endure. Imagination opens the other, be it a living, dead, or humiliated person, and it ‘speaks’ for the other. Thus, images of rape become witnesses of violence; they depict, testify, and help look into the eye of history. Such images also make us, as viewers, witness this horrible history by the proxy of an image.

Images never give complete visibility; moreover, they can show absence through partial visibility, which is invariably what they offer us. Lysovenko is critical of both media and art: “News or art tries to cover up the war shamefully, but filming or painting of ruined bodies up close is not at all exposing, but hiding what war is, because it is nothing special, and it is unbearable”.<sup>76</sup> Images of war are simultaneously about this ‘nothing special’ and something ‘unbearable’. If we don’t look at the war, we miss the point. By restraining the imagination to work on visual images of violence, we do not come closer to the absence of the dead. Every act of creating an image overcomes the impossibility of describing something real. Artists, in particular, refuse to bow their heads before the unimaginable and ineffable, whose devastating hypnosis they feel like anyone who has faced the destruction of people by other people.

For many artists, drawings of wartime violence were both egodocuments and aesthetic experiences that allowed them to cope with unspoken anger and pain and share it with others through social media. Photographer Yurko Diachyshyn describes this attempt to turn images into language in the following Facebook post:

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75 Harvey, “Eyes Wide Open”, 98.

76 Kateryna Lysovenko (Facebook profile), “V voine net nichego vozyshennogo...” (“There is nothing sublime about war...”), Facebook post, 14 January 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/cloisonnage/posts/pfbido2DbwBvxQFCimNRmWM2BWV5N6tC5MX7fasxhgCpgrdUdBgHB6rgatV484VEmfxwRqdl> [accessed: 14.06.2024] [author’s trans.].

The first time I filmed a funeral for soldiers at the beginning of the war in March 2022, it was very difficult, and I told myself that I would not show such things again. The very next day, I was taking photographs of a funeral again. Because how else can we tell the world about this pain, what war and loss are, and that every killed soldier is not just a statistic but a great tragedy and wound for the family and loved ones? It's hard to think about it and look at it, but we need to keep thinking about it.<sup>77</sup>

Images of rape make sorrow and pain available to the senses, which means being moved emotionally and to thought. It also means to give metaphors to those without names and images, to those invisible victims whose traumatic experiences are hidden from sensibility. In the essay "On the Concept of History", Walter Benjamin wrote that nothing that has ever happened should be considered lost to history for a truthful chronicler.<sup>78</sup> Certainly, only the 'rescued humanity' comprehends the entirety of its history: thus, each moment a person experiences becomes a quotation (in the form of words and images). Didi-Huberman sees the main task of the chronicler (and I do hope that the described cases also refer to this figure) as talking about the unseen setting of phenomena, deeds, and places that need to be made sensible or visible. We can only hope that such 'talking' and dialogue with the help of images and words about war will shape a memorial, an inclusive 'something' that will give a voice to the unheard victims.

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# The Opacity of War: Vision and Information on the Battlefield

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Lesia Kulchynska

## Civilians: Uncertainty

When we woke up in our Kyiv apartment to the sound of explosions on 24 February 2022, it was clear that the war had started. The first thing that my survival instinct told me to do was to go on the internet and look for information. I was trying to find details about the invasion and clues on how to behave in the ongoing emergency, as I believed information was the key to making the right decisions. I also believed that the internet was the right place to find it. The first comment on the situation that I found was a short report on the *Ukrainska Pravda* (*Ukrainian Truth*) news portal: “From various cities of Ukraine, local residents report that they heard the sounds of explosions and gunshots, in particular in Kharkiv, Odesa, and Kyiv”.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, we heard this. A little later, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba confirmed on Twitter (now X) what everyone already knew: that Russian President Vladimir Putin had launched a full-scale war against Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky urged civilians “not to panic”: “We are being attacked not only by bombs but also by fakes”, he said in a video address to citizens posted on his Facebook, setting up an environment for general uncertainty.<sup>3</sup>

Yet I could not find any particular information about the situation in Kyiv, the presence of Russian troops in the city or region, or their movements in other regions.

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  - 2 @DmytroKuleba (Dmytro Kuleba), Twitter (now X) post, 24 February 2022, <https://twitter.com/DmytroKuleba/status/1496695282293161987?t=bdsxtzg9zwhc6DRxpflAmQ&s=19> [accessed: 06.06.2023] [author’s trans.].
  - 3 Alyona Mazurenko, “Zelenskyy zaklykav ne panikuvaty: nas atakuyut ne lyshе bomby, a j fe-jky” (“Zelensky Urges Not to Panic: We Are Being Attacked Not Only by Bombs but Also by Fakes”), *Ukrainska Pravda* (*Ukrainina Truth*), 24 February 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/02/24/7325273/> [accessed: 15.11.2023] [author’s trans.].

There was no guidance for citizens on where the safest and the most dangerous areas were. As a mother of a four-year-old daughter, I decided that we had to leave the capital, as it seemed the most unsafe place to me. There are many stories about people who, following the same logic as mine, escaped from Kyiv to Bucha or Irpin during the first days. Lacking information about the movements of Russian troops, they supposed, as I did, that those small towns around Kyiv were much safer than the capital. “So that is how it was: we took our daughter to Bucha, a suburb that later became tragically famous for the atrocities inflicted by the Russians on the remaining residents”, recalls the head of Mystetskyi Arsenal National Art and Culture Museum Complex Olesya Ostrovska-Liuta.<sup>4</sup> Luckily, her daughter was evacuated from Bucha before the occupation.

My friend, the curator Ksenia Malykh, who had an apartment in Bucha, witnessed that there was no information about the movement of Russian troops around the city – not on the official city website, the official Facebook community page, or the Bucha Telegram channel. “Local authorities didn’t provide any instructions, nor did they call for evacuation, they rather tried to calm us down in a ‘don’t panic’ style”, she said.<sup>5</sup> Art researcher Oksana Semenik, who survived the occupation in Bucha, confirms this:

[T]he official authorities of Bucha said that it is better to stay at home and not to go somewhere, that everything is ok. Unfortunately, there was no information about what was happening on which roads (which, on the one hand, was absolutely correct, if they said that, let’s say, the Zhytomyr highway was safe, it could have been shelled).<sup>6</sup>

She says that they found out that the city was taken only when shelling, explosions, and street fights started on their street. “There was also a funny story about the beginning of the occupation”, she recalls,

Russians entered our area sometime on 3 March (if I’m not mistaken). At that time, the Ukrainian flag was still hanging over the city council, and its image was spread in the media as the message that Bucha is free. My friends were sending it to me (the connection was still there), while we were sitting in the basement and heard the occupiers driving through our streets.<sup>7</sup>

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4 Olesya Ostrovska-Liuta (Facebook profile), “Kilka dнів tomu v Niu-York...” (“A few days ago in New York...”), Facebook post, 16 January 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/18Wrzuqa41/> [accessed: 13.12.24].

5 Ksenia Malykh, Facebook direct message to author, 08 October 2023 [author’s trans.].

6 Oksana Semenik, Facebook direct message to author, 08 October 2023 [author’s trans.].

7 Ibid.

When I was trying to escape Kyiv, the only bus I managed to get on was going to Ismail, a small town on the Romanian border. Along the way, as we travelled to the South, we observed long lines of military vehicles. Those vehicles were unmarked, and it was anxiety-inducing that it was unclear who was inside: enemies or defenders. On the internet, there was no information about any military troops on the Kyiv–Odesa route that we were driving down.

Travelling in the direction of the Black Sea and wondering whether the region we were heading to was already occupied or not, I strongly felt the inefficiency of modern information technologies in a situation of real danger and their total failure to provide any guidance when it was most needed. Frightened and perplexed, I was staring at my smartphone in search of any helpful information only to realise – in frustration – that my trust in the internet information industry and its promises to assist me in any trouble, unfortunately, did not prove to be justified. Updates about some explosions here and there were popping up, but decisions had to be made at one's own peril and risk.

In his notes about the occupation he experienced in Vorzel, another Kyiv suburb, the anthropologist Evheny Osievsky wrote:

War, it turns out, comes in shades and degrees. You go to sleep in the evening still reading about military clashes in the news; hear distant explosions the next day; feel the window panes shaking for the first time; and realise that the place you have been calling home for the last seven years is surrounded by invaders.<sup>8</sup>

After the occupation, he became a volunteer for the Armed Forces of Ukraine and later died in the battle near Bakhmut. His account tracks the trajectory of the disaster approaching: from the news about the violence to the realisation that you are already in the midst of it. Unfortunately, reading news about the approaching disaster does not help to prevent being caught in it.

“War is the province of uncertainty: three-fourths of those things upon which action in War must be calculated, are hidden more or less in the clouds of great uncertainty”, wrote Carl von Clausewitz in his famous treatise *On War* at the beginning of 19th century.<sup>9</sup> “It is therefore again talent, or the favor of fortune, on which reliance must be placed, for want of objective knowledge”, he continues.<sup>10</sup> Clausewitz discusses uncertainty as one of the four elements that constitute the “atmosphere of war” (along with danger, physical effort, and chance) to claim that the genius of war

8 Evheny Osievsky, “Six Cats, Thirty People, Four Mortar Shells: Two Weeks in the Occupied Kyiv Suburbs”, *e-flux Notes*, 25 March 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/457983/six-cats-thirty-people-four-mortar-shells-two-weeks-in-the-occupied-kyiv-suburbs> [accessed: 13.11.2023].

9 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J. J. Graham, Gutenberg EBook, 2006, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1946/1946-h/1946-h.htm> [accessed: 12.12.24].

10 Ibid.

professionals is their ability to take action, “removing the torments of doubt, and the dangers of delay when there are no sufficient motives for guidance”.<sup>11</sup> He describes wars that took place before satellites or drone surveillance, which can help locate the enemy, and before technologies of instant communication. Surprisingly, modern, technologically equipped wars, such as the one in Ukraine, are still filled with an impenetrable fog. But now it is mostly civilians who must deal with this uncertainty. The ‘genius of war’, a talent to take action without having sufficient information, described by Clausewitz as the professional skill of ‘warlords’, is now needed by every civilian to get on with everyday life. When I asked Malykh how she understood that going to Bucha would be dangerous, she said, “I felt intuitively that it’s better not to go there”.<sup>12</sup>

## The More Information, the More Uncertainty

Writing about the fog of war, Clausewitz highlights the unobvious ability of information to increase, not reduce, uncertainty:

In the course of action circumstances press for immediate decision, and allow no time to look about for fresh data, often not enough for mature consideration. But it much more often happens that the correction of one premise, and the knowledge of chance events which have arisen, are not quite sufficient to overthrow our plans completely, but only suffice to produce hesitation. Our knowledge of circumstances has increased, but our uncertainty, instead of having diminished, has only increased.<sup>13</sup>

War is a situation where there is an acute need for information. Knowing about enemy movements or green corridors is vital for people’s lives, so they eagerly monitor all possible data sources. In addition to the official information channels, a wide variety of Telegram channels and Facebook and Viber groups spread immediately after the beginning of the war. Every city, village, neighbourhood, neighbourhood block, apartment building, or any other type of community quickly established its own channel to exchange not only all possible evidence and news but also rumours and fakes about the encompassing threats and ways to avoid them.

In other words, war creates an enormous user demand for vital updates. This demand, in turn, contributes to the immense proliferation of messages created both by newsmakers and users, aimed at answering this need for guidance, regardless of the capacity to deliver valuable and needed details. Therefore, information spaces

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11 Ibid.

12 Malykh, Facebook message.

13 Clausewitz, *On War*.

become oversaturated with messages with next-to-zero information value, most of which confuse people more than guide them.

The Ukrainian analytic news resource, *texty.org.ua*, conducted a telling study on disorienting information abundance, which is discussed in an article by Andrii Voyenkomchenko. They analysed Telegram channels aimed at informing users about the places and times where military summonses were being handed out by representatives of military commissariats on the streets of Ukrainian cities. Such channels, which emerged due to the fear of being mobilised into the army (namely, a fear of death), exist in every regional city; in the bigger cities, there are dozens of them. The information circulated by those channels is based on messages delivered by anonymous users about where and when they saw representatives of military commissariats (or those who look like them) hanging the so-called flyers (military summonses). According to the report, “[t]he flow of news about the often imaginary activity of the commissariat employees is overwhelming, and it is sometimes very difficult to separate real military commissars from ordinary military personnel” because cautious users inform each other about almost every encounter with someone in a military uniform.<sup>14</sup> A user of one of those channels says in an interview: “Those channels are such a super source of anxiety. In fact, there is not so much systematic information there, but constant message flow greatly increases anxiety. I began to feel trapped, at a dead end”.<sup>15</sup>

The fakes and propaganda massively spread by the Russians contribute to the proliferation of the informational ‘trash’ circulating on all those channels aimed at informing civilians about the potential dangers of war. According to Voyenkomchenko, the channels warning about the handing out of military summonses are also infiltrated by Russian bots to spread their propaganda narratives aimed at exploiting the fear of mobilisation to fuel discontent with the government, despair, and a mood of surrendering.

Paul Virilio, in *Strategy of Deception*, describes the internet as a tool to mislead: “The Internet is of military origin and has military purposes. In the field of information, it plays more or less the same role as the jamming of enemy broadcasts in earlier world conflicts”.<sup>16</sup> The jamming operation of the internet, according to Virilio, is performed by stripping facts of their context: “with the ‘liberation of information’ on the Web what is most lacking is meaning or, in other words, a context into which

14 Andrii Voyenkomchenko, “Pasotka strakhu. U kozhnomu velykomu misti je telegram-kanaly, jaki pyshut, de vruchajut povistky” (“The Trap of Fear: In Every Big City There Are Telegram Channels That Write Where Summonses Are Served”), *texty.org.ua*, 25 September 2023, <https://texty.org.ua/articles/110729/pastka-strahu-u-kozhnomu-velykomu-misti-y-e-telehram-kanaly-yaki-pyshut-de-vruchayut-povistky/> [accessed: 12.12.24] [author’s trans.].

15 Ibid.

16 Paul Virilio, *Strategy of Deception*, trans. Chris Turner, London: Verso, 2007, 79.

Internet users could put the facts and hence distinguish truth from falsehood”.<sup>17</sup> Referring to the initial purpose of the internet as a medium to communicate military messages that cannot be intercepted, Virilio uses its military roots as a metaphor to describe the internet’s impact on the information ecosystem, where the ‘meaning’ is lost in the flood of the contradictory ‘facts’ and multiple overlapping narratives competing for information space simultaneously. In tracking this puzzling effect to the ‘military origins’ of the internet, Virilio might be overinterpreting, but, regardless, the military potential of the ‘jamming’ capacity of the internet is indeed fully manifested during this war.

### Some of These Are My Home

Public digital information space is a strategic space of a military operation during wartime. It is a space surveilled by the enemy so that they can use any publicly accessible information for their goals. For this reason, it should be strictly regulated and controlled and wiped of any strategically valuable information. At the same time, it is a space where misleading messages can be spread by both sides to deceive the adversary, or where, as Virilio claims, any valuable information can be easily ‘jammed’ by a flood of competing controversial, false, or provoking messages quickly produced and spread by military bots.

This space of military operation is the same space that is navigated by civilians in search of information vital to their lives. It is the space where we, regular internet users of a country at war, exchange messages through unsafe channels cluttered with misinformation and potentially exposed to the enemy’s surveillance, leading to suspicion, self-censorship, and opacity, and compelling us to improvise on our own DIY crypto and decrypto strategies.

“Your beautiful picture with the location of our military units, checkpoints, strategic territorial defence facilities in the background is all statistical information for the enemy”, said Roksolana Yavorska, spokeswoman for the Security Service of the Lviv region on 18 March 2022.<sup>18</sup> Just two days later, on 20 March 2022, the Russian occupiers shelled a big shopping centre in Kyiv. As a result of the shelling, four people died, one person was injured, and several houses and the shopping centre burnt down. A few days after this, employees of the Security Service of Ukraine detained a man who published videos on TikTok showing that there was

17 Ibid., 84.

18 Natalia Karnaukh, “90% rozvidualnoi informatsii nakhodyt z socmerexh” (“90% of Intelligence Information Comes from Social Networks”), *Suspilne Novyny (Public News)*, 18 March 2022, <https://suspilne.media/218993-90-rozvidualnoi-informacii-nahodit-z-socmez-sbu-lvivsini/> [accessed: 12.12.24] [author’s trans.].

military equipment of the Ukrainian Army near the shopping centre. This video is supposed to be the reason the occupiers decided to direct the rocket at this very place. Since 27 March 2022, unauthorised distribution of information about the transfer of weapons, armaments, and military supplies to Ukraine; the movement, transfer, or placement of the Armed Forces of Ukraine; or other Ukrainian military formations can result in criminal liability, according to Law no. 2160-IX, adopted on 24 March 2022.<sup>19</sup>

While Virilio comments on the general cognitive framework of the internet operation, the Ukrainian art collective *fantastic little splash* in their interactive video work *see also* gives concrete and visual examples of information ‘jamming’ during the ongoing war. The artists reflect on different regimes of data opacity during the war, in particular, the phenomenon of the massive circulation of heavily pixelated images of explosions in Ukrainian cities in Ukrainian media and Telegram channels (Figs. 9, 10, and 11). The details of these images are blurred to such an extent that they give no information except for the fact of the explosions. Users themselves often blur these images to comply with wartime information regulations. The suppression of the information is needed for safety reasons, as the enemy can use the visual details to calibrate their fire. Not only the visual details that help geolocate the explosion should be removed from the image but also, of course, any text captions that would help to do this. Trying to share vital information, the users often ‘jam’ their messages to the extent that they communicate little other than their disquietude or signal that ‘something has happened’. Striving to get some information on the place under attack, they also have no choice but to guess: “This is my home, and this, and this, some of these is my home, my lovely pixelated home”.<sup>20</sup>

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19 Law of Ukraine, On Amendments to the Criminal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure of Ukraine to Ensure Counteraction to Unauthorised Dissemination of Information on the Sending, Movement of Weapons, Armaments and Ammunition to Ukraine, Movement, Disposition or Deployment of the Armed Forces of Ukraine or Other Military Formations Formed in Accordance with the Laws of Ukraine Committed in Conditions of Martial Law or State of Emergency, Liga 360, 24 March 2022, <https://ips.ligazakon.net/document/T222160?an=1> [accessed: 12.12.24].

20 *fantastic little splash*, *see also: a set of compressed images and feelings*, interactive video work, simulation and found photos, 2023, interacted with by author 16 October 2023. This work is currently not available online. Because this work is interactive, I am unable to provide a timestamp.

Figure 9: Image from *see also*: a set of compressed images and feelings

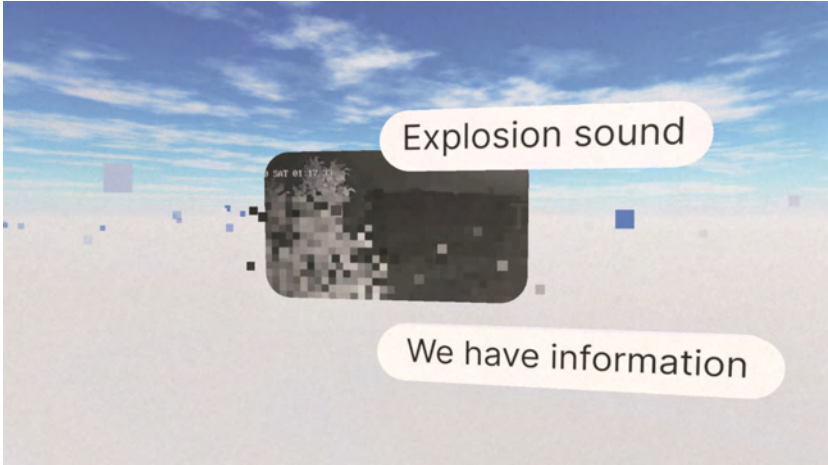


Image by fantastic little splash, interactive video work, simulation and found photos, 2023.  
Image provided courtesy of fantastic little splash.

Figure 10: Image from *see also*: a set of compressed images and feelings



Image by fantastic little splash, interactive video work, simulation and found photos, 2023.  
Image provided courtesy of fantastic little splash.

Figure 11: Image from see also: a set of compressed images and feelings



Image by fantastic little splash, interactive video work, simulation and found photos, 2023.  
Image provided courtesy of fantastic little splash.

“In truth, all of them depict our common home under attack”, the artists summarise.<sup>21</sup> We are zealously sharing these blurred images, sensing that they contain certain information that could be vital for us or our loved ones, although the only information they convey is that we all are targeted. Those images render our living environment opaque, where specific features – except for being a zone of violence – remain almost indistinguishable.

## Invaders: Blindness

Informational fog is needed during a war to confuse the enemy. Civilians, along with the enemies, must deal with it and operate within it. What is more surprising is that the blurriness of vision could also be a part of the invasion strategy; I am referring here to the vision of the invaders themselves.

In her war diary record on 26 March 2022, Yevgenia Belorusets talks about her conversation with her neighbour Andrij, whose relatives live in the occupied villages near Chernihiv. Andrij’s relatives told him that Russian soldiers, who are breaking into the apartments and houses of the villagers, know almost nothing about the actual progress of the war:

21 Ibid.

The soldiers' smartphones have been taken away from them. Russian military officials claim that Kyiv is already half occupied and that Odesa has been under Russian control for a long time, with many other such successes. They ask about villages and use outdated national maps from 2015 when many places had different names. Then the soldiers try to take the cell phones of Andriy's relatives and other villagers. They do this to sever people's connection to the outside world, and perhaps to acquire some information themselves.<sup>22</sup>

On 28 September 2022, *The New York Times* released an article with excerpts of phone calls made by Russian soldiers to their relatives' homes in March 2022 and intercepted by Ukrainian law enforcement agencies. The authors of the article describe the general framework of the intercepted conversations:

Cut off from the outside world and frustrated by commanders who the soldiers say keep them in the dark, the soldiers rely on the calls home for updates on the war they're fighting. But what they hear from their families – a rosy picture propagated by Russian state media – is often at odds with their reality.<sup>23</sup>

"What are they saying on the news? We are sitting here with no information at all", a soldier from the battlefield asks his parents in Russia. The parents inform him that, according to the news, "there's no more Ukrainian Armed Forces; it's just the Nazis left". "Did they lay down their arms?", the soldier asks for clarification. "Yes, they laid down their arms, and they no longer exist", confirms his father.<sup>24</sup>

According to an article in *The Los Angeles Times*, based on a database of 2,000 intercepted phone calls obtained by the Associated Press, "Russian soldiers had been told, by Putin and others, that they'd be greeted as liberators and that anyone who resisted was a fascist, an insurgent – not a real civilian".<sup>25</sup> The article quotes the soldier Leonid, who tells his mom that "civilians were told to flee or shelter in basements, so anyone who was outside must not be a real civilian".<sup>26</sup>

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22 Yevgenia Belorusets, "Letters from Kyiv: A Wartime Diary", *Artforum*, 04 April 2022, <https://www.artforum.com/slant/a-wartime-diary-by-yevgenia-belorusets-88035> [accessed: 12.12.24].

23 Yousur Al-Hlou, Masha Froliak, and Evan Hill, "'Putin Is a Fool': Intercepted Calls Reveal Russian Army in Disarray", *The New York Times*, 28 September 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/09/28/world/europe/russian-soldiers-phone-calls-ukraine.html> [accessed: 12.12.24].

24 Ibid.

25 Erika Kinetz, "In Phone Calls Home, Russian Soldiers in Ukraine Say They 'Never Saw such Hell'", *The LA Times*, 23 February 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-02-23/ukraine-war-intercepted-russian-soldier-phone-calls> [accessed: 12.12.24].

26 Ibid.

In a surreal way, the Russian soldiers invading Ukrainian territory exist and act like ghosts, in a kind of parallel dimension. The space where their operation is supposed to take place does not coincide with reality. The places where the soldiers are supposed to be have different names, different people inhabit them, and things are completely different from what the soldiers imagine. Some of them notice this difference: “Mom, we haven’t seen a single fascist here”, confesses Sergey, “[t]his war is based on a false pretense. No one needed it. We came here and people were living normal lives”.<sup>27</sup>

Yet the military operation continues according to the coordinates of fictional space, regardless of whether it coincides with the real one. “We were given an order to kill everyone we see”, a soldier from Bucha tells his mother.<sup>28</sup> In the virtual space of the operation, anyone seen by Russian soldiers is a fascist and therefore must be killed.

## A Map Without Names

In a 1972 *New York Times* article about American B-52 bomber crews operating in South Vietnam, Joseph B. Treaster mentions an interesting fact: “The maps used by the crews show almost no place names. One general said that kept the maps uncluttered”.<sup>29</sup> “For all you know, you could be bombing New York City”, joked one of the pilots interviewed by Treaster.<sup>30</sup> The US pilots bombing South Vietnam “knew virtually nothing about their targets, and showed no curiosity”, writes Treaster. Knowing no details about the places they had been bombing nor the inhabitants of those places, the pilots – almost literally – blindly followed the instructions of their command. “If we are killing anybody down there with our bombs”, says one of the B-52 aircrew, “I have to think we were bombing the enemy and not civilians. I feel quite sure about our targeting”.<sup>31</sup>

On the maps the bombers were using, “the targets were given code numbers and were marked by intersecting map coordinates”.<sup>32</sup> The coordinates of the target are

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27 Al-Hlou, Froliak, and Hill, “Putin Is a Fool”.

28 Ibid.

29 Joseph B. Treaster, “Aboard B-52 Bomber High Over Vietnam A Crew Takes Part in an ‘Impersonal War’”, *The New York Times*, 13 October 1972, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1972/10/13/91352667.html?pageNumber=12> [accessed: 12.12.24].

30 Ibid.

31 Joseph Treaster, “Aboard B-52 Bomber High over Vietnam a Crew Takes Part in an Impersonal War”, *The New York Times*, 13 October 1972, quoted in: Derek Gregory, “Lines of Descent”, *openDemocracy*, 08 November 2011, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/lines-of-descent/> [accessed: 12.12.24].

32 Ibid.

all that mattered; all the rest, including the name of a place, would just clutter the map, as well as the soldier's mind. They did not need to know the details of the operation because they did not make any decisions; they were just executing the orders. "Essentially I feel like I'm a nonparticipant in the war", Captain Jennings said after the flight, "I'm intelligent and I know I'm in it but I don't feel it".<sup>33</sup> As Treaster relates, "[o]ne pilot said he often thought of himself as a long-distance truck driver. A crewman said that bombing South Vietnam from a B-52 was like delivering the mail".<sup>34</sup> If ideology is an imaginary relationship to the real conditions of existence, as Louis Althusser claims,<sup>35</sup> this is a perfect example of how it works. The opaquer to one's eyes real conditions are, the more convincing the fantasy. The uncomfortable 'knowledge' about what is happening is easy to ignore, as Captain Jennings shared, once the 'feelings' are captured by a pleasing imaginary scenario.

The 'blind' bombing described by Treaster was not an invention of the Vietnam War. In his article "Lines of Descent", researcher of late modern war spatiality Derek Gregory explores the trajectory of aerial killing from the Second World War to the Vietnam War and modern drone wars. "These are very different sorts of war, but there are several senses in which today's drone wars in the global borderlands were anticipated by the advocates of what has variously been called 'progressive' or even 'beneficial bombing' in the 1940s", particularly rendering bombing as "an abstract, purely technical exercise for those who execute it", claims Gregory.<sup>36</sup>

The distance, spatial but also cognitive, between the target and the killer creates this abstraction. "[T]hey weren't people to me, just the target. It's the distance and the blindness which enabled you to do these things", Gregory quoted a member of the Lancaster bomber crew after his first raid during WWII.<sup>37</sup> "This was a common sentiment [during World War II], and Charles Lindbergh<sup>[38]</sup> saw it as the very diagnostic of modern war, where 'one kills at a distance, and in doing so does not realize that he is killing'", writes Gregory.<sup>39</sup> This was comparable to "viewing it on a motion-

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33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation) (January–April 1969)", in: *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971, 127–188, here 142–427, 166–176.

36 Gregory, "Lines of Descent".

37 James Taylor and Martin Davidson, *Bomber Crew*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004, 282–284, quoted in: Gregory, "Lines of Descent".

38 An American aviator, military officer, and author whose wartime journals are referred to by Gregory in "Lines of Descent".

39 Gregory, "Lines of Descent".

picture screen in a theater on the other side of the world”, Lindbergh wrote in his wartime journals about his own experience of air bombing.<sup>40</sup>

The ‘blindness’ of Russian soldiers during their operation in Ukraine adds an odd twist to this development. Operating on the ground, Russian soldiers are not distanced from their ‘targets’ like the Lancaster or B-52 pilots. On the contrary, they perform the killing as intimately as possible, not only seeing the faces of their victims but also often touching and even penetrating their bodies, staying in their houses, sleeping in their beds, and maybe even walking in their shoes. Yet their cognitive distance to the ‘real conditions’ of the operation is being effectively sustained by their disconnection from almost any sources of information except their commands and relatives who transmit official propaganda. Just like B-52 bombers in South Vietnam, they know virtually nothing about their targets. And just like the pilot Lindbergh, they seem to see their victims as if on a motion-picture screen. This time it is a screen where an old Soviet movie about the Second World War is being projected. While a B-52 pilot in Vietnam had to design for himself a fantasy of being a post-man delivering mail to obscure the reality of himself dropping bombs, the Russian soldiers in Ukraine are well equipped by the official state-designed fantasy that the ‘Great Patriotic War against Fascism’ is being repeated.

## Fantasy Screen

In his fourth seminar, Jacques Lacan introduces the concept of ‘screen memory’ to explain the formation of fetishistic fantasy. Screen memory, according to Lacan, is “the moment when the chain of memory stops” to avoid encountering something traumatic<sup>41</sup>: “Think of the way a cinematic movement which unfolds rapidly might stop suddenly at some point, freezing all the characters”.<sup>42</sup> The traumatic thing Lacan discusses in this seminar is the mother’s lack of phallus:

It [the memory] is arrested at the hem of the dress, no higher than the ankle, and this is why the shoe is met here. This is also why the shoe can [...] function as a substitute for what has not been seen but which is articulated and formulated as being, here for this subject, what the mother possesses, namely the phallus. Doubtless it is an imaginary phallus, but it is essential to her symbolic foundation as a phallic mother.<sup>43</sup>

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40 Charles Lindbergh, whose wartime journals are quoted in: Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987, 209–210.

41 Jacques Lacan, *The Object Relation: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, trans. A. R. Price, Book IV, Cambridge: Polity, 2020, 111–112.

42 *Ibid.*, 112.

43 *Ibid.*

The reason behind the irrational obsession with the mother's shoes (shoe fetishism) is that the image of the mother's shoe functions as a substitute for her imagined phallus (which in Lacan's psychoanalytic theory is a symbol of power). Referring to this quite peculiar case of shoe fetishism analysis, we can understand how the fetishistic fantasy works in general. The fetish is a kind of a screenshot from the movie of memory, which stands for something desired and imagined but absent in reality. It is also an image from the past that substitutes the frustrating present, and an image of power that substitutes the lack of it. This past image, according to Lacan, functions as "the testimony and the support, the last support" of something desired but not existing, an anchor of the fantasy.<sup>44</sup> Blindness is an integral part of this operation as a fetish is exactly the kind of image that aims to protect one from seeing reality.

Accordingly, the fetishistic Russian invasion of Ukraine is based on the denial of actual reality and the replacement of it with images from the past. It is not by chance that the key figure for the inception of the war waged by Russia against Ukraine, an organiser of militant groups in the so-called Donetsk People's Republic, was a Russian secret services officer, Igor Girkin, famous for his passion for and active participation in historical military reenactments. It is similarly not by chance that the Russian occupation of the Donbas started with the robbery of the Museum of the Second World War in Donetsk, from where the terrorists stole World War II-era weapons, kept there as exhibits, to use them in their fight against alleged fascists in the resurrected battle.<sup>45</sup>

In line with the fetishistic logic described by Lacan, the Russian war against Ukraine is rendered as a reenactment of a glorious scene from the past, the so-called Great Patriotic War against Fascism, which is forever etched in the Russian collective memory as a victory. This victory is the moment when memory should stop, to not encounter all the failures that follow. The fetishisation of the memory makes the fleeting moment of victory eternal, possible to be replayed, or reenacted, again and again. The tricky thing, though, is that this eternal reenactment of victory over fascism is not possible without the figure of the 'fascist enemy'. That is why 'fascists' are so important in the Russian phantasmatic scenario: they are those who have been defeated by the 'Russian Army'. The 'fascist' figure is crucial to the fantasy of Russian greatness because it is crucial to the scene of Russian victory. During the first months of the full-scale invasion, Russian social media were flooded with posts saying "Russian soldiers liberate Europe from fascism again". Once the fascists are in the game, the very battle against them is already a victory, because within the

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44 Ibid.

45 24.tv.ua, "U Donetsku separatysty vykraly z muzeju zbroju" ("In Donetsk, Separatists Stole Weapons from a Museum"), 11 May 2014, [https://24tv.ua/u\\_donetsku\\_separatisti\\_vikrali\\_z\\_muzeju\\_zbroju\\_n441585](https://24tv.ua/u_donetsku_separatisti_vikrali_z_muzeju_zbroju_n441585) [accessed: 12.12.24].

screen memory frame, the battle against the fascists is a victorious one. Remember the Russian soldiers who during the first months of the invasion believed that they were fighting in a battle that was already won, that they would be greeted as liberators, and that the 'Nazis laid down their arms'. They just need to reenact this victory, but to do so, the very 'fascists' need to be reenacted first.

## The Production of the Fascist Enemy

Reflecting on Russia's persistent violence against Ukrainian civilians, Svitlana Matviyenko writes: "According to the Russian state and state-controlled media, there are no civilian casualties in this war. The secret logic behind such 'success' is simple: the rocket, bomb, or grenade always arrives at its destination because its destination is where it arrives".<sup>46</sup> Following this logic, the Russian Army always kills its enemies because the enemies are those who have been killed. The absent 'fascists' can easily be brought into the picture by the very act of killing. If, according to Lacan, fetishistic fantasy is supported by the frozen image aimed at arresting the uncontrollable flow of reality, death is the most secure way to reach that goal. Dead bodies cannot object to the identity imposed on them, but they can silently serve as compelling evidence that the 'fascist threat' has been eliminated. In this sense, violence is the most effective production of the needed images. Borrowing Lacan's formula, we can say that the violence becomes the evidence and the last remaining support for the fantasy.

During the Second World War, the term 'terror bombing' was introduced to describe the strategic bombing of civilian targets without military value. It aimed above all to damage the enemy's morale. This term usually refers to air attacks on German and Japanese cities by the Allied forces. In *Terror from the Sky*, Igor Primoratz writes that the explicit aim of terror bombing was

[T]he destruction of German cities and towns and the killing of their inhabitants. Civilians were not killed accidentally, as an unintended, unforeseen, and unforeseeable side-effect of attacks on military targets. They were the direct, intended target of those attacks. Killing them was meant to undermine the morale of the German civilian population at large, to intimidate the German government, and to force it to capitulate.<sup>47</sup>

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46 Svitlana Matviyenko, "Speeds and Vectors of Energy Terrorism", *e-flux* 134, March 2023, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/134/525421/speeds-and-vectors-of-energy-terrorism/> [accessed: 12.12.24].

47 Igor Primoratz, *Terror from the Sky: The Bombing of German Cities in World War II*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2010, 6.

Analysing this strategy, he concludes: “The four components of the bombing campaign – violence against the innocent with the aim of intimidation and coercion – are the four defining traits of terrorism”.<sup>48</sup>

In “Lines of Descent”, Gregory refers to the target maps for the area bombing<sup>49</sup> of German cities at night as a visual matrix of this kind of warfare, as described by the pilot and writer Len Deighton: “These were bare-bones affairs, printed in black and magenta so that they could be read in the dim amber light of the navigator’s table. The only white marks were the thin rivers and blobs of the lake, and the roads were purple veins so that the whole thing was like a badly bruised torso”.<sup>50</sup> The cities became “just shapes, like the ill-defined blurs that passed across the H2S radar tube”, he continues, and “that, of course, was the whole idea”: “The new grey faceless maps were just one aspect of a new kind of war”.<sup>51</sup> This is a kind of war where the inhabited territory is no longer seen as a living environment or even a natural landscape but as a generalised target. Those maps were not designed to locate specific objects but to mark whole areas that needed to be eliminated.

Terror bombing is also a strategy that Russia uses in the war against Ukraine, shelling from the sky random civilian targets without any specific selectiveness. Simultaneously, the soldiers on the ground, indiscriminately killing anyone they see, function as a mere extension of the terror bombing operation. In this sense, the complete ignorance of Russian soldiers of the place they are invading is a structural part of this kind of war: the details do not count because the only information they need to do their job is the order to kill everyone they see in whatever area they operate, to demoralise and intimidate the population, and to coerce the Ukrainian government to surrender.

The military strategy of terror bombing German and Japanese cities during the Second World War could have only been justified by, and was therefore based on, ideological blindness: a blinded vision that did not discriminate between the civilians and the military, rendering the whole society as a ‘fascist enemy’. Only this ideologically blinded vision could depict the images of the devastated German and Japanese cities not as scenes of catastrophe but as ones of glorious victory. In *Potential History*, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay recalls that

Visual records of the erasure of Japanese cities and their populations were featured in *Life* magazine. The destruction of a city and its inhabitants was not cen-

48 Ibid.

49 ‘Area bombing’ is a form of strategic bombing. It is a type of aerial bombardment in which bombs are dropped on the general area of a target, rather than on specific targets. Area bombing can be a part of a terror bombing strategy. ‘Carpet bombing’, also known as ‘obliteration bombing’, is a type of area bombing that aims at the destruction of the target area.

50 Gregory, “Lines of Descent”.

51 Ibid.

sored. Photos of cities “before” and “after” their devastation were classified as visual markers of a mission accomplished, with articles given such titles as “The War Ends: Burst of Atomic Bomb Brings Swift Surrender of Japanese”.<sup>52</sup>

Russia’s indiscriminate violence against the Ukrainian population and territory is justified in the same way – as a fight against the imaginary terrifying ‘fascist enemy’. Only this time, the logic of ideological rationale is reversed: it is the very fact of destruction and violence performed by the Russian Army that is supposed to function as proof of the fascists’ presence in Ukraine. As it is only the fascist enemies who deserve such violent treatment, those who have been killed in such a brutal way must be fascists. The images of burnt-down Ukrainian cities, which are supposed to evoke the memories of the burnt-down, defeated Berlin or other German cities, function as historical visual quotes and simultaneously evidence that the Great Patriotic War against Fascism is taking place again.<sup>53</sup> The mass rape of Ukrainian women and girls by Russian soldiers echoes the mass rape of German women by the soldiers of the Red Army in ‘glorious’ 1945. The Kakhovka Dam destroyed to prevent the advance of the Ukrainian Army is an homage to the Dnipro Dam blown up in 1941 by the Red Army to stop the fascists (both times, the main victims of the flood were Ukrainian civilians).

One of the most established and acclaimed Russian writers of Soviet times, Ilya Ehrenburg, wrote in June 1942: “We understood: Germans are not humans. From now on, the word ‘German’ is the most terrible curse for us. From now on, the word ‘German’ discharges the gun. We will not talk. We will not be outraged. We will kill. If you didn’t kill at least one German in a day, your day was lost”.<sup>54</sup> In the same newspaper, *Krasnaya Zvezda* (*Red Star*), Ehrenburg wrote a year later:

We have reached the limit of our hatred. We cannot live while the Germans are alive. “The grass withers from them, and the heart dries up”, the fighter Ilya Gorev told me. Yes, our hearts are now dry, like the earth in a drought. We cannot wait. Killing the Germans became a necessity for us, like air. We will live, we will kill them.<sup>55</sup>

52 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, London: Verso, 2019, 443.

53 For more on the iconography of Russian violence during the Russo–Ukrainian War, see: Lesia Kulchynska, “Violence Is an Image: Weaponization of Visuality during the War in Ukraine”, *Institute of Network Cultures Blog*, 26 October 2022, <https://networkcultures.org/tactical-media-room/2022/10/26/violence-is-an-image-weaponization-of-the-visibility-during-the-war-in-ukraine-2/> [accessed: 12.12.24].

54 Ilya Ehrenburg, “Ubey!” (“Kill!”), *Krasnaya Zvezda* (*Red Star*) 172, 24 July 1942 [author’s trans.].

55 Ilya Ehrenburg, “Tak zreet pobeda” (“This Is How Victory Grows”), *Krasnaya Zvezda* (*Red Star*) 238, 09 October 1942 [author’s trans.].

This kind of discourse of the indiscriminate and dehumanising ‘holy hatred’ of the ‘Germans’ was heavily promoted in Soviet media and cinema during the Second World War, encouraging and justifying any kind of violence against any German without consideration. Now, this ready-made ‘antifascist’ (turned anti-German) hatred is excavated from the storage of the Second World War Museum to be used, along with the stolen WWII-era weapons exhibits, to justify and fuel violence against a peaceful neighbouring country.

## Conclusions

War is a situation of collapsed vision. In an evil cycle, violence is rooted in an unwillingness to see and is based on blindness to justify itself. In this case, the violence is also aimed to dazzle, to cover the perpetrator’s flaws in the fog of fear, and to substitute Russian failure to control Ukraine with images of dominance over it. “Against all traditions of photojournalism and other modes of visual revelation, it seems that visuality had become a weapon of authority, not against it”, visual studies theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff claims.<sup>56</sup> He clarifies the meaning of the word ‘authority’: “[it] can be said to be power over life, or biopower”.<sup>57</sup> In my text “Violence Is an Image”, reflecting on the circulation of images of violent Russian crimes in Ukraine, I wrote, “It is exactly the message of such an unlimited power over life that is [meant to be] conveyed and declared by the images of torn corpses of Ukrainian civilians widely distributed across the media”.<sup>58</sup> Looking for guidance and security, civilians of the assaulted country find themselves in the weaponised media space heavily saturated with such violent images, where, amid the chaotic flows of confusing information, the most certain message is precisely this: we all are under attack.

In such an environment, blindness can also become a survival strategy. A close friend, who had stayed in Kyiv since the beginning of the war, told me that she had stopped reading the news after two years of war. She even turned off the alarm notifications: “It is not possible to live under the constant threat of death”, she said, “I try to move everything that hardens my anxiety out of my sight”.<sup>59</sup> This kind of ignorance is her strategic choice, a risky trick to slip away from the fog of fear.

In his article “The War Phone”, based on interviews with Ukrainian servicepeople, Roman Horbyk cites one of his interviewees: “Soldiers are not very interested in

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56 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, 14xiv.

57 *Ibid.*, 28.

58 Kulchynska, “Violence Is an Image”.

59 Iryna Akulova, private conversation, 13 December 2023.

information about the war”.<sup>60</sup> This answer referred to media information: the information the soldiers need they receive from their comrades in direct communication. Soldiers are not interested in news about the war because the news is being produced on the battlefield, while the media only echoes them, with aberrations and delays. Virilio’s critique of the internet information space for its lack of context receives an unexpected twist in the context of war. Ongoing war is, by definition, a situation with a radically unstable meaning because it is exactly the battle over context and meaning. It is only the end of war, its resolution, which will define the context and stabilise the meaning of all war-related facts. Uncertainty is inevitably inherent to war and its information dimension, as it is a situation in the making; it is an unresolved and therefore unstable situation. The war itself is a fog.

In *The Command of the Air*, published in 1921, Giulio Douhet predicted that in the future “the battlefield will be limited only by the boundaries of the nations at war, and all of their citizens will become combatants, since all of them will be exposed to the aerial offensives of the enemy. There will be no distinction any longer between soldiers and civilians”.<sup>61</sup> Once the distinction between soldiers and civilians has been erased by the indiscriminate targeting of the entire population of Ukraine, we all have been pushed onto the battlefield. Immersed in its inherent fog, the only strategy left is to hone one’s ‘genius of war’, an ability to take action in an uncertain context. While uncertainty should be embraced as an inevitable condition of participation in an ongoing war, certitude is to be created not by information, but by our actions and decisions.

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61 Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, trans. Dino Ferrari, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998, 9–10, quoted in: Gregory, “Lines of Descent”.

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# Materialities of Archiving and Art



# Moving Images Between Mariupol and Lviv: An Archivist's Perspective

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*Oleksandr Makhanets*

In February 2023, I received two videos in private messages<sup>1</sup> that touched me as a historian working with moving-image archives. I was already planning this text, and these messages confirmed my fears about the fate of film archives in the occupied territories. The first video depicts the inside of the Mariupol's Ukrainian House Palace of Culture (formerly the Palace of Culture of the Metallurgists), which had been looted. The camera shoots down a corridor and the foot of a staircase, where hundreds of metres of 35mm film are intertwined among scattered objects and garbage, and a large metal container for storing such films is lying next to it. The film strips also wind their way up the stairs. The camera approaches the bundle of films hanging from the railing and captures fragments of footage. The images on the films are difficult to see, but an optical soundtrack can be recognised. The second video was shot on the street nearby, with the camera looking down and capturing a 35mm filmstrip lying between the sidewalk and the lawn (Fig. 12). The cameraman picks up the film and shoots the image on the film up against the light (Fig. 13). This time, the buildings of a factory are clearly visible. The film is smeared with mud. The twisted fragment on the street is maybe 10 or 20 metres long, which means that it is no more than 40 seconds of footage.

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1 For security reasons, I do not provide details about the origin and authorship of the videos.

*Figure 12: 35mm film stock on the streets of occupied Mariupol*



Still from a video by an anonymised author, 06 February 2023, still from 00:00:12. Image provided courtesy of the anonymous author.

*Figure 13: 35mm film stock on the streets of occupied Mariupol*



Still from a video by an anonymised author, 06 February 2023, still from 00:01:31. Image provided courtesy of the anonymous author.

The first thing I thought when I received these videos was that they were ordinary film copies of replicated feature films that could have been stored in the Palace of

Culture and once screened there. However, almost immediately, the author of the video dispelled my expectations by informing me that the films depict Mariupol and the Ilyich Iron and Steel Works in particular. This means that these are films that were most likely shot by Mariupol amateur filmmakers in 1960–1970, similar to the few copies that were kept in the Mariupol Museum of Local Lore and digitised by the Urban Media Archive (UMA) of the Center for Urban History in 2020–2021.<sup>2</sup> The museum burnt down in April 2022 as a result of constant Russian shelling of the city, and later it was also reported that local collections were stolen and taken to Russia, so it is not known whether anything has survived.<sup>3</sup>

## Film as an Object and Its Biography

In this text, I want to reflect on moving images as material objects in the context of war to draw attention to a different way of thinking about the sensitivity of images and their agency. Analysing the example of archiving and digitising amateur films from Mariupol, I will share my thoughts on the challenges that the archivist faces in the context of war, the new meanings that are imposed on sources of historical knowledge, and the role of the materiality of images. Based on the concept of 'object biography', I argue that images as physical objects are of great importance for their holistic interpretation. Their form is not constant and changes over time, which affects the way we perceive them. As a result of the war, archives and films are at great risk or have been lost entirely. This raises new problems in understanding the relationship between the original and its digital copy and gives the copy a new status if the intangible copy remains the only way to reconstruct the content of the once three-dimensional object. Reflecting on this problem, I propose to look at the digital copy of the lost object as an heir who continues to mediate its biography. Using the term 'object biography', I refer to a concept that has long been established in

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- 2 Iryna Sklokina and Viktoriia Grivina, "Un/Archiving Post/Industry", Center for Urban History, <https://www.lvivcenter.org/en/researches/un-archiving-post-industry/> [accessed: 02.03.2023].
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the humanities through the work of archaeologists<sup>4</sup> and anthropologists<sup>5</sup>. This approach is based on the idea that not only people but also things have the ability to act and are important social agents.<sup>6</sup> The key is the ability of objects to transfer meanings that are not fixed at a single moment, but instead, being in time, space, and social context, the meaning of objects is constantly transformed through interaction with people and can be accumulated as the histories of these objects.<sup>7</sup> Another important remark for understanding the agency of things, as Christopher Steiner suggests, is that “they are infinitely malleable to the shifting and contested meanings constructed for them through human agency”.<sup>8</sup> Things are an integral part of social action and, thanks to their meanings and their form, can shape relationships and interactions between people. Thus, each object is interpreted as being in motion and having its own trajectory of life, and the study of their biographies helps reveal hidden connections in the social world.<sup>9</sup>

Attention to things and their materiality has also included the study of photography, which has opened up new perspectives for the consistent analysis of images as three-dimensional objects and their biographies. What is more complicated in this case is that images translate an active content that cannot be separated from the form. A pioneering work in this area was the volume edited by Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, in which the authors examine photography and consider materiality as an integral part of the image.<sup>10</sup> Although my text will focus on the example of moving images, the methodology of Edwards and Hart’s volume is similar, as both photographs and moving images (film) share the same principle of creation. In the introduction to their publication, the authors note that, for a long time, the way of thinking about photography has emphasised the content of the image over the physical form. Thus, images created by the photographic method are often perceived as a medium that is used purely as an illustration, ignoring the form and its functions.

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- 4 Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, “The Cultural Biography of Objects”, *World Archaeology* 31/2, 1999, 169–178, here 169.
  - 5 Igor Kopytoff, “The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process”, in: Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, 64–92, here 65–68; and Janet Hoskins, “Agency, Biography and Objects”, in: Christopher Tilley et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Material Culture*, London: SAGE, 74–84.
  - 6 Hoskins, “Agency, Biography and Objects”, 74.
  - 7 Gosden and Marshall, “The Cultural Biography of Objects”, 170; and Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things”, 67.
  - 8 Christopher Steiner, “Rights of Passage: On the Liminal Identity of Art in the Border Zone”, in: Fred. R Myers (ed.), *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*, Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2001, 207–231, here 210.
  - 9 Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things”, 67.
  - 10 Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, “Introduction: Photographs as Objects”, in: Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (eds.), *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, London: Routledge, 2004, 1–15, here 1–3.

The intention of the authors is to break with this approach and to draw attention to the material dimension of photographic images and the fact that the meanings produced by form and the meanings derived from content are inseparable in this case. This methodology places photographic images as objects in time and space, in a specific historical context, and studies their existence, how they are used, moved, transformed, and interpreted at a particular moment, and, ultimately, how they act as subjects.<sup>11</sup>

The life of an image is a dynamic process of interacting with discourses and layering different levels of meaning, and from this perspective, museums and archives, where the images may end up, are not neutral places but construct new meanings and evaluations according to their own strategies and political frameworks. Edwards and Hart call museums and archives 'arch-synthetic' objects, where images are subjected to intellectual and physical reordering: "they do more than put objects in their proper place or make place for them. They are active environments for participating in the histories of objects, active environments that ultimately shape histories, through the preserving contexts that they themselves constitute".<sup>12</sup> When it comes to digitising images to create new digital archives and provide access to these materials that have been largely invisible, another problem arises related to the materiality of the object. Its new digital representation, supplemented with metadata, becomes a digital surrogate of the original and is placed in a new digital environment (database) with its own context and order. The alienated copy is a separate entity with a different status, but it also changes the status of the original.<sup>13</sup> Although digitisation is not considered a preservation method in general archival practice due to the impossibility of reproducing all the properties of a physical object, a copy retains its relationship with the original and records its state at a particular point in time. In an attempt to deconstruct the established prejudice against digital versions of material images, Jasmine E. Burns draws attention to the need to give more weight to digital copies, arguing that reproduction does not deprive objects of Walter Benjamin's 'aura' but rather reveals the existence of the original, enhancing its meaning and value.<sup>14</sup> An additional argument for the importance of digital archives is the loss of the original, or its inaccessibility, as will be discussed

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11 Edwards and Hart, "Introduction", 1–3.

12 Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, "Mixed Box: The Cultural Biography of a Box of 'Ethnographic' Photographs", in: Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (eds.), *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, London: Routledge, 2004, 48–64, here 50.

13 Emanuela Rossi, "The Digital Biography of Things: A Canadian Case Study in Digital Repatriation", in: Simona Pinton and Lauso Zagato (eds.), *Cultural Heritage: Scenarios 2015–2017*, Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2017, 657–669, here 666.

14 Jasmine E. Burns, "The Aura of Materiality: Digital Surrogacy and the Preservation of Photographic Archives", *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 36/1, 2017, 1–8, here 6–7.

later in this text. Despite the inability to reproduce physical properties, a copy can be the only substitute for a lost original and will, in fact, be equated to that status in terms of archiving.

### Three Amateur Film Collections from Mariupol

During 2020–2021, the Center for Urban History, together with the University of St. Andrews and in partnership with the Mariupol Museum of Local Lore, the Pokrovsk Historical Museum, and the Donetsk Regional Museum of Local History, implemented the project *Un/Archiving Post/Industry*: “Its aims were to collect surviving industrial heritage collections and create digital archives illustrating the work, leisure, space, and architecture, festivities, and everyday life of industrial cities, plants and factories, and industrial communities at work and at home”.<sup>15</sup> The materials that were collected included photographs, films, and videos that were stored in the collections of local museums and in private family archives.

I will focus on the details of the biography of three collections of moving images from Mariupol that were discovered during the project and included in the UMA of the Center for Urban History in Lviv in the form of digital copies. The UMA is a digital archive that works to digitise, provide access to, and promote visual, audio-visual, and audio sources related to the history of cities in Central and Eastern Europe that are, for various reasons, out of the spotlight of academic discourse.

The first collection is a set of 16mm and 35mm films made by Mariupol amateur filmmakers in the 1960s and 1970s, which was kept at the Mariupol Museum of Local Lore. Three 16mm films were created at the Zhdanovsky Metallurgical Institute film studio, while five 35mm films were created by different authors. These are two issues of *Screen of Pryazovia*, the newsreel of the City Club of Amateur Filmmakers, which includes reports prepared by different studios (Fig. 14). The film *75 Flameful Years* (1972), by the national film studio Flame, is about the connection between the history of Zhdanov (the Soviet-era name of Mariupol) and the Ilyich Iron and Steel Works and its 75-year history. The collection also includes the film *Electroslag Remelting*, by the Zhdanov Heavy Engineering Plant studio, and a film by the correspondent office of the Ministry of Installation and Special Construction Works about the installation of a convector at the Ilyich Plant (Fig. 15). Finally, there is also a box with various fragments of footage, the remains of the editing process that were not used in the films, containing short fragments of city views, the tragically known Mariupol Theatre, and views of the sea.<sup>16</sup>

15 Sklokina and Grivina, “Un/Archiving Post/Industry”.

16 Urban Media Archive, Center for Urban History, “Mariupol Museum of Local History”, <https://uma.lvivcenter.org/en/collections/147/videos> [accessed: 07.03.2023].

Figure 14: Still from the newsreel *Pryazovskyi Ekran* (*Screen of Pryazovia*)



Still from the newsreel *Pryazovskyi Ekran* (*Screen of Pryazovia*), 35mm film, no. 3, 1969, 10:47, still from 00:08. The newsreel was made by the Zhdanov City Club of Amateur Filmmakers and is part of the collection of the Mariupol Museum of Local History. The digital scan of the 35mm film is stored in the Urban Media Archive of the Center for Urban History, <https://uma.lvivcenter.org/en/videos/46886>. Image provided courtesy of the Center for Urban History.

In general, the entire collection tells the story of the city's history with a distinct emphasis on industrial production, which is a significant part of Mariupol's identity. The fact that local amateur filmmakers had access to professional 35mm film and the appropriate equipment during the second half of the 20th century is evidence of serious funding for this activity by the wealthy enterprises of heavy industry and, as a result, the scale of amateur filmmaking and the importance of film production for the city. Even though state support of amateur filmmaking was widespread in Soviet Ukraine, film studios mainly used much cheaper 16mm film stock and equipment. Films by Mariupol amateurs were not marginal at the time, and, being in line with propaganda discourse, their films were screened in cinemas and broadcast on TV; these filmmakers also participated in republican and all-union festivals organised for and by film amateurs to show their films.<sup>17</sup> Although the output of film studios

17 Oleksandr Makhanets, "Amateur Filmmaking in Soviet Ukraine: Collective Practices", *reesources: Rethinking Eastern Europe*, Center for Urban History, 26 March 2024, <https://edu>

in Mariupol was significant, as evidenced by the press and private paper archives of local film amateurs, only a few films were deposited in the collection of the Mariupol Museum of Local History. The reason for this lies in the lack of an archiving policy for amateur films in both the USSR and in independent Ukraine. In 2021, these films were digitised by the Center for Urban History as part of the aforementioned project, and the originals were returned to the museum for safekeeping along with digital copies, which were also digitally included in the UMA collection. After the occupation of the city and reports of a fire in the museum, the collection was likely lost. Thus, all that remains are digital surrogates of the films placed in a new environment with their own organisational structure and a network of connections between other digital objects with which they had not been connected before. They are separate entities that are represented in the virtual world through another institution that is not directly connected to the original material and place of origin. At the same time, copies acquire a new status and testify to the past existence of the originals, although their life as physical objects is over; in an intellectual sense, digital copies can be read as the next stage or continuation of the object's biography.<sup>18</sup>

The second collection of moving images comes from the private archive of Heorhii Kotelnykov, and its peculiarity lies in the fact that his films were shot in the 1950s with an experimental self-made camera and 35mm photographic film (Fig. 16). At that time, compact, small-gauge cameras were not widespread in the Soviet Union, so building the camera on his own was one of the achievable solutions if he wanted to make films. The idea of Kotelnykov's self-made camera was borrowed from the construction of a cinematograph that he once encountered at a flea market in Mariupol. The construction of the device was similar to those from the dawn of cinema in the late 19th century; it combined both a projector and a camera and looked like a wooden box with a lens and hand crank. The only film stock available at that time was photographic film, so he adapted it and invented his own format, which involved shooting in four rows with a frame size of 4.5mm by 6mm (Fig. 17). If shooting with a speed of 16 frames per second, up to 80 seconds of footage could be shot on a standard roll of film.

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.lvivcenter.org/en/modules/amateur-filmmaking-in-soviet-ukraine-collective-practices [accessed: 10.06.2024]; and Maria Vinogradova, "Socialistická Filmová Tvorba vs. Gosplan: Budování Infrastruktury Sovětského Amatérského Filmu" ("Socialist Movie Making vs. Gosplan: Establishing an Infrastructure for the Soviet Amateur Cinema"), *Illuminace (Illumination)* 28/2, 2016, 9–27, here 20.

18 Rossi, "The Digital Biography of Things", 668.

Figure 15: Still from the film *Montazh konvertora na kombinati im. Il'icha* (Installation of a Convector at the Ilyich Plant)



Still from the film *Montazh konvertora na kombinati im. Il'icha* (Installation of a Convector at the Ilyich Plant), dir. J. Kunts, 35mm film, 1977, 10:00, still from 00:08. The film was produced by the Correspondent Office of the Central Bureau of Scientific and Technical Information of the Ukrainian Professional Technical Construction Institute of the Ministry of Installation and Special Construction Works of the USSR and is part of the collection of the Mariupol Museum of Local History. The digital scan of the 35mm film is stored in the Urban Media Archive of the Center for Urban History, <https://uma.lvivcenter.org/en/videos/46886>. Image provided courtesy of the Center for Urban History.

Figure 16: Heorhii Kotelnykov's self-made camera



Image by author, August 2022.

In 2021, the filmmaker contributed three films he made on this camera for digitisation and, since they were nonstandard, it was necessary to find an approach to digitise them. This method can be called digital reconstruction, as each of the thousands of frames was scanned manually and then animated using software. Kotelnykov, in his 80s, saw his mother and friends from his youth in film for the first time since the time of his experiments. Still, in addition to its family value, his invention has a broader cultural significance for the Mariupol community and society at large, as it is a testimony to the technical creativity and pioneering practices of private amateur filmmaking, as well as to human interaction with visual media.

Kotelnykov's camera was showcased at the exhibition *Society with a Movie Camera*, which I curated at the Center for Urban History in Lviv in the autumn of 2021, and met the beginning of a new phase of the war there – unlike its inventor and his films, which ended up in blockaded Mariupol. During the tragic events of the city's occupation, the apparatus and the digitised copies of the films became, for me as their custodian, a kind of mediator of anxiety for their owners and reminded me of specific acquaintances who were out of reach and in extreme danger. More than six months passed before I found out that Kotelnykov had managed to evacuate and was in Ukraine in a relatively safe place. We managed to talk on the phone several times, and he was as happy as ever to receive attention for his invention and offered

to continue to store the camera at the Center for Urban History but regretted that he had to leave the films at home in Mariupol. Later, I received a message with a photo of a destroyed house – windowless and burnt – saying that this was the house where Kotelnykov had lived. It is not known if his films survived the fire and are still intact; if so, they are probably in the ruins of the house, and the images on the celluloid base – sensitive to temperature and humidity – would be decaying faster than usual.

*Figure 17: A fragment of original film stock shot with Heorhii Kotelnykov's camera*

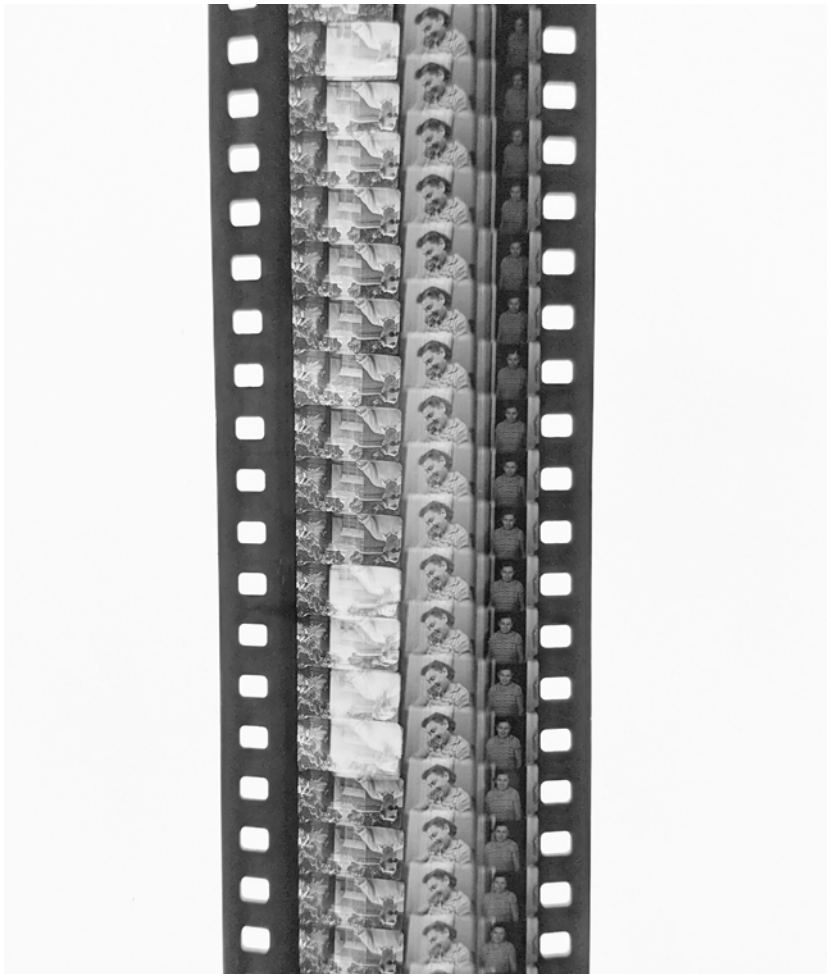


Image by author, July 2021.

The third collection, which was digitised and donated to the UMA, is also private and consists of 27 reels of 8mm home movies that document the life of a family from Mariupol in the 1970s and 1980s (Figs. 18 and 19). It also connects with specific people under threat. For security reasons, I am not naming the filmmaker who granted the films to the archive, as he remains in the occupied city. Fortunately, we eventually received confirmation that he managed to survive the most acute moment of the occupation in the spring of 2022. Unlike the previous ones, this collection has definitely survived, but now it is divided by the front line. Its digitisation took place in two stages: after the first portion of 15 reels was ready, it was returned to Mariupol and the next portion of 12 reels was sent to Lviv, where they remain to this day, without the possibility of returning and reuniting with the other films. Only digital copies were returned to the owner thanks to the available internet connection.

*Figure 18: A man with a movie camera at a May 1st demonstration*



Image by an anonymised author, 8mm film, Mariupol, 1974, still from 00:06:43. The original is part of a private collection and the digital scan of the 8mm film is in the Urban Media Archive of the Center for Urban History. Image provided courtesy of the Center for Urban History.

Figure 19: Mariupol Port, viewed from a ship



Image by an anonymised author, 8mm film, Mariupol, 1974, still from 00:03:07. The original is part of a private collection and the digital scan of the 8mm film is in the Urban Media Archive of the Center for Urban History. Image provided courtesy of the Center for Urban History.

As is typical of the home movie genre, the 8mm films document special moments in family life: celebrations, weddings, carefree walks around the city, children, vacations on the sunny beaches of Mariupol, and travel, among other things. They show the best periods of life in the brightest colours and, despite their undeniable conventionality, these images are real, following the notion by Jonas Mekas. In his film *Outtakes from the Life of a Happy Man* he says, “these are not memories, this is all real what you see, every image, every detail, everything is real”.<sup>19</sup> They are more real than ever before because, viewing them now, it is impossible to escape the thought that in the future the lives of the specific people imprinted on the film will be destroyed by war. These home movies are sensitive because of their private nature, but they become sensitive in a new way and acquire new meanings because of their physical contact with the tragedy of war, which is both common and personal at the same time.

19 NOWNESS, “Outtakes from the Life of a Happy Man’ (Excerpt) by Jonas Mekas”, YouTube video, 3:53, here 0:53–01:08, 22 January 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGUT\\_4F2SRM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGUT_4F2SRM) [accessed: 10.06.2024].

## When Films Meet the War

Each image has its own material form of embodiment and, as an ageing object, it is sensitive to environment and time, as well as to the social context and discourses that determine its value. With its own trajectory of life, the image is in motion, creating a network of connections and meanings that are constantly transformed throughout its existence.<sup>20</sup> However, in the ordinary state of things and the peaceful flow of life, many of these processes are so stretched out over time that plenty of connections between physical objects of archival value and other actors remain rather weak, invisible, or insignificant. The stability of materials under conditions of sustainable preservation dilutes the intensity of interconnections, just as lack of disturbance slows down the discursive changes through which we assign meanings to these materials. In contrast, war activates the acceleration of many physical and intellectual processes in specific places, or in relation to specific places. Because of the Russo–Ukrainian War, we can see an exceptional concentration of transformations of meaning – in our case, of film archives from Mariupol.

First of all, two of the collections mentioned above were likely irretrievably lost due to bombings and fires. The videos I received in February 2023 show that the number of lost moving-image archives in Mariupol is much higher than I had imagined, and that looting and vandalism are also the reasons for this. The digital copies of the lost films kept by the Center for Urban History in Lviv, alienated from their material carriers, are perhaps the only way to see what was once captured on film – the past of the now destroyed city. This loss makes the copy more valuable, as it is the only way to transfer the images to the future. The ‘digital copy of the film’ becomes the ‘digital copy of the lost film’. Thus, the fact that a digital copy created for access and representation acquires the status of an original communicates the absence of the original source and its physical death, if we follow the metaphor of biography. Or, in other words, the digital copy inherits the biography of the original, along with the fact of loss, and continues to mediate it.

The digitised film archives from Mariupol are even more important in the context that these are not the only losses of the historical heritage of the city and its community; the films I mention are a small sample of what has been lost compared to the scale of what has been stolen and destroyed in the fires. The war turns archives into ashes and debris, leaving no choice and no possibility to sort out what is important for archiving and preserves the history of the city and what is secondary and worth less attention. Artefacts’ processes of decay, which could typically last for centuries, are accelerated to mere months or days. In this situation, everything that remains becomes incredibly valuable. Both the object and its contents are direct traces and evidence of the city’s tragedy and the gap that tears its past and future apart.

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20 Gosden and Marshall, “The Cultural Biography of Objects”, 169.

Researchers will approach the preserved artefacts like archaeologists to reconstruct and imagine what happened from the remaining pieces. The alienated digital images will become documents of the existence of the celluloid films that depicted the city; at the same time, they will testify to what happened to the physical media.

The fact that the loss of the original materials and the digital copies' acquisition of a new status results in a shift of power over the object is problematic. As long as the Mariupol Museum of Local Lore remains in an uncertain status with no physical access to the city, the UMA of the Center for Urban History becomes the actual place of storage for the films and takes on custodial responsibility, which is inseparable from power over these objects. The UMA's digital environment subordinates materials to its own order and discourse, which can have an active impact on the meaning and interpretation of films.<sup>21</sup> Now they are inscribed into the wider historical narrative with a specific focus on the history of cities along with other collections, but detached from the local context. They are visible for certain audiences familiar with the centre but may be unseen by those belonging to other networks connected with Mariupol. To be able to comprehend all these implicit layers of biography of historical sources that ended up in the 'arch-synthetic' collection requires material literacy and media literacy, as well as an understanding of the context.

Despite the limitations and problematics of interpretation that arise when a digital surrogate of the original image appears in a virtual environment, this also has advantages. Modern digital infrastructure not only subordinates but also makes the object more autonomous and accessible to the source community. The community of Mariupol residents suffered greatly and incurred great human losses, and those who managed to survive and evacuate became scattered across Ukraine and the world. Others remain under threat in the occupied city. The digital environment has become an opportunity for them to reconnect, create their own virtual spaces, and regain their agency despite the distance and tragic experience. Historical heritage plays a key role in this, as can be seen in the following online projects that appeared in 2022: The History of Mariupol was created in response to the destruction of the Mariupol Museum of Local History and collects all materials related to the history of the city,<sup>22</sup> and Mariupol Memory Park is a space for reflection and an archive that collects memories, artefacts, and testimonies about the destroyed city, without any hierarchical order.<sup>23</sup> Both projects use digitised materials stored at the Center for

21 Edwards and Hart, "Mixed Box", 50.

22 Istorija Mariupolia (The History of Mariupol), <https://mariupol.dev-for-web.com.ua/> [accessed: 06.03.2023].

23 Mariupolskyi park pamyati (Mariupol Memory Park), <https://www.mariupolmemorypark.space/> [accessed: 06.03.2023]; and Ksenia Rybak, "Ruiny navchyly mene chomus pro mene samu". Mariupolskyi park pamyati – avtonomnyi anarchiv" ("The Ruins Taught Me Something about Myself: "Mariupol Memory Park is an Autonomous Anarchive") *Commons*, 04 Decem-

Urban History. Digital objects, which are evidence of the materiality of the heritage of Mariupol citizens, allow the community to reconnect with their historical past.

The events of the war define new discourses that emerge about Ukrainian history in general and about Mariupol specifically. The tragedy of the occupation, the siege of the city, and the defence of Azovstal have gained an important symbolic place in the war's chronology and have become directly associated with the city, while detailed and prolonged media coverage has made millions of people indirect witnesses to the events. This process affects the epistemological optics with which we analyse the archives of moving images from Mariupol, not only in terms of the physical objects threatened but also in terms of how we interpret their content. Additionally, an important role is played by the effect of the photographic nature of the images; their indexicality, which may make films (especially home movies) seem unquestionably truthful; and the characteristics of the amateur footage, which enhances realism due to its ease and imperfection.<sup>24</sup> The content of the films from Mariupol became sensitive because they connect with the past and, to see it from today's perspective, one needs to look back and overcome the metaphorical gap: the tragic events of the war. Looking back and looking at the past in the films, everything takes on new meaning; all the connections coincide at one point. The linear chronology leads everything and everyone depicted to a tragedy that can no longer be erased from the history of the city and its community. Those who we see in films are not nameless figures or walk-ons from the past but living people who ended up in the epicentre of the war. These connections remain invisible if we take the historical sources out of their context and the physical films out of the specific time and space where they are located. Such a biased perspective on archival sources is ahistorical and historical at the same time. On the one hand, reading the source in this way considers the events that happened in the 'future', but, on the other hand, it pays attention to the entire biographies of the films as objects, rather than just being fixed to the moment of their creation. The comprehensiveness of the tragedy makes the films ambiguous; they are documents about the events that were captured by the camera, but also objects that are victims of war and serve as evidence of war.

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ber 2022, <https://commons.com.ua/ru/mariupolskij-park-pamyati-avtonomnij-anarhiv/> [accessed: 06.03.2023].

24 Péter Forgács, "Wittgenstein Tractatus: Personal Reflections on Home Movies", in: Karen I. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmerman (eds.), *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 47–56, here 51.

## Conclusions

The approach to the analysis of moving images as physical objects opens up a new perspective on their role and meaning, which is especially relevant today, in the digital age, when the computer screen flattens the three-dimensional materiality of images that are physical objects. The context of war, due to the intensity of physical and discursive processes, as well as inaccessibility, uncertainty, and loss, allows us to see at an accelerated speed what an image as an object goes through during its biography (decay, ageing, gaining new value). It also draws attention to another kind of sensitivity of images – their physical vulnerability – and thus to the fact that as the material condition and location of an image changes, perceptions of it change, which is no less important than the content depicted.

The films from the Mariupol Museum of Local Lore and the private collection of Heorhiis Kotelnykov have been lost. One private collection of home movies that was digitised has survived, but it is divided: part of it is in the possession of the owner, while the other part remains in Lviv. All the digital copies of the above-mentioned collections are preserved in the UMA of the Center for Urban History. Notwithstanding that there are many limitations associated with the digital archiving of analogue media and that digital copies cannot replace the originals and reproduce all their physical properties, now the copies of the lost films have gained the status of the original. By using the object biography metaphor, we can say that the copy inherits the biography of the original and continues it, accumulating new facts, including the fact of loss. From this perspective the war becomes a significant and inseparable event that may affect the perception of the source itself.

At the same time, thanks to online access and the autonomy of digital files, the source community and the owners of the films have been able to reconnect with the city and its history in a virtual space. This is especially important when a significant part of the historical heritage and objects that carry the memory of the private or common past have been lost or are inaccessible. Preserved films, even in digital form, gain more weight and serve as tools for the agency of Mariupol's people.

For the archivists who work with these Mariupol collections, war conditions impose a special moral responsibility and obligation regarding the preservation, use, and interpretation of these films. Moving images that were moved from Mariupol to Lviv have become a moving trigger. The direct relation to the tragedy of Mariupol makes the content of the films sensitive. Although they were created decades ago, they depict events from the recent past and living people who are direct victims of the war and who are currently in danger. Their city and lives were destroyed. The films mediate this connection, adding a new layer of meanings to them, making them both evidence and victims of the war.

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# Community Archiving as Resistance to Epistemic Erasure in the Ukrainian East, 2014–2023

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Victoria Donovan

In his seminal essay on archival power and its limits, the political historian and anticolonial critic Achille Mbembe reminds us that the archive, rather than a neutral repository of knowledge, is “a matter of discrimination and selection, [resulting] in the granting of a privileged status to certain written documents, and the refusal of that same status to others, thereby judged ‘unarchivable’. The archive is, therefore, not a piece of data, but a status”.<sup>1</sup> Mbembe has not been alone in highlighting the exclusionary politics of the archive. In their 2017 “A Manifesto for Feminist Archiving (or Disruption)”, for example, the feminist arts and heritage collective Digital Women’s Archive North foreground these same processes of selection and deselection in the production of archival knowledge: “An archive becomes such because individuals decide that certain pieces of knowledge and data should be collected and retained following initial generation and use”, the collective writes. “This is a political act: we select material to retain at the expense of other material or data. In selecting certain content we announce to future users that this material holds importance (to someone, for some purpose). Often the identity of the archivist or collector is secondary (or absent)”.<sup>2</sup>

Building on these insights into the hierarchical, often colonially informed politics of archive-making, scholars have in recent years begun to draw attention to ‘community archiving’ as a means of recuperating marginalised histories and, as the Professor of Archival Studies Michelle Caswell argues, of “catalyz[ing] these histories for liberation”.<sup>3</sup> ‘Community archiving’, defined as archival work conducted ‘with’ and ‘for’ the communities represented rather than ‘about’ them, is revealed in this scholarship as “liberatory memory work” capable of “releas[ing] societies from

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- 1 Achille Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and Its Limits”, in: Carolyn Hamilton et al. (eds.), *Refiguring the Archive*, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002, 20.
  - 2 Digital Women’s Archive North, “The Feminists Are Cackling in the Archive”, *Feminist Review* 115, 2017, 155–164, here 157.
  - 3 Michelle Caswell, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*, Abingdon, Oxford: Routledge, 2021, 8.

cycles of violence, prejudice, and hatred and instead [creating] vibrant and conscious societies that strive to achieve a just balance of individual and collective rights".<sup>4</sup> In Ukraine, as I argue in this chapter, 'liberatory memory work' of the sort described by Caswell has been pursued by activist communities and their international collaborators with growing urgency since Russia first invaded the country in 2014. With conversations about epistemic imperialism and calls for the decolonisation of knowledge infrastructures intensifying following the escalation of the war in 2022, this work is advancing at pace. In this chapter, I propose to analyse this activity through the lens of 'community archiving' scholarship, drawing on empirical findings from long-term field research and interviews in eastern Ukraine, a region rich in industrial history and heritage.

Industrial heritage has long been a problematic category in post-independence Ukraine. Following the outbreak of war in the east, a region with a high concentration of industrial heritage objects and collections, and the decommunisation laws in 2015, its status became increasingly precarious. Deindustrialisation, military conflict, and strategic shifts in cultural memory politics – the entangled politics of which I discuss in more detail below – meant that many objects of industrial architecture, material culture, and archival collections were abandoned as 'historical trash'. In this context and related to the growth in activist self-organisation after 2014, a number of community and grassroots initiatives emerged to preserve this part of the region's historic legacy. From activist archiving to guerrilla preservation, these initiatives presented a wide spectrum of extra-state activity. With the escalation of the war in February 2022, these initiatives, now displaced from the occupied east, continued their work at a distance, resisting the region's cultural erasure.

This chapter draws on interviews and participant observation work conducted with activist communities and heritage practitioners in the Ukrainian east before February 2022 and online interviews conducted since the beginning of the escalation. It details the conditions of composite precarity in which grassroots and community preservationist initiatives emerged in the region after 2014 and explores how participants in these initiatives understood their work. The chapter argues that the infrastructure of voluntarism formed in these years provided the foundation for a new wave of preservationist work after February 2022. With Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, activist networks mobilised to carry out the cultural preservation work that the Ukrainian state was too overextended or under-resourced to do itself. This included the museum evacuation work undertaken by the NGO Museums Crisis Center, volunteer 3D-visualisation initiatives that digitally mapped damaged heritage objects, and a multimedia project to digitally document the displaced communities of occupied Mariupol.

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4 Ibid., 13.

## Industrial Heritage Preservation before 2022: Dereliction and Petrification

On 1 May 2022, a red-brick gymnasium, part of the “Prosvita” cultural and educational complex built by the 19th-century Belgian managers of the Lysychansk soda plant, burnt to the ground following Russian bombing. The gymnasium’s ruination was just a drop in an ocean of heritage destruction underway in Ukraine at this time and drew relatively little attention beyond the community of activists who had worked for many years to preserve the region’s industrial material heritage. For this group, however, the building’s destruction was deeply symbolic. Since the occupation of parts of the country’s eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions by illegal, Russian-backed militias in 2014, civic activists had been engaged in the promotion of the Donbas’s ‘European’ history and heritage, partly as a means of combatting the toxic ‘Russian World’ propaganda issuing from the occupied territories.<sup>5</sup> The destruction of the Belgian gymnasium, one of the most significant architectural relics from the era of foreign capitalist investment in the Ukrainian east, was consequently understood as an attack on this memory, part of the Russian Federation’s genocidal war of cultural erasure.

While the full-scale invasion posed an unprecedented threat to this legacy, the status of industrial heritage was precarious even before 2022. With the privatisation of industry in the 1990s, many of the region’s factories and plants had been catastrophically mismanaged by oligarchic elites, sent into liquidation, or sold off for parts.<sup>6</sup> The caustic soda factory in Lysychansk, for example, had been gradually dismantled over the course of ten years. Once the main premises had been blown up and the historic cableway (a kind of cable car system for coal) removed, all that was left was a devastated expanse. Similar cases could be found across the eastern region.<sup>7</sup> The Azovmash machine-building plant (formerly the Belgian-owned Providence factory) in Mariupol had likewise been forced into liquidation in the first decade of the 2000s, leaving hundreds of workers unemployed.<sup>8</sup> When I visited the site in winter 2021, all that remained of the premises was a field of rubble punctuated by tall chimney stacks (Fig. 20). The rich complex of Belgian-built, 19th-century industrial

5 Elements of this activist work were documented in the film *EuroDonbas* (2022), directed by Korniy Hrytsiuk. The film was accompanied by a podcast series exploring the European (in particular German) architectural and cultural heritage of the Donbas region.

6 For the most comprehensive accounts of these processes, see: Denys Kazanskyi and Maryna Vorotyntseva, *Yak Ukraina vtrachala Donbas (How Ukraine Lost the Donbas)*, Kyiv: Cherna hora, 2020; and Yuliya Yurchenko, *Ukraine and the Empire of Capital: From Marketisation to Armed Conflict*, London: Pluto Press, 2018.

7 Interview with Vitaliy Matukhno, resident of Lysychansk and cultural activist, online, June 2022.

8 Interview with Andriy Prokhopov, resident of Mariupol and factory manager, Mariupol, November 2021.

architecture, proudly featured in archival postcard photography, was barely identifiable among the wreckage.<sup>9</sup>

Industrial heritage preservation posed a unique set of problems for the post-independence Ukrainian state. As the historians of Ukrainian monotowns Iryna Sklokina and Volodymyr Kulikov have pointed out, the associations of this legacy with celebratory Soviet narratives of industrial modernity and proletarian consciousness marked it out as ‘difficult heritage’ after 1991.<sup>10</sup> Qualifying neither as religious nor civic architecture, categories that were prioritised in the preservationist legislation of the post-Soviet era, few objects of industrial architecture were designated as heritage after 1991.<sup>11</sup> The result was that many historic industrial buildings fell into dereliction in the years that followed. With the outbreak of war in the east in 2014, it became increasingly difficult for local authorities to attract the external funding necessary for the adaptation of these sites as commercial spaces or cultural venues. Consequently, many buildings were abandoned to their fates, being overtaken by wildlife or dismantled by enterprising locals who used the construction materials in their own projects (Fig. 21).<sup>12</sup>

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- 9 For late 19th- and early 20th-century archival photographs of the Providence plant, see the collections from the Mariupol Local History Museum digitised through the Un/Archiving Post/Industry project in 2020–2021, now accessible through the Center for Urban History’s Urban Media Archive: Urban Media Archive, <https://uma.lvivcenter.org/en/photos?full-search=h=mariupol> [accessed: 06.06.2024].
- 10 Volodymyr Kulikov and Iryna Sklokina, “Industrial Heritage and Its Multiple Uses in Donbas, Ukraine”, *REGION: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia* 10/1, special issue *Donbas Imaginaries: Heritage, Culture, Communities*, January 2021, 33–60.
- 11 In addition to the administrative complex around the Belgian-built soda factory in Lysychansk, protected 19th-century industrial heritage sites in the Ukrainian east included the following: the residential complex and administrative buildings around the Alchevsk Metallurgy Plant in the Luhansk region (occupied since 2014); two mill buildings that belonged to German Mennonites in New York and the Novogrodovsk community; the ruined office building of the Joint-Stock Company “Dziewulski and Lange” in Sloviansk; the Palace of Culture and Technology at the Novokramatorsk Machine Building Plant in Kramatorsk; and Shop No. 1 of the Avtosklo Plant in Kostiantynivka (though the reference number was never assigned). A number of other sites were in the process of being registered when the full-scale invasion took place in February 2022. My thanks to Mykhailo Kulishov for his help compiling this list.
- 12 See “‘Druhe zhyttia’ industrial’noi spadshchyny” (“The ‘Second Life’ of Industrial Heritage”), a section of the exhibition *Ekolohiia u Fokusi (Ecology on Camera)*, curated by Dmytro Bilko, Victoria Donovan, Volodymyr Kulikov, and Iryna Sklokina, produced through the Un/Archiving Post/Industry project in 2022: *Ecology on Camera*, “The ‘second life’ of Industrial Heritage”, <https://ecology.lvivcenter.org/en/industrial-heritage.html> [accessed: 06.06.2024].

Figure 20: Azovmash (formerly the Providence factory) in Mariupol



Image by author, November 2021.

If the architectural legacy of industry was falling quickly into dereliction, industrial museum heritage was, by contrast, preserved in a form almost entirely unreconstructed from the Soviet era. Factories in the Ukrainian east often had their own museums. These were promotional institutions founded in the 1960s and 1970s that were intended to exhibit industrial achievements to local audiences and visiting delegations.<sup>13</sup> Following the privatisation of industry in the 1990s, these museums were acquired by new oligarchic owners, who adapted the displays for their own purposes. The museums often preserved the narrative arc of their Soviet predecessors, tweaking their beginnings and endings to reflect the new capitalist reality. The museums that I visited in Kramatorsk, Sieverodonetsk, and Mariupol thus all retained their focus on the factory's provisioning role, local hero workers, and technological achievements. By contrast with the deindustrialising landscapes outside their windows, they gave no impression of the socioeconomic decline that had consumed the region after 1991.

13 Kulikov and Sklokina, "Industrial Heritage and Its Multiple Uses in Donbas, Ukraine", 40–41.

*Figure 21: Ruins of a 19th-century, Belgian-built office of the Bakhmut salt mine. In the foreground is a stack of bricks collected from the building, presumably for use in a DIY construction project.*



Image by author, July 2021.

A key theme in industrial museum exhibitions was that of paternalistic care. The factory was celebrated in the displays as the heart of the community, the builder of residential housing and schools, the founder of popular literacy and culture, and the sponsor of theatres and palaces of culture, sports clubs, and oases of na-

ture.<sup>14</sup> Exhibitions of paternalistic care were often accompanied by formalised expressions of thanks from the local community. The foyer of Novokramatorsk Machine-Building Plant (NKMZ) Museum in Kramatorsk, for example, was occupied by a folding display board detailing the factory’s achievements, in front of which stood a plastic installation of the words “I ♥ NKMZ” (Fig. 22). The intention was that people visiting the museum would take pictures with the installation and share these on social media. This contemporary expression of gratitude to the factory management for the improvement of community life resembled the expressions of gratitude to the Soviet leadership Jeffrey Brooks describes in his book *Thank You, Comrade Stalin*.<sup>15</sup> Looking beyond the Soviet context, parallels can also be found in exhibitions in the colonies of the British Empire, where emphasis was placed on the transformative, modernising role the industrialising imperial system had played in the regulation and provisioning of local community life.<sup>16</sup>

Figure 22: Entry hall to the NKMZ Museum in Kramatorsk



Image by author, July 2021.

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- 14 Fieldnotes based on excursions around the AZOT Museum in Sievierodonetsk in July 2019, the NKMZ Machine Building Plant Museum in Kramatorsk in July 2021, and the Ilych Iron and Steelworks Museum in November 2021.
  - 15 Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin: Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.
  - 16 See, for example: Sugata Ray, “Colonial Frames, ‘Native’ Claims: The Jaipur Economic and Industrial Museum”, *The Art Bulletin* 96/2, June 2014, 196–212.

Another theme of industrial museum exhibitions was that of generational continuity. This idea was most powerfully expressed in the visual tradition of the ‘family dynasty’. With its roots in the Soviet era, this practice involved photographing family members of different generations, all of whom had worked at the same enterprise, and calculating the collective number of years of their service. At the AZOT nitrogen plant in Sievierodonetsk, for example, an album was on display showing portraits of worker families such as the Fadeevs, 13 members of which had worked at the chemical plant for a collective total of 275 years.<sup>17</sup> At the Ilych Iron and Steelworks Museum in Mariupol, which I visited in November 2021, the tradition had been given a modern twist. With declining numbers of local young people choosing to work at the factory, Metinvest (Rinat Akhmetov’s steel and mining company, which owned the factory) decided to reboot the ‘family dynasty’ theme.<sup>18</sup> A glamorous new gallery of dynastic families with high-quality photographs and details of their contributions was created in the corridor at the end of the exhibition (Fig. 23). In addition, factory workers were invited to claim monetary rewards in the form of vouchers for goods sold in Metinvest-run stores and calculated in accordance with their family’s total number of years of labour.<sup>19</sup>

## Without the State I: Self-Organisation and Civic Archiving

Industrial heritage preservation in the Ukrainian east was thus characterised by state neglect, on the one hand, and institutional anachronism, on the other. Faced with this reality, local activist communities in the region mobilised to enact change on their own terms. In her 2022 monograph on self-organisation during the Maidan Revolution, Emily Channell-Justice writes about the “withdrawal of the state” in post-independence Ukraine. She explains that the neoliberalising Ukrainian state displaced many of its governmental responsibilities to non-state actors – NGOs and volunteers – normalising the ‘citizen-as-activist’ model of participation in public life.<sup>20</sup> This tendency towards self-organisation was in evidence when I travelled through the eastern Donbas region between 2019 and 2021. Volunteer organisations and cultural activists, many of whom had been displaced from occupied urban centres such as Donetsk and Luhansk to cities such as Sievierodonetsk, Bakhmut, Kramatorsk, and Mariupol after 2014, were playing an important role in the region’s

17 Fieldnote from excursion around the AZOT Museum in Sievierodonetsk, July 2019.

18 Interview with Artem Bereznev, resident of Mariupol and factory workshop manager, November 2021.

19 Interview with Iryna Badasen, resident of Mariupol and director of the Ilych Iron and Steelworks Museum, November 2021.

20 Emily Channell-Justice, *Without the State: Self-Organization and Political Activism in Ukraine*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022, 26–28.

heritage politics.<sup>21</sup> Rather than waiting indefinitely for the state to formulate adequate responses to the manifest challenges facing local communities, these activist groups were pursuing direct action. As Channell-Justice explains, such activist work followed a simple, self-propelling logic: “if something needs to be done and a person has the ability to do it, then the person should simply do it”.<sup>22</sup>

One of the organisations independently involved in questions of industrial heritage management in the east was the NGO DE-NE-DE.<sup>23</sup> Founded in 2016, this group of heritage experts, mostly from Kyiv and Lviv, coordinated projects with local history museums in the east with the intention of fostering more critical approaches to heritage collections and practices of display. In 2019, I visited Mykola Lomako, the director of the Lysychansk Local History Museum, who had recently partnered with DE-NE-DE on the project *The Museum Is Open for Restoration*. As part of this collaboration, DE-NE-DE and the museum had curated the exhibition *Svitlohrad Museum*, comprising artist-led engagements with different museum objects and artefacts. The exhibition included a work by Kseniia Hnilitska, formed of a collection of Soviet sculptures, their backs turned towards the viewer, gazing at a wall painting of a pastoral scene.<sup>24</sup> By contrast with unreconstructed displays at the region's privately owned factory museums, where industrial heritage was heavily ideologised and made to work for the promotional purposes of the enterprise, *Svitlohrad Museum* offered a radical reimagining of the role of heritage in the decommunisation process. Here the material culture of the past was shown as having agency of its own, resisting its instrumentalisation by political elites and engaging in the process of imagining its own future. Rather than state-led, this radical heritage initiative was the result of local actors “simply do[ing] it” themselves.

Another example of self-organisation around industrial heritage preservation was the *Un/Archiving Post/Industry* project led by the Center for Urban History

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21 For an account of post-2014 art activist initiatives, in particular feminist activism, in the region, see, for example: Irina Kuznetsova, “The Feminist Geopolitics of Donbas: The Role of Art in Challenging Bordering”, *REGION: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia* 10/1, special issue *Donbas Imaginaries: Heritage, Culture, Communities*, January 2021, 61–83; for more on the role of displaced activists in the development of cultural life in the government-controlled east after 2014, see: Dmytro Chepurnyi, “Podolaty roz’iednannia: suchasne mystetstvo Skhodu Ukrainy” (“Overcoming Disconnection: Contemporary Art of Ukrainian East”), in: Victoria Donovan and Darya Tsybalyuk (eds.), *Mezhi kolaboratsii: Mystetstvo, etyka ta Donbas (Limits of Collaboration: Art, Ethics, and Donbas)*, Kyiv: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2022, 296–305.

22 Channell-Justice, *Without the State*, 28.

23 See: DE-NE-DE (Facebook page), <https://www.facebook.com/denedenede/> [accessed: 08.03.2023].

24 Roman Huba, “Svitlohrad: mystets'ka utopiia na Donbasi” (“Svitlohrad: An Artistic Utopia in Donbas”), *VELYKAIDEIA (BIGIDEA)*, 21 March 2017, <https://biggggidea.com/practices/svitlohrad-mistetska-utopiya-na-donbasi/> [accessed: 06.06.2024].

in Lviv and a team of researchers (including myself and the project research assistant Viktoriia Grivina) at the University of St. Andrews, in partnership with local history museums in Mariupol, Pokrovsk, and Kramatorsk (relocated from Donetsk).<sup>25</sup> Identifying the vulnerability of industrial heritage collections at museums across the east, this project was primarily a digitisation initiative that resulted in the digital archiving of approximately 30,000 photo negatives and around 90 hours of archival film. The project included a series of public-facing activities, including home movie days, exhibitions, public lectures, workshops, and summer schools, which encouraged community engagement with the digitised collections. Like DE-NE-DE's *The Museum Is Open for Restoration* project, *Un/Archiving Post/Industry* was an initiative led in partnership with local museums to foster a critical conversation around the politics of historical representation. Rather than abandoning industrial heritage as 'historical trash' or preserving it in uncritical Soviet-era forms, the project aimed to 'un-archive' new narratives and experiences from Ukraine's industrial past, which until then had been marginalised in official history.<sup>26</sup>

Beyond NGO engagements with local museum collections, cultural activists in the Ukrainian east were involved in their own civic archiving projects. These projects were often born from conditions of precarity resulting from years of economic decline, deindustrialisation, and war. Mykhailo Kulishov's digital archiving project *Mines and Pits of Donbas*,<sup>27</sup> for example, began life as a physical collection of books on industrial themes that Kulishov had purchased in and around his home city of Horlyvka. When Horlyvka was occupied in 2014, Kulishov was forced to abandon his library and began to work instead on building the digital collection, which he believed was a more sustainable means to continue work on the project.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, in nearby Sievierodonetsk, the mass abandonment of industrial heritage

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25 *Un/Archiving Post/Industry* was a project realised by the Center for Urban History of East Central Europe and the University of St. Andrews, in partnership with the Mariupol Local History Museum, Pokrovsk Historical Museum, and Donetsk Regional History Museum. It was supported by the Global Challenges Research Fund and the House of Europe, 2019–2021: Iryna Sklokina and Viktoriia Grivina, "Un/Archiving Post/Industry", Center for Urban History, <https://www.lvivcenter.org/en/researches/un-archiving-post-industry/> [accessed: 08.03.2023].

26 See, for example, the publication by project partner Dmytro Bilko, "Vybrakovani svitlyny ta kanon pizn'oradians'koi shkil'noi fotohrafii" ("Rejected Photographs and the Canon of Late-Soviet School Photography"), *YourArt*, July 2021, <https://supportyourart.com/columns/vybrakovani-svitlyny-ta-kanon-piznosovyetskoyi-shkilnoyi-fotografii/> [accessed: 08.03.2023].

27 *Shakhty i rudnyky Donbasu: Industrial'na fotohrafia. Girnychopromyslove kraieznavstvo (Mines and Pits of Donbas: Industrial Photography. Local Mining History)*, <https://www.donmining.info> [accessed: 08.03.2023].

28 Interview with Mykhailo Kulishov, resident of Bakhmut and interdisciplinary researcher, online, July 2022.

sites and the vulnerability of historical artefacts contained within these buildings prompted a group of cultural activists based at the +/- Art Residency to begin curating an Archive of Deindustrialisation. Scouring the region's abandoned factories, the group collected objects that had been discarded as historically worthless, giving them new lives as parts of mosaics, installations, and digital photography (Fig. 24).<sup>29</sup> Both initiatives present examples of self-organisation as a response to failures on the part of the state to preserve and manage industrial heritage.

*Figure 23: Hall of family dynasties at the Ilych Iron and Steelworks Museum in Mariupol*



Image by author, November 2021.

29 For a more detailed account of this activity and interviews with key practitioners, see: Victoria Donovan and Darya Tsymbalyuk, "Vid ruin porn do 'zabroshka-erotyky': Doslidzhennia Viktorii Donovan ta Dar'i Tsymbaliuk pro Sievierodonets'k" ("From Ruin Porn to 'Zabroshka Erotica': A Study of Sievierodonetsk by Victoria Donovan and Darya Tsymbalyuk"), *YourArt*, July 2021, <https://supportyourart.com/stories/vid-ruin-porn-do-zabroshka-erotyky/> [accessed: 08.03.2023].

Figure 24: ‘Historical trash’ collected from abandoned factories stored at +/- Art Residency in Sieverodonetsk, forming part of the Archive of Deindustrialisation



Image by Oleksandr Kuchysnyi, 2019. Image provided courtesy of Oleksandr Kuchysnyi.

It is useful to consider this extra-state preservationist activity in the context of scholarly work around ‘community archiving’ as resistance to epistemic injustice and erasure. How can we understand the different imperatives to archive and collect in the face of growing precarity and the motivations of the different actors involved in this work? In her introduction to *Urgent Archives*, Caswell notes that it is important to distinguish between community activist archives, in which communities have autonomy over practices of archiving and preservation, and extractivist preservationist practices, usually well-funded and often linked with universities, that “collect materials from local communities without entering into an ongoing relationship of care”.<sup>30</sup> While driven by different actors and institutions, I would argue that all of the initiatives discussed above fall into the category of ‘community archiving’, and that they manifest an ‘ongoing relationship of care’ with local communities around questions of preservation and professional integrity.<sup>31</sup> Both the NGO/museum collaborations and the civic archiving initiatives were realised ‘with’ and ‘for’

30 Caswell, *Urgent Archives*, 17.

31 I discuss in more detail the long-term engagement of local partners in the Un/Archiving Post/Industry project as an example of ethical, nonexploitative international collaboration in my ASEES NewsNet blog post: Victoria Donovan, “The (Sorry) State of the Field or Why Western Humanists Need to Listen in Silence and Solidarity”, ASEES NewsNet, 20 January

the communities represented, rather than extracting cultural resources from them to the benefit of external organisations. This ongoing relationship of care developed in new directions following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. At this time, professional networks established between 2014 and 2022 reactivated to provide urgent support for emergency preservation work and for colleagues at risk.

## Without the State II: Activist Archiving after February 2022

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022, the preservation of industrial heritage was far from the first item on state policy agendas. In the context of the mass atrocities and mass destruction of urban infrastructure and cultural heritage across the country, the value of this already deprioritised cultural legacy depreciated further. As Diána Vonnák notes, state perceptions of the eastern Donbas region as lacking in cultural value informed the politics of emergency preservation during this time.<sup>32</sup> The Ukrainian state was slow to mobilise to help museums in the east after February 2022, failing to issue either guidelines or funding to support their evacuation. Even though museum collectives had been living with the threat of invasion for many years, and for some this was the second displacement after 2014, many still felt unprepared for full-scale war. Without adequate state intervention, professionals were left to decide for themselves how best to ensure the survival of their collections and whether to evacuate independently or abandon museums to occupation.<sup>33</sup>

Forced into acting once more 'without the state', NGOs and activists emerged as the primary drivers of wartime heritage preservation projects. Existing activist networks reanimated to respond to the new conditions of hyper-precarity and cultural erasure in the east. Thus, members of DE-NE-DE founded the Museums Crisis Center in the immediate aftermath of the war, offering practical support to museums in the east with the packaging and transportation of their collections.<sup>34</sup> In an interview

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2023, <https://www.aseees.org/news-events/aseees-news-feed/january-issue-newsnet-available> [accessed: 08.08.2023].

32 Diána Vonnák, "This Happened to Us for the Second Time": War-Preparedness, Risk, Responsibility and the Evacuation of Donbas Museums in 2022", *Museum & Society* 21/2, 2023, 4–16, here 5.

33 Vonnák, "This Happened to Us for the Second Time", 8–9.

34 For an account of the activities of this organisation since the full-scale invasion, see Olha Honchar's intervention on the panel "Zberezhenia i zachyst" ("Preservation and Protection") at the Symposium *Viina v Ukraini: Bytva za kul'turu. Mizhnarodnyi forum z bezpeky kul'turnoi spadshchyny* (*War in Ukraine: The Battle for Culture. International Forum on Safety of Cultural Heritage*), from 38:32: Shtab poriatunku spadshchyny/ Heritage Emergency Response Initiative (Facebook page), "Preservation and protection", Facebook video, 01:41:17, 09 Febru-

conducted in June 2022, one of the members of the Crisis Center team explained that it was thanks to the organisation's long-term work with museums through the The Museum Is Open for Restoration project that the relationships of trust were established to allow this activist-supported evacuation work to take place.<sup>35</sup> The growth in activist self-organisation after 2014 consequently laid the groundwork for the volunteer-driven emergency archiving work in the eastern region after February 2022.

The professional networks fostered between heritage professionals, researchers, and academics through the Un/Archiving Post/Industry project likewise provided a framework for emergency preservation work following the full-scale invasion. Particularly vulnerable heritage collections at the Mariupol Museum of Local Lore, which were subsequently looted by invading Russian soldiers and transported to Donetsk, were urgently digitised, preserving copies of unique photographic collections and newspaper archives for future generations of researchers. Following the first, most urgent phase of preservation work, relationships of care and solidarity were manifested in exchanges between project partners in Ukraine and the UK, where discussions took place around questions of precarious heritage, the politics of cultural erasure, and digital archiving as resistance and activism.<sup>36</sup> Future partnerships, collaborations, and funding, with the aim of supporting and facilitating the work of partners in the Ukrainian east, striving to preserve their local heritage, were also envisioned and planned.

While little could be done to protect objects of architectural heritage in the face of full-scale war, volunteer-run digitisation projects innovated responses to the question of how to preserve the country's architectural legacies. Notable examples of such initiatives included the #SaveUkrainianHeritage project at Skeiron, which carried out 3D scans of architectural monuments, mostly in the Lviv and Kyiv areas; Scan UA, which used 3D scanning and photogrammetry to create digital models of destroyed heritage objects in the Kyiv and Kharkiv areas; and the War Up Close project, which made 3D models and virtual tours of architectural ruination in the

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ary 2023, [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=717426099785591](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=717426099785591) [accessed: 08.03.2023].

35 Interview with Leonid Marushchak, founding member of DE-NE-DE, conducted by Diána Vonnák, online, 03 May 2022.

36 "Durham and Donbas in Focus", an international workshop at Spennymoor Town Hall in Durham, England, on 26 May 2023. See: Nicola Craddock, "Durham and Donbas in Focus", Redhills, 03 May 2023, <https://redhillsdurham.org/durham-and-donbas-in-focus/> [accessed: 08.08.2023]. The workshop was organised and funded as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council project "Donbas in Focus: Visions of Industry from the Ukrainian East", AH/V001051/1.

Kyiv, Kharkiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy regions.<sup>37</sup> Again, the deprioritisation of the cultural heritage of the Donbas region, combined with the difficulty of accessing the eastern territory because of ongoing fighting in the area, meant that few of these projects engaged the industrial heritage of the east. An exception in this regard is the NGO Pixelated Realities, based in Bakhmut, where the press correspondent Mykhailo Sharkov was bravely conducting digitisation work in conditions of full-scale war.<sup>38</sup>

Kulishov's Saltway project also used 3D-visualisation technology as a means of preserving industrial heritage sites.<sup>39</sup> Initiated before the full-scale invasion and supported since 2022 with funding from the arts and culture NGO IZOLYATSIA: Platform for Cultural Initiatives, this project digitally documented places of interest linked to the Donetsk region's historic salt-mining industries. Navigating the site using the website's 3D-visualisation technology, the visitor could explore the naturally occurring salt plains and saltwater ponds around Sloviansk, descend into the cavernous salt mines of Soledar, and visit the architectural heritage objects connected with the industry. Since many of the places documented in Saltway are, at the time of writing, occupied by the Russian Army, the website provides privileged access to heritage objects that form an important part of the region's cultural identity. Like the Museum Crisis Center, Kulishov's Saltway project drew on activist heritage practices developed in the post-2014 period, expanding and enhancing these to respond to the increased vulnerability and precarity of industrial heritage after February 2022.

One more experimental example of activist work to preserve the legacies of the industrial east was Mariupol Memory Park (MMP).<sup>40</sup> An online multimedia archive of essays, creative writing, visual art, filmmaking, and audio storytelling, the project commemorated the diversity of cultural life in the southern steel-making city on the

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37 Skeiron, "#SaveUkrainianHeritage", <https://skeiron.com.ua/saveukrainianheritage/> [accessed: 08.03.2023]; Scan UA, <https://scanua.com/> [accessed: 08.03.2023]; and War Up Close, "War in 360°", <https://war.city/destructions-in-vr/> [accessed: 08.03.2023].

38 For more information about NGO Pixelated Realities, see: Donechchyna v evakuatsii (The Donetsk Region in Evacuation), "3D i restavratsiia: Yak riatiui't arkhitekturu v Ukraini" ("3D and Restoration: How to Preserve Ukraine's Architecture"), YouTube video, 06:11, 27 January 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6OHEz8Sfto> [accessed: 08.03.2023].

39 "Shliakh, poznachenyi silliu" ("Saltway"), a project by Mykhailo Kulishov, realised with the support of IZOLYATSIA: Platform for Cultural Initiatives: Saltway, <https://saltway.in.ua/saltway-vr/> [accessed: 08.03.2023].

40 Mariupol' skyi park pam'iaty (Mariupol Memory Park), a project by the NGO Freefilmers, produced by Sashko Protyah and coedited by Nychka Lishchynska, Victoria Donovan, and Diána Vonnák (2022–present): Mariupol Memory Park, <https://www.mariupolmemorypark.space/> [accessed: 08.03.2023].

Sea of Azov before its brutal siege and occupation by Russian forces. Including documentary artwork of the city's industrial architecture and landscapes<sup>41</sup> and audio stories dedicated to unexpected encounters with local slag heaps (*terikony*), MMP is an archive of the intangible heritage of industry: the experiences of life in the toxic orbit of heavy industry, the (activist) values associated with this life, and the visual and creative cultures that emerged within these contexts. Like Kulishov's Saltway project, MMP preserved aspects of the cultural heritage of industry that formed the foundation of community identity – heritage that is now no longer accessible or no longer exists as a result of Russia's neocolonial land grab in the east.

How, then, does the evidence of self-organised archiving and preservation in wartime Ukraine add to our understanding of activist archiving more generally and its motivations and potential social impact? How does the case of activist archiving in the Ukrainian east, the industrial heritage of which has arguably been doubly marginalised – firstly through cultural deprioritisation in post-independence Ukraine and secondly through military targeting by the Russian Federation following the full-scale invasion – contribute to our knowledge and appreciation of the social function of community archiving and its role in affirming local identity and belonging, particularly in conditions of mass displacement and deterritorialisation?

In an article published in the *Society of American Archivists* in 2016, Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez discuss the affective impact of community archiving for those whose heritage has historically been excluded from mainstream culture.<sup>42</sup> Discussing the systematic marginalisation of migrant communities in institutions of memory, they propose the notion of 'symbolic annihilation' to describe the purposeful exclusion of ethnic groups from the historical record. Drawing on interview work with South Asian American communities involved in self-documentation projects, they argue that community archiving provides an alternative means of achieving "representational belonging", of "empower[ing] people marginalized by mainstream media outlets and memory institutions with the autonomy and authority to establish, enact, and reflect on their presence in ways that are complex, meaningful, substantive, and positive".<sup>43</sup> What, though, if the annihilation under discussion is not just symbolic but also real-world and

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41 See, for example: Artem Bereznev, "Zavod" ("The Plant"), <https://www.mariupolmemorypark.space/en/gallery-en/the-plant/> [accessed: 08.03.2023]; and Barbudaz, "Zavod" ("The Plant"), <https://www.mariupolmemorypark.space/gallery/zavod-barbudaz/> [accessed: 08.03.2023]. For audio stories about slagheaps, see: Sashko Protyah and Masha Pronina, "Tri istorii pro terikony" ("Three Stories About Bings"), <https://www.mariupolmemorypark.space/audiostories/> [accessed: 08.03.2023].

42 Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez, "'To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing': Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives", *Society of American Archivists* 79/1, 2016, 56–81.

43 Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, "'To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing'", 57.

immediate, as in the case of the Ukrainian east? What affective role can community archiving play, then, for those who are acting to preserve their heritage in the face of mass violence and military destruction?

To answer this question fully would require more research and interviews with a wider spectrum of community archivists currently active in Ukraine. I would like, however, to offer some concluding remarks here based on the participant observation work and semi-structured interviews I conducted in the Ukrainian east over the past eight years. Based on this experience, I would argue that community archiving before February 2022 was serving, as it was in Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez's study, to build 'community belonging' and assert an alternative hierarchy of cultural value. This work, like that of the South Asian American archivists, resisted the 'symbolic annihilation' of local communities and empowered and enabled reflexivity among groups whose history and heritage had been at times maligned in mainstream culture. Before 2022, this work was directed at the symbolic erasure of industrial heritage as a deprioritised category following the decommunisation laws of 2015. After February 2022, however, when 'symbolic annihilation' was replaced with the prospect of real-world annihilation – that is, strategic cultural destruction, displacement, and looting carried out by invading Russian forces – this work acquired more urgency.

Following the full-scale invasion, community archiving work was done without the privileged space for reflexivity and affectual response. This was archiving work as resistance to existential threat, rather than epistemic injustice, and, as such, it was necessarily more mechanical and automatic than analytical in nature. What is clear is that the networks and processes established during the years prior to the escalation, as well as relationships of interprofessional care and solidarity, provided some necessary infrastructures for this work to be conducted efficiently and successfully. The work of community archivists in the east, acting intuitively to preserve their heritage at a moment of national emergency, formed a foundation for subsequent activist initiatives and projects. Some of these projects sought to foster a sense of 'representational belonging' among displaced communities, many of which faced the manifest challenges of reconstituting cultural identity and community solidarity in the face of deterritorialisation, cultural and linguistic dislocation, and the traumas of war.

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# The Loss of Home: Memory and Materiality in Ukrainian Contemporary Art during the Russian War in Ukraine

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Kateryna Iakovlenko

In Francisco de Goya's series *The Disasters of War* (1810–1820), war is presented as a beast or an unnatural force that 'breaks': it climbs into a person's bosom, or even into the most hidden spaces, without leaving a single centimetre of privacy. In fact, war is often represented as a sum-total evil; it is all-consuming, destroying cities, physical neighbourhoods, and communities. Indeed, it changes all existing structures and connections. However, in this article, I would like to focus on how it affects individual life, literally crossing 'the threshold of the house'.

The enemy that crosses the threshold of the house is one of the vivid images of the canonical author of Ukrainian literature, Taras Shevchenko.<sup>1</sup> The metaphor, 'war on the threshold', is also often found in literature to describe the proximity of a person to violence and war crimes. It is embodied in *Kyiv Diary*, a graphic series and book by painter Vlada Ralko.<sup>2</sup> However, behind these doors, someone may need help offered by a stranger, as described by Zygmunt Bauman, who speaks of otherness.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the image of the house's threshold can be a critical meeting point with evil or of feeling empathy for someone needing help. Indeed, the symbolic space of the house is essential for interpreting art. However, first, I must draw attention to the house from the point of view of its materialism: the actual preservation of space.<sup>4</sup> Its safety and reliability are, first and foremost, antithetical to the active influence of war.

As a contemporary art researcher originally from the Luhansk region, who has now lost her home in Irpin due to the fighting in and occupation of the city in 2022, I look at the work of displaced artists and artists who reflect on the war. These works

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- 1 Taras Shevchenko, "U Boha za dveryma lezhala sokyra" ("God Had an Axe behind the Door"), *Taras Shevchenko: Povne zibrannia tvoriv (Taras Shevchenko: A Complete Collection of Works)*, Vol. 2: Poetry, 1847–1861, Kyiv, Naukova Dumka, 2003, 79–80.
  - 2 Vlada Ralko, *Kyiv's'kyy shchodennyk (The Kyiv Diary)*, Lviv: National Voznytskyi Art Gallery, 2019, 70.
  - 3 Zygmunt Bauman, *Strangers at Our Door*, Cambridge: Polity, 2016, 126.
  - 4 Kateryna Iakovlenko, "Eyewitness the Russian War in Ukraine: The Matter of Loss and Arts", *Sociologica* 16/2, 2002, 227–238, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/15272> [accessed: 23.06.2024].

can convey the pain of loss and offer solutions to process this trauma. In the context of the Russian war in Ukraine, I have followed this topic since 2014, but it has now found its most significant aggravation and relevance. As a curator who organised an exhibition in her destroyed apartment in Irpin,<sup>5</sup> I am familiar with the intellectual and ethical efforts required to work with unhealed raw memory. However, in this article, I will not refer to my curatorial practice and only focus on selected works of art created from 2014 to 2023.<sup>6</sup> These works address memory in diverse ways, both as a theme and as the materiality of that theme. In this text, I focus on the intersection between the materiality of memories, the materiality of art, and the ethical challenges facing artists working with their own memories and the memories of others.

I am interested not only in a lost continuity in the history of Ukrainian art, as it is transmitted through the image of home, but also in the materiality of home. This is the materiality of memory – a physical place where work, creativity, and life are possible. I consider the home as an intimate space of protection destroyed by war and look at physical destruction and displacement. As Hannah Arendt states, “to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man’s power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events”.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, I focus on the connections between privacy and materiality, asking, how can art shift this privacy in order to provoke empathy and support? My article includes references to various genres and media, but I primarily address the physical plane of the home and memory. As such, I focus on the war starting in 2014 and try to show the dynamics of this topic’s coverage and its depiction by artists.

Following Roland Barthes, I consider materiality to be a specific property of an artistic object that is devoid of (semantic) connection with its context and is reproduced in the structures of the viewer’s perception with the help of a nonassociative

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5 For more context, see my essay: Kateryna Iakovlenko, “Vorsicht, gefährliche Bäume” (“Attention, Dangerous Trees”) in: Kateryna Mishchenko and Katharina Raabe (eds.), *Aus dem Nebel des Krieges. Die Gegenwart der Ukraine (From of the Fog of War: The Present of Ukraine)*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2023, 125–167. See also: Kateryna Iakovlenko, “Life after Ruins”, *e-flux*, 29 September 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/493800/life-after-ruins> [accessed: 23.06.2024].

6 This essay was written during 2022 and the autumn of 2023. At the time of its editing, more artworks by displaced women artists have appeared. See, for example: Natasha Chichasova, “I dim tvii tut, shcho tak tebe trymav. Istoriï chotyrokh khudozhnyts z Donechchyny i Luhanshchyny” (“And Your Home is Here, Which Has Held You So Well: Stories of Four Artists from the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions”), *ArtsLooker*, 12 June 2024, <https://artslooker.com/en/this-house-kept-a-hold-on-you-stories-of-four-women-artists-from-donetsk-and-luhansk-regions/> [accessed: 23.06.2024].

7 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York City: Schocken Books, 1951, 45.

way of attributing meaning.<sup>8</sup> Turning to the theory of things,<sup>9</sup> I also closely examine household objects and things connected to memory as well as their history and meaning. Does their value change in connection with their transition to the artistic field? And how do the artistic field and artistic gestures transform and influence objects and things? In describing materiality related to art during the war, I pay attention to how objects convey the intangible: feelings, emotions, experiences, and memories. Thus, I consider what art and its materiality can do to help us understand the experiences of others, thereby evoking empathy and solidarity.

In a text on Ukrainian art since 2014, which reflects on the war through personal interactions and draws on Judith Butler's writing, Ukrainian critic Olena Martyniuk states that those examples of artistic work that synthesise war bring the material reality of war closer to the viewer and become representative strategies that are capable of influencing society through the experience and knowledge of daily life during war.<sup>10</sup> Working on the war since 2014, I must emphasise that, in this case, artists' works, experiences, and images are woven together. For example, some artists have experienced losing their homes. Their work is not only about how they form and convey images and ideas but also about the actual loss of space – both in relation to their personal memory and professional development. When looking at other people's suffering, they mostly view it as a mirror, because they are also vulnerable to or have experienced loss. I want to stress this double emotional load and the strength of these artists, who use artistic methods involving their traumas and experiences to process the suffering of others.

I am interested in the literal space of the home: its walls, ceilings, floors, backyards, and belongings, as well as the roads that once led to this home. This is a physical space that provides a feeling of peace, comfort, and security. This space influences the sensations of the human body – it has smells, textures, and aesthetic configurations expressed through furniture and textiles – and it conveys memories of events and life as they are conducted in this space.

## The Image of Home and the Materiality of Memory

Considering a massive corpus of drawings, paintings, and installations, and especially those created during 2022, I look specifically at the ways artists participate

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8 Roland Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*, Susan Sontag (ed.), trans. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc. et al., New York City: Hill and Wang, 1983, 495.

9 See: Bill Brown, "Thing Theory", *Critical Inquiry* 28/1, special issue *Things*, 2001, 1–22.

10 Olena Martyniuk, "Ukrainian Women Artists Reflect the War in the Donbas", *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 9/1, 2022, 139–176, <https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus631> [accessed: 23.06.2024].

in the process of reconstructing the memories and homes of those who lost theirs. This approach is 'tactical', as the researcher Oksana Dovgopolova calls it, because it is primarily about memorialisation and commemoration that takes place almost immediately after the occurrence of a tragic event.<sup>11</sup> This positionality is reflected in the form and content of these artistic expressions.

Aleida and Jan Assmann assert the existence of different types of memory, two of which are important for my argument: cultural and communicative. Cultural memory is based on cultural codes, images, texts, literature, myths, rituals, and many other things that form cultural contexts over time.<sup>12</sup> Communicative memory refers to daily experiences and a 'lived' past; it is therefore temporally limited. Its temporal frame shifts; it is fragile and depends on procedure. In contemporary art created in the moment of 'living history' or history being played out, the experience of living these recent and tragic events is alive, fresh, and performative. Yet even the images of home – which should seem stable and immobile in the context of a fresh loss – are in flux.

On the one hand, the idea of the loss of home can be interpreted mainly as connected to the loss of the physical space of a person's house or apartment. However, in specific cases, the home appears as part of a broader configuration that includes the spaces around it, such as streets, parks, and squares. Additionally, this idea can also symbolise the loss of roots and local history.

The Donetsk-born visual artist Kateryna Yermolaeva studied architecture but made her first artistic works as a graffiti and street artist. She moved to Kyiv in 2011, where she began to develop her artistic practice, working with installation, photography, and performance art. She produced the work *Blockade of Memories* in 2015 as a nominee for the PinchukArtCentre Prize for emerging Ukrainian artists (Fig. 25). *Blockade of Memories* was a total installation in which the artist deals with war and the impossibility of returning to the city of Donetsk, where her relatives were still living at that time. In this work, using drawings, she reproduces from memory a hybrid space consisting of three sections that were most important for her: her grand-

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11 Kateryna Iakovlenko, "Ye pam'yat' stratehichna, a ye taktychna: Oksana Dovhopolova ta Kateryna Semenyuk pro te, yak pam'yataty viynu s'ohodni" ("There Is Strategic Memory, and There Is Tactical Memory: Oksana Dovgopolova and Kateryna Semenyuk on How to Remember the War Today"), *Suspilne Kultura (Public Culture)*, 09 June 2023, <https://suspilne.media/502378-e-pamat-strategicna-a-e-takticna-oksana-dovgopol-ta-katerina-semenyuk-p-ro-te-ak-pamatati-vijnu-sogodni/> [accessed: 23.06.2024].

12 See: Aleida Assmann, "One land and three narratives: Palestinian sites of memory in Israel", *Memory Studies* 11/3, 2018, 287–300, <https://doi.org/10.1177/175069801877185> [accessed: 23.06.2024]; Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 319; and Jan Assman and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity", *New German Critique* 65, 1995, 125–133.

mother's house (through images and objects from her kitchen and wardrobe), her parent's house (through the family dining table), and the family's dacha or country house (through her parents' preserves). Yermolaeva complements each space with essential elements. These are things from these spaces or ones that belonged to relatives: a framed photograph of her parents, a toy, her father's preserves, and her grandmother's handkerchief, on which her grandmother prepared breakfast for her every morning when she was a child.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 25: *Blockade of Memories*



Image by Kateryna Yermolaeva, installation with murals, acrylic paint on foam board, and personal belongings, *PinchukArtCentre Prize Exhibition*, Kyiv, 2015. Photograph by Sergey Illin. Image provided courtesy of the PinchukArtCentre.

Since 2014, interest in materiality, the body, and objects has increased, particularly in Ukrainian art, through the study of object-orientated theory. This surge of interest is also a consequence of things that have been lost due to the Russian invasion, such as the physical destruction of material and cultural heritage from shelling and the looting of art objects, taken from Ukraine to occupied or Russian territories.

13 In 2024, Yermolaeva made a second version of the work for the exhibition *Between Farewell and Return* (30 May–04 August 2024) curated by Natasha Chychasova and Asia Tsisar at the Mystetskyi Arsenal, Kyiv. In this edition of the artwork, Yermolaeva talks about the transformation of memory and refers to her dreams about her hometown. She recreates not only the private space of the house but also the access to it, which is currently lost. See: Mystetskyi Arsenal, "Between Farewell and Return", <https://artarsenal.in.ua/en/vystavka/between-farewell-and-return/> [accessed: 23.06.2024].

In his lecture about Vlodko Kostyrko, an artist who works with Lviv's history and culture, Ukrainian critic and theorist Borys Filonenko proposes that when objects suddenly gain significant attention, they get the main role in the narrative; they are no longer elements of a design, an interior, or the overall space – rather, the interior and the house themselves become important in artistic expressions.<sup>14</sup>

In Yermolaeva's work, objects become essential elements of memory formation. They reacquire materiality through the reproduction of everyday memories in the wall drawings. This installation also had notable 'blind spots' – places the artist does not remember. Still, she decided to depict things that she no longer remembered through absence. Commenting on this work, in 2015, she noted that during the second year of the war, she felt changes in herself, and she knew that she could no longer be the same.<sup>15</sup> Collecting and arranging these objects in a physical space helped her return to her memories and allowed her to touch essential places and people. In an interview, she notes that she had doubts about creating the work because it was too personal, emotional, and traumatic, and she had not created similar works before:

I do not like sentimental things, but my project turned out to be sentimental. I tried all the time to get away from sweetness and wanted to add some harshness, but then I realised that it is impossible to speak about your home brutally. I wrote everything with care and love. My family's opinion about the project was important to me. As a result, when relatives visited the exhibition and walked around the exposition, they kept repeating: "Let us go home", referring to my work.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, she speaks of *Blockade of Memories* as an artistic milestone for her because, in it, she shows her personal life to the general public for the first time. Unfortunately, this attempt to open up played a rather tragic role: according to her, after producing *Blockade of Memories*, she again closed in on herself. For example, in 2021, she noted that a "creative path is an escape from oneself into general society, followed by subsequent attempts to return to the self, which continue to this day".<sup>17</sup> For her, this conflict is primarily provoked by social and political problems – most notably, war. She states that she understood her powerlessness during the war, her powerlessness "before the circumstances, the state's and officials' inability and un-

14 Borys Filonenko, "Public Talk on Vlodko Kostyrko", 13 February 2022, Ya Gallery, Lviv, Ukraine.

15 Kateryna Iakovlenko, "Khudozhnitsa Yekaterina Yermolayeva: lichnyye istorii rabotayut sil'neye global'nykh tem" ("The Artist Yekaterina Ermolaeva: Personal Stories Work Stronger than Global Themes"), *Ukrainska Pravda (Ukrainian Truth)*, 15 March 2017, <https://life.pravda.com.ua/culture/2017/03/15/223126/> [accessed: 23.06.2024] [author's trans.].

16 Ibid.

17 *Secondary Archive*, "Kateryna Yermolayeva", <https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/kateryna-ye-rmolayeva/> [accessed: 23.06.2024].

willingness to resolve the conflict. As a result, I rapidly began to lose myself as an artist and a person, and fell into a long depression".<sup>18</sup>

The researcher Iuliia Lashchuk discusses depression among displaced people. Describing the topic of displacement in Ukrainian contemporary art, she cites statistics on post-traumatic disorders:

According to research published by International Alert, 32% of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ukraine suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the armed conflict in the east, with a high prevalence of mental disorders such as depression (22%) and anxiety (17%), which is exceptionally high among women. Furthermore, research says that 74% of IDPs who need psychiatric care do not receive it.<sup>19</sup>

Lashchuk describes the loss of a home as a broad deprivation of history and identity, as well as a feeling of the impossibility and even fear of integration into new cities. She insists that residents of Crimea and the eastern regions of Ukraine, displaced due to Russian aggression, are not only refugees but migrants, refugees, and nomads simultaneously. According to her, each term carries essential differences, united in the experiences of displaced Ukrainian artists. The number of challenges they face significantly increases, and the war becomes a painful and traumatic process for these artists, one that calls into question their artistic practices and methods.

*Odyssey Donbas* (2015) by Darya Tsymbaliuk, Julia Filipeva, and Victor Zasyppkin is an artistic research project based on in-depth interviews with migrants. The artwork was a drawing process accompanied by interviews: displaced people were invited to create mental maps of their hometowns, which they had left due to the war. The project description states:

These maps have frozen cities and villages of Eastern Ukraine in a state, in which they had been before the beginning of military actions, a state, in which they stayed in the memory of people. This project is a certain journey to Donbass [sic!], which is made possible through personal stories of people.<sup>20</sup>

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18 Ibid.

19 Iuliia Lashchuk, "Displaced Art and the Reconstruction of Memory: Ukrainian Artists from Crimea and Donbas", *Open Cultural Studies* 2, 2018, 700–709, here 701.

20 Darya Tsymbalyuk, Julia Filipieva, and Victor Zasyppkin, *Odisseia Donbas (Odyssey Donbas)*, <https://donbassodyssey.weebly.com/about.html> [accessed: 26.10.2023].

In this work, Yulia, a 28-year-old participant from Luhansk, notes the following:

I miss the steppe [...] I miss vastness, a huge land surface which goes up to horizon and apricot trees. Yes, I really miss apricots. We have a lot of them. Luhansk is the city of apricots, they lie on the ground, when they ripen, nobody picks them up, there are so many of them there, and here you can not find them at all.<sup>21</sup>

Here, the concept of home is transformed even more broadly than the idea of the city. It goes beyond the city's borders and encompasses the uninhabited steppe. The city is ruptured by the image of "a huge land surface which goes up to horizon and apricot trees" and turns into a natural landscape.<sup>22</sup> These intersections of memory and landscape allow a person to remember and fantasise about the environment in which they grew up and, to a greater extent, to idealise that which has been lost. With the help of drawing mental maps, the person tries to recreate their native space by displacing negative features and memories. Sana Murrani, Helen Lloyd, and Ioana-Cristina Popovici believe that "the construction of memory guides the process of re-making a home in displacement".<sup>23</sup>

Both Aleida and Jan Assmann have argued that settlements (cities and towns), and especially those that have experienced traumatic events, materialise history, become its material traces, and form signs of the past.<sup>24</sup> They also discuss how each smaller community relies on its own symbols and signs. The mental maps created by the participants of *Odyssey Donbas* record such essential places of memory. *Odyssey Donbas* allows viewers to see these common intersections: the house, the streets, and the importance of the natural landscape. However, in turn, it also reveals the differences that arise in each map and are built on individual experiences.

Going a step further, Yermolaeva's artwork delves into 'reconstructive memory theory', coined by Frederic Bartlett, a British professor of experimental psychology and author of the 1932 book *Memory: Studies in Experimental and Social Psychology*.<sup>25</sup> According to Akiko Saito, Bartlett describes the process of memorisation, which involves reproducing experiences or events that are partially stored in memory. However, Bartlett emphasises that when memory reconstructs events, the current context in which a person is located will affect both the reconstruction and the sur-

21 Yulia (28 years old, Luhansk), "Stories", *Odisseia Donbas (Odyssey Donbas)*, <https://donbassodyssey.weebly.com/stories.html> [accessed: 26.10.2023].

22 Ibid.

23 Sana Murrani, Helen Lloyd, and Ioana-Cristina Popovicia, "Mapping home, memory and spatial recovery in forced displacement", *Social & Cultural Geography* 24/8, 1305–1323, here 1307, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2022.2055777> [accessed: 23.06.2024].

24 Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*; and Aleida Assmann, "One land and three narratives".

25 Akiko Saito, *Bartlett, Culture and Cognition*, Hove: Psychology Press, 2000, 284.

rounding narrative, including the appearance of blind spots and gaps, which are also formed and influenced by the cultural context, values, and beliefs of the person. In this case, Yermolaeva's artwork restores memory by presenting a traumatic experience through drawing. Recovered memories are embodied in the material form of the artistic work and supplemented with new elements from 'real life'. In one of her interviews, she talks about the problem of drawing and how she thought that her reproduction of spaces did not correspond to reality, but when her relatives saw the work, they assured her that the space was indeed like that.<sup>26</sup> However, the paradox is that this space was a hybrid from the very beginning and combined three physical houses – the parents' apartment, the dacha, and the grandmother's house. So, in real life, this space in fact does not exist.

Memory reconstruction occurs as a result of recalling simple everyday objects and moments: for example, an episode from childhood, like a grandmother making pancakes. These memories also have nonvisual components, such as the smell of pancakes and jam or the texture of the handkerchiefs knitted by the grandmother. This 'set' of memories is related to the phenomenon described in *In Search of Lost Time*, the literary work by Marcel Proust, the first volume of which, *Swann's Way*, begins with an involuntary memory prompted by a madeleine cookie.<sup>27</sup> In some of the interviews conducted in the framework of the *Odyssey Donbas* project, food memories also arise: the image of an apricot, which has become a symbol of the region and the city, is illustrative.<sup>28</sup>

Theorising Proust's novel, Paul Connerton emphasises that it "shows us the disconcerting alienation-effect, the sense of a mental jolt, that results from the intersection of incommensurable memories".<sup>29</sup> Notably, Yermolaeva, even in her drawings, pays attention to the process of remembering and forgetting at the same time: this process of working with memory through drawing differs from other artistic methods where artists, on the contrary, try to see something even in blind spots. That is, the process of remembering and the processes of displacement and forgetting occur in her art simultaneously. In particular, Yermolaeva says:

For me, this is an excruciating and ambiguous process. I have not even read the news for the last two years. I need to call my parents and ask how they are doing – this is the daily news. During Maidan, there was much artistic speculation on this topic. When you see volunteers trying to help effectively, you stop understanding how art should work in this case. However, at some point, I could not ignore the

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26 Iakovlenko, "Khudozhnitsa Yekaterina Yermolayeva".

27 Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way, In Search of Lost Time*, Vol. 1, trans. Lydia Davis, London: Penguin, 2004, 468.

28 Tymbalyuk, Filipieva, and Zasytkin, *Odiseia Donbas*.

29 Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 121.

internal pain that accumulated during the conflict. It was important for me to talk about the shared experiences through my personal experiences.<sup>30</sup>

## Materiality and Activism

*Backyard* (2015), a project by the artist collective Open Group, works with the theme of memory and the image of home (Fig. 26). Unlike the group's previous projects, which refer to memories of the Russo–Ukrainian War that are still fresh and sensitive, this project focuses on the theme of violence over a longer period of time. *Backyard* is a video installation consisting of several parts. Two video interviews feature two elderly women: Filomena Kuryata, who discusses her lost home during World War II, and Svitlana Sysoeva, who describes her lost home during the Russian intervention in the east of Ukraine. The work also includes models of the women's lost houses, reproduced according to the women's memories, and sketches also based on their stories.

For the members of Open Group, the concept of the backyard at the same time “contains the understanding of privacy and property” and “means something that is the only thing that remains after the house has been destroyed, disappeared from the face of the earth”.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, they emphasise that, “for the audience, this work is an opportunity to conditionally stand and look at a house that was destroyed due to the war. Moreover, for the project participants who lost their homes, this is another attempt to imagine and recreate it in memory”.<sup>32</sup>

Let me emphasise the geography of the home. One of the important theoretical texts describing the refugee phenomenon and its relationship to the geography of the home is *Strangers at the Door*, by Bauman. In it, Bauman uses the metaphor of the threshold of the house.<sup>33</sup> He describes this threshold as one that can carry danger, because behind the door there can be a stranger whose mere appearance can destroy the stable order. However, Bauman debunks this thesis and emphasises that vulnerability and the need for help can also be hidden behind this unknown. More specifically, Bauman explains this image by underlining that refugees and displaced people are met right at the door when they come to ask for shelter. Thinking about the architecture and the symbolic meaning of the house, the members of Open Group came to the conclusion that the safest place is the backyard. The backyard becomes a place of peace and comfort, where the family spends time; being invited into the backyard

30 Iakovlenko, “Khudozhnitsa Yekaterina Yermolayeva”.

31 Open Group, *Zadnii dvir (Backyard)*, 2015, <http://open-group.org.ua/ukr/projects/backyard> [accessed: 23.06.2024] [author's trans.].

32 Ibid.

33 Zygmunt Bauman, *Strangers at Our Door*.

means gaining entrance into the close circle of people living in this house. When the authors conceived this project and offered to look at the backyard, this was also about creating a safe space where you can see the open wounds and injuries of the displaced people or feel like part of this community.

When looking at the work of Open Group, it is also important to highlight the artists' previous work. For the 56th Venice Biennale, Open Group created the performance *Synonym for "Wait"* (2015), which also addressed the image of the house. In the performance, the members of the group took turns sitting at a table in the exhibition space, with nine video screens in front of them. Each screen was connected to a camera pointed at the front door of the house of a Ukrainian soldier. The members of the group refused food and drank only water during the month-long performance. Each screen would go blank whenever one of the respective soldiers returned home.<sup>34</sup>

This performance was about expectations and the separation of emotional experience. The artists did not reconstruct the house but instead sat at an ordinary table, looking at the monitors – like every Ukrainian, reading the news and waiting for victory. It is the table that conveys this 'materiality of the house'. Open Group describes it as a "typically Ukrainian table".<sup>35</sup> This 'typicality' precisely plays a unifying function and creates the conditions of an experience shared by others. Another aspect related to the idea of home is the attention on the door, which conveys the moment of waiting. Of course, anyone can walk through that door, which is why every creak and knock can create tension. They heighten the feeling that this door might open at any moment and even the silence itself can intensify the sense that something will happen. Here, the camera allows you to focus and to not miss the exact moment of returning.

The work also concerns another point of view: it is not about the displaced people, but about those who protect them, about their families and destinies – that is, about the everyday and personal. As of August 2023, Open Group consists of three people: Yuriy Biley, Anton Varga, and Pavlo Kovach Jr. The first two live abroad and are outside their own homes and Kovach was recently mobilised to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. This again emphasises that this situation of war does not separate artists from the subjects they discuss but rather becomes a part of their artistic practice and life.

The project *Our Apartments, Houses, Dachas, Garages, Offices, and Yards*, by the Prykarpattian Theater artist collective (Ivan Bazak, Roman Himey, Yarema Malashchuk, Tereza Yakovyna, and Ostap Yaschuk), was implemented in 2022.<sup>36</sup>

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34 Open Group, *Synonym do slova "chekaty"* (*Synonym for "Wait"*), 2015, <http://open-group.org.ua/en/projects/synonym-for-wait> [accessed: 23.06.2024].

35 Ibid.

36 Nastya Popovich, "U Kolomyji predstavly vystavku z vidtvorenymy budynkami pereselentsiv" ("In Kolomyia, an Exhibition with the Recreated Houses of Immigrants Was Pre-

The artists invited displaced people from the east of Ukraine not only to remember their own home but also to personally recreate it in model form. According to the artists, “facades can say more about our common subconscious”.<sup>37</sup> In his *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard looks at formal and material imagination and gives modelling in material imagination a prominent role. This formation of models allows us not only to revive memory and space but also to strengthen its meaning.<sup>38</sup> The artworks by Open Group and Prykarpattian Theater that use this modelling tool as therapy remember and rethink the loss by making it.

Another work by the Prykarpattian Theater collective was the participatory art project *Theater of Hopes and Expectations* (2022), a temporary space built in a city park in Düsseldorf (Fig. 27).<sup>39</sup> For the summer of 2022, the park was turned into a public exhibition and lecture space in which Ukrainian cultural figures were given the floor. *The Theater of Hopes and Expectations* was built precisely as a temporary space for the summertime. Upon completion of the project, its facade was to be dismantled. However, the members of the Prykarpattian Theater used the structure’s materials to reconstruct a real house in the village of Sloboda-Kuharska in the Kyiv region. The artists decided to help the Honchar family, whose house burnt down due to a rocket attack. Reconstruction is taking place jointly with the Livyj Bereh (Left Bank) volunteer group.

This type of ‘ecological thinking’ in art and civic activism was a practical response to the challenges of war. In a private conversation I had with one of the project’s authors, he brought up the topic of art’s role during the war and its financing. He said that financial support for artists can be allocated for institutional and artistic activities, yet it does not include humanitarian needs, housing reconstruction, or temporary financial support for those who have lost their jobs. Because they had used discarded building materials in the construction of the temporary institution and received funding from the city budget of Düsseldorf, the members of the Prykarpattian Theater were able to redirect these material resources to the humanitarian needs of Ukrainians. Thus, if memory reconstruction played a vital role in previous projects, in the working memory of this project, the tragic past is replaced by the present and the future. The idea of reconstruction, especially during wartime, becomes an important artistic and activist gesture that affirms the idea of life over death, rebirth over decay, and solidarity over the destruction of ties.

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sented”), *YourArt*, 09 May 2022, <https://supportyourart.com/news/u-kolomyyi-predstavlyly-vystavku-z-vidtvorenymy-budynkamy-pereselencziv/> [accessed: 23.06.2024].

37 Ibid [author’s trans.].

38 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, London: Penguin, 2014, 279.

39 Prykarpattian Theater, *The Theater of Hopes and Expectations*, 2022, <https://theater-hopes-expectations.com> [accessed: 23.06.2024].

*Figure 26: Backyard*



Image by Open group (Anton Varga, Yuriy Biley, Pavlo Kovach, and Stanislav Turina), installation with two videos (55:11 and 1:25:21) and architectural models, created with the support of the 2016 Impart Festival Office, Wrocław, 2016. Photograph by Malgoryata Kujda. Image provided courtesy of Open Group.

*Figure 27: The Theater of Hopes and Expectations, Part 1*



Image by Prykarpattian Theater collective, Düsseldorf, 2022. Image provided courtesy of the Prykarpattian Theater collective.

Returning to Bauman's *Strangers at Our Door*, the author refers to Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophy and singles out conversation as an essential component of the community that arises between individuals – hence the phenomenon of consensus and common language. I would also like to draw attention to the fact that the emergence of a common language results from speaking and listening, which release memory. Yermolaeva's artwork differs from other examples here in that it excludes collective action. The author works with her trauma, independently. By contrast, the other works were created by collectives, in some cases formed on a project basis (*Odyssey Donbas*) and in others as part of a larger and ongoing collaborative practice (the work of the Open Group and Prykarpattian Theater collectives). They are aimed at the experience of collectively living through trauma and the development of empathy, among other things. In the artistic examples I have given, the commons becomes a crucial constituent of the works: in *Odyssey Donbas*, the commons are the collection of materials and drawings; in *Backyard*, they are a combination of the experiences of people who survived various wars; in *Our Apartments, Houses, Dachas, Garages, Offices, and Yards*, they are the creation of layouts; and in *The Theater of Hopes and Expectations*, they are the joint reconstruction of a private house, which is funded by collective projects and charitable contributions, all volunteer-based.

The Russian war in Ukraine put the issue of collectivity in a different order of priority. The development of the volunteer movement in the army, among civilians, and in the public sector significantly increased after 24 February 2022. As a result, artists' practices also gave way to volunteering or other social activities. In particular, the Prykarpattian Theater collective and their *Theater of Hopes and Expectations* project, which transformed from a temporary institution into direct assistance in rebuilding a specific home for a specific family, are illustrative. Here, the power of art has acquired a surprisingly material form and content that goes beyond contemporary art and has become a remarkably life-changing practice. I would also stress the importance of works that go beyond the border of the simple (artistic) image and imagination as such, where the imagination is inferior to basic materials, such as wood, glass, or brick. All these things create the materiality not only of memory, but of the future.

## Materiality and Commemoration

Artist and performer Alevtina Kakhidze, who was born in the Donetsk region, faced problems due to the war from 2014 onwards, like many artists from the east. Her mother's house was located behind the demarcation line on the territory of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic. Since 2013, Kakhidze has been creating drawings based on dialogues with her mother, and the centre of these was the house where the author grew up. She described how her mother talks to the neigh-

bours, takes care of the dogs, works in the garden, or goes to the market. Through Kakhidze's drawings, the space of the village of Muzichi on the outskirts of Kyiv, where she lives, also became intimately familiar for audiences at her exhibitions and on her Facebook account.

The image of the house appears in Kakhidze's works not only as the house where she was born but as her mother's fortress. But this fortress was not protected. Kakhidze painted the way it appears in the midst of shelling – the house finds itself in the middle of the great narrative of war. Through minute details of her mother's life in these circumstances, the artist explains how life is transformed as a result of violence and aggression and how people's thoughts and behaviours change. In particular, this can be seen from her mother's conversations with neighbours and her occasional conversations with Russians and their supporters.

Kakhidze's mother, Klubnika Andriivna, died in 2019 while standing in line at a checkpoint on her way to visit her daughter in Kyiv.<sup>40</sup> In memory of her mother, the artist created a unique monument that partially repeats the architecture of her mother's house. Kakhidze says that she wanted to recreate the home that her mother did not want to leave. "And your home is here, which kept you like this", says the monument.<sup>41</sup> Kakhidze explains: "Mom did not leave, even though she could, because she had chosen a home, which she built over a lifetime. It was her life that she did not want to leave".<sup>42</sup> At the same time, Kakhidze was thinking of those people who were alone in the occupied territories – their homes were left without visitors because relatives could no longer come to them. "I never asked my mom where she wanted to be buried, but it was clear to me that her body should be somewhere near her house. And if it happened that her body was in the village of Muzichi, then the house should be here as well. The task was clear: symbolically recreate her home", Kakhidze said.<sup>43</sup>

Kakhidze's small monument reproduces the facade of the house to scale. However, only the porch retains its actual size. The artist did this for various reasons. First, creating a place where she could sit and talk with her mother was necessary. Second, the porch is where one can rest – it is a safe place. In this case, the idea of the porch resonates with what Open Group intended when they created *Backyard*,

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40 Kateryna Iakovlenko, "Alevtina Kakhidze: the artist who 'made Donbas human'", *Open Democracy*, 29 July 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/alevtina-kakhidze-artist-donbas-ukraine/> [accessed: 23.06.2024].

41 *Past / Future / Art*, "Dim materi Alevtyny Kakhidze: pam'yatnyk usim, khto ne brav uchasti u viyni, ale stav yiyi uchasnykom" ("The House of Alevtina Kakhidze's Mother: The Monument to All Who Did Not Partake in the War but Became Its Participant"), 23 December 2021, <https://pastfutureart.org/alevtina-kakhidze-mother-memorial/> [accessed: 23.06.2024] [author's trans.].

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

asserting that the house is not only its literal walls but also its physical and emotional attachments. In this work, the house and its materiality completely identify with the surrounding territory: the house is not only the walls but also the land and the space around the house. Private space is not limited to physical walls, private life is not limited to the confines of the kitchen or the bedroom, and the personal tragedies of war become part of national grief and collective trauma. Kahidze dedicated this monument to all those civilians who died in the occupied territory and whose names are equally important for history.

The image of the loss of a home has become very important in modern art; through it are broadcast not only personal experiences but also the difficulties that a society faces during war. These start from personal experience and depression and end with humanitarian problems and the loss of a home, which spill over into social and economic realms. Art in such a situation is not behind but on the avant-garde of events. However, unlike the actual battlefield, where artists are just as present as soldiers, others choose effective forms for themselves, such as volunteering and reconstruction. These art forms are 'practical' futurisms, which, in addition to ideas about reconstruction, offer actual plans for rebuilding and are directly involved in these processes.

All these works also raise another question about the materiality of art: can such projects exist in circulation and become commercially successful? For example, records of the Open Group performances exist only in poor-quality documentation. The work of Prykarpattian Theater is the same. All these works may be shown at exhibitions and in the media, but the representation of these works is limited to documentation or description, not the work itself. But this work is a gesture; it is a state; it is something that lives in a given moment of time and in a limited territory. The work goes beyond the boundaries of art.

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# The Decolonised Body: Corporeality, Violence, and Resistance to Objectification in Recent Ukrainian Art

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Svitlana Biedarieva

## The Evolution of Ukrainian Art, 2014–2023

Over the last ten years, including the year 2022 – which was the most traumatic in terms of human loss and destruction – the narratives and methods artists have used to address the reality of war events in Ukraine have evolved. I propose that this evolution of resistance through art can be classified into three dimensions, which have permeated all layers of Ukrainian society: from the public sphere to the private level, and further, into intimate space. These three different stages of art production have been reflected in artworks and represent epistemological transformations taking place in Ukrainian society.

First, on a public level, the rise of documentary practice occurred after the beginning of the war in 2014, resulting in what I call the emergence of documentary art as a unity between artistic practice and documentary media such as film, photography, and reportage.<sup>1</sup> This also included archival work: the reinterpretation of existing historical archives, particularly those of eastern Ukraine and Crimea, and the creation of archives of the ongoing war, which aimed to transform the politics of memory. Works by Piotr Armianowski, Mykola Ridnyi, Yevgenia Belorusets, Dana Kavelina, Andrii Dostliev, and Lia Dostlieva, among many others, were key in the development of this stage of documentary practice.

In 2014, artists were conduits reflecting the situation on the front lines for audiences outside the warzone. The extensive development of documentation practices in art and film reflected the epistemological shift brought about by the war as a production of new knowledge and a further reconsideration of identity and memory by Ukrainian society. This shift marked the beginning of the dismantling of entan-

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1 I discuss Ukrainian artists' shift to documentary art practices after 2014 in the following work: Svitlana Biedarieva, "The Documentary Turn in New Ukrainian Art", in: Svitlana Biedarieva (ed.), *Contemporary Ukrainian and Baltic Art: Political and Social Perspectives*, Stuttgart: Ibidem Press, 2021, 53–78.

gements with postcolonial narratives, aiming for full decolonial release instead.<sup>2</sup> Here, I use the classification proposed by decolonial scholar Madina Tlostanova, who distinguishes between postcoloniality and decoloniality not only from a paradigmatic point of view, such as the postcolonial theory that was largely developed by Indian theorists, such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak and the decolonial theory by Latin American scholars Walter Mignolo<sup>3</sup> and Aníbal Quijano, but also from a chronological perspective.<sup>4</sup> The postcolonial condition in this model, and as used in this text, immediately follows the anticolonial resistance and the resulting downfall of an empire, when a society of a newly independent country reworks, rethinks, and recombines recent colonial experiences. Stuart Hall describes the 'postcolonial' as a shift from the anticolonial binary forms of representation to their rereading within cultural translation and transculturation.<sup>5</sup> The decolonial stage, however, goes one step further by seeking liberation from any colonialism-related elements by producing new, disentangled narratives that need not pass the translation process and rather focus on history in the making.<sup>6</sup>

The second, private level of interpretation of personal experience was marked by the immersion of the artists in war events after the beginning of the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. The artists' positions transformed into those of active participants in the events because of the all-involving character of the invasion. The genre of reportage from the front line was substituted with personal diaries depicting the uneasy reality that the artists and their closest circle were witnesses

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- 2 I define 'decolonial release' as decoloniality exercised in full, as a complete disentanglement from colonial narratives.
  - 3 Walter Mignolo's support of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine raises an important question about the methodological and conceptual gaps existing between decolonial theory in Latin America and its applicability to the Ukrainian case. This paradoxical example proceeds from the vision of Western capitalism and neoliberalism as the main sources of colonialism, while omitting the fact that the work of Russian neocolonialism in post-Soviet spaces largely claims the legacy of the socialism of the past (while in reality it relies on the same capitalist essence of Russian authoritarianism). See: Walter Mignolo, "It is a Change of Era, No Longer the Era of Changes", trans. Giovanni Tosti-Croce, Allison Madigan, and Walter Mignolo, *Postcolonial Politics*, 29 January 2023, <https://postcolonialpolitics.org/it-is-a-change-of-era-no-longer-the-era-of-changes/> [accessed: 05.08.2024].
  - 4 Madina Tlostanova, "The Postcolonial Condition, the Decolonial Option and the Post-Socialist Intervention", in: Monika Albrecht (ed.), *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined: Multidirectional Perspectives on Imperial and Colonial Pasts and the New Colonial Present*, London: Routledge, 2020, 165–178, here 165.
  - 5 Stuart Hall, "When Was 'the Post-colonial'? Thinking at the Limit", in: Stuart Hall, *Selected Writings on Marxism*, Gregor McLennan (ed.), Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021, 293–315.
  - 6 Tlostanova, "The Postcolonial Condition, the Decolonial Option and the Post-Socialist Intervention", 165.

to. The realisation of imminent danger from the Russian army also played a role in the reconsideration of artists' agency in these events. Reported speech – a report of the distant events characteristic of documentary practices between 2014 and 2022 – turned into the direct speech of immediate eyewitnesses of the violence, permitting entry into their private spaces. This process can be observed in works by Alevtina Kakhidze, Vlada Ralko, and Yevgenia Belorusets, which I discuss later in this chapter.

The last, intimate level included reflections on the trauma of violence, including sexual violence, and the necessity to oppose the objectification of the human body brought about by the war atrocities. It prompted the creation of works addressing the topics of corporeality and resistance to aggression, simultaneously constituting the presence of violence and denying its power of reduction of personality through the lens of victimhood. The artists challenge objectification through violence by putting its dehumanising qualities into focus, moving this topic from the periphery to the centre. This tendency became visible in works by Maria Kulikovska, Kinder Album, Kateryna Lysovenko, Danylo Movchan, Roman Khimey, and Yarema Malashchuk. Although informed by documentary practice, such as photography and film, these artists' methods turned to more symbolic expressive means, presenting a more advanced degree of the interpretation of the events, in contrast to documentary practice as the initial process of knowledge production. In this process, it is particularly important to avoid what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls 'image mirroring' as a possible direction of a decolonial process of epistemological production:<sup>7</sup> this means avoiding binary oppositions such as borrowing from the language of the aggressor, and instead reestablishing the value of a repressed body through a pluralist approach, described by decolonial scholars as 'aesthesis' – a liberating ability to perceive through the senses as a result of emancipation from the oppressor.<sup>8</sup> Aesthesis is opposed to aesthetics as a colonial notion, turning to forgotten (or nonexistent) models of perception that have been censored or suppressed.

Intimate space and its transgression became the main topic of artists' attention in the second half of 2022, as Ukrainian society attempted to comprehend the effects of the brutal invasion. The bodily and gendered dimensions of violence caused by Russian war crimes against Ukrainians, and the questions of objectification and dehumanisation brought about by violent deaths, were addressed by many artists following the traumatising events in the Kyiv suburbs and the east and south of the country in the spring of 2022. In this text, I will discuss how works by Ukrainian artists reflect on the impact of war atrocities on personal and intimate space and

7 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018, 5.

8 See, for example: Madina Tlostanova, *What Does It Mean to Be Post-Soviet? Decolonial Art from the Ruins of the Soviet Empire*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018, 26.

how they use decolonial optics to challenge the objectification and dehumanisation of the human body in the aftermath of the invasion.

## Bodily Integrity and Ways of Addressing Unrepresentable Violence

To illustrate the shifts between the levels of interpretation and expression in Ukrainian art before and after the beginning of the full-scale invasion, I want to address works by Ukrainian emerging photographer Artem Humilevskiy.<sup>9</sup> He made his series *Giant* (2021–2022) before the beginning of the full-scale invasion. It presents the figure of the artist, who appears at the same time as a model in the centre of the image. His nude body is a landmark for the steadiness in the image, while the photographer observes the disaster unfolding in the distance. He watches a burning field with detachment from the local catastrophe and contemplates the violent destruction of the ecosystem that occurs in front of him. At first sight, the monumental, static figure of the artist that responds to the title of the series – *Giant* – appears here as a celebration of the invulnerability of the human body in the face of disastrous events; however, it also ironically connotes the absurdity of the situation depicted in the image, turning it into a pastiche of its own messages. As Tlostanova proposes, “the decolonial sublime acts through parody, irony, canonical counter-discourse, deliberate and aestheticized nostalgia, grotesque, chiasmus, overlay”.<sup>10</sup> We can observe all these elements and methods in recent Ukrainian art, which discusses and opposes the war’s deadly effects through reclaiming bodily value as a part of a larger desired image of disentanglement and victory.

Humilevskiy abandoned the series with the beginning of the full-scale invasion and began a new one, *Roots* (2022). In several digitally manipulated photographs from this series, the artist attempts to morph into the natural landscape, such as a tree destroyed by lightning (Fig. 28). The damaged trunk of the tree symbolises the destruction that envelops every person in Ukraine. The body of the artist is at the same time exposed by the split in the wood and protected by the trunk, becoming its continuation and shelter. His figure represents an encounter of the living with the lifeless – or the dead – while at the same time exploring the profound connection between the two. No detachment is visible any more in this work, which manifests a full immersion in situations of vulnerability and rootedness. Through *Roots*, Humilevskiy presents a reflection on the relationship between human beings and the natural world in the midst of conflict and destruction. The photograph invites us to

9 See the artist’s website: Artem Humilevskiy, official website, <https://humilevskiy.com/> [accessed: 11.04.2024].

10 Tlostanova, *What Does It Mean to Be Post-Soviet?*, 32.

contemplate the fragility of life, the resilience of the human spirit, and the ability to employ irony, which endures even in the face of the most extreme challenges.

The works that turn from the idea of the integrity of the human body to questions of violence are less ambiguous. This has to do with the dehumanising quality of the war. The astonishing number of dead people flattens our perception of reality. A human body affected by extreme war violence loses its agency – and a war action that has the restoration of coloniality as its final aim intends to turn it into a lifeless object, by both denying its identity and agency and threatening to physically destroy it. The artistic practice that opposes this objectification of war victims and war witnesses faces an impasse where the fact of death is final, and its irreversibility blocks any possible ambiguous interpretation, converting each artwork into an individual anticolonial statement. The artists reflect on the violation of the limits of the human body by war atrocities and turn to the discourse of anticolonial resistance, both in response to the shock of the unfolding of the military action and as an intention to oppose this action through available means. The fresh and ongoing trauma provokes only the possibility of a direct response when the art takes a straightforward anti-colonial approach using categorical binary oppositions. This is what has happened to Ukrainian art after the invasion, with its amplified attention to the organic matter of death and suffering and the questions of the objectification of devalued human life.

*Figure 28: Image from the series Roots*



Image by Artem Humilevskiy, 2022. Image provided courtesy of Artem Humilevskiy.

Figure 29: Interview with Adorno



Image by Alevtina Kakhidze, 2022. Image provided courtesy of Alevtina Kakhidze.

The drawing *Bucha. Me. 47 Minutes by Car* by Alevtina Kakhidze depicts the impossibility of visually recording the extreme violence that occurred in Bucha, a town near Kyiv that was heavily affected by the Russian occupation, with more than 300 civilians killed by the Russian army and buried in mass graves.<sup>11</sup> The artist's body is bent in sorrow, shown in front of a vast red blot, which marks the site of Russian

11 For more on Kakhidze's work, see: Svitlana Biedarieva, "Alevtina Kakhidze", *Burlington Contemporary*, 27 July 2022, <https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/articles/articles/alevtina-kakhidze> [accessed: 11.04.2024]. Also see the artist's website: Alevtina Kakhidze, official website, <http://www.alevtinakakhidze.com/> [accessed: 11.04.2024].

soldiers' massacre and rampant rape of civilians. This work directly addresses the irrepresentability of violence – an important notion that entered the European scholarly and philosophical discourse in the aftermath of World War II and the atrocities of the Holocaust. Kakhidze's work echoes German philosopher Theodor Adorno's famous statement that “to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric”, as every artistic representation of death became excessive and unnecessary after the horror of the unspeakable.<sup>12</sup> The artist addresses this phrase directly in another drawing, *Interview with Adorno* (2022) (Fig. 29), where she asks the question, “Is it barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz, Irpin, Mariupol, Bucha?”<sup>13</sup>

Ukrainians' immediate experience of the war brought about the idea that any attempts to represent this violence are inevitably reductive and that the only way to truly confront its horror is to acknowledge its irrepresentability. From a decolonial point of view, this irrepresentability presents a problem of forming a decolonial epistemological basis as a set of new disentangled narratives because the creation of new knowledge is obstructed by the impossibility of visualising the events – and, consequently, a comprehension of their magnitude. Therefore, the violence and suffering can often be silenced or ignored by still-dominant (post)colonial narratives. The task of Kakhidze, in this work, is to return representability to them through addressing them and by representing her own life experience of proximity to the massacre: not showing the trauma itself but the artist's reaction to it, condensed into a seemingly naive reflection. Such a decolonial gesture challenges the vision of irrepresentability that, according to Jacques Rancière, deprives victims of their image in politically engaged art practices, turning instead to the depiction of the atrocity as a rhetorical figure, actualised by communication between the artist and the event, as a relative connection between them.<sup>14</sup>

Vlada Ralko's *Lviv Diary*, a series of drawings named after the city in which she found shelter after the outburst of violence with the full-scale invasion, explores the profound trauma of war by merging erotically charged images with depictions of extreme violence (Fig. 30).<sup>15</sup> The drawings are excessive and grotesque in their manner, as the artist fills nearly the entire paper with sketches of male and female, and, in some cases, cupid-like figures, who represent different stages of a struggle with a

12 Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson and Samuel Weber, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997, 34.

13 Alevtina Kakhidze, *Interview with Adorno*, drawing, 2022.

14 Jacques Rancière, “El teatro de imágenes” (“The Theatre of Images”), in: Nicole Schweizer (ed.), *Alfredo Jaar: La política de las imágenes* (*Alfredo Jaar: The Politics of Images*), Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Metales Pesados, 2008, 69–90, here 77.

15 Vlada Ralko and Milena Khomchenko, “Lviv Diary: Is it Convenient to Know?”, Shcherbenko Art Centre, <https://www.shcherbenkoartcentre.com/en/publications/vlada-ralko-en/lviv-diary-is-it-convenient-to-know/> [accessed: 11.04.2024].

two-headed pigeon-like eagle. At times, it is only the decapitated head of this monster that appears in the drawings; at other times, we witness an epic fight as part of the heroic narrative. Informed by religious iconography and pornographic imagery, this series draws on the figurative and bodily reinterpretation of the colonial entanglement between Russia and Ukraine. The Soviet symbols that occasionally reemerge in the drawings imply that this fight is a final and irreversible battle that will dismantle not only the falsified pseudo-imperial narrative used by Russia but the entire post-Soviet space, or, at least, Ukraine's belonging to it. The decolonial perspective is incorporated in this work through the interplay of power positions that the sides repeatedly exchange as the military situation changes. The series offers a detailed exploration of the deep wounds inflicted by war and the ongoing struggle for decolonial release. The fusion of erotic and violent imagery creates a visceral and emotive response in the viewer, highlighting the intensity and complexity of the trauma experienced by those caught up in the war situation.

### Art's Resistance to Objectification and Transgression

In the search for an explanation for the violent transgression of intimate bodily space brought about by Russian war crimes, the artists turn to visual methods that at times intersect, aiming to convey the scale of the trauma and its impact on both individuals and communities affected by the violence. For example, Kateryna Lysovenko's works tackle the topic of extreme violence that marked the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>16</sup> Her painting explores the complex relationship between epic narratives of the war drawn from classical mythology and the death and violence that occur in real life.

Instead of talking about her large-scale works, I will focus on smaller watercolours by the artist. In Lysovenko's watercolour *Being under Knowledge* (2022), the inner organs of children are exposed, a commentary on the violent nature that touches everyone living in Ukraine, including children. The vulnerability of children and the violation of their bodily limits also allude to the violation of the state border of Ukraine when the entire country became exposed to pain, trauma, atrocity, and ruin. Physical violence goes hand in hand with epistemic violence, which permeates all aspects of life and exposes its fragility. The artist often uses binary oppositions in her work to address the topic of the trauma of the war as expressed through bodily experience. In the work *A Woman and Death* (2022) (Fig. 31), a woman embraces the double-headed figure of death in a kind of dance. In addition to its usual monstrous appearance, death here has an emphasised irregularity that highlights its grotesqueness and deformity. The parallels that can be drawn to the Russian state

16 *Secondary Archive*, "Kateryna Lysovenko", <https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/kateryna-lysovenko/> [accessed: 11.04.2024].

emblem – and that are also used in the work of Ralko, where an eagle with two skulls frequently appears – depict the deadly encounter with evil, which takes a concrete form. Both in Lysovenko's and Ralko's works, this encounter between human and nonhuman (yet anthropomorphic) figures is characteristic of the artists' vision of the hybrid appearance of the enemy who has crossed the ambivalent border between the all-unifying (yet concrete) human image and the allegoric portrayal of the official image and policy of the aggressor state.

*Figure 30: Image from the series Lviv Diary*

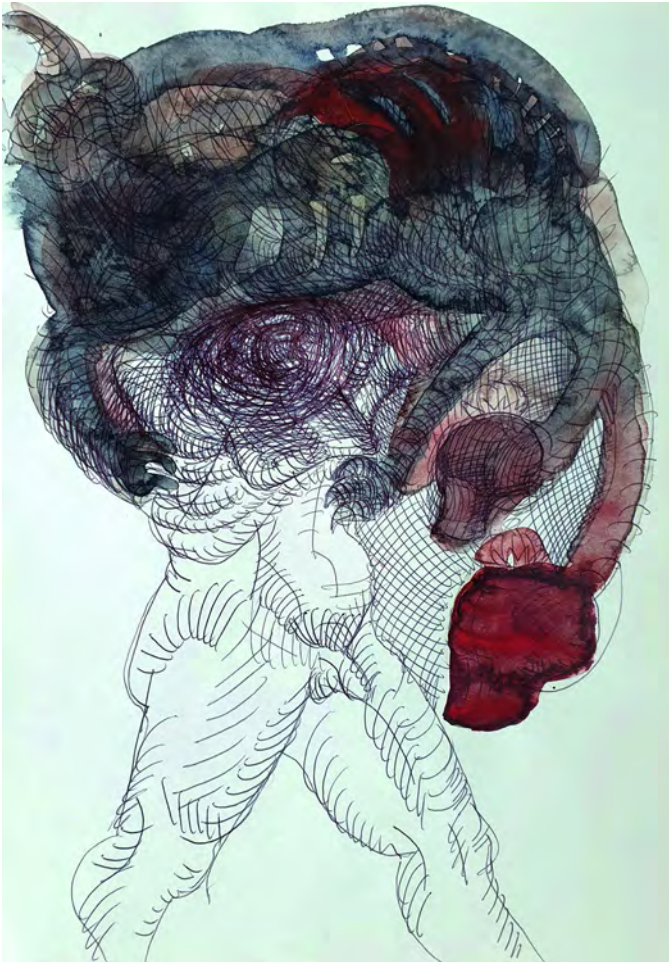


Image by Vlada Ralko, 2022. Image provided courtesy of Vlada Ralko.

*Figure 31: A Woman and Death*

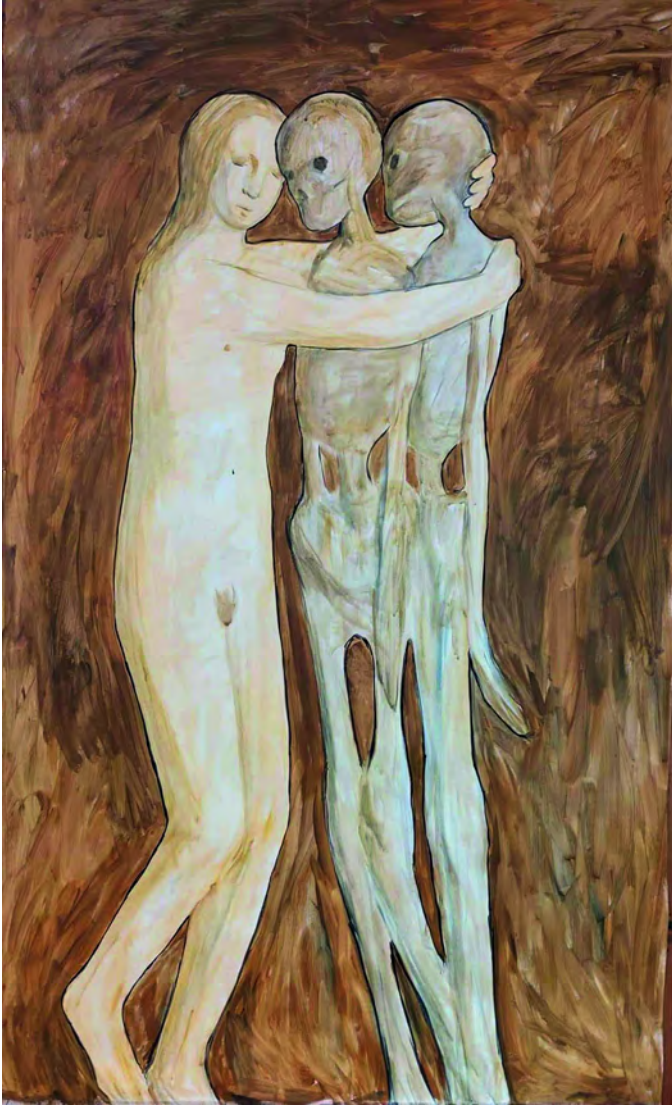


Image by Kateryna Lysovenko, 2022. Image provided courtesy of Kateryna Lysovenko.

Figure 32: *Nitrogen Explosion*



Image by Danylo Movchan, 2022. Image provided courtesy of Danylo Movchan.

Danylo Movchan's works employ a similar watercolour technique that uses transparency to expose the inner organs of the figures, showing their inner structure as a sign of the absence of defensive limits or a testimony to physical violence and death.<sup>17</sup> Movchan, originally an icon painter, depicts stylised figures against a plain background, making references to religious iconography and thus placing the images of victims of the war in a religious or mythological narrative. The work *Nitrogen Explosion* (2022) (Fig. 32) depicts the moment of death as it presents the body thrown upwards by an explosion wave, convulsing in agony. The watercolour *Two Bodies with Hidden Faces* (2022) outlines the bodies of men or women with their faces invisible and unrecognisable, reflecting in this way the all-unifying logic of the war that depersonalises its victims. After Russians left behind mass graves of civilians across the territories of Ukraine liberated from the invasion, the question of the identification and recognition of war victims took central place as a new discourse of the formation of the newest historical memory and a sign of emancipation from this objectification of war victims through an acknowledgement of not only the existence of a historical trauma but the agency of each person who fell victim to the

17 Ukraine Ablaze, "Danylo Movchan", <https://www.ukraineablaze.art/en/artists/danylo-movchan/> [accessed: 11.04.2024].

aggression. The identification of every victim contributes to their repersonalisation, by opposing the postcolonial logic of the irrepresentability of evil.

The topic of the anonymity of violence and the objectification of its victims was also addressed by the performance artist and sculptor Maria Kulikovska in a reflection that linked physical violence with the destruction of cultural objects across the country.<sup>18</sup> The concept of the work was based on real events that occurred in Donetsk. Kulikovska exhibited soap sculptures from the *Homo Bulla* and *Army of Clones* series (2012), modelled after her own body, at the IZOLYATSIA Platform for Cultural Initiatives in 2012. In 2014, the art centre was captured and looted by pro-Russian militants from the unrecognised Donetsk People's Republic and has become an illegal political prison since then.<sup>19</sup> Following the seizure of the centre, a group of pro-Russian terrorists used these sculptures as targets for shooting. In 2019, reflecting on this trauma, Kulikovska set up a performance where she shot replicas of her sculptures. The artist carried out this performance for the Ukrainian–Swiss film *The Forgotten* (2019) by Daria Onyshchenko (Fig. 33). This destruction of the artist's own image mirrors the killings that occurred widely in the east of Ukraine after 2014 and represents the artist's consideration of herself as being in the place of female victims, as no more than another object of the atrocity.<sup>20</sup>

In her new work *The Table of Negotiations* (2022), Kulikovska responds to this intention of objectification brought about by Russian war crimes, as well as attempts to resist it, by bringing the question of dying back to the limits of perception. This exaggerated, unpleasant work in a series of three-dimensional tiles presents a feast of death, a nightmarish collection of images that has been following Ukrainian society since they learnt about crimes against civilians in Bucha, Mariupol, Izium, and other Ukrainian cities. Ceramics, the material of the work, is testimony to the fragility of the human body. The appearance and statement of this work are reminiscent of the human organs served on a plate in Judy Chicago's famous *Dinner Party* (1974–1979) and the direct visual experience of the aftermath of slaughter in Marina Abramović's *Balkan Baroque* (1997). Kulikovska's aggressive work aims to trigger viewers' emotions and to involve them in an elaborate game of apprehension and obsession with ongoing trauma. The decolonial aesthesis as a liberated return to formerly taboo senses and feelings resurfaces here as a method of resistance, as a demythologisation of both topics in the face of war through a discussion on violence and explicit corporeality emerging in Ukrainian society.

18 Maria Kulikovska and Oleh Vinnichenko, official website, <https://www.mariakulikovska.net/project-page/homo-bulla---human-as-soap-bubble> [accessed: 11.04.2024].

19 For example, see: Stanislav Aseyev, *Torture Camp on Paradise Street*, trans. Zenia Tompkins and Nina Murray, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022.

20 See also: Svitlana Biedarieva, "Art Communities at Risk: Ukraine", *October* 179, 2022, 137–149.

Figure 33: Screenshot of Maria Kulikovska's *Homo Bulla*. Replica



Still from *The Forgotten*, a film by Daria Onyshchenko, 2019. Image provided courtesy of Daria Onyshchenko.

Figure 34: Image from the series *Bones*



Image by Kinder Album, 2022. Image provided courtesy of Kinder Album.

Kinder Album takes a similar approach to examining trauma through its corporeality. She sculpts human and animal bones in ceramics, and the resulting burnt and damaged carcasses morph into floral adornments. The artist challenges death and dismemberment as she turns to heal the wound through vegetation as a symbol of revival. The decorative aesthetics of her sculptural work, as in the *Bones* series (2022), becomes a practice of regeneration as the artist turns to the restoration of agency through growth (Fig. 34). This resurrection, however, remains incomplete, as the bones do not fully transform; rather, they remain in disaccord with the seemingly excessive floral decoration. This project argues for the possibility of regaining one's perception, even if it is that of pain and grief, and discusses and opposes the war's deadly effects through reclaiming bodily value as a part of a larger desired image of disentanglement. This practice of regeneration responds to what Tlostanova considers a decolonial strategy of 're-futuring', where the agency of the oppressed victims and witnesses of the war is reclaimed through aesthesis as a possibility to regain one's own perception, even if it is that of pain and grief.<sup>21</sup> An orientation to this resurrection through a comprehension of the uneasy reality and its reinterpretation or reworking marks the turning point in Ukrainian art's concerns of reestablishing bodily agency as an anti-objectifying decolonial gesture.

Resurrection, as resistance to cruel acts of war, is also the topic of Dana Kavelina's unfinished film, *Mother Srebrenica, Mother Donbas* (2021–), which the Kyiv-based artist had to stop at the beginning of the full-scale invasion.<sup>22</sup> In this film, the violence of mass atrocities is reinterpreted through a comparative perspective on the Holocaust, particularly the Lviv pogroms of 1941, the Srebrenica massacre, and the war in the Donbas. The artist reimagines the story of the war as one where the victims of the Holocaust are not exhumed after their violent death but are resurrected by means of placing a slip of parchment in their mouths. This reference to the 17th-century legend of a golem, who was resurrected after receiving a slip with a name, calls for an epistemic change in the recognition of the victims of war-caused violence, their identification, and finding their role in history. The hope for resurrection expressed by the artist is hope for postwar reconstruction and regeneration, as well as the effective preservation of the memory of those who suffered from aggression. Kavelina's film, therefore, attempts to return to the frames of the representability of violence, challenging what Ranci re calls a threnody of the "unrepresentable/intractable/irredeemable, denouncing the modern madness of the idea of a self-emancipation of mankind's humanity and its inevitable and

21 Madina Tlostanova, "Decolonial AestheSis and the Post-Soviet Art", *Afterall Journal* 48, 2019, 100–107, <https://www.afterall.org/article/decolonial-aesthesis-and-the-post-soviet-art> [accessed: 11.04.2024].

22 *Secondary Archive*, "Dana Kavelina", <https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/dana-kavelina/> [accessed: 11.04.2024].

interminable culmination in the death camps".<sup>23</sup> One of the most important statements produced by Kavelina, following the experience of the war, is the reversal of the visions on the bodily dimensions of violence formed after World War II. This statement brings in new narratives that mark the creation of new epistemologies – which inevitably will be converted into new methodologies for addressing the trauma.

## Conclusions

The new Ukrainian art produced after the second half of 2022 calls for resistance to the objectification of those affected by the war, making a statement against the anonymity of violence and insisting on seeing the scale of injustice. Recent art practices emphasise art's capacity for resilience and resistance in the face of disaster, and mark the decisive break with colonial narratives, creating instead their own narratives drawing on the epistemological basis gathered in the first stages of artistic documentation of the war from 2014 to 2021. The decolonial statements proposed by the projects discussed in this text focus on the human body as one of the first targets of war-related violence and, at the same time, as the most powerful tool of resistance to the aggression.

Ukrainian wartime art shows a profound transformation in its execution and methods of expression: from detached documentation preceding the full-scale invasion to the eyewitness accounts of the first months of the invasion and, finally, to the artists' interpretation of complex issues of bodily limits, survival and death, and the fundamental right to human agency. These works show the ongoing decolonial transformation that guides Ukrainian culture and art and ensures its endurance and development as resistance to the threat of human loss caused by the war.

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23 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, 24.

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# Politics of Infrastructures



# Do Androids See Electronic Films? The Use of Drones and Algorithmic Vision in Russia's War against Ukraine

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*Taras Nazaruk*

## The View from Above

The image shows an industrial winter landscape from an altitude of over 300 metres. The camera shakily approaches a sandy embankment, and, as it approaches, a trench becomes visible, with a green target marker in the middle of the frame constantly in focus. The marker serves as an autoguidance function and corrects the drone's flight trajectory. At an altitude of 30 metres, the footage becomes slow motion, and two people in the trench are visible just before the explosion occurs. This footage was taken by a Switchblade kamikaze drone during a strike on Russian troops, supposedly during the battle of Bakhmut in the winter of 2022. The moment of hitting the target is not shown from the drone's point of view – another reconnaissance drone captured the moment from a distance of several hundred metres away. After the explosion, one of the wounded soldiers tries to crawl out of the trench.<sup>1</sup>

Another image from the front line shows autumn fields from about the same height, with the date stamp and zoom level visible on the screen. When the camera starts zooming out, an explosion blinds the screen. Only a slow-motion replay allows us to see the moment an anti-aircraft missile attempts to hit the drone. According to the authors of the publication of the video, it withstood this strike (Fig. 35).<sup>2</sup>

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1 @clashreport (Clash Report), "Ukrainian Switchblade-300 Kamikaze UAV in Action", X (formerly Twitter) post, 13 December 2022, <https://twitter.com/clashreport/status/1602560451732275200> [accessed: 14.03.2023].

2 Povernys' Zhyvym (Facebook profile) "Rosiyany bezuspishno namahayutsya znyshchty 'Leleku-100'" ("Russians unsuccessfully attempt to destroy 'Leleka-100'"), Facebook post, 04 December 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/backandalive/videos/росіяни-безуспішно-намагаються-знищити-лелеку-100/507872847965418/> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

*Figure 35: A Valkyrie drone captures an unsuccessful attempt of a Russian missile to strike it.*



Image by Army SOS, 01 May 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/armia.sos/permalink/3344841992411050>. Image provided courtesy of creator Yaroslav Tropinov (Army SOS, volunteering organisation).

In the combat zone, drones are used to conduct reconnaissance, identify targets, and guide artillery. They are used to carry out strikes, evaluate the results of a strike, even clear mined positions,<sup>3</sup> and help evacuate civilians<sup>4</sup> or take soldiers captive.<sup>5</sup> People hide from them, try to jam them, or shoot them down.

As civilian drone technology has become widely used and affordable in recent decades, it has become an integral part of Russia's war in Ukraine. Since the beginning of the invasion, social media and news reports have regularly shared and discussed drone footage from the war. While this is not the first time that views from above have been used in war, it is unlikely that the visuals of combat in any other war have been so dominated by this view.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of a bird's-eye view itself is not new. It can be easily traced back to the Renaissance practices of mapping and depicting cities, such as Jacopo de' Barbari's panoramic *View of Venice* from 1500. Such a view has long been intriguing and interesting for humans because of its ability to cover a larger and more complex area than the human eye can see from a human height. On the one hand, *View of Venice* shifted the humanlike gaze from the hustle and bustle of a single street to an elevated perspective of the city below us, as if it were a godlike gaze, an attempt to grasp the city in its entirety, to offer a universal view. On the other hand, it showed how useful such a view is for military purposes and opened the city's defence vulnerabilities to the eyes of hostility. This view became so valuable and militarily sensitive that the Venetian state did not produce any more such detailed panoramas of Venice in the following 150 years.<sup>7</sup>

As Caren Kaplan shows, the view from above was anticipated as a promise to reveal an all-encompassing perspective in various historical and technological contexts (i.e., maps, towers, air balloons, drones, satellites, etc.). Military use became apparent with the invention of planes and photography. Since World War I, aerial

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- 3 Butusov Plus, "Ya osobysto zrobyv minus 500 okupantiv' – operator drona 10-yi OHSBr 'Skyba' u boiu." ("I have personally made minus 500 occupiers' – drone operator of the 10th Brigade 'Skiba' in combat."), YouTube video, 15:03, 18 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmsXSksVCXc> [accessed: 14.03.2023].
  - 4 Shoot\_shoot, "SHOCKING DOCUMENTARY FILM 'FOLLOW ME' On the military rescue operation in Ukraine 2023", YouTube video, 31:25, 18 January 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTCwmV7Rh8c> [accessed: 06.04.2024].
  - 5 The Wall Street Journal, "Watch a Russian Soldier Surrender to a Ukrainian Drone in Bakhmut | WSJ", YouTube video, 07:05, 14 June 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2W8yRa9X uA> [accessed: 14.06.2023].
  - 6 My factual knowledge about this topic is mainly based on publications available as of February–March 2023, when this text was written. The use of drones and algorithms by the military in Ukraine, as well as the public discussion around this, has intensified since then.
  - 7 Juraj Kittler and Deryck W. Holdsworth, "Digitizing a Complex Urban Panorama in the Renaissance: The 1500 Bird's-Eye View of Venice by Jacopo de' Barbari", *New Media & Society* 16/5, 2014, 770–788.

photography has become commonly used for reconnaissance with a definitive military value.<sup>8</sup> Ever since, these panoramic views have been an unquestionable part of military action, and over the decades the technology has shifted from aerial photography to satellite and computational views (i.e., Sputnik, GPS, etc.).

In current warfare, the bird's-eye view of Ukrainian cities has been completely subordinated to military purposes to keep it away from hostility. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, drone flights have been completely banned for civilians. Bird's-eye views of Ukrainian cities have become militarily sensitive.<sup>9</sup> Currently, such footage is primarily used for monitoring and reconnaissance by – and for – the military. Short episodes – rather visually impressive – are published by press officers with a few days' delay, with no harm to operational security. Obviously, the context is very limited, as it might have a direct impact on combat, so civilians see drone videos but do not really see what purpose they originally served. This footage does not really inform the general public about warfare developments. They are shared to assure civilians that they have a voyeuristic gaze on the battlefield. And this is, after all, the position from which this essay is written. It is just my civilian opinion, based on fragments of public reports, and does not contain any military insights or expertise.

Drone footage is a key element of any combat in this war. However, a single piece of drone footage is only a fragmentary view, with its scope limited to a certain area and time. A simple high-altitude view from a drone is not enough when the scale of the warfare stretches over hundreds of kilometres. Each particular view from above is eventually supposed to be integrated into something much bigger – a universal view of the entire frontline area, military tactics, and strategy collected from hundreds of instances of drone footage, integrated with other sources of information (e.g., satellite data, intelligence, military reports, etc.). This is where algorithms and computer networks are applied. How, then, is the production of this overarching gaze on warfare developments constituted through an algorithmic vision?

Geographer Denis Cosgrove argues that the “meanings of the photographed earth” were “anticipated long before the photographs themselves were taken”. In his view, “for all its radical newness, actually witnessing the globe culminates a long genealogy of imagining and reflecting upon the possibility of doing so”.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, drone videos and datasets integrated into a larger algorithmic structure are

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8 Caren Kaplan, *Aerial Aftermaths: Wartime from Above*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017, 13.

9 *WikiLegalAid*, “Poryadok vykorystanny tsyvilnykh povitryanykh droniv (bezpilotnykiv)” (“The Procedure for the Use of Civilian Drones (UAV)”), <https://tvf.innk/zTzMu> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

10 Denis Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, 9.

seen today as a promise that is supposed to offer the all-encompassing panorama of complex, large-scale processes, like frontline developments in the Russo–Ukrainian War. This anticipation consists of its own genealogy of imagination and reflection. The idea of seeing something beyond the limitation of the humanlike point of view by using computers is also not new. Its trajectory starts in the mid-20th century in the post–World War II context, when cybernetics became one of the key attempts to comprehend and govern complex structures and processes in which a single person is only a part of something larger.

Coined by the American mathematician Norbert Wiener, this discipline proposes the idea of managing complex systems on the principles of control and communication in the animal and the machine.<sup>11</sup> This idea gained considerable popularity worldwide with the beginning of electronic computing and discussions about its application in society. Moreover, due to a high degree of abstraction when it comes to governing large-scale systems, it was closely connected to the concept of *visuality* – computers and algorithms should show us what the human eye cannot see on its own. Soviet scientist Victor Glushkov explicitly used the metaphors of ‘film’ and ‘visuality’ to explain this idea.<sup>12</sup>

In the Soviet Union, cybernetics gained widespread popularity with the beginning of Khrushchev’s reforms. Projects using computers and algorithms were launched first in the military and later in civilian spheres. One of the most notable scholars in this field was Glushkov. While focusing on civilian computer networks, his theoretical thinking and research infrastructure were involved in a broad spectrum of cybernetic projects in the Soviet Union. He founded his research centre in Kyiv in the early 1960s, which still exists today, called the Institute of Cybernetics. His name is usually associated with the concept of the all-state automated system of management (better known as OGAS), a nationwide computer network often called the ‘Soviet Internet’ in the literature. Glushkov was convinced that complex processes and systems can be comprehended primarily through building networks of computers to collect multiple sources of information and to calculate and process them with algorithms, which was supposed to improve the efficiency of the Soviet Union’s planned economy.<sup>13</sup>

In his view, various pieces of information about our current reality are fed to the ‘electronic brain’ (Glushkov’s metaphor for a computer), where those are integrated

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- 11 Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*, Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1950.
  - 12 Victor Glushkov, Gennadiy Dobrov, and Valeriy Tereschenko, *Besedy ob upravlenii (Conversations on Governance)*, Moscow: Nauka, 1974, 36 .
  - 13 The history of OGAS and the context of Soviet cybernetics is explained in: Benjamin Peters, *How Not to Network a Nation: The Uneasy History of the Soviet Internet*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017; and Slava Gerovitch, *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak: A History of Soviet Cybernetics*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002.

into a larger sequence to show our complex reality. In the example of a factory, he stresses how the information (or 'data', as one would put it today) about production is more important for an algorithmic vision than the production itself: "It is possible to imagine that a certain strange film is born in the electronic brain of the factory, where not the external, visible shell of the production process, but its internal, informational essence is recorded. Watching the film, the brain advises how to make the process optimal".<sup>14</sup> Computers not only visualise the complexity of the current situation but also prospectively project potential scenarios, therefore affecting the decision-making process. Computing serves as an intermediary between contemporary reality and the eventuality of the future. It is supposed to create a 'film' that is projective in nature – a 'film' representing potential developments. Even though Glushkov's metaphor refers to manufacturing production as an example, in his view, this principle of collecting and structuring the data to manage large-scale and complex processes is applicable to basically any sphere of social life. This metaphor does not reflect the factual, objective reality of using technology back at the time. It illustrates instead a way of thinking about technology, anticipating its universality for extending human comprehension. It is an imaginary that promotes the use of computer technology for social, economic, and military governance. With this metaphor, Glushkov introduced the term ASU – automated management system.<sup>15</sup> Such systems were actively created in nearly every sphere of late Soviet society, with varying levels of both complexity and efficiency. The term ASU is still used, including in a military context, which suggests that, directly and indirectly, this imaginary is, to an extent, still present today.

If we follow this metaphor of 'an electronic brain watching a film', we can try to trace how the anticipation of extending human comprehension with technology is present in the Russian war in Ukraine. It leads to another visuality of this war created by drone vision, data production, computational algorithms, and ASUs used on the battlefield. What films do drones watch in this war? What modes of visuality (and reality) do the 'electronic brains' of automated control systems offer to humans?

This is a 'film' done by and for the military. It begins with technical infrastructure, logistics, and people's expertise on the ground supplying drone footage of a specific 'scene' or 'episode' of the war. Once aggregated from dozens of other drones and integrated by algorithms with other reconnaissance datasets via specific apps, the military develops a certain 'film sequence' providing 'situational awareness' for still fragmented but nevertheless larger areas and broader time frames. Processed and analysed on a higher level of abstraction via ASUs, 'sequences' are eventually 'edited' into a 'film'. This 'film' is supposed to provide an all-encompassing overview of the front line, which affects the decision-making process of higher command.

14 Glushkov, Dobrov, and Tereschenko, *Besedy ob upravlenii*, 36.

15 Ibid.

In the following sections, I will trace, through illustrative examples, some key infrastructural elements facilitating the algorithmic vision used by the military in this war.

## On the Ground

Military drone visibility is generated through sweat and blood. Their maintenance is hard work. The use of drones in the war has reached an unprecedented level of intensity. According to Ukrainian military estimates, 500 drones can be in the sky simultaneously during combat operations.<sup>16</sup> This is evidence of their relentless necessity on the battlefield. At the same time, their vulnerability to adversaries' weapons makes them expendable. According to analysts, a quadcopter, such as a commonly used series of compact drones called Mavic, operates for an average of three flights; a fixed-wing drone (e.g., Bayraktar, PD-2, Leleka, Valkyrie), for six. A third of the flights are successful. In the first six months of the war, Ukraine lost 90 per cent of its drones.<sup>17</sup> This is another indication of which infrastructure and logistics solutions on the ground are required to get the view from above.

"Mavic 3 is something we always need", says a soldier who has been a drone operator since 2019.<sup>18</sup> The interview with his group was filmed in a field on the line of contact during a combat mission. During the full-scale invasion, he killed about 500 soldiers by dropping grenades from civilian drones. According to this soldier, drones are constantly involved in repelling offensives or capturing prisoners. At the same time, he admits that they lose drones regularly.<sup>19</sup> The drones are shot down, their batteries run out, and communication is lost due to signal jamming. They try to find them after they are lost<sup>20</sup> or to evacuate them from the front line.<sup>21</sup>

16 Sam Schechner and Daniel Michaels, "Ukraine Has Digitized Its Fighting Forces on a Shoestring", *Wall Street Journal*, 03 January 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-has-digitized-its-fighting-forces-on-a-shoestring-11672741405> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

17 Mykhaylo Zabrodskyyi, Jack Watling, Oleksandr V. Danylyuk, and Nick Reynolds, "Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022", Royal United Services Institute, 30 November 2022, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/preliminary-lessons-conventional-warfighting-russias-invasion-ukraine-february-july-2022> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

18 Butusov Plus, "Ya osobysto zrobyv minus 500 okupantiv", 06:41–06:43 [author's trans.].

19 *Ibid.*, 10:31–11:03.

20 Babylon13ua, "Poryatunok ryadovoho drona" ("Saving Private Drone"), YouTube video, 11:36, 02 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fDZUDLjblI> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

21 @yigal\_levin, "Bespilotnik 93-iey brigady VSU evakuiuyet..." ("A drone from the 93rd brigade of the AFU evacuates..."), Telegram post, 22 December 2022, [https://t.me/yigal\\_levin/37706](https://t.me/yigal_levin/37706) [accessed: 10.03.2023].

This soldier is one of many who are on the other side of average drone footage, who travel to the line of contact with the necessary equipment to get the drone into the air. This takes place under fire, in the open field, in trenches and dugouts, or in unprotected territory, as well as in different weather conditions, which affect both people and drones. Drone operators are trained in flying, technical characteristics, remote control, targeting, and registering drones in systems to distinguish them from civilians or to feed intelligence. Because this drone view requires significant resources and energy, a certain personal relationship is formed between drones and their operators. They euphemistically call drones ‘birds’, ‘eyes’, and so on. They even jokingly ‘bury’ them, as if the drones were live beings that require respectable burial and mourning for the loss.<sup>22</sup>

Both the government and volunteer organisations work to supply military units with drones. The government and businesses allocate funds. Volunteers also organise crowdfunding campaigns, and not only in Ukraine, which has included raising millions of dollars for Bayraktars (long-endurance combat drones) and multiple small-scale allocations for Mavic 3s for individual military units.<sup>23</sup>

Blood and flesh, in peace or under fire, in cold or heat – maintaining the infrastructure is essential to keep drones in the air. This is how the cuts for the ‘film’ are collected. The first level of algorithmic vision takes place here as machines are tied to human bodies through designing repeatable collective routines of setting up hundreds of drones in the sky over the front line.<sup>24</sup> Fragments of footage from such drones are what civilians usually see. These are actual hostilities with actual people and machinery that can be easily understood without additional context. The further level of abstraction in an algorithmic ‘film’ takes place in the next stages.

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22 @lastwarriorr, “Chas dla zboru hroshey nastav!...” (“The time to raise money is now!...”), Telegram post, 07 December 2022, <https://t.me/lastwarriorr/19266> [accessed: 10.03.2023] [author’s trans.].

23 For more on the governmental programmes of fundraising for and the import and production of drones, see: Joe Tidy, “Ukraine rapidly expanding its ‘Army of Drones’ for front line”, *BBC*, 26 April 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-65389215> [accessed: 10.03.2023]. See also about the crowdfunding campaign in Lithuania to buy a military drone: *Euronews*, “Lithuania Shows off ‘Crowdfunded’ Military Drone It’s Giving to Ukraine”, 07 July 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/07/07/lithuania-shows-off-crowdfunded-military-drone-its-giving-to-ukraine> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

24 The broader use of the term ‘algorithmic’ as a tie between machines and human bodies is discussed by Jussi Parikka in: Jussi Parikka, “Operational Images: Between Light and Data”, *e-flux Journal* 133, February 2023, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/133/515812/operational-images-between-light-and-data> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

## Scene

“Drones don't see, they scope”, Australian artist Kathryn Brimblecombe-Fox emphasises through her series *Dronescapes*.<sup>25</sup> Images transmitted by drones have one key characteristic. First of all, they provide an overhead view from a distance of several hundred metres to several kilometres, a picture of landscapes destroyed by the fighting – trenches, craters, burnt houses, and mangled trees. Sometimes this visualisation is transmitted from the infrared spectrum through thermal imagers. Sometimes this visualisation is blurred, shaded, or clouded. As the war has lasted more than a year, all four climatic seasons are visible in this footage. The landscape, however, inherently remains only a background in these images. The key focus is the military: positions and numbers, precise coordinates or distances from the target, and movement directions and speed, among other things. Eventually, this visuality must be transformed into information for the ‘electronic brain’. Images are quantified and measured to become ‘operational’ and therefore eligible for processing, analysis, and synthesis.<sup>26</sup> At this stage, it is not the captured visual footage itself that becomes more important but the quantified data extracted from it, as well as the way it is combined and visualised with other datasets.

Drone footage usually does not exist autonomously. It is integrated into a wider network. “It's like a taxi – whoever responds to the order the fastest is the best”, says a member of the special unit “Birds of Madyar” about the work of an unmanned aerial vehicle reconnaissance pilot and drone integration into the ASU.<sup>27</sup> One of the most popular Android-based systems is ASU Kropyva (Nettles), developed by volunteers after the beginning of the war in 2014. According to them, the app is used by over 90 per cent of artillery units.<sup>28</sup>

With this application, drones, artillery units, and local commands are connected to a network. The command and artillery units can monitor updates of enemy targets, receive their coordinates, and automatically calculate the direction of fire and

25 Federica Caso, “Visualising the Drone: War Art as Embodied Resistance”, *E-International Relations*, 16 May 2018, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/05/16/visualising-the-drone-war-art-as-embodied-resistance/> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

26 Parikka, “Operational Images: Between Light and Data”.

27 5 kanal, “Schoyno! Madyar pokazav, yak robytsya BABAKH na holovy okupantiv” (“Now! Madyar showed how to make a BOOM on the heads of the occupiers”), YouTube video, 03:58, here 01:49–01:54, 22 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyNlYOZ8r9g> [accessed: 10.03.2023] [author's trans.].

28 Yura Fedorenko, “Na rivni tekhnologiy u nas vse ye’. Volonter ‘Armiya SOS’ – pro peredchuttya peremohy, steky tekhnologiy v armiytskykh proyektah i naypopulyarnishi ukrainski BPLA” (“In Terms of Technology, We Have Everything’: Army SOS Volunteer Talks about the Anticipation of Victory, Technology Stacks in Army Projects, and the Most Popular Ukrainian UAVs”) *DOU*, <https://dou.ua/lenta/articles/army-sos/> [accessed: 10.03.2023] [author's trans.].

distance from the target. The units with the most favourable position promptly hit the target and then update the status or correct the data in the app. Data from rangefinders, sniper devices, and weather stations supplement the information from drones.

According to the developers, the Kropyva system has made it possible to significantly reduce the average time to deploy artillery, the time to hit an unplanned target, and the time to open fire in response to adversary strikes. Drones, along with this app, do not just register a combat operation – they take part in it. The war in Ukraine is far from a war of only machines; human soldiers on the ground play the key military role. However, drones, algorithms, and telecommunications have changed combat and deeply mediated it. Kostiantyn Polishchuk, a photojournalist that now serves in the Ukrainian Armed Forces, notes: “This war is not about small arms; it is a war of drones and artillery. Many people who have directly taken part in battles confirm that they never fired at the enemy and have not fought face to face”.<sup>29</sup> This war has therefore become a combination of cybernetic tools and kinetic weaponry. Their uses have crossed over each other to the extent that division between these types of military combat is no longer clear.<sup>30</sup>

Operational communication between all elements of this network is provided by local radios and satellite internet connection is provided by Starlink. Some clever units even came up with a solution to mount the satellite terminals on a drone and fly it into the air for better coverage.<sup>31</sup> The supply of Starlink satellite stations was a game changer for communications on the front line, as it provided communications that were virtually invulnerable to Russian electronic warfare. Before that, Ukrainian satellite terminals were either jammed or cyberattacked by the Russians. At the same time, this made the Armed Forces of Ukraine vulnerable to the decisions of the private company SpaceX, such as the restriction of its use near the front line in early February 2023.<sup>32</sup>

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29 Kateryna Iakovlenko, “Images at War: Interview with Ukrainian Photographer Kostiantyn Polishchuk”, *e-flux*, December 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/508561/images-at-war-interview-with-ukrainian-photographer-kostiantyn-polishchuk> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

30 Cyberwar discourse and practices are analysed in: Nick Dyer-Witherford and Svitlana Matviyenko, *Cyberwar and Revolution: Digital Subterfuge in Global Capitalism*, Ann Arbor: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. How weaponry and media are merging is discussed from a media theory perspective in: Jeremy Packer and Joshua Reeves, *Killer Apps: War, Media, Machine*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020.

31 Tom Cooper, “Ukraine War, 10 February 2023”, Medium post, 10 February 2023, [https://medium.com/@x\\_TomCooper\\_x/ukraine-war-10-february-2023-df851175ef7b](https://medium.com/@x_TomCooper_x/ukraine-war-10-february-2023-df851175ef7b) [accessed: 10.03.2023].

32 Micah Maidenberg, “SpaceX Limits Ukraine’s Military Use of Starlink Satellite Business”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 08 February 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/spacex-to-limit-ukraine-s-military-use-of-starlink-satellite-business-11675894401> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

Thus, the Kropyva map is continuously used to exchange data updates on the progress of combat operations in real time for a particular area of the front line. Its use is apparent in many stories about these scenes from certain parts of the battlefield. But that kind of imagery is rare in the public sphere, as the key screen here is an application that is not accessible to civilians.

However, this is still not the 'film' that Glushkov envisioned in his metaphor. In military parlance, Kropyva serves at the tactical level, meaning that it shows only one of the scenes of this 'film' from a particular area of several hundred metres to dozens of kilometres. These scenes are arranged in a sequence in the next stage.

## Sequence

It was unexpected for the operator of the Neptune antiship missile system to see a large object on his radar in the Black Sea, 120 kilometres away from the Ukrainian coastline, on 13 April 2022. By its size, it could only be the flagship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, the cruiser *Moskva*, which came notably within range of the Neptune missiles. While the Russians on their side failed to notice the missile launch, the ship was damaged and soon sank.<sup>33</sup> According to the Ukrainian military, the ASU Delta, an automated management system, was also used for communication and data exchange between all those involved in this combat operation.<sup>34</sup> But not only during this one.

Employees of nine situational centres along the front line use Delta to collect and analyse photos and streams from drones, data from dozens of Ukrainian and third countries' satellites, and information from NATO intelligence. The system also manages in what area which reconnaissance drones operate. It also indicates tasks and provides a report on the results. Such views from above are complemented by data from intercepted radio signals or posts by the Russian military on social media.

In addition to drones and reconnaissance, the situation behind enemy lines is monitored with the help of guerrillas and civilians. The Telegram chatbot eVoroh

33 Iryna Balachuk and Roman Romaniuk, "It became known how exactly Russian cruiser Moskva was discovered and sunk: details and photos", *Ukrainska Pravda (Ukrainian Truth)*, 13 December 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/12/13/7380515> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

34 Tayisa Melnyk, "Viyskoviy soft DELTA teper ofitsiyno v ZSU. Vin dopomahav u vsikh velykykh operatsiyakh – vid potoplennya 'Moskvy' do zvilnennya Zmiinoho. Chomu z nym voyuvaty shvydshe" ("Delta Military Software Is Now Officially in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. It Helped in All Major Operations – From the Sinking of the Moskva to the Liberation of Zmiine. Why It Is Faster to Fight with It"), *Forbes.ua*, 04 February 2023, <https://forbes.ua/innovations/twitter-dlya-zsu-viyskoviy-soft-delta-dopomagav-u-vsikh-velikikh-operatsiyakh-vi-d-potoplennya-moskvi-do-zvilnennya-zmiinogo-chomu-z-nim-zsu-voyuyut-shvidshe-0712-2022-10318> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

(eBopor, or eEnemy), developed by the Ukrainian Ministry of Digital Transformation, is integrated into the Delta system. With its help, civilians can quickly inform the Armed Forces of the presence of the Russian military or its equipment. Over the first year of the full-scale invasion, 462,000 users have registered with the chatbot.<sup>35</sup> In previously occupied Kherson, a local partisan placed surveillance cameras in apartments in different parts of the city to monitor the movements of Russians. The footage was transmitted to the Armed Forces of Ukraine.<sup>36</sup>

The idea for Delta came from volunteers back in 2015, during the fighting in eastern Ukraine, and in 2016 the navy began using it. With the start of the full-scale invasion, it was already being actively used by other units. In February 2023, the Armed Forces of Ukraine officially incorporated it and allowed it to be deployed in the cloud outside of Ukraine for better protection against missiles and cyberattacks.<sup>37</sup>

All collected information is organised into catalogues and mapped according to frontline sectors covering dozens and hundreds of kilometres. This allows military commanders to register in the system and subscribe to updates from the area they need. In this way, the military can improve their 'situational awareness' of the enemy in a certain area and make decisions about further actions and the placement of their own forces. The system also helps monitor and adjust attacks on enemy positions. This way, Delta serves as a hub, integrating drone and other inputs into a sequence, as in a film, depicting an episode taking place in a certain area and time.

Delta is accessible only to a limited number of military personnel and is kept as classified as possible from prying eyes, both their own and those of adversaries. In the autumn of 2022, the Russians managed to gain access to the system through a phishing attack. Although the data they obtained was only fragmentary and quickly

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35 Mintsyfra (Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine), "Yak Ukrayintsi dopomahaly v borotbi z vorohom" ("How Ukrainians helped in the fight against the enemy"), Telegram post, 23 February 2023, <https://t.me/mintsyfra/3842> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

36 Hanna Mamonova and Kateryna Kobernyk, "U Khersonskiyh pidlitkiv operatyvnoho dosvidu bilshe, nizh u deyakykh spivrobitnykiv spetsluzhb. Yak misto chynylo opir rosiyanam – rozkazuye pidpilnyk i mayzhe spetsahent" ("The Kherson Teenagers Have More Operational Experience than Some Intelligence Officers: How the City Resisted the Russians – An Underground Member and Almost Special Agent Tells Us"), *Babel.ua*, 07 December 2022, <https://babel.ua/texts/87954-u-hersonskih-pidlitkiv-operativnogo-dosvidu-bilshe-nizh-u-deyakykh-spivrobitnikiv-specsluzhb-yak-misto-chinilo-opir-rosiyanam-rozkazuye-pidpilnik-i-mayzhe-specagent> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

37 Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, "Za podannyyam ministra oborony Oleksiya Reznikova Uryad pryinyav rishennya schodo zaprovadzhennya systemy Delta v Sylakh oborony, Ministerstvo oborony Ukrainy" ("Following a Proposal by Defence Minister Oleksiy Reznikov, the Government Has Decided to Introduce the Delta System in the Defence Forces, the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine"), 04 February 2023, <https://www.mil.gov.ua/news/2023/02/04/oleksiya-reznikova-uryad-prijnyav-rishennya-shhodo-zaprovadzhennya-sistemi-delta-v-silakh-oboroni/> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

outdated, it showed both the value and vulnerability of the sequences that are formed at this level.<sup>38</sup>

## Film

When the Armed Forces of Ukraine began preparing an offensive in southern Ukraine in the summer of 2022, the universal gaze on the war was extremely important for decision-making. For Ukrainian commanders, it became apparent that the enemy had begun to move its forces southwards, thereby weakening the front in the Kharkiv region. The commander of the ground forces, General Oleksandr Syrsky, noticed this dynamic and eventually organised and successfully conducted an operation in this direction.

However, it was not only the panoramic view that was important but also the modelling of potential scenarios. In July, a meeting was held in Germany between the Ukrainian, American, and British militaries to conduct a wargaming session, taking into account available resources and possible attack options. This was how they planned the offensive in southern Ukraine. The plans were broader than those that were implemented. In particular, in the Zaporizhzhia region, it was planned to reach Crimea and cut the 'land corridor' between Russia and the peninsula. But after the simulations conducted during this session, it became clear that there would not be enough forces for such an operation. In the end, the Ukrainian military decided to concentrate on Kherson.<sup>39</sup>

In fact, the general public does not know much about the ASUs that were applied by the Ukrainian command to see opportunities and plan offensives in Kharkiv and Kherson. But it seems that systems like Dzvin-AS were designed precisely with such an idea in mind – modelling and planning large-scale military operations by analysing datasets aggregated from lower levels. The Armed Forces of Ukraine requested Dzvin-AS's development in 2016 and incorporated it in December 2022, a few weeks before the start of the invasion.<sup>40</sup>

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38 Yevhen Pylypenko, "Rosiya zapustyla feyk pro khakerskyi zlom Delta – unikalnoho boevoho softu ZSU" ("Russia Launched a Fake about Hacking Delta, a Unique Combat Software of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. What Really Happened"), *LIGA.net*, 01 November 2022, <https://news.liga.net/ua/politics/news/rf-zapustila-feyk-o-vzlome-delta-unikalnogo-boevogo-softa-vsu-cto-bylo-na-samom-dele> [accessed: 10.03.2023] [author's trans.].

39 Isabelle Khurshudyan, Paul Sonne, Serhiy Morgunov, and Kamila Hrabchuk, "Inside the Ukrainian Counteroffensive That Shocked Putin and Reshaped the War", *The Washington Post*, 29 December 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/12/29/ukraine-offensive-kharkiv-kherson-donetsk> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

40 *Defense Express*, "V Ukraini pryinyato na ozbroynnya avtomatyzovanu system upravlinnya: Dzvin-AS" ("The Automated Control System Dzvin-AS Was Adopted in Ukraine"), 08 Decem-

The metaphorical ‘film’ that Glushkov discussed is supposed to be projected at the level where Dzvin-AS is. This is the level of strategic and operational decisions. While at the level of drone footage, one would have a top-down view of the recognisable landscape; with each zoom-out level, the picture becomes more abstract, requiring a legend to read markings; the image of the landscape turns into a topographic map, and the data increasingly turns into schematic visualisations and dashboards. The reconnaissance image is accompanied by, for example, data on troops, supply stockpiles, types and quantities of ammunition, and the logistics chain. In addition, such a system is supposed to collect combat-relevant data from civilian structures. The images become quantified into data. In high-intensity battles on a front line stretching over 1,500 kilometres,<sup>41</sup> the sources of information are so disparate, large-scale, and complex that they require automation tools and algorithms like Dzvin-AS to generate combat management documents, create and track maps, obtain comprehensive data on their own troops and intelligence data on enemy forces and their current and potential supply lines, and suggest the optimal use of this data in different scenarios.

The system is designed in such a way that it only aggregates data and transmits it to the level of high-ranking military commanders. This ‘film’ is accessible only for a limited circle. Therefore, civilians can only guess how informative and helpful it is. However, this ‘film’ was conceived to be projected – to construct a ‘script’ of potential events. In this sense, projection is something that implies future eventuality, to ‘project’ as a way to ‘see’ the future. Because it is classified, the broader public cannot see this projection and thus cannot ‘see’ the ‘film’ about the future eventuality. The only possibility for the public is to follow the post-facto results of what was projected and what decisions were accordingly made by military commanders.

The time distance between potential scenario calculations and actual events defines the essence of ASUs. According to Glushkov’s concept, the shorter the time distance, the more efficient the system.<sup>42</sup> This is exactly the goal that the military set for such systems – quick data exchange and analysis as a way to calculate future developments and establish an advantage over the adversary. This was emphasised by the Armed Forces of Ukraine Commander-in-Chief General Valeriy Zaluzhnyi in his comments in 2020, two years before the start of the full-scale war, when one of

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ber 2022, [https://defence-ua.com/news/v\\_ukrajini\\_prijnjato\\_na\\_ozbrojennja\\_avtomatizov\\_anu\\_sistemu\\_upravlinnja\\_dzvin\\_as-9905.html](https://defence-ua.com/news/v_ukrajini_prijnjato_na_ozbrojennja_avtomatizov_anu_sistemu_upravlinnja_dzvin_as-9905.html) [accessed: 10.03.2023].

41 CinCAFU (Valeriy Zaluzhnyi), “Zbroiny syly Ukrainy zvilnyly 40% zakhoplenykh pislya 24 lyutoho terytoriy...”, (“Ukrainian armed forces liberate 40% of territories seized after 24 February...”), Facebook post, 02 January 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=478660831096074&set=a.225687776393382> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

42 Glushkov, Dobrov, and Tereschenko, *Besedy ob upravlenii*, 36.

these systems was tested in an exercise: this was about the possibility for high commanders to receive reports on the developments of hostilities, not with a four- to six-hour lag but in nearly real time.<sup>43</sup> The fact that the system is perceived as a possibility for algorithmic predictive modelling is also evident in some of the comments made by the military: “If the core is made right, then even artificial intelligence can be installed on it, which will play back [or play forward?] possible solutions to the commander in this situation, I don't think it will be a problem”, says Pavlo Pavlenko, Head of Operational Situation Monitoring and Automated Control Systems of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.<sup>44</sup> The Ukrainian Minister of Defence, Rustem Umerov, is similarly convinced that “technology will win the war”.<sup>45</sup>

As the scale gets larger, not only does the image become more abstract and schematic. It complicates the infrastructure to combine all these modes of visibility into a comprehensive whole. The Ukrainian Army's need to develop ‘eyes’ became critical with the outbreak of hostilities in 2014. First, a number of volunteer solutions and then official assignments appeared at various levels to build an infrastructure of ‘seeing’ the adversary. In addition to Kropyva, Delta, and Dzvin-AS, the army uses about a dozen similar applications and systems at various levels: from maps and artillery calculations at the tactical group level to monitoring situational awareness and controlling combat operations at the brigade or command level – on land, at sea, and in airspace.<sup>46</sup> Some of these systems were created by volunteers, some were commissioned by the government, and some were developed by foreign partners. In some cases, the systems are equivalent and even compete with each other. In other cases, they complement each other or create opportunities for interoperability.

43 Defense Express, “Tsyfrova revoliutsiya dlya ZSU: Na scho zdatnyi Hermes-C2 vid UaDefense” (“Digital Revolution for the Armed Forces of Ukraine: What Hermes-C2 from UaDefense is Capable of”), YouTube video, 10:44, 01 October 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKPszcm\\_k9I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKPszcm_k9I) [accessed: 10.03.2023].

44 Defense Express, “Automatyzovana systema upravlinnya viyskamy: tsyfrovyy ‘Dzvin’ dlya ZSU” (“Automated Troop Management System: Digital ‘Bell’ for the Armed Forces of Ukraine”), YouTube video, 10:43, 16 December 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43FwNYTBlyQ>, 08:41–08:49 [accessed: 10.03.2023] [author's trans.].

45 *Radio Liberty*, “Viynu vyhrayut tekhnolohii – ministr oborony Ukrainy” (“Technology Wins the war’ – the Minister of Defence of Ukraine”), 29 November 2023, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-umerov-tekhnologiyi-viyna/32706700.html> [accessed: 11.12.2023] [author's trans.].

46 Tayisa Melnyk, “IT-khaos na sluzhbi ZSU. Sotni tysyach viyskovykh korystuyutsya riznym softom, yakyy rozroblyy volonter. Chy nebezpechna taka detsentralisatsiya” (“IT Chaos in the Service of the Armed Forces. Hundreds of Thousands of Military Personnel Use Various Software Developed by Volunteers. Is Such Decentralisation Dangerous?”), *Forbes.ua*, 14 November 2022, <https://forbes.ua/innovations/it-khaos-na-sluzhbi-zsu-sotni-tisyach-viyskovykh-korystuyutsya-riznim-softom-yakyy-rozrobili-volonteri-chi-nebezpechna-taka-detsentralizatsiya-14112022-9700> [accessed: 11.12.2023].

Some systems are only at the stage of testing, while others have already had dozens of updates, releases, and compatibility tests with NATO systems. However, steps towards universal integration for practical use at all levels are actually taking place in the process of combat.

Many of the above-mentioned systems involve specialists who are, in one way or another, connected to the cybernetics infrastructure in Ukraine. For example, the developers of the Dzvin-AS software partly originate from the aforementioned Institute of Cybernetics, founded by Glushkov.<sup>47</sup> This is one of the instances where Glushkov's legacy and the legacy of other Soviet cyberneticians are still present in not only the theoretical framing of how computational technology could be used in society but also the research and education infrastructures that were shaped in Ukraine since the 1960–70s by Soviet cybernetics. Therefore, the algorithms in service of the Armed Forces of Ukraine illustrate a combination of global technologies, local IT expertise with its origins in the Soviet cybernetic heritage, and the experience of military operations since 2014, when the Russian aggression in Ukraine started.

Glushkov's metaphor implies that the input data is calculated into a structured sequence of events. But one can question to what extent the 'film' projected by 'an electronic brain' will actually take place on the ground. Algorithms write a 'script' based on collected data and develop a projection of how the 'film' is supposed to evolve. But the reality on the ground does not necessarily follow the inscribed eventuality. Moreover, do the 'scripts' themselves possess the ontological capability and sufficient datasets to project future events?

Despite these efforts, this 'film' cannot provide a complete picture and take into account the complexity of the war – it cannot collect and consider everything. There will always be elements that are invisible to the system. First and foremost, this is data that intelligence has not noticed or that has changed since it was generated. Apparently, at different levels of running the system, it faces a number of difficulties that are simply impossible for outsiders to learn about – the data may be incomplete, inaccurate, or generated with errors. It is also unclear what non-military aspects of wartime reality are incorporated into the data (such as civilian casualties or infrastructure destruction).

## Conclusions

As examples in this essay show, the Ukrainian military imagines and practises network-centric war strategies during the Russian invasion, with the intention of

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47 Softline, "History", <https://softline.company/en/about-us/history.html> [accessed: 10.03.2023].

gaining an advantage based on a real-time and all-encompassing 'view from above'. Drones and algorithmic vision seem to be among the priorities at all military levels – from regular drone reconnaissance by local military units to strategic decisions by high-ranking military commanders. Despite various imperfections of the current systems, their value is rather unquestionable and anticipated as the ultimate means to gain an advantage on the battlefield.

The 'film', as Glushkov conceptualised it in his metaphor in the 1960–1970s, is supposed to show the potential course of the war. Such a metaphor distinctively enables a thinking tool to explore the imagination and infrastructure behind the algorithmic vision used in this war. In the same way as the value of aerial photography of Earth was much anticipated and imagined even before it became possible, Glushkov inspired reflections on the potential use of algorithms and computer networks for governing large-scale complex structures. In addition to the Soviet cybernetic theoretical legacy, its research and infrastructural legacy also influenced the way contemporary technologies are applied in Ukraine and who is involved in the development of multiple ASUs for the military.

These ASUs are used to aggregate drone footage as 'scenes' from particular parts of the front line, coordinate action between military units, collect reconnaissance data on adversary troops, and arrange ammunition supply logistics. Algorithmic vision, in this case, varies from images of a landscape and scoping military targets on the level of 'scenes' and 'sequences' to more abstract forms of maps or graph visualisations at the level where the raw imagery is processed and analysed into a metaphorical 'film'. Its production is a continuous process of simultaneous military action and data aggregation mixed together. Data production becomes both the result and the goal of hostilities.

Writing a 'script' for this 'film' would not mean developing a definitive storyline of the warfare but creating algorithms to collect drone footage and other sensory media input, process them, and model future eventualities in anticipation that they will project the final scene of the victory by real people on the ground and closing credits reading "The End".

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# The Destruction of Ties: Ghosts on the Antonivka Bridge

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*Gintautas Mažeikis*

On 11 November 2022, during the advance of the Ukrainian Army, the Russian Army, retreating from the right bank of the Dnipro River in the Kherson region, destroyed several sections of the Antonivka Bridge. Since the Russo–Ukrainian War is deeply contextualised in various political, mythological, and dystopian narratives, it is important to discuss the meaning of blowing up this bridge from the point of view of politico-symbolic thinking.

Given that friends, and even lovers, may turn into adversaries, it is crucial to construct bridges designed for swift dismantlement if required or to forge relational and cultural disparities that allow for future reconciliation. In this paper, I delve into the metaphorical and metonymic significances of bridges against the backdrop of contentious actions towards Ukraine by the Russian ‘Immortal Regiment’. Employing Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of the rhizome, my analysis juxtaposes and examines the Palmburg Bridge in Königsberg, the Antonivka Bridge in Kherson, and the Kerch Bridge in Crimea. I ask: what does it mean to perceive democracy as a live rhizome characterised by horizontal connections and disruptions, and what, conversely, does it mean to perceive it as a hierarchical structure akin to a growing and breaking tree? When do and which bridges serve the purposes of social rhizomes, and when do they serve the verticals of global or national power? In addition, it is worth thinking about the value and political influence of each of these social organisations and their bridges.

Social rhizomes and trees have their own memories and dreams, which open or close paths for the journeys of spirits and history. What is the difference between rhizomatic memory near bridges and vertical memories organised by the main or even only tree or by marches of ‘immortal flocks’? I look mainly at the Antonivka Bridge and discover the painful problems of the Tavria region and Crimean identity and consider the hope of regional reconciliation. I present a metaphor of an ecosystem between many trees of power and fields of social rhizomes to explain the role of bridges. Bridges can reconcile different political powers and social rhizomes, but they must be able to be destroyed at any moment when local life is threatened.

## The Bridge and the Poetics of Home

In *The Bridge*, writer Iain Banks depicts the bridge as a connection to imaginary worlds into which the protagonist falls while in a coma after a car accident. The author portrays the bridge as both a tangible entity and a dream, blending these aspects, and I interpret it as a metonymy of psychic life and the Real, in the vein of Jacques Lacan. This is because the inconsistencies with the social reality of the protagonist cause it to fragment into distinct symbolic worlds:

I have a problem with languages, indeed. In any single section of the bridge there are anything up to a dozen different languages; specialised jargons originated by the various professions and skill-groups over the years and developed and added to, altered and refined to the point of mutual incomprehensibility so long ago that nobody can actually recall the process taking place or remember a time when it had not yet begun.<sup>1</sup>

In the novel, returning to a normal state or home (while questioning whether such a state or home truly exists) entails comprehending not only the languages of various symbolic worlds but also all the metamorphoses that the protagonist undergoes during his coma (in an unconscious state). The story, written in a surreal and psychoanalytical style, helps us understand the phenomenology of the bridge, comparing it with other phenomenological descriptions by Gaston Bachelard and with the phenomenological poetics of the home.

Given that the protagonist navigates three distinct realms, he assumes three identities and names: Alex, John Orr, and the Barbar. While I won't delve into each persona in detail, we can envision our own protagonist as functioning within Vladimir Putin's historical delusions, his previous tranquil existence to which he yearns to return like Odysseus to Ithaca, and as a soldier fighting for democracy in Ukraine. All three roles possess the capacity to be both imaginary and real simultaneously. The task of Banks's hero and of our hero is to return to the safe and private condition that Bachelard identifies with home.

The bridge (the dream system) creates distances or separations from the traumatised consciousness, but it can also bring the divided character back home: to a safe and united state. Across the bridge, good and evil can invade: neighbours, merchants, guests, enemies, ghosts, and mythical unknowns. The concept of otherness forces the split; the separation is not only external but also internal, and it presupposes or demands special attempts at connection or disruption, of bridging or blasting – and both actions are equally important. Bachelard writes about the power of bridging, but not about the power of rupturing: “bridging the distance separating

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1 Iain Banks, *The Bridge*, London: Hachette, 2008, 14.

precious stones and stars, imagination makes possible a 'correspondence' between what one touches and what one sees, enabling dreamers in a sense to reach out to, to run their fingers through, the jewel heap of the stars".<sup>2</sup>

The power of bridging connects our imagination and feeling of home, as an inner perspective, with the main poetic elements of the living world: water, air, earth, and fire. In my interpretation, these are the river of life, the wind of freedom, the earth of our ancestors, and the fire of hearts. The home correlates with the material house and the conditions of safe self-dreaming. As Bachelard writes, "the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace".<sup>3</sup> And the home or house (the dream and its materiality) dialectically turns into the inner homeland and its external practices. But, following Banks's and Bachelard's intentions, we can say the bridge opens the way for the guest of dream or fear. Intimate dreams of home are limited by household (*oikos*) concerns and public life among neighbours. But rescuers and enemies, utopia and dystopia, come from the other side of the shore.

Beyond the Dnipro lies the mythologised, historical Ukrainian steppe of Tavria and, further still, the captivating and enticing Crimea. Tavria and Crimea evolved into vibrant places of legend and dreams, where as many as a dozen different languages could be encountered. Thus, the diverse historical tribes and peoples, alongside their varied languages and cultures, were interconnected by the Antonivka Bridge. This diversity can be envisioned as the multiplicity and rhizome described by Deleuze and Guattari.

Hannah Arendt established that both inner life in the home and *oikos*, the household, are different and even opposite domains to politics: the family home is not part of the social contract, not a *res publica*. This fact, however, does not degrade *oikos* but distinguishes its separate, different values. Originally, *oikos* was not a place of private life but the sphere of domestic authority for the *oiketai* – slaves, family members, and other domestic workers.<sup>4</sup> Norbert Elias notes that the sphere of privacy in a house or inner home appears later in the development of the culture of palaces, different from fortress rules.<sup>5</sup> Private spaces, palaces, and manors became the main places of the so-called civilising process, understood as the development of rites, manners, politeness, flirtation, boudoir culture, and the appropriation of myths and fairy tales. By contrast, fortresses and castles represent anxiety regarding external obstacles and threats, the environment of obeying mythic and propaganda visions.

A culture of privacy encompasses personal intimacy and clandestine dreams, along with the related culture of romance and play – significant features of domes-

2 Gaston Bachelard, *Earth and Reveries of Will: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Kenneth Haltman, Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 2002, 223.

3 *Ibid.*, 28.

4 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 86.

5 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, 84.

tic life. Privacy domesticates dreams, transforming them into playful activities and toys while purging all historical spectres. In stark contrast, war belongs neither to the public sphere, nor to *oikos*, nor to private life. War ravages the home, obliterates intimacy, resurrects historical spectres, and dismantles public life by severing numerous rhizomatic connections.

War constitutes a distinct realm of existence, giving rise to a particular breed of warrior – known as the ‘dogs of war’: that is, professional soldiers who thrive on the adrenaline rush of combat and are continuously enlisted for new military conflicts. These dogs of war form private and even illicit military enterprises, such as Russia’s Wagner Group, and possess a deep-seated interest in perpetuating conflict worldwide. Amid Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, we have witnessed the military, propelled by a phantom of animosity or commanded by these dogs of war, crossing bridges and transforming homes and lives into debris. Their ideology is centred on dismantling all rhizomatic connections among communities to erect a new tree of power, establishing a hierarchy. As a strategy, bridges should thus be constructed and safeguarded in a manner that allows for their swift demolition should the existence of local populations come under threat. However, in February and March 2022, Ukrainians were unable to accomplish this, and the enemy traversed the Antonivka Bridge.

The metaphor of the bridge embodies the existence between two internal states of mind. In *A Bridge of Longing*, David Roskies recounts how storytelling in Yiddish became a life-saving practice for generations of displaced Jewish artists. Similarly to Banks’s story, Roskies’s heroes were writers who collected folklore and transformed it into artistic pictures for the local people to rebuild their lost homes. Language and stories became the daydream – the bridge to lost worlds, to absent homes. Roskies interprets the Yiddish stories of writer Isaac Leib Peretz as suggesting that these narratives serve as a crucial bridge between “the ruins of the brain and the corpses of the heart”.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the Ukrainian language emerges as a bridge of hope towards home, but achieving this requires silencing the language of the aggressors: poisoned or counterfeit connections.

## The Bridges of a Thousand Plateaus

The metaphor and metonymy of the bridge hold equal importance from both a civilisational, geopolitical, and macro perspective and the standpoint of local, human, and micro interactions. The Antonivka Bridge, inaugurated in 1985, was designed to meet Ukraine’s internal requirements and to link local communities. Therefore, its

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6 David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, 145.

significance ought to be analysed from a horizontal perspective: examining how it has facilitated the integration of diverse local communities, including Ukrainians, Russians, Greeks, Tatars, adherents of Orthodox and Uniate churches, Catholics, and Protestants, as well as farmers, metallurgists, traders, and ecological activists. The war destroyed diversity, reduced it to relations between enemies and those on 'our' side, and shifted the meanings of the bridge from micro, autonomous relations to macro, political confrontation and corresponding narratives.

Modern Western democracy cannot be imagined without the development of the rights of nongovernmental organisations or without the development of autonomism. It is crucial to highlight that the concept of rhizomatic organisation proposed by Deleuze and Guattari does not specifically address democracy or any other form of governance, such as oligarchy, feudal society, or monarchy. Instead, the rhizomatic organisation focuses on the evolving development of local connections or resemblances that emerge within one or similar ecosystems, independent of the form of political hierarchies that govern them.<sup>7</sup> I think that in the form of deliberative and participatory democracy with a multiplicity of communities, autonomous groups, and cultural movements, the qualitative diversity has some features of a thousand plateaus. This means that the idea of autonomism can be explained not so much through the concept of a rhizome but by a thousand intersecting plateaus, each one of which consists of rhizomatic ties.

Contrary to the plateaus is the vision of the verticality of power – not only the idea of a tree of the world or the state but also ideas of unity, God, a supreme sovereign, and so on. Both rhizomatic networks and hierarchical power structures require bridges that facilitate the functioning of either local socioecological systems or a centralised system of authority. The hierarchical aspect is comparative to the 'tree' model of power, accompanied by grand political mythologies. For instance, centralised power uses bridges to propagate the concept of a 'united nation', or to facilitate expansion and annexation.

Conversely, the horizontal dimension highlights the interactions among local communities, free from the dominance of overarching narratives. Within this context, numerous small and disparate tales may emerge, rooted in local kinship or family histories. Here, the idea of a bridge can be presented metaphorically and metonymically. As a metaphor, the bridge shows the possibility of crossing the limitations of space and gaps and of extending either a single rhizome or intersecting thousands of plateaus and creating a new symbiosis. Metonymies, on the contrary, have the power of concretisation: the Antonivka Bridge shows the drama of different shores and the attraction and separation of the local people of Tavria or greater

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7 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, 16.

Ukraine. Rhizomes have limited spatial character; they are territorised, lack centralised structures, and are less formalised and more socially ecosystemic. Adaptation and multiplication are their strengths, while long jumps or distances are their weaknesses. Bridges, contrarily, break spatial constraints and contribute to deterritorialisation, in order to, later, connect separated distant groups. Rhizomes need bridges to overcome natural territorialisations. Metaphors of social rhizomes and bridges do not negate but complement each other.

Deleuze and Guattari find that a rhizome implies conceptual neighbourhood relationships, clusters, and ecosystems while bridges do not care about the local symbiosis of groups:

The concept's only rule is internal or external neighbourhood. Its internal neighbourhood or consistency is secured by the connection of its components in zones of indiscernibility; its external neighbourhood or exoconsistency is secured by the bridges thrown from one concept to another when the components of one of them are saturated.<sup>8</sup>

In the context of the metaphor of bridges as a condition of communication and as a constructive mediator, we can talk about hyperreality in a post-structural sense.

Given that our discussion transcends physical bridges to encompass their metonymies and metaphors, alongside their conceptual and cognitive representations, Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality becomes crucial.

Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality explores the distortion of reality as individuals turn to virtual pleasure for solace. We are faced with a problem: the material, bloody, and terrorist war waged by Putin's Russia against Ukraine, which is too brutal for an outsider to imagine as opposed to the images of the war created by Telegram channels and other media, which distract from the unbearable reality and present another, consumable war. Baudrillard draws attention to analogous substitutions (real into imagined and simulated). He shows how the Holocaust, as unbearable suffering and horror, was transformed into an adapted television image and then into a hyperreality (where the scenography and the broadcast exceed reality). Baudrillard observes that when the real event is replaced, first images are adopted, then narratives adapted to consumer society, and finally it becomes a myth. According to him, the myth tries to overcome the cruelty of the war: "That is to say not only a screen and a visual form, but a myth, something that still retains something of the double, of the phantasm, of the mirror, of the dream, etc."<sup>9</sup>

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8 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell III, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 90.

9 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994, 51.

A similar transformation occurred with the Antonivka Bridge, which initially shifted from being a component of a roadway to a symbol of war and propaganda before evolving into the realm of dreams and myth, or hyperreality, manifested through television, social networks, and Telegram channels. In the context of contemporary information warfare, the bridge symbolises the connection between the reality of our psychic state, an imagined past, the spectres of history, and contemporary contextualised images. A hallmark of hyperreality is the substitution of communicative consensus with theatricality. However, in my view, when discussing the Antonivka Bridge, we encounter a complex array of phenomena: the traditional reality where the bridge served as a basic form of communication and a symbol of community cohesion; its later use as a propaganda tool; its subsequent use as a metaphor for the transformation of a mythical territory; and, finally, as an element within a spectral narrative (recalling Banks's novel).

## Dystopian Bridges

Kremlin politicians harboured aspirations of resurrecting a vanished, imagined world through the construction of the Kerch Bridge to the annexed Crimea. The Kremlin's imagination yearned for a restoration of lost dignity, with Crimea serving as the quintessential symbol of this envisioned honour in wartime. The contemporary Putinist narrative of outrage and a call for retribution is rooted in a nostalgia for this lost (and imagined) realm. Fundamentally, human consciousness continually strives to forge connections between the present, marred state and a perceived ideal wholeness. However, fulfilling these desires does not necessitate the occupation of actual territories; it suffices to generate images for consumption, as Baudrillard advocated.

Dmitry Glukhovsky's novel, *The Outpost*, is about a dystopian bridge spanning the Volga River.<sup>10</sup> In the novel, absolute evil resides on the opposite bank of the Volga, in the Russian countryside, while the 'insiders' find themselves within the imperial circle of Moscow. According to the novel, the Kremlin's desire for hard vertical power and dominance created this absolute evil, and now the Kremlin would like to block the bridge to defend itself from its created horror. Glukhovsky portrays the bridge in a dystopian manner: beyond the Volga lie psychic mutants, casualties of a cognitive-narrative experiment. Thus, the bridge serves as a portal to our fabricated malevolence, a realm of demise. Yet this very bridge simultaneously offers a means to comprehend the love intertwined with evil within us.

The main protagonist considers crossing the bridge to the other side to be recognised by a beloved person. Banks's and Gluchovsky's bridges are similar in this sense

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10 Dmitry Glukhovsky, *Outpost 2*, trans. Paul Podmiotko, Krakow: Insignis, 2021.

and present the same poetics. The absolute evil was created by the explosion of an ‘incantation’, a secret propaganda formula that drives people insane. The created evil, the absolute Other, seeks to return to Moscow. We could, here, see a parallel with a contemporary situation, the criminal and artificial so-called Donetsk and Luhansk ‘People’s Republics’, formed by the Kremlin in 2014. Gluchovsky’s bridge presents the road to the complete Otherness, to created ‘aliens’ and dystopia, but the imperial greed of Moscow doesn’t allow for the destruction of the connection (the bridge) and, as a result, these aliens, an insane people, break through into Moscow’s territory. We cannot compare the Antonivka Bridge with Gluchovsky’s, which tells us rather about internal Russian insanity. At most, Gluchovsky’s bridge can be compared with the Kerch Bridge, built under the intoxication of propaganda.

The underlying aspects of our consciousness and subconsciousness, as well as our bodily consciousness, require architectural metaphors, or bridges, that attempt to connect the body, the Real (as conceptualised by Jacques Lacan and further discussed by Slavoj Žižek), dreams, and the narratives of everyday life (reality). However, Žižek argues that the gap between the Real (our supreme Ideal) and the symbolic order is fundamentally “unbridgeable”,<sup>11</sup> yet there is a constant effort to bridge this divide through the creation of narratives: “To use Lacan’s words, once we’ve spoken, the gap between the Real and its symbolisation is irreducible”.<sup>12</sup> So the bridge is only an attempt to connect these divides – or, as Banks writes, “Perhaps the dream is a bridge”.<sup>13</sup>

Dreams during alert consciousness, or daydreams, can triumph over critical thinking, and this is the condition of the rising of a spectrum of desired historical memories. As Jacques Derrida remarks, the house is also a primary place of haunting; spectres rise from the toxic hopes and forbidden desires of imagined justice before they leave the home and enter into the public imagination.<sup>14</sup> Derrida describes how the ghost of Hamlet’s father, appearing in the palace, later transforms into the spectre of Communism in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s *Manifesto*:

I have just remembered what must have been haunting my memory: the first noun of the *Manifesto*, and this time in the singular, is “specter”: “A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism.” Exordium or incipit: this first noun opens, then, the first scene of the first act: “Ein Gespenst geht um in Europa—das Gespenst des Kommunismus.” As in Hamlet, the Prince of a rotten State, everything begins by the apparition of a specter.<sup>15</sup>

11 Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, London: Verso, 2012, 732.

12 Slavoj Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan*, London: Polity, 2014, 11.

13 Banks, *The Bridge*, 12.

14 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, London: Routledge, 1994.

15 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 2.

Experiencing the paranormal demands special attitudes and skills of dreams and memory, and it characterises the poetics of bridges too. The absence of a critical understanding of our own (home) or historical (public) spectres has as a consequence the irrational obedience to the will of ghosts.

Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) presented the idea of perverse subjugation to the ghost, where the moral spectre of the mother, found either on the third floor (the superego) or underground (the subconsciousness, the id), destroys the hero's life. Žižek believes that the movie made audiences "identify with the abyss of identification".<sup>16</sup> A chasm exists between dreams fuelled by fear (such as the ghost of Hamlet's father or the mother in *Psycho*) and reality governed by social norms or political circumstances, separating the imperative of desire from social conventions.

Only imagined ghosts have the ability to traverse this gap, represented by the metonymy or metaphor of a bridge. Forbidden dreams become dangerous in public when they gain political power. This is what happens in the case of mass resentment: the Germans believed that victory and pride had been stolen from them in World War I, while the Russians suffered resentment because they believed in the injustice that the empire and the Soviet Union had been lost. But someone must wake the ghost. Alexander Dugin, Alexander Prokhanov, Putin, and many other philosophers, writers, and politicians have conjured and invited the mutant ghost of the great tsarist empire and the Bolshevik Soviet Union. The most obvious mutant ghost appeared in the Kremlin's memorial campaign, the Immortal Regiment, which occupied the entire political life and imagination of Russia<sup>17</sup> and tried to find roads and bridges to Ukraine. The Immortal Regiment is a mass civil event in major Russian cities and the 'Russian world' on Victory Day, 9 May, when people walk the streets with photos of their ancestors, who had been participants in various Soviet and Russian wars. The Immortal Regiment propaganda event began in 2011. The political rhetoric of the event is akin to incantations to gather dead souls to celebrate past and future victories. We can compare this event to mass hauntology in Derrida's sense. After the first part of the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, in 2014, the Immortal Regiment came to Crimea, and, later, after 2022, the Regiment of Ghosts invaded Ukraine over the Antonivka Bridge into Kherson.

Who can withstand the influence of ghost politics? There are numerous possible responses, but akin to the setting of a psychoanalysis session, one might suggest a

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16 Slavoj Žižek, "In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large", in: Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, London: Verso, 1992, 211–272, here 226.

17 Julie Fedor, "Memory, Kinship, and the Mobilization of the Dead: The Russian State and the 'Immortal Regiment' Movement", in: Julie Fedor, Markku Kangaspuro, Jussi Lassila, and Tatiana Zhurzhenko (eds.), *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 307–345.

prolonged and critical recollection of the origins of the politics coupled with open discussions. The success of social and cultural development depends on the consultation of relatives and friends, on negotiations between local neighbours, on debates between community members, and on the diplomacy of alienated foreigners and enemies. Negotiation builds bridges and then cleanses and protects them against ghostly manifestations. This is especially important for bloodlands<sup>18</sup> and their peoples.

There are many international bridges cleared of the spectre of envy. One of the most famous is the Øresund Bridge between Denmark and Sweden, freed from many historical superstitions. Conversely, the Kerch Bridge in Crimea not only breaches international laws (as it leads to an occupied territory) but is also laden with illusory historical spectres and propaganda. In ordinary peacetime, people need no diplomacy and rely on simple, negotiated agreements that express the inner workings of social rhizomes. But big political powers always need diplomacy, especially between alienated factions and enemies. When warring countries, especially if they were united for a long time in the past, try to reconcile after a war, after deep hatred, and after rivers of blood, special diplomacy that pays attention to historical traumas and subconscious minds is required. To destroy the Berlin Wall, the symbol of the Cold War and the division of Germany, transatlantic diplomacy was needed, but the rebuilding of Berlin after the fall of the wall was based on public, communal negotiations related to posttraumatic memory. The reconstruction of the Antonivka Bridge will also require international diplomacy, but the lives of the communities in Kherson, Tavria, and Crimea can be recreated through local negotiations and the recognition of traumatic memory after cleaning the bridge of imperial spectres.

*Realpolitik*, global politics, and their associated diplomacy are founded on the balance of power among major states. However, local, horizontal, and communal negotiations rely on trust and detoxifying local consciousness. Thus, global diplomacy and local negotiations require distinct platforms: one catering to alienated interest groups and the other fostering trust and collaboration. Global diplomacy is propelled by the interests of monopolies, large corporations, and nation-states, with discussions occurring away from the everyday lives of individuals; local or neighbourhood negotiations take place at the heart of communities, focusing on overcoming prejudices and the spectres of memory. Engagements in common social and

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18 Discussing the mass victims of World War II and the Stalinist regime, Timothy Snyder wrote: "The place where all of the victims died, the bloodlands, extends from central Poland to western Russia, through Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic States [...] During the years that both Stalin and Hitler were in power, more people were killed in Ukraine than anywhere else in the bloodlands, or in Europe, or in the world". Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, New York: Basic Books, 2010, vii–viii and 20.

cultural activities aid at the local level and align with the rhizomatic politics previously discussed.

## The Palmburg, Kerch, and Antonivka Bridges

The history of the Antonivka Bridge brings to mind the Palmburg Bridge over the Pregel River (Palmburger Pregelbrücke, historically located in former East Prussia, near Königsberg, now Kaliningrad), constructed in 1938. It was the longest bridge in the German Reich and catered to the developmental needs of the local community. In 1945, the Commandant of the Königsberg Fortress, General Otto Lasch, ordered the Palmburg Bridge be demolished to thwart the Soviet advance.<sup>19</sup> The partially destroyed Palmburg Bridge has long stood as a symbol of a lost Prussia and Königsberg, serving as a site of historical hauntings (following the mass rape and murder of Königsberg's inhabitants by Soviet forces) and a marker of strife. The bridge was ultimately demolished in 2016, and for 60 years before that, Soviet and Russian authorities made no efforts to restore it.

Remaining a poisoned, toxic symbol from 1945 to 2016, fragments of the bridge signified that the Prussians had departed and would not return to the now Russian city of Kaliningrad. Even following the demolition of the Palmburg Bridge, artistic endeavours continue to memorialise the deadlock of historical choices and the lack of reconciliation with the erstwhile Prussian community. From the Soviet/Russian ideological point of view, the broken bridge symbolised the inability of the Nazis to return. The trajectories of time and space were compressed and stopped, and the ghosts of memory and the subconsciousness of the old city remained in the basements of old buildings built before 1945 and on the remains of the Palmburg Bridge. It symbolised the impossibility of reconciliation in this bloodland and marked a radical gap between the culture of Königsberg and Kaliningrad's attempts to create a pseudo-Soviet culture. Kaliningrad's culture was not a simulacrum of former Prussian life but a thin and fragile imitation of happy Soviet life intended to hide confusion and anxiety. The Palmburg Bridge became a symbol of the traumatic memory of Prussia, a witness of the spectre of Königsberg between Soviet and Russian desires and dreams.

Another important symbol is the Kerch Bridge (also known as the Crimean Bridge), the embodiment of Putin-era military occupation, corruption, and longing for power. It connects not local communities, but realises the desires of imperial power, which imitate nostalgia for a return to a lost world. Putin's propaganda presents the annexation of the peninsula as the correction of a historical error

19 Otto Lasch, *So fiel Königsberg: Kampf und Untergang von Ostpreußens Hauptstadt (How Königsberg Fell: The Struggle and Downfall of East Prussia's Capital)*, Stuttgart: Motorbuch Verlag, 2010, 42.

through the demolition of all Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian memory. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the new bridge was planned, and the construction was celebrated in 2018 as a symbol of the reawakening of the imagined old empire through a bridge that united disrupted consciousness. The new Crimean – or Kerch – Bridge does not connect Russia and Ukraine but separates all possible friendships from the moment of its inception; it destroys the possibility of mutual understanding between different nations and was built for imperial and corporative interests. It must demonstrate the regeneration of lost imperial dignity and satisfy resentment. This imagined and lost, and ultimately nonexistent, Empire correlates with Lacan's concept of the void of nonexistence<sup>20</sup> as the condition of contemporary self-recognition. Nonexistent entities, such as ideological narratives, claim to satisfy imaginary desires that are not grounded in the everyday practices of community life. Thus, these nonexistent entities shape our sense of self. The destiny of Crimean Tatars, local Crimean Germans, and Ukrainians is the best witness of continuous imperial persecutions of national minorities on the peninsula. The Kremlin's imaginary discourse never existed as local practice and was replaced by the resentment of the 'lost'. This is how we can describe the post-Soviet and postimperial imagination of Putinists and their visions of rebuilding the Russian world, or Novorossiia.

The Antonivka Bridge was built in the late Soviet era, in 1985, and had an important socioeconomic function as the gate to the south of Ukraine (so-called Tavria) and Crimea. The bridge gained new symbolic significance in the period of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022. Ukraine lost the bridge very quickly: the war started on 24 February 2022, and the bridge was attacked on 26 February by the Russian Army for the first time. Finally, the city of Kherson fell after a short battle in the beginning of March. The success of Russian troops was based on miscalculations by the Ukraine Army and, probably, betrayal by local city authorities ("Betrayal somewhere on the regional level"<sup>21</sup>). The Antonivka Bridge continued the task of the Crimean Bridge: it opened the way for the imperial imagination and allowed ghosts to enter Ukraine.

Many intoxicated propagandists and collaborators, full of belief in the Russian Empire and the Bolshevik Soviet Union, came and destroyed all local life (the rhizome). My own Ukrainian friends suggest that the bridge became a symbol of a surprise military attack, betrayal, and a bloody severance of all ties with Russia. The

20 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977.

21 Donbas.Realii, "'Dohovornyak', shchob viddaty Kherson – tse mayachnyia – veteran DAPu Oleksandr Tereshchenko" ("The 'Agreement' to Give Away Kherson is Nonsense – DAP Veteran Oleksandr Tereshchenko"), *Radio Svoboda (Radio Liberty)*, 18 July 2022, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/viyna-oleksandr-tereshchenko-mykolaiv/31924403.html> [accessed: 20.11.2024].

Antonivka Bridge was built too well: it was too strong and too important to be destroyed so quickly as Ukrainian military forces retreated from Kherson.

## Postcolonial Cleansing and Building

Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania are full of their own ghosts: from the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania) to many external and internal bloody conflicts. The problem is not historical memory and its ghosts, but the readiness to defend against them, to clear the roads and bridges of their manifestations. Polish troops and rebellious local Poles occupied (or, in some interpretations, ‘liberated’) regions of Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine, resulting in the Polonisation of the local population. This became a painful wound for the region from 1920 to 1939, with ensuing thoughts of revenge and “ethnic cleansing”.<sup>22</sup> I am not talking about the whole region between Ukraine, the Baltic States, and Germany, but only along the Polish border. Here, ethnic cleansing and killing had a strong impact on the Polish and Jewish communities. Later, the local Soviet authorities in Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania only encouraged the expulsion of the Poles, as well as a simultaneous rapid Russification, while the Polish authorities carried out a similar ethnic cleansing and Polonisation of the Germans in Gdansk and Wrocław after the Second World War.<sup>23</sup> All this created many wounds of memory and burnt the ‘bridges’ of communication, partnership, and networks, which only began to be rebuilt after 1991.

The experience of reconciliation, community, and new solidarity in the face of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine can then be applied to thinking about the possibility of reintegrating Tavia and the Donbas into Ukraine. The history of neighbourly hatred has shown that there can be no truth and justice in ethnic relations unless they adhere to internationally recognised rules of self-government, respect, and bilateral recognition and unless they ensure open local negotiations at a grassroots level. The new political vision of the Lublin Triangle (Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania) or the new ‘Intermarium’<sup>24</sup> may be full of spectres, neither better nor worse than those resulting from the Russian Empire–Bolshevik mutant. The same may happen in relations between Ukraine and Turkey regarding the fate of the Crimean Tatars and, consequently, the fate of the Tavia region and the Antonivka Bridge. Thus, it

22 Philipp Ther, *The Dark Side of Nation-States: Ethnic Cleansing in Modern Europe*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2014, 121.

23 Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 331.

24 Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, *Intermarium: The Land Between the Black and Baltic Seas*, London: Routledge, 2012.

is important to develop local and international politics of heritage, memory, and dreams.

The story of the bombing and destruction of the Antonivka Bridge is a testimony to the illusion of believing in eternal peace or eternal brotherhood. The rhizomatic development of society implies constantly changing communal relations and, as a result, the uninterrupted local and regional politics of neighbourhood and processes of separation and reconciliation. Therefore, to use a metonymy, it is not eternal bridges that are built, but dynamic relationships that are developed. Tearing down bridges is a possible part of liberation from toxic historical influences, traumas, and repressed memories. Here, we can extend the metonymy of the bridge to the metaphor of the 'drawbridge': a link that is either willingly built or broken, as happens at border crossings and in how we behave in our everyday politics. The success of cultural development directly depends on international inclusion and bridging activities. I call an active bridging an intensive cultural and economic exchange, dialogue, and creativity between two countries, and an active network, a lively exchange between many different communities, among many plateaus: Ukrainians, Tatars, Russians, and Greeks; farmers, the creative class, and workers; or dreamers, subcultures, and vagrants can create their own plateaus. The dynamic bridges between them can symbolise and realise their intersections, but with the guarantee that the bridge can be destroyed if the ghosts of hatred invade. Active networks create the effect of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, where certain regions acquire new cultural and political identities. Cultural achievements occur when international cooperation creates common value, which distinct countries can present as their achievements.

Drawing on symbolic modes of thought (with reference to Derrida and Žižek, as mentioned above), the concept of a bridge can elucidate not only a specific engineering construct but also a local metonymy representing local, rhizomatic connections. It can also serve as a broader philosophical metaphor, illustrating human cooperation and the interactions between different identities. Symbolic thinking constantly oscillates between concrete empirical analysis, metonymic associations, and metaphorical extensions of understanding. Ultimately, symbolic thought seeks to grasp the ultimate, elusive vision: the Lacanian–Žižekian Real. This ideological, mythical Real, which has motivated figures such as Hitler, Stalin, and now Putin, among other dictators, opens the door to the ghosts of history and, consequently, to actual warfare. Paradoxically, to stifle the phantoms of imaginary thought, we are forced to destroy real works of engineering – bridges. These oscillations show how the purely imaginary is transformed into symbolic organisation, communication, propaganda, and efforts to forge not tangible but purely imaginary links to the unattainable, the nonexistent, and the unbridgeable (as Žižek puts it). Conversely, the historical experience of Central and Eastern Europe suggests that the solution lies in fostering horizontal, rhizomatic communication between local populations.

In this setup, bridges once again function as conduits of dynamic diversity, leaving fewer opportunities for the ghosts of history.

Cleansing symbolic – for example, postcolonial – thought and heritage of the spectre of hatred means a politics of reconciliation, dialogue, and bridges and the creation and accumulation of a new cultural-political identity, actively engaged in both local exchanges of cultural influences and international cooperation, such as in Central and Eastern Europe or the European Union. The circulation of cultural capital runs parallel to social cooperation, the politics of memory, and the critique of political prejudices, and it defines regional political identities, their exchange, new confrontations and negotiations, and the building and demolition of bridges. This is why I speak of dynamic bridges in the metonymic and metaphoric sense. Ordinary poets and writers, whose work we love, share, and discuss, become part of public practices and shared political identities, and thus of treaties and alliances – and necessarily creators of dynamic bridges and networks of cooperation.

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# The Second World War and Future Monuments to the Ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War in Kryvyi Rih

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Denys Shatalov

Kryvyi Rih is a large industrial city in southern Ukraine with over 600,000 inhabitants (the eighth largest in the country), located in the Dnipropetrovsk region. In Soviet times, Kryvyi Rih rapidly developed as the centre of iron ore mining and ferrous metallurgy. Its urban space was largely formed after the Second World War, with most of its neighbourhoods comprising of standardised buildings from the second half of the 1940s and 1950s and high-rise panel buildings from the 1960s to the 1980s. The city does not have a distinct centre, stretching over 60 kilometres along the ore deposits. In general, the city has characteristics that sociological surveys before 24 February 2022 identified with the south of Ukraine: the dominance of the Russian language and a strong presence of Soviet nostalgia.<sup>1</sup>

The most prominent place in the memorial space of Kryvyi Rih is occupied by monuments<sup>2</sup> commemorating the Second World War – or, rather, the ‘Great Patriotic War’ (GPW), considering that they were erected in the Soviet era. The first of them began to be installed on the sites of mass graves of Soviet soldiers in the second half of the 1940s (Figs. 36–37). But they filled the city space massively from the 1960s to the 1980s, often taking up places on the main streets of districts or in parks (Figs. 38–39).<sup>3</sup> In this respect, the Kryvyi Rih experience did not differ from other Soviet localities.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the World War II memorial space so familiar to Kryvyi Rih

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1 More context on the historical background of the city and its political landscape can be found in the following article that I wrote: Denys Shatalov, “Intertwined Memories of Kryvyi Rih: The ATO, Second World War, And The Cossacks”, *Etnografia Polska (Polish Ethnography)* 67/1–2, 2023, 71–93. It also describes the general trends in local memory politics in relation to the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) and World War II commemoration in 2013–2022.

2 In this text, I refer to the notion of ‘WWII monuments’ in a broad sense, meaning both monuments and memorials, including those on mass graves, located in the city.

3 Kryvyi Rih’s war monuments have not yet been the subject of detailed scholarly research. I base my information about them on the amateur work of Oleksandr Stepanenko. Alexandr V. Stepanenko, *Pamyatniki Krivorozh’ya (Monuments of the Kriviy Rih region)*, Vol. 1, Kriviy Rih, 2021, 78–127, 256–302, 310–346.

4 Natal’ya Konradova and Anna Ryleeva, “Geroi i zhertvy. Memorialy Velikoy Otechestvennoy” (“Heroes and Victims: Memorials to the Great Patriotic War”) in: Michail Gabovitch (ed.), *Pa-*

residents today is a product of the activity of postwar generations and was formed 20–40 years after the war ended. The existence of these monuments was a means of Soviet monumental propaganda<sup>5</sup>; they served as ‘sites of memory’ associated with the creation of the late-Soviet historical myth. But they also commemorated the war, which affected almost every family, and in this way, they were connected to a personal or familial experience.

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*myat' o voynе 60 let spustya: Rossiya, Germaniya, Yevropa (The Memory of the War 60 Years Later: Russia, Germany, Europe)*, Moscow: Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye, 2005, 241–261, here 243–249; Svitlana Kalibovets, “Memorialy Velykoyi Vitchyznyanoi viyny u mistakh-heroyakh Ukrayiny ta polityka pam’yati (1942–1980-kh rr.)” (“Memorials to the Great Patriotic War in Ukrainian Hero-Cities and the Politics of Memory (1942–1980s)”), *Naukovi zapysky [Natsional'noho pedahohichnoho universytetu im. M.P. Drahomanova] (Scientific Notes [of the M.P. Drahomanov National Pedagogical University])*, Seriya: Pedahohichni ta istorychni nauky (*The Pedagogical and Historical Sciences Series*), 103, 2012, 246–259; Aleksandr V. Antoshchenko, Valentina V. Volokhova, and Irina S. Shtykova, “War Memorials in Karelia: A Place of Sorrow or Glory?,” in: Julie Fedor, Markku Kangaspuro, Jussi Lassila, and Tatiana Zhurzenko (eds.), *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 465–493, here 469–475; and Ekaterina Makhotina and Philipp Bürger, “Making (Monumental) Sense of War: Memorials of the ‘Great Patriotic War in the Soviet Union and in Post-Soviet Russia’,” in: Guido Hausmann and Iryna Sklokina (eds.), *The Political Cult of the Dead in Ukraine: Traditions and Dimensions from Soviet Times to Today*, Göttingen: V & R Unipress, 2021, 197–222.

- 5 Alyaksyey Lastovs'kyy, “Misto yak monument Peremohy: Kyiv i Minsk” (“The City as a Monument to the Victory: Kyiv and Minsk”), *Skhid-Zakhid: Istoryko-kul'turolohichnyy zbirnyk (East–West: Historical and Cultural Collection of Papers)*, 15, 2011, 125–144; and Halyna Denysenko, *Kul'turna spadshchyna u formuvanni istorychnoyi pam'yati (Cultural Heritage in the Shaping of Historical Memory)*, Kyiv: Instytut istoriyi Ukrayiny NAN Ukrayiny, 2018, 62–68.

*Figure 36: Memorial on Sviatomykolayivska Street on the grave of sixty-eight Soviet soldiers fallen in 1944, built in 1958, restored in 1974 and 2015*



Image by author, 2024.

*Figure 37: Memorial on the mass grave of Soviet soldiers in the square near the Saksaganskyi Palace of Culture, built in 1953, restored in 1979*



Image by author, 2023.

*Figure 38: Memorial in Honour of the Soldiers-Rescuers of the KRES Dam of 1944, built in 1977*



Image by WDKeeper. Wikimedia Commons, 27 September 2014, file under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license, [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Файл:Пам'ятник\\_воїнам\\_-\\_рятувникам\\_КРЕСу\\_02.JPG](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Файл:Пам'ятник_воїнам_-_рятувникам_КРЕСу_02.JPG)

Figure 39: Soviet T-34 tank, installed as the Monument to the Tankmen-Liberators of Kryvyi Rih, built in 1972



Image by author, 2024.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, no dismantling of Soviet monuments took place in the city, as in almost all of southern and eastern Ukraine. All monuments directly related to Soviet ideology disappeared from Kryvyi Rih's space only during the 'Leninfall' of 2014–2015.<sup>6</sup> Following this, only a few 'neutral'<sup>7</sup> Soviet-era monuments

6 M.P. Nikytenko, "Kryvoriz'ki pam'yatnyky, yaki ne pidlyahayut' zanesennyu do derzhavnoho reyestru nerukhomykh pam'yatok Ukrayiny" ("Kryvyi Rih Monuments Not Subject to Inclusion in the State Register of Immovable Monuments of Ukraine"), in: Shaykan Valentyna et al. (eds.), *Materialy Druhykh Istoryko-kraeyznavchykh chytan' "Kryvorizhzhya: pohlyad u mynule..."* (*Materials of the Second Historical and Local History Readings "Kryvyi Rih Region: A Look into the Past..."*), Kryvyi Rih, 2016, 26–30, here 26–28.

7 Here, with 'neutrality' I mean the absence of political meanings attributed to the monument in everyday perceptions. As Oleksandra Haydai has shown, before 2013, Lenin monuments

to cultural figures remained in the city space, as well as the WWII memorials. The latter were repaired and restored throughout the period of independence, even after the outbreak of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, several new WWII monuments were installed in the first decade of the 2000s and the early 2010s. Currently, the city has more than 70 monuments related to WWII commemoration.<sup>9</sup>

The local authorities, represented by members of the Party of Regions headed by Viktor Yanukovich since the mid-2000s,<sup>10</sup> have consistently declared preserving the memory of victory among their priorities, annually organising numerous commemorative events on Victory Day and the Day of the Liberation of the City from the Nazis. For this reason, local WWII memorials have also been reconstructed. The situation did not change even after the fall of the Yanukovich regime as a result of the Revolution of Dignity, the Russian occupation of Crimea, or the outbreak of the war in the Donbas. In 2014–2015, governmental institutions initiated changes in official WWII commemorations, aimed at breaking with Russia-promoted traditions.<sup>11</sup> In

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(this could also be applied to other monuments of Soviet activists) were also ‘neutral’ in everyday perception, as they simply became a usual element of the landscape. However, during the Maidan protests, they became one of the objects of controversy, and the wave of their demolition turned into a significant symbolic event. Oleksandra Haydai, *Kam'yanyy hist'. Lenin y Tsentral'niy Ukrayini (The Stone Guest: Lenin in the Central Ukraine)*, Kyiv: K.I.C., 2018. Similarly, the neutral interpretation of monuments dedicated to Russian cultural figures, who were well-known due to Soviet education, was undermined after 24 February 2022, when in the perception of Ukrainians, they transformed from simply familiar monuments to a poet, writer, or artist into an enemy's cultural markers.

- 8 *Pershyy Mis'kyi (First City)*, “Oleksandr Vilkul: ‘U Kryvomu Rozi pryvely do ladu pam'yatnyky soldatam Druhoyi svitovoyi viynydo Dnia Peremohy, yakyy sviatkuvatymet'sia u misti 8 travnia” (“Oleksandr Vilkul: ‘In Kryvyi Rih, Monuments to World War II Soldiers Have Been Ordered for Victory Day, Which Will Be Celebrated in the City on 8 May”), 06 May 2022, <https://one.kr.ua/news/41018> [accessed: 04.07.2023]; and Olena Smolina, “Skil'ky koshtuye remont monumenta ‘Peremoha’ u Kryvomu Rozi” (“How Much Does it Cost to Repair the ‘Victory’ Monument in Kryvyi Rih?”), *Pershyy Kryvorizikiy (First Kryvyi Rih)*, 26 April 2023, <https://1kr.ua/ua/news-80041.html> [accessed: 04.07.2023].
- 9 These estimations are from Stepanenko, *Pamyatniki Krivorozh'ya*, Vol. 1, 78–128, 256–302, and 309–346.
- 10 For a brief overview of the use of the topic of WWII/GPW in the history politics during Viktor Yanukovich's presidency, see: Ararat L. Osipian and Alexandr L. Osipian, “Regional Diversity and Divided Memories in Ukraine: Contested Past as Electoral Resource, 2004–2010”, *East European Politics and Societies* 26/3, 2012, 616–642; and Alexandr Osipian, “War II Memory Politics in Russia and Ukraine and Their Uses During the Conflict in the Donbas (Spring–Summer 2014)”, in: Korine Amacher, Andrii Portnov, and Victoria Serhienko (eds.), *Official History in Eastern Europe*, Osnabrück: Fibre, 2020, 267–290, here 275–282.
- 11 On the changes in discourse, see: Oleksandr Hrytsenko, *Dekomunizatsiya v Ukrayini yak derzhavna polityka i yak sotsiokul'turne yavlyshche (Decommunisation in Ukraine as a Public Policy and as a Cultural Phenomenon)*, Kyiv: Instytut politychnykh i etnonatsional'nykh doslidzhen' im. I.F. Kurasa NAN Ukrayiny and Instytut kul'turolohiyi NAM Ukrayiny, 2019, 138–169;

Kryvyi Rih, there was no change of political elites after the Revolution of Dignity, and the city authorities continued to be dominated by figures associated with the Party of Regions and its political heirs. For them, the continuation of the earlier style of commemorating WWII (or rather the GPW) was also a means of demonstrating their opposition to the new post-Maidan central government and a means of mobilising their own electorate.<sup>12</sup>

The Russo-Ukrainian War, which has been happening in the format of the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) in the Donbas since the spring of 2014, is much more limited in the Kryvyi Rih public monumental space. Between 2014 and February 2022, three memorials related to the ATO were erected in the city. Two of them, the Memorial Cross in Honour of the Fallen ATO Soldiers (built in 2016, Fig. 40) and the Ilovaysk Cross (built in 2020, Fig. 41), were placed a few metres apart, next to the Soviet 'Victory' Monument (built in 1968), which is in fact the city's central WWII memorial (Fig. 42). They formed a common commemorative space in the Heroes' Square, which includes monuments to the ATO, WWII, as well as to participants in the Soviet-Afghan War (built in 1987) and liquidators of the Chernobyl disaster (built in 2019).<sup>13</sup>

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Lina Klymenko, "The Changed Paradigm of World War II Commemoration in Ukraine After Crimea's Annexation", *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 33/4, 2020, 517–520; and Teyiana Pastushenko, Dmytro Tytarenko, and Olena Cheban, "9 travnya 2014–2015 rr. v Ukraini: stari tradytsiyi – novi tseremoniyi vidznachennya" ("9 May 2014–2015 in Ukraine: Old Traditions – New Commemorative Ceremonies"), *Ukrayins'kyy istorychnyy zhurnal (Ukrainian Historical Journal)* 3, 2016, 106–124, here 111–124.

12 See, for example, statements by Oleksandr Vilkul, the most prominent former Party of Regions politician associated with Kryvyi Rih. *Korrespondent.net*, "Vilkul nazval tsinichnymi rekomendatsii instituta natsional'noy pamyati" ("Vilkul Called the Recommendations of the Institute of National Remembrance Cynical"), 24 October 2015, <https://korrespondent.net/ukraine/politics/3435857-vylkul-nazval-tsynichnymi-rekomendatsyyi-ynstytuta-natsyonalnoi-pamyati> [accessed: 04.07.2023]; and MOST-Dnepr (MOST-Dnipro), "Spustya 69 let posle pobedy nad fashistami, prazdnovaniye etogo svyatogo dnya postavleno pod ugrozu, – Aleksandr Vilkul" ("69 Years After the Victory Over the Fascists, the Celebration of This Holy Day is Under Threat – Aleksandr Vilkul"), 06 May 2014, [https://most-dnepr.info/news/societ/y/103390\\_spustya\\_69 let\\_posle\\_pobedi\\_nad.htm](https://most-dnepr.info/news/societ/y/103390_spustya_69 лет_posle_pobedi_nad.htm) [accessed: 04.07.2023].

13 For more information, see: Denys Shatalov, "Merging in Space: The Ongoing War and Previous Wars in Ukraine", *TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research*, 17 January 2023, <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/44335> [accessed: 04.07.2023].

*Figure 40: Memorial Cross in Honour of Fallen Kryvyi Rih ATO Soldiers, built in 2016*



Image by author, 2024.

*Figure 41: The Ilovaysk Cross, built in 2020*



Image by author, 2024.

Figure 42: The 'Victory' Monument, a memorial to the Soviet liberators of Kryvyi Rih, built in 1968



Image by WDKeeper, Wikimedia Commons, 17 September 2014, file under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Монумент\\_Перемога\\_07.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Монумент_Перемога_07.JPG)

In March 2016, in the Sevgok residential area<sup>14</sup> in the northern part of the city, another monument was erected to the fallen ATO soldiers (Fig. 43). This was the first actual monument to this topic in all of Ukraine. There, a monument with the figure of a Ukrainian soldier as its main element occupies a central place in the square in front of the Palace of Culture. The Soviet WWII memorial (built in 1959), whose central figure is a simple grey stele, is two blocks away (Fig. 44). Therefore, in this case, the memory of the two wars does not overlap in space.

14 The vernacular name Sevgok for this area comes from the Russian abbreviation of SevGOK, which stands for Northern Mining and Processing Plant (PGZK in Ukrainian). SevGOK is the main local enterprise.

Figure 43: Memorial in the Sevgorok residential area to fallen Kryvyi Rih ATO Soldiers, built in 2016



Image by Artem Nagorny, Wikipedia, 10 July 2019, file under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license, [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Файл:Кривий\\_Ріг,\\_пам%27ятник\\_Героям\\_АТО.jpg](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Файл:Кривий_Ріг,_пам%27ятник_Героям_АТО.jpg)

Despite the participation of Kryvyi Rih units and the fallen city residents, the ATO was considered ‘out there’, far away, and did not directly affect everyone’s everyday life. If you wanted, you could simply ignore it. In March 2022, however, the Armed Forces of Ukraine stopped the Russian Army just about 40 kilometres from the city. So it became impossible to ignore the war – it has touched every citizen of Kryvyi Rih, albeit in different ways.

Figure 44: Memorial in the Sevgor residential area on the mass grave of Soviet soldiers, built in 1959



Image by Anton Sribnyi, Wikimedia Commons, 8 January 2010, file under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Кривий\\_Ріг\\_Меморіал\\_на\\_вул.\\_І.Сірка.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Кривий_Ріг_Меморіал_на_вул._І.Сірка.jpg)

It is already clear that for the contemporary generation of Ukrainians, the Russian invasion will occupy a place comparable to that of WWII for the Soviet generations. The residents of Kryvyi Rih know the example of Soviet monumental war commemoration. To what extent, however, does this well-known model influence expectations for the monumental commemoration of the ongoing war? And to what extent has the ongoing war affected the attitude of citizens to the presentation of WWII in the city space and the changes expected in it? I discussed the expectations for future monumental memorialisation of the Russo-Ukrainian War in semi-structured interviews with permanent residents of Kryvyi Rih between the end of November 2022 and the end of April 2023. I recorded 13 interviews, and two other respondents gave their answers in writing. The respondents were selected using a nonrepresentative

sampling technique combined with a snowball sampling method.<sup>15</sup> The respondents represent the first, second, and third post-WWII generations (30–70 years old).

On the one hand, this chapter falls within the paradigm of collective memory studies, as defined by the ideas of Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, and Jan Assmann,<sup>16</sup> relying on the concepts of the relations of places, material objects, and memory formulated in their works. On the other hand, I place this text in the context of studies of memory politics and memorial culture in Ukraine. Usually, when regarding WWII, the researchers' attention in such studies is mainly focused either on the national level<sup>17</sup> or on the space of the largest cities and their Victory Day commemorations.<sup>18</sup> The controversy around the commemoration of WWII is usually presented through the dichotomy of (post-)Soviet and nationalist approaches,<sup>19</sup> while the issue of grassroots-level perception of the war by Ukrainians, which lies

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- 15 Initially, I invited respondents from the local Facebook group Kryvoriz'hka Starovyna (Kryvyi Rih Antiquities). This is a group where I usually publish materials on local history, so members were familiar with me as a historian, making establishing contact easier. I asked for interviews from people of different ages, social roles, and political positions. Later, respondents also recommended others. But such sampling, although presenting a variety of ideas, does not necessarily cover all local social strata and groups.
- 16 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 245; Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memorie", *Representations* 26, 1989, 7–24; and Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- 17 Wilfried Jilge, "The Politics of History and the Second World War in Post-Communist Ukraine (1986/1991–2004/2005)", *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas (Yearbook of Eastern European History)* 54/1, 2006, 50–81; and Georgiy Kasianov, *Memory Crash: The Politics of History in and around Ukraine 1980s–2010s*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2022.
- 18 Georgiy Kasianov (ed.), *Polityka i pam'yat': Dnipro – Zaporizhzhia – Odesa – Kharkiv. Vid 1990s do s'ohodni (Politics and Memory: Dnipro – Zaporizhzhia – Odesa – Kharkiv, from the 1990s to Today)*, Lviv: FOP Shumylovykh, 2018, 240; Pastushenko, Tytarenko and Cheban, "9 travnya 2014–2015 rr."; and Jochen Hellbeck and Dmytro Tytarenko, "My pobedim, kak pobedili 70 let nazad nashi dedy i pradedy. Ukraina: prazdnovaniye Dnya Pobedy v teni novoy voyny" ("We Will Win, as Our Grandfathers and Great-Grandfathers Won 70 Years ago. Ukraine: Victory Day Celebrations in the Shadow of the New War") *Neprikosnovennyi zapas (Untouchable Reserve)* 108/4, 2016, <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2016/4/my-pobedim-kak-pobedili-70-let-nazad-nashi-dedy-i-pradedy.html> [accessed: 04.07.2023].
- 19 Yuliya Yurchuk, "Reclaiming the Past, Confronting the Past: OUN–UPA Memory Politics and Nation Building in Ukraine (1991–2016)", in: Julie Fedor, Markku Kangaspuro, Jussi Lassila, and Tatiana Zhurzhenko (eds.), *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 107–137; Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "Legislating Historical Memory in Post-Soviet Ukraine", in: Elazar Barkan and Ariella Lang (eds.), *Memory Laws and Historical Justice*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 97–130; and Yana Primachenko, "Sovetskoye vs. natsionalisticheskoye: protivostoyaniye diskursiv i praktik v postsovetskoy Ukraine" ("Soviet vs. Nationalist: The Confrontation of Discourses and Practices in Post-Soviet Ukraine"), *Studia Universitatis Moldaviae* 110/10, 2017, 267–278.

outside these two positions, remains virtually unaddressed by researchers. At the same time, there are some valuable works related to the issues of war memorials in Ukraine. For instance, Iryna Sklokina concentrates on problems of the monumental legacy of WWII in Ukraine,<sup>20</sup> while Anna Glew produces detailed analyses of the practices of ATO memorialisation.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, Mischa Gabowitsch considers the fate of Soviet war monuments in the ongoing war.<sup>22</sup>

This paper is a specific regional example, demonstrating how the Soviet WWII memorial landscape is perceived in a city in southern Ukraine three decades after the collapse of the USSR and a year after the outbreak of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian War. I examine the situation from a grassroots perspective to explore the expectations from a memorial space by its 'consumers'. I hypothesised that the familiarity of the respondents with the Soviet practice of monumental commemoration of WWII, which they encounter in Kryvyi Rih, would in some way shape their expectations of commemorating the ongoing war. Therefore, during the interviews, I asked about the attitudes of Kryvyi Rih residents towards the existing memorials of WWII in the city space and their expectations for future monuments to the Russo-Ukrainian War. Additionally, I aimed to understand whether the residents feel a symbolic connection between the past and present wars, given that the mythology of WWII is actively involved in the discourse of the ongoing war.

## A Sacred Memory

Attitudes towards WWII and its commemoration in Ukrainian society are currently very fragmented (which is also reflected in the positions towards monuments discussed in this paper). It seems to me that the position of one of the respondents, Tetiana N. (aged 45), represents well the arguments of those who still respect the legacy of WWII. Additionally, her position seems to be indicative of the influence of personal experience on the perception of the WWII monuments and (potential) monuments to the ongoing war. Tetiana N. suggests that for the next generations, the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War will completely replace WWII in their memories,

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20 Iryna Sklokina, "Commemorating the Glorious Past, Dreaming of the Happy Future: WWII Burial Places and Monuments as Public Places in the Postwar Ukraine", in: Guido Hausmann and Iryna Sklokina (eds.), *The Political Cult of the Dead in Ukraine: Traditions and Dimensions from Soviet Times to Today*, Göttingen: V & R Unipress, 2021, 69–96.

21 Anna Glew, *The Commemorative Activity of Ordinary People in Central Ukraine after the Euro-maidan*, PhD dissertation, Manchester, University of Manchester, 2021; and Anna Glew, "Path Dependent: Positioning Ukrainian War Memorials in a Post-Soviet Landscape", *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 63/1–2, 2021, 229–247.

22 Mischa Gabowitsch, "Monuments in Times of War", *Eurozine*, 06 April 2023, <https://www.eurozine.com/monuments-in-times-of-war> [accessed: 04.07.2023].

and then the monuments associated with WWII will be removed from the city space. However, she does not see this as a near future, because for the current generation, WWII is still “our own” due to their family backgrounds: “Now they are not all going to be demolished, because, well, we’re still a generation that, our grandfathers, someone’s mothers have been in the war”.<sup>23</sup> It seems that with the outbreak of the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War, WWII has become even closer to Tetiana N., due to her own experience: “I understand that people have experienced the same. We’re going through it now”.<sup>24</sup> This perception is also transferred to the monuments of WWII; Tetiana N. claims they should remain in the city space because “these people have gone through exactly the same hell as we now. Maybe even worse”.<sup>25</sup>

Tetiana N. describes the memory of WWII as pain, and for her the monuments are a reminder of it. Even the Soviet tank on the pedestal is a symbol of the challenges and pain that the WWII generation went through: “It must be remembered. It should be honoured [...] it’s a feat. People laid down their lives because of it, we live, our children, grandchildren [...]. And the tank is, well, it’s a pain, a vital pain”.<sup>26</sup> Tetiana N. also characterises the ongoing war through the feeling of pain: “I want to scream in pain, how much is possible, how many more people have to die [...]. But it does not stop”.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the monuments dedicated to this war should first of all be monuments to fallen combatants. But at the same time,

[A] single monument could be made [...] to the killed children, old persons, women, just to civilians. [...] The next generation should understand that not only soldiers died in this war, but also many regular civilians were exterminated.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, the function of the monument is much more important than its form: “whatever monument may stand, you know, well, what’s the point? That is not the issue. Whatever monument may stand, it’s a person [...] who comes, puts down flowers, stands there, is in pain”.<sup>29</sup> It is up to specialists, sculptors, and architects to design the monuments, while “it is up to us, the people, to come to honour this memory”.<sup>30</sup> In this aspect, monuments acquire an importance almost comparable to sacred objects, which Tetiana N. emphasises through a comparison with churches. A church is a place for prayer, but you can also pray at home – similarly, for her, a monument is a place of honouring war victims, although it is not only here that we can

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23 Tetiana N., aged 45, manager, interview with the author, in person, 17 February 2023.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

remember them. The main thing is the sincerity of one's feelings, not the perception of the monument as an object: "it should come from the heart, not [whether] you like the memorial or not".<sup>31</sup>

However, the sites of future monuments are important. While the Soviet monuments placed along the streets became an invisible part of the urban landscape, as Tetiana N. explains, the new ones should attract attention and be the subject of interaction. This can be achieved by placing them in parks, for example:

It's a crowded place. A child runs up "Mum, who's the man?". Hop, and you tell the child the story of what man is standing [there]. Otherwise, you pull him by the arm, you run past the monument [...] Well, in crowded places like this. Maybe near a church [...] [you] prayed here, went out, honoured a soldier, a tankman, a pilot.<sup>32</sup>

Like Tetiana N., another respondent, Roman K. (aged 39), perceives the monuments of WWII through the experience of the generation of its participants, and due to his respect for them, he does not support the idea of dismantling these monuments. He believes that monuments to Soviet political figures can be removed, but not monuments that reflect people's bravery and the trials they endured, "the feat of a people who just selflessly... [fought]".<sup>33</sup> This is especially so now that "we can hear and imagine how it is and how difficult it all is".<sup>34</sup>

### **"So, Well, False, Not from the Heart"**

Tetiana N.'s parents survived WWII in their early childhood, and Roman K.'s great-grandfather went missing in action in 1941. The other respondents have generally similar family experiences, representing the first through third postwar generations whose parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents survived WWII (or perished) at different ages and in various roles. However, unlike Tetiana N. and Roman K., not all of my informants demonstrated a sense of connection between family stories and, more broadly, the WWII generation and the monuments to that war. There is another position that is noticeable: the perception of these monuments primarily as symbols of the Soviet era and reflections of the ideology of that time. Therefore, from this perspective, there is no need to continue to preserve all the monuments dedicated to WWII, and reformatting the memorial space of that war is acceptable.

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31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Roman K., aged 39, engineer, interview with the author, in person, 02 March 2023.

34 Ibid.

One of the motives for the rejection of the Soviet monumental heritage of WWII may be primarily aesthetic. For example, for Natalia S. (aged 56), Soviet monuments are too pompous, and “we have too many of them; they are too huge”.<sup>35</sup> In her opinion, the Soviet practice of massively installing monuments led to the devaluation of their role:

No, I'm already sick of it. You don't even notice it anymore. It's like decor. You just don't notice it. [...] And when they are placed on all, on every corner, it just becomes blurry [*zamulialos*], no one looks at it, no one is interested in it.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, these monuments are “false”. Natalia S. refers to the experience of the artistic associations in Soviet times, for whom making such monuments, mass-produced using standard models, was just a way to make money, and therefore, “it was so, well, false [*ne spravzhni*], not from the heart”.<sup>37</sup>

Additionally, for her, the problem with most Soviet monuments is their quality. Most of them are cement, and they simply decay over time. Therefore, she suggests that some of them can already be removed “quietly, slowly, slowly, where possible, not all at once. Well, what? Well, history will demolish it anyway. Should we wait for it to fall apart on its own?”<sup>38</sup> However, Natalia S. takes into account the position of those who still care about WWII monuments, so she suggests that the process of dismantling them should not be publicised or that it even be conditioned by a socially significant goal, such as building housing for internally displaced persons, those who lost their homes due to the ongoing war, and veterans. Another acceptable option for her is to “replace [the monument] with a small stone on which to inscribe what it is”, reconstruct the space, and make “a normal square around it”, but “remove these, remove the excess”.<sup>39</sup> Given the “wiping out” of WWII in the public memory, Natalia S. believes that only those monuments that have “some artistic value” will remain in the future. For example, the Victory Monument: “It is definitely a very beautiful monument. It has become a symbol of the city. So, it should stand and continue to stand”, although it may need to be somehow complemented.<sup>40</sup> Monuments should also remain on the WWII Soviet soldiers' mass graves around the city. Natalia S.'s attitude to them is in line with the common mortuary tradition: “If these are really buried people, there should be a monument. Because it is a grave”.<sup>41</sup>

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35 Natalia S., aged 56, artist, interview with the author, phone call, 23 January 2023.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

## The Soviet Counterexample

Other respondents also tend towards one of the two poles in their attitudes to the WWII Soviet memorial space, represented by the positions of Tetiana N. and Roman K. on the one hand and Natalia S. on the other. Some of them, such as Yuriy P. (aged 63), do not consider it appropriate to interfere with the WWII memorial space; “it is better not to touch the old memorials”.<sup>42</sup> The intermediate position, presented by Vira H. (aged 73), is a passive expectation of change, although at the same time a readiness for it: “[Let them] stand, they will crumble after a while anyway, they are not eternal”.<sup>43</sup> Some of the other respondents, such as Maksym P. (aged 40), see the reframing of these monuments as appropriate, as the Soviet monuments “are an anachronism now”.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, Maksym P. (aged 37) believes that the place of WWII is “overabundant” in the city memorial space, especially considering that Soviet monuments occupy central streets,<sup>45</sup> so it is necessary “to smooth it out, relocate it [...] somewhere to a certain place, to streamline it. But on the central streets these symbols are definitely not [needed]”.<sup>46</sup> Liana Zh. (aged 32) expresses a similar position. For her, “a monument for commemoration should be a must”, but Soviet memorials already need to be reformatted.<sup>47</sup> However, she is aware that this is a “painful topic for many people” – and therefore does not have any ready answer as to the direction of this reformatting.<sup>48</sup>

Another respondent, Denys Ch. (aged 40), states that “we can leave the mass graves, but we can change the ideology”.<sup>49</sup> Serhii P. (aged 58) presents a similar idea, but in more detail. He, like Natalia S., is convinced that any grave should have a sign above it. But the Soviet monuments that are now placed on them are outdated in this role, both ideologically and physically:

Let it not be a soldier standing with a submachine gun. It has already, let’s say, outlived maybe its aesthetics and [...] well, its contribution, because the time was

42 Yuriy P., aged 63, IT engineer, interview with the author, in writing, 21 November 2022. A similar position was shared by Oleksandr Sh., aged 50+, lecturer, interview with the author, in person, 05 January 2023; and Oleksandr P., aged 32, designer, interview with the author, in person, 05 December 2022.

43 Vira H., aged 73, pensioner with a construction work and librarian background, interview with the author, in person, 28 November 2022.

44 Maksym P., aged 40, office worker, interview with the author, in person, 29 December 2022.

45 It is interesting that, as mentioned above, Tetiana and Natalia, on the contrary, see the monuments’ locations as causes for their ‘invisibility’..

46 Maksym P., aged 37, land surveyor, interview with the author, in person, 18 January 2023.

47 Liana Zh., aged 32, financier-economist, interview with the author, online, 31 January 2023. Oleksandr Sh. shares a similar view.

48 Ibid.

49 Denys Ch., aged 40, electrician, interview with the author, in person, 21 February 2023.

such [...]. But mostly these monuments are not cast, or are not carved from granite, they are cast from something, they have been painted for almost a hundred years [...]. What is left of them? It's more paint [than the monument itself], it's all rusted, rotten.<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, according to him, old Soviet monuments from mass graves should be replaced; “it can be a sort of cross, it can be a certain memorial plate, it can be a kind of stone”, but the graves themselves should not be destroyed.<sup>51</sup>

Generally, this position shows us, first of all, a ‘political reading’ of old WWII monuments – in other words, overall, they are perceived as products of Soviet ideology and means of monumental propaganda. Moreover, a big share of them still contains Soviet symbols, but their aesthetics can also be perceived as ‘Sovietism’. These also include several pieces of Soviet military equipment, tanks, and guns mounted on pedestals. The positioning on this type of monument is the most established. Liana Zh. is convinced that “these tanks and guns, well, they’re [...] just a vestige”.<sup>52</sup> Serhii P. perceives the tradition of installing equipment as monuments as a means of Soviet propaganda: “When [any] person drove by and saw a gun – he felt the majesty of the army, the power of armaments and the like”.<sup>53</sup> But for him “the technique is just an attempt to show power. Not an attempt to memorialise something”.<sup>54</sup>

Two other respondents, in a similar vein, perceive military equipment as a symbol of militarisation and war as such. For Denys Ch.,

[T]his is the concept of militarisation, that’s it. This is the Soviet Union’s concept: “We are warriors, the best in the world” [...]. I think this is an outdated idea, and it [equipment] should be removed. There should be peace in the world.<sup>55</sup>

Valentyna O. (aged approx. 70) expresses a similar view of equipment on pedestals as a symbol of war: “We’ll remove the tank. [...] No. No *tachankas*. [...] No aircrafts – precisely peace”. Instead of equipment, she proposes an anthropologised memory: “I see only humans [...] of course there should be a human [...]. It is a human who wants peace [...]. We will not have [a memory] just about the war, but a thirst for life”.<sup>56</sup> Three other respondents (Natalia S., Maksym P., aged 40, and Serhii P.) state

50 Serhii P., aged 58, mobilised army officer with mining engineer background and ATO veteran, interview with the author, in person, 29 April 2023.

51 Ibid.

52 Liana Zh., interview.

53 Serhii P., interview.

54 Ibid.

55 Denys Ch., interview. Maksym P. (aged 37) shares a similar position.

56 Valentyna O., aged approx. 70, pensioner with engineering background, interview with the author, in person, 17 January 2023.

that this equipment from pedestals could be relocated to museum sites.<sup>57</sup> Their argumentation shows that they do not consider military equipment as a monument, a memorial object. For them, it is primarily an artefact of the past war with its own characteristics and history.

At the same time, there is an opposite position regarding military equipment, which is related to another 'reading' of the semantics of these monuments. For Tetiana N., for example, the essence of and reason for the monument are more important than its form, and the old tanks are also a symbol of the trials that the WWII generation went through.<sup>58</sup> Three other respondents (Oleksandr P., Roman K., and Vira H.) express similar attitudes. For them, Soviet-style monuments to Soviet soldiers do not raise any objections. But if for Tetiana N. it is acceptable to use military equipment for monuments to the ongoing war, for them the commemoration of this war by reproducing Soviet forms (as tanks on pedestals are perceived) is not acceptable, and other forms need to be found.<sup>59</sup> Talking about the potential monument to Ukrainian tank crews, Vira H. notes: "Not a tank should be placed, but something like [...] a tankman's helmet, something like this [...]. So that they are different. So that there wouldn't be a Soviet cliché".<sup>60</sup>

Finally, I should mention one more position, that of Maksym V. (aged 42). He advocates for the dismantling of Soviet monuments in the form of equipment. But at the same time, he accepts military equipment as a monument to the ongoing war, in particular as a sign of respect for the allies, to commemorate their transfer of tanks to Ukraine.<sup>61</sup>

Obviously, the question of the expected design of future monuments in honour of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War is difficult. Therefore, some respondents, referring to their own lack of expertise, prefer to leave the task of determining their appearance to experts. Also, two people (Olena K., aged 47, and Oleksandr Sh.) consider this issue premature – they prefer to wait until the war is over and only then think about erecting monuments.<sup>62</sup>

Those who are ready to discuss future memorials are no longer satisfied with the monumental aesthetics of the 'era of developed socialism'. Therefore, new war monuments are expected to be "not just an analogue of the monuments of WWII or just, well, a cross with names", as Liana Zh. states.<sup>63</sup> Instead, for her, it should be "a decent

57 Natalia S., interview; Maksym P. (aged 40), interview; and Serhii P., interview.

58 Tetiana N., interview.

59 Oleksandr P., interview; Roman K., interview; and Vira H., interview.

60 Vira H., interview.

61 Maksym V., aged 42, locomotive driver's assistant and ATO veteran, interview with the author, in person, 04 February 2023.

62 Olena K., aged 47, financial officer, interview with the author, in writing, 08 January 2023; and Oleksandr Sh., interview.

63 Liana Zh., interview.

option. Well, it should be something that [...] touches people”.<sup>64</sup> Maxim P. (aged 37) also expects “that it should be somehow more aesthetical, it should not be graves in the middle of the city [...], not just a stele, a pennant”.<sup>65</sup> As a suitable example, he refers to the monument to soldiers killed in the ATO in the Sevgor residential area: “At least [it] already looks aesthetic [...] it is already some kind of warrior image”.<sup>66</sup>

Serhii P.’s proposal is diametrically opposed in its aesthetic:

I think it would be best to put some kind of stone, such as in the form of a plate, maybe a trident, maybe even a map of all of Ukraine [...]. The very image of a soldier – again, it’s a return to the old. [...] I believe that after this war our Ukrainian society should fundamentally move away from Sovietism and the like [*ot sovet-shchiny, sovdepozvshchiny i tomu podobnogo*].<sup>67</sup>

But in fact, both respondents say the same thing: the new monument to this war should be different from the Soviet monuments to WWII. The seemingly paradoxical gap between the two requirements can be explained by looking at these respondents’ surroundings. For Maksym P. (aged 37), it is the north of the city, where there is a Soviet memorial in the form of a simple stele and the ATO monument with a figure of a soldier. Serhii P., on the other hand, mentions several times during the conversation the Soviet Victory Monument as an example, the main element of which is the figure of a Soviet soldier, and the figures of soldiers installed on mass graves.

The Soviet tradition serves as a counterexample also for Natalia S.:

But what do I not want? I don’t want pomp. These raised arms and legs, these ‘Motherland is calling’ [style monuments]. All this is nice, but it’s all so not from the heart [...]. That is, a monument can be more like a modest stele, that is, a monument [...] a memory [of], not a story about, it’s not theatre.<sup>68</sup>

For her, a good option for placing new monuments is the burial places of those killed in the ongoing war.<sup>69</sup> Tetiana N. compares the “functioning” of monuments to a

64 Ibid.

65 Maksym P., (aged 37), interview.

66 Ibid.

67 Serhii P., interview.

68 Natalia S., interview.

69 I would like to note that this idea was realised in Kryvyi Rih in July 2022, when a Cossack Cross was installed on the Alley of Honourable Graves at the Central Cemetery in honour of all the soldiers who gave their lives for Ukraine. Rudana, “U Kryvomu Rozi vidkryly pam’yatnyy znak – kam’yanyy Kozats’kyy Khrest na chest’ polehlykh voyiniv” (“A Memorial Sign Was Unveiled in Kryvyi Rih – A Stone Cossack Cross in Honour of the Fallen Soldiers”), 16 July 2022, <https://rudana.com.ua/news/u-kryvomu-rozi-vidkryly-pamyatnyy-znak-kamyanny-ko-zackyy-hrest-na-chest-poleglyh-voyiniv> [accessed: 04.07.2023].

place for prayer.<sup>70</sup> Natalia S., referring to the European commemorative practices she knows, sees a “temple-monument”, an ecumenical memorial church located in urban space, as a suitable form of commemorating the fallen.<sup>71</sup>

Respondents’ positions therefore show that future monuments to the ongoing war should attract attention and be a subject of interaction. In this request, we can also see a rejection of the present-day perception of Soviet monuments, which have become an invisible part of the city’s landscape, as Tatiana N. and Natalia S. view it. Tatiana N.’s idea of placing new monuments in parks and other public places was already mentioned above. Valentyna O. has a similar idea; given the uncertain shape of the future monument, she is concerned with its aesthetics: “Flowers would be [...] very beautiful, I don’t know”.<sup>72</sup> According to her, some kind of attraction should complement monuments in a park:

Here’s a nice script for this park’s needs, to come with the kids [...] to be attracted – to not just see the monument, but to have something alive. [...] Why would I take my kid and come [here]? Just to show [it to] him – he’ll be bored.<sup>73</sup>

Denys Ch. was the most conceptual about the idea of future monuments. He also supports them being interactive. He believes that shape or form are the means to achieve this. A simple sculpture does not provoke questions:

Well, I mean, when there is something clear, [when] there is an apple standing, you see [it] – it is an apple. Well, I mean, there is no other meaning, there is an apple. A soldier is standing [...] and] I see a soldier with a submachine gun running, shouting “Attack!”, everything is clear.<sup>74</sup>

Instead, as a concept, he proposes reproducing in the form of a monument the destroyed building in Mariupol, widely known from photographs:

It would show a lot of things. I mean, what the war can cause, and those who are alive now know who did it, so. And future generations, they will look and see what war does. That it is not very good, to put it mildly, yes. And so on. They will ask their parents: “Why is there such a monument? What is it?” Their parents will answer.<sup>75</sup>

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70 Tetiana N., interview.

71 Natalia S., interview.

72 Valentyna O., interview.

73 Ibid.

74 Denys Ch., interview.

75 Ibid.

It seems that the dissatisfaction with the Soviet memorial space is caused by two factors: the ‘political reading’ of the monuments and the inconsistency of their aesthetics with the respondents’ tastes, although the balance of these motives is different for each respondent. Moreover, the remark about the ‘invisibility’ of Soviet war monuments and the wish for future ones to be visible and interactive reflects a subconscious aspect of general expectations regarding attention to the memory of this war, experienced by my informants.

## An Adjacency of the Two Wars

The respondents unequivocally named 2014 as the beginning of the ongoing war and February 2022 as just its transition to another phase. The ATO monuments already located in the city space are now perceived as monuments to those who died in the first stage of the war. It is noteworthy that the common space of the Heroes’ Square is a conscious initiative of the local authorities. Unveiling the Cross in Honour of the Fallen ATO soldiers in 2016, the mayor, Yuriy Vilkul, commented on the choice of the place: “It is very important that it will appear here – next to the monument to the heroes of the Great Patriotic War and the monument to Kryvyi Rih residents who fought in Afghanistan”.<sup>76</sup> But this case of combining objects related to the memory of combatants in Afghanistan, liquidators of Chernobyl, and those fallen in the ATO near the WWII monument as a semantic centre is not unique; it is consistent with Ukrainian and, more broadly, post-Soviet vernacular practices.<sup>77</sup> However, only one of the respondents ‘reads’ this symbolic adjacency. For Oleksandr P. (aged 32), the example of the shared space of the Heroes’ Square “is a good idea”.<sup>78</sup> For him, symbolism is important; it is a demonstration of the continuity of generations of Ukrainian combatants. In the future, he sees no problem with a monument “where there will be a Red Army warrior, a UPA [Ukrainian Insurgent Army] warrior, [and] a warrior of today’s Russo–Ukrainian War” or with supplementing the old monuments with new thematic elements.<sup>79</sup> Another respondent, Yuriy P., supports the idea of potential adjacency without going into detail: “Placing new memorials next to the old ones

76 Ofitsiynyy veb sayt Kryvoriz'koyi mis'koyi rady ta yiyi vykonavchoho komitetu (Official website of the Kryvyi Rih City Council and its Executive Committee), “V Krivom Roge v seredine iyunya budet otkryt memorial'nyy krest boytsam ATO” (“Memorial Cross to ATO Fighters Will Be Opened in Kryvyi Rih in Mid-June”), 31 May 2016, [https://kr.gov.ua/ua/news/pg/310516594290801\\_n/](https://kr.gov.ua/ua/news/pg/310516594290801_n/) [accessed: 04.07.2023].

77 Kasianov, *Polityka i pam'yat'*, 140–141; Konradova and Ryleva, “Geroi i zhertvy”, 249–253; and Glew, “Path Dependent”, 229–247.

78 Oleksandr P., interview.

79 Ibid.

may be a not bad idea”.<sup>80</sup> Tetiana N. also accepts the idea of monuments to the ongoing war possibly standing next to WWII monuments because of the similar experiences of previous generations: “Because, well, there was a war then. That generation went through a rough war. Our generation is now also going through [a war]”.<sup>81</sup>

Two other respondents also accept the adjacency, but without giving it special symbolism. Maksym V., an ATO veteran, is ready to “treat with understanding” the potential neighbourhood of monuments to the two wars.<sup>82</sup> This position is based on his respect for the experience of those to whom they are dedicated: “Now, that war and this war are two big differences. But I respect those warriors, and everybody respects them. Well, those who’ve actually been in combat respect them, because they know what it’s like”.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, for Maksym P. (aged 40), the ongoing war is already in the foreground. He previously labelled the Soviet WWII monuments in the city space as “archaism”.<sup>84</sup> The present situation in the Heroes’ Square is acceptable to him; “the fact that the monuments are there together does not bother me personally”, but he does not give any special symbolism to this adjacency either.<sup>85</sup> He perceives the WWII monument more as a backdrop, especially since it is “politically indifferent: a soldier with a PPSH [submachine gun], no Lenin near him”, so it is acceptable as a reminder of another page of Ukraine’s past.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, this position reminds us that WWII monuments can be ‘read’ first ‘politically’ and only secondly ‘historically’, as discussed above.

Several respondents, however, refer to the space of the Heroes’ Square as an unsuccessful example. For Natalia S., the “cluster” of monuments in the park “looks like there’s [...] a cemetery”.<sup>87</sup> For Liana Zh., combining the monuments in space is also not a good option because of the diversity of events to which the monuments are dedicated.<sup>88</sup> The concentration of memorials next to one another leads to the impossibility of commemorating each single event with a decent sense of dignity.<sup>89</sup> Oleksandr Sh. believes that the idea of potentially placing monuments to the ongoing war beside the WWII memorials is unacceptable because “this way the losses of this war are erased”.<sup>90</sup> Rather, he thinks that new monuments would be better lo-

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80 Yuriy P., interview.

81 Tetiana N., interview.

82 Maksym V., interview.

83 Ibid.

84 Maksym P. (aged 40), interview.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Natalia S., interview. Maksym P. (aged 37) holds a similar opinion.

88 Liana Zh., interview.

89 Olena K., interview.

90 Oleksandr Sh., interview.

cated apart from the old ones.<sup>91</sup> Valentyna O. also suggests looking for separate sites for the new monuments, although she does not explain the need for this in detail.<sup>92</sup> Vira H. expresses her opinion in more depth. For her, this war and the former one should not overlap in space as “they are different” and the monuments should stand separately because “those [the people to whom the old monuments are dedicated] defended the Soviet Union, and there will be, the [Soviet] psychology will be near a such monument”.<sup>93</sup> She mentions the Sevgorod residential area as a good example, where the monuments to the ATO and WWII are relatively close to each other, but “[t]hey are in very different places. The ATO monument is right next to the park, you can see it as you drive by. And [the one to WWII] is in a completely different place [...] across the road in the park”.<sup>94</sup> Serhii P. speaks in the same vein: “Each period of history should have its own places and commemorative dates, and perhaps they should not even overlap and entangle”.<sup>95</sup>

In contrast to the several dozen monuments to WWII in the city, the mere two memorials dedicated to the ATO seem modest. However, no one of the respondents claims the need for a large number of future monuments to the ongoing war. Natalia S., as mentioned above, states that a large number of monuments only leads to their invisibility, turning them into an everyday part of the landscape. In contrast to the numerous pompous WWII monuments erected during the Soviet era, Natalia S. says that “the monument should be small, but very heartfelt. And only one”.<sup>96</sup>

However, there is another important circumstance. The massive number of WWII monuments in the city space of Kryvyi Rih is a product of the late postwar period, from the 1960s to the 1980s. Immediately after the war, monuments were erected only on mass graves scattered around the city. They paid honour primarily to military victims. As we can see, now, like in the early post-WWII period, the first stage of commemoration includes only the honouring of war victims but not the general ‘heroism of the nation’. During the eight years of the ATO in Ukraine, only monuments to fallen Ukrainian soldiers were erected. In Kryvyi Rih, in addition to the above-mentioned monuments in public space, four small memorials in honour of those who were killed in the defence of Ukraine were placed on the territory of enterprises or educational institutions, one grassroots memorial with portraits of the fallen emerged, and 119 memorial plaques dedicated to specific soldiers were installed.<sup>97</sup>

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91 Ibid.

92 Valentyna O., interview.

93 Vira H., interview.

94 Ibid.

95 Serhii P., interview.

96 Natalia S., interview.

97 Alexandr V. Stepanenko, *Pamyatniki Krivorozh'ya (Monuments of the Krivyyi Rih region)*, Vol. 2, Krivyyi Rih, 2021, 106–138.

Ukrainian society is currently at the most painful stage of commemorating the war. The position of Maksym V. explains why this stage does not require massive monument erection. For him, monuments are a reminder to the families of those lost, a painful memory. That is why there should not be many monuments: “What is the reason to remind [someone] of this pain at every turn?”<sup>98</sup> Remembering war victims is undoubtedly important, but it is necessary “not to overdo [it] with this memory”.<sup>99</sup>

Most respondents expect that future monuments to this war should be monuments to the victims of the war, both military and civilian. Directly or indirectly, during the conversation, they primarily named soldiers as the heroes of future monuments. But several respondents, like Tetiana N., also mentioned a second group that should be commemorated by monuments: civilian victims of the war.<sup>100</sup> But some think the monuments should be separate. Oleksandr Sh. states that they “separately should mention civilians and honour their memory, and separately the military”.<sup>101</sup> Liana Zh. shares a similar opinion. For her, too, monuments dedicated to fallen soldiers should be separated from the memory of civilian victims. But at the same time, “perhaps it can be somehow combined if it is a certain memorial complex”.<sup>102</sup>

Two respondents support the broadest view of whom the monuments should be erected to in the future. Liana Zh. believes that they should be “to everyone who was affected by the war”.<sup>103</sup> Oleksandr P. elaborates on this, saying that it’s important

[T]o memorialise not only those at the battlefield but also a more extended group – volunteers, medics, even specialists who set up electricity and utilities. It is thanks to them that hospitals work, that children’s heart surgeries are performed there.<sup>104</sup>

Oleksandr P.’s position can be interpreted as an emphasis on commemorating heroism rather than victims. Roman K. also directly expresses such a request. He is not a supporter of the self-victimisation of the Ukrainian nation, the concentration of historical memory on suffering. Instead, he refers to the example of the Jewish model of memory (as he sees it) as a worthy example to follow. Despite the many victims,

[P]eople don’t walk grieving, they’re evolving, there’s no anchor, you know. They remember, but it’s not so much [...] let’s say an anchor, just not so much that it’s

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98 Maksym V., interview.

99 Ibid.

100 Tetiana N., interview.

101 Oleksandr Sh., interview.

102 Liana Zh., interview.

103 Olena K., interview.

104 Oleksandr P., interview.

constantly burdening. And we just, you know, get pushed back to it [...]. Well, it happened – it happened, yeah, but what, what to do [about it]. Let's keep evolving. Or we'll be sad and grieve for another 235 years. That is all.<sup>105</sup>

Therefore, an acceptable option for him is to focus the commemoration not on suffering, but on heroism: “[monuments] should be made to something positive”.<sup>106</sup>

It is worth noting that the context of the interviews always refers to collective monuments dedicated to certain groups. There is no mention of the idea of commemorating someone's individual feat or loss, or of erecting a monument in honour of a single hero. Moreover, Maksym V. explicitly states that the monument should not be dedicated to a specific person; it should be “just a general, somewhat abstract memorial, specifically to this particular brigade or to this TRO [Territorial Defence Forces]”.<sup>107</sup>

## Conclusions

Kryvyi Rih respondents have a polyphony of ideas regarding old Soviet war monuments and expectations for new ones. The general attitude towards the city's existing Soviet-era memorial space of WWII and hopes for its reformatting are determined by one of two positions. In the first, these monuments are perceived as a symbol of the trials that previous generations of Ukrainians went through during WWII, and, out of respect for them, no interference with the existing space is needed. The personal experience of living through a war has also made the experiences of the WWII generation more understandable. The second position views the WWII monuments as Soviet ‘sites of memory’, primarily due to when they were erected; they are seen as objects associated with the Soviet period and ideology. Therefore, the old memorial space needs to be reformatted, although the memory of WWII is important regardless. However, as we can see from the respondents' reactions, most do not consider it significant to have any symbolic intersection of the two generations of Ukraine's defenders (during WWII and the ongoing war). This is reflected in the expectation of having a separate memorial space for the two wars.

At the same time, regardless of their position on the memorial space of WWII, respondents who are ready to comment on future monuments to the ongoing Russo–Ukrainian War want to see them represented differently from the previous tradition. In this sense, the familiar Soviet practice serves as a counterexample. Unlike the Soviet monuments, the new monuments should be ‘visible’. However,

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105 Roman K., interview.

106 Ibid.

107 Maksym V., interview.

this requirement is not so much an aesthetic expectation as one by the generations living through the ongoing war that the memory of it will be honoured and that their experiences will not become an invisible part of the city landscape, as happened with the old memorials to WWII. But in addition to the general aesthetic and ideological motives, the discrepancy between the Soviet monumental tradition and the expectations for the commemoration of this war can also be explained through temporal distances. That is, one war ended decades ago, and the other is ongoing. Similarly, the monumental landscape of WWII currently present in the city was mainly created a few decades after that war ended, during the activities of the post-war generations and the promotion of the heroic myth. Meanwhile, my interviews show the expectations of commemorating the current Russo-Ukrainian War by the generation that is living through it. Therefore, people now focus primarily on commemorating war victims, not on heroism itself, similar to the first stages of the WWII memorial commemoration in the 1940s and 1950s.

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# An Inconvenient Present: The Story of Political Advertising in Occupied Kherson

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Mykola Homanyuk

There is a lot of outdoor advertising in Ukraine<sup>1</sup>; it is a country of billboards. Ragged billboards with delicious food and beautiful clothes have become one of the images of the occupied territories of Ukraine. Pieces of paper, rusty metal, and the fragments of people's faces and bodies create at times frightening, at times comical collages made from layers of advertising from different periods. However, in May 2022, other figures began to appear in their place. Russian field marshals and writers, Red Army soldiers, Soviet actors, and war correspondents started to actively occupy advertising surfaces in cities captured by Russian troops. Later, they were joined by a happy population in traditional embroidered shirts, who were promised stability and protection if they accepted a Russian passport.

From Victory Day (9 May) until the de-occupation of the right bank of the Kherson region on 11 November 2022, the occupiers used outdoor advertising in the form of billboards, banners, and stickers. The narrative nature of these billboards is striking when they are considered in chronological order as part of the electoral campaign for the so-called referendum “on the issue of the Kherson region's accession to the Russian Federation as a fully-fledged subject of a single state”,<sup>2</sup> held on 23–27 September. The occupiers persistently offered the residents of the Kherson region to

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- 1 See, for example: Roman Tyshchenko-Lamanskyi, “Neestetychni bilbordy. Chomu u L'vovi vyrishyly demontuvaty reklamu” (“Unaesthetic Billboards: Why It Was Decided to Remove Advertising in Lviv”), *Tvoje misto (Your City)*, 12 December 2022, [https://tvoemisto.tv/exclusive/neestetychni\\_bilbordy\\_chomu\\_u\\_lvovi\\_vyrishyly\\_demontuvaty\\_reklamu\\_140902.html](https://tvoemisto.tv/exclusive/neestetychni_bilbordy_chomu_u_lvovi_vyrishyly_demontuvaty_reklamu_140902.html) [accessed: 31.05.2024]; and TSN, “Vlada khoche zmenshyty kil'kist' reklamnykh bilbordiv” (“The Authorities Want to Reduce the Number of Advertising Billboards”), 24 September 2015, <https://tsn.ua/video/video-novini/vlada-hoche-zmenshiti-kilkist-reklamnih-bilbordiv.html> [accessed: 31.05.2024].
  - 2 Sergei Bobyl'iov, “Glava Khersonskoy VCA podpisal ukaz o referendume po voprosu vkhozhdeniya regiona v sostav RF” (“The Head of the Kherson Military–Civilian Administration Signed a Decree on a Referendum on the Issue of the Region's Entry into the Russian Federation”), *TASS*, 20 September 2022, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/15809181> [accessed: 31.05.2024] [author's trans.].

get acquainted with their (the residents') supposed past, present, and future. Particularly the past significantly dominated these visual and textual narratives. Thus, in this article, I set out to uncover how history is instrumentalised in the public spaces of the occupied territories. Additionally, through this study, and the example of an occupied region, I try to understand how (and which) historical periods, figures, and visuals can be used to legitimise territorial expansion.

## Methodological Framework

From the methodology of memory studies, I mainly rely on Charlotte Linde's research, particularly *Working the Past: Narrative and Institutional Memory*, in which Linde explores the role of memory in the functioning of organisations through the case study of an American insurance company.<sup>3</sup> I reference this work to examine the executors of the electoral campaign in the Kherson region – so-called political technologists – and the methods they use – that is, their political technologies, the purpose of which is to achieve a set goal (voting for a particular candidate, party, or issue) by any means: from the subtle manipulation of voters to bribing members of election commissions. According to Andrew Wilson, the political technologies in several post-Soviet countries, and especially in Russia, form a highly developed industry of political manipulation.<sup>4</sup>

The main question Linde is interested in is how institutions (broadly defined), groups, and communities work with their pasts to achieve certain goals. Linde argues that individuals and groups can invoke and represent their past for a variety of purposes, including using the past to justify the legitimacy of power, to claim ownership, to assert political or intellectual primacy, and to create a sense of stability.<sup>5</sup> A community can only successfully maintain its identity when it has established an order that requires certain stories to be told under certain circumstances. Linde distinguishes between two types of such narratives: the 'heroic' or 'founding fathers' narrative and the 'paradigmatic' narrative. The 'heroic' is a story of origins, struggles, growth, and expansion. The 'paradigmatic' narrative is the narrative of the 'common person', the typical representative of a community.<sup>6</sup> Many of Linde's points resonate with ideas from classical memory studies about the relationship between memory and identity, about memory as a resource of power, and about the role of media in

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3 Charlotte Linde, *Working the Past: Narrative and Institutional Memory*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

4 Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

5 Linde, *Working the Past*, 3.

6 Ibid.

the functioning of collective memory, among other things.<sup>7</sup> The scale of the object of research chosen by Linde (i.e., a specific company) is also appropriate for my study, because my object of research (i.e., an advertising campaign) is the output of a group of political technologists.

In total, from May to September 2022, the occupiers put up six series of billboards around the city, as well as a few single billboards, all of which demonstrate the mechanisms of the occupiers' work with the population of the occupied territories. I documented the complete collection of billboards in the Kherson region from the beginning of the occupation to the liberation of the right bank (numbering fifty-nine billboards in total). These billboards form the empirical basis of this study. I photographed the billboards while I was in Kherson from 24 February to 23 September 2022. Beyond that, I created an archive of occupation newspapers, leaflets, and other printed materials. These materials have now been transferred to the State Archives of the Kherson Region.<sup>8</sup> Lastly, I also made field documentations of everyday life in the city through photographs, which are available on the Kherson Tut (Kherson Is Here) Telegram channel.<sup>9</sup>

The choice of the collection methods (observation and photography) in this research was determined by the fact that, like in Linde's work, it is a case study. That is, it is a description and analysis of a particular case, limited by place (the city of Kherson), time (the period of the occupation of the city by Russian troops), and the question posed (the use of historical information in a particular election campaign). In addition, I also use the approaches of narrative analysis, a research method aimed at interpreting texts with an emphasis on their temporal sequence.<sup>10</sup> In other words, this study considers the entire sequence of billboards as a narrative that has its own plot and logic.

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7 See, for example: Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen (Cultural Remembrance: Writing, Memory, and Political Identity in Early Civilisations)*, Munich: Beck, 1992; Barbie Zelizer, "Reading the Past against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies", *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12/2, 1995, 214–239; Jan-Werner Müller (ed.), *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; and Aleksey Vasiliev, "Memory studies: yedinstvo paradigmny – mnogoobraziye obyektov ("Memory Studies: The Unity of the Paradigm and the Diversity of Objects"), *Novoe literaturnoye obozreniye (New Literature Review)* 117, 2012, 461–480.

8 State Archive of the Kherson Region, collection 4146.

9 Kherson Tut (Kherson Is Here), Telegram channel, [https://t.me/kherson\\_tut](https://t.me/kherson_tut) [accessed: 31.05.2024].

10 Roberto Franzosi, "Narrative Analysis – or Why (and How) Sociologists Should Be Interested in Narrative", *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, 1998, 517–554.

## The Information Space of the Occupied Kherson Region

Having established military control over most of the territory of the Kherson region in early March 2022 and having overcome physical public resistance in late April, the occupiers launched a propaganda campaign aimed at building loyalty to the occupation regime. According to Harold Lasswell, “propaganda is the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols”.<sup>11</sup> In Kherson, the occupying regime broadcast these symbols using different methods: it promoted propaganda messages through analogue television, printed newspapers, and outdoor advertising, primarily billboards.

One reason for the emphasis on outdoor advertising was that the occupiers had a monopoly on it, unlike electronic and social media, where pro-Ukrainian sources completely dominated the information space. From the beginning of the full-scale invasion, social media immediately became the main source of information: some Telegram channels, Viber groups, and Facebook users were solely dedicated to conveying information about the war. This was true of all kinds of channels and groups: news channels as well as groups for the parents of schoolchildren, work colleagues, gym members, dog owners, and so on all participated in sharing information about the war.<sup>12</sup> Already on the second or third day of the full-scale invasion, it was clear that some things were going badly for the Russians. Videos of burning equipment and photos of dead Russian soldiers flooded the networks. Such posts were spread with exceptional enthusiasm. Here is one vivid example: on 27 February 2022, someone shared a Facebook post that the Roma had hijacked a tank from the Russians in the Kherson region; this was followed by a seven-second video of a tractor towing an armoured personnel carrier (APC), with someone running after it.<sup>13</sup> The video showed not a tank, but an APC, and it is not clear whose tractor it is, where it is going, and who is running after it – yet, because of this video, most Ukrainians be-

11 Harold D. Lasswell, “The Theory of Political Propaganda”, *The American Political Science Review*, 21/3, 1927, 627–631, here 627.

12 Field observations by the author. For more, see: Mykola Homanyuk, “Unter Besatzung: Eine Chronik aus Cherson” (“Under Occupation: A Chronicle from Kherson”), *Osteuropa (Eastern Europe)* 1–2, 2023, 69–96.

13 Mykola Homanyuk and Janush Panchenko, “From a Pilfered Nail to a Stolen Tank: The Role of a Media Event in the Consolidation of the Ukrainian Political Nation”, *TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research*, 04 April 2023, <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/46010> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

lieved the reality of the story with the tank.<sup>14</sup> Overall, a lead in the information war was immediately seized by pro-Ukrainian forces.

The main sources of operational information in the region were Telegram channels, including Khuevyi Kherson (Fucking Kherson, 467,000 subscribers), Nikolaevsky Vanyok (Ivan from Mykolaiv, 341,000 subscribers), Trukha Kherson (Rot Kherson, 129,000 subscribers), Kherson: voina bez feikov (Kherson: War without Fakes, 69,000 subscribers), Konstantin Ryzhenko – Journalist (55,000 subscribers), Khersonka ODA (Kherson Regional State Administration, 22,000 subscribers), and others.<sup>15</sup> Analyses also came from bloggers on YouTube channels. The Telegram channels of the occupiers, such as Kirill Stremousov (65,000 subscribers), Administratsiya Khersonskoi oblasti (The Administration of the Kherson Region, 25,000 subscribers), Tavria (16,000 subscribers), and Svobodnyi Kherson (Free Kherson, 11,000 subscribers), among others, had significantly fewer subscribers compared to pro-Ukrainian channels.

In addition to outdoor advertising, the occupying regime tried to compensate for the lag in social media with television and print media. The Kherson television centre was seized during the first days of the occupation and soon began broadcasting Russian channels and the local private channel VTV, which cooperated with the occupants.<sup>16</sup> Eventually, they established Tavria, an occupation state television channel and radio station, based on the Kherson branch of the Suspilne (Society) channel.<sup>17</sup> However, before the war, Ukraine had a digital broadcasting system, while Russian channels used analogue broadcasting, which created difficulties in delivering information – the viewer had to have a special tuner for this purpose.

In a city where the internet and television networks were constantly cutting out, the occupiers also used print media as an important propaganda channel. These publications, however, can only be called something like ‘newspapers’ conditionally: most of their articles were anonymous. The newspapers were also distributed for free – that is, they were leaflets in the form of a newspaper or a free local daily newspaper. There were several such papers distributed in the Kherson region. The first

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14 This information is based on an unpublished sociological report, *The Perception of the Romani in Ukraine during the Russian–Ukrainian War*, which was conducted by Mykola Homanyuk and Janusz Panchenko in April–May 2023 (N=902) and based on an online survey as part of the Vidnova Fellowship. In response to the question “Do you think the story about the Russian tank stolen by Roma is true or false?” 23 per cent of respondents answered “definitely true” and 46 per cent “probably true”.

15 The subscribers for these and other channels are based on the numbers from 20 January 2023, according to Telemetro, a website for Telegram channel analysis. Telemetro, <https://telemetro.io/> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

16 Field observations by the author.

17 Homanyuk, “Unter Besatzung”, 81.

was a regional edition of the *Komsomolskaya pravda* (*Komsomol Truth*). During the occupation of Kherson, they published eighteen issues. The most popular newspaper in terms of circulation was *Naddnepryanskaya pravda* (*Truth Along the Dnepr*), whose name and corporate style mimicked *Naddnipyanska pravda* (*Truth Along the Dniipro*), the newspaper of the Kherson Regional Council, which has been published since 1927. The usual content of the newspaper included holidays, changes made by the new authorities, ideologies such as “Ukrainians are Russians with Ukrainian passports”, normalisations of life in the region, the repair of Soviet monuments, crimes by “Ukronazis”, and job openings.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, in 2022, within electronic media, the occupation authorities could only establish control over local television and radio, which were not very popular with the local population, and could not achieve dominance over social media, which were the main sources of information in Kherson. Under these conditions, the occupiers relied on printed newspapers, which had almost completely fallen out of use before the war started, and on outdoor advertising (mainly billboards), which they employed on a large scale for political purposes.

## Political Advertising in the Public Space of Occupied Kherson

### The First Wave of Billboards (May 2022): “Kherson – A City with a Russian History”

In March and April 2022, the occupiers paid almost no attention to systematic community outreach; this was limited to sporadic handouts of humanitarian aid and media appeals. The occupiers first began promoting their core ideas and symbols in May. The city noisily celebrated holidays associated with the history of the USSR – Labour Day (1 May) and Victory Day (9 May). On 9 May, for example, they organised a procession of the Immortal Regiment<sup>19</sup> in Slava (Glory) Park, the laying of flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, ‘mass festivities’ with the participation of artists from the Russian Federation, and a military field kitchen (which gave out free cooked buckwheat and canned meat). The first occupation billboards appeared at this time in the central streets of the city. They featured Victory Day greetings in the style of Soviet postcards and posters with pictures of Red Army soldiers, St. George ribbons, Kremlin stars, red carnations, and Soviet military medals (Fig. 45).

18 From the author’s personal archive of these newspapers.

19 The Immortal Regiment is the name of the parade that occurs on Victory Day, during which participants march in columns through the streets of cities and carry photos of their relatives who took part in World War II. The movement was initiated in Tomsk in 2011. It has been happening in Moscow as part of the Red Square Parade since 2015.

Soon, systematic work began in the public space. At the end of May, the occupying regime put up billboards with the slogan “Kherson – a city with a Russian history”. Besides the general slogan, all the billboards had the emblem of the political party United Russia<sup>20</sup> on them. The series included nine billboards, which I detail below.

*Table 1: The first set of billboards, “Kherson – a city with a Russian history”. The campaign began at the end of May 2022.*

Image	Text (the text in bold appeared in larger letters on the billboards)
A monument to the first shipbuilders in Kherson and a portrait of Grigory Potemkin	<p><b>The founder of Kherson was the famous statesman and military leader Grigory Alexandrovich Potemkin, the creator of the Black Sea Fleet.</b></p> <p>The foundation of the city dates to 18 June 1778, when Catherine the Great signed a decree to build a fortress and a shipyard.</p>
A ceremonial portrait of Potemkin (including his military decoration)	<p><b>“The duty of a military man prompts concern for the preservation of people!”</b></p> <p>Grigory Potemkin-Tavrichesky (13.09.1739–5.10.1791) – a general field marshal, the founder of Kherson. In 1775, he achieved the liquidation of the Zaporizhian Sich, the main source of unrest in Ukraine. He oversaw the construction of the cities of Kherson, Nikolaev, Sevastopol, and Yekaterinoslav (Dnepropetrovsk). He initiated the Russian accession of Crimea in 1783.</p>
A ceremonial portrait of Aleksandr Suvorov	<p><b>“Nature created only Russia – it has no rivals!”</b></p> <p>Alexander Suvorov (24.11.1730–18.05.1800) – a great Russian general, a defender of Kherson.</p>
A ceremonial portrait of Denis Davydov	<p><b>Davydov Denis Vasilievich (1784–1839) – a Russian poet [and] a general [who] served in Kherson, was engaged in patronage, and promoted education through gymnasiums.</b> The most famous Russian hussar was born to the family of the brigadier Vasily Denisovich Davydov, who served under Alexander Suvorov. When Denis was only nine years old, the general [Suvorov] honoured him and his younger brother with his attention. The field marshal predicted a brilliant military career for the talented Denis, and for his younger brother Yevdokim – civilian service. In the second case he was mistaken, not recognising in the shy boy a future hero of Austerlitz.</p>

<sup>20</sup> United Russia is a Russian political party founded on 1 December 2001. It has a constitutional majority in the Russian parliament. The party logo is a bear.

Image	Text (the text in bold appeared in larger letters on the billboards)
A portrait of Aleksandr Pushkin with a goose-feather quill	<p><b>Pushkin visited Kherson on his way from Simferopol to Kishinev [Chişinău] on 18 September 1820. Aleksandr Sergeevich [Pushkin] visited this city for a second time in May 1824.</b> The history of the great poet's ancestors is also connected with Kherson – this city was built by his famous relative, Ivan Abramovich Hannibal. "Ivan Abramovich [...] built Kherson in 1779. His decrees are still respected on the western edge of Russia, where in 1821, I saw old men vividly preserving his memory".</p>
A portrait of Afanasii Fet	<p><b>Afanasii Fet – a Russian lyrical poet and translator, memoirist, corresponding member of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences (1886), prose writer.</b> Having graduated from university, Afanasii Fet in 1815 enrolled as a non-commissioned officer in the cuirassier regiment of the Military Order [the Order of St. George] (the headquarters were located in Novogeorgievsk, Kherson Guberniya), where he was made cornet on 14 August 1846. On 16 October 1849, [he was promoted] to lieutenant, [in] 1851, to staff sergeant. [He] served for a long time as regimental adjutant.</p>
A portrait of Boris Gorbатов	<p><b>Boris Gorbатов, a Russian-Soviet writer and screenwriter, journalist, war correspondent, visited liberated Kherson:</b> "We are standing on the tower of the commercial port building – from here, both the city and the river are visible. Here it is, the city is now forever ours, here it is, the Dnepr – mighty, free, wide, ours to the sea itself, forever ours... ", 1944.</p>
A portrait of Sergei Bondarchuk	<p><b>Sergei Bondarchuk was born 25 September 1920 in the village of Belozerka in the Kherson region of the Ukrainian SSR.</b> He made his debut as an actor in The Young Guard (he played the role of the communist underground fighter Valko). During filming, he married Inna Makarova, an actress playing one of the lead roles. From 1948, he worked at the Film Actor Studio Theatre. In the '40s and '50s, after playing Taras Shevchenko (1951), he was awarded the Stalin Prize and received the title of People's Artist of the USSR.</p>
Documentary photographs from the time of the Second World War (seven images)	<p><b>At the beginning of the Great Patriotic War, Kherson was occupied by fascists, more than 60,000 people were killed and tortured.</b> The Germans were helped by nationalists under the leadership of Stepan Bandera's brother, Bohdan. <b>After the war, the city once again became the industrial, agricultural, and cultural centre of the southern part of the Ukrainian SSR. In 2014, the city lost 60 per cent of its economy</b> after the Ukrainian blockade of Crimea.</p>

The abundance of text in the ads is immediately striking. It is too much for a billboard. Billboards are designed to grab a person's attention quickly and create a memorable impression, making the reader think of the advertisement after they pass it. Billboards should be read in a very short amount of time. Marketers recommend using no more than six to seven words on a billboard.<sup>21</sup> In our case, a significant portion of the billboard is filled by text, ranging from thirty to eighty words in addition to many numbers. To read this text, you must stop for a few minutes. This outdoor advertising only superficially resembles a billboard; instead of one striking image and a few words, these often include several pictures and large text fragments, making them more like a wall newspaper – a well-known propaganda format of the Soviet era.

Most of the images used in the series are connected to the imperial period of Russian history, mainly the era of Catherine the Great (1762–1796). Its heroes – the field marshals Grigory Potemkin and Aleksandr Suvorov, General Denis Davydov (Fig. 46), and the writers Aleksandr Pushkin and Afanasii Fet – are represented through painted portraits. The military figures are shown in uniform with decorations and medals, and with a detailed listing of their titles, ranks, and achievements. This is meant to create an image of the 'golden age' of Kherson, created by Russian political and military figures. This series includes numerous examples of the instrumentalisation of not only history but also culture through the inclusion of 19th- and 20th-century cultural figures as VIP agitators.

From this list, only Potemkin and Suvorov are notable figures in the urban history and mythology accepted among Kherson residents. And even in their cases, during the last twenty years, there has been a heated discussion in Kherson about their role in the history of the city and in Ukraine in general. The population generally saw Pushkin and Sergei Bondarchuk positively, but they were not associated with Kherson. Only local historians know of Davydov and Boris Gorbатов. Meanwhile, Davydov is more likely to be associated with *poruchik* (Lieutenant) Rzhhevsky, a character who features in popular jokes (usually with sexual or alcoholic connotations). And Fet landed on this list, apparently, only because of the similarity of the names of the modern Kherson region and the Kherson guberniya (governorate) of the Russian Empire – whose borders are in fact totally different. Fet served in Novo-georgievsk in the Kherson guberniya, which is now the Kirovohrad region. There are also no documents confirming Pushkin's stay in Kherson. Local historians are, however, inclined to think that Pushkin must have visited Kherson during his trav-

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21 See, for example: Stephen Jones, "10 Simple Rules For Your Next Billboard", Hue Marketing, 13 April 2023, <https://hue-marketing.com/billboard-design-rules/> [accessed: 31.05.2024]; and Microprinting, "4 Golden Rules for Designing a Great Billboard Ad", <https://www.microprinting.ca/4-golden-rules-for-designing-a-great-billboard-ad/> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

els in the south of what is now Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> An internet search shows that the texts for these billboards were taken from popular internet resources such as Wikipedia, *Kultura.RF* (*Culture.RF*), *RIA Novosti* (*RIA News*), and others.<sup>23</sup> These examples show the shallow approach of the project's authors, who relied on their own notions about the city rather than on local experts or research.

In addition, some of the 'facts' in the series ran counter to the interests of the information campaign. For example, one of Potemkin's achievements is that he destroyed the Zaporizhzhia Sich, which was condemned even in the USSR. Soviet historiography and education presented the liquidation of the Sich as a negative event that demonstrated how tsarist Russia introduced absolutism, serfdom, and feudal exploitation.<sup>24</sup> (Notably, a significant part of Kherson residents studied history in a Soviet school). Beyond this, the Cossacks are glorified in modern Ukraine.<sup>25</sup> Lastly, the billboard with Potemkin calls Dnipro by its old Soviet name, Dnepropetrovsk, which has not been used in Ukraine since 2016.

The 20th and 21st centuries are disproportionately underrepresented in the advertisements. The exceptions to this are the mentions of the occupation of Kherson during World War II, postwar reconstruction (on one billboard), Bondarchuk (who was actually not directly connected with Kherson), and the military correspondent Gorbatov, author of the essay "Kherson" (1944), whose visit to Kherson in 1944 was only a short episode of his life.<sup>26</sup> The most famous episode of Bondarchuk's life, receiving an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 1968, is omitted from his biography.<sup>27</sup> Instead, the Stalin Prize is mentioned.

The Ukrainian history of Kherson is represented by World War II and the year 2014. The billboards present these times as the dark periods of Kherson's history. Unexpectedly, the series mentions Bogdan Bandera (the brother of Stepan Bandera, one of the leaders of the Ukrainian nationalist movement), whose stay in Kherson

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- 22 Irina Kalinichenko, "A. S. Pushkin v Khersonie" ("A. S. Pushkin in Kherson"), *Letopis' Prichernomor'ia* (*Chronicle of the Northern Black Sea Region*) 2, 1999, 50–62.
- 23 Wikipedia, "Bondarchuk Sergei Fyodorovich", <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%91%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%25B> [accessed: 31.05.2024]; *Kultura.RF*, "Denis Davydov", <https://www.culture.ru/persons/8980/denis-davydov> [accessed: 31.05.2024]; and *RIA Novosti* (*RIA News*), "Biografia Grigoriya Aleksandroviča Potemkina" ("The Biography of Grigory Aleksandrovich Potemkin"), <https://ria.ru/20130730/953075597.html> [accessed: 31.05.2024].
- 24 See, for example: Vladimir Golobutskii, *Zaporozhskoe kazachestvo* (*Zaporozhian Cossacks*), Kyiv: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury USSR, 1957, 423; and Grigory Sergienko (ed.), *Istoriya Ukrain'skoi SSR* (*History of the Ukrainian SSR*), Vol. 3, Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1983.
- 25 Serhii Plokyh, *The Cossack Myth: History and Nationhood in the Age of Empires*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- 26 Boris Gorbatov, "Kherson", *Pravda* (*Truth*), 15 March 1944.
- 27 Michael Barrett, *Foreign Language Films and the Oscar: The Nominees and Winners, 1948–2017*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018.

is debatable<sup>28</sup> and is known only to a narrow circle of specialists. The fact that “the city lost 60 per cent of its economy” after 2014 has some real grounds. But first, it is not the city of Kherson, but mainly the farmers of the Kherson region who lost their markets in Crimea.<sup>29</sup> Second, the figure of 60 per cent is unfounded. Third, the main reason for this was not the Ukrainian blockade of Crimea but Russia’s occupation of Crimea in 2014.

## The Second Wave of Billboards (July 2022): The Founding of Kherson

The second billboard series (from July) was essentially the same as the first in terms of images and facts: the same nobles from the time of Catherine the Great, the same imperial history, and the same ceremonial portraits (Fig. 47). Of the nine billboards, six referred to the Russian Empire. Admiral Fyodor Ushakov appeared among the figures, with the words “Kherson – this is my city” attributed to him, although there is no such known statement by him. Probably, the authors of the series used the well-known local history website “Kherson – this is my city” and its slogan.<sup>30</sup> It is also unclear what the authors mean when they write that Suworov “saved the Kherson fortress”. The Kherson fortress was never part of any battles and was disbanded in 1835 because it was not needed.<sup>31</sup>

Table 2: The second set of billboards. This campaign began at the start of July 2022.

Image	Text (the text in bold appeared in larger letters on the billboards)
A ceremonial portrait of Catherine II	<b>1778.</b> Russian Empress Catherine II signed a decree on the foundation of the Kherson Fortress
A ceremonial portrait of Potemkin	<b>1779.</b> The Russian commander Potemkin laid the foundation of the future Kherson

- 28 Petro Arsenych, “Bandera Bohdan Andriiovych”, *Entsyklopedia Suchasnoii Ukrainy (Encyclopaedia of Modern Ukraine)*, <https://esu.com.ua/article-40240> [accessed: 31.05.2024].
- 29 Serhij Stepovyi, “Khtos’ mriye pro Yevropu, a my vzhe vtratyly rynky Krymu ta Donbasu” (“Some Dream of Europe, but We Have Already Lost Markets in Crimea and the Donbas”), *Kherson Online*, 21 October 2014, <https://khersonline.net/novosti/politika/30643-htos-mrye-pro-yevropu-a-mi-vzhe-vtratyli-rinki-krimu-ta-donbasu.html> [accessed: 31.05.2024].
- 30 adminkordi, “Ushakov Fyodor Fyodorovich”, *Moi gorod – Kherson (Kherson – This Is My City)*, <http://mycity.kherson.ua/people-kherson/people-u/ushakov-f-f.html>. [accessed: 31.05.2024].
- 31 Petr Tronko (ed.), *Istoriya gorodov i syol Ukrainskoi SSR: Khersonskaya oblast (History of Cities and Villages of the Ukrainian SSR: Kherson Region)*, Vol. 16, Kyiv: Ukrain’ska radians’ka entsyklopedia, 1983, 667.

Image	Text (the text in bold appeared in larger letters on the billboards)
A ceremonial portrait of Su- vorov and a plan of the fortress	<b>Aleksandr Suvorov.</b> The Russian general saved the “Kherson Fortress”
An image of a fleet of sailing ships	<b>Kherson.</b> Cradle of the Russian Black Sea Fleet
A map and the coat of arms of the Kherson guberniya (a Byzantine eagle)	<b>1803.</b> Kherson became a city of a guberniya of the Russian Empire
An image of sailing ships on a roadstead	<b>Kherson – this is my city.</b> Fyodor Ushakov, a Russian naval commander
A documentary photograph from the Second World War	<b>1944.</b> Kherson was liberated by Soviet troops
Documentary photographs from the Second World War (three images)	<b>1944.</b> The liberation of Kherson by troops of the USSR
A documentary photograph from the Second World War and a photograph of the decree	<b>30 March 1944.</b> The Kherson region was established by the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR

Figure 45: Billboard reading “Happy Victory Day”



Image by author, Ushakov Avenue, Kherson, May 2022.

Figure 46: Billboard showing Davydov



Image by author, Vyacheslav Chernovol Chaussée, Kherson, May 2022.

### The Third Wave of Billboards (July–August 2022): “Russia is Here Forever”

The third set of billboards, which was the most widely distributed in terms of the total number of copies, featured the recurring elements of the 1803 coat of arms of the Kherson guberniya (a Byzantine double-headed eagle with a laurel branch and a flame in its talons) and ribbons in the colours of the Russian flag. The central billboard of the series (the one most frequently printed) featured a quote by Vladimir Putin from his 2021 article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”: “Ukrainians and Russians – they are one people, one united whole”.<sup>32</sup> The other billboards of the series visualised this idea with people (children and mothers, e.g., Fig. 48) dressed in Ukrainian *vyshyvankas* – traditional costumes with national ornaments and embroidery (specifically, three billboards showed this) – and the image of the frigate (a type of warship), which is one of the symbols of Kherson (in Soviet times, it was part of the city’s coat of arms).

32 Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, official website of the President of Russia, 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

In these images, Ukrainian photographer Hanna Pasichnyk recognised her own work and children. The billboards featured part of her special patriotic series, which she created at the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion and had posted on various stock photo sites.<sup>33</sup>

Table 3: *The third set of billboards. This campaign began in the second half of July 2022.*

Image	Text
A blue background	Ukrainians and Russians – they are one people, one united whole
A sailing frigate	Kherson – this is a Russian city
Children wearing <i>vyshyvankas</i> in a meadow	Kherson – forever with Russia
A mother and daughter in <i>vyshyvankas</i> in a wheat field	Entering the future with Russia
A girl in a flower crown holding the flag of the Russian Federation	Russia is here forever

On the one hand, the appearance of a series with *vyshyvankas* can be considered controversial. Ukrainians wearing traditional clothing can be perceived as a direct reference to the nation whose ‘denazification’ is being pursued by the so-called special military operation. On the other hand, *vyshyvankas*, wreaths, and wheat fit perfectly into Russian ethnographic depictions of Ukraine, ideas of ‘Little Russians’, the image of Nikita Khrushchev in an embroidered shirt, and so on.<sup>34</sup> For instance, Soviet photo albums readily used images of Ukrainians in folk costumes.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, the embroidery on the billboards is neutralised by the Byzantine double-headed eagle and the white, blue, and red ribbon.

33 Yuliya Moskalenko, “Okupanty na Khersonshchyni rozmistyly propahandysts’kyi baner iz foto ukrayins’kykh ditei u vyshyvankakh” (“Occupiers in the Kherson Region Posted a Propaganda Banner with Photos of Ukrainian Children Wearing Embroidered Shirts”), *Dzerkalo tyzhnya* (Weekly Mirror), 31 August 2022, <https://zn.ua/ukr/UKRAINE/okupanti-na-khersonshchyni-rozmistili-propahandistskij-baner-iz-foto-ukrajinskikh-ditej-u-vishyvankakh.html> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

34 Iryna Tolok, “Vyshyvka v odyazi – shana ukrayins’koy tradytsiyi” (“Embroidery on Clothes is a Tribute to Ukrainian Tradition”), in: *Mystetstvo ukrayins’koy vyshyvky – zhyttyedayne dzhereło tvorchosti* (The Art of Ukrainian Embroidery – A Life-Giving Source of Creativity), Poltava: PNPU imeni V. Korolenka, 126–131.

35 See, for example: N.S. Pavlovskaya (ed.), *Radyans’ka Ukraina: Fotoalbum* (Soviet Ukraine: A Photo Album), Kyiv: Mystetstvo, 1977.

Here, we see a shift from the 'heroic' narrative to that of the 'common person', both of which are outlined in Linde's work.<sup>36</sup> According to Linde, both types of narratives are crucial for the institutionalisation of new members of a community. Citizens of Kherson first had to recognise their 'founding fathers' in Potemkin and Suvorov, then themselves in *vyshyvankas*; finally, they need to tie these two narratives – that is, concrete heroes in the form of Russian military men and contemporary nameless ordinary Ukrainians – into one.

Figure 47: Billboards with Potemkin and Catherine II



Image by author, Perekopska Street, Kherson, July 2022.

36 Linde, *Working the Past*.

Figure 48: A Billboard reading “Kherson – forever with Russia”



Image by author, Suvorov Street, Kherson, August 2022.

### The Fourth Wave of Billboards (August 2022): “Our Priorities”

In early August, another series of billboards appeared on the streets, which was now of an undisguised pre-election nature. All the billboards of this series featured the phrase “Our Priorities” at the top, followed by information about said priorities, such as health care, families, and social justice. The common element was the slogan of the forum “The Kherson region – we are with Russia”. This public forum, called “We

Are with Russia”, took place in Kherson on 30 July 2022.<sup>37</sup> During this event, the participants adopted the Declaration of “Russian Kherson”, which stated that the Kherson region is “the legal successor of the Russian Empire on the territory of parts of the Kherson and Tavricheskaya [Tauride] guberniyas”. From this, according to the organisers, came the necessity of “self-determination and the acquisition of subjecthood on the part of the people of the Kherson region as part of Russia and as a subject of the federation”, which “opens the way for us to hold a referendum”.<sup>38</sup>

All the people in this billboard series were also dressed in *vyshyvankas*. Interestingly, while almost all the previous outdoor advertisements suggested looking to the past for inspiration, this set turned to the future. Both in design and content, the fourth series was a typical pre-election advertisement, in which voters (the old and young people on the billboards, e.g., Fig. 49), were offered everything for free: medical care, compensation for the purchase of agricultural machinery, housing, and other such things. A particularity of populism in Russia is the attention paid to the most socially vulnerable and important groups of voters: pensioners, civil servants (employees of government institutions), and young families.<sup>39</sup>

Table 4: The fourth set of billboards, called “Our Priorities”. This campaign began at the start of August 2022.

Image	Text (the text in bold appeared in larger letters on the billboards)
A tractor	<b>Agriculture.</b> State compensation for the purchase of agricultural machinery
Two variants: either an elderly woman and a girl in <i>vyshyvankas</i> or an elderly woman with a younger woman	<b>Health care.</b> Free health care for the citizens of the Kherson region
A man and a pregnant woman in <i>vyshyvankas</i>	<b>Family.</b> The capital of maternity. The social guarantees of the Russian Federation

37 RIA Novosti (RIA News), “V Khersonе otkrylsya forum ‘My vmeste s Rossiyei’” (“The ‘We Are Together with Russia’ Forum Opened in Kherson”), 30 July 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220730/kherson-1806073200.html> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

38 Official website of the Administration of the Kherson Region, “Deklaratsiya ‘Russkiy Kherson’” (“Declaration of ‘Russian Kherson’”), [https://khogov.ru/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/6\\_m\\_d oc-24-print\\_0208.pdf](https://khogov.ru/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/6_m_d oc-24-print_0208.pdf) [accessed: 31.05.2024] [author’s trans.].

39 Nikita Petrov, “Evolutsiya populizma v rossiyskoy politike” (“The Evolution of Populism in Russian Politics”), *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniya (Bulletin of Public Opinion)* 3–4, 2018, 20–37.

Image	Text (the text in bold appeared in larger letters on the billboards)
An elderly man and a woman in <i>vyshyvankas</i>	<b>Social equality.</b> A decent life for the pensioners of the Kherson region
A family of three people in <i>vyshyvankas</i>	<b>Young families.</b> Your own apartment with state support
A hand holding a Russian Federation passport	<b>A passport of a citizen of the Russian Federation – this is social stability and security</b>

There were also single billboards that appeared in Kherson during the summer: the Day of the Russian Flag (22 August), the Day of the City of Kherson (17 September), and a billboard with an advertisement for firefighters with a text that echoed the content of the third series:

Russians and Ukrainians are one people. To serve as a firefighter of both Russia and Ukraine – this is a great part and opportunity of ensuring the safety of the people of the Kherson region! Prevention! Rescue! Help! (Fig. 50)

Here, we encounter “the people of the Kherson region”, a rather rare expression for occupation propaganda materials. It is similar to the notion of “the people of Donbass” or “the people of Transnistria”.<sup>40</sup> According to the “Russian Donbass” doctrine, “the people of the Donbass are an integral part of the Russian people, of historical Russia”.<sup>41</sup>

In this case, there was an attempt to show ‘ordinary people’, at least at the level of concrete professions or as employees of a specific institution, the Kherson Department of State Emergency Services – that is, the firefighters. But, as no employees from this institution cooperated with the occupiers, it was impossible to show actual firefighters from the city. Until August 2022, firefighters in Kherson worked in Ukrainian uniforms and under the Ukrainian flag when fulfilling their difficult obligations. Later, they were ordered to disband. For this reason, all the figures on the billboard fully or partially hide their faces – one of them wears glasses and a hood, another a helmet and an oxygen mask, and the third is in fact in a scuba diver’s suit.

40 Igor Voyt, “Formirovaniye pridnestrovskogo naroda kak protsess formirovaniya pridnestrovskoy identichnosti” (“The Formation of the Transnistrian People as a Process of Formation of Transnistrian Identity”), *Uchenyye zapiski Orlovskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta (Academic Notes of the Oryol State University)* 4, 2021, 32–36.

41 Russkiy Tsent (Russian Centre), “Proekt Doktriny ‘Russkii Donbass’” (“The Draft of the Doctrine of the ‘Russian Donbass’”), <https://russian-center.ru/8315-2/> [accessed: 31.05.2024] [author’s trans.].

Figure 49: Billboard reading “Our priorities. Family. The capital of maternity...”



Image by author, Suворov Street, Kherson, August 2022.

Figure 50: Billboard reading “Prevention! Rescue! Help!”



Image by author, Oleksandrivska Street, Kherson, August 2022.

### The Fifth Wave of Billboards (End of August): “The People of Kherson – the Pride of Russia” and “Russian Heroes, Then and Now”

A little later in August, another set of billboards appeared, again referring to the past and to the same figures. In the subseries “The People of Kherson – the Pride of Russia”, Bondarchuk, the playwright Boris Lavrenyov (in a Soviet military uniform), and the actor Yevgeny Matveev, a native of the Kherson region and known for playing Leonid Brezhnev (the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR from 1966 to 1982), appeared on the city streets. In the other subseries, “Russian Heroes: Then and Now”, Potemkin, Suvorov, and Ushakov resurfaced on the billboards, but now in the company of contemporary service people of the Russian Armed Forces. Noticeably, only one of them wore the ‘Z’ chevron and even this was half covered. By comparison, in Russia, ‘Z’ became the main symbol of the “special military operation” and is often used in outdoor advertising. It is possible that the authors of the Kherson billboards assumed that in Kherson ‘Z’ primarily carries negative associations.

The billboards presented in this series functioned as advertisements for programmes of the TV channel Tavria, founded by the occupants in the Kherson region.

In addition to the billboards with historical figures, the same series included billboards that announced programmes on socio-economic topics in a subseries titled “Tavria Answers”. These included the episodes listed in Table 5. All the episodes in this series also looked to the future.

*Table 5: The fifth set of billboards. This campaign began in August 2022.*

Image	Text
The Memorial to the Great Patriotic War in Slava (Glory) Park in Kherson	<b>Tavria-Kherson.</b> There will be something to watch
A portrait of Bondarchuk and a photograph of the Civil Registry Office building in Kherson	<b>The people of Kherson – the pride of Russia.</b> Sergei Bondarchuk. A People’s Artist of the USSR
A portrait of Lavrenyov in military uniform and a monument to the first shipbuilders in Kherson	<b>The people of Kherson – the pride of Russia.</b> Boris Lavrenyov. Writer and playwright
A portrait of Matveev and a statue of Potemkin in Kherson	<b>The people of Kherson – the pride of Russia.</b> Evgenii Matveev. A People’s Artist of the USSR
A ceremonial portrait of Potemkin and a statue of Potemkin in Kherson	<b>Kherson – this is Russia.</b> The founder of Kherson, Grigory Potemkin. Russian heroes, then and now
A ceremonial portrait of Suvorov, a reenacted photograph of a soldier of the Russian Imperial Army, and a photograph of a servicemember of the Russian Armed Forces	<b>Kherson – this is Russia.</b> Generalissimo Aleksandr Suvorov. Russian heroes, then and now
A ceremonial portrait of Ushakov, an image of the Russian Imperial Army landing force (a still from a Soviet film), and the landing force of the Russian Armed Forces	<b>Kherson – this is Russia.</b> Admiral Fyodor Ushakov. Russian heroes, then and now
No image	<b>Tavria Answers: Hryvna or ruble?</b>
No image	<b>Tavria Answers: Will the roads be like those in Crimea?</b>
No image	<b>Tavria Answers: In which language will they teach in schools?</b>
No image	<b>Tavria Answers: What will happen in Kherson after it returns to Russia?</b>

## The Sixth Wave of Billboards (September 2022): “A Decision Has Been Made. Kherson – This is Russia”

In the summer of 2022, outdoor advertising directly pointed to preparations for a referendum on the annexation of the Kherson region to Russia. The media stated that the referendum would be held on 11 September, the unified voting day in the Russian Federation. Eventually, the referendum on joining the Kherson region to Russia was announced on 20 September (which came as a surprise to most of the population). With this proposal, the Public Council of the Kherson Region addressed the Kherson Regional State Administration (the Public Council had been created by the Regional State Administration). In this case, the Council acted as a kind of body of the legislative branch of power.<sup>42</sup> Apparently, this was even a surprise for the occupation authorities, because the posting of billboards for the referendum began only the day before the referendum was scheduled. This last series included four types of billboards: three with the words “23–27 September. Referendum. We are with Russia” and one with “A decision has been made. Kherson – this is Russia”. All the billboards showed the coat of arms of the Kherson guberniya. The billboard with the slogan “A decision has been made. Kherson – this is Russia” stood out in this series. The historical narrative of all the billboards ended with an event: the return of Kherson to its ‘native harbour’.

Table 6: The last set of billboards. This campaign began on 22 September 2022.

Image	Text
A stylised heart in the colours of the Russian flag held in the palms of someone's hands	23–27 September. Referendum. We are with Russia
A family standing in front of a Russian flag and the monument to the first shipbuilders	23–27 September. Referendum. We are with Russia
A stylised image of a family in the colours of the Russian flag in the palms of someone's hands	23–27 September. Referendum. We are with Russia

42 TASS, “V Khersonskoy oblasti sozhdadut obshchestvennyy sovet kak odin iz organov upravleniya” (“The Kherson Region Will Establish a Public Council as One of the Governing Bodies”), 30 May 2022, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/14770115> [accessed: 31.05.2024]; and *Izvestiya* (News), “Khersonskaya oblast’ provedet referendum o vkhozhdenii v sostav Rossii” (“The Kherson Region Will Hold a Referendum on Joining Russia”), 07 June 2022, <https://iz.ru/1345963/2022-06-07/khersonskaia-oblast-provedet-referendum-o-vkhozhdanii-v-sostav-rossii> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

Image	Text
A girl wrapped in the flag of the Russian Federation standing in front of the monument to the first shipbuilders	A decision has been made. Kherson – this is Russia

Figure 51: Billboard with Suvorov



Image by author, Suvorov Street, Kherson, August 2022.

*Figure 52: Left to right: a billboard from the series “Our Priorities”, one from the last series with the statement “23–27 September. Referendum. We are with Russia”, and one from the third series reading “Entering the future with Russia”*



Image by author, Heavenly Hundred Street, Kherson, September 2022.

In conclusion, it should be added that, throughout the entire occupation of Kherson by Russia, the residents of Kherson continuously damaged the billboards. They splattered them with paint, peeled them off, wrote various inscriptions on them – from insulting the occupiers to glorifying Ukraine and the Armed Forces of Ukraine – and mocked them on social media, among other things. On 11 November 2022, when Kherson was liberated, residents tore down and burnt the posters en masse, and on 22 November, Potemkin, Suvorov, Pushkin, and others were put on

display at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War in Kyiv.<sup>43</sup> Thus, outdoor advertising in the occupied territories often came under the attack of members of the resistance, and after the de-occupation, the billboards became a way for citizens to channel their anger towards the occupiers. Soon after, new billboards with the inscription “Kindred people [*ridni*] – You are free” and images of the cross of the Armed Forces of Ukraine appeared in the liberated cities of the Kherson region in place of the occupation billboards. Billboards once again became an object of political attention in Kherson, this time from the side of Ukraine.

## Conclusions

During the time considered, Kherson was an important component in the information spaces of both Ukraine and Russia, as Kherson was the only regional centre of Ukraine that the Russians captured during their full-scale invasion. However, the billboards also implicitly emphasised that Kherson was the only captured centre of a former guberniya, and, like Crimea, it was linked to the so-called Greek Project of the Russian Empire.

Outdoor advertising in the occupied territory of the Kherson region became a prominent aspect of Russian propaganda. If we consider the first billboards as purely decorative, we can say that the referendum campaign began on 29 May with the second set of billboards. All figures that appeared in the campaign were either well-known historical actors or anonymous people. No contemporaries were used in the campaign. One of the reasons for this was the lack of recognisable and reputable people from the region who cooperated with the occupiers. An analysis of outdoor advertising also reveals the problems faced by the occupiers: a shortage of collaborators, a distorted view of Ukrainian society, and a lack of new ideas, among other things.

The majority of the campaign’s messages included references to history: monarchs, statesmen, military leaders, and historical events. However, the historiography of the images used is limited to the time between 1778 and 2014. The most frequently used people were from the Russian imperial period under Catherine II. Five billboards, for example, were directly or indirectly dedicated to Potemkin. The overall narrative suggests that the memory campaign used a kind of marketing ‘funnel’ model. At first, the billboards show the audience many ‘founding fathers’ from the imperial period, then a smaller number of heroic facts about the Soviet period,

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43 Reuters, “Russian Propaganda Banners from the Liberated Ukrainian City of Kherson are Displayed in the Capital Kyiv”, 22 November 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/idUSRTSDFCF/> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

followed by a few images of the ‘tragedy’ of the Ukrainian period of Kherson. Finally, with the prospect of a cloudless future, the consumer is told to make the ‘right’ choice.

Following Linde’s model, the information campaign was meant to lead to the institutionalisation of new community members – that is, to Kherson residents perceiving themselves as a part of Russian society and people. This did not occur because, within the ‘common person’ narrative, the advertising tropes and most of the real figures in the information campaign (i.e., collaborators) were anonymous or, otherwise, little-known or unpopular individuals. This suggests that the effectiveness of the ‘common person’ narrative depends on characteristics such as the anonymity or recognisability of the characters or heroes of the narrative.

In general, the technology of memory in occupied Kherson included the following main components: retrospective connections with an artificially selected period and a pragmatic (mercantile) perspective. These two components are the most used in electoral models – that is, as retrospective voting (for past achievements) and prospective voting (for promises). Within this scheme, there is no place for the inconvenient present.

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# Problematizing Legacies



# Doubled Fragility: Odesa's Monumental Art of the 1970–1980s

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Natalia Revko

I finished writing this text after some eight months and three instances of going back to Odesa from my emergency residency in Gdansk. It is most likely because of my long absence that my recognition of the changes that happened in the city was especially acute. By the sounds coming from the seaport, I could identify the state of the grain deal.<sup>1</sup> I could tell how people navigated around the city during blackouts. In the end, I could see how many buildings and streets, dear to my heart, had been damaged or destroyed.

In June 2023, during one of my visits to Ukraine, when I received the first editorial suggestions to this text, a series of the fiercest shelling of the war struck Odesa. Apart from causing civilian casualties and damage to the infrastructure, as well as the destruction of dozens of tonnes of grain ready for export, an amount hardly imaginable,<sup>2</sup> this shelling inflicted huge losses to the architectural heritage. Fifty-five buildings and objects of cultural value were damaged. That number includes museums, libraries, schools, and a church.<sup>3</sup>

The swiftness of the changes and the fragility of the reality around me have intensified my archival and research work, with which I was occupied as a museum employee before the full-scale invasion and as an independent actor afterwards.

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- 1 Dana Hordiichuk, "Den narodzhennia 'zernovoho korydor'u' i den kintsia. Yak Ukraina znovu opynylasia v morskii blokadi ta chym tse zahrozhuie" ("The Birthday of the 'Grain Corridor' and the Day of Its End: How Ukraine Once Again Found Itself in a Sea Blockade and What It Threatens"), *Ekonomichna pravda (Economic Truth)*, 18 July 2023, <https://www.epravda.com.ua/publications/2023/07/18/702321/> [accessed: 20.09.2023].
  - 2 Anastasiia Zharykova, "Rosiiiany znyshchylu 60 tysiach tonn zerna v portu Chornomorska" ("Russians Destroyed 60,000 Tons of Grain in the Chornomorsk Port"), *Ekonomichna pravda (Economic Truth)*, 19 July 2023, <https://www.epravda.com.ua/news/2023/07/19/702376/> [accessed: 20.09.2023].
  - 3 Mariia Kabatsii, "Komanda monitorynhu spadshchynu zafiksuvala ruinuvannia 55 ob'ektiv u Odesi" ("The Heritage Monitoring Team Recorded the Destruction of 55 Objects in Odesa"), *Ukrainska pravda (Ukrainian Truth)*, 03 August 2023, <https://life.ppravda.com.ua/culture/2023/08/3/255719/> [accessed: 20.09.2023].

Prior to each of my visits to Ukraine, I would arrange meetings with artists who had actively participated in the underground and unofficial art scenes of the 1970s and 1980s. I gathered and digitised archival documents, photographs, and graphic works, and I recorded hours and hours of conversations with these artists, building my own extended archive that I now keep on my hard disk drive.

I have noticed how my attention has dissipated. As if in a fever, I have been recording documents and conversations with actors from previous generations, hoping that if, for some reason, I don't make use of this material, at least my colleagues will be able to do that in the future. This is how I have captured the phenomenon of Odesa's monumental art, which lies somewhere between the official and unofficial art of the USSR. These days, sadly enough, this monumental art either exists in a bunch of faded snapshots or increasingly crumbles with the lapse of time, left without any proper law-regulated preservation and located on the interior or exterior of the infrastructure objects that became military targets in the onset of war.

## At the Studio

Visiting Viktor Maryniuk's studio has become one of the milestones in my study (Fig. 53). When he was studying in art college from 1959 to 1967,<sup>4</sup> Maryniuk, who was an active participant of the unofficial art scene of Odesa in the 1970s and 1980s, met other fellow artists with whom he later created a community that would act specifically beyond the official art framework.<sup>5</sup> At that time, he was already in conflict with the college's board due to his 'cubist' works.<sup>6</sup> In the early 1970s, several apartments in Odesa hosted exhibitions featuring paintings that would have never been shown in the official art spaces.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the audience drawn to those exhibitions was rather limited. Maryniuk's first personal show took place somewhere in 1971–1972 at Marharyta Zharkova's apartment.<sup>8</sup>

4 Archive of the Union of Artists of Ukraine (AUAU), Odesa department, dossier on Viktor Maryniuk. Please note, this is a small local archive in Odesa, and I was only provided with personal files upon request, which did not have any markings or document numbers.

5 Tatiana Basanets, "K istorii neofitsialnogo iskusstva Odessy" ("On the History of the Unofficial Art of Odesa"), in: Olha Balashova and Lyzaveta Herman (eds.), *Iskusstvo ukrainiskikh shestidesyatnikov (Art of Ukrainian Sixtiers)*, Kyiv: Osnovy, 2015, 62–65, here 62.

6 Viktor Maryniuk, interview with the author, in person, 23–26 December 2022.

7 Myroslava Mudrak, "Vstupna stattia" ("Introductory Text"), in: Giunter Herdin and Ihor Zubenko (eds.), *Suchasne mystetstvo z Ukrainy. Vystavka zhyvopysu-maliunkiv-skulptury (Contemporary Art from Ukraine: Exhibition Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture)*, Munich–Paris Travelling Exhibition Committee, 1980, 8–9.

8 Maryniuk, interview with the author.

Figure 53: The author visiting Viktor Maryniuk's studio



Image by Oleksandr Naselenko, 26 December 2022. Image provided courtesy of Oleksandr Naselenko.

Talking about official and unofficial art communities, it is necessary to provide several specific details. In the years following 1932, when the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union released its decree “On the Restructuring of Literary and Artistic Organisations”, a number of national creative unions, including the Union of Artists, were established in the USSR.<sup>9</sup> The Union of Artists was an official authority whose members complied with the principles of Socialist Realism, which was the ‘official method’ in the Soviet Union. It is difficult to define the term ‘Socialist Realism’, though, because of its vague nature. Susan E. Reid states that the fact that the phenomenon “never achieves concrete ontology”, even after continuous debates, “demonstrate[s] the contingency of Socialist Realism upon political and artistic power relations at different historical moments”.<sup>10</sup> That said, references to the charter of the Writers’ Union define Socialist Realism as a “historically concrete portrayal of reality” that has to comply with the principle of “truthfulness

9 Yevgen Nikiforov and Polina Baitsym, *Art for Architecture: Ukraine Soviet Modernist Mosaics from 1960 to 1990*, Berlin: DOM Publishers, 2020, 4.

10 Susan E. Reid, “Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror: The Industry of Socialism Art Exhibition, 1935–41”, *The Russian Review* 60/2, 2001, 153–184, here 154.

[*pravdivost*]” and the “ideological remaking and education of laboring people in the spirit of socialism”.<sup>11</sup>

That being so, practically every piece of art that strayed from the limits of the official system and ‘method’ and inherently experimented with form was labelled ‘formalist’,<sup>12</sup> which effectively grouped artists whose works put them under threat of professional persecution.<sup>13</sup> In one of his interviews, Maryniuk defined his position of that time as a struggle for the opportunity to make his own individual voice heard, saying:

In the meantime, there was a problem of artistic language that had been effectively destroyed in the early ‘30s. No specific language existed in the art community back then. What we saw in college? A pervasive ordinary academism, a little bit tempered with decorative elements. Everything else was banned.<sup>14</sup>

When I visited the artist’s studio, I felt like I met a like-minded person with a similar fondness for preserving and archiving things belonging both to himself and his colleagues: photos, documents, and works of art. Describing other people’s works, he would give special attention to some of them, such as those he had restored with the authors’ consent or those he had saved from the sorry fate of having been thrown away as rubbish. Among other things, for instance, there were Yurii Yehorov’s ‘cardboards’, which were pieces of cardboard that the artist had used as stencils for his monumental works. Yehorov had decided to discard them, but Maryniuk kept them for himself.

Another artist whose works have been preserved in Maryniuk’s studio, and who herself effectively ‘dwells’ there, is Liudmyla Yastreb, an artist, a member of the unofficial community, and Maryniuk’s wife. She tragically passed away in 1980 at the

11 Nikiforov and Baitsym, *Art for Architecture*, 4.

12 Alisa Lozhkina, *Permanent Revolution: Art in Ukraine, the 20th to the Early 21st Century*, Kyiv: ArtHuss, 2020, 187.

13 Halyna Sklyarenko, “Ukrainskyi stinopys 1960–1980-kh rokiv: evoliutsiia khudozhnoi movy” (“Ukrainian Wall Painting of the 1960s–1980s: The Evolution of the Artistic Language”), *Zbirnyk naukovykh prats SUCHASNE MYSTETSTVO (Collection of scientific papers CONTEMPORARY ART)* 18, 2022, 175–188, here 177, <https://doi.org/10.31500/2309-8813.18.2022.269727> [accessed: 23.03.2023].

14 Olha Savytska, Viktor Maryniuk, Yurii Yehorov, and Serhii Savchenko, “1970-ti: kvartyrni vystavky” (“1970s: Apartment Exhibitions”), in: *Non.Odeska hrupa. Lehendarni khudozhnyky-nonkonformisty Ukrainy (Non.Odesa Group: Legendary Nonconformist Artists of Ukraine)*, 2014, [https://issuu.com/stepanryabchenko/docs/non\\_part\\_3](https://issuu.com/stepanryabchenko/docs/non_part_3) [accessed: 20.09.2023] [author’s trans.]. Please note that this book is published on the online resource issue.com. Unfortunately, it does contain pagination. After contacting Stepan Ryabchenko, one of the editors, I learnt that the publication is still being refined in terms of its design. The editors, location, and publishing house are not officially listed in this version of the publication.

age of 35. Being rather far from the guidelines of Socialist Realism, in her works she explored the subject of the female body and abstract painting in an unrestrained manner. In 1976, a show of ninety-nine of Yastreb's works took place at the couple's apartment.<sup>15</sup> The artists made fifty copies of a handcrafted catalogue that they had prepared for that show. I managed to scan a copy of that catalogue when I visited Maryniuk's studio.

When I thought about the two artists' stories, however, I wondered why these particular artists, together with their colleagues, managed to create a huge amount of monumental works in their hometown and region without ever joining the union. Their monumental heritage had been mentioned in catalogues<sup>16</sup> and articles<sup>17</sup> dedicated to the group only cursorily. In one such catalogue, there was a small chapter providing documentation of some of their works,<sup>18</sup> but I had never come across a proper analysis of the phenomenon. This was the reason why I asked Maryniuk to provide me with any documentation, including photographs and sketches of monumental works he might have had in his possession, and to tell me more about what he knew on that subject.

## What Is Monumental?

The term 'monumental decorative art' is mentioned in Soviet art publications<sup>19</sup> and archive documents.<sup>20</sup> This particular term was widely used in the Soviet era. It covered a specific kind of art closely related to architecture, such as wall paintings, mosaics, stained-glass pieces, reliefs, and decorative sculptural objects in both interiors and exteriors. Scholars<sup>21</sup> connect its origin with the "Plan for Monumental Propaganda" that Vladimir Lenin introduced in 1918. The plan ordained the removal of tsarist monuments and stimulated the creation of objects that would promote so-

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15 Mudrak, 9–10.

16 Volodymyr Tsiupko and Olha Savytska, "Te, shcho nas zghurtuvalo" ("What Brought Us Together"), in: *Non.Odeska hrupa. Lehendarni khudozhnyky-nonkonformisty Ukrainy (Non.Odesa Group: Legendary Nonconformist Artists of Ukraine)*, 2014, [https://issuu.com/stepanryabchenko/docs/non\\_part\\_3](https://issuu.com/stepanryabchenko/docs/non_part_3) [accessed: 20.09.2023].

17 Basanets, "K istorii neofitsialnogo iskusstva Odessy", 65.

18 Volodymyr Tsiupko (ed.), *Modernisty Odessy (Odesa Modern Artists)*, Kyiv: ArtHuss, 2014, 274–295.

19 Borys Lobanovskiy, *Mozaika i freska (Mosaics and Frescoes)*, Kyiv: Mystetstvo, 1965, 148.

20 AUAU, Odesa dept., dossier on Maryniuk.

21 Nikiforov and Baitsym, *Art for Architecture*, 3; and Sklyarenko, "Ukrainskyi stinopys 1960–1980-kh rokiv", 175.

cialism.<sup>22</sup> Yet, because of its utopian nature and a lack of qualified sculptors, putting that plan into action did not result in wide popularisation of monumental art.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, the 1960s became a heyday for monumental art due to several factors. Firstly, Nikita Khrushchev's 1955 resolution "On the Elimination of Excesses in Design and Construction" introduced substantial changes to Soviet architecture, effectively removing elements of the 'Stalinist' style,<sup>24</sup> such as the pseudo-classical order system, colonnades, porticos, and excessive mouldings,<sup>25</sup> from further use and initiating marked reforms in architecture that were guided by functionality and the development of typified residential and public construction projects.<sup>26</sup> These considerable reforms of Soviet city design, which were heralded by standardised buildings featuring large squares of concrete and glass, preconditioned new means of decoration as well as further implementation of the ideas founded by the Plan for Monumental Propaganda.<sup>27</sup>

These changes were part of a larger phenomenon usually defined as the Khrushchev Thaw that brought about an atmosphere of relative freedom. It manifested itself as the denouncement of Stalin's cult, partial rehabilitation of political prisoners, alleviation of ideological censorship, and lifting some restrictions on access to information.<sup>28</sup> To the artistic generation of the 1960s, this meant an opportunity to push the limits of Socialist Realism.<sup>29</sup>

Even though the artistic community remained limited in its choice of subjects – with the obligation to produce idealised images of 'common people', the working class, Pioneer movements, and space programme achievements<sup>30</sup> – monumental art continued its development in terms of using new techniques and materials and had a certain degree of freedom thanks to characteristic large, flat surfaces, which required more generalised and clear imagery and decorations.<sup>31</sup> In fact, this enabled artists to experiment with form much more often than they would in easel painting.<sup>32</sup>

22 Christina Lodder, "Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda", in: Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor (eds.), *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917–1992*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993, 16–32, here 9.

23 Ibid., 26.

24 Nikiforov and Baitsym, *Art for Architecture*, 5.

25 Lobanovskiy, *Mozaika i freska*, 120.

26 Sklyarenko, "Ukrainskyi stinopys 1960–1980-kh rokiv", 177.

27 Ibid., 177.

28 Serhii Plokyh, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*, New York: Basic Books, 2015, 300.

29 Ibid., 301.

30 Nikiforov and Baitsym, *Art for Architecture*, 6.

31 Sklyarenko, "Ukrainskyi stinopys 1960–1980-kh rokiv", 177.

32 Nevertheless, Sklyarenko provides examples of monumental works that were destroyed in the mid-1960s due to accusations of 'formalism'. See: Sklyarenko, "Ukrainskyi stinopys 1960–1980-kh rokiv", 180–182.

Another important fact that contributed to the relative freedom mentioned above was that monumental art commissions were issued not by the Union of Artists itself but by the Art Fund. The Art Fund was the union's subsidiary organisation responsible for funding the artistic community and creating 'art production', which, apart from monumental art, included decorative objects such as embroidery, carpets, ceramics, and so on. That production eventually became part of the Soviet planned economy.<sup>33</sup> Artists were allowed to join *tsekhs* (a branch of industry or enterprise in the USSR) or combines of the Artistic Fund in order to accept and execute commissions, whose numbers were steadily increasing,<sup>34</sup> without ever joining the Union of Artists itself. This created a sort of 'loophole' for unofficial artists. As researcher Polina Baitsym notes, the Art Fund "did not mandate Union membership and a pledge to socialist realism".<sup>35</sup> She continues: "[t]he procedures of the vast network of workshops established throughout the country habitually eluded the grasp of the Union, especially in the spaces distanced from the capital, Kyiv".<sup>36</sup>

## Between the Official and the Unofficial

The post-Khrushchev era, which began in the late 1960s and unfolded throughout the 1970s, was characterised by a new round of political rigidity and intolerance towards any form of opposition,<sup>37</sup> often referred to as 'stagnation'.<sup>38</sup> Historian Serhii Plokyh illustrates this shift in the political vector with examples from the literary sphere, specifically describing the wave of arrests of intellectuals who had become active during the Thaw.<sup>39</sup> For the entire cultural and artistic community, including the Odesa art scene, this meant that they could no longer push the boundaries of Socialist Realism as the previous generation did, so they focused on their unofficial

33 Olha Yamborko, "Khudozhnyk dekoratyvnoho mystetstva i khudozhnia promyslovist u radianskii systemi vyrobnychkh vidnosyn" ("Artists of Applied Arts and Art Industry in the Soviet System of Production Relations"), *Naukovi zapysky Ternopilskoho natsionalnoho pedahohichnoho universytetu imeni Volodymyra Hnatiuka. Ser. Mystetstvoznavstvo (Scientific notes of Ternopil National Pedagogical University named after Volodymyr Hnatyuk, Series in Art history)* 2/39, 252–256, here 254, <http://dspace.tnpu.edu.ua/handle/123456789/12612> [accessed: 20.09.2023].

34 *Ibid.*, 255.

35 Yevgen Nikiforov and Polina Baitsym, *The Chips: Ukrainian Naïve Mosaics of the 1950–90s*, Kyiv: its publishing, 2024, 16.

36 *Ibid.*, 16.

37 Plokyh, *The Gates of Europe*, 304.

38 *Ibid.*, 307.

39 *Ibid.*, 303–304.

activities. Although the art scene appeared to be stagnant from the outside, work was in full swing in apartments and studios.

At the same time, monumental art paradoxically became one of the few opportunities for visual artists not only to earn a living but also to bring their art to the public. This became possible due to the reasons I mentioned above, such as the ability to receive commissions bypassing the Union of Artists, the functioning of decorative monumental art as a branch of production, the opportunity for artists to use more generalised forms to create images on a wide and flat surfaces, and, as described by Baitsym, that the appendix ‘decorative’ in the Soviet term ‘monumental-decorative art’ allowed “a certain conceptual flexibility”.<sup>40</sup>

Therefore, another researcher, Halyna Sklyarenko, while analysing the development of monumental art in Ukraine (with a primary focus on Kyiv) and outlining the difference between the art of the 1960s and 1970s, defines monumental art as “arguably the most liberal form of visual art” in the post-Khrushchev Thaw era, stating that a large number of artists from the unofficial communities would work with monumental painting.<sup>41</sup> This held true for Maryniuk and Yastreb, as well as for a group of their colleagues from Odesa.

For them, monumental art was another way to make a living, although still not the main one. Furthermore, they would not stop at making sketches; they executed commissions on their own to gain bigger remunerations and better control over the implementation of their own or colleagues’ sketches.<sup>42</sup> Apart from that, this was an opportunity for them to win the attention of a bigger audience and to realise ideas they had been elaborating in their paintings, which were shown only to a limited number of visitors of apartment exhibitions. According to Tetyana Basanets, an art history scholar from Odesa who used to be an active participant of the unofficial scene,

[M]onumental and decorative art established a legitimate space for their [the unofficial artists’] ideas. Wall paintings, pieces of stained glass, and mosaics (not only in Odesa) became a specific form of giving publicity to that peculiar form of seemingly figurative and abstract art.<sup>43</sup>

When the Khrushchev Thaw of the 1960s began, Maryniuk and Yastreb were still students, whose professional activity coincided with a period of the ‘stagnation’. In their

40 Yevgen Nikiforov and Polina Baitsym, *The Chips*, 15.

41 Sklyarenko, “Ukrainskyi stinopys 1960–1980-kh rokiv”, 183.

42 Maryniuk, interview with the author.

43 Basanets, “K istorii neofitsialnogo iskusstva Odessy”, 65 [author’s trans.].

interviews, Maryniuk and other unofficial artists of the time mention a difference between the 1960s and the 1970s, even pointing to a sense of shattered hopes.<sup>44</sup>

*Figure 54: Photograph of the ceiling painting in the assembly hall of the Palace of Students, titled Celebration*



Image by Viktor Maryniuk, 1987. Image provided courtesy of Viktor Maryniuk.

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44 Yuriy Yehorov et al., "8 bereznia 2003 r. Odesa, maisternia V. Basantsa" ("8 March 2003. Odesa, Workshop of V. Basanets"), in: *Non.Odeska hrupa. Lehendarni khudozhnyky-nonkonformisty Ukrainy (Non.Odesa Group: Legendary Nonconformist Artists of Ukraine)*, 2014, [https://iissuu.com/stepanryabchenko/docs/non.\\_part\\_3](https://iissuu.com/stepanryabchenko/docs/non._part_3) [accessed: 20.09.2023].

Although the differences between the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the use of terms like 'Thaw' and 'stagnation', do require a certain degree of generalisation and have their pitfalls, the influence of these tendencies can still be traced in the biographies of the artists I write about. I will return to this, but first, I also want to briefly outline how the unofficial art scene functioned.

Valerii Basanets, another artist of the time, recalls how the community effectively redesigned its information environment to lay the foundation for further work: "We felt that somewhere there, there was another world, so we attempted to reconstitute it in our own minds".<sup>45</sup> They scanned publications of Soviet art criticism for any mentions of prohibited Western artists,<sup>46</sup> shared art catalogues smuggled by sea,<sup>47</sup> and sought out art literature from neighbouring Poland and Hungary, which they could sometimes find at the local department for international press.<sup>48</sup> In her essay "Spiritual Stoicism of the Artist in the Soviet Union", Yastreba describes the process as follows:

Artists rose to the challenge of acting as "scavengers", collecting everything that had been discarded by contemporary society. In garbage heaps were [the rubble of] deserted churches and monuments of architecture, icons, sculptures, old books, paintings, etchings, antiques, and pieces of folk art in all their richness. All these things were being picked out of the dust, cleaned, scraped, repaired, [and] restored to their primordial essence. Everything was being examined with an astonishing intentness of a first glance at something that had been familiar for ages. There was an urgent craving for restoration of forsaken traditions in that. Every such discovery that passed through one's own hands gave a feeling of a vivid connection with the past, inspiring hope and confidence.<sup>49</sup>

Capturing, let alone generalising, the boundary between the official and unofficial practices of artists is quite challenging, since the existence of this boundary, its rigidity or porosity, varies depending on the circumstances of each artist's biography, the series of their personal decisions and strategies. Even solely among the

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45 Yehorov et al., "8 bereznia 2003 r. Odesa, maisternia V. Basantsa" [author's trans.].

46 Ibid. [author's trans.].

47 Basanets, "K istorii neofitsialnogo iskusstva Odessy", 63.

48 Maryniuk, interview with the author. A few respondents told me about this department/library, but in the interview I cite here, there is no clarification. Some older colleagues recall the Odesa State Scientific Library named after O. M. Gorky.

49 Liudmyla Yastreba, "Dukhovnyi stoitsizm khudozhnyka v radianskomu suspilstvi" ("The Spiritual Stoicism of the Artist in the Soviet Union"), in: *Non.Odeska hrupa. Lehendarni khudozhnyky-nonkonformisty Ukrainy (Non.Odesa Group: Legendary Nonconformist Artists of Ukraine)*, 2014, [https://issuu.com/stepanyabchenko/docs/non.\\_part\\_3](https://issuu.com/stepanyabchenko/docs/non._part_3) [accessed: 20.09.2023] [author's trans.].

circle of Odesa artists of the 1970s generation who participated in apartment exhibitions, the artists had vastly different relationships with the official system and the unofficial circle. For example, Yehorov, an artist of the older generation, a member of the Union of Artists, and a person whose artistic career can be called successful, occasionally participated in apartment exhibitions, and was in constant interaction with the unofficial circle of artists. Valerii Basanets had been a member of the Union of Artists since the 1970s and actively participated in both official and apartment exhibitions. On the other end of the spectrum is Valentyn Khrushch, who, even under the patronage of Yehorov, never integrated into the official system.<sup>50</sup>

I believe that the topic of the intersection between official and unofficial communities, their mutual penetration, and the influences they exerted on each other still requires archival research and the search for a theoretical framework. Taking into account all the aforementioned conditions of creating monumental art in Ukraine, its process of implementation could serve as an illustration of the complex interrelationships between the two worlds of official and unofficial art. Tracking the activity specifically of Maryniuk and Yastreb within the official context is far more complex than in the unofficial one. In the book *The Union of Artists in Odesa*, Oleksandr Dmytrenko provides a comprehensive and detailed set of documents from the archive of the Union of Artists in Odesa and other resources. These documents contain some mentions of Maryniuk's<sup>51</sup> and Yastreb's<sup>52</sup> participation in the official youth exhibitions of the late 1960s. However, those references, as well as mentions of other artists from the unofficial community, almost disappeared in the period from 1971 to the late 1980s.

In 1971, a show featuring young artists, with Maryniuk among them, took place at the exhibition hall of the Odesa department of the Union of Artists. The show had been planned as an invite-only event, but the artists made advertisement posters that eventually drew rather significant public attention. Because of that incident, a following session of the Union of Artists issued a resolution "on the artist's internal work and discipline, with regard to the report of a group of young artists: Dulfan, Strelnikov, Maryniuk, Sychov, and the member of the Union of Artists of the USSR Lopatnikov", which described the works featured in the show as those that "failed to have revealed the diversity of reality and modernity, [...] with some of the works demonstrating a flawed concept of depicting actuality".<sup>53</sup> The publicisation of the

50 "Personazhi andegraundu: Khrushchik" ("Characters of the Underground: Khrushchik"), in: *Non.Odeska hrupa. Lehendarni khudozhnyky-nonkonformisty Ukrainy (Non.Odesa Group: Legendary Nonconformist Artists of Ukraine)*, 2014, [https://issuu.com/stepanryabchenko/docs/non\\_part\\_3](https://issuu.com/stepanryabchenko/docs/non_part_3) [accessed: 20.09.2023].

51 Aleksandr Dmytrenko, *Soyuz khudozhnikov Odessy (The Union of Artists in Odesa)*, Stryi: Ukropol, 2013, 180.

52 *Ibid.*, 170.

53 *Ibid.*, 185.

show was reprimanded as a “violation of the moral, ethical, and regulatory codes of the Union of Artists”.<sup>54</sup>

*Figure 55: Detail of the ceiling painting in the assembly hall of the Palace of Students, titled Celebration*



Image by Viktor Maryniuk, 1987. Image provided courtesy of Viktor Maryniuk.

Another revealing fact about the relations between the unofficial and official circles is that, even though some of those artists actively produced monumental works in the 1970s, which is also confirmed by existing photographic evidence and personal dossiers, “the first oblast exhibition of monumental and decorative art” did not feature their works.<sup>55</sup> Dmytrenko states that the second exhibition took place

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54 Ibid., 185–186.

55 Ibid., 209.

in 1988,<sup>56</sup> and Maryniuk acknowledged and recalled his participation in our interview.<sup>57</sup> Regardless, Dmytrenko claims that there was no information about this exhibition included in the archive of the Union of Artists, and, as artist Serhii Savchenko mentioned, the board did not approve that exhibition for official presentation.<sup>58</sup>

## Today

January 2023. Together with Oleksandr Naselenko, a friend and colleague of mine, I was at Maryniuk's studio. Naselenko hurriedly set up his photo camera and lighting devices, since electricity was only available for short periods. Because of power outages, we would later meet here a few more times. Naselenko had volunteered to make photos of sketches and documents from the archive. As early as summer 2021, I curated his first photographic show, where he presented his studies of the landscapes of southern Ukraine. Now he works together with both Ukrainian and foreign journalists, reporting the news about the ongoing full-scale invasion, so he is hardly found in Odesa these days. I thanked him for being ready to do the majority of the work for free, to which he replied he was glad to be there because it reminded him he still had something to do with art, not only with war.

Maryniuk regretfully remarked that most of the archival photographs had faded, and he suggested that we have a look at the sketches, since they at least reproduced colour. Although this archive was a genuine treasure to me, Maryniuk's remark seemed completely clear: by that time, the majority of works already existed solely in those photographs and sketches. Maryniuk could not specify the exact time when the no-longer-existent works had been destroyed, though, referencing the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s.<sup>59</sup>

Many works of monumental art throughout Ukraine were indeed ruined, mostly because of the privatisation of real estate and enterprises that took place in the 1990s and the subsequent mishandling by the owners. The scholar Yevheniia Moliar has emphasised that monumental art has never acquired any conservation status in Ukraine, nor a specific position in the cultural heritage list. The situation got even worse when a series of laws on decommunisation was passed. These specific laws, prescribing the elimination of the symbols of the communist and national-socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes in public space, have triggered the stigmatisation of

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56 Ibid., 255.

57 Maryniuk, interview with the author.

58 Dmytrenko, *Union of Artists in Odesa*, 255.

59 Maryniuk, interview with the author.

Soviet cultural heritage as a whole, making it possible for developers to escape legal repercussions to mishandling (usually meaning destroying) works of art.<sup>60</sup>

Since the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, things have increasingly worsened, and the list of destroyed works has been growing ever bigger due to repeated shelling and the Russian occupation of vast swathes of Ukrainian territories.<sup>61</sup> The martial law restrictions also prevented me from accessing some important objects in Odesa. All these things have effectively made scholarly work increasingly difficult. These days, it includes many features of activism. Moliar, apart from continuing her studies, writing texts, and giving public lectures, often directly communicates with property owners, persuading them to save valuable pieces, and champions the government-regulated preservation of monumental art.<sup>62</sup>

Another important effort of that art activism is documenting works of monumental art, an effort that has grown during the last decade. The largest projects in that field include the website Soviet Mosaics in Ukraine,<sup>63</sup> launched by the IZOLY-ATSIYA Foundation, and Yevgen Nikiforov's project, in which the author has gath-

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60 Yevheniia Moliar, "Khvyli nyschchivnoiu dekomunizatsii: v Ukraini prodovzhuiut ruinuvaty kulturnu spadshchynu" ("Waves of Devastating Decommunisation: The Soviet Cultural Heritage Being Destroyed in Ukraine"), *LB.ua*, 27 March 2019, [https://lb.ua/culture/2019/03/27/423045\\_hvili\\_nishchivnoi\\_dekomunizatsii.html](https://lb.ua/culture/2019/03/27/423045_hvili_nishchivnoi_dekomunizatsii.html) [accessed: 23.03.2023].

61 For a few cases of the destruction of monumental art due to the war, see: Polina Horlach, "U Mariupoli vnaslidok obstriliv zruinovani mozaiky Ally Horskoi" ("Alla Gorska's Mosaics Were Destroyed in Mariupol as a Result of Shelling"), *Suspilne Kultura (Public Culture)*, 22 July 2022, <https://suspilne.media/263297-u-mariupoli-vnaslidok-obstriliv-zruinovani-mozaiky-ally-gorskoi/> [accessed: 21.09.2023]. For examples of the destruction of mosaics in the Kyiv region during the occupation, see: Nastia Popovych, "Zalyshky zruinovanoi mozaiky v Makarovi peredaly do NAOMA dlia restavratsii" ("The Remains of the Destroyed Mosaic from Makarov Were Handed over to NAOMA for Restoration"), *Your Art*, 16 September 2022, <https://supportyourart.com/news/zalyshky-zruinovanoi-mozayiky-v-makarovi-peredaly-do-naoma-dlya-restavratsiyi/> [accessed: 21.09.2023]. For the destruction of a large-scale work by Volodymyr Zinchenko in Chernihiv, see: Ukrainian Institute, "Aeroport 'Shestovytsia'" ("Shestovytsia Airport"), 2022, <https://ui.org.ua/postcard/aeroport-shestovytsya/> [accessed: 21.09.2023].

62 Hanna Tsyba, "Yevheniia Moliar: v Mariupoli maie buty stvorenyi muzei monumentalno-dekorativnoho mystetstva" ("Yevheniia Moliar: A Museum of Monumental and Decorative Art Should Be Created in Mariupol"), *Korydor (Corridor)*, 21 March 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180626210950/http://www.korydor.in.ua/ua/opinions/yevgeniya-molyar-v-mariupoli-maye-buty-stvorenij-muzej-monumentalno-dekorativnogo-mistetstva.html> [accessed: 21.09.2023].

63 Soviet Mosaics in Ukraine, <https://sovietmosaicsinukraine.org/> [accessed: 21.09.2023].

ered some five thousand objects throughout Ukraine.<sup>64</sup> Being Nikiforov's own personal initiative, the project has already borne fruit, namely the books *Decommunized: Ukrainian Soviet Mosaics*<sup>65</sup> and *Art for Architecture: Ukraine Soviet Modernist Mosaics from 1960 to 1990*. Nikiforov co-authored the latter with Baitsym, another scholar of Soviet art heritage frequently cited in this article.

"It is solely thanks to Nikiforov's work that we are able to see that huge amount of works that have been destroyed. I think, there is no research that is not important existing in Ukraine today", comments Olena Zahrebina, an artist and founder of the Chernihiv Monumentalism<sup>66</sup> project, as we carry out an interview. Both being researchers focused on the local history of our hometowns, we quickly come to an understanding. In 2021, Zahrebina, together with her colleagues, organised a monumental art festival in Chernihiv. It is not yet known when the next episode of that festival will take place.<sup>67</sup>

In this article, it is impossible for me to mention all the grassroots initiatives, whether larger or smaller in scale, that document, preserve, and study monumental and decorative art of the Soviet era. However, I am happy to report that their numbers have been steadily increasing. I also want to place a particular emphasis on the fact that nearly every scholar supporting the preservation of Soviet monumental heritage clearly indicates the necessity of conducting more in-depth research and gaining a true understanding of the conditions under which such works of art were created, as well as the artists' biographies. This is crucial to inspire a greater public awareness of the complexity of Soviet art history and to convey that not every work from this period is merely propaganda. For instance, Moliar refers to the fact that the Soviet artist Ernest Kotkov, while executing one of his works on a nine-story building in Kyiv, actually alluded to Heorhii Narbut, a Ukrainian artist whose works had been publicly persecuted in the USSR.<sup>68</sup> In one of her lectures, Lizaveta German, another contemporary curator and scholar, mentions the Kyiv-born artist Oleksandr Dubovyk, who transferred a variety of abstract elements from his unofficial works to the monumental scale.<sup>69</sup>

64 Lizaveta German and Yevgen Nikiforov in: Ukrainian Institute, "Talk: Between two fires: Monumental Art in Ukraine", YouTube video, 14 September 2022, 1:33:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZMo9PIFIPGY> [accessed: 21.09.2023].

65 Yevhen Nikiforov, Olga Balashova, and Lizaveta German, *Decommunized: Ukrainian Soviet Mosaics*, Kyiv: Osnovy Publishing, 2017, 250.

66 Chernihiv Monumentalism, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/CheMonumentalism> [accessed: 21.09.2023].

67 Olena Zahrebina, interview with the author, online, 02 September 2023.

68 Yevheniia Moliar in: IZOLYATSIA. Platform for cultural initiatives, "Yevheniia Moliar — Soviet Mosaics In Ukraine", YouTube video, 08 November 2016, 56:59, here 31:46–33:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=NUcxyH8Krho> [accessed: 21.09.2023].

69 German and Nikiforov in: Ukrainian Institute, "Talk", 38:30–40:30.

With more and more similar cases now being studied, I recognise Maryniuk and Yastreb's heritage as another perfect supplement to this discussion. I provide this article with a few images I digitised at Maryniuk's studio, including a sketch made by Yastreb in the 1970s (Fig. 57) and photographs of the executed decoration of a public transportation stop (Fig. 58). It is currently unknown whether this work survives.

*Figure 56: Sketch of the stained-glass windows in the Palace of Students*



Image by Viktor Maryniuk, 1987. Image provided courtesy of Viktor Maryniuk.

Figure 57: Sketch of a bus stop design



Image by Liudmyla Yastreb, 1970s. Image provided courtesy of Viktor Maryniuk.

The side surfaces of the stop are decorated with traffic regulation signs. I pay particular attention to the passengers, who look exactly the same as the images of women Yastreb previously depicted in her paintings and graphics.<sup>70</sup> Their outlines

70 For examples from open resources, see: Liudmyla Yastreb, *Untitled*, 1978, gouache, ink, and graphite on paper, 28.5 x 20 cm, in the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Noncon-

are slightly rounded and a bit blurred, as if the passengers are flying in an imaginary space. In the middle of the composition, there is a fancy vehicle carrying people dressed in something resembling 19th-century garments, with one of them sitting on top of the vehicle. Even though we can see much more detailed and clearer imagery in the actual photographs of the executed work, the scene itself hardly resembles a Soviet city with its people, even less so propaganda. The recurrent motif of an imaginary city located beyond time and geography present in this work is an important topic the unofficial artists of Odesa elaborated on in their easel paintings. One can often observe playfulness, bright colouration, the attributes of celebration, and a certain feeling of naivety that were introduced in the festive and circus-like images of harlequins and merry-go-rounds.

*Figure 58: Photograph of the executed design of the bus stop*

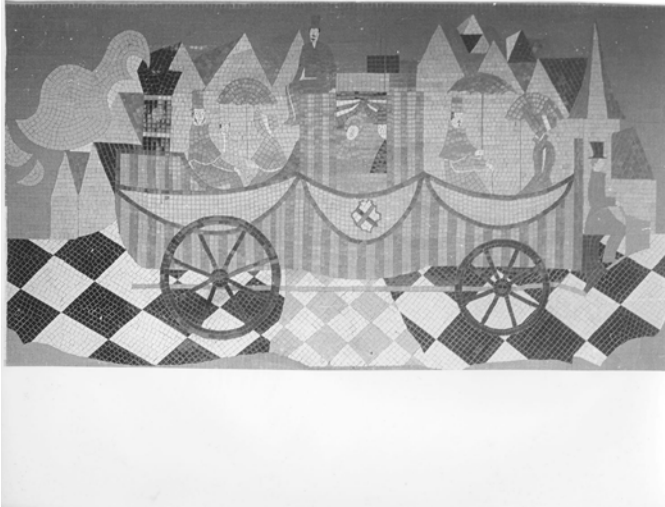


Image by Liudmyla Yastreba, 1970s. Image provided courtesy of Viktor Maryniuk.

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formist Art from the Soviet Union, available at: Liudmyla Yastreba, "Untitled", Zimmerli Art Museum, <https://zimmerli.emuseum.com/objects/53057/untitled?ctx=aa03954a539f46f7a1535ce868bbb3852120b735&idx=1> [accessed: 21.09.2023]; Liudmyla Yastreba, *Black Bird*, 1976, cardboard and oil, 70 x 50 cm, in the NT Art Gallery Collection, available at: Liudmyla Yastreba, "Works", NT Art Gallery, <https://nt-art.net/artist/yastrebludmila/> [accessed: 21.09.2023]; and Liudmyla Yastreba, *Harlequin*, 1974, canvas and oil, 50 x 33.5, in the NT Art Gallery Collection, available at: Yastreba, "Works", NT Art Gallery.

Similar images and forms transferred from unofficial painting<sup>71</sup> are observed in the plafond and stained-glass pieces executed by Maryniuk in 1987 in the House of Students in Odesa (Figs. 54–56 and 59–61). Unfortunately, only several stained-glass pieces of the whole body of work exist today. Although it was made during the period of weakening censorship restrictions, this work is an interpretation of the Soviet space-development topic, even if a free-spirited one, featuring cosmonauts and acrobats depicted together on a bright geometrical plane richly decorated with flowers, stars, and ribbons.

*Figure 59: Photograph of the executed stained-glass windows in the Palace of Students*



Image by Viktor Maryniuk, 1987. Image courtesy of Viktor Maryniuk.

71 For examples from open resources, see: Viktor Maryniuk, *The Clown*, 1982, wood and oil, 37.1 x 20, available at: Viktor Mariniuk, "Works", NT Art Gallery, <https://nt-art.net/artist/marinukviktor-2-2/> [accessed: 21.09.2023]; and Viktor Maryniuk, *Square with Figures*, 1976, oil on fibreboard, 50.8 x 50 cm, in the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union, available at: Viktor Mariniuk, "Square with Figures", Zimmerli Art Museum, <https://zimmerli.emuseum.com/objects/53066/square-with-figures?ctx=17f2a487f74478e86d52caf379d1aab1c89bd27e&idx=1> [accessed: 21.09.2023].

*Figure 60: Photographs of the executed stained-glass windows in the Palace of Students*

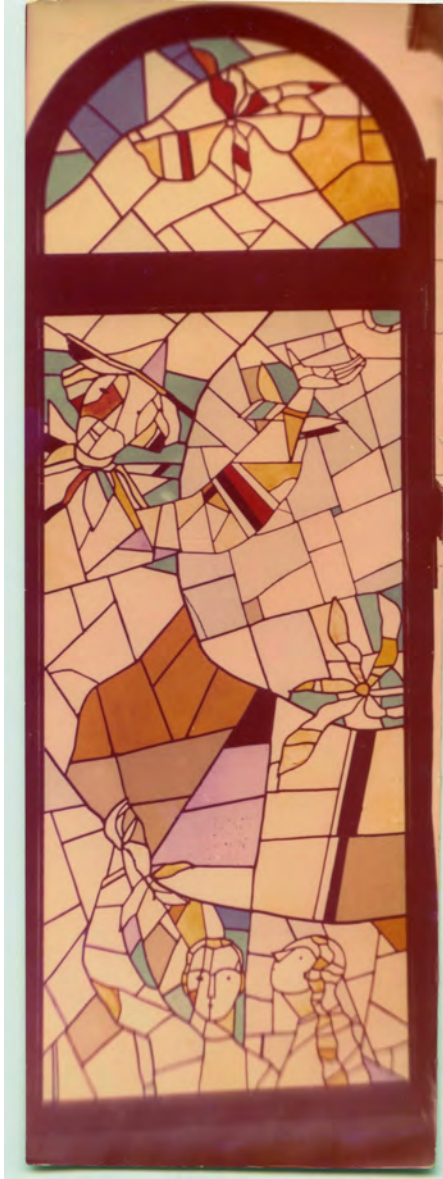


Image by Viktor Maryniuk, 1987. Image courtesy of Viktor Maryniuk.

*Figure 61: Photographs of the executed stained-glass windows in the Palace of Students*



Image by Viktor Maryniuk, 1987. Images provided courtesy of Viktor Maryniuk.

## Conclusions

My study has constantly been obstructed by wartime restrictions. Thus, I was unable to visit the archive of the Union of Artists of Ukraine in Kyiv to obtain more information; the institution denied access to the documents due to martial law. Some important people have also been beyond my reach: Dmytrenko, the author of *Union of Artists in Odesa*, a source that turned out to be enormously helpful to my research, postponed my request for conversation until the war ends. He is now serving in the military. However, despite all the difficulties, I want to share a simple yet crucial point that has been occupying my mind: I should not delay my study because of the war. It is specifically because of the war that I must not do so.

Maryniuk joined the Union of Artists in 1987.<sup>72</sup> His dossier, which is kept in the Odesa branch of the union, is now an important source of information about his Soviet-era monumental works. The dossier itself bears a rather articulate inscription reading ‘Monumentalist’. His and Yastreb’s paintings were presented to a wider audience in Ukraine in the 1990s. In the 2010s, a number of national museums hosted personal retrospective exhibitions featuring works by both artists.<sup>73</sup> These days, the biggest project Maryniuk has been working on is a comprehensive catalogue of works made by Yastreb. Because of that, in his studio I was fortunate to discover many of her works that I had not seen previously. At that moment, I silently promised myself to write another piece specifically about her heritage.

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73 Odesa National Art Museum, “Viktor Maryniuk ‘Zhyty uvazhno’” (“Viktor Maryniuk ‘Live Attentively’”), 2020, <https://ofam.ua/exhibitions/live-carefully/> [accessed: 21.09.2023]; and *Den (The Day)*, “Polet ‘belogo angela’. Kievskaya vystavka odnoi iz samykh yarkikh predstavitelnit odesskogo andegraunda” (“Flight of the ‘White Angel’: A Kiev Exhibition of One of the Brightest Representatives of the Odessa Underground”), 21 March 2011, <https://day.kyiv.ua/ru/article/taym-aut/polet-belogo-angela> [accessed: 21.09.2023].

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# Museum as Destiny, Museum as Fortress: Moving Museum Objects during the War – Then and Now

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*Anna Aliyeva*

## Context: The Prism of Private War Experience

The conditions in which I am writing this article – the conditions of war – are far from the conditions of the academic style of research that usually results in methodical studies with a proper bibliography. The war temporality consists of dense and unpredictable events. It leaves no space for reflection and requires a dynamic and sharp reaction to reality, which becomes possible in the form of the documentary genre: essays, diaries, and memoirs. In this way, the factor of fate rapidly bursts into life, not only privately but also professionally.

The war caught me, a historian of 20th-century art, at my workplace at the National Art Museum of Ukraine. This text is written under the influence of the war, so it can be considered the result of extreme museum work – namely, the experience of preserving the museum collection during the first days of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. After ten days of living in the museum at the centre of Kyiv, surrounded by enemy troops at that time, I was forced to evacuate with my child. After almost a month of moving around, we ended up in a small German town in Thuringia, where I was able to start an internship at one of the local museums with the support of the Siemens Arts Program.

My personal museum experience of the first days of the war and news about the looting of museum collections in the south and east of Ukraine, as well as the inability to separate myself and my research interests from the fate of the Ukrainian collection, set the direction for my research at the Stiftung Schloss Friedenstein Gotha (the Foundation of the Friedenstein Palace). The losses of this museum's collection were so extensive that the institution has set aside a special sector in its art history research work – 'provenance and restitution' – with a focus on how museum property moves during the history of a museum collection.

Thuringia, where Schloss Friedenstein is located, used to be a crossroads for the transfer of looted cultural property during and after World War II. Through this land, the path of Ukrainian cultural properties, extracted by German militaries, has

passed as well. A thorough study of this topic is described in an article by US scholar Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, “Nazi-Looted Art from East and West in East Prussia: Initial Findings on the Erich Koch Collection”.<sup>1</sup> She identifies the region as one of the ‘provenance stations’ in the history of the movement of Ukrainian cultural property. Grimsted bases her research on many archives located in Germany, Ukraine, and the Russian Federation, and she also pays attention to the personal memories of witnesses to these events. This article inspired me to immerse myself in the study of the history of the displacement of Ukrainian museum objects, restitution after WWII, and the consideration of possible restitution that will be urgently needed after the Russo–Ukrainian War ends. This topic, combined with my personal experience of war museology and my desire to talk about the discourse of museum objects’ displacement to a wider audience, led me to this text, in which eclecticism is symptomatic of our turbulent times.

International and Ukrainian scholars have done a lot of research on the ways cultural property was moved during the extreme historical events of the 20th century, such as the revolutions and wars that filled that time. Authors like Victor Akulenko, Natalia Kulakova, Janet Blake, and Roger O’Keefe have studied this topic.<sup>2</sup> However, special attention has been paid to WWII, as it was accompanied by perhaps the largest-scale movement, mostly of a criminal nature, of museum property. The Ukrainian historian Serhii Kot, in his thorough monograph *Return and Restitution of Cultural Property in the Political and Cultural Life of Ukraine in the Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries*, provides an extended tour into the history of the transfers of museum property in Ukraine and abroad. In addition, he establishes terminology that correctly describes these processes, ready to be used in the legal field. Lastly, he publishes facts that can be considered precedents for future restitution.<sup>3</sup>

There are enough sources to study the topic of the illegal transfer of works of art from Ukrainian museums during the Second World War, including the digitised

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- 1 Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, “Nazi-Looted Art from East and West in East Prussia: Initial Findings on the Erich Koch Collection”, *International Journal of Cultural Property* 22/1, 2015, 7–60.
  - 2 See: Viktor Akulenko, *Mizhnarodne pravo okhorony kulturnykh tsinnostei ta yoho implementatsiia u vnutrishnomu pravi Ukrainy (International Law of Protection of Cultural Property and its Implementation in the Domestic Law of Ukraine)*, Kyiv: Yustinian, 2013; Natalia Kulakova, “Henezys mizhnarodnoho zakonodavstva shchodo okhorony ob’ektiv kulturnoi spadshchyny” (“The Genesis of International Legislation on the Protection of Cultural Heritage Sites”), *Pravo i suspilstvo (Law and Society)* 2, 2015, 240–244; Janet Blake, “On Defining the Cultural Heritage”, *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 49/1, 2000, 61–85, here 61; and Roger O’Keefe, *The Protection of Cultural Property in Armed Conflict*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 101–111, 207–219.
  - 3 Serhii Kot, *Povernennia i restyutsiia kulturnykh tsinnostei u politychnomu ta kulturnomu zhytti Ukrainy (20 – poch. 21 st.) (The Return and Restitution of Cultural Property in the Political and Cultural Life of Ukraine (20th–early-21st Centuries))*, Kyiv: Instytut istorii Ukrainy, 2020.

and inventoried archives of the Central State Archive of the Higher Authorities of Ukraine, the German Federal Archives, including the Federal Archives in Koblenz, and the regional archives of German states, in particular the Main State Archives in Weimar.<sup>4</sup> As for Ukraine, museum archives have lists of lost works of varying degrees of development, some of which have been published. But when we begin to dive into the actual information, it becomes clear that it is not so much the systematic nature of the losses that needs attention, but rather each individual case. The human factor plays an important role in the study of events that occurred in times of extreme tension. The current war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine provides an experience of direct contact with all the horrors of war. When confronted with them, it truly becomes clear what role the fate of an individual person, or even fate in the ancient sense of its meaning, can play in the overall history.

## Process: A Brief History of the Movement of Cultural Property during and after World War II – Ukrainian Art Historian Polina Kulzhenko and Her Museum Experience

We can briefly outline the main routes of movement of Ukrainian museum property during and after WWII, focusing on the peculiarity of these movements – namely, the movement of objects in both directions: from east to west and from west to east. During WWII, Nazi troops occupied a large part of Ukraine in 1941 and introduced the power of the occupation administration, the Reichskommissariat Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> One of the subdivisions of this administration was in charge of cultural institutions, such as archives, libraries, higher education institutions, and museums. The archives of Reichsleiter Alfred Rosenberg's operational staff (the ERR archive) are available at the Central State Archive of Higher Authorities and Governments of Ukraine, and it is on the basis of these documents that one can roughly characterise the work of the

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- 4 Central State Archive of Higher Authorities and Governments of Ukraine (CSAHAGU), "Documents of the operational headquarters of Reichsleiter Rosenberg", <https://err.tsdavo.gov.ua/> [accessed: 20.01.2023]; Federal Archives, official website, <https://www.bundesarchiv.de/> [accessed: 24.01.2023]; Main State Archive of Weimar, official website, <https://landesarchiv.thueringen.de/weimar> [accessed: 25.01.2023]; and Federal Archives, "Koblenz", <https://www.bundesarchiv.de/DE/Navigation/Meta/Ueber-uns/Dienstorte/Koblenz/koblenz.html> [accessed: 25.01.2023].
  - 5 Tatiana Sebta, "Raikhskomisariat Ukraina" ("Reichskommissariat Ukraine"), *Entsyklopediia istorii Ukrainy (Encyclopaedia of Ukrainian History)*, [http://resource.history.org.ua/cgi-bin/eiu/history.exe?Z21ID=&I21DBN=EIU&P21DBN=EIU&S21STN=1&S21REF=10&S21FMT=eiu\\_all&C21COM=S&S21CNR=20&S21PO1=0&S21PO2=0&S21PO3=TRN=&S21COLORTERMS=0&S21TR=Rajkhskomisariat\\_U](http://resource.history.org.ua/cgi-bin/eiu/history.exe?Z21ID=&I21DBN=EIU&P21DBN=EIU&S21STN=1&S21REF=10&S21FMT=eiu_all&C21COM=S&S21CNR=20&S21PO1=0&S21PO2=0&S21PO3=TRN=&S21COLORTERMS=0&S21TR=Rajkhskomisariat_U) [accessed: 13.08.2024].

occupation authorities with cultural property and its movement. The occupation authorities described the collections of artworks, architectural monuments, libraries, and archives in as much detail as possible and analysed art processes in Ukraine. The archive's documents make clear that this work was carried out with the participation of not only German but also Ukrainian specialists who collaborated with the occupation authorities.<sup>6</sup>

The ERR archive, which is stored in the Central State Archive of Higher Authorities and Governments of Ukraine, provides a thorough overview of the cultural situation in occupied Ukraine. This archive consists of reports describing the status, specifics, and trends of the work of cultural institutions in Ukraine, including Kyiv, and details the history of institutions' foundations, their cultural role in the city's structure, their staff, and the material needs of such institutions. There are also plans for the development of these cultural institutions, as well as plans for the use of objects from museums, archives, and libraries, both on-site and on the territory of the Nazi state. The names of the German officers who made these reports are hidden behind pseudonyms, but the fact that the authors of the documents were aware of the state of affairs allows us to assume that the Ukrainian cultural community cooperated with the German occupiers.

The occupation regime in Ukraine was extremely brutal, resulting in hundreds of thousands of victims of the Nazis' actions. For example, during the German occupation of Kyiv from 1941 to 1943, the German occupiers shot civilians and Soviet prisoners of war, the Jewish and Roma population on ethnic grounds, and Communist party members and activists. In just two days, on 29 and 30 September 1941, nearly 34,000 Jews were shot in Babyn Yar in Kyiv.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, the language of the documents from the Nazi archives sounds especially unnatural – balanced and calm, claiming dominance and objectivity. This calm language of the documents justifies the interest in studying the cultural heritage of Ukraine as an alternative to the Soviet one, and this work with Soviet culture can likely be attributed to the goal of studying the opponent's ideology. The Nazis were particularly interested in so-called 'Bolshevik art'. The archive contains a "List of Bolshevik paintings from the Ukrainian museum in Kyiv",<sup>8</sup> which lists some works

6 CSAHAGU, "Fondy" ("Collections"), <https://err.tsdavo.gov.ua/fonds/?Limit=20&Page=1&SortField=FondNumber&SortOrder=asc>, [accessed: 20.01.2023]. See specifically collections 3674 and 3676.

7 For more, see: Vitalii Nakhmanovich, Anatolii Podolskyi, and Mikhailo Tiahlii (eds.), *Babyn Yar: masove ubyvstvo i pamiat pro noho, materialy mizhnarodnoi naukovoï konferentsiï, 24–25 zhovtnia 2011 r., m. Kyiv (Babin Yar: Mass Murder and the Memory of It, Materials from an International Conference, 24–25 October 2011, Kyiv)*, 2nd Edition, Kyiv: FOP Moskalenko O. M., 2017.

8 CSAHAGU, collection (col.) 3676, inventory (inv.) 1, document (doc.) 49, years (y.) 1942–1943, image (img.) 22, <https://err.tsdavo.gov.ua/file-viewer/56#file-32184> [accessed: 24.07.2024].

from the National Art Museum of Ukraine. The occupation authorities clearly distinguished between Ukrainian and Soviet culture and recorded the process of absorption of Ukrainian culture by the Soviet authorities. They used the opposition of the Ukrainian cultural community to Soviet ideology and Soviet management from the metropolis to discern between Ukrainian and Soviet culture.

The German occupiers were particularly interested in the National Art Museum of Ukraine, which placed both modernist and socialist art under the same category of 'Bolshevik art' and included artists of Jewish origin. Some of the works on this list were taken by the Nazis, along with a large number of works from Ukrainian museums during the retreat of the German Army from the territory of Ukraine in 1943.<sup>9</sup> The collection of the National Art Museum today contains several works from this list that survived all the wartime movements from east to west and from west to east.

Reports by the Nazis on the artistic process in Ukraine describe the current state of the art field; introduce leading artists from Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Odesa, such as the communities of the schools of monumental art of Mykhailo Boichuk, Anatolii Petrytskyi, and Fedir Krychevskiy; and recount the history of the Kyiv State Art Institute and the Soviet authorities' repression of these artists. There is documented scholarly interest in Ukrainian culture, its contextual separation from the Soviet narrative, and the intention to study it. Surprisingly, the documents from the ERR archive lay out the 'real history' of the artistic process in Ukraine in the first third of the 20th century as seen by contemporary researchers, criticising the interference of the Soviet ideological apparatus in the development of Ukrainian art. This view on Ukrainian art became possible only in the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Nazi reports also describe the destruction of St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery, a monument of medieval art, by the Soviet authorities according to the new city plan. Some of the surviving mosaics were taken to Germany during the Nazi looting of Kyiv museums, and after the surrender of the Nazi regime, they were transferred by the Americans to the Soviet Union as part of the restitution process; unfortunately, they have not yet returned to Ukraine. Now they are kept in Russian museums.<sup>10</sup>

9 CSAHAGU, col. 3676, inv. 1, doc. 49, y. 1942–1943, img. 23–24, <https://err.tsdavo.gov.ua/file-viewer/56#file-32185> [accessed: 24.07.2024]; and CSAHAGU, col. 3676, inv. 1, doc. 49, y. 1942–1943, img. 47, <https://err.tsdavo.gov.ua/file-viewer/56#file-32209> [accessed: 24.07.2024].

10 Serhii Kot and Yurii Koreniuk, "Mykhailivski pamiatky v rosiiskiykh muzeiakh" ("St. Michael's Monuments in Russian Museums"), *Pamiatky Ukrainy (Monuments of Ukraine)* 1, 1999, 63–80.

In 1942, the Reichskommissariat Ukraine planned to export Ukrainian Soviet artworks to Berlin as an illustration of the ideology of Bolshevism.<sup>11</sup> However, the plans quickly changed: after the war turned in favour of the Soviet Union in 1943, German troops began to retreat from the occupied territories, and a large-scale process of alienation and the illegal removal of art objects from Ukrainian museums and private collections began. This movement took place both in a centralised manner, in whole blocks, and in a chaotic manner, with individual officers stealing individual artworks. This process lasted until 1945, but in the territory of Poland and Germany the logistics of transportation varied according to the course of the Soviet offensive from the east and the Allied offensive in the west. The cordon of encirclement closed in the geographical centre of Germany, and thus the path of transportation of some groups of artworks was interrupted here.<sup>12</sup>

Not only official documents provide us with information about this time and the activities of Ukrainian and, in particular, Kyiv museums during the war. The personal memories of participants are also an important source of knowledge on these actions. Today, during the new devastating war against Ukraine and the terrible refrains from the past, these memories give rise to a special sensitivity to the archive as a medium of art history. For me, it is important to show the private stories of people – representatives of the cultural community – whose lives have undergone dramatic changes. It is important to provide an alternative perspective on the fates of professionals. In the future, Ukraine will come across different stories of people in the de-occupied territories, including the fates of workers of the state museums, who unfortunately were not always able to resist the demands of the occupation authorities and sometimes had to cooperate with the occupiers either to save their lives or to preserve museum objects. Focusing on people's stories, and how these stories are told and under the influence of what factors, allows us to imbue the legal plane with a sense of real life, which is why 'human rights' work is booming.

An interesting, contradictory example from WWII is Polina Kulzhenkos's story. She was a Ukrainian art historian and museum worker. Before the war, Kulzhenko worked in several Kyiv museums and taught at an art institute and university. In particular, she was the head of the graphic department at the Khanenko Museum. She was among those who did not evacuate from the city during the Nazi occupation of Ukraine but continued to work in her field of study in Kyiv. Like some other

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11 CSAHAGU, col. 3676, inv. 1, doc. 49, y. 1942–1943, img. 21, <https://err.tsdavto.gov.ua/file-view/56#file-32187> [accessed: 20.01.2023].

12 Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, "Nazi-Looted Books Still Far from Home", Library of Congress, lecture, 01:05:03, 2016, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021690147/> [accessed: 19.07.2024].

cultural figures, Kulzhenko signed work contracts with representatives of the Nazi occupation to have something to live on and not to give up her life's work.<sup>13</sup>

After the war, the Soviet authorities sentenced Kulzhenko to ten years in prison for her activities, and she spent her post-prison life in exile. Only when Ukraine became independent was it possible for her to publish her memories of wartime and her role in the illegal removal of artistic property from Kyiv museums (which she wrote in 1946).<sup>14</sup> The style of her memoirs and the conditions under which they were written make it evident that not all objective facts are present in her story, but the context of her work for the Nazi occupation authorities becomes clear in this sense. Now, when I read her memoirs, I am particularly struck by the sensory coincidences in the perception of the war and its tragic episodes: in her memoir, Kulzhenko's description of the explosions in Kyiv in the autumn of 1941 is, on an emotional and factual level, in tune with the events in Kyiv on 10 October 2022. On that day, a rocket attack by Russian troops in the central part of the city damaged educational and cultural institutions around Shevchenko Park, including the Khanenko Museum and Kyiv Art Gallery.

Kulzhenko's memories of the first months of the war in Kyiv in 1941 echo the present day and what we have experienced:

The war came crashing down like an avalanche – for the first few days, it all seemed like a terrible nightmare rather than reality surrounding you. The evacuation that soon began seemed strange, and there was no thought that Kyiv could be in danger of being overrun by the enemy. On 18 September, I was working with tour guides [...] when I returned home from the museum – it was almost impossible to cross Khreshchatyk – the Red Army units were retreating. Shells flew overhead. In the evening, fires broke out in all parts of the city [...] On the morning of 19 September, I hurried to the Russian and Western art museums, overcoming my fears that the museum buildings had been set on fire by the explosions of shells burning in the park. The buildings were mostly intact, but almost all the windows and skylights were shattered, the roofs were perforated, and all the halls were strewn with shrapnel.<sup>15</sup>

Kulzhenko was not only a witness to the actions of the German occupation administration in Ukrainian museums but also a direct participant in these actions. Typewritten letters and protocols of Kulzhenko's interrogations by the NKVD – the USSR's predecessor of the KGB – are evidence of the looting of Kyiv museums by

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13 Polina Kulzhenko, "Spomyn" ("Memories"), *Pamiatky Ukrainy (Monuments of Ukraine)* 1, 1998, 149–153.

14 Ibid.

15 Kulzhenko, "Spomyn", 149 [author's trans.].

Nazi troops and are a tangible testament to the times; they explain the art historian's motives for cooperating with the occupiers, which were based on the desire to preserve works of art:

On about September 10, Dr. Winter told me to start packing the paintings into crates to take them to the city of Kamenets-Podolsk. To my question regarding the purpose, he replied that it would be necessary to leave Kiev, but that there would be a severe struggle [...]. "Since we know" – he added – "that your life is inextricably linked with museum artefacts, we suggest that you accompany them to Kamenets-Podolsk".<sup>16</sup>

When the German troops retreated from Ukraine, Kulzhenko was preparing for the illegal export of objects from Ukrainian museums and accompanied the shipment. Her path lay to the west, through Kamianets-Podilskyi to Prussia and to the estate of Wildenhoff (now the Polish Dzikowo).

There, Kulzhenko spent several months looking after the works. The art historian recalls how she spent almost all her time cataloguing the works in detail, and she always had the manuscript of the catalogue with her. However, the Red Army was advancing on Prussia from the southeast and was already directly approaching the estate where Kulzhenko and the objects were based.<sup>17</sup> Later, according to her typewritten letter, a fire broke out in the estate as a result of the attack, which completely destroyed the building.<sup>18</sup> Grimsted mentions this was the doing of the SS commando.<sup>19</sup> According to Kulzhenko, the boxes with the works were also burnt, and she notes that the catalogue of the works she had compiled was not preserved.<sup>20</sup> Can we be completely sure that these works of art were destroyed? Can we be sure that even the catalogue has not been preserved?

The extreme work of Ukrainian museum workers and collections conservators during the war makes us look at past events with a new perspective, giving us reason to doubt the official versions of the events. In particular, given the motives and context of Kulzhenko's actions – a museum worker who committed the crime of collaboration for the sake of preserving and maintaining the museum collection – it is hard to believe that she lost the catalogue describing the removed museum objects that she created herself. This testimony was obtained during Kulzhenko's interrogation by the NKVD; the destruction of the works and manuscript is not confirmed by other

16 Polina Kulzhenko, letter from April 1946, 6 [author's trans.], on: *Forgotten Heritage*, "Polyna KULZHENKO Vospomynania" ("Polina KULZHENKO Memories"), 11 July 2017, <http://lostart.org.ua/en/research/1020.html> [accessed: 19.07.2024] [author's trans.].

17 *Ibid.*, 8, 10.

18 *Ibid.*, 12.

19 Grimsted, "Nazi-Looted Art from East and West in East Prussia", 13.

20 Kulzhenko, letter from April 1946, 14.

documents. A more in-depth study of the circumstances of this event, including a review of war protocols from the city, could shed more light on these occurrences. As for her fate as an art historian, despite her comprehensive artistic knowledge and extensive experience with objects of Ukrainian art, Kulzhenko spent most of her life in exile; the Soviet authorities banned her from working in Kyiv.<sup>21</sup>

## Postwar Period

Let us return to the legal aspect of the circulation of works of art that were illegally removed from Ukrainian museums. It is important to understand that the restitution processes that took place in the postwar period did not always take into account the interests of Ukrainian museums. After the capitulation of Germany in 1945 and its division into occupation zones between the Allied forces, a new stage of the active movement of artworks began, in particular from west to east, from Germany to the USSR. Between 1945 and 1949, trophy brigades worked in the Soviet occupation zone in Germany, confiscating entire factories and enterprises, raw materials, and products following the approved reparations plan. Since 1943, the USSR's Academy of Sciences had been developing a plan to compensate for the losses of Soviet museums during the war at the expense of works of art belonging to Germany. Igor Grabar headed this work. In the field of restoring the loss of cultural property, it was decided to introduce a mechanism of 'compensatory restitution', which provided for the removal of artworks from Germany.<sup>22</sup>

The development of the plan for 'compensatory restitution' began in 1943 with Soviet art historians compiling so-called lists of equivalents that contained calculations of the value of works of art, which were supposed to compensate for the losses and destruction caused by the Nazi invaders.<sup>23</sup> The commission members, who were art experts, were knowledgeable about the collections of German museums, and could rely on collection catalogues and current prices on the art and antiques market, although the art market in the Soviet Union did not officially exist.<sup>24</sup>

21 Serhii Bilokin, "Kulzhenko Polina Arkadiivna", *Entsyklopedii istorii Ukrainy (Encyclopaedia of Ukrainian History)*, 2008, [http://www.history.org.ua/?termin=Kulzhenko\\_P](http://www.history.org.ua/?termin=Kulzhenko_P) [accessed: 19.07.2024].

22 "Dokument no. 1" ("Document no. 1"), in: Mikhail Piotrovsky and Anna Aponasenko (eds.), *Gosudarstvennyi Hermitage Peremeshchenoe iskusstvo, 1945–1958, Arkhivnye dokumenty (State Hermitage Displaced Art, 1945–1958, Archival Documents)*, Part 1, St. Petersburg: Izdatelstvo Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha, 2014, 80.

23 "Dokument no. 5" ("Document no. 5"), *Gosudarstvennyi Hermitage Peremeshchenoe iskusstvo*, 107–108, here 107.

24 "Dokument no. 1", *Gosudarstvennyi Hermitage Peremeshchenoe iskusstvo*, 80.

They insisted on removing works of world heritage, suggesting that works of German art of local significance be left in place:

It would seem to me that we should not in any way encroach upon such exhibits in German museums, which are national monuments of Germany itself. It is not so important for us to get German works of art as it is to get what they have managed to collect from all over the world.<sup>25</sup>

The lists of works for compensation did contain world classics, but the actual removal of artworks from German museums and private collections was in some cases chaotic, just as the removal of art objects from the territory of Ukraine also took place in both centralised and private ways. After the war ended, Soviet trophy brigades began to confiscate art objects from museums in Berlin, Dresden, Potsdam, and Gotha, including those found in cellars, anti-aircraft towers, and mines near German cities at the end of the fighting. Preservation groups were formed from the seized works and sent in several waves by rail to the USSR. In particular, the State Hermitage Museum in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) became a key destination for these shipments. The State Hermitage Museum's records of the postwar years give a complete picture of the staggering volume of movements, with thousands of storage units.<sup>26</sup>

After the removal of works from German museums, Soviet trophy brigades began searching for works taken by the Nazi troops from Soviet museums, including those in Ukraine. For example, in Weimar (Thuringia), they found works from the Gauleiter Koch Collection, which also included works from Kyiv museums.<sup>27</sup> The process of search and seizure lasted until 1949, but after its completion not all objects were returned from the reception centre to the museums or owners: the State Hermitage Museum and other museums in the Russian Federation still have art objects that were in transit there in 1945–1949.

The political and justice processes in postwar Europe – namely, the recognition of the Nazis' crimes against humanity, the conviction and punishment of the Nazi regime and the National Socialist Party of Germany, and the rehabilitation of the victims of their policies – contributed to the introduction of a new humanistic and legal paradigm in the world. The restitution policy developed in the postwar years is based on the two Hague Conventions on the Law of Land Warfare (1899 and 1907),

25 "Dokument no. 3" ("Document no. 3"), *Gosudarstvennyi Hermitage Peremeshchennoe iskusstvo*, 83–84, here 83 [author's trans.]

26 Konstantin Akinscha, Grigori Koslow, and Clemens Toussaint, *Operation Beutekunst: die Verlagerung deutscher Kulturgüter in die Sowjetunion nach 1945 (Operation Looted Art: The Transfer of German Cultural Assets to the Soviet Union after 1945)*, Nürnberg: Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 1995.

27 See the Main State Archives in Weimar, depo 175, col. 0204, Catalogue of the Museum Property of the Königsberger Gauleiter Koch in the Landesmuseum.

which prohibit the looting of cultural property. In the 1950s, the Federal Republic of Germany developed such laws as the Federal Law on Compensation for Victims of National Socialist Persecution (1953),<sup>28</sup> the Federal Compensation Act (1956),<sup>29</sup> and the Federal Restitution Act (1957).<sup>30</sup>

In 1958, another important step in the regulation of property relations between the newly created German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the USSR was the mutual restitution of works, which saw the exchange of works seized during WWII between GDR and USSR museum institutions.<sup>31</sup> For example, a significant part of the objects from Berlin's Museum Island returned to Berlin, including the famous Pergamon Altar, which is now part of the collection of the Pergamon Museum.<sup>32</sup>

To the present day, many Ukrainian and German museums, as we know from the lists submitted to the Lost Art database, are still unable to find lost works of art. For example, more than six hundred works from the collection of the National Art Museum of Ukraine are considered lost.<sup>33</sup> The centre-to-centre exchange scheme and its consequence, the centralised storage of works returned from Germany to the museums of the Soviet metropolis, became an obstacle in the way of returning the works to Ukrainian museums. While the issue of lost objects that are still in Europe has the potential to be resolved, the fate of Ukrainian objects that ended up in Russian museum collections after WWII remains uncertain. It is important to note that the status of 'lost' is possible even if there is evidence that the object is located in a particular institution. For example, we know from transfer documents and catalogues that objects from St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery in Kyiv are in the Russian Federation and were illegally transferred there, but for Kyiv they have the status of 'lost'. Even the existence of reliable information about the location of the lost artworks, which can be used as evidence in court, does not guarantee a trial on

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- 28 Federal Act on Compensation for Victims of National Socialist Persecution (Federal Compensation Act – BEG), 18 September 1953, <https://reparations.qub.ac.uk/assets/uploads/1953-Germany-Federal-Act-on-Compensation-of-Victims-of-Persecution.pdf> [accessed: 21.07.2024].
- 29 Wollheim Memorial, “Federal Compensation Law (1956)”, [http://www.wollheim-memorial.de/en/bundesentschaedigungsgesetz\\_1956](http://www.wollheim-memorial.de/en/bundesentschaedigungsgesetz_1956) [accessed: 21.07.2024].
- 30 Bundesgesetz zur Regelung der rückerstattungsrechtlichen Geldverbindlichkeiten des Deutschen Reichs und gleichgestellter Rechtsträger (Bundesrückerstattungsgesetz – BRÜG) (Federal law on the regulation of the restitution law monetary liabilities of the German Reich and equivalent legal entities (Federal Restitution Act – BRÜG)), 19 July 1957, [https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/br\\_g/BR%C3%BCG.pdf](https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/br_g/BR%C3%BCG.pdf) [accessed: 20.01.2023].
- 31 “Dokument no. 82” (“Document no. 82”), *Gosudarstvennyi Hermitage Peremeshchennoe iskusstvo*, 340–341, here 340.
- 32 “Dokument no. 62” (“Document no. 62”), *Gosudarstvennyi Hermitage Peremeshchennoe iskusstvo*, 258–261, here 258.
- 33 Lost Art Database, German Lost Art Foundation, “Kiew (Київ/Kyiv) / Nationales Kunstmuseum der Ukraine” (“Kiev (Київ/Kyiv) / National Art Museum of Ukraine”), <https://www.lost-art.de/de/Verlust/540619> [accessed: 22.01.2023].

this matter will take place because the Russian Federation neglects laws not only in the field of human rights but also in the field of property relations.<sup>34</sup>

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the acquisition of legal subjectivity by the countries that were part of the USSR, the restitution process was ready to be restarted in the newly formed states. However, the Russian Federation adopted a federal law that legalises ‘trophy’ objects – namely, art objects displaced as a result of military operations that are located on the territory of the Russian Federation and are recognised as its property.<sup>35</sup> According to this law, the Russian Federation also reserves the ‘right’ not to carry out restitution measures and not to provide information about the ‘trophy’ objects themselves. Thus, the Russian Federation has chosen the path of criminal retention of museum objects belonging to other countries. Such an opaque policy in the field of museum affairs makes any further research on the fate of museum objects displaced during WWII to the territory of the Russian Federation almost impossible.

Today, the Museum Fund of Ukraine is experiencing unprecedented losses of cultural heritage as a result of the looting and destruction of Ukrainian museums by Russian troops and the illegal removal of works of art through the territory of annexed Crimea to the Russian Federation.<sup>36</sup> An important step should be to develop a plan for the future restitution of these objects and the introduction of compensation through reparations. In this process, the experience of the postwar period of the mid-20th century may be helpful. The conclusions that can be drawn from the examples given above are that both parties – the plaintiff and the defendant – must fully participate in the restitution process. The criminal actions of the aggressor should not only be recorded and judicially adjudicated with a sentence. A convicted aggressor who is brought to justice must be ready to restore property justice and actively contribute to this process.

A good example of working with provenance as a basis for restitution is the German government’s initiative, the interactive Lost Art database, organised by the German Lost Art Foundation.<sup>37</sup> In 1994, the Coordination Office of the German Federal

34 Kot and Yurii, “Mykhailivski pamiatky v rosiiskykh muzeiakh”, 63.

35 Federal law “On cultural property displaced to the USSR as a result of the Second World War and located on the territory of the Russian Federation”, 26 April 2000, <https://duma.consultant.ru/documents/653580> [accessed: 17.01.2023].

36 See, for instance: Andrei Tumanov, “Sobrali kollektcii: Muzeinyi fond RF popolnitsya tsenostnyami na milliard” (“Gathered Collections: The Museum Fund of the Russian Federation Will Be Replenished with Valuables Worth a Billion Dollars”), *Izvestiya (News)*, 14 October 2022, <https://iz.ru/1409315/andrei-tumanov/sobrali-kollektcii-muzeinyi-fond-rf-popolnitsia-tcnostiami-na-milliard> [accessed: 19.07.2024].

37 Lost Art Database, German Lost Art Foundation, official website, [www.lostart.de](http://www.lostart.de) [accessed: 18.01.2023].

States for the Repatriation of Cultural Property was founded in Bremen. It was established to record the loss of cultural property between 1933 and 1945 and to provide a basis for its repatriation. Headquartered in Magdeburg, the office was merged with the German Foundation for Lost Art in 2015. The resource has an informative function, but also has a legal leverage – it prevents the circulation of art objects with opaque provenance on the antiques market. The labelling of a work of art in the Lost Art database as 'lost' is the basis for freezing the lot at auction. Therefore, honest art market participants can always check the status of an art object if they have doubts about the legality of its circulation.

The database contains information about art objects that were lost as a result of the policies of the Nazi Party of Germany. Both museums and art collectors who are looking for lost art objects can participate in this initiative. For example, the National Art Museum of Ukraine has recorded almost six hundred objects in the Lost Art database that were lost during the Second World War.<sup>38</sup> These are mostly 19th-century and 20th-century works of Ukrainian art, including cityscapes and architectural and ethnographic sketches. The National Art Museum of Ukraine and its director, Yulia Lytvynets, are conducting thorough research on the loss of museum works during World War II, which were taken by the Nazi troops from Ukraine to the territory of modern-day Poland, Germany, Romania, France, the Netherlands, and the United States.

All the ways of illegal transfer of cultural property from the territory of Ukraine during the Second World War have not yet been identified, but the current Russo–Ukrainian War leads to further looting of collections and the destruction of Ukrainian museum buildings in the occupied territories. In the face of Russian aggression, Ukrainian museums have been forced to act at their own risk, using available resources to protect their collections and staff.

## **Fortress: The Defence of Kyiv and the National Art Museum of Ukraine during the Russian Invasion**

During war, it is the material side of a work of art, not its narrative that manifests itself in full. The war forces art history to narrow the focus of art interpretation and to develop practical knowledge in extreme conditions purely about the material nature of art, taking the object as a unit of measurement. When museology faces a reality that competes with action films in terms of the concentration of catastrophic events, the discipline of preservation comes to the fore. At the very least, these preservation efforts allow museum workers to secure objects of material culture and, at the very most, prevent museums from losing objects belonging to their collection. A popular

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38 Lost Art Database, "Kiev".

discourse of museology in recent years, which sees the museum as an open public space in which such a function as 'storage' is considered a priori unshakeable, cannot withstand the turbulence of wartime. In wartime conditions, the characteristics of artworks, such as size, material, and degree of preservation, as well as their signs of uniqueness among other works with similar material characteristics, such as authorship, time, and place of creation, become prevalent. These parameters are decisive in making decisions regarding extreme conservation measures – in particular, the evacuation of works of art.

At the beginning of 2022, the feeling of war was in the air, and it was felt in the National Art Museum of Ukraine. The Department of Cultural Property Expertise was processing requests for the removal of art objects (from people's private collections) from the southeastern cities of Ukraine in unprecedented numbers. A few days before the outbreak of war, the staff cleared all the passages and corridors in the administrative, research, and collection parts of the building. The museum administration was preparing for a possible siege of the city. But the war offensive began as unexpectedly as ever.

To assess the risks faced by the museum during the Russian offensive on Kyiv, we need to focus on its geographical location – the museum building is located at the foot of the Pecherskiy hills, on the approach to the 'government quarter' from Hrushevskoho Street. Government buildings begin immediately behind the museum, including the Mariinsky Palace, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, and the path to the Office of the President and the Central Bank of Ukraine.

A counterpoint on the military map of Kyiv, 24 February 2022 was not the first time that the museum found itself on the 'demarcation line' and turned into a fortress. The museum staff already had experience of round-the-clock duty in the museum and extreme evacuation of works when they were at the heart of the events during the Revolution of Dignity in 2014.

So, in the first hours of the Russian invasion, the museum's director, Yulia Lytvynets, arrived to ensure the first level of evacuation for the most valuable works from modern and ancient art. Although the museum urged the staff to take care of their personal safety first, by 9 a.m. most of the employees were already present in the museum. All those who were not blocked in the suburbs of the capital were on their way to the museum. A human chain was formed in the exhibition halls, which helped move the works of art from the 18th- and 19th-century exhibition to the depot rooms in a short time. The dismantling of the Baroque objects was a challenge due to the large dimensions of the objects and the weight of the solid wood material itself. However, this extremely difficult job was handled quickly thanks to the museum staff's teamwork. At the same time, the news was broadcasting – a nearby town was on fire, and the enemy was approaching the city. The heavy vibration of explosions could be felt underfoot. By noon, the priority work was completed. The

administration introduced a duty schedule that met the conditions of wartime – museum workers had to go on daily duty in pairs.

The next morning, 25 February, my colleague, the head of the museum archive, and I took up our daily duty. But we stayed in the museum for ten days instead of one. Strangely enough, we felt safe in the museum even though we were in the midst of the Russian invaders' main goal of capturing the government quarter of the capital. The mood was set by adrenaline and a fast-paced working atmosphere. In addition to us on duty, other people arrived at the museum – employees and a couple of artists, along with their pets. By noon, there were nine of us, including my seven-year-old daughter.

After being instructed to evacuate the building, we 'quartered' in the offices, taped up the windows, and set up a minimal life. We established a headquarters in the exhibition department; next to it was the restorers' room, where we made an improvised kitchen. It turned out that the museum had almost everything we needed to live comfortably and, most importantly, a secure basement that became our bomb shelter.

On the first day of our stay at the museum, we began barricading the building and systematically ensuring the safety of the exhibits. The presence of such a spontaneous group of specialists from different areas of museum work allowed us to act technically and purposefully in the following days. First, we hid the works with the status of 'temporary storage' that were in the museum at the time of the attack.

At that time, Russian sabotage and reconnaissance groups were actively advancing on Kyiv, repelled on the Left Bank of the Dnipro and in Obolon. We were working with live street camera feeds from the square and expected that by the evening the Russians might reach the government district, and thus our museum. After the initial work on the preservation of the exhibits was done, we continued to barricade the roof and the basement, leaving only two exits from the building free. Soon, we decided to conduct the second stage of the evacuation, a large-scale relocation of modernist and ancient art exhibits from the second floor of the museum to safer places, as well as to prepare climate-friendly places for the long-term storage of icons. These processes took place in the evenings in a 'light-masking mode'. The choice of time can be explained by our psychological state – the work distracted us from the nighttime terrors that took place outside the museum building. We could hear the sounds of machine gun fire and individual shots, followed by sirens in the morning and explosions. Ukraine's special military forces were clearing the government district of enemy subversive groups.

Russian troops seized the suburbs of Kyiv and, after three days of the offensive, it became clear that the Armed Forces of Ukraine had managed to stop them and keep them on the outskirts of the capital. We had a brief opportunity to go outside for food. When my colleagues and I went on a trip to the only working market in the area, we saw how the museum and Kyiv had turned into a fortress. There was an un-

usual silence. Absolutely empty, but flooded with sunshine, Sophia and St. Michael's Squares surprised us with their familiar yet unusual beauty. The greatness of this beauty and the feeling of history gave us enormous hope because we had nothing else...

For two years, masterpieces of Ukrainian modernism from the collection of the National Art Museum of Ukraine have been travelling around Europe. Exhibitions in Madrid, Brussels, Dresden, Vienna, Edinburgh, and Cologne give viewers an opportunity to get acquainted with Ukrainian art. But another important reason for these tours is to preserve the main objects from the collection, leaving them on view. The museum continues to operate, focusing on internal research work. The possibilities of restitution for the Museum Fund of Ukraine remain unclear as long as the war lasts. However, it is already known that alongside reclaiming works that were taken during WWII, Ukraine will also have to petition to have works restituted that were taken by the Russians from the occupied territories of southern and eastern Ukraine.

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

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Ewa Sułek

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 Lavra<sup>1</sup>, 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',<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> or creating a state-run museum that would present treasures of Ukrainian art and culture collected from multiple establishments, a so-called Ukrainian Louvre.<sup>4</sup> 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".<sup>5</sup> 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/mystetsky-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 Dychenko<sup>6</sup> 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,<sup>7</sup> which at the time of the Cossack Hetmanate<sup>8</sup> and Hetman Mazepa was the most developed part of the city.

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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: Plokhly, *The Gates of Europe*, 142. Paul Robert Magocsy 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).<sup>9</sup>

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



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

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(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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> In 1706, the Russian Emperor Peter I ordered the construction of the Pechersk Fortress<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> [...] It was very important for Russia to keep its army here because this land was not Russian – it was Ukrainian.<sup>18</sup> The region was hostile to the Russian state, and therefore, troops had to be kept here on a constant basis. [...] That is, this fortress<sup>19</sup> was built not for use in military action but to intimidate the local population and show [them] who the boss is.<sup>20</sup>

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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](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.<sup>21</sup> 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 1803<sup>22</sup>), 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).<sup>23</sup>

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



Image by author, November 2021.

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 region<sup>24</sup>: "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"<sup>25</sup>.

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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,<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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 Mazepa<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup>

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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](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](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).<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> Catherine II followed Peter I's idea of “making Russia a great power” by means of politics, diplomacy, and military coercion.<sup>33</sup> 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”.<sup>34</sup> 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 architecture<sup>35</sup> 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”.<sup>36</sup>

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.<sup>37</sup> 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

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31 Valentina Mikhailovna Belkovskaya and Olga Valeryevna Novikova, “Arsenal zdes samyi pri-mechatelnyi”. K istorii sozdaniya Starogo Arsenal a v Sankt-Peterburge” (“The Arsenal Here is the Most Remarkable”: On the History of the Old Arsenal in St. Petersburg”), *Klassika v I skusstve 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.<sup>38</sup> 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’”.<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup> It was handed over to the city of Kyiv in 2005,<sup>41</sup> 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,<sup>42</sup> 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,<sup>43</sup> and two solo shows of Ukrainian artists.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup>

*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 Ukraine<sup>46</sup> – 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.<sup>47</sup>

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 Church<sup>48</sup> to the artwork, which criticised the symbiosis of “regime and church”.<sup>49</sup> 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”.<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup> 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.<sup>52</sup> The myth manufactured by the Lavra’s monks will have long-lasting consequences, including Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.<sup>53</sup>

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.<sup>54</sup>

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.<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup> 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+*<sup>57</sup> 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*<sup>58</sup> (2017) focused on the figure of Mykhailo Boychuk and artists from his circle belonging to the generation of the so-called Executed Renaissance,<sup>59</sup> who were killed during the Great Purges of 1937 and had their artistic legacy destroyed (Fig. 67). *Futuromarennia*<sup>60</sup> (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).

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*.

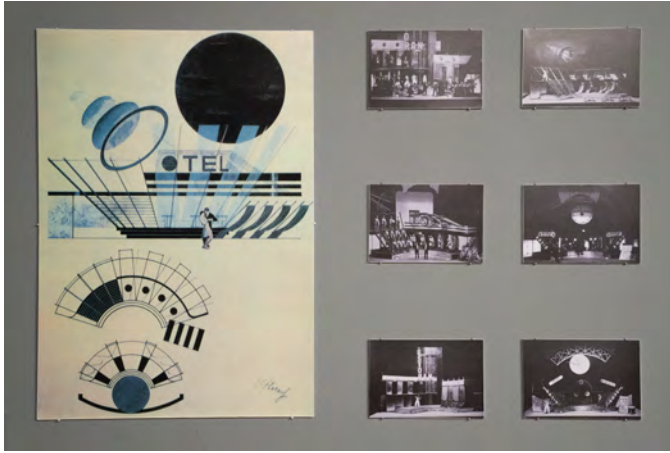
Figure 68: *Futuromarennia*

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,<sup>61</sup> Maria Prymachenko,<sup>62</sup> and Paraska Plytka-Horytsvit.<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup> 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”.<sup>67</sup>

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.<sup>68</sup> 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.<sup>69</sup>

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 Ablaze<sup>70</sup> 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.<sup>71</sup> 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.<sup>72</sup>

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*<sup>73</sup> 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.<sup>74</sup> In the second wartime exhibition, the *Heart of Earth*,<sup>75</sup> 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*,<sup>76</sup> 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 instytuttsiui. 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 instytuttsi: 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 instytuttsi”.
- 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.<sup>77</sup>

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.<sup>78</sup> 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".<sup>79</sup> 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,<sup>80</sup> 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=4QLblkaUU4I&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.<sup>81</sup> 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,<sup>82</sup> 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.<sup>[83]</sup> 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<sup>[84]</sup> 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.<sup>85</sup>

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-e-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”,<sup>86</sup> 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

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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.<sup>87</sup>

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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**Natalia Revko** is an art historian, curator, and artist from Odesa, Ukraine. Formerly affiliated with the Museum of Odesa Modern Art, she has been working independently since 2022, focusing on digitising private artist archives and collecting oral histories. One of the results of her activities was the publication of the Odesa Conceptual Art Archive (2024) on the online resource Artists Archives of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. In addition to archival research of local art history, Revko, as a curator and artist, actively explores the soundscapes of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine through field recordings, live sound streams, and curating collective sound installations. Her recent project, *As For Now — It Is Quiet* (2024), implemented in collaboration with Soundcamp (London, UK) and Home of Sound (Lviv, Ukraine), gathered about fifteen live sound streams from different parts of Ukraine and abroad. Revko's artworks have been presented at Galerie im Turm (Berlin, Germany), Halle 6 (Munich, Germany), and City Culture Institute (Gdansk, Poland). In 2024, Revko started an MA in Art History and Criticism at Stony Brook University (Stony Brook, USA). The Fulbright Ukraine Program supports her studies.

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Department of Sociology at the Ukrainian Catholic University. In 2021, she was a visiting lecturer at the University of Basel. From 2011 to 2017, she led the sociological team on the project *Region, Nation and Beyond: An Interdisciplinary and Transcultural Reconceptualization of Ukraine*, organised by the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland. In 2016/2017 and 2019/2020 she was a research fellow at the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University, where she developed a digital atlas of social changes in Ukraine after Euromaidan.

**Denys Shatalov** obtained his PhD in History in 2016. From 2015 to 2020, he was a research fellow at the “Tkuma” Ukrainian Institute for Holocaust Studies and at the Jewish Memory and Holocaust in Ukraine Museum. He was a 2019/2020 Prisma Ukraïna visiting fellow and a 2022/2023 non-resident Prisma Ukraïna fellow at the Forum Transregionale Studien in Berlin. He is also a member of the Prisma Ukraïna: War, Migration, Memory research group at the Forum Transregionale Studien. In 2023/2024, he was a Sustaining Ukrainian Scholarship fellow at the Centre for Advanced Studies in Sofia. Since 2022, Denys has worked on a project titled “That War and This War: The Entanglement and Interaction of the Imagination, Commemoration and Memory of World War II and the Ongoing War in Ukraine”. Along with his engagement in memory and memory politics studies, he also conducts research on the history of the ‘Cossack Myth’.

**Bohdan Shumylovych** is an associate professor of Cultural Studies at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv. He teaches courses in visual studies and aesthetics, leads the visual laboratory, and coordinates research seminars for BA students. He also works at the Center for Urban History in Lviv, where he lectures, develops thematic exhibitions, and conducts research. His work primarily focuses on the media history of East Central Europe and the Soviet Union, media arts, visual studies, urban spatial practices, and urban creativity. Since the onset of the Russian war against Ukraine in 2022, he has been collecting diaries and egodocuments of the war, with a particular focus on dreams. He also conducts research on changes in nightlife and urban temporalities during the war.

**Ewa Sułek** is an art historian, curator, textual and ceramic artist, and writer. She is the author of two books, award-winning short stories, and dramas. Before receiving her PhD in Ukrainian Contemporary Art, she held a Fulbright Junior Research Award at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute and was a visiting researcher at the University of Cambridge at the Department for Ukrainian Studies. Sułek is a DAAD PRIME postdoctoral fellow at the Institute for East European Studies at the Free University of Berlin and a visiting scholar at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University. Together with Pawel Zareba, she founded

the Lescer Art Center in Zalesie Górne, Poland. She lives between Boston, Berlin, and Warsaw.

