

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

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In mid-March 2022, Ukrainian artist Nikita Kadan described what he was living through as “an experience of being besieged”.¹ 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..!²

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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/ [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 [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*.³ 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”.⁴

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”.⁵

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.

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_/ [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 [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,⁶ 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”.⁷

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.

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.⁸ 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!*”⁹

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.

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.¹⁰

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.¹¹

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".¹²

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?¹³ 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?¹⁴ 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".¹⁵ 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".¹⁶ 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".¹⁷ 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).¹⁸

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 [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 [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\]Nz47/?img_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cmjmt8]Nz47/?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,¹⁹ 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)*.²⁰ At the end of 2022 and in February 2023, her work *The Lines* was displayed over the city centres of Berlin and Dresden.²¹ 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.²² 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).²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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".²⁶ 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"?²⁷ 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.²⁸

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".²⁹

26 Oraib Toukan, "Cruel Images", *e-flux Journal* 96, 2019, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/96/24/5037/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.³⁰ 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).³¹ 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?

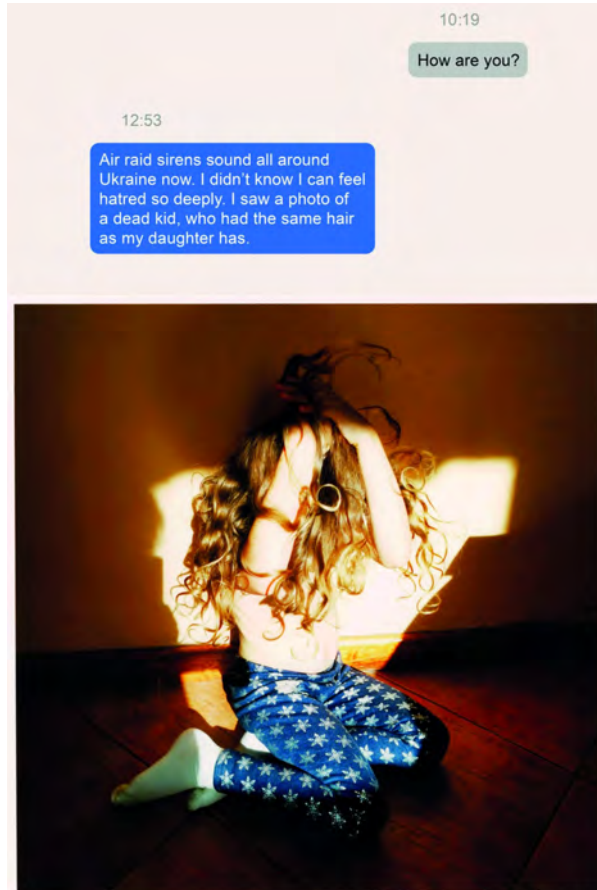
Even when it is next to impossible to deal with cruel images from a distance, someone still has to deal with them; someone has to articulate them, and someone has to witness them. The imagery one can see in the works of Ukrainian artists is rarely cruel. It is rather the opposite; it’s sublime, intimate, 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).³²

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 [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.³³

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.³⁴ 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".³⁵

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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