

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

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.¹ 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.² However, behind these doors, someone may need help offered by a stranger, as described by Zygmunt Bauman, who speaks of otherness.³ 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.⁴ 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,⁵ 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 2023.⁶ 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”.⁷ 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

5 For more context, see my essay: Kateryna Iakovenko, “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 Iakovenko, “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.⁸ Turning to the theory of things,⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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

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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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-

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.¹³

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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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".¹⁷ 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".¹⁸

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.¹⁹

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.²⁰

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 Filipeva, 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.²¹

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.²² 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".²³

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.²⁴ 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*.²⁵ 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 Popovici, "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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸

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".²⁹ 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

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.³⁰

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”.³¹ 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”.³²

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.³³ 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.³⁴

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".³⁵ 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 2022.³⁶

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”.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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).³⁹ 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.

sented”), *YourArt*, 09 May 2022, <https://supportyourart.com/news/u-kolomyyi-predstavlyu-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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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".⁴² 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.⁴³

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*,

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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