

9 “Today We are Drawing Death”¹: Instagram’s Role in Artistic Responses to the Bombing of Okhmatdyt

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Almost four years into Russia’s full-scale invasion, Ukraine has adapted to the harsh reality of war marked by daily air raid alarms and regular Russian missile attacks on Ukrainian cities, which have been destroying civilian infrastructure and affecting human lives. Only since the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022 have Russians launched more than 5000 missiles in Ukrainian territory, conducted almost 3500 airstrikes, and carried out more than one million drone attacks.² Ukrainians have learned to navigate a life in which no place is truly safe, and any city can become a target any day. Many still follow the rule of the two walls or seek refuge in bomb shelters during alarms, trying to find ways to balance their safety with the need to keep life moving forward. Some Ukrainians accepted the reality of the war and continue their almost ‘normal’ life, ignoring piercing air alarms and disturbing phone notifications, pretending to live as before the ‘big war’. However, even ten years after the beginning of Russian aggression and almost four years after the full-fledged invasion, some events stand out in their sheer brutality, leaving the whole nation in shock. Missile strikes at the maternity hospital in Mariupol, a train station in Kramatorsk, or a shopping center in Vinnytsia were among such tragic incidents. These attacks were deliberately targeted at civilian infrastructure, bringing many civilian victims with them. They also demonstrated that no civilian area in Ukraine could be protected by defying the basic principles of humanity and international law. Another devastating example of the ongoing violence and suffering endured by Ukrainians is the massive Russian air attack on July 8, 2024, in Kyiv, Dnipro, Kryvyi Rih, and Donetsk regions that caused widespread destruction, resulting in 37 deaths and more than 170 wounded.³ This time, Okhmatdyt, the largest children’s hospital

1 Quote from Dmytro Dziuba’s Instagram post from 08.07.2024, Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/C9JzvJvNhuj/?img_index=1

2 The numbers are given according to the information available here: https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Перелік_ракетних_ударів_під_час_російського_вторгнення. Accessed on 25th Oct 2024.

3 According to the official information provided by Radio Svoboda, “Missile strikes on Ukraine on July 8: Zelenskyi says 37 dead and more than 170 injured”, July 8, 2024 (<https://www.radiosvoboda.org/en/2024/07/08-missile-strikes-on-ukraine-zelenskyi-says-37-dead-and-more-than-170-injured/>)

specializing in oncohematological diseases, was among the Russian targets. It was reported that the strike on the children's hospital in Kyiv was carried out by an air-launched Kh-101 cruise missile and led to the destruction of one of the hospital's buildings, causing severe structural damage.⁴

The Okhmatdyt Hospital, which is a major center for cancer treatment and organ transplants for young patients from all the regions of Ukraine, is very well known among Ukrainians. It is widely recognized as a place where countless children's lives have been saved and where the most complex cases have been given life-saving treatment. This hospital has a unique symbolic significance. Unsurprisingly, the unprecedented cynicism of the Okhmatdyt attack resonated deeply in Ukrainian society. People in Kyiv quickly rushed to the site of the missile attack to assist with evacuation efforts and to clear debris. They formed human chains to quickly clear the ruins, bring food and clean water, and assist in helping the injured.⁵ Immediate witnesses of Russia's attacks also urged to document and share evidence with the world. Soon after, Ukrainian official outlets and social media were filled with shocking images and videos of the aftermath, documenting the damage and emotional toll of the strike. The brutality of this event, particularly given that it targeted a children's hospital, brought global attention back to Ukraine, which began to fade from international news cycles. This attack served as a painful reminder of the cruelty of the ongoing war, where anybody and any place could become a target of aggression.

As with many previous tragedies of the ongoing war, the shelling of Okhmatdyt provoked an immediate response from the Ukrainian artistic community, which will be examined later in this paper. Recent studies of various artistic practices triggered by the Russo-Ukrainian war highlight the importance of these artistic responses not only as tools for documenting wartime realities but also as a means of increasing visibility, supporting crowdfunding campaigns, fostering collective resilience, facilitating trauma processing, and constructing the shared memory of war (Kot et al. 2024; Leahy 2024; Olzacka 2024; Tolmach et al. 2024). However, there is limited research on how specific war events are mediated by social media and the artistic strategies employed in these representations. This study approaches the artistic practices of wartime as a type of affective media practice (Lokot 2023) that allows

iosvoboda.org/a/news-raketnyy-udar-zelenskyy-viyna-zahybli/33026890.html) accessed on 25th Oct 2024.

- 4 According to the official information provided by BBC News, "Children's hospital hit as Russian strikes kill dozens in Ukraine", July 8, 2024 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cl4y1pj-k2dzo>) accessed on 25th Oct 2024.
- 5 The video exemplifying the reaction of locals is available here, "Children's hospital hit as Russian strikes kill dozens in Ukraine", July 8, 2024 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cl4y1pj-k2dzo>) accessed on 25th Oct 2024.

Ukrainians to respond to and narrate their wartime experiences artistically and interpret, mediate, and engage with the trauma of war through creative expressions. It allows the analysis of the mediation of the artworks within the war-affected society and reveals the complex role of Instagram posts as war documentation efforts of Ukrainian artists, as emotional artifacts contributing to the act of bearing witness, and as tools for raising awareness and mobilization.

This study presents observations from 50 Ukrainian personal artistic Instagram accounts during the ten days following the missile attack on Okhmatdyt Children's Hospital. First, it briefly overviews Instagram's role during conflicts, emphasizing its use as a platform for reporting, documentation, and emotional engagement. Drawing on the concept of 'affective media practice,' this study explores how platforms such as Instagram enable artists and users to respond quickly to war-related events, not only by sharing information but also by constructing emotional and collective responses. Next, this paper examines various media practices that have emerged since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In the concluding section, the paper explores how Instagram facilitates a space where Ukrainian digital artists contribute to the public's understanding of war, offering a platform where activism and emotional documentation come together to amplify Ukrainian war narratives.

Instagram and Mediation of Conflicts

Today, Instagram, a photo- and video-sharing social network, is among the top three most popular platforms worldwide, with more than two billion users.⁶ Shortly after its launch in 2010, it quickly gained popularity among users and attracted scholarly attention owing to its specific features, such as its focus on visuality and performativity. Being primarily of a visual nature, this social network is seen as a 'part of everyday culture and modern lifestyle' and as 'a sort of a contemporary visual gallery' that serves as a rich source for studying how social, cultural, and political practices of contemporary society evolve with the emergence of digital technologies (Vukčević 2020: 160).

Earlier studies on Instagram predominantly focused on understanding the platform's functionality and the typology of content posted online (Hu et al. 2014; Smith/Sanderson 2015). Eventually, academic interest shifts towards more nuanced explorations of the social network, investigating how it functions as a tool for self-image construction, social reality creation, memory, and political communication. For

6 According to the official statistics of Statista, Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/> accessed on 25th Oct 2024.

example, al-Kandari et al. (2016) investigated the interplay between national cultural context and Instagram use practices. Similarly, Manovich (2017) analyzed the role of Instagram in the construction of contemporary cultural identity, focusing on the central role of images within social network communication. Building on this, later findings focus on the potential of the platform to manipulate identity construction or reproduce ideologies via the constant projection of a positive self-image (Fisher 2020), mediation of idealized hyperreal environments (Christanti et al. 2021) and visualization of lifestyles of privileged social classes (Vukčević 2020). Together, these studies illustrate the evolution of Instagram as an important medium for shaping perceptions and reproducing power dynamics via platform affordances. Recent studies have uncovered the emancipatory potential of Instagram to visualize and amplify the voices of marginalized communities or to serve as an arena for visual storytelling, participatory practices, and performative engagement with different audiences (Holowka 2024; Vitis/Gilmour 2017; Sciberras/Tanner 2022).

Moreover, the researchers focus their attention on the study of Instagram as a reporting and mobilization tool during times of crisis, showing the significance of the image-based nature of the social network for mediating firsthand experiences. By analyzing various case studies, scholars have shown that Instagram facilitates direct testimonies and personal engagement with audiences in real time, which is particularly relevant in the reporting of war and conflict zones. For instance, Sharma and Naresh (2022) analyzed the BBC's use of Instagram to frame the narrative of Afghanistan, demonstrating how visual storytelling can shape international perceptions, while Planeta (2023) explored how online platforms such as Tiktok, Instagram, Reddit, and Telegram allow for visual documenting and personal testimonies in the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine. Additionally, researchers have focused on Instagram as a platform for journalist reporting (Bossio 2023; Ongenaert/Soler 2024; Kohn 2017) or for digital participation and activism (Abushbak et al. 2023; Veloso da Silva/Muratalieva 2024).

The above-mentioned studies investigated media reporting and testimony predominantly through photo-based Instagram practices, focusing on how documentary images are used to convey events and experiences in times of crisis. Creative expressions from the zones of conflict digitally mediated through the affordances of new media add another layer of narration and representation of the complexities of war-torn reality (Oruc 2020). This paper shifts to the analysis of artistic Instagram accounts, which also play an important role in documenting and mediating the experience of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Unlike traditional journalistic reporting or citizen storytelling, these accounts combine the real-time narration of war developments with rapid artistic responses, capturing the emotional, individual, and collective aspects of conflict through the symbolic language of visual art. This immediacy and artistic framing provide a unique form of affective media practice central to wartime knowledge production and activism (Lokot 2023). Inspired by the con-

cept of "activist media practices" (Mattoni/Treré 2014), which are defined as everyday and creative media practices that serve to produce particular messages targeted at achieving strategic visibility, Lokot introduces the term *affective media practice* to analyze 'affective performances stemming from lived experiences' of Ukrainians in times of the Russo-Ukrainian war (2023). She focuses on the significance of 'affect, emotions, and embodied experiences of ordinary citizens' (Ibid.: 782) to illustrate the practice of resistance in networked spaces.

Artistic practices can be viewed as integral components of affective media practices of wartime, contributing not only to the documentation of conflict, but also to shaping shared emotional perceptions of war, fostering online activism, and forging a sense of belonging. As Rugo puts it, the war-related art "does not – or not merely – represent war, but presents it, makes it visible and audible, gives its experience a form" (Rugo 2024: 81). Indeed, amplified by participatory digital environments, wartime artistic productions play an active role in shaping how war-related events are collectively understood and emotionally processed, thus blurring the boundaries between representation and direct engagement. The frequency and intensity of artistic production during the Russo-Ukrainian war highlight how wartime creation posted online has become an empowering practice for many Ukrainian digital artists who feel the urge to document and share their lived experiences of war. This consistency in creating war-related art can be seen as a form of active investment in shaping collective knowledge and emotional responses to conflicts. As the paper will demonstrate later, artists utilize their social media accounts to actively engage with the consequences of the conflict, drawing heavily on media-disseminated evidence of the Russo-Ukrainian war. These artistic expressions address the destruction and trauma of war through the lenses of documentary realism and visual symbolism. By integrating photos, reproducing of the sites and people affected by the conflict through "social media realism" (Korneichuk 2024) or creating symbolic representations of war-inflicted events, they do not only make the consequences of war more visible, but also co-create the collective understanding of the conflict, bridging the gap between artistic expression and war testimony.

Mediatization of the Russo-Ukrainian War through Digital Art on Instagram

In recent conflicts, social media have become pivotal platforms for documenting, responding to, and participating in war in real time (Boichak/Hoskins 2022; Hoskins/Shchelin 2023). During the Russo-Ukrainian war, Instagram was actively utilized by Ukrainian politicians, civilians, military, and artists living through the conflict, turning the platform into a space for sharing war testimonies, digital activism, and the mobilization of online audiences.

While Russian forces are systematically targeting and destroying Ukrainian heritage and culture, Ukrainian cultural representatives have mobilized to respond to the war, turning the conflict into a catalyst for shaping new symbols and narratives that reflect the experiences of war and resistance. Christine Chraïbi noted:

A wave of Ukrainian art, especially graphic art, has cascaded across social media since Russia invaded Crimea in February 2014. Ten years of war have produced many vivid images created by Ukrainian illustrators, poignantly encapsulating the agony and fury of war and the indomitable Ukrainian resolve (2024).

Indeed, Ukrainian artists, placed in the middle of the war, have responded to the conflict not only as witnesses but also as active creators of a visual language that represents the brutality of war, helps to overcome the trauma, and reinforces the resilient spirit of the nation.

The image-centric nature of Instagram makes it an ideal platform for mediating digital artwork, particularly during conflict. Both official Instagram accounts, such as state-run accounts (Ventura 2024) and individual artists (Kot et al. 2024), utilize art and popular visual culture to mediate war-related events. While official Instagram accounts, such as Ukraine.ua,⁷ offer an example of strategic government communication and nation branding among international audiences (Ventura 2024), personal artistic accounts are mobilized to mediate the realities of the conflict and offer emotional and symbolic interpretations of the war (Kot et al. 2024). Hundreds of Ukrainian digital artists who live within the context of war regularly post their war-related artworks on Instagram. For example, Virtual Art Space *Art about the Long War*,⁸ a platform that collects information about Ukrainian wartime art, lists more than 300 Instagram accounts of Ukrainian illustrators who engage with the topics of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Artists use different styles, techniques, and forms, such as posters, illustrations, cartoons, and collages, to convey the story of Russia's invasion. Through symbolic imagery and a combination of digital works with slogans and hashtags, they create complex visual arrangements that become a part of a collective emotional response. This helps shape the public's perception of the conflict and serves as a form of activism that mediates the war's emotional and physical impact and fosters a sense of solidarity. In doing so, Instagram artist accounts have become both a media environment and a tool for reinforcing narratives of resistance and shared trauma.

7 Ukraine.ua account, Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/ukraine.ua/>

8 Platform Art about the Long War, Available at: <https://www.warart.site/>

Dataset and Methodology

The findings describe one particular case study to illustrate the practices and artistic techniques of Ukrainian digital artists mediating the events of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Data for this analysis were manually collected from 50 Instagram accounts of Ukrainian digital artists during the first ten days after Russia's missile attack at Okhmatdyt Hospital and comprised 97 visuals (photos, posters, cartoons, and collages). The analyzed accounts were selected within the framework of a larger study on the role of digital art during the Russo-Ukrainian war,⁹ and the author of the paper regularly follows the postings and updates from the artistic accounts since 2022. Artists' accounts were chosen based on their popularity on Instagram (measured by the number of followers) and their visibility across other digital platforms and Ukrainian media, including initiatives such as the Ukraine War Art Collection¹⁰ and Ukrainian Artists Against War¹¹. The data collection period was intentionally extended to ten days to capture the evolving intensity of artistic responses to the missile attack at Okhmatdyt Hospital. The majority of the images were gathered during the first three days of this period, highlighting the immediacy of artists' reactions to wartime occurrences.

The dataset comprises a mix of original creative productions and documentary photos reposted from various sources, emphasizing the overlap between the documenting and representational efforts of artists impacted by the conflict. A multimodal discourse analysis approach was employed to analyze and interpret visual productions. This approach enables the examination of both verbal and visual modes of meaning-making, with particular attention paid to the semiotic resources employed by the authors and the socio-political context in which the works are produced. Initially, the collected images were categorized into three types, enabling a more systematic analysis of the recurring themes and symbols. This classification illuminated the diverse ways artists responded to the bombing of Okhmatdyt and contextualized their work within the broader socio-political realities of the Russo-Ukrainian war. In the second stage, a more in-depth analysis was conducted to explore how visuals were connected to the triggering event and their surrounding social context. This involved investigating the interaction between visual and textual

9 See, for example, another co-authored paper on the topic of Instagram art: Kot, Svitlana, Alina Mozolevska, Olha Polishchuk, and Yuliya Stodolinska (2024): "The Discursive Power of Digital Popular Art during the Russo-Ukrainian War: Re/Shaping Visual Narratives." In: *Arts* 13/1, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts13010038>.

10 Ukraine War Art collection platform (<https://war-art.mkp.gov.ua/> accessed on 25th June 2024).

11 <https://ukrainer.net/illustrators-about-war/> accessed on 19th August 2024.

elements, the techniques of symbolic representation and their emotional resonance, and the role these artworks played in shaping a collective narrative of the war.

Mediatization of the Okhmatdyt Bombing on Artistic Instagram Accounts

The majority of the analyzed Instagram accounts demonstrated an immediate response to the missile attack on the children's hospital, reflecting the urgency and emotional gravity of the event. It is worth mentioning that the selected Instagram accounts have been actively posting war-related content since the onset of the full-scale invasion, and mediation of the Okhmatdyt bombing can be seen as an integral part of their regular affective media practice during wartime. Although the posting frequency varies across accounts – some artists regularly document the war, while others, after an initial surge of intense activity in the early months of 2022, transitioned to posting only during significant nationwide events such as large-scale attacks, changes on the frontlines, or major political decisions – the Okhmatdyt attack resonated with the majority of Ukrainian artists. The mediation of the event was realized by sharing several distinct types of visuals: documentary photos from the attack site, realistic representations of the tragedy, and symbolic interpretations of the event. Notably, while the missile attack also targeted other locations in different Ukrainian cities, only the bombing of Okhmatdyt Hospital was uniquely mediatized on artistic accounts, underscoring its profound emotional and symbolic impact.

The first content posted in the aftermath of the attack was the reposts of real photos directly from the site of the tragedy. The photos posted by the artists were widely used by other social media platforms and official outlets to report Okhmatdyt missile attacks. The dataset comprises 19 documentary photos featuring the consequences of the material destruction of the hospital or visualizing the victims of the attack, mothers and their children, and the patients of Okhmatdyt Hospital. This can be illustrated by Artem Gusev's post on the day of the tragedy (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1: Example of real photos reposting, Artem Gusev's Instagram account, post form 08.07.2024



Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/C9KP0UStKr8/?img_index=2 (reproduced with permission of the artist).

The photos selected for reposting were intended to evoke shock and deep emotional responses, serving as forms of testimony that reflect the everyday realities faced by artists living amid the war. Ukrainian artists utilize Instagram not only to mediatize the consequences of the bombing of Okhmatdyt but also to provide more information about the event and share their reflections in the aftermath of the Russian attack. The comment section is actively used to give important context to the photos posted online such as “Okhmatdyt, Kyiv city, 07.08.2024” or “Children’s hospital Okhmatdyt, July 7”. These posts serve to situate the event in time and context, ensuring that they reach those who may not be familiar with its details, while also inviting viewers to bear witness to the tragedy. The photos were deliberately selected to focus on the scale of the destruction and suffering of the victims, particularly highlighting the most vulnerable among them, the children. The affective aspect of mediating tragedy is also reinforced through the commenting section, where the artists share their personal emotions and reflections on living through the event. For example, the digital artist Kopytova Tetiana draws a stark comparison between the horrors of war and the suffering caused by diseases like cancer: “What is scarier: can-

cer or Russia? The world is tired of hearing us. However, when children die, the world must not remain silent. Today, the terrorist country Russia shelled the Okhmatdyt Children's Hospital in Kyiv, where children are treated for the most complex diseases like cancer."¹² Artem Gusev, another Ukrainian artist, expressed his emotional response to the bombing of the Okhmatdyt children's hospital with poignant words: "The attack on the children's hospital shattered emotions and brought tears flowing. Sick children. It's horrifying. There are no words."¹³ And Nastya Litepla rightfully notes the impact of the harsh realities of war on the work of the artists: 'Instead of drawing beautiful, life-affirming pictures, I have to draw pictures like this. 08.07.2024 over 40 Russian missiles were launched in Ukraine, one of which hit Children's Hospital Okhmatdyt in Kyiv.'¹⁴ The comments accompanying the photos were written in both Ukrainian and English, emphasizing the significance of these posts for both Ukrainian and international audiences.

In addition to sharing real photos, many Ukrainian artists combine these images with their artwork to create a powerful visual narrative that calls for action. These posts often include appeals for donations to support the reconstruction of the Okhmatdyt Hospital or to assist the Ukrainian army, fostering space for digital activism. By integrating artistic expression with urgent calls for humanitarian aid, these artists not only document the ongoing crisis, but also mobilize their followers to contribute to recovery efforts. For example, Khrystyna Valko expresses her anguish: "It hurts so much for every mother and child... There are no words."¹⁵ She further encouraged her audience to support the hospital by providing links for donations.

The combination of documentary photos, artworks, and commenting functions illustrates how Instagram's affordances are used to mediate lived wartime experiences and share the emotional impact of the tragedy. This approach enables the integration of factual documentation of an event with personal expressions to navigate the shock of a tragedy. By combining these elements, artists create a multifaceted narrative that not only informs but also emotionally engages their audience, inviting them to share the victims' pain and calling for action to support Ukraine. Let us now examine in greater detail the artworks posted to narrate the Okhmatdyt bombing.

12 Kopytova Tetiana, Instagram post from 09.07.2024, Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/C9LaiRFN1JF/?img_index=2

13 Artem Gusev, Instagram post from 08.07.2024, Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/C9KP0UStKr8/?img_index=2

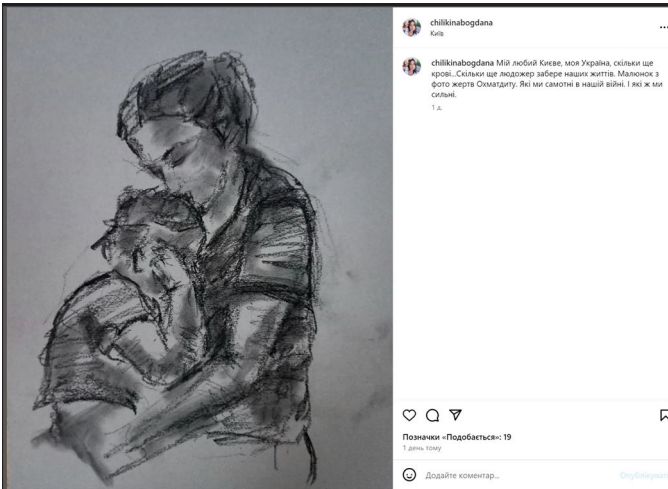
14 Khrystyna Valko, Instagram post from 09.07.2024, Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C9NQxrENeDY>

15 Nastya Litepla, Instagram post from 09.07.2024, Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/C9M1w3MKCl0/?img_index=1/

Artistic Responses on Instagram to the Bombing of Okhmatdyt

Ukrainian artists quickly turned to posting their artwork inspired by the missile attack, with the majority of these pieces being created and published online within the first three to five days following the event. This rapid artistic response can be categorized into *two major themes*. The first category encompasses works that reproduce the event, often characterized by a style that can be defined as "social media realism" (Kornreichuk 2024). These pieces focus on depicting the immediate consequences of the attack, predominantly by showcasing the physical destruction and portraying real victims or other affected individuals, such as doctors, rescue personnel, or volunteers, who were featured on the widely mediated photos from the site of the missile attack. The second category consists of artwork that utilizes symbolic elements and visual metaphors to process the traumatic experience and convey deeper meanings related to the general collective understanding of the conflict.

Figure 2: Example of social media realism, Chilikina Bogdana's Instagram Account, post form 08.07.2024)



Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/C9KJxs_N_3K/¹⁶ (reproduced with permission of the artist).

16 The photographic evidence which inspired the artist can be accessed here: Antonyuk Nataliya, "Russia's Attack on the Children's Hospital Okhmatdyt: Photos and Videos from the Impact Site", July, 8, 2024 <https://glavcom.ua/news/rosijani-potsilili-po-ditjachij-likarni-okhmatdit-shcho-vidbuvajetsja-na-mistsji-foto-video-1009001.html> accessed on 25th Oct 2024.

The illustrations that fall into the first category are focused on depicting the immediate consequences of the traumatic event of the bombing of Okhmatdyt Hospital. Inspired by the widely shared photo evidence from the tragedy site, such as photographs of buildings engulfed in flames, mothers shielding their children, and the wounded patients of Okhmatdyt Children's Hospital, the digital illustrators turn to documentalism and realistic depictions to further mediate the event on Instagram. Through documentary images, artists provide an almost unfiltered view of the consequences of the attack that brings to the forefront the devastating reality of the war. For example, Chilikina Bogdana's artwork emphasizes destruction and human suffering, portraying the mother who protects her child (*Figure 2*). The author deliberately created the image with only black lines to intensify the emotional impact of the artwork.

Among other recurring artistic reproductions based on real events are deceptions of the few patients in medical masks evacuating from Okhmatdyt hospital, as seen in the illustration by Stas Kolotov,¹⁷ or the visualizations of rescue personnel involved in fighting the consequences of the bombing, as in the artwork by Volodymyr Rebrov.¹⁸ This type of artistic war documentation functions as a visual war testimony and narration of the conflict. By selecting the most impactful images, artists contribute to a broader mediation of the tragic event and trigger emotional engagement with the social realities of the conflict. The artworks are often combined with hashtags such as #standwithukraine, #stopwar, #russiiaisaterroriststate, #armukrainenow, #warukraine, #war, #warart, which complete the visual message by verbally identifying the aggressor or adding antiwar slogans and appeals to help Ukraine. As in the case of the photos from the site of the tragedy, the commenting section is also actively used to share emotions, appeal for raising awareness about Russia's attacks, or provide details about the event. For example, artist Stas Kolotov accompanied his artwork posted on Instagram with a message reporting on the consequences of the missile attack: "The number of people killed as a result of a missile attack on Ukraine has reached 42.¹⁹ Four children were among the dead. The biggest tragedy for Kyiv and all of Ukraine is the destruction of the Okhmatdyt Children's Hospital. In total, at least 190 people were injured in Ukraine."²⁰

Realistic visualizations in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war refer to artistic practices that capture the immediate aftermath of traumatic war-related events and

17 Stas Kotov, Instagram post from 08.07.2024, Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/C9KpABjNWCh/?img_index=1

18 Volodymyr Rebrov, Instagram post from 11.07.2024, Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C9R8pcWttAT/>

19 The number of victims in the post does not correspond to the official statistics, as during the first hours after the event, only approximate numbers were available, leading to discrepancies between early reports and verified data

20 Ibid, 17

convey their emotional impact and larger context through Instagram's platform capabilities. By sharing realistic depictions of destruction and human suffering, these works offer a form of testimony that combines visual narration with emotional resonance. As a part of artistic affective media practice, these artworks serve not only to document events but also to amplify their visibility through media beyond photography.

Another category of artistic response involves more symbolic and interpretive representations of missile attacks at Okhmatdyt Hospital. These works, while not depicting the literal scenes of destruction, evoke deeper emotional and symbolic layers of mediatization of the Russo-Ukrainian war. They serve to embed the Okhmatdyt tragedy within the broader narrative of Ukraine's struggle against Russian invasion. By shaping the imagery of victimhood, aggression, and resilience, they provide a deeper meaning to the attack on the children's hospital and frame the event not as an isolated incident, but as a symbol of the larger context of the war, emphasizing the vulnerability of the civilian victim of the conflict. In this context, the image of the sick child has emerged as a potent symbol of the hospital attack, embodying the vulnerability of innocent victims and highlighting the tragic consequences of Russia's aggression towards Ukraine. This form of artistic expression can be illustrated by the artwork by Iryna Sosimovych, who depicts a lonely child on the hospital bed in the destroyed building of the hospital, emphasizing the vulnerability and chaos brought about by the war.²¹ The child is portrayed as a transparent figure alluding to his life taken away by the attack. This artistic choice resonates with the wartime artworks of other Ukrainian artists,²² which similarly aim to process the collective war traumas. Another similar example is Kustovsky's portrayal of a child in a hospital uniform and medical mask amidst the ruins of Okhmatdyt.²³ Both artworks focus on the vulnerability and fragility of children's lives, bridging personal traumas and collective experiences of loss. Among other recurring symbols to visualize children are small angles, toys, lullabies, and baby pacifiers that metonymically represent the victims. Artists deliberately combine these images with dark colors such as black, dark blue, or red to intensify the sense of tragedy.

More horrifying imagery is offered by Mykhailo Skop's interpretation of tragedy. The illustrator shared an artwork that featured an empty hospital bed in a shattered hospital room with broken windows and debris scattered across the floor. Among the wreckage, children's toys are tragically intermingled with fragments of the Russian

21 Iryna Sosimovych, Instagram post from 08.07.2024, Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C9KLXdcNvdw/>

22 See, for example, Olga Wilson's artwork, Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/olga.art/>

23 Oleksiy Kustovsky, Instagram post from 08.07.2024, Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/C9Kk_UY16HJ/

missile, creating a powerful and disturbing symbol of the tragedy (Figure 3). The absence of human characters intensifies the sense of loss, emphasizing the profound void left by violence targeted at a place that should have been a sanctuary for children. Combined with the words, 'Children's Hospital is Just Another Target for Russia,' and the use of dark colors symbolizing violence, Mykhailo Skop's artwork creates a powerful and somber message to convey the horrors of war.

Figure 3: Example of the symbolic interpretation of the event. Mykhailo Skop's Instagram Account, post form 08.07.2024



Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C9K0tiaIMLp/> (reproduced with permission of the artist).

The central image of the child, a symbol of innocence and vulnerability, becomes a poignant representation of the victims of the Russian missile attack on the Okhmatdyt. This image is often coupled with that of the mother, creating a deeper emotional message that resonates among online audience members. By visually merging the child as the target of aggression with the mother's protective figure, artists evoke empathy and collective support. This imagery represents the shared anxiety of Ukrainian mothers, who face the constant fear of losing their children due to the violence of war. The mothers are depicted holding their injured children in arms in an attempt to protect them from Russian attacks. This type

of artistic visualization can be exemplified by the artwork of Maria Loniuk posted online on the day of the bombing of Okhmatdyt.²⁴ Moreover, these depictions often evoke Christian iconography, specifically the ichonographies of Madonna and Child. This symbolism not only highlights the purity and innocence of the victims, but also starkly contrasts the cruelty of aggression. The powerful combination of these figures serves to intensify the emotional appeal of Ukrainian digital artists' artworks.

For example, the artwork of Yaroslava Yatsuba presents a powerful image of a mother and child situated in the center of a target, symbolizing the direct threat posed by war violence.²⁵ In addition to the artwork, Yatsuba added an emotional comment to her post, using the hashtag #russiisaterroriststate, stating, "There are no words to describe the rage. Condolences to the families of those killed and injured in today's mass attack This comment further emphasizes the artist's personal grief and the collective anger felt by many Ukrainians, turning the artwork into a space for sharing collective emotions. In her next post, Yatsuba shares a more personal reflection on being in the epicenter of the war and shares her personal testimony about the day of the attack: "High danger, rockets at Kyiv, explosions in Kryvyi Rih, Dnipro is all red, hospitals... houses... factories... children's tears... broken glass... lives torn apart... miraculously saved lives. Pain. Rage. Help. Get yourself together. Tomorrow is a new day."²⁶ This combination of vivid imagery and emotional reflection serves to intertwine the individual and collective experiences of war, enhancing the message of mutual help and resilience amidst despair.

The artwork responding to the Okhmatdyt attack also frequently incorporates representations of the aggressor, which is manifested in the use of recurring symbols, both in impersonal and personal forms. In some artwork, the aggressor is personified through the depictions of Vladimir Putin. For example, Andriy Petrenko's artwork depicts Putin cutting oxygen supply to a Ukrainian sick child.²⁷ The author adds a comment and calls the Kremlin's leader a 'children's butcher,' suggesting a direct connection between the figure of Putin and the suffering of Ukrainian children. In other artworks, the aggressor is frequently visualized through metonymic symbols such as Russian missiles, bombs, or other types of military equipment. This type of representation helps focus on the victims of the attack, illustrating the human cost of war. For example, Boris Groh's piece titled 'Military Target' evokes the horror

24 Maria Loniuk Instagram post from 08.07.2024, Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/C9KVlbctegw/?img_index=1

25 Yaroslava Yatsuba Instagram post from 08.07.2024, Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C9KC1XpNpqd/>

26 Ibid, Instagram post from 08.07.2024 https://www.instagram.com/p/C9KO-_pNZgk/

27 Petrenko Andriy Instagram post from 09.07.2024, Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C9MI9Y7txM3/>

of children witnessing missiles aimed at them.²⁸ The children are depicted from behind, and the artwork implies a future event, intensifying the sense of anxiety and helplessness that accompanies the situation. Khrystyna Valko's artwork shows a crying mother and child caught in a missile attack. The artist used red to depict rockets, implying the violence brought about by the Russian attack.²⁹ These representations serve to shape the image of the enemy, illustrate the injustice and cruelty of Russian aggression, and mediate the fear and trauma inflicted on Ukrainians.

The mobilization of public responses to the attack on the children's hospital played a crucial role in the mediation of this tragic event. One significant way to express this is through the production of war posters, which serve as a medium for artists to symbolically reflect on an incident while conveying important messages within the digital landscape. These artistic responses help increase Ukraine's visibility in the digital realm and promote solidarity with Ukraine. In the aftermath of the Okhmatdyt attack, new slogans responded to a shocking event. Phrases like 'We need weapons, not toys,' 'Russia kills our children,' 'Russia kills the future,' 'Russia is worse than cancer' encapsulate the urgency of the situation and the need for support for Ukraine. The posters produced in response to the Okhmatdyt hospital attack effectively combined imagery commonly used in other representations of the event, such as the depiction of a child as a symbol of innocence and missile imagery representing Russian aggression. However, through minimalist design choices, these artworks concisely encapsulate powerful emotions and urgent messages. For example, the poster created by Andrii Yermolenko on July 8, 2024, employs a minimalist palette of just two colors to convey a powerful message about the duality of childhood innocence and the harsh reality of war (*Figure 4*). In this artwork, a child is depicted in both victim and protective roles, trying to shield himself from an incoming missile with a toy. This imagery juxtaposes symbols of a peaceful life and war, amplifying the emotional impact of the work.

28 Boris Groh, Instagram post from 10.07.2024, Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/C9Py_ZFqeyI/

29 Valko Khrystyna, Instagram post from 09.07.2024, Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C9NQxrENeDY/>

Figure 4: Example of a poster production based on Okhmatdyt bombing. Andrii Yermolenko's Instagram Account, post from 08.07.2024



Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/C9KzsB_JooN/ (reproduced with permission of the artist).

The images and posters shared on Instagram often incorporate widely recognized phrases and hashtags, such as #russiaisaterroriststate, #standwithukraine, and #stopwar. These slogans serve to amplify artists' messages and engage the international community in a collective call for support for Ukraine. For instance, artists such as Artem Gusev³⁰ and Anastasiia Tuka³¹ have utilized these hashtags alongside their artworks about the Okhmatdyt attack to create a sense of solidarity and urgency among Ukrainians and international audiences.

The symbolic interpretations of the Okhmatdyt bombing not only focus on the tragedy and its consequences, but also feature the fight of Ukrainians against aggression by shaping the images of the self and the other. In this way, artistic practices inscribe the event into a collective narrative about war and forge resistance and solidarity in online spaces.

30 Artem Gusev; Instagram post from 08.07.2024, Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/C9KPoUStKr8/?img_index=1/

31 Anastasiia Tuka, Instagram post from 08.07.2024, Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C9KoQcNNHJ1>

Conclusions

The active presence of Ukrainian artists on social media platforms highlights the importance of artistic practices during wartime, which bridge personal experiences with collective narratives and activism. Through platforms such as Instagram, artists can find a space to share their personal and artistic reflections as well as express their emotions through the visual language of art and the affordances of the platform.

The analysis of Okhmatdyt attack mediatization has shown that Ukrainian digital artists immediately respond to the tragic events of the Russo-Ukrainian war. They employ a variety of techniques, such as the mediatization of documentary photos from the site of the attack, realistic representations of the tragedy, and symbolic interpretations of the event, combining them with comments, slogans, and hashtags. Ukrainian artists also mix their artistic expressions with real photographs to intensify the emotional impact of the message. They effectively used antiwar slogans and hashtags to promote solidarity with Ukraine and amplify the visibility of their artworks, ensuring that their messages reach a broader audience. Through their art, they not only document these atrocities but also create emotionally charged works that convey the trauma, resilience, and shared pain of the nation.

By combining realistic visualizations with symbolic representation, Ukrainian digital artists contribute to a multifaceted understanding of the war that resonates with the experiences of Ukrainians and helps mobilize the collective effort of the population. The incorporation of shared symbols helps narrate the tragedy of the war while simultaneously shaping the perceptions of the victim and aggressor. Artists often leverage their personal accounts to mobilize assistance for those in need, turning their platforms into spaces for activism and fundraising. This phenomenon highlights how wartime art serves as a unique form of media practice, combining elements of war testimony, artistic interpretation of conflict, and calls for help.

While this study highlights the importance and active use of Instagram as a medium for the mediatization of wartime art, it also reveals certain limitations. The focus on Instagram excludes the diversity of platforms utilized by Ukrainian artists and overlooks the broader range of artistic responses that extend beyond online interventions. Moreover, this study primarily examined short-term reactions to a single mediated event, offering only a partial view of the multifaceted nature of wartime artistic practices. Future research could address these gaps by exploring the long-term effects of wartime artistic practices on perceptions of conflict, within Ukraine and globally. Additionally, incorporating an analysis of alternative platforms or other digital and physical spaces could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of mediated wartime art.

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