

# Gardens of Tolerance: Ukrainian Women Artists Reflect the War in the Donbas

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Résumé de l'article

With ongoing war in the Donbas, war narratives and war images saturate public media in Ukraine, the discourse contaminated by ideological remnants of the Soviet World War II cult and by fake news. Art that deals with war wounds can subvert the familiar visual language of war propaganda, where the suffering of victims is a mere pretext for touting the inevitable triumph of the heroes. Currently in Ukraine, the most prolific art in this regard is produced by women-artists who address the trauma of war through painting and installations that offer highly personalized accounts. Often touching upon extreme circumstances, their art is about tolerance, both in terms of endurance and of the mutual understanding necessary for cohabitation. Alevtyna (Alevtina) Kakhidze's ongoing performance creates an opportunity to comprehend the war in the Donbas from multiple perspectives, including that of a gardener. She associates the tending of plants with her mother who died on occupied territory, refusing to leave her garden. Mariia (Maria) Kulikovska's sculptures serve as shooting targets for separatists in the occupied centre of contemporary art in Donetsk. Vlada Ralko's paintings of tortured bodies become a metaphor for scars garnered by a war that remains close to home. Paintings and sculptures by Maryna Skuharieva (Skugareva) and Anna Zviahintseva (Zvyagintseva) address the ruin of representation inflicted by war, and the conceptual performance by Liia (Lia) Dostlieva and Andrii Dostliev contemplates the healing process of war wounds. Neither making spectacle from the "pain of others" nor deeming it unrepresentable, this art seeks emphatic alternatives to traditional war narratives.



# Gardens of Tolerance: Ukrainian Women Artists Reflect the War in the Donbas

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**Abstract:** With ongoing war in the Donbas, war narratives and war images saturate public media in Ukraine, the discourse contaminated by ideological remnants of the Soviet World War II cult and by fake news. Art that deals with war wounds can subvert the familiar visual language of war propaganda, where the suffering of victims is a mere pretext for touting the inevitable triumph of the heroes. Currently in Ukraine, the most prolific art in this regard is produced by women-artists who address the trauma of war through painting and installations that offer highly personalized accounts. Often touching upon extreme circumstances, their art is about tolerance, both in terms of endurance and of the mutual understanding necessary for cohabitation. Alevtyna (Alevtina) Kakhidze's ongoing performance creates an opportunity to comprehend the war in the Donbas from multiple perspectives, including that of a gardener. She associates the tending of plants with her mother who died on occupied territory, refusing to leave her garden. Mariia (Maria) Kulikovs'ka's sculptures serve as shooting targets for separatists in the occupied centre of contemporary art in Donetsk. Vlada Ralko's paintings of tortured bodies become a metaphor for scars garnered by a war that remains close to home. Paintings and sculptures by Maryna Skuharieva (Skugareva) and Anna Zviahintseva (Zvyagintseva) address the ruin of representation inflicted by war, and the conceptual performance by Liia (Lia) Dostlieva and Andrii Dostliev contemplates the healing process of war wounds. Neither making spectacle from the "pain of others" nor deeming it unrepresentable, this art seeks emphatic alternatives to traditional war narratives.

**Keywords:** tolerance, empathy, differential grievability of lives, unrepresentability, war spectacle, Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

**Larisa** Reisner (Larissa Reissner), a Russian poet and writer associated with Acmeism<sup>1</sup> and appointed Communist Commissar of the Naval General Staff in 1919, visited the Donbas after her Hamburg affair with the German

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<sup>1</sup> Acmeism was a movement in Russian poetry in the 1910s. Acmeism poetry opposed mysticism and the complex metaphors favoured by symbolist writers and, instead, praised the return to a concrete meaning of the word. Antique culture was considered by acmeist poets among the highest achievements of human civilization. Among its notable members were Anna Akhmatova, Nikolai Gumilev, and Osip Mandel'shtam.

revolutionary Karel Radek. The fusion of her revolutionary fervour and her impressions of the mining region in eastern Ukraine resulted in the book *Ugol', zhelezo i zhivye liudi* (*Coal, Iron and the Living People*, 1925). In her book, Reisner intended to expose the beneficial impact of the Bolshevik Revolution on the coal industry and the people supporting it, but instead painted a revealing and depressing panorama of the miners' abysmal working and living conditions. Her descriptions of the local landscape, a dreary and bleak wasteland dotted with artificial mountains made of shale stone, are timeless and iconic: "On its fields, flat as a table covered with a dusty tablecloth of mugwort, regular pointed cones rise equally distanced from each other, geometrically correct lonely mountains" (Reisner 361).<sup>2</sup> These black pyramids are the Donbas's notable spoil tips, a recognizable symbol of the region as relevant today as one hundred years ago. Reisner's account of the state of the coal industry in 1925 was captured in Ukrainian photographer Oleksandr Chekmen'ov (Alexander Chekmenev)'s series *Donbas* (1994–2015). In his series, the gloomy terricones—another name for the artificial mountains of coal-production rubbish—alternate with portraits of stern miners, their skin permanently marked with coal dust, working in narrow and dark mine shafts or simply residing in appalling everyday living conditions.<sup>3</sup> For many years this bleak vision prevailed as the image of the Donbas, challenged only by Soviet bureaucrat Volodymyr Dehtiar'ov (1920–93), secretary of the Donetsk Communist Party during the 1960s and 1970s. After a visit to the Gardens of Versailles in France, Dehtiar'ov was inspired to transform the city under his jurisdiction into "a city of a million roses." This highly popular Soviet cliché was transmitted via postcards and other media, featuring the flowers that were planted all over the Donbas capital to implement his dream—a phantasmagorically jarring contradiction between the invented symbol and the harsh realities of life in the region.

The war in the Donbas instigated by Russian-backed separatists in 2014 brought yet another grim note to the already bleak portrait of the region. The entirety of Donbas history appears as the embodiment of intergenerational trauma; it comprised forced industrialization with the help of displaced peasants in the nineteenth century,<sup>4</sup> dekulakization (arrests, deportations, or executions of prosperous peasants and their families), the Holodomor (a man-made famine, 1932–33), the Stalinist purges of the early Soviet years, and yet another wave of population transfer in the aftermath of the great

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<sup>2</sup> All translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> According to Crowley and Ost, in 1997, a Ukrainian miner's wages were three times lower than in 1990, which at that time were only 3–5 percent of the global average.

<sup>4</sup> More on mining in the Donbas in the late nineteenth century can be found in the memoirs of the mining engineer Fenin; see Fenin.

famine and the devastation of World War II (1939–45).<sup>5</sup> This traumatic history was manifested in the region's multi-ethnic profile, especially in larger cities; its collective identity was embedded in individual occupations rather than national or ethnic roots. Utilizing a moment of political instability after the Euromaidan (Revolution of Dignity) in 2013–14, unidentified militia made attempts to seize public administration buildings in numerous southern and eastern Ukrainian cities in the spring of 2014. In Donetsk and Luhansk these attempts were successful and led to the unfolding of full military action involving both the regular Ukrainian army and Russian troops and armaments.<sup>6</sup> The ongoing military conflict has led to multiple deaths and injuries among the military and civilians. More than thirteen thousand deaths (including the 298 passengers on Malaysian Airlines flight MH17),<sup>7</sup> a colossal number of displaced and internal refugees, prisoner camps, and multiple incidents of torture, abduction, and public physical punishments have been witnessed in the Donbas.

Simultaneously, a media war was waged with propaganda and fake news. The most notorious fable was broadcast by Russian state channel Rossiya 1 about a boy who was allegedly crucified by Ukrainian troops on Lenin square in the Donetsk regional city of Sloviansk (Kholdarova and Pantii). Such atrocious lies intensified the atmosphere of panic and fear activated by the war, adding to the region's dark public image.

Many Ukrainian artists felt compelled to openly fight Russian propaganda by contributing art works to the growing activist and volunteer movement in Ukraine. Their art became widely known through several international exhibitions that focused on artistic responses to both the Euromaidan revolution and the Donbas war; some examples were: *I am the Drop in the Ocean* (2014, Kuenstlerhaus, Vienna, curated by Alisa Lozhkina and Konstantin Akinsha), *Permanent Revolution: Ukrainian Art Today* (2018, Ludwig Museum, Budapest, curated by Alisa Lozhkina and Konstantin Akinsha), *At the Front Line: Ukrainian Art 2013–2019* (2019, Mexico, Canada, 2020, curated by Svitlana Biedarieva and Hanna Deikun).<sup>8</sup> Among the

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<sup>5</sup> One third of the Ukrainians repressed during the Stalinist purges were from the Donbas; see: Kuromiia.

<sup>6</sup> More on why the Donbas in particular was vulnerable to military conflict can be found in Yekelchuk (123–33).

<sup>7</sup> A UN count reported on Radio Svoboda estimated that from 14 April 2014 to 31 July 2020, 13,100–13,300 individuals were killed, and 29,500–33,500 individuals were injured among military and civilian populations (Ermochenko).

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion of Euromaidan art, see Kozak; a catalogue to *Permanent Revolution* includes examples of art reacting to the Revolution of Dignity and to the Donbas war. Also, for a discussion of art responding to the war in the Donbas, see the chapter titled “Post-Trauma” in *Permanent Revolution* (Lozhkina 500–09).

earliest partisan art responses was the interventionist work of Serhii Zakharov of the Murzilka Art Group, whose audacious street art in his native Donetsk in 2014 mocked separatist militias before the artist was caught, imprisoned, and tortured.<sup>9</sup>

The Ukrainian Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale—"All the World's Futures" (2015) featured several artworks that became iconic representations of the Donbas war in the public perception, such as the Open Group's performance *Synonim do slova "chekaty"* (*The Synonym for the Word "To Wait"*).<sup>10</sup> This installation included live video transmissions from the households of Ukrainian soldiers then engaged in military actions in the Donbas, with performers constantly observing the videos. The group members who embodied the process of waiting exchanged places only when the soldier returned home. In the same pavilion Mykola Ridnyi presented his series *Slipa pliamy (Blind Spot)*, comprised of images from media reporting on the Donbas war. The images were covered with large ink blots to comment on the propaganda-mediated distortion of the war narrative.<sup>11</sup> Nikita Kadan's *Trudnoshchi profanatsii (Difficulties of Profanation)*, showcased in greenhouses at the Biennale, contrasted the war debris collected by the artist with growing live bean plants to reflect on the temporal dimension of memory. Kadan made multiple effective artistic commentaries on the Donbas war, including his *Zakhyst roslyn (Protection of Plants, 2014)*, *Ukryttia (The Shelter, 2015)*, and *Oderzhymyi mozhe svidchyty v sudi (The Possessed Can Witness in Court)*, shown at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine and at the School of Kyiv Biennale of 2015. In the latter installation the artist arranged on archival shelves selected pieces from the Museum of History's collection that referenced the Donbas region and Crimea, interspersed with artillery shells, collected in the war zone, and private household objects, such as house plants. Thus, Kadan envisioned the potential of personal historical narration, uncontaminated by ideology, to chronicle the brutality of war. The powerful artwork was exhibited in the Busan Biennale and at M HKA in Antwerp in 2018.<sup>12</sup>

This article is not dedicated to guerilla art, to art that works with the indexical traces of war, or to art preoccupied with the politics of memory and the distortion of reality by propaganda. Many compelling artworks in this vein have been created in Ukraine since the beginning of military operations;

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<sup>9</sup> Zakharov was released from the Donetsk prison and told his story in the graphic novel *Dira (The Hole)*.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the installation by the Open Group, and also of some artworks by Nikita Kadan and Mykola Ridnyi on the topic of the Donbas war, see Iakovlenko, "Ne(vidimaia)."

<sup>11</sup> Currently this artwork by Ridnyi is in the collection of the Ludwig Art Museum.

<sup>12</sup> Currently this artwork by Kadan is in the museum's permanent collection.

they relentlessly uncover the framing of war in what Judith Butler describes as “representational regimes through which it operates and which rationalize its own operation” (29). Inseparable from its frames, the material reality of war is approximated by such art, which is concerned with the truth and the representational strategies that influence the public’s understanding of the war.

Most of the Donbas artistic narrative is dominated by male stories and mythologies: from miners known for their sacrificial labour and strikes that influenced political decisions in the entire USSR, to the current war heroes and soldiers of the ongoing conflict, little space in the region’s story remains for women. Art by Ukrainian women artists that reacts to the 2014 revolution and the war in Donbas—and to the changes in Ukrainian women’s social roles precipitated by these conflicts—has received less critical and institutional attention. Not allowing themselves to appear only as a helpless and voiceless background for heroic deeds (a discourse inherited from Soviet war propaganda), women artists register the literal and discursive violence that the war inflicts on women in their highly personal, sometimes biographical but incessantly empathic, accounts. Their art is concerned foremost with the ethics of representation, such as, in Butler’s words, the “differential grievability of lives.” Apart from examining the hierarchies of importance endowed on people from different sides of the conflict by media and public opinion, this art addresses the representational havoc induced by the war, dealing with numbness, incomprehensibility, and caesura in creativity, as well as the failure and inefficiency of realistic visuality. Performances by Alevtyna (Alevtina) Kakhidze and Liia (Lia) Dostlieva, sculptures by Mariia (Maria) Kulikovs’ka and Anna Zviahintseva (Zvyagintseva), and paintings by Vlada Ralko and Maryna Skuharieva (Skugareva) do not depict the atrocities of war or testify to the sufferings of war victims in an unmediated way. In fact, none of these artworks engage their subject so obviously that it could be immediately recognized as a representation of war.

Methodologically speaking, this exploration of war’s complicated visuality was launched by French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s questioning of unrepresentability in art. When it comes to catastrophic and violent events, there is a debate regarding what is permitted to be depicted. This debate touches on the two overarching issues of this article: the ethics and failure of representation. I argue that the omission by the artists in the present article of a direct visual register in artistic responses to the traumatic and disastrous Russian-Ukrainian war in the Donbas does not constitute the “ethical turn” opposed by Rancière, in which the impossibility of depicting a catastrophe is transformed into a prohibition that suggests a dangerous lack of critical social dissensus. Rather, Ukrainian women artists perform the opposite of silencing representation, expanding the visual field

by expressing compassion together with documenting the regimes of visuality engendered by the war.

Susan Sontag, Virginia Woolf, and Judith Butler participated in a nearly century-long conversation regarding a potential antidote to “the perennial seductiveness of war” (Sontag 122). A specific issue that interests the Ukrainian women artists is the way Soviet discourse on World War II slips into public discussion of the Donbas war. Thus, these artists not only address the universal failure of language to describe war, they also dissect the language contaminated with worn-out Soviet ideology that perceives a defenceless motherland protected by male warriors, exposing the old clichés and symbols intertwining with the new stories and meanings.

Surprisingly, the theme of flowers and gardens appeared in a series of first-hand interviews I conducted in the summer of 2019 with Ukrainian women artists addressing the war in the Donbas. The garden as a theme and operational metaphor in describing the war’s horrendous impact on society appeared often as we discussed the war’s corrosion of reality, decay of meanings and symbols, and destabilization of representation as such. These interviews (and some later instalments) provided the basis of this article. Here, I address the representational collapse induced by the war in the Donbas and explore a specific female artistic perspective of war.

#### PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE 1: UNSEEN WOUNDS INFLICTED BY WAR

Incidentally, one of the most iconic artworks of the Donbas war, *Homo Bulla*, was created by Maria Kulikovs'ka (b. 1988) two years prior to the military conflict. The sculptural triptych by the Crimean-born Ukrainian artist was a continuation of the exhibition “Hender v IZOLYATSIYI: Pravo na samokonstruiuvannia v umovakh patriarkhatu” (“Gender in IZOLYATSIYA: Right for Self-Construction in Patriarchal Conditions”), curated by Olena Chervonyk (Chervonik) for the art foundation Izolyatsia in Donetsk in 2012. The Izolyatsia foundation was created in 2010 by philanthropist Liubov Mykhailova on the site of a defunct Soviet factory that produced insulation materials. In 2014, the Izolyatsia was seized by mercenaries of the self-proclaimed “Donetsk’s People Republic.”<sup>13</sup> Kulikovs'ka’s sculptures *Armiia kloniv* (*Army of Clones*, 2010) from the “Gender in IZOLYATSIYA” exhibition and *Homo Bulla*—both molds of the artist’s naked body—were destroyed by the military, who used them as targets for shooting practice after taking over the premises of the foundation.

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<sup>13</sup> The foundation has moved to Kyiv but was unable to retrieve either equipment or the remaining artworks on its premises. For the chronicle of the seizure and exile, see “Izolyatsia in Exile.”

**Figure 1. Maria Kulikovs'ka, *Homo Bulla—Human As a Soap Bubble*, Donetsk, Ukraine, from the collection of the Izolyatsia Foundation, 2012–14, courtesy of the artist.**



The exhibition “Gender in IZOLYATSIA” had been dedicated to the layered gender conditioning that exists in Ukraine, where traditionalist patriarchy is merged with the Soviet utopian myth of gender equality.<sup>14</sup> Kulikovs'ka participated by showing her breakthrough sculptural and performative project *Army of Clones*. In 2010, when the project was conceived and implemented, she was still a student of architecture who was spending a lot of time thinking about how spatial configuration influences the structures of thought, including thought about gender norms. Growing up in Crimea, Kulikovs'ka was surrounded by the ruins of the ancient Greek settlement Panticapaeum (currently the city of Kerch) and was fascinated by the Caryatids, columns shaped as female bodies. Contemplating their constructive utilitarian function in the building, Kulikovs'ka could not help but think about women's precarious position in Ukrainian society, ostentatiously proclaimed equal, yet carrying a double burden at work and at home while being stigmatized for their femininity. Revolting against the constrictions of her universalizing education that refused to take into

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<sup>14</sup> See the curatorial statement by Chervonik, “Gender in IZOLYATSIA.”



account a female particularity, Kulikovs'ka decided to counter this normativity by occupying space with her own copies, defiantly appropriating a caryatid as a model. Molded from white alabaster, a student's material resembling marble, the anatomically precise molds of the artist's body were missing hands. This mutilation resembled the most famous caryatids from the Athens Parthenon while also stressing the defenceless nature and fragility of the artist's army. The sculptures were placed in a public park in Kyiv, while the artist faced furious passersby who were scandalized by the presence of anatomical copies of the female naked body in a public space, their indignation even more aggravated when they noticed the original model walking shamelessly nearby (Kulikovs'ka).

For the project *Homo Bulla*, realized on the grounds of Izolyatsia in August 2012, Kulikovs'ka changed the material from plaster to semi-transparent colourful soap. Her body molds of soap, a delicate and malleable material, were intended to convey the ephemerality and vulnerability of the human condition. By being exposed to the ravages of natural elements and time, the sculptures were programmed to manifest the trauma of corporeal transience in the world and the beauty of slow decay. The curatorial statement by Chervonik invoked the Rococo-inspired themes of mortality, decay, and the transience of human life.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the colourful soap bubbles recalled Roman author Marcus Terentius Varro's famous phrase "Homo Bulla" in which he compared human life to a soap bubble that shines with beautiful colours before exploding and vanishing forever. The project came to an unintentionally dark finale after the militants' seizure of the Izolyatsia premises, as the molds of Kulikovs'ka's body were fired at and destroyed without a trace, not by time but by direct violence. Meanwhile, the Izolyatsia premises were turned into a concentration camp by the authorities of the so-called Donetsk republic, subjecting real human beings to psychological and physical violence, along with the sculptures (Aseyev and Umland; Mediina initsiatyva za prava liudyny). The art's destruction was not documented but boasted about to Russian journalists by a former visitor, who declared the shooting to be his own performance (Kulikovs'ka). Even without visual evidence, the execution of artworks that were casts of the artist's body evokes a visceral response, more profound than initially intended by the artist.

The category of the Kantian sublime is related to catastrophes of a divine nature, incompatible with human experience and thus unrepresentable, according to Jean-François Lyotard. Attacking the idea of unrepresentability, Rancière railed against the impact of an ethical turn that "reduced art to the ethical witnessing of the unrepresentable catastrophe" (201). Instead,

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<sup>15</sup> See the curatorial statement by Chervonik, "Homo Bulla."

Rancière advocates for artistic and political dissensus and “a lack of impossibility of representation.” For Rancière, “everything is representable,” even such topics as the extermination of European Jews (196). An inhuman atrocity inflicted by humans, the Holocaust was rarely documented visually, but was represented multiple times after the event in cultural artefacts, monuments, movies, and paintings, despite Theodor W. Adorno’s famous declaration that poetry and all art by extension were impossible after Auschwitz. Rancière instead sees a promise of transformation in the Holocaust’s destruction of a representative order, and lists Claude Lanzmann’s movie *Shoah* (1985) among the effective responses to this traumatic event. The unseen violence inflicted upon Kulikovs'ka’s artworks unfolds in our imagination just as the memoirs by Holocaust survivors in Lanzmann’s movie; though not supported by visual evidence, they act as their own testimony.

Before the war, Kulikovs'ka documented the sculptures’ transformations during her several visits to Donetsk, including the last visit in March 2014, which coincided with the short-lived Donetsk Maidan. The artist witnessed the attack of an angry crowd on the peaceful pro-Ukrainian demonstration next to the Taras Shevchenko monument, unhindered by the police. Escaping the escalating violence, Kulikovs'ka was abducted by a taxi driver who happened to be a supporter of the Russian invasion and threatened to kill her (Kulikovs'ka). Leaving Donetsk for good the next day, Kulikovs'ka had the premonition (which turned out to be correct) that she had seen her sculptures for the last time.

**Figure 2. Maria Kulikovs'ka with Uleg Vinnichenko, [MKUV Studio], *Hortus Conclusus: Indoor Garden*, 2019, ballistic soap, textile flowers, in the collection of the Zenko Foundation, Ukraine, courtesy of the artist.**



Banned from her native Crimea, Kulikovs'ka continues working in Ukraine and Sweden, exorcising her traumas with the help of performances and new sculptures. During the 10th Manifesta in St. Petersburg in the summer of 2014, Kulikovs'ka staged a performance titled *254*, the number assigned to her refugee petition in Kyiv. Wrapped in a Ukrainian flag, Kulikovs'ka prostrated her body on the stairs of the Hermitage Museum. She was ignored by bystanders for approximately half an hour before a passerby reported her to the police for disturbing the public order.

As an art student in Sweden, Kulikovs'ka searched for soap to create a new series of molds and discovered that this material is used for ballistic exercises by the military because it has the same density as the human body. Since that discovery, Kulikovs'ka has utilized military ballistic soap for her new series of sculptures, which she identifies by the medieval metaphor of *Hortus Conclusus*, an enclosed garden symbolizing the Virgin Mary's innocence. For her 2019 show *Moia shkira—moia sprava* (*My Skin is My*

*Business*) at the Odesa Museum of Art,<sup>16</sup> Kulikovs'ka combined the ballistic soap with textile flowers to create inner gardens within the molds of her body. For Kulikovs'ka, her body is the last bastion, her own territory in which to cultivate and protect the inner flowers not scorched by her experience of war, displacement, migration, and exile.

#### RUIN OF REPRESENTATION 1: WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

If Rancière primarily studies the philosophical implications of the ruin of representation produced by the havoc and devastation of war, Sontag's book *Regarding the Pain of Others* is a universally acclaimed resource for an expanded analysis of war's visuality. The invention of the camera and its ability to capture rapid motion has allowed for an evolution of the spectacle of war. Sontag questions the consequences of the classic methods of composition, rhythm, light, shadow, and balance to become means in the creation of beautiful yet horrible impressions of war that dismembers and fragments buildings and bodies, mixing them to the point of indistinguishability. Sontag reminds us that bodily torment is the most canonical subject of art, with spectators of religious painting observing corporeal sufferings on famous canvases for centuries (42). However, one of the goals of Sontag's book is to dispute the normalcy that has come to embrace the spectacle of war in home entertainment: "It is a view of suffering, of the pain of others, that is rooted in religious thinking, which links pain to sacrifice, sacrifice to exaltation—a view that could not be more alien to a modern sensibility, which regards suffering as something that is a mistake or an accident or a crime" (99).

Among Ukrainian women artists, Vlada Ralko (b. 1969) is one particularly attuned to traumas and their visual manifestations due to her consistent work with the category of the abject. Theorized as neither subject nor object, this concept by Julia Kristeva allowed Ralko to ponder the mechanisms of repression affecting the psyche and resulting in the fracturing of personality, deformed by the forced cutting away of anything deemed repugnant, horrible, or disgusting. Ralko is famous for her paintings of violently fragmented and agonizing bodies often rendered in viscerally pink colours as if they lack skin or have their intestines exposed. However, this obscene surplus of reality repressed by the superego or by social order attains acute poignancy when confronted with the monstrous spectacle of war. Ralko's series *Kyivs'kyi shchodennyk* (*Kyiv Diary*, 2013–15), which

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<sup>16</sup> More information, including the illustrations, can be obtained at the Odesa Fine Arts Museum's website; see Kulikovs'ka, *Moia shkira*.

began with documenting the Euromaidan and evolved to cover the Crimean annexation and the war in the Donbas, resonates with Sontag's comment regarding Simona Weil's *Essay on War*: "violence turns anybody subjected to it into a thing" (12). The fragmented body in Ralko's paintings, initially testifying to the inner war of hidden desires and dramas, is now made disturbingly real. In Ralko's words, "Earlier the body was whole despite the war that was raging inside it, but now the war attacks the body from the outside: it wounds and marks, it amputates."<sup>17</sup> That is, the war turns things and notions inside out, as reality collapses together with any language capable of its description.

*Kyiv Diary*, by Ralko, is a haunting panorama of war's brutality, interspersed with residual Soviet objects and environments as well as resurrected folklore symbols. Legless and armless torsos, macabre rag dolls, streaking gushes of blood, explosions, and swaddled infants against a background of dark earth and sky—this is a collection of the ghastliest metaphors incarnated by war. Among the earlier drawings in the series is a depiction of a human body, pushed through the slot of a voting booth, which becomes a discomfiting heap of minced meat. The rapidly painted black background contrasts with the transparent fragility of the pink human torso and legs outlined with a thin marker. The bodily torment in this drawing alludes to the so-called referendums in Crimea and Donbas, and the repugnant violence that followed them.

One of the most scarring metaphors in Ralko's series is the swaddled infant-soldier, a horrible merger of a baby covered in linen and a bandaged human torso with amputated limbs. Swaddled infants in a row are put to sleep on some angular, menacing, and dark war machines; the drawing is inscribed with a famous line from the folk lullaby "Oi khodyt' son kolo vikon" ("A dream walks by the windows"): "De khata novesen'ka, tam dytyna malesen'ka" ("There is a new house with a little baby in it"). Another line from the famous old lullaby "Pokladu ti pid lavytsiu" ("I will put you under the bench") decorates a drawing depicting a young mother cradling a crying amputee soldier. While the background is a chaos of dark brown brushstrokes, explosions, and typical Soviet apartment buildings. The only colour accent is the brightly red screaming mouth of the soldier, crying like an infant thrown into the world (see Figure 3).

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<sup>17</sup> From the unpublished statement that Vlada Ralko wrote for the exhibition in Kharkiv *Voyna-ona* (2014).

**Figure 3. Vlada Ralko, from the *Prykhystok poeta (Poet's Refuge)* cycle, part of *Kyivs'kyi shchodennyk (Kyiv Diary series)*, the artist's version of the original, 2014, acrylic, permanent marker on paper, 200x120cm, courtesy of the artist.**



The infant-soldier motif is a transformation of the torso theme in Ralko's work that was instigated by the war. According to the artist, what were formerly antique allusions to the armless Venus were replaced by associations with icons of dormition scenes in which saints' bodies are protectively covered with cloth and insect cocoons that in their ambiguity may harbour either life or emptiness (Ralko). The passive immobility of the swaddled figure echoes the incomprehensible violence of war.

The ultimate confusion of war is conveyed through yet another swapping of opposites: Mars and Venus exchange their looks and roles in Ralko's drawings and in large-scale paintings made during her art residence in Kaniv. On Ralko's monumental (approximately 177 inches long) canvas *Venera ta Mars (Venus and Mars, 2016)*—a painterly allusion to Sandro Botticelli's *Venus and Mars* (1485, The National Gallery, London, UK)—the goddess of love appears garbed in military uniform—sorrowful, anxious, and alert. A masked Venus holds and fires an automatic rifle in the direction of the drab Soviet buildings in the background. Sharing the immediate foreground with her is Mars, the god of war, stark naked and passive, and seemingly asleep. The dark and stormy cloud behind Venus's back is threateningly moving toward the buildings, while covering a ghoulish figure with a rabbit's head and legs cradling the infant cocoon (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Vlada Ralko, *Venera ta Mars (Venus and Mars)*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 450 cm, from the collection of Iurii (Yury) Stashkiv, courtesy of the artist.**



The mundane and ordinary architecture of the Soviet era is no longer neutrally anonymous but suddenly speaks volumes about the traps of the Soviet past. Ralko underscores the Soviet everyday as one of the culprits of the war in the Donbas. “The war did not appear out of nowhere,” she claims, “it has its roots, and this war originated from our everyday consent with Soviet everyday materiality still present everywhere” (Ralko). The typical Khrushchev style apartment buildings sprawling in every Ukrainian city and town, the Soviet utilitarian design prevailing in most administrative or hospital premises—all contribute to the Soviet ideology still lurking in public discourse on vital societal matters. Discussions of the war in the Donbas demonstrate the remnants of Soviet ideology most vividly. In her book on

Ukrainian feminist art of recent years, which includes a discussion of Ralko's *Kyiv Diary* series, American researcher Jessica Zychowicz points to the narrative structures present in the discussions of war inherited from Soviet memorial politics. She calls them "[g]rand narratives of tragedy and suffering that once drove the glorification and cathartic function of the Red Army victory narrative in the Soviet monopoly over memory" (Zychowicz 247). Ralko purposefully inserts fragments of the Soviet reality in her images: not only the architectural elements, but even the brownish dark backgrounds in her drawings and paintings refer to the most popular wall colours in Soviet administrative buildings. The artist estranges familiar objects and surroundings, calling for a reform of the everyday in order to create a counter-narrative of a war that resists the Soviet ideological residue.

The visual language of war is particularly prone to clichés and staple tropes. Sontag uncovers the roots of the convention to depict war as "a dignified all-male group outing" in the images by photographer Roger Fenton, who was the first to document war (50). This was the Crimean War (1853–56), during which Fenton invented and mastered a skill for staging the events for the photographic lens as a glorifying spectacle of male heroes. Acknowledging the damage that a woman is subjected to by a war not started by her, Ralko strategically omits glorified and victorious representations of fighting men, focusing instead on female figures depicting sorrow and anguish. The Soviet symbolic figure of the motherland is replaced with mothers caring for bandaged infant-soldiers or giving birth on battlefields. On one of her drawings, artillery fire strikes directly into the woman's exposed womb with the swaddled infant inside (see Figure 5). On another, women in the traditional Ukrainian headdress of flower wreaths with ribbons woefully watch the bandaged and immobile cocoon inside them, the dead soldier who is yet to be some mother's child.



**Figure 5. Vlada Ralko, from the *Kyiv Diary* series, 2013–15, gouache, watercolour, ballpoint pen on paper, private collection, courtesy of the artist.**



In Ralko's opinion, one of the most ravaging effects of war is on female subjectivity, for it questions its core and reduces it to hollowed-out symbols, like the Soviet motherland that requires the ultimate sacrifice from its children (Ralko). In one of the drawings of the series, Ralko effectively undermines the symbol by radically incarnating it. A strong and menacing female figure with the body structure of a Neolithic goddess, who looks very real in her contemporary underwear, stands on black soil, firmly propped by a shovel, preparing to bury dead soldiers piled in a heap nearby. The artist revisits the symbols herself, disturbing the war narrative by introducing a character inspired by the Ukrainian folk rag-doll, *lial'ka-motanka*, that traditionally served as a protective charm. On Ralko's painting the oversized

and ghoulish version of the textile doll endures Christ-like passions, refusing to be contained within the symbolic order via her newly found corporeal vulnerability.

Ralko does not allow for a woman to play a passive and depersonalized victim in a gory and exciting spectacle. A witness and avid chronicler of the Euromaidan, Ralko is aware of the active participation of Ukrainian women in violent and dangerous events. The transformation of women's role in society, and the perception of this role by community actors has been noted by many observers. A Ukrainian scholar of feminism, Tamara Zlobina highlights the monumental shift of attitudes that has occurred in Ukraine in recent years, prompted by the Maidan and the war in the Donbas: "The active and mass participation of women in Maidan, war, volunteer movement and politics, their dedication and heroism undermined the categories of 'Barbie' and 'Berehynia'" (152). Zlobina here refers to the gender system that developed in the post-Soviet period in Ukraine, as described by prominent Ukrainian anthropologist and feminist Oksana Kis'. According to Kis', only two gender identities were available for Ukrainian women, an overly sexualized and objectified Barbie doll or Berehynia (the Ukrainian word for "protectress" and the name of an ancient symbol and goddess), the selfless caregiver of a family's health and well-being. Since only these two models were propagated by media and popular culture, it was difficult for women who did not fit into either category to be represented and visible in Ukrainian society. The Maidan and the war, however, changed that, though not completely. Zlobina lists numerous examples of publicly visible Ukrainian women soldiers who resist reduction into a one-dimensional role by underlining both their femininity and their role as soldiers.

Zlobina focuses on one example, the story of Mariia Berlins'ka, whom she recognized in the Babylon'13 video as partaking in the Maidan's harshest clashes between police and protesters.<sup>18</sup> Berlins'ka later fought in the war in the Donbas as an aerial intelligence officer. After violence erupted during the Maidan Revolution (2013–14), Berlins'ka realized that she was barred from entering the most dangerous zones by male sentinels manning the barricades. In one notorious interaction with such a guard, Berlins'ka was told that women were not allowed to proceed further. When she inquired as to who could go behind the barricades, she was told that only people (*liudy*) were allowed (Zlobina 150). After this exchange, Berlins'ka made a speech from the main stage of the Maidan about gender equality, even though the stage managers were reluctant to let her on stage when they learned about

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<sup>18</sup> Babylon'13 is a Ukrainian collective of documentary filmmakers created in 2013. Video in Babylon'13 documents the street fights on the Hrushevs'kyi street in Kyiv in January of 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL4R7G-LBUsSskxz2-iTCaSCa6MrFWx8ep>. Accessed 25 Nov. 2021.

the topic of her speech.<sup>19</sup> Still, her vocal insistence on being heard contributed to the eventual shift that Zlobina highlights.

Ralko's fight against the shallow and worn-out symbols inherited from the Soviet past and male-dominated war story-telling is another contribution to this shift in the perception of women's roles. Ralko displayed her work in many Ukrainian cities during exhibitions dealing with the war in the Donbas, including the already mentioned *Voina-ona* (*War Is She*) in Kharkiv in October 2014<sup>20</sup> and the Kmytiv Museum of Soviet Art in September 2019.<sup>21</sup> Ralko further published a book titled *Liniia rozmezhuвання* (*Contact Line*) in dialogue with Volodymyr Budnikov, showcasing the *Kyiv Diary* series (Budnikov and Ralko).

The incarnated metaphors and symbols in Ralko's visual diary of the war call for reconsideration of how the war is perceived, depicted, and therefore understood. The disastrous effect of the war on life can make people expose their hidden side, turning them inside out: "the war, akin to a surgery suddenly reveals how everything inside us is obscene, dangerous, bloody and frightful" (Ralko). The obscene layer of reality or the "surplus of representation," as Rancière put it, is inherent in the discourse of war, undermining its own depiction or narration (198).

Ralko handles the ruin of representative order that war produces by always focusing on the suffering party, not the victorious one. Her emphatical artistic accounts of survivors' feelings concur with several of the main themes of this article. Even though Ralko does not employ the garden theme common to other artists in this article directly (apart, perhaps, from the wreath flowers decorating *lial'ka-motankas* in her drawings and paintings), Ralko shares in explorations of the war's impact on female subjectivity and offers her own compassionate alternative.

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<sup>19</sup> A video of Berlins'ka's speech on the Maidan stage, titled "Pravo zhinky na Maidan" ("A Woman's Right to Maidan"), can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9du79hujxo> (qtd. in Zlobina). Accessed 25 Nov. 2021.

<sup>20</sup> For more information on the exhibition *Voina-Ona*, including programming, see "Voina/ONA."

<sup>21</sup> For more on the exhibition "Viina v muzeii" (*War in the Museum*), see Kmytiv.

## PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE 2: FRACTURED SUBJECTIVITY

Alevtina Kakhidze's (b. 1973) drawings of and performances related to the war in the Donbas are informed by her personal entanglement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, which is her birthplace. Her art reflects a pronounced garden theme. Kakhidze's ongoing and evolving performance, which she refers to by the overarching title *Metod konstruiuvannia politychnoi pravdy* (*Method of Constructing Political Truth*), was presented for the first time in 2014 at Manifesta, the traveling European Biennale taking place in St. Petersburg, the event at which Kulikovs'ka had performed her previously discussed 254. Kakhidze's performance addressed the destabilization and fragmentation that followed Russia's annexation of Crimea and encroachment on the Ukrainian east. In an attempt to comprehend and communicate the violent and traumatic event of war, the performance was titled *V Afryku huliaty: Pro Ukrainu v ramkakh zakonu Rosiis'koi Federatsii* (*Where the Wild Things Are. About Ukraine within the Framework of the Law of the Russian Federation*).<sup>22</sup> During the performance, she embodied the subjective split by acting from the perspective of three conceptual characters that she created: the *Mediator*, the *Tourist*, and the *Fighter Against Electricity*. Her drawings representing the characters were enlarged to life-size posters and placed on the stage. The artist responded to audience questions such as "Whose is Crimea?" or "Do you think civilians die from the Ukrainian army's shell fire, too?" by moving in front of the corresponding image and answering from each character's perspective. The *Mediator* is akin to an international observer: someone who strives to be above the situation, who listens to all dissenting perspectives, and who alleviates the conflict by some means. The *Tourist* is an innocent bystander who happened to witness and document the event (for instance, by taking photos) but who is not familiar with the context of the situation. The *Fighter Against Electricity* (the title is a nod to a famous avant-garde opera *Pobeda nad Solntsem* [*Victory over the Sun*])<sup>23</sup> is a person who is deeply involved in the situation and who is skeptical about information provided by the media (Kakhidze).

At the time of Kakhidze's performance, her mother was living in the city of Zhdanovka in the Donetsk region, on the shifting front line that was occupied and freed several times in 2014. When in the position of the *Tourist*, Kakhidze was asked a question about Crimea; the artist replied that it was

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<sup>22</sup> A video of Kakhidze's performance at Manifesta 10 (2014) is available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLbFWt\\_PpNo&list=PLLIiLzMeYZOdvw3qxpMSqu3N3LiyR3rRn](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLbFWt_PpNo&list=PLLIiLzMeYZOdvw3qxpMSqu3N3LiyR3rRn). Accessed 25 Nov. 25, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> *Pobeda nad Solntsem* (*Victory Over the Sun*) is a futurist opera which premiered in St. Petersburg in 1913, with a libretto by Aleksei Kruchenykh, music by Mikhail Matiushin, and stage design by Kazimir Malevich.

definitely hers but also belonged to nobody, like the stars. In the position of the *Fighter Against Electricity*, she was asked about the origin of the shell fire. She answered passionately if the person asking the question wanted her mother to leave the safety of her basement to find out which side was shooting. The figures of Kakhidze's drawn characters bear a likeness to the artist to underline the fact that multiple perspectives can inhabit a single person, tearing her apart from within. Although the artist tried to be objective when answering tough questions about the war, she often failed to maintain a disinterested stance, being scared for her mother's life and mentally escaping into the position of the dispassionate *Tourist*. Exploring the idea of the truth itself decaying when confronted with real human suffering, Kakhidze's primary goals were to enhance empathy and to reveal how the hybrid war enabled a manipulation of facts.

**Figure 6. Alevtina Kakhidze, *Metod konstruiuvannia politychnoi pravdy (Method of Constructing Political Truth)*, performance in Mystets'kyi Arsenal, Kyiv, Ukraine, part of the exhibition *Revoliutsionuimo (Revolutionize)*, 5 Dec. 2018. Courtesy of the artist.**



Kakhidze's performance at the exhibition *Revoliutsionuimo (Revolutionize)* at Mystets'kyi Arsenal in Kyiv in December 2018 was a result

of four years of work.<sup>24</sup> As a UN messenger of tolerance in the UN program of Sustainable Development in Ukraine, Kakhidze repeated the performance in cities next to the front line.<sup>25</sup> During this time, a new character, *The Gardener*, appeared, whom the artist called a revolutionary experiment (Kakhidze). *The Gardener* figure was inspired by Kakhidze's mother, who refused to relocate from the war zone, motivated by her unwillingness to abandon her garden. While talking to other people in the front zone who were displaced and forced to relocate many times, the artist discovered that this attachment to gardens was a common theme. For instance, a woman from Sloviansk told Kakhidze that she was forced to leave her town when the war became especially violent. When she returned after the city was taken back by the Ukrainian army, she was heartbroken to discover that the tomatoes in her vegetable garden were completely lost in a sea of weeds. The woman threw herself to work, cutting and weeding in tears late into the night. When she woke up the next morning, she saw all her tomatoes on the ground, dead and scorched by the sun (Kakhidze). This story, among numerous others, caused the artist, an avid gardener herself, to ponder the delicate balance in a garden that is very easily disturbed; in other words, for the garden to thrive, no outside force should interfere violently. To extrapolate that conclusion further, she decided to give voice to the gardener's perspective in her performances.

Many of the questions to which Kakhidze responded during her performance at Mystets'kyi Arsenal had been posed to the artist also while she was traveling with her participatory artwork or discussing the events of the Maidan and the war in the Donbas with friends and acquaintances. She collected the questions that would be later addressed to her by her assistants in the audience, thus making the performance partially rehearsed, while also allowing ordinary viewers to voice their own questions. Among the questions that were posed during the course of her various performances were: "Can one throw stones at militia?";<sup>26</sup> "What was achieved with the help of Maidan?"; "Why discriminate against Russian-speaking people in Ukraine?"; "Why do you speak the language of the occupants?"; "Do you think that every Russian is guilty in the war?" *The Gardener's* answers were poetic and paradoxical. When answering the question "Why can't you relocate your mother from the occupied territory?" Kakhidze, as the *Fighter Against Electricity*, replied harshly that her mother was not a piece of furniture to be

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<sup>24</sup> On Alevtina Kakhidze's performance at Mystets'kyi Arsenal, see "Performans."

<sup>25</sup> For a list of UN tolerance messengers in Ukraine to which Kakhidze has belonged since 2018, see "Zustrichaite posliv."

<sup>26</sup> The question was posed by Kakhidze's mother during one of their first conversations after the war in the Donbas started. Documented conversations between the artist and her mother can be found in Kakhidze, "Prozhit' voinu."

moved against her will; as a *Gardener*, the artist noted further that she considered three hundred times whether to replant even a small flower in her garden.

While searching for answers in botany as she worked in her own garden and contemplated the war, Kakhidze discovered some inspiring ideas about the co-existence of vegetation. Plants learn to live next to each other because they cannot move, so their evolutionary development has taught them tolerance as a tool of survival (Kakhidze). The *Mystets'kyi Arsenal* performance projected such discoveries and a more reflective approach to the self-fracturing conceptual characters. During her performance for Documenta in 2014, Kakhidze represented these characters as a given, but in *Mystets'kyi Arsenal* she took the time to explain to the audience their meaning and admitted that they all were parts of her own identity.

Both the trials of the artist's mother, Liudmyla Andriivna (Liudmila Andreevna) Kakhidze, in the occupied territory and the artist's fears and frustrations were channelled into her series or drawings and a public Facebook page.<sup>27</sup> The title of the page, *Klubnika (Strawberry) Andreevna*, is the name that was given to Kakhidze's mother by children in the kindergarten where she used to work. In her drawings and stories, Kakhidze documented the troubles that her mother faced—such as the artillery shootings that injured or killed her neighbours, the changing of flags on administrative buildings, or her encounter with military members from both sides of the war—as well as her mother's mundane activities, like selling flowers in the market or the struggle to receive her pension. Ukrainian journalist Lesia Hanzha stated that because of Kakhidze's outspokenness, her mother became “the most well-known senior-citizen of the war zone.”

The vernacular tone of Kakhidze's stories and drawings helped to humanize the often-ostracized class of Ukrainian citizens, namely those who decided against abandoning their homes to relocate to Ukrainian-held territory and were subsequently held to be sympathetic to Russia's invasion.<sup>28</sup> As noted by Zychowicz, Kakhidze's colloquial tone appeared as an antidote to the language of war myth-making, entrenched in Soviet ideology: “Conversations between a mother and daughter transgresses the chaotic din of the media dramaturgy playing out elsewhere, supplying narrative detail to dispel myth” (268). The ordinary events of *Klubnika Andreevna's* life unfold in the form of a visual diary in Kakhidze's drawings,

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<sup>27</sup> A Facebook page by Kakhidze dedicated to her mother can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/truealevtina/>. Accessed 25 Nov. 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Andrii Reva, the Minister of Social Politics of Ukraine (April 2016–Aug. 2019), called people who refused relocation from the occupied territories “filth” in his interview with the BBC on 26 Apr. 2019, and became the subject of a lawsuit because of this statement (Hubar).

purposely unacademic in style and often accompanied by explanatory signatures akin to comic strips. Frequently the drawings were made semi-automatically, while the artist was talking to her mother on the phone.

**Figure 7. Alevtina Kakhidze, “V Zhdanovke zvoniat” (“In Zhdanovka They Call”), marker on paper, 2015, courtesy of the artist.**



The quotidian banality in Kakhidze’s drawing series is intertwined with the absurd phantasmagory of war and the overhauling of the ordinary fabric of life. The absence of cellular service forced residents to convene in the local cemetery, the only place with reception, where they could talk to their relatives and learn the local news—for instance, how many people had died in the recent shell fire. Kakhidze confesses to her incapability to ironize or think metaphorically about the circumstances, as war cancels all artifice: “In old days I would have talked about it as of an art metaphor: only in a cemetery in Zhdanovka there is a connection to the outside world” (“Prozhit’ voynu,” 182). Kakhidze’s drawing titled “V Zhdanovke zvoniat” (“In Zhdanovka They Call”) and dated August-September 2014 schematically depicts figures of people among graves and crosses holding their cell phones to their ears (see Figure 7). Apart from graves in the cemetery, there is a silhouetted church with bells and coned plinths topped with bright red stars (the only colour in the image). The graves are Soviet-style military graves for



soldiers who fought in World War II. The cemetery appears not only to be a portal to a different world but a place that placates ideological disparity.

**Figure 8. Alevtina Kakhidze, “In Her Garden,” marker and colour pencil on paper, 2014, courtesy of the artist.**



The garden is another character in Kakhidze’s series. It is featured on its own or as a background for stories of war that disrupt Klubnika Andreevna’s regular chores. In a drawing titled “In Her Garden,” the horizon is circled as if universalizing the garden and turning it into a globe on which Klubnika Andreevna sits surrounded by colourful flowers. The horizon, however, is attacked by red explosions that the figure ignores, ever focused on her flowers. On another drawing with a similar horizon, Kakhidze gives her viewers more details of the garden, with a tree captioned as “plum” and the plot of land captioned “garden,” with a row of carrots next to it. Klubnika Andreevna is hiding from the shell fire that is ravaging the horizon; the caption to the entire image voices her story: “Vse iz-za morkovki poshla v ogorod v tot den” (“The carrots are to blame; because of them, I went to my garden that day.” Yet another drawing depicts a diagram of the street where Klubnika Andreevna lives, with stray dogs abandoned by their owners who decided to flee the war zone. It shows the cellar where she hides from the shell fire, her big house, and her dog Irma’s little house. The proximity of Klubnika Andreevna’s house to the house where a neighbour was recently killed by shell fire is indicated on the diagram. The red colour underlines the place of the explosion as well as the address of Kakhidze’s mother’s house,

betraying the artist's anguish at the nearness of her mother's house to the location of a tragedy of war that claimed a civilian's life. The mode of Kakhidze's drawing—unrealistic, innocent, and soliciting sincere compassion—inadvertently responds to Sontag's consideration of the incongruity between beauty and truth in depictions of war, where traditionally conceived beauty is perceived as inauthentic (Sontag 78). The style of Kakhidze's series, simple and humorous, is as vernacular as its voice describing real events. In rejecting pathos and artifice, it is nakedly sincere and unsophisticated, evoking in a childlike manner the impression of raw truth.

**Figure 9.** Alevtina Kakhidze, “Rynok v Zhdanovke” (“Market in Zhdanovka”), marker and colour pencil on paper, 2014, courtesy of the artist.



Among the most insistent and potent messages that Kakhidze voices with her series of drawings is an acceptance of the heterogeneity of identities, populating the Donbas.<sup>29</sup> Just like the plants in her garden, Kakhidze believes that people with dissenting opinions can tolerate each other and live peacefully without blame and prejudice. Similarly, for Rancière “dissensus is a political core constituting the community” (188).

<sup>29</sup> For an examination of the multi-faceted national profile of the region, see Yekelchik, in particular 120–21.

Too often the inhabitants of the historically multi-ethnic Donbas region were reduced to a convenient single category and denied the multiplicity of self-identification. Ardent Communist Reisner, for instance, when visiting Donbas in the 1920s, was astonished to discover that people were speaking Ukrainian in the Bakhmut valley near Donetsk: “Peasants, populating the valley, for some reason spoke Ukrainian, were growing their watermelons and driving their slow splendid oxen” (376). One of the drawings in the series *Rynok v Zhdanovke* (*Market in Zhdanovka*, 2014) features Klubnika Andreevna next to other flower sellers (see Figure 9). While the signature above points to Klubnika Andreevna, the underlying signature to the entire drawing specifies that both pro-Ukrainians and sympathizers of the so-called Donetsk Republic are selling the fruits of their gardens at the market. The supporters of Ukraine and those who voted for Donbas’s independence in the staged referendum are drawn similarly by intention, to emphasize a humanity that extends beyond ideological predilections or indoctrinations.

The artist refuses to accept that some lives are more important than others. The distinction, however, is made by the representational regimes of war itself, as theorized by Butler in her *Frames of War*: “War is framed in certain ways to control and affect in relation to the differential grievability of lives” (26). Senior citizens who remained in the occupied territory are sometimes treated with hostility by the Ukrainian media and Ukrainian officials. Regardless of their political beliefs, these citizens are not able to uproot their lives and start anew somewhere else. They have to travel to the closest Ukrainian-controlled town beyond the occupied zone, often on foot, and wait in long lines at checkpoints to collect their pensions. For Klubnika Andreevna the journey through the border could take about eleven hours and was fraught by weather conditions and the absence of public restrooms and benches for rest. On 16 January 2019, during one such journey, Klubnika Andreevna died of a heart attack while trying to cross the border. Kakhidze continues to tell the story of her mother in drawings and performances, attracting the attention of international press and curators to the plight of displaced people in Ukraine and to the cruel practice of “pension tourism.”<sup>30</sup>

Kakhidze’s involvement with the Donbas war was unavoidable; it was personal as well as traumatic. As an artist she yearns for balance and therefore splits herself into conceptual characters, each with a different mode and degree of distance to the war. This fracturing of personality occurs

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<sup>30</sup> An online exhibition, *Visual Art of Radical Care: An Exhibition of Feminist Artists Activists from Central and Eastern Europe*, at the Yale Gallery, curated by Dr. Aniko Szucs (Sept.–Nov. 2020), <https://macmillan.yale.edu/event/visual-acts-radical-care-exhibition-feminist-artists-activists-central-and-eastern-europe-7>. For media reportage on the subject of pension tourism, see Malchevska; Iakovlenko, “The Artist”; see also “Ukraine: Dying in Lines” that tells the story of Klubnika Andreevna.

inadvertently, prompted by the incomprehensive violence of a war that refuses to allow a unified perspective. Kakhidze's bold and vocal insistence in her art and in media on the equal value of all the citizens involved in the military conflict despite their ideologies, creates a strong alternative to the traditional war discourse that separates "us" from "them." The garden in her work is a mode of existence that is sustainable and open to all sorts of differences, but it is also a symbol of something that requires constant and tolerant care.

#### RUIN OF REPRESENTATION 2: IMPOSSIBLE GARDENS

Anna Zvyagintseva (b. 1986) belongs to the generation of artists that began formulating their artistic programs and common generational identities in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution (a series of protests and political events) of 2004–05. Though her perception of war was not as raw and direct as Kakhidze's, she was similarly gripped by an artistic stupor after the eruption of violence in the Maidan was followed by military aggression in eastern Ukraine. Incapable of registering her emotions in an aesthetic manner, Zvyagintseva went through the folders containing her old drawings and noticed that the reality they represented was crumbling; decay was spreading on them like some infectious disease (Zvyagintseva). Like many Ukrainian citizens, she was glued to her computer screen, reading news at her desk in front of her window while intently absorbing the familiar yet somehow radically different landscape outside. These experiences developed into two projects in 2015: *Poriadok rechei* (*The Order of Things*), which received a Public Choice Prize in the 4th edition of the award at the PinchukArtCentre, and *Namaliuvaty svoje vikno, zim'iaty papir* (*To Draw Your Own Window, to Crumple the Paper*), shown at the School of Kyiv Biennale in 2015 and at Ya Gallery in the artist's native city of Dnipro in the summer of 2016.

**Figure 10.** Anna Zvyagintseva, *Namaliuvaty svoje vikno, zim"iaty papir* (*To Draw Your Own Window, to Crumple the Paper*), 2015, bar reinforcement, welding, iron wires, The School of Kyiv, Kyiv Biennial, 2015, photo by Oleksandr Burlaka, courtesy of the artist.



*The Order of Things* demonstrates the fragmentation and dissipation of reality inflicted by the trauma of war. Zvyagintseva renders her old drawings of women walking with children or picking flowers by welding metal, demonstrating the fragility of everyday life by contrasting the coarseness of her material with the delicacy of her drawing style. Yet even the sturdiest of metals cannot withstand the brutality of war. We notice how the contour is broken and the metallic lines are falling, creating by chance some crude

abstraction, a puzzle of fragments strangely familiar but too chaotically dispersed to be assembled together again.

In her interview, Zvyagintseva shares the story behind the production of the *To Draw Your Own Window, to Crumple the Paper* artwork as a matter of fact, placing an emphasis on its mundane nature: the artist draws her window with the potted flowers and lace curtains, and later disposes of the image by crumpling the paper. The reason for the artist's anguished gesture is not revealed, however, and this ambiguity and the accidental beauty of the destroyed silhouette persist. In *To Draw Your Own Window, to Crumple the Paper*, the artist reproduces this broken silhouette of the window with iron wires, enlarging the destroyed domestic scene to a monumental scale.

Rejecting the direct war depictions in this art piece, Zvyagintseva comments in her interview on the fact that the war appears in every familiar view; it is an invisible catastrophe that changes perspectives on how anything is seen. In *To Draw Your Own Window, to Crumple the Paper*, a sudden sense of loss permeates the view as one looks through the crooked window, reminded that nothing stays the same after war marks and smears every habitual object and view, turning those who cannot see it into its witnesses and making even flower drawings political. A flower is the most mundane domestic object, but its perception is distorted by the war even if it is not raging behind this particular window. Overall, the artist's piece conveys the anguish of many Ukrainians who are reading about the war in the Donbas in the news and thus allow war to enter their homes. Looming large, the beautiful yet menacing sculpture of *To Draw Your Own Window, to Crumple the Paper* testifies to the failure of traditional means to represent war, which spills into everyday reality.

Maryna Skugareva (b. 1962) shared with me the experience of war-induced caesura in her painting and drawing practices (Skugareva). Starting with the first death during the Euromaidan, the Revolution of Dignity and the war in the Donbas that followed merged into one continuous violent event. In such an atmosphere the artist found it impossible to paint. Skugareva belongs to the first generation of Ukrainian artists who came into prominence during *perestroika* and the late Soviet Union. Developing idioms of emerging contemporary Ukrainian art, Skugareva became well-known for her bold combination of neo-expressionist painting with embroidery that explored the traditions of the Ukrainian baroque and feminine domestic art techniques. All previous subjects and concerns now appeared to the artist to be worn-out by the war and by tragedy, yet the war itself could not find its way to her canvases. Skugareva would spend time in her studio, restlessly admitting that the female nudes or still lifes (her usual subjects) were incongruous with the crashing news of the Russian advance in the east, with tortures, and with the ruination of cities and bodies.

**Figure 11. Maryna Skugareva, *12 Iyppnia 2014 (12 July 2014)*, acrylic and acrylic markers on canvas, private collection, courtesy of the artist.**



On the subject of war depriving artists of their tools, Sontag quoted masterful novelist Henry James who was facing an unusual lack of words when tasked to describe for the *New York Times* the lethal destruction of a World War I battle: “The war has used up words; they have weakened, they have deteriorated” (qtd. in Sontag 25). Ukrainian poet Liubov Iakymchuk (Yakymchuk) in the foreword to her poetry collection *Abrykosy Donbasu (Apricots of Donbas)*<sup>31</sup> has similarly written about the intrusion of war into language: “The shells of the words remain the same, but the new senses appear” (x). For Skugareva, a similar epiphany occurred after the July 11 attack on the Ukrainian town Zelenopillia in 2014 that killed and wounded a great number of Ukrainian soldiers. This was the first documented rocket

<sup>31</sup> *Abrykosy Donbasu* was recently published in English translation; see Yakimchuk (OR add your own reference to the translation somewhere here).

barrage launched from the Russian territory. The next day, Skugareva went to a local market, bought a bouquet, and made what she calls “my first war still life” which she titled *12 lypnia (12 of July)* to commemorate the date (Skugareva).

Contrasted against the foil of the dark background, the brightly coloured flowers appear solemn, yet there is no festive triumph or joyfulness in them. Only after beginning her still life, Skugareva noticed that poppy flowers were included in the bouquet, which was unusual because the poppy is fragile and fades fast. For the artist the poppy added an additional layer of meaning as it brought to mind several traditional Ukrainian song-laments in which the death of Cossacks was conveyed through a red poppy, symbolizing the shedding of blood; in one such example: “Pokotyliasia holivochka tak, iak makivochka, vyletila dusha z tila, tak iak lastivochka” (“The head rolled down as a poppy flower, the soul has fled the body as a martin bird”).<sup>32</sup> Finally, Skugareva adapted to include the new conditions in her art and was able to paint another still life on 16 July 2014. Initially, she wanted the background to be lemon-yellow, but she covered it all with a dark brown colour, when on the next day Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 was shot down above Hrabove village in the Donetsk region. Although recognizable as war imagery only via commentary, Skugareva’s exquisite still lifes are inevitably and fatally reframed by the war, whose invisible marks are impossible to erase from their surfaces.

For both Zvyagintseva and Skugareva the war inflicted a temporal blockage of the capability to function as artists. After a time of pondering the incongruity of war and art, they both returned to creativity with newly-found meanings in old tools, images, and symbols. The flowers and gardens in their war-affected art remind the viewer of an antediluvian world, untainted by war. Their works contain markers of how deeply the war penetrates reality and our perception of it, including something as distant as a flower picked in a field by a child.

#### WHEN DOES THE WAR END?

In the examples above, the art of Ukrainian women artists is shown to reflect their immediate and raw responses to the chaos of meanings and the painful events generated by the Russo-Ukrainian war in the Donbas. Approaching the conclusion of this article, however, it seems fitting to mention the art that deals with the long-lasting effects of the trauma inflicted by the war. Lia Dostlieva (b. 1984) and her partner Andrii Dostliev (b. 1984) centre their art

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<sup>32</sup> For plant symbolism in Ukrainian folk songs, see Snihyr'ova.



projects around ideas of commemoration, trauma, and post-memory, engaging topics ranging from the Nazi occupation and the Holodomor to the war in the Donbas.

Exiled from their native city of Donetsk, they treat their experience of displacement with the language of conceptual art while also equipping it with the academic apparatus of anthropology (a discipline studied by Dostlieva at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland).<sup>33</sup> For example, their project *Kazkovi zamky Donbasu (Fairy Castles of Donetsk, 2018–20)* is dedicated to the erosion and fictionalization of the memory of their native town, mythologized by nostalgia and the impossibility of returning. Dostlieva's individual performance *298 (2017)* commemorates the victims of Malaysian Airlines MH17, recreating them as rag dolls in a participative 8-hour presentation at Wolności Square in Poznań. Collaboratively, Dostlieva and Dostliev also study the impact of the trauma that the state induced famine, the Holodomor (1932–33), inflicted on the third generation removed from it. In their project *Meni dosi soromno vykydaty izhu: Babusia meni rozpovidala pro Holodomor (I Still Feel Sorry When I Throw Away Food—Grandma Used to Tell Me Stories About Holodomor, 2018)*, Dostlieva and Dostliev meticulously document the food they had to throw away and the reasons for its disposal: “To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension” (31). While commenting on their selection of methodology, the artists admit to the failure of symbolic systems, be it visual or verbal language, when it comes to the narration of traumatic events. They cite a need to invent a special language to describe the effects of intergenerational trauma.

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<sup>33</sup> In my interview with the artist in December 2020, Dostlieva mentioned that the work of Marianne Hirsch was influential for their art practice.

**Figures 12, 13, and 14. Lia Dostlieva and Andrii Dostliev, *Zalyzuiuchy rany viiny* (*Licking War Wounds*), 2016–21: week 1, week 167, week 240 (the final week), courtesy of the artists.**





Dostlieva and Dostliev's project *Zalyzuiuchy rany viiny* (*Licking War Wounds*, 2016–ongoing) queries the longer perspective of the impact of the war in the Donbas. This work in progress began when the artists acquired a salt lamp shaped as a tank from the souvenir store in the city of Bakhmut in 2016. While writing about Donbas in 1925, Reisner dedicated an entire chapter to the city and its vast salt mines, struck by the austere beauty of their inner domes that in her view superseded in quality even such temples as Kyiv's ancient St. Sophia (377). After its brief occupation by the so-called Donetsk Republic in 2014, Bakhmut, the salt capital of the Donbas, was taken back by the Ukrainian army. However, the memory of the war lurked in unexpected places. For instance, souvenir shops that used to sell health-promoting salt lamps shaped as animal figurines, now started to sell salt sculptures of tanks.

When the artists learned about the new souvenir types, they were taken aback by the penetration of war into the everyday; they thought of the Martha Rosler project, *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967–72) (Vagner). Whereas Rosler photomontaged images of Vietnamese war victims with illustrations of affluent American households to underline the

jarring contrast between the two, the salt souvenir from Bakhmut testified to the normalization of war and its absorption into mundane reality.

Building upon the idea that the salt lamp had healing properties, and aware of the need for Ukrainian society to cure the war trauma, the artists came up with the idea of licking the lamp away, as a wounded animal would lick its sores to heal itself. Dostlieva and Dostliev have licked the lamp every day since they received it, documenting its slow disappearance weekly on their Instagram page.<sup>34</sup> The daily ritual, painful to the tongue and bitter to the taste, seems useless because the difference in the lamp from day to day is minimal and unnoticeable. Only by comparing images of the lamp from different years can the gradual melting away of the salt tank be perceived. Thus, the salt tank project mirrors the process of dealing with war trauma in Ukrainian society, with the bitter aftertaste of the war in the Donbas persisting in a less acute phase. (As of January 2021, the war is still ongoing, even if the shape of the tank is not recognizable anymore). War veterans crippled physically and mentally by the war, families who have lost relatives, displaced populations forced to start their lives anew, and people who remained on the occupied territory in precarious conditions—all comprise the society affected by the Donbas war that requires mending. Any remedy selected will work only over a long period of time.

Even if they were not conceived and created with healing properties in mind, the art projects in Ukraine aid in the alleviation of the collective trauma of the war, by processing the violent events. Perceiving the failure and inefficiency of realistic representations of war, the women artists discussed in this article countered war narratives that are obsolete and contaminated with Soviet ideologies. Instead of glorifying war and focusing on victorious male warriors, their projects reflect how the war has shifted the attitudes toward womanhood in Ukraine. Their art gives voice to multiple opinions and identities while insisting on empathy—the only common characteristic uniting projects so various in techniques and in the stories they tell. Touching upon extreme circumstances, this art communicates tolerance both in terms of endurance and survivability, and suggests the utmost delicacy, often inherent in devoted gardeners, when dealing with those affected by war. Neither making spectacle from the “pain of others” nor deeming the war unrepresentable, their art proposes emphatic and conceptual alternatives to traditional war narratives.

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<sup>34</sup> View an updatable Instagram page of the project at <https://www.instagram.com/lickingwarwounds/>. A personal website page of Dostlieva dedicated to the project can be found at <https://www.liadostlieva.org/licking-war-wounds/>. Accessed 25 Nov. 2021. When this article was being prepared for print, the project had reached its conclusion and the tank was eliminated; the war conflict, however, is far from over.

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