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Art's Relation to War. A Case Study on Ukraine.

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Introduction

I was always embarrassed about being Ukrainian. My Saturday language school used to give us these badges that read “It’s cool to be Ukrainian!”. That definitely made it less cool.

It was almost as if, until Russia launched its full-blown invasion of Ukraine in 2022, that Ukraine never existed at all. Just as the West swept over the Eastern Bloc after the fall of the Soviet Union, the whole world wrote-off Ukraine’s culture as merely a Russian copycat, except that it flourished in its own right. Ukraine’s diaspora somewhat ensconced in its own bubble, helped revitalise what the Motherland regarded as a ‘cultural cringe’. It is through this cultural exchange forced by the deportation, killings and genocide enacted by Russian invaders, that a new visual language flourished. This new language was one of war.

Chapter One provides a historical overview of how media and art have influenced public perceptions of war, spanning from militarised heroics in historical paintings of Empire building to contemporary instances of Soviet propaganda. It explores deviations from the norm through the example of diverse precursors like Francesco Goya and Otto Dix, who challenged warmongering ideals. Additionally, the chapter investigates the role of art in shaping wartime narratives and analyses the transformative impact of media coverage on how we consume war reports, from the Vietnam War's constant video loops to modern discussions on neutrality amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Chapter Two moves to investigate how contemporary artists grapple with perceiving and depicting current conflict, focusing on Ukrainian artists. It balances comparing examples of creative work that speaks to current issues while addressing post colonialist issues, working in the shadow of Russia’s

threat. This chapter opens up with a discussion of Slovenian political art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) and how their work influenced wider Eastern European artistic movements of resistance.

Finally, Chapter Three speaks to my current studio work. Through a consideration of the inner workings of the Ukrainian-Australian diaspora and furthermore my own place within this community. My material practice is also heavily inspired by artists as widely divergent as Janet Sobel, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and Sigmar Polke, all of whom embraced experimental and quasi-accidental processes. The work acknowledges the difficulties in creating art that speaks to conflict, something that cannot be captured through imagery alone.

Chapter 1:

War and its Depictions through the Ages. An overview.

This chapter opens-up a discussion about the changing nature of visualisations of war. It begins by considering the embellishment of war in history paintings from the 18th and 19th centuries. It moves then to consider different anti-heroic representations of war's horror as well as the mechanics of warmongering depicted by diverse artists like Francesco Goya and Otto Dix. The chapter also touches on art as a form of war propaganda. Outside of art, media coverage has dramatically changed the way we consume reports of war, from the constant video loop of images generated by the Vietnam War to staunch contemporary discussions about the notion of neutrality in relation to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

1) Fetishisation and Glorification: The Genre of History Paintings

The distance created by time exalts the past most strongly. Today we are amazed by images of gilded cavalry and shining bayonets dyed crimson by the blood of mortal enemies. A long standing tradition within the Western Canon of art has been to separate in paint: friend from foe. Reinvigorated by the emergence of the militarised state in post-revolutionary France, the trend of celebratory 'History Painting' became part of the rhetoric used to gain public consent for military policies as "war became the most viable basis of government"¹. This artistic genre established "normative principles around

¹ Siegfried, Susan Locke. "Naked History: The Rhetoric of Military Painting in Postrevolutionary France." *The Art Bulletin* (1993): 238

politically conditioned agendas”², constructing paintings through the interpretive conventions of the time to offer an ‘illusory reality’. By blending “the real and the illusionary through an authoritative communicative medium”³, ‘history paintings’ garnered the potential to authenticate an internal validity as the “tremendous need for documentary evidence gave it a sharp sense of political urgency and purpose”⁴. This cemented the use of art as a “legitimate and authoritative [form] of communication, [whose] importance [lay] beyond any aesthetic accomplishment”⁵: the aesthetics of praising a golden military were accomplished “under an obligation to shoulder a musket in defence of the nation”⁶.

This emphasis on absolute heroism is exemplified in the epochal work *Vive l’Empereur* (1891) (**Figure 1**) by French academic painter Edouard Detaille. In this work, the vast cavalry of Hussars charge out of the canvas, their leader narrowly missing the audience as his white horse shines through the smoke of kicked up dirt. His curved sword and scarlet uniform overshadow his serious face as he leads a horde of faceless soldiers. Detaille’s fascination with military uniform is clear through the sharp glinting details of the Hussar’s hats and jackets, an homage to the Napoleonic wars nearly 100 years prior. With no enemy in sight, the audience is left at the feet of the action (quite literally). The foreground is littered with discarded rifles and hats of the previous regiment, yet Detaille’s charge is fearless. Mouths agape shouting, swords are raised and hats tipped, we can almost see the blood in the eyes of the Hussars, almost hear the horses running towards the enemy. This is a painting that revels in war, one that asks us: Why have we forgone sharp, bright uniforms and images of military glory for drab khaki?

² Freathy, Paul, and Iris Thomas. “The Art of Propaganda: Marketing Nationhood through Visual Imagery.” *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 14, no. 3 (2022): 337

³ Freathy, Thomas: 338

⁴ Siegfried: 238

⁵ Freathy, Thomas: 333

⁶ Siegfried: 235



(Figure 1): Edouard Detaille, *Vive l'Empereur!*, 1891. 370.0 x 437.5 cm, oil on canvas. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

2) Nation Building: Unmasking the Charms and Charades of Soviet Propaganda Art

Soft rosy cheeked children with hands splayed open read a text, “Мы умрем за Сталина, для Родины! (We will die for Stalin, for the Motherland!)”, thousands of leaflets stuck on top of warnings, you walk with a sudden surge of pride as everything you do is in service for the greater good. You could say this is propaganda, the repeated promotion of misleading information in order to promote a specific viewpoint, however, it “is not limited to what we can see; [propaganda] is also what we come to embody and perform without necessarily being aware of our own implication in the process”⁷. The height of the Soviet propaganda machine under Stalin was a calculated hierarchy, “determined by the Council of People’s Commissars and the Political Bureau of the All Union Communist Party”⁸. It went against early Soviet avant-garde propaganda that revealed “the substructure of power in the process of the proletarianization of society”⁹. As propaganda further cemented many of the Soviet claims of unity, it made “an impact on human consciousness, the subject often set the task of motivating the audience to confrontation”¹⁰.

Within this genre, I believe that the most aesthetically successful posters worked best: even before the Stalinist regime regimented the output of propaganda, the Russian Constructivist movement questioned notions of production and consumption “driven by the desire to redirect this power towards a socialist transformation of the most basic elements of everyday life”¹¹. It heralded modernity in a strained

⁷ Staal, Jonas. “Propaganda Art, from Past to Present” *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019: 50.

⁸ Welch, David. “In Defense of Mother Russia” in *World War II Propaganda : Analysing the Art of Persuasion During Wartime*. Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2017: 96

⁹ Staal: 52

¹⁰ Blye, Gody “The Idea of the ‘Unity of the Slavs’ in Russian Propaganda During the First World War.” 16, no. 3 (2021): 1534

¹¹ Bader, Graham. “Re-imagining Russian Constructivism by Christina Kiaer.” *Art History* 31, no. 2 (2008): 257

economic climate as in “April 1918, Petrograd’s industrial workforce had fallen to a mere 40 percent of its numbers [from] the previous January”¹². Simple visual elements characterised Constructivism through its “precision, impersonality, clear formal order, economy of organisation and use of contemporary materials”¹³ as seen in the work of Kharkiv born artist Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953).

Inspired by French Cubism and the real-world material inclusions of Picasso’s collages, Tatlin’s output focused more on a ‘selection of materials’, “in which he composed works from bent metal sheets, wood fragments, glass, cement, and a range of other materials”¹⁴. Most revolutionary, the *Pamiatnik III Internatsionola (Monument to the Third International (1920) (Figure 3)* was a hypothetical tower designed by Tatlin as a Soviet representation of modernity, rivalling the Eiffel Tower. Theoretically the tower was a useable space open for the people built from glass, iron and steel¹⁵. It charged the ‘monumental propaganda’ campaign to replace tsarist memories with monuments “informed by the ideas of the incoming regime”¹⁶. The extremely technical design included rotating glass spaces designed to house Communist Party meetings but due to its overall scale and complexity, it was never realised.

¹² Walworth, Catherine. “The Economic Shaping of Constructivism” in *Soviet Salvage : Imperial Debris, Revolutionary Reuse, and Russian Constructivism*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017: 19

¹³ Saarinen, Tatiana. “Constructivism and Children’s Books in Soviet Avant-Garde Propaganda Art.” *Scandinavian Journal of Design History* 11 (2001): 122

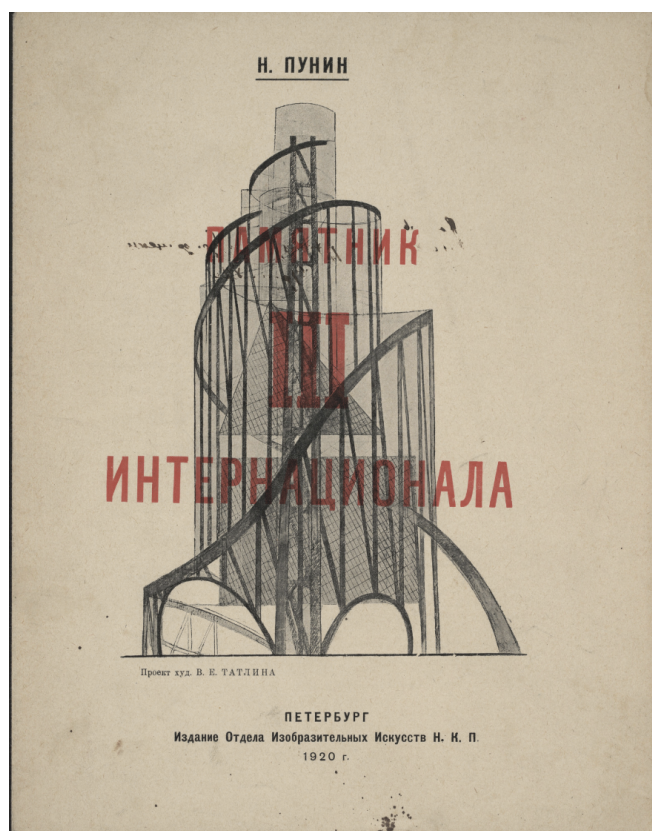
¹⁴ Walworth: 19

¹⁵ Ching, Francis D.K., et al. (2011). *Global History of Architecture*. 2nd edition. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., p. 716.

¹⁶ “Inventing Abstraction: Vladimir Tatlin.” MoMA, 2023.



(Figure 2): Earliest known instance of my Eastern European Mania, in the form of a collaged propaganda poster from Year 11, 2018.



(Figure 3): Vladimir Tatlin, *Pamiatnik III Internatsionala (Monument to the Third International)*, 1920. Author: Nikolai Punin. Book with two halftone relief illustrations (including cover), one with letterpress, Page: 28 x 21.9 cm. Published by Izo NKP, Petersburg. Museum of Contemporary Art, New York.

3) Historical Protest Art: Artists in and Against the System

Earlier, Francisco Goya's (1746-1828) series of etchings *'The Disasters of War'* (1810-1820) came to be "widely acknowledged as the turning point in the history of visual depictions of war"¹⁷, as it should. Focusing on the Peninsular War (1808-14)¹⁸, the eighty-two etchings void of colour in Goya's suite offer a more direct expression of the truth of war from an acknowledgement of the "innate human capacity for savagery that never expires"¹⁹. The series focused on a cycle of unvarnished brutality which highlights the realities of war and famine alongside political and cultural allegories. In the plate, *Tristes presentimientos de lo que ha de acontecer (Sad forebodings of what must come to pass)* (**Figure 4**), a ragged and spectral figure begs to the audience. His eyes are cast upwards towards scribbles and scratches of darkness, demonic figures or simply just rocks appearing all around him in the void. The haunting depiction alongside the work's integral caption "play an important role within the experience of viewing and reading"²⁰ the work, although the translations miss the idiomatic tone of the original Spanish, in which there is a clear sense of the foreboding 'demons' of war. Yet from a protest perspective, Goya straddles ambiguity. By taking "a largely pragmatic approach...[Goya became] a supporter of enlightened reform"²¹, while neither overtly a supporter of the Bonaparte regime nor the Spanish insurgency. However, because of its inflammatory nature, Goya's confronting work was not published until thirty-five years after his death.

¹⁷ Iarocci, Michael. "Introduction: Viewing, Reading, Witnessing" in *The Art of Witnessing: Francisco De Goya's Disasters of War*. University of Toronto Press, 2022: 3

¹⁸ Fought on the Iberian Peninsula by Spain, Portugal and the United Kingdom against the invading and occupying Napoleonic forces. It featured guerrilla warfare and a mass depletion in French resources and power giving rise to nationalist movements in Spain and Portugal.

¹⁹ Schjeldahl, Peter. "Art in a Time of War." *The New Yorker*, March 14, 2022.

²⁰ Iarocci: 4

²¹ Iarocci: 7

Skip forward a couple of hundred years to the aftermath of World War I which saw a new generation of disillusioned soldiers turned 'Dada' artists such as Otto Dix (1891-1969) who saw "fundamental shifts in [their] personal convictions and aesthetic positions"²². After four years at the front, Dix's work took a dark turn as he sought to "portray the aftermath and social misery...characterising [a] turn in public attitudes".²³ This is seen in Dix's painting '*Leuchtkugeln (Flares)*' (1917) (**Figure 5**). The assembly of bodies in this work are in the throes of death, white outlines and brilliant colours explode onto the canvas, as heads transform into morbid decaying skulls. A scramble of limbs shrouds the central figure, who appears more infant-like as he stares into the shooting stars of wayward bombardments "producing an ornamental effect against the vivid hues of the earth and sky"²⁴. This lived experience, highlights the "betrayal, insanity [and] the humanist image of the universal soldier as hapless victim of 'the system'"²⁵. It gives a despaired teary wave towards the tarnished mess of military carnage. Dix's work is filled purely with anger and disgust, showing the saddened maturity of a once enthused enlisted soldier who was misshapen by the active destruction of the human soul in war.

²² Tatar, Maria. "Fighting for Life: Figurations of War, Women, and the City in the Work of Otto Dix." *German Politics and Society*, no. 32 (1994): 28

²³ Translated by Content Engine LLC. *Beauty of the Week: "The War Cripples" by Otto Dix*. English ed. Miami: ContentEngine LLC, a Florida limited liability company, 2022.

²⁴ Tatar: 29

²⁵ Fox, Paul. "Confronting Postwar Shame in Weimar Germany: Trauma, Heroism and the War Art of Otto Dix." *Oxford Art Journal* 29, no. 2 (2006): 250



(Figure 4): Francisco Goya, *Sad Forebodings of Things to Come* (*Tristes Presentimientos de lo Que Ha de Acontecer*). 1814-1815, published 1863. 17.5 x 21.7 cm, etching and aquatint. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia. (Above)

(Figure 5): Otto Dix, *Leuchtkugeln* (*Flares*) 1917. (Left)

4) Over Stimulation: the Constant Video Stream

The Vietnam War revolutionised war coverage, shooting on the front also became cameras broadcasting to living rooms across America. Televised newsreels brought a newfound immediacy to war coverage, and the personal nature of the medium meant that forty-eight percent of the American public in 1972 “would be most inclined to believe [televised reports] if the media gave conflicting accounts”²⁶. It’s hard to say how many people actually watched the news, but the needs of media organisations changed to make sure people clicked their TVs on. “The producers of the news programs encouraged their Saigon correspondents to shoot film of combat”²⁷, their primary concern being entertainment arguably, gripping audiences to watch their fellow Americans in “unspecified but seemingly successful military activity”²⁸. Especially from 1965, TV news coverage shifted from stuffy domestic politics as a new type of war broke out: “clashes occurred between the commercial motives of broadcasting companies and the uncompromising documentary projects of other filmmakers and journalists”.²⁹

The combined result of this clash and the immediacy of incoming information saw the war presented in a mode that evoked empathy rather than base patriotism. The camera produced a ‘mirror of reality’, with the aim of showing the public what really happened, aiming the lens directly at horror. The Tet offensive in January 1968 accelerated a major shift in the way television coverage responded to war: “Before Tet, of the battles journalists ventured to describe as victories or defeats, 62% were described as victories for the United States, 28% as defeats, 2% as inconclusive or as stalemates. After Tet, the figures were 44%

²⁶ Hallin, Daniel C. ‘The War on Television, 1965-1973’ in *The Uncensored War: The Media and the Vietnam*. Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, (1986): 106

²⁷ Mandelbaum, Michael. “Vietnam: The Television War.” *Daedalus* 111, no. 4 (1982): 159

²⁸ Mandelbaum: 160

²⁹ Wahlberg, Malin. “Vietnam in Transmission: Documentary Film and Solidarity Programming in Swedish Broadcasting Culture (1967-72).” *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 7, no. 1 (2017): 46

victories, 32% defeats, and 24% inconclusive”³⁰. Often on-the-ground cameramen and media crews were young and aware of the politics of what they were seeing, as comrades to the thousands of ‘American boys’, the images they chose to capture were conscious and bleak.

The whole modern notion of how we receive news coverage of warzones is built upon the later, “unprecedented collaboration between the US government and the corporate-owned media”³¹ that was cemented by the Afghanistan War (2001-2021). In an effort to rectify the effect of the wide lens previously cast over the horrors of war during Vietnam, news outlets sent reporters to downplay the violence inflicted by US forces in Afghanistan. During the Vietnam war, reporters had free reign, interacting with troops and getting to the nitty-gritty within an active warzone. They also scared the US government and Pentagon making them seem something akin to ‘helicopter parents’ anxiously attempting to ‘correct’ official US broadcasts. This created a new model for war coverage: “controlling public access to military operations and censoring information that could upset civilians, including sanitising visual images”³². Yet, it did not stop the constant video stream. The dawn of the internet allowed a black-market of images and videos of bombing strikes and decapitations to make their way into the news feeds of the public, restarting and amplifying this constant video stream of violence.



(Figure 6): CBS camera crew interviewing American troops in Vietnam, 1967. (Photo by Tim Page/Corbis)

³⁰ Hallin: 162

³¹ Keeton, Patricia, and Peter Scheckner. *American War Cinema and Media Since Vietnam : Politics, Ideology, and Class*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013: 87

³² Keeton and Scheckner: 88

5) **Neutrality is Not so Neutral: How is the Invasion of Ukraine Perceived in 2023?**

Until most recently, modern warfare seemed to balance between tanks and words. Now doctored images and 'fake news' and online buzzwords are used to decimate the enemy. Even the titles 'Ukraine Conflict' or 'Russian Invasion' carry distinct biased meanings.

Obviously there were fake images back in the Vietnam War and earlier.³³ However, recent developments in technologies for doctoring and disseminating digital media have also become more popular to criticise as a result of growing mistrust of states relationships to big tech firms³⁴. Images are more abundant and easier to digest at face value, and more highly regarded as evidence, "as vehicles for promoting particular interpretations of the issues and actors involved and as political weapons"³⁵. Even fake images exist as real in our consciousness. The greater effects of this media transformation dramatically impact how we as citizens and artists see and 'experience' war.

These images and news reels are in many cases the only contact we have to the front lines, photos that show a deep imperialistic clash. With regards Ukraine, images open conflicts and the wider issue of neutrality projecting them into the public sphere. Advocates highly antagonistic to one another like Henry Kissinger and Noam Chomsky end up advocating the "same version of 'pacifism' which only works if we neglect the key fact that the war is not about Ukraine but a moment of the brutal attempt to change our entire geopolitical situation"³⁶, playing both sides of a dented coin: the invasion of Ukraine is

³³ Classic Soviet example of Stalin regularly removing opponents from documentary photographs once they'd been disgraced or physically eliminated. In Soviet Russia, photograph remove you.

³⁴ Canals, Roger. "Visual Trust: Fake Images in the Russia-Ukraine War." *Anthropology Today* 38, no. 6 (2022): 5

³⁵ Pantti, Mervi. "The Personalisation of Conflict Reporting: Visual Coverage of the Ukraine Crisis on Twitter." *Digital Journalism* 7, no. 1 (2019): 126

³⁶ Žižek, Slavoj. "Pacifism Is the Wrong Response to the War in Ukraine ." *The Guardian*, June 21, 2022.

illegal, yet was unprovoked. Is this just a local conflict? The invasion is Russia's new imperialist war, aiming to bolt down a new iron curtain, Ukraine's 'provocation' is self-defence and "at this point, the only way it could stop provoking its aggressive revisionist neighbour would be to lay down and surrender"³⁷.

Both Kissinger and Chomsky vie for pacifism, an easy option of appeasing Russia and losing more than territory: freedom. The idea of neutrality is beyond shifting blame onto Ukraine for fighting back, it is also denying Ukrainian sovereignty. Another fear furthered by claims for neutrality is their concession under threat of Russian nuclear attacks. Under constant nuclear threat, Ukraine still launches counter offences and reclaims territories which could easily lead to nuclear escalation. In Ukrainian eyes and as seen by the war crimes committed in Bucha and other occupied Ukrainian cities, surrendering only affirms nuclear blackmail³⁸. This disorientation blames an invaded Ukraine, mischaracterizing "heroic resistance as a rejection of peace".³⁹ Peace on Russian terms would actually mean a double serving of Russian aggression, the restoration and extension of forced colonialism.

Encapsulating the complexities and paradoxes of the neutrality argument is Slavoj Žižek's own conclusion:

"From the rightist standpoint, Ukraine fights for European values against the non-European authoritarians; from the leftist standpoint, Ukraine fights for global freedom, inclusive of the freedom of Russians themselves. That's why the heart of every true Russian patriot beats for Ukraine."⁴⁰

³⁷ Žižek, Slavoj. "The Dark Side of Neutrality." Project Syndicate, April 13, 2023.

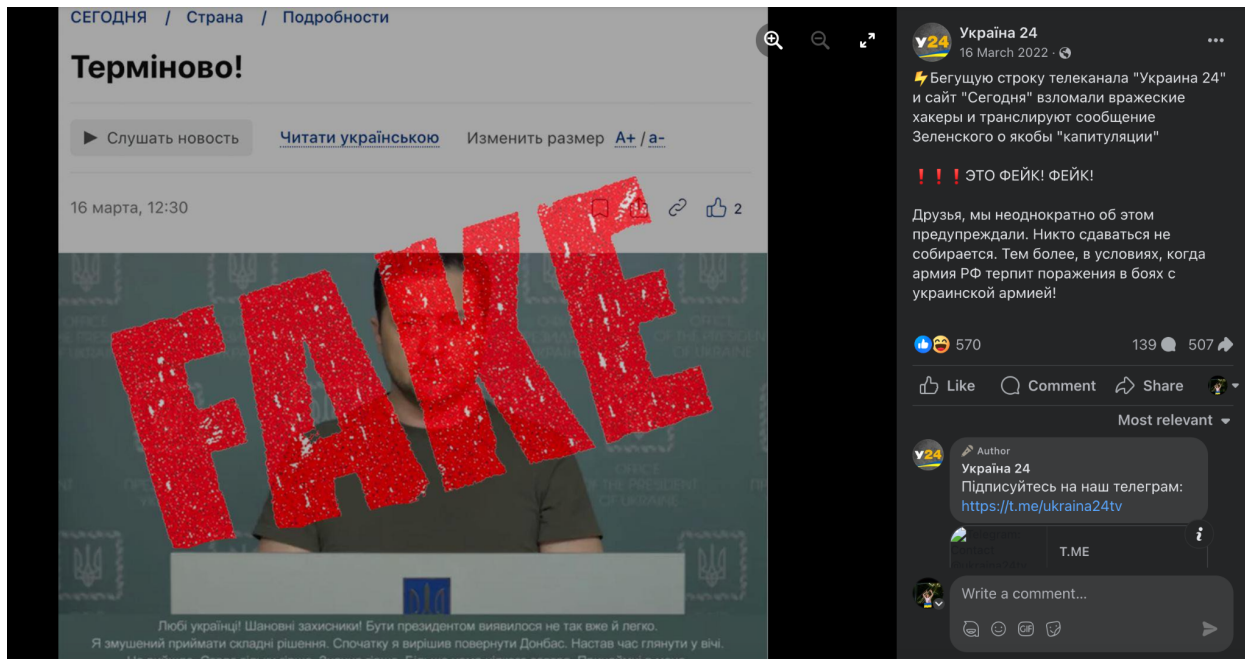
³⁸ Kukharskyy, Bohdan, Anastassia Fedyk, Yuriy Gorodnichenko, and Ilona Sologoub. "Open Letter to Noam Chomsky (and Other like-Minded Intellectuals) on the Russia-Ukraine War ." e-flux, May 23, 2022.

³⁹ Žižek, Slavoj. "The Dark Side of Neutrality."

⁴⁰ Žižek, Slavoj. "Pacifism Is the Wrong Response to the War in Ukraine ."

Conclusion

Historically the depiction of warfare in art was active and heroic as well as nationalistic. Art was used as a means of popularly legitimising nationalist territorial causes. In post-revolutionary Russia representations of war in art were used to support the Soviet cause internationally both in obvious propagandistic as well as radically more abstract ways, as was the case with artists like Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Constructivists. This reliance on war as propaganda in art wasn't always the case though. In the 18th Century, a critical artist like Francisco Goya was fully committed to depicting the actual brutality of war. His example was followed particularly after World War 1, by Dadaists and associated artists like Otto Dix, who fully intended to expose the dehumanising misery of modern mechanised warfare. With the advent of modern media, war imagery became televisual and immediate. During the Vietnam war, increasing amounts of damning documentary footage saw the tide turn against support for the US role in this conflict. From then on mainstream media images of war became more corporate controlled and more ambiguous: how much of this imagery was true, how much was fabricated? Currently, with the Russian led war in Ukraine, appeals for Ukrainian neutrality disguise the underlying reality of the conflict in which 'neutrality' is a false image.



How military control of Ukraine has changed

Feb 2022: Before the invasion Mar 2022: Russia's rapid advance



Nov 2022: Ukraine regains ground Sep 2023: Ukraine advances



- Russian military control
- Held or regained by Ukraine
- Limited Russian military control
- Russia annexed Crimea in 2014
- Russian-backed separatist-held areas

Note: Areas held or regained by Ukraine were reset by the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) on 12 May 2023

Source: Institute for the Study of War



(Figure 7): A facebook post which came up on my feed of Ukrainian news channel 'Ukraine 24' releasing a statement about the removal of a Zelensky deepfake posted on their website. The video was of a fake Zelensky asking Ukrainian soldiers to put down their weapons and surrender to Russia. (Above)

(Figure 8): An infographic posted on the BBC's live 'war tracking' website showing the changing military control of Eastern Ukraine during the invasion. (Left)

Chapter 2:

Regarding Russia and Ukraine: Picturing Conflict

The complexity and ambivalence of art directly responding to conflict is necessarily unresolvable, as much as such art aims at comprehension and context. This chapter begins by deliberating over the practice of Slovenian political art collective *Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK)*. *NSK*'s collective formation and individual projects are a direct response to the erasure of national cultures within the Slavic-bloc as they ironically appropriate totalitarian kitsch. The gestural nature of the work of Ukrainian painter, Lesia Khomenko speaks directly to the invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile, a new wave of Ukrainian contemporary art includes artists aiming to fight back against Russian Imperialism, using language and references to historical nostalgia. Using loaded symbols, these artists attempt the reclamation of their culture by asking the fundamental question: "What can I do as an artist?"

1) *Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK): A Regional Antecedent*

What's closer to war than living it? Apparently living in Yugoslavia in the 80s.

Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) (German for New Slovenian Art) formed as a response to the aggressive nationalistic politics between Germany and Slovenia, creating multi-dimensional work that understood "that mere criticism of nationalism without reflection would not make it disappear"⁴¹. Active in both

⁴¹ Mohar, Miran. "Why Neue Slowenische Kunst in German?" e-flux Journal, September 2014. (Accessed August 6th, 2023)

performance and the visual arts, *NSK* began “blending popular culture with subversive politics, high art with underground provocation - reflecting the political and cultural chaos of the time”⁴².

What I find interesting in *NSK* is the ‘Slovenian need for exposure’⁴³, bored of the idea of a pan-Yugoslav history or maybe just by the relative obscurity of the Eastern European niche. *NSK*’s methodology challenges these geopolitical norms offering a militant form of artmaking that denies any “implicit attitude that to ‘adopt’ such European nations and identities...[would disseminate] knowledge and national advocacy”⁴⁴. This reflects the Soviet-Russian conundrum also, with much of the ‘retro’ avant-garde art quoted by *NSK* highlighting the Stalinist displacement of modern ideologies. It’s as much a reclamation of Slovenian societal taboos as postmodern in redefining a culture continually quashed historically.

This idea is further realised through their transformation into the ‘*NSK* State in Time’ (1992-) (**Figure 9**): an “abstract organism, a Suprematist body, installed in a real social and political space as a sculpture comprising the concrete body warmth, spirit and work of its members”⁴⁵ or simply put a virtual global state. This state “conceived as a utopian formation”⁴⁶, is a state without territory and citizenship and therefore represents the state as offering the ease of simply existing - the ideal form of a state! As a response to the recent radical political transformations of Eastern Europe, the invitation by the Slovenian pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2017 recast it as an embassy for the *NSK* ‘State in Time’ bringing awareness that “contemporary art (irrespective of its declarative commitment to transnationalism) and nationalism are not necessarily mutually exclusive”⁴⁷. This discourse on the work’s philosophy of

⁴² Monroe, Alexei. *Interrogation Machine : Laibach and NSK*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005: 14

⁴³ Monroe: 60

⁴⁴ Monroe: 60

⁴⁵ Čufer, Eda, and IRWIN. “*NSK State in Time* .” IRWIN, 1992. (Accessed August 7th, 2023)

⁴⁶ “*Discovering Nsk State* .” *NSK STATE*. (Accessed August 7th, 2023)

⁴⁷ Mohar, “*Why Neue Slowenische Kunst in German?*”

“overcoming individuality and creating a collective organism”⁴⁸ urges citizens of the ‘State in Time’ into the wide historical net of Soviet revolutionary values like collectivism to a point “where progressive philosophy, social theory and the militarism of contemporary states clash”⁴⁹. Probably the best offer generated from this work is that all it takes to apply for a *NSK* passport (**Figure 11**) is €32 and completing a quick online form open to “all people, regardless of national, sexual, religious or other status or affiliation”⁵⁰. Bargain! An interesting case regarding these passports is the legality of their use: as a state without territory the passport is not an internationally recognised document.



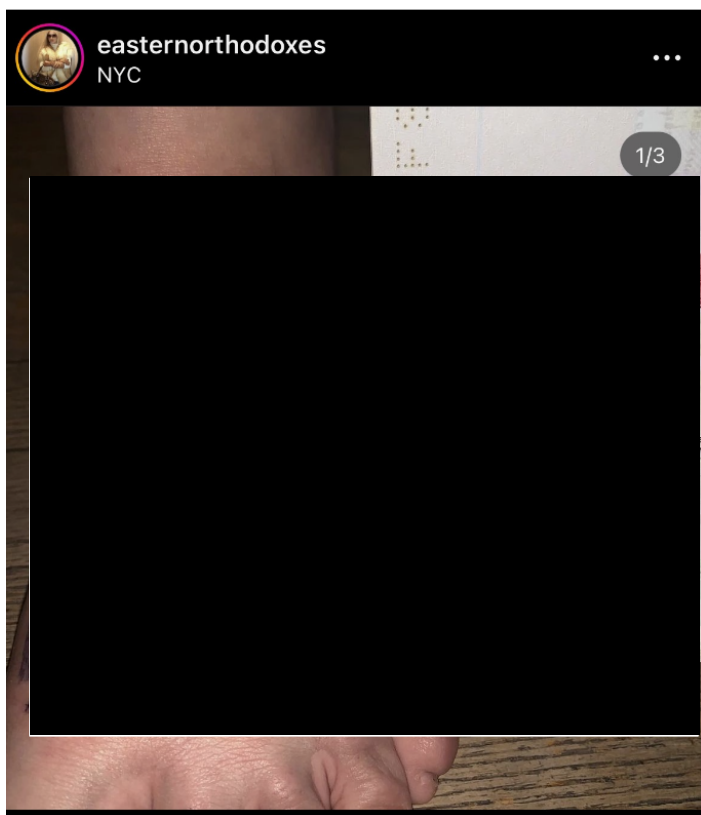
(Figure 9): Left, the plaque of NSK embassy, Beijing, 1994. Right, the plaque of NSK embassy, Moscow, 1992.

⁴⁸ Gravenor, Natalie. “Post-Modern, Post-National, Post-Gender?: Suggestions for a Consideration of Gender Identities in the Visual Artworks and Moving Images of Neue Slowenische Kunst.” *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae. Film and Media Studies*, no. 14 (2017): 178

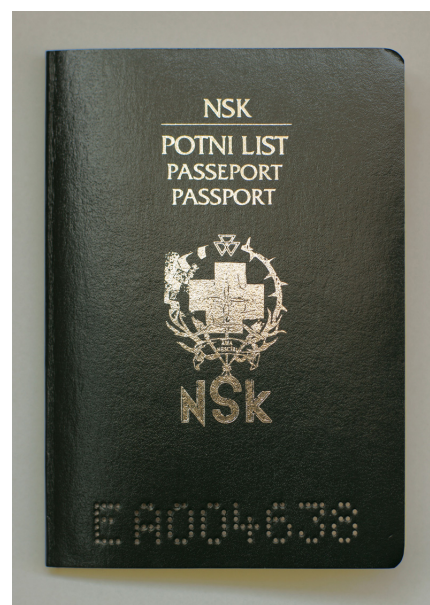
⁴⁹ Čufer, “NSK State in Time”

⁵⁰ “The NSK State.” NSK STATE. https://passport.nsk.si/en/about_us

NSK's passport project really speaks to the coveted fantasy of getting a passport easily. As a related aside, Ukrainian tattoo artist Alina Balban⁵¹ tattooed her US Visa on her foot (Figure 10). The performance and permanency of this act as well as its placement on her foot build a narrative of the lengths some are willing to go in order to be safe in another country, quite literally to step foot into the 'free world'. Balban's Visa is now hidden away in stinky socks as an interplay between legal definitions and lived personal identity. From 2006, over three thousand people from Nigeria have applied and received NSK passports due to not being able to leave their country, bumping this contemporary art project into the real world of geopolitics⁵². The fact that there have been so many instances of attempted border crossings using the NSK passports proves NSK's claims, "art is fanaticism that demands diplomacy"⁵³.



(Figure 10): Screenshot of Balban's US Visa tattoo. (Left)



(Figure 11): NSK passport. (Above)

⁵¹ @easternorthodoxes

⁵² Mohar, "Why Neue Slowenische Kunst in German?"

⁵³ "The NSK State." NSK STATE. https://passport.nsk.si/en/about_us

Sounds like all butterflies, rainbows and togetherness! But as ironic and militaristic looking as they are, collectively *NSK* have become Slovenia's most recognisable global cultural 'export'. *NSK* have presented a whirlpool of images and sources relating to the national disintegration of "repressed and problematic elements in distorted and over amplified forms in order to escape them"⁵⁴. The global alienation evident as irony in *NSK*'s project aims to reconcile a fractured sense of self, not the self aligned with Slovenian nationalism, but a deeper notion of self, linked to the creation of new systems of statehood for a state that had never really existed.

2) Lesia Khomenko: Contemporary Ukrainian art

I first saw Ukrainian painter Lesia Khomenko's works in the Ukrainian Museum in New York in July 2023. This unassuming building on the city's East Side was filled with the artist's large mural works of paint splatter, drips and splashes of colour and form. I'd never seen any 'contemporary' art from Ukraine, every trip home was a bombardment of centuries old icons, wax eggs, and some old babushka's colourful folkloric monsters.

Khomenko's works flooded the museum, and I was specifically drawn to the looseness in her brushstrokes, bridging "decades of narratives that were fragmented and concealed due to forced migration, resocialization, ruptures, and survivals"⁵⁵. Her works herald a change in the scope of Ukrainian art, from the hermetic isolation of repeated practices apparent in local catalogues to building an "awareness of the multiplicity of narratives that do not so much superimpose as complement each

⁵⁴ Monroe: 72

⁵⁵ "Lesia Khomenko: Image and Presence." The Ukrainian Museum, January 23, 2023. <https://www.theukrainianmuseum.org/lesia-khomenko/> (Accessed August 10th, 2023).

other”⁵⁶. This is evident in the visual discussions between Khomenko’s work *AJS* from 2023 (**Figures 12 and 13**) and the work of Ukrainian-American Abstract Impressionist painter, Janet Sobel.



(Figure 12): An installation shot of Lesia Khomenko, *AJS (After Janet Sobel)*, 2023. Courtesy of the Ukrainian Museum, New York. (Above)
 (Figure 13): Detail of *AJS*. (Right)



⁵⁶ Sakharuk, Valeriy. “Contemporary Ukrainian Art: Truth and Myths.” *CONTEMPORARY ART*, no. 17 (2021): 216

Khomenko's work highlights a trend in a turn from "rational creativity to irrational and intuitive creativity"⁵⁷, with spatial works such as '*Перспективна (Perspektyvna)*'⁵⁸ of 2018 (**Figures 14, 15 and 16**) mocking the rigidity of Socialist Realism and its blockhead utopia. Exhibited before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the young soldiers depicted in this work are masked hidden by birch trees as they run a monotonous routine as an alienable unit. Khomenko's domino-like canvases become like a surveillance tracker outside her studio window. The context of an old Soviet building, recreated in cardboard, becomes a mirror into the 'Union of Artists of Ukraine'. As the artist states, the work offered an escape to analyse the "countless connections established between the place, my political subjectivity and art practice, as well as an artist and institutions"⁵⁹ a means of withdrawing from the action. At the same time, Perspektyvna street was renamed in honour of Ihor Branovytskyi⁶⁰, a defender of the Donetsk airport in a counter-terrorist attack transforming Khomenko's studio space into a political epicentre, "constantly reminding me of the context that formed my identity as an artist"⁶¹. There are so many parts to this work; paintings, models, videos and sound which overstimulate the audience entrapping them in memories which dance around the main point: conflict. Khomenko's work is seen as a major development in Ukrainian art, as it uses multimedia forms to "strengthen the personal participation of the viewer in the unfolding of the narrative"⁶².

⁵⁷ Mironova, T. V. "Conceptual and Categorical System of Contemporary Ukrainian Art in the New Aesthetic Paradigm of the Twentieth Century." *CONTEMPORARY ART*, no. 16 (2020): 179

⁵⁸ *Перспективна* directly translates to 'Promising', yet in Khomenko's work she references it as a street in the centre of Kropyvnytskyi, Kirovohrad Oblast in Central Ukraine.

⁵⁹ Khomenko, Lesia. "Perspektyvna 2018." Lesiakhomenko. (Accessed August 14, 2023)

⁶⁰ Branovytskyi (dubbed 'Cyborg' for his military resilience) was taken captive by Russian-led forces while defending Donetsk International Airport in 2015. After his capture, he sustained several injuries during an interrogation and was shot along with other Ukrainian prisoners. Branovytskyi was posthumously awarded the Order "People's Hero of Ukraine" in June 2015 for his sacrifice.

⁶¹ Khomenko, Lesia. "Perspektyvna 2018."

⁶² Mironova: 185



(Figure 14, 15 and 16): Lesia Khomenko, *Перспективна (Perspektyvna)*, 2018. Oil paint on canvas, cardboard and video projection, Pinchuk Art Centre, Kyiv. Installation shots.

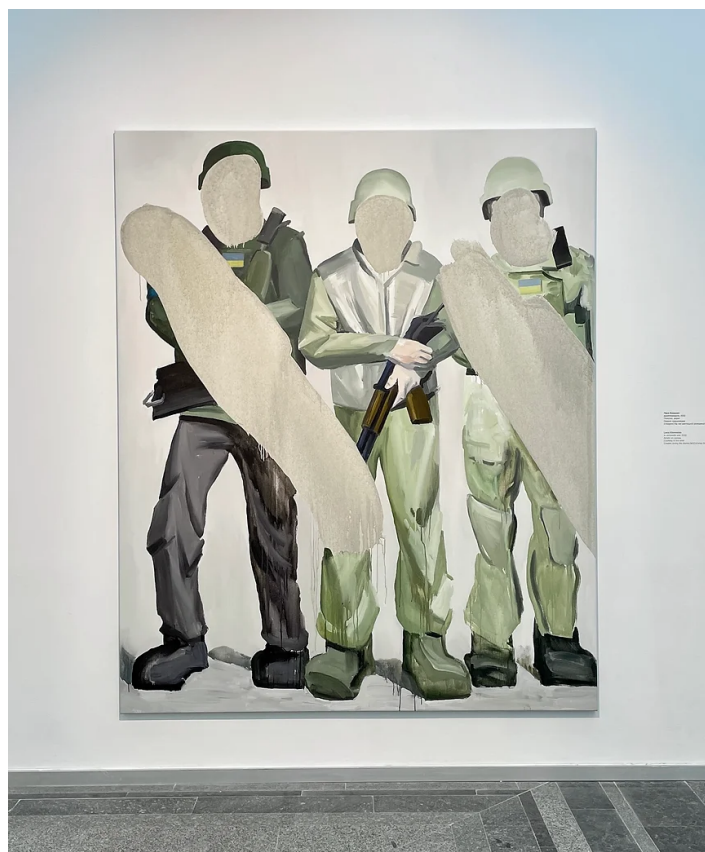
At the same time what drew me to Khomenko's art was the seeming effortlessness of her work. Moving through the space of the New York Ukrainian Museum, these giant canvases felt like remnants of her handiwork - bringing me closer to her experiences still living and working in Ukraine. The paint drips speak to the swiftness of her movements, as well as the urgency of the political situation. In her more recent works, the use of a limited palette of khaki, grey and black propel tiny patches of blue and red that are reminiscent of the censored newsreels and stories all over my Explore page⁶³.

Most interesting to me was Khomenko's *Unidentified Figures* series from 2023 (**Figures 17 and 18**), large scale portraits as 'selfies' and photos of Ukrainian soldiers from the front, their faces and weapons blurred or pixelated for security reasons. Beyond her exploration of photography and digital communication as new age weaponry, Khomenko's ghostly retouching in these pieces "doesn't remove strategic information from them; on the contrary, it adds new information that layers up just like characters' skins in video games"⁶⁴. The overall stylistic changes among these portraits suggest a complete individuality while seemingly remaining anonymous. Moreover, Khomenko comments on this digital dehumanisation as a way of deconstructing the meanings of representation within these images in both personal and cyber-war contexts⁶⁵. The overall effect is haunting. The cool washes of monochromatic grey melt away the essence of the sitter while the harsh strokes across their hands and faces and the pixels effectively create militarised robots. Khomenko mainly uses photos her husband sends her from the front, yet these images speak in a way as though she doesn't recognise him. It's sad in its own beauty. To me, Khomenko's brush strokes are her tears.

⁶³ Since the breakout of war in 2022, my social media has been flooded with infographics and images from the front, much of which the media aims to censor due to its highly graphic nature.

⁶⁴ Khomenko, Lesia. "Unidentified Figures 2023." Lesia Khomenko. (Accessed August 15, 2023)

⁶⁵ Khomenko, Lesia. "Unidentified Figures 2023."



(Figure 17 and 18): Lesia Khomenko, *Unidentified Figures* (series) 2023. Oil on canvas.

3) An Artist's Case Against Russia: Ukrainian artists NOW!

Apart from Khomenko, Ukrainian artists are exhibiting and making art today in totally new ways. From my personal experience being Ukrainian, I would say we can be pretty petty, holding grudges for decades and centuries. The biggest grudge being the one against Russia of course.

As Russian propaganda aimed to persuade people that Ukrainians and Russians are one and the same, this shared colonial history also prevented any uprising from within the forming Russian police state. Recently however, from the 2004 Orange Revolution⁶⁶ to the 2014 Maidan Revolution⁶⁷ and of course the full-scale invasion in 2022, “the Russians operate as if they are dealing with Russia itself”⁶⁸. From this situation, Ukrainian artists have always commented on the fundamental “yoke of the Russian colonial government”⁶⁹.

For Ukrainian artists, increased awareness of their compromised relationship to Russia offers more than a chance to rediscover their own history, but also invites them to share such deep trauma. Queer artist and writer Olexii Kuchanskyi commented in their letter on activism and cultural production during war, ‘It is Not the “Ukrainian Issue”’ (2023), “there is probably something fundamentally wrong with all those

⁶⁶ A series of protests in Ukraine from November 2004 to January 2005 as a run-off from the corrupted 2004 Presidential vote. With disputed results of the pro-Russian candidate and Prime Minister, Viktor Yanukovych. The nationwide protests, strikes and acts of civil disobedience called for anti-oligarch and anti-corruption measures and an annulment of the second round of votes in which Yanukovych won.

⁶⁷ More radical and violent protests in February of 2014, lasting 5 days in Independence Square, Kyiv. Following the Euromaidan Uprising, ousting then Prime Minister Yanukovych’s decision for closer ties to Russia, it called for the removal of Yanukovych and a return to the 2004 Amendments to the Constitution of Ukraine. At one stage, police snipers fired at protestors killing 108 and over 1000 injured.

⁶⁸ Radynski, Oleksiy. “The Case against the Russian Federation.” Journal #125, March 2022. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/125/453868/the-case-against-the-russian-federation/> (Accessed August 20th, 2023)

⁶⁹ Radynski, Oleksiy. “The Case against the Russian Federation.”

“progressive” institutions, ... if they are so easily captured by Putinism – a very specific form of imperialism that plays an essential role in the global capitalist order”⁷⁰. Kuchanskyi’s work links the lack of any decoloniality in institutions to the Putinist regime, which represents the real threat of ‘planetary’ terror. What I find interesting is Kuchanskyi’s use of language. It’s just so current, half essay filled with facts and other half personal diary. HSC English aside, these linguistic forms craft a truly intimate reading experience. The picture Kuchanskyi describes is melancholic, yet it still critiques the “domesticated actors which discuss the ‘anthropocene’ ignore...the silence [of] our sirens, explosions, shots and cries”⁷¹. These domestic actors are artists and museums, working during and in relation to a mass loss of culture, how can anyone ignore this?

Asides from the actual war, the grip that Russia has on Ukraine has substantially weakened. Yet it cannot be forgotten. Ukrainian photographer Yelena Yemchuk focuses on her own Soviet childhood. Through a dreamlike filter the artist creates images of a stark divergence between reality and the surreal. Her collections of photos in ‘*Gidropark*’ from 2010 (**Figure 21**) and ‘*Odesa*’ of 2019 (**Figures 19 and 20**) comment on this need to express her “wonderful childhood in Ukraine” and especially after the trauma of moving to the US, “I [Yelena] subconsciously went back to that time, to this place of healing, and in a weird way, a place where I felt secure and safe, the place of magic”⁷². Yemchuk dances around this ‘big brother’ relationship with Russia, with her ‘*Odesa*’ series capturing the general mood after the annexation of Crimea: “The atmosphere had become more aggressive and unhealthy,” she noted. The artist adds, “It was an instinctive thing to want to photograph, for example, teenagers who were voluntarily entering the military academy. People were beginning to understand what could be coming.

⁷⁰ Kuchanskyi, Olexii. “It Is Not the ‘Ukrainian Issue’ .” Bündnis internationaler Produktionshäuser, 2023. <https://produktionshaeuser.de/it-is-not-the-ukrainian-issue/> (accessed August 20th, 2023).

⁷¹ Kuchanskyi, Olexii. “It Is Not the ‘Ukrainian Issue’ .”

⁷² Cerbarano, Rica. “The Dreamlike Touch of Yelena Yemchuk on Show in New York.” Photo Vogue, April 4, 2023. <https://www.vogue.com/article/the-dreamlike-touch-of-yelena-yemchuk-on-show-in-new-york> (Accessed 24th August, 2023)

Between 2018 and 2019 the tension eased, but internally the Ukrainian people were preparing for the worst"⁷³.



(Figures 19 and 20): Untitled photos from Yelena Yemchuk, *Odesa*, 2019.

(Above)

(Figure 21): Untitled photo from Yelena Yemchuk, *Gidropark*, 2010.

(Left)

⁷³ Translated by Content Engine LLC. *Returning Home after the Bombing*. English ed. Miami: ContentEngine LLC, a Florida limited liability company, 2023: 2

In these photos, the teenagers look awkward; red eyes, blank stares and bruises on their necks - yet the close ups of their faces, nudes eating basketfuls of fresh cherries and corners of old apartments, create a strong sense of youthful unease. However the series extends from documenting the students at the military academy to give their lives more context. The images become bombarded with so many underlying narratives of deeply intimate moments to create a narrative of the Soviet fantasy of Odessa as 'free'. The city seemed full of contradictions, "acceptance but also danger, a place of characters, populated by outlaws and intellectuals"⁷⁴. The most striking image in the series is of two girls in a field playing with weeds (**Figure 22**), one smiles towards the camera yet the other is lost in thought, mesmerised by the fanned seeds drawn close to her face. Beyond the brutalist apartment blocks and sixteen-year-olds in military garb, this image seems so carefree. I feel like I understand Yemchuk's childlike wonder which overlooks anything bad in the world. Her case suggests this is happiness only a child can feel, one we can imagine the over five hundred children killed in this current war felt. Pure joy



and nostalgia.

(Figure 22):
Untitled photo
from Yelena
Yemchuk, *Odessa*,
2019.

⁷⁴ "Yelena Yemchuk's Ode to Odessa." Juxtapoz Magazine, 2022.

<https://www.juxtapoz.com/news/photography/yelena-yemchuk-s-ode-to-odessa/> (Accessed 23rd August, 2022)

Conclusion

The artists mentioned in this chapter represent a fascinating (and disturbing) intersection of politics, identity and artistic expression, the urgency and emotional depth of the human cost of war and displacement. While NSK works towards dismantling or at least critiquing globalisation, their work is also a commentary on the complicated relationship between Slovenia and Germany (and Russia) coloured by the experience of World War II and its immediate aftermath. This approach is mirrored by Ukrainian artists such as Yemchuk's confrontation of Russia's colonial domination. Ukrainian artists balance between an overt expression of defiance with one explicitly calling-out the "institutions [that] pretend that art and culture are powerless entertainment"⁷⁵, and the melancholic abstraction of fear felt through Khomenko's drips of paint. The point is about making these personal war-impacted experiences universal, because art and culture has now become Ukraine's saviour. In Ukraine creating art for the self has become an act of resistance.

⁷⁵ Kuchanskyi, Olexii. "It Is Not the 'Ukrainian Issue' ."

Chapter 3:

In the Studio

“Dear Diary...”: From Ukraine with Love

I was asked why I’m making this work, and at first, I had no idea how to answer this question. But as I make my works, print and reprint, spray and respray, I found my answer.

My work speaks directly to the Ukrainian diaspora of which I am a part, about the duality of living in and also outside of conflict. I remember when the current Russia/Ukraine war started, being completely attached to newsreels and articles. I was living so close to the news as my hometown was blown up yet I was also so far from the shells themselves. It is through considering these remnants of memory and imagery, that the drop sheets that form a major part of my Honours work act as a connection between diasporic archives in the material destruction of life back home in Ukraine. It is my actions in this work that determine the footprints and splashes of paint running wildly along the canvas. The work becomes a realisation that my actions here can have effects in Ukraine in the sense that my frustration about the war is visually brought to the surface, actualised. They are traces and remainders of the physicality of my hopelessness in relation to the situation. It’s purely imagined territory, a distanced reaction of someone who can only imagine what her family is going through.

Ukrainian-Australian diasporic life is full of vulnerability. Speaking of a recent stocktake of Ukrainian archival material in Victoria, a Ukrainian spokesperson pleaded, “given the significance of these materials as sources for the advancement about Victoria’s Ukrainian community, initiatives to ensure their protection are a matter of urgency”⁷⁶. Many of the materials I use in my art are sourced from personal

⁷⁶ Achilli, Alessandro, Marko Pavlyshyn, and Olha Shmihelska-Kozuliak. “Ukrainian Community Archives in Victoria, Australia: A Stocktake.” *East, West (Edmonton)* 10, no. 1 (2023): 30

archives, especially from dipping into my Babushka's hoarded treasures as a stronghold of the idealism of warped diasporic memories. This realisation and current rise in demand for evidence of a hybrid cultural identity, is not only an offshoot from the destruction back home but a wider negotiation of "hybrid identities that result from feeling a sense of belonging to two..places and involve a blending of an old identity with a newer identity"⁷⁷. This experience has been regurgitated after waves of Ukrainian refugees.

(Figures 23 and 24): Solomiya Sywak, *Red Stars*, 2023. Acrylic spray paint and archival folk embroideries. Installation view. This work sparked a further interest in the juxtaposition between the domesticity of embroidery and the action of graffiti.



⁷⁷ Volpe, Catherine Rita. "What Kind of Girl Is She?": Good and Bad Diasporic Daughters on Social Media." *Journal of Cultural Geography* 38, no. 2 (2021): 178

I myself have been in a constant dis/engagement with the role of ‘cultural-torchbearer’. The slight trim of stencilled embroidery that patterns the edges of my work as a framing device, function not only as the amassment of colours and images but suggest a historical bridge between dual identities. This concept of ‘cultural-torchbearer’ is new to me. But I feel so drawn in by it: why do I choose to write and depict Ukraine? Even as I sort through Facebook groups⁷⁸, I find more and more traces of Ukrainian embroidery; a sense of an e-diaspora reconstructing my own culture in an online space where I am no more than a follower reaffirming a greater homogeneous digital space⁷⁹. My thought and online activity stitches itself into a larger narrative: diasporic understanding of conflict from behind the safety of a desktop computer. The blocked-out frames in my work mean I can’t see traces of the conflict spilling over. It’s a ‘show-don’t-tell’ scenario, using strategic plans and maps as compositional design and weaving in aspects of a culture in decline and under attack. Maps and plots of air strikes further break down the abstract picture planes through cancelling out depth in areas of flat fabric.



(Figure 25): Composition planning for my work using camouflage fabric, paste-ups and Ukrainian trimming.

⁷⁸ ‘Ukrainians in Sydney’, ‘From Ukraine with Art’, ‘Slavic Memes for Slavicstani Teens’ and ‘Ukrainians in Australia’ are a few very active domestic and international diasporic facebook groups. I’m also a keen follower of meme instagram pages such as @outofcontextukraine and @babushka_knows_best

⁷⁹ Ponzanesi, Sandra (2020) Digital Diasporas: Postcoloniality, Media and Affect, Interventions, 22:8, 979

1) At Face Value: Direct Influences in my own Practice

(i) *Janet Sobel*

I once again found myself in awe in the Ukrainian Museum in New York, the small rooms holding the even smaller canvases of Ukrainian-American abstract expressionist painter Janet Sobel⁸⁰. Her automatic techniques of continuous painter splatters and loops create a flurry of action broken only by small slivers of primitive amorphism yet consistently characterised by elements of Ukrainian folkloric designs.

Sobel worked “freely and rapidly...preparing a ‘ground’ which would invariably suggest or trigger some ‘idea’”⁸¹, and the rapidly executed painting ground of my dropsheets-turned-canvas invoke accidental outlines of explosions and houses crumbling. While Sobel is honoured as a ‘primitive’ artist in American eyes, her works are regarded by Ukrainians with the same regard as Maria Prymachenko⁸². I feel that her work is the exact opposite of primitive, implying “an unimpeachable originality through ignorance of academic traditions”⁸³. Sobel’s painting, *‘Milky Way’* (1945) (**Figure 26**) was especially influential in my treatment of the accidental as artwork. The swirling swashes of pastel pinks and yellows pop off a dark background and move up the canvas like smoke.

⁸⁰ Born Jennie Olechovsky (1893-1968) in Dnipro Oblast, Ukraine, then the Russian Empire.

⁸¹ “Janet Sobel.” The Museum of Modern Art.

⁸² Born in Bolotyna, Ukraine, Prymachenko (1909-1997) was a self taught Ukrainian naive painter who also worked with embroidery and ceramics depicting folkloric motifs as well as fantastical and dreamlike creatures and scenes. In 2022 the Russian government deliberately attacked the museum which held her art as an act of destruction on Ukrainian culture.

⁸³ Zalman, Sandra. “Janet Sobel: Primitive Modern and the Origins of Abstract Expressionism.” *Woman’s Art Journal* 36, no. 2 (2015): 21



(Figure 26): Janet Sobel, *Milky way*, 1945. 114 x 75.9 cm, enamel on canvas. Museum of Contemporary Art, New York.

(ii) *Robert Rauschenberg*

The inclusion of archival and personal objects within an artwork has always interested me. Rauschenberg's intention within his practice was "escaping the familiarity of objects and collage"⁸⁴. He organised images to allow for the free association of their meanings, challenging the gestural via the inclusion of readymade materials. Both his 'combines' as well as silkscreen print series drew on the everyday, introducing the commonplace through traces, mark making and literal newspaper scraps.

Rauschenberg's *'Bed'* (1955) (**Figure 27**) for example affixes discarded objects such as old bedsheets, pillows and quilts onto a traditional support. Scribbled and dripped with paint, his own bed becomes a self portrait as its functionality is destroyed by vivid scrawls of colour. This bed displayed is void of its comforting associations. The Rauschenbergian ethos of painting "relates to both art and life (I try to act in that gap between the two)"⁸⁵. This is reflected in the inclusion of found trimmings and beads in my own work. Apart from the obvious borrowing of materials from real life, the scrawls and accidents in this work unfold from drips of colour as an internal self-image.



(Figure 27): Robert Rauschenberg, *Bed*, 1955. 191.1 x 80 x 20.3 cm, Oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, and sheet on wood supports. Museum of Contemporary Art, New York.

⁸⁴ "Almanac: Robert Rauschenberg." Tate.

⁸⁵ "Robert Rauschenberg. *'Bed'*, 1955." The Museum of Modern Art.

(iii) *Andy Warhol*

As famous as Andy Warhol is (to the potential point of cliché by now) his formalism, the layering of repetitive images which “unerringly brought into play through his strategies of appropriation”⁸⁶ has influenced my own use of the image through printmaking. And the fact that he was Ukrainian⁸⁷!

Warhol’s formal appropriation of repeated and layered images emphasised halftones especially to create new textures on flat surfaces. These created a very “automatic message...(via) its techniques of spontaneous, continuous and, most of all, unrevised production”.⁸⁸ This process of accepting, even relishing accidents, aligns with my own practice of plonking down a screen and layering an image freely. The strobing effects in Warhol’s ‘Double Elvis’ (1963) (**Figure 28**) was his attempt at creating a “formal device that almost makes it seem as if the singer-actor's likeness is moving or flickering against the silver-screen background”.⁸⁹ In my own work the distorted media prints of the smaller panels float over each other recreating the effect of flickering news reels. Furthermore, these two small panels which bookend the large drop sheet works, function similarly to ‘Double Elvis’ as large continuous canvases are cropped to highlight the movement of the seemingly over-exposed prints as they meld into the explosions depicted beside them.

⁸⁶ Powers, Edward D. “Attention Must Be Paid: Andy Warhol, John Cage and Gertrude Stein.” *European Journal of American Culture* 33, no. 1 (2014): 10.

⁸⁷ Warhol’s parents are Lemko (Ukrainian: Лемки) from the ethnographic region of the Carpathian Mountains in Ukraine, Poland and Slovakia. He was also baptised in the Byzantine Catholic Church, which is the main religion in Western Ukraine.

⁸⁸ Powers: 10

⁸⁹ “Andy Warhol. ‘Double Elvis’ 1963.” The Museum of Modern Art



(Figure 28): Andy Warhol, *Double Elvis*, 1963. 210.8 x 134.6 cm, Silkscreen ink on acrylic on canvas. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

(iv) *Sigmar Polke*

Examining Polke's extensive body of work reveals striking aesthetic contrasts among his spilled ink drawings, caricatures, prints, paintings, and photographs, all of which delve into the overwhelming influence of consumerist culture in West Germany. Personally, I'm intrigued by how Polke incorporated the duality of the consumerist ideals of West Germany and the socialist imagery of East Germany. Formative for me too is Polke's embrace of the mundane through his pioneering artistic 'style', often referred to as capitalist realism.

Polke's experimental paintings such as *'Watchtower'* (1984) (**Figure 29**) are closer to my own artistic output, as he experiments here with ghostly stencils of a surveillance tower on disjointed fabrics⁹⁰. The fracturing between image and background creates a complicated multi-layered narrative of both a hallucinatory memory and an underlying drive to artistic control: "the driving force behind this experimentation, was to make extraordinary art meaningful art - about everything"⁹¹. *'Watchtower'* not only looks like it fits in my 'Pinterest inspiration board' but the context of his upbringing in



post-war Germany shifts something like the otherwise decorative floral background of the work into a realm of radar static and camouflage. The watchtower itself becomes a symbol of Nazi and East German control⁹².

(Figure 29): Sigmar Polke, *Watchtower*, 1984. 300 x 224.8 cm, Acrylic paints and dry pigment on patterned fabric. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

⁹⁰ Carrier, David. "Sigmar Polke." *Burlington Magazine* 156, no. 1336 (2014): 485

⁹¹ Carrier: 485

⁹² Carrier: 485

2) In the studio: Making and Remaking

After absolutely destroying the piece of canvas that forms the ground of my Honour's work, dragging it through corridors, stomping it in the mud, I then used it to prime and prepare as material and additional canvases for other classes. I thought I was done. Except I wasn't and I sat with the canvas for weeks. This indecisive period lasted too long I thought as I made quick judgments that I then had to rethink over and over. The first large drop sheet I worked on became the centrepiece of my subsequent work. It was difficult working on a painterly ground that was already so busy. There were untouched areas that already created interesting textures that were under threat of being covered over. Would this ruin the work?



(Figure 30): Initial steps on the drop sheet, literally. Caked mud and dirt on canvas. (Left)

(Figure 31): Detail of drop sheet showing the accidental figurative spray paint houses. (Above)

Black spray reliefs on the bottom of the canvas replicated houses. White blocked-out areas suggested frames. Seemingly random spurts of colour conjured the luminescent explosions of shells. Most interesting of all perhaps was the interaction of dirt with the canvas. The relief prints of my hurried footprints created an initial layer while subsequent priming and painting on top trapped the dirt further to form tactile areas like documentation of crumbling, war-ravaged surroundings.

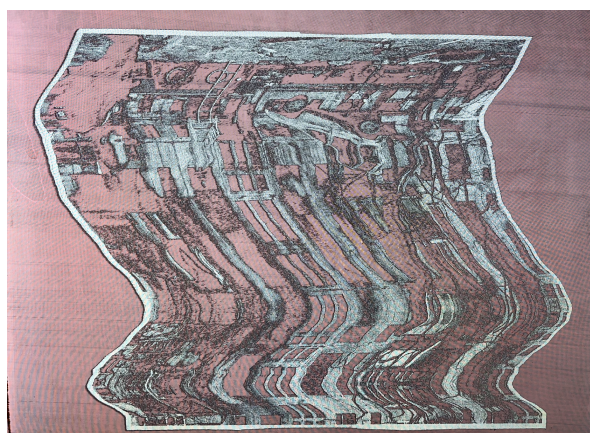
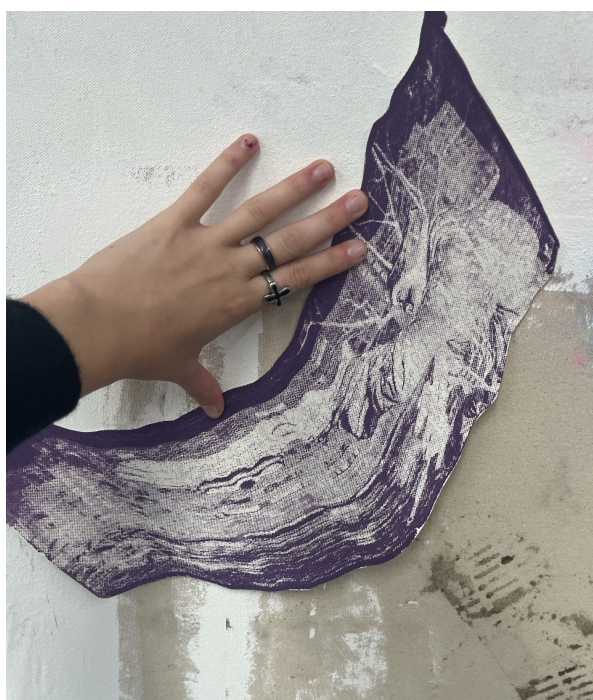
At this point, given the fragmentary nature of the work, it seemed best to add many small canvases to the one massive one. 'Over-making' it seemed was the best remedy. What started as experiments of layering spray paint with screenprints led to further insight into the process underlying my final artwork. I drew heavy inspiration from Rauschenberg's screen prints, in particular⁹³. Rauschenberg's use of bright colours and images torn from media, can be seen in my own use of fluro-colours, the glaring and acid vividness of which speaks to conflict and its emotional toll. I found in these experiments that the blown-out silk screen images screen tore away all the detail when printed onto canvas. The thick black blocks were successful in contributing a strong visual structure which was complemented by blocked-out sections of oversaturated colour.



⁹³ Robert Rauschenberg, 'Retroactive I' 1964

(Figure 32): Detail of spray paint. (Left)
 (Figure 33): Small canvases featuring spray paint and blown out screenprints. (Right)

These areas were distortions of images from magazine articles on Ukraine which I had been furiously collecting over the past year. Using half-tone textures, my aim was to replicate propaganda prints. The starkness of this process however tends to bring out texture in tiny specks that focuses the print pattern rather than the image. These experiments were not fully realised until the canvases on which they were printed were stretched, just like the large drop sheet. The architectural scale of the large, stretched canvas revealed a mass of new textures including crumpled paint and overlaid build-ups of ink. Working on eight canvas fragments at once, there was an underlying production mode to this approach that brought the varying sized pieces together, somewhat ala Warhol. Still, I was still not done.



(Figure 34): Planning paste-up composition with screenprints. (Top-left)

(Figure 35): Inked-up screen showing the halftone texture. (Bottom-left)

(Figure 36): Ink drop-sheet iteration with initial paste-up. (Right)

My participation in Judy Watson's print masterclass in September brought another revelation, and another drop sheet. While the rest of the masterclass group were mono-printing with natural textures, I was left alone in a room with bottles of ink, paper, and canvas. I feel like this is where emotions let loose. I splashed ink from bottles and sprayed it, so it ran across the work. This final drop sheet iteration turned into an explosion of shells and fury. Grey turns to melodrama as I reflect on my role as a 'cultural-torchbearer' and ask myself over and over, "what if my family never moved, how would I have even considered coping with war?".

In the end, with all these different fragments and component parts, I still felt I was teetering between being too coy with images of war and fearing being too literal. The pure process of randomly printing and spraying paint was a release from personal reflections on my connection with the current invasion. The screenprints lacked detail and the experiments proved the stark difference between printing on paper and printing on canvas (even with different hole sized screens). I chose to persist with the mass-print style of cheaply printed paste-ups.

Once again distortions of magazine articles relay major news sources like a magnifying glass on the conflict. I layer imagery on flat blocks of camouflage fabric. The use of fabric and weaving are such a big aspect of diasporic culture it seems. Such an approach represents one of the small details of diasporic experience that can be successfully appropriated and reused. Outside references to the camouflage gifted to Ukraine by neighbouring countries and the traditional trimmings of Ukrainian-Australian embroideries anchor my work to an idealised past. Taken directly from my Babushka's stash, these trimmings provide a potentially deeper connection to previous conflicts involving Ukraine, further indicating the waves of Ukrainian refugees that followed. Such details therefore represent more than a simple framing device.



(Figure 37): Detail of compositional planning of paste ups and traditional embroidery on 'major' drop sheet. (Above)

(Figure 38 and 39): The layering of fabrics, embroidery, paste ups and screenprints on smaller canvases. (Bottom left and right)

Conclusion

So I ask myself again: Why am I making this work?

My Honours project emerged from a reflection on my Ukrainian heritage, a deeply personal exploration amidst the ongoing turmoil marked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This invasion has historical precedents, but its current expression is more troubling than ever. As an artist, the challenge for me was to find a way to deal with my own heritage and the impact of this conflict on my family using means that were neither clichéd or trivialising. Is it possible to depict war in ways that do its trauma justice? This question is even harder to answer while a conflict, like the current Russia/Ukraine war, is still in play. I found it more authentic to experiment with quasi-accidental processes like printing, spraying, cutting, stencilling, and fragmenting than merely describe war imagery. In this process I was guided by artists like Janet Sobel, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol and Sigmar Polke for whom the secondary nature of printing and collaging was central. Ultimately, war and the war experience, even from afar, escapes adequate capture as mere imagery. My work gestures towards it as a way of grappling in real time, with a process of cultural and actual physical destruction.

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