

Art Communities at Risk: On Ukraine

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To focus attention on the amplified hostility around the world to the figure of the artist and artistic expression, as well as to attend to the conditions of specific instances of repression and specific tactics of resistance, we have commissioned an occasional series consisting of short contributions by and about artists, critics, and cultural professions at risk around the world, starting with Slovenia, Cuba, and Russia and now including Ukraine.

—The Editors

As this issue goes to press, an alarming number of Russian troops—currently around 160,000—massed along the Ukrainian border have begun pouring over it. A full-scale war in Ukrainian territories has broken out, threatening Ukrainian territorial integrity and its people.

But however frightening, these actions are part of an ongoing eight-year military invasion of Ukraine, which had already resulted in numerous casualties among military and civilians, the loss of Crimea and parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts, and roughly a million and a half displaced people, former residents of those occupied regions. The year 2014 marked the beginning of this war of aggression. In that watershed year for Ukrainian society and its artistic community, a series of unprecedented events unfolded within a few months and shattered the sense of peace that had characterized civic life in the country.

The gatherings of protesters in Maidan Square in 2013 were a harbinger of things to come. They began as a call for democratic elections. But the experience of these collective assertions, and the definition of a Ukrainian voice independent of Russia—despite the deaths of over one hundred protesters—resulted in a profound change in Ukrainian society: a renewed and pervasive feeling of independence, a resounding sense of solidarity, and an awareness of freedom of expression as a core value.

Such change came at a high cost. The pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich fled the country as a result of the protests. An illegitimate referendum in Crimea, which pro-Russian militants held in March 2014, cut the area off from the country, dividing families and friendships. Further, Russian troops launched



Maria Kulikovska. 6 Ballistic Soap Figures (Homo Bulla), 2019, for the film The Forgotten, 2019, by Daria Onyshchenko.

an intensive military drive towards eastern Ukraine. The destruction of Donetsk International Airport in 2015, resulting in the deaths of over one hundred Ukrainian soldiers, created a new pantheon of heroes in Ukrainian society, though these represented only a small fraction of the war's casualties. Civilian losses were significant and people were forced from their homes, fleeing shelling, and human-rights violations were pervasive. The militants created two new, unrecognized republics covering large parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (in the so-called Donbas region) that were referred to as the “ungoverned” regions, though the irony was evident. A stream of refugees from Donbas soon flooded Ukraine's main cities. Many people who remained in the occupied territories became hostages of the situation, subject to a weakening of basic human rights, including freedom of movement and expression, as well as widespread violence.

Not surprisingly, art communities in the east of Ukraine and Crimea were very much affected by the war. The self-proclaimed pro-Russian “authorities” moved quickly to suppress freedom of expression: Artist-activists were often among the first targets of violence and were forced to join the exodus of refugees from the Russian-occupied territories. These displaced artists found themselves in an ambiguous position. On the one hand, they became vulnerable, positioned precariously in the absence of clear cultural policies from the Ukrainian government in

the non-occupied territory concerning displaced artists at risk. Some felt marginalized as refugees, with limited access to resources—the media frequently intimated that, as easterners, they had allowed the war to happen. On the other hand, given their new position, visibility, and roles, many felt obligated to speak about the war and its impact on ordinary people and to discuss this trauma in a public space. Ukrainian art became increasingly focused on recording and reflecting on traumatic stories in the collective memory of forced migration, displacement, and loss.

In certain cases, cultural work was specifically targeted. The premises of the Izolyatsia Platform for Cultural Initiatives in Donetsk were seized by an armed pro-Russian group in 2014 and installations on its property by Ukrainian and international artists—including Maria Kulikovska, Zhanna Kadyrova, Daniel Buren, and Leandro Erlich—were ruined. The militants exploded an installation by Pascale Marthine Tayou in a particularly barbaric manner, enraged by its gender-related message. The cultural center became a notorious and illegal political prison where to this day pro-Ukrainian activists are being held and tortured.¹

Some of the artists I talked with for this article collaborated with the Izolyatsia Platform when it still defined cultural policy in the Donbas region and consolidated the artistic community. Now artists originally from Donbas and Crimea are scattered throughout Ukrainian territory and beyond. They continue to highlight the cultural and human losses caused by the Russian war and the risks this explosive situation continues to carry for the future of Ukrainian democracy and territorial integrity. The inability to return home is a focus of suffering but also a guiding light for those artists whose families, property, and memories were left behind.

Clearly, at this moment of heightened crisis, relief and forgetting are not possible. New military action in an expanded territory inevitably brings more casualties, devastating regions and precipitating a humanitarian catastrophe.

Like Ukrainian civilians in general, artists are preparing for the possible escalation. The artists I spoke with for this article are from Donbas and Crimea. Some had to leave their Russian-occupied hometowns at the beginning of the war; others lost the ability to reunite with their families in the occupied territories.

Lia Dostlieva and Andrii Dostliev are interdisciplinary artists who work with documents and objects left behind in the now-occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, using them to explore personal histories in such projects as *Occupation* (2015) and *Fairy Castles of Donetsk* (2018). The artists have since moved to Poland; their property in Ukraine has been ruined.

Maria Kulikovska is a sculptor, architect, and performance artist who was pushed out of her home in Crimea after its annexation in 2014. In her projects, she discusses the experience of displacement: placing bodily replicas on a map of Crimea, as in *Stardust* (2015), shooting them with a gun (*Homo Bulla*, 2014–18), and turning the figures of her entire family into bronze-cast bells (*President of Crimea*, 2021).

1. See the recent book *In Isolation: Dispatches from Occupied Donbas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021) by Stanislav Aseev, which includes an account of his detention in Izolyatsia.

Piotr Armianovski is a performance artist and documentary-film director, the author of short films—including *Mustard in the Gardens* (2018), *In the East* (2015), and *Me and Mariupol* (2017)—that evoke the turbulence and conflict of life in occupied Donbas. Unable to return to his hometown since 2014, Armianovski visualizes it through the stories of other displaced people, shooting his films in borderland areas that have remained under the control of Ukraine.

Alevtina Kakhidze is a performance, media, and graphic artist who has dedicated a number of projects (collected in the series *Strawberry Andreevna*, 2014–19) to her mother, who stayed in the occupied territory of the Donetsk oblast and was an eyewitness to the outbreak of violence there. Unable to extract her from the dangerous area, Kakhidze collected conversations with her mother as a form of deputized war reportage until her death at a military outpost separating Ukraine-controlled and occupied territories in 2019.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom in January.

Svitlana Biedarivva: **Could you tell us about your life and your art practice before the war?**

Andrii Dostliev: At that time, I almost didn't make any art. There were attempts to make art books and electronic music, and then there was a project in the urban space of Luhansk that we did with friends in 2013. Then I went to Poland and they went to the Maidan protests, where students were attacked by the ex-government.

Lia Dostlieva: I lived at that time in Kyiv for several years, though my family remained in Donbas. I worked on craft projects, making soft toys that were of artistic quality but not critical art. Also, I volunteered at the children's oncology unit as a portrait photographer for those children.

Maria Kulikovska: I finished my studies as an architect in 2013, and I explored the correlation between a body and architectural space. I remember making a drawing at one of the courses at the Academy of Art, where different architectural shapes grew from an embryo-like female body, such as buildings, houses, bridges, marking the belonging to the space. That work was destroyed by a professor who was appalled by the absence of architectural drawing in the image, and this made me turn toward art rather than architecture.

Piotr Armianovski: In addition to my artistic practice, I worked in organizing the festival of amateur films "Other Territories" and the theater festival "Art-Alternative." I also did street interventions and actions. My art practice was mostly in performance. With the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, I began working as a journalist for Ukrainian media and as an independent documentary director. From the materials that were shot at that time, I created several short films.

Alevtina Kakhidze: Before the war, I researched consumerist culture, with projects about the products from the West that began appearing in Ukraine and seemed very unusual. Since the war began, I look at all these luxury-shop dis-



Alevtina Kakhidze. Through the War with Strawberry Andreevna. 2014–16. Courtesy of Grynyov Art Collection.

plays that I had criticized before from a different point of view. Now, for me, a shop display that is open and not covered with boards is a sign of peaceful life. I also focused on the world of plants before the war. I made a huge map that I planned to cover, researching the vegetative realm in Ukraine. When the war began, it seemed that it was not relevant anymore.

Biedarieva: What has changed with the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of war in eastern Ukraine in spring 2014?

Dostlieva: I received a scholarship in Poland when the war began, and here is where finally my practice got this shape and found its critical function. The war impacted me on a mental and emotional level; I just couldn't think of anything else or work with any other topic. The war entered my hometown, but I had to read about it in the news. That's how I discovered one morning that my family's apartment where I grew up was abandoned and possibly ruined, and all the material objects related to memories from that place were lost. The most offensive part, beyond material losses, was that in the apartment were the memories of previous generations, such as photographic albums of our relatives. Our family arrived in Donbas in the 1950s,

but our family archive had earlier photographs, for example, those of my grandmother and great-grandmother who were evacuated to Uzbekistan during WWII, and even some pictures from the 19th century. Everything was lost. That is how my focus on the restitution of memory emerged. Andrii developed it because I was almost paralyzed from the horror of all these events at that moment.

Dostliev: Well, this experience suddenly overshadowed everything. In the news, we could only watch how the troops move from both sides of the border, and keep looking at the map all the time. I tried to find and interact with some volunteers to help the army. Each time I spoke on the phone with my mother in Donetsk, I tried to persuade her to move from there, at least temporarily, to the nearby city of Kharkiv. We talked at great length with Lia about this, and I began collecting photos from the same period, buying them at flea markets, recombining them as collages, recoloring and recreating scenes that I remembered from my family photographs, to replace the lost originals. This felt like a collective experience shared by more than a million people, among them artists, so we launched a project, Reconstruction of Memory, where we invited displaced artists from the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts and Crimea to discuss their experiences of loss and to restore their memories through reconstructing memorabilia. Rather than any solutions, we searched only for a language to describe this new reality. We were seeking to understand the ongoing events.

Kulikovska: When the war and occupation started, architecture became even less urgent for me. The military situation made me think more about the bodily impact in its relation to the vulnerability of human life. At the time of the events of the Maidan, when the situation was escalating to the violent side in January 2014, I married my colleague Jacqueline (who is now my ex-wife). We had to do it in Sweden because in Ukraine same-sex marriages are not allowed. We spoke together about how the Ukrainian government establishes borders, personal limits for what a person is allowed to do in their own house. As soon as we married, the government of a different country, Russia, violated borders and took my home—Crimea. When I flew back to Crimea from Sweden in February, I couldn't continue to Kerch, my hometown, because of the annexation of Crimea. It was dangerous to go there. I have not been able to return since. I had to stay in Kyiv. The anonymous people who illegally arrived decided for me what I can do and what I can't do in my own home. The war re-formed my life completely. Now, eight years later, when I am asked where I am from, I do not always know what to reply because this territory doesn't exist in the world's eyes and I don't exist in it anymore. My life is secluded behind a border that I cannot cross, and this is reflected in my art, which is a kind of self-therapy to me. I work with autobiographical elements in both performance and sculpture, using my own body as the source of the analysis of the reality around me. The sculptures that I



Piotr Armianowski. People's Museum of Avdiivka. 2019.

make are all molds of myself made of different materials. In spring 2014, I had with me a kit of watercolors and I painted all the time—naked bodies with different modifications; they all represented a female body mutilated between the closed borders. I take legal migration forms that accumulated over these years, I sit at the desk and paint body parts over them, some of them vulgar, to visualize my frustration.

Armianowski: My departure from Donetsk was not planned. I was working on a documentary film in different locations there, but at a certain point the outburst of violence became emotionally overwhelming. I saw several truly horrible scenes. So in May 2014, I had to stop shooting the footage and left Donetsk for what I thought was a week or so. I have not returned. I was blacklisted by the pro-Russian forces that occupied Donetsk because I was a member of the territorial committee that tried to hold democratic presidential elections there. For me, going there is dangerous. I know several cases in which people were kidnapped and tortured in the basements of illegal prisons that the Russian-allied occupants created, so I tried to keep working from afar. A year after I arrived in Kyiv, I was invited to the Theater of Displaced People to stage a play, and that prompted a renaissance of my work. I have staged several plays dedicated to Donetsk and the war. I kept returning to the parts of Donbas that are controlled by Ukraine, though, getting closer and closer to the border. There, I shot my films. *Mustard in the Gardens* (2018) was a lyrical story of a young woman who returns to her empty family house filled with

memories and surrounded by minefields. For me, it was an attempt to return to my own house, even if metaphorically. *Me and Mariupol* (2017) was inspired by the border city of Mariupol, which struck me as a small version of Donetsk and sparked a sense of nostalgia for me. At the time, I was reading Zygmunt Bauman about the real and the imaginary and saw this in my own eyes in Mariupol, as well as in industrial Donetsk. Imagine: There are large plants polluting the air and water, but for some reason people love this city. Those who live there see it differently. My other short work, *People's Museum of Avdiivka* (2019), brings a hopeful look at the museum that was created by the inhabitants of Avdiivka, a village in the “gray zone” of military action. The creation of this museum aimed to resist the war by preserving local memory; it was eventually ruined and its director died, but the people reconstructed it and kept it open. A location that attracts my attention for a documentary now is a former political prison in Lviv, “The Prison on Lontsky,” which is currently a museum. The Soviet government tortured and killed people there, as did the Gestapo. When I saw it, I felt that this place is the same as the illegal prison Izolyatsia in Donetsk where similar stories happen right now. Repetition, exchange, and consolidation connect the regions through historical experience.

Kakhidze: During my trip to the east of Ukraine, I visited Slovyansk, a small industrial city near the front line that had been occupied by pro-Russian military forces, but then they retreated and the city became Ukrainian again. I was surprised to discover that all the people there discussed their gardens and the nature around them as if they were escaping from this violent reality. That’s how my project with plants took on a new angle. It brought me a focus on growth and resistance, as the plants regenerate and do not get damaged so easily as people.

Since 2014, I have done more than ten projects on topics directly related to the war: texts and narration, performance, and interventions. Recently, I have illustrated a report by Amnesty International that focused on the war-related rise of violence against women. The report makes clear that during times of war, women are the most vulnerable, especially in towns like those bordering the occupied territories in the east.

Many of my projects were inspired by my mother. A pensioner, she was forced to cross the border between occupied and free Ukrainian territories to collect her pension, spending many hours in military outposts. In 2019, she died while crossing the demarcation line. Now there is no longer any situation in which I call her and she doesn’t pick up the phone, so I am not anxious anymore. I know how it sounds, but I can imagine the suffering of many people who couldn’t get their parents out of there or who couldn’t go there because of the danger for many activists. The risk of what will happen to their relatives, the inability to help in an emergency are the main concerns for many displaced people, rather than troop buildups.

I have made a monument in the graveyard to my mother. I was surprised that many people, instead of criticizing the fact that I didn't move her to Kyiv from the occupied territories, as they did many times before with my other artworks, were simply compassionate. This monument is about all these people who couldn't leave their homes because of their age, their attachment to their land, and what they built over their entire lives. However, when I wrote extensively for the media about ineffective Ukrainian social policies for elderly people in the occupied zones, there was a wave of criticism towards me, labeling people in the occupied territories terrorists and therefore not deserving of social guarantees from Ukraine.

Biedarjeva: **How do you see the situation now, with the current buildup of troops on the border with Ukraine? What risks for the art community does it bring?**

Dostlieva: I feel surprised that everyone speaks now as if the war is going to begin. The truth is that the war has been going on for the last eight years. I don't see any focused attempt to turn to the experience of people who already suffered through all of this. All the discussions about emergency suitcases, what needs to be in the first-aid kit, and what to do in the case of shelling appear as if they are brand-new thoughts and conversations. Many people in Ukraine already know the answers to these questions, but unfortunately their voices stay on the periphery. I have a bad feeling that when the war began in the east, the attitude was that we are somehow guilty ourselves because we are from Donetsk and we invited the war in. Today, the war approaches "normal" people and therefore it is alarming. So this blindness to the people from the east and social exclusion continues.

Kulikowska: The artistic community faces the same risks as the entire Ukrainian society does. I am a mother of a four-month-old baby born in Kyiv, and I don't want her to pass through my painful experience and become a refugee from the place where she was born. In 2014, I wanted to go to the front but realized I would probably be quickly killed because I had never held a weapon. So I understood that my artistic practice could become a weapon in which I could voice the concerns of many people in the same situation and create a platform where the voices of the displaced could be heard. However, how can I defend my child if the military action unfolds further in Ukraine? How can other people defend their children? I don't know, honestly. I am afraid.

Armianovski: This situation of instability is not new. We experienced that in spring 2014. The difference is that back then I could go to the border and physically communicate with those people who invaded the Donetsk territory, look them in the eyes, and ask them questions. This time it feels worse because I am present but helpless. I feel that I can't do anything to change the situation. I can't go to the front and see anything with my own eyes. I've considered joining the Territorial Defense Forces; these are circumstances not of an artist anymore but a citizen.



Andrii Dostliev, Occupation. 2015.

Kakhidze: We had this argument among the artists about packing an emergency suitcase, and we decided it was better to do it. Some artists I know are hiding their paintings. I don't know what museums are doing to prevent looting in the case of military intervention. However, for all the years of the war, many people have developed such resistance that they can discuss those topics, take action, and then move on to their everyday activities without thinking back. Artists are already accustomed to reading horrifying news, but in the last eight years of the war, such an attitude formed, such an emotional resistance, that it doesn't touch so much anymore.

Biedarivva: **What cultural policy does Ukraine pursue regarding the artists who were displaced as a result of the war?**

Dostlieva: If something like that exists, I have not noticed it. I believe that all the people who moved from Donbas helped themselves, and sometimes quite well because they were able to continue making art despite the circumstances. As for a conscious cultural policy concerning displaced artists, I haven't seen it. I saw instead the experience of displaced people being problematized in a negative way, as a question of not being patriotic enough and of letting Russian tanks into their territories. Considering us as culturally equal is sometimes problematic.

Dostliev: I would happily read interviews with other artists to see if someone has a different position. But I don't think that displaced artists appear in the public sphere as a part of some kind of governmental effort.

Kulikovska: I don't know about any program that supports artists who needed to flee the war. However, we need to understand that the country is not very rich and it is in crisis. Unfortunately, our people are also ethically impoverished, and this is connected with the Soviet legacy. They did not develop critical thinking and solidarity to the extent that is needed in a situation like this. As a dispersed entity, they hope for authority that could make rules for everything. Conscious, humane, and critically thinking people, in my opinion, do not need a governmental program to support them. Nearly all my projects come from my earned and invested money or private sponsors. This year, however, thanks to the Ukrainian Institute and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an important event happened: the Crimean Platform, where my husband, Uleg Vinnichenko, and I participated in a sculptural project. I think after the Crimean Platform, the professional curators who created it will push such projects forward so that artists who work partly in the underground because of their radical activity can receive at least some media support and public exposure and cease being marginalized.

Armiyanovski: I can't say that there is any kind of special policy regarding displaced artists. If one wants to make art, one can make art. You can go into business and fund your projects in your free time or apply for programs of the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation or the Ukrainian State Film Agency. There is certainly a more transparent cultural policy that is connected not to the war but to the Maidan and the cultural revolution it provoked in 2013. On the other hand, *Mustard in the Gardens*, which touches upon topics of war and displacement, received the main award at the Biennial of Young Art in Kharkiv organized by the Ministry of Culture. Is this a sign that there is a certain interest in the refugee topic? It might be, but there are no state-funded workshops, unions, or platforms I would know about.

Kakhidze: The government is creating a new institution called the Institute of Peace Building. I was invited as a representative of the artistic community to the process of discussion of its concept. So we can say that, finally, the voices of artists are present in institutional development. Some artists don't want to collaborate with the government in their projects, and it is their right, but I never heard of any censorship from the government's cultural policies. I like a work by Anton Lapov called *#hero*; it is a program that scans all the social networks in a given region—Kharkiv and Bakhmut (a city near the front) are examples. This program analyzed the tag “hero” and visualized what users of the Internet consider as such: from Ukrainian soldiers to the pro-Russian occupying forces. And this was shown in a state-sponsored exhibition—a sign of quite a healthy policy, which allows critical scope and doesn't see it as controversial rhetoric.

Biedarjeva: **How do you see the future of this military situation? Can art make positive contributions to the resolution of the crisis?**

Dostliev: I don't see a positive solution to this situation. I look forward with horror and prepare for a negative scenario as this threat develops. There is no way to plan, in my opinion, only to wait.

Dostlieva: We live outside Ukraine now, so we are in a privileged situation in comparison with those who directly experience the threat of invasion. We can speak about it, make projects about what is going on, participate in exhibitions, and attract international attention to this question.

Kulikovska: If we don't have culture and art in society, we will persist in endless discussions about who is to blame and we will not even need Russian propaganda to become fragmented. My husband and I are creating a gallery-shelter called Garage 33 for giving voice to the artists who aren't currently heard. We have bought a garage shed in a residential district in Kyiv and are expanding it into a gallery. Art has many hierarchies, and artists need to follow certain rules to be heard. We want to find new names, especially in the territories touched by the conflict. And I hope that we will transform the surrounding space. I believe that through a diversity of cultural perspectives, a person becomes open to interaction and finding civilized solutions to every conflict. If there is no full-scale war to come, I hope we will be able to create a safe platform for expressing opinions where a personal position can become a political statement and change society in this way.

Armianovski: I often think that when the war ends, the people who went through these scary years will still remain. Displaced people will return to their hometowns, and the task of reintegrating them and rebuilding the trust between them will be the duty of artistic and cultural projects. Art, in my opinion, has such a possibility of reconstruction. While the war is on, art and film can foster a feeling of closeness, support, and communication between people, as well as the possibility of transmitting empathy. This helps ameliorate the anxiety of everyday life.

Kakhidze: For me, there is no question that art is a powerful mechanism for the discussion and exchange of thoughts in a time of conflict. There is, however, the question of to what extent artists are involved in the decision-making processes—they can't impact legislation, for example, even as a consultative voice. This is something to improve upon in the future.

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Between 2015 and 2021, the war became a stalemate—which should not be seen, however, as a de-escalation—and life returned to Donbas. New initiatives of targeted resistance to the violence began to emerge along the border of the conflict. These projects aimed to involve the territories bordering the temporarily occupied zones in a dialogue through art. The idea of speaking with people through art stems from a strong collective belief that reuniting is possible and that art is the key to overcoming traumas and political differences. One and a half million displaced people, however, remain separated from their homes—homes that, in many cases, no longer exist, except in their memories. Despite the lack of governmental support, artists who experienced displacement have a privileged role in conveying their concerns and fostering public discussion about the rights of refugees and fashioning a public response to Russian aggression.

Now, when the hope for a peaceful life is once again threatened by the conflict's dramatic intensification, art provides one of the mechanisms for a civilized discussion rather than a scene of panic. Artistic projects that are conceived today will undoubtedly reflect the threats, anxieties, and risks of these most recent weeks—and will challenge the breakout of a full-scale war. They will also teach resilience and strength as a remedy to those who experienced loss and dispossession.

The year 2022 is a watershed that brings more threats to Ukrainian society and expands the violence further into Ukrainian territory. Hope for a peaceful future and strength are all that remain to us.