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WOMEN AT WAR

*The village of my postwar childhood was a village of women.
(...) I don't remember any men's voices. That is how it has
remained for me: stories of the war are told by women.*

– Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*

Women at War introduces some of the leading women artists working in Ukraine today and provides a context for the current war. Several works in the exhibition were made after February 24, 2022, when Russia began the full-scale invasion of Ukraine; others date from the eight years of war following the annexation of Crimea and the creation of separatist Donetsk and Luhansk “People’s Republics” in 2014.

War is central to history. History has been written (and painted) by men. This exhibition provides a platform for women narrators of history and also examines gendered perspectives of war.

War disrupts social structures, including gender roles. Both World Wars led to the emancipation of women, but when they ended, women were sent back to perform domestic tasks. Historically, in the West, women were mobilized on the “home front” as opposed to the “war front,” although many joined combat in drag. In Eastern Europe, this distinction never existed—every war was fought at home and women participated in great numbers in partisan groups and uprisings. In general, neither in the West nor in the East women were admitted into the army in combat roles until recently, but there were exceptions: the Russian army allowed women in combat already during WWI. Women are generally absent from the historical accounts of war, but violating a woman is seen as a violation of land and nation. Media images reinforce the perception of gender divide. But is war indeed gendered? Women comprise c. 25% of the Ukrainian armed forces. Russian soldiers rape Ukrainian civilians of all and no genders, including adult men. Yet, the majority’s experience remains tied to the traditional gender roles. Many artists in this exhibition struggle with the notion of victimhood and pose the question in what way women have agency during war.

The exhibition also offers an insight into Eastern European feminisms, which are significantly different from the Western mold. It contributes to the discourse about how national identity is tied to the perception of women’s role in society. There are parallels between the fight for Ukraine’s independence and the fight for the equality of Ukrainian women, stemming from the paradoxes of the Soviet Union, where early modernist, anti-nationalist, and feminist promises became but a fig leaf of propaganda for the increasingly brutal and misogynist patriarchal regime. Not only the national identity of Ukrainians found itself in a bipolar lock after the fall of the Soviet empire, but the role and image of women in society did so as well.

Seeing millions of women as potential workforce and aiming to employ them in factories, the Bolsheviks set on creating a “New Soviet Woman.” After women were granted the right to vote in 1917, the right to divorce in 1918, and abortion on demand in 1920, the 1930s saw a return to conservative values, including the criminalization of abortion (1936-1955) in an effort to increase the country’s population. During WWII, women not only comprised a huge percentage of labor force but also a considerable part of the military. The result was a unique combination of freedoms and limitations: women to a large degree replaced male workers directly after the WWII, including in traditionally male jobs, yet they were still expected to take care of the domestic sphere without help from their partners. The image of masculinized, liberated women in public art belied the reality—women were exhausted (and their conduct scrutinized), while Soviet leaders bestowed and took away their rights, always in order to boost productivity or population growth. By contrast, the image of feminized men never entered the public space. The misogyny of these policies was masked by the progressive language of propaganda which misled women doing double duty—in the entire Eastern Bloc—into a false belief that they were equal. As the artist Vlada Ralko put it:

The Soviet people ruled over nature and this was inscribed in the image of woman, where the efforts directed at her subordination to the masculine took the form of internal censorship [...], a woman consciously discarded her own femininity as something undignified. Seemingly emancipated from her former limited role as the keeper of the domestic hearth, the woman acquired a peculiar masculinity [...] Any bodily display or craving that does

not conform to established norms was stigmatized by the system as [...] a threat to the social order.¹

After the dissolution of the USSR, Ukrainian women turned away from the Soviet ideal of womanhood toward a traditional model of femininity at the expense of gender equality, and two decades passed before the feminist ideals became relevant again.

An independent Ukraine, torn between its colonial past, the unimaginable wounds of the 20th century (the Holodomor, two world wars, and the Holocaust), the aspirations of belonging to the West, and the actuality of an endemic crisis, became obsessed with history. Art of the 2010s was largely focused on the discussion of whether national identity should draw directly upon the short period of pre-Soviet independence or include the legacy of the Ukrainian SSR. The new generation of artists turned their attention to historiography—how history is written, who writes it, who and what remains invisible. Soviet painting, especially interpretations of WWII, came into focus for many. Others organized around the critique of decommunization—the destruction of Soviet monuments and mosaics in Donbas spearheaded by the post-Maidan government—and turned toward the blanked-out pages of history.

Dana Kavelina (b. 1995 in Melitopol) explores perceptions of war outside mainstream narratives. Because there is no objective history, she states, “the question is whom we empower to make a record.”² She proposes that history, which is told from the military, masculine, and nationalist viewpoint, needs to be rewritten in a way to “capture the unimaginable complexity and intricacy of the historical process, and preserve the multiplicity of voices [...] Such a structure cannot be linear; it would rather resemble a matrix.”³ Her profoundly feminist proposal has it that history should be written as a collective, rather than be the record of winners.

The structure of Kavelina’s long-term project *Mother Srebrenica Mother Donbas* (which encompasses her film and drawings in this exhibition) stems from this approach. She searches for a way to bring back subjectivity to women victims of war who were purposefully destroyed by repeated rapes—in Donbas during the last eight years; in “rape camps” established in the 1990s by the Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina; during the 1941 Lviv pogroms (by the Germans and the Ukrainians); and during the deportation of the Chechens in 1944 as part of the forced resettlement of ethnic minorities in the Soviet Union between the 1930s and the 1950s. Rather than laying out four separate linear narrations, the artist seeks to weave them into a collective story of woman’s total war experience. The series of drawings *Communications. Exit to the Blind Spot*, which Kavelina created in 2019 while developing *Mother Srebrenica Mother Donbas*, reveals interconnections among war rapes, childbearing, and the concept of a nation in which a woman is seen as a vessel to perpetuate community defined by blood. A drawing depicting a rifle and a vagina includes a written comment *nation (from Latin: giving birth)*. The one where a red line is pulled from a woman’s opening by five hands, forming a star-like shape, is signed *we are all tied now*. They were first shown at the 2019 exhibition *War in the Museum* at the Kmytiv Museum, which juxtaposed Soviet paintings of victory in WWII with works by contemporary Ukrainian feminist artists. Kavelina wrote in the accompanying text, “Every war is a war against women. [...] Any ‘Winner’s Story’ is glued together by woman’s bloody lingerie.”⁴

Kavelina’s experimental film-poem *Letter to a Turtledove* (2020) comprises fragments of archival footage of Donbas since the peak of Stalinist industrialization in the 1930s until the 1990s, amateur footage shot during the current war, and animated and staged film segments. Its heroine, Maria Kateryna, represents centuries-long conflation of women with earth, land, and nation, and women’s experience during the eight years of the war in Donbas. The stream-of-consciousness poem by Kavelina, breathlessly recited off-screen, seeks to limn the woman’s victimhood—the loss of subjectivity (personhood) through the torture of repeated rapes, which drove women past the limit of humanness, to only want death. The *Letter...* invites us to “think of a victim as having certain subjective agency who is not involved in the reproduction of violence yet absorbs it. This is her strength.”⁵

Importantly, the artist used archival footage to take issue with the Ukrainian government’s policy of decommunization, and the ensuing “distortion of the past and the dehumanization of an entire region of the

¹ Vlada Ralko, “Vlada Ralko,” Secondary Archive, February 23, 2022, <https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/vlada-ralko/>.

² Dana Kavelina, “Dana Kavelina,” Secondary Archive, February 23, 2022, <https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/dana-kavelina/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Dana Kavelina, email to Monika Fabijanska, May 17, 2022.

⁵ “Letter to a Turtledove by Dana Kavelina. Dana Kavelina in conversation with Oleksiy Kuchanskyi,” e-flux Video & Film, July 2020, <https://www.e-flux.com/video/339843/letter-to-a-turtledove/>.

country.”⁶ Arguing that the 70 years of Soviet history of Ukraine cannot be erased, she intends to provoke a public debate using found footage from various periods, with hope that comparisons across time will lead to the acceptance of a more complex Ukrainian identity.

The agency of the victim and gender roles of women in wartime are also explored by **Alena Grom** in the series of photographs *Womb* (2018), by **Oksana Chepelyk** in her video *Letter from Ukraine* (2014), and by **Vlada Ralko** in her drawing diary of everyday horrors of the war, published daily on Instagram (2022).

“A war does not leave winners behind, but those who survived,”⁷ **Alena Grom** (b. 1976 in Donetsk) echoes Kavelina while commenting on the legacy of the male perspective in battle painting. In her photography, “there are no defensive actions and heroic struggles, but the lives of people who are able to withstand the war.”⁸ Grom, who lost her home in Donbas and together with her family became internally displaced in 2014, focuses on the dramatic situation of people still living in the contested territories. Her photographs of the war-torn region, its inhabitants and refugees, often women and children, are not meant as an expression of pity or grief but rather as an affirmation of life against all odds with its survival strategies and the pain of loss. In choosing her visual language, Grom attempts to counter what Susan Sontag refers to as the commodification of suffering in war photography.⁹ Her photographs document the conditions of a child’s life in wartime rather than exploit children’s pain and death. In the series *Womb* (2018), Grom explores the phenomenon of increased birthrate during wartime—the photographs are based on the stories of women who gave birth while living in the war zone in Donbas, often staying with their newborns in cold, damp cellars for months.

Womb, in which we see children emerging from the underground, also refers to the myth of Prometheus. The Greek god, who stole fire from gods and gave it to humans as a form of technology, in some versions of the myth also created humans from clay. In Soviet art and propaganda, a heroic miner was depicted as Prometheus, hiding a grimmer reality. Following Ukrainian independence in 1991, coal mining and metallurgic output fell drastically, pushing Donbas into a deep crisis and a series of strikes. With the outbreak of the war in 2014, many mines were closed and makeshift coalmines turned into bomb shelters.

A pioneer of new media in Ukraine, and one of the first Ukrainian artists to expressly position her art as feminist, as early as in the 1990s, **Oksana Chepelyk** (b. 1961 in Kyiv), reflects on gender roles in *Letter from Ukraine* (HD video, 7:32 min, 2014). In the video, the plight of a mother is abstracted into a choreography to ominous music of the Ukrainian world-music quartet DakhaBrakha. Filmed in a peaceful and quiet Italian town, a woman escapes imagined shelling with a boy, in an image that points to the war role of a woman who is a mother, but also to recurring nightmares of those who escaped war. Born and educated in the USSR, Chepelyk provocatively addressed the position of women in Ukrainian society at the time when Soviet and traditional models of womanhood competed in public discourse. Characteristically for early Ukrainian feminist art, women in Chepelyk’s films usually stand for the nation. For example, in *The Chronicles of Fortinbras* (35 mm, 30 min, 2001), the figure of Ukraine brutalized by the Soviet system refers to national symbols of Motherland (the Soviet personification of the state), Madonna (in Christianity), and Berehynia (in pre-Christian folk beliefs). Piercingly minimalist, the 2014 *Letter from Ukraine* is free from symbolism that would compel us to see a woman as a victimized figure of a nation, yet she is still tied to her traditional gender role.

Lviv Diary (2022), the ongoing series of drawings of the horrors of war published daily on Instagram by **Vlada Ralko** (b. 1969 in Kyiv), follows the artist’s famous *Kyiv Diary* (2013-2015)—a daily notation of Euro-Maidan events, the annexation of Crimea, and the outbreak of the war in Donbas, which grew into a general reflection on human nature and its capacity for evil. While the painterly *Kyiv Diary*, with its vivid colors against deep black backgrounds, was realistic and narrative, *Lviv Diary* appears bleak: its color palette is reduced to blacks, greys, browns, fleshy pinks, and blood reds, and figures are sketched against the blank emptiness of death. These are images of total destruction rather than of fighting, which—with its action, gruesome disfigurements, and landscapes—still belonged to the sphere of life. *Lviv Diary* surrenders this narrative nerve and employs symbols instead.

In many drawings created in the first weeks of Russia’s 2022 aggression on Ukraine, Ralko used the imagery of the

⁶ Dana Kavelina, “Dana Kavelina,” Secondary Archive.

⁷ Alena Grom, “Alena Grom,” Secondary Archive, February 23, 2022, <https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/alena-grom/>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Susan Sontag, “Looking at War: Photography’s view of devastation and death.” *The New Yorker*, December 9, 2002, 82-98.

two-headed eagle of Russia's coat of arms, which dates back to the 15th century. The crowns, and the orb and scepter in the eagle's talons (in one of the drawings replaced by the hammer and sickle) are symbols of Russia's centuries-old imperial ambition ever since Ivan III (the Great) adopted the Byzantine double-headed eagle in his seal after the fall of Constantinople, giving the impetus to the idea of *Moscow as the Third Rome*. In Ralko's *Lviv Diary*, the heraldic eagle is often equipped with a monstrous missile-like penis, bringing to mind both the expressive line and the iconography of drawings and paintings by the U.S. feminist artist Judith Bernstein (b. 1942), wherein the penis morphs into a screw or a drill bit, and represents the patriarchal aggression of world leaders. Bernstein used the U.S. eagle to condemn the monstrosity of Donald Trump's presidency (*Seal of Disbelief*, 2017).

Besides the symbols of the invader—the rapist eagles and dogs and deathly skulls, *Lviv Diary* also includes the symbols of Ukrainian victims, such as a child impaled by a bomb and signed ДЕТИ (rus. children), referencing the bombing of the Mariupol theater that sheltered 1,000 civilians despite being marked ДЕТИ, on March 16, 2022. As the news of systematic killing and rapes of Ukrainian civilians started to circulate in the news, Ralko depicted increasingly tortured bodies—that of a woman, whose intimate parts were turned into a bloody pit caught in the pincers of the hammer and sickle, bodies with hands tied behind their backs, like the hands of the victims of Bucha massacre, and bodies being thrown into mass graves. Many echo Christian iconography, e.g. the Entombment of Christ, or the iconography of *Lustmord* (ger. sex murder)—a brutal depiction of a raped female corpse, shown mutilated or dismembered, popular with male artists in Germany in the aftermath of World War I. The female body and atrocities committed on women, literally and metaphorically, are among the main subjects of the artist for whom—as Kateryna Iakovlenko writes—“a woman is not just a mother, not just a sister or friend; a woman is the personification of the earth and land in the first place.”¹⁰

A vivid discussion about historiography among Ukrainian artists concerns historical painting. This critique is central to art practices of conceptual painters **Lesia Khomenko** (b. 1980 in Kyiv) who addresses the history of representation of war in painting, and **Anna Scherbyna** (b. 1988 in Zaporizhzhia) who undermines historical painting genres—from monumental to miniature—and the methods of their teaching in academia as an emanation of patriarchal hierarchies.

There are strong parallels between these two artists despite their eight-year age difference. They contend with mythologized versions of history and art history that were propagated by the Soviet Union. While both engage directly in civic activism, their art remains a critical and conceptual reflection on art and history. Finally, both target conservative Ukrainian art education, which has remained unchanged since the 1980s, insisting on the validity of the idea of genius and the imperative of following the masters.

Lesia Khomenko, who belongs to the generation shaped in the mid-2000s by the experience of the Orange Revolution, was one of the first artists in Ukraine to wrestle with the subject of history, and is a pioneer of institutional critique. A member of the artistic group R.E.P. (Revolutionary Experimental Space) since 2004, she also co-founded, in 2008, the curatorial union HUDRADA—a self-educational community based on collaboration. In 2015, Khomenko initiated the “Contemporary Art” course at the Kyiv Academy of Media Arts and remains its program director. The program became an avenue for younger artists seeking to gain knowledge beyond the Academy's teaching.

Khomenko deconstructs historical painting by comparing history and myths and exposing visual manipulations, and provocatively asks, “if there are still wars in this world, why can't there still be painting?”¹¹ She subverted Soviet war painting traditions, e.g., by abstracting socialist-realist paintings, or by creating a conceptual series of anonymous Ukrainian soldiers. The featured work, *Max in the Army*, is more personal—this monumental full-figure portrait of Khomenko's partner, an artist himself, joining the Territorial Defense of Ukraine, was painted in March 2022. The bravado brushwork and the monumental scale only make the civilian going to war look more lost. Grayish browns, greens, and blues are the colors of Soviet war paintings but also the colors of early spring in Kyiv.

Anna Scherbyna's conceptual undermining of classical painting genres is profoundly feminist. Her explorations of traditions of Ukraine's painting, historical memory, and political aspects of landscape painting, are an attempt to expose and deconstruct the established patriarchal order. *Some landscapes of the left-bank Ukraine* (2016-2019) subvert the historical genre of painted ruins, popular in the 18th century Europe, and depict the devastation of

¹⁰ Kateryna Iakovlenko, „Eat me, drink me — this is a war,” *BLOK Magazine*, February 24, 2022, <http://blokmagazine.com/eat-me-drink-me-this-is-a-war/>.

¹¹ Lesia Khomenko, “Lesia Khomenko,” Secondary Archive, February 23, 2022, <https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/lesia-khomenko/>.

Donbas in miniature watercolor landscapes. At such tiny scale, it is almost impossible to perceive the damage and they seem lyrical. In order to force the viewer to look closer, Scherbyna mimics the displays of watercolors in Ukrainian museums and covers each with a cloth, inviting us to lift it. The works were inspired by the artist's travels to the Luhansk and Donetsk regions during 2016-2019 as a member of human rights monitoring missions organized by Vostok SOS.

Another artist investigating the role of art in historiography is **Yevgenia Belorusets** (b. 1980 in Kyiv). A social activist, photographer, and accomplished writer, she explores the ways to render truth and attain objectivity in documentary art. Belorusets' approach crystallized in the post-Maidan period when the Ukrainian government introduced a set of decommunization laws. In 2016, 987 cities and villages and 51,493 streets were renamed, and 1,320 Lenin monuments and 1,069 monuments of other communist leaders were removed. Symbols such as the red star and the hammer and sickle were outlawed. In the wake of these laws, artists united to preserve Soviet mosaics, and took a "historiographic turn," focusing on the blanked-out pages of history and marginalized subjects.¹² In the increasingly heated debate about Ukrainian national identity, where less and less space was left for historical nuance, Belorusets focused on the fragility of factual truth threatened by political power, as discussed by Hannah Arendt.¹³ "My artistic and political intention is to make the invisible visible,"¹⁴ wrote Belorusets. In her efforts at rendering the truth, she turned to suppressed history, social issues, and marginalized or excluded groups: LGBTQ+ families (*A Room of My Own*, 2011-2012), Romani people (*Christina's Day*, 2018-2021), and Donbas miners.

Victories of the Defeated (2014-2017) is a series of more than 150 photographs and texts devoted to post-industrial Ukraine, work in coal mines at the edge of the war zone, and contemporary forms of labor. Belorusets' aim was to make visible the peaceful life in the war zone that is overshadowed by media images of war, and bring attention to the most vulnerable groups left behind who resist the war that engulfs them. Working on the project, she collaborated with trade unions and local labor activists, many of them women, such as Vera Yastrebova (the woman in the red helmet)—a lawyer from Lysychansk and a founder of the organization Public Labor Control. For *Women at War*, Belorusets selected photographs that focus on the presence and labor of women in the mines, showing them both at work and in the moments of transformation when they roam about the dressing room preparing to enter the outside world where their bodies are expected to conform to certain norms. The photographs show moments shared together, camaraderie, private rituals of beautification, and—most strikingly—their laughter and joy.

"They say that history is written by the victorious. But might it be possible to read or listen to a history written by the defeated?"—asks the artist. "Silence is inherent in a document which presents a reality yet does not interpret it."¹⁵ Belorusets refers to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), where he concludes that only facts, not aesthetic and ethical judgments, can be expressed with logical language. He concludes, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."¹⁶ The artist resists narrativity and proposes fragmentation as a means to present objective truth. She removes herself as an interpreter, and often refrains from editing her images. By inserting into the public sphere images of what is intentionally excluded from the media and public awareness, she wishes to destabilize the informational war's constricted view of reality. "In conditions of the [...] violence of war, and the divisiveness of any information, it is essential that we find a way back to the demands of the legal and ethical inviolability of human beings."¹⁷

Alevtina Kakhidze's (b. 1973 in Zhdanivka, Donetsk oblast) series of drawings with texts *Strawberry Andreevna* (2014-2019) represents a different approach to writing history. Since her participation in the Euro-Maidan Revolution, 2013-14, the artist, curator, and educator has remained devoted to the political mission of art. Kakhidze developed a methodology of "thinking through drawing," employs performance, and engages in ecofeminist practice. She is no longer solely concerned with the representation of women, but rather follows feminist philosophy to defend the rights of all who are excluded. Her art targets systems—consumerist, patriarchal, colonial, legal, educational, as well as corruption, and structural violence. Her art is inherently political, where the personal transcends the individual to confront social injustice.

¹² Alisa Lozhkina, "Between War and Rave. Ukrainian Art after the 2013 Revolution," *BLOK Magazine*, December 23, 2019, <https://blokmagazine.com/between-war-and-rave-ukrainian-art-after-the-2013-revolution/> - ftn16.

¹³ Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," *The New Yorker*, February 25, 1967.

¹⁴ Yevgenia Belorusets, "A Room of My Own," accessed June 27, 2022, <http://belorusets.com/work/a-room-of-my-own>.

¹⁵ Yevgenia Belorusets, "Victories of the Defeated," accessed June 27, 2022, <http://belorusets.com/work/victories-of-the-defeated>.

¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Strawberry Andreevna follows daily life of the artist's mother who remained in the occupied territories in Donbas. It starts in April 2014, when fights between armed separatists of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Ukrainian National Guard broke out in Zhdanivka. The only place where cellphone signal worked was the town's cemetery, and Ms. Andreevna, called Strawberry, had been going there to let her daughter know that she was still alive. The series covers five years of their conversations until January 16, 2019, when the artist's mother died of cardiac arrest while crossing the demarcation line between the self-proclaimed DPR and Ukraine to collect her pension. She was among half a million Ukrainian retirees living in the separatist territories, who registered as displaced persons in Ukraine in order to receive their payment—which required crossing the demarcation line several times a month. Another 700,000 retirees living there had no access to their pensions at all. Personal history proved a powerful way to evoke empathy among Ukrainians with those who—for various reasons—remained in the occupied Donbas.¹⁸

Zhanna Kadyrova (b. 1981 in Brovary, Kyiv oblast) created her installation *Palianytsia* (2022) in a village in the Transcarpathian region of Western Ukraine, where she evacuated from Kyiv when it became the target of Russian rockets. Large stones smoothed in local rivers reminded her of the typical Ukrainian bread, *palianytsia*. Because Russians cannot pronounce the word properly, it now serves to identify the enemy. Before and during the invasion, Russia infiltrated the territory of Ukraine with *agents provocateurs* gathering intelligence and helping to instigate pro-Russian manifestations and establish pro-Russian local administration. Kadyrova, one of the most successful Ukrainian artists internationally, a sculptor best known for her use of materials referencing Soviet legacy in Ukraine, such as concrete and mosaic tiles, to render clothes and food, now made the loaves of *palianytsia* from river stones and placed them on a table covered with a white cloth. The astonishing, tactile likeness of what is the most symbolic of foods in Europe, brings together the relationship between language and nation, and the centrality of grain as one of critical stakes in this war. The project is also a testament to the horrifying reality of war which forces the defender to become a killer.

Among the consequences of the political crisis in Ukraine during the last eight years, paralleling the process of (re)creating national identity locked between colonial Soviet past and aspirations to belong to the West, is a personal crisis to which many female artists attest. Several speak about a crisis of artistic vocation. **Alevtina Kakhidze** said that she had already made statements on all the important topics using art, and had to go beyond its limitations.¹⁹ Since 2018, she has served as the UN Tolerance Ambassador in Ukraine, and has been engaged in building peace, protection of biodiversity, and mitigation of the global climate crisis. **Zhanna Kadyrova** created her *Palianytsia* as a fundraising project for the war effort in response to a similar artistic crisis as a result of the 2022 escalation of Russian aggression. Most of the artists in the exhibition told me that making art seemed just not enough in wartime.

Yet, this personal crisis is not simply the crisis of one's role as an artist during war. It is also a mental health crisis, to which almost the entire society has been subjected for a prolonged period of time. Women artists speak about it openly. In the words of **Dana Kavelina**, "depression is the only adequate strategy in a situation where it is impossible to influence real political processes."²⁰ **Alena Grom** created several series of photographs of Donbas as a way to overcome trauma after losing her home there. **Kateryna Yermolayeva's** (b. 1985 in Donetsk) work emerges from an identity crisis triggered by the war, the loss of her family home, and the separation, in 2014, from the people with whom she grew up. The following year, she created a large-scale installation *Blockade of Memories* at the PinchukArtCentre, depicting the places she lost when Donetsk was taken over by separatists: her parents' and grandparents' houses, as well as their countryside house. "This project had a profound impact on me—she recalled—the war went on [...] and all I felt was my own helplessness facing the circumstances [...]. Rapidly, I began to lose myself as an artist, as a person."²¹ The crisis led the artist to experiment publicly, on Instagram, with her image by dressing up as non-binary characters, and later to explore the idea of self as composed of multiple personalities. At the nadir of her crisis, she attempted to find out who she was by decomposing herself into many characters, each of whom was still her. Yermolayeva continued this line of self-investigation, exploring the self in the context of gender roles and experimentation with drag, in the performance *Introutourist* (2016) and photographs (*Photos*, 2016-), four

¹⁸ According to an UN OHCHR report, over three million people continued to live in the Donbas conflict zone as of March 2016. The Ukrainian government registered 1.6 million internally displaced people within Ukraine. Over one million were reported to have sought asylum elsewhere, mostly in Russia. See: "[Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine 16 November 2015 to 15 February 2016](#)" (PDF), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, March 3, 2016.

¹⁹ Alevtina Kakhidze and Oksana Briukhovetska, "Alevtina Kakhidze," Secondary Archive, February 23, 2022, <https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/alevtina-kakhidze/>.

²⁰ Dana Kavelina, "Dana Kavelina," Secondary Archive.

²¹ Kateryna Yermolayeva, "Kateryna Yermolayeva," Secondary Archive, February 23, 2022, <https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/kateryna-yermolayeva/>.

of which are presented in *Women at War*.

Olia Fedorova's (b. 1994 in Kharkiv) outdoor installation *Defense* (2017) is a poetic take on land art, which, typically for her conceptual practice, marks Ukrainian landscape as a semantic space. Eight anti-tank hedgehogs made of paper, each 5 feet high, symbolize the futility of the mind's attempt to escape the reality of war. "We try to defend ourselves from the war virus, but all our attempts are just as naive and ephemeral as paper anti-tank hedgehogs under the caterpillars of armored vehicles"²²—the artist wrote. The installation, soaked with snow and rain, decomposed becoming one with landscape.

Fedorova stayed in bombarded Kharkiv during the battle for the city, supporting the war effort. Living between her apartment and the bomb shelter in the cellar, lacking access to art materials and the ability to work in landscape, she created a series of ten prayer-poems written with a felt-tip pen on bed linens and pieces of clothes. From a distance, *Tablets of Rage* (2022) resemble embroidery and bring to mind the history of women's work with textiles—not only as a form of creative expression but also an important healing and meditative practice. Kharkiv was shelled daily from February 24 through May 13, 2022. The first poem was written on March 24, the last—on May 11. The poem presented in *Women at War*, was created on March 29:

*May you choke on my soil.
May you poison yourself with my air.
May you drown in my waters.
May you burn in my sunlight.
May you stay restless all day and all night long.
And may you be afraid every second.*

In the last poem, written on May 11, Fedorova turns directly to God, "Don't let me ever forget my roots,/ But also don't let the past engulf me./ Give me enough rage to keep fighting,/ And may pain and anger not poison my soul anymore./.../ Give me the merciful dreams and save me from horrible nightmares."²³ Seven days later, the artist left Kharkiv for Austria.

The exhibition also features a linocut by **Alla Horska** (1929-1970), situating this contemporary art exhibition in the context of the legacy of women's art and political activism in Ukraine. Both Alla Horska—an artist and human rights activist, who was born in a Russian speaking family in Crimea but learnt Ukrainian—and poet and literary critic Ivan Svitlychny (1929-1992) whom she portrayed in this linocut in 1963, fought to preserve Ukraine's culture and language under the communist regime.

In 1960, both were among *Shistdesyatnyky* (The Sixtiers)—a movement of dissident literati, artists and scholars who rejected socialist realism and spread ideas of Ukrainian democratic and national revival. The group laid the foundations for the realization of the right of the Ukrainian people to statehood. In 1962, Horska investigated an eyewitness report of mass graves in Bykivnia near Kyiv, one of the places of secret executions carried out by the NKVD between the 1920s and the 1940s, which the USSR government admitted only in 1989. From 1960 to 1964 she co-created the Club of Creative Youth "Suchasnyk" ("Contemporary"), the center of Ukrainian culture in Kyiv. Svitlychny, also its co-founder, was arrested in 1965 for his involvement in the club and imprisoned for a year. In 1972, KGB arrested 14 "Shistdesyatnyky" who were accused of "Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism" and the dissemination of *samizdat*. Svitlychny served seven years in a labor camp and five years in internal exile.

Alla Horska was expelled from the Union of Artists of the Ukrainian SSR twice—in 1964, for her depiction of Taras Shevchenko in a stained-glass window in the foyer at the National University in Kyiv, and for her civic stance opposing political trials of 1967-1970. Unable to get artistic commissions in Kyiv, from 1965 to 1969 she collaborated with her husband Victor Zaretsky and other artists on monumental mosaics and frescoes on public buildings in Donetsk. Some of these masterpieces depicted the builders of Communism (*Prometheus* at School no. 5 in Donetsk, 1966; *The Flag of Victory* at the Young Guard Museum in Krasnodon, 1969), while others were joyful and magical interpretations of Ukrainian folk art (*Woman-Bird*, 1966; *The Bird of Hellas* in restaurant Aristocrat, Mariupol, 1967). In 1970, at the age of 41, Horska was murdered—presumably by the KGB. Her mosaics, some of which were registered as protected

²² Olia Fedorova, email to Monika Fabijanska, June 2, 2022.

²³ Translations by the artist, first published on Instagram, and later on her website, Olia Fedorova, "Tablets of Rage," accessed June 27, 2022, <https://www.oliafedorova.com/works/tablets-of-rage>.

monuments by Ukrainian artists in recent years, are now being bombed by the Russians.

For Ukrainian art, Alla Horska is what Frida Kahlo means for Mexican art. Like those of Frida Kahlo, Käthe Kollwitz, and other major women artists, her name was adopted as a *nom de guerre* by one of the Guerrilla Girls, a New York-based anonymous feminist art collective founded in 1985.

Post-war Ukrainian art is often divided into the official and the underground, the socialist and the nonconformist. Yet, they sometimes intertwined—perhaps most visibly in the art of Alla Horska.²⁴ Her activities paved the way for today's Ukrainian culture and independence, and her artworks inspire artists who try to reconcile the legacy of socialism with national culture.

After the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia recognized war rape as a crime against humanity in 1993, and in the wake of the #MeToo movement, wartime narrations finally include rape as a weapon. Artists are aware that this kind of representation is, ironically, as liberating as it is dangerous for women's subjectivity. A careful reader of Linda Nochlin may ask why the representation of a woman as a warrior is missing. Perhaps because the victorious, glorifying images are only created after wars end, or perhaps because Ukrainian women are wary of the problematic masculinization of women in the controlling and oppressive Soviet art, but Ukrainian artists do not seem to be seeking a mere reversal of gender roles in an effort to achieve equality. What they are after is dismantling the traditional narration of war, and abolishing the idea of triumphant victory in recognition of war's total devastation. They focus on life rather than on military combat, and specifically on the fate of all those who are disadvantaged, forgotten, or excluded from the mainstream narration. And this is their feminist contribution to historiography.

This is the second version of the essay, edited in August 2022 for the exhibition catalog.

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²⁴ Lizaveta German, "Alla Horska. The Banner of Victory," in *Why There Are Great Women Artists in Ukrainian Art*, eds. Kateryna Iakovlenko and Anna Lazar (Kyiv: PinchukArtCentre, 2019), 135-136. Available online at: http://pinchukartcentre.org/files/2020/womenartists_en.pdf.