






The Artistic Narrative in Times of War: NENKA project of Ukrainian visual artists

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The Artistic Narrative in Times of War: *NENKA* project of Ukrainian visual artists

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Abstract

Art is deeply linked and contributes to the fundamental axes of culture, that is, norms and standards of behavior, national traditions, principles of life and value systems. During periods of social crisis, art is one of the most vulnerable components, but at the same time a powerful catalyst for creative processes, as well as an expressive vehicle for a critical view of the current situation. Particularly in times of war, artistic expression is presented with a powerful life-giving potential and allows to accurately express the enormous emotional tension of people, whose lives have been disrupted by death, pain, and destruction. This is the case of Ukrainian artists who, through visual exploration, build a complex narrative that seeks to interpret and express the pain and hope of what happened in their native country and which, since 2014, has been experiencing the ravages of war.

Keywords: Ukraine, Artist community, Contemporary image, Art to highlight Ukraine War.

1. Introduction

The war between Russia and Ukraine is a complex conflict, framed in a global geopolitical reconfiguration and one that the entire world is currently facing. A conflict in that economic, political, and cultural factors intervene. In this area, we find, on one hand, Russia with a historical context resulting from an imperial past that has marked it, in addition to a complex economic relationship that over the years has been weaving with the main economies of the world, and on the other hand Ukraine, that has built its independency passing through complex historical processes in search of self-determination and autonomy from imperial regimes that have sought to underestimate and attack the cultural and identity structures.

In this context, we start investigating various artistic expressions that in the Ukrainian conflict have as a point of confluence of their narratives: culture, war, and State politics. A war cannot be understood without linking it to complex political and ideological processes, especially its cultural factor. By the cultural component of State policy, we refer to all the media that influence the construction of a national identity and the legitimation of the regimes in turn: posters, thematic films, music, art exhibitions, and in general the information distributed in various media that allow to construct proposed by the power discourse. However, the war manages to detonate parallel narratives, in a political activism that seeks to present an alternative critical vision using a different

style that allows reading from another angle to the one presented by the government. Observing the history of countries at war, we can see how it affects cultural processes, or even becomes a reason to rekindle conflicts or accentuate them. For example, the language issue in the case of the war against Ukraine (Panasenko, H., 2018).

In summary, although war is pain, blood, and suffering, if it is considered through the prism in which extreme situations provoke a readjustment of the senses, psychological adjustment that seeks to preserve life. Then we find in it a circumstantial trigger for the development of the cultural sphere and as an inexhaustible source of arguments in the various forms of artistic expression, making culture a refuge and cradle of hope.

In case of Ukraine, the creative flow has not stopped, various international institutions, art residencies, cultural foundations and private galleries are supporting Ukrainian artists. At the same time, expressions of solidarity are triggered between various international artistic sectors by adding the colors of the Ukrainian flag to their works or by incorporating inscriptions, lemmas, and slogans. Such artists as Marina Abramovic, Damien Hirst, Takashi Murakami, and others highlight war in Ukraine. (Foundation of Victor Pinchuk, 2022.).

2. Emergency support initiative: Journal *NENKA*

For the development of our research, we will take as a reference the *NENKA* journal, that arises with the intention of disseminating the various works that have emerged in visual art area in relation to the issue of the current war that Ukraine is facing. This magazine allows us to place it as a sample of some of the works that, in terms of art, are emerging as a form of cultural resistance. This is an initiative of the Ukrainian digital artist from Kharkiv Andriy Hupsa, known for his works in the *before/after* collage style, that let him to present Ukrainian cities before and after the war (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: Cover pages of the Journal *NENKA* 1 y 2 numbers. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CiSd8qODs9C/>

There are two versions of the magazine: printed and digital, the latter being more interactive and with a high level of audience participation. The magazine is published in Ukrainian, although it is distributed among the traditionally Russian-speaking population of the eastern regions of Ukraine where Andriy Hupsa lives. According to the law On ensuring the functioning of the Ukrainian language as an official language, all national and regional publications must be published in Ukrainian. But before 2022, according to Radakevich's research (Radakevich O. M., 2016. pp. 44–48.), a significant part of publications in Ukraine were printed in Russian due to its prevalence in the south-eastern regions of the country. However, after the events of 2014, the Russian language is not accepted so widely gradually re-establishing the use of Ukrainian language.

The journal currently has two issues published and the income generated from its sale has been sent to humanitarian organizations. Unlike the first issue, that focused on presenting works by the magazine's own creator, the second goes beyond the initial idea and brings together the works of other Ukrainian visual artists presenting their vision and interpretation of the war, emphasizing issues that seek to encourage unity and patriotism, as well as the rescue of the daily life of citizens who are currently experiencing the ravages of war, showing the stories that each one of them lives. Thus, the magazine begins to establish itself as a creative record of what Ukraine is currently experiencing.

Regarding the structure of the magazine, it is organized in semantic blocks. The permanent rubrics determine the main areas of work in which the editorial team outlines the volume of work and the thematic lines. These are combined in four blocks: digital photography, digital illustration, street art and meme. They seek to reflect the trends that are taking place in digital content in the Ukrainian artistic community.

3. Project *REFLECTIONS* by Andriy Hupsa – digital intervention

We focused our work on the digital intervention project *Reflections* of Andriy Hupsa since in it he shows us from his gaze the transit in the transformed reality and how the war changed the face of the Ukrainian cities, the project offers us a journey through different parts of the Ukrainian territory covering not only cities that are located on the border with Russia such as Kharkiv (where the artist lives) but even in those situated in the central and western part, far from the area of Military intervention.

The term reflection, presented as the articulating axis of the series, denotes an interaction between two realities, the one that is, and the one that is reflected. The latter is always perceived as a projection of reality and in that, with minimal distortions, it is always faithful to those it is projected on. In the artistic conception of Andriy Hupsa we could find a question about what we could consider as reality and what could be configured as part of a dream or nightmare, a kind of interaction between the world of sleep and wakefulness, where water as a mirror becomes an indication of what was and what most likely will not be.

The first piece of the series shows us Irpen, a small city near the Ukrainian capital Kyiv. This piece (fig. 2a) entitled: "24.02 changed the lives of each of us" with a 180-degree modification in relation to its first version as a metaphor for what February twenty-fourth meant at the beginning of the armed conflict: a turn between peaceful life and war.



Figure 2: a) First version published in Instagram. b) Journal *NENKA* number 2.

The following piece (Fig. 3) shows us a record of the explosions in Vinnitsa on July 14, 2022 where civilian buildings were damaged and dozens of people were killed or injured, including children, the author dedicates this piece to the 348 children war dead and more than 10 million people who have left Ukraine since February 24, 2022. According to data from the Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office, almost a thousand children have been injured due to ongoing war actions and Russian attacks in the territory of this nation (Rada Live, 2022).

From the perspective of Barthes, all photography contains that he has called reproduction style, in the words of the author defined as “a secondary sense whose signifier consists of a certain treatment of the image under the action of the creator and whose meaning, aesthetic or ideological, refers to a certain culture of the society that receives the message” (Barthes, 1986, p.13), and that emerges from the captured content. This style of reproduction implies the connotative prepositions where a code operates that detaches it from the mere denotative reproduction typical for photography without treatment. For Barthes (1986, p. 17), the connotation, built from a historical context, is built from three factors: manipulation of the space, poses and objects. The same that make up the framework on which the reading code will be built.

In this sense, the proposed connotative structure determines a code referring to family well-being that provide security and fulfilment to childhood, preserving innocence and fantasy on which infants build their personality, and that when contrasted with violent reality that is lived emphasizes the drama and pain that war is capable of inflicting on the most vulnerable sectors of society.

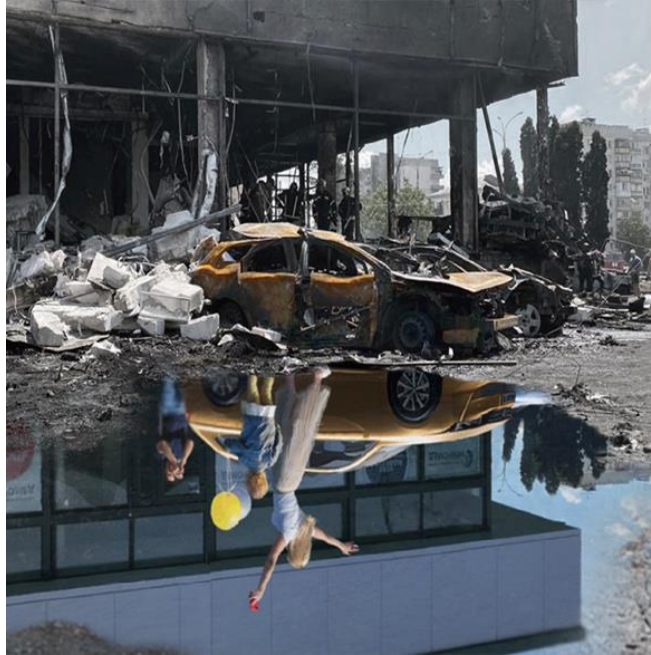


Figure 3: Vinnitsa. Journal *NENKA* number 2 (printed version).

In the next piece consist of two contrasting photographs (Fig. 4) it shows the Mariupol and in the reflection. We can observe the waiting room of the train station with the mural from the seventies of 20 century and in contrast to the ravages that the war has caused. The mosaic wall represents fragments of scenes of communist construction in the USSR as a great international task of the Soviet people, meeting the interests of the entire world socialist system, the interests of the international proletariat. Communism carried out the historical mission of delivering all people from social inequality, from all forms of oppression and exploitation, from the horrors of war and establishes on earth Peace, Labor, Freedom, Equality, Brotherhood, and Happiness of all peoples inhabiting the USSR. In the Soviet period, the model of the *three sister nations* was established as the basis of national relations among the East Slavs, where Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians were recognized as separate, but still connected by historical and cultural ties that grew out of a common ancient Russian cradle. In fact, this model has become a kind of substitute for the pre-revolutionary idea of the *Russian trinity*, that was never expelled from the subconscious of a significant part of the population of eastern Ukraine until the beginning of the conflict in 2014.

According to the same line proposed by Barthes, in this photographic series he emphasizes a narrative based on objects, where the connotation emerges from an exercise in that "objects are habitual inducers of associations of ideas" (1986, p.18). Also, there is a clear reference to the concepts of travel and culture, represented by the train station and the mural contained in it. We can observe the high contrast on the images, allude to the impossibility to move that is a direct manifestation of the civil liberty of the people and, in the case of these photographs, critically expresses the transgression that has been carried out against it. On the other hand, the object – mural – a direct representation of the art and the history, is presented in a destruction trying to express the irreverence and lack of respect of the values of common past. The art and history of a nation, as the first targets of any process of cultural conquest seeking the predominance of the cultural values of the transgressing peoples.

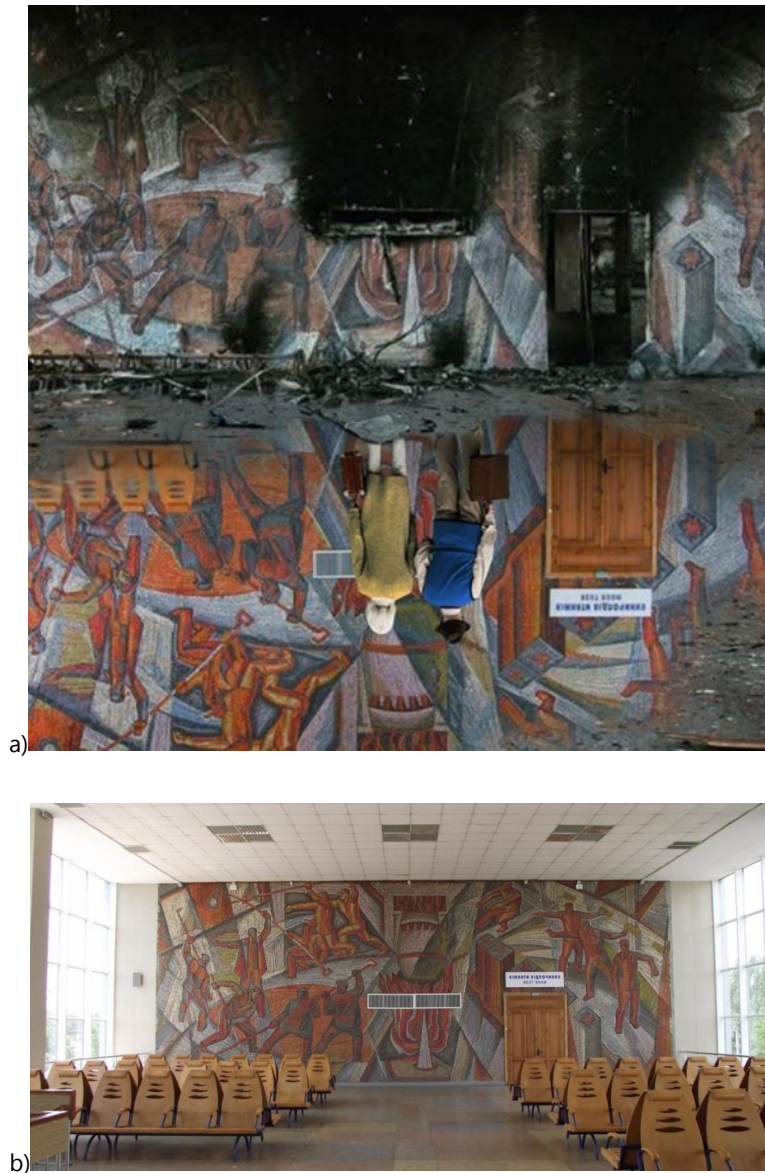


Figure 4: a) Mariupol. Journal *NENKA* number 2 (printed version) b) reference image of the mural. Source: <http://old-mariupol.com.ua/vokzaly-%e2%80%93-kalitki-goroda-chast-2/vtoraya-chast-vokzal-mozaika/>.

As has been mentioned, for Andriy Hupsa his works are characterized by emphasizing photographic montage as an expressive form (figure 5) and as the thematic and conceptual axis of war. The author, among other factors, must match the perspective, size, lighting, colour palette and even the season of the year in which the photo has taken. The final pieces are much more dramatic than the original photographs that are merely informative without emotional charge. Colours of the Ukrainian flag – yellow and blue, can be seen in almost all the works of Andriy Hupsa, but he uses them in a subtle way, in elements such as the clothing of the characters for example (see fig. 2, 3, 4). We can also find works with an achromatic scale, where grey tones and black prevail to emphasize the drama of war.



Figure 5: a) El proceso creativo del artista y b) resultado final de la intervension. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CfMruKINWfG/>.

The war period became a certain turning point for Ukrainian art that separated the artistic trends of the early 21st century and stylistic features. After February 24, 2022, the visual dialogue between the piece and the viewer is more immediate and takes place in real time. That is why it is used the concept of a simplified image, like the poster, where there is only one message that the viewer captures at first sight (figure 6). It is about the ability to be read and interpreted in a single way, such is the case of the murals of the Ukrainian artist Sasha Korban, whose work is also presented in the journal *NENKA*, and who creates his works on the walls of destroyed houses and pieces of asphalt.

Korban uses visual contrast to reinforce the message, especially semantic contrast with the combination of objects that have some opposite qualities: warrior – housewife, good – bad, etc. The contrast is reinforced by the unusualness of the situation, the introduction of fictional elements, and the use of allegory.



Figure 6: a Street artist Sasha Korban and his art. Journal *NENKA*, number 2 (printed version).

Ideological influence actively shapes people who are more and more inclined to simple forms of perception. A mural today is a way of exchanging ideas, a way of dividing what is one's own and what is foreign. Like any war, an information war is also a division between one's own and another's.

The paradox of modern society, especially for active Internet users, is that recently communication has accelerated so much that it is only possible through the mediation of a poster, mural, photomontage, or other form of visualized information encoded in a visual formula. The constant pressure of time implies obtaining information in a fragmented, rapid way, on the fly, without the possibility of systematization and comprehensive analysis.

4. Conclusions

The beginning of the Russian invasion to the Ukrainian terrain had a radical impact on the artistic consciousness of the Ukrainians. Analysing the works of Ukrainian visual artists, and in particular

the work of the artist Andriy Hupsa, we show that apart from portraying a cruel reality of destroyed cities, there remains a great hope driven by the creative potential of the artistic movement.

We identify some trends in the development of various manifestations of Ukrainian art in times of war: generalization and monumentality, heroization of historical moments, as well as the glorification of the image of Ukraine as a woman, suffering, but indomitable in the fight against the enemy. In expressive terms, we have noticed constant use of symbols of national identity: flag, shield, Ukrainian ornament, etc. It is important to point out that the various artistic expressions as forms of peaceful resistance continue to redefine themselves and investigate in creative, expressive, and conceptual terms. Despite the terrible catastrophe that war itself represents, today we can see that art is configured as a discourse of strength to develop a different worldview and, as in the work of Andriy Hupsa, function as a mirror in which humanity is able to see itself, consolidate and make reaffirmation the eternal values and ideals of humanity.

In the current geopolitical scenario characterized by a redefinition of both political and economic power centres, that at the same time is framed in a culture in which certainties dissolve and emotional subjectivity is suggested as a validator of reality to the detriment of logical and argued reason as a way of understanding reality. Fanaticism and totalitarianism emerge more frequently and lead to violence as a form of irrational imposition of ideas, beliefs, or value systems, culminating in this spiral of violence in war. In this context, as has been shown, historically art has always become an instrument that allows, like a mirror, to reflect the inconsistencies that humanity, in these states of irrationality, decides to naturalize and normalize to the detriment of fundamental rights of the man. In this sense, investigating the expressive forms and routes that the artists follow in times of war, allows us, in an exercise of metacognition, to recognize the perspectives from which we build the value framework of our society, and remind ourselves what characterizes us as humanity: our dignity.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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