
Ukrainian Art in the Time of the War: An Art Episteme Shift

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Abstract: For contemporary Ukrainian art, the time of war has become an occasion for the development of its vision of the national idea as a defining episteme, the process of approval of which began around the time of Ukraine gaining its independence in the 1990s, but was then suspended by the uncritical adaptation of the postmodern cultural-industrial paradigm, which was perceived a marker of belonging to the European family of developed democracies, while obviously ignoring the colonial-rudimentary patterns of Eurocentrism. The war has launched a transformation of cultural stratagems, during which certain types of older narratives typical of Ukrainian culture of the past decades and even centuries have been returning and becoming increasingly more important thanks to them re-actualizing the aesthetics that opposes those paradigms that tolerate a technocratic way of being marked by a commodified cognition, which also plays a significant role in nowadays' Russian pan-imperial ideology. The decolonial metamorphoses of the art epistemes of the Ukrainian visual arts during the war may testify to essential changes in solving the crisis state of artistic and cultural theories and practices. The experience of Ukrainian artists proves that in stressful conditions, the nation has been able to consolidate its efforts and self-organize around the main imperatives of transcendental aesthetics, where the priority of artistic, creative ecstasy in the fulfillment of life-affirming meanings helps to defend the state sovereignty. This makes it possible to conclude that a new humanistic vector of the future civilizational development of culture might be being born: the one in which contemporary narratives of progress-based postmodernism lose their power, as well as the militaristically-chauvinist authoritarianism that is being aggressively planted in the Russian Federation.

Keywords: Aesthetics of Resistance, National Sovereignty, Russian-Ukrainian War, Ukrainian Fine Art, Art Epistemes

1. Introduction

Four centuries of resistance of Ukrainian art to violent "Rusification" is a strong argument for the relevance of the truth expressed by T. Adorno about music, as an imperative for the presence of national specificity in art, which turned into a political ideology in the 19th century, because it focused on the priority of national features, representing a certain nation [1]. Today, this truth contradicts the globalization trends of post-culture, known as global public art in particular. Since the 1990s, Russia's pan-imperial ideology has tolerated pan-imperial Eurocentrism, welcoming contemporary art, promoting "post-ethnic" universality with art epistemes, while destroying all national separateness that did not correspond to the chauvinistic ideals of the "Russian world". The world that has always brought

death and discord, an example of which can be the current events in the occupied territories of Ukraine, where racism, dealing with the nation physically, encroaches on its history and memory, burning Ukrainian books, churches, schools, universities and museums.

The exhibition "Fortress. The Artistic Walls of Kyiv" is on display at the Museum of Ukrainian Diaspora in the capital of Ukraine, Kyiv, August through October 2022. It consists of works by artists who were in Kyiv during the entire period of the hot phase of the battle for the capital [2], and, among them, the director of the "Kyiv National Art Gallery" Yuri Vakulenko, who exhibited the painting "Unburned" (Figure 1) created during the February and March bombings of the city by Russian artillery and missiles in the basement of the Museum. The image of the Mother of God compositionally repeats the well-known icon, "The Mother of God of Vyshgorod", probably painted by a famous iconographer

Alipius Pecherskyi in the 12th century. This miraculous image was stolen by Prince Andrii Bogolyubsky from the Monastery of Our Lady in Vyshgorod after the severe defeat and destruction of the city, which is in close proximity to the capital, and since then the icon has been kept on the lands belonging to different Russian state formations where, since 1930, it has been part of the exposition of the Tretyakov Gallery (Moscow, the Russian Federation). According to a legend, the icon remained undamaged, surviving several fires, repelling enemies' attacks on the city of Moscow, etc. One might, thus, see this re-introduction of the image of the Vyshgorod Mother of God, which belongs to the iconographic type of "Tenderness", carried out by the brush of the professional restorer and painter Yu. Vakulenko, who once worked in the workshops of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, and now heads the Museum, as something that is certainly connected with Timothy Snyder's statement in the book "The Road to Unfreedom": "If we want to better understand good and evil, we should reanimate history" [11].

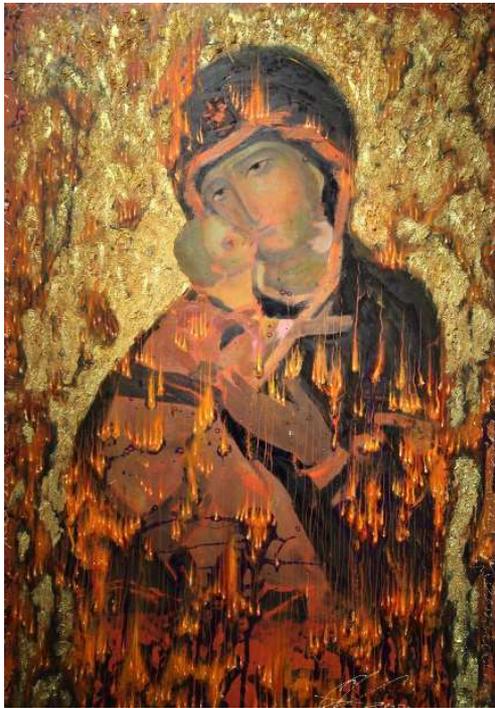


Figure 1. Yu. Vakulenko. *Neopalima*. 2022.

Believing that it is in Ukraine, which until the 24th of February had been perceived by Europe mainly through the prism of the views of a neocolonial paradigm, where the paths of the future history of Europe are now being decided, Timothy Snyder specifies in the June report "Postcolonial Ukraine: The Meaning of Resistance" at the Yale Center for British Art: Ukrainians are ahead of time, having an amazing ability in the post-Soviet era to "switch from language to language, from culture to culture", and are something "to which the rest of the world simply has not yet reached". The war showed how a nation is capable of self-organization instantly, "... Ukrainians and their resistance gave us the opportunity not only to look differently at Ukraine, but also

at the world in which we live", and, "While Ukrainians are being discovered for themselves in the West, Ukrainians are discovering themselves in a new way, but what is at the center of these discoveries is their identity. Ukrainians know exactly who they are, and the right to be themselves is what they are fighting for" [4].

The cultural and civilizational importance of Ukrainian resistance to the onslaught of the aggressor country is also indisputable from the point of view of Francis Fukuyama, because the economic and cultural consequences of this war, which are now felt all over the world, are already affecting the future of the civilized, democratic world. The Ukrainian historian Jaroslav Hrycak takes this position, further adding that "a free and strong Ukraine gives chances for a stable Europe... It is important, however, that Ukrainians fulfill their mission. Because nothing adds strength like the awareness of one's predestination" [7]. And this applies not only to the political will to de-colonial transformation of the country, it also applies to the transformation of art-epistemes, since the national idea again — after the 1990s, when the state's independence was declared — inspiredly resonated in its full aesthetic force. Once again, we can cite Adorno's point of view — which is still relevant today — according to which no socio-political turn of artistry is meaningful without its relevant aesthetic objectification.

2. Transformation of Art Episteme During the Hot Phase of the War

Ukraine, which is resisting heroically to the army of the Russian Federation, is paying an unimaginably high price for the right to be a sovereign democratic state. The predictions of Eugene Stormer and Paul Crutzen regarding the Great Anthropocene Extinction, which the scientific community refused to take seriously around the verge of the XX and the XXI centuries, have a chance to come true in Ukraine, which, according to Bruno Latour, was at the epicenter of a global collapse, where the existential fate of the life on our planet is being decided. Etienne Balibar, analyzing the situation in Ukraine in the summer of 2022 in London, was trying to convince the world's intellectual elite to support Ukrainians in their struggle for democracy, because the world is changing existentially, and humanity depends on what the world will become and whether it will exist.

The war has mobilized the creative elite of Ukraine to overcome the 30-year crisis of Western humanitarian knowledge, the crisis of art epistemology in particular, which was much talked about in the early 2000s by leading Western analysts, including H. Foster, B. Buchlo, M. Newman, J. Elkins. Yet, all the theoretical considerations haven't produced any clear practical effect so far and, because of that, the globalization of transnational capital continues to influence the world's cultural and artistic existence in such a way that they move dangerously close to technocratic development, which risks to end up in a hysteresis, to use a term introduced into social science by I. Wallerstein.

As this war has proved, a nation that has nuclear weapons and a large amount of military equipment is not automatically culturally developed; on the contrary, it easily succumbs to the biopolitical manipulations of authoritarian power and spiritually degrades, because, as Timothy Snyder analyzes, when the system cannot become stronger, it weakens others. By spreading reified postmodern art, which, in fact, reflects the very same postmodern-reified consciousness that is so typical of postmodernism, this nation allows itself to be turned into cannon fodder and supports the genocide of another nation, namely, Ukrainian, by doing so also destroying the world's international security architecture.

Back in the 1980s, Wolfgang Iser stated that deconstruction had become part of the chromosomal set of postmodern thinking [14], which did not prevent visual practitioners from adapting marketing strategies, legitimizing deskillings and camouflaging it with a socio-activist twist. So, in 2007 in Dubai, the first Global Art Forum recognized that the term “global art” is the same as “contemporary art”, and the marketing aesthetics of globalized art became total, while undergoing reduction and becoming similar to impersonally-indifferent and phatically-meaningless network communication.

Reflecting on, and reacting to the decline of professional and general culture in the era of post-truth and post-culture, the intellectual elite of the EU releases the 2017 Paris Declaration “A Europe we can believe in” [13], where it calls on the world, educators, scientists, artists, officials to avoid wars and civilizational collapse that are inevitable risks for “false Europe”, which imposes reduced commodified values on nations. The aesthetic — from the experience and judgment of which the post-culture refused — was considered by Hegel, one of the pinnacles of European philosophy, to be the highest act of the mind's, and not the practical reason's activity.

The war has made it so that the process of self-identification of the national art episteme is deprived of any pan-imperial influences from the outside, because the essential archetypes of cultural formation practices are being re-introduced into Ukrainian culture. These latter are addressed by amateurs, as well as artists with academic training, even those who, prior to the active phase of the war, had preferred contemporary visual practices (A. Naboka, Figure 9; A. Logov, who after the August turning point in the war again returned to visual objects of socially-engaged contemporary art: the installation “Hell” made of fragments of enemy weapons).

Those artists who have survived the invasion or occupation, avoid claims to quasi-original concepts and performative gestures of “aleatory materialism”, such as the relational philosophy of Nicolas Bourriaud, because the opportunistic market mainstream seems too artificial. The main motivation of their aesthetics of resistance is, thus, to defend Ukraine's independence and the right of an authentic Ukrainian culture to exist. The latter, by the very fact of its existence, supports, inspires and records the country's

indomitable struggle for its independence as a democratic society, while at the same time, from a certain point of view, being the result of this struggle and the amazing fact that Ukraine has withstood and continues to resist the overwhelmingly superior forces of the invading country.

This is the message that is, for example, conveyed by the graphic artist Yurik Stepanyan, who is currently working in Kherson, occupied by Russian armed forces and presenting the characteristic style of the Armenian episteme (Figure 10); or the street mural by Oleksandr Brittsev, a resident of Kharkiv, who has evacuated to Kropyvnytskyi, where in the summer of 2022 he created, on the wall of a multi-storey apartment building, a 27-meter-high painting depicting a figure of a woman wearing a wreath of sunflowers with the slogan: “Ukraine is Freedom!”. The words obviously refer to a famous statue by Frédéric A. Bartholdi and serve as a confirmation of the historical and cultural affiliation of Ukraine to the European family of nations. Another example in the same category is yet another patriotic mural in Kyiv — “Heroes without weapons” by Vitaliy Gidevan and Elena Noina (Figure 2), dedicated to the rescuers of the State Emergency Service, who, at the cost of their own lives, save civilians from burning houses bombed by the enemy.



Figure 2. V. Gidevan, O. Noina. Heroes without weapons. Kyiv, mural. 2022.

3. Finding Alternatives to Contemporary Art: Re-actualization of Certain Aesthetic Layers and Experiences

At the same time, it is time to put an end to the post-Soviet remnants of the feeling of inferiority that the imperial pan-ideology of the USSR instilled in the process of chauvinistic Russification of all its republics, and to change the attitude towards Ukraine by the West, stopping the uncritical and latent self-colonization by another imperial idea, that of Eurocentrism as “the dark side of the Enlightenment privatization of time and space” (Walter D. Mignolo [9]), when all nations during four centuries have adapted to the level of the Western episteme of knowledge and thinking, so that

today contemporary art, despite the obvious reduction of meanings associated with it and deskilling that accompanies it conquers the world only as a result and tool of successful benchmarking of transnational capital.

However, regardless of all the illusions of logic, orderliness, and inevitability inherent in this process, it is worth remembering that the very idea of progress, like Arthur Eddington's entropy arrow of technocratic time, guarantees an irreversible increase in entropy over time, according to the second law of thermodynamics. An excellent literary reflection on this matter can be considered the short story born in what would become the very center of multinational capitalism, or late capitalism — with these two terms, frequently used by Fredrick Jameson, considered to be synonymous — "Entropy" by Thomas Pynchon, published in the USA in 1960.

Therefore, it is impossible for artists not to draw conclusions during the war and not to change internally: it is not possible to work in a commodified, objective manner as before, because the world has become different. However, it still happens that artists habitually continue to make empty benchmarking abstractions, having evacuated to safe European countries where they opportunistically work on the theme of the war (Y. Mysko "Explosion", V. Tatarsky "When the guns are silent").

A naive belief in linear progress does not correspond to the truth of a complex and changing socio-political and cultural situation, which can lead to the re-actualization of certain aesthetic layers and experiences. In the end, it seems appropriate to mention here that M. Heidegger compared freedom of expression with the manifestation of the essence of a person, because "its proper fulfillment occurs due to freedom", "it embraces what is necessary, and imposes on itself the chains of the highest vocation" [5]. The philosopher spoke about the danger of misunderstanding a lexical expression, when "language builds a space in which all existence is at risk, a space in which one can get lost", threatening its own disappearance.

The contemporary paradigm uses the dangerous logic of artistic expression, forgetting that, according to Friedrich Hölderlin, "the new is always not for mortals, it belongs to the gods". But the socio-cultural turn of the contemporary art of the 2000s legitimizes forgetting/aphasia, and merges with life in all its brutality of a commodified consumer society. Under these circumstances, even the concept of instrumentalized consciousness cannot serve as a guarantee against delusion and being the carrier, or object, of this very consciousness. It is not by chance that F. Hölderlin noted at the end of 1780: "the most dangerous good is speech, so that by creating, destroying, dying and, returning to the ever-living teacher and mother, a person testifies who he or she is; (...) and learned from her [speech] what is most divine in her — her all-supporting love" [5].

Indeed, in stressful conditions of the war in Ukraine, the art lexicon awakens and opens itself up to ancient traditions, in particular "seraphism", which may be defined as the openness of the heart and soul to absolute truths along with

the readiness to defend the just freedom of the people's rule. Thus, the artists turned to sacred iconography, and to the forgotten types of image (Figure 7), and to the traditions of the folk "vytynanka", which is currently being presented to Europe by Daria Aloshkina (Figure 8).

A vivid example is provided by the modern works of Ukrainian artists who not only make "autonomous art" (P. Bürger), exhibiting it at charity auctions and exhibitions, and then directing funds to support the Armed Forces, but also "camouflage" the military functionality of such things as, for example, anti-tank "hedgehogs" in the center of the capital, into real art objects. Varvara Logvyn, for instance — a master of the all-Ukraine famous tradition of "Petrykiv painting", paints hedgehogs on Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kyiv (Figure 3), because the transformation of the city into a fortress did not coincide with her aesthetic tastes, and the desire to be useful during the war prompted her to create original creative artwork comparable to what artists did at the very beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, when they were painting cartridges, helmets, other things and ammunition of the military.

Returning to the capital after three months of evacuation, the artist records: "Remains of checkpoints, protective structures and thousands of anti-tank hedgehogs that spread through the city. They look creepy to me. So there was a call to make them "friendly" for Kyiv residents, without spoiling the functionality. <...> Painting anti-tank "hedgehogs", I combine the horror of war, which this protective construction represents, with the greatness of traditional Ukrainian culture. Ukrainians have something to defend. We have an incredible culture, deep values. Unfortunately, we are being forced to protect them... This viburnum hedgehog is my gift to Kyiv for the Independence Day and my deep gratitude to the defenders for the opportunity to work in the capital. They say that this hedgehog lifts the mood, strengthens the fighting spirit and confidence in victory" [8].

The image of the viburnum, which is a symbol of Ukraine and, as such, is common in national songs, imagery, and literature, and is one of the leading lexical elements of folk art, has become very popular today not only in Ukraine but also worldwide since the anthem of Ukrainian Sich Riflemen "Oi u luzi chervona calyna" ("Oh, the Red Viburnum in the Meadow") has become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance.

Another example of how art has affected and influenced the destinies of those defending Ukraine — this time not artist but soldiers in real trenches and at the front lines — could be Valery Puzyk from Odessa, who before the war was engaged in literature and film scripts. He took up painting already in the ranks of the Armed Forces, demonstrating a solid professional level (Figure 4). He used this form of maintaining internal psychological balance even during his participation in the campaign in the Eastern Ukraine in 2014–15, creating post-impressionist landscapes, battle paintings, secession panels as symbolic stained glass windows along the lines of traditional glass painting [10].

Unfortunately, many artists have already died at war while performing their civil duty and defending their native

country. Ukraine remembers them all, as well as many other artists who are now continuing the struggle for a free Ukraine both as soldiers and creating artwork as parts of the Artistic Front of the rear. A series of works about war in which we can witness all the circles of the hell of learning to survive in dangerous conditions (Figure 5) was made by Angela Kushchuk from Kyiv. The entire history of the Russian-Ukrainian war, as it has been experienced by Ukrainians, recorded by the media, testified by soldiers, reported by the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, can be traced by looking at these works: here is Mariupol, bleeding but resisting; here is an abstract allegory of the sound of an air alarm that cuts the space of the night in halves; and here residents of Irpin are evacuating with their pets across the destroyed bridge; the victims of the “Massacre in Bucha” are presented delicately, without excessive naturalization, because a lapidary stain on a white sheet creates an extremely powerful effect, and memory brings to the surface all the terrible naturalistic nuances of media images.

The artist says: “Pictures are the artist’s weapon. Everyone fights to the best they can, and I defend Ukraine with art. It struck me that I had to draw it. It was unplanned and unconscious... It is especially difficult to feel pain and yet to keep painting — you are living it again. When you paint a war, the hardest thing is that you experience this pain again and again. It’s like you die and are born again” (“Keeping beloved close during evacuation”, “Fleeing Irpin. Close our Sky!”) [3]. It is symptomatic that Angela and a number of other artists, such as Harnik Khachatryan, melting their own pain into an artistic message to the whole world, put the feelings of their heart into the created images on behalf of the entire nation, and even visualize the map of Ukraine, which can be perceived in different linguistic keys: both as a whole living organism pierced with and torn apart by rockets of enemy invasion (H. Khachatryan. Figure 6) and like bloody waves of wailing in Angela’s “Stope the War in Ukraine” (Figure 5(b)).

Therefore, we can agree with the historian J. Hrytsak’s opinion that despite the fact that throughout recent history and up to the present day, Ukrainians were subjected to repressive genocides and pressure of political assimilation, “Ukrainians managed to turn into a modern nation in exceptionally unfavorable circumstances” and preserve one’s own identity, which was formed during the statehood of Kyivan Rus. Moreover, modern Ukrainians do not shy away from “critical review of national heritage and recognition of national sins” or mistakes, and this is “a sign of great moral strength”, thanks to which an independent nation is approaching the future of an independent statehood accompanied by the appropriate culture formation practices [7].

It seems that the mainly uncritical attitude towards the experience of contemporary art, which Ukrainians had been trying to assimilate for a long time as a symbol of belonging to the family of European democracies, but without criticizing the pan-imperial rudiments of Eurocentrism and the eschatological movement of the market vector of art business, needs to be reconsidered now. The variant of

democratic cultural development that might be offered — if the abovementioned reconsideration is indeed taking place — could take into account the evaluation criteria of transcendental aesthetics.

The technocratic world of consumer society has deprived the subjects of history not only of economic independence, turning artists into a humiliating precariat as, in fact, servants of global capital. It has deprived the contemporaries of individual critical independence as the spiritual basis of self-actualization of a person free from the benchmarking strategies of business public relations. According to how the Ukrainian translator and philologist Oleksandr Yudin explains the postulates of the Frankfurt school of social philosophy, the transformation of the spheres of human existence into a shop of reified accumulations eliminates the very owner of these spheres of existence since the subject deprived of a transcendent goal is annihilated in the self-valued practice of total instrumentalization as a phatic domination of endless accumulation of capital. And only independent creative imagination is a condition for truly free art in a democratic society that values the spiritual experience of culture, rethinking it from the standpoint of modernity as free as possible from all sorts of neo- or postcolonial narratives [15].



Figure 3. V. Logvin. Painting of anti-tank hedgehogs on the Maidan of Kyiv. 2022.



Figure 4. V. Puzyk. Painting of the ammunition cover. 2015.

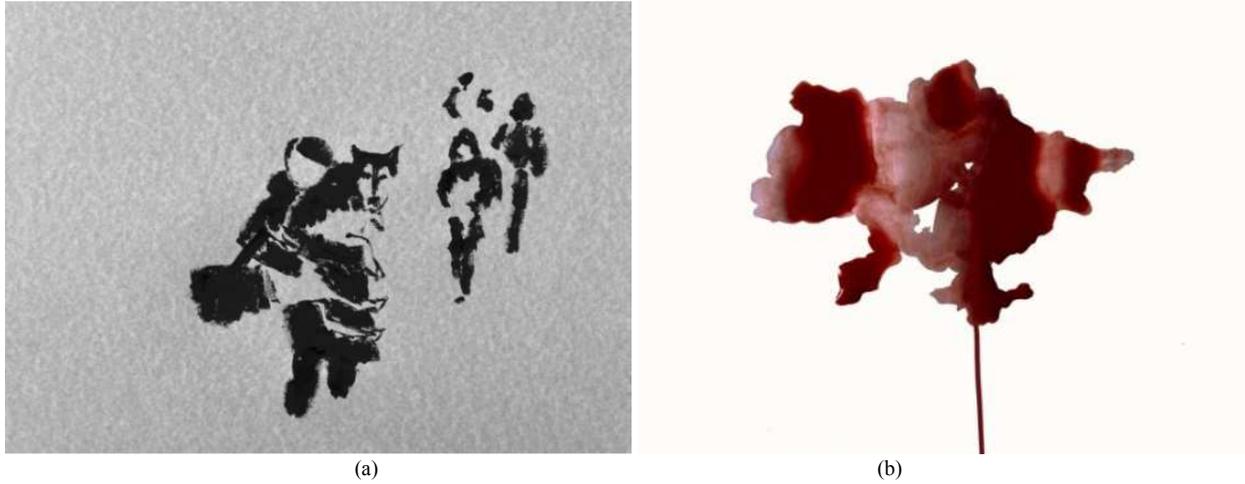


Figure 5. (a) A. Kushchuk. Keeping loved ones close during evacuation. (b) Stop the war in Ukraine. 2022.



Figure 6. G. Khachatryan. The organ of war. 2022.

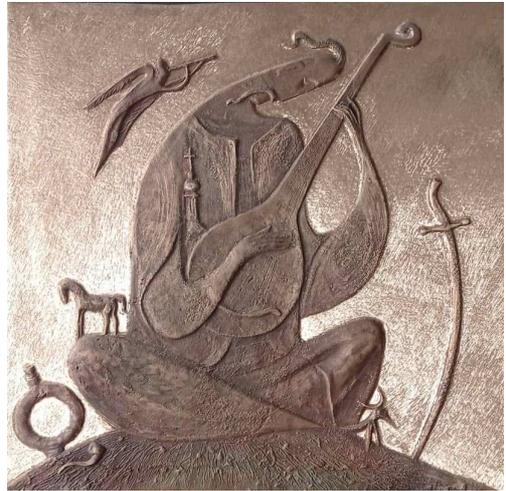


Figure 7. V. Gutyria. Mamai. 2022.

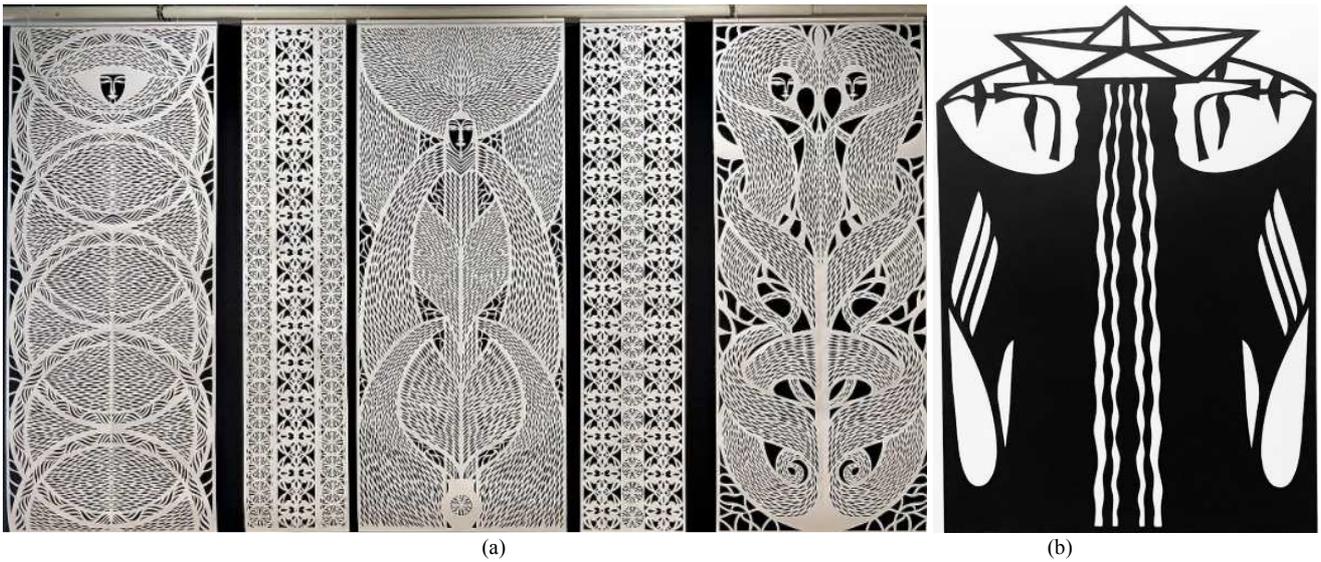


Figure 8. D. Aloskina. (a) Big Vytynanka. Exhibition in Warsaw, (b) small vytynanka "Mariupil". 2022.



Figure 9. A. Naboka. *AzovStal*. 2022.



Figure 10. Yu. Stepanyan. *Untitled*. 2022.

4. Conclusions

It is a well-known fact that at the end of World War II, Theodor Adorno, rejecting the very idea of art being possible after the horrors of Auschwitz and the Holocaust, believed

that at the moment when savage reality brutally breaks into life, creative thought should stop. Today, humanity is going through yet another catastrophic moment, and yet, the barbaric onslaught of the brutal reality caused Ukraine's artists to start and lead their own — mediated through artistic expression — struggle for sovereignty, human values, and democratic future of their country.

For contemporary Ukrainian art, the time of war has become an occasion for the development of its vision of the national idea as a defining episteme, the process of approval of which began around the time of Ukraine gaining its independence in the 1990s, but was then suspended by the uncritical adaptation of the postmodern cultural-industrial paradigm, which was perceived a marker of belonging to the European family of developed democracies, while obviously ignoring the colonial-rudimentary patterns of Eurocentrism. The current situation requires an essential awareness of self-identification art-epistememes, a re-interpretation of spiritual narratives of transcendental aesthetics of resistance as a manifestation of stress-resistance of culturally-competitive Ukraine, whose culture and art will enrich the European union of nations with a renewed exegesis of the postulates of ecstatic creativity, which are related to the Ukrainian metaphysical tradition of cordocentrism and seraphism [6]. So today, Ukrainians should, leaving all the inherited patterns of colonial psychology in the past, learn to take a critical attitude and, at the same time, trust themselves, their cultural traditions, and their language, including the vocabulary of artistic expression that has been developed throughout the history of the formation of the nation in the European community of democracies.

And in this quest, as a Ukrainian poet once noted:

“And there is no need for tears or despair,
And there is no need for fear and whining —
Only he lives who does not live for himself,
Who chooses life for others”.

(Vasyl Symonenko, *Maybe, yet again cannons will roar...*, 1955 [12]).

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