East/West
Journal of Ukrainian Studies

Art Resistance against Russia's "Non-Invasion" of Ukraine

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Volume 9, Number 1, 2022

Ukrainian Culture and the War in the Donbas

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088674ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus585

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies University of Alberta

ISSN

2292-7956 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Kozak, N. (2022). Art Resistance against Russia's "Non-Invasion" of Ukraine. *East/West*, *9*(1), 67–104. https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus585

Article abstract

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I offer three reasons to support this claim. First, these art projects superimposed images of the invasion over the physical sites where the "non-invasion" simulation dwelt and, in this way, not only made the war visible but also produced "a glitch in the matrix" effect—a conflict within the simulation visual regime that was inconsistent with its concealment function. Second, they "hailed" (in Louis Althusser's terms) actants of the simulation as subjects of Putin's regime, provoking suppressive reactions that proved Russia's participation in the war—which the simulation, thus, failed to downplay. And third, with carefully orchestrated strategies of online outreach to the public, these art projects attached themselves to the media dimension of the simulation, making the simulation's media proliferation work against itself.

Art Resistance against Russia's "Non-Invasion" of Ukraine[1]

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Abstract: When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, the Russian media ran what I propose to call a simulation of "non-invasion"—a spectacle aimed to distance Russia from the war. This essay explores activist art resistance against this simulation. Specifically, I discuss three art projects that were staged during the first, most violent year of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict: Mariia (Maria) Kulikovs'ka's performance at "Manifesta 10" in St. Petersburg, Serhii Zakharov's guerrilla installations on the streets of occupied Donetsk, and Izolyatsia's #onvacation occupation of the Russian pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale. These art projects, I argue, not only attacked the simulation from the outside as independent entities, but, by penetrating the simulation on site and online, they disrupted it from within.

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[1] This essay has taken its shape through a series of lectures and presentations I gave at several venues, including the 104th CAA Annual Conference in Washington, D.C. (2016), the Ukrainian Museum in New York (2016), Columbia University (2017), the Institute of Ukrainian Modern Art in Chicago (2020), and the conference "Five Years of War in the Donbas: Cultural Responses and Reverberations" organized by the Ukrainian Studies Program at the Harriman Institute, Columbia University (2019). For my initial presentations at the CAA and UM in 2016 I received a travel grant from the Shevchenko Scientific Society (Orest & Maria Hladky Fund for Art and Architecture). I am indebted to Halyna Kohut, Mark Andryczyk, Svitlana (Lana) Krys, Ksenia Maryniak, and three anonymous reviewers for *EWJUS*, who were the first readers of this essay and whose comments and suggestions were extremely helpful to me. My thanks also to George and Anna Rudawsky, Renata Holod, Vasyl Makhno, Myron Stachiw, Roman Kushnir, Rebecca Brown, Jennifer Griffiths, and Valérie Rousseau for helping and supporting my research project in multiple ways. Finally, I would like to thank my interviewees, whose courage I admire.

Volume IX, No. 1 (2022) DOI: https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus585

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Keywords: activist art, art resistance, simulation, "non-invasion," media war, Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

> "The day there is a real war, you will not even be able to tell the difference" (Baudrillard 58)

Introduction

In the early months of 1991, Jean Baudrillard published three short essays on the then-unfolding Gulf War—the American-led international response to Iraq's annexation of Kuwait. In these essays, Baudrillard provocatively claimed that this war will not take place, is not taking place, and has not taken place. The media, he argued, succeeded in convincing the public that "Desert Storm" in Kuwait was a "real total war," while in actuality it was merely a police operation against disproportionately weaker Iraqi forces. According to Baudrillard, the media achieved such a mass deception by producing what he arbitrarily called an "illusion of war," a "virtual war," or a "rotten simulation" of war (30, 35, 49, 59, 62, 84).[2] Like an opaque screen, this simulation concealed the real events, producing a "consensus by flat encephalogram" and tricking the public to "swallow the deception and remain fascinated" (Baudrillard 68).

Although the manipulation of representations of war, which Baudrillard described in his definition of simulation, had deep roots in the military propaganda of previous decades, the unprecedented surge in the development of media technologies that occurred at the end of the twentieth century became a game-changing factor. The use and abuse of these technologies prompted many other thinkers, including Nicholas Mirzoeff and W. J. T. Mitchell, to further voice concerns as to how a shooting war can expand from the battlefields onto media screens, how the military-visual complex increases its power, and how images are put into its service as deadly weapons, inhibiting the public's critical thinking.[3]

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[2] Baudrillard's 1981 book *Simulacra and Simulation* (Eng. trans. 1983) prompted McKenzie Wark to suggest that Baudrillard "had already written about the Gulf War before it even started" (217).

[3] In his book *Watching Babylon*, Mirzoeff discusses the use of images as "weapons in the media war that accompanied and had justified a shooting war" (68). Mirzoeff compares these "weaponized images" or "weapon-images" to *The Ring* (2002) horror film's deadly videotape being capable of annihilating its viewers after watching it. Yet

When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, Baudrillard's prophecy—quoted in the epigraph of this essay—seemed to come true. While in late February Russian soldiers were facilitating the annexation of Crimea, and while in April the Russian proxy rebellion was taking over cities in the Donbas, few people, even those trapped in the middle of the violence, could tell that the real war had started.[4] Along with its military operations on the ground, Russia launched a disinformation media campaign, blatantly denying its involvement in the war and leaving it "up to the victims of extermination camps to prove that extermination," to borrow a phrase from Jean-François Lyotard (9).

The Russian military-visual complex dissimulated the invasion—or, in other words, staged what I propose to call a simulation of "non-invasion," a spectacle in which Russia's invasion of Ukraine was *not* taking place. With regard to this proposed notion, I need to emphasize two things. First, although I consider the 2014 simulation of "non-invasion" to be a form of war by media, it was not an exclusively media phenomenon. To support its virtuality in actual existence, it relied on "real life" events and sites—which, as we will see, included art shows and the streets of occupied cities. Second, I am not positing that the "non-invasion" simulation concealed Russia's involvement in the war completely and for everyone. Even the most current media technologies of fake news and deep fakes are not yet capable of such totality. Yet the simulation did effectively produce havoc and disorientation, undermining oppositional voices and providing a pretext for the justification of non-involvement attitudes both inside Russia and around the world.

In this essay, I aim to explore how activist art resisted Russia's simulation of "non-invasion" in Ukraine. My hope is that this analysis will lead to a better understanding of art's agency against war and thus will contribute to overcoming skepticism about art's relevance to politics and provide activist art practitioners with intellectual resources to further struggle against the "fascinated swallowing" of deception that Baudrillard wrote about, both locally and globally.

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while this videotape attacks viewers only once, weapon-images attack their audience continuously with "sheer relentless persistence." Weapon-images achieve control over the audience through banality of themselves, when the public has no "time to pause and discuss any one [of them] in particular" (Mirzoeff 74). W. J. T. Mitchell, in several of his essays responding to the 9/11 attacks, pondered on the terrorizing effect wielded by the images. He applied the term "war of images" to *both* the terrorist and the anti-terrorist operations—not just to deny their reality as a shooting war but for the sake of "a realistic view of terrorism as a form of psychological warfare," which uses images, "especially images of destruction, to traumatize the collective nervous system via mass media" (Mitchell, "Cloning Terror").

[4] On Russia's invasion of Ukraine in a broad historical perspective, see Kuzio.

Specifically, I shall discuss three art projects that were staged during the first, most violent year of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict: Mariia (Maria) Kulikovs'ka's performance at "Manifesta 10" in St. Petersburg, Serhii Zakharov's guerrilla installations on the streets of occupied Donetsk, and Izolyatsia's #onvacation intervention at the 56th Venice Biennale.[5] Although there was no co-ordinated "plot masterminded by a hidden think tank" (ironically speaking) behind these projects, they have multiple points of intersection and therefore we can treat them as facets of a common art resistance movement.[6] The participating artists collaborated with each other, and they also shared a traumatic experience that the war had imprinted on their lives in different ways, fuelling their will to fight back in circumstances where, for many others, art seemed useless and futile.[7]

There have been several attempts to answer the question of how art can resist a media war. Consider, for instance, some of the responses to a questionnaire that was organized by *October* journal in 2007 concerning the alleged lack of intellectual and artistic opposition to the then-ongoing American military involvement in Iraq. For example, Christopher Bedford suggested that art should undermine the false "veracity" of the media-proliferated images that motivate support for war and should contest these images through "parallel critique," using "an information-rich, anti-spectacular documentary model" (20–24). Similarly, for Mark Godfrey art can resist by making visible to the public "what governments and news corporations prefer to render unseen," including such themes as places of war, links between past and present wars, and the death of soldiers sent to war (67). David Joselit, in turn, suggested that since the "military-entertainment complex" has opened a "mediated home front" in which

[5] These art projects were covered in the press, and the one by Zakharov was even mentioned in a few academic studies. Yet they were accessed merely as a form of antiwar protest, while their relation to the simulation of "non-invasion" was largely unaddressed. I cite some of these publications in the main body of the essay.

[6] I adopted the notion of "art resistance" from Lena Jonson, who defines it as "a kind of intellectual resistance expressed in artistic approaches that question the predominant official consensus" (Introduction 14).

[7] Skepticism about the potentiality of the arts against war may come even from artists who have participated in an antiwar struggle. Consider, for instance, Ad Reinhardt's dismissal of antiwar art he expressed in a 1967 radio interview, only a year after he had contributed an artwork to "The Peace Tower" in Los Angeles, one of the most important American antiwar art projects during the Vietnam crisis: "I think an artist should participate in any protests against war as a human being. There's no way they can participate as an artist without being almost fraudulent or self-mocking about what they are doing. There are no good images or good ideas that one can make. There are no effective paintings or objects that one can make against war" (qtd. in Frascina 81).

citizens are merely spectators in the Hollywood cinema, artists should "market" their "alternative narratives" to the mass audience (86–89). Finally, Krzysztof Wodiczko underscored that art needs to disclose media-produced blind spots and misrepresentations of war, providing the public with the "imagery that reports, testifies, explores, and uncovers the war" (173–74).

While acknowledging these and other insights, I see, however, two problems with the ongoing discussion. Reading through the extant literature, one may notice that (1) it primarily, if not exclusively, deals with the American context;[8] and (2) the authors, speaking broadly, understand art's clash with the media in terms of an external opposition that operates in an alternative or "parallel" universe, outside the media sphere as such. In this essay, I am not only expanding the conversation to the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, but based on this unattended context, I propose a novel approach to the problem of art's relation to a media war by considering the discussed activist art projects in their direct entanglement with the Russian simulation of "non-invasion" of Ukraine. These art projects, I argue, not only attacked the simulation from the outside as independent entities, but, by penetrating the simulation on site and online, they disrupted it from within.[9]

I offer three reasons to support this claim. First, these art projects superimposed images of the invasion over the physical sites where the "non-invasion" simulation dwelt. In this way, they not only made the war visible but also produced a "glitch in the matrix" effect, a contradiction within the simulation's visual regime that was inconsistent with its concealing function. Second, they "hailed" (in Louis Althusser's terms) actants of the simulation as subjects of Putin's regime, provoking suppressive reactions on their behalf that proved Russia's participation in the war, which the simulation thereupon failed to downplay.[10] And third, with carefully orchestrated

[8] It is notable in this regard that the editors of the above-mentioned *October* questionnaire only invited the opinions of art historians, artists, and curators who were "living and working in the United States or the United Kingdom" (Buchloh and Churner 4). From the forty-two responses that they received, only two pointed to the discussion's striking geopolitical limitation. Namely, Okwui Enwezor wrote that "the fact that there are no references to movements in other parts of the world included in the question's frame of reference, especially since it references events such as Vietnam, is a huge problem" (43); and the 16BEAVER group posed a counter-question: "It is good to talk about the war on Iraq, but why focus only on Iraq?" (149).

[9] The notion of disruption which I use here to characterize the modality of art's relation to the "non-invasion" simulation comes from Chantal Mouffe's definition of activist art's objective as the occupation of public space with the intent "to disrupt the smooth image that corporate capitalism is trying to spread, bringing to the fore its repressive character."

[10] Althusser uses the notion of *hailing* to describe a process through which ideology

strategies of online outreach to the public, these art projects attached themselves to the media dimension of the simulation, making the simulation's media proliferation work against itself.

The main body of this essay is organized into three sections, each investigating an individual art project. Each of these sections itself has an identical structure that includes four divisions. I begin with examining the antecedents in which the artist(s) decided to resist. Then, I discuss the particular site of the simulation and why we may think of it as such. Further, I conduct a walk-through of the activist art project, detailing the moves of the engaged actors. And finally, I offer a detailed analysis on how that art project succeeded in disrupting the simulation.

In writing this essay, I did not pretend to place my readers or myself in the position of a neutral observer. I doubt that avoiding politics is possible in any way besides repressing awareness of it. This is especially true in the domain of art history—which, as Donald Preziosi has diagnosed, "has never been the name of a science . . . [but is] a form of cultural practice necessarily interwoven with other forms of social and cultural practices, inexorably linked to social and ideological needs and desires" (52). Writing and reading about activist art, just like producing and viewing this art, are political acts. It is always about taking or choosing a side and not staying on the sidelines. On the other hand, no political expediency should prevail over critical investigation because only honest inquiry can do justice to the endeavours of the art projects that I discuss.[11]

"transforms individuals into subjects." As an example of hailing, Althusser refers to a commonplace situation when police addressing an individual say, "Hey, you there!" By reacting to the hail, individuals acknowledge themselves as subjects because they "ha[ve] recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to . . . [them], and that 'it was really . . . [them] who . . . [were] hailed' (and not someone else)" (Althusser 174).

[11] Opposing the approaches that insist on academic neutrality, I subscribe to Keith Moxey's argument that "all cultural practice is shaped by political considerations," and thus, that conflicts in art historical writing are inevitable. He specifically criticizes higher education for making "every effort to differentiate itself from the rough and tumble of political strife," pointing out that the infamous "ivory tower" metaphor became "as much an ideal as . . . a caricature" exactly because "by excluding politics from its purview . . . the academy continues to serve as a bastion of the status quo," with its "racial, social, and gender hierarchies" (Moxey xii).

Death in the Museum

On the morning of 26 June 2014, a group of artists gathered in front of the Office of the President of Ukraine in Kyiv. They wanted to raise public awareness of the wretched situation at art institutions in the Russia-occupied territories.[12] It was raining; the grey building towered over this tiny rally with a grim silence; painted signs lay on the ground like captured flags. If one was looking for a perfect allegory of art's futility against war, here it was. Yet two people in this group—Liubov Mykhailova and Maria Kulikovs'ka (also spelled as Kulikovska and Kulykivs'ka/Kulykivska)—were not going to accept defeat. Mykhailova, a founder of the Izolyatsia Foundation, had been working since 2010 to transform the abandoned Soviet-era insulation factory in Donetsk into a contemporary art space.[13] Kulikovs'ka, a Crimea-born visual artist, was a contributor to the Izolyatsia project: in 2012, she cast full-size sculptures of her naked body out of soap, with their rigid poses reminiscent of archaic Greek *korai*, and dispersed them around the factory's post-apocalyptic landscape, exposing them to weather and decay.[14] By 26 June 2014, Kulikovs'ka's sculptures and Izolyatsia's art space were destroyed. When Russia's proxy rebels entered the Izolyatsia premises, the staff was powerless. Just as the artists had once converted the factory into an art space, filling it with artworks, now the rebels have converted the art space into a prison, destroying all the artworks there. A territory intended for free artistic expression became a horrible reincarnation of the Gulag.[15] Mykhailova and her team relocated to Kyiv and continued their work in exile. Kulikovs'ka, instead, had become an exile without having moved away. She had been living in Kyiv for several years when Russian troops deployed on the Crimean Peninsula; that day, her home in the city of Kerch, where her family still lived, became out of her reach.[16]

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[12] For a video of the rally by Hromadske.TV, see Prysiazhnyi.

[13] On the Izolyatsia Foundation, see their website (*Izolyatsia*).

[14] Izolyatsia's curator describes the purpose of the project as follows: "Suffering from the sun, rain, and other atmospheric influences, the soap substance gets washed off from the iron sculpture framework, ultimately dissolving in nature the way human bodies do after death" (Chervonik).

[15] For the testimonies on the atrocities in the Izolyatsia prison, see Potekhin and Efimenko.

[16] Kulikovs'ka explained to me in the interview that she was afraid to visit her parents in Crimea because the Russian authorities could have arrested her on fabricated charges. A filmmaker, Oleh Sentsov, was arrested this way on 11 May 2014. Although his arrest triggered a global movement, #FreeSentsov, the filmmaker spent five years in a Russian prison and was released only as part of a prisoner exchange between Russia and Ukraine on 7 September 2019. Sentsov's story is told in the 2017 film *The*

Then, on 26 June, under that rain, Mykhailova and Kulikovs'ka decided to fight back.

Meanwhile in Russia, the Hermitage was preparing for a major global art world event—the opening of the tenth edition of "Manifesta," a prestigious biennial held every two years in different European cities.[17] Preparations for the show, however, were overshadowed by a scandal: 1,936 artists signed a petition demanding to suspend "Manifesta 10" until Russia withdrew its forces from Ukraine ("Suspend Manifesta"). Reacting to the petition, Manifesta's curator Kasper König dismissed the boycott and declared that participating artists will not "resort to cheap provocations" ("This Statement").

For the artists and the organizers of the show, the decision to participate or not presented a difficult dilemma. After 2012, when Vladimir Putin resumed charge of the Russian president's office, the state's cultural policy redirected the visual arts onto a conservative path.[18] In such conditions, holding the "Manifesta" in Russia—by the very fact of showing progressive contemporary art—might have served as an act of resistance to Putin's policies and, indirectly, as a protest against the invasion of Ukraine. For instance, Joanna Warsza, curator of public programming at "Manifesta 10," justified her involvement in the controversial show by pointing out that art could help Russian people to overcome "a certain unwillingness to take a political stand" (Riff 80). Warsza explained the tactics of resistance as "a detour through art," probably in reference to the Situationist method of detournement that involves hijacking a system's symbols and their subsequent subversion against the system they originally served.[19] In conclusion, however, Warsza acknowledged that such a justification may be naive and vulnerable to criticism. And indeed it was: instead of denouncing the Putin regime, "Manifesta" actively worked to facilitate its artwashing. By the very fact of its opening under the circumstances of the ongoing invasion, the show was instrumental in the denial of the invasion. In a sense, "Manifesta" became a space of that denial. It offered a striking dissonance between holding a progressive art show centred on freedom of expression, on the one hand, and reinforcing an authoritarian regime and its invasion of another country, on the other. In order to comprehensibly reconcile this

Trial: The State of Russia vs Oleg Sentsov, directed by Askold Kurov; for a film review, see Arel 932–34.

[17] As stated on the website: "Manifesta purposely strives to keep its distance from what are often seen as the dominant centres of artistic production, instead seeking fresh and fertile terrain for the mapping of a new cultural topography" (*Manifesta*).

[18] On Russian cultural policy since 2012, see Jonson, "The New Conservative Cultural Policy."

[19] On the use of the *detournement* in current protest art, see McKee.

contradiction, the public had to assume that Putin's Russia was not as bad as the activists and Western media portrayed it to be and that the invasion of Ukraine was not an invasion at all but rather a "non-invasion."

The show went off without incident until 1 July. On the morning of that day, Kulikovs'ka entered the courtyard of the Hermitage's General Staff Building.[20] Tall and blond, wearing a long coat, she sat down on a step midway up the grand stairway. Perhaps an attentive observer would have noticed that she was trembling, but in general there was nothing special about a woman sitting on the museum's stairway; people often did this. After a while, she took off her coat and, slowly sliding, lay down on the steps, covering her body from head to toe in a blue-and-yellow Ukrainian flag. She felt so stressed that her feet became numb, and she could not predict what might happen next.

Figure 1. Maria Kulikovs'ka, "254," 2014; photo by Dana Kosmina.

[20] I base my walk-through of the project and factual references on my Skype interview with the artist on 29 November 2015 (Kulikovs'ka). All translations are my own.

For a while, the artist became the proverbial "elephant in the room." The public seemed not to notice her. Eventually, a man approached Kulikovs'ka and started insulting her, suggesting that he will lie on top of her or even defecate on her. She did not respond. The man left, but then the museum's staff, security, and even the police showed up. They forced the artist to stand up, stripped her of the flag, and took her away to the entrance checkpoint. She walked calmly, following her flag, which a museum's staffer carried ahead of her. Kulikovs'ka recalls: "They threatened to undress me, cover me naked with the flag, and then throw me into the square and watch how the crowd will immediately destroy me." They also threatened to imprison her. That was a realistic option, given the fate of the punk group Pussy Riot, who served actual two-year sentences in penal colonies after they staged a mock prayer in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow in 2012.[21] Kulikovs'ka, however, evaded charges—after all, the Hermitage was a museum, not a church. The decision came via a call "from above," and the captors let the artist go. Kulikovs'ka assumes that she was released because the organizers wanted to avoid any further scandal around "Manifesta" and its associations with the Ukrainian crisis. This was a likely reason because neither the Hermitage nor "Manifesta" published an official reaction to the intervention. Yet Kulikovs'ka did not stay silent. The next day, she posted a brief statement on Facebook describing her position, while Dana Kosmina and another photographer (who prefers to remain unnamed) posted the photographs and videos that they took during the artist's performance. The Internet dissemination of these images triggered multiple comments, reportages, and interviews; by discussing Kulikovs'ka's performance, they drew attention to Russia's involvement in the Ukrainian events.[22]

[21] Dressed in bright outfits, they danced in front of the iconostasis, petitioning the Mother of God to "become feminist" and drive away the "evil Putin." This performance was debated from multiple perspectives. For more discussion of this performance, see Džalto 1–14, Stone-Davis 101–20.

[22] For instance, *Radio Svoboda*, the Russian branch of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (RFE/RL)—one of the first media organizations to publish a report on the incident—framed it as a "protest action against Russia's policy toward Ukraine" (Rezunkov).

Figures 2 and 3. Hermitage staff detain Maria Kulikovs'ka on 1 June 2014; courtesy of the photographer, who wishes to remain anonymous.

Kulikovs'ka attacked the simulation of "non-invasion" staged at the Hermitage with an antagonistic image visualizing the dreadful consequence of war—the dead body of a victim. For this, she utilized the activist art

strategy known as a *lie-in* or *die-in*. As one definition suggests, this is "a theatrical event where participants en masse pretend to be dead for a designated time, usually in carefully chosen locations to maximize effect or exposure" (Hanna et al. 224). Although the participants only pretend to be dead, when looking at photographs that capture them in their stillness one could not easily tell the difference between the death and its representation, at least at an emotional level. Such images evoke empathy, challenging observers to find out what is going on. The dark immediacy of the body on the ground, even in the setting of an art gallery, creates what Akram Zaatari calls a *mobilization image*—one that strives "to motivate viewers to act in accordance with a specific agenda" (Feldman and Zaatari 51). The roots of the die-in go back to the American antiwar movement in the late 1960s. During one of the best-known performances of that time, staged by the Guerrilla Art Action Group in the lobby of New York City's Museum of Modern Art on 10 November 1969, artists smeared with blood fell on the floor, representing dead victims of the Vietnam war (Mesch 79).[23] When on 1 June 2014 Kulikovs'ka lay her body on the grand stairway at the Hermitage, she was also representing a dead victim of war—yet, instead of blood she used the Ukrainian flag, clearly signalling that the die-in referred specifically to Ukraine. As the artist told me in our interview, on the stairs of the Hermitage she became aware that she was "living the death of all those people, whom no one will ever bring back" (Kulikovs'ka). She meant the activists who were killed during the Maidan Revolution, whose dead bodies had lain in the Independence Square in Kyiv covered with flags, and also the Ukrainian soldiers who returned home from the war in the Donbas in flag-draped coffins.[24]

Moreover, because of the long-standing patriarchal tradition that associates the images of young females with personifications, it was probably unavoidable to identify in Kulikovs'ka's performance a reference not only to unnamed victims of the war but also to her country overall. However, there was a difference: in contrast to the full-of-life female national personifications typical in the twentieth-century totalitarian propaganda, Kulikovs'ka represented Ukraine as dead. I recall here another example of such an unconventional and dark approach to national personification: a sculpture that the street artist Roti installed at Independence Square in Kyiv

[23] Some more examples of die-ins can be found at the *Global Nonviolent Action Database*.

[24] Putin's Russia indirectly acknowledged its responsibility for the shootings in the Maidan by insisting to include in the 29 December 2019 exchange list of POWs five members of Viktor Ianukovych's Berkut police squad, involved in the mass shooting of the Maidan protesters. For details and reactions in Ukrainian social media, see Sakovs'ka.

amid the Maidan Revolution on 7 January 2014.[25] Representing a woman emerging from water, this artwork, according to the artist's explanation, should have symbolized "New Ukraine," liberating itself from its dark past. Yet the horizontality of Roti's figure, which recalled depictions of deceased persons—as, for instance, in works such as John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1852)—invoked *post factum* a grimmer association with the bodies of protesters, whom police later killed on the streets. If Roti's sculpture was, as I have argued elsewhere, a "Freudian slip that revealed the artist's unconscious anticipation of the tragic outcome" of the Maidan Revolution, the image that Kulikovs'ka embodied in the Hermitage referred to the present and ongoing tragedy of war in Ukraine (Kozak 19).

This striking visuality was reflected in the suggestive numerical title that the artist gave to her performance: "254." Contrary to the abstractionists, who used numerical titles to avoid directing the viewer's perception toward a preprogrammed interpretation, Kulikovs'ka used the number with exactly the opposite aim: to make viewers think about her personal victimhood. "254" is her personal number in Ukraine's official displaced persons list, which she was assigned after Russia annexed Crimea.[26] The number as a title for the die-in performance creates a grim association with the tattooed numbers on the arms of Holocaust survivors and in other horrible situations when human life was reduced to statistics.[27] With this kind of title, Kulikovs'ka pointed to her own fate as a victim of the Russian invasion, a displaced person cut off from her home. Since she depicted a victim while being a victim herself, her victimhood converged with the victimhood she represented in her performance. The signifier converged with the signified, dissolving the division between art and life. When we look at the photograph of Kulikovs'ka under the flag while knowing that the artist herself suffered from the Russian invasion, we cease to be remote observers. We are turned into witnesses of a crime taking place in front of us. We are challenged to think and to act. Thus, the simulation of "non-invasion" loses its power over us.

The use of the die-in, combined with the artist's personal experience, created a powerful image by itself, but its disruptive effect on the simulation of "non-invasion" was reinforced even more through its being incorporated into the very site of the simulation. Not only did Kulikovs'ka portray a victim of the invasion while being a victim herself, she did it in the Hermitage—the prestigious venue of an exhibition that was intended to distract attention

[25] For images of the Roti installation, see Kozak 18, 19.

[26] As of 12 May 2020, the total number in that list has reached 1,446,651 persons ("Oblikovano").

[27] I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this striking analogy.

from the ongoing occupation of Ukraine. The conflict between two divergent modes of visuality—that of the performance and that of the simulation—thus became immediate and direct and, in that capacity, incompatible with the way the simulation operated.

Such a juxtaposing of two different realities recalls another antiwar activist strategy that can be called "bringing the war home," after the title of Martha Rosler's series of photomontages, in which she blended documentary images from war into photographs of American households found in commercial magazines.[28] On the other hand, one may note a striking contextual dissimilarity here. Kulikovs'ka did not bring war to her own home, she brought it to the home of the enemy after that enemy had brought the war to her home. In a sense, Kulikovs'ka performed as a victim's ghost, haunting her murderer from beyond the grave in his house, with a skeleton unexpectedly falling out of the closet in the middle of the banquet.

The reaction toward Kulikovs'ka on behalf of the Hermitage could not stop the disruption of the "non-invasion" simulation she initiated with her intervention. On the contrary, the suppression of the artist only contributed to that disruption. The artist's detention, threats of imprisonment, as well as the subsequent silencing of her performance—which Warsza describes as "censorship through indifference"—all this served to acknowledge that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was exactly what "Manifesta 10" was designed to help conceal (Riff 81). On the video capturing Kulikovs'ka's performance, a woman from the Hermitage staff is ordering the cameraman to stop filming; she says that there is nothing to film here because "this is not an artwork" but merely "a conflict situation."[29] This recalls Jacques Rancière's reference to the police suppression of political demonstrations by telling people to "move along" because "there's nothing to see here"—in this way asserting that "the space for circulation is nothing but space for circulation" while, in fact, it is a political space (37). Although suppressive by its intent, such an action in a semiosis of resistance arguably emerges as a disclosing alert of an oppressive regime.[30]

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[28] Rosler created the original series under the title *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* in 1967–72, reacting to the Vietnam War. In 2004 she continued her series in response to the war in Iraq (Mesch 88).

[29] The video of the performance was posted on Kulikovs'ka's YouTube channel (see "254. Protest in Manifesta 10").

[30] It is telling to compare the reaction to this performance at the Hermitage with the reaction to its later collective re-enactment in Paris. On 18 October 2014, Kulikovs'ka with a group of other artists (including Sofiia Akimova, Christine Bouvier, Oleksii Markin, Ornic'Art, Anna Des, Nataliia Tseliuba, and some local residents) staged a die-in with Ukrainian flags at the Boulevard de Charonne in order to protest the planned sale of two French Mistral class helicopter carriers to Russia ("254: Collective

When Kulikovs'ka was stripped of the Ukrainian flag and interrogated, the performance was not over, and it was not even over when she was released. It continued as a media event, and it was in the World Wide Web that its damage to the "non-invasion" simulation was most emphatic and lasting. The media images of Kulikovs'ka's performance—photographs, videos, artist's interviews, and journalists' reflections—transcended the public outreach limitations of the on-site event. While only a few visitors were present at the Hermitage stairway when Kulikovs'ka performed her die-in with the flag, the *post-factum* Internet audience became virtually unlimited. Although not a part of the official "Manifesta 10" program, Kulikovs'ka's performance became an antagonistic element embedded into its media image, constantly reassociating the art show with the ongoing Russian military incursion in Ukraine. It is no wonder that after the news of Kulikovs'ka's throwing the first stone at the opaque screen of the "non-invasion" simulation went viral, other acts of art resistance have followed.

One Artist Army

Before 2014, Serhii Zakharov worked as an interior designer, living a quiet apolitical life in the then-Ukrainian city of Donetsk. Even when the Maidan's fires were burning in Kyiv that winter, Zakharov watched those events only as a sympathetic observer.[31] But then the spring came to his city—the "Russian Spring." By May, Donetsk was taken under control by a Russian proxy rebellion, joined by foreign mercenary forces and local criminal thugs led by professional military instructors from Russia. The new authorities quickly organized their repressive apparatus and, accompanied by extortion of local businesses, unleashed terror on everyone who objected to the occupation. The rebels would arrest dissidents and random victims, take them to the basements of seized government buildings, and hold them captive there for months, beating, torturing, and even killing them. It was then that the rebels destroyed the Izolyatsia art space. Recalling these days,

Performance"). As the artist recalls in her interview, Parisians paid no attention to them but rather walked, and even jumped, over their bodies. Then a Russian woman came and began to insult them, complaining that she has to live in this "dirty France" because her "mother Russia is suffocating under the pressure of the evil West." And then came a policeman. When the artists explained their cause to him, he pledged his support and stayed to protect them. In Kulikovs'ka's words, this "was indeed unexpected [that] the French policeman, confronted with our, in fact, illegal performance on the street said to me 'I am completely on your side'" (Kulikovs'ka).

[31] Factual references to the artist and his project are based on my Skype interview with him on 20 December 2015 (Zakharov).

Zakharov told me in an interview that at some point he could not recognize his city anymore. In the artist's own words, "You walk through the streets and there is no one around, only cars riding at high speed with AK-47s sticking out of the windows . . . . And you are getting horrified for real" (Zakharov). Under the new circumstances, mere observation ceased to be an option, and Zakharov decided to resist.

During the invasion of the Donbas, just like during the invasion of Crimea, Russia denied its involvement in the conflict. By claiming that it was Ukraine's internal problem or even a civil war, Russian officials and media fabricated a *paracosm*—an alternative world with its own imaginary geography, fake events, and superheroes. This paracosm was given the name "Novorossiia" (New Russia). At first, on 12 May the proxy rebellion proclaimed two "people's republics" in the occupied part of the Donbas, with their capitals in the Ukrainian oblast capital cities of Donetsk and Luhansk. Then, ten days later the "insurgency's" leadership declared the unification of these "republics" into a confederate state with a new name. As it happens with nation-building enterprises, they excavated the nomenclature from the distant past. In the eighteenth century, the imperial Russian authorities invented the name "Novorossiia" for the newly occupied territories north of the Black Sea; by the twentieth century the name fell out of use, both officially and popularly. Now, in the twenty-first century "Novorossiia" arose once again to serve the simulation of "non-invasion" of Ukraine.

As paradoxical as the "non-invasion" itself, the Novorossiia myth combines apparently contradictory elements. According to Marlene Laruelle, these elements include "post-Soviet" Russian messianism, monarchist Orthodox conservatism, and European Fascism (55–56). Novorossiia's flag could well serve as the perfect visualization of that combination. Its red background is reminiscent of the red banner of the Soviet Communists, while its blue x-shaped St. Andrew's cross refers to Russia's imperial legacy and its general composition and colouring are reminiscent of the Confederate battle flag—a symbol of white supremacy in the West.

Despite its contradictions, the Novorossiia myth served to allow Russia to officially distance itself from the war in the Donbas and to present the situation as if it was not Russia that invaded Ukraine but Ukraine that invaded the "independent nation of Novorossiia." In July 2014, this carefully orchestrated spectacle clashed with Zakharov's grassroots art activism.

To start with, Zakharov tried to organize a group of pro-Ukrainian friends, but in the end only one person joined the cause, assuming the role of photographer.[32] Zakharov then came up with a collective identity for the

[32] As of November 2020, the photographer who worked with Zakharov was still

project, naming it "Murzilki"—a slang term for "naive foolish small guys who are being tricked by big bad guys." The artist ironically subverted these roles, attempting to trick those who got into power in Donetsk.

The plan was simple: Zakharov was going to install caricature images of Russian proxy rebels in the streets of the city and then disseminate photographs of these installations via the Internet. Since there was no time to paint directly in situ, the artist prefabricated the figures in his studio, cutting silhouettes out of cardboard and painting them in a colourful folk-style manner. He worked early in the morning, just once a week. Approaching a location, he usually stopped his car some distance from the spot and then carried the artwork, wrapped in a blanket, on foot; after the figure was installed, he would leave, then another member of the team photographed the result. In the evening of the same day, they would post the images of the installation on the project's website and share the links via social media (Zakharov).

After Zakharov began this activity, within a couple of weeks a Russian journalist wrote to him at the email address indicated on the website, requesting an interview and providing his cellphone number. Once Zakharov called that number, the cellphone was tracked; and on 6 August 2014, he was kidnapped by the rebels. During his captivity, they intermittently interrogated, beat, and even subjected Zakharov to mock executions. At some point, when the rebels lost interest in the artist, they released him, but then they arrested him again on the following day and the vicious cycle repeated itself. Zakharov was finally released only in October. He moved across the front line to Kyiv, leaving Donetsk and his former life behind—probably forever, as he now believes (Zakharov). Journalists dug into his story, winning Zakharov some renown, and the Izolyatsia Foundation invited him to collaborate on multiple projects in Ukraine and abroad, for which he resurrected his images from the initial installations.[33]

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living in occupied Donetsk; therefore, Zakharov could not disclose the name of this person.

[33] In collaboration with Izolyatsia, Zakharov reconstituted his rebel caricatures in a performance installation titled "Kartkovyi budynok Putina" ("Putin's House of Cards"). This time, instead of cutting out silhouettes he painted the portraits on six-foot-high double-faced playing cards, decorated with the appropriate index labels and suit patterns. During the Izolyatsia exhibitions, Zakharov assembled these cards into a three-storey pyramidal structure with the image of Putin-Joker in its base. In the culmination moment of the performance, the artist kicked the Joker's card out and the whole "house" fell apart, crashing to the ground (for a video recording of the performance, see Iarmolenko). With this dramatic burlesque, the artist linked the foundation of Novorossiia to the Kremlin, exposing Putin as the main trickster of the Donbas conflict. Travelling with Izolyatsia, Zakharov staged this performance not only in art galleries but also in the outdoor public spaces of cities close to the war

While Kulikovs'ka's approach at the Hermitage was to attack the simulation of "non-invasion" with an image of the war's victim, Zakharov's street art in Donetsk turned the Novorossiia myth into a joke. His "punchlines" were portraits of the Russian proxy rebels, depriving them of the heroic aura that the Russian media attempted to endow them with. It is telling that, according to Zakharov's testimony, his captors relayed to him that his pictures were interpreted as though he had spat on their icons. To them, the artist was an iconoclast attempting to bring their "heroes" down. Although *iconoclasm* would be a somewhat questionable term here, by reproducing portraits of Novorossiia's main actors in caricature versions the artist achieved a reprogramming of their reception—he made these "heroes" work against the cause that they originally served. Instead of reinforcing the Novorossiia myth, Zakharov's images subverted that myth's power. As with Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols,* Zakharov hit Novorossiia's idols with the hammer of critical visuality, making their "message" ridiculous in a way that their originators would never have intended.[34]

zone, encouraging the attending public there to confront their fears. In Kramatorsk, for instance, the local authorities recommended that the artist refrain from showing the performance in order not to provoke social tensions, but in response the artist organized a procession that paraded around the city, inviting people to join the show (Zakharov). Despite the fact that many turned away, Zakharov still gathered a crowd and destroyed the house of cards amid Kramatorsk's central square. Zakharov also translated his story of art resistance and captivity in occupied Donetsk into a graphic novel titled *Dira* (*The Hole*); for an analysis of this work, see Pidopryhora.

[34] W. J. T. Mitchell employs Nietzsche's metaphor of "sounding the idols" for the description of a "critical idolatry" approach that "does not dream of breaking the idol but of breaking its silence, making it speak and resonate, and transforming its hollowness into an echo chamber for human thought" (*What Do Pictures Want?* 26–27).

Figure 4. Serhii Zakharov, view of the image of Strelkov with inscription "Just Do It" next to the Novorossiia's flag on the building of the former Komsomolets Cinema, Donetsk, 2014; photograph from the *Myrzilka* website by an anonymous photographer.[35]

Consider Zakharov's representation of Igor' Girkin, better known by his pseudonym Strelkov. A colonel of the Russian special operations forces, Strelkov participated in the initial phase of the invasion of the Donbas and eventually took the position of "defence minister" in the so-called "Donetsk People's Republic" (Holovn'ov). Zakharov's bust painting shows him as a clumsy figure of a dull and sad middle-aged man with a mustache, who's attempting to shoot himself in the head with a Makarov pistol. There is a "Just do it" inscription next to Strelkov, encouraging him. Borrowed from the Nike brand slogan, this phrase refers ironically to the common saying "go shoot yourself," which is used as a reaction to an action with terrible consequences. Zakharov installed the Strelkov image onto the wall of a building, next to Novorossiia flags painted by rebels, thus disguising his

[35] Note that the website renders the word "Murzilka" (singular of "Murzilki") as "Myrzilka," using "y" instead of "u" in an attempt to imitate the Cyrillic script with Latin letters. The singular form for Murzilka alludes to the name of the Soviet popular illustrated journal for children published since 1924.

caricature as if it was an authentic element of the "non-invasion" simulation's landscape.

Figure 5. Serhii Zakharov, view of the images of Motorola and his bride outside of the Civil Marriages Registry Office, Donetsk, 2014; photograph from the *Myrzilka* website by an anonymous photographer.

In a similar manner, Zakharov portrayed another Novorossiia "hero"—Arsenii Pavlov, the leader of the "Sparta" proxy rebel battalion, known by the pseudonym Motorola. In one of his interviews, Motorola claimed that as a Russian citizen he came to the Donbas to protect Russian people (Chizhova and Lagunina). During this "noble" mission, he abandoned his family in Russia and married a 21-year-old local woman, Alena Kolenkina. This marriage served as an embodied symbol of unity between "the people of the Donbas" and the Russian mercenaries who came to "protect" them from "Ukrainian fascists." Zakharov used an "official" photo of the couple that circulated in the media in order to produce a Novorossiia version of Gomez and Morticia from *The Addams Family* cartoon series. The artist exaggerates the difference in stature between the bride and the groom, so that the bride looks twice as tall. He also enlarges the bandage on Motorola's wounded arm and supplements the image with a devil's tail and hooves, thus infusing the image with obscure comicality. Zakharov installed this comical wedding portrait next to the Civil Marriages Registry Office in Donetsk, where Motorola's wedding ceremony actually took place. In this way, his image re-enacts the actual event as a farce.

Along with these mocking caricatures, Zakharov also created images with horrifying references. One of the most striking examples is a figure of Death, wearing a hood decorated with the colours of Novorossiia's flag. It is holding a scroll with depictions of destroyed airplanes, helicopters, tanks, and killed soldiers. At the top, we see the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) that crashed over Ukraine on 17 July 2014, which took the lives of 15 crewmembers and 283 passengers, including 80 children.[36] The preliminary evidence, subsequently confirmed by an international investigation, pointed to Russian agents, who shot down the plane using a Buk missile system that had been brought to the Donbas from Russia. However, the Russian authorities and Putin personally denied this accusation, refusing to co-operate with the international investigation. Placing the image of Death with the airplane in the streets of occupied Donetsk, Zakharov linked the tragedy of MH17 with the Novorossiia myth.

The placement of Zakharov's images was crucial for their disruptive effectiveness. The artist used the streets of Donetsk, which were a key location for the staging of the simulation of the "non-invasion." This way, he managed to insert an alien disruptive element into the Novorossiia's illusion, masquerading as its organic component.

[36] On the Russian disinformation campaign regarding the downing of MH17, see Rietjens.

Figure 6. Serhii Zakharov, view of the image of Death holding a scroll with the downed aircrafts (including MH17), Donetsk, 2014; photograph from the *Myrzilka* website by an anonymous photographer.

As in Kulikovs'ka's case, Zakharov disrupted the simulation of "non-invasion" not only through iconographic means. The reaction of the mocked rebels played a major role, too, and Zakharov's captivity became a "glitch in the matrix" of the Novorossiia myth. Although the proxy rebels self-identify as freedom fighters, by persecuting and capturing Zakharov they turned the tables, revealing the authoritarian nature of their regime, which is intolerant of any freedom of expression.

Because Zakharov placed his installations in the streets, his works were categorized under the rubric of street art. Journalists even nicknamed him the "Banksy of Donetsk," referring to the anonymous street artist famous for his combination of dark humour and irony, with witty commentaries on

socio-political issues.[37] The focus on the street, however, distracts attention from the fact that the street was not the only location for the circulation of the images. After the rebels destroyed the street installations, the artist resurrected them in photographs, which he deployed into the virtual space of the Internet. It was the photographs on the website that achieved a major outreach to the public. Provoking discussions and interest in the press, the photos built awareness of Zakharov's art resistance.[38] Trapped inside the Novorossiia myth, Zakharov found a way to disrupt it by exposing its ironies and uncovering its horrors with his street/web art, which equally combined the street and web components and entangled them with the street and web components of the "non-invasion" simulation.

The Occupation "On Vacation"

In August 2014, the month when Russia's proxy rebels captured Zakharov in Donetsk, the situation at the front lines changed once again. On the eve of Ukraine's Independence Day, celebrated on 24 August, Russian regular army reinforcements invaded the Donbas and encircled a group of lightly armed Ukrainian units in the city of Ilovaisk. The encirclement resulted in major casualties—hundreds of Ukrainian soldiers killed, captured, and missing in action (Shramovych). Soon after, a peace plan was negotiated in the city of Minsk in Belarus, yet the fighting resumed already by the fall. A major hot spot occurred at the Donetsk airport, which Ukrainian airborne troops, known as the Cyborgs, managed to hold until January 2015. After the airport fell, the next round of negotiations took place in Minsk, but again the reached agreements were never implemented and the conflict continued as a series of endless skirmishes.[39]

These violent events served as a backdrop for the Ukrainian art world's preparations for an upcoming major international art show: the 56th Venice Biennale. In the ongoing crisis, the Biennale might have been an important venue for Ukrainian cultural diplomacy as it strove to gain international support for its resistance to the Russian invasion. At first, the Ministry of Culture assigned the organization of the national pavilion for the Biennale to

[37] Scholars have categorized Zakharov's work in the same way. For instance, N. M. Khoma refers to it as "political street art" (406), while Yuliya Ilchuk employs the parallel with Banksy: "If Banksy creates anti-establishment art that targets capitalist consumerist society, Zakharov challenges the separatist identity of his native Donetsk" (8).

[38] The website is still active (see *Myrzilka*).

[39] On the Minsk 1 agreement, see "Protocol on the Results." On the Minsk 2 agreement, see "Kompleks mer."

the Izolyatsia Foundation, which by that time had relocated from occupied Donetsk to Kyiv and was actively rebuilding its activity in the industrial zone on the right bank of the Dnipro River. Due to Izolyatsia's Donetsk origins and its exile, the choice aligned well with the political implications of the show, but the Ukrainian cultural authorities then revised their decision and handed the organization of the pavilion to the PinchukArtCentre (PAC), a privately owned institution that selected for the pavilion artists from its own network.[40]

After learning about Izolyatsia's dismissal from the pavilion organization, Clemens Poole, an American artist and curator, who had collaborated with Izolyatsia before, came up with the idea to stage an illegal guerrilla art intervention in Venice.[41] Poole shared his thoughts with Izolyatsia's founder Mykhailova and she agreed to back the project. During the next months, in total secrecy from Ukraine's official cultural authorities and below the radar of the press, Izolyatsia planned their conspiracy. They recruited almost every Ukrainian activist artist (including Kulikovs'ka) who had a valid Schengen visa to travel to Italy. They also sent out a call among their professional networks throughout Europe, asking artists to join their ranks. Legally and not, they obtained multiple press credentials from different media agencies, and even from the Biennale construction team, to gain access to the Biennale before the opening of the show on press day. Finally, in early May 2015, Izolyatsia smuggled about 1,500 military uniforms across the European Union border and deployed its "art regiments" in Venice, ready for "invasion"; their target was the Russian Pavilion at Giardini.

In 2015, for the first time in the history of Russian participation in the Biennale, the cultural authorities had entrusted their national pavilion to a woman. Moreover, that choice was progressive not only in terms of gender equality but in artistic terms, too. The pavilion's artist Irina Nakhova had participated in the Moscow Conceptualism movement of the 1970s–80s, then the leading nonconformist art movement that opposed the Soviet state system's control over art.[42] The pavilion's curator Margarita Tupitsyn was noteworthy as well: born into a family of Russian nonconformist artists, she had immigrated to the U.S., where she studied art history and worked as a curator and art critic.[43]

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[40] For the story of the Ukrainian pavilion organization, see Tsviakh, Barshynova. For a description of the pavilion itself, see "Hope!"

[41] Factual references to Izolyatsia's intervention at the 56th Venice Biennale are based on my Skype interview with the artist on 20 November 2015 (Poole).

[42] See the catalogue of the artist's 2019 exhibition at the Zimmerli Art Museum of Rutgers University: Sharp and Tulovsky.

[43] Her latest book on Moscow's "vanguard" art was published by Yale University

Nakhova titled her project "Zelenyi pavil'on" ("The Green Pavilion") and actually repainted the building's exterior a dark grayish green ("The Russian Pavilion"). She transformed four rooms inside the building into desolate environments, featuring an enormous sculptural head of a pilot in the first, a black glass square in the second, abstract red-green patterns filling the walls in the third, and a digital projection of architectural details in the fourth. According to Tupitsyn's explanation, the pavilion should have embodied "the sensuality intrinsic to non-institutional culture in the USSR," with its "threatened existence and aspirations to become part of a more universal discursive practice" (Masterkova-Tupitsyna).

Although Nakhova and Tupitsyn avoided commenting directly on the political implications of "The Green Pavilion," the link with the legacy of "non-institutional culture in the USSR" indicates that the project did have such implications. The Moscow Conceptualists had developed an intricate cryptic vocabulary that demonstrated their discursive oppositionality to the Soviet regime.[44] One of the key terms in this vocabulary was *mertsatel'nost'* (shimmering). Notably, Daniil Leiderman recently invoked this term to access contemporary protest art in Putin's Russia. Based on the Conceptualist poet Dmitrii Prigov's writing, Leiderman defines the shimmering as a "strategy of oscillation between mutually exclusive ideological and/or metaphysical discourses, from profound investment in the artwork to utter detachment, critical distance and merciless analysis, and then back again" (165). In other words, shimmering implies neither an artist's full identification with nor their complete distancing from "the texts, the gestures, and the behaviors," to use the original Conceptualists' phrasing (Monastyrskii 59). In the Soviet totalitarian state, which did not allow for art's detachment from ideology, aspirations for ideological neutrality functioned as a form of political dissent. If Leiderman is right about shimmering as a modality of contemporary protest art in Russia, then Nakhova's pavilion could arguably have been an attempt to "depart" from Putin's conservative and imperialist politics.

On the other hand, the very possibility of such a departure seems highly dubious—and not only due to the fact that the pavilion was supervised by the FSB, Russia's principal state security agency.[45] Rather, the major obstacle was Putin's ideology itself. Contrary to the 1970s–80s, when the dichotomy between Soviet autocracy and dissidents was clear, Putin's regime of the 2010s tended to enclose and instrumentalize every cultural gesture. This resulted in a hybrid ideological composition that combined and melted

Press (Tupitsyn, *Moscow*).

[44] On Moscow Conceptualism, see Tupitsyn, "About Early Soviet Conceptualism."

[45] The pavilion's commissioner was Stella Kesaeva, the wife of Russian billionaire Igor' Kesaev, whose connections to the FSB were exposed in WikiLeaks (Ahmadov).

down even mutually exclusive entities—like, for instance, the cult of the last Russian Emperor, Nikolai II, and the cult of Joseph Stalin.[46] Similarly, in the field of art, the non-conformist movement of the 1970s–80s might have worked for Russian propaganda—along with, for instance, Soviet Socialist Realism or post-Byzantine Orthodox icons. What is important to understand, however, is that different pieces of this eclectic ideology had a different importance and function. While conservative elements provided fundamental bricks for internally reinforcing the empire, the liberal elements served as a decorum for the façade, providing the external Western observer with a delusively progressive image. That is why whatever Nakhova's intentions were—and indeed they could have even been radically antagonistic to Putin's ideology—"The Green Pavilion," by its very link to Russia's official presence at the Biennale, functioned as Putin's ideological tool and was used not for the liberal transformation of Russian society but for tricking the Western public into believing that such a transformation was taking place.

In this light, handing off the Russian pavilion to a female artist of a nonconformist background, as well as to a female curator who was an American art historian, was in fact not a sign of Russia's liberalization but a delusional camouflage for Putin's oppressive and aggressive regime. In this manner, as with the "Manifesta 10" held in St. Petersburg one year earlier, "The Green Pavilion" at the 56th Venice Biennale participated in the simulation of "non-invasion" of Ukraine. That simulation, however, did not run fully according to plan.

On 6 May 2015, a group of artists wearing military camouflage jackets and bags entered the premises of "The Green Pavilion." They did not have any marks of distinction except the inscription "#onvacation" on their backs. The intruders behaved politely and quietly. Wandering around the exhibition rooms and taking selfies, they were distributing free camouflage jackets to other visitors. Visually they merged with the pavilion's environments, which, to use one critic's phrase, served as "the perfect background for the #onvacation campaign"—especially the third room, where chaotic green and red splashes on the walls resonated with the patterns on their jackets and bags (Cascone).

It took a while before the staff of the Russian pavilion identified the "occupation" as such and called the Biennale security. The activist artists left, but in the following days they kept coming back, engaging more and more visitors into the "camouflage occupation" all around the Giardini. Moreover, the group created a website advertising a competition to win a free tour to

[46] On melting down ideologically divergent fragments of the past into monolith of Russia's present, see Kalinin.

Crimea.[47] The instructions were simple: find an official representative of the #onvacation team, request a camouflage set, occupy whatever place you want, and post a selfie on a social media account with a corresponding hashtag. As the project got traction, the Biennale security left the activist artists alone and the Russian reaction scaled down to a dismissive tolerance. The tactical occupations continued until the end of May, leaving a memorable media trace. The press was favourable to the project and raised it to the top Biennale news story. The collection of links to major press publications archived on the project's website numbers eighty-four entries, including such top publications as *The New York Times*, *Artforum*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Guardian*. In early June, after the last activist left the show, Izolyatsia issued a press release, taking responsibility for the occupation, and announced the winner of the trip to Crimea to commemorate the sad anniversary of their exile from Donetsk.[48]

Figures 7 and 8. The *#onvacation* performance inside the Russian pavilion at the Venice Biennale on 6 May 2015. Images are from the #onvacation website.

[47] The web site is still active; see *#onvacation.*

[48] For the press release details, see "IZOLYATSIA pleads."

Figure 9. Instructions on joining #onvacation, 2015. Screenshot from the project website.

In their attempt to disrupt the "non-invasion" simulation, the #onvacation project combined both Kulikovs'ka's and Zakharov's approaches. Kulikovs'ka's performance in the Hermitage and #onvacation share a "bringing war (to the enemy's) home" strategy. Wearing camouflage jackets and occupying the Russian pavilion, the artists represented soldiers and thereby were metaphorically bringing war there. The activists internalized the conflict to the pavilion's inner space. If the pavilion by default aimed to convert its visitors into subjects of the "non-invasion" simulation, the distribution of camouflage jackets worked as an antidote to this subjectification. The choice to take a camouflage jacket and wear it led to a physical, even affective contact with this symbol of war. This way, the war was approximating to a viewer's body and self.[49]

The artists combined this serious facet of the project with a sense of spectacular irony reminiscent of the spirit of Zakharov's installations in Donetsk. When the #onvacation occupation of the Russian pavilion began, no one was able to tell the difference because along with the wearing of camouflage jackets, the artists were practising a "discursive camouflage"—they baldly denied their "occupation." In this very aspect the #onvacation project was substantially different from the usual "occupy" activist strategy, assuming that a protesting group would clearly state its identity and demands. In contrast, #onvacation participants kept their names secret. No institution claimed responsibility, and the activists did not voice any demands. Instead of informing visitors to the Russian pavilion about the ongoing invasion of Ukraine or passionately condemning Russian aggression, the #onvacation participants staged their cause as if they did not have any. Moreover, they visited not only the Russian pavilion but also pavilions of other countries and distributed the camouflage jackets among the public, without imposing any obligations.

The need to investigate what is going on worked as bait for the public, art critics, and journalists. They promptly drew a parallel between the #onvacation performance and Russia's "non-invasion" of Ukraine. The anonymity of the camouflaged activists denying the occupation of the Russian pavilion clearly corresponded to the anonymity of the Russian soldiers taking control over Ukraine's Crimea with no distinguishing marks on their uniforms. The *#onvacation* title itself was highly suggestive as well: it referred to the official Russian statements declaring that their soldiers

[49] I draw here on Kirsty Robertson's interpretation of textile artworks such as Zain Mustafa's *Clothesline* (2003) and Dominique Blain's *Missa* (1992 and 2004). These, she argues, "infold" the audience into distant conflicts "like a cloth that lies close to the body" (Robertson 29). There is, however, probably a paradox in any artwork that draws the viewer close to the war because, as Peter Eleey has pointed out, an artwork in a gallery space highlights its own and the viewer's distance from the war (17).

who were captured or exposed in the Donbas were not on duty but "on vacation."[50] Basically, #onvacation reverse-engineered the "non-invasion" simulation employed in Crimea and the Donbas, and using irony as their weapon, redeployed it at the Russian pavilion, which served as the site of its origin. Arguably, the camouflage used in the project referred to the Russian pavilion's camouflaging for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, causing a conflict in its visual message.

There was another conflict underlying the #onvacation occupation itself, which also worked for the disruption of the "non-invasion" simulation. Although the roles of the soldiers of invasion were played by artists, many of them were, in fact, the invasion's victims. Izolyatsia's members and other participants of the project—including Kulikovs'ka, who joined #onvacation as an independent artist—had been directly affected by the Russian invasion. Forced to leave their homes in Crimea and in the Donbas, they came to the Russian pavilion at the Biennale as silent witnesses to their own sufferings. Consider the case of the Crimean-born Izolyatsia member Oleksandra (Alexandra) Kovaleva, who told me in an interview that participation in the project was a part of her personal struggle, as a human being, to reject the enforced citizenship of a country of which she did not want to become a citizen.[51] As Kovaleva explained, after the annexation of Crimea, new Russian authorities automatically registered every person with Crimean residency as Russian citizens.[52] In order to change this newly enforced status, a person would have had to visit a special office and, in a written statement, reject their citizenship in person. For Kovaleva, who was living in Kyiv, this demand was an absurd and impossible task. Thus, from the standpoint of the Russian authorities she became a citizen of Russia while never applying for Russian citizenship and without obtaining any documents. She found herself in a situation when a sovereign power not only occupied her home but also attempted to define her identity. From this awareness proliferated the modality of her actions. Kovaleva describes her participation in the #onvacation as meditative: most of the time, she was sitting outside the Russian pavilion and drawing a map of Crimea in the sand. Her silent presence was a genuine testimony to the personal tragedy unfolding behind the "non-invasion" simulation's façade.

If the anonymity of #onvacation was fighting a manipulative technology

[50] Poole told me that it was the absurdity of the notion of soldiers fighting while on vacation that triggered the idea of the #onvacation project. On the detention of Russian soldiers in Ukraine, whom Russian authorities claimed to be on vacation, see McCoy.

[51] I base this account on my Skype interview with the artist on 30 November 2015 (Kovaleva).

[52] On the Russian policy of "forced passportization" in Crimea, see Wrighton.

with a similar manipulative technology, the participation of genuine refugees (even though not explicitly articulated) built a trust that invited viewers into the participation, transforming the disruption of the Russian simulation of "non-invasion" into a shared experience, open to everyone. And in response to that openness, the project gained widespread international support. As I have already mentioned, the very idea of #onvacation came from Poole, an American artist, and then artists from France, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and other countries responded to Izolyatsia's call to join the Ukrainian artists in the occupation (Poole). Moreover, international visitors to the Biennale, coming from multiple countries, who took camouflage jackets during almost a month-long performance, transformed it into a truly global act of resistance.

In contrast to Kulikovs'ka and Zakharov, the #onvacation activists hardly faced any serious repression, yet the reaction that they provoked on behalf of the Russian pavilion still propelled the internal disruption of the "non-invasion" simulation. The representatives of the pavilion were asked questions, and as they attempted to dismiss the importance of the activist art intervention, they implicitly confirmed that the activists had occupied the right place. For instance, an unnamed pavilion spokesperson, in conversation with *The Guardian*, described the #onvacation project as "low-end" and as unoriginal, but this description, given the overall tenor of the article, sounded ridiculous (Kirchgaessner and Walker). If the #onvacation project effectively shifted the discussions over "The Green Pavilion" from its artistic merits into its relationship to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the responses of the pavilion's representative pushed it there even deeper. As a result, some critics have uncovered militaristic implications in Nakhova's seemingly apolitical environments.[53]

Ultimately, the extensive outreach to the press and the Internet presence of the #onvacation project resulted in its entanglement with the media image of the Russian pavilion. Since artists invaded the pavilion on an early date, when Giardini was closed for the public but opened for the press, they manage to receive outstanding coverage. The website and the hashtag campaign in social media, instigated by the contest for the trip to Crimea,

[53] For instance, Carolyn Stewart links the head of the pilot in the first room to the militaristic icon of the fighter jet exploited by Putin in his self-promotion. Reading this artwork through the lens of #onvacation occupation, Stewart concludes: "Indeed, Putin might be the true performance artist of the Russian Pavilion. His regime signed off on a grandiose symbol of militant ambition, pushing the envelope further than any other national pavilion, yet with enough plausible deniability to make Biennale visitors question their own interpretation. It isn't 'really' a symbol of Russian military adventurism, just like Russian soldiers weren't 'really' invading Ukraine."

also contributed to the media proliferation of the project. Each media reference to Russian participation in the Biennale became potentiality contaminated with #onvacation's irony, pointing exactly to what the simulation of "non-invasion" aimed to deny. *Vice* was probably the most straightforward in acknowledging the efforts of the activist artists, going with a title: "Art project '#onvacation' is a middle finger to Russia's occupation of Ukraine" (Deitz).

Outro: Digital Afterlife

I interviewed Kulikovs'ka, Zakharov, Poole, and Kovaleva in the late months of 2015. By that time, because of the intensity of the war events, their projects seemed to be in the distant past—distant, yet never forgotten. Although the on-site projects vanished, their mediated traces continued to live in the virtual space of the Internet. This digital afterlife of the art projects invokes further implications on the ongoing discussion about the ontological relationship between an on-site performances and their media reproductions.[54] Although scholars tend to solve the problem through prioritizing one entity over another, the cases I have examined in this essay suggest that what is perceived as a media image of an on-site performance, under certain conditions (like when the art project clashes with the "non-invasion" simulation), may be a much more complex entity than a notion of reproduction implies. To explain what I mean, let us consider an analogy. In the fourth film of Ridley Scott's *Alien* saga, the protagonist Ellen Ripley (after sacrificing herself in order to kill the alien queen that had been gestating in her body) is being resurrected through a cloning procedure. Ripley's clone, however, is not identical with her "original" organism. Since Ripley's tissues were contaminated with the alien genome, her clone emerges as a hybrid creature with a mixed human-alien DNA. Similarly, when after their on-site death the art resistance projects are "resurrected" in the form of pixel agglomerations transmitted via binary code into viewers' electronics devices, these new visual entities become no longer just reproductions of the original on-site art works. Rather, they emerge as hybrid creations that combine the properties of the artworks and the simulation of "non-invasion" which these artworks, as I have argued, strive to disrupt from within.

[54] In a recent essay about the 1990s Moscow Actionism movement, Michelle Maydanchik has questioned a "rigid ontological distinction" between performance and its image. Maydanchik argued that Moscow Actionists with their intentional exploitation of the post-Soviet sensationalist media culture had "inverted the hierarchy between the initial act and its photographic record" but preserved the dependency of the latter upon the former (108).

Disrupting the simulation, the activist artworks become a part of it, but the simulation, in turn, in its disrupted and failing form, also becomes a part of the activist artworks' digital afterlife and in this manner complicates artworks' ontological status and questions the epistemological divide between art and media.

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