

Master's Thesis

‘Licking War Wounds’. The art of exile in the Donbass conflict.

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Abstract

The war in the Donbass region of Eastern Ukraine has transformed the Ukrainian art scene and catalyzed a lively civil discourse in order to deconstruct the proletarian myth of the Donbass. Simultaneously, the dismantling of democratic structures in the Occupied Territories led to an artistic exodus as artists advocating liberal democracy were no longer able to continue working independently. Through the analysis of exiled artwork created in the wake of the war, this thesis examines the ways through which the cultural and political dispossession is expressed in art. Particularly, I strive to understand the paradoxical situation created within the experience of exile. While art is deprived from its essential function to reconfigure territory and embody the concept of dissensus in the place it narrates, Donbass artists find a receptive audience predominantly abroad. De facto, visibility around the conflict is being 'exported' and serves to satisfy the needs of an international crowd. Having disappeared from the local space of Donetsk, art becomes an instrument of healing and a cry for help outside the region. While this process is vital to heal individual wounds, the local itself remains in a state of dispossession.

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1. Introduction

Since December 2016, the Ukrainian artists Andrii Dostliv and Lia Dostliva have been licking a tank-shaped salt lamp. At the time of writing in June 2021, 235 weeks of licking have passed and what was once a tank has become a hardly visible small chunk of salt. The Dostlivs, originally from the Eastern Ukrainian city of Donetsk but now living in Poland, call this long-term performance ‘Licking War Wounds’.



Figure 1: Tank-shaped salt lamp. Photo: Instagram.

The couple had purchased the lamp in the city of Bakhmut in Eastern Ukraine famous for its salt mines, which in 2014 had been occupied by Russia-backed separatist fighters. Once an undeveloped backwater, Bakhmut nowadays is a border city full with people who have crossed the front line into Ukraine from the Occupied Territories or who are waiting to return from the west. Salt lamps were always common in the city’s souvenir industry, but one in the shape of a

tank has only appeared since the city was re-captured by the Ukrainian army. For the two artists, who themselves have become refugees of the war, their slow and painful process of licking over a period of years demonstrates the ‘not necessarily successful re-shaping of the object of trauma’, a traumatisation that yet has to be overcome by Ukrainians and a wound that yet has to be licked for an indefinite amount of time (Dostliiv 2016).



Figure 2: Week 235. Photo: Instagram.

Leaning on German artist Josef Beuys, for whom the wound was a recurring theme connected to personal, social, and political traumas, decay, and death (‘Show your wound’, 1974/75), this thesis addresses the sociology of art centering its focus around the politically contested Occupied Territories in the Donbass region of Eastern Ukraine. With his concept of social sculpture, Beuys contributed to an expansion of the modern perception of art: the artist is no longer expected to only produce aesthetic objects, but rather a change in society.

Bearing this in mind, my interest lies in examining artistic modes of expression in and about the Donbass, a place where a state of exception and intractable conflict have become part of everyday life – so to speak, a raw wound. Most, however not all of my analysis, will be focused around artists originally from Donetsk. While internationally recognized as part of Ukrainian territory, the city is under the de facto administration of the unrecognized Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), which claims it as its capital. Since the outbreak of war in 2014, numerous political opponents and artists have left Donetsk or were imprisoned and tortured by pro-Russian separatists (Zakharov 2015, Hamel 2021). Artists committed to the making visible of political power structures through autonomous artistic practise could not remain in Donetsk without putting their lives at risk. Nowadays, art and critical voices de facto disappeared from the public space of Donetsk. Artists who self-identify as Ukrainian resettled either abroad like the Dostlivi, left for Kiev or live within the Ukrainian-controlled territory of the Donbass.

The anthropologist Karen Till uses the organic metaphor of the “Wounded City” as a temporally and spatially dynamic extension to Lefèbvre’s concept of ‘Right to the City’, connecting urban processes and psychosocial relationships between places and people. She argues that if individuals and their neighbourhoods are wounded through displacement, material devastation, and root shock, so is the city (2012: 6). Using Till’s ‘Wounded Cities’ as an operational framework, I will reengage with Jacques Rancière’s distribution of the sensible as a lens to connect aesthetics and politics. Originally tailored to reveal mechanisms of power and control in liberal democracies, it equally serves to analyze the entanglement between artistic practice, spatial perception and the political consciousness in the Donbass before 2014 and the rest of Ukraine.

With the beginning of the war in 2014, displaced artists originally strived to bring art into a realm that was being dominated by politics. Deprived of this opportunity, nowadays they are only able to display this very attempt outside of the realm itself - either in Kiev, or in European countries. Paying special attention to the effects of occupation, hence territorial and political dispossession as conceptualized by Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou (2013), I will examine art as an instrument of impact addressing a place where opponents have been banned, but the condition of war is normalized and ongoing. Dispossession as a theoretical concept is crucial as it provides the historical and psychosocial baseline for the political turmoil in the Donbass: the cultural and political loss and trauma it generated.

This thesis is structured as follows: After an overview of historical developments and the intricacies of the conflict in the Donbass (chapter 2), I will introduce key theoretical concepts and my intended contribution to existing research (chapter 3). Following a brief explanation of my methodology (chapter 4), throughout the empirical analysis (chapter 5), I will feature artists and their manifold ways to express personal and collective wounds while referring to a place they are physically unable to access. Subsequently, I will reflect my findings in a discussion of the empirical chapter (6).

2. A brief history

The search for a collective identity has always marked the Donbass people's experience during Soviet and post-Soviet times. The right to spatially represent this search as well as the given reality through art can be considered a Right to the City and is intricately tied to a process of democratization (Till 2012: 11). In a place like the Donbass mentally tucked between Ukraine and

Russia where people's identity is a politically and emotionally charged legacy, this right, however, cannot be taken for granted.

This chapter will give an overview of the complex nexus of Soviet history, the violent armed conflict starting in 2014 as a rupture point and artistic function as a relation to the first two. This will provide a sound ground to understand the multiple, yet atemporal layers of wounding the Donbass has experienced throughout the past 100 years in order to locate artists and their work within this context.

2.1. 'Homo Sovieticus?'

The Donbass is a coal-mining district, lying on the border with Russia and over 700 km away from the capital city of Kiev. During the decades following the Russian Revolution 1917, the region rapidly transformed from predominantly rural Ukrainian to urban Ukrainian-Russian. It turned into a place where people from different parts of the world came and coexisted, "a territory where people lived without roots, without reference to a place" (Michailova in: artukraine, 17 June 2014). Having no collective local history neither myths and heroes, new narratives were written for Donbass people; a Soviet identity created and imposed by the government. Uniting its members, it embraced a wide range of linguistic and ethnic backgrounds (Ilchuk 2018: 702). In spite of competing ethnic identities that already existed under the surface already during Soviet times, the authorities were striving to create a balance between those.

However, except for some heavy industry the Donbass did not have much to offer to its inhabitants. Until this day, for the majority of young men there is only one job available in the Donbass: that

of the miner. Throughout many decades, artificially created mining towns of the coal basin, as well as industrial mega-structures, shaped the socio-spatial identity of the Donbass and made it a place where people “work for the mono-industry and accept mono-ideology“ (Michailova in: artukraine, 17 June 2014), i.e. the socialist politics of centralized power and socially conservative formulas prevalent in the Soviet Union. Industrial production was seen as a national struggle and the miners of the Donbass were at its front lines, strenuously contributing to provide the fuel in order for socialism to move forward.

When as a consequence of the political change after 1991 mining and other heavy industries began to wither, the lack of jobs and economic flight led to a profound crisis in the region (Ilchuk 2016:2). The situation in the Donbass, similar to many other post-Soviet mono-towns, became problematic: its dependence on the competitiveness of a single company or factory, inflexibility and reliance on Soviet-era economics and technologies led to mass unemployment.

Living in an impoverished coal-mining district whose standards of living deteriorated since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the people of the Donbass maintained their Russian identity and strong cultural and economic ties across the border. Attachment to independent Ukraine remained low. The poignant memory of life in the Soviet Union, however, remained and took shape in the form of nostalgia for the stability people had under the socialist system, a past that was tangible and secure (Lowenthal 1985: 4). The Ukrainian journalist Stanislav Asejev from Donetsk attested his compatriots with the emergence of the ‘Homo Sovieticus’: A collective mindset dreaming of a happy future in communism, depicting the Soviet Union past as a personal intimate experience that has nothing to do with historic memory (Assejev 2020: 83f.). Part of that rhetoric is the glorification of the Red Army for its ‘victory over fascism’ during the second World War.

'People here speak of that war as if it happened yesterday, often blending it with the harsh realities of coal mining of the current political turmoil in one great narrative of struggle and survival against all odds' (Chiala 2015, in: postphotography.eu)

This nostalgia for the past, claims Assejev, goes hand in hand with the political desire for a 'strong hand', a rejection of democratic values and the idea of 'the Other' in politics and society (ibid.:48). Already in the 1990s, the political scientist Paul Holman foresaw that 'ultimate challenge to Ukrainian sovereignty may be neither military, political or economic. Rather, it seems likely to be cultural, spiritual, and psychological' (Holman 1994: 95). In 2014, Holman's prediction on polarized identities proved true and culminated in an explosion of the deep societal rifts that had been growing over years.

2.2. The war

Is the conflict in Ukraine a civil war, an invasion, or a war of independence?

With the Euromaidan - also called 'Revolution of Dignity' by its proponents - in 2014 starting in Kiev, a wave of demonstrations and civil unrest hit the country. The polarization between progressive, pro-Ukrainian and conservative pro-Russian forces experienced a new peak. The unrest was followed by the Russian annexation of Crimea. In the Donbass region a majority of the population did not support the Euromaidan which experienced a surge in Ukrainian national pride. Inspired by the takeover of Crimea and fueled by the anti-Ukrainian propaganda of Russian TV, a wave of anti-Maidan demonstrations swept through the south-eastern regions of Ukraine, encouraging increased autonomy from Kiev and occupying government buildings. Within a few weeks, Ukrainian state authority in the Donbass region was effectively dismantled. The increasingly defeated Ukrainian government avoided any negotiations and declared an Anti Terrorist Operation (ATO) against the rebels. Meanwhile, Russian president Putin hinted that if

the situation deteriorates, he will be forced to intervene militarily to restore the peace. With the obvious support of Russia, the anti-Maidan separatists eventually took over Donetsk and announced a referendum on the future of the region. They declared the establishment of the 'People's Republic of Donetsk' alongside the close-by 'Luhansk People Republic' (LPR) calling themselves collectively 'Novorossiia' (lit: 'New Russia').

Many Donbass residents who until that point had preferred not to make identity choices were forced into ones. People with a strong Ukrainian identity, amongst whom many belonged to the middle class and were students, intellectuals or involved in cultural production, largely left at the start of the insurgency (Matveeva 2016:17) – others, escaping the war, moved to Russia. Altogether, the annexation of Crimea and military invasion into Eastern Ukraine created more than 13 000 deaths and 1.7 million internally displaced people (IDPs) who fled in order to escape military actions and prosecution for their political views. Those who stayed in the Donbass sometimes stayed for ideological reasons. But more frequently, they valued their lifestyle, or were either elderly or in a vulnerable economic position that did not allow them to leave. Despite grievances against the Ukrainian government, their support for the separatist's cause was initially 'lukewarm' (ibd.).

In 2018, the Ukrainian parliament officially labeled the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk as temporarily-occupied territories and declared that Ukraine's main policy goal regarding the occupied parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions should be to liberate them and renew the constitutional order there, without specifying how this goal should be achieved. It became a

standardized practice for both Ukrainian and partly also Western media and the political discourse to refer to the Donbass as temporarily occupied territory when reporting about the region¹.

While this definition may be in line with international law, it creates a gap when it comes to the majority of local inhabitants who do not regard themselves as occupied. Life in the Occupied Territories involves the reception, adoption and transmission of ideology; through pro-Russian propaganda on TV and in the newspapers, visual symbols like mandatory DNR-flags in the urban space and the silencing of alternative voices of autonomous artists, as I will illustrate in the following sub-chapter. Lefèbvre reminds us that policies have their systems of significations – ideologies – which enable social acts and events to be subordinate to their strategies and influenced by them (Lefebvre 1996: 150). When public discourse is erased, this eventually influences the world views of people living on that territory.

2.3. The seizure of Izolyatsia

Artists who stayed in Donetsk contribute with their cultural production to the iconization of so-called "Novorossian" myths, turning artistic practice into the propaganda of quasi-Soviet ideals. All state-funded cultural events in Donetsk have the goal to glorify the heroism of Soviet soldiers, industrial workers and the magnificence of Russian history (Assejev 2020: 106). As a result of this development, the situation of cultural production on the Occupied Territories deteriorated rapidly, depriving art of almost all of its functions. Public space as a place for free expression collapsed and means of self-expression fell under military censorship.

¹ ["Arjev explains why PACE resolution is important for Ukraine". www.ukrinform.net.](https://www.ukrinform.net)

Izolyatsia is a non-profit platform for cultural initiatives founded in 2010 in Donetsk on the site of a former insulation factory, a remnant from Soviet times. Between 2010 and 2014, Izolyatsia grew to be the leading art institution of the Donbass. Its main goal was to transform the mono-industrial profile of the region and of the factory building a diverse landscape of local creative enterprises embracing the industrial heritage which lies at the heart of the foundation.

The factory building dates back to the 1950s, when it became a symbol for new life in the USSR after the war and stabilized people's everyday lives (Michailova in: Ocula, 30 September 2016). But in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the 1990s the factory had to shut down and the whole area deteriorated due to the sociopolitical change. This process went hand in hand with a loss of the local identity.

In June 2014, Izolyatsia's space was seized by Russia-backed separatist militias. The act provoked a public outcry and an international wave of outrage. Izolyatsia's art spaces were looted and confiscated for materials and equipment and the art destroyed. Its people went into exile in Kiev where they continue their work (Izolyatsia in exile 2014), both locally as well as in close collaboration with other places in Ukrainian-controlled territories of the Donbass. Looking back on the events leading up to the seizure, the founder Luba Michailova stated that Izolyatsia 'was a thorn in the eye of the separatists because it made people think'. The fact that they felt a need to seize it means the artists had done everything the right way (Michailova in: artukraine.com, June 2014). She recalls that at one of Izolyatsia's events on experimental music, a politician came up to her and said:

'I understand everything now. In Soviet times you would have been in prison since a long time, for undermining the State!' (ibd.)

Already before the seizure, in pro-Russian nationalist circles an understanding of what culture can be and what is at stake for them as a result of it had begun to mature. Visitors of Izolyatsia started questioning the ‘injections from Russia’ they had received, meaning ideological propaganda (ibd.). Following the fights between separatist forces and the Ukrainian army, Izolyatsia's unequivocal position as a pro-European organization advocating liberal democracy immediately made them a target. The platform’s agency to catalyze a gradual collective conversion of values towards a global approach to art rooted in the local communities had its price.

The Harvard International Review reports that since 2014, the separatists have been operating the place as a small concentration camp outside any regular jurisdiction where men and women are being tortured on a daily basis (Umland, Assejev in: HIR, 4 December 2020). A number of opponents, among them the journalist Stanislav Assejev whose work I have cited in this thesis, have been imprisoned there. In a troubling polysemy, the name of the prison remained Izolyatsia.

2.4. Summary

In ‘The collective memory’, Maurice Halbwachs already in the 1930s points out of the important role of place and spatial images, having its imprint on humans and vice versa (Halbwachs 2020: 139). A spatial framework and the relationship between a group to a place can be altered through major events: Both the collapse of the Soviet Union and the war beginning 2014 that led to the occupation, militarization and isolation of the Donbass (Ygorushkina in: Korydor, 1 February 2016) are such events. Donetsk and Izolyatsia essentially turned into a battlefield in which ‘participants engage in overt negotiations about the meaning of the past and present’ (Crang 1996 in: Smith 2006, 69), inherently tied to a reinterpretation of the Soviet heritage of the region.

Izolyatsia tried to live out a reality in which local and marginalized stories should be made more tangible in the built environment, where groups and individuals establish places of dissent and memory at historic sites of cultural loss to reclaim national pasts and imagine more just futures. This chapter has shown how the former insulation factory in its materiality implies diverging sets of values and how the collective memory attached to those unfolded within a spatial framework. What is troubling here is that these values were not negotiated in a Lefebvrian understanding of ‘Right to the City’. Rather, one violently hijacked the other while rendering it invisible. The former factory of a Socialist regime turned into an art platform whose property eventually was destroyed by separatist fighters is not an accidental chain of events but follows a certain dissonant logic. It is a testimony of how meaning is inscribed into urban place.

3. Literature review

Where, in all this tumultuous history and present of Donetsk, can we spot the wound? While impossible to grasp empirically, in this chapter I strive to show glimpses and fragments of this wound being translated into art. This chapter will outline the theoretical concepts helpful in framing those fragments and embed my research questions in the body of existing literature. Central throughout my analysis is the idea of wounding as an outcome of decades of dispossession mirrored in the human psyche but also in urban space. The form it has taken nowadays in the Donbass, however, is through the invisibility and potentiality of local dissensus as theorized by Ranciere. Instead, the glimpses and fragments of the wound have turned into an export product consumed on an international stage.

3.1. Whose city is it?

Starting from the most basic definition of a city, namely that it organizes people and things in manifold constellations (Thrift 2005, 140 in: Beyes 2010), the density and juxtaposition of difference has productive, generative effects – it produces urban space which can be understood as an effect of interrelations and interactions (ibid.: 231). According to the Marxist geographer David Harvey the Right to the City means a right to change ourselves by changing the city we inhabit. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization (Harvey 2008). The Right to the City should be read as a call for the radical restructuring of social, political, and economic urban relations. A key element of its radical nature is that it reframes the arena of decision making in cities: it reorients decision-making away from the state and toward an autonomous diversified production of urban space. Art, Lefèbvre argues, brings to the ‘realization of urban society its long meditation on life as drama and pleasure’ (Lefèbvre 1996: 157), an essential function for the expressivity and playfulness of a city.

Drawing on Lefebvre (1996 (1968)), Karen Till interprets the city as *oeuvre* (ibid.:101), a constant process by inhabitants through ongoing acts of making places. She points out that multiple pasts and futures of a city’s residents can be resources rather than obstacles as they open the opportunities for more socially just cities through places-based practices of care: all the more in post-authoritarian societies ‘that experienced difficult national histories of state-perpetrated violence and are undergoing political and social transition’ (Till 2012:10).

The occurrence of wounding, rather than a before/after events-oriented model that has clear starting points, happens in contingent densely settled locales which have been harmed by ‘social trauma resulting from state-perpetrated violence’ (Till 2012:7). Those forms of violence are not necessarily tied to a single event but can transform over years or decades, determining the expectations of what is considered to be ‘normal’ and structuring social and spatial relations (ibd.). In that respect, wound distinguishes itself from trauma which is a result of an event that can be tied to time and space. Key in Till’s concept of ‘wounded city’ as an organic metaphor is her focus on the psychosocial relationships between individuals and groups with their cities. According to Till, ways towards healing those wounds are honest mourning, a public confrontation with history and taking responsibility for the failures of a system and its violence. Not only her framing of Wounded Cities is a thoughtful approach to think about post-authoritarian space in turmoil, it can also be the vantage point from which to explore the condition in Donetsk and its expression within art. However, it does also reveal a number of ambiguities that deserve attention and which I will return to throughout my analysis.

According to Ukrainian urban scholar Oksana Mikheeva, most modern Ukrainian cities nowadays find themselves challenged to overcome the Soviet heritage of a specific organization and use of urban space. Urban space in Soviet times, despite the fact that it was declared to be inclusive and open to all, did not belong to anyone. Instead, its democratic use was in fact restricted from communal activities. This control of spatial power by public authorities narrowed the possibilities of natural communication between people, instead consolidating paternalistic top-down practices (Mikheeva 2016). By the early 1960s, Donetsk had spatially internalized the Soviet ideology that gradually had become a norm of everyday life. Monuments were a popular way to mark the social

space of the city, imposing a certain worldview and ways of understanding reality on people. Simultaneously, it erased any representation of marginalised social groups (ethnic, local, etc.) from the city space and reduced it to individual memories of particular people. Since 2014, the governing powers in the Occupied Territories have intensified dates and places for commemoration of the Soviet past. This has a strong symbolic value, meaning also a visual and spatial commitment to the ideological construct known as the 'Russian world'. This neo-Soviet construct re-interprets memory and history in Donetsk, using its main clichés in order to visually justify the geopolitical choices of the region's inhabitants (Mikheeva 2017). Leaning on Assejev's mocking term 'Homo Sovieticus', many people in the Donbass seem emotionally attached to the idea of economic stability and follow a nostalgic idea of the Soviet past, 'a past in which sausage was cheap and the tram ride almost for free' (Assejev 2020: 85), notwithstanding the deprivation it meant.

One of the ways in which authoritarian regimes inflict wounds is by imposing identities on individuals and depriving them of the right to narrate their own stories and to craft urban spaces representative of themselves. This deprivation was a natural by-product of the Soviet ideology. Imposing a narrative in which people for decades came to work for the mono-industry and accept a mono-ideology, the 'Soviet mentality became nothing but the long-lasting habit to delegate responsibility instead of making active decisions' (Assejev 2020: 45). The acceptance of this condition as normal, in my understanding is a result of state-perpetrated violence and the opposite of a commitment to the Right to the City. But previous initiatives in the Ukrainian-controlled parts of the Donbass region reveal that a successful revitalisation of local cultural economies was made possible through bottom-up community practice. Culture and art are served as key instruments of

impact since they model how to re-think a shared future for residents and create a sense of unity and identity in the city. Those temporary cultural interventions usually did not result in large-scale transformations, yet contributed to build sustainable connections between individuals and institutions (Donbass Studies Summer School, June 2019). These interventions are impossible in Donetsk. The events of 2014 have shown that the wound imprinted by the authoritarian regime of the Soviet Union has been reopened and rhetorically and spatially re-framed before it could heal.

3.2. Dispossession

Years after the outbreak of the war, Oksana Mikheeva writes that the self-image of the Donbass population is in flux. Residents realize that their homeland will not become a part of Russia, but neither they want to return to be part of Ukraine. Instead, the frozen conflict is reinforcing a regional sense of self-image that has isolationist traits. The leadership of the quasi-state entities and the members of the combat forces increasingly refer to themselves as a ‘Donbass nation’(Mikheeva 2016).

The occupation is a condition that initially had a temporary character but eventually turned into temporary permanence, transforming the psychosocial relationships between Donetsk and the people inhabiting it. It became not only a legal and territorial condition, but first and foremost a relation to a mindset for both those who stayed in and those who left Donetsk. In ‘*Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*’ (2013), Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou describe the condition of people who have lost their land, citizenship, property, and a broader belonging to the world, becoming subject to military and legal violence (ibid.:3). Their insights, both anchored in regional examples and claiming universal value, provide a logic largely applicable to the Donbass.

Butler and Athanasiou describe how dispossession works as ‘an authoritative and often paternalistic apparatus of controlling and appropriating the spatiality, mobility, affectivity, potentiality, and relationality of (neo-)colonized subjects’ (ibid.:11). While I will neglect the important question whether the Donbass should be regarded as neo-colonized by Russia, the overarching concept of ‘dispossession’ provides the language to express the experience of uprootedness, occupation, and the rupture of social bonds that people have suffered. The Soviet past and current present of militarization, occupation and isolation in the Donbass are results of the multilayered traumas playing out on an individual human level. Dispossession involves the subject’s relation to norms – meaning a ‘complicated affective, psychic, and political dynamic involved in the multiple nuances of becoming dispossessed, one that takes us to the [...] traumas of subjection and the foreclosures that structure our passionate attachments’ (ibid.: 6).

Yulija Ilchuk recalls how ‘to hear Donbass’ (uslyshat’ Donbas’) turned into a propaganda slogan of Eastern Ukrainian politicians who were responsible for the incitement and funding of the separatist movement in the months following the Euromaidan in 2014. Local political leaders and oligarchs in Donetsk played on a strong sense of regional identity, fostering fears of Ukrainian ‘fascism’ and distrust toward the central Kiev authorities among the population in Donbass (Ilchuk 2016: 1). Dispossession reveals mechanisms of how the political is personal and subjection is not always identified as such by the individual. People who have become dispossessed do not necessarily perceive those who dispossessed them as responsible. Friendships and families in Donetsk fell apart because of clashing attitudes towards Ukraine and Russia as a direct result of dispossession. Some people supported the ideological construct of Russia as a representation of the symbolic promise to bring back a Soviet past they are longing for. Dispossession as a collective

experience also means that political opponents of the occupation have been uprooted and left in large numbers. Those who stayed do not always have clear political affiliations: common is a ‘terrifying indifference of local residents who survived the hostilities’ (Ygorushkina in: Korydor, 1 Februar 2016). With the subject’s relation to norms being pro-separatist and pro-Russian, subjection can also result in a form of political agency.

3.3. Re-distribution of the Sensible

How then, if ever, can the condition of ‘becoming dispossessed’ be resolved if it is not only an external state tied to a political system but also a mindset responsible for a subject’s relation to norms? This next sub-chapter will discuss the implications of dispossession for art and its (dis)ability to function in this particular place of conflict. Central to such discussion is to first outline the status of art addressing the Donbass. Subsequently, I will use Rancière’s notion of the distribution of the sensible, and his understanding of art as a form of dissensus to embed it into a broader regional context.

The Euromaidan movement became a turning point for a Ukrainian art and culture scene that increasingly diversified and politicized. Part of that shift was the intersection of art, social criticism, and politics (Europe Now Journal 2020). The war in the Donbass catalyzed artistic initiatives and gave a stage to deal with broader issues such as Donbass history and identity. In a region which has previously been dismissed as alien to culture and civility by the rest of Ukraine, formerly unpopular industrial cities such as Mariupol and Kramatorsk were upgraded in their status as regional centers in terms of administration, but also in a cultural perspective (ibd.).

But as previously mentioned, independent cultural production and political opposition became impossible in Donetsk. In Jacques Rancière's understanding of the current political condition in democracies, spaces of public reflection are devoid of dispute and disagreement and replaced instead by a consensually established frame. Only within this frame participation serves to uphold an image of democracy in order to demonstrate that the people are part of the political process. Participation means a form of government, or management, of the limits of boundaries that determine what is perceived as visible, audible and what can be said or done (Rancière 2005: 85), what kind of social relationships are acceptable, how the economy should be organised or a city built. This frame of 'the Sensible' was also applicable in Donetsk since the collapse of the Soviet Union and until 2014.

The power that abolishes dissenting views over what is possible and true, a 'mode of symbolic structuralization that legitimizes this hierarchical order' (Rancière 2010 in: Johnson 2015,7) is consensus. Artistic practices, in contrast, are forms of visibility that can themselves serve as interruptions of the given partition of the sensible. Art is inherently dissensus. Therefore, work on aesthetics is work on politics. Artistic endeavors should have the power to disrupt and possibly rearrange this 'distribution of the visible which itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection' (Rancière 2007). Naturally, its goal is to get the viewer out of his passive observer status and make him into a partner for dialogue in order to create a powerful counter-story to the consensus. Consequently, when the potentiality of dissensus within independent art becomes weaponized by politics, it ceases being art. Rancière situates himself close to both Beuys and a Kantian engagement with art in *Critique of Judgement* where Kant writes that art is 'a mode of

representation which is intrinsically final, and which, although devoid of an end, has the effect of advancing the culture of the mental powers in the interests of social communication.’ (1931: 69).

Here, we need to return to Izolyatsia and its imperative to re-engage with the Soviet industrial heritage of the Donbass: to ‘make people think’ throughout the years of its existence was a form of dissensus and an enemy to the decades of dispossession during the Soviet Union. It was an invitation towards collective power to reconfigure territory, to implement the radical restructuring of social, political, and economic urban relations as demanded in Lefebvre’s ‘Right to the City’. This invitation per se turned the platform into a threat, a danger holding potential to dismantle the distribution of the sensible through the ability to “re-organize our spatial sensibilities through momentary interventions and disruptions of our senses” (Anani 2014: 212), and transform political imagination away from a “learned helplessness” into “moments that allow discourse, imagination and reflection on history, present and future” (ibid: 217).

Rancière’s account of the distribution of the sensible goes hand in hand with urban wounding: The forceful takeover by separatists of Izolyatsia’s space and urban space of Donetsk in a wider sense have led to a violent erasure of a possibility for dissensus. Expectations of the sensible cannot be thwarted any longer as those voices who could initiate a dissensus were violently muted. At the same time, artistic initiatives worldwide actively catalyzed a deconstruction of the ‘proletarian myth of Donbas’ (Ilchuk 2016: 14), leading to a re-distribution of the sensible on the Donbass outside the Donbass.

3.4. Contribution to existing literature

Social science addressing the war in the Donbass region has predominantly focused on aspects of identity, trauma and displacement (Lashchuk 2018; Shuvalova 2020; Ilchuk 2016; Lazarenko 2020). In *'Hearing the voice of Donbas: art and literature as forms of cultural protest during war'* (2016), Yulia Ilchuk underlines the importance of social networks and public performances in which works by artists from the Donbass are being disseminated as a *modus operandi* within political art in Ukraine. 'Regardless of whether this art is aligned or not with the ideas of the public, the fact that it carves a space and adds its voice to other voices in public can be considered as the civic practice of artists' (ibid. 4). In *'Displaced Art and the Reconstruction of Memory: Ukrainian Artists from Crimea and Donbass'* (2018), Yulia Lashchuk does an important contribution analysing the ways in which local memory of lost places is represented in the works of Ukrainian artists, drawing on their experience of forced migration. In 2019, the Donbas Studies Research Platform was initiated by Izolyatsia: a hub at the intersection of education, cultural preservation, history, and human rights outreach, addressing questions such as: 'What is a monotown; how does a city-forming enterprise affect the life of the community and its ideas of the past and future? Deindustrialization and conflict are the main challenges faced by the residents of the monofunctional cities in Donbass today. What is the role of cultural and artistic practices in defining and redefining cultural identity in this context?' (In: Donbass Studies, July 2019). While these studies have given attention to artistic practice and to an extent also to the intersection between politics, spatial relations and art, they have neglected to examine the significance of the making of in-visibility in Donetsk and the consequences of spatially exporting artistic visibility.

How can the difficult work of urban reframing or healing happen in the political context of an occupation, and muzzling of opponents, a situation which de facto is an open wound? It cannot, and exiled artists embody this impossibility by finding other platforms to make themselves visible and heard, and expressing their personal and collective wounds. Till's proposal to pay more attention to art as it does the difficult work of exposing injustice, political transparency and advocating public visibility is not a viable option any more in occupied Donetsk. Denying its residents the possibilities of negotiation and healing through autonomous art, the Right to the City has been kidnapped. Instead, the distribution of the sensible shifted: invisibility and violence became the agents of ideology while visibility of the Donbass was 'exported', creating a stage in a Ukrainian and international context. Ironically, this development came at a high price, catalyzed by the war itself. The wound, however, remains and is two-fold, anchored in the Soviet history of dispossession and spatially cemented in the present isolation of the Donbass. The wounds of artists are encoded in the art works itself.

So far, this thesis had the goal to disentangle the multiple layers of urban wounding told through the story of an art institution in the Donbass, embedding its local invisibility in relation to a historical and spatial context of dispossession; dispossession does not mean a linear process, but rather an overlap of spatial, psychological and biopolitical mechanisms. In the following, I will center my empirical analysis of artwork around the paradox that this wound finds expression on an international stage rather than in the place it narrates. This dialectic presents a gap within the meta-theory necessary to portray the odd relationship between local and 'export'. I believe my attempt to describe this gap and its consequences is both the difficulty but also the strength of this work.

4. Methodology

Little surprising, when I started this project my idea of what the outcome would look like was very different. Getting a deeper understanding of the significance of my data, the theory I derived essentially followed the principles of the Grounded Theory: After I discovered an artist and their work, reflecting on the added value of the particular artist for my research question and based on this comparison continued collecting and analyzing the data. Flowing in an interpretive space, challenged to select modes of analysis representing my work inevitably alters the story told about this space. Stories and their reinterpretation always depend on the reciprocal relationship between performer and observer. This methodology section addresses the issues of observing and interpreting art and space from a personal and physical distance to the subject.

Developing my methodology for this project was a slow becoming of finding puzzle pieces and connecting them through thematic analysis, and partially visual analysis of the artworks of 4 individual artist and one collective (Izolyatsia). Four of those are originally from Donetsk and one from Crimea. In my view it was important to include the Crimean artist Maria Kulikovska into this project; her work was exhibited in Donetsk when the war began and experienced one of the most severe cases of violence art throughout this time.

Media coverage and features on artists from the Donbass are scattered online in English, Ukrainian and Russian. My access to the information on art works was inherently biased as I took either information from their own websites or relied on media. But the portals or newspapers reporting about them implicitly take on a liberal pro-Ukrainian (or rather: anti-Russian) stance; otherwise, they would not be reporting about them: In pro-Russian media or particularly the local media in

Donetsk, these artists and their works are invisible. This perspective or even radically different understanding of what art should be, hence, is only partially considered in my empirical observations. For my analysis, I became aware of but did not try to resist this bias. Rather, I strived to create a connection between the artist, his or her work as it stands, and the collective or individual wound it tells; sometimes subtly, other times blunt. In spite of vast differences in technique and modes of expression (ranging from street art, performance art to sculpture and short film), I searched for the identification of emerging patterns connecting the stories artists tell through their work. Recurring themes were grievances against Russia and the separatists, criticism of the Ukrainian government, personal trauma and history of the Donbass. All of the artists had to some degree found recognition in Europe through media coverage, exhibitions or awards. In some cases, it was through subsidies by European political and cultural institutions that the creation of the art was enabled in the first place.

5. Setting the Stage - Analysis

This chapter will take a close look at the work of those artists who became political witnesses of dispossession and a reason for the separatists to render their autonomous art invisible. Donbass artists who found themselves in the midst of a tragic and traumatic conflict they resisted, nowadays work in exile. They are faced with the challenging task not only to express but possibly even to be public representatives of a healing process, revealing the manifold layers of wounding of their region. For each of the artists whose works I will present, Izolyatsia served at some point of their exile experience as the connecting piece between themselves and the place they left.

Izolyatsia's seizure in 2014 was a physical mirror of the agency of cultural conversion performed by the art collective. The power of this act is enhanced through the localization of artistic practice

in the spatial location of the former Soviet insulation factory. It illustrates the violent battle over the display of values between artists vis-à-vis pro-Russian militias – and shows how values are inscribed through their relationship with the physical location of Izolyatsia.

In a video interview in 2014, Leonid Baranov, a separatist whose unit seized Izolyatsia, called the modern art there ‘pornography’, saying that ‘considering what kind of art they have shown here, this center had to be seized’. With a flag of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People Republic in the background, he displayed a photography collection that included sexually suggestive nudes. Baranov stated, ‘This is not art and it cannot be art. These people are sick, and they have demonstrated this art to other sick people’ (Izolyatsia in Exile 2014). Baranov added that such perverted art had kept the region’s young people from having healthy and productive sexual lives.’



Figure 3: Leonid Baranov in his interview with Forbes Russia. 2014. Photo: Izolyatsia

‘This has nothing to do with anything lofty or sublime, with anything Slavic. These people hate everything Slavic, everything Russian. They’ve brainwashed our youth with this pornography. Our youth, instead of growing, marrying, getting children and getting jobs,’ he said, “they degrade...here our population here hasn’t grown, but started dying out.’ (Baranov in: IZOLYATSIA in Exile 2014).

Grounding his values in ethno-nationalist convictions of Slavic ‘purity’, he aims to cleanse the Donbass territory of its ‘impurities’, materialized physically and socially through the art platform located in a former factory, a site afflicted with a historical and emotional meaning. The militia leader’s reaction implies he understands well the ‘threat’ of culture – its danger to ‘leak out’ into everyday life, influencing and informing personal and community identity (Smith 2006: 70). Baranov’s act, thus, is also a consequence of his personal value construction: a forceful enactment of his Right to the City - a display of Russian national identity.

In a striking essay on the disappearance and exile of autonomous art under the Occupation, Alena Egorushkina 2016 raises the question whether art without freedom is possible. She concludes that the desire to return to the Soviet past and strengthen the Russian occupation became the ideological core of the war, forcing the efforts of those artists who remained on this territory into the mainstream of propaganda. Reflection and artistic expression were forced underground. Egorushkina claims that not only those works that carried subversive cultural meanings were destroyed, but also those that reflected the power of Donbass, and only by their very form were incomprehensible *to* the vandals. It was the irritation from their own misunderstanding that caused the desire to destroy (*ibid.*). Leaving the Occupied Territory, on the other hand, ‘the transfer of personal experience of artists has become the most popular artistic practice. Satisfying the informational and, possibly, emotional demand of European countries, artists primarily strive to convey living stories that serve partly as psychotherapy, and partly as a call for help’ (Egorushkina 2016). This sentence, in my view, is crucial in understanding the paradox and necessity of exported visibility. I will elaborate on this later.

5.1. 'On Vacation' – Exportation of visibility

In 2015, one year after the seizure in Donetsk, Izolyatsia unofficially invaded the Biennale in Venice with a bold guerilla art initiative, using the moment of exposure to display the universal nature of occupation to a broad international audience.



Figure 4: On vacation. Photo: Izolyatsia Twitter.

The uniforms had the words 'On Vacation' printed on them, a mocking reference to an infamous remark of separatist leader Alexander Zakharchenko during Russia's 2014 invasion of eastern Ukraine. He said the Russian soldiers were enjoying a 'vacation ... among brothers who are fighting for their freedom' (Kirchgaessner; Walkner in: The Guardian, 8 May 2015). The jackets were distributed among Venice Biennale visitors, who were asked to take selfies in country pavilions of their 'occupying powers of choice' (Izolyatsia on vacation, 2015). As they uploaded selfies on social media, participants were made part of a lottery, which gave them a chance to win a vacation in the popular holiday destination Crimea, occupied by Russia.

'We wanted to create a project that empowered the art viewer to deal with these questions of occupation. We distributed 1500 jackets to the public. Usually by the end of the day we had people coming up to us saying. 'Where did you get this? I see everybody with this. I wanna participate! [...]. Do you really want a free vacation to Crimea? According to Russia there is no problem there! But we want you to ask that question!' (ibd.)

By invading the Biennale, with its blunt title *#onvacation*, Izolyatsia created a loosely veiled allegory to the Russia-backed separatist fighters. Suddenly, the conflict home in Ukraine moved into the spotlight of an international artistic stage, represented by both Ukrainian and international members of Izolyatsia. The Guardian reported that interaction also happened between Izolyatsia and the Russian pavilion of the Biennale who, according to a spokesperson, reacted relaxed about the artistic invasion: 'They came here on Wednesday, they were in uniforms, they explained it was an art installation. Everything was very low-key,' (Kirchgaessner, Walkner in: Guardian, 8 May 2015). Yet, through the interaction with the Russian pavillon, Izolyatsia also created a channel of communication on a microlevel with the the artistic representations of the so-called enemy.

The guerilla act aroused great media and social media attention both in Ukraine and worldwide and was widely reported. Both the Guardian and the New York Times (Nayeri in: NYT, 10 May 2015) covered the intervention. But simultaneously through the act of occupation Izolyatsia's presence had completely disappeared from the space and awareness of its own hometown Donetsk. My attempt to find whether anything about the intervention had been reported in local newspapers on the Occupied Territories remained unsuccessful. While plenty of information in Ukrainian, English and Russian is available on the intervention, Stanislav Assejev reported in 2016 that he, based in the Donbass, was not able to access the websites of the Ukrainian newspapers *Radio Swoboda*, *Tyzhden*, *Ostrow* and *Dzerkalo tyzhnja* (Assejev 2020: 104)

This illustrates a situation where visibility and narratives around the conflict are, figuratively speaking, ‘exported’ – they gain a stage and relevance both in the national and international context, and in Egorushkina’s sense become a call for help. But paradoxically, it is a vicarious call as those whom it affects the most, people in the Occupied Territories, are physically isolated. Most may even disagree with the fact that they are under occupation. The boundary for dissensus is territorial and acts of dissent are not an option any more locally in Donetsk. This erasure of a potentiality for dissensus generates a wound in the urban space, as invisibility becomes a synonym for dispossession. The occupied territory turned into a place where the price for visibility and the politics of art is too high – one may be incarcerated for years. Public conversation means a direct threat on one’s life.

6.2. ‘The Ukrainian Banksy’ – Serhii Zakharov

“Back when I was in Donetsk, I thought I would draw what I saw there. But I drew only one picture there, because my relatives would hit me on the hands and tell me “Don’t do this!” (Zakharov in: Ukrainer, 21 January 2021)

The artist Serhii Zakharov, who internationally made himself a name as ‘the Ukrainian Banksy’ had been living and working in Donetsk all his life. In 2014, the outbreak of the war changed his life drastically. Zakharov retrospective told Ukrainian media in 2021, that after separatists took power and established the new system in 2014, initially some of the locals in Donetsk were actively engaged in showing that the city is a part of Ukraine rather than the newly proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic.

“Stencils appeared with the tryzub (a trident, the Ukrainian state coat of arms). I lived in the city centre, where there was a heap, and someone planted a flag in it. Someone else tore it down. Next time you go out, you see the flag again. So, there was a kind of struggle, only the struggle was no longer happening at political rallies, it was more an exchange of symbols.” (ibd.)

This struggle over symbols, however, terminated when the first person was murdered in the city. After the killings began, it became dangerous to wear Ukrainian symbols or publicly oppose the occupiers (ibd.). Alternative attempts of placemaking were rendered both illegal and illegitimate. Yet, with the fierce intention to fight the occupation on a mental level and change people's mindsets, Zakharov secretly had begun to create political caricatures – cardboard-installations at strategic locations all over the city, easily understandable for everyone: his street art became a tool of democratization in public space that at that point was hardly seen in Donetsk. Just like Banksy, Zakharov had to hide his true identity calling himself “Murzilki” instead. He used the plural “Murzilki” to fake a collective identity which in reality consisted of the artist and his photographer Mazurkevych who assisted the artist during the installations (Ilchuk 2016: 8). Affixed to fences and buildings, the grotesque silhouettes attracted attention and photos of them started popping up in social networks, circling locally but also all over Ukraine. Each installation was a special task, because first, the place needed to be chosen. Often, there were video surveillance cameras around and one needed to be attentive.

Zakharov reports that at that time, already no one spoke out against the Donetsk People's Republic and he was pleased to see passersby's positive reactions to his work who would laugh and take photos on their phones. For him, those reactions were an evidence that despite their silence, there were still many opponents in the city (Zakharov in: Foreign Policy, October 2014). He satirically depicted leaders and separatist commanders as clowns or skeletons, both ridiculing them and pointing at the danger of their rule. Faces of separatists were easily recognizable on the artworks. One of the most famous works became the marriage ceremony of the Russian militia hero nicknamed “Motorola” and his young bride in Donetsk; the first-ever registered wedding in the

newly established Donetsk People Republic attended by several dozen armed militiamen (Tavernise, S.; Schneider, In: NYT, 13 July 2014). Zakharov put up cardboard ridiculing the couple near the City Wedding Palace on the day of their wedding. The caricature was removed within half an hour, but the photos captured by passers-by flooded the Internet within minutes after their installation: they meant a temporary intervention in the urban landscape, creating a situation that invited citizens start to participate politically by observing – a form of dissensus, stretching the boundary of a new normality in the young republic within a new distribution of the sensible. This, naturally, drew the ire of the militants in Donetsk.



Figure 5: Wedding of 'Motorola'. Photo: Twitter

On 7 August 2014, Zakharov was kidnapped from his house and detained. After his arrest and torture 'for propaganda activities' by separatist forces it was international publicity that surrounded Zakharov's arrest and maybe even saved his life. Following Zakharov's abduction, Mazurkevych had asked Russian and Ukrainian journalists to create public pressure for his release (Ilchuk 2016:

8). The artist was finally released and managed to move to Kyiv in order to escape the constant supervision of local authorities in Donetsk (In: Ukrainer, 21 January 2021). There, he began working with Izolyatsia, who at the time already had established themselves in the capital. The visual message in his works: the separatists exist only because of the Russian leader's patronage (In: Guardian, 4 February 2015).



Figure 6: *House of Cards*, 2014

After his relocation to Kiev, his mocking installation [House of Cards](#), composed of large cards with the images of separatist leaders, was exhibited in museums all over European cities. The installation shows caricature-cards of the most important characters in the game on Eastern Ukraine. The role of the joker is assigned to the Russian President Vladimir Putin. In his house of cards, all characters stand on top of each other before they suddenly collapse with a loud bang – showing the instability of the occupation and its dependence on Russia and Putin. In European media, unequivocally hostile towards Russian policy, Zakharov became a celebrity known as the

‘Ukrainian Banksy’. An international fame he reached only after being detained and leaving Donetsk.

The metaphor of wounded cities works psychosocially according to the intimate relationships individuals and groups have with places, and hence the city (Till 2012:17). Similarly to the destiny of Izolyatsia, Zakharov’s dangerous commitment to live his Right to the City and the consequences he faced is the expression of a forced local invisibility. However, this also raises the question what the artistic representation of Zakharov and other artists who left the Donbass means for the place itself and whether it strives to be a ‘voice of the Donbass’: bearing in mind that a new distribution of the sensible has conquered the Donetsk city space and the reality of its inhabitants. ‘I would definitely not identify art by territory’, Zakharov publicly shared about his work in Kiev in 2019, five years after his move (In: The Ukrainian Week, February 2019). But how effectively can the violence and desolation of urban space and the stories from the Donbass be told through the representation of those who live in exile? Without local artistic presence, the wound can only be ‘licked’ from afar while leaving its inhabitants in the state of dispossession: it becomes an autopoietic mechanism, capable of maintenance only within its particular lifeworld of exile.

6.3. 'Homo Bulla' – Maria Kulikovska

"Of course I am scared. Maybe more than anyone else. But that is why I continue. It is difficult to be an artist during the war, but at the same time you understand that you have more privilege. You work with ideas and a lot of people listen to your words." (In: The World Weekly, 26 November 2015)



Figure 7: 'Homo Bulla'. Photo: Maria Kulikovska

Maria Kulikovska's artwork ranges from multimedia art, sculpture to performance, addressing social and political issues such as violence, gender and inequality. Originally from the Crimean peninsula, she nowadays defines herself as 'in exile'. Since the Russian annexation she has not been able to return to her hometown. Before the beginning of the occupation, Kulikovska showed two of her installations for the exhibition «Gender» in the space of Izolyatsia in Donetsk: "Army of the Clones" (2010) and "Homo Bulla" (2012) *Human as soap bubble – Remember about death*, casting soap sculptures of her own body shape. The sculptures were standing outside, being exposed to a natural transformation caused by wind and weather. According to Kulikovska, the purpose of the installation was to remind herself and others through the soap texture of the fragility

and instability of the human body and transience of time. Focus of her interest was in particular the naked female body, its transformation and perception by society (mariakulikovska.net). At the time of creation, Kulikovska could not have thought of the ironic ways in which her materialization of fragility would intersect with the experience of violence and destruction she was about to experience.

Shortly after the capture and looting by the militants of the Izolyatsia Art Center in 2014, a group of pro-Russian militants shot at Kulikovska's soap sculptures of her naked body, using them as training targets. The artist reports that in a media interview, the man who ordered the shooting announced that this was 'their performance, their manifesto to demonstrate what will happen to those who do not share their moral values'. She herself was declared as a degenerate artist. According to Kulikovska, the militia's actions prove "they're really scared of art, different opinions and the power of new fresh and open ideas. What made her an immediate target was her naked female body which was seen as a provocation (Cascone in: artnet, 25 November 2015).

In 2015, Kulikovska in response to the act of destruction recreated three replicas of 'Homo Bulla' as part of a group exhibition of Ukrainian and UK artists in London's renowned Saatchi Gallery. Naked, she then smashed the works with a hammer during the exhibition opening. When acquiring the soap for the installation in London from a soap factory in Sweden, she found out that the same soap is used by military factories to test ammunition as it has the same consistency as the human body. This discovery was a shock for her 'because I was running away to the Western world from the horror of war, and then I found myself in the center, in some kind of heart' (Kulikovska in: Hromadske, 20 December 2019). By destroying her statues, the artist sought to show the brutality

of war, while also protesting against the appropriation of the female body. ‘There was a lot of pain inside me when I tried to destroy my statues. I tried to kill myself with my own hands to show that no one else can take your life. Only you and nature are the master of your own body, not others’ (In: The World Weekly, 26 November 2015).



Figure 8: ‘Homo Bulla’ replica Photo: M.Kulikovska

The violent attack on Kulikovska’s art, and in a symbolic sense on her body, is a painful testimony of the special status of art in a war. The attack on ‘Homo Bulla’ is an embodiment of the wound, penetrating both humans and their tangible imprints within urban space. But it is also telling of the power to interact with the wound in a personal way. For Kulikovska this meant the intimate experience of trying to regain her agency by replicating the soap figures and destroying them with her own hands. She turns it into an ‘occasion of situated acts of resistance, resilience, and confrontation with the matrices of dispossession, through appropriating the ownership of one’s body from these oppressive matrices’ (Butler, Athanasiou 2013:22) and shows this to an international audience. At the same time, Kulikovska remains unable to share these experiences

with an audience in her home of Crimea or in the Donbass; as a political artist addressing not only the occupation, but also controversial issues like gender inequality and LGBTQI rights, she is additionally confronted with the censorship and lack of funding for her art in Ukraine, her home country. Complicated is also her relationship with the Russian art scene. After being arrested during a provocative performance in 2014 where she lay on the steps of St. Petersburg's Hermitage Museum wrapping herself in a Ukrainian flag, she received death threats - facing a painful lack of solidarity from the Russian art scene in the aftermath of her performance, Kulikovska ceased to work with Russian artists or galleries in Russia.

The story of Maria Kulikovska demonstrates the struggle in an attempt to display and process the wound she and her art physically experienced in Ukraine and Russia. Within this attempt, we encounter multiple layers of dispossession; not only the loss of land and community, but also the need to fight the ownership of her art and her living body as a woman. Those different layers intersect and are perceived differently by society and state institutions not only on the Occupied Territories, but also in Ukraine. While Kulikovska's stance against the occupation is seen as legitimate, when speaking about gender and queer rights, she is facing censorship. Instead, she finds an audience for her 'performative sculptures' (mariakulikovska.net) in Europe. There, however, she faces a lack of understanding for the political topics she is juggling with as 'they do not understand what Crimea is and often think that this is some kind of fun' (Kulikovska in: Hromadske, 20 December 2019). But while her life as a political artist and activist has become more dangerous since 2014, at the same time the only platform interested to hear her are European cities and art institutions, where her wounds are not necessarily understood by her audience. Kulikovska's situation cements my observation of the artistic inevitability to export visibility and

narration around a conflict, while simultaneously losing agency in the physical location to which the narration refers. It also leaves me with the open question whether exportation of visibility is a condition for healing, given that the possibility of dissensus at home was erased, or rather an obstacle showing that ‘running away to the West from the horror of the war’ (ibid.) can only be a temporary plaster for an individual. But as long as the voice of the artist remains invisible in the war zone itself, the collective wounded condition remains part of its spatiality.

6.4. Phone calls from the cemetery – Alevtina Kakhidze

‘A lot of people who had never been to Donbass talked to me about it – I “made Donbass human” for them. Empathy arises when you understand what someone has really experienced. I wrote and drew everything my mother and her neighbours had experienced: how the schools closed down, there was no water and the doctors gradually all left. All this provided space for empathy.’ (Alevtina Kakhidze in: Open Democracy, 29 July 2019).

Alevtina Kakhidze's mother lives in Zhdanovka, a small town close to Donetsk in the northeastern Donbass where some of the most violent fighting of the war took place. She barely leaves her basement, the city's services have collapsed and the only place where there was still cell phone reception is the cemetery on the outskirts of the town. It is from there that she calls her daughter, a high-profile artist in Kiev who is unable to return to visit her mother due to her political activism during the Euromaidan. Not only Kakhidze's mother is on the phone in the cemetery, also other residents are standing between the gravestones, holding their cell phones to their ears. A scene describing the bizarreness of war could hardly be more symbolic. In 2015, the conversations between Kakhidze and her mother were exhibited and staged for the first time as a theatre performance in the Cologne Art Academy in Germany. ‘Whoever watches the exhibition ‘Phone Calls from the Cemetery and Other Stories’ at the art festival Pluriversale in Cologne may feel a bit like a battered boxer afterwards’ a German newspaper reported afterwards (Klug in: Freitag, 23 September 2015).

Kakhidze's art succeeded in making war tangible. She meticulously documents the phone conversations with her mother in notes: Her notes focus on the everyday lives of her mother and her neighbours, lay bare the problems faced by displaced persons and residents of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the Occupied Territories. She complements the telephone conversations with childlike drawings of the local topography, maps the effects of the conflict and transfers them to a landscape with which she is familiar from her childhood. She created a Facebook page for the pictures and they became popular amongst those in Ukraine hungry for news about the breakaway territories. Eventually, also her mother's death becomes the object of the documentation project (Donbass News: Illustration of death, 3 March 2020).

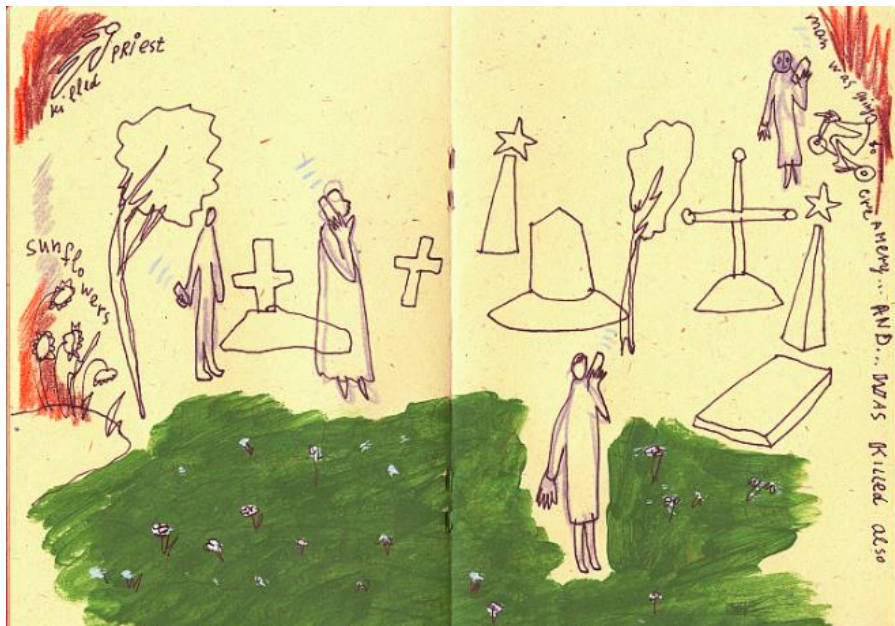


Figure 9: 'Phone calls from the cemetery'. Photo: Alevtina Kakhidze.

In January 2019, almost five years after the start of the war, the artist's mother whom for her project she had given the pseudonym 'Klubnika Andreyevna' ("Strawberry Andreyevna") died collapsing in the queue in the front line while crossing the demarcation line between Ukraine and

the self-proclaimed ‘Donetsk People’s Republic’ (DNR) in order to receive her pension from the Ukrainian state (Kateryna Iakovlenko in: Open Democracy, 29 July 2019).

The death of Kahidze’s mother, like the deaths of many other elderly people at border crossings, displayed the inhumanity of Ukraine’s policy towards pensioners living in the Occupied Territories. To claim their small pensions, elderly people have to register themselves officially as ‘Internally Displaced Persons’ and cross the demarcation line several times a month in weather conditions of rain, snow and sun - a practice that takes all day and has become known as ‘pension tourism’. Over 30 000 civilians cross the frontline every day, with deaths reported every month. After her mother’s death, Alevtina Kakhidze took the BBC to examine the border crossing point where her mother had died (ibd.).



Figure 10: ‘Pension Tourism’ Photo: Alevtina Kakhidze

'I used to draw the demarcation line in my work, or rather my mother would tell me about it and I would draw it. It came out so accurately that when I went there, the map I had drawn coincided exactly with the real one. It had so many details on it: where a bus runs and where it goes to... For example, the place where my mother died was the easiest for crossing the line – the place that belongs to no one. People have to walk over the line, not drive' (ibd.)

Upon the BBC visit, Ukraine's Social Policy Minister told the journalists that he had no sympathy for pensioners who had remained in the Occupied Territories and referred to them as 'scum'. The minister's comments created waves across Ukrainian society, with some MPs even calling for his resignation (ibd.). Striking is the reach of Kakhidze's voice by calling the attention of Ukrainian politicians and the international community to the everyday hardships of elderly people in the Occupied Territories. This is powerful, and a credo to what a re-distribution of the sensible can mean, going beyond simple pro-Ukrainian or pro-Russian solidarity but calling out nuisances in a through evoking empathy.

Possibly, Kakhidze's simple non-encoded paintings and documented conversations present the starkest example of putting a finger into the wound, by making it accessible and giving a face and a name to the abstract idea of war and dispossession. She succeeded in visually catching and narrating the expression of the wounds without putting herself in danger, yet eventually paying a fatal price of her mother's death. 'It was easier for me when everyone read what I wrote and supported me', she shared the therapeutic value of public exposure for her. For a long time after the death, Kakhidze continued to update the [Facebook page](#) she created for her pictures about her mother.

Kakhidze work expressed both the individual and collective wound: Her relationship with her mother, the loss of her mother, but also the inability to travel and see her and to take her art pieces

left behind in the Donbass; on a collective level the lack of empathy between relatives and neighbours towards each other, the humiliation imposed by the Ukrainian government towards its elderly members of society and finally. The wound is personal and intimate, but also spatially affecting the inhabitants of the Donbass: it is the demarcation line at the border crossing, the closure of schools, the cemetery which instead of giving respect to the dead becomes a safe haven for phone reception. In a wider sense it is also, as Assejev writes, the ‘dozens of tanks on the streets, the mine craters and traces of track vehicles on the asphalt in front of a cafe, leftovers of bullets on children’s playgrounds, house searches, and suspects of sabotage’ (Assejev 2020:46).

6.5. ‘On the East’– Piotr Armianovski

‘Kramatorsk may not be the nicest place a town of factories and broken infrastructure, but its denizens find much to love there, reflecting on their home with frankness and warmth’, the synopsis describes Piotr Armianovski short film ‘On the East’, set in the city of Kramatorsk – historically the largest manufacturer of mining equipment in Euof the Donbass region and since the beginning of the conflict also the Ukrainian-controlled administrative center.



Figure 11: Kramatorsk

Piotr Armianovski is a performer and film director originally from Donetsk, nowadays living in Kiev. His films and performances were shown and awarded at different international festivals and exhibitions, both in Eastern and Western Europe and before 2014 also in Russia. Since the outbreak of the war, he dedicated his work to documentary filmmaking in the Donbass area addressing the past and war-torn present of the territory: however, due to the lack of freedom of speech on the Occupied Territories, he is only able to work in the Ukrainian-controlled areas of the Donbass such as Kramatorsk.

‘On the East’, a 9-minute short film, starts with a scene of smoke coming out of pipes, to show shortly after a longshot of the mining fields surrounding the city. Residents of various professions and backgrounds, some of them elderly, speak interchangeably Ukrainian and Russian; they tell their stories, taking pride and a sense of emotional attachment to their city in their own ways; leitmotif of the film are factory life and the significance of Kramatorsk’s Soviet past for the mining and weapon industry during the Cold War.

‘I am here since 1971. And I fell for this city. I consider the NKMZ (the factory producing mining equipment) as my own little country. The plant gave me everything: it gave me a flat, and a life, my kids are working, the lads, doing no worse than their father. So I have something to be proud of.’ (On the East 2015, 2:15)

In the final scene of the film, a group of residents are spraying a huge trident, the Ukrainian national symbol, on the asphalt in front of the City Council of Kramatorsk. ‘People buy brushes, rollers and paint with their money. Spend their time. For the city to be alive, to be beautiful. It is something we need, especially in times like these’, one of the participants explains (6:00). After a conflict between the patriotic painters and Russian-speaking opponents of the work, the film closes with the group passionately shouting ‘Ukraine! Above all!’ (8:10) To the spectator, it remains unclear whether the Ukrainian national symbol sprayed on the ground is actually a criticism of nationalism or praise – everyone can choose for themselves, while the camera takes the position of a silent witness. Still, I am left wondering what the rampant sense of Ukrainian nationalism displayed in the film means for the Russian minority in Kramatorsk which makes up around one fourth of the population.



Figure 12: *On the East* 2015.

While Armianovski's film is not situated in the Occupied Territories and not affected by the censorship there, I chose to include 'On the East' into my analysis as it reveals a number of important elements in discussion of the wounded condition. Firstly, similarly to the work of artists I have introduced previously, it contributes to amplify the voices and history of the Donbass and process the war happening not only locally, but also through the inclusion of a larger international audience. Remarkably, at no point the war is explicitly mentioned in the film but only hinted at through half-sentences such as 'especially in times like these' (see above). At the same time, if not for the war: would the public interest and political relevance of the Donbass have skyrocketed the way it did? 'On the East' won prizes at festivals in London, Sweden and the USA – giving the Donbass and its people a voice on an international cultural stage, however only being able to present a pro-Ukrainian perspective. Secondly, while the Soviet history of the region lays a sound ground throughout my analysis, Armianovski is the only one of the artists who actively engages with the city's industrial past and almost intangibly connects it to the present. Neither trying to

demonize nor romanticizing it, the film gives an honest account of its history and its prolongation into the now through the voices of Kramatorsk residents.

Armianovski's confrontation with memory and national identity reveals ambiguities and question marks in my attempt to empirically grasp the historic dispossession caused by the regime of the Soviet Union. Pierre Nora observes that memory and history are far from being synonymous. They rather appear to be in fundamental oppositions: Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it installs remembrance within the sacred. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past calling for uncomfortable criticism and analysis (Nora 1989: 8f). If the outcome of dispossession, the wound, is an atemporal urban concept not exclusively tied to the war, but reaching back to decades of state-perpetrated violence – and the authoritarian, homogenizing regime of the Soviet Union can certainly be classified as such in its own ways: If its residence express pride and a sense of purpose over the mono-industry in their city - '*The plant gave me everything*' - is it yet my place as a researcher to call this a result of dispossession? But maybe it is exactly the position of the researcher to be able to hold those two ambiguities: acknowledging that a population can be collectively dispossessed and simultaneously accepting the memory of stability and safety, expressed by individuals, which the mono-industry was able to provide to its inhabitants.

7. Discussion

Throughout my work on this thesis I continuously mused: Is it even possible to write about a space through the voices of its artists who are not there any more, looking to spot a wound that is given its shape through art, but largely remains spatial and psychosocial?

I believe the contribution of this work was to expose the shortcoming of meta-theory in the relationship, or the lack of it, between the local and its 'export'. The erasure of dissent in Donetsk is a wound mirrored through its counter-response of exiles: the making-visible of art, through the narrations of this city in places who provide a platform for it. As I have shown, often these places lie outside of Ukraine and Russia. While the Kiev-based exiled platform Izolyatsia in many ways functions as an incubator for dissent and healing, the case studies I presented implicitly or explicitly address multiple overlapping challenges intersecting with the Russian occupation: Gender relations, questions on Ukrainian nationalism and loyalty, the Soviet past, de-industrialization, and relations with artists from Russia'.

Collaborations and performances in Europe, international exposure and sources of funding from European institutions are vital for Ukrainian artists and their ability to work. They also provide a more neutral and less emotionally charged territory to process the events back home. At the same time, with the words of Maria Kulikovska it also means a 'running away to the Western world'. This is key. While the turn towards West may be inevitable and necessary for individual ways of healing, the significance of this tendency goes further. As I have mentioned previously, Kant ascribes art the advancement of the culture of the mental powers. But for that to materialize, the political and social ground to make this advancement possible needs to be receptive - how else can

it become fertile? While artists encounter this reception in European countries, the dismantling of democratic structures in Donetsk rendered it impossible. At the same time, Western recipients of art may have a fundamentally different outlook on how they understand the situation in the Donbass than locals or Ukrainians. They are tuned to different ways of seeing and a radically different distribution of the Sensible, striving to satisfy their informational and emotional needs (Egorushkina 2016). What for artists, Ukrainians and the inhabitants of the Occupied Territory is the painful reality of their everyday life, in Europe runs the danger of becoming merely a story, a commodity to be consumed by a privileged audience hungry for culture.

If Ukrainian artists strive to bring art into a realm that is being dominated by a certain politics, but exhibit this attempt outside of the realm itself: what can be its impact on the mental powers of fellow Donbass and Ukrainian people? There, the collective condition of dispossession remains ongoing and the distribution of the sensible dictated by the separatist regime. In hindsight, the underlying logic of combining theory in which I described the potentiality of art and the subsequent empirical analysis feel somewhat dissonant. Trying to silhouette the wound, I hence was only able to describe two separated fragments of it: The urban space forcefully deprived of its Right to the City and the exported artistic articulation as a counter-response to it.

In his thick descriptions from 'In Isolation' (2020) Stanislav Assejev repeatedly returns to the dire economic situation of the Donbass miners as an explanatory fuel for the political situation, repeatedly reminding its reader of the importance of 'cheap sausage'. I was surprised to find that the theme of regional marginalization and poverty was not central in the artworks but either not mentioned or treated as side-topic (e.g. in the context of Alevtina's Kakhidze 'pensioner tourists').

This, again, raised the question of the relevance of art as a possibility for collective representation of the Donbass, and individual priorities (e.g. is the economic situation less important for artists, or is it possible just not a priority to focus on? If so, why?). I believe these questions deserve more attention from scholars.

8. Conclusion

My initial goal for this thesis was to examine art as an instrument of impact in Donetsk, a city that has been regionally isolated, militarized and occupied by a foreign power. A city in which opponents have been banned leaving behind wounds inscribed throughout generations of state-perpetrated violence. Those wounds shaped not only the psychosocial condition of its inhabitants, but also the urban space in which they were deprived from a possibility to live out a Right to the City. When artists are forced to operate in a place without freedom for autonomous action, they either become a handy tool for state propaganda or have no choice but to leave the place. Their absence locally creates a state of invisibility of alternative voices and a condition of spatial dispossession. The possibility for dissensus disappears, mourning and the honest confrontation with history and society become impossible - elements most necessary in order to heal the wounded condition.

Opposite to Beuys' imperative for 'social plastic' in order to have an impact on society, art addressing the occupation in Donbass instead fundamentally had to change its function. Social criticism and public revealing of power structures in the conflict became possible to some extent in the Ukrainian capital city of Kiev, as long as they did not overlap with other uncomfortable topics for the Ukrainian government, such as LGBTQI. Largely, however, they found an audience in European countries satisfying the 'informational and emotional needs' of the locals there. The

importance to enlighten an international crowd and to heal wounds individually by exposing one's personal pain and injustice, to evoke empathy and encourage political opposition on an international scale, are of great importance. But most likely they do not hold the power to disrupt and rearrange the Distribution of the Sensible creating resistance against mechanisms of power. Wounds can maybe be narrated, but not healed from exile: for that, an interaction between space, inhabitants and artist is inevitable. In my view, the question of 'exported visibility', how international consumption of Donbass art by Ukrainian artists affects the place it narrates and vice versa is very important and deserves attention that would expand my methodology from content and visual analysis to participant observation and narrative interviews.

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