

# New Epistemology of “A Complex We” in Ukraine’s Wartime Biosocial Transformations: from “The Naked Room” to Existential “Homelessness”

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This article’s main concern is to draw out the implications of bridging relationships between thinking about Ukraine’s war and art reflection that exploits new forms of social affairs, ecological issues, and human vulnerability; issues of new stratification of society and new forms of individual and international interaction; as well as new forms of social representation of those who belong to the “complex we” and who establish a new wartime landscape. It provokes the discourse of the more-than-human contribution with its ontological colour, that is presented in particular in the projects and practices of Ukrainian creatives – Nikita Kadan, Kateryna Lysovenko, Iryna (Ozi) Ozarinska, Yana Kononova, Maksym Krytsov, Artem Chekh. These creatives testify to the war crimes through artistic symbols, emphasising the vulnerability of human nature and the negative impact of wartime on the biosphere and the Anthropocene in general. Such artistic works prove that the world must operate under the sign of new drivers of security, institutional consolidation, and mediation. The article traces how the new ecology and social phenomena of wartime in Ukraine emerge from the concept of the instability of a new human home, from the conceptual foundations of the theory of a „complex we“ with due regard for structure and design.

**Keywords:** war-torn Ukraine, arts in wartime, “complex we”, homelessness, testimonio, material witness, landscape, new social stratification, ontological reality, ecological issues, Anthropocene.

The war in Ukraine has defined a new type of social entropy, which finds its special representation in the works of Ukrainian creatives. The thematic and motif-landscape of the represented practices and projects visualises the discourse of a new normal, caused by total fear of a possible planetary catastrophe with its threatening consequences for the social, political, and environmental spheres.

In addition, the war has led to changes in the social differentiation of society, as well as the urgency of reformatting global institutional co-operation in the context of the Rapid Reaction Mechanism in terms of security policy towards Ukraine. The war caused ontological changes in the perception of reality, in its representation in artistic reflection, which became an expression of archetypal fears and epis-

temological fragility. The space around a person, as it turned out, can be destroyed in an instant, the global security system is in a situation of entropy and unpreparedness to stop the Russian aggressor, who frightens the world with a nuclear weapon. In this regard, there is a need for a *new stratification of society*, and artistic reflection becomes a form of experimentation with the visual representation of potentially new forms of social interaction, in the context of creating a “new home” and building a “new normal”.

The artistic practices implemented by the “actors” of the “complex we” define complex configurations of transitions and interactions between migration issues and the need to address the phenomenon of homelessness, the importance of recording crimes and witnessing in the artistic reflection of the “complex we”.

In addition, artistic discourse, particularly in visual projects, becomes a factor in the adaptive practice of all those directly or indirectly associated with the war in Ukraine, revealing its representation in the structures of the “complex we”, which in the present study is taken from the research of Marisol de la Cadena, a Latin American researcher of eco-activist movements, Anthropocene issues, and new type of social stratification. Our study attempts to apply this theoretical paradigm to Ukrainian realities.

Marisol de la Cadena’s research delves into the examination of ontological and epistemological shifts in present-day communities, resulting in the displacement and devastation of pre-existing biosocial configurations. By scrutinizing these pro-

cesses of change and their implications on communities and their interactions with the environment, Marisol de la Cadena aims to shed light on the complex dynamics at play and the multifaceted impacts that resource extraction and development projects have on local ways of life, knowledge systems, and socio-ecological relationships. De la Cadena states that «... *the human that, after injecting coloniality to power-knowledge by self-positioning as a universal individual housing a soul and a mind inside a body placed vis-à-vis nature, became mighty enough to both claim authorship of the currently omnipresent planetary catastrophe and make bids to palliate it*» (Cadena, Marisol de la, 2019 : 479). The researcher proposes a fundamentally new form of capturing the relationship between the anthropological, geographical, and biological, which can be metaphorically defined by her own formula “*humans-are-with-cows-who-are-with-grasses-who-are-with-soils-who-are-with-water...*” (Cadena, Marisol de la, 2019 : 480).

The scholar has examined and categorized indicators of environmental and political transformation in Latin American countries grappling with the effects of warfare (Cadena, Marisol de la, 2020), excessive consumption, and societal unrest. Thus, the study may contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of change, conflict, and instability both within Latin American nations and in other regions such as Ukraine, shedding light on the complex intersections between environmental degradation, political upheaval, and social disruption.

Ukrainian reality at war is epistemologically different from Latin American reality, as well as different from the neo-liberal guidelines of the contemporary American-European political and social dimension. However, it is in this reality that a “complex we” is formed, which has a different configuration, a different type of connections that find their manifestation in artistic reflection, which represents the fragility of existence, human insecurity, and the vulnerability of the Anthropocene. De la Cadena uses the concept of *Anthropocene* as a phenomenon that serves as a new organising element for the social space which was also formed in Ukraine as a result of Russian aggression. During war, a person is not seen as an inviolable subject, it becomes part of the reality of war, as it can be destroyed along with material objects in the event of an enemy attack. The battle brings reality closer to the Anthropocene structure, i.e. moves it away from human subjectivity. This new model of Ukraine’s subjectivity is being created now, and this process has a great impact on the world consciousness.

For Marisol de la Cadena, *«a complex “we” [is] composed of an “us” and a “them” occupying (and being) in a partially connected time-place while at the same time exhibiting not difference but divergence, that is, what makes each (of “us” and “them”) be. This “complex we” implodes the possibility of a single locus of enunciation of the “self” because “us” and “them” occupy it, always considering that even in divergence “we” affect each other. Unlike the simple we, the “complex we” is what exceeds what the usual “we” is not»* (Cadena, Marisol de la, 2019 : 478).

To continue her argument, the “complex we” is about tangible changes and cultural shifts, the disappearance of past ties and the birth of a new sense of Ukraine during the war. Such a sense of new space is not yet coherent, clear, and consistent because of its vulnerability. The “complex we” is a representation of other forms of being, that each of us dimension did not realise before the wartime period. The “complex we” is a new form of existential state from which the self and the Other emerge in relational terms as the effective results of differences. The “complex we” is not just a phenomenon, but a discursive and narrative process that makes us stronger and more conscious every day.

However, I would like to bring this optic closer to a less concrete structuring and outline the ontological form of the new complex reality. The “complex we” is, thus, a kind of socio-cognitive mental map with the help of which we perceive ourselves and the world, and it is about a fundamentally different principle of the basic structural organization of such a world view caused by war. Such a map has several points of reference or basic concepts, which I will try to outline with the help of analysed artistic visual objects and practices. Currently, I intend to describe the epistemology of the “complex we”, while simultaneously integrating theoretical reflections and practical analysis of artistic works through the process of case studies and content analysis. My practice has aimed to exemplify the semiotically significant constituents of the “complex we” conceptualized in the psycho-emotional complexes of the art discourse.

## Homelessness

*One of the complex configurations of the outlined concept is the state of “homelessness”.*

This concept acquires various configurations – political, existential, psychological, social, etc. The shared sense of homelessness becomes an important factor capable of uniting artists in the newly created metamodern (in the form of a combination of previously incompatible epistemes and concepts), geopolitical and socio-cultural configuration, and forming a new community that strives through artistic reflection to work through trauma and imaginatively create a space of unity, to imagine the concept of Home, which is under constant threat, in a situation of uncertainty and danger. Today, in Europe and other countries of the world, Ukrainians are once again forced to build a new *symbolic representation of the House*, the foundations of which I see in the concept of a “complex we”. At the same time, art projects are aimed at working through the trauma from the loss of the previous *Home* and accumulating intentions to create a new safe environment that realizes the archetype of *the Home* in the conditions of the “homeless” reality, the path to which, however, lies, metaphorically speaking, through the *Naked Room* in the conditions of war.

Kateryna Lysovenko’s eponymous installation project, *The Naked Room* (2023, The Naked Room Gallery, Kyiv, Ukraine), is a powerful metaphor for such a “homeless” existence. She depicted a “dry”, cool, unfriendly, dark room, a cold space in which one cannot feel comfortable, which cannot be identified with human ideas of home cosiness. This is an image of a house

where there is practically nothing but whiteness and grey, where everything is damp and creepy, where the mind is filled with anxiety, and the feeling of emptiness and fluidity of the surroundings only intensifies the state of human unease (fig.1).

How does the artist see and describe this lonely space? “I want to create a room that is transparent, very uncomfortable, as if dissolving before our eyes, a room NOT for humans” (Калита, Н., Педоренко, М., 2023). The key motif for her is the motif of re-arranging the house. This particular image is iconic, metaphorical and, in fact, it refers to the archetypal meaning of life. The war destroyed the traditional idea of home. We need a radical reformatting of fundamental things to enter a new future without war. In the room, she installs basic objects for life – a chair and a table, a single bed in the corner with drawings of trees scattered on it, and several family portraits and landscapes sporadically placed on the grey walls. Kateryna Lysovenko demonstrates in her visual images and narratives the feeling of fear that shines through the walls of the room-not-for-humans as a desire to restructure it and restore it to its original and cosier form.

The bare space depicted by Kateryna Lysovenko represents the fragility, but also the transparency of the modern world. The war made everyone visible and vulnerable. Having left their homes, people became part of the emigration processes in Europe and the world at large, while the world is getting to know Ukraine with its ruined cities and shattered human lives. And in this case, a new common experience is being developed, as Kateryna says. So,

everyone is in a situation where life has been reduced to basic values that need to be rethought, and then on this basis, build a new life in and around them. We are talking about a huge biosocial reformatting: the Russian-Ukrainian war has shown how unprepared the established social models, international institutions, etc. were in the face of such unforeseen aggression, as their activities failed to guarantee security and peace in the world, as well as to protect Ukrainian land from enemy deadly weapons. A metaphorization of this narrative is presented by Lysovenko. The image of the *naked room* literally became an iconic and expressive bell of the abandonment of Ukrainian homes, the archetypal Ukrainian home falling into the situation of the same archetypal fire, the metaphorical burning of the old life in the fire, and the need for a huge recovery after the victory.

Synchronous visual projects that unfold in the dimension of war and are tied to the ontology of its course carry an additional burden in the context of the polemic on homelessness. In fact, this is another element of Kateryna Lysovenko's project *Naked Room*, which appeared during the full-scale invasion, and actualises her long-lasting reflections on the *survivor's guilt* (Калита, Н., Педоренко, М., 2023). Through the relaying of her own experience as a displaced mother, the artist was looking for a form that was understandable to everyone, a way to talk about the experience of war and mediation. What does it mean to be at a safe distance from the war zone? What does it mean to manifest one's presence in the war when the military conflict remains distant from direct perception? The artist



Fig. 1. Lysovenko K. *The Naked Room* (2023, The Naked Room Gallery, Kyiv, Ukraine).  
Image credit: The Naked Room Gallery.

is looking for answers to these and other ethical questions through the metaphor of bare space as a state of homelessness and being lost in an uncomfortable room. This parallel refrain in the theoretical field is reflected in the work of Mary A. Favret, who defines the epistemology of war as an *epistemology of mediation* (Favret, 2009 : 12), shifting our vision of time and space from order and security to the context of a conflict of potential threat to human life with its set of disturbing affective reactions. “Under such conditions of mediated knowledge, the sense responds not only to the war itself but also to the privileged experience of experiencing it – the privilege of knowing war from a distance” (Favret, 2009: 13), which Lysovenko, however, defines as survivor's guilt, giving relevance not only to the physical construction of war but also to the feelings and experiences of Ukrainians during the war, which are often personalised and differentiated (Калита, Н., Педоренко, М., 2023).



Fig. 2. Lysovenko K. *The Naked Room*. 2023  
(The Naked Room Gallery, Kyiv, Ukraine).  
Image credit: The Naked Room Gallery.

That is why Lysovenko's own Instagram, like many other Ukrainian artists today, becomes a mediation tool. It is not only communication with the recipient, but also the creation of a virtual diary document, a memoir archive that has its own epistemological voice and is a narrative of truth, often uncomfortable and despised. "At some point, I felt a break in my condition, in the condition of the people I know. The first months [of the full-scale war] were dominated by the unity of everyone with everyone, some misunderstandings from the past were forgotten. I had a physical sense of the state. Everyone's survival depended on everyone else's," says Lysovenko (Калита, Н., Педоренко, М., 2023). Lysovenko speaks about a special stratification of experience, deep psychic levels that war touches, separating its participants because of the multiplication of a new type of experience: those who survived feel guilty over those who died.

The space of such a conditional room is both a physical and a cognitive locus: the

room is presented not only as an aesthetic object, but also as a carrier of a certain socio-cultural situation, as a *fragile site of longing, belonging and memory* (Lauzon, 2017 : 14). Drawing parallels between the war-torn regions and the Chernobyl-devastated space of the Kyiv Polissia region suggests a fundamental connection to a distinct cultural stratum, cognitive framework, repository of memories (Pierre Nora), and reservoir of archetypal notions about the world. This comparison underscores the profound impact of these ravaged landscapes as potent symbols that evoke a shared understanding of collective trauma, historical memory, and universal themes that resonate across different contexts and experiences (Manier, D., Hirst W., 2008). Through this lens, the significance of these spaces transcends their tangible destruction, reaching into the realm of symbol and meaning that echoes through time.

The visual component of the room concept takes us to the dimension of transhistorical sustainability, realised in the unity of the physical and metaphysical in this space. Social life is intertwined with the past, realised in the oral history of each family, in the traditions of the people who lived in this space, inhabiting it not only physically but also narratively. The aftermath of both the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 and the ongoing war in Ukraine has redefined the notion of "Home", an archetype deeply rooted in human consciousness, as they have shaped a new form of existence characterized by displacement, loss, and perpetual uncertainty. The concept of "Home" has been fundamentally transformed as individuals are forced to navigate the ruins of

Fig. 3. A kindergarten in the former village of Zalissia (Chornobyl region, Ukraine). Image credit: Emma Thomson



their former lives and attempt to carve out a new sense of belonging amidst the chaos and destruction (Lauzon, 2017). Thus, the evolving nature of “Home” in this context remains elusive, with the outcome yet to be determined as the war persists and its toll of casualties continues to rise, leaving a trail of broken lives and shattered communities in its wake (fig. 2, 3).

The archaeological component of the naked room concept takes us to the space of the changed territory of residence – from the comfortable space of the house to the uncomfortable space of frontline foxholes and trenches in the contemporary reality of war. Some artists and cultural professionals are forced to stay in the trenches, and the trench is the image of the room where the sacrament of creativity takes place, which is already recorded in the memoirs, notes, and social media posts of artists who have gone through this experience. Their reflections have become part of a new narrative, realised through the strategies of verbal history, which affirms the memory of the tragic present. In fact, this is a new modi-

fied form of the trench visions from direct participants in the events, tell the world the truth about the catastrophe of war as a catastrophe of destroyed space, a *naked room* where the land itself was scorched and the inhabitants killed.

#### **Testimonio as a form of manifestation of the “*complex we*”**

I am sure you agree with the following statement: normally war involves both the archiving of a crime (documentation, excavation, description and preservation of fragments, photographs as “witnesses”), and work with memory, unprocessed historical traumas, the incorporation of historical and political contexts, crime, and punishment (nazism, rashism, but also communism). It is akin to bringing verbose order to the chaos of war, where you first need to count the losses, record the events and the dead, make sense of the massive loss of life, commemorate, highlight the nature of forward operations, promote the reintegration of veterans, and make it clear

that enthusiastic relief can be felt at this intermediate stage (McLoughlin: 7).

Being inside the ontology of war is diverse from being at a chronicled remove. The artist is a witness of the war, he or she is the *object of evidence*, that is, its “material carrier”. Artists’ works represent personal and collective traumas related to the historical and cultural-political context, reacting in different ways to the experience of war and their own objectivity in this war, rethinking the violent crimes of history that caused personal, collective, and generational traumas.

The scholars describe a significant link between the concepts of the *material witness* and the *testimonio* in the modern humanitarian discourse. The use of *testimonio*, material evidence, and perspectives from both the third and first person allows for a comprehensive and impactful representation of personal experiences in situations of injustice and oppression. *Testimonio* provides individuals with a means to express their personal experiences of injustice and oppression (Vandenburg, 2021).

The use of *testimonio* in contemporary humanitarian research provides multiple layers of authenticity and perspective. *Testimonio* serves as essential material evidence in capturing and conveying the essence of an individual’s experiences, incorporating both their personal perspective and external evidence.

Therefore, *testimonio* is a kind of verbal message to the outer community and those ‘actors’ of the ‘complex we’ that are outside the wartime reality, and material witness is a kind of objectivity behind it, a physical experience of this wartime phenomenon.

As long as war continues, we are all ‘material’ witnesses to this catastrophe that unfolds in different forms and narratives. Stating in her essay that “materials can, in fact, bear witness”, Susan Schuppli presents a new operational conception of the evidential role of matter, exposing the practices and procedures that allow matter to be physical evidence (Schuppli, 2020: 14). Despite the fact that the concept itself was borrowed by Schuppli from the legal lexicon (Rouquet, 2023), in its non-bureaucratic interpretation, material witnesses are “nonhuman entities and machinic ecologies that archive their complex interactions with the world, producing ontological transformations and informatic dispositions that can be forensically decoded and reassembled back into a history” (Schuppli, 2020: 3). What Schuppli calls “reassembled back into history” or “material witness” is a refrain in one of the statements of one of the most prolific Ukrainian artists in the West, Nikita Kadan: “...numerous Ukrainian artists moreover started to work with ruins. ...These works contain all the components of testimony: polyphonic, full of torment. On the off chance that all these individuals live on ruins, they have a moral right to appeal to these ruins. We are witnesses to the same wrongdoings. It could be a reflection in a minute of extraordinary feeling – but it may be a broken reflection” (Bauer, 2022).

Artists nowadays work with “confirmation” craftsmanship, using physical evidence as testimony to the truth about the crimes of war. This craftsmanship is made from materials found within the ruins, from liquefied glass from burnt buildings or from presses torn from rooftops by shrapnel. Flotsam and



Fig. 4. Kadan N. Tryvoha  
*Sirens and the Mast*. 2023  
(Saint Peter's Church,  
Ypres, Belgian). Image  
credit: Nikita Kadan.



jetsam as fabric witnesses of war are given a modern frame and new meaning within the hands of the artists.

The case of Nikita Kadan is about the archiving of sounds as well as the use of rubble and metal sheets from the Ukrainian war zone as material witnesses of war. Nearly daily, his Instagram features the most important “voice” of the war – an air-raid siren. Chronologically sequenced photos from the visual diary reveal an attention to details and focus on the crime scenes. Combining affectively powerful sounds into a cyclical structure (every day, every morning) becomes a public reading of wartime and demonstrates the ability to recognize the power of witnessing in daily routine. Through the construction of a visual soundscape of this catastrophe as evidence of a crime, Kadan focuses on the construction of history and memory of this war. In his interview for *Vogue magazine*, Kadan talks about “the magical-ritual nature of the “politics of words” during war, which through the act of repetition, repetition with many voices, turns into wearpons” (Брикалін, 2023).

In 2023, the artist Kadan with the support of ‘In Flanders Fields’ museum created the installation *Tryvoha (Sirens and the Mast)*<sup>1</sup>, which, when translated from Ukrainian, has a double semantic meaning – both a natural feeling of fear of a threat and a signal to warn the population of the danger of an air. The sound piece is the voice of an opera singers repeating the sound of an air raid siren. The project is about sirens from Homer’s *Odyssey*, who seduced ancient sailors with their singing, so part of Kadan’s new work is a psychoanalyst’s comment about the connection between danger and desire (fig. 4).

<sup>1</sup> Due to martial law, Nikita Kadan could not leave Ukraine. His work was eventually realized by Ypres artist Palieter Hillewaere with the help of Lisa Guerra, Bea Callemeyn, and other Ypres crafts(wo)men, Galerie Transit (Mechelen), Asortymentna Kimnata gallery (Ivano-Frankivsk), Albertinum (Galerie Neue Meister) – Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. The sound piece was produced in collaboration with Roman Grygoriv and Illia Razu-meiko. Musicians: Lena Bielkina (mezzo-soprano), Ihr Zavhorodnyi (violin). Sound engineer Anton Vertipolokh. With support of the Future Art Lab, University for music and performing arts Vienna.

The scale of the war and the catastrophic nature of the new socio-cultural reality force artists to rethink the existential foundations of Ukrainian reality in their artistic reflection. The artists try to find in the external socio-cultural dimension those references that can reveal the depth of the tragedy. Accordingly, we are talking about the inclusion of mythological narratives, which deepen the perception of the catastrophe in its archetypal manifestation. I have already emphasised in the project *The Naked Room* that it has become a kind of symbol of such transformations and searches on the archetypal and mythological level. The war transforms the traditional idea of the archetypal home as a place of safety, a path that, in Jung's archetypal theory, leads to protection and a new life. The migration from Ukraine caused by the war still cannot exist in the coordinates of stability, because it is impossible to predict when and how the war will end.

In his narrative, Kadan exploits the topicality of war while intertextualising it with references to mythology, i.e. an archetypal narrative that reveals the level of catastrophe to an external recipient. The semiotics of the title reveals the instability of the space that becomes the object of artistic reflection. The associative series refers to a sense of fluctuation, uncertainty, and threat. At the same time, there are very clear references to the militaristic narratives of the past, which, in the receptive field of the Western viewer, constantly update the concept of war, catastrophe, death, the dead, and so on.

The installation was set up in Saint Peter's Church in the Belgian town of Ypres, which in 1917 was at the bloody epicentre

of the offensive operation on the Western Front in West Flanders, Belgium, during the First World War (Third Battle of Ypres) and was almost destroyed under 24-hour artillery fire. This battle is an intertextual allusion that, in Western reception, is clearly linked to the events on the front during the First World War, visualising one of the bloodiest and most horrific pages of that war.

The installation is made of chromium-plated iron and covered with a translucent fabric, the epicentre of which is a symbolic nail pointing into the dome of the cathedral. It represents the mast Odysseus was tied to when the sirens seduced him. Kadan views historical events through the prism of mythology and the matrix of philosophical discourse. Considering the dialectical perspective of Horkheimer and Adorno, as discussed by Kadan in 2023, the installation harnesses its structural and narrative potency by invoking the archetype of the wandering hero, Odysseus, who embarks on a challenging journey to return to his homeland, Ithaca, amidst numerous obstacles. By tapping into this timeless and universal narrative motif, the installation seeks to resonate with audiences on a deeper level, portraying the struggle for belonging, resilience, and the quest for homecoming that transcends specific contexts. Just like Odysseus navigating a perilous voyage back to his roots, the installation echoes the inherent human desire to find solace and restoration in the familiarity and comfort of one's origins, despite the adversities encountered along the way. Kadan is trying to recreate the ancient Greek myth in order to reassure at least the recipients of

this art project that a secure future is possible. In this we see the assertion of a new ontology, which the artists record in their artistic reflection. It is a question of creating a new history from scratch: the world must change fundamentally after the victory over the Russian aggressor, otherwise this war will lead to a total catastrophe that will reset history and create the need for a new mythological narrative of civilisation.

His approach to history is materialistic and at the same time hypothetically yearning. In the chaos of the war's digressive manifestations, Kadan looks for order in archiving the voices of war, in found things and objects, turning them into artefacts, not hiding the identification marks at crime scenes, unnoticed or deliberately hidden traces of the past, and demonstrating the phenomenon of Ukrainian trauma caused by the war with its massive violence where past and present are fungible (Bauer, 2022).

### Combatants' Legacy in 'Complex We'

War in Ukraine is shaped by psychological and psychophysiological factors such as military hospitals, wounds, contusions, psychotrauma, prosthetics, and the fact that soldiers are being taken overseas for treatment – all these factors impact the psychological makeup of the war, and medical experts have dubbed this war *the war of limbs*. The media is full of reports: “in Ukraine amputation of limbs reached the scale of the First World War”, “about 50,000 Ukrainians lost their limbs due to the war”, “Fighters after the loss of limbs...”.

*The Wall Street Journal* reported that the real number could be higher than 50,000



Fig. 5. Kadan N. *Their Words*. 2023 (National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, Kyiv, Ukraine). Image credit: Nikita Kadan.

because it takes time to enrol patients after they undergo the procedure. Germany's Ottobock, the world's largest prosthetics maker, which works with Kyiv to help amputees, estimates the number of amputees at about 50,000, based on data from the government and medical partners. According to the Kyiv-based charity fund Health of the Ukrainian People, the number of serious injuries caused by the war is 200,000. According to the foundation, about 10% of serious injuries usually require amputation of limbs. Such numbers reflect the way Russia is waging war, making heavy use of mines and artillery, missile and drone attacks targeting both soldiers and civilians (Pancevski, 2023).

In this regard, in his sound installation, *Their Words* (2023), Nikita Kadan relies on onto-epistemological factuality, because the work is based on the story of a war veteran

who experienced phantom pains due to the loss of limbs and the political confrontation surrounding the legalization of cannabis use in Ukraine. We are witnessing a war has caused an epidemic of pain and trauma among both soldiers and civilians, and Kadan's goal is to break the cycle of community silence that accompanies trauma and phantom pains (fig. 5).

The artist is a witness on behalf of a certain community, as if striving for strict objectivity. They act as an instrument of social justice – which, however, does not involve the personal heroism that might be inherent in him if he were a subject. Thus, Kadan maintains his objectivity – “as opposed to a subject who constantly shrieks, one can become a point of evidence” (Bauer, 2022).

This strategy echoes the reasoning of Marisol de la Cadena, who also speaks of the formation of a *new ontology*. According to Kadan, this person is an object of the war and a person who has lost their subjectivity in the conflict. “Perhaps I myself want to be a tool, a medium whose material can be used to testify: perhaps I want to let the earth or molten glass speak for itself. In this sense, I am one of the agents” (Bauer, 2022). In other words, they compare themselves to witnesses, debris, timeless landscapes, and ruined things, which reinforces Marisol de la Cadena's theory that there is no hierarchy between geos and bios determined by the possible catastrophe in the “complex we”. Thus, the Anthropocene serves as a new organizing element for social space. A human being is not regarded as an inviolable subject during times of war; rather, this human being becomes a component

of the reality of war since he or she can be annihilated alongside tangible items as a result of an attack. The battle drives reality toward an Anthropocene structure, that is, away from human subjectivity.

A soft prosthetic leg can be used as an element of testimony, a war and violence quota, that is displayed on stage and tells a story quietly, succinctly, discreetly. Sound, light, actor's voice, brief description of extreme experience. Kadan argues that war serves as the staging point where discourse and narrative are generated by utilizing the *rhetorical* practice of war. The use of testimony as a source, among other voices, allows viewers to be actively involved in the process of emotional healing, and also highlights the healing power of art.

### **Being themselves and not yourself in wartime**

Furthering Marisol de la Cadena reading, she has described a “complex we” concept as a phenomenon that “includes our mutual excesses or *forms of being* that each of us did not have in the “we”. This “complex we” is the shared condition from which “self” and “other” emerge relatively, as intra-active assertions of differences” (Cadena, Marisol de la, 2019: 478).

The new realities (*forms of being*) associated with the conquest ambitions of the Putin regime have sparked a nationwide resistance, with many Ukrainian artists calling for armed resistance. The world-famous opera singer Vasyl Slipak was killed by an enemy bullet near Debaltseve; the talented poet and photographer Maksym Kryvtsov, codenamed “Dali”, who managed to pub-

lish in his lifetime a collection of poems eloquently entitled “Poems from the Gap”, fell victim to rashists; the poets Yaroslava Chornohuz and Dmytro Lazutkin are in the battle zone, and their ‘trench’ poems won this year’s highest state award – the Taras Shevchenko National Prize of Ukraine. In one of his poems, Maksym Kryvtsov recalls how as a young boy he collected scrap metal to earn a few cents, and *today* he has to collect the remains of his comrades in the plantations, *people who look like a person or part of a person, there is nothing so cold in the world* – this tragic everyday life of the horrors of war creates a philosophy of everyday life that humanity is not yet ready to comprehend in the form of an absurd combination of life and death, the bitterness of loss and the triumph of victory.

By exploring the metamorphosis of a collective inability to see the significance of the ordinary, poet like Kryvtsov shed light on the deeper social phenomena that emerge in such contexts. In one of Kryvtsov’s photographs we see boots fixed in the space of an empty reality. This is a kind of invariant of the «naked room», it is not known what happened to the owner of these boots, but their existential loneliness condemns the recipient to immerse himself in the flow of the tragic experience of this reality captured in the lens. The boots will forever remain «homeless», belonging to no one. Their existence is a zero degree of speaking: it is impossible to fully understand the tragedy associated with the death of a soldier defending his own land.

This photo by Kryvtsov typologically connects this visual artistic narrative with the works of the French «School of



Fig. 6. Maksym “Dali” Kryvtsov, poet and soldier of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Image credit: hromadske.

Things», in particular the works of A. Rob-Guillier, N. Sarrot, and others. In another interpretation of this work, we can recall the theory of dematerialisation of things, which was inspired by the discourse of Romanticism, in particular French Romanticism. S. Mallarmé possessed this ability to dematerialise words, searching for the ontology of things. And here we see the same intention in Kryvtsov: the object removes all the layers in our reception, reaching the ontological level. The configuration of the transition of the living into the dead and the dead into the living, which has to be reborn, is extremely frightening. In the photograph, the boots are a fixation of a past life, a terrible



Fig. 7. *Untitled*, 2023.  
Image credit: Svitlana  
Bozhko.

existential situation in which reality is ontologised without the presence of a human being.

The boots are a record of a person's memory, an image of a world that is unemotional and at the same time so emotional that it cannot be reproduced verbally, representing the fullness of pain and suffering that exists outside this image (fig. 7). We can therefore speak of a non-image space, of its temporal and timeless dimension, of the *long duration* of the war, of the narrative of this duration that Bergson wrote about when he spoke of the existence of time.

Kryvtsov's photograph of boots, on the one hand, reproduces the object in its ontological status, but at the same time it is a metacultural phenomenon, it always contains a reference to another reality. And the specificity of the connection with this external reality determines the intensity of the reflection and the intensity of the feeling of pain, suffering, cruelty, or, on the contrary, gives hope for optimism and

light. This leads to the perception of culture as a factor that fixes the objects that make up the totality of reality, which, according to M. de la Cadena, is the «complex we». And this «complex we» includes biological processes (we see animal images in the photographs), geoprocesses (we see a piece of land with boots on it and a blade of grass growing next to it), anthropological and socio-cultural transformations linked to the fact that a poet or artist takes up arms to defend his country and his people. In such a counterpoint of love and aggression, of the struggle between good and evil, a «complex we» is realised, involving the transformation of the whole community, in the unity of the biogeosocial and anthropological. The complexity of such an artistic image determines and represents the ontology of reality and at the same time shows the infinity of references that arise in reflection.

It is clear that in the context of such a photograph there is an event that dramatically changes reality. And in another photograph we see not just a cat, but we

understand that it is an animal that has been left without human care. And we see a soldier defending his country, its history and identity from the enemy on his own land.

A young writer and warrior Artem Chekh, in his essay “*I Spent Five Days in a Trench Waiting for Death. It Was Pure Hell*”, describes his radical transformation from a writer to a man with a gun. He had planned to write a novel about a Ukrainian soldier who took part in the American Civil War but changed the scenario when he found himself on the western edge of Bakhmut<sup>2</sup> with a gun in his hand. And after that, he reflects on why he was at the front and what he needed to do to realise this goal. Let’s agree with Artem Chekh in his essay, composed close to the western edges of Bakhmut, is there an honest concern among Ukrainians that hundreds of thousands of individuals are willing to put their lives on the line, and forsake their families, by attacking overwhelmed trenches or dry steppes? Is it safe to assume that they are longing for this unnerving experience? “We have children, families, jobs, hobbies, parcels in the mail. And some of us have an unfinished novel about the adventures of a Ukrainian in America who didn’t want to fight but couldn’t do otherwise. We also cannot do otherwise, because our enemies are trying once more to take away our right to live on our land. Because they are trying to take away our right to freedom” (Chekh, 2023).

2 Bakhmut, a city in eastern Ukraine, was the site of a large-scale clash between Ukrainian and Russian troops. The battle for the city, known as the ‘Bakhmut Meatgrinder’, was the longest in the Russian-Ukrainian war and held great strategic importance for both sides. As of the beginning of 2023, the town had been destroyed by over 60%, and by May it was completely destroyed.



Fig. 8. Artem Chekh at the frontline, May 2022. Image credit: Artem Chekh.

Let me quote another statement of Artem Chekh’s: “How could I not pick up a weapon here? For those who lived for many decades in the cozy arms of democracy and freedom, who don’t know the fear of captivity and torture, it is difficult to understand why such peaceful people – who from time immemorial grew wheat, mined iron and coal, and grazed cattle on boundless meadows – defend every meter of their country with such fury. But I know the answer. This is our wonderful land. And it must be free” (Chekh, 2023).

The idea that we, the “complex we,” are compelled to shield ourselves and participate in the warfare of others, is a fundamental aspect of our existence, as we are all capable of providing protection against all forms of aggression and are equipped with weapons of mass destruction (fig. 8).

During the war in Ukraine, artists and writers explore the profound impact of war on the creative consciousness, as they often feel the need to join the struggle not only as soldiers, but also as chroniclers and interpreters of the conflict, witnessing and depicting a new ontology of reality. They are driven by a desire to capture the emotions, human experiences and socio-political realities generated by military struggles. Through their works, they seek to give voice to the experiences of those directly affected by the war, to shed light on mostly tragic stories and to draw attention to the complex and multifaceted nature of the conflict. They fight because they believe that their unique perspective can contribute to a collective understanding of war as a first-person testimony and a form of new reality.

### Landscape as a “material witness” of war

Exploring the war and its devastating topographical effects, Kate McLoughlin notes: “War is fought over and in space, it alters irrevocably the space on and within which it occurs. But it also brings into being a unique situation, unclassifiable as either neutral ‘space’ or significant ‘place’, vital and intense yet temporary (...) and arbitrary, as much a product of experience as of geographical factors, transformative, requiring special consciousness (...) from those within it” (McLoughlin: 83). Despite the uncertainty and unclassifiable nature of the situation, it is observed that the visual strategies and ways of expression of artists have changed with the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Rather than attempting

to abandon artistic practice, artists have come to realize that their activity can be a diverse and individual contribution to the war.

The earth is a material witness of this war, a silent witness of the catastrophe against humanity. At the same time, it becomes a material and an instrument of memory of the tragedy and crimes of war.

*The Silent Book BBB*<sup>3</sup> project (2023) by Italy-based Ukrainian artist Iryna (Ozi) Ozarynska, whose structure unfolds in three semantic planes. The Silent Book could be seen as a triangle of the devil in the chronological dimension – Babyn Yar, Bucha, and Borodyanka – with their victims, continuity and archiving of continuity. It should be clarified here that she is working in one of the multidisciplinary projects where she uses visual means to record the atrocities of war, works with “reflected” history and “unprocessed” evil that came to us in the form of prejudice. The artist literally “paints” with earth brought from the disaster sites in the Kyiv region (fig. 9).

The *Book* deals with the theme of collective pain of total communist, nazi and rashist evil through visual, artistic images. It is a reminder that unpunished local evil gives rise to global evil. It is a view

3 The Silent Book Project „Triangle of Evil: Communism, Nazism, Rashism“ (Ukrainian earth, paper, author’s technique, 2023): artist Iryna Ozarynska (Odesa/Kyiv/Venice), curator Svitlana Lyakhovets (Kyiv/Vilnius), historians Oleksandr Mayevsky and Roman Pidkur (Kyiv). The book is a part of the project „Bykivnia, Babyn Yar, Bucha – Between the Masacre and the Memory of It (Triangle of Evil: Communism, Nazism, and Rashism)“, which is currently being carried out by the NGO „SVITARTA“ with the support of the EVZ Foundation.





Fig. 9. Ozarynska (Ozi) I. *The Silent Book. Triangle of Evil: Communism, Nazism, Rashism.* 2023. Image credit: Iryna (Ozi) Ozarynska.

of criminal regimes through the prism of universal values and empathy for every victim, regardless of how long ago the crime was committed. Finally, the current war and the horrific massacres that the Russian invaders have already committed and are continuing to commit put on the agenda the question of rethinking the tragedies of the last century and their organic incorporation into the general commemorative paradigm of European society of the memories of today's tragedies (Lyakhovets, 2023).

There are no texts in the *Book*, it is a silent dialogue with the recipient through the visual perception of allegorical images that blur the line between one's own and another's pain. This book is a pure emotion of experiencing the pain of tragedies caused by totalitarian occupation regimes.

A characteristic feature of Ozarynska's project is the fixedness and almost leaden immobility of the book's pages under the weight of clots of Ukrainian black soil, which «write» the silent history of the tragic present. Densely covered with earth with impurities of glue and water, the pages of

the book become an eloquent metaphor for the transmission of collective memory, the charred landscape of Ukraine, a witness to evil and its impunity. In the *Silent Book* project, *land is figured as a text of war* (McLoughlin, 2011), declaring a much more eloquent symbol, but not a rhetorical one.

Photographer Yana Kononova has conducted her research in southern Ukraine this year to document how the explosion of the Kakhovska HPP changed the local landscape, taking one piece of land from people and giving another in return. She started working on the digital photography *Desperations series*, dedicated to the environmental disaster in southern Ukraine, in the summer of 2023, after the de-occupation of the Kherson region from the Russian troops. The main motive of her work was to document the complex relationship that creates a state of existential tension between peaceful existence and fear of the reality of a new catastrophe. In Kononova's war photographs, there are ordinary black-and-white subjects of the landscapes of Nikopol, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia – a coastline inhabited by

Fig. 10. Kononova Y. Series "Desperation", dedicated to the ecological catastrophe in southern Ukraine in the summer of 2023. Image credit: Birdinflight.



abandoned ships, an industrial landscape with Dnipro structures, bridge arches, and a rocky island on the Dnipro, Khortytsia (fig. 10).

This media project illustrates the special relationship between war and altered landscape. Semantic contrast between the disaster and the ordinary effects becomes important for the recreation of the local landscape as a geological chronicle of man-made disasters, where life once flourished. "Looking at them, you can travel deep into history, observe how the symbols of Soviet industrialisation are superimposed on the consequences of a major disaster – the destruction of the Kakhovka dam" (Goldstein, 2023). The duty of art during times of war is to capture and communicate the intense nexus of tension and hardship stemming from intricate conditions that are intertwined with both the psychophysiological realm and the geological landscape.

The project's framework and titles serve to amplify the sense of being trapped within the mental and physical confines of obliterated towns like Avdiivka, Bucha, Borodianka, Kherson and Mariupol, illustrating the impact of human desolation within this harrowing context. The depiction of this inescapable environment of devastation and despair reflects the grim reality faced by individuals caught in the midst of conflict, underscoring the profound emotional and physical toll wrought by war on both individuals and communities.

The landscape, bearing the scars of war in the form of bullet holes, shrapnel from rockets, and the haunting remnants of fallen russian invaders, epitomizes the brutal aftermath of conflict, its soil serving as a tangible testament to the violent narrative etched across the ravaged terrain and stripped vegetation. Both those directly embroiled in the battle zone and artists capturing these scenes through visual

expressions exhibit a profound *topographical awareness* (Kate McLoughlin) of the unfolding warfare, mirroring the dual perspectives of firsthand witnesses and creative interpreters who seek to document and convey the palpable realities of war through their respective roles as participants or observers within the war-torn landscape.

**Concluding remarks.** Irrevocably altered space as a consequence of war is difficult to classify. However, it is possible to classify the unique situation generated by the altered space, which, according to Kate McLoughlin, appears as a product of experience, geographical factors, and transformations, which ultimately requires a special consciousness from all its participants. De la Cadena defines all these participants through the category of the “complex we”, manifesting that the fragility of being contributes to the consolidation of bios, geos and Anthropos in order to find new forms of preserving being.

Considering artists as witnesses and recorders of contemporary wartime, I outlined the following key reference points that structure the “complex we”: categories of psychological temporality (loss of security, destruction of the archetype of Home, remoteness or, on the contrary, proximity to the epicentre of hostilities and attack), epistemology (structures of consciousness in the situation of war, the lifeworld of war), grammar (forms of representation) and affect (sensuality).

Military aggression has generated other types of threats after February 2022, causing the destruction of the ecosystem in Ukraine, disruption of the normal functioning of social and cultural infrastructure, etc. In this new bio-socio-political order, a situa-

tion of special dispositional relations is being formed, which manifest themselves in practices of self-preservation and new identification, forced migration, the discourse of homelessness, and the need to record the horrors of war. With the help of visual projects, chaos is conquered and “tamed” in order to establish and consolidate a “complex we”. The structure of the “complex we” in a phenomenological way leads to a special reflection in art projects. Art, in particular visual practices, appears as a form of mediation of the experience of war, as an intention to structure it, to search for adequate grammatical forms and discursive models. The motif of home becomes one of the key ones; the “complex we” is in a situation of ontological homelessness: the fear of a possible attack, emigration and physical change of residence, etc. has led to the reflection of the fears of the “complex we” at the level of motifs and images that are the product of artistic reflection by contemporary Ukrainian artists – from feelings of guilt, rethinking the archetypal dimension of the existence of home, to the destruction of the eco-space and the earth as a whole. Art reveals the problem of the military, focusing in particular on their injuries and the need for rehabilitation, etc.

Finally, in view of this, the hunt for the archetypal world order and its revision is determined by the following methodological optics: the creation of contemporary visual practices, we are connected to them, the “complex we” is attached to them as a new type of community that realizes itself, in particular, through the art of reflection, represented in the analysed in our exploration of visual objects, artistic practices, etc.

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