

## "TROUBLED HOME": DISPLACED PLACE IDENTITY IN THE WARTIME WORKS OF UKRAINIAN ARTISTS

Artists working with issues of displacement, especially those who have experienced displacement themselves, can implement cognitive and performative actions to re-order, re-conceptualize, re-frame, and re-shape the identity of a home place.

OLEKSANDRA NENKO

Dr. Sc., collegium member at Turku Institute for Advanced Studies University of Turku, visiting researcher at UNIARTS



Irina Bondarenko, Kharkiv-Ljubljana

*Dreaming of the Windows at Dear Home* painting, collage, mixed technique, August 2022.

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Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine started on February 24, 2022, a large corpus of Ukrainian artworks have emerged in reaction to the loss of human lives, violation of human and national rights and freedoms, and unprecedented challenges to peaceful life in Ukrainian cities. Based on my interview data and secondary data on artistic statements in public media, I argue that many Ukrainian artists have felt an obligation to speak as public figures and citizens and to address numerous traumatic changes in the lives of Ukrainians. One of the addressed issues is the ongoing trauma of the "troubled home", which includes the actual ruination of thousands of residential buildings, disorder of the homeland as Ukrainians knew it (due to the challenged national borders and temporarily occupied territories), transition of the peaceful landscape of Ukrainian cities into wartime guarded spaces, forced relocation from one's own home places to other locations, along with other manifestations. The tragedy is ongoing, as the war continues, vast territories are under occupation, and redevelopment of the cities, including residential housing, has only started.

It is estimated that since war began in Ukraine in 2014, 14,7 million people have had to relocate, many of them twice in the course of 8 years (inhabitants of Donbass region and Crimea). Since 2014 "internally displaced people" (IDP) have become a regular topic in the agenda of Ukrainian internal affairs, including social and migration policies; as of April 13, 2020, the number of registered IDPs in Ukraine was almost 1,5 million people. Since February 24, 2022, Ukrainian temporarily displaced people, who are also sometimes called refugees (in Ukrainian policies and public discourse this is an unwelcome term), have formed a massive human wave. According to the Verkhovna Rada Human Rights Ombudsman's December 1, 2022, figures: in Ukraine there are 4,7 million registered IDPs; 14,5 million Ukrainians had left the country since February 24<sup>th</sup>; and 11,7 million people relocated to the countries of the European Union. "Displacement" in the form of destruction also hit housing. According to the regional military administrations, from February 24, 2022, to October 18, 2022, almost 160,000 damaged or destroyed objects were recorded in the territories available for counting; among those are predominantly residential premises – more than 142,000. Kyiv School of Economics reported damages as of November 2022: the number of destroyed and damaged private and apartment buildings is estimated to be 143,800.

Not surprisingly in such a context, reflecting upon "home" as a troubled symbol and concept, and finding artistic forms to express emotional aspects of trauma, as well as new signifiers for the

concept of home and the discourse of homeland became a creative task for Ukrainian artists. In place scholarship, home is called the "first place," fulfilling primary personal needs of safety, spatial positioning, and belonging (Oldenburg 1989). "Troubled home" is, in turn, the home being physically or discursively under hazard and risk of loss, causing traumatic experiences of the "self" as the owner or a dweller of the home. Personal identity and well-being are dependent on a strong feeling of place attachment and an elaborated materialized image of home (Low and Altman 1992). The primary function of a place is to engender a sense of belonging and attachment, and rootedness in a home place is "a knowing that is the result of familiarity through long residence" (Tuan 1980: 8). If the ordered, known, habitual place is violated, this creates disruption in personal identity as well. "Troubled home" as a concept signifies the interrupted routine of one's everyday life and attachment to place, as well as the problematization of a home place itself lost due to its physical ruination or to the necessity to leave it for a safer place. A human being cannot endure in such a state for a long time, and conscious actions to reframe a personal identity and identity of a home place have to be undertaken (Brown and Perkins 1992).

Scholars have recognized artists as knowledge creators (Sutherland and Acord 2007; Young 2003) and artworks as capable of communicating new meanings of place and space (Nenko et al 2017). Therefore, artists working with issues of displacement, especially those who have experienced displacement themselves, can implement cognitive and performative actions to re-order, re-conceptualize, re-frame and re-shape the identity of a home place. In their works, witnessing the troubled home can occur as narration of what is hindered or lost. Artistic knowledge creation can manifest itself in reestablishing the sense of home through emotional rituals, e.g., mourning for the home left behind, and reinforcing the identity of home by naming and ordering its symbolically important features and alienating the unwanted ones from this image through metaphorical or direct criticism.

In this paper, I look more closely at four projects by Ukrainian artists, illustrating the notion of the "troubled home" in artistic discourse and materiality of the artworks. I rely upon the socio-semantic approach to material culture to analyze the meanings codified in artistic narratives and forms (Gottdiener 1995). My choice of the projects is quite personal, as I know these artists, and have had interviews and personal conversations with them. At the same time, these projects represent different means of artistic expression - drawing, photography, collage techniques, and performa-

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tive rituals – and it is my intention to show that the attention to the “troubled home” is found across artistic genres and becomes a meta-theme in the arts. In addition, these artists are united by their local identities; three projects are made by artists from Kharkiv, which is also my home city, and one project by artists from Kyiv. The creators of three of these projects relocated to the safety of cities in the European Union, while artists of the fourth stayed in Kharkiv. All of the relocated artists have expressed in the interviews and conversations their wish to return to their homes in Ukraine. For all of the artists “home” is a universal topic, related to the ideology of humanism, human rights, and freedom; the artworks presented here thus have a clear sociopolitical dimension, but without harsh ideological claims, which are often found in other Ukrainian artworks of the wartime. As such, these artworks have a stronger therapeutic than ideological effect. All of the artists gave their consent for the public disclosure of their names.

### Windows on to the home place

The first artwork I am discussing here is made by a Kharkiv artist Irina Bondarenko, who had to relocate to Ljubljana with her family. Though primarily a musician, since the full-scale invasion, Irina has been creating numerous artworks in various techniques, such as drawing, painting, collage, mosaics, textile applications, and others; she also often creates poems. Irina is running a channel in Telegram social media, where she posts her artworks. For me personally, the flow of artworks in this channel offers a way to empathize, mourn, believe, and even laugh in an imaginary community of displaced people, who are willing to live through the tragic existential situation and to build a normal peaceful future, who have to rethink their views on the outer world, and their local and national identity. The artworks created by Irina are always messages about her own feelings, as well as statements to the public.

The one presented here is the artist’s metaphorical vision of the “home-left-behind”. The semantics of this image shows different shapes of windows in Kharkiv, its nature, and bits of music associated with the city. At the same time, there is a historical layer in the image - the material symbol of a traditional Ukrainian house, *khata* (hut). Blue and yellow colors remind of Ukrainian national symbolism. In general the artwork resembles a human dream of home, which rests on its archetypal elements, cultural patterns (window shapes, music), and natural landscape, powerful and enduring whatever the current ruinations. The con-

structed metaphorical link between the personal identity and the identity of place is an attempt to overcome the trauma of the troubled home.

During wartime, the habitual image of home is hindered by the outer hazard, in its whole contour or its particular items. One of the symbolic parts of the homes’ surfaces are windows, which are pathways connecting the inner world of the house with the outer world. In the second artistic and research project I discuss here, a “window” of a house is a central symbol, as in the previous project. Once a window was a connection between the private and the public, between the home and the world. Now it has been violated, becoming a channel of threat. Artists and researchers Dmytro Zaiets, Alisa Aleksandrova, and Alina Yesaian from Kharkiv are trying to reappropriate this element of the house, alienated and destroyed by the war. Artists are rethinking the form of the normal state of the window and they construct a new norm by showing the resourcefulness and virtuosity of people, when they guard their windows from the threat. The self-made fortifications of the windows are manifestations of the inhabitants’ material possession over them and their ability to take back their windows. Describing the project, Dmytro Zaiets says: “Windows, created to protect and illuminate the dwellings, today are canceled by the war and need to be strengthened. To protect homes from explosions, looters and invaders, duct tape, blankets, linoleum, an old fence and many other leftovers are used. [...] we look at the forms of fortification using the example of the city of Kharkiv and see how the perception and interaction with the window changes in wartime for the sake of more reliable protection of housing and one’s own life”. Thus, the windows of the house become a symbol per se, as rethought material items of everydayness metaphors of resistance, and the will to protect one’s home place and homeland.

### Experiencing displacement

The third project I consider, the performance *Where are You? (Де Ти? - in Ukrainian)* staged in Vilnius, puts forward one of the core questions that has haunted Ukrainians since February 24, 2022. This is the question of physical (dis)placement, the question of belonging and self-identity, the question about one’s temporary “home”, which is never a home in its full value. During the action, performers from Kharkiv, Maria Koreneva and Sandro Garibashvili, were telling the stories of their “nowhereness” with their bodies, using simple but vivid decorations symbolizing homes and



Dmytro Zaiets, Alisa Aleksandrova and Alina Yesaian, Kharkiv  
*The Blind Windows*  
 media-art exhibition in gallery Svitlo, Lviv, July 2022  
 © Dmytro Zaiets, Alisa Aleksandrova and Alina Yesaian



Maria Koreneva, Sandro Garibashvili, Kharkiv  
*Where Are You?*  
 physical theater performance, Vilnius, May 2022  
 © Maria Koreneva, Sandro Garibashvili

windows, trains, cars, and forgotten toys. Maria narrates about the project: "Since the beginning of the war we keep asking each other and friends, relatives, people we used to know one question - *Where are you?* And this question means a lot of different things: the place, the time, the mood, the question of safety, ideology, even relationship with gods. That is the title of our performance: "Де ти?", which means "Where are you?" in Ukrainian and, for a strange metaphorical reason, this is a sign you can frequently see during this war. It means "children" in Russian; it is a plea to Russian soldiers not to fire, which we saw on roads, houses, and shelters when we rode out of Kharkiv..."

The artists performed several therapeutic gestures during the performance, signifying the wish

to overcome displacement and to reconnect the fragments of the lost "home". Watching, listening, and empathizing with performers, the spectators could recollect their own bodily reactions, their own painful moments, and give way to their emotions. "I sang a Ukrainian children's song '*A crane flew over a hundred seas, a hundred lands*'... Thus I created a ritual of witnessing for the spectators, and many of them felt themselves migratory birds the way we did", says Maria. The artists created other rituals of witnessing the "unspoken" with recorded sounds of shelling, sirens, and cries of people, showing intense bodily reactions and movements. Reframing the state of helplessness into a metaphorical control over the troubled home was performed as well. For example, during

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the performance Maria was making *motankas* - traditional Ukrainian dolls, given to a person going for a trip to guide her home and guard her on the way. Maria's *motankas* were made for specific people dear to her; on the stage, she sent them with imaginary trains all over the world.

Artists also address the development of new routine knowledge about one's home place, help articulate new forms of experience, and raise awareness of its value, aesthetics, and mental energy. Forcedly acquired knowledge of organizing home routines during the wartime - boarding up the windows, hiding behind the two walls on the floor, making storage of food and water, living with lights shut down, packing necessary things into a bag - is not only pragmatic, but it causes pain. The arts can aid in overcoming refusal and displacement of one's experience, reaching its deliberate pronunciation and eventual admiration instead. The fourth case I discuss here, a craftivism project by Tonya Melnyk and Masha Ravlyk Luki-anova from Kyiv, entitled *Textile Book of Items inside an Emergency Bag*, addresses this. The pages of this book were made by participants of 3-day-long workshops in Helsinki. Each of the pages in the book represents a person and the things she took (or would have taken) into her emergency bag when leaving home or, conversely, the things she had to leave behind.

The metaphoricality of the book allows speaking of things that are not only technically items of the first priority, such as documents and money, but also easy to carry things embodying sense of home and the memory of a lifetime, e.g. a family photograph, one's mother's necklace, or a small toy mascot. When participants created pages of their emergency bags, meditatively thinking about the choices they had to make, they returned to the "expelled" experiences of their bodies, like the stress of packing or longing for deserted things, and reconstructed the hierarchy of things signifying home, taken or forgotten. Each page of the book was a way to say: "This is my memory, my self, my home, and my choices made" and served as a material proof of the gained experience, a step to support the healing process. The book itself was crafted into an emergency bag, detaching the tragic experiences from the authors and inserting them into a complex materiality of a collaborative artistic work.

## Conclusion

All of the artistic projects are expressing their vision on the troubled home, bringing into attention its different scales (from an apartment to



Tonya Melnyk and Masha Ravlyk Lukianova, Kyiv-Helsinki  
*Textile Book of Items inside an Emergency Bag*,  
 participatory workshop with textiles, May 2022  
 © Tonya Melnyk and Masha Ravlyk Lukianova

the whole country) and components (structural items such as windows, ordinary belongings such as photographs and clothes, and cultural archetypes such as national colors or *motankas*). All of these artworks, as different as they are, give their spectators and participants, especially those with their own troubled sense of place identity, a certain therapeutic effect. They offer the possibility to mourn and dream of an archetypal home, as in Irina Bondarenko's work, and and, as in work by Tonya Melnyk and Masha Ravlyk Lukianova, to meditate and acknowledge the traumatic experience of leaving home and the significant memory objects maintaining the link between the self and

the place. But also to alleviate bodily tensions after suffering home violation and create connections – imaginative but reinforced by folk magic – with those who are personifying home, as in Maria Koreneva and Sandro Garibashvili's performance, and to gain strength in reappropriating the home back and resisting the outer evil by taking control over specific parts of a house as in project by Dmytro Zaiets, Alisa Aleksandrova and Alina Yesaian. The art of the displaced artists tells the stories of the troubled homes, showing ways of addressing the emotional and cognitive turbulence of the wartime.

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