

Residency in the Occupation: Art under Threat of Death

I started collecting material for this article in March, in the city of Kherson occupied by Russians since the 28th of February, 2022. It is a sort of an attempt to attract attention to the art of resistance in a provincial city in southern Ukraine. The artists who remained there demonstrate the highest fortitude under the most threatening circumstances. Despite this, the Art Residency in the Occupation still keeps working.

In 2021, at the II Culture Congress in Lviv named "The Scene of the Future", I [interviewed](#) Pascal Gielen, professor of sociology of art and politics at the Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts (Antwerp University, Belgium), and we touched on the topic of art residencies - then, firstly, in relation to the pandemic, which almost destroyed the prospects for the exchange of visions, the development of critical thinking, and the support of alternative art practices. But even then, Gielen emphasized the need for residencies as a shelter for artists fleeing repressive regimes or war zones. He gave examples of the artists' cultural resistance against the tyrannical actions of the authorities, showing how important it is for people of culture to feel solidarity: "Art residencies in this aspect offer practices of contemporary art involved in transnational social movements - when artists and participants of these movements work together over global issues such as like the colonial legacy, the Anthropocene, etc. Art reflects more slowly than disasters unfold, but without these practices it is impossible to make a complete picture of our ideas about them. They connect artists with experts and form unexpected and highly effective interdisciplinary collaborations that go beyond a specific residency."

Who knew then that next year it would affect us fully, and almost the entire civilized world was ready to offer Ukrainian artists and cultural actors shelters of this kind - both for survival and for the opportunity to reflect on the terrible consequences of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

I have my own experience of three art residencies - both as a curator, as a team member, and as a journalist. And I see how our artists tell the world the truth about the war through the language of the arts. It is also important for me to convey how cultural resistance takes place, as it is no less powerful than the physical one, as the front of culture is the place where a free future is being elaborated. Gielen's words became prophetic for many researchers: "Living in times of permanent disasters is both a nightmare and a great fortune for a researcher." We have a chance to turn the nightmare into documentation, so that history no longer suffers from gaps caused by "ideologies."

In addition, much has already been written about the need for a clear sounding of our independent voice in the international cultural and artistic scene, where for many years Russia has dominated as a representative of Eastern European artistic practices. Today, Ukrainian art criticism is at the stage of searching for new approaches, tools for the analysis of local artistic content and its logical integration into the global context. Ukrainian culture was successively destroyed over the

centuries. But Ukrainians resisted then, Ukrainians are holding their own with dignity now. Art has always been a weapon, especially during war. Currently, creative people of Ukraine hold the Ukrainian artistic front.

From shock to work

I was born and worked almost all my life in Kherson, southern Ukraine. In 2015 I founded the Urban Re-Public, which focused on the topics of contemporary art, urban planning, and protection and promotion of cultural heritage. Our projects have always had a sociopolitical dimension. We have involved young Kherson architects, artists, creative people, to reflect on the issues of urban improvement, saving unique local architecture, working with historical memory, rethinking the collections of regional museums. In other words, our practices have never been "l'art pour l'art."

Kherson was occupied almost immediately, on February 28. We were in shock for about three weeks. And then I saw the first works on the theme of war by artists who found themselves in the free territory, and I thought that the only "mental" salvation is to document everything that was happening to us now through the arts. I started interviewing those artists with whom I had often worked on various art projects. As a result, 6 people agreed to become a participant of the Art Residency in the occupation curated by me. It should be noted that they had already begun to reflect on the new terrifying reality, and not only in Kherson. Any tragic event in the whole country became a trigger for them. It was clear that publicity should be minimized, as those who collaborated with the occupiers willingly helped FSB officers compile lists of ATO members, activists, journalists, all potentially disloyal to the "new authorities." Before the Bucha massacre, we naively believed that people of culture were not of particular interest to Russians. But it turned out that in Russia, as in any totalitarian country, they understand well that it is necessary to annihilate the progressive layer of the population, thus decapitating the nation of its best representatives. Culture in an independent and democracy-seeking country is an area where the resistance immediately manifests itself.

"Humanitarian OCCUPATION!"

The first to respond was ZHUK*, a well-known naïve artist, making his painting on vintage fabrics. He had already started the work "The Unwanted Guest" (acrylic, old tablecloth). The canvas depicts a giant hornet as a symbol of the destroyer and invader, which is torn apart by protective insects. Actually, his studio became our art shelter, where we gathered and discussed ideas, shared news, and encouraged each other.



He performed his second work in the poster format "putin cock-a-doodle-doo" a few hours immediately after the atrocities in Bucha were made public. ZHUK made this poster, using the "prison's inmate code" as the only currently acceptable narrative about putin as a person not worthy of human treatment. The flagrant intolerance of the statement (putin is in makeup, "femininely" dressed and ready for "using") is redeemed by the thesis of the artist that for people like him, with strong "spiritual clamps", this is the most shameful way of punishment. Death is too merciful.



His next work is called "Humanitarian OCCUPATION", where the image of the Babylonian harlot personifies the coming of the antichrist with all his infernal "gifts." The symbolic letter of the beast is Z. It is a sort of the eschatological reflections, saturated with continuous wars, when the earth is flooded with completely non-figurative streams of blood.



Waiting for the barbarians

The female artist Marka* from the occupied village in the Kherson region expressed all her fears and pain in the art diary “The Z-Notes by Mrs. Solodukha.” Her first drawing “It is impossible to leave or to stay” became a symbol of tragic parting of family members due to war.



I publicize a part of her notes, with her consent, because she is not at all sure that she will survive. We all know how Russians are fierce with the civilians, especially with women, in rural areas.

"It was the day (February 24) when my life was divided into "before" and "after". "Before" was youth and enthusiasm. And plans for the future that now flew like smoke from every explosion. It rang in my head: what did you live and create for? What was all this for? Now what?... The heart was filled with bitterness and fell into the abyss. My eyes haven't dried out for three months. The food tasted of ash. Day after day, we followed the news in convulsions of horror, waiting for our turn, sitting on the suitcases standing in the corridor. In the New Year, I did not make wishes and for the first time in my life I celebrated in a black dress. With active hostilities around, we hid in the basement. It was terrible, especially at night, to hear the battles and see the tracer bullets from all sides. At the end of our street, not far from us, two houses burned down. Neighboring villages were affected badly. We seem to have survived by a miracle. Because of my resentment of the war, I got sick. Then I realized: anger is killing me from the inside. And you can't get sick, as there is no medicine and doctors around. After recovering, I began to philosophize: how will God now arrange my fate? My dreams got wild. It was time to let everything and everyone go. The house became a waiting station, and the bed turned into a crow's nest. Where you constantly listened to the silence and go to bed fully dressed. We decided not to hide in the basement: we could be buried under the rubble of the house and suffocate. We felt apathy. The terrifying atmosphere of the 90s reigned. Many people moved like zombies with upturned

faces and deep gloom in their eyes. There was an increase in alcohol sold directly from barrels in the markets. Several pubs were opened. One day, I, dressed in second-hand clothes, drove my scooter to the nearest store. I didn't understand where so many Russians in civilian clothes came from. Two such persons were sitting on a bench. With full cans of beer still sealed, they followed me in and began to waltz in the store, improvising with jokes. I caught a bad acting performance and stormed out of the store without buying anything. They followed me. And while I was starting the scooter, one man, imitating the sounds of a scooter, yelled five times: "I haven't fucked anyone today." With his plate-sized eyes staring at me. I drove home, sadly thinking that the same concrete was poured into their heads that lay on the road.

The war crossed out my whole life, but my tiny workshop beckoned me. But how could you draw if you heard explosions? I thought: who am I kidding and why? You can't pretend that the war is somewhere beyond. You have to document your experiences on paper. The eldest woman in the family, 86-year-old Solodukha, gave the name to the future album - "The Z-Notes by Mrs. Solodukha." I understand how delicate and not straightforward this work should be, though it still does not guarantee your security. The topic is complex. The theme is war! You have to think a hundred times before sketching. After all, the other day in our area, threats of repression had already been addressed to other creative people. So sit down and don't tweet loudly, as they say. But isn't it immoral to shoot a sitting bird?

I am going to make coffee. My feet stop at my home library. The gaze falls on Coetzee's book "Waiting for the Barbarians", and I stretch my lips to blow the dust off the cover. Time is historical. Extremely painful is issue of the future. Lots of people have left. And they won't come back. Despite the insurmountable circumstances, the nervous pandemonium continues. As well as my "epic story" about today's reality. I hope only for the mercy of the gods."

Some of Marka's drawings from the diary:

Nine in the basement. 15/04/2022 (during shelling)



Easter Motif in Chornobayivka, 26/04/2022



The topic arose two days before the Easter holiday: "Well, in what other city should this picture be made, if not where one of the largest poultry farms in Europe, located in the village of Chornobayivka, with more than 4 million chickens ceased to work due to the war. And Chornobayivka itself is a notorious venue for Russians, their hell. To summarize a concept: when a man puts on a soldier's uniform and picks up a weapon, his name and facial features are practically erased from the news. Especially it relates to the dead. It has been observed that no explosion is heard on religious holidays. But the day before yesterday, Russian soldiers got drunk, drove through the streets, shot into the air and shouted: "This war sucks."

Whose house is it? 27/06/2022



Nobody will come

The series of Malen`kiy Nonstop* is another awful chronicle. The artist draws stories from her life, her dreams, gender-sensitive reflections with a marker on tiles in a comic-naive style, through a subtle metaphor, ironically reflecting the "medianess" of our reality, overflowing with all kinds of violence. Some pictures are almost memes, so precisely they hit the pain points of society. It is not about straight depicting atrocities in an effort to terrify people with its realism. The artist intentionally avoids exploiting sufferings. She does not feel that she has the right to be a voice of those who experienced them. Still, she feels to be capable of telling these stories.

Snow collectors. Mariupol. 18/03/22.

As the artist wrote on Facebook, this work was dedicated to those who were lucky enough to escape from the blockaded Mariupol. It seemed to her that as soon as it got warm, it would be easier for the people in the basements. But it turned out that Mariupol residents, on the contrary, hoped that it would be snowing for a long time, because snow is a source of water.



Trophy. 06/04/2022

The occupier's hand removes a gold earring from the Ukrainian woman's ear.



The artist was enormously touched by the topic of looting by the Russians. She told that in order to draw this story, she had to wear an earring that she found on the street a long time ago.

The Tourist. 15/04/2022

“Oh, these Ukrainians... their ice cream is "delicious", and juice, and a laptop in every house, and they eat Nutella... And nature is also beautiful!”



This image of a dead Russian paratrooper in flowers was inspired by a conversation between a Russian soldier and his wife that Ukrainians have "delicious ice cream and juice." The artist imagined that they would admire the Ukrainian nature in the same way...

Dancing on bones. 06/05/2022

The artist usually uses photos found on the Internet or screenshots, transforming them a little for her own stories. The scene of dancing on bones was inspired by David Lynch's Mulholland Dr.

"There is such an expression "dancing on the bones", it is a distorted version of another expression "life goes on". I like to use literalism in my works from time to time. And this work is an attempt to analyse where is the line between daily life, which continues, at least for someone, and entertainment, fun and hedonism. Who has the right to live their usual lives as if nothing happened, and who does not? Can we go back to our routine after witnessing and becoming victims of the

enemy's assault? We ask ourselves similar questions every day, and every day we look for answers that are still not final.”



The severed hand holding a Russian flag. 19/06/2022

“It is like Kharkiv, Severodonetsk, Luhansk, Popasna, Izyum, Lysychansk, Mariupol, Sumy, Chernihiv, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Slovyansk, Zaporizhzhia, Kryvyi Rih, Berdiansk, Melitopol, Kramatorsk, Beryslav, Kakhovka, Nova Kakhovka, Oleshki, Bucha, Irpin, Borodianka... and Kherson... The enemy did a lot of damage in these cities. It's hard for me to find words, that's why I drew this picture. In addition to the rejection of the Russian government and culture, this work also means that even if you support the aggressor, you are not immune to being run over by this road roller when you are no longer needed.”



"What is it like to be in the occupation?"

A playwright and film critic Artur Sumarokov was under occupation for 45 days: "I created the play "The Captivity" under conditions of the forced stay in Kherson, temporarily occupied by Russia.

Do you know what it means to be under occupation? It's like you are in the basement on a chain in the house of a serial killer who is only preparing you to kill slowly and painfully, gradually depriving you of money, food, air... Freedom. This is the most scaring. You can't do anything, as you go on living, slowly going crazy with the unknown. You see how the native city is being destroyed morally. How the occupiers remove Ukrainian flags. How they destroy the memory of our ATO soldiers. How Lenin's monuments are reincarnated, and this is necrophilia. I lost track of time. I thought that the 45 days in the occupation stretched over six months, and each day was simply endless.

What is it like to be under occupation?

It is to stop being afraid of death. Sometimes I've had the insane thought that there could be something more honest about having you and your house razed to the ground than being held hostage by a polite sadist. And I started writing the play in this depressed condition.

Not because I wanted to. But only to save my mind from destruction.

The first part of the play reflects the first weeks of the war and an attempt to make sense of the military invasion. The second one records how humanitarian, political and social life deteriorated for me personally. The play written under such extreme circumstances reflects the need to find a new drama language during the war and the prerequisites for the ethical deconstruction of reality, which was destroyed not only for me, but, also for millions of Ukrainians."

On May 9, Artur managed to leave the city. On May 10, he arrived in Lviv. And on May 7, after receiving permission to cross the border (due to health problems), he ended up in Lithuania. On May 25, Artur went to Klaipeda, to the Menu Zona Residency, where he is writing a new play "Memel - Dnipro" (Memel was a historical German name of Klaipeda till 1945). It tells the story of members of one family who experienced three wars - the First World War, the Second World War and the current Russian-Ukrainian war. The well-known Lithuanian theatre director Arturas Areima became interested in his texts and plans to stage one of his plays.

Home Maria

Li Biletska, a female photographer, is working on the documentary "Women in the Occupation." She also shot videos of the artists participating in the Kherson Art Residency in Occupation" and recorded our underground meetings for an upcoming documentary. Li also made the photographic series named "Home Maria" - portraits of women and girls in the occupation, creating a new iconography of wartime.



Now she is living in Kyiv.

Li also wrote a kind of diary on Facebook:

How are you? 05/09/2022

"When friends ask me: "how are you doing," I answer: "stable, we are holding on."

Because I honestly don't know how to tell briefly:

That the mobile network and the Internet may disappear for several days.

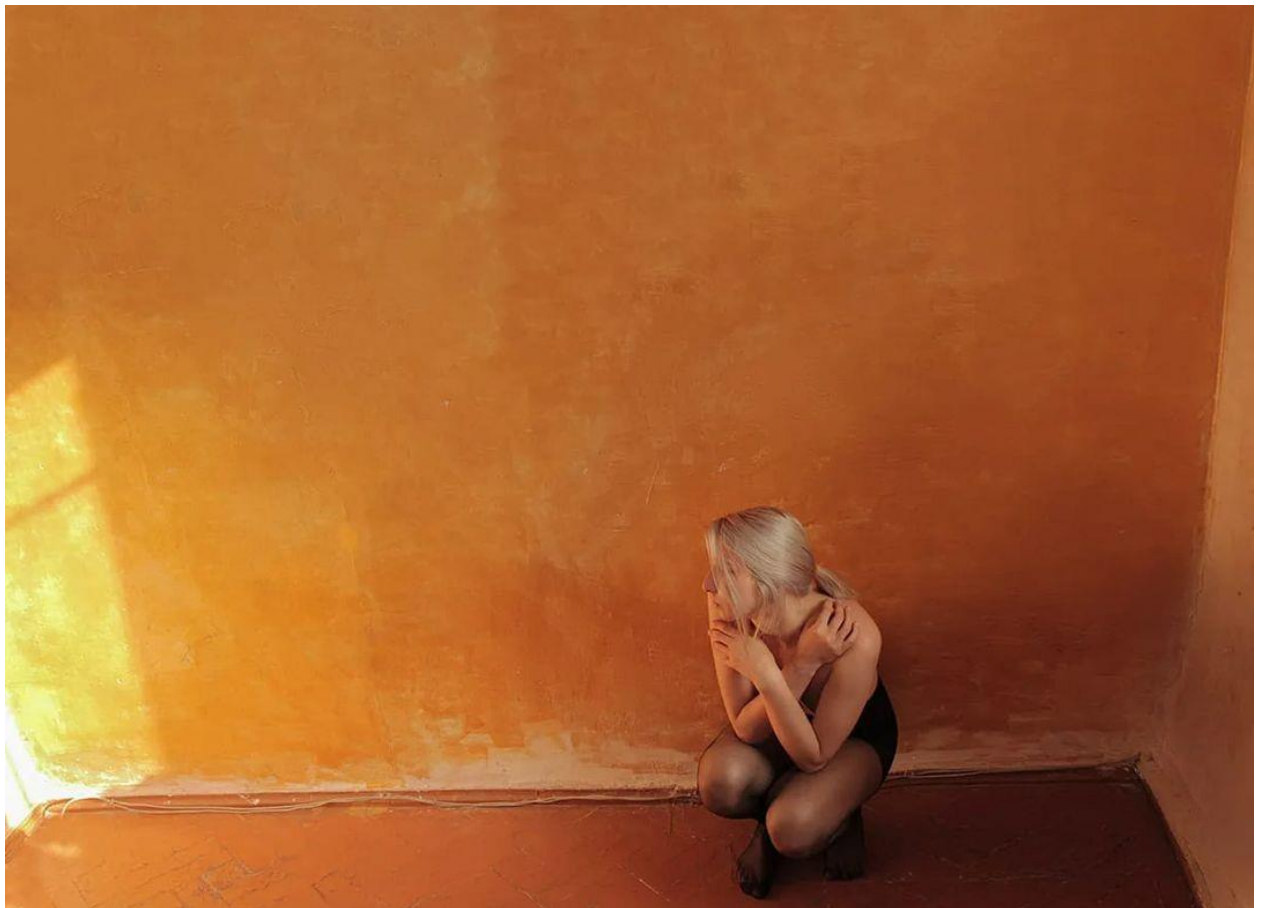
That my wisdom tooth has been torturing me for several days, and there is no medicine in town, in particular painkillers.

That there are lots of checkpoints here.

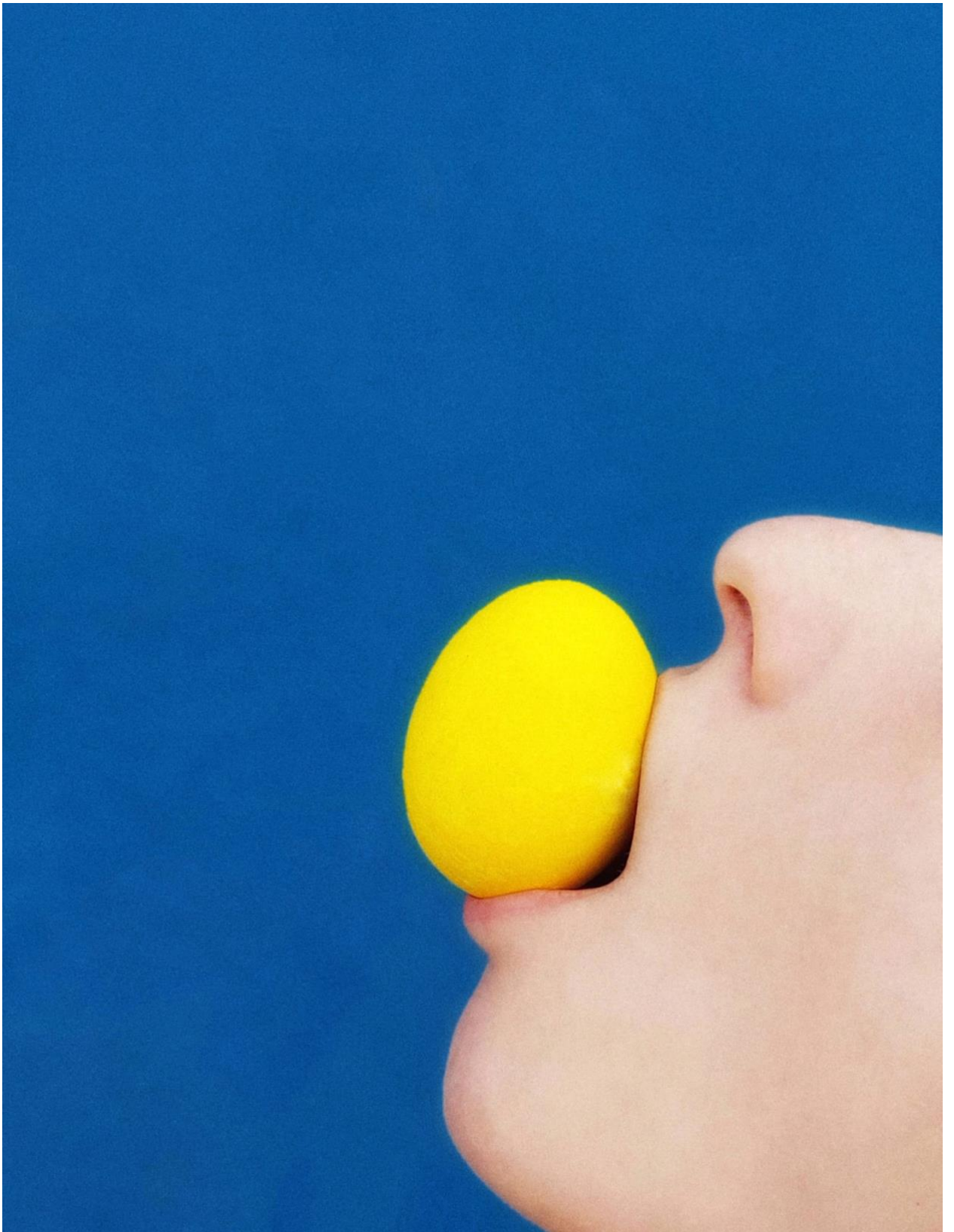
That there is almost no citizen on the spring streets. Those "actors" were brought from Crimea at 2 a.m. for the fake "Russian Victory March" film.

That the forest is burning in the region. Russians do not let it go out. Since yesterday, a veil of smoke has fallen on Kherson.

And it drags you down. But we hold on. We stubbornly try to live. We still have to plant a forest."



Christ has risen! Ukraine will also rise! 24/04/2022



"Today I saw families having picnics in the courtyards of multi-storey buildings. It was unusual to see. But it's nice to watch this occupation "pastoral": improvised tables down in new grass, warmed by the spring sun, people are softened up, in a kind of calm contentment, with their children nearby. It's so beautiful... And maybe I just projected my own joys, as I am going to the family meeting place, because such opportunities are worth their weight in gold. Priceless.

Christ has risen! Ukraine will also rise!

Bucha. 04/04/2022



It was a sharp reaction-performance with a text full of incredible pain:

Bucha.

Pain.

Grief.

Devastation.

Burnout.

Rage.

Hatred.

The rest of the words become scarce and worthless.

...I want to scream

Mona*, a young female artist, illustrator of children's books, created a series of paintings that echoed her inner state.

Transition. 29/04/2022

Mona dedicated this painting to three generations of women killed by a Russian missile in Odesa in April.



The artist also created the video "...I want to scream."

"I want to convey the tension and the horror that people are facing now. A series of losses, fears, screams, the roar of hail and the whistling of rockets is a great pain. Unbearable pain.

I'm afraid. Every day is scary because of explosions, and even more so because of uncertainty. I don't know what today will be like, I don't know what tomorrow will be like. Kherson is occupied. The city is supposedly alive, people are working, and traffic is moving. But I don't feel at home. I don't feel protected, I don't feel free. The days merge and seem to repeat themselves. There is a feeling of a closed cage. There is not enough air to breathe calmly. I want to scream.

February 24 became a black day in the calendar.

Rapid change of images is the way we live now. Now we need to cover more information to always be ready. Every second, everything changes. The emotional state of people switches just as quickly."

All participants of the Residency continue to work on their art diaries. Four of them remain under the enormous pressure of the occupation, risking their lives every moment. Communication with them is very unstable, and we are all afraid that during this time, when they are unavailable, something wrong can happen to them. We are all waiting for the liberation of Kherson - for the Residency to cease to be underground. For everyone to be free.

*Names were changed for security reasons