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Art and Culture at war: Reflections from Ukraine

In an insightful analysis for Culture Policy Room, Lina Kirjazovaite examines the profound transformation of art and culture in Ukraine since the 2022 Russian invasion.

Kirjazovaite delves into the shifting roles of Ukrainian artists, the blurring of art's purpose, ethical dilemmas, and the complex landscape they navigate amid the ongoing conflict.

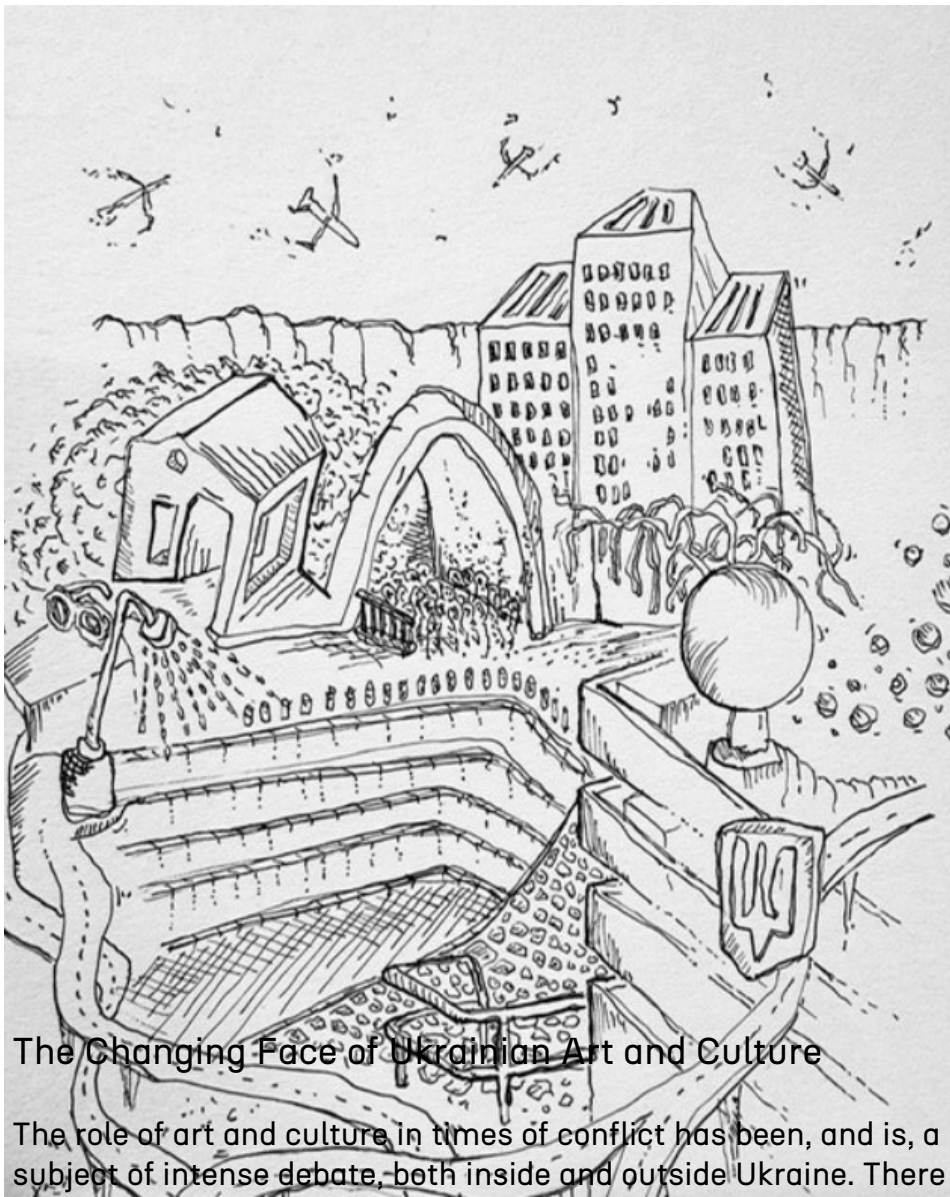
By Lina Kirjazovaite, [Culture Policy Room](#)

Me, personally, in my personal opinion, I think, or I believe, that an individual person cannot change the world. So, me as an artist, or me as a politician, or me as I don't know, a cultural worker or anything else, I cannot change the world. We just can change the world as a group, as a collective. It's impossible to do it on your own. And as an artist, you're not a social worker. You're not working in diplomacy or other stuff, you're an artist, and artists offer people who watch art a different perspective on the topics that art is dealing with. So then that's what art is offering. If I do art about war. I'm offering my perspective on war, but I cannot solve the war, and I cannot tell people what to do. It's just offering different images, different inputs and different perspectives. - Ukrainian Artist EU-UA Cultural Bridges Residency 2024.

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It has been more than two and a half years since Russia launched a full-scale invasion on Ukraine. Ukrainian art and culture, and therefore the artists themselves, are undergoing a profound transformation. The ongoing war has not only reshaped the nation but has also redefined the role of art and artists in society and even on a wider global political scene. However, it's crucial to recognise that culture and art are double-edged swords, capable of being used for both positive and negative purposes. This duality is evident in historical contexts where art has been used to promote harmful ideologies or manipulate public opinion. The key message on the instrumentalisation of art and culture in Ukraine is that this issue is complex and nuanced, the perspective shared among artists and cultural workers. While some embrace the use of art as a tool for addressing social and political issues or simply put, the reality one lives in, some also express concerns about its potential misuse.

Over the last year, I had the opportunity to participate in a cultural exchange and residency programme*, bringing together twenty artists from the EU and Ukraine to co-create and share experiences. Beyond our visits to Lviv and Kyiv amid air alerts and the resilient everyday life, I engaged with local artists and cultural organisations. We touched upon many topics, from what cultural diplomacy means to them, how they see themselves and the sector evolving and what the effect of the instrumentalisation of art and culture can be in times of war. While in no way does this article aim to draw any conclusions from these conversations, it does try to ask questions on what that means for the future. When at war, everything becomes so distorted and saturated that we wonder what this means for the broader cultural sector and creativity.



The Changing Face of Ukrainian Art and Culture

The role of art and culture in times of conflict has been, and is, a subject of intense debate, both inside and outside Ukraine. There is a feeling that in the early stages of the war, much Ukrainian art was used as a form of counter-propaganda to the Russian narratives. It was used to show a distinctive Ukrainian cultural identity, but also sometimes as a support to concrete material needs, like selling art to purchase guns for the frontline. However, now after many years at war, there seems to be a noticeable shift in the cultural scene. The initial wave of politicised art has begun to lose its appeal. Now, the cultural workers and artists in Ukraine feel that it is time to rethink their role and meaning, to refocus or even shift back towards what art and culture means for the collective future and beyond the war. There is a search for more quality, fairer representation and deeper relativity to the word. While still living and creating in war, there seems to be a growing desire to go beyond art as a political tool and address wider societal and global issues facing Ukrainians and indeed the rest of the world.

Shifting Priorities and New Realities

The war has forced artists to reconsider their priorities and

adapt to new realities. Basic needs take precedence, national and most international funding is repurposed for hard power and military. When speaking to local authorities, they acknowledged that since the beginning of the war, they do not have any budget to allocate to cultural activities, just operational expenses for utilities and salaries. However, once again the cultural sector has shown remarkable resilience. As one cultural manager noted:

The cultural sector continued to operate, with full theatres and concerts, providing a sense of normalcy and survival for the people.

However, it is also the cultural and creative sectors that manage to find new ways of sustaining their operations and activities, by securing new funding sources, adapting their works to new safety and security protocols, and protecting cultural heritage, while not emptying their museums and galleries. At the same time, there have been some concerns about the pressures that may affect the quality and integrity of their work. Some artists worry about the pressure to create work in the difficult circumstances that fits specific narratives, others about the thematic requirements imposed by funders.

Artists as Cultural Ambassadors

Ukrainian artists have found themselves thrown into the role of cultural diplomats and ambassadors. With maybe little time for reflection on how this can be done, many artists now see their work important to raise international awareness about the situation in Ukraine, as well as essential to maintain the national morale. Their work is also a vital tool for documenting the raw realities of war, creating counter-narratives about the perceptions of Ukraine's language and culture and preserving the spirit within Ukraine. This role imposed or willingly taken by the artist applies both to participants living in Ukraine and outside:

...As I understand it, it's a way to make people from other places understand what's going on here and to experience it through my art, my experience. To be an ambassador for Ukraine, and also for the people here, for example, in my case, in Germany. Somewhat choose a side and not say I don't care, because it's important to care and important to be here.

Blurred Lines: Art and Survival

The distinction between art for art's sake and art as a tool for change has become increasingly blurred. Artists are grappling

with the responsibility of creating meaningful work while navigating the harsh realities of war. Many have adapted their practices to address immediate needs, using their skills to raise funds or create art that provides comfort and hope to those affected by the war. The interconnectedness of art and reality is further exemplified by projects that emerge organically from artists' experiences. One artist shared her experience of performing a Christmas play in various locations, including police stations and hospitals, to bring joy and hope to people hiding in basements. The other one has left the country, with her five kids, still noting the importance of her creations for bringing the situation in Ukraine to foreign audiences, who sometimes are oblivious to both the causes of this particular war or are just tired of listening about it.

The Context and Representation

As the war continues, the demographics of Ukraine's art scene have shifted dramatically. While as previously stated the theatres and museums are still visited, there are often no young men in attendance, as they serve at war or are afraid to be drafted. This is also true for many male artists and led to women taking a more prominent role in the cultural scene. This shift not only challenges traditional gender roles but also raises questions about representation and inclusivity in a post-war future. So, in one way it offers a window of opportunity for underrepresented groups in the cultural sector. However, the question is how this will evolve in the future. What kind of balance, if any, will there be when some sense of normalcy returns?

Overexposure and Ethical Considerations

The wars today, in Ukraine and elsewhere, are very well documented, mainly due to the news coverage, digital platforms, social media and advancing technology. However, Ukrainian artists face numerous challenges: from managing security concerns that their work might pose to themselves and those at the frontlines, to navigating ethical and emotional dilemmas when documenting those particularly affected by the war. Additionally, they struggle with the risk of media overload, that might desensitise audiences and Ukrainian art overexposure, due to high demand and not always time to produce high quality works. Many artists are now looking for new ways to present stories in order to continue to engage with their audiences, without causing further harm. One photographer highlighted the challenge of finding new narratives to prevent overexposure and maintain the impact of her work. When you create in war or on the topic of war, maybe

not only the harsh images can raise awareness or deliver impact, and one needs to look for ways and narratives that connect us rather than distress or divide us. In general, artists cannot stay away from topics impacting our societies, but should be mindful of what effects their work will have on their subject, audience and wider societies.

Looking to the Future

No one instructed these artists to turn their work toward war, yet many find themselves compelled to do so. The instrumentalisation of art in Ukraine during wartime reveals a complex landscape where artists navigate between artistic autonomy, societal needs, and political realities. They become sometimes unwilling yet essential narrators of a painful chapter in their nation's history. However, they do offer new perspectives, and serve as ambassadors for the cause, and this is happening organically from their lived experience. While many still struggle to find their voice and fully understand what this new reality means for their future, one message that comes from these discussions is that the debate surrounding the instrumentalisation of art and culture often disguises a more fundamental truth: art and culture are intrinsically connected to the realities we live in, regardless of any intentional efforts to use them for specific purposes.

And here I leave you with a quote that touches me the most on the role of the artist in the wider context:

My impact, my role...it's like this song about a little silkworm, I am just a little worm, and I might make my own thread. And that's it. I think this is my way to make my own thread.

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