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It is Not a “Ukrainian Issue”: A Letter from a Civil Body on Activism and Cultural Production at War

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The first day was with real sirens. *Uuuuuuuuummmmmm* — “I have no shelters nearby. I better stay home.” Tried calling my partner, who was in another city. *U-u-u-u-u-u - no answer - u-u-u.*

Vzhvzhvzhvzhvzh. Next two secs: I saw a Russian airplane from the window. Third sec: explosion on the horizon. Vibrating walls. Frustrated, went to bed as if nothing had happened. Still keeping my phone. *U-u-u.* “Hello ...” Huh.

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On the very day of the invasion, I intended to clarify the topic of my article that I was preparing for a Russian magazine on contemporary art and theory. The issue was going to be focused on decoloniality. How ironic.

When leaving in a hurry ...

Beep

(Have to answer queer refugees from Ukraine to link them to comrades from Europe.)

When leaving in a hurry, I took a random book from my table—at least something. Not one on decoloniality. I won't discuss that text now, but there is one related observation to be mentioned. What if there is a significant feature of decoloniality itself besides (not instead of) the arguments and concepts from books?

Maybe decoloniality is not necessarily related to the libraries of great institutions. Such institutions in Moscow and Saint Petersburg remain open now. Well, the situation is a whole lot different in Kyiv, Odessa, and Donetsk. There are explosions (not of texts on the decolonial turn, but literally explosions) in each of these Ukrainian cities. Just like everything and everybody else, universities, theory, museums, artists, and art are under fire. Maybe decoloniality is related to that one thing one has about her/his/their current condition(s). A condition(s) with which one engages without preaching to the choir about "inclusivity." Why does that trick with cliches always work?

Beep

(My sweetheart is also awakened. S/he spent a night in the metro that currently serves as a shelter. I ask,

“How are you?” Answer: “I’m fi- … Oh, sirens, again.”)

There is probably something fundamentally wrong with all those “progressive” institutions, new institutionalities, etc, if they are so easily captured by Putinism—a very specific form of imperialism that plays an essential role in the global capitalist order. Many such cultural institutions live in harmony with Putinism and the global art and theory market. So this is not surprising, they cannot even react to the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine.

I mean not only Russian institutions, but all of those that pretend that art and culture are not a global market and a giant network of practices with a long history of acting transversely as artistic, theoretical, and political praxis. Those institutions pretend that art and culture are powerless entertainment, just as La Biennale di Venezia did [2]. These types of domesticated actors discuss the “Anthropocene” yet ignore Russian militants capturing the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. Yeah, it is unoriginal but this silence is our sirens, explosions, shots, and cries. I can hardly see the difference between conformism and “decolonization of the imagination” isolated from its own political and social conditions. Probably this isolation is the main ingredient of Putinist cultural production—it is generally fine but this is a crucial issue. It also seems to be the most effective way to keep critical discourses being …

Vzhvzhvzhvzhvzhvzhvzh — What is that? A car. Huh.

… to keep critical discourses being useless fetishes.

Now there is no possibility for me to work on the "clear" concepts, so implications and metaphors are my only means. You see, there are no libraries here, only one book, sirens, and explosions. By Putinism, I mean that strange kind of huge nonhuman war technology predicated on the merger of legal neopatriarchy, racist violence, neoliberalist capitalism, political isolationism, disinformation, and the latest surveillance equipment. Gas, oil, weapons, and human flesh to die for nonsense automated war, heteronormative fascism to reproduce human resources. Even that fascist himself is just a fleshy component of that mechanism. His pseudo historical narrative of the "great Russian empire" is a click of a weapon—it is load. Human rights are ignored. Putinism is the dark trajectory of posthumanism in a condition of global capitalism and "carbon democracies."

I capitalize "Putinism" not in order to honor, but because I believe it will end soon and will never happen again. It is a name, not a notion. No one can foresee what this nonhuman technology may do for peoples worldwide, for the planet. Because it may even do "what anyone has ever done in history,"[3] as that fascist said, suggesting a nuclear attack.

Nuclear power plants[4] and radioactive waste[5] storage sites are at risk. This is not paranoia. Russian militants have already jeopardized them.

The war in Ukraine is not a "Ukrainian issue." "Planetary" is not an accurate concept here, but it fits much better than in announcements of projects by institutions that ignore wars initiated and led by the same sources of their "criticism."

And yet many people from the Russian Federation have been fighting against Putinism not only nowadays but daily, for a long

time, as cultural and political activists, artists, curators, researchers, volunteers, trade union activists, feminist media activists, environmentalists, and many others with uncompromising political views. I know many of these people personally. Just as many do this on a regular basis in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Georgia, and all the indigenous peoples of RF. Putinism may be seen as a network of social, political, administrative, economic, and affective relations (based on fear and frustration). The dreadful international crime that started in the early morning of February 24th might become not only a huge tragedy, but also an opportunity to consolidate in order to rearrange those relations.

It is absolutely inconceivable, but this seems to be a time when binary opposition is useful. See the difference, neither Russians—Ukrainians nor Russia—NATO. The opposing sides are Putinism, a force that kills civilians and the environment in order to kill more, and a transnational network of those who believe in futures, which are alternatives to this creepy, destructive, alienated war technology.

That only book I've taken is *The Right to Truth: Conversations on Art and Feminism*, edited by Oksana Bryukhovetska and Lesia Kulchynska, published in Kyiv in 2019. In one of the conversations, artist and activist Dana Kavelina says that empathy is a means of struggle. It is a weapon that cannot be used by Putinism. And in current conditions, it seems to be no less critical than cerebral books and con ...

Uuuuuuuuuuuuuummmmmmmmmm

A siren. I should go. Not really a good time for writing.

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Briefly, from the shelter:

Solidarity is a way to neutralize Putinism as technology.

But there is no solidarity without a clear understanding of which side you are on.

Cultural criticists, leftists, feminists, eco-activists worldwide, those who read this: it is not a “Ukrainian issue.” It is an issue of fighting global capitalism, patriarchy, and saving the environment.

STOP COLLABORATING WITH RUSSIAN ART AND CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS, WHICH HAVE NOT TAKEN A STANCE AGAINST WAR!

HELP REFUGEES AT THE BORDERS!

This text was written as a way to cope with the very event of the first missile attack on a civilian apartment building in Kyiv, 26 February 2022. Since that day Ukrainian cities, towns and villages are under constant missile strikes, even Lviv, which is about 70 km from Eastern border of the EU, was striked a couple of times. Mariupol, Kherson, Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Sumy and many others were attacked with extreme violence to civilians. For instance, the authorities of Mariupol inform that more than 5 thousand people were killed during the blockade and constant shelling of the city, 210 of them were children. More than 2000 houses were damaged, which is 90% of the housing stock. Before the blockade, about 140 000 residents left Mariupol, then another 150 000 were evacuated. Russian troops forcibly deported about 30 000 locals to its territory. 170 000 citizens remain in the city and must be evacuated.

Edited by Tamara Khasanova. Thanks for comments and advice to Mariia Vorotilina and Ira Konyukhova.

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BM-21_Grad

[2] https://www.instagram.com/accounts/login/?next=/p/CaaLmtStDrW/

[3] https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/putin-ukraine-nato-nuclear-weapons-1.6362890

[4] https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/chernobyl-power-plant-captured-by-russian-forces-ukrainian-official-2022-02-24/

[5] https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-ato/3414326-russian-shells-hit-radioactive-waste-disposal-site-in-kyiv.html