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ART AS AN EXISTENTIAL MEANS OF PERCEPTION AND EXPERIENCE OF THE TRAGEDY OF WAR

The article analyses the role of art during the Russian-Ukrainian war (2022–2025) as a tool for survival, therapy and testimony. In extreme situations, such as war, artistic creation becomes a way of processing trauma and regaining a sense of meaning. Referring to François Jullien's concept of *dé-coïncidence* and the reflections of Władysław Tatarkiewicz and Irena Wojnar, the authors show how art allows individuals to break away from the overwhelming reality and open space for action and reflection. The case studies of three Ukrainian artists are presented: Yulia Ivashko, Oleksandr Ivashko and Serhii Belinsky. They present various creative strategies: from

escapist images of idealised nature, through expressive abstractions, to symbolic photographs depicting war without people. The authors also reflect on the tension between the therapeutic and artistic value of war art, pointing out that this boundary is often blurred and that authenticity and emotional power become its greatest value.

Keywords: war art, trauma, *de-coïncidence*, expression, Ukraine.

Introduction

The Russian–Ukrainian war (2022–2025) has precipitated not only immense human suffering but also a remarkable outpouring of artistic expression. In times of catastrophe, wars, epidemics and natural disasters, art often shifts from a purely aesthetic function to a therapeutic and existential one. This conflict has highlighted art's role as a protective psychological mechanism, allowing individuals and communities to process trauma through creativity. Historically, in response to crisis, artists have created parallel imaginative realities, from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, written during the plague, to Hašek's satirical novel about World War I, or Picasso's *Guernica* painted after the 1937 bombing. Even commemorative forms like the La Chapelle d'Emm memorial in Metzeral show how art externalizes collective trauma and gives form to memory. Today, during the first major European war of the 21st century, art once again functions both as testimony and as therapy.

Across Ukraine, creative responses have emerged from formal art studios, makeshift bomb shelters, front-line trenches and homes in exile. Soldiers write poems and songs; civilians keep diaries and draw their experiences; journalists and amateurs document war's destruction; survivors produce drawings and paintings during art therapy sessions. These literary, visual, performative and musical creative modes allow for emotional survival and symbolic transformation. Each medium becomes a conduit through which trauma may be not only expressed but also organized and thus partly integrated. The psychological value of such creative work is well documented: trauma theory suggests that extreme experiences resist integration into personal narrative and overwhelm psychic structures[1]. As Cathy Caruth writes, "trauma forces the self into hiding, and while the sensory manifold keeps 'recording' sights, sounds, smells,

[1] Broader research on this topic was conducted by Julia Iwaszko and Aneta Pawłowska as part of the Visegrad Fellowship Programme for the year 2024, contract no. 6240017, implemented at the Institute of Art History of as a project financed from the Visegrad Fund; see Yulia Ivashko, Aneta Pawłowska, *Art as a Means of Socialisation and Creative Development of People with PTSD Due to War Trauma (Visegrad Fund Report)*, unpublished research study, Budapest 2024.

and feelings, the brain fails to work them through"[2]. Artistic expression, then, becomes a space where disordered experience may find provisional form where raw pain can be contained in narrative, image, or gesture.

From an existential standpoint, the act of creation is a form of survival. Viktor Frankl, reflecting on his time in Nazi concentration camps, argued that "suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning"[3]. He termed this the capacity for "self-transcendence": the ability to reach beyond immediate horror toward a future or value. In the context of war, making art is such an act. It affirms life through the assertion of meaning, however fragile, and transforms the person from a passive victim to an active agent. Władysław Tatarkiewicz emphasized that one of the defining qualities of art is expression: "a distinctive feature of art is that it causes shock"[4], he wrote – pointing to its power to evoke, move and confront. Irena Wojnar, in turn, highlighted the formative and ethical role of art, especially in moments of crisis[5]. Aesthetic experience, in her view, nurtures empathy, resilience and the continuity of culture, offering "an escape from reality" that can become a vehicle for transformation and moral development.

This article explores how, under the conditions of the Russian–Ukrainian war, art functions as an existential tool that helps individuals endure trauma and reconstruct their internal world[6]. Through a humanistic and interdisciplinary lens, drawing on trauma theory, philosophical aesthetics, and especially François Jullien's concept of *dé-coïncidence*, we analyze the practices of three Ukrainian artists: Yulia Ivashko, Oleksandr Ivashko and Serhii Belinskyi. Their work ranges from symbolic absence to abstract emotion and idealized escapism, and reveals how creativity, even amid destruction, can act as a space of rupture and renewal. Through artistic *dé-coïncidence*, they separate from unbearable reality to form new experiential worlds – ones in which expression becomes survival, and imagination becomes resistance. As François Jullien writes:

> "Opening a gap in relation to conformity that no longer allows for any initiative enables us to reopen the possibility of action. When life has become too uniform and stuck to itself, the idea is to give way, to take a step back,

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2 C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1996, quoted in: J. Pederson, *Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory*, "Narrative" 2014, vol. 22, no. 3, p. 335.

3 Frankl discusses the importance of finding meaning in suffering, based on his Holocaust experiences. V. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Beacon Press, Boston 2006, pp. 80-85.

4 W. Tatarkiewicz, *Sztuka. Dzieje pojęcia*, PWN, Warszawa 1981, p. 44.

5 I. Wojnar, *Estetyka i wychowanie*, PWN, Warszawa 1964, pp. 108-121.

6 Y. Ivashko, A. Pawłowska, *Art as a Means*..., pp. 10-12.

to retreat in a minimal way – something small, just enough to create a distance, and precisely in that tension of distance, to once again capture the impulse to act"[7].

This is not escapism, but rather a profound engagement with reality from a different angle. As he further explains: "A life that has become too closely aligned with the conditions of its fulfilment has already exhausted all its possibilities. Conversely, life can only begin again when it separates from them"[8]. These ideas allow us to understand wartime creativity not as an avoidance of reality, but as a critical and regenerative act, one that makes life livable again by creating inner space for transformation.

Wartime Artistic Practices in the 2022–2025 Conflict: Case Studies

Yulia Ivashko, Oleksandr Ivashko and Serhii Belinskyi are three Ukrainian artists (and in two cases, artist-researchers) whose creative journeys during the war exemplify the multifaceted role of art as an existential tool. Each has engaged in artistic creation throughout the conflict, but the form and evolution of their work differ, reflecting personal responses to trauma. Drawing on studies conducted by the authors in 2022–2024 (including surveys of soldiers and civilians, and analyses of these artists' wartime output), we can observe patterns of change: initial shock and catharsis, attempts at direct representation of war and, later, a turn toward symbolic or escapist imagery as the war prolonged. The following discussion analyzes each artist's wartime oeuvre, noting how they balance *witnessing* versus *escaping* reality, and how their practices resonate with the ideas of de-coincidence, expression and meaning making introduced above.

Before the war, Yulia Ivashko painted very little, remaining within the realm of realistic images: portraits of people, detailed landscapes and architectural depictions. She approached art in a classical manner, aiming to capture the visible world faithfully. This changed dramatically with the outbreak of the full-scale war in 2022. In the first months of the war, Yulia experienced shock and fear that hindered her usual mode of painting. Instead of immediately translating the war onto canvas, she turned to writing, recording her impressions

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7 F. Jullien, *Ponownie otworzyć możliwości: de-koincydencja i kolejne życie. Wybór tekstów*, transl. E. Marynowicz-Hetka, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2024, p. 147.

8 Ibid., p. 177.

9 Julia Iwaszko's literary texts: S. Beliński, J. Iwaszko, *Kwiaty Południa*, Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe, Łódź 2022; S. Beliński, J. Iwaszko, *A światłość w ciemności świeci*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls, Kraków 2023; and J. Iwaszko, D. Michajłowski, S. Beliński, *I ciemność jej nie ogarnęła*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls, Kraków 2024.

and emotions in words[9]. These realistic stories about the perception of war were a form of catharsis, allowing her to verbalize terror and grief. Only after this initial phase did she gradually return to visual art. By mid-2022, she began producing a series of wartime artworks. Yet, strikingly, they were not realistic depictions of battle or ruins. Rather, Ivashko's wartime paintings veered into a new aesthetic: highly decorative, idealized compositions dominated by flora and delicate creatures. Around mid-2023, as the war ground on and daily stress accumulated, her output of watercolours increased sharply – particularly during periods of intense shelling and personal danger, as the artist herself has noted. It was as if each barrage of violence drove her not to portray destruction, but to paint ever more elaborate 'bouquets of life'. As Ivashko explained in an interview with Aneta Pawłowska, conducted via *WhatsApp* on 13 February 2023, her goal was not to document the horrors of war directly, but to create visual spaces of internal refuge, beauty and resilience as an imaginative counterpoint to surrounding trauma.

This artistic strategy resonates with Hans Belting's observation that:

> "[...] our bodies have a natural ability to transform into images and as in images places and things that elude us in time; we store these images in our memory and activate them through recollection. With the help of images, we defend ourselves against the escape of time and the loss of space that we experience in our bodies. Lost places occupy our bodily memory as images – as the old philosophers call it – as a place in a figurative sense"[10].

In Ivashko's case, the act of painting becomes a bodily act of remembrance – not of destruction, but of imagined or lost sanctuaries, blooming gardens, and the possibility of inner refuge amid external devastation.

In one of Yulia Ivashko's notable war-period watercolours, vibrant flowers fill the foreground, their blossoms rendered with exquisite detail and rich colour (Fig. 1). Behind the flowers, faint human figures (busts or faces) seem to peek out, partially obscured by petals and leaves, and a swarm of butterflies dances above. The scene is ethereal and dream-like: an Edenic garden in which humanity is quietly nestled. Another painting from this series presents an idealized portrait of a young woman whose form merges with an array of flora – her silhouette interwoven with blooming lilies and ivy, as butterflies flit around her. Rather than a realistic portrait capturing an individual's likeness, the artwork

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[10] H. Belting, *Antropologia obrazu. Szkice do nauki o obrazie*, transl. M. Bryl, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2012, p. 84.

portrays an 'inner state' or perhaps an archetype of innocence and hope. The style notably draws inspiration from East Asian art traditions[11]. Yulia, consciously or unconsciously, adopted principles reminiscent of the ancient Chinese "flowers and birds" (*huā niǎo huà*) genre and Japanese meditative painting[12]. The compositions abandon Western three-dimensional perspective and depth; instead, they become flattened twodimensional tapestries of pattern, much like a Chinese silk painting[13]. The emphasis is on asymmetry, subtle balance and suggestive emptiness as a *meditative* approach rather than a narrative one. Yulia has described her process here as imagining scenes "from the inside"[14], immersing herself in a tranquil mental space far removed from sirens and explosions. The very principle of her creativity changed: whereas before she painted what she saw externally, now she painted what she needed to see internally.

These works can be interpreted as a conscious escape into an ideal world. There is a clear *discrepancy* between reality and Yulia's war-period imagery: the actual war-torn environment of Ukrainian cities under siege has nothing in common with these gentle, blossoming sanctuaries. Yet that discrepancy is precisely the point. The paintings construct a parallel reality so full of life and harmony that it counteracts the omnipresent death and chaos. They are not depicting the war; they are *responding* to it by negation, by creating an opposite realm in which the values destroyed by war (e.g. beauty, peace) are triumphantly preserved in a symbolic form. This is art as *de-coincidence* in a very pure sense: Yulia refuses to "coincide" with the grimness of her situation. By stepping into an imaginary garden each time she paints, she opens a gap between herself and the war. Inside that gap, she can breathe, reflect, and eventually regain strength to face reality again. Viewers of her work have noted the poignant tension between what they know of the context and what the art shows: it invites one to ponder the psychological necessity of such imagined gardens. In aesthetic terms, the influence of Eastern art (where painting often aims to capture the spirit or inner essence rather than outward appearance) has enabled Yulia to

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11 In the visual culture of East Asia, the so-called "Chinese style" (中式风格, zhōngshìfēnggé) has long functioned not merely as an aesthetic category but as a powerful ideological and symbolic code. It draws on a broad historical repertoire of forms, motifs and spatial compositions – from traditional garden pavilions and scholar's studios to ink brush techniques and genre-specific pictorial modes. See: Y. Ivashko, P. Chang, *Modern "Chinese-Style" Arbours: Image Authenticity or Distortion?*, in: *Defining the Architectural Space. The Truth and Lie of Architecture*, vol. 1, Kraków 2020, pp. 19-31.

12 Y. Liu, *The Symbolism of Flowers and Birds in Chinese Painting*, "Oriental Art" 2000, vol. XLVI, no. 5, pp. 53-63.

13 Ibid., p. 54.

14 See: J. Iwaszko, A. Pawłowska, *Kaleidoscope. Yulia Ivashko and Her Watercolours*, Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe, Łódź 2024.

meditate through art. She idealizes figures by surrounding them with symbolic nature (as flowers and butterflies) that represent states of the soul rather than literal conditions. This transformation of style – from realistic to fantastical, was not a calculated stylistic choice so much as an emotional survival strategy that then found an apt style. As Aneta Pawłowska observed when studying Yulia's wartime works, the artist shows a clear "desire to escape from the realities of war"[15] into an oneiric, decorative aesthetic. Such escapism, far from being trivial, allowed the artist to stabilize her inner state during the most difficult moments. Her images can be read as moral protest in an aesthetic form: they protest the ugliness of war by declaring, through beauty, that the human soul will not be uglified. In Jullien's terms, Yulia's art continually opened a margin of *écart* (distance) from the immediate present, enabling her to live through painting what could not be lived outside of it.

Oleksandr Ivashko is a young professional artist and art researcher who, when the war broke out, also felt the need to express his feelings through art. However, his approach was not to escape into a world of imagination for a long time. Instead, Oleksandr's works from 2022 (the first year of the full-scale invasion) confronted the war in a more direct, albeit abstract and reflective, manner. All of his works on the war were created in that first year; interestingly, after 2022, the artist created almost no works about war, as if the initial burst of creative energy had exhausted his artistic need or as if his subsequent adaptation to life during the war had directed his attention elsewhere. Oleksandr's work from 2022 can be described as emotional abstraction or abstract expressionism. Instead of depicting tanks, soldiers or ruined cities, the artist poured his feelings onto the canvas through colour, form and gestural brushstrokes. These paintings are essentially non-figurative, but one can sense the turmoil in the world: turbulent compositions, sharp colour contrasts and dynamic, sometimes violent brushstrokes.

The painting entitled *Limb* contrasts sharply with the aesthetic of the decorative, idealised war compositions of his mother, Yulia Ivashko. The artist does not escape into a world of symbolic harmony but attempts to immediately and expressively transform the trauma of war through abstract forms that are strongly emotionally charged. The painting *Limb* depicts a deconstructed, amorphous landscape – reminiscent of city ruins – dominated by fluid, undulating forms, broken geometric structures and organic elements of a symbolic nature, such as a fragment resembling a luminous sign in the dark sky. The juxtaposition of these forms recalls not so much a specific scene as a state of suspension: a world plunged into silence after a catastrophe, a space between

15 Aneta Pawłowska's conversation with the artist, Łódź, 10.07.2024.

life and non-existence – in keeping with the title of the work, *Limb*. The evocative, cool colour scheme has a similar effect, with shades of navy blue, blue and grey dominating. All artistic means contribute to the mood of abandonment, emptiness and danger. This contemporary image of ruins and spiritual disintegration surprisingly corresponds to a classic example of expressionist iconography of catastrophe, Stanisław Kubicki's lithograph *The Tower of Babel II* [*Wieża Babel II*] from around 1917[16]. This work, created in the spirit of the Poznań-based artistic group Bunt, depicts a crumbling architectural structure – a symbol of human pride, the collapse of communication, and the breakdown of social order after the First World War. In *The Tower of Babel*, the dynamic arrangement of vertical and diagonal lines shatters the illusion of stability, expressing emotional tension and the spiritual disintegration of the world. The expressive use of chiaroscuro and deliberate deformation of form corresponds with the group's broader visual strategies, which served as a form of protest against militarism and social violence. This was consistent – as Agnieszka Salamon observes – with "the necessity of conveying extra-artistic ideas through artistic form"[17]. In *The Tower of Babel II*, the dynamic, vertical and diagonal lines of the lithograph shatter the illusion of order, revealing the emotional turmoil and spiritual disintegration of the world.

We find a similar formal strategy in Ivashko, although the medium, time and context are completely different. In the painting *Limb*, order is not only deformed (as in Kubicki) but completely shattered, and its fragments drift in an unnamed space. Ivashko's colour scheme, cool and subdued, serves to create a narrative atmosphere like the chiaroscuro contrasts in Kubicki's graphics. Both artists are dominated by the aesthetics of ruin: not as a realistic image of destruction, but as a sign of civilisational and spiritual catastrophe. What is more, both in *The Tower of Babel II* and in *Limb*, we observe the symbolic presence of hope: in Kubicki's work, it is the verticality of the tower, which has not yet completely collapsed; in Iwashko's work, it is a luminous point on a dark background, which can be interpreted as an echo of spiritual transcendence or an illusory orientation in chaos.

Although they are separated by almost a century, different media and different historical experiences, these works are united by a common expressionist vision of collapse and an attempt to transform it through the language of form. In this context, *Limb* can be interpreted as a contemporary, wartime echo of

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16 *Bunt – Ekspresjonizm – Transgraniczna awangarda*, https://ownetic.com/news/2015/11/27/bunt-ekspresjonizm-transgraniczna-awangarda-domek-romanski-wroclaw/ and https://cyfrowe.mnw.art.pl/pl/zbiory/542819 (accessed: July 21, 2025).

17 A. Salamon, *Twórczość graficzna jako narzędzie w walce o niepodległość. Przyczynek do genezy i historii "Zdroju"*, in: *Bunt: Ekspresjonizm poznański 1917–1925*, exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, Poznań 2004, pp. 96-118.

The Tower of Babel – an image of a disintegrating city and, at the same time, a disintegrating subject trying to salvage the remnants of meaning in a world filled with silence after a catastrophe (Fig. 2).

Oleksandr Ivashko's subsequent graphic works from 2022, *Composition 1* (Fig. 3) and *Composition 2* (Fig. 4), represent a series of emotionally charged drawings that can be read as visual representations of mental states in the context of war trauma. The artist focuses on the organic flow, condensation and entanglement of forms that resemble neural structures, roots or internal impulses – as if we were dealing with a drawing of the subconscious. *Composition 1* is more open in form. Fluid lines create a dynamic but unpredictable shape with blurred boundaries. This work evokes a state of tension, mental uncertainty, but with a visible internal dynamic. It is as if the artist was trying to capture the movement of emotions in their very course. The presence of a thin yellow line running through the structure may suggest an impulse, a trace of energy or an emotional core stretched out in a thicket of anxiety. *Composition 2*, on the other hand, shows a more compact and closed form, heavier in expression. Densely tangled lines create a massive shape that seems suspended in a vacuum, detached from external reality. The absence of any light or colour intensifies the impression of closure, condensed anxiety or psychological pressure. It is not the movement of emotion, as in *Composition 1*, but rather its blockage, suspension, internal pressure. Despite their apparent simplicity, both works give the impression of an authentic record of an experience that cannot be put into words.

When juxtaposed with the painting *Limb*, these two drawings appear as a form of introspection, an entry into the interior of the subject, into the depths of their nervous or emotional system. *Limb*, on the other hand, uses elaborate symbolism and a full painterly composition to show a catastrophe in outer space: the ruin of a city, a world after destruction, perhaps even cosmic landscapes of an apocalyptic nature. Thus, *Limb* can be read as the externalisation of trauma through its 'spilling' into space. *Composition 1* and *2*, on the other hand, are an internalisation of the same experience – a record of an internal struggle that does not need the form of the external world, but finds its reflection in the gestures of lines, the tangled brushstrokes and the turmoil of emotions. In this way, the three works form a coherent artistic narrative in which the catastrophe of war is presented both as an external event – social and material in nature – and as a psychological experience, deeply personal and silent. This diversity of artistic approach makes Ivashko's work unique: as a painter and graphic artist who does not so much illustrate war as experiences it on the plane of form, expressing the inexpressible.

Contemporary technological advances have made information about the ongoing Russian Ukrainian war widely accessible and rapidly disseminated. Among the vast array of wartime photography, a particularly poignant artistic

strategy has emerged: the portrayal of "a world without people." This approach, marked by the absence of human figures, expresses the trauma of war with striking emotional intensity. One of its most powerful exponents is Serhii Belinskyi[18] – a soldier-photographer whose images blur the line between official documentation and personal artistic expression. Before the full-scale invasion, Belinskyi had already developed a distinctive style that focused on objects, landscapes and animals rather than people. With the onset of war, this visual language became his dominant mode of expression. As head of the press service for the 28th Separate Mechanised Brigade, Belinskyi produced both official imagery and a parallel personal archive. The latter reson-ates with his pre-war style and functions as a means of processing trauma. In these personal photographs, soldiers recede into the background, while animals, objects, and landscapes become symbolic protagonists. Belinskyi's work echoes the introspective turn seen in artists like Yulia and Oleksandr Ivashko, though unlike them, he began his formal artistic training only after the war began, completing a master's degree during the conflict. (Fig. 5) (Fig.6)

His strategy – conveying war's tragedy without direct depictions of people, is both emotionally resonant and intellectually provocative. Images such as a bullet-riddled road sign *(Sign of War*) or a red slipper in school ruins invite personal interpretation. Even empty fields evoke collective trauma. As Belinskyi remarks, verbalisation is often unnecessary when a children's fairy-tale book lies beside a machine gun or a heart in national colours appears on a dusty windscreen. Animals also play a central role: starving cats, abandoned livestock and stray puppies adopted by soldiers remind us that war includes intimacy, tenderness and resilience. "Animals are the saviours of hardened souls"[19], Belinskyi writes. "The ruins of homes resemble gutted fish – like the wounded values of the world"[20]. Often, animals occupy the foreground, while people, if present, are vague shadows. Nature and animals, as in Ivashko's works, serve as means of psychic regeneration. Belinskyi's minimalist compositions: sparse, meditative and symbolically loaded, often recall Japanese aesthetics, turning visual restraint into a space of deep emotional resonance.

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18 More about the figure of Beliński and his photos from the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine: S. Belinskyi, Y. Ivashko, I. L. Kravchenko, A. Dmytrenko, I. Dreval, *Analysis of fine-art photography techniques in representing the tragedy of war in Ukraine using Serhii Belinskyi's works*, "Art Inquiry. Recherches sur lesarts" 2023, vol. XXV, pp. 345-365; J. Iwaszko, A. Pawłowska, O. Iwaszko, *W dobrej i złej doli. Przekształcenia stylistyczne fotografii Sergija Belińskiego*, Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe, Łódź 2023; Y. Ivashko, A. Pawłowska, S. Belinskyi et al., *Conveying the Tragedy of War Through Unconventional Photography Methods*, "Faces of War", no. 2, 2024, pp. 121-140 and A. Pawłowska, J. Iwaszko, *Sergij Belińskij. Fotografia, Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe,* Łódź 2025.

19 Based on: S. Beliński, J. Iwaszko, *A światłość w ciemności*..., pp. 56-57.

20 Ibid., p. 60.

Therapeutic Value versus Aesthetic Value: A Wartime Dilemma

In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, creativity has become both a mechanism for coping with a difficult situation and a form of civic engagement. Therapeutic strategies now include encouraging civilians and military personnel suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to express their experiences through drawing, poetry and other forms of creativity. This raises a key question about the fundamental value of war art: does it lie in its psychological function or in its aesthetic qualities?[21]

In Ukraine, soldiers undergoing rehabilitation and civilians are increasingly engaging in creative activities such as icon painting, writing, visiting museums and participating in exhibitions. Many of these works are created by people with no formal artistic training, including mothers, wives and sisters of fallen soldiers[22]. Although the technical quality of these works may vary, their emotional authenticity provides an important outlet for trauma. For people who are unable to express their experiences in words, the act of creation becomes a substitute for speech and a deeply personal form of emotional survival. This therapeutic dimension has sparked considerable debate. Research and conversations with artists show that war art often blurs the line between personal catharsis and public expression. In times of peace, therapeutic benefits and artistic value often coexist. In times of crisis, however, these aspects can diverge. Some argue that the healing function of art must take precedence, especially when it provides psychological relief and promotes solidarity. Others emphasise the importance of creating works that will endure, capturing the spirit of the times for future generations. These perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. According to François Jullien, all authentic art is created at a moment of *de-coincidence*, a break with the expected or the overwhelming. In the case of war, the overwhelming nature of everyday reality becomes a condition from which the artist must detach themselves. For this reason, even raw and unpolished works can have great expressive power. Over time, the difference between the therapeutic impulse and the pursuit of lasting artistic quality often diminishes. Some artists begin by seeking relief and ultimately arrive at works of symbolic and cultural permanence. This evolution is evident in the development of Yulia Ivashko's work, which has moved from introspective floral paintings to compositions that consciously integrate Ukrainian national motifs, or in Oleksandr Ivashko's abstract drawings, which can later be read in dialogue with the post-war tradition of expressionism.

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21 To see more: Y. Ivashko, A. Pawłowska, *Transformations of Exhibitions in War-Affected Ukraine: 2024 Perspectives on Art-Driven Inclusion and Socialization*, "Muzeológia a kultúr nededičstvo" 2025, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 43-63, https://doi.org/10.46284/mkd.2025.13.2.3.

22 Ibid., pp. 44-45.

Poland offers a different institutional approach. There, art therapy sessions are usually conducted under professional supervision and are not intended for public presentation. For example, the Museum of Art in Łódź and the Castle in Oświęcim organise regular creative workshops for patients of neurological and psychiatric institutions. These classes are supervised by qualified specialists and always in the presence of a psychologist. The resulting works are seen primarily as part of the therapeutic process rather than as autonomous works of art intended for exhibition. This clear framework allows for the preservation of ethical and professional boundaries between therapy and public art. In addition, the Odlot Gallery in Łódź[23] presents a unique curatorial model that combines therapy and artistic recognition. It is dedicated to presenting Art Brut – works by artists whose creativity stems from an inner need, often related to experiences of mental illness, neurodivergence or social marginalisation. The gallery celebrates the expressive power of non-academic creativity and challenges conventional definitions of artistic value. In this context, it is an inspiring example of how therapeutic art can be publicly honoured without losing its authenticity. In Ukraine, structures of this kind are still developing. As a result, the distinction between works created for therapeutic purposes and those intended for public presentation remains unclear. This lack of distinction poses curatorial and ethical challenges, especially when deeply personal works are exhibited without adequate context. Nevertheless, the absence of formal barriers has also allowed for a broader democratisation of artmaking during wartime, opening creative expression to people previously excluded from the art world. In Ukraine, efforts are now emerging to support both therapeutic and professional artistic production. Alongside spontaneous creativity, institutions are beginning to commission works by established artists that document and interpret the cultural impact of war. Exhibitions such as *How Are You? Ukrainian Art During Wartime* (Kyiv, 2023) (Fig. 7) and series of photographs by artists such as Serhii Belinskyi reflect a growing awareness of the need to sustain therapeutic practices while preserving artistic heritage of historical and aesthetic value.

Final remarks

Ultimately, debate on the therapeutic role of art should be understood not in black-and-white terms, but as a continuum. In times of national trauma, the very act of creation becomes essential – it is a means of survival, solidarity and cultural memory. What begins as therapy may later be recognised as art; what

23 See: *Galeria Odlot*, https://domnaosiedlu.com.pl/galeria_odlot (accessed: July 21, 2025).

begins as art may deepen its impact through its authenticity and emotional intensity. In today's Ukraine, this process continues, shaping not only individual resilience but also a multidimensional and lasting cultural record. In this context, it is worth recalling that the creation of works about war has a long tradition in art history. Francisco Goya, in his series of prints *Los desastres de la guerra* (1810-1820), brutally and realistically depicted the horrors of the Napoleonic Wars. Théodore Géricault, in his *The Return from Russia* (1818), captured the tragedy of wounded soldiers returning from the battlefield. Otto Dix, a German expressionist, in his series *Der Krieg* (1924), showed drastic images of World War I, inspired by his own experience as a soldier. Pablo Picasso, in his monumental painting *Guernica* (1937), depicted the collective trauma of the bombing of the Basque city. In the Polish context, Xawery Dunikowski, a sculptor and Auschwitz prisoner, created sculptures and drawings that were an artistic testimony to the nightmare of the camp. Today's art of war in Ukraine can therefore be seen as a continuation of this tradition – as testimony, therapy and a form of remembrance.

As François Jullien argues, "what is needed is the risk of allowing something new – and unrepeatable – to emerge"[24]. This risk becomes particularly vital in wartime, where the overwhelming reality must be interrupted or destabilised to allow for a different kind of truth to arise – one that is not imposed by ideological or narrative expectations. Jullien calls for a break from habitual perception, a moment of "de-coincidence," which makes the emergence of forms that are not only aesthetically original but existentially necessary possible. In this light, the creative responses to war in Ukraine – whether made by professional artists or civilians in the grip of trauma – should be read as such moments of rupture: deeply personal yet universally resonant.

24 F. Jullien, *Ponownie otworzyć możliwości*..., p. 177.

Fig. 1. *Dream of a green chrysanthemum about yellow leaves*. Artist Y. Ivashko, 2024

Fig. 2. *Limb*. Artist O. Ivashko, 2022

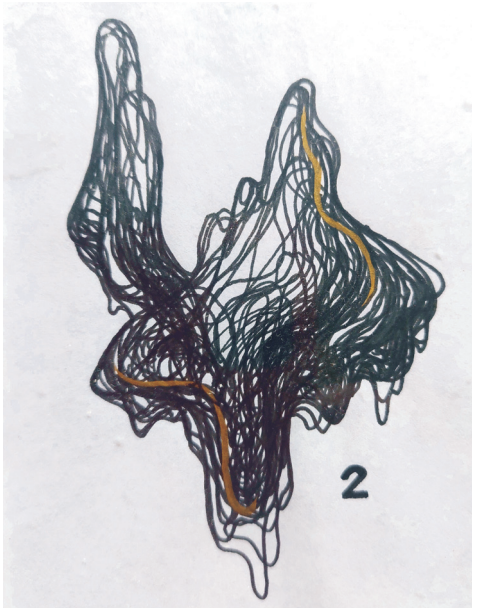

Fig. 3. *Composition 1*. Artist O. Ivashko, 2022

Fig. 4. *Composition 2*. Artist O. Ivashko, 2022

Fig. 5. In pretend captivity. Kramatorsk. Photo by S. Belinskyi, 2023

Fig. 6. Donetsk region. Drawing as a way of relaxation. Photo from the collections of S. Belinskyi, 2023

Fig. 7. Alina Yakubenko, *From the Military Series. Ink on paper*, 2023,
Source: https://blokmagazine.com/how-are-you-ukrainian-art-during-wartime/
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SZTUKA JAKO ŚRODEK EGZYSTENCJALNY POSTRZEGANIA I DOŚWIADCZANIA TRAGEDII WOJNY

Artykuł analizuje rolę sztuki w czasie wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej (2022–2025) jako narzędzia przetrwania, terapii i świadectwa. W sytuacjach granicznych, takich jak wojna, twórczość artystyczna staje się sposobem przetwarzania traumy oraz odzyskiwania sensu istnienia. Autorzy, odwołując się do koncepcji *dé-coïncidence* François Julliena oraz refleksji Władysława Tatarkiewicza i Ireny Wojnar, ukazują, jak sztuka pozwala jednostkom oderwać się od przytłaczającej rzeczywistości i otworzyć przestrzeń do działania i refleksji. Przedstawione studia przypadków trojga ukraińskich artystów: Julii Iwaszko, Oleksandra Iwaszko i Serhija Bielińskiego. Prezentują oni różne strategie twórcze: od eskapistycznych obrazów idealizowanej natury, przez ekspresyjne abstrakcje, po symboliczne fotografie ukazujące wojnę bez ludzi. Autorzy podejmują również refleksję nad napięciem między wartością terapeutyczną a artystyczną dzieł wojennych, wskazując, że granica ta często się zaciera, a autentyczność i emocjonalna siła stają się ich największą wartością.

Słowa kluczowe: sztuka wojenna, trauma, de-coďncidence, ekspresja, Ukraina.

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