

Pain Addiction

Dear reader,

This essay might be triggering. I assume, any writing about the ongoing war is triggering, isn't it? Usually what triggers the reader is an invitation (or often enforcement) to witness human suffering, injustice, atrocities and losses. I have no intention to trigger you in that way, as news have been up to this task and doing the job perfectly well. This piece may be triggering though, because it unveils uncomfortable truth about artists at war. Perhaps, I am getting too mysterious or promising here. So let me just start.

I have always been fascinated by living and working in harsh contexts. It appeared to me that this is what makes human alive. It is neither comfort and coziness of a quiet peaceful place, nor stability and predictability that make one evolve and transform. Human experiences life and grows by facing challenges, by causing oneself troubles and seeing how he/she will deal with them. This has been my firm belief since childhood. I deliberately chose to harden myself as steel by traveling to off the beaten track places around the world and volunteering there, by working in the war zone in the east of Ukraine for years, by executing extreme self-discipline and always choosing pain over pleasure. Pain, in my opinion, was the only way to become a full-fledged person. Pleasure was a way to remain childish and narrow-minded.

However, later I discovered that I have tried to kill two bees with one stone. Meaning that I find secret pleasure in suffering, as many other artists do, because we see it is a source of inspiration. As gorgeously outlined in a song "King" by Florence + The Machine:

*"The very thing you're best at is the thing that hurts the most
But you need your rotten heart, your dazzling pain like diamond rings
You need to go to war to find material to sing."*

Delirium art

Needless to say that I did not contemplate on fleeing Kyiv when the war escalated in 2022. Very few Ukrainians who stayed in the capital seemed to be suicide bombers ready to face occupation and death any moment. My major reason for staying was not art or social work, but rather the need to be in the eye of the storm and test my capacity to go through it.

After all, what can you create when you are in a survival mode under constant shelling and witnessing devastations all around? I can compare such creative process to writing a will while being delirious, when doctors said you most probably will be dead by morning. I speak from my own experience, as creating my play *Danger, Mine* was exactly a question of time. I wrote it in 10 days, feeling that I have to hurry up while I am still alive.

Art created in such harsh circumstances appears to be more of a scream of unconsciousness, of grief and pain than an actual gift to the world. You don't think about the value of your art piece or how it might affect others, you hurry up to produce something to dump your emotions. Most of the texts written in recent years are, in my opinion, these screams in delirium. The artist witnesses atrocities, feels horrified or helpless and needs to transmute one's hatred, anger, fear into something to save oneself from this inner turmoil. This is how war art is being born, and this is not a pretty child. Moreover, it is very likely that that child was never meant to be shown to anybody else, as it has nothing to give to people who get in touch with it, except pain.

Responsibility & retraumatization

Having made that argument, let me explain myself a little bit. This war child, born out of madness, may be of interest to foreign audiences who want to get a glimpse of what we, Ukrainians, are living through on a moment to moment basis. This export art is a political tool, working alongside international broadcasters to raise awareness and funds to stop russian aggression. However, if you are a creator still living in Ukraine and engaging with local audiences through your art, it is a whole different story. Here a question of responsibility for what we say comes into play, which we, artists, often driven by our egos, prefer to avoid.

Ukrainian poet and literary scholar Marianna Kiyanovska has once noted in her rules of a poet's life:

"It becomes increasingly difficult to speak. Poems are not fully born, because sometimes it is too scary. I unintentionally think: what will happen if I finish this line. And this is another totality: what is said immediately comes true, one must have the strength and conscience to be responsible for what was said".

Nowadays as a dramaturg I work primarily with dancers. For me dance is also text, thus, the same responsibility for what is said applies when one talks with her body. Majority of dancers who approach me for assistance are seeking ways to lighten the load of their emotions by creating a dance performance. It is quite understandable, yet when I ask why the audience should pay for somebody's endeavour to release their pain, I get sullen silence in return.

There is a very thin line between self-therapy and art, and for some reason it is believed per se that the artist's self-therapy must be interesting or helpful to others. What if not? What if one's emotional release becomes a burden for those who witness and participate in it?

The audience in Ukraine has been through war and suffering in real time. So when they come to theatre, how can artists ensure that we do not just vomit our unprocessed emotions on viewers? They have enough of their own. How do we make sure we do not retraumatize them? What is the value of our art for their souls, if it is a product of hatred, anxiety and grief? Why do we make and crave to share our war art? To transfer our grief to the audience (as suggested by a Swedish proverb that shared sorrow is half a sorrow), or to lighten their burden by offering nurturance with our work? There are many other questions, which, probably, do not have clear answers. Or have different answers depending on the artist that dares to pose them to oneself.

Feeding the beast

War art contains more laments of the moment than timeless gems for one's heart and mind. Living in Ukraine and making art these days seems to me like trying to paint a black cell in colour when you have only black chalk. The war trapped us in this cell and, as a voracious beast, demands to sacrifice not only our physical, mental and emotional health, but spiritual one as well. We all serve the war, knowingly or unknowingly, by continuing to feed it with our fears and contagious negativity.

I have noticed how much my own voice has shrunk in recent years, how narrow my set of topics for art pieces has become, how quickly the full-scale war and my survival mode made me lose freedom of full expression. Having observed works of other colleagues that were supported and made public, I came to a conclusion that any art created in the field of war has to be an ode to the beast. Otherwise, it is invalid, inappropriate, ill-timed. It makes me also recall a notion of 'pain-body', coined by a spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle in his book *The Power of Now*. According to Tolle, pain-body is an accumulation of negative emotions collected throughout one's life and requiring more pain to stay in power. He explains further:

"The pain-body wants to survive, just like every other entity in existence, and it can only survive if it gets you to unconsciously identify with it. It can then rise up, take you over, "become you," and live through you. /.../ Pain can only feed on pain. Pain cannot feed on joy. It finds it quite indigestible. Once the pain-body has taken you over, you want more pain. You become a victim or a perpetrator. You want to inflict pain, or you want to suffer pain, or both. There isn't really much

difference between the two. You are not conscious of this, of course, and will vehemently claim that you do not want pain. But look closely and you will find that your thinking and behaviour are designed to keep the pain going, for yourself and others.”

I have been an addict to emotional pain, dwelling on human suffering and creating art out of it long enough to see that this pattern is enduring and dysfunctional. Or to be more precise: its' only function is to trigger and feed pain-bodies in others, make them sink deeper into the vicious cycle of drama with no way out.

Artists in disguise

The solution is not in oblivion, escapism or trying to counterbalance pain with cheap thrills or fake optimism. This is not what I am suggesting here. What I am suggesting is awakening to the truth that our art has much more profound impact on the audiences that we may naively believe. What do I want them to feel? What future do I want for myself and people that get in touch with my art? Will feeding the beast of war with my grief make it die faster? What is my role as a human, as a creator on this planet in these turbulent times? Why was I given voice as an artist? To inflict more pain or, perhaps, to put some effort into healing it?

“Every great work of art is objective and impersonal, but nonetheless profoundly moves us each and all. And this is also why the personal life of the poet cannot be held essential to his art—but at most a help or a hindrance to his creative task,” Carl Jung wrote in *Modern Man in Search of the Soul*.

I doubt that art created under shelling can be objective and impersonal. Therefore, I also doubt its 'greatness' and value for the decades to come. I would love to be mistaken, so only history will reveal to us how much of artistic expression created in Ukrainian bloodshed will survive time.

As a Ukrainian artist Phil It asks in his song “Leave Behind”, released in 2023 (translated from Ukrainian):

*“What will we leave behind here?
Will there be a joyful sound?
You, try to find yourself where the love is.”*

In his talk “On Memory, Praise and Spirit”, given at St. Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in London, Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee cites the Sufi mystic Irina Tweedie who said that “we

are born into this world with two primal ancient impulses. The first one is to survive—to stay alive, to breathe. And the second one is to praise—to praise and to pray to the Divine in all their forms”.

Now, you might get irritated and ask me, “What is there to praise amongst endless destruction, chaos and death?” I have worked with war-affected communities since 2016 and found what is worthy of praise: human kindness, reciprocity, resilience, capacity to find joy despite loss, to rebuild one’s life and home from debris. These are the people who have shown me what true art is. It lies in restoring yourself after severe shock, in creating a new life when forced to flee, in cultivating beauty and enthusiasm regardless of how painful your personal story is, how much your pain-body has grown during the war. This is the art that I am interested in now, that make my soul nourished, that make me feel proud and happy to share the same land with people who, despite loss and grief, make a conscious decision to choose and cherish Life again and again.

It takes much more courage and perseverance to seek a tiny crack of light in the cell of war reality than to embrace darkness and surrender yourself to it. And when I ask myself what I can give to the people of my country, I ask what would love do. It is a radical and unpopular act, especially for a former pain addict like me. Yet, now I strongly believe that this is what makes a human alive and complete.