

SECTION 4. APPLIED CULTURAL STUDIES

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“SO WHAT DO YOU SEE?” PROJECT FINDINGS. VISUAL ART IN RECONCILIATION IN UKRAINE

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Since 2014, Ukraine became an epicenter of an armed conflict. Having worked in field of social reconciliation for Ukrainian communities since the very start of russian invasion to Ukraine, I observed that the practices that dominate the field of Conflict Resolution seemed to exhaust their potential in Ukraine due to the complexity of the situation as well as lack of political will to adapt unpopular decisions. At the same time, I believe that another reason for “liberal peacebuilding” [1, p.17] approach to fail on Ukraine’s territory is because the theories and processes of reconciliation that are being implemented were originating from the societies, cultures, and institutions that differ largely from those that are the recipients of conflict transforming interventions. The liberal peace is a “virtual peace”, according to Oliver Richmond; that is to say, “it exists in the discourse/imagination of the international community but is not experienced in the same way on the ground [2, p.354]. That spurred me to think that reconciling methodology, if imported, should be adopted to local environment and at the same time some alternative approaches and instruments might bring necessary shift at the dialogue and reconciliation table as many of the liberal peacebuilding “classics” has been given a try.

So this abstract unpacks some discourses and practices of conflict transformation circulating within visual art. Through analysis of images produced by non-artists it shows how visual art can be related to and sometimes subvert the dominant discourses around the current war in Ukraine. The findings presented are obtained as a result of the ‘So What do you See?’ project designed by the colleagues from the University of Bradford that I carried out July 2019 through February 2020 all over

Ukraine to gather and compartmentalize, what people at a grassroots level feel about themselves as individuals, about their social group and about the “other” they are in conflict with. The latter was revealed by their sketches or drawings.

I carried out this project in 16 location in Ukraine including territories not currently controlled by the Ukrainian government in Eastern Ukraine. Total number of participants was 334. They produced visual representation of their ideas about how they see themselves (either individually or as a group) in the Ukrainian conflict or how they see or would like to see the “other” side. The drawings were digitalized, catalogued and analyzed through Levinas ethics of the Other or, in Levinas's terms, on “ethics as first philosophy”, which presupposes the primacy of ethics from the experience of the encounter with the Other, as well as Lederach Moral Imagination approach, Daniel Bar-Tal Ethos of conflict concept and Cooley’s “The Looking Glass Self” approach.

The sketches obtained as a result of the project were of a different complexity and sensibility, but it was possible to arrange them in themes in accordance to the point that was made by participants at the time. It enabled to find and analyse the tendencies which are presented below. The suggested themes are as follows:

1. Maps and borders

The most obvious trend that stroked me as an unexpected one was that among vast variety of metaphors and symbols used by participants to provide their drawn responses, the most frequent image used for interpreting feelings in relation to the conflict had a map of Ukraine as a basis element. It is difficult of course to dissociate the meaning of the drawings from the settings and context they were made in. As on-going war in Ukraine resulted in a fast and very visible evolution towards enforcing the sense of individual or group identity – from fragile to quite monolete. And the contour of Ukrainian map has become an emblem of this process. An image of map as a symbol of territorial integrity becomes the most eloquent feature to be used by people either because they realize the urgency of the situation, or just following the fashionable trend. People turn to the symbols to have a “staying power” resources and a reference of their identity. They trigger an emotional response or attitude, which is termed by Turner to be “condensational”. Such symbols, as Anthony Cohen writes in his book “The Symbolic Construction of Community”, are “infused with timelessness ... and attain particular effectiveness during periods of intensive social change when communities have to drop their heaviest cultural anchors in order to resist the currents of transformation” [3, p. 102].

In case of Ukrainian community, it seems apparent that the cognitive map, which people and community is using to navigate interactions, encompasses exactly the physical map as of 1991 as a core symbol that “rhymes”. This is the moment where the heterogeneous collective image replication becomes the zone of conscious and subconscious visual influence that creates the environment of visual culture that conceptualizes the territory of Ukraine as a “non-negotiable” point for the community.



Fig. 1. Fem, 25, Rovenki, Luhans’k region, occupied



Fig. 2. Fem, 37, Poltava, Central Ukraine

2. The Other

This goes in-line with the main idea of the project as a way to journey around political clichés that in the best case scenario stop baring any meaning of in the worst case just add fuel to the current conflict. At the same time, the project was aimed to tackle the relations with “the Other” in Emmanuel Levinas’s understanding of the concept, where "ethics as first

philosophy” presupposes the primacy of ethics from the experience of the encounter with the Other [4, p. 162]. Although many participants approached the assignment as a chance to demonstrate their own feelings and position in the conflict or impose guilt on the opposite party, some did show certain relational reflexivity in the process. As a result, a number of images visualizing mirror and self-reflection appeared. They picture a mirror as a demarcation border, where “the Other” is an exact or crooked reflection of “I”.



Fig. 3. Male, 35, Kropyvnytskyi, Central Ukraine



Fig. 4. Fem, 22, Poltava, Central Ukraine

3. Communication dynamics (narrative fatigue, propaganda, comics as willingness to tell the personal story by other means)

In the afterlight, participants’ sketches revealed their sincere “word-fatigue”, as a portion of visual replies clearly demonstrate how the struggle of narratives causing their anxiety. A good third of sketches received from the participants can be described as comics (as they represent action rather

than a snap-shot of the situation). Ian Williams, comics artist and a co-founder of the Graphic Medicine movement, suggests that sequential art or a combination of visual art and narrative structure is able to impose some cathartic effect on the creator, so that he/she can reauthor the experience of trauma in a way that simple narration is not capable of doing [5, p. 34]. It is already a truism that in dialogue process between conflicting parties clichés don't work, whereas personal stories, when the person tells how the situation effected him/her on a personal level, have proven effectivity in establishing foundation for understanding. So by submitting comics as an answer to the project's prompts, participants are willing to tell the story, in many ways very personal and harsh. It could be a solid demonstration of readiness for dialogue, need to vocalize and visualize the person internal agenda, and perhaps, an interest in the agenda of the Other.

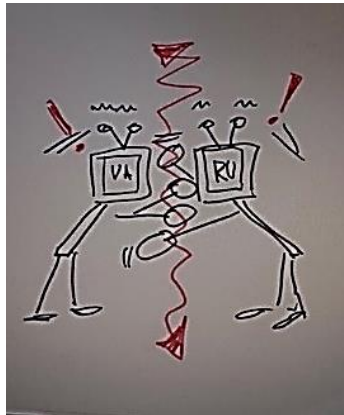


Fig. 5. Fem, 24, Krasnodon, Luhans'k region, occupied



Fig. 6. Male, 20, Lviv, Western Ukraine



Fig. 7. Fem, 36, Dnipro, Central Ukraine

4. Re-imagining positive future

The disintegrative and diversifying nature of social icons, that appeared handy for the participants during sketching, suggests that for conflict transformation to succeed we might need to provide them with other set of social icons which would re-imagining peace. As Frank Möller, Tampere Peace Research Institute professor, mentions that the changes of the world need the changes in the way we picture it. So in order for political actions to change, it is necessary to switch from the conflict-oriented thinking towards peace-oriented thinking. Yet popular culture demonstrate accentuation on visualization of conflict and violence [6, p.29]. Basically, it is a report on what is indeed happening. Under such circumstances visualization of peace is unavailable for the observer. Albeit peace visualization does influence its understanding and determination. So the social icons bearing the aesthetics of peace, could facilitate the shift in public conscience towards the idea of peace as a desirable option. Participants did provide some evidence of social iconology in-line with the aesthetics of peace, sketching commonly known symbols of positive dialogue – bridges built and hands shaken by contrast to the sketches of walls and barb-wires. The participants submitted an approximately even amount of “walls” and “bridges”, speaking categorically. Among other “iconic” images representing the aesthetics of peace submitted dealt with visualized, re-imagined future, where there is love and peace. They were all responses to prompts from the second column (wishful state of affairs). Most frequent symbols used were peace dove, heart, sun, happy family.



Fig. 8. Fem, 22, Mykolayiv, Southern Ukraine



Fig. 9. Male, 20, Kharkiv, Eastern Ukraine

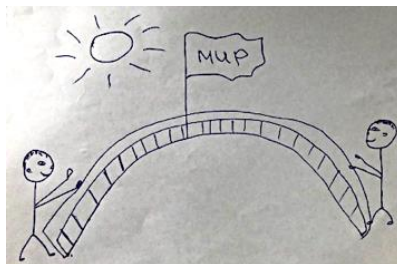


Fig. 10. Fem, 26, Poltava, Central Ukraine

Upon several weeks after participating in the project, participants were receiving the questionnaire designed to scope their feelings before, during and after the experiment on their e-mail addresses provided in the consent

form they were filling out before taking part in the experiment. One of the questions from the questionnaire was “Did you discover something about yourself as a result of participating in the project?” **68%** of respondents mentioned they did. Among them there were no same answers to generalize. The most interesting and revealing answers were as follows:

“I didn’t realize it would be so hard to do.”

“Our enemies want to see themselves just like we would like to see ourselves – free, strong and prosperous.”

“Personal experience reflects my answer.”

“Generalization of “WE” concept and how we are in reality diverse within this framework of “WE”.

The quintessential end-comment was *“The process of choosing the prompt facilitated clarification of my own values and motivation in the conflict”.*

Adam Curle, psychologist who became a pioneer of the field of Peace Studies, stipulated the importance of inwards focusing for those who are willing to achieve peace. He explained: “The point I wish to make is that without greater self-awareness, we do not *feel* differently and so do not *act* differently. If we see things in the same way, we behave about them in the same way. But to the extent that our perception of externals is related to a deeper vision of our own natures, so will our actions be changed. Thus awareness is the root of all change. Moreover, since peace means a change from unpeaceful to peaceful relations, it is the very source of peace” [7, p. 98].

Thus, the more our perception of the Other is corresponding to deeper understanding of ourselves, the larger is the probability that our attitude to the Other will be changed.

Peacebuilding process presupposes the work with social transformation, meaning the shift in people’s perception of the local environment and in the relations with the Other. And self-awareness is a corner stone of this transformation. Thus artistic experience can offer a new frame for interpreting the problem and the relationships around it. Such approach can provide momentum to conflict transformation in communities.

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