

ESSAY

'War Ecology of Ukrainian Art'

by Khrystyna Semeryn

In Lieu of Introduction

The fundamental tenets of human affinity with the world and survival itself have once again been called into question during the coronavirus pandemic. The basic primacy of the biological over the social, the superiority of the virus, something lifeless which gained an advantage over a living being on the biological ladder, the rethinking of the relationship with the environment and the cyclical nature of the biosphere, and the plain old threat of dictatorships to the world's life – these are the gifts our 2020s have brought us. In 2020, many thought that they only needed to wait for a while, and life would flow like a river again and return to its course. In Ukraine, it was said, however, that war always comes after a plague, and that last year there was a rich harvest of mushrooms in the Carpathian Mountains which, older people say, always happens before the war.

In the end, the war was not long in coming. Whilst I am penning this text, the Russian missiles keep killing Ukrainian people and animals and ruining Ukrainian cities, monuments, museums, and theatres. I grieve over killed and shell-shocked pets and animals days and nights. I cannot help but think about the destroyed natural environment, home for people and animals, shone ground layers with all its inhabitants, the burnt land and forests, polluted rivers and ponds with poisoned fish, mined fields and roads... Seldom do I deliberate about the stance of ecological NGOs and activists but again, Greta Thunberg organizes the next "Skolstrejk för klimatet" while ignoring not only my comments on Facebook but also the reality of devastating war and Russia's nuclear blackmailing in the heart of Europe. It seems that the tiny bodies of innocent cats burned by Russian artillery and dogs' paws cut off and nailed to the wall by Russian occupiers in Vorzel near Kyiv do not deserve protection and mourning, let alone the life of Ukrainians. Perhaps a silent cry of helplessness is what remains... Though no, there is yet another thing left, art, louder than a sound, even if it is outwardly silent.

Here is the rather opportune question: Will humanity still care about the climate change if we are all murdered by nuclear bombs? Despite it remains unanswered, the possible option is expression and reflection. I am saying about art as what else, if not art is capable of capturing the complexities of this world and mankind? Who if not artists are able to speak in the language of their arts about the threat of humanity to themselves and the planet?

A Natural Turn?

Ukrainian contemporary art reflects on environmental issues galore. They run the gamut of Ukrainian artists' *pre-war* works¹, be it Yulia Zakharova's "Crocodile" (2021) with an untypical animal in the channel of the only one wastewater treatment facilities in Kyiv and outskirts (Koshuba, 2021), Daria Chechushkova's "Book of the Air" (2020) where nature is a full-fledged co-author as the painted windows of an abandoned plant in Odesa (Smirnova, 2021) look different in different days and seasons, or the Ukrainian-Romanian joint project "RIVERSSOUNDS" within which the sound artists recorded and collected the soundscapes of the European rivers (Skoryna, 2021). There, the relations of man with nature are oftentimes debated and undermined, a new vitality, a role of nature in art, and the meaning of the biological are being looked for, and ecological concerns about the catastrophic inability of a man to live in harmony with the environment is spoken. Of course, from the current perspective under Russian bombardment, it all appears totally different. No matter how important talking about the climate change is, not mentioning the ongoing war would seem to be a farce.

Contemporary art reevaluates natural substances and the basic archetypes: water and plants as symbols of life, stone, clay, and grain. After all, the fairly developed ecological line exists in Ukrainian art. Against the background of hostilities in Donbas and the full-scale war, the confrontation between the ecological and the political became relevant, being resolved in art differently as politics does. As an illustration, in "Limits of Responsibility" (2014), Ukrainian artist Nikita Kadan represents the mini-gardens planted on Maidan Nezalezhnosti

¹ Under "pre-war" is meant time before Russia's full-scale invasion on February 24th, with recognition of Russia's hybrid war since 2014.

However, isn't it strange to divide your life into before and after the war in 2022? Anyway we have already got used to it.

in Kyiv by protesters during and after the Revolution of Dignity². Through the phenomenon of revolutionary gardening, he explores the rooting of a political idea, the habitation of political space through traditional practice. Likewise, the images of empty stands refer to political apathy as the organizing principle of the active society. Meanwhile, the well-known artist Alevtina Kakhidze, who spoke a lot about the people from the Donetsk Oblast occupied by Russia, has been researching plants and animals since 2013. Implementing the idea of the Adult Garden, Kakhidze sprouted her home garden in the most natural way possible, so as not to interfere with the interaction of plants and the environment. In the performative work “Green Theater Where Plants, Insects Are Actors” (2021), she created beds with plants and eight scenarios for the development of events for everything planted there (Libet, 2021). In Kakhidze’s critical optics, the style of human relations with plants is called a “totalitarian bed,” which refers to the treatment of the botanical environment in terms of power and dictatorship.



Zhanna Kadyrova, *Pallianitsa*, 2022, stones carved by a mountain river. Credits: FB page of the artist.

² The Revolution of Dignity, also known as the Maidan, the Euromaidan, took place in Ukraine from November 2013 through February 2014, after the refusal of then pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich to sign up the Association Agreement with the European Union and beating of students protesters by security forces. After deadly clashes between protesters and the security forces, with the possible participation of the Russian forces, in the capital Kyiv the Revolution culminated in the ousting of Yanukovich, the overthrow of the Ukrainian government, and the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014.

The ecological themes in art also bring a question of authenticity up, which becomes a thorny issue under conditions of the war of extermination. One of the first sculptural works created by Ukrainian artists after February 24 is Zhanna Kadyrova's "Pallianitsa." It was made from local river stones gathered in the place where the artist was evacuated. By embedding an archaic narrative into the present, the imagination of the Ukrainian sacred bread enhanced by local material connects with the Ukrainian cultural heritage and identity.

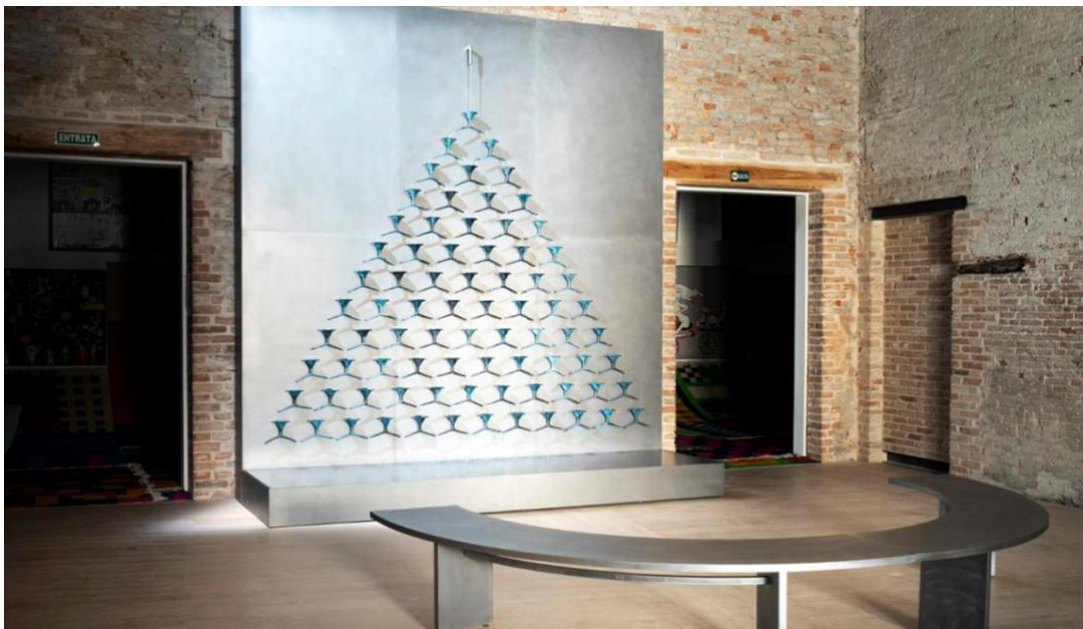
I would argue that the war has redefined an environmental concern of Ukrainian art, which is organically linked to the aesthetics of nature. According to writer Yevhenia Bielorusets, "The war seeks to establish crime as a form of life" (Kupchinetskaya & Badikov, 2022). Therefore, Russian aggression cannot be read beyond the environmental coordinates, and art contributes a lot to understand it. What I want to add is that the full-scale war has brought naturalism and increased attention to the environment and naked material, as we see in museums where fragments of missiles and other Russian weaponry are collected (the naked death), or as in the performance in support of Ukraine in Lithuania, when the pond in front of the Russian Embassy was painted with the nature-friendly bloody red paint (nature as a Great Collaborator). Eventually, the global issues bring art back to the natural habitat of life, encourages the artists to look for visual practices of living and extract the biological essence of life from the layering of social experience.

The Fountain of Exhaustion

Water, running down the swarm of bluish copper funnels, is murmuring quietly. As if the small air fleet, the triangle-shaped installation fastened with the thin trickles of water is arranged on the silvery panel and surrounded by the terracotta walls of the Arsenale di Venezia. The well-known Ukrainian kinetic sculpture is functioning for the first time in its 27-year-long artistic existence. Water is diminishing in its way top-down and is turned into a few drops in the bottom as the row of metal cans becomes the widest... Then it is lifted with the invisible system to start the way again.

This is the "Fountain of Exhaustion. Acqua Alta," the Ukrainian project in the national pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale to be the apotheosis of ecology, which permeates all the spheres of social and political life. Today it reveals the country amid the Russian

appalling attack. In 2018, Ukrainian artist Pavlo Makov received Ukrainian National Taras Shevchenko Award, the highest award in Ukraine, in Visual Art nomination. His layered and multivalent “Fountain of Exhaustion” is one of the longest-running artworks inscribed in the history of independent Ukraine. Firstly shown in 1995, it had passed the way from the local incident to the understanding of the cultural, social, and political cataclysms of the time. Its title, therefore, carries a lot of meaning. The layering that is exposed like onion scales under the knife of reality manifests an artist’s transcendent ability to speak in unison with history, to feel the subtlest shifts of time, even when the ripples on the water of reality are not yet visible.



Pavlo Makov, *Fountain of Exhaustion. Acqua Alta*, 1995–2022. Credits: the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine’s website.

To restore the narrative line, it is necessary to look through the entire history of the Fountain dating back to the early 1990s. It is being said that the impetus for the sculpture was given by a technogenic accident at Dykaniv sewage treatment plant in the summer of 1995. As the result, the pollution of rivers occurred in Kharkiv, the second largest Ukrainian city currently being under Russian bombardment. There was no drinking water in Kharkiv for four to six weeks. (By way of comparison, in today’s Kharkiv, there is no safety and peace for more than seven months). At that time, 37-year-old artist Pavlo Makov was conducting anthropological research on Kharkiv as a city crossed by many rivers (Filonenko et al., 2022).

It is true, though, that the drawing of a funnel had become the leitmotif of his artistic practice since the very first “funnel with juice” in 1993 (Filonenko et al., 2022). Along its way from the “urban mystification” to the working construction, the Fountain was embodied in drawings, a plausible picture of the mystified river bank with a fountain that did not exist yet, and other two-dimensional genres as well as the cardboard, silver, tin, bronze in 2003 and finally copper. There have been counted 16 different images in total (Popovych, Semenova, 2022).

The Fountain showcases how art can transform from a local art expression into a mighty statement about exhaustion as a promising conception for explaining the present-day world. The water in the Fountain breathes in accord with the rhythm of the water surrounding the city of Venice, which the second part of the title “Acqua Alta – High Water” encourages. Aside from other interpretation it is Makov's environmental statement about the flooding of Venice due to global warming. A curator of the Ukrainian Pavilion Borys Filonenko noted that the environmental agenda and the issue of depletion become their tool to show the Venetian context in the Ukrainian artist's works (Popovych, Semenova, 2022). Thus, the characteristic of Makov's art work is flexibility, its capacity for scaling from local to global and vice versa. This is in line with his long-term creative search for the Place within the eponymous project. The connection between Venice and Ukraine, the local and the global, ecology and all the fields of life is played with a potent image of water. Water symbolizes life and opportunities for the development that we are losing a lot every day, every hour because of the Russian invasion. Water is little short of demonstration of the devastation and depletion of resources, politics, society, and nature. After all, it is water that takes life when all vital resources are depleted and a balance in nature is violated and disturbed.

With two doors on each side of the wall, the Fountain apparently rereads the brick integrity of the Arsenale's interior enveloped in the reflection of metallic and blue, translucent shadows and lights enhancing the sensation of concern and anxiety. One may use any of the five doors to enter the room as an improvised public place not only for social entertainment but also in a role of the remainder about the global agenda. The room's architecture echoes other Makov's project, “Mappa Mundi” (2020–2021) which is a creative map of the world pictured a plan of the apartment with hundreds of rooms-states and doors between them.

When viewed downward, it reads the pure exhaustion whatever it is meant: natural sources, drinking water, global warming and climate change, as well as the feeling of being exhausted by the war. My private perception is more bizarre, referring to the experience of the ongoing war. "The small air fleet" mentioned at the outset appeared as a non-random piece of imagination whilst there is a fierce war in Ukraine and more similar images come to my mind; to be more precise, art are neither detached from reality nor a silent observer of it though the association is rather vague and highly debated. Depending on the lights and the location of a spectator, a net of the funnels begins resembling something anthropomorphic, a sort of crowd of identical men, the strictly subordinated units; military associations are expected. In case we have a view upward the sculpture, it can denote a strict hierarchy and brings up the issue of how a wealth of resources is being wasted for the maintenance of the dictatorship, a pyramid of the anti-human power. That means power is coupled with access to resources and their overexploitation and wasting for the whims of a restricted group. The artist himself pointed out that "...this exhaustion proves even power because most of the world's great fountains are built by empires and kingdoms." This is yet another powerful way of interpreting the artwork as well as relations between power and art as the latter ever underpinned imperialism and confronted it in parallel. Unlike pompous and splendid fountains that remained as the traces of the great empires in Budapest and Lviv, Vienna, and Kyiv, Makov's tellingly democratic fountain conveys a different message. On the contrary, it is about undermining power and its instability.

All these are certainly a matter of interpretation while the art piece constantly escapes the dictate of imposed meanings. Makov himself insisted on the open nature of the work speaking out that "everyone has their history of exhaustion." So his sculpture redefines the Latin original word "sculpo" which means "to carve." In continuation of the 20th-century practice of reevaluation of and transcending the boundaries of sculpture, the artist carves not the shape out of the material but the sense of the volume material and the sense are changeable and multilayered. When it comes to the turn to the project created in the middle 1990s, a member of the Ukrainian Pavilion's curating group Maria Lanko added that "This is symptomatic of Ukrainian art in general, the history of which is not only what has already happened, but also what has not received proper representation" (Popovych, Semenova,

2022). Ukrainian “Fountain” has finally started working on the international scene during the horrendous war. Nevertheless, water keeps running out and life, sources, and patience do the same.

Plants against War

The complex relationship between humans and the environment along with a humans’ destructive impact on the planet is explored by Nikita Kadan, one of the most renowned artists who was awarded the Shevchenko Prize this year, on the 14th day of the Russian invasion. Kadan works with complex memory and politics of remembrance, totalitarian past, political hijacking of the history, responsibility and guilt, and also his creative practice grows out of the interaction with the environment. Plants, soil, other natural materials, the biological process of growth and decay are critically important part of his language. The anti-war declaration comes across the environmental discourse of his artworks. In “Protection of Plants” (2014), the pale illustrations of plants and its parts affected by pests and diseases, cut out of the botanic books have been superimposed on a set of pictures in a chaotic way. The photographs show the houses damaged during the fightings in the Donetsk Oblast after the hybrid invasion of Russia in 2014. There are even a couple of the insects’ “portraits.”

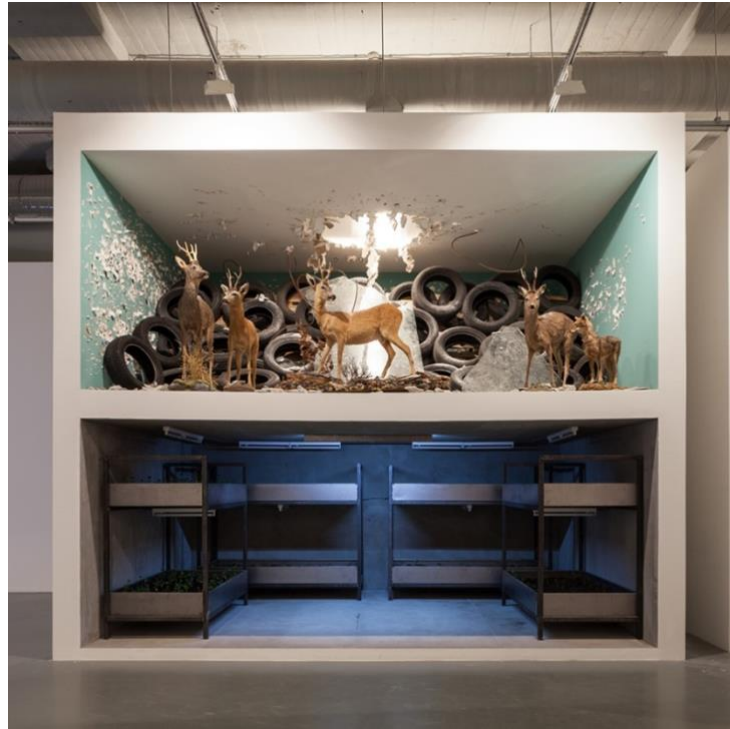
Photography, one of the most bizarre mediums is death, according to Susan Sontag’s well-known expression. To put it another way, in figurative language it captures and kills the image, puts an end to its processuality. However, this does not prevent the photo from generating an alternative reading, as well as the artist from instrumentalizing and internalizing the photo as part of another artistic statement. Sometimes as in “The Chronicle” series (2016), Kadan undermines the provisional integrity of the picture by disconnecting the integrity of traumatic photographs of pogroms, and violence against Maidan protesters (Kadan, 2016). To do this, he applies the technique of “cutting” figures out of their natural backgrounds, arranging them in the desired shape and location, which brings the original meaning to absurdity and changes the accents (as he said himself, “takes out the images”) (Semenik, 2017). In “Protection of Plants,” the death of a plant and the warfare destruction visually and semantically reinforce and explain each other. The metaphor of the damage is doubled, adopting the visual features of cracks and failures after

the Russian weaponry hit residential buildings. The faded, pale colour of the herbarium plays off the pastel colour of the photographs, where the damaged areas are accented with absorbing black. Predators and diseases manifest the decay and destruction that war brings on the physical and socio-cultural level, while the overall composition—the unity of the natural and the anthroponymic.



Nikita Kadan, *Protection of Plants*, 2014; paper, collage. Credits: the artist's personal website.

The war forced to a new perception of his artwork “The Shelter”. This is a two-storey work, where on the lower, darkened floor, the “shelter” itself, there are bunk beds with beds in which celery grows, a replica of the aforementioned “Limits of Responsibility,” and the upper floor with peeling walls is filled with tires, four stuffed deer and a dog figure, pieces of glass and other junk. Given the year of creation of the work, the tires refer to the fresh memory of Euromaidan, after which the Russian military occupied and destroyed part of eastern Ukraine. Basically, a renowned art critic Alisa Lozhkina writes that “the upper part of the installation was an allusion to the war-destroyed exposition of the Donetsk Museum of Local Lore” (Lozhkina, 2020). The glass and the collapsed ceiling are very reminiscent of this. In the artist's statement on his personal website, it is mentioned that, “The ruined museum space is reconstructed in the upper part of the construction. The car tires are added to the ruin transforming it to the barricade.” It is about art that takes over the baton of struggle.



Nikita Kadan, *The Shelter*, 2015; metal, wood, taxidermy, glass, rubber, paint.
Credits: the artist's personal website.

It is not the first time that stuffed animals appear in Kadan's practice ("Hold the thought where the story was interrupted" 2014). This is a semblance of a living and "beautiful" animal, which is inanimate, carefully killed for the sake of perfect imitation and exposure in an artificial environment. An episode from my life came to mind here. When I was a school girl I won a poetry competition about the protection of Ukrainian forests. I was taken to the awarding ceremony which took place in another region of the Carpathian Mountains, in quite an opulent building of the regional Forestry. I still remember my shock as its wooden walls were lined with stuffed animals, a vast majority of the rare Carpathian species, inside.

So what else do we see here? The clash of animate and inanimate nature, but necessarily the one that is under totalitarian control and ordered by the human will not the natural need. Of course, this sort of interference leads to decay. When the upper "lifeless" floor is illuminated through the holes in the ceiling, the lower floor is sheltered in bluish artificial light, and it is unknown what yield will be. If we interpret the work in mythological terms, it is the profane bottom space that retains the potential for survival, prolongs life while the sacred upper space has suffered excessive destruction. Basically, my interpretation of the

artwork as an ecological statement can go vastly further, beyond the author's auto-commentaries.

This year Nikita Kadan rethought his 2015 artwork "Difficulties of Profanation" in order to join "This is Ukraine: Defending Freedom" collateral event organized by PinchukArtCentre jointly with Ukrainian authorities. Previously, he presented a classic Soviet-style glazed showcase with debris collected in the Donetsk Oblast since 2014 and bean sprouts as a symbol of hope and life, as the installation symbolized the gradual healing of trauma, the gradual return to life. After the Russian attack on February 24th, the artist threw away the plants and removed the glass display, turning the installation into an open spatial object. Now the installation features metal debris from Kyiv during the Russian offensive in March, along with a mangled piece of a road sign, apparently from the iconic mining topos of Stakhanov – Kadiivka³, occupied first by the Bolsheviks in the 1920s and 2014, by the Russians. It is a rather lucid illustration of a city torn from the body of Ukraine and what remains of any Ukrainian settlement after being invaded by the "Russian world." In addition, a visual narrative that is archival Soviet photographs and postcards narrating the "Great Patriotic War" as a cliché of Russian propaganda undergirding the invasion has been included to the installation.

Culturologist Lesya Kulchynska considers the artwork as the "open structure," a result of turning the monument into a space which absorbs the viewer. "The monumentality of the exhibition does not leave the possibility of remote contemplation, you immediately find yourself in the midst the history. In some ways, it reflects the functioning of the image of war as such. This image is always overwhelming, it always seeks to impress, seeks to be a weapon. At the same time, the war itself remains something unrepresentable" (Kulchynska, 2022), she commented on. Kadan's work is an open wound since there is no safe place for life anymore. The fuzzy boundaries of the predominantly transparent exhibit are outlined with thin lines of the metal skeleton that, however, can be walked through. The nearly destroyed, massive parts of past ordinary life (a fragment of a road sign, a rusty washing

³ The second one, Kadiivka is an original Ukrainian name of the city before it was occupied by Russians.

machine) hang over right above visitors. So it intrudes rather drastically on the expanse of the Arsenale and steady European life at a far distance from the war in Ukraine.



Nikita Kadan, *Difficulties of Profanation II*, 2015–2022. Credits: CNN (originally: Pat Verbruggen/Courtesy Pinchuk Art Centre and Victor Pinchuk Foundation)

According to the official blurb, the expansion of the geography of the wreckage symbolizes a full-scale intervention and the reopening of the wound (“This is Ukraine...,” presskit). The artwork is a collection of visible and invisible traces of war, when art begins to speak the truth, becomes its proof and flag. In the text for a Lithuanian media outlet, I wrote that “*Difficulties of Profanation II*” is a kind of anti-sculpture: a form destroyed by war, a whole fragmented by violence. In the end, Ukrainian art is perhaps only able to collect the fragments destroyed and scattered by the century-long Russian war and return a new rethought integrity of culture, a new image of the world and ourselves.

In the abovementioned artworks, I succinctly traced the artists’ dealing with nature and environment in the background of the ongoing war. It is remarkable that created long before the full-scale invasion, art works speak about the war’s invisible presence threatening all living beings. The strong ecological messages are closely linked with social and political

issues, and the war makes everything to sound more distinctly and expressively. On the other hand, art always seeks to free itself from imposed senses and meanings following its own logic and cannot be squeezed into the confines of any interpretation. That allows it avoiding the historical pettiness and perishability while staying relevant in turbulences beyond time.

As always the author expresses the sincere gratitude to the Armed Forces of Ukraine for the opportunity to research and write in the midst of Russia's horrendous invasion of Ukraine.

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Images:

Zhanna Kadyrova, Pallianitsa, 2022, stones carved by a mountain river. Credit: FB page of the artist

Pavlo Makov, Fountain of Exhaustion. Acqua Alta, 1995–2022. Credit: the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine’s website

Nikita Kadan, Protection of Plants, 2014; paper, collage; credit: the artist’s personal website —. The shelter, 2015, the artist’s personal website

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Biography:

Khrystyna Semeryn is a Ukrainian researcher, journalist, and writer. She is/was Visiting Scholar at Indiana University Bloomington, AAJR-Fordham-NYPL Ukrainian Research Fellow, Think-Visegard Fellow, Virtual Visiting Researcher at Northwestern University and other. She also works as an independent analyst in cooperation with Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, Ukrainian leading think-tank as well as literary expert for the Ukrainian Book Institute, expert in culture & creative industries for the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, and editor of *Geopoetical Studies*. Since 2019, she has been a member of the Ukrainian Association for Jewish Studies.

Khrystyna writes about cultural memory, Ukrainian sculpture, gender and women's rights, cultural policy analysis, Jewish studies, literature, creative industries, and combating disinformation. She contributed to diverse media outlets such as *Krytyka Journal*, *Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal*, *Institute for War & Piece Reporting*, *Judaica Ukrainica*, *Studia Polsko-Ukraińskie*, *Studia Ukrainica Posnaniensia*, *Ukräiner*, *Medialab.Online*, *War. Stories from Ukraine*, *Povaha*, *UACulture* and many others. Her work received several awards including the first prizes of "Serhii Kemsy Award," Competition of young analysts from Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, Competition for art critics as part of Kaniv International Sculpture Symposium and the third prize of X Stedley Art Critics Prize in 2021.