

Art as War Testimony and Survival Manual

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The portrait is one of the most famous motifs in the history of art, dating back to antiquity. In all modern and contemporary artistic movements, it is an important thematic genre, providing the artist with the opportunity to study the inner life of the portrayed, and above all to depict and endow the individual with subjectivity. Modernity has reworked portraiture in various new contexts, introducing critical, social and political themes. One form of contemporary portraiture is the collective representation of an entire population through a cross-section of social, ethnic, political and other identities. The people portrayed are no longer subject to stylization to guide the reading of status and other elements indicative of it are included. On the one hand, the contemporary character is often characterized by outside the box compositions, unexpected locations, experimental use of light and raw, simple posing that captivates the viewer. Sometimes this composition and both modernist and classical shots escape the frame.

Repeat After Me II by the Ukrainian Open Group collective previewed in the Polish Pavilion at the 60th La Biennale di Venezia International Art Exhibition in 2024. Presenting a collective portrait of refugees from Ukraine, the interactive installation consists of two videos from 2022 and 2024 arranged in a dark space, with red light emanating from the background. A military karaoke bar of the future is suggested through the presence of elements such as microphones, neon signs, furniture, brochures and water. Both videos have a similar format and employ the same artistic gesture. They show refugees from Ukraine introducing themselves, stating where they are from, and sometimes adding where they are currently staying (in the 2024 video also mentioning people from other places of origin). They then proceed to talk about the weapons they remember best, imitating them, and then inviting the public to repeat them. The 2022 video was recorded in a camp for internally displaced people in Lviv who had fled eastern Ukraine to the west, meaning that they were still exposed to the same sounds every day. The 2024 video was recorded

in different parts of the world, mainly in cities in Europe: Wrocław (Poland), Berlin, Vienna, Tullamore (Ireland), Vilnius, but also New York. Here, the refugees shared sounds that are part of their trauma and the trauma of their bodies, the geography of refugeeism now having expanded with their migration across the world.

The Open Group collective was founded in 2012 and currently comprises three members, Yuriy Biley, Pavlo Kovach and Anton Varga. From the beginning, their practice has dealt with themes concerning collective memory, working first from the individual to the collective level. Their work often presents a situation where individual experience becomes a social experience. What has emerged as the uniting theme of their work is memory, and its ability to store and transmit information that is embedded in our genetic code. Current experiences become part of an archive inscribed in the history of generations. By collecting individual experiences of war, Open Group is the creator of a museum of collective memory. Collective experiences are always made up of the stories of individuals, but ultimately it is the stories of individuals, through citations and statistics, that make up the history of a group. The stories contained in Open Group's work represent nothing less than the history of the Ukrainian nation.

Repeat After Me II is a portrait of the collective experience of the protagonists, and at the same time it is a document of individual experiences of the disaster. At first glance, both of the videos resemble a social survey. Present are echoes of Krzysztof Kieslowski's 1980 documentary *Talking Heads*, which was the director's response to a series of articles published by critic Zygmunt Kałużyński in 1971, in which he questioned the artistic value of the films made by the so-called "Polish documentary school", accusing its makers of employing devices such as the banal convention of "talking heads". Kieslowski proved that this convention has tremendous power, allowing the creation of a unique relationship between the viewer and the documentary's characters. Kieslowski was one of the most important pioneers of

Polish filmmaking. His documentaries showed Polish reality while touching on universal problems. In *Talking Heads*, people speak to the camera about the pressing need for freedom, democracy and respect for human beings. The video protagonists invited by Open Group – without distinction of age, origin, profession and social status – similarly address the viewers face to face, establishing close contact, inviting them to repeat, but their position and the content of their speech are extremely different. They talk about what has happened to them, and their only dream is to survive and to live. Kieslowski builds an atmosphere of sincere conversation filled with hope, while Open Group focuses on the basic value of human life. *Repeat After Me II* gives voice to the Ukrainian people, seemingly ordinary people who become representatives of a wider group. They are the ones who have a voice, they become the subject, they have the upper hand. They do not choose to show their pain and suffering in full, which is perhaps why we feel shame and powerlessness in their presence. The artists do not present them as victims, even though they are indisputably victims of this war, having lost their homes and former lives. The artists give them a voice and show that they are people who still have something to say. They are beings whose testimonies and serious faces become a tool of resistance against the evil that has befallen them. While being victims of war, they simultaneously oppose what happened to them by looking us straight in the eye and sharing their experiences. This is what true heroism looks like.

The protagonists in *Repeat After Me II* are people like us, civilians, living ordinary and sometimes even “boring” lives. They represent the entire Ukrainian nation, but not only them. All of us can identify with them most of the time. They are not individuals with well-known names and positions. In focusing on collectivity and memory in its practice, Open Group has collaborated with people who have decided to publicly share their experiences of the war. They give us a testimony about the war, an eyewitness report, which have become all too commonplace in our current reality. Digitization and technological advances have enabled us to record and report on war on a daily basis. However, what we see in *Repeat After Me II* is not the few seconds of footage of warfare and casualties that the mass media gives us daily, but face-to-face encounters with individuals just like us. With focus and reflection, we can engage in an apparent dialogue and interaction with them. The characters invite us to recreate the sounds of weapons, but not everyone chooses to do so. Anyone can approach the microphone and repeat the sounds using the proposed karaoke format. Those who choose not to can listen from afar, in the space of the arranged bar. But even as we walk up to the microphone, we can only access a substitute experience. Ultimately, nothing can convey their real experience to us. The work functions as historical testimony, evidence of a war crime, a survival manual and a warning of armed conflicts around the world. In the seemingly ghastly entertainment context of a karaoke bar, the protagonists invite us to learn a lesson in survival, since knowledge of weaponry sounds literally saved their lives. When we are in the space, whether we repeat the sounds or not, we are still issued the warning and made aware of the tangibility of the threat that is war in the 21st century. The repe-

tition in which the audience is invited to engage serves as a way of perpetuating experiences that should not be forgotten. “While the people on the screen do not directly address the war or share personal narratives of escape and survival, *Repeat After Me II* adeptly and subtly reinstates the violence and imprecatory oppression that Ukrainians have endured for centuries.”¹ *Repeat After Me II* presents spoken testimonies of civilian victims/survivors of the war in Ukraine who share their experiences. They play back the remembered sounds of weapons so that we can repeat them. They convey to us their way of survival, but also the trauma that will stay with them for life. Psychological research conducted after World War II has identified two senses that most strongly record trauma in our bodies. These are hearing and smell.

And yet the sounds of weapons and war are not mere onomatopoeia, the mimetic stylistic device of choosing words that phonetically imitate the sound being described.

Onomatopoeia reproduces sounds from nature, but the sounds of weapons reproduced in *Repeat After Me II* are mechanical sounds. They are the sounds of death and disaster. A human voice making gun sounds cannot traumatize, which is good, because the goal of Open Group’s work is not to cause trauma, but to identify with it. Experiencing the work, we enter a traumatic memory zone that generates an array of different experiences. The work triggers basic feelings, sadness, sometimes despair and sometimes even shame. The latter feeling arises in people who feel they have not done enough to stop the evil. Shame functions here as a primal feeling of people who feel powerless, yet also responsible and aware of their direct contact with the victims in the video. *Repeat After Me II* makes an increasingly relevant, down-to-earth and simple statement in human terms every day, especially in the face of the absurdities happening in the world, the many ongoing global skirmishes, and war statistics that do not capture the reality of human tragedy. In 2025 Agnieszka Dauksza published *Insignificant People: Strategies for Survival*, a book that describes how “One’s own sense of powerlessness is never quite one’s own. Even though it consumes like a pain that prevents empathic feeling and condemns one to loneliness, it still turns out to be relational. One is powerless over someone or something, even if the object is the most abstract and the causes of the condition unclear. Similarly, attempts to transcend do not succeed alone.”² Dauksza says this in the context of breaking out of the Western model of oppressive success and productive activity, subverting the game imposed by the leaders. In the context of *Repeat After Me II*, insignificant people appear as the unified community of Eastern Europe, marked by a history in which figures with shaky images and mental states determined the fate of its borders. The protagonists in Open Group’s work are, in a sense, powerless individuals with no influence on any decisions. But, as Agnieszka Dauksza writes, “Powerlessness [...] is the starting point, frustration turns out to be something found, from which only possibly arise attempts to transcend the position and disagreement with what reality brings.”³ Understood and interpreted in this way, the work does not enfold the acceptance of grief within its small circle of heroes and heroines, but opens it to the non-

acceptance of this state by enabling the victims to openly declare the harm they have endured. The process of transferring memory thus becomes a gesture of resistance, a mode of recovering subjectivity, and of sharing private experience and survival instructions among a wider collective audience.

The immediate impetus for the Open Group project in 2022 was 'In Case of Emergency or War', a brochure that the Center for Strategic Communication and Information Security at the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture and Information Policy began distributing a few weeks before the Russian invasion. The brochure provided instructions explaining the correct course of action to take in the event of hostilities, depending on whether the attack is assault rifle fire, artillery shelling, firing from multiple rocket launchers or aerial bombardment. A booklet that functions as a menu in a military karaoke bar of the future thus becomes an actual survival menu in a bar where visitors do not sit on squishy, dusty bar chairs enjoying drinks and listening to popular hits. *Repeat After Me II* generates a variety of internal experiences. It becomes an impulse to empathize, to feel anger and discord, but also to fear for one's own survival. This work, perhaps like many others being produced in Ukraine today, is blunt because it brings us face to face with the victims of this war, invoking the memories and resistance of people who should be called heroes instead of victims. The work activates categories of dignity, touching on the identity of heroes who have experienced injustice yet have the dignity to look us straight in the eye. Do they feel the sadness of loss at this point, or is sharing their experience a form of purification and devotion that will make it easier for them to go on living? When the artists were searching for people to appear in the film, many people sorely needed not only to share their experience, but also to vent, and more, to be heard and feel that by sharing their story and announcing it to the whole world they were also doing something useful for their country.

In the 1950s and 1960s, European scientists began studying the psychological effects of World War II, mainly working with former prisoners of German concentration camps from Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Poland. European research on post-traumatic symptoms among civilians began later, in the late 1990s, focusing especially on the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Such work has been conducted extensively in Germany, but also in the Netherlands, Finland, Norway and Austria.⁴ The statistics indicate not only a selective approach to research, but also that it was done post facto, long after the fact. This means that traumatized war victims were left alone with their suffering for a long time. Today, the trauma is happening right in front of everyone's eyes, and we are all eyewitnesses to the crime. Could the immediate voicing of trauma offer an opportunity for healing? Being heard is therapeutic. By being heard, war victims could at least partially free themselves from a trauma that will never fully go away. Trauma is a permanent stamp, an indelible tattoo, like the camp number tattoos given to prisoners in German concentration camps during World War II. Today, tattoos can be washed off, but trauma written in the body is never wholly expunged. According to psychiatric research on PTSD prevalence among Polish World War II survivors,

the prevalence rate of potential PTSD was 32.3% Mean values indicating both the number and severity of PTSD symptoms were significantly higher for respondents with at least one war-related trauma as compared with cohorts without any recognized trauma.⁵

Antoni Kepinski, a Polish psychiatrist and pioneering researcher of trauma among concentration camp prisoners, wrote in his works about the dynamic tension that exists between individual space and common space. "Entering the common space forces one to exchange oneself 'for small things'; what is great, original, and unusual in us must be enclosed in one's own space, because usually the common space cannot accept it." This is also the case with the experience of trauma.⁶ Trauma generally remains locked in one's own space, and only with difficulty does the knowledge of its existence make its way into the common space. Two forces are at work here. The force of trauma, which renders a person helpless, depriving them of the ability to communicate, and abolishing the belief that words could accommodate their experience. The second force is the force of the community, which defends itself and refuses to accept a trauma that potentially disrupts its previous balance and peace. "Usually, the common space cannot accept it," Kepinski wrote. The sounds of war are sometimes intertwined with silences.

In his book *Intern*, Serhiy Zhadan describes a train station full of people who are not waiting for a train but taking shelter from gunfire: "...after the explosion, a muffled howling begins, then it gets quiet again. And then the silence is broken again outside the windows and the howling begins".⁷ "Silence is inextricably linked to trauma. People who have suffered severe trauma are silent. Sometimes it takes many years for any narrative about the experienced trauma to emerge. People want to separate themselves from what causes them the most pain."⁸

Testimonies of both material and spiritual destruction form the contemporary iconography of war. *Repeat after Me II* deconstructs the iconography of war by directing attention to individual experience. Portraits of victims become portraits of violence, arousing anger, causing stomachs to ache and throats to tighten. Open Group reaches beyond the frontlines, giving voice to people deprived of their homes, the space they identify with, and the loved ones who embody it. What they present is no longer the classic portrait as we know it from art history, but a portrait of 21st century humanity, which, like representations of World War II survivors, presents individual dehumanized by the war, but who try to retain their subjectivity to the end. It is a portrait of survivors who believe in life with all their might.

As observed by Svitlana Biedarieva, "Many of the works created by Ukrainian artists during the last eight years reflect on the postcolonial state and traumatic memories of Ukraine's entanglement with Russia before and throughout the twentieth century. However, since Russian bombs began falling on Ukrainian towns, killing Ukrainian civilians, including children, and destroying thousands of Ukrainian people's homes, unfolding in a full-scale Russian invasion of the country in February 2022, understanding of this postcolonial entanglement has changed—as has the attitude toward decoloniality in Ukrainian culture. Art is one of the indicators of such a profound liberation impulse. [...]"

The atrocities of the anachronistic Russian war of aggression have brought Ukraine to the culmination of its decolonial stage, with the once-dominating narrative of Russian culture ‘enveloping’ Ukrainian culture having fallen apart to the point of no return. Indeed, any further aggressive action on the part of Russia toward Ukraine will only continue to foster what is an inevitable shift.”⁹

Art in post-2014 Ukraine, taking up decolonial and deimperialist themes, has become a weapon of the struggle for independence. Regardless of the topics addressed, each work becomes a work about war, addressed both to the world at large, to make the voice of Ukrainians heard, but also to the Ukrainian people themselves. Open Group uses pop culture elements, real refugees, and simple images to present an anti-war manifesto in a non-violent way. Even though the war itself consists primarily of drastic images, *Repeat After Me II* is devoid of visual violence. One might imagine that we have become so desensitized that only the most drastic images of war would be capable of knocking us out of our complacency. But de facto, we feel more moved by looking straight into the eyes of the victims of war, confronting people who were forced to leave not only their homes, but also their previous lives. Their testimonies evoke deep reactions, causing shivers and bringing tears to our eyes. No one is indifferent to the image of suffering people who want to live with dignity. Moreover, the message is simple, universal and accessible to everyone, unimpeded by any language or cultural barriers. We have close contact with the video protagonists not only through the sounds and facial expressions they share with us, but also through their gaze, upright pose and sometimes gestures that try to illustrate the sounds. Gestures that become violent hand movements, with the actor’s gaze often following, just as they would also like to follow with it the trajectory of the movement of the depicted weapon.

Open Group’s practice blurs the boundaries between contemporary art and life. A long, theoretical explication is not needed in order to understand what kind of experience we are dealing with, even though their work touches on many topics and opens a wide field of analysis and interpretation. The artists offer us a shared experience and the individual choice to participate in the work. No feature film, no photojournalistic image, much less any painting or sculpture can convey this experience. Such art can also move us, but the portrait mentioned at the beginning of this text is, in Open Group’s case, a portrait that is not imagined, modified or staged. It is a real and sincere portrait that we take in not only with our eyes, but also on a deeper level of feeling, inviting us to empathize and reflect.

The many weeping people leaving the Polish Pavilion at La Biennale di Venezia were the best testimony to the boundlessness of empathy when it comes to the harming of civilian human victims. The message was understood by everyone, regardless of their background, race or professional status. The work united everyone, because the same was true of all the people who took part in the two videos. Looking back at the projects completed so far from Venice, New York,

France, Warsaw, Finland or Hungary, one interesting relationship could be observed. The farther away from the Ukrainian border the more willing the audience was to join in and play the sounds at the microphones. The closer to the border, the more the audience remained quiet, withdrawn and seated in the bar space. The tangible proximity of the war takes its toll on the audience in a physical way. Still, regardless of where the show was held, no one left the exhibition unmoved. And numerous reviews follow this feeling.

It has been almost a year since April 2024, and the war in Ukraine has been going on for more than three years. Since January 2025, the international political scene has become very volatile, presenting us with new, unexpected situations virtually every day; decisions are made over our heads, over which we have absolutely no influence. The decisions being made about Ukraine, often without its participation, are a sad episode confirming that *Repeat After Me II* still imparts a relevant lesson and warning, but its significance grows all the deeper the longer we have to deal with imperial policies that overlook civilian victims. It is difficult to predict what the future will hold. Even by the time this text is published, the world may already be a completely different place.

When I think back to last year and the opening of the exhibition at the Polish Pavilion, I now know that I made one of the most important decisions of my life in believing that art can have an impact on reality by sharing a manifesto that will spread around the world. As someone from the artworld who knows that there is no such thing as causality, I feel that I have not been indifferent to the subject of war and Ukraine. Since 2024, *Repeat After Me II* has been shown periodically at successive exhibitions and festivals like the Open’er Festival in Gdynia, Poland, which gathered over 15,000 viewers over three days. The work’s screenings have also been accompanied by discussions. Since the beginning of 2025, the plight of Ukraine has become all the more topical, and every new screening underlines its burning relevance. During the week following the February 14 opening at the Zachęta National Art Gallery, there has been much talk about the possibility for a quick end to the war. During the opening in the beginning of May in 601Artspace in New York everyone was talking about the upcoming meeting in Istanbul on the 15th of May that didn’t take place in the end. Every day moves us further away from the end of the war. The fact that the work will continue to be screened in many locations around the world is a gesture of solidarity that demonstrates our powerlessness in the face of an inhumane tragedy. However, this solidarity has its own power, because it makes us feel not alone. Our only dream in the current situation is that *Repeat After Me II* will soon become an archival work, and that it will tell the story of this war in the past tense, conferring it to history, while continuing to deliver a stern reminder of all the armed conflicts still going on in the world.

I am proud that I was able to contribute to enabling artists from Ukraine to make their voices heard in my country’s pavilion at such an important and difficult time for them. *Slava Ukraini!*

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- 2 Dauksza A., Ludzie nieznaczeni, strategie przetrwania, Kraków, 2024, p. 6
- 3 Dauksza A., Ludzie nieznaczeni, strategie przetrwania, Kraków, 2024, p. 6
- 4 List-Turlejska M., wstęp [w:] Lis-Turlejska M., Łuszczynska A., Szumiał S., Rozpowszechnienie PTSD wśród osób, które przeżyły II wojnę światową w Polsce, Wydział Psychologii Szkoły Wyższej Psychologii Społecznej, 2016, s. 924
- 5 Lis-Turlejska M., Łuszczynska A., Szumiał S., Rozpowszechnienie PTSD wśród osób, które przeżyły II wojnę światową w Polsce, Wydział Psychologii Szkoły Wyższej Psychologii Społecznej, 2016
- 6 Żechowski C. The silence envelope, [in:] catalogue Repeat After Me II, Warsaw, 2024, p. 77
- 7 Serhij Żadan, Internat, Wydawnictwo Czarne, Wołowiec 2019, p. 46
- 8 Żechowski C. The silence envelope, [in:] catalogue Repeat After Me II, Warsaw, 2024, p. 78
- 9 Biedarieva S., Decolonization and Disentanglement in Ukrainian Art, <https://post.moma.org/decolonization-and-disentanglement-in-ukrainian-art/>