

INTERVIEW WITH ELENA ARTEMENKO AND ILYA MARTYNOV BY DANILA BULATOV

Danila Bulatov: Tell us, how did Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine affect your plans?

Elena Artemenko: We were terrified, of course. At the time I was preparing an exhibition at the Sidur Museum. The agreement to have the exhibition was reached in early 2021, and the opening was scheduled for March the 15th, 2022. It was an important project for me, I had been working on it for three years and on the 2nd of March I found out that the opening would not take place. I remember the date because on the 4th of March they passed the law on falsehoods, and I thought at the time that the director of the Sidur Museum, by activating the censorship, was being proactive. The excuses were rather hypocritical: "I was assured that it wasn't about censorship, it was just unclear how to work now, so let's preliminarily postpone the exhibition for six months, when the atmosphere is clearer, and then we'll see". I immediately wrote to my friends who work in the exhibition department of the Moscow International Museum of Fine Arts, and they honestly told me that yes, it was censorship, and the problem was not even with the project, but with the text attached to it.

D.B.: What was in that text, and what was the project about anyway?

E.A.: I got the idea for the project back in 2019, when there were protests in Moscow over the unacceptance of candidates for the Moscow City Duma elections. There was some strong activism then, people started to get into trouble, but not as much as in 2021, when Navalny was arrested... In general, it's curious how our attitude towards violence changes as the degree of violence increases, and now the arrests of 2019 are perceived as a light version of what happened afterwards. Because the story of Belarus wasn't out yet, and that's when people were severely beaten, held in a special detention center in Okrestina. Anyway, at that moment I came across an article, where people detained at the protests described their feelings of being beaten

by the police. There were comparisons to a piece of meat being beaten, to a bag of bones. And one man said he was twisted like a piece of foam rubber. And this comparison stuck in my head, because if a person subconsciously compares themselves to foam rubber, it means that no matter how they are twisted, they will unbend and return to their former form. For me then, this comparison became a metaphor for the fact that at that moment, in 2019, people were not yet afraid of violence because they were absolutely sure they were right and knew they would unbend (to the higher power).

D.B.: It's a bit strange for me to hear you say that, because for me the history of safe peaceful protest ended with the Bolotnaya affair. back then it became clear that the authorities can do whatever they want....

Ilya Martynov: And yet in 2019 people were actively protesting, we went to all these rallies, and I even remember how the band "Krovostok" performed at one of the events, there was a stage on Sakharov Avenue...

E.A.: It sounds completely unimaginable now. In general, at that time there was this metaphor of foam rubber as a symbol of inner unbreakability. On one hand, you are weak, unarmed, but you have this strength to straighten up. I started making sculptures, repeating in marble the shape of twisted pieces of foam rubber. Time passed, and in early 2021, when the protests began again, the crackdowns were much harsher. Our friends were arrested, and someone was imprisoned for 15 days. And it was a real shock. After that, people stopped coming to the rallies. I continued to work on the project and saw that it reflected the gradual loss of resistance of the material - "foam rubber" as a result of constant violent deformation ceases to straighten and solidifies in a bent position.

At the end of 2021, these sculptures were joined by a marble plaque "cmd+z does not work" - about the impossibility of taking a step back using this magic keyboard shortcut. It seemed to me that the point of no return had been reached, and we could no longer return to our previous state, we were petrified. That was the general meaning of my text, which I wrote for the exhibition at the Sidur Museum.

D.B.: And especially the inscription about "command Z" began to sound ominous and relevant...

E.A.: Exactly! The accompanying text to the exhibition was extremely important to me, because the works are quite abstract, but when you read the text, you read the reference to the image of a twisted body.

D.B.: In general, against the backdrop of the war, the Sidur Museum did not dare to open your exhibition?

E.A.: Exactly, even though everything had already been approved, the manifesto and the stages were ready, and the date in which the works had to be installed was set. When they told me they decided to postpone the exhibition in autumn, I immediately understood that there would be no exhibition at all, and that exposing this project at the very beginning of the war was the last occasion before severe censorship. And so it happened.

D.B.: Yes, of course it's such a pity that the exhibition didn't take place, mainly because, in fact, in the first period of time after the invasion, the limit of allowed things was not clearly defined; there was the opportunity, if not directly speaking against the war, at least to appeal for peace and so on.

E.A.: Exactly. The cultural operator signed letters against the war. And everyone expected museums to perhaps take on cultural figures, or that one of the museums' directors said something. Such expectations now seem pretty naive.

D.B.: As a result, in September 2022, you and Ilya opened a joint exhibition called "Background Noise" at the Elektroavod gallery. Both your "foam rubber" works and the "cmd+z" sign were presented there.

Ilya, please tell us about your part of the project. In the announcement of the exhibition there are words about the need to talk "about the current social and political catastrophe, moving away from its literal, poster-like representation". How did you solve this task?

I.M.: We are talking about an extreme situation that none of us have ever faced before. It's a really big question of how to talk about what is happening to us today. I wanted to find some kind of image system that would allow us to talk about war and death in a clear and at the same time non-platonic way.

DB: It seems to me that your paintings of deformed horse carcasses are a very clear but at the same time not straightforward statement. As I understand it, you depicted dead horses based on archival photographs from the First World War?

I.M.: Yes, the works were based on photographs. I wanted to convey the feeling of the accumulation of these bodies, the very servitude of these horses, to express this terrible desire of people to subjugate everyone, to somehow force them, to send them to slaughter... Drawing a parallel with the value of human life. In the First World War a huge number of horses were involved, and almost 8 million of them were killed, these are all, as they say, collateral, unrecorded victims.

<https://imartynov.cargo.site/Background-Noise-joint-project-with-Elena-Artemenko>

D.B.: Now tell us about your migration. How did you end up in Switzerland and later on in France?

I.M.: At first we went to Kazakhstan, and we thought we would work there, Lena had already started googling marble mines in Kazakhstan. But it didn't work out, also because of restrictions on the time of stay without a residence permit. Even before the war, we received an invitation from the Pro Helvetia Foundation to a residence in Switzerland, and we moved to Uzbekistan, where we started applying for a visa to Europe. In order not to get a tourist visa for three months (only such an option was possible in Switzerland), we turned to the "Artists in Exile" organization, which helped us to get a French long-stay visa.

E.A.: At first I was sure that I should have stayed in Russia and made my art there. Russia started the war, and if I am against the war, then my statement should reach a Russian audience. Many families have started to split, mine included. Let's use my grandmother as an example, she is 85 years old; her husband, my grandfather, was Ukrainian (that's why I have an Ukrainian last name). All of a sudden my grandmother starts telling me about the Nazis in Ukraine and speaking to me in the language of propaganda. I realized that I had never talked about politics with my relatives before, I don't know their positions. And that all the values that we sort of broadcast with our art were actually broadcast within our community only to ourselves. And that my audience has always been people who share my views, and in fact I should have made projects for an audience that doesn't share my point of view....

I.M.: It's a one-gate game. It was as if we were in a kind of bubble, where everyone supports each other, where everyone is in solidarity with each other.

E.A.: Yes. It also turned out - and this was a shock to me - that a huge number of people in the cultural sphere, including among my acquaintances, agree that it is possible to solve issues by killing other people, that they consider violence in the most heinous form normal, and are even ready to volunteer for war. And trying to change someone's mind caused only despair. Anyway, when mobilization was announced, when I felt the danger not for myself, but for Ilya and our daughter, we left. But I was sure we would come back. I took the sculptures and our favorite things to the studio, so that when we returned, we would unpack all our old life, rent an apartment again, and live like we used to.

D.B.: And that's how everything is stored in the studio?

E.A.: It was. It quickly became clear that we wouldn't be able to return, especially after we had done several anti-war projects in Europe, and it was very risky to go to Russia, because I openly oppose the war on all social networks, and they could put me in jail for that.

D.B.: Well, especially since you have a little daughter, you wouldn't even go in for 15 days.

E.A.: Yes, in general, I have already decided to say goodbye to my old life and all the old works, including marble - something was thrown out, something taken home by friends.

DB: It's very sad to hear that, of course. On the other hand, even if some of the old works have to be exhibited in Europe, we will have to create them anew.

create them - because it is not very clear how now it will be possible to take something out of Russia. Tell me, was "The Fountain" also destroyed?

E.A.: Yes, too. There was an interesting story with the "Fountain" by the way. This installation is a reference to the "Friendship of Peoples" fountain, only instead of figures - deformed Kalashnikov automatic rifles made of wax, and the water - black, like oil...

<http://artemenko.net/fountain1.html>

Even before the war, I submitted this project to the Arte Laguna Prize in Venice, it made it to the finals, and in March 2023 it was to be shown at

the finalists' exhibition. During the call with the exhibitors, I decided to discuss with the organizers how I could get this installation out of Russia, because the machines would definitely raise questions at the border, the logistics are very complicated, everything is expensive, planes don't fly from Russia, I might not be able to get a visa, etc. At the same time, it would obviously be great to get the opportunity to show such an anti-war project in early 2023 on behalf of a Russian artist. And then an Ukrainian artist, whose project also made it to the final of the prize, takes the floor and, addressing the organizers, says something like the following: "Dear organizers, I would like to discuss such a moment. Russian artists are participating in your exhibition. But we, Ukrainian artists, are in solidarity that Russian artists do not have the right to participate in any big exhibitions now, because their country has invaded our country. And here is an artist complaining that the sky is closed, that she has some problems with her visa; I'm sorry, but I am in Kiev, and there were two arrivals this night, and it's just wild for me to listen to this." In the end, I decided not to participate in the exhibition. This is a very important question for me, how our anti-war statements made here abroad are perceived from the outside. I often hear the opinion that if you artists are really against the war, then go back to Russia, make anti-war statements there, and push for regime change. And this is an understandable complaint. Another question is whether what we do abroad is not perceived as speculation on the theme of war?

D.B.: It seems to me that Russian artists are working through their own trauma, and they have the right to do so. In any case, such projects should definitely be pursued, because in the end, in many ways it is art that will serve to build bridges after the war.

E.A.: Yes, because when the war is over, the question will arise, "Where were you artists during all those years of war"? Where and with whom did you exhibit? Were you silent or did you talk?

DB: At the Nairs Foundazion in Switzerland, each of you made an exhibition. Ilya, what was your project "Childhood during the War" about?

I.M.: It was birthed very quickly, literally in two or three weeks. You know, when you're an artist and you've been wandering for a while, you go into withdrawal, like an athlete who abruptly stops training. Plus there was an inexpressible desire to express how I felt about what was going on. We discussed a lot about how to talk about it, and we came to the

conclusion that we can only talk about our own experiences. This became the theme of my work - because we emigrated with our three-month-old daughter, Kira, and every two months we moved somewhere. and every two months we move somewhere else. Certainly it all affects her. As does the whole context of parents constantly reading the news in some kind of horror. The question arises, how to raise a little person in such conditions, how to make him happy and free despite all this?

E.A.: In addition to painting, there was a small object: a podium, on which there is coal and a rubber duck. Inside there was a speaker with audio of Kira humming and tapping on some wood. It sounded like she was banging on the inside of this box and trying to get out. I think it's a pretty accurate metaphor for how we're all physically trapped in the context of war.

DB: I also think Ilya's work is very timely. In general, it's a strong combination of such a garish aesthetic of children's drawings and creepy images - skeletons, ghosts, attack helicopters... But did you have your exhibition there too?

E.A.: Yes, I called it "Hide and seek". While walking around the residence, I found some white and black pieces of marble, apparently left over from the restoration of the buildings. It was as if these pieces prompted me to make the work "Black and White" - another statement on the theme of propaganda, which literally calls black the past and passes off lies as truth. I was really shocked by the way the footage of Mariupol destroyed by the Russian army was used on Channel One as proof that the city was destroyed by the AFU.

DB: Yes, it's amazing, I don't understand how it works at all.

E.A.: I also made a sign that says It is his[our]story. Conventionally speaking, "his" story becomes "our" story. There are three positions hidden here. One is about looking at history from a distance: we are not political, there have always been wars, this is history ("It is history"), but what can we do, we have to live somehow. Another position: it is history and the responsibility of the one who started the war ("It is his story"). The third position that I adhere to is "It is his[our] story", that this is our common history, for which we are all responsible.

DB: The very title of your exhibition refers to a children's game, was it actually a continuation of Ilya's project?

E.A.: Partly. When you have a child, you begin to automatically sing lullabies, poems and counting rhymes from your childhood, and you think about their meaning. The saying for the game of hide-and-seek: "One, two, three, four, five, I'm coming to find you, who did not hide, it's not my fault." I suddenly realized that the last words of this recitation, "who didn't hide, it's not my fault," are about shifting responsibility onto the victim and justifying any of their subsequent actions. And the whole game of hide-and-seek appears as a metaphor for war, especially the Russian army's "war" against civilians in Ukraine hiding in basements. There is a removal of guilt and responsibility for these murders: since you did not hide, it is not our fault.

<http://artemenko.net/hideandseek1.html>

There were also other objects in this installation - rocks, on which letters were written in charcoal to form an alphabet with words: war, guilt, pain.... In the backyard I found burned pallets and made a kind of children's hut out of them. In general, this exhibition was formed literally in two days from the things around me.

D.B.: I also see in the photo some kind of cabinet-casket ...

E.A.: Yes, apparently we all have the same deformed perception. When I saw this wooden box in the back room, I also immediately associated it with a child's coffin. There was a speaker inside, from which came the sounds of a lullaby.

DB: Tell me, and who was your audience? And how did the residence feel about your projects?

I.M.: Since these exhibitions were held at the residency, mainly its staff and the artists who lived parallel to us. In addition, there was an open house to which the residents of Scuol came. To be honest, this audience was enough, because it was the first opportunity to make an open project about the war.

E.A.: As for the residency itself, there was a strange story connected with my exhibition. Every month the residency organizes dinner parties with film screenings, these are commercial events. Traditionally, the dinner is held in the room where my exhibition "Hide and Seek" is. The administration liked the exhibition, but they didn't want to break tradition either, so they decided to hold the dinner right inside my installation. It

didn't bother them that people would have to have dinner next to this child's coffin or a pile of stones with skulls painted on them (a reference to Vereshchagin's "Apotheosis of War"). At first I wanted to dismantle the exhibition, but then I thought it would be a perfect metaphor for a feast during the plague. The idea came into my head to make an intervention - to put alphabet stones on the tables and put the words war, guilt, pain right next to the plates.

DB: And what was the reaction?

E.A.: No particular reactions. 20 people have come, waiters are serving soup, guests are drinking wine, there is "pain", "war", "guilt" next to the glasses, and no one asks a single question about the stones on the tables or about the installation as a whole. I start taking photos for documentation, but I sense the guests are unhappy that I'm doing this without asking. I dare to ask permission and at the same time tell them about the installation, the war in Ukraine and why the words are posted next to their plates. "Wow, it's so interesting! Very impressive!" Dinner continued as if nothing had happened.

DB: You're very brave, of course. Although I'm not sure it's a Swiss trait to turn a blind eye to tragedy, protecting one's peace of mind. You can see the same thing in Moscow, and anywhere else. After Scuol, you went to your residence in Lucerne, where you made a large installation together. What was it?

E.A.: In Lucerne we created the installation "Red Bath". The Neubad Residence, where we arrived, is a sort of DC located in a former swimming pool complex. It's a place with such an extraordinary acoustic and I decided to continue working with lullabies, which became an important part of my life, considering that I sing them to my daughter everyday. Furthermore, everyday I read news about this sanguinary and useless war, started by my Country, and about the number of casualties. And all these men that are now at war have mothers who sang them lullabies and raised them clearly for other purposes... And now these lives are being killed in a second for illusory goals and others' ambitions.

Altogether I recorded about 20 womanly voices who sang lullabies in different languages. I wanted to create an installation in which the mothers' voices seemed to cradle aggression and hate.

Ilya created a frightening, aggressive and powerful noise. We synchronised it with the red lights filling up the pool, and the audience transformed into a huge "blood" bath. When sound and light reached the

highest intensity, from the other speakers rose a sweet feminine singing, which gradually diminished both light and sound. And the swimming pool area gradually turned into an obscure motherly womb filled with soft voices singing lullabies. But then a new cycle of collision between light, sound and singing began.

<https://vimeo.com/844992898>

D.B.: Ilya, you literally graduated this summer at the Rodčenko School. Are they all pretending that nothing has happened? I find it difficult to imagine such a position in the contemporary art context.

I.M.: There is a different story regarding the Rodčenko School and how my videographic diploma project was censored and didn't take place at the diploma projects exhibition. At the same time, the exhibition wasn't announced anywhere, in order to make it as little visible as possible. Now the school website shows as a diploma work a painting project of horse carcasses, but in reality my diploma project was a film titled "The story of Meta Stas", which was ironic about the Russian propaganda machine.

<https://vimeo.com/845232645/d99aceefac>

D.B.: Damn, tell me more! But you weren't in Russia any more, so how did you discuss your thesis?

I.M.: Yes, it took place in June 2023, and I discussed my thesis online. The movie has been filmed in/for 6 months, firstly in Uzbekistan, then in France and lastly in Switzerland. I worked hard on it, besides it was important for me as proof of our "nomad" life and of a time indicator. And the story of its censorship was brought even more in light by this indicator. Shortly before the exhibition staging, my diploma supervisor Sergej Bratkov contacted me to tell me that he received a phone call from the school director and that the movie couldn't be shown at the exhibition because, according to them, it lacked spirituality... So they advised me to make a thesis about another theme.

D.B.: Dang! Did the word "spirituality" come out?!

I.M.: Yes, yes! At first, Sergej laughed, saying that I had touched the right nerve. For what I know, such a situation has never happened in this school, in which a thesis could be rejected or deleted because of its topic or because of technical problems, so I was assigned a room at the exhibition and everything has been prepared for its exposition. But only

a week before the beginning of the editing the school praesidium categorically told Bratkov that they were against the projection of my movie at the exhibition. But, like the case of Lena at the Sidur Museum, nobody wanted to admit the problem of censorship. I wasn't directly told, but the decision was communicated through Sergej, which increased the feeling that something abnormal was happening. The exhibition took place at the Catherine Foundation and all the works have been previewed by the Foundation. Generally speaking, the thesis had a double censorship, while it was impossible to find out about the exhibition, there were no manifestos, and it was also impossible to have access to it without an appointment.

D.B.: So, this year another tradition has been broken. After all, last year's diploma project exhibition was open to the public, right?

I.M.: Last year everything was normal, but this year there was a closed-doors session. At the end, Sergej suggested that I exhibit my work with horses independently, and so we did. But I still insisted that I could also add the movie to the discussion. Perhaps it won't be played at the exhibition, but it will be at least presented at the discussion, where some students and professors were present at the Catherine Foundation, and others were on Zoom. Apart from students and professors, no one was allowed to participate in the discussion. When it was my turn, the directors asked all the students who were there in person to exit the auditorium and the other students who were online were asked to exit the meeting. Whoever objected was simply banned. Lena insisted that she will remain on Zoom because she worked on the project too. And in such a mysterious environment, the other teachers were shown a fragmented movie that only lasted about 2 minutes, even though the movie was 10 minutes long. When I asked what that was, the answer was that everyone had already seen everything, and the ones who didn't would have done that later. I ironically suggested not showing the movie at all, because I would describe it orally.

E.A.: I couldn't stand the situation either, because I love the school, it's my *alma mater*, and I was horrified by what was happening. I said that I fully understand why the movie hasn't been projected at the exhibition, but why oblige the students to exit the auditorium and the Zoom meeting? I was told they did so in order to safeguard the school. After this, the faculty members privately wrote to me and explained that someone was anonymously writing complaints about the school, and they suspected it was one of the students.

I.M.: There was a case in which one of the students' exhibitions was closed because of a complaint. In other words, the reasoning that everybody cared for the school safety was approved and wasn't suspicious at all, so this form of self censorship was endured. I regret that I didn't have time to ask why such a contemporary art school would be useful or necessary, since they are afraid of exposing the students' works, why should it be kept in this form?

D.B.: But was this an isolated case?

I.M.: No, they did the same also with another work. I don't want to demonise the school, because before this, the students' critique position was more often supported and it seemed to me an important thing for the school. My upset is caused by this reassuring desire, "no matter what happens". So I don't understand why such irrelevant art institutions are necessary. Or maybe I am still in my illusionary bubble and I think that in a war the position matters and that we must talk about something more than distractions from it.

D.B.: In this regard, I have a question: how right do you think it is to cling to the fact that you come from Russia, and that you have something to do with this Country? Maybe we should start building a new European identity, especially when you have a little child for whom Russia won't mean anything?

E.A.: I think it depends on each one's decision. It could be a good idea for someone to say: "Stop, stop, we are done, I no longer want to feel guilty or ashamed when I am asked where I come from". But for me, trying to change my identity means an attempt to distance myself from responsibilities.

D.B.: What are your future plans and prospects?

E.A.: While we reflected on what we would have done or where we would have lived, I told Ilya that I had only one condition: it should be a place where I could see marble. And thanks to my friend, with whom I learned how to work stone, we found such a place in Germany.

I.M.: At the end we both went to the Art and Design University of Offenbach am Main (Hochschule für Gestaltung Offenbach am Main), where I went for my bachelor degree and Lena for the master degree. We'll start the lessons in October.

E.A.: Generally speaking, the plan is to never stop being artists, to keep working and talking about the war, because once it will be over with the defeat of Russia, sooner or later it will be necessary to rebuild the cultural bridges with the rest of the world. I believe the work of artists, writers, musicians who today realise projects against war is an important tool to use in this sense. Surely, these bridges won't be created based on the projects of today's museums or of the imaginary GES-2 (House of Culture).

In general, I was very disappointed by the fact that a great number of artists that I know still participate in exhibitions like Cosmospow. There are artists who left Russia because of the war, but who now return to Moscow, just to bring to the exhibition the works completed during the exile. I refuse to understand this. It's obvious that in Russia there is a great number of people who benefit from the war and who, not being able to spend money abroad like in the past, buy art at the exhibitions. And I don't believe that my colleagues don't wonder in which houses their works are exposed.

Moreover, I don't delude myself that the art against war could convince somebody or to change something. We need it for ourselves, like a motivation to keep talking to others, to avoid letting war become the normality.