

“Strange and Twisted Love”: Researching Art Practices in Donbas through Collaborative Frames

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In memory of Mykola Mykolaïovych Lomako (1953–2021), Lysychansk historian, architect, heritage professional, and social activist who so excellently promoted intergenerational dialogue in Donbas

From the production portraits of the Soviet avant-garde artists of the 1920s to the bleak depictions of failing Donbas monotowns in the cinema of the perestroika era, the landscapes and communities of Donbas have been repeatedly depicted as exotic abstractions, to be wondered at, emulated, or feared by the rest of the nation. In our role as researchers of such practices, we might consider ourselves to stand outside of the frame, to be engaged in a process of objective deconstruction that exposes the mechanisms of power that inform the politics of representation. In this article, we take issue with this assumption, highlighting the researcher’s complicity in perpetuating subject-object dichotomies, and thus inequalities of power, when we write about cultural representations. We scrutinize our roles in constructing new frames for understanding a region whose cultural representations we engage in our writing, and especially through our own practices of curating creative community engagement projects. Drawing on methods of reciprocal ethnography and collaborative writing, we espouse a more ethical, feminist approach to our topic, “writing with” rather than “writing about” the artists and practitioners whose curatorial work has informed contemporary ideas of Donbas. We engage in dialogue with our interlocutors to collectively deconstruct our creative work on Donbas identities and explore our shared reactions to this process. In this way, we reflect on the mechanisms of framing and exclusion that we—as researchers, curators, and art practitioners—inevitably engage in our work.

This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [AH/V001051/1]; the Scottish Funding Council Official Development Assistance Global Challenges Research Fund; Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Ukraine; University of St Andrews School of Modern Languages Knowledge Exchange and Impact Fund; University of St Andrews School of Modern Languages PhD Research Scholarship; and the Douglas and Gordon Bonnyman PhD scholarship. The research received ethical approval from the University of St Andrews Teaching and Research and Ethics Committee.

REGION: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia 10(1): 109–35, 2021.

DMYTRO posts a photo of a hotel that reads: *Vo tok*¹

DARYA: *vo tok* reads like a song by Antokha MC

DMYTRO: Hotel *Vo_tok*: from ruin porn to *zabroshka* erotic

DARYA: sounds like a title of a sad film

DMYTRO: Все это было, было. Все это нас палило. Все это лило, било, вздергивало и мотало, и отнимало силы, и волокно в могилу, и втаскивало на пьедесталы.

DARYA: love it when you quote Brodsky!

DMYTRO: “You will forget fairytale Luhansk and the school yard in Vtorchermet district.” When I’ve forgotten all Russian poetry will that mean I’m decolonized?

DARYA: Absolutely not!

OLEKSANDR: That wouldn’t be enough.

(Excerpt from the group’s Telegram chat)

In the midst of the ongoing pandemic, we² began a project about the creative and representational practices that have contributed to the cultural meaning of Donbas, the toponym used to refer to the Donets Coal Basin, a region in eastern Ukraine.³ This project was conducted remotely: every two to three weeks, a Zoom meeting would be convened with our project partners: Dmytro Cherpurnyi,⁴ a curator and cultural manager from Luhansk, formerly the program director of Donbas Studies at “IZOLYATSIA. Platform for Cultural Initiatives” in Kyiv; Kateryna Siryk, cultural activist from Luhansk and head of “Plus/Minus” in Sievierodonetsk, an alternative art initiative that hosts raves and lectures; Oleksandr Kuchynskiy, an independent artist from Sievierodonetsk and curator of an online archive, “IndustrialHeaven”; and Victor Zasytkin, an independent artist and co-originator of “zhuzhalka,” an artistic collective founded in Donetsk. The authors of this article are Victoria Donovan, a tenured academic from Wales now working in Scotland, and Darya Tsybalyuk, a researcher and artist from Ukraine currently doing a Ph.D. in Scotland. In these online meetings the group discussed the traditions of visualizing Donbas that have been historically marked by an aesthetics of violence and exclusivity. More often, however, we exchanged views on new creative imaginings of the region—including those authored by the project partners—that have engaged

¹ The hotel was once called “Vostok” (East), but the letter *s* was lost, so the name read as “Vo tok.”

² By “we” we mean Victoria Donovan and Darya Tsybalyuk as the authors of this text. Where we would like to distinguish our individual contributions to this project, we use our first names.

³ Vasilii Simonenko, *Ocherki o pryrode Donbassa* (Donetsk: Donbass, 1977), 9–10.

⁴ Later in the text we refer to our collaborators using their first names only.

with and challenged this visual heritage. Rather than stand outside the frame, performing scientific objectivity, we included ourselves and our own artistic and curatorial work in the discussion. This reciprocal approach allowed us to address the issue of our own positionality: neither belonging to nor being resident in the region, our authority to speak on behalf of contemporary cultural processes in Donbas is limited. By engaging in sustained conversations with local thinkers and practitioners, our intention was to overcome this limitation, constructing “collaborative frames” through which we could view the questions at the center of our research.

Among the questions structuring our project were the following: how are contemporary artists and creative practitioners engaging with the region’s history and heritage to produce new cultural understandings of Donbas? How do these practices draw on or depart from established ways of seeing and knowing the region, including Soviet practices of visual documentation and knowledge production? These questions emerged from our dissatisfaction with many of the historic and contemporary (visual) narratives that have contributed to the cultural construction of Donbas. We position this article, which is just one (more traditionally academic) output within the broader project,⁵ in dialogue with what we identify as a tradition of partial representation of the region’s human and more-than-human landscapes as places characterized by absence, decay, disintegration, and extreme violence.⁶ This interpretative tradition can be located, for example, as far back as the prerevolutionary texts of Vikentii Veresaev, who, writing for audiences in the imperial center, depicts Donbas as a place full of violent alcoholics living in appalling poverty;⁷ it emerges again, in inverted form, in canonical Soviet texts, such as Dziga Vertov’s experimental documentary *Entuziazm: Simfoniia Donbassa*, in which Donbas miners and factory workers are imagined as dehumanized extensions of industry, cogs in the

⁵ In keeping with the feminist ethics and collaborative methodologies that we espouse in this project, we have sought to realize multiple outputs from our work together that have the potential to benefit all contributors to the project in different ways. Therefore, in addition to this article, which has relevance to those of us working in academic research institutions, we will be publishing an arts book for a broader audience that will feature interviews and artistic, curatorial works of our partners. We also continue to work with our partners on a series of other projects, including the animation film *Displaced Garden* (Darya Tsymbalyuk and Victor Zasytkin, together with a team) and Victoria Donovan’s AHCR project “Donbas in Focus: Visions of Industry in the Ukrainian East,” which will include several artist-led initiatives, including workshops by Oleksandr Kuchynskyi, Victor Zasytkin, and Dmytro Chepurnyi.

⁶ While we recognize that the articulation of these tropes at different historical moments may have been driven by varying political motivations and have had different social resonances, we nevertheless deem it appropriate here to map in broad strokes discursive practices that continue to resonate in contemporary cultural landscapes and inform local practices of collective self-narration.

⁷ Vikentii Veresaev, “Podzemnoe tsarstvo,” in *Otkrytie strany ognia: Proizvedeniia russkikh pisatelei o Donbasse*, ed. K. F. Spasenko (Donetsk: Donbas, 1980), 71–106.

fierce machinery of Soviet modernity;⁸ the representational mode finds its continuation in contemporary writing and film, for example Oleksandr Mykhed's "*Ia zmishaiu tvoiu krov z vuhilliam*": *Zrozumity ukraïnskyi skhid*, in which an "expert" from the capital travels to the bleak eastern peripheries and discovers a deep-set conservatism and resistance to cultural innovation;⁹ Sergei Loznitsa's Cannes prize-winning film bearing the totalizing title *Donbas* likewise presents a picture of the region as a place of extreme violence and despair.¹⁰ Like Mykhed's book,¹¹ Loznitsa's film provoked a series of outraged reactions in Ukraine in response to its diminishing portrayal of local people.¹² All of these male-authored outsider narratives contribute to a genre we refer to as "Donbas horror." It is often difficult to find narratives that focus on other aspects of the region, and the domination of stories of violence and deprivation creates the risk of perpetuating the idea of Donbas as the uncivilized Other within Ukraine.¹³

Of course, it is not only outsiders who have been attracted to the thematics and aesthetics of "Donbas horror." Local creative practitioners have found subversive potential in adopting the mode for their own self-deprecating representations. Similar tendencies can be traced in the work of Luhansk photographer Aleksandr Chekmenev,¹⁴ for example, whose sumptuous black-and-white photography explores in ethnographic detail the social deprivation of the region's mining communities, particularly in the 1990s. It is present too in the works of younger generations of Donbas artists, musicians, and photographers: Oleksandr Ratiï's film *Vozvrashcheniia*,¹⁵ for example, showcases endless postindustrial landscapes to a soundtrack of haunting, ambient electronica, while the popular metal group Rvy i nervy stalk the ruins of Soviet industry to the sound of distorted guitars and droning vocals.¹⁶ This self-deprecating per-

⁸ Dziga Vertov, *Entuziazm: Simfonia Donbassa* (1930).

⁹ Oleksandr Mykhed, "*Ia zmishaiu tvoiu krov iz vuhilliam*": *Zrozumity ukraïns'kyi Skhid* (Kyiv: Nash Format, 2020).

¹⁰ Sergei Loznitsa, *Donbass* (2018).

¹¹ Lia Dostlieva, "Iak zmishaty svoiu krov z vuhilliam: Kil'ka kulinarnykh retseptiv i porad," *Korydor: Zhurnal pro suchasnu kul'turu*, 24 June 2020, <http://www.korydor.in.ua/ua/opinions/iak-zmishaty-svoiu-krov-z-vuhilliam-kilka-kulinarnykh-retseptiv-i-porad.html>.

¹² Denys Tymoshenko, "Ot otvrashcheniia do voskhishcheniia: Sotsseti o fil'me 'Donbass,'" *Radio Svoboda*, 25 October 2018, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/29559446.html>.

¹³ Andrii Portnov, "Donbass kak drugoi: Ukrainskie intellektual'nye diskursy vo vremia voiny," *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, no. 6 (2016): 103–18.

¹⁴ See the 1994–2011 photo series by Oleksandr Chekmenev, "Donbass," <http://www.alexanderchekmenev.com/projects/nazvanie/>, accessed 18 March 2021.

¹⁵ Oleksandr Ratiï, *Vozvrashcheniia*, 9 March 2013, <https://youtu.be/JZBonwUdAws>, accessed 18 March 2021.

¹⁶ Rvy i nervy, *Apokalispsis-folk*, 6 February 2011, <https://youtu.be/bj8vwShDNEI>, accessed 18 March 2021.

spective is also present in some of the works of our collaborators, who deal in the aesthetics of dereliction and apocalyptic ruination in their work. While the empowering potential presented by local appropriations of the genre are clear, as two researchers from outside the region, we wished to avoid perpetuating the tradition of narrativizing Donbas only as a place of misery and terror.

How, then, can collaborative methods disturb established cultural imaginings of Donbas? How can they help us form new kinds of understanding about the region that rely on local knowledge and embodied experience, as well as outsider looking? Seeking answers to these questions, we have turned to writings on feminist epistemologies, in particular Donna Haraway's thinking on situated knowledges, and to the collaborative methodologies of Social Anthropology, including the work of reciprocal ethnographers Liria Hernández and Paloma Gay y Blasco.¹⁷ In Haraway we have found useful the insistence on the "particularity and embodiment of all vision,"¹⁸ an understanding that directly confronts the fiction of the "view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity,"¹⁹ which is itself underpinned by an "ideology of direct, devouring, generative, and unrestricted vision."²⁰ As Haraway explains, partiality, rather than an epistemological weakness, is a site of potential strength through togetherness: it presents the possibility of joining with others, not with the aim of achieving universality, but to create webs of connection, solidarity. Following Haraway, we attempt in this discussion not to achieve an impartial understanding of our topic ("the [academic] view ... from nowhere," as it were), but rather to document the negotiation of that topic—Donbas and its contemporary cultural imaginings—by a group of individuals all invested in its definition.

Our methodological approach of "collaborative frames" has its roots, not only in theory, but also in our empirical knowledge and past experiences of collaboration. Guided by horizontally informed feminist thinking, including thinking that has emerged in the Ukrainian context,²¹ we have chosen our col-

¹⁷ Liria Hernández and Paloma Gay y Blasco, *Writing Friendship: A Reciprocal Ethnography* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

¹⁸ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 3 (1988): 582, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 589.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 581.

²¹ As this research was developing, many conversations exploring questions of war, postindustrial transformations, and/or "artivism" through feminist and/or queer methodologies have been taking place in Ukraine, including TvorchSkhid's explorations of derelict sites of eastern Ukraine (Freefilers, *Vy sho tut metal voruete? (Vidnovlennia prostoru)*, YouTube video recording, 24 November 2018, <https://youtu.be/dK5fGrGaMRo>, accessed 25 August 2021; films by Sasha Protyah (see <https://vimeo.com/protyah>); and Valeriia Zubatenko's writing on Mariupol's underground cultures (Valeriia Zubatenko, "Mariupol'ski marhinalii," *YourArt*, 5 February 2021, <https://supportyourart.com/category/specialprojects/mariupolski-marginaliyi/>, accessed 25 August 2021. See also Jessica Zychowicz, *Superfluous Women: Art Feminism and*

laborators based on established networks of trust and exchange: Darya and Victor had since 2015 collaborated on the Donbas Odyssey art project,²² and since 2020 have been working together on the animated film *Displaced Garden*; Dmytro, Kateryna, Victoria, and Darya had together coordinated the Donbas Studies Summer School that took place in Kyiv (“IZOLYATSIA. Platform for Cultural Initiatives”) and Sievierodonetsk (“Plus/Minus”) in 2019;²³ Oleksandr had also participated in the Summer School, where he met Kateryna, with whom he later collaborated on various art initiatives, some of which we discuss in this article. Our research therefore emerged out of a dense web of past and present collaborations, affective, institutional, and even financial ties that informed our writing, listening, and learning from each other. While this network of dependencies may at first appear problematic in terms of research ethics, it in fact formed the foundation for our collaborative work, which, as Hernández and Gay y Blasco have shown, requires strong relationships of trust and mutual respect to succeed.²⁴ Our choice of methods for this project was thus founded on far more than feminist criticism and cultural theory; it emerged too from our shared embodied experiences and encounters: of climbing together to the roof of a derelict building as part of a radio-walk in Sievierodonetsk; of traipsing around the streets of Lviv through chilly spring winds distributing art stickers; of collectively editing glitchy GoogleDocs with budgets and applications for funding for various projects we have worked on together.

Drawing on past experience of conducting ethically informed collaborative projects, we designed this research with multiple points of entry to maximize the possibility for our partners to shape and inform the discussion. To this end, we gave particular thought to the technologies and languages that could distribute authority most evenly across the project. By languages, we refer to academic and nonacademic language, to visual and written language, but also to Russian, Ukrainian, and English. We chose to conduct all our communication in Russian, as well as to translate field notes originally written in English into Russian, the language which, for most participants, was native. We also decided to conduct our work via a series of online Zoom meetings and a closed Telegram chat group, both platforms with which our partners were familiar and comfortable working. The research took the following form:

Revolution in Twenty-first Century Ukraine, <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487513740> (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020); Maria Mayerchuk and Olga Plakhotnik, “Uneventful Feminist Protest in Post-Maidan Ukraine,” in *Postcolonial and Postcolonial Dialogues: Intersections, Opacities, Challenges in Feminist Theorizing and Practices*, ed. Redi Koobak, Madina Tlostanova, and Suruchi Thapar-Björkert (London: Routledge, 2021), 121–37.

²² *Odisseia Donbass*, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/odyssey.donbass/>.

²³ Donbas Studies Summer School webpage, <https://donbasstudies.org/en/summer-school-2019/>, accessed 18 March 2021.

²⁴ Hernández and Gay y Blasco, *Writing Friendship*, chap. 1.

at each meeting, one collaborator would share their work representing and/or curating ideas of Donbas and would respond to any questions and comments raised by the group. Following the meeting, we (Darya and Victoria) would each write a field note reflecting on the themes raised in the discussion that resonated most with us; at the beginning of the next meeting, we would read our field notes aloud and give other participants a chance to respond, challenge, or correct our interpretations. In the time between the meetings, links, opinions, and information were shared in the Telegram chat. Our active engagement with our collaborators at each stage of the research and writing process impacted significantly on the work that we produced: knowing that we were accountable for our interpretations to our partners, we found ourselves writing in a markedly more compassionate and careful mode than we may have done in other, noncollaborative conditions. The detached academic approach, the critical looking from a distance typical of outsider narratives of the region, was here replaced by a more strenuous effort to understand where our partners were coming from, to provide them with a sounding board and support network as they developed their work and ideas.

Being aware of the critique of the collaborative methods, which despite ambitious aspirations never manages to escape the constitution of authority, we do not aim to present an equal and harmonious distribution of voices in this article, instead embracing the partiality of our perspectives and acknowledging the ways in which these perspectives were impacted and molded by negotiations with our partners. Having to represent our partners' creative thinking back to them responsibly, and not being able to reframe the discussion at a safe distance away from them, we found our ideas and interpretations coming together and pulling apart in different and intriguing ways. This process of collaborative research meant that we ended up writing about topics that we may otherwise have avoided (a number of artist works we discussed engaged with the tropes of dereliction, devastation, and despair that we identify as problematic above). In the three examples below, we attempt to show how certain ideas of place and practice emerged and crystallized over the course of our conversations, what stuck and what fell away as we conducted research through collaborative frames. We have singled out three creative practices from our conversations for discussion below: *zabroshka*, which explores ways of perceiving and engaging dereliction outside the frame of aestheticized ruination or "Donbas horror"; *delat' nechego*, which follows our discussion about institutions and their roles in the cultural formation of the region; and serious jokes, which reflects on speculation and humor as a different way of telling stories about Donbas.



Figure 1. Novodruzhesk Palace of Culture. Photo by Kateryna Siryk

Zabroshka

The phenomenon of *zabroshka* first emerges in our discussions as we listen to Kateryna and Oleksandr talk about their creative and ethnographic practices of visiting derelict sites around Sievierodonetsk. Following a short discussion of his curatorial project “IndustrialHeaven,”²⁵ Oleksandr assumes the role of moderator and asks his friend in mock-serious interviewer style: “So, Katia, why do you think it is that we’re so drawn to these places?”²⁶ Kateryna responds by talking, in sometimes lyrical and cryptic language, about the expeditions that she coordinates to the disintegrating industrial relics that populate the landscapes of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions. She travels in a small

²⁵ Industrial Heaven is an Instagram archive of visual materials relating to the region’s industrial heritage, which has more than 2500 followers. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/industrialheaven/>.

²⁶ Oleksandr Kuchynskyi, Seminar 1: Oleksandr Kuchynskyi and Kateryna Siryk, 15 October 2020, 00:50:00–00:53:00.

group of people, each of whom has their own agenda: some join the group with ethnographic intentions to document and archive the material culture of Soviet industry, which today, following the decommunization law of 2015,²⁷ has acquired the status, as she puts it, of “official trash” (*ofitsial’nyi musor*);²⁸ others have creative visions—the hallowed cathedrals of proletarian labor hold enormous potential for cultural adaptation as sites for art installations, exhibitions, and raves; others again, she remarks, tag along just to visit somewhere new and “take a couple of cool selfies.”²⁹

Kateryna and Oleksandr use the term *zabroshka*, to refer to their practices of engagement with derelict spaces. Some in the group are familiar with the term: as she speaks, Dmytro forwards to our Telegram chat images of visits to similar sites that he has made as part of the curatorial program he coordinated at “IZOLYATSIA.” For others, it is a relatively new discovery. Victoria remarks that her knowledge of these places is founded, for the most part, on the “ruin porn” aesthetic that is so dominant in representations of Eastern Europe in online visual archives such as Instagram. “Ruin porn,” which has been criticized for its tendency to “reduce, aestheticize and dehumanize the city, rendering architectural form naked and inhuman,”³⁰ nevertheless seems a far cry from the more care-driven, preservationist practices Kateryna describes in her presentation. In the following excerpt, Kateryna elaborates a definition of her activities that fundamentally shifts our understanding of *zabroshka* practice:

KATERYNA: This all demands a lot of time and endless involvement, that’s also important to understand.

VICTOR: LOVE.

KATERYNA: LOVE, that’s not even under discussion, but I suppose some kind of strange, twisted, in some way very perverted aesthetic and love [*izvrashchennoi estetiki i liubvi*] towards all this stuff, yes. It’s not even that we are fully conscious of what it is. Because the fact is that *zabroshka*, the word, is some sort of dialectism, or what’s the right word, I don’t know. *Zabroshki* and all that, we don’t have a sufficiently practical, experiential, or even official, or whatever, term to refer to these objects, and there are so many of these spaces, these planes [*ploskosti*], and the way they are understood too, the self-consciousness of it all. *Zabroshka*, what is *zabroshka*? I’m always uncomfortable when I fill in

²⁷ Pro zasudzhennia komunistychnoho ta natsional-sotsialistychnoho (natsyystskoho) totalitarnykh rezhymiv v Ukraini ta zaboronu ikhnyoi symboliky, 2015, available at <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/317-19#Text>.

²⁸ Kateryna Siryk, Seminar 1. Oleksandr Kuchynskyi and Kateryna Siryk, 15 October 2020, 00:54:47.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 00:52:00.

³⁰ Jamie Rann, “Beauty and the East: Allure and Exploitation in Post-Soviet Ruin Photography,” *The Calvert Journal*, 31 July 2014, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/2950/russian-ruins-photography>.

a form describing what it is that we do in our practice. Let's be honest, at the end of the day you can't use the word *zabroshka* in an official way. But how else can you refer to them? You can't.³¹

Zabroshka, in Kateryna's understanding, is submerged in the unconscious (*ne osoznana nami*), and it is only through physical and imaginative explorations that it actualizes and comes to the surface of reality. And, indeed, the group's explorations of zabroshki actively engage knowing through the body: in their collaborative practice, it is not sight that is privileged so much as corporeal presence, the experience of the body moving through the space of the building, the capacity of that body to dig, hold, handle, and caress its material contents and textures. When we ask Kateryna and Oleksandr to share photographs of their expeditions they hesitate, rightfully cautious of the ways that images of postindustrial dereliction can enter into a marketplace of exploitative consumption and reproduction. Through this semiconfrontational exchange, which involves local resistance to outsider looking, zabroshka emerges in our minds as both a place and a practice. It was this corporeal understanding of zabroshka that prompted us to write a text, published in the online journal *Your Art*, in which we read zabroshka practice through Audre Lorde's lens of "the erotic."³² This explicitly feminist reading surprised some in the group, who did not necessarily identify their practice as feminist but did not provoke conflict. Rather, the openness that we established as a foundation for our communication allowed for a multiplicity of meanings to circulate and coexist.

Listening to Kateryna and Oleksandr, we understand that zabroshka also stands for engagement with what they perceive to be the unprocessed Soviet past: the pamphlets, clocks, and periodic tables, discarded as historical trash, which the group excavates from the ruined buildings to be washed, collected, and potentially recycled into new creative work. This kind of engagement with industrial heritage is strikingly different from practices at Sievierodonetsk's only museum dedicated to industrial heritage at the AZOT works (where access is strictly controlled, and photography is categorically prohibited) or the more traditionally structured local history museum in the neighboring town of Lysychansk. While driven by a similar preservationist logic to the cultural structures established in the Soviet period, "Plus/Minus" is a place where these relics become accessible for tactile exploration, rather than hidden away behind glass vitrines.

The shared experience of journeying to, gaining access to, and exploring these sites creates bonds between the group members, leading, as Kateryna

³¹ Kateryna Siryk, Seminar 1. Oleksandr Kuchynskyi and Kateryna Siryk, 15 October 2020, 01:06:57–01:08:47.

³² Victoria Donovan and Darya Tsybalyuk, "Vid ruin porn do 'zabroshka-erotyky': Doslidzhennia Viktorii Donovan ta Daryi Tsybalyuk pro Sievierodonetsk," *YourArt*, 8 February 2021, <https://supportyourart.com/stories/vid-ruin-porn-do-zabroshka-erotyky/>.

explains, to the emergence of a community of an “intense and very meaningful nature” (*intensivnyi i ochen’ osmyslennyi kharakter*).³³ These processes are manifest in a trip the group made to Novodruzhesk in 2020. Having found an old Soviet banner dedicated to the “Day of the Miner” in one of the sites, Kateryna, Oleksandr, and their collective decided to transport it to an abandoned mine. The group ended up in a half-ruined Palace of Culture (Dom Kul’ tury—DK), which also happened to be a place where local teenagers were spending their time. The two groups quickly bonded and together performed an act of commemoration and revitalization in/of the decaying DK by stretching the banner across different parts of the building. Here, reflection on Soviet and industrial heritage is not verbalized but instead enacted through the body, which climbs, holds, and attaches; it is a lived experience that corporeally reconstructs the actions of previous generations, tracing the gestures that might have searched for the best place to hang a similar object in the past. Each participant becomes an actor in a process of collective remembering and exploration, where the past is not fossilized, but is instead a substance that activates a process of a playful engagement with the space and each other. The ruins do not just stand for the decay and the end of a former civilization, removed and remote from the viewer’s everyday life; they are rather the very site of today’s social interactions and connections, a place of mutual exchange and bonding.

The unofficial status of this kind of activity is reflected by the fact that the word *zabroshka* is absent from official discourse, something that makes it difficult for Kateryna to get formal recognition for her practice: “at the end of the day you can’t use the word *zabroshka* in an official way.” At various moments in our conversation, Kateryna asks us, as academics functioning in a UK context, how *zabroshka* might effectively be translated for the purposes of grant applications and reporting; she has never found an English-language term that adequately renders the concept. Later, in our Telegram chat, the group builds on its co-constituted knowledge, suggesting translations that cross the boundary of place and practice: tumbledown, brownfield site, wasteland, urban exploration, stalking? Oleksandr advises strongly against equating the group’s *zabroshka* activities with the subculture of *stalkerstvo*, a practice which is rooted in Tarkovsky’s iconic film *Stalker* and the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. video game that gained worldwide popularity:³⁴ “I wouldn’t fixate on Tarkovsky and *stalkerstvo*, if I were you,” he writes. “That film undoubtedly had an important impact on post-Soviet pop culture, and the term itself has already taken on a life of its own, but I wouldn’t use it to describe local artistic practices.”³⁵ This

³³ Kateryna Siryk, Seminar 1. Oleksandr Kuchynskyi and Kateryna Siryk, 15 October 2020, 00:51:26.

³⁴ Galina Boeva, “Transformatsii fenomena stalkerstva v postsovetском kul’turnom prostranstve,” in *Stereotipy i natsional’nye sistemy tsennosti v mezhkul’turnoi kommunikatsii 1*, ed. V. Shaidurov and A. Kiklevich (St. Petersburg: NIYAK, 2009), 149–56.

³⁵ Oleksandr Kuchynskyi, message in a Telegram chat, 12 November 2020.

exchange demonstrates the particular kinds of knowledge that conducting research through collaborative frames makes possible: hierarchical processes of academic knowledge production are countered by more horizontal directions of flow; ideas are negotiated in an ongoing and dynamic process of exchange.

Oleksandr proposes that we consider a very different cultural comparison: “Basically we are trying to rethink the REMNANTS of Soviet heritage, which are quite literally decomposing and disappearing before our very eyes. We’re trying to systematize them, to clean the dirt off them. We’re trying in a very literal sense to excavate old archives/artefacts from the ruins and the layers of dust. It’s more like digging [*diggerstvo*], if you ask me. But this term doesn’t cut it completely either ... maybe if you adapt it you could get something like *industrial digging* [English original].”³⁶ *Diggerstvo*, in Oleksandr’s thinking, is a practice of industrial archaeology, where through excavation the group is able to access strata of Soviet memories, digging deeper into not only space, but also time. Oleksandr perceives this kind of activity as a way to engage the region’s still unprocessed (Soviet) history and to understand Donbas’s current situation: “I think we need to visit derelict sites more often to at least understand why our region is so depressing.”³⁷ In an interview with another local artist, Vitaliy Matukhno, originator of the pop-up zabroshka gallery “gareleia neotodresh” (loosely translating as “unscrappable garalley”) in Lysychansk, similar sentiments echo: “We want people to start taking an interest in zabroshki, because this is the first step towards getting to know the city. When people are inside zabroshki, they mostly wonder about what was there before. They begin to wonder why ‘everything perished’ in this building. And sooner or later they come to the conclusion that they may be interested in the history of the city.”³⁸ Reading across and between these local initiatives, the idea of zabroshka as a vehicle for local self-knowledge production also takes shape. Kateryna explains this process in characteristically lyrical terms: “you notice how time smoulders [*tleet*], all matter is right there in front of your eyes, how drops of water are breaking through the plasterwork of some beautiful bas-relief, how the ceilings are caving in, or how pioneer camps are in the process of being dismantled.”³⁹ Zabroshka is thus a means of understanding the passage

³⁶ Oleksandr Kuchynskyi, message in a Telegram chat, 12 November 2020.

³⁷ Oleksandr Kuchinskyi, “Vid ruin porn do ‘zabroshka-erotyky’: Doslidzhennia Viktorii Donovan ta Daryi Tsymbalyuk pro Sievierodonetsk,” interview by Victoria Donovan and Darya Tsymbalyuk, *YourArt*, 8 February 2021, <https://supportyourart.com/stories/vid-ruin-porn-do-zabroshka-erotyky/>.

³⁸ Vitaliy Matukhno, “Vitaliy Matukhno: ‘My namahaemosia ozhyvyty ne mist-sia, a liudey,’” interview by Sievier zmin, 30 October 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/115063369878909/posts/413925843325992>.

³⁹ Kateryna Siryk, “Vid ruin porn do ‘zabroshka-erotyky’: Doslidzhennia Viktorii Donovan ta Daryi Tsymbalyuk pro Sievierodonetsk,” interview by Victoria Donovan and Darya Tsymbalyuk, *YourArt*, 8 February 2021, <https://supportyourart.com/stories/vid-ruin-porn-do-zabroshka-erotyky/>.

of time: the transformations—social, economic, ideological—that all inform the present conflicted situation in Donbas.

Delat' nechego

Delat' nechego (nothing to do) is a phrase that sounds a number of times in our discussions. Oleksandr uses it to explain the origins of his “IndustrialHeaven” project: “There was nothing to do [*delat' nechego*]... it was 2015 and I was sitting at home just like I am now. I was supposed to go to Luhansk, but I didn't end up going anywhere [...] I had to keep myself busy...”⁴⁰ Kateryna employs the same words when elaborating her reasons for returning to the Luhansk region around the same time and establishing “Plus/Minus,” a community arts space in Sievierodonetsk. While Victor does not use the exact phrase, it is also clear that his “zhuzhalka” collective was formed in the space between professional commitments, an unanticipated opening up of time for creativity.⁴¹ *Delat' nechego* stands for much more than millennial boredom, however; the phrase carries an ambiguity that is rooted, on the one hand, in self-irony toward artistic practices that are not institutionally recognized or seen to be valued in mainstream culture (including the *zabroshka* practices discussed above), and, on the other, what some in the group perceived to be the region's inadequate cultural infrastructure, presented for the most part by Soviet-era museums,⁴² the state of societal “*zabroshennost*” (abandonment) that is seen to characterize everyday life in Donbas.

A striking example of *delat' nechego* creativity would appear to be the aforementioned *gareleia neotodresh*, an initiative that is the focus of lively discussion during one of our meetings. As the organizer of *gareleia*, Matukhno explains, the name of the initiative emerged from his mispronunciation of the word *gallery*, but also gestures at the project's non-standard, extra-institutional status. By contrast with official galleries, in which works of art are curated for public consumption, *gareleia* is an improvisational exhibition space, a kind of postindustrial pop-up hosted in local *zabroshki*. As Oleksandr, who has shown his art at the space, explains, the only rules of display at *gareleia* are that you must not interfere with anyone else's composition. In his interview, Matukhno offers some observations about the state of the cultural landscape in Donbas, identifying the challenges and cultural potential that the perceived

⁴⁰ Oleksandr Kuchynskyi, Seminar 1. Oleksandr Kuchynskyi and Kateryna Siryk, 15 October 2020, 00:37:40–00:38:18.

⁴¹ Victor Zasytkin, Seminar 3. Victor Zasytkin, 5 November 2020, 00:37:12–00:37:30.

⁴² We should note that, in addition to local history museums, there also exist Houses of Culture, libraries, children's art circles, music and art schools, theaters, and local history clubs in the region. Yet, for young creatives, these cultural spaces, sometimes associated with the Soviet past, do not necessarily hold a strong attraction.

inadequacy of functioning institutions present for the needs of local creative communities:

Even if the authorities wanted to give us some kind of space that we could do something that we wanted with and make an exhibition there, I don't think I would be for it. I remember that I was talking once with Evgeny Koroletov and he said to me: "it's nice to imagine a gallery of contemporary art here, but what would it be like if it really existed?" And what came to mind was a [Soviet] House of Culture. Because the format that we have created for ourselves—it's the absence of a format and the freedom to do what we want—it would be difficult to work like that in an official structure. We don't rely on anyone for anything. If someone brings along a pot of paint, then we let him paint. So, if the authorities do want to work with us, well, I don't know how possible that will be with our project. It would be possible to make an exhibition outside of those parameters, but it wouldn't be *gareleia neotodresh*.⁴³

In this excerpt, Matukhno embraces the perceived inadequacy of local cultural institutions as a source of creative potential, an opportunity to make something radically new, or what Dmytro calls "an interesting format of its own" (*interesnyĭ svoĭ format*).⁴⁴ When he started his initiative, Matukhno tried to approach city authorities and old cultural institutions, only to be faced with endless bureaucracy and rejection. In this way, *gareleia* emerges out of *delat' nehego*, where this notion stands for both the absence of adequate institutions that could host and curate contemporary art events (there is nothing to do, *delat' nehego*) and for the acceptance of responsibility for creating new spaces, a refusal to be defined by lack and to accept old ways of making and doing (can't do anything about it, we have to do it ourselves: *delat' nehego, samim pridetsia*).

In his seminar, Dmytro also speaks about what he perceives to be Donbas's institutional weakness using a different phrase that he later explains away as a verbal slippage: *nedoinstitutsional'nost'* (under-institutionalization).⁴⁵ In her field note on this session, Victoria explores the implications of the *nedo-* prefix (roughly translated as "not yet" or "not enough"). She offers a provocation to Dmytro that his words might contain an (internalized colonial) assumption that Donbas, and, perhaps, more broadly Ukraine needs to "catch up" with the properly institutionalized West: "Does *nedo-* gesture at a historic preoccupation with lacking, insufficiency, incompleteness?"⁴⁶ In her note, Victoria critiques the perceived benefit of strong institutions in contexts outside of

⁴³ Viktoriia Kolomiets, "Gareleia Neotodresh." Iak u Lysychansku zakynuti budivli staiut artoprostorom," #ShoTam, 19 November 2020, <https://shotam.info/hareleia-neotodr-sh-yak-u-lysyhansku-zakynuti-budivli-staiut-artprostorom/>.

⁴⁴ Dmytro Chepurnyi, Seminar 4. Dmytro Chepurnyi, 26 November 2020, 00:36:27.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 00:34:10.

⁴⁶ Victoria Donovan, Field Note 5. Victoria Donovan, 1 October 2020, 1.

Ukraine, including the UK: “I can’t help but think how the UK’s institutional strength, the focus of so much admiration from abroad, is also the root of its crippling elitism and limits its cultural potential,” she writes. “Our whole society sometimes seems predicated on certain institutions of privilege: those who have passed through them govern benignly on behalf of the proles, while those who have been excluded gaze upon the elite with reverence and humble acknowledgement of their *nedo-* status.”⁴⁷

This interpretation causes one of the first confrontations in our discussions. When we present our field notes to the group, Dmytro reacts strongly to Victoria’s reading of the context through the prefix of *nedo-*. It is also a moment in which our authority as writers to shape a certain concept is questioned, as Dmytro underlines the vulnerability of the person being recorded for the purpose of analysis: “If I was writing a text, I would not have expressed myself this way.”⁴⁸ Here Dmytro is pushing back and problematizing Victoria’s crystallization of the *nedo-* image. Moreover, he challenges what he perceives to be Victoria’s idealistic interpretation of the creative space that opens up as a result of the absence of institutions or the weakness of the old Soviet structures. It is all well and good to advocate institutional weakness from a point of institutional privilege, he explains, but the reality is that Donbas needs a more developed cultural infrastructure that speaks to contemporary needs and practices. Others in the group concur with this point of view: listing all possible options, starting from the Palace of Culture, Oleksandr remarks that there is no appropriate museum or gallery space in the town to show his work: two of the places are permanently closed and two are poorly visited, therefore the only viable option for local contemporary artists is to exhibit in public places (“*est’ tol’ko ulitsa*”).⁴⁹ While the tension remains unresolved, the dissensus caused by different interpretations leads to a richer complexity of understanding of the local cultural context, its ambiguities and contradictions.

Not all artistic works in Donbas that we discuss exist outside institutional frames. In his seminar, Dmytro shares with us another set of projects that were produced as part of the curatorial programs run by “IZOLYATSIA. Platform for Cultural Initiatives,” one of the most influential cultural enterprises operating in the region. Rather than reflecting on the absence of cultural institutions or the creative potential presented by their weakness, these initiatives highlight the constraints of established or newly imposed institutional frames and neoliberal structures within which contemporary artists function. As Dmytro explains, they respond to these conditions with “symptomatic gestures” of irony, cynicism, or critical ire that draw attention to the joint conditions of

⁴⁷ Donovan, *ibid.*, 2–3.

⁴⁸ Dmytro Chepurnyi, Seminar 5. Darya Tsybalyuk, 10 December 2020, 00:05:09–00:05:13.

⁴⁹ Oleksandr Kuchynskyi, Seminar 4. Dmytro Chepurnyi, 26 November 2020, 00:40:04.

precariousness and dependency that they see as marking the creative sphere in Ukraine.⁵⁰

Among the works Dmytro discusses is *Special Thanks* by Egor Antsygin (2020),⁵¹ produced during the art residency “Landscape as a Monument” (“IZOLYATSIA. Platform for Cultural Initiatives”), which Dmytro curated together with Oleksandra Pogrebnyak in 2020. *Special Thanks* is a video piece featuring Antsygin standing still on a slagheap near Lysychansk next to a banner which reads: “Thanks to the art residency I came to Lysychansk!”⁵² The video is accompanied by a text that appears at the bottom of a screen as a news ticker. The text reflects on the constraints of the online format of the residency and critiques the modes of production required of the artists who participated. Commenting on the precariousness of artists who need an extra income to survive in Ukraine, Antsygin’s ticker text reads: “I thought that the online format would give me an opportunity to go to work and to take part in the residency.” He then continues to further criticize these unrealistic expectations: “The residency was coming to an end and required me to deliver results, which I did not have. I felt confused and ashamed in front of curators, who believed in my abilities and responsibility.”⁵³ Here Antsygin subversively presents his critique of the institutional frame as a required art product, ending his video with a mocking gesture of gratitude towards the organizers: “Thank you to Sasha, Dima, Ukrainian Cultural Foundation and ‘IZOLYATSIA.’”⁵⁴ Antsygin’s ironic use of a banner is reminiscent of Kateryna and Oleksandr’s intervention into the derelict Novodruzhesk Palace of Culture. But while Kateryna and Oleksandr are working in a space of institutional decay, Antsygin is resisting the new institutionalization of art practices. In both cases the banners work to subvert dominant discourses: the celebration of Donbas miners, who were in fact exploited by the Soviet and Ukrainian systems (Novodruzhesk intervention), and the neoliberal culture of expressing gratitude to funders who contribute to sustaining the precariousness of Ukrainian artists (*Special Thanks*).

Another project Dmytro shares is *Untitled* by the Lugansk Contemporary Diaspora (2018),⁵⁵ produced during the art residency “ZMINA” (“IZOLYATSIA. Platform for Cultural Initiatives”) and curated by Yelizaveta Korneychuk together with Dmytro. Like Antsygin’s project, *Untitled* critiques the new forms of institutionalization present in the region, in part a consequence of the increased international and NGO interest in Donbas culture and communities following the outbreak of war in 2014. Mocking the stilted institutional language of international grant writing, the artist description of *Untitled* reads:

⁵⁰ Dmytro Chepurnyi, Seminar 4. Dmytro Chepurnyi, 26 November 2020, 00:43:14.

⁵¹ Egor Antsygin, *Special Thanks*, 2020, <https://www.landscapeair.com/>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Lugansk Contemporary Diaspora, *Untitled*, 2018, <https://cargocollective.com/Lugansk/Untitled-ZMINA-A-I-R>.

The project was implemented as part of the ZMINA A-I-R residency in Lysychansk (Luhansk oblast) and consisted of a symbolic transfer of money allocated by the organizers of the residency to create an “artistic work with participatory practices” to guys from the local bmx community for the needs of the bmx-park. In line with the terms and conditions of the grant, the project included a collective imitation of the artistic processes planned by the program: an artist talk, a workshop, and a final exhibition.⁵⁶

The “collective imitation” referred to in the description consisted of a staged presentation, on which a slide with the single word *Presentation* was shown on a screen. The local BMX-community was then invited to position themselves in front of the slide for a photograph that would be included in the final report to be submitted to the funders. While Lugansk Contemporary Diaspora did engage with the community in a meaningful way, using the money to build moveable structures for the BMX-park, they also performed defiance in the face of institutional demands to instrumentalize their relations with the local community, turning them into quantifiable data for the benefit of the neoliberal logic. Here again there is a parallel to Kateryna and Oleksandr’s *zabroshka* practice which, as we note above, also resists the temptation of documenting, and thus instrumentalizing, the many meaningful connections the artists have built with local communities. Unlike “*zhuzhalka*,” “*IndustrialHeaven*,” and “*Plus/Minus*,” projects by Antsygin and Lugansk Contemporary Diaspora do not arise from the space of *delat’ nechego*; they were initiated within institutions, and are intentionally structured as forms of resistance, or what Dmytro calls “symptomatic gestures.” Yet what all of these projects would seem to have in common is their direct or indirect questioning of the authority of existing structures of power, as well as their attempts to foster alternative cultural forms in noninstrumentalizing ways. This more nuanced understanding of local practice and its relationship to established institutional structures emerges from the sometimes confrontational negotiations with our partners that resulted from our collaborative framing, a process whereby different forms of knowledge and experiences of cultural production in Donbas circulated and collided.

⁵⁶ Lugansk Contemporary Diaspora.

Serious Jokes

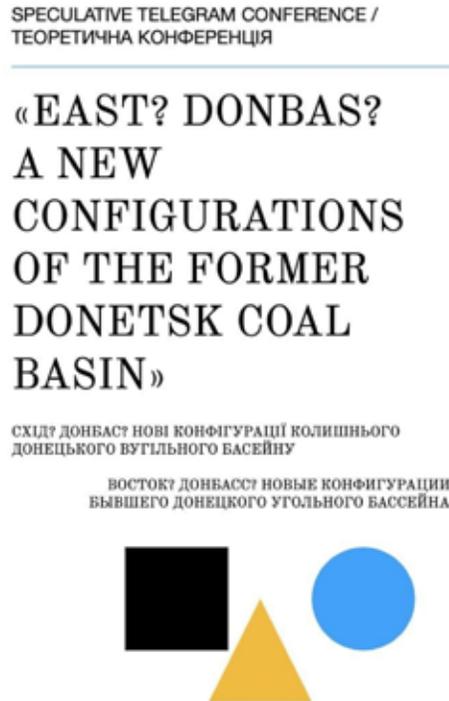


Figure 2. Dmytro Chepurnyi, Telegram chat, 29 December 2021.

Several months into our project, Dmytro posted this flyer for a make-believe academic conference to our Telegram chat. The only comment it provoked in the first instance was from Oleksandr who remarked phlegmatically that “it would make a good postcard.” Later the same day, following an exchange of messages about “the most neutral terms, that do not trigger political divisions or exploit the [Donbas] region as a resource,”⁵⁷ Dmytro reposted the flyer in two new variations. Believing the conference to be genuine, Darya responded to the post, asking for more details about how to apply, before being told by an obviously amused Dmytro that the event wasn’t real. This miniature “hoax,” intended to gently rib our academic inclinations to deconstruct and problematize geopolitical definitions (Donbas, Donetsk Coal Basin, eastern Ukraine, Ukrainian East), here realizes its intention to deceive and ultimately be discovered. Through the pleasure and embarrassment of discovery, it achieves its broader goal of pointing out the limits of our credulity and, even, as Darya

⁵⁷ Chepurnyi, Telegram chat, 29 December 2020.

remarks, our wishful thinking: this is the conference we would hope is in the making, one that takes seriously the violences of territorial definitions, but, for now, it is just a figment of our collective imagination.

The poster crystallizes a thread of discussion around speculation that emerges with a comment Victoria makes in response to Darya's first field note: "To what extent is Donbas a real place or a curatorial project?" With this semi-serious question, Victoria is addressing the dead-end rhetoric about the possibility of representing and representation, particularly in a region as violently amorphous as Donbas. Recent acts of territorial redefinition have caused much bloodshed in the region and, as Darya remarks in a later field note, should be treated with extra caution: "the last seven years of war have witnessed the harsh and cruel imposition of frameworks—the self-proclaimed, unrecognized DPR and LPR, and along the way, individual localities have been written into these frames, or left out of them, at the cost of hundreds of lives."⁵⁸ The group's awareness of the violence that has accompanied border (re-)definition in the local context ignites an ironic attitude towards any attempt to define or contain Donbas through arbitrary markers of identity. Discussing in a separate meeting the relationship of Mariupol to Donbas (is it in or is it out?), Oleksandr jokingly imagines the substitution of Donbas with "Donnetchyna," which in turn cancels out "Luhanshchyna."⁵⁹ At each turn, we run into the same failure of representation, where no matter which frame we apply, something is always left behind. Each time we find ourselves in a representational impasse, Dmytro's poster re-emerges as an inside joke: reacting to one person's paralysis, someone else reposts the poster with a variation of: "interested in this question? Apply to our conference." The poster thus employs the same ironic and absurdist logic as Victoria's comment, using play to open up new imaginative spaces.

Knowing the harm that representations can cause, it is often easier to retreat than to seek alternative, constructive ways of engaging the other. This kind of creative paralysis informs the project by Roman Himey and Yarema Malashchuk, "So They Won't Say We Don't Remember,"⁶⁰ where the work explores the challenges of representation, with the end result that the authors are only able to engage the local population in the form of a silent homage to the traditions of the past. In the project, realized within the Landscape as a Monument art residency, Himey and Malashchuk, together with the locals, walk along the surface of an old abandoned mine in Myrnohrad. As Dmytro explains in his seminar, the idea came to them when they realized they could not represent the small mining town because they were not natives of Donbas. The project was therefore structured around an exploration of surfaces, a

⁵⁸ Darya Tsymbalyuk, Field Note 7. Darya Tsymbalyuk, 27 December 2020, 1.

⁵⁹ The name Donbas implies inclusion of parts of Luhansk oblast, as well as parts of Donetsk oblast.

⁶⁰ Yarema Malashchuk and Roman Himey, *So They Won't Say We Don't Remember*, 2020, <https://www.landscapeair.com/>.

unidimensional experience, which the locals were invited to share but which ultimately did not depend on engagement with those living in town. *So They Won't Say We Don't Remember* is presented as a deliberate nonrepresentation of place, where the community is built around ritual rather than some articulated ideas of past or present identities. Recognizing a similar paralyzing attitude in the deconstructivist critique of Donbas signifiers, Victoria opens it up with a slightly absurdist question whether Donbas actually exists. Here, the playful nature of speculation allows one to step away from the important and yet unsolvable questions of representation in favor of other ways of storytelling.

If representation is doomed to failure, identification would seem to offer more opportunities. A powerful form of collective self-identification in the works we discuss (and the ways that we discuss them) is humor: parody, pastiche, and satire, hoaxes, mockumentaries, and “stio”-style modes all abound in the art produced in and around Donbas. This kind of humor, which plays on the boundary between legitimacy and fakery, belief and incredulity, functions to create a sense of belonging or even community among those who “get” the joke and are able to derive pleasure from it. In his seminar, Victor discusses a project entitled “Rzhavchino” (Rusty) that he developed with his “zhuzhalka” collaborators and that deployed just such a self-consciously parodic mode.⁶¹ “Rzhavchino” here stands for an imaginary postindustrial locality based on the town of Yenakiyev in Donetsk oblast, best known to Ukrainians as the hometown of former President Viktor Yanukovich. “Zhuzhalka” travelled to and wandered the streets of Yenakiyev, photographing evocative postindustrial scenes with an old Soviet-era camera. The aesthetic imperfections of the photographs, a result of the problems they encountered developing the film, were then packaged in the style of a Soviet postcard collection, including both font-specific annotations and envelope-style cover. Following an exhibition in the Donetsk gallery DaSein, “zhuzhalka” was invited to display the work in “IZOLYATSIA” (Donetsk) in 2014, where they developed the speculative fiction further furnishing the (now enlarged) images with detailed textual commentaries. In his seminar, Victor explains how the character of “the professor” (a thinly veiled parody of Yanukovich) emerged at the center of this fiction, his “theory of chaos” driving the country into collapse and postindustrial decrepitude, a state referenced in the photography:

VICTOR: At the core of it all was the history of the town of Rzhavchino and the professor ... what was his name again? I can't remember now, I can't bring it to mind... He was very passionate about thermodynamics and ideas like bifurcation points, and that was really what gave us the idea for the name ... and the theory of chaos ... and, basically, he had this idea ... to bring the theories and rules of physics into the social sphere... And basically, to drive society to chaos and on that basis

⁶¹ “Zhuzhalka,” *Rzhavchino*, 2012–13, <http://cargocollective.com/corwic/Zhuzhalka-009-Rzhavchino>.

to make a great leap forward. We designed that project in 2013, people were only just starting to think about Maidan ... and of course by this professor we mean our beloved "proffessor" by the name of Yanukovych... That's how it came about really... Yenakiyev is his hometown ... there were all these little jokes and references.

DARYA: Was it a text?

VICTOR: Yes, yes, there were several panels with text explaining what a bifurcation point was, there was a page from his dissertation, the academic work of this professor, where all this stuff was described as well. So to understand the full story, you had to take quite a deep dive into the text.⁶²

The inclusive humor of "Rzhavchino" works on several levels. Post-Soviet viewers might recognize the parody through formal aspects in the first instance: the art project appropriates the Soviet institution of the tourist postcard collection—a cultural form traditionally used to exhibit the socialist state's highest cultural achievements—using it to present images of postindustrial decrepitude and postsocialist pathos, panoramas made up of chimney stacks and gas holders, fading wall murals of Marx and Lenin. Taking a "deep dive" into the accompanying texts, however, viewers are treated to the pleasure of a more intricate parody: Ukrainians would immediately recognize the socially destructive "professor" as a comic rendering of incumbent president Yanukovych, whose dubious doctorate and famous misspelling of his rank as "Professor" caused a wave of cynical feeling in the country.⁶³ Rather than demonize Donbas as a hotbed of oligarchic corruption, however, "Rzhavchino" invites the viewer in, to identify with the asset-stripped local community, and to resist, through participation in a multilayer, multimedia in-joke, the dominant forces undermining Ukrainian society. Rzhavchino, then, is an imaginary landscape that strengthens the borders of the proto-Maidan community, a place that empowers and emancipates as it parodies.

⁶² Victor Zasyupkin, Seminar 3. Victor Zasyupkin, 5 November 2020, 00:48:58–00:51:06.

⁶³ "Tomu shcho 'Proffesor,'" 21 September 2004, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2004/09/21/3002574/>.



8.
Фасад промышленного здания.
ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО «ЖУЖАЛКА»
ДОНЕЦК

Пересылка посылки
в открытом виде
не требуется!

Figure 3. “Zhuzhalka.” Postcards from Rzhavchino.

During our discussion of parodies and parafictions, Dmytro posts a link to another locally famous hoax about his hometown of Luhansk. Authored by artist Andrii Dostliev under his *LiveJournal* pseudonym *el_gerund*, the wiki-style essay constructs an elaborate pseudohistorical narrative proving that Luhansk never existed. “I see that many still do not believe me when I say that Luhansk does not exist, and probably think that this is some ridiculous postmodern joke,”⁶⁴ the post begins in impressive poker-faced style. The author then continues to sketch a remarkably plausible fiction: Luhansk was a statistical invention authored by a desperate Stalinist bureaucrat in response

⁶⁴ Andrii Dostliev (*el_gerund*), “Pravda o Luganske,” 8 January 2011, <https://el-gerund.livejournal.com/272617.html>.

to the bloody dictator's unreasonable demands that he increase the country's industrial production. The location of the fictional city was selected with two requirements in mind: that it was near the Donetsk Coal Basin, but also far away enough from human settlements that no one would discover the ruse. The fiction, Dostliev explains, was preserved across the 20th century, thanks to obliging historians who, at the Soviet state's request, created fake entries for the town in the history books, lazy German officers, who concealed the town's fake status during occupation in order to have an easy life, and incurious Ukrainian citizens, who never bothered to check whether the city really existed. Evoking iconic cases of Soviet fakery, such as the Chernobyl cover-up, and famous myths of overproduction, like the superhuman feats of Donbas miner Oleksiy Stakhanov, the hoax writes itself into a culture of post-Soviet hyper cynicism. The community binding humor, however, which is here provided for the benefit of Donbas locals at the expense of the rest of the country, is founded on the idea of the region's territorial and cultural peripherality. The fact that so few Ukrainians ever visited Donbas, a region that was perceived to have few attractive or redeeming features, made the hoax even easier to fall for: as Victor remarks, even his well-informed Kyivan in-laws were taken in, leading to an awkward over-dinner conversation one evening.⁶⁵

We discuss another project of this kind which functions at the border of knowledge, perception, and wishful thinking. The short film *Svetlograd* by Alina Iakubenko⁶⁶ tells the story of a fictional agglomeration of three real industrial towns in Donbas: Sievierodonetsk, Lysychansk, and Rubizhne. In good mockumentary style, the film begins with an establishing shot of an industrial landscape (Sievierodonetsk) accompanied by an authoritative voice-over which informs us that we are about to hear the remarkable success story of postindustrial Svetlograd. Over the course of several face-to-camera interviews, intercut with documentary footage of local art-making, we learn that, with the closure of local factories, residents began to deploy their technical expertise in other more creative capacities. Borrowing equipment from their defunct industrial workplaces, locals started to work with metal sculpture, concrete moulding, and creative welding to turn the town into a veritable artist colony. The short concludes with footage of an Art Fair-style event and crowds milling around an impressive local complex of contemporary art, constructed on the basis of the former factory. Iakubenko details Svetlograd's ever-growing international prominence in the outro voiceover: "Art tourism stimulated the inflow of capital and the development of the art market. However, locals are scared of big crowds of illegal immigrants and cultural professionals from the art. Hopefully Svetlograd will keep its art autonomy within the Ukrainian context."⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Victor Zasytkin, Seminar 5. Darya Tsymbalyuk, 10 December 2020, 1:11:20–1:20:22.

⁶⁶ Alina Iakubenko, *Svetlograd*, 2017, <https://youtu.be/mMWtw2dw4Fo>.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 14:07–14:20.

Discussing this film, Victoria remarks that when she first watched it, back in 2018, she was deceived by the mockumentary style. She also notes that some students in her film studies course were similarly duped, believing in the utopian story of the region's postindustrial recovery and subsequent empowerment through art. The success of the deception is here once more predicated on the viewer's knowledge (or ignorance) of the local context. In the absence of a detailed understanding of the multitude of challenges of postindustrial transformation in a region that is also affected by the proximity of war, a viewer might be fooled by this aspirational fiction. As Darya points out, (de-)colonial dynamics are also at play in this process: limited knowledge of "peripheries" (whether these are Yakubenko's Svetlograd or Baron Cohen's Kazakhstan, for example) allow artists to play with mainstream audience perceptions and the limits of their credulity. While coordinating Donbas Studies Summer School in Sievierodonetsk, we met Mykola Lomako a heritage practitioner at Lysychansk local history museum and the main city architect who delivers a straight-faced interview in the mockumentary. Clearly, Lomako, a well-known heritage professional in the region, was chosen intentionally to deliver the authoritative narrative of cultural transformation. Watching again in 2020, we are both surprised to encounter this familiar face in this parallel, speculative universe: our personal connections with these places and people—a result of our collaborative projects and the conversations we have had as part of this research—would now make it impossible to believe in the utopian reality of Svetlograd. We are now, it would seem, firmly in on the joke.

Conclusion

Collaboration does not mean harmonious agreement. In fact, quite the opposite, the process of working on this article was often emotionally fraught. In our discussions, we brought different perspectives and positionalities to bear on our topic. This at times led to open disagreements, intense reactions caused by the criticisms expressed during presentations, and occasionally confusion about our collaborators' silence with regards to certain values that informed our understanding of their projects, such as feminism and decoloniality.⁶⁸ Most fundamentally, our dissatisfaction with established (visual) narratives of

⁶⁸ It is worth noting that the group was consistently more engaged in debating the relevance of decolonial frames to the work discussed, as opposed to the relevance of feminist frames. This can perhaps be explained by the growing prominence of discussions of decoloniality in Ukraine, which are often linked to questions of decommunization and, most obviously, the social consequences of the decommunization law of 2015. However, the quiet consensus around questions of feminist practice was perhaps also due to the fact that three of our four collaborators were men, and that consequently they did not feel comfortable debating these topics with two women, who in addition were situated in a Western academic context.

Donbas as a place of postapocalyptic dereliction, perennial violence, and despair encountered different attitudes towards this heritage, particularly among those in the group who were resident in Donbas. Conscious of the tendency of outsiders to marginalize Donbas through objectification, we often tried to problematize these representations, to read instead for evidence of constructive, creative developments in the region. Our partners were sometimes less critical of these narrative forms, willing to engage them for their own creative purposes or to humorously subvert them. This discrepancy raises a (perhaps dead-end) question that continues to preoccupy those of us in the humanities interested in ethical research conduct and decolonization of knowledge: who has the right to speak on behalf of the local experience? The problem is often reduced to a binary between those who know the local reality through their lives and bodies and those who know at a remove or a critical distance through, for example, displacement, deterritorialization, academic training. While this project demonstrates that perspective and positionality rarely break down into such neat categories, we still found ourselves occasionally grappling with this issue, struggling with the challenge of representing the dissensus inherent to our research practice, not overwriting this or subsuming it within a neat academic argument.

Where, then, does looking through collaborative frames get us? How, if at all, does it allow us to access different kinds of knowledge, in this case about Donbas and its cultural imaginings? As noted above, our understanding of ethical research goes further than the idea of “giving voice” to “marginalized” communities, an idea that has begun to come under scrutiny from those conducting decolonial research. We are interested, rather, in how collaborative methods make for reciprocal exchange: not only how we are able to “capture” a perspective that does not usually make it into the academic spotlight, but also how our own approaches and processes are impacted by conducting research in this fashion, how we can share our knowledges in practice, performing decoloniality and feminist ethics of collaboration and care in the way we construct projects and make texts. Writing “for” rather than “about” our collaborators we found ourselves working to a different set of expectations and with a separate set of ambitions. Rather than be driven exclusively by our own agenda—in this instance, to critique the established cultural scaffolding that has supported the idea of Donbas as a place of perennial lack (from the colonial vision of the “empty” Donbas steppe to contemporary ideas of the region as a cultural wasteland), we were impacted by the views and opinions of our partners, many of which collided and jarred with our own. In our discussions we were repeatedly brought back to spaces of dereliction (*zabroshka*, *Rzhavchino*), abandonment (*nechego delat’*, *nedoinstitutionalnost’*), where positive growth and constructive creativity could only ever be a chimera (*Svetlograd*). How, then, can we represent the pull and push of this research in a set of neatly packaged conclusions? How, if at all, does this process of negotiation further our understanding of Donbas?

In a project informed by such ambitious research ideals, perhaps the best we can hope for is to fail better each time. What we have settled for here, then, is a set of ideas produced through conversation and exchange but still informed by our own values and, accordingly, read in pro-social ways that foreground instances of community building, political resistance, and the emergence of new forms of solidarity. We read our collaborators' engagements with the decrepit landscapes of *zabroshki* as evidence of new kinds of embodied preservationist practice, which engender new knowledge networks away from what are perceived to be stagnant Soviet-era cultural institutions; we, likewise, chose to read our partners' accounts of institutional decrepitude for evidence of new cultural growth, *nechego delat'* practice that emerges in the cracks and gaps in the old cultural infrastructure; the constant play with notions of peripherality, cultural deprivation, and marginality that have been assigned to the region we also understand as a means to tell new stories, sometimes just for local audiences, that might replace the old stories told about Donbas. Collaborative framing means relinquishing control: letting go of institutionalized forms of knowledge production (in our case, seminar questions, twenty-minute papers, neatly authored field notes) and allowing other kinds of discourse to take root (discussions of peat fires, unstructured chat about local festivals, exchanges of Telegram stickers, self-deprecating jokes, and YouTube links). The cultural phenomena that we chose to crystallize in this article emerged from these fragmented conversations, almost against our own expectations. In the end, these phenomena actively resist the tradition of totalizing Donbas and its culture, representing a critique of absolute categorizations, as manifested in the genre of "Donbas horror" and its associated visual modes.

Epilogue

Since academic English might not be the most accessible mode of presentation for our collaborators, we recorded a 90-minute video message for them in Russian in which we recapped this article paragraph by paragraph. Slightly anxious about their reactions, we were surprised to receive overwhelmingly positive feedback. The responses we got were friendly and laconic, an unusual experience for academics used to processing fastidiously detailed peer reviews. In place of long paragraphs and suggestions for further reading, our collaborators indicated their general agreement with our arguments, noting only small misinterpretations that they thought were important to address:

OLEKSANDR: [in response to the question "did anything in the article surprise you?"] The *delat' nechego* bit did, I suppose. I never would have thought that something could be written about that.

VICTOR: Just finished watching the video and had a look at the text. All very cool!

DMYTRO: I really liked the article, huge thanks to you for taking on such a massive job.

KATERYNA: [...] I would like to doff my Saturday cap to those fine ladies, the co-authors of this all too tremendous publication) hope everyone has a great weekend and my deepest respects.

The project, however, does not conclude with this article. We are currently working with our collaborators on a multilingual, multimedia publication that will feature artist interviews and artworks for culturally engaged Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking audiences. Our collaborations continue to grow and gain momentum, at times in ways that are dizzyingly beyond our control, but always with an attentiveness to ethics that affirms our belief that research can be a manifestation of solidarity and care.

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