



ARCHITEKTURA I MEDYCYNĄ

pod redakcją
Darii Bręczewskiej-Kuleszy



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ART THERAPY THROUGH ART

ARTETERAPIA PRZEZ SZTUKĘ

Abstract

Since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the authors have been exploring the problem of art therapy using photographic art and watercolor painting. They have studied how PTSD manifests itself in drawings and artistic photography. The evidence base consisted of questionnaires, tests, and exhibitions of artwork by both civilians and military personnel. The goal was to conduct an experimental study with groups of military and civilian personnel to investigate the effects of art on their well-being.

Keywords: Art, Art Therapy, Ukraine

Streszczenie

Od początku wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej autorzy zgłębiają problem arteterapii, wykorzystując fotografię artystyczną i malarstwo akwarelowe. Badają, jak PTSD przejawia się w rysunkach i fotografii artystycznej. Bazą dowodową były kwestionariusze, testy i wystawy prac artystycznych cywilów i personelu wojskowego. Celem było przeprowadzenie eksperymentalnego badania z udziałem grup wojskowych i cywilnych, dotyczącego wpływu sztuki na ich stan.

Słowa kluczowe: Arteterapia, sztuka, Ukraina

1. INTRODUCTION

The impact of war affects not only physical trauma related to wounds, loss of limbs, etc., but also negatively affects mental abilities, mental and nervous state.

With the outbreak of the war, the authors began an experimental project aimed at using various types of art to treat mental and nervous disorders in civilians and military personnel. Such measures are already actively used in rehabilitation centres and cultural institutions. Here are just a few examples.

For example, the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra National Reserve has special cultural and artistic programs for military personnel undergoing rehabilitation. They can participate in archaeological excavations, try their hand at icon painting, and visit museums within the reserve's territory²⁸³.

An art therapy session for the wives of fallen military personnel, organized in Vinnytsia, was held as part of the volunteer project "I Am Alive and I Paint with My Heart". Widows draw their husbands, angels, and the Mother of God. Each woman expresses her grief in her own way; it is often difficult for a person to share her experiences with others, and then reminiscing through drawing becomes a form of relief. Drawing something of her own that personifies her husband, and then telling the group what she wanted to depict, the woman verbalizes her experiences. Notably, all participants in the project are amateurs without a professional art education, so an experienced artist assists them in selecting paints and composing the picture. However, when attending an art therapy session, women most often already have an idea for the picture. The completed pictures are then exhibited in various cities across Ukraine²⁸⁴.

The authors of the article initiated an experimental project at the onset of the war, aiming to utilize art as a therapeutic tool for treating psychological trauma caused by the war. They studied the Polish

²⁸³ Програма «Духовне відновлення у Києво-Печерській лаврі» допомагає знайти моральну та духовну підтримку українським військовим, <https://mcsc.gov.ua/news/programa-duhovne-vidnovlennya-u-kyvevo-pecherskij-lavri-dopomagaye-znajty-moralnu-ta-duhovnu-pidtrymku-ukrayinskym-vijskovym/> (accessed: 12.08.2025).

²⁸⁴ О. Камінська, Малювали спогади про чоловіків: у Вінниці для дружин загиблих військових організували арттерапію, Суспільне-Вінниця, 4 червня 2025, <https://suspilne.media/vinnytsia/1034651-maluvali-spogadi-pro-colovikiv-u-vinnici-dla-druzin-zagiblih-vijskovih-organizuvali-artterapiu/> (accessed: 12.08.2025).

experience of using art therapy to treat people with nervous and mental disorders – such activities were carried out in the Auschwitz castle and the Museum of Modern Art in Lodz.

The project aimed to explore the traumatic manifestations reflected in wartime photography and works of art and to argue for the therapeutic role of photography and watercolour painting (which was chosen as an example). All the authors of the project have been in Ukraine since the war began. Serhii Belinskyi is an active military serviceman, so in addition to the experience of others, they explored their own traumatic experiences and ways to improve their condition through artistic creativity.

The objectives of the study were as follows:

- to survey focus groups of civilians staying in Ukraine, refugees, and military personnel to determine the need of different groups for art in general and specific arts in particular;
- to determine through a survey whether different groups are aware of the presence of traumatic experiences and how they plan to return to normal life (12 answer options were provided);
- to offer the groups to draw a picture in colour at will and analyse the results;
- to analyse their own experience of reacting to a stressful, traumatic situation, expressed through artistic photography and watercolour drawing.

Scientific sources were processed in the following areas:

- publications dedicated to the war in Ukraine²⁸⁵;
- works that highlight the specifics of artistic creativity in times of war²⁸⁶;
- publications dedicated to the medical aspects of art therapy²⁸⁷.

²⁸⁵ S. Belinskyi, Y. Ivashko, A. Pawłowska, A. Dmytrenko, *Using Poland Experience in Revitalization for the Reconstruction of Ukrainian Cities Destroyed by the War*, [in:] *Defining the architectural space. Architecture and the city*, T. Kozłowski (ed.), vol.1, Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, Wrocław 2023, p. 41–54; S. Belinskyi, A. Dmytrenko, Y. Ivashko, A. Pawłowska, *The Face of the War in Ukraine. War Devastation and Reconstruction Concepts*, [in:] *Oblicza wojny: Narzędzia wojny*, T. Grabarczyk, J. Kita, M. Pogońska-Pol, M.M. Volośuk, t. 8, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2023, p. 15–35; Y. Ivashko, A. Dmytrenko, S. Belinskyi, M. Pabich, D. Kuśnierz-Krupa, J. Kobylarczyk, L. Bednarz, H. Kuzmina, N. Kovtiukh, *The Influence of Colonial Policy on the Destruction of National Cultural Identity and Ways of Overcoming its Consequences*, „International Journal of Conservation Science” 2024, vol. 15, p. 31–42; Y. Ivashko, A. Dmytrenko, O. Molodid, O. Ivashko, V. Molochko, S. Belinskyi, P. Bigaj, *The Destruction of the Established Urban Environment of Borodianka and Irpen as a Result of the Russian-Ukrainian War*, „International Journal of Conservation Science” 2024, vol.15, issue 2, p. 785–800; T. Kozłowski, Y. Ivashko, S. Belinskyi, A. Dmytrenko, O. Ivashko, *Teoretyczne i prawne zasady odbudowy zabytków architektonicznych w Ukrainie, które ucierpały w trakcie agresji rosyjskiej*, „Teka Komisji Urbanistyki i Architektury Oddziału Polskiej Akademii Nauk w Krakowie” 2022, Volume L, s. 391–408; A. Nadolny, Y. Ivashko, K. Słuchocka, I.G. Sandu, P. Bigaj, *In-fill Development Architecture, As Element of Post Second War Reconstruction of City of Poznan. Case Study of Joseph Stübben’s Extension Plan of the City from Years 1902–1918*, „International Journal of Conservation Science” 2023, vol. 14, issue 1, p. 57–74; A. Pawłowska, Y. Ivashko, S. Belinskyi, A. Dmytrenko, *The War in Ukraine: Between the Past and the Future. Historical and Existential Aspect*, „Історико-політичні проблеми сучасного світу” 2023, т. 47, p. 334–346.

²⁸⁶ S. Belinskyi, Y. Ivashko, I.L. Kravchenko, A. Dmytrenko, I. Dreval, *Analysis of fine-art photography techniques in representing the tragedy of war in Ukraine using Serhii Belinskyi’s works*, „Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts” 2023, vol. XXV, p. 345–365; J. Iwaszko, A. Pawłowska, O. Iwaszko, *W dobrej i złej doli. Przekształcenia stylistyczne fotografii Sergija Bilińskiego*, LTN, Łódź, 2023; Y. Ivashko, A. Pawłowska, D. Kuśnierz-Krupa, A. Dmytrenko, *Problems of replacing museum exhibitions during the Russian-Ukrainian war*, „Museologica Brunensia”, 2024, vol. 13, no 2, p. 38–45; J. Iwaszko, A. Pawłowska, *Kalejdoskop: Julia Iwaszko i jej akwarele*. LTN, Łódź, 2024; O. Molodid, O. Kovalchuk, Y. Ivashko, D. Kuśnierz-Krupa, P. Tisliar, A. Dmytrenko, L. Bednarz, *Research For Banksy Mural ‘Judoki’ in Borodyanka*, „International Journal of Conservation Science” 2023, vol.14, issue 4, p.1381–1390; Y. Ivashko, A. Pawłowska, *Transformations of Exhibitions in War-Affected Ukraine: 2024 Perspectives on Art-Driven Inclusion and Socialization*, „Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo” 2025, vol.13, no 2, p. 43–63; Y. Ivashko, A. Pawłowska, S. Belinskyi, A. Dmytrenko, *Conveying the Tragedy of War Through Unconventional Photography Methods*, „Faces of war” 2024, no 2, p. 121–140; A. Pawłowska, A. Gralińska-Toborek, P. Gryglewski, O. Sleptsov, O. Ivashko, O. Molodid, M. Początko, *Problems of Expositions and Protection of Banksy’s Murals in Ukraine*, „International Journal of Conservation Science” 2023, vol. 14, issue 1, p. 99–114; A. Pawłowska, J. Iwaszko, A. Dmytrenko, *Sergij Belinskij. Fotografia*, LTN – Uniwersytet Łódzki, Łódź, 2025; M. Żychowska, I. Sandu, Y. Ivashko, A. Dmytrenko, O. Ivashko, O. Morklyanyk, *Style as a Reflection of Ideology of the Authorities*, „Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts” 2022, vol. XXIV, p. 273–297.

²⁸⁷ C.A. Malchiodi (ed), *Medical Art Therapy with Children*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia 1999; D. Edwards, *Art Therapy*, 2nd edition, Sage, Los Angeles 2014; D.E. Gussak, M.L. Rosal, *The Wiley Handbook of Art Therapy*, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken 2016.

2. PROBLEMS OF THE MENTAL STATE OF MILITARY AND CIVILIAN PERSONS IN TIME OF WAR

We will not touch on the problems of physical injuries resulting from war, but we will focus on mental issues. Concussions, explosive injuries, and constant stress have a direct impact on the mental and nervous system. The peculiarity of concussions is that they may not manifest their consequences immediately. The main consequences of such a negative impact of a combination of factors most often include the following:

- sociophobia, when entering peaceful conditions, the desire to isolate oneself;
- aggression towards civilians living in ordinary conditions;
- indifference to ordinary human joys, former hobbies, any activity in general;
- emotional coldness as a protective reaction of the nervous system, which leads to seclusion, severance of family ties, loneliness, and isolation;
- nervous and mental problems that result in insomnia, nervous breakdowns, bad habits, and suicides;
- inability to do monotonous things, inability to concentrate, need for a quick change of activity, and adrenaline;
- difficulties with memorizing information;
- loss of professional skills;
- anxiety, inability to relax, distrust;
- sharp and uncontrollable reaction to loud sounds.

Today, these disorders are treated in various ways, and along with medication, non-traditional methods are also used – in addition to art therapy, this includes naturotherapy (hiking, river rafting, fishing), various types of zootherapy – hippotherapy (horseback riding), canisterapy (treatment with the help of dogs), etc.

Programs aimed at the socialization of military personnel are already being actively developed, the "Veteran's Assistant" program has been implemented, where the functions of the accompanying specialist include providing primary psychological assistance and assistance in socialization, choosing education, a place of work, etc.

One of the directions of socialization of military personnel today is the offer of their retraining on the basis of technical schools and universities. However, it is most difficult for veterans to enter creative specialties with creative competitions. That is why appropriate courses or preparatory departments can help with this.

The experience accumulated over the years of the Russian-Ukrainian war indicates that rehabilitation should not be limited only to the physical recovery of a person, therefore one of the most popular specialties now is psychology.

3. CONTENT AND DIRECTION OF ART THERAPY

Art therapy is used in various areas. It is used in medical fields, for the treatment of people with mental and neurological disorders, addictions, in geriatrics, as well as in rehabilitation in a broad sense, including family therapy, working with refugees, etc. Art therapy becomes a means of socialization and communication, because through drawing, the patient can express his experience of a traumatic experience or problem, which allows a psychologist to assess his condition and choose a treatment method.

The therapy session is aimed at the creative interaction between the patient and the art therapist in the process of creating a creative product.

Art therapy is a general concept of all artistic directions that are used for therapeutic purposes. These can be visual arts, music, theatre, dance, and rhythmic genres. Lesser-known directions include sand therapy, film therapy, and bibliotherapy.

Art therapy differs from traditional art in that it is aimed not at creating an aesthetic product, but at treating a specific person or group of people. The art therapist must be a psychologist, but should not be a professional artist, just like the patients. A painting or sculpture created during an art therapy session serves as a dialogue with the art therapist in the event that the patient needs to express his feelings in words. An art therapist is a person with a psychology education who can identify a problem through

images and colours. Thus, a work of art becomes an intermediate link between the patient and the art therapist.

When a patient "draws" his experiences, dreams, and feelings, he verbalizes them through artistic means, relieving psychological tension. Stress, tension, and neurotic state can be coordinated by setting the theme of the drawing.

In art therapy, two types of drawings are distinguished: spontaneous and impromptu drawings. In the case of spontaneous drawings, the patient chooses the subject or image; in the case of impromptu drawings, the art therapist asks the patient to draw something without preparation on a free or specific topic. Such sessions can be both individual and in groups; sometimes several participants can work on one project. The task of the art therapist is to identify the problem through the content, ways of expressing the drawings, polychromy, and repetition of plots in one author.

One of the markers of art therapy is the colours that the patient uses the most. Significantly, the interpretation of the meaning of colours in art therapy differs from the classification adopted in design. Most often, red symbolizes both the power of life and blood, war, orange is associated with the sun, happiness, yellow symbolizes both the sun and deception, morbidity, green is the sacred colour of Islam, the colour of plants, but at the same time immaturity and illness, blue is the colour of wisdom and loyalty, but also the colour of sadness and depression, purple symbolizes a combination of opposites, black is the personification of reliability and strength, but also mourning and dirt, white is both purity, the beginning of a new, and ashes and weakness.

4. QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY AND DRAWING AS AN INITIAL STAGE OF RESEARCH ON THE IMPACT OF ART THERAPY

As mentioned above, since the project was launched as an experimental one, its initial stage was focused on focus group work. Thus, research was conducted among the military, among students of the Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture, among refugees from Ukraine currently residing in Lodz, and research on drawings was also conducted among students of foreign universities.

The initial stage involved answering the following questions in the questionnaire:

1. Is there a place for art in war?
2. Is artistic photography in war a means of art therapy?
3. Is there a need for painting, music, and poetry among civilians in cities during wartime?
4. Is there a need to visit museums or exhibitions during wartime?
5. Do you think that drawing, music, sculpture, and dancing can improve your mental state during war-time?
6. How do you plan to deal with the war trauma you have experienced and return to normal life?

The following answer options were offered for the last question:

- I don't think I need anything special, it will pass on its own, I can cope on my own
- I need medical help and treatment from specialists
- Talking and communicating with family and friends
- I need to do my favourite things
- Alcohol, smoking
- Adrenaline – fast driving, extreme sports
- Playing sports
- Working in the garden, planting flowers, playing with pets
- Doing repairs or cleaning
- Going to cafes or restaurants
- Going on vacation
- Other.

The respondents were given half an hour to mark the correct option. The generalization of the data yielded the following conclusions: both civilians and military personnel need art in times of war, civilians openly write about the need for medical care, military personnel believe that they can cope on their own. Those who had artistic preferences or a relevant profession before the war actively used them as their own art therapy.

The next stage involved determining the internal state of people based on their drawings. The problem was that many soldiers refused to draw. Those who agreed drew mostly in pencil, graphically, using hatching, images of a mighty tree trunk cut in half, a house with tightly closed windows, a person without arms, the lines were broken. According to the classification of images in graphic tests (in particular, the test "house-tree-person", "my family"), such problems as dysfunction of the nervous system, acute reaction to stress, social phobia, emotional and nervous exhaustion, impaired serotonin production, and the inability to feel joy were manifested.

An experiment was also conducted to see whether directly experiencing a stressful situation personally has such an effect, or whether stress is transmitted even after viewing videos and photos of war by people living in other countries. During lectures on the topic of war at foreign universities, students were shown photos of the destruction of architectural objects (but without naturalistic reportage photos) and were asked to create a colour collage on an A4 sheet of paper or draw a picture in any technique that reflects their emotions after the lecture.

Even though these were people who had not experienced traumatic experiences themselves, and it was a temporary visual contact, the impact of negative information was recorded, which manifested itself in drawings, where danger and the desire for peace were expressed in a figurative form.

Thus, it has been experimentally proven that during times of war, many groups of the population in an acutely stressful situation need art. Over time, when the stressful situation lasts a long time and a person gets used to it, this need becomes less. Drawing, carried out in different groups, has shown the presence of psychological problems in those who have experienced war. Moreover, it has been proven that even visual information related to war has a temporary effect on people who have not been in war conditions.

5. RESEARCHING OUR OWN EXPERIENCE OF ART THERAPY IN TIMES OF WAR

The problem was that some people at a certain stage did not want to make contact and analyse their traumatic experience in detail. This often applies to military personnel. That is why the authors of the article examined in detail their own experience of using art to overcome stress.

Since Yulia Ivashko paints professionally, watercolour painting became such an "outlet" for her, although before the war, she painted in graphics. As noted by the famous art historians of the Institute of Art History of the University of Lodz, Professors Aneta Pawłowska and Piotr Gryglewski, this is how the need for color was expressed, watercolour in this case, becomes an "escape to an ideal world", thus turning into a psychological tool for correcting a person's mental state. Professors Aneta Pawłowska and Piotr Gryglewski noticed another difference: a departure from realism towards convention, an "ideal world". The main themes are not realistic landscapes, architectural objects, portraits, but images of flowers (Fig. 1). Although portraits of people remain, flowers or autumn leaves are depicted in large detail in the foreground, and people are in the background, behind the flowers, often in a romantic or historical image (Fig. 2). Thus, through the composition and plot of the picture, a compensatory reaction to acute stress will manifest.

Yulia Ivashko has been in Ukraine since the beginning of the war, so she could objectively assess her condition in different years of the war, her reaction to stress, and the place of painting in this process. At the beginning, the first year and a half of the war, these were not paintings, but artistic stories – a diary of war experiences. After a year and a half, this became a constant painting of flowers in watercolours, and most actively, after especially heavy shelling. In the fourth year of the war, such an acute need for daily painting for many hours gradually faded away, and the nervous system somewhat adapted to the prolonged stressful situation.



Fig. 1. Dream of a green chrysanthemum about yellow leaves
Source: Y. Ivashko, 2024.



Fig. 2. Theatre. Portrait of the director Józefa Zajęc-Jamróz (Ziuta Zajęcówna)
Source: Y. Ivashko, 2025.

Serhii Belinskyi was a famous art photographer and musician before the war, and during the war, he was the head of the press service of the combat brigade of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. For him, in the first years of the war, art photography became a means of getting used to stress. During 2022 – 2023, hundreds of photos and videos were taken.

If Yulia Ivashko chose flowers as such a compensatory plot, then Serhii Belinskyi showed the war through, figuratively speaking, “a world without people”. The plots of his photographs “for myself” are abandoned cows, cats, dogs, a child’s slipper on the scene of a destroyed school, ruins, the sky and flowering trees, as well as military equipment (Fig. 3). In contrast, his photographs on the brigade’s page depict fighters, battle scenes, etc. Thus, it is through photographs “for myself” that one feels one’s inner world, experiences, and emotions.

As Serhii said, during the first six months of the war, the camera became a barrier between him and naturalistic scenes. When he saw mutilated human bodies and ruins, he began to look at the world through the camera lens, thereby reducing his sense of reality.

At the end of the second year of the war, he was given a puppy, and this greatly influenced the subject matter of his photographs. A whole series of photographs and videos appeared under the title “Lucky” – Lucky in a car, barking at a magpie, climbing trees, walking in the evening, sleeping. A series of fighters with animals – with dogs and cats – also belongs to this period. As Serhii himself said, “animals are the saviours of hardened soldier souls.”

Just as Yulia’s need for daily drawing gradually decreased, Serhii’s need for such a large number of photographs also decreased. In the third or fourth year of the war, the subjects also changed. These were abstract photos of shadows on the stairs, realistic ruins of Kramatorsk, and lights at night (Fig. 4). Compared to the photographs of the first years of the war, they became less emotional, more realistic; the percentage of black and white images and night scenes increased (Fig. 5).



Fig. 3. Flowers and pink sky
Source: S. Belinskyi, 2023.

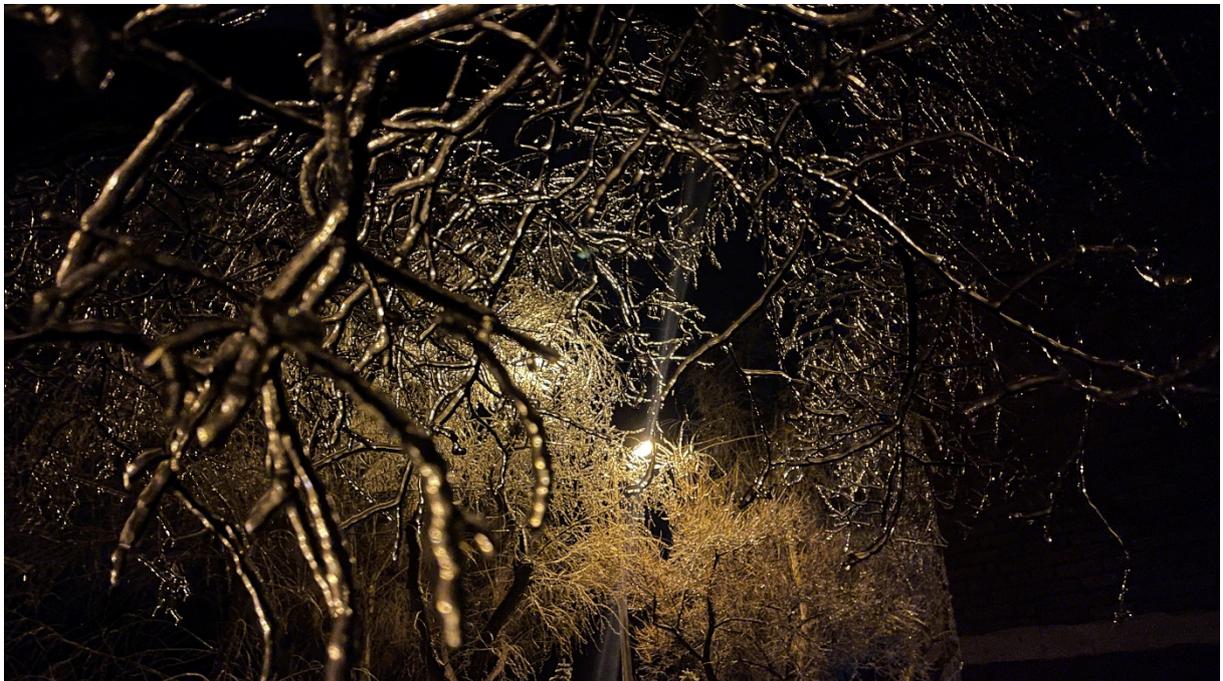


Fig. 4. In pretended captivity
Source: S. Belinskyi, 2023.



Fig. 5. Martians
Source: S. Belinskyi, 2025.

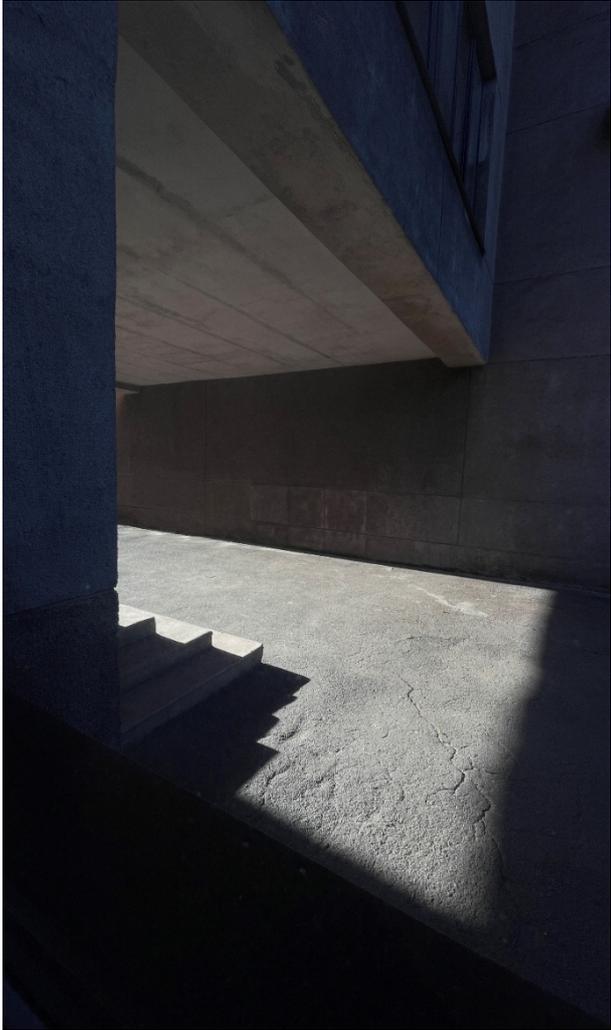


Fig. 6. Shadows
Source: S. Belinskyi, 2024.

6. POPULARIZATION OF MILITARY CREATIVITY AS AN OPTION OF ART THERAPY

A common option for art therapy today is the popularization of veterans' creativity, which becomes an additional incentive for their socialization. A well-known example is the work of the front-line correspondent Orest (Dmytro Kozatskyi), who gained world recognition as the author of photographs from the basements of Azovstal. After being demobilized, Orest is actively involved in public activities, including presenting his photographs at exhibitions and events.

With the outbreak of the war, a scholarship program for scholars from Ukraine was launched at the University of Lodz. The curator from the University of Lodz, Professor Aneta Pawłowska, suggested that Yulia Ivashko conduct a research project dedicated to front-line art photography. This project was selected, and for more than six months, Yulia Ivashko studied the ways of conveying the tragedy of war using the creative work of Serhii Belinskyi as an example. A feature of this collaboration with the military man was that the author commented on his photographs, which made it possible to formulate conclusions about the periods of transformation of the artist at the front, expressed through the means of art photography.

As part of the scholarship, exhibitions of war photography were organized in Poland and other countries, and three short films were made by Yulia Ivashko and Serhii Belinskyi, curated by Aneta Pawłowska. In 2024, a comprehensive study was conducted within the framework of a scholarship from the Visegrad Foundation, which concerned art therapy as a way to overcome PTSD, and a book of watercolours from the Russian-Ukrainian war was published.

7. CONCLUSION

The questionnaire survey revealed the need for all groups of people who have experienced traumatic experiences to engage with art. However, this does not necessarily have to be their own artistic creation; some respondents noted that visiting a theatre, museum, or gallery was an artistic aspect.

An experimental project has shown that the effects of psychological trauma are reflected in drawings. This could help diagnose problems in people and prescribe treatment regimens if they are unwilling or unable to voice them.

It has also been proven that traumatic effects are not only caused by personal experiences, but also by experiences perceived secondarily, through visual information. This is clearly demonstrated by the drawings.

Research and analysis of the authors' own traumatic experiences and the use of art therapy to overcome them allowed us to formulate certain conclusions.

Stressful situations are perceived more emotionally by people who are close to art, while a traumatic situation can give a new impetus and a new direction to their creativity. If drawing is used as art therapy, changes can occur in the technique (graphics are changed to colour), style (realism is changed to conventional and fantastic plots), and the number of paintings drawn (the greater the stress, the greater the need for drawing).

If artistic photography serves as art therapy, the general creative style may be preserved ("a world without people" before the war as well as during wartime), but the context changes (domestic animals in peacetime – abandoned animals in wartime).

So, in these two specific cases, more noticeable changes occurred in drawing compared to artistic photography. What is common is that the need for creativity was acutely manifested during the period of adaptation to a stressful situation and gradually decreased as a result of the nervous system's habituation to stress.

The study of the existing experience of art therapy as a means of rehabilitation in Ukraine allows us to predict its further development and improvement.

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