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***Yulia Ivashko***
*https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4525-9182*
*Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture*
*yulia-ivashko@ukr.net*

***Oleksandr Ivashko***
*https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9194-2153*
*Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture*
*ghok2233@gmail.com*

***Andrii Dmytrenko***
*https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1672-5973*
*National University "Yuri Kondratyuk Poltava Polytechnic"*
*ab.Dmytrenko_AU@nupp.edu.ua*

***Iryna L. Kravchenko***
*https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3972-5215*
*Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture*
*krav4ira73@gmail.com*

***Uliana Shcheviova***
*https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8586-5254*
*Lviv National Academy of Arts*
*uliana.shcheviova@gmail.com*

# TRANSFORMATION OF THE CURATORIAL APPROACH TO THE ART EXHIBITIONS' ORGANIZATION IN TIMES OF WAR

**Abstract:** The article is part of a study devoted to the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on all areas of culture and art in Ukraine. The example of exhibitions of artistic and documentary photography in cities of Ukraine and Europe shows changes in the organisation of such exhibitions. Emphasis is placed on methods of combining photography with other art forms – multimedia,

music, literature, songs, performances, etc. Changes in traditional curatorship in the organisation of museum exhibitions are investigated, and the transformation of museum work in war conditions is outlined. The conclusions are substantiated by the authors through exhibits of documentary and artistic photography. Several levels of combining photography and other types of art are identified.

**Keywords:** transformation, curatorial approach, organisation, art exhibitions, wartime

## Introduction

War affects all spheres of life of a warring society, including art. As the historical experience of wars and the current experience of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war show, even in times of threat, artists continue to create, and art institutions continue to present their work. At the same time, changes occur both in the works of art themselves and in the ways they are presented to the public.

The authors' field studies of the methods of organising modern exhibition expositions have shown the dominance of photographic art in museum and gallery spaces, both dedicated to contemporary events and the past. In particular, such photo exhibitions are held at the Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko Museum of Western and Eastern Art, at the Ukrainian House in Kyiv, at the Art Gallery in Poltava, to name a few. There are several reasons for this. The first is purely technical, i.e., the possibility of reproduction, replication, rapid transmission in digital form, and reaching a wide audience. The second reason is related to the very nature of photographic art, thanks to which one can record reality in the moment and, unlike traditional types of fine art, does not require a certain time distance, construction of artistic reality, or working conditions. Photographic art thus meets the needs of the moment, namely the fixation on reality, and also satisfies the growing interest in history that has arisen since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Thus, both documentary reporter photography and artistic photography are in demand during wartime. Documentary photography is more relevant during wartime, since it reflects reality as such, without embellishment. In contrast, artistic photography becomes more relevant "at a distance," that is, some considerable time after the end of a war. This is also typical for other types of art. For example, in the USSR during World War II and immediately after its end, openly ideological films were shot, often with a rather primitive plot. Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, however, a large number of feature films on the theme of wartime appeared, where the ordinary fates of people who suffer,

fear, love, laugh, and die became the focus. Let us name two such typical examples – "The Dawns Here Are Quiet" (1972) by Stanislav Rostotsky and "Only 'Old Men' Are Going to Battle" (1973) by Leonid Bykov.

Applying this historical experience of the staged nature of the impacts of crisis phenomena on art, we can predict that the popularity of exhibitions of documentary war photography from the times of the Russian-Ukrainian war will gradually be replaced by exhibitions of artistic war photography, which is aimed not at recording a certain event using the most realistic means possible, but at awakening certain predicted emotions and emotional states in the viewer.

Here, we return to the role of museums, galleries, and exhibitions in times of war. On the one hand, in times of threat , the need for art and culture is exacerbated, which becomes a means of escapism. On the other hand, cultural institutions (museums, exhibitions, theatres) want to prove the necessity of their existence even in difficult times. Therefore , in times of war, they somewhat change the list of functions: in peacetime, these are cognitive, educational, cultural, artistic functions, while in times of war, social, ideological-propaganda, cultural, psychological-supportive functions come to the fore.

In times of war, both the role of curators and curatorial approaches to organising exhibitions change. In the case of photographic art, exhibitions often turn into a multimedia performance, where photographs are arranged according to a certain plot, supplemented by a video sequence and texts on the walls corresponding to the plots (according to this principle, an exhibition of photographs by the famous photographer Oleksandr Hliadielov "And I Saw" was organized in the Ukrainian House, which in certain time sections presented the entire history of independent Ukraine, in its heroic and tragic moments, as accurately as possible, with the exhibition supplemented by texts on the walls and a video about the author's work). According to the same principle, an exhibition of art photography by Serhii Belinskyi was organised in the LTN gallery in cooperation with the Institute of Art History of the University of Lodz and the Lodz Scientific Society. Thus, a traditional photo exhibition turned into a combination of photography, cinema, and literature.

In moments of societal crisis , it is useful to see reality as it is. This is provided by documentary photography and cinema, which allow us to say: "we are in the moment." Nonetheless , there are types of art that are perceived at a distance from the event. This creates another danger – the past event's idealisation and thus the creation of an artificial reality. A typical example of this is the monument of a Soviet soldier with a rescued girl in his arms in Treptower Park in Berlin (an ideological message: a Soviet soldier is an enemy of Nazism, but a friend of the German people).

The purpose of the study was to analyse curatorial approaches to organising exhibitions of documentary and artistic photography from the beginning

of the Russian-Ukrainian war and to identify the techniques used to convey the main idea behind the exhibition.

The objectives of the study were as follows:

- to analyse, using examples of exhibitions from 2022–2025, how expositions are arranged;
- to determine the role of the curator in organising exhibitions during the Russian-Ukrainian war;
- to argue for changing the traditional museum function to an exhibition and gallery function;
- to determine methods for combining different types of art when organising an exhibition and analysing the phenomenon of "exhibition as performance."

In accordance with the research objectives, the source database was processed in the following areas:

- sources that cover photography techniques;[1]
- sources that analyse the category of art and the artistic in various manifestations;[2]
- sources dedicated to the problems of the war in Ukraine;[3]

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2 P. Gryglewski, Y. Ivashko, D. Chernyshev, P. Chang, A. Dmytrenko, *Art as a message realized through various means of artistic expression*, "Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts" 2020, vol. XXII, pp. 57-88; P. Gryglewski, D. Chernyshev, O. Kashchenko, A. Shilo, Y. Ivashko, A. Dmytrenko, O. Ivashko, *Between Practice and Theory. Comments on the Specificity of Art History and Art Education in Poland and Ukraine*, "Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts" 2021, vol. XXIII, pp. 168-190; M. Orlenko, Y. Ivashko, *The concept of art and works of art in the theory of art and in the restoration industry*, "Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts" 2019, vol. XXI, pp. 171-190; A. Pawłowska, *What is History of Art in the 20th and 21st century – A few theoretical problems*, "West Bohemian Historical Review" 2019, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 137-151; G. Sztabiński, *Why Do We Need the Term "Art"?*, "Art Inquiry. References sur les arts" 2019, vol. XXI, pp. 19-35; P. Sztabińska, *Zmiany relacji między artystą, dziełem a odbiorcą w sztuce współczesnej*, "Sztuka i filozofia" 2010, no. 36. pp. 81-90; P. Sztabińska, *The Minimalist Allergy to Art*, "Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts" 2010, vol. XII, pp. 91-108; P. Sztabińska, *Contemporary artist and the notion of center and periphery*, "Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts" 2014, vol. XVI, pp. 45-56; 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, pp. 273-297.

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- sources that analyse the change in curatorial approaches to organising exhibitions and expositions during wartime;[4]
- analysis of the photo artists' work during the Russian-Ukrainian war.[5]

**Curating photographic art during the Russian-Ukrainian war**

The tragic events of the Russian-Ukrainian war drew attention to photo exhibitions of war photography, both documentary and artistic. Photo exhibitions have become a common type of exhibition, even in museums that traditionally display their own collections of artefacts – paintings and graphics, sculptures, dishes, objects of ancient life, icons, and works of religious art, etc.

As can be seen from the example of famous museums in Ukraine, the most valuable collections are temporarily evacuated to partner museums abroad, while some are moved to storage. Since the halls need to be filled with something so that museums can continue their work even in times of war, each museum looks for its own solutions – it exhibits works by young artists and even holds flower exhibitions. However, the most universal and safest options in terms of preserving exhibits remain exhibitions of documentary and art photography, which in today's Ukraine are widely presented in exhibition halls and galleries, in museums, shopping malls, cafes, libraries and open urban spaces.

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The Ukrainian House organised a photo exhibition of documentary photography by Oleksandr Hliadielov, "And I Saw". As will be discussed later, in the difficult times that Ukraine is currently experiencing, the question of national identity arises, and the question of faith is inextricably linked to it. That is why photo exhibitions often have symbolic biblical titles. The title of Oleksandr Hliadielov's photo exhibition "And I Saw" is a phrase from the Revelation of St. John the Theologian (Apocalypse), which describes the cataclysms that destroy the old world and mark the arrival of the new world. 323 black-and-white photographs taken by the outstanding documentary photographer are evidence of 36 years of Ukraine's life, the path of its gradual emergence as an independent state (Fig. 1). What added to the unusualness was that the photographer shoots on an analogue Leica M6 camera with manual focus, uses 35 mm black-and-white film, and prints the photographs himself.

The photo exhibition was organised as a combination of several types of art – photography, video series, and eleven thematic essays into thematic blocks (Fig. 2). The project was organised by the National Centre "Ukrainian House", and the exhibition curators were Oleh Sosnov and Tetiana Lysun. The project was implemented in cooperation with the public organisation "Platform of Cultural Initiatives".

The photographs were grouped into separate blocks by chronology and theme. The arrangement of large black-and-white photos on white walls had a special effect. The exposition adhered to the principle of minimalism and black-and-white monochrome aesthetics.



Fig. 1. One of the sections of Oleksandr Hliadielov's photo exhibition. Photo by Y. Ivashko, 2025



Fig. 2. One of the sections of Oleksandr Hliadielov's photo exhibition. Photo by Y. Ivashko, 2025

The exhibition on the first floor featured the photographer's own words: "When I touch the most secret things in people's lives, I, an ordinary photographer, am not surprised by the evil that multiplies among them. But I am struck by the depth of humanity, incapable of destroying itself completely. And I am looking for it." As the photographer himself said in an interview, he considers himself a social photographer and often becomes the voice of those who do not have their own voice. A separate section of his photo exhibition called "Excess" tells about the lives of socially disadvantaged children on the streets, in shelters, reception centres , special schools, and boarding schools. This is how photos appeared with the titles "Homeless Girl in Hydropark. Kyiv, 1997", "A Ten-Year-Old Homeless Boy Inhaling Glue. Kyiv, 1996", "Homeless Children Post Nightclub Posters After Midnight. Odesa, 1997", "On the Threshold of the Family-Type Orphanage, the Martynenko Family. Vova with the Chickens He Was Looking After. Odesa, 2001. Now Vova is fighting in the ranks of the Armed Forces of Ukraine". A whole series of photos...

In a separate room, there are photos depicting the lives of drug addicts. Most of the photos in the exhibition can be called documentary, but some of them are also artistic, such as "Icon in an Abandoned House in Nove Sharne, Narodytskyi district, 1989". The authors have individually highlighted several photos that impressed them the most, and this photo is one of them. A simple vertical frame. Through the open wooden door, one can see a red corner of the

living room and a rough floor made of boards. In the corner, there is a village icon of St. Nicholas, and around it there is an embroidered towel. An icon with a towel in the middle of an empty house... Another such photo is "One of the Positions of the 36th Brigade Near Vodiane, 2019". A burnt bare tree trunk with fragments of branches pierces the sky...

The Poltava Art Museum (Mykola Yaroshenko Art Gallery) has also transformed its traditional direction and focused on temporary exhibitions. The exhibition, with the symbolic title "And There Will Be People on Earth", also includes a section on photographic art. Photographer Yaroslav Solop presented a series of photographs called "Eternal Return". Since the author is also an artist who works with collages, installations, sculptures, and graphics, he combines different techniques, complementing the photos of Crimean landscapes with super graphics.

Photographer Yevhenii Pavlov presented a series of photographs entitled "Violin" in the exhibition. He also experiments with various photographic techniques, such as image overlays, collages, and hand-painting. In the "Violin" series, the photographer sought to convey the rebelliousness of the 1970s' youth, making the main character a naked, fragile young man with a violin, as a protest against the Soviet ideal of a muscular man (Fig. 3).

A separate section presented photographs by Oleh Malovanyi under the title "Retrospective of Creativity". His photographs are also experiments in photographic art with a wide range of techniques – from collage, solarisation, isogelia, and photomontage to hand-painted prints. His photographs resemble avant-garde paintings with a combination of bright spots (Fig. 4).

On the first floor of the museum, an exhibition of documentary reportage photography "Brave to Save Lives" was organised, dedicated to the work of rescuers in the Poltava region. These photographs document the moments of eliminating the consequences of rocket strikes on civilian and residential buildings, extinguishing fires at industrial enterprises, and carrying out pyrotechnic works to neutralise ammunition.

The direction of motivational documentary photography is also presented at temporary exhibitions in large shopping malls and open public spaces. For example, the Gulliver shopping mall in the centre of Kyiv has been hosting such exhibitions since the beginning of the war. One such exhibition is dedicated to the ten teachers laureates of the Global Teacher Prize Ukraine. Given that many parents today take their children to other countries for a better education and a safe, stable future, the idea of such an exhibition is to show the possibilities of obtaining a high-quality school education in Ukraine and to encourage children and their parents to stay.



Fig. 3. Yevhenii Pavlov. *Violin*. Photo by Y. Ivashko, 2025

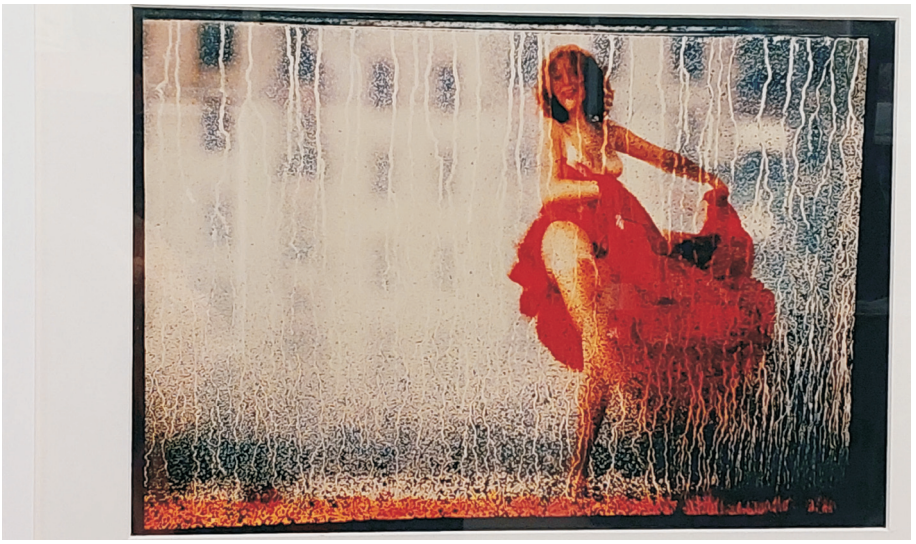


Fig. 4. Oleh Malovanyi. *Joy of Renovation*. Photo by Y. Ivashko, 2025

Another exhibition, “Kyiv residents – heroes of our streets”, in front of the Arsenalna metro station, has an educational purpose. Banners with a combination of graphic portraits, archival photos, and stories about prominent Kyiv residents, after whom streets are named, are installed in the open space (Fig. 5). This exhibition was implemented within the framework of the city competition of projects “Partnership for Community Development” with the support of the Department of Public Communications of the Kyiv City State Administration. Most of the depicted prominent Kyiv residents gave their lives for Ukraine – either during the Soviet years or at the beginning of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war. This information is given authenticity by a selection of black-and-white and colour photographs of each person.




Fig. 5. Exhibition, “Kyiv residents – heroes of our streets ”, in front of the Arsenalna metro station in Kyiv. Photo by Y. Ivashko, 2025

So, during times of war in Ukraine, exhibitions of both documentary and artistic photography, both black and white and colour, are organized.

One of the first examples of exhibitions of artistic war photography organised abroad since June 2022 were the exhibitions initiated by the Institute of Art History of the University of Lodz. A feature of these exhibitions was that they presented the work of a personality – a famous photographer, Master of Arts, Major Serhii Belinskyi, head of the press service of the Knights of the Winter Campaign 28th Separate Mechanised Brigade.

It is worth noting that in the preparation of the photographer's personal exhibitions at the gallery of the University of Lodz, at the Lodz University of Technology, at the universities in Opava and Ostrava, modern approaches to curatorship were used, where several types of art are simultaneously present in the exhibition (photography, multimedia, audio texts, voiceovers, printed catalogues). The above-mentioned exhibitions "And I Saw..." by Oleksandr Hliadielov (documentary photography is combined with literary texts on the walls and films about the photographer's work) and "Awakening" by Ivan Marchuk (paintings are combined with elements of performance – real works are exhibited on the walls, and on the screen they demonstrate their animation in the form of a surreal film, the exhibition is supplemented with ethnic motifs) were organized according to this principle.

The continuation of the project dedicated to the work of military photographer Serhii Belinskyi was the publication by the Cracow publishing house "Impuls" of two short stories – "A światłość w ciemności świeci..." and "I ciemność jej nie ogarnęła".

On March 22, 2025, based on the story "A światłość w ciemności świeci...", the premiere of the play of the same title (Fig. 6) was presented as part of the traditional theatre festival Theatrical Hyde Park in Cracow.



Fig. 6. The performance "A światość w ciemności świeci...". Photo by Y. Ivashko, 2025

This play was the first such performance about the war in Ukraine abroad. It completed a project about the work of a belligerent artist, depicting in visual theatrical form the diary of the lives of soldiers and civilians during the war, and the dilemma of whether art can become that ray of light in times of war.

The project about the war in Ukraine and the fate of an artist during the war turned into a multicultural and complex phenomenon that combined a photo exhibition, multimedia art, literature, theatre, songs, and music. The director and author of the play's script, Józefa Zając-Jamróz (Ziuta Zającówna), added new components to the project – a stage production, songs, and music specially written for the play.

Thus, the project, which began as a photo exhibition with short films, audio and catalogues, was gradually supplemented with new components. – First it was two fiction stories and then a theatrical performance – it was the performance that absorbed the photo exhibitions, short films and plots of the stories, while simultaneously supplementing these components with theatrical expressive techniques, such as acting, songs, music, and appropriate lighting. This transformed a realistic work about war into a philosophical avant-garde performance combining acting, photography, and video.

This example of curatorial approaches to the presentation of creativity is the most unusual and complex, since one direction of art (photo exhibition, short films) gradually transformed into another (literature). Eventually, a complex performance emerged that combined all these directions (theatrical performance). This example proves that modern curatorship can be experimental in nature, and an exhibition is usually not limited to one type of art and seeks new methods of visual attraction.

**Conclusion**

The authors' analysis of the experience of photo exhibitions during the Russian-Ukrainian war showed the following.

During the war, museum activities transformed. Since the most valuable exhibits were removed from the exhibition for their safety, museum halls were used for temporary exhibitions, such as photo exhibitions. The use of photographs in times of threat is logical: they are easy to reproduce in case of damage or destruction, easy to transport and mount, they do not require a special microclimate, like paintings, graphics, sculptures, and, in addition, they are easy to send in digital form, which eliminates the need to transport printed photographs; they can be printed on site.

The first feature that manifested itself during the Russian-Ukrainian war is the acquisition of the functions of exhibitions and galleries by museums.

The second feature is the emergence of a chance for artists of the "second echelon", that is, talented but less well-known. Since museums and galleries need to fill empty halls and justify their existence during times of war, they willingly exhibit the works of young artists and, at the same time, contribute to increasing their popularity.

The third feature is the spread of a separate genre of war photography, both documentary and artistic. If we talk about the genre of war photography, then before the full-scale invasion, it did not have such widespread recognition: in the Soviet Union, it performed a purely ideological function and showed the events of the past, namely the Second World War. Conversely, the specificity of the modern genre of war photography is that we live in this situation, and it shows the frame "here and now".

The fourth feature is a constant search, an experiment in organising modern photo exhibitions of wartime. A modern photo exhibition in Ukraine can combine not only different photographic techniques, but also different types of art, such as video, audio, literature, and music. Using examples of specific photo exhibitions, possible options for organising them with the involvement of other types of art are outlined.

The following levels of complexity of photo exhibitions were identified, where the criterion for division is the number of levels of art involved:

Level 0 – a photo exhibition of only photographs without involving other types of art, the simplest and most traditional option (exhibition in the Gulliver shopping centre);

Level 1 – a photo exhibition with one other type of art (photography and multimedia, photography and literature) (exhibition "And There Will Be People on Earth" in the Poltava Art Museum);

Level 2 – a photo exhibition involving two types of art (photography and multimedia and literature, photography and multimedia and poetry) (Olexandr Hliadielov's exhibition "And I Saw" at the Ukrainian House;

Level 3 – a photo exhibition transformed into a complex performance that develops over time, involving new types of art (photography, multimedia, literature, music, songs, performing arts) (Serhii Belinsky's exhibition "A światłość w ciemności świeci...", which was supplemented with literary works, music, songs, and a theatrical performance).[6]

Thus, a brief analysis of examples of organising modern photo exhibitions during the Russian-Ukrainian war proves that photography in wartime has become even more prevalent in exhibitions than traditional museum artefacts. In addition, the process of complicating the organisation of photo exhibitions,

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6 J. Iwaszko, A. Pawłowska, O. Iwaszko, *W dobrej i złej doli*...; A. Pawlowska, J. Iwaszko, A. Dmytrenko, *Sergij Belinskij*....

complemented by other art forms, is ongoing, turning them into a modern performance and thereby responding to the modern challenges of performative art.[7]

The possibilities of combining different art forms with photography, even theatrical art, music, and song, are demonstrated.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in the following:

- for the first time, the methods of curatorship and the principles of organising photo exhibitions during the Russian-Ukrainian war were compared, where exhibitions of varying complexity were taken for comparison;
- for the first time, the most common methods of combining photography with other types of art were theoretically outlined and, using examples of specific photo exhibitions, the levels of complexity of the exhibition were determined, where the criterion is the number of different types of art involved;
- it is shown that a project associated with the personality of an artistic photographer can develop over time into a complex multicultural phenomenon, when the idea of a photo exhibition and an illustrative series become part of literary essays, fiction stories, part of short films, united by a common idea and even integrated into the form of a theatrical performance, new songs and music are written on their basis. This opens up a new direction for research into art photography exhibitions as an artistic performance, a multicultural phenomenon with many artistic components.

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## TRANSFORMACJA PODEJŚCIA KURATORSKIEGO DO ORGANIZACJI WYSTAW SZTUKI W CZASIE WOJNY (streszczenie)

Artykuł stanowi część badań poświęconych wpływowi wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej na wszystkie obszary kultury i sztuki w Ukrainie. Na przykładzie wystaw fotografii artystycznej i dokumentalnej organizowanych w miastach Ukrainy i Europy ukazano zmiany w sposobie organizacji tego rodzaju ekspozycji. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono metodom łączenia fotografii z innymi formami sztuki – multimediami, muzyką, literaturą, pieśniami, performansem itp. Przeanalizowano zmiany w tradycyjnym modelu kuratorstwa stosowanym przy organizacji wystaw muzealnych oraz przedstawiono transformację działalności muzeów w warunkach wojennych. Wnioski zostały zilustrowane przez autorów przykładami ekspozycji fotografii dokumentalnej i artystycznej. Wyróżniono kilka poziomów integracji fotografii z innymi dziedzinami sztuki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** transformacja, podejście kuratorskie, organizacja, wystawy sztuki, czas wojny

**Yulia Ivashko**, Doctor of Science (Architecture) (2013), Professor (2014), Doctor habilitatus, nostrificated (2018). Author of over 550 scientific publications and monographs. Scientific interests and fields of scientific activity: folk architecture of different countries of the world, architecture and the art of historicism – eclecticism and Art Nouveau, Islamic architecture and art, the architecture and art of China, restoration of works of art. E-mail: yulia-ivashko@ukr.net

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**Oleksandr Ivashko**, PhD; an architect and artist. Scientific interests and fields of scientific activity: street art, contemporary art, art clusters.
E-mail: ghok2233@gmail.com

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**Andrii Dmytrenko**, PhD, Associate Professor at the National University "Yuri Kondratyuk Poltava Polytechnic". Author of more than 200 scientific publications. Scientific interests and fields of scientific activity: history of architecture, regional peculiarities of national architecture, architecture of buildings and structures, demographic aspects of spatial planning.
E-mail: ab.Dmytrenko_AU@nupp.edu.ua

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**Iryna L. Kravchenko**, Doctor of Science (Architecture) (2021), Associate Professor, Professor at the Department of Theory of Architecture of the Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture. Author of more than 70 scientific publications. Scientific interests and fields of scientific activity: history and theory of architecture, architecture of non-formal education institutions, architectural formation of modern informational and educational space, landscape architecture, and modern visual art.
E-mail: krav4ira73@gmail.com

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**Uliana Shcheviova**, PhD, Lecturer at the Lviv National Academy of Arts. Scientific interests and fields of scientific activity: history and theory of art, architecture and restoration, contemporary art, visual art.
E-mail: uliana.shcheviova@gmail.com

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