

Fight without the gun

Ukraine contemporary art action under Russian-Ukraine War

Host: Yao-Hua Su

Guest: Marta Trotsiuk, Mira Bachkur, Veronika Cherednychenko, and Zirka Savka

(00:20) Yao-Hua Su (Y): Welcome to MoCA on Air! I am today's moderator Yao-Hua. The thirteenth chairperson of association of the visual arts in Taiwan, which has been established in 1999, and it is one of the most important intermediary cultural organizations in Taiwan to advocate the right and all the working situation for visual arts practitioner. Today, we have a group of very great guests from far away, that's really a place that I have never been to. I'll introduce one of their members to introduce the whole group. Why they are here? You have to stay in tune and you will know why and what's the effort that we have put to bring all of them here. Marta?

(01:18)Marta Trotsiuk(Marta): Hello.

(01:19)Y: Hey, Marta! How are you?

(01:22)Marta: Beautiful. Thank you for inviting us for this podcast. It's a pleasure to speak with you. Thank you.

(01:27)Y: Sure. Marta I know that you are here with some sort of special mission and that's truly an honor for AVAT to have you and all the other three members. But I know that that's not only four of you that's actually kind of a very constituency of the contemporary art practitioners in Ukraine. Are you going to say for a little bit? Probably first introduce you and the other three artists that currently on the screen, and then talk a little bit about your organization.

(02:00)Marta: Yes, thank you. My name is Marta, I'm Ukrainian curator and art gallerist. My gallery's name is Gallery 101. It's actually an online gallery with pop up art events we're organizing. I'm here with three more artists, Veronika Cherednychenko, Zirka Savka, and Mira Bachkur. We came to Taiwan for art exchange program, and we'll participate in Taiwan Annual. Also, we have two other artists from Ukraine, male artist Denys Metelin and Taras Haida. Unfortunately they can't come to Taiwan because we have war in Ukraine and any man without super special reasons can't actually leave the country. So they have to stay to defend our homeland. So basically we are a group of six artists, four of us are here in Taiwan and two in Ukraine, but having their artworks online part of Taiwan Annual.

(03:04)Y: Okay. We have been kind of overwhelmed since February. And we understood that the other part of the world is having something very horrible. But as an artist who's very

sensitive to society, and also to the situation, probably today, we can talk a little bit more about the correlation between war and art and what would artists, sort of activists, do to confront the current very difficult situation. So I would like to kick off our today's dialogue with your observation. As I know that four of you have been here for more than three weeks. What's your observation of Taiwan? And I know that when you decided to really take this residency, a lot of friends from Ukraine raise the question for you, "Taiwan, is that a very dangerous place?" You know, it's kind of under the threat of the great, great China. But I know that you have some sort of response. And then when you really flew and be part of this geographic site, what's your observation of this place? And also, how do you ... I would say compare? But what would be the insight when after Ukraine has been suffered since the beginning of the year? And what will be your special insight when you come to Taiwan and go through all the recent conflict, which is not only imagination, that kind of conflict of Taiwan and China as an artist's view?

(04:51)Marta: Yes, of course. That's a great question, actually. We are very distant countries. But still we have something in common. Unfortunately, we have common problematics. And, yes, that's true that when we were applying here, our friends and relatives, they told us why you are going to Taiwan, it can appear that you are going from the one war zone to another. That was the period really tense in Taiwan when we were just to needed to land the plane, because Pelosi came at that time. And China started their military drills around the island. So I was afraid that they will cancel the sky, like they will close the sky, and maybe cancel our flights. So actually, I was not afraid, and my friends, like the artists I came with, we were not that afraid of the war, actually, maybe because we kind of adapted. And we hope that maybe it will not gonna happen. But we wanted to come to Taiwan so badly that we were at the most, we were afraid about canceling the trip, and that we will not be able actually to have our experience and cultural art exchange. And then when we landed here, we stayed one week in a quarantine hotel, adapting a little bit. And then news was not that horrible, they look not that horrible. And we understood that everything should be okay, for sure. And then the time passes, actually, we are in Taiwan, even a bit over a month. So actually, that's probably enough time to have our cultural art like experience in the country. We don't feel now any danger. But we know the situation. We were speaking a lot about this topic with Taiwanese. And we see that you are very curious about the situation in Ukraine, because you can relate, like, maybe you will need our experience to see what possibly could be happening, and how you can react and so on. And we already have this experience. I hope you will never have a war in your country. That's horrible. But maybe we can share. I hope that we can share some valuable information and insights for you because now we are in Taiwan, getting our kind of not relaxed time. But we are a little bit switched, like partly switched off from the war because we are not in Ukraine. But still we are reading news, we are all the time checking with our families, relatives and friends. But still, we don't hear here, for example, air alarms that we constantly hear in our country and which is scary. We still are startled when we hear some weird sounds, which remind us air alarm. So we probably have this kind of PTSD syndrome after facing the war, actually. But still, we have time to relax, kind of mentally here

and switch our mind to creative processes, and get our experience and we are very thankful to you for inviting us and to Taiwan, such a nice people and nice experiences. And that at least what we can do maybe to share our stories, which can be maybe in some use for thoughts or just for the perspective. And the truth may be information from insiders of the situation.

(08:32)Y: Right. But it's not only the Association of Visual Art in Taiwan who make this happen. We actually have a lot of helper from the first minute when we knew that the Gallery 101 has this project, taking art as a kind of cultural resistance. So we ran to legislator, the most affiliated legislator Wu Su Yao, who has been proposed the idea and drew the attention of cultural ministry to put their brands, to sort of draw an immediate brand on this perspective. And so this project is actually kind of made possible with the help of Taiwanese government as well as very helpful legislator. But I know that actually Zirka's husband is secretly in some way to confront the war. Is there anyone to ask you, is that a good time for making art? Probably, I don't know, Zirka or any one of you? Have you been asked about that sort of question?...Veronika?

(09:52)Veronika Cherednychenko(Veronika): Veronika, yes. I would like to say that for me, specially, working and drawing was a way out of this, to collect thoughts and find peace in this fear and anxiety. So I think it's the way to help myself. To do art is not a work for me anymore, it's just relax. So, yes, I think it's possible to do to create, to do art while the war is ongoing. Just to kill time, I don't know from news to news to have this one or two hour in peace and silence.

(10:46)Y: Yeah, yeah, I can't agree more.

(10:51)Mira: It's feeling one...

(10:53)Y: Mira. That's Mira.

(10:56)Mira: For me, I can't work because I leave my studio in Kyiv and come to live, and I have this feel, I leave my vault. And first month I can't think about painting or work. And for me all looks like illustration, only illustration because I see this feels for people who comes from Mariupol, Kharkiv, and I see every day for two months, about 100 and health people with different stories, and I can't draw, and I leave my studio, it's almost important. But when I left sometimes, for me, only for me, I started to work after two months, and it's about my feelings.

(12:08)Marta: I'll translate for Mira. The last phrase she told that she thinks that now it's crucial time for everyone and artists also, to come back to their work and because it's also informational and cultural field we are fighting for. So that's crucial for us to do within our niche what we can do for the victory.

(12:34)Y: Right, right.

(12:39)Zirka Savka(Zirka): Hello.

(12:39)Y: Zirka?

(12:39)Zirka: Hi.

(12:41)Y: Hi.

(12:41)Marta: I'll translate from Ukrainian to English for Zirka.

(12:44)Y: Perfect.

(Zirka speaking Ukrainian)

(13:03)Marta(speaking for Zirka): So Zirka just said that, for her opinion, it's very important to start to create and all to continue to create your artworks. And for her, it's also the way to put herself outside of the war is the same as for Veronika. And also she renewed her art practice. On the second day of the work, she came back to the studio, because her studio for her is like a special place where she can relax and probably be herself. So yes, we are all equal. And I will tell also shortly about my opinion, because I'm an art curator. So I know many artists and I'll follow them through this period of war. Because for me also it was a question how people react and what we will do. So what I saw there are two categories, like two types of people probably. And they're not related whether you're an artist or not. Just for people, generally. You have this fight or life response. So some artists, they can't create as Mira for some certain time. So they have this free response kind of. But for another they can't stop actually because it was a way to get out of the situation kind of, and then realization that your work is important actually, and it can help all the processes and you renew your art practice. Most artists I know they now renewed they art practices by now but for somebody it took some time, actually.

(14:47)Y: Right. Okay, before it's going to be too heavy. Probably we can listen something about what you have been doing in Taiwan, because I know that Veronika is doing VR for her residency in Taiwan. So probably some of the project you have been brought over. And Mira has done a lot of painting. I was told that most of the material that you are purchasing from the local art shop. And Zirka is using some rice paper and that's quite new for you. Also Marta as in different interaction and in a very, I would say, very strange situation for you. Although Marta is no stranger to Taiwan, though, has been here for several times, if I remember it right.

(15:38)Marta: One time before.

(15:41)Y: Okay, one time, but several years ago, but the other three artists, that's their first time been to this kind of place with humid and very hot weather. So I can imagine that kind of challenge for you. So tell us about your journey or your adventure, in arts and in life in Taiwan. Who's gonna start or Marta is gonna tell the story?

(16:09)Marta: I'm gonna to tell the main story, and then some insights can be added from them.

(16:16)Y: Okay.

(16:17)Marta: So, yes, that's a great opportunity to be in another countries such distant, as I mentioned before, and culturally different. So for sure it enriches your ideas, your perspective of how you see the world, and your art practice, actually. And of course, it's because also materials artists didn't use some of them they didn't use before. So on one hand is a challenge, but on the other, it's a great opportunity to learn new skills, and to try yourself in something different. And also, because we had some communication with local artists living in art village, this also inspires and gives some food for the imagination and for creation, although the topic of our project is memory and actually it's related to the war. Because you can't just get rid of this topic, it's on our hearts on our minds. So that's really strange because we have this cultural experience happy and vibrant, communicating with people. Taiwan greets us very well, people are very nice, and we enjoyed it. And also because we have possibilities to go to art institutions, for example, to MoCA and communicate directly with the art influencer, let's say like this, that's also special for us that gives more insightful information actually about how our niche art scene works here in Taiwan, what is your current situation you have, maybe some also problematic, some pros and cons and so on. So it gave us a lot of information, and a lot of tools mentally and physically buying in a store to create our project, the senses of the project, and actually the visual part of the project. So all of us we challenged ourselves kind of because if you're traveling to another country, you're going out of your comfort zone. But I think you will agree that you only grow when you go out of your comfort zone. So we believe that this experience we have here it will stay with us and influences us in a good way our art practices. So maybe some girls can tell I will translate about her experience and challenges might be working with the local materials.

(18:57)Y: Okay.

(Zirka speaking Ukrainian)

(19:24)Marta (speaking for Zirka): So it was interesting, but also challenging using rice paper because it's very fragile and very thin. And it's unusual. Also, she chose a pretty big format and it's also a challenge. So first she thought that she will play more with colors, but then she decided to create more graphic artworks. So I think because we visited some museums and the beginning of our staying here like in first maybe 10 days, we did it probably purposely

because I know as a curator that it also gives you some food for your mind and imagination. And we saw, for example, local graphics and paintings on this media. And maybe you then understand more and start to create, trying to implement your regular practice and style creating work, but using something so different.

(Zirka speaking Ukrainian)

(20:52)Marta(speaking for Zirka): So she told that it was a great experience for her using this kind of materials and so on. And but because it was short time, she couldn't be free and play and discover these all materials and techniques. But now she has her n inspiration, and when she is back to Ukraine, she will continue and hope to come back to Taiwan again.

(21:13)Y: Great. Yes.

(21:15)Veronika: Yes. And here I create two works. First it's named A Day. In this work, one day one shot. Only day is important, because in Ukraine, all Ukrainians are still in 24th February, we don't have spring, we don't have summer. And for me, I am right in this image a day in Taiwan. It's normal day, like nice September or something like this. They were in Ukraine. It's my day like the Ukrainian people. And my happy day in Taiwan, different part it's named A Day; it's canvases and video. Important part of this work is a video, which you need to scan code to see. To see it you need to do some action. And in this video, you see a normal life, normal happy life, again when you look in canvases, you see that something's wrong, something you want to take this time.

(22:44)Y: Thank you, Mira, for that new media artwork, are you bringing any kind of your machine here in Taiwan or you are kind of encountering a lot of new kinds of technology? Because I was told by a lot of foreign artists, they say, they came to Taiwan, because of Taiwan is the island of computer or the island of technology. So they are thinking that they can, you know, come here and buy a lot of new stuff and kind of generate new kinds of artistic content. And then, what's your story though?

(23:20)Mira Bachkur(Mira): Honestly, me too. So I thought, Taiwan and all around our laptops, computers and new technologies. But we face the reality. So I have only my laptop, and I had to manage the work with it. But it was okay. So my new experience was in format of this art. So I have a little bit of this virtual reality. So I made it already a few times, but I'm not a professional still in it, definitely. And this time, I made 360 video for VR helmet, which was not so easy for me. And the second part was joints, my classic technique. So I wouldn't say that I illustrated because it's not so illustrative. It's more abstract, but still it's about home and about my related in some way. And I want to share this story with audience. And also I want to mention that your museum was my favorite and this exhibition was just the best that we've seen here in Taiwan.

(24:45)Y: Yes, MoCA.

(24:46)Mira Bachkur(Mira): Yes. Yes. That was really great. I really like to a few digital artworks that were presented. I'm sorry I don't remember names of those artists. But that was great. These 3D, video artwork that was awesome.

(25:07)Y: Right, right, right. And because this is also the first year for Taiwan Annual to try to, you know, step into the metaverse and as Marta has shared with us sort of using the curatorial project to convert the 2022 Taiwan Annual, the space for 101 gallery turned into a some sort of battlefield. Because when you enter that place, then you will hear the siren. Marta, are you going to kind of speak on behalf of the other two male artists who cannot make it for this trip?

(25:46)Marta: Yes, of course. Firstly, it was very nice experience this metaverse. It's not that common used. It's very new, not only in Ukraine, probably. So while the opening, two other artists from Ukraine, they were online with me. And they created their avatars, and they went to the virtual exhibition place also. And May, she was helping because she translated some Chinese. And I was sending them that translation. So we were doing this online, kind of, from different parts of the world communication being at the same time in virtual reality. And they said, and they even posted stories and blog posts, or like their posts on social media that it was very great experience, like from another planet from the future.

(26:40)Y: (laughing) Okay.

(26:41)Marta: Like in Asia very much because they never been in any Asian country. And they went to this virtual exhibition, they hear the language is different. And for them it was unusual and bizarre feeling. So yes, they liked it very much. And also one of them, he told that, so I didn't tell my wife that I will be in this like online, kind of like exhibition opening. So she came from another room. And she was...

(27:08)Y: (laughing) They kind of met there...?

(27:12)Marta: No. She just came and she saw him during this, having this experience. And it was weird. And probably his face was weird. And he was doing some weird moves, and so on, and so on. So that was very great experience for those two artists. So Taras Haida he used to live in, in my city Lviv and then he moved to Kyiv, when the situation started to get very dangerous in the capital, he decided with his family moved to another city. And he started to create his digital collages almost immediately, so he was one of those artists who started to respond immediately. Now he came back to Kyiv, actually, and he's very active on cultural field, creating those posters, which are really straightforward about the war. And they are exhibiting in many countries. They are digital, so it's easy to send to print them to show on screens. Really nice media now because a transporting artworks from Ukraine is very complicated, the same as get them back. So it's great to have these digital artworks also. And

I advised many artists actually to digitalize their artworks, especially for now to represent the art abroad, because it's really important now.

About Denys Metelin, that's very unique, like interesting story, because he was born in Crimea peninsula, which is now occupied since 2014 by Russia. And when it was occupied, he was studying or finishing his study in my city in Lviv on the west of Ukraine. He didn't come back to Crimea. He decided that he is pro-Ukrainian. And he switched from Russian to Ukrainian, because in Crimea peninsula, many people speak Russian actually as a first language, that's because of some historical reasons that would lead like this. So he switched to Ukrainian and he started to create his art with really meaningful pro-Ukrainian topics.

Thinking about communist times, now about war times, so actually, I believe his artworks they are pretty illustrative. It's kind of like comic art or so. And they are colorful, but actually the topic and the meaning, and also he uses Cyrillic alphabet there with some triggers, words triggers. I think it's really powerful kind of, and kind of unique, I believe, now. So I also asked him, because he usually he works on canvases, not digital art. So I asked him to provide the art just to show it, just to be able to show it in foreign countries. So that's the story about those two artists, and they are staying in Ukraine and they're not serving in the army as for example Zirka's husband who is decided from the first day of the invasion voluntarily to go to serve the army, although he is an artist also, pretty known in our city. Denys and Taras they chose to stay and join this cultural army, let's put like this. Everyone, everyone does what he or she thinks he can be the most useful. Probably like that.

(30:38)Y: Okay, yeah. It's very sentimental, though. Yes, the first moment I met up with Zirka, and she told me this message and she kind of give me a card, which is printed as a small, small card. But well, that's a very strong and heavy message for me to receive here. So when we talk about, I mean, literally talk about the cultural or artistic resistance, but it's actually very, very true for artists and for the other people. That's a very, very true life that they are confronting. So can we take last moment to say a little bit about Marta your project of artistic and cultural resistance to the cultural invasion that you have felt?

(31:37)Marta: Yes, that's actually the main topic I'm talking about since the war started. And I feel that it's my duty or responsibility, and maybe the best I can do for myself as person, like, you can say, maybe cultural influencer, or just a curator and gallerist from Ukraine, is to talk about actually call a part of the invasion, which is cultural and as for my opinion, it's the main invasion. Because Russia, they want to eliminate us as a nation and how you do it, you destroy the culture, and the heritage, and, you know, everything that people have as their own nation, as we've defined them as the nation. Because Russia targets our museums, schools, libraries, archives, just as I told you, eliminate any signs of our difference and uniqueness. We have to stay strong with my colleagues and try to keep it, preserve it, and actually tell the world the truth, that we are different. We are not brother nations in any way. And our culture, and actually our art, and contemporary art is really interesting, unique and not the same. We believe that Russian culture is imperialistic culture. Our culture is culture of freedom and independence. And that's the most crucial. So what we are doing now with our colleagues,

first of all, we are communicating with the other our colleagues abroad, asking them to put cultural sanctions on Russia, cancel Russian artists and cultural representatives and in all events. Instead of this, invite Ukrainian representatives to show like to give the opportunity to talk, to speak and to show our unique art and culture. And second, what we do, we try to establish new connections because I will be honest with you, we have our problems inside the country. We are pretty young country, if you consider our full independence. We are a country, if you consider all the time we are struggling for to fight for our identity. But since the independence in 1991, we didn't do great job representing ourselves abroad in cultural field. So now because of that we have this problem that Russia did their propaganda and we didn't do our representation. And the main thing we are trying to do now is to establish connections with other countries, make some art and cultural exchanges, plan for the future collaboration, and speak up through art, through culture, about our identity and about the situation we are having just to try to explain people the situation and why Russian culture is so toxic because through Russian culture, Russia actually does a lot of propaganda. So that's what we are fighting now. That's what we are doing this cultural diplomacy and initiative of canceling Russia on cultural field.

(34:50)Y: Okay, thank you for sharing all this kind of messages and stories with us. And thank you for your participating in this podcast and thank you MoCA for providing this platform for us to demonstrate the contemporary art community in a globe. We all can stand together, and to communicate more, and to resist any sort of unfair treatment and unfair invasion. And I think that's all about the message that we wish to disseminate in today's episode. Thank you for your listening to MoCA on Air. And I hope that you can keep on paying attention and to support more about the contemporary art of the globe. And we hope to see you very soon in any site of a place that the contemporary art is happening. And hope to see you in the next episode of MoCA podcast.

(35:56)Marta: Thank you.