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«Lay it into the open wounds». Art at war in Maria Kulikovska's performative sculpture

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Abstract. The paper addresses the work of Ukrainian artist Maria Kulikovska, who resorts to military equipment as artistic materials and to destruction as an artistic method. In the first section, I contextualize Kulikovska's performative sculpture within art history, claiming that it can be regarded as Destruction Art. In the second section, I turn to Catherine Malabou's concept of "destructive plasticity" as a philosophical tool of an aesthetics of war, which offers a sound theoretical framework to further understand the implications of Kulikovska's artistic activity. In the third section, I focus on the main material adopted by Kulikovska, ballistic soap, showing how the artist materially deconstructs inherited dichotomies that keep informing our understanding of wars. By considering the artistic practice of a feminist artist (M. Kulikovska) through the lens of feminist scholarship (K. Stiles, C. Malabou, J. Butler), the paper investigates the relations between war and the arts from a situated perspective.

Keywords: plasticity, feminist art, Catherine Malabou, sculpture, performance.

> *We do not want to raise our index finger in admonition but rather lay it into the open wounds.*
> Gottfried Hattinger, *Out of Control: Ars Electronica 1991*

On June 9, 2014, pro-Russian militants opened fire on some sculptures by Crimean-Ukrainian artist Maria Kulikovska, disfiguring them. The artworks were displayed in Donetsk, in the territory of the Izolyatsia Foundation, an art center that became a target of the Russia-backed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) separatists. These events took place in the context of the annexation of Crimea and of the war in the Donbas region – conflicts that paved the way to the full Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In that framework, the art center was invaded and Kulikovska's sculptures were shot as a political gesture: as the DPR militants explained, they aimed at

taking down the sculptures of «a degenerate artist» (MKOV.studio [2023]), whose feminist and queer art had to be destroyed in order to show what would happen to those who might want to «disobey moral values and rules of the self-proclaimed republic» (MKOV.studio [2023]). Since then, the Izolyatsia complex has become a prison for Ukrainian hostages, a training base for DPR fighters and a depot for Russian weapons. Artistic materials, equipment and facilities have been converted into military ones (IZOLYATSIA [2023]).

The sculptures that were "executed" that day belonged to the series *Army of Clones* (2010) and to the triptych *Homo Bulla – Human as Soap Bubble* (2012-2014). Both series consisted of full-size casts of Kulikovska's naked body, realized in plaster and in soap respectively. The sculptures were not safely displayed in a museum – on the contrary, they were scattered around the Izolyatsia territory: Kulikovska's explicit aim was to make the copies of her own body vulnerable to the environment and to witness their slow, almost organic decay. Exposed to the rain, to the wind, to the sun, the surface of Kulikovska's soap bodies would begin to erode, undergoing a process in which aging would not consist in getting wrinkles but rather in bubbling, peeling, and ultimately cracking. The casts, thus, were intended as processual sculptures: they were meant to unfold in time, to transform in response to the interaction with their surroundings. War interrupted this organic process of gradual decay by opening unforeseeable wounds in the sculptures' bodies, changing their appearance forever in ways that could not have been imagined beforehand. When the DPR militants seized the Izolyatsia Foundation, not only did they shoot at some sculptures made by Kulikovska: much more radically, they shot at her very figure and, by substitution, at her body.

Unsurprisingly, 2014 represented a turning point in Kulikovska's artistic and personal history. Because of her politically engaged artistic statements and performances, she was included in a list of artists banned from Russia. In particular, two performances were responsible for the ban: on one hand, her marriage-as-a-performance to female Swedish artist Jacqueline Shabo, on January 11, 2014, which made her engagement with LGBTQIA+ issues decidedly come to the fore; on the other, her unauthorized performance *254*, held on July 1, 2014 at the opening of the biennial of contemporary art *Manifesta 10* in Saint Petersburg, in which she drew attention to the facts happening in Ukraine. In Russia, Kulikovska still falls under the category of terrorists or people dangerous to society. With the annexation of Crimea, this label now applies to her in her homeland too, and this is why since 2014 she has no longer been able to go back to her native city, Kerch.

The artist did not witness directly the DPR fighters wiping her sculptures out. Nevertheless, she was heavily hit by the episode, which represented a truly traumatic experience for her. In the attempt to cope with this event, she started re-enacting it over and over again through her artistic practice, adopting different scenarios and strategies in her performances. All these artistic actions have something in common: in re-staging the event, Kulikovska would not limit her presence to the role of the victim, represented by the injured casts displaying her own features, but she would also take on the role of the perpetrator, playing the role of the one who shot or beat the statues.

One of these artistic events occurred on November 23, 2015, at the Saatchi Gallery, in London, when Kulikovska angrily smashed a green replica of *Homo Bulla* she had realized for the gallery. The performance, named *Happy Birthday*, took place on the birthday of the artist's mother, who was stuck in the occupied territory. Kulikovska entered the exhibition space completely naked, wearing just a pink wig, sunglasses and shoes, and started beating the soap figure with a hammer (MKOV.studio [2023]).

More accurate re-staging of the shootings at Izolyatsia followed during the next years. On January 20, 2019, Kulikovska performed *6 Shot Soap Figures*, in which she fired at three replicas of the triptych *Homo Bulla* and at three additional casts of her body, made with a mixture of ballistic soap, blood and semen. The artistic performance became part of the Ukrainian-Swiss film *Zabuti* (*The For-*



Figure 1. Maria Kulikovska, *Six Shot Soap Figures*. Life-size casts in ballistic soap; shooting performance for the film *The Forgotten*. Kyiv, Ukraine, January 20, 2019. © MKOV.studio. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2. Maria Kulikovska, *Six Shot Soap Figures*. © MKOV.studio. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3. Maria Kulikovska, *Six Shot Soap Figures*. © MKOV.studio. Courtesy of the artist.

gotten), directed by Daria Onyshchenko and set in the city of Luhansk during its occupation by pro-Russian separatists. In the movie, Kulikovska impersonated a pro-Russian journalist who fired at the statues, placed in an industrial setting that closely recalled Izolyatsia Foundation's one (MKOV.studio [2023]) (see Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3)[1].

Lastly, on June 9, 2019, Kulikovska realized a video performance named *Let Me Say: It's Not Forgotten* (MKOV.studio [2023]). Engaging with her memories and elaborating on them, Kulikovska's video presents the artist in a forest-like environment, naked, embracing a rifle. She advances cautiously, then stops, points the rifle, and shoots three times at some targets that are left out of frame. Six soap sculptures appear through a dissipating haze. The figures are casts of Kulikovska's body and show round, open wounds on vital organs such as their heads, necks and chests. The penultimate frame shows us the artist with her rifle among the injured soap versions of herself[2].

In the face of Kulikovska's works, made with bullets rather than with chisels, many questions arise. What place can they find within art history? And how to conceive of them theoretically? Is it possible to bring together art and war, to envision something like an art made with war tools? War does not seem to be the bearer of a constructive agency in a narrow sense, as it functions by destroying and undoing, whereas art appears to belong to the sphere of making that war, by principle, excludes.

In the first section of this paper, I will contextualize Kulikovska's performative sculptures in art history by arguing that they have a distinguished and direct antecedent: the *Shootings* performed in the early 1960s by Niki de Saint Phalle. The artworks by Kulikovska, together with those by Saint

[1] A video is available at https://vimeo.com/355812203?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=28678424. At present, the artist collaborates with her partner Uleg Vinnichenko to the realization of her work.

[2] The video performance is available at https://vimeo.com/355812493?signup=true.

Phalle, can be understood as representatives of a wider and open category, that of Destruction Art. Destruction Art, as I will claim in the second section, can be regarded as the artistic declension of what philosopher Catherine Malabou has called «destructive plasticity», that is, formation achieved by means of destruction. Destructive plasticity, in turn, can become a central concept for a new aesthetics of war. In the third section I will focus more thoroughly on the materiality at stake in Kulikovska's pieces, i.e., on the artistic possibilities offered by ballistic soap. By means of this peculiar material and of the procedure of cast-making, Kulikovska artistically deconstructs inherited dichotomies such as those of ally and enemy, creation and destruction, thus showing that such allegedly opposed categories are entangled with one another.

1. DESTRUCTION ART

Traditionally, artistic practices seem to be based on creation and production rather than on destruction. On the contrary, the performances that Kulikovska realized in the aftermath of the 2014 events display a kind of making that is achieved by destroying. Here, war, violence and destruction function not only as triggering events for the artistic activity but also as the very tools at work in the artistic making. Therefore, it appears legitimate to ask whether these works can actually find a place within art history, and if so, where exactly they should be located.

In fact, Kulikovska is not the first one to explore the possibilities offered by rifles, guns and explosions as artistic tools. Suffices it to mention the case of Chris Burden's 1971 performance *Shoot*, in which the body artist decided to be non-lethally shot so that he could experience the firings instead of perceiving them visually (Stiles [2016]: 159-175). But there is an even more direct antecedent for Kulikovska's performances: the *peinture à la carabine* made by French-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle in the early 1960s.

From 1961 to 1963 Niki de Saint Phalle, the only female member of the Nouveaux Réalistes, enacted a series of performances called *Tirs* (French for *Shootings*) where she fired at bas-reliefs or sculptures she had previously made. In order to prepare them, she first embedded some bags filled with colored paint and some cans of spray paint in the sculptures; then, she whitewashed and plastered those massive assemblages to give them a seamless appearance. When these white, big objects were ready, Saint Phalle proceeded to shoot them: the bullets pierced the artworks' surfaces and made them explode; as a consequence, the artworks erupted with paint, as the color inside the bags began to drip. The artist's explicit goal, with these gestures, was to harm her own art, «to make [it] bleed» (Reynaud [2014]). During the session that took place on May 4, 1962, for instance, Saint Phalle pointed her rifle towards a plaster that had the features of the *Venus de Milo*: she shot, and, in turn, the iconic sculpture started bleeding (Dawsey et al. [2021]: 50-51).

In the case of both Saint Phalle and Kulikovska, what triggered the artistic gesture was a traumatic event – the military attack for Kulikovska, and a paternal sexual abuse for Saint Phalle. Both artists built on those traumas and started working with destruction as an artistic tool through an explicitly feminist approach. Both also resorted to an imagery of war[3]. Both artists, finally, directed violence towards artworks that were not to be understood as mere objects, but as parts of the artists themselves. If this is quite evident in the case of Kulikovska, who attacks casts of her own body, the fact must be acknowledged for Saint Phalle too, who conceived of the shooting sessions as a method for committing something like an always partial suicide (Bredekamp [2010]: 69-72). In both cases, then, the artworks were regarded as full-fledged parts of the artists' bodies.

In the above-described cases, creation and production are paradoxically achieved by means of destruction. With one and the same gesture, the artwork is blown away and is reborn in a differ-

[3] The case of Saint Phalle may be less evident, but her work too relies on images of military violence. See Dawsey et al. (2021): 44; 64.

ent form: what arises is a "post-traumatic artwork", which bears traces of the previous artwork but is also something radically different. Saint Phalle's statements make this ambivalence very clear, and this seems to apply to Kulikovska's performances as well: «It was an amazing feeling shooting at [an artwork] and watching it transform itself into a new being. It was not only EXCITING and SEXY, but TRAGIC – as though we were witnessing a birth and a death at the same moment» (Dawsey et al. [2021]: 15). As Saint Phalle acknowledges in an interview with founder of the Nouveau Réalisme Pierre Restany, before the firings the assemblages could already be regarded as full-fledged works of art, also considering that the process of making them was arduous and time-consuming. However, they could not simply stay that way, just as Kulikovska's casts can no longer live their quiet lives in the Izolyatsia territory. To Restany asking why she shot her artworks with a hunting rifle, Saint Phalle replied: «Well, I must shoot them for multiple reasons. […] The shoot […] is creation, it gives a new life to the object, which otherwise would have remained an art piece but that doesn't have this new dimension that the shoot can give it» (Dawsey et al. [2021]: 62). This new, bleeding life is the post-traumatic form that Kulikovska's wounded sculptures take on as well.

Kulikovska's performative sculptures work according to a logic that is not unique nor far-fetched but finds renowned antecedents and will arguably inspire new art in the future. What is this logic, exactly? I am convinced (along with Somchynsky [2020]: 56-61) that Kulikovska's performances can find a place within the wide and open category of "Destruction Art", to which Saint Phalle's *Tirs* have also been ascribed (Stiles [1992]: 88). Destruction Art is a term adopted and developed by art historian and curator Kristine Stiles, who borrows it from artist Gustav Metzger. It does not refer to any movement (Stiles [1992]: 76) or well-defined group of artists; even the artists who participated in the *Destruction in Art Symposium* (DIAS) in 1966 never produced a manifesto. This is why Destruction Art cannot be regarded as a closed category: rather, it is to be understood as an artistic *logic*, which is at disposal for new artistic experiences and for further experimentation[4].

To put it in a few words, the logic of Destruction Art consists in *performing* destruction instead of depicting it. Saint Phalle and Kulikovska do not portray the firings: they *actually fire* at the sculptures. The destruction is real. In this sense, Destruction Art does not deal with the representation of violence, with its visual, depictive renderings (which have been the object of most analyses centered on the relationship between art, aesthetics and violence, e.g., Berleant [2019]), it deals with the *presentation* of violence. On the other hand, Destruction Art must not be confused with iconoclasm: Kulikovska's shootings at the soap casts are artistic performances, while the firings by the DPR militants were not. Both the iconoclastic shootings by the DPR fighters and the Destruction Art performances by Kulikovska confront us with destructive gestures whose meaning and value is political and very much impacting on reality; however, the former gesture concerns the destruction *of* art, while the latter concerns destruction *in* art, or art *as* destruction. By adopting destruction as an artistic tool and method, Destruction Art cannot be assimilated to iconoclasm, nor can it be reduced to the mere depiction of violence.

Along with this description *ex negativo*, Destruction Art presents us with some peculiar characteristics that can be examined as such. According to Stiles, for example, Destruction Art has to do with bodies, wounds, and survivals. «In Destruction Art, artists present the "imagery of extinction" localized in the body, the object which is offered both as a destructible material and/or an agent of that destruction» (Stiles [1992]: 76). Destruction concerns the body both in active and

[4] In this respect, Destruction Art seems to have something in common with Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss' concept of the "formless". Both Destruction Art and the formless are to be regarded as an operative logic that exceeds categories, movements, or genres; moreover, both are interested in the negativity of the form. However, they maintain a fundamental difference in focus, as the concept described by Bois and Krauss does not go in the direction of actual destruction. See Bois, Krauss (1996).



Figure 4. Maria Kulikovska, *Six Shot Soap Figures*. Frame from the film *Zabuti* (2019), directed by Daria Onyshchenko. © MKOV.studio. Courtesy of the artist.

in passive terms, as one and the same body can take on the role of the destructive subject as well as that of the destroyed object. Such an undecidability, which destabilizes a clear dichotomy between victims and perpetrators, is evident in Kulikovska's performances: she is the one who shoots but also, by mimetic substitution, the one who is shot (Figure 4).

Destruction Art does not concern the annihilation of the body, which means that it does not engage with death – rather, it deals with wounds and wounded subjects outliving death. «*Destruction art is about open wounds*», Stiles claims ([1992]: 77, my emphasis). And wounds, one might add, are not lethal, but rather *plastic*: when wounded, a given body is not annihilated; on the contrary, it is traumatically molded. The wound gives access to a different corporeality. Such a new, wounded body is the body of the survivor, which is someone who failed to die for a traumatic event they experienced: the survivor is the post-traumatic subject in the broadest sense (which includes those who survived sexual abuse, as Saint Phalle, as well as those who survived geo-political and war trauma, as Kulikovska).

Destruction Art confronts us with trauma, understood – as we shall see more in depth – as a violent molding force. In spite of its gloomy overtones, however, Destruction Art does not give way to resignation. It is rather a politically engaged art we are dealing with, which bypasses not only all forms of acquiescence, but also of naïve optimism: «Destruction Art is not a utopic project», Stiles explains. «Rather it is a pragmatic one, enacted by artists who are profoundly skeptical but not cynical and who commingle responsiveness with reaction» (Stiles [1992]: 77). This perfectly applies to Kulikovska's performative sculptures, which bring together war wounds and new strategies to survive and embody them. The art of Kulikovska can be regarded as political «resistance in the form of an event», while it also allows the artist to learn how to live with her new, wounded body, thus providing her with «an important means to survival that must be continuously explored» (Stiles [1992]: 96).

2. DESTRUCTIVE PLASTICITY

Kulikovska's performative sculpture presents us with the possibility of *formation through destruction*[5]. Her work shows that war has indeed a morphogenetic power, or better that war can influence and deviate morphogenetic processes instead of just hindering them. It is my contention that Catherine Malabou's concept of destructive plasticity can provide a sound theoretical framework for the «formative-destructive power of the wound» (Malabou [2007]: 18) that we have seen at work in Kulikovska's art pieces. I argue that, besides being a valuable conceptual ally for addressing Kulikovska's practice, Malabou's theory too has something to gain from the encounter with these artistic performances. The French philosopher considers destructive plasticity as a phenomenon strictly relating to the human subject, which rules out the possibility for destructive plasticity to pertain to the arts too, especially to sculpture. Sculpture is regarded by Malabou quite univocally as concerning a positive, irenic formation (e.g., Malabou [2005]: 10). The encounter between

[5] Symmetrically, there are also artistic cases in which destruction is the result of excessive formation. These are processes of «undoing through creation» which are carried out, paradoxically, «against form and through form» (Pappas-Kelley [2019]: 76). What is shown by both approaches (destruction through creation and creation through destruction) is the impossibility of conceiving of the relation between morphogenesis and form-disruption in mutually exclusive terms.

Malabou's destructive plasticity and Kulikovska's Destruction Art is fruitful not only for the latter, which can thus benefit from a fitting theoretical framework, but also for the former, which can be broadened beyond its original purposes. Going beyond Malabou's intentions, it is possible to draw on the encounter between Destruction Art and destructive plasticity to turn the latter into an aesthetic concept – namely, into a concept for a new "aesthetics of war".

In order to understand what destructive plasticity is and how it can contribute to such aesthetics, let us take a step back to consider plasticity in general. Malabou efficiently recalls the multifaceted meanings of the concept:

> The term "plasticity" […] has three principal significations. On one hand, it designates the capacity of certain materials, such as clay or plaster, to receive form. On the other hand, it designates the power to give form – the power of a sculptor […]. But, finally, it also refers to the possibility of the deflagration or explosion of every form – as when one speaks of "plastique", "plastic explosive", or, in French, *plastiquage* ("bombing"). *The notion of plasticity is thus situated at both extremes of the creation and destruction of form*. (Malabou [2007]: 17, my emphasis)

Plasticity has first of all a positive meaning (the dynamics of giving and receiving form), which is understood by Malabou as a formative, "sculptural" activity (it is no chance that she speaks of the sculptor and of sculptural materials such as clay and plaster). Brain plasticity is most commonly regarded in the light of said positive meaning (which takes the form of either developmental, modulational or reparative plasticity, see Malabou [2004]). However, there are cases in which the brain undergoes permanent damage: Alzheimer's patients, people who suffered brain injury, victims of natural or political catastrophes, victims of mistreatment, war, terrorist attacks, captivity, sexual abuse[6] – all these cases represent, in Malabou's view, instantiations of a different kind of cerebral plasticity, which is usually not even regarded as such. «In science, medicine, art, and education, the connotations of the term "plasticity" are always positive. Plasticity refers to an equilibrium between the receiving and giving of form», Malabou ([2009]: 3) complains. In contrast with this widely shared perspective, Malabou claims that there must be a negative meaning of plasticity accounting for those occasions in which wounds, by destroying, create new forms. Traumatic events do not shatter plasticity, as it is often thought; they rather open up to a whole different kind of plasticity. The point is to envision «not the disruption of plasticity, but the plasticity of disruption» (Malabou [2011]: 491, my transl.).

The "new form" taken up by the subject who has undergone a traumatic experience is that of the survivor. The survivor, the "new wounded", is thus the subject of the aesthetics of war, which works plastically by means of wounds. The wound opens a caesura in the body and in the biography of the subject; moreover, it has a truly metamorphic power in that it creates a whole different person with an unprecedented identity. The wound puts an end to the previous regime of events. By breaching the personal history, the traumatic experience escapes any possible hermeneutic dimension: it is not possible to make sense of the wound. And yet the post-traumatic subject, uninterpretable and destroyed, does have a form. «Destruction too is formative. A smashed-up face is still a face, a stump a limb, a traumatized psyche remains a psyche» (Malabou [2009]: 4).

It is precisely with the aim of conceiving of the disturbing forms rising out of the wound that Malabou introduces the concept of explosive or destructive plasticity. Destructive plasticity is twofold: on a first level, destruction still works to the benefit of the good form. This "positive destruction" follows the model of apoptosis (i.e., in biology, the phenomenon of programmed cellular suicide which is what allows, for instance, fingers to take shape thanks to the cellular annihilation that creates interstitial voids between them, see Ameisen [2003]). As Malabou ([2009]: 4)

[6] Malabou's is a unified theory of the trauma: she explicitly and meaningfully brings together organic and sociopolitical trauma (e.g., Malabou [2007]: xviii; 10-11; 156).

argues, «this type of destruction in no way contradicts positive plasticity: it is its condition. It serves the neatness and power of realized form». Things change when we move to the second, more disturbing level of destructive plasticity. Here, destruction is a full-fledged explosion, a radical deviation from the good form: it is a negative plasticity that asks to be thought of on the model of terrorism. Here, we are dealing with a «pathological plasticity, a plasticity that does not repair, a plasticity without recompense or scar» (Malabou [2009]: 6). Proper destructive plasticity has no possible redemption nor cicatrization: it is therefore a plasticity of the open wound.

Malabou is particularly interested in this explosive, terroristic plasticity. If it is true that, in general, we are now witnessing a «failure of classical war» (Virilio [2007]: 10) fought in the external battlefield in favor of an «impure war» based on hyperterrorism (Virilio [2007]: 8-9), then this new war calls for a new aesthetics, whose subjects are the new wounded produced by destructive plasticity. However, it is crucial that in Malabou's view, even «[terroristic, destructive] plasticity – and herein resides its paradox – *ultimately remains an adventure of form*» (Malabou [2007]: 17, my emphasis)[7]. How does formation through destruction occur, precisely? Positive plasticity works following a logic of the imprint (Malabou [2004]: 15; see also Meloni [2019]), in which giving and receiving form are well balanced aspects. Destructive plasticity – this is my claim – takes the logic of the imprint to extreme: there is indeed a physical contact, but such contact is actually an impact, which is so violent that the new form emerges by explosion. Destructive plasticity carries on the idea that morphogenesis happens at the point of contact, but the contact itself is in this case so brutal that it does not result in a molding or casting activity – it rather results in a violation. If positive plasticity forms by means of imprints, destructive plasticity forms by means of traumas. And what is a trauma, if not an imprint so violent as to result in a rupture?

> The word "trauma" in Greek means "wound" and derives from τιτρώσκω, which means "to pierce". Trauma thus designates the wound that results from an effraction – an "effraction" that can be physical (a "patent" wound) or psychical. In either case, trauma names a shock that forces open or pierces a protective barrier. (Malabou [2007]: 6).

Plasticity, be it positive or negative, is thus a morphological notion, insofar as it has to do with forms and with the negotiations of their boundaries. But the contact that takes place in the imprint (the "good" imprint as well as the violent one) forces us to acknowledge that plasticity is about materiality too: plasticity is a matter of touch. After all, «to be wounded […] is to be touched» (Malabou [2007]: 160-161). War has the ability to shape and therefore has a specific aesthetic relevance; it endows bodies and psyches (Malabou) as well as sculptures (Kulikovska) with a new form. These new forms (the wounded subjects, the wounded sculptures) have their specific materiality, which asks for consideration.

3. EXPLOSIONS, ERASURES, ENTANGLEMENTS

Let us turn, then, to the material aspects of the peculiar encounter of art and war represented by Kulikovska's case. The artist, as we saw, realizes ballistic soap casts of her body. Soap is certainly not a material commonly adopted in the plastic arts, plaster being a much more common choice for casts and molds. However, soap has very interesting qualities and behaviors. Albeit having been around for millennia[8], soap is not to be found in nature: it is a human-made material obtained

[7] It is worth noticing, as a critical remark, that Malabou's plasticity never materially exceeds the morphological plane: it never goes in the direction of the formless (broadly intended). The point is acknowledged by Malabou herself, who, in an interview with Tyler M. Williams, recalls that Jacques Derrida formulated precisely this criticism (Malabou [2022]: 319).

[8] Evidence shows that soap had already been produced as early as 2800 BC. The history of the invention of soap is actually not easy to retrace because this water-soluble material leaves traces that are difficult for archeologists to interpret. This intriguing material thus represents a real

through saponification. This material is not only used as a cleaning product but is in fact employed also as a military material. In wound ballistics (the field studying the interactions between bullets and human bodies), soap is broadly adopted as a testing material because of its ability to simulate soft human body tissues in the firing experiments. The plastic quality of soap makes it particularly apt to behaviorally imitate the human flesh: «the choice of soap […] for simulating the behavior of human body tissue [is] guided by the fact that the passage of a projectile through soap, which is characterized by a lot of plasticity, results in a wound channel whose cavity remains visible after the experiments», scholars in wound ballistics explain (Dyckmans et al. [2003]: 627). Soap circulates among different domains, performatively acquiring new meanings: it is capable to move from domestic households to military bases to the plastic arts.

Not only does Kulikovska explore the possibilities offered by soap in the connection between war and sculpture (as she does in *6 Shot Soap Figures* and in *Let Me Say: It's Not Forgotten*); she also investigates the ways in which soap materially cuts across domesticity and the arts. Once again, this artistic operation is led in the light of war trauma, which is brought back, this time, to its most private dimension. *Lustration / Ablution* is a long-term performance, planned to be held 88 times (the first session took place in 2018), in which soap is returned to the intimacy of a domestic encounter in the bathtub: Kulikovska bathes together with one of her ballistic soap casts, whose traits slowly start to melt and dissolve (Figure 5, Figure 6)[9].

With this performance, Kulikovska intends to artistically clean up from trauma: she wishes to «clear herself from the pain, the political conflicts, discrimination, difficulties and chaos of this world» (MKOV.studio [2023]). However, the gesture displayed in *Lustration / Ablution* is limited to



Figure 5. Maria Kulikovska, *Lustration / Ablution no. 1*. First session of a long-term performance. Mystetskyi Arsenal National Art and Culture Museum Complex, Kyiv, Ukraine, March 8, 2018. © MKOV.studio. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6. Maria Kulikovska, *Lustration / Ablution no. 2*. Second session of a long-term performance. Art Edition of Vogue UA, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2018. Photo/video © Alive Gontar and the Vogue team; © MKOV.studio. Courtesy of the artist.

a mere attempt to wash the artist's wounds away: an attempt that only results in an even more traumatic and traumatized form, as the disfigured face in the bathtub shows (Figure 7).

Thus, war destruction manifests itself not only through deflagrations and explosions, but also through post-factum solace that, trying to clear the wounded body, ends up further eroding it. Erasure does not erase: it rather produces further wounds[10]. An open wound, in this sense, cannot

puzzle for material culture studies. On soap's history see Gibbs (1939).

[9] A video of the second part of the performance, realized in collaboration with Vogue, is available at https://vimeo.com/355818052?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=28678424.

[10] On surviving the erasure and on the eroticism of such a survival (clearly visible in Kulikovska's performances) see Malabou (2020).



Figure 7. Maria Kulikovska, *Lustration / Ablution no. 2*. Photo/video © Alive Gontar and the Vogue team; © MKOV.studio. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 8. Maria Kulikovska, *Carpe Diem*. Life-size casts in epoxy resin with the addition of flowers, chains, feathers, seashells, keys, and bones. Kyiv, Ukraine, 2017-2018. © MKOV.studio. Courtesy of the artist.

be healed: after the trauma, one can only learn how to live with their new wounded body.

Soap is water-soluble, it has the same density of the flesh, and it is also translucent. By exploiting this latter quality, Kulikovska uses the soap to display the permeable nature of bodies, whose boundaries are always porous. In her sculptures *Carpe Diem* (2017-2018)[11] and *880* (2019), for instance, Kulikovska embeds various objects in the casts – ranging from flowers to chains, feathers, seashells, keys, and bones – which remain visible from the outside (Figure 8, Figure 9).

If the wound is what decidedly opens the body, a certain openness was already inherent to the body as such: its intrinsic vulnerability (Butler [2009]: 33-62) always exposes it to the possibility of engaging in material entanglements with its surroundings.

Most times, this material entanglement is a direct confrontation with the enemy to whom one is necessarily bound. The point can be clarified by resorting to a classic argument on identity and relations, in the version outlined by Judith Butler.

> The subject that I am is bound to the subject I am not, we each have the power to destroy and to be destroyed, and we are bound to one another in this power and this precariousness. […] The "permeability of the border" represents a national threat, or indeed a threat to identity itself. Identity, however, is not thinkable without the permeable border. […] If my survivability depends on a relation to others, to a "you" or a set of "yous" without whom I cannot exist, then my existence is not mine alone, but is to be found outside myself, in this set of relations that precede and exceed the boundaries of who I am. […] The boundary is a function of the relation, a brokering of difference, a negotiation in which I am bound to you in my separateness. (Butler [2009]: 43-44)[12]

Kulikovska's art shows us the permeable nature of bodies and boundaries, but it also points out that social and material roles are never fixed. This is evident, for instance, in the video performance *Let Me Say: It's Not Forgotten*, where the artist shifts from the role of the victim to that of the perpetrator and back. In the performance, even the position of the viewer is called into question, as they take, in turn, the role of the target or that of the shooter (Somchynsky [2020]: 52; 57-58). A binary framework that posits a series of dichoto-

[11] The casts of *Carpe Diem* are actually realized in epoxy resin, but they maintain the translucent character of soap, which is used in the same way in other performative sculptures such as the one titled *Hortus conclusus* (2019).

[12] This is, of course, a Hegelian argument, built on the premise that «the subject is always outside itself, other than itself, since its relation to the other is essential to what it is» (Butler [2009]: 49).

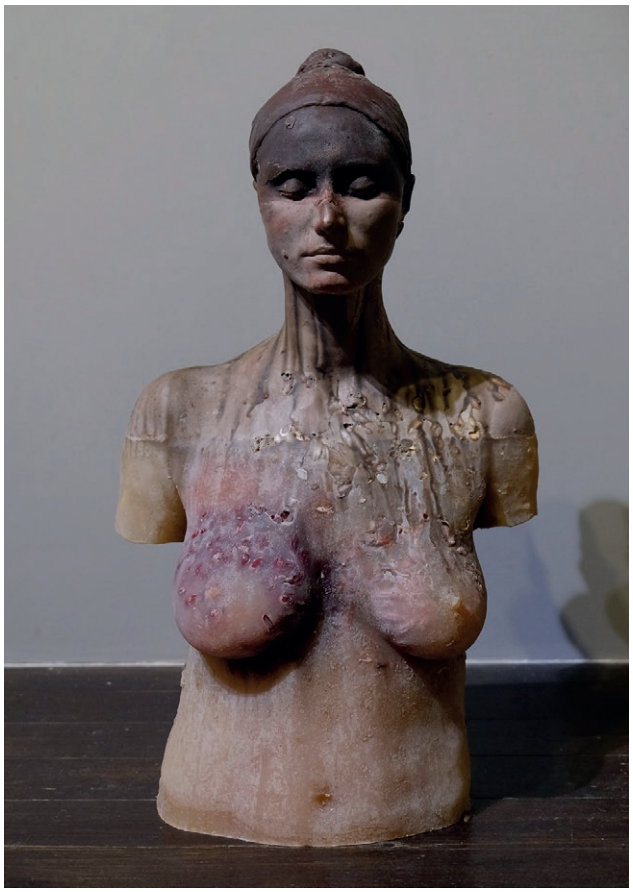


Figure 9. Maria Kulikovska, *880*. Casts in ballistic soap with flowers. Kyiv, Ukraine, 2019. © MKOV.studio. Courtesy of the artist.

mies (good vs. evil, friend vs. enemy, war vs. peace, destruction vs. creation) cannot account for Kulikovska's artistic practice, nor for war phenomena themselves[13]. Her performances are so powerful in that they display a mimetic antagonism[14]: an antagonism that does not function through opposition but rather through a mirroring encounter. In pointing the rifle at her own figure, Kulikovska shows something that proves true not only for her art but also for war dynamics – that is, that destruction cannot but happen between entities that might appear to be opposed, but are actually intimately entangled with one another. Antagonism truly works only if it is mimetic.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Kulikovska's performative sculpture deals with open wounds, traumas, and survivals: from an art historical perspective, it unfolds by following the logic of Destruction Art and posits itself in this tradition. From a philosophical point of view, on the other hand, Kulikovska's pieces can be addressed as artistic occurrences of Catherine Malabou's concept of destructive plasticity, whose formulation (originally relating to the human subject) is thus broadened to the field of the plastic arts, leading to a new aesthetics of war. Finally, the materiality of ballistic soap adopted as an artistic material reveals some fundamental dynamics at work in war trauma and military conflicts: most importantly, the co-implication of the different actors in a network of mirroring relations. Taking place at the intersection between war events and feminist practices, the art of Maria Kulikovska proves to be particularly timely and politically fierce.

[13] Another performance makes the point even clearer: *Blood and pressure* (2017), made by Kulikovska in collaboration with Russian-British artist Mila Dolman at Ugly Duck Art Center in London. Despite standing on opposite sides of the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Kulikovska and Dolman have similar interior struggles (e.g., their role as female artists). In the performance, they throw pieces of blood meat at each other, acting «as attackers and victims at the same time» (MKOV.studio [2023]).

[14] I borrow the expression "mimetic agonism" and slightly change it into "mimetic antagonism" from the field of the Mimetic Studies inaugurated by Nidesh Lawtoo (2022).

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