

Incorporating War

Gustatory Aesthetics, Embodiment, and Traumatic Experience in Contemporary Ukrainian Art

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Contemporary debates in aesthetics are increasingly challenging the traditional marginalisation of taste as an ‘inferior’ bodily sense, drawing attention to its cognitive, affective and ethical significance. Building on this reassessment, the authors consider the gustatory aesthetics as a critical model for analysing context-dependent forms of proximity, incorporation, and embodied implication. This model is applied to contemporary Ukrainian artistic practices that engage with wartime artefacts, sound, darkness, debris, traces of violence and traumatic experiences. Drawing on the critique of the hierarchy of the senses in the works of Carolyn Korsmeyer and on Nicola Perullo’s understanding of taste as a situational experience, the authors demonstrate how certain Ukrainian artistic practices transform military objects - fragments of missiles, bullet casings, weapons and other remnants of war - into media for aesthetic reflection and memory with an ethical underpinning. Gustatory aesthetics makes it possible to analyse how war-related art can create conditions for bodily intimacy without reducing trauma to a spectacle or transforming violence into an aesthetically consumed object. | *Keywords: Gustatory Aesthetics, Embodiment, War Artefacts, Traumatic Experience, Contemporary Ukrainian Art, Incorporation*

1. Introduction

Contemporary aesthetics increasingly calls into question the inherited hierarchy of the senses, within which sight and hearing have traditionally been privileged as the primary media of cognition and aesthetic judgement, whilst taste, smell and touch have been relegated to the realm of bodily need, appetite and subjective pleasure. This re-evaluation is important for analysing those artistic practices that cannot be fully understood through the model of detached contemplation. When a work of art confronts the viewer or listener with materials marked by violence, destruction and bodily vulnerability, the aesthetic experience can no longer be described merely as visual recognition or symbolic interpretation.

The starting point of this article is precisely such a re-evaluation, in which the aesthetics of taste is considered not as a literal reference to taste, nor as a metaphor for aesthetic judgement in the Kantian sense, but as a critical model for analysing aesthetic situations structured by proximity, embodiment, vulnerability and ethical engagement. Such clarification is necessary, as the concept of 'taste' can easily become too broad if it is used to denote any bodily reaction, sensory intensity or affective engagement. Therefore, in this article, the aesthetics of taste is used in a restricted sense, where it may refer only to those artistic situations in which the distance between the recipient and the material object becomes unstable, and the encounter with this object takes on a bodily, affective, meaning-making and ethically significant character.

As Carolyn Korsmeyer has demonstrated, taste was historically marginalised within philosophical aesthetics precisely because of its intimate relation to the body, pleasure, and necessity. In *Making Sense of Taste*, she notes that taste was long excluded from aesthetic theory on the grounds that it "involves the body too directly, is too closely tied to appetite and need, and lacks the distance thought to be required for disinterested judgement" (Korsmeyer, 1999, p. 2). At the same time, it is precisely the bodily intimacy of taste that is important for our study, as we believe it reveals the limitations of an aesthetic model based exclusively on visibility, detachment and the separation of subject and object.

Korsmeyer's argument provides a framework and enables us to understand taste as cognitively and symbolically significant. Taste is not merely a source of pleasure or disgust; it can also participate in the production of meaning. This is particularly important for the analysis of Ukrainian artistic practices that engage with wartime artefacts, as such materials do more than simply induce sensory shock. Fragments of rockets, cartridge cases, weapons, ammunition boxes, armour plates and other remnants of military violence carry within them stories of use, destruction, survival and loss. Their aesthetic power depends not only on their sensory impact, but also on the meanings that remain associated with these objects.

Nicola Perullo's ideas in *Taste as Experience* form the second theoretical axis of our study. Whilst Korsmeyer helps to explain why taste has been marginalised and why this marginalisation should be reconsidered, Perullo offers a positive model for understanding taste as a situational experience. His central thesis is that "taste is a situation, a circumstance and an ecological experience" (Perullo, 2016, p. 1). In this sense, taste is not merely a physiological sensation or a personal preference. It is a relational event that encompasses the perceiver, the perceived object, the environment, and the conditions under which the encounter takes place. This approach is fruitful for analysing works in which material objects are not merely represented, but are placed within a situation of encounter that alters the recipient's mode of attention. This relational understanding of taste is important because it prevents gustatory aesthetics from being reduced to the subject's private reaction to an external object. Taste does not reside solely in the perceiver, nor solely in the object of perception. It arises in the relationship between the

recipient, the object and the situation surrounding them. In this sense, the experience of taste is always an interaction ranging from the material properties of the object itself to the subject's cultural orientation, as well as the atmosphere, context and conditions in which the encounter takes place. That is precisely why, in this article, the gustatory aesthetics is considered not as a theory of the taste of food or drink, but as a critical model for analysing context-dependent forms of proximity, incorporation, and embodied implication.

Thus, in this article, we draw on the ideas of researchers Korsmeyer and Perullo together, but not as interchangeable concepts. Korsmeyer presents a historical-critical argument in which taste is important because it challenges the hierarchy of the senses and the dominance of aesthetic distance. Perullo offers a phenomenological and relational argument that taste is important because it emerges as a situational experience requiring engagement and embodiment. Together, these approaches enable us to understand the aesthetics of taste not as a loose metaphor, but as a model of an undistanced aesthetic experience. In our view, this model is particularly productive for analysing artistic practices that engage with the material remnants of war, where the object of encounter cannot be reduced merely to a sign, image or symbol.

At the same time, the analogy with taste has clear limits. We are not claiming that military artefacts can literally be tasted, or that any physical reaction to sound, touch, visual intensity or spatial pressure constitutes a taste sensation. A loud sound, a tactile surface, a heavy object or a disturbing image do not in themselves create a gustatory experience. This is precisely why it is necessary to distinguish between sensation, perception, affect, trauma and incorporation. Sensation denotes the immediate physical impact of sound, vibration, pressure, texture or darkness. Perception organises this sensory data into a meaningful encounter. Affect concerns pre-reflexive intensity and bodily orientation. Trauma is linked to a disruption of experience, memory, the capacity to act, and narrative integrity. Incorporation, in the sense in which the term is used here, occurs only when an encounter with the material traces of war enters the embodied field of memory, affect and ethical response of the viewer, listener or participant. This distinction also clarifies the relationship between the aesthetics of taste and other theoretical frameworks that will be drawn upon in this article. The aesthetics of taste does not replace affect theory, trauma studies or sound studies. Affect theory helps to describe intensity and highlight bodily reactions. Trauma studies help to analyse rupture, repetition and the complexity of narrative integration. Sound studies help to explain vibration, resonance and acoustic pressure. The gustatory aesthetics adds something else, something that answers the question: under what conditions is external material reality incorporated into the subject's field of experience in such a way that detached observation is no longer sufficient? It is precisely this question, rather than a general theory of corporeality, that guides the subsequent analysis. These boundaries are particularly relevant to contemporary Ukrainian art, created in response to

Russia's war against Ukraine. Since the start of the full-scale invasion (in 2022), Ukrainian artists have increasingly been working not only with images of war, but also with its physical remnants. Among the remnants of war, they actively utilise fragments of rockets and shells, spent ammunition, damaged military equipment, bullet-riddled armour plates, as well as sound recordings resulting from the use of weapons in various ways or from military debris. Such materials are not neutral. They retain their original functions and the associated histories of violence even after their artistic transformation. A rocket fragment remains associated with destruction; a cartridge case with the act of firing; an armour plate with protection, injury and survival. The artistic use of such objects creates a situation in which materiality and memory cannot be completely separated.

We regard all the artistic practices we have selected as unique, independent examples. Some works are directly linked to the aesthetics of taste, as they involve sound, vibration, resonance and physical pressure. Others operate indirectly – through visual encounter, material proximity, symbolic transformation or a commemorative function. This distinction prevents the concept of taste from being applied too broadly. Our aim is to identify those situations in which the material residue of violence breaches aesthetic distance and demands a bodily and ethical response. Artistic transformation does not automatically atone for or neutralise violence. Similarly, the use of war debris does not, in itself, create a sense of closeness to the victims. Such works can become a spectacle, a cathartic game, a patriotic backdrop, a visual curiosity or aestheticised violence. A painted bullet casing may preserve the object's traumatic history, but it can also be consumed as a surface to be decorated. A weapon used as a source of sound may provoke critical reflection, but may also be perceived as a spectacle. Therefore, the ethical power of such practices depends on whether the artwork preserves the object's violent history and whether it prevents the viewer, listener or participant from consuming it as a neutral aesthetic object.

We suggest that the gustatory aesthetics enables us to analyse this ambivalence. It raises the question of how intimacy is produced, what meaning it carries, and whether it fosters an ethical attitude towards the material remnants of violence, or, conversely, reduces it to spectacle. In this sense, the aesthetics of taste offers an opportunity to rethink the connection between trauma, memory, embodiment and aesthetic experience beyond purely representational paradigms. Art related to war is considered here not merely as a representation of violence, but as a field of material encounters in which the remnants of violence can enter into perception as demands for memory, responsibility and critical reflection.

2. Traumatic Experience, Embodied Memory and the Limits of Incorporation

Traumatic experience cannot be understood merely as an event that took place in the past and is subsequently represented in language, memory or art. It alters the way the subject exists in the world. In the context of war,

trauma can encompass physical injury, loss, fear, exhaustion, sensory overload and the repeated disruption of everyday life. Olga Kopyevska emphasises that war-related violence causes not only physical but also psychological and emotional trauma, the psychotraumatic potential of which can persist over time (Kopyevska, 2024, p. 7). This observation shifts the focus from trauma as an isolated event to trauma as an embodied state that influences the subject's perception, orientation and relationship with the surrounding world.

In wartime, this embodied state is rarely shaped by sight alone. Dust, smoke, darkness, acoustic pressure, odour and the physical sensation of polluted air can all contribute to the formation of traumatic perception. This is precisely why the sensory dimension of war should be understood not as an adjunct to representation, but as one of the conditions through which memory, fear and ethical response are formed. From a phenomenological perspective, trauma is not limited to emotion or cognitive content. It can disrupt the experience of time, space, bodily orientation and the continuity of the self. Serhii Rudenko and Mykhailo Tasenko note that phenomenological approaches are essential for understanding traumatic experiences beyond standardised diagnostic frameworks, as they allow for changes in the experience of time, space, the body and the self to be taken into account (Rudenko and Tasenko, 2024, pp. 128, 135–136). Artistic responses to war often address precisely those dimensions of experience that cannot be fully captured by a narrative description of disorientation, acoustic pressure, bodily vulnerability, material exposure and the difficulties of giving form to what has been experienced.

Hanna Meretoja's philosophical reflection on trauma helps to further clarify that a traumatic experience should be defined not primarily in terms of a narrative rupture, but in terms of the damage it inflicts on the subject's ability to act, understand themselves and shape their future prospects. As she writes, "traumatic experience should not be defined primarily in terms of disruption but in terms of how damaging it is" (Meretoja, 2020, p. 34). This approach is particularly important for the analysis of war art, as it prevents trauma from being treated merely as an aesthetic theme or a narrative problem. Trauma concerns the impairment of one's ability to navigate the world, to act, to remember and to imagine the future. Therefore, art that engages with trauma not only represents suffering but can also reveal the difficulties involved in its perception, memory and other modes of consciousness.

Traumatic memory is also linked to material and sensory forms through which the past continues to be present. Unlike ordinary memory, traumatic memory can resurface in the form of fragments, flashbacks, sounds, images, physical reactions or involuntary associations. The concept of memory in the digital age, proposed by Aleida Assmann, emphasises the growing role of photographs, sound recordings, video footage and other media in documenting past reality, whilst drawing attention to their vulnerability and instability over time (Assmann, 2012, p. 428). In art, this instability is often heightened through the use of damaged, broken or incomplete objects. Wartime debris, bullet casings, rocket fragments, photographs, recordings and personal

belongings can function not only as documentary evidence, but also as material traces that bring the past back into the present in the form of an unresolved demand.

The experience of a protracted war also makes it difficult to distinguish between the extraordinary and the everyday. What seems shocking from a distance may become part of the familiar world for those living under constant threat. However, habituation does not negate the trauma. Christian Wilde notes that when a devastating event becomes part of a person's everyday world, it may no longer cause such acute shock, but instead lead to helplessness, depression and chronic vulnerability (Wilde, 2020, p. 226). The repetition of attacks, sirens, losses and destroyed environments does not make violence any less devastating. Rather, it can transform an acute rupture into a prolonged state of physical and emotional exhaustion. Contemporary artistic practices that engage with wartime artefacts operate precisely within this field of damaged memory and prolonged exposure to violence. The aesthetics of taste help to describe those artistic situations in which traumatic material is experienced through proximity, sensory pressure and bodily engagement. In such cases, the viewer, listener or participant cannot treat the object merely as a distant sign.

However, artistic practices do not automatically heal trauma or guarantee an ethical understanding. They can create resources for memory, reflection and collective testimony, but they can also oversimplify, aestheticise or sensationalise violence. Therefore, the following analysis does not treat artistic transformation as inherently redemptive or therapeutic. Instead, we ask how specific works preserve, alter or neutralise the traumatic history of wartime artefacts. The central question is not whether art is capable of transforming trauma into beauty, but whether it can create an aesthetic situation in which the material remnant of violence remains ethically unsettling, rather than being transformed into a consumable image or a decorative object.

3. 'The Sound of Weapons' as Sonic Incorporation

In wartime, sound is perceived not only as an external object that attracts attention, but also as something that can be experienced through vibration, pressure, rhythm, repetition and acoustic shock. This is precisely why sound practices that engage with the materials and sounds of war require an analytical language that goes beyond mere representation. They do not simply 'depict' violence, but organise situations in which the listener encounters its material and acoustic remnants. Sound practices become relevant to the aesthetics of taste when they create a situation in which sound cannot be kept at a safe distance, when the listener encounters the material history of the object that generates this sound, and when such an encounter takes on affective and ethical significance. In this limited sense, the use of weapons as a sonic medium in contemporary Ukrainian music can be analysed as a form of sonic embodiment.

Contemporary musical performance increasingly functions as a form of social and theatrical action, engaging the audience in new ways of participation and perception. As Mariia Lihus notes,

Modern musical performance as a social performance is transformed into a musical and theatrical action [...] a characteristic feature of contemporary musical performance (including academic performance) is the search for experimental mise-en-scene and symbolic means that focus the audience's attention. (Lihus, 2016, p. 124)

In this sense, the use of weapons in musical performance reflects not only an intensification of performativity, but also a reaction to the traumatic intensity of contemporary experience. The work of Ukrainian percussionist and military musician Oleksandr Seleznov, a member of the Band of the Presidential Honor Guard Brigade "Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytskyi", is an example of sonic incorporation (Seleznov, 2023). Trained in academic percussion performance and contemporary musical practice, Seleznov combines technical virtuosity with experimental methods of sound production. Following the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, his compositional practice changed significantly. One of Seleznov's best-known works is the composition 'Unexpected Counterattack' (Seleznov, 2023), which was performed using an RPG-7, an AK-74 assault rifle, a Javelin portable anti-tank missile system and magazines for small arms. Before the war, such a set of 'instruments' might have been perceived as provocative or even unthinkable. In the context of Ukraine's defence, these objects take on a more complex status. They remain instruments associated with violence and destruction, but at the same time are linked to protection, survival, resistance and the defence of civilian life. Their artistic use does not erase their military function. On the contrary, the performance depends on this original function remaining recognisable. The sounds created in the composition 'Unexpected Counterattack' differ from the timbral characteristics of traditional musical instruments. Metallic surfaces, mechanical tension, harsh contact and the recognisable materiality of weapons form an acoustic field that is closer to impact, pressure and percussive force than to melodic development. The listener does not perceive these sounds as neutral musical material. Their origin matters. The RPG-7, AK-74, Javelin and magazines are not merely objects capable of producing sound. They are objects whose usual function belongs to the battlefield. This is precisely why the performance destabilises the boundary between music and noise, between aesthetic experimentation and the acoustic memory of violence. The performance stages the destruction of aesthetic distance. The listener is confronted with a sound whose material source cannot be separated from the history of violence associated with it. The acoustic event is not only heard but also physically experienced. Sound can enter the listener's field of experience as pressure, resonance and recognition. It must not simply be listened to and observed, but also endured, interpreted and ethically reflected upon.

Historically, military music has served ceremonial, signalling and collective functions within the army. Ukrainian musicological sources define military music as that which is linked to the educational, combat and cultural needs of

the troops, played during drill exercises, marches, ceremonies, parades and demonstrations, and also used for signalling and cultural and educational purposes (Filts, 2006, p. 370). In the traditions associated with Kyivan Rus' and the Zaporozhzhia Sich, military music was often performed using portable wind and percussion instruments – trumpets, whistles, kettledrums, tambourines, drums and kettledrums (Filts, 2006, p. 370). Such instruments were effective in open spaces and met the needs of collective coordination, ritual and combat communication.

Seleznov's practice both continues and breaks with this tradition. On the one hand, the composition 'Unexpected Counterattack' utilises the percussive potential of military objects and thus recalls the historical role of rhythm, signals and acoustic power in military contexts. On the other hand, it replaces traditional military instruments with real weapons. It is precisely this substitution that is decisive. A drum or a trumpet may signify military order or collective mobilisation, but an automatic rifle or anti-tank weapon has a direct material connection to destruction. Thus, the performance shifts military sound from the realm of ceremonial representation into the realm of material conflict. It does not merely accompany war, but renders the very object of war audible. On the one hand, this transformation can be understood as an act of resistance and support for the Ukrainian army, particularly given its circulation on social media and public reception. On the other hand, the use of weapons as musical instruments risks turning violence into a spectacle or an acoustic novelty. The critical power of the work depends on whether the listener recognises the violent origins of the weapons, or simply consumes the performance as an unusual musical effect. The piece 'Unexpected Counterattack' illustrates how sound maintains a tension between destruction and protection, violence and survival, noise and music. In this sense, Seleznov's performance can be interpreted as a form of sonic embodiment. The sound of weapons is perceived not only as a distant sign of war, but also as a material acoustic force capable of entering the listener's embodied field of perception. The performance prompts the listener to encounter the material residue of war as something that is simultaneously heard, felt and ethically reflected upon.

4. The Sound Transformation of Wartime Debris

Another important example of the artistic transformation of wartime material relates to the work of the Ukrainian composer Roman Hryhoriv. His practice operates at the intersection of contemporary academic music, performance art, opera and intermedia experimentation, combining sound with physical action, spatial dramaturgy and visual presence. In the context of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, this interdisciplinary approach has taken on particular significance, as Hryhoriv began working with military debris not only as scenographic material but also as a source of sound. This instance demonstrates a more direct form of sound-material incorporation than many visual practices involving wartime artefacts. The object is not merely displayed, painted or symbolically reinterpreted; it is acoustically activated. Its former function as a weapon is not erased, but transformed into a field of resonance, friction, pressure and vibration.

In the summer of 2023, Hryhoriv created a series of performative compositions using the metal casing of a spent rocket projectile from the 'Uragan' multiple launch rocket system, in collaboration with the National Ensemble of Soloists 'Kyiv Camerata'. This artefact came from a private collection of military remnants assembled by a military volunteer whose house had been destroyed during shelling in Irpin by precisely this type of weapon (Nevmerzhytskyi, 2023). The rocket casing is not an abstract object or merely an unusual instrument. It has a concrete connection to destruction, forced displacement and personal loss. Therefore, its transformation into a sound object cannot be separated from the violence to which it is physically linked. In contemporary art, the conceptual underpinnings of a work are of paramount importance, as they 'help' the listener to better understand the work's meaning, the artist's intention and so on. Without these 'additional' explanations, it is sometimes difficult for us to distinguish between a work of art and everyday objects, as both their location and the specific framework that shapes our perception are significant.

Initially, the rocket body was introduced as a scenographic element in the opera project 'Genesis' in October 2022, where it functioned primarily as an installation rather than a musical instrument. Its subsequent activation as a sound source marked an important transition from a visual presence to an acoustic encounter. The audience no longer merely saw a remnant of war, but also heard it. This shift from display to sound is central to the work's aesthetic and ethical power, as the object's material history becomes present not only as an image or symbol, but also as a resonance. The rocket's sonic potential was uncovered through a physical experiment, specifically by running a bow across various sections of its metal surface. This process revealed a wide spectrum of timbral effects – ranging from low-frequency vibrations to piercing, screech-like sounds produced by friction against the rocket's longitudinal sections.

The structural deformations caused by the impact took on acoustic significance, generating unstable resonance patterns and distinct vibrational effects. The resulting sound does not readily fit within the expectations of traditional instrumental performance. It exists on the borderline between music, noise, the sound of an object and an acoustic wound. A publicly available composition, which can be found on the author's page, is, for example, 'LANGSAM - 9M27K' (Hryhoriv, 2023). Hryhoriv's works are relevant to the aesthetics of taste because they create a situation in which the listener cannot completely separate the sound from the violent history of the object that produces it. The resonance of a rocket is not a neutral acoustic phenomenon. It is heard as the sound of a physical object whose usual function is associated with destruction. The work premiered in Kyiv at St Andrew's Church, where the acoustic and symbolic environment heightened the perception of the performance as a sonic requiem. The sacred space, the prolonged reverberation, the visual presence of the rocket casing and the knowledge of its military origins shaped the listener's experience as something more than a musical experiment. The performance did not offer a narrative

representation of violence. Rather, it placed the audience in an acoustic relationship with one of its material remnants. Trauma was not represented directly, but was approached through resonance, pressure and the unstable boundary between sound and memory.



Figure 1. Roman Hryhoriv with body of rocket

Hryhoriv's performances featuring war debris have been staged both in Ukraine and abroad, notably in Ivano-Frankivsk, Berlin and at Blenheim Palace. The reception of these works has varied depending on the context. For a Ukrainian audience, the sound of a rocket might resonate with shared experiences of air raid alerts, destruction, loss and survival. For some members of the international audience, the same object might be viewed from a greater distance – as a striking visual artefact, a curiosity or an unusual musical instrument. This distinction demonstrates that embodied aesthetic perception is neither universal nor automatic. The same object can foster an ethical connection in one context whilst remaining merely a spectacle in another.

The culmination of Hryhoriv's sound experiments with wartime debris was the album 'Irrenaissance' (2024), comprising twelve tracks that explore various configurations of the rocket's sound in combination with electronics,

an orchestra and the human voice. In some compositions, the rocket appears as a solo sound source, whilst in others it is integrated into more complex interlude textures (Hryhoriv, 2024). The closing track, 'Gloria in excelsis Deo', is particularly significant, as the sound of the rocket ceases in it, leaving only the human voice and the piano. This gesture does not merely resolve the violence inherent in the preceding soundscape. Rather, it reinterprets silence as an ethical horizon. The absence of the rocket's resonance becomes significant precisely because the listener has already encountered its acoustic power.

Performer Olena Shykina describes the sound of the rocket as immersive rather than external, noting that the listener feels 'as if inside the rocket itself', and that its timbre varies "from rough, powerful and disharmonious to lyrical, soft and harmonious" (Novitska, 2024). Such testimony suggests that the sound of the object is experienced not merely as an external musical effect, but as an acoustic environment that surrounds and engulfs the listener. At the same time, Shykina's reflections on the human capacity to transform fear and aggression into meaning and action should not be understood as a mere atonement for violence. A rocket does not become innocent simply because it is used in art. Its artistic transformation remains ethically fraught. It may open up space for reflection and action, but it does so only on condition that the memory of its destructive purpose is preserved.

Outside institutional artistic contexts, similar practices of sound transformation can also be observed in everyday wartime situations. Musicians serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine adapt military debris as improvised instruments for informal performances in the field, in particular creating stringed instruments from mine casings. One widely circulated video shows a sapper Andriy performing Volodymyr Ivasyuk's song 'Chervona Ruta', accompanying himself on a so-called 'mine-ukulele' (128 okrema bryhada).



Figure 2. Created a ukulele from a mine. Andriy is a soldier in the 128th Brigade of the Territorial Defence Forces.

Hryhoriv's works demonstrate how wartime debris can be transformed from instruments of destruction into media for embodied meaning-making, without losing their traumatic history. Here, the musical performance does not merely symbolically represent war. It activates a physical object and makes its violent past audible. The sound of a rocket becomes a point where trauma, memory, resistance and ethical ambivalence intersect. Through this sonic transformation, the listener encounters the remnants of war as something that can be heard, felt, remembered and which raises ethical concerns.

5. Visual Transformations of Wartime Debris: Memory, Ornament and the Risk of Aestheticisation

Contemporary Ukrainian art, created during Russia's war against Ukraine, is increasingly turning to the material remnants of violence as artistic media. Visual works created from the debris of war should not be understood merely as illustrations of trauma or symbolic representations of the conflict. At the same time, they cannot automatically be interpreted as successful acts of ethical transformation. Their connection to the aesthetics of taste is more indirect; it arises through material proximity, visual encounter, cultural coding and the viewer's realisation that the object has a history that extends beyond its present artistic form.

In her theory, Jill Bennett argues that affective imagery does not merely convey emotion; it can become a site of thought. As she writes, "affective imagery... does not just produce feeling; it is the site of thought" (Bennett, 2005, p. 10). This assertion allows us to move beyond the assumption that emotionally intense art is merely expressive or therapeutic. In the case of Ukrainian works created from the debris of war, affect becomes significant when it directs critical attention to the object's history, to the violence it embodies, and to the viewer's own stance regarding that violence. Bennett also emphasises that art can "trigger an empathic response from the viewer", which ideally should lead not to a sentimental conclusion, but to "thought and critical inquiry" (Bennett, 2005, p.6).

The viewer is invited to look at an object whose surface has been transformed, yet whose military history remains recognisable. A painted bullet casing, a decorated ammunition box or a plate of armour transformed into a canvas for an image create a tension between visual form and material memory. The viewer may see flowers, landscapes, ornamentation or national symbols, but these images appear on objects associated with gunfire, impact, defence, injury and death. The power of such works lies precisely in this unresolved tension.

One of the most common practices is painting on bullet casings. The artist Inna Zubok from Nizhyn is a consistent example of this approach (Bilous, 2024). By painting used bullet casings, she re-signifies objects associated with death and destruction as vessels of visual memory. Her works often feature landscapes, animals, floral motifs and other images associated with life, duration and fragile beauty. The impact of the works depends on whether the viewer realises that the painted surface remains a bullet casing. If this

realisation fades, the work risks becoming a mere decorative object. If it is maintained, the viewer is confronted with the coexistence of beauty and violence, ornament and destruction, aesthetic pleasure and ethical unease.



Figure 3. Works of Inna Zubok.

Walter Benjamin warned that the aestheticisation of politics transforms violence and power into spectacle, whilst the politicisation of art can reveal the political conditions of aesthetic experience (Benjamin, 1969). In the case of the painted bullet casings, this distinction helps to articulate the central risk. If the viewer perceives the cartridge case merely as an attractive, painted object, the work may descend into aestheticisation. If, however, the history of the cartridge case remains visible and unsettling, the work may politicise perception, forcing the viewer to juxtapose beauty, violence and survival.

In her concept of taste, Korsmeyer challenges the notion that aesthetic experience must necessarily be based on distance and detachment; taste becomes philosophically significant precisely because it engages the subject and destabilises the boundary between observer and object. Visual encounters with the debris of war do not literally replicate the experience of taste. The viewer does not absorb the object. However, they can create a similar structure of engagement, where the object's history precludes neutral contemplation. The viewer cannot look at a painted bullet casing as

an innocent image without simultaneously confronting the threat inherent in the object itself. Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory helps to explain how such objects mediate traumatic experiences beyond the realm of direct testimony. Hirsch understands post-memory as a relationship to the past shaped not only by personal memory, but also by representation, projection and imaginative engagement (Hirsch, 2012, p. 5). War artefacts, transformed into visual art, can function as mediators of such memory. They enable those who did not directly experience a specific attack, battle or loss to encounter their material trace through an aesthetic form. At the same time, such mediation remains precarious. It may open up a space for remembrance, but it may also trivialise or domesticate violence if the object is too readily absorbed into visual pleasure.

The broader field of Ukrainian visual practices can be organised into several interrelated strategies. The first might be termed 'pictorial inscription'- a pictorial or representational form of inscription in which military objects become alternative surfaces for drawing. In addition to Zubok's work, this strategy is evident in the art of Yulia Koval (Koval, 2024), who paints ammunition boxes, cartridge cases, weapons and large-scale military equipment, often as part of charitable initiatives in support of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Vadym Mitkov (Suspilne Zaporizhzhia, 2022) from Zaporizhzhia develops a more intimate version of this approach, creating miniature Ukrainian landscapes on fragments of shells and sometimes combining them with images of destroyed buildings (Smahina, 2023). In these works, visual beauty is not simply set against violence. Rather, it is placed in a tense relationship with it. A landscape painted on a fragment of wartime debris does not negate the destruction, but rather makes the contrast between everyday life and its violent interruption more visible.



Figure 4. Yulia Koval and her works (Skasiv, 2025)

The second strategy can be described as ornamental or traditional re-codification. A particularly telling example is the work of Oksana Bezdon (Sluzhyla viiskovoiu kukharkoiu, 2025), who applies Petrykivka painting to bullet casings, mines and fragments of ammunition. Petrykivka ornamentation (UNESCO, 2013) is associated with the domestic sphere, fertility, continuity and the vitality of Ukrainian visual culture. When it appears on military artefacts, a semantic clash arises. The floral ornament does not merely decorate the object; it imbues a material form associated with death with a cultural code of life. This practice can be interpreted as an attempt to symbolically disarm the object. At the same time, its ethical power depends on whether the object's dangerous origins remain recognisable. If the contradiction remains visible, the ornament becomes a form of resistance rather than concealment.

The third strategy involves functional transformation, whereby military remnants are repurposed into everyday objects. Oleksii Kaplauh (Gvara Media, 2022) from Kharkiv creates interior items - floor lamps and vases - from fragments of ammunition and captured helmets. Kateryna Uvarova (Morozov, 2022) transforms spent cartridges into jewellery and decorative objects, channelling the proceeds towards the reconstruction of the Hryhorii Skovoroda Museum, which was destroyed by shelling. Such works transfer wartime debris into domestic, cultural and social contexts. This movement is ethically complex. On the one hand, it may blur the line between the front line and civilian life, making the material consequences of war visible in everyday spaces. On the other hand, functionalisation may also domesticate the object, thereby weakening its traumatic power. The question, therefore, is not whether functionality is good or bad, but whether it preserves the object's connection to violence, loss and collective responsibility.

The fourth strategy can be described as a sculptural and monumental reconfiguration. Master blacksmith Oleksandr Shaposhnik's sculpture 'Girl-Kalina' (Nova skulptura 'Divchyna-kalyna', 2022), assembled from fragments of shells, transforms metal debris into a figure associated with Ukraine, rebirth, vulnerability and resilience. Projects such as 'ArtBronya' in Lviv (Karnaukh & Deineka, 2022) bring together artists who work with bullet-riddled armour plates from combat kits, transforming them into surfaces for visual reflection. In these cases, the object's previous function takes on particular significance. An armour plate is not merely a piece of metal. It is a protective surface that may bear traces of impact. When it becomes a work of art, it simultaneously embodies the ambiguity of a shield, a wound, an image and a testimony.

The fifth strategy might be described as a sound-symbolic intersection. Of particular importance in this regard is Ivan Bodnar's (Polivchak & Borysevych, 2022) transformation of bullet casings into bells. This overturns the historical logic whereby, during wartime, bells were often melted down to make weapons. Here, an object associated with a gunshot becomes a source of sound linked to mourning, warning, prayer and hope. Although this practice belongs partly to the visual realm, it also activates multisensory imagination.

The viewer imagines not only the object's appearance, but also its potential sound, ritual function and symbolic reversal.

Susan Sontag's reflections in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* are particularly important for understanding this risk (Sontag, 2003). Images and objects associated with suffering may inform, disturb or mobilise the viewer, but they may also give rise to fatigue, detachment or even a form of moral anaesthesia. When violence repeatedly appears in visually striking or aesthetically organised forms, the shock of suffering can be dulled. The viewer begins to perceive war as a familiar spectacle rather than an ongoing human catastrophe. This danger is exacerbated when military artefacts are transformed into beautiful, collectable or decorative objects. A painted surface may attract attention, but at the same time it may conceal the real history of injury, fear and death associated with that object. The ethical ambivalence of such works lies in the fact that they combine an instrument of violence with a creative gesture. In this sense, the ethical power of war-related art depends on a kind of 'language of truth' that maintains a connection with the context.

From the perspective of relational aesthetics, these works can also be understood as creating social situations, rather than merely autonomous objects. Nicolas Bourriaud's (1998) concept of art as a field of relations is significant for our study, particularly when works made from war debris circulate in exhibitions, charity auctions, museum projects, public performances and online platforms. The significance of these objects often arises through participation, donation, testimony, discussion and collective memory. However, the relational dimension should not be idealised. Social engagement does not guarantee ethical depth. A charitable object may retain critical power, but it may also be reduced to a consumable symbol of support. The difference lies in whether the work fosters reflection on violence or reduces it to an easily exchangeable symbol.

This is precisely why Ukrainian visual practices involving wartime debris exist in a liminal space between resistance and aestheticisation. They politicise art when they maintain the tension between an object's violent past and its transformed artistic form. They risk aestheticising violence when this tension disappears and the object becomes merely beautiful, collectable or decorative. The most powerful of these works do not merely invite the viewer to admire the transformation of weapons into art. They demand that we remain conscious of exactly what has been transformed. Their ethical power lies in maintaining a sense of unease. A bullet casing painted with flowers, a piece of armour transformed into an image, or a fragment of a rocket turned into a bell, can become sites of remembrance and resistance only when the artwork prevents the object's violent history from fading away. In this sense, the visual transformation of wartime debris reveals both the potential and the danger of aesthetic affinity.

6. Darkness, Drawing, and the Aesthetics of Working Through

Artistic reflection on war does not always depend on the direct transformation of military artefacts. In some cases, artists turn to traditional means of artistic

expression, but radically alter the conditions under which perception, memory and artistic gesture become possible. A telling example is the experimental project by the contemporary Ukrainian artist Mykola Plekhov (Plekhov, 2010), created in response to Russian attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure. Prolonged power cuts have made darkness a recurring feature of everyday life, transforming the absence of light from a temporary inconvenience into a familiar state. Plekhov's project was based on a simple yet conceptually significant constraint: he created graphic works in complete darkness, without artificial lighting, digital devices or visual feedback (Kravchenko, 2022). The artist deliberately closed his eyes and eliminated extraneous auditory stimuli, leaving only the ambient background sounds of his surroundings - such as the hum of generators or the distant rumble of traffic. The aim was not merely a technical experiment. Rather, the artist used darkness as a condition for observing his own psycho-emotional state and the spontaneous emergence of images, gestures, memories and bodily impulses in the absence of visual orientation. Therefore, darkness in Plekhov's project should not be understood merely as a physical circumstance. It functions as an altered mode of perception brought about by war. The blackout alters the relationship between the body, space and the imagination. Sight, which usually governs the act of drawing, is suspended; the gesture becomes less controlled; the hand begins to capture states that are not entirely accessible to conscious visual correction. Consequently, the resulting image is not merely a representation of darkness, but a trace of the artistic act carried out within it.

The project was carried out in Kyiv between 24 November 2022 and 20 February 2023 using black Canson paper and oil pastels. The visual language of the works is built on the contrast between deep black backgrounds and sharp, light lines. This contrast can be understood not only as a formal choice, but also as a response to the wartime experience of perceptual liminality. In conditions of danger, loss and the destruction of infrastructure, experience is often condensed into opposites: light and darkness, safety and threat, presence and absence, control and disorientation. Plekhov's drawings capture this condensation without reducing it to a direct illustration. According to the artist, the works functioned much like the Rorschach test, resonating most strongly with viewers who had undergone a similar experience of enforced darkness and sensory deprivation. This aspect is significant, as the project does not merely express a private emotional state. It creates a perceptual field in which individual experience can become recognisable to others. Here, the viewer encounters neither a documentary depiction of war nor a transformed military object, but rather a visual trace of a state shared by many civilians during the attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure.

The process of creating the works also involved subsequent reflection with a psychologist, which enabled the artist to correlate gestural expression, emotional states and subconscious associations. Over time, the project documented a transformation in both visual style and inner orientation. Aggressive and fragmented lines gradually gave way to smoother and more fluid forms. This shift indicates that darkness was experienced not merely as

a threat, deprivation or paralysis. It also became a space for adaptation, reflection and partial acceptance. The project therefore does not portray the disappearance of trauma, but rather a slow re-evaluation of the subject's relationship to the traumatic state. Dominic LaCapra's conceptual distinction between 'acting out' and 'working through' helps to clarify this process. "Acting out [...] involves the compulsive return of the trauma [...] Working through [...] implies a more critical and self-aware relationship" (LaCapra, 2001, p. 142). Plekhov's project can be understood precisely in this second register. It does not overcome trauma in a therapeutic or redemptive sense, nor does it transform darkness into a positive aesthetic value. Rather, it creates a disciplined artistic situation in which the traumatic state of a blackout can be re-enacted, observed, brought to the surface and gradually worked through by means of gesture.



Figure 5. Mykola Plekhov's work.

Unlike the sound-based practices of Hryhoriv and Seleznov, or the visual transformations of bullet casings and military debris, Plekhov's project does not focus on the physical remnants of weapons. He does not work with military artefacts whose violent history is physically present within the artwork itself. Its relevance lies in the transformation of the wartime condition of perception into an artistic method. Darkness becomes the medium through which trauma is registered, explored and, to some extent, worked through. The project engages with bodily vulnerability, sensory deprivation, affective intensity and altered perception; it arises from the conditions that war imposes on everyday perception itself. At the same time, Plekhov's project demonstrates that contemporary Ukrainian art responds to the war not only by rethinking its physical debris, but also by transforming the sensory conditions generated by the war into an artistic form. The absence of light becomes a medium for reflection; drawing - a means of capturing disorientation; gesture - a means of negotiating fear, memory and adaptation. In this sense, the project belongs to an aesthetic of working through, in which artistic practice does not erase trauma but creates a space where one can

approach it without reducing it to either spectacle or direct representation. Alongside works by Inna Zubok, Oksana Bezhon, Roman Hryhoriv, Oleksandr Seleznev and other artists, Plekhov's project highlights the diversity of Ukrainian artistic responses to the experience of war. Some practices engage with the material remnants of violence, whilst others deal with altered modes of perception, darkness, sound and bodily vulnerability. They are united not by a single technique or a universal aesthetic strategy, but by a shared desire to resist the neutralisation of traumatic experience. Their ethical significance lies in their ability to preserve a sense of unease, activate memory and create conditions for reflection in circumstances where everyday perception itself has been damaged by the war. At the same time, they shape new forms of aesthetic taste and judgement, which arise from specific social conditions brought about by and shaped through the hostilities.

7. Conclusions

The analysis presented in this article has shown that contemporary Ukrainian artistic practices which engage with military artefacts, weapons, sound, darkness and the material remnants of violence require an aesthetic language that goes beyond mere representation. These works do not merely depict war or illustrate traumatic experiences. In various ways, they create situations in which viewers, listeners and participants encounter the remnants of violence – whether as objects, sounds, images or altered conditions of perception – which maintain an ethical tension.

The article has argued that the aesthetics of taste can serve as a productive framework for analysing such practices, provided that the term is used in a restricted and methodologically precise sense. Taste is not understood here as the literal taste of food or drink, as an aesthetic judgement in the Kantian sense, or as a general synonym for bodily intensity. Drawing on the concepts of Carolyn Korsmeyer and Nicola Perullo, the aesthetics of taste is considered as a model of proximity, embodiment, vulnerability and ethical engagement. Its relevance lies in its ability to describe those aesthetic situations in which detached contemplation becomes unstable, and the recipient is confronted with material or sensory traces that must be perceived, endured, interpreted and made sense of.

The sound-based works of Oleksandr Seleznev and Roman Hryhoriv are examples in which the artists use weapons and fragments of military equipment as sources of sound, vibration, resonance and physical pressure. In these works, the listener encounters the artefact not merely as an image or symbol, but also as an acoustic force in which the object's menacing history remains palpable. The sound of a weapon or a rocket casing is not neutralised by its artistic use; on the contrary, it preserves the tension between destruction, defence, survival and memory.

The visual practices discussed in this article operate somewhat differently. In their works, Inna Zubok, Oksana Bezhon, Yulia Koval, Vadym Mitkov and Oleksandr Shaposhnik transform bullet casings, ammunition boxes, armour plates, helmets and war debris into painted, ornamental, sculptural, functional or commemorative objects. These practices are relevant to the aesthetics of taste in a more indirect way. They do not engage the viewer through vibration or acoustic

pressure, but can create a sense of material and symbolic closeness if the viewer remains aware that the transformed surface is still associated with gunfire, injury, defence, destruction or survival. These practices also play a part in reshaping aesthetic and ethical perceptions. By transforming military remnants into objects of sound, image, memory and public attention, Ukrainian artists challenge the reductive perception of Ukraine as a passive victim of war. Instead, they demonstrate Ukrainian cultural agency, capable of responding to destruction without denying the violence itself. At the same time, such works can counteract the normalisation of war, preventing military artefacts from becoming mere 'facts of life'. When placed within artistic, museum, performative or public contexts, these objects can compel the viewer to look beyond the painted surface, the ornamental form or the striking materiality - towards the human cost of the conflict. In this sense, their significance lies not in creating beauty from ruins, but in transforming the remnants of violence into a poignant aesthetic and ethical challenge.

Mykola Plekhov's works demonstrate the transformation of a wartime condition of perception into an artistic method, where darkness becomes a medium through which fear, disorientation, memory and adaptation can be explored; for it is we who determine the conditions under which material or sensory proximity acquires aesthetic and ethical significance.

The study also showed that the artistic transformation of war artefacts is ambivalent. Such practices can create spaces for remembrance, resistance, solidarity and critical reflection, but they also risk turning violence into a spectacle, a decorative surface or a sensational novelty. The value depends on whether the work preserves the connection between the object's threatening past and its transformed aesthetic form. The ethics of proximity emerges as a possible outcome of specific aesthetic situations in which the viewer or listener cannot consume the residue of violence as a neutral object; where discomfort persists, the object's history is preserved, and it does not become an empty performance. In this sense, contemporary Ukrainian art is an important arena for rethinking the connection between trauma, memory, embodiment and aesthetic experience. By working with weapons, fragments of rockets, bullet casings, armour plates, darkness, sound and other conditions engendered by war, Ukrainian artists do not merely create representations of destruction. They create encounters with its remnants. Such encounters can foster individual and collective reflection, but their power does not lie in resolving trauma. Rather, it lies in holding the complex space between pain and form, memory and materiality, resistance and aesthetic risk. Thus, this article does not propose a general 'taste for war'. Instead, we argue that certain artistic practices create multisensory situations in which sound, image, material memory and bodily vulnerability remain inseparable from ethical interpretation. Gustatory aesthetics emerges when aesthetic experience becomes a form of embodied engagement.

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