CRIMEAN PERSPECTIVES: CAPTIVE OF THE CONTEXT

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"The human body becomes political, even without its consent". Ukrainian artist Maria Kulikovska has said. Unapologetic in her frankness, Kulikovska works with a semi-activist attitude that unsettles the administrative apparatus and its representatives. Her practice is deeply intertwined with contextual pressure, whether governmental or social. Unwillingly, after leaving Crimea in 2014 she was considered an Internally Displaced Person (IDP) by the Ukrainian state. The historical fate of many of her works unleashes this complicated political context in which consent is bypassed—similar to people who contend with displacement.

In 2010, Kulikovska started to work on *The Army of Clones* — 20 plaster sculpture-casts, molded from her own naked body. From 2012, this piece was on view in the garden of the Foundation IZOLYATSIA in Donetsk, an industrial city in the east of Ukraine, in the exhibition "Gender in IZOLYATSIA: Seams of Patriarchy and Identity Tailoring," curated by Olena Chervonik. After the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2014, the occupation of the territory by the so-called Donetsk People's Republic began. The pro-Russian terrorist group took over IZOLYATSIA's building and made it into a prison, a place for torture. On the 9th of June 2014, the sculptures from *The Army of Clones* were shot, possibly used as targets in an

act of loathing and disgust towards the object of Ukrainian culture. The pro-Russian officer who gave the decree to demolish Kulikovska's works later called this action, speaking in the Russian media, 'destroying the degenerative art'.

After that incident Kulikovska recreated her own naked body in sculptures many times, using different materials for casting: plaster, wax, or soap. By placing these works under the open sky, the artist lets the natural forces such as wind and rain change them, modifying them until they are completely destroyed by the environment. However, in 2014 the environment appeared to be too political and the destruction far too literal.

I often think about the body and about how much of history–and, together with that, pain–it keeps in itself. In The Immigrant Artist Biennial 2023: *Contact Zone* water colors from three of Kulikovska's biographical series made between 2014-2022 are on view. Through body parts, they chart Kulikovska's anxieties and observations. I see, in this method of dissociation from the body that Kulikovska is applying, an attempt to purify–to rejuvenate the body, to leave at least some part of the trauma behind, to let this trauma live separately and be destroyed by more or less the same context that brought it to existence.

Maria Kulikovska, Grouped by series from right to left, *my beautiful. Wife?,* 2014, *Saga about pregnant me and my pregnant husband,* 2021, and *888,* 2018. Water colors on medical records and architectural paper. Photographed by Julia Gillard. Courtesy of EFA Project Space and The Immigrant Artist Biennial.

In 2020 Kulikovska was creating a palimpsest-like series of drawings placing watercolor flowers, genitals, and naked bodies over bureaucratic documents and passport scans. In the *Constitution of the President-ess of the Crimea*, the artist tells about the long process of answering personal questions while filling out applications for visas, attempting to romanticize it. This work addresses questions about values and, at the same time, it talks about an interference in personal boundaries by the indifferent bureaucratic machine. In 2019, a year before creating the series, in the interview to Ukrainian digital broadcasting station Hromadske, Kulikovska noted: "It's unpleasant when they [Ukrainian Authorities] say: you have a Crimean registration, so you are not a resident of Ukraine."

Maria Kulikovska. *Constitution of the President-ess of the Crimea,* 2020. Watercolor on paper, various sizes. Courtesy of the artist.

Kulikovska, like myself and another TIAB 2023: *Contact Zone* artist Kathie Halfin, was born in southern Ukraine on the Crimean peninsula, a crucial territory for the consciousness of post-Soviet citizens. The resting place for several generations of the Russian monarch dynasty, it was perceived as a paradise resort during Soviet times–due in part to its partly sub-tropical environment along the southern coast. Here, the famous negotiations after the Second World War took place, and this is the place where the Kyiv Rus was baptized–right on a shore covered with the ruins of Ancient Greek

civilization. In 2014, a Crimean referendum occurred–unrecognized by international law. *De jure*, the peninsula stayed as a part of Ukrainian territory but, *de facto*, is under Russian authority to this day.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and General Secretary Joseph Stalin at the Yalta Conference, held 4–11 February 1945, in Yalta located in Crimea. There the United States, United Kingdom, and Soviet Union met to discuss the postwar reorganization of Europe. From the collections of Encyclopedia Britannica.

An absolute majority of Crimean citizens have remained there since the annexation and have applied for a Russian passport, either willingly or imperatively. All of my friends and classmates, for example, have stayed there. My grandmothers, two uncles, and a cousin stayed as well. We might never see each other again. Now, it is physically impossible to get to Crimea through the official Ukrainian checkpoint—because of the literal warzone on the mainland all around Crimea, and throughout Russia. It is illegal according to international law, because setting up processes to cross the border would affirm the *de facto* ownership of the peninsula by Russia. On top of that, it might be personally dangerous for anyone active in the pro-Ukrainian field.

Being born in the periphery sometimes entails a continuous process of proving your political views or your inner sense of belonging. Being born in Crimea and living in Ukraine after the annexation, I was sometimes perceived as a suspicious element. Several acts of discrimination caused me to be ashamed and fearful

of mentioning my hometown. This lasted for around five years after moving to Kyiv. I did not share publicly where I was from, to avoid being asked about it during conversation. This is something that I imagine all of us, displaced citizens, sometimes feel.

I cannot count how many examples of displaced public figures talking openly about their homelands I had to see and hear until I understood that being from a problematic territory on the periphery is not shameful.

I often wonder if there is a chance to get a break from the body and the history that it holds—to imagine that no past has happened. It would be more pleasant to live without this baggage, and to be free to create without connection to its previous experience. Eventually, to break free you have to dive into your own context, to let yourself be captivated by it, to dissolve in it and become its official representative—perhaps, that is the solution.

Crimea occupied by Germany one year before the deportation of Crimean Tatars by the USSR. Photos made by Wehrmacht photographer Herbert List in 1943