



Title

Alevtina Kakhidze

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About the author(s)

is an art historian, curator and artist. Her current research focus is contemporary Ukrainian art, decoloniality and the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine. Biedarieva holds a PhD in History of Art from the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London. She curated the exhibition *At the Front Line. Ukrainian Art, 2013–2019*, which was exhibited in Mexico and Canada. She is the editor of *Contemporary Ukrainian and Baltic Art: Political and Social Perspectives, 1991–2021* (2021) and co-editor, with Hanna Deikun, of *At the Front Line. Ukrainian Art, 2013–2019* (2020).

Cover image:

Alevtina Kakhidze

by Svitlana Biedarieva • 27.07.2022

The works of Alevtina Kakhidze (b.1973) are directly informed by her biography. Born in the Donetsk region in eastern Ukraine, the artist has developed her practice in Kyiv, while always maintaining a connection to her birthplace. Initially, Kakhidze worked predominantly as a performance artist, using the discipline to address subjects of gender, social status and the position of female artists in a complex system of cultural hierarchies. For her performance *Only For Men, Or My Destined Beloved Show Yourself In The Mirror* **FIG.1**, the artist sat in front of a mirror in a gallery and only allowed male visitors into the room, critically reflecting the dominance of male visibility in a patriarchal society.¹ A subsequent performance, *I Am Late For The Plane Which Is Impossible To Miss* (2010), saw the artist borrow a private jet from the notorious Ukrainian oligarch and patron of the arts Rinat Akhmetov. The artist wrote letters to the wealthiest people in the country, in which she asked them to draw the landscape from the windows of their private jets. Two years later, the Akhmetov Foundation responded, giving the artist access to a private jet so that she could draw the view herself. Although Kakhidze took the flight, she chose not to draw anything while in the air because, according to her, it was not her intention to create a work but rather her request that the jet owner create it.² The project rethinks the hierarchical relationship between patron and artist, and the differing circumstances and limitations surrounding both.

Perhaps the topic that most frequently emerges in Kakhidze's work is the world of plants as a political and social metaphor. The artist's fascination with plants is rooted in their ability to regenerate under any circumstances, as well as their strength and quiet resilience. Her interest in plants is expressed in such projects as *For Children About the Citizenship of People, Plants, and Animals* (2016), *The Battle of Gardeners* (2017), *Flycatchers and Other Insects Go to Vote* (2017), *I Still Draw Love, Plants and Things* **FIG.2** and *The Green Theatre Where Plants and Insects Are Actors* (2021). Since 2011 she has also organised a private residency programme, The Muzychi Expanded History Project, in her house in Muzychi, a rural area near Kyiv. The house is surrounded by the artist's sustainable garden, allowing the residents to work closely with nature while also contributing to the local and national artistic development of the village. For *I Still Draw Love, Plants and Things*, Kakhidze drew three locations – the site of the exhibition in which the work was shown (Brussels), her current home (Muzychi) and her birthplace (Zhdanivka) – as

one single, seamless 'political' garden, which represents an ideal of unity that is currently fractured by the war.

Connections to the land became the main facet of Kakhidze's work when Russia invaded Ukraine in April 2014. Zhdanivka was occupied by pro-Russian forces as part of the self-proclaimed Donetsk Popular Republic. Kakhidze was unable to return to visit her mother, fearing for her life because of her activism and public pro-Ukrainian statements.³ On numerous occasions Kakhidze attempted to convince her mother to come to Kyiv, but she did not want to leave the land and the house to which she had dedicated her life. In a text written in 2006 the artist described Zhdanivka as a place with no particular interest:

No books have ever been written about my town [...] Zhdanivka, a town. Pop. 14.8 thousand. Coal mining... No cultural or historical monuments, no museums, no theatres, no hotels, no art galleries, no parks, no river.⁴

However, subsequently, it is this small town to which she has she dedicated a large number of her works.

For *Through The War With Strawberry Andreevna* (2014–19) Kakhidze recorded phone conversations that she had with her mother over the course of five years, in which she described her daily life under occupation. From these Kakhidze created a series of drawings, referring to her mother by the nickname Strawberry Andreevna. The name Klubnika (Strawberry), after her original name of Liudmyla, was given to her mother by a child at the nursery where she worked as a teacher. The series presented a unique form of reportage from the danger zone, as seen by the apparently ingenuous eyes of a direct witness. When listening to the recordings it is, at times, impossible to distinguish between the voices of mother and daughter; although they are separated by distance and political borderlines, they are united in shared feelings of fear, anxiety and apprehension. For example, in a collage of drawings from the series, titled *Not the End* **FIG.3**, the artist recounts the story of a monk who was killed by shelling in 2014, as told to her by Strawberry Andreevna:

9.09.2014 A monk died from a frag injury on Zhdanivka cemetery. He didn't go there to call, he'd been living there in the small monastery by the chapel. At this point Strawberry Andreevna added: Nothing is gonna happen to me, understand? I understood that there's no way – not tears, not threats, not trickery – to convince her to leave Zhdanivka.



Fig. 1 *Only For Men, Or My Destined Beloved Show Yourself In The Mirror*, by Alevtina Kakhidze. 2006. Performance. (Courtesy the artist).

It is noteworthy that a number of these reports from ‘the front line’ follow a laconic pattern. In this sparsity, Strawberry Andreevna becomes an almost mythical character, who can be bestowed with additional attributes and characteristics.

Kakhidze’s work also addresses more personal instances of conflict within families and local communities as a result of territorial occupation. The drawing *Mum, you did nothing wrong!* / “*Oh Lyuda, what have you done?! You’re not getting your pension* **FIG.4**, refers to misunderstandings with pro-Russian relatives who ‘sympathised’ with Strawberry Andreevna over her loss of pension as a result of her refusal to move away from the area. Here, the artist depicts herself as a large, even dominating, figure who protectively holds her mother, tiny in stature, in her hands, defending her from allegations of support for Russia. In order to receive their pension, retired people had to cross the border between Ukraine-controlled and Russian-occupied territories. Queues at military outposts could become very long, often involving several hours of waiting, and in 2019 Kakhidze’s mother died in one such queue. In tribute to her mother, Kakhidze now teaches art to children in the village of Muzychi, which she considers to be an important stimulus for her seemingly naive works.

With the Russian invasion in February 2022, Kakhidze’s art became more radical. Her critique of the war continues to be enacted through a personal lens, however her anti-colonialist narratives are more explicit and her reference points are wider, articulating the violence and imminent danger that characterise life for so many in Ukraine. In the drawing *Self-Portrait With Russian Military Hardware* **FIG.5**, made in March 2022, Kakhidze depicts the

trajectory of Russian invaders and their proximity to her home, which is situated at the intersection of the movement of military equipment used for the destruction of Ukrainian cities and villages. At this time, the artist was forced to spend the majority of time in the basement of her house, with air raid sirens repeatedly blaring. In *Bucha. Me. 47 Minute By Car* **FIG.6**, drawn a month later, the artist paradoxically depicts the impossibility of visually recording the extreme violence that occurred in the town of Bucha, one of the Kyivan suburbs that was heavily affected by Russian occupation. Her body is bent in sorrow, shown in front of a vast red blot, which marks the massacre of civilians and numerous rapes that Russian soldiers performed there.

An important element of Kakhidze's current work is the artist's call for the 'cancellation' of Russian culture, which she sees as the cause of the violence that is unfolding in Ukraine. Her drawings reflect an ongoing national reconsideration of once-dominant Russian culture and a move towards a renewed focus on Ukrainian culture, which was suppressed for centuries under Russian imperial rule. A number of her recent drawings are strongly anti-colonialist in their expression, and she continues to challenge the habitual imperialist dichotomy of Russian culture as 'enveloping' Ukrainian culture.⁵ In *Russian Culture Looks for an Alibi that It is not a Killer* **FIG.7**, the artist depicts a crawling hybrid monster, with the figures of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky representing the two heads of Russia's state coat of arms, which moves towards the West on the legs of Russian ballet dancers. It also includes the poet Joseph Brodsky, represented as one of his beloved cats, and the name of the Russian artist Anatoly Osmolovsky, representing 'contemporary art from Russia', which follows in the wake of the grotesque creature. In this darkly ironic image, Kakhidze illustrates the roles afforded to significant Russian cultural figures in the reconfiguration, and also the disfigurement, of the current post-truth ideology and the propaganda of the Russian state – they become a smokescreen that enables Russia to commit war crimes and atrocities while retaining the face of a 'civilised' country. A socially sensitive and prolific artist, Kakhidze explores a vast range of sociopolitical topics in her work and responds to the everyday traumas and concerns of Ukrainian society with impressive acuity.

This is the third in a series of profiles of contemporary Ukrainian artists.



Fig. 2 *I Still Draw Love, Plants and Things*, by Alevtina Kakhidze. 2017. Acrylic paint on paper. (Courtesy the artist).



Fig. 3 *Not the end* from the series *Through The War With Strawberry Andreevna*, by Alevtina Kakhidze. 2014–19. Acrylic marker pen and pencil on paper. (Courtesy the artist).



Fig. 4 Mum, you did nothing wrong!" / "Oh Lyuda, what have you done?! You're not getting your pension, by Alevtina Kakhidze. 2014. Acrylic marker pen and pencil on paper, 21 by 29.8 cm. (Courtesy the artist).

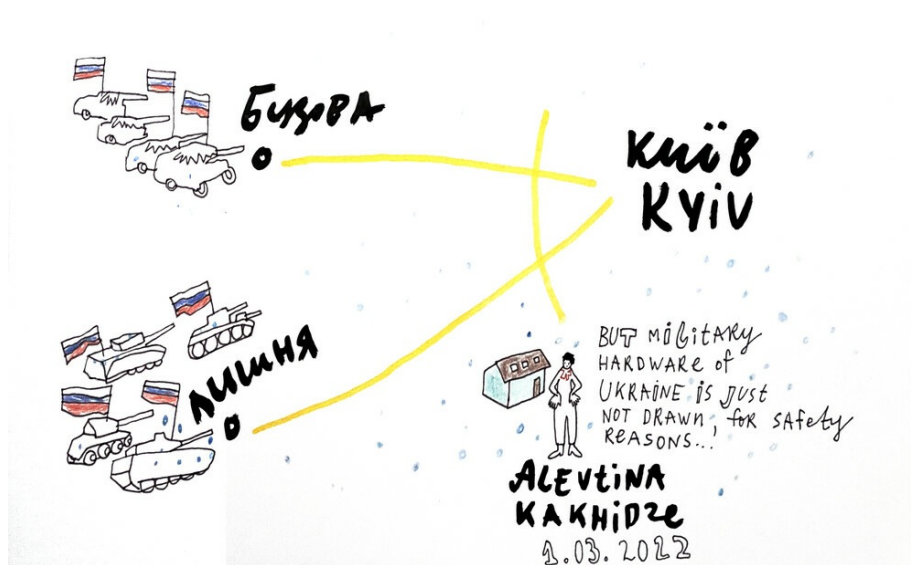


Fig. 5 Self-portrait with Russian Military Hardware from the series Wartime. A New Chapter of the Russia-Ukraine War Dated From 24.02.2022, by Alevtina Kakhidze. 2022. Acrylic marker pen and pencil on paper. (Courtesy the artist).

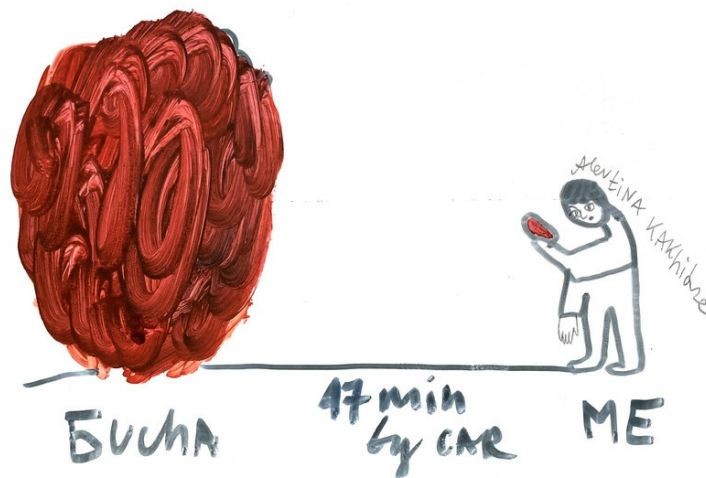


Fig. 6 *Bucha. Me. 47 Minute By Car* from the series *Wartime. A New Chapter of the Russia-Ukraine War Dated From 24.02.2022*, by Alevtina Kakhidze. 2022. Acrylic paint, marker pen and pencil on paper. (Courtesy the artist).



Fig. 7 *Russian Culture Looks for an Alibi that It is not a Killer* from the series *Wartime. A New Chapter of the Russia-Ukraine War Dated From 24.02.2022*, by Alevtina Kakhidze. 2022. Acrylic marker pen and pencil on paper. (Courtesy the artist).

Footnotes

- 1** See V. Shiller: 'Alevtina Kakhidze: "Til'ky dlia cholovikiv, abo sudzenyi-riadzenyi, znavys' meni u dzerkali"' ('Alevtina Kakhidze: "Only For Men, Or My Destined Beloved Show Yourself In The Mirror"'), in K. Iakovlenko, ed.: *Chomu v ukrains'komu mystetstvi ye velyki khudozhnytsi (Why There Are Great Women Artists in Ukrainian Art)*, Kyiv 2019, pp.148–55.
- 2** Conversation between Alevtina Kakhidze and the present author, 23rd July 2022.
- 3** See S. Biedarieva: 'Art communities at risk: on Ukraine', *October* 179 (Winter 2022), pp.144–45, available at direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/octo_a_00452/2004496/octo_a_00452.pdf, accessed 26th July 2022; and K. Iakovlenko: 'Alevtina Kakhidze: the artist who "made Donbas human"', *Open Democracy* (29th July 2019), available at www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/alevtina-kakhidze-artist-donbas-ukraine/, accessed 21st July 2022.
- 4** A. Kakhidze: *Zhdanovka*, Maastricht 2006, pp.1–5, available at www.alevtinakakhidze.com/topic_05/zhdanovka.pdf, accessed 21st July 2022.
- 5** See S. Biedarieva: 'Ukrainian wartime art: anti-colonial resistance in a decolonial age', *immediations* 19 (forthcoming).

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