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## To Survive: Towards an Anthropology of Shelter

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### To Make Yourself Invisible

In Lena Lagushonkova's *Life in Case of War*,<sup>1</sup> a drama written less than two months after the outbreak of war in Ukraine “on the basis of real stories,” an instruction manual on how to survive is created from scattered dramatic stories, traumatic flashbacks and heard truisms. The convention of the text oscillates between the elaboration of real textual help for people threatened by warfare and the exposure of the total helplessness in the face of war, revealing – always – the randomness, fragility and precariousness of human life in the face of brutal violence. Despite the collective and therapeutic dimension of both Lagushonkova's drama and its staging (the text was written specifically for specific Ukrainian refugee actresses and also included their stories), it fundamentally reminds us that, as Judith Butler wrote, “precariousness

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the Theatre Polski in Bydgoszcz for providing me with the text of the drama. The text was translated by MAart translation agency for the “Kontakt” International Theatre Festival in Toruń, all quotes are from this translation.

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implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other" and that "precarious life implies life as a conditioned process."<sup>2</sup> At the end of the performance, the actresses transform again symbolically into refugee women whose status is uncertain and who are exposed to the randomness of war and refugee biopolitics.

*Life in Case of War* is made up of eleven short scenes, constituting the successive points of this manual. One of them refers to rape as a potential and at the same time probable event threatened by life in a country at war. The fact that the text was written for six Ukrainian actresses who flew to Poland after February 24, 2022, and also takes into account their stories, emphasizes the collective, feminist dimension of this drama, in which sexual violence becomes an experience that unites a community of potential victims. Rape appears here as one of the old techniques of war, part of a brutal necropolitics whose aim is to ruin the enemy's world, to turn the space of her/his existence into a place where life is impossible:<sup>3</sup> this is achieved through the real and symbolic destruction of the space and time in which the victim/colonized lives, but also the destruction of her/his body and psyche – fragile and vulnerable elements.

According to Lagushonkova's war manual – taken here, of course, in ironic parenthesis by putting it in the mouth of a chorus of psychologists, most probably men – the only way to avoid the destructive power of rape is to try to separate the body and the affective sphere. To make the body a s y m b o l i c shelter, and thus – to be able to survive. Faced with the cruelty of this kind of violence and the possible strategies to "minimize losses," we are confronted here with the question: what does it mean to survive? Is survival inscribed, as it were, a priori, in the subsequent rebirth? And is not the potentiality of rape itself a form of violence that turns the world into a hostile place in which, in order to survive, one must make oneself as invisible as possible, d i s a p p e a r f r o m s i g h t?

If rape cannot be prevented and you are not sure whether you're able to put up a fight, try to "freeze" inside and out. The rapist isn't interested in sex but in proving his power over you, he wants to humiliate and degrade you. Active resistance on the part of a victim will spark and feed sadistic behavior. Therefore, the woman might be exposed to more pain and suffer genital and bodily injuries.

CHORUS: Advice from psychologists:

2 Judith Butler, *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 14, 23.

3 See Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

Repeat to yourself: “This is only my body, my soul is bigger, stronger, it cannot be possessed. I am 1000 times greater than my body. It’s just a body.”

- Important: do not allow yourself to feel guilty. The rapist is to blame, the occupier is to blame.

If possible, perform basic hygiene. But don’t risk your life to fetch a bucket of water from a well that is under fire.

- Most importantly: do not allow yourself to feel guilty. The rapist is to blame, the occupier is to blame.

If you’re in pain, use household antiseptics: a solution of baking soda (1 teaspoon per 0.5 liters of water), plain clean water, alcohol-free wet wipes for children, Tri-derm ointment, Levomekol ointment, Triacutan ointment, Bepanthen ointment. You can use Chlorhexidine once. Also regular hand cream, if you have any.

Remember: The rapist is to blame, the occupier is to blame. Do not allow yourself to feel guilty.

Do not use antiseptics or wipes containing alcohol, hydrogen peroxide, Panthenol, oil, or other greasy products.

- Important: do not allow yourself to feel guilty. The rapist is to blame, the occupier is to blame.

If you are of reproductive age, the risk of unwanted pregnancy is high, especially on day 6 to 16 of your menstrual cycle. For emergency contraception, take 0.1 mg of ethinylestradiol (i.e. 5 tablets of 0.02 mg or 4 tablets of 0.025 mg, or 2 tablets of 0.03 and 0.035 mg), and no less than 0.5 mg of Levonorgestrel. Repeat the dose after 12 hours.

This contraception is most effective if used within the first 24 to 72 hours after unprotected sex.

Remember: The rapist is to blame, the occupier is to blame. Do not allow yourself to feel guilty.

As soon as you have the opportunity, see a psychologist and a doctor, and get tested for sexually transmitted diseases.

Do not allow yourself to feel guilty. The rapist is to blame, the occupier is to blame. Were you taking notes?

Here, Lagushonkova touches upon an experience that remains – constantly – tabooed and – always – insufficiently reported and represented, and whose real image and traumatic impact on the lives of specific individuals will probably only be discovered many years after the end of hostilities in Ukraine. This invisibility of rape is also highlighted by the Israeli researcher and curator Ariella Aisha Azoulay in her text “The Natural History of Rape”<sup>4</sup> (under this

4 Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 236–264 or Ariella Aisha Azoulay, “The Natural History of Rape,” accessed January 2, 20203,

title, she also presented a work at the 12th Berlin Biennale in 2022: it consisted of a montage of historical photographs, book and magazine covers, textual commentaries, drawings, and finally the so-called “untaken photographs” – a concept whose theoretical basis she develops in her book *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*). Azoulay focuses on the rapes carried out by Soviet (but also, somewhat later, Allied) soldiers in Berlin at the end of April and throughout May 1945: several hundred thousands<sup>5</sup> women fell victim to them there at the time. The official date of the end of the war does not mark the end of the suffering of German women: in fact, the next month is a period of suspended law, a moment removed from “historical time” and therefore formless in its own way. This obscurity of the end and uncertainty of the beginning, so characteristic of moments of historical catastrophe, becomes for Azoulay a pretext to point to the oppressiveness of imperial history, which establishes itself by making invisible the suffering of the powerless.

In her essay, Azoulay refers to Marguerite Duras, who notes in the days of the war’s end: “Berlin is burning. [...] There are still some people alive there. [...] I think of the German mother of the little seventeen-year-old soldier who lay dying on August 17, 1944, alone on the heap of stones on the Quai des Arts.”<sup>6</sup> The French writer empathizes with the fate of German women and outlines a perspective on the potentiality of rape as a universal experience – thus evading the national, wartime logic that denies the enemy care and humanity. Rather, she tries to make the memory of violence and destruction multidirectional:<sup>7</sup> she later develops this way of talking about the catastrophe of war in the screenplay *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959). The theme that appears here, between the words, of the hunt for women – they are German women, but after all, the same experience happened in France and elsewhere to collaborators, lovers of Germans, finally: completely random women who find themselves in the “wrong place at the wrong time” – is later developed in the scenario of the film about the double tragedy of Hiroshima and of Her (the French Woman), where the main character survives the end of the war

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[https://s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/fourcs-content/files/689/original/natural\\_history\\_rape.pdf?1588861085](https://s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/fourcs-content/files/689/original/natural_history_rape.pdf?1588861085). As an artistic installation *Natural History of Rape* (2017/2022), accessed January 2, 2023 <https://12.berlinbiennale.de/artists/ariella-aisha-azoulay/>.

5 Different sources give different statistics. Azoulay writes, for example, of between 500,000 to 700,000 women raped in Berlin, which at first glance seems exaggerated, although not impossible.

6 I quote from: Azoulay, *Potential History*, 249–250.

7 See Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

locked in the basement of the family home: a place that is her private prison and, at the same time, a shelter, protecting her from the “hunt” and, in effect, from being lynched or raped. This reference to *Hiroshima mon amour*, is also related to the question of what is invisible:<sup>8</sup> what eludes vision in the historical process, what remains impossible to represent/tell or is overlooked by an imperial, universal history. What, however, survives “in spite of all.”

The title of Azoulay’s essay and work directly refers to Winfried Georg Sebald and his “On the Natural History of Destruction.”<sup>9</sup> In it, Sebald recounts the Allied bombing and complete ruination of many German cities during the Second World War as an experience that never fully entered either literature or the collective consciousness of Germans, remaining something not fully experienced, repressed, partially erased also from the realm of the visual. Azoulay – contrary to the author of *Austerlitz* – focuses, however, not on the image of ruined cities, but on the blinded (also by Sebald) “human ruins”: she draws attention to the invisibility of rape and to the absence of testimonies related to this experience in historical archives. Meanwhile, German cities, especially Berlin, were full of photojournalists in the days just after the end of the war: “did they not witness these rapes first hand, or did they choose not to use their cameras when their fellow soldiers raped women in front of their eyes?”<sup>10</sup> In keeping with her methodology of analyzing non-existent visual testimony, Azoulay also analyses the photographs of ruined Berlin: she points out that, outside the ruins, only soldiers and photojournalists are in them. The absence of women in the photographs is a kind of *à rebours* testimony to prove the scale of the oppression directed against them. Azoulay draws attention to the facades of ruined houses: depending on the case and the specific situation, they become, for the women living in Berlin at the time, a trap – an isolated crime scene – or, by contrast, a refuge or shelter, allowing them to hide from their oppressors. The invisibility of the victims resonates here in an interesting way with the invisibility of the hiding places in which they managed to hide and survive. Going already beyond Azoulay’s text, we can see that we are dealing here with movements that have opposite vectors. The first – belonging to imperial history – seeks to render invisible bodies and spaces subject to wartime oppression, to invalidate them. The second – this

8 I write more on this in my book *Wszystkie wojny świata* [All the world’s wars] (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2021).

9 W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House 2003).

10 Azoulay, *Potential History*, 239.

one belongs more to specific individuals, the “weak,” powerless against the forces of history<sup>11</sup> – means making oneself invisible (as well as the space one inhabits), in order to survive.

### Constructing Shelter

Yet another experience that Lagushonkova evokes, and which is very literally related with “survival,” is living in a shelter or, to be more precise, seeking and constructing a safe shelter from bombs. The instruction manual is broken down in this scene of the drama into a series of sentences-advice spoken by specific refugee actresses:

If you cannot go to a shelter, stay at home. (Olena)

The safest place in your flat is between two solid walls: the first wall will take the impact, the second will shield you from any debris. (Żenia N.)

Do not take shelter in stairwells, under arcades or on escape stairs. (Asia)

If you're caught under a collapsed wall, don't try to take it apart by yourself. Wait for professional help. (Aliona)

Take down all mirrors and any doors with glass elements and lay them on the floor.

Cover them with blankets. (Olena)

Tape up the windows. (Żenia N.)

In fact, this is a manual that helps to turn one's own home into a shelter – at the same time, it makes us realize that shelter often still needs to be constructed. Here, Lagushonkova touches on a theme that emerged strongly after February 24, 2022: the topic of adapting private spaces for warfare recurs in photographs and media reports from Ukraine (especially in the first weeks of the war). One of the many images appearing on social media showed, for example, a window of a house in Kyiv that had been very tightly, completely draped with books: they had been treated as protective material over the glass that had been shattered during the bombing. This is typical of a wartime disaster situation: objects change their function – some turn out to be useless or suddenly become a lethal threat, others are necessary, gaining new functions. The use of objects, space and the bodies placed in it becomes something subject to metamorphosis, negotiable, performative. The same ambivalence and oscillation is inscribed in the very notion of home: in a situation of war, its familiar space is both the safest shelter and a place

11 We can also add here the category of the “insignificant people,” which is used by Agnieszka Dauksza in her text “Wojna bezsilnych. Niekończąca się historia” [War of the powerless. An endless story], *Teksty Drugie* 3 (2020): 9–20.

constantly threatened with destruction, which can suddenly – in the blink of an eye – turn into our own tomb.

However, it seems possible to try to look at the problem of shelter construction in the broader context defined by the notion of crisis. “If you can’t go to a shelter, stay at home”: the COVID-19 pandemic (with the slogan “Stay at home!” recurring like a mantra), the war in Ukraine and the migrant crisis that hit Europe with such force in the middle of the previous decade put the primary anthropological function of the home back in focus – as a place of survival in which the fragility and contingency of life is simultaneously revealed. Perhaps it is this intuition linking habitation with impermanence and anxiety that lies at the root of a number of art projects in recent years redefining the notion of home/shelter.

The interest in impermanent architecture (as identified with that made by migrants) gains its most recognizable material dimension in Rebecca Belmore’s work *Biinjya’iing Onji* [From inside], made especially for documenta 14 in Athens (2017). She prepared a sculpture in the form of a marble tent, which stood on the Filopappou Hill located opposite the Acropolis. Belmore reverses the meanings in a perverse way: something impermanent acquires the characteristics of permanence, a nomadic, usually fast-disappearing temporary shelter is immortalized, elevated to the status of a contemporary “antiquity” – it becomes a fossil of contemporary history, something that *survives* and in which, as it were, a preposterous look from the future is inscribed. The Canadian artist’s work draws attention to the impermanent, ephemeral nature of contemporary shelters: they often remain invisible to the gaze. Again, there is a double movement: on one hand, those who temporarily inhabit them try to make them and themselves as invisible as possible, try to disappear from view (their survival may depend on it); on the other hand, these places and their inhabitants are permanently made invalid by the power and associated imperial history (as meaningless and therefore unworthy to survive and to be seen). Belmore gives the work a title that directs us to the relationship of the gaze and invisibility: *From Inside*. There is no one in the empty marble tent, yet it is giving a glimpse from within. History written from the point of view of the powerless, the “insignificant,” the deprived of rights and visibility remains to be written.

The theme of the *impermanence of shelter* is also echoed by Dutch photographer Henk Wildschut, who between 2009 and 2016 documented the so-called “Jungle,” a temporary migrant town that grew up on the outskirts of Calais and which, in 2016, at the moment of its greatest growth, is being demolished by a decision of the local authorities. Wildschut has created two series of photographs, *Shelter* (2010) and *Ville de Calais* (2016) – the first dedicated to the architecture of migrant shelters, the second already

a full documentation of life in the “Jungle of Calais.” It focuses on the construction of living space as a gesture of survival. The inhabitants have to constantly renew their efforts to make their space “domesticated”: it is periodically destroyed by the authorities (which makes their efforts almost Sisyphean), and at the same time these attempts seem to be a form that allows them to survive – necessary in the face of the biopolitics of the state of emergency that is stripping them of meaning.

Wildschut photographs, for example, the gardens created next to the migrants’ “houses,” a kind of “micro-Edens” – some of which have only survived a few days. It is also worth noting the performative dimension of these gestures: the shelters are subject to constant construction and deconstruction, the materials are reused, the use of space is something that is subject to transformation. For the author himself, this draws parallels with children’s practices of constantly establishing and transforming domestic space and building shelters during play. The surprising book *Huts, Temples, Castles* (2022) by German photographer Ursula Schulz-Dornburg can also be recalled in this context. It is a series of photographs of the experimental playground Jongensland in the suburbs of Amsterdam, which existed from 1948 until the late 1970s; the photographs were taken in 1969. The entire area, which was heavily isolated from the outside world, was put at the disposal of children as a play space – over the years a micro-town consisting of temporary children’s shelters, built from whatever the little builders had at hand, had grown up there.

This childish procedure of constructing a shelter becomes the main subject of Joanna Piotrowska’s photographic series *Frantic* (2016–2017). The photographs show adults – the artist’s friends – hiding in the provisional shelters they have constructed (made of chairs, bedding, clothes, other furniture) in their own flats (so-called “body fortresses”). The idea of the series directly refers to children’s games of building hiding places, but “the starting point for dwelling on this game and transposing it into the adult world was the artist’s fascination with those shelters being always built inside a home, as if the domestic space itself did not provide enough protection from the outside world.”<sup>12</sup> The photographs evoke an aura of omnipresent danger, and one can also feel a certain regressive and neurotic quality to the characters portrayed. What is striking is the apparent incompatibility of the worlds of children and adults, and the fact that the line between play and oppressive situations becomes blurred. In order to survive (the category of survival acquires a more universal and less defined dimension here), it is necessary, again, to make oneself invisible or barely visible – to create a wall

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12 For a description of the project and the book see <https://www.lespressesdureel.com/EN/ouvrage.php?id=6026&menu=4>, accessed January 2, 2023.



that protects one from the world and makes it difficult to be seen. Here, the gesture of constructing a shelter acquires a fundamental dimension, becoming something almost primordial – and at the same time, paratheatrical, performative action is the framework. In this context, it is worth mentioning the theory of the “theatricalization of life” of the avant-garde theorist and director Nikolai Evreinov:<sup>13</sup> he pointed to the childish drive to play as crucial to theatre and, at the same time, to our lives. From this perspective, the constant process of performing the shelter would be a necessary gesture in order to survive.

### The Anachronism of the Shelter

In contrast to the ephemeral shelters discussed here is the nuclear bomb shelter – an example of typical wartime architecture, a true “survival machine.” Ukrainian artist Mykola Ridnyi’s 2013 video work *Shelter* shows a Cold War-era underground shelter in Kharkiv, where defense training and weapons handling exercises take place. The guide to this enclosed underground micro-world is a retired teacher – the caretaker of the place and at the same time the embodiment of the old Soviet ideology. In one of his statements, he outlines a kind of theory of the shelter:

Shelters are installations that protect those inside from adverse factors such as nuclear, chemical or biological warfare, as well as high temperatures and fire-related factors. In addition, the shelter must have a living room. This room must be equipped with chairs, benches and bunks so that adults can sit and those who are sick and children can lie down. This room must have a kind of manned post to supervise the behavior of those inside. There must also be an emergency exit so that people can get out if the primary entry/exit points are blocked by debris. No more shelters are currently being built in Kharkiv and existing ones are being sealed.

In contrast to temporary shelters, which depend on the creativity of their maker, Cold War-era shelters were therefore created according to a clear pattern, in a way that would ensure survival. The overriding principle is functionality: there are no superfluous things in it, every position of the body is already planned in advance and is intended to increase the chances of survival. At the same time, the shelter is here a figure of the militarization of space, a fear of war fueled by propaganda and, perhaps above all, an escape from the real world. Ridnyi’s work is based on the contrast between past and present, theory

13 Nikolai Evreinov, “Teatralizacja życia” [Theatricalisation of life], trans. Julia Holewińska, *Konteksty 2* (2008): 140–153.

and practice: when the film was made, the threat of war seemed distant, while the shelter had become an anachronistic place in its own way, deprived of its original function, a relic (survival) of a different order. At the same time, the film very quickly gained, preposterously, a new meaning: since 2014, the possibility of reusing these spaces in the context of a potential military threat began to be recreated in cities in eastern Ukraine. The Russian invasion in February 2022 realized these fears – underground life became an important part of the experience of the inhabitants of this part of the world once again. Shelters have become not only places of hiding, but also places of creation – these activities are sometimes intertwined. For example, this was the case with Yermilov Centre in Kharkiv – an important contemporary art gallery located in the basement of the local university, on the site of a former shelter. For the first two weeks of the war (we should remember: Kharkiv was on the front line at the time), people were hiding in this space and there was an interventionist exhibition *How Are You?*:

Banal everyday photos and videos document the life of the artists in the gallery, which for two weeks was turned into a bomb shelter. People watch films, cover windows with protective shields, eat, sleep, and have long conversations. It looks like some awkward indoor picnic, but endless explosions can be heard. The gallery is located in the heart of the city, in the basement of a constructivist building at Kharkiv's Karazin University. By an ironic twist of fate, these are the areas of Kharkiv that have been most affected by the bombing. The curators of *How Are You?* emphasize that these photos are the documentation of a performance. Referring to Ilya Kabakov's immersive artworks, they call the gallery turned into a bomb shelter a "total installation."<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, the fear of nuclear war and about surviving in a completely destroyed world is revived anew. It can be seen here that the nuclear threat multiplies the question posed by Judith Butler about the "precarious life" and the necessity of a politics of care. As Günther Anders wrote, in the era following Hiroshima and Nagasaki, our status is permanently altered: we are survivors,<sup>15</sup> as the potential for complete destruction and annihilation is now inscribed in our existence. Any history written nowadays should therefore be written with the awareness of the necessity of adopting a different epistemology: from the point of view of the survivors, not of the victors.

14 <https://www.textezurkunst.de/en/articles/alisa-lozhkina-we-are-only-seen-when-we-die/>, accessed January 2, 2023.

15 Günther Anders, *L'homme sur le pont*, in: *Hiroshima est partout*, trans. Denis Trierweiler (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008), 71.

In another video *Father's Story* (2012), Mykola Ridnyi again explores the space of the underground: we see the basement of the family home, hear the artist's voice guiding us through this rarely visited place, which served as a food storage space and which, in the event of war, would act as a private shelter with a reinforced concrete structure. "People who remembered the war would store various products here" to then "come here and eat like animals." The cellar is therefore overflowing with old preserves – a mass of jars dating back to the last decade of the USSR and the 1990s, the time of political transformation. At the same time, the cellar is a place long unvisited and unused: it becomes a kind of "sideways branch lines of time," an anachronistic space. Everything is covered with old Soviet newspapers, serving as protection from dust and water. Never-opened jams, salads, lard, pickles and moonshine become here a kind of inhuman survivors, persisting persistently despite the change of historical epoch and epistemological paradigm.

In the case of both of Ridnyi's works, the underground world is presented as a space of post-imperial nostalgia, a relic of a time when the fear of nuclear annihilation was alive and the need to organise one's own survival was an everyday experience. The shelter and the basement become a form of tomb in which unwanted memories are deposited (which is particularly topical today, when many Ukrainians are asking themselves what to do with the memory after the USSR, in the face of the need to decolonise imperial culture), an inner space which, like our memory, is made up of different layers of temporality and where material remnants of another era survive.

What survives then appears as a form of anachronism of time. Aby Warburg's concept of the posthumous life of Antiquity and the related term *Nachleben* are worth mentioning here. It refers to the "survival" or "survivance" of forms and images, a deep visual cultural memory not subject to changes in artistic or cultural style and paradigm. This notion, so central to all Warburgian thinking, derives from nineteenth-century evolutionism, Anglo-American anthropology and from cultural scholars such as Edward B. Tylor. As Georges Didi-Huberman notes:

*Nachleben* is for Warburg what makes historical time impure [...]. In Warburg's understanding, the surviving form does not triumphantly relive the death of its competitors. On the contrary, it experiences, symptomatically and spectrally, its own death: it disappears at a certain point in history, only to reappear again, at a moment when we probably do not expect it [...]. *Nachleben* can, from this point of view, be compared to the models of time which, in evolutionary theory, form a symptom, i.e. an obstacle to all continuous and linear patterns of adaptation. Evolutionary theorists spoke of "living fossils," those perfectly anachronistic forms of survival.

[...] Warburg's *Nachleben*, however, does not tell us about "living fossils" or "backward" forms. It tells us about *heterochronies*.<sup>16</sup>

Against Tylor and the evolutionists, for Warburg what survives is thus not strong enough, but rather adequately weak in order to be able to disappear and appear, to exist in a spectral way. Weakness seems to be the paradoxical but necessary condition for survival.

### **Between the Living and the Dead**

Shelters are, it is worth repeating once again, also places of execution and particular types of violence – removing oneself from sight in order to make oneself invisible to the oppressor(s) facilitates, under certain circumstances, the hiding of traces of the violence and thus the double invalidation of the victim. This regularity can be clearly seen in the media coverage of Bucza, Irpien and Hostomel (taking into account the as yet unexplored nature and scale of the crimes committed there and the incomplete access to information – surely the "Bucza effect" remains a chapter for researchers and artists to write as well). In those sub-Kyivan villages occupied by Russian troops at the very beginning of the invasion, much of the drama took place in the cellars and basements of houses – out of sight not only of bystanders, but often also their neighbours. The inhabitants usually chose to hide in these places in order to wait and survive. At the same time, in some cases, the shelters turned into their tombs: some cellars turned into places of execution, where people were killed and raped. The bodies of those killed usually remained for days afterwards among the living or had to be left in the streets: burial became something extremely dangerous in those days.

This living with the unburied dead has become an experience that provokes reflection on yet another meaning of shelter/refuge/bunker/hideout: as a place where the living and the dead coexist. The identification of the shelter with the tomb appears, for example, in Paul Virilio's book on the archaeology of the bunker, where he notes the similarity of military, fortified architecture to ancient tombs.<sup>17</sup> This recurring association linking the bunker (and other forms of subterranean architecture) with the tomb asks us to return to perhaps the most fundamental image: the gas chamber with

<sup>16</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Image survivante: histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: ed. de Minuit, 2002), 67–68. Translated from French by the author of this article.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Virilio, *Bunker archéologie* (Paris: Galilée, 2008), 16.

its concrete, monolithic interior. A place where concrete melts, literally, with grey human ashes.

In Polish art portraying the experience of the Second World War, the shelter/hideout remains something very rarely visualized, almost unrepresented.<sup>18</sup> Among the exceptions is Mieczysław Wejman's oil painting *In the air-raid shelter* painted in 1944 – one of the few visual testimonies of this “underground life.” At the exhibition at the Jewish Historical Institute,<sup>19</sup> it was included in Wejman's series of prints entitled *Dancers*, which refers to Goya's series of prints *The Disasters of War* and metaphorically conveys the drama of the Warsaw Ghetto and the complicated relations of gaze and responsibility linking Poles with exterminated Jews, on both sides of the ghetto wall. It remains unclear whether Wejman's painting was created before or after the Warsaw Uprising and whether it refers to the direct experience of the horror of being a civilian in a fighting Warsaw, or whether it rather evokes – like *Dancers* – a mediated drama of the ghetto inhabitants. Leaving this question unresolved, it can certainly be said that it captures the universal wartime experience, when escaping to a shelter becomes not only the only way to avoid falling bombs, but often also simply the last option through which one could try to hide and avoid almost certain death. Wejman's painting shows people crowded into a limited space, there are also children – their movements are restricted. The central place of the composition is occupied by a suitcase standing on the floor. Its presence gives movement to the static composition and introduces unusual tension: the painted figures are actually just waiting to escape (to where?) – but they cannot move. You can feel the mood of anxiety. This experience of stillness and suspension is striking.

In the preserved testimonies from the shelters and bunkers where the remaining ghetto inhabitants and fighters were hiding during the uprising, there is a recurring theme of fear, hunger, claustrophobia and the expectation of death, but above all precisely of stillness, suspension, silence and the inability to breathe. “The bunkers were crowded and squeezed, and at the same time it was necessary to maintain complete silence, as there were Germans on the ground looking for hidden Jews. [...] People also died in the shelters: they were suffocating from lack of air, dying of heart problems, from wounds,

18 In this context, we should mention Natalia Romik's exhibition *Hideouts. The Architecture of Survival*, which was presented at Zachęta – National Gallery of Art in Warsaw in 2022. The exhibition is part of the author's research project, done in academic collaboration with Aleksandra Janus, and dedicated to the hiding places of Jewish refugees during Second World War.

19 *Dancers 1944. Mieczysław Wejman*, Jewish Historical Institute, Warszawa 2022, curator: Piotr Rypson.

from asphyxiation, poisoned by gas thrown into the bunkers by the Germans. They were buried – if possible – at night in the courtyards,”<sup>20</sup> writes Barbara Engelking. Unable to find the ghetto inhabitants hidden in bunkers and hideouts, the Germans simply began methodically to burn house after house, changing life in the hideouts into hell and in fact leaving the victims with only one choice: the type of death.

In the margin of these reflections, it is worth noting that the inability to have a full breath, the sensation of suffocation so distressing to those in hiding, is one of the key experiences and at the same time evocative metaphors describing life in the colonial “world-death”<sup>21</sup>: the cry “I can’t breathe!” is both a desperate gesture of resistance to the necropolitics of the state of emergency and an attempt to describe the situation of a world in crisis of a simultaneously warlike, ecological and pandemic nature.<sup>22</sup> The inability to breathe is thus, literally and metaphorically, the first step towards non-existence.

*In the air-raid shelter* thus becomes an important visual contribution to the anthropology of shelter that is outlined here. At the same time, looking at Wejman’s work it is difficult not to avoid another, so powerful, association. It is, of course, the similarity – not formal, but thematic – to the world of Andrzej Wróblewski’s paintings. In the series *Executions* (1949), but also in many of his other paintings – for example, in those where the motif of “standing” or of a “queue” appears – the gesture of suspension – of holding one’s breath? – is associated not only with the necropolitics of war, but also with the suspension of the laws that rule the world of the living. These images are filled with the dead, those “not fully visible” – they coexist in one space with the survivors. Wróblewski usually “marks” these “disappearances” with blue – a transitory color, mediating between presence and absence.<sup>23</sup> *The Executions*

20 Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City*, trans. Emma Harris (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p.

21 Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War. Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 100.

22 Achille Mbembe, “The Universal Right to Breathe,” trans. Carolyn Shread, *Critical Inquiry* 47 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1086/711437>.

23 On the meanings of the colour blue cf. e.g. Carol Mavor, *Black and Blue. The Bruising Passion of “Camera Lucida,” “La Jetée,” “Sans soleil,” and “Hiroshima mon amour”* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Michel Pastoureau, *Blue: The History of a Color*, trans. Mark Cruse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Derek Jarman, *Chroma: A Book of Color* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Tomasz Szerszeń, “The Colour of History,” trans. Arthur Barys, *Widok. Teorie i praktyki kultury wizualnej* 24 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2019.24.1943>.

are transformed “into a kind of knowingly instituted communication between the living and the dead.”<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps to complete the image of the shelter is to see it as a place of mediation with the dead: through death potentially inscribed in every attempt to avoid it, to hide from it. The gaze coming from this place would thus inevitably focus on what escapes us on a daily basis: the frightening precariousness of life.

## Abstract

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*To Survive: Towards an Anthropology of Shelter*

The text attempts an anthropological reflection on the theme of shelter. Starting from the current war in Ukraine and its literary and visual representations through the migration crisis and back to the Second World War, the author analyzes images and visual testimonies of examples of hideouts, shelters, ephemeral homes. At the center of the considerations lies the category of “survival” as crucial for wartime and refugee bio-and necropolitics. “Survival” appears here in a dynamic relationship with the visible and the invisible, as well as through the prism of two types of history: the imperial, official one and the one belonging to the powerless, the insignificant, the deprived of visibility, the half-dead.

## Keywords

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survival, shelter, necropolitics, war in Ukraine, anachronism, visual anthropology, history of wars

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<sup>24</sup> Dorota Sajewska, “The Necromancers,” in *Perspective of Adolescence. Szapocznikow – Wróblewski – Wajda*, ed. Anda Rottenberg, trans. Jerzy Juruś (Katowice: Muzeum Śląskie, 2018), 219.