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Performative Protest Actions in the Baltic States Against Sexual Violence in Russia's War in Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

In the article I consider women's performative protest actions against sexual violence in Russia's war against Ukraine and their media images. After the withdrawal of the Russian army from Kyiv, a massive amount of war crimes against civilians in its suburbs were revealed. The article gives an overview of the protest actions and their media afterlife in the Baltic states in spring 2022, discusses the representational strategies and media photos based on Rancière's essay "The Intolerable Image", considers the issue in the contexts of the public sphere, and the feminist research on women's life stories and representational strategies that try to depict women's experiences in war. The events are historically contextualized in a discussion on women and war based on the research of WWII memoirs and autobiographies (Kurvet-Käosaar 2000, Alexievich 2017, Paju 2005). The protest actions and their media images created a transgressive zone of disturbance where several modes of public sphere and social practices, including protest, art, media, mourning, etc. intertwine.

KEYWORDS
feminism, protest action, public sphere, media, representation, transgression, Russia's war in Ukraine

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Performative Protest Actions in the Baltic States Against Sexual Violence in Russia's War in Ukraine

On February 24 2022, the Russian Federation started a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, attacked the whole country, including Kyiv with missiles, and occupied large territories near the Russian and Belarussian borders. Since 2014, Russia has occupied the Crimean peninsula and eastern Ukraine. The aggression of the Russian Federation against an independent country has been brutal not only in the fact itself, but also by the amount of violence against civilians as well that has marked the full-scale invasion since 2022. The war in Ukraine is also a media and information war. In a global context, the messages spread by both sides have formed polarized attitudes. Immediately, the war evoked a wide range of different public acts: protests, marches, mourning, art works etc. Some of the most outstanding acts were the women's performative protest actions against mass violence in the outskirts of Kyiv (Bucha, Irpin etc.). One of the most shocking aspects of the so-called Bucha massacre was the amount of sexual violence that took place during the Russian occupation. The protests against sexual violence distinguished of the general political context by its performative nature and artistic imagery. These performative protest actions and their media images created a transgressive disturbance both in the public space and sphere, and have a significant feminist meaning.

I will discuss the performative protest actions led by women in spring 2022, and the widely spread media images of the actions, mainly in the Baltic states, in its wider contexts. First, I will explain sexual violence as a war crime, then describe and interpret the events in terms of Jacques Rancière's essay "The Intolerable Image". In the second part of the article, I discuss the actions in the context of the public sphere, to clarify the actions in the fields of politics and art; lastly, I will consider contemporary and historical examples of women's war experiences to find similar representational strategies.

The Bucha Massacre as a War Crime

When the Russian Army attacked in spring 2022, the world media was filled with shocking images: photos of women and children in underground shelters, basements, a young woman in labour saved from an attack against a hospital, mass graves of tormented people, and destroyed residential areas. Later, the Bucha and Irpin evidence of crimes against civilians, newly found mass graves in areas where the Russian military had withdrawn, accompanied by heartbreaking survival stories were revealed. Certain photos of the Bucha massacre victims became symbols of Russian aggression and war crimes against civilians: the videos and photos of dead people lying down, hands tied behind their backs like the widely republished one of the victim Oleksandr Chumak's[1], heads in black plastic bags; some with only the hands of a dead person visible under the soil, such as the one of Iryna Filkina[2] and her polished nails. A large number of visual evidence proved sexual assaults where people were tormented (raped, then

1 Al-Hlou et al. 2022, 24:23.
2 Somerville 2022.

burned, and their bodies left on the roads)[3]. The widespread media images were the crucial bases for constructing and understanding the war in Ukraine, raising empathy, becoming sources of protest actions, and creating new images.

Dealing with war crimes is regulated by many internationally acknowledged documents. The International Criminal Court opened investigations of the Ukraine situation on 2 March 2023, focussing on alleged crimes committed in the context of the situation in Ukraine since 21 November 2013. The scope of the situation encompasses any past and present allegations of war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide committed on any part of the territory of Ukraine by any person.[4] The Geneva Conventions "protect people who do not take part in the fighting (civilians, medics, aid workers) and those who can no longer fight (wounded, sick and shipwrecked troops, prisoners of war)."[5] The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court states: "The jurisdiction of the Court shall be limited to the most serious crimes of concern to the international community as a whole. The Court has jurisdiction in accordance with this Statute with respect to the following crimes: (a) The crime of genocide; (b) Crimes against humanity; (c) War crimes; (d) The crime of aggression."[6] Committing rape and sexual violence is listed as one of the war crimes, as crimes against humanity, and as a crime of aggression, while among the acts of genocide, "imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group"[7] is connected to sexual violence that in general reduces the birth rate. All of these crimes share a significant common trait of intentionality: war violence is not occasional, but planned and institutional, e.g. approved by political or military leaders. This explains the importance of the protests' location: the Russian Federation's embassies are the representatives of the aggressor state.

Yet, sexual crimes and women as war victims have been a taboo for a long time, rape is one of the most invisible and silenced crimes. As late as in the 1980s, sexual crimes against women were not been considered as torture, therefore a political crime. Instead, rape has been dealt with according to domestic laws. Rape in war has been considered as a sexual act and therefore a private, not political issue. Jinee Lokaneeta states: "Using intersectional analysis, feminists conceptualized rape as an instrument of war and genocide, challenging mainstream tendencies to treat rapes either as attacks on one community by another, or as attacks by men against women."[8] After great efforts by feminist activists, rape has become a crime against humanity and mode of torture in 1998 after the Rwandan genocide. Sexual violence in war presents many overlapping taboos: sexual violence itself, but also women (not to mention transgender or LGBTQ+ people) in military structures and war. Considering rape as a weapon and torture (it means, a war crime, not civil crime) has caused a significant paradigm shift. These conditions give the reason and motivation to publish instances of sexual crimes and point more strongly to the aggressor, not the victim. The performative protest actions in spring 2022 are not only humanist, but remarkably feminist in their agenda, pointing sharply to crimes against women.

The discussion on women and war in Eastern and Central Europe has been mainly based on the research of WWII. The Estonian-Finnish writer, Sofi Oksanen, widely known for her novels depicting WWII horrors and its aftermaths on women through generations (*Puhdistus*, or *The Purge*, play in 2007, novel in 2008, opera by Jüri Reinvere and a film in 2012) has pointed out how systematic the abuse against women has been in Russia's wars throughout history. In her essay, "Putin's War Against Women"[9] (entitled "Rape is a Weapon in War"[10] in Finnish and Estonian), Oksanen outlines the systematic and intentional use of sexual violence of the Red Army in WWII and the Russian Army today. She puts in words the distorting influence of rape: it is a violent act not only against a woman's body, but their identity, social network, and place

3 McKernan 2022.
4 Situation in Ukraine, ICC-01/22 2022.
5 International Committee of the Red Cross 2014.
6 Rome Statute, Part 2, Article 5.
7 Rome Statute, Part 2, Article 6.
8 Lokaneeta 2016, 1019.
9 Oksanen 2022c.
10 Oksanen 2022a; Oksanen 2022b.

in the society, causing an existential crisis.

The other major paradigm shift is the fact that the wars in the twenty-first century have an immediate online media presence in various forms, such as audio-visual documents, comments, critical analysis, opinions, editorials, even memes. The CCTV footages, photos, and videos made by civilians survivors are used as evidence in the investigations of war crimes.[11] This paradigm shift makes more visible the crimes, the victims, the predators, and the people who stand up for the victims.

The Performative Protest Actions in Spring 2022

In a few weeks after the revelation of the Bucha massacre, a series of events occured one after another in Eastern Europe. Protesters appeared in front of the Russian, French, and German embassies or government buildings in many countries, enacting the victims.

The protests against the sexual violence started in a pond in front of the Russian embassy in Vilnius, Lithuania on 6 April 2022. The artists dyed the pond in front of the embassy blood red and used it as a performative site. The action, called *Swimming Through*, saw Olympic gold medallist Rūta Meilutytė swimming through the lake. The video of the action was posted on social media;[12] the footage also includes a message on the road next to the pond: "Putin, the Hague is waiting for you."[13] On 7 April, a group of women and some men in white clothes were bathing in the red pond,[14] or lying on the waterside, enacting a dead body. The images of the dark blood red pond went viral, not only on social media and news portals, but also infotainment environments such as Bored Panda shared the photos and videos of the pond and the swimming or floating figures.

At the same time, 6 April, thousands of people were lying down with Ukrainian flags in front of Germany's parliament to commemorate the people killed in Ukraine and to demand that Berlin stop purchasing oil and gas from Russia. The news comment points out: "Many of the demonstrators had their eyes shut and their hands behind their backs, as if they had been tied up."[15] Similar events took place in Vilnius, in front of the German embassy, and the Russian embassy in Budapest on 8 April. At this stage, the protests against sexual violence in the war and against the deep entanglement of European politics and economic ties with Russia are simultaneous, but different in their imagery.

On 13 April, a rather small group of women – about twenty people – gathered in front of the embassy of the Russian Federation in Tallinn. They stood still in a row for about ten minutes, heads covered with black plastic bags, wearing casual pullovers or hoodies, hands tied behind their backs, bare legs and backsides in white underwear covered with red paint. A few days after the protest in Tallinn, images of protesting women in similar positions were dispersed from Vilnius, Riga, and other cities around Europe. In this action, the generally published images of killed civilians and strong references to sexual violence are combined and therefore provoked the next wave of performative citations.

16 April, about eighty women gathered in Vilnius, in front of the Russian embassy again, in the same position. 17 April, four women repeated the action in Dublin, Ireland.[16] 20 April: over 200 women stood in front of the Russian embassy in Riga. While protesters in Tallinn remained silent and neutral in their homey pullovers, Riga protesters had slogans on their garments, many of them in strong language.[17]

19 April in Tallinn: anti-war protests were held in front of the embassies of Germany and France to force the leading countries of Europe to provide weapons and missiles to Ukraine, and also to refrain from using Russian gas. The protesters were standing silently or lying down, costumed in black plastic bags, hands tied behind their backs, but fully dressed. White T-shirts

11 Al-Hlou et al. 2022.
12 Swimming Through 2022.
13 BNS/TBT Staff 2022.
14 Andrijauskas 2022.
15 DPA World 2022.
16 Griffin 2022.
17 Eng.LSM.lv 2022.

said: “Violè par mon frère“/“Tuè par mon frère.”[18] 20 April: about twenty women repeated the action in Gdansk, Poland, this time with anti-war slogans in different languages on their backs, some of them were wearing Ukrainian and Belarusian flags.[19]

On Facebook, a worldwide event for 28 May was announced: the *Russian Shame-Protest Against the Rape of Women in Ukraine*[20] that clearly called on women to join as “regularly dressed protesters”, or as “girls who are willing to dress up in specific attire”, describing the same look as in the Tallinn-led protests. Unfortunately, there is very little information online about the course of this event.

The spring 2022 performative protest actions were clear in their political messages: in a number of cities, women brought their half-naked and silenced bodies to the streets to condemn sexual violence against peaceful civilians. Yet, their pose and appearance were ambivalent. The women cited in their poses dead bodies represented in the media, yet they did not lie on the ground, but stood firmly on their feet. The casual pullovers referred to the fact that women are raped in everyday, private environments[21]. The naked legs brought the nudity into the public space, in front of power represented by the embassy. The blood on the legs and underwear reminded one of things not spoken about: a woman’s body, especially when its borders, first of all, sexual organs, are violated. It indicated the red, fresh blood of the wounded. Covered heads and tied hands indicated the victims’ corpses, unable to see or speak. These are traumatized women: the images give an impression of numbness, acting like zombies. The images represent the bodies that are neither dead nor alive, but in an in-between zone of death and life.

As actual bodies, the performers transgressed social norms and met the condemnation (a certain intolerability) of the public, yet also praise.[22] It was challenging to come out in the chilly April weather to meet the public and power without seeing them. As re-enactments of actual victims, they blurred the border between life and death, representing them in an uncanny liminality. It is traumatic work, restoring and making public the fate of the victims, giving them visibility, keeping them alive. The protesters also inspired new bodily enactments and protests to take place, thus spreading the message, breaking the silence around sexual violence in war, and building communities of female solidarity.

Performative Protest Actions and the Public Sphere

Christopher Balme has claimed protest performance is a genre with a crucial triangular relationship, the meeting of three P-s: protest, performance, and the public sphere, that have reconfigured two significant developments.[23] “On one hand, the social media and their complex, sometimes, parasitical relationship to mainstream news media. On the other the inventive aesthetic dimension of performance that, because of its very inventiveness, has the potential to activate engagement in a way that traditional protest procedures (demonstration, occupation, marches, and so on) do not.”[24] Street protests take many forms and carry different purposes: making or influencing politics, building communities (e.g. refugees), serve as collective mourning, etc.

The protests against the Bucha massacre were rooted in the public sphere and media: the sources of the protest actions were photos from liberated cities. The protests aimed to raise awareness of the crimes, and therefore strengthen public support of Ukraine, for example, to pressurize governments to supply arms to the Ukrainian army. Citing the poses of the victims, the protesters in various countries formed a “chain of images”[25] that could have a stronger influence on public opinion than the separate acts themselves. In this respect, the inventiveness of artistic and performative protest acts lies in the repetitive nature of media images and the

18 Eesti RahvusRinghääling 2022.
19 dor 2022.
20 Women For Ukraine - жінки для України 2022.
21 Karro 2022.
22 Postimees 2022.
23 Balme 2018, 62, 71.
24 Balme 2018, 71.
25 Rancière 2011, 94.

intervention into the public space. In the case of the Bucha protests, the elaboration between social and mainstream media is not even necessary, as the prominent news portals picked the topic up very quickly.

The 2022 protest actions had their own media life where we can follow a chain of photographic equivalents representing the same motives (similarities) in certain variations and amplifications (dissimilarities). The artistic image-making attracted media that produced a representational chain of visually intriguing images of provocative sexuality and morbidity intertwined with political messages. Photographers in different countries picked up the citations of initial, real Bucha victims, turning their lenses to the tied hands and painted nails of the protesting women. A remarkable amount of the published photos from all the main protests focus on body parts: legs, sneakers, tights, or hands, as in the initial documentary photos. Therefore, the female bodies are distorted and the wholeness enabling a subject is ruined for the third time, while at first, they were distorted as actual victims, second as the half-naked protesters. The multiplicity of distortion preserves the ambivalence and transgressive nature of the acts, or another intolerability in Rancière's terms.

The 13 April 2022 protest in front of the Russian embassy in Tallinn, Estonia, took place in a location where power and art met face to face. The public space in a section of a few hundred meters in Pikk street has become a contested site of protest: the temporary fence in front of the embassy is filled with anti-war messages: posters, images, drawings, clothes, and toys in red paint etc. Opposite the embassy are several art institutions, such as Draakoni (Dragon) Art Gallery and Kanuti Gildi SAAL, the leading contemporary performing arts venue that hosted the Bucha rape protest preparation and aftermath. The environment of art institutions amplified the artistic quality of the protest action and shifted the event from a purely political to an artistic context.

The governments of the Baltic and most of the Central European states support Ukraine unconditionally – the democratic context of the protesters in these countries provides safety, but still, the artists performing protest acts are not representatives of their states. The artists starting the protest action in front of the Russian Federation embassy in Tallinn, Liis Vares and Liis Lindmaa, stated in an interview that the action needed performative courage, and that all the participants remained anonymous.[26] Balme stresses the importance of protest performances in states where democracy is non-existant, compromised, or corrupted,[27] which is the case in totalitarian Russia today. Even if the Bucha protests took place in democratic countries, the direct opposition to the aggressor state put the protesting artists into insecure and unequal positions. A democratic state offers shelter not only for refugees, but also for artists by giving them a platform to speak out against terror regardless of their location or art form.

Some of the most valuable testimonies of life under the Russian Federation's occupation and inhuman conditions are Viktoria's letters. Viktoria Berezina is an artist from Kherson, her letters from the occupied city to her friend and gallerist in Tartu, Raul Oreškin, were first published on his social media feed and on the tARTu gallery webpage. In cooperation with digital media and performance group e¯lektron the letters were read out 10 May 2022 by Estonian female actors, the loudspeakers set outside the Draakoni gallery (just opposite the Russian embassy), and online. Social media, an online artistic platform, and an art gallery combined a space where a number of female voices mediated one: the actors reading the letters were presented with their full names, while Viktoria was only known by her given name. The democratic society of freedom of speech and ambivalent artistic space protected the speakers, and dispersed the subject of the speech, while the initial speaker herself could remain anonymous until reaching a safe place in Tartu.

Considering the wider context of public protests, the political actions stand out as a large group of people occupying the public space with outspoken messages. In a crowd an individual becomes anonymous, while giving their face and body for the general mission. Participating in public protests is not always secure, as the aftermaths of the protests against the governments in Russia and Belorussia have shown: the protesters are often imprisoned, or even tortured. In Ukraine's long process towards a liberal society, mass protests have held a central role. Olga

26 Karro 2022.
27 Balme 2018, 65.

Danylyuk describes the 2014 Euromaidan protests in Kyiv in terms of their aesthetic passions, communal life, and carnivalesque atmosphere.[28] The Euromaidan protests, or revolution of Dignity, has many common traits to the protests of 2022–23; first of all the intertwining of (social) media and protesters occupying public spaces. Danylyuk mentions the weaponization of information and a highly theatrical protagonist-antagonist scheme invoked during 2014 conflicting propaganda narratives in media. Therefore, she reminds that performance is a highly powerful, but ephemeral form: "The presence of the actual bodies on the streets during the Maidan uprising was crucial for the success of the protest. (…) United by the passionate identification with their cause, protesters transcended individual feelings and divisions to act as collective body."[29]

Next to openly political protests, there have been a number of other events for Ukrainian refugees and local people volunteering around Europe. Many of the public mourning events, many of them staged as installations, e.g. empty baby prams[30] or empty pairs of shoes[31], were held in public spaces to commemorate both Ukrainian and WWII victims, or more conventional publicly shared moments of silence with burning candles.[32] Shoes have been formerly used to memorize holocaust victims, suicide victims, child victims of gun violence etc. Another genre is peaceful community-building events such as walks, national holiday celebrations etc. Out of personal experience in Tartu, I point out the function of community-building of these events: the aim is not to resist, reveal, pay attention to something outside, but to nourish the spirit of civilians at a critical time. Humour is one more important form of protest and coping mechanism in a situation of crisis. Social media memes, or funny protest slogans ridicule and therefore make the aggressor appear less harmful.

The Bucha massacre protests differ from traditional protests by the fact that, in this case, artists often intentionally remained as anonymous as the victims they stood up for, representing a collective identity fighting for human rights. This non-traditional agent position or engagement to the war events placed the protesters in an in-between zone of personal and public voice, where the image of victim may rise into focus. Since there is no direct visual evidence of the crimes of sexual violence, the artists followed their imagination by depicting the raped women standing in such a way that the spectators closest to them could see the violent-ragged bodies of the victims. The homey clothes referred to the moment the women were attached in their domestic environments.[33] In the Bucha massacre protests, the message is conveyed in a disturbing and transgressive aesthetic form, or as Rancière would put it: "It is the voice of a body that transforms one sensible event into another, by striving to make us 'see' what it has seen, to make us see what it tells us."[34] The protests became a nod where politics, protest, art, and media met in an ambivalent relation of the (non)sayable and the visible.

Representations of Women's War Experiences

The War in Ukraine and the traumatic experiences of its people are already a frequent topic in the arts, including performance, theatre, film etc. As the photos and videos serve as evidence in the criminal processes, they are not questioned under the same ethical scope as Rancière in the context of consumer society,[35] but need a different political and aesthetic context formed by historical experience and its representations. In his essay "The intolerable image", Rancière discusses the images of war crimes in the context of Western consumer society and Guy Debord's society of spectacle. In the context of the war in Ukraine, this framing collapses, at least in Eastern Europe and the Baltics, where historical memories of the Red Army's atrocities are not forgotten and, furthermore, because of the awareness of the actual threat and geographical closeness.

28 Danylyuk 2018, 159, 161.
29 Danylyuk 2018, 169.
30 Sabin 2022.
31 Hungary Today 2022.
32 Tartu Postimees 2022.
33 Karro 2022.
34 Rancière 2011, 94.
35 Rancière 2011, 81-5.

In “The intolerable image”, Jacques Rancière discusses the war photos of violent acts or victims in regard to spectatorship: the intolerable in the image leads to think about the intolerability of the image. The complex relation to the photos representing the intolerable has caused critique: the ones viewing the images do not take action, but remain passive. However, while not agreeing with the critique of the passivity of the image, Rancière discusses the photos taken in Auschwitz during WWII and a film with testimonies of the survivors, reaching the point of unrepresentable, the influence of intolerable reality for a person. Describing the relation of voice as a source of testimony (e.g. taken as a reliable source) and image that has often been seen as a source of passive consumption, Rancière speaks for the power of an image. The survivor’s silence caused by the intolerable experience, the trauma, finds its way to representation in visual images and linguistic figuration. “Figurative equivalence is a system of relations between similarity and dissimilarity, which itself brings into play several kinds of intolerability.”[36]

In Rancière’s terms, a chain of images are shaped in the case of the recurrent motifs in the visual evidence of the Bucha massacre, the protest performance imagery, and in the photos taken of the protests. Rancière defines representation not as producing a visible form, but as an act of offering an equivalence.[37] By creating equivalences while citing, shifting, and recontextualizing the initial visual motifs, the chain of images becomes a “[p]rocess of figuration that is a process of condensation and displacement.”[38] The intolerability does not lay only in the initial event, but also in the whole process of representations.

The imagery of the Bucha massacre, protest performances, and media images have corresponding imagery in art, literature, and even memoirs. Women’s war trauma discourse is widely researched, and the same artistic tools reappear both in the current war and WWII representations. Common traits in the representations of women’s war experiences are silencing, distortion, masking and anonymity that all function as equivalences of the initial traumas. As discussed below, the protest actions use similar imagery that places the action in a feminist context.

In fall 2022, Draakoni gallery presented Mari Männa’s exhibition with the trilingual title *Elagem sõpruses! Let’s live in friendship! Давайте жить дружно!*, a reference to an ideological Soviet slogan. The exhibition consisted of white distorted female body parts with details of everyday life: legs with shoes, half-bodies with handbags, etc. On small screens, some online comments, and graffiti commenting on the situation were shown. The artist entered into a critical dialogue with the political site behind the window (the embassy of the Russian Federation), offering a clearly readable, but affectively disturbing statement on the war.

An example of women’s experiences in the wider conflicts of national and gender identities, is Sofija Melnikova’s solo performance *Drama Queen* in Riga, Dirty Deal Teatro,[39] a significant work as a war refugee’s self-analysis. Melnikova was a theatre student in Kharkiv, Ukraine. She tells the story of her relationship with an abusive boyfriend before the war, the period of hiding in the basement shelter, her escape by train under missile attacks, arriving to Riga, and finding a Russian-speaking girlfriend there. Melnikova’s performance is a confession representing sexual and mental vulnerability, depicting the most intimate experiences of being seduced, subordinated, and silenced through mental abuse. Performing in Ukrainian, she retold the dialogue parts of both of her abusers (boyfriend in Kharkiv, girlfriend in Riga) in Russian. A pro-Kremlin lady on a train also spoke in Russian. This nuance gave the stories a wider political meaning: both of her partners forbad her to sing, belittled her thoughts, and used her body. As a Ukrainian woman, her fate was silence. Nevertheless, Melnikova’s performance eloquently made the point that being abused once makes the subject vulnerable to being abused again.

Leena Kurvet-Käosaar[40] has discussed autobiographical literature and the memoirs of civilian women under the Nazi and, later, Red Army terror: for example the famous Estonian-Swedish pianist Käbi Laretei, or Latvian writer Agate Neusaule. The authors create a liminal

36 Rancière 2011, 94.
37 Rancière 2011, 93.
38 Rancière 2011, 94.
39 *Drama Queen* 25.11.2022.
40 Kurvet-Käosaar 2000.

space of the fictional and factual in their writing. The texts indicate the selective, distorting, and masking nature of the memory, or hide the witness behind a mask of a fictive character and play with different levels of recognizability. Many authors have stressed how the events experienced did not leave a deeper mark on them; the filter of social acceptability is a hidden mechanism that determines the possibilities of publishing the women's traumatic experiences.

Belarusian writer and Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich collected and published the stories of women participating in WWII as soldiers. Her book, *The Unwomanly Face of War* (Russian original in 1985), opens up a frustrating picture: the official Soviet paradigm neglected everything non-heroic in the war narrative. Alexievich admits the hard work to convince the women to speak: the written and unwritten rules of the sayable made the women keep silent and hide their real stories for forty years. She was the first one who really asked about their lives.[41] Alexievich faced many filters of social acceptability with the manuscript in late 1980s Soviet Union. Even in the renewed version, only one woman speaks up about the rape against German women they saw while marching to Berlin, and one woman openly tells about sexual harassment in the red Army itself. Many of the women experienced mixed feelings after the war: being proud of the war victory was shadowed by the slut-shaming of military women.

Imbi Paju's documentary film *Memories Denied*[42] and a book with the same title (2006 in Finnish, 2007 Estonian and Swedish) corroborates the burden of historical silence while trying to break it. The film is a portrait of four ladies who speak in their old age for the first time of the Soviet repressions they experienced during WWII, and their unhealed traumas that appear to surface as nightmares. Descriptions of separations, physical violence, humiliations, destructions of homes, and slightly hinted sexual abuse force the ladies constantly to interrupt their stories, and repeat that they do not want to talk. The book openly describes sexual violence and the destruction of homes.

All these examples manifest the various ways the silence around women's war experience is created: by personal suppression or trauma, unwritten social norms, fear of shaming, dominant political paradigm, forced by authorities, or subconsciously. In the context of public protests that are normally in open spaces, are loud, involve a lot of people, and speak out clear messages, the silence surrounding the protests was remarkable. In this remarkable silence, Rancière highlights the power of the image: "The force of the silence that translates the unrepresentability of the event exists only through its representation. The power of the voice opposed to images must be expressed in images. The refusal to speak, and the obedience to the voice that commands, must therefore be made visible."[43] Comparing the 2022 protests to WWII experiences, we can claim that the silence around sexual war crimes is made loudly visible.

Conclusion

More urgently than ever before, the war in Ukraine has brought the position and fate of women in war into a new light. Previous feminist works on recognizing a wider form of violent acts committed against civilians, including sexual violence, has changed the whole discourse of war victims in a gendered way and in terms of violence in general. A year after the Bucha massacre, both the victims and the aggressors are identified, the distorted bodies on the photos are given back their identities, the culprits are made responsible for their crimes.

The highly performative and artistic feminist protests carry, in this context, many common formal features with political protests, such as taking place in the public sphere, uniting anonymous participants, and standing in opposition to the reprensentatives of power. The acts are also rites of mourning as the performative side consists of standing silently for the victims. As community building, the acts represent mainly female artists and/or art institutions as certain communities with political or ethical standpoints. Considering the acts as art projects,[44] the number of participants is relatively small as is common for performance art, but the acts create

41 Aleksijevitš 2017.

42 *Torjutut muistot. Tõrjutud mälestused* 2005.

43 Rancière 2011, 92.

44 As the highest recognition in the field of the arts, Liis Vares won the Estonian Cultural Endowment Performing Arts annual award for a number of her social and art projects, including the anti-war actions.

strong images that trigger a number of media representations.

Considering the problem of women's rights in current conflict areas, the Bucha massacre and sexual violence protests have actualized the historically silenced topic, even while using silence as a performative tool. Considering protest performance as a genre, feminist performative protests against the war in Ukraine have become a place where politics, protest, community, art, and media meet. Although it is not possible to claim that the feminist performative protests that started in the Baltics achieved large success in the rest of Europe (the number of following protests was actually rather modest), the actions and their media coverage encouraged the discussion of sexual assaults against women in culture and society in a larger context. The different functions of political (resistance, recognition, awareness raising, conveying a message); and social (mourning, community-building) are compound in an ephemeral performative form. In the protest images, not only the transgressive power of the liminal space of the fictional and factual is present, but also certain aspects of the experience are amplified by the media. The artistic image-making and bodily vulnerability oscillate between political messages and personal bodily experiences.

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