



Seoul Mediacity Biennale
Newsletter
August Issue, 2023

SOLIDARITY

Solidarity, the SMB newsletter August issue introduces an interview with AWC (abbreviation of their official name The International Coalition of Cultural Workers in Solidarity with Ukraine) in order to study further on the ideas of 12th Seoul Mediacity Biennale (SMB12). The non-territorial mapping referenced throughout SMB12 unfolds imagined alternatives for crossing boundaries in an era when extremist nationalism and cultural isolationism have become particularly acute. As an art collective and platform that has actively implemented the language of interdependency throughout non-territorial solidarities within the limits of geopolitical crises and territorial maps in recent years, AWC strongly argues for the solidarity and diversity of art and cultural workers. This interview with AWC offers an opportunity to confirm the political role of the biennale, which acts as a truly global public space and an alternative to constant displacement and border crossing.

Hanul Cho (SMB) Would you please begin by introducing AWC and explain how the collective is organized?

Maxim Tyminko (AWC) Our group originally consisted of artists, curators, and art managers—all of Belarusian descent—who collectively worked on an alternative Belarusian Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale. Aleksander Komarov, Anna Chistoserdova, Antonina Stebur, Lena Prents, Oxana Gourinovitch, Valentina Kiselyova, and myself developed the Drazdovich TV video streaming platform to reflect on the Belarusian protests of 2020 and envision the future of Belarus.

However, after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 and Belarus provided its territory for the deployment of the Russian army and military equipment, we realized that we could no longer present Drazdovich TV as it was originally conceived. It would have been unethical and insensitive to do so. Despite our initial feelings of numbness and shock, we knew we had to do something. We felt a responsibility to reflect on this brutal aggression against a sovereign country and to support the Ukrainian people, which includes many of our friends, colleagues, and relatives.

We were joined by two Ukrainian curators, Tatiana Kochubinska and Natasha Chychasova,

and together we created The International Coalition Of Cultural Workers In Solidarity With Ukraine. Based on the Drazdovich TV platform, we developed the online platform antiwarcoalition. art and launched it in late April 2022. The website features artist statements from various countries affected by armed conflict, including Ukraine, Belarus, Mexico, Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and South Africa. It also allows Belarusian artists and part of the curatorial team to respond to our own complex circumstances as representatives of a co-aggressor state. We envision antiwarcoalition. art as a network of solidarity and shared experiences through discussing new strategies of global coexistence, language, and decolonization.

Anna Chistoserdova (AWC) For us, the implementation of the project has become not only an opportunity to showcase artworks and artist statements to a wide audience, but also a means of financially supporting artists and cultural workers from Ukraine, Belarus, and other countries where military and political conflicts and repression are felt.

Hanul Cho (SMB) AWC is structured as an online platform, which is an interesting way to propose an alternative that transcends the geospatial paradigm. Is there any particular reason to adopt this method, given that you receive and release artwork online through an open call system? Aside from the way that artists participate by sharing their work online, is it possible for non-artists to collaborate with AWC?

Tatiana Kochubinska (AWC) I think that in the contemporary world, one can hardly categorize online platforms as alternatives. Today, the model of an online platform is not unique or innovative. There are already plenty of scientific, archival and artistic projects that implement the structures and possibilities of online tools, which are easily accessible and widely disseminated. We adopted this method in order to share information about the war as quickly and extensively as possible, to include diverse artistic voices from around the world, and to emphasize the horizontal structure of our project. It is also important to mention that AWC operates offline as well as online. It is primarily through our offline activities that we are able to engage “non-artists” and collaborate with

different institutions by collectively organizing exhibitions, discussions, screenings, and activations. Ideally, we would like to think of establishing possible alternative formats in pursuit of a coherent language to describe the war that penetrates us psychologically,

politically, physically, and economically. The impetus that drives our project forward invokes the possibility of creating joint alternative formats within the realm of art that allow us to talk about the continuously changing world in wartime.



(top) AWC, *NICHT Unser Krieg*, Weltkunstzimmer, Düsseldorf.
On photograph works by (from left to right): Helmut Schweizer,
Sasha Kurmaz, Johan Widén, Ylva Gislén, Elin, Maria Johansson,
Ksenia Yurkova. Photo by Myriam Thyges. Courtesy of the AWC

(bottom) AWC, *NICHT Unser Krieg*, Weltkunstzimmer, Düsseldorf.
On photograph works by (from left to right): Hito Steyerl, Sergey
Bratkov, and Vlada Ralko. Photo by Myriam Thyges.
Courtesy of the AWC

Hanul Cho (SMB) It seems like an array of art museums that collect vast and diverse works. Some artworks may contain themes or contexts that are unrelated to the AWC's mission, project direction, or even its reversal. What is it that you ultimately expect from these online collections and AWC's loose constituency of contributors from various nationalities and cities, particularly with regard to your offline activities?

Antonina Stebur (AWC) It is important to note that AWC is more than an online platform and includes a network of offline events such as discussions, lectures, exhibitions, and screenings. From my perspective, the online platform functions as a flexible and living archive, but it can also be understood as a political instrument. At the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, I personally found it difficult to write anything, even in my diary, until December 2022. I experienced a sense of shock and language paralysis, as if all concepts and words were insufficient to accurately describe the situation. One of the objectives of our project has been to provide a space where cultural workers can gather and discuss strategies for discussing the war and disasters of the current era. We do not anticipate creating or offering a ready-made language for this purpose, but we hope that through such exchanges of ideas and sharing of experiences, we can better comprehend the network of glossaries, concepts, and language. We aim to sketch out a draft or framework for different ways to think and speak about wars.

Our second major goal is to understand the connection between the "online platform" and "offline events," which is based on the idea of interdependence. We begin with the premise that we cannot live in isolation from one another—our connections are not solely based on metaphysical images and ideas, but on concrete infrastructures as well. As such, by examining the transportation of grain, the IT industry, and how today's road systems are organized, we can observe the degree to which we are all interconnected. It is therefore impossible to establish democracy in an isolated country, since doing so would conceal the traces of exploitation and repression that have negatively impacted other groups, crops, and countries.

Therefore, this war is not just a military conflict between Russia and Ukraine—it is a war

that affects everyone. For instance, the Russian occupation of Chornobyl (Chernobyl in Russian) gave rise to one of the darkest chapters of this war, potentially precipitating a global environmental crisis. Ukrainian researcher Svitlana Matviyenko, in her article "Pollution as a Weapon of War," analyzes the occupation of Chornobyl and a series of explosions on June 6, 2023 at the Nova Kakhovka Power Plant in the Kherson Region under Russian control. She writes, "War is an attack on the entire ecosystem, where all living and non-living entities interact through nutrient and energy cycles within and beyond their immediate environment, within geometric communities."

Additionally, it is important for our project to demonstrate how various processes like war, protests, repressions, and uprisings are interconnected. In late 2022, we organized a discussion at the Lithuanian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale that focused on the understanding of the care infrastructure and featuring cultural workers from Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Iran. We specifically discussed the ways in which Iran's successful uprising might provide wartime aid to Ukraine by halting the sale of Iranian drones to the Russian state. Consider, for a moment, the ability of these two countries to influence each other, despite a distance of over 3,000 kilometers between them—this is what we call interdependence.

Hanul Cho (SMB) You recently participated in a number of important international art events around the world, including the Venice Biennale, Manifesta, documenta, etc. How does taking part in these exhibitions correlate to AWC's activities?

Aleksander Komarov (AWC) AWC's participation in international exhibitions is essential to our mission, since it demonstrates that everyone is an integral part of this pivotal moment in history and asserts that we can change its trajectory only through active participation.

When we come to realize that we are in a state of war with no middle ground, no distance from the conflict, and no means of escaping the notion of a "safe haven" within the art world, the truth becomes evident: "This is NotOUR war!" It is a matter of our very existence. Exhibitions have become highly contested and wartime circumstances now compel many art institutions

and collections to reevaluate and redefine their mission and legacy, in the service of offering new proposals that address the complex dependencies of present-day survival. Through pop-up exhibitions and discursive events, we continuously remind ourselves and others that the war is ongoing and will not simply disappear. It is our duty to address and voice our position in every work, against any form of aggression, each and every day.

Hanul Cho (SMB) Many recent biennales, including this one, have focused on issues like the global environmental crisis, diaspora, displacement, decolonialism, war and authoritarianism, racism and feminism. It seems that AWC also seeks to expand this sensibility to the point of implicating everyone who is living amid this era at a global scale.

You have expressed fear toward the divisive extremes of power that predominate in times of war. In addition, during the early stages of the war, some Ukrainian artists boycotted their works with Russian artists, and some venues in Europe declared that they would not screen or present works by Russian artists (even though some originally hail from Ukraine), resulting in many exhibitions and programs of anti-war Russian artists and activists being canceled overseas. In reality, if you were to present an anti-war message, it would have raised major concerns about the various conflicts and issues taking place. How do you manifest AWC's activism within different conflicting concepts such as inclusion and exclusion, belonging, and otherness?



AWC, *The European Pavilion*, Goethe-Institut, Rome.
On photograph works by (from left to right): Marina Naprushkina, Olia Sosnovskaya & A.Z.H., Mykola Ridnyi, Francis Alijs.
Courtesy of the AWC

Antonina Stebur (AWC) Ukrainian artist Alevtina Kakhidze shared an important thought during our event at documenta 15, which focused on non-human agents during the war. She highlighted a recurring sentiment in Western countries: “Why should we support Ukraine when there are larger global issues like the environmental crisis that need attention?” The problem with this question is that it creates a false dichotomy, as if there is an imperative to decide between supporting Ukraine or addressing the environmental crisis. In reality, this is not a choice that needs to be made because Russia's actions—including military aggression and the mining of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, which is larger than Chernobyl —also contribute to environmental pollution and pose threats to the Earth's ecology. As such, supporting Ukraine can be seen as a means of addressing the environmental crisis, highlighting the importance of recognizing our interconnectedness and rejecting the hierarchization of problems—they are all related.

Tatiana Kochubinska (AWC) I don't think of AWC as a body that can bring an end to worldwide wars or conflicts. It is a community of like-minded art practitioners who seek to tackle questions of war through their artistic practices, or at least interrogate the potential for art to operate as a tool of resistance in today's world. We constantly question if there is anything we can do to withstand the war or remind the world about it. I believe that we can propose a network of solidarity in which individuals may imagine themselves in the place of another—even for just a moment—



AWC, *The European Pavilion*, Goethe-Institut, Rome.
On photograph: *A Childhood Tale From The Dark* by Leman Sevdâ Darıcıoğlu. Courtesy of the AWC

and contemplate the meaning of things such as injustice, bombings, suffering or violence. Such issues might help to connect with people by means of art. In that light, I would like AWC's platform to confront the global practice of othering.

Hanul Cho (SMB) Activist artists also face a dilemma of being easily misunderstood as irresponsible practitioners who only raise problems instead of answers. That said, given AWC's structure as an activist collective with a clear perspective, do you feel any hesitation in conducting projects that are deeply involved with the ongoing situation? In other words, how do you contend with the possibility that your intentions may be read differently when art enters the public domain, and what public role do you expect from the community and society?

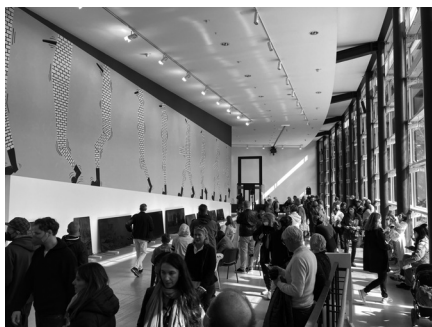
Antonina Stebur (AWC) The notion of art's autonomy, which posits that art exists within its own hermetic sphere of activity, emerged relatively recently in art history, sometime in the 18th century. Nevertheless, many artists who worked in the classical eras were inherently political. Gustave Courbet, for example, even wrote the *Realist Manifesto*, in which he advocated for the integration of political discourse into art. Broadly speaking, I find the boundaries between politics and art to be very contrived. The word aesthetics is actually defined as "feeling, sensory perception," which is why Immanuel Kant's work on aesthetics is titled *Critique of Judgment*. It seems to me that Judgment as a

process links art and politics very strongly.

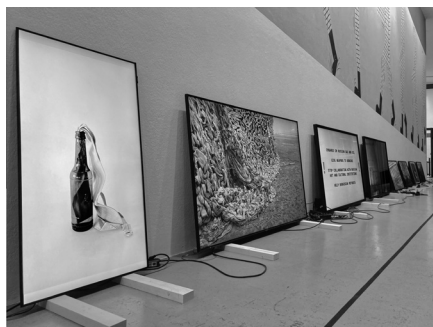
It is important to understand that these commonalities, which bridge the realms of art and politics, can work in two directions. On one hand, it can be liberating when art is engaged in criticism such that it undermines the existing political system. As political philosopher Chantal Mouffe wrote, "What is needed is widening the field of artistic intervention, by intervening directly in a multiplicity of social spaces in order to oppose the program of total social mobilization of capitalism. The objective should be to undermine the imaginary environment necessary for its reproduction." This is crucial to the potential of art, which contains tools that can influence societies—political imagination, play, connecting communities, etc.—and empower it to infiltrate political and social spheres alike.

On the other hand, the dark side of this connection between politics and art emerges when art serves the interests of the authorities. Many dictatorial and totalitarian regimes have aestheticized themselves through art, and such potential for risk is also important to understand.

Aleksander Komarov (AWC) In my opinion, non-uniformity and diversity are not problematic. In fact, they are essential aspects of art, providing unique experiences by combining different directions and facilitating self-reflection within a given system of rules. Our goal is to expand the issue so that it is not merely seen as a single activist project or considered in isolation. Each collaboration within each local context provides



AWC, *Non-Human Agents During The War*, Documenta 15, Documenta Halle, Kassel, 2023. Courtesy of the AWC



AWC, *Non-Human Agents During The War*, Documenta 15, Documenta Halle, Kassel.
On photograph works by (from left to right): Stefan Klein, Zoya Laktionova, Nastia Teor, Clemens V.Wedemeyer and more. Courtesy of the AWC

us with new directions, creating an open space for spontaneous dialogue that goes beyond the singular, while also reflecting and contributing to the community. Our intention is for the platform not to be solely perceived as a manifesto—for us, it is a distinct part of art that is crucial for its survival. We don't aim to create a new space or a new role for artists. Those already exist, so our purpose is to showcase and acknowledge their presence.

Hanul Cho (SMB) Biennales in Asia have a shorter history than those in the West, but have nonetheless grown rapidly in a short time. Increasingly, they attempt to construct their own identities by expressing doubts about Western-oriented art discourse and theories, while paying attention to the problems of Asia-ness and Asian modernity. How does AWC view Asia and the Biennale?

Aleksander Komarov (AWC) Asia certainly has a rich history and diverse cultural identities, and each country has its own distinct experiences and narratives. Biennales are the best examples of exploring such perspectives by engaging with artists and cultural organizations, which are often influenced by the specificity of the territory and the neighboring countries. It's true that North Korea and South Korea have technically remained at war since the 1950s—similarly, China and India do not have a peace treaty, nor do Russia and Japan. Such relations in the region have complex historical, geopolitical, and cultural dimensions. We are interested in learning more about this part of the world and understanding how artists and cultural organizations navigate the challenges of ongoing tensions. I believe this will be a valuable experience for us.

At the same time, we want to convey a message from our own part of the world, where war not only influences the future of Europe, but that of Asia as well. It reveals the colonial ambitions of one state over another and disputes over territorial claims, as well as camouflage that enrich natural resources and politically influence neighboring countries. We would love to meet artists and cultural organizations from this region and to absorb the insights that inform their perspectives, creative responses, and other means of addressing the unique circumstances they face, particularly in relation to the war in Europe.

The International Coalition of Cultural Workers in Solidarity with Ukraine is a group of cultural and artistic workers: Aleksander Komarov, Anna Chistoserdova, Antonina Stebur, Lena Prents, Maxim Tyminko, Natasha Chychasova, Tatiana Kochubinska, Valentina Kiselyova. antiwarcoalition.art is an open online platform that collects, shares and distributes statements against war created by artists from all over the world. Driven by the Russian aggression and war against Ukraine, this platform presents an opportunity to protest against war, dictatorship, and authoritarianism. We express solidarity with those in Ukraine who are affected by the Russian military aggression, and with those resisting colonial, patriarchal, imperialistic, and political repressions and terror elsewhere.

서울미디어시티비엔날레
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Published by
Publisher
Editor
Contributor

Seoul Museum of Art
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Seoul Mediacity Biennale
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Anna Christoserdova,
Antonia Stebur,
Maxim Tyminko,
Tatiana Kochubinska (AWC);
Hanul Cho (SMB)
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Translation
English proofreading
Design

Printing and Binding

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AWC (The International Coalition of Cultural Workers in Solidarity with Ukraine),
The European Pavilion, Goethe-Institut, Rome.
On photograph: *A Childhood Tale From The Dark* by Leman
Sevda Daricioğlu. Courtesy of the AWC

