

Being witness, being judge: reflections on a visit in War-torn Ukraine

by Gianluigi Ricuperati

Together with some extraordinary people - Vanessa Branson, art activist founder of the Marrakech Biennial; Masha Isserils, curator in Dresden and Berlin; Alberto Zontone, partner at Patricia Urquiola studio; Stephen Lanvin, cultural copyright consultant; Gabriele Abruzzese, art photographer, and the very talented Nastya Stovbyr, pianist - I spent the last three days in Ukraine at war, in its air punctuated by constant air raids, along its railways, in homes, among people. It was an unavoidable act, linked to the curatorship of the Ukrainian pavilion at the XXIII Triennale, but it was also an honour projected in my mind and blood, as well as an urgent thing to pass on to my children Lev and Joel, who are half Ukrainian: when you love a world, carry a little of its weight.

In these days, I have been afraid, I have felt curious vertigo, I have exchanged glances of gratitude with strangers and heartfelt hugs with soldiers and fighters (two absolute novelties, for me, as for many others); in these days, I have better understood the contradictions of a national cosmos that is far from perfect, but perfectly situated on the right side of History, which is where we are lucky enough to have been born, namely in the liberal democratic value system; in these days I have thought about love and seen the consequences of death, experienced the absurd cold of the bunkers and the absurd hilarity of joking (almost) all the time, even when one should not. In these Ukrainian days, I have seen museums without works, cultural institutions with their windows covered by cloths and wooden boards, the now proverbial statues protected by sandbags, but also extraordinary artists, curators full of hope, cultural workers determined to write with very clear words the present future of a heritage to be defended and disseminated. I also saw a minister of culture of great quality, who works on Sundays and listens to visionary proposals with a pragmatic spirit, and entrepreneurs who have enlisted to resist, tenacious mayors, vibrant publishing houses, and again, again. If Russia's intent was to deny Ukrainian identity, and if the best part of identity is also through culture, truly, today, the country is more alive than ever.

Our trip, however, was not only constructive and instructive but also ritualistic.

In fact, we visited Gostomel, near Bucha, in the Kyiv region, where the Russian army carried out acts of devastation and desecration, rape and offence.

It is one of the most intense impressions I have ever had. It was a ritual of observation and silence. One cannot really understand the extent and intensity of this war and its consequences without visiting Ukraine today, tomorrow, the day after. Do it. Come here. Security is important, and in one part of the country, it is now at an acceptable level: come here before the news becomes history. If you think that all this does not affect you, if you are more interested in works of art than in the human beings to whom they are destined and by whom they are brought into the world, I will give you a crutch to convince you: unthinkable

war crimes have been committed in Ukraine, even against the artistic and cultural heritage. These crimes must be witnessed, they must be breathed, they must be worn on one's skin like a red-hot pin - and only then, only after thousands of people like me and my fellow travellers on this extraordinary adventure have ploughed the streets of Kyiv, only then, I believe, can they be truly punished.

We are all, at the same time, witnesses and judges of the crimes against culture and humanity perpetrated by the Russians in Ukraine.

Photo: Gabriele Abruzzese









