

The cultural home front

The cultural distant front

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Red Sky 4



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All the included photos were taken by the author in March 2026.



The experience of war in Ukraine is presented on different stages in the West, in realistic and aesthetic experiences. By means of multisensorial displays, exhibitions aim at portraying on the ground experiences, while attuning with receiver profile. Transposition of the on the ground experience is multidirectional, with own representatives immersion experiences brought back onto national stages and national representatives traveling to foreign stages for giving account.

*Close to the war exhibition.
The National Museum of the
80 Years' War, The
Netherlands.*



War in places of worship

The *Dichtbij de Oorlog* exhibition is showcased at the National Museum of the 80 years' war, in a XVth century religious building.

The voluntary character of an exhibition experience bears the demands of the agency driven, artistic criteria. The war experience is aestheticized and put on display in our (former) places of worship. In this, inevitably, the contours of the aesthetic and the brutal begin to merge. The brutal invades the familiar beauty of historical worship places and the aesthetic softens the true meaning of war artefacts.

The home and distant fronts are brought closer in this exposition, by acts of transposition, visualisations and interpretation. Inevitably, the experience requires interpretation and bears interpretation from the original choices on the what and how is presented.

What is striking about the exhibition is its static character. In this it does not capture the essence of a hot conflict: its energy – vital in its defensive manifestation and forces – destructive in its offensive character. War - especially drone warfare - is perpetual movement, noisy and smelly – diesel, burned plastic, burned trash and more than that.



Close to the war exhibition. The National Museum of the 80 Years' War

A drone hanging in a church is a strange sight

For the neophyte, it might be an enlightening experience.

For the connoisseur, the sight infuriates:

a drone seen above is never static, never silent, never friendly.

The attempt of a multi sensorial experience in the exhibition includes visuals and sound. A random sound experience is intended to replicate the acoustics of war. Yet the sounds of a surveying Shahed or FPV are very distinct and a more common experience than the visual of the Shahed.

The sound from a surveying Shahed that circles in the dark in look for its prey bears the meaning of intent.



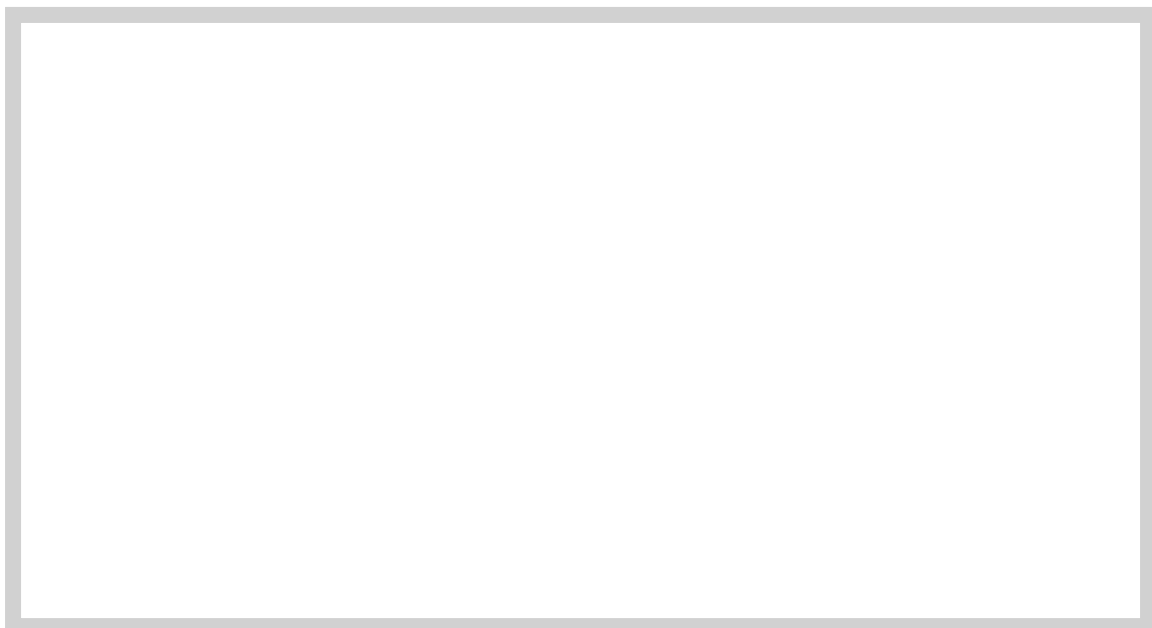
The sense of smell is rarely engaged in war exhibitions, while smell is almost never absent in war.

A reminder of this is the exhibit in the War Diaries section at the National Military Museum



*War diaries
exhibition. National
Military Museum
Soesterberg, The
Netherlands*

with an encased Ukrainian military uniform that was given back to the families of the fallen while still bearing the smell of war.





Immersion by proxy

Proximity of witnesses brought in the local or national background is meant to bridge the gap between the familiar and the unfamiliar, to make the experience and its consequences as close as possible while not requiring immersion.

The VPRO “Game of drones” documentary is showcased at the *Close to the war* exposition, presenting the intertwining perspectives of Foreign Fighters from Ukraine, Ukrainian veterans and video footage of drone strikes. The backgrounds intertwine with the narratives in both contrasting and synchronizing ways: urban zones on the frontlines in different stages and degrees of destruction, images from the zero lines, European urban and non-urban background, array of inside civilian and military backgrounds. Dutch, English and Ukrainian languages narrate the stories. The frames change rapidly from settings in Ukraine to settings in the Netherlands and back, underlining visible and less visible technological and human connections and implicitly an argument for involvement for self-interest. The raw perspective of the western fighter on the enduring experience of surveying drones is edifying.

In a physical diagonal from where this documentary is presented in the *Close to the war* exhibition, the “step in, take a seat and have a talk with a refugee” section is found, which distorts the overall integrity of the experience. So too does the large image of a child among ruins. Including real people - elderly women - in the exposition and having their experiences shared on this purposefully constructed scene is out of place, contradicting the strong self-interest messaging transmitted by the documentary and included statements of politicians. Even more so given closeness of displayed cases from destroyed drones.

Mixing the narratives – self-interest and technology with the humanitarian cause, whether incidental or meant as shock through contrast or all-comprising view of the conflict - does more harm than good to the cohesion of the narrative construction.



Shades of war

There are a million shades between the esthetical experience of war and its most ugly face that should be indecent to display.

The traces that war leaves behind can serve as indication of the everyday fight and its cumulative effects. These contrast everyday (western) experiences through the power of at first sight innocuous oppositions or disturbances in the familiar pattern of the environment:

Forests filled with bottles, empty energy drink cans, power bar wrappers.

Overall – the empty plastic water bottle: carpets of empty plastic bottles invading natural habitats – the green of the forests, the fields, the grey of the roads.

The discarded empty water bottle - a constant image of this war that is not depicted.

The size of the personal space of an individual soldier – in his dugout or assigned housing. The inside of his backpack.

The front smells of burned plastic.



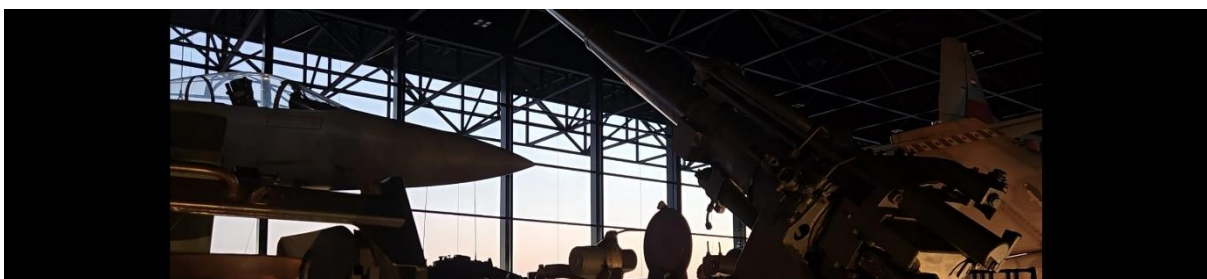
The night of Military Music

The Night of the Military Music that took place in March at the National Military Museum offered a niche platform for displaying the function of culture during wartime and – more generally – culture performed by and for the armed forces. On a background of shared meaning and symbols – military apparel, uniform and history – representatives of national and international army structures executed cultural performances. It was a night of two way military cultural diplomacy at its best.

The performances of the Cultural Forces of Ukraine included information on the representations that are given for the soldiers on the front lines. By means of video representation, unknown backgrounds were brought on an international stage – those of the forests and safe houses that make the front line or are next to it.

Two physical backgrounds in particular had impact on the acoustic message of the performances: the heavy wartime firepower machinery against a sunset background and the largescale painting of the scene of the Battle of Quatre Bras, under the title Crossroads Waterloo.

The performances included impact through singularity, not numbers.



Sunset performance at the Night of Military Music, 2026.

While the performances inevitably appeal to the emotional side through content and through the purpose of deployment on the front line, they do so without an implicit call for immediate emotion based reaction from the audience.



The function that culture has during conflict – the cultural front – is made visible on a wider scale. Distances and points of reference between the cultural home front and the cultural distant front become relative, interchanged. Yet the function that culture serves when present on the frontlines is evident, as well as its political function when agency driven and performed from a distance.

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About the author.

Diana Popa has over 17 years of experience in research and academia and has authored numerous reports and scientific articles. Recent research and analysis focus on resilience as part of defence programmes, emerging disruptive technologies, in particular Artificial Intelligence in high risk areas, including defence.

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