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Remembering the present, imagining the future

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2023

Document Version:
Other version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Graf, S. (2023). *Remembering the present, imagining the future: Temporalities of Ukrainian Virtual War Museums*. 17-18. Abstract from CBEES Annual Conference 2023, Stockholm, Sweden.

Total number of authors:

1

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Abstract CBEES Conference 2023

Remembering the present, imagining the future: Temporalities of Ukrainian Virtual War Museums

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This paper focuses on how Ukrainian virtual war museums are mediating, archiving, and memorializing the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine. Applying an ecological understanding of war, this study attends to one facet of memory production: How do virtual museums envision the future of Ukraine while mediating and remembering the full-scale invasion? More precisely, I explore the ways the spatiotemporal figure of 'the future' is present in the assemblages that compose the virtual museums of war. By 'virtual' or 'virtuality' I refer hereby to both a digital entity, such as a virtual museum, and to something that might be actualized in the future (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). This assumption implies a potential future-oriented direction in both assemblages and virtuality.

In this regard, this study takes up discussions of thinking about futurity and its multiple relations with perceptions of the past and present in history (Tamm and Simon 2021), memory studies (Gutman et al. 2010; Szpunar and Szpunar 2016) and anthropology (Pink and Salazar 2017) focusing on practices of anticipation, while paying close attention to the production of memory in an unfolding war.

This analysis looks at four virtual museums: Meta History: Museum of War, Virtual Museum of the Russian Aggression, War Up Close, and the War Fragments Museum. All museums are virtual only with a focus on exhibiting and rendering war, and they can be seen as a direct response to the Russian invasion. Applying an ecological understanding of war that foregrounds the crucial interplay between human and non-human actors in our post-digital world, as part of their embeddedness in connectivity, digital spaces have become sites of conflict, and thus part of today's conduct of war.

Through digital ethnography and digital methods, I illustrate the entanglement between the museums' infrastructures and their exhibitions to grasp the complex interactions between past, and present. This encompasses 'anticipatory practices' (Tamm and Simon 2021; Anderson 2010) such as building archives, production of memory, processes of heritage, collection of donations, coping mechanisms with trauma, and visions of the future, to ultimately counter the Russian invasion. The analysis draws on online observation, networked content analysis, interview data, and social media analysis to shed light on the relation of engagement with war, memory production, and the imaginations of the future. By focusing on the use of temporalities in virtual museums, this paper provides valuable insights into how virtuality is employed in the present to shape the future.