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Ukrainian Aesthetic Traditions as Epistemic Practice: Reframing VALYA's Diasporic Fiber Work as Decolonial Method

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Article Abstract:

This paper argues that Ukrainian visual culture sustains traditions of aesthetic expression and knowledge that predate—and cannot be fully explained by—the imperial and national frameworks of Russian and Western art histories. I use the term "Indigenous" here to emphasize the relationship between cultural knowledge, place, and practices transmitted across generations, while recognizing that these traditions have always developed through exchange. Central to this argument is epistemic agency: the capacity to produce knowledge and define the terms through which one's culture is understood. Ukrainian visual practices have sustained this capacity under conditions of imperial coercion, cultural assimilation, and historical rupture. These practices developed through centuries of interaction with Byzantine Christianity, steppe cultures, Ottoman and Polish–Lithuanian political formations, Jewish and Roma communities, and transregional trade networks. Such encounters helped shape local visual languages through adaptation, exchange, and reinterpretation. Cultural continuity, in this account, does not require cultural purity. I therefore approach Ukrainian visual culture as a dynamic field in which inherited symbols and practices are continually reworked. Its continuity lies in the capacity to transform these inheritances and articulate culturally situated ways of seeing, knowing, and belonging.

Within this evolving constellation, certain recurring forms—spirals, solar rosettes, meanders, branching structures, and cross geometries—function as persistent visual frameworks through which relationships between body, land, ritual, and collective memory are articulated. I refer to these recurring visual structures as Ukrainian cosmograms: patterned systems that organize cosmological thinking within material practice. Tracing their lineage from Trypillian material culture through Slavic ritual traditions, textile practices, and contemporary abstraction, the paper examines how these symbolic grammars persist through processes of suppression, reinterpretation, and modern artistic reactivation. Contemporary Ukrainian diaspora artist VALYA (Valentina Roenko Simpson) engages these visual structures through fiber-based installations that reactivate ancestral pattern languages within the spatial and conceptual frameworks of contemporary art. Through close visual analysis of works such as *SHE*, it shows how cutting, felting, suspension, and ritual materials transform absence into testimony and pattern into theory—recasting fiber as a decolonial medium that restores cultural sovereignty. Ultimately, the essay positions Ukrainian visual culture as a generative center of cosmological thinking that both predates and exceeds Western modernism and demands reclassification within global art history.

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1. Introduction

Garment and textile traditions often function as material embodiments of humanity's relationships to land, kinship, and cycles of transformation. Within Ukrainian visual culture, embroidery, weaving, and ritual cloth have historically operated not merely as decoration but as carriers of memory, protection, and cosmological orientation embedded in seasonal and communal practice. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ethnographic documentation records the placement of motifs on garments—particularly at thresholds of the body such as cuffs, collars, and chest panels—as protective and relational rather than ornamental. These traditions form part of a broader visual epistemology grounded in relationships to land, seasonality, and communal practice, in which pattern, repetition, and material process encode relational knowledge.

Scholars of Indigenous textile traditions in North America have articulated similar understandings of fiber as a cosmological practice. Diné (Navajo) master weaver Lynda Teller Pete, for example, describes weaving as an enactment of stories, prayers, and cosmic order—an idea that resonates conceptually with Ukrainian ritual textile traditions in which cloth functions as a carrier of memory, protection, and cosmological orientation. While these traditions emerge from distinct historical and colonial contexts, placing them in dialogue highlights textile as a form of knowledge-making rather than mere ornamentation. Situating Ukrainian material culture within this broader conversation expands decolonial discourse and challenges assumptions that cosmological textile knowledge exists only outside Europe.

Academic scholarship generally has not approached Ukrainian textile, embroidery, and fiber art through a cosmological or epistemic lens. Instead, Ukrainian aesthetics are often flattened into binaries such as folk versus modern, ornamentation versus fine art, or craft versus high culture. Ukrainian aesthetics trace a long and shifting genealogy shaped by intertwined legacies of innovation, suppression, and revival. Their trajectory reveals a persistent dialogue between tradition and modernity, the local and the global, and survival and transformation. Across the centuries, Ukrainian visual culture has not merely absorbed external influences but actively reinterpreted them through an intrinsic sensibility rooted in land, ritual, and collective memory. Ukrainian art has been an active contributor to expanding the cultural field of art production.

This essay argues that Ukrainian visual culture sustains a cosmological visual grammar—what I term Ukrainian cosmograms—whose formal and symbolic structures can be traced across a longue durée, from Trypillian material culture through later Slavic and folk traditions into modern and contemporary practice. Rather than asserting uninterrupted transmission, the paper

identifies recurring configurations of form and meaning that persist, transform, and are reactivated across historical rupture. Positioned between Western binaries that separate "craft" from "fine art" and the cyclical erasures of cultural identity enacted by Russian imperial and Soviet frameworks, Ukrainian art operates as an autonomous visual vocabulary that resists both reduction and assimilation. Within this context, textile practices in particular function not as peripheral or decorative forms but as epistemic systems: they articulate a relational understanding of body, land, and cosmology, embedding knowledge in material, pattern, and process. Far from decorative, these symbolic forms encode relationships among embodiment, environment, ritual, and cosmological order, sustaining a mode of visual thinking that is at once vernacular and philosophically complex. Within this framework, "Indigenous" is understood as a land-based, knowledge-bearing aesthetic tradition, traced through material practices of textile, ritual object, and patterned abstraction. Although obscured and distorted through imperial and Soviet assimilation, these systems were never extinguished and continue to shape contemporary artistic production.

The paper first establishes the historical grammar of Ukrainian symbols—spirals, solar rosettes, meanders, and branching forms—as cosmograms rather than ornament. It then situates their continuity within the disruptions of imperial domination, addressing a critical gap in North American art history and decolonial studies by bringing postcolonial frameworks into dialogue with Eastern Europe's internal colonialisms. Drawing on David Moore and Svitlana Biedarieva, the essay positions Ukrainian visual culture within an expanded decolonial discourse.

At its center, the paper examines Ukrainian-American artist VALYA (Valentina Roenko Simpson) as a contemporary transmitter of Indigenous Ukrainian abstraction. Through close readings of her fiber-based installations—particularly *SHE*—it demonstrates how natural materials, cut cloth, and spatial immersion reactivate cosmological structures and transform "ornament" into epistemology. VALYA's practice emerges as a decolonial method grounded in Ukrainian visual knowledge.

Finally, the essay places VALYA in dialogue with contemporary American women artists working in fiber to clarify both shared material strategies and the distinct post-Soviet colonial histories her work renders legible within U.S. institutions. Taken together, this study reframes Ukrainian textile-based abstraction as a living theory of relationality and advances Ukrainian art as a critical site for expanding global decolonial discourse beyond its dominant geographic and imperial frameworks.

1.1. Ukrainian Cosmograms: From Trypillian Origins to Modernity

Ukrainian cultural symbolism emerges from multiple historical strata, including the Trypillian civilization (5500–2750 BCE), early Slavic cosmologies, agrarian ritual systems, and later folk-art lineages. Across these layers, Ukrainian visual culture is structured by cyclical understandings of life, materiality, and the natural world. Motif families—spirals, meanders, rosettes, branching forms, and cross-like geometries form a durable visual vocabulary that exceeds mere decoration. While archaeological interpretations of prehistoric meaning remain necessarily provisional, ethnographic accounts of later Ukrainian practice consistently situate patterned forms within protective, relational, and cosmological frameworks. The term "cosmograms" is used to describe how these recurring visual structures operate as knowledge-bearing systems across historical, ethnographic, and contemporary registers.

At the same time, this approach distinguishes between formal recurrence and fixed symbolic meaning. Prehistoric visual systems rarely survive with written exegesis, and assigning stable meanings—such as fertility, life, or death—to specific motifs risks imposing retrospective coherence onto fragmentary material evidence. Rather than asserting seamless symbolic continuity, this study advances a three-part framework: first, the repetition of motif families across material traditions; second, their documented ritual and embodied use in later Ukrainian contexts, where pattern operates through placement, seasonality, and protection; and third, their conscious reactivation in contemporary practice, particularly in the work of artists such as VALYA. Within this model, continuity is understood as recursive rather than static: forms persist, meanings shift through lived and cultural contexts, and are reinterpreted within modern artistic discourse. It is precisely through this ongoing process of recurrence and transformation that Ukrainian visual culture maintains its epistemic force.

These continuities differentiate Ukrainian aesthetics from many European cultures in which pre-Christian cosmologies were sharply interrupted or overwritten. Over centuries, Ukraine adapted cosmological symbolism, incorporating it into embroidery (*vyshyvanka*), *pysanka* (inscribed ritual eggs), weaving, clothing, ritual objects, and domestic altars. Yet this lineage should not be understood as seamless or untouched by history. Imperial and Soviet regimes profoundly fractured the conditions of transmission through linguistic suppression, religious control, folklorization, and the elimination of intellectual elites. Ritual knowledge was displaced from public institutions into domestic and rural spaces; intergenerational transmission was interrupted; symbolic systems were recoded as "folk ornament" rather than epistemic practice. What persisted did so unevenly—through women's labor, ceremonial repetition, diasporic memory, and later ethnographic documentation that both preserved and standardized motifs once embedded in lived ritual.

Continuity, therefore, operates not as static preservation but as recursive recomposition. Symbols endured through adaptation, selective survival, revival movements, and modern codification, circulating between lived practice and archival reclassification. Rather than disappearing, these symbols persisted through reinventions, diasporic transmission, and modern ethnographic codification, forming a recursive lineage shaped by rupture as much as endurance. Understanding these forms as vehicles of knowledge—not decoration—is essential for recognizing how Ukrainian art participates in land-based cosmological frameworks that Western art history has largely overlooked. It is precisely within this dialectic of fracture and reactivation that Ukrainian visual culture acquires its contemporary decolonial force.

In the last few centuries, Imperial and Soviet narratives have often obscured this lineage, seeking either to assimilate or efface it. Tsarist cultural policy and Soviet ideological centralization collapsed Ukraine's distinct artistic identity into the myth of a unified "Russian" culture, while Western institutions often misclassified Ukrainian artists as peripheral participants in modernism. To re-situate Ukrainian art within global discourse, therefore, is not merely to recover a suppressed history but to articulate its theoretical autonomy—a lineage defined by both resistance and innovation.

1.2. Ukrainian Art Beyond Empire: Rethinking Coloniality and Knowledge

To ask *what Ukrainian art is*—and what it continues to become—requires a framework that recognizes its dynamic, interstitial nature. It cannot be confined to national borders or reduced to stylistic categories; rather, it operates as a constellation of aesthetic, epistemic, and spiritual practices shaped by entangled histories of colonization, migration, and exchange. Ukrainian visual culture emerges from multiple temporalities: pre-Christian cosmologies, Byzantine spirituality, baroque syncretism, and the disruptions of imperial modernity. In the twenty-first century, it functions as a site of both recovery and resistance—reviving suppressed visual languages while engaging global discourses of decolonization and identity formation.

The colonial dynamics shaping Ukrainian cultural history differ in important ways from the settler-colonial models that have often structured decolonial theory. Ukraine's experience of imperial domination did not primarily operate through overseas expansion or racialized settlement, but through what scholars have described as forms of internal imperial colonization. In this context, coloniality functioned through mechanisms of epistemic domination: the suppression of language, the restructuring of cultural institutions, the appropriation of artistic production into imperial narratives, and the reclassification of cultural heritage within archival

and museum systems. Ukrainian cultural production was frequently incorporated into Russian or Soviet frameworks that extracted intellectual and aesthetic credit while obscuring the regional and linguistic contexts from which these works emerged. Understanding coloniality in the Ukrainian case therefore requires attention not only to political domination but also to the institutional processes through which knowledge, cultural memory, and artistic authorship were reorganized and misrecognized.

This distinction does not place the Ukrainian experience outside decolonial inquiry; rather, it expands the scope of colonial analysis to include imperial formations that operated within continental spaces. By foregrounding mechanisms such as linguistic suppression, archival misclassification, and cultural appropriation, Ukrainian visual culture becomes legible as a site where coloniality operates through epistemic and institutional structures rather than through settler replacement alone. Situating Ukrainian art within this framework allows for a more precise understanding of how imperial power shaped both the production and the global reception of cultural knowledge.

Slavic art history remains underrepresented in North American academia. The dominant paradigms of postcolonial and decolonial theory—developed primarily through the analysis of Western Europe's overseas empires—have rarely been applied to the internal colonialisms of Eastern Europe. Foundational theorists such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Walter Mignolo have profoundly shaped understandings of cultural subjugation and hybridity, yet their frameworks seldom account for the imperial mechanisms of Tsarist and Soviet Russia, where colonization operated internally through assimilation and erasure rather than through geographic distance or racial hierarchy. This omission leaves a critical gap in global decolonial thought.

David Moore's 2001 essay "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique" stands among the earliest and most incisive attempts in the English language to address this theoretical gap (Moore 112). Moore identifies the need for a global critique that acknowledges how postcolonialism intersects with post-Soviet conditions—especially through ethnic erasures, coercion, and resistance that characterize Eurasian modernities. Building upon this inquiry, Ukrainian scholar Svitlana Biedarieva has expanded the field by introducing critical terminology such as *ambicoloniality*, a concept that captures the complexity of Ukraine's position as a nation historically subjected to overlapping imperial systems while simultaneously generating its own aesthetic and epistemic resistance. Her work redefines decolonial discourse by insisting on the inclusion of Eastern European and particularly Ukrainian experiences in the broader critique of colonialism (Decolonization and Disentanglement in Ukrainian Art 10-16). Despite her contributions, more scholarly work is needed to clarify Ukraine's colonial histories and to reassess cultural appropriation and identity

by examining Ukraine's contributions to global scholarship. This paper seeks to position Ukrainian artistic production within a broader intellectual framework that foregrounds its autonomous origins and restores visibility to cultural contributions long overshadowed by Western and Russian narratives.

Within this expanded framework, the dynamics of Ukrainian cultural misrecognition can be productively read through a modified understanding of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism —not as a direct East/West opposition, but as a broader epistemic structure that produces cultural difference through hierarchies of knowledge and representation. In both Russian imperial discourse and Western art-historical classification, Ukrainian culture has often been rendered peripheral: aestheticized as "folk," absorbed into dominant narratives, or treated as derivative rather than generative. This process aligns with what Walter Mignolo describes as the coloniality of knowledge, in which certain epistemologies are subordinated or erased within global systems of classification.

At the same time, Ukrainian artistic practice—particularly in diasporic and contemporary contexts—can be understood through Homi K. Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity and strategic re-articulation. Artists such as VALYA do not simply recover suppressed traditions but actively encode and amplify markers of Ukrainianness within their work, transforming forms historically relegated to ornament or ethnography into sites of epistemic assertion. This process may be understood as a form of anti-orientalist practice: a deliberate re-signification of visual language that resists both imperial assimilation and Western marginalization. Through material choices, symbolic repetition, and spatial installation, such work asserts Ukrainian visual culture not as peripheral but as a self-determined and knowledge-producing system.

2. Indigenous Grammars of Abstraction: VALYA and the Epistemic Lineage of Ukrainian Visual Culture

Ukrainian art may be understood as a distinct aesthetic system shaped by visual traditions that link body, environment, and spirituality. Central to this system is the *vyshyvanka*, whose geometric and floral motifs function not only as ornament but as repositories of protective signs, ancestral memory, and cosmological orientation (Rubchak 83–101). These patterns articulate relationships between the human, the land, and the sacred, forming a visual logic of kinship and continuity.

This logic resonates with earlier visual cultures, including the abstraction of Trypillian ornament, where spirals, triangles, and meanders have been interpreted as indexing cyclical time, fertility, and cosmological balance (Videiko). Rather than serving as a precursor to Western

modernism, these forms constitute a long-standing grammar of abstraction that persists across rupture, circulating through ritual practice, domestic making, diasporic transmission, and later ethnographic and artistic reinterpretation.

This lineage continues within contemporary practice, where artists such as VALYA (Valentyna Roenko Simpson) mobilize these visual systems as living epistemologies. Working in fiber installation and sculptural environments, VALYA reactivates Neolithic and vernacular forms not as static heritage but as conceptual frameworks for engaging identity, memory, and embodiment. Through spiral geometries, concentric structures, and rhythmic patterning, her work situates these visual logics as enduring aesthetic principles that resonate with, yet remain distinct from, modernist concerns with abstraction and materiality.

2.1 VALYA as Contemporary Transmitter of Ukrainian Cosmology

SHE may be understood as both a meditation on gendered experience and an engagement with ancestral memory. The installation is organized around an immersive spatial environment interrupted by a monumental, larger-than-life three-dimensional *rushnyk*—the traditional Ukrainian ritual cloth—whose scale transforms a familiar domestic and ceremonial object into an architectural presence. In its presentation at the Oceanside Museum of Art in California, the installation incorporated stones, candles, a continuous white stripe running along the perimeter of the gallery, portraiture of the *Baba* (elder woman), creating a multilayered symbolic field grounded in ritual, lineage, and feminine knowledge systems. Constructed from blood-red threads, the suspended *rushnyk* generated dynamic shadows through shifting light, making shadow itself an active component of the viewer's experience. Interactive vertical red textile scrolls and suspended charcoal elements draw on symbolic vocabularies associated with Ukrainian textile and ritual traditions.

This installation suggest continuity, regeneration, and cyclical transformation. Its meaning remain historically layered and open to reinterpretation; within VALYA's installation, fixed historical symbols serve as elements of a contemporary visual language that invites reflection on life cycles, ancestral presence, and the relationship between material and spiritual worlds. Within this immersive environment, VALYA brings together abstraction, installation, and phenomenological perception with the material specificity of Ukrainian cultural forms. Vertical threads echo the linear structure of embroidery, while suspended fabrics evoke ritual textile practices historically embedded in domestic and communal spaces. The spatial orchestration of fabric, shadow, and thread recalls the contemplative atmosphere of sacred interiors, situating the viewer within a carefully structured perceptual field.

The installation produces a shared experiential space rather than a singular narrative. A horizontal white line traverses the room, guiding movement and perception, while suspended figurines evoke themes of embodiment, vulnerability, and generational continuity. These elements remain grounded in the material vocabulary of Ukrainian textile culture while retaining broader contemporary legibility.

VALYA's installations do not reconstruct a lost past but mobilize historical motifs as conceptual tools for engaging memory, identity, and transformation. Her references to deep time and origin function as part of a mythopoetic vocabulary rather than archaeological claims, articulating continuity through symbolic and material association. Her large-scale felted works, including *Metamorphosis* and *Rebirth*, translate the tactile qualities of ceramic vessels into suspended fiber structures. This shift from ceramic to textile reconfigures material logic, positioning fiber as a conceptual medium capable of carrying cultural memory and embodied knowledge.

Through these installations, VALYA places Ukrainian visual traditions in dialogue with contemporary sculptural practices, including installation art and process-based work, while extending into performative space. In *SHE*, the viewer becomes an active participant: distorted mirrors fragment perception, while suspended fiber generates shifting geometries of light and shadow that recall the rhythms of textile patterning. Lines mapped onto the walls evoke systems of lineage and transmission, situating the body within a continuum of cultural memory. Candles and stones anchor the installation materially, invoking temporality, land, and ritual presence.

Within this framework, acts of making—spinning, weaving, pottery—function as cosmogenic practices. These processes operate as forms of embodied knowledge through which material transformation parallels ecological and cyclical rhythms.

VALYA activates Ukrainian cosmograms not only as visual structures but as experiential systems. As viewers move through the installation, they engage in a process of recursive meaning-making that echoes cyclical frameworks embedded in Ukrainian visual culture. The work thus operates at the intersection of sculpture, environment, and performance, transforming textile epistemologies into spatial encounters. Ukrainian visual language emerges here not as static heritage but as an adaptive system that continues to generate knowledge through perception and interaction.

VALYA has described her artistic process as one in which the artist serves "as a pencil in God's hands" (Roenko Simpson, personal interview). This understanding positions artistic making as mediation between material, memory, and cultural inheritance. Her installations function as sites where historical motifs and contemporary practice converge.

2.2 European Hybridity and the Politics of Ornament

VALYA's work intervenes directly within the intersecting terrain of imperial appropriation, Western marginalization, and modernist hierarchies. Her installations demonstrate that Ukrainian ornament operates as a system of ancestral knowledge and embodied memory rather than decorative surface. By integrating symbolic vocabularies with contemporary spatial strategies, she repositions ornament as a theoretical language.

Her mixed-media environments incorporate materials historically classified as "craft" within Western and Soviet frameworks. In her work, these materials regain cosmological significance: thread becomes lineage, red marks protection and vitality, and geometric forms articulate cyclical time and continuity.

This approach resists the ornamental logic imposed on Ukrainian culture. Rather than reducing pattern to surface, VALYA restores it as a form of knowledge. Her engagement with Trypillian abstraction positions these motifs as early expressions of cosmological thinking. They function not as citations but as active principles within contemporary practice.

Her installations challenge the modernist assumption that ornament belongs to the past or to the "primitive." Large-scale fiber structures draw simultaneously on contemporary installation and historical symbolic grammars. The result is not folkloric hybridity but a demonstration that Ukrainian abstraction operates in parallel to modernism. Ornament becomes a mode of encounter in which the viewer's body is guided and reoriented within a network of symbolic relations.

2.3 Cosmology, Craft, and Feminine Knowledge Systems

Neolithic visual systems, often relegated to anthropology within Western art history, encode cosmological principles that articulate relationships between human life, ecological cycles, and material practice (Encyclopedia of Ukraine). These forms function as expressions of cosmology, linking symbolic structure to seasonal rhythms and regenerative processes.

In Ukrainian visual culture, symbolic forms originating in prehistoric material culture reappear in later ritual and textile traditions. Spirals, meanders, and concentric forms have been interpreted as reflecting cyclical time and continuity between human and natural systems.

Archaeological interpretations remain debated, yet they consistently point to the centrality of transformation and regeneration within Trypillian visual culture (Videiko 35–60).

VALYA extends this engagement by translating ceramic and ornamental logics into installation. Suspended figurines and textile grids transform two-dimensional ornament into immersive spatial systems, establishing a dialogue between material traditions across time.

Her references to primordial or mythic narratives operate as symbolic frameworks rather than historical claims, allowing prehistoric visual languages to be reimagined within contemporary art. Through felt, pigment, and fiber, VALYA translates tactile processes—pressing, layering, binding—into sculptural form. These gestures echo historical practices of making, connecting contemporary work to ancestral craft traditions.

This translation foregrounds the gendered dimensions of knowledge. Textile and ceramic production, historically associated with women's labor, carried significant cosmological meaning. VALYA reengages this lineage by positioning fiber as a medium of cultural transmission and relational knowledge. Her practice also resonates with ecofeminist thought, which links ecological systems with embodied knowledge. The use of natural fibers and hand-based processes challenges industrial logics of extraction, instead emphasizing transformation through renewal.

Her installations create environments of permeability and flux, where light, material, and body interact. These spaces foreground a relational aesthetic in which perception, ecology, and memory converge.

By engaging Trypillian visual vocabularies within contemporary installation, VALYA situates Ukrainian cosmological thought within a global artistic discourse. Her work reactivates these forms as conceptual structures capable of addressing ecological and cultural concerns, restoring craft traditions as sites of knowledge.

2.4 Semiotics of Cut Cloth: Visual Analysis of SHE

In *SHE*, vertical red and charcoal scrolls form a tripartite structure that recalls an epigraphic system. The symbols draw from embroidery, ceramics, and invented visual languages. Zigzag forms suggest movement and flow; ladders evoke vertical connection; circles and crosses recall solar unity. These elements evoke protection, transformation, and continuity without fixing singular meanings.

The central panels introduce cultivated space, cosmic rhythms, and dualities through geometric and figurative forms. The right panel extends this system through grids, crosses, and serpentine lines that suggest balance between earthly and cosmic forces. Together, the columns operate as a visual system of transformation and renewal. VALYA's technique of cutting into fabric reverses embroidery, producing meaning through subtraction. This gesture evokes both erasure and recovery, transforming absence into presence.

Red cloth anchors the installation in Ukrainian textile tradition, where it signifies vitality and protection. Negative space suggests historical rupture, while graphite rubbings of contemporary marks juxtapose ritual and everyday inscription.

3. Western Dialogues Versus Muscovite Assimilation: Recovering Ukrainian Intellectual Autonomy

Ukrainian art history is best understood not through a binary opposition between "Western openness" and "Eastern repression," but through overlapping systems of cultural misrecognition. The reception histories of artists such as Kazimir Malevich, Sonia Delaunay, and Maria Prymachenko demonstrate how institutional and art-historical taxonomies have repeatedly subsumed Ukrainian-born or Ukrainian-formed figures into generalized "Russian" or "Soviet" categories (Museum of Modern Art; Centre Pompidou; The Ukrainian Museum). While these artists worked within diverse and often transnational milieus, such classifications obscure the regional, linguistic, and cultural conditions that informed their practices. Rather than asserting direct lines of formal inheritance, this paper foregrounds Ukrainian visual logic as a structuring presence—one that underpins both historical and contemporary practices and calls for a reconfiguration of how Eastern European art is situated within global art history.

Within Russian imperial and Soviet frameworks, Ukrainian artistic production was subject to systematic assimilation and appropriation. Cultural forms, artists, and intellectual traditions were absorbed into a Russocentric narrative that positioned Ukrainian culture as a regional variant of a unified imperial civilization. Kazimir Malevich, born in Kyiv and shaped by Ukrainian visual culture, was canonized within the category of the "Russian avant-garde," while figures such as Oleksandra Ekster and Vladimir Tatlin were similarly subsumed into narratives that minimized their Ukrainian contexts. Earlier cases, including Ilya Repin, further illustrate how imperial frameworks claimed artists from Ukrainian territories as representatives of Russian cultural achievement.

In Western Europe and North America, by contrast, Ukrainian art was less often assimilated than peripheralized—misclassified under generalized "Russian" or "Soviet" labels or relegated to ethnography and decorative craft rather than recognized as a field of intellectual and aesthetic production. These parallel mechanisms—imperial assimilation and institutional marginalization—produced distinct yet mutually reinforcing forms of invisibility. Western art-historical hierarchies, particularly the division between fine art and craft, further displaced Ukrainian textile and ritual traditions into folkloric categories, obscuring their epistemic and aesthetic complexity. Even Sonia Delaunay, born in Odesa, was often framed as "Russian-born" or absorbed into Western modernism without sustained attention to Ukrainian cultural frameworks.

Understanding these intersecting systems of misrecognition is essential for repositioning Ukrainian art within global discourse. Rather than framing Ukrainian cultural development through an East–West divide, it is more accurate to recognize that Ukrainian artists have navigated multiple overlapping imperial and institutional structures. Their work emerges through processes of negotiation, adaptation, and reinterpretation, producing visual forms that are neither derivative nor isolated, but dynamically situated within transregional cultural networks.

4. Realism to Relationality: Divergent Aesthetic Worlds

This essay positions Ukrainian art as a critical site for rethinking the definition of art—its ontology, social function, and epistemic foundations. Rather than opposing national styles, it treats realism and abstraction as a heuristic for understanding how visual legibility becomes politically organized within imperial cultural systems. Imperial institutions frequently privileged forms of representation that were didactic and immediately legible, capable of conveying ideological narratives and political authority. This tendency became particularly pronounced in Russian imperial and Soviet contexts, where figurative realism was aligned with pedagogical and ideological goals.

By contrast, many strands of Ukrainian visual culture sustained symbolic, patterned, and relational modes of expression embedded in textile traditions, ritual objects, and vernacular ornament. These systems operate through repetition, geometry, and abstraction rather than narrative figuration. This distinction is not a rigid national opposition but a broader tension between visual regimes oriented toward representational clarity and those grounded in symbolic and cosmological patterning.

At the same time, the hybridity often associated with Ukrainian modernism must be understood within the conditions of artistic education and institutional power. A significant

number of Ukrainian-born artists were trained in Russian imperial academies, Soviet institutions, or Western European centers such as Kraków, Munich, and Paris. Figures including Kazimir Malevich, Alexander Archipenko, Sonia Delaunay, David Burliuk, Oleksandra Ekster, Vladimir Tatlin, Mykhailo Boichuk, Ilya Repin, Arkhip Kuindzhi, Serhiy Vasylkivsky and many others moved through these institutional networks, absorbing and contributing to dominant aesthetic systems ranging from академический реализм (academic realism) to Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, and abstraction. Their training situated them within the visual languages of empire and European modernity, where realism functioned as a vehicle of ideological clarity, and later modernist abstraction emerged as a transnational avant-garde discourse.

As a result, Ukrainian artists were frequently integrated into the cultural taxonomies of the systems in which they were educated. Artists trained in St. Petersburg or Moscow were canonized within "Russian" or "Soviet" art history, while those working in Paris or Berlin were absorbed into narratives of European modernism. This process reflects not only geographic mobility but institutional appropriation: naming, classification, and canon formation were structured by the centers of power that governed artistic education and exhibition. Hybridity, therefore, should be understood not simply as stylistic synthesis but as a condition produced through overlapping systems of imperial assimilation and Western incorporation.

Within this framework, Ukrainian artists did not passively adopt foreign aesthetics but actively mediated them. Ilya Repin (Aka Ripin) and Arkhip Kuindzhi engaged academic realism while retaining attention to land, atmosphere, and regional specificity. Kazimir Malevich and David Burliuk transformed figuration into radical abstraction, while Oleksandra Ekster and Vladimir Tatlin navigated between painting, design, and spatial construction. Alexander Archipenko translated Cubist principles into sculptural form, and Sonia Delaunay developed a language of color and rhythm that intersected with both European modernism and textile-based abstraction. Across these practices, elements such as rhythmic repetition, radial symmetry, and material tactility—rooted in Ukrainian visual traditions—reappear within the vocabularies of realism, modernism, and abstraction.

Understanding this trajectory reframes Ukrainian art not as derivative of dominant centers, but as a site of active negotiation across multiple aesthetic regimes. Ukrainian artists moved between realism and abstraction, figuration and ornament, academic training and vernacular knowledge, producing hybrid forms that reflect both adaptation to and resistance against the institutional systems that shaped their visibility. In this sense, Ukrainian art occupies a critical position within global art history: not at the margins, but within the very processes through which modern artistic categories were constructed, contested, and transformed.

4.1.Gendered Hierarchies and Aesthetic Colonialism

Ironically, the same Western fine art tradition that became a global standard of "high culture" also entrenched hierarchies that privileged male-dominated practices—particularly oil painting—while devaluing forms such as embroidery, weaving, and textile work. Within this framework, fiber arts were relegated to the category of "craft," positioned as domestic, feminine, and secondary to the intellectual rigor of painting and sculpture. This hierarchy was not accidental; it was rooted in Enlightenment and colonial ideologies that defined artistic value through systems of patriarchy, material dominance, and class distinction. As Rozsika Parker observes in *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), embroidery was long regarded as the work of women "confined to the home and to silence," while painting was elevated as the vehicle of male genius and public expression (Parker).

The geopolitical order of Europe itself mirrored these aesthetic hierarchies. Western art institutions—academies, salons, and later museums—functioned not only as arbiters of taste but also as instruments of cultural colonization. Through exhibitions, publications, and pedagogy, they established what Walter Mignolo calls "the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo 8-10)," which defines knowledge, aesthetics, and value from a Eurocentric standpoint (*The Darker Side of Western Modernity*). This system simultaneously exalted the European avant-garde and marginalized artistic traditions from colonized or peripheral regions, framing them as primitive, folkloric, or naïve.

In this sense, the very mechanisms that celebrated modernity also perpetuated an aesthetic colonialism that erased or diminished local and Indigenous expressions. Fiber arts—central to the visual and ritual culture of Ukraine—were absorbed into this logic of hierarchy. They were viewed as ethnographic curiosities or remnants of a premodern society rather than systems of abstraction and meaning. Nevertheless, these very practices—embroidery, weaving, and ritual textiles—represent the aesthetic and philosophical core of Ukrainian culture: an art grounded in oral transmission, collective labor, and a cosmology of pattern and rhythm rather than in the individualized authorship prized by Western modernism.

Thus, the marginalization of Ukrainian art within Western discourse parallels the suppression of women's creative labor within art history. Both result from the same structural biases that define "fine art" as masculine, intellectual, and Western, while coding "craft" as feminine, bodily, and local. This dynamic reveals not only the cultural violence of aesthetic

hierarchies but also their ideological purpose: to reinforce systems of domination by separating the material and the spiritual, the manual and the conceptual, and the provincial and the cosmopolitan.

In the Ukrainian context, reclaiming textile and craft traditions as legitimate aesthetic forms becomes an act of decolonial resistance. It challenges the inherited categories of Western art history and asserts a different genealogy—one that situates artistic knowledge in communal, embodied, and intergenerational practice rather than in the myth of solitary genius. In this light, fiber arts are not peripheral but foundational; they carry the rhythm of cultural survival and encode what Bhabha would call "the interstitial" space of identity—the threshold where colonized and Indigenous, feminine and national, and premodern and modern converge (*The Location of Culture*).

4.2 Imperial and Soviet Regimes of Cultural Erasure

While Western discourse carries its own internal critiques and ideological tensions, the empire to Ukraine's east—across its tsarist, imperial, and Soviet iterations—pursued a far more radical program of cultural erasure. Both the tsarist and Soviet regimes undertook systematic efforts to suppress or subsume Ukrainian identity through linguistic, cultural, historical, and demographic interventions. This imperial formation functioned not only through territorial domination but also through a sustained epistemic project aimed at neutralizing Ukraine as a distinct cultural and political subject.

In the tsarist period, Ukrainian identity was recast as a regional variation of the so-called "triune Russian nation," an imperial ideology that subsumed Ukrainians within a unified Russian people and thereby justified the systematic suppression of linguistic and cultural autonomy. This framework was enforced through explicit state policies, most notably the Valuev Circular of 1863, an internal decree issued by the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs that curtailed Ukrainian-language publishing by declaring the language illegitimate for educational and religious use, and the Ems Ukaz of 1876, promulgated by Tsar Alexander II, which extended these prohibitions to encompass public performances, theatrical productions, and the importation of Ukrainian texts from abroad. Alongside these cultural restrictions, earlier imperial interventions had already dismantled the political infrastructures of Ukrainian self-rule: the abolition of the Hetmanate in 1764 eliminated the semi-autonomous Cossack state, while the destruction of the Zaporozhian Sich in 1775 eradicated a central military and symbolic locus of collective governance. The repression of Ukrainian intellectuals further reinforced this colonial project, most notably in the persecution of Taras Shevchenko, the poet and artist whose work

articulated a distinctly Ukrainian historical and cultural consciousness and whose arrest, exile, and censorship exemplified the empire's broader strategy of silencing figures capable of mobilizing alternative epistemic and national imaginaries.

The Soviet regime inherited, intensified, and systematized these strategies under the guise of socialist internationalism. Stalinist repression violently reversed the cultural revival of the Ukrainization decade, culminating in the deliberate destruction of the Ukrainian intelligentsia. The "Executed Renaissance"—the targeted imprisonment, execution, or silencing of writers, artists, scholars, and clergy—removed the intellectual class capable of shaping modern Ukrainian cultural discourse. As Malko's research underscores, this assault on cultural producers functioned as a cornerstone of Soviet internal colonization: the erasure of intellectual leadership was designed to interrupt the continuity of national memory, eliminate alternative epistemologies, and integrate Ukrainian cultural production into a Russocentric ideological framework (Malko 63-78).

The Holodomor of 1932–33 extended this logic of destruction into the social fabric by targeting the Ukrainian peasantry, the primary carriers of linguistic, ritual, and oral traditions. Functioning as both genocidal famine and cultural excision, the Holodomor severed the demographic foundations of Ukrainian identity, ensuring that future cultural revival would occur without its historical custodians. At the same time, Soviet policy entrenched linguistic Russification in education, administration, and industry, rendering the Ukrainian language increasingly incompatible with urban modernity and upward mobility. In her interview, VALYA underscores the survival of her family and the genocide of her village during this era (Roenko-Simpson, Personal Interview).

Both the tsarist and Soviet empires deployed cultural appropriation and historical rewriting to further undermine Ukrainian subjectivity. Ukrainian contributions to modernism were absorbed into Russian or Soviet canons, while Ukrainian culture was simultaneously relegated to the realm of folklore. Demographic engineering, urban Russification, and the suppression of religious institutions further destabilized the transmission of cultural memory. Folklorization (*sharovarshchyna*) completed this ideological project by reducing a sophisticated ceremonial and symbolic culture into decorative stereotypes devoid of political or philosophical substance. In addition to the consistent erasure of Ukrainian identity over multiple centuries, which targeted musicians, artists, and scholars with "liquidation in [the] 1920s and 1930s," Russian cultural policy and media apparatuses in the second half of the twentieth century deployed what can be described as *cultural simplification technologies*—systematic strategies of aesthetic and ideological reduction that trivialized Ukrainian art and identity (Malko 63–78). This process was not accidental but functioned as a deliberate mechanism of imperial control,

transforming a complex and intellectually rich culture into a caricature of itself. Through state-sponsored entertainment, film, and visual propaganda, Ukrainian culture was redefined as *sharovarshchyna*—a pejorative term derived from the bright folk trousers (*sharovary*) traditionally worn by Cossacks. Within Soviet and post-Soviet discourse, *sharovarshchyna* began to signify a shallow, folkloric kitsch: an artificial, sentimentalized version of "Ukrainianness" stripped of its historical depth and political consciousness (Bilenky; Riabchuk).

This reductive representation rendered Ukrainian cultural production two-dimensional—colorful but hollow, decorative but unserious. Its figures were often portrayed as rustic peasants, cheerful but naïve, devoid of intellectual or moral substance. Soviet comedies, variety shows, and state art exhibitions frequently depicted Ukrainians as coarse or primitive, emphasizing drunkenness, buffoonery, and emotional excess as defining traits. These stereotypes effectively displaced the philosophical and avant-garde dimensions of Ukrainian art—its deep connections to symbolism, abstraction, and spirituality—by framing it as a provincial craft tradition suitable only for amusement or ethnographic display (Etkind; Thompson).

This process of cultural vulgarization was deeply gendered and classed: the rural, feminine, and communal qualities ascribed to Ukrainian visual culture were systematically positioned against the urban, masculine, and rationalized image of Russian artistic and intellectual production. Such binaries reinforced a hierarchical structure in which Ukrainian expressiveness could be displayed but not theorized. As a result, the canon of "Russian" modernism absorbed the intellectual achievements of Ukrainian modernism—from Malevich's metaphysical abstraction to Bohomazov's structural dynamism—while relegating Ukrainian folk and decorative traditions to ethnographic spectacle. By severing these aesthetic practices from their philosophical, spiritual, and epistemic foundations, Soviet cultural politics reduced Ukrainian art to ornamental labor rather than legitimate cultural knowledge (Biedarieva, "Decolonization and Disentanglement in Ukrainian Art").

The cultural dynamics that shaped the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did not dissipate; rather, they provided the structural groundwork against which contemporary political and artistic resistance would later unfold. The mass mobilizations of the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2013–14 Revolution of Dignity (Maidan) can be understood as part of this longer historical continuum. Each uprising not only challenged political domination but also reasserted the right to cultural self-definition long denied by imperial and Soviet frameworks. In these moments, cultural symbols, historical memory, and visual languages resurfaced as essential instruments of national articulation rather than ornamental residue (Plokhy, Serhii. The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine).

Against the backdrop of Russia's ongoing war, contemporary Ukrainian artists—whether working in their homeland or in diaspora—activate this inherited archive with renewed urgency. Their practices demonstrate a cultural renaissance grounded in both recuperation and innovation: reengaging suppressed signifiers, recontextualizing folk and modernist lineages, and generating new aesthetic strategies that assert Ukraine's epistemic autonomy in the twenty-first century.

5. Decolonial Scholarship in the United States: Reframing Ukraine Beyond Imperial Narratives

Decolonial research on Ukrainian culture holds significant urgency and relevance within the intellectual landscape of the United States, where the dominant frameworks for understanding empire, identity, and cultural resilience have historically centered on Western European and Global South contexts. Ukraine's experience of long-term internal colonization under tsarist and Soviet rule complicates these established paradigms and expands the geographical, historical, and epistemic scope of decolonial inquiry. In examining Ukraine as a site of sustained cultural erasure, epistemic domination, and resistance, U.S.-based scholarship gains a crucial comparative lens for understanding how imperial systems operate beyond conventional colonial binaries. This scholarship illuminates forms of cultural suppression—linguistic repression, historical rewriting, demographic engineering, and appropriation of artistic heritage—that mirror but also exceed familiar colonial models, thereby strengthening broader decolonial theory.

In the U.S. context, decolonial research on Ukrainian culture plays a vital role in correcting long-standing misconceptions shaped by Cold War geopolitics and the dominance of Soviet interpretive frameworks. For decades, American scholarship absorbed narratives that positioned Ukraine as culturally derivative, a mere regional inflection of a monolithic "Russian" identity. This epistemic collapse—rooted in tsarist and Soviet imperial narratives—obscured the independent genealogies of Ukrainian modernism, ritual cosmology, textile traditions, and intellectual history. Decolonial scholarship disrupts these assumptions by restoring the suppressed cultural lineages that have shaped Ukraine's contributions to global modernity. This work is not simply recuperative; it reshapes how knowledge about Eastern Europe is produced, curated, and taught in U.S. institutions, calling for a critical reassessment of the very categories through which the region has been understood.

Within this scholarly shift, the work of Ukrainian American artist VALYA becomes emblematic of how artistic practice can function as a form of decolonial knowledge production.

Trained within the complexities of Soviet cultural conditioning yet rooted in Ukrainian ritual, materiality, and memory, VALYA's installations trace the suppressed histories of Eastern Europe not through academic exposition alone but through embodied spatial experience. Her suspended fibers, blood-red textiles, and Trypillian - inspired fertility forms reconstruct a cultural memory that imperial regimes sought to erase. In the U.S. context, VALYA occupies a distinct positionality: she is both a bearer of diasporic inheritance and a creator whose work resists the folklorization and Russification historically imposed on Ukrainian culture. Her practice asserts the specificity of Ukrainian visual language—its cosmology, its symbolism, and its histories of rupture—and offers American audiences an experiential counter-archive to Soviet narratives that reduced Ukrainian culture to provincial or decorative motifs.

Studying artists like VALYA in the United States is therefore inseparable from the broader decolonial imperative. Her work becomes a place of inquiry for the histories that U.S. institutions historically miscategorized or ignored. Through her installations, Ukrainian cultural epistemologies enter American academic and museum spaces not as ethnographic curiosities but as complex, modern, and philosophically rich systems of meaning. In this way, VALYA's practice challenges entrenched epistemic hierarchies and demands that American universities and cultural institutions recognize Ukraine as a site of intellectual and artistic innovation rather than a muted periphery of Russian civilization.

Moreover, U.S. engagement with decolonial Ukrainian studies aligns with broader commitments to cultural preservation, global human rights, and the ethics of representation. Russia's renewed aggression since 2014—and especially the full-scale invasion of 2022—has made cultural erasure once again a weapon of war: museums are looted, archives destroyed, religious sites bombed, and the Ukrainian language and identity targeted for elimination. In this context, artists like VALYA carry heightened significance: her creative work becomes testimony, cultural preservation, and political resistance. American researchers, curators, and educators play an essential role in amplifying these practices, ensuring that Ukrainian cultural history is neither flattened by imperial narratives nor lost amid ongoing violence.

Ultimately, decolonial scholarship on Ukrainian culture in the United States is indispensable for dismantling inherited misconceptions, illuminating suppressed histories, and supporting a global intellectual environment in which cultural sovereignty is recognized as a fundamental right. Through figures like VALYA—whose work bridges heritage, trauma, resilience, and creative innovation—American institutions gain access to a fuller, more accurate understanding of Ukraine's cultural world, one that challenges imperial legacies and affirms the country's distinct and enduring contributions to global art and knowledge.

5.1. VALYA in Dialogue with Contemporary Western Artists

VALYA's artistic practice is most productively understood within a broader field of contemporary women and diasporic artists who employ fiber and textile traditions as decolonial and reparative modes of expression. Although these artists emerge from distinct cultural and historical contexts, they share an aesthetic and philosophical terrain in which fiber functions as a vehicle for embodied knowledge, cultural memory, and resistance to dominant art-historical hierarchies that have long marginalized textile practices as "craft." Within this constellation, VALYA's work resonates while asserting a distinct post-Soviet and Eastern European diasporic epistemology.

Formally, VALYA's process-based installations parallel the material logic of artists such as Tara Donovan, whose sculptural language of accumulation and repetition transforms modest materials into immersive environments. In both practices, meaning arises not solely from material choice but from sustained bodily engagement: pressing, binding, layering, and duration become modes of thinking through matter. While Donovan's materials often retain an industrial or disposable character, VALYA's use of wool and felt anchors similar strategies of accumulation within a cosmological and ancestral framework, extending process into epistemic continuity (Donovan, interview).

Conceptually, VALYA's work aligns with artists including Tanya Aguiñiga, Suchitra Mattai, Carolina Caycedo, Shan Goshorn, and Yinka Shonibare, who mobilize textiles as instruments of historical inquiry and cultural critique. Shonibare's long engagement with Dutch wax fabric exposes the entangled histories of colonial trade, hybridity, and identity, revealing textiles as carriers of global power relations rather than neutral decoration. His practice demonstrates how fabric operates as a political archive—an insight that resonates with VALYA's use of Ukrainian fiber traditions as repositories of suppressed cosmology and imperial violence. While Shonibare addresses British colonial history and its African diasporic entanglements, VALYA foregrounds the cultural erasures enacted through Russian and Soviet imperial regimes; together, their practices reveal textiles as transnational sites of decolonial knowledge production.

This decolonial orientation is further echoed in Tanya Aguiñiga's knotting and binding practices rooted in the U.S.–Mexico borderlands, where repetitive gesture becomes a language of vulnerability and resilience, and in Suchitra Mattai's braided assemblages that merge colonial textiles with inherited saris to form palimpsests of diasporic memory (Aguiñiga, *Border Quipu*; Mattai, *Myth from Matter*). Carolina Caycedo's fiber installations introduce an ecological

dimension that deepens this relational materiality, situating textiles within networks of land, labor, and care, while Shan Goshorn's basketry—woven from archival documents of Cherokee history—transforms craft into historical intervention and asserts Indigenous sovereignty through material memory (Goshorn, *All My Relations*).

Taken together, these comparisons position VALYA within a dynamic field of contemporary fiber artists who treat textiles as philosophy, resistance, and embodied knowledge. What distinguishes her within this field is her synthesis of process-based material systems with a post-Soviet diasporic cosmology shaped by internal colonization and cultural suppression—an axis of imperial violence that remains under examined in U.S.-based decolonial discourse. While many American and transnational fiber artists address settler colonialism, racialized violence, or ecological extraction, VALYA foregrounds the symbolic and epistemic violence enacted through linguistic, ritual, and historical erasure.

By committing to felt—an ancient technique shaped through pressure, repetition, and bodily endurance—VALYA exemplifies textile making as epistemology grounded in touch and rhythm. Encountering her installations invites viewers into an embodied relationship with material memory: the density and pliability of felt generate sensory experiences that mirror themes of migration, rupture, and resilience. Fiber thus becomes a mediator between viewer and history, transforming viewing into a form of witnessing.

Within the landscape of contemporary fiber art, VALYA's contribution is both aligned and singular. Her work expands the cultural geography of decolonial textile practices by introducing Eastern European diasporic knowledge systems into a field shaped largely by Indigenous American, African diasporic, and Latinx perspectives. Through felt and cut cloth, she insists that cultural memory is not only seen but felt—and that making itself remains a powerful assertion of identity, sovereignty, and survival.

6. Conclusion

Taken together, these threads reveal that Ukrainian visual culture is not a regional variation of a dominant Russian or Western canon but a sovereign aesthetic and epistemic system whose roots precede and exceed both. From Neolithic cosmograms to *vyshyvanka* geometries, from baroque hybridity to modernist abstraction, Ukrainian art has persisted as a relational ontology that binds body, land, and spirit. Imperial projects—tsarist, Soviet, and even Western institutional—have repeatedly attempted to reduce this complex visual philosophy to folklore, ornament, or provincial craft. However, the very categories designed to domesticate Ukrainian

culture have also exposed the fault lines of colonial aesthetics, in which hierarchies of realism over abstraction, painting over textile, and empire over "periphery" are revealed as ideological rather than natural. To reposition Ukrainian art within global discourse, therefore, is not merely to add another case study to existing narratives, but to unsettle the assumptions that have long governed what counts as art, knowledge, and modernity.

Within this reorientation, VALYA's practice emerges as both an embodiment and an agent of decolonial transformation. Her installations are not simply contemporary artworks that reference heritage; they are operational cosmograms that reactivate Indigenous grammars of abstraction within the language of global installation art. By cutting, felting, suspending, and inscribing fiber, she performs a material philosophy in which ornament becomes structure, absence becomes testimony, and softness becomes a mode of resistance. Works such as *SHE* transform red cloth and cut symbols into a script of survival, making visible the historical erasures that shaped Ukrainian experience while simultaneously proposing a future in which those erasures are neither forgotten nor final. Her alignment with contemporary American fiber artists underscores that her work is not an isolated project but part of a wider field in which textile practices function as decolonial methods—reclaiming memory, insisting on embodiment, and refusing the marginalization of so-called craft as secondary to intellectual labor.

At the same time, VALYA's work insists that decoloniality in the Ukrainian context cannot simply be mapped onto existing postcolonial frameworks developed from the histories of overseas empires. Her practice points instead to the specificity of internal colonization, linguistic and cultural suppression, and ornamentalization as a mode of epistemic violence. In dialogue with theorists such as Biedarieva, Said, and Bhabha, her fiber environments demonstrate that Ukrainian ornament is not a decorative residue but a living theory—a way of thinking through pattern, rhythm, and repetition that challenges linear narratives of modernity. When experienced in U.S. museums and academic spaces, her installations function as counter-archives, offering American audiences an encounter with Eastern European colonial histories that have rarely been named as such. In this sense, VALYA's practice is not only about Ukraine, but it is also about the limits of Western knowledge and the urgent need to provincialize the canons that have long claimed universality.

For U.S.-based scholarship, engaging Ukrainian visual culture through artists like VALYA opens a critical space in which decolonial inquiry becomes more geographically expansive and structurally precise. It invites a rethinking of how empire operates within Europe itself, how textile and ritual arts can serve as repositories of suppressed cosmologies, and how diasporic artists translate those cosmologies into contemporary idioms without surrendering their autonomy. Future research might trace these lines further—linking Ukrainian textile

epistemologies to other Indigenous fiber traditions, revisiting museum collections miscategorized under “Russian” or “folk” labels, or examining how contemporary Ukrainian artists negotiate the overlapping violences of patriarchy, ecological crisis, and imperial war. Such work would not only deepen understanding of Ukraine but also enrich global art history with models of aesthetics grounded in relationality rather than domination.

Ultimately, this essay argues that Ukrainian visual culture and VALYA’s practice in particular compel the reimagination of art as a form of cosmological thinking and decolonial world-building. Her felted architectures, cut cloths, and suspended figures do more than illustrate historical narratives; they enact a way of being in which making is inseparable from remembering, and material is inseparable from spirit. In their presence, the viewer encounters not just an individual artist’s vision but an enduring lineage that has survived erasure, simplification, and war. To attend seriously to this lineage is to acknowledge Ukraine not as a decorative margin of Europe but as a generative center of visual thought—one whose textile grammars, cosmological symbols, and decolonial practices have much to teach about how cultures endure, resist, and remake the world through art.

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