

ALISA LOZHKINA

ART IN UKRAINE

20TH TO THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY



# PERMANENT REVOLUTION

ART IN UKRAINE, THE 20th  
TO THE EARLY 21st CENTURY

Alisa  
Lozhkina

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Written by a leading Ukrainian curator and art critic, this book is an attempt to draw the history of the development of visual art practices in Ukraine, from the birth of modernism to the present day, into a cohesive narrative. Particular emphasis is given to the period since independence. How has the language of art changed over the last century and a half? What role has turbulence played in this process as Ukraine has undergone a series of transformations from its provincial status on the edge of the Russian Empire, through the difficult stage of building socialism, all the way to achieving independence, the Orange Revolution, the Revolution of Dignity, and the coming challenges of its most recent history? This analysis offers a brief overview of the main events and phenomena in Ukrainian art, as well as a variety of illustrative material from dozens of museum and private collections, and the archives of artists and their families.

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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The history of Ukrainian art is, in many ways, the history of Ukraine itself. As this book moves through the last century, it shows us how art is inextricably intertwined with ideology, identity, politics, and war. It shows us how Ukraine is still a contested space, pulled this way and that by internal and external forces. An example of this that is relevant to my job as translator is the issue of transliteration— not, perhaps, the most glamorous subject, but one that is illustrative of the challenges that arose when bringing this book into English. One important task was to ensure that all the names of people, places, and publications were rendered in their Ukrainian form, a form less well known to a western audience that may be more familiar with Russian spelling conventions, such as Nikolai rather than Mykola, Olga rather than Olha, and so on. We worked hard to ensure that Ukraine sat front and center both orthographically and thematically. After all, this book was written to do precisely that: to center Ukraine and its art when so often it has been obscured, appropriated, or repressed. Transliteration was thus a matter of decolonization and part of a wider and ongoing struggle in which Ukraine's identity and sovereignty has repeatedly been eroded and attacked. While transliteration is one small area of contention, Ukrainian art is vast by comparison. Alisa Lozhkina has done a brilliant job in weaving together decades of Ukrainian art history to deliver us a rich tapestry of artistic expression that ranges from paintings of the Carpathian Mountains to simulated sex acts outside the Ukrainian parliament. I am proud to be part of a project that aims to share Ukraine's art and history with a wider audience since the lessons of Ukraine's past are relevant for us all.

Settling on a specific method to transliterate Ukrainian names, places, and publications was not easy. If we applied a uniform set of transliteration rules we would have found ourselves at odds with commonly used and understood spellings, or with the wishes of individuals who choose to spell their names in a certain way. We trod a fine line between keeping the book as accessible and faithful as possible, while at the same time trying to maintain a measure of consistency. Our solution to this conundrum was to use a simplified Library of Congress system as our baseline. We then turned to the Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine as a further guide for spellings, as well as deferring, where appropriate, to broader common usage. There is a mixture of Russian- and Ukrainian-language sources in this book, so the appropriate transliteration system has been applied in the footnotes where necessary. In the few instances I have added my own footnotes for further explanation, they are followed by [Translator's Note] or [T.N.].

I want to thank Alisa both for her words and her ongoing support during this project. I am also deeply grateful to Roman Ivashkiv and Ali Kinsella for the amount of time and effort they invested editing this book. Any mistakes that may remain are mine alone.



MYKOLA PYMONENKO.  
FORD. 1901.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 89×140 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
ODESA FINE ARTS MUSEUM.



# INTRODUCTION

In the thirty or so years since the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine has gained independence, witnessed unprecedented growth in oligarchical capitalism and corruption, and lived through three waves of mass protests, two revolutions, a hybrid war in the East of the country, the annexation of Crimea, and an overdue and overwrought process of decommunization. At the same time, Ukrainian politics has descended into pure carnival. Flashes of direct political action are routinely followed by long periods of drawn-out political theater; the movement between these two modes characterizes this period. A permanent state of social turbulence has gradually become habit and this, in turn, has helped shape several generations of Ukrainian artists whose worldview is inextricably linked with life during times of radical change.

To this day, Ukraine is still seen by some foreigners as a small replica of Russia. The reality, however, is that Ukraine has a radically different culture and political context with its own particular history. Perhaps it is because Ukraine isn't sufficiently exotic that its "otherness" gets little attention and the country sits at the fringes of pan-European discourse. Despite its immensity, varied history, and rich cultural tradition that has been heavily influenced by the country's artists, Ukraine remains a blind spot for the rest of Europe.

In 1850, Karl Marx wrote about permanent revolution and how the final goal of all revolutionary transformations was to transition to a classless society while bringing radical change to society's ideas and attitudes. In the 20th century, Leon Trotsky took Marx's words and reformulated them. As they sang in a famous Soviet song, "A revolution has a beginning, but it has no end."<sup>1</sup> In the case of modern-day Ukraine, the state of permanent revolution is a fitting metaphor for the atmosphere in the country. Ukraine has been riding the roller coaster of social upheaval for three decades as mass protests have followed one after the other, all while the tragic specter of 1917 hovers silently overhead. Where the Western intellectual's fantasy about revolution ends is where the reality of Ukraine's recent history begins, and that reality exists in sharp contrast to any theory.

The country's artistic energy and atmosphere have evolved thanks to a combination of factors: the state of turbulence, which once begun doesn't seem to have an end; the country's painful search for identity within a theater of shadows from the past; the fact of living amidst the ruins of the greatest utopia of the 20th century; and the sincere belief that, despite a multitude of historical scars, society can, and should, change.

There is another unexpected aspect to the metaphor of permanent revolution in modern-day Ukraine, which is in the spirit of Marx's original theory about the export and sharing of ideas. In recent years there has been an interesting development: following perestroika and the collapse of the USSR in Ukraine, as in other former Soviet republics, it was commonly thought that a time would come when the country would

<sup>1</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Permanentnaia revolutsiia* (Berlin: Granit, 1930). For Trotsky, the key to victory for socialism in the USSR was the export of revolution to the West and the ensuing victory of communism on a global scale. In this work, "permanent revolution" is meant in a metaphorical sense.

overcome the remnants of its totalitarian past and become a Western-style democracy. Paradoxically however, everything is happening the other way around. It appears now that Western countries are beginning to experience things that have long been familiar in Ukraine. Indeed, any Westerners familiar with the history of post-Soviet Ukraine would be forgiven for having slight *déjà vu*. There are oligarchs in power and trophy wives, hybrid wars and color revolutions, the hollowing out of familiar narratives, relativism, and a total loss of trust. Following the 2016 US elections, the whole world began to talk about the “post-truth” age and information manipulation on the internet, yet it was during the 2013–2014 EuroMaidan protests that Ukraine became one of the first targets of a huge disinformation campaign with social networking sites flooded with fake news.

The global changes brought about by the arrival of digital capitalism have introduced deep confusion, a sense of bewilderment for the future, and the need to fundamentally rethink previous models of social order. Since the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine has learned to survive atop the ruins of old values and ways of thinking. At the same time, the country has managed not to fall back into the clutches of authoritarianism. In a sense, over the past three decades, Ukrainian society has already lived through many of the challenges of modernity that the rest of the world is only now beginning to encounter.

What place is there for modern art in a worldview which is almost entirely subordinate to the eros of politics? What is political art in an environment where the very word *politics* has become synonymous with corruption and lawlessness? At the same time, what does it mean in a place where the country’s main square is regularly graced with barricades whose beauty and elemental conceptualism the world’s best artists could only dream of?

A surprising paradox exists in Ukraine today: while the art scene has developed rapidly, there are still very few comprehensive texts that cover the history of the different movements and phenomena that make up Ukrainian modern art. The blame for this lies, first and foremost, with the systemic and institutional crisis that exists in the country, a crisis which, 28 years after Ukraine achieved independence, has still not been overcome. Constant societal transformation does little to strengthen the function of memory. The individual’s inner voice, founded on the experience of past generations who have survived “the short 20th century” (which the historian Eric Hobsbawm called the “age of extremes”), constantly whispers to us that some things are easier to just forget. Thus, we find ourselves in a situation where the biggest risk to our art—and society in general—is our memory ceasing to work.

Once Ukraine regained independence, modern art gradually became the dominant artistic paradigm in the country. How are we to understand this phenomenon and how does it relate to art from the Soviet period, the nonconformist tradition, and the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century? Since 1991, not enough work has been done to set up a comprehensive archive or conduct an analysis of the entire cultural period. State museum foundations haven’t put in place any kind of comprehensive procurement strategy, and the Ukrainian Museum of Modern Art remains a utopian dream. Thankfully, in recent years the situation has begun to improve. It seems that many have suddenly remembered how interesting it can be to write and publish

books. However, is it possible for just one person to dutifully restore the entire canvas of events and write a detailed and rigorous history of Ukrainian art? Of course, this would be an insurmountable task, which would require a completely different team and time frame behind it.

This book does not pretend, under any circumstances, to try and cover all the figures and events in Ukrainian art. It is written from a subjective standpoint, and its aim is to try and convey Ukraine's artistic tradition as it exists amidst the complex transformations facing our society. The project was first thought of in 2010 and began life as a series of newspaper publications entitled *Point Zero: A New History of Art*. It would never have been possible without the curator and art critic Oleksandr Solovyov, a man absolute in his dedication to art. A long pause followed this series. At first, in order to begin compiling an art history, it seemed that all we needed to do was to publish a few articles online. Later someone would have to write a full history, a folio of several tomes that analyzed everybody and everything. Years went by and web sites changed and shut down. As it turns out, even the World Wide Web cannot claim to be the perfect place to store our memories. We, in fact, lost access to a sizeable portion of material from the *Point Zero* newspaper series. Moreover, the "one-voice" approach to history, supposing the existence of a single reliable narrator, has become hopelessly outdated. The arrival of the post-information age has made it clear that history can, and should, be comprised of different, often contradictory, voices, whose sum nonetheless creates an overall picture of the issue at hand. It is in this multilayered "voice," one of countless possible ways to write this history of modern Ukrainian art, that this book is written.

I returned to the idea of this publication two years ago upon the initiative of the French publishing house Nouvelles Éditions Place. I thought it was important to not just write about the artistic phenomena of the last few decades, but to also include a more general picture of the events that have taken place in Ukrainian society and art since the beginning of the 20th century. The succession of transformations that Ukraine has gone through in this period has been deeply painful, and as a result the nation has engaged in what Aleida Assmann referred to as "all forms of forgetting"<sup>2</sup> as a defense mechanism. Assmann's research into the cultural memory of societies that have experienced trauma helped me better understand our own situation. This book is written for two very different audiences: the local and the English-speaking one. It is possible that at points, Ukrainian readers will feel that I am describing certain obvious things in too much detail.

Finally, I must thank all those involved in this project. I have always thought that this is one of the nicest parts of writing a book. This publication would never have seen the light of day if it weren't for the French philosopher and editor Igor Sokologorsky's wish "to publish something in Paris about Ukrainian art." His support, sincere interest in Ukraine, and constant deadline reminders were invaluable to me. Nor would this book exist if not for the artist Oleksandr Roitburd; my meeting with him changed my life. Neither would it exist without Oleksandr Solovyov, and it is with

<sup>2</sup> Aleida Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma: Memory and the Politics of Postwar Identity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

great pride that I consider him my teacher. This book was born from conversations with the art historian Konstantin Akinsha. Over the last few years, we organized several European exhibitions of Ukrainian art as seen from within the context of revolutionary transformation, and it is thanks to this that we became friends. I also want to thank the curator of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Nicola Lucci-Gutnik. Our collaboration allowed me to look at Ukrainian art from a distance and to identify pivotal moments in its most recent history. I certainly would not have managed this by myself. It was together with the founder of the Zenko Foundation, Zenko Aftanaziv, and the project's producer, Karina Kachurovska, that we managed to get a grant from the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation (UCF) and make this dream a reality. I am very thankful to the UCF, to the team at the book's Ukrainian publisher, ArtHuss, and to our French partners, the publisher Nouvelles Éditions Place. And of course, above all, I thank my mother, Nadiia Lozhkina for her boundless love and support. I want to dedicate this book to her and also to my grandmother, Olena Illivna Luhova, a Ukrainian historian, daughter of an "enemy of the people," and a passionate and incorrigible patriot. This book began in my childhood, when every morning, sitting on the veranda of our small Soviet *dacha*, my grandmother would tell me about the 20th century and teach me how to think.







## PART 1. BEGINNINGS. BEFORE THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION

Ukraine became an independent state on 24 August 1991. However, the path to that independence lay through the 20th century and a whole host of obstacles and trauma. At the beginning of the century, Ukraine was colonized and divided into two parts controlled by two powerful empires. It wasn't long before Ukraine found itself at the epicenter of some of the biggest and most violent conflicts of that period. The collapse of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires, World War I, the 1917 revolution, the civil war, the Holodomor of 1932–1933,<sup>3</sup> Stalinist industrialization, the Great Terror of 1937, World War II, and the Holocaust. There were tens of millions of victims, not to mention the lost futures and deep wounds, which to this day have yet to heal, three, four, five generations later.

For a short time after the 1917 revolution, Ukraine existed as its own state, the Ukrainian National Republic (UNR), with its own government and constitution. Soon after, there was a coup, and Hetman Skoropadsky came to power, but he was quickly removed from the leadership of the UNR. Soon, a bloody struggle between the Bolsheviks and the White Army began on Ukrainian territory. The balance of power switched rapidly and repeatedly from one side to the other, though in the end the Bolsheviks emerged victorious. Technically, it wasn't until 1920 that the Red Army conquered the UNR, with the Republic ceasing to exist in 1921. During that period, from 1918 to 1921, Ukraine had become the center of a powerful anarchist movement led by Nestor Makhno.

After the Bolsheviks' final victory, the national communists acquired a great deal of influence in the Ukrainian Soviet Republic. They were a group of political activists who combined their communist views with pro-Ukrainian cultural policies. This led to a short, but bright cultural life in the country, which was tragically ended with the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s. So when we talk about art from the late 1910s into the 1920s in Ukraine, we must remember that this period represented a stage of romantic fascination with utopia, and that it's simply not possible to separate the history of the Ukrainian avant-garde from the political views of the majority of its representatives.

When talking about unofficial art in Ukraine during the Soviet period, we can see tangible regional differences. The big cities formed their own traditions, which would eventually influence the development of the new art that emerged from independent Ukraine after 1991. It should also be remembered when examining these different traditions that Western Ukraine was the last region to become part of Soviet Ukraine and that region has its own particular historical and cultural character.

Ukraine had special status in the USSR. As a matter of fact, Ukraine was second in influence among all other republics. In the late Soviet period, it was commonly thought that Ukrainians ruled the Soviet Union, such was the prestige that Ukrainian delegates held when working among the Soviet elite. Nevertheless, Ukraine felt the full force of

<sup>3</sup> A man-made Stalin-orchestrated famine. [Translator's note]

pressure from Moscow throughout the entire Soviet era. While pretending to support Ukrainian folk culture, in reality, the central authorities clamped down upon all forms of freethinking in the republic, fearing the emergence of so-called “bourgeois nationalism.” As a result, cultural figures in Ukraine lived in a greater state of fear and constraint than those in Moscow. This is well illustrated by the late-Soviet saying: “When they cut their fingernails in Moscow, they cut off their fingers in Kyiv.” All the same, this didn’t prevent the creation of a unique artistic tradition, nor the formation of an unofficial circle of artists who remain little known outside Ukraine. Even in Ukraine itself, which, having gained independence relatively recently, finds itself situated at a crossroads of values and public discourse, the journey to processing the country’s recent art history is only just beginning.

## CHAPTER 1.

# THE BEGINNING OF MODERNISM: FROM THE 1880s TO 1917

## A CHANGE IN ARTISTIC LANGUAGE AND THE SEARCH FOR A NATIONAL STYLE

Ukrainian art met the 20th century at a crossroads. Amid a crisis in academic thought and the inability of the realist tradition to adequately respond to the challenges posed by the invention of photography and the demands of a growing capitalist society, a global modernism was rapidly emerging. This modernism would define the work and direction of several generations of artists. The year 1917 was approaching. A premonition of social catastrophe and transformation hung in the air and, in fact, the clamor of revolution could already be heard in artists' studios. In less than two decades, there was a swift metamorphosis galvanized by a powerful fascination for modernism, from the colonial romanticism and ethnographic realism of Mykola Pymonenko and timid experiments with impressionism to a cosmopolitan avant-garde and utopian abstraction.

This was a period in which art was radically reoriented from the local to a pan-European context; art became international and was subsumed into a larger international movement which has no single name.<sup>4</sup> The overall mixture of modernist tendencies which characterized European art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries served as a focal point for the artistic developments that were taking place simultaneously in the part of Ukraine controlled by the Russian Empire and in the part controlled by the

<sup>4</sup> Modernist tendencies in art appeared in the second half of the 19th century with the arrival of impressionism, followed by post-impressionism, symbolism, Fauvism, and so on. Impressionism and its associated artistic movements are focused, on the whole, on reimagining *how* an artist sees. At a certain point, art became saturated with optical games and illusions and artists began to explore new artistic territories. One of the first attempts at such an exploration was a movement that set itself the task of expanding the range of artistic techniques through a return to simplicity and the organic art of antiquity and non-European culture—a rehabilitation of decorative arts. Depending on the region, this movement had different names: *Art Nouveau* in France, the *Vienna Secession* in Austria-Hungary, *Jugendstil* in Germany, *Stile Liberty* in Italy, and *Modernismo* in Spain. Within the confines of the Russian Empire, the accepted term for this movement at the time became *modernism*.

Austro-Hungarian Empire. Indeed, the nascent modernist movement acted as a focal point within the larger European context too, from St. Petersburg, Moscow, Helsinki, Vienna, Budapest, Warsaw, and Krakow to Paris, Barcelona, and Munich. In a sense, this was the biggest wave of artistic globalization in history. The next time something similar would happen would only be at the end of the 20th century with the emergence of the first generation of post-perestroika artists.

Modernism appeared gradually in Ukrainian art. This slow emergence coincided with a national search for new political discourses and the awakening of a national consciousness. Despite the fact that Ukraine was divided between two empires, at the end of the 19th century interest in the country's history grew, which laid the foundation for seeing Ukraine with its own autonomous cultural and historical identity.<sup>5</sup> In this context, work with folkloric and historical themes gained special importance. As opposed to later periods when art of this kind would become an empty cliché, at this time these themes played a noticeable role in shaping the identity of the new Ukrainian intelligentsia. The language of artistic expression would undergo radical changes at the beginning of the 20th century; however, the search for a national artistic style would capture the interest of artists with completely different viewpoints and from completely different artistic movements.

In the second half of the 19th century, the so-called *peredvizhniki* (itinerants) played an important role in the part of Ukraine that was ruled by the Russian Empire. This was a movement inspired by the left-leaning radicalism of educated sections of society, which in particular idealized peasant and folk culture (i.e., the so-called *narodnytstvo*, or populism). Its art looked for an escape from the crisis in academic art while also rejecting elitism and emphasizing the social and educational functions of *peredvizhniki* work. To reflect these principles, the Society for Traveling Art Exhibitions was established, its most active period being between 1870 and 1880. A paradoxical phenomenon, the paintings by the *peredvizhniki* were an experiment, an attempt to introduce a social agenda into a conservative artistic language, an act that foreshadowed the coming century with its own proletarian revolution. It wasn't long, however, before the artistic compromise between painting in an old style and depicting new content could no longer be maintained, and the movement began to stagnate.

An important figure in understanding the future development of Ukrainian art is Ilya Repin. One of the best painters of the 19th century and an active member of the Society for Traveling Art Exhibitions, he maintained a complicated relationship with modernism, however he did indirectly incorporate many elements of this new artistic language into his work. Born in Chuhuiv in the Kharkiv region, he was educated in St. Petersburg and from there became a part of the Society for Traveling Art Exhibitions. Repin was one of the stars of the imperial artistic establishment, though at the same time he maintained an interest in his homeland and its history his whole life. He met with Ukrainian cultural figures and used Ukrainian subject matter in a whole

<sup>5</sup> The late 19th and early 20th century is when the "Ukrainian national revival" (which has been written about by many historians, including Hrushevsky, Doroshenko, and Krypyakevych) finally progressed to a political stage. For more, see: Yaroslav Hrytsak, *Narys z istorii Ukrainy. Formuvannia modernoi ukrainskoi natsii XIX–XX st.* [Essays on the history of Ukraine. The formation of the modern Ukrainian nation in the 19th and 20th centuries] (Kyiv: Geneza, 2000).

range of his works. The most famous of these is his work *The Zaporozhian Cossacks Write a Letter to the Turkish Sultan* (1880–1891). This huge historical panel was created by Repin under the influence of the Cossack historian and researcher Dmytro Yavornytsky and the findings of the 1880 research expedition<sup>6</sup> to the territory of the former Zaporozhian Sich.<sup>7</sup> Repin consulted Mykola Kostomarov, another eminent academic and specialist in Ukrainian history, when planning his route through Zaporizhia. Repin's painting became one of the most iconic paintings that feature Ukrainian themes. It influenced the development of Ukrainian historical painting, it embedded the image of Zaporozhian Cossacks in mass culture, and it is even indirectly reflected in the aesthetics of the protest movements in modern, independent Ukraine. Repin would inspire not only the esteemed socialist-realists in the 20th century, but also the leaders of the unofficial Kyiv circle of intellectuals of the 1960s and 70s. For example, Valerii Lamakh dedicated his fifth *Book of Schema* to Repin.<sup>8</sup>

Another realist of the late 19th and early 20th century whose art had a significant impact on the Ukrainian school of painting was the artist and fellow member of the *peredvizhniki*, Mykola Pymonenko. In his work, Pymonenko created a romanticized image of the Ukrainian village, reflecting the stereotypes held in the Russian Empire of life in “Little Russia.” He did this through numerous references to life in the countryside, an abundance of ethnographic detail, sentimentality, and a bright color palette. His painting *Ne zhartui* (Don't Joke, 1895) has an interesting history. It depicts a furious mother walking towards two lovers who hold each other in an indecorous embrace set amidst a Ukrainian pastoral scene. Once the century of technical reproducibility had got under way, this ironic composition, as if giving a peek into peasant life, was spread among the population and achieved cult status. Thousands of reproductions were made and new life was given to one of the most popular subjects of Ukrainian folk art in the 20th century.<sup>9</sup> A shift towards expressionism could be felt in Pymonenko's later work; an example of this is his painting *Kyiv Flower Seller* from 1908.

<sup>6</sup> Repin's recollection of this trip is evidence of how seriously he treated Ukrainian history. He embarked on the trip together with the 15-year-old Valentin Serov. “I had two books, beloved by both of us, by Antonovych and Drahomanov—*A History of the Cossacks in Southern Russian Songs and Epics*. We were reading a Ukrainian epic, and Serov, who had been attending a Kyiv gymnasium for two to three years, clearly savored the essence of the Ukrainian language.” Ilya Repin, *Dalekoe blizkoe* [Far and near] (Moscow: Azbuka, 2010), 152.

<sup>7</sup> A semi-autonomous Cossack state that existed within the 16–18th centuries. [T.N.]

<sup>8</sup> Valerii Lamakh, *Knigi skhem* [The books of schema] (Kyiv, 2011), 831–913.

<sup>9</sup> Among researchers, the painting was given the name *Run, Petro and Natalka—Mother Is Coming with a Rolling Pin*, which was in keeping with the titles of similar paintings. At the beginning of the 20th century, the practice of mass reproduction and distribution of famous artists' works depicting the countryside and folk life became commonplace. Other such artists include Kostiantyn Trutovsky and Karl Briullov. For more, see: Petro Honchar and Lidia Lykhach, *Chyste mystetstvo* [Pure art]. Catalog for exhibition at Mystetskyi Arsenal (Kyiv: Rodovid, 2017).

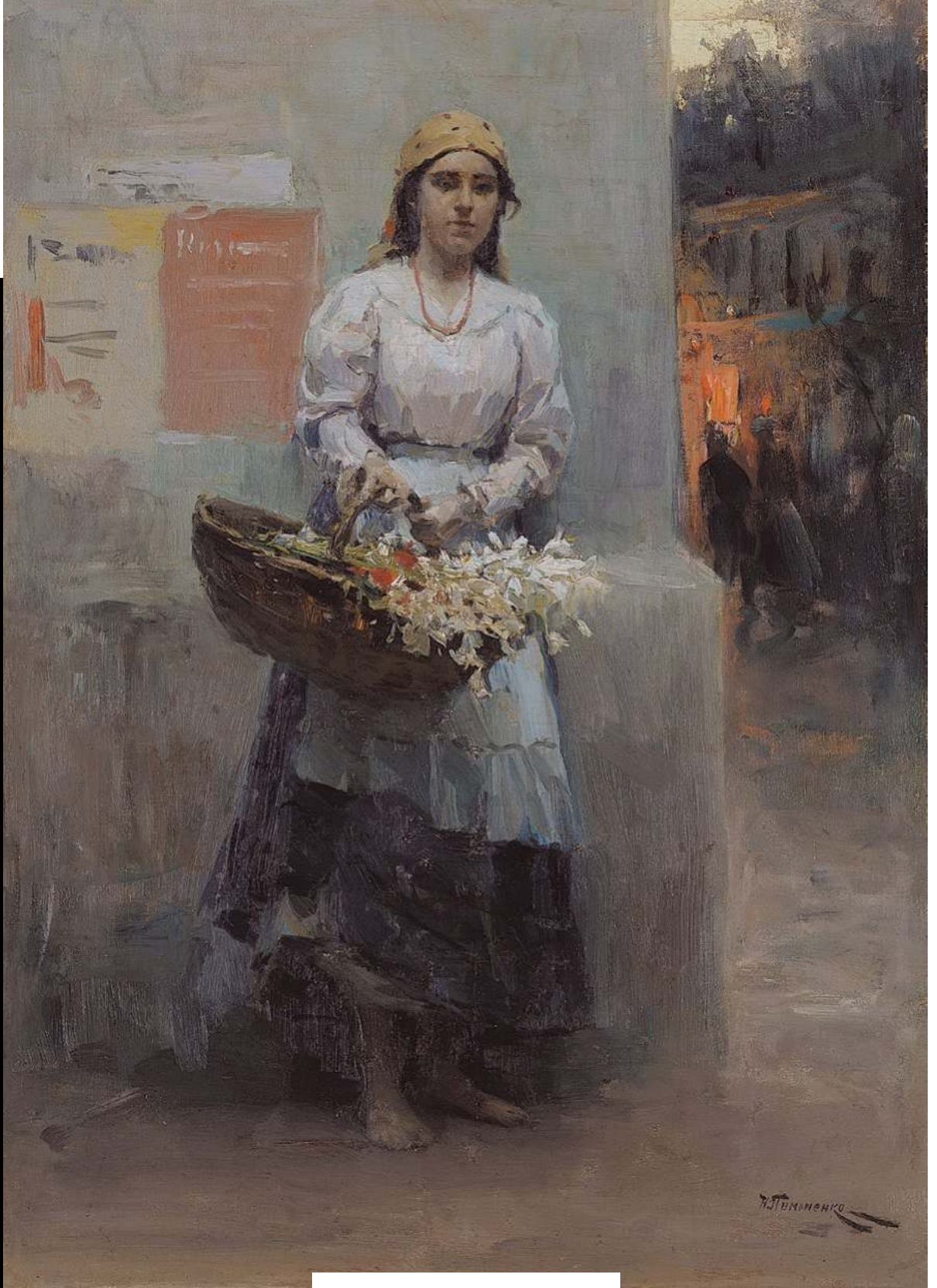


ILYA REPIN.  
*THE ZAPOROZHIAN COSSACKS WRITE  
A LETTER TO THE TURKISH SULTAN.*  
1889–1896. OIL ON CANVAS. 170×267 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
KHARKIV ART MUSEUM.



FEDIR KRYCHEVSKY.  
*BRIDE*. 1910.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 215x295 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.





MYKOLA PYMONENKO.  
KYIV FLOWER SELLER. 1908.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 87×62 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.

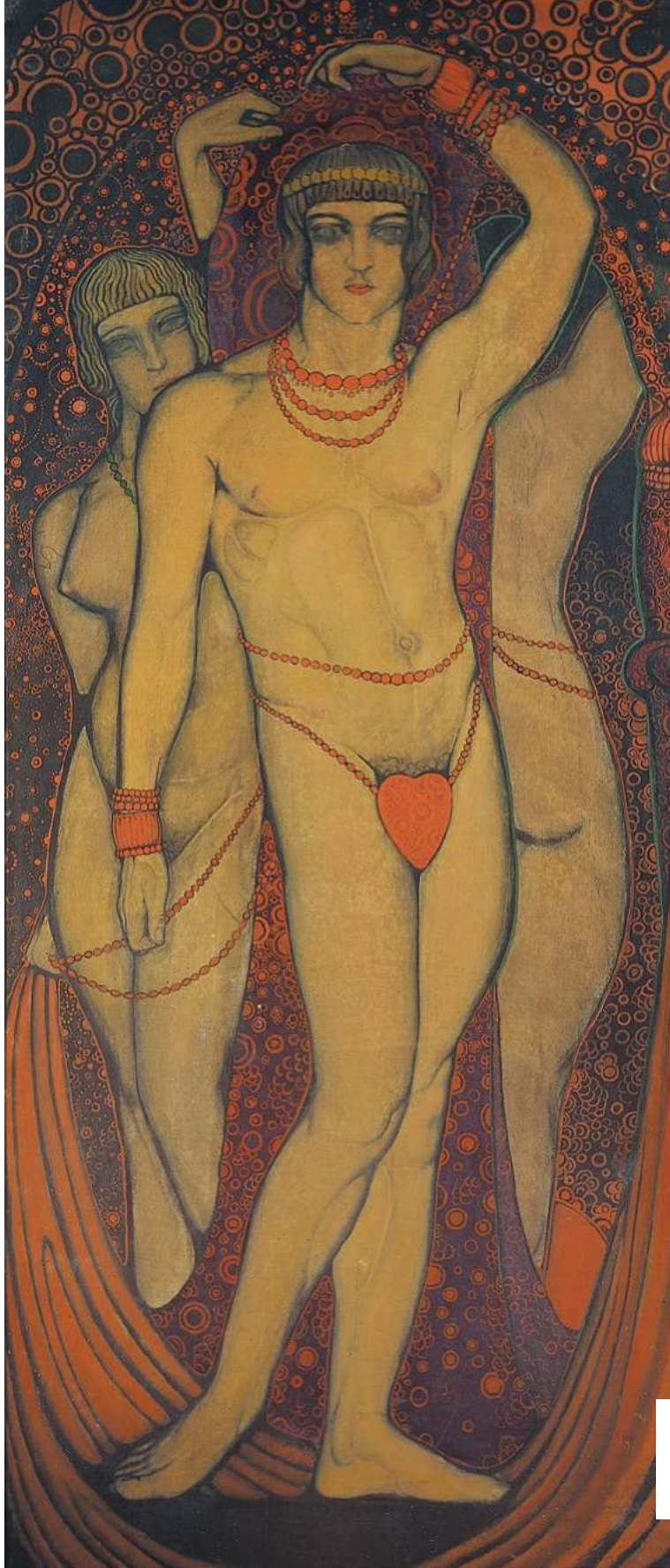
# MODERNISM, THE SECESSION, AND IMPRESSIONISM

The Ukrainian art scene began to radically change upon the introduction of elements of modernism. In the mid-1880s the symbolist and Russian modernist artist Mikhail Vrubel was working in Kyiv. Here he created murals and icons in St. Cyril's Church, designed friezes for St. Volodymyr's Cathedral, and also began preliminary work on the painting *The Demon Seated*, which would prove pivotal in his work as an artist. Vrubel's Kyiv period, which foreshadowed his later, more mature work, would exert significant influence on the development of modernism in Ukraine. Another proponent of the modernist style was the Pole Wilhelm Kotarbiński who lived in Kyiv from the 1880s until his death in 1921. He took part in decorating St. Volodymyr's Cathedral under the direction of Viktor Vasnetsov.

The interior design of St. Volodymyr's Cathedral became a pivotal moment in the development of Kyiv's artistic life in the late 19th century. The professor Adrian Prakhov, an authority in art history and archeology from St. Petersburg, was brought in to take charge of the design and its implementation. It is hard to overstate the role he played in the development of the art scene over the next few years. It was Prakhov who invited several famous artists of the time to work on the cathedral, the likes of whom included Viktor Vasnetsov, Mikhail Nesterov, Pavel and Aleksandr Svedomsky, as well as Mikhail Vrubel and Wilhelm Kotarbiński.

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, Kyiv was growing at a swift pace and transforming from a provincial town into a metropolis with significant cultural ambitions. This growth was due to several factors, not least among them the development of capitalism and the rapid growth in industry that was taking place at that time on Ukrainian soil. The Tereshchenko family, sugar refinery owners with substantial land holdings, supported the artistic scene over the course of several years. The father Ivan and his son Mykhailo were among the most important art collectors and philanthropists in the Russian Empire. Following the 1917 revolution, their collection was nationalized and formed the basis for the art shown at the Kyiv Picture Gallery,<sup>10</sup> situated in the former home of the family of Fedir Tereshchenko. The building next door, which was also turned into a museum, was the former home of a distinguished family of Kyiv philanthropists whose former owners were Varvara (née Tereshchenko) and Bohdan Khanenko. This museum now houses a rich collection of classical European and Eastern art.

<sup>10</sup> Today the museum is called the Kyiv Picture Gallery National Museum. [T.N.]



IVAN MIASOEDOV.  
PAVLENKO MANOR, 1900–1910s.  
PHOTO. FROM THE  
COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL  
ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.

VSEVOLOD MAKSYMOVYCH.  
NUDES. DECORATIVE PANEL. 1914.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 243×101 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



FEDIR KRYCHEVSKY.  
PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST'S WIFE,  
LIDIA STARYTSKA. 1914.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 216×99 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE



MYKHAILO ZHUK.  
*BLACK AND WHITE*. 1914.  
GOUACHE, PASTELS, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER. 207×310 CM.  
FROM THE PRIVATE COLLECTION OF TARAS MAKSYMIUK.



OLEKSANDER MURASHKO.  
*FLOWER SELLERS*. 1917.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 133.5×159 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.

The artists of Ukrainian modernism represented a wide array of different personalities and fates. The greatest Ukrainian painter at the beginning of the 20th century was perhaps Oleksander Murashko. Originally from Kyiv, he trained at the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts studying under Ilya Repin, was a member of the Munich Secession, visited Paris, and was very familiar with impressionism. Murashko developed his own style, combining a Secession palette and a Parisian deftness and elegance with a more national style. He achieved particular success in his portraiture. Murashko paid close attention to the depiction of light and shadow in his work, aided by his use of color. Indeed, it was the play of sparkling light and patches of color that would come to define his more mature work, blinding and hypnotizing the viewer. His 1909 painting *Carousel*, which depicts two young women at a busy folk fair, won the gold medal at an exhibition in Munich<sup>11</sup> and was purchased straight away by the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. Two pieces of Murashko's art were shown at the Venice Biennale in 1910, and between 1911 and 1912 he took part in several exhibitions associated with the Munich Secession.

The early 20th century marked the arrival of the Poltava artist Vsevolod Maksymovych, a painter influenced by Vrubel and Russian symbolism, as well as by the paintings of the Austrian Gustav Klimt and the Englishman Aubrey Beardsley. He was a bright, though fleeting, light on the horizon of Ukrainian modernism: when he was 20 years old, Maksymovych committed suicide. However, in just a couple of years, from 1912 through 1914, he had managed to complete an impressive number of paintings, establish friendships with Velimir Khlebnikov, Mikhail Larionov, Vasili Kamen-sky and other futurists in Moscow, star in the now-lost avant-garde film *Drama in the Futurists' Cabaret No. 13* (1914), and also to reconceptualize the Vienna Secession through the prism of classical aesthetics.<sup>12</sup> The decorative scenes of luxurious feasting that feature in Maksymovych's work, the references to classical subjects, the cult of the beautiful body, decadence, and eroticism all intertwine to form an instantly recognizable whole, bearing witness to the outstanding talent of the young artist.

Vsevolod Maksymovych adopted his passion for athleticism and modernism from his mentor, a fellow Poltavan, Ivan Miasoedov. The son of the *peredvizhniki* artist Grigorii Miasoedov, he was educated at the best art schools in Moscow and St. Petersburg. After the death of his father, with whom he had a complex relationship, the young artist moved to the family estate outside Poltava in 1911. The decadent artist from the capital regularly shocked local townsfolk with his views and quickly became the center of local bohemian life. He brought with him an interest in antiquity, then fashionable in the St. Petersburg academy, and an interest in modernism and in the new art of photography. The passionate and extravagant Miasoedov enjoyed strength-based sports and achieved no small measure of success, taking part in competitions

<sup>11</sup> Olha Zhabkova, introduction to *Oleksandr Murashko. Tvory z koleksii natsionalnoho khudozhnio-ho muzeiu Ukrainy* [Works from the collection of the National Art Museum of Ukraine] (Kyiv: PC World Ukraine, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> "The introduction of athleticism into the Secession style, together with frequent images of languid ethereality, made up Maksymovych's individual contribution to that style," writes scholar Iryna Horbachova in *Storinky ukrainskoho modernu. Istorii ta suchasnist* [Pages from Ukrainian modernism. History and modernity], <https://storinka-m.kiev.ua/article.php?id=897>

and circus performances. Another of his passions was nudism, an idea he actively promoted in the artistic-philosophical group called the Garden of the Gods. This group existed during Miasoedov's Poltava period, and its members included Vsevolod Maksymovych.<sup>13</sup>

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Vienna Secession was a rich source of inspiration in Ukrainian art. The central figure in Ukrainian modernism at the time was the artist, poet, and playwright Mykhailo Zhuk. Zhuk discovered his passion for the Secession while at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, where he studied under the famous Polish modernist Stanisław Wyspiański. Zhuk's name is inextricably linked with Odesa, where he lived for many years. There he worked as, among other things, the vice-rector at the Art Institute, which was soon after reorganized into an art college. Before the 1917 revolution Zhuk taught painting to the Ukrainian poet Pavlo Tychyna at the Chernihiv seminary.<sup>14</sup> The talented pair became close, their friendship founded on their closely aligned worldview. Tychyna was the main hero of Zhuk's panel painting *Black and White*. The young modernist poet appears in the piece as a dark angel. The viewer would never guess from his poems of that period that he would write some of the future classics of socialist realism, valorizing collectivization and Stalinist industrialization. In *Black and White*, Zhuk characteristically combines floral motifs, a symbolic poetry, and a rich decorative element, which was intrinsic to the Secession style. The dark angel plays on a flute while a girl listens to him, frozen as if in prayer or from timid indecisiveness. Perhaps she senses the gradual transformation of the poet-werewolf Tychyna and the sad fate awaiting the enchantingly beautiful Ukraine that stretches out beneath the wings of the painting's central figures.<sup>15</sup>

Another modernist of note working in Ukraine in the first third of the 20th century was the artist Mykhailo Sapozhnikov. Much of this artist's mature oeuvre was connected with the Dnipropetrovsk (today, Dnipro) region, and as a result most of his works are now held at the Dnipro Art Museum. He was, perhaps, the most prolific symbolist in the history of Ukrainian art.

<sup>13</sup> Ivan Miasoedov's biography is full of unexpected twists and turns. In 1912, he married an Italian circus dancer and took her with him back to his Poltavan estate. Together they traveled around Ukrainian villages, learning local dances and buying up old items of national dress. Miasoedov ended up in Germany following the revolution, where he found a rather original use for his artistic talents. He began making counterfeit banknotes, while his wife took care of their distribution. He landed in jail as a result of these activities. After he was freed, he moved to Liechtenstein with his family with fake passports where he was arrested again for forging state documents. Ivan Miasoedov died far away from Ukraine in Buenos Aires in 1953. Up to the end of the 20th century, there were still legends in Poltava and Kharkiv about this extravagant artist and the equipment he used to forge rubles, which was supposedly found in his old Poltava home as it was being repaired in the 1960s. For more about these legends, see: Vladimir Yaskov, "Khlebnikov. Kosarev. Kharkov," *Volga*, no.11 (1999).

<sup>14</sup> For further information about the relationship between the artist and poet, and also to learn more about Tychyna's poetry collection *Panakhidni spivny* [Funeral hymns], which by some miracle was preserved in Mykhailo Zhuk's archive, see: Boris Khersonsky, "Nadgrobnoe rydanie" [Tombstone wailing], *Mezhdunarodnyi literaturnyi zhurnal "Kreshchatik"*, 17 (2002).

<sup>15</sup> The model for the white angel was Pavlo Tychyna's young love at the time, Polina Konoval, the daughter of the writer and public figure Ivan Konoval (Voronkovsky). For more details, see: Vitalii Zhezhera, "Ii smert zminyla poeta" [Her death changed the poet], *Hazeta po-ukrainsky*, May 11, 2006.





MYKHAILO SAPOZHNIKOV.  
*LORD OF DARKNESS. NO. 4, 2ND VARIATION. SERIES 1: SPECTERS.*  
1906-1916. DISTEMPER ON CANVAS. 125x105 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE DNIPRO ART MUSEUM.



OLEKSA NOVAKIVSKY.  
*LEDA*. 1920s.  
CHARCOAL ON PAPER. 143x220 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NOVAKIVSKY FAMILY.

In the first half of the 20th century, the most prominent figure in the search for a national style in Ukrainian art was Fedir Krychevsky, a classmate of Ivan Miasoedov's in Moscow and fellow member of the Garden of the Gods in Poltava. While the main body of his work would be completed following the revolution, his artistic excellence was widely recognized as early as 1910. Krychevsky gained a reputation for his attraction to monumentalism, ornamentation and scale, his assured painting style, and his love for national motifs. Thanks both to graduating from the Higher Art School of the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg and for painting the prize-winning work *Bride* (1910), Krychevsky traveled to Europe on a trip paid for by the Academy. This trip, which took him to Vienna and acquainted him with the work of Gustav Klimt, brought about a fundamental shift in the artist's creative vision. Henceforth for many years, even into the Soviet period, he would incorporate elements of the Vienna Secession into his work, threading Cubist and Boichukist elements onto Klimt's far-reaching influence.

Vasyl Krychevsky, Fedir's older brother, also played a distinguished role in the development of modernism in Ukraine. A painter, architect, film production designer, and graphic artist, Krychevsky designed the coat of arms for the Ukrainian National Republic, a trident based on the crest of Volodymyr the Great,<sup>16</sup> the grand prince of Kyivan Rus. He also worked on the construction of the provincial Zemstvo Building in Poltava,<sup>17</sup> which was built in the architectural style of Ukrainian modernism and combined elements of European modernism with national elements from the tradition of Ukrainian baroque, in particular.

Modernism in Western Ukraine, at that time still under the control of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, understandably developed in its own particular direction. However, there were several people who united both the East and West, and who appeared to have anticipated a common future for Ukrainian art. An important figure in understanding the legacy of the Western Ukrainian artistic tradition is Oleksa Novakivsky, a graduate of the Krakow Academy. His work straddled the intersection of impressionism, post-impressionism and expressionism. He moved to Lviv in 1913 upon the invitation of the Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky, a well-known patron of the arts and the founder of the Lviv National Museum. It would be difficult to overestimate the role that Sheptytsky played in the artistic development of Ukraine in the first decades of the 20th century. It is largely thanks to the metropolitan's open-mindedness and authority that Lviv modernism is so closely associated with religious themes.<sup>18</sup> With Sheptytsky's support, Novakivsky founded an artist's school in Lviv in 1923. The school was attended by many artists who would prove central to the further development of Novakivsky's work, Roman Selsky, in particular. In his work, Novakivsky intertwined the Ukrainian artistic tradition with religious themes, creating his own take on modernism.

<sup>16</sup> Krychevsky's trident is now depicted on the small coat of arms of independent Ukraine.

<sup>17</sup> Today the building houses the Poltava Regional Studies Museum.

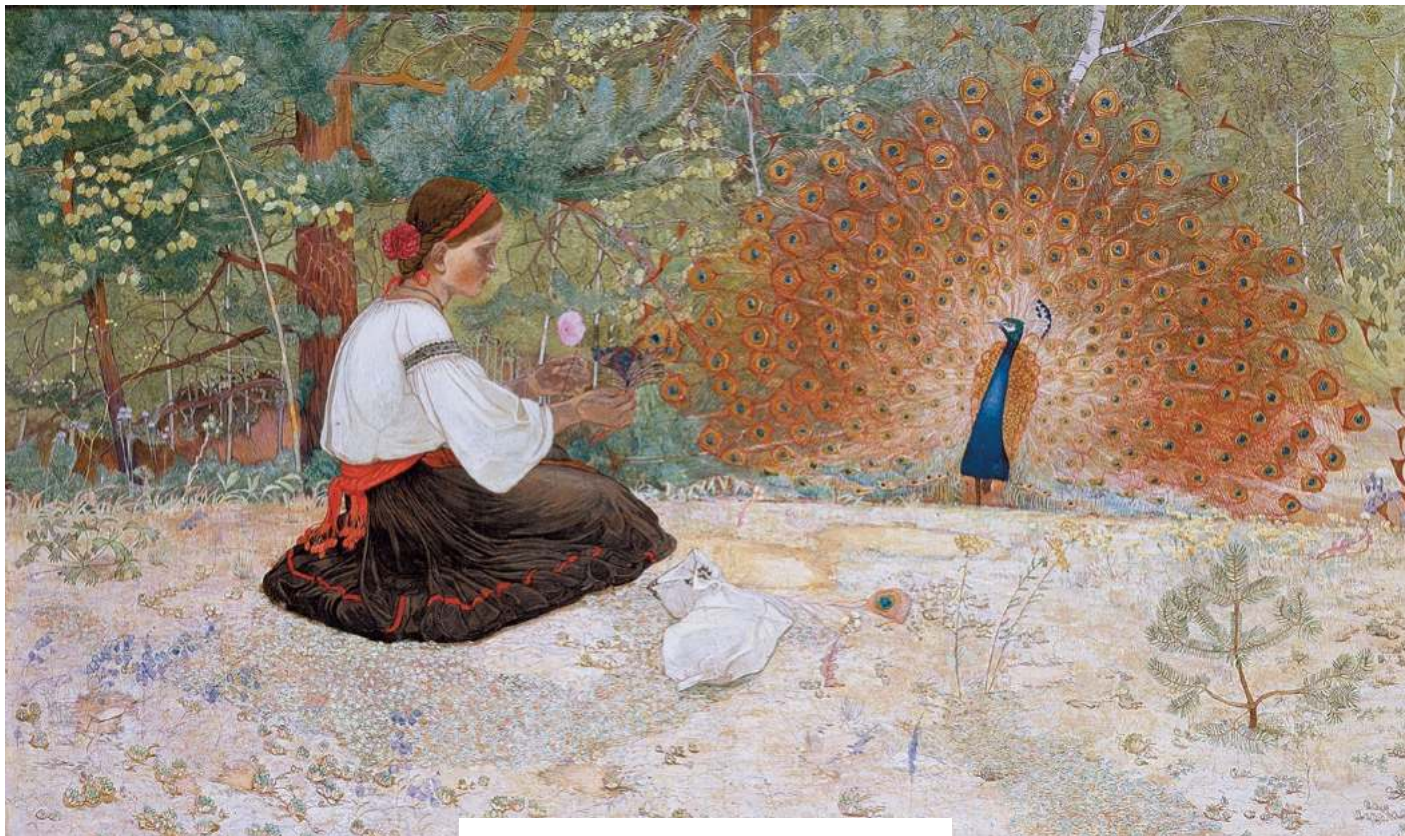
<sup>18</sup> See: Sofia Bonkovska, "Lvivska setsesiia u tserkovno-obriadovomu mystetstvi Halychyny" [The Lviv Secession in the church and ritual art of Halychyna], *Ukrainske mystetstvoznavstvo: materialy, doslidzhennia, retsenzii* (Kyiv: IMFE im. M. T. Rylskoho NANU) 10 (2010): 85–92.

Petro Kholodny is an artist with an unusual biography. He was a physics teacher, the principal of a business school and the Taras Shevchenko First Ukrainian Gymnasium. He also served as the minister for national education in the Ukrainian National Republic (UNR) and became a huge painting enthusiast. Following the collapse of the UNR, he moved to Halychyna (Galicia) and settled in Lviv in 1922. While there, Kholodny headed the Circle of Promoters of Ukrainian Art [Hurtok diiachiv ukrainskoho mystetstva], a collective of cultured individuals who had emigrated from Eastern Ukraine and who took an active part in local artistic life. From the 1910s on, the artist developed his own recognizable style, incorporating elements of the Secession with Ukrainian folk art as well as with the Byzantine and Galician icon painting traditions. This style unites him with Novakivsky, but whereas Novakivsky's art is elevated by his expression and energy, Kholodny's work is dominated by a Secession aesthetic and ornamental sparseness. Kholodny came into his own while in Lviv. He left behind the role of physics teacher and minister and dedicated even more time to decorative art, painting walls and designing stained glass windows in the Dormition and St. Nicholas Churches as well as in the Lviv Theological Seminary.

Elements of impressionism and post-impressionism began to penetrate into Ukrainian art at the same time as the Secession movement. The influence of both movements can be seen in the work of many artists, including Oleksander Murashko and Fedir Krychevsky. The slightly delayed arrival of impressionism to the Ukrainian art scene is also connected with the transformation evident in the later work of many members of the *peredvizhniki* movement such as Kyriak Kostandi and Mykola Pymonenko, among others. This process was also a result of the influence of the Krakow Academy where the distinguished western Ukrainian Modernist Ivan Trush studied alongside the aforementioned Novakivsky and Kholodny. Other artists whose work bears the influence of impressionism include Mykhailo Berkos, Mykola Burachek, Petro Levchenko, and Abram Manevich.

In the early 20th century, nearly all future members of the avant-garde went through an impressionist period, which served as a form of training, freeing them from the shackles of more traditional forms of seeing and artistic creation. Examples of these artists range from Kazimir Malevich and Davyd Burliuk to Oleksandra Ekster and Oleksander Bohomazov. For the majority of these artists, their impressionist period represented just a stage on their journey to forming their own artistic language. Impressionism would return, though when it did, it would have to live through the completely different Soviet period.<sup>19</sup> Under totalitarianism, the word *impressionism* would become taboo, and in certain periods, an accusation of being an impressionist could potentially be life-threatening. However, during periods of ideological thaw, using elements of the lightest forms of impressionism was permissible and would be seen as one of the most radical ways to push the boundaries of fine art.

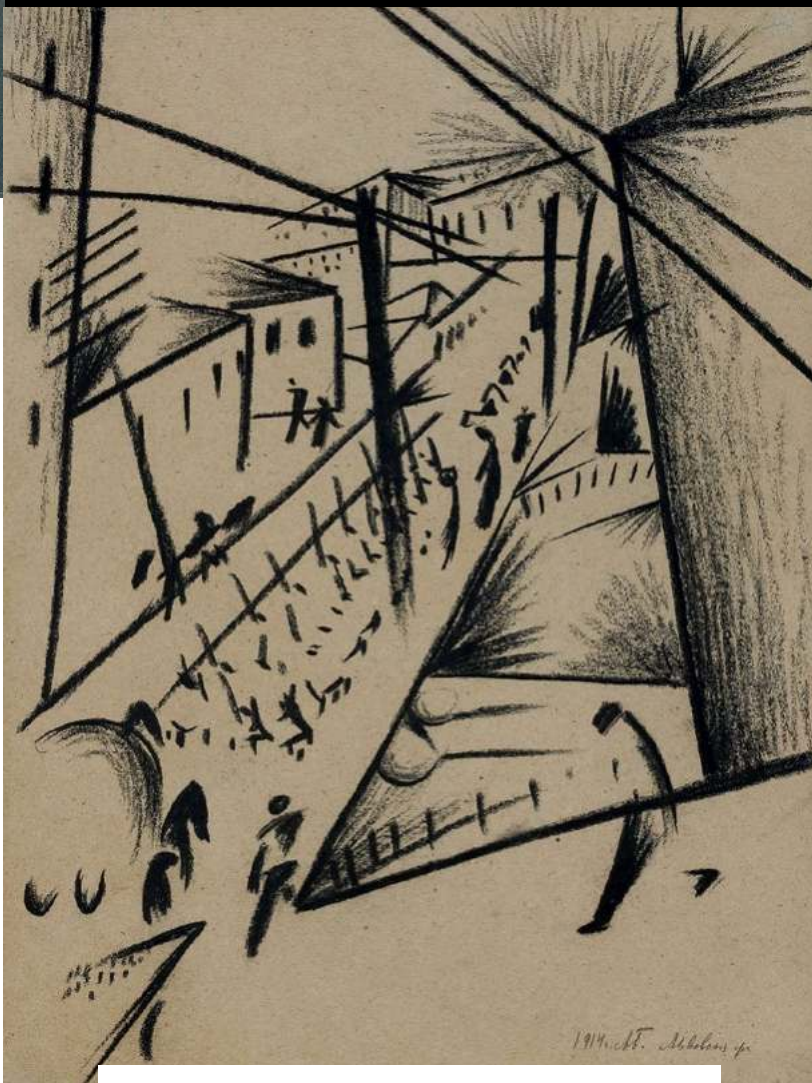
<sup>19</sup> See: Halyna Skliarenko, "Impresionizm v ukrainskomu zhyvopysi. Osoblyvosti interpretatsii khudozhnioho dosvidu" [Impressionism in Ukrainian painting. The features of interpreting artistic experience], *Mystetstvoznavstvo Ukrainy*, 11 (2010): 16–22.



PETRO KHOLODNY.  
*THE FAIRY TALE OF THE GIRL AND THE PEACOCK.*  
1916. TEMPERA ON WOOD. 85x144 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL ART  
MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



DAVYD BURLIUK  
WITH A PAINTED FACE.  
PHOTO. C. 1914.



OLEKSANDER BOHOMAZOV.  
TRAM, LVIV STREET. KYIV. 1914. PENCIL ON PAPER. 40.2×30.2 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE KRÖLLER-MÜLLER MUSEUM,  
OTTERLO, THE NETHERLANDS. OBTAINED WITH THE SUPPORT  
OF BANKGIRO LOTTERY.

# THE BEGINNING OF THE AVANT-GARDE. CUBO-FUTURISM

In the early 20th century, the development of Ukrainian art was directly influenced by its wider European modernist context. At first, the center of the European art world was the Austro-Hungarian Secession, though it wasn't long before Paris became the central focus. In the 1900s and 1910s, many artists headed to Paris to see the newest and most current art. Amongst these artists was the Odesan Sonia Terk who moved to Paris in 1907 and would soon garner international acclaim as the artist and designer Sonia Delauney. Other visitors to Paris included the fellow Kyivans and classmates at the Kyiv Art School, Oleksandra Ekster and Alexander Archipenko. Ekster returned to Kyiv and had a significant influence on the development of Ukrainian Cubo-Futurism. Archipenko, on the other hand, would remain abroad, becoming a legend of international modernism, yet throughout his life he would continue to pay tribute to his connection with Ukraine.

At the end of the first decade of the 20th century, the art scene was to undergo a radical change once again. In place of modernism, impressionism, and symbolism, each with their own gentle opposition to the academic tradition and ideas of art for art's sake, more radical artistic movements arrived. These were movements that aimed to destroy preexisting norms and to transform not only art, but the world in its entirety. This ultra-left specter of modernist thinking would be grouped together under the umbrella term "the avant-garde."<sup>20</sup> However, that term was barely used in the 1910s, and the artists referred to themselves with completely different names and labels. Thus began the era of "isms," and Paris was to dictate what was in fashion and what was not. It was there that, in place of Fauvism, which was the most radical artistic movement at the turn of the century, a completely new style arrived. The change in tide was marked in 1907 with Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*. In the years that followed, Picasso, together with Georges Braque, would become the founder of a new artistic movement that was destined to change how we see the world forever — Cubism. Founded in Italy, futurism was a different revolutionary movement born under the influence of cubism and inspired by the rapid industrialization and growth of mass society. In 1909, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti wrote the futurist manifesto in which he celebrated war and the poetry of machines, while also calling for the destruction of museums, libraries, academic institutions, and all traces of culture from the past. The word *futurism* was hypnotic with its sense of power, dynamism, and momentum towards the future. It was roughly at the same time that the Russian Velimir Khlebnikov would think up the local term *budetlian*. By the summer of 1910, artists and poets who were part of the newly formed futurist association Hylaea (Gileia, in Russian) would use the term *budetlian* to label themselves. At the core of this group were the brothers

<sup>20</sup> The term *modernism* was first used in 1929 by the poet and active member of the French Communist party Louis Aragon when he wrote about Arthur Rimbaud. *Avant-garde*, used to denote the rough grouping of radical left artistic movements at the beginning of the 20th century, entered popular usage only in the early 1970s.

Davyd and Mykola Burliuk, Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Benedikt Livshits, Vasili Kamensky, and Vladimir Mayakovsky.

The family history of Davyd Burliuk, the leader of the *budetlians*, is inextricably connected with Ukraine. He was born in the region around Kharkiv and lived for a long time in the south of the country in the Taurida gubernia. This wasn't far from the city of Kherson where his father worked as the manager for an estate in Chernianka. And it was precisely in this region that the Hylaea group was founded,<sup>21</sup> named in honor of the old name of that region which dates back to the work of Herodotus. Most of the members of this group had a tie to Ukraine, sharing an enthusiasm for the country's history of antiquity. In St. Petersburg, the group's raw energy triggered both interest and apprehension, and undoubtedly marked them out as decidedly different in relation to the otherwise chilly atmosphere of the northern capital. "We bear witness to a new invasion of barbarians, mighty in their talents, dreadful in their indifference. Only the future will show us if they are 'Germans,' or instead Huns, of which no traces will remain." Here the poet Nikloday Gumiliov sensed the spectral energy of those from the southeastern provinces of the empire.<sup>22</sup>

Any attempt to try and define the boundaries of a "Ukrainian avant-garde"<sup>23</sup> encounters the general problem of a national culture existing within a larger empire. Many artists who were originally from Ukraine are known to the world as members of the Russian avant-garde. Today researchers are actively investigating the specifically Ukrainian components of the avant-garde movement, which were spread across the territory of the Russian empire in the second decade of the 20th century. A pioneer in this field is Dmytro Horbachov, an art critic and a passionate advocate of the Ukrainian avant-garde since the Soviet period.

Discussions surrounding the specific nationality of the avant-garde are methodologically ambiguous. The artists themselves were defined by a certain cosmopolitanism, and in their work they posed global questions about the limits of artistic discourse and the capability of art to exist in a state of pure non-objectivity, while at the same time retaining a utilitarian quality. However, as the history of the Ukrainian avant-garde shows, non-objective art is not itself free of ideology. While the early members of the avant-garde worked to destroy the established artistic canon, mercilessly threatening old norms and cultural codes, in fact, they were carrying out the same experiment that the Bolsheviks would soon be carrying out on a national scale. As a result, researchers of the national roots of the Ukrainian avant-garde recognize

<sup>21</sup> In addition to Davyd Burliuk and his brother Volodymyr, the group also consisted of Vladimir Mayakovsky, Benedikt Livshits, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Velimir Khlebnikov, Vasili Kamensky, Elena Guro, and Anton Bezval. For further information about Hylaea and the futurists' Chernianka period, see: Benedikt Livshits, *Polutoroglaziyi strelets* [One-and-a-half-eyed archer] (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to note here that art critics mirrored Gumiliov's turn of phrase when describing the "invasion" of Moscow by Ukrainian members of the trans-avant-garde and painters of the New Wave in the late 1980s. The Gumiliov quote comes from Olga Rykova's review of V. N. Terekhina and A. P. Zimenkov, eds., *Russkii futurizm: Teoriia. Praktika. Kritika. Vospominaniia* [Russian futurism. Theory. Practice. Criticism. Memories] (Moscow: Nasledie, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> The term *Ukrainian avant-garde* was first mentioned in an academic sense by the art critic Andrei Nakov in 1973 at the *Tatlin's Dream* exhibition in London. The exhibition catalog: Andrei Nakov, *Tatlin's Dream: Russian Suprematist and Constructivist Art, 1910–1923* (London: Fischer Fine Art, 1973).





VADYM MELLER.  
COSTUME SKETCH FOR THE BALLET MASKS BY CHOPIN.  
BRONISLAVA NIJINSKA'S SCHOOL OF MOVEMENT, KYIV. 1919.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF THEATER,  
MUSIC, AND CINEMA ARTS OF UKRAINE.



OLEKSANDRA EKSTER.  
*BRIDGE (SÈVRES)*. C. 1912.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 145x115 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.

the universal agenda of those artist-revolutionaries, while also paying attention to the stylistic features, color palette, and thematic focus of their work, which draw from the rich tradition of Ukrainian folk art. At the beginning of the 20th century, this tradition inspired a whole range of artists hailing from different positions and viewpoints.<sup>24</sup>

During the early stages of the Ukrainian avant-garde's development, several exhibitions were put on in Kyiv and other cities.<sup>25</sup> Towards the end of 1908, the exhibition *Zveno* (Link) took place in Kyiv at the Musical Instrument Depot on Khreshchatyk Street. Oleksandra Ekster and Davyd Burluk organized the exhibition and, alongside their own art, showed the work of Volodymyr Burluk, Liudmyla Burluk-Kuznetsova, Mikhail Larionov, and Aristarkh Lentulov. *Zveno* was a continuation of the exhibition *Stefanos*, which had opened in 1907 in Moscow. At the opening, Davyd Burluk distributed copies of a manifesto entitled "The Voice of an Impressionist in Defense of Painting." The artist declared, "The high priests of art are fleeing in their automobiles, taking their treasures with them in tightly locked suitcases. Self-satisfied bourgeoisie, your faces beam with an all-knowing joy."<sup>26</sup> While the Kyiv public did not give the exhibition the response it deserved, it all the same became a milestone event in the history of art. These were the first steps of the future avant-garde in the entire Russian Empire.

Another milestone in the history of cubofuturism was the *Koltso* (Ring) exhibition, which took place in Kyiv at the beginning of 1914. It was organized by an artist's group of the same name, which included Ekster, though it was her classmate at the Kyiv Art School, Oleksander Bohomazov, who played the leading organizational role. Bohomazov's own work underwent a rapid transformation during this time, evolving from a soft pointillism toward Cubo-Futurism. However, this wouldn't have been possible without the influence of Ekster, who kept him up to date on the most recent developments in the art world from abroad.

Ekster played a huge role in the Kyiv art scene during those years. She traveled a great deal through Europe and became acquainted with Pablo Picasso and Guillaume Apollinaire in Paris and made contact with the futurists in Italy. With the priceless information she accrued, she was able to keep Kyiv up to date on the rapidly changing European art scene. The artist's studio at 27 Fundukleivska Street<sup>27</sup> became a hub for sharing new artistic ideas. Several future luminaries of the art world took part in her workshops: Vadym Meller, Anatol Petrytsky, Oleksander Khvostenko-Khvostov, and Pavel Tchelitchev. While at Ekster's studio you could not only listen to lectures but also look at the work of her students. There was always someone of interest giving

<sup>24</sup> Dmytro Horbachov, *Avanhard. Ukrainski khudozhnyky pershoi tretyny XX stolittia* [Avant-garde. Ukrainian artists from the first third of the 20th century] (Kyiv: Mysterstvo, 2017), 28–50.

<sup>25</sup> For more information see: Elena Kashuba, *Pervye avangardnye vystavki v Kieve 1908–1910 godov: "Zveno", "Salony Izdebskogo", "Koltso"* [The first avant-garde exhibitions in Kyiv 1908–1910: Link, the Izdebsky Salons, Ring] (Kyiv: Triumf, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> This quotation comes from John Bowlit's essay on Ukrainian modernism from John Bowlit, et al., eds., *Ukrainskyi modernizm 1910–1930* [Ukrainian modernism 1910–1930] (Kyiv: Ukrainian Museum Foundation, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Today this is Bohdana Khmelnytskoho Street.

a talk, whether it was Ilya Ehrenburg, Benedikt Livshits, Yakov Tugenkhold, or Viktor Shklovsky.

In 1919, Vaslav Nijinsky's sister Bronislava, a ballerina, choreographer, and member of Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, opened the avant-garde School of Movement (École de Mouvement) in Kyiv. The school's main purpose was to find a new language of choreography. It was through her contact with Ekster and her students that Nijinska arrived at an understanding of how to create a new form of ballet. The foundations of this new understanding were laid as a direct consequence of the ongoing revolution in modern painting.<sup>28</sup> For her performances, Nijinska worked with one of the brightest lights in Ekster's circle, Vadym Meller, and then later went on to work with Ekster herself. Before this period Ekster had already worked in a theater, making costumes for Alexander Tairov, who pioneered the concept of synthetic theater in his Moscow Chamber Theater. There she helped him stage the plays *Famira Kifared* (1916) and *Salomé* (1917). Thus, a theatrical avant-garde was born in Ukraine, destined to become one of the brightest pages in the history of art from that period. By some miracle, sketches for these innovative performances, staged in the late 1910s and early 1920s, survived the Soviet period and today make up one of the largest remaining physical remnants of the Ukrainian avant-garde. These sketches were drawn by a range of artists such as Petrytsky, Ekster, Meller, and Khvostenko-Khvostov. In the 1920s, the theater director Les Kurbas staged political and philosophical performances remarkable for their unique set design and for embodying the spirit of post-revolutionary Soviet Ukraine. His work is a shining example of how world-class experimental theater existed in Ukraine in the 1920s.

<sup>28</sup> Georgii Kovalenko, "Bronislava Nizhinskaia i Aleksandra Ekster" [Bronislava Nijinska and Oleksandra Ekster], *Voprosy teatra* (Moscow) no. 3/4 (2016).



VASYL SEMENKO  
IN FRONT OF HIS PAINTING *CITY*, 1914. PHOTO.  
FROM THE ARCHIVE OF THE ARTIST'S NEPHEW,  
MARKO SEMENKO; PROVIDED BY LIUBOV YAKYMCHUK.

# QUEROFUTURISM (OR PANFUTURISM)

While the Cubo-Futurists were focused on the art scene across the Russian Empire, another type of futurist group was born, one with a more national focus. Its leader was the young poet Mykhailo (Mykhail) Semenko. At the end of 1913, along with two other artists, his brother Vasyi and Pavlo Kovzhun, Semenko founded the first Ukrainian futurist group. Once they had pledged themselves to futurism, these young men gave themselves exotic new names: Mykhail, Bazyl, and Pavl, and they set up the printing house Quero (from the Latin: *to search*) where they began publishing small books in Ukrainian.<sup>29</sup> It was their focus on nationality that caused a huge scandal around the querofuturists. In February 1914, just a couple of months after the group was founded, the scandal erupted following the publication of Semenko's 8-page poetry pamphlet *Derzannia* (Audacity). In the pamphlet's foreword/manifesto, Semenko made one of the most radical gestures in the history of Ukrainian art. The audacious 21-year-old poet violated the holiest of holies for a nation that had endured centuries of slavery. He dared to speak irreverently of one of the most important symbols of the Ukrainian national movement—the national poet Taras Shevchenko and his *Kobzar* (his best-known collection of poems):

*You raise your greasy Kobzar and say: here is my art. Man, I'm embarrassed for you... You bring me debased "ideas" about art, and it makes me sick. Man, art is something you haven't even dreamt of. I want to tell you that where there is a cult, there is no art. ... Man, time turns Titans into worthless Lilliputians, and their place now is in the annals of scholarly institutions. ... I burn my Kobzar.*<sup>30</sup>

When the Italian Marinetti called for the destruction of museums and libraries, no one doubted the value of Italy's culture, which had in fact long been held up as the cultural standard for the whole of Europe. When the "barbarians" from Hylaea announced their wish to throw Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and others off the ship of modernity in their manifesto "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" (1912), which was hastily written in a Moscow hotel, they were addressing the rather different reigning imperial culture of their own country. While both the "barbarians" and the querofuturists existed within a Ukrainian context during this time, they never formally made contact or recognized one another.<sup>31</sup> All the same, Semenko's gesture was inspired by the rhetoric of that 1912 manifesto. Semenko, however, appeared to have been even more radical than his *budetlian* colleagues. In attempting to adapt futurist slogans to a Ukrainian context, he had struck a nerve in a society that had long existed in a state of colonial dependence and that retained a desperate hunger for freedom. As he took aim at the authority of the past, he ended up striking the heart of the Ukrainian

<sup>29</sup> Oleh Ilnytskyj, *Ukrainskyi futuryzm (1914–1930)* [Ukrainian futurism (1914–1930)], trans. Raia Tkhoruk (Lviv: Litopys, 2003), 26.

<sup>30</sup> Mykhail Semenko, "Sam" [By myself] (1914). Translation from Oleh Ilnytskyj, "Cultural Revolution: Mykhail Semenko, Ukrainian Futurism and the 'National' Category," *Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal* 4 (2017): 47.

<sup>31</sup> Halyna Skliarenko, "Avanhard v Ukraini: obshyry iavyschcha, etapy rozvytku" [The avant-garde in Ukraine. Extent of the phenomenon, stages of development], in *Ukrainske mystetstvoznavstvo: materialy, doslidzhennia*, 320.

intelligentsia for whom Shevchenko was still a symbol of the dream of freedom, national culture, and statehood. In reality, Semenکو's manifesto wasn't aimed at Shevchenko in particular, but rather at the conservative stuffiness of his acolytes and at his ritualized canonization, which impeded the development of a more modern, dynamic, and Ukrainian-speaking urban culture. The querofuturist manifesto of 1914 contained similar rhetoric regarding a national crisis in art: "May our parents (who have left us with no legacy to speak of) take comfort in this so-called homegrown art. May they grow old together. We, the young generation, refuse to shake hands with them. Let us catch up to the present day instead!"<sup>32</sup> As he tried to rid Ukrainian culture of its mothballs, this young futurist's position provoked a furious reaction amongst the patriotically minded intelligentsia. His position was not helped by the fact that the imperial authorities had decided to ban any celebration of the centenary of Shevchenko's birth in March 1914. Over 100 years have now passed since this scandal raged, but the questions raised then are still relevant today. Ukrainian culture is still burdened with the scars of postcolonial trauma and the calls to burn the *Kobzar* and to create a new modern culture, without any accompanying hollow romanticism, are still just as complicated and painful as they were then.

The artistic output of the querofuturists remains under-researched. The young Vasyl Semenکو died on the front line during World War I, and of all his work only a couple of blurry photographs remain in which the young bohemian artist poses in front of one of his innovative paintings, his expressive face painted in the latest futurist style.<sup>33</sup> After 1917, Pavlo Kovzhun played an active role in the fight for Ukrainian independence. When the Ukrainian National Republic's army was defeated, he fled to eastern Ukraine and joined the Artes group, which would play a central role in the inter-war art scene. In 1931, he co-founded the Association of Independent Ukrainian Artists (AIUA). Kovzhun mainly worked on book illustrations and wrote articles about early 20th-century art in Ukrainian and Polish. Unfortunately, he left no detailed accounts of his futurist youth. He did, however, write a small article in the literary newspaper *Muzahet*,<sup>34</sup> which detailed the vibrant cultural life of revolutionary Kyiv and the opposition between the futurists and the symbolists. The next time Ukrainian futurism would appear would be in a completely different, post-revolutionary context. Its re-emergence would be closely linked with the journal *Nova generatsiia* (New generation) and the fervent convert to communism, Mykhail Semenکو.

<sup>32</sup> Mykhail Semenکو, "Kverofuturizm" [Querofuturism], in *Mykhail Semenکو. Vybrani tvory*, comp. Anna Bila (Kyiv: Smoloskyp, 2010), 267.

<sup>33</sup> "We paint our faces both because a clean face is disgusting and because we wish to herald the unknown; we are rebuilding life and bringing the multiplied human soul to the upper reaches of existence." Iliia Zdanevich and Mikhail Larionov, "Pochemu my raskrashivaemsia. Manifest futuristov" [Why we paint ourselves. A futurist manifesto], *Argus*, no.12 (1913).

<sup>34</sup> Pavlo Kovzhun, "Muzahet," in *Pavlo Kovzhun. Tvorchyna spadshchyna khudozhnyka: materialy, bibliografichniy dovidnyk* [Pavlo Kovzhun. The artist's oeuvre: materials and bibliographic reference guide], comp. Ivan Melnyk and Roman Yatsiv, Postnarbutivska pleiada (Lviv: Lvivska natsionalna akademiia mystetstv, 2010), 75–78.

# THE IZDEBSKY SALON AND THE INDEPENDENT ODESANS

The city of Odesa played an important role in creating new forms of art. The modernist tradition arrived on the city's art scene only just before the revolution. Prior to that, from the start of the 20th century, it had been primarily focused on impressionism. From 1890 and for several decades after that, the Society of Southern Russian Artists (SSRA) played a defining role in the artistic life of the city. The upper ranks of the SSRA included Kyriak Kostandi, Petro Nilus, Herasym Holovkov, and Tit Dvornikov. Members of the SSRA started out as members of the *peredvizhniki* school, but by the beginning of the 20th century had shifted towards impressionism and modernism. That said, it was the *peredvizhniki* that gave the Odesa Art School its teachers, and while the school has gone down in history as just a local institution of note, its teachers educated some of the most prominent members of the avant-garde. It may seem paradoxical, but the conservative members of the SSRA tutored the likes of Davyd and Volodymyr Burluik, Natan Altman, Vladimir Baranoff-Rossine, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Teofil Fraerman, Amshey Nurenberg, and Volodymyr Izdebsky.

Sometimes art needs a jolt, a spark to make it truly radical. With this in mind, it is therefore relevant to remember Volodymyr Izdebsky, a preeminent cultural figure who played an invaluable role in introducing examples of the global and national avant-garde to Odesa and other major cities in the empire. An artist, sculptor, and impresario, Izdebsky was born in Kyiv and received his art education in Odesa and Munich where he befriended Wassily Kandinsky and Alexej von Jawlensky. He was a fiery social revolutionary and he entered the history books thanks to two salons that he organized at the end of 1909 and the beginning of 1911, respectively. These salons were a turning point in the circulation of radical art. The 27-year-old Izdebsky opened the first salon in Odesa and then took it to Kyiv, St. Petersburg, and Riga. The salon contained around 800 works of art by 150 young artists from France, Italy, Germany, and the Russian Empire. Work was shown by such artists as Henri Matisse, Georges Braque, Maurice de Vlaminck, André Derain, Kees van Dongen, Maurice Denis, Albert Marquet, Gabriele Münter, Giacomo Balla, Paul Signac, Pierre Bonnard, and Henri Rousseau. There were around 120 local artists that took part as well, including Wassily Kandinsky, Alexej von Jawlensky, Oleksandra Ekster, Vladimir Tatlin, Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova, Aristarkh Lentulov, Robert Falk, Ilya Mashkov, Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, Volodymyr and Davyd Burluik, and Léon Bakst.

The second salon was smaller, taking place only in Odesa, Kherson, and Mykolaiv. That said, over 400 works of art were shown by Russian and German artists. They included art by Ekster, Tatlin, Mashkov, Falk, Goncharova, and Lentulov.<sup>35</sup> The stand-out sensation of this salon was Kandinsky, who exhibited 60 pieces of work. The effect of Izdebsky's salons on the art scene was akin to an exploding bomb. Many artists and critics encountered modern art for the first time at Izdebsky's salons. According to

<sup>35</sup> Sergei Lushchik, *Odesskie salony Izdebskogo i ikh sozdatei* [The Izdesbky salons of Odesa and their founder] (Odesa: Studiiia Negotsiant, 2005).

# 19<sup>10</sup> САЛОНЪ 2



МЕЖДУНАРОДНАЯ  
ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННАЯ  
ВЫСТАВКА

УСТРОИТЕЛЬ В.А.ИЗДИБСКИЙ

КАНДИНСКИЙ

CATALOG FROM IZDEBSKY'S INTERNATIONAL  
EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS, SCULPTURES,  
ENGRAVINGS, AND DRAWINGS. 1909-1910.  
DESIGNED BY WASSILY KANDINSKY.



the Odesan Benedikt Livshits, whose life was closely tied with Kyiv and St. Petersburg and who took part and chronicled the futurist Hylaea movement, “Izdebsky’s exhibition played a decisive role in drastically altering my artistic tastes and attitudes.”<sup>36</sup>

There was much to link the founder of abstractionism Wassily Kandinsky with Odesa, and not just Izdebsky’s salon. Kandinsky moved to Odesa from Moscow with his parents in 1871. He attended Gymnasium No. 3 for boys, where he had his first painting lessons. Kandinsky’s relationship with the port city was contradictory; when leaving the city in 1889 to go and study in Moscow he wrote, “Odesa, be gone with you!” and complained many times in his autobiography *Stupeni* (Steps, 1918) that his family felt alienated in the city and didn’t understand its language. Nevertheless, Kandinsky visited Odesa every year to see his friends and relatives and was an exhibitor and member of the SSRA from 1898 to 1910. He also maintained contact with Nilus, Kostandi, and many other young artists, several of whom left to study abroad due to his influence. After 1910, Kandinsky’s views began to diverge from those of the Southern Russian school, though he would continue to exhibit his work in Odesa, showing his “compositions” and “improvizations” of that period. Kandinsky was one of the masterminds behind Izdebsky’s salon and the 1914 Spring Art Exhibition. His essay “On Understanding Art” was published in the catalog for that exhibition, which was the last large pre-war international art event featuring the Munich group Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider), led by Kandinsky, the Moscow group Jack of Diamonds, and the Odesans, who would go on to form the core of The Society of Independent Artists.<sup>37</sup>

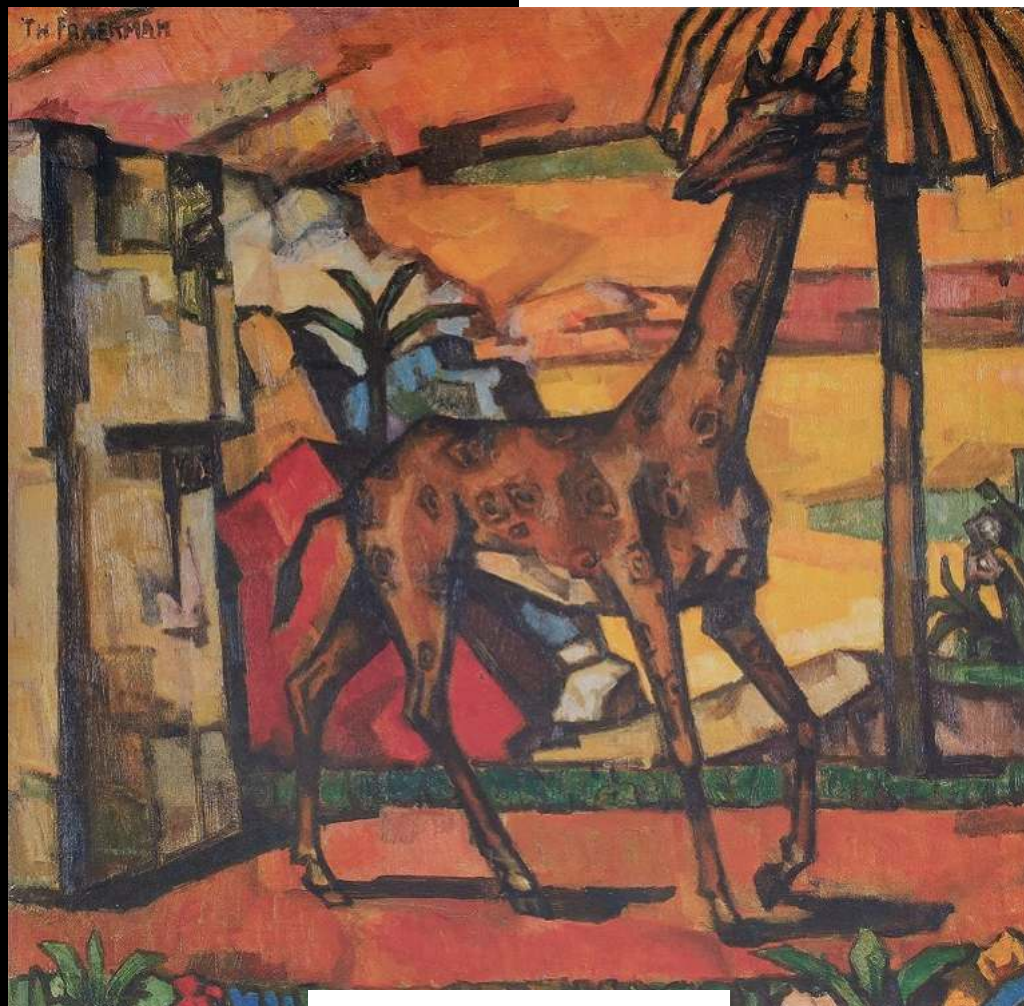
The talented and expressive *Independent Odesans* comprised a bright page in the history of Odesan modernism. Veniamin Babadzhan, Moisei Gershenfeld, Amshey Nurenberg, Teofil Fraerman, Sigizmund Olesevich, Isaak Malik and Sandro Fazini (Srul Fainzilberg, the brother of Ilya Iff)—all of these artists studied at the Odesa Art School and opposed the SSRA, which by the end of 1910s had become a society of backward-looking painters. Many of the Independents lived for a long time in Paris, joining the École de Paris. The influence of Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse and de Vlaminck, Picasso and Braque is evident in their work. After returning to Odesa from Paris, Nurenberg set up an open workshop of easel and decorative painting and sculpture. During the years 1918–19, its students would include Naum Sobol, Polina Mamicheva-Nurenberg and Isaak Efet-Kostini. Its teachers would be Nurenberg’s friends from The Society of Independent Artists: Fraerman, Malik, and Babadzhan. Other members of the Independents included Pavlo Nitshe and the symbolist Dmitrii Lebedev who died young and whose watercolors are often compared by art historians to the work of Vsevolod Maksymovych. The arrival of the Independents coincided with the Russian revolution and the civil war, and the resulting chaos of that time meant that the majority of their

<sup>36</sup> Livshits, *Polutoraglazi strelets*, 413.

<sup>37</sup> See Vitalii Abramov, “V. Kandinskii i ‘Vesenniaia vystavka kartin’ 1914 goda v Odesse” [W. Kandinsky and the 1914 spring art exhibition in Odesa], in *Chernyi kvadrat nad Chernym morem. Materialy k istorii avangardnogo iskusstva Odessy XX veka* (Odesa: Druk, 2001).



AMSHEY NURENBERG.  
*HUNTING*. 1912.  
OIL AND CANVAS ON BOARD. 57.5×121 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
UKRAINIAN AVANT-GARDE FOUNDATION.



TEOFIL FRAERMAN.  
*GIRAFFE*, 1918.  
OIL ON CANVAS, 65x65 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
UKRAINIAN AVANT-GARDE FOUNDATION.

work had been lost,<sup>38</sup> and the society itself quickly broke down. Veniamin Babadzhan, enlisted to fight at the beginning of World War I, was shot in 1920 in Crimea during the Red Terror, meeting the same fate as many other White Army officers. Amshey Nurenberg lived a long life, painting conformist socialist-realist art, while Sandro Fazini left for Paris and died in Auschwitz in 1942. Isaak Malik moved to Moscow in 1933 and made signs for the city zoo, portraits of political leaders for different companies, as well as reproductions for the Museum of the Revolution. In the end, only Teofil Fraerman continued to live and work in Odesa. He taught at the Art School and would go on to influence the next generation of young artists.

<sup>38</sup> A large collection of work by artists from that circle was found in Israel only at the end of the 2000s. They had been transported on the steamer *Ruslan* by the collector and patron Yakov Pereman. For more, see: Tatiana Markina and Mariia Khalizeva, "Kollektsiia Iakova Peremana vernetsia v Kiev" [Yakov Pereman's collection returns to Kyiv], *Kommersant-Ukraina*, no. 73 (April 27, 2010).



KYRIAK KOSTANDI.  
*GEESE*, 1913.  
OIL ON CARDBOARD. 45.5×35.8 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.

## CHAPTER 2.

# THE UKRAINIAN REVOLUTION AND THE RED RENAISSANCE: FROM 1917 TO THE EARLY 1930s

## THE UKRAINIAN REVOLUTION AND THE FOUNDING OF THE ACADEMY OF ARTS

According to Eric Hobsbawm, World War I marked the end of the “long 19th century,” a period of world history that started with the French Revolution and marked the beginning of global capitalism, urbanization, the appearance of modern ideologies, the development of socialism and nationalism, as well as the dominance of empire. The war, the 1917 revolution and the subsequent political cataclysms signaled the beginning of a string of painful transformations that Ukraine was to endure in the “short 20th century,” aptly named by Hobsbawm the “age of extremes.”<sup>39</sup>

There was a certain delay in the development of avant-garde art in Ukraine. If the peak of the Russian avant-garde arrived in the 1910s and the first years following the revolution, then the most active analogous period in Ukraine happened later at a time when these movements were already undergoing crisis and even persecution in Russia. The reason for this delay lay in the political situation of the period.<sup>40</sup> During World War I, Western Ukraine became a theater of fierce military struggles. It was here in 1916 that one of the bloodiest battles of the war took place: The Brusilov Offensive. This offensive claimed around a million lives in total from both sides. Following the 1917 revolution, the same region which had once been under the control of the Russian Empire became embroiled in a protracted and complicated struggle for power

<sup>39</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991* (London: Penguin, 1994).

<sup>40</sup> For more, see: Skliarenko, “Avanhard v Ukraini,” 321.

between those fighting for an independent Ukraine, the Bolsheviks, and those who wished to return Russia to its pre-revolutionary state. Sadly, there was also a lack of unity in the pro-Ukrainian camp. Power changed hands with such speed that it quickly became the new normal for the Kyiv populace. All the same, this was a key moment in the history of Ukraine—not dissimilar to the plot of a blockbuster film—and the extraordinary events of that time redrew the fate of the Ukrainian people.

The Ukrainian National Republic (UNR) was founded at the end of 1917. It was a dream come true for the local intelligentsia, the very same which had come under fire from Semenko when he called for the *Kobzar* to be burned. The declaration of independence on 22 January 1918 was a triumph for the national movement and a landmark in the country's cultural life. Many artists supported the pro-Ukrainian forces, playing their part in building the new state and in creating new symbols and insignia for the newly independent Ukraine. However, it was the more moderate modernists rather than the radical avant-garde that took the leading role. Their aesthetic platform and worldview were more in line with that of the Ukrainian intelligentsia who formed the core of the new Ukrainian establishment. Perhaps the central figure of this period was the graphic designer Heorhii Narbut. Narbut represented the younger generation of the Russian organization *Mir isskustva* (World of Art) and he was an expert in ancient Ukrainian art and heraldry. He was Ukrainian by birth, though he received his formal artistic education in St. Petersburg.

In 1917, a 31-year-old Narbut moved to Kyiv where he quickly found himself at the center of political events. The artist won a competition to design banknotes for the UNR and through this helped create the first Ukrainian money. He used a rich array of baroque elements as well as many historical symbols, including Prince Volodymyr the Great's trident. The idea of using the trident in the UNR's coat of arms originated from the art historian and active member of the Republic's Central Council, Dmytro Antonovych.<sup>41</sup> During the period of the Ukrainian Revolution, there were 24 types of paper money and 32 types of currency coupons in circulation, and a sizeable proportion of these were designed by Narbut.<sup>42</sup> During Hetman Skoropadsky's brief rule, the artist sought the removal of the coat of arms and state seals designed for the UNR by Vasyl Krychevsky and instead offered his own designs to the Hetman. But it wasn't long before power changed hands again. The state seal designed by Narbut in this period was also used on the 1000-*karbovanets* banknote.<sup>43</sup> Narbut authored the designs of the Ukrainian army's military uniform, UNR postage stamps, as well as the packaging and labels of Ukrainian goods. In 1917, Narbut also started work on drawings for the *Ukrainian Alphabet*, one of the most important works of this period, though sadly it was never completed.

<sup>41</sup> Pavlo Hai-Nyzhnyk, "Utverdzhennia tryzubu v ofitsiinii symvolitsi Ukrainskoi Narodnoi Respubliky ta Ukrainskoi Derzhavy doby Tsentralnoi Rady i Hetmanatu (1917–1918 rr.);" [The establishment of the trident as an official symbol of the Ukrainian National Republic and the Ukrainian State of the Central Rada and the Hetmanate (1917–1918)], *Hileia* 131, no. 4 (2018): 21.

<sup>42</sup> Andrii Boiko-Haharin, "Heorhii Narbut — Tvorets hroshei z natsionalnym dukhom" [Heorhii Narbut — Creator of money with a national spirit], *Numizmatyka i falerystyka* (Kyiv), no. 2 (2017): 20–26.

<sup>43</sup> *Karbovanets* was one of the forms of currency that was used during this time. [T.N.]



HEORHII NARBUT.  
A UKRAINIAN NATIONAL REPUBLIC BANKNOTE  
WORTH 100 HRYVNIAS. 1918.



HEORHII NARBUT.  
PAGE FROM THE ALPHABET. THE LETTER "A."  
GOUACHE AND INDIA INK ON PAPER. 31×22.5 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL ART  
MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



In 1917, during a high point in the national revolution, a committee was set up to found the Ukrainian Academy of Arts in Kyiv.<sup>44</sup> This was done upon the initiative of a group from the Ukrainian intelligentsia led by famous cultural figures of the time: the historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky, the archeologist and ethnographer Mykola Biliashivsky, and the art historians Dmytro Antonovych and Hryhorii Pavlutsky.

Historical circumstance meant that prior to the end of the 19th century, Ukrainian art was only reflecting the artistic trends and movements of the Russian art school and elsewhere. Of particular influence was the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts as well as other European academies where many artists went to get their education. There were practically no fully fledged art schools in the cities of Ukraine under Russian imperial control. The situation was gradually changing by the late 19th and early 20th century, and this change began in Odesa. The Odesa Art School of Drawing opened in 1865 and was upgraded to a specialized school in 1899.<sup>45</sup> One of the school's teachers was a member of the *peredvizhniki* and the director of the Odesa City Museum: Kyriak Kostandi. In 1869 in Kharkiv, Maria Raevskaia-Ivanova opened the first private school for drawing and painting in the Russian Empire. She was the first woman to gain the status of free artist from the Imperial Academy. The school received municipal status in 1869, and in 1912 it was converted into a specialized school. Fedir Krychevsky, Mykola Pymonenko, and Oleksander Murashko taught there. Its students included many future members of the avant-garde: Kazimir Malevich, Oleksandra Ekster, Aristarkh Lentulov, Alexander Archipenko, Oleksander Bohomazov, Anatol Petrytsky, Ivan Kaveleridze, and Solomon Nikritin.

The Ukrainian Academy of Arts was founded on 18 December 1917. The Academy became an integral part of the newly founded Ukrainian state's cultural policy, which aimed to support the nation's cultural and intellectual traditions. The Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, headed by the academic and philosopher Volodymyr Vernadsky, was also founded around this time, in November 1918. Sadly, it proved impossible to fully realize the aims of the Academy of Arts during such a time of extreme political instability. A small group of devoted professors and students had to work without permanent premises or adequate resources.<sup>46</sup> All the same, the foundations of the Ukrainian art school had been laid. Artists from the widest possible range of viewpoints and positions helped lay the foundation for the Academy; adherents of academic modernism, post-impressionism, the secession and expressionism—Oleksander Murashko, Mykhailo Boichuk, Heorhii Narbut, Fedir and Vasyl Krychevsky, Mykhailo Zhuk, Mykola Burachek, and Abram Manevich.

Many of the first cohort of teachers at the Academy did not last long in their posts. Manevich emigrated very quickly, and then on 14 June 1919, when Kyiv had been captured for a short time by the Bolsheviks, a tragedy occurred. Murashko, an active

<sup>44</sup> Olena Kashuba-Volvach, *The Ukrainian Academy of Art: A Brief History* (Kyiv: Rodovid, 2015).

<sup>45</sup> From 1965 on, this institution was named the Grekov Odesa Art School, in honor of its former student Mitrofan Grekov, the Soviet artist and painter of war scenes.

<sup>46</sup> Lada Nakonechna, "Istoriia reform Natsionalnoi akademii obrazotvorchoho mystetstva i arkhitektury" [A history of the reforms of the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture], *Naukovyi visnyk "Kurba-sivski chytannia,"* no.12 (2017).

member of the Academy and one of the best painters of pre-revolutionary Kyiv, was shot near his home. During the Soviet period, his death was considered an accident and a sad manifestation of the lawlessness and constant upheaval that defined Kyiv at the time. However, the artist's wife cast doubt on this version of events in her memoirs.<sup>47</sup> Who wanted the artist dead? There are several theories, ranging from a mistake in the secret police's so-called "execution lists" to orders from higher up.<sup>48</sup> Murashko's murder and the storm of rumors that surrounds it act as a good illustration of the tense mistrust, ideological differences, and extreme competition that ruled artistic life at that time. As time went on, these differences would only remain as societal conflict continued to grow, reaching its peak at the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s.

One year after the killing of Murashko, the Academy's rector, Heorhii Narbut, also passed away. Up until the institution's reorganization by the Bolsheviks in 1922, it was de facto led by the nationally oriented monumentalist Mykhailo Boichuk. Boichuk's classes during those hungry war years gave life to a whole host of young artists: Vasyl Sedliar, Oksana Pavlenko, Onufrii Biziukov, Antonina Ivanova, and Ivan Padalka. These artists would lend significant weight to the Ukrainian art scene in the 1920s and early 1930s, and would come to be known as "Boichukists."

## THE KULTUR-LIGE (CULTURE LEAGUE)

The beginning of 1918 marked a key moment in the history of the UNR's Central Council in Kyiv: the founding of the Kultur-Lige (a Jewish Culture League). The aim of this organization was to support all aspects of Jewish-Yiddish culture — theater, music, education, literature, and also fine art. At the beginning of its existence, the League was specifically limited to the cultural sphere and played an auxiliary role to the newly formed Ministry of Jewish Affairs of the UNR. During the time of the Hetmanate, however, it essentially took on the major functions of the Ministry itself.<sup>49</sup> At the end of 1918 and beginning of 1919, sister organizations appeared in Petrograd, Crimea, Minsk, Grodno, Vilnius, Białystok, Moscow, Rostov-on-Don, Chita, Irkutsk, and Harbin. From the very beginning, these organizations were considered branches of the Culture League, and up until the mid-1920s, the Ukrainian organization remained the largest and most active.

<sup>47</sup> Marharyta Murashko, "*Eti desiat let bolshogo, glubokogo schastia*": *Spohady Marharyty Murashko* ["Those ten years of great, big happiness." The memoirs of Marharyta Murashko], comp. Vitalii Tkachuk, intro. Daria Dobriian (Kyiv: ArtHuss, 2016), 87.

<sup>48</sup> Daria Dobriian, "Postat Oleksandra Murashka (na materialakh spohadiv vdovy khudozhnyka)" [The figure of Oleksander Murashko (Based on materials from the artist's widow)], *Etnichna istoriia narodiv levropy* 49 (2016): 75–76.

<sup>49</sup> For more information on the formation of the Culture League, see: Hillel Kazovsky, "The Phenomenon of Kultur-Lige," in *Kultur-Lige. Artistic Avant-Garde of 1910s and the 1920s*, ed. Hillel Kazovsky (Kyiv: Dukh i litera, 2007), 24–36.



MYKHAILO HRUSHEVSKY WITH THE FOUNDERS OF THE UKRAINIAN ACADEMY OF ARTS.  
TOP ROW FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: HEORHII NARBUT, VASYL KRYCHEVSKY,  
AND MYKHAILO BOICHUK. BOTTOM ROW LEFT TO RIGHT: ABRAM MANEVICH,  
OLEKSANDER MURASHKO, FEDIR KRYCHEVSKY, MYKHAILO HRUSHEVSKY,  
IVAN STESHENKO, AND MYKOLA BURACHEK.  
PHOTO, 1917. FROM THE M. T. RYLSKY INSTITUTE OF ART HISTORY, FOLKLORE,  
AND ETHNOLOGY FUND AT THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES OF UKRAINE.

It only becomes clear how revolutionary the establishment of the Culture League was when the wider Jewish context in Ukraine during this period is taken into account. The attitude of the Russian Empire towards its large Jewish population was historically cruel and heavy-handed. The boundary of the Empire's Pale of Settlement, east of which Jews were forbidden to live, ran through Ukraine. Exceptions to this rule were only made for a select few. At the beginning of the 20th century, the majority of Jews lived in small towns (shtetls) in Right-Bank Ukraine and communicated in Yiddish. Life in the Pale of Settlement was particularly hard. Most of the population lived in poverty without much chance of social mobility. Jewish communities were closed off, and there was the constant threat of pogroms. All of these factors led to the rise in popularity of Marxist ideas among the Jewish population. For the very same reasons, Ukraine

became one of the centers of the birth of the Zionist movement and also witnessed massive waves of immigration to the USA. During World War I, the situation only worsened as anti-Semitic sentiment in the Russian Empire continued to increase.

Many cultural figures of the time had high hopes for the revolution as a means to improve the Jews' lot in the Russian Empire. Unfortunately, this enthusiasm was confronted with a period of great violence. During this era of instability from 1918 to 1920, bloody pogroms in Ukraine continued unabated, leaving thousands dead. At the same time, the collapse of the Empire meant that Jews were able to move freely, and as a result they quickly started resettling in big cities and began to play an active role in urban cultural life. In this context, the work of the Culture League was just one episode in the wider cultural-political Jewish revival at the time of the revolution and the early USSR. During this period, Jewish collective farms were created and plans were made to resettle Jews to northern Crimea and the Azov Sea region.<sup>50</sup> On the whole though, the Jewish national revival under Soviet power had the same end as the Ukrainian intelligentsia's romance with the revolution. That said, the revival's role in history should not be understated. A remarkable feature of this movement was the attempt to develop an alternative to the Zionist worldview with its elitist cult of the Hebrew language and the idea that all Jews must sooner or later make their home in distant Israel. Instead, it was argued that the *promised land* should be built right then and there, that a purely religious identity should be rejected, and that Yiddish should be adopted as the national language as a counterweight to Hebrew.<sup>51</sup>

In 1918, the majority of Jewish cultural figures working in Ukraine had gathered around the Culture League in Kyiv. Practically all the Jewish artists in Kyiv had links with the League's art section: Mark Epstein, Boris Aronson, Solomon Nikritin, Issachar Ber Ryback, Aleksandr Tyshler, Abram Manevich, Isaak Rabinovich, Isaak Rabichev, as well as other artists who had come to Kyiv from other corners of the Empire: Eliezer (El) Lissitzky, Sarra Shor, Yosyp (Joseph) Chaikov, Polina Khentova, and Mark Sheikhel. One of the tasks the League set itself was the establishment of a Jewish museum. In particular, the League sought to achieve a synthesis between old and new, and it was interested in adapting both traditional Jewish culture and modern artistic developments. Like Ukrainian artists of the same period, the artists of the Culture League were focused on finding a national Jewish style.

Most members of the Culture League in Kyiv attended Oleksandra Ekster's studio and were enthused by the development of Cubo-Futurism. The synthesis of searching for a national style and the experience gained at Ekster's studio brought about an unexpected revelation. In their 1919 article "The Path to Jewish Painting," Boris Aronson and Issachar Ber Ryback wrote,

*Our living Jewish art, which has absorbed elements of the Western European tradition, belongs in the "left" camp. And this is no accident. Jewish artists feel an affinity*

<sup>50</sup> After 1928, the Communist Party took a harder line towards the Jewish population and instead allotted a distant region in the far east of Russia for resettlement. The Autonomous Jewish National Region was created there in 1934.

<sup>51</sup> Paul Robert Magosci and Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *levrei ta ukraintsi. Tysiacholittia spivisnuvannia* [Jews and Ukrainians: A Millennium of Coexistence] (Uzhhorod: Valerii Padiak, 2016), 11–90.

with contemporary innovators who are preaching the precepts of abstractionism, since only in pure abstract art, free from literary contamination, is it possible to discover a unique national style.<sup>52</sup>

Over the centuries, Jewish culture had a strong tendency towards religious study. However, in the wave of 19th-century secularization, the first areas of focus for Jewish cultural figures were philosophy, literature, and music.<sup>53</sup> The practice of fine art remained marginal and, at times, impermissible. In the Jewish tradition, anthropomorphic depictions were forbidden, and there was a distrust of images in general. This attitude has its roots in the second commandment of the Torah: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.”<sup>54</sup> Abstraction, and its refusal to imitate reality, was the perfect way out of this complicated dilemma where a ban on representation met a desperate need to represent. The avant-garde agenda intertwined with the centuries-old tradition of Jewish mysticism and metaphysics. This gave birth to the Jewish avant-garde, which became an important chapter in the history of Ukrainian art.

Mark Epstein was a fascinating and unique figure in the Culture League and the Jewish avant-garde. He was interested in the ideas of cubism from as early as 1918, synthesizing them with elements of Art Deco. For a short period in the early 1920s, there was a boom in Jewish book printing with many artists associated with the Culture League working in book design. Epstein created covers for Yiddish children's books, and by the end of the 1920s he had made over a hundred designs dedicated to the displaced and colonized Jewish community. Under the particular influence of primitivism, his style evolved away from Cubism towards a more neo-classical style, and broadly speaking, in the general direction of modernism between 1910 and 1930.<sup>55</sup>

Eliezer (El) Lissitzky was a cofounder of the Culture League in Kyiv and one of the internationally better-known members of the group. During his work in the Culture League's art section, Lissitzky's interest gradually shifted from Jewish folklore and traditions to non-objective art. Perhaps the most striking example of this shift is found when one compares his 1919 illustration for Ben-Zion Raskin's story *The Chicken Who Wanted a Comb* with his famous propaganda poster from the following year, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*. Their practically identical compositional elements are especially noticeable.<sup>56</sup> Influenced by meeting Malevich in Vitebsk, and after adopting a supranational Suprematism, Lissitzky transformed his fairy-tale illustration

<sup>52</sup> Issachar Ber Ryback and Boris Aronson. “Shliakhy ievreiskoho zhyvopysu. Rozdumy myttsia” [The ways of Jewish painting. Thoughts of an artist] *Oifang* (1919): 99–124. The Ukrainian title is the author's translation from Yiddish.

<sup>53</sup> See chapter 6 in: Eric Hobsbawm, *Razlomnoe vremia. Kultura i obshchestvo v XX veke* [Russian translation of *Fractured Times: Culture and Society in the Twentieth Century*], trans. Nikolai Okhotny (Moscow: CORPUS, 2017).

<sup>54</sup> Exod. 20:4–5 (KJV)

<sup>55</sup> Olha Lahutenko, “Mark Epstein,” in *Kultur-Liga*, 38–46.

<sup>56</sup> Kseniia Bilash, “Khudozhniki Kultur-Ligi: kievskii evreiskii avangard na karte mirovogo iskusstva” [The artists of the Culture League: The Kyiv Jewish avant-garde on the map of world art], *Levyi bereg*, June 6, 2018, [https://lb.ua/culture/2018/06/06/399460\\_hudozhniki\\_kulturligi\\_kievskiy.html](https://lb.ua/culture/2018/06/06/399460_hudozhniki_kulturligi_kievskiy.html).



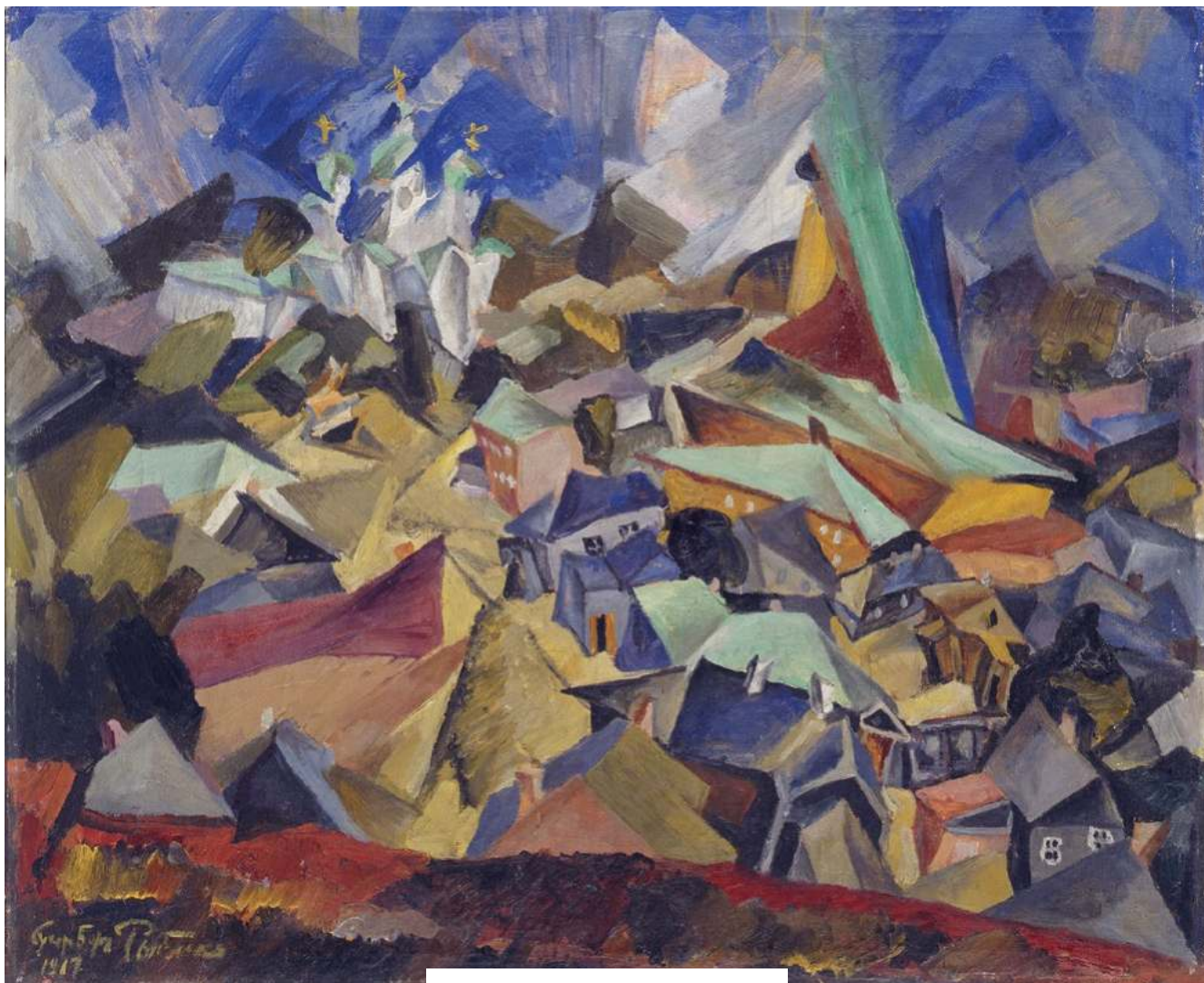
MARK EPSTEIN.  
*FAMILY. CUBIST COMPOSITION.* 1920s.  
INDIA INK, PEN, AND WATERCOLOR. 46.5x32.3 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL ART  
MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



EL LISSITZKY.  
ILLUSTRATION FROM THE BOOK  
*THE CHICKEN WHO WANTED A COMB*. 1919.



EL LISSITZKY.  
*BEAT THE WHITES WITH THE RED WEDGE*. 1919–1920.  
CHROMOLITHOGRAPHY ON PAPER. 53×70 CM.  
THE RUSSIAN STATE LIBRARY, MOSCOW, RUSSIA.



ISSACHAR BER RYBACK.  
CITY. 1917.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 57x70 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.

of an evil tiger into an ideological weapon of Soviet propaganda, communicating with the viewer using elements of non-objective art. As the famous Soviet military march of the same period went, “We are born in order to turn fairy tales into reality.”<sup>57</sup> It was along this envisioned trajectory, from magical fairy tale towards the abstraction of art and ideology, that the Jewish revival of this period followed. Indeed, this was the trajectory of the avant-garde as a whole, seeing the revolution as a way to realize their precious dreams of miraculously transforming the world as they knew it.

<sup>57</sup> This anthem was co-authored by the Jewish poet Pavel German and Jewish composer, Yuli Khait. [T.N.]



# ART AND REVOLUTIONARY PROPAGANDA. THE UKROSTA WINDOWS AND YUGOLEF

Following the failed attempts to create an independent Ukrainian state, the Bolsheviks assumed power, and from 1921 to 1991 Ukraine was part of the communist project. Ukrainian art of the 1920s reflected the late establishment of Soviet power along with the legacy of the failed struggle for independence together. The Bolsheviks' eventual triumph in Ukraine came at the same time as the start of the NEP<sup>58</sup> period in Soviet Russia, with its subsequent liberalization of economic, cultural, and national politics, and of the country in general. The hardest revolutionary stage was past, and little by little, plans could be drawn up to build a new state for the future.

The avant-garde declared that art was dead and contained only the remnants of a bourgeois past. As a result, artists who saw the revolution as the embodiment of their utopian ideals had to completely rethink their approach to art. Art had to become utilitarian; its main purpose was now to serve the needs of a new society. Having survived its own death, art began to merge with the propaganda machine. Artists and members of the avant-garde began to come up with all manner of possible communist celebrations and demonstrations. The 1919 Odesa May Day celebrations were headed by Oleksandra Ekster, who also painted propaganda trains and the propaganda steamship *Pushkin* during the same period. In 1918, Nathan Altman created designs for Uritsky Square in Petrograd<sup>59</sup> to celebrate the first anniversary of the revolution. In Vitebsk, a group of avant-gardists headed by Kazimir Malevich used the Suprematist style as an ideological tool and the basis for new forms of visual propaganda in the urban landscape. Suddenly the fronts of homes, banners, and interiors all spoke the aesthetic language of the avant-garde.<sup>60</sup> A whole new system of art production arose to meet the needs of the victorious proletariat. The avant-garde thus became part of the wider project of "life building."<sup>61</sup>

Amidst huge societal polarization following the Bolsheviks' shaky victory, propaganda became a hugely important focus for the young Soviet government. The Bureau of Ukrainian Printing was set up as early as 1919, and one of its main tasks was the creation of propaganda posters. At the start of 1920, the Bureau was reformed into the Ukrainian department of ROSTA (UkROSTA, a branch of the Russian Telegraph Agency, which merged the functions of a telegraph agency and a propaganda department). From 1919 to 1921, the Moscow bureau of ROSTA began releasing

<sup>58</sup> New Economic Policy. [T.N.]

<sup>59</sup> Now known as Palace Square. [T.N.]

<sup>60</sup> Roman Osminkin, "Politiki rannesovetskogo avangarda: ot 'bespredmetnosti' k 'zhiznestroeniuiu'" [The Politics of the early Soviet avant-garde: from "non-objectivity" to "life-building"], *Vestnik kultury i iskusstv* 4, no. 48 (2016).

<sup>61</sup> Mariia Zalambani, *Iskusstvo v proizvodstve. Avangard i revoliutsiia v sovetskoii Rossii 20-kh godov* [Art in production. The avant-garde and the revolution in Soviet Russia of the 1920s] (Moscow: IMLI RAN, Nasledie, 2003).

*ROSTA windows*—satirical posters that poked fun at opponents of the new government. Vladimir Mayakovsky and Odesan Amshey Nurenberg (among other adherents of this new art form) played an active role in their creation. The posters served as a way to spread political information. Amid a newspaper shortage, they were accessible to the Bolsheviks' main audience: less-educated sections of society who could easily access the posters' visual language and humor. Initially, the ROSTA windows were put up in shop windows, hence the name. The poster department of UkROSTA was headed by 19-year-old Boris Yefimov (Boris Fridliand), a future master of the Russian caricature. By 1920, posters were being distributed in Kharkiv, Kyiv, and Odesa. The Ukrainian windows were substantially different from those made in Moscow. No artists of note took part in their creation; stencils weren't used; and there was a preference for formal posters over a more playful "comic book" style. UkROSTA mainly produced posters for bulletin boards. The Ukrainian "windows" had little impact on the development of Ukrainian fine art, in contrast to the windows' influence in the Russian context. However, the Odesa windows played a large role in the establishment of the Odesan literary school.

Once the Bolsheviks had finally taken control of Odesa, it became an important center for leftist art. The pro-Soviet Bureau of Ukrainian Printing had been operational there since the end of 1918. In February 1920, the day immediately after Soviet power had been established, YugROSTA (SouthROSTA) was set up and began producing YugROSTA windows. Soon after, they were renamed OdUkROSTA (OdesaUkraineROSTA) windows.<sup>62</sup>

A joyful group of young artists and poets gathered around OdUkROSTA, all ardent followers of futurism, which had first put roots down in Odesa at the time the members of Hylaea had been touring. "You think malaria makes me delirious? It happened. In Odessa it happened," Mayakovsky wrote in his cult poem "A Cloud in Trousers."<sup>63</sup> The fleeting love affair that served as the basis for the poet's first mature work occurred during the course of a Cubo-Futurist performance in Odesa at the beginning of 1914. The arrival of the Cubo-Futurists left a lasting impression on the youth of the city. During the heroic peak of futurism, most of YugROSTA's future staff were still teenagers at school. Soon war thundered and the revolution came, but in Odesa Mayakovsky and the ideas of futurism were not forgotten. Thus, when ROSTA windows primarily associated with Mayakovsky arrived, all the young futurists who had not been able to take part in the first wave of futurism came running. Another factor, no less important, was that food rations were given for propaganda work which were worth their weight in gold during those hungry post-revolution years. YugROSTA played host to a lively collective of artists and poets. The brightest lights among them were the future stars of Soviet literature: Valentin Kataev, Yuri Olesha, Ilya Ilf, Eduard Bagritsky, and Semyon Kirsanov. All together around 50 artists worked there, including Yevgenii Oks, and Ilya Ilf's two older brothers: Sandro Fazini and Mikhail Fainzilberg. Another member of this

<sup>62</sup> Alena Yavorskaia, "Shershavym iazykom plakata" [In the rough language of the poster], *Oktiabr*, no.11, (2013).

<sup>63</sup> Vladimir Mayakovsky, "A Cloud in Trousers," trans. George Reavey, in Bengt Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky: A Biography*, trans. Harry D. Watson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).



SRUL FAINZILBERG (SANDRO FAZINI).  
SKETCH OF A DETAIL OF THE MAIN FACADE OF THE ODESA  
OPERA THEATER. *A WORKER AND A PEASANT*. 1920.  
FROM THE ODESA MUSEUM OF REGIONAL HISTORY.



рабочий! Сняв ярмо раба,  
Вся прелесть вольности изведай.  
Трудна и тяжела борьба,  
Зато уже близка победа.  
И ты не уставай в борьбе,  
Идя на штурм капитализма,  
Ведь советует путь тебе  
Священный факел коммунизма.

РАБОЧИЙ! СНЯВ ЯРМО РАБА  
ВСЯ ПРЕЛЕСТЬ ВОЛЬНОСТИ ИЗВЕДАЙ.  
ТРУДНА И ТЯЖЕЛА БОРЬБА,  
ЗА ТО УЖЕ БЛИЗКА ПОБЕДА.

И ТЫ НЕ УСТАВАЙ В БОРЬБЕ,  
ИДЯ НА ШТУРМ КАПИТАЛИЗМА,  
ВЕДЬ СОВЕЩАЕТ ПУТЬ ТЕБЕ  
СВЯЩЕННЫЙ ФАКЕЛ КОММУНИЗМА.

EDUARD BAGRITSKY.  
A POSTER SKETCH. WORKER! HAVING REMOVED THE YOKE,  
BASK IN THE DELIGHT... POEM BY EDUARD BAGRITSKY. 1920.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE ODESA MUSEUM OF  
REGIONAL HISTORY.



SRUL FAIZILBERG (SANDRO FAZINI).  
 SKETCH FOR A POSTER. BATTLE WITH THE WHITES. 1920.  
 FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE ODESA MUSEUM OF REGIONAL HISTORY.



EDUARD BAGRITSKY.  
 SKETCH OF POSTER IN OCTOBER OF 1917. 1920.  
 FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE ODESA  
 MUSEUM OF REGIONAL HISTORY.

circle was Borys Kosarev, who would go on to become a famous artist and set designer, playing an important role in the Kharkiv avant-garde scene of the 1920s.

Among those working at YugROSTA's Department of Visual Propaganda (Izogit) was Viktor Fedorov, a childhood friend of the writer Valentin Kataev. According to Anastasiia Bugreeva,<sup>64</sup> Fedorov was the inspiration for the artist Dima in Kataev's novel *Uzhe napisan Verter* (Werther has already been written), which depicts the bloody events in Odesa after the Bolsheviks seized power. Here is a representative passage from Kataev's novel:

*While he was a diligent artist at Izogit, he wasn't particularly good, more of an amateur. Too much superfluous detail. Too much like the peredvizhniki. By comparison, other artists at Izogit were true masters, astute and modern. Their revolutionary sailors, composed in the spirit of Matisse on huge plywood panels, were erected on Feldman Boulevard and were practically levitating. Black bell-bottoms. Saffron-yellow faces in profile. The ribbons of St. George pinned to their peakless caps fluttering in the breeze. An ultramarine sea with the gray flatirons of battleships, red flags on their masts. It all blended into the scenery of the tree-lined seaside boulevard, which lay opposite the former palace of the governor-general and the former London Hotel.*

*Left march! Left march! Left march!*

*Jars of distemper were being warmed up atop a little cast-iron stove. Thick paint brushes. A piece of cardboard. A coarsely and thickly painted figure of Baron Wrangel in a wool hat and a Circassian coat with a cartridge belt, flying in the sky above the Crimean Mountains. Beneath it ran a little poem:*

*"Wrangel flew through the midnight sky, singing his final song before death. Comrade! Get the Baron in your sight, lest he continue to take flight."*

*Wrangel was still hanging on in Crimea, and he could launch a landing force at any moment.*

*The White Poles were attacking from the west, fresh from giving Trotsky a pounding outside Warsaw. Trotsky carried the world revolution on the tip of his bayonet, although Lenin had suggested the possibility of peaceful coexistence. Piłsudski had already cut off the road to Kyiv, and his forces were somewhere near Uman, near Bila Tserkva, near Kodyma and Birzula. There were even rumors that Vapniarka and Rozdilna had also been captured.*

*Maybe it had been foolish of him to work at Izogit and draw Wrangel?*

*That said, he didn't believe that there would be a new coup. However strange it seemed, romantic notions of the revolution completely overtook him.<sup>65</sup>*

In the early 1920s, the organization YugoLEF (Southern LEF) was established in Odesa. This was under the influence of the Moscow art group LEF (the Left Front of the Arts), in which Vladimir Mayakovsky played an integral part. From 1924 to 1925, the organization published five issues of its eponymous magazine, featuring, among other things, articles on the theory of leftist art. YugoLEF initially focused on the field of

<sup>64</sup> Anastasiia Bugreeva, "'Nastoiashchie мастера' (khudozhniki i poety) odeskogo lugROSTA" ["The real masters': (artists and poets) of the Odesa YugROSTA], *Visnyk Odeskoho istorychno-kraieznavchoho muzeiu*, no.11 (2012): 72–79.

<sup>65</sup> Valentin Kataev, *Uzhe napisan Verter* [Werther has already been written] (Moscow: Eksmo, 2013).

literature; however, their ideas around synthesizing different art forms became very popular. According to the eighteen-year-old poet Semyon Kirsanov, an active member of the group and a protégé of Mayakovsky, there were over 500 members of YugoLEF.<sup>66</sup> However, there are grounds to suppose that Kirsanov's figure could be a poetic exaggeration. Members of YugoLEF helped with revolutionary celebrations, and as part of a propaganda brigade, they traveled through villages and towns reading poems and generally advocating Soviet power and new forms of art. In Odesa, YugoLEF held workshops and organized clubs, a canteen, and a theater. The avant-garde theater production *The Extraordinary Adventures of the Tribe of Nobodies*, staged in the spring of 1925, was the group's swan song. Already by that summer the majority of its members had moved to Moscow or Kharkiv, and the story of YugoLEF essentially came to an end.

## THE ARTISTIC CLIMATE OF THE 1920s

Soviet power gradually became the new normal. By the mid-1920s all opponents of the regime had already fled or perished during the years of the revolution. The remaining members of the intelligentsia were either still enraptured by the new government or had reconciled themselves to the inevitable. In December 1922, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was created. Ukraine formally received the status of an independent state entity, though its western regions were still under the control of foreign powers. In April 1923, the Communist Party announced that *korenizatsiia* (nationalization) would become a central party policy. This allowed for the rapid growth of Ukrainian culture during this period. At first, the Soviet leadership kept its word in regard to the national question, and special attention was given to the promotion of national cultures. This was a way to secure the support of the populations of individual republics, to openly reject the old colonial policies of the Russian Empire along with the dominance of the Russian language, while at the same time eradicating any opposition, such as the remnants of the old regime. This policy was particularly well aligned with the views of certain public and political figures in Ukraine who had been promoting national communist ideas since 1917. As a result, an extensive program of Ukrainization unfolded together with a revival of Ukrainian culture. This would not have been possible without the multitude of patriotically minded Ukrainian communists for whom Ukrainization had long been a sacred mission. Among them was the people's commissar of education from 1924–1927, Oleksander Shumsky, and his successor to the post, Mykola Skrypnyk.

The post-revolution generation of the 1920s believed it was possible to create a modern Ukrainian culture under the aegis of the Bolsheviks' communist project, and that generation would become one of the most prolific and influential in modern art history. Like adding yeast to dough, there would be huge growth in art, literature,

<sup>66</sup> Yevgenii Demenok, "Futuristy v Odesse" [Futurists in Odesa], *Art Ukraine*, October 11, 2013, <https://artukraine.com.ua/a/futuristy-v-odesse>.



ANATOL PETRYTSKY.  
*THE CRIPPLED*. 1924.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 167×194 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.

theater, cinema, and photography in this period. It was an era of intense interaction between different art forms, when all artistic spheres were overtaken by an interest in the avant-garde and all that was modern. However, the spirited 1920s would be followed by tragedy. The Stalinist repressions of the 1930s would take the lives of many cultural figures. In 1959, the literary theorist Yurii Lavrinenko published an anthology in Paris of repressed Ukrainian poets, writers, and playwrights. Upon the recommendation of the Polish writer Jerzy Giedroyc he named the anthology *The Executed Renaissance*,<sup>67</sup> a term that denotes a central martyrology for victims of the Soviet regime.

<sup>67</sup> Yurii Lavrinenko, editor. *Rozstriliane vidrozhennia: Antolohiia 1917–1933: Poeziia — proza — drama — esei* [The Executed Renaissance: An anthology 1917–1933: poetry, prose, drama, essays] (Kyiv: Smoloskyp, 2008).



Since then this term has been used in relation to all discussions and work which focus on how Ukrainian culture flourished during the early years of the USSR. That said, modern researchers think the term “Red renaissance” is more appropriate.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, in a preface to his 1926 volume, which featured a poem entitled “The Call of the Red Renaissance,” Volodymyr Gadzinsky, wrote, “For us the past is just a way to comprehend modernity and the future. It gives us crucial experience and practice in building the great Red Renaissance.”<sup>69</sup> This metaphor more accurately reflects the period of the 1920s when a sincere interest in and passion for Red ideology existed before everything was drowned in blood.

World War I, the revolution, dire poverty, starvation, and the Bolsheviks’ bloody struggle for power cost Ukraine millions of lives and brought untold devastation. That catastrophe echoes through the work of several art pieces dating from the middle of the 1920s. All of them contain the spirit of Austrian modernism and German expressionism. The first example is Anatol Petrytsky’s work *The Crippled* (1924), a gloomy canvas depicting post-war devastation. Widows, orphans, disabled people—the First World War and the following turbulent years had a disastrous effect on the lives of millions. In the mid-1920s the wounds were still fresh. The painting depicts a woman and her sons; one has lost his leg, though we don’t know what fleeting truth he was fighting for when it happened. We will never find out why her second son is blind. In fact, it is not even clear whether it is a family in the painting or a group of crippled people thrown to life’s wayside at the bloody beginning of the 20th century. The painting captures the pain and suffering of a whole generation of people who found themselves caught in the meat grinder of history. The dark brown and grey color palette that Petrytsky uses for the majority of his easel work, including *The Crippled*, is a legacy of his earlier engagement with Cubism. Parallel to his painting work, Petrytsky also made a significant contribution to art of theater, and through the course of his life created hundreds of costume sketches for all manner of performances. In his brilliant theater drawings, he shows a completely different side to his artistic talent: instead of using the darker color palette of his paintings, the sketches are characterized by a riot of color and avant-garde forms. It is hard to imagine that Petrytsky was a costume designer as well as being the painter of *The Crippled*, which was successfully exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1930.

The second example of art echoing the trauma of the revolution and its aftermath is the striking triptych *Life* (1925–1927). Fedir Krychevsky, in a manner typical of the time, conducts a belated dialogue with Gustav Klimt. Krychevsky, who was an active member of the art scene in the 1920s and 30s, generously dilutes elements of the Secession while incorporating a national style characteristic of the 1920s. This decorative and masterful overview of an individual’s life charts a path from young love and raising a family to returning home from war with no legs. At first glance, the

<sup>68</sup> Iryna Troskot, “Iaryna Tsymbal: ‘Psykhologichnyi roman pereduvav masovym zhanram’” [Yaryna Tsymbal: “The psychological novel preceded mass genres”], *LitAktsent*, March 3, 2016, <http://litakcent.com/2016/03/03/jaryna-cymbal-u-1920-h-psyholohichnyj-roman-pereduvav-masovym-zhanram/>.

<sup>69</sup> Volodymyr Gadzinsky, “Zaklyk chervonoho renesansu: [poema]” [The call of the red renaissance: (a poem)] (Moscow: SiM, 1926).

aestheticization of this man's tragedy should cause offense. However, it is precisely the juxtaposition of the Secession's refined artistic language, together with the tragic and eternal subject matter that compensates for the anachronistic reference to Klimt. The painting becomes its own sort of religious icon dedicated to a human existence in which the fatalistic inevitability of suffering and death lurks beneath the beautiful veneer and alluring music of love.

The third example is the painting *For Rule by Soviets!* by Viktor Palmov. He was born in Russia but came into his own after he moved to Kyiv. Before the revolution he participated in the Moscow Cubist scene and during the civil war found himself in far-flung Vladivostok with an old acquaintance from his Cubist days—Davyd Burluk. It was in Vladivostok that the artists became close friends. While in the Far East, Palmov worked as a drawing teacher, created Cubo-Futurist compositions, and also contributed to the magazine *Tvorchestvo* (Creation). The future core of the Moscow LEF group worked at that magazine too: Nikolai Chuzhak, Sergei Tretiakov, and Nikolai Aseev. In the autumn of 1920, Palmov set off with Burluk to Japan to organize a large exhibition of avant-garde artists. The artists quickly found themselves at the center of artistic life in Japan and even managed to influence the development of Japanese futurism.<sup>70</sup> Palmov's and Burluk's paths diverged soon after. The latter left with his family for America, while Palmov spent some time collaborating with the Moscow LEF group before setting off for Burluk's home country: Ukraine.

Palmov spent the remaining years of his life, from 1920 through 1929, in Kyiv. Once there, he left Cubo-Futurism behind for good. The aesthetics and poetry inherent in the work from his Kyiv period have much in common with the art of Marc Chagall. Palmov went on to create his own original theory of "color painting." This theory advocated a form of artistic improvisation, where the artist would impulsively paint color onto a canvas that would in turn reflect their emotional state.<sup>71</sup> It was thanks to this kind of game that the painting *For Rule by Soviets!* (1927) and its rich mass of color was conceived. A revolutionary in a blue shirt, his heart wounded, lies on a blindingly red Bolshevik banner. His lips shine pink but the skin under his eyes is marked by bright blue shadows letting us know that he is in fact dead. He may not be alive but there is no sense of tragedy in the painting. From the perspective of 1927, when the painting was completed, it seems that the revolutionary's struggle wasn't seen as futile.

In Kyiv, Palmov worked as a professor and then went on to become the dean of the painting department of the Kyiv Art Institute (KAI). In 1922, the Ukrainian Academy of Arts was reorganized, becoming the Kyiv Institute of Plastic Arts. Two years after that, the institute was merged with the Kyiv Architectural Institute and became the Kyiv Art Institute.<sup>72</sup> The art historian Ivan Vrona was appointed as the institute's rector.

<sup>70</sup> Vladimir M. Markov, "Russkii sled v Iaponii. David Burluk — otets iaponskogo futurizma" [Russian traces in Japan. Davyd Burluk father of Japanese futurism], *Izvestiia Vostochnogo instituta* (Vladivostok) no. 14 (2007).

<sup>71</sup> Andrii Sydorenko, "Kyivskiy period tvorchoosti Viktora Palmova (1925–1929)" [The Kyiv period of Viktor Palmov's art], *MIST: Mystetstvo, istoriia, suchasnist, teoriia* 11, (Kyiv) (2015): 205.

<sup>72</sup> The Institute kept this name up to the collapse of the USSR, though in 1992 it was renamed the Academy of Visual Arts and Architecture.



FEDIR KRYCHEVSKY.  
TRIPTYCH *LIFE*. 1925–1927. TEMPERA ON CANVAS.  
"LOVE," THE LEFT SECTION. 177×85 CM.  
"FAMILY," THE CENTRAL SECTION. 148.5×133.5 CM.  
"RETURN," THE RIGHT SECTION. 178×89 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL ART  
MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



VIKTOR PALMOV.  
*FOR RULE BY SOVIETS!* 1927.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 177×142 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.

During the years between 1924 and 1930, the Institute flourished. In Russia at that time the avant-garde's romance with the revolution was waning fast. The new government did not really need utopian artists with their ideas about the death of bourgeois culture and the transformation of mass society through *zaum* ("transreason" or "beyondsense") art. Indeed, *zaum* was unintelligible and far removed from the experience of wider society. The members of the avant-garde who had supported the revolution during its romantic Dadaist phase found themselves out of sync with the rapidly emerging proletarian state. In Ukraine, the opposite was true. The 1920s marked a high point in the inspiration and activity of the artistic community. The significant efforts of Ivan Vrona and Mykola Skrypnyk, that fiery advocate for Ukrainization, helped the Kyiv Art Institute become an important center for progressive artistic practice. It became a crossroads of ideas where passions raged and artistic arguments between members of the avant-garde and more conservative artists were taken very seriously.

The KAI became an innovative school which adhered to the ideals of the Bauhaus movement, although the Institute's program did not include design or architecture, which were both integral to the success of the German school. A cinema-photography-theater department opened at the Institute. This department was to be led for two years by Vladimir Tatlin, the avant-gardist who had moved to Kyiv from Russia. He would also take charge of the faculty of formal-technical disciplines (*fortekh*). The star-studded staff of the Institute was composed of artists who hailed from a wide range of positions and viewpoints: Fedir and Vasyl Krychevsky, Mykhailo Boichuk, Vadym Meller, Oleksander Bohomazov, and Viktor Palmov. Visiting teachers included Pavel Golubiatnikov, Nikolai Triaskin, Vladimir Tatlin, and, of course, Kazimir Malevich.

In the summer of 1927, after his first arrest, Malevich went to Kyiv. Immediately after his arrival he was invited by Vrona and Skrypnyk to teach at the Kyiv Art Institute.<sup>73</sup> The world-renowned Suprematist was actually born in Kyiv and he had fond memories of his Ukrainian youth.<sup>74</sup> It is also possible the formation of Suprematism was considerably influenced by Malevich's acquaintance with Ukrainian folk art.<sup>75</sup> When he was young, Malevich had spent a year studying at Mykola Murashko's Kyiv drawing school under the tutelage of Mykola Pymonenko. At the end of the 1920s, the artist spent a lot of time in Ukraine. He taught at the KAI from 1928 to 1930 and published articles

<sup>73</sup> Tetyana Filevska, "Kyivskiy kaleidoskop Kazymyry Malevycha" [The Kyiv kaleidoscope of Kazimir Malevich], in *Kazymyr Malevych. Kyivskiy period 1928–1930*, ed. Tetyana Filevska (Kyiv: Rodovid, 2016), 14.

<sup>74</sup> Dmytro Horbachov, ed., "*Vin ta ia byly ukraintsi.*" *Malevych ta Ukraina* ["He and I were Ukrainians": Malevich and Ukraine] (Kyiv: SIM studiia, 2006), 21.

<sup>75</sup> Malevich writes in his autobiography about his first encounter with Ukrainian folk art, "Villages, as I said earlier, were practicing art (I didn't know that word at the time). Rather, things were made there which I liked a great deal. These things contained the essence of my feeling for the peasants. I watched with great excitement how the peasants made paintings, and I helped them spread clay on the floor of their huts and make patterns on their stove. The peasant women depicted roosters, foals, and flowers with a good likeness. The paints were all prepared there and then from different clays and blue dye. I tried to recreate them on my own stove at home but it just didn't work" (From Kazimir S. Malevich, "Glavy iz avtobiografii khudozhnika" [Chapters from the autobiography of an artist], in *Malevich o sebe. Sovremenniki o Maleviche: V 2-kh t.* [Malevich on himself. His contemporaries on Malevich: 2 vols.], ed. I. A. Vakar and T. N. Mikhenko [Moscow: RA, 2004]). For more about the connection between Ukrainian folk art and Malevich's suprematism, see: Dmytro Horbachov, "Kievskii treugolnik Malevicha" [Malevich's Kyiv triangle], in *Poeziia i zhivopis. Sbornik trudov pamiati N. I. Khardzhieva* (Moscow: lazyki russkoi kultury, 2000), 203.

about a new theory of art in the Kharkiv magazine *Nova generatsiia* (New generation). In 1930, he held an exhibition of his work at the Kyiv Picture Gallery; this would be the last exhibition of his work in his lifetime.

The period of innovation at the KAI came to an abrupt end in 1930. Vrona was fired from his post as rector along with some of the brightest teachers: Malevich, Fedir Krychevsky, Boichuk, and Lev Kramarenko. Storm clouds began to gather above the so-called “formalists,” as these pioneering artists came to be labeled.

The atmosphere of that time is captured well in the memoirs of Vasyl Kasiian, the graphic artist who studied in Prague and, upon his return to Soviet Ukraine in 1927, immediately took up a professorial post at the KAI. Kasiian writes,

*From the very beginning of my time at the Kyiv Art Institute, the arguments between artists over the future direction of art were descending into a fierce ideological battle. The realists railed against the formalist camp, which was headed by its apostle professor Kazimir Malevich and his followers who included V. Tatlin, Ye. Sahaidachny, V. Palmov, O. Bohomazov among others. Malevich had his own special office at the Institute, and I once asked him what it was for. “To cure students of realism,” he answered. Malevich’s view—that art could only be elevated through its own distortion—was flawed in its conception. This was eloquently illustrated by Malevich’s exhibition at the Kyiv Picture Gallery. The exhibition provoked a highly negative response from the public and the gallery’s director, the artist Kumpan, was given a severe reprimand.<sup>76</sup>*

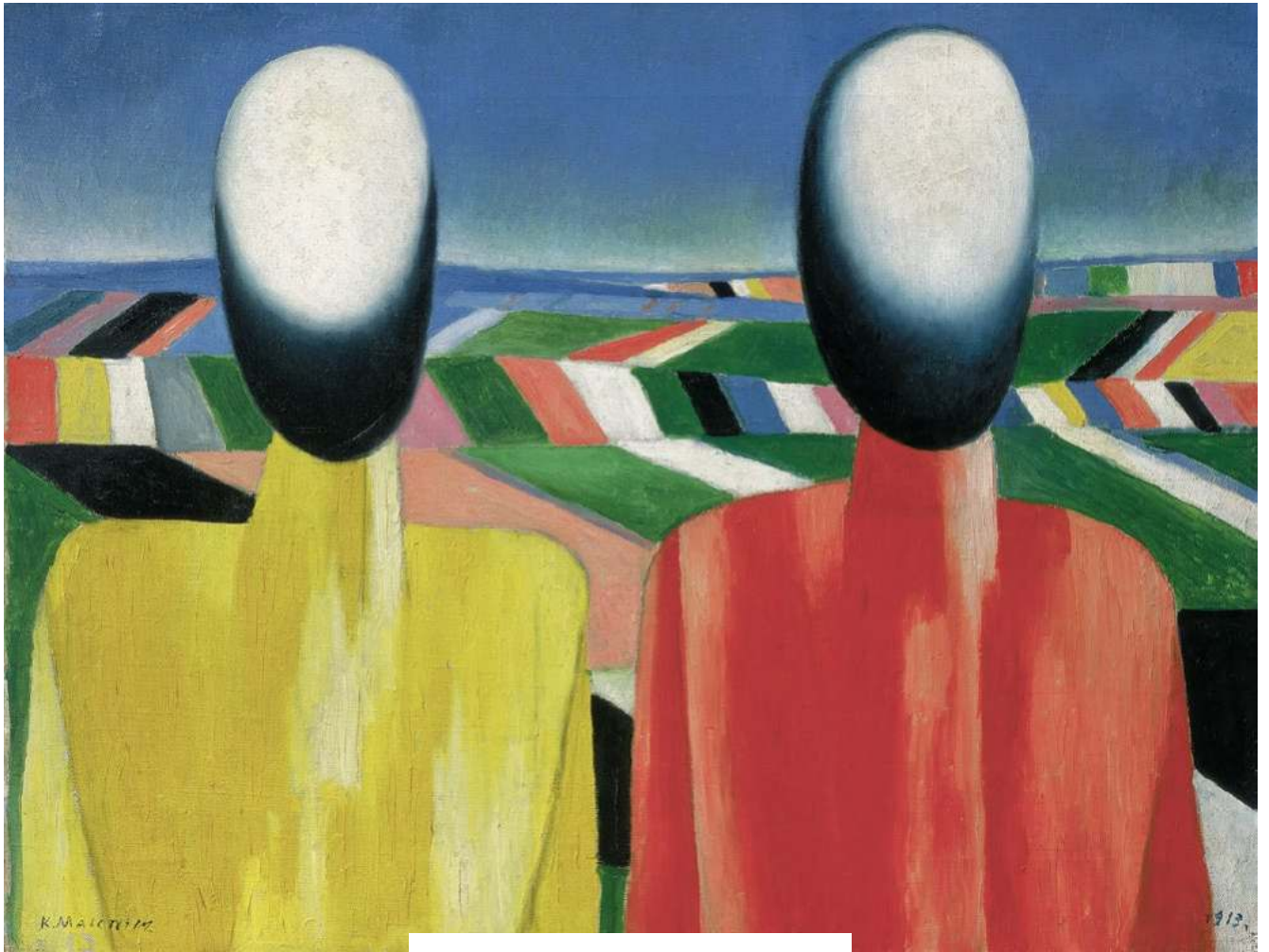
Malevich wasn’t just criticized for his Kyiv exhibition. In the autumn of 1930, he was arrested for the second time and sent to a Leningrad jail for several months. Following his release, the artist began work on his *Second Peasant Cycle*, which would become a central series of paintings in his later work. Malevich traveled frequently to Ukraine at this time, bearing witness to its color-saturated landscapes and how they were entangled in the forced collectivization, which began in 1928 and ended in the tragedy of the Stalin regime’s famine-genocide, the Holodomor. Researchers see these trips to Ukraine reflected in the disturbing aesthetic of the *Second Peasant Cycle*.<sup>77</sup>

## WAR OF THE UNIONS

By the end of the 1920s, the ideological struggle that Kasiian wrote of had become particularly ferocious. As if sensing the approaching end of artistic freedom, the artists of this period fought a painful, toxic, and, at the same time senseless, war over the future direction of art, which in turn drained all energy out of the artistic community. At the heart of the conflict were all manner of unions, groups, and associations, all behaving like political parties involved in a bitter ideological war. Unfortunately, our current understanding of the nuances of this conflict is hindered by several factors.

<sup>76</sup> Vasyl Kasiian, *Z moho zhyttia. Spohady. Kn. 3: 1927–1941* [From my life. Memories. Book 3: 1927–1941], 349, kept by the artist’s family. Quoted in Horbachov, *Malevych ta Ukraina*, 418.

<sup>77</sup> Jean-Claude Marcadé, *Malevych*, trans. Vasyl Starko (Kyiv, Rodovid, 2013).



KAZIMIR MALEVICH.  
PEASANTS. C. 1930.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 53x70 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE STATE  
RUSSIAN MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA.

The first problem is that all the organizations, in accordance with the latest proletarian fashion of the time, had complicated abbreviations as their names. The obsession that totalitarian regimes have for abbreviations is an interesting topic that is well illustrated by George Orwell's *1984*. In Orwell's dystopia, language, which has been mutilated by the party ideology, is called Newspeak. It is characterized by an abundance of abbreviations and acronyms. The obsession for abbreviating was highly prevalent in the early USSR. The old tsarist names of state bodies and organs of power were removed, and the young Soviet society began searching for new ways to label the institutions of the young worker-peasant state. This resulted in names that were long and cumbersome, which in turn made it necessary, in the spirit of telegraph messages and their economy of language, to ruthlessly shorten them. Thus, a whole universe of Soviet abbreviations was born, which sounded much like the poetry of the avant-garde.

The futurist *zaum*, with its origins in avant-garde poetry, appeared to have been resurrected in the form of a new totalitarian language. That said, in the 1920s people were not yet sick of the ubiquitous capital letters that covered fences, banners, and billboards. As a matter of fact, they appeared very modern. In line with the spirit and language of the time, artists used these strange incantations to name their groups and unions.

Anyone trying to get to the heart of the in-fighting between so many talented artists will also encounter a second problem: all of them, no matter their position, communicated in Newspeak. Their arguments were heavy with ornate phrases and ideological mantras, which were typical of the rhetoric used at early Soviet Bolshevik meetings and party congresses. And like those early Bolsheviks, their discussions also revolved around the idea of creating an ideal proletarian art for the future, one best suited to the needs of the new state and its citizens. When answering the question of what that new art should look like, each group of artists used the same set of half-empty phrases. Here, the devil is in the details, and one must carefully sift through long manifestos and nasty accusations of heresy. The Kyiv Art Institute was the battlefield where most of the conflict's participants worked. It was therefore inevitable that students would soon be drawn into the war between professors.

Once the intricate abbreviations and the lacework of para-Marxist language is navigated, there is a fairly clear demarcation between the different groups of artists and their ambitious leaders. The first group appeared in 1923 under the name the Association of Artists of Red Ukraine (AARU).<sup>78</sup> This group shared a lot in common with its Russian prototype: the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AARR). The latter emerged in 1922 and actively recruited members in Ukraine, the result of a change in the USSR's cultural climate. The members of the Russian pro-government group were proponents of strict realism and considered all avant-garde experiments "harmful contrivances." On the other hand, the Ukrainian AARU insisted on the synthesis of the local realist school with elements of the newest painting movements such as impressionism, modernism, and symbolism. The core of this group was made up of many artists who were trained in the Russian academic school, including Fedir Krychevsky, Karpo Trokhymenko, Ivan Yizhakevych, and Yukhym Mykhailiv. Roughly speaking, they toed the official realist line while incorporating soft hints of modernism. An ideal example of this is Krychevsky's triptych *Life*, which was Secessionist in form, while socially minded and politically correct in content.

The second, and most powerful, organization at that time was the Association of Revolutionary Art of Ukraine (ARMU), which was founded in 1925. From the very beginning, this association contained a wide range of artists: Mykhailo Boichuk, Vasyl Sedliar, Oleksander Bohomazov, Vasyl Yermilov, Viktor Palmov, Oleksander Khvostenko-Khvostov, and Vladimir Tatlin. The ARMU declared it was as inclusive as possible. At first glance, all its members were acting in the name of "all that is good, against all that is bad." In 1926, the ARMU's theoretician Ivan Vrona declared that the Association's

<sup>78</sup> Uliana Melnykova, "Mystetski obiednannia v Ukraini 1920-kh—pochatku 1930-kh rokiv (teoretychni zasady ta tvorchak praktyka)" [Art associations in Ukraine in the 1920s and early 1930s (theoretical principles and creative practice)] (PhD dissertation, Kharkiv State Academy of Design and Arts, 2007), 16.



main goal was to accommodate as wide a spectrum of artists as possible and to consolidate the strength of artists in Ukraine. He wished to create a platform that could exist above ideological differences and host all working artists, whether they be from the extreme right or the radical left.<sup>79</sup> The Association's goals completely coincided with the position of Vrona himself when he worked as the rector at the KAI. He invited the best professors to the institution, regardless of any differences in viewpoint. Amid the wider context in which everybody was pitted against everybody else, this call for consolidation clearly seemed constructive. However, at the same time, the delicate phrasing masked a hidden truth. While all forms of artistic experience were demonstratively welcomed, the ARMU was in reality comprised of artistic innovators oriented towards Europe. They had little appreciation for the provincial narrow-mindedness of proletarian realism and its blind hatred of all forms of experimentation, masked by the inherited authority of the *peredvizhniki*.<sup>80</sup>

How can the existence of art, that vestige of the old bourgeois order, be justified in a socialist state ruled by the proletariat? How can art serve the needs of that class? Should it use its authority to draw in society in its wake or should it instead cede to the tastes of the masses? Members of the ARMU were in favor of the first option and, though they did not know it, they were signing their death warrant with this choice. While appealing to the sacred figure of speech of the day — “the needs of the people” — the theoreticians at the ARMU insisted on parity between fine art, decorative art, and utilitarian art. Over time, the Boichukists, with their bent for monumentalism and the primacy of a national style in art, took control of the ARMU. This led to conflict, and as a result, an entire group of avant-garde artists led by Viktor Palmov split from the ARMU in 1927.

It was in this way that the Association of Contemporary Artists of Ukraine (ACAU) was born. Its members included Anatol Petrytsky, Pavel Golubiatnikov, Mikhail Sharonov, and other artists. Their position was understood by their contemporaries as embodying a “refined Eurocentrism.”<sup>81</sup> In 1929, another group of young artists split from the ARMU, creating their own organization: the Association of Young Artists of Ukraine (AYAU). It was in 1928, however, that the most symbolic artistic rupture occurred when a group of artists hailing from the LEF movement formed the Zhovten (October) group.<sup>82</sup> The declaration that Zhovten's members signed in 1930 was a clear signal of decisive change in the country's political landscape. Members of this new

<sup>79</sup> Ivan Vrona, *Mystetstvo revoliutsii i ARMU* [Art of the revolution and the ARMU] (Kyiv: Ts. B. ARMU, 1926), 6.

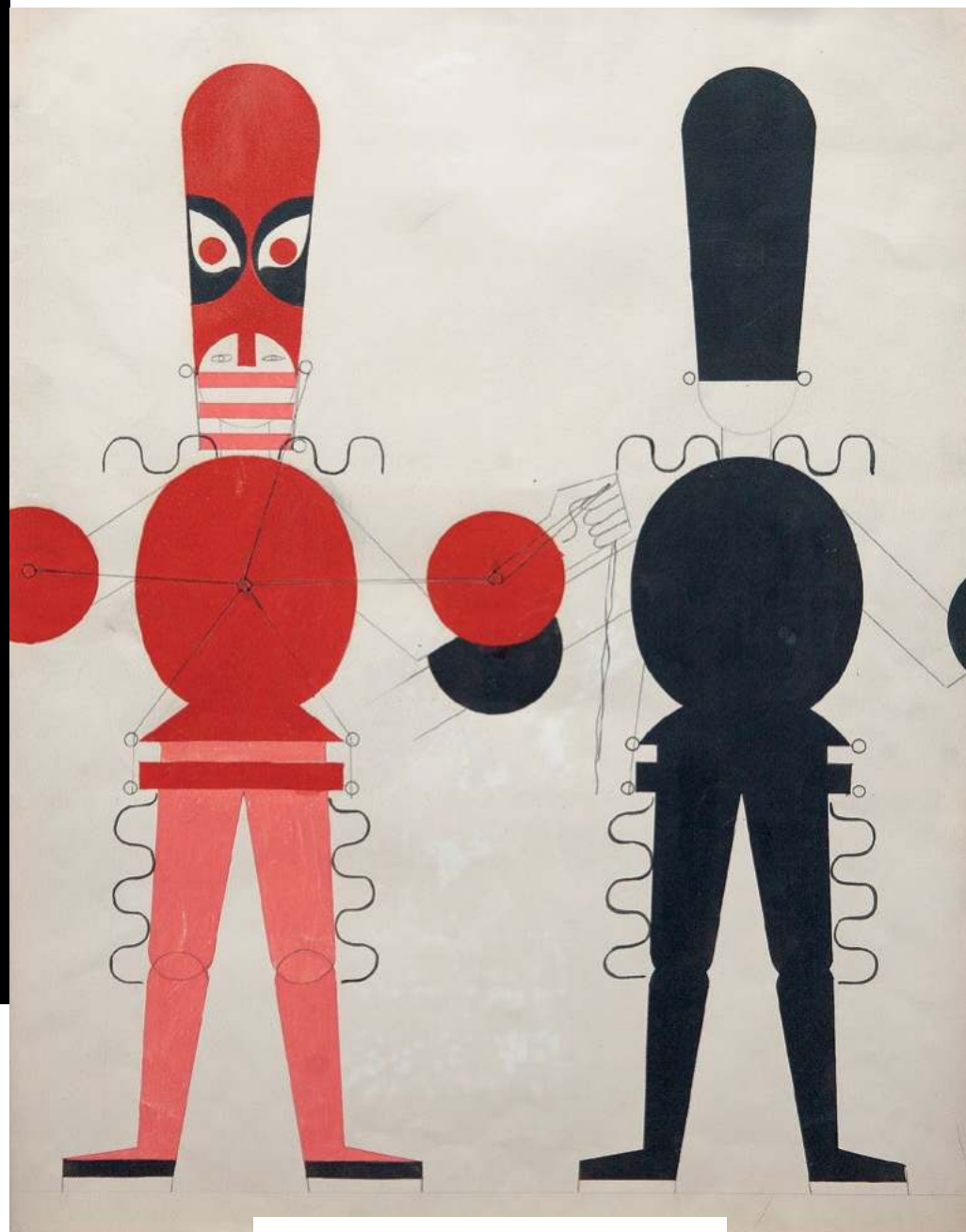
<sup>80</sup> Andrii Puchkov, “Vybrani mistisia z biohrafii Ivana Ivanovycha Vrony” [Selected sections of the biography of Ivan Ivanovych Vrona], *Suchasni problemy doslidzhennia, restavratsii ta zberezhennia kulturnoi spadshchyny* 6 (2009): 321–368.

<sup>81</sup> Ivan Vrona, who remained in the ARMU after the formation of the ACAU, wrote, “What this group shared with the AARU was a preference for easel-based art intended for a narrow circle of viewers who were already well acquainted with the cultural movements of the time. This was an art predominantly for the upper echelons of the intelligentsia. It followed the newest bourgeois trends and the work of the Russian and French schools.” Quoted in Dmitrii Severiukhin and Oleg Leikind, *Zolotoi vek khudozhestvennykh obedinenii v Rossii i SSSR (1820–1932)* [The golden age of artistic associations in Russia and the USSR (1820–1932)] (St. Petersburg, 1992), 17.

<sup>82</sup> A copy of the Moscow Oktiabr (October) collective, which was founded in 1928.



ANATOL PETRYTSKY.  
COSTUME SKETCHES FOR *ECCENTRIC DANCES* BY KASIAN  
GOLEIZOVSKY. MOSCOW CHAMBER BALLET. 1922.  
WATERCOLOR, GOUACHE, AND INDIA INK ON PAPER. 62x50 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF THEATER, MUSIC,  
AND CINEMA ARTS OF UKRAINE.



ANATOL PETRYTSKY.  
COSTUME SKETCH *EXECUTIONER* IN PUCCINI'S  
*TURANDOT*. STATE OPERA, KHARKIV, 1928.  
WATERCOLOR, GOUACHE, INDIA INK, AND  
APPLIQUE ON PAPER. 72x54 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF  
THEATER, MUSIC, AND CINEMA ARTS OF UKRAINE.

movement included Vasyl Kasiian, Mykola Rokytsky, Vasyl Ovchynnykov, and Zinovii Tolkachev. The language used by these dissenters again included the worn adage proclaiming the necessity of finally creating a true and ultimately correct proletarian art. This group also declared that they would work collectively to create art, and made other declarations that were barely distinguishable from the general pathos of the period. Most important here were not aesthetic principles, but rather their calls to exterminate class enemies. Accusations denouncing the other associations as “bourgeois” or “petit bourgeois” read as particularly sinister amidst the increasingly oppressive atmosphere of terror at that time.

This artistic war and the never-ending sprouting of different artistic associations was forced to an end on 23 April 1932 when the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR adopted the motion “On the Restructuring of Literary and Artistic Organizations.”<sup>83</sup> Stalin and the party initiated the creation of a centralized system of creative unions to do away with the growing atomization of artistic groups. At first, attention was focused on writers and artists. Their furious rivalry over who could create a correct and singular proletarian art was becoming more of a burden to a regime that was increasingly embracing totalitarianism. In taking advantage of the sectarian nature of the cultural community, those in power could adopt the role of peaceful arbiter, pulling apart the scrapping school children. In the years that followed, this paternal concern would become progressively pathological. Soon it would be only the party that decided what kind of art the people needed. It was just a couple of years before all avant-garde movements were crushed and socialist realism declared the only correct art form.

## OLEKSANDER BOHOMAZOV. FROM CUBO-FUTURISM TO *THE WOODCUTTERS*

Was there ever a specifically Ukrainian avant-garde movement? Many world-renowned members of the avant-garde who had a connection to Ukraine only spent a part of their life there, while also belonging to a broader cultural background. Moreover, following the post-Soviet avalanche of “forgotten” names and histories, virtually all “non-Soviet” artists, including the mildest modernists, were labeled as avant-garde. This only served to further blur the perception of a Ukrainian avant-garde.

Renato Poggioli was one of the first theorists of the avant-garde, and he understood it not as an aesthetic phenomenon but rather as an ideological one. Among the characteristics of the avant-garde, Poggioli identified nihilism (a rejection of all

<sup>83</sup> Politburo of the CC of the CPSU, “O perestroike literaturno-khudozhestvennykh organizatsii” [On the restructuring of literary and artistic organizations], addendum no.3 to par. 21 of the Politburo protocol no.97, April 23, 1932 (Moscow: Partiinoe stroitelstvo, 1932) no.9, 62.

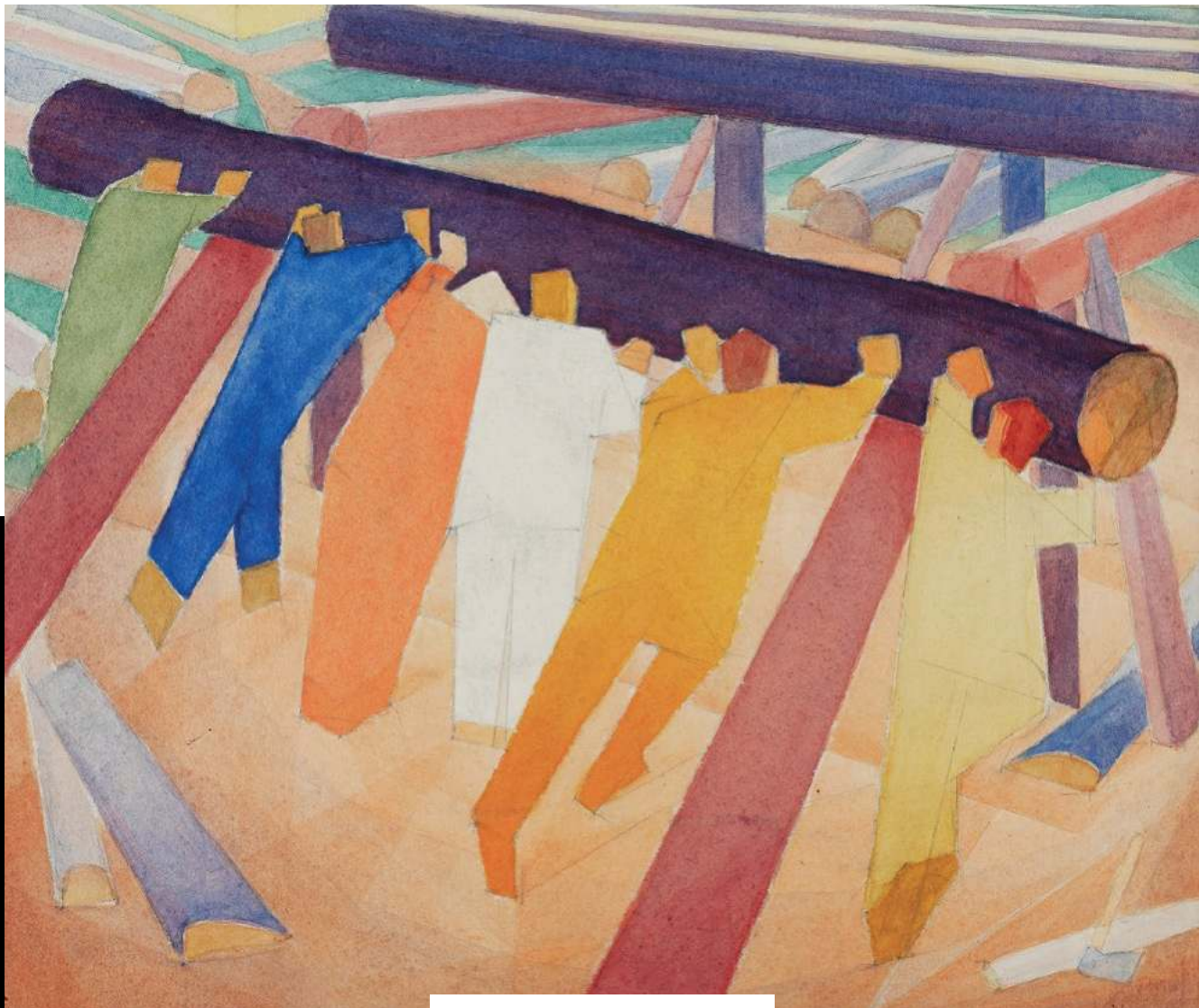
**а. комашка**

**за**

**пролетарську  
гегемонію  
в  
просторовому  
мистецтві**

**всеукраїнське  
художнє  
видавництво  
ахчу**

ANTON KOMASHKA.  
COVER OF THE BOOK *FOR PROLETARIAN  
HEGEMONY IN SPATIAL ART*.  
KHARKIV, THE ALL-UKRAINIAN ART  
PUBLISHER OF ARMU, 1931. 72 PAGES.  
FROM THE YAROSLAV MUDRY NATIONAL  
LIBRARY OF UKRAINE.



OLEKSANDER BOHOMAZOV.  
*ROLLING TIMBER*. 1928–1929.  
WATERCOLOR ON PAPER. 25×30 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF  
JAMES BUTTERWICK.

aspects of the past), activism (the wish to change society by whatever means available), agonism (the spirit of opposition to different movements), and futurism (a fascination with technological progress). Poggioli highlights the difference between the avant-garde and specific “schools” of the past, which were built on the principle of passing knowledge from teacher to pupil, a knowledge of technique, as well as hierarchy. In contrast, the avant-garde is not a “school” but rather a “movement,” a group working collectively towards a particular goal.<sup>84</sup> Delineating a distinct Ukrainian avant-garde becomes difficult when trying to find the specific characteristics of Ukrainian art, not to mention the tendency of post-Soviet scholars to further blur its definition. The art of each of its representatives, with the odd exception, carries a distinctly individual character.

Perhaps the avant-garde Kyivan Oleksander Bohomazov and the Kharkiv constructivist Vasyl Yermilov are the best examples of first-class artists whose life and work were intricately tied to Ukraine. They both worked alone. In the late 1970s, in an essay about the international exhibition of a completely different generation of Ukrainian artists, when detailing the Ukrainian non-conformist tradition Susan Richards, the British art critic from the London Institute for Contemporary Art wrote, “These icons of individualism carry a message for the West.”<sup>85</sup> According to her, the individualism of Ukrainian artists was a protest against the collectivist ideals that ruled Soviet society. And yet, the pull towards individualism is characteristic of the Ukrainian cultural community in general. The majority of the scene’s leading lights was not particularly concerned with cultivating a like-minded circle of people around them. Both Bohomazov and Yermilov, who shared few similarities, were so involved in the artistic process that they had no interest in creating a “movement” around them and instead focused on the development of their own individual avant-garde projects.

For a long time Oleksander Bohomazov stood in the shadows of his friends and fellow students from the Kyiv Art Institute, such as Oleksandra Ekster and Alexander Archipenko. However, in the last few decades, researchers have come to understand that he was an important figure in the international avant-garde. Bohomazov became an accomplished Cubo-Futurist even before World War I, taking part in and helping to organize exhibitions. He also wrote “Painting and Its Elements” (1914), an original essay dedicated to the theory of art. In this text he tracks the birth of artistic form through the movement of the primary artistic element — the dot.<sup>86</sup> In its level of reflection and deep interest in rethinking artistic form, it stands alongside such texts as Kazimir Malevich’s *Suprematism: 34 Drawings* (Vitebsk, 1920) and Wassily Kandinsky’s *Point and Line to Plane* (1918–19), though chronologically it precedes both.

After the war and revolution, Bohomazov played a leading role in designing communist celebrations and worked as an artist for the 12th Bolshevik army, which was then

<sup>84</sup> Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 20–26.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Lesia Smyrna, *Stolittia nonkonformizmu v ukrainskomu vizualnomu mystetstvi* [A century of nonconformism in Ukrainian visual art] (Kyiv: Modern Art Research Institute, 2017), 165.

<sup>86</sup> Oleksander Bohomazov, “Zhyvopys ta elementy” [Painting and its elements], comp. by Tetiana Popova and Sashko Popov (Kyiv: Zadumlyvyi straus, 1996).

involved in heavy fighting in Southern and Western Ukraine. He designed the facade of a propaganda train and, together with Ekster and Vadym Meller, he decorated the merchant ship *Pushkin*.<sup>87</sup> As mentioned, the majority of Cubo-Futurists and members of the avant-garde supported the Bolsheviks. They saw their policies as embodying the utopian ideals held by radical art movements wishing to completely remodel society. After peace was declared, Bohomazov did a lot of teaching and worked in the Kyiv Art Institute from 1922 to 1930. However, he did not escape unscathed from the revolutionary upheaval and his time in the Bolshevik army. He died of tuberculosis in 1930.

In his final years, Bohomazov's art took a new direction. In the early 1920s, he moved away from Cubo-Futurism and began to study the dimensional possibilities of color. During the same period, Viktor Palmov and Kazimir Malevich would also become interested in the psychophysiological impact that blocks of localized color and their interplay could have on the viewer. But it was Bohomazov who would become an unrivaled virtuoso in this field. At the end of the 1920s, he worked on a cycle dedicated to the theme of labor. In 1927, Bohomazov began a series of sketches and drawings of laborers who were sawing timber. He worked on these sketches in his beloved Boiarka, the same small town where he wrote "Painting and Its Elements" and where he worked as a school teacher during the hungry years of the revolution. He only managed to bring a few of his sketches to completion. *Saw Sharpening* (1927) and *The Woodcutters* (1929) were perhaps conceived as part of triptych, with a third part, *Rolling Timber*, remaining as a sketch. *The Scavengers* (1929) was another separate completed piece of work from this series. The heart of the series lies in the bright flowing swathes and harmonies of color that provoke an intense emotional reaction in the viewer. His paintings are illuminated with a warm and even light that feels unearthly, a light that turns mundane drawings of laborers' lives into tight clusters of metaphysical tension. Bohomazov's whirlwind of color produces its own form of music that can't help but provide the viewer with a sense of palpable satisfaction.

<sup>87</sup> Eduard Dymshyts, "Ukrainskyi Pikasso—Oleksandr Bohomazov" [Oleksander Bohomazov, Ukrainian Picasso], *Biblioteka ukrainskoho mystetstva*, 1991, <http://uartlib.org/ukrayinskiy-pikasso-oleksandr-bogomazov/>.

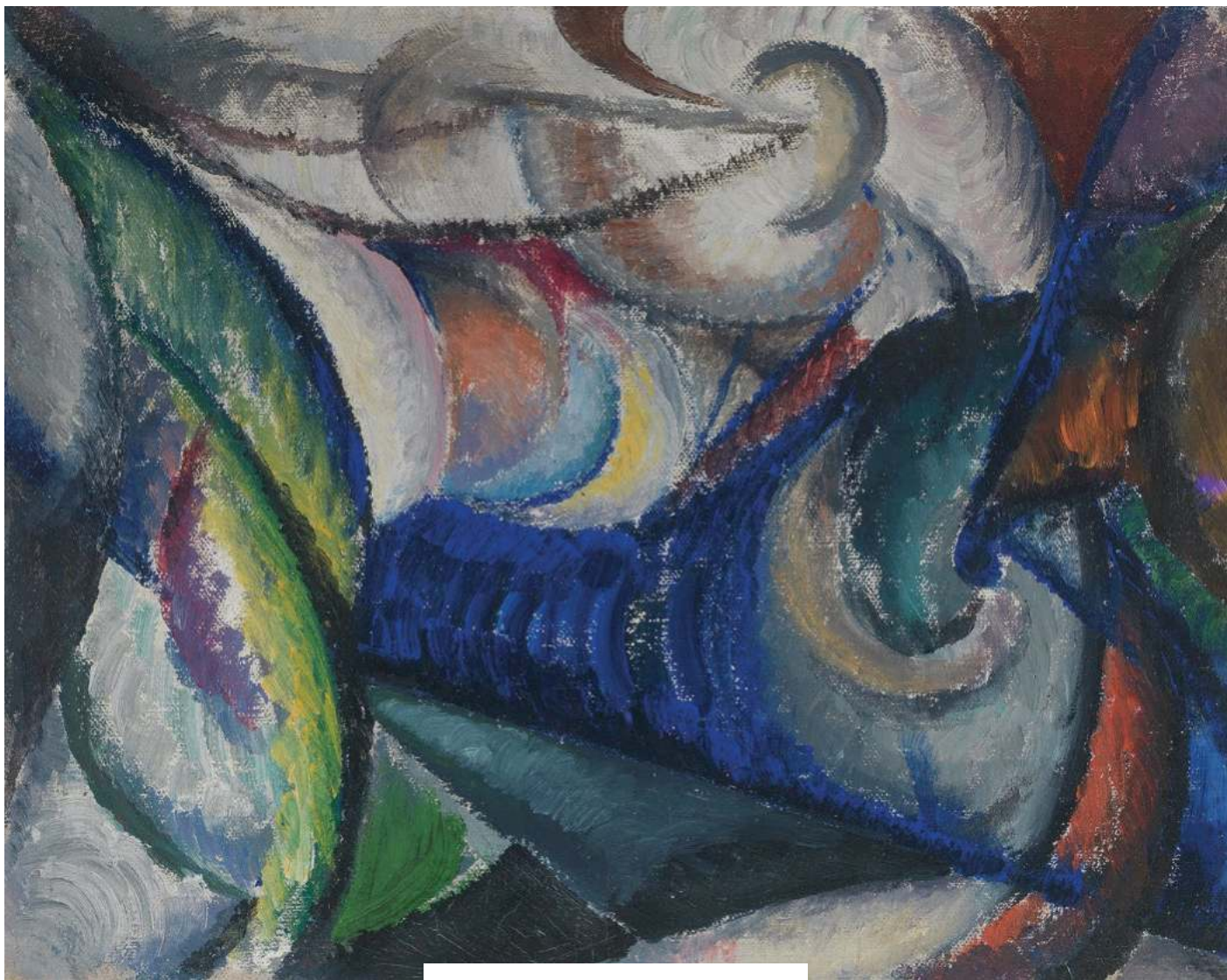




OLEKSANDER BOHOMAZOV.  
SAW SHARPENING. 1927.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 138×155 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



OLEKSANDER BOHOMAZOV.  
WOMAN SITTING AND READING (WANDA). 1913.  
CHARCOAL ON PAPER. 21.5×18 CM.  
FROM A PRIVATE EUROPEAN COLLECTION.



OLEKSANDER BOHOMAZOV.  
*LANDSCAPE WITH A TRAIN*. 1914–1915.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 33×41 CM.  
FROM A PRIVATE EUROPEAN COLLECTION.

# VASYL YERMILOV AND THE CONSTRUCTIVIST AVANT-GARDE IN KHARKIV

The constructivist artist Vasyl Yermilov had a significant influence on the development of Ukrainian graphic design and the visual arts in general. In the 1920s, the phrases “Yermilov typeface” and “Yermilov school” were synonymous with the highest artistic quality.<sup>88</sup> In 1912 Yermilov studied in the same class as Vladimir Mayakovsky and Davyd Burluk at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture. Though he studied in Moscow, a large part of his life would be spent in Kharkiv. The peak of the artist’s career in the 1920s would coincide with Kharkiv’s own cultural heyday.

In 1919, Kharkiv became the capital of Soviet Ukraine. At that time, the fight for independence was going on in Kyiv. Even after the Soviets took power, the nationally minded Ukrainian elite were still too powerful. Therefore, Kharkiv became the center of Bolshevik Ukraine until 1934. The city enjoyed a period of intense construction, during which time culture, art, and industrial and graphic design saw significant growth. Unlike exhausted Kyiv, where the arrival of the Bolsheviks marked the symbolic punishment of its lowered status and the evisceration of any hope for independence, the city of Kharkiv was in the ascendancy following the revolution. The shared sense of inspiration and energy at this time even managed to soften the nasty infighting among artists’ groups.

Architectural constructivism stands as a symbol of this heroic period in Kharkiv’s history. A leading example of this is the Derzhprom building (State Industry Building). This huge constructivist building was the first Soviet skyscraper, built between 1925 and 1928 by the architects Sergei Serafimov, Samuil Kravets, and Mark Felger. As with Arkadii Mordvinov’s post office, Derzhprom was a present to Kharkiv from Ukraine’s “elder brother”<sup>89</sup> as part of the project of creating a new colonial capital. A specifically Ukrainian constructivist architectural school never developed though, and new buildings that were built later in Kyiv often leaned more towards an Art Deco style.

Back in Kharkiv, even writers became interested in constructivism. In 1925, Vasyl Yermilov joined the Ukrainian constructivist group *Avanhard* (Avant-garde). The group was headed by the modernist writer Valerian Polishchuk, who was interested in the synthesis of different art forms. Yermilov quickly became one of the leaders of the group. He designed the cover and layout for the journal *Avanhard*, which was published from 1928 until 1929 in Kharkiv. In 1927, Yermilov also developed links with the now Boichukist-led ARMU. He was a multi-faceted artist; even from a young age, after completing various arts and crafts workshops, he was drawn to the applied arts,

<sup>88</sup> Aleksandr Parnis, “Ukrainskii lov priekhal v Moskvu” [Ukrainian Job came to Moscow], *Novaia gazeta* (Moscow) July 12 2012, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2012/06/13/50139-ukrainskiy-iov-priehal-v-moskvu>.

<sup>89</sup> During the Soviet period, Russia was often framed as the kindly “elder brother” in relation to the smaller republics within the USSR. [T.N.]

working on book design, street furniture, and his own typeface. He also worked on posters and industrial graphic design, creating sketches of packaging, labels, and stamps for light and heavy manufacturing. Yermilov's collages and reliefs are of particular interest. He found a unique laconic language, the sparsity of which was a tribute to both the post-revolutionary asceticism of the time and, of course, to Constructivism. For Yermilov (as for many other artists of that period, like Tatlin, for example), the composition of his creations was very important. He would use just a few adjacent colors and two to three geometrical elements while including a host of additional and carefully processed materials, such as wood, metal, cloth, and screws, among other things. The aesthetic of Yermilov's completed reliefs separated him from the Russian representatives of Constructivism, who rejected any form of easel-based work. Yermilov's excellent sense of style and composition in conjunction with his ability to process different types of material mean that Yermilov's work now comprises one of the brightest pages in the history of Ukrainian art. The best original example of Yermilov's Constructivist *gesamtkunstwerk*<sup>90</sup> was the creation of the USSR's first Palace of the Pioneers and Little Octobrists in Kharkiv (1934–35).

A complex fate awaited this accomplished member of the avant-garde. His persecution began at the end of 1929 when three articles by Valerian Polishchuk and two Boichukist artists from the ARMU, Vasyl Sedliar and Bernard Kratko, on Yermilov's art were published in an issue of *Avanhard*. In one of the texts, Polishchuk underlined Yermilov's proximity to the Boichukists and then went on to chart the genealogy of his Constructivist views. He wrote, "Yermilov's work represents the highest example of the beauty inherent in the skillful and efficient synthesis of different artistic elements and a logically constructed layout, supported by a wide range of artistic methods. After all, the beauty of efficiency is the rallying cry of our time."<sup>91</sup> Having just recently returned from traveling around Europe with Boichuk, Sedliar, in his own adulatory article, finished with the naive declaration: "I congratulate Yermilov and sincerely wish for him to travel abroad."<sup>92</sup> In just a few years it was precisely the Boichukists' international travel that became the formal reason for their eradication.

In a way that was uncharacteristic of Constructivism in general, *Avanhard* introduced a sense of humor, disruption, and eroticism into the movement. Even questions of organizing working conditions gained another layer of meaning at the hands of the Constructivists. In addition, modern music was of great interest to artists and those working in the cultural sphere; and the third issue of the journal, devoted to music, caused quite a scandal. It featured a jazz etude by Yulii Meitus, which, in and of itself prompted a strong reaction from the public who began attacking jazz and the fox-trot, seeing them as symbols of "bourgeois decadence." No less aggravating was the affected poetry of *Avanhard*'s own sex symbol, Raisa Troianker. The issue opened with her erotic poetry and its allusions to the past in which a future female avant-garde artist, whose husband is an animal tamer, is forced to put her head into the jaws of

<sup>90</sup> A work of art that strives to use as many forms of art as possible in its completion. [T.N.]

<sup>91</sup> Vasylii Sontsvit, "Khudozhnyk industriialnykh rytmiv" [An artist of industrial rhythms], *Avanhard* (Kharkiv) no. 3 (1929): 155.

<sup>92</sup> Vasyl Sedliar, "Maister Vasyl Yermilov" [Master Vasyl Yermilov], *Avanhard* (Kharkiv) no. 3 (1929): 157.

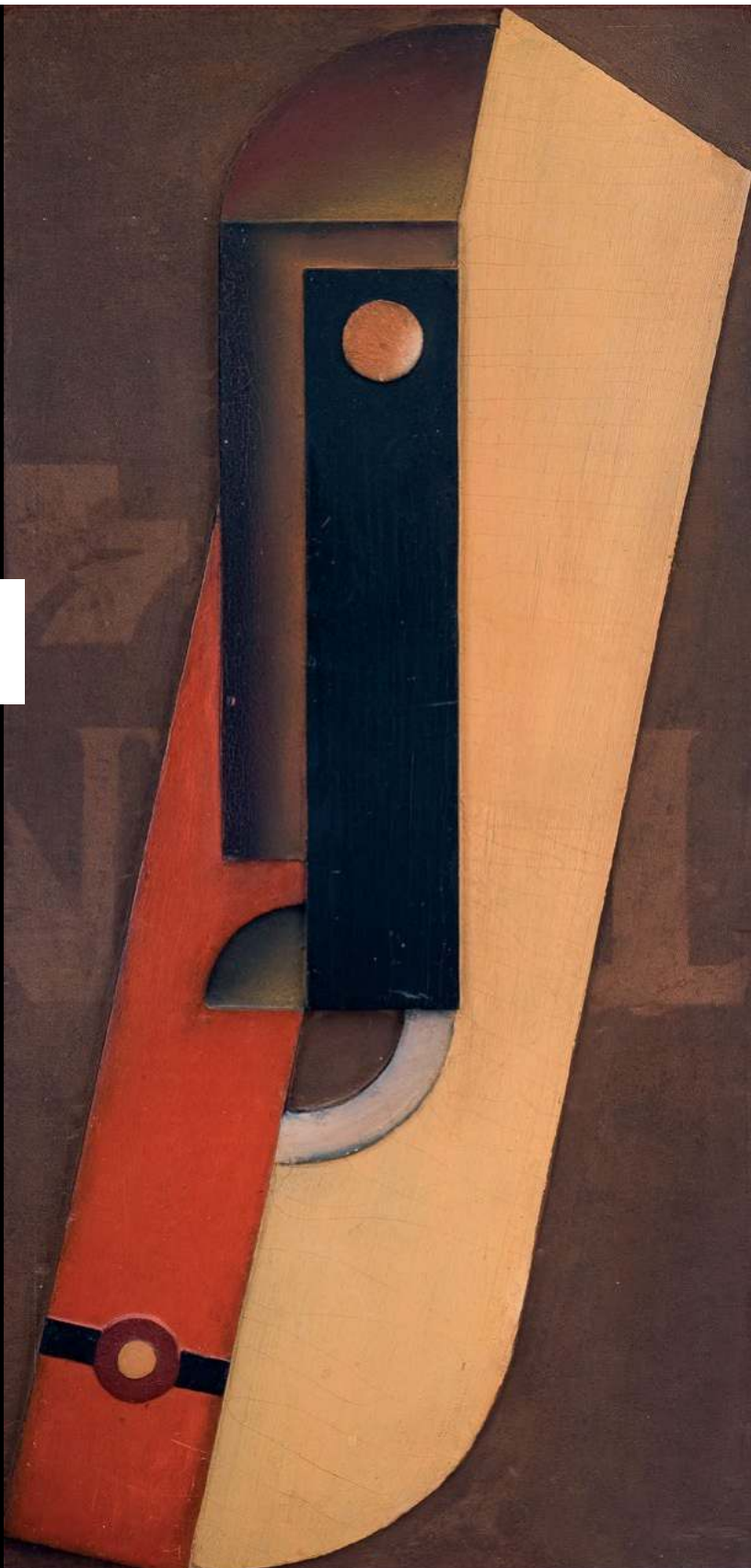


POSTCARD, PRINTED IN THE USSR. 1953.  
DERZHPROM (GOSPROM) BUILDING ON  
DZERZHINSKY SQUARE, KHARKIV, UKRAINE.



VASYL YERMILOV.  
A MOCK-UP OF THE AVANHARD  
JOURNAL COVER.  
1929. GOUACHE AND INDIA INK  
ON PAPER. 30.5×22.9 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF  
THE NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF  
UKRAINE.

VASYL YERMILOV.  
*HARLEQUIN*. 1924.  
OIL AND GRIT ON WOOD. 76x36 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF  
MYSTETSKYI ARSENAL.



a tiger during a circus performance. All of this “decadence,” together with the general frivolity and contrarian nature of the journal, stoked the imagination of its foes. Polishchuk’s provocative description of “a bed for love” that Yermilov was allegedly constructing only added further fuel to the fire:

*When constructively rearranging his flat, the artist Vasyl Yermilov began to fight with his wife’s feather bed, trying all the while to turn the bedroom into a sleeping car akin to a luxurious train carriage. Besides, when considering the unsuitability of the TseRabCo-Op<sup>93</sup> bed for copulation V. Yermilov managed to put together a cheap, comfortable and beautiful workbench-bed that would allow him to fulfill those life-giving urges of the human organism. The advice of his wife helped the artist in this regard. Thus, we pronounce our refrain: All hail cleanliness and openness, all hail the healthy functioning of the human body, even in public! Long live the public juicy kiss of the naked female breast!<sup>94</sup>*

The prudish Soviet state could not allow such behavior, not even from the distinguished “Homer of the revolution.”<sup>95</sup> Following a large public meeting of proletarian students who protested against Polishchuk and his team’s pornographic content, the journal was shut down. For a long time Yermilov received abuse thanks to “a bed for love” as well as for other articles in the disgraced journal. However, it wasn’t until the end of the 1930s that the real persecution began and figures in the Ukrainian art scene suffered a wave of repression. As a result, the rest of the artist’s life was spent in poverty and obscurity. That said, he survived to see a thaw in the country’s cultural climate, and in 1962 Yermilov had his first solo exhibition in Kharkiv for several decades. In 1968, his work was included in the final book of the monumental six-tome *A History of Ukrainian Art* edited by the former futurist Mykola Bazhan. Still, Yermilov never received the recognition or respect that he deserved in his lifetime. In his final years, though, he became a connecting thread between the Ukrainian avant-garde and Kharkiv’s unofficial art scene at the end of the 1950s and into the 1960s.

## THE PANFUTURISTS, MYKHAIL SEMENKO, AND NOVA GENERATSIIA

The art of Mykhail Semenko, together with the varied work of the Ukrainian panfuturists, straddled the intersection between literature and art and formed one of the central pillars of the Ukrainian avant-garde: “For us, destruction is not some perversion or footnote of art, but actually the final stage in its development. For us, what is referred

<sup>93</sup> *TserabCo-Op* stands for the Central Workers Cooperative. During the NEP period it was these cooperatives that produced the majority of consumer goods.

<sup>94</sup> “Mystetskyi vinehret” [Artistic salad], *Avanhard* (Kharkiv) no. 3 (1929): 180.

<sup>95</sup> This was what the literary critic Volodymyr Koriak called Valerian Polishchuk in his book *Six and Six*. Quoted in Yaryna Tsymbal, “Zlet i padinnia ‘Avanhardu’” [The Rise and Fall of *Avanhard*], *Ukrainskyi tyzhden*, no. 30 (August 7, 2016): 40–43.



to as art is an object to be liquidated, though we do this through our actions and not our words.” Thus run the first lines of the anthology *Semafor u maibutnie* (Semaphore into the future, 1922).<sup>96</sup> In the same year, analogous panfuturist ideas were outlined in the bilingual newspaper *Katafalk mystetstva* (Art’s hearse). In his book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, scholar Peter Bürger wrote the famous maxim that the avant-garde was a critique of art using the tools of art itself.<sup>97</sup> If the above-mentioned criteria of Renato Poggioli are also considered, then according to all formal criteria, the artistic activity of Mykhail Semenko and the panfuturists represents the most coherent Ukrainian avant-garde project of the 1920s. At the beginning of the decade, futurist members of the organization Aspanfut (Association of panfuturists) also gathered around Semenko. The association lasted until 1924 and its followers included Geo Shkurupii, Yulian Shpol, Mykola Bazhan, Oleksa Slisarenko, and others. The make-up of the panfuturists changed at different stages in time. In the middle of the 1920s, for example, many went their separate ways to join the host of different organizations that were sprouting up in that period. Even Shkurupii went and rashly joined the rival literary association Vaplite,<sup>98</sup> an act for which he later publicly apologized. But the core of the movement remained unchanged and existed into the 1930s with Semenko at its head, forming the beating heart of the central artistic phenomenon of the era — the journal *Nova generatsiia*.

Even back in his Cubo-Futurist period, Semenko maintained a burning hatred for narrow-minded provincialism, and much of his mature work would also be spent criticizing these features of contemporary Ukrainian culture. An important characteristic of Ukrainian panfuturists was that while they retained their ultra-left viewpoint, they didn’t position themselves in relation to Moscow, but rather in relation to the European cultural scene. They translated their work into German, campaigned for Ukrainian to be written in the Latin alphabet, and published news bulletins covering the international art scene.

The covers and layout of all panfuturist publications were completed in the most progressive avant-garde style of the time. Indeed, the panfuturists had been running their own printing house Golshtorm (Gulf stream) since the time that *Semafor u maibutnie* and *Katafalk mystetstva* were published. The avant-gardist Nina Genke-Meller, Oleksandra Ekster’s close ally and Vadym Meller’s wife, became its head artist. From an artistic point of view, Semenko’s “poetry painting” is of particular interest. These graphic poems simultaneously make reference to the Cubo-Futurists’ avant-garde experiments, Apollinaire’s calligrams, and the old tradition of Ukrainian baroque visual

<sup>96</sup> A part of the anthology was printed with Ukrainian transliterated into the Latin alphabet as a type of propaganda. “Semafor u majbutne. Aparat konstrukciji metamystetctva” [Semaphore into the future. A system of constructing a meta-art], *Semafor u maibutnie* (1922): 1.

<sup>97</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>98</sup> Vaplite — *Vilna akademiia proletarskoi literatury*, Free Academy of Proletarian Literature. [T.N.]



MYKHAIL SEMENKO.  
THE VISUAL KABLEPOEMA ZA OKEAN  
(CABLEPOEM ACROSS THE OCEAN). 1920–1921.  
PRESENTED WITH THE PROJECT 1914–2014.  
THE CENTENARY OF UKRAINIAN FUTURISM.

<p>3   <b>А</b>ляска океанія <b>К</b> затремтить вібрацією радіохвиля!</p>	<p><b>ЗВОДЬТЕ ПОВСТАННЯ СТЯГ!</b></p>
<p><b>З</b>емля з каменю міста <b>О</b> стукає світом пульс!</p>	<p><b>УВАГА!</b> б'ється хвиля смакеним прибором одбійайте хвилю на оспал! (бідний есеніус без темпераменту між рухомих крижаних чр.) арушніца наварування людських мас. бутице лава стиле</p>
<p><b>І</b>ндія обів'ємо <b>М</b> дротом дим!</p>	<p>ростопленим есеніусом. ала Франциска коладний гістусер споволо страшике леминичним внпрім. наліце приманки роліном нагине еспона як устриця. похоне криця нікя і ніч неотти васгоде гошну міст.</p>
<p><b>Я</b>понія всі еребуси світу <b>У</b> станції нам!</p>	<p><b>СЛУХАЙТЕ!</b> пророчесья вілю наварування мрія з цінночі екорить людина світ. здрігують долини і гравіня хроби від золотих бурунів прабою. обриси вомих суходолі то дуина людська. бігунона кола спинають поверхні моцій. підземними порами словучаться материяи.</p>
<p><b>Н</b>а останній скелі кіліманджаро червоний стяг!</p>	<p>—</p>
<p><b>НІАГАРА</b></p>	<p><b>КИЇВ</b></p>

Михайль Семенко, Погодомалкристо.

„Каблепома“. Картина № 3.

<p><b>ПРОЛЕТАРІ УСІХ КРАЇН ЄДНАЙТЕСЯ!</b></p>	<p>8 <b>М</b>лукає клич з континенту на континент!</p>
<p><b>ЕПОХА.</b> арушоло ні агару гавилою шпелітою лаюю роаіліась світом і наліліна поверхля землі. ростамовуєтос на новім грунті! внї, расіанні вкочіуть на землі. •</p>	<p><b>А</b>хай живе червоний океан!</p>
<p>Na monblan! Na kordil'ery! Barykady na andaql! Tytanyk revol'uciji Gollstromyt! Atlantyku zemnyq okeaniv! Tegnykam Imperatyvnyj dekret: 1925 I Radio-tram I ZEML'A — — MARS abo semenko—idiot pl'us Armija revol'ucioneriv I krov. —</p>	<p><b>ШТУРМ</b></p>
<p><b>БУЕНОС-АЙРЕС</b></p>	<p><b>И</b>СЛУХАЙТЕ <b>ХИ</b> <b>ЕКВАТОР</b> <b>НИ</b></p>
<p><b>НАФТА</b></p>	<p><b>НАФТА</b></p>
<p><b>АНГЛІЯ</b></p>	<p><b>АНГ</b>ЧІКАГО <b>ЛІЯ</b>ПОНІЯ</p>

Михайль Семенко, Погодомалкристо.

„Каблепома“. Картина № 8.

poetry,<sup>99</sup> all of which anticipated the conceptual experiments of artists from the second half of the 20th century. Back when Semenko published a few of his graphic poems in *Katafalk mystetstva*, he was developing the idea that it was precisely through “poetry painting” that a new meta-art of the future could be born, made possible once the ritualistic avant-garde execution of the art of the past had taken place.

In the middle of the 1920s, Semenko moved to Odesa to work at a film studio. He began writing screenplays for film and began canvassing his friends to take up the newest art form: cinema. At this time, the Ukrainian avant-garde underwent a period of intense growth. From 1922 until 1930, the most important organization in the history of Ukrainian art was in operation: the All-Ukrainian Photo-Cinema Administration (VUFKU). Many artists and writers, including Semenko, worked in collaboration with VUFKU. Indeed, it was at VUFKU that the world-famous film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) by Dziga Vertov was born. In 1930, VUFKU released another film that would go down in history: *Spring* by Mikhail Kaufman, Vertov’s brother and the cameraman on *Man with a Movie Camera*. Among the many directors who worked at the VUFKU were the likes of Les Kurbas, Ivan Kavalieridze, and the most important Ukrainian avant-garde filmmaker of all, Oleksander Dovzhenko. Dovzhenko’s *Earth*, released in 1930, is an inarguable classic of Ukrainian art and of the global cinematic avant-garde movement as a whole. The assistant to the cameraman who filmed *Earth* was the Kharkiv artist and screenwriter Borys Kosarev, who started out working at the Odesa YugROSTA. His documentary shots from the filming are some of the best-preserved examples of photography from the 1920s.

Many cultural figures of that time became enraptured by the magic of cinema. However, Semenko maintained his love for the printed word, and at the end of 1927 *Nova generatsiia* was born in Kharkiv. This wasn’t just a journal but a community of free-thinking intellectuals advocating the synthesis of different art forms. *Nova generatsiia* managed to stay afloat for three whole years until December 1930. Earlier, in 1927, Semenko published the book *Zustrich na perekhresnii stantsii* (*A Meeting at the Crossroad Station* [2020]), which told the story of an imagined rendezvous between the leader of the Ukrainian futurists and his closest allies—Geo Shkurupii and Mykola Bazhan. Vladimir Tatlin designed the layout of the book. During this period, another young new writer appeared on the horizon: Oleksa Vlyzko. In 1930, Oleksa’s brother Oleksander produced high-quality avant-garde covers for his books *Zhyvu, pratsiuu* (*I live, I work*), *Poizdy idut na Berlin* (*Trains go to Berlin*), and *Hoch Deutschland* (*High Germany*).<sup>100</sup>

Anatol Petrytsky and Vadym Meller also joined forces with *Nova generatsiia*. Meller was working as a set designer for Les Kurbas’s theater, which had moved to Kharkiv in 1926. At the same time, the preeminent Meller also worked as the first art editor for

<sup>99</sup> In particular, the graphic poetry of the panfuturists echoes the poetry of the Kyivan Mohyla College-educated theologian and poet Simeon Polotsky, the decorative poetry from Ivan Velychkovsky’s 17th-century *Mleko folio*, and the applied art of the students of the Kyivan Mohyla Academy at the beginning of the 19th century. See: Vitalii Mitchenko, *Estetyka ukrainskoho rukopysnoho shryftu* [Aesthetics of Ukrainian calligraphy] (Kyiv: Hramota, 2007), 21–23.

<sup>100</sup> Myroslava M. Mudrak, “*Nova generatsiia*” i mystetskyi modernizm v Ukraini [Nova generatsiia and artistic modernism in Ukraine] (Kyiv: Rodovid, 2018), 88–89.



OLEKSANDER VLYZKO.  
COVER OF OLEKSA VLYZKO'S BOOK *HOCH DEUTSCHLAND!*  
KHARKIV-KYIV, DVU (THE STATE PUBLISHING HOUSE OF  
UKRAINE), 1930. 76 PAGES. PRESENTED WITH THE PROJECT  
1914–2014. THE CENTENARY OF UKRAINIAN FUTURISM.



OLEKSANDER VLYZKO.  
COVER FOR OLEKSA VLYZKO'S BOOK *ZHYVU, PRATSIUU*  
(I LIVE, I WORK). KHARKIV-KYIV, DVU (THE STATE  
PUBLISHING HOUSE OF UKRAINE), 1930. 198 PAGES.  
PRESENTED WITH THE PROJECT 1914–2014. THE  
CENTENARY OF UKRAINIAN FUTURISM.

*Nova generatsiia*. The journal's editorial team was increasingly interested in the new forms of media that were appearing at that time, and it was up to Meller to make decisions on photomontages and other related challenges. In May 1928, he hired the photographer Dan Sotnyk. In 1929 Sotnyk, along with other panfuturists, set off to document the development of industrial centers in Donbas and Transcaucasia. He published his photos in *Nova generatsiia*. Sotnyk's work underwent a gradual evolution from expressionism to a simple and sparse Constructivism.<sup>101</sup> *Nova generatsiia* also published work by international and Ukrainian photographers, experimental work by students from the KAI, as well as frames out of VUFKU's avant-garde films. The magazine became a center for sharing and disseminating new artistic media, as well as for the synthesized art of the future.

Kazimir Malevich also had articles published in *Nova generatsiia*. From the end of the 1910s, Mykhail Semenko became involved with Suprematism and even wrote two "superpoems," which, along with Malevich's work, framed a conditional non-objectivity through a variety of angles. By the summer of 1930 *Nova generatsiia* had published 12 of Malevich's articles. Most of them were based on lectures that the artist gave at the State Institute of Artistic Culture, the Institute of the History of Art, and also at the KAI.<sup>102</sup>

The main rival of *Nova generatsiia* and the panfuturists was Valerian Polishchuk and his *Avanhard* magazine. Amidst the heated and sarcastic polemics exchanged by the two journals, it appears that neither side noticed the danger looming on the horizon. The ascendant Stalinist regime had little need for either Eurocentric leftist panfuturists or Ukrainian Constructivists. *Nova generatsiia* began to be persecuted precisely for what it had so vociferously fought against for so long: regionalism and for being overly highbrow. In December 1930, the journal closed its doors, a year after *Avanhard*. Semenko attempted to become a socialist-realist artist, but Stalin's Terror was already beginning. In the end, the Terror claimed both Valerian Polishchuk and Mykhail Semenko; the former opponents and leaders of the Ukrainian avant-garde ended up as victims of the repressions. It also claimed the lives of Geo Shkurupii, Oleksa Vlyzko, and many other figures from the cultural scene of the 1920s.

## MYKHAILO BOICHUK AND HIS CIRCLE. THE BEGINNING OF THE PURGES

Mykhailo Boichuk was a central figure in Ukrainian art. He studied in Vienna, Krakow, and Munich. Then in 1907, under the patronage of Andrei Sheptytsky, he moved from

<sup>101</sup> As *Nova generatsiia* scholar Myroslava M. Mudrak wrote, "As a matter of fact Dan Sotnyk was to *Nova generatsiia* what Aleksandr Rodchenko was to LEF and Novyi LEF, what Theo van Doesburg was to De Stijl, and what László Moholy-Nagy was to Bauhaus." Ibid, 291.

<sup>102</sup> Filevska, "Kyivskyi kaleidoskop," 15.

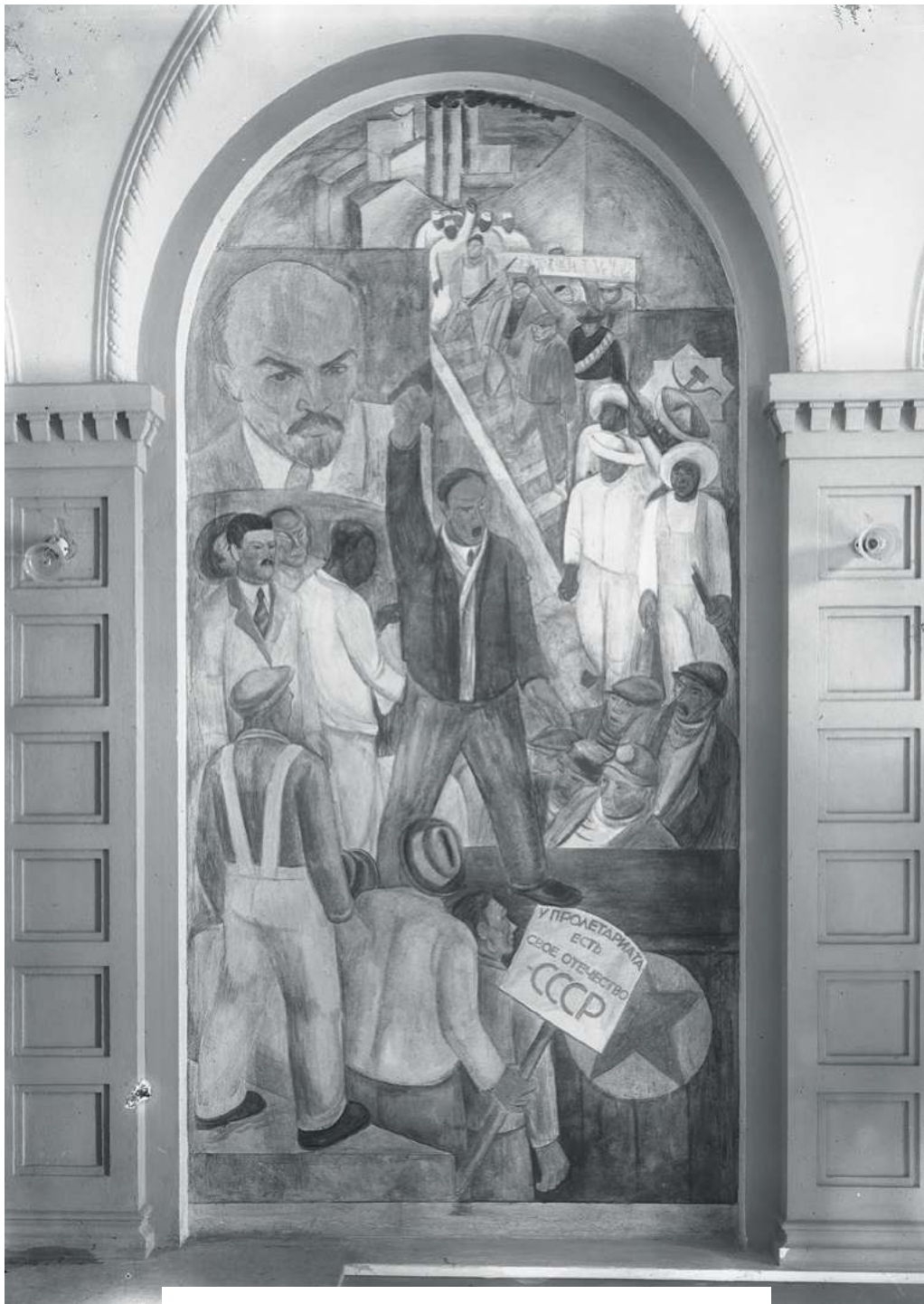
Lviv to Paris.<sup>103</sup> In Paris, Boichuk immersed himself in the artistic process and visited Paul Ranson's academy, where he became interested in monumentalist art. At that time, Western modernism was searching for a new language, borrowing from non-European artistic traditions and folk art. While trying to find a way to apply this strategy in a Ukrainian context, Boichuk found an alternative direction in the Byzantine tradition, the art of Kyivan Rus, and Ukrainian folk painting. Another of Boichuk's passions was the proto-Renaissance and the artists Cimabue and Giotto.

Boichuk was a totalitarian leader and, in a sense, the "Socrates" of Ukrainian art. He wasn't a prolific artist and a lot of his art was destroyed in the times that followed. The majority of what remains lacks much artistic depth or quality. That said, Boichuk was unique in his ability to create ideas, to gather a circle of like-minded artists around him and to give direction to their work. Even in Paris Boichuk established a Ukrainian-Polish circle that had its own fair share of drama and intrigue. Boichuk's sweetheart, the Polish aristocrat Zofia Segno, was forced by her brother to leave Paris and marry another. Subsequently Boichuk took another artist, Zofia Nalepińska, as his fiancée. Boichuk's circle also included Mykola Kasperovych from Chernihiv, Zofia Nalepińska's friend Zofia Baudouin de Courtenay, Helena Schramm, and Yanina Levakovskaia. At this time, Boichuk was advocating collective authorship like in the old icon-painting workshops. In 1910 at the *Société des Artistes Indépendants* (Society of Independent Artists), eighteen works of art were shown by Boichuk, Segno, and Kasperovych, all of which were signed with the words "Rénovation Byzantine" (Byzantine Revival). The neo-Byzantines were met with criticism — Guillaume Apollinaire wrote about the group's work.<sup>104</sup> However, the synthesis of the prevalent artistic tendencies in European art at the beginning of the 20th century combined with an archaic ecclesiastical monumentalism was to become Boichuk's calling card.

The years following the revolution, the 1920s in particular, comprised the next stage in Boichuk's artistic career and the "second calling" of his circle. During this time, Boichuk went on to co-found the Ukrainian Academy of Arts and young artists couldn't help but gravitate to his workshops in monumentalist art. Over time, a circle of talented artists formed around him who would each contribute a great deal to the art scene of the 1920s. They included Vasyl Sedliar, Oksana Pavlenko, Ivan Padalka, Antonina Ivanova, Kostiantyn Yeleva, Onufrii Biziukov, and Zofia Nalepińska-Boichuk. The abundance of female artists on this list is impressive, especially amidst the prevailing patriarchy of the Ukrainian art scene at that time. Every one of them was an artist of the first order. All the artists in this circle were original in their own right, having a distinctive and personal artistic language while also leaving a bright legacy for future generations. This brings the suitability of using the umbrella term "Boichukism" into question, since it downplays the role of individual artists, as well as implying a cult of personality. All the same, the term is still used today. Both Mykhailo Boichuk's

<sup>103</sup> Liudmyla Sokoliuk, "Shkola ukrainskoho monumentalizmu Mykhaila Boichuka" [Mykhailo Boichuk's Ukrainian school of monumentalism], in *Boichukizm. Proekt velykoho styliu. Kataloh vystavky* (Kyiv: Mystetskyi Arsenal, 2018), 13.

<sup>104</sup> Yaroslav Kravchenko, "'Paryzki sympatii' Mykhaila Boichuka" [The "Parisian sympathies" of Mykhailo Boichuk], *Den* (Kyiv) October 30, 2015.



A FRAGMENT OF A PAINTING IN THE ASSEMBLY HALL OF THE M. KOTSIUBYNSKY PRESS HOUSE IN ODESA (NOW THE YURI OLESHA CHILDREN'S THEATER, 48A HRETSKA STREET) COMPLETED BY A GROUP OF ARTISTS FROM THE ODESA POLYTECHNIC COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS: M. PAVLIUK, YA. TIMOFIEV, I. PASTERNAK, O. SERIAKOVA, V. VOLIANSKA, H. DOVZHENKO, I. GURVICH. 1930.  
PHOTO MADE FROM A GLASS NEGATIVE.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



charisma and the rejection of artistic egocentrism proved too powerful. The Boichukists worked a lot in decorative and applied arts. In 1923, Sedliar became the director of the Mezhyhirya Ceramic Technical College where Pavlenko also worked. This institution played an important role in the development of applied arts in the 1920s and became an important center for artists from the Boichukist circle.<sup>105</sup>

Upon the arrival of Soviet power, Mykhailo Boichuk set off in a rather controversial direction. He attempted to place the artistic language of religious art at the services of the nascent machine of monumentalist communist propaganda. Boichuk and his school made large-scale frescos and panels showing scenes from the life of the new Soviet person. From 1919 until 1935, the artists worked on paintings in the Lutsk barracks in Kyiv (1919), the All-Ukrainian Central Executive Committee Sanatorium on the Khadzhibey Estuary in Odesa (1929–1930), the M. Kotsiubynsky Press House in Odesa (1929–1930), and the State Red Factory Theater in Kharkiv (1933–1935). The Boichukists' work at this time was chronologically and thematically in sync with Mexican monumentalism, with the work of artists such as Diego Riviera, José Orozco, and David Siqueiros, in particular.

Upon inspection, the numerous examples of Boichukist easel-based work display a tendency to draw on the icon-painting tradition through their use of tempera and generalized representation of form. The legacy of the Boichukist circle is rich, but the graphic work of Nalepińska-Boichuk and Pavlenko, as well as Vasyl Sedliar's illustrations for Shevchenko's *Kobzar* in which the artist's extensive experience in the field of ceramics is evident, deserve special mention.

Opinion is still divided about whether or not the Boichukist school was avant-garde. On the one hand, the work of the Boichukists was cohesive in a way that was rare in Ukrainian fine art; they were consistent in their ideas in a way that is characteristic of the modern avant-garde movements of the time. That said, the idea of building a new communist art on the foundations of medieval religious painting is essentially ultra-conservative. What is clearer is the Boichukists' contribution to the development of a national style, the discussion of which was a point of severe contention in Ukrainian art at the beginning of the 20th century.

In the 1920s, the Boichukist circle was not just another group of artists. It was perhaps the most influential force in art at that time, wielding great influence in the main artistic association of the period, the ARMU. Following the shift in the country's ideological climate at the beginning of the 1930s, the artists began to quickly evolve in the direction of what might tentatively be called proto-socialist realism. Their attempts at artistic compromise with the regime would end in tragedy. In 1936, the movement's leader was accused of espionage and shot in 1937. The same fate would meet his wife Zofia Nalepińska-Boichuk, Vasyl Sedliar, Ivan Padalka, and the majority of the circle's artists. Virtually all the school's collective works of monumentalism, as well as many individual works of art, were destroyed. For several decades the memory of the Boichukists, along with Mykhail Semenکو and other members of the Red Renaissance, was completely erased. The resulting gaps in the history of art were filled with the empty

<sup>105</sup> Liudmyla Sokoliuk, *Mykhailo Boichuk ta ioho shkola* [Mykhailo Boichuk and his school] (Kharkiv: O.O. Savchuk, 2014), 83–93.

babble of Soviet art historians, all talking in Newspeak about “realism” and how it was the sole way to satisfy the artistic needs of the proletariat.

What happened to the promised communist renewal of Ukraine? Why did the Red Renaissance end up soaked in blood? As the historian Yuri Shapoval writes,<sup>106</sup> the Great Terror began much earlier in Ukraine than it did for the rest of the USSR. Collectivization began long before 1937, as far back as the end of the 1920s, and it took on a truly monstrous form in agricultural Ukraine. The forced unification of peasant households into collective farms was accompanied by a *dekulakization* campaign.<sup>107</sup> The resulting liquidation of wealthy peasants and the agricultural middle class, accompanied by mass deportations, continued for several years. Whatever was left of the unhappy peasantry was suffocated by Stalin’s terrible famine of 1932–1933.

Even members of the pro-Ukrainian intelligentsia living in big cities couldn’t help but see what was happening; subsequently the Soviet nomenklatura’s traditional distrust of Ukraine and its elite grew exponentially. A wave of arrests began, and in May and July 1933 in Kharkiv two members of the Red Renaissance committed suicide one after the other: the writer Mykola Khvylovy and the people’s commissar of education and an advocate for Ukrainization, Mykola Skrypnyk, who shot himself in his office in the Kharkiv Derzhprom building. The purges in the capital city Kharkiv were particularly severe, and it was the leaders of the literary avant-garde who were at their epicenter. At the end of 1933, Les Kurbas was, the head of the avant-garde theater Berezhil and the most important theater director of that era, was arrested.<sup>108</sup> On 21 January 1934, the 12th Congress of the Ukrainian Communist Party decided, under pressure from the Kremlin, to move the capital back to Kyiv, which was at that time seen as more loyal and obedient.

The era of the Red Renaissance came to an end. The Soviets erased all mention of those repressed in the art world, and the tumultuous history of the 1920s was rewritten beyond recognition.

The Great Terror began in 1937. The mass liquidation of undesirables smoothly transitioned into unbridled violence where a person could be killed simply because of a mistake in a surname on a warrant. The Terror gripped the USSR in its entirety, but Ukraine witnessed a particularly thorough cleansing of its creative intelligentsia. According to some sources, over a third of the artists killed in the 1930s and 1940s in the USSR were in Ukraine.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Yuri Shapoval, *Ukraina XX stolittia: Osoby ta podii v konteksti vazhkoï istorii* [Ukraine in the 20th century: People and events in the context of a troubled history] (Kyiv: Heneza, 2001), 31.

<sup>107</sup> *Dekulakization* means repressions against wealthy peasants, referred to as *kulaks*. [T.N.]

<sup>108</sup> In 1937, along with thousands of others, he was shot in the Sandarmokh forest in Russian Karelia.

<sup>109</sup> Oleksii Rohotchenko, *Sotsialistychnyi realizm i totalitaryzm* [Socialist Realism and totalitarianism] (Kyiv: Feniks, 2007), 125.



IVAN PADALKA.  
TOMATO HARVEST. 1932.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 244x184 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



PAINTING IN THE STATE POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION CLUB IN ODESA.  
(TODAY THE BUILDING HOUSES THE PUBLIC UTILITY COMPANY  
OBLTRANSBUD AT 34A MARAZLIIVSKA STREET).  
BY ARTISTS: I. GURVICH, A. TKACHEV, L. DUKOVYCH, I. PASTERNAK,  
AND P. PARKHET. 1930. PHOTO MADE FROM A GLASS NEGATIVE.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



## CHAPTER 3.

# STALINISM AND THE CULT OF PERSONALITY: THE EARLY 1930s TO 1953

## THE BIRTH OF SOCIALIST REALISM

The 1930s came on the heels of the euphoric polyphony of the 1920s. This decade brought an abrupt end to the continuous artistic disputes over how best to capture the spirit of the period and how to create a new aesthetic for the new government. It demanded a completely new type of art in place of the innovation and avant-garde practices that had come before. Starting in 1934, “socialist realism” became the only true and correct artistic direction. The term first appeared on the pages of the Moscow-based *Literaturnaia gazeta* (Literary newspaper) in 1932. It had been used in a discussion about the need to bring literary figures and movements that challenged normative sensibilities into line. The ascendant totalitarian regime’s heightened awareness of literature was no accident, reflecting Joseph Stalin’s own interest in literature. Contemporary art, conversely, wasn’t something Stalin or his close circle understood particularly well or even respected.<sup>110</sup> The concept of socialist realism became a carbon copy of the prescriptive Soviet views on literature, essentially equating the work of a writer and the work of an artist. Soviet bureaucrats would apply exactly the same criteria to both spheres when assessing their quality and ensuring that they serve as tools in the creation of a new type of person.

<sup>110</sup> In July 1933, Evgeny Katsman attended a meeting organized by Kliment Voroshilov at Stalin’s dacha between Stalin, high Soviet officials, and artists. Katsman attended alongside Aleksandr Gerasimov and Joseph Brodsky. His diary entries of this event are particularly revealing: “We began talking about formalism. With a cunning yet benevolent expression, Stalin asked, ‘What is formalism?’ Again, we went by the book and used examples of Shevchenko, Shterenberg, and others. ‘You see, Joseph Vissarionovich, ideas and feelings aren’t important here, rather specific technical methods and the application of color are important, among other things.’ ‘That won’t get us anywhere,’ said Stalin, ‘a living person is needed, living color, living water, movement, everything needs to be alive. That’s the kind of painting we need, that’s the kind of art we need. A portrait must bear a resemblance to its subject. If there is no resemblance that means it is bad and it isn’t a portrait.’”



GUSTAV KLUTSIS.

"COMMUNISM IS SOVIET POWER PLUS THE ELECTRIFICATION OF THE ENTIRE COUNTRY. THE DNIPO  
HYDROELECTRIC STATION IS THE GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT OF SOCIALIST INDUSTRIALIZATION."  
A MAY DAY DECORATION ON SVERDLOV SQUARE IN MOSCOW, 1932. PROPAGANDA INSTALLATION—  
A FRAGMENT OF A PHOTO MONTAGE IN AN URBAN SETTING. 23.3x17.5 CM. PHOTO BY I. ALEKSEEV.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE LATVIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ART, RIGA, LATVIA.



VASILII YEFANOV.  
*AN UNFORGETTABLE MEETING*. 1937.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 270×391 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE STATE  
TRET'YAKOV GALLERY, MOSCOW, RUSSIA.

Above all else, works of art were judged for their adherence to the correct ideological narrative. Any kind of formal experiment in which there was no mention of the great leader or socialist society was categorically denounced. An artist had to be supremely careful, even when painting seemingly inoffensive landscapes and still lifes. The result of equating fine art to educational and propaganda literature was an overabundance of cliché.<sup>111</sup> The art of mature Stalinism comprised an endless story about the joy of the present day under socialism, a joy which existed only in the imagination of the state machine and in the mind of the great leader himself. The jubilant present day in a socialist realist painting was not a depiction of reality as seen by common people, but rather a projection of an ideal that didn't exist, a wished-for future. Stalinism transferred the joyful tomorrow of the avant-garde to the present day. The totalitarian

<sup>111</sup> During the time of the Thaw when the systemic ideological pressure was slightly eased, the subject of the harshest criticism was precisely this "literariness" of art. The postmodern dislike held by many post-Soviet artists towards the grand narrative is comparable to the Soviet dissident scorn for kitsch in literature and the overly literal socialist realist tradition.



regime constructed a completely virtual reality, an exuberant “realism,” which replaced reality with fantasy and used all available forms of media to skillfully instruct the viewer on what and how to see. All the while, this art existed apart from the empirical reality of mass repressions, widespread poverty, and substandard living conditions. As a matter of fact, Stalin achieved what the futurists had spent years dreaming of: killing art in its traditional form. Boris Groys has written that socialist realism and Stalinism in general were not rejections of the avant-garde project, but rather represented a substantively new phase in its development.<sup>112</sup>

Any understanding of what comprised a “correct” narrative within the obscure genre of socialist realism was subject to change depending on Stalin’s mood and the latest plans for political purges within the state apparatus. Therefore, even if an artist created an ideal piece of propaganda, this did not mean she could, or should, sleep soundly. The situation could change radically by the morning and her work could be found to contain “subversion.”<sup>113</sup>

What is socialist realism? Amidst the endless tomes of party literature in Newspeak on the subject, there is no simple or clear answer. Elena Petrovskaja writes, “One shouldn’t see the artistic image as being the aim of this ‘method.’ Moreover, no image exists, nor could it, that can fully satisfy the requirements of the method.”<sup>114</sup> Socialist realism did not exist in a single, unchanging form. At different times and in different political contexts, the application of this term within Soviet art altered significantly. It would also be a mistake to label all artwork made during the Soviet period as socialist realist. In a society where the aesthetic was under complete political control, a nuanced approach, capable of discerning the slightest shade of meaning, is needed. A paradoxical quality of socialist realism is precisely its emptiness, its rhizomatic nature, its ability to be both everything and nothing at the same time. It represents the wizardry of totalitarian optics perpetually evading any precise codification.

It is also important to understand that from the beginning socialist realism was imposed as a “method,” not a style. It represents a particular kind of relationship with reality in which truth is substituted for ideological expediency. In other words, truth is not how things really are, but how those in power would like them to be. As Ekaterina Degot noted, “A piece of Soviet art invites us to look at an imperfect reality. We

<sup>112</sup> Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (London: Verso, 2014).

<sup>113</sup> After Stalin’s death a joke circulated in artistic circles and, as was often the case with Soviet jokes, it represents a valuable insight into the time. It is a story about a law-abiding socialist-realist artist who had completed a group portrait of Stalin and his close comrades standing in front of an incoming tide. In the course of endless party purges, one after another, the artist carefully painted over those who had fallen out of favor. When all of Stalin’s former comrades had been shot, only the USSR’s leader remained in the scene. The artist breathed a sigh of relief. But that wasn’t the end of it. Stalin died and his cult of personality began to be dismantled. As a result, all that was left in the painting was the incoming tide. This anecdote references the real story of a photograph of Joseph Stalin, which the artist Isaak Brodsky used to paint a portrait of the leader in 1928. The photograph was a group shot and it was regularly used in the media, though from 1926 to 1937 four close allies of Stalin were carefully removed one by one. As a result, only the general secretary remained. The removal of those purged from photographs was a common phenomenon at that time.

<sup>114</sup> Elena Petrovskaja, “Sotsrealizm: vysokoe nizkoe iskuustvo” [Socialist realism: high low art], *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal*, no. 43–44 (June 2002).

have to believe in the painting that stands before us.”<sup>115</sup> In this vein, the methodology of socialist realism became the basis not only for Soviet literature and art, but also for journalism, philosophy, historical sciences, and Soviet officialdom’s general way of thinking. Attempts to apply a similar approach to the natural sciences resulted in Lysenkoism, a campaign to destroy Soviet genetics and establish the pseudo-scientific Michurian Agrobiology in its place. Lysenkoism thrived thanks to its ideological proximity to the teachings of Stalin. During the perestroika period, Aleksandr Gangnus, who worked to popularize science at the time, noted that both Lysenkoism and socialist realism were different manifestations of a subjective idealism that seized upon power; they each represented their own type of mystical religiosity that became compulsory. They supplanted the traditional democratic values of science and culture: freedom of research, the continuity of ideas, and uninterrupted development.<sup>116</sup>

The writer Maxim Gorky was the harbinger of socialist realism. As early as the start of the 20th century he spoke in favor of rehabilitating realism, which, at that time, many thought had run its course. Gorky wanted art to examine life from a perspective enhanced by the ideals of the future. This way of thinking was closely aligned with that of revolutionary, writer, and art critic Anatoly Lunacharsky who had long harbored similar views to Gorky’s. In 1905, Lunacharsky put forward the theory of “positive aesthetics,” in which he highlighted the necessity of a union between the ideals of socialism and aesthetic harmony. This union called on art, to use the precise phrase of the Soviet theoretician Mikhail Lifshits, “to play a jolly march for the people as they undertake serious work.”<sup>117</sup> However, at the beginning of the Soviet period, both Lunacharsky and his old friend Aleksandr Bogdanov, a Proletkult<sup>118</sup> ideologue, had stressed the necessity of having a range of voices and perspectives in art. Despite this view, both men drew inspiration from the Nietzschean cult of strength and contempt for the weak when thinking about their “positive aesthetics,” and Bogdanov’s Bolsheviks were very influential in the establishment of socialist realism as the single correct artistic method. At the beginning of the 20th century, all three men, Lunacharsky, Gorky, and Bogdanov, were associated with the God-Builders, a circle of people who supported the integration of Marxism into a new proletarian religion. Just a few decades later their views on art would become a useful tool in the formation of a new Stalinist religion: the quasi-Marxist cult of personality.

Scholars have long noted that ideologically biased realist art movements are not solely a Soviet phenomenon, but rather a defining trait of the 20th century as a whole. The colossal technological and demographic changes of this period helped

<sup>115</sup> Ekaterina Degot, “Kak smotret na poslevoennoe sovetskoe iskusstvo bez nenavisti” [How to look at post-war Soviet art without hatred], *Theory and Practice*, October 21, 2016, <https://theoryandpractice.ru/posts/14856-ekaterina-degot-kak-smotret-na-poslevoennoe-sovetskoe-iskusstvo-bez-nenavisti>.

<sup>116</sup> Aleksandr Gangnus, “Na ruinaх pozitivnoi estetiki” [On the ruins of a positive aesthetics], *Novyi mir*, no. 9 (1988): 148.

<sup>117</sup> Mikhail Lifshits, “Vystuplenie na konferentsii, posviashchennoi 100-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia A. V. Lunacharskogo, v akademii khudozhestv SSSR, 24 noiab. 1975 g. Istochnik” [Paper at a conference at the USSR Academy of Sciences, dedicated to the 100th anniversary of A. V. Lunacharsky’s birthday, Nov. 24, 1975], in *Sobranie sochinenii* [Collected essays] (Moscow: Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo, 1988), 3: 213–228.

<sup>118</sup> A Soviet art institution that set out to create a revolutionary, working-class aesthetic. [T.N.]

to suddenly push the European masses to the front and center of the historical stage. The resulting determination of those in power to brutally anonymize and manipulate the consciousness of those masses was characteristic of this period and helped give rise to the demand for totalitarianism and its corresponding aesthetic in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Spain in the 1930s.<sup>119</sup>

Having rejected innovative art, the arbiters of socialist realism instead embraced a more classical style, ostensibly refashioning it to suit the needs of the proletariat. There is one important thing that distinguishes the 20th century from any previous stages of artistic development: the mass distribution of photographs and cinematography. While declaring a return to the values and spirit of the *peredvizhniki*, socialist realists began using photographs and film stills en masse in their work. A typical example of a painting based on a photograph is the most famous canvas associated with Stalin's cult of personality, Aleksandr Gerasimov's painting *J. V. Stalin and K. Ye. Voroshilov in the Kremlin* (1938). This painting came to be ironically known as *Two Men in Power after a Shower*.<sup>120</sup>

The establishment of the idea of socialist realism in the USSR was inextricably tied to the advances of new forms of media. The rapid development of photo and film montage in the 1920s had a great influence on the formation of the Stalinist aesthetic. In the late 1920s, Lev Kuleshov began his revolutionary experiments in film montage, which went on to be called the "Kuleshov effect" and "creative geography." The director famously filmed a close-up of the actor Ivan Mosjoukine's face and made three copies of the film reel, combining each copy with a completely different image: a bowl of delicious soup, a young woman on a sofa, and a child in a coffin. Kuleshov showed these three separate sequences to audience members and they were all convinced that they had watched three completely different shots of Mosjoukine. In the first instance he wanted to eat, in the second he was enchanted by the woman, and in the third he was dying of grief at the loss of the child. But in reality, the audience members saw the same shot of the actor's face three times. In his "geographical" experiments, the director created an imagined reality on screen through a carefully ordered sequence of shots and manipulation of scale. For instance, he convinced his viewers to believe that the hero of the film they were watching was entering the Capitol in Washington, when in reality the scene had been shot in Moscow on the steps of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Kuleshov's discoveries were important in grasping the manipulative potential of cinematic language, in which the content of one film shot could completely alter the meaning of the shot that came before. Therefore a carefully edited sequence of documentary footage could tell a completely fictional story. All of socialist realism in the widest sense of the phrase was one big experiment (in the spirit of Kuleshov) with the consciousness of the Soviet individual.

<sup>119</sup> Mariia Chegodaeva, *Sotsrealizm. Mify i realnost* [Socialist realism. Myths and reality] (Moscow: Zakharov, 2003).

<sup>120</sup> The researcher Jan Plamper thinks that the painting could have been based on the photograph published on 14 May 1935 in the newspaper *Pravda*, which showed Joseph Stalin and Viacheslav Molotov walking in the Kremlin. For more, see: Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

It turned out that it was easier to manipulate a moving image than a static one. At that time, the technology to process photographs was still in its infancy. While the propaganda photo montages of the avant-garde were highly effective and striking, it was still technically difficult to create a convincing illusion of verisimilitude. Since this illusion was absolutely necessary in creating a specific socialist-realist “reality,” painting became a priceless tool in the project of ideological montage. Therefore, particular stress was laid upon making paintings non-experimental, dry, and as realistic as possible. This would help create the effect of “documenting” a wished-for reality.

In 1932, the critic Viktor Shklovsky declared, “The time of the Baroque has passed; the time of a continuous art has arrived.” For Shklovsky, the Baroque meant avant-garde montage, autonomous images, and an abundance of stand-alone detail, as seen in the work of Sergei Eisenstein, Isaac Babel, and others. According to Shklovsky, their art had become obsolete and a new era of art had arrived “without the cut and paste of montage.”<sup>121</sup> Having rejected experimentation in art, Stalin instead began to experiment on a macro-social level. As he did this, he used many discoveries of the avant-garde. Avant-garde montage ceased to be an artistic phenomenon, and instead became one of the state’s main tools to force society to believe in the unedited and seamless nature of its artificially created totalitarian reality.

## ON THIN ICE. THE END OF THE 1930s

In 1934, the capital of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (UkrSSR) was moved back to Kyiv. At the peak of the purges, the city underwent a period of heavy construction. From as early as 1933, the authorities began to demolish one of the most important examples of ancient Kyivan Rus church architecture: St. Michael’s Golden-Domed Cathedral. The parts of the cathedral that were still remaining in 1937 were demolished by explosion. The official explanation for this act of unprecedented vandalism was the state’s plan to build a series of governmental buildings in the cathedral’s place. In 1938 they did actually build one of two planned administrative buildings close by the former cathedral,<sup>122</sup> however the plan to build the series of governmental buildings was never completed. From 1936 to 1939 the Supreme Soviet of the UkrSSR was built in another part of Kyiv’s central district, while nearby the UkrSSR’s Council of Ministers was erected from 1935 to 1937.

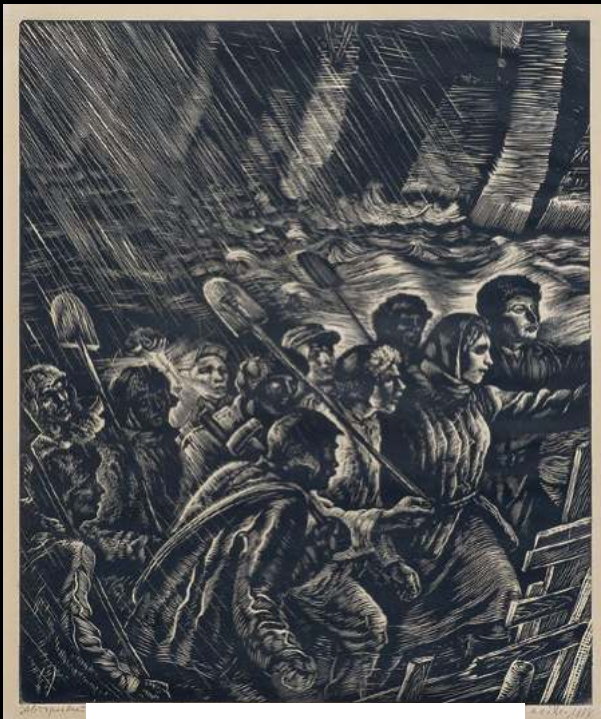
This was the era of triumphant socialist realism, in which the most powerful force in the art world became the state and its system of art acquisition. Artists became completely dependent on the leadership of the state administration and they would become, to a large extent, bureaucrats in their own right in the service of the party’s

<sup>121</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, “O liudiakh, kotorye idut po odnoi i toi zhe doroge i ob etom ne znaiut. Konets barokko” [On people who walk the same path but don’t know it. The end of Baroque], 1932. Qtd. in Iliia Kukulín, *Mashiny zashumevshogo vremeni. Kak sovetskii montazh stal metodom neofitsialnoi kultury* [Machines of noisy time. How Soviet montage became the method of unofficial culture] (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2015).

<sup>122</sup> Today this building houses Ukraine’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



MYKOLA BURACHEK.  
*THE ROAD TO THE COLLECTIVE FARM*. 1937. OIL ON CANVAS. 57×76 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



VASYL KASIIAN.  
*STORMING THE BREACH*. 1934.  
WOOD ENGRAVING ON PAPER. 28.6×24 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL  
ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.

ideological department.<sup>123</sup> In what would become characteristic of the Soviet period, at this time a secondary layer of interpretation would appear in which a hidden narrative could exist parallel to the official interpretation of any given fact or work of art. Special attention had to be given to the unseen nuances and shades of meaning that were missed at first glance. The purges, together with the daily reality of living in fear under the gaze of the state security services, were highly traumatic for the artistic community. On the other hand, as correctly pointed out by the art critic Borys Lobanovsky, “without the meaningless faith (for example in the thought-up ‘terrorist actions’ of the Boichukists), envy, and hatred that seethed within, socialist realism from the 1930s to the 1950s would have been utterly empty.”<sup>124</sup> The drama of the 1930s should not be solely reduced to state coercion of artists. Tyranny and a reactionary politics are natural consequences of radical revolutionary transformation. Many cultural figures were not just passive victims; in fact, they welcomed the new era and took an active part in strengthening the system. Many also sincerely believed in the socialist ideals of this time and had faith in Stalin. All the while, the regime and society were moving hand-in-hand towards totalitarianism.

Once the Kharkiv avant-garde had been suppressed and the capital moved back to the more conservative Kyiv, the Soviet authorities set the future direction for the development of the Ukrainian art school. For several decades after this point Ukraine became one of the centers of painting in the USSR, which was possible, among other things, due to a reformed Kyiv State Art Institute. All hints of formalism were stamped out and a suitable environment was created for artists to churn out ideologically correct works using canvas and oil paints.

The “themed painting” and “themed exhibition” would play a leading role in the formation of the socialist-realist canon. However, the format of the themed exhibition was not new. It first appeared in the USSR long before the arrival of socialist realism. Examples included *Ten Years of the Red Army*, *The Everyday Life of Children of the Soviet Union*, *The First Anti-Papist Exhibition*, and *The Art of Imperialism*. These exhibitions were the product of the first five-year plan and a second wave of politically fueled artistic radicalism. The themed exhibition turned out to be the ideal format to develop the mythologies of the history and lived experience of the Soviet individual. Bureaucrats held a decisive role in choosing the theme of the exhibitions and which artists would take part. Themed exhibitions played a leading role in the totalitarian

<sup>123</sup> “It is impossible to read Soviet poetry and literature, or to look at photographs of Soviet paintings and sculptures without having a physical reaction of disgust mixed with horror. It is with these pieces of art that bureaucrats, armed with a quill, paintbrush, or chisel, under the supervision of other bureaucrats armed with pistols, serve the ‘great’ and ‘genius’ leaders who in reality lack any spark of either geniality or greatness.” Thus wrote Lev (Leon) Trotsky in 1929, right after he had been exiled from the USSR on the steamship *Ilyich* to Turkey and had set himself up on one of the Princes’ Islands just outside Istanbul. See: Lev Trotsky, “Iskusstvo i revoliutsiia” [Art and revolution], *Partisan Review* (1929), <https://www.magister.msk.ru/library/trotsky/trotm466.htm>.

<sup>124</sup> Borys Lobanovsky, “Ukrainskyi zhyvopys v labetakh perebudov. Vid dzherel sotsrealizmu do 1980-kh” [Ukrainian painting in the clutches of transformations: From the sources of socialist realism to the 1980s], in *Realizm ta sotsialistychnyi realizm v ukrainskomu zhyvopysu radianskoho chasu. Istoriia, kolektsiia, eksperyment* [Realism and socialist realism in Ukrainian painting of the Soviet era. History, collection, experiment] (Kyiv: LK Maker, 1998), 30.

regime's efforts to share sanctioned art with the wider population.<sup>125</sup> Examples of the all-union "blockbuster" exhibitions at the end of the 1930s include *20 Years of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army*, *20 Years of the All-Union Lenin Komsomol*, *The Industry of Socialism*, and *Stalin and the People of the Soviet Union in Fine Art*. These exhibitions played a large role in establishing the cult of Stalin.<sup>126</sup>

The main artistic trend of the period was the so-called "applause style," which consisted of an iconography of Stalin surrounded by clapping crowds. In contrast to Russia, this trend did not develop rapidly in Ukraine. Many artists found a compromise by creating work with a historical-revolutionary theme instead, choosing to add to the burgeoning Bolshevik mythology of heroic deeds committed between 1917 and 1920. All the same, art was being directed down a new road and there was no time for stragglers. While the Boichukists were still alive, they made a concerted effort to reach a compromise with the regime and began to adopt a more socialist-realist style. This is particularly noticeable in the frescoes at the Red Factory Theater in Kharkiv, completed between 1933 and 1935 by Mykhailo Boichuk, Oksana Pavlenko, Ivan Padalka, and Vasyl Sedliar. The former members of the AARU were more successful than the Boichukists in this regard; it helped that the association had already begun to prudently adopt a more realist position by the mid-1920s.

One of the most important artists of the period was Fedir Krychevsky, who had finally let go of his passion for Gustav Klimt and his memories of the years he spent at the St. Petersburg Academy. From 1934 to 1935, he painted the masterful academic painting *Conquerors of Wrangel*. Note the painting's triumphant tone and the abundance of red, not to mention the rosy, idealized heroes blazing with energy, a modern day *Three Bogatyrs*.<sup>127</sup> With this work Krychevsky appears to be doing everything he can to show that he is ready to become an artist of the new socialist era. However, following the painting, the artist did not go on to create anything that was particularly socialist realist. In 1937, he would paint the defiantly sensual and pointedly apolitical *Happy Milkmaids*. From then on, he focused on his teaching work at the Kyiv State Art Institute and gradually faded into the shadows. One would have thought that Krychevsky was born to paint in the "applause style," but his canvases remained blank, and ultimately that style died out, unable to withstand the horror of the coming reality. The artist and his brother Vasyl's attempts to flee from the USSR during World War II is testimony to his relationship with Soviet power. Vasyl escaped to the West, and from there made his way to Venezuela. Fedir did not manage to escape the clutches of his socialist homeland. He was caught by Soviet counter-reconnaissance troops and sent back. He died in 1947 in exile in the town of Irpin near Kyiv.

There were two more former members of the AARU who were active during this period. Both of them had matured as artists before the Bolsheviks arrived: the old battle

<sup>125</sup> Igor Golomshtok, "Sotsrealizm i izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo" [Socialist realism and fine art], in *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon* [Socialist-realist canon], ed. Khans Giunter and Yevgenii Dobrenko (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2000).

<sup>126</sup> Boris Ioganson, "Pervye tridtsat let Moskovskogo soiuz khudozhnikov 1932–1962. Mify, realnost, paradoksy" [The first thirty years of the Moscow Union of Artists' 1932–1962. Myths, reality, paradoxes], *Iskusstvoznanie* (Moscow) no. 3–4. (2012): 537–562.

<sup>127</sup> The three bogatyrs are mythological Russian knights featured in the *byliny* (epic poems). [T.N.]



KARPO TROKHIMENKO.  
*CONSTRUCTION ON THE DNIPRO*. 1937.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 120×166 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.





axe and military artist Mykola Samokysh and Ivan Yizhakevych, who had formerly been a master of religious painting. In 1935, Samokysh painted *The Red Army Crosses the Syvash*. The battle scene was painted in pastel tones and the artist's attention focused on the exquisitely rendered light-pink explosions, which strikingly reflect the soft blue of the river and sky. The painting portrays masses of soldiers fighting to the death for access to Crimea, thus entering the historical books. They form the backdrop of this memorable firework of a painting. The artist is not so concerned with the furious struggle between Wrangel's forces and the Red Army; instead, he seems to cultivate a more philosophical interest in the flickering of lethal, yet beautiful flames.

Researchers agree that many paintings from the late 1930s may contain hidden messages from those who helped make them.<sup>128</sup> When studying the art from the time of repressive totalitarianism, it is important to remember that sometimes what the artist leaves out is no less important than what was included.

In 1938, as the 125th anniversary of Taras Shevchenko's birth approached, Ivan Yizhakevych completed the painting *Perebendia*.<sup>129</sup> By this time, the Soviet authorities had already developed one of their most curious characteristics—a pathological obsession with dates and all manner of jubilees and associated exhibitions and events. The main driving force in choosing which dates and events to celebrate was impossible to predict, perhaps determined by some esoteric calendar sorcery. In the Soviet period, the cult of Taras Shevchenko, which had been criticized by the querofuturists, reached a scale that was nothing short of pathological. What began as an honest engagement with Shevchenko's bold and defiant artistic position was gradually replaced by the ritualistic worship of a bronze statue. And yet, double standards abounded in official Soviet celebrations. In the finest tradition of Bakhtinian carnival logic, these celebrations allowed what would normally have been forbidden in everyday life. Thus, at the height of the reprisals against the Boichukists, all in the name of the fight against nationalism, the 64-year-old Yizhakevych could happily illustrate the Ukrainian folk *kobzar*, a blind wandering minstrel, which ordinarily would have prompted particular hostility from the Soviet authorities.<sup>130</sup> The justification for this was supposedly Shevchenko's anniversary celebration and his poetry about an isolated poet, unneeded by society, who talked to God near a burial mound in the steppe.<sup>131</sup> The reference to that subject in 1938 was, perhaps, also no coincidence.

In 1937, the celebrated impressionist and co-founder of the Ukrainian Academy of Arts Mykola Burachek completed the work *The Road to the Collective Farm*. In it, a crowd of distant peasants walks through some sort of improvised folkloric arch

<sup>128</sup> Rohotchenko, *Sotsialistychnyi realizm i totalitaryzm*, 190.

<sup>129</sup> "Perebendia" is the title of a poem by Shevchenko. Here it refers to a *kobzar*, an itinerant minstrel who performs epic poems, primarily about Ukraine's glorious past. [T.N.]

<sup>130</sup> At the 1933 plenum of the All-Ukrainian Committee of the Workers' Union, the folk instruments *kobza* and *bandura* were declared to be hostile to the class struggle. After this, *kobzars* essentially disappeared. They had been wandering national bards who in traditional society had performed the role of the media and bearers of collective memory; however, they were seen as beyond the control of Soviet power and ideology.

<sup>131</sup> Taras Shevchenko, "Perebendia," in *Zibrannia tvoriv* [Selected works], vol. 1 *Poeziia 1837–1847* [Poetry 1837–1847] (Kyiv, 2003), 110–112.

from whose top hangs a blurry portrait of Stalin. The painting glows with a sense of joy and with the lush and idyllic landscape of the countryside. The mountains on the horizon were most likely painted somewhere on the western border of the UkrSSR, perhaps in the region of Podilia. At the time the painting was completed, much of the territory featuring that kind of landscape was not part of the USSR, yet soon it would be, and it would have to travel its own symbolic *Road to the Collective Farm*. In 1937, Volodymyr Kostetsky painted *Interrogation of the Enemy*, the same year that the torture and shooting of “enemies of the people” was in full swing in the basement of the former Kyiv Institute for Noble Maidens.<sup>132</sup> Kostetsky’s painting is based on the history of the Bolshevik revolution, though it indirectly reflects the atmosphere of the Great Terror and the psychosis that gripped a society searching for the omnipresent enemies of the Soviet system.

One of the period’s most prevalent themes was the pathos of Stalinist industrialization. It was at this time that new industrial concerns were being established in the Donbas. A separate milestone from that time was the construction of the Dnipro Hydroelectric Station (DniproHES) from 1927 to 1932 in Zaporizhia. This was an important landmark in the Soviet campaign for the subjugation of nature to the interests of industry and the people. The main architect of this project was one of the Vesnin brothers, the constructivist Viktor Vesnin. The pride of the UkrSSR, DniproHES entered Soviet mass culture as a symbol of the period’s industrial boom and the society-wide mobilization in aid of the Communist project. The industrial landscape became an important part of the socialist-realist canon. Examples on this theme include Oleksii Shovkunenko’s *Constructing the Edifice of the Hydroelectric Station* (1931), and *Construction on the Dnipro* (1937) by the realist and former member of the AARU Karpo Trokhymenko. Here, a group of workers has just arrived at the republic’s biggest construction site. They are the new people of a new country, laborers who just yesterday were illiterate paupers and by tomorrow will have the energy of Ukraine’s most powerful river at their fingertips. They will be Stakhanovites,<sup>133</sup> jolly leaders of the Komsomol, and trade union activists. *Construction on the Dnipro* is a convincing example of how a painting could take Soviet cinematography as inspiration. The painting could easily be a freeze-frame from a socialist-realist fairy-tale film about a proletarian Cinderella.

By the end of the 1930s, some artists had stopped actively creating art, attempting instead to wait out the terrifying times unnoticed. Other artists used this time to successfully establish themselves in the socialist-realist school. They mastered the Aesopian language of the Communist Party nomenklatura while also taking advantage of the empty spaces in the art world left by the repressions, inserting themselves into an artistic landscape that had changed dramatically in the previous decade. For some, this complicated period was their time to shine. For example, the 1930s was a pivotal moment in the career of the European-educated Vasyl Kasiian, a former member of the ARMU who had already started confidently adopting the official artistic line at the beginning of the decade. From 1930 until 1949, Kasiian lived in Kharkiv and was

<sup>132</sup> A pre-revolutionary public education institution for young girls. [T.N.]

<sup>133</sup> A term referring to a worker who works exceptionally hard and is exceptionally productive. [T.N.]



ZINOVII TOLKACHEV.  
*MOTHER AND CHILD*. 1945. PENCIL ON PAPER. GIFT FROM ANEL AND ILYA TOLKACHEV.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE YAD VASHEM WORLD HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE  
CENTER, JERUSALEM, ISRAEL.

there when the Kharkiv Polygraphic Institute<sup>134</sup> was founded. The Institute went on to become an important center in the development of Soviet graphic design. In the coming decades, Kasiian would go on to fill all manner of managerial positions in the Union of Artists of Ukraine, which was founded in 1938. He would also become a deputy (i.e., member of parliament) of the UkrSSR for five sessions, as well as a beloved author across the USSR whose masterful book illustrations would be distributed in the millions.

## WORLD WAR II. INTO THE FIRE

World War II was absolutely catastrophic for Ukraine, the blood-soaked years of 1941–1945 creating millions upon millions of victims.<sup>135</sup> The contrived nature of socialist realism was directly challenged by the global tragedy taking place. Indeed, a substantial shift towards humanism can be seen in the work of individual artists both during and immediately after the war. A harsh and sincere realism replaced the theatrical revolutionary-historical heroics and images of an imagined Soviet prosperity.

From the second half of 1941, Soviet Ukraine was occupied by the Germans. Some artists, such as Vasyl Yermilov and the Krychevsky brothers, Vasyl and Fedir, remained in the occupied territories. However, the majority of “loyal” artists were sent into evacuation by the Soviet authorities. While in Moscow and the countries of Central Asia, these artists played an active role in designing and decorating propaganda trains, flyers, and of course, the main artistic wartime medium: posters. Vasyl Kasiian’s poster *Slavs, To Battle!* (1942) is especially striking.<sup>136</sup> The poster’s central figure, dressed in a traditional Hutsul *kyptar*, a sleeveless sheepskin jacket, and holding a Soviet banner, calls on the viewer to fight the German occupiers. The poster’s text is in Russian and addressed to all Slavic nations. It was precisely at that time that the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) was born and the powerful Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) was operating in Western Ukraine.<sup>137</sup> In 1942, Hitler began to mobilize against members of the OUN in the occupied territories. It is possible that Kasiian’s poster held another message directed at the Ukrainian soldiers: to fight the Germans and to disregard any thought of embracing a national movement.

The majority of Soviet posters were aimed at raising the spirits of the Red Army. During the war, the propaganda material of the *agit-windows* enjoyed a certain

<sup>134</sup> Otherwise known as the School of Printing Art.

<sup>135</sup> Many researchers assert that World War II in Ukraine began in 1939 and only ended in the middle of the 1950s. Indeed, there were five wars that took place on Ukraine’s territory during this period: the German-Polish war (1939–1945), the German-Soviet war (1941–1945), the German-Ukrainian war (1941–1944), the Polish-Ukrainian war (1942–1947) and the Soviet-Ukrainian war (1939–1954). See: Volodymyr Viatrovych, “Druha svitova. Viina pamiatei” [The Second World War. War of memories], *Zbruch*, May 9, 2016.

<sup>136</sup> Academy of Sciences of UkrSSR, *Istoriia ukrainskoho mystetstva v shesty tomakh* [The history of Ukrainian art in six volumes], vol. 6 *Radianske mystetstvo 1941–1967 rokiv* [Soviet art 1941–1967] (Kyiv, 1968), 21.

<sup>137</sup> More information on the UPA and the OUN can be found in the Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine. [T.N.]

popularity. They were created in the mold of UkROSTA and YugROSTA windows from the time of the revolution. The main feature of the agit-windows was the way they were divided into sections to tell a story like a comic strip. They were often satirical and featured heroic themes. The main difference between agit-windows and normal posters—and the key to their success—was their reference to topical sociopolitical issues. Every window went through several rounds of censorship, though all of them were more or less based on the bulletins put out by the Soviet Information Bureau.

The drawings and art produced during the war were first and foremost designed to document what was happening in an accessible way. The drawings of land desolated by battle or of a Berlin recently captured by Soviet troops were important records of the time. A rising star of the Ukrainian art school during this period was Mykhailo Derehus. He created posters, agit-windows, and two poignant cycles of etchings entitled *On the Roads of War* (1941–1942) and *Kyiv in Ruins* (1943).

Like most of the artists in evacuation during this period, Derehus relied on photo documentation of the war's devastation as well as his own imagination. Yet it was the artwork of eyewitnesses that carried the greatest weight. The work of Zinovii Tolkachev is of particular note here. Before the war Tolkachev was an average Soviet artist. In 1928, he created the series of drawings *The Red Army* and *The Lenin Mass*.<sup>138</sup> In 1930, he joined the art group October and began teaching at the Kyiv State Art Institute. In fact, he was offered the post of deacon at the Institute just before the war began. He had a solid Soviet career producing quality conformist art. During the war, however, Tolkachev underwent a radical transformation.

Tolkachev served in a unit of the Soviet army that gathered evidence of Nazi crimes in the occupied territories. In the autumn of 1944, he was ordered to the recently liberated Nazi death camp Majdanek, located just outside Lublin. What he saw was so shocking that Tolkachev began drawing nonstop, attempting to document the tragedy and sheer barbarity of the camp. This is how the drawings *Gas Van*, *The Ovens Are Smoking*, *Only Bones*, *High-Voltage Wire*, *Gas Chamber*, and *Children... Children* were created.<sup>139</sup> Within the scenes documenting what Tolkachev saw are prisoners with brands burnt into their arms, gallows, stiff corpses, and gas chambers where the damned had been suffocated by Zyklon B. They overwhelm the viewer with their content and with the artist's ability to capture the essence of what was in front of him. After this shocking confrontation with reality, Tolkachev either didn't want to or simply couldn't continue to perpetuate the same old aesthetic of Soviet art. From then on, a powerful sense of expression with a clear modernist influence entered his work.

In the beginning of 1945, Tolkachev entered the Auschwitz concentration camp just a few hours after it had been taken by the Red Army. Tolkachev spent several months here and in that time created the incredibly important series *Auschwitz* and *The Flowers of Auschwitz*. When the artist ran out of paper, he began to draw on the official Auschwitz stationery that he found in the camp's headquarters. This accidental

<sup>138</sup> Halyna Skliarenko, "Zinovii Tolkachov—ilustrator ievreiskoi literatury" [Zinovii Tolkachev, illustrator of Jewish literature], *Visnyk KhDADM*, no. 9 (2011): 177–187.

<sup>139</sup> Elena Chentsova, "Zhivopis na blankakh komendatury Osventsima [Painting on the letterhead of the Auschwitz commandant's office], *Den*, May 12, 2000.



MYKHAILO DEREHUS.  
ON HOME SOIL. C. 1942–1943.  
ETCHING AND AQUATINT ON PAPER. 15×18.8 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL ART  
MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.

conceptual shift in his work had a dramatic effect on the work he created. Tolkachev's drawings, which document the horror of crimes against humanity on official camp stationery under the heading "The Camp Commandant of Auschwitz," are particularly gut-wrenching to look at. These drawings gained attention immediately following the war. There were exhibitions held in Warsaw and other cities in Poland. The Polish government sent the albums *Majdanek* and *The Flowers of Auschwitz* to the heads of the anti-Hitler coalition, generals, and other high-ranking officials. At home, however, the artist would not find much in the way of recognition.

Vasyl Ovchynnykov found himself in a similar situation when he created the triptych *Babyn Yar (Road of the Damned)* right after the war in 1946. His canvas was dedicated to the mass extermination of Jews in 1941 in Kyiv, a tragedy in which nearly 150,000 lives were taken. After he returned home after the war, the artist found that half of his neighbors were missing. Upon asking around he was horrified to learn how



NIL KHASEVYCH.  
FREEDOM FOR THE PEOPLE! FREEDOM FOR THE INDIVIDUAL!  
FROM THE SERIES THE IDEALS OF THE UKRAINIAN  
LIBERATION MOVEMENT. 1949.  
FROM THE ALBUM GRAPHIC ART IN THE UPA BUNKERS.



the Nazis had rounded up the defenseless women, children, and elderly for execution, promising that they would just be resettled.<sup>140</sup> Just like the Holocaust in general, it quickly became unacceptable in the USSR to talk about the tragedy of Babyn Yar. Following the war, these artistic bursts of humanism were quickly forgotten, and it was with even greater enthusiasm than before that the Soviet state returned to the dissemination of normative art and the paranoid search for dissenting voices. A new wave of repressions began, this time in the name of fighting against formalism, cosmopolitanism, and “groveling to the West.”

Ovchynnykov's *Babyn Yar* and Tolkachev's *Christ at Majdanek* were shown at the first post-war exhibition of Ukrainian artists at the Museum of Russian Art in Kyiv in 1946. Their work immediately caused a scandal. Tolkachev was accused of Zionism and branded as the “embodiment of cosmopolitanism and bourgeois nationalism.”<sup>141</sup> Yet he continued to make art about Jewishness and the death camps until the end of his life. Ovchynnykov's triptych was declared “unpatriotic” in 1949. Even though the monumentalist artist began work in 1936 as head of the Kyiv Museum of Western and Oriental Art<sup>142</sup> (a position he held for 42 years) and had no Jewish roots, he was attacked for many years for his “cosmopolitanism.” The party leadership ordered his triptych destroyed, yet it was saved thanks to Mykhailo Derehus, who hid the work in the basement repository of the National Art Museum of Ukraine.

In Western Ukraine, the end of the war did not mark the return of peacetime. This territory was now under the control of the USSR, but a powerful national movement numbering in the hundreds of thousands was present in most areas. The OUN's and UPA's most active period was during the war, after which they went underground to continue fighting for an independent Ukrainian state. It wasn't until the mid-1950s that the Soviet regime succeeded in finally crushing this resistance to its rule.

The OUN and UPA ran an active propaganda campaign in support of their position both during the war and in the years that followed. The main artist of this movement became the Volhynian Nil Khasevych. He graduated from the Warsaw School of Fine Arts and went on to create posters, postcards, illustrations, caricatures, banknotes, and military decorations for the UPA. Everything that Khasevych created was rooted in his social and political views. Following the arrival of Soviet power, the artist went underground, living in a bunker in the Rivne region. There he worked with several apprentices creating anti-Soviet propaganda woodcuts. In 1952, Khasevych's work depicting the true situation and mood in Ukraine fell into the hands of foreign diplomats and was made into its own book in the USA.<sup>143</sup> The Soviet security services began

<sup>140</sup> Odesa Art Museum, “Ukrainskii khudozhnik-kosmopolit.” [A Ukrainian cosmopolitan artist], *Migdal Times*, no. 158 (March 2019), <https://www.migdal.org.ua/times/158/50533/>.

<sup>141</sup> “Riadovoi Tolkachev u vorot ada. Maidanek i Aushvits posle osvobozhdeniia: svidetelstvo khudozhnika [Private Tolkachiov at the gates of hell. Majdanek and Auschwitz after liberation],” *Yad Vashem*, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, copyright 2020, [https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/ru/exhibitions/tolkatchev/about\\_tolkatchev.asp](https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/ru/exhibitions/tolkatchev/about_tolkatchev.asp).

<sup>142</sup> Today known as the Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko Museum of Art.

<sup>143</sup> Nil Khasevych, *Ukrainian Underground Art: Album of the Woodcuts Made in Ukraine in 1947–1950 by Artist of the Ukrainian Underground Nil Khasevych — “Bey-Zot” and His Disciples* (Philadelphia: Prolog, 1952).



VASYL OVCHYNNYKOV.  
BABYN YAR (TRIPTYCH). CHARCOAL AND PASTELS  
ON CANVAS. 160×109 CM/160×277 CM/160×109 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL ART  
MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



hunting for Zot (the artist's underground alias), and when they found him, he was executed along with his comrades.

Gradually, the war became a cornerstone for Soviet mass culture and its mythology. Over time, practically all traces of the true reality of the war disappeared. The ideological socialist-realist machine crushed the sincere humanism that arose from that period, creating instead an incomprehensible body of work of varying quality.

## STALINIST GRAND STYLE AND THE POST-WAR SHIFT TO “BIEDERMEIERISM”

Huge canvases filled with people celebrating the party's general secretary and the noble Soviet spirit, baroque abundance, sweeping brush strokes, powerful sculptural compositions, and striking architectural ensembles. A joyful, almost hysterical, optimism. All these things contrasted sharply with the reality of the post-war Soviet Union, where the majority of the urban population was sheltered in poorly maintained communal apartments and peasants on collective farms were denied the internal passports required to move freely within the USSR. Ukraine's losses in World War II numbered more than 10 million people.

The 1930s saw the arrival of the “applause style” and the corresponding set of rules on how to depict Stalin. As a rule, the general secretary did not like posing for paintings, so his first portraitists mainly painted him from photographs. At the end of the 1930s, Isaak Brodsky, Aleksandr Gerasimov, and Vasilii Yefanov, the artists closest to Stalin, developed a stock set of poses that then served as the basis for future depictions of the leader. Thus, instead of looking at Stalin himself, other artists would instead rely on these stock poses to depict the great leader. Another interesting feature of art from this period is that in pre-war paintings Stalin is generally depicted as a person: holding forth at a plenum, meeting with peasants at a collective farm, hugging children. In post-war art, however, he increasingly appears just as a symbol, taking the form of a bust, portrait, or some other representative form within an artwork.

Ukraine was given a ready-made artistic canon, and the Stalinist grand style embedded itself in the country immediately after the Second World War. The post-war years marked the peak of Soviet art's isolation. It was during this period that the characteristics of socialist realism became more defined.<sup>144</sup> One of Stalinism's main champions in Ukraine during this period was Viktor Puzyrkov. He painted *I. V. Stalin Onboard the Cruiser Molotov*, which was the star of the All-Union Art Exhibition in 1949. In 1947, he also painted the huge *The Black Sea Fleet* (220×340 cm). Gigantic proportions are a distinctive characteristic of “high” socialist realism. These paintings were not made to

<sup>144</sup> Galina Yankovskaia, “Khudozhnik v gody pozdnego stalinizma: povsednevnaia zhizn i (ili) ideologiya” [The artist in the years of late Stalinism: everyday life and (or) ideology], in *Words, Deeds, and Values. The Intelligentsia in Russia and Poland during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Fiona Bjorling and Alexander Pereswetoff-Morath, Slavica Lundensia, vol. 22 (Lund, Sweden: Lund University, 2005), 269.



MYKHAILO KHMELKO.  
TO THE GREAT RUSSIAN PEOPLE! 1947.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 297×513 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.

be viewed privately; they were for official institutions, for the reception of foreign delegations, in the palaces of congress, and in the main exhibition halls of the country. This obsession with size, which is characteristic of the Ukrainian art tradition of that time, has its origins both in the context of socialist realism and also in the way the Soviet system calculated the price of paintings, i.e. by counting how many square centimeters each one measured. Millions of reproductions and postcards would be produced from the paintings that were favored by the Communist Party leadership. Indeed, the postcard became the most prevalent way for art to be disseminated during this period.

The Odesan Leonid Muchnyk painted *The Rebel Sailors of the Battleship Potemkin Carry the Murdered Vakulenchuk to Shore* from 1949 to 1957. This painting, which used a revolutionary-historical theme, was fated to play its own role in the history of art of independent Ukraine.<sup>145</sup> The mutiny of the sailors aboard the battleship *Potemkin* during the 1905 revolution, in which rebel sailors docked the ship in Odesa, was the inspiration for Sergei Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin* and became one of the key Soviet myths of the city.

<sup>145</sup> During the 1998 exhibition *The Kandinsky Syndrome* at the Odesa Fine Arts Museum, the artist Oleksandr Roitburd would project his postmodern artwork entitled *The Psychedelic Invasion of the Battleship Potemkin into the Tautological Hallucination of Sergei Eisenstein*.



LEONID MUCHNYK.  
*THE REBEL SAILORS OF THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN  
CARRY THE MURDERED VAKULENCHUK TO SHORE.*  
1949-1957. OIL ON CANVAS. 290x457 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE ODESA FINE ARTS  
MUSEUM.



VIKTOR PUZYRKOV.  
*THE BLACK SEA FLEET*. 1947.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 220×340 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



SERHII HRYHORYEV.  
*JOINING THE KOMSOMOL*. 1949.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 142×201 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



POSTCARD VERSION OF THE WORK  
WITH BUST OF STALIN.



The artist most symptomatic of this period was Mykhailo Khmelko, the creator of the central “icon” of the applause style, the grandiose painting *To the Great Russian People!* (1947). This densely populated composition invokes the pre-revolutionary, government-commissioned classic by Ilya Repin: *Ceremonial Meeting of the State Council on 7 May 1901* (1903). Khmelko depicts Stalin in the Georgievsky Hall in the Kremlin Palace at a reception in honor of the Red Army troop commanders on 24 May 1945. At this event, Stalin made a famous toast in which he proclaimed the hegemony of “the Russian people” in the USSR and their subsequent status as the main victors of World War II. The fact that this painting and its subject was completed in Ukraine, a place which, along with Belarus, had suffered the greatest losses in the war and where a significant proportion of the population was involved in the nationalist underground, made it a particularly pleasing gift for the general secretary.

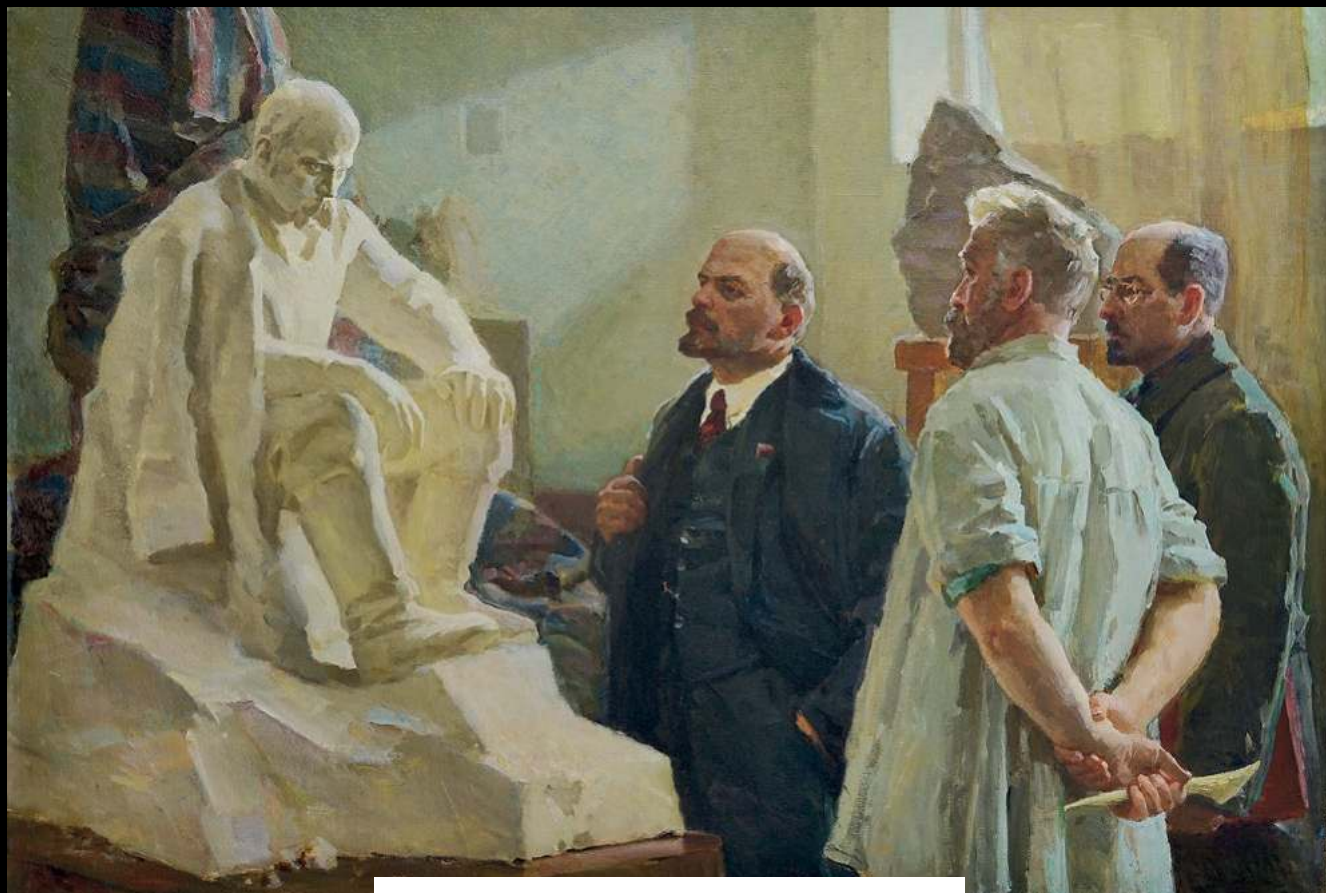
Continuing in the same ideological direction set by his 1947 painting, in 1951 Khmelko completed another huge painting dedicated to the Pereiaslav Council of 1654 and Bohdan Khmelnytsky’s historical decision to align himself with the Russian tsar: *Forever with Moscow, Forever with the Russian People* (280x551 cm). Khmelko was a master painter and his capabilities as an artist had long been legend. It was said that he had already spent the money that was supposed to be for art models and so he set a pack of Zaporozhtsi cigarettes, which carried a reproduction of Repin’s painting, in front of him and began confidently sketching out the characters for his painting of Bohdan Khmelnytsky. He managed to remain on the art scene following the dismantling of Stalin’s cult of personality. In 1961, he created the epic painting *The Motherland Greets a Hero*, which depicts the first cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin in front of clapping crowds as he walks to embrace the general secretary Nikita Khrushchev.

Serhii Hryhoryev was another first-class artist from this period. He began his career at the end of the 1920s and worked as an assistant to Fedir Krychevsky during the 1930s. He was an artist who could be counted on to toe the official line. Hryhoryev was the rector of the Kyiv State Art Institute from 1951 to 1955. The educational content of his work compensated for his dry and inexpressive style of painting. An example of this is his painting *Discussing a Bad Grade* (1950), in which members of a school Komsomol committee seriously lecture an older pupil who received a bad grade. Another of Hryhoryev’s famous paintings is *Joining the Komsomol* (1949). Both pieces are testament to the difficulties faced by conscientious Stalinist artists following the leader’s death. In both these pieces Joseph Vissarionovich is present in the form of a heavy bust; after 1953, the artist had to remove any trace of Stalin from his paintings. This was so the paintings could be used in future exhibitions and remain aligned with the party politics of the time. An area of relative freedom for artists was paintings of children. His work *Goalkeeper* features an impromptu soccer match in post-war Kyiv. Together with *Joining the Komsomol*, this painting’s sense of emotion and drama earned him the Stalin prize in 1949.

In the 1940s and the early 1950s, artists competed for the Stalin prize, the “Oscar” of the Soviet art world, which was awarded to the work that best glorified the USSR’s great leader. This prize was taken very seriously and it was the future masters and professors of the Kyiv State Art Institute who set the tone: Mykhailo Khmelko, Viktor Puzyrkov, and Serhii Hryhoryev. A few decades later some recognizable features



MYKHAILO DEREHUS.  
TARAS LEADING THE TROOPS  
(FROM GOGOL'S STORY *TARAS BULBA*).  
1952. OIL ON CARDBOARD. 50x86 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL  
ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE. **146**



IVAN-VALENTYN ZADOROZHNY.  
V. I. LENIN INSPECTS THE MAKING OF THE T. H. SHEVCHENKO  
MONUMENT IN MOSCOW. 1958. OIL ON CANVAS. 107x161 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL TARAS  
SHEVCHENKO MUSEUM.

of “high” socialist realism would paradoxically be inherited from these artists by their students (and their rivals) working in a completely different post-Soviet context.<sup>146</sup>

A new generation took the stage following World War II. This was a generation for whom socialist realism wasn’t one of several styles, but rather the only possible art form for the heroic country that defeated Nazism. These artists brought an evident energy and joyful sense of youth to their work. An example of this is the Stalin-prize winning painting *Bread* (1949) by one of Soviet Ukraine’s brightest artists, Tetiana Yablonska. When comparing Yablonska’s painting to Oleksandr Maksymenko’s *Keepers of the Land* (1951),<sup>147</sup> in which a cheerful young cyclist, a purposeful young peasant girl, and an old man write a letter together in aid of repairing a collective farm left in ruins by the war, Yablonska’s is closer to the truth of the period. Yablonska’s painting depicts a group of working women and offers a realistic reflection of the post-war context in which there were hardly any men left in Ukraine. Yablonska brought a sense of hope to the art of Soviet Ukraine, but this alone could not prevent the decline of the socialist-realist movement.

The central task of this period was the post-war restoration of the country. At the end of the 1940s, the reconstruction of Khreshchatyk Street began. The architectural ensemble on Kyiv’s main street was a shining example of Stalinist architecture with its characteristic decorative “extravagances.” These buildings were built according to the designs of Aleksandr Vlasov, Anatolii Dobrovolsky, and Borys Pryimak, among others. The buildings feature that traditional Ukrainian inclination for the baroque style. The heart of Kyiv was built like a miniature copy of Stalinist Moscow with its recognizable high-rise buildings.<sup>148</sup> The task set before the architects was clear: to create an image of Stalinist unity with the center of the Soviet Union, thus preserving the supremacy of Moscow. This sense of Kyiv as a “not-quite Moscow” is characteristic of other pieces of status architecture that were built later, such as the VDNH and the Kyiv metro.<sup>149</sup>

By the mid- and late 1950s, the Soviet authorities had decided upon a new strategy in their approach to Ukrainian national culture. Formally speaking, the Ukrainian language was already represented in book printing and education but Ukrainian culture began to be gradually filled with ethnographic clichés. “Ukrainianness” in the Soviet space began to only signify the so-called *sharovary*,<sup>150</sup> the traditional *hopak* dance, and *horilka* with *salo* (vodka with fatback). Elite urban culture was developed and spread mainly in the Russian language. The cult of Taras Shevchenko, Ukraine’s

<sup>146</sup> This refers to representatives of the so-called New Wave movement, which included Arsen Savadov, Heorhii Senchenko, Vasyl Tsaholov, Oleh Holosii, Valeria Trubina, Oleksandr Hnylyzkyj, and others.

<sup>147</sup> This painting echoes Fedor Shurpin’s painting *The Morning of Our Homeland*, which depicts Stalin in front of endless fields.

<sup>148</sup> According to the architects’ original idea, there was to be a central high-rise building in the ensemble crowned by a tower and spire: the Moskva Hotel (today, Ukraine). The project was axed following the “campaign against excess” after Stalin’s death. The height of the building was shortened and the idea of a spire on top was rejected.

<sup>149</sup> VDNH stands for the Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy of the UrSSR. This multi-purpose exhibition complex is now known as the Expocenter of Ukraine. [T.N.]

<sup>150</sup> Also known as sirwal pants, *sharovary* used to be worn by Ukrainian Cossacks, but in certain contemporary contexts they are also used as a metaphor for how Ukrainian culture is reduced to kitsch. [T.N.]





TETIANA YABLONSKA.  
BREAD. 1949. OIL ON CANVAS. 201×375 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE STATE  
TRETYAKOV GALLERY, MOSCOW, RUSSIA.

greatest writer of all time, was rewritten in the interests of those in power and made to serve the authorities in constructing their own national stereotype. An example from the vast Soviet visual array of “Shevchenkiana” (a corpus of works dedicated to Shevchenko) is Karpo Trokhymenko’s *Shevchenko on Chernecha Mountain* (1954). Ivan-Valentyn Zadorozhny’s painting *V. I. Lenin Inspects the Making of the T. H Shevchenko Monument in Moscow* (1958) is a striking take on this theme, too. Derehus also produced work focusing on Ukrainian historical themes and the Pereiaslav Council, whose anniversary was widely celebrated in 1954. In comparison to Khmelko’s paintings with their overabundance of figures parading through in theatrical dress, Derehus’s work features a more romanticized view of Ukrainian history, which contained, as Borys Lobanovsky accurately observed, a “heartfelt excitement.”<sup>151</sup>

As the sun set on Stalinist megalomania and the industrial production of socialist-realist melodrama, the artistic mood in the country began to gradually move in the opposite direction. This period can very tentatively be called “Stalinist Biedermeierism.” After decades of extreme hardship, post-revolutionary and post-war asceticism, and the unconditional primacy of the collective over the personal, people began to finally tire and demand a sense of privacy. Traditionally, any attempts in Soviet society to create an apolitical space dedicated to personal shelter and well-being would have been quickly vilified and labeled as “bourgeois,” a highly offensive term in the eyes of leading communists. Little elephants on the dressing table, lace curtains, and lights with lampshades were all inaccessible pre-revolutionary luxuries. But after the war, that was precisely what people needed: a private space that contained things that were essentially unpretentious and sentimental, a space unburdened by a socially critical and ideological subtext.

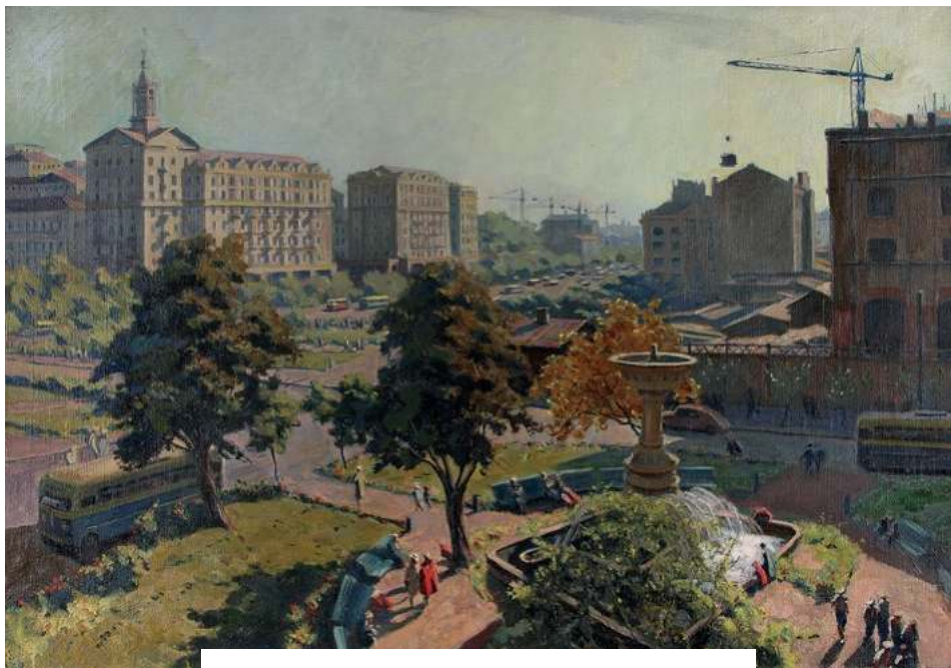
This trend was especially prevalent in applied art. The 1950s saw a boom in the production of porcelain. The most interesting examples of 1920s and 1930s porcelain were the so-called “propaganda porcelains”: statuettes, decorative vases, and crockery decorated with revolutionary images and slogans. They were mainly produced for export and as presents for high-ranking officials. Starting in the 1950s, the market for domestic porcelain began to boom. The centers of porcelain production in Ukraine were the experimental factories in Baranovka, Horodnytsia, Dovbysh, Korosten, Polon, and Kyiv. Homey domestic items began to be produced in the millions: children at play, cute animals, literary and folkloric characters, bandura players, embroiderers, beautiful vases, and sets of tableware. This demand for the personal and the private began in the 1930s and reached its apogee in the 1960s, when the mass construction of individual accommodation buildings known as *khrushchovkas*,<sup>152</sup> had begun. This coincided with a radical change in the aesthetics of Soviet design. In the early and mid-1950s, touching scenes of chubby children, aimless strolls in squares, and joyful new year celebrations became popular in fine art. Tetiana Yablonska’s *Spring* (1951) and Yevhen Volobuiev’s *Morning* (1954) are paintings in which the viewer can sense the new atmosphere of a more warm-hearted Stalinism.

<sup>151</sup> Lobanovsky, “Ukrainskyi zhyvopys v labetakh perebudov,” 56.

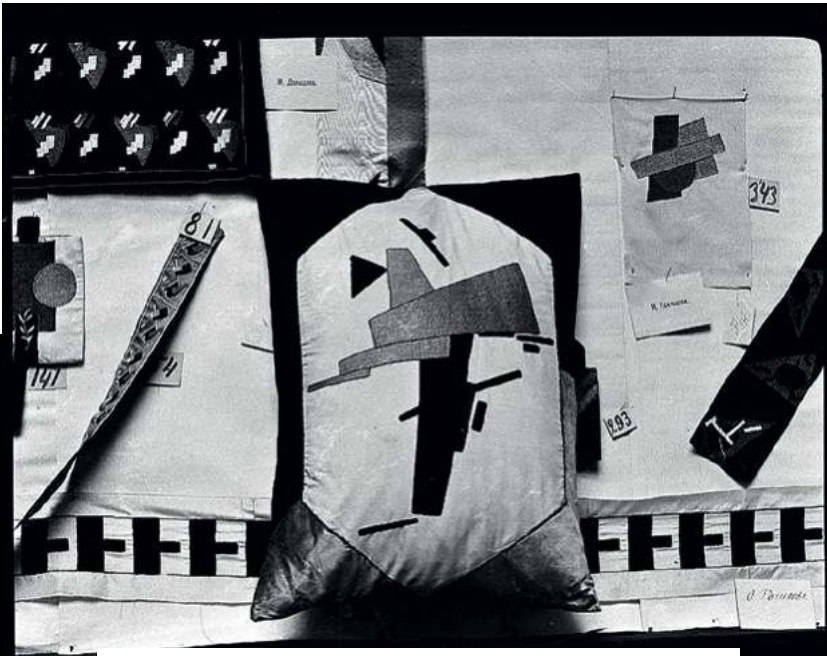
<sup>152</sup> Low-rise, low-cost apartment building named after Nikita Khrushchev, who led the Soviet Union after Stalin.



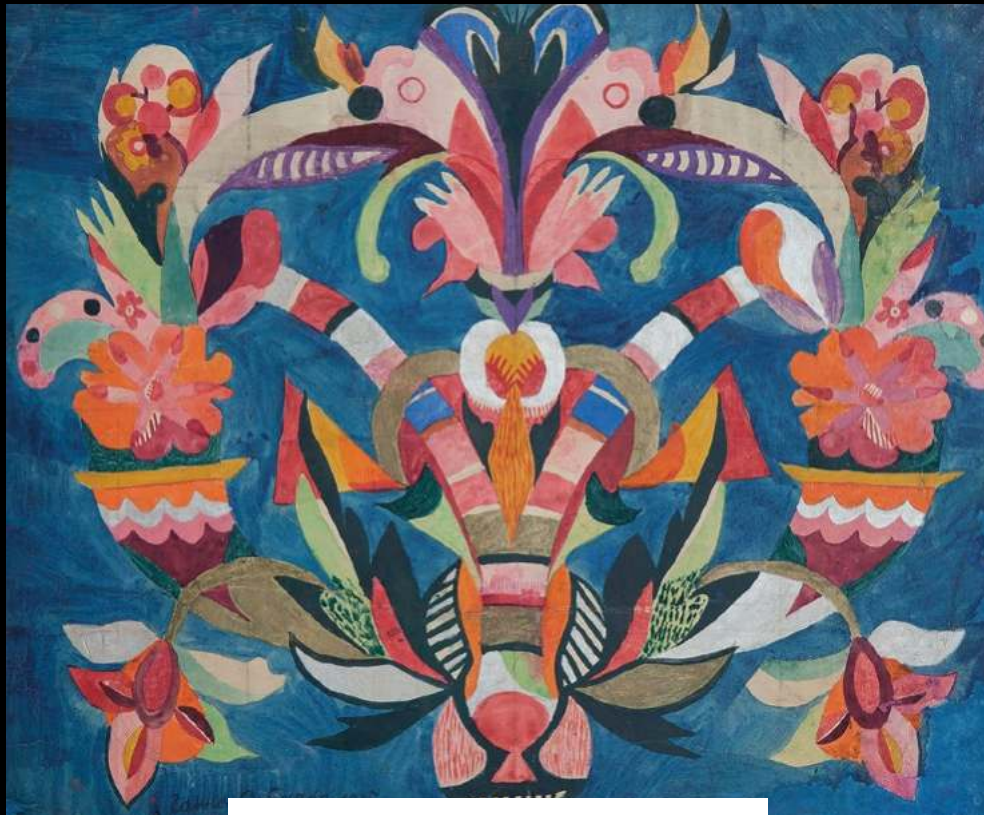
YEVHEN VOLOBUIEV.  
*MORNING*. 1954. OIL ON CANVAS. 72x110 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL  
ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



OLEKSANDER KHVOSTENKO-KHVOSTOV.  
*KYIV. THE CONSTRUCTION OF KHRESHCHATYK*.  
1954. OIL ON CANVAS. 78x119.5 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE KYIV HISTORY MUSEUM.



SOME OF THE PIECES AT THE SECOND *VERBIVKA* EXHIBITION. IN THE CENTER IS A CUSHION DECORATED WITH A SUPREMATIST KAZIMIR MALEVICH DESIGN. 1917. PHOTO BY OLIVER SEILER. FROM THE COLLECTION OF CHARLOTTE DOUGLAS, NEW YORK.



HALYNA SOBACHKO-SHOSTAK.  
*THE DANCE OF THE FLOWERS*. 1912.  
 FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM  
 OF UKRAINIAN DECORATIVE FOLK ART.



# THE FOLK ALTERNATIVE

The monotonous landscape of pompous Stalinist socialist realist art begins to come to life when one explores its margins. One striking area of artistic freedom was the domain of so-called folk art. Practiced by “graduates of the people,” i.e. artists who had not received a formal art education, this branch of art was nonetheless centrally supported and cultivated. According to the logic of Soviet power, the artistic achievements of countryside villagers had to not only reflect the diversity of cultures within the USSR, but also serve as the visual embodiment of the Stalinist slogan, “Life has become better, life has become happier.” So happy, in fact, that even simple peasants would supposedly have enough free time to pick up a paintbrush. In Ukraine, two of folk art’s brightest representatives were women: the creator of escapist, metaphysical, and colorful compositions Kateryna Bilokur, and the unique visionary Maria Prymachenko. The biographies of these two artists, rare instances of women in the highly patriarchal world of the Soviet artistic elite, are eloquent examples of the distance that lay between reality and Stalin’s claim that “life has become happier.”

Stalinist grand style was art created by men about men. Women, in the best-case scenario, took the role of supporting cast members. Folk art, conversely, became a niche in which an equal, and sometimes dominating, voice was held by women. Traditionally, it was women who did embroidery and carpet weaving, as well as decorative drawings on the walls of their ovens and whitewashed homes in the villages. These decorative drawings are an ancient Ukrainian craft form which had a significant influence on the avant-garde,<sup>153</sup> as well as on the easel-based work of the Soviet period. It was from these decorative drawings that *Petrykivka* painting,<sup>154</sup> a rich floral style of ornamentation, emerged later in the 20th century. Tetiana Pata was the most famous artist working in this style in the Soviet period.

The flourishing of Ukrainian folk art wasn’t only a result of the state’s ideological priorities. First and foremost, it was due to the legacy of the avant-garde, which the Soviet establishment had inherited. The active cooperation and mutual influence between folk art and innovative art movements started at the beginning of the 20th century.

Like most artists of her time, Oleksandra Ekster’s engagement with avant-garde practices existed in parallel to her interest in folk art. In the early 20th century, the majority of European modernists were focusing their attention on folk art in order to broaden their traditional perception. They focused on the art of outsiders, the legacy of non-European cultures, and African art, in particular. The working cooperatives in the villages of Verbivka and Skoptsi were a fascinating phenomenon that arose from the crossover of folk and avant-garde art in the 1910s. The cooperatives were organized to help revive traditional embroidery and carpet-weaving practices. Ekster and Yevhenia Prybylska worked there, as well as Kazimir Malevich who would come

<sup>153</sup> Dmytro Horbachov writes, “There is a close analogy to Suprematism in the geometric drawings of the Podilian cottages, decorated Easter eggs with astral symbols, and the patterns of *plakhta* skirts, all of which comprise a magical elemental code (e.g., fire, earth, and water).” See: Horbachov, *Malevych ta Ukraina*.

<sup>154</sup> According to the Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine, it is a kind of “folk painting on the whitewashed walls of peasant houses.” [T.N.]



VASYL DOVHOSHYIA.  
COCKEREL. EARLY 1920s.  
GOUACHE AND INDIA INK ON PAPER.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF UKRAINIAN  
DECORATIVE FOLK ART.



VASYL DOVHOSHYIA AND YEVHEN PSHECHENKO.  
HORSE. 1925. WATERCOLOR AND GOUACHE ON PAPER.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM  
OF UKRAINIAN DECORATIVE FOLK ART.



YEVMEN PSHECHENKO.  
ACROBAT. 1927. GOUACHE ON PAPER.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF UKRAINIAN  
DECORATIVE FOLK ART.



MARIA PRYMACHENKO.  
*GREEN ELEPHANT*. 1936. WATERCOLOR ON PAPER. 30×41 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF UKRAINIAN  
DECORATIVE FOLK ART. PUBLISHED WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE ARTISTIC  
HERITAGE OF THE MARIA PRYMACHENKO FAMILY CHARITABLE FOUNDATION.



MARIA PRYMACHENKO.  
*BLACK BEAST*. 1936. WATERCOLOR ON PAPER. 30×41 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF UKRAINIAN  
DECORATIVE FOLK ART. PUBLISHED WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE ARTISTIC  
HERITAGE OF THE MARIA PRYMACHENKO FAMILY CHARITABLE FOUNDATION.

later.<sup>155</sup> These avant-garde artists created sketches that were brought to life by master folk craftswomen. Suprematist scarves, pillows, blankets, and bags were made at the workshops in the Ukrainian villages and successfully sold in Poltava, Kyiv, Moscow, and Berlin.<sup>156</sup> In Skoptsi, a new original artist emerged under the influence of Ekster and Prybylska. Her name was Hanna Sobachko-Shostak, and she was a crafts-woman of decorative and applied art who combined folk traditions and elements of the avant-garde in her work. The cosmic aspects of Ukrainian folk art had a strong impact on Ekster, Malevich, and other avant-gardists. Bright abstract fabrics, embroidery, or especially icons and *pysankas*, or Easter eggs, comprised intimate and priceless examples of an art that wasn't built on the principles of realism, but rather on rhythm and color, drawing on a wealth of archaic and magical imagination.

These workshops became a unique space which produced some of the future luminaries of folk art in the Soviet period. One future star to emerge in Skoptsi alongside Sobachko-Shostak was Paraska Vlasenko. Another was the artist Yevmen Pshechenko, who came out of the Verbivka workshop, which was headed by Natalia Davydova and included Ekster and Malevich. Pshechenko's work was exhibited at the final exhibition of the Verbivka cooperative at the Lemerse Gallery in Moscow. That exhibition also featured the work of Ekster, Malevich, Ivan Pun, Nina Genke-Meller and Yevhenia Prybylska. Verbivka produced another outstanding artist named Vasyl Dovhoshyia. Sadly, there is little information preserved about this artist. In the 1920s, critics connected the originality of his work with his knowledge of Japanese art. Dovhoshyia apparently spent some time in Japan during the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–1905.<sup>157</sup>

The vibrant mixture of Suprematist embroidery and the ancient tradition of hut decoration, together with an archaic cosmic knowledge that was amplified under the influence of the avant-garde, gave life to one of the most interesting phenomena in the history of Ukrainian modernism: Folk surrealism. The peak of the first wave of this movement came in the 1920s. At the time, no one was talking formally about surrealism. The art produced by some of the best artists associated with this movement, Pshechenko and Dovhoshyia in particular, was labeled as folk art. The artistic integrity, freedom of thought, and originality of these artists was far ahead of other so-called professionals from this period.

In 1935, preparations began for Ukraine's First Republic Exhibition of Folk Art. It was shown in Kyiv in February 1936 and traveled to Moscow in July of the same year, and then later to Leningrad. Experimental workshops were also organized at the Kyiv State Museum of Ukrainian Art with the aim of creating work for an exhibition at the

<sup>155</sup> Tetyana Filevska, "Persha amazonka avanhardu" [The first Amazon of the avant-garde], *Ukrainskyi tyzhden*, January 21, 2017.

<sup>156</sup> Dmytro Horbachov, "Hopasho-sharovarna kultura iak dzhereło svitovoho avanhardu" [Hopak-sharovary culture as a source of the world avant-garde], *MIST: Mystetstvo, istoriia, suchasnist, teoriia*, no. 3 (2006): 43–51.

<sup>157</sup> Serhii Shestakov, "Vzaiemovplyv profesiinoho ta narodnoho mystetstva na prykladi tvorchosti Hanny Sobachko, Vasylia Dovhoshyi ta levmena Pshechenka" [Interaction of professional and folk art in the work of Hanna Sobachko, Vasyl Dovhoshyia, and Yevmen Pshechenko], in *100 rokiv kolektsii derzhavnoho muzeiu ukrainskoho narodnoho dekoratyvnoho mystetstva: Zbirnyk naukovykh prats* [100 years of the collection of the State Museum of Ukrainian Decorative Folk Art: A collection of academic work] (Kyiv: ArtEk, 2001), 171–180.

Kyiv Pecherska Lavra.<sup>158</sup> Talented masters of folk art came from all over Ukraine, developing their skills and artistic knowledge through creative collaboration. The best professional artists were invited, including the modernist and long-time adherent of folk art Vasyl Krychevsky, the avant-garde thespian Anatol Petrytsky, and the graphic artist Vasyl Kasiian. Hanna Sobachko-Shostak led workshops on composition.<sup>159</sup> Other participants of the workshops included the sculptor Ivan Honchar, a member of the Honchar dynasty, Paraska Vlasenko, who took part in the Verbivka avant-garde cooperative, and Maria Prymachenko. Prymachenko was a young artist in whom folk surrealism found its second wind; she was an artisan in hut painting and embroidery, as well as making decorative figures out of bread.

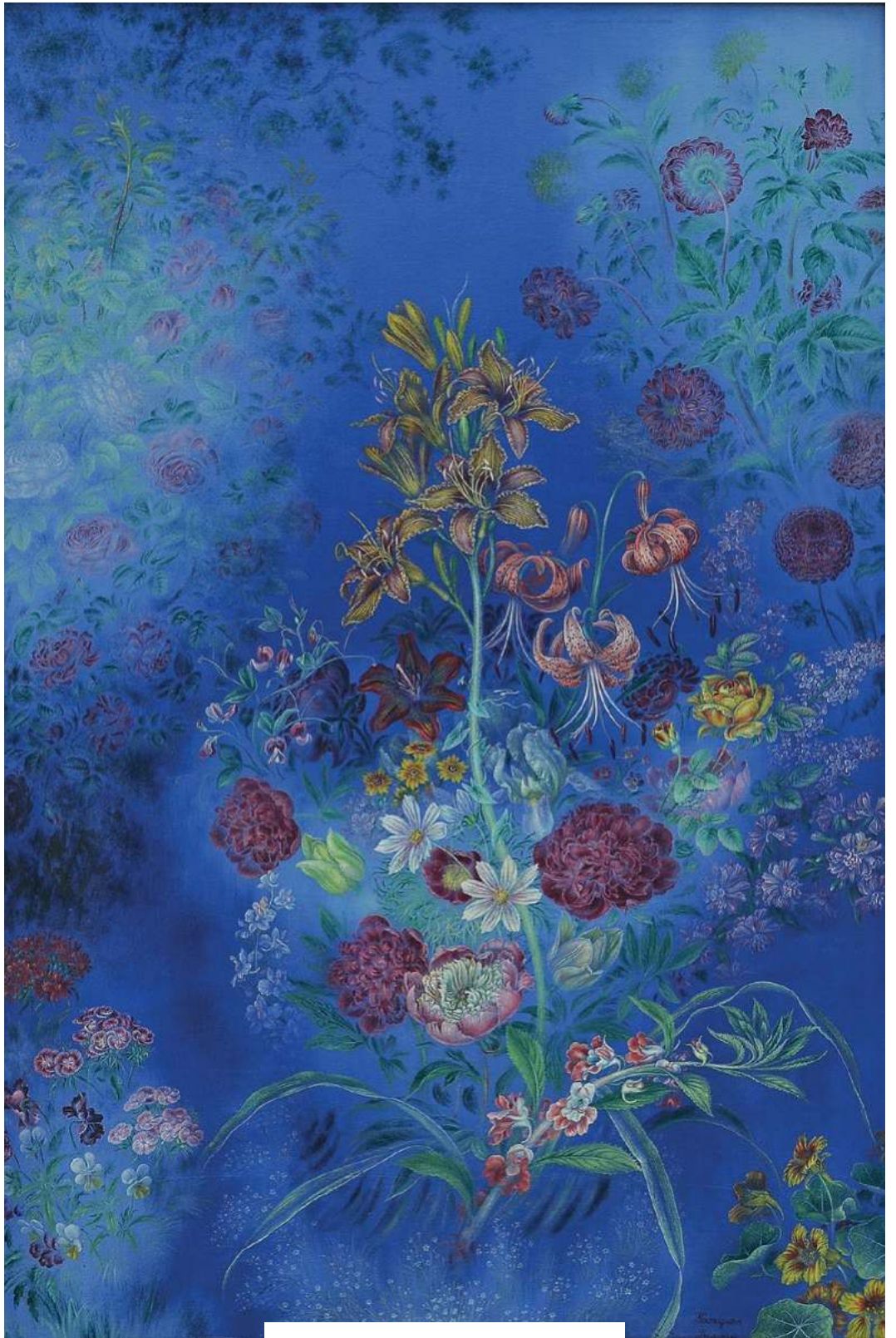
Many know Prymachenko as a unique, naturally gifted, self-taught artist, a half-wild granny in a headscarf, creating masterpieces in a distant village backwater. The mythology surrounding Maria Prymachenko was in part created by the artist herself, who spent several decades carefully cultivating this image after she returned to her home village. During the Soviet period, a peasant headscarf and a demonstrably rural way of life was an effective defense against many an ideological storm.

All the same, Maria Prymachenko and her unique cosmology did not appear out of thin air. They both grew out of the powerful folk avant-garde school of which Ekster and Prybylska were the driving force. Of course, it is also difficult to call a person self-taught when she worked shoulder to shoulder for two years with such distinguished artists as Krychevsky and Petrytsky, and then later collaborated with a film studio in Kyiv. Prymachenko's best work was made following her acquaintance with these illustrious modernist and folk artists. Having returned to her home village before the war, the artist made her own brand of distinctive art right up until her death. She created a whole artistic world, which would have a significant influence not only on Ukrainian fine art but also on design, fashion, and mass culture.

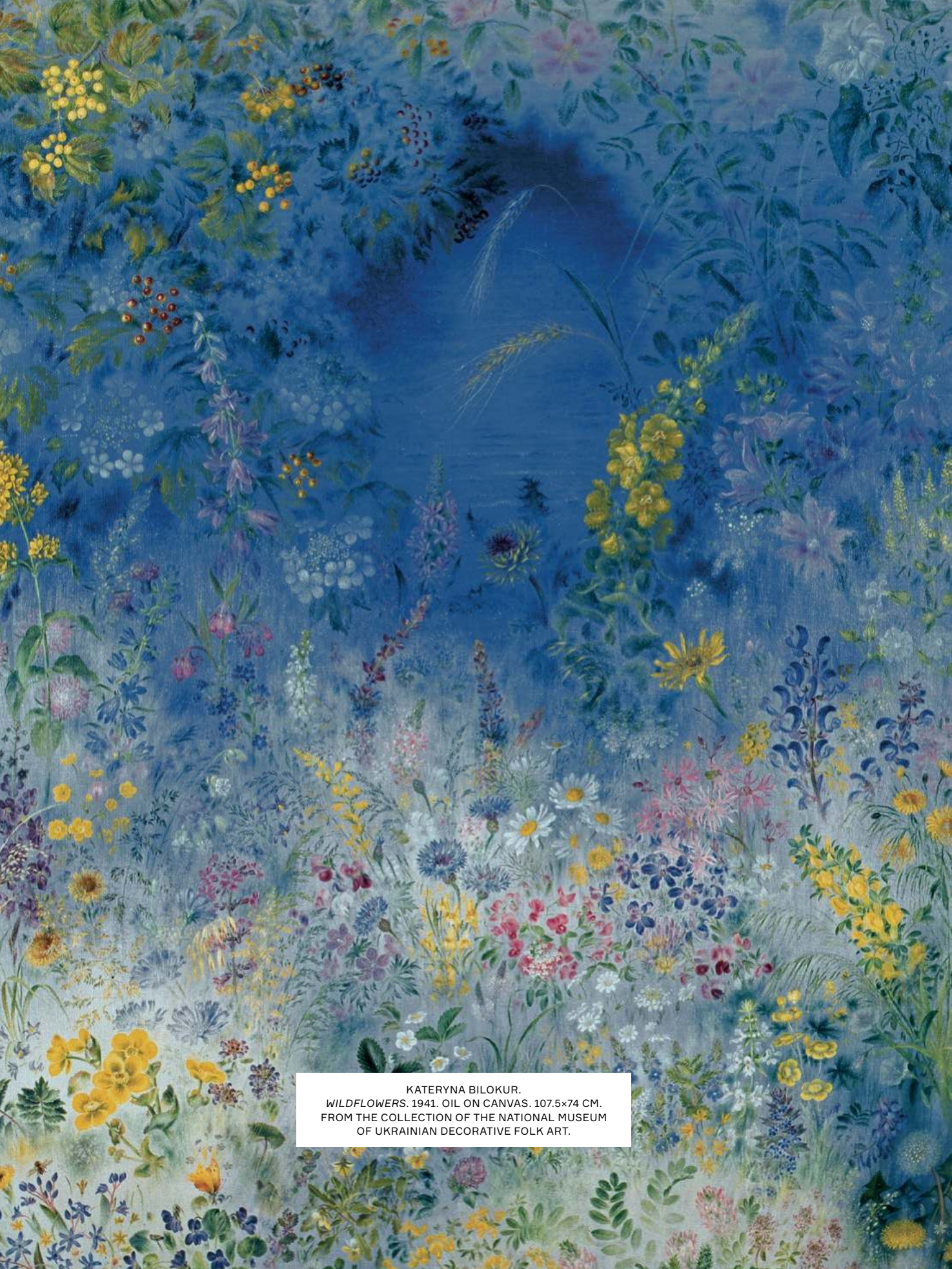
Between 1936 and 1937, Maria Prymachenko created albums of brilliant artwork, which were filled with fantastical characters, each of them evoking the spirit of surrealism. Almost immediately she began to receive all kinds of official bonuses for her work. Here it is worth remembering the bloody atmosphere of 1937 when the Boichukists were crushed by the Stalinist regime for daring to offer their own interpretation of folk art. In this comparison, the Soviet art establishment's paradoxical attitude, rather, its intentional doublethink becomes glaringly obvious. Folk art became an ideological tool under Stalinism. Having understood the need to demonstrate the prosperity and increased creativity of the masses, the Soviet authorities closed their eyes to the fundamental divergence between the folk-art aesthetic and the language of socialist realism. Decorative and applied art inhabited a sheltered niche, and it was thanks to this niche that the art of Maria Prymachenko and others like her survived and garnered acclaim. At the same time, this meant that it had a marginal status and for many years it was labeled as "naive."

<sup>158</sup> Also known in English as the Kyivan Monastery of the Caves, it is a historic Orthodox monastery, considered the center of Eastern Orthodox Christianity in Europe. [T.N.]

<sup>159</sup> NAN Ukrainy. Institut istorii Ukrainy, *Entsyklopediia istorii Ukrainy: Ukraina—Ukrainci* [Encyclopedia of the history of Ukraine: Ukraine—Ukrainians], vol. 1 (Kyiv: Naukova Dumka, 2018).



KATERYNA BILOKUR.  
*FLOWERS ON A BLUE BACKGROUND.*  
1942–1943. OIL ON CANVAS. 107×71 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL TARAS SHEVCHENKO MUSEUM.



KATERYNA BILOKUR.  
WILDFLOWERS. 1941. OIL ON CANVAS. 107.5×74 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM  
OF UKRAINIAN DECORATIVE FOLK ART.



Kateryna Bilokur was a unique artist who managed to preserve almost complete autonomy from any ideology while working during the oppressive Stalinist period. She never went to school, nor did she ever study drawing. She learned her artistic craft, as with reading and writing, by herself. Bilokur's story is an example of how a girl from a poor peasant family was treated in the early 20th century: giving her an education or even indulging her interest in becoming a professional artist was absolutely out of the question. Yet, her cry "I want to be an artist!" was not empty posturing, but the fundamental standpoint of someone who sacrificed her personal happiness for the chance to paint. And she succeeded. Furthermore, at the end of the 1930s, Bilokur's art attracted the attention of critics, and she had her first exhibition in 1941 in Poltava. The majority of Bilokur's early work was destroyed in the war, but the post-war period would inspire the next stage in the development of her work.

Taken together, Kateryna Bilokur's body of work makes up a unique floral universe. She did not follow the usual path of folk ornamentation, instead she preferred to create art in the spirit of the old Dutch masters. The existential tension held within her large, bright canvases is created through her use of spatial pause. A cosmic emptiness and darkness yawns in between the joyful floral compositions. It is as if the flowers appear out of nowhere, tentatively yet resolutely carried out of the universe's depths into life by the artist's vision. Dmytro Horbachov noted Bilokur's connection with the tradition of folk ornamentation in his work on Oleksander Bohomazov's theory of rhythm. He saw how the areas of figurative tension in her work alternate with intervals of absolute stillness. "The interval, the big open space is characteristic of Kyiv, and more generally, Ukrainian art. It is a sign of a 'steppe' mentality. As the writer Maik Yohansen joked, 'The steppe is something which isn't.'<sup>160</sup> It is precisely this thing which "isn't," the universal steppe, that takes center stage in the work of Kateryna Bilokur.

Kateryna Bilokur became a cult figure in her own lifetime but died in poverty. In contrast to the well-fed masters of Stalinist socialist realism who were fawned over by the country's leaders, folk artists, both male and female, usually received nothing more than paper certificates to celebrate their achievements.

<sup>160</sup> Horbachov, "Hopashno-sharovarna kultura," 21.

## CHAPTER 4.

# A MULTICULTURAL MOSAIC: WESTERN UKRAINE BEFORE AND AFTER JOINING THE USSR

## THE TRANSCARPATHIAN SCHOOL OF PAINTING

The art scene in Western Ukraine differed significantly from that in the central and eastern parts of the country. After Stalin's death, when the USSR's political climate changed and the thaw began, Tetiana Yablonska's work underwent a shift towards a soft modernism. It is telling that this shift occurred after a visit to an art exhibition of Transcarpathian artists.<sup>161</sup>

Following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the history of this region frayed into different strands. Up until 1939, the regions of today's Lviv, Ternopil, Ivano-Frankivsk, Volyn (Volhynia) and Rivne were part of Poland. Chernivtsi officially became a part of the USSR in 1940, but in reality it was under Romanian control until the end

<sup>161</sup> "And so the 'Thaw' had begun. The cult of personality was being dismantled, and an artistic revival had started. I felt trapped creating paintings on 'infantile themes.' I felt I had to push myself creatively. The Transcarpathians and their unusually interesting school of painting helped me. How fresh the work of Erdeli, Kotska, Manailo, Sholtes, Hliuk, and Bokshai seemed! Oh, how they were a breath of fresh air in our art! And how enthusiastically they took part in our exhibitions! It wouldn't be long however, before these artists would be tyrannized on Zhdanov's orders. But I digress. Their art had a great influence on me, especially when I so clearly felt the need to escape feeling trapped. Manailo's Kyiv exhibition and its exuberant success touched me deeply in my soul. And what was I doing? Somehow, Armen, Vadym Odainyk, his wife, and I set off in Vadym's car to Transcarpathia to paint. We stopped in the village of Apsha in the Solotvyno district, right by the border. Romanian villages, unusual architecture, and colorful national dress. Everything was unusually expressive. We worked a lot, with great energy. My creativity returned that spring." Tetiana Yablonska, "Pro sebe" [About me], *Dzerkalo tyzhden*, June 24, 2005, [https://zn.ua/ukr/SOCIUM/tetyana\\_yablonska\\_pro\\_sebe.html](https://zn.ua/ukr/SOCIUM/tetyana_yablonska_pro_sebe.html).

of the war. Transcarpathia became a part of the Soviet Union only in October 1944; between world wars the region was under the jurisdiction of Czechoslovakia, and during the war was annexed by the Kingdom of Hungary. These regions were the last to join Soviet Ukraine, and as a result they did not witness the awful purges of the late 1930s. This meant that the modernist tradition survived there, together with the memory of “other” art.

Western Ukraine is a striking mixture of cultures, languages, and ethnicities. Formed under unique historical circumstances, the region’s art comprises a wide variety of different traditions that, for decades, have served as a source of inspiration and an example of relative artistic freedom for the rest of Ukraine.

When the Soviets reached Transcarpathia, they encountered the region’s original and well-developed school of painting. Within the Soviet art scene at that time, the Transcarpathian artists seemed as if they were from a completely different planet. They distinguished themselves with their bright color palette, the clear influence of modernism (Cézannism, in particular), plein-air painting, and their beloved subject of Carpathian landscapes. Peers, countrymen, and fellow students at the Budapest Academy of Arts, Yosyp Bokshai and Adalbert Erdeli founded a public drawing school in Uzhhorod in 1927. Both the school’s teachers and its students incorporated the most progressive European styles into their work. Other Transcarpathian artists included Bokshai and Erdeli’s student Zoltan Sholtes, and graduate of the Prague Academy of Arts, Architecture, and Design, Fedir Manailo. The artists in this region sometimes combined their painting with rather unexpected jobs or activities. For example, Bokshai and Erdeli’s talented student Andrii Kotska, who graduated from the Hungarian Academy in Rome (Római Magyar Akadémia), worked as the chief officer at the Uzhhorod police department, and before that he worked as a teacher in a secluded Carpathian village.

Soviet Uzhhorod remained an important center for both official and unofficial artistic life. One of Bokshai and Erdeli’s most talented students was the Uzhhorod native Ferenc Szemán. A nonconformist and close friend of director Sergei Parajanov, he began to experiment with abstraction in the 1960s. The Soviet establishment did not look favorably upon Szemán, and the first solo exhibition of his work took place only in 1990.

In the second half of the 20th century, Pavlo Bedzir was a bright light in Western Ukraine’s Carpathian art scene, often working in tandem with his wife Yelyzaveta Kremnytska. The son of a priest and a close follower of eastern philosophy, he lived through his fair share of trial and hardship. In the 1960s, together with Szemán, Bedzir managed to win a government contract to work on the designs of new bus stops. During these years, Bedzir developed a recognizable artistic style which became known for its tendency towards abstract forms and use of plant motifs. In his pictures and drawings, trees are woven together with roots and upper branches, all hinting to the Soviet viewer that beyond the flimsy screen of reality lie radically different dimensions. The slightly terrifying, organic character of Bedzir’s work carries within it the energy of a slumbering mountain forest and the ancient Carpathian tradition of *molfarism*, a local variant of shamanism. It contains an entire universe of local tradition devoid of any vulgar ethnography, and its roots reach into eternity, untouched by fleeting ideology and passing kings.



PAVLO BEDZIR.  
FROM THE SERIES *FROM THE LIFE OF TREES*. 1994.  
GRATTAGE ON HARDBOARD. 100x150 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE XX-XXI MUSEUM.



ANDRII KOTSKA.  
*DELPHINIUMS*. 1971. OIL ON CANVAS. 116×130 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE YOSYP BOKSHAI  
TRANSCARPATHIAN REGIONAL ART MUSEUM.



ADALBERT ERDELI.  
*STILL LIFE WITH A RED CUP AND BLUEBELLS*.  
1946. OIL ON CANVAS. 69×82 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE YOSYP  
BOKSHAI TRANSCARPATHIAN REGIONAL  
ART MUSEUM.

# CULTURAL HEROES ON THE MARGINS OF EMPIRE, EPOCHS, AND GENRES

The small and charming town of Chernivtsi in the Bukovyna region<sup>162</sup> was historically a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Its inhabitants spoke German, Yiddish, Ukrainian, Romanian, Polish, and Russian, all of which led modern poet Igor Pomerantsev to call Chernivtsi a “small acoustic miracle.”<sup>163</sup> It was a true crossroads of cultures and fates. As in many regions of Ukraine, there was a high percentage of Jews in the local population. After World War II, a significant proportion of the Jewish population that survived the Holocaust moved to Romania, and from there to Palestine. A second wave of emigration happened after the collapse of the USSR. Today this town has somewhat fallen off the map, but people are increasingly remembering how it gave life to a whole host of brilliant German-language poets of Jewish origin in the interwar years. It was in Chernivtsi that the outstanding 20th century poet Paul Celan was born, living there until 1945. After he survived the Holocaust, he wrote his poem “Death Fugue” in Chernivtsi. This visionary poem was so avant-garde in its structure that it appeared to erase the boundaries between different art forms.

The fate of Rose Ausländer, another German-language author, was also intertwined with Chernivtsi. Unlike Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger, the 18-year-old “Anne Frank of Chernivtsi,” the talented poet—and Celan’s second cousin—Ausländer managed to survive the mass extermination of the Jews. In her memoirs, she remembers Chernivtsi as a town of dreamers and disciples populated by adherents of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud. In her twilight years the poet asked, “Why do I write?” She answered, “probably because I arrived on this earth in Chernivtsi. Because the world came to me through Chernivtsi.” The town also had its own, small, artistic tradition: the talented graphic artist Leon Kopelman and the famous cultural figure Arthur Kolnik also lived there.

One of the most impressive figures in the town’s art scene at the end of the 20th century was Bronislav Tutelman. Tutelman, or Buma, as he was more commonly known, was an active participant in Moscow and Kyiv’s unofficial art scene starting in the late 1970s. He was friends with Ilya Kabakov and other artists from that circle, taking part in exhibitions with them. In contrast to his colleagues who quickly left their provincial hometown, Buma was a true *genius loci*. No matter where he went, whether it was New York, Kyiv, Moscow, or Tel-Aviv, he always came back home. Tutelman’s early work was of a conceptual nature. In his paintings he explored the lives of symbols and people. The symbols always appeared in the context of the town. Tutelman portrayed his home town as something mysterious and sublime in which every common object, be it a streetlight, drainpipe, or electrical wire, gains a new meaning:

<sup>162</sup> The border area between Ukraine and Romania. [T.N.]

<sup>163</sup> Igor Pomerantsev, “Chernovtsy kak malenkoe akkusticheskoe chudo” [Chernivtsi as a small acoustic miracle], *Radio Svoboda*, September 4, 2010, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/2148073.html>.



ROMAN SELSKY.  
*STILL LIFE WITH A BOOK.*  
1926. OIL ON CANVAS.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE ANDREI  
SHEPTYTSKY NATIONAL MUSEUM IN LVIV.



BRUNO SCHULZ.  
*REVOLUTION IN THE TOWN* FROM *THE BOOKE OF IDOLATRY*.  
1920–1921. CLICHÉ VERRE. 17.4×22.7 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM IN  
KRAKOW, POLAND.





Вид из водосточной  
трубы 22.9.82.

В водосточной трубе

22.9.82.

Ъ. 89.

BRONISLAV TUTELMAN.  
A LANDSCAPE OF FOUR PAINTINGS.  
1989. OIL ON CANVAS. 520x130 CM.



HENRYK MIKOLASCH.  
*THE BLUE BOTTLE*. 1914.  
A PHOTO PRINT USING A TRIPLE LAYER OF  
RED, GREEN, AND BLUE FILTERS.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL  
MUSEUM IN WROCLAW, POLAND.

connecting the earth and sky.<sup>164</sup> Chernivtsi was and continues to be the beating heart at the center of the artist's work. Both his paintings from the 1980s and photography, which he began using in later decades, are nearly always continuing a conversation about home, whether it be the worldly Chernivtsi or something metaphorical, an abstract town. The collapse of the USSR proved a difficult time for Tutelman. After being cut off from the Moscow scene, he didn't manage to establish himself in Kyiv and remained alone in Chernivtsi. Today he's not just an artist, but the cultural hero for a whole era, a unique and charming character who is inextricably tied to the image of the town that always succeeded in captivating his imagination.

Three photographers from the Moscow Group of Four were from Chernivtsi too: Vyacheslav Tarnovetsky, Serhii Lopatiuk, and Boris Savelev. The group was formed and operated in Moscow, with the Russian photographer Alexander Sliussarev completing the quartet. By the 2010s, Savelev was spending most of his time in his hometown.<sup>165</sup> Today he is a famous photographer whose work is housed in the Tretyakov Gallery, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and other prestigious collections. At the end of the 1980s, a book of Savelev's photography projects was published by Thames and Hudson.<sup>166</sup> The main motifs in his work are the individual and the city, the absurd, the poetics of coincidence, and the accidental metaphysics of an individual's existence in a metropolis.

It would be impossible to talk about any *genius loci* of the 20th century and not mention Bruno Schulz. The modernist writer and graphic artist was born in 1892 into a Polonized Jewish family in the provincial Halychyna (Galician) town of Drohobych (Drohobycz in Polish), which today is situated in the Lviv region of Ukraine. He spent his entire life in this town, only leaving on rare occasions. Drohobych was the center of Schulz's universe and the setting for all his literary work, which he wrote in Polish. In his youth, Schulz received a fragmented art education in Lviv and Vienna, and from 1924 on he worked as the drawing and shop class teacher in a Drohobych gymnasium. In 1920, Schulz used the technically complex cliché verre method to create a series of prints which he called *The Booke of Idolatry*.<sup>167</sup>

The central motif in this series, as in a large part of Schulz's surviving work, is the admiration of haughty and stately women by feeble men. Indeed, the author himself is in almost every single print of the series situated amidst other submissive characters. The characteristically decadent eroticism of Schulz's art is highly reminiscent of the work of another artist from Galicia—Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. When the Red Army arrived in Drohobych in 1939, Schulz painted a portrait of Stalin and other Soviet leaders, as well as a huge socialist-realist painting, entitled *Freeing the People of Western*

<sup>164</sup> Alisa Lozhkina, "Bronislav Tutelman. Metafizyka Chernivtsiv" [Bronislav Tutelman: Metaphysics of Chernivtsi], in *Bronislav Tutelman: Katalog* (Chernivtsi, 2007).

<sup>165</sup> Alina Sanduliak, "Boris Savelev: v povsednevnosti ia ishchu unikalnye veshchi—svet, sostoianie, situatsii" [Boris Savelev: I look for the unique in the everyday—light, condition, situations], *Art Ukraine*, July 11, 2017, <https://artukraine.com.ua/a/boris-savelev--v-povsednevnosti-ya-ishchu-unikalnye-veshchi--svet-sostoyanie-situacii/>.

<sup>166</sup> *Secret City, Photographs from the USSR, Boris Savelev* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988).

<sup>167</sup> Mikołaj Gliński, "Bruno Schulz: The Immortal Artist," *Culture.PL*, November 19, 2013, <https://culture.pl/en/article/bruno-schulz-the-immortal-artist>.



DANYLO FIGOL.  
*VISITING SHADOWS*. PHOTO. 1937.  
FROM *SVITLO I TIN*, NO. 2 (1937).



DANYLO FIGOL.  
*THE VISITING SUN*. PHOTO. 1933.  
FROM *SVITLO I TIN*, NO. 7/8 (1933).



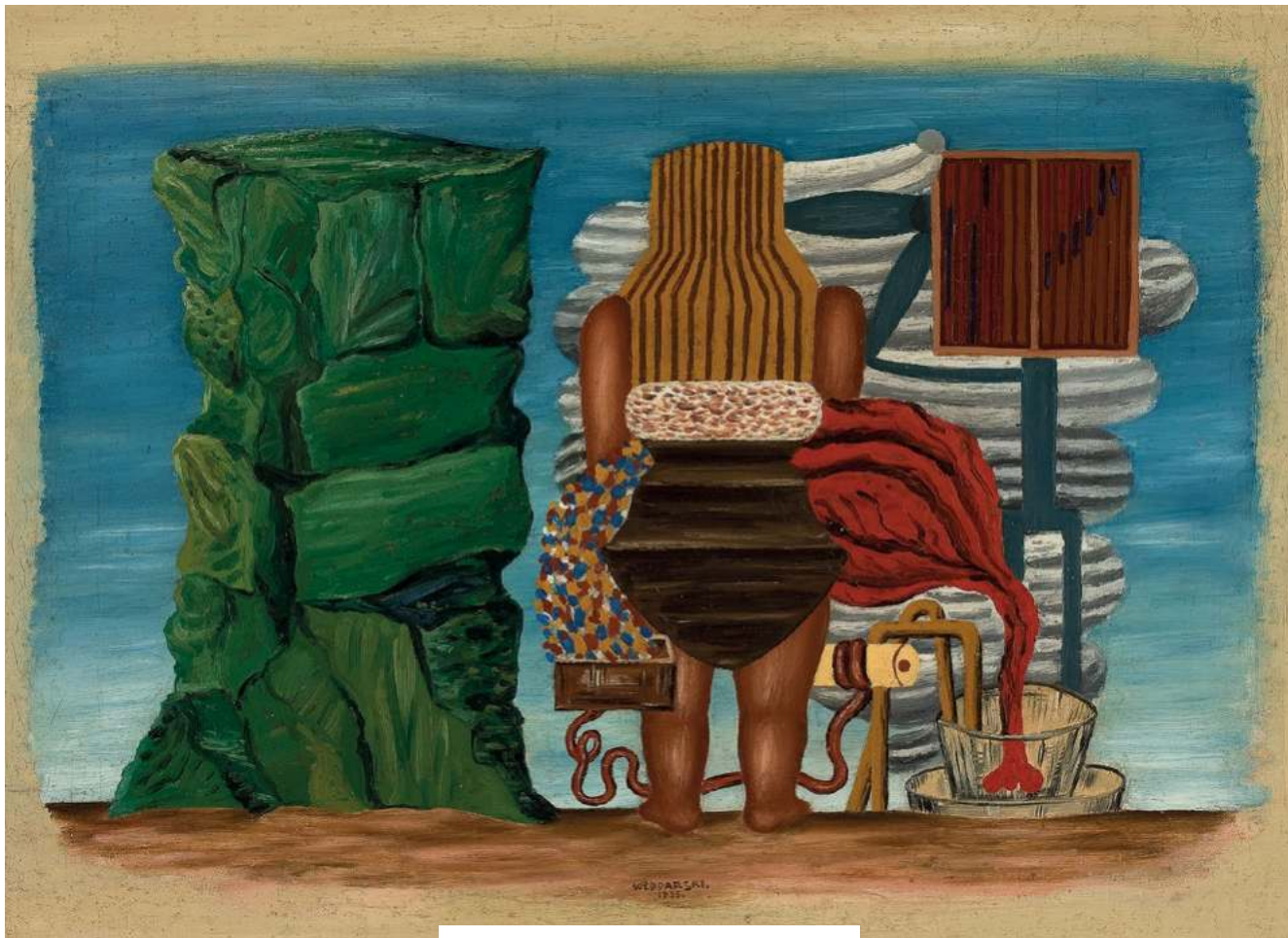
WITOLD ROMER.  
FROM THE SERIES START. PHOTO. 1939.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE ROMER FAMILY.

*Ukraine.* The artist was then arrested for using yellow and blue in his painting, the colors of the Ukrainian National Republic's flag. He was interrogated under the absurd accusation of Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism. The Germans arrived in Drohobych in 1941, and Schulz was again forced into the service of a new regime. In a cruel twist of fate, on 19 November 1942, the day Schulz's escape from the ghetto was planned for, a Jewish pogrom began in Drohobych. The brilliant artist and writer was killed by a bullet fired from the gun of a drunk Gestapo officer, just a few minutes' walk from the house where he was born.

## THE FORGOTTEN NAMES OF INTERWAR LVIV

Without a doubt, Lviv was the region's main cultural center and the one with the strongest art scene. This city in Halychyna has an ancient and complicated history characterized by a mixture of Ukrainian, Polish, and Jewish heritage. In the early 20th century, the influence of the Vienna Secession and modernism in Lviv was unmistakable. The city, which was then situated in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, also began to see the gradual penetration of other contemporary European art movements such as Cubism, expressionism, and futurism. In 1913, an art exhibition of work by artists associated with the Berlin gallery Der Sturm was put on in the Art-Industrial Museum.<sup>168</sup> This allowed the viewing public of Lviv to become acquainted with artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Alexej von Jawlensky, Oskar Kokoschka, and others. These new art movements weren't immediately accepted, but they began to be covered and discussed in a string of articles published in local newspapers. Following World War I, the dissemination of new art movements sped up considerably. This was initiated mainly by the Friends of Art Society which organized a whole array of avant-garde art exhibitions. An exhibition of Polish expressionists was set up in Lviv in 1918 under the aegis of this society. This exhibition had a big impact on the local art scene. During the three years from 1920 to 1922, the newest Polish art, which was calling itself "formism," returned to Lviv. Gradually Lviv artists began to join the ranks of the avant-garde art movement, and many went abroad to study and gain experience. Between 1924 and 1929, a large group of artists from Lviv moved to Paris. Some of them (including the future star of Lviv modernism Margit Reich) became students at Fernand Léger's Académie Moderne. Also studying in Paris at that time was Reich's husband, an artist who would be central to the Lviv art scene in the middle of the 20th century, Roman Selsky. Ivan Trush and Oleksa Novakivsky also worked in Lviv. Petro Kholodny and the former querofuturist Pavlo Kovzhun moved there following the failure of the Ukrainian revolution. Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky would play a hugely important role in supporting the Ukrainian artistic tradition.

<sup>168</sup> Today the building houses the Lviv National Museum.



MAREK WŁODARSKI (HENRYK STRENG).  
*THE SORCERER AT A GREEN ROCK*. 1930.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 60×81 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL MUSEUM IN WARSAW, POLAND.



KARLO ZVIRYNSKY.  
*VERTICAL-2*. 1957. PLYWOOD AND  
TEMPERA ON WOOD. 67×86.5 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



Unfortunately, the multicultural artistic modernism of interwar Lviv remains a relatively under-researched topic — indeed, it was practically taboo in the Soviet period. History was rewritten for the sake of ideology: it was important to show that Western Ukraine's entry into the USSR was an organic and historically necessary process. The Soviet authorities made it seem that the realist tradition was the sole important art form in interwar Lviv, preferring to remain silent about the influence of the international avant-garde and its associated movements. Thus, all facts and events that did not fit in with the set chronology, whether it be for ethnic or ideological reasons, were scrubbed from history. As a result of all this, after the collapse of the USSR, academic research in art history found itself in crisis.<sup>169</sup>

In the 1930s, Lviv was host to two leading artist organizations: the Association of Independent Ukrainian Artists (ANUM) and Artes. ANUM (1931–1939) organized both solo and group exhibitions in which artists from Lviv exhibited their work alongside the art of Halychyna artists living in Paris, as well as renowned artists like Pablo Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani, Gino Severini, Marc Chagall, and others. The Artes association organized 13 exhibitions in different cities during its years of operation (1929–1935). The association's members actively experimented with photography and cinema, with some of them going on to co-found the Lviv cinema club Avanhard. Its members included Reich and Selsky, Henryk Streng, and many others. Reich and Selsky were among the few cultural figures who remained in Lviv after surviving World War II. They ran a salon in their home, which became an important center for intellectual life in the city. In that informal setting, the remains of the interwar art tradition were inherited by a completely different — Soviet — Lviv.

In 1933, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti came to Lviv for the performance of his play *The Captives* at the city's opera theater. By that time, Marinetti was no longer the radical rebel he had been in the 1910s, but instead a favorite of Mussolini who was campaigning for futurism to be declared the official art form of Fascist Italy. His arrival in Lviv was welcomed by those on the right and criticized by those on the left.

A separate page in the city's history of this period belongs to the Lviv school of photography. As late as the 1910s, photography enthusiast, head of the Lviv Photographic Society, critic, and *kulturträger* Henryk Mikolasch was still living and working in Lviv. A lot of Mikolasch's work was published in Vienna, Krakow, and Lviv. He played around with the fashionable genres of that time, exploring the boundary between photography and graphic art, in the meantime also becoming a pioneer in color photography in Western Ukraine. A famous photograph by Mikolasch is his *The Blue Bottle*, which is reminiscent of Cézanne's still lifes. The photograph was made in 1914 using a triple layer of red, green, and blue filters. From 1921, Mikolasch was head of the photography department at the Lviv Polytechnic. The institute of photography that he founded at the Polytechnic would become an important center for experimentation in the field of pictorialism. This was an important stage in photography's

<sup>169</sup> Today, the history of a “different” Lviv is being reintroduced into pan-Ukrainian history. This is in part thanks to the efforts of the Lviv artist and curator Andri Boiarov. See: Andrij Boiarov, “MAJAKI and МАЯКИ\* Modernist Art in the Interwar Lviv. Chronological Outline,” *Lviv: City, Architecture, Modernism*, eds. Bohdan Cherkas and Andrzej Szczerski (Wrocław: Museum of Architecture, 2017), 327–349.

journey to become an independent art form, and Mikolasch's experiments played an influential role in the history of Lviv photography. Representatives of the Lviv photography school attended the Polytechnic, including the likes of Janina Mierzecka and Józef Świtkowski. Another prominent head of the photography department was Witold Romer, a photographer and pioneer in aerial photography, which was a popular genre at that time. After escaping Lviv in 1941, Romer went to work for the British Royal Air Force and invented an innovative way to take nighttime aerial photographs.

From 1930 to 1939, the Ukrainian Photographic Society (UPhoto) was active in Lviv. This society of amateur photographers introduced the art and technology of photography to the Ukrainian-speaking population of Western Ukraine. Each year from 1930 to 1934, the members of UPhoto held the *Ukrainian Photography Exhibition*. In 1935, they put on an exhibition entitled *Our Homeland in Photographs*, which showed 450 shots by 67 photographers divided into three categories: "Regional Art Photography," "Documentary Photography," and "Beginners' Photography." The sixth and seventh UPhoto exhibitions (in 1937 and 1938) were called *The Exhibition of Ukrainian Art Photography*. The eighth exhibition, planned for 1939, did not take place due to the outbreak of World War II. Active members of the society included Danylo Figol, Yulian Dorosh, Yaroslav Savka, and Stepan Shchurat. From 1933 to 1939, Shchurat published the first specialized photography magazine in Western Ukraine, called *Svitlo i tin* (Light and shadow).

It appeared that absolutely everybody had suddenly become interested in photography in interwar Lviv. The prominent Polish philosopher and student of Husserl, Roman Ingarden spent a whole decade from 1931 to 1941 teaching at Lviv university. As an amateur photographer, he created a whole series of work that the modern art scholar, and director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow (MOCAK), Maria Anna Potocka would later call "phenomenological photography."<sup>170</sup>

The most important experiments by Lviv photographers in this period, just like their avant-garde counterparts in other countries, were in montage and collage. Margit Reich and other members of the Artes group took part in this experimentation, too. Montage, though in this case literary, was an important aspect of the creative legacy of Debora Vogel, who was one of the most brilliant women of the Lviv avant-garde.<sup>171</sup> Vogel was an art-critic, poet, and one-time fiancée of Bruno Schulz; indeed it was in their correspondence that Schulz's first literary masterpiece was born: *The Street of Crocodiles*. Vogel engaged with constructivism and other new art movements of the period, writing about art in Polish and Yiddish. She died tragically with her whole family

<sup>170</sup> "While taking photos he had a realization and stumbled upon a theory. He placed his photos in a philosophical context, tending to adopt a confrontational interpretation. Any analysis of Ingarden's photographic legacy needs to take context into account. The assessment of any image depends on the relationship between the aesthetic of representation and aesthetic theory that undergirds it. In this game between thought and image, the image appears to be inaccessibly simple, almost a little naive in its attitude of 'open acceptance of everything.' ... It could be said that the philosopher used the artistic photograph as a way to privately confirm his own aesthetic views. It became visual evidence of the theory: 'this shot is good, a result of my intention, which means that probably, what I think is right.'" Translation from: Maria Anna Potocka, *MOCAK FORUM* (Krakow: Museum of Contemporary Art), no.2 (November 2015).

<sup>171</sup> Andrii Boiarov, Paweł Polit, and Karolina Szymaniak, eds., *Montages. Debora Vogel and the New Legend of the City* (Łódź: Museum Sztuki, 2017).

during the Holocaust.<sup>172</sup> Debora Vogel's body was identified by Henryk Streng, an artist from Artes and the illustrator of a book of her essays. Streng, by some miracle, managed to escape a concentration camp and went into hiding for two years, saved in part thanks to changing his name to Marek Włodarski.

Lviv's cultural landscape was completely reshaped by the arrival of the Soviet regime, World War II, and the Holocaust. Some perished while others fled, but nonetheless the city's artistic tradition survived. Looking at the 1950s work of Roman Selsky's student Karlo Zvirynsky without knowing Lviv's avant-garde history, it would be hard to believe that his artwork was made in the same era and the same country as the countless images of "high" socialist realism. His series of experiments with abstraction were comprised of non-figurative compositions made from raw materials such as twine, wood, tin, and cardboard. A deeply religious Christian who received his elementary education in a monastery, Zvirynsky found himself in an ambiguous position. Like many artists of his generation from across Ukraine, he lived in parallel to the establishment, though not in direct confrontation with it. He taught at the Lviv Institute of Applied and Decorative Art, but it was his "private academy" at his home that would prove more important to his students. Zvirynsky's biography successfully illustrates the situation faced by a whole range of Western Ukrainian artists working within the context of the Soviet art scene. They received no state recognition or prizes, nor were they subject to particularly severe persecution. This allowed an original art scene to gradually take shape in Lviv, where the influence of the European modernist tradition could be felt even on the level of official, as well as decorative and applied art.

<sup>172</sup> Lizaveta Herman, "Debora Fogel ili Novaia legenda Lvova" [Debora Vogel or the new legend of Lviv], *Levyi bereg*, June 8, 2018.

## CHAPTER 5.

# A “DIFFERENT” KIND OF ART AND THE LATE SOVIET PERIOD: 1953 TO THE END OF THE 1980s

## THE BEGINNING OF THE THAW AND AUSTERE STYLE

Stalin died on 5 March 1953 after being in power for 29 years. The leader’s departure shook Soviet society to its core and ushered in a radical transformation in the nation’s sociopolitical climate. At first, a reverent attitude was maintained towards the former leader. A sarcophagus was built for Stalin’s body in the Kremlin mausoleum alongside the most sacred corpse of them all: Lenin’s.<sup>173</sup> However, in 1956, at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the new general secretary of the party Nikita Khrushchev gave his “secret speech,” also known as “On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences.” In this historic speech, Khrushchev accused Stalin of a multitude of crimes and of establishing a cult of personality. He also announced that the victims of state repression should be rehabilitated. This speech marked the beginning of de-Stalinization. The portraits and sculptures of the former leader that had once accompanied Soviet citizens wherever they went — in state institutions, on the metro, and throughout the urban landscape — were taken down.<sup>174</sup> Museums began to change

<sup>173</sup> Stalin was only removed from the mausoleum in 1961.

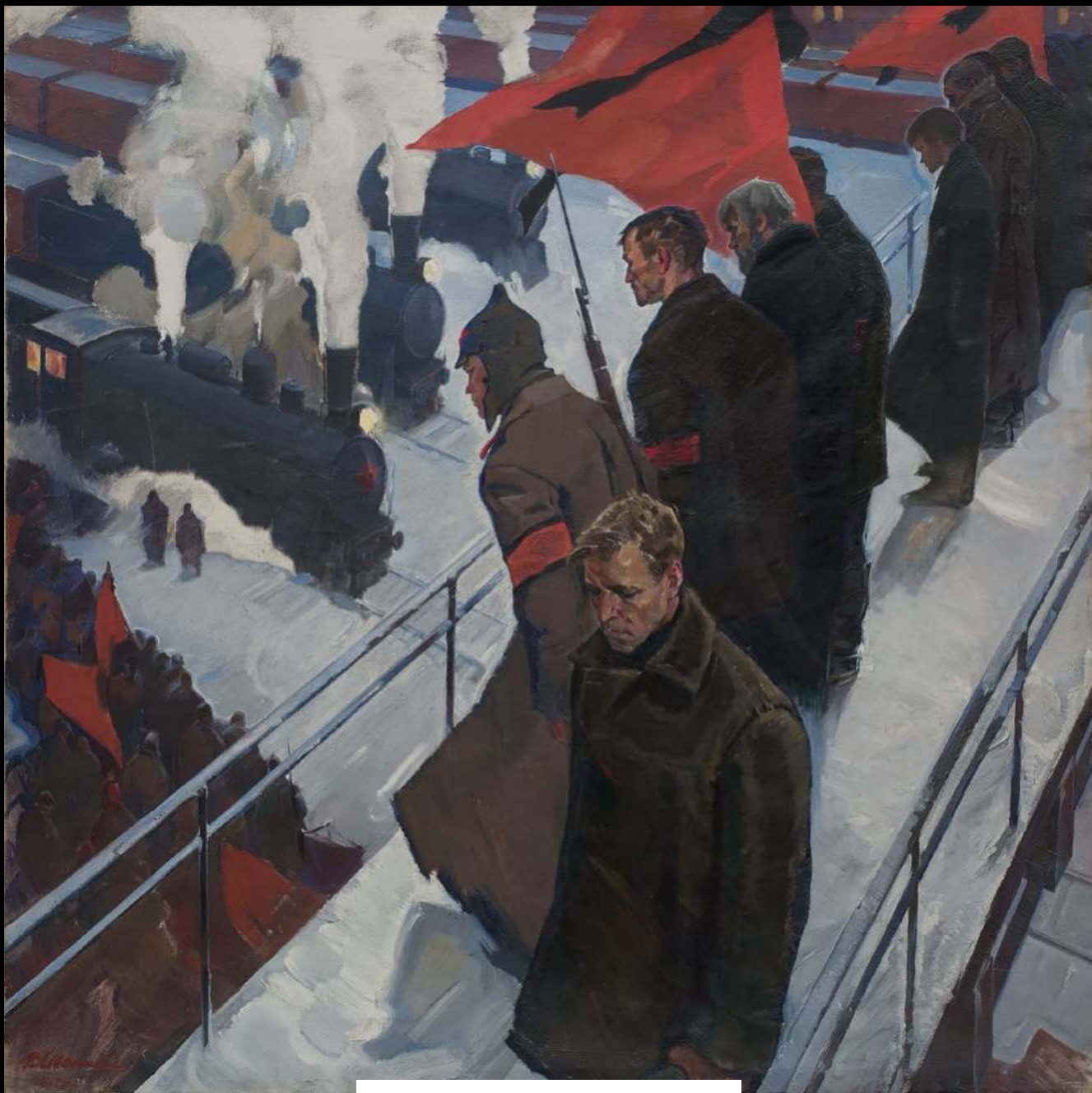
<sup>174</sup> “The portrait of that being had loomed large over us for thirty years. ... It was impossible to even take a step without being greeted by him on the right, the left and straight ahead. It was hard to defamiliarize ourselves from that face, from the whole host of associations which it prompted in us, to look at his features openly and without prejudice,” said Daniil Andreev, a writer-cum-mystic who spent 10 years in a Stalinist camp. See: Daniil Andreev, “Temnyi pastyr” [Dark shepherd], in *Roza mira* [The rose of the world], book 11 *K metaistorii posledego stoletia* [Toward a metahistory of the last century], <http://rozamira.org/rm/htm/index.html>.



IRYNA PAP.  
 THE TARAS SHEVCHENKO NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF KYIV.  
 KYIV, APRIL 1961. MANUALLY ENLARGED PRINT ON SILVER  
 BROMIDE PHOTO PAPER.  
 PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST'S FAMILY.

what was on show. The most enterprising artists, like Serhii Hryhoryev, managed to save their work by erasing all traces of the disgraced dictator. Where it was impossible to remove Stalin, museum staff hid the pieces out of view in museum storerooms.

Soviet society was unable to live without any kind of icons of socialism. The system needed propaganda. A popular idea at the time was that all the horrors of totalitarianism, the excesses of collectivization, and the repressions resulted from Stalin perverting the bright and true intentions of the first leader of the Bolshevik revolution. The cult of Stalin was unilaterally replaced by the cult of Lenin. Thus Ukrainian “Leniniana” became a huge industry, fulfilling state orders to create portraits of the leader of the proletariat. The main task of the Kyiv State Art Institute (KSAI), and other high-profile academic institutions, became to prepare its students to service this industry. In 1953, Oleksandr Lopukhov’s diploma submission was the painting *To Petrograd*, a future classic of Soviet art. The painting, which would become a sensation almost immediately, depicts an episode from the state-approved history of Lenin’s life when he traveled to Russia on a steam locomotive from Finland in 1917. This is a striking example



VIKTOR SHATALIN.  
*LENIN IS DEAD. NATIONWIDE MOURNING.* 1967.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 245x243 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL  
ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.

of how mass cinema culture helped create the mythology of socialist realism, because the painting doesn't correspond to actual history, rather it references Mikhail Romm's 1939 film *Lenin in October*. Viktor Shatalin's *Lenin Speaks on Red Square* (1959) is done in a similar vein to Lopukhov's painting, inspired by revolutionary photography as opposed to historical fact. In 1957, Shatalin became famous for his revolutionary-historical work *Through Valleys and Over Hills*. Both artists were professors at the KSAI and important figures in the post-Stalinist Soviet establishment. In the early 1980s, together with a whole host of artists from an earlier time, they became the teachers of the future leaders of the Ukrainian New Wave.

The period of the Thaw began following Stalin's death and the 20th Party Congress in 1956. In Ukraine it lasted until 1965, whereupon the first wave of arrests of the intelligentsia took place. The final blow for the rest of the USSR came in 1968 when Soviet troops invaded Czechoslovakia.

An interesting character, active both before and after the Thaw, was the painter and Soviet spy Mykola Hlushchenko. While living in Berlin and Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, the former White army soldier Hlushchenko worked as both an artist and a secret service agent.<sup>175</sup> He maintained links with the Ukrainian diaspora and reported on the mood in Europe to the Soviet authorities. It was thanks to the director Oleksander Dovzhenko that he acquired a Soviet passport in 1923.<sup>176</sup> In 1940, while preparing an exhibition of Soviet folk art in Berlin, Agent Yarema (the artist's secret service alias) found out that Fascist Germany was preparing to attack the USSR. Hlushchenko's report arrived on Molotov's and Stalin's desks, but they ignored it. The artist was surrounded by the rumor that he was personally acquainted with the German *Führer* and that he allegedly even gave him painting lessons. One thing is known for sure: upon German Minister for Foreign Affairs Ribbentrop's arrival at the Soviet exhibition in Berlin, he stated publicly that Hitler held the artist's talent in high regard and presented Hlushchenko with an album of the German leader's own watercolors.<sup>177</sup> From 1944 on, Mykola Hlushchenko lived in Kyiv and painted restrained, yet lyrical landscapes. With the arrival of the Thaw, he resumed active travel around Europe as well as painting his beloved modernist impasto paintings, which channeled the spirit of the Fauvists and the Nabis group. Hlushchenko's bright landscapes, which were unusual by Soviet standards, generated great interest amongst the viewing public.<sup>178</sup>

This period saw the weakening of the USSR's cultural isolation. The international art exhibitions in Moscow at the end of the 1950s played a large role in shifting

<sup>175</sup> The documentary evidence of this fact was first uncovered in the 1980s in the KGB archives by the art researcher Eduard Dymshyts. The evidence was quickly published on behalf of the security services in the newspaper *Vechirnyi Kyiv* (Evening Kyiv).

<sup>176</sup> Thus allowing him to leave the country. [T.N.]

<sup>177</sup> Halyna Petrivna Herasymova, "Hlushchenko Mykola Petrovych," in *Entsyklopediia istorii Ukrainy* [Encyclopedia of the history of Ukraine], ed. V. A. Smolii, NAN Ukrainy Instytut istorii Ukrainy (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 2004), [http://www.history.org.ua/?termin=Glushchenko\\_M](http://www.history.org.ua/?termin=Glushchenko_M).

<sup>178</sup> According to several witnesses, the artist's Odesa exhibition in 1956 was visited by 18,000 people. See: Irina Olikh, "Shtrikhi k portretu khudozhnika. Vystavka Nikolaja Glushchenko v Kieve" [Strokes for a portrait of an artist. Mykola Hlushchenko exhibition in Kyiv], *Artkhiv*, March 2018, [https://artchive.ru/news/3256~Shtrikhi\\_k\\_portretu\\_khudozhnika\\_Vystavka\\_Nikolaja\\_Glushchenko\\_v\\_Kieve](https://artchive.ru/news/3256~Shtrikhi_k_portretu_khudozhnika_Vystavka_Nikolaja_Glushchenko_v_Kieve).

artistic perspectives and in the formation of the Soviet unofficial art scene. In 1956, an extensive Pablo Picasso exhibition opened at the Pushkin Museum. To the Soviet viewer unversed in modernism, the exhibition came as something of a shock. In 1957, the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students took place with 34,000 people arriving from 131 countries. After living behind the Iron Curtain, the USSR took this chance to meet the outside world as a cause for great celebration. In the summer of 1959, the American National Exhibition took place in Sokolniki Park. The US Secret Service was particularly diligent in choosing what art to present. Abstract expressionism, with its philosophy of unbounded freedom, was chosen for its ideological opposition to socialist realism and unexpectedly became a weapon in the Cold War.<sup>179</sup> It was thanks to the efforts of the CIA that the Soviet intelligentsia first discovered the art of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Willem de Kooning. Two years later, in 1961, an exhibition of French art opened at the same location. Among the art on show, viewers became acquainted with the abstract art of Yves Klein, Pierre Soulages, and Jean Dubuffet, as well as the surrealists René Magritte and Yves Tanguy. Exhibitions of modern English and Belgian art also took place at this time.<sup>180</sup>

The arrival of an “austere style” was an important milestone during these times of change. Having rejected the varnished hypocrisy of socialist realism, young artists attempted to speak in “hard truths.” The heroes of their canvases were, overall, people from romanticized professions, such as polar explorers, geologists, and young members of the Komsomol laying claim to distant Siberia. These heroes were not just faceless cogs in the totalitarian system; rather, they were young, bright intellectuals and individuals absolute in their determination to change the country for the better. Since the USSR released the first satellite into orbit in 1957, the theme of conquering the cosmos took up its own role in the Soviet collective imagination, as well as in the expressive language of the period’s austere style. This style drew on the posters and public art campaigns of the 1920s, creating a composite portrait of a young generation that had begun to flourish in the age of hope following the death of Stalin. This art wasn’t rebellious or dissenting; it was an expression of sincere faith in the rejuvenation of the system. In the second half of the 1960s and in the 1970s, this austere style would transform into a purely lyrical and metaphysical art.

This movement would give rise to a whole generation of artists in Russia and in other Soviet republics, for example Tahir Salahov, Viktor Popkov, and Geli Korzhev. In Ukraine, freedom of thought came at a high price. The system in the republic was much more reactionary, oppressive, and immovable. The austere style did appear in Ukraine, but it came later and was costly. That said, it played an important part in transforming the creative language of a whole range of artists. Elements of the austere style can be seen in the work of artists such as Vilen Chekaniuk, Dmytro Shavykin, Mikhail (Moisei) Vainshtein, and Viktor Ryzhykh. Perhaps the purest examples of the austere style can be seen in the early art of Vladyslav Mamsikov and Ihor Hryhoryev.

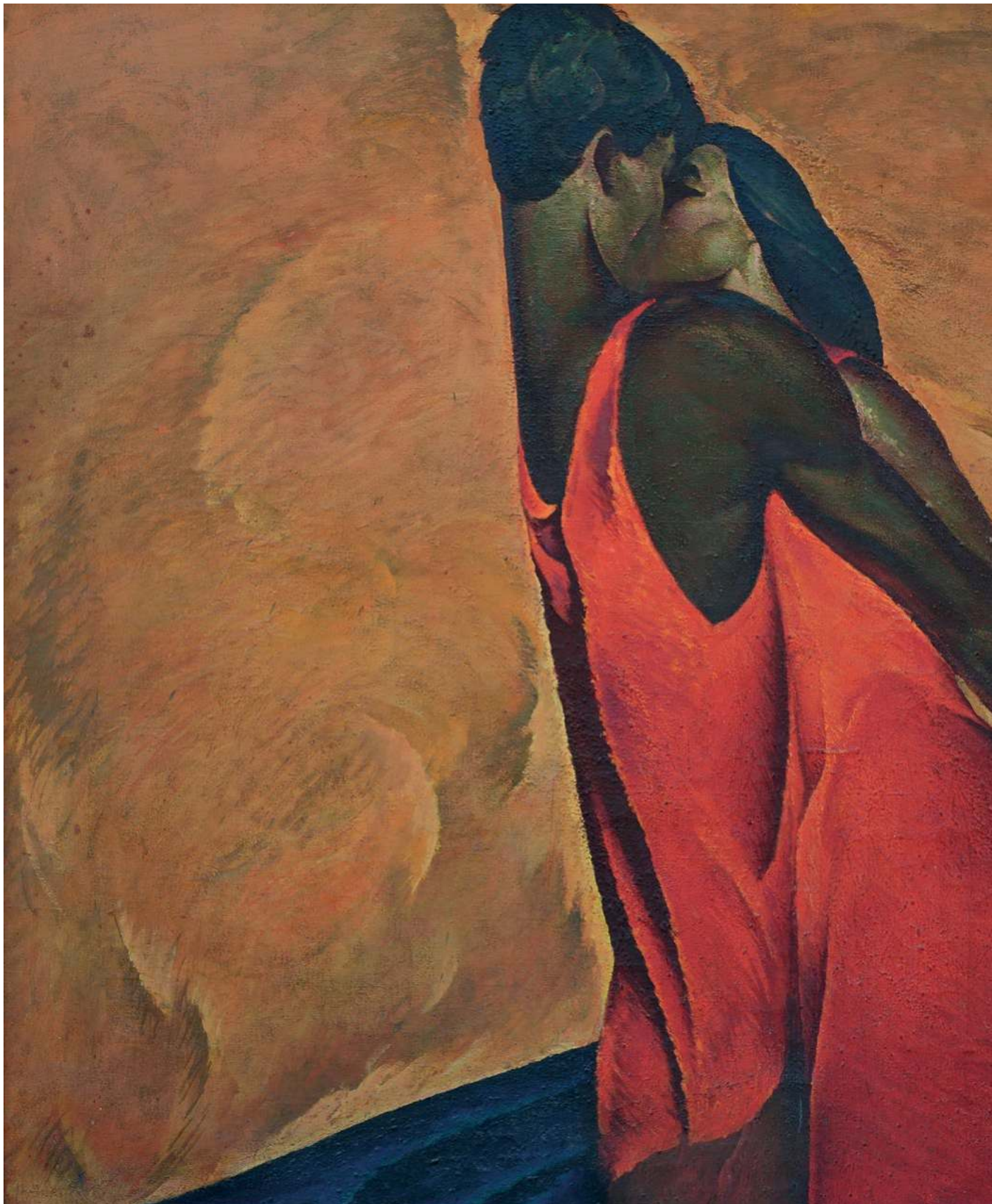
<sup>179</sup> Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 2001).

<sup>180</sup> Ioganson, “Pervye tridsat let moskovskogo soiuz khudozhnikov,” 555.





VILEN CHEKANIUK.  
*THE FIRST KOMSOMOL CELL IN THE VILLAGE.*  
1958. OIL ON CANVAS. 220×180 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL  
ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.





OLEKSANDR ATSMANCHUK.  
*FLIGHT*. 1967.  
TEMPERA ON CANVAS. 189.5×219 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
ODESA FINE ARTS MUSEUM.



TETIANA YABLONSKA.  
SWANS. 1966.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 105.5×129.5 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



MYKOLA HLUSHCHENKO.  
BY THE SEA. 1970.  
OIL ON CARDBOARD. 70×98.5 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.

An increasing demand for intimacy was reflected in the art of another representative of the generation of the late 50s and 60s: the Odesan Oleksander Atsmanchuk. In 1957, his painting *Order Given* was shown for the first time at a regional exhibition.<sup>181</sup> The scene, which depicts a farewell between a female revolutionary and her beloved soldier, is very much in the spirit of Thaw-era romanticism. Instead of the usual appeal to the collective that characterized high socialist realist art, the artist withdraws into a more melodramatic lyricism. The openly modernist painting *Flight*, in which a couple kisses passionately, is even further away from the artistic sensibilities of the establishment.

## THE 1960s GENERATION: DISSIDENTS IN POLITICS, NEO-MODERNISTS IN ART

In the 1960s, official “realism” began to diverge even further from a more traditional understanding of realism and incorporate aspects of national and international modernism into itself. This period also saw the emergence of two parallel art worlds, exemplifying a kind of hyperbolic geometry in which they were simultaneously separate and intersecting. One was establishment art, and the other was the unofficial art scene with its own narratives, values, and heroes. Despite the mutual antipathy that existed between these two worlds, many artists were forced to exist in both. This would have a significant influence on the character of Soviet art from this period. Apart from “Lenin factories” and the mass production of Lenin portraits and increasingly meaningless propaganda slogans, art was moving further and further away from Stalinist socialist realism. The one thing that did continue to connect the two, however, was the Aesopian language used in the rhetoric of Soviet art criticism.

After the Thaw, several movements emerged in Soviet art that were situated outside of public artistic discourse and no longer state-approved. They were traditionally labeled using several terms: unofficial, underground, or nonconformist. Each of these terms contains its own nuance in meaning. Nonconformist and underground art were characterized by the artists’ political and existential opposition to those in power. In the Ukrainian context, and in Kyiv in particular, the most suitable umbrella term for artistic practice which deviated from the party line and that was subject to harsh censorship and constraint, was “alternative” or “unofficial” art. This kind of art only appeared in singular bursts and was often the result of significant compromise by the artist.

<sup>181</sup> *Vystavka proizvedenii khudozhnika Aleksandra Pavlovicha Atsmanchuka (1923–1974)* [Exhibition of work by artist Oleksandr Atsmanchuk (1923–1974)] (Odesa: Odesa Museum of Western and Eastern Art, 1975).

After Stalin's death, the surviving witnesses of the Great Terror began to be released. In 1962, on a wave of Thaw-era liberalism, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was published in the literary journal *Novyi mir* (New world).<sup>182</sup> This tale of prisoner life in a labor camp had the effect of an exploding bomb in Soviet society. Parallel to officially sanctioned literature, *samizdat*, or in Ukrainian, *samvydav*,<sup>183</sup> began to play an ever-bigger role in the life of the intelligentsia. From the beginning of the 1960s, Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*, another shocking literary account of Stalinist repression, began to be distributed through *samizdat*. After 1954, people began to finally feel that they could air their opinions out loud, seek the truth, and gain a certain measure of independence from the state leviathan. In the Thaw period, the dissident movement wasn't underground, but part of an open and public discourse.

The *shistdesiatnyky*, or "sixtiers," movement in Ukraine was a cultural-political phenomenon. The humanitarian intelligentsia fought Russification and worked for the revival of a national culture. Their agenda didn't include a demand that Ukraine leave the USSR; rather, they stood for the liberalization of the existing regime. The *shistdesiatnyky* would have most influence in the literary sphere. In fine art, the married couple Alla Horska and Viktor Zaretsky, both artists and political activists, would become the symbol of the nationally oriented *shistdesiatnyky*. Their flat was a meeting place for artists, literary types, patriotically minded dissidents, and recently released political prisoners. The artist Liudmyla Semykina was also associated with this movement. Another center of cultural life for this generation was the studio of Ivan Honchar, an artist and collector of folk art.<sup>184</sup> The most politically active out of all the artists was Horska. Along with other human rights activists, such as director Les Taniuk and poets Vasyl Symonenko and Ivan Svitlychny, she was among the founders of the Club of Creative Youth. This club was a favorite meeting place for the young Kyiv intelligentsia of the 1960s.

The *shistdesiatnyky* movement began as a culturological exercise under the aegis of the Komsomol and initially drew little attention from the state. But this quickly changed in 1962 when, amid heightened interest in the rehabilitation of victims of state repressions, members of the group set up a commission to investigate rumors about mass graves near the village of Bykivnia outside Kyiv. In 1937, thousands of political prisoners were buried there. They had been tortured in the basements of the NKVD,<sup>185</sup> transported out of Kyiv, and shot on site.<sup>186</sup> In 1941, the occupying Nazis were actually the first to mention the mass graves near Bykivnia. The first thing that members of the commission saw when they arrived at the presumed site of the

<sup>182</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. "Odin den Ivana Denisovicha povest," [One day in the life of Ivan Denisovich: A story], *Novyi Mir*, no. 11 (1962): 8–75.

<sup>183</sup> Literally meaning "self-printed," it refers to the clandestine creation and distribution of banned literature. [T.N.]

<sup>184</sup> Heorhii Kasyanov, *Nezhodni: Ukrainska intelihentsiia v rusi oporu 1960–1980-kh rokov* [Dissenters: Ukrainian intelligentsia in the resistance movement of the 1960–1980s] (Kyiv: Lybid, 1995), 19.

<sup>185</sup> Soviet interior ministry overseeing the police and prisons, predecessor to the KGB. [T.N.]

<sup>186</sup> The official website of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory: <http://www.memory.gov.ua:8080/ua/publication/print/1001.htm>.

shootings in 1962 was children playing football with a human skull. The skull had a bullet hole in its side.<sup>187</sup> After talking with local residents, the researchers uncovered more shocking details. The intelligentsia sent a memorandum to the city council demanding the investigation of Stalinist crimes and that a monument be erected in Bykivnia in memory of the murdered political prisoners. For decades afterwards, the Soviet authorities would attempt to prove that the bodies in the mass graves were not prisoners from NKVD jails, but instead victims of Nazism. The KGB would not forgive the activists for the shadow they cast over the reputation of the state security services.

In the 1960s, the names of cultural figures repressed in the 1930s began to reenter the art world. A full revision of official history was still a long way off, but thanks to the efforts of some art critics, certain concessions were made to modernism in official discourse. From 1966 to 1969, the six-volume *History of Ukrainian Art* was published. This series was edited by the former futurist Mykola Bazhan, an authoritative literary figure and member of the establishment. The fifth volume in the series was dedicated to the art of the early 20th century.<sup>188</sup> The tone of this book was set by the former rector of the Kyiv State Art Institute and theoretician of the ARMU, Ivan Vrona. Thanks to the efforts of those who survived the cultural renaissance of the 1920s, the book is full of information about artists who it was once thought had been permanently erased from the history of art. Oleksandra Ekster and Vasyl Yermilov feature in the book alongside the Boichukists. The presence of the latter is especially important, and Vrona paid particular attention to their return to public discourse. One of the young co-authors of the volume was Borys Lobanovsky, an art critic from the 1960s–1970s generation.

The publication of a detailed and relatively liberal history of art was a real event in Ukraine, especially considering how the field of art history had been decimated following the repressions of the 1930s. In the same period, the main curator of the State Museum of Ukrainian Art,<sup>189</sup> Dmytro Horbachov, gained access to a special archive and was shocked to uncover the work of avant-garde artists. He dedicated his whole life to returning forgotten names to the history of art, as well as to researching the Ukrainian avant-garde.

The return of the Boichukists to historical memory coincided with a revival in monumental art in the USSR. The many mosaics, stained glass windows, and bas-reliefs that were erected on building facades were the embodiment of the energy of the 1960s in Ukraine. What is more, a relative freedom came with working in monumental art. This artistic tradition, which had begun in the 1920s, announced its return with renewed strength. However, the new generation of artists was not interested in creating the perfect artistic language of propaganda; rather, they were engaged in a semi-conscious drift towards modernism and a search for figurative art, while pretending, for the sake of appearances, to repeat the symbolic mantras of communism. For a whole generation, neo-modernism became not only an aesthetic choice, but a political one too.

<sup>187</sup> Kasyanov, *Nezhodni*, 18.

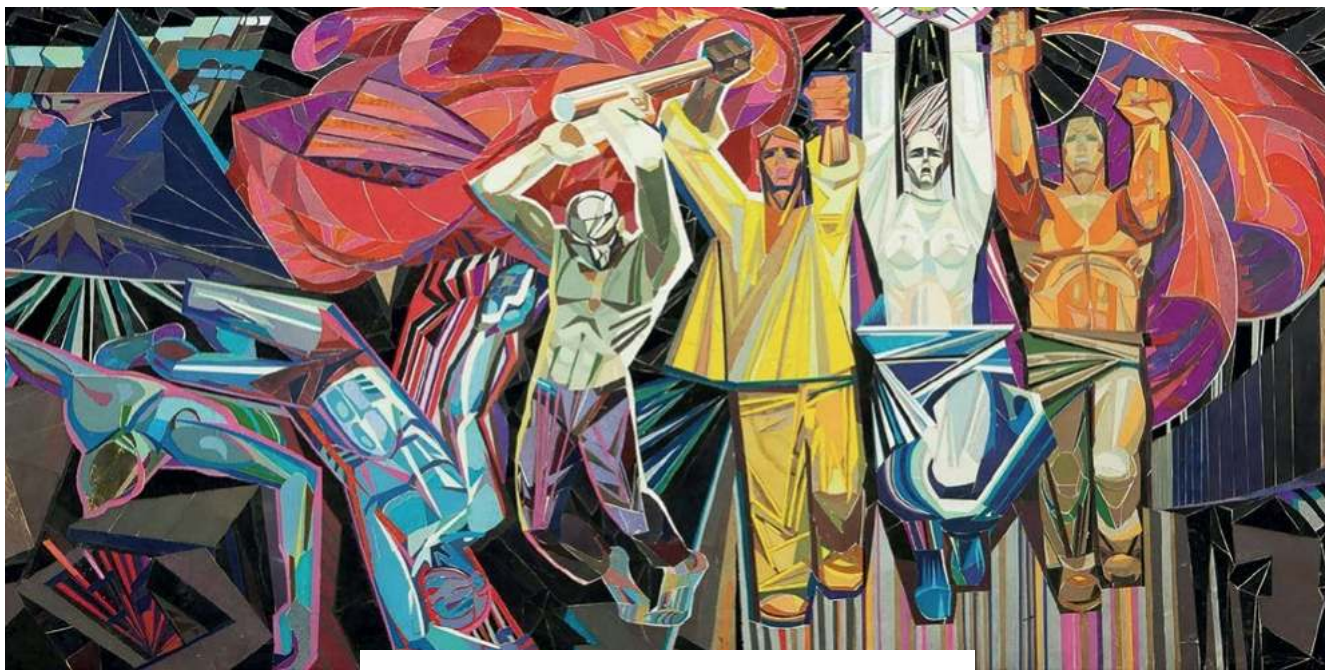
<sup>188</sup> Academy of Sciences of UkrSSR, *Istoriia ukrainskoho mystetstva*, vol. 5 *Radianske mystetstvo 1917–1941 rokiv* [Soviet art 1917–1941] (Kyiv, 1967).

<sup>189</sup> Now known as the National Art Museum of Ukraine. [T.N.]



ALLA HORSKA.  
A PORTRAIT OF VASYL SYMONENKO. 1964.  
TEMPERA ON PAPER. 111x47 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE XX-XXI  
MUSEUM. KYIV, UKRAINE.





ALLA HORSKA, VIKTOR ZARETSKY, AND VOLODYMYR SMIRNOV.  
*THE FLAG OF VICTORY*. SKETCH OF A MOSAIC FOR THE  
MOLODAIA GWARDIIA MUSEUM IN KRASNODON. 1968.  
DRAWING. 160x78 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF IGOR VORONOV.



VIKTOR ZARETSKY.  
*NIGHTTIME ARREST*. 1962.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 100x100 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF  
LIUDMYLA BEREZNYTSKA.

The ritualistic repetition of modernist elements, which had already become outmoded in the West, like Tetiana Yablonska's folk art, for example, was not just a bland form of imitation. It was, in fact, an intuitive impulse to return to the point in time when the natural course of art history had been interrupted. It was, of course, also symptomatic of a dearth of information about other non-Soviet art movements. When we look at the attempts of the Ukrainian *shistdesiatnyky* to make art in the language of international modernism,<sup>190</sup> it is also important to remember how dangerous this path was in the Soviet Union, especially in Ukraine. This was a bold political statement for artists living in a totalitarian society behind the Iron Curtain, where there was still acute ideological pressure despite all claims of liberalization.

The *shistdesiatnyky* were especially interested in problems associated with Ukraine's nationhood, an interest amplified by the art schools in Western Ukraine, which had only recently become part of the Soviet Union. This interest gave rise to a decorative folk art that would be the dominant art trend of this period. Several Western Ukrainian artists led the way: the Transcarpathian Volodymyr Mykyta, Ferenc Szemán, Yelyzaveta Kremnytska, Laszlo Puskas, and Edita Medvetska, along with Volodymyr Patyk from Lviv. Before long, they would be joined by the Kyiv artists Tetiana Yablonska, Alla Horska, Viktor Zaretsky, Liudmyla Semykina, and Ivan Marchuk. Olha Petrova would call this movement "folk style," and it was greeted with hostility by the state. The work produced by these artists was not shown at exhibitions and was sometimes even destroyed.<sup>191</sup>

By the mid-1960s, the Ukrainian intelligentsia were forced to see that the totalitarian regime had no intention of accommodating alternative ways of thinking. It was at this time that the first wave of arrests began. However, the most painful moment came in 1970, when the activist Horska was killed in mysterious circumstances. Rumors quickly started circulating that the artist's death was the KGB's "punishment" for her investigation into Bykivnia as well as other matters associated with her activist work. It was also thought that her death was a way to frighten the pro-Ukrainian sections of society. The rumors were not without foundation.<sup>192</sup>

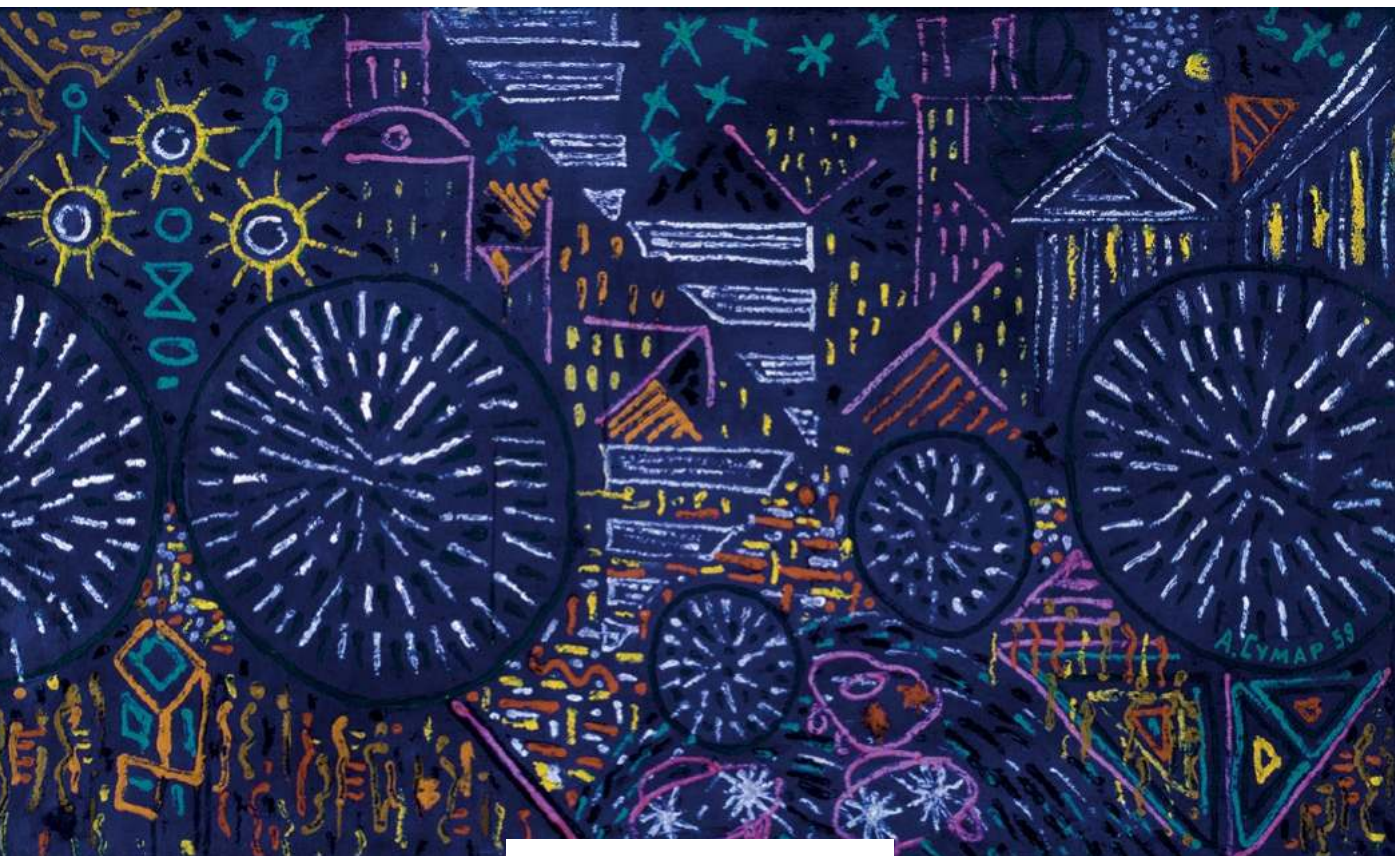
<sup>190</sup> In an essay on artists from this period, Halyna Skliarenko wrote, "The art pieces that caused disputes appeared banal, while those that were innovative appeared tentative and discrete." See: Halyna Skliarenko, "Iskusstvo ukrainskikh shestidesiatykh: 'drugoe,' 'svoe,' — 'raznoe'" [The art of the 60s in Ukraine: "alternative," "own," and "different"], in *Iskusstvo ukrainskikh shestidesiatnikov*, ed. Lizaveta Herman and Olga Balashova (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2015), 32.

<sup>191</sup> "What was allowed was 'sharovary folklore,' which represented Soviet Ukraine over decades of friendship in Moscow as the local color of the colony." Olha Petrova, "Vid normatyvnosti do tvorchoho pliuralizmu. Zhyvopys 60–80-kh XX stolittia" [From normativity to creative pluralism. Painting of the 1960s–1980s], in *Tretie oko. Mystetski studii. monohrafichna zbirka statei* [Third eye. art studios. A monographic collection of essays] (Kyiv: Feniks, 2015): 21.

<sup>192</sup> Oleksii Zaretsky, "Alla Horska pid kovpakom KDB. Antyukrainska spriamovanist spetsoperatsii" [Alla Horska on the hook of the KGB. The anti-Ukrainian position of the special operation], in *Fundator suchasnoho ukrainoznavstva. Zbirnyk naukovykh prats na poshanu 80-richchia Petra Kononenka* [Founder of modern Ukrainian studies. A collection of scholarly work in honor of Petro Kononenko's 80th birthday] (Kyiv, 2011), 54–58.



OLEKSANDR DUBOVYK.  
*PICKET*. 1966.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 160×180 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



ANATOLII SUMAR.  
*LENIN STREET*. 1959.  
TEMPERA ON CANVAS. 65.5x110 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST'S FAMILY.

Of all the artists in the Soviet Union, only a small number of them were dissidents. The majority preferred to avoid direct confrontation with the state, keeping their personal lives and interests separate. In this period, one way to silently oppose the system took the form of experimentation with abstract art. From the beginning of the 1950s, Karlo Zvirynsky began creating his own *Arte Povera*-style compositions in Lviv. In Transcarpathia, Pavlo Bedzir was the most important example of this tendency towards abstraction in his vibrant nature-based art. In Kharkiv, Vasyl Yermilov continued to work on abstract and figurative-abstract collages, as well as on the design of monuments, though virtually no one was aware of the art he was making. In Kyiv, Valerii Lamakh, Vilen Barsky, and by the second half of the 1960s, Hryhorii Havrylenko were trying their hand at abstraction. Oleksandr Dubovyk was another artist who introduced elements of abstraction into his art and who worked a lot in monumentalist art during the Soviet period. Few artists of this generation were interested in pure abstraction. For most of them, it was principally a short-term interest on the way to reinterpreting figurative art. Thus, these experiments were political and countercultural rather than purely aesthetic.

The end of the 1950s saw Anatolii Sumar debut his abstract art. An architect by training, he took up painting for just seven years, from 1957 to 1964. Sumar was influenced to draw by the work of Picasso and other Thaw-era Moscow exhibitions,<sup>193</sup> his work always balancing on the edge of non-objectivity. His artworks were not representations of pure energy and form; rather, they were light abstractions of reality, often based on his observations of the urban landscape.<sup>194</sup> The city of Kyiv is a central character in Sumar's work, though it can initially be difficult to grasp the meaning behind each piece. Almost immediately after he had picked up the brush, the architect became a legend on the unofficial Kyiv art scene. With a few rare exceptions, he almost never sold any of his art.

Sumar stopped painting almost as suddenly as he had started. According to his relatives, the uncompromising artist was influenced in his decision by a youth art exhibition in which the party leadership sharply criticized abstraction, using Sumar's art as an example. The harsh reaction of the party nomenklatura can be explained. On 1 December 1962, General Secretary of the USSR Nikita Khrushchev, unversed in modern aesthetics, visited an exhibition of work from the Novaia realnost (New reality) art studio at the Moscow Manege gallery. Upon seeing the works of abstract art, he stirred up a scandal and swore at the experimental artists, ordering a ban on non-figurative art. The very next day, a devastating article on the exhibition was published in *Pravda*.<sup>195</sup> A couple of weeks later, Khrushchev held a string of meetings with figures from the art world, at which he condemned "the deviation from socialist realism" and the "presence of formalism and abstractionism." In 1963, artists that succumbed to the "pestilent influence of the West" began to be targeted. Sumar was not interested in compromising with the state and so preferred to remain silent. Thereafter, he worked in industrial design and at a toy-design bureau. He would only return to painting in his later years, in what was by that time independent Ukraine. It was then that he created a series of illustrated letters to his granddaughter, which gave an overview of his experience and achievements as an artist and would be his final artistic testament. Previously, Sumar had never fully opened up, but in the letters he attempted to tell the child about his love for art and its history in simple terms.<sup>196</sup>

In this period, many realists of the older generation began to avoid large, themed paintings commissioned by the state, along with all of their associated baggage, whenever possible. They preferred to work within the more neutral genres of landscape, portraiture, and still life. These artists included Oleksii Shovkunenko, Onufrii Biziukov, Serhii Shyshko, Heorhii Melikhov, Dmytro Shavykin, Karpo Trokhymenko, Mykhailo Derehus, and Serhii Poderviansky.

<sup>193</sup> Asia Bazdyreva, "Anatolii Sumar. Polveka tishyny" [Anatolii Sumar: half a century of silence], *Art Ukraine*, July 4, 2014, <https://artukraine.com.ua/a/anatoliy-sumar--polveka-tishiny>.

<sup>194</sup> Halyna Skliarenko, "Tvorchist Anatoliia Sumara (1933–2006). Paradoxes 'vidlyhy'" [Works of Anatolii Sumar (1933–2006). Paradoxes of the "Thaw"], *Suchasne mystetstvo* 11 (2015): 240.

<sup>195</sup> Yurii Gerchuk, *Krovoizliianie v MOSKh, ili Khrushchev v Manezhe 1 dekabria 1962 goda* [A hemorrhage at the Moscow Union of Artists, or Khrushchev at the Manege, December 1, 1962] (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2008).

<sup>196</sup> Anatolii Sumar, *Lysty pro mystetstvo* [Letters about art] (Kyiv: Stedley Art Foundation, 2018).

Another form of silent protest against the stifling Soviet establishment was to escape the studio and create art in the open air. Soviet art institutions offered artists a plethora of possible long-term creative retreats. Artists could lose themselves within the vast geography of the USSR, and it was impossible not to be inspired by the national and cultural diversity on offer. Large cities were the strongholds of Soviet power, but many remote and rural areas in the 1960s were still stuck in “medieval times.” A lot of artists took advantage of these opportunities and, for many, the chance to escape across the country was their saving grace. Georgia, Armenia, Central Asia, the Russian North, and the Ukrainian Carpathians—all of these beloved places featured in the travels of the *shistdesiatnyky*, who were engaged in the eternal search for originality, for a new sincerity, and an alternative to state-approved truths.

In the middle of the 1950s, two young students at the Kyiv State Art Institute, Ada Rybachuk and Volodymyr Melnychenko, set off on their own type of escapist retreat. When preparing for their degrees, they didn’t take the prescribed path and rejected the chance to gain professional experience at a Soviet factory. Instead, the two lovebirds set off for the end of the earth: the Arctic. In the Arctic Ocean, east of the Barents Sea, lies Kolguyev Island where the artists spent several years. Unlike other visitors to the island, such as geologists and engineers who preferred not to fraternize with the local inhabitants, these two Kyivans fully immersed themselves in local life. While they were not initially used to the harsh conditions, they began wearing fur clothing and living in the tundra in a *chum* (a type of tent used by the local populace).<sup>197</sup> In keeping with that era’s romantic notions of the far north and in opposition to the main adherents of the austere style, these two artists were opposed to the Soviet colonization of the Arctic. They sided with the victims of that process: the indigenous population. After acquainting themselves with the folklore, dress, and traditions of the local Nenets people, Rybachuk and Melnychenko found themselves witnessing a humanitarian tragedy. In 1955, the Soviets began building a nuclear test site on the neighboring Novaya Zemlya archipelago. As a consequence, all the Nenets people who lived in the surrounding regions, many of whom had previously been ardent supporters of Soviet power, were forcibly resettled.<sup>198</sup> Hundreds of Nenets were resettled on the island of Kolguyev, which for all intents and purposes became a place of exile for those indigenous people yearning for their native soil.

The Arctic had a transformative effect on the artists. While there, they produced several series of bright images infused with local shade and color. They would keep returning to the Arctic for the rest of their lives. In 1990, the cameraman Izrail Goldshtein would shoot the film *The Cry of the Bird* with a screenplay by Rybachuk and Melnychenko. He also managed to capture Kolguyev Island, and the artists dedicated their work to that island’s inhabitants. “The wish to go beyond the sea, beyond the

<sup>197</sup> Yekaterina Shchetkina, “Nezakazannyi pamiatnik severnomu narodu” [An uncommissioned monument to the northern people], *Zerkalo nedeli*, March 27, 1997.

<sup>198</sup> Following the revolution, an important political figure on Novaya Zemlya was the distinguished indigenous artist and story teller Tyko Vylka. Once the construction of the nuclear test site was underway, he was one of the first to leave the archipelago so as to set an example for those who resisted the resettling. He died four years later in Arkhangelsk, tortured by his own nostalgia. In Soviet times, his name and art were widely known and helped influence the romantic view of the north that existed in popular culture.



SHOT FROM THE FILM *THE CRY OF THE BIRD*.  
SECOND FROM LEFT, VOLODYMYR MELNYCHENKO.  
FIRST FROM RIGHT, ADA RYBACHUK.  
COURTESY OF VOLODYMYR MELNYCHENKO.



ADA RYBACHUK.  
FROM THE CYCLE *SEVEN WOMEN FROM SEVEN CHUMS*, 1963. MONOTYPE. 70x62 CM.  
COURTESY OF VOLODYMYR MELNYCHENKO.



YURII KHYMYCH.  
A LOVELY DAY. 1968.  
GOUACHE ON PAPER. 50×73.5 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF PETR ZUEV.



horizon, beyond limits, though still remaining on earth, to cross the sea, and there, we don't know where, on the edge of the sea (where is that, the edge of the sea?) to meet the unknown," Ada Rybachuk's voice can be heard off camera, her words the manifesto of a whole generation. The artistic legacy of Rybachuk's and Melnychenko's flight to the Arctic is made up of huge polychrome ceramic heads depicting the inhabitants of that distant island, books, hundreds of drawings, illustrations for fairy tales, a documentary film, and photographs. Taken together, this legacy comprises a substantial and impressive expression of a deep love for the cold North.

An escape into the wilderness became the fundamental survival strategy for yet another artist: the architect and teacher Yurii Khymych who had enjoyed a fairly successful official career. Having started out with realistic watercolors, by the end of the 1950s, Khymych completely changed his style and began working with gouache in an original, modernist way. By inhabiting the quiet artistic niche of architectural landscape, he was able to preserve his freedom of self-expression, which would have been impossible in the more prestigious genre of the thematic painting. Using gouache allowed for maximum artistic flexibility. Over the course of his life, Khymych traveled all over the Soviet Union and abroad, creating thousands of paintings. The artist's best works are his Kyiv and Carpathian landscapes, as well as the work documenting his travels around Armenia, Finland, and the Russian North. During his life, Khymych practically never poked his head above the parapet. He didn't take part in the art scene, nor was he ever interested in proving his artistic credentials to those around him. He simply left his house every day and painted. It was only after Khymych's death that his incredible artistic industry and the true volume of his work became known.

Many other artists found themselves in a similar situation, when an artist's only opportunity for a breath of freedom was to take their paints and set off across the vast expanses of the USSR. These artists included Roman Selsky, who adored painting in the open air with his students, Leonid Chychkan, for whom the Carpathian Mountains became a safe retreat from ideology,<sup>199</sup> Oleh Vasylyev,<sup>200</sup> and hundreds of other members of the Union of Artists who went on months-long creative expeditions every year.

<sup>199</sup> Leonid Chychkan, *Albom* [Album] (Kyiv: Mystetstvo, 1972).

<sup>200</sup> "Oleh Vasyliiev." *Zhyvopis. Kataloh vystavky tvoriv* ["Oleh Vasylyev." Painting. A catalog of the exhibition of his work] (Kyiv: Spilka khudozhnikov Kyieva, 1990).

# KITCHEN TABLE DISCUSSIONS. THE ORBIT OF THE KYIV NEO-AVANT-GARDE<sup>201</sup>

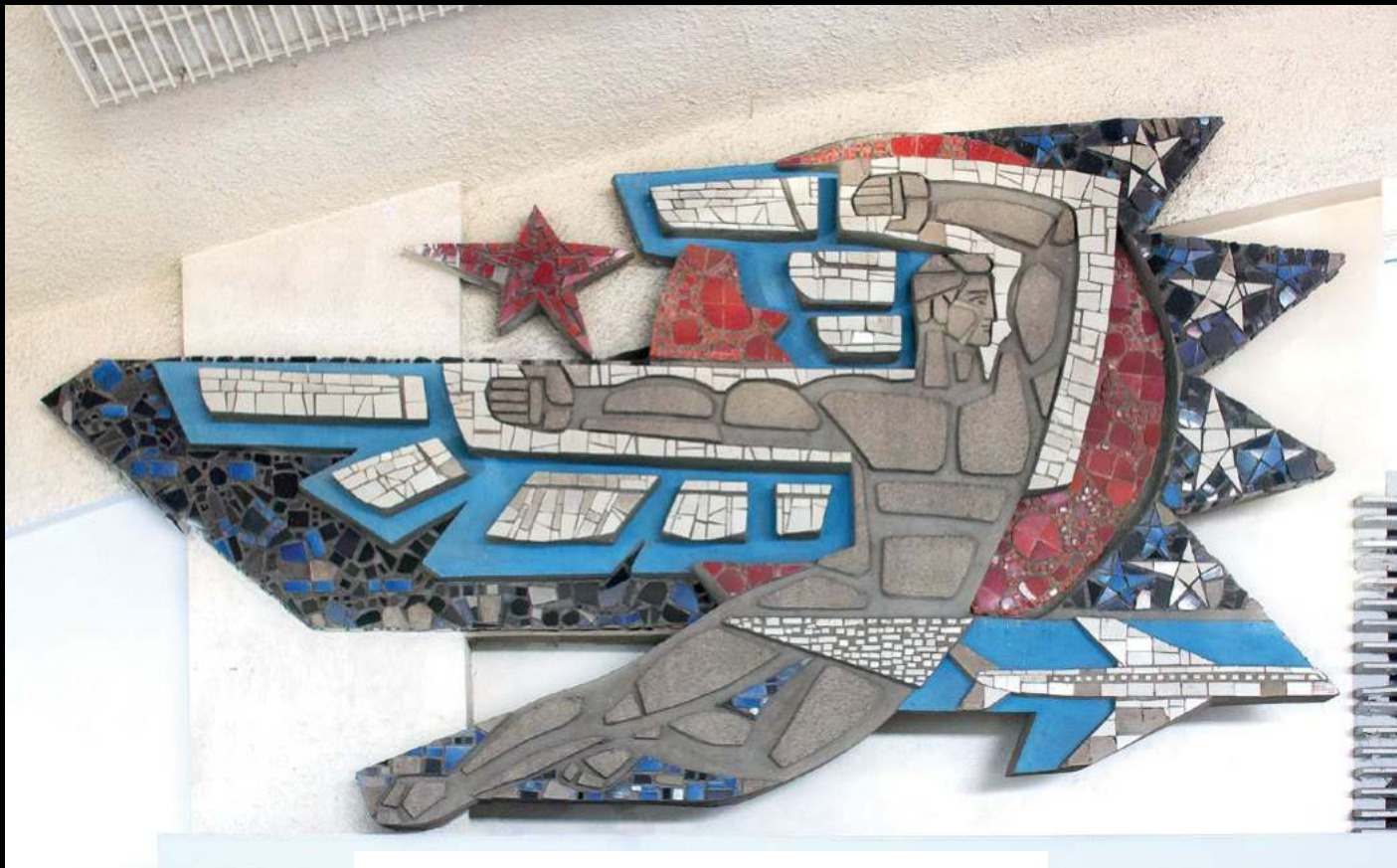
Following the Thaw, the creative atmosphere in Kyiv in comparison to Moscow was more stifling, and the ideological pressure from the party nomenklatura even more intense. What was deemed acceptable in the relatively liberal center was quickly nipped in the bud in Kyiv. Thus, unlike in Moscow, Kyiv saw cultural stagnation in its unofficial art scene, and for a long time the city had no counterculture to speak of. Most artists seeking an escape from the dead end of socialist realism ended up joining the ranks of bland modernists who lacked any kind of real innovation, or they became “avant-garde artists in their free time.” They combined often successful careers in the official system with experimentation, criticism, and discovery in their time outside of it.

An intellectual circle grew up in Kyiv in the 1960s that would become a bright page in the history of alternative art in Ukraine through the resulting friendships and art of its members. The creative contact between the group’s members had an interdisciplinary quality. Alongside the artists Valerii Lamakh, Hryhorii Havrylenko, and Vilen Barsky, there was also the composer Valentyn Sylvestrov, the art critic Anna Zavarova, the artist and critic Borys Lobanovsky, the translator from German Mark Bielorusets, the cyberneticist Tala Ralleva, and the architect and light organ enthusiast Florian Yuryev, among others. This group was not limited to Kyivans either and was later joined by the film director Sergei Parajanov, who was working a lot in Ukraine at that time, as well as by the Moscow poet Gennadiy Aygi.

The most original artist in this circle, and its lead thinker, was Valerii Lamakh. “I understand now that Valerii Lamakh was the spiritual center of an expanding cultural universe, which every new generation seems to try and create in any given space or time,” wrote Sylvestrov, a master of the musical neo-avant-garde.<sup>202</sup>

<sup>201</sup> The term “neo-avant-garde” has come to denote the leading art movements in Western Europe and America from the end of the 1950s until the mid-1970s. The term came into circulation following the publication of Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and is mainly used in the context of post-war art criticism. Later, the researchers Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster engaged Bürger in a discussion to reformulate the definition of neo-avant-garde to give it a more neutral meaning. See: Benjamin Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000). An attempt to include Soviet art into the discussion about the neo-avant-garde was made in 2016 by the curators of the exhibition *European Art. 1945–1968*, which was shown at the Center for Fine Arts BOZAR (Brussels, Belgium), the Center for Art and Media ZKM (Karlsruhe, Germany), and at the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts (Moscow, Russia). See: Zoia Katashinskaia, “Sovetskoe iskusstvo priznali evropeiskim” [Soviet art is recognized as European], *Artgid*, January 31, 2017. The Kyiv circle, with Valerii Lamakh, Hryhorii Havrylenko, and Vilen Barsky at its head, was the closest to neo-avant-garde practices and inquiry in the Ukrainian art scene of the 1960s and 1970s.

<sup>202</sup> Valentyn Sylvestrov, “O Valerii Lamakhe” [On Valerii Lamakh], *Novyi krug. Ezhekvartalnyi khudozhestvenno-filosofskii i kulturologicheskii zhurnal* [New circle. A quarterly art-philosophical and culturological journal], no.1 (1991): 118.



VALERII LAMAKH, IVAN LYTOVCHENKO, ERNEST KOTKOV.  
*ICARUS*. 1965. TERMINAL B OF BORYSPIL INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, KYIV.  
PHOTO: YEVGEN NIKIFOROV, FROM THE PROJECT  
*UKRAINIAN SOVIET MOSAICS*.

Lamakh appeared to combine the incompatible within himself. He was a successful monumentalist artist and the creator of huge mosaics and decorative compositions on the main buildings of the country. He was also a member of the governing body of Ukraine's Union of Artists, while to his friends he was a sophisticated abstract artist and thinker, who was spiritually close to the then-contemporary school of French structuralism. Finally, he was the author of the five-volume illustrated essay entitled *Books of Schema*,<sup>203</sup> an esoteric artistic-philosophical work that he worked on for decades.

Lamakh had been interested in philosophy since his youth, reading Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer in the original German. His output is interesting because it contains no conflict between his different identities. There was Lamakh the monumentalist with his interest in Byzantine art, and Lamakh the philosopher who used a variety of media to reflect upon the same fundamental laws of human existence and the role of the artist as a mystic medium between the seen and unseen worlds.<sup>204</sup> The Soviet universe existed apart from this world, the center of which consisted of earnest discussions in friends' kitchens and contemplation with oneself in private. This wasn't the position of a fighter, revolutionary, or transgressive member of the counterculture, but rather the position of a monk or hermit. Considering the ideological climate of Kyiv at that time, it was most likely the only possible way to protest while retaining some measure of freedom.

Broadly speaking, the artists in Lamakh's circle understood what was happening behind the Iron Curtain. Despite opinions to the contrary, it was possible to find out about contemporary art movements in the West. Up-to-date information about the European art scene was gathered piece by piece, often with the help of Polish and

<sup>203</sup> Alisa Lozhkina, "Valerii Lamakh i ego skhemy" [Valerii Lamakh and his schema], *Art Ukraine*, September 21, 2010, <https://artukraine.com.ua/a/valeriy-lamah-i-ego-shemy>.

<sup>204</sup> Here are a few excerpts from the third part of the *Books of Schema*, "The Cycle of Reflections" (1968–1978):

*"The schema is a language in which images radiate light, taking the light of others into itself while remaining unchanged and unaltered by that connection with others. The schema are points which breathe light, forever approaching, extinguishing and flaming, as a way to express the inexpressibility of the world."*

*"The schema is proof of the world's integrity  
The body lives and sees and thinks  
And the eyes see and think and live  
And the mind thinks and lives and sees  
The schema is a proof expressing the world's unity  
Where sky land sea  
Are my body and my intellect and my eyes  
And my body and my intellect and my eyes  
Are land and sky and sea."*

*"The schema is within a person, and it is through the schema that they see the world. Or rather, the schema creates the world within a person. And there is another schema that exists beyond this world. The person within the world sees this schema and recognizes it as their own. The contemplative schema is perceived as existing far away, beyond the horizon, further than all of the earth. The creative schema is perceived as within the subject. To see the schema is to contemplate the completed process of creation, but it isn't passivity. In the beginning, the schema gives birth to myth, and then sees it within itself. At this point the creation process of one cycle finishes. This cycle closes and new cycles arise."*

See: Valerii Lamakh, *Knigi skhem* [Books of schema] (Kyiv, 2011), 43 and 211.

Czech magazines. Today we are surrounded by a myriad of paintings, and it is no longer an inaccessible luxury to travel to the world's best museums. It is thus difficult to imagine the sense of reverence that a Soviet artist or critic living behind the Iron Curtain felt when standing in front of a painting. To spend your whole month's salary on an art album, prompting the envy and admiration of your friends, and to know and adore the art of great masters such as Rubens or Velázquez inside out only from poor-quality, black and white reproductions in shabby Soviet publications—this was how things were in Soviet society, where the private sphere was reduced to a minimum and the most minor luxuries were condemned as bourgeois excesses. In certain circles, high-quality art books and reproductions were even valued more than the coveted and incredibly expensive jeans, which were unobtainable for the average Soviet citizen.

Borys Lobanovsky called the members of this Kyiv group “anchorites.”<sup>205</sup> Indeed, they were certainly hermits on an intellectual level. The unofficial scene in Kyiv at that time was made up of small disparate groups disconnected from one another, their numbers limited to how many chairs could fit around the kitchen table in a cramped Soviet apartment. Lamakh and Havrylenko's circle took little interest in politics, at least in the form of public activism. The zenith of this group's artistic output came at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s during a period of disillusionment in the Thaw and increased state suppression, which created an all-encompassing feeling of helplessness. The paradoxical statement “everything was forever, until it was no more,” which Alexei Yurchak used as a title of his book,<sup>206</sup> aptly describes the atmosphere in the late Soviet Union. The USSR seemed utterly indestructible to Valerii Lamakh and his companions; however, they regarded totalitarianism as a metaphorical darkness and an irreplaceable part of creation, like the black yin in the ancient Chinese ideogram of yin and yang, without which there would be no light, no unity of opposites, no universal balance.

Lamakh equated the political system to changing weather conditions. It could be unpleasant, so one needed to wrap up warm and build a solid shelter so the bad weather couldn't dampen a person's individual spiritual freedom. Chinese philosophy, and the *I-Ching* in particular, which Lamakh knew very well, had a significant influence on the creation of his *Books of Schema*, specifically their diagrams of dynamic cycles of “recurring symbols.” The impossibility of public expression combined with the ugliness of the surrounding reality forced him to go into internal migration, to search within for universal and supra-temporal truths and discourses. He compensated for his lack of access to modern literature and philosophy by engaging in a highly contemplative study of the classics. Texts like the philosophical chapters of the Mahabharata, research into Zen Buddhism, and the work of itinerant Ukrainian philosopher Hryhorii Skovoroda would also become the Kyiv intellectual circle's focus of interest, texts that

<sup>205</sup> Borys Lobanovsky, “Kievskie anakhorety” [The Kyiv Anchorites], in *Iskusstvo ukrainskikh shestidesiatnikov*, 42–53.

<sup>206</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

comprised what Michel Foucault would later call “technologies of the self.”<sup>207</sup> These areas of interest were typical of the whole USSR in this reactionary period following the Prague Spring.<sup>208</sup> The era of physicians and lyricists had come to an end, and was now followed by a period of interest in Eastern philosophy, a preoccupation with esotericism, and the Soviet intelligentsia’s turbulent reengagement with religion.

Lamakh’s wife, Alina, was his reverent disciple and guardian of his *Books of Schema*. She was an artist too, working mainly with textiles. She created quiet, existentially deep color compositions inspired by the contemplative philosophy of her husband and the art of Kateryna Bilokur.

Having tried his hand at abstraction, Lamakh began to re-engage with figurative art. Lamakh’s main intellectual companion, Hryhorii Havrylenko, would travel the same path just a little later. In the 1960s, Havrylenko actively experimented with abstraction while creating figurative art at the same time. Stand-out examples of the latter include his illustrations for Dante’s collection of poetry *Vita Nova*. The common thread running through Havrylenko’s work consisted of two motifs: his interest in Eastern philosophy and the female image. The artist’s muse, strictly of the platonic kind, was not an earthly, “fleshy” Aphrodite, rather the abstract, heavenly Aphrodite Urania. Aleksei Titarenko called the *shistdesiatnyky* the Ukrainian proto-renaissance, referring, of course, to the arrival of the raw, corporeal painting of the trans-avant-garde that came a couple of decades later. For the time being, though, the art of Lamakh’s intellectual circle would just dream of flesh.<sup>209</sup> Havrylenko’s *Two Women in Nature* (1965), which depicts a young girl and her elderly mother, two ages and two universal ways of being that are permeated by a pervasive and intangible harmony, was the artist’s biggest figurative success. Thematically, this motif connects Havrylenko with the work of an artist whose style differed sharply from the strict sentimentality of the *shistdesiatnyky*—Fedir Krychevsky’s *Three Ages* (1913). Havrylenko had little to do with the Soviet art establishment, but he was an important focal point in unofficial circles. According to his contemporaries, it was Havrylenko who gave Parajanov the idea for his cinematic masterpiece, the poetic Carpathian love story *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1964). The talented graphic artist Heorhii Yakutovych would work as a production designer on the film, and Fedir Manailo as a consultant.

Havrylenko’s *Madonnas* ended up in one of the period’s most important cinematic works, the screen tests for Parajanov’s short film *Kyiv Frescos* (1965). The film was conceived as an innovative piece of work about the capital in that period. The authorities did not allow Parajanov to complete his project, accusing him of a “mystically subjective relationship with reality.”<sup>210</sup> The 15 minutes of screen tests that remain of the

<sup>207</sup> Foucault wrote of technologies of the self as “models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for deciphering the self by oneself, for the transformation one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object.” See: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2 *The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage, 1985).

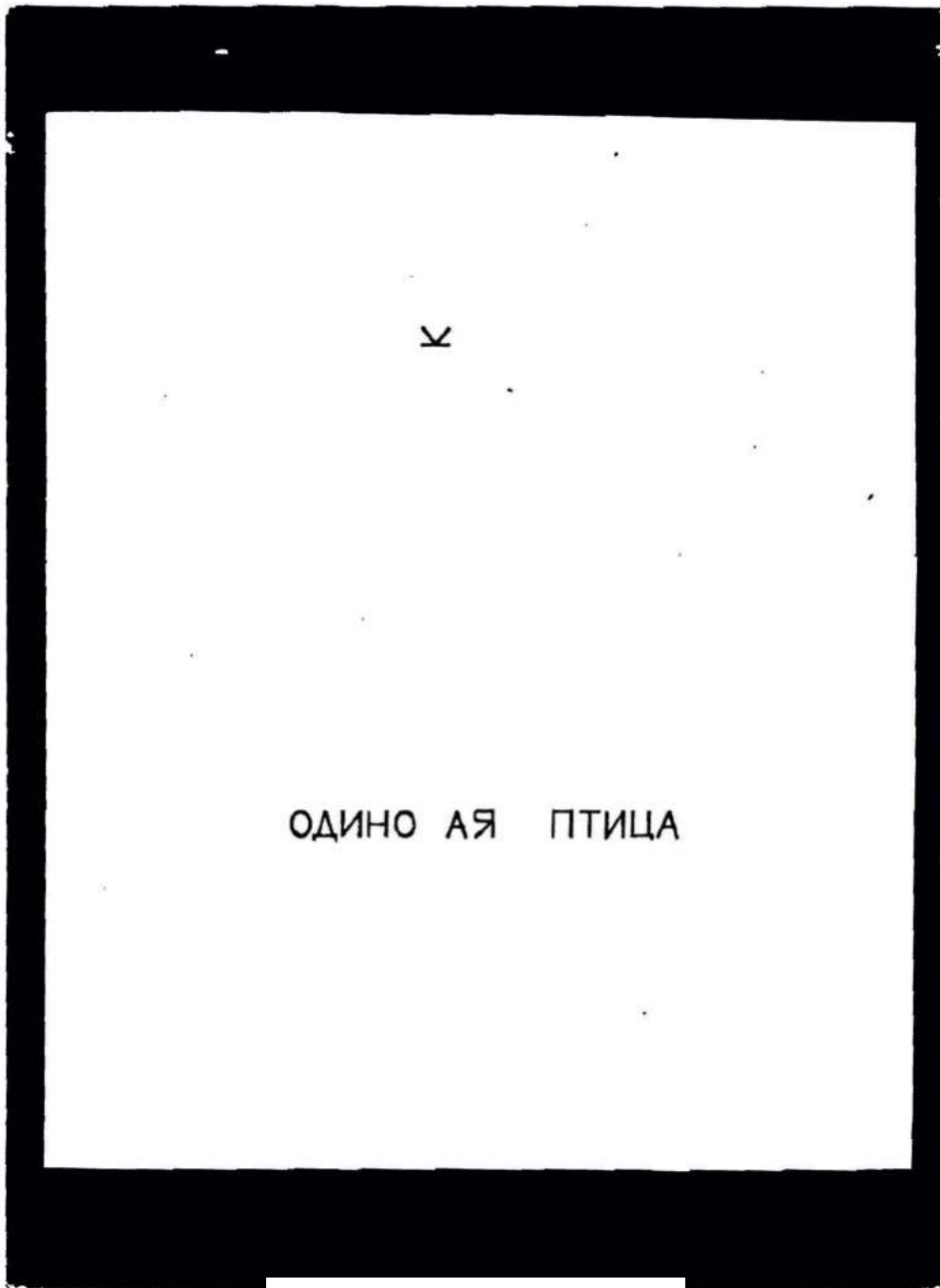
<sup>208</sup> A period of liberalization and reform in Communist Czechoslovakia eventually suppressed by the USSR in 1968. [T.N.]

<sup>209</sup> Aleksei Titarenko, “Odinokii zvuk dragotsennykh shestidesiatnykh” [The lonely sound of the precious sixties], in *Iskusstvo ukrainskikh shestidesiatnikov*, 15.

<sup>210</sup> Levon Grigorian, *Paradzhanov* [Parajanov] (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2011), 310.



HRYHORII HAVRYLENKO.  
*COLOR COMPOSITION*. 1981.  
MARKER AND INDIA INK ON PAPER. 41.5×29.5 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



VILEN BARSKY.  
*VISUAL POEMS. A LONELY BIRD.* 1976–1980.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.





VILEN BARSKY.  
*HANDS AND TARGET*. 1969.  
GOUACHE ON PAPER.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST'S FAMILY.

un-shot film are a unique example of video art in which there is no plot, no stylistic limits, and no dialogue, but the unmistakable atmosphere of Kyiv in the 1960s.

A central member of the Kyiv neo-avant-garde scene was Vilen Barsky. From as early as the 1950s, Barsky was one of the first artists in Ukraine to begin using a conceptual language in his art. He created work that sat at the crossroads between poetry and visual art. It is interesting to note that both artists from the West and those living in the Soviet Union began experimenting with conceptualism at almost the same time—in the second half of the 20th century. The wish in both artistic spheres to abandon the excessively visual had the same root: a distrust of the image. But if in the West the image was corrupted by consumer society, then in the USSR conceptualism arose as a reaction to totalitarianism and the state's manipulation of the image for ideological ends.

Though Vilen Barsky was an established and successful portrait artist, he began to completely reject the industrially produced, thematic socialist-realist style of painting. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, like Lamakh, he began to embrace abstractionism. He was also interested in Zen Buddhism, but, visually speaking, he would move in a completely different direction. Barsky began using stencils of heads, his hands, and different combinations of numbers in his art. He used these motifs repeatedly and they became characteristic of his work. In his subsequent written work he would explain in detail the genealogy of each image.<sup>211</sup> No less interesting was Barsky's visual poetry.<sup>212</sup> Here his work was in sync with the explorations of the Moscow conceptual movement; he was also continuing the work of the futurist Mykhail Semenko from the beginning of the 20th century. Barsky made Jorge Luis Borges fashionable in Kyiv and translated his work long before the state publishers. He was passionate about music and deeply engaged with modernism. He was a thoughtful and melancholic man, a true eccentric on the Kyiv art scene.

The artist emigrated to the West in 1981, though he didn't accept or understand the laws of the art market there and failed to establish himself in the world of galleries and art institutions. Barsky's work of visual poetry *A Lonely Bird* was actually the artist's self-portrait, and like the "k" on the cover of his work, he flew high up above the petty opportunism, commercial vulgarity, and superficial abundance of his contemporary society.

Valerii Lamakh died before his time in 1978; Vilen Barsky left for Germany in 1981; and Hryhorii Havrylenko died in 1984. With that, this group of like-minded artists fell out of existence. Thinking about art, a tradition characteristic of Kyiv's neo-avant-garde community, was hugely important and valuable in Ukraine where artists were

<sup>211</sup> Vilen Barsky, "Der Künstler über sich selbst und seine Arbeiten (russischer Text)" [The Artist on himself and his work (in Russian)], in *Arbeiten 1959–1980. Malerei, Graphik, Collagen, Texte. Eine Ausstellung der Katholischen Akademie Schwerte 16. Januar bis 28. März 1982* (Schwerte, Germany: Katholische Akademie, 1982).

<sup>212</sup> Alisa Lozhkina, "Vilen Barsky: 'Ja sebia chuvstvuiu kievskim khudozhnikom, kotoryi zhyvet v Germanii, i odnovremenno russkim poetom, poskolku pishu na russkom'" [Vilen Barsky: "I feel like a Kyiv artist who lives in Germany, and at the same time like a Russian poet since I write in Russian"], *Art Ukraine*, March 22, 2011, <https://artukraine.com.ua/a/vilen-barskiy-ya-sebya-chuvstvuyuu-kievskim-hudozhnikom-kotoryy-zhyvet-v-germanii-i-odnovremenno-russkim-poetom-poskolku-pishu-na-russkom>.

usually restricted to only thinking about their work in practical terms. Kyiv's "secret" life in the 1960s and 1970s, as described by Anna Zavarova,<sup>213</sup> is an example of how an intellectual community of like-minded thinkers who shared a sincere interest in art could create a unique artistic community even in times of the greatest stagnation. What's more, they managed it while crammed into just a few Kyiv apartments and artists' studios.

## MOSAICS, ARCHITECTURE, AND THE MONUMENTS OF LATE-SOVIET MODERNISM

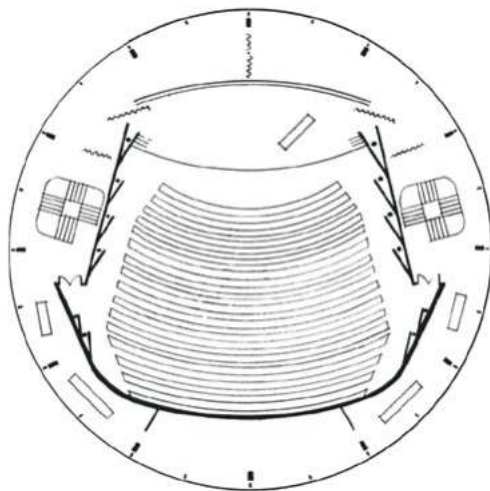
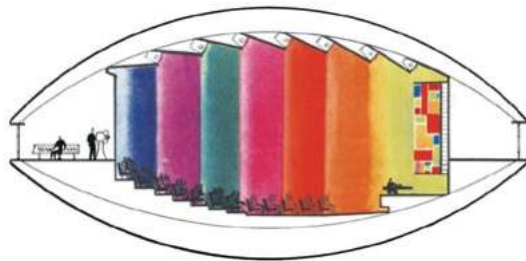
In Ukraine, the 1960s to the early 1980s was a time in which limits were blurred and the official and unofficial worlds mutually influenced each other. Modernist elements began to increasingly appear in the official language of art. This was especially prevalent in the areas where the wounds of Stalinist socialist realism were not so deep, specifically, in architecture and monumentalist art. For the first time since the Boichukists, the language of monumentalist art was actively developed. The preferred technique of the new wave of Ukrainian monumentalists, their "calling card," was the mosaic. As if anticipating the approaching digital age with its all-encompassing pixelization, the artists breathed new life into a long-forgotten art form that creates images from tiny pieces of colored glass and ceramic tile. The artists working in this field were Alla Horska and Viktor Zaretsky, Valerii Lamakh, Ada Rybachuk and Volodymyr Melnychenko, Oleksandr Dubovyk, Ivan Marchuk, Ivan Lytovchenko, Halyna Zubchenko and Hryhorii Pryshedko, Fedir Tetianych, Mykola Storozhenko, Volodymyr Priadka, and many others. One of the most interesting artists in this genre was Ernest Kotkov who worked with Lamakh and Lytovchenko on the Kyiv river port.

Huge mosaic panels like *Icarus* became the saving grace amidst a monotonous urban landscape of concrete panel buildings. They were used to generously decorate the facades and interiors of buildings. The opulence of the large-scale mosaics compensated for the cheap and visually boring architecture. Mosaics have long been a symbol of Kyiv, though they were originally only associated with sacred art. Saint Sophia's Cathedral is one of the most important historical sites in the capital; it is a monument to ancient Slavic church architecture with its well-preserved mosaics by Byzantine masters. For example, the mosaic depicting the Virgin Orans is one of Kyiv's key landmarks. Once this new generation of master modernists put their creations on the side of multi-story Soviet buildings, mosaic lost its singular association with church art and was found to be an original and modern art material. Many artists, such as Lytovchenko, Lamakh, Priadka, Kotkov, Dubovyk, and Marchuk used

<sup>213</sup> Anna Zavarova, "Vozvrashchenie" [Return], in *Knigi Skhem* [Books of schema] by Valerii Lamakh (Kyiv, 2011), 13.



THE UKRSSR INSTITUTE FOR SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL INFORMATION AND  
TECHNICAL-ECONOMIC RESEARCH FOR THE STATE PLANNING COMMISSION.  
ARCHITECTS: LEV NOVYKOV AND FLORIAN YURIEV. 1971. POSTCARD.  
PHOTO: I. KROPYVNYTSKY.



FLORIAN YURIEV.  
PLANS FOR CONFERENCE HALL AND THEATER.  
MID-1960s. COURTESY OF THE PLAN'S DRAFTER.

mosaic to recreate forbidden abstract compositions. Over time, a paradoxical situation arose. The Ukrainian Soviet authorities did not officially recognize abstraction and approached any form of modernism in easel-based art with great caution, but at the same time, dozens of bright modernist compositions began to appear in the urban landscape.<sup>214</sup> On one of Kyiv's main thoroughfares, Prospekt Peremohy (Victory Prospect), the ends of several buildings are taken up with gigantic semi-abstract mosaic panels.

Developments in architecture were no less rapid. Late-Soviet architectural modernism evolved in relation to the international advances being made at the time. A clear example of this is a building built from 1964 to 1971, its construction led by Lev Novykov and Florian Yuryev from the Kyivproekt state institute. The UkrSSR Institute for Scientific and Technical Information and Technical-Economic Research for the State Planning Commission was called "The Saucer Building." Indeed, the structure that housed the library was an enormous "flying saucer" that looked as if it were landing next to the main building. The Institute's architectural design is a direct reference to the work of Oscar Niemeyer and his National Congress of Brazil (1960).<sup>215</sup> According to Yuryev's plans, the "flying saucer" was meant to house a modern light and musical theater. This plan was never realized.

Over the course of his long life, Florian Yuryev tried his hand in many spheres. A graphic artist and art critic by training, he wrote popular science books on the theory of color, made customized violins, taught, and, in the 1960s, experimented with color and light organs. First and foremost, Yuryev's body of work is curious because it gives an insight into a generation's range of interests. After the Thaw in the USSR, one of the most popular phrases of the time became *nauchno-tekhnicheskaiia revoliutsiia* (verbatim, "the scientific technological revolution"). Its meaning in society was associated with the rapid growth in the volume of information, the automation of production and its control, and the ever-widening usage of electronics in daily life. Like in the early 20th century, the future had become exciting once again. The beginnings of the computer age, combined with a society-wide sense of optimism in technology, gave rise to interest in the synthesis of the sciences, art, and technology. Back at the start of the 20th century, it was characteristic of avant-garde artists to experiment with ways to introduce the latest advances in science and psychotechnics into their artistic practice.<sup>216</sup> This again became the creative focus of Soviet artists in the 1960s. Yuryev tapped into this mass wave of interest with his research into the connection

<sup>214</sup> For more detail on Soviet mosaics in Ukraine, see: Yevgen Nifikorov, *Decommunized: Ukrainian Soviet Mosaics* (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2017).

<sup>215</sup> A member of the Brazilian Communist Party, the modernist architect Oscar Niemeyer was well acquainted with the Soviet creative intelligentsia. At the beginning of the 1960s, an album of his work was published in Moscow. See: Oskar Nimeier, *Moi opyt strotelstva Brazilia* [Oscar Niemeyer. My experience building Brasília] (Moscow: Izdatelstvo inostrannoi literatury, 1963).

<sup>216</sup> See Margarete Vöhringer, *Avantgarde und Psychotechnik: Wissenschaft, Kunst und Technik der Wahrnehmungsexperimente in der frühen Sowjetunion* [The avant-garde and psychotechnics: science, art, and the technology of perception experiments in the early Soviet Union] (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007). Available in Russian translation, but not in English.

between light, color, and sound.<sup>217</sup> Music and light concerts would take place in Moscow and Kharkiv in the 1960s and 1970s. In Odesa, the artist Oleh Sokolov<sup>218</sup> organized dynamic light performances, and in 1966, Yuryev held his first music and light concert in Kyiv.<sup>219</sup>

Soviet Kyiv's modernist constructions include the artificial island and residential neighborhood of Rusanivka on Kyiv's left bank, which was completed by the architects Vadym Ladny and Henrikh Kulchytsky (1963–1966) as well as Avraam Miletsky and Eduard Bilsky's Pioneers Palace (1965); the House of Furniture (1971) by Natalia Chmutina, and the Saliut Hotel (1982–1984) also by Miletsky. Unfortunately, these buildings are all under threat due to both Kyiv's chaotic city administration and the lack of any sense that it is worth preserving the Soviet era's architectural legacy.

Amongst the monuments and buildings from the Soviet past that caused controversy in their day is Vasyl Borodai's *Motherland Monument* (1981), the idea for which was conceived by Yevgeny Vuchetich. The steel sculpture stands 102 meters tall and is located in a memorial complex dedicated to the history of World War II. Visually, the monument resembles the ancient "protective talisman" of the Ukrainian capital—the mosaic Virgin Orans from St. Sophia's Cathedral. Instead of praying, Borodai's atheist "Madonna" rises above the city holding a huge sword and a shield adorned with Soviet insignia. Another monument from this period is the *People's Friendship Arch* (1982), which was built to immortalize the "union of Ukraine and Russia" in line with the USSR's interpretation of the events of 1654. In late-Soviet Kyiv, the remaining examples of modernist architecture in the public sphere were openly frowned upon. It was only much later when these examples of modernist architecture were already collapsing and contemporary Kyiv was experiencing a general urban crisis that there began to be an understanding of the importance of this period.

A sad chapter in the more recent history of Ukrainian art was the construction of a huge relief around one of Kyiv's brightest examples of late-Soviet architectural modernism—Avraam Miletsky's crematorium (1975).

In 1967, the couple Rybachuk and Melnychenko were offered the chance to come up with ideas for developing the territory around the crematorium. They created a plan for a memorial complex. A part of the complex would be the high relief *The Wall of Memory* which would be 230 meters long and range from 4 to 14 meters in height. *The Wall of Memory* would be a succession of unfolding scenes from world history and mythology, from Prometheus to World War II and the post-war recovery. Work on the technically complicated and stylistically refined construction lasted 13 years, and the huge panel was finally completed at the end of 1981. All that was left was to add color.

<sup>217</sup> From 1962, there existed a specialized science-research institute in Kazan for experimental aesthetics and light organs called Prometei (Prometheus). In 1968, the institute's engineers built an original dynamic lighting system for another "flying saucer," the Kazan circus (1965–1967), constructed in the USSR under the influence of Oscar Niemeyer. See: Vladimir Ivanov, *Arkhitektura, vdokhnovlennaia kosmosom. Obraz budushchego v pozdnesovetskoii arkhitekture* [An architecture inspired by space. A picture of the future in late-Soviet architecture] (St. Petersburg: Borei Art, 2017).

<sup>218</sup> Kseniia Bilash, "Florian Iurev. Modus ischezaiushchego modernizma" [Florian Yuryev. The mode of disappearing modernism], *Levyi bereg* (Kyiv), February 1, 2019.

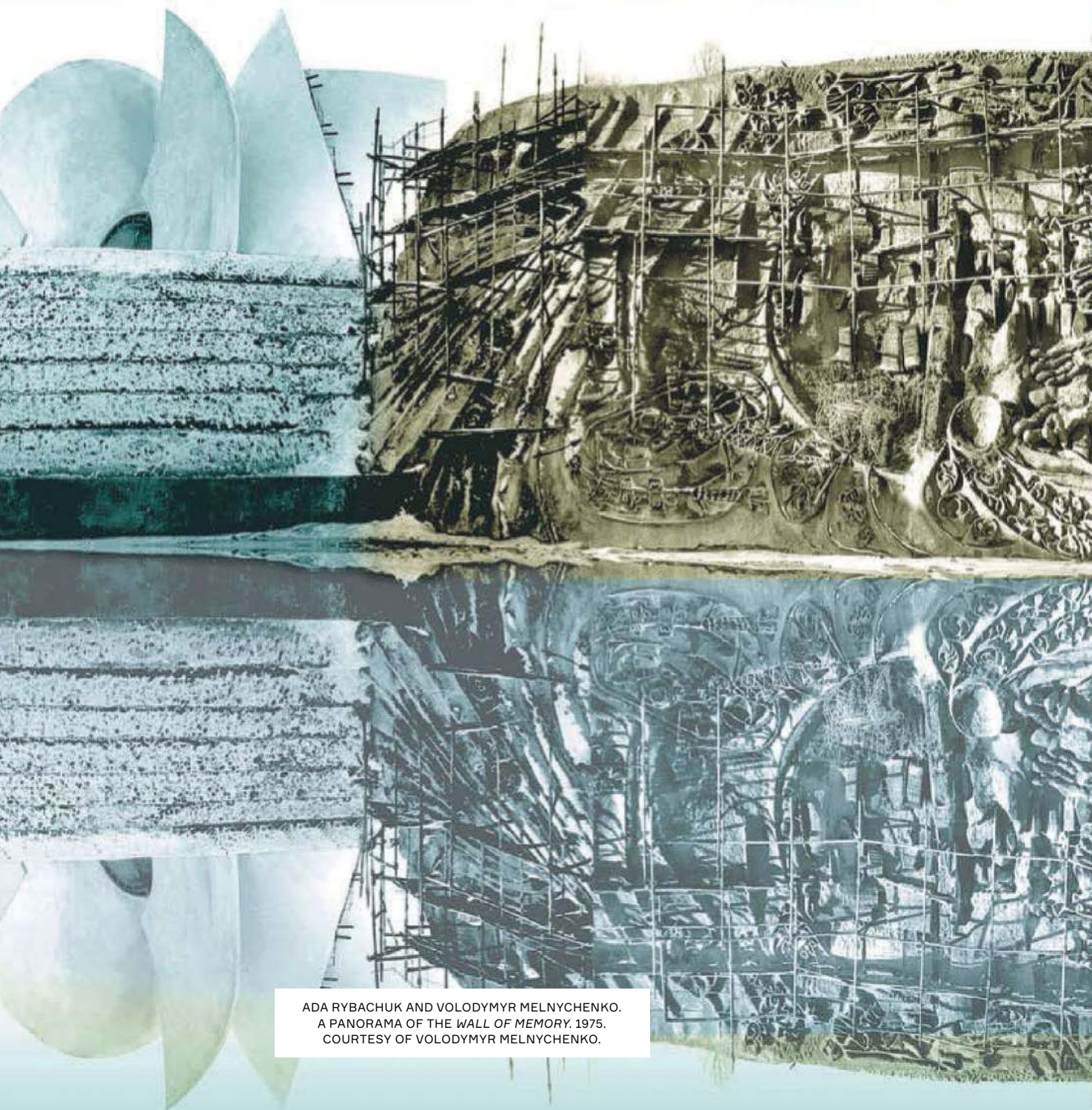
<sup>219</sup> Serhii Plachynda. "Persnyi kontsert" [First concert], *Ranok*, no. 3 (1966).



HALYNA ZUBCHENKO AND HRYHORII PRYSHEDKO.  
MOSAIC PANEL *FORGERS OF MODERNITY* ON THE WALL OF THE  
FOYER AT THE INSTITUTE FOR NUCLEAR RESEARCH OF THE  
UKRAINIAN NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES IN KYIV. 1974.  
PHOTO: MAKSYM BILOUSOV.

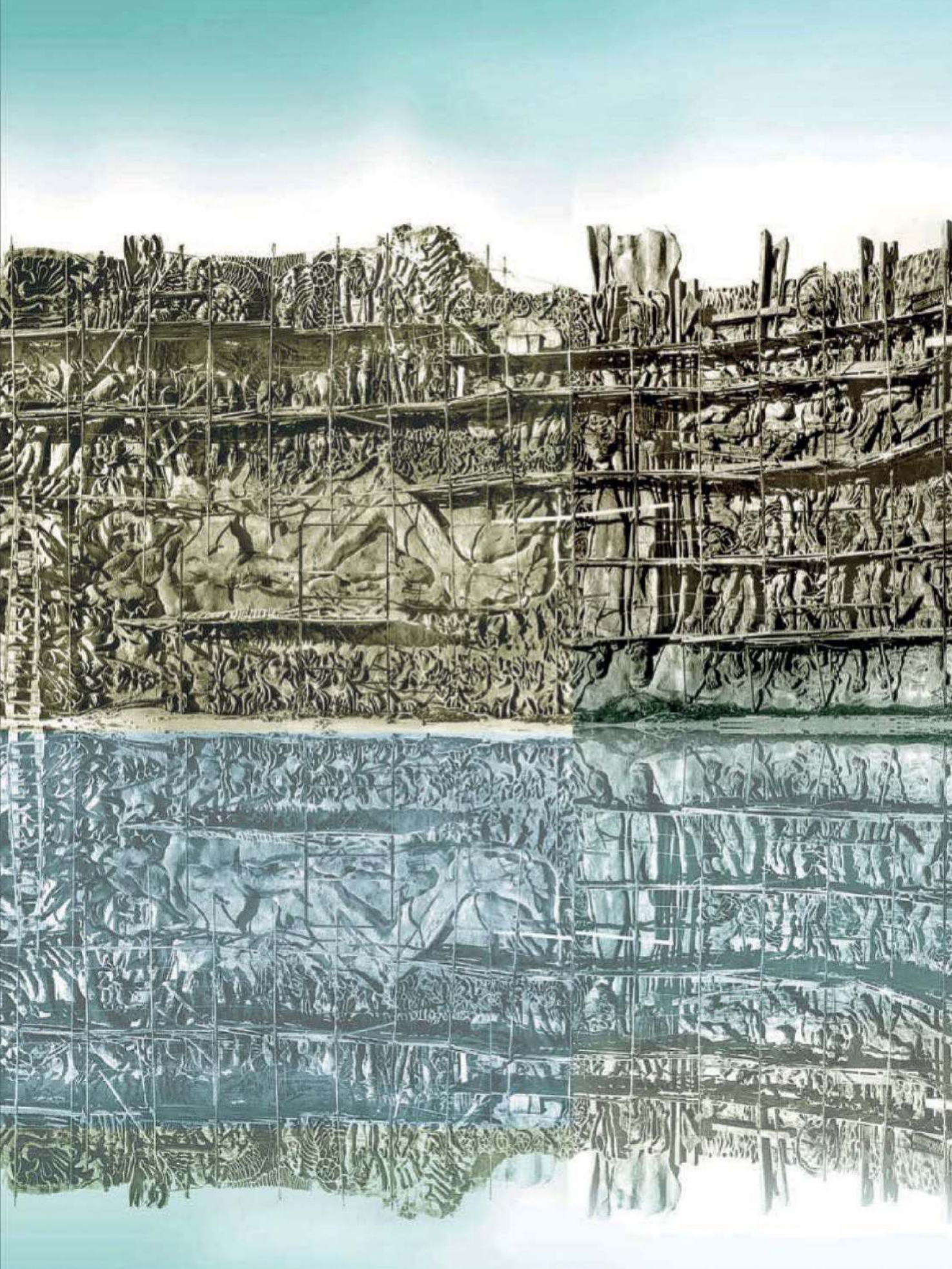


A PANORAMA OF KYIV'S PECHERSKA LAVRA  
WITH THE MOTHERLAND MONUMENT.  
SCULPTOR VASYL BORODAI. MID-1980s.  
FROM THE ARCHIVE OF OLEKSANDR SOLOVYOV.



ADA RYBACHUK AND VOLODYMYR MELNYCHENKO.  
A PANORAMA OF THE WALL OF MEMORY. 1975.  
COURTESY OF VOLODYMYR MELNYCHENKO.







OLEKSANDR RANCHUKOV.  
*BREZHNEV HAS DIED.* FROM THE SERIES  
*A PICTURE OF SOVIET LIFE.* 15 NOVEMBER 1982.  
BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTO.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST'S FAMILY.

But suddenly the country's leadership made a shocking decision: the wall had to be destroyed. No letters of petitions in defense of the piece had any effect, and in March 1982 the result of years of unimaginable toil by the artists was covered in concrete. Cement trucks poured more than 300 loads of concrete over the almost finished relief.<sup>220</sup>

There are many possible explanations for this tragedy. They include the “shadow of anti-Semitism,” which posits that the country's government didn't like the overly “Jewish” faces of the people depicted in high relief, and the ongoing conflict between the artists and the main architect of the memorial complex, Miletsky. To this day, the concrete-covered *Wall of Memory* still stands next to the Kyiv crematorium. Unseen by any passing visitors, it remains in its place. The relief is a powerful symbol and visual illustration of the Soviet leadership's brand of politics, which would forcefully erase the memory of the tragedies and crimes committed against its own people. The relief is also a reminder that a truth remains a truth, even when covered under a mass of concrete, and this truth must be preserved at all costs.<sup>221</sup>

## THE 1970s AND EARLY 1980s: QUIET ART, INDIVIDUAL MYTHOLOGIES, AND THE KYIV UNDERGROUND

The official art of late-Soviet Ukraine remained the strictly regulated product of cultural bureaucrats. A true belief in the victory of socialism had been irrevocably lost, and in its place flourished a deep cynicism and treacherous web of double standards. During this period, the ranks of socialist-realist artists distinguished themselves in creating an empty—and slightly manic—art, unintentionally drifting towards a post-modern outlook and sensibility. The endless confusion of quotes recycled from earlier socialist-realist “hits,” the complete loss of faith in the originality of artistic experience, and the cynicism and self-deprecation soaked in everyday alcoholism, all made it clear there was a crisis in Soviet art and the Soviet worldview in general. By the late 1970s—early 1980s, the system was showing no signs of life. The tragic experiences of World War II, which for decades had served as perhaps the only area of sincere expression, had by this time become just a collection of empty clichés. Viktor Shatalin's *Battle of the Dnipro* (1983) is a striking example of an artwork that was ambitious in principle, but absolutely incapable of evoking lived experience.

<sup>220</sup> For more, see Asia Bazdyreva, “Istoriia (ne)odnogo prestuplenia” [History of (more than) one crime], *Art Ukraine*, June 25, 2013, <https://artukraine.com.ua/a/istoriya-neodnogo-prestupleniya>.

<sup>221</sup> In May 2019 a small fragment of the wall was restored. For more, see “V Kieve prezentovali vosstanovlennyi fragment ‘steny pamiaty’ na Baikovoi gore” [Fragment of *Wall of Memory* presented at Baikova Mountain in Kyiv], *Ukrinform*, May 19, 2018, <https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-kyiv/2463635-v-kieve-prezentovali-vosstanovlennyj-fragment-steny-pamati-na-bajkovej-gore.html>.

Starting in the 1960s, the unofficial art scene valued a sense of privacy above all else. Its art was dominated by understated pieces which weren't overly melodramatic or pompous. It existed in opposition to the bravura of socialist realism with its mania for huge canvases and grand thematic paintings. This type of private art was given the name "quiet painting" and came to the fore following the decline of Thaw-era liberalism and the beginning of the so-called "stagnation," a phrase which came to characterize Brezhnev's rule in the 1970s. This was an extremely stifling period defined by increased bureaucratic pressure. An individualist style reigned in alternative art at this time, though it presented with marked regional differences.

One of the most active unofficial art scenes appeared in Odesa. In Kharkiv, a group of innovative photographers came together. "Quiet art" dominated the scene in Kyiv. Prominent figures from this period include: Yakym Levykh, Zoia Lerman, Yurii Lutskevych, Mikhail (Moisei) Vainshtein, Halyna Hryhoryeva, Oleksandr Dubovyk, Valentyn Reunov, Serhii Pustovoit, the ceramicist Olga Rapai, and the graphic artist Yulii Sheinis. Another artist from the underground scene was the abstractionist and outcast who never joined the Union of Artists, Oleksandr Shuldyzhenko-Stakhov. During his youth in World War II he ended up in London and graduated from the Central School of Arts and Crafts. In 1954, he unexpectedly decided to return home.

The authorities regarded Shuldyzhenko-Stakhov with caution. He was never admitted to the Union of Artists, lived in a small room in a communal apartment, and until the end of his life created reams and reams of work, none of which was accepted into the socialist-realist canon. Many of these pieces were dedicated to a London that had long been lost.<sup>222</sup>

Another bright figure on the unofficial scene was Anatolii Lymariiev. Sunlight was the central, active component of his work. The artist differentiated himself from Van Gogh by creating bright, energetic paintings which were radically different from the "quiet" paintings of this period. Halyna Borodai lived for only 31 years but she still managed to create a piece of art that would be important for her generation—the proto-postmodernist work *In Memory of Aleksei Gavrilovich Venetsianov* (1979–1980). An important center for artistic and bohemian life in this period was the studio of two important representatives of the Union of Artists liberal wing: the couple Halyna Neleva and Viktor Ryzhykh. Ryzhykh's triptych *Cybernetics* (1985) was a landmark painting that reflected the spirit of the time.

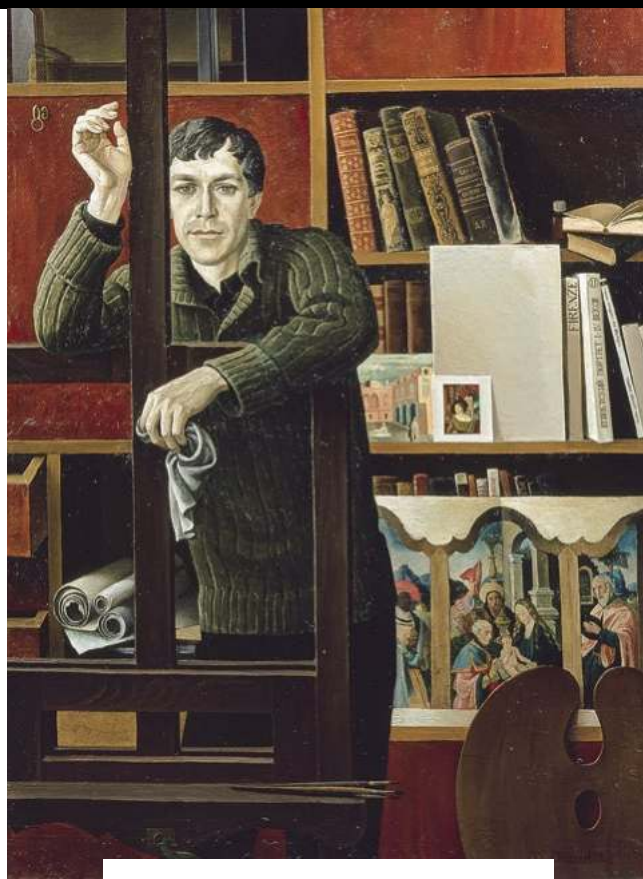
Liubomyr Medvid was a legend of Lviv's unofficial art scene. A student of Roman Selsky, Medvid was active from the 1960s onwards. In the 1970s, he created a series of allegorical artworks, of which perhaps the most impressive was *Boys with Wheels* (1968–1972). This series anticipated Tiberiy Szilvashi's 1970s "chronorealism"<sup>223</sup> with its tense sense of frozen time. The series also echoes the work of Serhii Pustovoit

<sup>222</sup> Hlib Vysheslavsky, "Hrafika Oleksandra Shuldyzhenka (Stakhova) v konteksti mystetstva nonkonformistskoho rukhu v Ukraini" [Work of Oleksandr Shuldyzhenko (Stakhov) in the context of Ukraine's nonconformist art movement], *Khudozhnia kultura. Aktualni problemy* [Art culture. Contemporary problems] 12 (2016): 33–58.

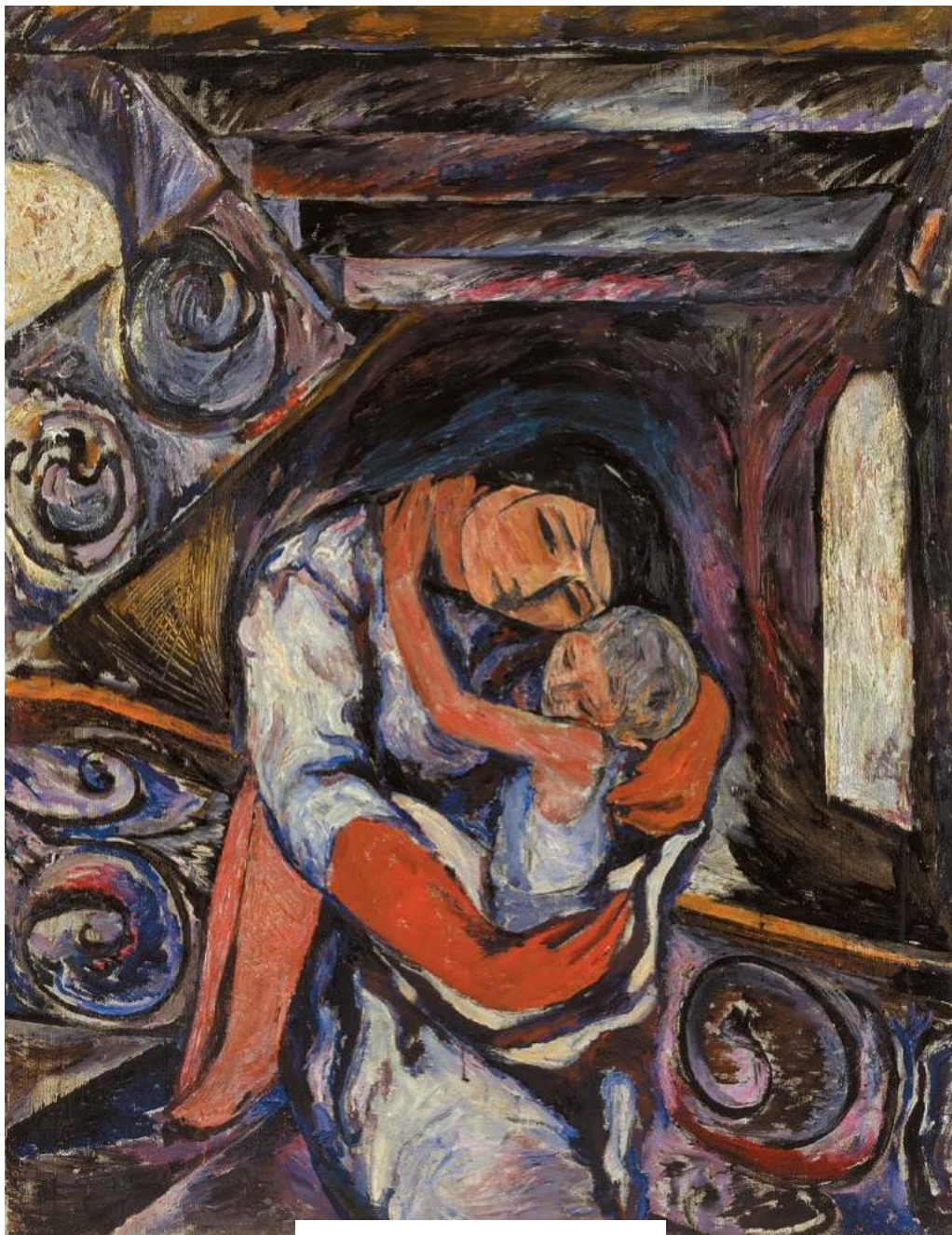
<sup>223</sup> Halyna Skliarenko, "Zhivopys—eto navsegda. Tiberii Silvashi" [Painting is forever. Tiberiy Szilvashi], in *Sovremennoe iskusstvo Ukrainy. Portrety Khudozhnikov* [Modern art of Ukraine. Portraits of artists] (Kyiv: Modern Art Research Institute, 2015), 25.



VIKTOR RYZHYKH.  
 THE CYBERNETICS TRIPTYCH.  
 1985. OIL ON CANVAS.  
 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



HALYNA NELEDVA.  
 PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST VIKTOR RYZHYKH.  
 1972. OIL ON CANVAS. 140x110 CM.

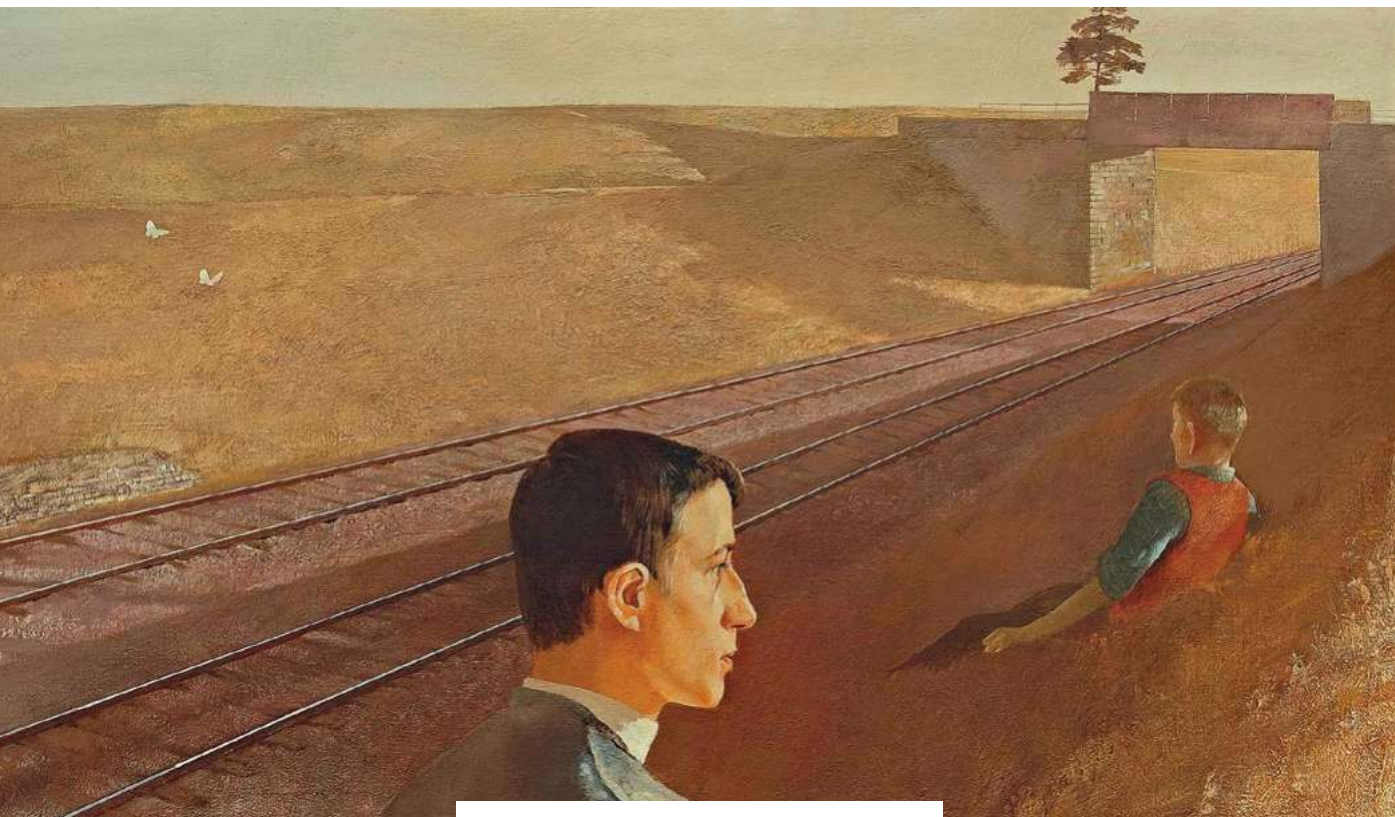


ZOIA LERMAN.  
*WORRY*. 1969.

OIL ON CANVAS. 130x100 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



ANATOLII LYMARIEV.  
JARS. 1985.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 97×107 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST'S FAMILY.



LIUBOMYR MEDVID.  
*AUGUST*. FROM THE SERIES *BOYS WITH WHEELS*.  
1968–1972. TEMPERA ON CANVAS. 70×120 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

whose work heavily features allegory and the nagging sense that our visible reality is, in fact, fictional.

Another figure of note who produced art with a national focus was the painter Ivan Marchuk. Beginning in the 1960s, the artist spent the next few decades experimenting with a wide variety of modernist techniques, trying on the masks of Paul Klee, Georges Seurat, and Max Ernst. Marchuk mixed elements of pointillism and surrealism with traditional folkloric themes in his work, thus winning the favor of those in society with dissident sympathies. The official art world didn't greet Marchuk with particular enthusiasm, but he was adored by the wider Ukrainian intelligentsia.

At the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, Mykhailo Hrytsiuk's authority among the progressive portions of society was inarguable. The sculptor had an unusual life: he was born in Transcarpathia, but moved with his parents to Argentina when he was still a child. He went on to spend half his life in Buenos Aires. He attended an evening art school and was influenced by the art of Russian immigrant and master of modernist sculpture, Stepan Erzia. Like many other emigrants who were



seduced by the Soviet government's call to return to the USSR, Hrytsiuk returned to his historic motherland in 1955. His parents' introduction to socialism did not go well and they quickly returned to South America, but the 27-year-old Hrytsiuk remained in Ukraine. He finished top of his class in his final year of art school and then enrolled at the Kyiv State Art Institute. Having grown up in Argentina, the artist always remained somewhat of a foreigner in Soviet Ukraine. He worked in a recognizably modernist style, creating sculptural portraits of distinguished cultural figures such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Pablo Picasso, Sergei Parajanov, and the musician Mstislav Rostropovich, who fell out of favor with the Soviet authorities. He was also one of the creators of a monument to Taras Shevchenko in Moscow. The authorities did not look kindly upon this suspiciously freethinking "eccentric," and his first solo exhibition only took place after his death.

A unique Kyiv character from the 1970s to the 1990s was Fedir Tetianych, or as he called himself and his own life philosophy: Frypulia. In the finest Kyiv tradition, this legend and pioneer of Ukrainian action art combined his loyal image as a Soviet painter and member of the Union of Artists with carnivalesque subversion. In official art, Tetianych was famous as a monumentalist artist whose mosaics decorated many buildings in and outside Kyiv. At the same time, he worked in virtually all spheres of art: painting, drawing, installation, sculpture, and performance art. The figure of Tetianych on his various adventures through stagnation-era Soviet Kyiv is direct proof of the close genetic link between modern performance art and the ancient orthodox tradition of the holy fool. According to one story from the 1970s, Tetianych once arrived at an official session of the Union of Artists dressed as an alien.

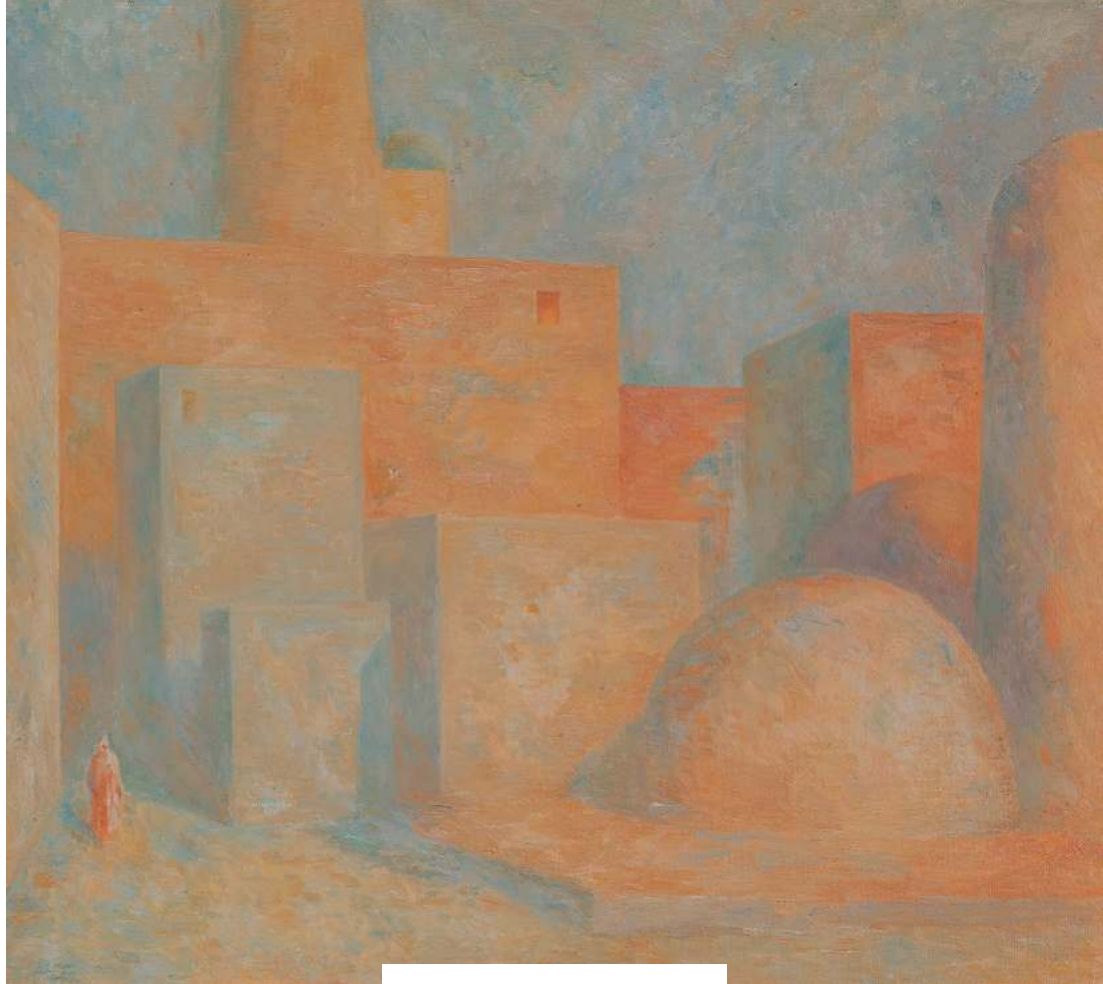
It was a rare occurrence in the 1980s and early 1990s for there to be an exhibition opening without this unique character arriving in strange dress. With his shocking outfits and accessories, the artist highlighted the absurdity of the surrounding reality. His songs, dances, and recognizable style, which combined elements of Arte Povera, disco culture, and the sci-fi aesthetic of films from the 1960s and 1970s, were famous throughout Kyiv's art scene.

At the heart of Tetianych's work was the idea of a harmonious and communal utopia in an era of scientific and technological progress. From the 1960s onwards, he created large installations which he called *biotekhnosfery* (bio-techno-spheres). They were conceptual prototypes for flying machines of the future, which curator Valerii Sakharuk compared with the work of Malevich, Tatlin, and Lissitzky.<sup>224</sup> Another cultural-historical and sociopolitical connotation of these "spheres," which were often created using rubbish (ripped pieces of paper, old bits of wood, and material), is Diogenes's barrel, a sanctuary for the modern philosopher where he can hide from the grind of reality, slipping or flying away into one's self. The street philosopher Frypulia wandered Kyiv for decades, turning his whole life into a performance. His contemporaries would smile when they saw him, taking him for a freak or just a natural part of the urban landscape. Fedir Tetianych's work, in the context of Ukraine's most recent art history, was only examined in a new light after his death in 2010.

<sup>224</sup> Igor Kruchyuk, "Tak govovil Fripulia. 'Beskonechnost.' Fedor Tetianich" [Thus spoke Frypulia. 'Eternity.' Fedir Tetianych], *Antikvar*, May 27, 2015.



VLADYSLAV MAMSIKOV.  
*WORKING AFTERNOON*. 1973.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 100×50 CM.  
COURTESY OF LIUDMYLA BEREZNYTSKA.



VOLODYMYR BUDNIKOV.  
*KHIVA*. 1978.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 100×110 CM.

The true art underground of Kyiv in the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s was comprised of two friends, Mykola Trehub and Vudon Baklytsky. Back in the 1950s, they set up the group New Bent. The name of the group was a reference to the organization of Dutch painters Bentvueghels,<sup>225</sup> as well as having an association with modern music (sounding like “new band”). Initially, the collective also had a third member, Volodymyr Borozenets, but he quickly left New Bent, having adopted a position of compromise in relation to the official art establishment. Baklytsky and Trehub, on the other hand, were unswerving in their non-conformity. They existed apart from the system in a small niche of like-minded individuals. At a certain point, the artist Vera Waisberg joined their group. She would later remark, “Mykola Trehub and Vudon Baklytsky were what one would call each other’s entire professional environment and source of professional contact. They served as confirmation for the other, as a precedent.”<sup>226</sup>

With no professional art education and unconstrained by the specter of socialist realism, the artists existed entirely apart from the main unofficial art scene in Kyiv. Their canvases were marked by their freedom of expression and intensity; and these two daring and independent artists turned their lives into an unending creative event.<sup>227</sup> Unfortunately, due to their isolation and the absence of a wider artistic context, their art did not progress beyond the bounds of conventional painting to a broader understanding of artistic practice. Furthermore, the experience of living in a cultural desert and the lack of artistic freedom and self-realization led to tragedy. Trehub committed suicide in March 1984, hanging himself from the gates of Vydubychi Monastery in Kyiv, which housed his studio. Vudon Baklytsky survived his best friend only by eight years. Following the explosion at the Chornobyl nuclear power plant, Baklytsky created his *Chornobyl Madonna*, painted in the style of Ethiopian icons, as a simple and striking symbol of the grief that swept over Ukraine. In 1990, he became a co-founder of the art group Strontsii (Strontium) which was a gathering place for artists who were concerned with the Chornobyl tragedy.

Paradoxically, very few artists featured the disaster at Chornobyl in their work. As could be expected, the terrible technogenic catastrophe, for which society blamed those in power, was not made an artistic priority by the art establishment. Moreover, the radiant socialist-realist industrial landscapes of the 1970s, commissioned by the state during the Chornobyl nuclear power plant’s construction, looked particularly ominous when examined retrospectively. Dissidents interpreted the explosion at the atomic power station as a failure of the hated Soviet establishment, but, on the whole, also remained silent. By the time the necessary distance had been achieved to contemplate the disaster, other movements and events in society had become so intense that Chornobyl was simply lost amid the new traumas and upheaval of that period. The glaring absence of any large-scale artistic reflection on those catastrophic events,

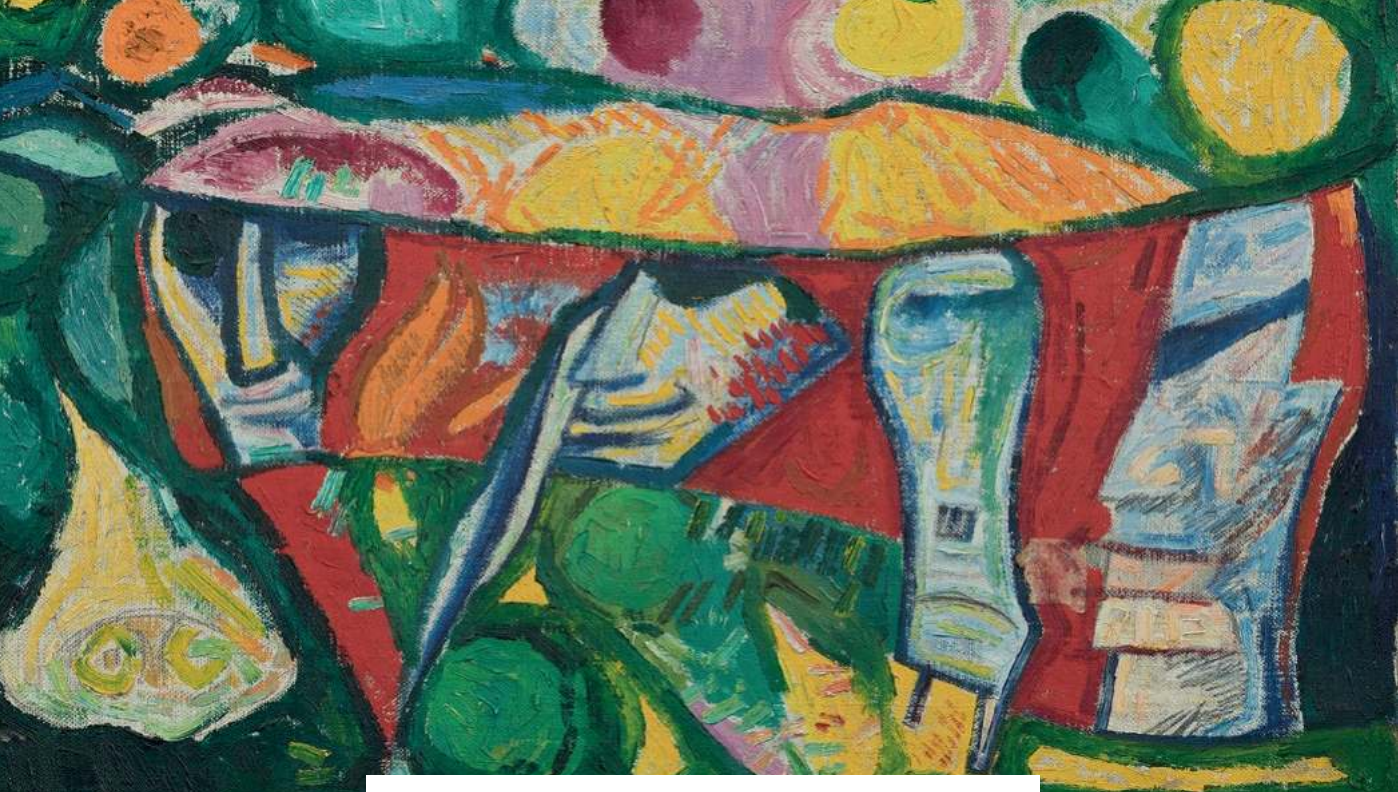
<sup>225</sup> This organization of Dutch artists who were opposed to the academicism of the time existed from 1620 until 1720. A shortened form of the group’s name, Bent, is often used in literature.

<sup>226</sup> Nikolai Leonenko and Vera Waisberg, “Zapozdalyi nekrolog” [A belated obituary], *Art Ukraine*, January 17, 2012, <https://artukraine.com.ua/a/zapozdalyy-nekrolog>.

<sup>227</sup> For more, see: Olena Holub, *Sviato nepokory ta budni anderhraundu. Zhyttiepysy ne vyznanykh za zhyttia khudozhnykiv z komentariamy* [Holy disobedience and everyday life in the underground. Biographies of artists unrecognized in their lifetimes with commentary] (Kyiv: Antykvart, 2017).



FEDIR TETIANYCH (FRYPULIA).  
*THE CITY OF IMMORTALS.*  
PERFORMANCE. LVIV SQUARE, KYIV. 1989.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST'S FAMILY.



MYKOLA TREHUB.  
UNTITLED COMPOSITION. 1980.  
CANVAS AND OIL ON CARDBOARD. 36x60 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



VUDON BAKLYTSKY.  
CHORNOBYL, MADONNA. 1980s.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 65x72 CM.



VIKTOR MARUSHCHENKO.  
*POLICE IN THE CHORNOBYL ZONE. AUTUMN 1991.*  
THE BRIGHT SPOT ON THE PHOTO IS THE RESULT OF RADIOACTIVE  
DUST FALLING ON THE FILM. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



VIKTOR MARUSHCHENKO.  
*CHORNOBYL, EVACUATION. MAY 1986.*  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



TIBERIY SZILVASHI.  
*EVENING IN RUSANIVKA*. 1979.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 80×100 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
UNION OF ARTISTS OF UKRAINE.



which took place less than 100 kilometers from Kyiv, would later be particularly striking. Among the work that was made on this topic was the photo series *Chornobyl* by Viktor Marushchenko. The artist spent many years documenting the lives of people who survived the disaster and who were resettled from their homes. His first photograph was taken on 8 May 1986, 12 days after the explosion, and the last was taken in August 1995. Another work made soon after the event was *Catastrophe* (1986–1987), a painting by the hyperrealist Serhii Bazyliev.

## THE ARTISTS OF THE KYIV TRAIN STATION. HYPERREALISM, CHRONOREALISM, AND THE LAST SOVIET GENERATION

In the late 1970s and early 1980s when Kyiv's cultural landscape had become increasingly stagnant, a new generation of artists began arriving on the scene. They reoriented themselves towards Moscow as a way to escape their local context. Thus, the group called the Artists of the Kyiv Train Station appeared. All trains bound for Ukraine departed from Moscow's Kyiv train station, which explains the name of the group. With this name, these artists moved endlessly between Kyiv and Moscow, blending their experience of both capitals in their work. Serhii Bazyliev, Serhii Heta, and Serhii Shershtiuk became famous at the beginning of the 1980s for their hyperrealist canvases. At first, it appeared that their work was absolutely uncritical of Soviet reality. However, their painting technique, which mimicked a camera viewfinder, drew attention to the absurd and pathological nature of everyday Soviet life, which was crumbling beneath the surface.

It all began in the 1960s at the Taras Shevchenko State Art School in Kyiv. It was here that the three teenage Serhiis became friends—Bazyliev, Heta, and Sherstiuk. These three young men from prosperous families were called “rich kids” in the Soviet underground scene, and their privilege would only increase over time. It wasn't long before Sherstiuk, the son of a high-ranking general, left for Moscow to study in the prestigious art history department of Moscow State University. Sherstiuk would go on to become the ideological leader of the group. Bazyliev and Heta went on to study at the Kyiv State Art Institute. A contemporary of the three who traveled a similar path was Serhii Yakutovych, son of Heorhii Yakutovych, the Soviet graphic artist and production designer for Parajanov's classic *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*. In the 1970s, Bazyliev, Heta, and Yakutovych the younger became friends and even put on an exhibition together at the youth exhibition hall at the Union of Artists on Krasnoarmiiska Street. Another young artist studying a few grades higher under the tutelage of Tetiana Yablonska was the Transcarpathian Tiberiy Szilvashi. By the mid-1970s, this generation would begin to come into its own. Beyond the facade of this relatively

prosperous period was internal stagnation and a deep sense of contradiction, which, before long, would bring about crisis and collapse in the USSR.

Of them, Tiberiy Szilvashi would undergo the most dynamic change in the late 1970s, whereupon he would develop his conception of “chronorealism.” The artist was interested in the blurry line between illusion and reality, and his paintings from this period were full of allegory and deliberate vagueness. Time was an unfathomable category that the artist sought to investigate, and in his work time truly feels like eternity. His deeply existential paintings were, perhaps not wholly consciously, the result of living through of a period of deep stagnation. They were frozen icons representing momentary, subjective states of being, which are returned to an earthly, human realm through the artist's skill.

The year 1980 would be an important year for this generation. The official All-Union Youth Exhibition took place in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. This was a yearly display of talent, where experts from the big cities could sniff out new blood from the regions with a view to inviting them back to Moscow. Tashkent was a triumph for Szilvashi, Heta, and Bazyliev. They were invited to open an exhibition in Moscow, though it was a long time before anything was shown. The large *Young Artists of Ukraine* exhibition in the Central House of Artists, showcasing the work of eight artists, only happened five years later, by which time their generation had already moved into a completely different artistic phase.<sup>228</sup>

While still at the Institute, Bazyliev and Heta began to shuttle back and forth between Kyiv and Moscow. Moscow was an interesting place to be at that time as the city was host to a series of large international art exhibitions. In the important year of 1980, an exhibition opened at the Pushkin Museum that would change the fate of an entire generation: *American Painting from the Second Half of the 19th to the 20th Century, from US Art Collections*. For the first time, the wider Soviet public became acquainted with the work of Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Jasper Johns, and James Rosenquist. Besides pop art, the exhibition also dedicated a lot of space to the newer art movement of hyperrealism. This movement was conceived as a post-pop art phenomenon and a reaction to conceptualism with its rejection of the figurative.<sup>229</sup> Chuck Close's huge painted portraits of scaled-up photographs, as well as the paintings of Richard Estes and Ralph Goings, indistinguishable from real photos, left a deep impression.<sup>230</sup>

They were already aware of hyperrealism in the USSR thanks to snippets of information in the magazine *Amerika* and other traditional sources of information from

<sup>228</sup> This exhibition featured the works of Tiberiy Szilvashi, Serhii Bazyliev, Serhii Yakutovych, Volodymyr Budnikov, Andrii Chebykin, Valerii Laskarzhevsky, and Serhii Odainyk.

<sup>229</sup> “Photography, cinema, television, reproductions, and advertisements all comprise a mass-market culture which, in many ways, displaces immediate reality as it truly exists. Artists cannot ignore the powerful impact of this, but they can utilize it, they can make this ‘second nature’ the tool and hero of their art,” writes the author of the first monograph on Soviet photorealists. See: Olga Kozlov, *Fotorealizm* [Photorealism] (Moscow: Galart, 1994), 8.

<sup>230</sup> Marina Bessonova, “Vystavki sovremennogo iskusstva. Khronika proshedshikh sobytii” [Exhibitions of modern art. A chronicle of past events], *Izbrannye trudy (sbornik)* [Selected works (collection)] (Moscow: Baltrus, 2005), 122.



TIBERIY SZILVASHI.

*THIS WONDERFUL SUMMER*. DEDICATED TO ANDREI TARKOVSKY. 1985.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 100×200 CM. FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF UNIONS OF ARTISTS. MOSCOW,  
RUSSIA. THIS ORGANIZATION WAS DISSOLVED IN 2017 AND ITS  
COLLECTION WAS DISTRIBUTED AMONG OTHER INSTITUTIONS.





SERHII BAZYLIEV.  
*ONE TIME ON THE ROAD*. 1983.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 180×220 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF  
UNIONS OF ARTISTS. MOSCOW, RUSSIA.



SERHII HETA.  
A WALK. FROM THE SERIES VDNKh. 1983.  
PENCIL ON PAPER. 61x76 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE STATE  
TRETYAKOV GALLERY. MOSCOW, RUSSIA.

the West, as well from an article in the state-approved magazine *Iskusstvo* (Art).<sup>231</sup> The Moscow conceptualists, as well as artists in Kyiv, were already using photographs as the basis for their painting at this time. Estonian artists were also moving in a similar direction. But it was after the exhibitions of 1980 that hyperrealism would become a serious trend in the art world. Its triumphant invasion of the Moscow art scene would be led by the three Kyivans: Sherstiuk, Bazyliev, and Heta. Their art was gleefully received in the West as critical of the Soviet regime and subsequently bought up by museum collections (in particular, by the expanding collection of Peter and Irene Ludwig). But as a matter of fact, these paintings were completely representative of the system at large. Hyperrealism had been greeted warmly by the Soviet establishment for whom the language of “photorealism,” as it was called at the US exhibition, was firmly adjacent to the state’s understanding of art. A little later in 1982, the art critic Aleksandr Kamensky would coin another term, “documentary romanticism,”<sup>232</sup> to describe the artistic practice of Bazyliev, Sherstiuk, Heta, and other artists who used the aesthetic of photography in their paintings. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, hyperrealism would be called the last big art movement of the Soviet era.

Hyperrealism was a paradoxical phenomenon. In creating the perfect image, it simultaneously underlined the fiction of empirical reality, hinting that the picture that seems absolutely true to life is actually nothing more than a decoy. However, the Soviet nomenklatura understood something else in the programmed falsehood of hyperrealism: the glimmer of the single correct artistic method, socialist realism. Indeed, there had already been a period in Soviet art when paintings had been lovingly made from photographs. The zenith that the socialist realist style aspired to, otherwise known as Stalinist grand style, was also characterized by a pared-back aesthetic devoid of any artistic extravagance, and resembling the photograph as closely as possible.

American hyperrealism became famous thanks to the way it subtly captured the sense of alienation characteristic of a developed capitalist society. Soviet hyperrealism, and its Kyiv offshoot in particular, was much more emotionally loaded. In contrast to the American version, it focused on a sense of intimacy and proximity.<sup>233</sup> Community was the most important element in the work of Bazyliev, Sherstiuk, and Heta. Life within a narrow circle of close friends, parties, and trips to the sea were all documented on trendy photo slides and subsequently turned into hyperrealist canvases.

Serhii Bazyliev’s *One Time on the Road* (1983) became a symbol of this generation. This group of stylishly dressed young people looks suspiciously modern. The “camera” has caught them unawares somewhere on the southern Crimean shore. They are either discussing where to go next, or have simply stopped to have a cigarette. All of the painting’s heroes are at that tender age when each one is primarily, and deeply,

<sup>231</sup> Valerii Turchin, “Giperrealizm. Pravdopodobie bez pravdy” [Hyperrealism: Verisimilitude without truth], *Iskusstvo*, no.12 (1974).

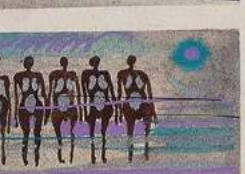
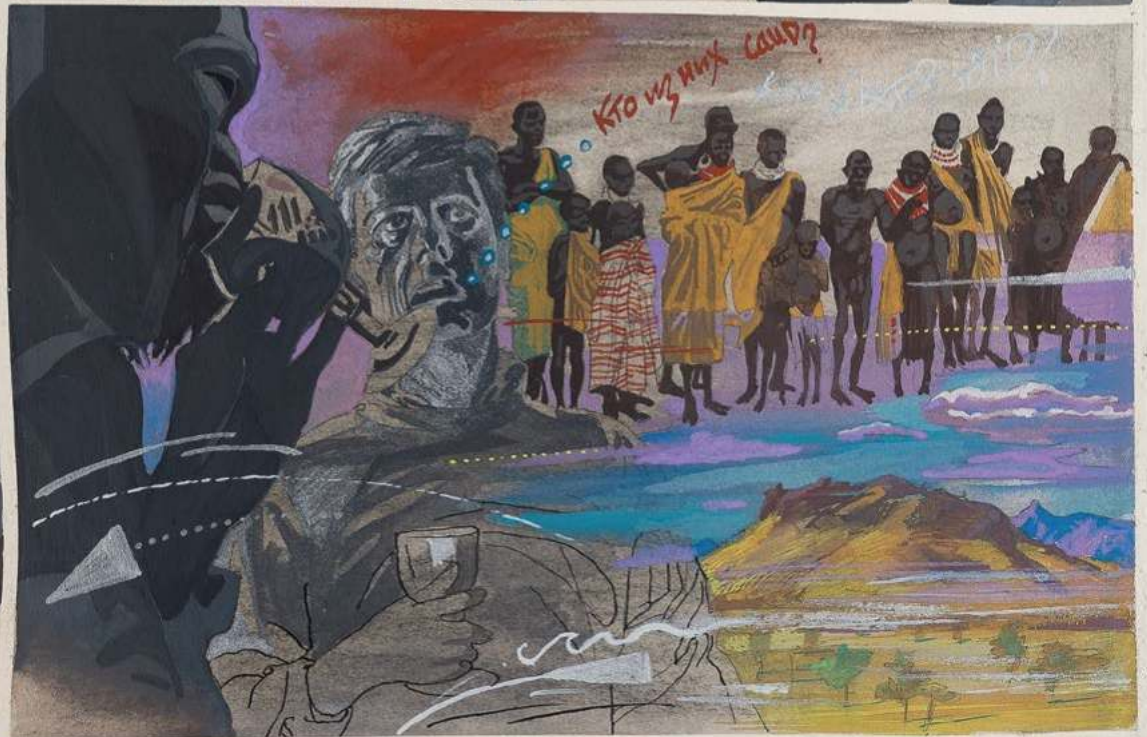
<sup>232</sup> Aleksandr Kamensky, “Dokumentalnii romantizm” [Documentary romanticism], *Tvorchestvo*, no.10 (1982).

<sup>233</sup> According to Andrei Kovalev, “Growing up under the pressure of state ideology, the Soviet individual was not in any condition to fend off the redemptive warmth of human feelings.” Andrei Kovalev, “Giper! Stil, naposledok obedinivshii khudozhnikov v SSSR” [Hyper! The style that finally united artists in the USSR], *The Art Newspaper Russia*, no.31 (March 2015).



SERHII YAKUTOVYCH.  
THIS IS AFRICA (A FRIEND'S STORY). 1988.  
INDIA INK AND WATERCOLOR ON PAPER.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST'S FAMILY.





concerned with what makes them individually unique. In the center of the canvas is Sherstiuk; Bazyliev is on the left with the red bag. To the far right of the canvas is another Kyivan member of the hyperrealists, a future star of Ukrainian literature who hails from a long line of artists, Oleksandr (Les) Poderviansky.

A student of the graphic artist Vasyl Kasiian, Serhii Heta was a brilliant drawer who created hyperrealist pictures using just a simple graphite pencil. The drawing of each large-scale photo took months of intensive work. One random click of a camera shutter would grow into a powerful and meditative piece of work. The most interesting artwork of this type is Heta's series *VDNKh* (1983).

Another "hit" from this period was *Father and I* (1983) by Serhii Sherstiuk. The enlarged photo portraits of the artist and his father offer a comparative analysis of two generations: the strict father in his military uniform next to his lax and neurotic son. However, as Serhii Yakutovych would point out, this image of an unfocused, bohemian "golden youth" was deceiving. "Despite looking at first appearance like a bunch of disheveled and frivolous bon vivants, the generation of the Kyiv Train Station was in fact defined by its professionalism," wrote Yakutovych.<sup>234</sup>

For a short time while in Moscow, Bazyliev, Sherstiuk, and Heta would find a common language with Mykola Filatov and Ihor Kopystiansky from Lviv.<sup>235</sup> The Muscovite Alexey Tegin also shared an interest in hyperrealism. The resulting group of artists would become the famous, semi-mythological, group Shist (Six).<sup>236</sup> In Moscow, hyperrealism was labeled as a Ukrainian phenomenon.<sup>237</sup> Another distinctive feature that this movement shares with the wider Ukrainian painting tradition is the absolute lack of a coherent discourse, something incredibly important to modern art. It was precisely this inability to reflect on one's personal artistic practice, to explain the how and the why, that left the hyperrealists in the shadows of the exquisitely articulate school of Moscow conceptualism and sots art.<sup>238</sup>

Mykola Filatov and Ihor Kopystiansky would soon become central figures in the successful Moscow perestroika art scene. Alexey Tegin would wholly dedicate himself to Eastern philosophy and experimental music. In 1984, Serhii Bazyliev created his statement piece *Goodbye to Kyiv*. He depicted himself and Serhii Sherstiuk resting on bicycles with a road sign for Kyiv in the background.<sup>239</sup> The work hints at the artist's

<sup>234</sup> "Pokolinnia kyivskoho vokzalu" [The Kyiv train station generation], *Yakutovych Academy*, March 3, 2018, <http://yakutovych.academy/railway/>.

<sup>235</sup> Ihor Kopystiansky's participation in the hyperrealist movement remains a subject of debate. While he was present in all early publications as a member of the Shist group, today he denies his association with the artists from that movement.

<sup>236</sup> This group only ever existed in an informal sense.

<sup>237</sup> According to Bogdan Mamonov, "This was perhaps the first time that Ukraine declared itself the founder of the most contemporary, most fashionable trend in art. This was despite the eventual flight of all the 'hyperstars' to the north." Bogdan Mamonov, "Moskovskii giperrealizm kak sluchai chastnoi zhizni" [Moscow hyperrealism as an instance from one's private life], *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal*, no. 45 (2002).

<sup>238</sup> Known as socialist art, or Soviet pop art, this was another Soviet unofficial art movement that began in the 1970s. [T.N.]

<sup>239</sup> Halyna Skliarenko, "Hiperrealizm v konteksti ukrainskoho mystetstva druhoi polovyny XX stolittia" [Hyperrealism in the context of Ukrainian art in the second half of the 20th century], *Suchasne mystetstvo* 9 (2013): 174.

final departure from his hometown. However, by the mid-1980s, when virtually the entire circle of Kyiv artists had finally moved to Moscow, hyperrealism died out. Perestroika had begun and would prove to be an era of new heroes and values, in which the successful young stars of Soviet art were unable to find a place for themselves. Paradoxically, it turned out that the high point in that generation's career were the years spent in transit between the train stations of Kyiv and Moscow.

Of the Kyiv Train Station generation, only Tiberiy Szilvashi and Serhii Yakutovych remained in Kyiv. In the beginning of the 1980s, there were elements of hyperrealism in these artists' work, but their individual trajectories and mythologies were of much greater importance. Following the collapse of the USSR, with the exception of Szilvashi, the hyperrealists and their followers found themselves on the fringes of the artistic world. They remained an unfinished and indistinct phenomenon. "Our generation, the children of the intelligentsia who had been crushed by the system, were free but living in a vacuum," claimed Yakutovych,<sup>240</sup> who suffered from living in such a stifling environment, of feeling absolutely lost. For the rest of his life, he yearned for the friends now living in Moscow, remembering the times roving between the two capitals when those young Kyivans were able, for a short time, to experience a sense of community.

## THE KHARKIV SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Kharkiv was one of the biggest industrial and scientific centers both in the USSR and later in independent Ukraine. It was Soviet Ukraine's second largest city by population and had an established avant-garde tradition, an active underground scene, and a school of art with a strong social focus. The Kharkiv school of art would go on to be one of the most powerful phenomena in the art of new Ukraine.

Kharkiv was inextricably connected with the memory of Soviet power's early Beginnings, of that heroic time when the artistic avant-garde's love affair with communism wasn't yet stained with the blood of the Executed Renaissance. In the 1960s and 1970s, the memory of the avant-garde still lived on in Kharkiv. The legendary Vasyl Yermilov survived the Great Terror, and an artistic underground emerged in Kharkiv in the early 1960s with two of Yermilov's friends at its center: the artist Vagrigh Bakhchanyan and the poet Eduard Limonov. Both would soon move to Moscow where they integrated themselves into the underground cultural scene and then emigrated to the West. Vagrigh Bakhchanyan joined the Fluxus group in New York, where he would spend the rest of his life. Bakhchanyan's ironic conceptual artwork and his extraordinary personal charisma left a deep mark on the history of unofficial Kharkiv. The artist's slogan — "We were born to turn Kafka into reality" (a pun on a Soviet slogan in which "Kafka" replaced the Russian word *skazka*, or "fairy tale") — as well as another

<sup>240</sup> "Pokolinnia kyivskoho vokzalu."

witty term, “SOSialist Realism,” which Bakhchanyan used self-deprecating to describe his own artistic process, thereby also ridiculing socialist realism, became famous. At one point, Bakhchanyan worked as a designer in a factory, and legend has it that after reading about Jackson Pollock in a magazine, he convinced the workers at the factory to punch holes in tins of paint and to create a huge dripping painting on the floor of an empty factory workshop.

Kharkiv was an industrial city. It was full of ne'er-do-wells, people living in poverty, students, and poets. The Kharkiv bohemian scene developed in close quarters with those living at the bottom of the social ladder. This impacted the tone and themes of art produced by natives of this city. In this context, at the end of the 1960s, a whole host of young artists would appear who came not from bohemian circles, but from a local amateur photography club. Photography was the biggest hobby in the USSR.<sup>241</sup> The country had a huge number of professional organizations and regional photo clubs. In Kharkiv, where the car factory produced the wildly popular Soviet equivalent of the Leica, the FED camera, the national fixation with photography reached even greater proportions. The first to experiment with a series of conceptual photos was the simple Soviet engineer Boris Mikhailov. Soon, a few other active amateurs would join his photo club, the majority of whom worked at one of the numerous Kharkiv factories. They were not only interested in the technical aspects of the discipline, but also fascinated by the aesthetic and semantic expression that a photograph contained. This was enough for an art form to take root and define the Kharkiv art scene for decades to come, while at the same time differing sharply from the photography of the Soviet mainstream.<sup>242</sup>

The Vremia (“Chas” in Ukrainian, or “Time” in English) group was formed in 1971.<sup>243</sup> Its members included Boris Mikhailov, Yevgeniy Pavlov, Yurii Rupin, Oleh Maliovany, Oleksandr Suprun, Hennadii Tubalev, Anatolii Makiienko, and Oleksandr Sytnychenko. The photographers developed an artistic method they called the “theory of the blow.” Their photographs were meant to challenge a stagnant Soviet society through form and content.<sup>244</sup> The result was a movement that became known for devalorizing Soviet mythology and using shock and brutality in its art. When utopia had ossified and turned into a dismal cargo cult, the artists of this generation attempted to focus on the everyday, on the things that were not covered by the Communist *Pravda* newspaper. They decided to tell the stories that lay beyond official Soviet photography’s field of vision.

<sup>241</sup> Ekaterina Degot, “Kharkovskaia fotografiia — proizvodstvo svobodnogo vremeni” [Kharkiv photography — A spare-time industry], 5,6, no. 7 (May 2012): 4.

<sup>242</sup> According to Alla Rozenfeld, “The main task of the photographer in Soviet Russia was to represent everyday life in a positive way, as a triumph of optimism. They were expected to illustrate an official ideology, producing images that conformed to the dogmas of Socialist Realism.” Alla Rozenfeld, “Photography as Art: Contemporary Russian Photography in the Yuri Traisman Collection,” in *Forbidden Art: The Postwar Russian Avant-Garde*, Yurii Traisman Virtual Museum of Russian Art, <http://russianartsfoundation.com/#leng/content/show2901/>.

<sup>243</sup> Tetiana Pavlova and Yevgeniy Pavlov, *Violin* (Kyiv: Rodovid, 2018).

<sup>244</sup> Nadezhda Prigodich, “Gruppa ‘Vremia’ — teoriia udara [The ‘Vremia’ Group — theory of the blow], 5,6, no. 7 (May 7, 2012): 5.



BORIS MIKHAILOV.  
FROM THE SERIES *YESTERDAY'S SANDWICH*.  
LATE 1960s–LATE 1970s. COLOR PRINT.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.





BORIS MIKHAILOV.  
FROM THE *RED SERIES*. 1968–1975.  
COLOR PRINT. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



VAGRICH BAKHCHANYAN.  
STALIN TEST, 1982.  
MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER. 36.9x47 CM.  
REPRODUCTION COURTESY OF THE KHARKIV  
MUNICIPAL GALLERY WITH THE PERMISSION  
OF THE ARTIST'S WIDOW IRINA BAKHCHANYAN.



In the 1970s, experiments with complicated photographic technology became popular in the group. Kharkiv photography essentially grew out of the Soviet tradition of amateur photography. Formal exercises that were popular among photo enthusiasts became a key tool in their work. Experiments with equal optical density, pseudo-solarization, double exposure, montage, collage, and retouching photos were all purely technical approaches that transformed not only the aesthetic, but also the political message of a photograph, commenting on a grotesque modernity and the crisis in socialist values.

Of note here is the series *Yesterday's Sandwich* (late 1960s to the late 1970s) and other earlier photographic series by Boris Mikhailov. He was a central figure in *Vremia* and would become one of the most famous Ukrainian modern artists in the world Mikhailov explained,

*When I had just started doing photography, I accidentally put in two slides at once, and I unexpectedly got a composite photographic image. This was how I made the series Yesterday's Sandwich, which, thanks to its unusual nature, brought me my first photographic success, especially among filmmakers. By combining the slides, it seemed to me that I had found a kind of generalized, metaphorical, and unique picture of our life.<sup>245</sup>*

Mikhailov's *Red Series* (1968–1975) was a landmark in the artist's work. The series was shot in Kharkiv and its running theme was the color red. In the propaganda language of the Soviet establishment, the color red was a powerful symbol of the revolutionary struggle, though at a certain point it had become so overused in people's everyday life that it became almost invisible. When examining Mikhailov's work we can see how redundant red had become in its total dominance of the visual urban landscape, inhabiting all aspects of its existence.

Another of Mikhailov's series from this period, *Unfinished Dissertation* (1984–1985), is no less impressive. Mikhailov created a unique photo diary in which he took the text of a stranger's unfinished dissertation and inserted his photos into it, as well as short comments. The result was a palimpsest that offered a unique insight into the mood of the time and a record of the futile hopes of an entire generation. In the Soviet period, a dissertation was considered the key to a bright and fulfilling future. Research institutes and their sluggish bureaucratic atmosphere in the stagnation period became the primary site of intellectual procrastination, a form of silent protest against a numbing and senseless system. The time when the series was created was the calm before the storm. Just a few years later, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the academic intelligentsia would become one of the main victims of the transition to capitalism. The research institutes would close, and the authors of those countless dissertations would be left without the means, and more importantly, without the skills to survive in the new world. They would quietly take to drink, end up trading in cheap Turkish clothing at markets across the country, and try their utmost to move abroad to a more prosperous country.

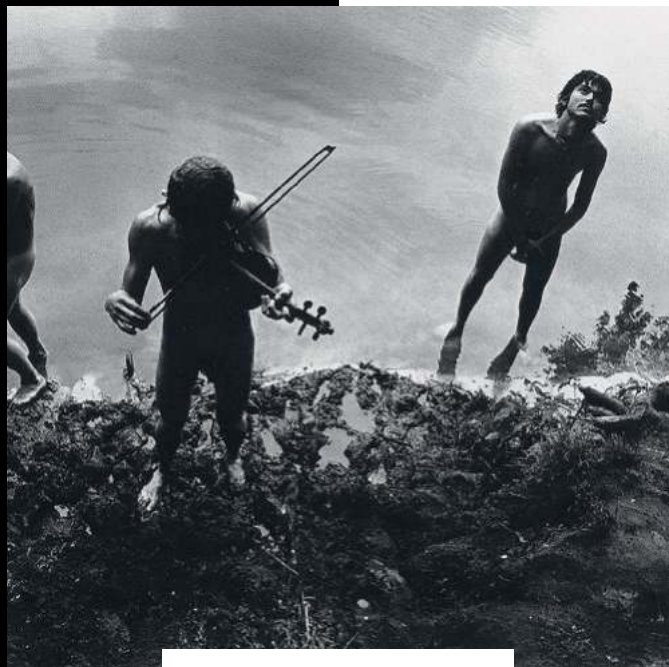
<sup>245</sup> Alina Sanduliak, "Kharkovskaia shkola fotografii. Boris Mikhailov" [Kharkiv school of photography. Boris Mikhailov], *Art Ukraine*, November 26, 2015, <https://artukraine.com.ua/a/kharkovskaya-shkola-fotografii--boris-mikhaylov->.



YEVGENIY PAVLOV.  
*ECLIPSE*, 1999. PHOTO.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



YEVGENIY PAVLOV.  
FROM THE SERIES *VIOLIN*. 1972.  
GELATIN SILVER PRINTS.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



YEVGENIY PAVLOV.  
FROM THE SERIES *VIOLIN*. 1972.  
GELATIN SILVER PRINTS.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

One of Mikhailov's projects dedicated to the grotesque late-Soviet everyday was entitled *Luriki* (1985). *Luriki* was a slang word that common folk used to refer to black-and-white photographs. In the Soviet period, photographers could earn money by enlarging and brightly coloring these photos using aniline paints. For example, a family that only had a small passport photo, a *lurik*, of the husband and father they lost during World War II, could turn it into a large and striking portrait of the deceased. In Kharkiv photography, *lurik* came to mean any colored photographs. The combination of being a real historical artifact and having an absurdly sentimental aesthetic helped make them into a cult object for the Vremia group, and this aesthetic would, one way or another, be reflected in the work of most of its members.

A series of photographs that would prove revolutionary for Kharkiv photography was created at the beginning of the 1970s by another active member of the Vremia group, Yevgeniy Pavlov. *Violin* (1972) was a poetic series of photographic compositions that featured young Kharkiv hippies, and it was one of the first experiments with male nudes in the homophobic USSR. In this period, when most Soviet photographers thought only in terms of one photograph, the idea of a series, and the resulting expansion of a space for dialogue with the viewer, was particularly innovative. *Violin* was followed by the series *Love* in 1976, and then *Archive Series*, which contained black-and-white snapshots of life in Soviet Kharkiv from 1965 to 1988. These series, whose photos appeared at first glance to be accidental and random, in fact strictly adhered to the photographer's artistic logic and the principles of the Kharkiv school.

Vremia's co-founder Yurii Rupin was also engaged in literature alongside photography. His novel *Luriki*, the short story "Diary of a Photographer," and other novels offered bright and well-written vignettes from the life of the Kharkiv photographic underground in the 1970s. His work also included a photo-history about real life in Soviet Kharkiv in all its dreary depression, unvarnished by any propaganda. The deconstruction of the Soviet myth about a happy life and the brave portrayal of the nude body in *Us (Double Portrait with Wife)* (1971), and the series *Banya*<sup>246</sup> (1972) was fully in accordance with the "theory of the blow," shocking contemporary viewers and forcing them to question if, in fact, the emperor had no clothes.

Depicting the naked body was taboo in Soviet photography. "Above all else, nudity in photographs was scary, and that fear was based on the fact these photographs could bring criminal charges," writes Tetiana Pavlova, an expert on the Kharkiv school of photography and the wife of Yevgeniy Pavlov.<sup>247</sup>

The naked body, together with the documentation of an unsightly Soviet reality, comprises the two poles of Kharkiv photography from this period. In practically all the photograph series, nudes became a symbol of freedom, a protest against the oppressive torpor of surrounding society. The person with no clothes in 1970s Kharkiv photography is basically Robert Musil's *Man Without Qualities*, or, to be more precise, a person with no ideology. Those wearing clothes in the photography of the Vremia

<sup>246</sup> An Eastern Slavic steam bath, but the word can also refer to a bathhouse. [T.N.]

<sup>247</sup> Tatiana Pavlova, "Kharkovskaia shkola fotografii. Iurii Rupin" [The Kharkiv school of photography. Yurii Rupin], *Art Ukraine*, November 10, 2015, <https://artukraine.com.ua/a/kharkovskaya-shkola-fotografii--yuriy-rupin>.



YEVGENIY PAVLOV.  
FROM THE SERIES LOVE. 1976.  
GELATIN SILVER PRINT.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



YEVGENIY PAVLOV.  
FROM THE ARCHIVE SERIES. 1974–1988.  
GELATIN SILVER PRINT.



YURII RUPIN.  
FROM THE SERIES *BANYA*. 1972.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST'S FAMILY.



YURII RUPIN.  
FROM THE SERIES *7TH OF NOVEMBER*. 1975.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST'S FAMILY.



YURII RUPIN.  
FROM THE SERIES *7TH OF NOVEMBER*. 1975.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST'S FAMILY.



BORIS MIKHAILOV.  
SOTS ART. 1975–1986. HAND-COLORED PIGMENT PRINTS.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PINCHUKARTCENTRE 2019.  
PHOTO BY MAKSYM BILOUSOV.



group are almost always seen as revolting or simply absurd. The nakedness of the Soviet individual who has stepped out of their “casing,” who now shows their clean, shining, white, and shockingly erotic body, is the sole ray of hope in an otherwise depressing universe, captured by the lens of an artist from this group. Boris Mikhailov took photos that focused on the intimate—and not always flattering—moments of communal living, a life without frivolity that looked like it had been captured accidentally on film. It is this realistic depiction of an awkward and unkempt nakedness captured by the voyeuristic photographer pressing the shutter, which begins the process of deconstructing the glossy Soviet narrative and completely turns it on its head.

In 1976, due to the radicalism of Vremia’s members, the Kharkiv Regional Photography Club was shut down. However, even though the group no longer existed formally, its photographers continued to attend various exhibitions using its name until the 1990s. Vremia’s only exhibition in Kharkiv took place in 1983 in the House of Academicians, and it was closed on the day of opening. During perestroika, a younger generation of Kharkiv photographers came onto the scene, which included the group Gosprom (an abbreviation meaning “state industry”). This group’s members included Serhii Bratkov, Ihor Manko, Hennadii Maslov, Kostia Melnyk, Mykhailo Pedan, Leonid Pesi-n, and Volodymyr Starko. During a surge of interest in all things political during this period, the group focused its attention on reportage as its central method. From 1990 to 2010, new artists who arrived on the Kharkiv scene would actively collaborate with members of Vremia, or at least employ the points of reference and ways of looking that the group had developed. The close attention paid to passing on the group’s artistic approach to younger artists and its consequent diffusion into later artistic practice helps us see how unique and illustrious the Kharkiv school of photography was as an artistic phenomenon.

# ODESA: FROM NONCONFORMISM TO CONCEPTUALISM

Odesa's art scene was as interesting as the one in Kharkiv. From the 1950s to the 1970s, Odesa had perhaps the most full-fledged unofficial scene in all of Ukraine, with its own exhibitions, intellectual clubs, and collectors. Oleh Sokolov, an artist who broke from figurative art in its traditional sense and created truly alternative "proto-conceptualist" pieces, worked there from the end of the 1950s. By the late 1960s, a community of unofficial artists had emerged in Odesa, headed by the likes of Valentyn Khrushch, Yurii Sychov, Liudmyla Yastrub, Oleksandr Anufriiev, Lucien Dulfan, Viktor Maryniuk, Volodymyr Strelnykov, Volodymyr Naumets, Valerii Basanets, and others.

An artistic phenomenon particular to that time was the "apartment exhibition." In the middle of the 1970s, hundreds of events of this kind took place in Odesa and formed the backbone of the city's unofficial scene. Odesa's free port spirit resisted any kind of sectarian self-isolation, as demonstrated by the city's nonconformist art scene of that period. In Odesa, the doors of apartment exhibitions were open to all, welcoming not only chosen like-minded members of the art community, but also numerous random guests and viewers.

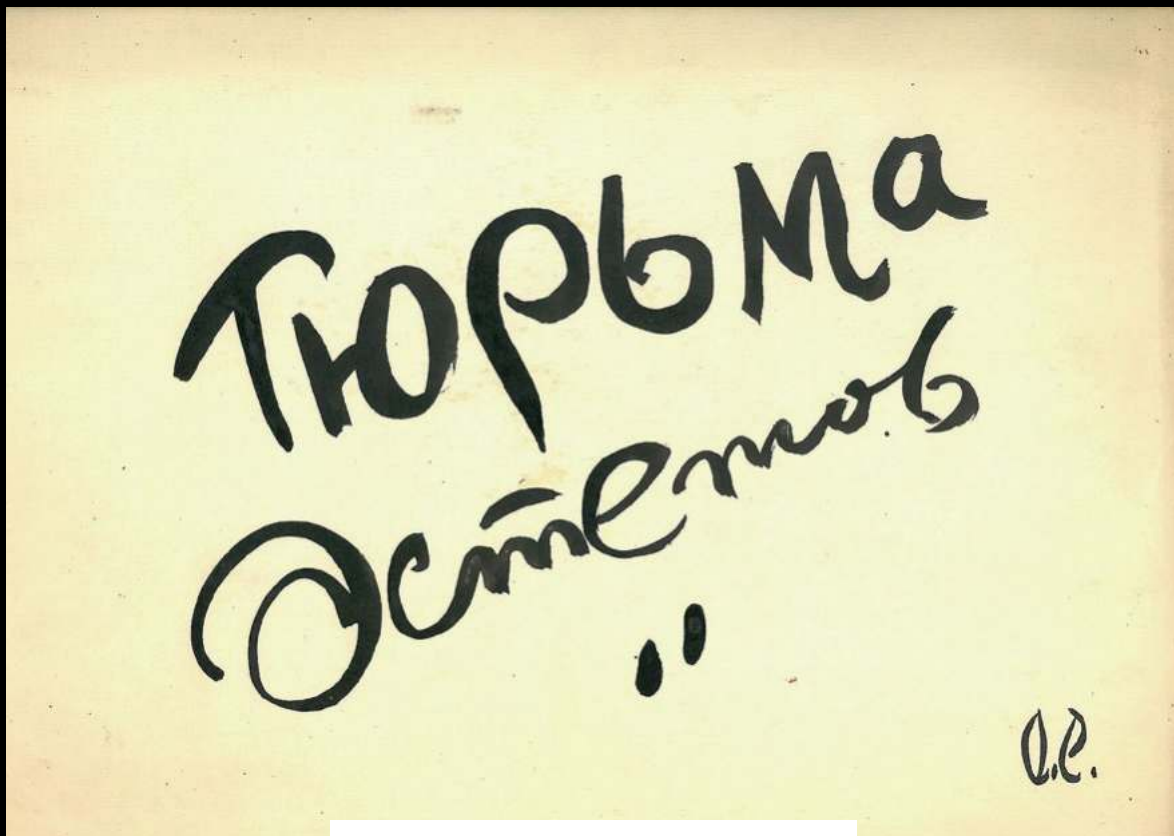
In the summer of 1967, long before Moscow's "bulldozer exhibition" of 1974, the duo Sychyik+Khrushchik, made up of the artists Stanislav Sychov and Valentyn Khrushch, arranged the first nonconformist "fence exhibition." The three-hour period when the artists' work was hung on the fence of the Odesa Opera Theater became an important moment in the history of Ukrainian unofficial art. Yevhen Holubovsky, the Odesan culturologist and witness to that legendary time, writes,

*It was more of an ethical and aesthetic protest, rather than a political one. And this was how the Odesan nonconformists differed from the Moscow avant-gardists. The latter's "bulldozer exhibition," organized by Oscar Rabin, thematically waged war against "Sofia Vlasyevna," the name given to the Soviet authorities by Muscovites afraid of wire taps. Khrushch and Sychov, on the other hand, were not fighting anyone. They upheld their own sense of personal integrity, and asserted their right to sincerity and purity in art.<sup>248</sup>*

However, the artistic experiments within this community were mainly limited to "catching up" with modernist painting. The majority of its members were interested in purely aesthetic exploration and, in contrast to the Moscow unofficial scene, were extremely apolitical.

A true counterculture only really appeared in Odesa in the early 1980s, when a group of young artists gathered in the city armed with a new set of intellectual and aesthetic reference points. From the beginning it wasn't a single group, rather a constellation of acquaintances who were divided up according to their interests, but who had, for a short while, worked in a similar style. They included Serhii Anufriiev,

<sup>248</sup> Yevgenii Holubovsky, "Iz istorii odesskogo avangarda: 'Zabornaia vystavka'" [From the history of the Odesa avant-garde: 'The Fence Exhibition'], *Vikna-Odssa*, April 20, 2010, [http://viknaodessa.od.ua/?zabornaya\\_vystavka](http://viknaodessa.od.ua/?zabornaya_vystavka).



OLEH SOKOLOV.  
PRISON OF THE AESTHETES. LATE 1950s. 21x29.7 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF YEVHEN DEMENKO.



VOLODYMYR NAUMETS.  
GIFT. 1982. DOCUMENTATION OF AN ART ACTION.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF  
ODESA MODERN ART.



ILLIA GERSHBERG.  
*VOLODYMYR STRELNYKOV'S STUDIO. 1971.*  
FROM THE AUTHOR'S COLLECTION. COURTESY  
OF THE MUSEUM OF ODESA MODERN ART.



ILLIA GERSHBERG.  
VALENTYN KHRUSHCH AND STANISLAV SYCHOV.  
FENCE EXHIBITION. ODESA. PALAIS ROYALE SQUARE. 1967.  
FROM THE AUTHOR'S COLLECTION. COURTESY OF THE  
MUSEUM OF ODESA MODERN ART.



LIUDMYLA YASTRUB.  
*PINK CURVE*. 1978. OIL ON CANVAS. 42x31 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF OLEKSANDR ROITBURD.



VALENTYN KHRUSHCH.  
*MEMORY OF THE PAST*. 1985.  
WOOD, VARNISH, PLATE. 16x16 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
MUSEUM OF ODESA MODERN ART.



LEONID VOITSEKHOV, LIUDMYLA SKRYPKINA, OLEH  
PETRENKO, SERHII ANUFRIEV, AND YURI LEIDERMAN.  
THE RODNIA EXHIBITION. SONIACHNA STREET, ODESA. 1982.  
FROM THE ARCHIVE OF YURI LEIDERMAN. COURTESY OF  
THE MUSEUM OF ODESA MODERN ART.



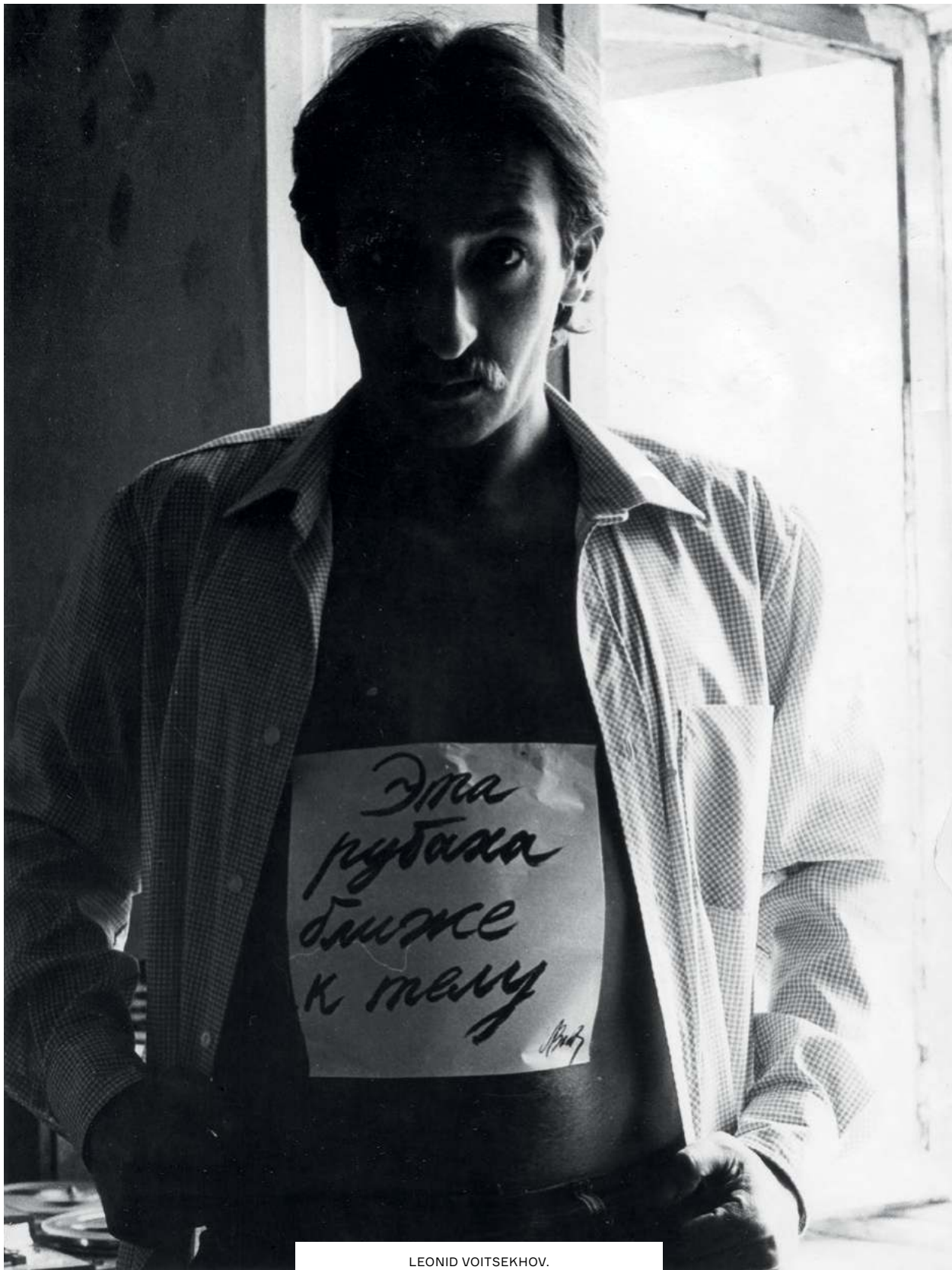
Yuri Leiderman, Ihor Chatskin, Volodymyr Fedorov, the Perts group (Oleh Petrenko and Liudmyla Skrypkina), Larysa Rezun, and Dmytro Nuzhyn. As the oldest of the artists, the group's unspoken leader became Leonid Voitsekhov. It all began with their apartment exhibitions, put on in the spirit of the European Fluxus group.

Among their first collaborative projects, initiated by Voitsekhov, was the apartment exhibition *Rodnia* (Kin) in 1983. It was put on in the home of Serhii Anufriiev's mother Marharyta Zharkova. It was here in this famous "salon," in reality a standard Soviet apartment on Soniachna Street, that the older members of Odesan bohemian life would gather. *Rodnia* took up the entire wall of one of the rooms, covered in photographs from the personal family archives of the exhibition participants. All attendees were told in advance that they would be witnessing artwork completed "using new techniques." In reality, once the guests had arrived at the apartment on Soniachna Street, they ended up having to listen to the artists give long and detailed explanations for each photograph: about somebody's grandmother and where she lived; about who studied with whom; and about who went on to get married. This was clearly an ironic statement on the familial atmosphere within the early 1980s unofficial Soviet art scene, whose cozy solidarity and constant bickering resembled life in a communal apartment.

There was a glaring cultural vacuum in Kyiv at this time, and the main intellectual focus for the young Odesans became the Moscow conceptualist group. They discovered the work of the art group *Kollektivnye deistviia* (Collective Action), whose founder Andrei Monastyrsky was their idol, and they began gradually spending more and more time in Moscow. One of the first to establish regular contact with the Moscow conceptualists was the affable and charming Serhii Anufriiev, the son of the Odesan non-conformist from the previous generation, Oleksandr Anufriiev. Yuri Leiderman went to study at the Moscow Institute of Chemical Technology. This generation of Odesans was, on the whole, not interested in professional art education—the conservative Soviet art colleges had nothing to offer them. A certainty hung in the air at that time that anybody could become an artist, and the main thing was not *how* art was made, but rather what it was about. This particular artistic culture, like that of Moscow, was originally paper-based and mainly focused on text and discourse, rather than being centered on the image.

The poet Ihor Chatskin, the author of the first conceptual painting in Ukrainian art, *I Ruble Ihor Chatskin*, would later recall how news from the capital's art scene traveled to Odesa:

*Monastyrsky's writings were hugely influential when they arrived; rumor was, too, of course. Actually, I think that rumors were an important and completely separate thing. They were varied and often fantastical. Seriozha [Serhii] Anufriiev, who heard most of the rumors, had an amazing ability to embellish what he had heard and often make things up. I remember a fantastic story about Vadyk Zakharov. Anufriiev was talking about some work or other by Vadyk Zakharov. The work featured Vadyk with his eyes closed, bound shut (he has a pretty well-known series like that). He had begun working with Skersis, and this is what he did: he had his eyes tied shut with a sign above him saying: "Piracy is good." Somehow, Seriozha managed to interpret that as "Fascism is what we need now." That is the only example I can fully remember, but there*



LEONID VOITSEKHOV.  
*THIS SHIRT IS CLOSER TO THE BODY.* 1983.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF PETR SHYRKOVSKY.

were a thousand instances like it. While the overall situation resembled a “game of telephone,” there was the fairly objective magazine *A-la [A–Z]*, and Monastyrsky’s writings, bewitching, magical texts which we didn’t always understand. He was some kind of shaman or something.<sup>249</sup>

And Odesa wouldn’t be Odesa if it didn’t bring its own rebellious spirit to Soviet unofficial art. Connecting the unconnectable; ironically distorting ideological clichés; subversively appropriating the day-to-day features of late-Soviet life; combining a childishness and intelligence; while also binding all of these things together into a kind of poetry—these were all ingredients of the Odesa recipe for conceptualism. When looking at the art of many Odesans from this period, it is difficult to separate the figure of the artist from their work. Serhii Anufriiev and Leonid Voitsekhov are examples of this. Both of them are highly important representatives of Odesa conceptualism, but at the same time it is hard to pinpoint their artistic contribution to a specific piece of art, whether it be text, a series, or project. Of course, both of them had their own particular trademarks, but above all else they were charismatic communicators, and the unique atmosphere of the Odesa art scene in the 1980s wouldn’t have been possible without them.

Another stand-out figure from this period was Yuri Leiderman. A thoughtful and intellectual man who loved reading complicated texts, he was also a poetically minded, romantic, and ironic observer. The most interesting stage in the history of this group was at the end of the 1980s, that incredibly important time in art, when the Odesa artists squatted on the street Furmannyi Pereulok and in the Chistye Prudy neighborhood in Moscow.

In 1987, Leiderman and Anufriiev, together with the Moscow artist Pavel Pepperstein, created the art group Inspection Medical Hermeneutics. This collective became the brightest phenomenon in the later years of Moscow conceptualism. In the best tradition of schizoanalysis, while also appropriating the language of secret orders and lodges, the artists called themselves “inspectors.” They organized meetings and composed intentionally complicated texts. They wrote using an Aesopian language, which could be interpreted as an ironic commentary on the characteristically impenetrable nature of the Moscow art scene at that time. However, they were not simply playing intellectual games. In many ways, these unique compositions helped define the period, and quotations from their work, which was full of poetic neologisms, spread like wildfire.

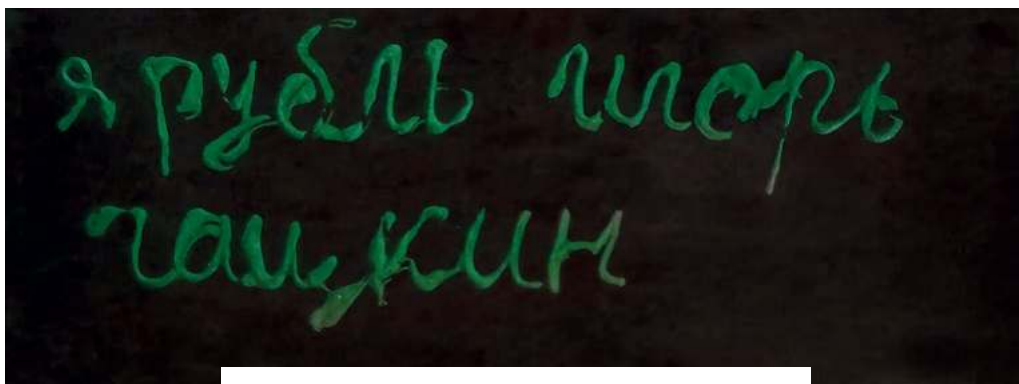
Another original aspect of the Odesan art scene of the 1980s was two art groups, each comprised a married couple. The Pertsy (Peppers) group (Liudmyla Skrypkina and Oleh Petrenko) and the Martynchyky group (Svitlana Martynchyk and Ihor Stiopin). The most famous artworks by Pertsy were made in 1985 and consisted of a unique surrealism with its roots in communal life. It was made up of absurd objects which combined banal features from Soviet everyday life with elements of scientific-technical discourse. In this way they created a teapot with boiling green peas; paintings on handkerchiefs; and domestic appliances covered in all manner of mathematical tables.

<sup>249</sup> Ihor Chatskin, interview by Elena Godina, *Iskusstvo Odessa 80-kh* [Art of Odesa in the 1980s], 2000, <http://kiev.guelman.ru/odessa/chatskin/interview.html>.



- Загляни, Аня - проникновение сквозь оболочку - это первая ступень трансгрессии  
 Следующая ступень - более радикальная -  
 - это бесконечное нанизывание оболочек  
 на сквозные стержни. Проникновенности.

SERHII ANUFRIIEV.  
 UNTITLED, 1985. COLLAGE ON PAPER.  
 38x18 CM. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



IHOR CHATSKIN.  
 I RUBLE IHOR CHATSKIN. 1984.  
 ARTIST'S REPRODUCTION FROM 2003. 33x99 CM.  
 FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE ODESA FINE ARTS MUSEUM.

7. IX. 82 г. В г. ОДЕССЕ  
В 10 Ч 03 МИН, ПО МОСКОВСКОМУ  
ВРЕМЕНИ, СОСТОИТСЯ ПЕРВЫЙ  
В ИСТОРИИ ЧЕЛОВЕЧЕСТВА  
ПИЛОТИРУЕМЫЙ ПОЛЕТ МЫСЛИ

IHOR CHATSKIN.  
A NOTE DESCRIBING IHOR CHATSKIN AND YURI  
LEIDERMAN'S FIRST PERFORMANCE. 1982.  
INK ON PAPER. 15x21 CM.



YURI LEIDERMAN.  
FROM THE BOOK *I BELIEVE IN STRENGTH AND A YELLOW CANISTER*.  
1984. MARKER AND PENCIL ON PAPER. 16.5x10 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF ANDREI MONASTYRSKY.

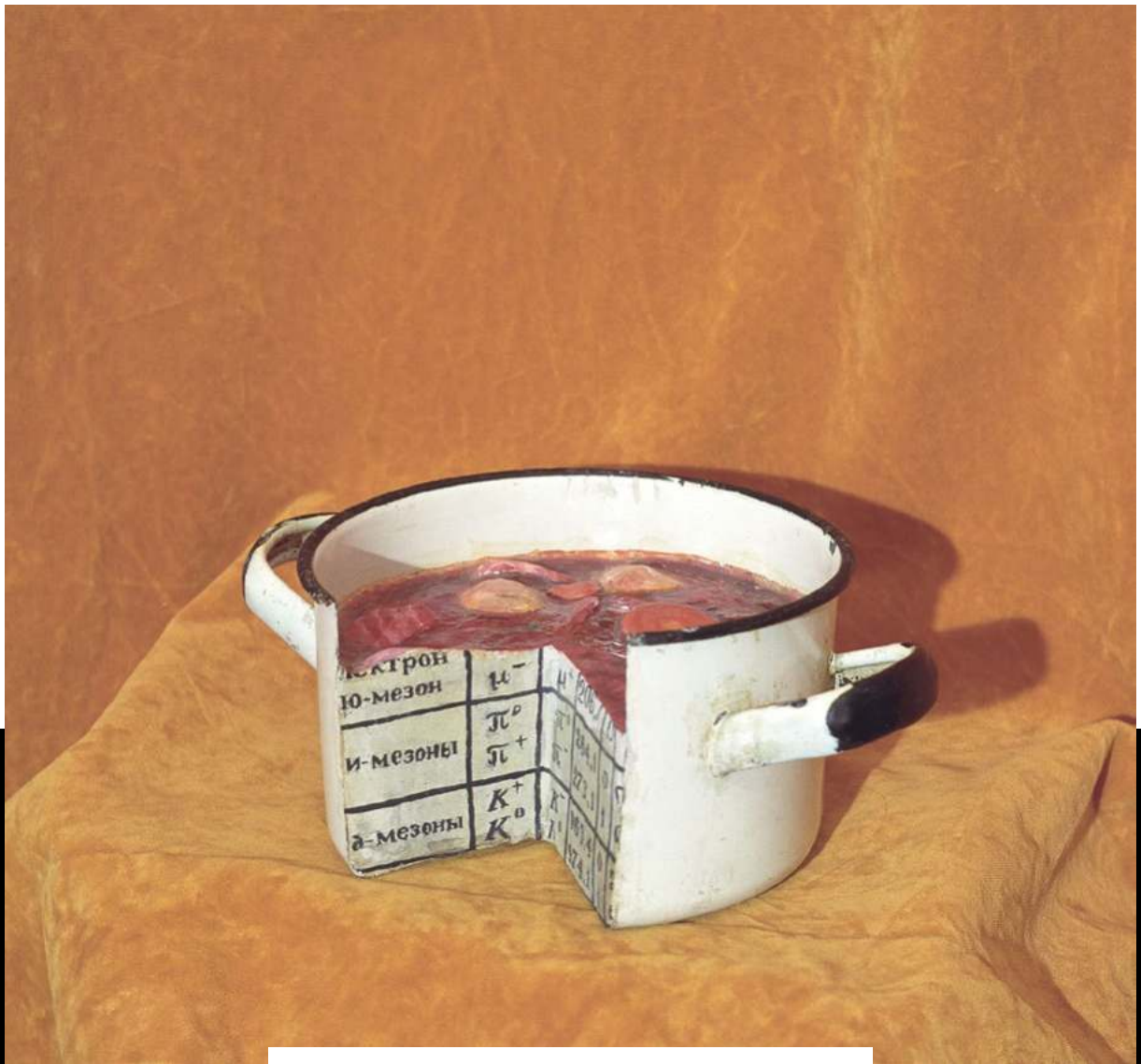
The second pair, the Martynchyky, existed on the edge of the Odesan scene; they were on friendly terms with the artists and their art had some mutual overlap. This pair's art focused on an imagined mythology of their own creation, which they continued to develop in a humorous manner over an extended time period. Their imagined "primitive" tribes and peoples, their ways of life, and histories, were all realized in the form of paintings, drawings and objects. Perhaps the Martynchyky's most famous pieces are their plasticine installations where the sense of childishness is emphasized through their choice of a material that is traditionally used in children's crafts.

The performances staged by the Odesans were another landmark in the history of Ukrainian art: *Exploring the Artistic Wilds* (1987), *In No Time* (1987), and many others. These were stand-out moments in the history of Soviet performance. Leiderman and Ihor Chatskin's 1984 performance entitled *Ways to Use a Flag as a Murder Weapon* was an iconic statement on Soviet reality, which has not lost its relevance even to this day. To a certain extent, the performance could serve as an eloquent epigraph for Ukraine's most recent history with its unceasing political strife and conflict.

Following the turbulent 1980s, many of the Odesa conceptualists remained permanently in Moscow and some left for the West, but the majority either returned to Odesa or at least maintained a close connection with the city. Recently, Ukraine has seen a surge of interest towards the Odesa art scene of the 1980s and a reassessment of its role and influence. Today it is evident that Odesa conceptualism is an integral part of the history of Ukrainian art and constitutes one of its brightest chapters.



SERHII ANUFRIIEV.  
FROM THE SERIES HANGAR NUMBER 3. 1983.  
MIXED MEDIA ON CARDBOARD. 30x21 CM. FROM THE  
COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF ODESA MODERN ART.



THE PERTSI GROUP (LIUDMYLA SKRYPKINA AND OLEH PETRENKO).  
A POT FILLED WITH BORSHCH. 1995.  
OIL, PAPIER MACHE, ENAMELED METAL. 25×17×10 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE PINCHUKARTCENTRE.





YURI LEIDERMAN AND IHOR CHATSKIN.  
*WAYS TO USE A FLAG AS A MURDER WEAPON.* PERFORMANCE IN  
LEONID VOITSEKHOV'S APARTMENT. 1984. PHOTO. EACH IS 17x23 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF ODESA MODERN ART.







## PART 2. THE ART OF INDEPENDENT UKRAINE

The collapse of the USSR didn't happen overnight. The conflict between the official ideological narrative and the reality of Soviet daily life, a conflict captured by both Odesa conceptualist artists and by the Kharkiv Vremia group, developed gradually over time. The Soviet party establishment had aged, their senses somewhat dulled, but they did not relinquish their grip on the reins of power over that vast country. The state's economic policy was focused on heavy industry and military defense. In the Soviet era, the needs of the "little man" to have a comfortable, ample life with a sense of privacy were considered bourgeois and routinely condemned. Of course, any comparison of the early post-revolutionary years in the USSR with the later period of mature socialism would clearly show a growth in prosperity and a certain compromise with "bourgeois values." This shift began as early as the 1930s, gaining pace by the 1950s. Nonetheless, the Soviet individual continued to live in a visually austere world where there was a regular deficit of consumer goods.

The Soviet individual's material needs could no longer be compensated for on an ideological level. The slogans from the post-revolution years had long lost any value, turning into empty signifiers. Replicated in a frenzy of self-repeating government propaganda, these slogans followed Soviet people everywhere they went, and yet, despite being ubiquitous, they became even more invisible. They began to evoke nothing but a sense of exhaustion and an ironic indifference to official culture with its varnished depiction of reality and hyper-patriotism.

The life of the Soviet intelligentsia was utterly defined by a sense of futility and a passionate interest in anything that was happening beyond the Iron Curtain. Sweet songs about freedom and peace made their way across the divide full of the promise of alluring little joys: bright colors, tasty aromas, a variety of goods on shop shelves, fashionable clothes, and, of course, popular music and cinema. The West won the Cold War thanks, in part, to its symbolic weaponry. In a world where communication and technology were developing at an incredible rate, the Soviet Union with its everyday austerity, decaying narratives, and lack of an appealing alternative cultural model just came across as, to put it one way, "unsexy." At a certain moment in time, a society-wide consensus oriented itself towards chewing gum,<sup>250</sup> unlimited consumption, and the specter of freedom. Both ordinary citizens and the new generation of the political elite, who had emerged from the youth wing of the Communist Party, the *Komsomol*, were ready to do anything to break free from the iron clutches of a utopia that had passed its expiration date.

Amidst the growing crisis, there was a growing appetite for decentralization in the majority of the Soviet republics, including Ukraine, and the local elites began to gather strength. After bungled attempts at political and economic reform beginning in 1986 under perestroika, the Soviet Union finally collapsed in 1991. A sense of freedom hung in the air.

<sup>250</sup> Chewing gum, which had to be imported, quickly became popular among both children and adults and served as one of the symbols of the West.



VIKTOR MARUSHCHENKO.  
PERESTROIKA. BYKIVNIA. 1987.  
PHOTO. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



STILL FROM THE FILM *NINOTCHKA*.  
DIRECTED BY ERNST LUBITSCH. 1939.



STILL FROM THE FILM *ALONE* (1931).  
DIRECTED BY HRYHORII KOZINTSEV  
AND LEONID TRAUBERG. 1931.

That era's epic confrontation of values, which lasted the best part of the 20th century and which led to the complete disintegration of the USSR, is well captured by two old films. In 1931, the premiere of the film *Odna* (*Alone*) took place. It was filmed in Leningrad by Hryhorii Kozintsev, who was from Kyiv and a former student of Oleksandra Ekster, together with Leonid Trauberg, who was born in Odesa. Its mixture of avant-garde montage and music written by Dmitri Shostakovich successfully highlights the innovative nature of this story about a graduate of a Leningrad teacher training academy. A young woman plans to marry and is looking at a wedding dinnerware service with her fiancé. Out of shot, a female choir sings, "How wonderful life will be!" But to live in this old-fashioned way, in comfort, warmth, and amidst the prosperous apathy of common folk was simply not to be. The motherland bursts into the life of this young heroine and she is duly sent off to the distant Altai Mountains. Her hopes of personal happiness dashed, the young woman nonetheless makes her choice to support the building of utopia. She is sent to the edge of the earth to teach the children of nomads. She doesn't just teach them to read and write, but also teaches the ideals of the new communist society. When the heroine nearly dies of frostbite, the Soviet motherland sends a technological miracle into the slumbering taiga to save her: an aeroplane. And from radio sets across the country a stern voice shares the achievements of that simple Altai schoolmistress.

It was hard to resist both the energy of this story and the totalitarian ideals behind it, which, at the time of shooting, had yet to be soaked in the blood of the Great Terror. It was even harder to find some kind of "capitalist" alternative to oppose it. However, when Ernst Lubitsch's *Ninotchka* was released by the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios in Hollywood in 1939, it appeared that Western society had emerged from its previous shock and had found the Achilles heel of the Soviet individual. Thus, began the development of a powerful, and no less viral, counter-myth about freedom and

limitless consumption as the most tangible manifestation of that freedom. The main heroine of the film, played by the magnificent Greta Garbo, is a severe Soviet commissar. She lives in abject poverty in a Moscow communal apartment but ardently believes in communism and its leaders. After ending up in Paris in the world of the aristocracy and under the influence of a sudden passion for a handsome capitalist, the woman begins to shy away from her unshakeable principles. She transforms from a bluestocking with a bust of Lenin under her pillow into a passionate glamorous beauty in luxurious evening dresses, furs, and diamonds.

The Soviet myth about the fervently ascetic communist who saw life as a sacrifice proved stronger only in the short term. Over time, however, the diamonds won out. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the former Soviet proletariat, engineers, academics, and members of the Komsomol all followed in the apostate Ninotchka's footsteps in the Rabelaisian pursuit of luxury.

The instant transition from socialism to capitalism was a traumatic process. This would quickly become clear when money lost its value, shop shelves completely emptied, and life on the ruins of old narratives turned out to be less joyful and peaceful than it had appeared while the USSR still existed. On the one hand, the 1990s in Ukraine were a romantic period of rebirth connected to the country's declaration of independence, a search for identity and new values, and the formation of a new social order. At the same time, they were wild, hungry years that saw the collapse of industry, rises in unemployment, the growth of crime and mafia clans, and the creation of a *Homo novus*. The "new Russians" (a term that transcended nationality and was applied to the lucky nouveau-riche), were the first to successfully master the art of living in a changed world. The country saw capital and power redistributed into the hands of bandits and former Komsomol leaders. It was this churning mixture of people and events at the end of the 1990s that led to the formation of a new social order, the leading roles taken by fantastically wealthy oligarchs and those who had emerged alive from mafia infighting.

In the late-Soviet consciousness, the Western world was an idealized El Dorado. Of course, such a romanticized view did not last long when confronted with reality. Many artists and cultural figures who had emigrated before perestroika were shocked to find themselves in a society that the Soviet person found extremely difficult to adapt to. Vilen Barsky, for example, who left in the early 1980s, wrote about this in his memoirs. Following the dissolution of the USSR, the difficulties in engaging with the western world and its values became even more acute and complex. Only a handful of artists from Ukraine succeeded in moving abroad and establishing successful careers.<sup>251</sup> Having lived through the post-perestroika boom in interest in all things Soviet, the majority of artists remained at home. Ukrainian art was isolated from an international audience for several decades due to the significant linguistic and cultural barriers that surrounded the country, the difficulties in translation (both in the literal and figurative sense), and also the country's deceptive reputation as a "not-quite Russia."

<sup>251</sup> Examples include Ilya Kabakov who was born in Dnipro (then Dnipropetrovsk), but who lived in Moscow from the age of 16; Boris Mikhailov and Sergei Sviatchenko from Kharkiv; Igor Kopystiansky who was from Lviv and a star of the Moscow underground; and Anton Solomoukha from Kyiv.

Official Soviet art during the perestroika period underwent significant liberalization. The meaninglessness of the state machine, whose only purpose was to serve an expired ideology, became increasingly apparent. The time for a new kind of art had arrived, an art that abandoned the senile Soviet old guard and declared its intentions to keep up with current world events.

As paradoxical as it may seem, the Soviet art establishment in Ukraine turned out to be more resilient than the Soviet Union itself. After the collapse of the USSR, there were essentially two art worlds. Artists from the old system were slow and unwilling to yield their positions, and some lived out their years while remaining faithful to their craft. At this time, a huge number of artists transformed themselves and shed their skin to adapt to this new age. Old socialist realist masters now began painting Orthodox churches, or, in place of Lenin, portraits of criminal bosses, businessmen, and new Ukrainian bureaucrats. Realist art continued to be made by members of the now anachronistic Union of Artists, which held on despite its status gradually declining to that of a small gallery. To this day, realist art remains the fundamental aesthetic taught to the younger generation at the country's National Academy of Visual Arts and Architecture, as well as at other high-profile institutions. Young artists learn modern art techniques not within the academy, but rather from friends, online, in short courses, and increasingly while outside of the country.

The conservatism of the Ukrainian art school helps explain many of the peculiarities of the country's contemporary art scene: its weaknesses, and at the same time, its strengths. In particular, its influence can be felt in the dominance of classical art forms such as drawing, sculpture, and above all, painting, which sits above all the rest. On the one hand, painting is Ukraine's "calling card"; but on the other hand, its dominance inhibits the development of other important forms of contemporary art.

After Ukraine regained independence, the state acquisition of artwork ceased. The result of this is that even the biggest art collection in the country, the National Art Museum, has a gap three decades wide in its catalogue. At this moment in time, there is no state or private institution with a representative collection of art from this period. Artworks are spread across many private collections in Ukraine and abroad, and a portion of them have been irretrievably lost. This era of intense change has done little to strengthen the function of memory. To a large extent, the history of modern Ukrainian art up to the present is akin to a kind of apocrypha passed by word of mouth between artists, curators, enthusiast art historians, and first-hand witnesses to recent events.

The new Ukrainian political elite inherited the bureaucracy of the old Soviet system. In the Soviet Union, the leadership of each republic enjoyed a certain level of freedom in making economic decisions. However, all cultural policy and ideological decisions were made in Moscow, at the center of power. In the old system, these policy decisions arrived from above, but in independent Ukraine, cultural policy spent many years on the margins. Bureaucrats continued to listlessly imitate the cultural model they inherited from the USSR. Hence, culture became a collection of saccharine folkloric and ethnographic clichés such as songs and dances, crafts, and over-the-top exhibitions of countryside landscapes. Fine art was largely limited to realism, thus reflecting the tastes of bureaucrats who grew up in the Soviet canon, as well as of society at large. It goes without saying that within this system of values, modern art — with its specific



look, transgressive nature, and exploration of difficult topics—was not afforded much space. That said, it was precisely the semi-dissident position of modern artistic practice in Ukraine that, to a certain degree, helped the art scene. It was on the ruins of the past, and practically in total isolation from the corrupt state machine, that a new wave of art appeared. The last time art contained such strength and integrity was at the time of the avant-garde.

It is a consciously cultural, existential, and, to a certain degree, political choice to create modern art in Ukraine. Everyone who ended up in this narrow circle in the last 30 years saw their membership as badge of pride and distinction, fully appreciated only by those within it. It was precisely that sectarian spirit that set the general tone and mood of the entire art process. In 1987, Leonid Voitsekhov, a member of the Odesa conceptualists, created the slogan “Whose side are you on, masters of the Renaissance?” He was ironically playing on Maxim Gorky’s letter to American correspondents,<sup>252</sup> while at the same time giving voice to the antagonism between the old and new art worlds as they both fought for space in the history of art. Voitsekhov’s banner seems to tell the viewer, “If the Renaissance artists were alive today, they would be creating modern art and not dismal socialist realism.” That was the choice faced by every Ukrainian artist over the last three decades: to continue to practice a neutered post-Soviet academy-style art, or to move into the uncharted waters of modern art. It was symptomatic that the art magazine from the 1990s edited by artist Hlib Vysheslavsky was called *Terra Incognita*. This sense of the unknown transformed making modern art from a normal career choice into a gripping adventure, a story with an open ending.

<sup>252</sup> Maxim Gorky, *S kem vy, mastera kultury? Otvety amerikanskim korrespondentam* [Whose side are you on, masters of culture? A reply to American correspondents] (Moscow: Partizdat, 1932). In this essay, Gorky called on American cultural figures who sympathized with communist ideas to decide which side they were on in the USSR’s war against bourgeois ideology.

## CHAPTER 1.

# THE NEW WAVE ON THE RUINS OF UTOPIA: THE LATE 1980s TO 2004

## A PERMITTED RENAISSANCE: THE TRANS-AVANT-GARDE AND THE BIRTH OF THE NEW WAVE

By the 1970s, having accepted that it would be impossible to completely stamp out nonconformist tendencies in art, the Soviet system began to reduce some of the ideological pressure on the art scene. This was how “permitted art”<sup>253</sup> came about—a phenomenon connected with the work of young artists, in which moderate experimentation with form became possible. It was in the context of permitted art at the end of the 1980s, amidst a rush of perestroika inspiration, that the Ukrainian New Wave was born.<sup>254</sup> This generation was lucky because its formative years came during an era of radical change. Where their predecessors had to timidly stand by and be quiet, these artists were able to scream with all their might. Their wish to rebel was in sync with the time, and before long a critical mass of artists had gathered together. They were interested in contemporary philosophy and current trends in international art; they were united by their raw energy; and it seemed like they had absorbed that era’s spirit of hope and rebirth into their very core.

The New Wave was formed on the ruins of the old system, but it still took full advantage of that system’s numerous resources. The official all-union and republican youth exhibitions helped give extra momentum to circulating the new art movements of this

<sup>253</sup> Ekaterina Degot and Vladimir Levashov, “Razreshennoe iskusstvo” [Permitted art], *Iskusstvo*, no.1 (1990).

<sup>254</sup> This is an umbrella term for an array of artistic phenomena in Ukrainian art at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. The name “New Wave” was synonymous with an entire generation following Oksana Barshynova’s curatorial exhibition of the same name, which was dedicated to art from the second half of the 1980s and held at the National Art Museum of Ukraine in 2009.

# С КЕМ ВЫ, МАСТЕРА РЕНЕССАНСА?

Л.Войцехов 1987

LEONID VOITSEKHOV.  
*WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON, MASTERS  
OF THE RENAISSANCE?* 1987.  
ARTIST'S RECONSTRUCTION. 2015.  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS. 84×480 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
MUSEUM OF ODESA MODERN ART.



VALENTYN RAEVSKY.  
*HOLY DOORS. DIPTYCH.* 1989.  
OIL AND ENAMEL ON CANVAS.  
300×200 CM (EACH PIECE).



ARSEN SAVADOV AND HEORHII SENCHENKO.  
*BLACK MONKEYS*. 1991.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 370×460 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF MARAT GELMAN.

period.<sup>255</sup> An art exhibition of this kind took place in Kyiv in 1987. Alongside more conservative pieces, it was here that artworks by artists thinking outside the box were displayed freely for the first time. The artist Tiberiy Szilvashi played a significant role in helping unify the New Wave generation. He was a highly prominent figure when the late-Soviet art world was undergoing intense transformation. Before long, he would become the leader of a different movement, the abstract sculptural group the Painterly Preserve.

In 1987, Szilvashi was a well-known, energetic man on the Kyiv art scene. He headed the youth section of the Union of Artists where his responsibilities included looking after beginner artists. At the youth exhibition in 1987, Szilvashi and his colleagues selected the best artists, judging by the artworks they had presented, and invited them to Sedniv the following year for an open-air painting retreat. In this small town in the Chernihiv region there was an old Soviet artists' boarding house owned by the Union. In 1987 and 1988, this place played a large role in helping the new generation of artists come into their own.

To begin with, the artists of the Ukrainian New Wave called their movement the “trans-avant-garde.” The term was first used by the Italian art critic Achille Bonito Oliva to describe a new movement in Italian art in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The large-scale, expressive, and postmodernist painting of artists such as Francesco Clemente, Sandro Chia, Mimmo Paladino, and Enzo Cucchi immediately struck a chord with the young Ukrainian painters. However, it would be an exaggeration to say that they were well acquainted with the work of the Italian Transavanguardia movement and its adherents that they based their name on.

At the end of the 1980s, even though the winds of change were blowing with unusual force, in true Soviet fashion the arrival of information from the outside world was still intermittent at best. As a matter of fact, the Ukrainian trans-avant-garde of the 1980s had the same kind of relationship to its Italian prototype as the Russian Futurists did in the 1910s to the art of Marinetti and the Italian Futurists. The Russian Futurists had been inspired by Marinetti's manifestos, but were only tangentially connected with the Italian movement as a whole. That said, Ukrainian art in the 1980s had begun for the first time in many years to consciously, albeit a little belatedly, keep track of global artistic trends. The artists of the New Wave had barely managed to jump on the last carriage of the international trans-avant-garde movement, which by the end of the 1980s was already losing steam, but it is hard to overstate the importance of this new international focus.

Another term that is used in relation to art from this period is trans-avant-garde neo-baroque.<sup>256</sup> Baroque is one of the richest traditions in Ukrainian art. Having chosen postmodernism with its emphasis on citationality as their main strategy, members of the New Wave began to actively use elements of baroque visual language in their

<sup>255</sup> Oleksandr Solovyov, “Sketch o mladoukrainskoi zhivopisi. Vzgliad iz Kieva (1989)” [Sketch on young Ukrainian painting. The view from Kyiv (1989)], in *Turbulentni shliuzy* [Turbulent gateways] (Kyiv: Modern Art Research Institute, 2006), 7–13.

<sup>256</sup> Cited in *Ukrainska Nova khvyliia: Katalog vystavky v Natsionalnomu khudozhnomu muzei Ukrainy* [The Ukrainian New Wave: catalogue for the exhibition at the National Art Museum of Ukraine] (Kyiv, 2009), 33.





ARSEN SAVADOV AND HEORHII SENCHENKO.  
*CLEOPATRA'S SORROW.*  
OIL ON CANVAS. 1987. 275×330 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS.

artistic arsenal. Indeed, one of the periods in the work of some artists in this group was called “curly style” thanks to the whimsical ornamentation of their paintings.

Postmodern, large-scale, figurative paintings, overflowing with quotations and riddled with mythological themes were the bedrock of early work from the New Wave. This was not classical academic painting. Most canvases were created wet-on-wet with a pure explosion of energy. The artists competed over who could paint more pieces in one night. While working within the traditional “oil on canvas,” the artists tended towards self-expression, veering close to spontaneous urban art, street art, and murals, which would only arrive on the Ukrainian art scene two decades later. At the end of the 1980s, the young artists’ attitude towards form was intentionally slapdash. Their artistic explorations were for the sake of expressive, rather than technical, perfection, for the sake of a pure “vitality,” as was the custom to call it at that time.

Arsen Savadov and Heorhii Senchenko were the first intellectual leaders of this generation. The central icon of the new wave generation, the painting *Cleopatra’s Sorrow* (275×330 cm, 1987), was their creation. This postmodern work is an artistic paraphrase of Diego Velázquez’s *Equestrian Portrait of Prince Balthasar Charles*. The rider blazes with a savage and barbaric sexuality as she sits upon a huge tiger daringly outlined in red. The background is a surreal, desert landscape, while an empty plinth awaiting a new hero stands in the foreground. According to legend, the artists had to break the doorframe in order to get the gigantic painting out of the studio. The hole subsequently went long unrepaired as evidence of a real and symbolic breakthrough. *Cleopatra* is a collective depiction of the ambitions of new Ukrainian art, daringly invading the art-scene and declaring a total break with the Soviet system, as well as the unofficial traditions of the past.

As *Cleopatra’s Sorrow* enters the annals of modern Ukrainian art history, the painting remains more myth than real artifact for the modern critic and viewer. When it was first shown, the artwork was resoundingly successful in exhibition. At the peak of Savadov and Senchenko’s popularity, the painting was first sold to the Paris Galerie de France, and then later bought by the French-American artist and collector, and co-founder of Nouveau Réalisme, Arman. After Arman’s death, the painting remained in private hands. Since the end of the 1980s, the painting is only really remembered through poor-quality reproductions and the enduring admiration of first-hand witnesses.

The formative years for this new generation of artists occurred during the total collapse of the Soviet system and the arrival of an independent Ukrainian state on the world map. All the same, at the beginning of the movement, the USSR and its worldview, were still in existence with Moscow at the center of its universe. It was those young artists’ dream to conquer the capital. And they succeeded. With the Moscow conceptualist scene by now tepid and tired in the background, the barbaric, fleshy painting of the trans-avant-garde was a breath of fresh air. Naturally, there was some envy and skepticism, but on the whole the Ukrainian artists were warmly received by the local critics and curators. At the end of the 1980s, Russian art critics, including Ekaterina Degot, Andrei Kovalev, and Vladimir Levashov, wrote a whole series of articles about Ukrainian art. In Moscow, this group of artists became known as the “southern Russian wave,” seen as a counterweight to the northern Moscow conceptualist





OLEKSANDR HNYLYZKYJ.  
*DISCUSSING A SECRET*. 1988.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 200×200 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE STATE  
RUSSIAN MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG,  
RUSSIA. DONATED BY MARAT GELMAN.



OLEH HOLOSII.  
YES. 1990. OIL ON CANVAS. FIVE  
CANVASES COMPRISING 300×600 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF  
VOLODYMYR OVCHARENKO.





OPEN-AIR PAINTING RETREAT IN SEDNIV, 1989.  
TIBERIY SZILVASHI AND OLEKSANDR SOLOVYOV IN THE MIDGROUND;  
OLEH HOLOSII'S *ATTIC* (OIL ON CANVAS, 1989) IN THE BACKGROUND.  
PHOTO FROM THE ARCHIVE OF OLEKSANDR SOLOVYOV.

school.<sup>257</sup> Following the arrival of an independent Ukraine, this term, with its colonial aftertaste, fell out of use. Nonetheless, the Ukrainians attracted the interest of the first private Russian galleries: Regina<sup>258</sup> and the galleries of Marat Gelman. After the collapse of the USSR, the paths of the former colony and metropole diverged and the new Ukrainian art scene set off in its own independent direction. Moscow faded into the background as an artistic focal point.

The new art scene in Ukraine had its center in Kyiv, but it wasn't limited to just the capital city. From 1987 onwards, the Odesans Vasyl Riabchenko, Serhii Lykov, and Zoia Sokol joined the New Wave painting movement. They joined alongside one of the brightest stars of their generation, the future leader of the Odesa new wave, the artist, curator, art manager, and kulturträger, Oleksandr Roitburd. The Uzhhorod artist Pavlo Kerestei would also play an important role in art from this period, as well as Andrii Sahaidakovsky from Lviv.

In the Soviet system, the art world had gradually become a kind of caste system, in which one's craft was inherited. A significant portion of artists from the New Wave belonged to privileged artistic "clans." Arsen Savadov was the son of the famous book designer and member of the USSR Union of Artists, Volodymyr Savadov. Maksym Mamsikov was the son of a member of the UkrSSR and part of the 1970s Ukrainian art scene, Vladyslav Mamsikov. Illia Chychkan was the grandson of Leonid Chychkan, who was a professor at the Kyiv State Art Institute, and son of Arkadii Chychkan, who was a member of the UkrSSR Union of Artists. Ilya Isupov was the son of the monumentalist artist Volodymyr Isupov and the famous ceramicist Nelli Isupova.

Students educated at the Kyiv State Art Institute formed the backbone of the New Wave.<sup>259</sup> Many of them had previously studied at the Taras Shevchenko State Art School. In the USSR, it was thought that children needed to begin learning the technical nuances of fine art from a young age. An array of specialized boarding schools had been set up for this purpose. Arsen Savadov, Heorhii Senchenko, Oleh Holosii, Oleksandr Hnylyzkyj, Valeria Trubina, Vasyl Tsaholov, Oleg Tistol, and Mykola Matsenko: all of these artists were students of the very same masters who received the Stalin prize in the 1940s and 1950s and who helped shape socialist realism at the peak of its development. These artists learned academic drawing and painting from a young age. They grew up in a system where a reigning piety regarded the painting as the highest form of artistic expression.

Large-scale canvases filled with people, a bright color palette, confident and broad brush strokes—all these characteristics of Ukrainian postmodernist painting were inherited from its "closest relative": the socialist realist painting. But in moving away from that traditional style, artists were able to imbue their work with radically new content, a vitality and energy that was inherent to that generation. As it lay dying, Ukrainian socialist realism paradoxically gave life to new art. No matter how much the

<sup>257</sup> This name was cemented after the 1990 *Babylon* exhibition in Moscow, which featured representatives from the southern regions—artists from Moldova, Rostov-on-Don, and Ukraine.

<sup>258</sup> Since 2018 this gallery has been known as Ovcharenko. [T.N.]

<sup>259</sup> The situation wasn't limited to Kyiv. Oleg Tistol and Mykola Matsenko, for example, studied in Lviv. Oleksandr Roitburd and Vasyl Riabchenko had attended Odesa's arts and graphics school.



OLEKSANDR ROITBURD.  
*THE LANGUOR OF JACOB AND RACHEL*. 1989.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 198x296 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF  
ODESA MODERN ART.



YURI SOLOMKO.  
 A FURTIVE KISS. 1991. LAMINATED OFFSET MAP  
 AND OIL ON CANVAS. 202×176 CM.  
 FROM THE COLLECTION OF NATALIA ZABOLOTNA.

artists of that generation rebelled, experimented with new media, and attempted to rid themselves of this “academic” style,<sup>260</sup> large-format, figurative painting would continue to haunt them to the present like a fairy-tale witch’s curse. Postmodernism in Ukrainian fine art is first and foremost post-socialist realism.<sup>261</sup>

## THE HARD BORDER OF NATIONAL POST-ECLECTICISM

Another branch of the new art of independent Ukraine, which stood apart from the New Wave scene, was a circle of artists who became known as the Hard Border of National Post-Eclecticism (HBNP). As opposed to the cosmopolitan focus favored by the majority of trans-avant-garde artists, representatives of this group were instead more focused on a national mythology. The group was made up of two married couples, Oleg Tistol and Marina Skugareva, and Yana Bystrova and Kostiantyn Reunov, as well as Oleksandr Kharchenko. The basis of the group’s artistic strategy was an unwritten plan thought up by Tistol and Reunov in 1987, when they were serving in the Soviet army. The art critic Konstantin Akinsha wrote an essay entitled “The Poetics of Surzhyk, or Chicken Kyiv”<sup>262</sup> about these artists, in which he analyzed the idea of national art as an original response to socialist art. Naturally, themes featuring national stereotypes dominated the group’s work. They were conveyed in the postmodern, ironic way characteristic of this era.

The group focused their attention on historical events that held special significance for Ukraine. The formation of HBNP happened at a time when the former Soviet republic was actively searching for a new identity. In the moment that the country regained independence, it became especially important to reassess the previous Soviet historical narrative and to deconstruct colonial stereotypes whose roots went all the way back to the imperial past. The search for the new nation’s roots, which involved finding new heroes and exploring forgotten pages of history, was accompanied by an emotional rhetoric that occasionally encroached on the absurd. The artists of HBNP watched with interest how Ukraine, having only just emerged from one historical mythology, was doing everything in its power to construct another.

The Hard Border of National Post-Eclecticism investigated the clichés, kitsch, and all manner of extremes that appeared on the route to decolonization. The artists did not adopt the position of removed observers; rather, they armed themselves with a good-natured sense of humor and, akin to anthropologists in the field, immersed

<sup>260</sup> Oleksandr Solovyov, “Na shliakhakh ‘rozkartiniuvannia’ (1993)” [On the path to “anti-painting” (1993)], in *Turbulentni shliuzy*, 14–23.

<sup>261</sup> Konstantin Akinsha, *Permanent Revolution: Ukrainian Art Today*, Exhibition catalogue from the Ludwig Museum in Budapest (2018), 203.

<sup>262</sup> Konstantin Akinsha, “Poetika surzhika, ili kotleta po-kievski” [The poetics of Surzhyk, or Chicken Kyiv], *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo*, no.3 (1989).





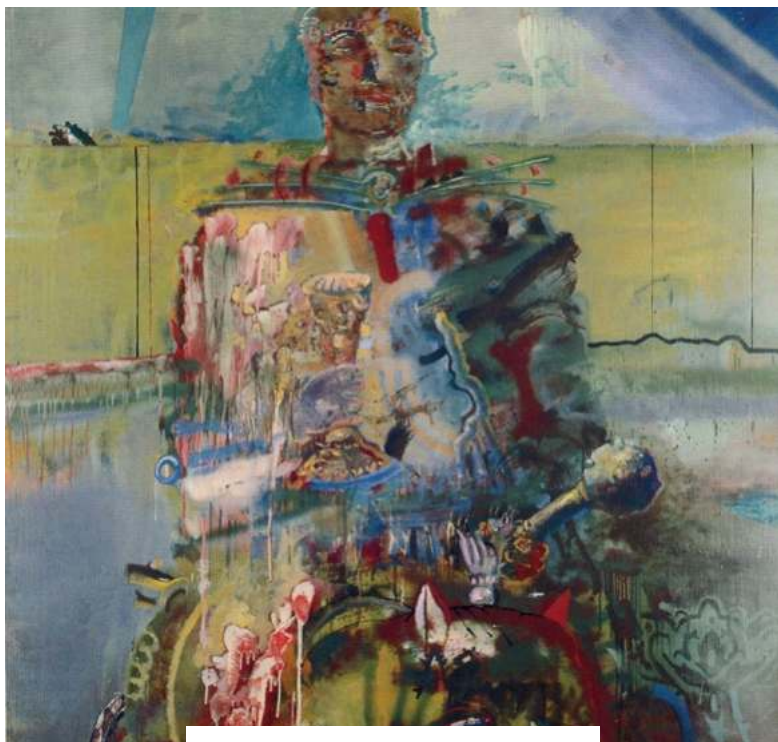
OLEG TISTOL AND MYKOLA MATSENKO.  
THE UKRAINIAN MONEY PROJECT. 1995.  
COLLAGE ON PAPER. 32×92 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
ABRAMOVYCH FOUNDATION.



KOSTIANTYN REUNOV.  
*UNTITLED*. 1989.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 90×120 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
ABRAMOVYCH FOUNDATION.



OLEG TISTOL AND KOSTIANTYN REUNOV.  
*AN ACT OF ARTISTIC OPPOSITION.* 1990.  
PHOTO BY OLEKSANDR KHARCHENKO.



OLEG TISTOL.  
*CONDOTIERRE*. 1988. OIL ON CANVAS.  
150x130 CM. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



MARINA SKUGAREVA.  
*EVENING NEWS*. 2000. OIL AND  
EMBROIDERY ON CANVAS. 96x100 CM.

themselves completely in the subject of their research. They searched for hidden delights and new aesthetics within provincial naiveté and described the fundamental source of their inspiration as “the beauty of the national stereotype.” In this group’s artwork, irony was so closely intertwined with seriousness that it was not always easy to understand when their work was critical and when it was sincerely sympathetic.

At the end of the 1980s, this group of artists moved to Moscow, distancing them from Kyiv’s art scene. While in Moscow, they became some of the most active members in the artistic life of the squats, which existed first on Furmannaia and then on Trekhrudnaia Lanes. The Russian curator Olga Sviblova would play an important role in the HBNP’s creative process. Capturing the spirit of the time, the group also came up with its own joint stock company, End of the Century Art. Tistol and Reunov became co-directors of the company and began publishing their mock advertisements in various publications, just like a true capitalist business entity. Sviblova’s article on this project was entitled “In Search of a Happy Ending.”<sup>263</sup> This ironic and ambiguous expression was also incorporated into the joint-stock company’s official seal. Sviblova outlined the HBNP’s strategy as “the creation of new stereotypes for a totalitarian, political, and intellectual eroticism.”

To all intents and purposes, the group ceased to exist in 1991. In contrast to the Odesa conceptualists, of whom only a few returned to Odesa following the collapse of the USSR, none of the artists from Hard Border stayed in Moscow. Even to this day, Tistol and his long-time collaborator Mykola Matsenko continue their research into national identity and its associated clichés and stereotypes in their long-running project NatsProm.<sup>264</sup>

The female artists in the group went off in different directions. At the beginning of the 1990s, Bystrova moved to France and left the art world behind, instead becoming a computer programmer. Olga Sviblova went on to become one of the central figures of Russian contemporary art during the 2000s and 2010s as the director of the Moscow Multimedia Art Museum. After Hard Border broke up, Skugareva began to develop her own original artistic language which included painting and elements of embroidery. She would become one of the central artists on the art scene in the 1990s and 2000s.

<sup>263</sup> Olga Sviblova, “V poiskakh schastlivogo kontsa” [In search of a happy ending], *Rodnik* 41, no. 5 (1990): 42.

<sup>264</sup> This can be variously interpreted as “national industry” (*natsionalna promyslovist*), “national crafts” (*natsionalni promysly*), or “national promotion” (*natsionalna promotsiia*).

# SEX, DRUGS, AND CONTEMPORARY ART: THE SQUATS<sup>265</sup>

By 1990, the Ukrainian New Wave generation had surfaced as a fully formed artistic phenomenon. After their first thundering successes at the end of the 1980s, they quickly matured, and their work began to show signs of decadence. The period from 1990 to 1992 might well be called their golden age. Next came a period of momentum, years when this group would become not only the center of artistic life in Kyiv, but the wider social scene too.

Members of the New Wave wanted to make large-scale pieces of art; however, they needed studios big enough to allow them to work in their preferred format. In the center of Kyiv there were semi-derelict buildings from the pre-revolutionary era that were standing empty. The government, as well as the nascent criminal bourgeoisie, did not have enough money for their reconstruction. The old communal apartments, with their multiple rooms and high ceilings, were ideal for artists' studios. Oleksandr Klymenko managed to arrange for him and his friends to use one of the abandoned buildings that was in need of serious repair. Most of the artists didn't have anywhere to live, so the squat became a kind of dormitory, except that each artist could have their own separate apartment. The first Kyiv squat appeared at the end of 1989 on the corner of Lenin (today Bohdan Khmelnytsky) and Ivan Franko Streets. For the next five years, the history of modern Ukrainian art would be intertwined with their communal way of life.

Squatting was an important cultural phenomenon at the end of the 20th century, famous examples of which include Copenhagen's Christiania and the squats in New York's East Village. Of course, in the late-Soviet context, the Moscow squats are the most famous. Furmanaia and Trekhprudnaia are words known to everybody interested in contemporary art from that period. At the end of the 1980s, at the peak of interest in all that was Soviet, the Moscow squats became not only the center of local artistic life, but also a window to the world welcoming crowds of curators, art dealers, and collectors. The Kyiv squats differed from those in Moscow in that they were less focused on the external observer. Foreigners did visit, but this wasn't a determining factor in the life of the squatting community.

Until the summer of 1990, the artists living on Lenin Street were completely focused on their own artistic projects. In terms of output, these adrenaline-fueled six months comprised one of the most productive periods in the history of this generation. Given the opportunity to scale up their work, Vasyl Tsaholov, Valeria Trubina, Dmytro Kavsan, Yurii Solomko, Oleksandr Klymenko, and others began making enormous artworks, in quantities even bigger than the canvases themselves. The artists moved from their studios on Lenin Street to another abandoned building on Mykhailivska Street, which then still bore its old, revolutionary name (it was renamed Paryzka Komuna, or Paris Commune in 1926).

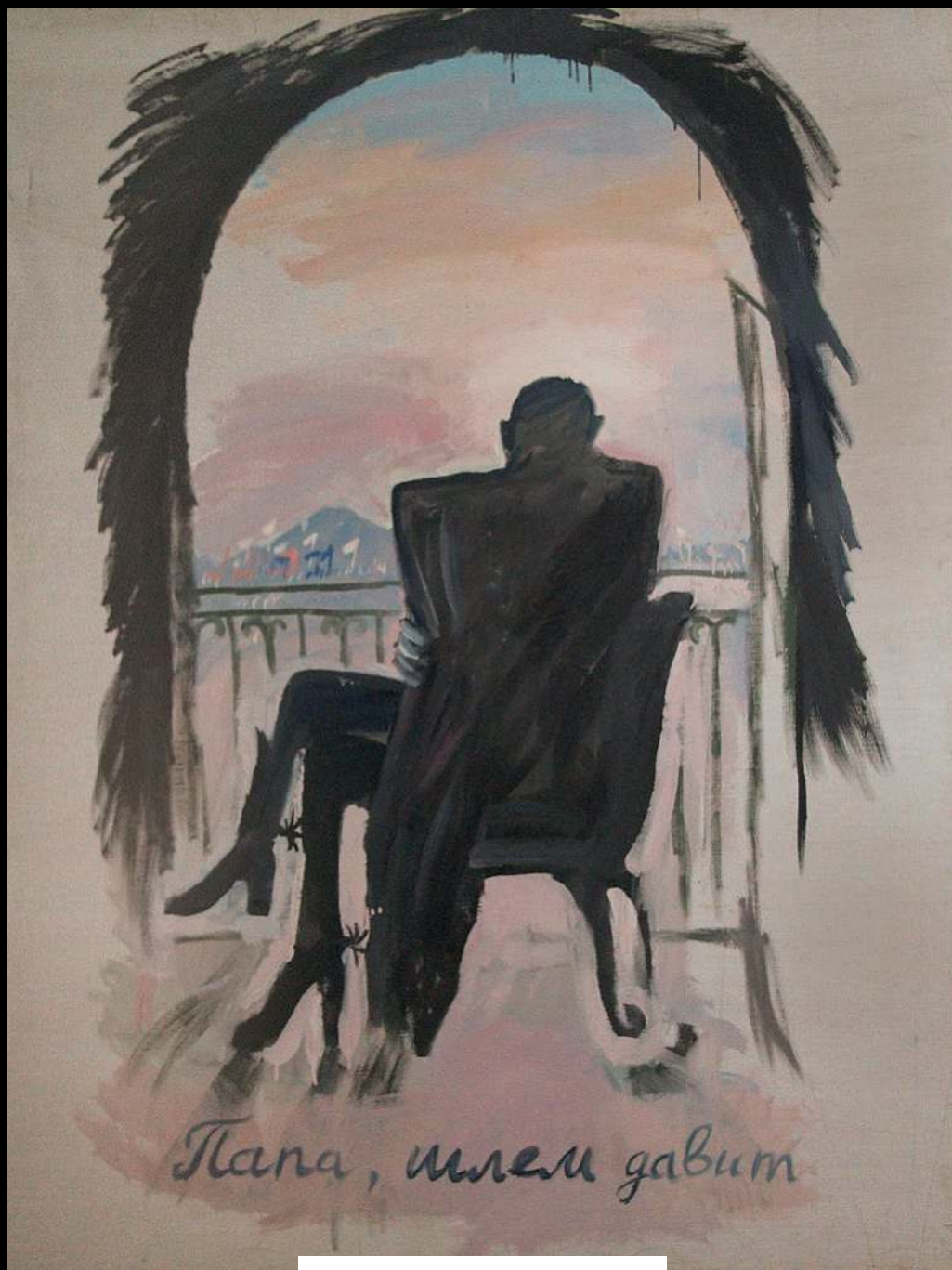
<sup>265</sup> With the permission of the co-author, this section utilizes fragments from the journal series "Point Zero. Novitnia istoriia suchasnoho mystetstva [Point Zero. Recent history of modern art]" by Oleksandr Solovyov and Alisa Lozhkina which appeared in *TOP10*. 2009–2010.



OLEKSANDR SHEVCHUK.  
FROM THE SERIES *KYIV, BALCONY*. 1994.  
PHOTO TAKEN ON THE BALCONY OF THE  
SQUAT ON PARYZKOI KOMUNY STREET.  
FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: VALERIA TRUBINA,  
RUSLAN RUBANSKY, AND VIKTORIA  
PARKHOMENKO.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



IN THE COURTYARD OF THE SQUAT ON  
PARYZKOI KOMUNY STREET IN KYIV. ARTISTS  
MAKSYM MAMSIKOV, KYRYLO PROTSENKO, AND  
OLEH HOLOSII. 1991. PHOTO BY MYKOLA TROKH.  
FROM THE ARCHIVE OF OLEKSANDR SOLOVYOV.



OLEKSANDR HNYLYZKYJ.  
PAPA, THE HELMET IS HEAVY. 1990.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 195x145 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.



The squat in 18a Paryzka Komuna became legendary and a name that was on everybody's lips. At the beginning of life at ParCommune, as the squat came to be known, the artists maintained their creative tempo. However, the squats soon became known for something else: as a place to socialize and party. Not only artists gathered there, but also the city's progressive youth: musicians, poets, the first computer programmers, fashionistas, collectors who were just starting out, and gallery owners. Indeed, Western curators who were interested in the newest movements in post-Soviet art also visited.

By 1991, the group's creative productivity had begun to decline. In this period, the artists were not desperate to be part of a common movement and their ideas lacked unity. Gradually, they began to distance themselves from the trans-avant-garde, though not always achieving much in the way of results. This prompted Konstantin Akinsha to write an article about the fate of this generation entitled "A Wreath on the Coffin of Ukrainian Postmodernism."<sup>266</sup> What Akinsha considered the end was in fact just a shedding of skin. The New Wave's interest in postmodernism all but disappeared as they became tired of complicated metaphor and gaudy baroque. The time had come for a new artistic language.

Oleh Holosii and Oleksandr Hnylyzkyj became central figures in the Kyiv squat scene. Their attention was captured by the neo-expressionist ideas of non finito art. Artwork could be finished at any stage; it didn't have to be completed and perfected. This art was made with spontaneity and impulsiveness, broad brush strokes, and with runny household paints instead of the thicker, professional kind. For the artistically gifted and romantic Holosii, the process was often more important than the result. His "flow paintings" were rugged, intuitive, emotional and self-reflective. Hnylyzkyj preferred a more escapist style which was permanently apocalyptic, noticeable in his "wave paintings" or in works such as *Feeding the Cat* and *Bad Flora* with their atmosphere of quiet horror.

A new type of art could be seen not only in Holosii's and Hnylyzkyj's art, but also in the work of Vasyl Tsaholov, Maksym Mamsikov, and Illia Chychkan. All of them began borrowing from the aesthetics of cinema and popular culture. The artists' work was moving in a roughly similar direction. They used a simplified artistic language and rejected a baroque style, overseeing the introduction of a "Zen-like" emptiness and simplicity into their work, with a light touch of narrative and irony. During this period, Hnylyzkyj brought empty canvases into fashion. Paintings began appearing with less and less paint on them, leaving more of the canvas uncovered than not. As it became increasingly fashionable to distance themselves from painting per se, artists began introducing physical objects into their artworks. The creation of a "cute" art with a light touch, which featured an intentional ignorance, a carnival of simplicity, and a naive and spontaneous simplification, was given its own name: the aesthetic of "cutism." Oleksandr Hnylyzkyj's artwork *Little Squirrel* would become the epitome of this new

<sup>266</sup> Konstantin Akinsha, "Venok na mogilu ukrainskogo postmodernizma" [A wreath on the coffin of Ukrainian postmodernism], in *Portfolio. Iskusstvo Odessy 1990-kh. Sbornik tekstov* [Portfolio. The art of Odesa in the 1990s. A collection of essays] (Odesa, 1999), 12–15.

movement: an empty canvas with a fluffy toy squirrel in the middle, only its shadow marked with paint.

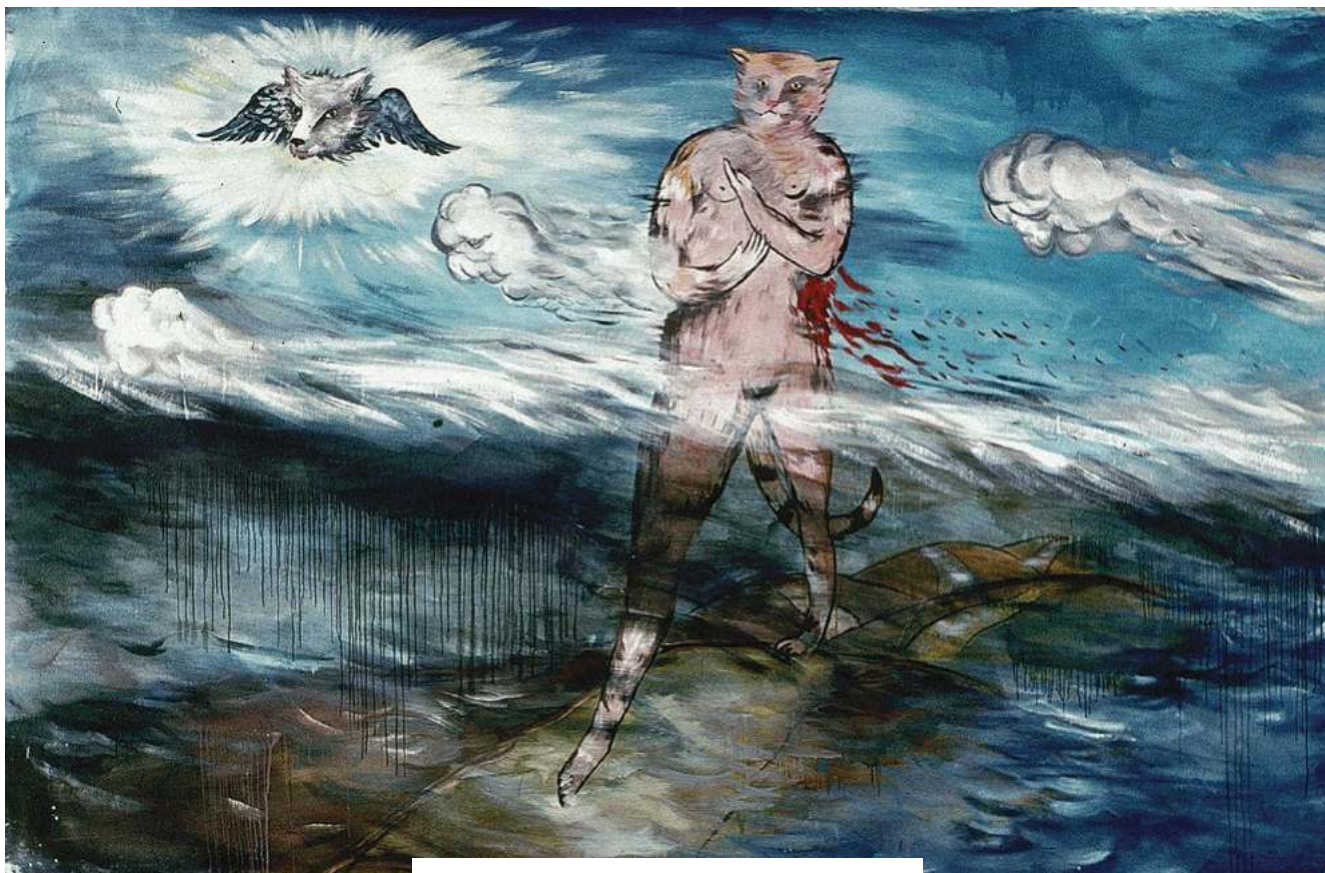
ParCommune was regularly visited by Oleksandr Roitburd and other Odesans. The charismatic Serhii Anufriiev was a regular guest, who was at that time a member of the Medical Hermeneutics Inspection group. He wrote the piece “Kyiv as a Cultural Model,”<sup>267</sup> in which he examined the city as a zone of cultural recreation and the source of a generous, abundant, and carnal mentality. Western critics began to pay attention to the New Wave and to the ParCommune, and an article on this artistic phenomenon appeared in the American journal *Art News*.

ParCommune became the epicenter of the squatters’ boom. However, the artists of the New Wave inhabited a wider geography. In the early 1990s, the most bohemian area in Kyiv was comprised of the streets that radiated directly out of Kyiv’s central square, now called Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square). This was Kyiv’s version of Soho, with the only difference that instead of the thousands of artists who lived in New York’s Soho, there were just a few dozen artists living on the roads that led away from the Maidan. However, symbolically, and in terms of the quality of artistic output, Soho is an appropriate comparison. This was an area of the city where bohemian types lived shoulder to shoulder, dropping in on each other to visit, exchanging ideas, discussing their work and, of course, painting the town red.

The peak of the market’s interest in ParCommune’s artwork came at a time that money as such was practically taken out of circulation. *Kupony* (coupons) were introduced in the country instead: huge sheaves of freshly-printed paper, which then proceeded to rapidly decrease in value in the face of permanent inflation. Due to such financial instability, the relationship between artist and collector took on the medieval character of bartering. Artists could be paid in washing or sewing machines, fridges, hi-fi centers, or other forms of technology that were considered a luxury at that time. This introduced an element of the absurd into the life of the Kyiv squatters. All the same, at the beginning of the 1990s, when compared to their fellow Ukrainians and less fortunate colleagues, these artists appeared to be successful and relatively prosperous. ParCommune became a combination of the bohemian and the bourgeois, of a certain fecklessness and love for comfort. Old half-abandoned 19th-century buildings, high stucco ceilings, hammocks on the balconies, shocking outfits, a sense of relaxation and utter timelessness— all these things came together to create the unique atmosphere of the best years of new Ukrainian art.

It would be impossible to mention ParCommune and avoid the sexual and psychedelic revolution happening at the same time. As the famous joke went, “There’s no sex in the Soviet Union.” The sexual revolution that began in the West in the 1960s only started in the USSR as it was about to collapse. Artists from all periods of history have been preoccupied with exploring the limits of human experience. In Kyiv at the ParCommune, eros and psychedelia were intertwined into one, and helped create an image of the squat as a place of absolute freedom from any limits.

<sup>267</sup> Serhii Anufriiev, “Kiev kak kulturnaia model” [Kyiv as a cultural model], *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*, no.1 (1989).



VALERIA TRUBINA.  
*A WOUNDED CAT IS WALKING, GNAWING ON A DEAD  
DOG'S EAR.* 1990. OIL ON CANVAS. 200x300 CM.  
FROM THE ARCHIVE OF OLEKSANDR SOLOVYOV.



MAKSYM MAMSIKOV.  
*BURROW.* 1993. OIL ON CANVAS. 125x140 CM.  
COURTESY OF ANDRII BEREZNIAKOV.



VASYL TSAHOLOV.  
*I REALLY LOVE MY JOB.* FROM THE CYCLE  
*WORLD WITHOUT IDEAS.* COLOR PHOTO. 1993.  
COURTESY OF THE PINCHUKARTCENTRE  
RESEARCH PLATFORM.

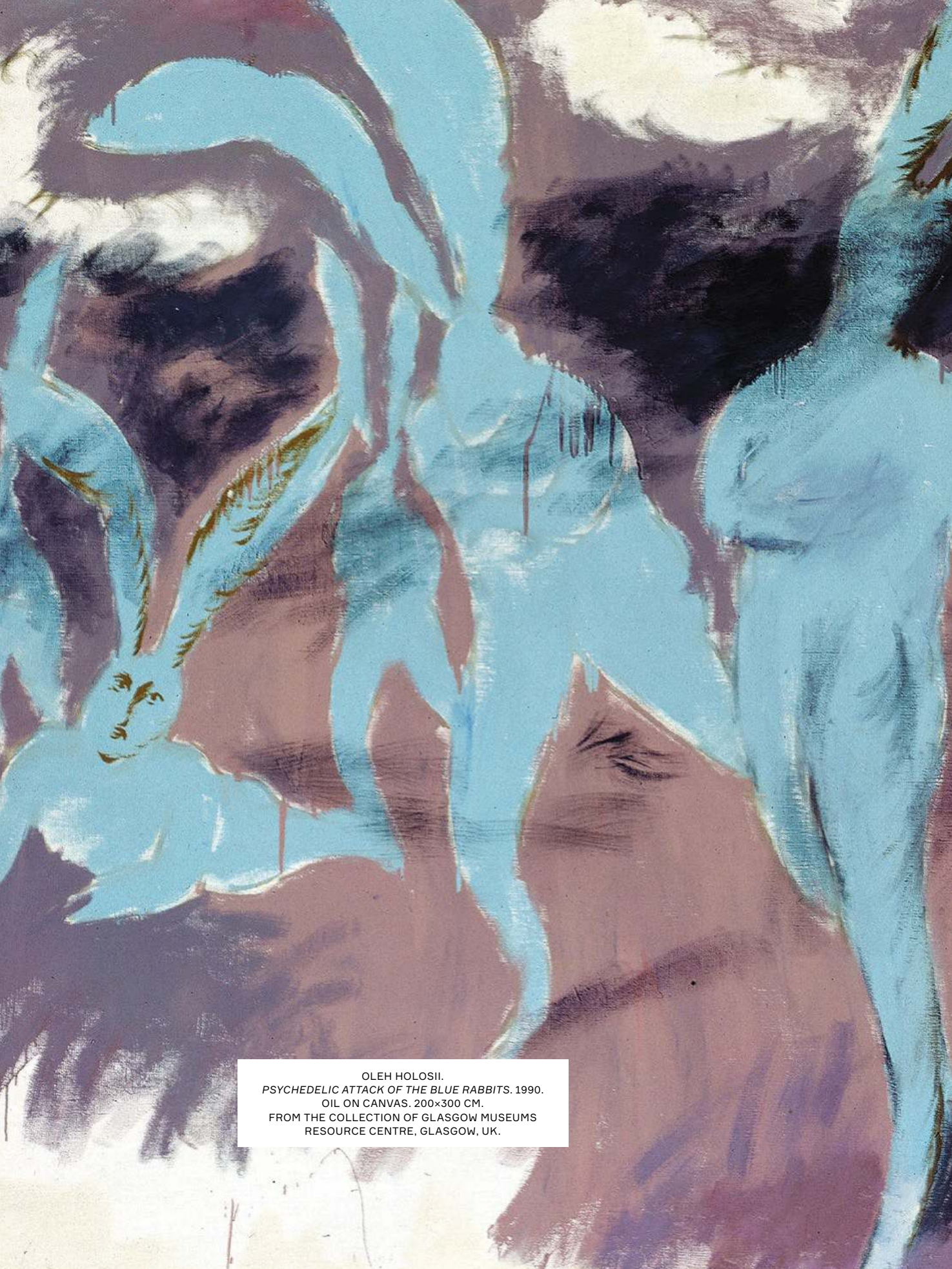
The collapse of the USSR is interesting in that processes that happened gradually in other societies happened all at once in the post-Soviet context. This included the shock at the collapse of familiar values and the psychosis induced by the introduction of western popular culture. In the early 1990s, cheap soap operas from Mexico, Brazil, and the US, with their vulgar capitalist Cinderella fairy tales, were watched by practically the entire population of the country. The reading public discovered philosophy and literature that had previously been taboo to read. Sigmund Freud and Carlos Castaneda, Timothy Leary and Henry Miller, the French structuralists and post-structuralists, postmodernists and positivists, esoterica and palmistry, the Bible and the Bhagavad Gita—all of these things were read all at once and at speed in the same way a person eats who has long been tormented by hunger. An industry in pirated cassettes began to flourish. Alongside Hollywood classics and shockingly unfamiliar pornography, the Soviet people also began to encounter European art house cinema. Parallel to all this was the arrival of a huge quantity of new narcotic substances, whose effects artists found astonishing. An alternative music scene developed and the first raves took place. Taken together, all these things comprise a rather kaleidoscopic and unique new world view. Artists used all possible methods to expand their consciousness; this wasn't seen as a kind of vulgar decadence, rather as a philosophical exploration.

The New Wave is often criticized for its lack of interest in the political. It is true that activism in Ukrainian art would only begin a few decades later. However, the artists' apolitical stance and the sexual and psychedelic revolution that the generation of the 1990s lived through could, to a certain degree, themselves be interpreted as a political position. If artists did indeed engage with political themes, it was most often done at an ironic distance. The negative legacy of the recent past was clearly at play here, where everything political was associated with the overinflation of narratives and the empty images of the propaganda machine in the late Soviet period. The fundamental characteristics of this generation were freedom, hedonism, and transgression.

Transgression is key to understanding the art world post perestroika. Leaving "normal" behind in order to explore the territories of the impossible was a strategy borrowed from postmodern philosophy. Overcoming social taboos and moral boundaries amidst over-consumption and excess, uncovering one's sexuality and the "death of God" on the ruins of the communist utopia, all became a kind of fetish. Bataille's "absolute negativity,"<sup>268</sup> which is experienced during ecstasy, frenzy, orgasm, and death, was taken literally by the artists of the New Wave and practiced without compromise.

Transgression became a natural reaction to the changes happening in a society where the dominant narratives were fundamentally changing. New capitalist values replaced old communist ideals, but the young artists were not particularly interested in or inspired by this process. A mistrust of society was transmuted into a search for new territory that was free from state ideology.

<sup>268</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 1989).



OLEH HOLOSII.  
*PSYCHEDELIC ATTACK OF THE BLUE RABBITS*. 1990.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 200×300 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF GLASGOW MUSEUMS  
RESOURCE CENTRE, GLASGOW, UK.



As sociologist Pascal Gielen writes,

*Sociologists understand very well that people, groups, and organizations always exist within a society. ... Exodus is possible through the power of imagination. Or, perhaps, it is worth using the neologism inodus, thought up by the Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto, since the power of imagination allows us to remain in the physical world while mentally distancing ourselves from it.*<sup>269</sup>

The psychedelic experiences of the 1990s generation can be characterized precisely as *inodus*, a retreat into the self, into an imaginary space, or even further, into a space of altered consciousness.

Timothy Leary, a theoretician of psychedelic rebirth, compared the experience of hippies in the 1960s and their radical process of *inodus* under the influence of LSD, to the discovery of new continents by the great explorers of old. “The surface of the ‘new’ hemisphere is just as real and uncultivated as Columbus’s ‘new’ world,” writes Leary.<sup>270</sup> It is both a glorious and dangerous thing to disembark upon the unexplored territory of one’s consciousness. Just like any underprepared “psychonaut,” the artists of the New Wave took substantial risks in their semi-serious postmodernist experiments with “absolute negativity.”

On 17 January 1993, Oleh Holosii died during a psychedelic walk around the city. He fell to his death after trying to take flight from a building site in the botanical gardens. His unidentified body lay in one of Kyiv’s morgues for nearly a month, with the laconic label “foreigner.” The artist, who had just returned from Munich, had appeared to be too well dressed amidst the poor post-Soviet context of independent Ukraine.<sup>271</sup>

The breadth of Holosii’s work should not be limited only to discussions about psychedelic experimentation. In just the few years following his arrival on the art scene in the late 1980s, Holosii created hundreds of artworks. Among them were dozens of large-format pieces that went down a storm on the art scene. He achieved as much in his 27 years as others do in their whole life. According to Degot,<sup>272</sup> Holosii worked nights on end in competition with other artists in the squats on Lenin Street and at ParCommune, ruthlessly taking inspiration from all around him. His legacy is striking for its variety and the pure energy of his painting that is spread across every canvas. The role of his psychedelic experiences in the whirlwind of imagined forms present in his art is obvious. However, it is not the only or the most important aspect of his work.

The most famous artistic statement regarding those experiences is Holosii’s painting *Psychedelic Attack of the Blue Rabbits* (1990). Following the logic of postmodern citation, the artist copied the composition of Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin’s canvas *In the Line of Fire* (1916). The heroes of World War I as depicted in this classic painting are replaced with absurdist rabbits with human faces. *Psychedelic Attack of the Blue Rabbits* is the manifesto of a generation whose front line wasn’t advancing through

<sup>269</sup> Pascal Gielen, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Politics, and Post-Fordism* (Valiz, 2015). Quote translated from the Russian edition.

<sup>270</sup> Timothy Leary, *The Politics of Ecstasy* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1968).

<sup>271</sup> Furthermore, British pounds were found in his pocket.

<sup>272</sup> Ekaterina Degot, “Dary kleptomana (Oleg Golosii)” [Gifts of the kleptomaniac (Oleh Holosii)], *Galereia “Regina” Khronika. Sentiabr 1990–iiun 1992* (Moscow, 1993).



an utterly fake reality, but rather through the territory of expanded consciousness. Petrov-Vodkin's painting depicts a group of soldiers hurling themselves into an attack. One of them is running forward with a weapon in his hands, but the central figure of the composition is another officer who has just been fatally wounded in the heart, even though just seconds before he was leading the charge. This attack is clearly his last. As if sensing his own fate and fearing it, Holosii subtly shifts the emphasis in his interpretation of Petrov-Vodkin's work. Nonetheless, the prophetic nature of *Psychedelic Attack* becomes especially clear when it is compared with the original.

Oleh Holosii's death was deeply traumatic for the whole New Wave generation, and it drew a symbolic line under the heroic era of the Kyiv squats. The euphoria of ParCommune faded away and, as accurately described by Jean Baudrillard, who was especially popular at that time, a sense of "the world after the orgy" settled in its place. The squat scene lasted until 1994, whereupon it finally fell apart.

## THE CURATOR: FROM OVERSEER TO PARTICIPANT

At this time, the new figure of the curator appeared on the art scene. Ironically, this was a term well known to Soviet artists, originally used to label special KGB agents whose task it was to spy on "unreliable" elements. After perestroika, the term took on a more positive meaning, and it was also at this time in the West that the curator's role grew in importance. The history of the emergence of the curator's role in Ukraine and the New Wave is inextricably linked with the main ideologue of that generation, the art historian and critic, Oleksandr Solovyov. It was Solovyov who found reference to the Italian Transavanguardia in a journal and shared it with Ukrainian artists. It was he who organized most of the main exhibitions of this new art while completely falling in love with it. And, finally, it was Solovyov who would become a mentor and guide for several generations of young artists.

Oleksandr Solovyov was a little older than the main body of artists in the New Wave, but as fate would have it, in his youth he served in the army with Vasyl Tsaholov. Together they drew portraits of Lenin and became friends for life. Solovyov arrived on the scene having originally been part of the official Soviet art establishment. He started out in the exhibition department of the Union of Artists, but before long began living in the ParCommune bohemian squat. On the one hand, Solovyov was an active participant in the New Wave, a real character on the scene, and one of the main heroes in the history of this generation. On the other hand, he was an analyst and archivist of this era, the author of numerous texts, and an important figure in Ukrainian art over the last 30 years. His point of view and curatorial approach were not about being a distant observer, but rather a co-participant who was emotionally and practically involved in the process.

Another important figure in the 1990s was Marta Kuzma. An American of Ukrainian descent, she took the reins at the Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) in 1994,

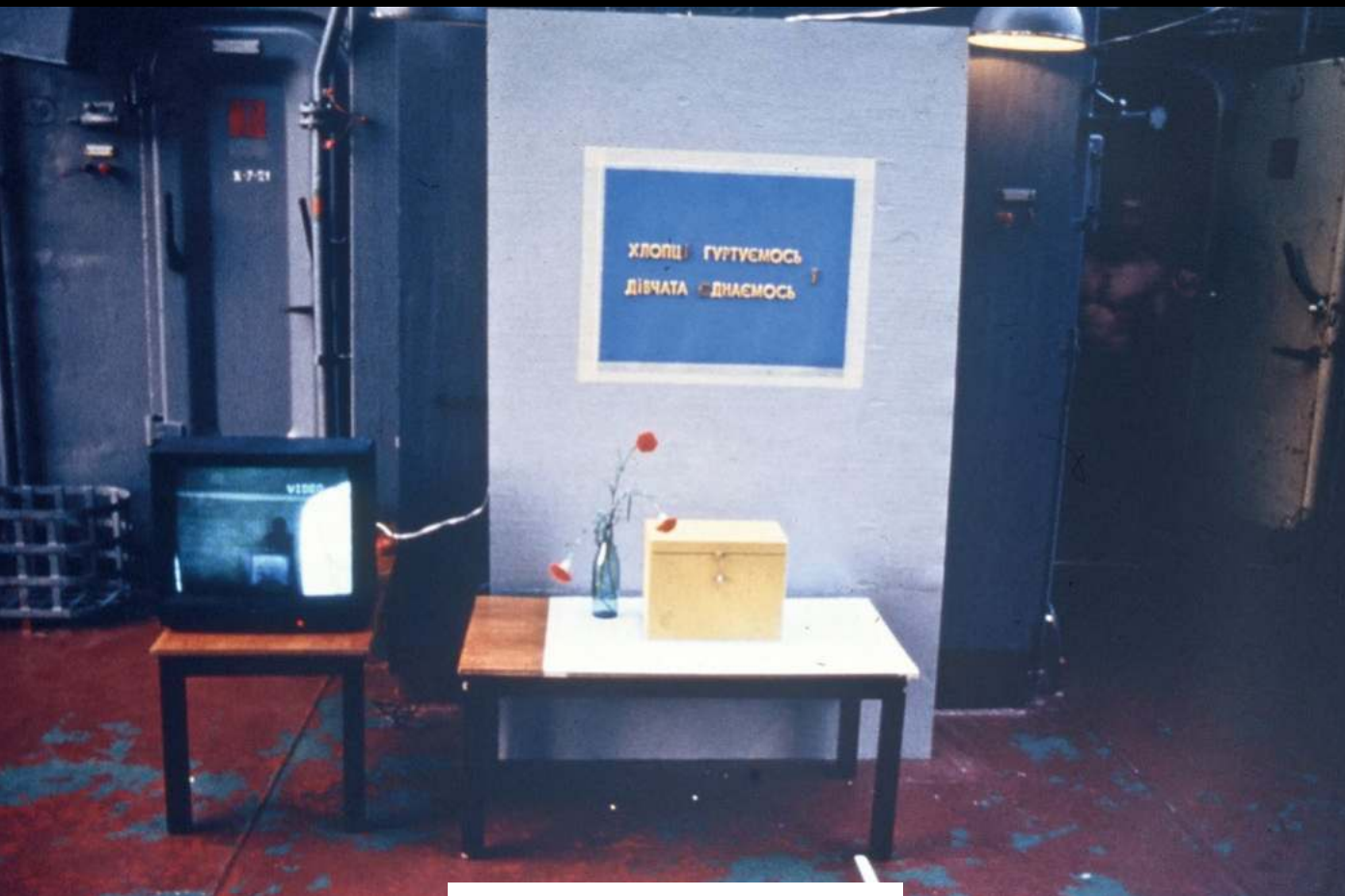
when it had just opened in the old academic wing of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. These art centers, supported by the billionaire George Soros's Open Society Institute, were opening across all the former members of the Eastern Bloc. The mission of the foundations was to transform the ex-totalitarian countries into so-called open societies, i.e., to refashion them in the Western image. Culture was commonly understood to be a form of soft power during these years, and contemporary art was seen as a tool for societal transformation. It was in this unexpected way that politics worked its way into the life of the apolitical New Wave generation. Fortunately, these centers of contemporary art weren't a central component of the Soros foundation's project, and they were able to avoid an excess of ideological rhetoric. Generally, the art centers played a hugely important role in the establishment of contemporary art in the post-Soviet space, from Russia and Central Asia to the Baltics, former Yugoslavia, and Ukraine. If art in the 1980s was, roughly speaking, an indirect artifact of an excessively self-referential approach, then from the mid-1990s it became the indirect result of art education, projects, and workshops.

The SCCA remained active until the early 2000s. From the very beginning, the center focused on supporting new artistic practices and dedicated funds for the completion of alternative art projects. In an art scene lacking a serious art market, and with the artists of the New Wave gradually moving away from painting, the grants on offer to make video-art, installations, and other curatorial projects were incredibly important. During the time Kuzma was head of the Soros Center, it wasn't quite an art institution in the formal sense of the word. A bohemian spirit still hung in the air together with the communal atmosphere inherited from the ParCommune. The charismatic Kuzma was less a director, and more the empress of the SCCA. This energetic and bright foreigner burst momentarily onto the New Wave scene, and, much in the spirit of the art scene at the time, did not keep things strictly business. The romance between Kuzma and the star of the ParCommune parties, the young artist Illia Chychkan, became yet another legend from this era and further underlined the sense of bohemian community that ruled the Soros Center.

Kuzma created a whole array of landmark projects on Ukraine's new art scene. The most famous of these was *Alchemic Surrender*, which was staged aboard the Ukrainian fleet's flagship, *Slavutych*, in Sevastopol. The exhibition took over a fully functioning military warship upon which the Ukrainian artists turned the sailors into the central characters of their transgressive artwork. There had been a great deal of tension associated with Sevastopol since the collapse of the USSR; indeed the division of the Black Sea Fleet was the main political conflict between Ukraine and Russia in the early 1990s. *Alchemic Surrender* has become one of the most significant pieces of new Ukrainian art, especially following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the resulting array of new possible readings and contexts that this created. In 1997, a new director was appointed at the Soros Center. This was the artist and curator Jerzy Onuch, who was much more conventional, and at the same time somewhat less charismatic. In 1993, he set up his own landmark exhibition of 1990s Ukrainian art called *The Steppes of Europe* (Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw). Marta Kuzma continued her career outside of Ukraine. Today she is an influential international curator and the head of the Yale School of Art.



CURATOR NATALIA FILONENKO IN  
THE MIRROR MAZE AT THE *MOUTH  
OF MEDUSA* EXHIBITION. 1995.



RAPID RESPONSE TEAM  
(BORIS MIKHAILOV AND SERHII BRATKOV).  
*PANDORA'S BOX*. INSTALLATION IN MARTA  
KUZMA'S PROJECT *ALCHEMIC SURRENDER* ON  
THE SHIP *SLAVUTYCH*. SEVASTOPOL. 1994.

Another curator no less emblematic of this heroic period in Ukrainian art was Natalia Filonenko. Her career is another example where creative cooperation, cohabitation, and co-existence play a central role, as opposed to an approach that favors research and maintaining a sense of distance. A temperamental and expressive woman, Filonenko was the partner of the artist Oleksandr Roitburd and later of Maksym Mam-sikov, one of the central figures at the ParCommune parties. In the late 1990s, she was the first person in Ukraine to gain a curator's diploma. Having graduated from the prestigious Bard College in New York, she became the first professional curator of modern art in the history of independent Ukraine. After returning to Ukraine, Filonenko continued to devise and set up different exhibitions that stood out for their original vision and intimate sense of the familial. The peak of her curatorial career came in the early 2000s. In the second half of that decade, Filonenko, tired from a lack of demand, lost interest in artistic cooperation and moved away from the art scene, doing just the occasional exhibition, lecture, or workshop.

Kyiv gallery owners were also actively involved in organizing different art projects during this period. They included the owner and curator of the Alipii gallery, Valerii Sakharuk, and one of the pioneers of Kyiv's gallery industry, Viktor Khamatov. From the late 1980s, Sergei Sviatchenko also played a big role in the development of the art scene. Sviatchenko was an architect, the art editor of the Komsomol youth magazine *Ranok* (Morning), and the co-founder (together with Khamatov) of the Soviart center for contemporary art. During his tenure, he put on several landmark exhibitions such as *Kyiv-Tallinn* (1987), *21 Viewpoints: Young Contemporary Ukrainian Artists* (1989), *Ukrainian Painting (MalARTstvo) of the 1960s–1980s* (1990), and *Flash: The New Generation of Ukrainian Art* (1990). In 1990, Sviatchenko moved to Denmark where he established himself as a successful artist. In the 1990s, a whole array of curators came to the fore in Odesa: Mykhailo Rashkovetsky, Olena Mykhailovska, Vadim Besprozvanny, and Andrii Taranenko. Artists themselves would also become curators, such as Oleksandr Roitburd and Ihor Chatskin in Odesa, or Yurii Sokolov in Lviv.

# THE LVIV ARTISTIC ALTERNATIVE

In comparison to the closed and relatively inactive scene in Kyiv in the 1980s and 1990s, the situation in Lviv was quite different. The city had a rich art scene and was in active dialogue with artists in the Baltic states, Moscow, and Poland. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, an unofficial scene grew up in Lviv. A central figure in this scene was Oleksandr Aksinin. The graphic artist created illustrations for *Alice in Wonderland*, *Gulliver's Travels*, the ancient Chinese *I-Ching*, as well as his own series *Boschiana* (dedicated to Hieronymus Bosch). Aksinin became friends with artists in Tallinn and put on exhibitions in Estonia and Poland. He became close with the conceptualists in Moscow and Leningrad, meeting Ilya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov, and Dmitri Prigov. He was also associated with the underground poetry journal 37. The artist worked within a fairly conservative aesthetic.

Heavy with meaning, Aksinin's etchings and watercolors are interesting in the context of the development of late-Soviet illustration and book design, but Aksinin's significance as a communicator and creator of ideas goes well beyond his role as a graphic artist. A mystic and intellectual, a legend of the unofficial scene in Lviv, Aksinin died in a plane crash in 1985. He was just 35 years old. His friends and fellow artists, Halyna Zhehulska, Henrieta Levytska, and Mykola Kumanovsky, continued to work in the city Aksinin had left behind. The photographer Mykhailo Frantsuzov also joined this group. The aesthetic of his work had a lot in common with the output of the Kharkiv photography school.

In the late 1980s and the mid-1990s, there was a name on the Lviv art scene that left a multitude of legends in its wake, though less in the way of artwork. This was Yuri Sokolov, the "artist of life," who had worked in a conceptualist style since the 1980s.

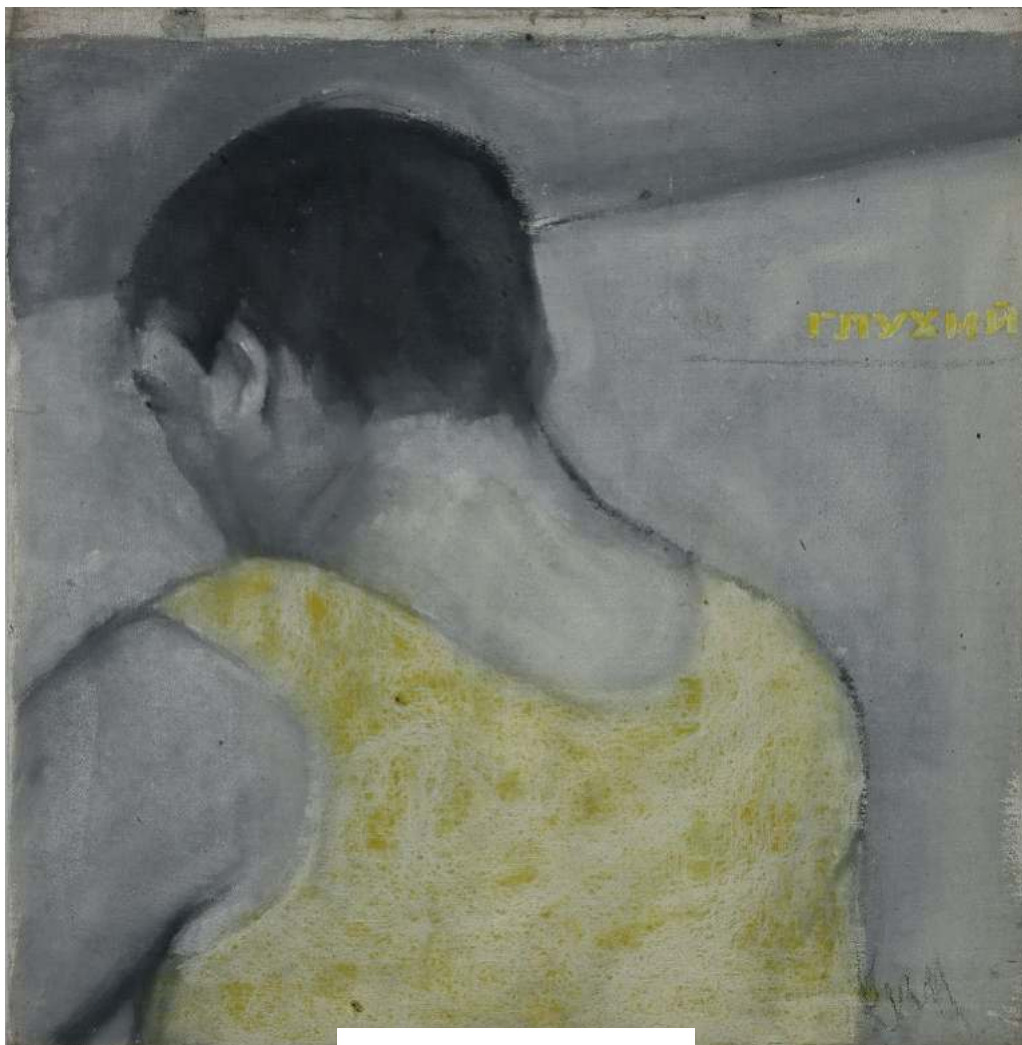
He was a pedagogue and a pioneer of curation who unexpectedly served as the link between post-Soviet Lviv and the artistic practice of a completely new generation. Upon the invitation of young artists, he joined the Open Group and became their own unique kind of guru. During the Soviet period, Sokolov taught in the interior design department of the Lviv State Institute of Applied and Decorative Arts. In his own time, he experimented with collage and elements of conceptualist language.

By the late 1980s, Yuri Sokolov had become one of the leaders of Lviv's unofficial scene, overseeing a large alternative art project *An Invitation to a Discussion* (1988), and the exhibitions *The Theater of Things, or the Ecology of Objects* (1988) and *Plus '90* (1990). Following the collapse of the USSR and the arrival of Ukraine's independence, Aksinin and his circle's work was shown at the Central House of Artists in Moscow in 1992, and the exhibition *In Search of Temptation. A Female Exhibition* (1994) was put on at the Lviv Ethnographic Museum. He also continued to create artworks, art-environments, and performances.

Sokolov collaborated with the creative organization The Center of Europe and in 1994 opened the Decima gallery, one of Lviv's first contemporary art spaces in the foyer of the Ethnographic Museum. The majority of work shown at the gallery was conceptualist in nature. For example, on 13 June 1994 Sokolov opened the exhibition *A Million Flowers or "Come to Where the Flavor Is"* (with the second half written in a "Ukrainian English"). Elderberry branches were strewn across the gallery floor and



OLEKSANDR AKSININ.  
WORD. 1980. ETCHING ON PAPER.  
9.5×13.3 CM (OVAL), 16.7×21.8 CM (PAGE).  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
STEDLEY ART FOUNDATION.



ANDRII SAHAIDAKOVSKY.  
*DEAF*. 1996. OIL ON CANVAS.  
COURTESY OF YA GALLERY, KYIV.



a few printed pages were hung on the walls. The project was dedicated to the 25th anniversary of minimalism, and was, according to the art critic Hlib Vysheslavsky “a minimalist conceptualist replica-cum-reflection on the artworks of his colleagues from previous years, in particular Avdey Ter-Oganyan on Trekhprudnaia Lane (Moscow) and also the work put out by The Kitchen gallery in New York.”<sup>273</sup> In 1995, Decima moved to Sokolov’s apartment building. Pieces of artworks were spread throughout the basement, attic, and the internal courtyard of the building, thus creating an informal art space called Chervoni Rury (Red pipes), which existed until 1999.

In 1995, together with Dmytro Kuzovkin, Sokolov founded the conceptualist quasi-institute called the Seventh Maik Yohansen Lviv Academy of Arts and Literature.<sup>274</sup> According to Sokolov, the founding mission of the institution, which lasted until 1999, was to act as a focal point for the Lviv art scene. This was a scene where artistic experimentation was often forgotten in favor of a bohemian way of life, endless meetings in Lviv coffee shops, and discussions over wine together with the sense that there were no limits and, at the same time, of feeling utterly lost. The made-up institution also had its own periodical publication, *The Academy Herald*, which was self-printed, and Sokolov and Kuzovkin only ever made one copy of each issue.<sup>275</sup>

The ironic Sokolov called himself an “artman,” mimicking the newly popular terms like “businessman” and “showman,” which appeared in the 1990s. In a 2007 interview, he succinctly outlined his professional credo and described the position of post-Soviet artistic practice which had emerged amid an institutional and discursive vacuum. For him, the most important thing in art was self-organization. Sokolov wrote:

*Having lived a long time, I understood that you don’t need to be afraid of anything, you don’t need to search out art historians, you don’t need to search out critics; you should listen to yourself, to the surrounding environment, to people, to search for something and make your own conclusions. You need to be your own art historian, artist, painter, artman, curator, and photographer.*<sup>276</sup>

One of the most important representatives of the Lviv art scene in recent decades has been Andrii Sahaidakovsky. His nickname was *dido* (grandpa) thanks to the full beard that he had worn since his youth. At the end of the 1980s, he took part in exhibitions in Lviv and Kyiv and became another unofficial leader of the Lviv art scene. Sahaidakovsky’s studio was one of the centers of bohemian life in the city with its macabre atmosphere and creative chaos. It was an art installation in and of itself, akin to

<sup>273</sup> “Yurii Sokolov, CV,” *Open Archive*, <http://openarchive.com.ua/sokolov/#practice158>.

<sup>274</sup> Maik Yohansen was a Ukrainian writer and scholar, who, together with other Ukrainian intellectuals, was executed by Stalin in 1937.

<sup>275</sup> Lizaveta Herman and Maria Lanko, curators’ text to exhibition *36 postriliv u vyhliadi iaskravyykh synikh kul, shcho rozryvaiutsia u nebi na pyshni Zeleno-Fioletovi Pivonii* [36 shots in the form of bright blue bullets bursting in the sky into lush green-purple peonies], *Ya Gallery*, <https://yagallery.com/exhibitions/36-postriliv-u-viglyadi-yaskravih-sinih-kul-sho-rozkrivayutsya-u-nebi-na-pishni-zeleno-fioletovi-pivoniyi>.

<sup>276</sup> Yurii Sokolov, “Iakby zamist pamiatnykiv Shevchenku stavyly pamiatnyky Maiku Iohansenu, to my vzhe buly b v Evropi” [If monuments to Maik Yohansen were erected instead of monuments to Shevchenko, then we’d already be in Europe], *Vholos.com*, October 30, 2007, [https://vgholos.com.ua/news/yurij-sokolov-yakby-zamist-pam-yatnykivshevchenku-stavyly-pam-yatnyky-majku-johansenu-to-my-vzhe-buly-b-v-yevropi-2\\_107762.html](https://vgholos.com.ua/news/yurij-sokolov-yakby-zamist-pam-yatnykivshevchenku-stavyly-pam-yatnyky-majku-johansenu-to-my-vzhe-buly-b-v-yevropi-2_107762.html).

Francis Bacon's famous studio. The artist's recognizable style was comprised of intentionally grimy and expressive paintings completed on the back of old, shabby carpets, rugs, and mats. Much in the style of Arte Povera, there were virtually always textual elements added, too.

Random fragments of phrases with their absurd poetry underline the expressiveness and pathological nature of his work, forming the basis of the artist's brutal yet intimate style. In contrast to many other Lviv artists from this period, Sahaidakovsky was integrated into the Kyiv art scene from the 1990s. He took part in many landmark Ukrainian and international exhibitions of new Ukrainian art, and regularly showed his own artworks at Kyiv galleries.

Another branch of Lviv art that organically grew into the Kyiv art scene was the Masoch Fund. The group was set up in 1991 by the artists Ihor Podolchak and Ihor Diurych, as well as by the theater director Roman Viktiuk. The Fund's mature work was mainly the product of the creative partnership between Diurych and Podolchak. The Masoch Fund played a significant role in Ukrainian art in the 1990s. The group's name is a reference to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, the 19th-century Austrian writer who was born in Lviv and whose literary aesthetic was used to describe a sexual "disorder." The main characters of *Venus in Furs* and *Don Juan of Kolomyia* hailed from Halychyna (Galicia), which is depicted as an exotic, sexual El Dorado in Sacher-Masoch's work. The Hutsul vests and scarves, whips and crops from Ukrainian folklore would all be fetishized in Masoch's work. For Diurych and Podolchak, the figure of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch was associated first and foremost with the margins of culture and society. The choice of name for their group was an attempt to outline a different kind of Lviv that wasn't in school textbooks, but which excited the imagination through its associations with decadence and sexual perversion.

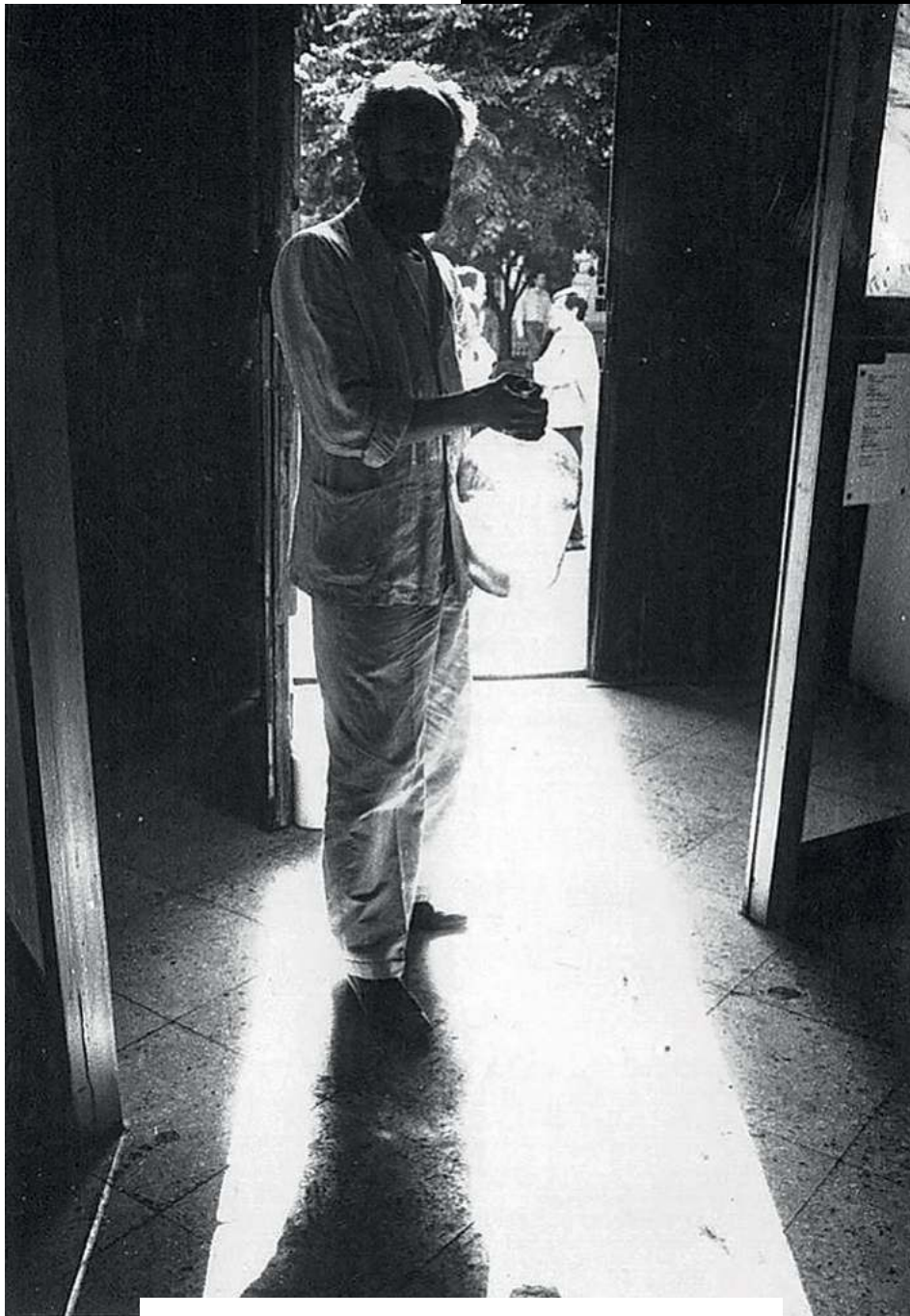
When talking about the artistic life of post-Soviet Lviv, it would perhaps be easy to forget Andrii Boiarov, an artist who for many years lived between Lviv, Tallinn, and Warsaw. Having essentially rejected painting, Boiarov produced mainly conceptual work. In the early 1990s, he began to experiment with found images, using fragments of archival images in his work, or even just accidentally discovered photographs. He also took photos of what appeared to be unimportant objects that only acquired meaning in relation to the wider context of his work.

Lviv's history and energy is an integral part of most of Boiarov's projects. However, the Lviv in his work is not the same city known to Kyivans who would travel there for a couple of days to simply relax amidst a backdrop of beautiful architectural scenery. In his current projects, Boiarov has embraced the memory of pre-war Lviv and immersed himself in its history, focusing on the intellectual connection Lviv has with some of the most important figures and movements in European modernism. In his later artistic and curatorial work, Boiarov also worked on outlining the genealogy of Lviv's artistic history from the beginning of the 20th century to the present day. He did this with the help of a complicated system of hyperlinks, a spiderweb of names, events, and connections, all of which, when taken together, constitute an important contribution to the construction of new narratives for the history of Ukrainian art.

Andrii Boiarov began his experiments in the late 1980s. The young architect became friends with Andrii Sahaidakovsky and other Lviv artists who were all



VASYL BAZHAI.  
*LABYRINTH*. 1998. INSTALLATION.  
COURTESY OF YEVHEN KARAS.

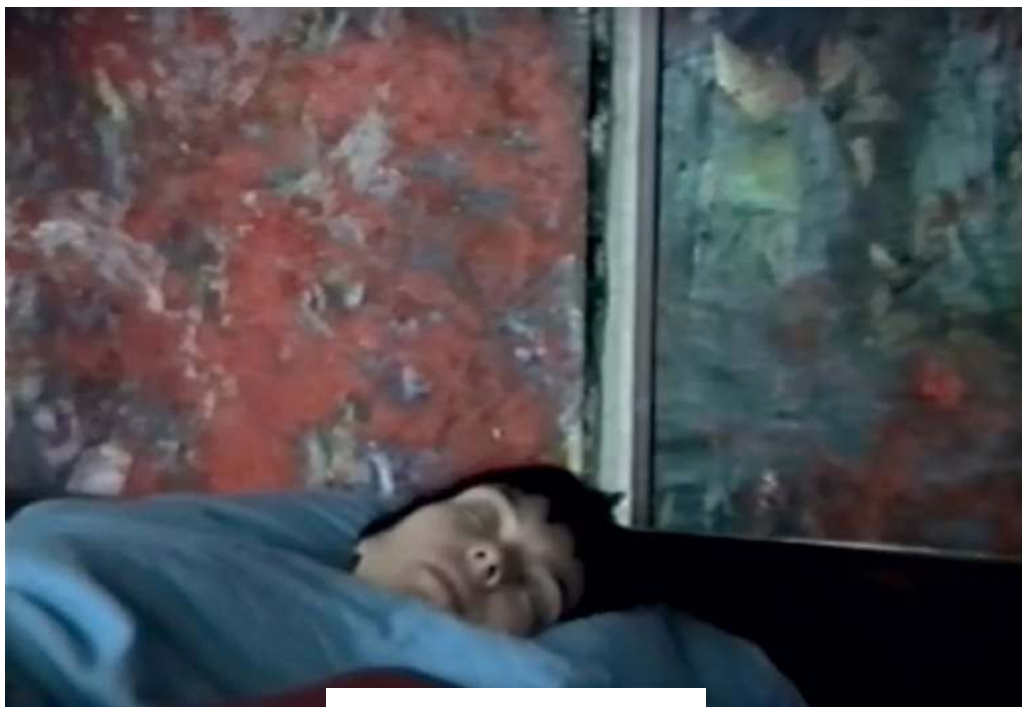


YURII SOKOLOV AT THE DECIMA GALLERY.  
EARLY 1990S, LVIV. THIS PHOTO IS A FRAGMENT OF  
YURII SOKOLOV'S ARTWORK *TO MY WIFE*, 1999. ALBUM, MIXED MEDIA.  
COURTESY OF OPEN ARCHIVE ([OPENARCHIVE.COM.UA](http://OPENARCHIVE.COM.UA)).

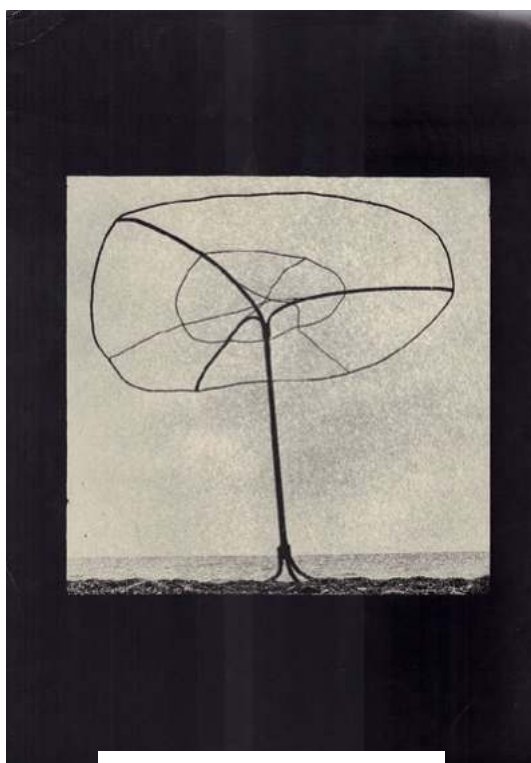


YURII SOKOLOV.  
UNTITLED. 1980S.  
PHOTO AND COLLAGE ON PAPER.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
GRYNYOV ART FOUNDATION.





ANDRII BOIAROV.  
*SLEEP, ACT I-II*. 1994. VIDEO STILL.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



MYKHAILO FRANTSUZOV.  
*END OF SEASON*. 1980.  
PHOTO PRINT. 40x30.5 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
GRYNYOV ART FOUNDATION.

simultaneously rejecting both the Soviet establishment and the soft opposition offered by the school of applied and decorative arts, which had become the city's artistic calling card. Through another Lviv native, Mykola Filatov, they all began visiting the squat on Furmannaia Lane in Moscow. This was the epicenter of the dying empire's alternative art scene. Following independence, the links the Lvivans had with the former capital's avant-garde gradually disappeared.

Another thread connecting 1980s Lviv and the unofficial scene in Moscow was Igor Kopystiansky. In the 1980s, while working in Moscow in tandem with his wife Svetlana, Kopystiansky maintained his connection with Lviv. It was through him that an interest in conceptualist artistic practice appeared in the city. The Kopystiansky couple achieved huge success in 1988 following Sotheby's first Moscow auction. Igor's *Restored Painting No. 5*, a postmodernist portrait of a young girl from the 19th century with an antique craquelure effect across its surface, was sold to the singer Elton John for the eye-watering price, at that time, of £44,000 sterling. Svetlana Kopystiansky sold her *Landscape* for a similar sum to another buyer. Before long, the artists moved to New York. Today, their works can be found in the collections of museums such as MoMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Tate. Since their move, the artists essentially do not interact with the Lviv art scene.

Paradoxically, an important point in the history of Lviv's art during the collapse of the Soviet Union revolves around the Lenin Museum. In 1990, it lost its status as a museum and was turned into socio-political center. The exhibition *Deflowering* was put on there almost immediately. Its curator was Heorhii Kosovan, who was the founder of the first modern art gallery in Lviv, Three Dots. The intention of the exhibition's participants, Platon Sylvestrov, Andrii Sahaidakovsky, Oleksandr Zamkovsky, and Ihor Shuliev, was that the project had to become the vulgar and aesthetic "deflowering" of the central strongholds of totalitarian ideology in the city. The provocative modern artworks were comprised of collages, installations, and other objets d'art that shocked the conservative Lviv public and ironically dissected the Soviet narrative that had been all-powerful not so long before. In the center of one of the halls was a coffin with a fish swimming inside it. This installation was by Sylvestrov, who vividly described the opening of the exhibition in his memoirs. The list of imaginary guests mentioned by the artist is particularly striking. He includes many authoritative cultural figures from bygone eras who played a part in Lviv's unofficial scene.

Sylvestrov writes,

*The right to open the hall door was offered to an art historian of a non-traditional sexual orientation. For obvious reasons, I won't include his name here. Once he had opened the door, he saw a transparent film of cellophane had been stretched behind it. He was horrified, but it was too late!*

*The crowd behind him grew impatient and pushed him into the hall, tearing the Vladimir Ilyich Lenin Museum's hymen!*

*The KGB couldn't f...ing believe it, and then jazz started playing instead of the USSR's national anthem.*

*The opening was attended by 27 KBG officers*

*125 gawkers*

*35 snitches*

*634 viewers*

*And also Roman Turyn with Nykyfor*

*Margit and Roman Selsky*

*the sculptor Severa*

*Soch-Masoch and Bruno Schulz*

*Stanisław Lem*

*Mr. and Mrs. Henia and Leopold Levytsky*

*Iryna Vitaminivna Soboleva*

*Vitalik Urbanovych*

*Oleksandr Aksinin*

*Sasha Koroliiov and his dog*

*Henrieta Levytska and Volodia Buhlak*

*Hryhorii Ostrovsky*

*Daniil Kharms burst in, arm-in-arm with Saltykov-Shchedrin*

*the poets Oleksii Parshchikov and Lionia Shvets, who were both wasted and offered everyone a drink of pure water from the river Styx.*

*Everyone loved the drink.*

*They had to go and buy more.*

*Finally, Omar Khayyam entered in a dignified manner, walking a turtle on a leash.*

*Three white mushrooms grew on its shell.<sup>277</sup>*

Sylvestrov's artworks made from dominoes were first shown at *Deflowering*. One of the most striking examples featured the playing pieces arranged to look like an Orthodox icon of the Virgin Mary. Thereafter, the artist became known for using dominoes in his work. Playing dominoes was a popular male pastime in the USSR, where groups would gather in almost every courtyard to play in the evening. The clear contrast between the pathos of religious art and this proletarian pastime with its roots in an ancient Indian gambling game created an unexpectedly striking juxtaposition.

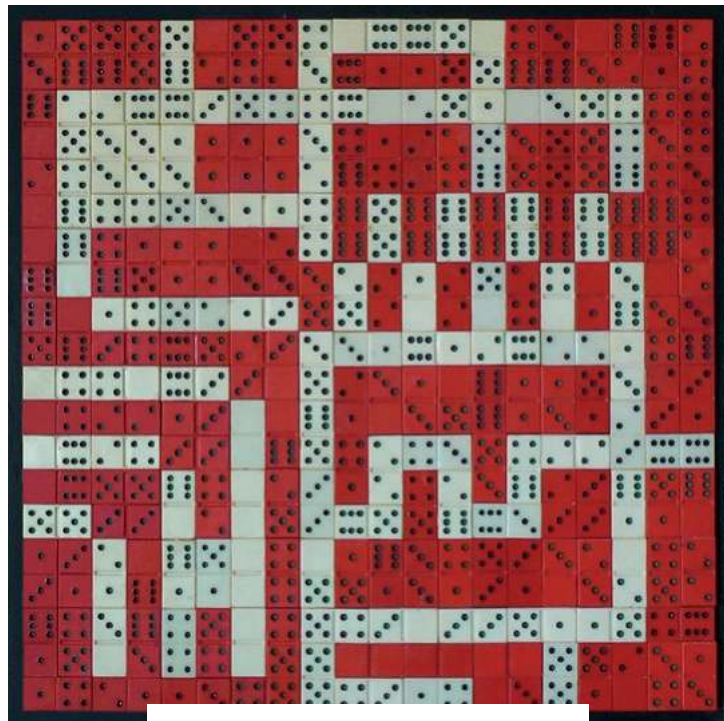
In the 1990s, Lviv was a mosaic of separate, autonomous personalities. In contrast to the circle of artists who congregated in Kyiv's ParCommune, this city lacked

<sup>277</sup> Platon Sylvestrov, "Defloratsiia" [Defloration], *PlatonArt.de*, <http://www.platonart.de/ru/platon/texty/?e=35>.





THE *DEFLOWERING* EXHIBITION. 1990.  
 PLATON SYLVESTROV'S HALL.  
 COURTESY OF STANISLAV SILANTYEV.



PLATON SYLVESTROV.  
*LABYRINTH*. 1996.  
 DOMINOS AND MIXED MEDIA. 42.5x42.5 CM.  
 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST'S FAMILY.



MYROSLAV YAHODA  
IN THE LAST YEARS OF HIS LIFE AT HIS STUDIO.  
ANDRII SAHAIDAKOVSKY IS IN THE BACKGROUND.  
PHOTO BY NATA KATERYNENKO.

a stable focal point for new ideas and discourses. There was also a lack of ambitious art institutions in the city at that time. Most initiatives had a closed, domestic, and therefore isolated character. To be an artist in Lviv was to make friends and to drink coffee, as well as stronger things, with many people, but all the same to remain alone on a creative level. Most probably, this is why the art of the 1990s in Lviv, up until very recently, has lived in the shadow of the more involved and collaborative artistic communities that existed in Kyiv, Odesa, and Kharkiv.

There are practically no women among the list of central figures from this period, an inheritance from Soviet times and also characteristic of the new art of Ukraine. Back then, with just a few exceptions, the only roles women had were that of art critics, working behind the scenes, or as “muses.” Paradoxically, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the number of women in leading positions in independent Ukraine’s modern art scene was even smaller than in the later years of the USSR. During this period in Kyiv, Odesa, and Kharkiv, women were given only two kinds of roles: organization or inspiration. The situation was no better in the traditionally conservative Lviv.

The host of personalities on Lviv’s art scene in the 1990s included the postmodernist painter Volodymyr Kostyrko; the artist, curator and party animal Borys Berher; the creator of installations, sculpture, and video- and land-art projects Serhii Yakunin; as well as Hanna Sydorenko, Dmytro Kuzovkin, and others. Vasyl Bazhai, a student of Roman Selsky and Karlo Zvirynsky, continued the tradition of non-figurative art. Bazhai was a painter, performer, installation creator, and also the star of the Kyiv gallery Atelier Karas in the late 1990s and early 2000s. At the same time, Vlodko Kaufman, the veteran art director of Dzyga, Lviv’s main contemporary art gallery in the 1990s and early 2000s, also began using contemporary art practices in his work. He was an artist, performer, and curator who popularized performance as an art form.

It would be impossible to write about the Lviv art scene at this time without Myroslav Yahoda. He was a painter, graphic artist, poet, set designer, and a well-known personality in the city. He graduated as an artist from the Ukrainian Academy of Printing. He ended up at the psychiatric hospital on Kulparkivska Street three times. Alcohol was the drug of choice in bohemian Lviv, but in Yahoda’s case it was more than just a hobby. His bouts of drinking were heavy, chronic, and hopeless, soaked in an existential isolation from which he could not be saved. Living in a noisy city, he became a hermit. For years, he didn’t leave his damp and semi-underground studio, calling it, in an old Lviv tradition, his *pyvnytsia*, or “cellar.” He would smoke two packets of the cheapest cigarettes every day and over time his face began to transform and resemble a bloated, monstrous mask. But that was just at first glance. Before you knew it, the shy smile of a child would appear on his face disfigured by alcohol. He was too alive and too genuine to feel at home in this world. He was a tragic character who was too far-sighted to stay afloat in the ironic culture of postmodernism.

Yahoda’s art was on the border between genius and mere nothingness. Indeed, “nothing” was one of the artist’s favorite categories. That was what he called his play that was performed in 2002 at the Nebo (Sky) Theater in Lviv.<sup>278</sup> Yahoda’s expressive

<sup>278</sup> Natalia Slobodian, “Nimyi kryk suchasnoho Vah-Hoha (Boha)” [The dumb cry of the modern Van Gogh (God)], *Postup*, May 25, 2002, <http://postup.brama.com/usual.php?what=2461>.

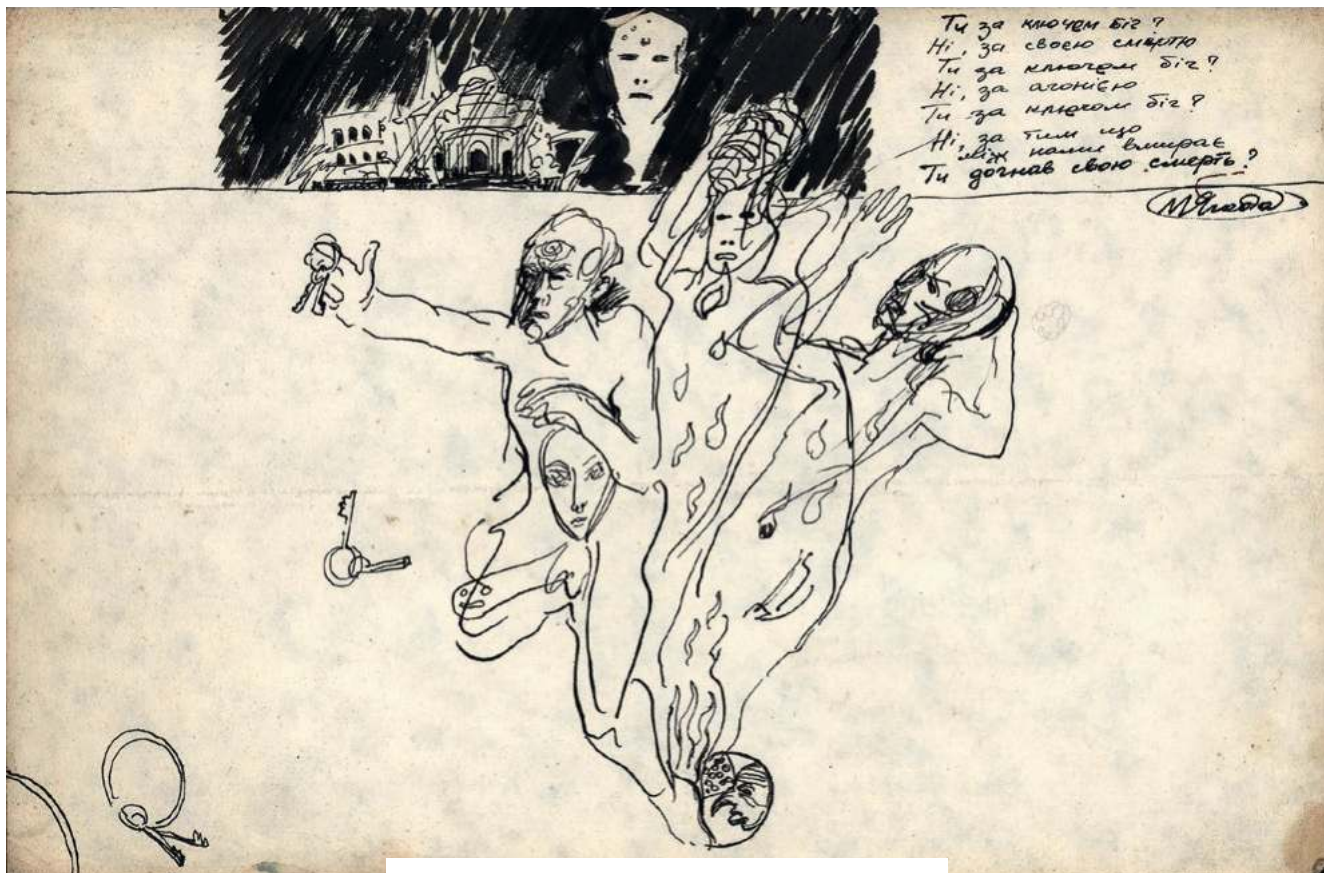
painting and graphic art brought him in line with the artistic language of the outsider movement. As a professional artist he always remained a radically marginal figure, both in his life and in his work. Yahoda's world was full of eerie fantasies and mystical characters. His expressionism intertwined with naive art, symbolism, and a pathological corporeality. At first glance, his artworks seem to essentially be either nightmares or a chronicle of psychopathic delirium. While there may be a godforsaken quality to the deformed, terrifying characters, if one looks deeper, there is no evil lurking there. The eyes on their dark faces are filled with loneliness and suffering. Yahoda the poet gives his viewer hidden clues to help interpret his paintings. His poems also contain the silence of God, despair, exploration, and a lot of darkness. However, instead of speaking in mythological or mystical terms, Yahoda shares his thoughts out loud about the role of the artist in the universe.

Another side to Yahoda was his work as a set designer for the theater director Attila Vidnyánszky, now the artistic director of the Hungarian National Theater. In the early 2000s, they created performances at the National Hungarian Theater in Berehove, as well as at the National Theater in Budapest. One would think that being a hermit and working in the theater are two incompatible things. But the combination of the incongruous describes Yahoda perfectly.

There are many features and motifs in Yahoda's work that align him with the aesthetic of Austro-Hungarian decadence of the early 20th century. It is possible that on some subtle level the artist was tuning into vibrations that were invisible to others, the vibrations of a different Lviv, a city of tragedy, death, forgotten roots, and erased histories. The dead of Lviv found a thoughtful conversation partner and drinking buddy in Yahoda. Perhaps Yahoda's behavior would seem crazy, at least to those who considered a blunted spirit a healthy thing.

*"They point their finger at me  
And twist it at their temples. But I climb into the corner and wait  
For the corrupt ecstasy of word and paint.  
Beyond the painting. Art is  
Making love during a car crash.  
I want to draw the moans of the earth."<sup>279</sup>*

<sup>279</sup> "Vykyk Bohu Myroslava lahody," [Myroslav Yahoda's Challenge to God], *Postup*, August 3, 2004, <http://postup.brama.com/usual.php?what=28140>.



MYROSLAV YAHODA.  
DID YOU RUN FOR THE KEY? 2000S.  
INDIA INK ON PAPER. 24x36 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE XX-XXI MUSEUM. KYIV.

TOP RIGHT CORNER READS:  
DID YOU RUN AFTER THE KEY?  
NO, I RAN AFTER MY DEATH  
DID YOU RUN AFTER THE KEY?  
NO, I RAN AFTER AGONY.  
DID YOU RUN AFTER THE KEY?  
NO, I RAN AFTER THE THING  
THAT IS DYING BETWEEN US.  
DID YOU CATCH UP WITH YOUR DEATH?



# POLITICAL PERFORMANCES

Postmodernism in the post-Soviet sphere was combined with a nihilism that was entirely characteristic of life on the ruins of empire and its old narratives. Disconcertingly, it was also combined with a romanticism, sense of freedom, and the feeling that something new was happening in the country. This mixture created a unique type of worldview. In the universe of the 1990s, a radical cynicism sat alongside a lyricism; a disappointment in political utopia coexisted with a sincere faith in the power of so-called “political technology.” Ukraine discovered new forms of artistic practice that were already well-established in the West, but new for the post-Soviet space such as video, performance, and installation art. Transgression, combined with an interest in the aesthetic of the grotesque, was the ruling mood in art. A whole host of artworks combining a frenetic energy with sharp socio-political discourse were created during this time.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Ukrainian artwork began to combine elements of performance and “happenings,” postmodern irony, burlesque, play, and also pointed political satire. For the most part, this art was driven by politically active students from non-art institutions, i.e. historians and philosophers. Meanwhile the work produced by the conservative, painting-centric world of Ukrainian art would be excluded from modern artistic discourse for a long time.

The youth revolutionary-patriotic union Rays of Juche was established in Kyiv in 1989. This organization was thought up by the students Mykola Polishchuk (the commissar) and Dmytro Poliukhovych (the commandant Leibediev-Kumach). The peak of the organization’s activity came in 1990—1991. Rays of Juche was a bright page in the history of early Ukrainian political performance. Rays of Juche’s burlesque interventions and performances were inspired by the ideology of the North Korean communists, in particular by the notorious magazines *Korea* and *Korea Today*. In the late Soviet period, the propaganda publications of the Korean communists resembled the perfect artistic parody of a decaying USSR, with all the idiocy of its empty slogans and rituals. Juche was the localized Korean variant of Marxism created by Kim Il-sung. Once they had adorned themselves with all the regalia of North Korean propaganda, the young founders of Rays of Juche set about dissecting the absurdity of the reality that surrounded them. No one was safe, neither communists nor nationalists. The headquarters for the Rays of Juche was a cheap basement bar in the building of the Union of Writers on Bankova Street in Kyiv. All manner of political activists gathered there, representing a wide array of views. In 1989, the bar’s clientele ranged from activists for the newly-formed People’s Movement (Narodnyi rukh) of Ukraine to pro-Russian monarchists. Radical absurdists, the ironic disciples of Korean Juche, also drank their fair share there too.

Rays of Juche’s light-hearted farewell to the Soviet past was well received at the time. However, it wouldn’t be long before the project would be forgotten. After its participants graduated from college and entered adult life, the subtle artistic trolling of Rays of Juche became incomprehensible to a younger generation that wasn’t as familiar with life in the USSR. The work of Rays of Juche was in tune with the ideas of the Polish organization Orange Alternative, which staged various original stunts during the years of martial law in the 1980s, such as a New Year’s demonstration of Santas

(known as “Father Frost” in the former Soviet Union). Rays of Juche’s famous stunts included searching for gold under the Communist Party’s regional committee building, announcing the construction of an underground tunnel from Luhansk to Pyongyang, throwing confetti and ticker tape at the arriving delegates of one of the UkrSSR’s final Communist Party congresses, sending the Pyongyang Hawks brigade to Iraq with great fanfare, seizing a memorial cannon from outside the Arsenal factory in Kyiv during the anniversary of the Bolshevik January uprising, and then attempting to use it to shoot at the Verkhovna Rada.

*The first public stunt took place in September 1990. Prior to the stunt, in the summer, a blue and yellow Ukrainian flag had been erected in front of the Kyiv City Council building. It hadn’t taken long before the patch of ground by the flag pole turned into a gathering spot for all the local “arm-chair warriors.” Those who were especially fervent brought flowers to the flag and even lit candles. One day, the “warriors” were shocked to read a pamphlet which said that the “revolutionary Kimjongilia flower” was going to be laid by the red flag of the UkrSSR (which was nearby). By the time the flower was to be laid, all the “warrior” reservists had been called in, together with the press. Despite the shouts of “Shame!” a jar of wilted begonias, and a ribbon from a funeral wreath with the words “To the Red Flag, from the children of the Great Leader,” was placed at the base of the flagpole. By the next day, details of the stunt had been published in virtually all the Ukrainian and Moscow newspapers. What was particularly humorous were the journalists’ discussions over what exactly the Youth Revolutionary Patriotic Union Rays of Juche was. None of our journalist brothers guessed that we were just playing around,*

remembers one of the group’s founders Dmytro Poliukhovych.<sup>280</sup>

In the middle of 1993, within Kyiv’s Leftist Youth Union (LYU), another similar group was formed: the Revolutionary Industrial Complex (RIC). The central creative approach of this group was also political performance. The collective organized a whole range of performances both on the campus of the Taras Shevchenko National University and outside it. Within the LYU, the group was seen as a postmodern faction. The RIC carried out its ironic stunts from April 1994 to 1998. Their Hercules stunt, organized on 12 April 1994, was characteristic of their work:

*A patch of wasteland in the Honchari-Kozhumiaky area was chosen as the RIC’s future firing ground. This venture was to be a composite of the RIC’s conceptual projects:*

*a) The territory of the firing ground was sown with flakes of oatmeal, which were meant to demonstrate the symbolic insemination of the historical center of Kyiv with revolutionary potential.*

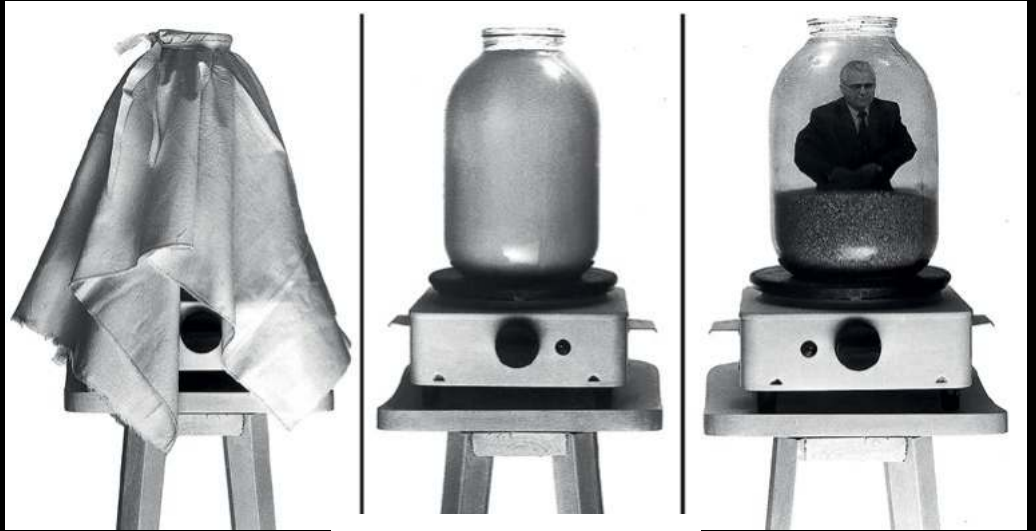
*b) The sowing of the flakes was accompanied by readings of certain texts which the project’s participants had endowed with magical properties, thus increasing the possibility of germination.*

*c) On the whole, this venture was to illustrate the idea of the “mirrored kolobok,”<sup>281</sup> which projects its erroneous reflections onto the surrounding world as it sits off-center relative to its own axis of rotation.*

<sup>280</sup> Dmytro Poliukhovych, “Vysmiiani monstry” [Mocked monsters], *Den*, September 14, 2006.

<sup>281</sup> A Slavic fairy-tale character somewhat akin to the gingerbread man, but in the form of a ball of dough.





THE MASOCH FUND.  
*MAUSOLEUM FOR THE PRESIDENT*.  
1994. INSTALLATION.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS.



THE MASOCH FUND.  
*ART IN SPACE*. 1993. VIDEO STILL.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS.

All together this demonstrated the fairly ironic attitude that the RIC members had towards modern artistic practice, i.e., towards “contemporary art.” Despite a certain agnosticism in some of their ideas, the RIC demonstrated its intention to be an active presence in the artistic space: literally (by way of the firing ground) and symbolically (by invading the protected areas of “modern art”).<sup>282</sup>

Other interesting art projects from this period were carried out by the Lviv group the Masoch Fund. One of the Fund’s projects, carried out in front of the National Art Museum of Ukraine, was called *Mausoleum for the President* (1994). It happened on the eve of independent Ukraine’s second presidential election. The artists invited viewers to the opening without sharing any details of what would happen. The public arrived at the designated place, the entrance to the country’s main museum, and they saw a secret object covered with a white sheet. When the performance started, the sheet was removed to uncover a three-liter jar filled with traditional Ukrainian lard. The jar was then placed onto an electric cooker and the artists began to slowly melt the jar’s contents. Once its contents became transparent, it revealed a preserved image of Ukraine’s first president Leonid Kravchuk, whose photograph had been placed in the lard beforehand. This inflammatory stunt was followed by a fiery speech given by Ihor Podolchak on the steps of the museum, much to the displeasure of the museum staff.

Another of their projects was *Art in Space* (1993), which was the first art exhibition in history to be carried out in space, on board the Space Station Mir. The video recording of the project showed the Russian cosmonauts Sergei Avdeev and Anatoly Solovyev examining two small drawings by Ihor Podolchak while floating in a gravity-free environment. The Masoch Fund also experienced its own passionate love affair with the North Korean people. In 1994, following the death of the great helmsman Kim Il-sung, the Fund created a postal art project. The artists sent a telegram to the North Korean embassy in Moscow with their condolences, all expressed in the baroque style of Korean propaganda. In the same year, upon the arrival of George Soros to Ukraine, the artists suggested their project *Climax* to the patron of Kyiv’s Center for Contemporary Art. The main idea of the project was to create a 40-meter superstructure made out of ice to put on top of Mount Everest. This symbolic upgrade for the world’s tallest peak would bring its height to 8888 meters (horizontally 4 infinity symbols). According to the artists, it would be a worthy reflection of the billionaire’s socio-humanitarian ambitions. Other projects by the Fund in the 1990s included *The Final Jewish Pogrom* (1995) and *Happy Victory Day, Mr. Müller* (1995).

The Masoch Fund’s projects centered on politics, uncomfortable themes, provocation, and the trolling of art institutions. The way the group evolved is striking when compared to the transformation seen in the wider post-Soviet context during that period. The artists gradually began to move away from art into the real world, away from postmodern ironic games and into politics. From the late 1990s, they became creative advisors for several nationwide political voting campaigns. This synthesis of art and politics, and the preoccupation of creatives with “social shamanism” is characteristic of a time when everything seemed to be a humorous, though slightly drawn-out joke.

<sup>282</sup> *Kombinat Revoliutsii. Istoriia*. [The revolutionary industrial complex. A history], <http://art.mamchich.info/combinat/history.html>.

Certainly, there was the feeling that a real artist could rule the world with the help of a few simple formulas, devices, manipulations, and games. Their universe of disintegrated narratives was ruled by a romantic nihilism and the feeling that anything goes. The reigning mood of the time was the belief that reality was just a fantasy, a hallucination, a dream in which you could just play the fool. At a certain point, the political golems that the playful postmodernist artists had created took on human form and escaped from the artists' clutches. They then went on to lives of their own, which turned out to be suspiciously sincere and far from harmless. By this time, the artists Diurych and Podolchak had already left politics and instead dedicated themselves to filmmaking. Their debut film *Las Meninas* would premiere in 2008.



OLEKSANDR ZHYVOTKOV.  
*DESNA. TWILIGHT. SVENSKY MONASTERY.*  
1989. OIL ON CANVAS. 90x100 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.

# THE PAINTERLY PRESERVE: AN ABSTRACT DIRECTION

Parallel to the logocentric postmodernism of certain groups, Kyiv also saw the development of another branch of art. A circle of artists formed whose main focus was abstraction, metaphysics, and the alchemic interaction between the artist and the surface of a painter's canvas. The nucleus of this movement was made up of artists who were a little older than the shining youth of the Ukrainian New Wave. Tiberiy Szilvashi, Mykola Kryvenko, and Anatoly Kryvolap were all over 40 by the time the USSR had collapsed, and by that stage they had already matured as people and artists. They were joined by the young, talented, and like-minded Oleksandr Zhyvotkov, together with Marko Heiko, and Serhii Zhyvotkov. Painterly Preserve, as the group was called, was not defined by collective artworks and manifestos; rather it was a shared space for communication, a laboratory of ideas. These artists, who did not match the age or energy of the boisterous ParCommune scene, attempted to find and develop their own answer to the question of what form art should take following the collapse of ideology. In this period, it felt like everyone was experimenting with new forms of media, yet Painterly Preserve remained faithful to painting as an art form. All their formal experiments remained within the confines of a canvas. The group's name reflected a deliberate conservatism, or, more precisely, a chivalrous fidelity to the medium, what others might call Stockholm syndrome for painting. Painterly Preserve was a manifestation of the artists' own awareness that painting was quickly falling out of fashion.

Art historian Oleksandr Solovyov situated this group on the border between the radicalism of the New Wave and the tired retrograde art of the late-Soviet academy style.<sup>283</sup> In a sense, Painterly Preserve was trying to catch up with the country's modernist tradition, which had been halted in its tracks decades before. When he was young, one of the group's members Kryvenko, having studied under the legendary and precise master Hryhorii Havrylenko, experimented with non-figurative art back in the Soviet period. The artists of Preserve restored a sense of continuity between the avant-garde, the unofficial tradition, and the art of new independent Ukraine.

The group's lead thinker was Tiberiy Szilvashi. He had previously worked at the youth organization of the Union of Artists and organized the open-air painting retreats at Sedniv, which marked a milestone for the trans-avant-garde. Szilvashi's evolution from the soft realism of the 1980s to his later monochromatic pieces demonstrates the artist's careful exploration of new narratives at a time that seemed utterly devoid of meaning. On the other hand, this might have just been the behavior of an over-achiever. The successful Soviet functionary, famous for his liberalism, naturally wanted to have his say in the new art of independent Ukraine. From the viewpoint of the late USSR, practicing abstraction was nigh on the most radical taboo to break. At the same time, Szilvashi's canvases covered in pure color weren't so much a tribute to global modernism as a departure from the excessive use of narrative in Soviet art.

<sup>283</sup> Oleksandr Solovyov, "U konteksti kartyny (1995)" [The painting's context (1995)], in *Turbulentni shliuzy*, 7–13.



ANATOLY KRYVOLAP.  
*UNTITLED*. 1990. OIL AND MIXED MEDIA  
ON CANVAS. 100×140 CM.  
FROM A PRIVATE COLLECTION, UKRAINE.



They spoke of an austere art and creative gateway into something new. Yes, one can forbid oneself from drawing narrative canvases populated with different figures and take a vow of painterly asceticism. But to fully abandon the gravitational field of local tradition was impossible, and, in the grand scheme of things, unnecessary.

Thus, there was a hint of influence from the Ukrainian painting school in the non-figurative art of the 1990s. It can be seen in its love for rich and sometimes blindingly bright paints (especially in the work of Kryvolap) and the corporeal texture of the paint as it lay upon the canvas. Generally, color plays a large role in the philosophy of Painterly Preserve. The artists looked to the familiar canvas for support after having found themselves in a world where the laws of the previous epoch no longer applied. They needed their Preserve as a way to somehow create boundaries in a world with no rules. Having drawn a magical circle around themselves, like the hero of Gogol's story "Viy," the painters set off on an emotional, visual adventure across the unfamiliar terrain of non-objective art. In its own way, the artwork of this circle was psychedelic. But where the younger generation needed narcotics to achieve that effect, the more mature masters only needed pure color and light.

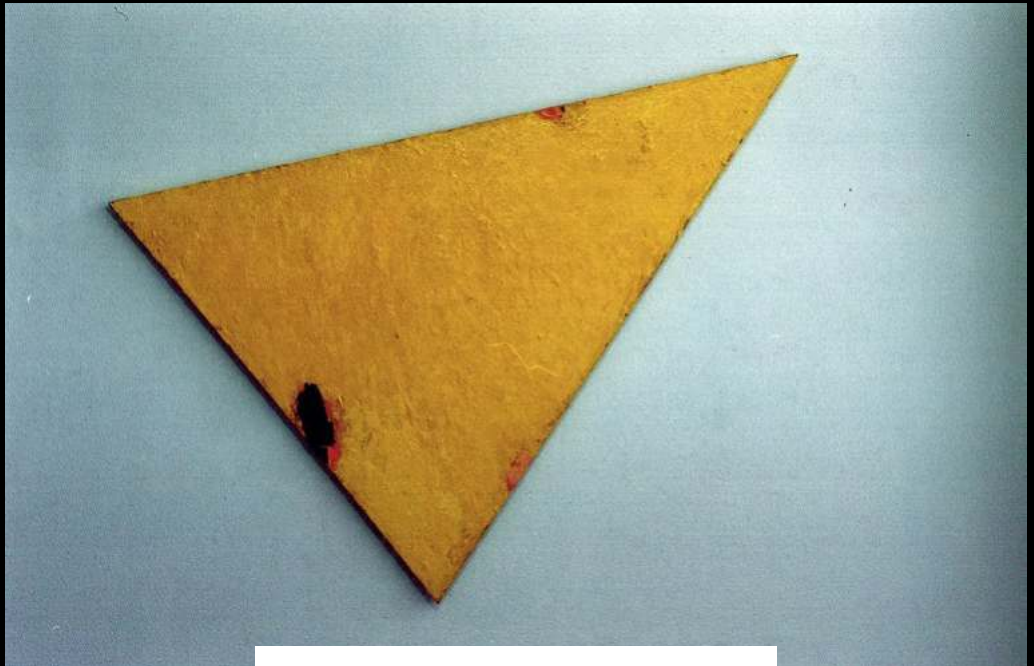
After existing for five years (1991–1995), Painterly Preserve eventually wore itself out. Nonetheless, its artists continued to meet and experiment with non-figurative art. Abstraction was in demand on the art market and more accessible, and the art of this group dominated Kyiv galleries up until the mid-2000s. Kryvolap went on to become one of the most commercially successful artists of independent Ukraine. Szilvashi was closer to the New Wave and created art projects for the Kyiv Soros Center, experimenting with installations and remaining, to this day, faithful to his monochromic artworks. Szilvashi writes,

*At that time, we tried to develop a different agenda, which would only find a clearer formulation in the theory and artistic practice of a completely different generation. It was a resolutely anti-postmodernist position. And it is only now, as I discover parallels among my colleagues from all over the world, that everything I previously only understood intuitively becomes clear. What set us apart was our rejection of a text-centric model. I didn't think that in 1990, but now the theories of Harman, Brassier, and Meillassoux shed light on the proceedings,<sup>284</sup> making sense of the entire ontological pivot that took place in art and philosophy. If we are talking about the fate of painting in a post-medium world, and its capability to help us understand reality (it is perhaps the only tool of metaphysics), then it is possible that our efforts were not in vain.<sup>285</sup>*

<sup>284</sup> Ray Brassier, Graham Harman, and Quentin Meillassoux are modern philosophers and representatives of the "speculative realist" movement, which gained fame at the end of the 2000s.

<sup>285</sup> Tiberiy Szilvashi, private correspondence with the author.





TIBERIY SZILVASHI.  
*PAINTING*. 1996. OIL ON CANVAS. FROM THE  
COLLECTION OF SQUIRE PATTON BOGGS LAW FIRM.



TIBERIY SZILVASHI.  
*PAINTING*. AN INSTALLATION AS PART OF JERZY ONUCH'S CURATORIAL PROJECT *PAINTING*.  
LEON TARASEVYCH — TIBERIY SZILVASHI. 2001. THE CENTER OF CONTEMPORARY ART AT  
THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF THE KYIV-MOHYLA ACADEMY. KYIV.



ROBERT SALLER.  
*ON BOTH SIDES*. 2009.  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS. 120x120 CM.  
COURTESY OF YEVHEN KARAS.



PAVLO KOVACH.  
*HARVEST*. 1996.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 150x170 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

# TRANSCARPATHIAN POPTRANS

Another independent art phenomenon of the 1990s was the Poptrans group from Uzhhorod. The group's founders were Pavlo Kovach, Vadym Kharabaruk, Andrii Stehura, Robert Saller, Petro Penzel, and Marsel Onysko. Later on, the collective would see Penzel leave and Natasha Shevchenko and Viktor Pokydanets join. Each of these artists would also pursue their own creative career outside of the group. The group's official history is widely understood to have begun at their 1996 exhibition, but the group's members had known each other for a long time before then, and even took part in the 1988 exhibition *Left Eye*, which was groundbreaking for Uzhhorod at the time. The group's name is meant to stand for "popular transformation." Poptrans began by ironically combining the American pop-art tradition with a post-Soviet resentment, a nostalgia for the recent past, and a local Transcarpathian flavor. As a result, the group gradually developed its own recognizable style whose main characteristics would include stencils on canvas, collage, posters, and a local kind of playfulness. The group's main area of interest was the life of provincial Uzhhorod at the end of an epoch with its unique mixture of aesthetics, languages, and traditions, all seen through the prism of the local sense of humor.

In his first joint Poptrans project, *Nostalhin* (1994), Kharabaruk represented objects from the old Soviet way of life in a faded nostalgic style, placing them on an abstract decorative background. Kovach combined Soviet propaganda posters with a digital aesthetic. Robert Saller, who also worked with installations, created photo collages in which the derelict urban landscape of post-Soviet Uzhhorod was populated with the huge neon signs of a western metropolis. The combination of a totalitarian aesthetic, 1960s pop art, and an abundance of ironic text stencils foresaw the language of mass internet culture that would arrive in the coming decades. Later, in the internet era, the art group would include elements of a digital aesthetic as a device in their work. While Poptrans existed, they self-published a whole array of magazines: *Sho* (Huh), *la-1* (Z-1), *Bortovoi zhurnal* (In-flight magazine), and *Panic Button*.

In the 1990s, the group occupied a consciously marginal and even semi-underground position. Work by Poptrans artists was barely shown at Kyiv exhibitions, though the group did carefully follow the capital's art scene, aligning its creative practice with what it observed. All the same, Poptrans inhabited its own separate world, and even up to the present day the number of its serious exhibitions outside of Uzhhorod can be counted on two hands. One of the first comprehensive presentations of their work in Kyiv occurred only in 2007 at the Karas gallery. In line with Poptrans's aesthetic, the exhibition was called *Kheppi Land* (Happy land). The group still exists today, and in 2019 there was another exhibition of their art in Kyiv, this time at the Mala Gallery in the Mystetskyi Arsenal.

# IN SEARCH OF A MASTER

The modernist idea of complete autonomy in art is representative of the same kind of utopia that believed socialist realist art should only faithfully and eternally serve Stalin's cult of personality. The dictatorship of the outsider's gaze is an important factor in the history of art. It could be the will of the church, the tsar or, a political leader. It could also come from a less obvious source such as a separate class or group of people, a leader of opinion, society as a whole, or, as often happens in the modern world, from the art market and the international art elite. For many years, progressive cultural figures in the post-Soviet space were afflicted by a kind of semi-blindness. In the Soviet past, everyone could see ideology for what it was, but in the post-Soviet present it was either tactfully ignored or welcomed as some kind of abstract, democratic, transformation. The trauma that resulted from the collapse of the USSR was too severe, and the desire to interpret those events in the metaphysical terms of victory of good over evil was too strong.

In socialist realism, the Communist Party dictated how and what the artist should see. Yet, in the USSR's unofficial art scene, hermetic-sectarian societies played a significant role. The external influence of the western market was also significant with the resulting demand for dissident and non-conformist art. In the early 1990s, there was a burst of activity from the trans-avant-garde artists whose paintings rebelled against the confines of late socialist realism and epitomized a search for a new authoritative point of view, a new foundation with its own symbolic power that would help these artists enter the history books. That authoritative and dominating point of view would come to be held by the mythologized, artistic mainstream of western galleries and institutions. The newly formed western-style art centers, foundations, and galleries played no small part in helping artists who were looking to catch up on years of Soviet censorship and finally be in sync with contemporary trends on the global art scene. Every group, or "party,"<sup>286</sup> as they came to be called in the 1990s, interpreted this in their own way.

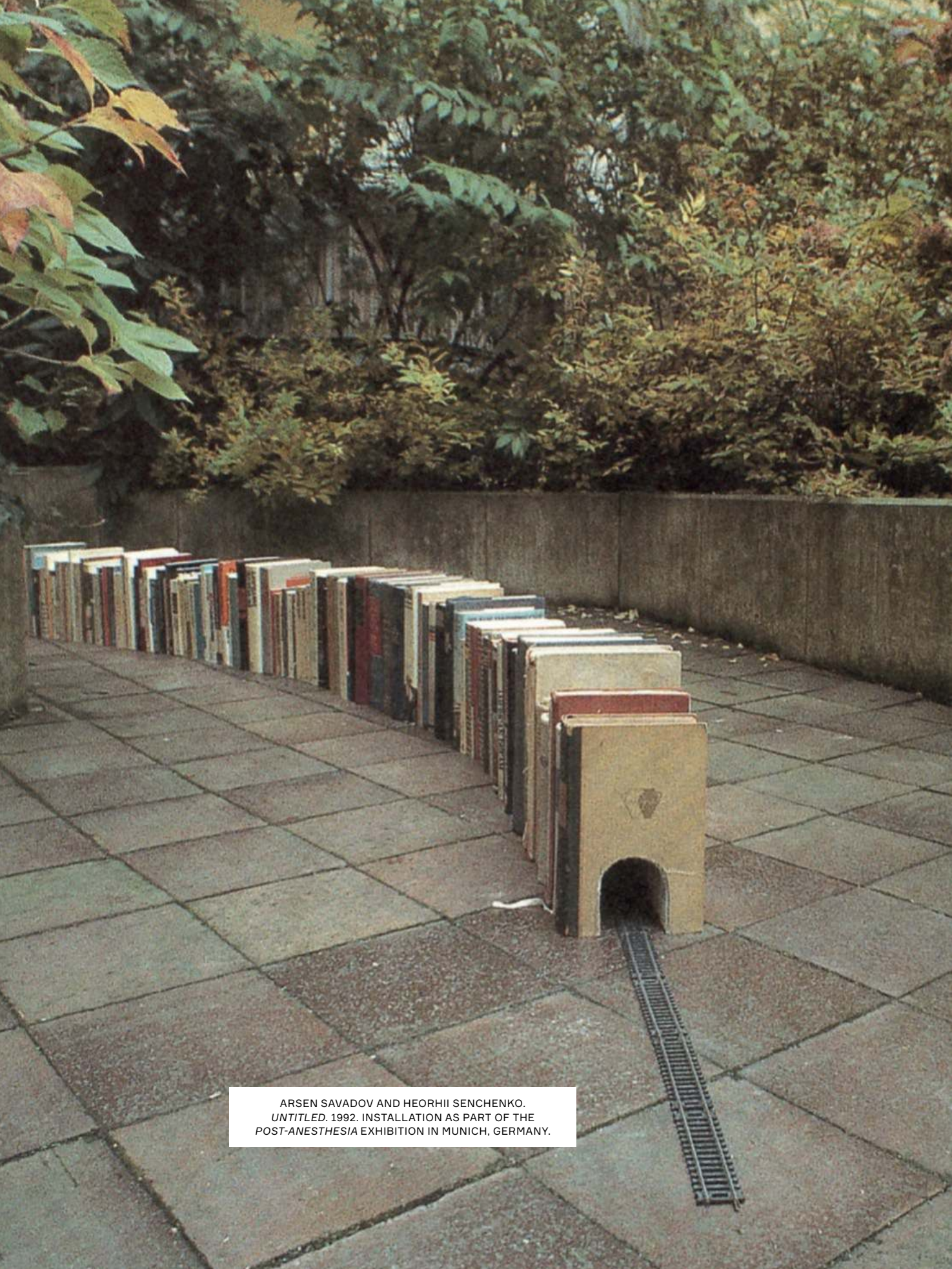
It was no accident that one of the popular names for the leading art movements in the post-Soviet space at that time, posited as an alternative to socialist realism, was "front-line art." The main value of these new movements was seen in their conformity to the larger context, and to the evolving global art environment, in particular. That larger context, however, was really the thinly veiled supremacy of the western viewpoint inherited from the Cold War with its support of all forms of dissident art in communist and post-communist countries<sup>287</sup> and its own specific canon of art history. This was the fluid and highly effective viewpoint of the victor masquerading as a new

<sup>286</sup> Viktor Miziano, "'Tusovka' kak sotsiokulturnii fenomen" [The 'party' as a sociocultural phenomenon], in *Khudozhestvennaia kultura XX veka: Sb. statei* [Art culture of the 20th century: A collection of essays] (Moscow: Russkoe Slovo-PC, 2002), 352–363.

<sup>287</sup> Marie Leduc, *Dissidence: The Rise of Chinese Contemporary Art in the West* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018). This book demonstrates an array of distinct parallels in the development of modern artistic practice in post-perestroika USSR and China, in particular, the reception of these practices by the Western world.



MEETING OF UKRAINIAN ARTISTS WITH GEORGE SOROS.  
FROM LEFT TO RIGHT. GEORGE SOROS, JERZY ONUCH,  
ANATOLII HANKEVYCH, AND ARNOLD KREMENCHUTSKY. 1993.



ARSEN SAVADOV AND HEORHII SENCHENKO.  
*UNTITLED*. 1992. INSTALLATION AS PART OF THE  
*POST-ANESTHESIA* EXHIBITION IN MUNICH, GERMANY.

universal artistic language. Here, “contemporary” equated to a precise set of clichés that spread gently, yet decisively, across the globe.

The passion for destroying old taboos and the sense of “anything goes” that characterized this period were combined with an overarching desire to conform with a wider global expectation of what art from the former Soviet Union should look like. This prompted a demand for a radicalism in art. The second half of the 1990s was a time when shock tactics would become central to artistic practice and when artists would aspire to create “correct” institutional art “like they do abroad.” At that stage, this slightly naive attempt to copy Western clichés on the ruins of the old Soviet art system was seen as the only constructive way out of an ideological and value-based impasse.

## AWAY FROM PICTURES<sup>288</sup>

Having “thought up” their own version of the trans-avant-garde movement, Kyiv artists began to immerse themselves in the city’s vibrant art scene. For a while, their art was limited to old-fashioned experiments on canvas; however, it wasn’t long before a crisis began to emerge. Once they had made a name for themselves as a painters’ movement, the artists began traveling to the West for the first time, to a world they had only previously dreamed of. Their collective culture shock was combined with a sense of professional shock: they could find virtually no paintings to speak of.

The early 1990s saw a conceptual shift in European art. New forms of media (for example, photo and video) dominated the big exhibitions, such as *Documenta* in Germany. Text was everywhere, but there were almost no “pictures” at all. This was the beginning of potentially one of the most interesting periods in Ukrainian art. Artists uncovered new art forms that had been given little value or attention in the Soviet art world: video, photo, performance, land art, and installations, among other things.

In this context, the evolution of Vasylyl Tsaholov, a denizen of the ParCommune squat, is indicative of a shift in the Ukrainian art world. Tsaholov’s rejection of traditional painting began with the series *A Feelings Eraser* (1992). These works were completed in a sketch-like, pseudo-realist manner with some parts of the canvas left unfilled. They created an effect of “super credibility” with texts written by the artist placed at the bottom of the works. Tsaholov also began to engage with photography at this time, creating a series shot in a deliberately fake film-set made from an old aquarium. The artist placed magazine cutouts in the aquarium, framing them with cuts of meat and other absurd materials. This was its own type of pre-computer editing because, as they were shot again, these pictures looked like a true “over-sized” film shoot, with real-life models, huge chunks of meat, helicopters, and other objects. Another symbolic piece by Tsaholov was his 1993 photo series *World Without Ideas*

<sup>288</sup> With the permission of the co-author, this section utilizes fragments from the journal series “Point Zero. Novitnia istoriia suchasnoho mystetstva” [Point Zero. Recent history of modern art]” by Oleksandr Solovyov and Alisa Lozhkina which appeared in *TOP10*. 2009–2010.

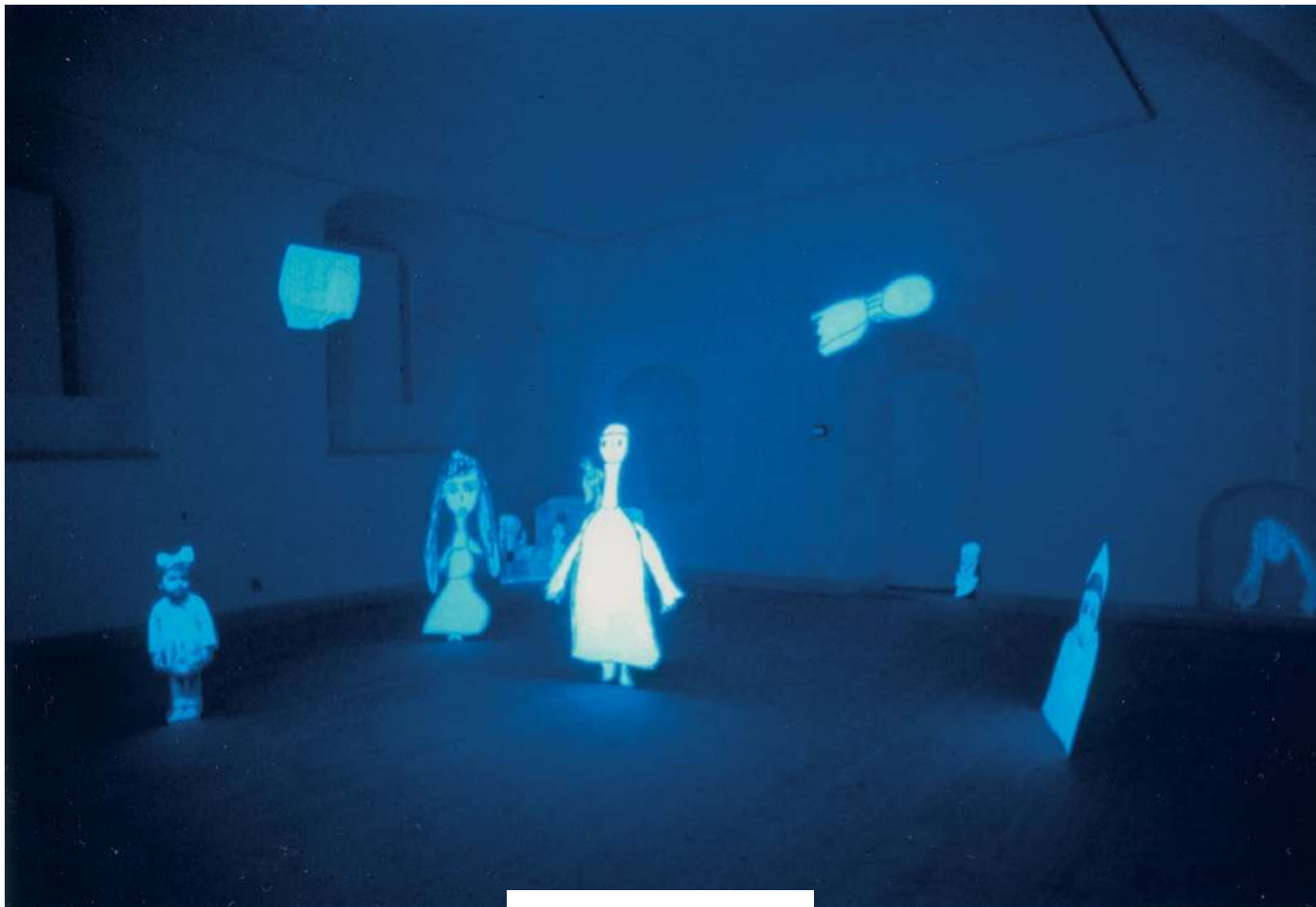
printed on old Soviet photo paper, thus creating a unique patina and unexpected color effects. At this time, Tsaholov also had another original idea titled *Solid Television*, which served as an umbrella term for a whole array of other projects. One such project was the performance *You Can Eat What You Can Eat (The Tower of Babylon)* where the Kyiv art community collectively ate a sacred cake in the form of the tower of Babylon at an exhibition opening.

Tsaholov's theatrical performance piece *Karl Marx — Père Lachaise* became a landmark in 1990s Ukrainian art. The performance was staged in May 1993 and featured the symbolic execution of the Paris Communards, in which the artists from ParCommune walked in front of a fence surrounding the construction site of the former sweets shop on Karl Marx Street (now Horodetskoho Street). All the main figures of the New Wave took part in the performance, playing the roles of executed communards. They were Oleksandr Hnylyzkyj, Natalia Filonenko, Maksym Mamsikov, Illia Chychkan, the art critic Oleh Sydor-Hibelynda, and the curator and critic Nadia Pryhodych, who was Tsaholov's wife. As the column of artists marched peacefully down Horodetskoho Street in broad daylight, a car with Chychkan at the wheel drove up. Chychkan and Valentyn Raievsky jumped out of the car and "shot" the artists with pneumatic pistols. They theatrically fell to the ground, their steaming, revolutionary blood flowing into the gutter (with the help of some tomato juice). Leaflets were then distributed with a conceptualist text commentary on the performance. Within minutes, television cameras had appeared at the scene of the "tragedy." The photographer Mykola Trokh documented the group's performance, which went on to become Vasyl Tsaholov's artwork *Karl Marx — Père Lachaise*.

At this time, between his Munich residency and the ParCommune's *Kulibin* exhibition in Edinburgh, Oleksandr Hnylyzkyj created another landmark piece of art. The artist managed to buy some curved mirrors from the fun house of an abandoned entertainment park, which he used to create his next piece of video art. Once he had installed the mirrors in his studio, Hnylyzkyj invited Natalia Filonenko and Maksym Mamsikov to play the leading roles in his film. Hnylyzkyj managed to create a truly unique surrealist effect by filming erotic and pornographic scenes reflected in the curved mirrors. It was as if the spirit of Dali had been reawakened, flavored with some of the hedonism, psychedelia, and creative experimentation that ParCommune had come to be known for.

The end of the 1990s was dominated by big art projects. It was in this period that phallic motifs became increasingly common in Ukrainian art as artists had really "matured" and achieved a whole plethora of individual breakthroughs separate from a united artistic movement or from life in a "communal kitchen." The central figures of this period were Arsen Savadov, Vasyl Tsaholov, Oleksandr Hnylyzkyj, and Illia Chychkan in Kyiv; Boris Mikhailov and Serhii Bratkov in Kharkiv; Andrii Sahaidakovsky in Lviv; and Oleksandr Roitburd in Odesa. It was these artists who set the tone and shaped the face of Ukrainian art at the turn of the millennium.

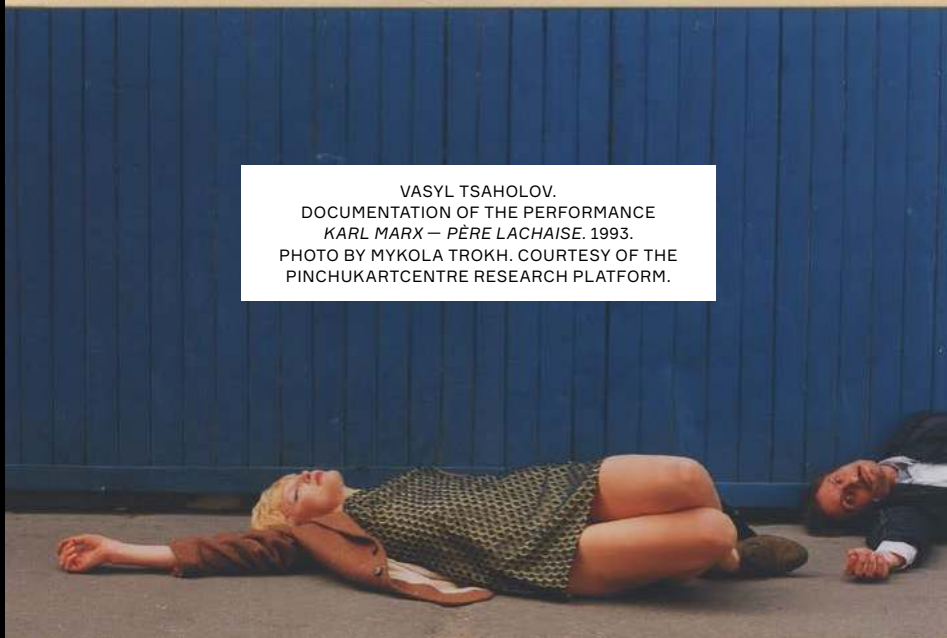




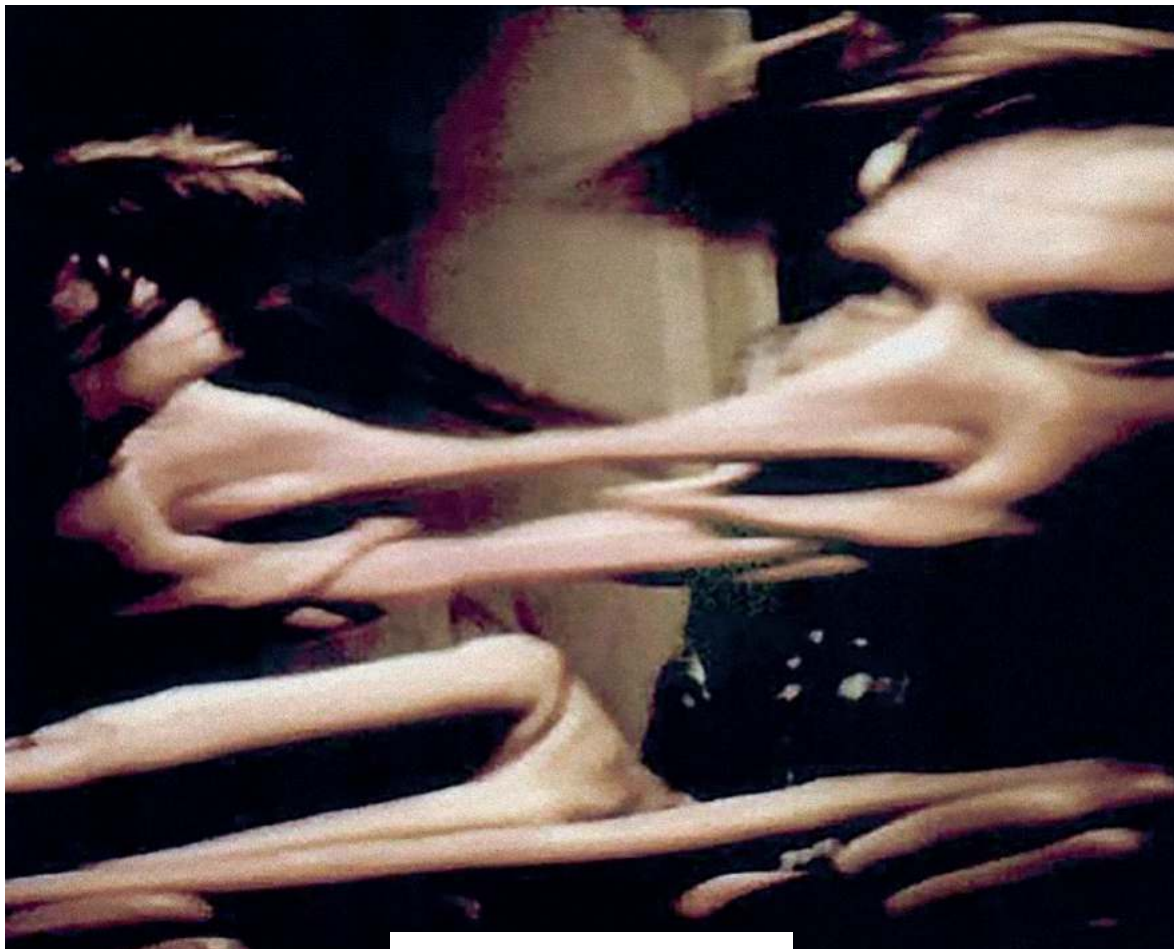
TETIANA HERSHUNI.  
*CHILDREN'S ROOM*. 1996.  
INSTALLATION AT THE *SUGAR  
PLUM VISION* EXHIBITION.



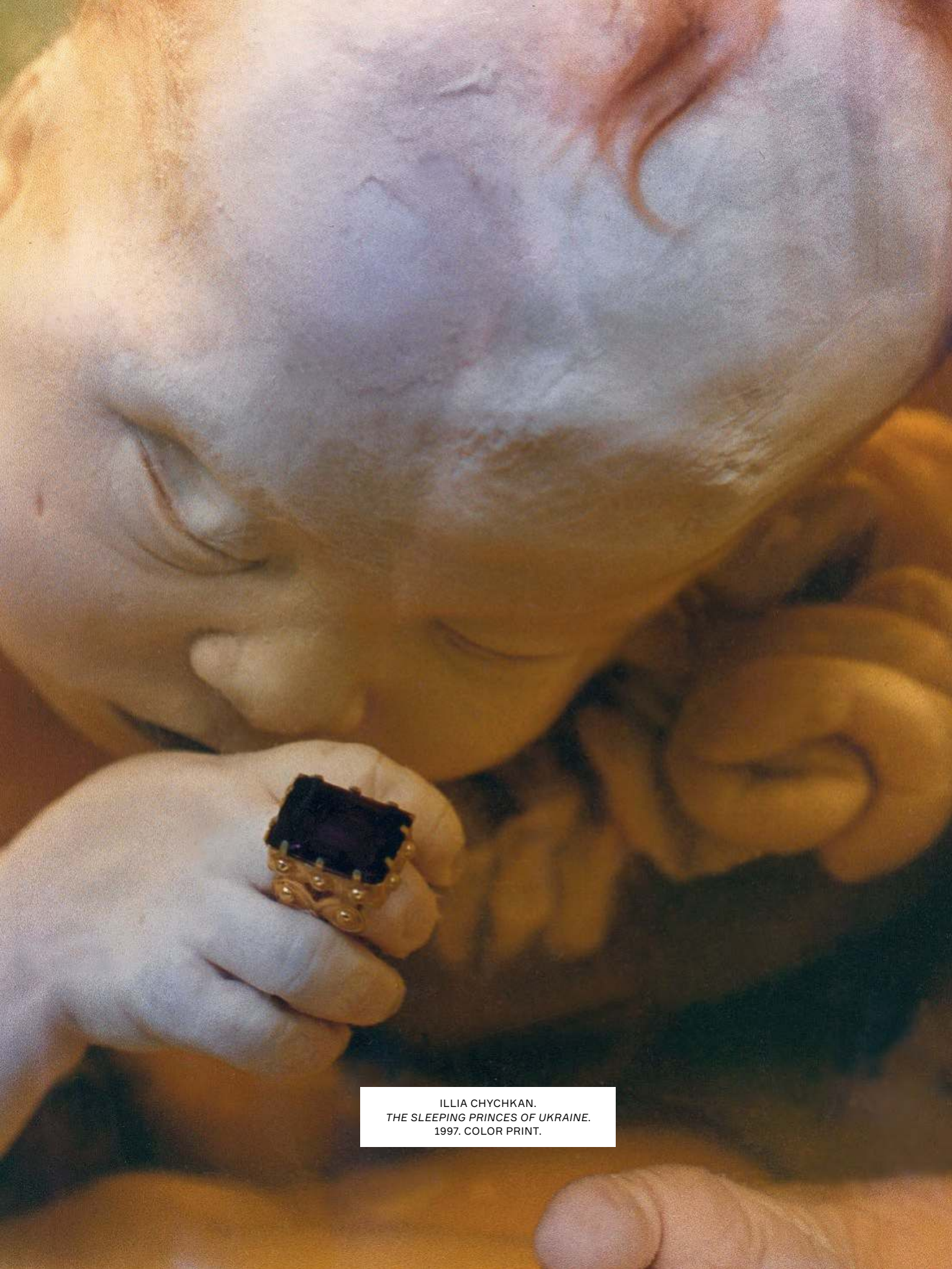
VASYL TSAHOLOV.  
DOCUMENTATION OF THE PERFORMANCE  
*KARL MARX — PÈRE LACHAISE*. 1993.  
PHOTO BY MYKOLA TROKH. COURTESY OF THE  
PINCHUKARTCENTRE RESEARCH PLATFORM.







OLEKSANDR HNYLYZKYJ, NATALIA  
FILONENKO, AND MAKSYM MAMSIKOV.  
*CURVED MIRRORS-LIVING PICTURES*.  
1993. VIDEO STILL.



ILLIA CHYCHKAN.  
*THE SLEEPING PRINCES OF UKRAINE.*  
1997. COLOR PRINT.



VASYL RIABCHENKO.  
*THE DEATH OF ACTAEON*. 1988.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 200x300 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

# ODESA DRIVE

In the 1990s, Odesa has its own chapter in the history of new Ukrainian art. The conceptualist artists from the 1980s had left for Moscow by the end of the decade, and new forms of artistic practice quickly filled the resulting vacuum. Odesa art from the 1990s had its roots in the local non-conformist tradition, and Odesa artists from this period worked in greater collaboration with the Kyiv and general art scene in Ukraine than the Odesa conceptualists of the 1980s.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new circle of painters appeared in Odesa: Oleksandr Roitburd, Vasyl Riabchenko, and Serhii Lykov. Adhering to the ideas of the Kyiv New Wave, they took part in the aptly named 1990 Odesa exhibition *After Modernism*. The Odesa version of the Ukrainian trans-avant-garde movement broke the boundaries of nonconformism, mixing it with conceptualism and the new poetics of Arsen Savadov's work. The influence of the earlier conceptualists was mainly limited to verbal exchanges. For instance, it was thanks to conversations with Serhii Anufriiev about the "pseudo-subject" and other artistic elements that a generous helping of the absurd found its way into a more traditional modernist narrative. And yet, whereas the Kyiv trans-avant-garde initially interpreted the painting as a simulacrum, the Odesans understood modernism to be something sacred.

The Odesans' metaphorical, postmodern paintings abounded in quotes and references to biblical motifs. The artists' focus on themes of both the Old and New Testament was a form of protest against the oppressive imagination of state atheism during the late-Soviet period. Indeed, this was characteristic of the intelligentsia's interest in different forms of religious tradition and esoteric practice. References to the Jewish tradition could be strongly felt in Roitburd's work. However, the Odesans' turn to mythology was far from a banal search for their roots.<sup>289</sup>

In contrast to Kyiv, the Odesa New Wave was not fated to be made up of professionally trained painters. Thanks to the work of Roitburd, a new faith in modern art began here, drawing on the spirit of the literary and poetic underground tradition, which had grown up in the multitude of Odesa coffee houses and other bohemian watering holes. This introduced a particular sense of the naive into the New Wave, but it was a breath of fresh air all the same, and it was key in helping the Odesans leave painting-centric art behind in the mid-1990s.

As the 1980s turned into the 1990s, artists associated with the post-punk youth style and subculture entered onto the Odesa art scene: Ihor Husiev, Dmytro Dulfan, and Andrii Kazandzhii. This generation had little reverence for the modernist tradition. The artistic duo of Anatolii Hankevych and Oleh Mihas played a significant role in the "second wave" of the Odesa trans-avant-garde. The artists' huge canvases simulated Roman mosaics. Their performance of *Cleansing* at the Marat Gelman Gallery in Moscow in 1991 garnered a lot of attention. The artists invited visitors into a hall where

<sup>289</sup> As the art critic Vladimir Levashov wrote, the intention behind the Odesans' explorations of the past was not to find an "expected treasure," rather it was, in of itself, a form of self-expression, i. e. a cultural game played for the sake of playing. Vladimir Levashov, "Posle modernizma—2" [After modernism—2], in *Portfolio. Iskusstvo Odessy 90-kh* [A portfolio. Odesa art in the 1990s] (Odesa, 1999).

a luxurious buffet awaited them. There were no exhibits apart from food and drink. Instead, visitors were invited to examine pamphlets about the importance of nutrition, the dangers of overeating, as well as about ancient sacred recipes for the physiological cleansing of one's intestines with using hollowed pumpkins. "Of course, for the sake of clarity, there was a video demonstration of this cleansing. Judging by the review's headline ('Moscow Will Long Remember This Exhibition...') the quantity and quality of the food produced the necessary impression," wrote the art critic Mykhailo Rashkovetsky.<sup>290</sup> It is important not to forget the severe food shortages of this period. An invitation to a feast in this context, as opposed to just appreciating art, was not only a criticism of the art system, but also a comment on society as a whole.

At this time, the number of new players on the contemporary art scene began to rapidly increase. New additions to the scene included Eduard Kolodiy, Pylyp Perlovsky, Hlib Katchuk, Olha Kashymbekova, Volodymyr Kozhukhar, Oleksandr Panasenko, and Katia Solovyova. The artists of the Odesa New Wave scene were joined by a group of curators, critics, and intellectuals: Mykhailo Rashkovetsky, Olena Mykhailovska, Andrii Taranenko, and Vadim Besprozvanny. Together with Roitburd, they went on to create several landmark art projects and texts. A whole host of figures from the conceptualist community joined them in the second half of that decade too.

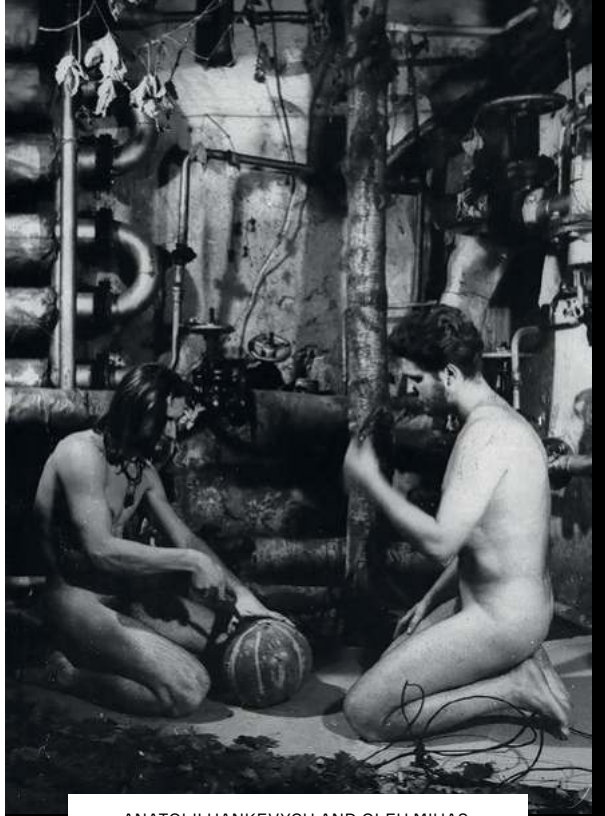
In 1996, Odesa became the second city in Ukraine to host a Soros Center. It played a significant role in bringing the local art scene to life, though the city was hardly a blank canvas. Back in the early 1990s, the Tyrs Center for Contemporary Art had played an active role in the city, followed by the Association of New Art. The association's co-founder was Roitburd, the unofficial leader of Odesa's art scene in the 1990s. Roitburd's huge canvases from the late 1980s, overloaded with mythological and cultural references, were always given complicated names. This love of words was not a passing phase. In the 1990s, Roitburd wrote several key artistic texts, and in the 2010s became one of Ukraine's most influential political bloggers.

Over the course of a decade, beginning in the late 1980s, Roitburd became a guru for a whole generation of young artists, curators, and art critics. He became the link between Odesa and the ParCommune in Kyiv, and helped to define what a Ukrainian curator looked like. He was also a pioneer in video art and an active figure in Odesa's newly formed art institutions. A passionate intellectual and talented communicator with transgressive leanings, the postmodernist Roitburd was both adored and hated in 1990s Odesa. People's points of view depended on if they were drawn to his peerless charisma and the flow of his thoughts and ideas, or if he instead prompted a deeper Oedipus complex within them.

In the mid-1990s, a series of events that would determine the artistic mood of the period took place in Odesa. With a shared sense of bravery, discovery, and provocation, with elements of art brut and experimentation with new media, Odesa rivaled Kyiv in the depth and intensity of its artistic output. In 1994, almost at the same time as Marta Kuzma's *Alchemic Surrender* in Sevastopol, the *Free Zone* exhibition took place in Odesa. Another exemplary curatorial project titled *Kandinsky Syndrome* opened in the fall of 1995. The absurdist premise for this exhibition lay in the intersection

<sup>290</sup> Mykhailo Rashkovetsky, *Eksgumatsiia iskusstva* [The exhumation of art].





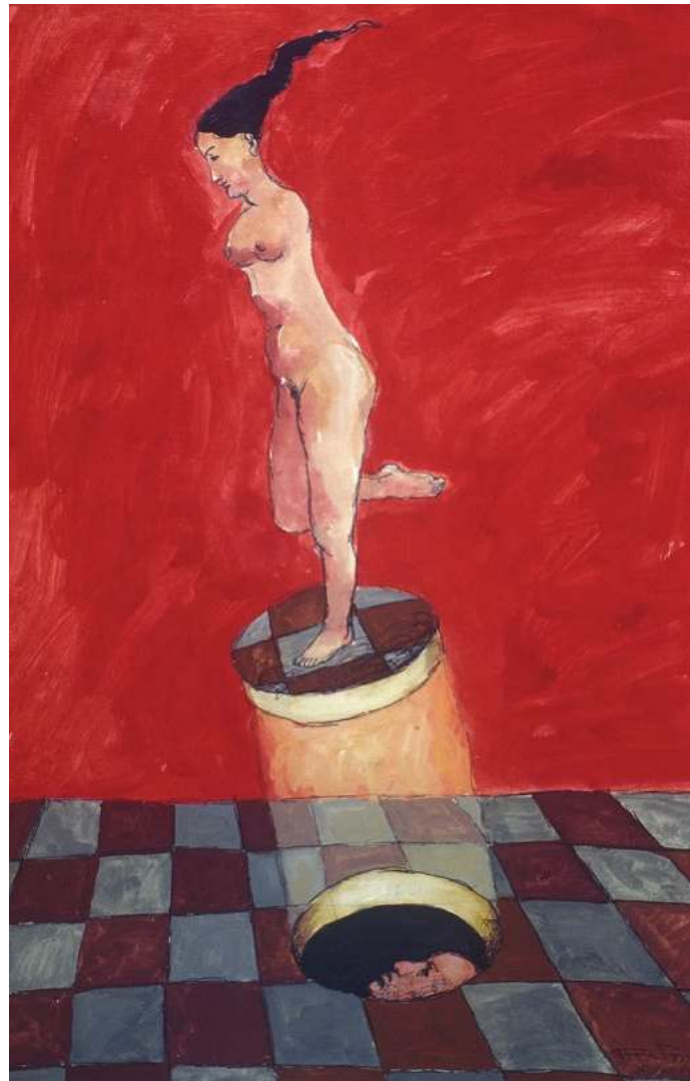
ANATOLII HANKEVYCH AND OLEH MIHAS.  
*CLEANSING*. 1991. A PERFORMANCE AT THE  
MARAT GELMAN GALLERY. MOSCOW, RUSSIA.

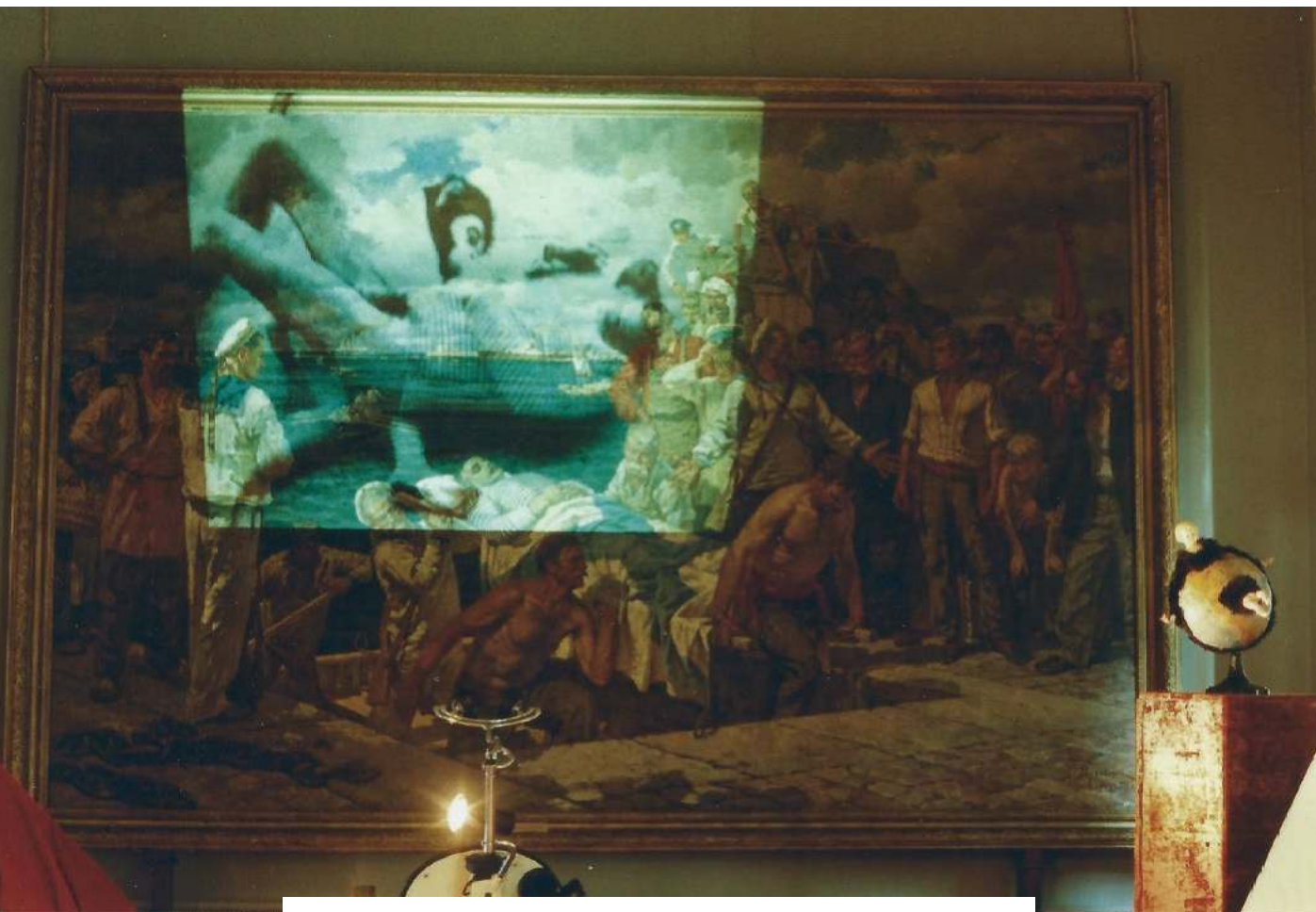


OLEKSANDR ROITBURD.  
*PSYCHEDELIC INVASION OF THE BATTLESHIP  
POTEMKIN INTO THE TAUTOLOGICAL HALLUCINATIONS  
OF SERGEI EISENSTEIN*. 1998. VIDEO STILL.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



OLEKSANDR ROITBURD.  
FROM THE CYCLE *VSEKIDNEVNIAT ZHIVOT V POMPEI*  
(FROM THE SERBIAN: *EVERYDAY LIFE IN POMPEII*).  
1994–1999. MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER. 59.4×42 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.





OLEKSANDR ROITBURD.  
PROJECTION OF *PSYCHEDELIC INVASION OF THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN*  
*INTO THE TAUTOLOGICAL HALLUCINATIONS OF SERGEI EISENSTEIN*  
ONTO LEONID MUCHNYK'S PAINTING *REBEL SAILORS OF THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN*  
*CARRY THE MURDERED VAKULENCHUK TO SHORE.*  
SHOWN AT THE ODESA FINE ARTS MUSEUM  
AS PART OF THE COLD ACADEMY EXHIBITION. 1998.

between the biographies of two famous Kandinskys—one the artist and founder of abstractionism, the other his relative, a psychiatrist who wrote about a syndrome of psychic automatism, which featured “pseudohallucinations,” named after him. The exhibition *Dr. Frankenstein’s Office* (1995) took place as part of *Kandinsky Syndrome*. The summer of 1996 witnessed *The Phantom of the Opera*, the concluding part of a so-called “neo-chimerical triptych.” The curators of these exhibitions understood neo-chimerism as a type of art in which the tradition of the neo-baroque was enriched by adding bizarre and excessively psychedelic mutations, elements designed to shock, and *Kunstkamera*<sup>291</sup> motifs.

In 1996 in Odesa, the curator Olena Mykhailovska led a three-day festival performance of *March Weekend*, an art event that contained elements of the club culture that was fashionable at the time. In the 1990s, rave culture and contemporary art developed alongside one another. These mutually influential movements had a lot in common: an interest in modern cultural phenomena, new media forms, transgression, and psychedelia. Phil (Pylyp) Perlovsky is an illustrative example in the way he combined his active role on the Odesa art scene with his DJ persona. Other artists, such as the video artists Hlib Katchuk and Olha Kashymbekova, were actively experimenting with being “video jockeys.”

In July 1998, a landmark exhibition took place at the Odesa Fine Arts Museum. Entitled *Cold Academy*, it was the second annual concluding exhibition of the Soros Center. The exhibition was curated by Roitburd, and it marked both the peak of his curatorial ambitions and a high point in his creative output. The name of the project was a metaphor for the state of contemporary art at the time. According to Roitburd, after a hundred years of rebellion and transgression, art had acquired a set of certain clichés, which had become cold and academic.<sup>292</sup> Roitburd’s rebellion against contemporary art was a symptom of his generation’s growing disappointment with the imported (and often imposed) artistic practices from the West, which, back in the 1990s had initially appeared so attractive and full of potential liberation. A conference dedicated to the lack of cultural understanding between Eastern and Western Europe took place at the same time as the exhibition. International curators took part, including David Elliott, the director of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Barbara London, the curator of the video-art collection at MoMA, and Lynne Cooke, the curator of the Dia Art Foundation in New York.

It was at the *Cold Academy* exhibition that Roitburd showed his video installation *Psychedelic Invasion of the Battleship Potemkin into the Tautological Hallucinations of Sergei Eisenstein*. Snippets of Eisenstein’s film were rearranged by Roitburd and edited together with surrealist film vignettes, which were themed around the film *Battleship Potemkin* and created with the help of figures from the Odesa art scene in the 1990s. Instead of a screen, the film was projected onto the emblematic socialist realist painting *Rebel Sailors of the Battleship Potemkin Carry the Murdered Vakulenchuk*

<sup>291</sup> This refers to the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography in St. Petersburg, which grew out of Peter the Great’s personal collection of curiosities and oddities. [T.N.]

<sup>292</sup> Museum of Odesa Modern Art, “‘Bez nazvaniia’. 1998” [“Untitled.” 1998], YouTube video, 28:58, August 1, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcR0Isbdt2g>.

to *Shore* (1949–1957) from the collection of the Odesa Fine Arts Museum. Soon afterwards, Roitburd's video was bought by MoMA in New York, and then chosen to be part of the central section of the 2001 Venice Biennale, *Plateau of Humankind*, by curator Harald Szeemann. The second part of Roitburd's work was *Eros and Thanatos of the Victorious Proletariat in Dziga Vertov's Psychomotor Paranoia* (2001). Here, in the spirit of Vertov's avant-garde Kino-Eye film technique, fragments of film from the widest range of sources possible were organically woven together, from clips of autopsies to snippets of German pornography. Taken together, all of them had one common denominator: the aesthetic of Vertov's film, flavored with a generous dose of brutality that was specifically Roitburdian. In this period, Hlib Katchuk and Olha Kashymbekova were also producing films using a similar postmodern technique by re-editing clips from black-and-white films.

In the 1990s, Ukrainian video art's central approach was characterized by appropriation and citationality, in that it drew on different narratives and sources and spliced together a range of film reels and other video material. On the one hand, it was its own form of *Arte Povera* arising from a lack of technical and financial means. Yet at the same time, it was also a reaction to the boom in pirated video cassettes and the ever-increasing access to VCRs. The 1990s generation, who had grown up in an environment of Soviet visual asceticism, began to gleefully reassess what was considered "classic," and, with a playfulness that was typical of the time, to confer new meaning on, alter, and reconceptualize it.

The artistic output of the Odesans Myroslav Kulchytsky and Vadym Chekorsky was of particular note during this period. In the second half of the 1990s, this pair of artists developed their own unique video art doctrine, which was founded on the idea that video art's beginnings were primarily to be found in media and conceptualist sources, and not in specifically figurative ones. It was in this context that Kulchytsky and Chekorsky made their work *Who Will Read All This*, which was an endless cycle of credits from an unknown American film. Other films in a similar vein were *New York, New York...*, *Empire of Passion*, and *Deep Throat*. The peak of the pair's appropriation of different media forms was *Screen Copy* (1998), which transferred clips of a computer screensaver into video format. Kulchytsky and Chekorsky became the first Ukrainian artists to explore and develop the world of pirated video. One of the pair's most famous pieces made was a series of photocopies of shots from Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow Up*. Kulchytsky and Chekorsky reordered the frames, creating a new, separate plot of criminal intrigue within the original story.

In the 1990s, the photography scene in Odesa wasn't growing as fast as, for example, in Kharkiv. Oleksandr Shevchuk, known by his nickname "Chef," was of the few artists in the city who worked only in photography, while at the same time maintaining close contact with the contemporary art movement and its respective artistic practices. One of the most expressive series made by the artist was titled *Meat Grinder*. Its enlarged close-ups of every-day kitchen utensils were unsettling and looked highly anatomical.

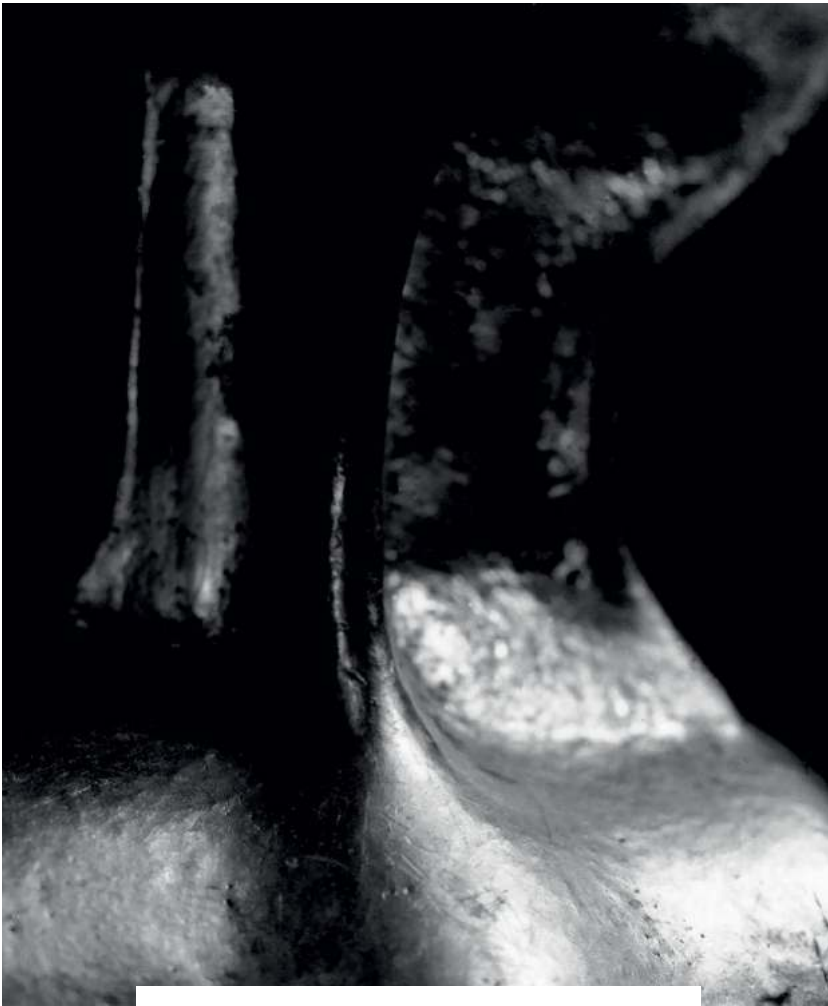
The painter Vasyl Riabchenko, who was associated with the Odesa trans-avant-garde movement, also actively experimented with photography at this time. He created postmodern photographs that employed the principles of absurdist collage.



ЧАЦКІН Ігор

Ірпій образец дегенерата-интеллекта со склонносте к агрессивной интуиции к нарушению закона. Указанной подбородок, обрамляя на себе вначале на фронтальной фотографии и выделенный на профиле, показывает на лабильность черт лица как таковых. Уши ровными большие, с приросшим мочком и сетчатой расшивкой, лоб скривлен назад. Глаза широко поставлены (как посылка)? Впрочем, пусть себе лежат. Брови густые. Затылок плоский. Выражение лица в целом угрюмо-злобное, не предвещающее ничего хорошего посетителю выставки и посетителю его художественных работ. Нос, хотя и седловидный (подобное седло было характерно для князей в Вавилоне в период пребывания на территории этого постыдного государства семитских племен). Склоня также к расщеплению текстов и виртуальному саморасщеплению с "поэзией" чувства вниз на другие лица.

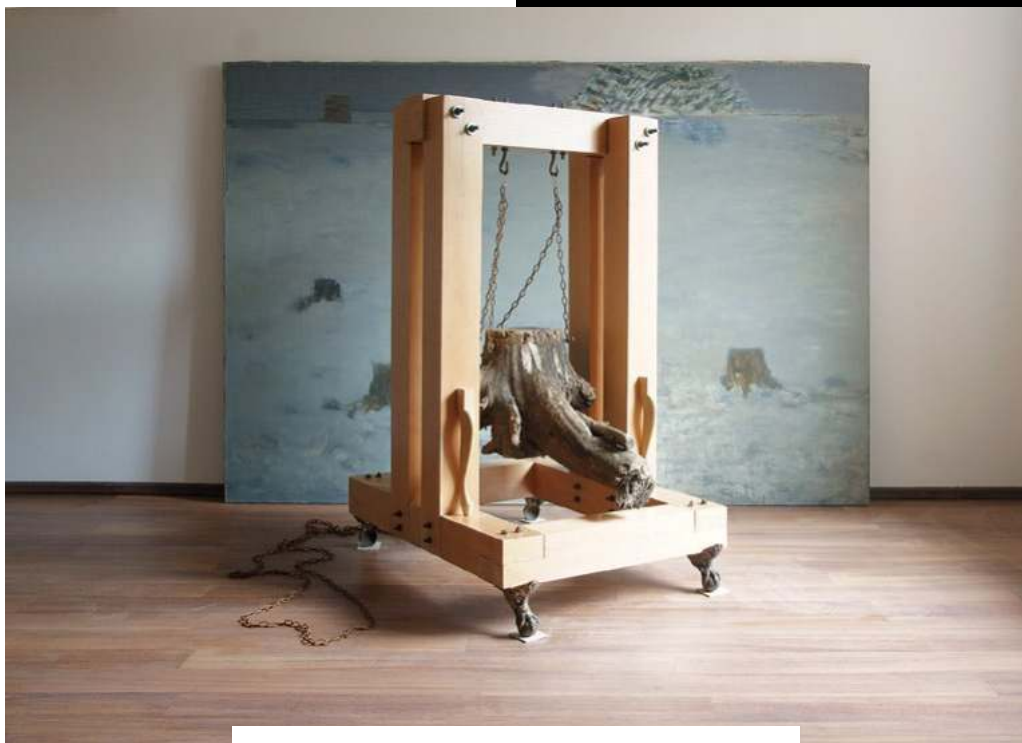
IHOR CHATSKIN.  
FILE DOCUMENTATION OF  
PROJECT WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK  
OF THE CRIME EXHIBITION. 1999.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
MUSEUM OF ODESA MODERN ART.



OLEKSANDR SHEVCHUK.  
FROM THE SERIES *MEAT GRINDER*. 1996.  
BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTO. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



THE GROUP GENERAL CONDITION (IHOR HUSIEV, YULIA DEPESHMOD, AND VADYM BONDARENKO).  
*TO THE DESCENDANTS OF THE POTEMKINITES*. DOCUMENTATION  
OF ART PERFORMANCE. ODESA. 1993. PHOTO. 13×18 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF ODESA MODERN ART.



VASYL RIABCHENKO.  
*A SWING FOR STUMPS*. 1993. INSTALLATION. 200 CM TALL.  
PHOTO FROM THE ARTIST'S STUDIO. 2000S. ODESA.





SERHII ZARVA.  
OGONEK. 2007. MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS.  
46×38 CM, INCLUDING THE FRAME.  
FROM THE ARCHIVE OF OLEKSANDR SOLOVYOV.

Another important figure was the artist, poet, and performer Ihor Husiev. An active member of artistic life in the 1990s, Husiev combined his painting with research into new forms of expression which included performance, objets d'art, and installations. A demonstrative "bad taste" was characteristic of Husiev's paintings, which included vulgarity, kitsch, gloss, and a post-media aesthetic. The artist continues his exploration of these themes to this day.

Another artist from the same scene was Eduard Kolodiy. He created the series *Anatomy for Artists*, which contained 20 pages of reproductions of nude drawings, which the artist expertly annotated with surrealist details. The faces of all manner of animals, such as lions, rams and others, peek through the torsos of the nude models.

Another active figure on this scene was Oleksandr Panasenko, who went by the name "Doctor." That nickname is deceiving since this artist gained fame for his highly pathological artworks that used a poisonous, synthetic, color palette. Panasenko took pornographic images featuring oral sex and used them in his work. He would then completely remove the men, their genitalia, and any other connection they had to their surrounding reality from his artwork. Only the heroines would remain, frozen in odd positions with strangely open mouths, as if they were shouting out loud.

On the eve of the millennium, critics were drawn to the work of another Odesan, Volodymyr Kozhukhar. The artist's provocative series of erotic paintings and images were his own unique response to the flow of *chornukha* in the media: the pornographically explicit descriptions of murder scenes, rapes, and all kinds of indecent acts that were shared on television screens and newspapers.

Serhii Zarva was one more artistic discovery from Odesa in the late 1990s. He created a series of photographs of real people that were colored over in the style of early 20th-century German expressionism. They were exhibited together in the form of an iconostasis under the title *Family Album*.

By the end of the 1990s, the former conceptualists began to share the scene with the former members of the trans-avant-garde. Serhii Anufriiev collaborated with Ihor Husiev. Other active members of this process were the culturologist Vadim Besprozvanny and the artist, poet, and pioneer of Odesan conceptualism Ihor Chatskin. In 1996, Besprozvanny organized and curated the art project *Death of the Titanic* in the half-ruined building of the Reformation Church. The project predominantly featured videos and art installations and its participants included Husiev, Dmytro Dulfan, Oleksandr Shevchuk, and others. The project *Art & Fact* would follow in 1997.

Ihor Chatskin became the curator of the exhibition *Crime* (1999), which was inspired by true events.<sup>293</sup> In August 1999, the artist mysteriously disappeared, and Odesa was gripped by the ensuing drama. The police found a mutilated corpse and suspected that it could belong to the missing artist. A possible suspect in the horrendous murder was Chatskin's colleague and Roitburd's house was even searched. At a certain point, a head that was assumed to be Chatskin's was found in the sea, and the scandal and paranoia surrounding the case reached its peak. Thankfully, the artist was discovered soon after. He explained his disappearance by saying that he had fallen into a ravine

<sup>293</sup> Ute Kilter, "Igor Chatskin Crime," You Tube video, 15:01, November 7, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9pbfjDcNvU>.

while traveling in Crimea. He said that he apparently twisted his ankle and survived for a month eating a bag of pearl barley someone had left, washing it down with water from a stream. Nearby, he found a wet, stuck-together glossy magazine from which he learnt the recipe for a dish called saddle of lamb by heart. His Odesa friends pretended they believed this fictional story. They bought a saddle of lamb at the Novyi Bazar and prepared while closely following the recipe. Chatskin then brought this dramatic episode to life in the form of an exhibition. Every artist in the project wrote down the story of the imagined crime they wanted to commit most of all. The exhibition also included the psychological profile of each participant, which was completed according to Lombroso's theory of crime. The profiles themselves were made by the psychiatrist and poet Borys Khersonsky. No less interesting was the exhibition's own art book, which was also published.

At the beginning of the millennium, the Odesa art scene began to fade, and serious conflict raged between its main voices. Roitburd, disappointed in the dissemination of artistic ideas in the city and having fallen out with his close colleagues, moved to the USA intending to emigrate there. Mykhailo Rashkovetsky left contemporary art for a time and became the curator of Odesa's Jewish museum. Vadim Besprozvanny left for Argentina, whereupon he moved to the USA, and Vadym Chekorsky emigrated to Canada. The curators Olena Mykhailovska and Andrii Taranenko relocated to Kyiv, leaving art behind and preferring to work for fashionable glossy magazines. In the old Odesa tradition, Anatolii Hankevych, Andrii Kazandzhii, and Eduard Kolodiy all moved to Moscow to search for a better life. Some could no longer stand to continue their bohemian way of life. The Odesa art scene gradually died off leaving behind a cultural vacuum in the city for a long time.

## 1990s PHOTOGRAPHY: A NEW SENSE OF SOCIETY

In the 1990s, the former citizens of the Soviet Union found themselves living on the ruins of the past in a society whose values had radically changed. This would be an important topic in the art of that time. This paradigmatic shift hurt the southeast of Ukraine in particular. In the Soviet period, this region was famous for its industry and its mines, but the years following the collapse of the USSR brought crisis. By the mid-1990s, the Donbas had become a source of constant social instability and criminal chaos, with rising unemployment, a financial deficit, and the transfer of heavy industry into the hands of local organized crime bosses. The very same miners who had been so glorified by Soviet propaganda became pariahs and the symbols of puppet rebellion. Their strikes were regularly used in all manner of ways to blackmail Kyiv politicians. The tangle of conflicts and contradictions that culminated in the bloody political tragedy of 2014 was born in this region in the 1990s.

Donetsk miners became the protagonists of Arsen Savadov's project *Donbas Chocolate* (1997). This project's central motifs were first touched on by Savadov in his video

art piece *Voices of Love* that he made with Heorhii Senchenko for 1994's *Alchemic Surrender* staged on the warship *Slavutych*. In 1994, the artists shot a 90-minute video in which sailors were dressed in ballet tutus. In the mid-1990s, after splitting from his long-time collaborator, Savadov left painting fully behind him and went on to create a series of photo projects that would become artistic landmarks of that decade. The majority of them were based on the same principle: a group of performers invade real life, highlighting its aesthetic and absurdity with their presence. The ballerina's tutu would become the leitmotif for most of his projects. In his series *Donbas Chocolate*, young performers descended into a working mine where they engaged in chthonic activities with the Donetsk miners.

*Donbas Chocolate* was one the most important artistic statements that came out of independent Ukraine. A part of the project's success can be explained by the way Savadov framed his traditional hyper-aestheticism and characteristic love of paradox within the context of one of post-Soviet Ukraine's deepest social wounds. The intense sensation of meaninglessness combined with the hopelessness of existence, dirt, sweat, and the constant threat of mortal danger (there were regular reports in the news at this time of miners dying en masse underground) were all highlighted by their juxtaposition with the gentle and vulnerable ballet tutus. For the post-Soviet person, the ballet tutu was a recognizable visual symbol connected with the collapse of the all-powerful Soviet empire: The ballet *Swan Lake* was the only thing shown on television for hours and hours during the 1991 coup.

It was probably only there and then, in the Donbas in the mid-1990s, at a time of all-encompassing anxiety and uncertainty, that one of the most closed communities of men could transform with such ease into psychedelic purveyors of artistic performance. The extremity of the context helped turn their absurdist actions in the mine into a mysterious carnival that was built on a game of contradictions: male vs. female, the upper world vs. the cosmos of subterranean non-existence, real vs. imagined, and so on. A defiled innocence, symbolized by the dirty tutus, entered into alchemic cooperation with the energy of a male collective, leading to a powerfully transgressive experience for both the projects participants and its viewers. Just like Savadov's other series at this time, *Donbas Chocolate* first gained a wide circulation in the publication *OM*, a cult Moscow glossy magazine. By masking shocking contemporary art as a run-of-the-mill fashion story, Savadov achieved a heightened sense of expression in his work, bringing as large an audience as possible into a hypnotic trance. He had left pictorialism behind, while nonetheless tentatively setting up his mega-projects in "a pictorial way." At the same time, he brought a documentary authenticity and an acutely social viewpoint into his work.

Another important artwork by Savadov from this period was the series *Collective Red—2* (1999). It began as a performance-invasion of a communist May Day demonstration on Kyiv's European Square. The same performers wearing ballet tutus adopted bizarre poses in front of the demonstration, turning it into the backdrop for their personal homoerotic performance. By the late 1990s, Ukraine's Communist Party had become a caricature of its former self, a collection of armchair warriors and empty simulacra. *Collective Red—2* focused on the precarious nature of reality as it stood on the border between different epochs, when the young decadents' only inheritance



ARSEN SAVADOV.  
FROM THE SERIES *DONBAS CHOCOLATE* (FROM THE PROJECT *DEEPIINSIDER*).  
1997. DOCUMENTATION OF THE PERFORMANCE. COLOR PHOTO.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE ZENKO FOUNDATION.



ARSEN SAVADOV.  
FROM THE SERIES *COLLECTIVE RED*—1.  
1998. COLOR PHOTO.



ARSEN SAVADOV.  
FROM THE SERIES COLLECTIVE RED — 2.  
1999. COLOR PHOTO.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



MAKSYM MAMSIKOV.  
*THE BERKOVETS CEMETERY AND ITS INHABITANTS.*  
1999. COLOR PHOTO. 70x100 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.





VASYL TSAHOLOV.  
ARTISTIC GYMNASTICS. 1997. COLOR PHOTO.  
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE  
PINCHUKARTCENTRE RESEARCH PLATFORM.



OLEKSANDR CHEKMENEV.  
FROM THE SERIES *PASSPORT*.  
1994–1995. COLOR PHOTO.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE LUDWIG  
MUSEUM, BUDAPEST, HUNGARY.

from the collapsed totalitarian system was a pile of empty symbols and a vague memory of the color red as a symbol of the Red Terror and the 20th century's most resilient utopia. In this spectacle, the performers took on the role of elusive beauties who, in the best traditions of the genre, had to save the world from the reign of a past epoch's dead symbols. The conflict between the post-Soviet and Soviet was presented as the aesthetic confrontation between apolitical youths, played by the beautiful actors in all their erotic energy, and the withered and grotesque demonstrators.

The second, staged, part of the series was defined by its intentionally overloaded composition. The mass of bodies, slogans, and flags invoked the absurd theater of late Soviet totalitarianism, as well as the traditions of socialist realist art, in order to systematically ridicule the USSR's aesthetic during the last decades of the state's existence. In Savadov's transmedia theater, Soviet motifs were used as a backdrop for the actors' performance, which included a host of costumed epebes. The youths in ballet tutus demoralized and undermined those former everyday citizens of the USSR. Orgiastic psychedelia paraded itself in front of totalitarian seriousness. Old veterans

posed wearing toadstool hats, and it soon became clear that everybody in the frame, including the performers, was no more than just a part of an endless, bloody-red hallucination.

A characteristic feature of Ukrainian photography in the second half of the 1990s was its rejection of the new fashion for digitally experimenting with images and altering them. Instead, photography was more interested in shocking its audience by using either a documentary or staged format. This *Photoshock without Photoshop*<sup>294</sup> was quite paradoxical given Ukrainian artists' general interest in new forms of media. The desire to preserve the honor of the image in the age of the computer, to resist technology, was characteristic of all photography from this period. Ukrainian artists began to move towards a new kind of social engagement, suggesting that art which, figuratively speaking, refuses to march into the enemy's lair and fight till its last breath, will be doomed to fall into contemptible metaphorical abstraction.

The Luhansk native Oleksandr Chekmenev's artwork *Passport* is one of the most important documentary accounts of Donbas in the 1990s. The photo series was created from 1994 to 1995. During this time, the citizens of independent Ukraine began changing their old Soviet passports for new Ukrainian ones en masse. The state sent photographers to the homes of those who, for whatever reason, could not make it to the photo studio. Thus, Oleksandr Chekmenev found himself in the homes of the most disadvantaged inhabitants of Luhansk: old people who were sick, immobile, or mentally ill. The tragedy of these people left to the mercy of fate, all living in abject poverty, highlights how absurd it was that these pensioners, having survived in isolation for weeks and months, were being forced by the state to go through the process of acquiring new documents. Chekmenev's portraits are striking in their composition and in the empathy of the author's gaze. In one of the photographs we see an old woman, with a coffin made for her lying to the side. The plain white background which is held by the photographer's assistant adds a spontaneous sense of the absurd to proceedings, an unexpected reference to Malevich's Suprematist *White Square*.

The *Homo novus* of the 1990s was the anecdotal "new Russian" (i.e., nouveau riche) and its prototype, the bad-humored gangster in a raspberry-colored jacket that was fashionable at the time. Naturally, it wasn't long before they, with their own aesthetic and way of thinking, captured the attention of Ukrainian artists. An eloquent artwork from this period is Maksym Mamsikov's project *The Berkovets Cemetery and Its Inhabitants* (1999). After accidentally finding himself in the Berkovets cemetery in Kyiv, the artist discovered an entire mini-city of newly erected monuments. Images of the local criminal bosses, their wives, their partners-in-crime, and other "people from the 90s" were engraved on hyperrealist headstones, reflecting the spirit and taste of those times. The naiveté of the granite plinths and their brutal sense of kitsch dovetailed with the tragedy of every death. This was a series of work that was completely unstaged; rather, it was just a methodical effort to document the results of anonymous creativity. Indeed, the series generated a lot of interest from the public, especially outside Ukraine, where it was seen as extremely exotic.

<sup>294</sup> Oleksandr Solovyov, "Kiev. 1998: 'Fotoshok bez Fotoshopa'" [Kyiv. 1998. "Photoshock without Photoshop"], *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal* (Moscow) no. 23. (1999).



RAPID RESPONSE TEAM  
(SERHII BRATKOV, BORIS MIKHAILOV, AND SERHII SOLONSKY).  
*IF I WERE GERMAN*. 1994. (WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF VITA MYKHAILOVA).  
SILVER PRINT. PRIVATE COLLECTION, MOSCOW. PHOTO COURTESY OF  
THE PINCHUKARTCENTRE. PHOTO BY SERHII ILLIN.



SERHII SOLONSKY.  
FROM THE SERIES *BODY I*, 1993. BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTO.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE GRYN'YOV ART FOUNDATION.



SERHII BRATKOV.  
ZAKHAR. FROM THE SERIES *KIDS*. 2000. COLOR PHOTO.  
40x27 CM. FROM THE COLLECTION OF VOLODYMYR  
OVCHARENKO. PRINTED COURTESY OF OVCHARENKO.



SERHII BRATKOV.  
FROM THE SERIES *HORRORS*. 1998. COLOR PHOTO.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

An artwork which indirectly reflected the mood of the time was Vasyl Tsaholov's *Artistic Gymnastics* (1997). The image of a gymnast crucified on a cross in a Soviet gym leaves a rather surreal impression. And yet, the artwork contains a host of strong associations with 1990s Ukraine. At that time, it was fashionable for mafia bosses to wear crucifixes, which were jokingly referred to as "gymnasts." Sports gyms were known as the places where the future criminal bosses and leaders of big business trained in all manner of martial arts during the late Soviet period. By combining irony and an aesthetic expressiveness, Vasyl Tsaholov created a poetic, and at the same time pointed, statement.

Kharkiv's photography tradition had been growing at a rapid rate since the Soviet period, and by the 1990s the city had become an important center for contemporary photography. An interest in social problems has always been a characteristic of the Kharkiv school. At the same time, it is not easy to determine the border between documentary and staged photography in their work. Work from the Kharkiv school often seems pre-planned, even their reportage series contains a "spontaneously staged" effect which makes it even harder to distinguish a documentary photo from fiction.

From 1993 to 1996, the collective Rapid Response Team existed in Kharkiv. It consisted of the central representatives of the local art scene, Boris Mikhailov, Serhii Bratkov, and Serhii Solonsky. One of the group's most celebrated projects was their series *If I Were German* (with the participation of Vita Mykhailova, 1994). In this series, the members of the group attempted to act out World War II from the opposite perspective. The artists dressed in Nazi uniforms and played the role of occupier as a way to investigate the contradictory relationship—not devoid of perversity—between the victim and punisher. Other projects by the group included the art stunt *We Spit on Moscow* (1995),<sup>295</sup> in which the artists attempted to teach a camel in a local zoo to spit in the direction of Russia, strictly adhering to the direction shown by a compass. Other projects were *A Box for Three Letters* (1994) and *Sacrifice of the God of War* (as part of *Alchemic Surrender*, 1994).

Serhii Bratkov became a key figure in Ukrainian art during this period. Bratkov was practically the only member of the Kharkiv photography school who endeavored to study drawing and painting, too. By the mid-1990s, he was already a fully developed artist and worked both as a member of Rapid Response Team and also individually. From 1993 to 1997, Bratkov's Kharkiv studio functioned as a gallery of alternative art called Up/Down. It hosted dozens of independently organized exhibitions of new art.

In 1996, Bratkov worked on the provocative series *Princesses*. The heroines of the project were the women who attended the Kharkiv Reproduction Center, all of whom desperately wished to become pregnant. Bratkov photographed them with their tights lowered while holding containers of sperm from anonymous donors in their hands. "It is about the fact that everyone dreams of conceiving a prince's child, but it turns out to be just a soldier's,"<sup>296</sup> Bratkov said when talking about his artistic reasoning.

<sup>295</sup> Spitting in the post-Soviet space is a sign of both disrespect and not caring.

<sup>296</sup> Ekaterina Dehot, "Sergei Bratkov: 'Tema gadosti stanovitsia glavnoi'" [Serhii Bratkov: "Filth becomes the main topic"], *Colta*, <http://os.colta.ru/art/names/details/1940/>.

In 1998, Bratkov created the project *Horrors* which was a series of staged photos based on Soviet pioneer-themed horror-rhymes. Popular folklore rhymes about heroic pioneers during World War II were “spoiled” by a dark humor and sense of burlesque present in the popular imagination of the time. “A little boy found a machine gun / now the village has no one,” “Children in the basement played gestapo / They cruelly tortured the plumber Potapov.” Bratkov created images of his short macabre jokes, which had their roots in Soviet childhood, creating unique stop-frames as if from an un-shot horror film about sadist-pioneers.

Another project from this period was *Kids* (2000). This series featured provocatively made-up young children adopting candid poses amidst bleak interiors. One girl smokes a cigarette; a second spreads her legs showing her fishnet tights. The series, which encroaches on the risky territory of forbidden pedophilic fantasy, was shot in Kharkiv where Bratkov worked with a local modeling agency. According to the artist, it was the children’s parents themselves who brought them to the casting in the hope of new earnings and quick fame, seeing nothing pathological in the children’s revealing clothing and make-up. What today would be considered provocative and bordering on exploiting a child’s sexuality, was seen in the post-Soviet 1990s as essentially normal. The collapse of the totalitarian system resulted in the blurring of the boundaries of what was socially acceptable and a higher threshold for what was considered shocking. Following the much talked-about exhibition of the photographs at Moscow’s Regina gallery, in 2000 Bratkov moved to Moscow; however, the artist continues to maintain close links with the art scene in Kharkiv and across Ukraine.

Serhii Solonsky was another important artist from the 1990s Kharkiv photography scene. His 1993 project *Let’s Drink* was dedicated to the Soviet tradition of drinking on trains. Once after a business trip, the Solonsky found himself sharing a train compartment with mid-ranking managers, so the photographer took on the role of a reporter, a traditional role for members of the Kharkiv school of photography. He thus carefully documented the apotheosis of Russian train psychedelia. These well-to-do people on the Kyiv-Simferopol train achieved a previously unheard of unity in communication, overcoming the eternal duality between Eros and Thanatos by way of epicurean libations, heartfelt discussions, and, of course, loud drinking songs. At this point it would be impossible to forget the champion of train drinking, the hero of Venedikt Yerofeev’s book *Moskva-Petushki* (translated into English as *Moscow Circles* or *Moscow to the End of the Line*). However, Solonsky’s heroes differ from Yerofeev’s in their joyful happiness and Rabelaisian bacchanalia, in the relegation of that purely Slavic metaphysics of alcoholism into the background—a metaphysics that is often identical to the metaphysics of suicide—and in the absence of a tragic foreboding of one’s unavoidable and fateful end. Yevgeniy Pavlov from the *Vremia* group made *Alcoholic Psychosis*, a project that sits in contrast to Solonsky’s work with its depictions of a person’s agony in the midst of deep alcoholic delirium. Solonsky’s work, on the other hand, depicts alcoholism as a collective carnival ride, a joyful escape from the dreary day-to-day.





SERHII SOLONSKY.  
FROM THE SERIES *MOONSHINERS*. 1998.  
COLOR PHOTO. COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM  
OF THE KHARKIV SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHY.



BORIS MIKHAILOV.  
CASE HISTORY. 1997–1998. COLOR PRINT.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



BORIS MIKHAILOV.  
*TWILIGHT*. 1993.  
TONED BLACK-AND-WHITE PRINT.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

Solonsky's series found its sequel in the 1998 project *Moonshiners*. The photographer was struck by the everyday life of his alcoholic neighbors who earned their money by making homemade alcohol. The photographer bore witness to the poverty, extreme domestic squalor, decay, and neglect on display and captured it on film. However, like the previous series, these photographs are not despondent; in fact, a riotous sense of intoxication reigns in them. The inebriated joy of people drinking until they black out, people who have no past, no future, only the fragile and momentary drunk-en present, helps produce an even more tragic impression than the depressive scenes and despair featured in the work of other Kharkiv photographers.

Solonsky's *Moonshiners* echoes Boris Mikhailov's famous series *Case History*, which was shot between 1997 and 1998 in Kharkiv. Mikhailov had begun to work on the subject of post-Soviet catastrophe at the beginning of the 1990s. The projects *Of the Earth* (1991) and *Twilight* (1993), along with the famous *Brown* and *Blue* series, represent an impressive menagerie of characters and settings. These photographs look like observed candid snapshots of a society collapsing, which all come together to create a comprehensive and monumental panorama. Both series share Mikhailov's characteristic and merciless artistic gaze and feature his unique visual lyricism while balancing on the border between the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic. After living in the West for several years, Mikhailov returned to Kharkiv in the second half of the 1990s. The city, which is connected with all of the artist's main projects, had changed dramatically. It was now ruled by a new class of millionaires who had appeared out of nowhere. On the other side of the coin was the hitherto unseen homeless population, the drunken and broken-down *Homo sovieticus* of yesterday.

*Case History* was Mikhailov's most contradictory and simultaneously powerful, art project. In 1999, the series was published as a separate book by the Swiss publisher Scalo. In 2011, individual artworks from the series were shown at New York's MoMA as part of the artist's solo exhibition. Before then, parts of the project had been exhibited at international art centers and galleries. The vast photographs showed scenes from the life of Kharkiv's homeless population with their intoxicated faces, blue and swollen hands, strange poses, genitals out on display, and awkwardly drunken antics. In Ukraine, Mikhailov's work had a mixed response. The artist was accused of profiting off of his subjects, intentionally exaggerating the colors of his photographs, and playing to the western gaze with its demand for *chornukha* (i.e., the macabre) from the former USSR. In the 1990s, virtually all Ukrainian artists who were experimenting with different forms of art were regularly rebuked in a similar way.

The fact that Mikhailov's photographs were both candid and staged was yet another reason for conservative critics and society to take issue with his work. The author himself never hid the fact that he would pay the heroes of his series a small amount to act scenes from their personal life. The scale of Mikhailov's project, and the power of its impact, proved bigger than discussions about the ethical aspects of how the series was made. The shocking pictures from the lives of post-Soviet society's "untouchables" were not just for voyeuristic enjoyment. The photographs became an allegory for the human condition in general. The abbreviation used by the Soviet police to denote a homeless person was *BOMZh*, which stood for "without a specific place of residence." In the 1990s, this phrase summed up the mood of an entire generation who

had grown up in the USSR and were suffering under their own irrelevance in the new post-Soviet world. But Mikhailov's project wasn't just social satire. Kharkiv's homeless population was a mirror for contemporary society and each individual who, at one point or another on some level, felt abandoned and lacked a specific place in the world around them. At certain moments, it could feel as if one was forsaken by God; at other moments, that they lived in existential isolation. The horror and revulsion that Mikhailov's work prompts in its viewer is comparable to a fear of heights, where the fear of falling into the abyss is multiplied many times over by one's repressed desire to jump.

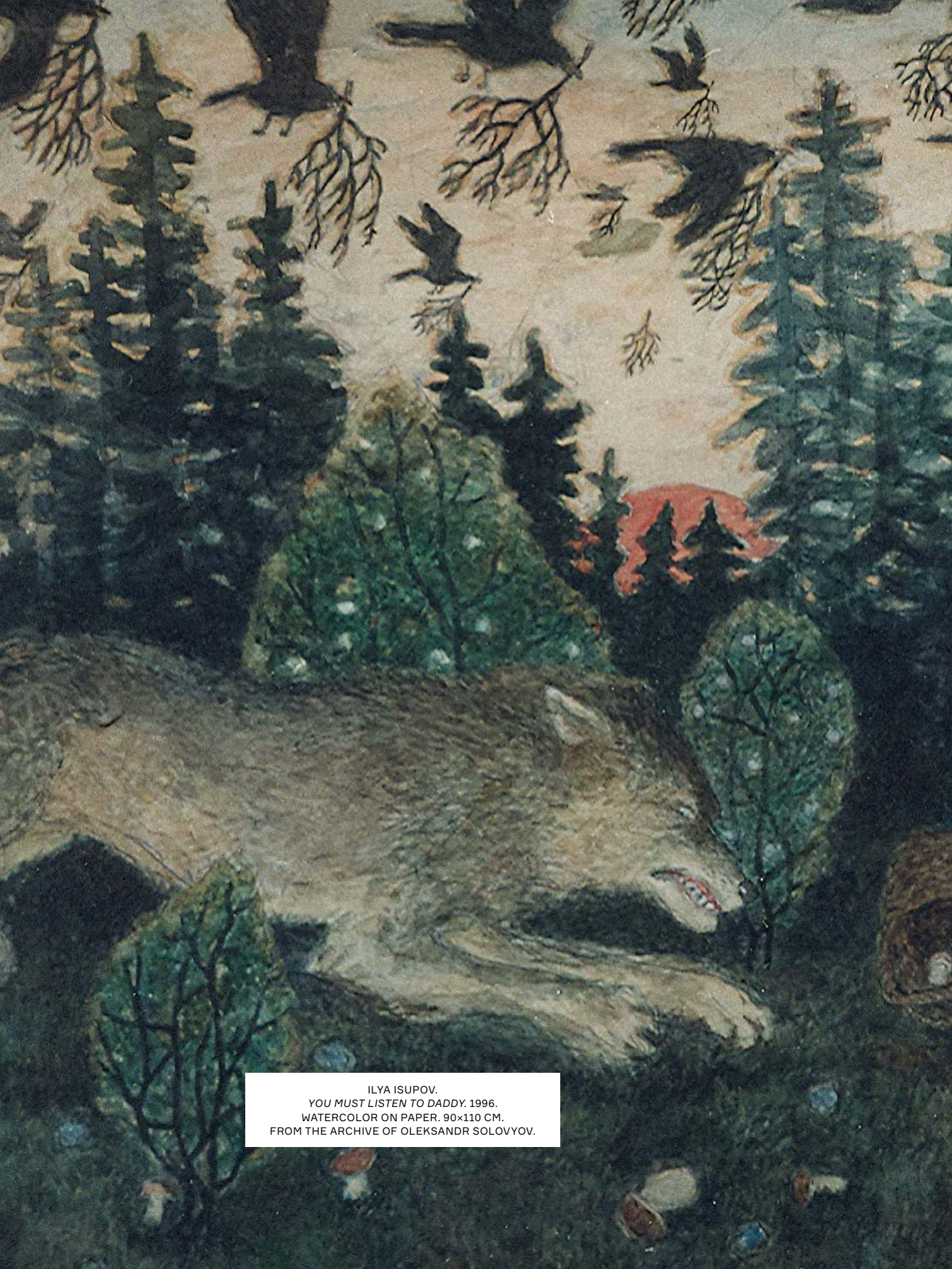
## A RETURN TO PAINTING

Amidst the kaleidoscope of experiments with new types of media in the second half of the 1990s, one might be under the illusion that painting had died off. However, as Francesco Bonami aptly put it, painting is a skeleton that is always escaping from the closet.<sup>297</sup> This statement is especially true for Ukraine with its obsession with painting as an art form.

The late 1990s saw attempts to resuscitate a more traditional version of representative art. There were no manifestoes to this effect, but nonetheless, a large number of artists all returned to their first artistic calling at the same time. That said, they did so while remembering the experience they gained from working with new forms of media. Mamsikov began to make a series of miniatures; his "pocket paintings" were often no bigger than a pack of cigarettes. Roitburd, despite his "anomalous" experiments, never actually moved very far from painting as a discipline. In the second half of the 1990s he created the cycle of artworks entitled *Everyday Life in Pompeii* as well as the series of paintings *Gay-Gothic* (1996), among other works. Tsaholov employed an aesthetic in the vein of Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* with his *Macho I* and *Macho II* (1999). The Odesans Eduard Kolodiy, Volodymyr Kozhukhar, Oleksandr Panasenko, and Ihor Husiev created some interesting work (which included pieces made as part of a painting workshop organized in an abandoned cardboard factory).

Ukraine also witnessed the emergence of post-media painting, which would reach its peak of development in the following decade.

<sup>297</sup> "Painting will haunt us, just like any repressed desire — this skeleton is capable of opening the closet door." Quoted in Viktoria Burlaka and Oleksandr Solovyov, "Stsena fantazma" [Fantasy scene], *Art Magazine*, no. 43/44 (June 2002).



ILYA ISUPOV.  
*YOU MUST LISTEN TO DADDY*. 1996.  
WATERCOLOR ON PAPER. 90x110 CM.  
FROM THE ARCHIVE OF OLEKSANDR SOLOVYOV.





THE UKRAINIAN DELEGATION IN FRONT OF  
THE NATIONAL PAVILION IN VENICE. 2001.  
FROM THE ARCHIVE OF YURII SOLOMKO.



## CHAPTER 2.

# THE ORANGE GENERATION: 2004–2013

## THE CHALLENGES OF A NEW MILLENNIUM

Ukrainian art greeted the turn of the millennium under the shadow of impending crisis. The drive for all things new that characterized the 1990s had faded away, and amid the government's never-ending budget cuts and redistribution of industrial enterprises inherited from the Soviet era, no progress had been made to establish a fully functioning cultural scene in the country. By the early 2000s, there was a noticeable decline in the institutional and financial support for new artistic practice provided by the former Soros Center,<sup>298</sup> which had played such an important role in the 1990s art scene. Nonetheless, the center, located in an old academic wing of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, had retained a leading position in the country's art scene and still managed to play a part in the biggest art scandals of the period. Perhaps the most famous of these scandals concerned who would represent independent Ukraine at its first-ever national pavilion at the 2001 Venice Biennale.

Initially Jerzy Onuch, the director of the former Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, was appointed curator of the Ukrainian pavilion. The plan was for the Masoch Fund to exhibit their project *The Best Artists of the 20th Century* on behalf of Ukraine. Ihor Diurych and Ihor Podolchak intended to expand on Andy Warhol's thesis that each person deserved 15 minutes of fame. Dictators, maniacs, and terrorists were chosen as the 20th century's best "artists" alongside the fathers of new systems of thought, putting Freud and Einstein beside the likes of Hitler and Mao. However, in the finest traditions of Ukrainian art, a fratricidal war soon erupted. The result was that Onuch, who at the height of preparations for the project wrote an open letter denouncing president Kuchma, was removed from his position as curator. With the

<sup>298</sup> In 1997, upon Jerzy Onuch's arrival as director, the name Soros was removed from the center's name at the wishes of its founder and patron himself. From then on, it was to be called the Center for Contemporary Art at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (Jerzy Onuch, comments made to the author). Society was slow to change and continued to call it the "Soros Center" for a long time.

unexpected support of the anachronistic Union of Artists and other members of the Soviet-era art-nomenklatura, a completely different group of artists went to Venice instead. They included Valentyn Raievsky, Oleg Tistol, Yurii Solomko, Serhii Panych, and Olha Melentii. The group also included Onuch's avowed enemy Arsen Savadov who, on the eve of one exhibition opening, threw a cake at the director of the Center for Contemporary Art.<sup>299</sup>

With Raievsky as curator, the Ukrainian pavilion in Venice instead took the form of a large military canvas tent. In an act of homage to the museums in the Ukrainian provinces, it featured a kitsch diorama of sunflowers before a backdrop of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. Perhaps, if the project had been shown earlier, or even *after* war had broken out in the southeast of Ukraine, it wouldn't have caused such a wave of discontent within the country, and would have succeeded in capturing the attention of international critics. In 2001, interest at the Biennale was focused on complex computer technology while this installation from the former Soviet Union was seen as only engaging with the work of Ilya Kabakov, which was by then already a decade old. The artists' irony was not fully appreciated. As a result, Ukraine's long-awaited arrival in Venice resulted in failure. Even after the Biennale, both sides of the artistic conflict went on to settle their differences in court.

That same year of 2001, Onuch organized an exhibition at the Center for Contemporary Arts, which, in a sense, anticipated future political events in Ukraine. As part of the exhibition *Ukrainian Brand*, the curator gathered artists who, in his opinion, could help compose a collective image of contemporary Ukraine. Artists from a wide variety of backgrounds all gathered under one roof: Taras Polataiko, Oleksandr Roitburd, Illia Chychkan, Tiberiy Szilvashi, Ihor Haidai, Viktor Marushchenko, Serhii Bratkov, Andrii Sahaidakovsky, and others. The participants also included Oleh Kulyk from Kyiv, who had worked in Moscow since the mid-1980s and made a name for himself as part of the Moscow action art scene. *Ukrainian Brand* presented itself as an impressive study and dissection of national stereotypes aided by the tools of contemporary art. There were yellow and blue walls, village rugs, and even an embroideress. Of course, the exhibition couldn't have taken place without Taras Shevchenko, a writer whose life and oeuvre epitomize the concept of "Ukrainianness."

The central piece of the exhibition, which also formed the core of its marketing campaign, was an art action organized by the Masoch Fund. After finding a portrait of Shevchenko painted by the futurist Davyd Burluk at a Sotheby's online auction, the artists, with great pomp and ceremony, organized the return of the work to Ukraine. All of this was accompanied by the advertising campaign "Meet the Father" and all the hype that came with it. The artwork was displayed in a gold frame and behind bullet-proof glass, guarded by a two-man security detail working around the clock. A symbolic red carpet led from the entrance of the exhibition right to the painting. There was obvious tension between the national romantic narrative represented by Shevchenko and futurism, whose founding mission was to throw similar historical figures "from the ship of modernity." This tension caused many to suspect that the whole

<sup>299</sup> Sergei Marin, "Sobaka laet, Biennale uplyvaet" [A dog howls, the biennale floats away], *Gazeta* 2000 66, no.13 (March 30—April 5, 2001).



SECURITY GUARDS BY DAVYD BURLIUK'S PORTRAIT OF TARAS SHEVCHENKO. AN ART ACTION BY MASOCH FUND AS PART OF THE *UKRAINIAN BRAND* EXHIBITION. 2001. PHOTO FROM THE ARCHIVE OF THE NEWSPAPER *DEN*.

stunt was nothing more than Diurych and Podolchak playing a postmodern joke.<sup>300</sup> All the same, the image of Shevchenko in a *vyshyvanka*,<sup>301</sup> combined with the story of the old avant-gardist Burluk's apparent awakening of national consciousness, caused a furor. While observing the usual rules of ritualized idol worship, the artists succeeded in giving a dopamine rush not only to the wider public, but also to one of the country's top bureaucrats. At the exhibition opening there was a long queue wishing to worship at the shrine of Shevchenko, which included the businessman and member of the Ukrainian parliament, Viktor Pinchuk. At that time this oligarch and son-in-law to the

<sup>300</sup> Halyna Skliarenko, "Ihry z istoriieiu' v suchasnomu ukrainskomu mystetstvi" ["Playing with history" in contemporary Ukrainian art], *Suchasne mystetstvo*, no.9 (2013): 129. In an interview with Alisa Lozhkina, Diurych refuted claims of it being a hoax and declared that Burluk's artwork was an original.

<sup>301</sup> An embroidered shirt. [T.N]

president had only just begun to take an interest in art. It was in no small part thanks to his influence that the *Ukrainian Brand* exhibition was soon visited by the Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma himself. This was an important precedent in the history of independent Ukraine, where the head of the government didn't just grace a folk singing or dancing competition with his presence, but a provocative contemporary exhibition. The country's new art scene began to gradually emerge from underground.

The national and political branding that became fashionable in those years would be adopted on statewide. The stunning victory of the Orange Revolution was, not least, a triumph of the "Ukrainian brand" as conceived by the political strategists of the opposition, the result of viral political marketing and a successfully formulated signature style.

A whole array of young curators played an important role in the Ukrainian art scene of this period through their exploration of different artistic mediums. In 1998, Nadia Pryhodych organized the video art festival *Dreamcatcher*, and would later work on it in tandem with Olha Zhuk. The exhibition took place five times, and over the course of its life it evolved into a fully international event. In collaboration with the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts (SCCA), Natalia Manzhaliy and Kateryna Stukalova ran several workshops for young artists who were interested in new artistic techniques. These initiatives matured at the Kyiv International Media Art Festival, which was held three times between 2000 and 2003. The program manager at the SCCA, Liudmyla Motsiuk, organized several public multimedia events, the largest of which was the *Dynamo-Machine* project held at the Dynamo stadium in 2001. A new circle of artists arose from these workshops and festivals. Unlike the previous generation, they did not consider painting their primary artistic medium. The heroes of this chapter of Ukrainian art, the so-called second wave of Ukrainian media-artists,<sup>302</sup> included Hlib Katchuk, Olha Kashymbekova, Ivan Tsiupka, Marharyta Zinets, Oleksandr Vereshchak, Solomia Savchuk, and Natalia Holybroda. These artists were not solely fixated on their artistic predecessors; rather, the SCCA gave them hope that they could access the vast networking potential offered by international workshops and festivals. Oksana Chepelyk deserves special mention as an artist who always stood somewhat apart from the main art scene. She studied and trained at western art schools and from the very beginning was focused on creating a "correct" institutional form of media-art. Operating from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, Chepelyk's landmark artworks included the video piece *Leaders' Best Toys* (1998) and also *The Fortinbras Chronicles*, a black-and-white experimental film that employed a light BDSM aesthetic, which was still fairly unusual at that time.

The artists Ilya Isupov, Kyrylo Protsenko, and the video art pioneer Oleksandr Hynlyzkyj came out of the ParCommune and played a significant role in mastering new forms of media-art during this period. Hynlyzkyj worked a great deal with his spouse and co-creator Lesia Zaiats while they were involved with the Institute of Unstable Thoughts group. The Institute's best work from these years was *Visual Vinyl* (2002).

<sup>302</sup> Yanina Prudenko, "Istoriia media-artu v Ukraini. Dosvid arkhivuvannia" [The history of media-art in Ukraine. The archiving experience], *Vidkrytyi arkhiv ukrainskoho media-artu*, <http://www.mediaartarchive.org.ua/publication/dosvid-arkhivuvannya/>.

Hnylyzkyj's traditional "tinkering" was apparent in this media installation which demonstrated his interest in optical illusions, old examples of trompe-l'oeil, and modern rave culture. He stuck all manner of objects around the edge of old vinyl records. While turning the records and shining a strobe light at them, they achieved a kind of DIY animated effect that enchanted viewers and forced them to put aside their surprise and instead witness the birth of a small visual miracle.

From 2000 to 2001, Illia Chychkan created a cycle of work that was supposedly based on the lives of rabbits. The story went that he gave the animals the psychotropic substances LSD and ketamine, the latter particularly beloved at that time on the Ukrainian party scene. One of the central pieces from the cycle was the video *LSD-Puppeteers* (2001). The hands of hidden puppet masters forced the animals to jiggle frantically to disco music, accompanied by an intense light show created by a flashing strobe light. Aside from the video, the project also included a large photo story from the lives of these "big-eared heroes." In one photo, a rabbit pokes its head into the drum of a toy washing machine; in the next shot it is tied to a bed frame by another mafia rabbit. In other photos, a rabbit floats in outer space, plays with its friends in a rock group, and dances in front of a glittering disco ball. In these photos Chychkan's rabbit becomes "just like a person." It imitates being human, becoming a kind of forged image, a counterfeit, something which modern mass culture is often accused of creating. And paradoxically it is only the psychedelic substances that allow the rabbit, and by extension the artist behind it, to remain sane, providing a light reprieve from the much stronger narcotic known as life. Another piece by Chychkan was his unedited video *Song*, part absurd, part MTV-esque video clip. In it, a big fish rhythmically opens its mouth while a song by the German group Rammstein plays in the background. In reality, the fish has just been taken out of the water and is suffocating, but the viewer doesn't see that, or doesn't want to. Instead it is more pleasant for them to ponder the archetypal fairy tale about a singing fish.

Chychkan's most important work from the early 2000s was his video and photo project *Atomic Love* (2001). This project told the surrealist story of a passion that erupted between two liquidators during a man-made disaster and was filmed at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. Many years had passed since the explosion, and the exclusion zone was no longer as terrifying as it once was. In the early 2000s, Chernobyl had not yet become a tourists' Disneyland; however, Chychkan's lyrical masquerade marks a shift in tone. The way it lightly and frivolously engages with what was until very recently a traumatic topic heralds the approaching transformation of Chernobyl into an amusement park for bored bon vivants.

In that same 2001, a large solo art project by the young artist Anatolii Sloiko and curator Mariian Andrusenko entitled the *Art of Whispers* opened at the former SCCA. The visionary installation, literally a whisper machine, seemed to signal the arrival of new promising names onto the art scene. However, just like the second wave of media-art, these young artists who entered the scene at the beginning of the 2000s did not succeed in seriously challenging the supremacy of the New Wave. Hoping for an easy breakthrough, they utilized modern artistic practices in their work, but it wasn't long before they became disappointed with Ukraine's weak and small-time art scene. As a result, they migrated to more fashionable areas such as the advertising industry.

A large part of the older generation also worked in the advertising world at this time. The children of the ParCommune rapidly adopted the technology of marketing in their work. The reason for this romance between art and advertising was a lack of money, drive, and new forms of discourse within the art scene. The high concentration of artists working in advertising in Kyiv and Moscow didn't happen again, either before or after this brief love affair between art and marketing strategists. Chychkan, Kyrlyo Protsenko, Isupov, Maksym Mamsikov, among others, would become art directors, advertising executives, and creative consultants for Ukrainian and international agencies in Kyiv. For the post-Soviet individual, advertising was something new and intriguing. The transition to capitalism was accompanied by the romanticization of the advertising industry. As if overnight, a whole host of different agencies and production studios sprouted up and began to grow. While the cinema industry and the majority of other areas of culture were in a state of paralysis, this vibrant and postmodern camp industry attracted many creative individuals. For some, this romance with consumerist glamor was just a temporary way to earn some money, while for others it constituted a new life-long paradigm.

## THE GALLERIES AND MEDIA PROJECTS OF THE YEARS IN BETWEEN

The 2000s saw the gradual centralization of Ukraine's art scene. As in the past, regional art centers had little part to play. Indeed, it would be even harder for the country's regions in this period than during Soviet times. The economic and cultural stagnation in the provinces prompted a mass exodus to the capital. After all, the only way for artists to establish themselves on the art scene in the 2000s was to have a serious résumé of exhibitions in Kyiv. Ukraine's capital essentially stopped paying attention to the rest of the country, which created large holes in national memory. Curators and artists arriving on the scene in the 2010s attempted to fill in these holes. On the other hand, the growth and development achieved in the second half of the 2000s by different subcultures on the capital's contemporary art scene brought about a significant diversification in artistic practices. Whereas earlier it made sense to analyze each separate region, starting in the 2000s it became more important to look at the general trends, as well as individual artistic phenomena in order to better understand the country's art scene.

The number of regional institutions that actively supported contemporary art, and recognized the break from the socialist realist tradition and the post-Soviet art school, self-proclaimed "progressive organizations," could be counted on the fingers of one hand. In 1993, the artistic organization Dzyga was formed in Lviv, opening a gallery at its headquarters in 1997. Its co-founder and art director was the artist and performer Volodymyr (Vlodko) Kaufman. For many years the gallery would remain the city's main art space, putting on respectable art exhibitions. An analogous setting within Kharkiv's cultural scene at that time was the Municipal Gallery, which opened in 1996



ILLIA CHYCHKAN.  
*ATOMIC LOVE*. 2001. VIDEO STILL. FROM THE  
COLLECTION OF THE PINCHUKARTCENTRE.



ILLIA CHYCHKAN.  
FROM THE SERIES *RABBITS*. 2000.  
COLOR PHOTO PRINT. 120×120 CM.



ANATOLII ZVIZHYNKY.  
PARTYZOANE. FROM THE SERIES  
GENTLE TERRORISM. 2005.  
INK ON BEDSHEET. 160x120 CM.



with Tetiana Tumasian as its director. From 2003 onwards, the gallery hosted a festival of experimental visual art called NonStopMedia which in the 2000s would have great influence in shaping the younger generation of Ukrainian artists.

At the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s, an influential literary-art group was formed in Ivano-Frankivsk. It would later be given the name the “Stanislavskiy Phenomenon.”<sup>303</sup> This circle of artists included Yuri Andrukhovych, Volodymyr Yeshkiliev, Taras Prokhasko, the artist and writer Yuri Izdryk, the artist and art-critic Anatolii Zvizhynsky, the artists Rostyslav Koterlin, Myroslav Yaremak, and others. The international biennale festival Impreza took place five times in Ivano-Frankivsk between 1989 and 2007. From 1998 to 1999 the city hosted the Marhinesy (Margins) gallery curated by Anatolii Zvizhynsky, which had moved there from Kyiv. Zvizhynsky was also the co-editor of the artistic almanac *Kinets kintsem* (In the end). It was published in 1999, 2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, and 2009 with the artist and kulturträger Rostyslav Koterlin as the head editor.

At the end of the decade Viktor Khamatov’s gallery Soviart, founded back in 1987, lived on in Kyiv. Other pioneers on the capital’s gallery scene included Blank-Art, which was founded in 1993 (the peak of its activity lasted from 1993 to 1994), as well as Ra and Atelier Karas, both founded in 1995. Liudmyla Berezhnyska’s L-art gallery opened in 1994. In the 1990s, she specialized in selling socialist realist artworks, but at the beginning of the 2000s she gradually moved in the direction of contemporary art.

During the 1990s and 2000s, practically no books on contemporary art were published in Ukraine, and any research that was carried out was a one-off and lacked any kind of systematic approach. Art criticism appeared on the pages of rare and specialized publications. The important editor and artist Hlib Vysheslavsky published the journal *Terra Incognita* from 1993 until 2000.<sup>304</sup> He attempted to shine a light on developments in the Kyiv art scene as seen within a wider international context. A large part of each of the journal’s nine issues was dedicated to an overview of artistic life in Berlin, Warsaw, Krakow, Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Odesa, among others. Among the journal’s Ukrainian authors were Vysheslavsky himself, Kateryna Stukalova, Halyna Skliarenko, Nadia Pryhodych, Olena Mykhailovska, Mykhailo Rashkovetsky, and Marta Kuzma.

From 1999 to 2011, the Soviart gallery published 44 issues of the journal *Halereia* (Gallery). The art critic and curator Aleksei Titarenko led the journal through its most active period in the early 2000s. After the journal *Terra Incognita* folded, *Halereia* became the sole journal that specialized in contemporary art in the country. In 1999, the book *Portfolio: The Art of Odesa in the 1990s* was published in Odesa and edited by Olena Mykhailovska, Oleksandr Roitburd, and Mykhailo Rashkovetsky. The book’s articles gave a summary of the upheavals and pressure in Odesa society over the course of the previous decade. This book was just one of a few texts that took a thorough approach in archiving Ukrainian post-Soviet artistic practice and was written by the very people who inhabited that world. Another important Odesa initiative was the archive *The Art of Odesa in the 80s* which was published in 2000 with the participation of the

<sup>303</sup> Stanislav was the name of Ivano-Frankivsk up to 1962; prior to WWII it was known as Stanyslaviv.

<sup>304</sup> The archive of the *Terra Incognita* journal can be found at <http://terra-art.in.ua/>.

local branch of the SCCA. This anthology was put together by the culturologist Vadim Besprozvanny based on interviews with the main figures of Odesa conceptualism.<sup>305</sup> The Kyiv journal *Parta* (Desk) was another significant publication from this period; two of its issues published in 1996 and 1997 were edited by the critic and curator Oleksandr Solovyov. *Art Journal*, based in Moscow and published by Viktor Miziano, was also an important forum for discussion about Ukrainian art at this time. It published the work of the Kyiv art critics Solovyov, Viktoria Burlak, and Oleh Sydor-Hibelinda. Later, it also featured the first articles about the artists who arrived on the art scene in the 2000s.

The Dnipro-based journal *Nash* (Ours) was another significant publication from this period. The brainchild of art director Ihor Nikolaienko, it lasted from 1998 until 2007; the peak of its popularity came at the beginning of the 2000s. *Nash* was typical for a publication made during a transitional period. It preserved the look of “old-school” print culture, but at the same time, the journal carried a premonition of the coming epoch with its over-the-top, web-based aesthetic. *Nash* very quickly became a cult phenomenon thanks to its informal style. The journal didn’t position itself as an art project, but essentially, that’s what it was. Collage was the main device Nikolaienko used in both the journal’s content and visuals. Images found by chance and a certain care-free banter — akin to modern internet memes — were printed next to artworks by stars of the Ukrainian art scene such as Hnylyzkyj, Savadov, and Roitburd. Its brutalist layout was accompanied by slogans and texts that were no less striking. *Nash* published excerpts from Serhiy Zhadan’s novel *Depesh Mod* (*Depeche Mode*) alongside trashy jokes. One of the journal’s regular contributors at the end of the 1990s was the Kyiv critic Dmytro Desiateryk. The journal maintained an ongoing collaboration with Crimean photographer Oleksandr Kadnikov, as well as with the unique photo artist Mykola Trokh, who became legendary for capturing the Kyiv party scene in the 1990s. One of the journal’s covers was created by Zoia Cherkaska, a then unknown Kyivan who went on to become a star on the Israeli art scene. “God exists. I read about it in *Nash*” — this phrase from the young Odesa poet and art manager Oleksandr Orydoroha reflects the journal’s status in the country’s cultural life in the early 2000s.

Uta Kilter was another flamboyant figure from this period, a performer and journalist who held cameo roles in most of Kira Muratova’s late cinematic work. From 1993, she used her own money to create a unique TV program about contemporary art for the independent Odesa cable channel ART. Around 1100 episodes were filmed over the 22 years that the program aired. *Situation UTE* became one of the most comprehensive video archives for the contemporary art scene in Odesa and in Ukraine in general. The expressive and unorthodox Kilter can’t be defined by traditional categories and frames of reference. Above all else, her program was closer to a form of video art based on the contemporary art scene rather than any kind of conventional media content. On the one hand, it is a great shame that *Situation UTE* stopped running, but, on the other hand, it is a miracle that such an experimental program lasted on the air

<sup>305</sup> Elena Mikhailovskaia, ed., *Iskusstvo Odessa 80-kh* [The art of Odesa in the 80s], comp. V. Besprozvanny and E. Godyna (Odesa: The Odesa Center for Contemporary Arts, 2000), available at <http://kiev.guelman.ru/odessa/>.

for so long. From 1997 to 2000, dozens of episodes of the program *Untitled* were aired on the Odesa cable channels 42 and 52. This unique TV show was created by Hlib Katchuk in collaboration with Olha Kashymbekova. The artists used experimental video montage techniques disguised as everyday journalism to create an original program with an art-house aesthetic.

In 2002, the festival Cultural Heroes took place in several cities simultaneously. It featured artists, musicians, literary figures, and actors from Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Uzhhorod, Donetsk, and Dnipro. For a period in time that lacked many serious cultural events, this was huge. The festival was unique because it was essentially the first attempt in the history of independent Ukraine to actively facilitate mutual cultural exchange between different regions of the country. The fact that the TV channel Inter became an organizer of the event was important because it helped create the illusion for the cultural figures involved that they held the attention of a wider section of society. Marat Gelman was one of the main initiators of the festival. The Muscovite gallery owner and political strategist was normally involved as a consultant with various political forces in Kyiv. In that same 2002, a branch of his gallery opened on Kostelna Street in Kyiv. Over the next two years Gelman's gallery in Kyiv would become a center of the contemporary art scene. After returning from his brief emigration to New York, the Odesan Roitburd became the gallery's director. With the declining Soros Center and abstractionist mainstream in the background, the Gelman Gallery in Kyiv stood out for its radical and bohemian approach.

Other important art projects included Savadov's *Kokto* exhibition and Roitburd's curatorial project *Xenophilia*. The latter was dedicated to societal attitudes towards migrants and the "others" within each culture, and it is a project that has retained its relevance up to the present day. There was also Hnylyzkyj's graphic art exhibition *Security Bonds*, and the debut of Vlada Ralko, one of the most important contemporary artists of the 2000s. Ralko's project *A Chinese Erotic Diary* was a series of drawings based on her extensive travels in China. The project's playful orientalist facade opened up to reveal something that was rare for Ukrainian art at this period: an extensive reflection on the theme of the feminine combined with a brutal sense of trauma.

A landmark project for Kyiv society was Roitburd's *Nashi* (Ours) made together with Solovyov in December 2002. This memorial exhibition featured hundreds of archival photographs from the time of the ParCommune and the mid-1990s. The exhibition expressed a sense of nostalgia for that heroic period, which at the time of the exhibition already felt like faded antiquity. At the same time, the exhibition turned the spotlight on a cast of characters who had previously seen themselves as completely unconnected to one another. "The very use of the word 'ours' often carries a political, party-based, patriotic, branded or even a clan-like (*cosa nostra*—our thing) meaning,"<sup>306</sup> wrote Solovyov in a text about the art project. The creators of the exhibited photographs, those who had documented the art scene of that time, were the Kyivans Mykola Trokh and Oleksandr Druhanov, as well as the Odesan Oleksandr Shevchuk.

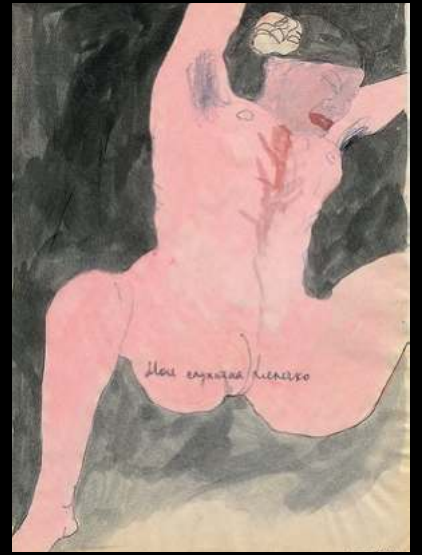
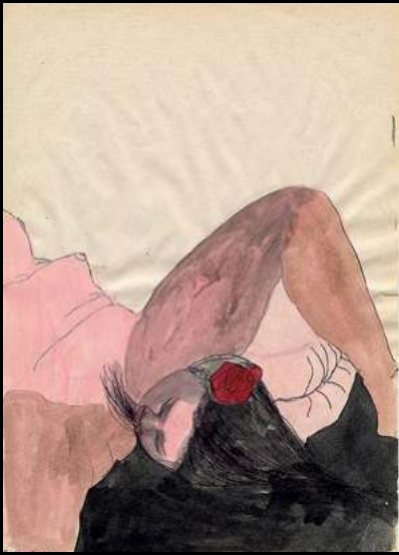
<sup>306</sup> Oleksandr Solovyov, "Nasha marka" [Our brand], *Galereia Gelmana v Kieve* [Gelman Gallery in Kyiv], 2002, <http://kiev.guelman.ru/rus/exhibitions/nashamarka/>.

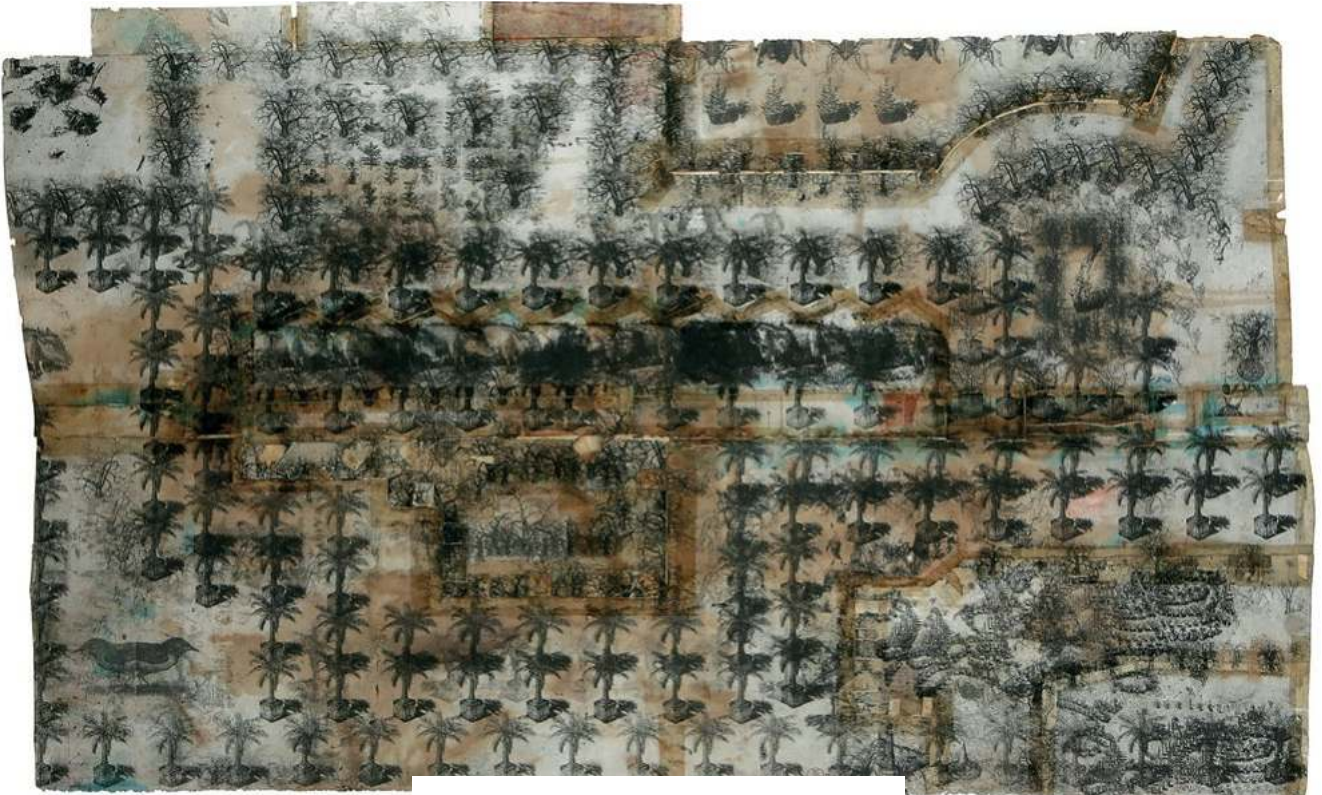


РАЗРЕЗАТЬ ГОЛОВУ И УДАЛИТЬ  
ВНУТРЕННОСТИ

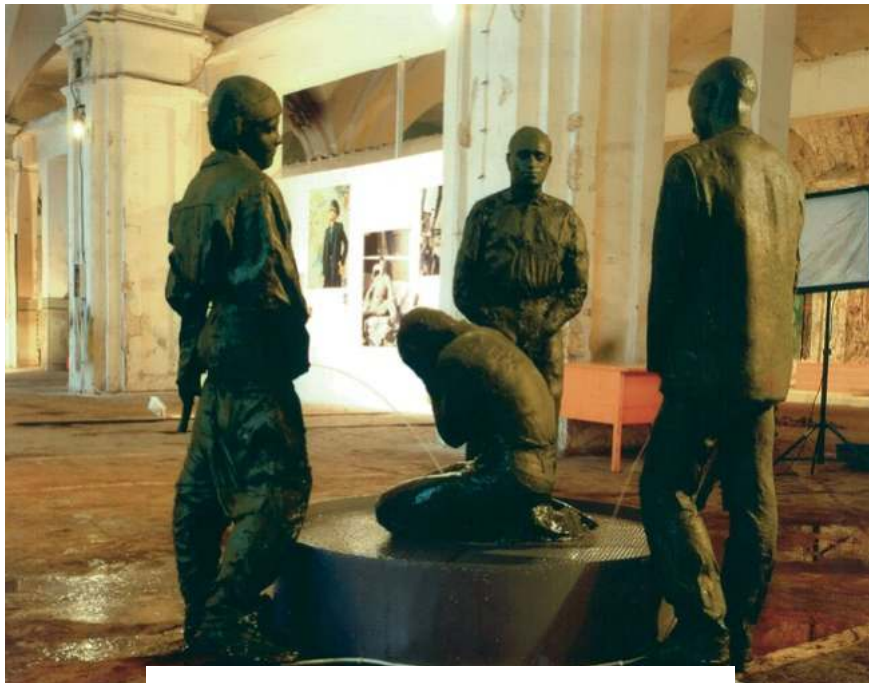
Влада Ралко

VLADA RALKO.  
FROM THE SERIES *A CHINESE EROTIC DIARY*.  
2002. MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.





PAVLO MAKOV.  
*ATTEMPT VERSAILLES III*. 2005–2006.  
REPEATED USE OF INTAGLIO WITH DRAWING AND  
ACRYLIC ON PAPER. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



VASYL TSAHOLOV.  
*FOUNTAIN*. 2004. LATEX AND METAL. INSTALLATION FOR  
THE EXHIBITION *FAREWELL TO ARMS* AT THE KYIV ARSENAL.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE PINCHUKARTCENTRE.

The Muscovite Gosha Ostretsov's exhibition *New Government* would anticipate the political cataclysms the loomed on the horizon. This smart work of fantasy created five imagined leaders of the country who had to hide their faces behind monstrous black masks while working. The completely depersonalized governmental figures became a surreal caricature of any functioning state bureaucracy. The exhibition opening was accompanied by a symbolic protest opposing the new government. The "protest" paraded around Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) while "chanting anti-government slogans and fomenting civil unrest."<sup>307</sup> In 2003, this performance on the Maidan, with its comic quasi-revolutionary slogans, absurd posters, and demands to overthrow a dehumanized government, appeared to be just a fun game and nothing more. Just a year later, the very same Maidan would see real demonstrations with similar slogans and a comparable half-serious aesthetic accompanied by a real revolutionary agenda.

With the heroic stage of Ukraine's new art in the past, the problematic absence of a museum of contemporary art in the country became even more obvious. At the end of 2002, the all-powerful Viktor Pinchuk began to develop an interest in contemporary art under the influence of his political consultant Marat Gelman. To begin with, the conversation revolved around a museum. The Marat Gelman Gallery in Kyiv was delegated the task of running the project. A group of experts led by Roitburd and Solovyov prepared a huge portfolio that presented a vision for the future collection and its contents. At that time, the task of putting together a comprehensive collection of Ukraine's newest art did not seem utopian. Virtually all the main art figures from that period were still alive, and the market and human fecklessness had not yet succeeded in emptying the period's main "hits" from artists' studios and collections. The prices for work by contemporary artists remained more than "democratic." At the end of the year, in November 2003, the result of the experts' efforts took the form of an exhibition-sketch of the museum's future collection. It opened in the exhibition hall of the House of Artists and was called *The First Collection*. It appeared that a museum of Ukrainian contemporary art was no longer just a pipe dream; however, before long, the art collector's interests began to drift in the direction of international artists.

The beginning and middle of the 2000s was a time when contemporary art began to be used by the global elite as a tool to cultivate their personal image and to climb the social ladder. London gallery owners began to play an integral role in this "international washing machine." Work by the superstars of commercial art, the likes of which included Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, and Takashi Murakami, sold like hot cakes. The hyper-consumption of art became an entry ticket into closed elite clubs and societies. Middle-Eastern, Latin-American, and Chinese businessmen began hysterically buying these bright, expensive toys. The position of first violin in this performance was taken by the "new Russians," as the nouveau riche were then known. The sheer volume of liquid capital at the disposal of the post-Soviet oligarchs served to completely undermine the international art market, which was already in a state of crisis. At the same time, the contemporary art market witnessed an unprecedented boom in this period.

<sup>307</sup> From the press release of the exhibition, which can be found at <http://kiev.guelman.ru/>.

Viktor Pinchuk's team began looking for a space in Kyiv. This was how the gigantic, old, and classical building of the Arsenal, which had been a closed military site not long before, found itself on the art world's radar. In 2004, the exhibition *Farewell to Arms* took place there, curated by Oleksandr Solovyov. The venue's huge halls still contained the décor of a Soviet factory, yet it was perfectly suited for contemporary art. Again, it appeared that setting up a museum of Ukrainian contemporary art was just one step away. In his curator's introduction to the exhibition, Solovyov confidently wrote about the future museum, and in his foreword to the exhibition's catalogue Pinchuk wrote about the Arsenal as a future "center of contemporary art."<sup>308</sup> Just a month and a half after the opening of the exhibition, this already political story saw a new development: the Orange Revolution. Following the change in power, Pinchuk, the son-in-law of the former president, fell into disgrace. The country's new leader, Viktor Yushchenko, was well known for his sentimental attitude towards traditional Ukrainian culture and folklore, and he declared his intention to turn the Arsenal into the "Ukrainian Hermitage."<sup>309</sup>

In the end, Pinchuk still managed to open his ambitious institution in 2005. The art center bearing his name went on to pay special focus to artworks by the international superstars of the art world. For a tenth of the price of one of Damien Hirst's artworks, a favorite of Pinchuk's collection, it would have been possible to create a quality museum of the latest Ukrainian art. Alas, that idea was dead and buried, and the hopes of a comprehensive private collection were not realized. On the other hand, the National Art Museum began to gradually open itself up to contemporary art in the final years of the 2000s. In 2003, under the aegis of Moscow gallery owner Vladimir Ovcharenko, a huge retrospective of Oleh Holosii's work was exhibited at the museum. In 2009, the landmark exhibition *New Wave* was opened, curated by Oksana Barshynova. This was the first time, at the level of a central national museum, that the art from the late 1980s and early 1990s was conceptualized as a cohesive phenomenon.

A sense of melancholia reigned in the Ukrainian art scene on the eve of the Orange Revolution. It appeared that contemporary art was living out its final years. Everyone was waiting for fresh blood, searching for young talent, but the next generation was instead choosing career paths that offered them the greatest prospects. The generation that began working at the end of the 1980s felt the history of "real" art in Ukraine would end with them. The majority of artists were working in advertising and the most popular phrase on the art scene at that time was "They have left art behind."

<sup>308</sup> *Proshchavai, zbroie. Suchasne ukrainske mystetstvo. Muzeinyi proekt* [Farewell to arms. Contemporary Ukrainian art. Museum project], Arsenal, Kyiv, October 1–14, 2004.

<sup>309</sup> Oleksandr Hnylyzkyj and others, "Chto ne sozdano segodnia, ne sokhranish zavtra. Sovmestnoe zaiavlenie gruppy ukrainskikh khudozhnikov" [What isn't created today, won't be preserved tomorrow. A joint declaration from a group of Ukrainian artists], *Galereia Gelmana v Kieve*, 2005, <http://kiev.guelman.ru/rus/archofnews/news-exhibanons/zayava-muzey/>.



# AN ELEMENTAL POSTMODERNISM AND A CREEPING SCHIZO-BAROQUE

In 2001, two events happened almost simultaneously that perfectly reflected the spirit and aesthetic of the period. The first was the large-scale reconstruction of the Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in the center of Kyiv. A market-focused eclecticism was released upon the Soviet architectural ensemble that had originally been completed between the 1950s and the 1970s. A huge trench was dug out beneath the country's main square and the Globus shopping mall was built within it. The leader and brains behind this project to rebuild the square was Kyiv's main architect, Serhii Babushkin. In addition to the glass walls and domes of the Globus mall, various features in the spirit of a "national style," were added to the square: The Lach Gates crowned by the figure of Archangel Michael, a sculptural composition honoring the legendary founders of Kyiv, as well as the Independence Monument, a 62-meter column. The goddess Berehynia stands atop the column, wearing national dress and holding a viburnum branch. The monument and sculptures were created by Anatolii Kushch. They are all characteristic of a new type of Ukrainian urban sculpture, an artistic language inherited from late-socialist art which was placed at the disposal of the rapidly developing industry in national and patriotic memorials.

The artists of yesterday who had once helped create the ubiquitous monuments dedicated to Lenin, milkmaids, and collective farmers did everything in their power to adapt to the new ideology of the period. They favored an overly varnished depiction of reality, imbuing their work both with a sense of narrative and an excessive number of ethnographic features. The resurrected language of late-Soviet art was incapable of hiding the fact that Ukraine's new ruling elite had no particular ideology to call its own. Girls in embroidered *vyshyvanka* shirts and angels with halos were just fig leaves behind which bureaucrats at all levels attempted, without much effort, to hide the central drive and passion of that period: the redistribution of resources inherited from the UkrSSR for their own personal gain. The result was a double simulation: the state imitated holding a certain set of ideas and values, and the artists, wearily utilizing established clichés, imitated serving those ideas.

The reconstruction of the Maidan marked the beginning of Kyiv's urban collapse. The lack of any regulations or rational planning meant the next decade and a half saw a chaotic period of construction in which there was little interest in preserving any sense of aesthetic cohesion, and the city's infrastructure was excessively and irresponsibly exploited. This period was truly a triumph for national creativity as the city's new high rises were adorned with plastic windows, balconies, extensions, and all manner of plasterboard.

The second event in 2001 was the release of the first blockbuster in the history of independent Ukrainian cinema. The government spent a huge, for the time, 12 million hryvnias (around 2.5 million dollars) on the historical biopic. The director was Yuri Illienko, a legend of Ukrainian poetic cinema. The long-awaited film promised to be an event close to the heart of patriots and Ukrainian history buffs. Hetman Mazepa was a preeminent figure in Ukrainian history. In the years following Ukraine's declaration

of independence, this anti-hero from the annals of Russian imperial history became a cult figure and a cornerstone of the country's new identity. The 2002 Ukrainian premiere of the film *A Prayer for Hetman Mazepa* took place in the freshly refurbished, modern Ukraine movie theater. It seemed as if each seat in the cinema wanted to say, "Look, this is the new capitalist motherland that we dreamt of for so long." A motherland complete with new, comfortable movie theaters, popcorn, and life-affirming, almost Hollywoodian, cinema. However, just as Ukraine in 2002 was a particularly unique and grotesque version of western capitalism, the film, watched by an audience sitting in comfortable new armchairs, was very different from what they expected.

Illienko's film opens with a beautifully drawn map of Europe in the form of a woman. Ukraine was in the geographical position of Europe's vagina, with the bell tower of Kyiv Pecherska Lavra in the place of her clitoris. The creator of the map was the film's production designer Serhii Yakutovych, an artist and member of a Ukrainian artistic dynasty. The masterful artworks he made for the film were completed in the finest traditions of Soviet drawing and went on to become part of his *Mazepiana* series. These scenes, depicting moments from Ukrainian history, were completed in a style that was typical of Soviet art with its rich and cliched artistic language that was interwoven with a brutal and excessive eroticism. This approach was indicative of the film as a whole. The plot involved scenes of homoerotic love between Mazepa and Peter I, Viktor Kochubei's wife masturbating with a decapitated head while looking out on the bloody Battle of Poltava, and altogether two and a half hours of pure absurdity, bad acting, erotic caricature, and general insanity.

This overly long, unfinished, and shocking film with poor sound editing was not attempting to be true to life. Its entire aesthetic was supposed to be artificial. In many parts of the film, hand-drawn, shoddy backdrops were used instead of more realistic decorations. Savadov employed a similar approach when he incorporated unconvincing hand-drawn decorations into real-life settings when preparing his photo projects *Angels* (1997–1998), *Underground 2000* (1999), and *Karaite Cemetery* (2001).<sup>310</sup> The woman on the map in the film was nothing short of a homage to the classic painting on Yuri Solomko's maps of the early-90s. Moreover, Illienko and Yakutovych highlighted their rejection of "contemporary art" many times.<sup>311</sup> Having been given the chance to creatively express themselves, it seemed they decided to outdo even the most determined artists with their radicalism. They created a burlesque caricature of post-Soviet reality, with its sense of disorientation and passion for transgression, all done with government money and the applause of the country's bureaucrats. It was also an important statement on the undimmed cult and eternal trap of Ukrainian baroque. Any attempt to dismantle this particular cult would, in fact, give it a new life, again adorned with all the same excessively baroque elements.

<sup>310</sup> Viktoria Burlaka, "'Staffazh' simvolicheskogo v fotoproektakh Arsena Savadova—Implantatsiia iskusstva v telo realnosti" ["Staffage" of the symbolic in Arsen Savadov's photo projects—implanting art into the body of reality], *Mystetstvozhnavstvo Ukrainy*, no.14 (2014): 25–34.

<sup>311</sup> Serhii Yakutovych, "Vse suchasne mystetstvo—vid dyiavola" [All contemporary art is from the devil], *Ukraina moloda*, March 28, 2009, <http://umoloda.kyiv.ua/number/1378/164/48589/>.



MYKOLA MATSENKO.  
*MAIDAN*. 2002–2003.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 146×116 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



SET DESIGNS FOR THE YURI ILLIENKO'S  
FILM *A PRAYER FOR HETMAN MAZEPA*,  
CREATED BY SERHII YAKUTOVYCH.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST'S FAMILY.



Despite the apparent absence of any similarities between the reconstruction of the Maidan and the film *A Prayer for Hetman Mazepa*, the two were united by a shared passion for pretense. Those behind the supposed “restoration” of a “national style” on the Maidan appear to be explicitly ridiculed in the film. Upon encountering the entropic rage of society and surviving the collapse of a shared set of values, the fantasy of a heroic past and the resurrection of historical justice spill into an absurd and nonsensical celebration.

## POLITICAL EROS. THE ORANGE AESTHETIC

The protests of 2004 were called the “Orange Revolution” and the Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kyiv became its epicenter. This wasn’t the first instance of social turbulence in the country after the collapse of the USSR, but it was the largest. The years 2000 and 2001 saw the huge “Ukraine without Kuchma” protests. The death of Georgiy Gongadze, a Ukrainian journalist of Georgian extraction, resonated deeply in the country and served as one of the main catalysts of social discontent. The founder of the online political website *Ukrainska pravda* (Ukrainian truth) was found decapitated on 2 November 2000 in the Tarashcha forest outside Kyiv. Audio recordings were found a few weeks later in which President Kuchma discussed the possible assassination of the journalist with his inner circle.

Here is an excerpt from the transcript of a conversation of July 10, 2000 between President Kuchma and Minister of Internal Affairs Kravchenko:<sup>312</sup>

*Unknown (enters): May I come in please?*

*Kuchma shuffles his papers.*

*Kuchma: Ukrainska pravda — it’s just, f\*ck, the nerve of it, I’ve seen it. That freakin’ bastard. That Georgian guy.*

*Unknown: Gongadze, you mean?*

*Kuchma: Gongadze. Someone must be financing him.*

...

*Kuchma: Well, f\*ck, that’s it. Can we do anything? F\*ck, this is just... f\*ck.*

*Unknown: He needs to be...*

*Kuchma: F\*cking deport him, deport him to Georgia and f\*cking leave him there.*

...

*Kuchma: Or take him there, undress him, take his f\*cking pants off and leave him, let him sweat, the little shit.*

*Kravchenko: We’ll do it.*

*Kuchma: He’s just a little f\*cking shit.*

<sup>312</sup> Available at <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2005/03/31/3008404/>.



PARASKA KOROLIUK (BABA PARASKA) DURING THE EVENTS OF THE ORANGE REVOLUTION, 2004. FROM THE ARCHIVE OF ROMAN BEZSMERTNY.



A RALLY ON MAIDAN NEZALEZHNOSTI, KYIV. THE LEADERS OF THE ORANGE REVOLUTION, YULIA TYMOSHENKO AND VIKTOR YUSHCHENKO. PHOTO OF THE MONITOR SCREEN ON THE MAIDAN. PHOTO BY NATALIA TSYMBALOVA (LIBERAL.IO.UA).



HLIB KATCHUK AND OLHA KASHYMBEKOVA.  
*VELVET LABYRINTH*. 2004. FILM STILLS. FROM THE  
COLLECTION OF THE LUDWIG MUSEUM, BUDAPEST, HUNGARY.



The epic investigation of this matter reached surreal proportions and kept society transfixed for several years. This story had everything: wildly corrupt oligarchs in power, police misconduct, stormy romances, fervent espionage, mysterious suicides, backstreet deals between good and evil, and the weak hope that the journalist was still alive and the whole story was a crazy postmodern simulation. Gongadze's head, which had vanished without a trace, became symbolic of the postmodern emptiness that typified Ukrainian politics. The search for those who ordered and carried out the killing became one of the main demands of the Orange Revolution.

Back in 1990, a large student anti-communist hunger strike called the Revolution on Granite had taken place on the Maidan in Kyiv. The protestors pitched tents on Kyiv's central square, and the music group Mervtyi Piven (Dead rooster) and singer Maria Burmaka gave performances at the end of the protests. The situation in 2004 was similar, except that this time hundreds of thousands gathered on the Maidan. The stage on the square, which alternated between musical performances and politician's speeches, started out as a secondary feature but quickly became the beating heart of the proceedings. This was a media- and social-network- based revolution. It didn't have a clearly defined center, but the anti-government TV station 5 Kanal (Channel 5) played no small part in its victory.<sup>313</sup>

This period came to be defined by political performance in all of its forms. Bursts of real direct political action replaced a long period dominated solely by political TV shows. When trying to analyze Ukrainian culture during the first post-Soviet decades, what immediately comes to mind are not landmark films, songs, books, or even works of art, but rather the quasi-political spectacle of those shows that the country was gleefully gorging on, admittedly with a certain measure of weary disgust and aggression. Indeed, the country still gorges on these TV shows today. Following the replacement of newspapers and television with websites and Facebook, the strength and prevalence of this kind of political spectacle has only increased.

The oligarchs remained the main plague of this period. The country's vast resources were in the hands of a few warring political-economic groups. In the words of the Swedish economist and diplomat Anders Aslund, the Orange Revolution, and the preceding election campaign, was a battle between millionaires and billionaires.<sup>314</sup> However, it was also a protest by the burgeoning middle class, the voice of the generation that had matured after the collapse of the USSR. They were not content with their young, developing country being ruled by foul-mouthed "red directors"<sup>315</sup> who cut deals with bandits and thieves.

It is clear from the name of the Orange Revolution that it held a dominant and distinct aesthetic. That bright, energetic color became the mark of the protestors, and it flooded the center of the city. Some scholars have called the events of 2004 "the

<sup>313</sup> Serhii Kvit, *Masovi komunikatsii* [Mass communication] (Kyiv: Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, 2008), 3.

<sup>314</sup> Anders Aslund, "Ukraine Whole and Free. What I Saw at the Orange Revolution," *The Weekly Standard*, December 27, 2004.

<sup>315</sup> This refers to the directors of Soviet industrial concerns who managed to preserve their positions in the era of market-based capitalism. They distinguished themselves by their demonstrably brutal and authoritative leadership style, as well as by often being incompetent on questions of law and finance. From 1986 to 1992, Leonid Kuchma was the director of the huge space-rocket concern, Pivdenmash.

Orange Visual Revolution,”<sup>316</sup> and understand it as “using postmodern techniques to destroy the traditional systems of power.” The situation in 2004 had a decidedly non-violent character, despite the unprecedented numbers of people gathering in the center of Kyiv and the strikingly expressive mood of the protest. In fact, the entire revolution was one big street performance. It was a political protest with contained elements of folk and carnival, upturning the official hierarchy and restoring a mythical golden age of universal equality. As Bakhtin reminds us,

*all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age.*<sup>317</sup>

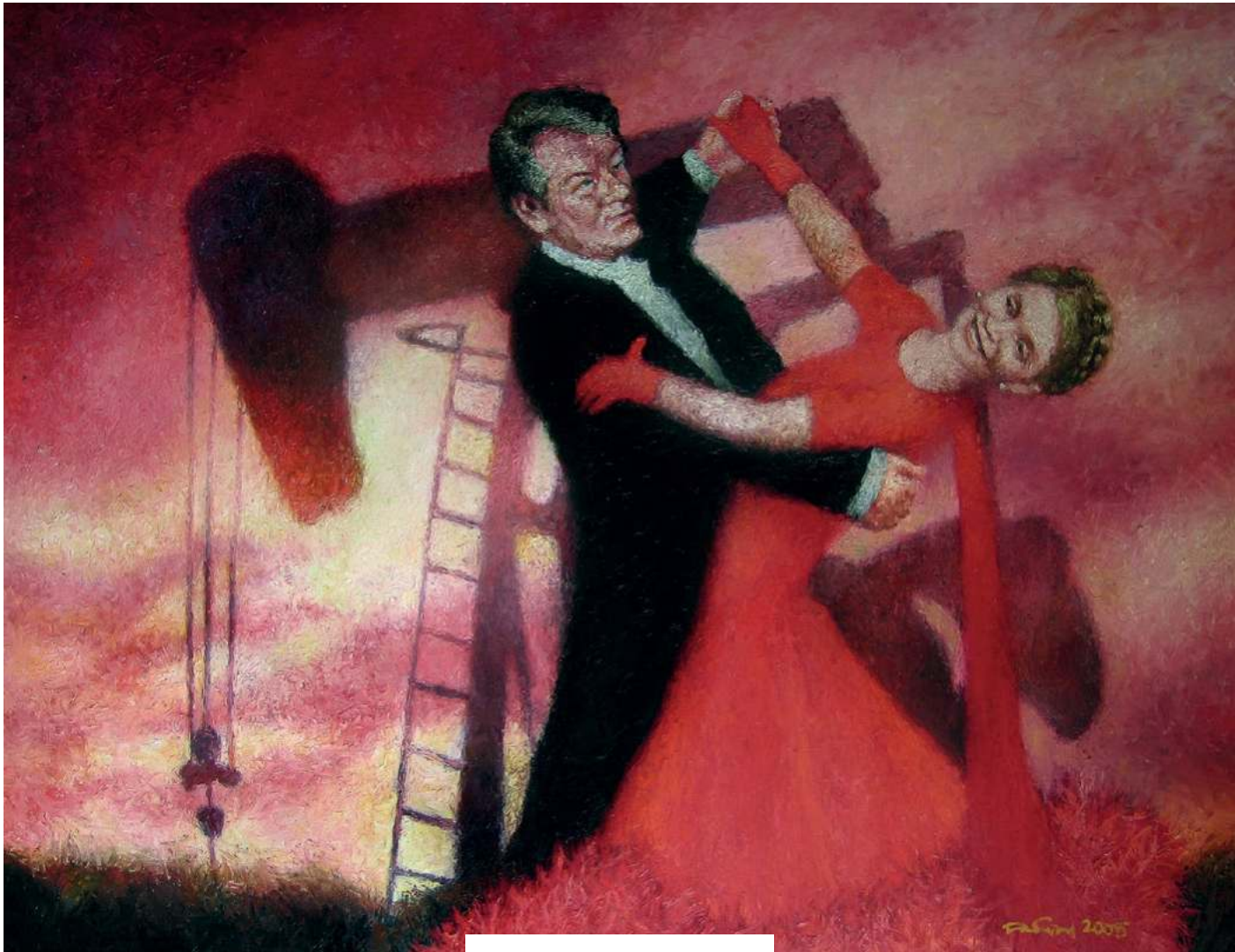
In their documentary video artwork *Velvet Labyrinth*, the Odesans Hlib Katchuk and Olha Kashymbekova focused on the atmosphere of the Orange Revolution with its abundance of visual symbols. On the final night before the revolutionary tent city was cleared, the artists walked from the Khreshchatyk metro station to the Maidan Nezalezhnosti. In one shot, they filmed the winter barricades, which were covered in orange ribbons tied there by the tent city’s inhabitants. With the help of some computer manipulation, the artists added even stranger elements to their expressive panorama. Suddenly, amidst the color orange, extreme political slogans, and more mundane scenes of life at a fading protest, an image of the Mona Lisa appeared, and Barbie and Ken dolls smiled radiantly at the viewer from behind the barricades. Somewhere else a space rocket was taking off. It gradually became clear that the film was obeying the laws of absurdist theater, or some kind of bright, but nonsensical and slightly drawn-out hallucination.

The events surrounding the Orange Revolution also featured elements of fairy-tale narrative. The world was suddenly divided into good guys and bad guys. The main anti-hero of the Maidan was the pro-government candidate Viktor Yanukovich, the representative of the Donetsk economic clan. By irony of fate, he was destined to play this role twice. The poisoning of Viktor Yushchenko, the main “good” character and pretender to the presidential throne, and his consequent transformation from a handsome man into a Quasimodo, his face pitted with sores, was a blow to society and helped consolidate the opposition’s forces. The crowds on the Maidan also behaved as if they were in a magical fairy tale. Suddenly, everyone wanted lead a better and kinder life than they had in the normal and disenchanting world. Yushchenko’s ally in opposition, Yulia Tymoshenko, became a style icon; her braids, which simultaneously referenced an age-old Ukrainian tradition and the hair style of Princess Leia in *Star Wars*, helped her conquer people’s hearts.

No one was thinking solely in terms of Yushchenko and Tymoshenko’s specific political standpoint. They had become a magical king and queen, kind rulers who rose out of the collective subconscious and who would do whatever it took to fight off the

<sup>316</sup> Pavel Rodkin, *Oranzhevaia vizualnaia revoliutsiia. Firmennye stilyi protiv simvolicheskikh sistem. Eskalatsiia dizaina i eskalatsiia vlasti* [The orange visual revolution. Brand styles vs. symbolic systems. The escalation of design and the escalation of power] (Moscow: Luch, 2005).

<sup>317</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10.



OLEKSANDR ROITBURD.  
FROM THE SERIES *TANGO*. 2004.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 150×200 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

forces of evil. It is symptomatic that during the 2005 new year's celebrations on the Maidan, after the revolution had passed, the crowd fervently called for Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko to replace Father Frost and his Snow Maiden on the stage. Of course, the king and queen did appear. Snow fell on Yulia Tymoshenko, dressed in a white sheepskin coat with a fur trim, and people cried from happiness. Finally, the fairy tale had become reality.

Oleksandr Roitburd captured the mood of this period with artworks that both romanticized those events and were ironic at the same time. *An Equestrian Portrait of Viktor Yushchenko* (2005) was completed in the best traditions of ceremonial portraiture, referencing Jacques-Louis David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1801). The new



PREPARATION FOR THE EXHIBITION *THE REVOLUTIONARY EXPERIMENTAL SPACE* AT THE CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS AT THE KYIV-MOHYLA ACADEMY, KYIV. 2004.  
PHOTO BY OLEKSANDR SEMENOV.

Ukrainian president was depicted sitting atop a white horse, posing in front of the American Grand Canyon. This was a nod to the rumors regarding the role of the USA in the 2004 revolution. In the paintings from his *Tango* series (2005–2006), the main “couple” of the Orange Revolution, Yushchenko and Tymoshenko, dance a passionate tango in front of oil derricks and a bare, open landscape.<sup>318</sup>

## QUICK RESPONSE ART. THE REVOLUTIONARY EXPERIMENTAL SPACE

An entirely new generation of artists came onto the scene amid this new atmosphere born on the Maidan. The revolutionary, carnivalesque romanticism of this period provoked a burst of creative energy and a rush of adrenaline. Young students at the art academy, recent graduates, and other creative figures who joined their ranks, all took part in the protests. It was at this time that they formed a closer relationship with Jerzy Onuch, the director of the Center for Contemporary Art (CCA) at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Legend goes that it all began when Volodymyr Kuznetsov, the only one among the artists who had exhibited at the CCA prior to the revolution,<sup>319</sup> went to the art center looking for a ladder. He needed it to hang canvases on Khreshchatyk and by the Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers “in support of the revolutionary spirit.”<sup>320</sup>

The CCA lay empty during the ongoing crisis as all of its exhibitions were canceled due to the country’s political situation. Yet, artists needed a studio and a meeting place away from the revolutionary square, which was becoming colder by the day. Revolutions in Ukraine traditionally happen in the interval between the close of the agricultural season and before the beginning of New Year celebrations, during the onset of autumnal blues and the first frost. The iconic image of the Maidan is of thousands of protestors amidst heavy snowfall. “During those revolutionary days, the Center became a headquarters for young artists, a place to meet, to rest, essentially, a Revolutionary Experimental Place,” Jerzy Onuch remembers.<sup>321</sup>

As they moved between the Maidan and the CCA, they formed, and understood themselves to be, a united group of young artists. And it all happened at a speed reminiscent of wartime, in a matter of weeks, if not days. Every one of them was interested in contemporary artistic practice. The protests on the Maidan began on 22 November,

<sup>318</sup> Energy resources were one of the main sources of income for the new Ukrainian oligarchy. See: Anastasiya Salnykova, “The Orange Revolution: A Case Study of Democratic Transition in Ukraine,” (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2006), 47.

<sup>319</sup> The project *Strashno* [Scary] was exhibited as part of a competition for young artists and curators at the CCA. See: <http://volodymyrkuznetsov.com/CV>.

<sup>320</sup> From the press release “R.E.P., Open Studio,” December 18, 2004.

<sup>321</sup> *Vidpovid khudozhnykiv: Ukrainske mystetsvo ta pomarancheva revoliutsiia* [Artists respond: Ukrainian art and the Orange Revolution] (Chicago: Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art, 2005).

and the CCA had already opened an exhibition by 18 December. The artists gave their project the name the Revolutionary Experimental Space (REP).<sup>322</sup> In the beginning, it didn't exist as a specific group, but instead as an open forum for dialogue with a constantly changing roster of participants. There were around twenty people at the project's core, which remained more or less stable. The majority of them went on to become important figures in the history of their generation. The most active members of REP were Volodymyr Kuznetsov, Lesia Khomenko, Nikita Kadan, Lada Nakonechna, Zhanna Kadyrova, Borys Kashapov, Artur Belozеров, Ksenia Hnylytska, Volodymyr Shcherbak, Oleksandr Semenov, Sasha Makarska, Viktor Kharkevych, Alina Yakubenko, Denis Salivanov, Anatoly Belov, and Mytia Buhaichuk. Even before the exhibition at the CCA, many of them had taken part in other pro-Maidan cultural events, for example the exhibition *An Artistic "YES!" to the Orange Revolution*, which was held at the Kyiv House of Artists.<sup>323</sup> Kyiv was buzzing at the time, and many artists from different political camps and with different points of view arrived at the country's central square to take part in both the protests and the artistic projects that supported them.

The quality of the *Revolutionary Experimental Space* exhibition was not consistent because it included a lot of naive and immature art work. At the same time, the exhibition demonstrated a powerful, overflowing energy, as well as the serious artistic potential of its artists. For many artists, this exhibition opened the way to a more "mature" art. REP was not established in a creative vacuum. Many of its members had known each other since childhood or from when they studied together at art school. As with the New Wave, the core of the REP group consisted of people who had received a traditional art education. After art school, the majority of them continued to study together at the Academy, except for Zhanna Kadyrova. She was not accepted into the Academy; yet, this did not stop her from becoming a key figure of her generation. On the eve of the Revolution, several future members of the group took part in an exhibition at the Ivan Honchar Museum. It was there that Kadyrova exhibited her artwork *Board of Honor*, which was done in the style of Cindy Sherman, and recreated a Soviet board of honor. But instead of valorizing the so-called shock workers (*udarniki*) of industry, it featured the artist herself in various poses. Oleksandr Semenov was an important representative of this group, though someone who would later leave art behind. At that time, he exhibited his paintings on wadded mattresses, a signature device that he quickly became known for.

The role of family was significant in the fate and history of the REP group. Ksenia Hnylytska was the daughter of Oleksandr Hnylyzkyj, and she spent her childhood in the ParCommune squat. She was "part of the family," and this was an important factor in how this group of artists navigated the world around them. When Ksenia came of age, older curators actively adopted her friends into the "family," too. Back in 2002, Hnylytska and Kadyrova took part in Natalia Filonenko's *Blue Clay* exhibition at the Gelman Gallery in Kyiv. Hnylytska showed photographs from her *Blue Series*, and

<sup>322</sup> The Ukrainian acronym, *REP*, is also the Ukrainian word for "rap music." [T.N.]

<sup>323</sup> Olesia Avramenko, "Khudozhnyky na barykadakh, abo Romantyka revoliutsii ta tvorchy proiavy myttsiv" [Artists at the barricades, or the Romance of the revolution and artists' creative endeavors], *Suchasne mystestvo*, no. 2 (2015): 242–243.

Kadyrova attracted attention with her art performance. The young artist brought a blue horse to the gallery opening; the horse, painted with animal-friendly paints, became an addition to her installation, which featured live rabbits. In the summer of 2004, in the same gallery, Hnylytska co-exhibited the project *Auto-Cellulite* with Anna Yermolaieva. Following the formation of REP, Oleksandr Solovyov, who was at that time working as a curator at the PinchukArtCentre, became one of the “fathers” and patrons of the group. Viktor Miziano was another important figure, representative of the growing international side of the young Ukrainian art scene. He was a Russian art critic and curator from the same post-perestroika “call” as other artists from that circle.

However, artists from the Ukrainian New Wave had a rather contradictory relationship with the REP group. At that moment in time, none of the individualists from the older generation harbored any ambitions to become a guru to this younger group. Neither were the younger artists all that interested in joining the “family,” especially after seeing their predecessors’ exhaustive and tired fixation on commercial painting. They were searching for new artistic methods and points of reference. The older generation had until recently been waiting for a strong, new tribe of artists to appear on the scene. When they eventually did, the relationship between the generations was dominated by a neurotic sense of mistrust and the classic conflict between parents and their children. A difference in personality and approach also played a part. Compared to the chaotic artists that came out of the 1990s, the Orange generation seemed more serious, rigorous, and methodical. In contrast, their predecessors had been a successful bunch of rowdy dropouts. Now it was the star students’ turn.

Following REP’s exhibition, Onuch offered the group a year-long residency at the Center for Contemporary Arts with a mandatory number of art projects to be completed. This proved to be a strong incentive for the group. One of the newly formed group’s main problems was the “burden of painting.” The academic background the majority of the artists shared had helped create the impression that an art project was an event, a fixed date, where there had to be a particular number of canvases on display. The group began searching for a way out of this archaic way of thinking, and subsequently underwent a radical shift in the way they operated. They began having weekly meetings and discussions about art projects. *Art Magazine*, edited by Viktor Miziano, became an authoritative source of information for the group thanks to the subtle influence of Nikita Kadan, who would go on to become the group’s intellectual leader. The creation of a recognizable style in REP’s early work was stimulated by their interest in the legacy of Moscow actionism, along with their active involvement in the street democracy practiced at the time of the Orange Revolution.

“The Big REP” began working as a collective, focusing on creating art actions and interventions in public spaces. In 2005, there was still a sense of revolutionary drive in their art projects with all the energy of a bustling late-night party. At the same time, a critical point of view had entered their work, which would go on to become a defining characteristic of all the group’s future output. The time had come to ask questions about the real impact of the protests, instead of just focusing on their romantic atmosphere. The REP’s art actions *Intervention* (2005) and *We Will REP You* (2005) were made in a similar vein. A group of performers invaded the public sphere and, using it as a form of decoration, created their own burlesque spectacle. *We Will REP You* took



OLEKSANDR SEMENOV.  
UNTITLED. 2004. OIL ON MATTRESS.  
PORTION OF THE EXHIBITION THE *REVOLUTIONARY  
EXPERIMENTAL SPACE* AT THE CENTER FOR  
CONTEMPORARY ARTS AT THE KYIV-MOHYLA ACADEMY.  
PHOTO BY OLEKSANDR SEMENOV.

place on November 7 alongside a demonstration by the Communist Party and a public meeting of nationalists, which was accompanied by a prayer service. This style of art action was reminiscent of Savadov's performances, his piece *Collective Red—2* in particular. That said, there was less of a staged aestheticism in REP's art. The critical nature of their work stood front and center. The masked performers became the mirror for a society in which political masquerade had become a defining phenomenon of the period.

The group's sharp political pronouncements were accompanied by humorous hats and protective suits, slogans with quotes from the history of art, as well as patently absurd language. Among the group's final actions was *West-East* (2005), where the artists tied a rope around the Independence Monument. They then invited anyone who wished to join them in symbolically pulling the rope either eastwards or westwards.



This action resonated with the then overblown questions regarding the cultural differences between Eastern and Western Ukraine and the eternal problem of what direction civilization had taken in the country.

During the course of its actions, the group was in dialogue with the history of art and also reflecting on the unceasing political spectacle that existed in the country. The project *REP, Party* (2006) was staged like a theatrical skit, which was characteristic of art actions from that period. This project took the form of a street party that ridiculed its surrounding reality at the same time. During the course of a normal election campaign, the artists set up a propaganda tent for a made-up political party on Kyiv's Maidan. This party, like all of its competitors, had its own recognizable political branding together with its own distinctive black-and-white color scheme and rhetoric about defending contemporary art and culture, which at that time had been completely forgotten by the country's politicians.<sup>324</sup>

*Untitled* (2005) was an important art action created by the group. Right before the elections, members of REP went out into an open field and held a political protest without a single spectator. Protest was seen as an end in and of itself, as expressed in the group's slogans: "Culture," "Spirituality," "Tourism?," "Sport," "REP" "Five Times a Week." This was political theater that existed for the sake of theater, a form of artistic expression stripped of any need to serve a particular ideology. This stunt, which had no name, was one of early REP's most poetic and visually cohesive artistic statements.

By 2005, these artists could no longer be just spectators, and instead they ended up being participants in Ukrainian cultural-political scandals and intrigue. The group was supposed to represent Ukraine at the Venice Biennale. This decision was unexpectedly reversed and Mykola Babak's lyrical ethnographic project *Your Children, Ukraine* was sent instead. Thus, in accordance with the tastes of the new president Viktor Yushchenko, Ukraine was represented at the main international forum of contemporary art by agricultural photography from the beginning of the 20th century. In response, the artists of the REP created the art action *Under the Rug* (2005). They carried out a carnivalesque protest outside the Office of the President of Ukraine. In front of the country's most senior bureaucrats, the REP group acted out a biting parody of the opacity of Ukrainian cultural politics, referencing the countless public protests and strikes that had taken place outside that very building since Ukraine's declaration of Independence.<sup>325</sup>

<sup>324</sup> *R.E.P. Revoliutsiinyi Eksperymentalnyi Prostir* [REP, Revolutionary Experimental Space] (Berlin: The Green Box, 2015), 236.

<sup>325</sup> Tamara Zlobina and Nikita Kadan, "Ukraine—R.E.P" [Ukraine—REP], *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal*, no. 61/62 (2006).

# REP AND THEIR MATURE WORK

Artistic collaboration is no simple thing to organize. It is nigh on impossible for a group of 20 people communicating over long distances to maintain a sense of artistic connection. By the end of the REP's residency at the CCA, it was clear who comprised the active core of the group: Nikita Kadan, Lesia Khomenko, Volodymyr Kuznetsov, Zhanna Kadyrova, Ksenia Hnylytska, and Lada Nakonechna. These artists would go on to become the face of the group.

Ever since the group was founded, self-organization had been an important factor in how it operated. When surrounded by stagnant, Soviet-style institutions, a complete lack of contemporary art centers, museums, and salons on the mainstream gallery scene, it was extremely important to have a survival strategy for operating outside of museums and without a curator. The artists often took on the role of curator themselves, paying particular attention to the criticism of art institutions. These aspects of the group's work were in harmony with the wider context of artistic practice in Eastern and Central Europe. It wasn't long before the unique and methodical REP group succeeded in breaking into the international arena. This was the first group of Ukrainian artists with no links to late-Soviet art, and it was warmly recognized and accepted by western art institutions. In the beginning, REP exhibitions were particularly successful in Poland. The creative output of both the group and its individual members transformed and grew thanks to their active international networking, residencies, and exhibition projects.

The long-running project *Patriotism*, which was started by the core members of REP in 2006, became the group's most celebrated work. It was shown in a variety of manifestations at international art centers and galleries, as well as in Ukraine. The artists compiled a collection of pictograms, or visual symbols that worked like hieroglyphics. Michel Foucault wrote in *The Archeology of Knowledge* that any given writing system determines a person's worldview and way of thinking. The alphabet denotes sounds, but hieroglyphics denote ideas and concepts.<sup>326</sup> Thus REP created its own pictograms and inserted them into a monumentalist, thematic panel. They tell the viewer a story with a strong social focus and without the need to be translated into this or that national language. The central idea of the project was the search for a universal language and the question of whether patriotism was possible without nationalism and paternalism.

*Mediators* was another smart and long-running project by the group. It began in 2006 with the performance of *Lyre Player* on Sofiiska Square in Kyiv. A folk musician accompanied by a hurdy-gurdy recreated art performances by Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramovic, and other classics from the 20th century. To continue the project in different countries, local performers, such as Polish songwriters, Kazakh *aqyns*, or Armenian *ashughs*, were invited to participate. They retold the story of contemporary art projects using language characteristic of a national epic. They also performed songs about when artworks were censored, lawsuits were brought against artists,

<sup>326</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Parthenon Books, 1972).



THE REP GROUP.  
*PATRIOTISM. FENCE.* 2009. VINYL ON THE WALL  
AT MŰCSARNOK/KUNSTHALLE, BUDAPEST.  
COURTESY OF THE KUNSTHALLE PRESS-  
SERVICE, BUDAPEST, HUNGARY.



THE REP GROUP.  
*A BIG SURPRISE.* PORTION OF THE EXHIBITION. 2010.  
THE NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE.  
FROM THE ARCHIVE OF MUSEUM EMPLOYEES.



THE REP GROUP.  
*EUROREMONT. THE PATH TO IMPROVEMENT (2012).*  
INSTALLATION. THE FUTURE GENERATION ART  
PRIZE EXHIBITION, VENICE.  
COURTESY OF THE PINCHUKARTCENTRE.  
PHOTO BY SERHII ILLIN.



or exhibitions were targeted and denounced. The absurdist collision of an archaic form with contemporary content created a multilayered and effective juxtaposition. The piece forced the viewer to consider the parallels between folk and contemporary art, as well as their joint opposition to elitist artistic practice. As Warhol and Beuys said, anybody could become an artist. Something which was revolutionary for 20th-century art had been practiced for millennia in folk art. *Mediators* was also a criticism of the post-Soviet art world, in which folklore often occupied a more privileged position than contemporary art.

REP's mature output was a successful symbiosis of elements of postmodern irony, criticism of the post-Soviet cultural landscape, and distinct content and themes that were accessible to an international audience. Gradually, the group's artistic practice evolved in the direction of what the Russian art critic and curator Valentin Dyakonov labeled in 2010 "the new boring."<sup>327</sup> This refers to the work produced by young artists operating in the post-Soviet space in the second half of the 2000s who worked in the recognizable style of international, institutional art. They were united by their interest for leftist discourse, activism, and the fading "non-performativity" movement, which had its roots in the artistic practice of 1970s western conceptualism. This trend would play a big role in 2010s Ukrainian art, in part thanks to the authority of the REP group and its associated projects from the 2000s.

Smuggling gradually became one of the most pressing social problems for the western regions of the country. People transported alcohol and cigarettes into Poland and other countries. The difference in price of these products provided a stable income and facilitated the rapid growth of the black market. REP's project *Contraband* (2007) was dedicated to this problem, documenting the humiliating experience that had become routine for thousands of Ukrainians living close to the border.

The 2000s were a paradoxical period in Ukrainian history. Local economic growth coincided with a global economic boom, which lasted until the financial crisis of 2008. This was a time of big dreams and blinding wealth. Nouveau riche businessmen and expensive cars filled Kyiv. A significant proportion of them were people from the eastern regions of the country, where the bloody transition of Soviet industrial giants into private hands led to the unprecedented enrichment of the local economic and criminal elite. New Ukrainian capital entered a stage of advanced consumerism. New homes and office blocks were built, while shopping malls, restaurants, and galleries were opened. People, at least in the capital and other big cities, began to emerge from post-Soviet squalor and began to earn, more or less, a respectable amount of money. It was hard to discern the symptoms of chronic crisis beyond all the tinsel and kaleidoscopic growth of this period. From the outside, it seemed that everything in Ukraine and its art scene was A-okay. Initially, REP chose to adopt a critically analytical approach towards the Ukrainian context, as if looking in and imitating a supposed

<sup>327</sup> Valentin Dyakonov, "Novye skuchnye" [The new boring], *Kommersant Weekend*, June 25, 2010, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1387493>. Contrary to first impressions, the scathing name does not carry negative connotations. Dyakonov talks about it in detail at a lecture at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in 2015. See: GARAGEMCA, "Lektsiia Valentina Dyakonova 'Novye skuchnye,'" [Valentin Dyakonov lecture, "The New Boring"]. You Tube video, 1:17:23, October 1, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8xK21D\\_PPI&vl=ru](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8xK21D_PPI&vl=ru).

Western viewpoint. This two-sided approach with its surgical sense of distance, provoked its fair share of criticism, yet this was precisely what allowed the artists to succeed in identifying the beginnings of catastrophe in a country that appeared to be stable and developing.

An important aspect of the group's work included attracting artists who held similar views and positions to active collaboration with them. The landmark *Societies' Project* (2007) is a stand-out example of this. It was shown at the CCA and also at the Arsenal Art Center in Białystok, Poland. The head of the art center, curator Monika Szewczyk, was one of the first to support the group and its members. The idea of the project was to outline the group's general goals and projects and to unite young artists. Alongside REP were other important groups from the 2000s such as SOSka, Psia Krew, Penoplast, Totoro Garden, the Carpathian Theater, and also the Kherson Artistic Society.

The 2000s were a period of collective collaboration in art. A new understanding of the role of art and the artist's mission replaced the individualism of the 1990s. Activism and critiquing art institutions took center stage. The *Societies' Project* marked the point at which REP finally grew up, became a recognized force on the art scene, and, moreover, began to give voice to their own ambitions of leadership. The next stage of this strategy was the creation of their own cultural space, a place to communicate their ideas to the outside world. This was created at the end of the 2000s without the involvement of the REP brand, and exists to this day as the Hudrada curator's society.<sup>328</sup> Two of the key figures of the *Societies' Project* became Nikita Kadan and Yevgenia Belorusets. Belorusets was a literary figure and translator who debuted as a photographer at the end of the 2000s with her socially minded art project *32 Gogol St*. Her series of documentary-style black-and-white photographs focused on the harsh living conditions experienced by the residents of a crumbling building in the middle of Kyiv. In 2009, Belorusets led the way in creating the online art-literary publication *Prostory* (Spaces)], and before long became one of the key figures in the field of critical art.

REP's subtle and ironic art project *A Big Surprise* (2010), shown at the National Art Museum, remains relevant to this day. In this exhibition, curated by Olesia Ostrovska-Liuta, the artists cut openings into the plasterboard walls of the museum. In a way reminiscent of the fairy tale Pinocchio, the openings revealed a hidden world of communist propaganda which had long been suppressed deep in the subconscious of new Ukrainian culture. An example of this was a monument to Lenin. The artists didn't even remove the monument from the central hall of the country's main museum, rather they simply covered it using the cheapest building materials, thus simulating a ritualistic clearing out of the country's "skeletons in the closet." While walking through the museum's usual collection, visitors to the exhibition encountered the monument through a series of small peep holes. They saw the intrinsic truth of the museum looking out at them, an unwanted past that the new world had not even tried to honestly erase.

<sup>328</sup> In 2019, this society included: Larysa Babii, Kateryna Badianova, Yevgenia Belorusets, Oleksandr Burlaka, Larysa Venediktova, Oleksandr Volodarsky, Vladyslav Holdakivsky, Ksenia Hnylytska, Anna Zviahintseva, Yurii Kruchak, Yulia Kostereva, Nikita Kadan, Volodymyr Kuznetsov, Anna Lazar, Vasyl Lozynsky, Lada Nakonechna, Anton Smyrnov, Natalia Chermalykh, and Lesia Khomenko. See: <http://hudrada.tumblr.com/About%20Hudrada>.



LESIA KHOMENKO.  
*DACHA MADONNA*. 2004.  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS. 140×100 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.





ZHANNA KADYROVA.  
A PACK OF LMS. FROM THE PROJECT  
TRASH MONUMENTS. 2006. CERAMIC TILES,  
POLYURETHANE FOAM, CEMENT. 60x85x40 CM.  
PRIVATE COLLECTION, MOSCOW.



NIKITA KADAN.  
*GRANDMA (MAUSOLEUM OF WELFARE)*.  
2013. CONCRETE, GLASS, BREAD.  
FROM THE EXHIBITION *FUTURE GENERATION*  
*ART PRIZE* IN VENICE. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE  
PINCHUKARTCENTRE. PHOTO BY SERHII ILLIN.



VOLODYMYR KUZNETSOV.  
*KOLIIVSHCHYNA*. 2011.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PINCHUKARTCENTRE.  
PHOTO BY SERHII ILLIN.

The installation was a metaphor for post-Soviet Ukraine, which preferred to repress the trauma of the recent past instead of accepting and addressing it.

The post-Soviet individual's pathological desire for cheap decor and pompous imitation, which were clumsily utilized to transform spaces inherited from the Soviet period, became the research focus for the long-running art initiative *Euroremont*.<sup>329</sup> The most memorable part of the initiative was shown as part of Viktor Pinchuk's presentation of the project *Euroremont: The Path to Improvement* (2013) at the Venice Biennale. In the entrance hall of an old Venetian palazzo, the artists installed a stretch ceiling, a design feature popular across the post-Soviet space. It was completed in the best traditions of "luxurious" *euroremont*, with several plasterboard layers, whimsical multicolored waves, and recessed office lighting. The project's focus on the desire to turn away from the past and hide the squalor of Soviet multistory panel buildings with the help of futuristic decorations came across as particularly ingenious. Even after traveling to Europe and arriving at a luxurious historical building, *Homo postsovieticus* remained unchanged, quickly erecting a zone of fictitious modernity and a paltry sense of chic.

History would play a cruel joke on critical art in the late 2000s. The second half of the 2000s and the beginning of the 2010s was a time when the main problem facing Ukraine's future development remained the unprecedented concentration of capital in the hands of oligarchs. At the end of the 2000s, the businessman Viktor Pinchuk's art center began to pay closer attention to young Ukrainian art. Gradually, those emerging from REP and other critically minded artists found themselves hostages to a situation where the only viable institution capable of consistently supporting contemporary artistic practice was a center that depended on the money of an oligarch. The artists formerly associated with the REP spent the next decade closely tied to the PinchukArtCentre; however, at the same time they continued to espouse a critical leftist viewpoint and place significant emphasis on institutional criticism in their work. By the late 2000s and into the 2010s, this circle of artists found themselves more in demand abroad than at home. This was in no small part thanks to the deep systemic contradictions present in the Ukrainian art scene. REP's exhibition marking their 10th anniversary was symptomatic of this. The exhibition took place in 2014 at the Polish gallery Labirynt (Labyrinth), and not at one of Ukraine's central art institutions.

Since its inception, all members of REP also worked on their own individual careers in parallel to the group, comprising the core of the young art scene in Ukraine during the second half of the 2000s. Over time, the group's operations were overtaken by the individual careers of its members. While working individually, they most often worked within more conservative disciplines, such as painting, sculpture, and graphic art. Lesia Khomenko explored the possibilities of painting and worked in dialogue with art from the Soviet period. Khomenko's most celebrated series was her *Dacha Madonnas* cycle from 2004. These monumental, elderly woman in swimming costumes selflessly digging up plots of land had given themselves to the most perverse hobby that came out of USSR—the voluntary self-torture of looking after a smallholding. These women unceremoniously display their flabby, disheveled bodies in a way reminiscent of Soviet beach culture. The paintings have no space either for the eroticism of the classic

<sup>329</sup> A term that denotes "European-style" renovation. [T.N.]

nude, or for the pathological corporeality of Lucien Freud's work. Lesia Khomenko used a dry, academic compositional language in order to depict the aged body, which was transformed in her work into a tool little different from that of an old rake or shovel. The corpulent ladies are shown from a low angle, which was characteristic of the dramatic, socialist-realist exaltation of workers and laborers. "However, this is not an ironic postmodern citation. One can feel a solidarity with those who are depicted here, a unique sincerity in the glorification of these brutal figures," Viktoria Burlaka writes about Khomenko's work.<sup>330</sup>

Ksenia Hnylytska also worked mainly in painting. Lada Nakonechna created subtle graphic art projects, combining the technical skill she learned within the walls of the Art Academy with the discursive and aesthetic devices of contemporary conceptualism. In the mid-2000s, Zhanna Kadyrova achieved fame thanks to her use of rough, "unfeminine" materials. Her large-scale art pieces covered in simple tiles opened a new page in the history of Ukrainian sculpture. Kadyrova's series *Invisible Forms* is another important project that came as the 2000s gave way to the 2010s. All manner of lighting equipment, from a huge streetlight to small table lamps, "shone" with a frozen Suprematist concrete beam. Locking the slight and intangible light waves into place by way of a heavy brutal material helped create a memorable visual paradox.

Volodymyr Kuznetsov was the oldest member of the group and its sole member from outside of Kyiv. After graduating from the art textile department at the Lviv National Academy of Arts, he worked with embroidery and also created expressive paintings that were close to the aesthetic of street art. After joining REP, he worked a lot with video.

Nikita Kadan spent longer than all of his fellow members searching for his own style. He experimented with a wide range of aesthetics and types of media. The influence of the Kyiv New Wave could be felt in his early paintings. Over time, the artist's practice matured and he found his own unique and aesthetically varied style. Kadan was a central figure on the art scene at in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Later, he began to focus on themes of police violence and historical memory, and after the 2013–2014 revolution he created installations based on the political turbulence in the country.

## REBOOTING THE KHARKIV SCHOOL: SOSka

The art group SOSka appeared on the Kharkiv art scene in October 2005. In many ways, this group's artistic journey was similar to Kyiv's REP. It was clear that a new generation of artists had arrived on the scene who shared a sense of solidarity in their views and methods.

<sup>330</sup> Viktoria Burlaka. *Vony i my. Katalog vystavky Generations. UsA v PinchukArtCentre* [They and we. Exhibition catalog for *Generations. UsA* at the PinchukArtCentre], 2007, [http://pinchukartcentre.org/files/exhibitions/pdf/generations\\_katalog.pdf](http://pinchukartcentre.org/files/exhibitions/pdf/generations_katalog.pdf).



THE SOSKA GROUP.  
BARTER. 2007. COLOR PHOTO.  
COURTESY OF MYKOLA RIDNYI.



THE SOSKA GROUP.  
*THEY'RE ON THE STREET.* 2006.  
PHOTO DOCUMENTATION OF A SERIES OF  
PUBLIC ART EVENTS IN KHARKIV AND KYIV.

Just like REP, in their first projects SOSka drew inspiration from the language of political protest and the time of the Orange Revolution. Viktor Miziano wrote how the group's artistic practice was an attempt to move away from the social performances that had dominated post-Soviet society.<sup>331</sup> Even before the group formed, SOSka's future participants held a critical view of their surrounding reality. In October 2004, on the eve of the mass protests on Kyiv's Maidan, the group's future members Mykola Ridnyi and Bella Lohachova held a performance at the Kharkiv Municipal Gallery. They splashed white paint on the portraits of all politicians who had taken part in the election campaign.<sup>332</sup> The ever-present wish to start again from "a blank page" was characteristic of the post-Soviet Ukrainian mentality, which, in turn, helped give birth to a series of mass protests and revolutions. The Kharkiv artists chose to adopt a "meta-position" in regard to their political reality, as opposed to their fellow citizens who took every available opportunity to attack whatever political camp opposed them. They were always "against everybody," which made their art unpalatable to the provincial art establishment and incomprehensible to all sides partaking in political conflict.

The artists had no intention of joining or supporting any of the political parties. First and foremost, the group's interest in sociopolitical issues was shaped by previous generations of artist-innovators who had been primarily focused on the pressing social issues of the time. In contrast to REP, who had quickly become opposed to their artistic forebears from the post-perestroika New Wave generation, the Kharkiv artists adopted a more conciliatory position towards their numerous and illustrious elders from the local contemporary art scene. At every opportunity, they highlighted the lineage of the "Kharkiv school" which included the avant-garde artists from the first half of the 20th century alongside the legendary nonconformist Vagrich Bakhchanyan, with his artistic manifesto "SOSrealism" and its ironic take on the condition of socialist realism. This lineage included the Kharkiv school of photography headed by Boris Mikhailov, and also placed particular emphasis on the Rapid Response Team, whose performances in the mid-1990s had a clear influence on SOSka's early output. One of the SOSka group's achievements was mapping out the lineage of Kharkiv's contemporary art scene and, from the beginning, integrating their individual artistic practice into that context.

The search for artistic "ancestors" was an integral theme to the art of this generation. This attempt to map out an artistic lineage was simpler in Kharkiv thanks to the nature of the local artistic tradition. In contrast to the Kyivans, who clung to painting despite its rapidly falling out of fashion, the Kharkiv artists had long preferred to work with new forms of media. In the mid-2000s, this made them a more meaningful point of reference for the young generation who were initially focused on the world of European art institutions. At this time, REP was more focused on mobilizing allies and like-minded people from among their contemporaries. By 2010, however, one of the group's

<sup>331</sup> Viktor Miziano, "Tolko tvoi mechty! O proekte 'Mechtateli' gruppy SOSka" ['Only your dreams! The SOSka group's "dreamers" project], in *Hrupa SOSka. Mriinyky: katalog vystavky v PinchukArtCentre* [The SOSka Group. Dreamers: exhibition catalog at the PinchukArtCentre] (Kyiv, 2008), 24.

<sup>332</sup> Anna Kryventsova, "'SOSka': Mezhdru aktsiei i institutsiei" ["SOSka": Between art actions and institutions], *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal*, no. 67/68 (2008).

leaders, Kadan, began to search for the group's alternative roots, later declaring a connection between the group's artistic practice and the tradition of Odesa conceptualism.

The central strategy of Kharkiv's new art scene was to organize everything without outside help. In October 2005, Mykola Ridnyi, together with the artists Anna Kryventsova, Bella Lohachova, and Olena Poliashchenko, opened SOSka's self-run gallery-cum-laboratory in a small abandoned building in the center of the city. Ridnyi was the 20-year-old son of the famous Kharkiv sculptor who would soon be the artist behind the majority of post-Soviet Kharkiv's official monuments. The space served both as a studio and place for exhibitions. To begin with, SOSka was an organization in flux, rather than a stable group with a fixed number of members. Ridnyi, however, remained a constant figure. By mid-2006, the group's membership had become more stable. Ridnyi and Kryventsova remained part of the group, along with another young artist called Serhii Popov.

The beginning stage of the group's artistic activity coincided with a period of political turbulence in the country, which is reflected in the artworks they produced. The art action *They're on the Street*, done by Ridnyi, Kryventsova, and Popov in 2006, was indicative of their artistic output. On the eve of scheduled elections, the artists went begging on the street while wearing the masks of Ukrainian politicians: the president, the prime minister, and the leader of the opposition. Their absurdist performances on the metro and streets of Kyiv, with the help of TV's "talking heads," became a metaphor for the situation in Ukraine where politicians had become as rich as kings, transformed into the puppets of the biggest oligarchs while the country continued to live in abject poverty.

Ridnyi and Lohachova's video art piece *Be Happy* was a direct reference to Kharkiv photography from the 1990s. It was, in its own way, a sequel to Boris Mikhailov's *Case History*. As opposed to the brutal degradation endured by the heroes of that classic photo series, the homeless heroine in this new decade demonstrated her desire, in whatever way possible, to conform to the ideals of capitalist society. She goes swimming in a river, blowing bubbles and pretending that she is utterly happy and content with her life. The result is an effective allegory for post-Soviet Ukraine, whose population was occupied with an analogous, and naive imitation of luxury and abundance in the hope that simulating happiness would conceal their true insecurities.

Over time, the group's creative output began to mature. In 2008, the artists exhibited their *Dreamers* project at the PinchukArtCentre. This marked an important stage in both the development of their artistic language and the issues the artists were focused on. At this stage, both Ridnyi, working as an individual artist, and the group as a whole had begun to turn their focus towards the "goth" and "emo" subcultures that were popular among urban youth in the 2000s. *Dreamers* depicted these young girls and boys soaring above miserable high rise apartment buildings; the project presented a portrait of young "dreamers" who were searching for authentic emotion amidst the alien-like wilderness of post-Soviet cities.

In May 2009, the SOSka group took on the role of curator for a large museum event. Ridnyi, Kryventsova, and Halyna Kuklenko organized the *New History* exhibition at the Kharkiv Art Museum. They showed the work of contemporary artists from Ukraine, Russia, and Eastern Europe amid a collection of paintings from the





THE SOSKA GROUP.  
*DREAMERS*. 2008. COLOR PHOTO.  
COURTESY OF MYKOLA RIDNYI.

19th–20th centuries. The museum’s administration was not prepared to engage in dialogue with contemporary art, seeing the work of the young artists as essentially trespassing on sacred ground. A scandal ensued, and the exhibition was closed the day after it opened.<sup>333</sup> Between 2009 and 2010, Kryventsova left the SOSka group. Ridnyi and Popov continued to work on collaborative projects together, but in just a couple of years, the group’s activity came to a halt, and its members began to concentrate on their individual careers.<sup>334</sup>

The post-Orange generation came to be defined by its provocative nature and the way it used conflict to draw society’s attention towards the contradictions inherent in the post-Soviet art world. It also paid special attention to the landscape of international art institutions and attempted to build a new narrative for Ukraine and its art that was comprehensible to the Western curator and viewer. This generation’s critical eye was trained upon Ukraine’s painful transition from being a privileged—yet at the same time isolated and culturally repressed—province of the Soviet empire to becoming an independent “third-world” country torn apart by contradictions.

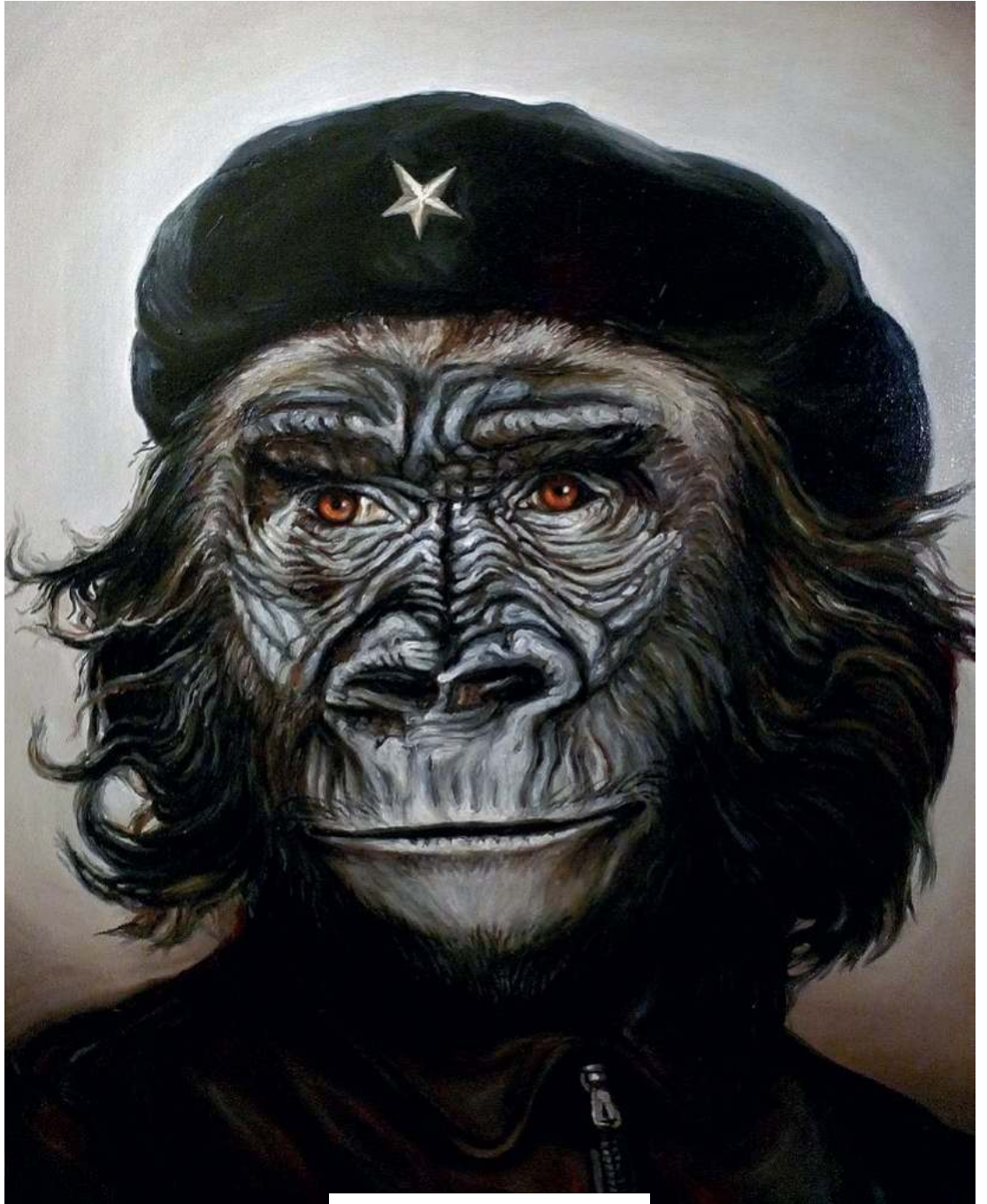
## FIGURATIVE ART IN THE POST-MEDIA AGE AND THE GLAMOR EXPERIENCE

Having survived the radical “anti-canvas” period of the 1990s, individual artists from the New Wave generation began to gradually return to painting at the end of the 1990s. By 2004 and 2005, their numbers had swollen to epidemic proportions.

In 2002, Arsen Savadov created *Sputnik*, his first painting for many years. It depicts a person lost in thought as they wander in front of a familiar Crimean landscape with the legendary Soviet satellite that first orbited the earth in place of a head. This canvas immediately achieved cult status, though it would be several years before Savadov fully embraced this medium once again. The artist’s style through the second half of the 2000s was an attempt to synthesize the visual language from the period of post-Soviet glamor with the virtuosic painting skills that he learned within the walls of the Kyiv State Art Institute. Since the late 1980s, the legacy of the socialist realist tradition could be felt in the paintings of the New Wave. By the 2000s, the artists from this generation had stopped rebelling against the work of their artistic forebears. After a long period of experimentation with new forms of media, Savadov returned to this artistic tradition. He created huge, bright canvases filled with people, intentionally overloading them with content and transforming them into unique hand-painted collages featuring recognizable characters and motifs taken from his photo projects from the late 1990s.

<sup>333</sup> Mykola Ridnyi and Anna Kryventsova, “Perspektivy laboratornosti” [Laboratorial perspectives], *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal*, no. 73/74 (2009).

<sup>334</sup> “Razgovor s Mykoloi Ridnym. Prostranstvo razorvannykh svyazei” [A conversation with Mykola Ridnyi. The landscape of broken ties], in *Komu prenadlezhit avangard? Malevich-proekt* [Whom does the avant-garde belong to? The Malevich project] (Moscow: Krasnaia shpana, 2019), 105.



ILLIA CHYCHKAN.  
CHE GUEVARA. FROM THE SERIES  
PSYCHODARWINISM. 2005-2007.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 200x150 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



VASYL TSAHOLOV.  
*BUNNY*. FROM THE SERIES *UKRAINIAN X-FILES*.  
2002. ACRYLIC ON CANVAS. 200x300 CM.  
PHOTO FROM THE ARCHIVE OF OLEKSANDR SOLOVYOV.



OLEG TISTOL.  
*CABINET OF MINISTERS.*  
FROM THE CYCLE *TV + REALISM*. 2005.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 160×180 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
PINCHUKARTCENTRE.

Glamour was an important part of visual culture in the 2000s. The fervor for vulgar luxury held by the USSR's former citizens dominated the mood of the period; this was a fast-moving time that was essentially held together by manipulating the state budget and relying on the country's freshly privatized industries. Decades of criminal infighting had come to an end, and a new, relatively "vegetarian" era began that was defined by big money, glitter, a gleefully well-nourished cynicism, and the complete decimation of any shared narratives. As the upper reaches of society grew in wealth, the national art market also grew at a rapid rate. While the new Ukrainian art collectors ignored photography, they were interested in comprehensible, commercial painting that reflected their altered worldview. In this context, demand grew for the brutally ironic, figurative art of the postmodernists. Viktor Pinchuk began to collect the paintings of the New Wave. This, in turn, increased their demand among collectors and aided the transformation of that generation's leading artists into media personalities and gossip-column favorites. These artists became both the beneficiaries and victims of the boom in the art market. The new fashion for painting prompted the mass return of artists to the art world, artists who had until that point disappeared within the advertising industry. The new artistic aesthetic that emerged at that time bore all the hallmarks of the artists' experience in advertising. By the late 2000s, the work of artists from the New Wave had become more expensive than at the beginning of the decade, their paintings produced in bulk and extremely commercialized.

The second factor that shaped the face of the art scene in the mid-2000s was its "post-media" character.<sup>335</sup> Painting, which had been revived following decades of experimentation with photography and video, underwent radical change. A new way of seeing had arrived. In the 20th century, hyperrealism had been a popular way to achieve the perfect likeness of a photograph or a way to recreate the alienated gaze of the photograph; however, artists were now focused on describing a world completely dominated by media images.

The first big series that celebrated the triumphant return of painting was Vasyl Tsaholov's *Ukrainian X-Files*, which was part of a larger sequence of art projects. In the summer of 2002, an eponymous exhibition that displayed large canvases presented in a kind of ironic mockumentary style was held at the Marat Gelman Gallery. The paintings depicted the imagined arrival of alien humanoids to a Ukrainian village. The artist explored this new mythology in his later projects as well. Tsaholov's painting *Koschei* (from the series *Phantoms of Fear*, 2004) would become one of his most memorable artistic statements. It depicted Koschei the Deathless, the anti-hero of Russian folklore, getting off a subway car on the Kyiv metro.

<sup>335</sup> "The popularity of that label is, in many ways, connected with the poetic and eschatological prefix 'post,' which denotes a borderline condition, a discursive Rubicon—the end of an old way of seeing, and by inference, the beginning of a new one. 'Post' gives rise to an enigmatic ambivalence, an unstable narrative, the feeling of a certain fictitiousness, the inauthenticity of contemporary values and techniques in painting," writes Viktoria Burlaka, a researcher of the post-media aesthetic during the 2000s. See: Viktoria Burlaka, "Chto podrazumevaetsia pod postmediinoi optikoi" [What is meant by Post-Media optics], *Art Ukraine*, October 2, 2018,

<https://artukraine.com.ua/a/chto-podrazumevaetsya-pod-postmediynoy-optikoy/>.



ARSEN SAVADOV.  
*SPUTNIK*. 2002.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 150×210 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

In a world of broken values and technological revolution in which new gadgets appeared every year and everything was increasingly virtual, demand grew for new, in-offensive fairy tales that suited the new digitally conscious age. Ilya Isupov was an artist whose work overflowed with fairy-tale themes and neo-mythologies. Oleksandr Hnylyzkyj was also reinterpreting fairy tales at this time; he depicted Cheburashka and the crocodile Gena<sup>336</sup> wearing Adidas tracksuits, as well as a mermaid cutting up her own tail. Indeed, it was only this artist who was capable of depicting the new heroes of post-Soviet society's collective mythology so ironically and earnestly, in a way that was both heartfelt and simultaneously expressive.

Humor was an important strategy employed by artists to help them avoid being sucked into painting's gradual commercialization. Postmodern thought sees life as make-believe and utterly dominated by irony. Hence, artists "sort of" created paintings, and had a "sort of" serious attitude towards what they depicted. The majority of this generation's art featured this simulation of painting suspended somewhere between seriousness and a joke. Illia Chychkan was a master of postmodern emptiness.

<sup>336</sup> Famous Soviet children's cartoon characters. [T.N.]



VASYL TSAHOLOV.  
SWAN LAKE. 2007.  
ACRYLIC AND OIL. 200x300 CM.





His main painting cycle from the 2000s was called *Psychodarwinism*. These large-form artworks, both lighthearted and ironic, featured well-known figures from popular culture with monkey faces instead of their own. Here the artist hints that humanity is used to seeing itself as the crowning glory of all creation, yet as a matter of fact, humans are just animals, humorous and endearing in their vain arrogance.

During the 2000s, Maksym Mamsikov's work dominated this banquet of emptiness. In the late 1990s, he began working on his "pocket" paintings which featured randomly chosen images—a packet of Belomor cigarettes, a bowl of borshch, a shuttlecock soaring into the unknown, cars stuck in snow drifts. All of them were painted on extremely small canvases which helped lend the paintings a distinctly absurdist character. In the mid-2000s, the artist introduced another pivotal theme into his work whereupon a stencil-blue sky and an equally striking blue sea would occupy a central position in his art. These paintings featured kitsch inflatable objects in the style of Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami and stylized beach scenes. There was an increasingly small amount of specific content in his artworks, suppressed by a pervasive and piercing bright-blue emptiness.

Once he finished working as the director of the Kyiv Gelman Gallery, Oleksandr Roitburd returned to painting after a long break. Where his work had once been characterized by its sense of drama, expressionism, aggression, and corporeality, Roitburd now had a new distinctive style, which had become elegiac and full of lyrical melancholy. The path back to the terrible and glorious world of the 1990s was now closed. The impossibility of returning to the past prompted a gentle nostalgia and an attempt to synthesize the artistic language of the late 1980s and early 1990s with a sense of the urban naive and an interest in the artists from the leftist Russian salons in the early 20th century (Natan Altman, Yurii Annenkov, and Boris Grigoriev). Roitburd created artworks that resembled a kaleidoscope of disparate dream-like and hallucinatory paintings. While he tried, just like in times past, to invade forbidden realms, he instead found himself working within a bright and inoffensive surrealism. A turning point for Roitburd was his artwork *Girl in the Forest* (2004). The heroine of the piece, who looks as if she has come from the artist's earlier canvases, hugs a huge bald head that smiles cunningly while lying on the ground.

Viktor Sydorenko is another successful artist and cultural figure from the 2000s—a painter and the founder and director of the Modern Art Research Institute at the National Academy of Arts in Ukraine. During the drawn-out years of change and transition, the Institute was the sole organization that regularly published books and anthologies of academic articles focused on contemporary art and culture. The organization was sometimes criticized because most of its publications were overly focused on the directors of art institutions; however, in a context where the national school of art criticism had collapsed, the fact that the Institute existed at all was important. In 2003, Sydorenko represented Ukraine at the Venice Biennale with the project *Millstones of Time*, and then went on to become the commissioner of the country's pavilion from 2007 to 2013. From 2000 into the 2010s, he created series of paintings and sculptural projects which posited as their central hero the *Homo sovieticus*, an average person from the Soviet era who wore a familiar pair of vintage long johns. The central themes in this artist's work were the loss of individuality and the rise of mass society.

Oleg Tistol did not need to return to painting because he had never left it. From the 1990s onwards, he repeatedly painted the same landscape—the silhouette of a mountain top with decorative stripes or stencil decorations underneath it. The first mountain was Kazbek,<sup>337</sup> drawn using a pack of the eponymous cigarettes. Later, Tistol added the mountain Ararat<sup>338</sup> to his mountain iconography. Dozens of the repeating compositions, which the artist produced tirelessly over the course of several decades, help recreate the questions posed by Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In 2005, Tistol created the *Telerealism* cycle which was inspired by the events of the Orange Revolution when the entire country spent months glued to their TV screens. Random frames from that period’s endless stream of TV images were resurrected by the artist in painting form, which in turn emphasized their significance and monumentality. Tistol masterfully created the effect of a glitchy analogue TV image with its slight blurriness in his work.

Oleksandr Hnylyzkyj’s final artworks dismantled the principle of ironic distance that had previously pervaded new Ukrainian painting. He created deceptive works of art featuring paradoxically enlarged “portraits” of everyday objects. In classical art, deceptions, or *trompe-l’oeil*, were pictures that created the optical illusion of three dimensions when in fact they were only in two. While there were many so-called “deceptions” in Hnylyzkyj’s work, they were of a completely different, existential character. A huge drinking glass strikes the viewer with its monumental size, forcing them to think about why the artist is giving such significance to what would appear to be a banal, everyday object. The piece’s title *This is Not a Glass* is a reformulation of René Magritte’s artwork *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*. Unlike Magritte, Hnylyzkyj made no attempt to hint at the use of deception in his work. Nonetheless, the viewer still feels like there is some kind of trick at play when looking at his painting. Something causes them to pause in front of the huge canvases and to continue staring at them while asking the question, “And what exactly am I looking at?”

Even after learning of his illness, Hnylyzkyj worked until the very end. He created a series of work based on the theme of everyday hospital life. Just like in his work from previous years, the central heroes of his work again appeared to be uninspiring everyday objects that took on unforgettable expressivity and tragedy. The eloquent silence of those empty “stand-alone objects,” which were simultaneously full of an internal tension, left the viewer to reckon with the fundamental questions of life and death.

The return to painting did not mean a rejection of other forms of media. In the 2000s, artists of the New Wave continued to work with video, installations, and sculpture; however, the influence of a new way of seeing was visible in these other genres. The most characteristic examples of this were Tsaholov’s hyperrealist sculptures which ranged from his brutal *Writing Boys*, which was shown at the *Farewell to Arms* exhibition in 2004, to his ballerina-jihadists at the end of the 2000s.

<sup>337</sup> A dormant volcano on the Georgian-Russian border. [T.N.]

<sup>338</sup> A dormant volcano in the east of Turkey. [T.N.]



OLEKSIY SAI.  
FLOWERS. 2009. COLOR PRINT  
ON ALUMINUM. 300x132 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



OLEKSIY SAI.  
MOLD. 2009. INSTALLATION.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

# KHERSON ART-BRUT AND THE POETRY OF A CORPORATE BOTTOM FEEDER: EXCEL AND CHANSON

In the mid-2000s, the art scene was populated both by art collectives and autonomous young artists who were creating their own striking, individual bodies of work. One of the first such artists to emerge was the graphic artist Oleksiy Sai. His first solo projects took place at the very beginning of the decade at the Marat Gelman Gallery in Kyiv. In 2003, at the very height of summer, the artist released his cheery art project *Happy New Year*,<sup>339</sup> in which he brought snowmen to the gallery, placing them in ice-cream freezers. Before long, he opened his most sincere installation, *2D Friends*, which featured images of the artist's closest friends and the entire Kyiv art scene of the early 2000s printed onto images of propaganda pin-ups that had been cut up like a jigsaw. Sai only settled on a recognizable style by 2004–2005. The shift in his artwork was connected with his part-time work in the advertising sector. In contrast to the more famous members of the older artistic generation who had short and sparkling careers in advertising, the young Sai began working at the very bottom of the industry but later spent many years working as an agency's art director. His experience of working in a corporate environment became Sai's main source of creative reflection and inspiration.<sup>340</sup>

Working day to day in an office pushed the artist to search for a new kind of language that would adequately reflect this way of life. In the mid-2000s, Sai came up with an original method for creating artwork using the office program Excel. This method, in which each visual segment looked like the result a specialized mathematical or accounting formula, became the foundation of his long-running *Excel Art* project. It was hard to believe that the bright, rich images of luxurious gardens, exotic insects, and pixelated landscapes were the result of the artist's masterful manipulation of one of the dullest office computer programs. The artist went on to incorporate elements of corporate culture in his installations. The central hero of Sai's work was the "small" office worker with their virtually invisible life dramas that took place between the printer and the coffee machine.

The naturally gifted Kherson artist Stas Volyazlovsky burst onto the art scene in the second half of the 2000s. He had completed art school as well as courses in graphic design and spent the rest of his career working on his own version of contemporary art brut. Volyazlovsky did not move to the more dynamic Kyiv, instead remaining in Kherson. With his characteristic rude sense of humor, he named his own art

<sup>339</sup> Stanislava Beretova, "O proekte Alekseia Saya 'S novym godom'" [On Oleksiy Sai's *Happy New Year* project], *Galereia Gelmana v Kieve*, <http://kiev.guelman.ru/rus/exhibitions/new-year/>.

<sup>340</sup> Alisa Lozhkina, "Aleksii Sai: 'Ofisnye prezentatsii stanoviat'sia bolee poniatnymi, esli ikh rassmatrivat kak tiuremnoe narodnoe tvorchestvo'" [Oleksiy Sai: "Office presentations become more comprehensible if they are understood as folk, prison art"], *Art Ukraine*, September 14, 2010, <https://artukraine.com.ua/a/aleksey-say-ofisnye-prezentacii-stanovyatsya-bolee-ponyatnymi-esli-ih-rassmatrivat-kak-tyuremnoe-narodnoe-tvorchestvo>.



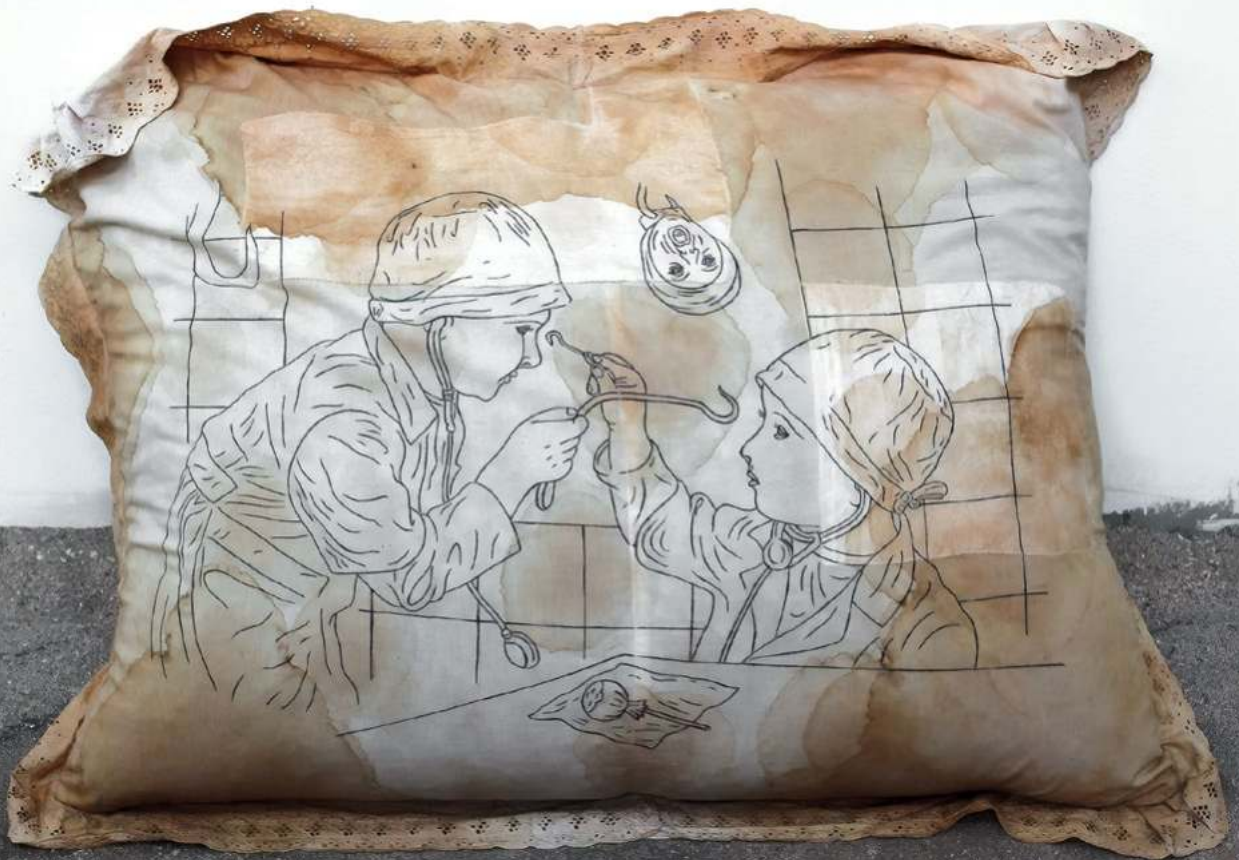
OLEKSIY SAI.  
FRIDAY NIGHT FEVER. 2009.  
DIGITAL PRINT ON ALUMNIUM. 181x104 CM.





STAS VOLYAZLOVSKY.  
CHANSON-ART. 2006. MIXED MEDIA ON TEXTILE.  
PHOTO FROM THE ARCHIVE OF  
OLEKSANDR SOLOVYOV.





STAS VOLYAZLOVSKY.  
*THE DIFFUSION OF IDENTITY*. 2016.  
STRAW, BALLPOINT PEN, AND TEXTILE.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF HENNADII KOZUB. THIS  
ARTWORK WAS CREATED AS PART OF THE BIRIUCHYI  
INTERNATIONAL CONTEMPORARY ART SYMPOSIUM.

“Kher-art.”<sup>341</sup> His work was comprised of a brutal, yet lyrical narration of the life and interests of simple people living in provincial towns in the post-Soviet landscape. Volyazlovsky populated his pantheon of urban folklore heroes with politicians and popular chanson singers. This pantheon would become the foundation of his artistic style, a style which the artist would label “Chanson-Art.”

Volyazlovsky’s style was aesthetically close to the work of outsider artists, prison art, in particular. The *Chanson-Art* series, which he began in 2006, was full of pieces created using a ballpoint pen on pillowcases, bourgeois lace pillows, and second-hand bed sheets soaked in *chifir*.<sup>342</sup> The obsessive canvases overloaded with detail were covered in harsh jokes, explicit erotica, and fragments of overheard conversations that balanced on the edge of extreme profanity and a unique kind of sincere tenderness. Alongside his “rags,” as the artist liked to call his textile works, Volyazlovsky also experimented with photography and video, creating musical artworks. He preserved his love for the poetry of provincial absurdity in whichever media form he was using.

Stas Volyazlovsky was not alone in Kherson. In the early stages of his career, the artist was lucky enough to come into contact with like-minded people who had, in 1996, set up the Totem<sup>343</sup> association in the city. Totem began as the brainchild of young TV broadcasters, but it gradually grew into a center for artistic youth initiatives. In the early 2000s, the center’s field of interest came to include the village of Chornianka, where the Burliuk family had lived at the beginning of the 20th century and where futurism was born. It also included the creative output of Polina Raiko, an outsider artist from Tsiurupynsk (now Oleshky), an old woman who had decorated her home in painted, expressive images. These two areas of interest were important within the context of developing the region’s artistic practice. From 2002, Totem organized the Terra Futura festival in Chornianka and Kherson; after Polina Raiko’s death in 2004, they set up an art event in Tsiurupynsk in her honor. In Kherson, Totem organized media art courses that attracted a group of like-minded individuals. Stas Volyazlovsky joined Totem in 2003, creating over 30 pieces of video art in tandem with Maks Afanasiev, the association’s co-founder. From 2011 on he brought the musical project Rapana<sup>344</sup> to life together with another artist and designer from that circle called Semion Khramtsov. Just like Volyazlovsky, who collaborated extensively with the group, Totem’s aesthetic placed particular emphasis on trash, art brut, home video, and a witty play on provincial kitsch.

Another art initiative that appeared in Kherson in 2004 was the museum of contemporary art established by the artist Viacheslav Mashnytsky. Like all other Kherson art projects from this period, this museum bore little resemblance to a western art institution. It was a self-organized space situated directly in the artist’s apartment that, in

<sup>341</sup> Roughly translated as dick-art. [T.N.]

<sup>342</sup> An exceptionally strong tea with narcotic-like effects that is associated with prison and Gulag life. [T.N.]

<sup>343</sup> Dana Brezhneva, “Zakhvatyvaiushchii mir TOTEMa” [The enchanting world of TOTEM], *Art Ukraine*, March 19, 2015, <https://artukraine.com.ua/a/111/>.

<sup>344</sup> Maks Afanasiev, “Videoart v Khersoni” [Video art in Kherson], *Vidkrytyi arkhiv Ukrainiskoho media-artu* [The Open Archive of Ukrainian Media Art], [http://mediaartarchive.org.ua/publication/videoart\\_in\\_kherson/](http://mediaartarchive.org.ua/publication/videoart_in_kherson/).

the years that followed, would host chamber exhibitions and parties. Even though the self-run museum would gradually acquire its own small collection, the “outsider” nature of its art initiatives would lose none of its charm.

## TRUE WEIRDOS AND A RETURN TO PERFORMANCE

In 2009, a new self-organized art space appeared in Kyiv that would prove very important for the generation of the late 2000s. It was created by Artur Belozеров, a member of both “big” REP and the local party scene. He worked in collaboration with another former member of REP, Borys Kashapov, who was also known under the pseudonym Andriusha Kremov. Their punk gallery LabGarage was situated in a garage cooperative on Velyka Zhytomyrska Street, near Peizazhna Alley, a promenade beloved by Kyivans. It was not a serious or rigorous institution, rather a space of freedom and buffoonery, where the main methodology appeared to be complete spontaneity and a resistance to order and structure. Despite this, the LabGarage contrived to put on entirely classical chamber exhibitions, concerts, lecture courses, and film viewings. At certain stages, members of REP were involved in an unofficial capacity, for example Nikita Kadan delivered lectures and Zhanna Kadyrova oversaw four curatorial projects in the space. Later, LabGarage changed premises permanently, but the gallery’s most memorable location would always remain the garage on Velyka Zhytomyrska.

The most striking exhibitions created by LabGarage included the art project *Society’s Member* by Andriusha Kremov, Masha Pavlenko’s show *V kontakte* (In contact),<sup>345</sup> as well as Artur Belozеров’s installation *Bourgeoisie, Bourgeois Some More* (2009). The flamboyant artist Belozеров also redefined a typical feature of the urban landscape: the dumpster. The banal dumpster became a metaphor for consumerist society, which both the artist himself and the “antiglamor-anticrisis” LabGarage were opposed to. The dumpster was transformed by Belozеров into a luxury Jacuzzi bath, priced at 15,000 euros. The artist was poking fun at the sky-high prices in contemporary art in post-crisis Ukraine. The art group TOPORKESTRA, another memorable art phenomenon from this period, performed at the opening of the project. In the 1980s and 1990s, exhibition openings in Kyiv rarely took place without the appearance of the performer and city personality Fedir Tetianych. In the same way, it was rare for TOPORKES-TRA to not appear at an art event in the city in the late 2000s and 2010s; they were an elemental and daring collective of musicians, whose leader Serhii Topor had at some point also trained as an artist. The calling card of that decade’s most spontaneous, non-mainstream, and artistic musical collective was loud music, unbridled fun, and, of course, the neighbors calling the police.

The second half of the 2000s saw the emergence of art projects that straddled genres, synthesizing music and contemporary performance. This included the

<sup>345</sup> Also the name of the most popular social-networking site in post-Soviet countries. [T.N.]



HAMMERMAN DESTROYS VIRUSES.  
THE SHOW *THE ISOTOPE SHINES BRIGHTLY*.  
2009. LVIV. PHOTO BY VITAMINKA.



THE FEMEN GROUP.  
DOCUMENTATION OF THE ART ACTION *VAGINART*  
AT THE PINCHUKARTCENTRE IN FRONT OF SERHII  
BRATKOV'S *KHORYTYSIA*. FEBRUARY 2, 2010.



ARTUR BELOZEROV IN THE LABGARAGE GALLERY  
ON 31 NYZHNOIURKIVSKYI STREET, KYIV. 2012.  
PHOTO BY MAKSYM BILOUSOV.

legendary group Penoplast (Styrofoam)], whose provocative performances in the second half of the 2000s involved many members of that period's art scene. Active members of Penoplast included Anatolii Belov and Zhanna Kadyrova. Artur Belozеров was one of the leaders of the group, and the creator of the "trash hit," *Rinat, Give Me a Billion*, which was dedicated to a certain odious Ukrainian oligarch. The group's most memorable member, the "face" of Penoplast, was Don Pedros (Serhii Demchuk). An idiosyncratic outsider-figure, who was old enough to be the father of the rest of the group and had worked previously as a journalist, he made his living selling plastic bags on trains and he was practically never sober when in public.

Within the context of the late 2000s, it is important to include the kings of Ukrainian camp, the provocative performance group Khammerman Znyshchuie Virusy (Hammerman Destroys Viruses). This collective was founded in 1996 in Sumakh. By 2004, when Hammerman's first relatively successful music album *Pop Star* was released, the group was made up of the duo of Volodymyr Pakholiuk and Albert Tsukrenko. The group's critical and provocative texts were dedicated to the acute social problems facing post-Soviet society, namely low-paid office work, alcoholism, corrupt politicians, the growing role of the church, and the double standards of its followers.

The lyrical hero of most of Hammerman's compositions was an imagined member of Ukraine's creative class who harbored their own creative ambitions, all the while slaving away at a "normal" job. Of course, this was entirely autobiographical; the group's members earned their living in journalism. Pakholiuk and Tsukrenko included Surzhyk,<sup>346</sup> the living, breathing voice of the people, in their compositions. They were also not afraid of producing work of a low musical quality. Every performance by the group turned into a show with its own pre-prepared theme and range of costumes worn by the artists. The costumes stood out for their trashiness, irony, and also for the particular artistry that was unique to the group. The performer's otherworldly aesthetic and sense of mockery, borrowed from queer culture, sat alongside their cis-gender identity and their reverence for family values, upon which they placed particular emphasis. For a long time, Hammerman existed in parallel to contemporary artistic society, and it was only by the mid-2010s that the gap began to narrow. Some of the group's most famous shows from the end of the 2000s included performing in funeral wreaths with nothing on underneath, and also while wearing Orthodox icons.

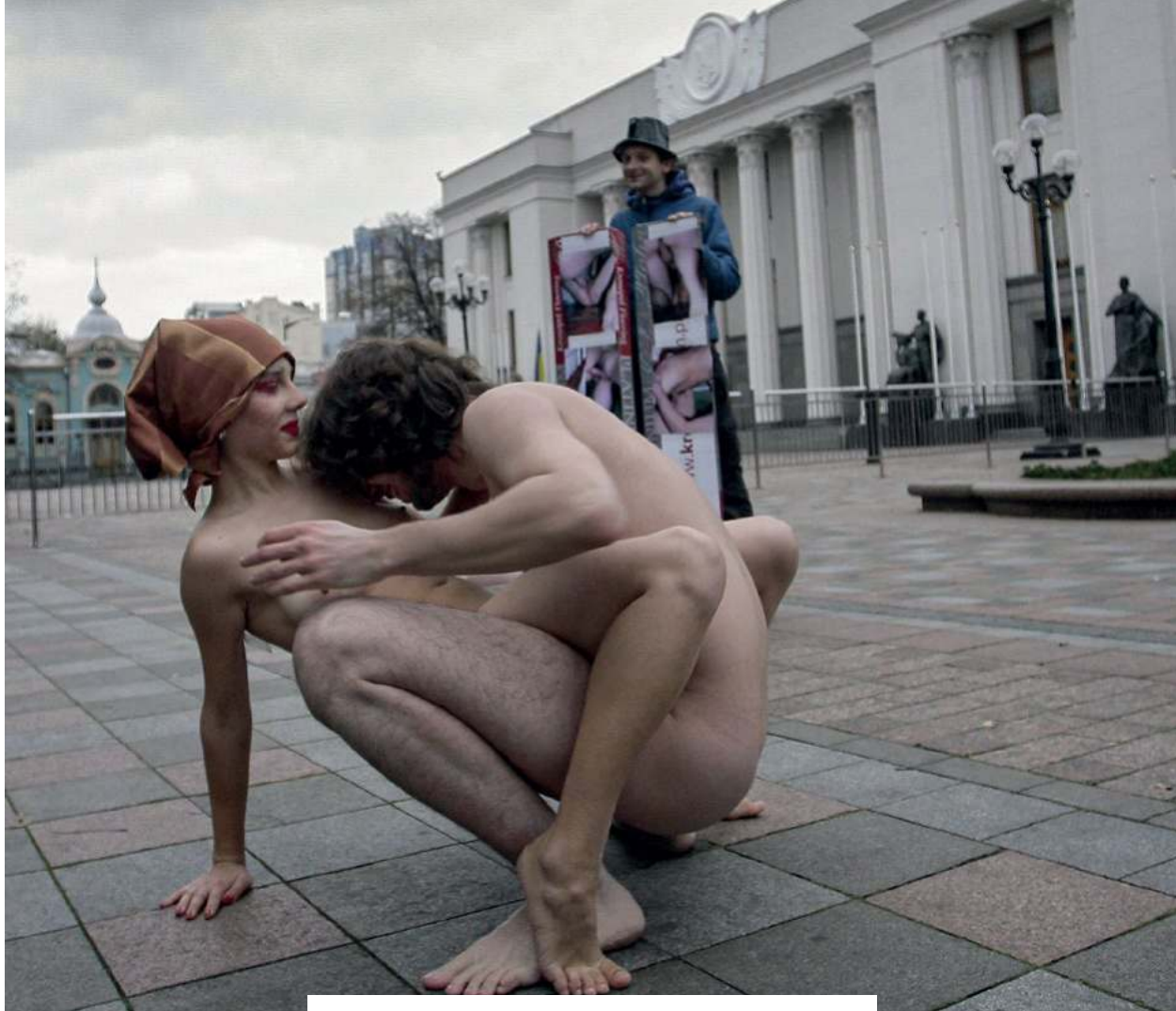
The protest performance was another art phenomenon from the second half of the 2000s. The experience of the color revolutions demonstrated the effectiveness of the artistic act and its viral nature in the media. The expansion of the internet saw the growth in popularity of striking, calculated artistic statements that were geared towards an online audience. In neighboring Russia, the group Voina (War) came to be known for their art actions which criticized those in power. Attempts to use the language of contemporary performance as a way to engage with both political and social problems also began to appear in Ukraine.

One of the most popular protest statements organized by members of the country's art scene was *Lie and Wait*. The action was carried out by Mykola Ridnyi, a participant of the SOSka group with the help of Ivonna Holybievska. In 2006, after the artist

<sup>346</sup> A term that refers to a sociolect that mixes Ukrainian and Russian. [T.N.]



MEMBERS OF THE GROUP PENOPLAST.  
FRONT ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: YULIA PELIPAS, DMYTRO MOISEIEV,  
BORYS KASHAPOV, ANATOLII BELOV, AND ANDRII MAVR (SEVERYN).  
2007. FESTIVAL OF SAND, TRUKHANIV ISLAND, KYIV.  
PHOTO FROM THE ARCHIVE OF ANATOLII BELOV.

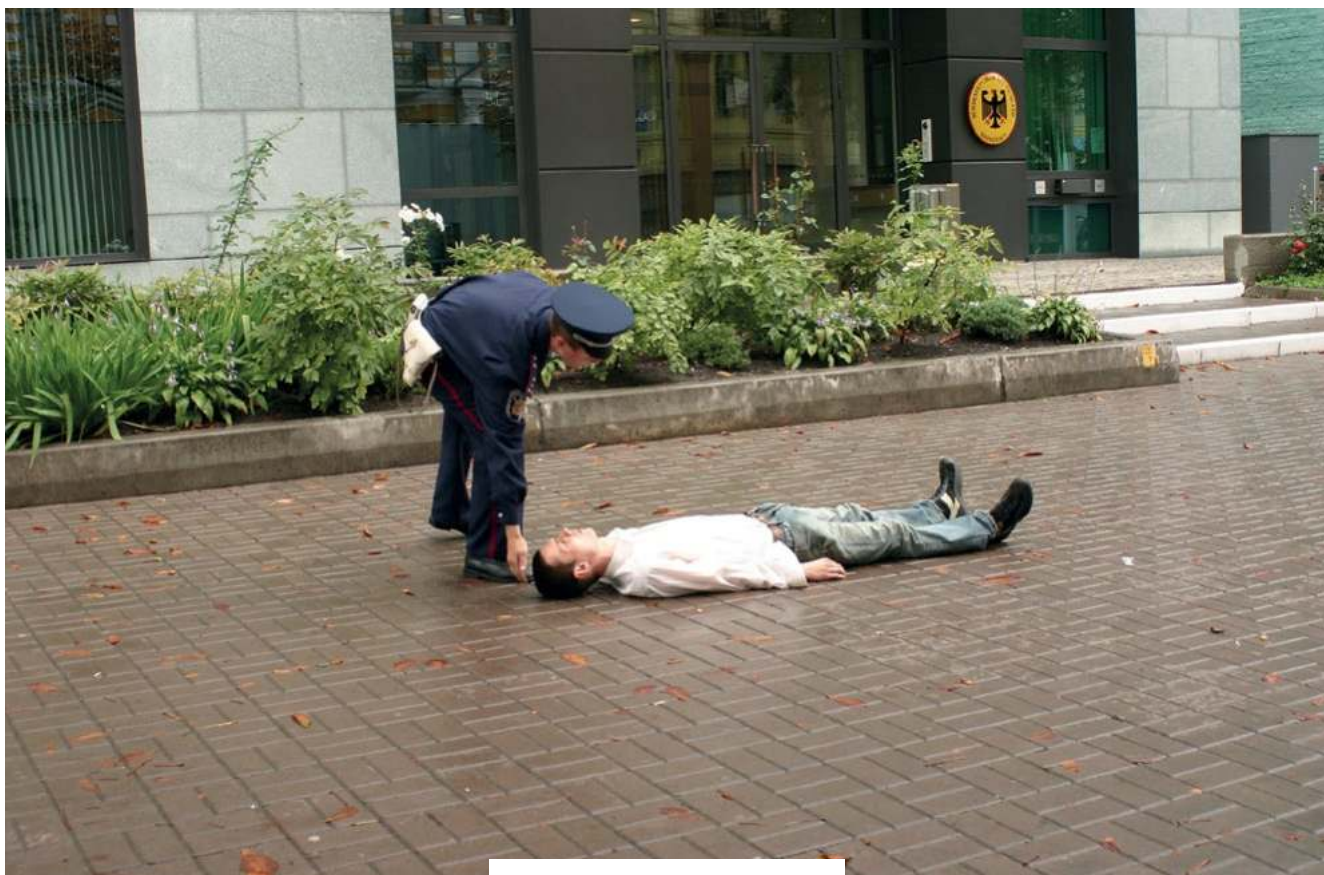


OLEKSANDR VOLODARSKY AND AN ANONYMOUS MEMBER OF A GROUP OF RADICAL ARTISTS SET UP BY THE ARTIST. AN ART ACTION OUTSIDE THE VERKHOVNA RADA OF UKRAINE PROTESTING THE ACTIONS OF THE NATIONAL EXPERT COMMISSION ON THE PROTECTION OF PUBLIC MORALITY. NOVEMBER 2, 2009. PHOTO BY UNIAN.



THE ART GROUP VOINA WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF REP AND ADOLFYCH. DOCUMENTATION OF THE ART ACTION A FEAST IN MEMORY OF D. A. PRIGOV ON THE KYIV METRO. FEBRUARY 10, 2008. ALL MATERIAL IS PUBLISHED WITH THE PERMISSION OF ALEKSEI PLUTSER-SARNO, VOINA'S THEORETICIAN.





MYKOLA RIDNYI.  
*LIE AND WAIT*. 2006. ART ACTION.  
VIDEO DOCUMENTATION BY  
IVONNA HOLYBIEVSKA.

had been refused a European visa several times in a row, Ridnyi lay on the sidewalk in front of the German embassy in protest, after which he was detained by diplomatic security. The project was inspired by the artist's real experience of being unable to obtain a visa despite having an invitation to his own exhibition in Europe. The humiliating process of drawing up the correct documents to visit Europe, a place traversed by almost every traveler, sat in sharp contrast to politicians' rhetoric about European integration and demonstrated the true attitude of the European Union towards Ukraine and its citizens.

At the beginning of 2008, the exhibition *Common Space* was opened in a freight container at the Arsenalna metro station in Kyiv. Its participants included REP and the Russian art group Voina. Video footage of FEAST (PIR), an art action by Voina, was shown at the exhibition alongside other art pieces. FEAST was originally organized in 2007 in memory of the artist and writer Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov. Voina invaded the public sphere and set up a sumptuous commemoration for the leader of Russian unofficial art directly in a carriage of the Moscow metro. The Kyiv authorities destroyed the *Common Space* exhibition, just two days after it opened, and dismantled the freight container in which it had been held. In a show of protest, the exhibition's organizers decided to carry out their own FEAST art action on the three lines of the Kyiv metro. This analogous "invasion" took place on February 10, 2008.<sup>347</sup> Members of REP, along with the Kyiv counterculture writer Adol'fych, took part alongside the Voina group.

The Femen group was a controversial art phenomenon from the end of the 2000s. Their work combined elements of contemporary art, media spectacle, and political provocation. Despite the warm reception the group received in Europe, France in particular, the group was never accepted within the contemporary art scene in Ukraine. In fact, the sole stunt connected to figurative art that the group performed just demonstrated the hostility of Femen's members towards true artistic practice. Femen was labeled as a media project, solely created to breathe some life into the endless stream of Ukrainian political TV shows. On February 2, 2010, Femen activists started a protest in the PinchukArtCentre wearing nothing but their underwear. They were protesting Serhii Bratkov's artwork *Khortytsia*, which depicted a girl in national Ukrainian costume with exposed genitals. The naked protestors, wearing Ukrainian national garlands on their heads, held up placards with the words "Ukraine is not a Vagina!" and "VaginArt!", which, in the context of Femen's strategy of provocatively utilizing their naked bodies, only served to highlight the absurdity of what was happening.

Oleksandr Volodarsky's (also known as Shiitman) art action next to the Verkhovna Rada, ended in scandal. Oleksandr, an artist and blogger from Luhansk, together with a member of a radical art group he created, imitated a sex act next to the building of the Ukrainian parliament. This was in protest against the actions of the National Expert Commission on the Protection of Public Morality. Criminal charges were

<sup>347</sup> Aleksei Plutser-Sarno, "Gruppa Voina 'Pominki po Prigovu dolzhny nosit vsenarodnyi kharakter!' Aktsiia PIR v vagone metro" [The Voina Group: "Commemorating Prigov should be an international event!"] The FEAST art action on a metro carriage], *Livejournal.com*, October 11, 2007, <https://plucer.livejournal.com/199938.html>.

consequently brought against the artist for disorderly conduct, and as a result he spent five months in a prison colony. On 29 September 2010, spurred on by his experience with criminal investigators, Volodarsky organized the art action *You're Not in Europe Any More*. The phrase was then tattooed onto the artist's back without any ink, and was, in his opinion, the perfect image to encapsulate the working principles of the Ukrainian law enforcement agencies.

In the 2000s, artists weren't only interested in performance as a form of protest. Artists such as Myroslav Vaida appeared on the scene, and from 2008 the annual *Performance. Days of Art* was held in Lviv, headed by Vlodko Kaufman. The independent research collective TanzLaboratorium was an important group at this time, balancing on the border between performance and contemporary dance. Larysa Venediktova, Olha Komisar (Savchenko), and Oleksandr Lebedev were at the core of this group. TanzLaboratorium formally existed from the early 2000s,<sup>348</sup> though the peak of the group's activity within the contemporary art scene occurred at the beginning of the 2010s. The collective's central themes were the body and its imagination, time, and also dance as a form of thought.

Alevtina Kakhidze was an artist whose art projects often included a performative element. Her performance *I Am Late for a Plane for Which It Is Impossible to Be Late* took place in 2010. As part of a newly founded grant program from a foundation set up by the oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, she gained permission to take a flight in a chartered plane owned by an unnamed individual. This project marked the continuation of her 2008 exhibition, in which Kakhidze wrote letters directly to several oligarchs that contained the following words: "I am an artist. When I am asked if I can paint someone's portrait, a still life, or the sea, I always reply that I can draw anything. Rather, that is what I used to say. Now I don't say that. The issue is that I discovered there is one thing I cannot draw. I cannot draw the earth, as if drawn while looking out the window of my own private plane."<sup>349</sup> After completing the flight, the artist held a press conference and told everyone who gathered all the details of how the project came about. No drawing was made as a result of sitting on board the airplane. This succeeded in destroying the stereotype of the artist and their social role, and prompted a negative reaction from the public. The artist's flight in a private plane, paid for by a businessman with a questionable reputation, and her refusal to create a "work of art" in the traditional sense of the word, was an excellent illustration of the contradictions inherent in the young Ukrainian art scene at the end of the 2000s and beginning of the 2010s.

<sup>348</sup> Larysa Venediktova, "Tanzlaboratorium," *Openarchive.ua*, <http://openarchive.com.ua/tanzlaboratorium/>.

<sup>349</sup> Olesia Ostrovska-Liuta, "I Am Late for a Plane for Which It Is Impossible to Be Late," *Art Ukraine*, September 13, 2010, <https://artukraine.com.ua/a/ya-opazdyvayu-na-samolet-na-kotoryy-nevozmozhno-opozdat/>.



APL315.  
GRAFFITI. 2009.  
SEVASTOPOL, UKRAINE.

# ART AND THE STREET

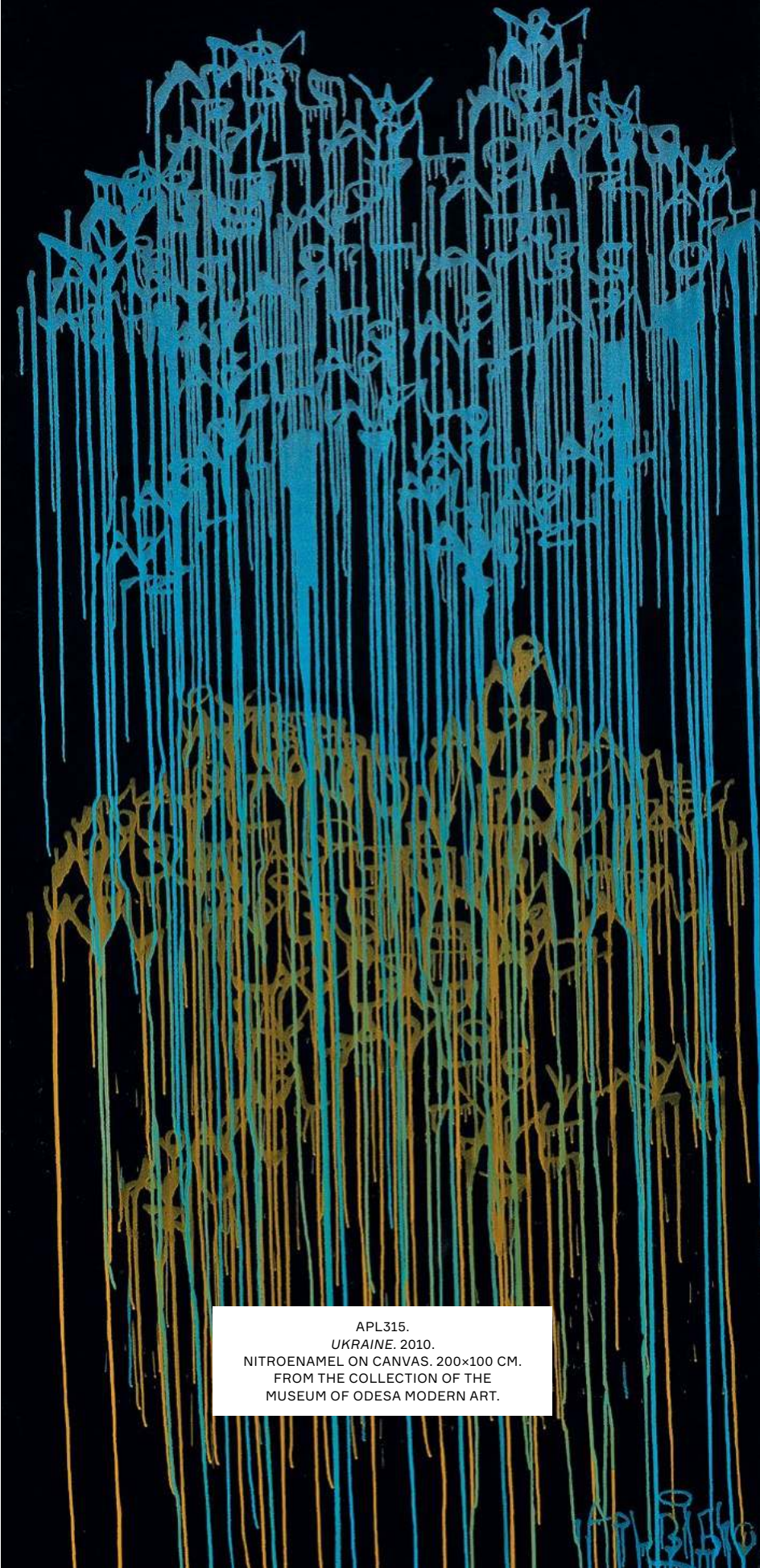
At the end of the 20th century, street art,<sup>350</sup> with its unique aesthetic and rebellious spirit, was one of the main sources of inspiration for a conventional art scene that found itself at a discursive and expressive dead end. In Ukraine, as in other post-Soviet countries, graffiti culture only began to emerge following the collapse of the USSR. The second half of the 2000s saw increased interaction between street art and conventional art. An increasing number of artists who had started on the street began to show interest in contemporary art and, likewise, young artists with a more traditional background employed elements of street art in their own artistic arsenal. Galleries and a few institutions were increasingly interested in the sense of freedom and boldness that was associated with street-based art.

Most graffiti artists stayed within the bounds of youth culture, which remained a place for them to let off steam and engage in countercultural activity. One of graffiti's first enthusiasts, who would gradually drift towards contemporary art, was the philosopher and graduate of the Kyiv-Mohyla academy, Vova (Volodymyr) Vorotniiov. The artist was born in Chervonohrad in Western Ukraine and from a young age was interested in different youth subcultures. Fresh from university, he moved to Kyiv and immediately fell into the graffiti scene. Vorotniiov combined his street experience with philosophical reflection and became, perhaps, the most articulate Ukrainian artist working in the sphere of street art.

Vorotniiov remembers his first serious encounter with contemporary art in 2000 when he illegally swam in the swimming pool that was part of Tiberiy Szilvashi and Leon Tarasevych's exhibition at the Center for Contemporary Art at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. After starting out with deconstructivism, stopping just short of naked destruction, Vova Vorotniiov, known by the pseudonym Lodek, became renowned as a street artist who helped to popularize graffiti. He founded the group Psia Krew and became its leader. Psia Krew's members included Sasha Kiot, URA, as well as another artist who worked under the alias "Homer." Homer's earliest work hints at the artist's future shift towards the world of contemporary art, where he would, in time, achieve significant success under his real name: Sasha Kurmaz.

The duo Interesting Fairy Tales was another unique phenomenon on the Ukrainian street art scene. After getting started in the 2000s with a more classical "street-writing" style, by the mid-2000s Volodymyr Manzhos (Waone) and Oleksii Bordusov (AEC) had begun to create figurative, narrative-based murals inspired by the Brazilian street artists and twins, OSGEMEOS, and the South-American school of contemporary

<sup>350</sup> There is still some confusion over the terminology used to describe street-based art. Generally, "graffiti art" relates to tags or murals that bear the name of the artist and are created using spray paint. "Street art" refers to artistic practice that places special emphasis on visual images. Street artists don't just use spray paint and other paints, but also stickers, stencils, and wallpaper paste, and they are often interacting with the surrounding environment, for example making street signs, or incorporating fortuitously placed trees into their final art piece. See: Naomi Rea, "Street Art Is a Global Commercial Juggernaut With a Diverse Audience. Why Don't Museums Know What to Do With It?," *Artnet News*, August 7, 2019.



APL315.  
UKRAINE. 2010.  
NITROENAMEL ON CANVAS. 200x100 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
MUSEUM OF ODESA MODERN ART.



SASHA KURMAZ.  
LOOK AT ME. 2013.  
A PUBLIC INTERVENTION.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

muralism. Interesting Fairy Tales' pieces are reminiscent of children's book illustrations that have been enlarged to a huge size.

The young artist APL135 appeared in Odesa in the second half of the 2000s. He started out as a "street bomber" and member of the small youth subculture of graffiti artists, though the artist was only in the beginning stages of his career when he succeeded in breaking into the museum and gallery scene. Once there—in contrast to most other artists who started out with graffiti—he didn't just bring a street aesthetic into the "white cube," rather he developed his own personal style of non-figurative painting that referenced street art, but didn't copy it.<sup>351</sup> APL315's education is key to understanding the artist's individual style. A professional biologist and entomologist who graduated from the invertebrate department, he created images in his work which, from afar, looked like the silhouettes of insects. The artist researched organic aesthetics and asked questions about the fragility of ecosystems that, while indifferent to humans, are under great threat of extinction in the age of the Anthropocene.

In the second half of the 2000s, Hamlet Zinkovsky practiced street art in Kharkiv. Zinkovsky's style was far removed from the artistic language of traditional graffiti artists. He preferred narrative murals whose content, as a rule, was deeply melancholic and Hamlet would include images of his namesake in his work. Over the last 15 years he has not tired of creating art that challenges the poor residents of gloomy high-rise buildings to think about the meaning of life, reminding them of the unavoidable loneliness and existential inescapability of human existence.

Roman Minin was another artist based in Kharkiv originally from the Donbas. He spent a long time finding his artistic voice, experimenting with elements of street art while at the same time flirting with the local art community and researching ideas around self-interest. At the very beginning of 2010, he began the art project *A Plan to Escape the Donbas Region*. In this work, which references the aesthetic of Fernand Léger, he combined elements of Christian iconography with his research on Donetsk miners, a topic close to the artist's heart. The eye-catching mixture of a laconic black and white color palette, a distinct emphasis on decoration alongside the artist's own secret language, which was purportedly used to disguise the "escape plan," brought the artist success after it was shown at the PinchukArtCentre in 2013 and helped set the tone for his future work.

In August 2010, Roman Minin and Hamlet Zinkivsky found themselves at the center of a scandal. As part of the Balaklava Odyssey festival, they painted inscriptions onto huge metal tanks in Sevastopol. The work was called *Preserving History* and appeared, at first glance, to be absurdist. However, in reality, it was political graffiti. Examples of the graffiti included: "Lenin has been moth balled," "Zhukov and other Hetmans," and "Beria's Ajika." The artists were attempting to talk to the city's inhabitants about their history and about the importance of remembering one's past. Their attempts failed; the city's local residents, along with the law enforcement agencies, reacted with hostility to Minin and Zinkovsky's artwork. The art project revealed the Crimean residents' pained rejection of any ironic remarks regarding their recent historical past, and on

<sup>351</sup> APL315, "Interview," *Art Ukraine* 18, no.5 (September–October 2010): 16–22.





VOVA VOROTNIIOV.  
*ORCHESTRAL MANEUVERS*. 2012.  
 VINZAVOD (WINE FACTORY), MOSCOW,  
 RUSSIA. PHOTO BY VOROTNIIOV.



HAMLET ZINKOVSKY AND ROMAN MININ.  
*PRESERVING HISTORY*. 2010.  
 A STREET ART PROJECT THAT WAS PART OF  
 THE 2ND BALAKLAVA ODYSSEY MEDIA AND  
 PERFORMANCE FESTIVAL. SEVASTOPOL, UKRAINE.



INTERESTING FAIRY TALES  
(AEC AND WAONE). 2008.  
MURAL FOR THE LAVRA GALLERY.  
KYIV, UKRAINE.

a micro level, it played out the identity drama which would precede the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

The trend of street art aligning with the gallery-institutional mainstream resulted in crisis. Street art quickly became commercialized. By the mid-2010s, the fashion for street art in Ukraine, in its legal mural-based form, had reached critical mass. Dozens of state-sanctioned art pieces adorned the facades of high-rise buildings in big cities. The majority of them were openly kitsch. Sensing that the traditional language of street art was becoming exhausted, the artists who had started out in street art began to move into new territory and migrated to post-graffiti art.

Post-street art was not limited to the city space. Today, many serious representatives of graffiti art are engaged in active pursuit of new forms of self-expression, beyond just a couple of spray-painted walls. This shift helped give rise to an entirely new world of post-graffiti art: from video, photography, and installations to land-art projects, performances, and art actions. Vorotniiov's work is an example of this new trajectory. He gradually lost interest in art that was strictly street-based and the artistic language of his projects became increasingly minimalist and conceptualist. In 2010, he moved definitively into the world of contemporary art and began creating performances and projects with a critical focus. One of Vorotniiov's breakthroughs came in 2013 when he was announced as a finalist for a young artists' prize at the PichukArt-Centre. The artist displayed his ingenious installation *Festive Whitewashing*, which was dedicated to the passion of Ukrainian municipal workers for painting trees and curbsides white at the beginning of spring. The project echoes REP's *Euroremont* with its reflection on the post-Soviet individual's love for cheap decoration in place of any kind of real change.

In the second half of the 2010s, an analogous evolution would take place in APL315's art. Both the gallery and the street would remain part of his life, but there would be a shift at the heart of his artistic explorations. The artist began working with tattoos, using the human body as a canvas or wall, transferring images and tags that had once lived on the street onto skin. The body became a street, and the street a body. Armed with a bravery learned on the graffiti scene, a readiness for new challenges, and the habit of long graffiti "raids" in the open air, Apl315 didn't abandon the street entirely, but began using an entomologist's net and a metal detector when creating new work. The members of Interesting Fairy Tales would become the most commercially successful artists from this scene. Their accessible figurative language, and the fairy tale-surrealist themes in their work, made their art palatable to an international mass audience. Both the group itself and its individual members quickly became a successful and recognized gallery-street brand.

# HIPSTERS, SOCIAL NETWORKING, AND A DELUGE OF PHOTOGRAPHS

Looking back at 2007, we see a world ruled by an unclouded faith in globalization and the financial progress that accompanied it. The poetry of the checkbook became the universal language of artistic expression. The fashionable trends of the time included uncompromising glamor, overconsumption, and the concept of “the end of history,” which also included the history of art in a formal sense. The global financial crisis took place just a year after the boom of 2007, paralyzing the art market and also undermining society’s faith in the status quo. For the first time, wealthy Westerners began to seriously think about how their familiar economic system could just be a bubble, that money could be virtual, and that excessive and thoughtless consumption could be a threat to their well-being. A new generation of millennials announced their arrival after the global financial crisis—the first generation who truly grew up online. This was a new type of person who held values that aligned with post-Fordian capitalism, with its emphasis on a creative economy, online discourse, and the principles of a shared economy.<sup>352</sup>

A new cultural hero arrived on the scene: the hipster. Their values included minimizing their spending on consumption, showing concern over how and where consumable products are made, exhibiting a demonstrative modesty combined with narcissism, and a preoccupation with technological gadgets. Naturally, this had an influence on the atmosphere of artistic society. The hipster, quite apart from what they actually did for a living, positioned themselves as a modern version of the traditional “bohemian artist,” even though this position was often of a superficial nature. Nonetheless, the influence of hipsters on the development of contemporary visual culture is hard to overstate. It was precisely at this time that a narrowly specialized section of professional society began to dictate the kind of images produced and the type of creativity in demand within mass culture.

In the second half of the 2000s, a colossal leap in technology prompted a revolution in photography. Until recently, photography had been an expensive pastime, and the time and energy it had taken to master analog cameras was simply incomparable with the simplicity of “digital.” By the mid-2000s, digital cameras had become available to the average consumer, as had computer technology, which simplified the photo-editing process, and also access to the internet, which allowed for photos to be shared instantaneously. Social-networking sites appeared where the photograph played a central role. In 2007, the first model of the iPhone went on sale, which was perhaps the most sought-after consumer item in history. Its multimedia possibilities and revolutionary interface had no less an effect on visual culture than Jan van Eyck’s innovations in oil painting.

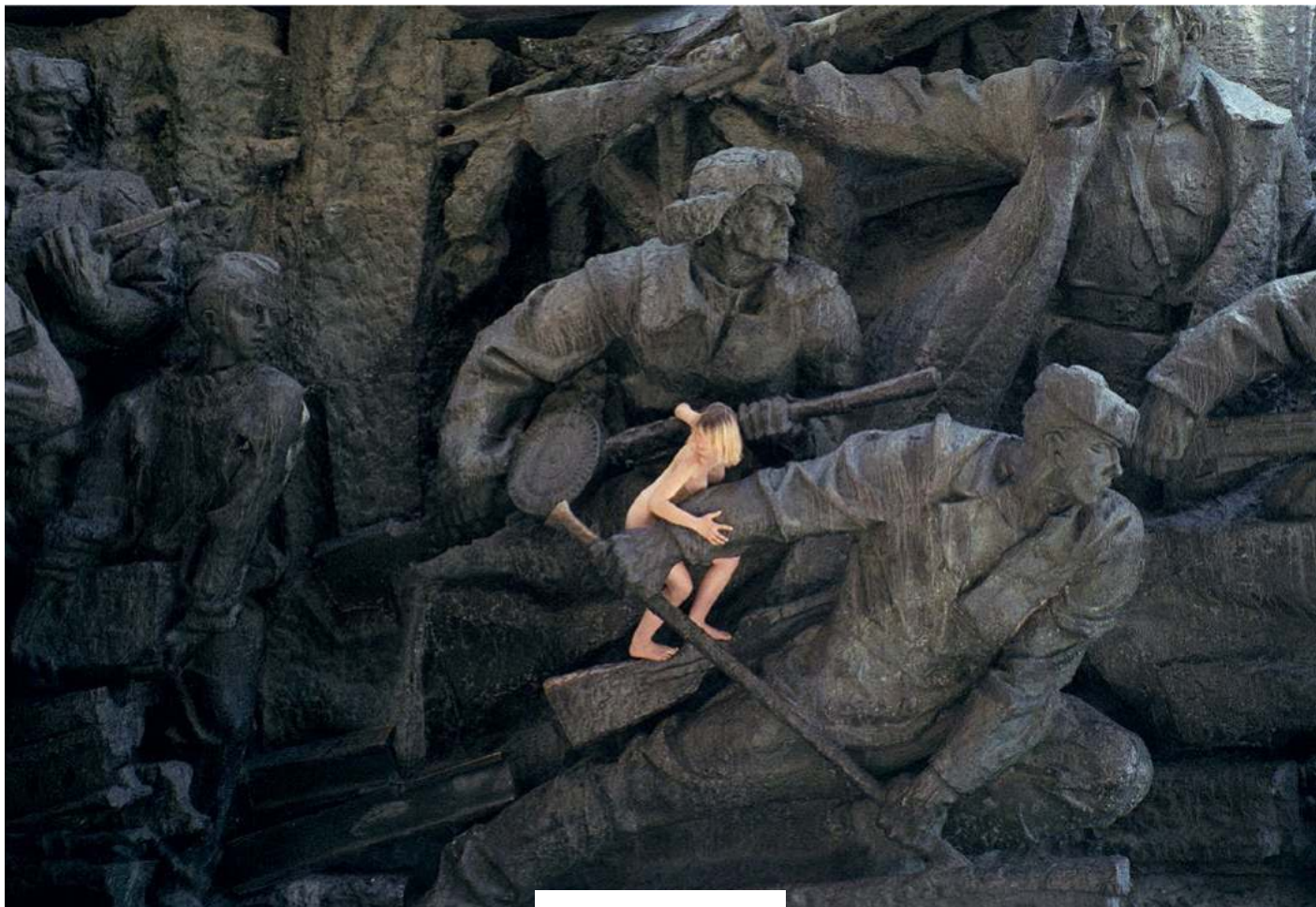
<sup>352</sup> To learn more about how post-Fordian capitalism incorporated strategies from contemporary art, see: Pascal Gielen, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Politics and Post-Fordism*, trans. Clare McGregor (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2015).



SYNCHRODOGS.  
FROM THE PROJECT *MISHA KOPTIEV*.  
2011. COLOR PHOTO.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS.



YAROSLAV SOLOP.  
*TROJAN HORSE*. 2014. DIGITAL PRINT  
ON A COLOR PHOTO. 60×90 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



SASHA KURMAZ.  
*UNTITLED*. 2011.  
COLOR PHOTO.



GORSAD KYIV.  
*BALLOON*. 2017.  
COLOR PHOTO.



GORSAD KYIV.  
*ANGEL*. 2017. COLOR PHOTO.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS.



The “selfie” generation’s egocentrism and familiarity with the virtual sphere fundamentally changed how an image was seen. This new, online way of thinking transformed the world of contemporary art<sup>353</sup> and influenced the language of photography in particular. With the arrival of the digital age, photography became ubiquitous and lost practically all connection with the material world. On the whole, photographs existed *on* the internet and *for* the internet. The individual photographic image was no longer valued for its unique nature, but instead for its ability to fit into the flowing current of digital information.

As they honed their individual craft, digital photographers often spontaneously recreated the history of photography in their work, but in a fraction of the time. Upon obtaining their first camera, virtually everybody began with formal experimentation in the spirit of Rodchenko, with some moving on to modest surrealism and so on. In the Ukrainian context, the majority of young photographers’ work evolved in a broadly similar direction, that is, towards an artistic language that was close to the work of Boris Mikhailov. This new Ukrainian photography closely resembled the work of that master of the Kharkiv school of photography, characterized by its interest in an “ugly” aesthetic, a pronounced sexuality, a neutral and apolitical viewpoint, and a love for the banal everyday. For some artists, the reference to Mikhailov was conscious, while others gained inspiration from the surge of creativity within the online Ukrainian photography community that grew up around the newly formed social networking sites. The mass of art brut style photography was close to the style of Mikhailov and other artists who had, since the Soviet period, been interested in understanding what constituted Soviet, and post-Soviet “trash.” Connecting with the general population, which had previously demanded a certain strength of will and communications know-how, had now become a voyeuristic exercise, just a few clicks of the mouse away. Gone was the need for a translator or a mediator; the universe of post-Soviet despair, with the kitsch baroque of its squalid interiors alongside direct quotes from all manner of strange characters could now be shared online directly by the people themselves.

A curious feature of this new generation of photographers was the ironic distance they maintained from their subject, which, paradoxically, likened their work to the post-media paintings of an older artistic generation. Those painters had “sort of” made paintings, while the new photographers “sort of” immersed themselves in a meaningless stream of internet trash and “sort of” put on shows inspired by it, all the while dressing in second-hand clothes from the 1980s and 1990s and wearing a mask of sincerity in order to disguise the emptiness of their online discourse. This helps explain why articles about this generation repeatedly highlighted the fact that a real hipster would never admit to being one. Representatives of this subculture were defined by their desire to appear as something other than what they were, while highlighting their uniqueness at the same time. They did all this while following the strictest stylistic and behavioral clichés, without the slightest deviation.

<sup>353</sup> “Today we start with self-globalization. Uploading our writing or artworks online means we are addressing a global audience, and thus avoiding having to start local first. Here the personal becomes the global, and the global personal.” See: Boris Groys, *V potoke* [In the flow] (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2018).

A new wave of young photographers emerged who were working in the space between contemporary art, fashion, and the “anti-glamor” aesthetic favored by cult international publications such as *Dazed and Confused*, *Vice*, and others. The group Synchronodogs appeared in 2008. In 2013, the duo of Tetiana Shchekhlova and Roman Noven from Western Ukraine took part in an exhibition of nominees for the young artists’ prize at the PinchukArtCentre. From that point on, the group became a recognized international brand.<sup>354</sup> One of Synchronodogs’ most striking projects was their photo series dedicated to Mykhailo Koptiev, a star of Kyiv’s alternative scene during the 2010s. Back in 1993, Koptiev had organized a theater of erotic fashion in Luhansk entitled *Orchids*, though it would be much later when Koptiev became a legend in Kyiv, only after his luxury-trash vintage photos of provocative shows from the 1990s became an internet sensation.<sup>355</sup> Synchronodogs’ series, shot in Luhansk at the beginning of the 2010s, demonstrated the hidden homoerotic life of a provincial, post-Soviet industrial city. It would only be a couple of years later when that same town would become the epicenter of a political and military earthquake.

Gorsad, which appeared in 2011, was another art group that was closely aligned to Synchronodogs. Their work was also a purely web-based phenomenon. At first, the artists oriented themselves towards an international audience, bypassing local galleries and art institutions. Gorsad’s members included Maria Romaniuk, Viktor Vasylyev, and Yulian Romaniuk. They were also published in the same fashionable hipster publications,<sup>356</sup> creating bright images based on the poetry of the absurd, youth aesthetics, and a love for the chaos of post-Soviet trash. This apolitical, and non-judgmental view of the “wild, wild East,” which was at the same time aware of its own exoticism, brought the group significant international acclaim in the 2010s.

In 2011, the photographer Yaroslav Solop began his long-running project *Plasticine Mythology*. While Solop worked within a typical “millennial” aesthetic, he avoided making his work overly fashion focused. He was more interested in conceptual photography and tried, with the help of his photographs, to talk about online corporeality, flexible gender stereotypes, and survival in a post-culture world. Another figure working with conceptual photography at the end of the 2000s was Oleksii Salmanov, recipient of the PinchukArtCentre’s special prize in 2009.

Sasha Kurmaz was a former member of the graffiti art scene, and his work demonstrated the most coherent synthesis of photography’s new aesthetic with a conceptual methodology taken from contemporary art. Kurmaz used his street-art background in his work. His best projects were based on the principles of street intervention, for example, Kurmaz illegally replaced public advertisements with his own photographs, colonizing advertising spaces and light boxes, reappropriating them to spread his ideas and images. This search for an alternative space to show and present photographs,

<sup>354</sup> For more about the group and their work see: “Interviu s Synchronodogs: ob iskusstve, mode i uspekhe” [An interview with Synchronodogs: On art, fashion, and success], *Vogue.ua*, June 30, 2016.

<sup>355</sup> Mykhailo Koptiev and his theater became an important part of Kyiv’s art scene in the mid-2010s. See: Anna Tsyba, “Mikhail Koptev: ‘Nekotorym bylo stydno sest v zal, i oni smotreli moe shou, priachas za kulisami’” [Mykhailo Koptiev: “Some people were embarrassed to come to my show, and they watched it hiding in the wings”], *Bird in Flight*, March 13, 2018.

<sup>356</sup> Charlie Allenby, “Gorsad Are Making Love, Not War,” *Dazed Digital*, May 8, 2014.



SERGEY MELNITCHENKO.  
*SCHWARZENEGGER IS MY IDOL*. 2012–2013.  
 COLOR PHOTO. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



VLADYSLAV KRASNOSHCHOK (THE AWL GROUP).  
 FROM THE SERIES *THE NEGATIVES ARE PRESERVED*.  
 2011. A PHOTO FROM THE EARLY 20th CENTURY  
 THAT HAS BEEN DRAWN ON. FROM THE  
 COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF THE KHARKIV  
 SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

leaving behind the more traditional mediums of the internet, books, and the white cube, really resonated with the demands of the period.

In the early 2010, a young artist from Mykolaiv by the name of Sergey Melnitchenko arrived on the scene. His series *Schwarzenegger is My Idol* (2012) offered a portrait of post-Soviet provincial youth, for whom Arnold Schwarzenegger represented a dream of a different future, a real-life superhero who inspired them to transform themselves and their bodies. While making the series, Melnitchenko became acquainted with the photographer Roman Piatkovka.

Piatkovka was from the second generation of the Kharkiv school of photography. In the early 1990s, he created a series of work in which he replicated techniques used in the past by more mature artists. Nonetheless, Piatkovka was a charismatic pedagogue and kulturträger in his own right, and from the late 2000s into the 2010s he educated an entire generation of upcoming artists. In 2010, Piatkovka helped create the Ukrainian Photographic Alternative (UPHA). He did this together with Misha Pedan, another representative of the Kharkiv school of photography's second wave, and also the photographers Kostia Smolianynov and Oleksandr Liapin. The organization was founded in opposition to the official National Union of Ukrainian Photo Artists and mostly existed online until the end of 2010.<sup>357</sup> Dozens of photographers informally associated themselves with the alternative organization, rejecting the primacy of “beauty” and technical skill when taking photos. Instead, these photographers employed a new, online way of seeing in their work, and in some cases were inspired by the way the Kharkiv school of photography had developed their photos.

In 2010, the Awl (Shylo) group emerged amidst a surge in interest in Lomography and the rediscovery of analogue photography in the digital age. Serhii Lebedynsky, Vladyslav Krasnoshchok, and Vadym Trykoz, members of Awl, all entered into creative dialogue with the work of Boris Mikhailov<sup>358</sup> and positioned themselves as the successors of the Kharkiv school of photography. They used black-and-white analog photographs in their work, while also coloring their photographs themselves, that most famous conceit of the Kharkiv school. Awl's pseudo-vintage pieces brought them success on the international scene, however it is more difficult to categorize them within a local context. Essentially, their work is a consciously postmodern repetition of classical elements from the Kharkiv school, rather than being its living and breathing descendent. At the end of the 2010s, sustained interest in the Kharkiv school of the past gave Serhii Lebedynsky and Vladyslav Krasnoshchok the idea to set up the Museum of the Kharkiv School of Photography.<sup>359</sup>

<sup>357</sup> The artists Yaroslav Solop and Mykhailo Buksha helped secure the organization's status as an independent entity. At the end of 2018, they brought out the book *UPHA. Made in Ukraine*. For more details see: Valerii Dorosh, “O knize pro ukrainskuiu sovremennuiu fotografii: Misha Buksha i Yaroslav Solop” [On the book about contemporary Ukrainian photography: Misha Buksha and Yaroslav Solop], *L'Officiel Ukraine*, October 24, 2018.

<sup>358</sup> For example, members of Awl created the project *Finished Dissertation*, which visually and conceptually drew on Boris Mikhailov's *Unfinished Dissertation*. See: Alina Sanduliak, “Gruppa ‘Shylo’: ‘Ironiia — eto chisto kharkovskaia shtuka’” [Awl group: Irony is purely a Kharkiv thing], *Bird in Flight*, July 29, 2015.

<sup>359</sup> For more information see the official website of the Museum of the Kharkiv School of Photography, <https://moksop.org/>.

# THE NEW LEFT VS. THE NEW RIGHT

The late 2000s marked a period of unexpected commercial success for the former members of the New Wave, as well as heightened interest in the political art of those artists who emerged after the Orange Revolution. Predictably, there was also a growing rift between artistic generations at this time. Older artists played to the markets and stuck to painting, while the younger generation strove to conform to the intellectual climate in the West, espousing a leftist agenda and an interest in non-speculative artistic practice, while also criticizing established art institutions. For the perestroika generation, the political viewpoint of younger artists triggered their own trauma of growing up in the late USSR when they were surrounded by the vast state machine pumping out its empty leftist slogans. They did not understand how it was possible to defend leftist ideas while knowing about the crimes of totalitarianism. For the young artists, not knowing the USSR, those same leftist ideas held a completely different set of connotations. They were concerned with the increasingly radical and rightist atmosphere in society, with the problem of homophobia, and so on.

The Soviet universe began to seem like some kind of mystical Atlantis when viewed from the post-crisis years of the late 2000s. The majority of artists who had reached maturity by the end of the 2000s and early 2010s had been born during the Soviet period. For them, the USSR represented an irretrievably lost childhood. The poverty and ideological vacuum of post-Soviet society in the wake of capitalism's great victory left only questions in place of any sense of optimism for that generation. The most expressive artworks in this context were REP's art projects, the individual work of Nikita Kadan and Yevgenia Belorusetz, the exhibitions put on by the curator's society Hudrada, art by the son of Illia Chychkan, the anarchist and antifascist Davyd Chychkan, and also the initiatives of the architects Oleksandr Burlaka and Ivan Melnychuk together with the Group of Subjects art collective they were part of.

Anatoly Ulyanov, the bright young art critic and blogger of the 2000s, was focused primarily on fighting the growing conservatism within Ukrainian society, in particular the Commission for the Protection of Public Morality. At the beginning of the 2000s, the student of the Kyiv Institute of Journalism created the online resource *proza.com.ua* with his friend, the photographer Natalia Masharova.<sup>360</sup> Ulyanov became famous as the country's most ambitious literary critic, but it wasn't long before he began focusing on contemporary art and writing scathing, critical reviews of art projects from the time when "art-glamor" was flourishing in Ukraine. Ulyanov tried his hand at performance, but his central medium remained text. The young author's brave nihilism, combined with *Proza's* focus on shocking content, resonated with the tastes of the country's growing online audience. Ulyanov became a public figure and often appeared on TV criticizing the actions of the morality commission, as well as Kyiv's odious mayor Leonid Chernovetsky. After being attacked by members of the Bratstvo (Brotherhood) party, Ulyanov fled the country, *Proza* was shut down, and its writers moved on to other projects.

<sup>360</sup> Anatoly Ulyanov, "Istoriia moego bezhenstva" [The story of my flight], *Dadakinder.com*, July 21, 2018, <https://dadakinder.com/txt/2018/7/case-of-anatoli-ulyanov>.



ANATOLY ULYANOV. 2005.  
PHOTO BY NATALIA MASHAROVA.



ANATOLY ULYANOV.  
GLASS CLOUD BY THE DUCK AVANT-GARDE. PART OF THE ART  
PROJECT KAZANTYP-ART (CURATED BY ALISA LOZHKINA).  
2006. PHOTO BY NATALIA MASHAROVA.



ANATOLII BELOV.  
FROM THE PROJECT *HOMOPHOBIA TODAY, GENOCIDE TOMORROW*.  
2010. STICKER. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



IVAN SEMESIUK.  
HOPAK. 2012. OIL ON CANVAS. 80x60 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF ANTIN MUKHARSKY.





OLEKSA MANN.  
THE KNIGHT AND URBANIST YAREMA VYSHNEVETSKY  
(ALSO SPELLED JEREMI WIŚNIOWIECKI IN POLISH. [T.N.]),  
DESCENDENT OF RURIK AND GEDIMINAS,  
BURNS A FUCKING VILLAGE. 2012.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 40x60 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF OLEKSANDR ROITBURD.

Ukrainian society also witnessed the resurgence of the far right. In 2009, following a talk about homophobia at Kyiv's Ya Gallery, far-right radicals attacked the gallery and smashed its windows. A week later, the space was set on fire after a Molotov cocktail was thrown through a window and someone wrote the slogan "No to Sodomy. OUN"<sup>361</sup> on the walls of the gallery. In response to this act, Anatolii Belov created the art piece *Homophobia Today, Genocide Tomorrow!* Belov then placed his expressive drawings in public spaces, spreading queer ideas and questioning the conventions of received societal norms. That same year, as part of Lviv's Contemporary Art Week, Belov displayed his art project *My Porn, My Right*. The project was a response to the passing of "law 404," which made keeping pornography on personal computers illegal.

In the second half of the 2000s, a group emerged that was diametrically opposed to the artists and critics on the left and united under the banner of conducting research into the phenomenon of "greed." Several artists who had simultaneously developed an interest in folk life in contemporary Ukraine then went on to unite under the aegis of the Greed-Art movement. Ivan Semesiuk, Oleksa Mann, Nina Murashkina, Serhii Koliada, Andrii Yermolenko, Ihor Pereklita, Serhii Khokhol, Roman Minin, and others worked under the leadership of the showman and ideologue Antin Mukharsky. From 2009, Mukharsky organized exhibitions where the group displayed paintings, posters, and installations, focusing on the everyday life of the Ukrainian lumpen. Their project, with its roots in show biz, stood out for its extremely provocative nature. The group's exhibitions were not without wit, but they lacked a sense of meaningfulness and depth. With a complete lack of reflection, their humorous caricatures, focus on the aesthetic of internet-based demotivational images, cheap prints, and kitsch came across as a joyful statement of fact rather than a specific criticism of society. As a result, the artists of this movement were labeled as members of the conservative right.

2013 saw the release of the anthology *Greedology*,<sup>362</sup> which explored the phenomenon of greed and self-interest. Famous art critics, artists, and literary figures came together to author the collection. *Greedology* was more interesting for its literary-artistic initiatives rather than the group's artistic output, which was oriented towards exhibitions at museums of contemporary art. On the literary side, Ivan Semesiuk and Oleksa Mann gradually evolved to become the group's strongest "greedy" authors. A turning point in their biographies came after the mass protests began on the Maidan in 2013.

## ART INSTITUTIONS AND THEIR CRITICS

The end of the 2000s saw the chaotic development of several art institutions. The fashion for contemporary art, set by Viktor Pinchuk's center, helped stimulate an art market and prompted the immediate appearance of several new and ambitious galleries. As strange as it may seem, the most dynamic commercial art project of the 2010s

<sup>361</sup> OUN—the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists.

<sup>362</sup> *Zhlobolohiia* [Greedology] (Kyiv: Nash format, 2013).



ARTEM VOLOKITIN.  
MATRYOSHKA DOLLS. 2009. OIL ON CANVAS.  
255x190 CM. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



OKSANA BRIUKHOVETSKA.  
*BODY NO. 2010. A GRAPHIC ALBUM.*  
PHOTO, GOUACHE, AND INK ON PAPER.  
PART OF THE EXHIBITION *UKRAINIAN BODY*. 2012.  
PHOTO BY MAKSYM BILOUSOV.

did not have an “institutional home.” The art dealer Ihor Abramovych dealt in new Ukrainian painting for over ten years, while managing to preserve a measure of independence from any specific art institutions. At the end of the 2000s, the liveliest art space to appear was the Bottega art gallery, which by the 2010s had been renamed the Shcherbenko Art Center.

Non-commercial projects also grew up around this time. The final collapse of the Center for Contemporary Art at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (formerly the Soros Center) in 2008 helped breathe life into two other art initiatives. The Foundation Center for Contemporary Art (CSM) became its direct descendent. At the end of the 2000s and into the 2010s, it played host to exhibitions and educational projects. In 2010, one of the heads of the foundation, Kateryna Botanova, set up *Korydor*, a critical online journal about contemporary culture.

From 2008, the Center of Visual Culture (CVC) took over the premises of the old CCA. This new institution operated out of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy building until 2012. The CVC’s founders were Vasyl Cherepanin, a young lecturer from the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy’s cultural studies department, and Oleksiy Radynsky, who was also a graduate of cultural studies. Very quickly a group of young intellectuals gathered around the CVC. The CVC’s emergence on the scene was closely linked to the old CCA that had existed in the same space. On the other hand, there was one individual who played an important role in its history. From the end of the 1990s, the cultural studies department of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy became one of the centers for the dissemination of contemporary philosophical ideas. This was thanks to the work of the charismatic Oleksandr Ivashyna who was passionate about contemporary philosophical concepts. In a situation where Ukraine lacked an adequate institution for art education and where the conceptual components of contemporary artistic practice were often more important than the visual, the cultural studies students coming out of Ivashyna’s department were more prepared for the challenges of modernity than the students of the conservative art academy. This was how the CVC appeared in the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy building, going on to become an important center for Kyiv’s cultural and intellectual life from the late 2000s to the mid-2010s. The group of ambitious culturologists and activists that gathered around the CVC stood out for their leftist views and the emphasis they placed on non-spectacle-based art. The most interesting projects created in this context were by curator and artist Oksana Briukhovetska and also curator and culturologist Lesia Kulchynska. From 2009, the CVC group developed close relations with those working around the left-leaning, sociopolitical, Polish journal *Krytyka Polityczna*. From 2011 to 2014, five issues of a Ukrainian-language version of the journal were published, and after 2014 they would continue to be published online.

On February 10, 2012, the president of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy Serhii Kvit shut down the *Ukrainian Body* exhibition that had been organized by the CVC. The curatorial project created by Briukhovetska, Serhii Klymko, and Kulchynska was dedicated to investigating corporeality in contemporary Ukrainian culture. After the exhibition was closed, the CVC was denied further access to the old academic building that had housed the Center since 2008, and the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts prior to that. This event prompted wide public discussion about censorship on the Ukrainian art scene. In particular, the president of the academic institution’s comment, “It’s not

an exhibition, it's shit," shocked the viewing public.<sup>363</sup> The famous international curator David Elliott, along with a host of authoritative intellectuals, came out in defense of the exhibition.<sup>364</sup>

The Mystetskyi Arsenal, the country's biggest institution for art exhibitions, fully opened its doors to the public in 2010. The Arsenal hosted large-scale "blockbuster" exhibitions that were, on the whole, dedicated to contemporary art. The first Kyiv biennale of contemporary art, *Arsenale-2012*, marked the pinnacle of exhibitions organized by the institution thus far. Around 100 artists took part in the project, which was initiated by the director of the art center Natalia Zabolotna and curated by David Elliott. *Arsenale-2012* marked an important precedent for a public institution organizing a state-funded international contemporary art exhibition. "Blockbuster" exhibitions of contemporary art at the Mystetskyi Arsenal became a symbol of the period and drew the ire of artist-activists who launched a wave of criticism at existing art institutions. July 2013 bore witness to one of the biggest scandals of the decade. The scandal was a result of the tangled knot of complicated relationships between artists and art institutions with all of their associated conflicts and contradictions, combined with many years of legally unregulated interaction between different members of the art scene.

Volodymyr Kuznetsov, a member of the REP, was asked to create the large-scale mural *Koliivshchyna. The Last Judgment* at the Arsenal for the exhibition *The Great and the Majestic* which was to commemorate the anniversary of the Baptism of Kyivan Rus. Working firmly within the style of Orthodox iconography, the artist depicted the highest church hierarchs and their security detail boiling in a hellish cauldron.<sup>365</sup> The head of the exhibition, Natalia Zabolotna, announced that critical artworks would not be shown and gave a hurried order for Kuznetsov's mural to be covered in black paint.

<sup>363</sup> Oleh Mylynchuk, "Serhii Kvit pro vystavku 'Ukrainske Tilo': 'Tse ne vystavka, a laino'" [Serhii Kvit on the *Ukrainian Body* exhibition: "It's not an exhibition, it's shit"], *Gazeta.ua*, February 10, 2012.

<sup>364</sup> Oleksandr Ivashyna's text about the exhibition helps give a diagnosis for Ukrainian society, which was increasingly showing signs of degradation following its various transformations: "The *Ukrainian Body* exhibition represents a wavering line between human and non-human. ... There is no humanity when the unsightly body is covered up. There is humanity in observing the decay and 'death' of the collective body, when there is something thing to feel ashamed of. Today, it is impossible to insulate oneself from both the invasion of images pertaining to 'indecent' bodies, and from the truly traumatic state of civic life. ... The participants of this exhibition feel a kinship with the reality of the Ukrainian body; they can both feel ashamed of it, and they can also delight in it. But for them, the birth of a new Ukrainian body is impossible without constant attention, suffering, and the observation of its mutilated remains." Quoted from: Oleksandr Ivashyna, "Horhona ukrainskoi kultury" [The gorgon of Ukrainian culture], in *Ukrainske tilo: Kataloh vystavky* [The Ukrainian Body: exhibition catalogue] (Kyiv: Naukovo-doslidnytskyi tsentr vizualnoi kultury, 2012).

<sup>365</sup> The destruction of Kuznetsov's mural was not the first time in history when a high-powered individual panicked at the sight of an artistic image. It was just like in classic depictions of the final judgment in hell where a grotesque and naïve monster devours those more grotesque and naïve than himself. The tradition of depicting sinners from among high church hierarchs and nobles has its roots in the distant past. It should be noted that this type of iconography has never been looked upon favorably by those in power. One of the first documented cases of destroying an image of the final judgement in Ukraine took place in 1774. In the choir transept of St. Sophia's Cathedral, the part of a fresco that depicted nobles burning in hell fire was painted over on the orders of the Metropolitan. A large collection of final judgement scenes is preserved at the Sheptytsky National Museum in Lviv. In several of them, restorers found evidence that scenes depicting hell had been painted over at a later date.



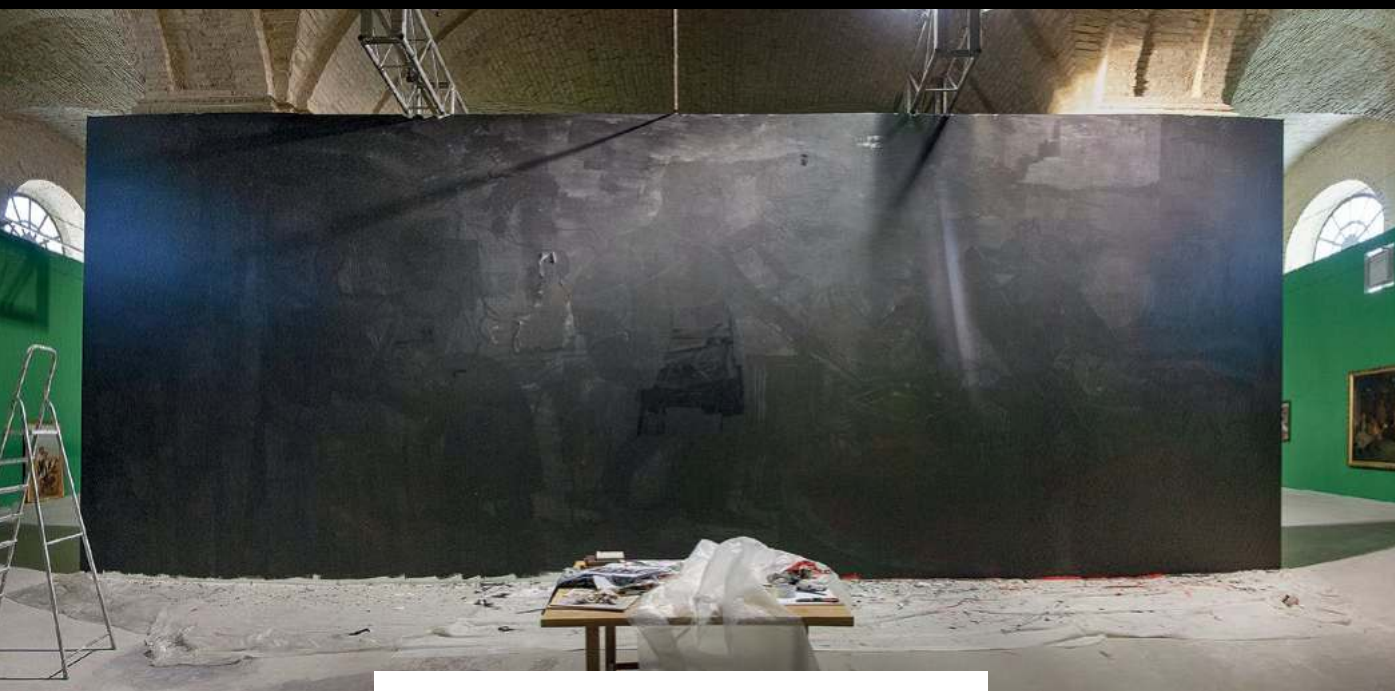
ALEVTINA KAKHIDZE.  
PERFORMANCE OF *DUCHAMP* AS PART OF THE FIRST KYIV  
BIENNALE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, *ARSENALE-2012*.  
MYSTETSKYI ARSENAL, KYIV. PHOTO BY MAKSYM BILOUSOV.



SERHII PETLIUK.  
*DREAMS OF EUROPE*. VIDEO INSTALLATION AS PART OF THE SPECIAL EXHIBITION  
FOR THE FIRST KYIV BIENNALE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, *ARSENALE-2012*.  
MYSTETSKYI ARSENAL, KYIV. PHOTO BY MAKSYM BILOUSOV.



VOLODYMYR KUZNETSOV IN FRONT OF  
PART OF HIS WORK *KOLIIVSHCHYNA. THE LAST  
JUDGMENT*. 2013. MYSTETSKYI ARSENAL, KYIV.  
PHOTO BY MAKSYM BILOUSOV.



VOLODYMYR KUZNETSOV'S *KOLIIVSHCHYNA.  
THE LAST JUDGMENT* AFTER IT WAS PAINTED OVER. 2013.  
MYSTETSKYI ARSENAL, KYIV. PHOTO BY MAKSYM BILOUSOV.



On the same day, she gave an interview in which she called her actions “performance.” This incident did great damage to the reputation of the Mystetskyi Arsenal and caused a wave of protest that resulted in artists boycotting the institution for several years amidst ongoing demands for official acknowledgement of censorship and vandalism.

The scandal surrounding Kuznetsov anticipated not only the artistic, but society-wide upheaval which would begin in Ukraine just a couple of months later. Here, as in the events described above, it all began with a sense of deep discontent with those in power (rumor had it that President Viktor Yanukovich was to attend the exhibition opening). And once again, it was social media that provided the main platform for the viral spread of information and discussion.

## CHAPTER 3.

# BETWEEN A WAR AND A RAVE: THE 2013 REVOLUTION AND BEYOND

The 2013–2014 Ukrainian Revolution and the tragic events that followed, including the annexation of Crimea and military engagement in the country's east, became one of the most important, fruitful, and complicated periods in the history of new Ukrainian art. On the one hand, it was a time of surging emotions when many artists rediscovered the meaning of patriotism and became directly involved in revolutionary and military campaigns; on the other, this was nothing like the carnival of 2004. This surge in patriotism, without which the revolution or the military operations that followed would not have been possible, led to the gradual radicalization of right-leaning sections of society and a heightened nationalism. The logical conclusion of this was a rushed process of decommunization, which led to yet another attempt to erase the country's historical past, a past that had already survived a multitude of similar episodes during the 20th century.

Contemporary Ukrainian art anticipated the coming social upheaval long before the beginning of revolutionary events in Kyiv. Nikita Kadan's artwork *Treatment Room* (2009–2010) was one of the art pieces that tapped into the growing discontent and tension in Ukrainian society, as well as the threat of police violence. Kadan's artwork featured a series of prints on dining plates dedicated to the theme of police torture. Other artworks in this vein included Mykola Ridnyi's *Water Erodes Stone*, which was nominated for the PinchukArtPrize in 2013, Vasyl Tsaholov's canvas paintings for his series *Ghost of the Revolution* (2013), as well as Nikita Kadan, Mykola Hrokh, and Yevgenia Belorusets's exhibition *Before the Execution*, which opened at the Karas gallery in October 2013, right on the eve of events on the Maidan. "The specter of strength and rectitude looms on the horizon,"<sup>366</sup> wrote Belorusets in a piece for the exhibition. Kadan presented a series of watercolors for the exhibition entitled *Controlled Coincidences* (2013), which were dedicated to violence, something that would soon erupt in the political sphere.

<sup>366</sup> Yevgenia Belorusets, "Vystavka 'Pered kaznio'. Chast pervaia" [The 'Before the Execution' exhibition: Part 1], *Prostory*, November 7, 2013.



VASYL TSAHOLOV.  
*MOLOTOV COCKTAIL*. FROM THE SERIES *GHOST OF THE REVOLUTION*. 2013. OIL ON CANVAS. 251×175 CM.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF EDUARD SURZHYK.



MAKSYM MAMSIKOV.  
*BEACH*. 2012.  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS. 140×160 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



NIKITA SHALENNY.  
FROM THE SERIES *WHERE IS YOUR BROTHER?*  
2013. COLOR PHOTO. 150x200 CM.  
FROM THE MOCAK COLLECTION, KRAKOW, POLAND.



MYROSLAV VAIDA.  
*FOREST*. 2012. INSTALLATION AS PART OF THE *FOREST*  
EXHIBITION IN THE MALA GALLERY AT THE MYSTETSKYI ARSENAL.  
PHOTO BY MAKSYM BILOUSOV.



MYKOLA RIDNYI.  
*WATER ERODES STONE*. 2013. INSTALLATION.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PINCHUKARTCENTRE.  
PHOTO BY SERHII ILLIN.

Nikita Shalenny, an artist from Donetsk, also created work on the eve of and during the Maidan protests. His art was striking for its ability to tap into the spirit of the time. In December 2013, he displayed his art project *Where is Your Brother?*, which was a series of sophisticated drawings taken from the lives of “new Ukrainians.” The project’s central heroes were the officers of the Berkut riot police unit, who would very soon play a deplorable role in the history of the Maidan. Shalenny’s second project to predict the future was *Catapult*, which featured a small model of a catapult that he created in September 2013 with the help of an engineer from the Yuzhmash factory.<sup>367</sup> Just a few months later, catapults would become one of the symbols of the resistance on the Maidan.

## ART AT THE BARRICADES

At first, the protests gathered momentum on social-networking sites and were actively supported by the creative classes. At this stage, the protest was entirely peaceful, and it looked like 2013 would follow the same pattern as 2004. The so-called “Euro-Revolution” was initially limited to lively dancing, joyful meet-ups between members of the art scene in the spirit of the *Occupy* movement, and discussions about the fate of humanity over hot cups of tea and revolutionary sandwiches. Oleksandr Roitburd was one of the first artists to step out onto this carnivalesque Maidan. He took an active part in the first wave of protests, which were joyful, pacifist, and small. Roitburd’s activity on Facebook became so popular that in just a few days he became a hero of the Maidan and the intellectual leader (or ruler!) of a creative class, which actively supported the idea of European integration on both social-networking sites and the Maidan itself.

The protests of 2013 were not limited to a harmless carnival, and on the night of 30 November the government began brutally dispersing students on the Maidan. The next day proved to be a turning point when a huge crowd of intellectuals gathered on Mykhailivska Square and barricades were quickly erected on the Maidan. Within the first few days of the protests the *Straik-Plakat* (Strike-Poster) group appeared on Facebook, where open-access revolutionary protest posters created by members of the country’s creative community were uploaded throughout the following months. The group’s posters included a portrait of Ukraine’s president with a red clown’s nose as well as the poster “I am a drop in the ocean,” which was a reference to the “warm ocean strategy”<sup>368</sup> that became popular in the early stages of the revolution and denoted a peace-loving and positive protest.

After the students were violently dispersed, a new stage of the Maidan protests began, marked by the construction of ultra-aesthetically pleasing ice barricades and the assembly of a national “art piece” which became known as *Yolka* (Christmas tree

<sup>367</sup> A Ukrainian state-owned aerospace manufacturer. [T.N.]

<sup>368</sup> This was the idea that the protesting should be welcoming and peaceful, and fully surround and oversaturate the “system.” [T.N.]

in Russian). A characteristic feature of the 2013–2014 Maidan protests was their complete aestheticization. The protest city behind the barricades became an all-encompassing art installation clearly visible from the staged media shots taken by the revolution's foot soldiers. Overall, the Maidan's aesthetic invoked an anti-utopia that was futuristic, yet harkened back to medieval times. Indeed, culturologists led by Umberto Eco had only recently been predicting the arrival of such a time.

Naturally, the protest prompted a wave of conceptual creativity from the Ukrainian populace. Over the course of two months, a whole array of art actions were staged on the country's central square, several of which were seen by the entire world. As a rule, the organizers of these art actions were members of the public, not "professional" artists, but people who had chosen artistic methods to convey and share their civic position. On 7 December 2013, Markiyan Matsekh from Lviv did one such art action that garnered a lot of publicity. He played a piano outside the office of the President of Ukraine. The photograph of a young man playing Chopin in front of a wall of state security forces set the internet alight and became a symbol of peaceful civic protest.

On 29 December 2013, another celebrated civic stunt entitled *The Kingdom of Darkness is Surrounded* was held in Kyiv's government quarter. The aim of the stunt organized by the Maidan's Civic Sector was to show those defending power their own faces, and also to redirect the negative energy given off by the security forces back onto them. The stunt's participants carried mirrors and pointed them towards the row of police officers guarding the government quarter, a part of the city, which, following the dispersal of demonstrators, had become a true symbol of the kingdom of darkness.

At the very beginning of the protests, a group of young artists appeared who had formerly been part of the Greed-Art scene and associated with the unofficial Bacteria Gallery. The group's most active members were Oleksa Mann, Ivan Semesiuk, and Andrii Yermolenko. In 2013, they had announced their arrival on the art scene with their shocking pieces, which played ironically with the most unsightly aspects of new Ukrainian reality, that is, the thugs, schmucks, and other low-life inhabitants of the edges of large Ukrainian cities. Semesiuk and his fellow artist had also created slogans such as "Freedom or death" or "Freedom or everyone can go f\*ck themselves" long before the artists reappeared with full force on Kyiv's Maidan. These old slogans were defined by their national anarchist flavor and abundance of ironically employed foul language. They also added a certain color to the bright and memorable texts that Semesiuk and Mann regularly posted online. For those artists who never abandoned the barricades on the Maidan, not even in the bloodiest days of the protests, this was their time to shine. They even organized an improvised gallery and communications center right on the edge of the Maidan, where Khreshchatyk Street runs past the square. The communication center was given the name the Artist's Barbican.<sup>369</sup> The Artist's Barbican was hastily built from industrial pallets and sheets of plywood and was, for a long time, the center of gravity for the creative youth that gathered on the square. The improvised street gallery showed the work of Mann, Semesiuk, Yermolenko as well as Vitalii Kravets, Lena Dubrova, and other artists. A flash-fiction festival

<sup>369</sup> Barbican, or barbacane, is an element of medieval fortifications, designed to defend a city's gates.





MAKSYM BILOUSOV.  
FROM THE SERIES *GUARDS OF THE MAIDAN*. 2013–2014.  
COLOR PHOTO. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



MARKIYAN MATSEKH  
(WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF OLEH MATSEKH AND ANDRII MEAKOVSKY).  
DOCUMENTATION OF THE PROTEST ACTION *A PIANO FOR THE BERKUT*.  
7 DECEMBER 2013. OUTSIDE THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT OF UKRAINE.  
PHOTO BY ANDRII MEAKOVSKY.



A PORTION OF THE *MEZHYHIRYA CODE* EXHIBITION  
(CURATED BY OLEKSANDR ROITBURD AND ALISA LOZHKINA)  
AT THE NATIONAL ART MUSEUM OF UKRAINE, APRIL 2014.  
PHOTO BY OLEKSANDR BURLAKA.



SERHII LEBEDYNSKY (THE AWL GROUP).  
FROM THE SERIES *EUROMAIDAN*. 2014.  
BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTO.  
FROM THE MUSEUM COLLECTION OF THE  
KHARKIV SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHY.



ROMAN MYKHAILOV.  
*SHADOWS*. 2014. BURNT WOOD.

and lectures were also held there. It was also worth noting that the Barbican had its own stove, which, when it was freezing cold, proved to be quite an important factor in attracting those concerned with creating art. Even before the revolution, the artists of the Barbican had worn the mask of the “right,” albeit with a certain sense of irony. Yet on the Maidan with its ultra-nationalist slogans, these artists felt significantly more confident and at home in comparison to the artists of the radical left.

The famous Kyiv artist Ilya Isupov became one of the most energetic members of the Maidan. Aside from taking part in the protests, Isupov posted a highly topical series of pictures on Facebook. His work *Happy New Year* caught the public’s attention. It depicted the country’s president holding a hunting rifle next to some dead wild boars, while a special forces unit stands in the background.

The Odesan Ihor Husiev suffered together with the Maidan from a distance. Alongside his striking painting series *Knights of the Revolution*, which the artist began in early 2014 under the influence of the Maidan’s aesthetic, he wrote a series of short poetic vignettes on Facebook, themed around the revolution. These poems were then included in the collection *Laikkhokku* (Like-a-Haiku).<sup>370</sup> Here are two poems from Husiev’s *Revokhokku* (Rev-Haiku) series:

*As if glued to the screen  
The tea leaves go cold  
My heart is on the Maidan*

\*\*\*

*You called me at night  
Candles and a couple of cocktails  
The third was a Molotov*

One of the key features of the Maidan protests was their media-centric nature. Never before had political events in Ukraine, nor indeed the documentation of public unrest, been so aestheticized. Thousands of photographs were taken on the Maidan during some of the fieriest moments of the protests. The fiercer the opposition between the government and the protestors, the more striking and cinematographic its documentation became. As a result of the Maidan’s strange gravitational pull, the protests saw the creation of a significant body of video and photo material, some of which was even taken during the protests’ saddest and ugliest moments. Eminent artists, alongside news agency photographers and simple amateurs, all fought for the perfect shot. Those who succeeded in capturing the most interesting photographs from that winter included Serhii Bratkov, Boris Mikhailov, Vladyslav Krasnoshchok and Serhii Lebedynsky, Oleksandr Burlaka and Sasha Kurmaz, Oleksii Salmanov, Kostiantyn Strilets, and Oleksandr Chekmenev.

The Kyiv artist Vlada Ralko subtly conveyed the growing sense of tragedy associated with the Maidan and the events that followed it. Her art project *Kyiv Diary* was based on her daily observations of how the situation was developing in Ukraine. Ralko

<sup>370</sup> Ihor Husiev, *Laikkhokku 2013–2015* [Like-a-Haiku, 2013–2015], Dymchuk Gallery, 2015. Translated from Russian.

recorded her emotions and feelings almost every day from the end of 2013 until 2015 in a series of drawings.

One of Ukraine's leading photographers, Oleksandr Chekmenev, created striking portraits of those who took part in clashes with pro-government forces, as well as a series of photographs recording the events that followed the Maidan in Eastern Ukraine. The latter series included portraits of injured Ukrainian soldiers in hospital and people who had lost their homes, among others.

One important art event that took place in the spring and summer of 2014 was the *Mezhyhirya Code* exhibition, held in the halls of the National Art Museum of Ukraine, which had spent the entire revolution as a barricade outpost. Oleksandr Roitburd curated the exhibition along with the author of this book. It featured artifacts and other objects that were removed from the ex-president Yanukovich's palatial Mezhyhirya property by resourceful museum staff after he fled the country. The objects were intentionally presented in a chaotic pile of varying price and value, intended to immerse the viewer in the absurdist and kitsch world of the Ukrainian kleptocratic elite. It was one of the most visited exhibitions in the museum's recent history.

## POST-TRAUMA

The sense of shock and trauma that followed the bloody events on the Maidan, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the beginning of military operations in the Donbas had a deep impact on the art community. This period represented a heavy, post-revolutionary "hangover" for many artists who had been active participants on the Maidan and who found it hard to convey the emotional turmoil of this period through specific pieces of art. On the other hand, some artists were inspired to explore new themes, problems, and projects. The documentary films made by the director and artist Oleksiy Radynsky, an active member of the CVC, stand out in this regard. Radynsky's work included films focused on the events of the Maidan, though his film *The People Who Came to Power* (2015, with Tomas Rrafa), about the beginning of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, deserves special mention.

Nikita Kadan and Mykola Ridnyi also began creating new work independent from the REP and SOSka groups. This marked a new stage in their creative output. Kadan's exhibition *The Possessed Can Testify in Court* (2015), held at the National Art Museum of Ukraine, was a powerful artistic statement on the brutal war in the Donbas, which had begun after 2014. For this exhibition, Kadan set up shelves that looked like they belonged in an archive and placed objects on them that told the story of the region's Soviet past. Stripped of their ideological context, the objects appeared awkward and melancholic. Shells that had fallen in Eastern Ukraine from 2014 to 2015 were also displayed in the museum's stairwells. Another of Kadan's works, *The Shelter*, was shown at the Istanbul Biennale in 2015. The upper section of the installation was an allusion to the Donetsk local history museum that had been destroyed by the war, replete with taxidermied deer, tires from the barricades, and peeling walls. The lower section was a bomb shelter that contained bunk beds holding absurdist troughs of soil with plants



OLEKSANDR CHEKMENEV.  
FROM THE SERIES *WAR IN THE DONBAS*. 2014.  
COLOR PHOTO. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

MYKOLAIVKA, DONETSK OBLAST, UKRAINE. 22 JULY 2014.  
THE 85-YEAR-OLD VARVARA FROLOVA POSES WITH AN ICON  
OF ST. VARVARA THAT HER GRANDFATHER ONCE PAINTED.  
THE BUILDING SHE USED TO LIVE IN WAS DESTROYED  
DURING THE ARTILLERY BOMBARDMENT OF MYKOLAIVKA.  
VARVARA FOUND THIS AND TWO OTHER ICONS IN SNOW  
DRIFTS. SHE THINKS THAT ONLY FAITH CAN SAVE HUMANITY.

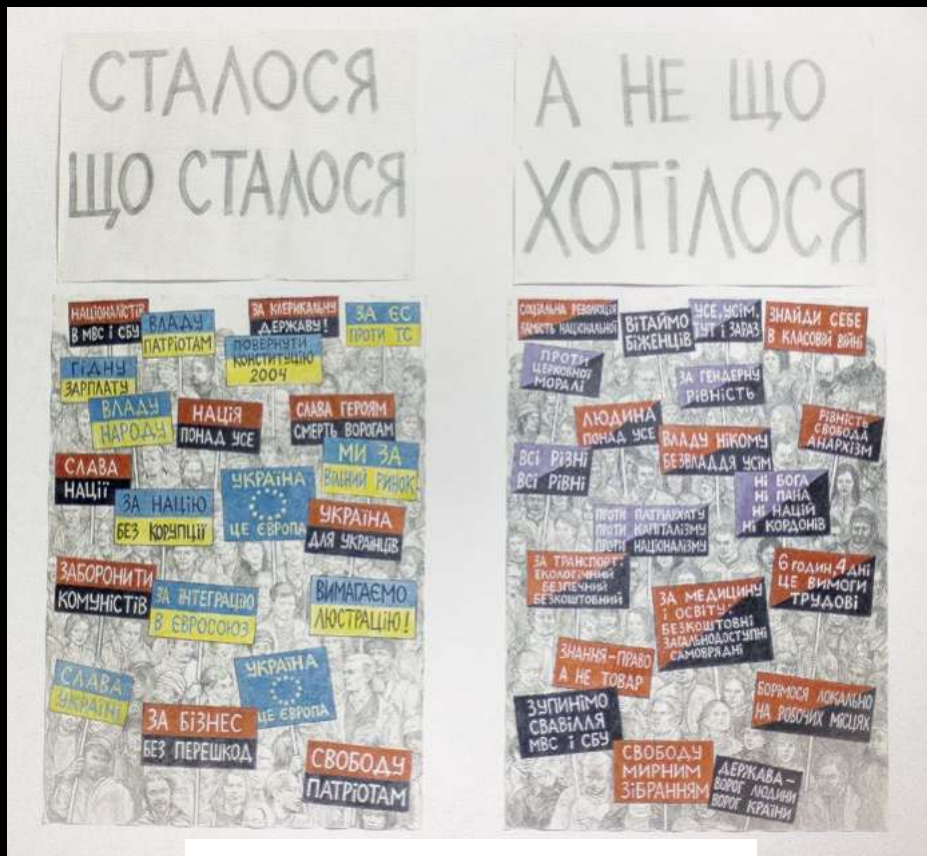


MARIA KULIKOVSKA.  
*HAPPY BIRTHDAY!* 2015.  
PHOTO DOCUMENTATION OF THE ARTIST'S  
PERFORMANCE AT THE SAATCHI GALLERY, LONDON.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.





NIKITA KADAN.  
*SHELTER*. 2015. METAL, WOOD, TAXIDERMIED  
ANIMALS, GLASS, RUBBER, AND PAINT.  
COURTESY OF THE TEAM AT THE ISTANBUL  
BIENNALE OF CONTEMPORARY ART.



DAVYD CHYCHKAN.  
 WHAT HAPPENED, HAPPENED, BUT NOT WHAT WE WANTED.  
 MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER. FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
 GRYNIVOV ART FOUNDATION.



VLADA RALKO.  
 FROM THE SERIES KYIV DIARY. 2013–2015.  
 MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER. 21×29.7 CM.  
 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

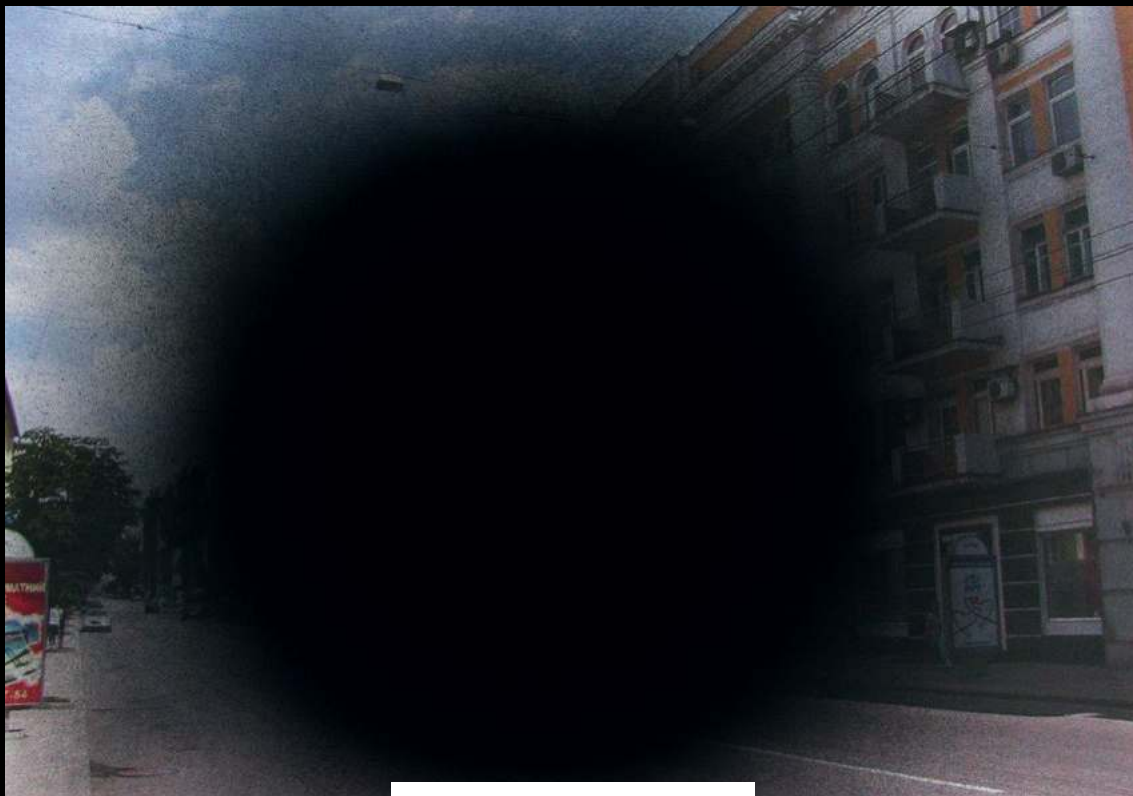
growing inside them. This was a reference to the story that after the revolution on the Maidan, protestors eventually began to dig vegetable plots on the country's central square.

Mykola Ridnyi exhibited his work *Blind Spot* at the Venice Biennale in 2015. It was comprised of boards covered in black paint, with just a small round photo image left in the center, creating the impression of looking through a peephole. This piece was designed to make the viewer's perspective feel limited and irrelevant as they peered at the segment of reality on display. Another artwork shown at the Ukrainian pavilion that year that dealt with the conflict in Ukraine was the Open Group's video installation *Synonym for "Wait"* (2015). The artists set up video cameras inside the homes of people who had gone off to war, displaying the video feeds in real time as part of their installation.

Roman Mykhailov was one of the most interesting representatives of the new generation of artists that arrived on the scene in this period. In 2014, the Kharkiv-based artist used pieces of burnt boats to create his project *Shadows*, which was themed around both the annexation of Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet, which had been a bone of contention between Russia and Ukraine for decades. This installation was shown at the IX ART KYIV Contemporary at the Mystetskyi Arsenal, and later in Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, on the anniversary of the peninsula's annexation. Another of Mykhailov's projects began on the Maidan when he used the flaming barrels in the square's tent city to smoke sheets of drawing paper (*Breath of Freedom*, 2013). Subsequently, this series prompted him to create other art pieces comprised of gigantic sheets of burnt paper (*Fragility*, the facade of the Church of Saint-Merri, Paris, 2014; *Reality Burns*, 2015). After the revolution, the artist Daria Koltsova actively explored political themes. In a statement on the Maidan era, she covered a board with segments from the Ukrainian constitution and used a black marker to cross out the articles that had been violated by Viktor Yanukovich's regime.

Maria Kulikovska was one of the most interesting and politically active artists from the post-Maidan period. At the 2014 Manifesta biennial art show in St. Petersburg, the artist staged a high-profile performance in which she wrapped herself in a Ukrainian flag on the steps of the Hermitage. Another performance that caught the public's attention was her art action *Crimean Raft* (2016), in which the artist sailed on a raft from Kyiv down the Dnipro River without any food reserves. Here, Kulikovska was reminding her audience of the people who had been left defenseless and without a shelter or homeland after the annexation of Crimea. Even before the Maidan, Kulikovska was creating art by making casts of her entire body. Interestingly, pieces from this series were located in Donetsk's sole center for contemporary art: Izoliatsiia (Isolation). During the conflict in Donetsk, the area around the factory that housed the art center was captured by soldiers from the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). As a result, Kulikovska's *Homo Bulla* sculpture exhibition was destroyed. In memory of this event, the artist conducted a performance entitled *Happy Birthday* at the Saatchi Gallery in London in 2015. The naked artist used a hammer to smash a mold of her own body made out of soap. This was her response to the destruction of her work by the separatists.

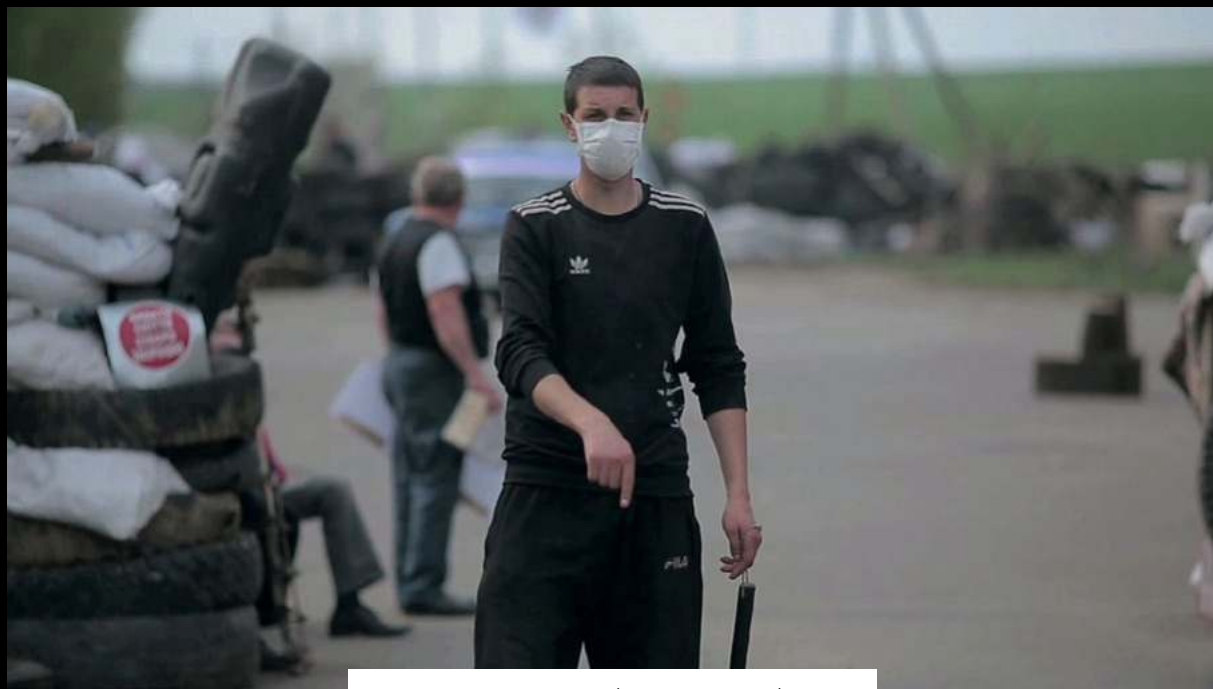
A scandal erupted in 2017 after radical-right vandals attacked Davyd Chychkan's exhibition *Lost Possibilities*. This exhibition was practically the first to offer a critical



MYKOLA RIDNYI.  
*BLIND SPOT*. 2014. COLOR PHOTO.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



PIOTR ARMIANOVSKI.  
*MARIUPOL AND I*. 2017. VIDEO STILL.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE  
LUDWIG MUSEUM, BUDAPEST.



OLEKSIY RADYNSKY (WITH TOMAS RAFA).  
*THE PEOPLE WHO CAME TO POWER*. 2015. FILM STILL.  
COURTESY OF OLEKSIY RADYNSKY.



9.07.2014 in Zhdanivka.  
 It's strange, on the occasion  
 of the 100th anniversary of the  
 Revolution, we are celebrating  
 the 100th anniversary of the  
 death of the poet, the  
 author of the poem "The  
 Song of the Cuckoo".  
 I understand that there's  
 no way to get there, but  
 I'll try to go there - to  
 the place where he is  
 buried.

It was about the  
 100th anniversary of the  
 Revolution, we are celebrating  
 the 100th anniversary of the  
 death of the poet, the  
 author of the poem "The  
 Song of the Cuckoo".  
 I understand that there's  
 no way to get there, but  
 I'll try to go there - to  
 the place where he is  
 buried.

War

От осколочного  
 ранения  
 умер монах  
 a monk died from a frag  
 injury



HE 00000



ALEVINA KAKHIDZE.  
 FROM THE PROJECT THE STORY OF STRAWBERRY ANDREEVNA, OR  
 ZHDANIVKA. 2014-2018. MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER.  
 UPPER SECTION COURTESY OF THE COLLECTION OF THE GRYNVOW  
 ART FOUNDATION; LOWER SECTION COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

reflection on the Maidan experience, using the distance of time to create a fully formed and eloquent artistic statement. The artist had taken part in the protests of 2013 and 2014, but he maintained the opinion that the revolution had not achieved its aims. The ensuing discussion of Chychkan's project, along with the act of vandalism committed against it, captured the public's attention.

Alevtina Kakhidze's art project *The Story of Strawberry Andreevna, or Zhdanivka* (2014–2018) was a striking reaction to Ukraine's political crisis. The project consisted of four years of phone conversations and meetings between the artist and her mother, who lived in the occupied territory of Donetsk oblast. It all began in 2014 when fighting broke out between the Ukrainian National Guard and the self-proclaimed separatists of the DNR in Kakhidze's home town of Zhdanivka. The only place in Zhdanivka with cell-phone reception was the town's graveyard, which was where the artist's mother always went to tell her daughter she was still alive. The project included drawings from 2014 to 2018, video performances, and also printed propaganda material that reflected the atmosphere of hatred and absurdity that prevailed in occupied Zhdanivka. Over the course of several years, the artist's mother had created her own archive of collected newspapers, postcards, and other propaganda material made by the self-proclaimed DNR, which she then gave to her daughter.

The story continued until 2018, by which time there was no telephone network available in Zhdanivka and only pensioners were left in the occupied town. On 16 January 2019, the project's main hero, Strawberry Andreevna, Alevtina Kakhidze's mother, died of cardiac arrest at a DPR checkpoint. She had been returning from a trip to Ukrainian-held territory to collect her pension.

## THE APOSTLES OF INDIVIDUALISM: THE SPECTER OF LARGE-FORMAT ART

It was said that a new generation of artists was born following 2014, just like after the Orange Revolution. However, in contrast to 2004, when artists were united by their activist ideals, this new generation of young artists was not homogenous. The first cohort of this generation was a group that could tentatively be labeled the "children" of the big exhibitions held at the PinchukArtCentre and the Mystetskyi Arsenal in the late 2000s and early 2010s. These artists were concerned with developing their own individual careers, rather than contributing to a larger group dynamic. They were focused on "big" and commercially successful Western art, the kind of art that Viktor Pinchuk's art center had made its name exhibiting. The artists were mesmerized by the success stories of Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami, Yayoi Kusama, and Anish Kapoor. The proximity to this art offered by Kyiv's exhibition halls made them believe that even if they were from Ukraine, they could become the next Damien Hirst.



ROMAN MININ.  
A PLAN TO ESCAPE THE DONBAS REGION. 2011.  
FOAMCORE BAS-RELIEF. 195x282 CM. FROM THE  
COLLECTION OF THE ABRAMOVIYCH FOUNDATION.







ROMAN MYKHAILOV.  
FROM THE SERIES *REALITY BURNS*. 2015–2018.  
FIRE ON PAPER. 600×450 CM. FROM THE  
COLLECTION OF Q CONTEMPORARY, HONG KONG.  
ON DISPLAY AT THE *PERMANENT REVOLUTION*  
EXHIBITION AT THE LUDWIG MUSEUM, BUDAPEST.

Access to the Mystetskyi Arsenal's unique exhibition space helped facilitate the appearance of huge, impressive installations. In the first half of the 2010s, this space was curated by Oleksandr Solovyov and hosted regular group exhibitions of young artists' work. It was as if the art complex's spacious, old halls demanded the artists "think big!" The PinchukArtCentre prize was no less important for these young artists. Participants in the prize's final exhibition were allocated money to produce their work, and, when preparing their exhibits, they could work in tandem with Björn Geldhof, the Centre's experienced curator and art director. The sense that a new and original group of artists had appeared soon confronted a harsh reality. The revolution and the sad events that came after it were quickly followed by an economic recession. Big art projects were the first to suffer. A whole host of "individualist" artists, who were still fixated on size and the pre-crisis cultural context, and whose art needed a big space to be exhibited, discovered that they no longer "had a seat at the table."

Roman Mykhailov announced his arrival on the art scene immediately after the revolution. His passion for large-format art created for art institutions rather than for more discursive artistic practice was combined with his own harrowing experiences of the war. Mykhailov's most important pieces were created at the height of military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, all around the theme of fire. His artworks included burnt paper from the *Reality Burns* project and charred wooden objects that evoked ships from his *Shadows* project. Fire became an ambivalent symbol in Mykhailov's work: on the one hand, it represented trauma and pain, but on the other, it helped construct a new artistic reality. Following his acutely political art projects, the artist began exploring the potential of painting. This medium holds a uniquely complicated position in the world of Ukrainian contemporary art. Until recently, Ukrainian art was accused of clinging to painting as an art form; yet in the second half of the 2010s it had, in reality, disappeared from the young art scene altogether. Despite this, Mykhailov turned to painting to help him discover a new artistic language and to explore the dark corners of his own subconscious. The most striking example of this was his project *Fear* (2017).

The mid-2010s saw a rapid evolution in Nikita Shalenny's artistic practice. An architect by training, he created large and technically complex installations. In 2016, he created his most successful work, entitled *Siberia*. The artist built a huge panel made of cheap Chinese towels, evoking a scorched forest in reference to Siberia as an enduring symbol of the concentration camps and repressions in the nation's collective memory. By the late 2010s, Shalenny was increasingly focused on the international art market and began to experiment with virtual reality.<sup>371</sup> He achieved particular success in this regard, exhibiting his work in collaboration with artists such as Olafur Eliasson and Paul McCarthy.

Another artist from this generation who focused on large format art was Roman Minin. Having developed his own identifiable style at the beginning of the decade, he brought it to life in the 2010s through his murals, stained-glass compositions, sculptures, and easel-based artworks. Minin experimented with new materials and techniques while working within a late-Soviet monumentalist aesthetic. The artist created

<sup>371</sup> Rebecca Schmid, "Virtual Reality Asserts Itself as an Art Form in Its Own Right," *New York Times*, May 1, 2018.

original and commercially successful pieces that went on to become some of the most visually recognizable symbols of the post-Maidan era.

Stepan Riabchenko shared an interest in large-scale commercial art with Shalenny. Riabchenko began working with digital art in the late 2000s. His series of “portraits” depicting computer viruses, the *Virtual Flowers* project, his large-format pieces *The Death of Actaeon*, *Lemon Chickens Will Be Saved*, and *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, which was shown at the PinchukArtCentre in 2011, are all huge, bright prints that look as if Riabchenko created them for international art fairs and modern interiors. In the 2010s, Riabchenko also created large-format, figurative neon art. The biggest of them was his *New Era* (2011–2012, measuring 610×860 cm), which was created in the Mysteretskyi Arsenal for a special project as part of the first Kyiv biennial *Arsenale-2012*.



STEPAN RIABCHENKO.  
*ALL-HEARING EAR*. 2015–2016. INSTALLATION, NEON.  
DISPLAYED AT THE *EVENT HORIZON* EXHIBITION, MYSTETSKYI  
ARSENAL, KYIV. PHOTO BY BOHDAN POSHYVAILO.



NIKITA SHALENNY.  
*SIBERIA*. 2015–2016. BLACK CHINESE TOWELS. 350×2000 CM.  
DISPLAYED AT THE *EVENT HORIZON* EXHIBITION,  
MYSTETSKYI ARSENAL, KYIV. PHOTO BY MAKSYM BILOUSOV.



LARION LOZOVY.  
*BETROOT REVOLUTION*. 2018. INSTALLATION.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PINCHUKARTCENTRE.  
PHOTO BY MAKSYM BILOUSOV.

# A CONCEPTUAL SHIFT

Following the EuroMaidan revolution, artists interested in exploring large-format art found themselves working in parallel to another group of artists with a radically opposed set of values and references. These artists were working within a neoconceptual style and were more interested in engaging in collective discursive practice. Indeed, they were more oriented towards art institutions than the art market. In the second half of the 2010s, these artists rapidly accumulated cultural capital. This was in part thanks to the non-speculative nature of their art, which was consequently less wasteful, and also due to the support of the PinchukArtCentre, which was increasingly interested in this kind of art.

The art made by the Open Group was most representative of this type of work. The art collective appeared in Lviv in 2012, and became famous thanks to the art projects held at the locally run gallery Detenpyla. The group was founded by Eugene Samborsky, Anton Varga, Yuriy Biley, Pavlo Kovach, Stanislav Turina, and Oleg Perkovsky.<sup>372</sup> The legendary Lviv artist and curator Yurii Sokolov was involved in the Open Group's early work. Over the course of several years, Liza Herman and Maria Lanko, the dynamic young curators and founders of the Open Archive project,<sup>373</sup> also worked in active collaboration with the group. It was thanks to this partnership that word quickly spread about the group in Kyiv. The Open Group's projects were focused on researching the idea of "community."

In 2019, the Open Group was chosen to curate the Ukrainian pavilion at the Venice Biennale. They presented their project *The Shadow of a Dream Cast Upon Giardini della Biennale*. The exhibition was preceded by a big scandal featuring Arsen Savadov, who had been second choice to curate the pavilion that year. Ironically, the Open Group's project ended up polarizing the very community they were trying to investigate. After announcing that the project would feature the largest Soviet freight plane *Mriya* (Dream) flying over Venice, the artists maintained a sense of intrigue until the last possible moment. They also declared that the project's participants included "all" Ukrainian artists (the group announced an open call, so that any artist who wished to take part could technically do so). Thus, the Ukrainian pavilion had hundreds of nominal participants. This was an ingenious trolling of the contemporary art world, and of the Biennale itself with its elitist atmosphere where only the "chosen" could attend. Any hopes for an actual "show" were not realized. In the end, the project became a kind of symbolic story of how no one flew anywhere and the entire art world just ended up debating whether the non-existent flight was art or not.

In 2015, the Method Fund collective appeared in Kyiv.<sup>374</sup> The Fund was created by a group of artists, curators, art critics, and teachers: Lada Nakonechna, Ivan Melnychuk, Kateryna Badianova, Tetiana Endshpil, Olha Kubli, and Denys Pankratov.

<sup>372</sup> Since 2014, the group's permanent members have been Yuriy Biley, Pavlo Kovach, Stanislav Turina, and Anton Varga. See: "About Us," [opengroup.org.ua](http://opengroup.org.ua), <http://open-group.org.ua/ukr/about-us>.

<sup>373</sup> *Vidkrytyi Arkhiv* [Open archive], <http://openarchive.com.ua/>.

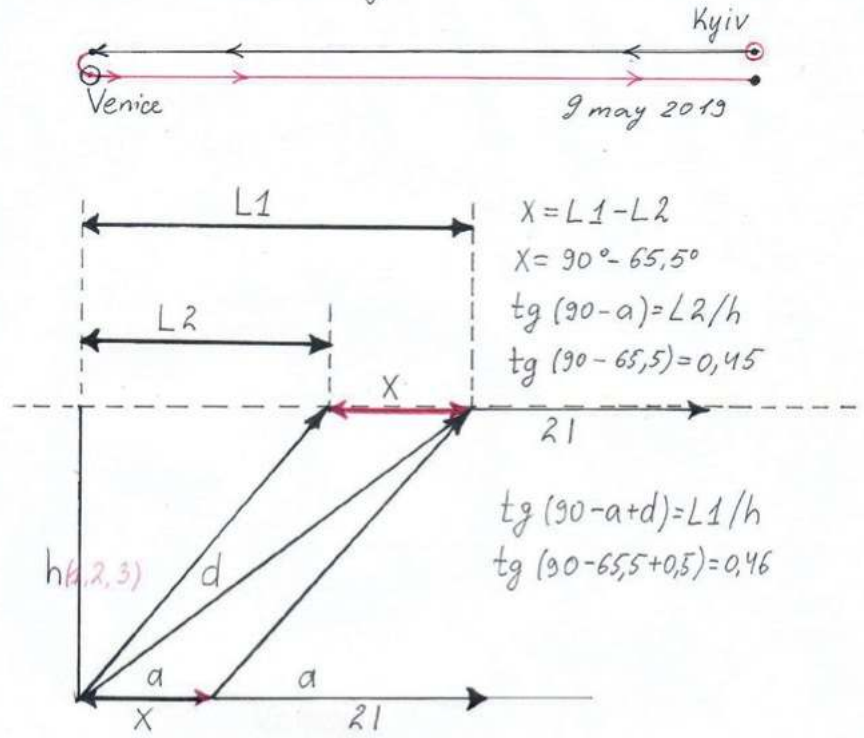
<sup>374</sup> Method Fund, official page, <https://sites.google.com/site/methodfund/>.



MYKOLA KARABINOVYCH.  
*VOICE OF THIN SILENCE*. 2018. INSTALLATION.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PINCHUKARTCENTRE.  
PHOTO BY MAKSYM BILOUSOV.



An - 225 Mriya



- 1  $h = 700$   
 $700 [tg(90 - 65,5 + 0,5) - tg(90 - 65,5)] = 7$   
 $84 - 7 = 77 \text{ m /Size of shade on the hide of flight 700 metres/}$
- 2  $h = 300$   
 $300 [tg(90 - 65,5 + 0,5) - tg(90 - 65,5)] = 3,17$   
 $84 - 3,17 = 80,83 \text{ m /size of shade on the hide of flight 300 metres/}$
- 3  $h = 3000$   
 $3000 [tg(90 - 65,5 + 0,5) - tg(90 - 65,5)] = 31,7$   
 $84 - 31,7 = 52,3 \text{ m /size of Shade on the hide of flight 3000 metres/}$

					The Shadow of Dream* cast upon Giardini della Biennale			
Зм.	Арк.	№ докум.	Підпис	Дата				
Розробив								Літ.
Перезір.								Арх.
Реценз.								Архушія
Н. контр.								
Затверд.								

\* Dream - is literary translation of Mriya - Ukrainian aircraft, the biggest in the world

THE OPEN GROUP.  
 THE SHADOW OF DREAM CAST UPON GIARDINI DELLA BIENNALE. 2019.  
 A SKETCH FOR THE UKRAINIAN PAVILION AT THE VENICE BIENNALE.  
 CALCULATIONS BY SOFIA BERCHA. COURTESY OF YURIY BILEY.

The Fund was primarily focused on the shifting standards within art education and also on researching the phenomenon of socialist realism.

In the second half of the 2010s, the young artists' prize held at the PinchukArt-Centre became an important space for the distribution of conceptualist artistic practice while also helping to legitimize it. Some of the prize's most promising nominees included Anna Zviahintseva, whose work could be characterized as a kind of "emotional minimalism," and Mykola Karabinovych, who was the first to receive the art center's special prize in 2018 with his artwork *Voice of Thin Silence*.<sup>375</sup> By the late 2010s, it could be said that neoconceptualism had become one of the most important trends in young Ukrainian art, expanding and strengthening an artistic community that had appeared in the mid-2000s in the wake of the REP and SOSka groups. The online resource *Prostory*, which focused on the problems facing artists in this period, became the main media platform for conceptually oriented artists.

## GREATER UKRAINE. NOMADS WITH THE MOTHERLAND ON THEIR PHONES

Jacques Lacan wrote that the desire to be somewhere else could be just as strong as sexual attraction itself. This statement has never been truer in a world where the borders between states and cultures are increasingly blurred. The modern person increasingly chooses to move away from the place they were born, while at the same time preserving their connection with that place and community via a complex web of social networks and hashtags. In this way, a person can interact with completely different settings and contexts without their physical body ever leaving their home.

There are many moments throughout Ukraine's complicated history when cultural figures migrated away from the country. In the early 20th century, dynamic young artists traveled to Europe to explore the as-yet-unknown archipelago of modernism. During the Soviet period, there was a constant and significant flow of people to Moscow, while after the collapse of the USSR there was a big wave of migration to Europe and to Israel. There was another round of migration in the 2010s, prompted by the economic recession and post-revolutionary "hangover." As in previous decades, young artists, critics, and curators left their motherland in search of new narratives, a more comfortable life, or simply because mobility is one of modernity's main fetishes. An important factor in why many chose to leave Ukraine was the lack of modern, high-quality art education. This, combined with underdeveloped art institutions, did not promise particularly enticing prospects for young Ukrainians.

<sup>375</sup> For more see: Yevgenia Belorusetz, "O rabote Nikolaia Karabinovicha 'Golos tonkoi tishiny'" [On Mykola Karabinovych's *Voice of a Thin Line*], *Prostory*, March 29, 2018.

An important factor in all of this is how the artists choose to self-identify, and to what extent they continue to participate in online discussions and art projects. Some, after gaining an education abroad, return to Ukraine. Many who leave manage to preserve an ephemeral sense of home on the screen of their laptop or smartphone. Today, there is a plethora of artists who maintain their connection with Ukraine in the virtual sphere. They include Mitya Churikov, who was from the REP generation and studied in Germany, Zina Isupova, who lives in Moscow and graduated from the Rodchenko Art School, Nina Murashkina, who travels between Ukraine and Spain, and many other students who apply every year to international art schools. Dozens, if not hundreds, of young artists have settled in neighboring Poland. Their numbers include the likes of Vasyl Savchenko, Oleksandr Sovtusyk, and others. Two members of the Open Group, Ukraine's most significant art group from the 2010s, live outside Ukraine. The art critic and recently turned photo artist Anatoly Ulyanov, the photo artist Natalia Masharova, and the curator Olena Chervonyk are all active on social media, even though they left Ukraine in the late 2000s and live thousands of kilometers away. Some, like the art critic Asia Bazdyreva, became nomads, moving across the globe from project to project. These are just a few randomly chosen examples from an ocean of names and destinies.

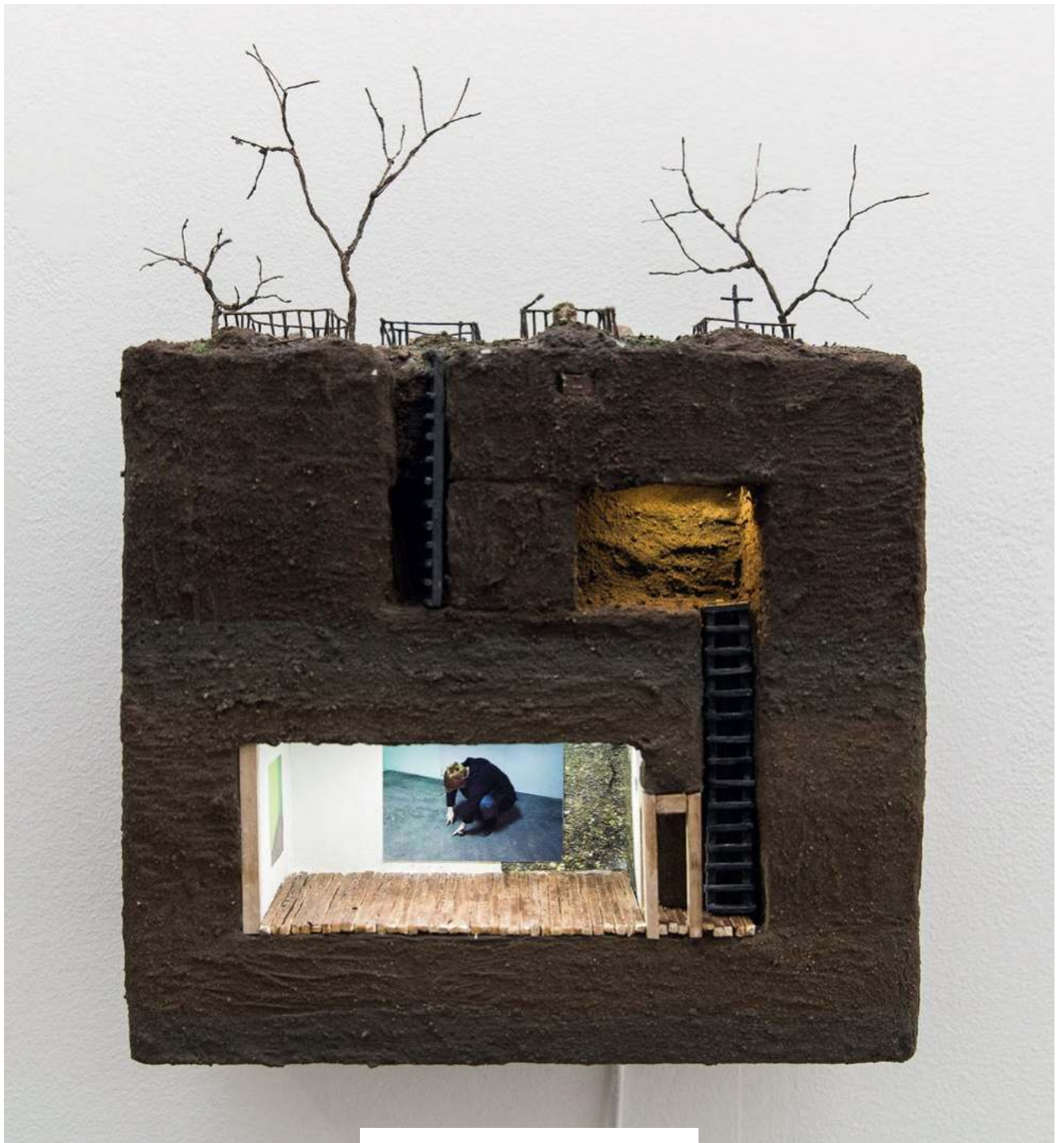
There are different ways to react to this global exodus. It is difficult to avoid comparisons with analogous events from the early 20th century, when Ukraine lost the most important representatives of its art scene time and time again. On the other hand, the global enriches the local, while the importance of national elements in art gradually gets smaller and smaller. Maintaining a connection with one's community is still important, but increasingly, one's physical presence plays much less of a role.



ULIANA BYCHENKOVA,  
*WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR MONEY AND WHAT  
DO YOU DO ALL DAY*, 2015. VIDEO STILL.



BORYS KASHAPOV.  
*MY RIGHT TO 15 MINUTES OF SHAME.*  
2013. VIDEO STILL.



ZINA ISUPOVA.  
*UNDERGROUND RESISTANCE*. 2018.  
MIXED MEDIA. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

# THE RISE OF WOMEN

In recent decades, the art scene in Ukraine has begun to align with the global art scene. This is also true for one of the main trends of the late 2010s, which was resuming the conversation about the role of women in culture and society. Ukrainian art history is full of talented female artists.<sup>376</sup> However, before 2010, women in the art system were, as a rule, limited to secondary positions. Even at the level of management, women rarely held leadership roles. Despite the majority of the workforce in Ukraine's central museums being women, the role of director would, nonetheless, be given to a member of the "stronger sex."

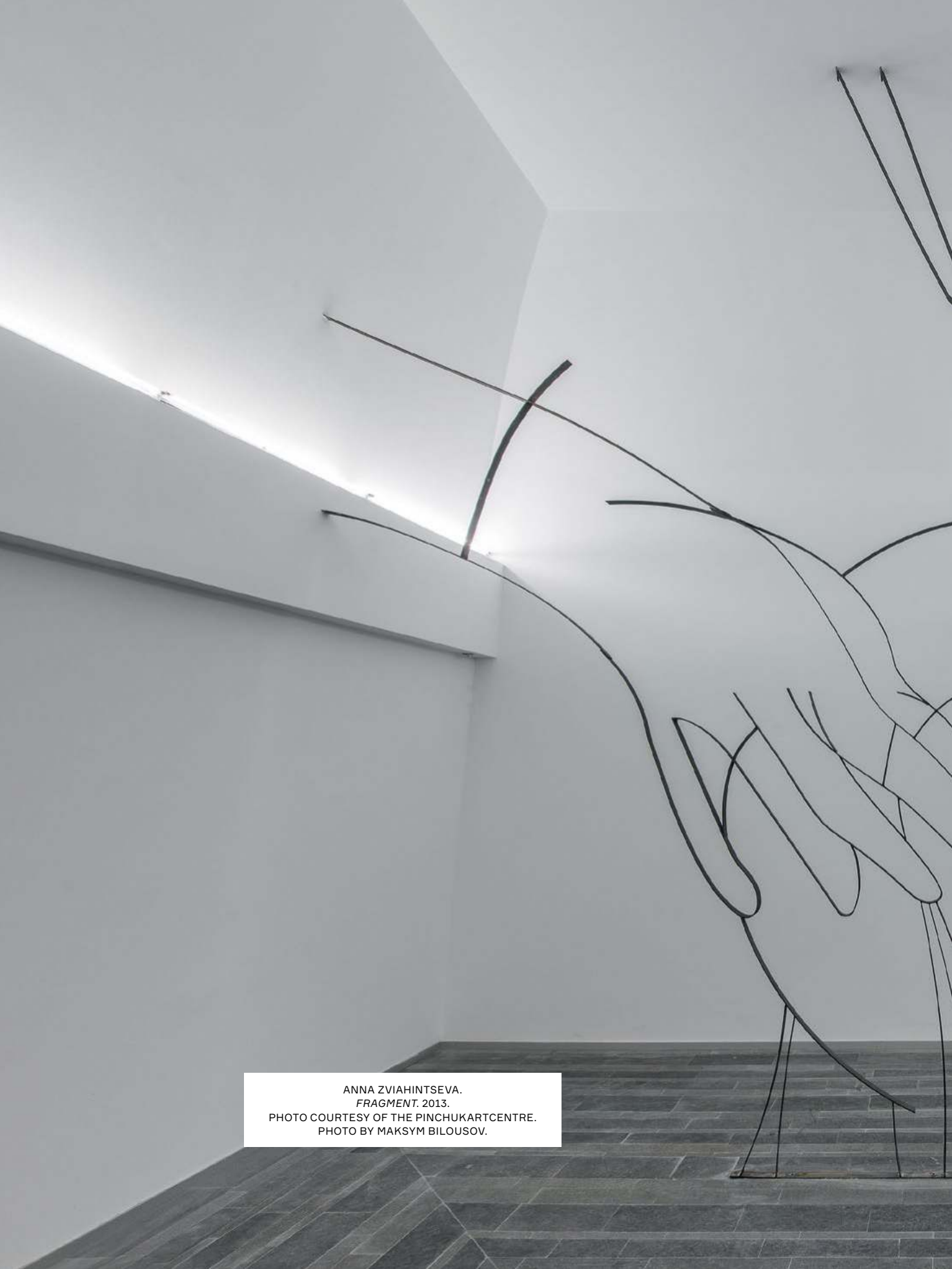
A radical, yet imperceptible at first glance, change took place in the 2010s. If one were to look today at the balance of power in the Ukrainian art establishment, she would clearly see the disproportionate representation of women at all levels: institution directors, curators, journalists, editors-in-chief of art publications, art critics, gallery owners, employees at art foundations or various kinds of private institutions. Whereas 10 years ago 40% of the leadership positions in the Ukrainian art world went to women, today that figure is approaching 80–90%. Some might say that women have become the leaders of the art world thanks to a less competitive environment that is still critically underfunded and undervalued by society. Like it or not, art has definitely become female territory.

It is important to remember that many topics being discussed in the 1920s USSR were only touched on by Western society at the end of the 20th century. That said, the Soviet Union was a strange mix of feminist rhetoric and misogyny. The Soviet social context was defined by its poverty and minimalism, which was further reinforced by the trauma of World War II, when, in the absence of the men who died in the war, women took on all professions, including those traditionally reserved for men: they built the Kyiv Metro, they worked their fingers to the bone on collective farms, and they raised children by themselves. As a result, when the USSR was in the process of collapsing, Soviet women were less concerned with questions of equality. Instead, they were focused on the possibility that they might regain a right to femininity. Freedom in the 1990s and 2000s included the right to be a weak little "doll." The first generations of post-Soviet women had their dreams and aspirations shaped by the story arcs of soap opera actresses who found love and support in the arms of rich princes. It was in part thanks to this that Ukraine gained its reputation as a factory for mail-order brides.

It wasn't until the 2010s that women felt they could really share their own subjective experience. This doesn't mean that there wasn't any discussion about feminism in art in Ukraine. This problem was touched on tangentially back in the 1990s when there was a series of exhibitions that questioned the role of women in society.<sup>377</sup> In the early

<sup>376</sup> For more on women in Ukrainian art, see: "Chomu v ukrainskomu mystetstvi ye velyki khudozhnytsi" [Why there are great female artists in Ukrainian art], *PinchukArtCentre*, 2019.

<sup>377</sup> Kateryna Yakovlenko, "'Rot Meduzy': pershi sproby feministychnykh vystavok" [*Mouth of Medusa: The first attempts at feminist exhibitions*], *Korydor*, November 9, 2018, <http://www.korydor.in.ua/ua/context/rot-meduzy-pershi-sproby-feministichnyh-vistavok.html>.



ANNA ZVIAHINTSEVA.  
*FRAGMENT*. 2013.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PINCHUKARTCENTRE.  
PHOTO BY MAKSYM BILOUSOV.





2000s, the curator Olesia Ostrovska-Liuta put on one of the first articulate feminist exhibitions at the Center for Contemporary Art at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. The curator, artist, and activist Oksana Briukhovetska began organizing feminist exhibitions at the Center for Visual Culture in the late 2000s.<sup>378</sup> In the 2010s, the researcher and head editor of the publication *Gender in the Details* Tamara Zlobina also explored the topic of feminism.

There have been many outstanding women in the history of Ukrainian art: Maria Bashkirtseva, Oleksandra Ekster, the Boichukists Oksana Pavlenko and Antonina Ivanova, the talented Soviet artist Tetiana Yablonska, and of course the folk artists Hanna Sobachko-Shostiak, Maria Prymachenko, and Kateryna Bilokur, among others. Over the past 30 years in Ukraine the number of women working in art has continued to grow. The main names from the country's most recent art history include Valeria Trubina and Natalia Filonenko, members of the New Wave, Marina Skugareva, a central art figure from the 1990s and 2000s, Vlada Ralko, who appeared on the art scene in the early 2000s, Masha Shubina and Alevtina Kakhidze, members of REP Zhanna Kadyrova, Lada Nakonechna, and Ksenia Hnylytska, Bella Lohachova and Anna Kryventsova of the SOSka group, and also Yevgenia Belorusets, Alina Yakubenko, Alina Kleitman, Anna Zviahintseva, Liubov Malikova, Maria Kulikovska, Daria Koltsova, Alina Kopytsia, Nina Murashkina, Katia Yermolaieva, Anti Gonna, and others.

<sup>378</sup> Oksana Briukhovetska, "Obraz zherty i emansypatsiia. Narys pro ukrainsku art-stsenu i feminizm" [The image of the victim and emancipation. An essay on the Ukrainian art scene and feminism], *Prostory*, March 3, 2017.



ALINA KLEITMAN.  
*ASK MOM*. 2018. VIDEO INSTALLATION.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



KINDER ALBUM.  
*BLIND WHITE COYOTES*. 2018.  
OIL ON CANVAS. 100x130 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

# THE POETRY OF THE PROVINCES AND A NEW CLUB CULTURE

The underground night club Efir (Live/On air) was an important gathering place for artists and cultural figures in post-Maidan Ukraine. The club provided a regular dose of hedonism, escapism, electronic music, and an active club life to all who entered its doors. It was a unique reaction against the excess of all things political in a country still traumatized by conflict. Paradoxically, it was precisely the artists and activists who were regulars at the club (the likes of Yevhenia Moliar, Dana Brezhneva, Oleksandr Dolgyi, Alina Yakubenko, and others) who formed the backbone of a new art group that spent several years studying the situation in the east and putting on art projects in the most depressing regions of the country that had suffered from the military conflict.

Perhaps the most characteristic feature of the second half of the 2010s was the interaction between rave culture, which had unexpectedly returned to Ukrainian art at the height of the crisis, and thorny political discourse. A prime example of this was the grassroots art initiative DE NE DE (Here and there), which appeared in the summer of 2015. The activist Yevhenia Moliar, who had studied the traditions of Soviet mosaics and monumentalist art in Ukraine, was the central figure of this initiative. DE NE DE was focused on the controversies that arose from the process of decommunization. The latter was overseen by the post-Maidan government and its main ideologue, the right-leaning historian Volodymyr Viatrovych. One aim of decommunization was the complete destruction and removal of all Soviet-era monuments from Ukraine. The artists of DE NE DE came together to reinterpret the legacy of Soviet modernism and to oppose the barbaric methods employed by the zealots of radical memory politics.

At the height of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, Moliar began to organize educational conferences and expeditions to areas near the front line. She did this with the help of Leonid Marushchak and Olha Honchar, activists from the Ukrainian Crisis Media Center. These initiatives ushered in a creative boom as Kyiv artists began to regularly visit small provincial towns in Eastern Ukraine. Indeed, there was a surge of interest in the regional histories of Ukrainian art at this time. The second half of the 2010s saw the rediscovery of the Ukrainian provinces and the melancholic poetry of small, abandoned local institutions and museums. DE NE DE's first exhibition opened in 2016 in Kyiv's "flying saucer" building. In 2017, the group opened an exhibition entitled *The Museum of the Town of Svitlohrad* in the Lysychansk local history museum. This would prove to be a landmark in the group's artistic output. Another project by DE NE DE was their artistic residency *Above God* which has been taking place since 2015 in Vinnytsia in the building of the semi-derelict Russia Cinema.

In 2017, amidst this surge of interest in regional history, Vova Vorotniiov carried out his own art action. He spent over a month walking from his birthplace Chervonohrad, a mining city in Lviv oblast, to Lysychansk, another mining city in the east of Ukraine situated next to the conflict zone. The apparent aim of the trip was to take a piece of Chervonohrad coal to add to the collection of the Lysychansk local history museum. This simple gesture, hinting at a symmetry between two "poles" of Ukraine, was



MEMBERS OF THE GRASSROOTS  
ART INITIATIVE DE NE DE.  
KYIV. WINTER 2019.



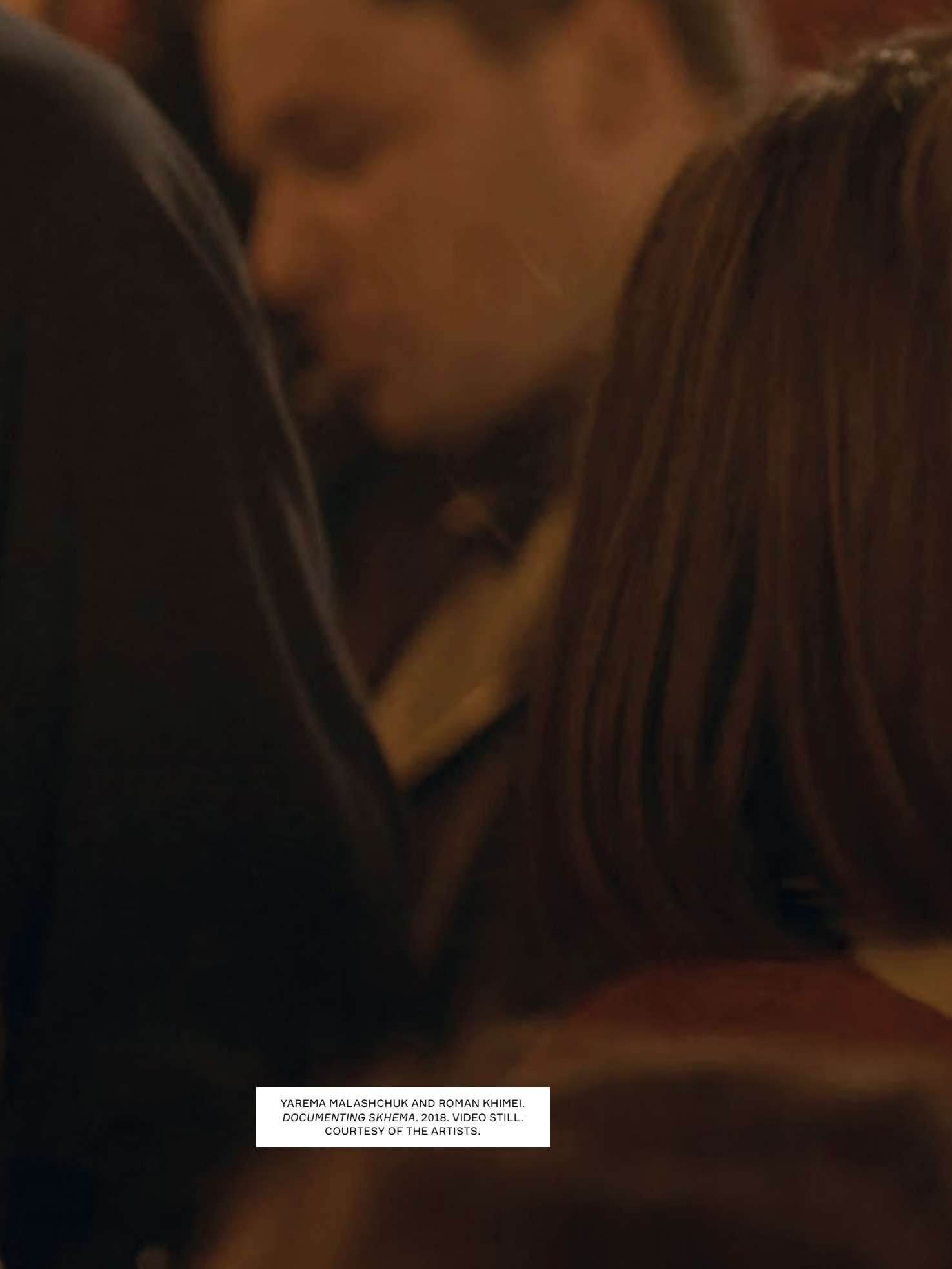
MEMBERS OF THE GRASSROOTS ART INITIATIVE DE NE DE.  
YEVHENIA MOLIIAR AND LEONID MARUSHCHAK.  
KAMIANSKE. SPRING 2019.



SASHA KURMAZ.  
FROM THE SERIES *HEAVEN*.  
2017. COLOR PHOTO.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.







YAREMA MALASHCHUK AND ROMAN KHIMEI.  
*DOCUMENTING SKHEMA*. 2018. VIDEO STILL.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS.





designed to symbolically unite two very different parts of the country. As he walked, the artist also published a travelogue of his journey on social media, which became an interesting and stand-alone portion of the project.

Other popular initiatives from the mid-2010s included art projects that emerged from the Ukrainian rave scene. The projects were organized in the Closer club, the center of Kyiv's electronic scene. Artists became involved in the development of the capital's underground club scene, along with the many mini-raves in the provinces, which in turn gave rise to a whole host of artworks themed around the new Ukrainian rave movement. The aesthetic of this movement was similar to that of "hipster" photography in the late 2000s and early 2010s. It placed particular emphasis on "trashiness," second-hand clothes, and a rejection of any attempt to appear more civilized than one was. In fact, it aimed to tune into the vibrations of the "wild, wild East." The music initiative Human Likeness, which was a collaboration between the artist Anatolii Belov and the DJ Hosha Babansky, was symptomatic of this period. The film experiments *Herd* (2016) and the TV series *REGLAMENT*, which was shot entirely on an iPhone, were created by Babansky as a way to carefully document the life of the new Kyiv underground. No less interesting in this context is *The Celebration of Life* (2016), Belov and Oksana Kazmina's part-documentary, part-narrative film about vampire ravers in Kyiv.

The SKHEMA parties were a central part of the Ukrainian rave scene, which helped make Kyiv a world center for electronic music in the late 2010s.<sup>379</sup> Sasha Kurmaz's art project *Heaven* (2017) focused on the people who attended SKHEMA's raves. In 2018, the young directors Yarema Malashchuk and Roman Khimei, who worked on the border between cinema and contemporary art, shot their short film *Documenting SKHEMA* about those legendary parties.

## FORWARD INTO THE PAST. A TIME TO THINK RETROSPECTIVELY

Decommunization, and the controversies surrounding it, has become a central theme in recent Ukrainian art. The preservation of Soviet mosaics is a case in point: the country's leadership tried to destroy mosaics under the guise of erasing the ideological symbols of the totalitarian past. The photographer Yevgen Nikiforov's book *Decommunized: Ukrainian Soviet Mosaics* was the result of extensive research into these mosaics. Nikiforov's second series *The Republic's Monuments* is dedicated to monuments from the Soviet era that have been taken down or destroyed. Marginal themes and the forgotten pages of history became the central focus for a whole host

<sup>379</sup> Kate Villevoje, "Lose Yourself in the New Sound of Kiev," *i-D magazine*, May 31, 2016.



YEVGEN NIKIFOROV.  
A MONUMENT TO THE SOLDIERS OF THE 1ST CAVALRY ARMY  
LOCATED NEAR OLESKO (LVIV OBLAST, UKRAINE). FROM THE SERIES  
*ON THE REPUBLIC'S MONUMENTS*. 2014–2018. COLOR PHOTO.  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE LUDWIG MUSEUM, BUDAPEST.



VOVA VOROTNIOV.  
*INVENTORY*. 2018. VIDEO STILL.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



NIKITA KADAN.  
VIEW OF THE EXHIBIT *REPEATED FORGETTINGS*. 2016.  
YA GALLERY, KYIV. PHOTO BY MAKSYM BILOUSOV.





OLEKSANDR SOVTUSYK.  
FROM THE SERIES *CARPETS*. 2018.  
INSTALLATION, CARPET. 300x200 CM.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

of artists and activists. Nikita Kadan used the umbrella term the “historiographic turn”<sup>380</sup> to describe this renewed interest in questions surrounding memory. Towards the end of the 2010s, Kadan began to create his own artworks based on traumatic and pivotal episodes from the 20th century—the Stalinist repressions, Jewish pogroms, and so on. Yevgenia Belorusets and Davyd Chychkan’s 2015 art project *Let’s Put Lenin’s Head Back Together Again!* was shown at the PinchukArtCentre and explored both the mechanisms of memory and its obstacles. In August 2017, in the former town of Kirovohrad, renamed Kropyvnytskyi, Oleksiy Sai made a sharp statement on the endless repetition of historical mistakes. He scattered dozens of rakes around the base of what had been a Lenin statue but had subsequently been turned into an impromptu monument to the heroes of the Maidan and those fighting in the East. This was perhaps the most relevant statement regarding the risks and fears that face modern Ukraine.

At the end of the 2010s, the museum as an institution became an important focal point. In 2018, Oleksandr Roitburd was in charge of the Odesa Fine Arts Museum. The group involved with DE NE DE’s work began to gather around a rather curious collection of Soviet art in the village of Kmytiv near Kyiv. This small collection, which dated from the Soviet period, was put together under the initiative of Yosyp Bukhanchuk, a soldier and teacher of civil defense at the Leningrad Academy of Arts.

A whole host of art projects can be characterized by this “backward gaze.” In 2016, Mykola Ridnyi made the film *Grey Horses*, which told the story of his great-grandfather who was an anarchist and fought for Nestor Makhno<sup>381</sup> in the early 20th century. Oleksiy Radynsky spent several years researching the work of the artist Florian Yuryev, a member of the *shistdesiatnyky* movement. His film *Facade Color: Blue* premiered in 2019 and follows the construction of a new shopping mall that is located next to the “flying saucer” building that Yuryev helped design in the 1970s. The crumbling Soviet modernist building is surrounded by the unsightly chaos of a new construction site. This juxtaposition acts as a symbol for Kyiv’s cultural context where the rapid decay of modernity pushes artists to mythologize the sunken Atlantis of the Soviet project. Oleksiy Radynsky once called late-Soviet modernism “our antiquity.” Naturally, in the choice between the mythology of a dying modern empire and the hopelessness of life in a third-world country, many artists chose the former. This fixation on history comes from a sense of disappointment in modern-day progress and the fact that the most of the wounds left by the 20th century are still left undiscussed.

Even as they recede into history, the ghosts of this undiscussed past continue to torture haunt us. A blinding example of this is the war of memory politics that has erupted in Ukraine and across the world. The modern individual with all her gadgets, big data, and artificial intelligence has become increasingly vulnerable when faced with questions of history. In the early 20th century, the god-like members of

<sup>380</sup> Nikita Kadan, “Na meste pamiaty” [In place of memory], *Khudozestvennyi zhurnal*, no.104 (2018). The American critic and curator Dieter Roelstraete has written about a historiographical pivot in art since the end of the 2000s. For more see: Dieter Roelstraete, “After the Historiographic Turn: Current Findings,” *e-flux Journal*, no.6 (May 2009).

<sup>381</sup> A Ukrainian anarchist revolutionary who led an independent army from 1917 to 1921. [T.N.]

the avant-garde were seen as the future. Now, contemporary Ukrainian artists are obsessed with the past. Perhaps it is only by discussing the past that we can, with a clear conscience, truly see the present.

## IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION

Ukrainian art lives atop a volcano, a site of rupture with a constant desire for new beginnings. Every generation sincerely and honestly believes that it will have the biggest impact of all and live on in the history books forever. They may achieve some measure of success in their initial attack, but it isn't long before the ground begins to shift beneath their feet. Soon, yesterday's youth finds itself on the trash heap of history, replaced by yet more newcomers with fire in their eyes. "Forsooth, the land turns round as does a potter's wheel. The robber is a possessor of riches. [The rich man] is [become] a plunderer"<sup>382</sup>—this was written on papyrus nearly 4000 years ago around the time of the First Intermediate Period in Ancient Egypt. In Ukraine, the "potter's wheel" has turned many times during the last hundred years. This has helped create a traumatized society, existing in a permanent and painful state of transformation. Despite this, Ukrainian art still contains a unique energy and thirst for life. As history shows, however, the passion of one generation doesn't stay in focus for very long. One of today's most important tasks is to minimize the wounds left by time, and to try and ensure a smoother transition between generations. For until we learn how to sew together the threads of history, the fabric of our reality will continue to tear, and we will continue to suffer.

<sup>382</sup> Alan H. Gardiner, *The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage (from a Hieratic Papyrus in Leiden)* (Leipzig: Georg Olms Verlag Hildesheim, 1969), 27.





OLEKSIY SAI.  
*DON'T STEP ON THE RAKES.* 2017.  
INSTALLATION SURROUNDING WHAT USED TO BE A LENIN  
MONUMENT, NOW TRANSFORMED INTO A MEMORIAL TO  
THE SOLDIERS WHO DIED DURING THE WAR IN DONBAS.  
KROPYVNYTSKYI (RENAMED FROM KIROVOHRAD DURING THE  
DECOMMUNIZATION DRIVE IN 2017). PHOTO BY NADIJA LOZHKINA.

ALISA LOZHKINA

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THE 20th TO THE EARLY 21st CENTURY**

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