

A photograph of a person lying on their side, covered in red paint or powder. The person's face is partially visible, and they appear to be wearing a dark cap. The background is dark, and the overall scene is dramatic and artistic. The text "Art Riot" is overlaid in large, bold, white letters across the center of the image.

Art Riot

Art Riot

Post-Soviet Actionism

Curated by Marat Guelman

Edited by Andrey Kovalev

Content

26 **Introduction**

28 Marat Guelman
Introduction

32 Boris Groys, Andrey Kovalev
Russian Actionism: The New Narodniki

40 **Protagonists**

42 **Oleg Kulik**

48 Charles Esche
Animal Magic Oleg Kulik or how one person
dealt with the collapse of everything

54 Ekaterina Degot
Like a Fish in Water: Oleg Kulik in the 1990s

64 **Pussy Riot**

70 Helen Pyotrovsky
Pussy Riot: From Intervention to Action

82 Nadezhda Tolokonnikova of Pussy Riot's
prison letters to Slavoj Žižek

96 Maria Alyokhina
Riot Days (excerpts)

106 **Pyotr Pavlensky**

112 Sarah Wilson
Pyotr Pavlensky: Images of conviction,
bureaucratic convulsion

124 Ludmila Bredikhina
Performance Instead of Politics CV,
or the Pavlensky File

132	Context
134	<u>Arseny Sergeyev</u> You're Not in Moscow Here
156	<u>Alisa Lozhkina</u> Permanent Revolution. Contemporary Art and Politics in Ukraine 1987–2017
178	<u>Anna Matveeva</u> St. Petersburg Votes Atypically
186	Historical Perspective
188	<u>Natalia Murray</u> Revolutionary Spectacle: Street Performances in Petrograd in 1917–1920
196	<u>Andrey Kovalev</u> Against All. Toward a History of Protest Art in Russia
216	<u>Alek D. Epstein</u> Art Activism in the Putin Era. The Heirs of Moscow Conceptualism and Sots Art in the 21st Century
228	Catalogue Plates
244	Endnotes
250	Selected Bibliography
254	Biographies

After the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine went through a complicated change of semantic and economic models and also, unlike many post-Soviet countries, a continual and not always peaceful rotation of elites. Parallel to these changes, the attitude toward the political in art was also transformed.

In the last 30 years, Ukraine acquired state independence, confronted the phenomenon of oligarchic capitalism, and went through three waves of mass protests, two revolutions, a war in the country's east, the annexation of Crimea, a neurotic and belated de-communization, and an endless number of less-obvious externally but domestically deeply felt signal political events. Flare ups of direct political action were replaced by long periods of the rule of political spectacle, which

could be called the nerve of the era. If we try to analyze the culture of those decades, we think not of the landmark films, songs, books, and even works of art, but of one or another series of quasi-political spectacles that the country swallowed and continues to swallow with pleasure mixed with weary revulsion or aggression. With a switch in media from newspaper and television to websites and Facebook, the spectacles strengthened

their positions. What is the place of contemporary art in a coordinate system completely subjugated to the eros of the political? What is political art in an environment where the very word 'politics' is a synonym for corruption and lawlessness yet, nevertheless, people build barricades on the country's main square with startling regularity, with beauty and elemental conceptualism that the world's best artists could envy?



Starting in the 1980s, we can speak of the formation of a new art in Ukraine, which broke radically with the practices of socialist realism and developed in sync with the international cultural process. The generation of the late 1980s and early 1990s is probably the brightest phenomenon in Ukrainian art since the times of the avant-garde in the early twentieth century, squashed by the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s. The transitory post-Soviet identity of the 1990s and early 2000s was gradually replaced by a rethinking of the political in art, raising the degree of comprehension of the social fabric and interest in activist practices. This coincided with a technological and network leap, forming a new generation of artists oriented on completely new meanings, audiences, and goals.

Did Ukrainian art of the last decades go faster than the political transformations, did it forecast them, did it participate in them directly?

Formally, the artistic practices related in some way with politics in Ukraine can be divided into three categories:

1) Art about politics. Works in which the political appears as subject; often a very acute, critical, and expressive reflection of the environment, but at the same time not calling for its instant transformation.

2) Art as politics. Various activist practices seeing their calling in not only reflecting but in transforming reality.

3) Art from politics. An extremely contradictory phenomenon, the product of appropriation by the mainstream of practices of contemporary art in order to strengthen the effectiveness of the political spectacle (the work of the Femen group, used by certain politicians, property developers, and other methodologies of performance art in the fight against competitors). This category also includes the elemental popular performances in times of political turbulence (the collective performances during Euromaidan, the carnival aspects of the Orange Revolution).

Chronologically the recent decades can be divided into three periods, in which the intertwining of political and artistic practices followed several different scenarios.

ON THE RUINS OF UTOPIA

SECOND HALF OF THE 1980s–2004

The first stage covers the period from the second half of the 1980s to 2004. This is a zone of maximal turbulence — the death of Homo sovieticus on the ruins of the USSR, the conception of contemporary art practices, experiments with media, and a distrustful tentative search for a new Ukrainian identity.

The photography projects of Boris Mikhailov, Yuri Rupin, and other representatives of the acutely social Kharkov school of photography in the late 1970s–1990s create a well-rounded picture of the collapse of the great Soviet narrative. The famous series of portraits of Kharkov's homeless, *Case History* by Mikhailov (1997–1998), is an uncompromising view of the degradation of a society that lived through a large-scale social catastrophe.

In Odessa of the early 1980s, a group of artists sharing common interests worked together for a while as a group — Sergei Anufriev, Yuri Leiderman, Dmitri Fedorov, Pertsy, Larisa



2

3

fig. 1 Masoch Foundation Mausoleum for the President, 1993
fig. 2–3 Yuri Leiderman and Igor Charstkin Killing with a Flag, 1984

Rezun, Dmitri Nuzhin, and others. Leonid Voitsekhov, as the oldest, became the unspoken leader of the circle. They started out with apartment exhibitions, actions in the spirit of Fluxus. Odessa conceptualism is a homegrown phenomenon that resonates deeply with world tendencies. Their actions — *Methods of Killing with a Flag* by Leiderman and Chatskin (1984), *Scouting for Artistic Deposits* (1987), and *In a Jiffy* (1987) by Voitsekhov — are the best pages in the history of Ukrainian performance art in the Soviet period, when the very word was not allowed to exist. A no less important milestone in Ukrainian art were the graphic albums, texts, paintings, objects and installations of the Odessa Conceptualists.¹

Kiev in the late 1980s gave rise to a powerful generation of painters who called themselves 'transavanguardists.' But very quickly their interest in excessively baroquely narrative works changed to new aesthetic programs, and the generation entered art history as the Ukrainian New Wave. The programmatic apolitical stance, hedonism, sexual and psychedelic revolutions that the generation went through can be interpreted as a political position. When they did touch on political themes, it was usually with a great deal of ironic distancing. It was the effect of the negative imprint of the recent past when everything 'political' was associated with the inflation of meanings and the emptiness of images of the late Soviet era propaganda machine.²

Oleg Tistol and Konstantin Reunov created an ironic preparation of the nascent new Ukrainian idea; in 1987 the artists announced the program Volitional Edge of National Posteclecticism. They made an attempt to create a national tradition of 'Cossack Baroque.' In the mid-1990a Tistol worked with Nikolai Matsenko on the project Natsprom, studying national stereotypes 'in the object sphere.'³

Yuri Solomko is another prominent member of the generation of the late 1980s–1990s. 'Geopolitical aestheticism' in the form of postmodernist quotations from classic paintings done on standard geographical maps became the basis of a language that the artist used for decades.⁴

The Rays of Juche, a revolutionary patriotic youth union, was formed in 1989 in Kiev. The association became the base of a mass youth movement that peaked in 1990–1991. The Rays of Juche's burlesque and travesty actions, allegedly inspired by the ideology of the North Korean Communists is an example of early Ukrainian political performance art.

In the middle of 1993 the Combine of Revolutions group formed within the Kiev Left Association of Youth (LOM). The group performed a number of actions at the campus of Shevchenko University, and it was represented within the LOM structure by the Postmodern Perspective faction. The Combine of Revolutions continued its ironic actions from April 1994 to 1998. One of its characteristic actions was *Hercules (Oatmeal)* on 12 April 1994:



1



'An empty lot in Gonchary-Kozhemiaki was selected as the future testing ground of the Combine of Revolutions. The action combined several conceptual acts by members of the Combine: 2

a) the territory of the testing ground was sown with oatmeal flakes, intended to demonstrate the symbolic insemination by revolutionary potency of the most historical nucleus of Kiev;

b) the action of harvesting porridge was accompanied by the reading of certain texts that were imbued by the action participants with a special, magical quality, increasing the possible fertility;

c) on the whole the actions illustrated the concept of the Mirror Kolobok, whose constant replacement around its own axis projects its erroneous reflection onto the surrounding world.⁵

This action demonstrated the ironic attitude of the Combine workers to the practitioners of 'contemporary art.' Besides which, despite the agnosticism of the elaborated concepts, the Combine showed its desire to be present in the space: both literary (at the testing ground) and symbolically (encroaching on the preserves of 'contemporary art').

One of the most interesting phenomena of that period was the Masoch Foundation, created in 1991 by the artists Igor Podolchak and Igor Durich as well

fig. 1 Arsen Savadov From the Series 'Collective Red Part 2,' 1999

fig. 2 Arsen Savadov Donbass-Chocolate, 1997





as the theater director Roman Viktuk. The action *Mausoleum for the President* (1993) beneath the National Art Museum of Ukraine is a signal work of the era. A photograph of President Leonid Kravchuk was put in a three-liter jar of schmaltz and cracklings. When they heated the jar on an electric hot plate, the schmaltz became transparent and revealed the conserved image of the president.⁶

The postmodernism on post-Soviet soil of the period mixed with the nihilism typical for the state of ruined empires and meanings. Paradoxically it combined with romanticism, the spirit of freedom and the sense that something new was happening. This mix gave rise to a unique worldview model. Around the world in the 1990s radical cynicism easily lived with lyricism, and disillusionment in political utopias coexisted with a wild faith in social shamanism in the form of 'political technologies.' Ukraine was discovering genres that had been established by then in the West but were still new in the post-Soviet space: video art, performance, installation. Transgression and interest in the aesthetics of the ugly reigned in art. It was then that a large number of works were created that combined the turbulent energy of the era with acid sociopolitical meaning. Among them are the documentation of Yuri Leiderman and Igor Chatskin's performance *Methods of Killing with a Flag* (1983), retaining its timeliness over decades, and the Arsen Savadov's classic photo series *Donbas-Chocolate* (1991) and *Collective Red Part 2* (1999).

Donbas-Chocolate became Arsen Savadov's calling card in the mid-1990s. The photo documentation of the 1997 performance is a component of the *Deepinsider* project, which from its creation has provoked viewers with its frankness and powerful aesthetic expression. Savadov found the basic expressive elements of his work in the video project *Voices of Love* that he made with co-author Georgy Senchenko; in 1994 the artists shot 90 minutes of video on the military ship *Hetman Sahaidachnyi* with sailors dressed in ballet tutus. In the *Donbas* project, real miners from the southeast part of Ukraine participated in the performance.

The *Donbas-Chocolate* series became one of the main artistic statements of the new Ukrainian art. In part its astonishing success is explained by the fact that Savadov's traditional hyperaestheticism and his paradoxical aesthetic, based on the absurdist dressing up of male performers with their subsequent brutal incursion into the insouciant fabric of the real, this time was activated in the context of one of the most acute social boils on the body of post-Soviet Ukrainian reality. By the mid-1990s the Donbas was the source of constant social instability and criminality, and the miners, previously hailed by Soviet propaganda, had become a symbol of permanent localized rebellion, for they were periodically used by Kiev politicians for various types of blackmail. The conflicts that turned

1



into a large-scale national tragedy in 2014 were brewing in the region then. The tense realization of one's meaningless and hopeless existence, the filth, sweat, and danger (news reports of mass deaths in mine collapses had become common then) is heightened by the counterpoint of the delicate and vulnerable tutus, which were also a familiar visual symbol of the collapse of a mighty empire. *Swan Lake* was broadcast on national television during the coup of 1991.

Savadov's unique gift for suggestive immersion of his characters into the space of aesthetic experiment in a radical performance, documented in *Donbas-Chocolate*, here reaches its apogee. What did it mean for the miners, this experience of totally overcoming conventions, disrobing for the camera, mixing with a group of immoral performers, and the homoerotic dressing in tutus? The seeming impossibility of the event is what fascinates viewers so powerfully; and this event is also a marker of the era, for probably it was only then and there — the Donbas in the mid-1990s, on the ruins of the Soviet Empire in a space of total anxiety and uncertainty could members of one of the most closed male communities so easily be transformed into the psychedelic agents of Arsen Savadov's performance art. The edginess of the situation turns an absurdist action in the mines

into a mystery carnival built on the play of opposites: male vs female, the above-ground world vs the cosmos of underground nonbeing, real vs imaginary, and so on. Despoiled innocence, symbolized by the dirty tutus, enters into an alchemical interaction with the majestic energy of the male collective and leads to a powerful transgressive experience that is felt by both participants and viewers.⁷

Savadov's *Collective Red Part 2* begins as a performance invasion into the space of a real May Day demonstration by Communists on European Square in Kiev. Savadov's by-then traditional performers in tutus take bizarre poses in front of the rally, underlining the absurdity of the event. The Communist Party of Ukraine by the late 1990s was a strange relict of the past, a simulacrum that had lost all ties to reality. Ukrainian society was suffering through a painful and multilevel transformation in those years. The post-Soviet euphoria coincided with the arrival of the postmodern aesthetic, leading to formation of a hedonistic, apolitical, and very vital generation. The fin-de-siècle spirit was strong in the late 1990s. *Collective Red Part 2* captures the friable existence on the border of eras, when the collapse of the totalitarian system with its cruel mechanisms of oppression led to a sexual and psychedelic revolution, leaving the young decadents a legacy of void symbols and vague memories of red as the emblem of the terrible terror and the most long-lived utopia of the twentieth century.

The pictures taken during the demonstration are filled with tension and suspense. Getting ready, the performers are prepared to deconstruct a recently powerful mythologeme by their actions. On the square, they begin their strange movements. Some passersby look bewildered, but basically the crowd in the background seems totally indifferent and does not register the artistic provocation. The performers' role is one of strange beauty, which in the best traditions of the genre, is meant to save the world from the rule of dead signs of a bygone era. The conflict between Soviet and post-Soviet is presented here as an aesthetic contradiction between apolitical youth in the person of beautiful actors radiating erotic energy and the faceless indifferent extras on the stage.⁸

The second — staged — part of the series is distinguished by intentional compositional overload. This conglomeration of bodies, slogans, and flags is



2



Fabrizio 2015

1

164	165
-----	-----



fig. 1 Alexander Roitburd
From Series 'Tango,'
2005-2006

fig. 2 Alexander Roitburd
Yulia-Turtle, 2005

a reference to the late-Soviet totalitarian theater of the absurd and to the tradition of countercultural Sots Art, which mocked the aesthetic of power during the last decades of the USSR's existence. But in Arsen Savadov's transmedia theater, the Soviet artifacts are used as an effect backdrop for the traditional author's spectacle with costumed ephebes. The homoerotic youths in tutus seem to have completely corrupted and demoralized a group of ordinary citizens of the USSR. This unbridled psychedelic action triumphs over the totalitarian seriousness, and elderly veterans pose wearing ridiculous mushroom hats, and at some moment it becomes clear that they all, including the performers, are but part of an endless blood-red hallucination.

GENERATION ORANGE. BETWEEN TWO REVOLUTIONS

2004–2013

The start of the second period corresponds to the Orange Revolution of 2004 and its end comes at the beginning of Euromaidan and the revolutionary events of late 2013 and early 2014. This inter-revolutionary period brought a new generation of artists to scene which formed after the collapse of the USSR. This generation was not traumatized by propaganda and was the first to actively and systematically work with Western institutions. The 1990s saw a chaotic number of random meetings, exhibitions, and projects, which by the end of the 2000s had taken on a semblance of a system. Artists were recognized and they gradually learned how to translate their ideas and concepts into a professional language understood by the international community. The formation of this generation took place in the context of understanding the political in art, taken from what was timely at the moment in the intellectual climate.

The Orange Revolution was a time when the carnival aspect was radically injected into politics. The peaceful protest in 2004 on Maidan were extremely aestheticized, weaving unique lowbrow popular performances, costumed demonstrations, a special humor, slogans, songs and so on as well as the total supremacy of orange, which had become the symbol of resistance. Similar elements, but in a much less peaceful context, would appear in the aesthetics of the revolution of 2013–2014. The main heroes of the Orange Revolution became iconic personages of the new mythology. The transformation of the popular media images of Yulia Tymoshenko and Victor Yushchenko in art found its reflection in the paintings of Alexander Roitburd, a classic of the Ukrainian New Wave, whose works are ironic yet romanticize the events, for example, *Equestrian Portrait of Victor Yushchenko* and also the *Tango* series of 2005–2006 (the paintings depict the main couple of the Orange Revolution dancing the fiery Latin American tango against the background of banal postcard landscapes).

Velvet Labyrinth (2004), a video by Olga Kashimbekova and Gleb Katchuk, is a valuable document of the days of the Orange Revolution. The artists visited the rows of tents and barricades between Bessarabskaya Square and Independence Maidan in the period between the first and second rounds of the elections, at the height of revolutionary events. The result is a single-frame work in the manner of Katchuk and Kashimbekova, when a seemingly documentary narrative gradually takes on surrealistic notes.

The period right after the Orange Revolution was a time of collective dynamics, when two powerful art collectives appeared on the scene and in many ways defined the face of the era — R.E.P. in Kiev and SOSka in Kharkov.⁹

R.E.P. (Revolutionary Experimental Space) was formed at the height of the Orange Revolution and at first was a broad art movement. Twenty artists



1

2

were united by a euphoric mood and programmatic exhibition at the former Soros Center in Kiev. Its early actions — *We Will R.E.P. You* (2005) and *R.E.P. Party* (2005) — are classics of Ukrainian contemporary art, a sharp and aesthetically expressive reaction to the polarization of the political space of post-Orange Ukraine. Their 2005 action *Under the Rug* was telling. The artists went to the protest outside the presidential administration office after their participation in the Venice Biennale was canceled through 'under the rug' intrigues. *East-West* (2005) involved a tug-of-war on Maidan, which resonated with the prevalent arguments about cultural differences between Eastern and Western Ukraine and the eternal problem of the country's civilizational choice.¹⁰

In 2006 the group began working with six members: Nikita Kadan, Lesya Khomenko, Zhanna Kadyrova, Lada Nakonechnaya, Vladimir Kuznetsov, and Ksenia Gnilitskaya. The artists elaborate on themes that are problematic in Ukrainian society in the multi-year projects *Patriotism*, *Mediators*, and *Euroremont*. Since the end of the 2000s, the members of the association have been developing their individual careers. The internationally best-known artist in the group is Nikita Kadan, their informal leader.¹¹

The action of SOSka *They Are on the Street* (Nikolai Ridny, Anna Kriventsova, Sergei Popov) is important for the 'post-Orange' period. On the eve of another

fig. 1-2 SOSka They Are on the Street, 2006
fig. 3 Femen Vagina Art, 2010

3



round of elections, the artists begged on the street wearing masks of the leading Ukrainian politicians — president, prime minister, and opposition leader.¹²

Another important work of that period that has not lost its power is Nikolai Ridnoy's *Lie and Wait* (2006, with Ivonna Golyievskaya). After the artist had been refused a European visa several times in a row, he lay down on the sidewalk in front of the German Embassy, whereupon he was arrested by the embassy guards.

Among the works that treated political themes with wit and originality are those by Sergei Zarva of Odessa and Stas Volyazlovsky of Kherson. Zarva covers reproductions of paintings and variations on the theme of *Ogonyok*, the cult Soviet magazine of the perestroika era, with cheap mass-produced icon covers. Volyazlovsky works in the spirit of outsider art, creating pieces on sheets and pillowcases in an obsessive style typical of prisoner artworks.

The second half of the 2000s and the early 2010s was the flowering of the oligarchy in Ukraine and also the transition of contemporary art from marginal practice to more or less mainstream. It was swept up in a wave of activity by the PinchukArt-



Centre, with its program of showing the top world commercial names. A number of noncommercial art institutions have opened, most notably the Center of Visual Culture founded by leftist intellectuals who left the Kiev-Mogilyansk Academy. In the early 2010 PinchukArtCentre began supporting young Ukrainian art. As a result a number of artists in the circle of R.E.P and SOSka find themselves in a complex situation when perhaps the only viable institution to systematically support contemporary practices is an art center financed by an oligarch. These contradictions plus the absence of support from state and private foundations and organizations have led to entire generations of artists who are more in demand at institutions in neighboring countries than at home. Perhaps the most symptomatic in that sense was the exhibition dedicated to the tenth anniversary of R.E.P., which took place in 2014 in the Polish gallery Labyrinth and not in a central Ukrainian institution.

In early 2008 the Common Space Exhibition opened in a freight container at the Arsenal metro station in Kiev, which included R.E.P. and the Russian group Voina. One of the exhibits was a video of Voina's 2007 action, PIR, in memory of Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov. The Kiev authorities destroyed the exhibition, taking apart the container in which it was held; two days later the organizers decided to perform PIR on the three lines of the Kiev metro. The action took place on 10 February 2008, and Voina was joined by R.E.P. and the Kiev countercultural writer Adolfych.

One of the most contradictory phenomena of the end of the 2000s is the work of the group Femen, which combines the elements of contemporary art, media show, and political provocation. Despite the warm welcome they received in France, for example, in Ukraine the group was never perceived as part

of the subculture of contemporary art. On the contrary, the only action related to figurative art showed the conservative hostility of the Femen members toward contemporary art practices. On 2 February 2010 the activists, dressed only in panties, protested at the PinchukArtCentre in front of Sergei Bratkov's *Khortytisia*, which depicted a young woman in national Ukrainian costume with her genitals exposed. 'Ukraine is not a vagina!' and 'Vaginar!' were the signs held by the topless activists wearing Ukrainian national wreaths in their hair, which in context of their strategy of using their bodies provocatively merely underlined the absurdity of their action.

In August 2010 the Kharkov artists Roman Minin and Hamlet Zinkovsky found themselves in the center of a scandal. For the project *Balaclava Odyssey* they made graffiti on metal canisters in Sevastopol. They called the work Conservation of History and consisted of absurdist, but occasionally acutely political signs: 'Lenin in Naphthalene,' 'Zhukov and Other Hetmen,' 'Beria's Adjika,' and so on. The local residents and the law and order services hated the project. The work revealed the painful rejection by Crimean residents of sarcastic remarks about the recent past, and in a microscopic version replayed the drama of identity that had preceded the annexation of the peninsula in 2014.

2

fig. 1

Vasiliy Tsagolov From the Series 'Spectre of Revolution,' 2013

fig. 2

Markiyam Matsekh Piano for Berkut, 2013



A significant event at the end of the 2000s was the action by Alexander Volodarsky (Shiitman), a blogger and artist from Lugansk, at the Supreme Rada. On 2 November 2009, in protest against the decisions of the National Expert Commission on Protecting Public Morality, Alexander and a member of the group of radical artists he founded simulated a sex act in front of the parliament building. He was charged with hooliganism and spent five months in a penal colony. On 29 September 2010, Volodarsky acted out *You're Not in Europe Here*, which was based on his interrogations. The phrase was tattooed without color on the artist's back and in his opinion it best exemplifies the principles of Ukrainian law and order.¹³

On 10 February 2012 the president of the Kiev-Mogilyansk Academy Serhiy Kvit shut down the exhibition *Ukrainian Body*, organized by the Center for Visual Culture. The project was dedicated to studying physicality in Ukrainian culture. After the show was closed, the Old Academic Building of the Academy was closed as well; it had served as the home of the Center and before that the Soros Foundation. This led to a wide public discussion of censorship in the Ukrainian art space. The public was particularly offended by the comment of the school's president who said, 'This isn't an exhibition, it's shit.'¹⁴

The first half of the 2010 marks the activity of a major exhibition institution, the Mystetskyi Arsenal. Blockbuster shows, the apogee of which was the *Arsenale-2012*, the First Kiev Biennale of Contemporary Art, became one more symbol of the era and gave rise to a wave of institutional criticism from activist artists. The complex of difficult relations between artist and institutions and all the accompanying social conflicts and contradictions, the many years of living in a situation of double standards and unregulated relations between the subjects of the art process, led in the summer of 2013 to perhaps the greatest scandal of the era.

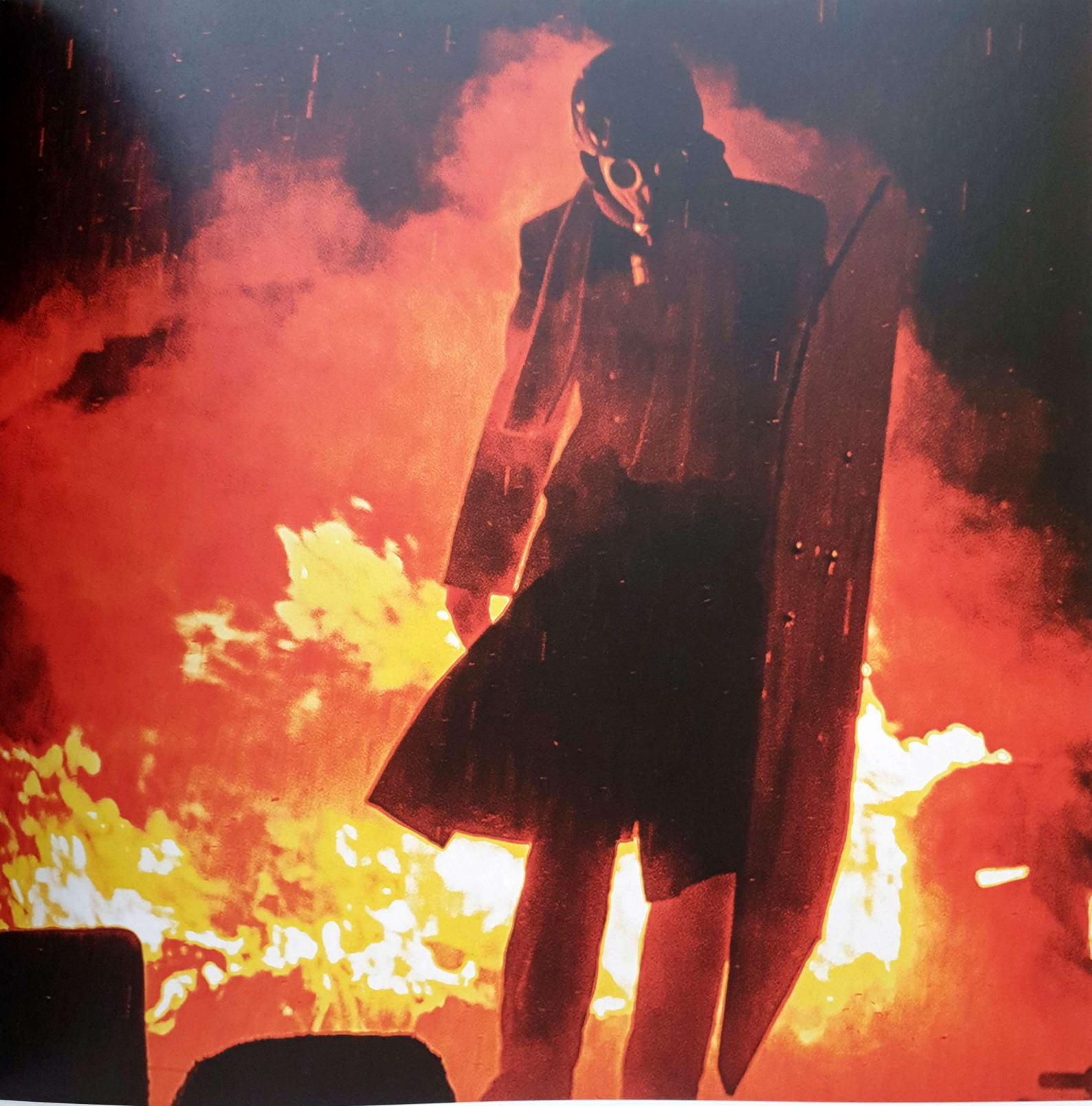
At an exhibition on the anniversary of the christening of Kievan Rus, *The Great and The Majestic* at the Mystetskyi Arsenal, Vladimir Kuznetsov, a member of R.E.P., without permission from the curators created a large mural called *Koliivshchina. The Last Judgment*. The artist depicted the Church hierarchy boiling in a cauldron of hell — completely in the spirit of Orthodox iconography, by the way. The director of the institution declared that she did not accept this work for exhibition and ordered it painted over with black. Followed by an interview in which she called her act a performance, the situation elicited a wave of protests against the Mystetskyi Arsenal with a boycott of many years by artists and demands for an official admission of censorship and vandalism. Such an admission was made obliquely by the new director of Arsenal in the summer of 1917. In a sense the situation involving Kuznetsov's mural was a presentiment of the turbulence, not only artistic but national, that began just a few months later. Here, as in subsequent events, everything was based on the great dissatisfaction with the current regime (Victor Yanukovich was rumored to be coming to the vernissage) and the social media were the main platform for viral dissemination of information and discussion.

MAIDAN AND BEYOND

2014–2017

The period of Ukrainian revolution of late 2013 and early 2014 and the tragic events that followed — the annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in the eastern part of the country — became some of the most important, fruitful, and complex stages in the history of contemporary Ukrainian art and culture. On one hand, there was an emotional surge, a time when many artists discovered the concept of patriotism and experienced direct participation in revolutionary and military events not at all in the

Igor Petrov From the Series
'Maidan,' 2014



carnival aspect of 2004. However, the patriotic surge that made revolution and military action possible also led to the gradual radicalization of rightwing feelings, a strengthening of nationalism, which resulted in the logical culmination of hasty de-Communizing, which threatens to become yet another period of erasing historical memory, which the country had experienced a few times in the twentieth century.

The foreboding of social unrest appeared in Ukrainian art long before the revolutionary events in Kiev. Among the works where the dissatisfaction with the growing tension in society as well as the threat of police violence is Nikita Kadan's famous project of 2009–2010, *Treatment Room*, prints on plates dealing with police torture. Others include *Water Cuts Stone* by Nikolai Ridny, nominated for the Pinchuk Art Prize in 2013, the landscapes of Vasily Tsagolov from the *Specter of Revolution* series (2013), and the exhibition *Before the Execution* by Nikita Kadan, Nikolai Grokh, and Evgenia Belorusets at the Karas Galley in October 2013, just before Maidan. 'The specter of power and righteousness appears on the horizon,' wrote Belorusets in the project text.

Nikita Kadan showed his watercolor series *Controlled Accidents* (2013),¹⁵ devoted to the violence inherent in the political sphere. Nikita Shalenny is another artist whose works on the eve and during Maidan are strikingly current. In December 2013 he presented *Where Is Your Brother?* a series of aesthetic drawings on the life of 'new Ukrainians.' The project's main characters were members of the Berkut division that played a very sad role in the history of Maidan. A second premonition project of Shalenny's is his *Catapult*, a small model of a catapult made in September 2013 with an engineer from YUZHMAASH. A few months later real catapults became a symbol of the resistance on Maidan.

The Ukrainian protest in the first stage accumulated in the social networks and was actively supported by the creative class, including artists. At this stage the protest was exceptionally peaceful and it seemed the 2004 scenario would be repeated in 2013 and the so-called Eurorevolution would be limited to wild discothèques, joyous meetings of the art community on the square in the spirit of the Occupy movement, and conversation of the fate of humanity over hot tea and revolutionary sandwiches. One of the first to join this carnival Maidan was Alexander Roitburd, a participant of the first pacifist, small, and joyous wave of protests. Roitburd's activity on Facebook was so famous that he became a hero of Maidan and thought leader of the creative class that supported integration with Europe in the social networks and on the square.¹⁶



1

- fig. 1 Nikita Shalenny From the Series 'Where is Your Brother?', 2013
 fig. 2 Codex Mezhyhirya Exhibition, 2014
 fig. 3 Nikita Shalenny From the Series 'Where is Your Brother?', 2013

The protest of 2013, as we know, was not limited to harmless carnival; on the night of 30 November the authorities began a cruel break up of the student crowds on Maidan. The next day, when a huge crowd of intelligentsia gathered on Mikhailovsky Square, was a watershed, and barricades appeared on Maidan soon after.

A Facebook group appeared in the first days of protest called Strike Poster. The protest posters made by the creative community were posted throughout all the months of Maidan. One of the best known works was a portrait of the president of Ukraine with a clown's red nose; another was the poster 'I'm a Drop in the Ocean,' referred to the 'strategy of the warm ocean,' that is, a peace-loving positive protest.

After the students were attacked, a new stage began, with the construction of ultra-aesthetic ice barricades and the construction of a folk art object that was called 'yolka,' or Christmas tree. The generally aesthetic nature of the protest characterized Maidan 2013–2014. The total installation, which is what the protest city inside the barricades was in fact, and the images from the revolutionary frontlines in the media that seemed almost staged — the aesthetics of Maidan referenced the futuristic anti-utopia of the New Middle Ages, recently predicted by cultural historians led by Umberto Eco.¹⁷

The Ukrainian protest gave rise to a wave of popular conceptual creativity. During their presence for over two months on the country's main square, the protesters performed a number of actions, some of which were heard around the world. As a rule, the organizers of the actions were members of the creative class, not professional artists, who chose artistic methods of making their civic position clear.

Perhaps the most famous action was by Markiyano Matsekh, a musician from Lvov, who played the piano in front of the presidential administration building on 7 December 2013. The photographs of the young man playing Chopin outside the walls of the *siloviki* bastion exploded in the Internet and became a symbol of peaceful civil protest. Other musicians played on the piano after Matsekh, but they did not have the same international resonance.

On 29 December 2013 another significant action took place in the government neighborhood — *The Kingdom of Darkness Surrounded*. The goal of the action, organized by the Civil Sector of Maidan, was to show the authorities their face and to redirect the negative energy coming from the *siloviki* back on them. They brought numerous mirrors, which were directed at the column of policemen guarding the government buildings, which had turned into a symbol of the kingdom of darkness.¹⁸

At the first stage of the protest, young artists who had been associated with the informal Bacteria Gallery joined the protest. The most active in the group was Oleksa Mann, Ivan Semesuk, and Andrei Ermolenko, who had made a name for themselves in 2013 with the shocking works, ironically handling the least attractive aspect of the new Ukrainian reality — the life of the 'gopniks,' thugs, and other inhabitants of lumpen outskirts of big cities. 'Freedom or Death,' or 'Freedom or All Go Fuck Yourselves' in Semesuk's reading and other anarchic slogans with a large dose of unprintable vocabulary were part of their work long before they were re-actualized in Maidan in Kiev. It combined very colorfully with the memorable texts Semesuk and Mann regularly posted in the social networks. Thus Maidan became the artists' golden hour, and they remained on the barricades even on the bloodiest days, organizing an improvised gallery and communications center on Kreshchatik Street approaching Maidan, which became known as Mystetskyi (Art) Barbakan (barbican, a medieval fortified gate). The improvised street gallery showed the works of Ivan Semesuk, Oleksa Mann, Andrei Ermolenko, Vitaly Kravts, Lena Dubrova, and other artists, and it was site for lectures and a festival of short prose. Quite



2

3



Importantly, the Barbican had a stove, which given the freezing temperatures, became a culture-forming factor. The Barbican artists had worn the ironic mask of 'rightwing' before the revolution, so they felt more confident and organic on Maidan with its ultranationalist slogans than artists of left-radical views.¹⁹

The Kiev artist Ilya Isupov became one of the most energetic participants of Maidan. Besides participating in the rallies, Isupov posted a series of new drawings on Facebook. People particularly liked *Happy New Year*, which showed the president with a hunting rifle and killed boars with a special forces unit behind him.

The Odessa artist Igor Gusev supported Maidan, albeit at a distance. He began a painting series *Knights of the Revolution* in 2014 under the influence of the aesthetic and street style of Maidan. He also created a very sophisticated group of short poetic sketches on revolution, which were called Revhaiku, for example:

Frozen to the monitor
Tea leaves cooled
My heart on Maidan.

You called me at night
Candles and a pair of cocktails
Molotov was the third.²⁰

Outstanding media presence was a key characteristic of the Maidan protests. Never before had political event in Ukraine, and especially the documentation of social unrest, been so aestheticized. Maidan gave rise to thousands of photographs in the hottest spots of the protests. The tougher the confrontation between regime and opposition became, the more cinematic and vivid were the photographs. Maidan's strange attraction even in its most sorrowful and ugly manifestations brought a huge number of videos and photo documents that without any pretention to artistry are as expressive as the most sophisticated works by classic battle painters. Famous artists worked side by side with photographers from news agencies and amateurs. The artists with the most interesting photographs include Sergei Bratkov, Boris Mikhailov, Vladislav Krasnoshchek and Sergei Lebedinsky, Alexander Burlak and Sasha Kurmaz, Alexei Salmanov, and Konstatin Strelets.²¹

The increasingly tragic nature of Maidan was captured most accurately by the Kiev artist Vlada Ralko. She based her project *Kiev Diary* on her daily observations, a graphic series that recorded her emotions and feelings almost every day of the protests.²²

One of Ukraine's leading photographers, Alexander Chekmenev, made memorable portraits of the participants in the confrontations with pro-government forces and then a series of photographs of subsequent events in eastern Ukraine — portraits of people who had lost their homes, wounded Ukrainian soldiers in the hospital.

One of the most unusual exhibitions of the period was *Codex of Mezhyhirya*, which took place in spring and summer of 2014 in the Grushevsky National Art Museum of Ukraine, located on the fore post of the barricades throughout the revolution. The curators were the author and Alexander Roitburd. We presented artifacts and objects brought out of Yanukovich's abandoned multimillion-dollar Mezhyhirya residence, when the ex-president fled. The objects of various levels of value and price were arranged in chaotic piles, plunging the viewers in the world of absurdist kitsch of the kleptocratic regime. It was one of the most visited exhibitions in recent history.

- fig. 1 Maria Kulikovskaya
'Happy Birthday' at
Saatchi Gallery, 2015
- fig. 2 Alexey Say Do not Step
on the Rake, 2014
- fig. 3 Maxim Belousov Ice
Maidan's Barricades,
2014



1

The shock after the bloody events at the end of Maidan, the annexation of Crimea, and the start of military action in Donbas is a trauma that affected the art community. For many artists who had been participants in Maidan, this was a period of a heavy, postrevolutionary 'hangover,' and emotional drama difficult to express in actual works. For other artists, on the contrary, this period was an impulse for elaborating new themes, problems, and project. A remarkable phenomenon of this period were the documentary films of Alexei Radinsky, an activist of the TsVK circle, director and artist, about the events of Maidan, and particularly his film *The People Who Came to Power* (2015, with Tomash Fara) about the beginning of the conflict in eastern Ukraine.²³

In the post-Maidan period Nikita Kadan and Nikolai Ridny, no longer in R.E.P. and SOSka, created powerful works with a recognizable language. Nikita Kadan's project *A Madman Can Testify in Court* at the National Art Museum of Ukraine (2015) is one of the strongest statements about war in the Donbas. Using shelves similar to those in archives, Kadan placed objects from the museum collection relating to the Soviet period of the region where furious conflict broke out after 2014. Outside an ideological narrative, the objects seemed incongruous and melancholy. On the museum's stair landings, he placed shells that fell on Eastern Ukraine in 2014–2015. At the Istanbul Biennale of 2015, curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, another signal work of Kadan's from this period was shown — *Refuge*. The top of the installation was an allusion to the destruction wreaked by the war on the Donetsk Natural History Museum, with stuffed deer, tires from the barricades, and peeling walls. The lower level of the work is a bomb shelter with two levels of wooden shelf bedding holding absurdist vegetable garden beds. At the Venice Biennale, Nikolai Ridny showed his program work *Blind Spot* (2014), banners painted over in black, leaving

just a small eyehole, creating the sensation of the limited and irrelevant viewpoint on the displayed part of reality. There was another piercing work about the conflict in Ukraine shown at the same biennale at the Ukrainian pavilion, a video installation by Open Group, *Synonym for the Word Wait* (2015). The artist had set up cameras working in real time in the homes of people who had gone to war.

In this period a new generation of artists came on the scene, with Roman Mikhailov of Kharkov as one of the most interesting. His 2014 project *Shadows* — charred remains of ships — is dedicated to the annexation of Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet which had been an apple of discord between Russia and Ukraine for decades. The installation was shown at IX ART KYIV Contemporary at the Mystetskyi Arsenal and later at the Supreme Rada on the anniversary of the annexation. Another important project began in Maidan, when Mikhailov smoked graphic pages over burn barrels in the tent city on the barricades (*Breath of Freedom*, 2013). This series led to gigantic canvases of burned paper (*Fragility*, on the façade of Saint-Merri, Paris, 2014, *Burn of the Real*, 2015, and others).²⁴



2

3



The topic of political events of recent years is actively developed by the artist Daria Koltsova. Her work during the Maidan era includes a banner with lines from the Ukrainian Constitution, with all the articles violated by the regime of Victor Yanukovich crossed out with black marker.

Maria Kulikovska is one of the most interesting and political active artists post-Maidan. Her performance, wrapping herself in the Ukrainian flag on the steps of the Hermitage Museum during Manifesta 2014 in St. Petersburg, was resonant as was her action *Raft Crimea*, when she floated down the Dnepr River on a raft without food supplies, to call attention to the defenseless people left without home or homeland after Russia's annexation of Crimea. Before Maidan, Maria had begun a series of works that were casts of her body. These works were part of an exposition at the only contemporary art institution in Donetsk, the art center Izoliatsia. Separatists took the territory of the factory where the art center was located during the conflict in Donetsk and her exhibition of sculptures, *Homo Bulla*, was riddled with bullets. In memory of that event, the artist held her performance *Happy Birthday* at the Saatchi Gallery in 2015. The naked artist broke casts of herself made of soap as a response to the separatists who destroyed her works.

The pogrom by rightwing hooligans of David Chichkan's exhibition *Lost Opportunities* became a huge scandal on the edge of art and politics in 2017. The exhibition was probably the first clear and whole artistic statement conceptualizing the Maidan experience critically and with distance. The artist participated in the protests of 2013–2014 but feels that the revolution did not achieve its goals. The discussions of Chichkan's project and the subsequent vandalism were important in the social discourse.

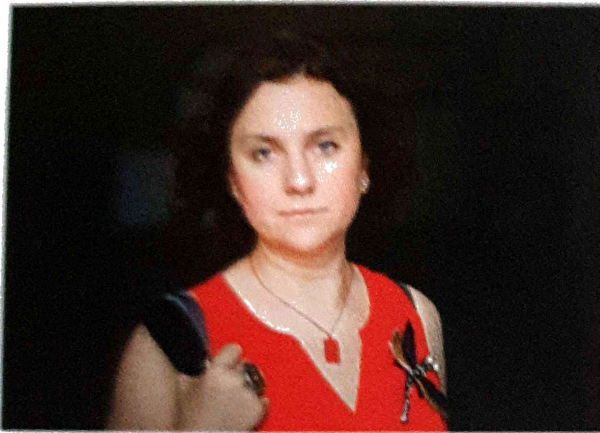
A most interesting phenomenon of post-Maidan Ukraine is a group of artists and creative figures centered on the underground nightclub Efir. On the one hand, their hedonism, interest in electronic music, active club scene, and escapism are a counter reaction to the excessive presence of politics in the life of the country, traumatized by conflicts. On the other hand, it was this very group of artists and activists (Alina Yakubenko, Alexander Dolgy, Evgenia Molar, and Dana Brezhneva) who were the backbone of the initiative group of the Ukrainian Anti-crisis Center, which studied the situation in the eastern part of the country for several years and worked in the most depressed regions suffering from the military conflict.

In May 2017 the artist Vova Vorotnev performed an action that involved walking for a month from his hometown, Chervonograd, a mining town in the Lvov region, to Eastern Ukraine, carrying a piece of coal that would symbolically unite the two such different parts of the country. The travelogue he posted in social media along the way is a separate part of the project.

De-Communizing the country and the controversial issue around it is one of the important themes of contemporary Ukrainian art. The preservation of Soviet mosaics, which the current leadership tried to destroy under guise of fighting the ideological symbols of the totalitarian era, has become a rallying point for many artists and activists. The photographer Evgeny Nikiforov published *Decommunized: Soviet Mosaics in Ukraine* in 2017, detailing his research. The war on Soviet monuments after the scandalous destruction of the statue of Lenin in Kiev during Maidan became a national sport. Evgeny Beloruset's *Putting Lenin's Head Together* at the PinchukArtCentre in 2015 addressed the mechanisms of memory and the complexity of their functioning. In August 2017 in Kirovograd, recently renamed Kropivnitsky, the artist Alexei Sai made a witty statement in this regard. His scattered rakes around the pedestal of the former Lenin statue, now used by locals as a homemade memorial for the heroes of Maidan, make an extremely relevant statement about the anxieties and risks for modern Ukraine.







ALISA LOZHKINA is based in Kyiv, Ukraine. She is an art historian, critic and curator. In 2013–2016 Ms. Lozhkina served as Deputy Director of Mystetskyi Arsenal, a large museum and exhibition complex in Ukraine. In 2010–2016 she was the editor in chief of the leading Ukrainian contemporary art magazine ART UKRAINE and curated numerous international exhibitions of Ukrainian contemporary art (MOCAP, Krakow, Poland; Künstlerhaus, Vienna, Austria; Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art, Chicago, USA; Galeria sztuki Dworcowa, Wroclaw, Poland etc.). She contributed to numerous Ukrainian and international magazines and catalogues on Ukrainian contemporary art.

Art Riot
Post-Soviet Actionism

Saatchi Gallery, London
16 November – 31 December, 2017

Presented by

The Tsukanov Family Foundation

Curated by

Marat Guelman

Catalogue

Edited by

Andrey Kovalev

Translator

Nina Bouis

Editors

Jean-Claude Bouis

Natalia Murray

Graphic Design

ABC Design Studio

Dmitry Mordvintsev

Svetlana Danilyuk

Image Editing

Tatiana Borisova

Svetlana Danilyuk

Daria Goriacheva

Olga Zirko

Published by © ABCdesign Studio

Publication © ABCdesign Studio 2017

texts © the authors 2017

unless otherwise stated, all works

© the artists 2017

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying or recording, or by any information retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright holders, except for brief passages quoted by a reviewer in a newspaper or magazine.

© Tsukanov Family Foundation

ISBN 978-5-4330-0086-5