



# Religion and Gender

## Re-Thinking Cultural Institutions in Ukraine: New Media, Museums, and Activism(s)

**JESSICA ZYCHOWICZ**

Research Fellow  
Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies  
University of Michigan (US)  
zychowic@umich.edu

Presented at the  
**12th Annual Danyliw Seminar**  
Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Ottawa  
10-12 November 2016

Draft: Not To Be Cited Without Permission

## 1. Overview

By investigating civic activism in Ukraine from 2004-2014, my broader project explores how an emerging generation of artists—often referred to as the Third Avant-Garde—are contesting past Soviet and Western conceptualizations of the public sphere and the controversial term “feminism” as it travels in the local context. Many of the materials produced by these artists illuminate the conflicted discourses underpinning media images of post-Soviet Ukraine to reveal compelling narratives about nation, human rights, and the production of dissidence in a global context.

Young people in Ukraine do not remember the fall of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, the nonviolent gatherings on Kyiv’s main square against a rigged presidential election in 2004 were a mild upheaval compared to the decline in civil liberties incurred over the decade that followed. The mass demonstrations on Kyiv’s Maidan, or square, in November 2013 were a culmination of deeper grievances that were unleashed in response to ousted President Yanukovych’s refusal to sign an Association Agreement that would have moved the country closer to joining the EU. More importantly, this act catalyzed a need for regime change by a polity divided by elites. The troubled outcomes of the Orange Revolution that had once served a limited, albeit formative function by helping to solidify a democratic identity in Ukraine, have only been further complicated by the conflict with Russia in the region.

The specific artworks and narratives I have selected for this paper feature local activists’ perspectives in the decade leading up to the 2013-14 Euromaidan Revolution, offering insights into a history that skirts the grand narratives of nationhood and war often promulgated in mass-media about Ukraine. Each chapter in my broader project traces a different scholarly debate on Soviet and Western connotations with notions of human rights and its terms of equivalence, the former oftentimes positioned in an asymmetrical either/or (for or against) relationship to democracy, making this term particularly difficult to translate. The repetition of false binaries across contexts (national, mass-media, linguistic) also reveals the manipulative surfaces upon which conversation about women’s and gender rights can become limited and stymied. Contrary to these limiting devices, in the years between the Orange Revolution and the events of winter 2013-14, many intellectuals, artists, and others became activists—sometimes against their own will—risking their bodies in the face of physical violence.

My aim is to offer up critical material for viewing new opportunities for publicly engaged cultural systems. I focus on Ukraine’s younger generation of self-identified feminist and LGBTQ activists’ experiences since the Orange Revolution. Many artists and activists have continued to carve out pivotal public sites for dialogue. In this paper, I narrow my focus to recent initiatives by the Visual Culture Research Center (VCRC). I will address several factors shaping the discourses at play within the visual exhibits be-

ing produced by curators at VCRC, an important venue for creative work that has struggled to survive in light of censorship by the regime and attacks from the far right. Their works often involve explorations of Kyiv's urban space, in particular where monuments, museums, and architecture mark shifts in ideology. This group is especially unique in their depictions of intergenerational perspectives on Soviet past and the ways in which it is continually (re)inscribed through local social conflicts and their distribution/ perpetuation/ resolution across urban space.

## 2. New Publicly-Engaged Forums: *The School of Kyiv*

“The address of the booth selling scrap metal is on Mirnaya Street, a term which denotes both world and peace, though the street was formerly known as Chorny Yar, or Black Ravine. Nearly a century ago local residents petitioned the city to change the name of their street. The notion of a Black Ravine called to mind a necropolis. No one wanted to rent a room there. ‘Sign, seal, and deliver what you will, but give us Peace!’ went the slogan” (Mishchenko 2015).

This excerpt is from *The Book of Kyiv*, a collection of essays containing local accounts of the many changes to result from the nation's recent experience of revolution, occupation, and conflict. The narrative often stretches back to the city's origins in the tenth century, visually framing the present in layers of dialogue, parable, and metaphor that lead readers to confront their surroundings critically, irreverent of taboos in prescriptive uses of space. Instead, oral histories and anecdotal narratives about the city convey how memory inscribes and alters environments. The text trespasses into alleyways between churches and a mosque where the homeless rest, into secret gardens growing near forgotten mass graves dating to, “sometime after Oleg the Prophet was interned,” in which all were “buried in rows: first the locals, then soldiers, then Roma, Muslims, Jews, then victims of the plague.” The text scales all walls— depicting, in images, how the city populates and moves counter to divisive strategies in the mainstream media stories of national conflict. Pathways emerge:

“Today the outskirts of the market are filled with Tatars, who, having fled Crimea after its annexation by Russia now bake and sell *cheburek*, a dough pastry filled with seasonings. In 1980 a covered building was added to the marketplace. The structure resembles a seagull, and the air there smells of seagulls as well, due to the stray cats that compete with the birds in retrieving any discarded fish.” But these newly displaced Tatars from Crimea have actually been here before; there is even a hill nicknamed after them, returning it to its original inhabitants—“Tatarka,” now mostly abandoned, lies on a weedy slope hidden from view.

The texts are a guide to *The School of Kyiv*. Spread out across 18 venues in the city, what started as an art event became a multinational phenomenon and a springboard for dialogue about Euromaidan. The performances, public lectures, and art installations that manifested from September–November, 2015 were originally supposed to be the 2nd Kyiv Biennial, but had been postponed from 2014 because of the revolution. The first biennial was held in 2012. In November 2013 two Austrian curators, Hedwig Saxenhuber and Georg Schöllhammer, had signed on to organize the second event.<sup>1</sup> Only six months before the 2015 opening, the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture canceled the state funds earmarked for the biennial, stating that art is not a priority in a time of war. This sudden turn of events galvanized the local art community in their efforts to sustain the project.

### 3. The Visual Culture Research Center

The fifteen organizers of *The School of Kyiv* are members of the Visual Culture Research Center (VCRC), founded in 2008 as a “platform for collaboration between academic, artistic, and activist communities.”<sup>2</sup> The group has since been housed in three different venues in the city due to controversial relations with state authorities for the content of their artworks, including expulsion from Kyiv-Mohyla Academy in an act of censorship by University President Sergiy Kvit for the exhibit *Ukrainian Body*, in 2011, for images depicting nudity and same-sex couples. The group has received an outpouring of international support: the lists of signatories on petitions include figures such as Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek. Efforts to keep the initiative afloat in Ukraine’s politically regressive environment attest to the fact that Vasyl Cherepanyn, Director of the VCRC, has broken new ground for art and its impact on local civic struggles.

A powerful message resides in the parallel between the artistic process and public dialogue. Experiments underway at VCRC list as their central aim, “a new discourse of Ukraine,” in which “representation means gaining political subjectivity – being present, visible, and voiced as a separate entity” (Cherypanyn 2015). This is also a valuable point for addressing local demands for more autonomy from which to gain critical vantage in evading propaganda clashes between the nation’s EU and Russian neighbors. What art offers, when supported as a socially engaged process, is a step forward out of crisis by challenging audiences and participants to absorb and question a turbulent history without the blame involved in naming perpetrators and victims. Creating public space for free discussion also responds to misrepresentations of Ukraine in the propaganda daily synthesized by the “information war,” only one outgrowth of Putin’s ongoing disregard for Ukrainian sovereignty and international treaty.

1 For more details on the curation and planning of the event, see Matusevich 2015.

2 The Visual Culture Research Center: <http://vrc.org.ua/en>.

In “Declaration of the School of Kyiv,” Cherepanyn issues a comprehensive mission for the role of art in public life by evoking the manifestos of Kyiv’s avant-garde artist-revolutionaries of the early 20th century. The document unifies the six divisions of the school by establishing several key aims for its participants in a sociopolitical experiment focused on “understanding what we have lived through.” Each division engages a different cluster of concerns about transformation, neocolonialism, and dispossession in Ukraine’s post-revolutionary moment. The School of Abducted Europe lists among its objectives of study: “exclusion of the European ‘Other’ and the new ‘Schengen wall’; ‘the end of ideology’ and the rise of the far right in Europe and beyond; the conflict of historical memories and the remaking of war; cultural wars between pornography and religion; ‘the hatred of art,’ iconoclasm and image wars.” The School of the Displaced involves refugees and displaced peoples to ask how participatory and performative actions might ameliorate states of crises. The School of Realism and The School of Landscape investigate the contentious past lives of these aesthetic forms; while The School of the Lonesome teaches the theory and practice of documenting contemporary history in open workshops, such as, “How to Remember? How to Archive?” lead by Zeyno Pekünlü. The School of Image and Evidence synthesizes a curriculum based in user-generated online video to facilitate documentary reports by participants in order to contest mass-media propaganda about the war. The School of Kyiv plans to open several branches in institutions throughout Europe in 2016.<sup>3</sup>

In format, *The School of Kyiv* challenges the traditional idea of a Biennial because it is not annual art event or market, but a social experiment that includes resuscitating Ukraine’s past cultural institutions. The Academy of Arts, Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture, National Museum of the History of Ukraine, and the National Library for Architecture all lent out their spaces. This is a thorn in the side of the privatized monopoly over contemporary art in Ukraine. By contrast, the VCRC concept relies on global knowledge and volunteer labor flows through networks, many which have been strengthened in Ukraine over the past decade through NGOs. The self-organized crisis centers that emerged out of Euromaidan have also catalyzed the motivation to reverse outflows by increasing aptitude around media and financial sustainability to combat critical issues facing Ukraine such as the digital divide, social intolerance, and rising income inequality.<sup>4</sup>

A new museum structure might thus envision ways to facilitate public access to interpretive practices. Given the relatively young age of the organizers (mostly in their 30s), the projects foregrounded in this paper have political corollaries in the street gatherings of the early 2000s. Many of the texts reflect ideas espoused by youth groups, such

---

3 Partners include: The Polish Institute, Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej; ERSTE Foundation, Goethe Institut; the Ministry of Culture of Georgia; local news outlets *Ukrains’ka pravda*, Kyiv Post, Hromadske TV; and the UART Foundation for Cultural Diplomacy, among others.

4 For a detailed, comprehensive study of networks and global knowledge flows, see Kennedy 2015.

as PORA, that were instrumental in the Orange Revolution and whose members have survived into the present through student unions.<sup>5</sup> By no small measure, the emerging generation of artists in Kyiv has been at the forefront of sheltering public debate in the intervening years between Ukraine's two recent revolutions. The focus of their civic efforts has evolved into mitigating the negative impacts of regressive laws on independent venues for citizens to discuss more than only art: freedom of expression, censorship, democracy, and human rights.

#### 4. The Role of Media and Information

Despite expectations to the contrary, in the years following the Orange Revolution, when the emerging generation came of age, Ukraine's Parliament (Verkhovna Rada) slid farther toward authoritarianism and sidelined many rights. The failure to sign an Anti-Discrimination Law was overlooked in the talks leading up to the EU Accession Agreement extended to ousted President Viktor Yanukovich. In 2010, the pro-Western opposition leader of the Orange Revolution, former President Viktor Yushchenko, established a censorship bureau charged with monitoring media and public information (the National Expert Commission of Ukraine on the Protection for Public Morality). Protests went largely unnoticed against the Commission's anti-abortion bill in 2011, which was spearheaded in partnership with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in a conference on Bioethics. Ukraine then followed suit behind Putin's similar initiatives by instituting a "gay propaganda law" criminalizing any behavior, display, or distribution of information conveying same-sex desire. Kyiv's Commission functioned in an authoritarian, Soviet manner; it has since been disbanded, but its effects remain in pervasive censorship practices and negative public attitudes toward minorities.<sup>6</sup> During the events on Maidan in 2013-14, many members of Ukraine's art community were among the first to organize the crowd, guide independent journalists, deliver medical aid, and run transport logistics. Social media platforms played a major role in facilitating communication to reduce violence and save lives.

With the boom in big data, access to information has become a basic human need around the globe equal to the right to shelter, water, etc. The United Nations have adopted an Open Charter, "The Principled Use of Humanitarian Information in the Network Age," for "the implementation of open-data policies by 2015" to streamline data sharing between governments and humanitarian responders (United Nations Report 2013). The charter includes a system of checks-and-balances for signatories. But information at

5 For more context on the role of student unions, youth activism and women's groups in the Euromaidan, see Channell-Justice 2014.

6 Attitudes toward LGBT issues in Ukraine have become more negative in the decade since the Orange Revolution (Martsenyuk 2012).

this scale can easily be misused. The effects of shared big data and surveillance on human rights are evident in the rise of extreme groups and the repression of civil liberties worldwide. During a Toronto screening of “This is Gay Propaganda!: LGBT Rights and the War in Ukraine” (2015), the film’s director, Marusya Bociurkiw, discussed her work with another director from Uganda; they both agreed that the church-state bond in both countries had restricted the free flow of information and compounded discrimination against minorities. In 2013 the Director of one of Ukraine’s prominent museums destroyed a controversial painting on display the night before a visit from Yanukovich to mark the anniversary of the Christianization of Kyivan Rus.<sup>7</sup> In January 2015, a prominent leader in the art world survived an attack by a far-right group. Incidents like this have become all too common. Just last month, October 2016, an anonymous group intimidated audience members at the premiere of Bociurkiw’s film in Chernivtsi. A separate screening to be held under police guard is currently in the planning stages—this is the direct outcome of a public petition to the mayor of the city.

Themes and topics among Ukrainian art-activists since 2014 highlight cultural institutions as sites for examining questions around social responsibility, and Ukraine’s national identity in a global context. Theatre performances, debates, and participatory actions in Kyiv’s urban space are providing new platforms for sharing information that challenge the blanketing effects of big data and mainstream media on democracy. For example, panel titles at the VCRC 2015 October Biennale included: “Art as Something Else: Artists Making Institutions”; “Who is Supposed to Build Bridges?”; Learning Europe: Making Space for Self-Education Practices”; “Writing Across Borders: Prospects for a European Public Sphere.” The range of countries represented by participants was promising. Speakers and performers included Masha Gessen, Anne Applebaum, Marci Shore, Timothy Snyder, Slavenka Drakulic, Sergey Bratkov, Komar & Melamid, Pawel Althamer, and others. Performance group DIS/ORDER held a “Queer Chapel,” featuring a performative, interactive LGBTQIA marriage ceremony. Nikita Kadan’s sculpture installation, “The Possessed Can Testify in Court,” employed Soviet-era kitsch to deconstruct how ideological meanings are assigned to random objects.

Concern with increasing censorship in Ukraine can be observed at the highest levels. Yet reform efforts have continually unraveled alongside Western leaders’ fatigue with the unresolved hybrid proxy conflict (Yekelchik 2015). One could argue that a media “information war” has catalyzed and sustained the conflict on all sides, but that is a separate debate. A more pressing concern may be how to sustain democracy through increased participation. The events on Maidan in 2013-14 were a watershed for protest, but the continual loss of life and mass displacement have taken a toll on public morale.

.....  
 7 The painting depicted politicians and church figures falling into a nuclear reactor, and marching workers, intellectuals, and dissidents resembling members from feminist activist groups Pussy Riot and Femen (RFE/RL 2013).

Some cultural elites appointed by Yanukovych still occupy their posts, unable to change the oppressive daily practices of the old regime, often due to structural financial constraints. There can be no regeneration without investment in the cultural sphere. The prison complex located across the street from the planning center of *The School of Kyiv* was a stark reminder of this: the former has heating, a full staff, and is always filled with residents; while the second is a nearly empty textiles warehouse.

### V. Critical Pathways Forward

The actual impacts of revolution and war in Ukraine are immediate. Invaluable opportunities are emerging for more discussion in contemporary Ukraine about its troubled long twentieth century. Risks to freer dialogue remain as can be seen in a recent motion by some parties to outlaw all symbols connected with the Soviet regime. It may be argued that this kind of silence can actually facilitate censorship and reduce dialogue by allowing for greater cooptation of the past.

In the 1970s the architect Edward Bilsky developed a project for the Museum of Contemporary Art to be constructed on October Revolution Street, the present site of the memorial to the Heavenly Hundred (Небесна сотня) who lost their lives defending the Maidan in 2014. These plans were made during the Stagnation period, and served a pragmatic end: The development of cultural institutions near the corridors of power was intended in order to keep artists from getting too involved in dissident activities. Repressions against the intelligentsia in the 1970s resulted in limiting the museum to a single gallery. With the end of the USSR, the unfinished museum was demolished and the territory was slated for a “shopping center and hotel,” but court battles continued and nothing was accomplished. Another architectural pair, Miletsky & Shevchenko’s project, included not only a new museum, but uniting the old and new museum buildings into a single museum complex. Hrushevskoho and Instytutaska Streets – separated by a steep hill and several buildings – were to be joined. These two main corridors providing access to the governmental area would have connected to form a broad pathway up from Maidan. This alternative structure of the state-art nexus may have resulted in a different outcome of the revolution.

Historically, artists and activists adopt similar roles in applying pressure against public silence. Art does not signify protest in the traditional sense of a state v. society, or group v. society approach to social change. Art is the practice of displaying and interpreting information: it leverages self, audience, and public in critique. Thus, art always contains an element of social controversy. The Soviets formally recognized art as subversive. In 1917, the Bolsheviks seized and installed in state museums all possessions from land-owning peasantry (kulaks). When Viktor Yanukovych fled Ukraine in early 2014,



the self-defense brigades from Maidan seized his palatial private estate, Mezhyhirya. They discovered embezzled property valued into the high millions, including rare ecclesiastical texts and objects from the 10th century. Items of interest were shipped to the National Art Museum of Ukraine where I observed how curators from several state museums organized them into an ad-hoc exhibit entitled, “Codex Mezhyhirya.” The artifacts were displayed on the very crates they were shipped in, surrounded by their wrappings and marked off from the crowds with nothing more than a thin yellow string. Each formed an inventory of the deposed dictator’s strange tastes, framed in sections such as: “The Book of Idols,” and “The Book of Vanity,” a room filled with gaudy self-portraits (Lozhkina and Roytburd 2014). The exhibit proved that the former criminal’s plundering of resources in private resembled the same kitsch aesthetic as the campaigns invented by the oligarchs that ruled the 2000s. Their rule had created an information vacuum in the fallout of the Orange Revolution.

Adopting the same format of the codex, and organizing themselves into “books,” *The School of Kyiv* returned Yanukovych’s stolen texts to the public, but did so by coordinating events across the city to propose a new kind of “museum.” The initiative was promising in its ambivalence toward East/West regionalism and other polarizing narratives (there is no official language, no central bureau of review, and no firm attachment to any one sponsor). By no small measure, the emerging generation of artists in Kyiv and their work—especially when we consider it during the years 2004-2014—might be understood to a degree as working to shelter public access points for knowledge and dialogue. The concept dates to Poland’s “flying universities,” which were maintained by the underground resistance during German occupation. (Later, activists from the Solidarity movement would broker many NGO networks between the West and Ukraine in local projects)(Pospieszna 2014).

War is not a distant memory in Ukraine. The nation’s youngest artists are seeking continuities with their grandparents’ lived experiences by exploring Soviet spaces, but also “Orange” and “Maidan” revolutionary spaces—from the margins. Their work is often deliberately placed against the “noise” of the information war, in which the past becomes a weapon of the present to provoke divisive social conflicts, and is often drawn in stark East v. West terms. These images undercut news stories that delegitimize individual experience, and do not account for ambivalence and anxiety over failed regime changes, unraveled reforms, and a hybrid proxy war in which it is unclear who is fighting whom.

Exploring intergenerational and international experiences of regime change can open two critical pathways to peace in Ukraine. Securing freer spaces for education and open debate must be facilitated in a grassroots capacity in order to reduce propaganda that relies on identity (ethnicity, nationality, religion, and sexuality) proliferated by the unprecedented falsification of the present state-to-state combat between Russia and Ukraine as a conflict driven by civilians. Secondly, the extensive lessons for strength-

ening global solidarities around information access, knowledge networks, and delivery channels for material support should be considered a preventative measure in the diffusion of human rights infringements. It is crucial that Ukrainians' unique cultural and civic viewpoints as being "between" the EU and Russia are not reduced to economic and military tactics only.

Art has urgency in Ukraine in which minorities, artists, and journalists who speak out can easily become targets, forcing retreat from a hostile political environment. This situation is not unique to Ukraine; it is no fault of its citizens, who have fought tirelessly for democracy, nor it is the product of an "ethnic" conflict. The outcome of regressive legislation and elite shoring up resources is a population starved of information, the very basic fabric from which knowledge can be cultivated through education. New engagements with urban space and art can be sites for innovation as they allow interactive experiences that disperse educational processes not only across traditional sites, such as the university and the traditional museum, but by recasting the public value of learning in local terms. Among what is often rendered defunct or obsolete by outsiders, Ukraine's public is invited to encounter through the interstitial spaces of the city as a microcosm for all post-Soviet society. Audiences are invited to explore artifacts of past moments in national history in tension with present ideologies: the pedestal remaining after the demolished statue of Lenin, a metro station from the 70s that was never completed, an open air lecture, a textbook: the idea of "the public" becomes the public encountering itself through its own myths—as they are lived and remembered.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Channell-Justice, Emily. 2014. "Flexibility and Fragmentation: Student Activism and Ukraine's (Euro)Maidan Protests." *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*. October 20. <http://berkeley-journal.org/2014/10/flexibility-and-fragmentation-student-activism-and-ukraines-euromaidan-protests/>
- Cherypanyn, Vasyl. 2015. "Declaration of the School of Kyiv—Kyiv Biennial 2015," *Political Critique.com*, September 24.  
<http://politicalcritique.org/cee/ukraine/2015/declaration-of-the-school-of-kyiv-kyiv-biennial-2015/>
- Kennedy, Michael D. 2015. *Globalizing Knowledge: Intellectuals, Universities, and Publics in Transformation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Lozhkina, Alisa and Alexander Roytburd. 2014. "Inventory of a Dictator," *Art Ukraine.com*. June 13. <http://artukraine.com.ua/eng/a/inventory-of-a-dictator/#.VoGnkhN3Oo>
- Martsenyuk, Tamara. 2012. "Ukrainian Societal Attitudes Towards the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Communities." *Gender, Politics, and Society in Ukraine*. Eds. by Olena Hankivsky and Anastasiya Salnykova, 385-410. Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- Matusevich, Yan. 2015. "This is Not a Biennale," *Medium.com*, November 17. <https://medium.com/@yanmatusevich/this-is-not-a-biennale-63c20637646e#.abzudotdp>
- Mishchenko, Kateryna, ed. 2015. *The Book of Kyiv*. Kyiv: Medusa. <http://theschoolofkyiv.org/>
- Pospieszna, Paulina. 2014. *Democracy Assistance from the Third Wave: Polish Engagement in Belarus and Ukraine*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- RFE/RL. 2013. "Ukrainian Museum Director Destroys Critical Painting Ahead of President's Visit," July 26. <http://www.rferl.org/content/ukraine-art-destroyed-kuznetsov-kiev-an-rus-yanukovych/25058261.html>
- "This is Gay Propaganda!: LGBT Rights and the War in Ukraine" Directed by Marusya Bociurkiw. Documentary, 53 mins. Winds of Change Productions.

United Nations Report. 2013. *Humanitarianism in the Network Age*, Eds. by Rahul Chandran, Andrew Thow, Daniel Gilman, and Andrea Noyes. New York: OCHA Policy and Studies Series United Nations Publication.

Yekelchuk, Serhii. 2015. *The Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.