

УДК 7.01(06) (477)

Усенко Н.О.

Харківська державна
академія дизайну і мистецтв

THE ART OF POLITICAL PROTEST: UKRAINIAN VERSION

Усенко Н. О. Мистецтво політичного протесту: українська версія. На початку XXI століття в українському мистецтві спостерігається активізація інтересу художників до політичного життя країни. Відправною точкою став 2004 рік, відзначений протестами проти нечесних виборів, народженням першого «Майдану» і «помаранчевої революції». На хвилі суспільно-політичних подій в Україні народилася низка різноманітних художніх об'єднань та угруповань, у творчості яких ми можемо побачити відображення подій революції, пошуки вирішення громадських проблем, і, зокрема, розчарування у своїх політичних переконаннях. Дана публікація присвячена дослідженню найбільш значущих художніх об'єднань та проектів, які стали ключовими для розвитку в Україні мистецтва політичного протесту; у статті розглядаються їх творчі концепції, функції, цілі та завдання, аналізується концептуальне вирішення окремих задумів, визначається роль найяскравіших політичних арт-проектів в контексті українського мистецького процесу.

Ключові слова: сучасне мистецтво, Україна, політичний протест, акціонізм, художнє життя, виставки.

Усенко Н. А. Искусство политического протеста: украинская версия. В начале XXI века в украинском искусстве наблюдается активизация интереса художников к политической жизни страны. Отправной точкой стал 2004 год, отмеченный протестами против нечестных выборов, рождением первого «Майдана» и «оранжевой революции». На волне общественно-политических событий в Украине появился ряд различных художественных объединений и группировок, в творчестве которых мы можем увидеть отражение событий революции, поиски решения общественных проблем, и, в частности, разочарование в своих политических убеждениях. Данная публикация посвящена исследованию наиболее значимых художественных объединений и проектов, которые стали ключевыми для развития в Украине искусства политического протеста; в статье рассматриваются их творческие концепции, функции, цели и задачи, анализируется концептуальное решение отдельных замыслов, определяется роль ярких политических арт-проектов в контексте украинского художественного процесса.

Ключевые слова: современное искусство, Украина, политический протест, акционизм, художественная жизнь, выставки.

Usenko N.A. The art of political protest: Ukrainian version. At the beginning of the XXI century Ukrainian art observed activation of the artist's interest for the political life of the country. The starting point was 2004, marked by protests against unfair elections, the birth of the first "Maidan" and "Orange revolution". In a number of artistic actions organized by art groups we can see the reflection of the revolution events, the search for the solution of social problems, and, later, the frustrations of their ideals. The publication is devoted to the study of the most important art associations and projects which have become keys for the development of the Ukrainian art of political protest. The article discusses their creative concepts, functions, goals and objectives, analyzes the conceptual solution of individual plans, defines the role of the brightest political art projects in the context of the Ukrainian artistic process.

Keywords: contemporary art, Ukraine, political protest, actionism, artistic life, exhibitions.

Introduction. The 2000's in contemporary art of Ukraine were observed with big changes: activation of artistic life began and was accompanied by various art events. One of the most distinctive features of contemporary art was actualization of political subjects in various art forms, which was a reaction to the events in the political life of the country on her way to democracy. Most clearly the political art came to light during the events of 2004 and 2013-2014, when in Ukraine massive actions of protests in the name of democracy were held. These revolutionary events were called "Maidan" (2004) and "Euromaidan" (2013) because it started in Independence Square in Kyiv (from Ukrainian the word "Maidan" is translated as "Square").

It should be noted that in 2004 and in 2013 those protests on Maidan were supported by a significant part of Ukrainian intellectuals. In various activities many Ukrainian artists participated, expressing their civic and political stands in a number of artistic projects and works.

Background. Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in the arts of political protest in Ukraine. Over the past 10 years, this theme appealed by V. Sydorenko, T. Pavlova, A. Soloviev, A. Lozhkina, A. Kriventsova, etc. However, the existing publications mention only some aspects and events related to the investigated problem. Therefore, the study of these publications shows that today the art of political protest in Ukraine has not been the subject of the comprehensive research.

The objectives of this paper are to investigate the features of the art of protest in Ukraine, to analyze the most important artistic projects, to determine their impact on contemporary artistic process.

Results. Political issues in the national art developed vividly and variously since Ukrainian

Independence (1991). However, the growing interest of artists in this phenomenon has been observed since 2004, when Ukraine increased democratic tendencies, and not only de jure but also de facto the free expressions became possible. Then, during the “orange” revolution of 2004, a number of works for where the term of “modern revolutionary art” had begun to be used were created. It was not only the “traditional” paintings or graphic, photographic works, but also unusual art objects, indispensable attributes of the first Maidan – “American” boots, painted polyfoam plates and “injected” oranges [4].

On the wave of the revolution in the different cities appeared bright politically oriented youth art groups, the most active among them were “R.E.P” (Kyiv) and “SOS’ka” (Kharkiv). It is significant that in the capital the statements of “R.E.P” artists existed in opposition to the tradition of painting, but the artists of art-group “SOS’ka” in Kharkiv relied on existing traditions of nonconformist school of social photography. One of the earliest and most famous projects of art-group “SOS’ka” is a series of events “«They» on the street”, where the ironic criticism of artists revealed all the candidates in the presidential race – Viktor Yushchenko, Viktor Yanukovich and Yulia Tymoshenko. In this event the artists looking like homeless people and with masks of Ukrainian politicians were begging for money. In this way they wanted to demonstrate their point of view as for the state of the current political system in Ukraine. Asking for money in this project became a metaphor for the direct methods, by which candidates used to receive votes – massive media campaigns. These actions of young artists had wide response, because their critical position coincided with the sentiments of the society after the Maidan [6].

Actions of this art-group demonstrated the impact of policy on every common man and marked the need to join the fight against the absurd political pressure. The general state of the people in the first days after the Maidan found its reflection in the exhibition “Favourites”, where a number of portraits of dogs and cats with propaganda slogans opposed to a series of pets cemetery. In the context of the political events the project “Ukrainian Gothic” became interesting, where artists presented to the public the modern heroes – “goths” and “emos” who posed with the Ukrainian flag, a portrait of the Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko and Soviet boards of honor in the background. In a series of photos the artists ironically show the indifferent face of the modern Ukrainian patriotism: the young Ukrainian students who are not interested in politics and who have only a local state existing within their narrow society [7].

It should be underlined that during the first years of the XXI century bright politically oriented projects and events of young artists gradually influenced on the formation of the artistic society. However, this process was quite slow, and traditional institutions continued demonstrating a valid format of thinking

without taking serious modern works of young artists. A good example of the conflict between new and old art was the exhibition “New History” (2009), created with support of Foundation “Eidos” in Kharkiv Art Museum and where the main goal was to create an artistic dialogue by opposing the works of classical and contemporary art. In this project the well-known representatives of the young generation artists participated: N. Ridny, A. Kriventsova, Z. Kadyrova, A. Vayndorf and others. By the way, the work of the latter, as well as other projects within the exhibition, was seen by the museum administration as an insult to the symbols of Ukrainian history. The next morning the exhibition was cancelled because the Director of the Museum found them obscene and not corresponding to the museum policy. This event was significant in the context of understanding of the role of art institutions in the developing modern Ukrainian art, the members of which even in the beginning of twenty-first century continue working on the principles of dead socialist realism.

A similar situation occurred in 2013 during the opening of the exposition “Great and majestic” in “Art Arsenal” (Kyiv), where a number of modern Ukrainian artists works were exhibited. On the day of opening the director of “Art Arsenal” N. Zabolotnaya before the arrival of the official persons led by President Viktor Yanukovich, overpainted in black the work of V. Kuznetsov “Koliivshina. Last Judgement”, where was ironically revealed a painful subject of Ukrainian corruption of all the levels – from police and officials to the priests. The director explained this action by her wish to create “her own performance”, saying that “nobody can criticize the Motherland” and named the work of V. Kuznetsov a “slap” and “provocation against the audience of the exhibition”, considering, probably, the high society circles [1].

This event for Ukraine has become quite symptomatic. The behaviour of the curator of the exhibition showed not only her lack of professionalism as a leader of one of the most popular exhibition areas of the capital, but also highlighted the lack of civilized view on the development of the modern Ukrainian culture, a derogation from the democratic and moral principles and strengthened of the country’s censorship. Moreover, according to some critics, this act of vandalism allowed the occurrence of another, more important work of understanding and verbalization of basic concepts of contemporary artistic practice and its institutional (political) function. This is how a incomplete mural of V. Kuznetsov was transformed into a collective media performance.

The most striking and inconsistent works were created during the Ukrainian democratic revolution of 2013-2014, started by the event in support of European integration called “Euromaidan”. Civil resistance to the regime, powerful impulses to achieve freedom and justice were reproduced in the art works. On Euromaidan almost all important in Ukraine directions and genres

of contemporary art were shown: performances, art events, flash mobs, installations, almost all types of graphic design, as well as more traditional painting, drawing, photography etc. One of the first movable art objects of Euromaidan became the base of the Kyiv Christmas tree, decorated with political propaganda posters and ribbons with the symbols of the European Union and the Ukrainian flag.

This tree was the first formal reason for the struggle between protesters and authorities who, in an attempt to disperse Euromaidan. Art critic V. Ibrayeva described the process like this: "hand-made as well as printed posters are hung on the base of the Christmas tree, and as a response to its partial dismantling, Facebook demotivator demonstrated a little girl with a poster "Choke on your Christmas tree". So, after the protesters and forces collisions that tree became a symbol of freedom of expression [5].

Interesting art objects and symbols of the first days of Euromaidan were hand-painted orange miner's helmets, which immediately marked a vivid image of Euromaidan protesters. From the beginning of the protests, they were used by the activists as the first defense against attacks of "Berkut" forces and provocators, so-called "titushko".

It was designers who first to respond to the events of Euromaidan and produced a series of posters dedicated to the European integration movement. At that time also the first photographic and artistic works were created. It should be observed that all the art works of that period were marked by the patriotic romantic mood, full of inspiration and hope. Most of them were made with using symbolic colours – yellow and blue, which showed a friendly combination of the Ukrainian and the EU flags.

In similar colours were made photo series of Kharkiv artist R. Minin "Bonfire of Maidan". There were painted films depicting various demonstrations on Independence Square. These photos were taken at the different time and at the various events in the Maidan. The main character surely is the Square as a symbol of Ukrainian freedom. In these photos the beauty of Kyiv and protesters union were revealed [1].

The first period of Euromaidan included original design coloured sticker sets, resembling to chewing gum wrappers "Love is ...", where the authors (V. Duman & others) promoted a positive goal of Euromaidan and stressed the peaceful character of the protests. They listed many reasons to find the strength and courage to express loudly a desire to be a part of the European society. The main characters of stickers are peaceful and romantic Ukrainian boy and girl who want peace most of all, even with "titushkos".

After the violent dispersal of protesters, artwork shifted to depressive and ironic forms. Like this was the gloomy and restrained "Reward for silence" (R. Minin), ironic "Hero of Our Time" about "titushko" (A. Ermolenko), "Student Day" (Y. Zhuravel), etc. Subjects of all these works gradually became more

militant, demonstrating the despair, hurt and offense of the activists by the actions of the current government. However, most of the main characters of these creations are the same young, smart and friendly boys and girls who are still hoping for a peaceful settlement of the conflict.

A considerable symbol of democratic struggle in Euromaidan was the project "Art Barbican". Barbican serves as a fortification of the castle, fortress or city walls. So now, in the same form the organizers imagined the art-checkpoint of creative intellectuals gathered by the efforts of the art-association "Last Barricade". On the walls of "Barbican" art prints by artists I. Semesyuk, A. Ermolenko, O. Mann, well known by their co-work with the "Jerk-art" were presented. In this project young the authors used images of Ukrainian poet, artist and freedom fighter Taras Shevchenko, revolutionary Nestor Makhno and protester of Euromaidan Mychaylo Hawryluk, who became the symbols of national ideas awakening for the protesters and supporters of Euromaidan.

During Euromaidan a number of significant performances, events and flash-mobs supporting European integration and expression passed. For example, on Kharkiv Euromaidan it was organized an ironic art flash-mob "Area of Freedom" near the fence built around Freedom Square. The main idea of this action was to point out the fact that freedom in Kharkiv was locked in all the senses of the word.

On the way towards Ukrainian democratization also the actions of pulling down of the monuments of Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin were important, which became a symbolic sign of sweeping out the communist regime of the Ukrainians' life. However, many citizens of the country did not understand that ceremony of renovation. Art-critic Valeria Ibrayeva noted that dumping of the Lenin monument in Kiev equated the actions of Maidan supporters to the actions of the Soviet Bolsheviks, who once tried to change the history by destruction of monuments, architecture and art. Kyiv artist O. Roitburd said that the monument did not need to be destroyed, but only to be removed to the other location. Fighting with the symbol of communism in many cities of Ukraine ended with the victory of the protesters. Only in the eastern regions Lenin monuments remained in their places. Ironically, in this case it can be considered an example of the Kharkiv Lenin monument, which was not destroyed because of the aggravation of the social situation in the city. This leftover of totalitarianism, clearly is an antagonist to Freedom Square where it is located. However, the Kharkiv Maidan activists temporarily accepted just superficial changes. For example, in work of Bella Logacheva the artist offers to repaint the monument in the colors of free Ukraine.

Existing for some time as epicenter of Ukrainian cultural life, within which a large number of art works and projects were created, Euromaidan itself has become a newborn island of Ukrainian democracy,

a place and a symbol of freedom in the country. Analyzing the art-works of Euromaidan we draw attention to the importance of this event in the context of the artistic process. Thus, the whole Independence Square becomes, by definition of the Russian artist P. Pavlensky, a “total installation”: “On the Maidan we see the social body coming back to life – a community of people. But Maidan can not be permanent”.

The process of Maidan’s events has some features of mythologizing. Thus, the Maidan stands a battleground between Good and Evil, and its members – the protesters, government officials, troops of “Berkut” and security forces, journalists, volunteers and others play a key role there. An interesting and definitely important symbolic process of the revolution protest was burning tires and so-called “dialogue” of the protesters with “Berkut” – made in various performance ways: fighters were asked to go over to the peoples side, people offered them flowers and painted their shields in yellow-blue colours.

The most astonishing and tragic works were created by artists after the January events in Hrushevskoho street, when the first victims of unknown snipers appeared. Several works were devoted to one of the victims, an Armenian young man Sergei Nihoyan, who became the modern incarnation of the protesters’ love of Ukrainian culture. Among them there are mural painting made by the street art artist from Lviv Sergey Radkevych. “Sergei Nihoyan. Armenian motif” – a first portrait created for the cycle “Rest in peace” dedicated to the victims of the recent events in Ukraine”. In this art-work an activist Sergei Nihoyan was portrayed as a symbolic target, and at the same time reminds the iconographic suffering image of Christ, who brought himself as a sacrifice for his people. “It is a work that rises from the horizontal plane and moves in a vertical to glorify the image of today’s martyrs” – says the artist [8].

In addition to military busts targets, the artist depicts the silhouette and portrait, carved before on tombstones in Armenia, where Sergei Nihoyan came from. “With this painting I express a personal protest against the directed and deliberate aggression against the human body, the absurdity of “human body” used in military exercises. Being inanimate, this aggression carries the sign of the living entity and brings a real sacrifice. This work was created in memory of those who suffered from deliberate violence”.

The tragic perception of life as a battle is presented in the works of early 2014, where the events of 18-20 February are reflected. After the mass shooting of activists and ordinary passers-by by snipers, a number of art-works were created, which expressed grave pain of loss, frustration, devastation of war and anger at those responsible for the deaths of the unarmed protesters. All the dead from bullets during the Ukrainian fighting were called “The Heaven’s Hundred”, and that made them almost the saints. The works devoted to the tragic events of that February are astonishingly tragic. Here

we see the new Maidan as an epicenter of fighting and bloody massacres. New heroes of these works are the dead of «The Heaven’s Hundred».

The events of Euromaidan made a reaction of artists from other countries who presented their views on the situation in Ukraine in their works of art and events. Thus, the Polish artist Kaśka Czapska after the fighting in the centre of Kyiv created a poster – stars of the flag of united Europe became the bullets holes on the flag of Ukraine – a reminder of what a terrible sacrifice Ukrainian people made for their desire to enter the European Union.

Among the works of Russian artists there were an interesting and symptomatic artistic event for a support of the multiplicity of “Freedom”, which was held in February 23 in St. Petersburg while hearing of detained Russian protesters on the Bolotnaya street.

Organizer artist Peter Pavlensky explained his creative vision: “Hot tires, Ukrainian flags, black flags and crashing blows on iron – a song of liberation and revolution. Irreversibly Maidan spreads and penetrates into the heart of the Empire. It is an action of plurality, this is an action of a collective body. Fighting with the imperial chauvinism continues – the church of the blood of the Saviour, the place where a successful attempt to kill the emperor was made, where liberation uprising in Right Bank Ukraine was severely dealt with, in Poland, Lithuania and Belarus. We are fighting for our freedom and yours. Today, when the state encourages all to celebrate the fatherland Defender’s Day, we encourage everyone to feast on the square defending the freedom. Bridges are burning and there’s no way back” [2].

Critics try to explain such a great resonance of Maidan’s art and point out the long lasting connection between art and politics. Valeria Ibrayeva notes, that “aesthetics of protest has a rather long history - starting from the red Phrygian cap and the Marseillaise of the French revolution to movement «Wear national» by Mahatma Gandhi”.

Boris Groys observes that art has always included some political representation, and that art itself has traditionally acted like a background and a pattern for political power. However, in contemporary art this relationship between art and politics has changed considerably due to the transition of art into the political arena. The earlier systems of political and artistic representation were separated one from another, but now, in the era of media, every politician can become a bright and public art-person generating significantly more pictures and images than an artist, by creating his own performance. Similarly, the artist enters the arena of a politician and uses his instruments. In B. Groys opinion, producing of a memorable image by any media-persons, politician or artist, starts with the creation of a collision or conflict situation [3].

It is the image expressed in the form of conflict, and is, according to art historians, “the contemporary media icon in the form of controversial”. This is the “icon of space” where exists the ideological struggle,

where the variety of the modern propaganda machines operate in the same manner as the propaganda machine of the church “- said Boris Groys. That is why the icon, as well as modern media icon, is political by its nature. And this is how, according to art historians, a contemporary art becomes political. If the image shows nothing (not mimetic), it cannot be criticized, because any criticism involves the comparison. Outside of the established museums and galleries, the artists of the political protest make their expression across the street [3].

Here are represented the biggest number of important artistic events and performances. One of the most interesting features of this type of contemporary art – dynamics, variability, transformativity. It can be seen in the protest performances and art events of Euromaidan, in projects of Ukrainian art-groups “R.E.P.”, “SOS’ka” and others, where the desire for freedom of expression made the basis for the creation of large art form.

The artistic value of Euromaidan art appears in it. Euromaidan presents the living process, a kind of creative act of human rebelliousness – it is constantly changing and transforming. As a collective creation, the art of Maidan was intended to reveal a personality in human, to revive the desire to overcome the stability and conditionality of the imposed roles.

Conclusions. One of the most marking features of the contemporary Ukrainian art of the 2000’s was the actualization of political issues in various kinds of creation. The most visible one was expressed during the events of 2004 and 2013-2014 years, known as “Maidan” (2004) and “Euromaidan” (2013). Growing of artist’s interest in political subjects has been observed since 2004, when in Ukraine democratic tendencies increased, and not only de jure but also de facto, free expressions became possible.

The most striking manifestation for the democratization of art, which has always been a political tool in Ukraine, became the creation of critical works of art, art events, formation of a number of socially and politically oriented youthful artistic groups having their citizen position and considering the main goal of their work to draw attention of the public to political events. Today we can say that these groups gradually made an influence on the creation of the artistic medium.

The real awakening of public awareness arose from the art-events of Euromaidan, which showed striking changes in the social, political and cultural life of Ukraine. The brightest objects of Euromaidan – Kyiv City Christmas tree (with symbols of the European Union and the Ukrainian flag), orange miner’s caps, painted like Easter eggs, colourful hand-made and printed propaganda posters, original coloured stickers “Euromaidan – is ...”, ironic cartoons, art projects, performances and flash-mobs. These events showed a creation in Euromaidan’s space of the creative progressive cultural and artistic environment, of large performance, the protagonist of which was the Maidan

itself – the spontaneous and unpredictable collective body of the creative people, united and acting, however, like one and having the same goal.

The event had its own symbolism and mythological meaning. This fact can be confirmed by international resonance: the events resembling “Maidan” were repeated in other countries, but mostly in Russia, whose inhabitants are experiencing the same problem. All these events greatly influenced on the development of contemporary art in Ukraine: the awakening and creation of a politically conscious society and an adequate citizen position, without which a further cultural development of the state is impossible.

References:

1. Балашова, О. Арт-итоги года. Часть 1 / О. Балашова, Л. Герман, М. Ланько [Електронний ресурс] // Українська правда. – Режим доступу: <http://life.pravda.com.ua/culture/2013/12/26/147291>.
2. Горящие покрышки и стук палок по железу – Майдан в Санкт-Петербурге [Електронний ресурс] // Цензор.net, Kyiv. – Режим доступу: http://censor.net.ua/photo_news/272418/goryaschie_pokryshki_i_stuk_palok_po_jelezu_mayidan_v_sanktpeterburge_fotoreportaj.
3. Гройс, Б. Искусство. Дизайн. Политика // «Искусство Москвы». Лекция в рамках ярмарки «Арт Москва». – М., 2004.
4. Данюк, І. Мистецтво Майдану побачить світ [Електронний ресурс] // Як справи, Київ? Режим доступу: <http://kakdela.kiev.ua/17414/art/1905.html>.
5. Ибраева, В. Майдан и его искусство [Електронний ресурс] // Buro 247, Kazakhstan. – Режим доступу: <http://www.buro247.kz/culture/expert/iskusstvo-maydana.html>.
6. Кривенцова, А. «SOS’ka» между акцией и институцией // Художественный журнал. – Москва. – № 67-68.
7. Ридный, Н. Перспективы лабораторности / Н. Ридный, А. Кривенцова// Художественный журнал. – Москва. – № 73-74.
8. Сергачкова К. Художник створив роботу «Сергій Нігоян. Вірменський мотив» [Електронний ресурс] // Українська правда. – Режим доступу: <http://life.pravda.com.ua/culture/2014/02/12/152028>.