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Export of revolution: The Vienna exhibition «I am a drop in the ocean»

The article describes the process of organizing an art exhibition on the Revolution of Dignity in Vienna in May 2014. It demonstrates how art and culture can play a significant role in fighting stereotypes and clichés spread in Europe by Russian propaganda.

Keywords: Maidan, Revolution of Dignity, Russian propaganda, political posters, protest performances, artists participating in revolution, Kunstlerhaus, Gonchar museum, documentary "Museum 'Revolution'".

У статті розглянуто процес організації мистецької виставки «Я крапля в океані», присвяченої Революції Гідності, що пройшла у Відні в травні 2014 року. Вона демонструє роль, яку відіграють мистецтво та культура в процесі подолання стереотипів та кліше, що нав'язуються в країнах Європи через механізми російської пропаганди.

Ключові слова: Майдан, Революція Гідності, російська пропаганда, політичний плакат, протестні перформанси, участь митців у революції, музей Івана Гончара, документальний фільм «Музей Революції».

The events of the Maidan revolution influenced not only different strata of Ukrainian society but also Ukrainians abroad. Ukrainian intellectuals living in the West were faced with the problem of how to support the revolution and participate in the rebuilding of the country. One form of such participation is the organization of exhibitions of contemporary Ukrainian art. The experience of the exhibition organized in Vienna in May 2014 proved that art could be efficient in fighting stereotypes and clichés spread in by Russian propaganda in Europe.

The idea to organize an exhibition of art in Vienna connected to the events in Maidan came to me when, like every person born in Ukraine and living abroad, I spent my nights watching the webcam from Grushevskogo street. The inability to influence the events and the unbearable feeling of powerlessness slowly brewed the urge to do something which only a curator is able to do – to curate an exhibition giving the Viennese public a glimpse of the icy barricades, the dirty snow, the heaps of cobblestones used in true 19th century fashion as the weapon of the revolutionaries. Another source of motivation was the impressive dissemination of Russian propaganda – fairy tales about radical nationalists and

neo-Nazis mercilessly attacking peaceful riot police, descriptions of anti-Semitic crowds gathering on Maidan and other antics of Russia Today TV filtered their way to the Austrian press.

However, the main impulse was the role of artists during the events in Maidan and the impressive creativity of masses. It has already been noted that the Revolution of Dignity freed Ukraine of the post-Soviet notion of the political «postmodernism» based on the distortion of the truth, the merciless manipulation of public opinion and juggling with simulacrum so perfected recently by Putin's propaganda outlets.

The events in Maidan inspired Ukrainian artists to revive classical modernist genres such as the political poster. Posters designed by a group of young and gifted graphic designers were posted on the web and downloaded by thousands of people. Iconic images such as the depiction of president Yanukovich with a red clown nose or the composition with a drop symbolizing the power of drops/people united in the ocean of civil protest became the real symbols of the Revolution of Dignity.

No less important were protest performances often organized not by artists, but by civil activists, who

succeeded in creating strong and impressive images which captured the attention of the world – Markiyan Matsekh, a musician from Lviv, playing the piano in front of the shielded police guarding the presidential administration, or a performance organized by the Civil Sector of Maidan called *The Kingdom of Darkness Is Surrendered*. In the performance, dozens of women young and old form a line facing the ranked riot police. They hold mirrors that echoed the shields carried by the police. Some mirrors had the words «Lord, is it me?» inscribed on them. Policemen, forced to stare at their own reflections, looked lost and confused.

It was necessary to show not only the works of professional artists created on the eve and during the events of Maidan but to introduce the Viennese to this true art of the revolutionary street. If the public performance manifested the initial peaceful stage of the protest, the violent clashes provoked by police brutality progressed into the random killing of protesters at first sight did not give artistic manifestations a chance. However, the homemade arms and protection gear of the revolutionaries were practically immediately transformed into aesthetic statements – plastic helmets were decorated with traditional Ukrainian ornaments, plywood shields were turned into paintings. It was necessary to show these objects of new folk art together with the high art of painting, sculpture, photography and installation.

To my great surprise, Peter Zawrel, the director of the *Kunstlerhaus*, the oldest exhibition hall in Vienna, immediately agreed to give the second floor of his institution to the proposed exhibition. In early February it was decided that the show could be planned for May. Even under normal circumstances, preparation for an exhibition in three months could be a nightmare. The daily news didn't add optimism. At some point, a respected Austrian shipping company became nervous that a truck transporting the exhibits from Kyiv could become an easy target for Russian bombers. The logistical nightmare in the post-revolutionary Kyiv was solved only through the heroic labors of Alisa Lozhkina, the co-curator of the exhibition, who proved able to work wonders.

She succeeded not only in collecting the necessary art works, but also in printing gigantic images of protest performances. *Gonchar Museum* generously shared with us objects collected on Maidan – shields, sticks, helmets and even catapults – we had the possibility to return to the old thesis about «Revolt as Art» and to give the audience a chance to look at the arms of revolt as an art form.

When the exhibition was finally installed, it was time to deal with PR. *Kunstlehaus* invited Sebastian Kurz, the Foreign Minister of Austria, to open the show. Kurz agreed and it was very important – the exhibition obviously was turning not only into a cultural but also a political event¹. The major Austrian newspapers published positive reviews of the exhibition². However, to our surprise the halls of the *Kunstlerhaus*, were frequented not only by Austrian but also by international journalists. The exhibition was featured by the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, *Der Spiegel* and the *France Press*³. *Associated Press TV* and *Mexican TV* ran reports on the show⁴. Both Alisa and I spent hours talking to journalists, explaining to them not only the meaning of the exhibited art works but also the events in Maidan, trying to deconstruct Russian propaganda stereotypes. We were very happy that the message we wanted to convey to the public was heard and understood. Two art curators succeeded in winning a battle against Russian propaganda by the means of their profession.

However, the exhibition in Vienna had another unexpected outcome. In early April, Anatoliy Golubovskiy, a documentary producer from Moscow, visited me in Budapest. Anatoliy belongs to the intellectual circles of Russia, who can't be fooled by state TV shamanism and jingoist screams "Crimea is ours!" Like us, he had an urge to do something to

¹ I AM A DROP IN THE OCEAN: ART OF THE UKRANIAN REVOLUTION: Einladung zum Pressegespräch anlässlich der Ausstellung. *Kunstlerhaus*. Access mode: http://www.khaus.at/z/images/ausstellungen/2014/Ukraine/IAMADROP_Presseinfo_deutsch_english.pdf

² Michael Freund, "Von Anarchie bis Agitprop, aus aktuellem Anlass." *Der Standard*, April 14, 2014. Access mode: <http://derstandard.at/1397302058334/Von-Anarchie-bis-Agitprop-aus-aktuellem-Anlass>

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Almuth Spiegler, "Die Ikonen der maidan-Revolution". *Die Presse*, April 10, 2014. Access mode: <http://diepresse.com/home/kultur/kunst/1589400/Die-Ikonen-der-MaidanRevolution>

³ Adam J. Goldmann, "Art of Maidan", *Wall Street Journal*, April 9, 2014. Access mode: <http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303603904579491433856069104>

Nora FitzGerald, "From Ukraine's Independence Square, the art of the revolution", *Washington Post*, May 2, 2014. Access mode: http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/from-ukraines-independence-square-the-art-of-the-revolution/2014/04/30/e91a6260-cbd3-11e3-95f7-7ecdde72d2ea_story.html

Georg Diez, "Wenn Maler scheissen lerner." *Der Spiegel*, 2014, No 20;

Sim Sim Wissgot (AFP), "Protest art from Kiev's Maidan on show in Vienna." *Daily Star*, April 16, 2014.

⁴ "Austria Ukraine Art." *AP Archive*, April 10, 2014. Access mode: <http://www.aparchive.com/metadata/Any/11de720c8edd20648745d4aaf508a44>

influence the events. During our meeting, he decided to make a documentary about the exhibition in particular and Ukrainian revolutionary art in general.

The project was started with minimal financial support provided by an Austrian architect. The crew of Russian documentary makers filmed the installation of the exhibition in Vienna and then visited Kyiv to interview artists and to find documentary footage of the artistic activities during the revolution. They succeeded in digging through archives of TV station and international news agencies. Fortunately, the protest performances and dissemination of the political posters were filmed by different TV outlets, both Ukrainian and international, who usually never used such footage in their broadcasts. The film called «Museum 'Revolution'» became a true video-archive of the art of Maidan¹. The documentary has already

been screened at different international film festivals, however there is not even a vague chance that it could be shown in Russia.

The experience of the project I AM A DROP IN THE OCEAN proved that an individual initiative of the «helpless» intellectuals – art curators and documentary producers could not only lead to the realization of cultural project in the difficult situation of post-revolutionary Ukraine, but to attract wide international attention. Ukrainian artists proved that during the time of social and political upheaval, they are ready to produce not «art for art's sake,» but art able to convey a message from the smoldering Maidan to the European public.

¹ Museum "Revolution", Antipode. Access mode: <http://antipode-sales.biz/movies/revolution-museum/>