



On the Streets and in the Galleries: Responsive Exhibits in Ukraine

by Christi Anne Hofland and Linda Norris

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On November 21, 2013, a group composed mostly of students gathered in Maidan Nezalezhnosti, the central square of Ukraine’s capital, Kyiv, to protest the Ukrainian government’s sudden suspension of preparations for signing an Association Agreement with the European Union. When police forces violently dispersed the protesters on November 30, a wave of demonstrations and civil unrest, now referred to as “The Revolution of Dignity,” ensued. Drawing hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians to the square, the protests continued through February 23, 2014, when President Viktor Yanukovich fled the country after police snipers had killed more than 100 protesters.

As the protests unfolded over the winter of 2013-2014, participants responded with a variety of nimble, responsive exhibitions that became integral components of emerging definitions of national and community identity. And the story is far from finished. The exhibition process continues, in Ukraine and elsewhere.

On the Streets: Protesters Create Pop-ups on Maidan

Since the protests had no defined leadership structure, the initial pop-up exhibitions were uncurated and without limit to the number of participants. When authorities justified the first crackdown on protesters by claiming that protesters blocked the installation of the city’s *yolka*, or New Year’s tree, the protesters responded by decorating the tree’s frame themselves with flags, slogans, and other signs (fig. 1). The *yolka* became a dynamic, changing exhibit over the course of the protests. Protesters also hung art on the barricades and produced



Fig. 1. The *yolka* (New Year’s tree) being disassembled by authorities, June 2014. Courtesy of Christi Anne Hofland

performances. Inspired by conversations with protesters, an artists’ brigade decorated tents, makeshift shields, and donated construction helmets. Since everything took place on the open and level street, there was no distinction between curator and visitor.

Among protesters were practicing artists who organized a public art space called the Artistic Barbican. Soon one of the liveliest areas on the square, it hosted exhibitions, readings, discussions, and lectures. Among the frequent visitors were well-known artists and intellectuals eager to engage in conversation.



Fig. 2. Oleksandr Melnyk's *Eyes* shown on Maidan, December 2013. Courtesy of Oleksandr Melnyk

Artist Volodymyr Svachiy used donated canvases and paints to launch a series of community mural projects. On three occasions, he installed massive canvases on the square as open platforms for anyone to draw or write their thoughts. Each finished canvas now reflects the mood and events of a particular time.

Painter Oleksandr Melnyk joined the protests with his painting, *Eyes* (fig. 2), a close-up of the eyes from a Christ icon in an Orthodox church. Melnyk came to the square every day holding his painting. He attached a caption, “I see all that you do,” reminding viewers that all activities of the conflict, both positive and negative, were visible to the world. He then added, “You are all wonderful. I love you” to the back of his canvas.

For participants, these pop-up exhibits were a way to strengthen the group. According to Igor Bezhuk, “Everyone has their way to contribute to a better future—someone stands, someone volunteers, someone sends money, and someone creates art.”¹ Museum professionals also got involved. The Ivan

Honchar Museum, which showcases Ukrainian folk art, transferred all its programming to the square in order to be where the public was. With Ukrainian folk art and traditions quickly becoming predominant themes on the Maidan, it was a natural match for the emerging environment. Staff installed a *didukh*, a traditional holiday decoration, and organized folk dancing and singing events.

Maidan, once the most upscale areas of central Kyiv, was now surrounded by barricades of tires and burnt-out buses. Setting up easels amidst the rubble, hanging artwork along the barricades, even moving a piano to the square for anyone to play humanized the situation. It transformed a painful and uncertain experience into something compelling and inviting, and provided some sense of comfort and familiarity amidst a distressing reality.

Museums Act: Responsive Exhibitions

Though the square was the center of activity, several museums also created responsive exhibitions during and after the protests. The National Art Museum,

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Fig. 3. Curator and painter Aleksander Roitburd at the *Codex of Mezhyhirya* exhibition (featuring portraits of former president Victor Yanukovych) at the National Art Museum of Ukraine. Photo courtesy the PR Department of the National Art Museum of Ukraine

the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, and the Honchar Museum all demonstrated that if an exhibition is to be responsive, its creators cannot wait until the story is done and everyone feels comfortable. These museums' initiatives are particularly significant given the slow path to relevancy for museums in the post-Soviet era.

The National Art Museum was located on the front line of the conflict. As smoke from tires filled the air, the staff slept in the museum to protect the collection. The crisis motivated curators and educators to mount a series of exhibitions and programs that explored current issues and provided space for reflection.

Their first exhibition, *Codex of Mezhyhirya* (fig. 3), displayed objects from ousted President Yanukovych's fantastical country home, *Mezhyhirya*. Curator Alexandr Roitburd organized the exhibition as an account book with such categories as the "Book of Vanity" (portraits) and "The Book of Transparency" (glass vases). By showing Yanukovych's ill-gotten "treasures," the museum brought a new level of attention to the protests' motivations and helped shift the dialogue from the initial goal of joining the European Union to creating a "Revolution of Dignity."

The museum's subsequent exhibition featured the work of French combat photographer Eric Bouvet, who had recorded what he witnessed in the protests. To break down the barriers between the museum and the community, the work was displayed both in the museum and along the fence outside leading to the Ukrainian parliament. It served as memory and reminder while the city cleaned up and residents returned to their daily lives.

Before the country could recover from the protests, Ukraine found itself in a military conflict in its eastern regions. The National Art Museum responded with *War Portraits*—a series of 11 large-scale photographic portraits accompanied by interviews of wounded soldiers in their hospital beds. This simple, spontaneous installation brought the reality of the war—more than 400 miles away—home to the capital.

In fall 2014, the art museum collaborated with a public relations firm and a group of museum professionals planning a permanent Maidan museum to create an exhibition with multiple components—a space for museum visitors to share their perspectives on sticky notes; a program space for events, such as documentary film screenings; and an installation titled *Freedom*, by contemporary artist Vlodko Kaufman. It was one of the first places where the community could publicly consider what a future Maidan Museum might be.

The Museum of the Great Patriotic War, a memorial to the Soviet triumph over Fascism in World War II, created a Maidan exhibit (fig. 4) within its own context. Part of a temporary exhibition on contemporary issues, it consists



Fig. 4. Mайдan section of *Apocalypse of the Twentieth Century*, an exhibition at the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, October 2014. Courtesy of Linda Norris

primarily of photographs from Mайдan and the fighting in eastern Ukraine, with minimal text. By taking a new approach of employing a message advocating peace, not celebrating war, the war museum tied the current conflict to a broader narrative about 20th-century conflict on the anniversary of World War II.

In November, the Ivan Honchar Museum opened the exhibition, *Freedom of Creativity: (R)evolutionary Culture of Mайдan*. Using objects collected during the protests, they displayed the protests' "creative" components, including Oleksandr Melnyk's *Eyes*, Volodymyr Svachiy's murals, a reassembled piece of the *yolka*, and even Molotov cocktails creatively constructed from found objects. The opening featured singing, speakers, a bonfire, and free food, just as the Mайдan had during the protests. Co-curator Vlodko Kofmann explained that they did not seek to recreate the Mайдan but to recreate the mood in order to inspire reflection.² The exhibition also included space for visitors to share written comments about the future Mайдan museum (fig. 5). Ihor Poshyvailo, the museum's deputy director, felt that additional facilitation was needed since responsive exhibits are so new to Ukraine.

"And what will you do to make that future?"

No one knew what would happen when a few students went out to protest a turn away from the European Union. Mайдan seemed to give many Ukrainians a sense that they could make a difference—that their individual creative talents had value, but even more so if they joined together. Since more than 95 percent of Ukraine's museums are government operated, for museum staff members joining in the protests meant taking a personal risk. In some cases, staff were ahead of their museum leadership in responding to Mайдan, proving that nimble and responsive leadership can come from anywhere in an institution.

While it is perhaps too soon to place the events of the past year in a historical context, many museums actively considered their role in the preservation

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Fig. 5. Talkback board of the exhibition *Freedom of Creativity* at the Ivan Honchar Museum, November, 2014. Courtesy of Bohdan Poshyvailo

What shape will a museum designed to be nimble and responsive— and a permanent record of events—take?

Endnotes:

¹“Khudozhnyky, Kotorye Rysuyut Evromaydan [Artists Who Draw the Euromaidan],” *Ya Perevozhbu S Odnoho Bereha Na Druhoy* [Translating from One Side of the Bank to Another]. January 29, 2014, accessed February 1, 2014, <http://perevozchik00.livejournal.com/26151.html>.

² 24 Telekanal. “V Kyievi hotuyut vystavku iz artefaktiv Maydanu [In Kyiv, preparing an exhibition of Maidan artifacts].” YouTube video, 2:13. November 26, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IoptuRV36GE#t=101>.

³ Oksana Mykoliuk. 2014. “What Makes Plywood Stronger?” *Kyiv Day*, February 18, 2014, accessed February 22, 2014, <http://www.day.kiev.ua/en/article/time-out/what-makes-plywood-stronger>.

⁴ Anastasiya Cherednichenko. *Muzeynyy Prostir* [Museum Space], No. 1:11 (2014).

of Maidan while the protests were still taking place. The Center for Urban History recorded interviews with protesters. The Honchar Museum collected artifacts. Artists were also thinking about preserving artifacts even as they created them. In an interview with the newspaper *Kiev Day*, an artist expressed her desire to exhibit her decorated shields “when we win.”³

Our Ukrainian colleagues now debate, consider, and wonder what the permanent Museum of Maidan will be. What shape will a museum designed to be nimble and responsive—and a permanent record of events—take? A summer 2014 issue of *Muzeynyy Prostir* (*Museum Space*), from the Ukrainian Center of Museum Development, published essays to consider the question.⁴ Linda’s article in the issue suggested a dialogic museum framing the museum around, “What should the future Ukraine be?” In conversation,

her colleague Eugene Chervony responded, “But that’s not the only question. We should also ask, ‘And what will you do to make that future?’”

The events of Maidan demonstrated that Ukrainians are resourceful; they can create something from almost nothing. Many are skilled at circumventing official systems that have rarely served the public interest. Those skills continue to make Maidan exhibitions creative. But less familiar to Ukrainian museums is the process of creating dialogue within exhibitions and museum settings. One Soviet legacy that continues is the single, definitive curatorial or artistic voice. However, museum colleagues—and the general public—heard many voices on the square and elsewhere. Since Maidan is not the property of scholars and scientists, it offers the potential to change Ukrainian museums into lasting places of civic engagement. ✨

References:

Over the past years, the two authors had numerous conversations with colleagues, friends, and perfect strangers in Ukraine. We are grateful for their time, their perspectives, and their willingness to share ideas in such difficult times. For those interested in learning more about cultural and social movements within the context of Maidan, we recommend the following.

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