VIII International Forum for Doctoral Candidates in East European Art History
An Event of the Chair of East European Art History, Faculty of Humanities and
Social Sciences, Humboldt University Berlin

Lubava Illyenko
University of Augsburg, Germany

Ukrainian Soviet Mosaics under the Post-Colonial Lens

Since 2013 I worked on the topics of the Soviet monumental heritage in Ukraine, focusing on the public space monuments, mosaic and mural decorations. Ironically, that was exactly the years, when the attitude to the Soviet-era monuments began its rapid change. Since then, Ukrainian society tries to come to terms with its dubious past. Therefore the object of my research is constantly heated up by social debate and controversy.

In my Master thesis tilted as „Denkmalsturz und Denkmalschutz. Beisetzung politischer Denkmäler anhand einer Fallstudie zum Denkmal Lenins in Kyiv" (2018, the University of Augsburg, note 1,0) I conducted an exemplary evaluation of Lenin monument, wich was smashed at the beginning of Euromaidan 2013. This demolition launched a massive iconoclastic wave in Ukraine, known also as Leninfall, wich gave no mercy to the communists dedicated monuments across the country. The adoption of the official decommunisation laws in May 2015 only legalized this already ongoing process. Altogether 2,5 thousand monuments to Lenin and other Soviet statesmen were toppled down or dismantled up to 2018. Yet, hundreds of the mosaic panels were either closed up, or poured with concrete, or painted over. The main task of my research was to resist this trend (~~of blind destruction~~) of underestimating of the Soviet heritage in my motherland. I strove to find the way to treat it as a material attribute of history and culture of the bygone epoch.

I launched the dissertation project „**Ukrainian Mosaics of the Soviet Era: Between Art and Ideology**" in 2019. It is called to scrutinise the general historical and ideological conditions for execution of the exterior mosaic decorations in the 1960-80s. At the same time I reassess the mosaic heritage in regard to its artistic merit and cultural meaning for contemporary Ukraine. I am sure that the mosaic medium, wich had been originally used for propaganda, transformed into the unique art phenomena for Ukraine, especially during the 1960s. However, I have already formulated the key questions for my research[1], inter alia: did Ukrainian artists manage to develop a visual language that

---

[1] See the dissertation project summary both web site of the University of Augsburg, Faculty of Philology and History, Chair of History of the Arts and Cultural History: https://www.uni-

transcended meticulously controlled content and canon of Soviet art? Was the turn to the folk and national motives in the numerous mosaic works a kind of resistance?

After the beginning of the full-scale Russian military invasion, the situation with the monumental heritage escalated afresh. Ukrainians began to demolish the monuments and the busts to Alexander Pushkin[2], allusively trying to get rid of everything of Russian origin. Again the public monuments acted as visual markers of the social transformations. This time, a decolonial shift occurred in the country. It had and still has quite emotional character. My colleagues accelerate now an idea of writing Ukrainian art history of the 20th century from scratch.[3] It alludes an establishment of postcolonial perspective, including full reconsideration of the colonial elements of the past and partial dismantling of historical memory.

In fact, decommunisation in Ukraine, which had broken with the country's Soviet past, was currently continued by decolonisation. The process of dismantling of colonial narratives goes further. And it directly affected the subject of my ongoing dissertation in many aspects. Foremost, how should the decolonisation optic be appleid? For instance, should I implement a biographic approach as a kind of decolonial practise? Does it implies a tenfold focus on the circumstances of the mosaic artists „lifes and works" within the Soviet system, including system of state commissions, censorship, educational opportunities, available art literature and art exhibitions, and many-many other social and private, official and underground issues? Is there something else about the post-colonial lens, that must be included in my current (re)writing about the Ukrainian mosaics of the Soviet era?

These questions and concerns I would like to discuss with the colleagues during the Forum for Doctoral Candidates in East European Art History at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

augsburg.de/de/fakultaet/philhist/professuren/kunst-und-kulturgeschichte/kunstgeschichte/dissertationen-masterarbeiten/dissertationen-kunstgeschichte/ukrainische-mosaiken-der-sowjetzeit-zwischen-kunst-und-/.

[2] It is not surprising that exactly this poet suffered social ostracization. If the figure of Lenin symbolically performed the political regime of the Bolsheviks, Communists, and Soviets, the message of Pushkin statuary was not so prescriptive. Demonstrating the popularity of Russian culture for a certain terrain, his figure rather announced the presence of Russian dominant, accentuating its influence and leadership (in other words - the position of imperialistic unity).

[3] For example: Ukrainian Pavilion Public Programme at the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia „Decolonising Art. Beyond the Obvious", September-November 2022, Link: https://ui.org.ua/en/sectors-en/ukrainian-pavilion-public-programme-at-the-59th-la-biennale-di-venezia-2/; online conference „Exhibition Histories and the Roles of Documentation: Writing Ukrainian Art History from the Scratch", 30.01.2023, Organiser: Estonian Academy of Arts, Institute of Art History and Visual Culture. Link: https://www.artun.ee/en/calendar/exhibition-histories-and-the-roles-of-documentation-writing-ukrainian-art-history-from-scratch/ and many other recent events.