

**Artist Roles, Social and Political Engagements in Contemporary Art: A Study of the  
Contemporary Ukrainian Art Scene**

Kinga Laura Lendeczki

[lkinga.89@gmail.com](mailto:lkinga.89@gmail.com)

Aesthetics Doctoral Program

Doctoral School of Philosophy, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

In my doctoral dissertation, I examine the local characteristics of socially engaged art projects in Ukraine. I started my research in 2020, and initially, I concentrated on the social and cultural commitment of artistic and curatorial collectives that emerged following the Orange Revolution in 2004. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia had a significant impact on my investigation and forced me to adapt the scope and methodology of my research to the changing circumstances.

I examine myths, propaganda and cultural representations constructed from power positions. Being essential parts of dominant narratives, they were brought into life to support political aims and shape the cultural imagination of the society. Among these narratives can be mentioned the democratic facades that were created to cover up the contradictions of the transition; the projected image of Europe; the myth of the ‘two Ukraines’ and the myth of ‘the Other’<sup>1</sup> that were used to sharpen divisions among social groups and contributed to the dehumanisation of the inhabitants of geographical regions. In my thesis, I aim to explore how artists working with socially engaged art practices resonated with these narratives and how they attempt to subvert the dominant discourse and offer alternative visions through the means of art.

I chose the so-called Donbas region in Eastern Ukraine as a case study. I focus on artworks, artistic initiatives and artistic research that reflect on the cultural representation of Donbas and the heritage that derives from it and seek to culturally redefine what this region means from an internal perspective. During my research, I focus my attention on those artworks that approach this region through its human and non-human inhabitants and their convoluted relationship to their lived environment. In analysing these works, I examine the artists’ motives for choosing this approach, their methods and the obstacles they encounter besides the ongoing war. I also find it important to reveal recurring themes and tendencies. I will put emphasis on exploring processes and revealing correlations instead of focusing on certain phenomena.

From a methodological point of view, this research aims to join in a dynamic discourse about the decolonial reading of the history of the postsocialist and postsoviet regions. The conceptual framework, methodology and glossary of this discourse are still evolving, which can be a

<sup>1</sup> Yurchenko, Y. (2022). Ukraine and the (Dis)integrating „Empire of Capital”. In Gagyí, A. Slacálek, O. (Ed.), *The Political Economy of Eastern Europe 30 years into the 'Transition'. New Left Perspectives from the Region* (pp. 97-113). Palgrave Macmillan.

challenge during the research. Particularly, taking into consideration the intense debate that surrounds this discourse. Furthermore, in some cases, the research results are interpreted in a geopolitical rather than primarily academic context. The other methodological source I will use is the discipline of environmental aesthetics that studies the dynamics of the relationship of

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human and non-human beings with their lived environment and the emotive, perceptive and affective state one experiences while discovering this environment.