



MAILINGLIST

Art Books

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# *Circling the Square: Maidan and Cultural Insurgency in Ukraine*

by Olga Kopenkina

## ***Circling the Square: Maidan and Cultural Insurgency in Ukraine* (Cicada Press, New York, 2014)**

At first glance, *Circling the Square: Maidan and Cultural Insurgency in Ukraine*—an oversize newsprint published by the New York-based Cicada Press—seems to be a risky endeavor: most of its texts were written and originally published in March, when the Ukrainian revolution could be perceived, according to one of the authors, Larissa Babij, “from the position of exhaustion that was only a projection then.” Indeed, the month will certainly be remembered in Ukrainian history for its post-Euromaidan, post-revolutionary backlash, which spiraled at times into chaos. The height of the political volatility—which began March 1, when the Russian parliament authorized the use of military force in Ukraine, and lasted until the Ukrainian presidential elections on May 25—kept the country in a state of emergency. Facing a civil war fueled by the official Russian media’s anti-Ukrainian propaganda on the one hand and by the threat from Ukrainian militant right-wing forces on the other, a number of Ukrainian and Russian artists, curators, and writers are attempting to revisit last winter’s Maidan uprising in order to locate it in the actual landscape and in both nations’ cultural psyches.

Maidan—both the public space in Kiev, which was occupied by protesters from November to May, and the political action (often referred to with the name “Euromaidan”) that brought President Viktor Yanukovich’s corrupt government to an end—has gained enormous significance as an example of the self-organization and commonality of the people. In the midst of the most agonizing public debate over the future of Ukraine, Kiev’s Maidan kept its material presence in barricades, military tents, piles of dirty automobile tires, barbed fences, field kitchens, and improvised anti-Russia and pro-European Union displays.

But what exactly is Maidan? Is it a necessary structural component of a revolution that is and must

be localized in a particular place? Is it a uniquely Ukrainian invention? Russian writer and public intellectual Dmitry Bykov recently noted that Maidan would never be possible in Russia because of its traditional inclination toward an unbridled riot, which, while aiming to end centuries-long corrupt governments, usually winds up in another circle of totalitarian rule. Indeed, Maidan is something that is created by a more structured, self-organizing, and self-governing social body. As historian Timothy Snyder wrote in the *New York Review of Books*, this kind of autonomous governance was formed in the Middle Ages, when the inhabitants of today's Ukraine sought to establish a statehood that would ideally represent all groups of citizens.<sup>1</sup> Snyder notes that, in Ukrainian, "maidan" signifies "not just a marketplace where people happen to meet, but a place where they deliberately meet, precisely in order to deliberate, to speak, and to create a political society." Maidan, he argues, is not just a tool of politics, or a place from where politicians call for a public action; it is an "act of public politics itself."

*Circling the Square* delineates the history of Kiev's Maidan protests in Oleksandr Burlaka's two well-researched articles "Architecture and Aesthetics of Maidan" and "Topography of Protest." In 1990, the Ukrainian Students Union organized a national strike to protest the Soviet Union's influence on their country, including the military draft of Ukrainian students into the Soviet Army. Students, mainly from Western Ukraine, arrived in Kiev, set up their encampment on October Square (the Soviet name of today's Maidan), and began a hunger strike that continued until the prime minister resigned and the Ukrainian parliament agreed to meet the protesters' demands.

In 2001, the square, which had been renamed Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in the aftermath of the U.S.S.R.'s collapse, became the center of a mass protest campaign whose collective refrain was "Ukraine without Kuchma," referring to Leonid Kuchma, the nation's corrupt president. Burlaka analyzes the architecture of Maidan and its surrounding streets (he also supplies a detailed map of the latest insurgency), providing a thoughtful observation that the protests happened amid the urban structures designed specifically to prevent them. In fact, in the Soviet era, the plazas and main streets of Ukrainian cities were built with the goal of glorifying a dominant political order, and later—remarkably, after the 2001 anti-presidential campaign in Kiev—for commercial shopping, but not for gathering and camping. Surprisingly, this forbidding environment failed to prevent last winter's political activity at Maidan; moreover, its meaning has been subverted and amplified in a strange way. To experience this, one should stroll around the U.S.S.R.-era brutalist architecture and the obscure Soviet monuments that were used by the protestors as props and holding posts for posters, announcements, and manifestos. Burlaka emphasizes the symbolism of the empty granite pedestals, which had once borne statues of Lenin before they were toppled by Ukrainian nationalists in the recent clashes with pro-Russia forces. The observation evokes what Slavoj Žižek defines as "historical irony"<sup>2</sup>: ostensibly, one might assume, the nationalists should have been celebrating Lenin, *because in* the first decade of the Soviet Union, Ukraine enjoyed national sovereignty within the Bolshevik-run state. Instead, however, the suppression of the left in Ukraine and the resurgence of Russian nationalism have caused history to be reconsidered.

Most of the articles in *Circling the Square* seek to define what the Maidan revolution means for cultural workers in Ukraine. Is this evidence of an epic defeat, given the number of armed people on the streets, the scores dead, and the escalation of violence in the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine?<sup>3</sup> Or, on the contrary, has it signaled the moment when cultural practitioners can plug into the social process directly and help move things forward? One of the publication's most significant texts, "Cultural Maidan: Assembly for Culture in Ukraine to Replace the Ministry of Culture," attempts to answer these questions. Kiev-based performance artist and theorist Larisa Venediktova describes the creation of the Assembly for Culture in February 2014, when 300 Ukrainian cultural workers gathered in Kiev on the grounds of the national Ministry of Culture to ruminate on how to bring systemic change to the arena of culture. While keeping a distance from the violent events in the streets, they formed separate groups of musicians, circus workers, event organizers, designers, advertisers, and other artists, with the goal of coming up with new organizational models for Ukrainian cultural workers.

The objectives were bold, directly referencing such early avant-garde rhetoric as, Venediktova writes, the necessity of moving "culture away from serving the interests of the acting power and towards the cultural needs of all people." Ukrainian art has for the past 15 years oscillated between Ukrainian oligarchic capital and big state-supported museums and institutions; there is a tangible lack of small, self-organized, artist-run spaces. A lot of regional cultural institutions and museums, including those in Kiev, seem to be neglected. (Some can't even pay their electricity bills, and visitors are often invited to look at the displays in the darkness). State museums and institutions exercise a heavy-handed control over cultural production and display (Anastasiya Osipova's text, "Black Squares," tells about the most blatant censorship scandal that took place in 2013 at the highly revered Mystetskyi Arsenal, also known as the Museum of Ukrainian Contemporary Art). And despite the interventionist collectives that emerged after the Orange Revolution in 2004, the contemporary art scene seems to gravitate toward a several few established art centers that are financed and empowered by industrial tycoons and the wives of dodgy politicians. Culture is a battlefield, and an extension of Maidan, Venediktova suggests, and it's clearly illustrated by the struggle of those who seek the legalization, representation, participation, and negotiation of institutional power and the rights of individual artists.

These thoughts are echoed in "Watching Maidan," by Ukrainian curator Larissa Babij, who is driven by the idea that the leaderless revolution on Maidan is an opportunity for artists "to demand a kind of horizontal organization, which increases the responsibilities of each and every individual citizen-participant." The discussion evokes the yearlong struggle by the Kiev Art Workers' Self-Defense Initiative, which, at one moment, managed to influence the National Art Museum of Ukraine's search for a new director. But the current debate seems to be interlaced with contradictions, of the kind that often accompany major cultural shifts. It presents the artistic community as torn between two opposite movements: one for a horizontal, self-organized management of art production that is freed from government control and political instrumentalization, and another that gravitates toward the "normal, legitimate existence"

associated with exhibiting in well-established art centers and selling via art galleries. Moreover, when artists negotiate power, they often tend to copy institutional models, inclining toward the professionalization of their own practice and, as a result, managerism. It seems that only a powerful sociopolitical movement like the one in Ukraine can redeem artists' aspirations toward "normality," as it helps regain cultural power within a transformative social movement. But its success depends upon the revolution surviving.

*Circling the Square* conveys this doubt about whether the revolution will survive in "The Betrayal of Maidan," a provocative text by Russian artist Petr Pavlensky, which features illustrations of a burning barricade (reminiscent of *Liberty*, an action on St. Petersburg's Tripartite Bridge that he organized in February in solidarity with Euromaidan). Reacting to the Russian invasion of Crimea and the escalation of violence in eastern Ukraine, Pavlensky blames Russian society for "rejecting" Maidan's "anarcho-communist model of coexistence" for the sake of an order guaranteed by a centralized vertical power center. More recently, his sentiment resonated again when the newly elected president, Petro Poroshenko, questioned the legacy of Maidan and pledged to clean the city of the movement's tents and barricades as his first task—a call that immediately materialized in an order from Kiev's new mayor. Meanwhile, as a response to the ongoing Ukrainian crisis, the Russian artists group Chto Delat published an open letter (also included in this publication) announcing their withdrawal from the international art exhibition Manifesta 10, which opens in Russia this summer. The letter put art institutions under scrutiny not only in Russia and Ukraine but also throughout Europe—specifically Manifesta—for its indifference to the international artist community's call for solidarity with Ukraine and a boycott of Russia's repressive cultural policies.

Ukraine elected a new president in May, but the civil war is spreading across more territory in the east. The revolution that kicked off in November on Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kiev, as a result of leftist horizontal organizing, appears to have stopped halfway, bringing a new elite, if a pro-European one, to power. But whatever direction Ukrainian politics finally takes, wherever the new lines of confrontation are drawn, Maidan, which is always something more than barricades and smoky tires, will always be there, if latently. It will remind Ukrainians and Russians that a time of hope, planning, and possibility was ripe once, and that the utopian spirit, so fittingly (if not always consistently) captured in this publication by Cicada Press, is ready to be restored in the new circle of revolution and transformation—if that moment ever comes again.

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A digital edition of *Circling the Square: Maidan and Cultural Insurgency in Ukraine* can be downloaded from Cicada Press's web page.

The print version of the publication is available for purchase at the Sunview Luncheonette, at Human Relations and Book Thug Nation bookstores, or on the website: [cicadapress.net](http://cicadapress.net).

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## NOTES

Timothy Snyder, "Fascism, Russia, and Ukraine," *New York Review of Books*, March 20, 2014.

Slavoj Žižek, "Barbarism with a Human Face," *London Review of Books*.

A point of view voiced in Ukrainian writer Serhiy Zhadan's text "Why Maidan is the defeat of our culture," which was published in Russian online at [forbes.ua](http://forbes.ua).

## CONTRIBUTOR

## Olga Kopenkina

OLGA KOPENKINA is a New York-based curator and critic. With Gregory Sholette and Larissa Babij, Kopenkina curated the exhibition *Imaginary Archive* in Kiev in April.

## RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



## Perpetual Revolution: The Image and Social Change

by Alexandra Juhasz

MAR 2017 | ARTSEEN

*Perpetual Revolution*, currently at the ICP, makes powerful use of the museum's walls, paint, institutional power, and curatorial competencies, to create a holding environment for images of social change.



## Out of Reach

by Katharina Smundak

FEB 2016 | BOOKS

My great-grandmother on my grandfather's side was born in Odessa, Ukraine, in 1888. She was twenty-nine when the Russian Revolution toppled the Tsar.



## Ratmansky's Quiet Revolution

by Susan Yung

JUL-AUG 2016 | DANCE

There's a quiet revolution underway at ABT—in its spring season, an impressive half of the repertory is by Alexei Ratmansky. The latest addition is *The Golden Cockerel*, a full-length spectacle originally created in 2012 for the Royal

Danish Ballet, which loaned the lavish costumes and scenery by Richard Hudson (based on early 20th-century designs by Natalia Goncharova).



# Syria: The Stolen Revolution

*translated from the French by Janet Koenig*

**FEB 2016 | FIELD NOTES**

"They stole the Revolution from us!" exclaims Majd, an early actor in the Syrian Spring, now a recent refugee in France. Since the popular uprising in March, 2011, networks of resistance have formed in the continuum between militants in exile and those working in Syria's liberated zones.

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