POMIĘDZY
МІЖ • МЕЖДУ • BETWEEN • ZWISCHEN • ENTRE

Polsko-Ukraińskie Studia Interdyscyplinarne
2023, nr 1 (8), ss. 57–62

https://czasopisma.marszalek.com.pl/en/10-15804/pom
DOI: 10.15804/PPUSI.2023.01.05

Iryna Soliarska-Komarchuk
Ph.D. in Philosophy, Associate Professor
Associate Professor at the Department of Art History Expertise
National Academy of Management Personnel of Culture and Arts
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3229-9153
irasolarsky@gmail.com

OF THE TRANSAVANT-GARDE IN UKRAINIAN AND POLISH ARTISTIC TRADITIONS

Summary: The article analyzes the artistic processes that emerged in the world in the second half of the twentieth century, after the Second World War. One of the most striking phenomena of that period was the transavant-garde, and the reasons for its emergence in many European countries and the United States are determined - Arte Cifra or la transavanguardia in Italy, Figuration Libre in France, New Image Painting in the United States, Neue Wilde in Germany, Nowa Expression in Poland. This diversity of transavant-garde manifestations in the context of national artistic systems is explained by the peculiarities of ethnomentalities that were formed on the basis of certain archetypes and universals. An important feature of the world transavant-garde is the artists' appeal to expressionism. There is a rethinking and renewed interpretation of expressionism, which actually gave it the name «neo-expressionism». Considering the reasons why artists from different countries turned to expressionism, it is concluded that it was the analysis of inner experiences and the desire to express them as vividly as possible that caused such a «global» commitment. Closely related to this is the process of creating individual mythologies, which, through certain images (the use of linearism, dissonant color juxtapositions, deviations from the true image, the use of different techniques and materials in one art object), encouraged the viewer to experience certain affects.

At the same time, the Ukrainian and Polish artistic systems of the time, as well as social and political life, were closely controlled by the Soviet system. The situation was especially difficult in Ukraine, where alternative views on art could be paid for with imprisonment or even life. However, in both Poland and Ukraine, there were artists who were engaged in aesthetic resistance and belonged to opposition movements such as counterculture and non-conformism. It is under these conditions that neo-expressionism gets its unique forms of development in both Polish and Ukrainian art. The New Expression movement has been developing in Poland since the early 1980s. Artists, turning away from official cultural institutions, spontaneously created alternative structures. The Polish New Expression, which officially declared itself and kept in touch with foreign colleagues, was a legitimate part of the global movement, and martial law did not allow Polish artists to enter the international scene. Using the creative methods of neo-expressionism, the artists fought for political freedom with inspiration. The artists, ridiculing the absurd world around them with the help of grotesque, used simplified composition and strong contrasting colors.

Aesthetic resistance in Ukraine was deeply underground. Nonconformist artists could not organize exhibitions or communicate with their foreign colleagues. Therefore, the names of Ukrainian artists were not known to the world, as well as to most of their fellow citizens. Tight control by the authorities influenced the maximum reflection of opposition artists and determined the symbolic and metaphorical language of their works. After all, expressionism was despised and not supported within Soviet art.

Keywords: ethnomentalism, archetype, artistic thinking, counterculture, non-conformism, expressionism, new expression in Poland and Ukraine

1. Introduction

Ukrainian art is one of the areas that is little known not only to art historians in most of Western Europe, but also to our closest neighbors, the Poles. It is relevant to draw parallels in the study of artistic processes in Ukraine and Poland, which reveals the ethnomental basis of the visual arts and indicates the peculiarities of artistic thinking. After all, inclusion in the universal community occurs, first of all, ontologically, in particular through culture, ethnology, and aesthetics (Lychkovakh, 2014). The contents of the nation's experience are universals, archetypes that manifest themselves in metahistorical situations and are able to ensure a «national renaissance». Thus, ethnomentalism determines the national style of thought, culture, art, and literature. Each ethnomentality represents unique spiritual values gained through a peculiar experience of interaction between man and the World. This is how humanity looks like – as a combination of ethnic archipelagos (Krymskyi, 2010).

These reflections seem especially interesting in the context of considering the evolution of Ukrainian and Polish art in the second half of the twentieth century, when both artistic traditions, as well as social and political life, were under the close control of the Soviet system, in a state of unfreedom. The rejection of this situation led to the creation of opposition movements – counterculture in Poland and non-conformism in Ukraine. Therefore, the aim of the study is to identify the peculiarities of the transavant-garde in Ukrainian and Polish art, which developed in these artistic systems as a forbidden and oppositional movement to the values of the dominant political system. In addition, Neo-Expressionism, as one of the brightest movements of the transavant-garde in the oppositional artistic traditions of Ukraine and Poland, received peculiar features of manifestation due to the universals and archetypes of ethnomentalism. Consideration of these artistic traditions through this prism determines the novelty of the study.

Research methodology. The topic of Neo-Expressionism in the Ukrainian and Polish art systems, which is also related to such concepts as transavant-garde, non-conformism, counterculture, and ethnomentalism, has been little studied by Ukrainian scholars. There are also few works by foreign specialists that would address the problem of transavant-garde manifestations in countries where art was under the control of totalitarian authorities, which, like in Ukraine, used physical violence. The research uses articles and books by foreign and Ukrainian scholars such as R. Poggioli, A. Rottenberg, L. Smyrna, H. Vysheslavsky, V. Lychkovakha, and S. Krymsky.

The research methods used are epistemological analysis to clarify the concepts of a number of art historical concepts and to identify the stylistic features of neo-expressionism; systematic and analytical analysis to present the peculiarities of the Ukrainian and Polish transavant-garde.

2. Aesthetic resistance of Ukrainian and Polish art

The formation of resistance in Ukrainian art began in the 1920s. It is important to recall here that the Iron Curtain created by the Soviet system cut off Ukrainian artists, as well as other creative and scientific intellectuals, from the world community for a long time. That is why there is such a false statement as Renato Poggioli's, according to which the avant-garde, despite all its leftist and pro-revolutionary sympathies, can flourish only in free democratic societies. The scholar concludes that the remnants of aesthetic protest in the countries behind the Iron Curtain survived only in Poland, as local authorities were forced to compromise with the national and religious spirit (Poggioli, 1968).

Due to the aggressiveness of the Soviet system, the world has not known about the Ukrainian artistic resistance that took place within the framework of nonconformism until now. But the representatives of this movement knew about the world and what was happening in it, using various tricks and approaches. The art of these Ukrainian artists has never been a phenomenon separated from the global artistic process. In particular, the famous representative of Lviv nonconformism, Carlo Zvirynskyi, who founded an underground academy, made sure that his students read the works of famous contemporary writers, Nobel laureates. Most often, this literature was read in Polish, as Zvirynsky received it from Poland thanks to his colleague and brother. He also bought foreign literature about artists in different languages in special bookstores. He listened to BBC

radio in Polish, where they critically discussed European art.

The Soviet system brutally dealt with undesirable artists through murders, concentration camps, arrests, and moral and psychological harassment. Therefore, many nonconformist artists worked in two dimensions to survive: socialist realism, which was supported by the authorities, and «secret» works made in a personal manner. Although there were artists who did not cooperate with the authorities in any way. The price of such a choice was oblivion, moral and psychological humiliation, a ban on exhibitions, and constant persecution by representatives of punitive authorities. Non-conformism meant a special form of artistic activity aimed at nationalizing art, fostering a new attitude towards the human being, the individual in culture, and a new understanding of the meanings of art as such. Hence the affirmative imperative of nonconformism: the nonconformist artist sought to fulfill himself through mastering national issues. The artist's attitude to national phenomena as forbidden was manifested in forms that were mostly sublime and sacred (Smyrna, 2017). Thus, the archetypes and universals of ethnomentalism become not only the basis of the artist's vision and reasoning, but also sacred guidelines that, through symbolic and metaphorical images, can penetrate the field of understanding of the other and encourage the comprehension of reality.

National issues were also valuable for Polish artists of the counterculture, which, under Soviet oppression, also acquired a sublime and sacred feeling and status, although the form of its expression (according to the methods of neo-expressionism) did not coincide with this content. But this dissonance is the credo of the transavant-garde. Pathos will be inappropriate and ridiculous when values are being destroyed and reality is changing. It is known that in such moments it is better to listen to a jester, because only through a joke can you tell the unfortunate truth. (Rottenberg, 1989).

3. Neo-Expressionism as a Reflection and a Cause of Mythmaking

Transavant-garde (Italian: la transavanguardia) is often considered in two ways: the Italian version of the expressionist movements of contemporary art of the late 1970s and 1980s, which emerged almost simultaneously in many countries; and the totality of these movements, which are very different and even contradictory. This concept was introduced in 1979 by the Italian art historian and critic Aquile Bonito Oliva. In one of his articles, he noted that the term indicates something that is beyond or after the avant-garde. In Italy, in addition to the term transavant-garde, Arte cifra is used, in France Nouveaux fauves or from the art group La Figuration libre (free figuration), in the United States New Wave, although there are variants – New Imagine Painting, Bad Painting or Wild Painting, the post-graffiti phenomenon is also involved, in Germany and German-speaking countries Neue Wilde, and in Poland New Expression, although the Wroclaw environment is used to calling itself by the German name.

An important feature of the world transavant-garde is the artists' appeal to expressionism. It is being reinterpreted and reinterpreted, which actually influenced the emergence of the term «neo-expressionism». But in each specific national variant, neo-expressionism received a different semantic load and artistic interpretation, which was actually reflected in the variety of names of this movement. In view of this, a sensitive question arises: why was expressionism singled out by artists in the postwar world (the second half of the twentieth century) and formed the basis of transavant-garde movements? It is important that Neo-Expressionism also marks a return to figurative painting, which was for some time (40s and 50s of the twentieth century) replaced by expressionism, but abstract.

Reflecting on these questions, we should turn to the first expressionism that emerged in pre-war Germany in 1907–1910 within the groups The Bridge and The Blue Rider. Among the avant-garde movements of the time, Expressionism stood out for the following features: subjectivism, which implied a spontaneous expression of inner experiences, a commitment to mystical tendencies, criticism of modern civilization, the use of brutal contrast, caricature and grotesque, and the deliberate deformation of real objects. In fact, the term expressionism takes us away from the more general meaning of the word expression, because every artist is able to reveal himself through his art, but only an expressionist allows the viewer to «live» his innermost emotions, provoking specific and violent psychological reactions in him (Martinelli, 2022). It was not the external reality but the analysis of inner experiences that motivated Expressionist artists to

create images. Therefore, the form as a membrane of the mental dialog between man and the world was an important means of conveying inner expression, as it represented the power of disillusionment with the ideas of progress, and the continued belief in reason and intelligence. Thus, the images are characterized by intensified linearity, color in dissonant juxtapositions, and deviations from the true image.

Naturally, the Second World War, as the next great existential tragedy, influenced the further development of expressionism, as the search for the meaning of human existence became crucial in the face of global disillusionment. The destructive power of this war affected not only individuals but also entire nations: genocides, concentration camps, «sorting» of peoples, destruction of statehood, appropriation of cultural heritage, creation of new world orders with the leveling of the interests of a number of European states. All of these circumstances of universal aggression created disillusionment with institutions and pushed for extreme subjectivism. Therefore, the main idea of Neo-Expressionism is to see the world from the point of view of the individual and to express emotions through the creation of works. The process of individual artistic myth-making became a prominent feature of art in the second half of the twentieth century. The personal myth became a way for the artist to communicate with the world. It is noteworthy that it was in the 1960s that the concept of «mythopoetics» was actively studied and introduced. This term was introduced by representatives of the Anglo-American school of mythological criticism. Unlike the concept of «mythology», which refers to a worldview system that is the embodiment of the collective unconscious, «mythopoetics» is associated with the subjective unconscious, so the universals and archetypes co-created and passed through personal experience required special forms of expression, which was provided by neo--expressionism.

4. Neo-expressionism in the projection of national artistic thinking

The introduction of maximum subjectivity in images, myth-making, and the freedom to integrate anything influenced the nature of the Neo-Expressionists' creative methods. Traditional techniques were accompanied by a new style and theme of works dictated by unbridled imagination; the use of different artistic traditions in order to find new meanings; a combination of different techniques; adherence to technical skill, despite the impression of formal negligence; narrative; regionalism. And, of course, the criticism and negation of ideology, which distinguishes transavant-garde movements from avant-garde ones. Novelty and originality were also not the goal, because the main message of the new art was the ambiguity of the modern world.

Unlike most countries where the transavant-garde with its neo-expressionist movements spread in the last third of the twentieth century, a number of Eastern European countries, including Poland and Ukraine, were engaged in a real struggle against the totalitarian Soviet system. For these societies, existential values (freedom of choice, national self-identification, creative expression) were not a topic of reflection, but the meaning of a fierce struggle. And while the Polish artistic counterculture, which nevertheless represented a separately recognized state, was gaining some success, Ukrainian nonconformism could not even announce its presence to the world, nor could it name itself. It was under these conditions that neo--expressionism received its unique forms of development in both Polish and Ukrainian art. After all, the archetype of freedom is equally inherent in both ethnomentalities.

The phenomenon called «New Expression» developed in Poland from the early 1980s, during the birth of the Solidarity movement and the years of martial law, reached its peak in 1986-87, and in 1989 it practically faded away. Artists, turning away from official cultural institutions, spontaneously created numerous artistic collectives (Gruppa, Luxus, Koło Klipsa, Sternenhoch, Riders of the Lost Black Volga, O'pa). Thanks to New Expression, the artistic map of Poland is being significantly decentralized (Poznan, Gdańsk, Wroclaw, Łódź, and Lublin are highly rated). Despite the fact that the Polish New Expression was a legitimate part of the global movement, martial law did not allow Polish artists to enter the international scene. At one of the auctions and the preceding exhibition «New Figuration – New Expression» at DESA Unicum in Warsaw, the artists of the legendary Warsaw Gruppy (Grzyb, Pawlak, Modzelewski, Sobczyk) make their presence felt in the most tangible way. The-

ir brutal, aggressive paintings have become synonymous with a new expression of the Polish New Wild, a rebellion against the repressive system of the 1980s. The pictorial «wildness» of the Gruppy was a response to totalitarianism and the brutality of martial law. It was a perverse response, colored by provocation, irony, laughter, ridicule, caricature, exaggeration, violence of form and color.

Among the Ukrainian nonconformist artists whose work was characterized by the features of transformed expressionism, we should mention the Kyiv-based group New Bend, whose members, Mykola Tregub and Woodon Baklytskyi, were uncompromising supporters of staying in the «underground». The values of the counterculture, which was built intuitively, «by touch», by nonconformists, were creative work of thought, otherwise known as freethought; reliance on broad historical layers of world culture and, consequently, rejection of the socialist realist surrogate of culture; the will to individual creative achievements, which implied responsibility amid the general relaxation of the stagnation era, as well as a certain honesty as a desire to embody the ideal in one's own life (most often, forcedly, in the inner experience of self-reflection). (Vysheslavsky, 2021).

The New Bend group was formed in the 1960s on the initiative of Mykola Tregub. The name itself seems to hint at the kinship between the creative pursuits of Ukrainian artists and their foreign colleagues. But in occupied Soviet Ukraine, the expression of color and form was condemned as distortion. The group soon disintegrated due to constant harassment and persecution by punitive authorities. As before, so after, these artists were not allowed to participate in official exhibitions. They organized demonstrations of their works on their own in the walls of an abandoned brick factory, or in the apartments of Kyiv intellectuals or in abandoned buildings. The price of independence under totalitarianism was extremely high: the premature deaths of M. Tregub in 1984, whose body was found hanged at the gate of the Vydubytskyi Monastery (the authorities declared it a suicide), and V. Baklytskyi in 1992, who had poor health due to an earlier attempt to poison himself.

Both artists were self-taught and belonged to the postwar generation. In addition to the tragedy of the Second World War, which was imprinted in the childhood memories of M. Tregub and V. Baklytskyi, they were well aware of the consequences of the Hunger (Holodomor) of 1932-1933 in Ukraine, which almost completely destroyed the family of Tregub's mother. The experience prompted the two friends and like-minded people to refuse to cooperate with the Soviet authorities in any way and to look for forms and methods of artistic expression that could convey the full force of their inner experiences. Of course, official art education was not able to help them find such methods and, moreover, severely punished such attempts.

On the way to their independent creative formation, M. Tregub and V. Baklytskyi were guided by the achievements of the Ukrainian avant-garde of the 1920s (intensified expression of drawing, refusal to create the illusion of space) and, at the same time, admired foreign masters: Rembrandt, Vermeer, Van Gogh, Chagall, Modigliani, Pirosmani, and others, paying attention to the techniques that allowed them to express their inner moods and reflections to the maximum. An important aspect of the work of these artists was the desire to interact with the world as a macrocosm, in which existence loses its loneliness and finds the meaning of its being. The elements of nature depicted in their paintings – trees, sky, flowers – turn into a symbol or metaphor for such interaction.

Eyewitnesses point out that M. Tregub considered his works to be living and free beings. That is why many of his works are multi-layered and have several levels of contemplation – visible and hidden, pasted or depicted on the back. The artist usually worked with oil on organite or cardboard, used the collage technique, involving other objects in the canvas. He printed stencils and made installations. He boldly combined not only materials, but also techniques – painting and graphics, where he also added objects.

Woodon Baklytskyi was just as inventive: oil painting, watercolor, tempera, and author's designs. Woodon used techniques of minting, wood carving, and ceramics. After all, he believed that the divine nature endowed to man should be involved in creativity. In addition, the expression of color (the use of hot colors) and form characterizes his works as extremely eloquent, addressed to the experiencing person.

5. Conclusions

The transavant-garde, which is clearly manifested in various national artistic systems, through its characteristic ideologies – the absence of narratives, irony, interest in myth, pluralism, subjectivism, appeal to academic art and, in this regard, the revival of the figurative in the image, encourages the rethinking and use of creative methods of expressionism, which can maximally satisfy the artist's desire to express his own mythologies. Thus, neo-expressionism in the last third of the twentieth century became the most widespread movement of the transavant-garde, but within a specific artistic system it acquired a special expression. However, unlike most countries where a new expression or a new figure is developed, the Ukrainian and Polish artistic environments were censored by the totalitarian system. Under such conditions, neo-expressionism in Polish art, New Expression, became a means of protest and uniting citizens in order to gain political freedom. Aesthetic resistance in Ukraine, due to severe repression and humiliation, was deeply underground. A rather narrow circle of people was familiar with the works of opposition artists, so artists who used expressionist methods could not even dream of creating alternative creative groups. Tight control by the authorities influenced the artist's maximum self-immersion and the symbolic and metaphorical language of his artistic mythologies. In particular, it is noted that the Lviv nonconformists of the 1970s differed from their older colleagues in that they avoided both politics and national themes, being driven by a focus on their own inner world. Ukrainian and Polish Neo-Expressionist artists, living in the specific conditions of political and ideological oppression, also developed original artistic techniques and methods.

References:

1. Vysheslavsky G. (2021). Totalnyi teatr Oleksandra Aksinina. [Alexander Aksinin's Total Theater]. URL: https://antikvar.ua/totalnyj-teatr-aksinina/ [in Ukrainian].
2. Krymskyi S. (2010). Pro sofiinist, pravdu, smysly liudskoho buttia: zb. nauk.- publ. i filos. statei [On Sophistry, Truth, and the Meanings of Human Being: a collection of scientific, public and philosophical articles.]. Kyiv: IFNANU, p. 462 [in Ukrainian].
3. Lychkovakh V. (2014). Sofiolohiia Serhiia Krymskoho na tli ukrayinskoi filosofii etnokultury. [Sophiology of Serhiy Krymsky against the background of Ukrainian philosophy of ethnoculture]. Filosofiia i politolohiia v konteksti suchasnoi kultury. – Philosophy and political science in the context of modern culture, 7. pp. 106–110. [in Ukrainian].
4. Smyrna L. (2017). Stolittia nonkonformizmu v ukrainskomu vizualnomu mystetstvi. [A Century of Nonconformism in Ukrainian Visual Art]. Kyiv: «Phoenix» Publishing House, p. 480 [in Ukrainian].
5. Kuc M. (2019). «Nowa figuracja – nowa ekspresja»: Dzicy w cenie. URL: https://www.rp.pl/rzezba/art1137281-nowa-figuracja-nowa-ekspresja-dzicy-w-cenie [in Polish].
6. Martinelli O.G. (2022). Różne historie ekspresjonizmu. URL: https://www.artmajeur.com/pl/magazine/5-historia-sztuki/rozne-historie-ekspresjonizmu/331900 [in Polish].
7. Poggioli R. (1968). The Theory of the Avant-Garde. Cambridge Mass. p. 230.
8. Rottenberg A. (1989). Przekroczenie. *Co słychać?*, red. M. Sitkowska. Wydawnictwo Andrzej Bonarski. Warszawa, s. 192–197 [in Polish].