

How My Art History Was Reborn

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1 Volodymyr Kuznetsov, *Koliivschyna: Last Judgment*, an in-process view inside the Mystetskyi Arsenal, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2013

In late July 2013, Volodymyr Kuznetsov's unfinished mural went viral on social media. It represented a scene of the Last Judgment, the Christian belief in the after-death trial through which all humans will be reborn, the righteous into a place of happiness and joy and sinners into a place of suffering and pain. In accordance with medieval iconography the artist depicted a huge cauldron filled with ruling-class corrupt politicians, oligarchs, judges, and church hierarchs. The twist was that Kuznetsov's personages came from present-day Ukraine's social reality and the mural was located inside an important state-funded gallery in Kyiv as part of a pompous exhibition designed to be seen by the country's political elite. Clearly, the artist used this opportunity to manifest his dissent with the social injustice in the country. He, however, has never finished his artwork. Before the opening, the mural was destroyed.¹

This incident happened twenty-two years after Ukraine declared its independence from the Soviet Union and got rid of censorship and ideological dictates—there were no more forbidden subjects, censorship, or control over artists and art. Thus, the Kuznetsov case came as a disgusting breath of the dark Soviet past. The disturbance had been growing since the recent elections when Viktor Yanukovych, winning with a small margin, became president of Ukraine. Backed by a powerful oligarchic clan and, as was rumored, by Russia, he was gaining control step by step over the state apparatus and all aspects of social life.

Two month later, at the beginning of the fall semester, 2013, I went to the dean's office at my faculty in the Ivan Franko University of Lviv and stated that I would like to quit. I was not so rash as this sentence suggests. I had a full-time job as a research scholar in the Academy of Sciences, which allowed me to focus on writing and wait until the situation changed. My students, however, along with many other students all over the country, thought differently, launching the Maidan, an Occupy revolution which aimed to depose the emerging dictator. With these events the country's life ran into turmoil. My life did, too.



2 Maxym Vehera paints amid clashes on Hrushevskiyi Street in Kyiv during the Maidan, January 24, 2014 (photograph provided by the artist)

At 2:00 AM on January 21, 2014 I found myself standing on Hrushevsky Street in Kyiv among the most zealous protesters in front of a riot police squad. I stood not in the vanguard, of course, but rather in the back line. To tell the truth, it was a very deep back line. Recalling my unfinished writings on post-Byzantine iconography, I wondered—what would happen if I got a head injury and forgot everything I knew? Meanwhile, jangling their shields, the police attacked. While they were approaching us in the slow but inevitable motion of a giant bulldozer, I tried to evaluate the distance to the nearest barricade where I could get shelter after they crashed our first lines. This, however, did not happen. The vanguard resisted, and the attackers retreated. Next evening, I left for my home in the city of Lviv to discover in the morning that in renewed clashes three protesters had been killed.

At that moment, I felt myself detached from my art history completely. Now, not only my lectures but also my writings seemed pointless. I could not think about art when people were dying on the streets. There were more killings, and even after the Maidan achieved its victory the turmoil never stopped. Russia annexed the Crimea, launching a proxy war against Ukraine. That was the point at which I found myself before an existential choice. Doubtful that I could ever return to art history again, I went to the military office and put my name on the list. Luckily, they have never called me back.

And so I am here in this audience today, and there are two main things that I have learned and would like to share with you. The first is that to be reborn my art history needed to reconnect to my life. I need to make it relevant to the events I am living in, and with my teaching and writing I need to express what indeed matters to me. The second is that I do not need to go through this alone.

In summer 2014, amid escalation of the war, a colleague sent me the CAA-Getty International Program announcement. There was a question in the application that struck me at once: “Please describe topics that you would like to explore.” Almost immediately I came up with a subject very far afield from my specialization in Byzantine art but with a direct connection to my recent experience with the Maidan revolution in Ukraine. I suggested that I would speak about art embedded into protest. This was something that I was eager to discuss. My application succeeded, and I began to work. Collecting my memories from the Maidan, getting in touch with artists whom I knew and whom I never had met before, trying to catch up with an enormous body of unfamiliar scholarship, I developed a lecture and started to present it in different venues outside the academic environment, aiming to reach people who, perhaps, had never had an opportunity to encounter protest art firsthand. Eventually, I find my audiences in galleries, nonprofit organizations, workshops, schools, and even churches. After my presentation in the Ukrainian Museum in New York, an artist from Thailand came up to me and shared that now she knew what she needed to do with her art back at home. The feedback moved me to the core. That was how art history could contribute to social change along with the art it discusses.

Back in Lviv a few months later, I invited colleagues from my department to meet me in a café. I told them that I was struggling with an unfinished research project and I wanted to present it to them in the hope that they would bring me their suggestions. We spent two hours in informal exchange and helpful criticism and decided to meet again with a different presenter. Eventually, we moved our meetings to the public library, reinforcing our discussions with a multimedia projector and a screen. Engaging more and more colleagues from different art institutions in our city and even from neighboring Poland and Slovakia, including both experienced and emerging scholars, we organized nineteen meetings in two years.²



3 The Seminar for Visual Art Studies, November 19, 2015 session, First Lviv Mediateka, Lviv, Ukraine (photograph by the author)

On this journey, I rethought the way I was doing research; I reinvented myself as a scholar. I did resume my unfinished research on post-Byzantine art, now approaching the subject from a perspective relevant to the reality in which I live, relying on the immediate responses from my colleagues. This way, my art history returned to life.

I would like to conclude with the comment Theodor Adorno once made about the activity of the *Außerparlamentarische Opposition* (APO), a radical New Left student group operating in West Germany in the late sixties and early seventies. Adorno said, “Even though I had established a theoretical model, I could not have foreseen that people would try to implement it with Molotov cocktails.”³ What I have seen is that people were throwing Molotov cocktails at the police exactly because a theoretical model appeared not to be sufficient to protect their freedom. It is through bridging theory to life that we can make it sufficient. And when it comes to matters of art, it is the art historian's turn. At times, I tell myself, don't stay in the back line, step forward. Within art history's vanguard, there is enough room for everyone. Resist!

Notes

¹ On the story of the destroyed painting see Richard Solash, “Ukrainian Museum Director Destroys Critical Painting ahead of President's Visit,” *RFE/RL* (July 26, 2013), <http://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-art-destroyed-kuznetsov-kievan-rus-yanukovych/25058261.html>, accessed March 19, 2017. In response Ukrainian artists organized a protest and published a letter pledging to boycott the gallery: “Open Letter from the Art Workers' Self-Defense Initiative to the Ukrainian and International Art Community,” *ARTMARGINS* (August 5, 2013), <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/featured-articles-sp-829273831/719-open-letter-art-workers>, accessed March 19, 2017.

² The list of scholars (in alphabetical order) who presented papers at the seminar: Natalia Diadukh-Bohatko, Agata Dworzak, Marta Fedak, Vladislav Greslik, Agnieszka Gronek, Oksana Herii, Halyna Kohut, Natalia Kolpakova, Sophia Korol, Mirosław Piotr Kruk, Andrii Lesiv, Mariana Levytska, Jacek Maj, Nazaria Mykhailuk, Iryna Patron, Mariana Pelekh, Daria Skrynnyk-Myska.

³ Adorno is cited in Grant Kester, “The Noisy Optimism of Immediate Action: Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy in Contemporary Art,” *Art Journal* 71, no 2 (Summer 2012): 89. That article as well as others in that issue of *Art Journal* resonated with the then fresh memory of the Occupy Wall Street protest.