

*Paper prepared for the Third Euroacademia International Conference
The European Union and the Politicization of Europe*

Lisbon, 26 – 27 September 2014

*This paper is a draft
Please do not cite*

Exhibition Becomes Politics. How Art Exhibitions About the Ukrainian Crisis Bring Up Diplomatic Contradictions

by Sebastian Loewe

abstract: The paper scrutinizes two art exhibitions in Berlin and Kiev about the current political crisis in Ukraine in light of their implications for transcultural understanding. Not only did the art exhibitions called “The Ukrainians” (DAAD gallery, Berlin) and “Fear and Hope” (Pinchuk Art Center, Kiev) want to foster alternative views and a critical focus on the crisis, but the art institutions themselves emphasize the importance of a transcultural approach that exceeds political borders. The artworks presented in the exhibitions, especially the works in Berlin, counteracted these particular institutional goals. The paper analyzes selected, exemplary artworks from Nikita Kadan, Zhanna Kadyrova, Yuri Leiderman and the artist group “Revolutionary Experimental Space”, as well as the curatorial and discursive framework of the shows, and examines their consequences for the institutional goals. As the paper will demonstrate, the exhibitions result in contradictions in terms of the higher purpose of cultural diplomacy, updating a persistent narrative of the barbaric East as enemy stereotype. The paper is complemented by a short methodological chapter which suggests a broader theoretical approach to cultural diplomacy.

keywords: art and politics, politically engaged art, art exhibitions, European relations, Ukraine crisis

Introduction

Very recently it seemed that diplomacy failed when the multi-dimensional and tricky situation in Ukraine turned from civic protests to civil war. But as it turns out, diplomatic efforts are not considered dispensable, therefore have been continued in the classic field of politics in general, and in the field of art and culture in particular. I would like to present an admittedly unique case of cultural diplomacy, but one that is characteristic of the current stance on the Ukrainian crisis in Germany. In May 2014 the gallery program of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in Berlin, Germany, conducted an exhibition entitled “The Ukrainians”. The title refers to a British band of the same name that emanated from the band “The Wedding Present” in 1990. The exhibition leaflet states, that The Ukrainians were the first Westerners that shot a music video entirely in Eastern Europe, subtly putting the Berlin exhibition in the tradition of Western cultural acquisition. The exhibition featured established and emerging Ukrainian artists such as Nikita Kadan, Zhanna Kadyrova, Yuri Leiderman, Boris Mikhailov, Vlada Ralko, Mykola Ridnyi or Oleksandr Melnyk. At the very same time a similar exhibition took place at the Pinchuk Art Centre in Kiev, Ukraine, entitled “Fear and Hope”. The show also featured Nikita Kadan and Zhanna Kadyrova, who exhibited in Berlin, as well as a third artists by the name of Artem Volokitin. All of the artists won the main Pinchuk Art Centre Prize since 2009. The exhibition aimed to “respond to the new sociopolitical context of Ukraine formed by recent events in the country and ongoing crisis” (Pinchuk Art Center 2014, par. 1).

Both exhibitions reacted to the fundamental changes and debates that followed the international struggle for Ukraine, but also wanted to create a space for alternative reflection and critique of the ongoing animosities. The Pinchuk Art Centre (2014, par. 5) states that very clearly:

“The exhibition in the Pinchuk Art Centre is a platform where artists can be both critical and non-partisan, and combines their new produced works with older works, revealing the presence and development of those subjects through their thinking.”

The DAAD gallery (2014, par. 2) announces:

“In view of the current political situation in Ukraine, the daadgalerie presents The Ukrainians, a group exhibition and series of talks bringing together visual artists and writers of different generations and contexts whose work is closely intertwined with their political involvement. The exhibition aims to add the perspectives and means of expression of visual artists and writers who are directly affected by the current events in Ukraine and in some cases activists themselves to the controversial debate that has been going on in the media for months and to the many expert talks on the situation in Ukraine.”

Being “closely intertwined with” and “directly affected by” the current events, apparently does not mean that the artists could not offer an unbiased perspective. The DAAD show obviously presumes that ‘being involved’ is a distinct quality that brings a different understanding to the conflict and adds depth to the mass media debate. A debate that, especially in Germany, is very partisan, neatly discerning good (EU) and evil (Russia), and thus can be characterized as the depreciation of Russian culture, assuming that Russia and the high values of culture do not fit and consequently, do not belong together. German newspapers mostly claimed, that with the Pussy Riot trials, the strengthening of the orthodox church or the anti-gay legislation, the culture in Putin-run Russia finally disappeared. Because Western values, that are presumably a priori inherent in art, could not thrive in Russia, concluding that art there is improbable if not impossible. Newspapers also picked out certain persons to illustrate that general judgment and, for example, claimed that acclaimed Russian conductor Valery Gergiev, who openly supports Vladimir Putin’s anti-gay legislation, could not possibly be a

sophisticated artist, but is instead a power-hungry hypocrite, unworthy to lead a renowned German orchestra like the Munich Philharmonic. Against the background of this media discourse, the Berlin exhibition apparently wanted to add a differing perspective.

In addition to the particular purpose of the exhibitions, i.e. a subjective but impartial critique of the current political events, the overall purpose of the art institutions is decidedly intermediary and diplomatic: The Pinchuk Art Centre (2014a, par. 2) focuses on “bridging national identity and international challenge”, and the DAAD artist program (2014, par. 2) “has defined itself as a forum of artistic dialogue which extends beyond cultural, geographical and, certainly, beyond political borders”. Both higher institutional purposes serve the idea of a mutual exchange and mutual understanding of different national cultures, and coincide with the very definition of cultural diplomacy.

But surprisingly, a closer look at what was presented at the exhibitions may astonish or even baffle the viewer, because it challenged the self-issued assignments by the curators and the art institutions. How come the exhibitions, especially the Berlin-based, resulted in the very opposite of a subjective yet impartial critique, establishing a new kind of anti-East narrative?

Subsequent to a brief introduction to the theoretical and methodological approach, I want to analyze selected artworks that illustrate the concept of the exhibitions, focusing on the Berlin show, and finally examine the political and diplomatic outcome of the exhibitions, asserting that they result in a diplomatic contradiction.

New approaches to cultural diplomacy

The theoretical and methodological approach I want to employ, emanates from the assertion, that the mentioned exhibitions, the Berlin-based in particular, even if they did not directly take place in a foreign nation, can and must be considered as diplomatic.

Cultural diplomacy as John Lenczowski (2009, 74) puts it in accordance with Milton C. Cummings Jr. is an

“exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding.”

Culture, in this model, serves as a means for promoting this understanding by presenting a set of values and meanings that are compelling to an audience (be it politicians or ‘normal’ people) in the “target nation”. And it seems to be a prerequisite that the nation which sought to be affected has to be understood as well, therefore the mutuality. But diplomatic relations should not be confused with randomness. As the report of the Center for Arts and Culture (2004, 7) states:

“Cultural diplomacy, in particular, can help bring people together and develop a greater appreciation of fundamental American values and the freedom and variety of their expressions.”

The quote clearly indicates that bringing “people together” is a deed meant to foster “appreciation of fundamental American values”. The desired exchange to develop mutual understanding is not purposeless, but follows a certain pattern: demonstrating the own nation’s higher values, depicted in the good, the true and the beautiful, aims at the apodictic acceptance of the national interests and political demands. Cultural diplomacy is a quintessentially political method of gaining influence over a sovereign power, state or territory by the means of culture.

Traditionally, cultural diplomacy is understood as something that takes place in a “target nation” in order to be efficacious. This misconception needs to be challenged and the core definition of cultural diplomacy expanded in order to fully grasp the political and diplomatic effects of the exhibitions on the Ukrainian crisis in Berlin and Kiev. I want to emphasize that not only cultural products and events brought to a foreign nation yield certain cultural effects, but domestic events and exhibitions, particularly in times of ubiquitous digital media coverage, can develop a certain traction and radiance that exceeds the national arena, causing effects comparable to ‘traditional’ cultural diplomacy. All the more an institution like the German Academic Exchange Service and its DAAD gallery program foster the approach of international exchange and cultural diplomacy in the field of the arts. Since the Berlin art scene is highly international as well, DAAD exhibitions reach an international, culturally sophisticated audience of possible worldwide proponents and opinion leaders in Berlin, making the exhibitions breeding grounds for transnational exchange and understanding.

In the subsequent section, the artwork’s endowment with meaning and values, which is used to induce transnational acknowledgement, will not simply be confirmed, but put into a content-related perspective that reveals the effects of a specific diplomatic practice. The rash conclusion that the mere public exhibition, without any recognition of the artwork’s content, equals an abstract diplomatic effect needs to be scrutinized. We have to admit, that the specific content of artworks is equally important when it comes to the production of meaning as well as (trans-) national relations. Consequently, the exhibited artworks will be methodologically analyzed with regard to their aesthetic and political statements, as well as their political implications, which translate to the usage of critical theory as a theoretical background and an analytical method that balances both of these aspects of the work, deploying an analysis technique of close reading, adapted for the visual arts.

Exhibited works and institutional framing

This chapter presents exemplary artworks from the exhibitions, with an emphasis on the Berlin-based show. The chapter focuses on the aesthetic and political interpretation of the selected works as well as the discursive and

institutional framing that adds information and clues for interpretation. The analysis comprises five different artworks and an essay. The selected works are (1) "Procedure Room" by Nikita Kadan, (2) "untitled" by Zhanna Kadyrova, (3) "Verkhovna Rada" and (4) "A Statement by Kasper König, Curator of Manifesta-1939" by Yuri Leiderman, (5) "Patriotism.Chronology" by R.E.P. and additionally (6) the short essay "Drawing a blank: Maidan and Boycott of Manifesta" by Sean Snyder and Olga Bryukhovetska.

(1) The first work "Procedure room"ⁱ, 2009/2010, by artist Nikita Kadan was exhibited both in "The Ukrainians" as well as in "Fear and Hope". The work depicts torture scenes printed on white porcelain plates. The scenes comprise torture practices such as burning nipples with a cigarette, suffocating someone with a plastic bag or breaking someone's fingertips in a door. Nikita Kadan uses the souvenir plates to juxtapose the blatant violence with the purity of the porcelain and the elegance of the gold rim and in this way allows a certain perception of torture: Not only seems it inappropriate to design porcelain that way, making it a deliberately moral contestation to aesthetically enjoy this piece of art. The variety of atrocities as well as the calm and collected cruelty of the torture instructions irradiates a certain seriousness. But at the same time Kadan ridicules the depicted methods by putting them on a souvenir plate and transforming them into something that possesses mere museum-like quality or serves only as a private memory from the old days.

The porcelain plates do not reveal who does these inhuman things to whom and with what intentions. The exhibition leaflet changes that by explaining that the scenes refer to widespread practices by the former pro-Russian, Ukrainian police. The leaflet also reveals a nexus between the Soviet power and the Ukrainian torture practices, that artist Kadan asserts by copying the style of the Soviet "Popular Medical Encyclopedia" in his drawings. The short text in the leaflet ends with a quotation from the artist, saying: "The didactic character of the drawings appeals to the collective responsibility of those who remain silent even though they know about it. . . ." The "collective responsibility", which Kadan requests, obviously does not apply to the torturers. These immoral characters remain evil and are not part of the "collective" which is supposed to break the silence in order to overcome anguish and pain. This certain artistic view draws a very distinct line between a peaceful, homogenous collective of victims and illegitimate perpetrators, who are said to be technical relicts from the Soviet times. It is the viewers assignment to identify these two distinct groups: one is the national Ukrainian collective that is tortured by the other, by former Soviet-led forces. In his art work Kadan transforms the political practice of torture into a question of moral integrity, by asserting and verifying morality as a value that underlies the national Ukrainian collective and that Russia fundamentally lacks.

(2) In her work "untitled"ⁱⁱ, 2014, which was exhibited in "Fear and Hope", Zhanna Kadyrova took a wall, carved out the shape of Ukraine and put it in the white cube of the Pinchuk Art Centre. In her work Crimea lies separately, but in the same black material, flat on the granite floor a couple meters away from the Ukraine-shaped wall. The heavy looking wall itself is only propped up by three iron rods, leaving the impression of a fragile balance. The back side of the wall is decorated with a quaint looking wallpaper, depicting flower ornaments. The beholder can walk around the Ukraine-shaped wall and the chipped Crimea-shaped part, making it not hard to identify the political reference. What was once a national unity is now a fragile entity and separated territory. The black color from the front signifies a dark and menacing side of the nation, the back side may point to the backwardness of the nation. The viewer is altogether confronted with a sculpture that represents a nation that is in a very bad state because it is divided, inversely assuming that once the nation regains territorial integrity it will thrive and flourish.

The exhibition website adds critical information that further directs the interpretation of the artwork. Accordingly, Kadyrova found the wall in "a former soviet factory" in Shargorod, Western Ukraine. It is burnt from the outside and covered with "old soviet wallpaper" from the inside. This information puts the work in a specific light: In Kadyrovas artistic view the current Ukraine and the separation of Crimea is said to be a residue of the collapsed Soviet communism and its economy. The political question would be: Why is an allegedly, completely ruined world power interested in challenging the Ukrainian territorial integrity and how can it pursue this challenge? Kadyrova is not interested in the political implications of the Ukrainian crisis, but roots for national unity and territorial integrity with a sculpture that symbolizes the need for it. The artists transforms the political conviction of a united Ukraine into an artistic statement that claims a necessity for national unity prior to any political argument, simply because it aesthetically demonstrates the negative outcome of missing unity: Ukraine becomes dark and retrograde. Former Soviet Russia in this artistic worldview is the corrupting and therefore unnatural influence on a virtually sovereign nation.

(3) In "Verkhovna Rada", 2007, shown at "The Ukrainians" artist Yuri Leiderman sewed portraits of former leading Ukrainian politicians on a Ukrainian flag, namely Igor Kril, Ivan Plyushch, Viktor Yushchenko, Viktor Yanukovich, Nestor Shufrych, Vyacheslav Boguslayev, Taras Chornovil as well as Volodymyr Lytvyn. Taking just the artwork and the title (which refers to the national parliament) into consideration, the work implies a significance of these political characters by simply intersecting the politicians with the institution where state power is generally executed. Foremost, the artwork causes the rather trivial insight that national power, parliament and elected representatives somehow belong together. But what does that criticize? The somewhat appealing and ridiculing pencil portraits show a hint of criticality that is only tangible because of the odd kind of approval the work exudes.

Only if the viewer reads the accompanying text on the wall and also shares Leiderman's pro-European/anti-Russian point of view does the allegedly self-explanatory work deploy distinct explanatory power: the list of politicians consists entirely of pro-Russian representatives that the artist called "parliament rats". These politicians filibustered Yulia Tymoshenkos election for prime minister in 2007. Leiderman, "being in a rage" about this conduct, produced the artwork "trying to make those incapable of acting, that preclude the Ukrainian path to Europe". The latter quotation is repeated and emphasized in the leaflet. Not only do these statements reveal the artist's symptomatic view on how art is a means of politics, which can easily influence state affairs, but also show the partisanship both of the artist and the curators. Uninterested in the matter of the politicians' conduct in need of an explanation, Leiderman's work

idealistically presumes that these characters must vote for Tymoshenko, and thereby counts on the mutual sentiment of the viewer, which fairly adds up to the criticality of the work: One has to be equally partisan to share a critique that assumes that politicians who do not support pro-European Tymoshenko, (who by the way, earned a fortune dealing with Russian energy companies), misbehave and are therefore not human, but filthy rodents. For this moral worldview Leiderman created the rather ambiguous symbol of a Ukrainian flag covered with accused immoral politicians.

(4) The second work by Yuri Leiderman called "A Statement by Kaspar König, Curator of Manifesta-1939", 2014, and is not mentioned in the leaflet of "The Ukrainians", but was presented or rather handed out to the visitors of "The Ukrainians". The work comprises a single sheet of paper with an altered version of a statement by Kaspar König regarding the 10th Manifesta biennial. In his work Leiderman amalgamated present day Russia with the German Nazi Reich by claiming both are the same. Leiderman altered an original statement by Kaspar König, in which the curator explains and promotes his controversial work in St. Petersburg, by simply replacing parts of the statement: Russia becomes the German Reich, St. Petersburg becomes Munich, the Hermitage becomes the Pinakothek, and so forth. The altered version makes Russia the present day Nazi regime and König a Nazi collaborationist, who seems to deliberately defend the cultural policy of the Nazis:

"All artists were invited to participate with the following statement: ,Of course the political circumstances are currently delicate and unpleasant, and we have to make sure not to censor ourselves. It is important to me that my contract guarantees artistic freedom, however within German Reich law. Still, we hope to exhibit substantial artworks that do not resort to cheap anti-National Socialist provocations. The environment and the possibilities for this exhibition are very rich and it would be a mistake to reduce our possibilities to the level of just making a particular political statement.'" (Leiderman 2014, 1)

Obviously, Leiderman wanted that "particular political statement" to be addressed, namely that Russia is the new Nazi Reich, an abominable aggressor, that attacked Ukraine for no good reasons, and a regime "where freedom of art expression is repressed, where imperial chauvinism and obscurantism raised in state ideology" as Leiderman (2014a, par. 1) stated in his appeal to boycott Manifesta 10. The artwork illustrates Leiderman's artistic idea, which is not interested in the factual clarification of the Nazi analogy, that emanates from a particular purpose: to give the very own moral indignation and idealistic frustration by the Manifesta staff an unchallengeable urgency and persuasiveness. By nominating Russia as today's Nazi Reich, Leiderman transforms his "shame" (Leiderman 2014a, par. 1) about the fact that Western cultural workers are not allowed to collaborate with Russia, but do it anyway, into a pseudo-conclusive image. The artwork results in a statement of a fundamental moral gap between Western values that culture workers need to defend and Russian barbarism.

So that the beholder does not mistake Kaspar König for a fictional character in a fictional artwork, Leiderman made sure that the real Kaspar König is signified. On the back of the sheet a photograph depicts König with his Manifesta staff cheering for themselves, subtitled with the exact names and occupations.

(5) "Patriotism.Chronology", 2014, by the artist group R.E.P. (Revolutionary Experimental Space) that comprises the members Nikita Kadan, Zhanna Kadyrova, Lada Nakonechna, Olesia Khomenko, Ksenia Hnylytska and Volodymyr Kuznetsov is a mural produced for "The Ukrainians" depicting a chronological sequence of the events from November 2013 to March 2014 in a somewhat cryptic iconology. To decipher the idiosyncratic icons R.E.P. handed out a so called dictionary, i.e. a paper sheet consisting of the "translation" of some 120 icons. For example the scalpel symbolizes criticism, the hayfork protest, the anchor symbolizes stability or a man in a suit symbolizes power. The "dictionary" consists of terms like richness, prosperity, alcohol, surveillance, ruins, territory, attention, void, law enforcement authorities, pop-star, capital or mass-media, to name only a few. The most striking fact of that "language" is that it does not have an exact grammar since it just consists of nouns. Consequently it lacks the ability to express complex issues. When the viewer tries to decipher the mural with the help of the "dictionary" it just leads to a collection of nouns, as well as some occasional adverbs and prepositions that do not reveal more than the vague associative coherence of an enumeration. For example, the first line in the upper section translates: friendship inspiration, naivety, naivety publicity, peace, naivety manifestation of dreams, naivety, naivety manifestation of stability, and again: friendship inspiration, naivety, naivety publicity. Consequently, the mural is a fragmented chronology, a mere enumeration and a diagrammatic non-statement of the events. The artwork plays with the pretension of significance, i.e. that the sum of the icons eventually disclose more than the individual parts.

So that the beholder does not lose sight of what the message is, R.E.P. puts a written "chronology" on the back side of the "dictionary" pamphlet, which reads as follows:

"PATRIOTISM.CHRONOLOGY

- 21-30 November - Peaceful protests demanding closer ties to
- Europe (Ukraine-EU Association Agreement)
- 30 November - First violent police attacks on protesters
- 1 December - 19 January - People's presence on Maidan, tent city
- 19 January 2014 - Beginning of violent confrontations protesters and police
- 22 February 2014 - Escape of Yanukovich from Ukraine. Victory!
- March 2014 - Annexation of Crimea by Russia
- March 2014 - Ongoing - Russian intervention and separatist movement in Eastern Ukraine" (Revolutionary Experimental Space 2014, 2)

This "chronology" not only enumerates the events, but clearly judges them: The protesters were marked "peaceful", whereas the police operations are "violent", assuming that, by blaming the cops for being violent, all critique is

enunciated. Viktor Yanukovich's impeachment by the Western world powers is furthermore understood as a "victory" for the protesters, subsequently put into question by the Crimea crisis and the "Russian intervention". What is tangible here is a work that claims the relentlessness of an impartial critique of the events, incriminates corruption, abuse of power, manipulation, conformism, war, etc., but lacks the explanatory cohesion, resulting in a loose collection of buzzwords. The work is then flanked by the partisan, pro-European classification of the symbolized events – a view that is given priority *because* the actual mural remains cryptic.

(6) The short essay "Drawing a blank: Maidan and Boycott of Manifesta", 2014, by Sean Snyder and Olga Bryukhovetska (2014) is not an artwork itself, but a substantial part of the discursive framework of "The Ukrainians". The unedited version was laid out at the entrance of the exhibition, an edited version by Snyder/Bryukhovetska (2014a) has been published by Frieze Magazine later on. Since the visitor was confronted with the unedited version it is only logical to scrutinize this particular text. The essay covers the boycott of the Manifesta 10, assuming that the biennial adds to the "cultural capital" of Vladimir Putin himself. Since "Putin's policies" are unacceptable, every artist who takes part in the Manifesta deliberately and effectively supports the Russian legislation and the Russian "aggression against Ukraine", which for the authors is equally unacceptable. The same authors that detest Russian legislation that allegedly curtails artistic freedom, dictate to the international artists and "confronts every artist with the choice of whether or not to collaborate with the Russian capital". As if the corporations of the free world do not "collaborate" with Russian capital as well, and as if the question "whether or not to" take money from someone, isn't constantly on the table, the artist in this view is obliged to advocate moral purity for the sake of art. To demonstrate this amalgamation of art production and higher political values, Snyder and Bryukhovetska, state that the entire political protest movement Euromaidan has been a breeding ground for critical and progressive art. Moreover, the political Euromaidan is claimed to be a total work of art:

"Art does not withstand Maidan as a live ‚Gesamtkunstwerk‘. The aesthetic power of Maidan has been widely acknowledged, one might call it a beauty of deeply democratic social movement, which is based on self-organization of the people and their collective fight against the corrupt, exploitative and criminal power." (Snyder, Bryukhovetska 2014, 1)

In this worldview art production and Western values are inseparable, fundamentally intertwined and respectively refer to each other. The Western values are claimed to be not just a political protest agenda, but part of the DNA of the progressive Ukrainian culture. Euromaidan is supposed to be art itself and outshine traditional art practices. In reverse, art that allegedly works in favor of Russia, is not deeply intertwined with a great culture, but henchman of imperialist politics:

"Those who do not have enough courage to withdraw will not be able to evade being labelled a collaborator. They ‚turn Russian money into cultural capital“ to quote Jones, even if they imagine themselves as ambassadors such as basketball player Dennis Rodman in North Korea, or pertain to the outdated idea that art somehow finds asylum from politics in the heavens of disinterested beauty. The truth is: Putin = War against Ukraine = Manifesta 10." (Snyder, Bryukhovetska 2014, 2)

Referring to both of the quotations the dialectic of Snyders and Bryukhovetskas political judgment reveals the following tautological worldview: Even if art is not autonomous, the correct political commitment endows beauty and consequently establishes an equivalence of politics and beauty, whereas the illegitimate political commitment leads to a process of war-like betrayal of artistic integrity and the corruption of the arts. In any case, the differences are irreconcilable.

Political judgments and diplomatic effects

To sum the previous chapter up one may conclude that the artworks in conjunction with the exhibition's supplementary texts foster a very narrow view on the political conflict, revealing artistic views that are neither political nor explanatory. Instead, the artworks find images and symbols to stress the urgency of partisanship for territorial integrity, national unity or good government – which is a nationalistic view. This view, that demands the liberation from Russia, only to take up a subordinate role to two other world powers, pairs smoothly with a pro-European view. The artworks translate the current conflict with post-Soviet Russia in light of the nationalistic, pro-European standpoint into ciphers for the immoral aggression against the Ukrainian nation, be it through the secret police or disloyal politicians or Russia's economic residues. Eventually, the artworks do not explain Russia's political, economical or military actions, but rather artistically transform them into a moral worldview. Russia is said to not only completely lack moral values, but to be a barbarian, culturally depraved regime, a new fascist empire, which is essentially different from Ukraine. Art in this abomination of a nation is assumed to be corrupted and misused for illegitimate and unethical purposes.

The topos of the barbarian East is not only a very persistent one, used in a variety of topics, prominently in the debate about the former GDR Palace of the Republic in Berlin (Rada 2013), mainly stating a culturally deprived East. It also seems less of a strict party program when applied by the arts, which make the political judgment appear as the outcome of impartial artistic criticality and not like the result of partisan civic politicization.

Scrutinizing the content-related implications of the artworks, the artistic and discursive results of the exhibition, surprisingly, do not match the initial statements of the curators and the institutions. Neither are the artists "both critical and non-partisan", nor does the artworks add different perspectives to "the controversial debate". In fact, the media discourse as it happens in Germany is very much copied by the exhibition. As laid out in the introduction, the single-sided debate almost unisonous claimed that Russia is so fundamentally hostile to art's freedom, that art and culture could not possibly thrive there. A recent article of Ukrainian activist Larisa Denisenko in a renowned German

newspaper, whose headline reads “My Neighbor, the Homo Sovieticus” puts this common standpoint in a nutshell:

“But also the elderly and those people who grew up with the Russian culture find it hard these days to draw the line between this culture and these aggressions. If one watches coffins containing terrorist victims, one does not think of the books of Dostoyevsky or Ulitskaya.” (Denisenko 2014, 9)

Instead of explaining why the Russians interfere with the Ukrainian sovereignty and what a nation with imperial interests actually is, the author claims that (national) culture is incompatible with national politics, that terrorism and intellect do not go together, that Russia is no longer the nation of novelists like Dostoyevsky or Ulitskaya. Denisenko does what most of the journalists in the debate and also the artworks did: Firstly, she claims that national culture is a pre-political, unbound, free expression of the self or the people and not the mere result of national sovereignty. Secondly, she contradicts herself by claiming that the national culture, especially the arts, matches the national authority, in the way that they induce and determine each other, otherwise she would not be startled that her personal literary favorites cannot make up for the overall political deficits of the Russian power.

This collective confinement of art production is the curatorial outcome of the exhibitions “The Ukrainians” in Berlin and “Fear and Hope” in Kiev as well as the discursive outcome of the media debate. It results in a rehashed narrative of alterity of the former Soviet East and current Russia that cements existing dichotomies of East and West and redraws cultural borders.

Obviously, the results of the exhibition do not match the overall institutional purposes of mutual exchange and understanding either. The goal of the Pinchuk Art Centre to try “bridging national identity” is only partially accomplished. On one hand the pro-European standpoints translate into a European identity, but the nationalistic standpoints tackle it at the same time. The anti-Russian narrative openly counteracts the goal, deepening the intercultural gaps between Russia and Europe. The same goes for the statement of the DAAD gallery to provide a “forum of artistic dialogue which extends beyond cultural, geographical and, certainly, beyond political borders”. On one side the cultural borders between Ukraine and the EU become permeable, on another the political borders between Russia and Europe have not been crossed but rather reconstructed.

Altogether, this sheds light on the decidedly intermediary and diplomatic purposes of the art institutions: Instead of fostering a subjective but impartial critique of the current political events, they obviously root for the partisanship of Western values that art is entitled to and supposed to promote. At the end of the day, the artworks do not add more than an unchallenged, a priori moral partisanship to an over-simplified understanding of the conflict, to which the institutions deliberately contribute.

The two exhibitions are an example of the contradictions cultural policy can create, when exhibitions overly focus on a prescribed political enmity instead of emphasizing the values of culture by presenting art that challenges prevalent political and moral beliefs, art that provides subjective, but unbiased, critical perspectives instead of confirming old enemy stereotypes.

References

- Center for Arts and Culture. 2004. “Cultural Diplomacy. Research and Recommendations.”, accessed August 19th 2014, <http://www.nyu.edu/brademas/pdf/publications-moving-forward-cultural-diplomacy.pdf>
- DAAD artist program. 2014. “The Berliner Künstlerprogramm”, *DAAD gallery profile*, accessed August 19th 2014, <http://www.berliner-kuenstlerprogramm.de/en/profil.html>
- DAAD gallery. 2014. “The Ukrainians”, *DAAD gallery past exhibitions*, accessed August 19th 2014, http://www.daadgalerie.de/en/index_en.php
- Denisenko, Larisa. 2014. “Mein Nachbar, der Homo Sovieticus” *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, August 6: 9.
- Leiderman, Yuri. 2014. *A Statement by Kasper König, Curator of Manifesta-1939*. Berlin: DAAD gallery.
- Leiderman, Yuri. 2014a. “STOP THE WAR: Yuri Leiderman”, *Art Ukraine*, <http://artukraine.com.ua/eng/a/stop-the-war--pismo-yuriya-leydermana/#.U-tTHUiDNPw>
- Pinchuk Art Center. 2014. “‘Fear and Hope’, group exhibition including: Nikita Kadan, Zhanna Kadyrova, Artem Volokitin”, *PAC current exhibitions*, accessed August 19th 2014, <http://pinchukartcentre.org/en/exhibitions/current/24734#>
- Pinchuk Art Center. 2014a. “PinchukArtCentre”, *PAC Mission*, accessed August 19th 2014, http://pinchukartcentre.org/en/about_us/mission
- Rada, Uwe. 2013. “The Barbarian East.”, In *The Berlin Reader. A Compendium on Urban Change and Activism*, edited by Matthias Bernt, Britta Grell and Andrej Holm, 71-77. Bielefeld: transcript publishers.
- Revolutionary Experimental Space. 2014. *Wörterbuch/Dictionary*. Berlin: daad gallery.
- Snyder, Sean and Olga Bryukhovetska. 2014. *Drawing a blank: Maidan and Boycott of Manifesta*. Berlin: DAAD gallery.
- Snyder, Sean and Olga Bryukhovetska. 2014a. “Drawing a Blank. Ukraine’s Maidan Protests and Manifesta”. *Frieze Art Magazine Archive, Issue 164*. <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/drawing-a-blank/>
- Waller, Michael J. 2009. “Cultural Diplomacy, Political Influence, and Integrated Strategy,” In *Strategic Influence: Public Diplomacy, Counterpropaganda, and Political Warfare*, ed. by Michael J. Waller, 74–99. Washington, DC: Institute of World Politics Press.

[author biography]

Sebastian Loewe, born in 1978 in Potsdam, Germany, received a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in media and communication studies and a diploma in fine arts (M.F.A. equivalent). Loewe studied in Bochum and Halle, Germany as well as in Tokyo, Japan. He is currently writing his doctoral dissertation on a scholarship by a German research foundation. The working title is “Discourse About Kitsch”, a foundational study of kitsch theories as well as a discourse analysis of kitsch judgments.

Loewe also works in the academic and artistic field of art and politics, gives talks and workshops on topics like cultural policy, political art, political theater, self-organization in the arts or artists’ protest movements. He is the founder of the socially engaged art and discourse platform *ufo-University*, published in several magazines and recently edited the book “Das Elend der Kritik” (The Immiseration of Critique), published by *The Green Box Art Editions*, Berlin. Loewe is a visiting lecturer at the University of Art and Design Burg Giebichenstein, Halle, Germany. He lives and works in Berlin, Germany.

i Cf. <https://artsy.net/artwork/mykyta-kadan-procedure-room>

ii Cf. <https://artsy.net/artwork/zhanna-kadyrova-untitled>