

Doubled Fragility: Odesa's Monumental Art of the 1970–1980s

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I finished writing this text after some eight months and three instances of going back to Odesa from my emergency residency in Gdansk. It is most likely because of my long absence that my recognition of the changes that happened in the city was especially acute. By the sounds coming from the seaport, I could identify the state of the grain deal.¹ I could tell how people navigated around the city during blackouts. In the end, I could see how many buildings and streets, dear to my heart, had been damaged or destroyed.

In June 2023, during one of my visits to Ukraine, when I received the first editorial suggestions to this text, a series of the fiercest shelling of the war struck Odesa. Apart from causing civilian casualties and damage to the infrastructure, as well as the destruction of dozens of tonnes of grain ready for export, an amount hardly imaginable,² this shelling inflicted huge losses to the architectural heritage. Fifty-five buildings and objects of cultural value were damaged. That number includes museums, libraries, schools, and a church.³

The swiftness of the changes and the fragility of the reality around me have intensified my archival and research work, with which I was occupied as a museum employee before the full-scale invasion and as an independent actor afterwards.

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- 1 Dana Hordiichuk, "Den narodzhennia 'zernovoho korydoru' i den kintsia. Yak Ukraina znovu opynyliasia v morskii blokadi ta chym tse zahrozhuie" ("The Birthday of the 'Grain Corridor' and the Day of Its End: How Ukraine Once Again Found Itself in a Sea Blockade and What It Threatens"), *Ekonomichna pravda (Economic Truth)*, 18 July 2023, <https://www.epravda.com.ua/publications/2023/07/18/702321/> [accessed: 20.09.2023].
 - 2 Anastasiia Zharykova, "Rosiiany znyshchylu 60 tysiach tonn zerna v portu Chornomorska" ("Russians Destroyed 60,000 Tons of Grain in the Chornomorsk Port"), *Ekonomichna pravda (Economic Truth)*, 19 July 2023, <https://www.epravda.com.ua/news/2023/07/19/702376/> [accessed: 20.09.2023].
 - 3 Mariia Kabatsii, "Komanda monitorynhu spadshchyny zafiksuvala ruinuвання 55 ob'ektiv u Odesi" ("The Heritage Monitoring Team Recorded the Destruction of 55 Objects in Odesa"), *Ukrainska pravda (Ukrainian Truth)*, 03 August 2023, <https://life.pravda.com.ua/culture/2023/08/3/255719/> [accessed: 20.09.2023].

Prior to each of my visits to Ukraine, I would arrange meetings with artists who had actively participated in the underground and unofficial art scenes of the 1970s and 1980s. I gathered and digitised archival documents, photographs, and graphic works, and I recorded hours and hours of conversations with these artists, building my own extended archive that I now keep on my hard disk drive.

I have noticed how my attention has dissipated. As if in a fever, I have been recording documents and conversations with actors from previous generations, hoping that if, for some reason, I don't make use of this material, at least my colleagues will be able to do that in the future. This is how I have captured the phenomenon of Odesa's monumental art, which lies somewhere between the official and unofficial art of the USSR. These days, sadly enough, this monumental art either exists in a bunch of faded snapshots or increasingly crumbles with the lapse of time, left without any proper law-regulated preservation and located on the interior or exterior of the infrastructure objects that became military targets in the onset of war.

At the Studio

Visiting Viktor Maryniuk's studio has become one of the milestones in my study (Fig. 53). When he was studying in art college from 1959 to 1967,⁴ Maryniuk, who was an active participant of the unofficial art scene of Odesa in the 1970s and 1980s, met other fellow artists with whom he later created a community that would act specifically beyond the official art framework.⁵ At that time, he was already in conflict with the college's board due to his 'cubist' works.⁶ In the early 1970s, several apartments in Odesa hosted exhibitions featuring paintings that would have never been shown in the official art spaces.⁷ As a result, the audience drawn to those exhibitions was rather limited. Maryniuk's first personal show took place somewhere in 1971–1972 at Marharyta Zharkova's apartment.⁸

4 Archive of the Union of Artists of Ukraine (AUAU), Odesa department, dossier on Viktor Maryniuk. Please note, this is a small local archive in Odesa, and I was only provided with personal files upon request, which did not have any markings or document numbers.

5 Tatiana Basanets, "K istorii neofitsialnogo iskusstva Odessy" ("On the History of the Unofficial Art of Odesa"), in: Olha Balashova and Lyzaveta Herman (eds.), *Iskusstvo ukrainskikh shestidesyatnikov* (*Art of Ukrainian Sixtiers*), Kyiv: Osnovy, 2015, 62–65, here 62.

6 Viktor Maryniuk, interview with the author, in person, 23–26 December 2022.

7 Myroslava Mudrak, "Vstupna stattia" ("Introductory Text"), in: Gunter Herdin and Ihor Zubenko (eds.), *Suchasne mystetstvo z Ukrainy. Vystavka zhyvopysu-maliunkiv-skulptury* (*Contemporary Art from Ukraine: Exhibition Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture*), Munich–Paris Travelling Exhibition Committee, 1980, 8–9.

8 Maryniuk, interview with the author.

Figure 53: The author visiting Viktor Maryniuk's studio



Image by Oleksandr Naselenko, 26 December 2022. Image provided courtesy of Oleksandr Naselenko.

Talking about official and unofficial art communities, it is necessary to provide several specific details. In the years following 1932, when the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union released its decree “On the Restructuring of Literary and Artistic Organisations”, a number of national creative unions, including the Union of Artists, were established in the USSR.⁹ The Union of Artists was an official authority whose members complied with the principles of Socialist Realism, which was the ‘official method’ in the Soviet Union. It is difficult to define the term ‘Socialist Realism’, though, because of its vague nature. Susan E. Reid states that the fact that the phenomenon “never achieves concrete ontology”, even after continuous debates, “demonstrate[s] the contingency of Socialist Realism upon political and artistic power relations at different historical moments”.¹⁰ That said, references to the charter of the Writers’ Union define Socialist Realism as a “historically concrete portrayal of reality” that has to comply with the principle of “truthfulness

9 Yevgen Nikiforov and Polina Baitsym, *Art for Architecture: Ukraine Soviet Modernist Mosaics from 1960 to 1990*, Berlin: DOM Publishers, 2020, 4.

10 Susan E. Reid, “Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror: The Industry of Socialism Art Exhibition, 1935–41”, *The Russian Review* 60/2, 2001, 153–184, here 154.

[*pravdivost*]” and the “ideological remaking and education of laboring people in the spirit of socialism”.¹¹

That being so, practically every piece of art that strayed from the limits of the official system and ‘method’ and inherently experimented with form was labelled ‘formalist’,¹² which effectively grouped artists whose works put them under threat of professional persecution.¹³ In one of his interviews, Maryniuk defined his position of that time as a struggle for the opportunity to make his own individual voice heard, saying:

In the meantime, there was a problem of artistic language that had been effectively destroyed in the early ‘30s. No specific language existed in the art community back then. What we saw in college? A pervasive ordinary academism, a little bit tempered with decorative elements. Everything else was banned.¹⁴

When I visited the artist’s studio, I felt like I met a like-minded person with a similar fondness for preserving and archiving things belonging both to himself and his colleagues: photos, documents, and works of art. Describing other people’s works, he would give special attention to some of them, such as those he had restored with the authors’ consent or those he had saved from the sorry fate of having been thrown away as rubbish. Among other things, for instance, there were Yurii Yehorov’s ‘card-boards’, which were pieces of cardboard that the artist had used as stencils for his monumental works. Yehorov had decided to discard them, but Maryniuk kept them for himself.

Another artist whose works have been preserved in Maryniuk’s studio, and who herself effectively ‘dwells’ there, is Liudmyla Yastreb, an artist, a member of the unofficial community, and Maryniuk’s wife. She tragically passed away in 1980 at the

11 Nikiforov and Baitsym, *Art for Architecture*, 4.

12 Alisa Lozhkina, *Permanent Revolution: Art in Ukraine, the 20th to the Early 21st Century*, Kyiv: ArtHuss, 2020, 187.

13 Halyna Sklyarenko, “Ukrainskyi stinopys 1960–1980-kh rokiv: evoliutsiia khudozhnoi movy” (“Ukrainian Wall Painting of the 1960s–1980s: The Evolution of the Artistic Language”), *Zbirnyk naukovykh prats SUCHASNE MYSTETSTVO (Collection of scientific papers CONTEMPORARY ART)* 18, 2022, 175–188, here 177, <https://doi.org/10.31500/2309-8813.18.2022.269727> [accessed: 23.03.2023].

14 Olha Savytska, Viktor Maryniuk, Yurii Yehorov, and Serhii Savchenko, “1970-ti: kvartyrni vystavky” (“1970s: Apartment Exhibitions”), in: *Non.Odeska hrupa. Lehendarni khudozhnyky-nonkonformisty Ukrainy (Non.Odesa Group: Legendary Nonconformist Artists of Ukraine)*, 2014, https://issuu.com/stepanryabchenko/docs/non_part_3 [accessed: 20.09.2023] [author’s trans.]. Please note that this book is published on the online resource issue.com. Unfortunately, it does contain pagination. After contacting Stepan Ryabchenko, one of the editors, I learnt that the publication is still being refined in terms of its design. The editors, location, and publishing house are not officially listed in this version of the publication.

age of 35. Being rather far from the guidelines of Socialist Realism, in her works she explored the subject of the female body and abstract painting in an unrestrained manner. In 1976, a show of ninety-nine of Yastreba's works took place at the couple's apartment.¹⁵ The artists made fifty copies of a handcrafted catalogue that they had prepared for that show. I managed to scan a copy of that catalogue when I visited Maryniuk's studio.

When I thought about the two artists' stories, however, I wondered why these particular artists, together with their colleagues, managed to create a huge amount of monumental works in their hometown and region without ever joining the union. Their monumental heritage had been mentioned in catalogues¹⁶ and articles¹⁷ dedicated to the group only cursorily. In one such catalogue, there was a small chapter providing documentation of some of their works,¹⁸ but I had never come across a proper analysis of the phenomenon. This was the reason why I asked Maryniuk to provide me with any documentation, including photographs and sketches of monumental works he might have had in his possession, and to tell me more about what he knew on that subject.

What Is Monumental?

The term 'monumental decorative art' is mentioned in Soviet art publications¹⁹ and archive documents.²⁰ This particular term was widely used in the Soviet era. It covered a specific kind of art closely related to architecture, such as wall paintings, mosaics, stained-glass pieces, reliefs, and decorative sculptural objects in both interiors and exteriors. Scholars²¹ connect its origin with the "Plan for Monumental Propaganda" that Vladimir Lenin introduced in 1918. The plan ordained the removal of tsarist monuments and stimulated the creation of objects that would promote so-

15 Mudrak, 9–10.

16 Volodymyr Tsiupko and Olha Savytska, "Te, shcho nas zghurtuvalo" ("What Brought Us Together"), in: *Non.Odeska hrupa. Lehendarni khudozhnyky-nonkonformisty Ukrainy (Non.Odesa Group: Legendary Nonconformist Artists of Ukraine)*, 2014, https://issuu.com/stepanryabchenko/docs/non._part_3 [accessed: 20.09.2023].

17 Basanets, "K istorii neofitsialnogo iskusstva Odessy", 65.

18 Volodymyr Tsiupko (ed.), *Modernisty Odessy (Odesa Modern Artists)*, Kyiv: ArtHuss, 2014, 274–295.

19 Borys Lobanovskiy, *Mozaika i freska (Mosaics and Frescoes)*, Kyiv: Mystetstvo, 1965, 148.

20 AUAU, Odesa dept., dossier on Maryniuk.

21 Nikiforov and Baitsym, *Art for Architecture*, 3; and Sklyarenko, "Ukrainskyi stinopys 1960–1980-kh rokiv", 175.

cialism.²² Yet, because of its utopian nature and a lack of qualified sculptors, putting that plan into action did not result in wide popularisation of monumental art.²³

Nevertheless, the 1960s became a heyday for monumental art due to several factors. Firstly, Nikita Khrushchev's 1955 resolution "On the Elimination of Excesses in Design and Construction" introduced substantial changes to Soviet architecture, effectively removing elements of the 'Stalinist' style,²⁴ such as the pseudo-classical order system, colonnades, porticos, and excessive mouldings,²⁵ from further use and initiating marked reforms in architecture that were guided by functionality and the development of typified residential and public construction projects.²⁶ These considerable reforms of Soviet city design, which were heralded by standardised buildings featuring large squares of concrete and glass, preconditioned new means of decoration as well as further implementation of the ideas founded by the Plan for Monumental Propaganda.²⁷

These changes were part of a larger phenomenon usually defined as the Khrushchev Thaw that brought about an atmosphere of relative freedom. It manifested itself as the denouncement of Stalin's cult, partial rehabilitation of political prisoners, alleviation of ideological censorship, and lifting some restrictions on access to information.²⁸ To the artistic generation of the 1960s, this meant an opportunity to push the limits of Socialist Realism.²⁹

Even though the artistic community remained limited in its choice of subjects – with the obligation to produce idealised images of 'common people', the working class, Pioneer movements, and space programme achievements³⁰ – monumental art continued its development in terms of using new techniques and materials and had a certain degree of freedom thanks to characteristic large, flat surfaces, which required more generalised and clear imagery and decorations.³¹ In fact, this enabled artists to experiment with form much more often than they would in easel painting.³²

22 Christina Lodder, "Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda", in: Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor (eds.), *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917–1992*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993, 16–32, here 9.

23 Ibid., 26.

24 Nikiforov and Baitsym, *Art for Architecture*, 5.

25 Lobanovskiy, *Mozaika i freska*, 120.

26 Sklyarenko, "Ukrainskyi stinopys 1960–1980-kh rokiv", 177.

27 Ibid., 177.

28 Serhii Plokyh, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*, New York: Basic Books, 2015, 300.

29 Ibid., 301.

30 Nikiforov and Baitsym, *Art for Architecture*, 6.

31 Sklyarenko, "Ukrainskyi stinopys 1960–1980-kh rokiv", 177.

32 Nevertheless, Sklyarenko provides examples of monumental works that were destroyed in the mid-1960s due to accusations of 'formalism'. See: Sklyarenko, "Ukrainskyi stinopys 1960–1980-kh rokiv", 180–182.

Another important fact that contributed to the relative freedom mentioned above was that monumental art commissions were issued not by the Union of Artists itself but by the Art Fund. The Art Fund was the union's subsidiary organisation responsible for funding the artistic community and creating 'art production', which, apart from monumental art, included decorative objects such as embroidery, carpets, ceramics, and so on. That production eventually became part of the Soviet planned economy.³³ Artists were allowed to join *tsekhs* (a branch of industry or enterprise in the USSR) or combines of the Artistic Fund in order to accept and execute commissions, whose numbers were steadily increasing,³⁴ without ever joining the Union of Artists itself. This created a sort of 'loophole' for unofficial artists. As researcher Polina Baitsym notes, the Art Fund "did not mandate Union membership and a pledge to socialist realism".³⁵ She continues: "[t]he procedures of the vast network of workshops established throughout the country habitually eluded the grasp of the Union, especially in the spaces distanced from the capital, Kyiv".³⁶

Between the Official and the Unofficial

The post-Khrushchev era, which began in the late 1960s and unfolded throughout the 1970s, was characterised by a new round of political rigidity and intolerance towards any form of opposition,³⁷ often referred to as 'stagnation'.³⁸ Historian Serhii Plokhyy illustrates this shift in the political vector with examples from the literary sphere, specifically describing the wave of arrests of intellectuals who had become active during the Thaw.³⁹ For the entire cultural and artistic community, including the Odesa art scene, this meant that they could no longer push the boundaries of Socialist Realism as the previous generation did, so they focused on their unofficial

33 Olha Yamborko, "Khudozhnyk dekoratyvnoho mystetstva i khudozhnia promyslovist u radianskii systemi vyrobnychkh vidnosyn" ("Artists of Applied Arts and Art Industry in the Soviet System of Production Relations"), *Naukovi zapysky Ternopilskoho natsionalnoho pedahohichnoho universytetu imeni Volodymyra Hnatiuka. Ser. Mystetstvoznavstvo* (Scientific notes of Ternopil National Pedagogical University named after Volodymyr Hnatyuk, Series in Art history) 2/39, 252–256, here 254, <http://dspace.tnpu.edu.ua/handle/123456789/12612> [accessed: 20.09.2023].

34 Ibid., 255.

35 Yevgen Nikiforov and Polina Baitsym, *The Chips: Ukrainian Naïve Mosaics of the 1950–90s*, Kyiv: its publishing, 2024, 16.

36 Ibid., 16.

37 Plokhyy, *The Gates of Europe*, 304.

38 Ibid., 307.

39 Ibid., 303–304.

activities. Although the art scene appeared to be stagnant from the outside, work was in full swing in apartments and studios.

At the same time, monumental art paradoxically became one of the few opportunities for visual artists not only to earn a living but also to bring their art to the public. This became possible due to the reasons I mentioned above, such as the ability to receive commissions bypassing the Union of Artists, the functioning of decorative monumental art as a branch of production, the opportunity for artists to use more generalised forms to create images on a wide and flat surfaces, and, as described by Baitsym, that the appendix 'decorative' in the Soviet term 'monumental-decorative art' allowed "a certain conceptual flexibility".⁴⁰

Therefore, another researcher, Halyna Sklyarenko, while analysing the development of monumental art in Ukraine (with a primary focus on Kyiv) and outlining the difference between the art of the 1960s and 1970s, defines monumental art as "arguably the most liberal form of visual art" in the post-Khrushchev Thaw era, stating that a large number of artists from the unofficial communities would work with monumental painting.⁴¹ This held true for Maryniuk and Yastreba, as well as for a group of their colleagues from Odesa.

For them, monumental art was another way to make a living, although still not the main one. Furthermore, they would not stop at making sketches; they executed commissions on their own to gain bigger remunerations and better control over the implementation of their own or colleagues' sketches.⁴² Apart from that, this was an opportunity for them to win the attention of a bigger audience and to realise ideas they had been elaborating in their paintings, which were shown only to a limited number of visitors of apartment exhibitions. According to Tetyana Basanets, an art history scholar from Odesa who used to be an active participant of the unofficial scene,

[M]onumental and decorative art established a legitimate space for their [the unofficial artists'] ideas. Wall paintings, pieces of stained glass, and mosaics (not only in Odesa) became a specific form of giving publicity to that peculiar form of seemingly figurative and abstract art.⁴³

When the Khrushchev Thaw of the 1960s began, Maryniuk and Yastreba were still students, whose professional activity coincided with a period of the 'stagnation'. In their

40 Yevgen Nikiforov and Polina Baitsym, *The Chips*, 15.

41 Sklyarenko, "Ukrainskyi stinopys 1960–1980-kh rokiv", 183.

42 Maryniuk, interview with the author.

43 Basanets, "K istorii neofitsialnogo iskusstva Odessy", 65 [author's trans.].

interviews, Maryniuk and other unofficial artists of the time mention a difference between the 1960s and the 1970s, even pointing to a sense of shattered hopes.⁴⁴

Figure 54: Photograph of the ceiling painting in the assembly hall of the Palace of Students, titled Celebration



Image by Viktor Maryniuk, 1987. Image provided courtesy of Viktor Maryniuk.

44 Yuriy Yehorov et al., "8 bereznia 2003 r. Odesa, maisternia V. Basantsa" ("8 March 2003. Odesa, Workshop of V. Basanets"), in: *Non.Odeska hrupa. Lehendarni khudozhnyky-nonkonformisty Ukrainy (Non.Odesa Group: Legendary Nonconformist Artists of Ukraine)*, 2014, https://issuu.com/stepanryabchenko/docs/non._part_3 [accessed: 20.09.2023].

Although the differences between the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the use of terms like 'Thaw' and 'stagnation', do require a certain degree of generalisation and have their pitfalls, the influence of these tendencies can still be traced in the biographies of the artists I write about. I will return to this, but first, I also want to briefly outline how the unofficial art scene functioned.

Valerii Basanets, another artist of the time, recalls how the community effectively redesigned its information environment to lay the foundation for further work: "We felt that somewhere there, there was another world, so we attempted to reconstitute it in our own minds".⁴⁵ They scanned publications of Soviet art criticism for any mentions of prohibited Western artists,⁴⁶ shared art catalogues smuggled by sea,⁴⁷ and sought out art literature from neighbouring Poland and Hungary, which they could sometimes find at the local department for international press.⁴⁸ In her essay "Spiritual Stoicism of the Artist in the Soviet Union", Yastreba describes the process as follows:

Artists rose to the challenge of acting as "scavengers", collecting everything that had been discarded by contemporary society. In garbage heaps were [the rubble of] deserted churches and monuments of architecture, icons, sculptures, old books, paintings, etchings, antiques, and pieces of folk art in all their richness. All these things were being picked out of the dust, cleaned, scraped, repaired, [and] restored to their primordial essence. Everything was being examined with an astonishing intentness of a first glance at something that had been familiar for ages. There was an urgent craving for restoration of forsaken traditions in that. Every such discovery that passed through one's own hands gave a feeling of a vivid connection with the past, inspiring hope and confidence.⁴⁹

Capturing, let alone generalising, the boundary between the official and unofficial practices of artists is quite challenging, since the existence of this boundary, its rigidity or porosity, varies depending on the circumstances of each artist's biography, the series of their personal decisions and strategies. Even solely among the

45 Yehorov et al., "8 bereznia 2003 r. Odesa, maisternia V. Basantsa" [author's trans.].

46 Ibid. [author's trans.].

47 Basanets, "K istorii neofitsialnogo iskusstva Odessa", 63.

48 Maryniuk, interview with the author. A few respondents told me about this department/library, but in the interview I cite here, there is no clarification. Some older colleagues recall the Odesa State Scientific Library named after O. M. Gorky.

49 Liudmyla Yastreba, "Dukhovnyi stoitsizm khudozhnyka v radianskomu suspilstvi" ("The Spiritual Stoicism of the Artist in the Soviet Union"), in: *Non.Odeska hrupa. Lehendarni khudozhnyky-nonkonformisty Ukrainy* (*Non.Odesa Group: Legendary Nonconformist Artists of Ukraine*), 2014, https://issuu.com/stepanryabchenko/docs/non._part_3 [accessed: 20.09.2023] [author's trans.].

circle of Odesa artists of the 1970s generation who participated in apartment exhibitions, the artists had vastly different relationships with the official system and the unofficial circle. For example, Yehorov, an artist of the older generation, a member of the Union of Artists, and a person whose artistic career can be called successful, occasionally participated in apartment exhibitions, and was in constant interaction with the unofficial circle of artists. Valerii Basanets had been a member of the Union of Artists since the 1970s and actively participated in both official and apartment exhibitions. On the other end of the spectrum is Valentyn Khrushch, who, even under the patronage of Yehorov, never integrated into the official system.⁵⁰

I believe that the topic of the intersection between official and unofficial communities, their mutual penetration, and the influences they exerted on each other still requires archival research and the search for a theoretical framework. Taking into account all the aforementioned conditions of creating monumental art in Ukraine, its process of implementation could serve as an illustration of the complex interrelationships between the two worlds of official and unofficial art. Tracking the activity specifically of Maryniuk and Yastreb within the official context is far more complex than in the unofficial one. In the book *The Union of Artists in Odesa*, Oleksandr Dmytrenko provides a comprehensive and detailed set of documents from the archive of the Union of Artists in Odesa and other resources. These documents contain some mentions of Maryniuk's⁵¹ and Yastreb's⁵² participation in the official youth exhibitions of the late 1960s. However, those references, as well as mentions of other artists from the unofficial community, almost disappeared in the period from 1971 to the late 1980s.

In 1971, a show featuring young artists, with Maryniuk among them, took place at the exhibition hall of the Odesa department of the Union of Artists. The show had been planned as an invite-only event, but the artists made advertisement posters that eventually drew rather significant public attention. Because of that incident, a following session of the Union of Artists issued a resolution “on the artist's internal work and discipline, with regard to the report of a group of young artists: Dulfan, Strelnikov, Maryniuk, Sychov, and the member of the Union of Artists of the USSR Lopatnikov”, which described the works featured in the show as those that “failed to have revealed the diversity of reality and modernity, [...] with some of the works demonstrating a flawed concept of depicting actuality”.⁵³ The publicisation of the

50 “Personazhi andegraundu: Khrushchik” (“Characters of the Underground: Khrushchik”), in: *Non.Odeska hrupa. Lehendarni khudozhnyky-nonkonformisty Ukrainy (Non.Odesa Group: Legendary Nonconformist Artists of Ukraine)*, 2014, https://issuu.com/stepanryabchenko/docs/non_part_3 [accessed: 20.09.2023].

51 Aleksandr Dmytrenko, *Soyuz khudozhnikov Odessa (The Union of Artists in Odesa)*, Stryi: Ukropol, 2013, 180.

52 Ibid., 170.

53 Ibid., 185.

show was reprimanded as a “violation of the moral, ethical, and regulatory codes of the Union of Artists”.⁵⁴

Figure 55: Detail of the ceiling painting in the assembly hall of the Palace of Students, titled Celebration



Image by Viktor Maryniuk, 1987. Image provided courtesy of Viktor Maryniuk.

Another revealing fact about the relations between the unofficial and official circles is that, even though some of those artists actively produced monumental works in the 1970s, which is also confirmed by existing photographic evidence and personal dossiers, “the first oblast exhibition of monumental and decorative art” did not feature their works.⁵⁵ Dmytrenko states that the second exhibition took place

⁵⁴ Ibid., 185–186.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 209.

in 1988,⁵⁶ and Maryniuk acknowledged and recalled his participation in our interview.⁵⁷ Regardless, Dmytrenko claims that there was no information about this exhibition included in the archive of the Union of Artists, and, as artist Serhii Savchenko mentioned, the board did not approve that exhibition for official presentation.⁵⁸

Today

January 2023. Together with Oleksandr Naselenko, a friend and colleague of mine, I was at Maryniuk's studio. Naselenko hurriedly set up his photo camera and lighting devices, since electricity was only available for short periods. Because of power outages, we would later meet here a few more times. Naselenko had volunteered to make photos of sketches and documents from the archive. As early as summer 2021, I curated his first photographic show, where he presented his studies of the landscapes of southern Ukraine. Now he works together with both Ukrainian and foreign journalists, reporting the news about the ongoing full-scale invasion, so he is hardly found in Odesa these days. I thanked him for being ready to do the majority of the work for free, to which he replied he was glad to be there because it reminded him he still had something to do with art, not only with war.

Maryniuk regretfully remarked that most of the archival photographs had faded, and he suggested that we have a look at the sketches, since they at least reproduced colour. Although this archive was a genuine treasure to me, Maryniuk's remark seemed completely clear: by that time, the majority of works already existed solely in those photographs and sketches. Maryniuk could not specify the exact time when the no-longer-existent works had been destroyed, though, referencing the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s.⁵⁹

Many works of monumental art throughout Ukraine were indeed ruined, mostly because of the privatisation of real estate and enterprises that took place in the 1990s and the subsequent mishandling by the owners. The scholar Yevheniia Moliar has emphasised that monumental art has never acquired any conservation status in Ukraine, nor a specific position in the cultural heritage list. The situation got even worse when a series of laws on decommunisation was passed. These specific laws, prescribing the elimination of the symbols of the communist and national-socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes in public space, have triggered the stigmatisation of

56 Ibid., 255.

57 Maryniuk, interview with the author.

58 Dmytrenko, *Union of Artists in Odesa*, 255.

59 Maryniuk, interview with the author.

Soviet cultural heritage as a whole, making it possible for developers to escape legal repercussions to mishandling (usually meaning destroying) works of art.⁶⁰

Since the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, things have increasingly worsened, and the list of destroyed works has been growing ever bigger due to repeated shelling and the Russian occupation of vast swathes of Ukrainian territories.⁶¹ The martial law restrictions also prevented me from accessing some important objects in Odesa. All these things have effectively made scholarly work increasingly difficult. These days, it includes many features of activism. Moliar, apart from continuing her studies, writing texts, and giving public lectures, often directly communicates with property owners, persuading them to save valuable pieces, and champions the government-regulated preservation of monumental art.⁶²

Another important effort of that art activism is documenting works of monumental art, an effort that has grown during the last decade. The largest projects in that field include the website Soviet Mosaics in Ukraine,⁶³ launched by the IZOLY-ATSIYA Foundation, and Yevgen Nikiforov's project, in which the author has gath-

60 Yevheniia Moliar, "Khvyli nyshchivnoiu dekomunizatsii: v Ukraini prodovzhuiut ruinuuvaty kulturnu spadshchynu" ("Waves of Devastating Decommunisation: The Soviet Cultural Heritage Being Destroyed in Ukraine"), *LB.ua*, 27 March 2019, https://lb.ua/culture/2019/03/27/423045_hvili_nyshchivnoi_dekomunizatsii.html [accessed: 23.03.2023].

61 For a few cases of the destruction of monumental art due to the war, see: Polina Horlach, "U Mariupoli vnaslidok obstriliv zruinovani mozaiky Ally Horskoi" ("Alla Gorska's Mosaics Were Destroyed in Mariupol as a Result of Shelling"), *Suspilne Kultura (Public Culture)*, 22 July 2022, <https://suspilne.media/263297-u-mariupoli-vnaslidok-obstriliv-zruinovani-mozaiky-ally-gorskoi/> [accessed: 21.09.2023]. For examples of the destruction of mosaics in the Kyiv region during the occupation, see: Nastia Popovych, "Zalyshky zruinovanoi mozaiky v Makarovi peredaly do NAOMA dlia restavratsii" ("The Remains of the Destroyed Mosaic from Makarov Were Handed over to NAOMA for Restoration"), *Your Art*, 16 September 2022, <https://supportyourart.com/news/zalyshky-zruinovanoi-mozaiky-v-makarovi-peredaly-do-naoma-dlia-restavratsii/> [accessed: 21.09.2023]. For the destruction of a large-scale work by Volodymyr Zinchenko in Chernihiv, see: Ukrainian Institute, "Aeroport 'Shestovytsia'" ("Shestovytsia Airport"), 2022, <https://ui.org.ua/postcard/aeroport-shestovytsia/> [accessed: 21.09.2023].

62 Hanna Tsyba, "Yevheniia Moliar: v Mariupoli maie buty stvorenyi muzei monumentalno-dekorativnoho mystetstva" ("Yevheniia Moliar: A Museum of Monumental and Decorative Art Should Be Created in Mariupol"), *Korydor (Corridor)*, 21 March 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180626210950/http://www.korydor.in.ua/ua/opinions/yevgeniya-molyar-v-mariupoli-maye-buty-stvorenij-muzej-monumentalno-dekorativnoho-mystetstva.html> [accessed: 21.09.2023].

63 Soviet Mosaics in Ukraine, <https://sovietmosaicsinukraine.org/> [accessed: 21.09.2023].

ered some five thousand objects throughout Ukraine.⁶⁴ Being Nikiforov's own personal initiative, the project has already borne fruit, namely the books *Decommunized: Ukrainian Soviet Mosaics*⁶⁵ and *Art for Architecture: Ukraine Soviet Modernist Mosaics from 1960 to 1990*. Nikiforov co-authored the latter with Baitsym, another scholar of Soviet art heritage frequently cited in this article.

"It is solely thanks to Nikiforov's work that we are able to see that huge amount of works that have been destroyed. I think, there is no research that is not important existing in Ukraine today", comments Olena Zahrebina, an artist and founder of the Chernihiv Monumentalism⁶⁶ project, as we carry out an interview. Both being researchers focused on the local history of our hometowns, we quickly come to an understanding. In 2021, Zahrebina, together with her colleagues, organised a monumental art festival in Chernihiv. It is not yet known when the next episode of that festival will take place.⁶⁷

In this article, it is impossible for me to mention all the grassroots initiatives, whether larger or smaller in scale, that document, preserve, and study monumental and decorative art of the Soviet era. However, I am happy to report that their numbers have been steadily increasing. I also want to place a particular emphasis on the fact that nearly every scholar supporting the preservation of Soviet monumental heritage clearly indicates the necessity of conducting more in-depth research and gaining a true understanding of the conditions under which such works of art were created, as well as the artists' biographies. This is crucial to inspire a greater public awareness of the complexity of Soviet art history and to convey that not every work from this period is merely propaganda. For instance, Moliar refers to the fact that the Soviet artist Ernest Kotkov, while executing one of his works on a nine-story building in Kyiv, actually alluded to Heorhii Narbut, a Ukrainian artist whose works had been publicly persecuted in the USSR.⁶⁸ In one of her lectures, Lizaveta German, another contemporary curator and scholar, mentions the Kyiv-born artist Oleksandr Dubovyk, who transferred a variety of abstract elements from his unofficial works to the monumental scale.⁶⁹

64 Lizaveta German and Yevgen Nikiforov in: Ukrainian Institute, "Talk: Between two fires: Monumental Art in Ukraine", YouTube video, 14 September 2022, 1:33:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZMo9PIFIPGY> [accessed: 21.09.2023].

65 Jevhen Nikiforov, Olga Balashova, and Lizaveta German, *Decommunized: Ukrainian Soviet Mosaics*, Kyiv: Osnovy Publishing, 2017, 250.

66 Chernihiv Monumentalism, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/CheMonumentalism> [accessed: 21.09.2023].

67 Olena Zahrebina, interview with the author, online, 02 September 2023.

68 Yevheniia Moliar in: IZOLYATSIA. Platform for cultural initiatives, "Yevheniia Moliar — Soviet Mosaics In Ukraine", YouTube video, 08 November 2016, 56:59, here 31:46–33:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=NUcyH8Krb0> [accessed: 21.09.2023].

69 German and Nikiforov in: Ukrainian Institute, "Talk", 38:30–40:30.

With more and more similar cases now being studied, I recognise Maryniuk and Yastreb's heritage as another perfect supplement to this discussion. I provide this article with a few images I digitised at Maryniuk's studio, including a sketch made by Yastreb in the 1970s (Fig. 57) and photographs of the executed decoration of a public transportation stop (Fig. 58). It is currently unknown whether this work survives.

Figure 56: Sketch of the stained-glass windows in the Palace of Students



Image by Viktor Maryniuk, 1987. Image provided courtesy of Viktor Maryniuk.

Figure 57: Sketch of a bus stop design



Image by Liudmyla Yastreba, 1970s. Image provided courtesy of Viktor Maryniuk.

The side surfaces of the stop are decorated with traffic regulation signs. I pay particular attention to the passengers, who look exactly the same as the images of women Yastreba previously depicted in her paintings and graphics.⁷⁰ Their outlines

70 For examples from open resources, see: Liudmyla Yastreba, *Untitled*, 1978, gouache, ink, and graphite on paper, 28.5 x 20 cm, in the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Noncon-

are slightly rounded and a bit blurred, as if the passengers are flying in an imaginary space. In the middle of the composition, there is a fancy vehicle carrying people dressed in something resembling 19th-century garments, with one of them sitting on top of the vehicle. Even though we can see much more detailed and clearer imagery in the actual photographs of the executed work, the scene itself hardly resembles a Soviet city with its people, even less so propaganda. The recurrent motif of an imaginary city located beyond time and geography present in this work is an important topic the unofficial artists of Odesa elaborated on in their easel paintings. One can often observe playfulness, bright colouration, the attributes of celebration, and a certain feeling of naivety that were introduced in the festive and circus-like images of harlequins and merry-go-rounds.

Figure 58: Photograph of the executed design of the bus stop

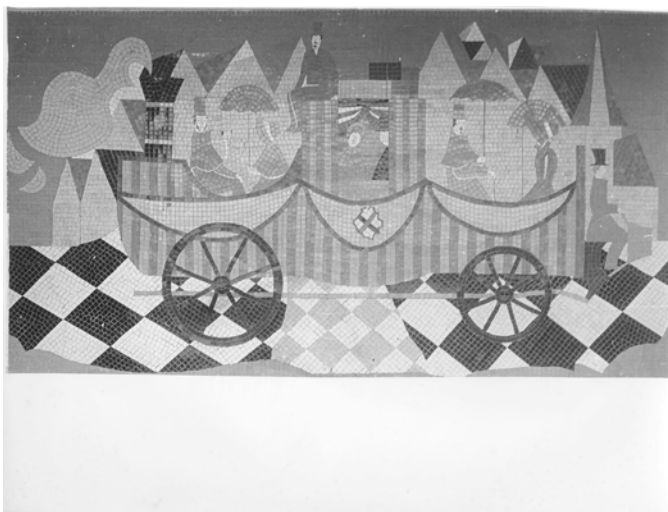


Image by Liudmyla Yastreba, 1970s. Image provided courtesy of Viktor Maryniuk.

formist Art from the Soviet Union, available at: Liudmyla Yastreba, "Untitled", Zimmerli Art Museum, <https://zimmerli.emuseum.com/objects/53057/untitled?ctx=aa03954a539f46f7a1535ce868bbb3852120b735&idx=1> [accessed: 21.09.2023]; Liudmyla Yastreba, *Black Bird*, 1976, cardboard and oil, 70 x 50 cm, in the NT Art Gallery Collection, available at: Liudmyla Yastreba, "Works", NT Art Gallery, <https://nt-art.net/artist/yastrebludmila/> [accessed: 21.09.2023]; and Liudmyla Yastreba, *Harlequin*, 1974, canvas and oil, 50 x 33.5, in the NT Art Gallery Collection, available at: Yastreba, "Works", NT Art Gallery.

Similar images and forms transferred from unofficial painting⁷¹ are observed in the plafond and stained-glass pieces executed by Maryniuk in 1987 in the House of Students in Odesa (Figs. 54–56 and 59–61). Unfortunately, only several stained-glass pieces of the whole body of work exist today. Although it was made during the period of weakening censorship restrictions, this work is an interpretation of the Soviet space-development topic, even if a free-spirited one, featuring cosmonauts and acrobats depicted together on a bright geometrical plane richly decorated with flowers, stars, and ribbons.

Figure 59: Photograph of the executed stained-glass windows in the Palace of Students



Image by Viktor Maryniuk, 1987. Image courtesy of Viktor Maryniuk.

71 For examples from open resources, see: Viktor Maryniuk, *The Clown*, 1982, wood and oil, 37.1 x 20, available at: Viktor Mariniuk, "Works", NT Art Gallery, <https://nt-art.net/artist/marinukviktor-2-2/> [accessed: 21.09.2023]; and Viktor Maryniuk, *Square with Figures*, 1976, oil on fibreboard, 50.8 x 50 cm, in the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union, available at: Viktor Mariniuk, "Square with Figures", Zimmerli Art Museum, <https://zimmerli.emuseum.com/objects/53066/square-with-figures?ctx=17f2a487f74478e86d52caf379d1aab1c89bd27e&idx=1> [accessed: 21.09.2023].

Figure 60: Photographs of the executed stained-glass windows in the Palace of Students

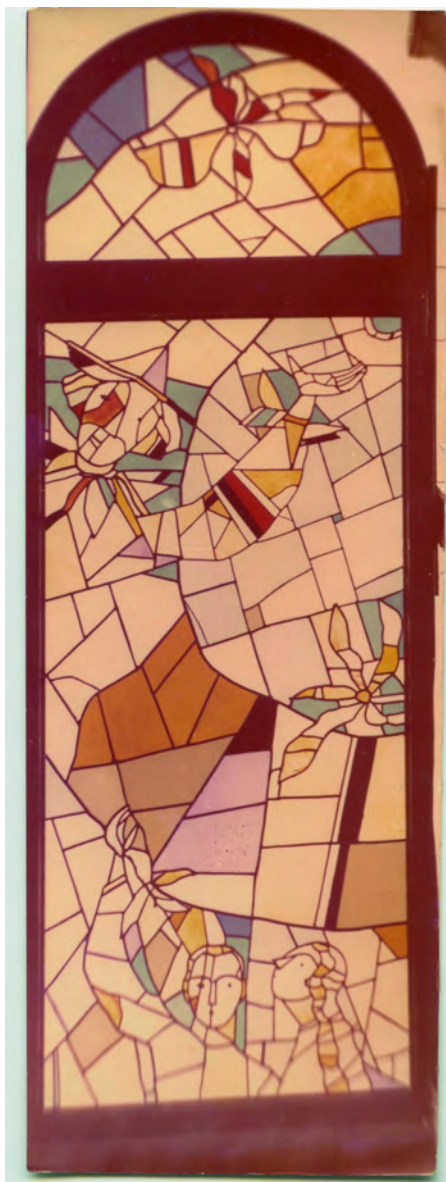


Image by Viktor Maryniuk, 1987. Image courtesy of Viktor Maryniuk.

Figure 61: Photographs of the executed stained-glass windows in the Palace of Students



Image by Viktor Maryniuk, 1987. Images provided courtesy of Viktor Maryniuk.

Conclusions

My study has constantly been obstructed by wartime restrictions. Thus, I was unable to visit the archive of the Union of Artists of Ukraine in Kyiv to obtain more information; the institution denied access to the documents due to martial law. Some important people have also been beyond my reach: Dmytrenko, the author of *Union of Artists in Odesa*, a source that turned out to be enormously helpful to my research, postponed my request for conversation until the war ends. He is now serving in the military. However, despite all the difficulties, I want to share a simple yet crucial point that has been occupying my mind: I should not delay my study because of the war. It is specifically because of the war that I must not do so.

Maryniuk joined the Union of Artists in 1987.⁷² His dossier, which is kept in the Odesa branch of the union, is now an important source of information about his Soviet-era monumental works. The dossier itself bears a rather articulate inscription reading ‘Monumentalist’. His and Yastreba’s paintings were presented to a wider audience in Ukraine in the 1990s. In the 2010s, a number of national museums hosted personal retrospective exhibitions featuring works by both artists.⁷³ These days, the biggest project Maryniuk has been working on is a comprehensive catalogue of works made by Yastreba. Because of that, in his studio I was fortunate to discover many of her works that I had not seen previously. At that moment, I silently promised myself to write another piece specifically about her heritage.

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73 Odesa National Art Museum, “Viktor Maryniuk ‘Zhyty uvazhno’” (“Viktor Maryniuk ‘Live Attentively’”), 2020, <https://ofam.ua/exhibitions/live-carefully/> [accessed: 21.09.2023]; and *Den* (The Day), “Polet ‘belogo angela’. Kievskaya vystavka odnoi iz samykh yarkikh predstavitel'nykh odeskogo andegraunda” (“Flight of the ‘White Angel’: A Kiev Exhibition of One of the Brightest Representatives of the Odessa Underground”), 21 March 2011, <https://day.kyiv.ua/ru/article/taym-aut/polet-belogo-angela> [accessed: 21.09.2023].

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