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Ukrainian Modernism: Identity, Nationhood, Then and Now

SUSAN SNODGRASS

The following is a transcription of "Ukrainian Modernism: Identity, Nationhood, Then and Now," a panel discussion held at the Ukrainian Museum in Lviv, Ukraine, and the Ukrainian Museum in New York, Ukrainian Museum in Edmonton, Canada, and Ukrainian Museum in Toronto, Canada, on October 31, 2006, and the Ukrainian Museum, New York, November 1, 2006. April 29, 2007. The panel focused on the issues raised by the exhibition Ukrainian Modernism: Identity, Nationhood, Then and Now, which was organized by the Ukrainian Museum, New York. The exhibition Susan Snodgrass presented this panel with a series of questions before opening the discussion to the audience. Panelists included Adrienne Kochman, Assistant Professor of Art History, Ukrainian Studies, Columbia University; Ihor Sonevytsky, Associate Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Illinois Research Scholar at the Center for Ukrainian Studies, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and Andrea Wachtel of Northwestern University.

Susan Snodgrass: Modernism in the twentieth century has been a contested concern about modern Ukrainian history for those in the audience who are unfamiliar with Ukraine or with Ukrainian art. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Ukraine was a land without a state, a nation without a state, and a people without a state. Its lands were divided between the Russian Empire, which Ukraine joined in independence in 1918 after the collapse of the Russian Empire. The freedom was over but when its territories were reunited in 1921, in 1923, the period known as Ukrainization manifested under the Bolshevik regime. Ukrainian modernism was a movement that represent the Ukrainian intelligentsia and peasantry. Ukrainization was thoroughly implemented by the Bolshevik regime in the 1920s, but was then reversed in the early 1930s, when Stalin came to power. Many artists and culture-bearers disappeared, and many were executed. Ukrainian modernism was the subject of this exhibition and panel. Artists search for identity via cultural through various modern movements and styles, including Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, Suprematism, Neo-Primitivism, Neo-Classicism, and Socialist Realism. Ukrainian modernism was a movement that represented the Ukrainian intelligentsia and peasantry. Ukrainization was thoroughly implemented by the Bolshevik regime in the 1920s, but was then reversed in the early 1930s, when Stalin came to power. Many artists and culture-bearers disappeared, and many were executed. Ukrainian modernism was the subject of this exhibition and panel. Artists search for identity via cultural through various modern movements and styles, including Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, Suprematism, Neo-Primitivism, Neo-Classicism, and Socialist Realism. Ukrainian modernism was a movement that represent

the audience.

Audience Q: Does Marc Chagall fit into any of this history? If so, where?

Myroslava Mudrak: Marc Chagall worked in Vitebsk, which today is Belarus, and then he went to Paris. There is very little connection, but it is worth examining. The work of the colorist Viktor Palmov that we see here, in both subject and the treatment and transparency of color, I think there is a certain kinship that we can find between Palmov and Chagall, and this is a kind of art historical mini-story that is worth looking into. At this time, there is no point of reference or time to speak about it.

Audience Q: What impact did the oppressiveness of Russia have on this work?

Victor Palmov, May 1st, 1929. 63 3/8 in. x 63 x 3/8 in., oil on canvas. Image courtesy of the National Art Museum of Ukraine, Kyiv.

Andrew Wachtel: It had a very direct impact on those artists who were killed in concentration camps and accused of Ukrainian nationalism so in that sense for some people it had a pretty negative affect. For other artists in this show, many were dead long before the Soviets ever got there. Others, like Rodchenko, were perfectly happy inside a Soviet context. Again, let me tell you the extent to which there is no Ukrainian modernism. The Russians were not particularly those who considered themselves Ukrainian, and they suffered. Just because you were in Ukraine did not mean that you were necessarily Ukrainian. You might be safe, but it varied enormously for the different artists in this show. Generally, the Soviets were not too happy with what we call modernist art. That is why nobody saw this work between 1932 and 1970. It was there, but stuffed away. The Russians suppressed Russians just as much as they suppressed Ukrainians. They just did not like modernist art, period.

Nicholas Sawicki: This exhibition ends at 1930 without a real hint of what happens later, and it doesn't address what happens to these artists in the era of Stalinism. Criticism was cast at the Guggenheim's recent exhibition *Russia!* for similar reasons, since it glossed over the same issue. In 1937, Boichuk and his wife were shot and killed by the police, and certainly there were great constraints imposed on artists in the 1930s. It would have been interesting if the exhibition had included information like this to situate us historically.

Susan Snodgrass

Susan Snodgrass is a Chicago-based critic and editor of *ARTMargins Online*. Much of her writing is devoted to alternative models of critical practice and artmaking, whether exploring new genres of public art or contemporary art in former Eastern Europe. She is a 2018 recipient of a Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for her blog, *In/Site: Reflections on the Art of Place*, which explores art, architecture and urbanism, and a finalist for the 2019 Dorthea and Leo Rabkin Foundation Arts Journalist Award. She has written for both print and online publications for over 30 years, most notably for *Art in America* for which she was a Corresponding Editor, as well as *Textile: Cloth and Culture and THE SEEN*. Her book *Inside the Matrix: The Radical Designs of Ken Isaacs* was published by Half Letter Press in 2019.

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