

The KrAM Project - for the international audience

When the proposal was made in summer 2008 to present KrAM (Criticism of Actual Art) internationally and in particular to the audience of INDEX (the Swedish Contemporary Foundation, Stockholm) all the founders of KrAM began to think... Mainly they wondered if the project would be understood, given that it makes sense only in a Ukrainian context and is intended for the Ukrainian reader. It seems that it would be unsuitable for the foreign art expert... But in the end we decided to take a risk and provide a small selection of texts for “beyond Ukraine” using the somewhat surprising name “Useless Reading.” At first glance it’s provocative and resembles more an artistic action. However, by using it, we are stressing the local nature of our project... Perhaps a similar idea is concealed in the Ukrainian name of the project. In Ukrainian “kram” means goods, wares, merchandise. Though in the local context, it’s not that works of art aren’t completely unnecessary, at present they’re not understood; nobody knows “what’s it for?” and “what do you make of this?” Simply speaking, there exists almost no hermeneutic tradition of art messages that require not some kind of ideological perception, but more than anything else – interpretation... Although we don’t claim to have completely filled this niche...

Thus, we are fully aware that KrAM will also be incomprehensible for the international audience. This is not only due to the fact that the overall situation with art in Ukraine is rather difficult to comprehend for a foreigner. We’ll try to provide a few facts.

Fact #1 – Since Ukraine’s independence, in other words starting in 1991, official Soviet art (social realism) that was once considered progressive and modern, lost its importance. Back then it mainly fulfilled the role of a “screen” to allow one to work in art professionally and had few truly devoted adherents. Nevertheless, it is customary to call the art that replaced it, that which is created by its contemporaries “here and now” – “contemporary art” rather than using the customary Ukrainian words “suchasne mystetstvo.” The fascination with pronouncing foreign words likely creates a realm of something unusual, and practically everyone who finds their way into it can discover some secret meaning or will automatically join the global context.

Fact #2 - At the National Academy of Fine Arts, the course on history of Ukrainian art ends with the 1960s while the course on history of world art ends with the 2000s. For many Ukrainian students, Kandinsky and Malevich are still considered innovative artists (and by no means classics).

Fact #3 – There is no Museum of Contemporary Art in Ukraine. And most importantly, there is no institution that would take on the work of creating an archive of processes taking place in contemporary art in our country.

Fact #4 – At the National University of “Kyiv-Mohyla Academy’s” Center for Contemporary Art (CCA), which was founded by George Soros in Kyiv and has held exhibits of works by Bill Viola, Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys, it’s never impossible to meeting someone from the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine. But the most widespread reaction by “workers from the arts” from the University to the work of CCA is plain incomprehension and non-acceptance.

Fact #5 – One can count upwards of ten critics in the country, but even they write expert articles rather sporadically given that absence of requests. Therefore, the press release is mainly all that’s ever written about an art event.

It was in this context that the electronic publication KrAM appeared. Its mission is to stimulate art criticism in Ukraine.

Several facts about KrAM:

KrAM is the private initiative of six people, each of whom has some connection to art.

The founding members of KrAM post their own commentaries, essays and critiques about actual art or invite other authors to do so.

KrAM has no editorial board. The texts that appear on the site are the initiative of every founding member, who takes on the responsibility for posting materials.

KrAM receives no outside financial support. It functions as a closed club. The electronic publication is paid for by the founding members’ membership dues.

The club’s founding members:

Volodymyr Babyuk, art consumer

Kateryna Botanova, art manager

Yulia Vaganova, art manager

Alevtina Kakhidze, artist

Taras Lyuty, philosopher

Olesya Ostrovska, curator

Kateryna Botanova
The great power of art

Unspoiled by visits by foreign stars, Ukrainian cultural figures continue to remarkably manage to preserve a provincial soul in their reception of guests.

The cultural program of the lucky westerner (or more uncommonly easterner) without fail consists of some home-style warm tea in a studio with a circle of the owner's closest friends and sincere conversations about: So what Ukrainian artists do you now? And Real art can truly change the world.

And no matter how the poor guest politely choking from tea doesn't recall the greatness of Malevich and Kandinsky and doesn't try to say that art, like the outside world, has changed greatly over the last one hundred years, he is seldom heard. After they leave, the masters, sadly shaking their heads, confirm that the West (East) doesn't want to know anything about them. But the guest remarkably observes that art in this hospitable country, which seems to rejoice in its own isolation from the world, is happily stuck, at best, in the Soviet tradition of the previous century, when art not only belonged to the people, but actively remade its consciousness.

Roger Buergel, the curator of one of the most prestigious contemporary art forums Documenta XII, was even luckier. He got an earful about the "saving power of art" from the rather young audience at his Kyiv master-class. "With all due respect to art, I'm not sure that it's capable of saving someone or changing the world," he carefully noted.

What a strange thing this belief in the great power of art! It's a peculiar pass into eternity with a test on spirituality, because when art is capable of changing the world then the artist is almost a god, who has to know the answer to all questions. And for those who have all the answers, continuing to think is an unjustified waste of time. One pleasure remains – drinking tea and talking about real art being able to change the world and how the West (and the East) don't know and don't understand anything about us.

Yulia Vaganova
The closed and "open" Ukrainian topic or who should pay whom in the art world and how?

If barter between artist and gallery is underdeveloped and primitive, then what can one say about the relationship between curators and galleries. Who is the curator and what do you do with him? Why is he needed and what type of barter is possible?

The direct meaning of the world curator is someone who manages or oversees. Howev-

er, the direct translation from Latin today doesn't fully describe the function of a curator of an art project. You can name different definitions and different functions that are ascribed to curators depending on the country, type of institution, etc. I especially like the short definition of a curator as "content specialist." What's the situation with "content specialists" in Ukraine?

My practice has shown that a curator was at times and continues to be confused with a manager or a project coordinator. Therefore, he was given only technical functions. And at times, a curator's obligations are given to coordinators.

At times, the person who wrote the text/article or simply the press release to a project was considered the curator.

Sometimes attempts are made to delegate leadership functions to the staff curator, and accordingly the salary in this situation depends on the person's leadership qualities and not his curatorial skills. The misunderstanding of the role of the curators and his functions provokes galleries to the simplest and foolproof "use" of the curator. If such a fashionable word exists and every project should have a curator, then "we have to hire one." By the way, personal exhibits - and most "projects" in Ukraine are personal exhibits - can easily be held without a curator. But we can't call things what they are, and so every kiosk is a hypermarket and every project is curatorial - the curator's function is another issue. Because developing a project, finding artists, and building displays are such minutia, then there's probably no sense paying for them. What's so difficult about hanging works of art? There are lots of artists - what's so difficult about choosing? And as for a project idea - something fashionable, or scandalous, or attractive, best to be "about underwear" because nobody's interested in lofty matters. But then what are we paying curators for???? Just for that sad page of text that's called the concept??? That's why the gallery starts throwing the functions of manager, dealer, PR manager, etc. on the curator.

If uniting a curator and artist in one person, if we're talking about an author's project, then the function of "curator" is simply crossed off by gallerists. Moreover, at times the staff curator's "personal" concept is added to an author's project, which clutters the author's idea. No need to comment on the results.

Personally, this situation is somewhat strange. I know very few curators in Ukraine, and I can count the good ones on one hand - commercial galleries should be "fighting" for curators. But this isn't the case, probably for these same reasons - the underdevelopment of the art market and the audience.

H: What's it's like to work as a curator?

Y: You mean, what kind of work models exist between a curator and a gallery?

H: Yes.

Y: If you like a certain curator's projects and you've seen several of them, you can invite this curator to work on a project for your gallery, trusting the curator's taste. You

can propose a certain topic for the project and ask him to develop this topic by creating a project. You can invite a ready-made curator's project. You can announce a competition for the best curatorial project. You can invite a curator to join your staff to develop a series of projects that match the mission and goals of the gallery and will promote the achievement of these goals...

H: So, how exactly do they work together?

Y: What do you mean?

H: Do you have to pay them?

I'm trying to find something positive in the abovementioned dialogue, thought it's rather difficult. Nevertheless, the gallerist asked about the curator and perhaps tried to figure out who's to pay whom.

Alevtina Kakhidze

My husband's eyes are like Jeanne Samary's*

- Who's Jeanne Samary?
- Renoir painted her.
- And your husband has eyes like her?
- Yes.
- And what does this mean?

For the project "Nizhnist" (Tenderness) [1] I put up a reproduction of a portrait of the recognized beauty and actress Jeanne Samary, painted by the French impressionist painter Auguste Renoir, and an amateur photograph of my husband. The installation was called "My Husband's Eyes are Like Jeanne Samary's."

In Ukrainian publications, this work was accompanied by only the words "sentimentality" [2] and "hyper-intimacy" [3]. This isn't accurate or correct. My project was more ironic than sentimental, more hyper-public than hyper-intimate. This is so obvious!

By being united with risk (they could have not believe me when I said that my husband's eyes are like Jeanne Samary's), sentimentality can't dominate and remain a distinct quality. Moreover, present my project in reverse: a male artist insists that his wife's eyes are like those of the man in the portrait!?! And that portrait was painted by a woman who is a renowned artist and recognized by all! Neither this portrait nor this woman exists.

Even if a male artist does such a project he will insist that his wife's eyes are like those of the man in the portrait – but he, as a man, won't be called sentimental. Aspects of inequality, irony, even the humour of my own opinion - these should be my project's epithets, not sentimentality.

And now, why I don't believe that the project is hyper-intimate. The demonstration of "intimate" details (such as who has my husband's eyes) in the project weren't meant for pure demonstration, but to try to be like Renoir, to create something ideal like he did, to have a muse like he did! And that's what I did, moreover, publicly – everyone looked at him and not me (like with Jeanne Samary and Renoir – everyone looked at her, not at him). That's why my project isn't hyper-intimate [3], but hyper-public.

By the way, there was no constructive criticism of my project. The project included Renoir's quote (intonations of admiration), but Renoir was the dumbest of all the impressionists in his characterization of beauty and women. Look closely at how Jeanne Samary is pictured, how she's standing, how she's dressed, how her mouth is ajar. Naturally, the choice of this quote could have been chance, but not so much so as not to understand the emphasis of my gesture in the given context – Jeanne Samary is ideal for illustrating the polarity of masculinity and femininity. I even thought the critics would write: "Alevtina manipulates gender stereotypes and takes her lead from the taste of the mainstream audience! Renoir is limited!" But nobody wrote this...

Furthermore, I wasn't able to avoid reflection (typically by women) – for my own affirmation, I used a "man's" quotation in the project – Jeanne Samary's portrait wasn't painted by a woman! But are there female quotations!?

I wasn't able to avoid general reflection – Jeanne Samary's portrait wasn't painted by a Ukrainian artist! Is there a Ukrainian artist who's painted a portrait that everyone recognizes?

It's a shame that my project can't be improved, it can't be better – it cannot have the abovementioned shortcomings. Perhaps that's how I did everything that I could in due time, in my situation, in my position?

[1] The Installation "My Husband's Eyes are Like Jeanne Samary's" was displayed in Olesya Ostrovska's curatorial project "Tenderness" (Center for Contemporary Art, National University of "Kyiv-Mohyla Academy," 2003). The project concentrated on the issues of the inexpediency of breaking such ideas as "tenderness" and assigning it to a woman – "motherly tenderness," "female tenderness."

[2] "Tenderness on a Napkin," Maksym Petruk, *Sehodnya*. June 14, 2003, No. 1476: "For sentimental Alevtina Kakhidze, the eyes of her second half are like Jeanne Samary's from Auguste Renoir's famous paintings (for comparison, reproductions of considerable dimensions are also presented)."

[3] "Honey, Honey, Baby..." Ihor Lyamshyn. *Culture*. June 2, 2003: "Just like "I feel good" radiated in full strength by Alevtina Kakhidze about her strong half. With intention or without, but she thought her husband's eyes look like those of Jeanne Samary, a

popular actress in the XIX century (and her eyes are indeed like ripe cherries). To support this, a full-size photocopy of the Hermitage portrait by Auguste Renoir is displayed and across the hall is a photograph of her husband. Between them is a slide show juxtaposing the “tender and sweet eyes” of different people. You have to think that we’re not even talking about reticence, which for art isn’t at all a sin, but more likely about hyper-intimacy, the fascination with what is one’s very own.”

* text from the project which was initiated by Alevtina Kakhidze to describe and criticize her own artwork.

Taras Lyuty

Does an artist need to be paid?

I think it was Marx who said that every job should be compensated. But the issue lies in reducing art to economics, and thereby solving all problems...

Seeing as art in today’s Ukraine isn’t independent like in other countries, where the tie to economic determinism is a defining moment in the process of its organization and control. Though, even before Marx, a good always has a price, regardless of its dimension. All of this, without exception, relates to the work of an artist, who stands by the easel with a paintbrush as if by a lathe (or is coming up with something through non-classical means, taking into consideration the development of the innovative expressive opportunities of contemporary art), setting his work in a concrete product.

However, no artists ever agreed to similar primitivism in defining their profession. At least you hope not... There’s currently no need to talk about the sanctity of art, since it hasn’t been able to lose this element fully, even over the many year of secularization. No matter how much dependent on pragmatism, creation in no way relies on it, since it’s an act of harmonious freedom.

This means that apart from overcoming the frames of the normative, and artist doesn’t rid himself of the responsibility for his creation. Though the responsibility isn’t reduced to an external factor, in the sense that there exists regulation – the author has to do something, and there are things that he shouldn’t approach. You can consider responsibility to be conformity with the challenge the creator is faced with. Let them be social conditions or consequences of his leisurely thoughts that are then somehow embodied in the work of art...

The modern level of reflection about the art process in Ukraine is measured not with instruments, but is based on completely barbarian principles. In other words, people who take on “institutionalizing” art decide, first and foremost, the question of their own image. Granted, it would be irrelevant to accuse them of this. But in opening new spaces

and involving artists in them, the latter are transformed into hostages of their artistic activity. Therefore, the chance to publicly “shine” becomes the reward for the artist, and not a proper assessment of his work.

The situation is reminiscent of the dilemma faced by a person who is constantly tormented by the question, “Do you need to pay the priest who blessed your home?” The church is a full-fledged social institution that carries out a number of social functions, and so by giving away “one-tenth of our earnings” to its servant, we are apparently doing what is fair “according to the law.” But can you buy God’s grace? This is what troubles the person when wondering, “how should I pay”...

It seems to me that the Ukrainian artist is in a role similar to “a priest.” He is forced to give away what is most valuable, that in time is transformed into a good, which after all will be packaged in a cover of charity...

So if someone wants a concrete answer to the question that has transformed into something nearly rhetorical: “Does an artist need to be paid?” then the answer could be as such: until we get rid of the notion that art is a hobby or a handicraft, we won’t not just pay for it, we won’t think about how much “it costs”...

Olesya Ostrovska-Lyuta **Rift and constant recreation**

Two things prompted me to write this text: Oksana Zabuzhko’s book *Notre Dame D’Ukraine: Ukraine in a Conflict of Mythologies* and the roundtable “Eastern Europe after Financing Ends – Trying to Find Another Cash Cow” at the Center for Contemporary Art at the National University of “Kyiv-Mohyla Academy” on July 11, 2007.

During this July discussion at the CCA among artists, art critics, curators, journalists and cultural entrepreneurs, member of the art group R.E.P. Mykyta Kadan announced the idea for a new art project which will include a series of interviews with artists from the 1980s and 1990s, such as Oleksandr Roitburd, Mykola Matsenko, Tiberiy Silvashi, etc.

In describing the idea, Kadan affirmed that he and his co-authors have nothing in common with their predecessors – artists from the 1990s. This statement by Kadan became the starting point for further discussions, all the more because we’ve heard similar comments more than once over the last ten years. Before continuing my thought, let me note: I understand that he meant not only their personal artistic dimension, but also the social and political positioning or non-positioning oneself as an artist.

So, what does Kadan’s statement bear witness to? The desire to distance oneself from association with one’s predecessors and deny the genetic tie with the creative works of

artists from earlier generations. This position is basically a rejection of artistic heredity. From Mykyta Kadan's words emerged the opinion that he, as an artist, grew independently and distinct of all earlier Ukrainian artists. Artistic practices present in Ukrainian art circles up till 2004 had no great influence on him - that was the year he became one of the founders of the R.E.P Group and launched his personal artistic presence. What's the reason for this view?

At first glance, this is simply an individual statement by a singular representative of Ukrainian artists, in the best meaning of the word. And in my opinion, it is exceptionally symptomatic for our entire cultural circle and in this sense – contrary to Kadan's opinion – has very much in common with all his predecessors in the Ukrainian artistic environment.

I follow from Oksana Zabuzhko's thesis from her monograph *Notre Dame d'Ukraine*. Zabuzhko analyzes V. Lypynsky's cultural model of "intelligentsias of rift" inherent in the cultural situation in the Russian Empire in the 19 century and then in Ukraine in the 20th century and our time. The very intelligentsia born in Russia is viewed as a breaking phenomenon. Several thoughts from *Notre Dame*:

"The intelligentsia's scientific environment, its *modus vivendi* – this, according to V. Lypynsky is the "break with all collective public traditions. No inherited experience, no inherited values: everything can and must be tried and there is nothing to lose." [1]

And further:

"...the hidden drama of Ukrainian culture in the XX century lies in the fact that the European style of intelligentsia formed in the XIX century was born from the Kozak-Polish nobility tradition – our Mazepa-style "local community" "Knights of the Holy Ghost" – was long before it's physical destruction the force of internal inertia of colonial growth forced out from the socially authoritative view by Russian-style intelligentsia – "by a narodnik" (Russian populist) or "someone without grounds" (it doesn't matter as Lypynsky wrote, that individual representatives of this style could have been "very civilized, scholarly and enlightened," – they, nevertheless, remained "people of rift.") – and that the Ukrainian intelligentsia continued to reproduce further based on this style (with certain colonial modifications and corrections based on "local conditions") [2].

Moving from Oksana Zabuzhko opinions, Mykyta Kadan's statement completely corresponds to the cultural type that dominates in Ukrainian post-Soviet culture. This is someone without history, who constantly tries to create his own history and hold a monopoly on it, while taking the risk that his successors will note and accept this monopoly and will thereby completely reject the value of their predecessors' views as one that conforms to their own monopolistic history. For an "intellectual of rift" or in our case "an artist of rift" of great weight is his autonomy from any common roots with the previous generation of artists. At the same time, this autonomy seems apparent, but more about this later.

Another phenomenon that I believe needs to be taken into consideration is the phenomenon of culture creoles [3]. A cultural Creole is a person with a vague identity that exists on the border of several cultures, who doesn't adapt to the system of values of either of them, and accepts those or other values by situation. Mykola Ryabchuk, an author who in many of his works analyzes contemporary Ukrainian culture from the point of view of post-colonial studies, repeatedly noted that Creole forms of perception and self-perception are rather widespread in Ukraine [4]. Our intelligentsia is often times no exception. Therefore, this type of "intellectual of rift" falls onto this ground, which as Zabuzhko shows has always been present in our culture since the end of the 19th century.

The cultural situation, where the members of a cultural organism lack a single (common) system of values, and the normative figure who is the bearer of cultural values is an "intellectual of rift", support for a common creative history becomes a truly rare act.

However, the position of denying a connection with one's predecessor seems completely substantiated from the point of view of the young, and no matter how intellectually refined artist (in this case, I have in mind a concrete artist and not merely a type). Intellectual efforts are made without in the boundaries of a definite model, which is accepted as understood and open to doubt. This model foresees criticism and denial of its very own foundations: by distancing oneself from a predecessor, every forthcoming artist intends to renounce the foundations of the cultural model in which the processor worked and to build a completely new, independent and original model. The focus lies in the fact that this distancing is the foundation and core of the same constantly recreated model – the worldview of the "intellectual of rift." By rejecting the culture-creating values of his predecessor, the "intellectual of rift" ends his cultural mission and starts his own so that his successor completes what has been started in the same way. Renunciation and change in models are parts of the same game. The artists remain in the boundaries of the same model as his predecessor until the moment that he comprehends the nature of his renunciation.

Mykyta Kadan isn't the only one who believes that he, as an artist, has nothing in common with artists from the 1990s, but the artists in the 1990s also didn't see their relationship with institutions of social realism. Similarly, the social realists (though on a clear ideological basis) renounced modernists at the same time that social realism was deeply based in futurism. This conventional chain shows the overall logic of the situation. The cultural mission of an "artist of rift" ends and is fulfilled by his successor's renunciation of his cultural values.

This worldview of "rift" multiplied by the erosion of cultural identity, allows an artists to hold different artistic or even political views, and change them depending on conjecture. Since there is a lack of responsibility before a successor – "intellectual and spiritual father" – there is no need to maintain a stiff position. An artist can allow himself to allegedly experiment and test different views, and as a result, avoid responsibility for his own work, because it is announced as nothing more than an experiment. Every political opinion is considered merely an innocent external mask, while a "real artist"

should only be worried about artistic problems. This allows him not to think about allegedly overly politicized issues such as the ethics of an artistic opinion, involvement in political discourse, and the economic component of creativity.

But after all, even such a well-considered and unfixed position doesn't save the artist from renouncing his successor. And his renunciation at the same time contains a "gap" that allows the artist to hold new situational positions. For example, Mykyta Kadan didn't assert an ideological, world view or historical unity in the boundaries of artistic discourse that forces its adherent to hold certain values (as Zabuzhko likes to repeat – nobles oblige!). He simply distanced himself from views that were never defined. His affirmation had a sort of gap that from time to time could be filled with certain situational values. There is nothing binding the artist to stick to clear rules of the game because these rules aren't made public.

For example, this "gap" allows an artist to simultaneously participate in an exhibit at the Pinchuk Art Center and criticize the Pinchuk Art Center as an institution.

But criticism of your predecessor isn't automatic evidence of you're adapting to a worldview model of "rift" - it can only maybe show this. After all, you can't describe a cultural type with only one typological trait. Other traits of this type may include radicalism, by which I mean renunciation of any type of roots in general and the absence of clearly articulated values.

I think that the R.E.P. Group, whose work became the point of departure for these thoughts, has a chance of becoming part of this circle of renunciations-rifts. By denying the creative unity with the first post-Soviet generation of Ukrainian artists, the members of R.E.P. are trying to feel out a historical continuity with the help of declared interviews with their predecessors. Acting within the boundaries of the "intellectual of rift" model, they are utilizing cultural practices that developed in cultures with clear models of cultural heredity.

The lack of professional art criticism today in Ukraine significantly complicates the description of any artistic models and strategies, and thereby also their understanding. The absence of analysis of artistic practices, individual gestures and texts isn't only extremely important for critics in Ukraine (who practically don't exist) but also artists. Inasmuch as any artistic act requires that the artist understand his own foundations, in the situation where there is a lack of an institute of Criticism, the artist partially takes on this role himself. At least when it comes to interpreting the position from which the artist's expression emerged, which seems to be the necessary minimum in cultures with a developed artistic discourse, but is very weakly comprehended by artists in the Ukrainian context.

Therefore, I would consider the key task in contemporary Ukrainian art discourse, in a broad sense, (I'm not limiting art to simply visual practices) to be the comprehension by an artist of his own position from the point of view of his personal artistic message as well as through the prism of the cultural situation and the cultural types that dominate

here.

1. Zabuzhko, O. *Notre Dame d'Ukraine: Ukraine in the Conflict of Mythologies*. Fact. 2007. Page 502.
2. Ibid. page 503.
3. See for example: Ryabchuk, M. *From Little Russia to Ukraine: Paradoxes of Delayed Nation-Building*. Krytyka. 2000. Page 304.
4. Ibid.

Virtual Vova Statement 1

When seeing students from the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture, I am obsessed by the thought: “Shave half of them and send them to the PTU!*”

*PTU – a vocational school where you can learn a professional trade such as painter-plasterer, floor-tiler, lathe operator, mill operator, bricklayer...

“Virtual Vova” was initiated as a special project by Volodymyr Babyuk – he’s not an art expert, but one who appreciates art. With time, all the founding members of KrAM joined Virtual Vova. As a result, “VV” lost its tie to a specific person, but maintained Volodymyr Babyuk’s optics.