

Contemporary public art in the city space of Kharkiv¹

Dmytro Zaiets, Department of Theoretical Sociology, Kharkiv National University; and Center for Social Studies, Institute of Sociology and Philosophy of the Polish Academy of Sciences

Reflecting on the space of the city and its visual content with different kinds of art, I make no claim to originality. Art has always served an aesthetic, memorial and ideological function in the politics of urban planning, from cave drawings, through the medieval cathedral to the posters of Soviet socialist realist art. But the second half of the 20th century was distinguished, among other innovations, by the inclusion of art in the process of structuration of the urban environment, the set of visual patterns with the intent to “switch” the mode of “seeing” the city through a new formula for urban art, namely public art.

This specific approach to contemporary art arose as both a consequence and a “mediator” of civil engagement in the public sphere of Western European and American cities in the 1960s. As such, public art tries through creative means to change the visual models through which the city is perceived. Therefore, public art is not only art, but also incorporates specific socio-cultural practices including the ontology and methods of visual anthropology and ethnography, semiotics, media theory, and other approaches that are not typically applied to the field of art criticism. Works of public art are reminiscent of a social experiment that simulates the sensation of displacement and confusion by creating innuendo and then challenges conventional codes and stereotypes, familiar relationships and social attitudes. By conducting these experiments outside the institutional walls of art temples (such as galleries and museums) in the public space of the city, the artists provide a new format of communication with the public. Public art does not require payment for entry into its space; rather, it looks for its audience in public urban areas. Changing the habitual perception of art as elitist, the artists re-open urban space for art and for the communities that make up a city.

The main purpose of this article is a sociological examination of artifacts of public art in post-Soviet Kharkiv, Ukraine, and an interpretation and analysis of how social memory is actualized through art. This study thus understands public art as tangible representations of the processes of social memory. To this end, this study uses qualitative methodological techniques, namely, visual analysis and expert interviews. Visual analysis of the works of public art reveals hidden meanings, how the work is constituted, and the ways in which public art can be read as a “reminder” of particular aspects of social memory. Interviews with

experts reconstruct the socio-cultural context in which these works of public art exist, paying particular attention to social, spatial and aesthetic elements.

Public art as “reminders” of social memory

For this study, I examined public artworks in the city space of Kharkiv. In selecting the artwork to consider in this study, I focused on specific aspects of their content. Despite their extraordinary configurability, contextuality, and stylistic hybridity, public artworks as “reminders” of social memory share certain common features. According to M. Krajewski,² public artworks as “reminders”:

1. Are specially designed for and displayed in public urban spaces;
2. Incorporate nontraditional *antimonumental* form, including horizontality/inversion, immateriality or incompleteness;
3. And, most importantly, have specific content, which is often individualized, interactive, humoristic or negative.

Based on these characteristics, here I understand public art as encompassing a complex variety of (traditional, modern and mixed) forms of art and tactics (specific cultural practices and artifacts), that are specially designed and displayed in the city space and that focus primarily on the (re)construction of public space through initiating dialogue and provoking debate. This last component, the creation of dialogue and debate, is one of the fundamental characteristics of public art.

Using this understanding, this study examines 19 works of public art that act as “reminders” (for a listing see Appendix 1). The selection includes both wall paintings that incorporate elements of traditional painting and graffiti, street art, environmental art, community art projects, “art in the public interest,” and an original installation of plunk art (or “plop”). Although the range of artwork selected is broad, each corresponds to my understanding of public art. As such, the goal of each is to initiate public dialogue in the public space with an unprepared audience, and to “upgrade” or modify the content of social memory of the urban community by offering new symbolic images, or by placing familiar images in new artistic contexts.

This paper proceeds in the following manner. First, I describe and analyze the selected works of public art, especially the work they do as “reminders.” In the next part of the paper, I reconstruct the social, cultural, and spatial context in which the artwork exists. Then, I critically evaluate the artwork based on the artists’ intention to emphasize the public

sphere in urban culture. Finally, by way of conclusion, I propose strategic recommendations to improve and reorganize urban space and the formation of public spaces.

Field of works

For artists, the Kharkiv collective identity serves a similar function to public demonstrations, in that city identity and the identity of townspeople frame social memory. Young painters, designers, and graffiti artists decorate the city space by experimenting with the familiar images of (1) famous writers; (2) stories of Kharkiv during its “space age”; (3) its recent industrial past; and (4) the ecological safety of the city. All these domains offer possible characters, themes, texts, and traditions that have renewed the collective image(s) of the city. The intentions, ideograms, and semantics of the public art examined here allow us to elaborate four categories of objects that are developing cultural values and penetrating social memory:

1. *Kharkiv - cultural;*
2. *Kharkiv - modern;*
3. *Kharkiv - ecological;*
4. *Kharkiv - cosmic.*

The first category includes works that personify cultural symbols. In this way, they emphasize components of the city identity that present Kharkiv as a city of art, music, and literature, more generally, as a city of culture. Here, the wall paintings on Pushkinskaya and Gogolya streets are particularly relevant. On these streets, there are more than a dozen works by founders of the street-art movement in Kharkiv, including painters Roman Minin and Gamlet Zinkovsky. The exhibition of the artworks is supported both by a municipal gallery and the individual sponsors (who provided the working material instead of financing). These wall paintings are examples of street-art. The paintings of Pushkin and Gogol in the street-art interpretation by Minin and Zinkovsky are particularly illustrative examples of the changing nature of visual communication between art and the audience in an urban environment. These paintings have great artistic value based on their smart composition, rich colors, and good graphics. But they are still more remarkable because they fluidly articulate the specific cultural game that Rosalind Krauss called the “optical unconscious.”³ Thus, through the tactics of “coup,” the meanings of the wall paintings frame “Pushkin,” “Gogol,” “Kharms,” and “Tolstoy” in unusually egalitarian contexts. These classical figures of literature are more comedic, irrational, and prosy than monumental. Cheerful, straightforward idioms transfer images directly to passers’-by consciousness. Pushkin appears on a horse, in

space, or in the casino (see Appendix 1). Thus, Pushkin is shown in contemporary life where he exists on the level of routine practices. This contemporary version of a Pushkin memorial does not show passersby the school cliché of “the great Russian poet,” but depicts a living humane man. The “anti-heroism” of this work is an important feature of Kharkiv street-art and has led to the inclusion of Pushkin in the discursive field of public art.



"Duel of the Century", R. Minin, 2009



"Eternal Love", R. Minin, 2009



"Pushkin in fun", I. Ponkratov, 2008

The palimpsest of street paintings

Visual texts are expressions of the activity and process of the filiation⁴ of cultural meanings.⁵ In the works of Minin and his colleagues, the active substrate is represented by both the visual stylistics of activism (street art, sms-art, wall painting) and the visual yet plastic form of a single work, in which the structure tries to demonstrate fully the rhetorical charge of the visual narrative of the urban image of Kharkiv. In creating different scenic modes, artists are not just talking about great writers, but instead fill the content of social identity with important elements and conventional formations of, on the one hand, common but the eternal topics such as literature, passion, nobility, love, and on the other, of cultural figures.



"Naked Pushkin", R. Minin, 2009

Based on the semiological minimalism of contemporary art, these artists in some way attempt to formulate an historical identity of the city, and to reinterpret the accepted understanding of the "other." The actual implementation of these identity politics necessitates returning such important cultural figures like Gogol and Pushkin to within the symbolic borders of Ukraine. The "domestication" of such iconic figures expands the range of symbolic cultural models of Kharkiv.



"Pushkin's palms", Yu. Alimova, 2008

This idea is extended by the murals that are on the same street in the neighborhood with other “icons” of Russian literature. These artworks were created in the style of naive art, with G. Zinkovsky’s works being particularly reminiscent of Mary Pryimachenko’s works. Pryimachenko is a Ukrainian artist whose life and works fully meet the expectations that are traditionally associated with great artists or are considered holy in Orthodox culture. These expectations include the implied lack of recognition of one’s works and poverty during life, followed by recovery and sanctification after death. This kind of person was necessary to consolidate the community around the “Ukrainian idea.” M. Pryimachenko, as well as Nikolai Gogol, and the philosopher Gregory Skovoroda, are the driving force of these integrative processes and the galaxy of recognizable symbols of local and national importance. This is a natural phenomenon for any contemporary state, and is similar to the need for national symbols (flag, anthem, coat of arms).



"Windows of growth", R. Minin, G. Zinkovsky, 2008



"Pushkin and the Muse", S. Harlshan, 2008



"Gogol-Mogol", U. Bychenkova, G. Zinkovsky, 2008

To the “Kharkiv – cultural” category we also may add an unprecedented musical event, which was the result of interactions between the Kharkiv Philharmonic and the city’s subway administration. The Symphony Orchestra played last summer surrounded by thousands of spectators in the metro station “Universitet.”⁶ The same unusual urban location for public art was selected for the “Christmas tramway”⁷ event in April, for the second consecutive year (2008-2009). This event included a thematically decorated interior of a tram that followed route number 12 from the Railway Station to Gorkiy Park. Live musicians accompanied the passengers’ carols. The “art-tram” was the third element of the “Tripoli” Christmas Festival.⁸



Concert at the Subway, 2009

Colorful street paintings and musical events are free and are thus open to a wide range of people. Importantly, they also offer another angle on the familiar and the routine and take place in the urban environment in a friendly space, and as such educate townspeople in cultural terms of openness and creativity. These events and others in the city thus use a full

arsenal of artistic techniques of modern public art (street art, community art, musical performance) to direct the public imagination and channel the social memory of Kharkiv and visitors in the direction of a bright, artistic, music, and cultural image of Kharkiv.

Modern Kharkiv

Kharkiv is a modern city, swarming with thousands of “electric bees” – its progressive city-dwellers, a tribute to Kharkiv’s industrialism, progress, modernity, and its main industries (machine building, high scientific and educational potential, high-speed communications, established infrastructure), all of which are attributes of an industrial city.

The most striking example of this idea is the statue “Symbol of Exhausting Night Labor” (Символ изнурительного ночного труда), which is located in the pedestrian crossing at the “Universitet” subway station. This monument was made by workers in their spare time with old metal parts and was installed during the night on August 8, 2009, 34 years after the opening of the Kharkiv Metro system. The installation embodies the career of subway workers and their daily hard labor. The “techno-statue” was originally installed without a nameplate, which generated surprise and interest among the public. This was caused by the unique morphology and semantics of the monument. Its visual appearance is the actualization in social memory of the community’s professional identity, without which it is impossible for a metropolis to function. (Transport is, after all, the artery of the complex Kharkiv “organism.”)

The pathos and irony of the statue shout through the steel frame constructed out of scrap pieces. This “hero of our time” is a simple worker on the night shift with the indomitable resilience of metal. An insufficient budget was offset by the workers’ commitment to create such a statue. This commitment is represented by the figure itself, which holds up a heavy metal rail of the subway. The statue’s unusual form (it was made from discarded material), and tragic subject matter explain our attention to the installation’s public art context as well as its emotional impact on city residents. After several threats to tear down the sculpture on the grounds that it blocked evacuation routes from the metro and had not been approved by the appropriate ministry, the city dismantled the sculpture. However, the sculpture was eventually returned to its original place due to public outcry. This is an illustrative example of how art creates not only a real public space (the area immediately around the artwork), but also the idea of “public-ness” in the minds of the viewers. Here, not only is the “Iron man” himself important, but also the relationship that exists between him and the audience. And it is likely that every such instance of communication will cause

viewers to become more reflective about transport as well as their own place, rights, and obligations to the city and other people who live in it.



Iron Man, Team subway workers, 2009

This artistic conceptualization of professional identity can be extended to the whole city. One example of this is a PR campaign entitled “Motor City.” On their own initiative, one artistic firm, 3Z,⁹ has developed and begun promoting an alternate logo for the city, in effect, creating a tourist brand of Kharkiv. This brand highlights the historical origins of the city’s modernism, its scientific status, and the mobility of its inhabitants. One part of the project entailed painting city lights in the shape of a large “X” (the first letter in the name of the city in Ukrainian) on sidewalks and on the walls of buildings. The company also pasted up posters around the city depicting sports halls and factory shops from the second half of the twentieth century, the heyday of Soviet Kharkiv as one of the industrial, scientific, educational and cultural centers of the USSR.

The designers who developed this idea justify the nod to the city’s former grandeur by emphasizing the possibility of revival in a new, modified form. For them, this brand image, on the one hand, serves as a potent reminder that Kharkiv was a leader in industry, science and culture, and on the other hand, actualizes the mentality of the city’s inhabitants, namely

their traditional commitment to bold and purposeful cultural diversity. With this in mind, the creative team plans to create a comprehensive brand image that will present the city as an object of investment while also making it attractive to tourists. It is interesting that a small group of designers on a voluntary basis have developed such a well-conceived project as an attractive hometown brand to city authorities and inhabitants. Perhaps it will have no effect, but that is not of particular relevance for my discussion here. Of greater importance here is the fact these initiatives were presented in public space, in the same manner as R. Minin's street art and the monument to metro workers in the Kharkiv subway station. These are the real "fragile flowers of democracy" in which the democratic potential of artistic and civil practices of public art resides.



"Motor City" Posters made by "3Z", 2009



"Alternative Kharkiv's Brand" designed by "3Z", 2009



One of the design elements of city branding conception. "Design for police car", "3Z" studio, 2009

Pure and green Kharkiv

This category is exemplified by the socio-ecological “engagement” of public artworks presented in Kharkiv by Uliyana Bychenkova and Yuliana Alimova. In this category, I am primarily interested in “eco-action,” which started in response to the felling of trees in the central streets of Kharkiv (Rymarskaya and Culture streets) in April 2009. In one installation, social ideas were conveyed through a series of inscriptions, such as “Remember!” “Rustling!” and “Falling leaves!” that were attached to pieces of sawed trees. Squares of cut wood were painted red, which symbolized blood. Photos of the work were presented in 2009 at the International Triennial of environmental poster “4th Block,”¹⁰ a designer competition in Kharkiv.



The art-project “Roslo”(Grew). U. Bychenkova, Yu. Alimova, 2009



"Grew", U.Bychenkova, Yu. Alimova , 2009

U. Bychenkova’s repertoire of urban interventions includes less dramatic works that are nonetheless conveyed through similar ideological and thematic means. Their main

purpose is “humanizing” the city environment. To achieve this goal, Bychenkova uses the metaphorical image of an “environmental alarm bell” through which she tries to draw people’s attention to the problem of clean air, clean rivers, parks, green streets and residential districts. One of G. Zinkovsky’s works betrays a similar ideological connotation. In it, a dove is depicted on one of the city walls against the backdrop of a heavenly-colored label bearing the word “clean.” This image thus literally corresponds with the everyday artist’s desire to see the city streets clean.



“Eko-navigacija” (Eco-navigation), U. Bychenkova, 2009



“Chustyj golub” (Clean pigeon), G. Zinkovski, 2009

“Per aspera ad astra”

Another conceptualization of the city in public art projects is its association with its recent cosmic past. (The city once produced hardware systems for rockets.) The theme of space and individuals associated with it are frequently depicted by painters, including Ola Pelipas (“Sputnik”), Kostia Alyeninskyy (“Spacecraft”), Sergei Harlashyn and Roman Minin (“We first”), Dasha Yermko (“Gagarin”).

One example of such a theme is the projects along Gagarin avenue that accompanied the first contemporary art festival in Kharkiv called “Gagarin Fest,”¹¹ entitled “*Portrait of those for who we are not ashamed*” (R. Minin). It criticizes Kharkiv artists by implying that they do not explore anything new and valuable in the world of art. But this does not mean that the artist does not support the progressive image of “scientist” Kharkiv, only that he does it in humorous form.

Images of “cosmogenic” Kharkiv, meanwhile, do not limit themselves only to figures of the first astronaut. They also include allusions to the first living creatures in space. Belka and Strelka, the first dogs in space, also look down happily in space suits at passers-by from the wall adjacent to the house on the street festival in works by R. Minin. Konstantin Zorkin’s work, “Tube,” is also instructive in this regard, as all that is needed for a successful interpretation is the phrase: “*Tube - this is the thing that unites artist and astronaut*”. Here, Kharkiv public art, albeit appealing to the serious theme of space as representing a possible transgressive act and a cultural leap to the future, literally mocks the value Soviet propaganda placed on space. The inversion of meaning shows the direct compatibility of these works with the canon of public art.



“Pionery” (Pioneers), made for “Gagarin-fest” R. Minin, 2009

The works of art discussed above were both initiated and distributed by artists in cooperation with other professional or graffiti artists. But in Kharkiv there were also works of public art commissioned by the local administration or private businesses. These may be included under the concept of public art as a “reminder,” but with some reservations. In determining what constitutes genuine examples of public art, we should bear in mind that, in these cases, a municipality or business strives to represent itself (the professional community, region, or city) to a sponsor (consumers, higher authorities) in an attractive way, with the help of art displayed in a public space. Here, those commissioning the art are motivated by their

desire to receive the fame and reputation of originality that often accompany such public displays of art. As a result, the city space becomes commercialized.

I have noticed a trend of attaching the public manifestos of various professional groups to public installations of sculptures and statues. Typically, these works possess a symbolic referent and, here, the artwork functions as “demarcation pillars” that signify the symbolic boundaries of a community. For example, the monuments “The Chemist” (Blücher Street 4, sculptor S. Gurbanov, and architect M. Shkodovsky) and “The Violinist” (Constitution Square, S. Gurbanov) were commissioned by the Pharmaceutical University and the Conservatory, respectively. Interestingly, “The Violinist” has acquired a certain mythological character. Because of the lack of sufficient space near the building, the sculpture was installed on the roof. The sculpture’s odd location has today led it to acquire the character of an urban legend. “The Violinist” has become a subject of active myth-making, and now his “sublime existence” is associated with a sense of flight and lightness that music gifts to a devoted listener.

Here, special attention should also be given to recent changes made to the Kharkiv subway by the subway administration in 2008 and 2009. The idea of metro stations as art has justified a range of artistic changes to the station, primarily for PR purposes. These artworks are original, creatively designed, and guided by Western trends in subway advertising. Importantly, the idea here is that advertising the subway itself will increase the demand for advertising in the subway. The following are some examples of this trend:

- (i) Pavilion entrance / exit of the “Naukova” (“Science”) metro station is now adorned by portraits of scientists;
- (ii) Improvised park space (including an artificial lawn with benches and lights) decorates the walkway approaching the “Radianska” (“Soviet”) station;
- (iii) Painting the “Sportyvna” (“Sports”) station with festive banners in the team colors of the “Metalist” football (soccer) club and devoted to the opening of its rebuilt stadium.

By way of concluding this section, I will note that the generally dull and gray cityscape of Kharkiv has recently been enlivened by the diversity of artistic projects that have appeared in the public sphere. In the city’s streets, parks, and metro system, we encounter a true mix of genres and styles of art. Despite this variation, the public art discussed is united by a goal to “update” the memory of the city about historical dates, events, and, finally, about people. However, although they exist in static forms, they do not look at us as traditional

monuments. Rather, they are placed directly in our path, as is “Iron Man” in the subway, or under our feet, like the alternative emblem of Kharkiv on pavements of the city’s central streets.

Unlike European public art, public art in Kharkiv is not aggressive - its task is not to remind residents and visitors of the horrors of totalitarian regimes or wartime. Although it is likely that a time for this will come, heretofore public art has focused more on creative or integrative issues. Kharkiv is a complex symbolic system and urgently needs images that can enrich the value of this system: a “social imaginary” that includes positive images and symbols that are able to reconfigure the baggage of collective knowledge – social memory – by using the nonpolitical, anti-heroic, and anti-monumental. And artists are aware of this need both for the inhabitants (which in some sense is the city) and for the city’s self-image on a nation-wide scale. Thus, the public works of art discussed here have employed various artistic approaches to the “work of memory” to shape a cohesive and attractive image of the city and its inhabitants. In the next section, I shift the emphasis from explaining the artistic and creative side of public art to identifying the immediate socio-economic and cultural context of public art and public sphere in the city.

The socio-cultural context of Kharkiv public art as “reminder”

To reconstruct the social and cultural context of works of public art, I utilize expert interviews. Altogether there were fourteen interviews, including nine with artists (R. Minin, G. Zinkovsky, S. Popov, U. Bychyenkova, Y. Alimova, V. Koltun, O. Yalovega, K. Zorkin, D. Moshchenko); one with a curator (M. Koneva, deputy director of the Kharkiv Municipal Gallery); two with art critics (O. Koval, senior lecturer in art history and theory HDADM; L. Starodubtseva, head, Kharkiv National University media communications); and two with representatives of city administration (S. A. Hulyevsky, Head of Public Relations SOE Kharkiv Metro; D. P. Kuznetsov, Deputy Head, Department for Culture, Kharkiv municipality). All interviews were conducted between November 1 and November 28, 2009, in Kharkiv. In this section, I offer some general comments to help us better understand the context in which public art in Kharkiv exists.

Kharkiv showed progress in the unique social and cultural changes. This city is a place where tradition and identity are always in flux. Today we can confidently state that the creative, public environment has emerged out of a vicious circle of deadly stagnation. The cultural vacuum and print “gyres” that were present in the 1990s have been replaced by a variety of cultural artifacts. Kharkiv is now a place where a number of multicultural

trajectories pave the way into the historical and physical space of the city. Its history and memory are part of experiments carried out at on various fronts throughout the city. Public art is one such movement involved in this process and it is being carried out in accordance with the identity and norms of the tradition closest to it, the decorative and monumental schools of art. Traditionally, the “innovative” residents of Kharkiv recognize themselves in new creative facts of public artists’ self-identification

Urban space is not just a place that permits, often thoughtlessly, movement. On the contrary, urban space has a unique historic character, including traces of cultural accretions and struggle. Its spatiality derives from the interactions and physical objects contained within it and constructed by information flows and relationships between and among people and objects. Space is constantly produced and modified. And if this space is open, able to be viewed, culturally homogeneous, and contains some element of conflict, then it is public. My assessment of public artworks is grounded in a sociocultural interpretation of the nature of public space and the nature of place. Public space and *place* more generally depend on what happens within their borders, what kind of interactions permeates them, what senses describe the trajectory of power relations, the meaning and value attributed to works of public art, their sponsors, critics, spectators, strangers, and what meaning and significance the work of art itself brings to everyday social and cultural community.¹²

The broad range of social relationships creates different places, which, in turn, differentiates the “public.” Awareness of this variability imposes the corresponding principle of plurality into the analysis of works of public art. Here, two points are important. First, “publicity” can take both “strong” and “weak” forms.¹³ Accordingly, public art can utilize “strong” publicity, creating a ruthless, energetic environment for interaction, criticism, and different social identities; or it can employ “weak” publicity and engender a harmonious environment that is, above all, aesthetically pleasing and supportive of social tolerance. Second, public art is public not because of its constant motion or its introduction into public place / space, which it ultimately symbolically eliminates, but because public art is able to construct these places by means of material objects and / or Pleiades of cultural practices and dialogue.

The Narrative space of Kharkiv public art

Most works of art, according to their creators, aim to be ornamental and decorative. In this way, they seek to aestheticize the urban environment and create a brilliant image that will unite the city. As one artist, A. Yalovega explains, “This is an example of how artists express

themselves, how they make life a little brighter. It is a type of nonverbal therapy.”¹⁴ Another artist, R. Minin, offers a similar perspective on the beneficial nature of public art: “As Leger said, color is a nutritious vitamin in the city for people.” Minin’s public artworks are aesthetically appealing, especially to children, but they are not bold or particularly provocative. Rather, they create an atmosphere of harmony, laughter, a sense of the sublime, and perfection. In response to my question as to whether his works will ever be exhibited in a contemporary art gallery, he explained, “I doubt that the gallery will like what we draw for what it really is, even though some, embarrassingly, have even tried to make it beautiful.”

Public art reveals a great deal about the character of a city and its public culture. The idea that “Kharkiv is painted” betrays a temptation to display the city’s openness and democracy. Despite the fact that public art in Kharkiv is moving both ideologically and practically in this direction of openness, it still stumbles on the bumps of the city’s Soviet experience. The totality of socialist realist art created an institutional framework in which art dominates an authoritarian relationship between itself and society. Kharkiv public art retransmits, to some extent, these institutional forms of cultural life based on Soviet models. This attitude is reflected both in claims by experts (U. Bychenkova, Y. Alimova) that the state should support artists and in the stylistic connection of public art in Kharkiv to the monumental school of Soviet art.

Thus, Minin claims that public artists’ desire to beautify the city’s streets has at least two distinct interpretations. In the first interpretation, the identity of the artist is placed within the wider context of modern art and its authoritarian past. The public artist’s opinions, values, and identity are showcased in the city’s public space. In their works of public art, we see post-avant-garde trends in contemporary art found not only in Kharkiv, but in art throughout the former Soviet Union. These artworks violate the ideological foundations of public art in an urban environment. The media frequently consider the actions¹⁵ of public artists outrageous. In this context, the captions that accompany each wall painting showing authorship¹⁶ or some other authoritative attribute serve literally to “occupy” the city.

A certain degree of intellectual discomfort also exists because of the relative uniformity of style of public artworks, which are predominated by murals as opposed to performances or installations. The limited arsenal of expressive techniques is reinforced by their permanency. For example, using a waterproof paint ensures wall paintings a long life on the streets. But this idea of longevity runs contrary to the episodic nature of street art that conforms to the laws of urban life. In this understanding, street art must be flexible, to be born and die every day, echoing the lives of the city’s residents.

As Konstantin Zorkin, an expressionist painter, explains, art is not sacral, universal, or eternal. During my interview with him, he spoke as many revolutionary avant-garde artists do, with romance, skepticism and determination, of the urgent need to combat the number one enemy of art, “philistine indifference.” In Zorkin’s view, “Street art is a bridge between the temple of art and the masscult, in other words, the intermediary between art and society.” To establish this intermediary connection, it must be understood that, “the primary purpose of such social work is aesthetic education” (Zorkin). Interestingly, these statements echo those by Soviet ideologists, ancient philosophers, and avant-garde artists of the early twentieth century that art should have an educational purpose.

That street art is a tool for bringing people to art and that it manifests the artist’s desires to see the city filled with art in fact does not separate it from socialist realism. The main difference between the two is that, unlike the socialist realist art of the Soviet period, street art imposes on the public the meanings and values not of an ideological state apparatus, but of the individual artists. The task at hand is thus the decoding of the subaltern symbols contained within these works. In other words, public art in the urban space is a visual provocation that seeks to change the perception of the artwork and fashion a new attitude toward it, while not openly challenging viewers’ ideas by using aggressive configurations.

Zorkin eschews this moderate idea in favor of something bolder. For him, in order to educate viewers, it is first necessary to shock them. As he puts it, “Sometimes, to wash someone’s eyes you may first need to spit in them.” Zorkin is deeply skeptical about the obvious aesthetic considerations and decorative nature of Minin’s and Zinkovsky’s work. However, Zorkin represents one of the extremes of Kharkiv street art that rejects the traditional triad of power distribution in art between the artist, audience, and artwork itself in which the artist is an author who has more authority. Rather, the balance of these elements must be qualified.

Another conceptual flaw in Kharkiv public art is its potential loss in potency when it caters to a wide audience. For example, art critic Oleg Koval argues that, in contrast to Zorkin’s visual narrative, Minin’s “poetry”¹⁷ demonstrates the unconditional reflection of the artwork’s essence in its form. In other words, the artwork clearly expresses its meaning. This means that even a casual glance from a passerby is enough to ascertain its meaning. The subject of this type of artwork is often a recognizable household image. A series of works presents a collage of contemporary everyday life. To quickly manifest its meaning, public artwork strives for simplification and offers easily understandable conceptual characters. This explains why there are so many verbal cues in works of public art. Koval explains, “The

ways and reasons why visual components are arranged in particular ways, the discussion of which is usually confined to comics, sparks debate about Minin's work not as art, but as 'conceptology' and 'conception writing' that contain unconscious cultural metaphors." In other words, Minin's works incorporate a number of common trends in the understanding of visual space in advertising. They offer not only goods or services, but ideas and symbols.

However, public artists must be careful not to go too far in this direction and create a language that is oversimplified, or, by contrast, an image that is inaccessible to the public. Both forms, increasing complexity and simplification, are collapsing the development of public art in Kharkiv. As artist V. Koltun concludes, "When addressing extremely important social problems, it's very easy to make a mistake. Such work must be designed to withstand the highest degree of viewer criticism. People today are more aware of their world than they were 20 years ago, because of the Internet. When working with precise cultural concepts, it is very easy to fall into naïve romanticism, opaque, lifeless expressionism, or flat discontent."

Now I turn to the second interpretation of public art, which focuses on specific works of art not within the general paradigm of public art, but how public artwork is reflected in the broader mirror of public culture of the city. The question at hand is, then, to explore the nature of attitudes to art in society and the public nature of this culture. The "soft," "weak" public in public artworks as "reminder" in Kharkiv is not the fault of the artist, but rather a consequence of the Soviet experience in regulating of public cultural practices. The same (authoritarian) designs, categories and schemes of perception, understandings and practices of art still persist today. With all of its desire to break with the academic "docks" (borrowing the term from Bourdieu), the Kharkiv avant-garde embodied by Minin and other artists still retains a share of authoritarianism in the logic of their relations with the public. In offering an alternative to the state monopoly on the development of cultural values and identities, artists, acting through the mechanism of the social-art poster tradition in the USSR, essentially monopolize this right for themselves. This necessitates reflection, choice and discussion of public artwork among a broad and diverse audience.

However, with every new work of art, some artistic innovators are moving steadily to deconstruct the "monopolization" of the senses by public institutions. In this regard, the wide range of festival participants in "Gagarin Fest" and the future plans of its sponsors (Non-Stop Media [2008] and Street-Art [2009]) are illuminating. M. Koneva, deputy director of the Kharkiv Municipal Gallery, explains, "We are going to extend the range of techniques and genres. There will be street sculptures, more events, and of course, street art."

The interviews with U. Bychyenkova, G. Zinkovsky, Y. Alimova, R. Minin, and O. Yalovega speak to the difficulty of creating “soft,” “harmonic,” and “human-scale” works of art. It is also important to bear in mind the audience here. The audience, which is undergoing daily crisis (economic, social, cultural), will obviously reject destructive, conflict-provoking public art. Instead, artist G. Zinkovsky argues that he and other artists place bright accents in the “text” of the city to create a brief respite from the mass of information noise generated by the commercials, as well as to highlight unique visual images of the city. Zinkovsky continues: “I am creating a focal point in the city, which gives residents a reason to walk down the street, something to show each other, something to tell the tourists.” Similarly, Artist R. Minin emphasizes the benefit his public artwork brings to the city, its residents, and himself: “Streets are like different lives, they’re never identical. There are crazy, underclass, and normal, and cops, and grandmothers on those streets, and it is interesting there. I know a lot, and it was pleasant to work and interact with passersby, and I’m satisfied, I am glad - I did something good.”



“Ukrains’ka mriya” (Ukrainian dream), G. Zinkovski, 2009

Still, artworks without open public debate are just parts of an urban culture game for the artist. Openness and heterogeneity are some of the key indicators and principles in the creation of public works that are observed only at a “narrative level” of publicity, that is, in the physical presence of the works.¹⁸ There is no formulation of an institutional element that would provide open and critical discussion on public artwork among artists, art critics, scientists, and the wider community. As one local artist, Y. Alimova, puts it, “The public art movement in Kharkiv is very young, and is not as socially conscious and responsible as it should be. Public art, of course, makes our city interesting and unique. But it hasn’t always been so simple, it had its own difficulties, and now the result speaks for itself.”

The lack of social responsibility and social consciousness are frequently recurring themes in the artistic and academic criticism of public art in Kharkiv. Generally, I view this as a natural part of the growth of public art in the city. As this new art form consolidates and becomes institutionalized, the institutions and mechanisms of publicity naturally gravitate around these projects and pay them more attention. Artists in the public sphere often demonstrate a lack of experience and skills, which, in Kharkiv, has caused public art to be associated with “childlike” qualities such as excessive forwardness and extraordinariness. Zorkin comments that, “Kharkiv public art today focuses only on promoting the theme of Pushkin and Gogol.” Another artist, V. Koltun, seconds Zorkin’s statement on the difficulties young public artists face, though he remains optimistic: “Playing with values and stereotypes, of course, is difficult for young artists, but this is very interesting and promising.”

On the other hand, most graduates from Kharkiv’s 15(!) art institutes face a dearth of professional opportunities. The large number of professionals necessitates alternative platforms for creative expression for the younger generations of artists. Of course, one option is always professional emigration. In Kharkiv, the lack of professional opportunities for young artists manifests itself in rather odd ways. There is no systematic coordination of artists or groups that would allow artists to build on one another’s projects. How can these forces be united? Kharkiv painter Minin offers the following suggestion: “An artistic team needs rehearsal, and this rehearsal should be on a wall where they could paint legally and it would be easy for them to practice.” One member of the Ukrainian contemporary art group “SOS’ka” elaborates more on the problems young artists face:

The daily routine and drabness of Kharkiv is forcing young artists to look for an alternative outlet for their creative energy. Minin painted on the wall, others create private galleries, a third group acts as if it were tainted and segregates itself in extreme expressionism, while the fourth goes into business, like graphic design. For an artist, engagement with public art project necessitates some institutions ... in which a person could come up with ideas and put them into practice without worrying about competition, if these ideas are interesting and relevant, that is. And people should also receive money to experiment creatively and not be left cold and hungry as Minin was when he painted “Gogol” in October (2008). His work was not evaluated properly. This kind of life leads an artist to the grave or, if he is creative, into business, and eventually his works will adorn the bar interiors. [The way artists are treated] is not humane or proper. There is no communication between society and art, and no mechanism for it. We need a dialogue (S. Popov).

The recent economic crisis has eroded much potential support – financial and otherwise – from government, private businesses, or civil organizations. Art for these social actors today is regarded only in terms of their own personal or social interests. Frequently, this means that art is not separated from the sacral or ideology-mentoring functions of propaganda. In Kharkiv, art usually does not receive much attention except around holidays or on the eve of the rare visits from famous people. At other times, sponsorship has only residual value.

However, financial problems are only the tip of the iceberg. The real threat comes not from lack of money, but from the irresponsibility of patrons, sponsors, and the government. For example, interviews with municipal officials (the deputy head of department of culture in the city and the curator of “art-politics” in the subway) reveal that those in positions of political power harbor an ambivalent attitude toward art. While municipal officials may have good intentions to “humanize” the urban environment by “making it more comfortable to stay in” (D. Kuznetsov), in practice, their use of public art is little more than a propagandistic practice to project an artificial image of “contemporary,” “liberal,” and “caring” municipal authorities. For instance, all of the artistic installations and events in the Kharkiv Metro without exception are the result of initiatives from the head of the Metro. According to S. Hulyevsky, the head of the public relations department for the metro, “The boss [director Sergei Museev] has a strange weakness for art, he thought up all the art in the subway from scratch.” Such a complete co-optation of public art in the metro is remarkable. Still, it is embarrassing that all of the works that originated from the pen of the boss are conceptually sheepish and aesthetically weak. Separate projects, such as the “park corner,” installed in an untidy entrance to the subway, look, frankly, cynical.

In a manner characteristic of Soviet leadership, in Kharkiv, the authorities can take back unexpected gifts as easily as they can give them. When approving the functional and artistic aspects of a project, its financing and implementation often depends on the decision of one person, albeit a patron. Thus the subtle and complex process of the democratization of public space (underground, in this case), as well as the art itself, which is designed to “socialize” this space, often take on an absurd character. Minin recounts an incident that illustrates exactly this phenomenon: “He [the director of the metro] still wanted to have drawings in the metro of ‘Gepu’¹⁹ and ‘Dobkin’²⁰...I even made a sketch at his request, or rather on his orders: Dobkin with a shovel and Kernes with binoculars. Well, it was fun to do, I even showed them holding caduceus.²¹ But when they approved the sketch it was no longer funny.” The participation of local authorities in urban art projects is not simply passive.

Rather, it seeks to place artworks literally on the walls of communal property. It seems that the municipal government has not yet understood the constructive and democratic potential of these cultural practices.

Despite these obstacles, local artists remain confident and optimistic about the role of public art in reshaping Kharkiv as a cultural, contemporary and clean city. As Zorkin comments, "It's all good, but for a half million [residents] in Kharkiv this is not enough ... Kharkiv must recognize its great potential in terms of creativity." O. Yalovega is similarly upbeat: "In the future, all of this will be really great for Kharkiv's inhabitants." And Minin reminds us not to discount the importance of public art for the city's residents: "Let Kharkiv look forward to all possible forms of art - provocations and events, performances and installations - and not just football players around every corner."

Conclusions

In summarizing the reconstruction of the social and cultural context of artistic practices in Kharkiv, it is important to bear the following points in mind about the function of public art in the city as "reminder." Public art:

1. Provides "soft" or "weak" public spaces, in other words places that are structured critically, but not in such a way as to present conflicting subjects or themes that cause heated social interaction. Rather, these spaces generate socially passive and tolerant, but distanced, interactions.
2. Is apolitical and actualizes the identity of Kharkov by updating the symbolic meaning and collective knowledge of Kharkov as a cultural, modern, intelligent, and environmentally safe city.
3. Articulates the artists' claims for public attention.
4. Embodies the narrative element of publicity. Public art does not create the institutional aspect of publicity, which would provide an open public discussion forum initiated by the artists for the critical evaluation of the artwork by the general public.
5. Is created by skilled artists who strive to imbue their creations, which address social problems, with an aesthetic element to harmonize urban space.
6. Is stylistically distinct from its Western analogues. This specificity is reflected in the combined traditions of painting in the Kharkiv School in tandem with street-art trends found in European and American cities.

7. Preserves some Soviet patterns of understanding the relationship between art and power, as well as art and society. These are reflected specifically in how the audience regards artists' complaints of the lack of public funding for art, and also in how little attention is given to views of residents in the urban area where public artworks are planned.

However, as I have show in this paper, I refuse to accept the fatality inherent in contemporary Ukrainian sociological thought, and instead proceed by examining the role of public art by exploring the status of such cultural practices. Because relatively little in the cultivation of the "tender flowers" of democracy has used sociological methods (including theories, criticisms, and predictions), this garners respect not only from the scientific community but also among the wider population. And this respect is justified by the creative, integrative, and critical resources of public art, as well as its potential to modernize. These *can* and *must* be brought to bear on the management, assimilation, and improvement of the social, cultural and economic life of city communities.

But how to can these processes be organized? Dziga Vertov, a classic Russian filmmaker, defines art as: "a life caught unawares." The practice of an urban artist is similarly based on the tactics of surprise and amazement. "Masters" sho surprise the viewer do so through simple things, just one line or phrase from an episode of life. They not only inspire urban residents to decorate the place in which they live, but also excite the cognitive and mnemonic processes of consciousness.

At the same time, saying that these processes unfold unexpectedly or unpredictably does not imply 1) that art is shrouded in mystery and can be understood by only a select few (artists); and 2) as this article has demonstrated with respect to public art in Kharkiv, the creative process need not be autonomous (isolating) unruly, and chaotic. Rather, as Peter Hall suggests, creativity and innovation in an urban context should become an integrated and holistic process that encompasses all aspects of urban life.²² Kharkiv has yet to realize that its fate is inevitably connected with how it uses, or is used by, the creative potential of its citizens. The ability of the city to recognize, disclose, nurture, guide, use, maintain, and, eventually, assimilate this creativity will determine its fate among Ukrainian cities.

Today an important question for any city is how (and if) it will provide an atmosphere that will foster the development of its latent creative potential. Following English writer Phil Wood,²³ I insist that public art (the catalyst of democratization and modernization processes) possesses the means, strength, and resources for the creation of such an atmosphere. To that

end, by way of conclusion I suggest several stimuli that can push “a city in crisis” into developing the creative potential of its artists. The substance of following suggestions is based on the combination of specific properties of “the public” and “public art”:

1. *Comprehension of crisis*: Many cities have experienced crisis, but few have realized the constructive potential inherent in it. Glasgow and Huddersfield serve as examples of two British cities that have successfully responded to economical and social crises during the 1980s; other examples of successful responses to crises include many cities in Ireland and Belgium in the 1970s.

2. *Creation of space for creative experiment*: designating open areas of the city’s “art-space”²⁴ where innovative thinking is encouraged.

3. *Partnership and gathering of ideas*: creating an appropriate atmosphere for debate and network cooperation; adventurism and competitiveness.

4. *Inclusion of other senses*: Involving diverse points of ethnical, cultural, and other ways of experiencing art besides only sight.

5. *Organizational opportunities and management*: This factor is one of the most important stimuli because, without effective organizational structures and technologies,²⁵ a city will not be able to translate the creative ideas into actions.

The role of public art artists – the “cultural creators,” as art critic O. Koval terms them – in activating and increasing the creative capital of a city will be positive only in the case when their cultural practices provide a forum for open and critical communication. In other words, the principles of the public sphere included in the sociocultural structurization of the public art field can become an incentive to “update” and reformat Kharkiv’s social, economic, and political realms.

Appendix

Table 1. Works of public art as “reminder” displayed in Kharkiv from October 2008 to December 2009.

	Piece	Author	Location	Genre	Style
1.	"Duel of the Century	R. Minin	69a Pushkinskaya st.	Wall painting	Street-art
2.	"Eternal Love"	R. Minin	67 Pushkinskaya st.	Wall painting	Street-art
3.	"Pushkin in fun" (Пушкин в азарте)	I. Ponkratov	64 Pushkinskaya st.	Wall painting	Street-art
4.	"Naked Pushkin"	R. Minin	67 Pushkinskaya st.	Wall painting	Street-art
5.	"Pushkin's palms"	Y. Alimova	53 Pushkinskaya st.	Wall painting	Street-art
6.	"Windows of growth"	R. Minin, G. Zinkovsky	61 Pushkinskaya st.	Wall painting	Street-art
7.	"Pushkin and the Muse"	S. Harlshan	Aula, 67 Pushkinskaya st.	Wall painting	Street-art
8.	"Gogol-Mogol"	U. Bychenkova, G. Zinkovsky	2 Gogol st.	Wall painting	Street-art
9.	"Ukrainian dream"	G. Zinkovsky	32 Pushkinskaya st.	Wall painting	Naive Art
10	"Ukrainian miracle"	G. Zinkovsky	32 Pushkinskaya st.	Wall painting	Naive Art
11	Concert at the Subway	Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra	Subway station "Universytet"	Music event	Classical concert
12	"Christmas tramway"	R. Minin	Route number 12	Action	Community art
13	Iron Man	Team subway workers	Subway station "Universytet "	Installation	Techno-statue

14	"Motor City"	Design studio «3Z»	st. Pushkinskaya st. Sumskaia, av. Lenin	Intervention	City-lights
15	"Grew"	U.Bychyenkova, Y. Alimova	st. Rymarskaya, st. Culture	Eco-Action	"Art in the public interest"
16	"Eco- navigation"	U. Bychyenkova	st. Rymarskaya	Eco-Action	"Art in public interest"
17	"Clean pigeon"	G. Zinkovsky	45 Pushkinskaya st.	Wall painting	"Art in public interest"
18	"Gagarin Fest"	R. Minin and another group of artists.	20a Gagarina av.	A series of wall paintings	Street-art
19	"Brocaded corner"	Order subways	Subway station "Radianska"	Installation	Plonk-art

¹ The author is grateful to Katherine Pruess for her generous editorial assistance with this article.

² M. Krajewski, "Od muzeum publicznego do muzeum publiczności," w: J.Lubiak (red.), *Muzeum jako świetlany przedmiot pożądania* (Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź., 2007): 51-64; and M. Krajewski, "Co to jest sztuka publiczna," *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* (1/2005): 2-35.

³ Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

⁴ It is a relationship, continuity, development and dismembering of anything in the ancestral connection, such as philosophical ideas.

⁵ O. V. Koval', "Kultur'nyi smysly i vizual'nyi narrativ Romana Minina (Electronic resource)", *Vestnik KhGADI* (No. 2, 2006, Seria: Iskusstvovedenie), http://www.nbu.gov.ua/portal/Soc_Gum/Tnvakho/2009-3_4/09kovrma.pdf

⁶ TSN.ua, "Kharkiv'ska filarmonii dala kontsert u metro," (April 20, 2010) <http://tsn.ua/tsikavinki/harkivska-filarmoniya-dala-kontsert-u-metro.html>

⁷ Natal'ia Kogan, "Rozhdestvenskii marshurt' 'bezumnogo tramvaichika,'" (Electronic Resource)" *Novosti Khar'kova*, http://kh.ric.ua/vse_novosti/obwestvo/rozhdestvenskij_marshrut_bezumnogo_tramvajchika.

⁸ The "Tripoli" Christmas festival was a unique event in Kharkiv on December 25 to 27. The festival lasted for three days and took place in three fields. The festival was created

and directed by Roman Minin, who was supported by patron Anatolia Saenko, who is known for the grandiose “Gagarin Fest,” which was a major art event for the city in November 2009.

⁹ “3Z” is a Kharkiv studio specializing in graphic design. The founders and employees are Sergey Myshakin and Tanya Borzunova. Their website is <http://3z.com.ua>

¹⁰ For more, see 4th Block Association of Graphic Designers, “Warning CO2!” <http://www.4block.org/ru/project>

¹¹ This festival took place between October 30 to November 7, 2009. One part of the festival united different artists and styles. The name of the festival, according to organizers, was chosen because the artist is in some sense like Gagarin in that he opens new worlds for people’s imagination. The festival program included interactive promotions, online painting, performances, an exhibition of contemporary art painters, and, of course, street-art.

¹² D. Massey and J. Rose, “Personal Views: Public Art Research Project” Artpoint: A Catalyst for Creative Thinking in Public Spaces, www.artpoint-trust.org.uk.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ These quotes and the others that follow are English translations based on the original Russian-language interviews.

¹⁵ The “protest rise” of Gamlet on a stool in the city center, watch is a parody of the army orderly who has served on “locker.” The artist thus raised the issue of time passing speedily in the fussy life of contemporary man. Stop the time to look at what’s happening - it’s the act of independence, freedom and reflexivity.

¹⁶ The idea of authorship, which is distributed in public space and monopolizes it, is articulated by sociologist Oliver Marchart following J. Hertz: O. Marchart, “Art, Space and the Public Sphere(s)” <http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/0102/marchart>.

¹⁷ I understand the appeal of poetry in art in that the text works to address himself to his own language. This principle is well-known formula of pure art: “art for art’s sake”.

¹⁸ A Shparaga, “Demokraticeskii potentsial kulturnykh praktik v usloviakh avtoritarisma: sluchai Belarusi,” *Postsovetskaia publichnost’: Belarus’, Ukraina*, ed. V. Furs (Vil’nius: EGU, 2008), 168.

¹⁹ “Gepa” is the nickname of the acting Mayor of Kharkiv, Genady A. Kernes.

²⁰ The surname of the governor of Kharkiv region, Mikhail Dobkin.

²¹ This is one part of Kharkiv’s emblem.

²² P. Hall, qtd. in Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How Its Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 158, www.creativeclass.com

²³ Phil Wood, "Big Ideas for a Small Town: The Huddersfield Creative Town Initiative," <http://philwood.eu/#/publications/4537957407>.

²⁴ How it has been made with one of the quarters of Vilnius. "The independent republic Zareche" is similar to the Vatican in the center of Rome but instead of religion, here, creative freedom rules. For more detail, please see <http://www.inache.net/mif/209>

²⁵ For a description of one of the possible ways in which the creative process can be used in the organization of a city, based on the example of the English town, Huddersfield, see <http://www.huddersfieldpride.com/archive/cti/cycle.htm>