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A Revolution on Standby

Author Aaron Moulton tries a 72 Hours jump into Kiev's Contemporary Art scene

"There's never been anything like his before," a common expression heard during my 72 hours in Kiev but one that was always meant with the utmost sincerity. It was true. Within less than a year there has been the opening of a contemporary art center, the inauguration of an arts competition, the steady blossoming of more focused spaces for engaged contemporary art projects and a revolution on hold; what more could you ask for? Last August Kiev had a surprising lack of art institutions in place, everyone presumably holding their breath for the opening of the **Pinchuk Art Centre**, which opened last September. In a city where setting precedents appears to be a national pastime and entrepreneurial energies have plenty of space to operate, the speed with which we see the cultural landscape change here will be noteworthy. **Collector Viktor Pinchuk appeared with force ...**

in the early Noughties, filling the gap of what were presumably the hopeful expectations of George Soros' efforts to institutionalize art and culture in Eastern Europe, i.e. neo-capitalists directionalizing capital towards art. Commonly dubbed as the richest man in the Ukraine, he is

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one of the only people to establish a homegrown model of institutional approach for the good of culture. Out on the street the abundance of E800 class Mercedes SUVs show the other side of that coin.

Pinchuk has been collecting art for more than a decade and with the advice of his curator **Alexander Soloviov** managed to put together an incomparable array of the Ukraine's more notable players in contemporary art. Local stars like Alexander Gnilitsky, Vassily Tsagalov, Oleg Kulik and Sergey Bratkov sit alongside Olafur Eliasson, Thomas Ruff or Michael Lin, a problematically self-evident effort to legitimize through an East-West call and answer of rather clumsy curating. The troubling question about the collection however lies in how rich it is; a sign of how unaware or inactive the collecting of local institutions has been. If Ukrainian institutions ever tried to put together a collection, let alone a survey show of contemporary art from the country, they would be looking to Pinchuk as London's Tate would Saatchi to adlib their glaring oversights of recent local accomplishments.

Nicolas Bourriaud was enlisted in 2003 to head up the acquisition of "international" art, an overwhelmingly daunting task of piece-mealing an as yet indeterminate facade of the most hip and hyped. The focus has been tamed by looking at works dealing with art and technology – areas already present in Pinchuk's extensive collection of new media work from the Ukraine and semi-biographical given Pinchuk's background in industry. This collection and its activities have officially set the stakes for an art scene that has been long dominated by a rather weak commercial market. Asking how one can generate interest where art world chic or cultural awareness is still not especially widespread, the center works in an intelligently populist fashion to get the layperson and the cognoscenti involved.

Choosing shows and curatorial motifs that have the right mix of gimmick and glam, the retrospective of Vik Muniz and the just opened exhibition of work from Elton John's collection were proof that for a private institution satisfying a quasi governmental status of initiative that this is probably the right path to take for a beginning.

Natalia Manzhali and Ludmila Montsiuk from Media Art Lab ...

were waiting for me at the Pinchuk Art Center's futurohipster café. Bourriaud has ended up with a monster in what appears to be a cliché of his own making. A white geodesic cavern of cool, the bar on the top floor of the art center touted everything from interactive sofas with unconventionally movable parts and speakers teeming with bossanova remix all the way to a set of lonely and probably never used turntables sitting symbolically center stage. This was somehow an unironic welcome to contemporary art style. The center itself is located in Kiev's ultra high-end Arena center, a complex that boasts the city's finest luxury fashion and entertainment indulgences.

Manzhali and Montsiuk are an inspiring pair whose activity has worked to develop a dialogue with a nascent but multiplying public in Kiev through a brand of unorthodox public art projects. Media Art Lab receives funding from a variety of the usual suspects: Goethe Institute and occasionally Soros. Recent collaborations include **ZKM in Karlsruhe and ARS Electronica**. Their work together under the guise of this organization is only two years old however their partnership has spanned over a decade through the Soros years through which they initiated the **KIMAF festival for media arts**. The duo is always finding new ways to proliferate a media arts platform for Ukrainian artists. The projects give site-specificity a renovated edge by working in such unexpected locations such as the football stadium, one of the many casinos or even the

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stock exchange. In early September they will have a hand in putting together the **Animation Film Festival held in both Kiev and Linz.**

Out on the street in the Independence Square ...

demonstrators seemingly hold the city at bay organizing manifestations, concerts and rallies. All the while they are squatting in tents and waving flags, a view that gives any first glance a sense that the "Orange Revolution" from the winter of 2004/2005 is still in full swing. Under a very thin surface however lies a different story. The varied "color revolutions" of late have breached international public consciousness with a zeal that democracy and a final lustrative purging of the last remnants of the Soviet system is in order. Yet lubricated by the U.S. government's interests and Soros-fed campaign tactics, the establishment of a more transparent bureaucracy proves difficult when it comes to pragmatics that one isn't too surprised when the story fades as the last piece of confetti touches down – i.e. the "Blue Jeans Revolution" in Minsk or the now unknown "Purple Revolution" in Iraq.

In fact after Victor Yushenko claimed victory over Viktor Yanukovich in the notoriously rigged elections, he was soon after forced to set up a bipartisan coalition with his ousted opponent, a seeming contradiction to the momentum generated by the protestors, news and hopeful beginnings they created. Today, three years later as the next election sits on the autumnal horizon, we still see camps fighting for the sway of their respective parties in this Orange Revolution on standby.

What you don't know or immediately see is that everyone there has been invited, bussed in from the provinces rather than coming out of national interest. Each of these revolutionaries has in fact been paid a modest fee equivalent to 30 euros a day, not bad as a wage in Kiev, to live within a theater of revolution. Some of the "professional revolutionaries" have been rumored to change sides based on better pay and the amount of money used to sustain this effort is by now surely a figure in the government's budget.

These conditions offer a curious creative environment ...

for socially engaged practices or the individual generally interested in the dynamics of national identity in flux. During the initial surge when the revolution seemed to hold an original political position, a young group of 20 or so artists came to the frontlines alongside their countrymen to share this platform. The group called **Revolutionary Experimental Space or R.E.P.**, used the revolution as a medium to protest a different kind of urgency, the inertia of art and culture. Superficially seen as pseudo-activism of an enfant terrible, their actions hold a very specifically Ukrainian place in cultural production. Their aim: to revolutionize a language for contemporary art, one that is not a hybrid East-West dialect but something truly Ukrainian used to decipher locality with a critical approach. Their work, easily placed within an updated yet site-specific vernacular of institutional critique, aims everywhere from the passerby, the feint official infrastructures for art, the education system to an even wider ambition of making concise and astute observations and interventions around the geopolitics that shroud the Ukraine.

Now having cohered into a core of six members (Kseniya Gnyilytska, Nikita Kadan, Zhanna Kadyrova, Olesya Khomenko, Volodymyr Kuznetsov, Lada Nakonechna), two recent projects from 2007, "REP Academy" and "Contraband", provide insightful ruminations on these issues.

The first is a straightforward documentary that dissects the academy in which many of the group still attend. The piece potentially elicits a reflex interpretation of a negative nature when thinking about the dated educational system still buttressed by an ethos leftover from the Soviet-era

artist unions. While it certainly illuminates the conditions -- providing overall one of the most informative perspectives on the structure responsible for educating the next generations -- it proves to hold things at a responsibly objective distance delineating the path every artist still takes today in the Ukraine.

On the other hand, "Contraband" ...

shows members of the group inflating colorful balloons with methane gas and hot water bottles with oil, materials that are then strapped and tied to their body. The aim of the "performance" was to see whether they could successfully import insignificant quantities of fuel from the Ukraine into Poland. Sure enough the video shows these merry pranksters crossing seamlessly through customs and out into the Polish border town. The final scene is of them absconding behind the public toilet, cutting the material free and leading the viewer to believe they go to sell their import alongside the countless other peddling vodka and cigarettes. The commentary does not get any more direct. Here we witness the alternative economies potentially fabled from the geostrategic manipulation of Ukraine's position by Russia, conditions that might lead the common person to absurd lengths of importing a material that now literally lubricates our diplomatic and foreign policies in the world.

Many of the local commercial galleries don't differentiate themselves... much between being vendors of art or artisan craft, selling works that have little redeeming value for visual culture. That being said, a handful are working to change that.

At the gallery called "**Zeh**", found in an inconspicuous back courtyard, a series of iconographically rampant work adorned the raw brick walls. The artist Rustam Mirzoev made paintings to deconstruct the daily codes of Ukrainian life through superimposing them upon a tense series of blue-tone social scenes. **Lada Nakonechna**, a member of R.E.P. had a solo show that inaugurated the gallery located in the corner of the Arsenal complex. "Fashion Ukraine" was a video of Kiev locals exiting the market slowed down to a crawling pace and synched to a hypnotrance beat. It gave a runway interpretation of the everyday that caused the corners of the mouth to curl. Another part of the project showed snapshots Nakonechna took on the fly of people seemingly mimicking their immediate environs. Coincidentally dressed in near exact hues of the wall, door or vehicle they happen to be passing, the artist, like a hunter or urban zoologist, captured them with the precision of Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moments." Fine Art Gallery had an exhibition of new work by Ksenia Gnyilitska. A departure from earlier projects, the very young but well exposed Gnyilitska -- also a member of the R.E.P. and whose father is painter Alexander Gnyilitska -- filled canvases with simulations of fabric designs from every corner of the earth, all cut-up, mishmashed, and juxtaposed to create unlikely but effective visual harmonies.

Lectures, conferences and now an arts competition the EIDOS foundation ... is helping to build commercially viable careers of Ukrainian and Eastern European artists both in Kiev. The crowd began to swell with local glitterati at the massive **Arsenal building**. BBC Kiev Correspondent Helen Fawkes and exhibition co-sponsor Jock Mendoza-Wilson from System Capital Management both agreed that there had been nothing of this kind ever in their time in Kiev and the energy and amount of people was proof of that.

While the look of the exhibition operated a bit like an art fair -- and the quality as patchy as one -- it certainly offered a more genuine attempt to change the cultural landscape. Each of the

respective pavilions was filled with one or two projects that were asked to envision a potential museum of contemporary art for Kiev. Probably the most poetically ironic project was a video by **Yu Kruchak** showing a young blind girl delicately passing her fingers across the architect's model of the yet unimaginable museum in question. As the city really only has the Pinchuk center and the listing Soros center this could only be described as a cry for help to the ministries of culture to wake up.

Festivities were pleasantly interrupted by the theatrics of "**Dach**", a performance group whose play entitled "The White Bosch" after Hieronymous was enough to make Matthew Barney weep for sincere material. Members moved about to tribal drumbeats atop a puddle-deep layer of water – a logistical nightmare for the occasional breaches into the neighboring exhibits. Boats of paper with spindly frames were doused in gas and set aflame, their reflections a flickering double beneath. Not far from the Wicker Man or some ritual sacrifice the rhythm pushed onward, the crowd gobsmacked. Having performed the world over this troupe immediately impressed as a sure thing.

Regarding the institutionally oriented affairs ...,

it is difficult to gauge the level of commitment behind these efforts as they are most all privately funded. Will they hold their ground when the floodgates of interest open for say the Euro Cup 2012. Or as culture begins to take a front seat in social circles, could some elements to the initiative be construed as a public relations coup for a society savvy C.V.

I was told that EIDOS Foundation had enough money to be operational until July after which no one was sure what would happen, if it would close or get sold. The hybridizing seen in the Ukrainian pavilion caused a virtual eclipse on the ground and in the media as no one mentioned the Ukrainian artists in their reviews. It would be hard to say that the Pinchuk center is the cause or catalyst for this two-day immersion in a now art-infused Kiev.

But credit should be given for helping to see where the bar could be set and from that point the entrepreneurial nature of this country's people did the rest.

Aaron Moulton is a former editor of Flash Art International from 2005-2007. He is currently working as a freelance curator and critic in Berlin, opening a commercial gallery called Feinkost in October.

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