

**Svitlana Biedarieva, ed.** *Contemporary Ukrainian and Baltic Art: Political and Social Perspectives, 1991–2021*. Ukrainian Voices Series. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2021. 302 pp. \$46.00, paper, ISBN 978-3-8382-1526-6.



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Discussing contemporary Eastern European identity and its effects on art is an ambitious project. With *Contemporary Ukrainian and Baltic Art: Political and Social Perspectives, 1991–2021*, Svitolana Biedarieva met the challenge and edited a thematic volume discussing questions of identity, memory, trauma, and social changes expressed in the art of Ukraine and the Baltic countries. The seven chapters in this book address the thirty-year period following the dissolution of the USSR and the artistic transformations taking place after independence. All of the contributors agree that the fall of the Soviet Union was one of the most traumatic historical events for Eastern Europeans. Art of this period plays the role of coping mechanism to allow such trauma and memory to be expressed and of redefining national identity.

For example, Margaret Tali addresses difficult memories in the Baltics, such as Nazi occupation, extermination camps, and totalitarian regimes. She also presents artists who try to reclaim minority identities, such as Russian, Jewish, and LGBT. Through art, artists articulate the problems with

the exclusionist national identity discourse that was formed after independence with regard to minority groups. Ultimately, Tali proves that the past continues to shape identity politics in the Baltic states.

Olena Martynyuk addresses another traumatic event: the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. She analyzes the eschatological and post-apocalyptic references and themes in perestroika paintings, most specifically, Arsen Savadov and Georgiy Senchenko's *Cleopatra's Sorrow* (1987) and Oleg Tistol's *Reunification* (1988). She argues that the particularity of Ukrainian postmodernism is indebted to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the failure of the Soviet paradigm, and the search to redefine Ukrainian identity during perestroika.

Biedarieva also presents art as a coping mechanism. In her chapter, she examines the role of documentary practices in contemporary Ukrainian art and the ways social and cultural transformations can be engendered through art. The artistic work she addresses mixes existing archival mater-

ial with contemporary interviews and recordings of traumatic memories and violence, such as the Holocaust, the negation of the Soviet past within a larger debate about Ukrainian national identity, the war in Donbas (2014), and the rise of right-wing ideological groups and their persecution of sexual minorities. She argues that artists are the mediators between the audience and the uneasy political and social environment in which they live and that their art contributes to creating a visual archive that establishes “new visualities that mark the differences between the past and the possible future as a form of post-colonial response” (p. 66).

Postcolonial deconstruction is at the center of most artists’ work presented in this volume. National redefinition in post-Soviet countries is complex and the question of forgetting or remembering the past both favors and discriminates a part of the population. For example, Ieva Astahovska addresses the (de)construction of identity, nationalism, locality, and memory from post-socialist to transnationally oriented capitalist societies in Latvia and the Baltics. In this chapter, she demonstrates how the work of artists exposes the complexity of Baltic national identity and belonging, the tensions created by the exclusionary policy of ethnic nationalism, and the imagined difference among people who share collective identities nurtured by different institutions.

These institutions are equally problematic as they control what can be part of the official history of art and control a part of the national identity. Lina Michelkevičė and Vytautas Michelkevičius question the notion of collecting that is at the heart of these institutions. On the one hand, collections allow for a more stable historical narrative. On the other hand, they do not satisfy the representational needs of the whole country and certainly not its identity complexities. In this chapter, the authors address the rebellious work of contemporary Lithuanian artists who have reconstructed a museum outside the institutional space.

They also present a peculiar decollecting project called the Cemetery of Artworks, in which artists exhibit their work in a gallery before parting with it and burying it. This humorous practice questions the collecting of museums but also the concept of memory in this process.

The Ukrainian artists presented in Kateryna Botanova’s essay also moved from Ukrainian institutional space. Her chapter deals with bodies, sexuality, and performance as the main pillars of political emancipation and a way to break free from the Soviet collective experience. Through a discussion of decisive historical and traumatic moments, such as the fall of the USSR (1991), the Orange Revolution (2004), and Euromaidan (2013–14), Botanova shows how artists moved from the museum space to confront and sometimes provoke history in spontaneous experimental venues located in the middle of the conflicts. They attempted “to fill the gap of outdated and conservative art education,” questioned the role of the artist in Ukrainian society, created a possibility for participatory approaches, and practiced solidarity and activism in art (p. 89). Botanova argues that Ukrainian artists are not the offspring of political history but rather their instigators.

Like Botanova, Jessica Zychowicz looks at the question of the body and power. However, her focus is on gender identity and emancipation as perceived by feminist artists in Ukraine. She explains that national ideology rejects the socialist past deemed irrelevant and counterproductive to contemporary Ukrainian society. However, in doing so, its positive associations with socialism and feminism are also thrown away. Then, how can one reclaim feminist history and ideology? This is the question raised by the artists introduced in this final chapter. They explore Ukrainian social construction of femininity, censorship, and heteronormativity. Zychowicz demonstrates that their bodies become sites for political and ideological discussions and examines the use of art by female

artists to reintroduce feminism to Ukrainian society.

Overall, Biedarieva's publication is well balanced and a very good resource for a comprehensive understanding of post-Soviet societies and contemporary art in Ukraine and the Baltic states. She put in great effort into integrating scholarly work by women active in the art scene, such as art historians and researchers (Biedarieva, Martynyuk, Michelkevičė, Tali, and Zychowicz), and curators (Astahovska and Botanova). Biedarieva's publication is one of the rare studies of contemporary art in Ukraine and the Baltic countries in the English language. The book, however, includes some technical vocabulary that might at times confuse a reader with no background in art history. Furthermore, it would have been interesting to see more images of the exhibitions introduced by the contributors. Nevertheless, this will not stop a general understanding of the arguments presented by the authors.

*Contemporary Ukrainian and Baltic Art* legitimates art as social and cultural resistance and artists as actors of social transformation. The post-colonial and national questions raised in this study find echo in more recent sociopolitical events: the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War and the reactions of members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) from the Baltics. Ultimately, *Contemporary Ukrainian and Baltic Art* allows the reader for a better understanding of the conflict, thus making this publication shine with contemporary relevance.

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