

## **IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND REFLECTION IN UKRAINIAN PUBLIC ART**

Difficulties in identity construction and reflection in former soviet countries seem to be a keystone of their national, political and social formation. Sovietism is institutional background of post-soviet identity design. While soviet ideals were imposed, the problem of post-soviet identity lies in tendency of keeping it away of public articulation. That is why we found it interesting to find identity's reflection in public art.

Examining constituent elements of public art has shown that the phenomenon consists of broad spectrum of activities and approaches. Its forms are divided into visual (murals, art sculptures or monuments and memorials, mosaics, paintings, poster/sticker street art, land or earth art, objects in space, park furniture, digital arts or electronic installations in urban spaces, video art etc.) and performing arts (dance, voice and theater performances, health related activities, music and art-festivals etc.) or hybrid forms for using different media.

Though there are numerous types of public art practices in different spaces (like urban, suburban and rural) in our research we focus on community based murals and graffiti in urban areas. It however can't avoid speaking about art performance. While murals mostly propose ideas and give answers, art performance usually states the question "Who am I?" and designs the personal answers.

However public art has been used from ancient times, now we consider it to be a contemporary art direction which is the result of art-strategies transformation based on cultural context and in some forms even able to resist commercial representation. The processes of using public art for identity construction started being regulated by Ministry of Culture in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, – it started off being a tool for propaganda and forming a constrained identity (e.g. Diego Rivera fresco in Mexico-city "Colonialism"). In the 1960s public art began gaining autonomy as a form of site construction and art endeavors in the realm of individual and public interests.

Why is art used as a tool for identity influence? First of all art as mentality's reflection influences people unobtrusively. This method was effectively used during the soviet times (e.g. "The hammers of modernity" – Institute for Nuclear Research in Kyiv, "Victory" on the wall of National Cancer Research Center). The examples show the professional identity priority and construct the idea of urban professions and professionals – highly educated, progressive and aspirated – and rural professions as calm, meditative work for pleasure, that was completely

differed from reality. The most prestigious spheres of self-fulfillment were according to soviet public art – medicine, science, sport and labor professions.

The post-soviet societies had been maintaining their homogeneity for a long time, hiding cleavage into communities due to post-soviet ideology. Diversity demonstration was not encouraged. State-established aesthetics was white, male, heteronormative and socially equal (that is feigned) identity. The first post-soviet public art projects were mostly commissioned in form of murals as they were not any more financed by state institutions on the regular base, thus became a spontaneous and sincere reflection of suppressed national identity – they were naïve ideas of nation background, fabulous national positivism avoiding true problematics.

The next tendency reflected in public art showed that sovietism was closely connected with Russian language, Russian culture and Russian art. And desovietization has brought to partial derussification in languages and art of formal soviet cultures. This period started reflecting mindfulness in post-soviet identity – non Russians, having hard and hidden national background, victim and heroic at the same time (this is the soviet identity influence where victimity was used for avoiding responsibility. Public art starts showing anti-soviet and new heroes.

Only in recent years the voices of self-determination became louder. They are the voices of displaced people, minorities (national, gender, religious or political), poor, disabled and other disadvantaged communities – the people, who were not heard, now construct a sense of own identity and proclaim it through public art.

Non regulated public art practices are the most interesting part of identity reflection. Being a community representative, every artist either purposely or subliminally reflects cultural and social identity of a certain group. Moreover, the default expectations of the art market and curatorial establishments made contemporary artists dramatize and exaggerate their identity extravagance.

Thus, the societal pressure is coming out at every stage of producing pieces of art and is based on a complex combination of social, historic and economic factors. The artist acts as an agent under pressure of alien identities.

The new for our society form of public art called Community public art now is becoming more popular and seen in public landscape. Community public art is art placed in public places and spaces, based on interrelationships between content and audience. The phenomenon is also known as “Community art”, “Community-engaged art”, “Community-based art” and “Dialogical art”, as far as they all refer to the art based in and generated practice in a community setting, but differ in level and form of community engagement. Using a special algorithm of making a dialog a specialist makes audience reflect their ideas of identity into visual symbols and then with the help of professional artists represent it in form of public art.

The curated community public art practices have shown that the post-soviet identity in post colonial countries now is mostly reflected in field of nationality, belonging to age group (teenagers and seniors focus on it), belonging to territory (as city), and in Ukraine it is often patriotism on the background of current Russian-Ukrainian war which lead to social and spatial reconceptualization of the country. The latest public-art works show the tendency of avoiding problems' articulation and focusing on general ideas of happiness. Recent murals often show happy people, bright images of animals, positive vision of future. Only some artists dare to express "uncomfortable" ideas, as the result having murals painted over with white paint.

Thus art, especially public art, is a type of identity research for many artists and a source of hidden information about identity design for sociologists. There are many public art pieces which found no verbalization or textual representation, so are difficult for objective analysis ones.