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World in Ukraine

World in Ukraine: France

EXCLUSIVE

French curators shed light on Ukraine's contemporary art

By Alexander Query.

Published April 9, 2021. Updated April 12 at 6:39 pm



An artist puts in place her installation for the Socle Collectif's exhibition "Entropia" which took place in Kyiv in August 2019, showcasing the new generation of Ukrainian artists.

Ukraine's contemporary art scene is alive and kicking. The country has been a hotbed for avant-garde artistic minds and daring exhibitions for a few years now.

This scene attracted the attention of young French curators Sonia Gaspard and Clara Malet who set up Socle Collectif in Kyiv three years ago, a project dedicated to strengthening artistic links between France and Ukraine.

They chose social media and pop-up galleries to shed light on the emerging Ukrainian contemporary art, a scene that felt freer than what they'd seen before.

"There was a feeling of something new here," Gaspard told the Kyiv Post.

Open scene

Gaspard, who has a background in art management, and Malet, who studied in the Ecole du Louvre to become a curator, set up two temporary exhibitions in Kyiv in April and August 2019. They were called "Uglification" and "Entropia."

"Uglification" was referring to a current trend the art curators noticed, both in France and Ukraine, when artists intentionally go against the "good taste" in order to question the polished modern society.

Mixing visual installations, prints, digital art and video, they offered a platform for artists to explore the middle 1990s through the early 2000s in which Kyiv's current artist community mostly grew up.

Gaspard now lives in Russia and Malet had to come back to Paris when the global pandemic hit Ukraine, but they continue running Socle Collectif online (especially on Instagram) to show Kyiv's young art scene. Instagram is a must-have for any kind of artist today, according to them.

Kyiv is a tight cultural scene compared to Paris, Malet said, which made it easier for them to meet the country's most prominent artists.

“Every young artist knows each other here,”
Malet said.

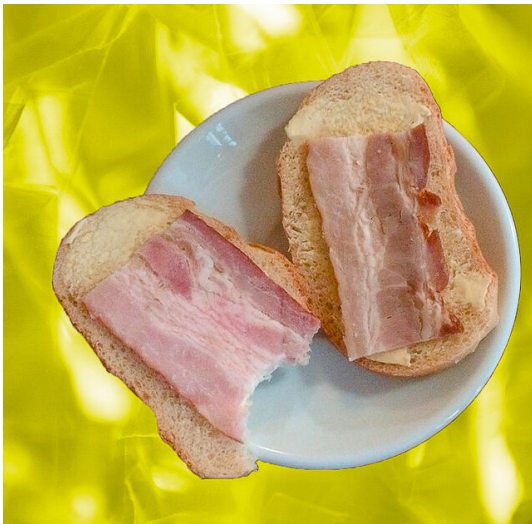
Both curators found the artistic scene more united in Kyiv than in Paris, where groups of artists tend to be more separated across different art movements.

Kyiv is also more open than Berlin, they said. The German capital, where Gaspard used to live, is known for its contemporary art scene around the world, but she described it as a closed world for outsiders.

“In Berlin, everybody keeps their contact for themselves,” Gaspard said.

In Kyiv, in turn, she had the opportunity to meet numerous artists easily. One of them was Sasha Kurmaz, a 34-year-old street artist and photographer who explores the links between individuals, society and the state, and is also well known in France, Gaspard said.

Their encounter resulted in Kurmaz’ engagement in the “Uglification” exhibition, through which the artist showcased prints and photographs.



Art piece picked up from the online portfolio of Socle Collectif.
Instagram and social media are crucial for any kind of artist today, French curators Sonia Gaspard and Clara Malet told the Kyiv Post.

No money

While the Ukrainian art scene is more open than anywhere else, it is poor. The state doesn't finance the industry, which leads to economic instability for both artists and art spaces.

Before the pandemic closed art galleries in France, French artists could potentially live from their art through public finances and useful contacts in the art market, allowing them to easily sell their works given they have a good reputation.

"Art became a job in France," Malet said.

Ukrainian artists don't have the luxury of subvention, and for Gaspard, it hampers the scene. The curator said that the lack of money reduces the number of artists. The only people able to create all day must be wealthy.

Both concurred it was the same in France a century ago. It might change, they said, but the evolution of the art market is hard to predict in Ukraine.

At the same time, surprisingly, there's a positive thing about poverty of the art scene. It leads to more creativity among some artists, because they don't rely on money to create. It also gives them more freedom, because they are not forced to produce for art patrons.

Contemporary Ukrainian art is about autodidacts with no connections on the art market. Young

artists often already have a job and see art as a passion to share, Malet said.

Trends

The Ukrainian identity, the seven-year ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine that started in 2014, the reinvention of the outdated Soviet aesthetic and the issue of the LGBTQ rights are recurrent topics among Ukrainian artists.

But they don't constitute trends so far. It's too early to grasp and predict artistic tendencies in Ukraine because the market is still young, the curators said. Art historians need at least 10 years and a bit of distance to outline artistic trends in a cultural scene, according to Malet.

"It's a tough question because it's too early to answer," Malet said.

Both curators plan to continue to closely monitor the scene in Ukraine and extend their project in Central Europe, including Prague where both already have connections.

They also think about organizing exhibitions in France and invite the artists they met in Ukraine to engage in the artistic scene of Paris.

"Pandemic aside, it worked so well in Kyiv that we feel it will be harder to find the same excitement to organize events in Paris," Malet said. "But we'd love to try."