

# Polyphony and the Carnavalesque in Kyiv

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the significance of the place in Kyiv where the statue of Lenin stood before it was toppled during the Euromaidan protests. Following the monument's demolition, many works of art have been successively exhibited on this site. Drawing on Bakhtin's concept of the carnival sense of the world, the article suggests that these sculptures, installations, and performances have demonstrated the permanent carnivalesque potential of the place. Moreover, as different representations of Ukrainian memory and identity, these works of art have created a polyphony of voices about the Ukrainian past, present, and future. The research explains the significance of this phenomenon for the Ukrainian society.

**A**lthough the Euromaidan protests in the winter of 2013–14 started as a reaction to the Ukrainian government's decision to suspend the signing of the Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine, they significantly transformed the prevalent Ukrainian approach toward the communist past. President Viktor Yanukovych and his Party of Regions were widely considered as pro-Russian, and they openly supported the post-Soviet version of collective memory (Liubarets 2016, 209). In contrast, the Euromaidan protesters were oriented mainly toward the West. Outraged by the brutality of the police, large numbers of Ukrainians joined the protests. Simultaneously, as Serhii Plokhii (2017) points out, "the people rejected the increasingly authoritarian government, which they now wanted to bring down." Since the president and his allies were associated with the Soviet legacy, the protesters' antipathy

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toward the Yanukovych regime led to the demolition of the statue of Vladimir Lenin in Bessarabs'ka Square in Kyiv on December 8, 2013. Hence, the Euromaidan protests initiated the so-called Leninfall (*Leninopad*), that is, “a symbolic farewell to the Soviet past—the demolition of remaining monuments to Lenin, more than five hundred altogether, in a few weeks” (Plokhy 2015, 452).

The civil unrest during the Kyiv demonstrations can be seen as an example of a “protestival.” This contemporary form of a demonstration not only involves political activities but is also a way to express the creativity, diversity, and festive mood of the protest participants (St. John 2008, 168). Moreover, a “protestival” contains many elements of a carnival (Buyskykh 2016, 71), an event in which “hierarchies of status [dissolve]; instead of domination, the ordinary people [find] realms of equality between all: carnival [promises] freedom, voice, agency, and empowerment” (Langman 2014, 196). Full of artistic invention, performances, joy, and brotherhood (see Kozak 2017; Sułek 2018, 2019), the Euromaidan protests were not different in this respect from other “protestivals” and can be considered a phenomenon whose carnival spirit was evident.

The removal of the statue of Vladimir Lenin in Kyiv during the Euromaidan protests was also a part of the “protestival.” The event had the features of a carnival, so in this context the statue’s toppling was a specific performance in which hierarchy was suspended. Moreover, the symbolic liberation from the authorities can be interpreted as decrowning, part of the binary ritual essential for the carnival sense of the world (i.e., crowning/decrowning; see Bakhtin 1984, 124).

The demolition of the statue of Vladimir Lenin did not dispel the carnival mood affecting this place. The pedestal and the area at the intersection of Khreshchatyk Street and Taras Shevchenko Boulevard have become a site where many new sculptures and installations have been exhibited and where performances have taken place. So far, the art objects set up in this location have been temporary. Replacing one work of art with another has become an ongoing symbolic process of crowning and decrowning. The site can thus be analyzed as a place where the carnival sense of the world (Bakhtin 1984) has lasted beyond the end of the Euromaidan protests and is present even today.

This article aims to analyze how the carnivalesque is reflected in the succession of sculptures/performances/art installations that have replaced the statue of Lenin. The examination is based on Bakhtin’s (1984, 123) four essential categories of the carnival sense of the world:

- I. “Free and familiar contact among people”: people are not limited by social structures.

- II. “A new mode of interrelationship between individuals”: people can act, speak, or behave freely. Eccentricity and inappropriate behavior is allowed.
- III. “Carnivalistic *mésalliances*”: combining ideas, symbols, values, and so on, that are generally inappropriate, oppose each other, or do not fit together is possible and welcome.
- IV. “Profanation”: sexually shocking behavior, parody, and blasphemy are allowed.<sup>1</sup>

The article also attempts to test how the analyzed works of art discuss and interpret the Ukrainian past, present, and future. The different representations of Ukrainian memory and identity that have appeared in this space resonate with each other. Moreover, various social, religious, or ethnic groups have imbued them with specific, sometimes antithetical, meanings. Hence, the former site of the Lenin monument can be seen not only as an exemplification of the carnival sense of the world but also as a place of dialogue, where “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” (Bakhtin 1984, 6) is present. Based on this analysis, the research also aims to determine the meaning of this place for Ukrainian culture.

The first section, focusing on the art installations during the Euromaidan protests, shows how the characteristics of the carnival reality are present in the unauthorized artistic interventions that provide commentaries on the ongoing social and political breakthrough in Ukraine. The second section analyzes the works of art included in the “Social Contract” project, which clearly showed features of the carnival sense of the world and simultaneously interpreted the changes in the Ukrainian memory, identity, and mentality after the Euromaidan protests. The third section discusses how unauthorized artistic interventions and political voices regarding religion, feminism, and nationalism have maintained the carnivalesque potential of the former location of the monument of Lenin. It also discusses how the site has enabled artists and political activists to present their values and the symbols they use, irrespective of the actual impact such people may have on the public debate. The fourth section focuses on the virtual statue of Satoshi Nakamoto, a pseudonymous person who invented digital currency. The preceding procession and the ceremony of unveiling the monument expressed the potential of the carnival reality by

1. In this article, I analyze sculptures, installations, and performances and classify their features or symbolic meanings as the exemplifications of the aforementioned four categories. Roman numerals are used to assign a specific category to each examined example.

using inappropriate, eccentric symbols and ideas. The fifth section analyzes two recent art installations that did not have many features of the carnivalesque—this does not mean, however, that the place has lost its carnivalistic quality. The last section presents the conclusion, pointing out that the carnivalesque potential of the former site of Lenin’s statue is closely related to changes in Ukrainian society following the Euromaidan protests.

### **Art Installations during the Euromaidan Protests: A Golden Toilet and One Hundred Gold-Painted Child Mannequins**

On February 3, 2014, the activists of a youth wing of the All-Ukrainian “Fatherland” Union (Vseukrayins’ke obyednannia “Bat’kivshchyna”) and two student organizations put up a replica of a golden toilet on the column that had supported the Lenin monument, toppled two months earlier (Malover’yan 2014). This art installation reflected a widespread rumor that President Yanukovich had solid gold toilets in his mansion in Mezhyhirya; during the Euromaidan protests, the golden toilet became recognized as a symbol of corruption, criminal regime, and unjustified luxury.<sup>2</sup> The activists who installed the golden toilet stated that it should be interpreted as a message to the deputies of the Verkhovna Rada,<sup>3</sup> urging them not to work for the owner of the golden toilet (Malover’yan 2014).

Both the golden toilet and its installation reflected elements of the carnival sense of the world. The fact that the activists installed the toilet without permission but did so undisturbed proves that, then and there, the power of the authorities as well as the hierarchical distance between people was suspended (I). Hence, the participants in the installation could express themselves freely. Their behavior, even if somewhat eccentric or inappropriate, was deemed acceptable (II). The golden toilet installed on the column can also be seen as an example of “carnivalistic *mésalliances*” that occur when incongruous or opposite ideas, things, and values are combined (Bakhtin 1984, 123). In this context, a pedestal—a place for sacred and absolute symbols of society—was merged with a toilet, which could hardly be considered an object suitable for that site (III). Furthermore, the whole installation can be perceived as a parody or even profanation. The toilet may trigger associations with something low, corporeal, or obscene (IV).

2. The golden toilet, primarily as the manifestation of enormous wealth and kitsch, might also be an object associated with the “new rich.” This social class emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The image of the “new rich” is based on the stereotype that they amassed wealth by unfair means in the 1990s, are not very well educated, love luxury, and have bad taste in art. In Ukraine, according to Serhy Yekelchuk (2020, 69), “the new rich usually owed their instant wealth to their government connections, if not their own political appointments, but some of them also came from gangster backgrounds.”

3. The Verkhovna Rada is the unicameral parliament of Ukraine.

Although for the participants of the Euromaidan the golden toilet symbolized the end of the corrupt and criminal regime, the art installation might have been perceived differently by people who viewed some of Yanukovich's political decisions in a positive light. During his presidency, Yanukovich repealed the decision of former president Viktor Yushchenko to posthumously award the title Hero of Ukraine to Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych, leaders of Ukrainian nationalist organizations that fought the Soviet army and the Nazis during the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> The Ukrainian citizens (mainly those living in the Russian-speaking east and south of the country<sup>5</sup>) who shared post-Soviet interpretation of history found the glorification of these anti-Soviet organization leaders to be offensive and were pleased with Yanukovich's decision. Moreover, Yanukovich contributed to passing a new law that gave every language the status of a regional language if it was spoken by at least 10 percent of the region's population. The aim was to allow the Russian-speaking people from Ukraine's southern and eastern regions to use their first language in official situations, for example, in schools or courts. Thus, for some Ukrainians the golden toilet might have signified the end of the era of balance between the two most popular languages and the two most powerful collective memories in Ukraine.

On February 13, 2014, a new crowning ritual took place. An installation by Tatiana Voytovich-Berkovich called *Determination* was set up around the pedestal. The work of art consisted of 100 golden child mannequins; one of them was put on the column and others surrounded it in several rows, arranged in a way resembling a group photograph. As the artist stated, the installation symbolized the future of the Ukrainian children and thus the future of Ukraine itself (Sulek 2018, 31). According to Sergey Pivovarov (2018), the installation also symbolized the young generation who had taken over the emblematic place vacated by Lenin and who wanted to make Ukraine a better state. *Determination* was ultimately dismantled by passers-by, with its elements treated as souvenirs.

As an artistic intervention, *Determination* also presented features of the carnival sense of the world. Its installation could be compared to the golden toilet event: no one opposed the process, and it was completed without any disturbances. It was both an outspoken commentary and a carnival gesture made in a nonhierarchical

4. Bandera and Shukhevych were the leaders of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and its paramilitary force, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army.

5. Although the concept of "two Ukraines" that highlighted the differences between eastern and western regions of the country is popular in the public discourse, the situation in Ukraine after the Euromaidan protests and Russian aggression is more complicated than this notion may suggest. Thus a detailed analysis of the situation in regions would create a more nuanced picture, yet such an in-depth study falls beyond the scope of this article.

space (I). Furthermore, the fact that people peacefully dismantled a work of art can be interpreted as an example of free and familiar relations between them (I). Moreover, *Determination* reflected both the present and the future: the young generation that started to fight for their rights and the fate of children, respectively. In that way, the installation managed to combine two experiences of time (III). In this case, the category of *time* seems to be particularly significant. *Real* monuments are primarily oriented toward the past, aimed at commemorating historical events, and are (at least in theory) permanent. In this context, *Determination* may be seen as a parody—a monument directed toward the present and the future (IV). Moreover, this work had probably been intended to be a short-term display even before it was made temporary by passers-by. Considering the above, the characteristics of the carnival reality are strongly present in *Determination* as such and in the audience's approach to the monument.

*Determination* indicated that the young generation became a new political actor, one that would fight for the future of Ukraine. There is an apparent contradiction between the child mannequins, a personification of youth, and the toppled sculpture of Lenin, symbolizing the status quo and the unwanted past. Moreover, as noted by Andriy Liubarets (2016, 209), “Lenin monuments were partly associated with the Yanukovich regime, because of the pro-Soviet memory policies espoused by his party and its allies from 2005–2013.” In this context, the Euro-maidan protests can be seen as a clash between the young people and the old order. However, *Determination* may also be interpreted as a generational conflict. The pro-European leanings of young people seem to contrast with their parents' or grandparents' opinions, since “Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union and for older generations it is possible to have attachment to Soviet times, the Russian language, and to hold religious and family ties to Russia” (Pshenychnykh 2020, 399). As a result, the pro-Soviet and pro-Russian part of the older generation might see *Determination* as the symbol of generational renewal that excluded its views and experience from public debate.

### **Art Installations in the Social Contract Project**

In April 2016, an open call for a temporary artistic installation as part of the Social Contract project was announced by the Izolyatsia (Isolation) foundation. This nongovernmental organization for cultural initiatives received permission to use the space vacated by the Lenin monument for artistic purposes. The contest was open to all, regardless of artists' age, nationality, or gender. According to Izolyatsia (2017b), the demolition of that monument presented an excellent opportunity to rethink the past and to develop strategic directions for Ukraine.

From this, the Social Contract project, which aimed to encourage Ukrainian society to debate these issues with the help of art, was born.

The winner of the contest was the installation *Inhabiting Shadows* by Mexican artist Cynthia Gutiérrez. From July 9 to July 16, 2016, a scaffolding staircase was erected so that anyone could ascend to the top of the pedestal and stand where Lenin had stood (Walker 2016). Izolyatsia (2016) claimed that the installation provoked “a reflection about identity, imposed memory and system failure.” Furthermore, Gutiérrez stated that her intent was to enable people to occupy the empty space and feel that they were in charge. They could use this opportunity to do whatever they wanted (Gerasimova 2017).

*Inhabiting Shadows* was an installation as well as a performance that encouraged people to occupy the former site of the Lenin monument. All participants had equal access to the top of the column. There was no hierarchy (I). The viewers were thus able to symbolically take over the sacred place (a pedestal), which can be considered a carnivalesque *mésalliance* (III) as well as an act of profanation and parody (IV).

The artistic intervention by Gutiérrez symbolically decrowned the past and crowned the ordinary people. The performance might be interpreted as an act of liberation of its participants—and symbolically all of Ukrainian society—from communist ideology and heritage. What is more, it offered to the audience the opportunity to decide about themselves. *Inhabiting Shadows* seemed to emphasize that the Ukrainian people had an exceptional opportunity to shape their future on their own.

The next installation in the Social Contract project was created by Iranian artist Mahmoud Bakhshi. *Endless Celebration* occupied the site November 7–21, 2016. It had the form of a blinking neon sign that showed in turn the faces of Lenin (red light), the Virgin Mary (green light), and pop singer Madonna (yellow light). Elise Morton (2016) noted that the artist used “traffic light colors to signal both finality and progression: red to convey the impossibility of a return to the past, green and yellow to signpost possible new directions.” Kateryna Filyuk (2019), curator of the Social Contract project, pointed out that the installation’s starting date was chosen to concur with the anniversary of the Great October Revolution, which had been “doomed to oblivion in contemporary Ukraine.” Along with *Endless Celebration*, a poll was conducted so that the city residents could assess Mahmoud Bakhshi’s work and suggest a statue that could be erected on this spot.

*Endless Celebration* displayed visible features of the carnival sense of the world. Not without irony and a sense of humor, the sculpture juxtaposed symbols that

were radically different or even polar opposites, such as the Virgin Mary and Lenin (III). In this respect, the act of merging such symbols might be interpreted as a parody of all the depicted values, a profanation of true celebration (IV). Moreover, the opinion survey conducted during the exhibition can be seen as a performance that allowed citizens to actively contribute to the art installation and make an uninhibited gesture (I).

Through his artistic intervention, Bakhshi commented on the current situation in Ukrainian society. The images and values associated with Lenin—for example, the communist past, the influence of Russia, and the Soviet style of governance—were “stopped” and considered as an unwanted inheritance. In their place, new values were chosen or widely regarded as available options. Morton (2016) emphasized that the Virgin Mary and Madonna embodied religion and the economy, respectively. However, these two symbols are open to interpretations: the Virgin Mary can also be seen as a personification of the Ukrainian/Eastern path of development, in which the spiritual dimension of life is considered essential, whereas the pop singer Madonna might symbolize Western values.

From May 3 to May 17, 2017, another art installation was displayed as a part of Social Contract 2017, the second phase of the project. The jury shortlisted four applications. The winner, *Ritual of Self-Nature*, by Mexican artist Isa Carrillo, was selected in an online vote. The installation fully covered the bare pedestal with mint and rosemary plants. The exhibition was partially damaged by an unidentified person (*Vesti.ua* 2017) but was promptly restored. According to Izolyatsia (2017c), Carrillo proposed neutralizing the ideological tension surrounding the vacant pedestal, so she invited Kievans “to join a shared quest for internal balance and calm.” The project ended with giving away the plants to anyone who wanted to adopt them. The artist also pointed out that the site needed to be purified, not only because of Lenin but also as a site of executions during the Nazi occupation (Carrillo, n.d.).

The vote for the shortlisted proposals and the final stage of *Ritual of Self-Nature* encouraged the citizens of Kyiv to become involved in reshaping the monument site. The idea behind these two events not only involved active participation but was also based on the principle of equality (I). Moreover, partial destruction of the installation can be interpreted as eccentric, inappropriate behavior (II), and as profanation (IV), which is characteristic of the carnival sense of the world. Apart from this, the symbolical clash of ideology and human violence with the power of nature could be regarded as a manifestation of carnivalistic *mésalliance* (III).

The message of Carrillo’s work was that past violence and the influence the communist era had on Soviet citizens could not be considered in Ukraine as an



unwanted heritage, best soon forgotten. The trauma caused by the past had to be healed, and what the Ukrainian society needed was a “therapeutic intervention,” allowing them to come to terms with the past. Thus the notion of purification, embodied by medicinal plants, was essential to *Ritual of Self-Nature*.

On October 10, 2017, a Romanian artist Manuel Pelmuș organized a performance titled *A Monument for Kyiv*—the last event in the second phase of the Social Contract project. The artist invited locals “to participate in a choreographed action around the empty pedestal” (Izolyatsia 2017a). Eighteen people took part in the performance: as a starting point, they struck a pose imitating that of the Lenin monument. Only then was each person allowed to move, pose, and behave as they wished. The performance symbolized postcommunist countries’ efforts to deal with the communist past and to create their own memory of the communist era (Sulek 2019, 178).

*A Monument for Kyiv* presented features typical of the carnival reality. Residents of Kyiv participated in a performance in which they could express themselves freely, as only the initial pose was predetermined. In this way, the Lenin monument site turned into a nonhierarchical space where participants could express their identities and thoughts through gesticulation and other body movements (I). Furthermore, the imitation of Lenin’s pose might be seen as mockery of the symbol of communist power, therefore being a parody (IV) and eccentricity (II).

*A Monument for Kyiv* can be interpreted as a message addressed not only to Ukraine but also to other postcommunist countries. Each of these states has been undergoing a transformation aimed at rethinking the past and establishing a new politics of memory. Although the process seems to be similar for all these countries, every state has adopted a different approach, and so have different groups within the various post-Soviet states. The postcommunist area appears to be a polyphony of more or less distinct voices speaking about the past. In this context, a clash of memories is inevitable.

The messages conveyed by the artistic interventions in the two parts of the Social Contract project were not very diverse. Only “A Monument for Kyiv” focused on issues other than the internal situation in Ukraine, reflecting the fact that the process of transition and dealing with the issues related to the past, memory, and identity was occurring in all postcommunist countries. The rest of the works reflected the current notion that the communist era in Ukraine was considered an abandoned, unwanted past,<sup>6</sup> while Ukrainian society was about to define its new

6. The negative attitude toward communism in Ukraine after the Euromaidan protests and Russian aggression in Crimea and Donbas resulted also in decommunization laws that were adopted in 2015. For more information, see Pastushenko (2020, 80).

path of development, with the majority of Ukrainian people already oriented toward the West. Thus, the installations suggested that Ukrainians also needed to create their own politics of memory and, by extension, an identity that could be more appropriate for achieving redefined political and social goals. This approach to the Ukrainian past and contemporary situation, although expressed by foreign artists, seems to fit well into the mainstream narrative that has been established in Ukraine after the Euromaidan protests and Russian aggression.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the artistic installations analyzed so far may be seen to marginalize groups of Ukrainian citizens who are oriented toward the Russian language and culture or who share the post-Soviet collective memory. However, subsequent artistic installations at the former Lenin monument site would address different issues.

### **Unauthorized Artistic Interventions and Expressions of Political Views: Religion, Nationalism, and Feminism**

After the Euromaidan protests, a significant number of artistic interventions and demonstrations of political opinions at the monument site were not authorized. These works of art and manifestations of political beliefs followed a practice introduced during the Euromaidan protests that expressions of views and artistic creativity would take place without official permission. After 2014, the unauthorized artistic interventions and expressions of political beliefs implied that Lenin's monument site continued to exist as a space where the power of authority was suspended or at least limited, so the space maintained its potential for carnival reality.

On the night of July 5, 2016, just before the planned installation of *Inhabiting Shadows*, an unknown person or persons put up at the top of the pedestal a small sculpture of the Virgin Mary (*Vesti.ua* 2016b). The next day, the statue was found lying on the ground next to the column, having been toppled, intentionally or not (*Vesti.ua* 2016a). The unauthorized installation of the sculpture and its toppling can be considered as a carnival gesture in a nonhierarchical space, where the symbolic process of crowning and decrowning is perpetuated (I). Since nothing is known about that artistic intervention, it is difficult to determine whether the act showed any other characteristics of the carnival sense of the world. Moreover, we can only speculate about the aim and the message of the sculpture. The religious interpretation seems most probable, but putting up

7. According to Andrey Kurkov (2015, 9), "Psychologically, Ukrainian society may be unstable, but ideologically the country is, as never before, steadfast in its striving towards Europe."

the sculpture may also have been an expression of other views, since in Ukraine the Mother of God does not have only religious connotations. Her feast (Intercession of the Theotokos) in the Eastern Orthodox Church is celebrated on October 14, which is also the anniversary of the foundation of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Khromeychuk 2020, 141), a Ukrainian nationalist paramilitary formation operating during and after the Second World War. The Ukrainian Insurgent Army is seen as an ancestor of contemporary Ukrainian nationalist organizations. Andriy Liubarets (2016, 205) points out also that the “Theotokos of Pokrova was seen as a protector by Ukrainian Cossacks. Therefore, the Day of the Ukrainian Cossacks has been celebrated on this day [October 14] since 1999.” In Ukraine, the Cossack legacy often symbolized national integrity and a “glorious national past” (Plokyh 1994, 151). The Cossacks are widely considered as a historical example of a brave and independent political/military organization. On top of that, October 14 is also celebrated as the Day of the Defender of Ukraine,<sup>8</sup> a state holiday established by President Petro Poroshenko in 2014. This decision aimed, among others, to replace the Defender of the Fatherland Day (February 23), a holiday associated with the Soviet Union and also celebrated in Russia. Ultimately, the sculpture of the Virgin Mary not only appears to correlate with religion but might be also seen as a symbol associated with forces, organizations, and people who fought for or defended Ukraine. These interpretations show that Ukrainian society has close ties with Christianity. However, for such religious minorities as Muslims or Jews, this vision of the condition of being Ukrainian might read as their marginalization or even exclusion.

On August 23, 2017, the Ukrainian feminist activist group FEMEN organized a performance titled *Chocolate Freedom*, in which a topless woman wearing a characteristic crown climbed with a torch and a large confectionery bag to the top of the pedestal, where she assumed the pose of the Statue of Liberty. Then she started to scatter candies. A banner attached to the column read “Chocolate Independence” (Knyaz’skaya-Khanova 2018). According to FEMEN (2017), this performance was intended to highlight the indifference of the Ukrainian president Petr Poroshenko (2014–19) to the problems of women. The candies and the “Chocolate Independence” slogan were an allusion to the president, who had made a fortune in the chocolate industry.

Such an unauthorized performance can be seen as a demonstration of carnival reality, where hierarchy does not exist and all people have the right to express themselves freely (II). Also, the nudity of the performer can be seen as a symbol

8. In 2021 this holiday was renamed the Day of Defenders and Defenders of Ukraine.

of freedom (I). On top of that, the act of baring breasts in a public space is commonly regarded as inappropriate behavior (II). The whole performance can be interpreted as a profanation, in which a feminist activist mocked President Poroshenko and other authorities (III).

The message sent during the performance seems to be clear. The feminist activists wanted to draw attention to the fact that the president and, by extension, political elites have no interest whatsoever in women's social and political problems. FEMEN (2017) enumerated the most crucial issues: the Istanbul Convention had not been adopted; an abortion ban had been issued; and women and children living in the front-line zone were forced to engage in prostitution, while authorities did nothing. Notably, the message of the performance focused on the current situation in Ukraine, thus being similar to the act of installing the golden toilet. Another aspect that these artistic interventions had in common was the emphasis on the poor quality of political leaders in Ukraine.

Yet there are at least two distinct points of view that do not focus on the anti-patriarchal and pro-women's rights message of FEMEN's performance. First, representatives of the conservative part of the society often appear to read such types of expression superficially or literally. Their interpretations highlight mainly inappropriate behavior, profanation of traditional and national symbols and values, or mockery of politicians and politics, while the real objective of FEMEN's performances is overlooked or unmentioned. The second clearly divergent perspective comes from a group that by no means can be called conservative. According to Olga Plakhotnik and Maria Mayerchuk (2010), "because of the use of sexualized images and objectified sexist stylistics, academic feminism outright rejects FEMEN's activity as a conceptual distortion." Thus FEMEN's performance might be assessed negatively by both conservative and liberal communities—considered as a profanation both of traditional symbols and of feminist ideas.

In September 2017, unknown activists attached to the column a memorial plaque that commemorated Oleksandr Muzychko, alias Sashko Bilyi, and Oleh Muzhchyl', alias Lisnyk—two Ukrainian nationalists, members of the Right Sector (*Pravyi Sektor*), a far-right political and paramilitary organization. Both Muzychko and Muzhchyl' died during shoot-outs with the police (Fraza 2017), in 2014 and 2015, respectively. The activists also displayed at the top of the pedestal a number of national(ist) symbols: the flag of Ukraine, the Ukrainian coat of arms, a trident (*tryzub*),<sup>9</sup> and the flag of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (Orhanizatsiya Ukrayins'kykh Natsionalistiv). Both the city government and

9. A trident is also the symbol of Tryzub, a far-right Ukrainian paramilitary movement.

the leaders of the Right Sector claimed that they had no knowledge as to who was responsible for this act (Prihod'ko and Drannik 2017).

The unauthorized character of the commemoration can be interpreted as a demonstration of the carnival sense of the world (I). Although the act as such was not an artistic intervention, it indicated that the monument site remained open to unconventional, outspoken, and not always popular gestures that probably would not have been accepted by the authorities.

The manifestation of nationalist beliefs and the commemoration of the members of a far-right organization can be interpreted as an attempt to display a specific understanding of patriotism. In this context, both Muzychko and Muzhchyl', who had taken part in the Donbas War, were presented as a symbol of such patriotism. The activists who put up a memorial plaque seemingly wanted to express that the Ukrainian nationalists deserved recognition, visible in the public sphere. In that context, the criminal past of Muzychko and Muzhchyl' was irrelevant—they were represented as heroes. However, such a vision of patriotism based on ethnical self-identification excludes ethnic minorities, and the memorial plaque commemorating the members of the Right Sector in the center of Kyiv might be interpreted, for instance, by Ukrainian Tatars or Roma as a symbol of the power of nationalistic paramilitary movements or as a potential threat for those citizens who are not ethnic Ukrainians.

Those three manifestations of political beliefs (which may also be considered artistic performances of a sort) emphasized that the place vacated by Lenin's monument remained a space marked by the carnival sense of the world. As a further confirmation, all these political-artistic interventions can be interpreted as attempts by those who felt marginalized or nonexistent in the public sphere to speak up. The carnival rules of the site enabled them to show their values and symbols, irrespective of what impact they actually could have on public debate.

### **A Statue of Satoshi Nakamoto: A Virtual Monument**

On September 29, 2018, a virtual statue of Satoshi Nakamoto, a pseudonymous person who invented the digital currency bitcoin, was unveiled next to the pedestal (*Ukrinform.ua* 2018). Before that, about fifty people took part in a procession from the Kyiv City State Administration building to the Bessarabs'ka Square. During the unveiling, a stand was placed closely to the column; it held a banner directing smartphone owners to a virtual location, where they could admire the statue of Satoshi Nakamoto in all its glory. According to Lubomir Tassev (2018), what the participants in the unveiling ceremony saw on their screens was “a three-headed virtual figure with a Robocop-style bottom half and a politically correct

top half representing different genders and races. It [had] a bitcoin symbol stamped on its bare chest and Vitalik Buterin's face tattooed on the back."<sup>10</sup> Around it, people held placards with different bitcoin-themed slogans, such as "We Want Pension in Bitcoin" (Tassev 2018). The aim of the event was to advertise the smartphone application "Satoshi Nakamoto Republic," in which virtual versions of real cities could be created with augmented reality (AR) technology and then incorporated into a "Virtual Republic." The users could purchase virtual land on which they could install their own AR objects with the help of coordinates or QR codes to give the cities a desired look (Satoshi Nakamoto Republic 2019).

Both the procession and the ceremony of unveiling the monument of Satoshi Nakamoto reflect the carnival sense of the world. While a procession usually is a solemn affair, this one was joyful and colorful; some of the participants were dressed as different pop culture characters, with a harlequin walking next to Santa Claus. The whole event might be seen as eccentric, inappropriate, and even incomprehensible (II). The ceremony as such was full of carnivalistic *mésalliances* (III): the unveiling of the virtual monument took place in a real site; the statue of the communist leader was replaced with the monument of a pseudonymous person whose invention had contributed to capitalism; the ideological significance of the place was combined with an event advertising a smartphone application. The statue of Satoshi Nakamoto might also be interpreted as a parody of *real* monuments (IV). Instead of carrying ideological, political, or religious values, which are usually attributed to commemorative objects, the monument of Satoshi Nakamoto was part of a promotional campaign attempting to exploit the potential of the place. In this context, it can be seen as a mockery, an inherent element of the carnival sense of the world.

### **The End of the Carnival Sense of World? *Middle Way and Confrontation***

Besides sculptures, performances, and manifestations of political or religious beliefs that carried visible traits of the carnival sense of the world, the former site of Lenin's monument also hosted art installations that did not display many features of the carnival spirit. Those works of art nonetheless contributed to the polyphonic character of this site as they engaged in a dialogue with the previous installations and performances and the place's past in general.

On September 27, 2018, Romanian artist Bogdan Rață set up next to the pedestal a giant open hand, freshly repainted blue from its original red. The sculpture,

10. Vitaly Buterin is a Russian-born Canadian programmer, known as a cocreator of the blockchain platform Ethereum. Its digital currency, called ether, is the second cryptocurrency after bitcoin.

named *Middle Way*, was installed at the request of the Embassy of Romania in Ukraine and in consultation with authorities in Kyiv. It was a part of the “Moving Monuments” project (Brovko 2018). The sculpture symbolized friendship and cooperation. As Rață himself (2018) explained, the new color was chosen to “respect Ukraine’s flag and its European values.” The sculpture brought a multitude of reactions, not all of them positive; also, some politicians inquired whether the *Middle Way* had been set up legally (Kravchenko 2018).

Rață’s sculpture did not show many overt features of the carnival sense of the world. Proposed by the Embassy of Romania in Ukraine and accepted by Kyiv authorities, the installation of this work was not an unauthorized, grassroots activity and was therefore far from being a nonhierarchical event. Unlike during carnival-style artistic events, here passers-by had no possibility to actively interact with or cocreate the object. In this respect, the concept of this sculpture was the exact opposite of the idea behind the majority of the other artistic interventions, where the involvement of city dwellers was anticipated. *Middle Way* did not attempt to make use of Bessarabs’ka Square and its history to introduce some surprising or unexpected associations. Neither did it aim to question or mock its predecessors or the symbolic meaning of the site, thus showing no qualities of parody or profanation. The temporariness of *Middle Way*, which can be seen as a symbolic act of crowning/decrowning, was probably the only quality that linked the sculpture to the carnival, although the unusual form and color of the sculpture might also be considered as a manifestation of eccentricity (II).

The message conveyed by the sculpture was related to universal values. The media pointed to freedom and cooperation as the fundamental concepts of Rață’s work (see Brovko 2018; Davies 2018; Kravchenko 2018). The artist’s statement (Rață 2018) added more context to this interpretation. The blue color of *Middle Way* was to indicate the relationship between Ukraine and Europe. Rață stated that freedom, cooperation, and tolerance are “European values” and hinted that they constitute an important part of the Ukrainian identity as well. His clarification appears to be in line with the self-perception of the majority of Ukrainian society.<sup>11</sup> However, as in the case of the artistic interventions of the Social Contract, the citizens who did not approve of Ukraine’s orientation toward the West might have seen *Middle Way* as another symbol of imposed pro-European policy and unwanted ideas that take over the public space.

On October 29, 2019, a sculpture titled *Confrontation (Protystoyannya)* was installed close to the column. This work by Ukrainian artist Oleksiy Zolotaryov

11. For more information about the changes in the identity of the Ukrainian citizens, see Averianova and Voropaieva (2020).

was (as of October 2021) the last installation to symbolically replace the statue of Lenin. It was installed as the winner of the “Price of Freedom” competition organized by the NGO Ukraine Crisis Media Center. The sculpture looked like “a metal sphere surrounded by metal angular ‘frames’” (Pitalev 2019) or, according to Zolotaryov himself (Metinvest 2020), like “a sphere and an anti-tank hedgehog.” *Confrontation* was set up to commemorate the sixth anniversary of the Euromaidan protests. Diana Popova (2019), director of the culture department in the Kyiv City State Administration, argued that the sculpture was “an attempt to visualize the feeling of inner tension, conflict, an unstoppable force that cannot be subjected to an inspection of mind. The most important driving force in life is always something that is even more important than memory. This driving force, what gives us reason to live, is a sense of freedom.” As all the previous works of art exhibited in Bessarabs’ka Square, *Confrontation* was a temporary installation—in September 2020, it was transferred to Mariupol in southeastern Ukraine (Nevskaya 2020).

As in the case of *Middle Way*, only its temporariness might be seen as a characteristic linking *Confrontation* to the concept of carnival life. The other qualities of the work seemed to state emphatically that the sculpture and its exhibition had nothing in common with the carnival mood. Although *Confrontation* was chosen in a competition organized by a nongovernmental organization, the contest was not only approved by the Kyiv City State Administration but was also in line with the policy of the Ukrainian state, which considers the Euromaidan protests as crucial events in the history of Ukraine (see Liubarets 2016, 199). In this context, the power and support of the authorities were clearly visible behind the project. Besides, the sculpture was not designed to interact with the people, nor did it combine inappropriate, different, or opposing values, symbols, and ideas. Finally, *Confrontation* was set up to commemorate a fragment of the past very relevant to the Ukrainian society, so there was no place for any type of parody or profanation regarding the sculpture or the celebration commemorating the Euromaidan protests. Thus the art object can be considered as characteristic of a noncarnival sense of the world, described by Bakhtin (1984, 160) as “one-sided and gloomy official seriousness.”

Zolotaryov’s sculpture was to embody the value of struggle and freedom, and the primary context in which it was interpreted was that of the Euromaidan protests. In 2013–14, the demonstrations against President Yanukovych and his corrupt government included many elements of a carnival festival, including the toppling of the Lenin monument. Six years later, a sculpture was erected in the same spot to commemorate those events and the values they represented, indicating



that the Euromaidan protests had become a part of the official Ukrainian identity endorsed by the authorities. The nonhierarchical character of the Euromaidan protests ultimately turned into its controlled commemoration. Undoubtedly, most Ukrainian people did not have any objections against the official views on the Euromaidan protests. Thus, *Confrontation* was accepted widely and seen as a noncontroversial (apart from the question of the aesthetic value of the sculpture [Marchenko 2019]) symbol of the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine. However, for those who did not share the widespread opinion about the Euromaidan protests, Zolotaryov's sculpture may have had a completely different meaning. Sanshiro Hosaka (2019, 52) points out that Russian-Soviet interpretations of history find many adherents in Ukraine's eastern regions. People who were attracted to these narratives might see the Euromaidan protests, for instance, as a coup d'état that brought the "fascist junta" into power. In this context, *Confrontation* is by no means unambiguous or lacking controversy.

### Conclusion

Not all the installations set up in Bessarabs'ka Square can be treated as manifestations of the carnival sense of the world, yet this does not necessarily imply that the place has lost its carnival quality. Although *Confrontation* clearly indicates that the authorities can control and make use of the site and its symbolic value, the temporariness of this particular artistic intervention suggests that there is still space for other works of art and grassroots manifestations of political/social beliefs that are initiatives independent of the authorities. Probably only a permanent monument can limit the carnivalesque potential of the place, although it is unlikely that this would prevent any further unauthorized activities. It is not certain either whether the values and symbolic significance of the hypothetical permanent monument would be considered by the society as "Ukrainian" and fully accepted.

It is difficult to imagine which symbols should be reflected in the potential monument. They would have to represent a nationwide consensus, as Ukraine is a very heterogeneous and diverse country (see Shevel 2011). Andrii Portnov (2015, 730) argues that the complexity of Ukrainian society "cannot be reduced to the language or ethnic issues but should include other social dimensions and divisions, such as those based on gender, age, and education." The Euromaidan protests started the process that limited the role of fixed identity as a principal driving force shaping political and social life (Hrytsak 2014, 225). People started to express their subjectivity, and thus at present a substantial part of Ukrainian society does "not follow some present fixed identities and national roles—instead,

they negotiate new values and acceptable forms of social interaction” (Gerasimov 2014, 30–31). As these “new values” are shared by the vast majority of Ukrainian people, perhaps some of them might be reflected in the hypothetical permanent replacement for Lenin.

The sculptures/performances/art installations analyzed in this article can be interpreted as a polyphony of voices about Ukrainian society and its values. The works of art whose aim was to deal with communist history and memory seemed to present the Soviet past as an unwanted heritage. Ukraine has been attempting to liberate itself from this experience by creating a new memory as well as a new politics of memory. However, some of the art interventions indicated that Ukrainian society after the Euromaidan protests seeks to address other issues as well: the quality of political elites, the shape of patriotism, the future of the young generation and of the nation as a whole, Ukraine’s relations with the West, and the position of the country among other postcommunist states. A variety of opinions and beliefs expressed by the installations and politically themed performances not only established “a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” (Bakhtin 1984, 6) but also initiated a dialogue about contemporary Ukraine and its problems. It is probable that in the place where the monument of Lenin used to stand, this dialogue will remain “continuous and open-ended” (Bakhtin 1984, 251), meaning that the potential future works of art and manifestations of social and political views will continue to be a vital representation of social, cultural, and political changes in Ukraine.

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