

The offensive Ukrainian Body and the case of the insulted national identity

The *Ukrainian Body* exhibition, organized by the Visual Culture Research Center, was launched on February 7, 2012 in the Old Academic Building gallery of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Three days after the launch, the university president Serhiy Kvit locked the gallery's premises with his own hand and notoriously commented his actions with the phrase "This is not art, this is shit". A number of protests against the exhibition closure followed, but the event never resumed. On the contrary, the University's Academic Council made the decision to close down the Visual Culture Research Centre, which at the time was part of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. The premises in the Old Academy Building became the library archive. This was the end of the site's period in history when it had any relation to art.

The closure of the exhibition raised a question about the line between "art" and "shit", the acceptable and the intolerable, and ultimately between "body" and "spirit" in Ukrainian society. The question is, in fact, about the border between things we can safely fit into our perceptive horizon and things that we cannot or do not want to include in our comfortable *Lebenswelt*. The aim of the exhibition was, in the first place, to reveal the periphery that lies beyond this comfort horizon.

Despite of the title, the exhibition was not addressing the issue of Ukrainian identity. On the contrary, one of its tasks was to oppose the very notion of such through a materialistic glance at the Ukrainian society; that is to contest the idea of the common "identity" by using the evidences of various bodily experiences. We aimed to look at the Ukrainian society from a corporeal standpoint. For it is through the body, its sensibilities, emotions and needs that reality reveals itself in the crudest way. Society pierces our bodies in a multitude of ways and leaves its traces, distortions and impressions on them. These bodily impressions often point to the direction we refuse to look.

Each artwork displayed at the exhibition is an articulation of the artistic experience of being in a particular material, social and cultural environment. Naturally, it was those things that we experience most acutely and painfully that came into focus. In a certain sense, *Ukrainian Body* came across as "the body of evidence." It is the evidence of certain situations and impressions undergone by real people, but it also is the evidence of a different life of the "Ukrainian body", the body that is preferably unseen. This approach proved to be effective as far as it revealed at once the vulnerability of the Ukrainian identity construct.

It was the very title of the exhibition, which affected the notion of national identity, that was among the main reasons of its closure. The intolerability of the *Ukrainian body* was that it attached the denotation of national belonging to things that turned out to be unbearable for the holders of "Ukrainian" identity.

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Lesia Kulchynska has curated a range of exhibitions in the Visual Culture Research Centre. She was one of the curators of the closed exhibition *Ukrainian Body*, which examined the social reality in Ukraine through the prism of bodily experience.