

# Cultural and Performative Dimensions of the Kyiv Maidan (2013–2014)

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**Abstract:** *This article provides an overview of the cultural/performative dimensions of the Kyiv Maidan (2013–14), exploring the special place occupied by art in these revolutionary events. The empirical material attests that the Maidan generated and was reflected in works of art in various genres: performance, installation, cinema, music, painting, sculpture, and literature—in short, across the full range of the creative artistic palette. Professionals and amateurs, famous artists and artistic youth—the Maidan united them all and became the scene for complex collective artistic expression, filled with emotion and creativity. This expression was powerful in form and diverse in content: it was radical and political, philosophical and poetical, and deeply aesthetic.*

*The cultural and performative dimensions of the Maidan marked a critical pivot away from the old Soviet paradigms. New narratives entered Ukrainian art discourse, ranging from calls for Euro-integration to social mobilization for civil rights and, later, in the work of many artists, the notion of a “battle for the Motherland.” The art of the Maidan ranged from witty protest to radical challenge and through to the sacral, and organically drew in elements of the avant-garde, mass culture, and high classicism. These elements dominated differentially across the main phases of the Maidan. The avant-garde tendencies of Maidan art were quickly absorbed by mass culture and applied broadly to easy-to-sell merchandise. This process entailed commodification, but it also offered an efficient way to deliver messages to the public.*

*Drawing on art data as its primary sources, the article looks first at the interplay of art and politics, placing the Maidan in the broader context of world events and the deeper historical perspective*

of Ukraine. In the second part it reflects on the Kyiv Maidan in the framework of Bakhtin's carnival theory, analyzing the Maidan in relation to its opposite—the anti-Maidan that supported the ruling regime in the country.

*Everything is art. Everything is politics.*

Ai Weiwei

## Introduction

From the very beginning of the Maidan in November 2013 the artistic aspects of the protest were evident, as was the urgent need to document this extraordinary outburst of revolutionary creativity. In this article, I provide an overview of the cultural and performative dimensions of the Kyiv Maidan (2013–2014).<sup>1</sup> The insights and conclusions are based on the results of fieldwork that I conducted in the winter of 2013–2014. This fieldwork included photographing artistic

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<sup>1</sup> My focus here is mainly on the events in Kyiv. It should be noted, however, that “Maidans” were held throughout all of Ukraine and in various cities abroad. The protest started on 21 November 2013, in response to President Viktor Yanukovich's decision not to sign the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU. The term “Euromaidan” is often used synonymously with the terms “Revolution of Dignity,” “Maidan,” “Kyiv Maidan,” and “Eurorevolution.” However, some argue that the term “Euromaidan” should be used only for the protests' first phase, 21–30 November 2013, when the focus was mainly on European integration. See A. Kyrydon, “Evromaidan/Revolutsiia Hidnosti: Prychyny, kharakter, osnovni etapy,” *Istorychna pamiat'* 33 (2015), [http://nbuv.gov.ua/UJRN/Ip\\_2015\\_33\\_4](http://nbuv.gov.ua/UJRN/Ip_2015_33_4); and O. O. Kryvitchenko, “Ievromaidan—maidan iak biopolitychni spilnosti novoho typu, shcho samoorganizuiutsia,” *Grani* 6 (June 2014), <https://grani.org.ua/index.php/journal/article/viewFile/542/558>. More about the Euromaidan can be found in Viktor Stepanenko and Yaroslav Pylynskyi (eds.), *Ukraine after EuroMaidan: Challenges and Hopes* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015); David R. Marples and Frederick V. Mills (eds.), *Ukraine's Euromaidan: Analyses of a Civil Revolution* (Stuttgart: *ibidem* Verlag, 2015); and Marta Dyczok, *Ukraine's Euromaidan: Broadcasting through Information Wars with Hromadske Radio* (E-International Relations Publishing, 2016).