

ART MUSEUM OF ESTONIA

KUMU

МИСТЕЦЬКИЙ
АРСЕНАЛ
MYSTETSKYI
ARSENAL

FUTUROMAREMVA

UKRAINE AND
AVANT-GARDE

08.04.–

10.09.2023



Exhibition at the Kumu Art Museum

Futuromarennia: Ukraine and Avant-Garde

Project team

Curators: Olha Melnyk, Ihor Oksametnyi and Viktoriia Velychko
Exhibition design: Lera Guievska
Graphic design: Kostiantyn Martsenkivskyi
Coordinators: Elnara Taidre and Iryna Bilan
Exhibition team: Richard Adang, Andres Amos, Serhii Diptan, Külli Kaats, Klaire Kolmann, Anna Pohribna, Renita Raudsepp, Mati Schönberg, Peeter Talvistu, Helen Volber and Oleksandr Vynogradov

Project partners

Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinema of Ukraine
National Art Museum of Ukraine
Dnipro State Art Museum
Kharkiv Literature Museum
Oleksandr Dovzhenko National Centre
National Research Restoration Centre of Ukraine
Central State Archive-Museum of Literature and Art of Ukraine
Kharkiv Private Museum of City Estate
Lviv Museum of the History of Religion
Valentyna Kostyukova

We thank

Republic of Estonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Embassy of Estonia in Kyiv
Embassy of Ukraine in Tallinn

With the support of



KULTUURIMINISTEERIUM



On the cover: Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov (1895–1967). Stage design for a play *Mob*, adapted from Upton Sinclair's novel *They Call Me Carpenter*. 1924. Mystetskyi Arsenal

Published by the Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum, 2023

In 2019–2021 Mystetskyi Arsenal in Kyiv explored Futurism and the related cultural experience of the Ukrainian avant-garde. The name of the project (*Футуромарення* can be translated as “Futurodelirium” or “Futuredreaming”) captured the atmosphere of creative experiments at the beginning of the 20th century, where uncertainty (delirium) and procedurality formed an important concept for creative searches.

The exhibition at Mystetskyi Arsenal ended on the eve of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, which fundamentally changed the world context. The historical analogies that transpired in our research were now clearly revealed by the war. A characteristic feature of Russian aggression is an attack on culture. For the Ukrainian avant-garde, it has lasted for more than a century: from the appropriation of artistic heritage in the 1910s and the repression of its creators in the 1930s to the looting of museums in the occupied territories and the destruction of monuments as a result of the ongoing bombings.

That is why the current project for Kumu has a slightly different focus, with a special emphasis on the self-sufficiency of the Ukrainian version of Futurism. The artists of the 1910s worked in a common cultural space with Russians. At the same time, they were primarily connected with Ukraine: the Burliuk brothers, Oleksandra Ekster and Kazymyr Malevych were not epigones but leaders of new ideas that were spreading across Europe at the time. From the beginning, they gravitated toward a different mental model: away from archaic contemplation and toward a passionate and politically engaged stance of both creating new art forms and changing society.

In our exploration, Futurism is a revolutionary impulse rather than merely a particular art movement. Embodied in the slogan “Metropolis, Machine, Mass”, Futurism reflected the dynamics of change at that time and

had a significant impact on the development of art throughout the world. In this project, we sought to describe the artistic vision of the future that was born on Ukrainian historical soil in the 1910s and 1920s.

Futurists of the 1920s emphasised their Ukrainian identity. After centuries of Russian domination, they were particularly sensitive to the issue of national cultural sovereignty. In a fiery polemic with the Russians, Mykhail Semenko always stressed that no one would dictate to them how to write. This is extremely relevant to the present situation.

So our project for Estonia is not only about art. *Futuromarennia* is about Ukraine, its heritage and its identity. This is our story, told in the first person. At the same time, we are telling a story that has not yet become a past. Like a hundred years ago, we are once again defending our land from imperial encroachments while dreaming of a better future. Isn't that what the projects of Ukrainian Futurists at the beginning of the 20th century were about?

“Bacteria of Futurism”

On 20 February 1909, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurism* was published in the French newspaper *Le Figaro*. The author called for an end to canonical art and celebrated technology instead. In his abstract model of a renewed world, man himself, devoid of sensitivity, turns into a powerful mechanised being directed into the future. The poet Mykhail Semenko was the most consistent supporter of the Italian model of Futurism in Ukraine. He was the one who coined the metaphoric term “bacteria of Futurism”. At the beginning of 1914, in Kyiv, he published his collections of “poetry-songs” *Derzannia* (Daring) and *Kvero-futuryzm* (Questing Futurism), which marked the emergence of the Ukrainian version of Futurism.

However, infection with Futurist ideas in Ukraine happened a little earlier. Oleksandra Ekster was the connecting link between Kyiv and European art centres. The term “Futurism” was perceived as a general definition of artistic innovations. It delineated the space for experimentation and the search for a new artistic language, in a broad sense the avant-garde. This is how the Suprematism of Kazymyr Malevych and the Cubo-Futurism of Davyd Burluk, Oleksandr Bohomazov and Vadym Meller arose.

Influenced by Futurist ideas, a plethora of art groups emerged in Ukraine during the 1910s, such as the Hylaea society in the Kherson region, an art colony in the village of Krasna Poliana in the Kharkiv region, Soyuz semi (Union of Seven) in Kharkiv, and the Kyiv group Koltso (The Ring).

However, quickly modernising the artistic language and, with it, the rest of that world turned out to be a difficult task. Advocacy for dynamic industrialisation and urbanisation was met with little enthusiasm in the traditional society of predominantly agrarian Ukraine, which at that time was divided between the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires.

Kherson region

Futurist ideas were international in nature, but at the same time they worked powerfully within the local context. Under the influence of historical myths about Scythian warriors and freedom-loving Cossacks who once ruled the Ukrainian steppe, in the summer of 1910 the literary and artistic society Hylaea was born in the village of Chornianka, near Kherson. "Hylaea" is what the ancient Greek historian Herodotus called that area.

Chornianka, where the Burliuk family lived, became a creative laboratory for the young experimenters Velimir Khlebnikov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vasily Kamensky, Benedykt Livshyts and Oleksii Kruchenykh. Followers of Marinetti, they called themselves Futurists. At the same time, emphasising their individuality, they used the name budetliane, derived from a future tense form of the verb "to be." The programmatic principles of Hylaea were based on the denial of cultural heritage and calls to forget about common sense, good taste and outdated language.

Davyd Burliuk was the leader of the society. Often called the "Ukrainian father of Russian Futurism" today, he in fact considered himself a descendant of Zaporizhzhian Cossacks and a "Tatar-Zaporizhzhian Futurist". In 1916, Davyd became the head of Obshchestvo predsedateley Zemnogo shara (The Society of Heads of the Globe), invented by the Futurists. This daring act symbolically defined his identity. Tireless energy drove him as he moved around the world: to Kyiv, Munich, Moscow, the Far East and almost half a century of creative life in the USA. In December 1913, Davyd Burliuk organised a tour of Futurists in the cities of the Russian Empire. The painted faces of the participants and their defiant behaviour caused outrage. At a poetry event in Kyiv, they hung a grand piano upside down above the stage, an apt metaphor for the Futurist movement of the time.

Kharkiv region

In the spring of 1906, the paintings of the Burliuk brothers exhibited in the hall of the Kharkiv Noble Assembly caused a scandal, and at the same time they activated the young people who were eager for artistic experimentation. Numerous centres and art groups were emerging in the city, looking for an alternative to academicism. Founded in 1907 by Yevhen Ahafonov, the studio Golubaya Liliya (Blue Lily) synthesised visual arts with theatre and literature. A new interpretation of the figure of the artist and of gender roles was emerging. Particularly telling in this context was the role of the artist

Mariia Syniakova, who became a legend during her lifetime. She was an idol of three eras: Futurism in the 1910s, the period of bulldozer exhibitions in the 1960s, and post-Soviet art in the 1980s and 1990s. On an estate in the village of Krasna Poliana, near Kharkiv, where she lived with her sisters Nadiia, Vira, Oksana and Zinaida, a Ukrainian branch of Neo-Primitivism was formed, based on folk art, and was called "folk futurism" or "intimate futurism."

The phenomenon of Krasna Poliana had a significant impact on the members of Soyuz semi (Union of Seven): a powerful centre of the early avant-garde formed in 1915–1917 at the Kharkiv Art School. The use of various techniques, a combination of modernism with Futurist grotesque and bold experimentation were manifested in the works of artists who in a few years would determine the artistic direction of an entire generation. Among them were Vasyl Yermylov and Borys Kosarev.

Kyiv

On 23 February 1914, the exhibition *Koltso* (The Ring) opened in Kyiv on Khreshchatyk street. Organised by the group of the same name, which included Oleksandra Ekster, Oleksandr Bohomazov, Mykhailo Denysov, Kateryna Vasylieva, Vanda Monastyrskya-Bohomazova and Xan Krohn (from Norway), the exhibition showed Cubo-Futurism as a self-sufficient artistic direction. 306 works by 21 artists were presented. Bohomazov's introductory article to the catalogue and his thesis text "The Essence of the Four Elements" became an artistic manifesto. Later, he developed it into a theoretical treatise, *Painting and Elements* (1914). Bohomazov's theory substantiated the synthesis of Futurist kineticism and the Cubist decomposition of form. He analysed the objective world using four basic elements: Line, Form, Colour, and Picture Plane. Through these elements, Bohomazov conveyed movement in nature and human feelings. Such searches were synchronised with the artistic practices of Italian Futurists and English Vorticists, as well as those of Kazymyr Malevych, Oleksandr Arkhylenko and Oleksandra Ekster.

The formal experiments of Viktor Palmov, a member of the Moscow Cubo-Futurist group, began outside of Ukraine. However, it was in the 1920s in Kyiv, where Palmov was invited to become a professor of the Art Institute, that these experiments became embodied in the concept of "colour-painting", laid out by him in the magazine *Nova generatsiia*. Palmov's colours direct the viewer's emotional perception in an exceptional way and shape the dynamics of the canvas, leaving a feeling of immediate improvisation.

Supremat experiments with embroidery

Among the various artistic experiments by the Futurists was the actualisation of the folk tradition, including cooperation with Natalia Davydova's handicraft workshop in the village of Verbivka in the Cherkasy region. In 1915, Nina Henke became the main artist of the artel, inviting Oleksandra Ekster, Kazymyr Malevych and other members of the Supremus group to collaborate. In 1915 and 1917, Davydova and Henke organised exhibitions of modern decorative art in Moscow, which exhibited everyday items embroidered with avant-garde sketches. At the end of 1917, more than 400 works of the Verbivka artel were taken to Moscow to organise another exhibition. Since then, some of them have been stored in Russian collections.

In 2007, a project was launched to reconstruct embroidery based on original sketches by avant-garde artists. The project's initiator was Tetiana Kara-Vasylieva, with a PhD in art history. The project is being implemented by teachers and students of the Mykhailo Boichuk Kyiv Academy of Decorative Arts and Design.

Destruction and Construction

As a result of the First World War and the Ukrainian National Revolution of 1918, independent Ukraine emerged for a brief time. However, by 1921, the Russian Bolshevik regime established its power over most of the Ukrainian lands, creating the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, with the capital in Kharkiv. In order to neutralise the national movement, in the 1920s the Bolsheviks introduced a policy of Ukrainisation. Its consequence was an incredible cultural explosion that led to the emergence of various art movements and groups.

The most radical new art vision was offered by Futurists. Their activities took on the appearance of a conceptual movement, from the declaration of the theory of Panfuturism to its culmination: the publication of the magazine *Nova generatsiia* (New Generation). Mykhail Semenکو proposed the idea of destroying the heritage of the past and constructing a new cultural model through meta-art. He combined the international principles of leftist art with the task of national socialist modernisation. This required a radical change in all tools of cultural communication: in literature, the visual arts, architecture, the design of everyday life and public places, theatre and cinema. Such ideas gained political support. Ukrainian communists saw Futurism as a suitable instrument in their strategy to simultaneously deal with social and national questions, overcoming the conflict between the proletarian cities and the unharnessed elements of Ukrainian villages.

The frantic pace of economic and social transformations of the 1920s—industrialisation and urbanisation—forced Ukrainian Futurists to hurry. Adapting formal searches to the needs of the time, they “skipped over” entire stages of art evolution and denied both the heritage of the past and contemporary practices. To illustrate the mutual influences of different artistic currents and to present the broader context of the avant-garde processes of the 1920s, we expand our view beyond the circle of artists who formally belonged to the Futurists.

Poezomaliarstvo

Creating a synthetic work of art was one of the central ideas of Futurism. Italian Futurists of the 1910s described it as “words at large”, while the Ukrainians called it poezomaliarstvo (poetry-painting). These are works where the boundary between image and word disappears, and letters perform not only a grammatical function but also an associative one. In poetry-painting, the principles of syntax and the very principles of the literary text were destroyed. Sound imitation, shifts of images, the invention of “arrogant” neologisms and technical achievements of printing were applied. Visual poetry was most clearly manifested in the work of Mykhail Semenko, who published two collections of poetry-paintings: *Kablepoema za okean* (Cable-Poem Across the Ocean, 1920–1921) and *Moia mozaika* (My Mosaic, 1922).

Nova generatsiia magazine

Discussion was an indispensable attribute of the artistic life of the 1920s. The main platforms for intellectual discussions of the day were periodicals. Starting a magazine or a journal was relatively easy and quick, making it a common practice among representatives of numerous art groups. The *Nova generatsiia* magazine, published from October 1927 to December 1930, was the pinnacle of the Futurist movement in Ukraine. It had state financing, confirming the official recognition of the Futurists. A total of 36 issues were published with the circulation varying from 1,000 to 1,700 copies. Mykhail Semenko was the editor-in-chief throughout the magazine’s existence. The artists Vadym Meller, Anatol Petrytskyi and Dan Sotnyk were responsible for the layout design. The magazine regularly published reviews and translations from Western books and magazines, thus promoting the current artistic trends.

Futurist theatre

The Futurist idea of creating “total art” fit well with stage experiments. The new theatre destroyed the fourth wall, the one between viewers and the stage, engaged the audience, and blurred the line between reality and action.

The most consistent advocate of Futurist theatre was the director Marko Tereshchenko. The theatre he founded in 1920 bore the name of the young writer Hnat Mykhailychenko, who was shot for his revolutionary activities. Thus, the theatre declared its commitment to left-wing ideas from

the start. Around the same time, Tereshchenko published his own manifesto, *Art of Action*, calling for making theatre appropriate to the era of social shifts. The actors of the new theatre had to become free creators of their art, just as workers in a communist society became the masters of production. Tereshchenko embodied his theories in a number of mass spectacles in the form of collective action based on works by famous writers of the time, in particular the Futurists Mykhail Semenko and Heo Shkurupii. However, his experiment did not last long: in 1925 the Hnat Mykhailychenko Theatre was closed.

The avant-garde experiment of the 1920s also affected the art of opera. The opera of the classical repertoire received a new incarnation, Futurist in spirit and visuals. This was done mostly through the modernisation of scenography. The opera stage became functional. Instead of painted backdrops, stage designers built complex structures. Moving colour planes combined with light modelled the stage space, accentuating and enhancing the dramatic action. Today the sketches for opera and ballet performances look like self-sufficient works of object-less art in which various geometric elements interact with each other, creating their own rhythms.

Berezil Artistic Association

The Variety Theatre manifesto (1913)—the most famous presentation of Filippo Marinetti’s views on theatre—undoubtedly influenced the views of the Ukrainian director and theatre reformer Les Kurbas. In 1919, he published a fragment of Victor Auburtin’s book *Art is Dying* in the magazine *Mystetstvo*, edited by Mykhail Semenko. Kurbas’s preface to the publication is entirely consistent with the ideas of Futurism. He claimed that, under the influence of industrialisation, “old art” dies and new art is born, examples of which were works by Čiurlionis and Mayakovsky. In his stage experiments, the director rejected the old tradition, admired new technical means, and used cinema, elements of circus action, vaudeville and acrobatics.

At the same time, Kurbas did not share the radicalism of the Futurists and constructed his own model of new theatre. In 1922, he founded the Berezil Art Association. Its name referred to the spring month of March and was a declaration of renewal. Kurbas introduced a new theatrical aesthetic in which acting skills, stage design and music worked together to realise the director’s ideas. He built a repertoire of works of classical drama but preferred the plays of contemporaries: Mykola Kulish, Maik Yohansen and

Mykola Khvyliovyi. Special attention was paid to scenographic construction in which the actors became moving components of the space. The principle of movement as the basis of stage action was embodied in the production of Georg Kaiser's play *Gas* in 1923.

Cinema

The art of cinema was synonymous with the age of modernisation. Art-as-industry, production art and high-tech art embodied Futurist fantasies perfectly. It was not burdened by an outdated classical heritage and was being created in the here and now.

Futurism in Ukrainian cinema is associated with the directors Dzyga Vertov (Davyd Kaufman) and Eugene Deslav (Yevhen Slabchenko). The former worked in Ukraine from 1927–1930 and the latter emigrated to France. Despite their different social contexts, the creative methods of the directors were similar in many ways: fragmentation, plotlessness, dynamic editing (montage), uncontrolled flows of impressions and reflections, and unexpected angles. However, Deslav was more focused on abstract visual experiments. He made “poetry-films,” visual symphonies of urbanism that established his authority as an innovator in the circles of Italian and French Futurists.

The works of Dzyga Vertov, who preferred capturing real life, still remain the standard for documentary films. *The Eleventh Year* was shot on the occasion of the 11th anniversary of the October Revolution (the Bolshevik coup of 1917). The main theme of the film is the construction of Dniprelstan (the Dnipro hydroelectric power plant) in Zaporizhzhia, which became a symbol of industrialisation in Ukraine and a central element of Soviet propaganda. In 1928, the power plant became the subject of another avant-garde work: the symphonic suite *On the Dniprelstan*, by the young composer Yulii Meitus.

Architecture

In the 1920s, the architecture of Ukraine was dominated by the avant-garde method of Constructivism, the equivalent of European functionalism formed under the influence of German Bauhaus. Reflecting industrial aesthetics, Constructivist architecture contrasted sharply with pre-revolutionary “bourgeois” styles and used tectonics, texture and construction as the main material elements.

At the same time, radical urban plans are being implemented, which are inspired by the urbanist ideas of the Futurists regarding the facilitation of the day-to-day life of people and their integration into production as much as possible. In contrast to the cities of old, *social cities* were planned. This neologism had two meanings: cities where residents built socialism, and cities for people. They were planned to rise near the newly built giants of industry.

Such approaches were most consistently implemented in Kharkiv. The city that served as the capital of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic until 1934 turned into a laboratory for testing Constructivist approaches. A social city was built around the Kharkiv Tractor Plant, while the governmental district saw the construction of the 13-storey House of State Industry (Derzhprom), the first skyscraper in the Soviet Union. At the same time, a large number of other Constructivist buildings were erected in the city: residential, administrative, industrial and educational buildings that now symbolise the unique urban experiment of the 1920s. Currently, they are under threat of destruction by the Russian aggressors; every fourth building in the city has been damaged.

Our 1920s shot in the 2020s

This is a story of a hereditary crime.

A six-storey building in Kharkiv. Initially, it was called the Slovo Building (*слово* means “word” in Ukrainian) because it has the shape of the Cyrillic letter “C”. It was built in the late 1920s for the Ukrainian intellectual elite. Its inhabitants—writers, musicians and artists—had their own vision of the future and called themselves builders of the Red Renaissance. Over time, the building began to be called the “Crematorium”: in 1933–1937, the state security authorities arrested more than 70 of its residents, 33 of whom were shot.

The strengthened Soviet empire lashed out. We call that time the Executed Renaissance. Ukrainisation was replaced by Russification, socialist realism prevailed, and art turned into propaganda. Fragile as glass, dreams about the future were quickly shattered. The very mention of former residents of the building became taboo.

In the 1990s, the legacy of Kharkiv writers was reborn. A memorial plaque was installed at the Slovo Building. In 2021, an art residency was launched in one of the flats.

The Empire strikes again. We call our time the Great War. Arrests, torture and executions. The burning of Ukrainian books. The destruction of cultural heritage. On 7 March 2022, a Russian rocket fell near the Slovo Building. Broken glass. Damaged façade.

But in the wounded Slovo, people keep dreaming about the future, such people as the employees of the Literary Museum, who organised an art festival under attacks. Or Oleksandr Savchuk, who publishes new books in Kharkiv, and the reporter Oleksandr Osipov, who took photos of the building for this installation.

And this is a story of inherited Ukrainian resilience.

The exhibition *Futuromarennia: Ukraine and Avant-Garde* at the Kumu Art Museum has been organised in collaboration between the Art Museum of Estonia and Mystetskyi Arsenal (Kyiv, Ukraine).

Kumu Art Museum

Weizenbergi 34 / Valge 1

Tallinn, Estonia

Additional information:

kumu.ekm.ee