



# **Solid Television: Ukrainian Art of the 1990s and Its Media**

Твёрдое телевидение:  
украинское искусство 1990-х  
и его медиальность

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This article presents a concise overview of the evolution of contemporary Ukrainian art, tracing its roots back to late-Soviet practices in the 1980s. Special emphasis is placed on the emergence of media art during the 1990s, highlighting the key practices and discourses that shaped Ukrainian video art in this period. The author underscores that Ukrainian video art from that era navigated between the production of visual content (films, narratives, formal experiments) and the realm of video installations and sculpture, representing and analyzing the specificity of televisual mediality. Notably, it was within the genre of media installation that Vasyl Tsaholov's concept of "solid television" took shape, encapsulating the collective exploration of Ukrainian artists in the realm of media art.

SOLID TELEVISION, UKRAINIAN  
VIDEO ART, SCREEN CULTURE, ART  
AND MEDIA INSTALLATIONS

Статья дает краткий обзор эволюции современного украинского искусства, которое берет свои истоки в позднесоветских художественных практиках 1980-х гг. Особое внимание уделяется появлению медиа-арта в 1990-е годы, когда сформировались ключевые практики и дискурсы, определившие специфику украинского видео-арта. Автор указывает на то, что украинский видео-арт лавировал между производством чисто визуального контента (фильмы, нарративы, формальные эксперименты) и различными видео-инсталляциями, а также скульптурными композициями, осмысляющими специфику телевизионной медиальности. Примечательно, что именно в жанре медиа-инсталляции была сформулирована концепция Василя Цаголова о «твердом телевидении», включающая в себя коллективные достижения украинских художников в сфере медиа-арта.

ТВЕРДОЕ ТЕЛЕВИДЕНИЕ, УКРАИНСКИЙ  
ВИДЕО-АРТ, ЭКРАННАЯ КУЛЬТУРА,  
ИСКУССТВО И МЕДИА-ИНСТАЛЛЯЦИЯ

This article resulted from extensive observation of the development of art in Ukraine, and argues that the progression of contemporary Ukrainian art was significantly influenced by the late-Soviet period. While neo-avant-garde practices existed in the 1960s and 1970s, they did not have the same profound impact on artistic processes as the new wave that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Two crucial turning points during this period were the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 and the political perestroika in the USSR. The man-made disaster not only fostered disbelief in Soviet socialism but also cultivated an ironic and critical attitude among young people. Perestroika, on the other hand, facilitated the emergence of young unofficial artists on the Soviet art scene, many of whom became the vanguard of the “contemporary” or “alternative” art movement.

During this time, video art, as part of the broader field of media art, began to flourish in Ukraine with the support of grant-funded Western organizations. The rise of artistic video was also influenced by the rapid development of media infrastructure, the liberalization of late-socialist television, and the widespread distribution of films through video cassettes. While the relationship between art and television had undergone multiple transformations in the Western world from the 1960s to the 1980s, Ukrainian artists started actively re-evaluating the role of mass media only in the early 1990s. However, it is worth noting that the Western theories of media, despite influential figures like Jacques Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, and Marshall McLuhan, did not necessarily resonate with Ukrainian artists at the time.

By presenting Ukrainian media practices, which were outside of Western historiography and periodization for some time, we hope to help researchers better understand the history of video and television in Europe. The Ukrainian video art of the 1990s serves as a valuable

case study for comprehending the medium's history and aesthetics. It allows us to examine video in terms of its materiality, affordances, and conventional usage, and in relation to everyday cultural perceptions of its significance within a given historical context. In this way, we can trace the cultural function of video and television, which refers to the ways in which it was "valued or not valued, made authentic or inauthentic, legitimate or illegitimate" (Newman: 3). Video, including television, was not merely a collection of objects and activities, but a dynamic network of concepts within the collective consciousness. Our comprehension of the materiality and artistic significance of television and video was shaped by the influence of discourses surrounding video technology, as well as the behaviours and social beliefs associated with it. This text provides partial insights into the discourses and practices surrounding television within artistic circles of late-Soviet and post-Soviet Ukraine. Taking into consideration the site of production (why television appeared in art) and works themselves (how television was depicted/re-thought in art), this research still lacks analysis of perception and audience reactions.

### **LATE SOVIET UKRAINIAN ART**

Peter Osborne indicates that (in the West) new art originated in the early 1960s in opposition to neo-avant-garde practices and famously claims that contemporary art is post-conceptual art (Osborne: 19). The reason for the rapture he sees in the 1960s, caused by a "complex conjunction of social, political and cultural radicalisms that swept through not just North America and Western Europe" (Osborne: 19–20). In Soviet Ukraine, the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s mainly tried to reconnect with pre-war aesthetics, while conceptualism was almost

**1** Amir Weiner claims that Soviet socialism was already different after 1945; it turned from 'robust' to 'retiring', but the final decomposition took place only in the second half of the 1980s, see: (Weiner).

invisible. Thus, not the 1960s instigated new Ukrainian art, but the 1980s, which in Eastern Europe could be considered as the continuation of the "long sixties".

New Ukrainian art, which developed in the late 1980s, was often called in Ukraine 'suchasne' [contemporary] or 'aktualne' [actual] and metaphorically framed by critics and art historians as a 'new wave' [nova khvyliia] (Skliarenko: 18). This new wave was a direct response to the Chornobyl nuclear disaster in 1986 and the reforms implemented by Mikhail Gorbachev in the USSR. These two significant factors, the aftermath of the disaster and the political changes, greatly influenced contemporary Ukrainian art practices, which often embraced the carnivalesque concepts of Mikhail Bakhtin. In the UkrSSR, party officials were specifically instructed to engage in dialogue with various groups of young people, emphasizing conversation and persuasion rather than imposing the knowledge or beliefs of the older generation (Mickiewicz: 5). This trust in dialogue and discussions with the young generation, as the founders of Soviet socialism assumed, had the power to fuel a new flame in fading fire of socialist civilization.<sup>1</sup>

The first extensive exhibition of new and young Soviet art took place in 1987 in Moscow and was followed by similar artistic shows in other cities, like L'viv (*Invitation to Discussion* exhibition curated by Yurii Sokolov) and Kyiv (*Youth of the Country* exhibition) (see interview with Olexandr Soloviev (*Ukrayins'ka Nova Khvyliia. Mystetstvo Druhoyi Polovyny 1980-Kh - Pochatku 1990-Kh Rokiv*: 31-32). The artistic exhibitions organized in 1987 under the Soviet regime were categorized as "new art" or young Soviet art. These exhibitions often originated from informal artistic gatherings known as Plein-air, such as the one held in the Ukrainian village of Sedniv in Chernihiv oblast (Shiller). The youth edition (#10) of the Soviet magazine *Iskusstvo* in 1988 was

entirely devoted to the Moscow exhibition of 1987, delving into discussions about the various aspects of young and contemporary art. Editors maintained:

[...] Till now, young artists were separated from wider social life by slogans, which claimed that we do not have generational conflict in the USSR. This situation led to the formation of independent young culture [...] We share the party's claim that each generation should say its word in history, but more importantly – young people will have to show and express the amount of huge intellectual potential that has been accumulated during Soviet rule (“*Molodyie o Molodykh*”: 1).

Within the pages of this magazine, Olexandr Soloviev, a young and promising Ukrainian critic, expressed his views on the state of the contemporary world in the 1980s. He highlighted the existence of an existential crisis and emphasized the role of reflexive contemporary art in overcoming this crisis. Soloviev informed Soviet readers that young Ukrainian art followed a trajectory similar to other international artistic trends, including the *new image* (USA), *trans-avanguardia* (Italy), *new expressionism* (Germany), and *new subjectivity* (France) (Soloviev, “Po Tu Storonu Ochevidnosti”: 36). As an example of Ukrainian postmodern trans-avant-garde (consider the tension between neo-avant-garde and contemporary art of the 1960s, indicated by Osborne), Soloviev used works of young artists from Kyiv, especially the painting of Arsen Savadov and Yuri Senchenko *Cleopatra's Sadness* (Fig.1), which was displayed in Moscow's exhibition of 1987.

Soloviev regarded this painting as an epitome and metaphorical depiction of its era. The artwork contained significant references to art history while simultaneously conveying an ironic commentary on the

## 2

See an interview with one of the pioneers of new art after 1986, (“Arsen Savadov: My Characters Are Personalities with a Vague Understanding of Reality”)

state of the present, particularly in relation to Soviet contemporary art. This ironic stance adopted by Ukrainian art in the late-1980s became the prevalent attitude within the artistic community.<sup>2</sup> Soloviev’s publication marked a significant breakthrough in understanding ‘young art’ as post-modern and drawing connections to the emotionally driven paintings of the 1980s. This artistic approach stood in contrast to the ‘colder’ conceptualism often embraced by Moscow-based artists. Moreover, Ukrainian contemporary art was described through the lens of its own distinctive school and tradition. Prior to this, the art scene in Ukraine primarily relied on borrowing theoretical models and artistic concepts from other cultural centres, whether in the West or the East.

From Moscow’s perspective, Ukrainian art was considered Southern (geographical metaphor), and this perception of *warm* (emotional) art from the South was often borrowed by Ukrainian critics. Russian imperial art historical tradition termed Ukrainian art as ‘south-Russian’ [yuzhno-russkoe], therefore it was not astounding that one of the first exhibits of young Ukrainian art in the Soviet capital, called *Babylon* and organized by Marat Gelman in the Palace of Youth, was perceived in similar terms. ‘South-Russian wave’, ‘new wave’, ‘warm postmodern’, ‘new southerners’, ‘south alternative’, or ‘trans-avant-garde neo-baroque’ – these are among the few titles, which were used by Soviet critics to describe young Ukrainian art from the late 1980s.

As often happens in colonial histories, Ukrainian artists and critics borrowed the notion of ‘new wave’ from the outside but removed the ‘southern’ topos from it. In 2009, the National Art Museum of Ukraine in Kyiv, to commemorate its 110 years, organized an exhibition called *Ukrainian New Wave: Art of the Second Half of the 1980s - Early 1990s*. This exhibition, curated by Oksana Barshynova, was specifically dedicated to postmodern Ukrainian art, which was characterized by irony,

simulation, provocation, or following the rules of *Das Glasperlenspiel* (Barshynova: 12). In 2014, known Ukrainian art critic Hlib Vysheslavskyi defended his Ph.D. thesis at the Institute of Problems of Contemporary Art (Kyiv), which was titled *New Wave in Visual Art of Ukraine in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s*. Obviously, the perception of 1980s art in terms of ‘new wave’ dominates in post-Soviet Ukraine.

But this was not the only view on young and new art which developed in Soviet Ukraine in the late 1980s. Jerzy Onuch, a Canadian citizen, born in Socialist Poland and having a Polish-Ukrainian identity, came to L’viv in 1991 to participate in the event *Biennale of Ukrainian Fine Art ‘Lviv-1991’*. He was struck that the identity of young Ukrainian art was constructed from Moscow’s perspective, and wanted to add another dimension to this story. Thus, in 1993 he organized in the Centre for Contemporary Art ‘Zamek Ujazdowski’ (Warsaw) an exhibition called *Steppes of Europe*, which featured not only artists from Kyiv (like Arsen Savadov, Oleh Holosii or Oleh Tistol), but also young artists from L’viv (like Andrii Sahaidakovskyi or Vasyl Bazhai). Interestingly, this exhibition framed new Ukrainian art not as a South-Russian wave, or a ‘new wave,’ but as a ‘European fringe,’ using a geographical metaphor similar to Moscow’s critics. He believed that what was artistically made in Ukraine in the late-1980s was peripheral, but this was not the periphery of Moscow but rather the periphery of Europe, the ‘steppes of Europe,’ wild and almost unknown artistic territory.

Consequently, the late 1980s saw Ukrainian fine art flourishing through an active exchange with both the art scene in the Soviet capital and contemporary art movements from the Western world. The emergence of contemporary Ukrainian art as a distinct presence garnered recognition from local and external critics. However, the process of understanding and interpreting the artistic practices of that period



**FIG. 1** → Arsen Savadov, Georhii Senchenko, *Cleopatra's sadness*. Oil on canvas. 1987



**3** On late Soviet 'stio**b**' see Aleksei Yurchak's highly influential work of American anthropology: (Yurchak).

**4** Some of the posters from the important L'viv exhibition *Invitation to Discussion* (1987), curated by Yurii Sokolov were exhibited in Kyiv (PinchukArt-Centre) in 2018 at the show *Red Book: Soviet Art in L'viv in the 80s - 90s*, see: <https://pinchukartcentre.org/en/exhibitions/red-book>.

still involved borrowing models and tropes from external sources. The post-traumatic aftermath of the Chornobyl disaster and the post-colonial quest for a unique identity significantly influenced the approaches of Ukrainian artists. Irony and *stio**b*** (a form of satire) became prominent tools utilized by many artists as they navigated these complex circumstances.<sup>3</sup> Often contemporary art was involved in dialogues and discussions,<sup>4</sup> which, though not regarded by the authorities too seriously, later held great power to change the cultural situation in the country.

## UKRAINIAN MEDIA ART IN THE 1990S:

### DIFFERENT PERIODIZATION

During the late-1980s and early-1990s, Ukrainian contemporary art underwent a rapid evolution, and 1993 became a pivotal year for

the emergence of new genres and approaches to artistic creation, particularly in association with television and media. Local artists fearlessly delved into various contemporary art genres such as performance, installation, happening, lend-art, and kinetic art. In addition, postmodern artists incorporated innovative elements into their creative repertoire, such as works in progress (highlighting the incompleteness of the artwork as a deliberate aspect), anamorphoses, text marginals, video art, and immersive environments. Discussions surrounding the colonial position of Ukrainian culture within the USSR and its post-colonial state had been ongoing since the dissident samizdat movement of the 1960s.

While Ukrainian media art of the 1990s may not have been as well-documented or widely recognized as some other art movements of the time, it played a crucial role in shaping the contemporary art landscape in Ukraine. The experimentation and exploration of video as an artistic medium during this period laid the foundation for the continued development of media art in Ukraine in subsequent years. To forge authentic characteristics, artists employed diverse strategies. Some groups sought legitimacy by drawing inspiration from local or national historical references, while others found validation through engaging with global artistic trends or exploring entirely subjective experiences.

Since both television and video share a common technology, especially in terms of how the final images and sounds are presented and experienced, the relationship between artists' video and broadcast TV was complex in many countries (Meigh-Andrews: 2). The pre-1965 activities of artists Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell, in appropriating the television apparatus and presenting the domestic TV set as an iconic object, were crucial to the establishment of video art as discourse, and

influential on subsequent generations of video artists (Meigh-Andrews:10). Successive video artists were often concerned with the disassembly of the television set as a physical object and the reinterpretation of the TV signal; another camp of artists considered its role in contrast and distinction to ordinary TV as a mass medium (Boyle). Many artists in Western countries took up a position against television and sought to change it or challenge the cultural stereotypes and representations it depicted. In the 1970s-1980s video art progressively dissociated from television, instead artists used the medium of television to express conceptual ideas and also to convey ideas about time and space (Newman: 33).

The TV set as an object and a metaphor made a cultural circle between the 1960s and 1990s; being treated in the early stage as an entity of home settings from which 'external' ideology spans into the privacy of the house or apartment, and obtaining nostalgic qualities in the 1990s when the technology was close to obsolete. During these thirty years of evolution, 'television as a box' produced additional genre forms and metaphors. As a lighting box (Westgeest: 86), a TV set was sometimes treated as a special material object within complicated installations (like in the works of David Hall) when its physical qualities were emphasized. Out of this approach was derived the genre of videowall, with its magnifying effect, while other artists strove to hide the materiality of the box, emphasizing the image/visual quality of the monitor's broadcasting. In many artworks where a TV set plays a role, interaction with it could lead to the total destruction of the object, breaking out of the box, or desire for interactivity and inclusion of a visitor (as a co-author or as a visual object). So, to sum up, when in the 1990s, the video was turning into a flickering live mural disassociating from the box of a TV set or a monitor, its connotations of domesticity,

the lightbox, anthropomorphism, outside-inside, window, sculptural object, etc., steadily vanished in many gallery spaces and art practices. But video art did not become cinema nor purely projection art; it held to its history and often employed strong media metaphors.

We hardly find the same tendencies in socialist Ukrainian art, which reacted to the omnipresent media (mainly video technology) only in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Ukrainian video art had a distinct path of development and could not emerge in the 1960s since the art world and video technology had different functions in UkrSSR (Gržinić: 25–27). If video art<sup>5</sup>, as Michael Newman insists, “has always been understood by practitioners and critics in relation to commercial television” (Newman: 30), there was not commercial TV under socialism. Slight market changes in Soviet media took place only after 1986, but viewers’ participation and manipulation of the TV image were not in the imagination of late-socialist artists. In the USA or Western Europe, video art already in the 1960s became known for its expressive and artistic utilization of television technology, playing a role in ideological battles against domination. However, we lack documented Ukrainian perspectives that view television as a ‘creative medium’ (echoing the name of a 1969 exhibition at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York) in a similar manner.

Michael Newman’s treatment of Western video development from the position of ‘revolutions’ that are closely connected to American aesthetics and history, produces teleology of video, which places post-Soviet countries like Ukraine on the periphery of actual or global artistic development. And it is tempting to explain East-European media art as a process of perpetually catching-up, but such an approach leads us to certain technological determinism or mechanistic causality when specific stages of artistic evolution are linked to some technology and

**5**  
In American discourse, video was synonymous with television in the 1950s

its ultimate interpretation. Marita Sturken affirms that any art should be treated as a phenomenon, interwoven with local ideological discourses and aesthetic practices:

*The assumption that the aesthetics of video is a direct result of its properties leads us into technologically determinist terrain yet again. Technologies such as television do not simply appear at [a] specific point of history, they arise out of specific desires and ideologies. However, this distinction does not negate the fact that video has a specific phenomenology, which affects our experience of the medium (Sturken: 118).*

Certainly, early American or European video artists explored the specific properties of video not only in order to distinguish it from other fine art media such as film, painting, and sculpture but because these properties also had much in common with other concerns of the period – especially those of Conceptual Art, minimal sculpture and performance. Similarly, Ukrainian artists of the late 1980s and 1990s considered video in relation to painting or sculpture and understood its nature within a discourse of conceptualism, performance, and installation. Critics, such as Olexander Soloviov, who did not find ‘new art’ behind Ukrainian video practices of the 1990s, were keen to discover inherent medial properties of video, which for them had been lacking from many artworks. In their view, each art form should have its own fundamental characteristics and aesthetics, though scholars warn us that a technology-dependent relationship is especially problematic in relation to any art historical analysis.

A discussion of video’s intrinsic characteristics has been the leading approach to tracing the medium’s history, and this reveals a fundamental problem in any analysis of the relationship between American or European cultural creativity and technology (Meigh-Andrews: 7).

In post-Soviet Ukraine, video's identity as a medium remained not in its being (the production of the analogue signal in the form of television) but in its use: how it was imagined, constructed, promoted, applied, and represented. For many contemporary artists, television, and video were a by-product of other technologies and became the source of multiple practices, battles, and disagreements. Video, as affirms James Moran, is too incomplete a medium for any particular narrative to rationalize its essential substance (Moran: 32). Thus, technical determinism, or western-oriented periodization of television and video, must be replaced by a historically material model emphasizing a dialectic of technology and practice mediated by human desire and intention, which is special in any given historical moment.

#### **THE IMPACT OF THE SOROS CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART**

In the late 1980s, Ukrainian artists who aligned themselves with the contemporary art movement often found themselves grappling with familiar existential questions: What defines art, and what falls outside its boundaries? How does the artwork interact with its audience? Is the quality of a piece still paramount, or should we prioritize its essence? Should art solely be pursued for its aesthetic appeal, or can it transcend into a way of life? How does art connect to the world and its creator? Does the artwork continue to belong solely to the artist? However, amidst these ongoing inquiries, something new emerged in the early-1990s. Ukrainian artists increasingly began to contemplate the concept of new media and whether art should embrace and utilize new tools and technologies, adding a fresh dimension to their artistic exploration.

Alisa Lozhkina and Oleksandr Soloviov admitted that in the mid-1990s, Ukrainian contemporary art was marked by two trends, mainly

institutional reshuffling, and the arrival of media art (Soloviev and Lozhkina). The active work of the Soros Art Centers in Ukraine played a significant role in determining the local artistic situation until the end of the decade, and many art institutions or galleries followed the model offered by this western-style organization. The activities of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) not only provided Ukrainian artists with valuable insights into new trends within the global contemporary art scene but also played a significant role in initiating new projects. Among initiatives which turned Ukrainian artists' attention to new media was a project InfoMediaBank, which organized an operational studio and lectured artists on various techniques such as morphing, generative art, interactive art, 3D modeling, net.art, etc. After each workshop, artists created new works, and soon it became obvious that it was necessary to produce a new exhibition platform for presenting media art made during masterclasses, specialized training, or in response to grants.

The establishment of the SCCA in Kyiv in 1994 played a pivotal role in fostering the emergence of early media art. Housed within the former academic wing of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, the SCCA had a stated mission to facilitate the transformation of ex-authoritarian countries into open societies, as noted by Alisa Lozhkina (Lozhkina: 303–04). However, an alternative perspective could suggest a sense of superiority and a hegemonic endeavor on the part of certain Western funds or organizations to reshape former socialist cultures in alignment with the principles of liberal, market-oriented democracy. The leadership of the institution, initially under Marta Kuzma and later succeeded by Jerzy Onuch (both experts on foreign art), introduced diverse methodologies to educate local artists on the intricacies of contemporary art. These initiatives encompassed more than just exhibitions; they

also included the establishment of a modest grant system. Artists were required to acquire the skills of articulating their artistic proposals through formal applications. Additionally, practical masterclasses were organized to assist artists in adapting to the demands of a market-oriented economy.

In the final years of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art in Ukraine, curators of this program, Natalia Manzhali, and Kateryna Stukalova, formed an artistic event called KIMAF (Kyiv International Media Art Festival), which had several editions from 2000 to 2002. This festival offered Ukrainian artists the first specialized space where local media artists exhibited with their external colleagues. However, this phase of media art development in Kyiv came to an end with the closure of the SCCA in 2004. Consequently, there was a discontinuation of artistic residencies and the well-equipped media laboratory, leading many artists, particularly those who had experimented with video in the 1990s, often with the support of SCCA grants, to return to more conventional mediums such as painting and photography. Armed with the knowledge gained from InfoMediaBank, some artists ventured into fields like design and mass media production.

Soros CCA in Ukraine instigated a surge of interest in curatorial practices and new media, in particular, video art, whose full-scale entry into the discourse of Ukrainian art begins in the mid-1990s. Ukrainian artists who went into the camp of contemporary art, often were attracted by new media, which helped them to step away from conventional oil painting. As Arsen Savadov claims:

*Sometime in the 1990s, I realized that I was bored with painting. I started working with new media, not just photography; I made huge banners, videos... It was inherent to that time because we were going*



through this stage of our development. We [...] dived into Moscow conceptualism and liked it! But with time it became clear that we have to look for our own path (“Arsen Savadov: My Characters Are Personalities with a Vague Understanding of Reality”).

Many artists of this period shared such an attitude and were eager to experiment with various media, although it was not easily accessible. A video camera in the late-1980s and early-1990s was a luxury for artists, but many painters were keen to try the new medium. Legendary Ukrainian artist Kyrylo Protsenko started experimenting with cinema in the early 1990s, using a 35 mm camera, which was more accessible in Kyiv, with its rich cinematic culture. He recalled that: “Video art then directly depended on the video camera. So, if someone had a video camera, it was like a little spaceship” (Horodivska). He, like many other artists of the time, would classify their media art trials as “experimental films”, or “video clips”, closely connected with sound or music.

An exemplary film, or a quasi-movie, which has elements of both professional and amateur cinema, embodying such aesthetics was Vasylyl Tsaholov’s video, called *Milk Sausages* (1994) (Fig.2). The main character in this experimental video film was played by art critic Oleh-Sydor Hibelynda. It is a story of a maniac who dreams of ruling the world, and it is not a horror in its purest form, but a very ironic parody, in which fear is rather imitated. One may read this work within the aesthetics of (anti)cinema or irony, but Yanina Prudenko affirms that Tsaholov’s video can also be treated as media activism and criticism of television. By her interpretation, *Milk Sausages* [Molochni sosysky] was a reaction to the television of the post-Soviet 1990s when cable TV overloaded people, with multiple VCRs and video cassettes



← **FIG. 2**  
Vasily Tsaholov, *Milk Sausages*. Video. 1994  
Image courtesy  
of Mystetskyi Arsenal,  
Kyiv, Ukraine ([https://  
artarsenal.in.ua](https://artarsenal.in.ua))

of Western movies entering private apartments, and public video salons where one could see cheap films and porno (Platonova). Tsaholov's video was an attempt to make a B-movie, but in the style of mimicry and post-modern irony characteristic of art circles of the time.

#### **BETWEEN IMAGE AND TEXT**

One of the main themes of the mid-1990s in Ukrainian art was the change of textual culture (sometimes called, after McLuhan, a 'Gutenberg consciousness') to screen perception and visual culture. Many artists still shared discursive frames on art borrowed from conceptualism, with its preoccupation with text and sign. The common discussion within artistic circles of the time was about relations between text and image, concept and form. Kateryna Stukalova wrote

in an essay about Vasyl Tsaholov's exhibition *You Can Eat What You Can Eat* that the artist is not avoiding 'text' but rather:

*[...] his actions are aimed more at the creation of those "author's texts" with which they are necessarily accompanied [...] The action/performance becomes only an occasion to create a full-fledged text, a kind of artist's manifesto. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons for abandoning the practice of painting – because the text that complements the pictures is nothing more than an auto-interpretation, a situation where the artist becomes "his own critic" (Stukalova, "Vasyl Tsaholov. Mozhna Jisty Te, Shcho Mozhna Jisty").*

The theatricality in art was often discussed as if it constituted part of national tradition, beginning in the late Renaissance and Baroque. In the 1990s, to think about a video without references to text or film culture was rather challenging for Ukrainian artists, and they still had to develop their own discourses on new media, reality, and representation. Artists often were unaware of the history of Western video or media art but actively tried new technologies and made experiments. Orest Sikora, writing about Ukrainian video art in 1996, stated that, despite an influx of video works, it was difficult to affirm that these works constituted art, as the creators often had little awareness of artistic conventions and discourse (Sikora). Because of this 'amateurism', known art critic Olexandr Soloviov even in the late-1990s, was still doubtful of the new Ukrainian media art, especially in researching its own ontology, claiming that:

*The reasons for the increased interest in video and new media in Kyiv and Odesa are predetermined by the long overdue need to move away*

*from the picture-centrism inherent in Ukrainian art. However, the new Ukrainian video is still far from understanding the cardinal problem generated by new technologies – the problem of Vision (Soloviev, “Kiev. 1998 god: ‘Fotoshok bez fotoshopa’”).*

Soloviev believed that the technological culture of the 1990s led to a change in the very nature of visual perception, foreseeing the destruction of familiar art historians’ concepts such as “observer” or “image” and producing artificial visual spaces that would be fundamentally different from the imitative possibilities of cinema, photography, and television. As for Ukrainian video art, it was still an imitative (mimetic) media, so the established status quo between the “observer” and the “image” was not violated. Therefore, Soloviev assured that Ukrainian video of the 1990s was still a pictorial art, often conceived and described by the categories of conventional visual art. Ukrainian video as mimetic media was “spiritual video”, claimed this critic in his review, most likely indicating that it was missing ‘sober’ conceptuality (Soloviev, “Kiev. 1998 god: ‘Fotoshok bez fotoshopa’”). Soloviev’s criticism of the visuality of Ukrainian video art was rather a utopian desire than a real possibility. As it was difficult to imagine pure television art elsewhere, Ukrainian artists were bound with concepts and ideas of fine art within, and from the conventions from which they emerged.

In Kyiv, this transition from text to new image was emphasized by the project *Barbaros: New Barbaric Vision*. This exhibition took place in March 1995 in Central Place of Artists [Tsentralnyi dim khudozhnyka] and combined various important Ukrainian artists of the time (Soloviev and Lozhkina). Within the framework of the show, Arsen Savadov and Heorhii Senchenko (with the participation of Olexandr Kharchenko) created the installation *Bar-Bar-Ost*, within which they

exhibited a whole series of shocking works, from the video recording of the crucifixion with the participation of an actual Kyiv ‘urban freak’ to photographic documentation of the first Chechen war, where the most shocking moments were smoothed over by the introduction of elements like children’s bunny suits with ears. The work was complemented by giant decorative spoons from the arsenal of theatrical decorators, real cow hides, a smoke machine in the hall, and the authors of the installation themselves walked around in monster masks at the opening, playing the role of bartenders-cupbearers (Soloviev and Lozhkina). Such projects aimed to create synthetic environments, where video, installations, sounds, and more conventional images, played together in a form of theatrical settings.

Video art developed in various Ukrainian cities like Odesa or Lviv more as a synthetic phenomenon, often exhibited as cinematic video installations, that is, video recording or video loop (shown from a TV set) was meaningfully attached to other art objects. Video works from the 1990s were created in such a way that the video was not a closed object in itself, not a film or abstract video, but more than often interacted with the space, and with other pieces, conjuring up associations in the viewer’s imagination. It was common for the artist to cite, borrow, remake, and work with found footage, in order to create ironic and burlesque statements.

### **VIDEO, SCULPTURE, AND CINEMATIC INSTALLATIONS IN THE 1990S**

Ukrainian artists and critics often described this interest in media in the mid-1990s not from the viewpoint of video, but rather from the perspective of the screen. Alisa Lozhkina, Olexandr Soloviev, Mykhailo Rashkovetskii, and other authors who wrote about media

art of the time, repeatedly considered it a ‘turn to the screen,’ ‘screen culture’ [ekranna kultura], or monitors but avoided using television as a term (Vysheslavskiy: 53-70). Conceptually for local artists, there was no direct correlation between television and video, at least on the level of language. So, artists either thought about video in terms of films (often purchased on video cassettes), a visual stream/broadcasting or in terms of objects/show-boxes, like TV sets and monitors. The obvious reason for such comprehension of video as art was the frequently-used genre of video installation, or making artistic environments with TV sets or monitors.

Ukrainian artists of that time interacted with screens and made artistic installations, in which monitors played an important role. According to Helen Westgeest, the viewer plays a pivotal role in installation art, and their active participation is significant. She regards video installations as either cinematic installations or as installations within the broader realm of art. In these installations, the evolution of the dispositif, the blending of actual space with imaginary space, holds great importance:

*Video installations are not only closely related to installation art, but as spatial arrangements of moving images they are also part of a development from classical cinema toward cinematic installations (Westgeest: 81).*

In the 1990s, Ukrainian artists were more likely to think in terms of such ‘cinematic installations’ (mentioned by Westgeest) and preferred space arrangements, sculpture, or theatrical effects while often evading displaying so-called linear video or abstract video flow. One of the most noticeable early installations in Ukrainian art was *Local Sensing*

6 This work was exhibited in Odesa at the important project “Free Zone” [Vilna Zona], see: (Kovalchuk)

[Lokalne zonduvannia], produced in 1995 by Eduart Kolodii and Ihor Khodzynskii (Vysheslavskyyi: 62). Artists aimed to integrate the visual elements emanating from the monitors and the physical configurations of television sets, transforming them into installation objects.

Anatolii Hankevych from Odesa, who produced notable media artworks during this period, serves as a prime example of an artist who transitioned into new areas of art (“Hankevych pro Hankevycha”). Within the installation titled *Katholikos* (1994), Hankevych captured a recording of himself simulating crucifixion (Fig. 3). As part of the installation, he mounted a continuous video loop of his exposed body onto a wooden cross, which was then displayed on a television screen.<sup>6</sup> This work had several referential levels: having the title *Katholikos* and presenting a cross alluded to religion (*Video Installation “Katholikos” A. Gankevich 1994*). However, a viewer was proposed to behold not a figurine of Christ, like in a church, but rather the *mise-en-abyme* (an infinitely recurring sequence) video image of an artist, which placed a spectator as if between two mirrors. It is intriguing to compare Hankevych’s crucifix installation and Keith Haring’s graffiti artwork from 1984. Both pieces explore thought-provoking themes, such as the contrast between wealth (symbolized by the use of dollars) and the artist, and the symbolism of television as a form of religion or iconic representation. In Hankevych’s work, one can also consider the influence of Nam June Paik’s *TV-Buddha* (1974), which further adds to the discourse surrounding the portrayal of television as a significant cultural symbol.

There are interesting parallels to be drawn between *Katholikos*’s portrayal of the artist as a martyr and the concept of simulated or unreal martyrdom as examined by Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra. Both Hankevych’s installation and Baudrillard’s ideas delve into the



← **FIG. 3**  
Anatolii Hankevych,  
*Katholikos*. Video-in-  
stallation. 1994

notion of artifice and the blurring of reality and representation. One intriguing comparison lies in the substitution of Christ's traditional crown of thorns with an artificial wreath surrounding the TV screen in Hankevych's installation. This alteration introduces a distinct layer of symbolism, evoking notions of artifice, constructed narratives, and the manipulation of religious iconography within contemporary contexts. By exploring these themes, the artwork prompts us to contemplate the nature of representation, the authenticity of martyrdom, and the complex relationship between art, reality, and simulation.

The title *Katholikos* carries significant meaning, rooted in the Latin and French words derived from the Greek adjective "katholikos", which translates to "universal". By invoking this term, Hankevych's installation suggests an association with the concept of universality. In the context of TV as a universal religion, the title can be interpreted



7

I would like to acknowledge Maria Zhukova for bringing to my attention the significant role of *perestroika* (in Ukrainian *perebudova*) in the late 1980s, which successfully engaged alternative artists with television. She highlights the transformative nature of this period, wherein television ceased to be solely a tool of propaganda and dominance but also became a realm for self-reflection, see: (Zhukova 164)

as a provocative commentary on the role of television as a pervasive force in contemporary society. It hints at the idea that television functions as a quasi-religious institution with its ability to reach a broad audience and shape collective consciousness. In this sense, TV serves as a ubiquitous source of information, entertainment, and shared experiences, assuming a position of influence and authority akin to that of a religion. By aligning the notion of universality with TV, Hankevych's work prompts us to question the impact and significance of this medium as a cultural phenomenon. It raises concerns about the power of television in shaping our perceptions, constructing realities, and potentially replacing or supplanting traditional religious or spiritual beliefs.

Anatolii Hankevych's utilization of the TV set as a tool for self-reflection represents a progressive development in artistic representations of television.<sup>7</sup> It can be seen as a simultaneous amalgamation of the European tradition from the 1960s, as exemplified by Nam June Pike and many others, and a demonstration of new artistic tendencies. On the one hand, his work aligns with the lineage of artists who explored television's symbolic and cultural significance and considered it a powerful medium with societal implications. But his approach also showcases innovative and contemporary tendencies of the 1990s. By employing the TV set as a tool for self-reflection and introspection, he highlights its evolving role and its impact on personal identity and artistic expression. This combination of historical reference and forward-thinking experimentation demonstrates Hankevych's ability to bridge the past and present, creating a thought-provoking dialogue between established artistic traditions and emerging practices.

TV sets and video played an important role in the art project *Kandinsky Syndrome* (curated by Olena Mikhailovskaia, Mykhailo

Rashkovetskii, and Olexandr Roitburd), which was arranged in Odesa in 1995. Curators meticulously played with the last name of Kandinsky, a famous artist (Wassily) and psychiatrist (Victor). The curatorial text indicated the syndrome of psychic automatism (known as Kandinsky-Clérambault syndrome), which manifests itself in the alienation or loss of one's own mental processes by the self, an awareness of extraneous influences of undefined or concrete force ("Kandinsky Syndrome"). The syndrome is characterized by paranoid schizophrenia and features like pseudo hallucinations, delusions of control, telepathy, etc. But at the same time, this syndrome explains the post-modern situation:

*In the murderous, rational world of advancing technology and the individuality-destroying values of the new consumer society emerging on the ruins of the Soviet empire, the artist has no choice but to rush forward to conquer the irrational. Armed with asociality and immorality, protected by total skepticism and disillusionment, the artist is once again staking on Kandinsky's principle of "inner necessity", which is an immutable condition for creativity - a notion that has, unfortunately, slipped from the active tools of contemporary culture into the realm of ideal notions ("Kandinsky Syndrome").*

In Olexandr Roitburd's installation, a video borrowed a sequence from the renowned TV series *Twin Peaks* (David Lynch, 1992). This particular sequence depicted a column of flame emerging from the head of the demonic protagonist. The video was shown on a TV set, an immanent part of the installation, placed on the top of a readymade kitchen gas stove (Fig. 4). Thus, the visitor was exposed to a double television reference: a TV set, which had a connotation of domesticity, showed a video sequence from a television series (living room art,

virtual delirium) while another domestic object, such as the kitchen gas stove, formed a quasi-imaginary and surrealistic delirium arrangement in real space. The work's elements highlight the additional theme of consumerism (the parallel between the stove and TV, as well as the connection between meal and broadcast) and its impact on the assimilation of television series as easily-consumed cultural products in a post-socialist setting.

Similarly to Roitburd's cinematic/television citations, the work *Post-mortem* by Myroslav Kulchytskii and Vadym Chekorskii presented at this exhibition, a monitor showing a looped fragment from the French film *Savage Nights* (Cyril Collard, 1992), perched on a hospital gurney hanging from the ceiling (Rashkovetskii). The installation had clear references to the film's main character Jean, who, as Collard commented, struggled with illness (HIV positive) and with human stupidity, with all sorts of racism, and tyranny. Hence, television as a phenomenon and as an object was included in a cinematic art installation, in which references to film culture were not only on the level of discourse but also visible within the art environment/installation.

Yanina Prudenko suggests that the act of appropriating films or sequences from TV serials in installation artworks enables an examination of television as a subject and encourages artistic self-reflections (Platonova). The 1990s opened to the post-Soviet public the Western phenomenon of lengthy television series, so artists like Oleksandr Roitburd used video loops appropriating television films in order to make their pathetic, funny, or grotesque comments about the new (for post-Soviet people) media reality.<sup>8</sup> According to Hlib Vyshelevskii, an important impulse for the development of, as he called it, *appropriate video*, among Ukrainian artists was a seminar, *Videocontext*, organized in 1998. Initiated by the Soros Center for Contemporary Art



← **FIG. 4**  
 Olexandr Roitburd,  
*Éric Troncy's Hypnotic  
 Session*. Video-instal-  
 lation. 1995 (Odesa)  
 Image courtesy of  
 Mystetskyi Arsenal,  
 Kyiv, Ukraine ([https://  
 artarsenal.in.ua](https://artarsenal.in.ua))

in Kyiv, the seminar invited known media archaeologist Erkki Huhtamo, or Polish artists like Marek Wasilewski or Mirosław Kaczmarek, and together with local Ukrainian artists, the group aimed to create new media works. Artists widely used aesthetic and technical methods drawn from post-modern art, such as appropriation, montages, citations, pastiche, destruction, and irony (Vysheslavskii: 56).

Ukrainian artists often followed their Western colleagues, who frequently used television monitors as parts of installations or sculptures. TV boxes served as references to domesticity and intimacy. Indeed, in the 1960s-1980s, the effects of the monitor were unavoidable until the emergence of video projections that filled gallery rooms in the 1990s. During this earlier period, the monitor established the optimal viewing position for the observer, often being perceived as a 'talking head' due to its anthropomorphic qualities. Nam June Paik's *Family*

**8**  
 In Soviet media culture, television series had different associations than in the West since socialist miniseries of the 1970s were ideologically burdened, while the TV series as part of popular culture arrived only in the early-1990s, in the context of post-socialist transformation.

**9**  
See the documentation of this installation here: <http://www.mediaartarchive.org.ua/media-art/kiss-on-the-glass>.

**10**  
On the metaphor of a TV set as boxes, see: (Flusser).

of *Robots* (1986) exemplified the ultimate embodiment of monitor anthropomorphism, while Jan Dibbets' *TV as a Fireplace* (1969) presented the monitor as a vivid metaphor for domesticity. But in Ukrainian contemporary art, TV sets, as part of sculptures or installations, obtained additional meanings, which derived from the developing media culture of the 1980s and early 1990s.

Ukrainian artists often thought about the screen as if it was a painting; a semi-image. The medial ontology of the television set also bore similarities to Leon Battista Alberti's metaphor of the painting as a window, connecting the viewer to the outside world and to history. As a result, the TV set was occasionally treated as a space that bridged the realms of interior and exterior, creating a connection between the viewer's internal and external (often mediatized) experiences. In certain installations, television monitors were combined with negative spaces, a common approach in modern sculpture, effectively "activating the internal space of the imagination and creating awareness of the processes whereby viewers fill in the gaps" (Elwes: 148). A similar approach can be found in the interactive installation *Kiss on the Glass* [Potsilunok na skli], produced in 1996 in Odesa by Vadym Chekorskii and Myroslav Kulchytskii, in which visitors were invited to talk on the phone with the character featured in the video on the TV set.<sup>9</sup>

The inclusion of the recipient in the installation is undoubtedly influenced by the rich tradition of performance art. In American and European media art of the 1970s-1990s, television boxes<sup>10</sup> (and video) were frequently parts of performances, and in many works of Bruce Nauman, Les Levine, or David Hall, the live element of the performance work was expanded to include media and the visitors to a gallery. Still, the specific details and techniques employed in implementing the object-recipient dialogue within *Kiss on the Glass* installation introduce

novel elements. For instance, the depiction of a kiss in the installation can be seen as a reference to David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983). But, in the artwork, the kiss takes place on the glass in front of the TV screen. This raises intriguing questions about the continued desire or fascination associated with television as an object of desire, even in a sexual sense. Furthermore, overcoming distance through a telephone introduces the idea of transforming the reception of TV from a passive experience, opening up possibilities for the viewer to engage with the medium more actively. In this regard, the relationship between the human being and technology can be seen as a symbiotic one, but it also invites reflection on the inherent distance that exists between the viewer and the medium. By exploring these themes, the installation contemplates the evolving dynamics between humans and technology and invites viewers to reflect critically on their engagement with the TV medium.

This metaphor of a monitor, as if dividing reality and the fairy-world behind the screen, was addressed in the mid-1990s by artists such as Hlib Katchuk or Andriy Kazandzhii. In 1995 Kazandzhii produced a video loop, which featured a drill in the form of a child toy, that was used to drill a hole in the television screen (Fig. 6). The title of this work, *As Screens Get Thinner* referred to the continued development of technologies that strived to turn a TV set from a box into a flat panel, a mere monitor that could be used similarly to a painting. In 1997, Hlib Katchuk made a similar visual metaphor in another video, where a supposed Pinocchio, a metaphor for a character that seeks fresh experiences, immerses himself in the reality behind the screen. The video shows a person plunging into the simulated world of television (Fig. 5), aided by a surreal portrayal of drug use. His desire to enter a magical world leads to the elongation of his nose, and with the help of a stretched

11

In the 1970s, Todd Gitlin discussed the concept of the “hypodermic effect” of television, which suggests that the medium has a powerful and direct influence on viewers, injecting them with specific ideological messages, see: (Gitlin). For Soviet discussion about television as a drug, see: (Zhukova: 174).

12

Mykola Ieriomin, “The anniversary of ‘The Weevil Show’: a classic of national television turns 25 years old,” PlayUA (blog), May 18, 2021, <https://playua.net/yuvilej-shou-dovgonosykyiv-klasytsi-ukrayinskogo-telebachennya-vypovnylosya-25-rokiv/>.

nose, the character is physically submerged in animation. Using his nose, like a syringe, Pinocchio absorbs some mysterious liquid directly from the TV screen and injects it into his arm – in the manner of heroin addicts. After getting the injection, one can see a visualization of the hero’s psychedelic experience as animation depicts the path of the magical substance through Pinocchio’s body.<sup>11</sup> In such works, Katchuk or Kazandzhii obviously reflect the popularity of television and new media, which absorb viewers and addict them to a flow of media.

### **SOLID TELEVISION: REALITY AND ITS MEDIA SIMULATION**

*Let’s not waste time on some crappy TV show!  
Because there is a show more ragged and more torn  
– this is our life!<sup>12</sup>*

*Solid Television* [Tverde Telebachennia] was the title of a series of works made in the mid-1990s by Vasyl Tsaholov, and its essential reworking of the medium distinguishes these works in Ukrainian art of the time. Kateryna Yakovlenko identifies *solid television* as a methodically-applied artistic and philosophical concept, within which Tsaholov primarily worked in this period (Yakovlenko, “Tverde Telebachennia”). Alisa Lozhkina also notes that Tsaholov used the term *solid television* as an umbrella term for a whole array of other projects, such as the performance *You Can Eat What You Can Eat* (Lozhkina: 342). Apparently, Tsaholov grasped the ideas of solid television in his earlier projects, such as *World Without Ideas*,<sup>13</sup> the performance *Karl Marx – Pere Lachaise* (May 1993), and *Mimicry and Mimicry Experiences* (1992-1993). All these projects developed inside an artistic squat on Paris Commune Str. (now Mykhailivska Str.) in Kyiv, and they often involved artistic



← **FIG. 5**  
Hlib Katchuk, *Apocalipso*. Video. 1997



← **FIG. 6**  
Andrii Kazandzhii, *As screens get thinner* [Koly ekrany staiut tonshymy]. Video. 1995



13

This exhibition of photography took place in one of the spaces of the Ukrainian Artistic Union but was curated by the short-lived gallery UKV, owned by Tetiana Krendeliova. Krendeliova also facilitated another important exhibition by Tsaholov *Huma Pochutiv* [Rubber of Feelings], but the gallery was closed soon after in mid-1993, see: (Yakovlenko, “Halereia suchasnoho mystetstva «UKV».”).

collectives. He worked together with other young artists, and, in the 1990s, turned to aesthetics of media and popular culture to rethink the nature of painting (Lozhkina: 295, 341). Lozhkina suggests that his rejection of traditional oil painting began with the series *A Feelings Eraser* (1992), which:

*[...] were completed in a sketch-like, pseudo-realist manner with some parts of the canvas left unfilled. They created an effect of “super credibility” with texts written by the artist placed at the bottom of the works (Lozhkina: 341).*

Tsaholov gradually shifted from painting to photography to challenge the artistic representation of reality while working with the problem of simulation. He finally formulated his manifesto of ‘reality as media’ in 1993, in the important but unpublished text called *Solid Television*. He stated that his concept adopted new materialism, in which the assumption of the immateriality of the world is mixed with the acceptance of it as a solid and (biological) system (Yakovlenko, “Tverde Telebachennia”). He was eager to create artistic performances that the television would grasp as real happenings. In his big performance, *Karl Marx – Pere Lachaise* (May 1993), an actual television crew arrived to report the supposed murder of Paris Communards in Kyiv. The performance, in which he involved his fellow artists, indeed looked as if people were executed on the streets of the Ukrainian capital.

The artist declared that his experiments were an attempt to go beyond imagined reality because works of art themselves have never been real, but have always been the result of imitating or mirroring something. Here he was obviously referring to the ancient idea of mimesis

but using the language of mimicry. Tsaholov envisioned the world and the reality of the 1990s as a solid three-dimensional telecast and treated the actual space of the city as a television set-up, that allowed viewers to become more organic; in a sense, natural. Essentially, the task of the artists and art was to help viewers to discover the actuality of solid television by confronting them with the real or, rather, with the absence of the real. By experiencing art, the viewer supposedly gets rid of the split between reality and its simulation, and experiences the social imaginary as a fact. Like in *The Matrix*, released in 1999, five years after Tsaholov's grasping of 'reality as media', mindful appreciation of solid television (as if awakening from sleep) should make people aware that their fate, adventures, and actions are just a series of visuals or videos, designed somehow to enrich this meaningless, endless series of life forms.

In the early-1990s, well-known artist Vito Acconci, who had already been working with video since the 1960s, had concerns about television replacing reality (*Virtual Intelligence Mask*, 1993<sup>14</sup>). He believed that television crucially influences our perception of the self, so, seeing endless visual models which were tempting to follow, a human may imitate somebody but not become themselves. Further, he argued that humans "function as 'screen', a simulation of self", so that "television strengthens the diagnosis that the border between the inside and the outside is blurred: the diagnosis of 'self' as a concept is old fashioned" (Valentini: 9). For many Ukrainian artists of the 1990s, an issue of (medially-)simulated identity was important as well.

The idea of merging reality and the world of television fascinated Tsaholov so much that he was eager to witness interferences of the televisual in everyday life. He claimed that reality is fictitious because the truth that was relayed with the help of a blue screen (Soviet metaphor

**14**  
See Virtual Intelligence Mask at: <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/virtual-intelligence-mask>.

**15** Soloviev refers to Pierre Bourdieu's famous text *On Television*, published in 1996, see: (Soloviev, "Kiev. 1998 god: 'Fotoshok bez fotoshopa'").

**16** Media scholars often explore the concept of television as a flow, drawing on the research of Raymond Williams in his work *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. However, it is uncertain whether Tsaholov was aware of this body of literature and the arguments put forth by Williams.

for a TV set) was perceived as an everyday fact. He called his epoch a *mediacratia* and affirmed that, under it, to exist means not to be in the world, but "to be shown on live television."<sup>15</sup> Television extends our eyes and ears, and we tend to believe that what we see is the only existing reality. But this belief is false. According to Tsaholov's statements, life, history, and the world are just a stream of events that are built into a neat narrative line, and the number of interpretations far exceeds the number of phenomena that are interpreted (Stukalova, "Dreifuiuchy Navkolo Vavilons'koyi Vezhi": 5).

This media metaphor about the world as a linear flow<sup>16</sup> was developed by Tsaholov earlier, in his project *World Without Ideas*, where he argued against Platonic idealism, stating: "The world is just a flow of... events that can be described as being linear" (Stukalova, "Kateryna Stukalova pro proekty Vasylia Tsaholova «Huma pochuttiv», «Svit bez idei» ta performansu «Mozhna jisty te, shcho mozhna jisty»"). In such an understanding, the flow of reality is structured like a language, as in McLuhan's observations that new electric technology has large implications for the future of the language. He called this new phase "the technological simulation of consciousness", where television replaces language and thinking. Tsaholov argued that: "The regular television set has become an inseparable component of our daily existence, representing an enigmatic and astonishing technological manifestation of a metaphysical process and, through this process, our consciousness inherently validates the genuineness of existence by observing the presence of things" ("Razgovor Aleksandra Solovieva s Vasiliem Tsagolovym o «Mazepe»": 49).

In February 1995, Vasil' Tsaholov curated<sup>17</sup> the project *Mazepa*, where artistic artifacts of various artists were filmed in the space of the Kyiv fortress *Kosyi Kaponir* [Slanting Caponier], and then shown to the public in the same place using one television monitor. Tsaholov remarked that

the viewer was ensnared in a predicament, unable to switch between works and compelled to watch them as a continuous video stream from start to finish. The author noted that the most surprising and vexing aspect was Oleh Kulik's work, which featured constant profanity emanating from the screen. This project resembled more of a research laboratory than an aesthetic representation of art. In this context, Tsa-holov and fellow artists toyed with the notion of exposition commonly found in white cube galleries, where curators showcase paintings and other traditional images. The question posed was, what would happen if one were to merge two spaces — the physical room of a gallery and the video space of a TV set?

For him, it was important to try to rethink the concept of exposition; a show, not in a narrowly professional way as an exhibition of works by a show of talents, but more broadly – as a fundamental principle of art. In the same year, Tsa-holov embodied the idea of substituting reality in his work *Teleauction*, creating a series of news stories that were read on camera by members of the Kyiv artistic community (Oleksandr Soloviov, Oleksandr Hnylytskii, Serhii Bratkov, and others).<sup>18</sup> The television news partly corresponded to the everyday life of the time, and partly they were invented/fictionalized by the artists, creating certain media mockumentaries. In some plots, artists discussed their latest projects and exhibitions alongside fictional exhibitions and events, so the viewer, unfamiliar with the context and unable to discern which were authentic, could not distinguish the border between fictitious and real. The effect was enhanced by the fact that these stories were broadcast on the Ukrainian TV channel ICTV, thus, artistic fiction and fictitious reality of television finally met. The visual aesthetics, such as the linearity and consistency of the television announcers' narration, gave no reason to doubt the veracity of what was voiced and shown.

**17**

This project was supported by The Soros Center for Contemporary Art in Kyiv, see: [http://www.mediaartarchive.org.ua/eng/institution/csm\\_soros\\_kyiv](http://www.mediaartarchive.org.ua/eng/institution/csm_soros_kyiv).

**18**

This project reminds earlier work of *Pirate Television* (1991), initiated by late Soviet artists Vladislav Mamyshev-Monro, Juris Lesnik, and Timur Novikov.

As many artists in Ukraine were interested in making installations and environments, Vasyl Tsaholov continued exploring the televisual media in his artworks also in this direction. In 1998, at the Soros Center for Contemporary Art in Kyiv, Oleksandr Soloviov curated the exhibition *Intermedia*, which was the first project exclusively dedicated to media art (Prudenko: 162). Tsaholov devised an installation that involved the construction of a television studio, inviting viewers to assume the role of a TV presenter (Fig. 7). Placed in the center of the gallery space, the installation encouraged active participation from the viewers. Within this installation, the artist meticulously recreated the environment of a television studio, complete with a table and chair for an announcer, a camera aimed at the prospective reporter, and the presence of studio lights, among other elements. In the background of all the furniture and equipment stood a large photographic background showing a natural landscape. A TV set, which was part of this installation, carried the feed from the installed camera, showing the scenic background as if it were genuine. However, the presence of the chair within the shot made gallery visitors aware that what one sees on the screen is not the outside reality but a studio setting.

By offering interactivity to visitors, the artist purportedly acknowledged the idea that we are all interconnected with television, but only those who appear on the screen attain actual existence. Through this work, Tsaholov once again raises questions about the construction of reality, wherein the television camera and its surrounding environment lend an almost authentic quality, akin to documentary filmmaking. The debunking of the myth surrounding television's truthfulness arises as we witness the back of a chair against the backdrop of the landscape behind the announcer, unveiling the fact that the visual scene is constructed within the confines of a studio. The landscape



← **FIG. 7**  
 Vasyl Tsaholov, *Solid Television Studio*. Installation at the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA), Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, 1998.

displayed on the screen is not a natural depiction captured by a camera; rather, it is a mere photograph, a reproduction of a reproduction. In this manner, Tsaholov's intention was not only to create a metaphor but also, through the installation and visitor participation, to expose the mechanics of television itself.

So, the concept of *solid television* developed in the early-1990s was partially transformed in the late-1990s into an idea of a studio, a space for producing reality. Soloviev admits that the conceptual basis of Vasyl' Tsaholov's installation *Studio of Solid Television* (SSTV) was the transfer of the concept of 'display' [*pokaz*] or 'performance/representation' [*predstavleniie*] from philosophy to TV media. To confirm their authenticity, in order to exist, Soloviev claimed that a person will no longer have to appeal to reality, but to the work of television channels and studios (Soloviev, "Kiev. 1998 god: 'Fotoshok bez fotoshopa'";

“Vasyl’ Tsaholov. Studiia Tverdoho Telebachennya. 1998. Instaliatsiia”). Writing about this project, Soloviev argued that television, by appropriating [*pry vlasnyt’*] the metaphysical functions of philosophy, was supposed to eliminate [*skasovuiie*] philosophy, and at the same time, determine what and who would be allowed to materialize in TV; to become, to exist (“Vasyl’ Tsaholov. Studiia Tverdoho Telebachennya. 1998. Instaliatsiia”).

In 2002, Tsaholov created the second version of the *Studio of Solid Television* (SSTV) installation, abandoning interactivity. The studio was located on a high podium, which added theatricality, but the audience was no longer required to act actively – it was enough to observe passively. This new installation influenced the younger generation of Ukrainian artists. Alevtina Kakhidze, who made a homage to Tsaholov’s installation in 2014 (Fig. 8–9), recalled:

*His work, for me, is an illustration of how a non-existent reality in a television studio can be presented as a reality. But since all this is shown to the viewer, he is not deceived – the viewer receives knowledge. The most important detail in his installation is photography. The photo shown on the TV screen is unclear: is it taken in reality [...] or from the image on the wall in the TV studio? (Yakovlenko, “Tverde Telebachennia”).*

Kakhidze believes that Tsaholov’s work is remembered in Ukraine for the fact that the viewer experiences the method of *solid television*, and gazes at the truth from within. The visitor of the installation often finds themselves in the fictional world built by the artist and, at the same time, they can find answers there. Therefore, for many Ukrainian artists, Tsaholov’s work from 1998 was a total installation,



← **FIG. 8**  
Alevtyna Kahidze, *TV Studios / Space Without Doors* (part of the “PAC-UA Rethinking” project). Photos courtesy of PinchukArtCentre, 2014. Photographer: Serhiy Ilyin



← **FIG. 9**  
Alevtyna Kahidze, *TV Studios / Space Without Doors* (part of the “PAC-UA Rethinking” project). Photos courtesy of PinchukArtCentre, 2014. Photographer: Serhiy Ilyin



an installation in which everything that was there was not accidentally chosen by the artist. Rather, it made the visitor a part of a fictional space, thus reproducing the key mechanism by which television works – the construction of world/reality (“Alevtyna Kakhidze u Rozmovi z Tetianoiu Kochubins’koiu”).

This work of Tsaholov combined personal, social, and ideological aspects, and this is what makes it special among the works of Ukrainian art reflecting television. The power of Tsaholov’s installations of the late 1990s lies beyond their video characteristics and the nostalgia provoked by the TV set; the single monitor of the installation did not offer a special visual experience. Yet, in its spatial and ideological program, the *Studio of Solid Television* (SSTV) created an aesthetic experience. In this work, one could encounter video as an apparatus, in which the physical machinery and the psychic relations it has with those around it are not just metaphors of one another but, to all intents and purposes, as Sean Cubitt posits, are models of each other (Cubitt: 106). In the late-1990s, Tsaholov, as if warning Ukrainians about the media wars that would take place in a decade, notified that television was turning into people’s whole social being, into everything which defined their own idea of themselves (Bourdieu: 478).

## CONCLUSIONS

The emergence of contemporary Ukrainian art took place during the latter half of the 1980s, coinciding with the decline of the Soviet Union. However, the exploration of media and television as artistic mediums gained significant momentum during the early 1990s, following the collapse of the USSR. A pivotal moment occurred in 1994 with the establishment of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA)

in Kyiv, which played a crucial role in shaping various forms of artistic expression, particularly in the realm of media art. Unfortunately, the closure of the SCCA in the early 2000s resulted in a decline of interest among Ukrainian artists in new media and television, primarily due to limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and a lackluster art market.

Between 1993 and the early-2000s, Ukrainian artists formulated specific approaches to engage with media and television, often reminiscent of historical instances of Western media art. However, this period, the 1990s, possessed a unique context due to the concurrent digital revolution, which blurred the distinctions between video, film, artistic video, and animation. The advent of digital technology bestowed a universal framework of 'video' upon moving digital images, rendering the demarcations between various media ontologies less conspicuous compared to the 1960s or 1970s. In the 1990s, the essence of video as a medium was not exclusively determined by its technical attributes, whether analog or digital. Instead, its significance resided in how it was conceptualized, crafted, endorsed, utilized, and depicted. For numerous contemporary artists, television, and video were secondary outcomes arising from other technological advancements, resulting in a multitude of approaches, conflicts, and divergences within their artistic practices.

Among various attitudes to working with media, we can differentiate several tendencies, which this article highlights. First, *video as sculpture* has emerged as an innovative (for Ukrainian art) approach, challenging conventional ideas of sculpture by incorporating time-based elements. In such works, television as a cultural form was reflected by artists through black boxes of TV sets. Artists, such as Hankevych or Roitburd, have seamlessly integrated video or moving images into

sculptural works, often incorporating screens or display surfaces within installations. This integration allowed for a harmonious relationship between the physical sculptural elements and the temporal nature of the video content. In the 1990s, Ukrainian video sculptures also embraced interactivity, encouraging active engagement from viewers (Chekorskii and Kulchytskii). Through interactivity, the boundaries between the viewer, the artwork, and the video content blurred, enhancing the overall experience and intensifying the feeling of participation (Katchuk, Kazandzhii).

Describing video installations as a genre, artist, and critic Catherine Elwes differentiates several approaches to video (Elwes). She acknowledges that a TV set used to bear an essential connotation of home space and domesticity; thus, artists either confirmed such media stereotypes or tried to reconstruct them. She claims that when working with video, one usually encounters three trajectories, personal (expressive), social (domesticity), and ideological (media culture):

*As a whole, video art made a three-way connection from artistic expression to the private sphere and on to televisual culture in the shape of entertainment, with marketing and current affairs constantly flowing through the permeable boundaries of the home (Elwes: 142).*

Video artists could not avoid associations with a TV set as something domestic and anthropomorphic. Some even argued that television boxes in galleries put them in the mood to have tea, as if at home, and not to appreciate art (Westgeest: 85). In the art world of the 1990s, video transcended the confines of the television set and acquired cinematic qualities such as projection art and immersive experiences. However, it retained certain aspects of its inherent “video ontology” distinct from

traditional narrative-based films, often encompassing abstract audio-visual flows and eschewing a linear storyline. As Tom Sherman describes in his pessimistic account of new media culture, in the 1990s the video became a medium “without edges”, being frameless and weightless (Sherman, cited after: Elwes: 154). After freeing itself from the box, “video as a picture” gained “pure cinemascope illusionism” (Elwes: 153) that elevated video (or video film) to a kind of electronic mural painting. So, when video replaced painting in a gallery space, every use of the monitor in exhibitions was, for some observers, inevitably mingled with nostalgia and the associations often felt when technology like 8 mm film cameras, or old cell phones, becomes outmoded.

The second important specificity of working with media in the 1990s was that TV sets for many Ukrainian artists were associated with their communicative interface, namely the *screen*. Some Ukrainian critics, as well as artists, perceived the new media art of the 1990s through the metaphor of a screen or window. Screens, such as those found on televisions, have become an integral part of daily lives, transforming how people communicate, gather information, entertain themselves, and engage with the world. The television screen could be seen metaphorically as a *window* that provides a view into different realms. The metaphor of a window helps us understand the complex relationship between screens and our engagement with screen culture. It highlights the transformative power of screens as portals to information, communication, and virtual experiences, while also reminding us of their role as filters, mediators, and reflections of our digital society.

TV sets and screens helped artists to express individual matters (Hankevych) as well as social (Katchuk). Within this frame of reference, we can read Tsaholov’s work on the concept of “display” and “representation” [*predstavleniie*] as well as *remediation* or *borrowing*.

Television content, including shows, commercials, and news broadcasts, was sometimes remixed and repurposed by artists to create new and often satirical works. By editing and recontextualizing existing footage, artists offered social commentary, critiqued popular culture, or explored themes in unexpected ways. This form of creative expression allowed for the deconstruction and reinterpretation of television content. In such works, Ukrainian artists frequently referred to the idea of *mimesis* and the *imitation* or representation of reality. Some of them, like Tsaholov, continuously commented on the issues of simulated identity, the construction or portrayal of an identity that may not necessarily align with one's true self.

Dieter Daniels from the Academy of Visual Arts (HGB) in Leipzig, argues that even though relations between television and art are profound, a distinct art, closely associated with television, has never appeared:

*Television is the most efficient reproduction and distribution medium in human history, but it can scarcely be said to have come up with anything in the last half-century that could be called an art form unique to that medium (Daniels).*

He defined in the early 2000s four post-utopian strategies of artists, who did not share the utopian vision of television held by their older colleagues. Among those strategies were “analytical deconstruction of the mass medium” using the means of art, artistic occupation of niches in the expanding media landscape, or direct cooperation with television (Daniels). Almost all of these strategies were shared by Kyiv-based artist Vasyl Tsaholov, who adopted media art aesthetics in the 1990s and worked within them for almost a decade (Fig.10).



← **FIG. 10**  
Vasyl Tsaholov in the  
art gallery UKV during  
the personal exhibi-  
tion *The World Without*  
*Ideas*, 1992.

Tsaholov's *Solid Television* was the most pronounced artwork and philosophy of the 1990s, which aspired to develop a continuous commentary on media, and television in particular. He assumed that television had the ability to simulate reality by presenting fictional or non-fictional content that aimed to represent aspects of the real world. This capacity to simulate reality offered viewers a variety of experiences, ranging from scripted narratives that reflected aspects of the real world to live broadcasts that provided an immediate connection to real-time events. For Tsaholov, television as a cultural form, material object (and network), and artistic metaphor, served as a powerful medium for presenting and exploring different facets of reality and shaping our understanding of the world. Through immersive and participatory experiences, often in the form of installations, his artworks

challenged the passive consumption of mass media and encouraged viewers to become active participants in the deconstruction process.

Analytical deconstruction of mass media using art allowed Tsaholov to critically examine, question, and undermine the dominant narratives and power structures inherent in mass media. Where other artists were preoccupied with personal expressions or commented on existing cultural practices, he delved into an ideological sphere. Therefore, all three trajectories of working with media, mentioned by Catherine Elwes (personal, social, ideological) developed during the 1990s in Ukrainian media art. By employing artistic techniques and approaches, Tsaholov challenged the authenticity, objectivity, and influence of mass media. But if his colleagues from the West were inclined to comment on capitalism as a source of domination, Ukrainian post-Soviet artists of the 1990s were still distant from such criticism and more interested in philosophy than in political ideology. ♡

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- FIG. 1: Arsen Savadov, Georhii Senchenko, Cleopatra's sadness. Oil on canvas. 1987. Source: <https://archive.pinchukartcentre.org/works/arsen-savadov-georgij-senchenko-1987-pecha>
- FIG. 2: Vasily Tsaholov, Milk Sausages. Video. 1994. Image courtesy of Mystetskyi Arsenal (<https://artarsenal.in.ua>) Source: [[https://lb.ua/culture/2018/03/22/393287\\_fleshbek\\_9oh\\_10\\_klyuchevih\\_rabot.html](https://lb.ua/culture/2018/03/22/393287_fleshbek_9oh_10_klyuchevih_rabot.html)]([https://lb.ua/culture/2018/03/22/393287\\_fleshbek\\_9oh\\_10\\_klyuchevih\\_rabot.html](https://lb.ua/culture/2018/03/22/393287_fleshbek_9oh_10_klyuchevih_rabot.html))
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- FIG. 4: Olexandr Roitburd, Éric Troncy's Hypnotic Session. Video-installation. 1995 (Odesa). Image courtesy of Mystetskyi Arsenal, Kyiv, Ukraine (<https://artarsenal.in.ua>). Source: [https://lb.ua/culture/2018/03/22/393287\\_fleshbek\\_9oh\\_10\\_klyuchevih\\_rabot.html](https://lb.ua/culture/2018/03/22/393287_fleshbek_9oh_10_klyuchevih_rabot.html)
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- FIG. 6: Andrii Kazandzhii, As screens get thinner [Koly ekrany staiut tonshymy]. Video. 1995. Source: [https://archive .pinchukartcentre.org/works/andrij-kazandzhij-1995-koli-ekrani-stayut](https://archive.pinchukartcentre.org/works/andrij-kazandzhij-1995-koli-ekrani-stayut)
- FIG. 7: Vasil Tsaholov. Solid Television Studio. 1998. Installation at the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA), Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Source: [https://archive .pinchukartcentre.org/works/vasil-tsaholov-1998-tverde-telebachennya-i](https://archive.pinchukartcentre.org/works/vasil-tsaholov-1998-tverde-telebachennya-i)

FIG. 8–9: Alevtyna Kahidze, TV Studios / Space Without Doors (part of the “PAC-UA Rethinking” project). Photos courtesy of PinchukArtCentre, 2014. Photographer: Serhiy Ilyin. [https://pinchukartcentre.org/ru/photo\\_and\\_video/photo/25583](https://pinchukartcentre.org/ru/photo_and_video/photo/25583)

FIG. 10: Vasyl Tsaholov in the art gallery UKV during the personal exhibition *The World Without Ideas* (1992). The photo was printed in the magazine “*Terra incognita*” (published between 1993–2001).<sup>19</sup> Source: [http://terraincognita-art.pro/001/ti1/01\\_14ua.html](http://terraincognita-art.pro/001/ti1/01_14ua.html)

**19** Mykola Kostiuchenko and Olexandr Soloviev, “Vasyl Tsaholov. Svit Bez Idei,” *Terra Incognita*, 1994, [http://terraincognita-art.pro/001/ti1/01\\_14ua.html](http://terraincognita-art.pro/001/ti1/01_14ua.html).

## Резюме

Игнорирование особых контекстов бывших советских республик, формировавших специфические практики и формы, приводит к тому, что весь багаж искусства советского периода рассматривается как некий однородный монолит, при этом точкой отсчета становится русскоцентричная или даже москвоцентричная перспектива. Цель этой статьи – указать на то, что при неоспоримом значительном влиянии советской империи на свои периферии, эти периферии, в свою очередь, во многом развивались под воздействием в том числе и внешних факторов. Из перспективы Москвы украинское искусство квалифицировалось как «горячее» и «южное»; во времена перестройки критика определила его как «новую волну». Это «новое украинское искусство» явилось непосредственной реакцией на Чернобыльскую техногенную катастрофу (1986), которая для многих молодых художников выступала свидетельством бесперспективности советского социализма.

Появление в Украине Центра современного искусства Джорджа Сороса в начале 1990-х годов переключило внимание представителей «новой волны» с Москвы на другие центры художественной жизни, а также послужило толчком к рождению медиа-искусства в Украине. Художественные лаборатории, мастерские, публичные лекции, которые проводил Центр современного искусства, стали исходной точкой для появления целого поколения украинских медиа-художников. Данная статья дает краткий обзор эволюции современного украинского искусства, начиная от позднесоветских эстетических практик 1980-х годов и вплоть до работ середины 2000х, отзывающихся на искусство 1990х, когда украинский медиа-арт переживает пору своего расцвета. Именно в этот период

телевизионный экран выступает как средством ретрансляции видеоизображения, так и объектом рефлексирующего анализа самой телемедиальности.

Автор обращается к ключевым практикам и дискурсам, которые сформировал украинский медиа-арт 1990х гг., подвергая пристальному анализу такие работы как видео-инсталляции *Католикос* (1994) Анатолия Ганкевича и *Гипнотический сеанс Эрика Тронси* (1995) Александра Ройтбурда, интерактивную инсталляцию *Поцелуй на стекле* (1996) Вадима Чекорского и Мирослава Кульчицкого, видео *Апокалипсо* (1997) Глеба Катчука и *Когда экраны станут тоньше* (1995) Андрея Казанджия. Автор подчеркивает, что украинский видео-арт того времени лавировал между производством визуального контента (фильмов, нарративов, формальных экспериментов), видеоинсталляциями и скульптурой. Примечательно, что именно в жанре медиа-инсталляции сформировалась концепция Василия Цаголова о «твердом телевидении», которая как бы заключает в себе коллективные поиски украинских художников в сфере медиа-искусства 1990-х годов.

Как и многие другие молодые художники того времени, Василий Цаголов прошел эволюцию от живописи, графики и фотографии до видео-инсталляций и медиа-арта. Именно этот художник был в числе активных критиков идеологического аппарата медиа, демонстрируя в своих работах огромные возможности телевидения в искажении реальной картины мира. Результатом длительных художественных исканий стал проект *Твердое телевидение*, анализирующий телемедиальность как средство имитации реальности и предлагающий зрителям разнообразный рецептивный опыт, начиная от сценарных нарративов, отражающих аспекты действительности, до прямых трансляций, обеспечивающих



мгновенную связь с событиями в реальном времени. Телевидение как культурная форма, материальный объект (и технология), а также как художественная метафора выступили для Цаголова мощным средством репрезентации и одновременно средством для исследования разных граней реальности и формирования нашего понимания мира. Проект приглашал зрителей стать активными участниками процесса деконструкции. Возможность непосредственного погружения зрителя в медиасреду и его соучастия в инсталляциях способствовали тому, чтобы воспринимать этот проект как вызов пассивному потреблению средств массовой информации.

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