

Art as an instrument and a form of dialogue in a divided community

Maxim Ieligulashvili¹ ✉

Abstract

The article deals with the practical features of using tools and forms of contemporary art for building peace and increasing social cohesion in conditions of social conflict and divided communities and society. The possibilities of using these tools in the form of preventive measures, as well as forms of building trust or motivation for communication between the parties of the conflict were analyzed. The issues and peculiarities of these tools application on both methodological and practical levels were considered.

Zusammenfassung

Kunst als Instrument und Form des Dialogs in einer gespaltenen Gemeinschaft.

Der Artikel behandelt Anwendungsmöglichkeiten, wie man Formen und Methoden der Kunst nützen kann, um Frieden und sozialen Zusammenhalt in Zeiten sozialer Konflikte sowie gespaltenen Gemeinschaften und Gesellschaften fördern kann. Es wird erörtert, wie man diese Präventionsmethoden, Vertrauensaufbau und Motivation einsetzen kann, um Kommunikation zwischen den Konfliktparteien zu initiieren. Wirkungsweisen und Besonderheiten dieser Methoden auf methodologischer und praktischer Ebene werden aufgezeigt.

Keywords: peacebuilding, art, performance, intervention, conflict, dialogue

1. Introduction

Quite often, working with groups in dialogues or helping out for mastering this approach, I am talking about “zooming in and out” – as means of scaling things and phenomena. In order to realize myself the processes that involve me in a conflict or complex interaction with the he/she Other (hereinafter “the Other”) as a person, or in general with a figure of the Other as someone incomprehensible, or even “alien”, an ability to perceive all from different sides simultaneously is necessary and the main task for me. However, in the conditions of the progression of splits, the accumulation of collective and historical traumas, the escalation of the situation, the ability to such zooming becomes blocked. It is not an issue of willingness, we just fail to provide it. This happens at a personal level, but what about the dynamics of social processes, inclusions and layers of visions, conflicts of interests and self-replicating memory? Are classical forms and tools of diplomacy and peacemaking capable of working at different levels

including temporality simultaneously?

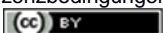
Art as a peculiar form of communication is increasingly beginning to be involved as an ingredient, and sometimes as an alternative to classical diplomacy and peacebuilding. Due to the wide range of tools, the existing experience of working with taboo or controversial topics, with a certain tendency to prognostication and memory work, art can significantly help in reducing the level of tension, de-escalating the situation, building mutual understanding and relationships, becoming a basis for the prevention of conflict recurrence. Often in fresh or, conversely, ancient and prolonged conflicts, art remains the only opportunity to begin barrier-breaking processes, becomes the bridge for dialogue in communities and regions with existing territorial, ethnic or religious conflicts.

Art, in its diversity, actually serves as a kind of kaleidoscope of realities and alternatives, which at the same time provides the opportunity for “zooming in/out” simultaneously. Such versatility and internal capacity of art makes it an extremely effective tool for social transformation. Changes that can rebuild the community or fix the decline are becoming the basis for reconciliation or, on the contrary, for division. Accordingly, under conditions where the social dynamics is in transit from authoritarianism to democracy, the present armed conflict and the occupation of a part of the country, when we fix

¹ coordinator of Non-formal education program Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union

✉ Korrespondenz über diesen Artikel ist zu richten an Maksym Ieligulashvili, Ukraine. EMail: mieligulashvili@gmail.com

Lizenzbedingungen:



cases of so-called “divided communities” at different levels and in different spheres, art can play one of the key roles in the process of multilevel dialogue.

After all, art for dialogue can play the role of not only reflecting or fixing reality. It can become a means of a certain intervention and a rupture, which “polyphonizes” social visions and stops omission. Due to imagination and reflection, art generates myriads of visions and scenarios of the future and the past, providing only the point of the present for one's choice, a certain impulse of coercion to determine one's own place in the dilemma of surrounding reality, thereby creating though changing, but a sense of ability and capability, dependence of reality from our choice for each of us.

In 2014, we tried for the first time in terms of post-revolutionary disorientation, the beginning of an armed conflict and an essential sense of the hidden situation of a divided community to test art as part of the dialogue process. During this time, we and a large number of cultural activists, artists, mediators and facilitators tested a wide array of art approaches and media including installations, performances, Forum Theatre, verbatim, video art, etc. However, a personal starting point was a theatrical performance, made in 2014 in Kherson (Ukraine) – “Talking To Yourself”. Applying verbatim, we tried to allow those who believed that they were not heard or forbidden to express their opinions to speak publicly:

“It is sometimes difficult for us to talk to others. Especially, in conditions of conflict. When it seems that the other side is simply not able to comprehend our feelings and thoughts. But we have our vis-à-vis to talk, often intuitively building arguments and picking up words.

It is more difficult when we fall into the illusion that there is no vis-à-vis. Not because he/she is absent, but because he/she dare only talk to him/herself. At this level, we get our own illusion, while others are a ring of monotonous conversations. Conversations that absorb us deeper and deeper in some sort of autosuggestion.

Instead of understanding, we are locked up in our isolated universes. But sooner or later these isolated worlds intersect, and it depends on us what will happen next - an explosion or

conversation, additional bricks in the wall or the beginning of the stairs”.

2. What can art move?

Indeed, art is not only a means of manifestation, fixation or reflection of certain events or phenomena. Art can be another tool for actions aimed at building a dialogue between different social groups and individuals. In 2018, the group of dialogue facilitators and mediators developed standards, focused on transformative effects, which provide a dialogue in the process of sharing meanings and improving understanding/relationships between participants (IPCG 2018). Accordingly, the work of contemporary artists, art activists working on the humanitarian crisis, conflict of memory/memories in Ukraine, can provide important components for the preparation, start, conduct and reflection on the dialogue process. After analyzing the practice of using art in acute, socially important discussions, looking at the content with which artists and certain mediators are dealing in Ukraine, one can distinguish seven key effects that contemporary art generates. Effects that can strengthen the process of sharing meanings, social transformation, aimed at ensuring qualitative changes in the conflict and post-conflict area.

2.1. Firstly, art remains an area of sensory perception and interpretation, not an examination or clear/correct answers. This is an area of reflection and personal or solidarity rethinking the traumatic present or the trauma of the past. The art product is distributed and retransmitted due to sharing by others, their reflections, indignations or raptures. Accordingly, it must include the viewer, cause emotion and provoke reflections. Thus, becoming a certain laboratory area, where, under the supervision of many personalities, we can experiment, combine what is taboo, unconscious or censored by society and individuals. A piece of art can actually cause a wide range of emotions. But to a greater or lesser extent, it makes us feel empathy towards events, situations, specific people and their stories. In this case, empathy generates sympathy, a certain emotional connection with the Other or even an “alien”, while remaining their own identity and views untouched. Art transforms collective memory into personal and individual, helping the viewer experience some distant things, trying to perceive the Other's events as their own, as something in which he/she got involved. Art in one form or another becomes an attempt to experience

“theirs” as “ours”. Accordingly, an artist, an activist becomes a mediator who makes the viewer not only look at the work of art, but interact with it, which, as a result, reveals the meaning of the work, the manifestation of events and their vision. We do not only bring the events closer geographically or in time, we can, via visual and audio forms, contribute to emotional immersion, help in the attempts to “walk in someone else’s shoes”.

2.2. Secondly, art contributes to a certain elasticity, plasticity of fixation processes and rethinking those or other events. Art becomes a peculiar means of commemoration. When trying and working with modern times, with what happened around them or with their participation, artists reduce the cacophony and flickering of the surrounding routine to some sort of a silent archive, where, at some point, the voices become separated from the media and in some way objectified in the form of artifacts or archives. But at the same time there is an intensification of empathy.

Contributing to the polyphony of experiences, promoting the inclusiveness of a narrative, art creates a completely different approach to fixing and assessing events. For reminiscences, memories are sufficiently dynamic processes that suffer from internal pressure and the influence of changing external circumstances. Thus, through interweaving voices and the vision of different people and processes, art interventions that relate to the fixation and reflection of the tragic pages of history unfolding in Ukraine are able to act as the architect of the future. Art actually becomes a definite means of building bridges in divided communities, because quite often the voices marginalized by the mainstream are the focus of the artist’s attention; thus, preserving the diversity of memories, but not leveling a certain part of voices or promoting oblivion.

Art creates an opportunity, a chance of building individual identity or even the identity of communities/groups based on the inclusion of memory of the crimes and traumas into a collective consciousness, making it actually a peculiar act of solidarity and recognition, re-humanization of events and their interpretations. It becomes one of the tools for constructing memories, forming a polyphonic narrative, thus joining the process of building artifacts of the future. Already at the stage of rethinking and preserving, we prevent domination of the monomyth, allowing for clarification and inclusion of diverse experiences and visions. Being fixed in the memory of culture, these memories obtain a permanent, though specific life.

2.3. Thirdly, the dialogue processes built around works of art become a means of building a safer place for participants. Through art intervention, the art product is filled with content and becomes valuable only through sharing meanings and comments, comments on the comments, thus creating an avalanche of interpretations and meanings. It is this space that enables a person who is in a situation of self-censorship and self-defense, even in cases of taboo in a group or society, to try to comment in a much safer space, to make a comment that can relate directly to his/her experience or, conversely, a more secure interpretation of a particular strategy for perceiving and treating not the very experience but the particular art product. In group processes around art products, there is always an opportunity to speak using one’s experience, or to choose a first safer attempt to talk about the understanding/interpretation of what has been seen, thereby replacing oneself with a work of art as a potential object of someone’s critique.

The common knowledge and interpretation of the art product can be an integrative factor, albeit temporarily, but at certain moments, sufficiently intimate to ensure a confidential sharing of views and other forms of social interaction. In fact, when discussing about and around some art object and action, we are getting the opportunity to start a safer communication, that gradually gains in strength and confidence in the participants themselves, since it always has a kind of a safety play.

2.4. Fourthly, dialogues with the use of art products not only create a safer and more inclusive space, but also provide the basis for the development of already formed or emerging taboos and prohibitions within groups and society as a whole. Art cannot exist without arguments, discussion and dispute. It is filled with arguments and counterarguments, a controversial area, open to many voices, which amplify or compete for its place in the existing narrative. Artists quite often remind society of the possibility of different views, even if it may run counter to the existing consensus or common sense from the point of view of the majority. In this way, the minority voices are being amplified a priori, or the voices of those who do not speak in the public at all, whose opinion is marginalized or not heard. It becomes a definite space for individual solitude and solidarity, because art quite often catches out the components of the context, “uncomfortable” for most people, thereby forcing or reinforcing social reflection.

In situations where social dynamics engages solely around trauma, violence or revenge, a person is born without memory, without the past, without expectations for the future. Instead of our own memories or polyphony, we become media of the mono-narrative and mono-myth, taboo and oblivion consensuses turn into delayed-action mines, if not for the present, then for the future. Therefore, it is extremely important for the society to break the circle and heal the traumatic event, providing representation of different voices and visions. Art can bridge this gap through empathy to a situation or individuals, certain coercion to work with taboos or the initiation of a dialogical inspection – where I am, where my community is now.

By interweaving stories, trying to work with the controversial topics, dilemmatizing and illustrating the importance of the choice of bystanders, who consciously or not try to stay in their soap bubble, contemporary art by rethinking traumatic experience minimizes the threat of oblivion, or targeted amnesia.

That is what James Baldwin called unpredictable stories. Those stories and experiences that must be heard, because

“As is the inevitable result of things unsaid, we find ourselves until today oppressed with a dangerous and reverberating silence [...]” (Baldwin 1983, p. 24)

In fact, contemporary art is a tool for initiating the healing of the present trauma or returning to the unreflected past, thus becoming a means of prevention of silence that lays delayed-action mines in the interaction of generations and future conflicts. Examples of this occur more evidently in recent decades – the oblivion consensus after the Second World War in Europe and youth riots in 1968, the history of slavery in the US, post-colonial history.

All those events and unhealed social/collective traumas, conflict narratives and counter-memory, which, when confronted and conflicted, form our perception of the past, provide a conflict today and construct a completely incomprehensible and disorientated tomorrow.

2.5. Fifthly, with the help of a dialogue based on the understanding and perception of difference, but on equality, we provide the foundation for demopolization and democratization within society. After all, art and the art-based dialogue multiply the approaches and tools of treating the past and present, respectively taking the monopoly of the

past from the historians and the present-day from the politicians, blurring the right of individuals/groups to private understanding and assessment of events.

Basically, with the help of art and the art-based dialogue, we are able to create a new form of social cohesion, collective identity as a new collective community based on the transformed experience gained through dialogue. This creates a more reliable and understandable, albeit temporary refuge shelter, helping people survive in situations of violence and cacophony of conflicts, providing somewhat different, alternative dimension of reality that has a significant capacity for implementation and sustainability: a reality that has the potential to grow and synchronize with other social transformations in society.

Interpreting and rethinking reality, art can serve the basis for shifting from the space of divided, conflict perception of reality and the future to the experience of planning new horizons of expectation, creating the demand for opening opportunities for making other, inclusive decisions and even actions. And artists and dialogue makers, due to the available knowledge and skills, cultural polyphony in experience and practice, can be much better communicators and “visualizers” of ideas, requests and interests of the parties to the conflict.

The society inside as well as outside needs interpreters of meanings and interpretations, people who are capable of providing more full, deep communication. And it is art that can become that universal interpreter and repeater of the already filtered and rethought experience of forming another, more democratic and fair reality.

2.6. Sixthly, works of art can actually be part of the historical narrative, of general and common memory, a milestone in the postcolonial construction of collective memory in Ukraine. After all, they are based on common rituals, symbols, heroes and antiheroes. In fact, art products in their rethinking and reflection, fixation and conjectures become a future historical reconstruction, setting the framework for individual memories. Whether we want it or not, our present and past shape us and our vision of the world. And it depends on us what to do with this legacy - to accept, forget, refuse or sacralize. Rethinking and working with it is possible only after we enter the inheritance rights.

Art becomes if not a notary, then a certain framework, makes this process more dialogical and conscious, responsible. We, with a greater level of awareness of the layers, features and controversies of the situation and assessments, determine our

attitude and approaches to diffusion. Accordingly, contemporary art can be a tool that not only facilitates communication with various groups, but also is a means of activating and attracting witnesses, viewers to the processes of evaluation and comprehension of modernity. After all, contemporary art appeals and speaks from the nominal present about the anxieties and hopes, aspirations and phobias of modern humans. The artist turns to the current moment, takes into account its conjuncture and features, not only becoming a push, fixation or provocation, but also assuming the functions of representation of the modernity.

2.7. Seventhly, art can be both a place and a means of achieving a certain dialogical arrangement between the victim and the perpetrator, the area where the parties, undergoing transformation personally, have the opportunity both to transform their own relations and to form a new narrative, where both sides recognize trauma shared by them and society. People not only recognize, but also in the process of reflection, rethinking of events or a common history, they receive the opportunity to heal trauma within some kind of a laboratory area. I would like to give an example of the event in Kharkiv – the Festival “NON STOP MEDIA VII: UPGRADE”. The main theme of the festival was guilt. “Guilt: ascension or total passivity?” The participants of the festival tried to find the answer to this question:

“Strong feeling. A mean feeling. Dropping to the knees, but preventing from falling to the bottom of absolute inhumanity. Mea culpa. Mea maxima culpa. Stretching to infinity. For what? For everything - for our own imperfections, for the ugliness of the surrounding reality, for the good intentions to change the world for the better and the inability to change even ourselves... For what we have done to the world and ourselves. For a conscious and unconscious desire not to be guilty about anything. Let others drown in a corrosive solution of reflection, rubbing salt in their ego, beating themselves with rods (metaphysical and real), banishing all the inner darkness. Producing to each other stigmata, explicit and hidden – as proof of the God’s presence in our souls. Lord, I’m guilty...”

3. Shifting from monologue to polyphony

Of course, the effects described in this material can be achieved only through providing a combination of tools and means of art with a dialogue process and approach. Both the success of the transformative component of the dialogue and the recognition, popularity of a particular art product depend on synchronous interaction and mutual reinforcement. Analyzing the Ukrainian and international practice of using art in interactive events, it is possible to identify several strategies, and which artists and art activists apply in the combined or individual dimensions. In particular, they are:

Polyphonization of experience, layering of memories and witnesses' views. This is one of the key means of destroying the mono-myth and the mono-narrative; the destruction that loses its frightening character, because it necessarily provokes the creation of something new, ensuring the continuity of the natural cycle of destruction and reproduction, ensuring reproduction of multi-voice experience.

3.1. Filtering

The modern world, especially in the phases of exacerbation, gives rise to a new vastness. Many voices, many events, recorded and digitalized, close here and now in my home via computer, in my pocket via smartphone, generate cascades of disorienting stories. To experience something and to reflex experience is getting harder. We do not hear voices and stories, we hear the murmur of many who surround us from everywhere. To understand our present or future or how the past is interweaved into the present is almost impossible. An artist can serve as a filtration device and a person who, by removing noise, is able to amplify one voice or another, to emphasize the story, to fasten others' attention on it - acting as a peculiar retarder and enlightener for society.

3.2. Singularization: Transformation of many stories into one allows us to see the greater integrity of the situation, its certain systemicity and universality, a certain universality of the experience gained.

3.3. Slowing down: Everything is changing faster than it was before, and even it is expected since yesterday. In increasingly shorter periods of time, our everyday life is invaded by something unknown from previous experience. Historic traumas and events unreflected by society are being laid on the present conflict. We are confused and more and

more accelerating, competing in an attempt to catch up on events and situations. Artists, by singling out a story, provoke us to slow down and contemplate, thus forming a request for careful consideration of what we have seen, providing in situations of total shortage of time and peculiar white noise there is enough time for observation, reflections and stories, which were previously missed. That calls for creating situations of rapid stillness of rethinking.

3.4. Synthesis: The connection of disparate parts of memories, sources, tools in order to create something qualitatively new ensures the research of the phenomenon in its unity and the mutual connection of parts. By combining artistic elements, we cross the meanings, creating a completely new unique author's view, which incorporates the reflections of colleagues and spectators.

3.5. Communication: Any art product displayed online or offline, in museums or in squares, in theatres or in apartments, contains a certain statement about society that is addressed, if not to the whole society, then at least to a certain part of it. Now art is always about relationships and exchanges: exchanges with impressions, senses and counterarguments. This is not an area of silence, but the area that provokes a quiet talk or an inflammatory, sharp debate. In the context of post-conflict settlement, or in situations involving dialogues in ongoing conflicts, it is art that can be the starting point for engagement for individuals and groups.

3.6. The strategy of smugglers in conflict

Working on both sides of the line of collision, interweaving and combining stories of different parties and times, art interventions can form the basis for diffusion of narratives, even when originally illegitimate and not manifested vividly, but having the potential to amplify these channels of interaction and mixing.

4. Art can also become a hazardous tool

At the same time, it is not worthwhile to romanticize and universalize art in the process of dialogue. It is a tool that can produce those positive effects, as described above, but can on the contrary be a tool of intensifying confrontation or provoking violence. When developing interactive processes with the use of art, it is extremely important to consciously treat both its strengths and risks.

Indeed, contemporary art offers quite a lot of opportunities for dialogue design in an ongoing

conflict. At the same time, it is important to understand that, like every instrument, it requires careful preparation and well-considered application. Art in this case is the embodiment of tendencies and mood that prevail in society. Accordingly, contemporary art can serve as a tool for creating a dialogue process, be a "repairman" or a provocateur, a trigger for participants. It can be a point and a space where participants can see the incarnation of their stories interwoven with the stories of other people, a story where the enemy and the threat have a chance to become just the Other. However, art can become a tool of incitement, a spark that can launch a new round of escalation of the conflict. After all, the language of art appeals to feelings and provokes us to action and reaction here and now. Without proper support, space and viewers, exhibits and dialogue tools, we have every chance to create a new conflict situation that may become one of the list of claims, or even a new reference point in a public conflict.

In addition, taking into account "emotionality", some simplicity in relaying, the breath of art means and their versatility, the ease of fixation and reproduction of reality, we get in a certain trap. The trap is to detect and disseminate only mainstream or society-friendly narrative. The narrative that remains has gaps of blind zones, a narrative that loops autosuggestion and self-reproduction of certain situations. When only a specific theme is the basis for perception and reflection - for example, the pre-conflict past, which is already presented as self-sustaining and self-reproducing memories. The present becomes all, filling and retransmitting itself in the past and constructing the future. Without the physical embodiment of the past, we record and document the memories of it as the basis of the self-evident future, but the future, which has no chance to be anything other than mist of our memories. We are not capable of doing anything; we are blocking even an attempt to start the excavation of the future. What we claim as promising and turbulent, in general, remains nostalgic and retrospective, while thoughts, visions or rather their avoidance is increasingly confronted with the idea of conscious avoidance; avoiding on different levels and different topics, accumulation of blind zones simply turn into such a dynamic leviathan. The leviathan that continues to grow stronger, receives an ever greater and, unfortunately, legitimate subjectivity, without leaving space and the ability to escape from the circle of self-reproducing, retrospective modernity.

One should not forget about the problems of the complexity of languages and the provocation of

avalanches of interpretations. The increasing number of artists, the availability of means and the variety of topics, given a certain provocation of the polyphonic singularity and meanings, can create situations of an area, filled with paradoxes and interpretations that conflict, layer and interact in the format of the more and more complicated hyperlink system. In fact, leading to what Pascal Gielen called “collective visual or auditory murmur”. In such conditions, art space, as well as the whole world, falls into a situation of systemic, chronic instability and volatility. Volatility cannot be predicted, since events and directions of their development correspond more to total chaos than at least to some ordered models. Technological development, the acceleration of communication and mobility create the continuity of the emergence of new opportunities, thereby creating no longer for society, but for artists the situation of cacophony and disorientation, grasping the moment, rather than focusing on sustainability. Instead of reflections, we receive cascades of captures and objectifications by someone else's experience, which, due to the kaleidoscopic reality, will not be able to either launch a deep research, or resist the mainstream and mono-myth.

In addition, average citizens have a fairly wide range of stereotypes and labels regarding contemporary art. Accordingly, there is a rather high level of skepticism and prejudice, which can cause a rather low level of interest, especially at the beginning of the work. On the other hand, contemporary artists, critics and connoisseurs of contemporary art often exist within the self-ghetto, where products and projects are made for the “art crowd” leaving behind direct consumers. It is important to take into account the existing level and forms of the proposed works when selecting the forms of work, experts and artists, leaving room and the opportunity for art to remain art, while also giving people with a low level of relevant knowledge a chance to join the process.

It is also important to realize the threat of turning contemporary art into a political weapon, under the conditions of inclusion of authors on the subject, the inability to overcome their own inclusiveness and become personally neutral. It is art that can build, establish and strengthen links between different historical events and traumas – of not one generation or century. By erasing chronological and eventful differences in stories, contemporary art produces false analogies, the ritualization and canonization of which may become a political

weapon, capable of providing self-replicating conflict for generations to come.

Consequently, since the beginning of the armed conflict in Ukraine, not only humanitarian missions, but also documentation and attempts to build peace started at different levels and with different focus. Such a difficult and controversial experience of the exit from the revolution in the war found its imprint/reflection in the works of artists. Sometimes, within conflict interventions or working with divided communities, sometimes as a reflection or an attempt to understand what is happening around and inside us. Creating a resonant space makes it capable of becoming a development site or, conversely, an escalation laboratory. After all, work with art, the development of works and products, their polishing, repetition and refinement can build memory of the future – not limited to the life of one person or generation. It creates a specific narrative, rethinking reality in the potential, the chance of a certain Other, I hope, nonpolar frame of the future. And polyphony, reflexivity of memory and memories will depend on the focus of the works, the possible space of pluralism of thoughts, experiences and memories. In addition, by fixing and trying to generate a reflection to some events, we also obtain tools, forms of a certain political and structural stabilization, means of solidarity of a person with another person, the means of treating fear or guilt, instruments of dynamic provision of social and cultural inclusion, and means of building trust. It really cannot change/correct the past, but it can become a very effective approach to transforming our present into a different level of the future.

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Autor

Maksym Ieligulashvili, coordinator of non-formal education Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union, Facilitator and trainer of non-formal education, works in the field of human rights protection, non-discrimination and social conflict. He actively uses art tools to work with historical memory, controversial themes, peacebuilding, and in general in non-formal education and adapted these tools for peace building activities in the context of the conflict in Ukraine. He has worked in the sphere of overcoming the humanitarian crisis and peace building in Ukraine since 2014. He cooperates with different national and international organizations and institutions in these topics.

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