ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank TEDxUF organizing team for the opportunity to share my ideas. I thank artists and colleagues for the amazing working experience. I thank my friends and family for the continuing love and support.
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<td>TED</td>
<td>TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) is a media organization which posts talks online for free distribution, under the slogan &quot;ideas worth spreading&quot;. TED was founded in February 1984 as a conference, which has been held annually since 1990. TED's early emphasis was technology and design, but it has since broadened its focus to include talks on many scientific, cultural, and academic topics [1].</td>
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<td>ATO zone (Ukrainian: Зона АТО), or Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone (Ukrainian: Зона проведення антитерористичної операції), is a term used by media, publicity and government of Ukraine for the eastern Donbas region, aimed at pushing back Russian-supported separatists [2].</td>
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Abstract of the Essay Submitted to the School of Art + Art History
College of the Arts University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the
Application for the Degree of Master of Arts in Museum Studies

CONNECTING COMMUNITIES THROUGH PUBLIC ART
TEDxUF TALK

By
Iryna Kanishcheva
January 2018

The following essay is based on the talk given at the independently organized by the
Gainesville, Florida community TEDxUF 2017 (Theme: Transparent), a conference that took place
at the Curtis M. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts in Gainesville, Florida, on April 1, 2017.

The subject of the talk is based on personal ideas and experiences arising out of organizing
public art events locally (Florida) and internationally (Ukraine). The most unusual or provocative
artworks were selected. The criteria for this selection was based on those artworks that received
the most attention in the media and in publications of relevant street art blogs conveying the idea
of connecting communities through public art. Street art has always been a tool for sharing
opinions, asking difficult questions, and expressing political and environmental concerns in a
public space. This essay seeks to uncover some of these aspects of public art.

The video from the original talk can be accessed by following the link:
https://youtu.be/pAJKXVKM0Dw
CHAPTER 1
INTERNATIONAL

Introduction

Street art can provoke conversations and highlight social, political, environmental issues, and has always been a powerful platform to convey messages to the masses.

Originally considered as vandalism and used to mark territorial boundaries today’s street art is a tool for urban beautification and regeneration. Many street artists have earned international attention for their street work and have made a full transition from street art into the mainstream art world. Traditional graffiti and street art motifs have also increasingly been incorporated into mainstream advertising, with many instances of artists contracted to work as graphic designers for corporations [3]. Street artists are no longer constantly at risk of being handcuffed by police, falling from a roof or under the wheels of a subway train. Street art has become more accepted by the general public, likely due to its artistic recognition. This has led to a loss in its original thrill. Some artists have become bored of the repetitive art festivals and have turned to the street art to express more meaning ideas, often using unusual surfaces and places.

A mural in Chernobyl

One of the most interesting projects I had an opportunity to co-organize was in Chernobyl, Ukraine. We know about the disaster that happened on April 26, 1986. The reactor No. 4 of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine (a Republic of the former Soviet Union at that time) exploded releasing 400 times more radioactive matter than the bombing of Hiroshima [4].

Igor Kostin (1936-2015), a Ukrainian photographer, took one of the first pictures within hours after it exploded. Kostin and two other photographers flew over the nuclear power plant in
a helicopter. The high radiation ruined all of his pictures except for one [Figure 1], and that shot of the destroyed reactor remains one of the defining images of the disaster. For the next twenty years he persistently investigated its effects on mankind and the environment [5].

![Image of the remains of Chernobyl’s destroyed reactor No. 4 in 1986.](image)

Figure 1. Igor Kostin photographed the remains of Chernobyl’s destroyed reactor No. 4 in 1986. Photograph: Igor Kostin [5].

ArtUnitedUs mural project, founded and curated by Geo Leros and myself, wanted to acknowledge the 30th anniversary of the horrific nuclear disaster by creating a painting from a photograph taken by Igor Kostin [Figure 2], thus giving tribute to the photographer. “I wanted to create a work that honored the sacrifice Igor Kostin made in the documentation of this disaster and for the importance of photojournalism as a medium of sharing the information with the world and in this case, showing the extreme dangers nuclear energy can have.” – Stated Guido van Helten when describing his ideas for the mural honoring Igor Kostin [6][7][8][9][10].

The mural was created inside the unfinished cooling tower of reactor No. 5 of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. This area is still very restricted. The levels of radiation in Pripyat
are higher than the norm, but safe for a limited time. Access to the area is allowed under supervision and for very limited time. Radiation levels change daily and are dependent on various factors including wind speeds. Instruments such as Geiger counters are necessary to detect it [11].

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 2.** Photographs from series that received the first prize in the category “Science and Technology” of the World Press Photo contest in 1987. Photographs: Igor Kostin [4]

However, since radiation levels have decreased, limited tourist tours began in 2002. The empty landscape of Pripyat with its frozen-in-time buildings has become Ukraine's most talked-about tourist attraction. Visitors can experience this radioactive wasteland and take selfies in front of abandoned fairies on a guided tour just a few hundred meters from the remains of the ruined reactor. Sometimes, tourists can go inside the reactor area [12][13].

After the image of the completed mural was disseminated widely in street art media, many other artists asked us about an opportunity to paint in this area, because it is “cool”. But it is not “cool” - it is a scary place. We did it once to remind us all of the tragedy responsible for taking so many lives.
Figure 3. Guido van Helten was able to use only a ladder, and painted for just one day. Photograph: Anton Kuleba [6][7][8][9][10].

Figure 4. Finished mural by Guido van Helten for ArtUnitedUs, Chernobyl, Ukraine. Photograph: Anton Kuleba [6][7][8][9][10].
In Eastern Ukraine, where a war is taking place, we organized another unusual project.

In 2014, Russia made several military incursions into Ukrainian territory. After Euromaidan protests and the fall of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych, Russian soldiers without insignias took control of strategic positions and infrastructure within the Ukrainian territory of Crimea. In March, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, annexed Crimea, and he gave political and military support to the east’s anti-Kiev rebellion. His goal was to create Novorossiya, a historically fictitious pseudo-state encompassing Ukraine’s eight Russian-speaking southern and eastern regions (“oblasts”) all the way up to Moldova. The war also wrecked the economy and infrastructure of the Donbass region of Ukraine known for its heavy industry and coal mining [14].

Even though Avdiyivka is one of the frontline cities right next to the active warzone, people still remain and live amongst the conflict. We invited an artist who wanted local people to think about something other than the war for at least a moment. ArtUnitedUs mural project collaborated with artists from around the globe with one mission: to raise public awareness and attention to the problem of war, aggression and violence, bringing instead a message of love and reconciliation. With this idea in mind Australian artist Guido van Helten completed a large-scale mural in Avdiyivka [Figure 6], an eastern Ukrainian town where fighting between Russia-backed separatists and government troops has killed many people [15][16][17][18][19][20].
Figure 5. Guido van Helten visited a local school to photograph Marina Marchenko, whom he chose for his mural because of the kindness in her eyes. Photograph: Amos Chaple [16]

Figure 6. Large-scale mural in Avdiyivka, ATO zone, Ukraine. Photograph: Amos Chaple [16]
The mural features the portrait of Marina Marchenko, a 73-year-old teacher, photographed by van Helten shortly after his arrival in Avdiyivka [Figure 5]. Guido van Helten spent two days wearing a bulletproof vest and helmet and working on the wall facing the front lines and therefore visible to separatist snipers. It wasn’t an easy assignment, on the two days that van Helten worked on the mural, the boom of mortars and rattle of machine-gun fire were present, the late afternoon; sometimes he was fraught with the fear that something could go wrong. But, his wish for giving something beautiful to the people who live there, and his wish for bringing some joy to them were stronger. "These people have probably never seen anything like this.... If I can give them something to think about that isn't war -- even for a moment, then it's worth it." – Says the artist. Avdiyivka, the city that once had a 40,000 population, is now mostly destroyed; high-rise apartment complexes stand empty exposing holes in the walls caused by direct hits from numerous bombardments. Above the van Helten’s work there is a damage from artillery and tank rounds. The building stands empty since 2014, after a Grad (“Hail”) rocket landed in one of the apartments, killing two civilians inside [15][16][17][18][19][20].

The teacher’s husband was injured during the fighting in 2014. They were unable to afford his medical treatment. After the painting of the mural, a journalist wrote an article about Marina Marchenko and her husband’s story. The attention brought by the article helped her to fundraise for her husband’s recovery [21]. This is an example of how street art can have a social and political effect.

It was named one of the most thoughtful murals of 2016, according to UK street art blog “Graffiti Street” [22]. “Without making a formal statement, Van Helten’s mural, organized by ArtUnitedUs and curated by Geo Leros and Iryna Kanishcheva, sends a strong message, not just to the people in both sides of Avdiyivka, but also to the world.” – Street Art News [15].
One of the main goals of the project was to attract the world’s attention to Ukraine. Though people continue to die on a regular daily basis from the conflict, it is not enough for international news; most people around the world are not aware of what is going on there. At the same time, we want to show that Ukrainians are still alive, they work hard and, despite the hardships are capable of creating amazing things.

**ArtUnitedUs**

Through ArtUnitedUs we have created a row of murals inspired by the recent situation in Ukraine. Sometimes it is too direct to showcase objects like weapon and soldiers, but always possible to express ideas through the abstract. For example, a mural named “Instability” by Greek artist INO that shows a ballerina dancing on a bomb is criticizing the failure of coexistence between people on Earth [Figure 7]. The symbolism of paintings will of course be interpreted by the viewer, as ever, and instability often applies to our politics, our trade relations, our warring countries and cities, immigration of refugees, access to clean food and water, our shifting environment, even our banking systems. Ukraine itself has suffered the crisis of war and division in recent years as well, so this mural may evoke emotions which people in Kiev can relate to [23][24][25][26][27][28][29][30].

Another mural by Berlin-based artist collective Innerfields (consisting of German artists Holger Weißflog geb. Stumpf, Jakob Bardou and Veit Tempich) depicts a woman hugging a white figure of man with an arrow in his back [Figure 8]. This person is not present physically, but a sense of presence is felt. It is a story about missing someone, like soldiers who are fighting to liberate the East of Ukraine right now. The arrow symbolizes both love and pain, because both have the potential to hurt us. The arrow has also the power to give and take, and it can also symbolize destiny. But, as the artists explains, it is the viewer who gives the piece meaning based on his or her own cultural experience and cultural baggage [31][32][33][34].
Figure 7. “Instability” by INO for Art United Us in Kyiv, Ukraine. Photograph: Iryna Kanishcheva

Figure 8. “Present” by Innerfields for Art United Us in Kyiv, Ukraine. Photograph: Iryna Kanishcheva
Similarly, French artist MTO painted a “gift” named "From Russia with love" [Figure 9]. The mural is a visual representation of the hacker attack that left 230,000 Ukrainian residents in the dark. The digital love-cannonball sent from Moscow (Russia) to Kiev (Ukraine) represents the love/hate relationship between the two countries, but it also serves as a reminder of our dependence on electricity and other power sources. In order to depict the cyber world and represent the strength of this attack, MTO painted over 2,000 fake tiles and fake windows creating an illusion, a “virtual reality”, as background for his main image [35][36][37].

Finally, among the most significant artworks ArtUnitedUs created in 2016, is “Tools for abstraction”, unofficially the tallest mural in Europe so far [Figure 10]. Drawn in abstract shapes, the 26-story mural incorporates the Ukrainian word ВОЛЯ (Liberty), the Ukraine Coat of Arms, and the personal stories of the local neighborhood [38][39][40][41].

Today, many cities around the world, large and small, are showing their support for street art through mural festivals. These vibrant events make art accessible, free of charge to their communities, create Instagram and Facebook pages to attract visitors. Thus, ArtUnitedUs quickly made Kiev one of the leading cities in street art. Murals are now part of guided tours, along with historical and architectural landmarks, where people hear explanations about the ideas behind the artworks and attracting an ever growing number of international journalists, photographers and street art lovers.

Street art has become one of the “sights to see” in many cities around the world. New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, Berlin, London, Paris, Hamburg and many more, now offer street art tours all year round. Kiev has now joined them.
Figure 9. “From Russia with love” by MTO for Art United Us in Kyiv, Ukraine. Photograph: Iryna Kanishcheva

Figure 10. “Tools for abstraction” by 2501 for Art United Us in Kyiv, Ukraine. Photograph: courtesy of the artist.
CHAPTER 2
LOCAL

352walls/The Gainesville Urban Art Initiative

This all began right here in Gainesville, where my first mural project was organized. When I moved here five years ago, I lived right across from the 34th Street Graffiti Wall. I was able to photograph new paintings in the form of classical graffiti and UF greetings, which is a good way of communication, but there were no murals. Furthermore, the walls downtown were bare. It was weird to me that in the city with one of the biggest universities in the United States and so many young people, a relevant contemporary art form had not developed. So I wrote a detailed proposal, found walls and got permissions, sought sponsors, convinced artists and the City of Gainesville helped me produce it.

Eleven murals by internationally recognized artists were created, and eleven murals by local artists. Initially, I thought that Gainesville was too small of a city and the idea wouldn’t take hold. But after seeing similar projects in Hollywood, Sarasota and St. Petersburg, Florida, I decided to try and presented my ideas to the city. “This is a really interesting example of citizen initiative that was in the right place at the right time and brought together a number of different entities to make it a reality,” Russell Etling, The City of Gainesville Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Department’s Manager said.

352walls/The Gainesville Urban Art Initiative had a goal to position Gainesville as a cultural destination in future years, foster economic development and promote urban renewal. People love the new look of downtown Gainesville. They have a reason to do a walk, invite their friends. A lot of publications appeared all around the world in street art news. The more known an artist is, the more followers he has, the more attention he brings.
Figure 11. “What Are the Aesthetics of Reinvestment” by Gaia for 352walls, Gainesville, FL. Photograph: Iryna Kanishcheva

Figure 12. “C10H15N“ by Axel Void for 352walls, Gainesville, FL. Photograph: Iryna Kanishcheva
Like other cities in the world, Gainesville also has meaningful paintings. For example, a mural entitled “What Are the Aesthetics of Reinvestment” dedicated to the problem of gentrification and displacement [Figure 11]. Internationally acclaimed muralist Gaia sought to develop a portrait of downtown Gainesville and locate the theoretical framework behind New Urbanism and its influence upon gentrification. On this side, continuing from the genesis of New Urbanism, beginning at the top, is the state flower, the Orange Blossom that would change the fate of the sunshine state. Farther down is a portrait of Osceola painted by George Catlin. The Seminole figure gives a historical context to the violence of displacement. Finally, the piece concludes with a portion of the Union Street Condos with a jogger illustrating the lifestyle preferences of the newcomers [50][51][52].

Another work that can be considered controversial, depicts the city scape and a weird word across it [Figure 12]. Many people love it and often take selfies in front of it. But some, who know this word, “C10H15N” is the chemical formula of Methamphetamine, would like to paint it over. Why did the artist title it this way? Maybe, he wanted the viewer to ask questions, to think about a global drug problem, or just used the formula to emphasize another such idea [53][54][55].

Often, a thoughtful piece can be painted over. In Jacksonville, Florida, where I recently worked as a consultant on a project, a mural named “Capital control” that depicted a security camera and was painted on a bank existed for only a few days. There are hundreds of examples of destroyed art pieces in many cities around the world. Street art creates a space for dialogues between artist, viewers and building owners. People in Jacksonville really liked it before it was buffed. The bank managers, however, were sure people would feel uncomfortable with “Big brother watching them.”
Grove Street Neighborhood

The most recent project we have done in Gainesville was organized by Maria Huff Edwards and myself, and supported by neighbors, neighborhood supporters, and ordinary people — there were no corporate sponsors or big organizations, there was no city involvement. Initially just one mural, the Grove Street Neighborhood initiative quickly gained neighborhood support and developed into a full scale community project with the unveiling of ten murals in total for just one month [56]. We all volunteered from organizers to artists with the main goal to make this area beautiful, working with a very small budget and using only one rugged terrain scissor lift.

Baltimore based artist, Gaia, created a mural titled “Poetics” that depicts the portraits of two people: the famous Beat poet Jack Kerouac (whose works have been part of an annual reading at Dreamers Garden in the Grove Street Neighborhood since 2002) and Wilhelmina Johnson, prominent Gainesville educator and civil rights activist. This way the Grove Street Neighborhood wanted to celebrate both literary and African American history. [57][58][59][60].

And a very important mural we created in collaboration with PangeaSeed Foundation’s public art program Sea Walls: Murals for Oceans. The artworks of the program bring the message of ocean conservation into streets around the globe. By collaborating with an ever-growing community of 200+ international contemporary artists, they have created nearly 300 murals in 12 countries around the world since the program’s establishment in 2014. Gainesville, Florida is now among those cities that carry the mission to generate awareness and stimulate dialogue and inspire positive changes surrounding global ocean environmental issues. [61]

The sea wall in Gainesville was painted by Miami based artist Ruben Ubiera and depicts a life-size decomposing beached whale. Vultures feed from it while flowers arise from the rotting carcass [Figure 14].
Figure 13. “Poetics” by Gaia for Grove Street Neighborhood, Gainesville, FL. Photograph: Iryna Kanishcheva

Figure 14. Ruben Ubiera for Grove Street Neighborhood, Gainesville, FL. Photograph: Iryna Kanishcheva
A mural about death, greed and rebirth provoked conversations. Some people ask, “Who in their right mind would paint a decomposing animal being eaten by vultures on the side of a building?” and name it disgusting. Others admire the idea behind the mural, the artist’s technique, and the artistic purpose behind the artwork, and the reality reflected in the mural. According to the artist, Ruben Ubiera, the artwork intends to make the viewer aware of the environmental problems that our oceans are being exposed to these days:

“I wanted to stop people on their tracks while making them aware of a problem that concerns us all: the oceans. Without them, there’s no life. The vultures represent the corporations and politicians feeding their pockets from the sea’s demise. The flowers: hope, growth, and possibility. Metallic colors were used on the sunflowers to add beauty, and reflect light, while the sun hits the wall the whole day.” – Explained Ruben Ubiera [62][63][64][65][66].

CONCLUSION

I believe public art is the perfect mediator between artists and audiences to inspire action for social and political awareness. Each of us can contribute by allowing artists to use our own properties as their canvas, or by navigating through the bureaucratic process on behalf of the artists, or being the liaison between the artists and various civic entities. It is enough to simply stand in front of a street artwork and try to understand its meaning. Why is the ballerina dancing en pointe on the head of a bomb? Why the blank figure of the man the woman embraces? Who is this woman in the portrait depicted on the wall? Why the dead whale? And, perhaps the greatest question public art can elicit, what can we do to support positive change?


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Iryna was born and raised in Ukraine where she received two Master’s degrees - Master of Science in Pharmaceutical Sciences and second Master’s degree Master of Arts in Economics with concentration in Management - and has previously worked in the pharmaceutical sector.

Upon moving to the USA she founded and curated the first urban art project in North Florida, 352walls. She was also the official photographer for the project. For this work, she was awarded the 2015 Public Art Award for the significant contribution to the enhancement of the greater environment through public art.

Later, she worked as the Co-Founder and Co-Curator for one of the biggest mural projects in the world, ArtUnitedUs (Kyiv, Ukraine), well-known for its row of significant artworks. She has received a special Gratitude from the Mayor of Kiev Vitali Klitschko for introduction of new ideas and decoration of the Capital of Ukraine with a mural series. As well as a Gratitude from the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine for civic activity, promotion of Ukraine, and creating art objects of worldly importance.

She established an online guide to the street art scene and urban culture in Gainesville, GNVUrbanArt.com. The blog has both informative and educational content.

For Art (Re)public in Jacksonville, FL she worked as Urban Art Consultant and gathered the best artists from around the world. She also was a Creative Partner for Basel House Mural Festival in Miami, Wynwood, consulting the project during Art Basel 2017. To top it off, Iryna has initiated a row of engaging community activities with various organizations, introducing people of different ages to the Graffiti world.
Currently Iryna curates the Grove Street Neighborhood project that brings together Gainesville residents and features the work of regional and national artists and works as Urban Art Consultant at UF Performing Arts Gala 2018, A Night in the City.

As a photographer, Iryna has contributed to numerous publications for the most relevant street art galleries on the web and in magazines, such as Street Art United States, Instagrafite, Brooklyn Street Art, Graffiti Street, Urbanite, Street Art News, Graffiti Art Magazine (issue #28, #31, #32), Uninhibited Urban Art Magazine (issue #4), Stuart Urban Art Magazine (issue #2), and more. Her photographs were exhibited in the Historic Thomas Center, Gainesville, FL; Morean Arts Center, St. Petersburg, FL; Gary R. Libby Gallery, Gainesville, FL and more regional galleries. Ironically, her first international solo show was in her hometown, Kiev, America House Kyiv gallery.