The Assembly for Culture in Ukraine:
Shaking the Foundations of Ukraine's Ministry of Culture

A conversation between
Larissa Babij and Corina Apostol

The Assembly for Culture in Ukraine is essentially an ongoing meeting of citizens who are concerned with how cultural processes in Ukraine are structured and intent on transforming these structures and pressing the Ministry of Culture to shift the vector of influence on culture from government ideology to the people who are the recipients and creators of cultural products and processes.

One of the defining characteristics of the Assembly (one which is often criticized) is that it does not have a consolidated voice. Based on the principle of horizontality, which defies hierarchy, the Assembly functions through self-organization. Initiatives come from individuals and the initiator is responsible for making his/her proposition happen. No one gives or fulfills orders. And no one is delegated the responsibility for speaking or answering or deciding for the group. The Assembly expresses its positions in letters addressed to particular government officials and in public statements published on the Internet. Audio and video recordings of almost all meetings are also available via the Internet within Ukraine.

In the following conversation the use the word "we" refers to past events (involving several or more participants of the Assembly) and positions that have been agreed upon and declared as common views of the ACU.

Corina Apostol (CA): I would like to start with very basic questions about how the Assembly came into being and how it's developed over the past month. We've recently heard of cases of art workers' protests in Bucharest or Belgrade, and even occupations of museums and public institutions; at the same time, these actions seemed to be effective only for a short period of time, as some kind of consciousness-raising moments.

Larissa Babij (LB): The Assembly for Culture in Ukraine came into being after three months of continuous protest and civic tension in Kyiv and all over Ukraine. The Assembly has been meeting regularly in the basement of the Ministry of Culture since February 23, 2014. Those who have been involved in the protests in some form or other have accepted the fact that you have to give up your daily routines and certain expectations in emergency situations. Work in the Assembly demands a lot of time, patience and flexibility, but there are enough people interested in reforming culture in Ukraine that it has persisted for two months already, albeit with varying momentum.

CA: How did you decide to occupy the Ministry of Culture? As I remember, the situation in Kyiv back in February was very dramatic and volatile, in terms of the political processes and protests on Maidan.

LB: The week between February 18-22 was the most violent on the Maidan: a hundred people were killed and many of my colleagues and I were volunteering in hospitals. As former President Yanukovych seemed ready to withdraw, on February 21, Ukrainian students took over the Ministry of Education. The following day I saw a Facebook post from an unfamiliar person calling people to gather and occupy the Ministry of Culture. Since I have often picketed the Ministry of Culture together with the Art Workers' Self-defense Initiative (ISTM), most recently in a series of demonstrations aimed at the Ministry itself in January, I decided to go and investigate this proposal to occupy the Ministry.

Initially a group of 40-50 people, including cultural workers, journalists and a student "self-defense" brigade from Maidan, gathered near the Ministry. Someone called the Minister of Culture and his deputies to come and open the building, as it was Saturday. Our main goal was to prevent people from the previous administration from removing documents from the building, especially those containing evidence of corruption.

CA: How did you manage to establish yourselves inside the building?

LB: After an hour or two of standing and calling through the windows of the Ministry, someone from inside opened the doors, and then they let us inside. There was an unused space in the basement that we were allowed to set up for our discussions. We then decided to call an official meeting the next day for everyone who works in or is concerned with the cultural sphere and how it has been organized thus far in Ukraine.

On February 23rd the Assembly as such was born. Over three hundred people came to the meeting, including some former and current bureaucrats. Many attendees wanted to complain about their experiences, but others began to formulate what has to be done to change the Ministry of Culture and restructure the cultural process in Ukraine.

CA: What was the reaction of the people still working in the Ministry? Did they join the discussions?

LB: Initially no, the occupation occurred over the weekend and almost nobody was working there. At that time there was no Minister of Culture, because all the former cabinet members had been dispersed and no one had been appointed yet. On the day after entering the Ministry a few of the occupiers sealed all the doors of its offices to prove that no documents had been removed, and we continued to block access to most Ministry employees until the new Minister was appointed.

CA: And how was the new Minister appointed?

LB: He was put in power by the new government, but he also had the support of the Maidan. He is an actor who spent a lot of time on the Maidan stage. On the most violent days in February, when there was a lot of shooting, he was there, trying to calm people and giving directions where medical help was needed. His appointment, like that of other current Ministers, was an attempt to build a bridge between the protests and the new government.

CA: The Assembly was also responsible for putting out a series of concrete demands to change the Ministry. How would they affect the way the Ministry is organized and functions?

LB: In the first week when we were physically blocking the building of the Ministry we set out some demands: one was to set up a financial audit of the institution, one was about lustration. When the minister was appointed, he met with the Assembly and signed a memorandum, which included (in addition to the above-mentioned demands) his promise to recognize the legitimacy of the Assembly, implement structural reforms and to develop together with the Assembly mechanisms by which the public can exercise control over the Ministry's decisions and policies. While the first demands are practically aimed at preventing further corruption, the other points demand that the Ministry begin to function as a public institution, listening to and serving the people. The main task was to start developing new organizational mechanisms in collaboration with the Minister, and in parallel develop mechanisms through which the Assembly and the general public could have access to and influence the decision-making processes of the Ministry.
After the new Minister was appointed, he dismissed most of the previous deputy ministers, and the Ministry went back to work. An independent organization has been hired to perform a financial audit, but it hasn't started yet. The Assembly has regularly demanded meetings with the new administration; these demands have been met with reluctance. We've met officially with the Minister five times so far, plus several meetings with his new deputies. The administration has tried to get the Assembly to go away, but the Assembly persists in meeting in the basement of the Ministry of Culture and pestering officials to produce evidence of beginning systemic reform.

CA: The Assembly adopted a non-hierarchical model of organization, similar to that used in the Occupy movement. If I understand correctly, there is not one leadership, but everyone who is present at these meetings can influence the process.
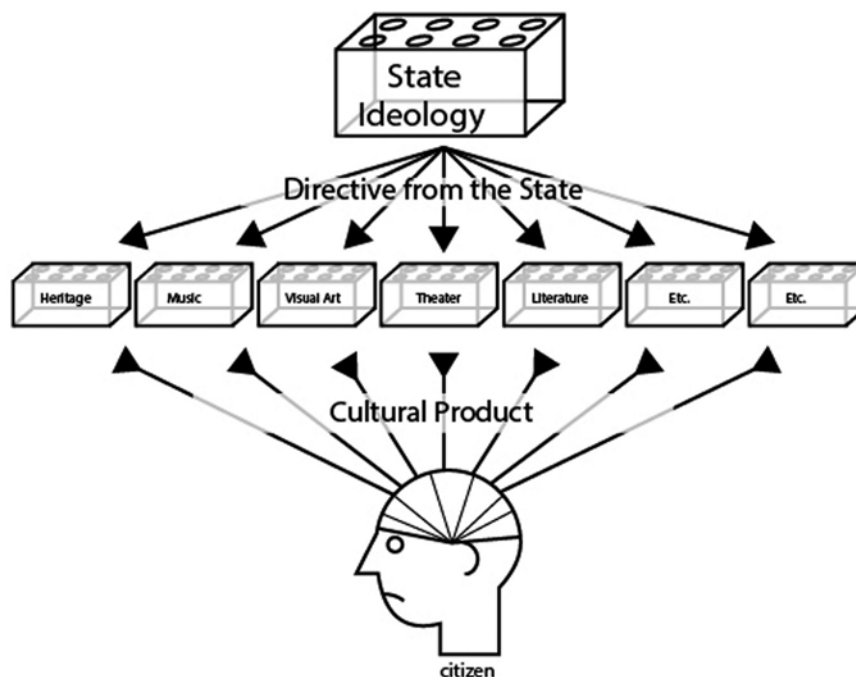
LB: Yes, that was a fundamental decision. When the group was just forming, we realized that if we are trying to change the system, the more the Assembly mimics the existing system the less likely we are to make meaningful changes. The Assembly is a method for collectively discussing issues and making decisions; its membership is fluid. There have been tensions in the group over maintaining this non-hierarchical, horizontal organization, which demands a lot of time and patience from its participants. The second meeting with the Minister, which revealed how little interest the official structure actually has in the ideas and demands of the Assembly, deepened a schism between the Assembly's participants over priorities and fundamental principles. While there are staunch proponents of the Assembly as such, even though its radical, utopian methods may ultimately only yield small

How the Cultural Agencies Function
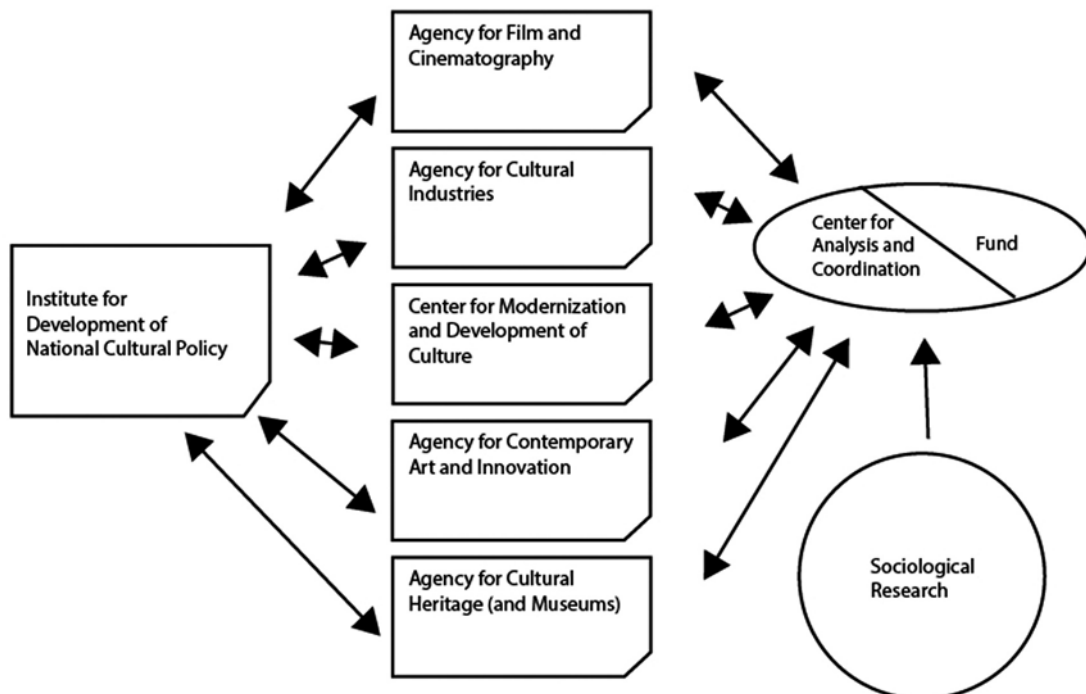
Agencies are autonomous. The Center for Analysis and Coordination (CAC) works with the agencies and independent sociological research to determine the public's cultural needs. The Institute for Development of National Cultural Policy makes recommendations directly to the Agencies - it does not allocate funds. State funding for culture is distributed through the CAC; individual agencies may receive additional funding through grants, charitable donations, etc.

How the old Ministry of Culture Works

State
Ideology

Directive from the State

| Heritage | Music | Visual Art | Theater | Literature | Etc. | Etc. |

Cultural Product

citizen

The Ministry serves state ideology
by controlling cultural production.

results, others prefer efficiency and effectiveness, especially in influencing policy and decisions within the specialized departments of the Ministry, to the slow, laborious process of systemic change. However, the Assembly is still meeting and working through these differences to identify common goals and ways to work together.

CA: Could you say a bit more about the composition of the Assembly and the participatory impetus behind different groups in its constituency?

LB: The Assembly is open to everyone: the amount of people that show up for any given meeting varies from just a few people to several hundred. I'd say there are around 30-40 people who are very active, and each meeting usually has around 20 attendees, including continuous newcomers. People participating in the Assembly, while they may be members of various groups and organizations, speak for themselves and do not represent the interests of any other group. Thus the Assembly does not supersede, replace or deny any other cultural organizations.
Because the first meetings had so many participants, a decision was taken to break up into working groups. While there were conflicting views on how the groups

should be organized, the principle that was chosen was by discipline: film, circus, music, design, contemporary art, festival organizers, coordination, etc. The problem is that this to some extent mimics the existing structure of the Ministry of Culture, favoring the old-fashioned division by genre, which does not reflect today's cultural production. However, there is also a group devoted to analysis, which is developing a proposal for reorganizing the Ministry.

The working groups researched and prepared reports on the needs of their respective spheres. The Assembly also had conversations with people who had worked in cultural administration in other countries like Belgium, Switzerland, Poland and Lithuania; those from the latter countries shared their experiences restructuring their cultural administration when transitioning to the EU.

CA: Tell me a bit about the drawings created within the Assembly that begin to describe what new structure you had in mind.

LB: The Assembly agreed that the Ministry was not serving the needs of culture, but instead serving whatever ideology the government wanted to promote and functioning as a mechanism for corruption. Since the system itself is dysfunctional, regardless of the individuals working in it, the challenge is finding a way to change the entire system, without immediately dissolving the existing structures.

The first drawing shows how the old Ministry was working, with ideology from the

Concept for Reorganization of Cultural Administration
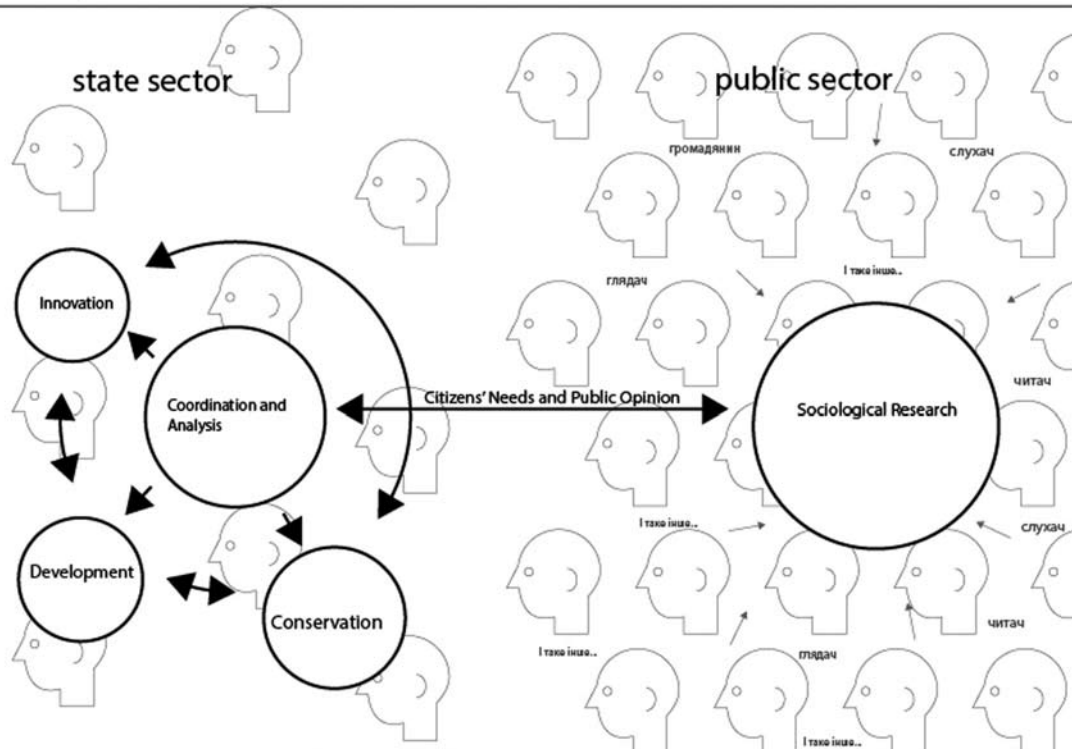
The State serves culture, focusing on the needs of the public.

top sifting down through all the departments. The main conceptual shift proposed by the Assembly is eliminating the top-down vector, so the people and their needs become the focus of cultural activity and administration. The system that would provide coordination and resources for cultural activities should be focused on the public – viewers, thinkers, doers. Practically speaking, this system could be organized as a series of autonomous agencies focused on different aspects of culture (conservation, development, innovation) and a center for coordination and analysis that would distribute the national budget according to the needs of the public and the needs of the agencies. It is imperative to separate state cultural policy from the budget; in this model, those who develop cultural policy make direct recommendations to each agency, but do not influence the distribution of funding.

CA: How do you negotiate the relation between the Kyiv-based Assembly and other cities across Ukraine?

LB: The Assembly for Culture in Ukraine is nationwide. From the beginning in other cities such as Zaporizhya, Kharkiv, Lviv, people formed their own assemblies. In an attempt to avoid centralization in the capital, the assemblies in Kyiv and other cities share a lot of their minutes and recordings of meetings online. Information is also passed along personally when people travel between cities.

CA: What are some of the most important things that you feel the Assembly has achieved so far?

LB: As in the model I described above, where cultural administration focuses on aspects of conservation, development and innovation, I have observed that the members of the Assembly include people who are conservators of an authoritarian system of thinking (waiting for a commands from above), people who believe that cultural management and other forms of "modernization" should be implemented in Ukraine's cultural sphere, and people who see the Assembly as a means to invent new ways of working together. At its core the Assembly – as a foundation for Ukraine's future culture system – really is about social relations. One of the important things is to keep the Assembly autonomous from the Ministry, which not only allows for a certain degree of unpredictability and mobility, but also clarifies the difference between exercising one's rights as a citizen and aspiring to power. It is also worth noting that the Assembly's work to reform the Ministry of Culture began immediately after the Yanukovych regime dissolved, affirming that cultural reform is fundamental to any kind of social, political or economic change.

Larissa Babij lives in Kyiv, where she works with Ukrainian contemporary artists as a curator, writer and co-conspirator of experimental projects. Together with Tanz Laboratorium she has been producing the annual PERFORMATIVITY Educational Art Project since 2011. In April 2014 she brought Gregory Sholette's and Olga Kopenkina's "Imaginary Archive" to Ukraine (including new works by local artists). Her writing has been published in ARTMargins Online, Guernica and other publications. She is a member of the Art Workers' Self-defense Initiative (ISTM).