

Nikita Kadan

In recent years, sites of protest—Tahrir Square, Zuccotti Park, Taksim Square—have functioned in large part as visual interventions in the fabric of the city. As such, they've made claims on attention, time, and space on behalf of those excluded from the normal running of things. These provisional encampments took something from several disparate spheres—political demonstrations, the squatters' movement, refugee and homeless camps, even music festivals—and fashioned them into something new: One might almost say a *genre* where politics and the image met on updated terms.

Nikita Kadan's show "Limits of Responsibility" took as its starting point recent events in Ukraine, where the demonstrations on Kiev's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) had particularly disorienting effects, as the collapse of the Yanukovich government was followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea, the ongoing conflict in the country's east, and the creation of a rickety coalition government that has little chance of winning its citizens' trust. In this exhibition, the artist—himself a vocal participant in the Maidan protests and the



discussions they gave rise to—brought these events into dialogue with Soviet visual forms. The four-part installation whose title lent the show its name (*all works 2014*) was introduced with facsimile pages from a 1970s Soviet design manual apparently intended for bureaucrats planning to show the USSR's ever newly astounding agricultural achievements. The next gallery contained a re-creation of one the objects depicted there: an A-frame stand with four heads of lettuce growing under and between empty white-painted boards. The third part of the work, in the same space, is a slide show of scenes in the Maidan in the spring of 2014, when activists gathered to protest the clearance of the square. Many of the images depict a well-tended vegetable garden set similarly between the barricades and tents.

Do the empty panels in Kadan's version of the Soviet display represent a McLuhanesque reminder that the medium is the message? Or are they a blank slate for agitprop to come? Either way, it seems odd that in a recent interview Kadan did not speak of "barricade gardening" as something rooted in ideas of the commons, heterotopian dissent, and renewal—comparable, for example, to the urban-gardening movement in New York and elsewhere. Instead, he described it as "a space where pure survival gets a political voice." This doesn't quite address the implications of a series of gray watercolor drawings (*all Untitled*) in which human bones, architecture, and monuments from the Soviet past emerge from or next to vegetables, hence a fundamentally political symbolism.

The delicate and rigorous brushwork deployed here also served to intensify the contrast between the transitory nature of the slide projections and the concreteness of the display stand, which thus itself illustrated the distance between art, propaganda, activism, and documentation. Perhaps this remove was the actual subject of the exhibition. Kadan's orchestration of an ambiguous collusion between 1970s Moscow and 2014 Kiev in an art gallery in Berlin (and, from this January to April, at Waterside Contemporary in London) pointed to something the exhibition didn't quite answer, a question akin to those that followed the Occupy and Maidan actions themselves: What comes next? What future would be good enough—or different enough—to quality not simply as business as usual?

If this query articulates a core problem for politics today, it also a problem for art. The intimate intensity of the Maidan protests and the cool academicism of the gallery space may appear irreconcilable, but Kadan's suggestion seems to be that if a rapprochement between the two were possible, it would be through a formal reanimation of the inherited visual languages of past hopes and desires. The show was an attempt to triangulate conflicting scripts, and it's not Kadan's fault that political art within the gallery so often bumps headlong into the fact that, as he put it in a recent interview, "contemporary art is in a place of quiet elitism."

—Alexander Scrimgeour