Encoded Identity: Ukrainian Cultural Memory in Contemporary Calligraffiti

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ABSTRACT

Cultural identity is preserved not only through historical monuments, archives, museums, and written records but also through language, symbols, colors, repeated images, and visual traditions. Cultural-memory studies emphasize that collective memory depends on forms through which communities preserve and reinterpret shared knowledge across generations (Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2011; Erll, 2011). Contemporary visual art can participate in this process by transforming inherited cultural material rather than simply reproducing it.

This article examines Ukrainian cultural memory in contemporary calligraffiti through a qualitative, practice-based visual analysis of selected works by the author. Particular attention is given to the relationship between written language, national symbolism, visual recognition, and semantic interpretation. The principal case study is a composition in which the text of the National Anthem of Ukraine is incorporated into the form of the Ukrainian Tryzub against a blue-and-yellow background.

The study proposes the concept of "encoded identity" to describe a visual strategy in which culturally significant linguistic or symbolic information is incorporated into an artwork without necessarily remaining immediately readable. The analysis distinguishes between direct visual recognition and contextual understanding. It does not assume that a viewer can independently identify concealed text without supplementary information. Instead, it argues that visual encoding can operate together with captions, artist statements, curatorial explanation, or prior cultural knowledge to create successive levels of interpretation.

The article concludes that contemporary calligraffiti can function as a meeting point between writing and image, individual artistic practice and collective cultural memory, and immediate visual perception and culturally informed interpretation.

Keywords: Calligraffiti, Ukrainian Art, Cultural Memory, Cultural Identity, Visual Communication, Tryzub, Ukrainian National Symbols, Calligraphy, Visual Encoding, Contemporary Art, National Identity.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural symbols acquire meaning through repeated social use. Flags, emblems, national texts, alphabets, monuments, and other recognizable forms become connected with shared historical narratives and collective identity. Halbwachs (1992) argued that individual memory develops within social frameworks, while Jan Assmann (2011) later described cultural memory as a system through which societies preserve significant knowledge through texts, symbols, rituals, and other durable forms. Aleida Assmann (2011) similarly emphasizes the importance of media and cultural forms in transmitting memory beyond individual experience.

Visual art participates in this process because cultural memory is not transmitted exclusively through verbal historical narratives. Images, colors, written signs, and recognizable visual structures may also function as carriers of cultural association.

This is particularly relevant in the Ukrainian context, where questions of national identity, language, historical memory, and cultural affiliation have acquired increased public importance. Kulyk (2016), examining Ukrainian national identity in the context of Euromaidan and the war, demonstrates that identity is dynamic and can become intensified or reconfigured in response to major historical events.

Contemporary artists therefore encounter inherited cultural material not as a fixed collection of symbols but as material that can be interpreted, reconstructed, and placed into new visual contexts.

Calligraffiti provides a particularly useful field for examining this process because it exists at the intersection of writing and image. Letters can retain linguistic associations while simultaneously functioning as lines, shapes, rhythms, and compositional structures. Zhelev (2024) describes calligraffiti in relation to the integration of calligraphic and contemporary graphic principles, demonstrating how written forms can operate as elements of a broader visual system.

The present study examines this relationship through the artistic practice of Oleksandr Zinoviev, whose work includes calligraffiti, monumental painting, street art, graphic work, and body art. A recurring element of this practice is the transformation of written language into compositions in which letters, symbols, and ornamental structures become interconnected.

The central research question is therefore not whether an encoded cultural text remains automatically readable. Rather, it is:

How can culturally significant written and visual material continue to participate in the communication of cultural identity when it is transformed into a partially or substantially non-readable visual structure?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CULTURAL MEMORY, LANGUAGE, AND VISUAL FORM

The concept of collective memory provides the theoretical starting point for this analysis. Halbwachs (1992) demonstrated that memory is not solely an individual phenomenon but is structured through social relationships and shared frameworks. Cultural-memory theory subsequently expanded this idea by examining the media and cultural forms through which societies transmit knowledge about their past.

Jan Assmann (2011) distinguishes cultural memory from ordinary everyday communication by emphasizing its relationship with symbolic forms capable of transmitting meaning across longer periods. Aleida Assmann (2011) similarly examines archives, texts, monuments, images, and other cultural media as mechanisms through which societies preserve and reactivate memory.

Erll (2011) further emphasizes that cultural memory should not be understood as a static collection of information. Memory is mediated, reconstructed, and interpreted. The form through which something is remembered influences the way it can be understood.

This theoretical position is particularly important for visual art. When an artist transforms an existing cultural symbol, the result is not simply a duplicate of the original cultural object. The transformation creates another mediation of that object.

Language is especially significant because it carries both semantic and visual information. Words communicate through meaning, but writing also possesses form. Alphabets, letter structures, scripts, and calligraphic traditions become recognizable visual systems.

Historical Cyrillic traditions demonstrate that writing has long operated simultaneously as language and visual composition. Spasskova (2026), for example, examines decorative title ligatures and forms of written

ornamentation in medieval Cyrillic manuscripts, showing the close historical relationship between textual and visual organization.

The present article does not claim a direct historical continuity between those manuscript traditions and contemporary calligraffiti. Instead, such historical examples establish a broader context in which Cyrillic writing has long possessed both semantic and visual functions.

Contemporary calligraffiti develops this relationship under different cultural and artistic conditions. Letters may be compressed, interconnected, rotated, layered, stylized, or transformed until immediate readability becomes secondary to composition.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative, practice-based visual-analysis methodology. The empirical material consists of three selected works from the author's artistic practice. The works were selected because they demonstrate different relationships between writing, cultural reference, public space, and visual recognition.

The analysis considers four principal characteristics: the degree of textual readability; the presence of recognizable cultural symbols; the relationship between linguistic content and visual composition; and the role of contextual information in interpretation.

The first work was selected because it combines three explicit elements associated with Ukrainian national identity: the Tryzub, blue-and-yellow coloring, and the text of the National Anthem of Ukraine. The second demonstrates the relationship between calligraffiti and Ukrainian urban space. The third demonstrates how Ukrainian linguistic and cultural reference can be communicated without relying on an official state emblem.

The study is practice-based rather than audience-based. It analyzes the construction and intended visual logic of the works but does not claim to establish how all viewers actually interpret them. No interviews, questionnaires, eye-tracking studies, or controlled audience experiments were conducted.

This distinction is important. Statements concerning viewer response in the following analysis describe possible interpretive processes suggested by the structure of the works; they should not be understood as experimentally demonstrated psychological responses.

The author's own works and photographic documentation constitute primary material for the analysis. They are therefore treated separately from the secondary scholarly literature used to establish the theoretical framework.

CULTURAL IDENTITY WITHOUT LITERAL ILLUSTRATION

National identity in visual art can be communicated through immediately recognizable imagery such as flags, maps, traditional clothing, historical figures, or national emblems. However, identity can also be communicated through less direct mechanisms.

Language itself can function as a cultural marker. A familiar color relationship may activate a national association. A historical writing tradition can influence a contemporary composition without being literally reproduced. A recognizable emblem may remain visible even when its internal structure is transformed.

This indirect approach is particularly compatible with calligraffiti because calligraffiti already occupies an intermediate territory between reading and seeing.

The distinction between recognition and interpretation is central here.

Recognition concerns what the viewer can identify directly from visible information. Interpretation involves additional cultural or contextual knowledge.

A viewer familiar with Ukrainian symbolism may immediately recognize blue and yellow or the silhouette of the Tryzub. The same viewer cannot necessarily determine that a specific hidden text is the National Anthem merely by looking at a highly transformed calligraphic composition.

Accordingly, the present study treats visual recognition and contextual disclosure as separate but potentially complementary mechanisms.

THE TRYZUB AS A VISUAL CARRIER OF CULTURAL MEMORY

The Ukrainian Tryzub is an especially useful example of the relationship between visual simplicity and cultural density.

Its external structure is compact and recognizable, while its significance extends beyond graphic form. It functions as the national emblem of Ukraine and carries historical and contemporary associations with Ukrainian statehood and identity.

As Kulyk (2016) demonstrates more broadly, national identity in Ukraine is closely connected with changing historical and political circumstances. Within such contexts, national symbols can acquire meanings that extend beyond their formal institutional function.

For an artist, the challenge is therefore not merely to reproduce an established symbol but to determine how it can enter an individual visual language without losing its recognizable cultural reference.

The first work analyzed in this study approaches this problem by reconstructing the Tryzub through written material.

CASE STUDY: THE NATIONAL ANTHEM ENCODED WITHIN THE TRYZUB

The composition combines three cultural elements: the blue-and-yellow colors associated with the Ukrainian flag, the recognizable form of the Tryzub, and the text of the National Anthem of Ukraine.

These elements do not have the same degree of immediate accessibility.

The blue-and-yellow relationship can be perceived immediately. The external structure of the Tryzub may also be recognized immediately by viewers familiar with Ukrainian symbolism. The anthem, however, is encoded within the calligraphic structure and cannot be assumed to be independently identifiable by every viewer.

This difference is fundamental to the analysis.

The work therefore establishes two levels of communication. The first is visual recognition based on visible form and color. The second is contextual interpretation, which becomes possible when the viewer learns through a caption, artist statement, curatorial text, or other supplementary information that the calligraphic structure contains the National Anthem.

This distinction avoids treating concealment as a self-sufficient mechanism of communication. Instead, the work can be understood as combining visual encoding with paratextual disclosure.



Figure 1 — Work With The Ukrainian Anthem / Tryzub

Figure 1. Oleksandr Zinoviev. Calligraffiti composition incorporating the encoded text of the National Anthem of Ukraine within the form of the Tryzub against a blue-and-yellow background. Primary source: artist's personal archive.

Once the textual content is disclosed, the visual structure can be reconsidered.

The calligraphic lines are no longer perceived only as ornamental or graphic forms. They can also be understood as transformed language. The National Anthem therefore operates in the composition in two ways: semantically, as a culturally significant text, and materially, as the visual substance from which the image is constructed.

This transformation changes the ordinary relationship between text and emblem. The anthem is not simply written next to or beneath the Tryzub. Written language participates in constructing the emblem itself.

RECOGNITION, DISCLOSURE, AND INTERPRETATION

The distinction between recognition and understanding requires further clarification.

Recognition can occur through immediately visible information. A culturally informed viewer may recognize the colors and the Tryzub without explanation.

The encoded anthem operates differently.

If the degree of transformation prevents the text from being read directly, the viewer cannot reasonably be expected to identify its precise linguistic content without additional information. The process should therefore not be described as automatic "discovery."

Instead, two viewer situations should be distinguished.

In the first situation, a viewer encounters the work without supplementary explanation. The viewer may recognize Ukrainian national symbolism and perceive the internal calligraphy as writing or writing-like visual material, but may not know which specific text has been encoded.

In the second situation, the viewer encounters a caption, artist statement, exhibition text, or verbal explanation identifying the encoded material as the National Anthem. This information changes the subsequent reading of the same visual object.

The second viewing is therefore not a purely visual discovery. It is a reinterpretation produced through the interaction of image and contextual information.

This mechanism is consistent with Erll's (2011) understanding of cultural memory as mediated rather than transmitted independently of form and context. Cultural meaning emerges through relationships among the cultural object, the medium, available knowledge, and the interpretive situation.

The significance of the work therefore lies not in proving that hidden information communicates itself automatically, but in demonstrating how visual and textual channels can cooperate.

FROM COLLECTIVE TEXT TO INDIVIDUAL ARTISTIC LANGUAGE

The National Anthem belongs to collective national culture. The specific visual system through which it is transformed belongs to the individual artistic practice of the author.

This distinction is important.

The artist does not claim authorship of the cultural text. Rather, an existing text is used as material for an individual visual interpretation.

Such reinterpretation illustrates the dynamic character of cultural memory described by Assmann (2011) and Erll (2011). Cultural memory survives not only through exact repetition but also through changing forms of mediation.

In this case, the semantic content of the anthem is not rewritten, while its visual organization is radically transformed. Sequential written language becomes spatial composition.

The resulting work therefore exists between collective cultural material and individual artistic language.

CALLIGRAFFITI BETWEEN WRITING AND IMAGE

The example also illustrates a broader characteristic of calligraffiti.

Conventional writing is organized primarily to facilitate reading. In calligraffiti, readability can coexist with other priorities: rhythm, density, balance, movement, repetition, and graphic expression.

Zhelev (2024) discusses calligraffiti as a contemporary system in which calligraphic structures can be adapted into complex visual forms. This relationship makes the medium particularly suitable for investigating the boundary between linguistic meaning and visual perception.

The works examined here do not suggest that readability and visual meaning are opposites. Rather, they can occupy different positions within the same composition.

A word may be completely readable, partially readable, recognizable as writing without being decipherable, or transformed so extensively that it primarily functions as visual structure.

This produces a continuum rather than a simple opposition between “text” and “image.”

ZAPORIZHZHIA AND THE EXPERIENCE OF PLACE

Cultural identity is not formed only at the national level. It also develops through particular cities, neighborhoods, linguistic environments, and personal histories.

For Oleksandr Zinoviev, Zaporizhzhia represents an important environment in which his artistic practice developed.

Work with murals and urban surfaces creates a direct relationship between artistic language and physical place. Unlike an artwork encountered primarily within a gallery, a mural becomes part of an existing urban environment and is experienced alongside architecture, streets, advertising, signage, and everyday movement.

Public art is therefore particularly relevant to cultural-memory studies because it places artistic communication directly within lived space.



Figure 2 — Oleksandr Zinoviev Mural In Ukraine / Zaporizhzhia

Figure 2. Oleksandr Zinoviev. Mural/calligraffiti work in the urban environment of Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine. Primary source: artist’s personal photographic archive.

The mural demonstrates a different relationship between cultural identity and visual form. Unlike Figure 1, its cultural significance does not depend primarily on an official national emblem.

Its context includes the city itself, the linguistic environment, the artist's local practice, and the relationship between written form and public space.

This distinction is useful because it prevents Ukrainian cultural identity from being reduced exclusively to flags and official state symbols.

CULTURAL MEMORY IN PUBLIC SPACE

Public art occupies an unstable position between cultural presence and physical impermanence.

A mural may be encountered repeatedly by people who do not intentionally visit museums or galleries. At the same time, urban artworks can be painted over, damaged, demolished, altered, or removed.

The physical object is therefore not necessarily permanent.

Cultural-memory theory provides a useful framework for understanding why physical disappearance does not automatically eliminate cultural presence. Aleida Assmann (2011) emphasizes the role of different media and archives in preserving cultural material. Photographic documentation, media publication, digital circulation, and later reference can extend the cultural existence of an artwork beyond the lifespan of its original physical surface.

In the case of street art, photographic documentation is therefore more than a practical record. It can become a secondary medium through which the work continues to circulate.

This article nevertheless distinguishes such documentation from scholarly sources. Photographs from the artist's personal archive constitute primary evidence of the works themselves; they do not provide independent scholarly authority for theoretical claims.

MIGRATION AND CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Migration creates another context in which cultural memory can be examined.

When an artist moves between countries, the physical and linguistic environment changes, but previously developed visual habits, cultural references, techniques, and memories do not disappear automatically.

The same cultural symbol may also function differently for different audiences.

A Ukrainian viewer may recognize the Tryzub immediately and connect it with national history, statehood, personal experience, or contemporary events. A viewer unfamiliar with Ukrainian symbolism may initially encounter the same form primarily as a graphic structure.

The meaning of the artwork is therefore not located entirely inside the visual object.

The object provides visual information, while the viewer brings different levels of cultural knowledge. Interpretation emerges from their interaction.

This observation is consistent with the broader understanding of cultural memory as socially and culturally mediated rather than universally identical (Halbwachs, 1992; Erll, 2011).

For an artist whose practice developed in Ukraine and later continued in the United States, this difference becomes especially relevant. A work can function simultaneously as a contemporary visual composition and as a culturally specific statement, but access to the second level may require cultural knowledge or contextual explanation.

CULTURAL MEMORY THROUGH TRANSFORMATION

Preservation is often associated with maintaining an object in its original condition. That understanding is appropriate for many historical artifacts, but living cultural practices operate differently.

Cultural forms can also continue through reinterpretation.

An older writing tradition may influence contemporary design. A national text can become material for experimental typography or calligraphy. An established symbol can be reconstructed within a new artistic vocabulary.

Assmann (2011) and Erll (2011) provide a theoretical basis for understanding memory as dependent on repeated mediation rather than simple unchanging transmission. Within contemporary art, transformation can therefore become one of the ways cultural material remains active.

Calligraffiti is particularly relevant because it combines writing — one of the traditional mechanisms for preserving cultural information — with contemporary visual practices associated with urban art, graphic experimentation, and individual authorship.

ENCODED IDENTITY

On the basis of the works analyzed here, the term “encoded identity” is proposed to describe a visual strategy in which culturally significant information is incorporated into the formal structure of an artwork without necessarily remaining immediately or completely readable.

Encoding may occur through language, symbol, color, transformed letterforms, or combinations of these elements.

The National Anthem/Tryzub composition provides the clearest example.

Blue and yellow provide one level of cultural recognition. The Tryzub provides another. Knowledge that the internal calligraphic structure contains the National Anthem provides a further semantic level.

These layers do not have identical communicative functions.

Color and emblem may provide direct visual recognition for culturally informed viewers. The encoded anthem requires either sufficient textual readability or supplementary contextual information.

For this reason, encoded identity should not be understood as a self-sufficient secret code that every viewer can decode independently. It is better understood as a layered communication system in which visual form and contextual knowledge can work together.

This qualification is important because it allows the concept to describe actual visual practice without making unsupported assumptions about audience response.

CULTURAL REFERENCE WITHOUT AN OFFICIAL NATIONAL SYMBOL

The third work demonstrates another form of cultural encoding.

Cultural identity is not limited to state emblems. Language, literary references, historical forms of writing, and culturally recognizable texts can also function as carriers of collective memory.

In this type of composition, written language may remain materially present even when calligraphic transformation reduces immediate readability.

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The cultural reference is therefore less dependent on official iconography and more dependent on the relationship between language, visual form, and contextual knowledge. n through an explicit state symbol.

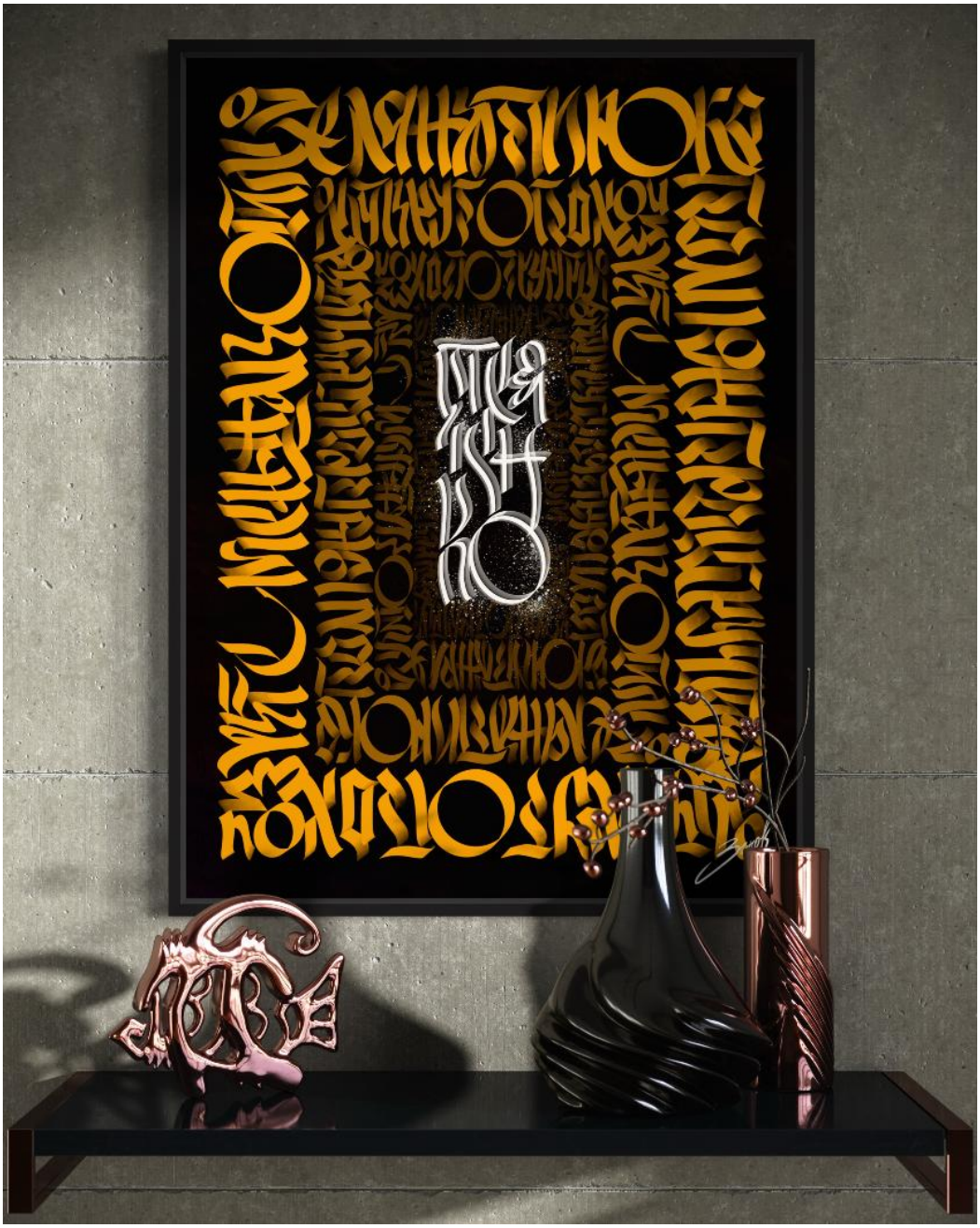

Figure 3 — Work With Ukrainian Text / Cultural Reference

Figure 3. Oleksandr Zinoviev. Calligraphic composition incorporating Ukrainian linguistic or cultural references. Photograph from the author's archive.

CULTURAL MEMORY AND INDIVIDUAL ARTISTIC STYLE

The three works demonstrate different relationships between inherited cultural material and individual artistic practice.

This relationship creates a potential tension.

If an artist reproduces inherited symbols without transformation, the work may remain primarily illustrative. If all recognizable cultural references disappear, however, the connection with cultural memory may become inaccessible without extensive explanation.

The practice examined in this study occupies an intermediate position.

The Tryzub remains recognizable while its internal structure is transformed. The National Anthem remains conceptually present while its ordinary textual organization is replaced by a calligraphic structure. Ukrainian linguistic material can be incorporated into compositions without requiring the use of an official emblem.

This approach allows collective cultural reference and individual artistic style to coexist.

DISCUSSION

The analysis suggests that the relationship between cultural memory and contemporary calligraffiti is best understood not as a simple process of hiding and discovering information, but as a layered process involving visual recognition, textual transformation, contextual disclosure, and subsequent interpretation.

This distinction addresses an important methodological issue.

A viewer who recognizes blue and yellow or the Tryzub is responding to visually accessible cultural signs. A viewer who knows that the National Anthem is encoded inside the Tryzub possesses additional information that may not be obtainable from the image alone.

The two forms of understanding should not be treated as equivalent.

Accordingly, the principal finding of this study is not that concealment automatically strengthens cultural-memory transmission. Such a claim would require empirical audience research.

Rather, the analysis indicates that reduced textual readability can change the mode through which cultural material is encountered. When contextual information identifies the concealed text, the viewer can return to the same visual structure with new semantic knowledge.

The communication therefore operates through a combination of visual encoding and paratextual disclosure.

This is a more limited claim, but it also provides a clearer analytical model.

The process can be described in two stages.

During the first stage, the viewer encounters the visible composition. Recognition depends on immediately accessible features and prior cultural knowledge.

During the second stage, supplementary information — for example, a caption, artist statement, exhibition description, or curatorial explanation — can disclose the encoded linguistic content. The viewer may then reinterpret visual forms that initially appeared primarily decorative as carriers of specific language.

This two-stage model helps distinguish readability from cultural recognition and semantic interpretation.

It also provides a framework for understanding why calligraffiti can be relevant to cultural-memory studies. The medium allows language to remain materially present while changing its degree of linguistic accessibility.

The result is not the disappearance of language but a shift in the relationship between seeing and reading.

METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION

The analysis also suggests that the relationship between text and image in calligraffiti should not be reduced to a binary distinction between readable and unreadable.

A more useful model is a continuum.

At one end is conventional readable text. At the other is a visual structure whose linguistic origin may no longer be recognizable. Between them are multiple intermediate states in which writing remains identifiable while its precise semantic content becomes increasingly difficult to access.

This continuum can be analyzed through several variables: textual readability, visual recognition, symbolic familiarity, contextual information, and cultural knowledge.

Such a model may be useful beyond the works examined in this article. It could potentially be applied to contemporary typography, street art, calligraphy, graphic design, and other forms of visual communication in which linguistic signs are deliberately transformed.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The present study has several limitations.

First, it is based on qualitative, practice-based analysis of works created by the author. This provides direct knowledge of artistic intention and production but does not provide independent evidence of audience interpretation.

Second, the selection of works is purposive rather than representative. The three examples were chosen because they illustrate different aspects of the relationship between cultural reference, written language, public space, and visual encoding.

Third, the study does not empirically test whether viewers recognize, understand, or interpret the works in the ways discussed above.

For this reason, claims concerning viewer response have been framed as analytical possibilities rather than demonstrated psychological effects.

Future research could test the proposed two-stage model empirically.

Participants could first encounter the National Anthem/Tryzub composition without any explanatory information. Researchers could record which elements they recognize and whether they identify the presence or content of the encoded writing.

The same participants could then receive a caption explaining that the National Anthem is incorporated into the composition. Their subsequent interpretation could be compared with their initial response.

Different participant groups could also be examined, including Ukrainians living in Ukraine, members of the Ukrainian diaspora, and viewers without prior familiarity with Ukrainian national symbols.

Such research would make it possible to distinguish more precisely between direct visual recognition, culturally learned recognition, textual readability, and interpretation produced through contextual disclosure.

Future studies could also examine how calligraffiti relates to established research on visual semiotics, multimodality, typography, and reception, thereby expanding the theoretical basis of the present practice-based study.

CONCLUSION

Cultural memory is transmitted through multiple forms, including language, symbols, images, texts, rituals, places, and cultural media (Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2011; Erll, 2011). Contemporary visual art participates in this process not only by preserving inherited forms but also by transforming and recontextualizing them.

The works examined in this article demonstrate several ways in which Ukrainian cultural material can enter contemporary calligraffiti.

The composition incorporating the National Anthem within the Tryzub is particularly significant because it combines national color, national emblem, and national text within a single visual structure.

However, these elements communicate differently.

The colors and emblem can provide relatively immediate recognition for viewers familiar with Ukrainian symbolism. The encoded anthem cannot be assumed to communicate its specific textual identity independently when its readability has been substantially reduced.

Its semantic significance becomes clearer through contextual disclosure.

This distinction leads to a more precise definition of encoded identity.

Encoded identity is not simply cultural information hidden inside an artwork. It is a visual strategy through which cultural information is incorporated into artistic form at different levels of accessibility. Some elements may be directly recognizable; others may require linguistic knowledge, cultural familiarity, or paratextual explanation.

Calligraffiti is particularly suited to this process because it allows writing to function simultaneously as language and visual structure.

The principal conclusion of this practice-based study is therefore not that concealment inherently strengthens cultural memory. Rather, visual transformation can create a layered relationship between recognition and interpretation, especially when visual encoding operates together with contextual information.

For an artist whose practice developed in Ukraine and continues within another cultural environment, this relationship acquires additional relevance. Physical location and audience may change, while culturally formed visual language can continue to travel with the artist.

In this sense, contemporary calligraffiti can become not simply a representation of inherited identity but a site where cultural memory is translated, transformed, and encountered under new visual conditions.

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